

# Inclusion: Building a compassionate culture

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# Content

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- Part 1. Compassion in education
  - What compassion is... and what compassion isn't
  - The links between compassion and inclusion
  - Fears, blocks and resistances to compassion
  - Compassionate school cultures

# Content

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- Part 2. Compassionate teacher-student relationships
  - The emotional regulation systems in the mind
  - Causes of emotional dysregulation in students:
    - special education needs
    - developmental trauma
  - Co-regulation of emotions
  - Attachment theory
  - Helping students to regulate their emotions in the classroom

# Content

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- Part 3. Wellbeing for educators – learning the skills of self-compassion
  - A compassionate mind
  - Life experiences & the tricky brain
  - Self-criticism & how it triggers stress
  - The emotional labour of teaching
  - Self-compassion & the benefits of meditation
  - The liberation of accepting & welcoming emotions

# Polls 1a & 1b

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1a) What age students do you teach?

1b) How long have you been teaching?



# Compassion challenge!

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- Set an intention to do one thing differently in the classroom
- Small changes can make a **big** difference





# Part. 1 Compassion in education



# What is compassion?

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**“Compassion is the courage to descend into the reality of human experience.**

Compassion can be understood as having two components:

- (1) a sensitivity to suffering in yourself and others, and
- (2) a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent this suffering.”

*Prof Paul Gilbert, founder of Compassion Focused Therapy*





# We're only human!

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None of us chose to be born, nor the genes that made us.

None of us chose our bodies, emotions or basic temperaments.

None of us chose our early experiences nor our current culture.

Yet all of these shape us...





Breaking news... We make mistakes!



Key qualities of  
compassion

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Warmth

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Kindness

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Courage

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Strength

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Wisdom

A motivation to care



A fluffy, light brown teddy bear is the central focus of the image. It is sitting on a wooden surface, looking down with its hands near its face, suggesting a state of distress or contemplation. The bear's fur is very soft and shaggy. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The overall lighting is soft and somewhat dim, creating a somber and intimate atmosphere. The text "Compassion can be scary" is overlaid in the center of the image in a clean, white, sans-serif font.

Compassion can be scary

# Why is compassion important in schools?

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- We have the highest levels of anxiety and depression in young people ever recorded
- We have high levels of burn-out in teachers and a crisis in teacher recruitment and retention

**We want everyone in a school to be working from a sense of safety, security and belonging**

**rather than from a place of fear and exhaustion**



# Why is compassion important for inclusion?

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- Inclusion requires a sensitivity to need
- Inclusion requires a commitment to enable and empower all students, no matter their differences

**We want everyone in a school to be working from a sense of safety, security and belonging**

**rather than from a place of fear and exhaustion**



# Key components of a compassionate school culture





Questions?

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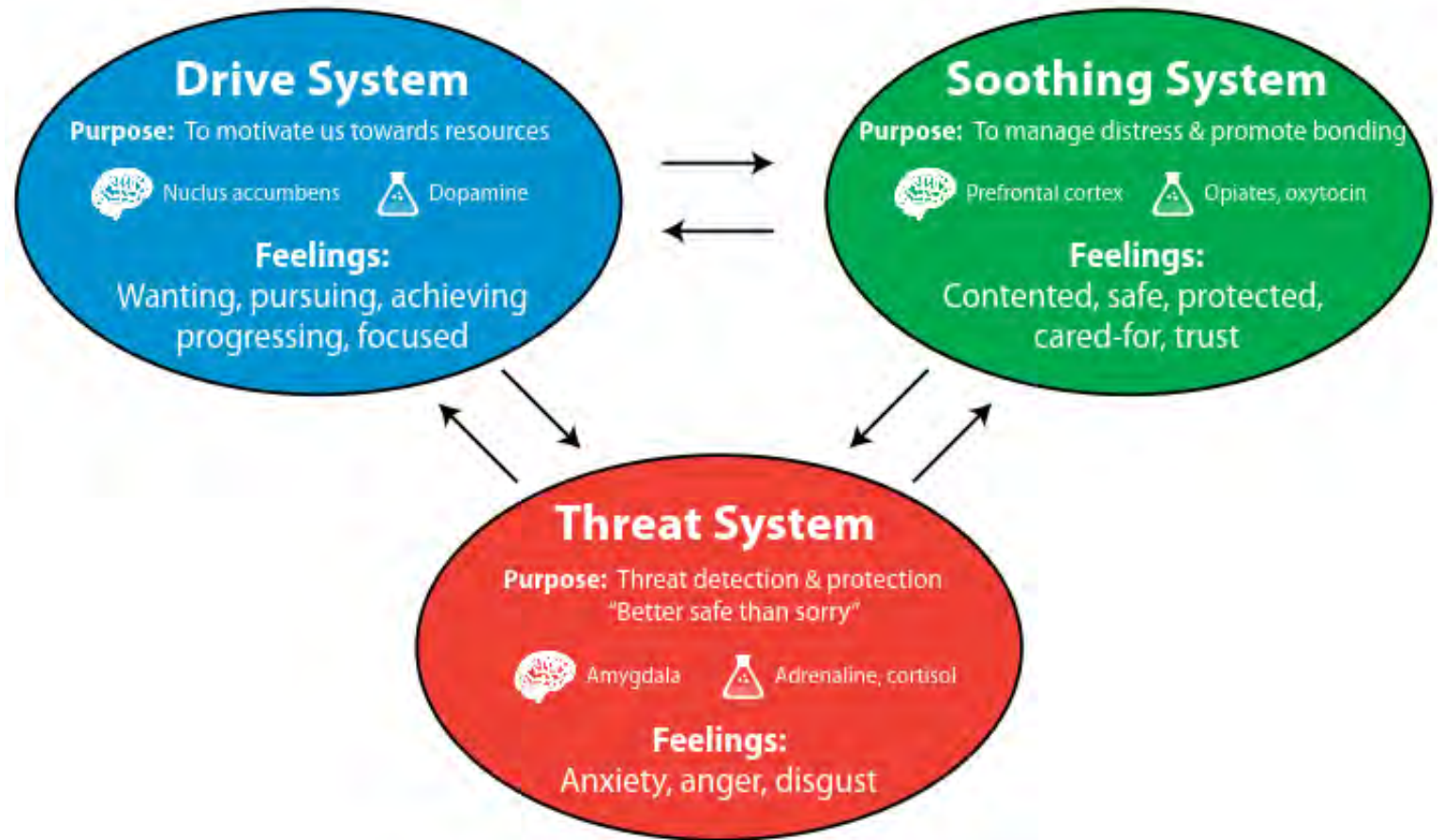


