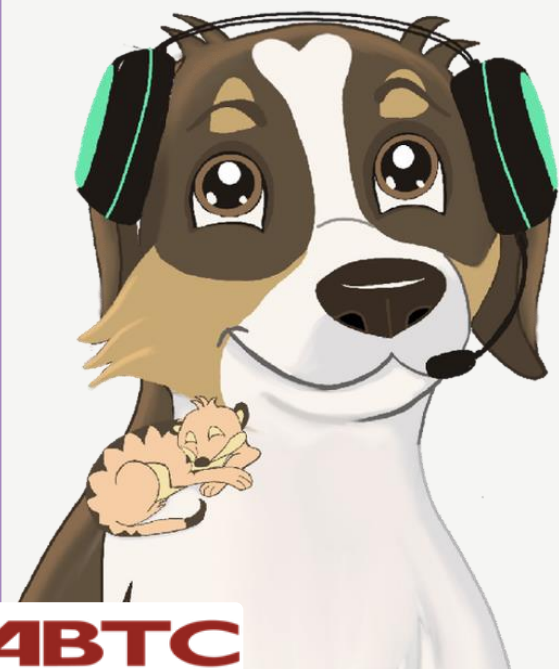




Frantic to Focused: Understanding Arousal Through the Meerkat Method



Who Am I and why are there Meerkats?



ABTC - CAB (Clinical Animal Behaviourist) & ATI (Animal Training Instructor)

MSc in Companion Animal Behaviour
BSc Zoology

Creator of the Control the Meerkat framework

Director of the APBC (Association of Pet Certified Control Unleashed Instructor Behaviour Counsellors)

Trustee of the ADAA (Assistance Dog Assessment Association)

Animal Trainer of over 24 years



“Behaviour makes more sense when we understand the nervous system underneath it.”



What is the Meerkat Method?

The Meerkat Method is a practical model designed to help recognise different states of arousal, and capacity in real time. It combines..

Arousal

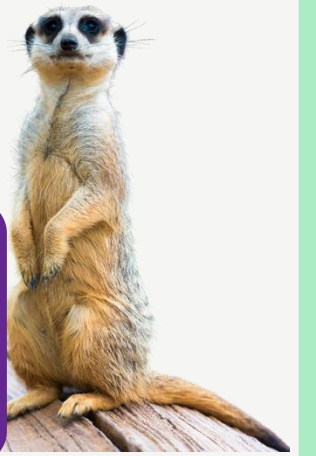
The nervous system's level of activation

Attention

What the dog can notice and focus on

Emotions

The felt experience driving behaviour



Motivation

What drives approach or avoidance

Learning

What can be processed and retained

Behaviour

The visible output of all the above

The Meerkat helps us talk about behaviour without losing compassion.



Why Arousal Matters

Arousal controls the dog! Deciding what they can notice, process, ignore, learn, and choose in that moment.

- Take food
- Follow cues
 - Process information
- Inhibit impulses
- Engage socially
 - Explore safely
- Recover after stress
 - Their attention!



Too high → they react

Too low → they disengage.

Just right — is where they can actually focus, think, learn, and cope.

High arousal isn't a training issue, it's biological

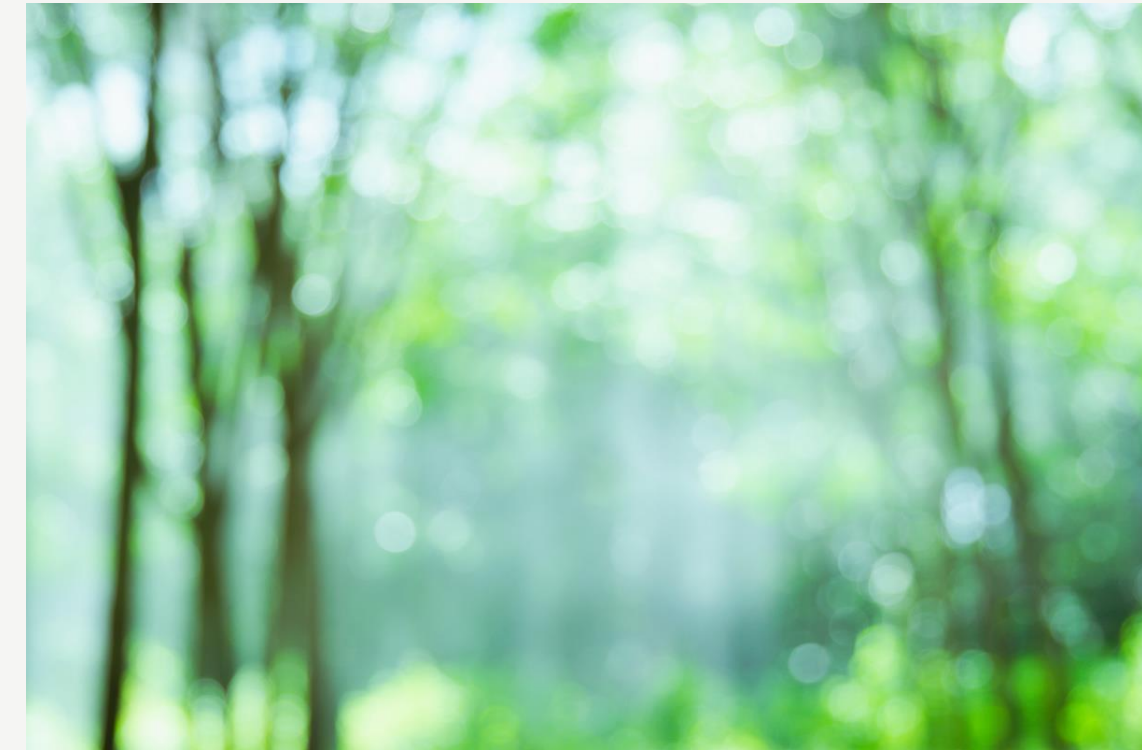
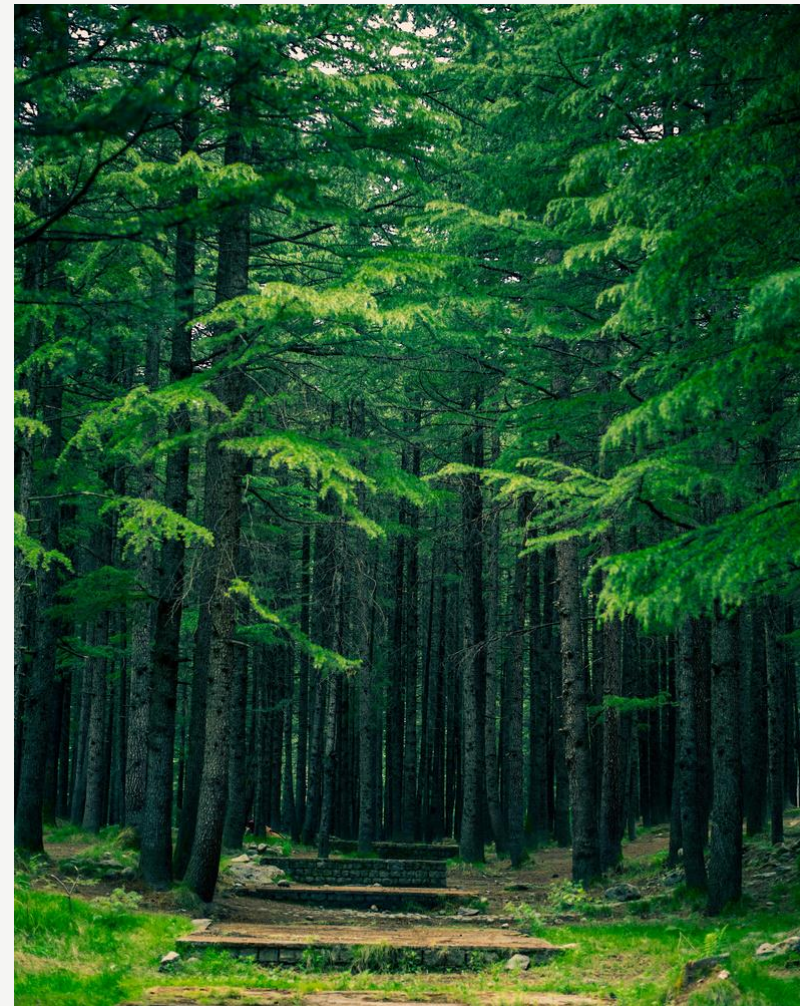
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Why Arousal Matters

Arousal controls the individual and can change their!

- Perception
- Attention
- Decision making
- Emotional responses
- Behavioural flexibility
- Learning capacity



The individual we see depends on the state the nervous system is in. The same individual can behave very differently at different arousal levels.

“State changes what the dog experiences — not just how they behave.”



Focused Not Frantic

The concept of arousal brings together motivation and emotion.

A little arousal can be beneficial for task performance, but too much can be maladaptive and even harmful to the individual.

Performance is better under conditions of medium arousal (alert meerkats) and with tasks that have a medium arousing potential too.

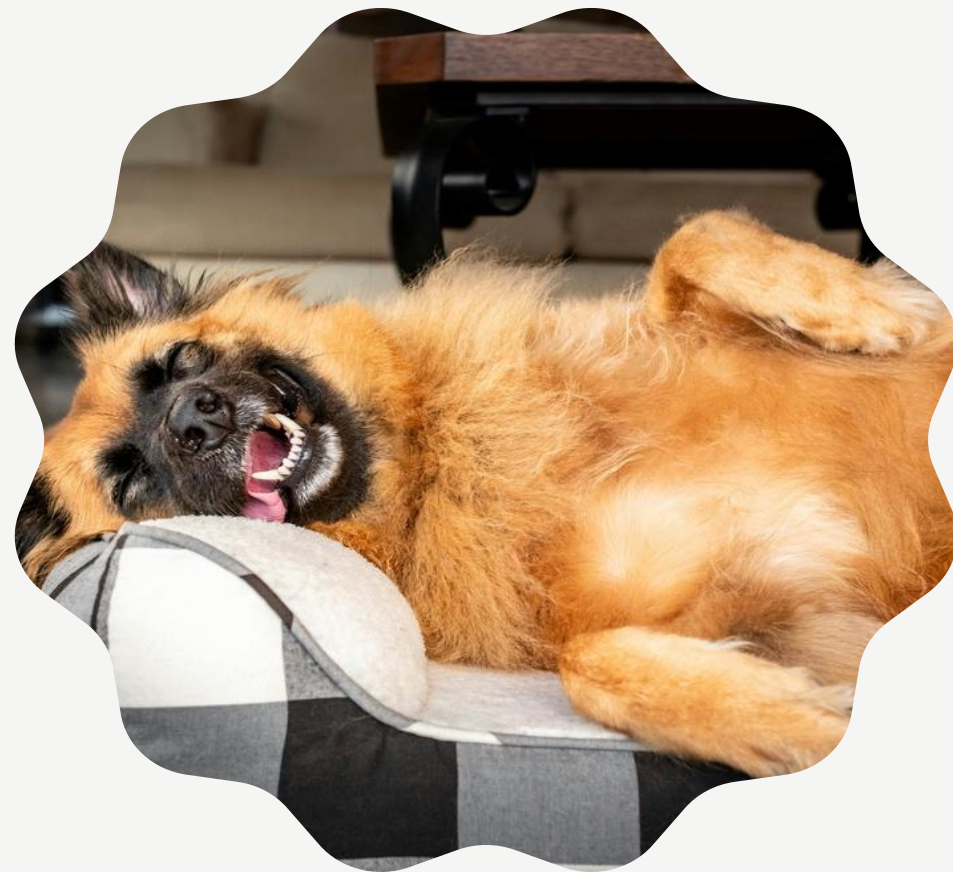


vs



Motor Readiness & Reflexivity

The visible expression of arousal — the intensity, persistence, and effort behind a dog's behaviour, and often shows us how much energy is flowing through the system, and which Meerkat is likely in control."



Muscle Memory and patterns/habits will be seen first in high arousal



Sensory Gating and Neuroception



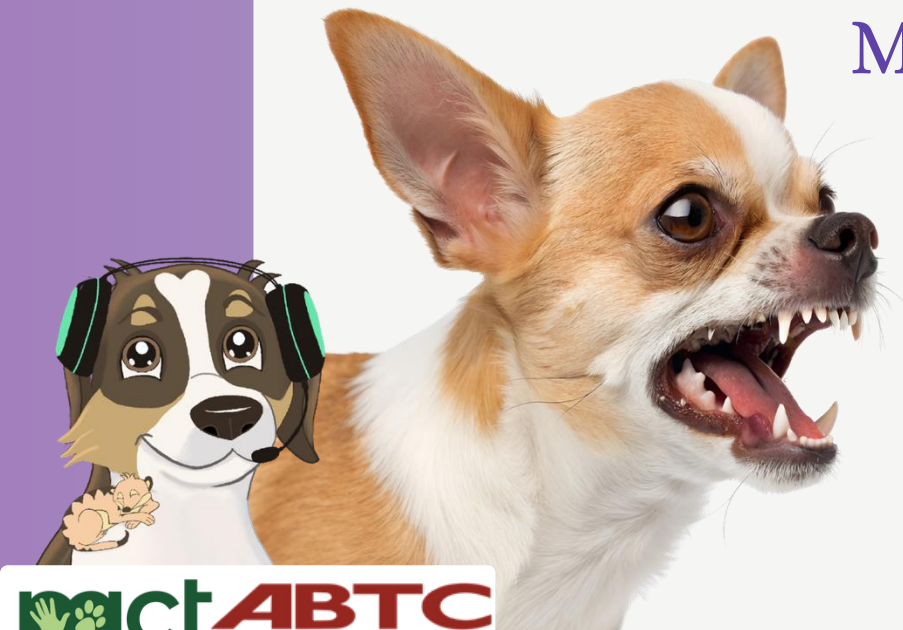
Sensory gating decides what gets through to the brain and can vary with arousal levels.

As arousal rises, gating tightens, attention narrows, and the Meerkat prioritizes potential threat over everything else.

This is why dogs 'don't hear you' when the Meerkat is active

**Control the arousal =
Control the gates**

Control The Meerkat!



Dragon



THE SCIENCE OF AROUSAL

Lets step beneath the behaviour and look at the biology that explains why dogs arousal shifts, and why their behaviour changes so dramatically with it.

Flexible learning and problem-solving are most accessible in regulated nervous systems. Learning is best with Alert and Calm

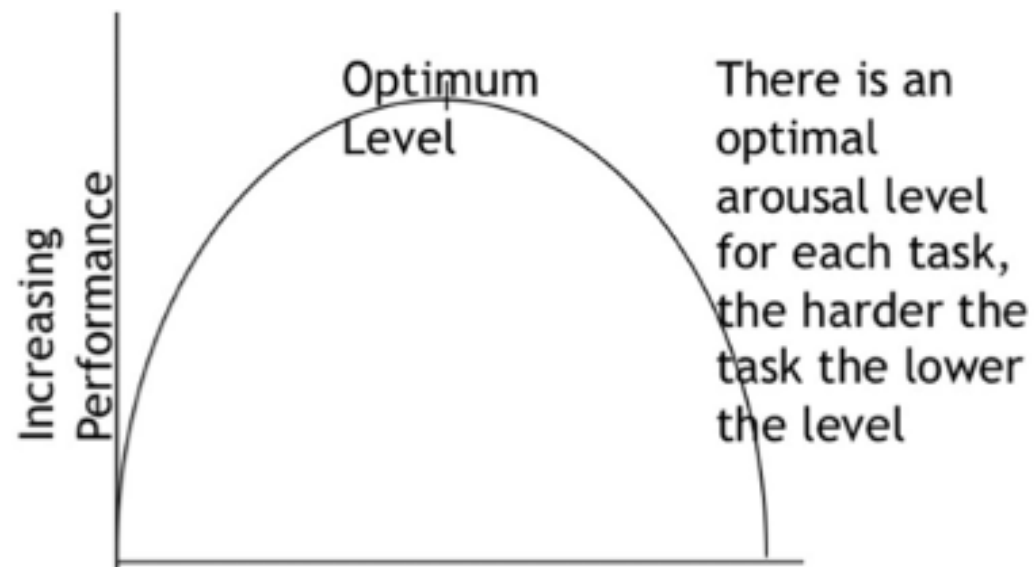
Dogs move between states continually throughout the day, recognizing these changes is key to supporting our individuals.

