

# Empower – Menopause and Cancer Survivorship Pathway

Mood, Brain-Fog, Anxiety & Stress Management

‘Coping Compassionately – Riding the Menopause Wave!’

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# Understanding Compassion

- Sometimes it's important for us to acknowledge the reality of life and find a way we can work with this, rather than ignoring it or trying to block it from our minds.
- Compassion provides the grounding of a wise & courageous base for us to work with life's realities.
- To develop compassionate minds, acquiring the wisdom in understanding how and why we suffer may be an important step.

# Compassion defined ...

“Compassion can be defined in many ways, but its essence is a basic kindness with a deep awareness of the suffering of oneself and of other living things, coupled with the wish and effort to relieve it.” (Gilbert, 2010)

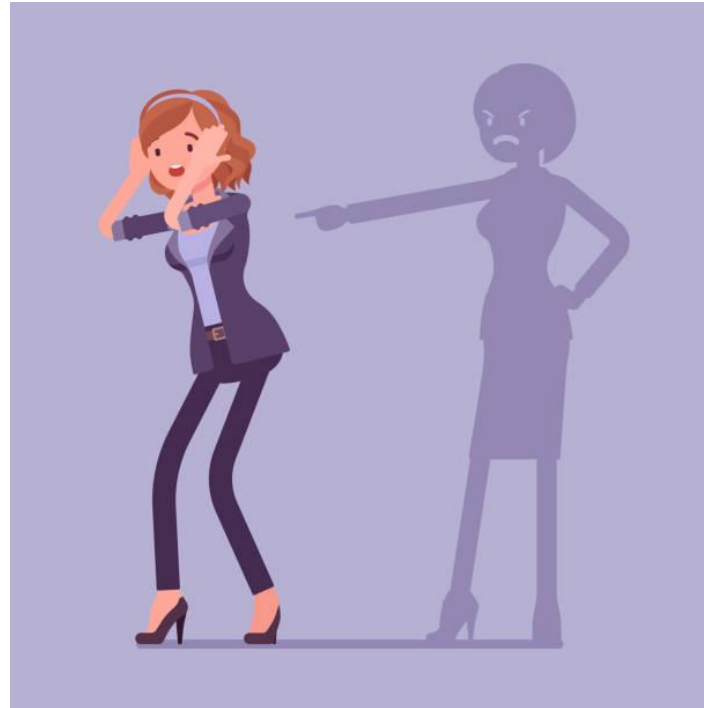
# From pity to compassion...



# Why We Need Compassion

- Our minds have evolved in a way that makes them quite “tricky” – programmed to look out for danger.
- Thus we can get stuck in thinking-feeling loops that can drive stress and anxiety.
- How we *respond* to ourselves in moments of anxiety, or difficulty, or struggling can make all the difference to how we cope.

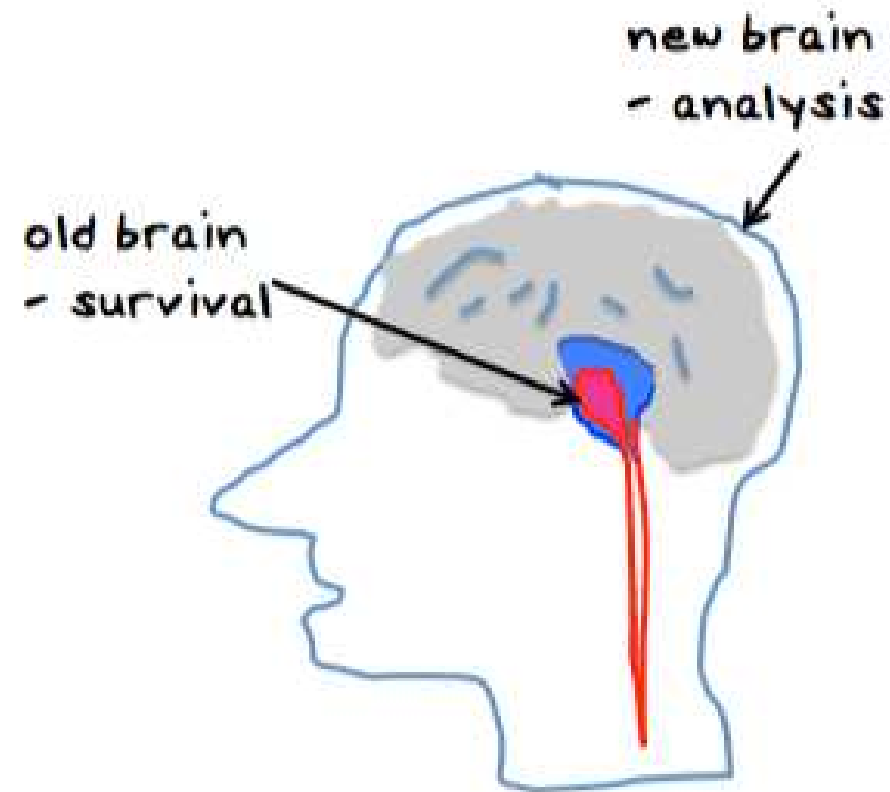
# Are you self-critical during moments of brain-fog, anxiety ...?