## Part 2. The compassionate teacher-student relationship



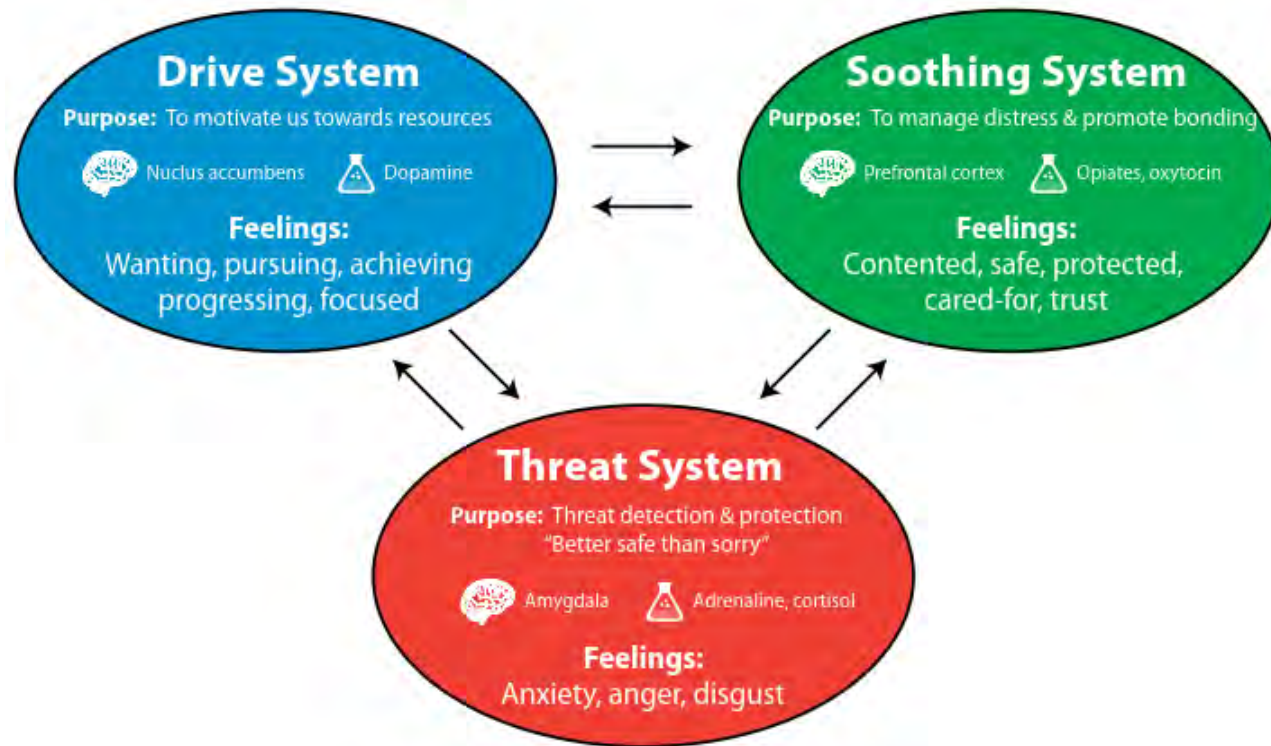
# Neuroscience: the three circles

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# Poll 2

Which circle(s) are you in today?