“Supporting regulation, changes everything else.



Yerkes–Dodson & Performance

Yerkes/Dodson/Hobbs Law Of Arousal JERKES/DODSON/HOBBS LAW OF AROUSAL



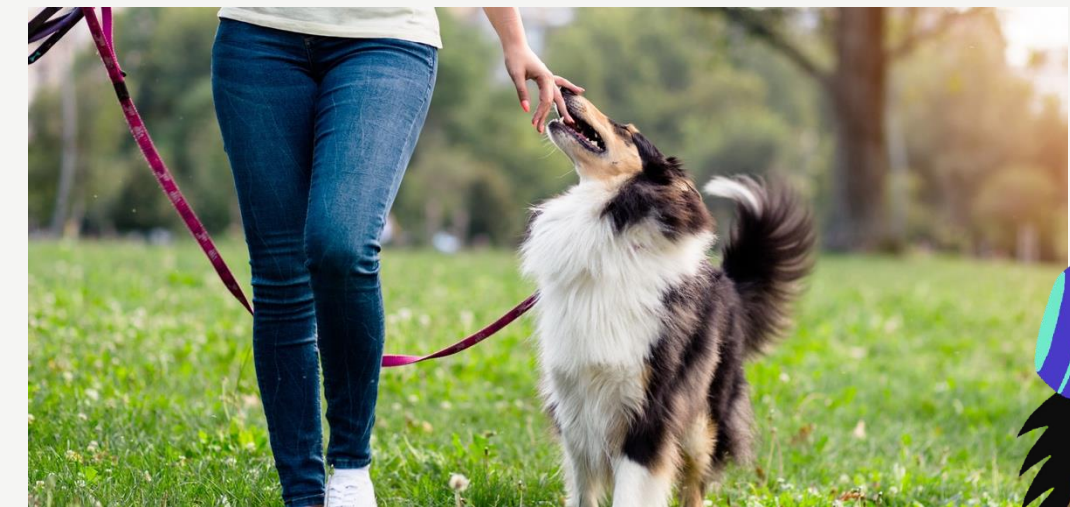
- Jerkes & Dodson created the initial curve however, Hebbs (1995) introduced the term more generally.
- Hobbs used the curve to describe the relationship between arousal and performance.

- By doing this he changed the driving concepts for motivation from the BODY to the BRAIN !

Performance improves with arousal...
until arousal becomes too high.

Too low and the individual drifts, too
high and the Meerkat hijacks.
The sweet spot is always focused,
never frantic.

The goal is not “calm.”
The goal is regulated enough to think

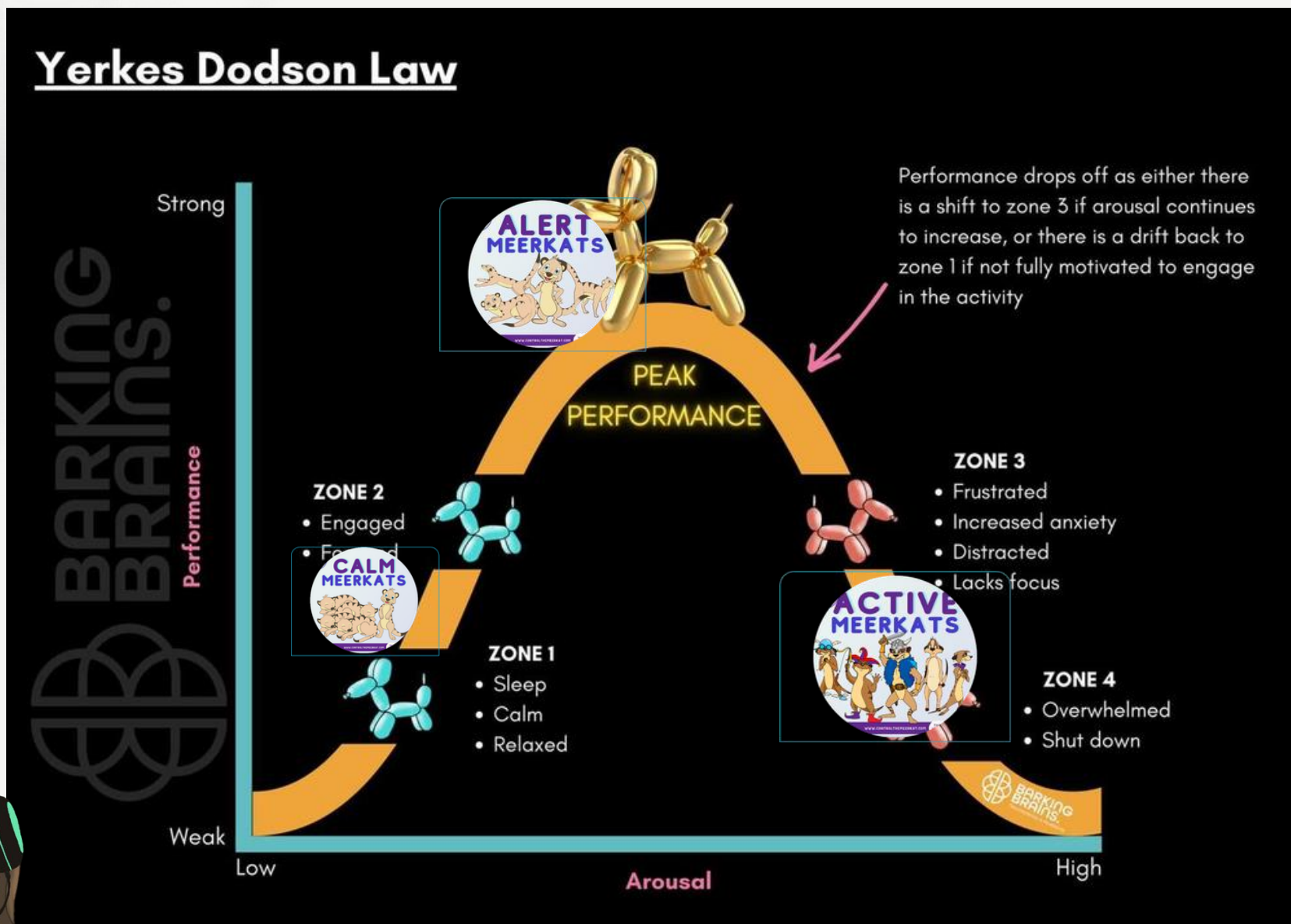


Focused NOT Frantic



Yerkes–Dodson & Performance

So the goal isn't always 'calm' — it's that balanced middle: enough energy to learn, not so much that thinking shuts down. Or, in Meerkat terms: Alert and Focused, not Frantic.”



Moderate arousal supports:

- selective attention
- behavioural flexibility
 - learning
- impulse control
- social engagement

Regulated dogs have greater access to flexible learning and behavioural choice.

Overwhelmed dogs rely more heavily on survival responses and well-rehearsed habits.

Credit to Kathy Murphy & Bobbie Bhambree of Barking Brains

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So what happens in the brain?

There are so many internal processes occurring that impact our dogs behaviour, it can be difficult for our caregivers to understand the neurological and metabolic complexities.

As professionals it's our job to understand these concepts and be able to relay them in a more accessible format



But What Actually Happens?

Arousal is the nervous system's level of activation, it determines how ready the dog is to:

notice

react

explore

learn

connect
socially

protect
themselves

As activation rises:

- Attention narrows
- Movement readiness increases
- Reflexive behaviour becomes more likely – habits, patterns
- Cognitive flexibility decreases
- Behavioural flexibility decreases



Arousal changes which behaviours become accessible.



But What Actually Happens?

Arousal determines how ready the nervous system is to notice, react, explore, or learn.

It's not emotion, it's not stress, and it's not behaviour. But influences all of them.

Arousal is created and influenced by different neurological systems; which include (but are not limited to)

1. ARAS — the Ascending Reticular Activating System
This controls wakefulness, alertness, and sensory readiness.

The Autonomic Nervous System (ANS)
This balances sympathetic 'go' energy with parasympathetic 'rest' energy.

Sympathetic-Adrenal-Medullar SAM —
the adrenaline-driven surge that spikes arousal rapidly.

Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal HPA axis, which deals with longer-term load.

Arousal & the gates determines which brain networks are online, and therefore what the dog can actually do

Why Baselines Shift

The nervous system doesn't simply react to the environment or potential stressors. It adapts to them.

Repeated activation can change: vigilance, recovery, sensitivity, coping capacity - This process is called: Allostasis



Recovery influences future coping capacity. It isn't what happens after the work.

Recovery is part of the work.



Why Arousal Changes Reinforcement Value

Arousal changes what the individual finds reinforcing.

Low arousal → food works, toys can help increase arousal (if we need more attention).

High arousal → movement works, Food needs to be used quickly, toys can often get straight in there. If too high only distance or time will help.

This isn't fussiness — it's physiology."



Why Arousal Changes Reinforcement Value

The types of food we use and how we deliver it can often make all the difference.

‘High value’ soft food is good for distraction, better for some if moving (ping pong, chase, find it)

‘Low value’ often kibble, chewing and crunching can help with thinking and processing.

Food delivered in predictable ways can help lower arousal and get the brain back online, especially if regularly practiced. (Leslie’s Pattern Games)



Food as Feedback

Feeding for regulation is different to feeding as a reward.

Eating can help reduce arousal and interrupt the switch from a parasympathetic state (calm meerkat /rest & digest) to a sympathetic state (Active Meerkat (F/F))

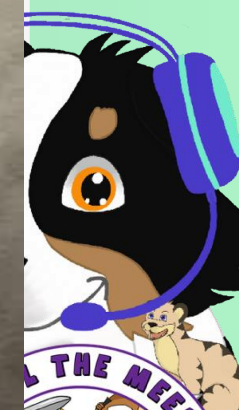
The action of eating helps dogs in two main ways.

1. A distraction - nose magnet, find it type exercises (great management)
2. It helps them calm and process what's around them

Both can help lower arousal and interrupt the meerkat

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Nuffle Window Video - FEEDING THE Meerkat!



Why Meerkats?



What do you think of when you think Meerkat ?



- Sentry duty – Always looking for potential threats (real & perceived!
- Alert - always ready for action!
- Social – Each have their own role.
 - Burrows ?



Arousal is the dog's internal energy dial ?



Our job is to figure out where that dial is pointing and guide the individual back into that place where they can actually think, learn, and choose.

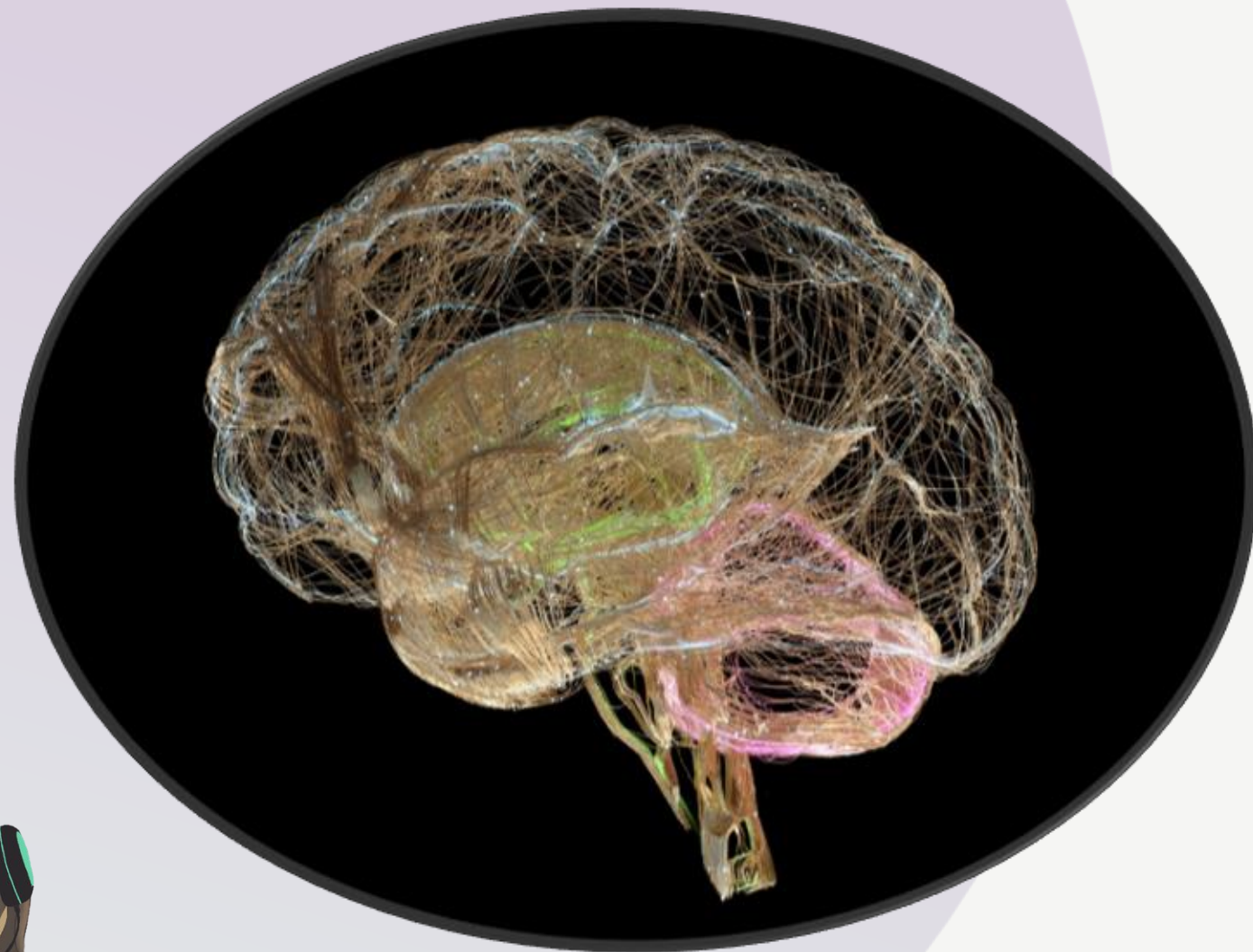
Imagining a Meerkat on your dogs shoulder can help recognise these internal states in real time.

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Meerkat States

Neuroscience is complex, the meerkat analogy allows us to explain these concepts in an accessible format.



These Meerkat states give us a clear, functional map of the individual's nervous system — what's biologically available in each moment; **through 3 Meerkat states;**

- **Calm is good for recovery**
 - **Alert is teachable**
 - **Active is protective**



Active Meerkat states!



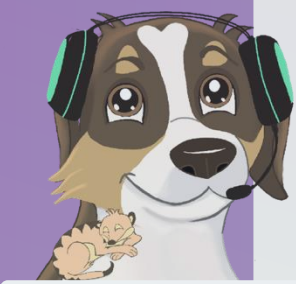
- On alert all the time / shut down and just existing
- Individuals impacted by chronic stress and/or trauma
- Triggered constantly, These individuals struggle to think, problem solve, play, recall from memory. Often touch sensitive – not always pain related – emotional allodynia
- Over the top response, that's not appropriate or proportional to the situation
- Not always in context e.g. dog reacts to handbag not a dog
- Insecure / disorganized attachments
- Access to all meerkats – but often has a primary meerkat often due to their trauma



Alert Meerkat states!



- Dogs that struggle with arousal levels but can chill out, often teenagers and / or Hyperactive / high drive dogs
- Can be healthy or subtle underlying medical ailments
- Often have single event trauma,
- Will activate once triggered, can cope most of the time, are building resilience, recover but takes time.
- Can complete the stress cycle.
- Strong attachments
- Access to all Meerkats, depending on context



Calm Meerkat states!



- Most chilled dogs have these
- No trauma history, or well into their recovery.
- Will activate once triggered, can cope, have resilience, recover quickly.
- Can complete the stress cycle.
- Access to all Meerkats, depending on context
- Secure attachments



Arousal is fuel that runs these states & activation is



- Instinctive
 - Fast
 - Automatic
- NOT conscious



Once sensory information enters the system, it moves through a rapid sequence.

SENSORY INPUT → ALARM SYSTEMS → BEHAVIOUR.”