# The Power of Self-Criticism

- Constantly putting yourself down can activate your stress systems and trigger the emotional systems in your brain that lead you to feeling anxious, angry and down.
- Our own thoughts can affect parts of our brain that give rise to more stressful and unpleasant feelings.
- If we develop a self-critical style then we are constantly stimulating our threat system and will understandably feel constantly threatened.

# Understanding our Tricky Brains





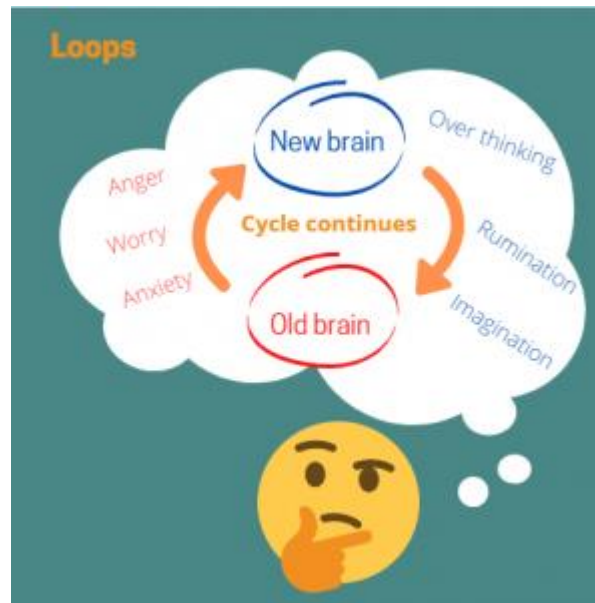
# Old Brain

- The product of hundreds of millions of years of evolution, originating in reptiles.
- Often called the ‘reptilian brain’.
- Does not “think” too much but rather, operates from a “better safe than sorry” perspective.
- Designed to protect us, rather than be logical or calm.
- Designed to make mistakes and overestimate danger.
- Can get activated very easily and can be difficult to soothe.

# New Brain

- This is located in the prefrontal cortex gave rise to wonderful new abilities such as:
  - Our ability to imagine things
  - We can consider the future
  - We can think about our thinking
  - We can reflect on things in the past

# Thinking Loops



# Dealing With Our Complex Brains

- Now, there are many ways we can deal with this problem. One is just to carry on and hope that things improve.
- Another is to try to understand our minds better and see if we can train them and cultivate so that our unpleasant emotions are easier to regulate, and our positive and pleasant emotions are easier to generate.
- A first step on this journey is to understand why our emotions can be so difficult and why this is not our fault.

# Emotions and Our Complex Brains

- Back to evolution – our bodies and our brains are connected.
- Think of physical pain – it is there to alert us to what is wrong in the body.
- Difficult emotions are similar.
- We need to understand them, their purpose and how they were designed by nature to inform us.
- We can then stand back from them then and just notice.
- What we feel – we can heal!

“LET’S NOT FORGET THAT THE LITTLE EMOTIONS ARE THE GREAT  
CAPTAINS OF OUR LIVES AND WE OBEY THEM WITHOUT REALISING IT”

**Vincent Van Gogh**

# Menopause and Emotions

- Think of emotions as energetic information!
- Emotions give us feedback that inform our motivation.
- Things going well – pleasant emotions.
- Things not going well – unpleasant emotions – change.
- How we **attend** to our emotions, and our thoughts and reasoning about our emotions, and the situations that might stir them up, can do much to calm us down or make things worse for us.