# Primary causes of emotional dysregulation in students

## **Special educational needs**

Differences in brain structure, sensory overwhelm, immature brain development, difficulty inhibiting responses

E.g. brain injury, ADHD, autism, down's syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome

## **Developmental trauma**

Experiencing events during childhood that cause intense physical, emotional or psychological harm or distress

e.g. War, rape, torture, natural disasters, accidents, illness or medical procedures, abuse, bullying, bereavement

# Special educational needs

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- Physical, cognitive or social
- Every task is harder
- Fewer cognitive resources
- Difficulties with peer relationships
- Comparison with peers leads to low self-esteem and self-criticism



# Being socially “excluded”

- Lack of sense of belonging
- Unmet needs
- Social rejection
- Feeling disempowered

... can trigger a student's threat system

Being in threat  
reduces  
engagement  
in the  
classroom



Threat



# Overstimulation

- The developing brain is not skilled in regulating emotion
- This skill develops gradually and involves inhibiting behaviour
- Students without this ability can become over-excited and over-stimulated



Drive

# Trauma

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- Any event that causes physical, emotional or psychological harm or distress
- (usually unpredictable and uncontrollable)
- Beliefs and assumptions about the way the world works are shattered
- The world feels unsafe
- The brain goes into survival mode



# The effects of trauma

The mind and body are in a permanent state of high alert causing extreme anxiety

The world is seen as threatening – the mind believes it is in immediate danger

Body is flooded with stress hormones at the slightest trigger or reminder of threat

# Reactions to threat



Fight



Flight

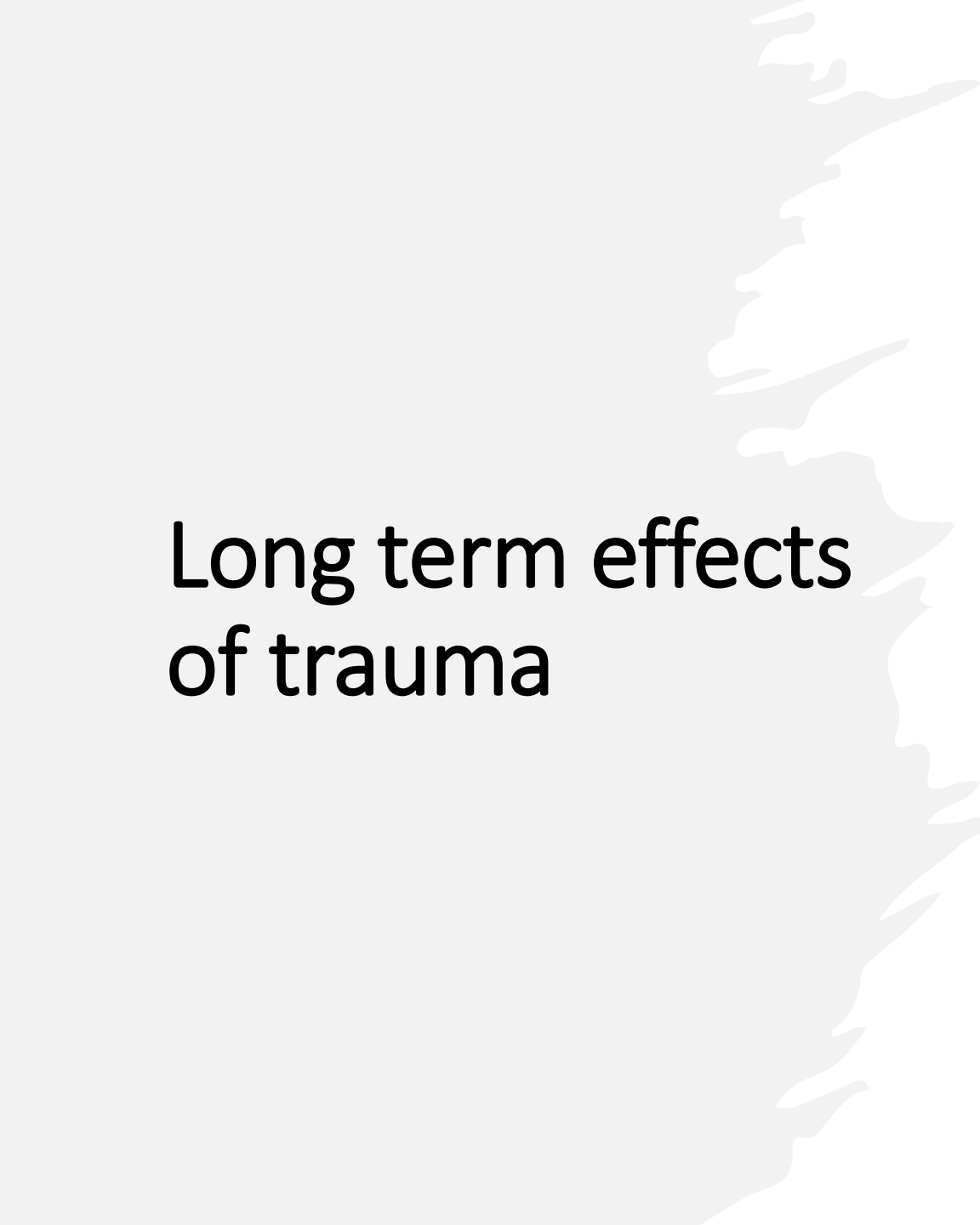


Appease



Freeze





# Long term effects of trauma

- Feeling out of control or feeling “crazy”
- Physical symptoms of chronic anxiety: high heart rate, sweating, muscle tension, headaches, stomach issues
- Blaming self
- Difficulty trusting other people
- Hopelessness
- Effects of childhood trauma may permanently alter the structure of the brain and the stress response