The Meerkats gives us a visual way to understand which activation state the dog is in, and therefore what behaviours are biologically accessible in that moment.





Remember

Arousal changes what the individual is capable of in that moment. That's why two dogs can behave very differently in the same situation.

But if we only focus on the outward behaviour, without understanding the nervous system underneath it, we risk misunderstanding the dog completely.



Arousal $\neq$ Stress

Arousal tells us how activated the nervous system is. Stress tells us how well it's coping.

They interact — but they are not the same

- A dog can be highly aroused and enjoying themselves
- A dog can be highly stressed while appearing shut down or quiet



Misreading arousal and stress leads to poor assessment.



How do we explain all this?

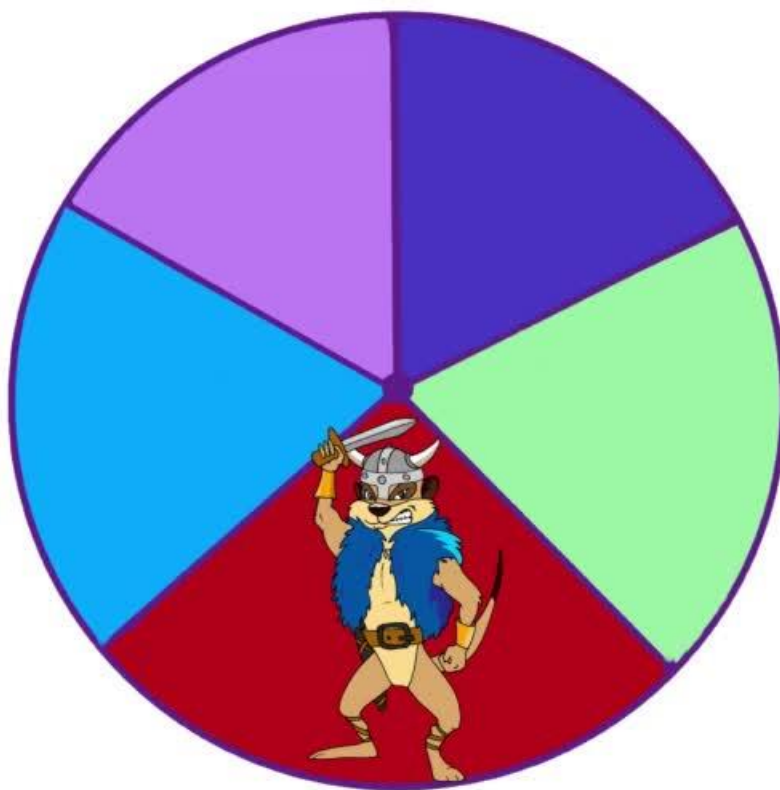
All dogs have a meerkat on their shoulder, and many in their burrows within the brain. They work together to keep the individual safe and will take control if they feel it's needed! When safety is a priority the Meerkat will ALWAYS respond first



Meerkat Responds First

Perception → Emotion → Motor → Cortex

Analyzing...
Situation



The limbic system fires before the cortex — your dog feels first, reacts second, and thinks third.
This isn't disobedience. It's simply how the brain is wired."

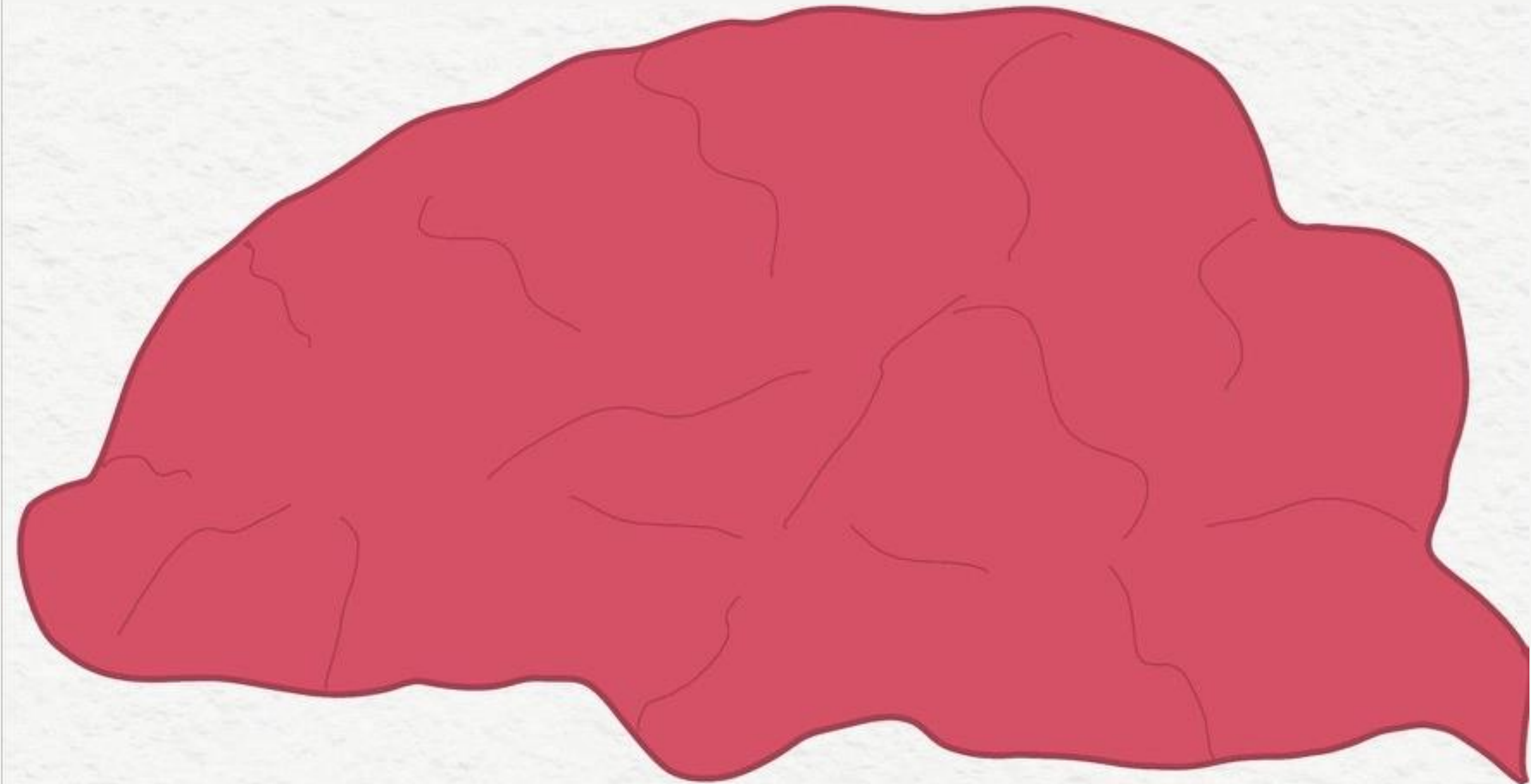
The Meerkat is driven mainly by the fast systems, which is why regulation work focuses on movement, sniffing, breathing, patterns, and decompression: tools that help calm the system before the Meerkat hijacks the behaviour.

