

Perfectionism from a contextual perspective:

Supporting healthy striving and flexible responding



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Disclosure

Jennifer Kemp:

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Lanaya Ethington:

- Conference participation funded by my employer, the University of Iowa

Introductions



Today's agenda

- Present a functional contextual behavioural formulation for perfectionism
- Build therapist skills in addressing problematic perfectionistic responding to support healthy thriving
- Provide an opportunity to reflect on our own perfectionistic responding as therapists and how this can influence the therapeutic process




YOU
ARE
HERE

YOU
ARE
HERE

YOU
ARE
HERE

PART 1: Contextual Behavioural formulation of perfectionism

Perfectionism is a transdiagnostic process

- 
- **Anxiety** (e.g. Klibert et al, 2015;
 - **Depression** (e.g. Flett, 1995; Rice, Ashby & Slaney, 1998)
 - **Eating disorders** (e.g. Fornieles et al, 2007; Culbert, Racine & Klump, 2015; Wilksch, Durbridge & Wade, 2008)
 - **Marital dissatisfaction** (e.g. Dimitrovsky, Levy-Shiff & Zanany, 2002; Haring, Hewitt & Flett, 2003)
 - **OCD** (e.g. Chik, Whittal & O'Neill, 2008; Pinto et al, 2017; Wu & Cortesi, 2009)
 - **Personality disorders** (e.g. DiMaggio et al, 2018)
 - **Hoarding** (e.g. Frost, Rosenfield, Steketee & Tolin, 2013)
 - **Social anxiety** (e.g. Levinson et al, 2015)

Personality trait models of perfectionism

- Normal / Neurotic
Hamachek (1978)
 - Self-Oriented, Socially-Prescribed, Other-Oriented
Hewitt, Flett & colleagues (1991-)
 - Multi-dimensional: Concern over Mistakes, Personal Standards, Parental Expectations, Parental Criticism, Doubts about Actions, Organisation
Frost & colleagues (1993-)
 - Adaptive / Maladaptive
Rice & colleagues (1998-)
- and* Clinical Perfectionism



‘Dual Process Model’ of perfectionism

- Slade & Owens (1998; 2008)
- Only behavioural model?

Positive perfectionism:
characterised by *pursuit* behaviour

- Pursue success, perfection, excellence
- Motivated to get close to their ideal self



'Dual Process Model' of perfectionism

Negative perfectionism:

characterised by *avoidance (escape)* behaviour

- Avoid failure, imperfection, mediocrity
- Motivated to get away from their feared self

People may be motivated by one, both or neither



Exploring “perfectionistic responding”

Helpful or unhelpful?



Helpful perfectionistic responding

- Pursuit of excellence
- Setting high/stretch targets
- Motivated by performance and accomplishment
- Working hard
- Striving, thriving



Common patterns of unhelpful perfectionistic responding

- a) Setting unrealistic ('perfect') standards
- b) Avoiding failure & mistakes
- c) Self-criticism if standards not met
- d) Basing self-worth on achievement