# Effects on behaviour & learning

Intense reactions when triggered – may be jumpy and get angry or anxious very quickly

Avoidance of any triggers – people, places, situations – may affect attendance

Difficulty in focus and concentration due to hyperarousal or lack of sleep and fatigue

Dissociation – may appear “spacey” or as if daydreaming

Negative interpretation bias – student interprets everything as threatening, feels criticised and rejected

Being in threat  
reduces  
engagement  
in the  
classroom



Threat

# Co-regulation of emotion


- Teachers can help support the emotional processing of students through the teacher-student relationship – *co-regulation*
- Starts with preschool students but continues up to age 18, as the brain develops
- This works via the attachment system



Soothing



# Research on the teacher- student relationship



- Feelings of belonging and affiliation with teachers at school are associated with achievement, motivation and self-regulation of emotions (Osterman, 2000)
- Emotionally supportive classroom environments have a positive effect on student behaviour (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey 2012)

# Attachment and relationships

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- Relationships are based on our attachment system, a brain system present from birth
- Early experiences with caregivers influence our relationships later on
- Secure relationships are based on trust, safety and respect
- Secure relationships help us to process difficult emotions and still feel safe



# Self-reflective exercise



Think of a teacher from your own school days that you had a good relationship with



Think of a teacher from your own school days that you had a poor relationship with



**What made the difference?**

# Qualities of a secure relationship

Validating

Attuned

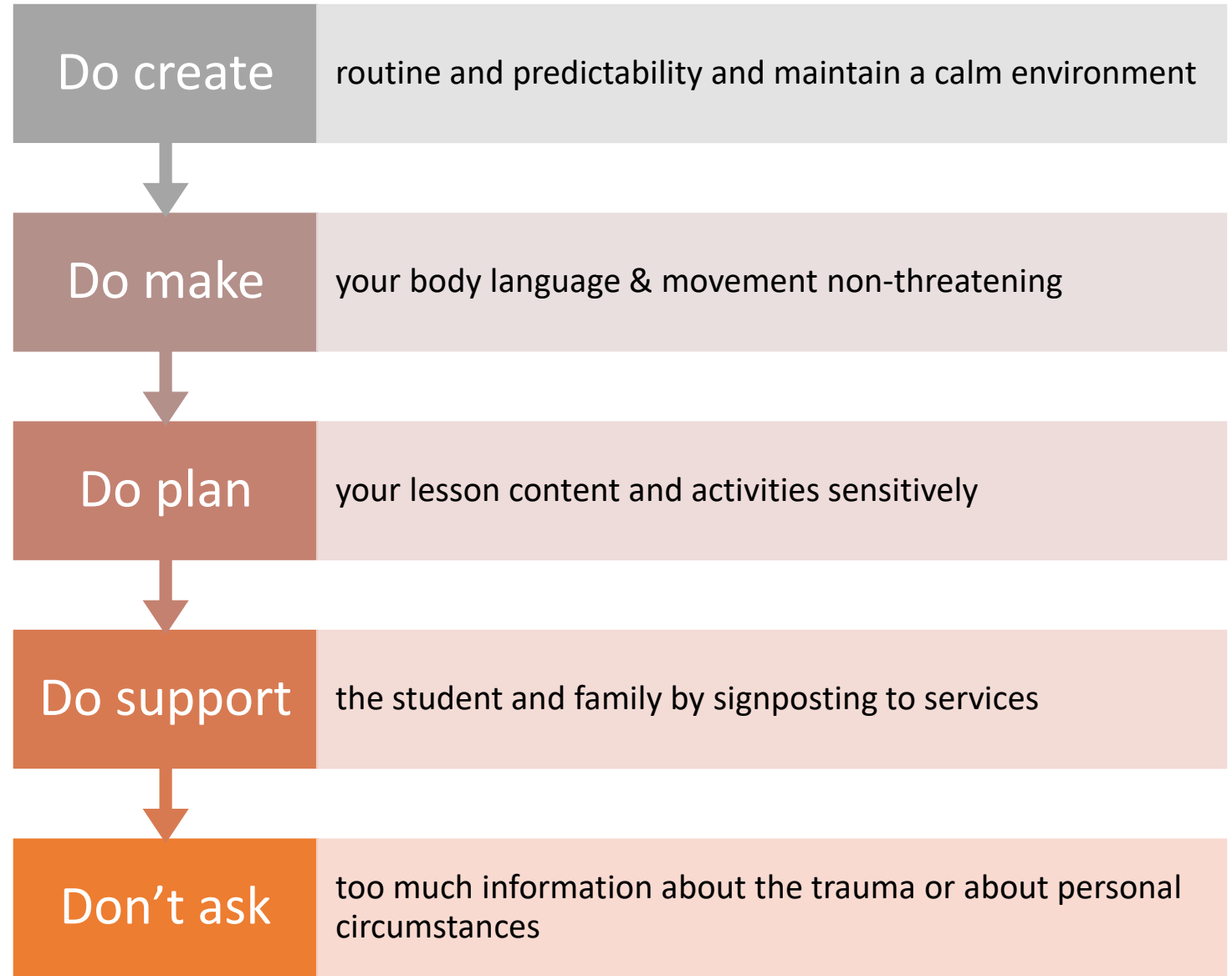
Responsive

Consistent

Authentic

Safe

# How to be *a safe base* in the classroom



# Classroom routine & environment

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- Quiet, uncluttered classroom with easy access to the door
- Keep to the same routine in classes
- Establish ground rules of the classroom, which help students to feel safe
- Try mindful breathing at the start of lessons