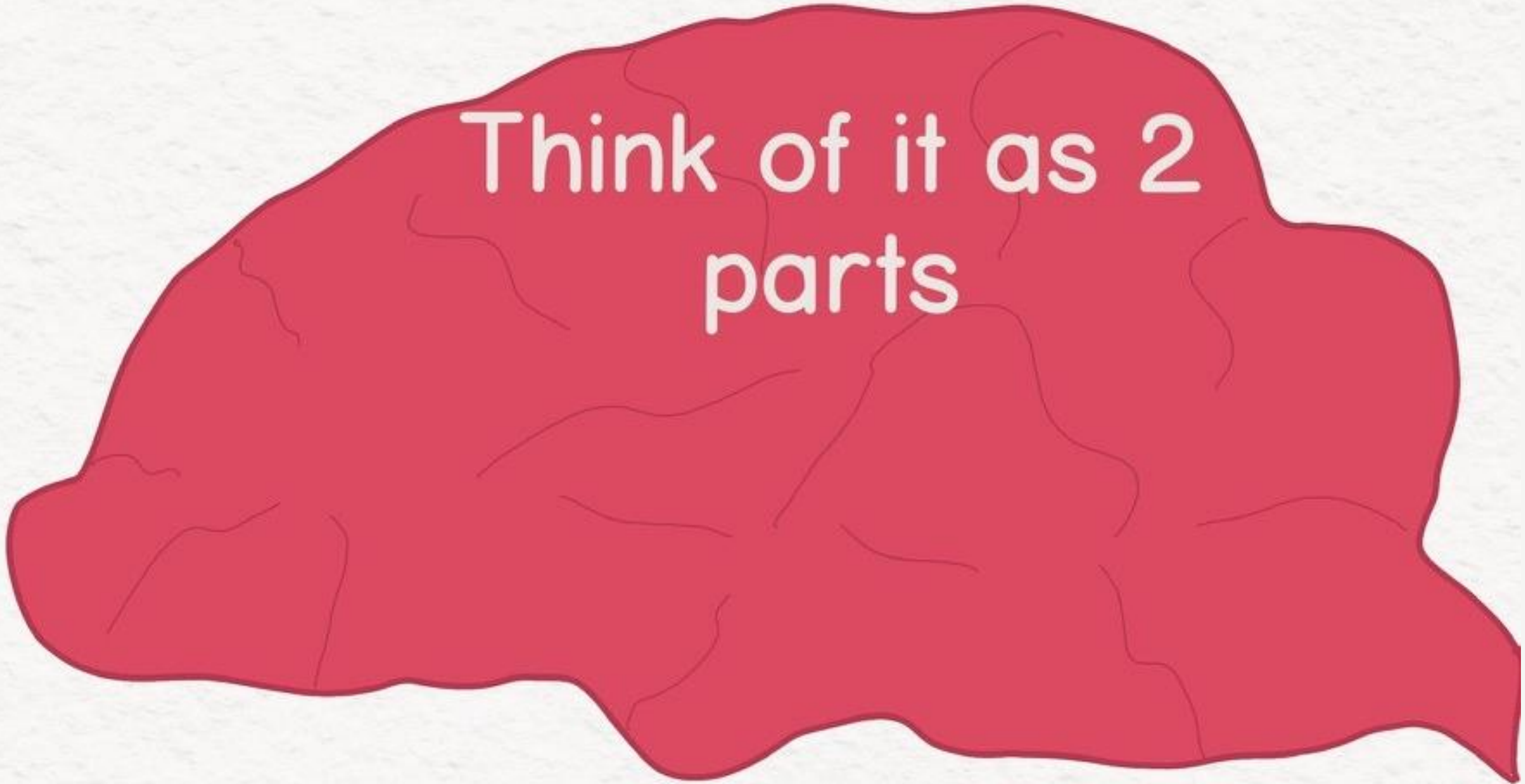


Wolf



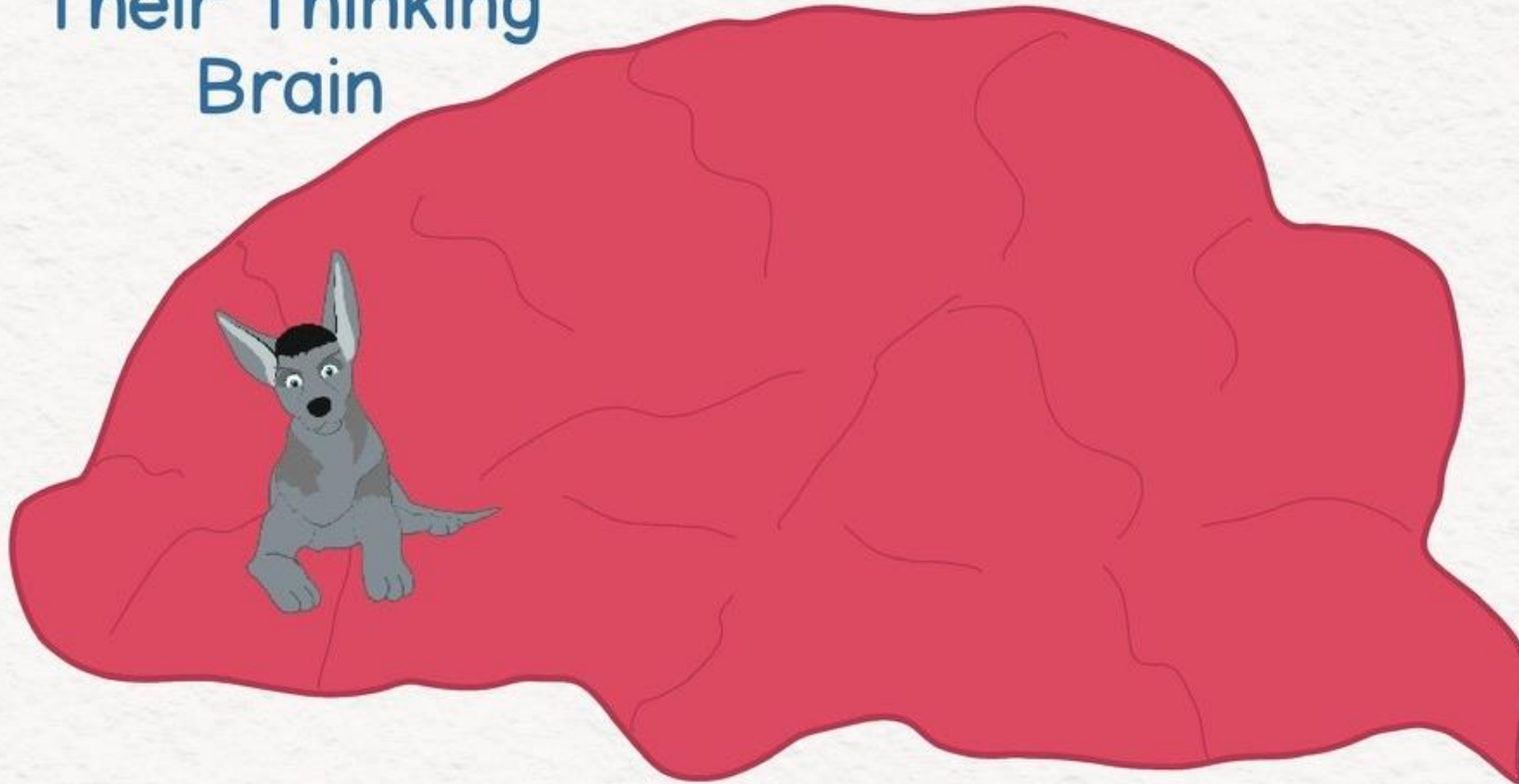
This is your dogs brain



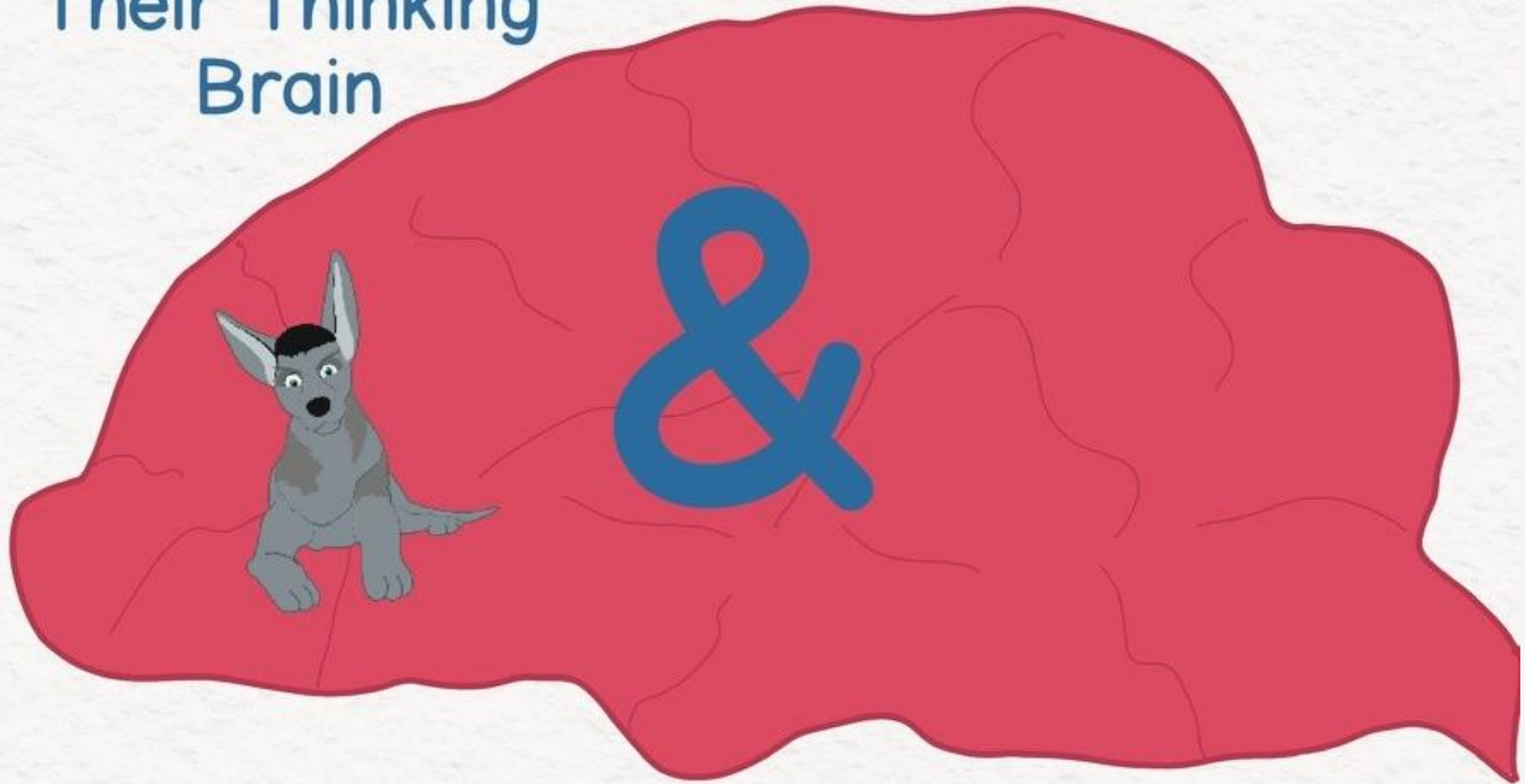


Think of it as 2
parts

Their Thinking Brain



Their Thinking Brain

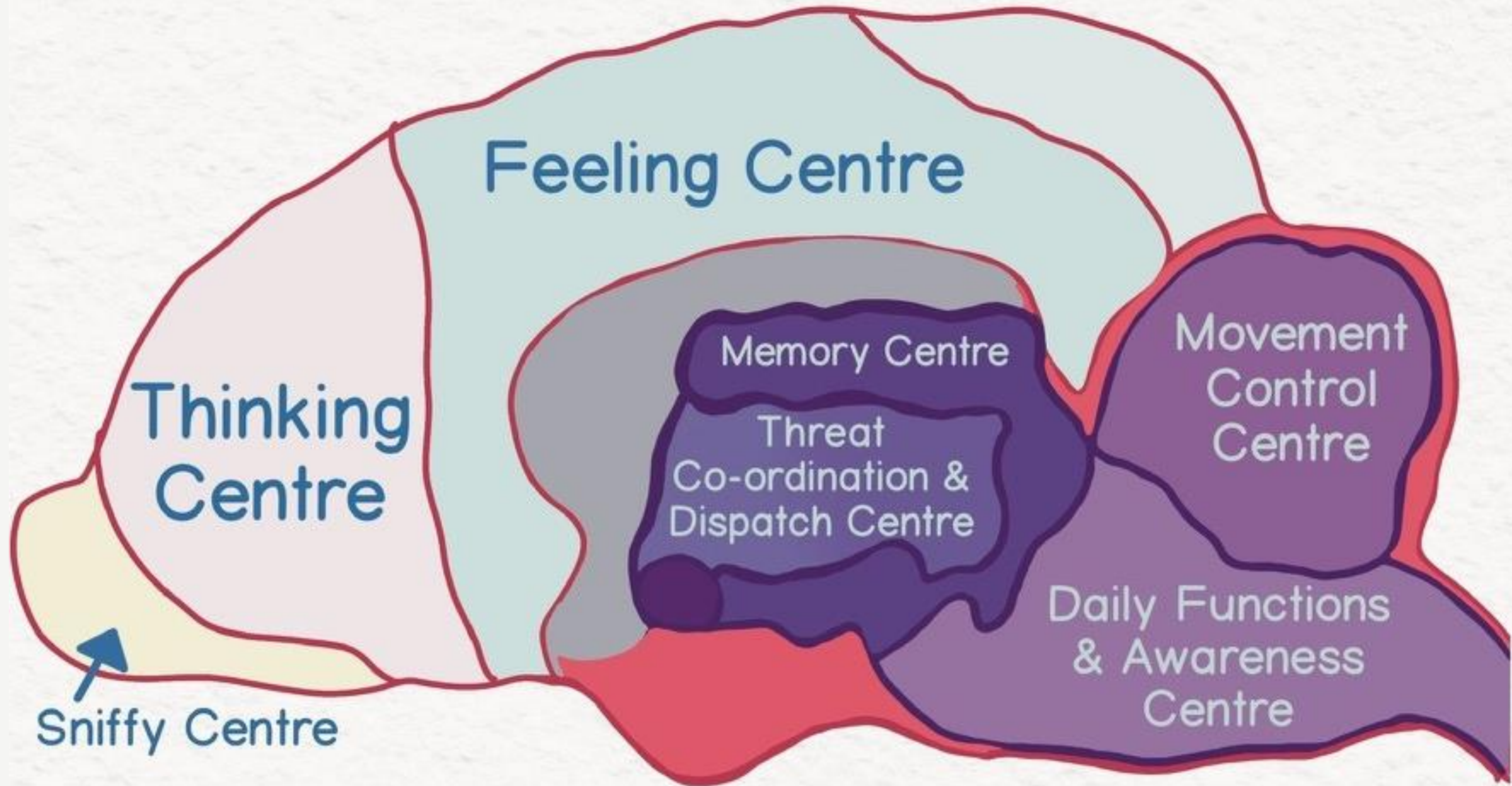


Their Thinking
Brain

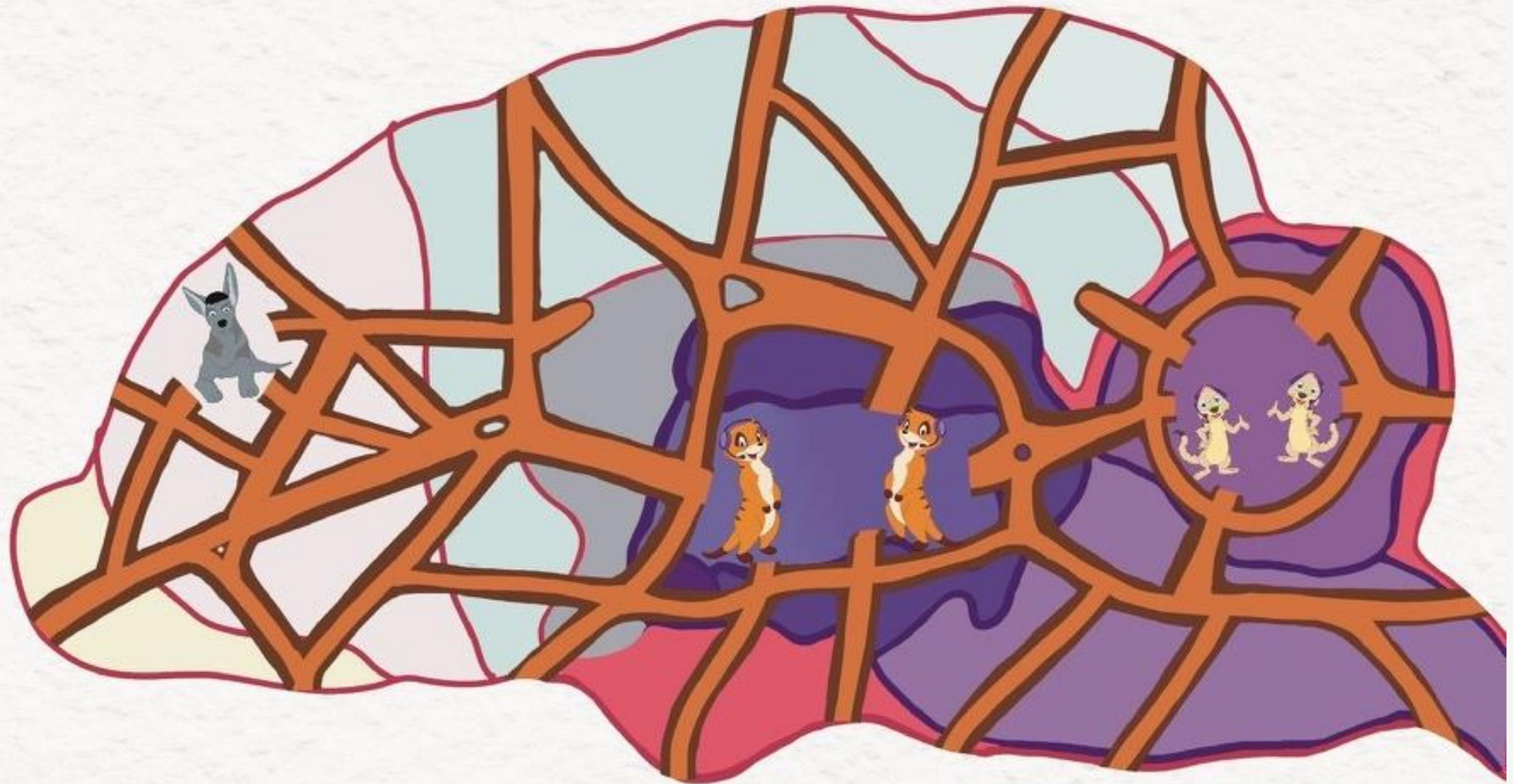


Their meerkat brain!

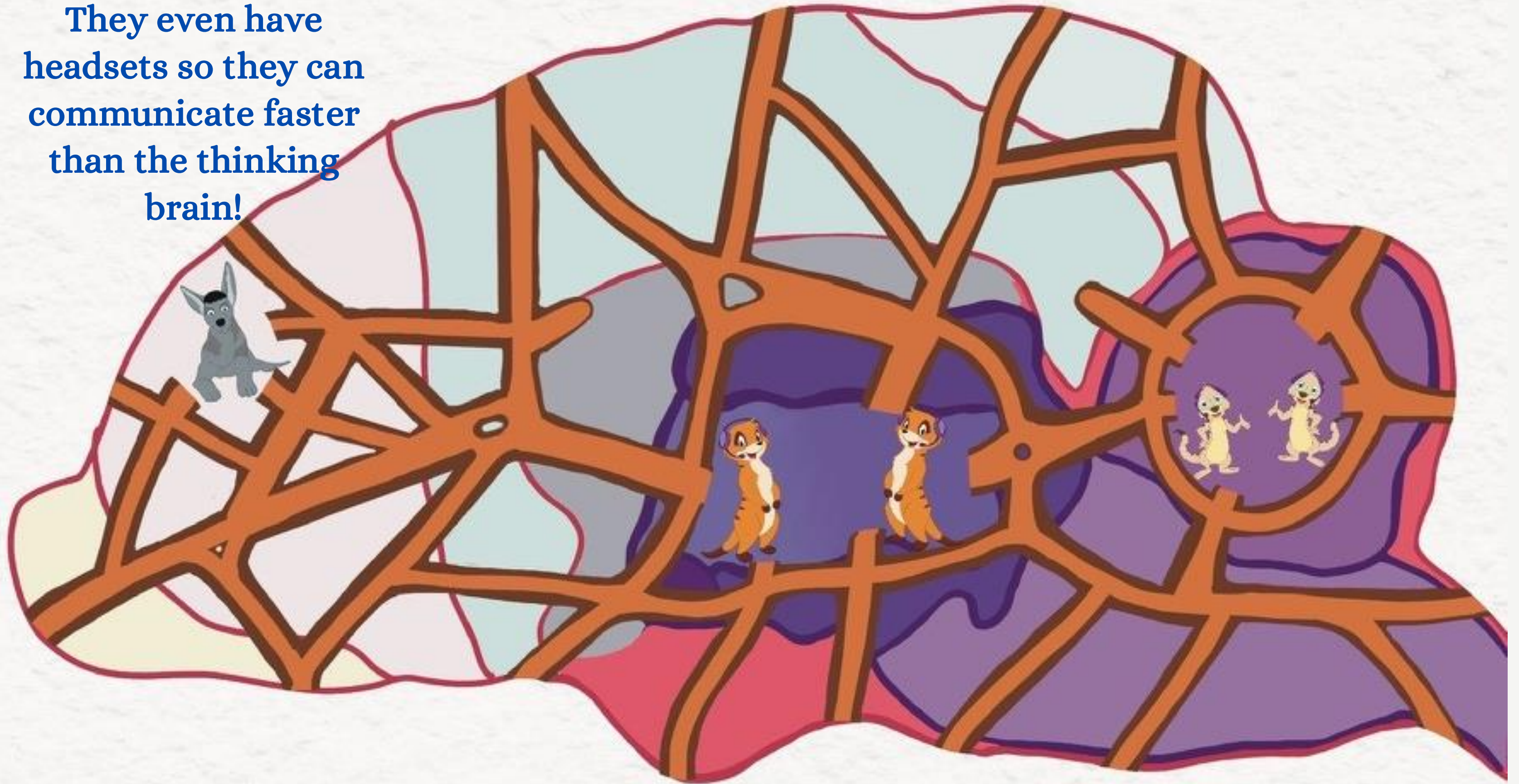
These are the regions inside your dogs brain



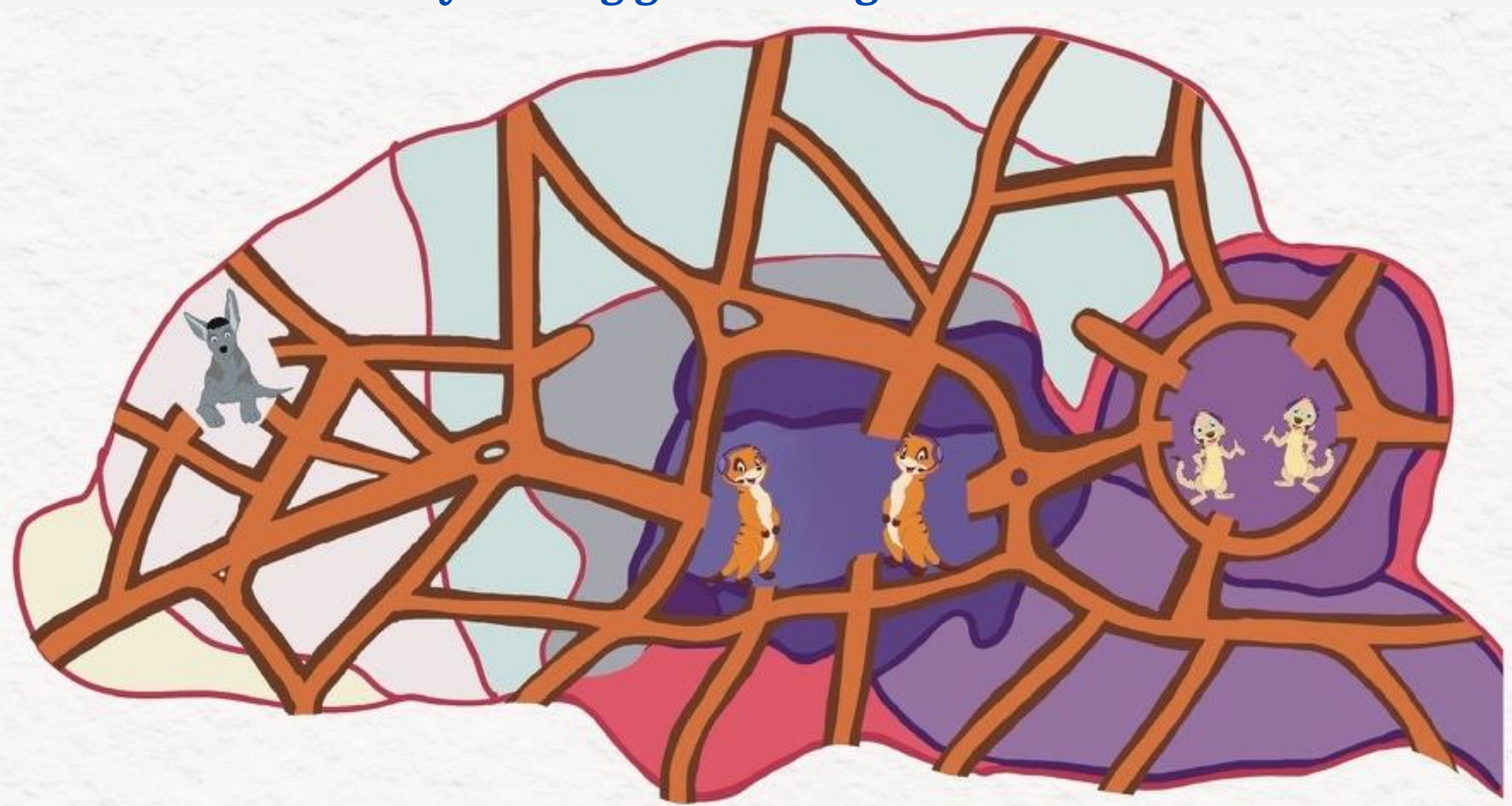
Try to think of the brains neural pathways, as meerkat burrows.