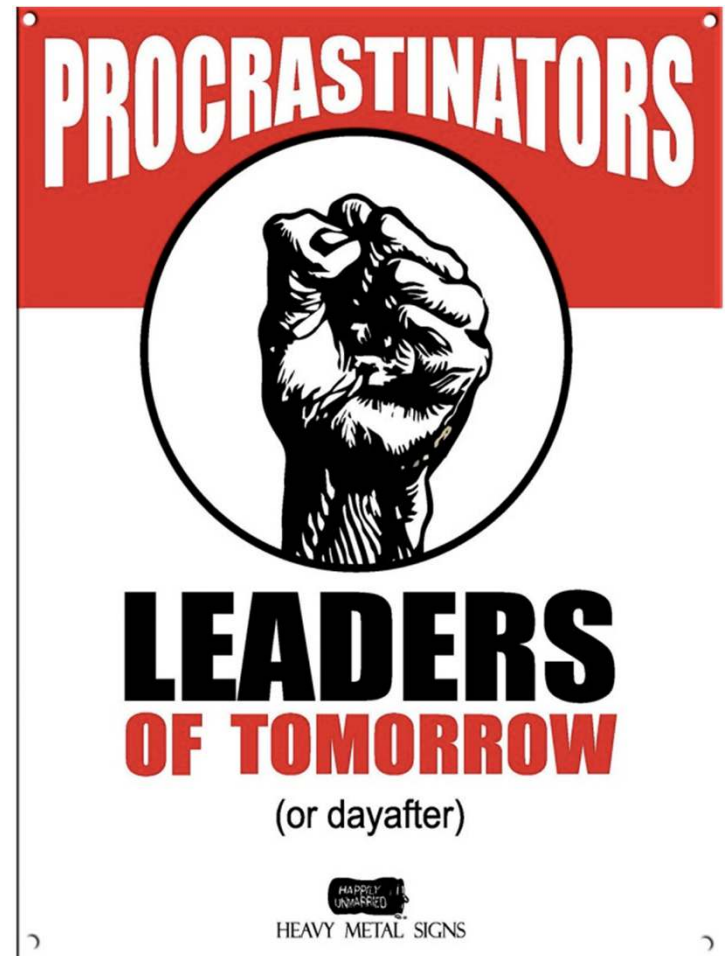
a) Setting unrealistic standards

- Relentlessly striving for very high standards
- Continually raising standards over time, especially if goal is attained
- Standards are unachievable (i.e. 'perfect')



b) Avoiding failure & mistakes

- Avoiding or postponing any tasks where mistakes are possible
- Checking & rechecking work
- Procrastination
- Excessive effort (without joy)
- Overworking
- Total avoidance



c) Self-criticism if standards not met

- Self-criticism when standards not achieved
- Self-criticism seen as a motivator
- Tendency to discount achievements as “not good enough”



d) Basing self-worth on achievement



- Self-worth dependent on achieving (very high) standards
- Self never good enough

Possible functions of perfectionistic responding



Fⁿ1: Attain positive reinforcement from others

Fⁿ2: Achieve high performance & reach challenging targets

Possible functions of perfectionistic responding

Fⁿ3: Avoid aversive emotions arising from negative evaluations

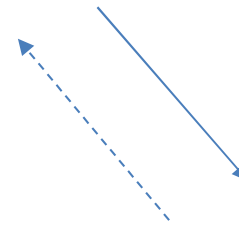
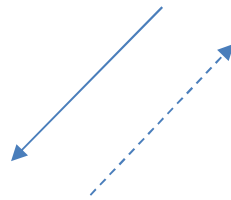
Fⁿ4: Attain self-acceptance

Fⁿ5: Attain acceptance from others



Perfectionistic responding from an RFT perspective

“Perfect”



The Function of Rules in RFT

- Tracking – tells us what outcomes to attend to in the experiential world to evaluate action
- Pliance – tells us to attend to authority of some sort and ignore contextual feedback
- Augmenting – form of relational framing that can change how we feel and are motivated by something



Unhelpful perfectionistic responding

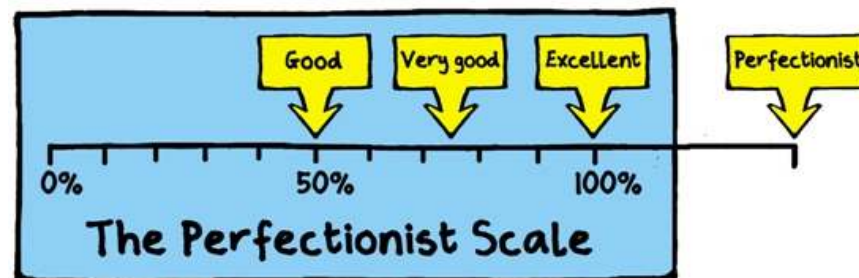
Characterised by:

Rigidity

Intolerance of ambiguity

Certain context sensitivity

and certain context insensitivity



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Self-reflection activity

In pairs, discuss

- What patterns of perfectionistic responding might you engage in?



Self-reflection activity

- I should always work at my peak level of enthusiasm and competence.
- I should be able to handle any client emergency that arises.
- I should be able to help every client.
- When a client does not progress, it is my fault.

(Deutsch, 1984)





"Don't be afraid of perfection, you will never reach it..."

-Salvador Dali

PART 2 – Addressing problematic perfectionistic responding

Process-Based Therapy

“Treatment based on the coherent application for changeable evidence-based processes linked to evidence-based procedures that ameliorate the problems and promote the prosperity of people.”