# Menopause and Anxiety



- Anxiety = an important, basic defensive emotion.
- Focused on threats.
- Gives us a sense of urgency, prompting us to do something.
- Anxiety can also direct our bodily feelings and emotions, attention, our thoughts, and behaviour.
- Do we want to be dominated by these primitive emotions? Or recognise them and learn to ride them in different ways?

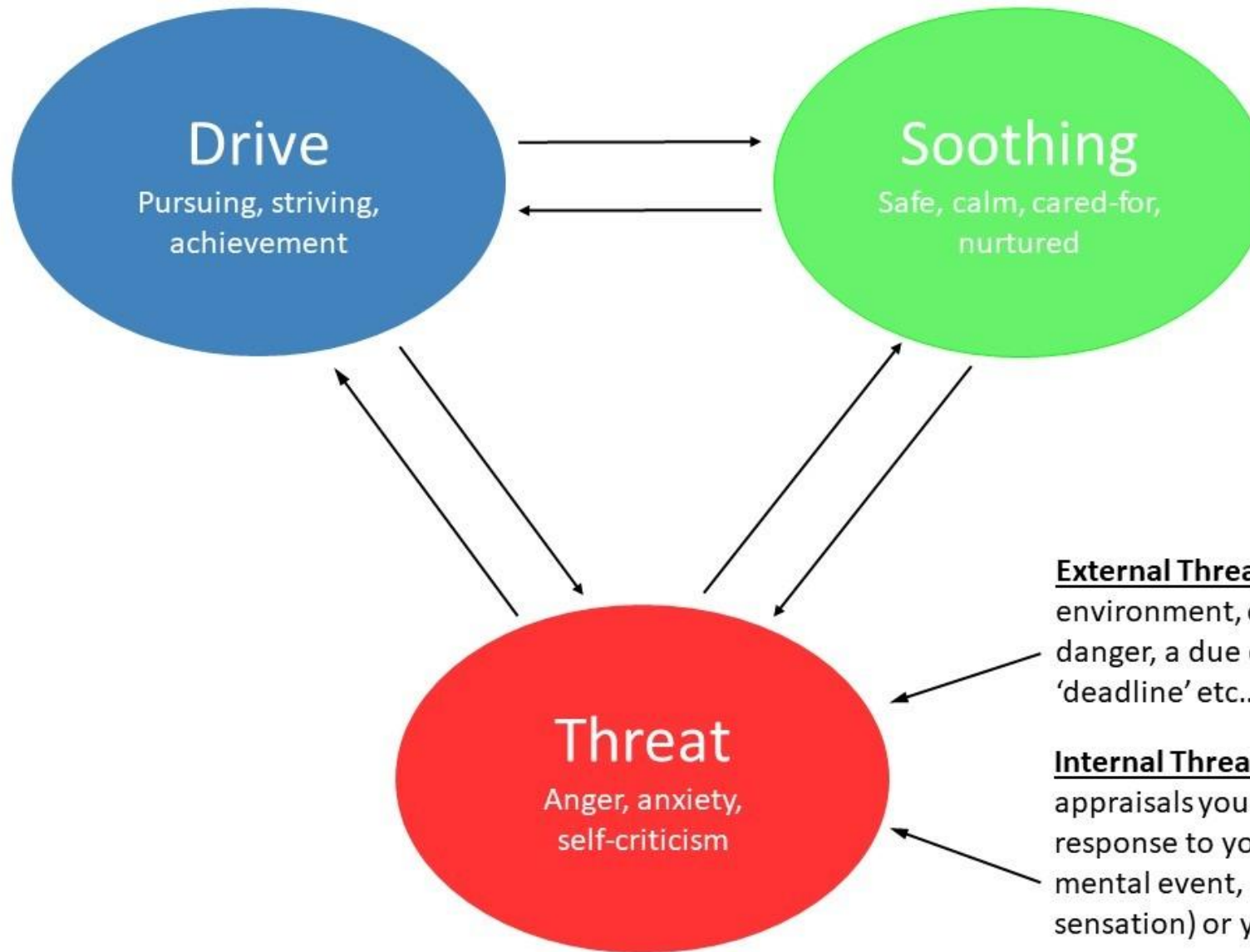


# Surfing Our Emotions



# Managing Difficult Emotions

- **Acknowledge, Allow, Appreciate** – Emotions as info!
- Reframe thinking of emotions as ‘good’ or ‘bad’.
- Befriend them – easier to deal with.
- Genetic and developmental differences among us determine how easily or intensely these emotions can be triggered in us.
- Question is: *how do we then respond to those reactions in our bodies?*