# What are you saying but not saying?

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- We have evolved to be very sensitive to social cues of acceptance or rejection
- Non-verbal communication is read quickly and subconsciously by others around us



## The Visual Cliff

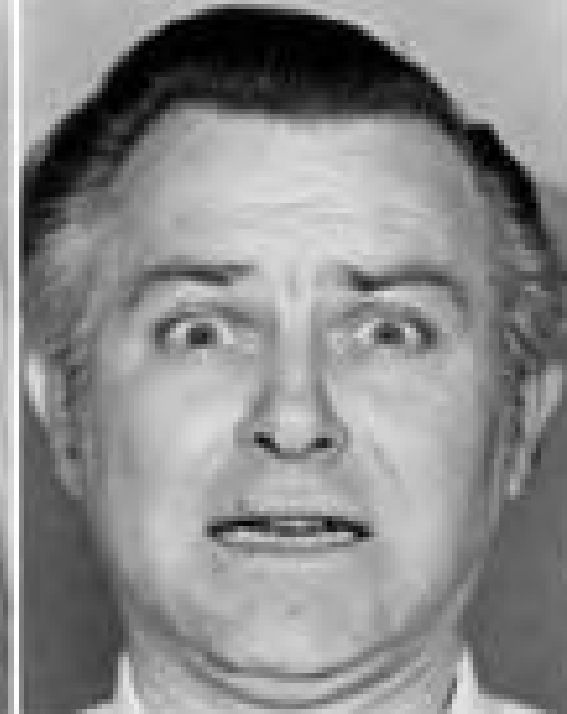


Attachment: the visual cliff experiment



Which face  
would you like  
on the other  
side of your  
visual cliff?

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Be aware of  
your body  
language &  
movement

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# Compassion challenge!

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- Set an intention to do one thing differently in the classroom
- What will it be?
- AWWA have a checklist you can use to reflect on your teacher-student relationships in the classroom



Questions?

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# Part 3. The wellbeing of educators

# Compassion challenge!

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- Set an intention to do one thing differently to support your wellbeing
- Small changes can make a **big** difference



# Poll 3

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Over the past 7 days, rate your emotional wellbeing on a scale from 0 (very low) to 10 (very high)

- a) 0-3 low
- b) 4-7 medium
- c) 8-10 high



A compassionate  
mind  
understands...

We are shaped by life experiences

Our brains are not designed for 21<sup>st</sup> century  
living!

Emotions are powerful

We are human... we're not perfect

Teaching is difficult!



# Shaped by life

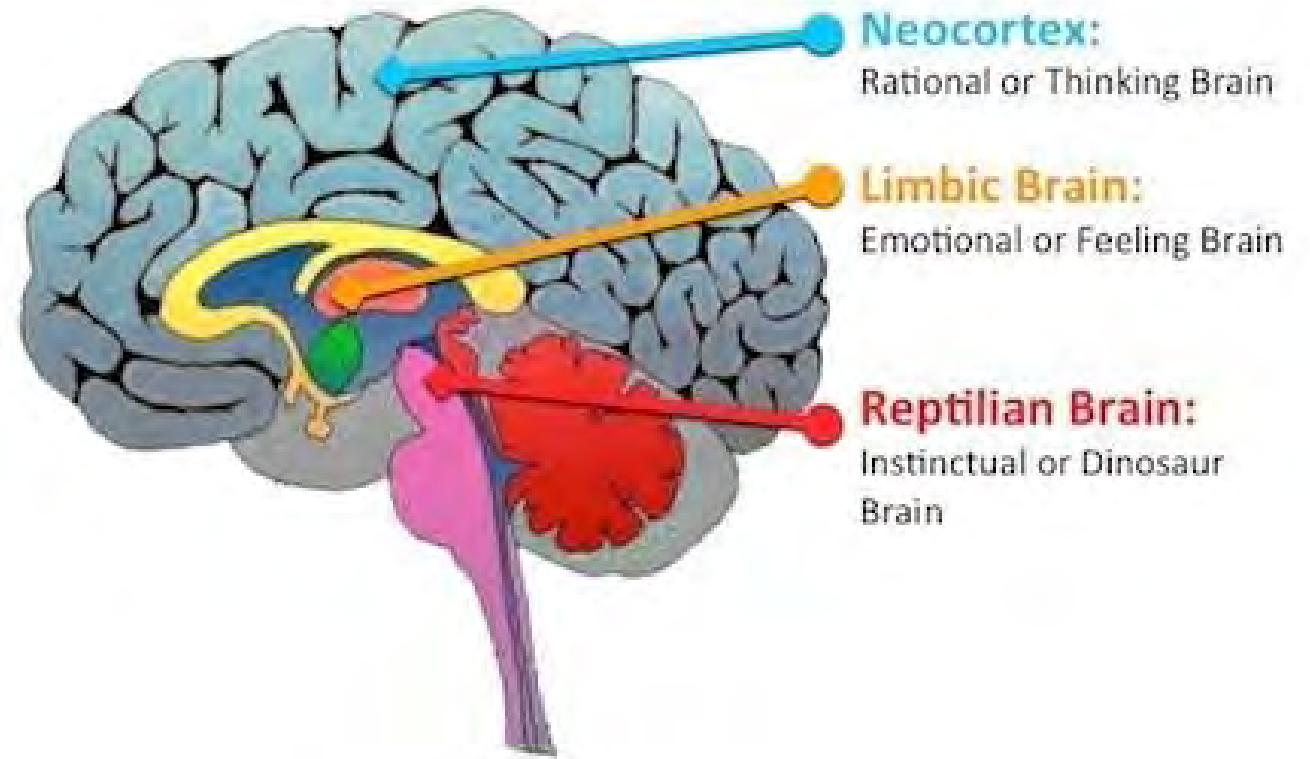
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Self reflective exercise – what has influenced your life?