Hayes, 2017

Process-based therapeutic approaches targeting perfectionistic responding

1. Increasing flexible behavioural repertoire
2. Building flexible 'self-ing'
3. Cultivating self-compassion



1. Increasing flexible behavioural repertoire

Therapeutic targets

- Checking & rechecking work
- Procrastination
- Excessive effort / overworking
- Avoiding activities where failure is possible



Exposure

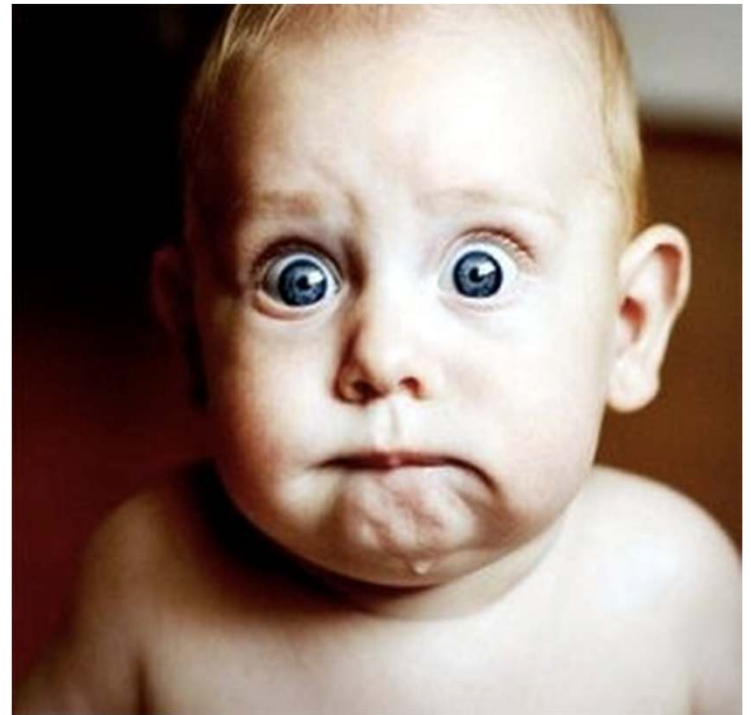
Target = willingness to risk failure (acceptance)

Not a reduction in fear

(Morris, 2016)

Possible examples:

- Sending an email only checking once
- Submitting assignment after only three reviews
- Taking a risk to phone a friend



Exposure



Remember

Start small – no, *really* small

‘White-knuckling’ doesn’t work
(Coyne)

Choices linked to **values**
(Needs to be worth it)

10% not 100%

Watch for the paradox of ‘perfect homework’

2. Building flexible 'self-ing'

Therapeutic targets

- “Stuck” story
- Over-identification with perfectionism
- Behavior based on pliance
- Overly critical



Flexible 'self-ing'

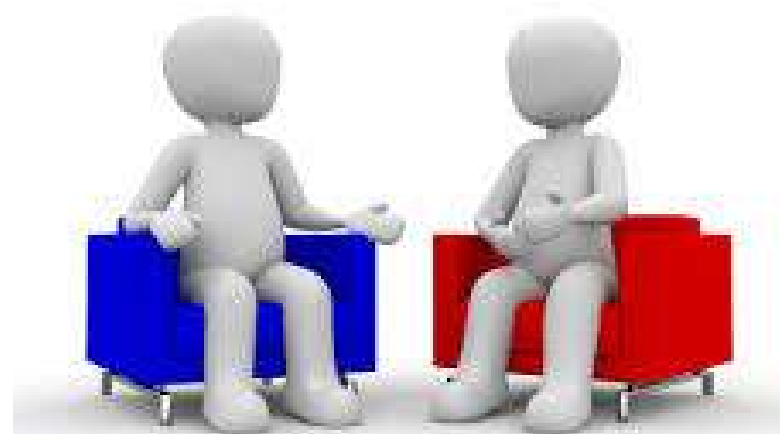
Cultivating “observer” self:

- Mindfulness
- Defusion
- Passengers on the bus

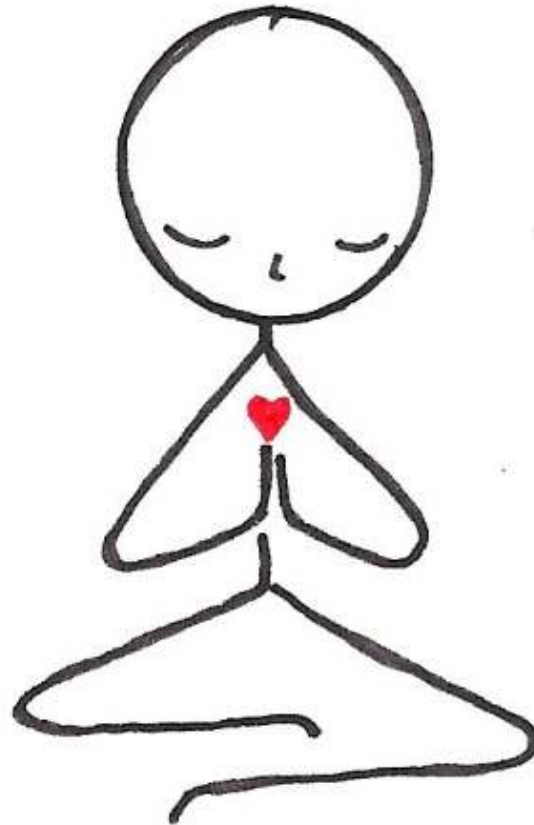


Flexible 'self-ing'