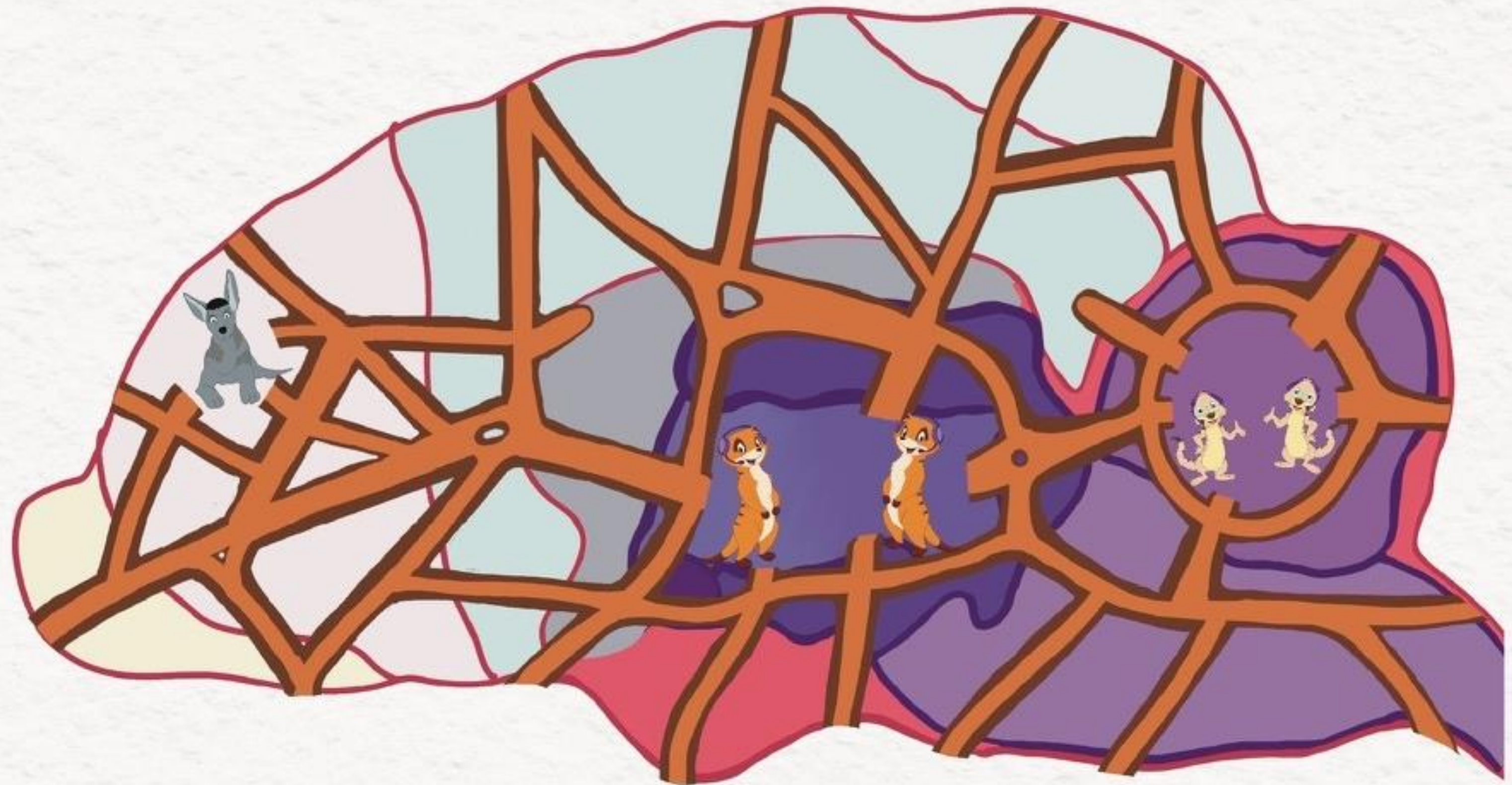
They even have
headsets so they can
communicate faster
than the thinking
brain!



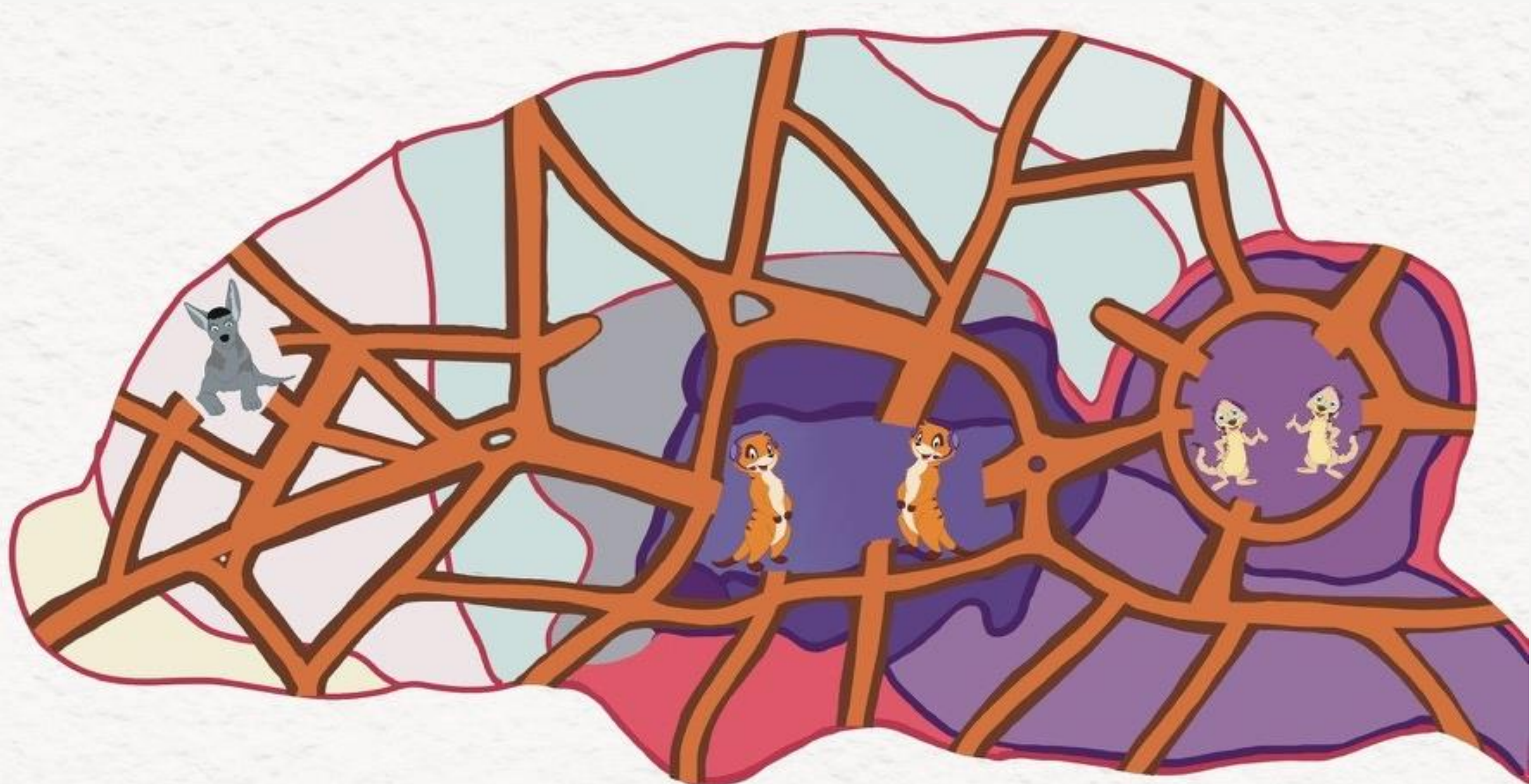
The meerkats are constantly creating, redirecting, and repairing these burrows, as
your dog goes through their life



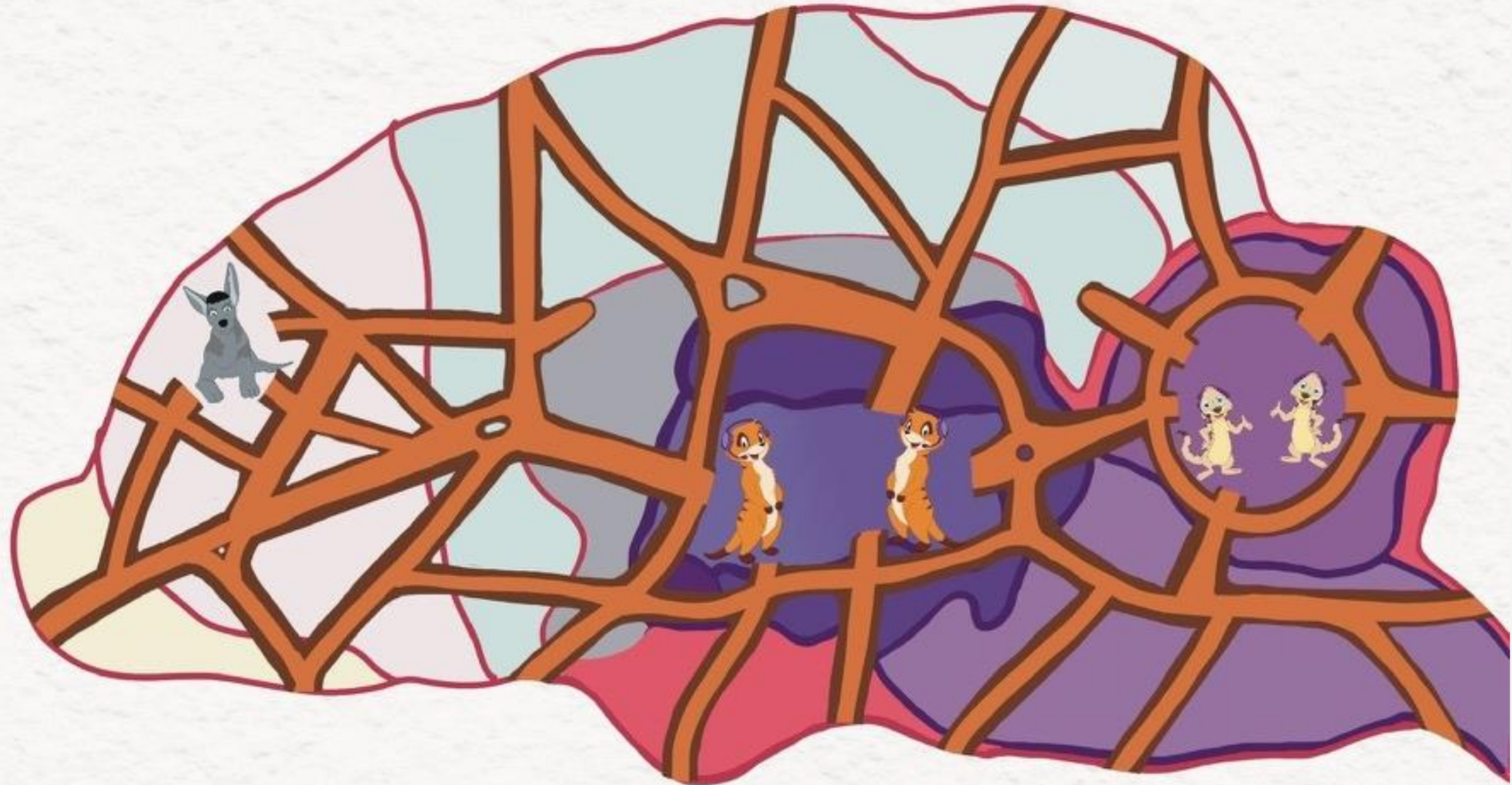
Dogs with healthy and resilient brains, have meerkats that know how to build, reinforce, and maintain the burrows effectively.



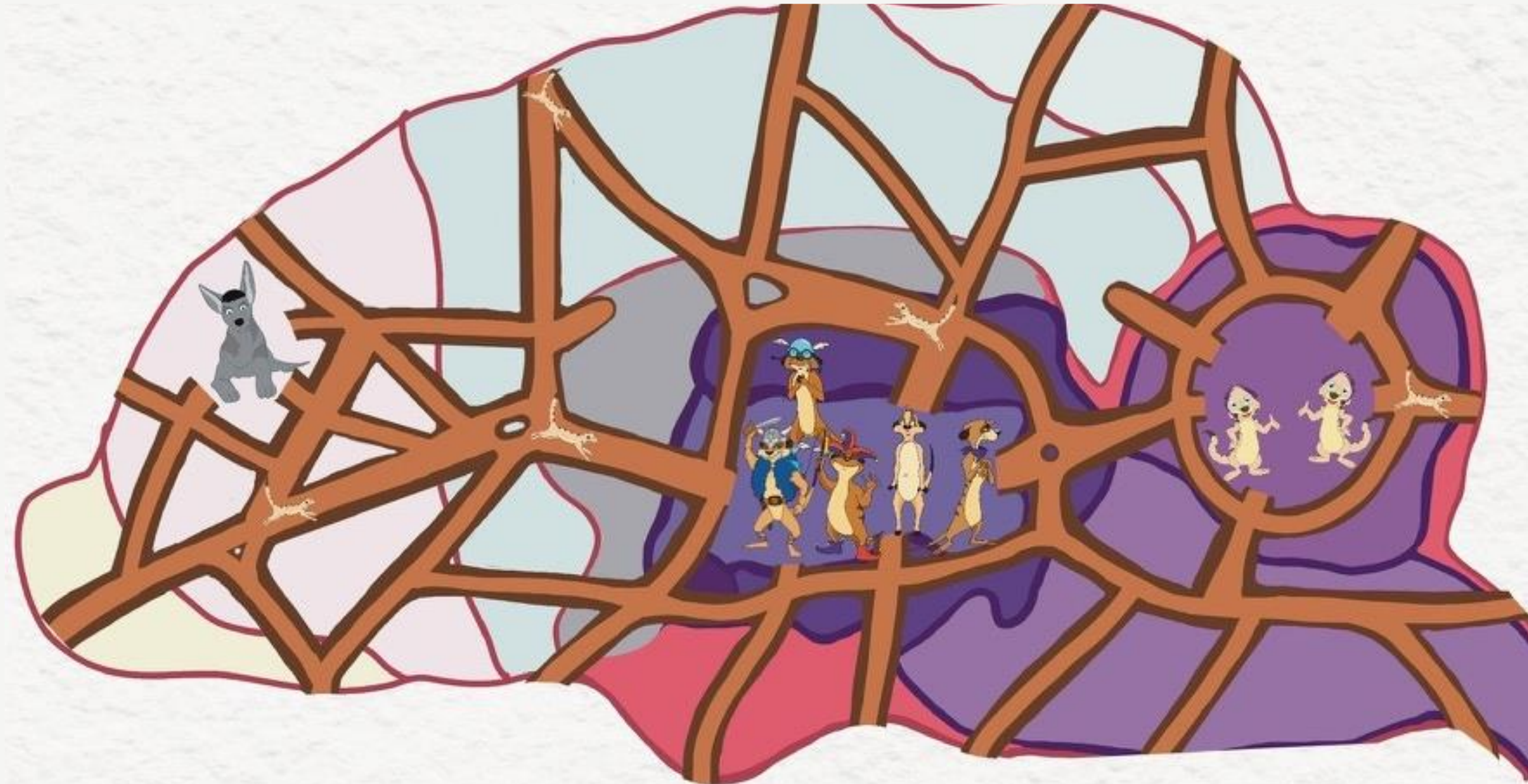
When a situation causes the dogs to react. These meerkats can assess via their sentry, communicate with all brain regions via their headsets, and recover swiftly with little damage to the burrows.