- Early experiences: parenting, culture, schooling, gender
- Later experiences: relationships, career, society, world events, personal events

# The tricky brain

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# Self-criticism



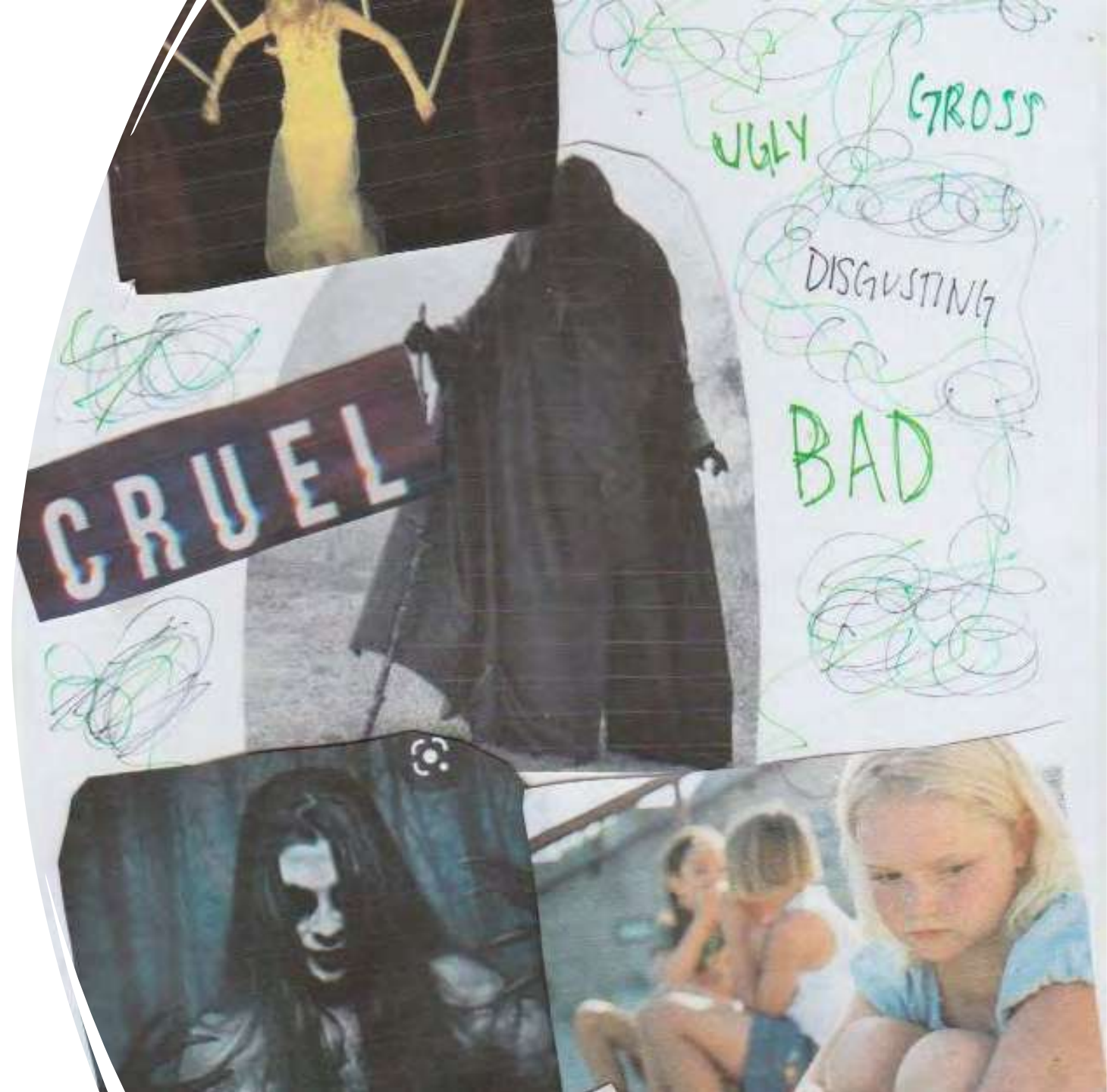
That meeting went  
badly  
People don't like me  
I'm an useless leader