**External Threats:** Threats in your environment, e.g. physical danger, a due date, or a 'deadline' etc...

**Internal Threats:** Threatening appraisals you make. E.g., Your response to yourself (incl. any mental event, emotion or physical sensation) or your environment

Adapted from Gilbert, P (ed) (2005). *Compassion: Conceptualisations, Research and Use in Psychotherapy*. Routledge.

# 1. Threat and Self-Protection System:

- The function of this is to pick up on threats quickly.
- Then give us bursts of feelings such as anxiety, anger, or disgust.
- Feelings will ripple through our bodies alerting and urging us to take action against the threat, to self-protect.
- Your threat system is your basic ‘fall back system’ – the easiest of all to feel and trigger.

## 2. The Drive-Excitement System

- The function of this system is to give us positive feelings that guide, motivate and encourage us to seek out things.
- This system is primarily an activating and 'get go' system.
- When balanced with other 2 systems, it guides us towards important life goals.
- When our desires and goals are blocked for this can be seen as a 'threat'.
- The threat system kicks in with anxiety, fear, or anger.

# 3. Soothing and Contentment System

- Brings soothing and peacefulness to self.
- Helps to restore our balance.
- Contentment is a form of being happy with the way things are and feeling safe, not striving or wanting.
- When people practise meditation and ‘slowing down’ these are the feelings they report:
  - Not wanting or striving
  - Feeling calmer inside and connected to others

# Key Point

- Some people with psychological difficulties have a very highly developed threat and self-protection system.
- This makes anxiety and anger easier to feel.
- Soothing and contentment system is less well developed as they haven't had the chance to develop it.
- Compassionate mind training similar to physiotherapy for the mind!

# The Power of Self-Kindness

- The soothing & contentment system in the brain helps to calm and soothe us when things are hard or when we're frightened.
- We feel soothed when others are kind, understanding, supportive and encouraging.
- We can learn to be kind and supportive to ourselves by *catching* our self-critic, *noticing* our wandering mind, and *practising* a soothing breath-work that soothes the mind.





- If we can learn to be kind and supportive, to send ourselves helpful messages when things are hard for us – we are more likely to stimulate parts of the brain that respond to kindness.
- This will help us cope with stress and setbacks.

## ...but ...

- For people who are very self-critical, beginning to become self-compassionate can seem like a threat.
- They feel that self-kindness or even making every effort to be kind and gentle to one self is a weakness / indulgence.
- They believe that they simply don't deserve it.
- Research indicates that when some people first start to be kind they can feel it as rather strange or threatening.
- They have to work through these 'fears' to start training their minds in self-kindness.

# Managing our Mood

- Bring present to our difficult emotions can allow us to adjust more easily – what we resist, persists.
- When we can allow, acknowledge and appreciate the emotion or sensation as being ‘just information’ we can move past it with less distress.
- There are many aspects to *resting the mind* and body and reducing stress.
- The first one involves learning to pay attention in a kind and gentle way.

# Mind Training

- We can learn how to train our minds so that our attention brings into the foreground ideas, images, or ways of thinking that are going to be helpful to us.
- Rather than let our attention drift around in a sea of anxiety or unhappy things.
- We simply need to pay attention.

# Mind Like a Spot Light

- We can think of our minds like this.
- Try to reside in the “spotlight”.
- Notice what the spotlight lights up.
- Learn to distinguish this consciousness.

# Tender Self Compassion Break

# Managing Brain Fog

- Routine
- Rest
- Reminders
- Rejuvenate
- Rely on others
- Regular sleep

# Reminder ...

- We have ‘tricky’ brains, this is not our fault.
- How we respond to ourselves can – or + our distress.
- Compassion takes practice but even 1 minute of “dedicated self-kindness” can make all the difference.
- Surf difficult emotions by breathing in, exhaling out.
- Use your attention like a “spot-light” moving away from anxious thoughts.
- Practice your kind-voice “Go easy” on yourself.



# Thank you!!