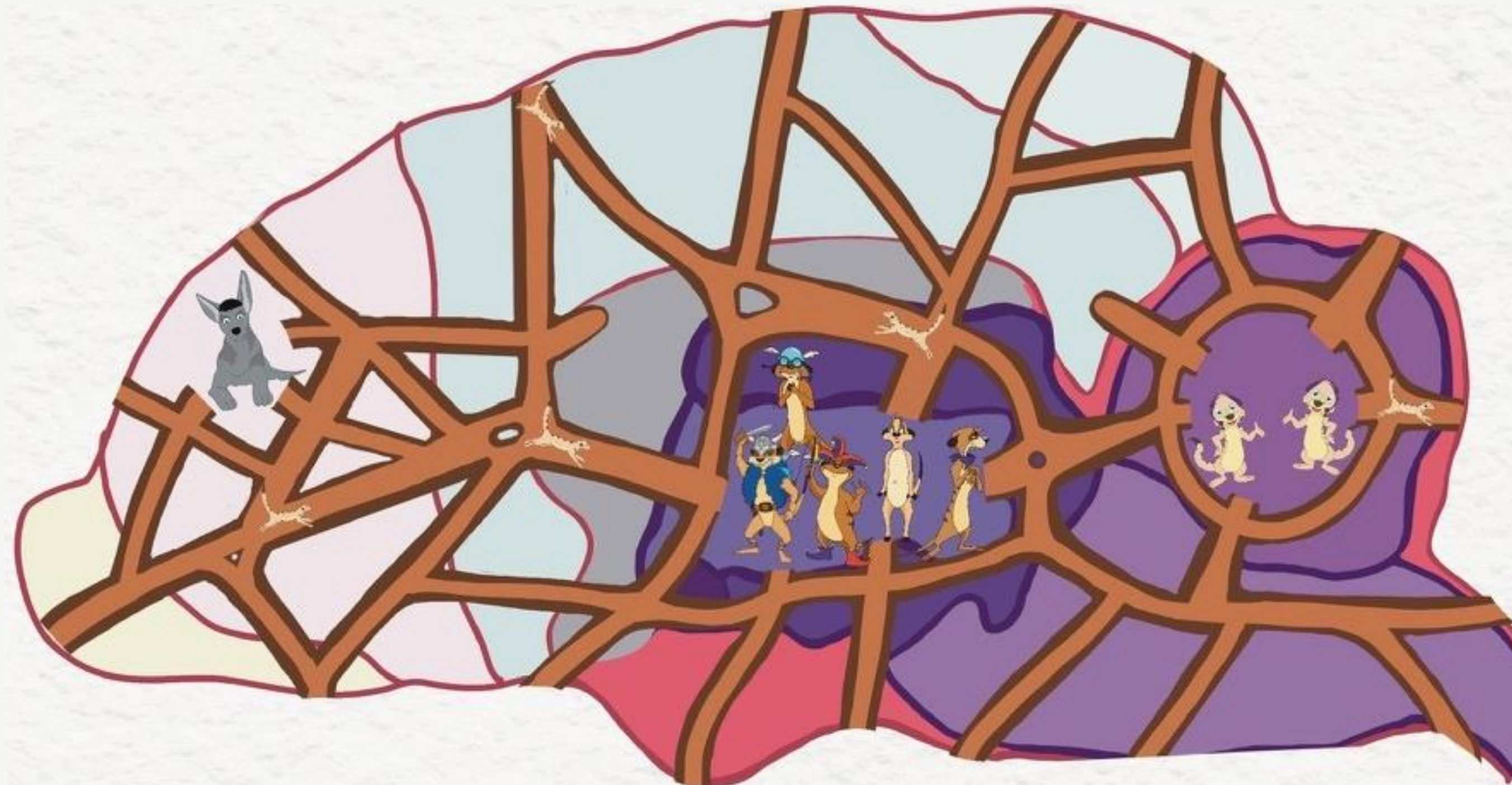
The more they practise in safe ways the faster the recovery



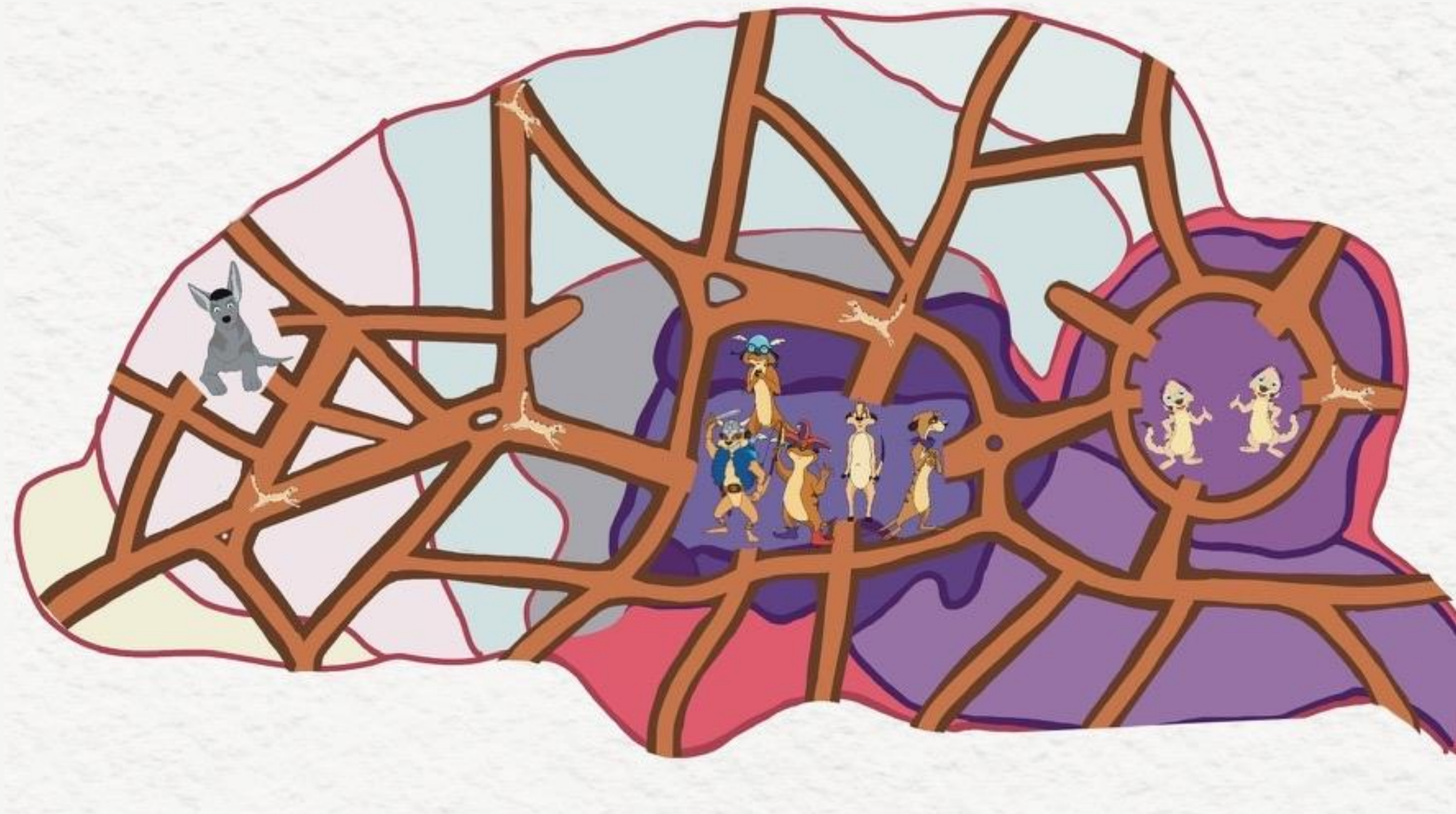
If an event is too much, or they have had little to no safe practise, Active
Meerkats will hijack the brain!



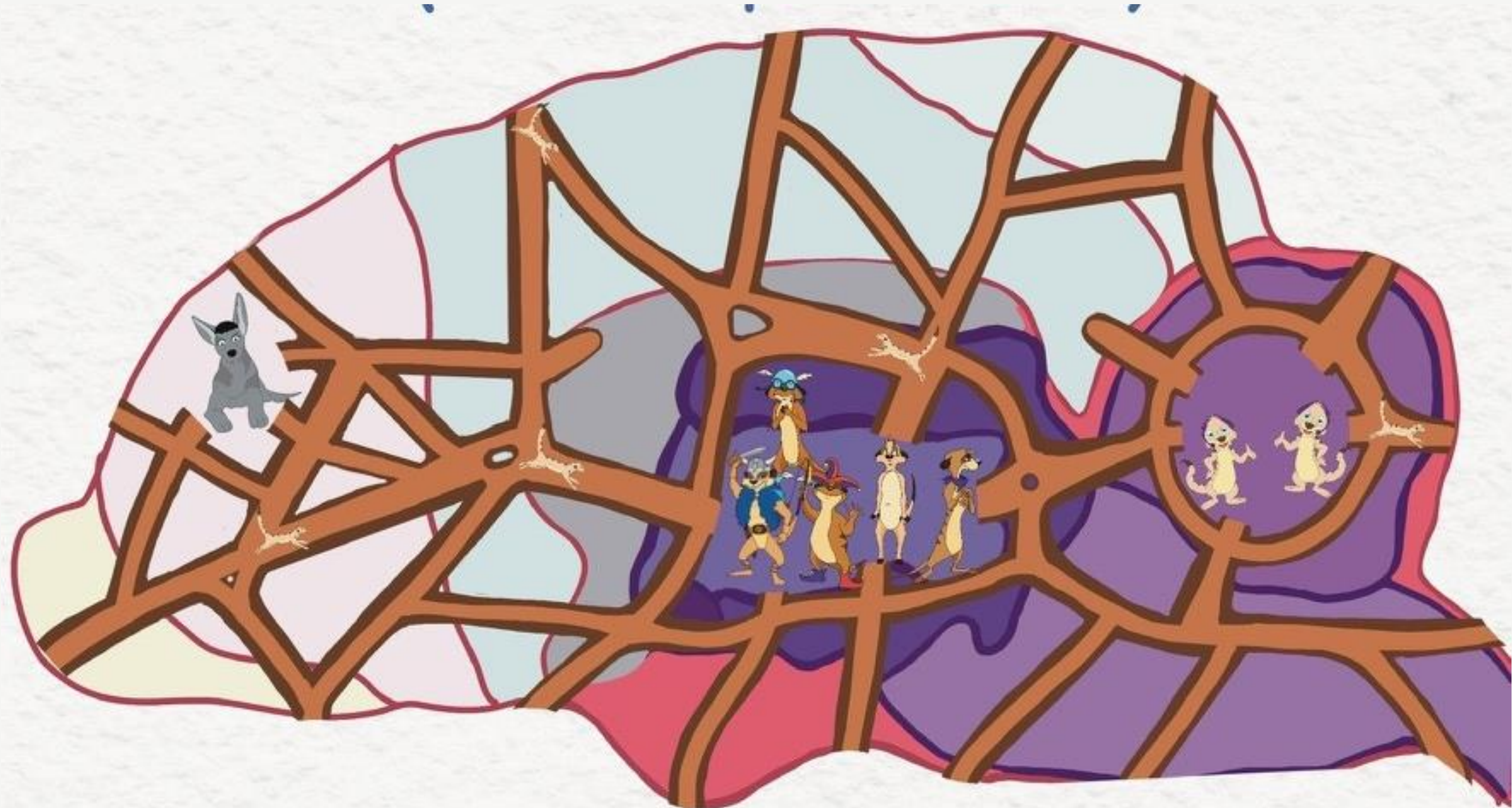
This happens regularly for dogs who have an Active meerkat
as their Sentry



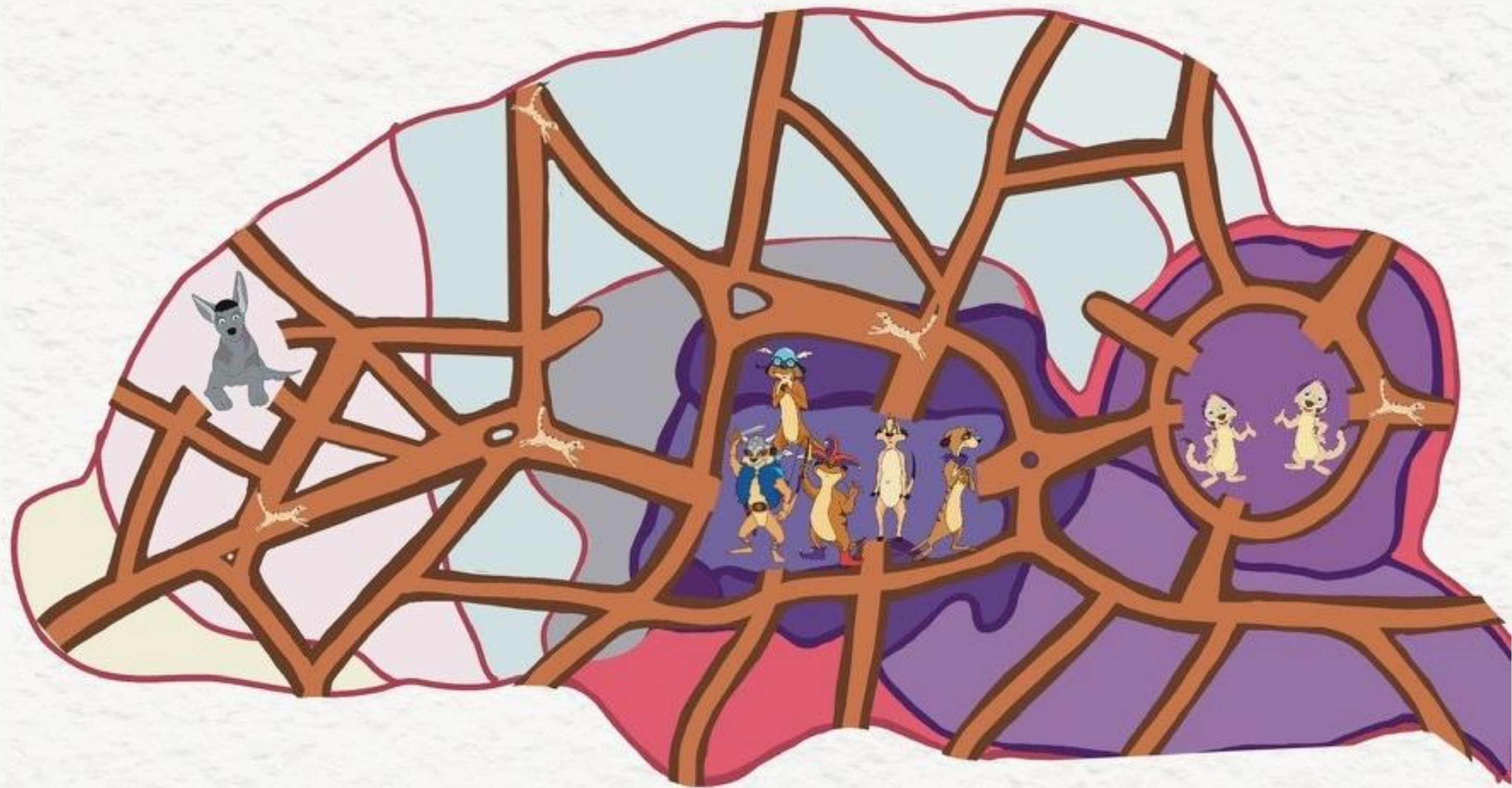
There are more likely to panic if they feel threatened (real or
percieved)