# Self-criticism

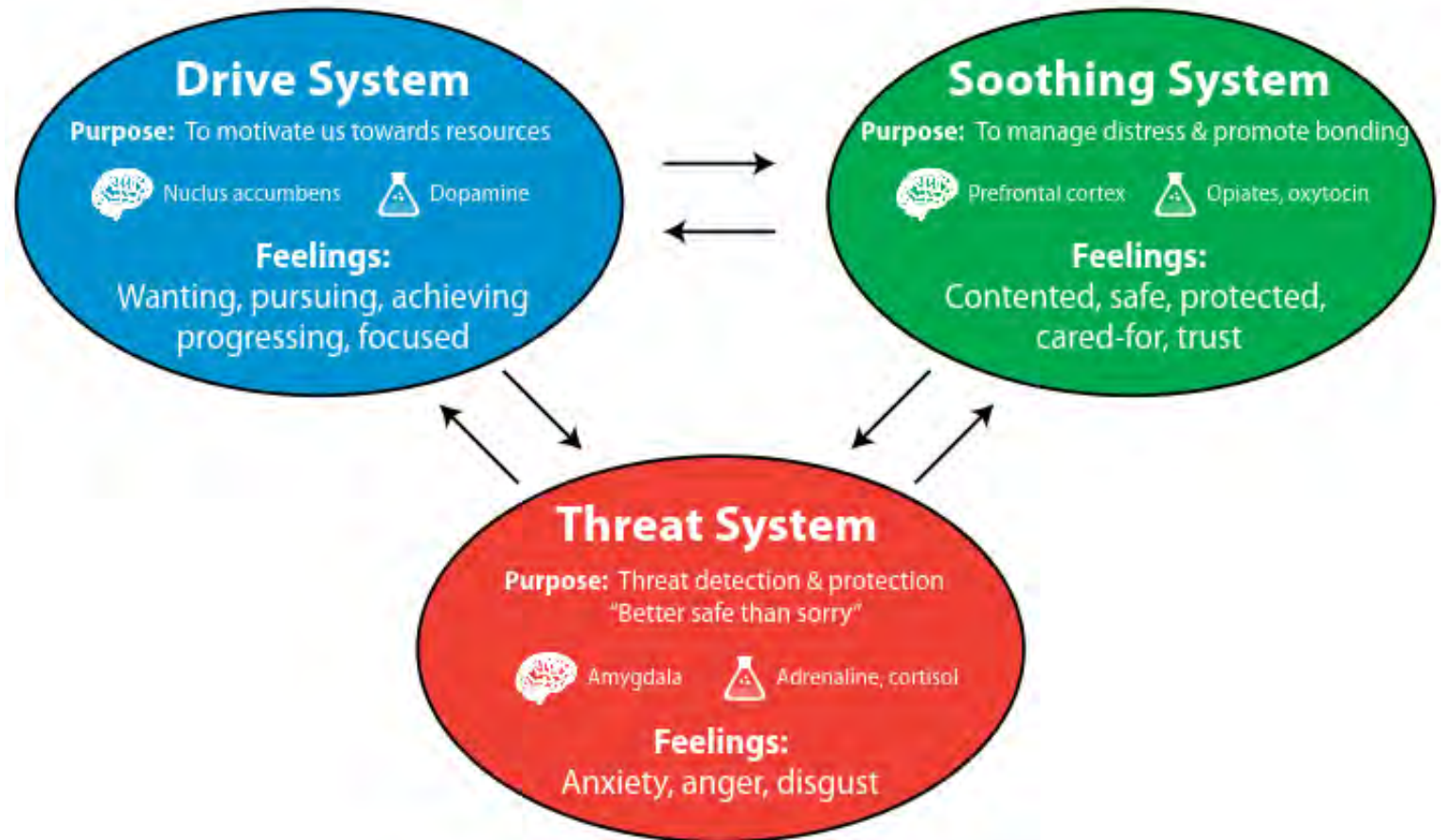
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- I'm not good enough
- No-one likes me
- I'm a failure
- I'm stupid
- I'm ugly



# Neuroscience: the three circles

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# The emotional labour of teaching

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- Co-regulation of the emotions of students
- Self-regulation of own emotions
- This increases our cognitive load
- Teaching is difficult!

Isenbarger, L. and Zembylas, M., 2006. The emotional labour of caring in teaching. *Teaching and teacher education*, 22(1), pp.120–134.





Difficult moments in the classroom

# Poll 4

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Which is your most difficult emotion in the classroom?