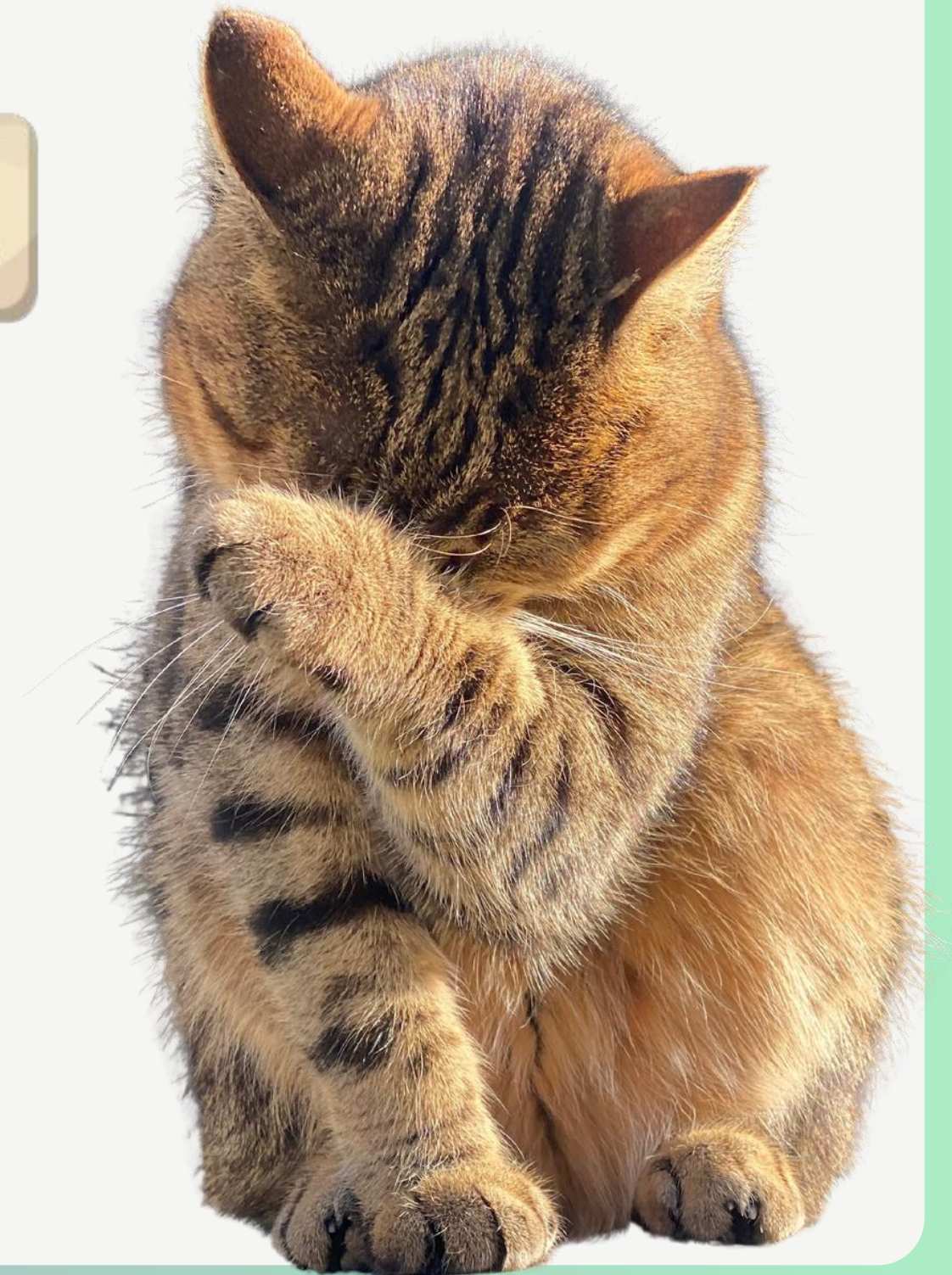


They can hijack your dog, causing them to react without thinking!



This reaction is often not appropriate or proportional to the situation.





Remember the headsets?

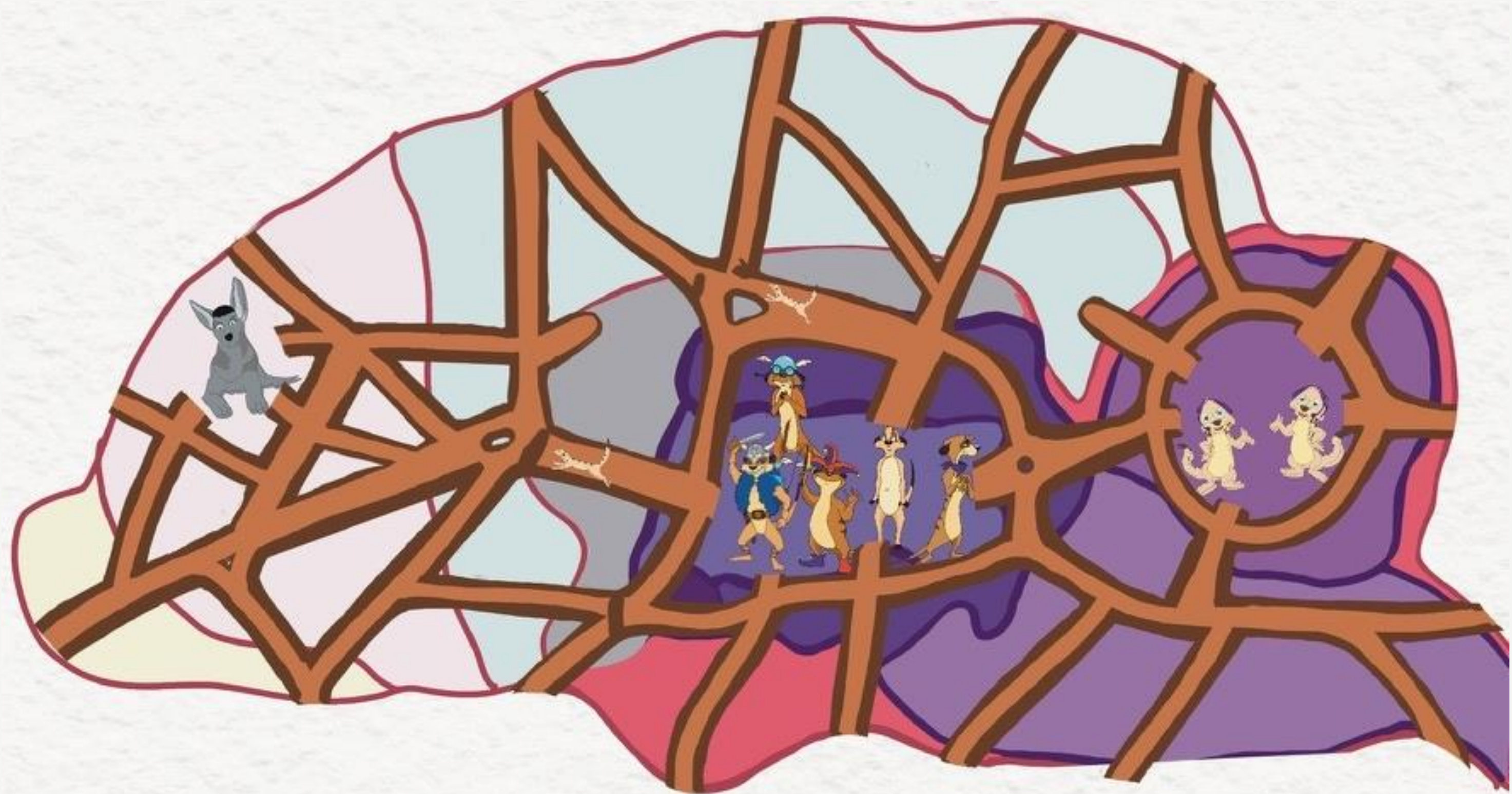
Meerkats can communicate with each other faster than they can to our dogs thinking brain

We first need to slow down this communication, by reducing arousal, then teaching self regulation exercises where they can practise in safety

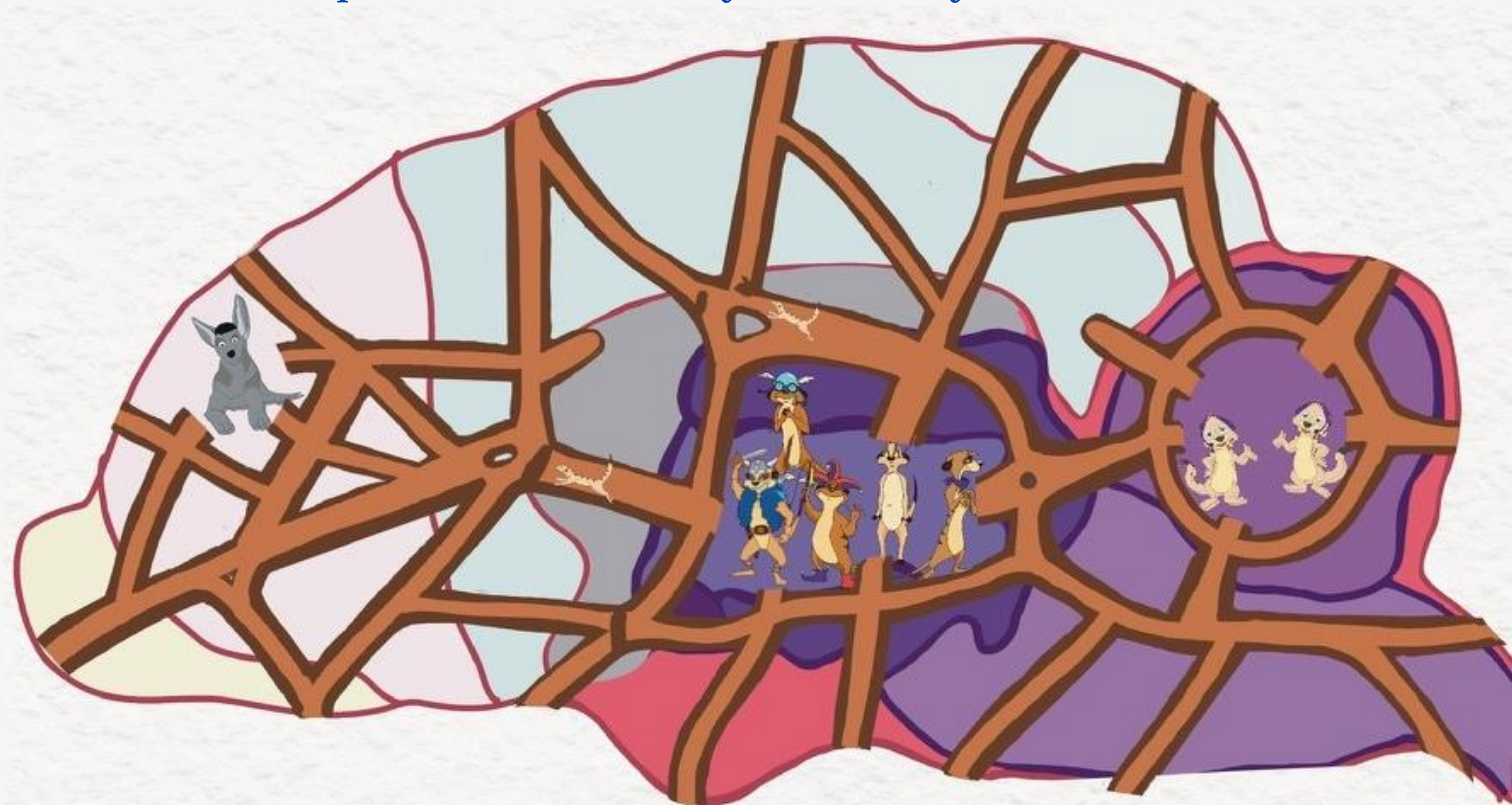
First we need our Alert meerkats to take charge over the Active meerkats!



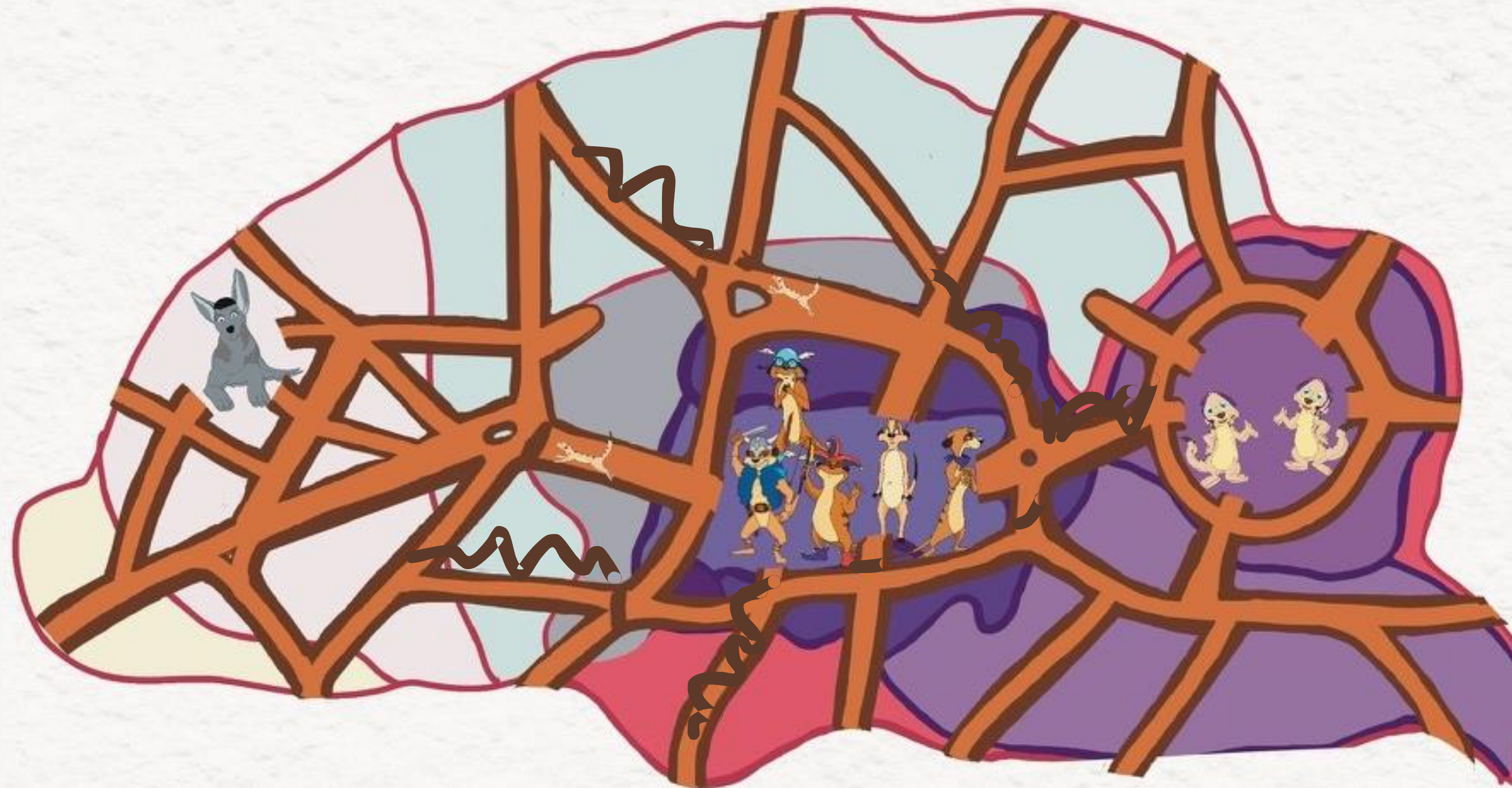
Active meerkats panic the other meerkats, which results in them blocking up the burrows to reduce communication, as a defense!