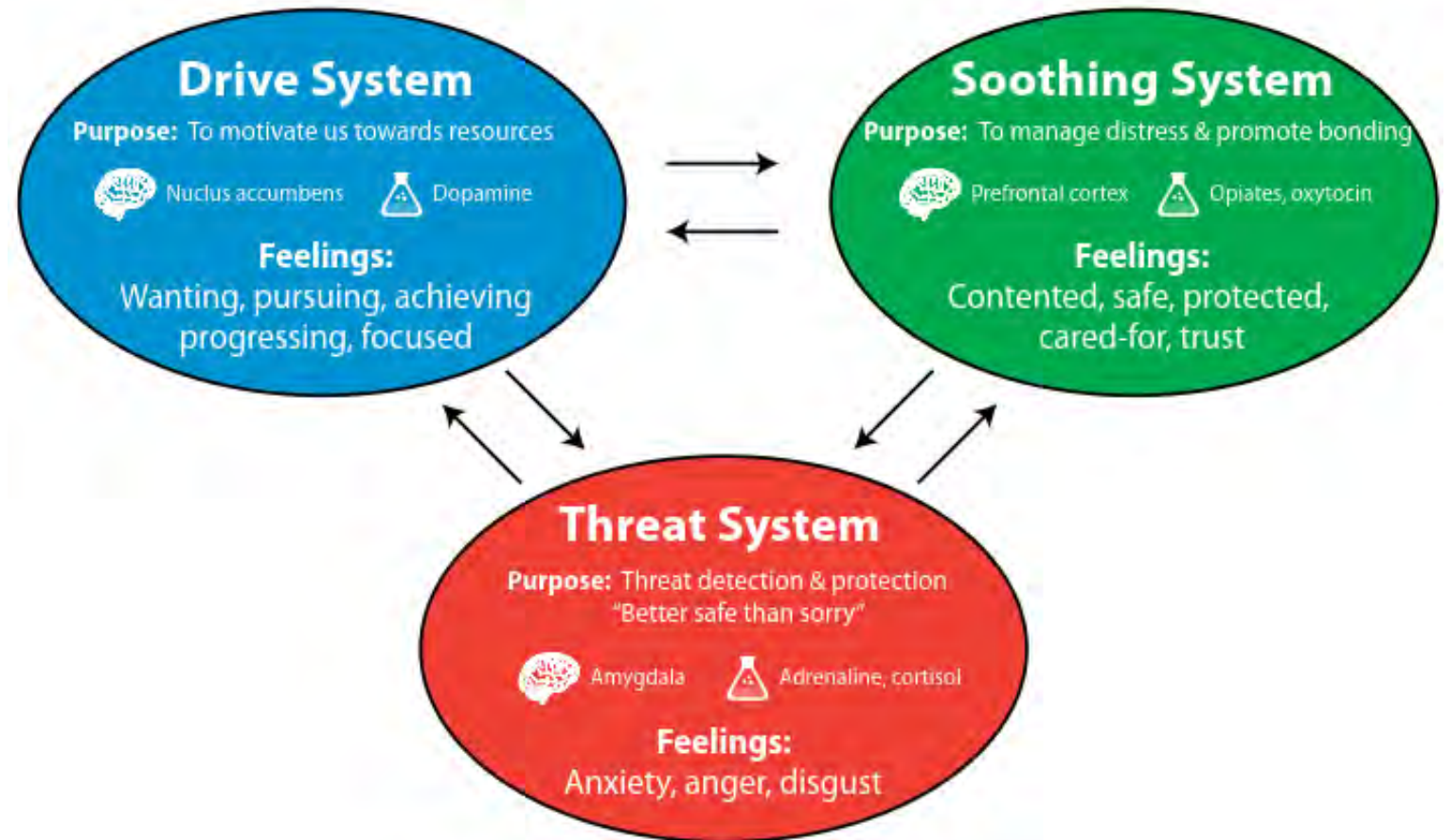
- a) Anxiety, worry or panic
- b) Frustration, anger or irritation
- c) Sadness, hopelessness or demotivation





# Neuroscience: the three circles

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# What might help



To soothe your throat, take slow breaths, relax your face and any tense parts of your body



Say something helpful to yourself: *“This is difficult, I’m doing my best”*



Remember you are only **human**, you don’t have to be perfect



Connect with a colleague later on in the day

# Welcoming our emotions

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- Frequently we resist emotions or respond to them in unhelpful ways... avoidance, numbing, self-criticism...
- Accepting our emotions as part of the human condition brings relief
- **What we resist... persists...**



# A meditation

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Everything is welcome today



# Compassion challenge!

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- Set an intention to do one thing differently to support your wellbeing
- What will it be?





# Further reading

***Cultivating Teacher Wellbeing***  
***by Kate Brierton & Christina Gkonou***  
***Cambridge University Press,***  
***date of publication March 2022***

- *A Compassionate Mind* by Prof Paul Gilbert
- *The Compassionate Mind Workbook* by Chris Irons & Elaine Beaumont
- *Daring Greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead* by Brene Brown
- *Attachment and Emotional Development in the Classroom* by David Colley & Paul Cooper (eds)
- *The Trauma Sensitive Classroom* by Patricia A Jennings

Questions?

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