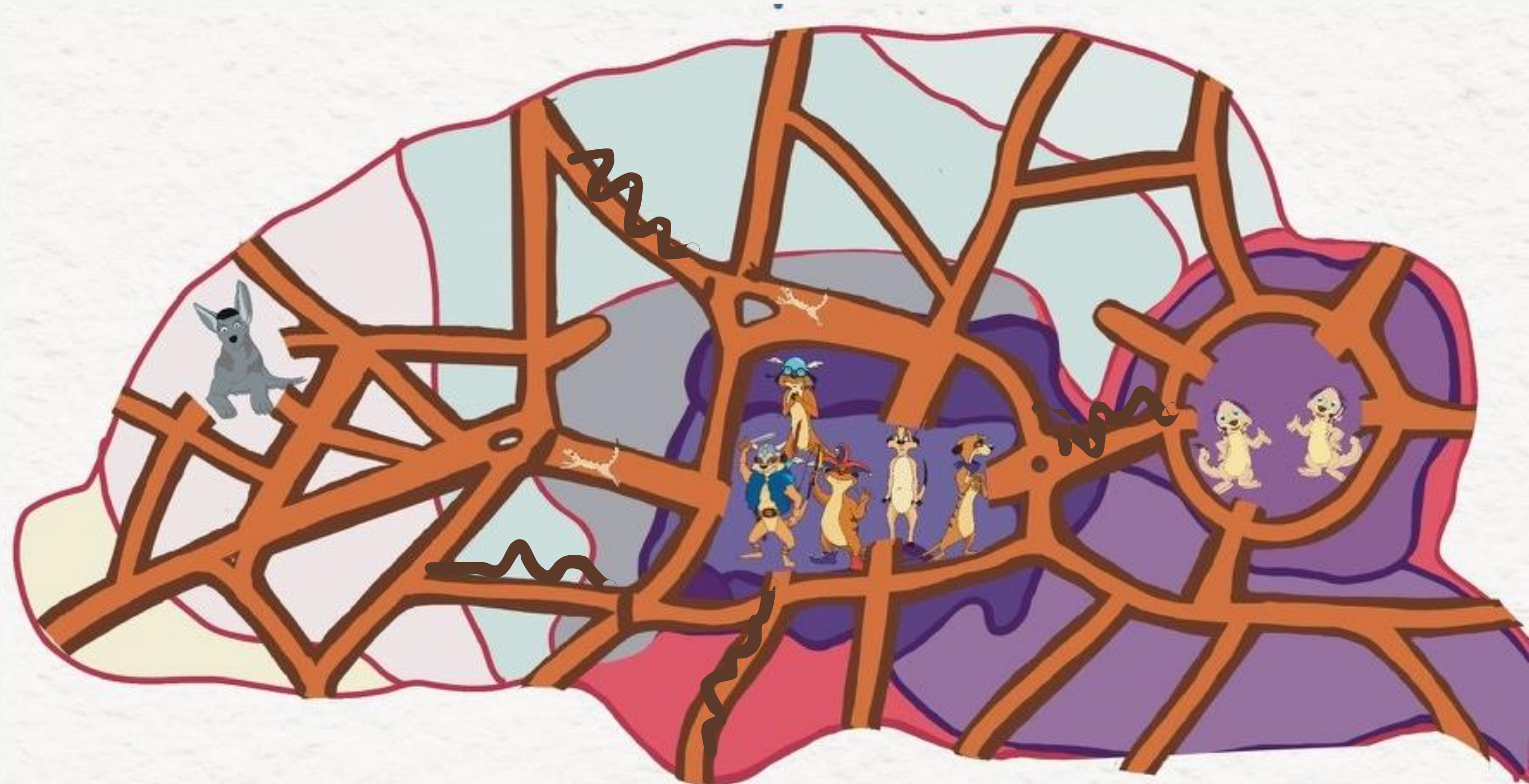
This limits communication to their logical and rational areas of the brain and impacts their memory, until they decide it's safe.



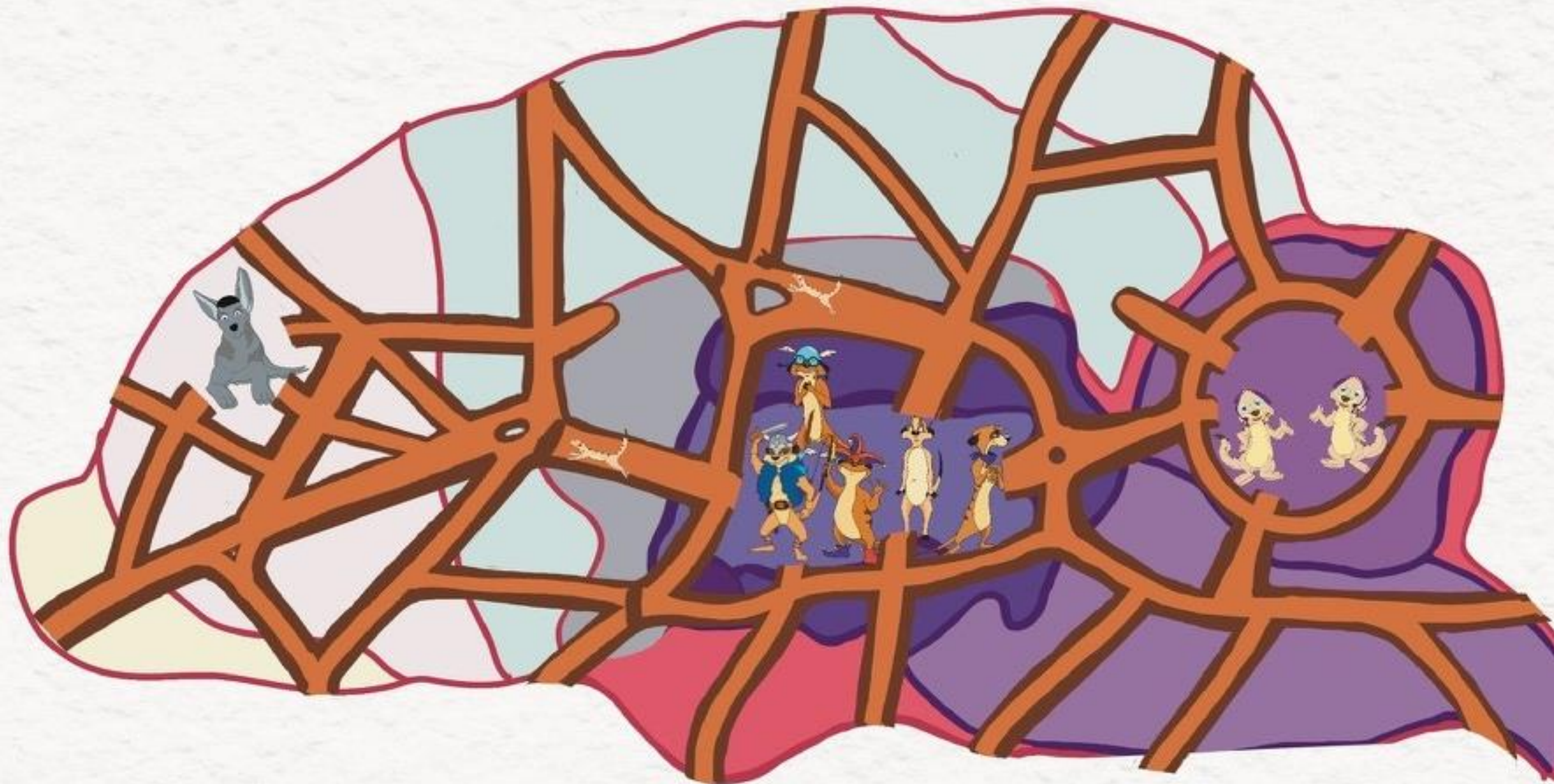
When this happens the burrows could collapse!



Which blocks & disrupts all communication until they can be repaired,
or an alternative burrow is created...

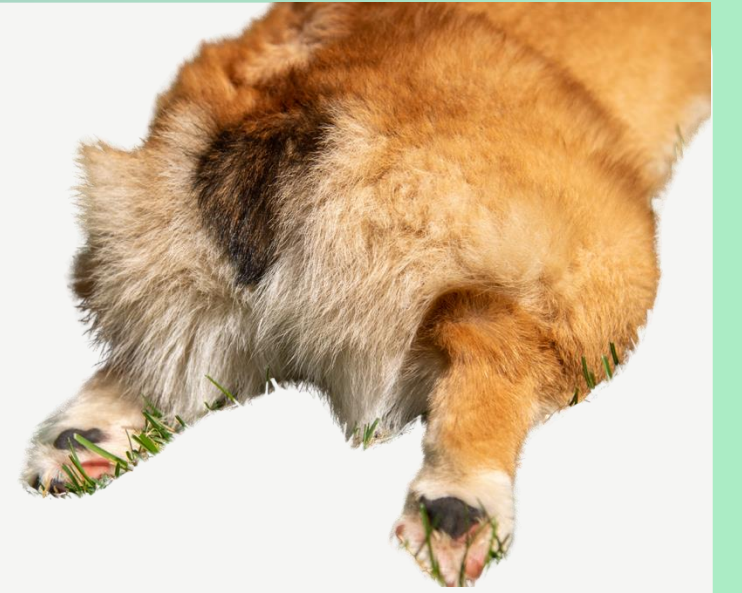
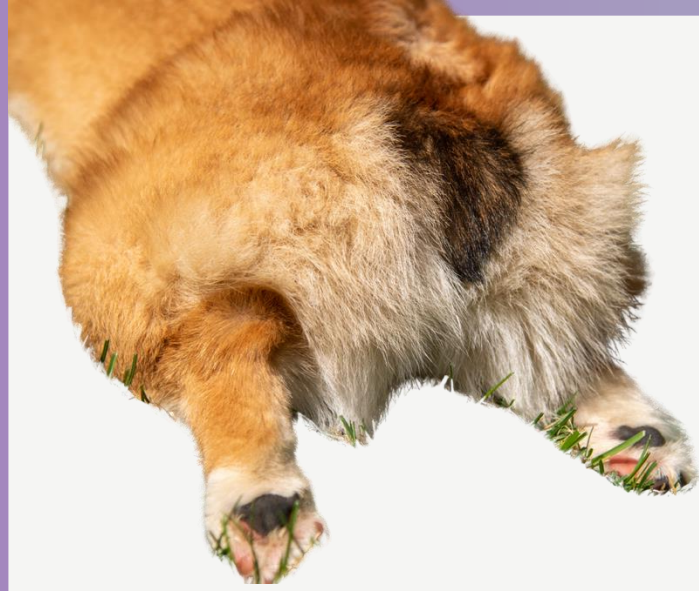


This impacts the dogs recovery and behaviour, as the meerkats take over
in an attempt to keep the brain safe



Without resilience or the ability to self regulate, the meerkats don't have the knowledge or tools to repair or reinforce the burrows effectively





But!

With access to the right tools, resources, and environment, even these meerkats



Can learn how to repair and maintain their burrows in times of stress :)



So how do we help our dogs to control their Meerkats and increase their resilience?



Assess The Dogs Autonomic State – Their Meerkat



CALM MEERKATS



www.controlthameerkat.com

ALERT MEERKATS



www.controlthameerkat.com

ACTIVE MEERKATS



www.controlthameerkat.com

In this moment, their
Meerkat is Calm, Alert, or
Active ?

Their Meerkat is
responding to? Think
internal, external &
social?

Their Meerkat needs?
Grounding? Play? Touch?
Safety?

Their Meerkat wants to?
Escape? Hide? Run?
Fight? Play? Train?
Whatever it takes ?

We can only help dogs with calm/alert
Meerkats, in the situation. Those with
alert meerkats need focus exercises,
problem solving, body awareness to
keep them grounded and focused.
Active Meerkats need safety,
grounding & connection.

“Calm is restorative,
Alert is learning-
ready, and Active is
reflexive.

Recognising which
Meerkat you're
looking at tells you
exactly what the dog
can do in that
moment.

www.controlthameerkat.com



Meet the Meerkat Where They Are



Calm → rest
Alert → train
Active → safety

Regulate first → then educate.

**Biology over behaviour every
time.**

Our approach needs to focus on understanding their physiological and emotional state, and meeting them where they are.

This starts with controlling the meerkat!

Environmental Engineering

Real behaviour change starts with the environment.

When we shape the dog's world to reduce allostatic load and increase predictability, we keep the Meerkat closer to Calm and Alert — where learning is actually possible.

Arousal regulation skills help all cases!

As you can see the science of arousal is complex and doesn't fit any specific protocols, as it's so dependent on the individual (health, hormones, lived experience) and their environment in that moment, even more so if the individual is impacted by trauma!

This is why I developed the meerkat framework - to make the science more digestible & CUTE!



Thank You for listening

Not sure where to take
your career?

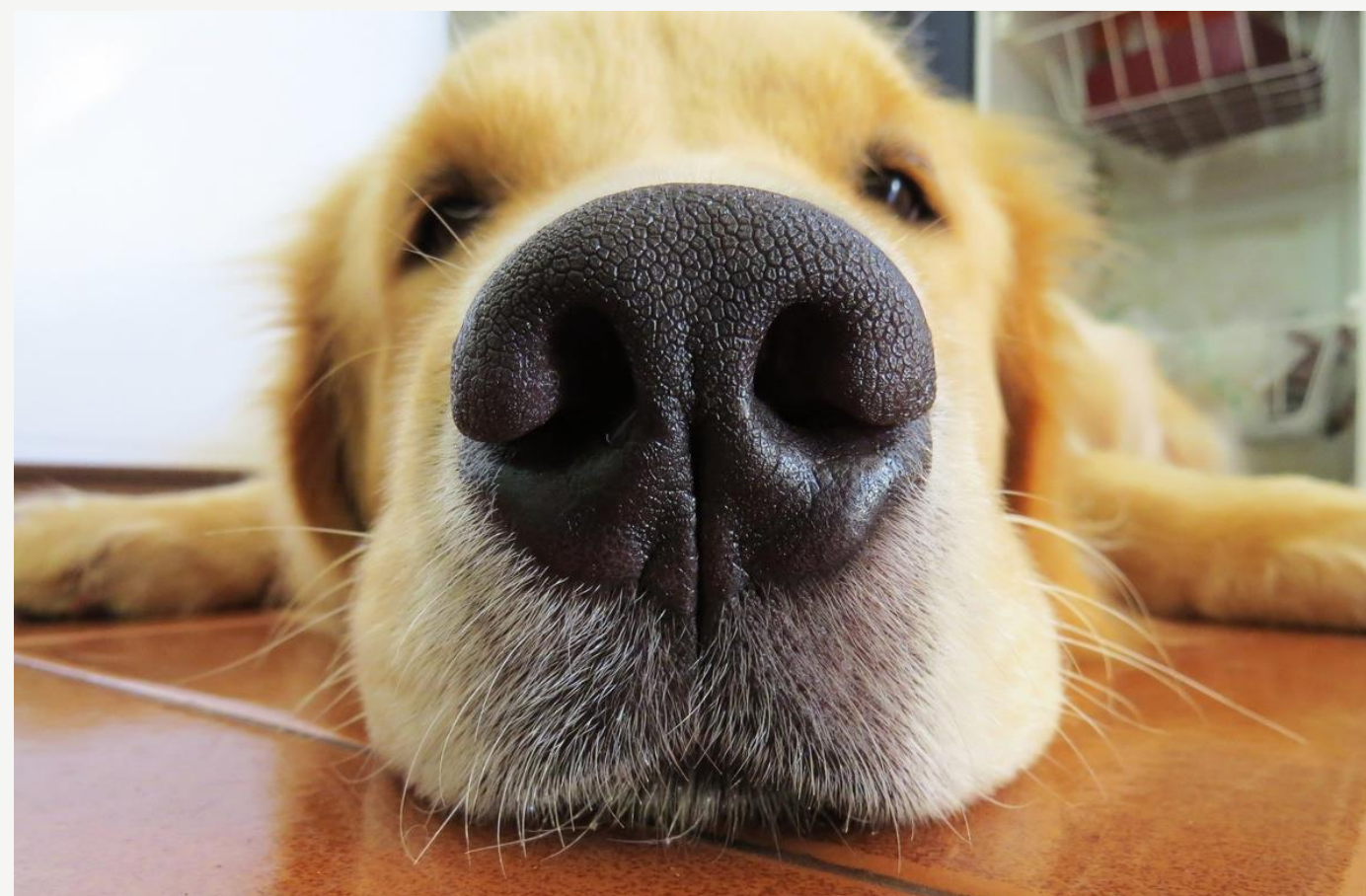
Looking for one off
support?

Have a difficult case
you'd like support with?

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a case together?

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