- Loosen attachment to self-concept (that may cohere with perfectionism)
 - Self-as-context
 - Tracking
 - Awareness of “selves”
 - Empty chair



3. Cultivate self-compassion



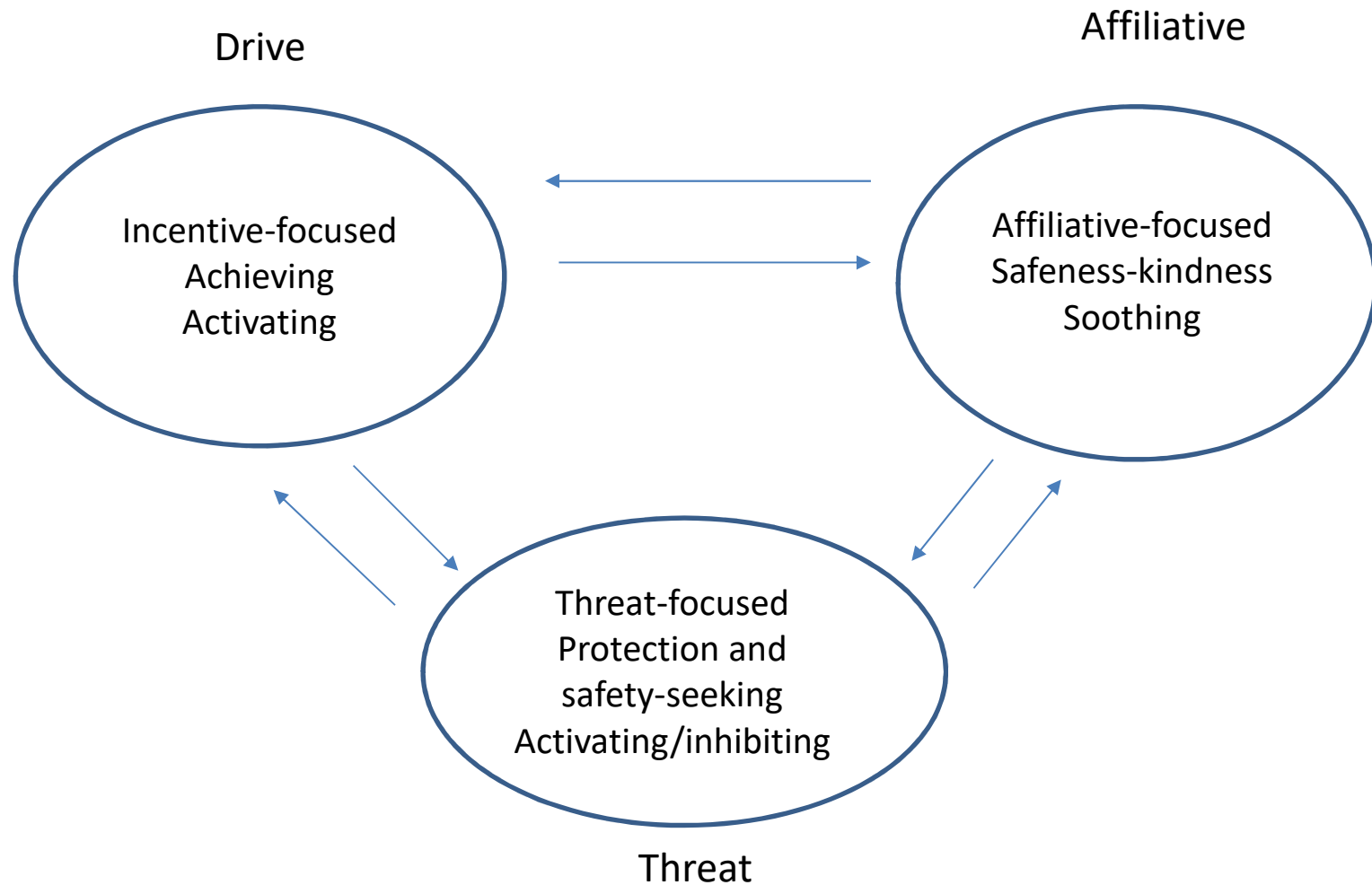
Cultivating self-compassion

Therapeutic targets:

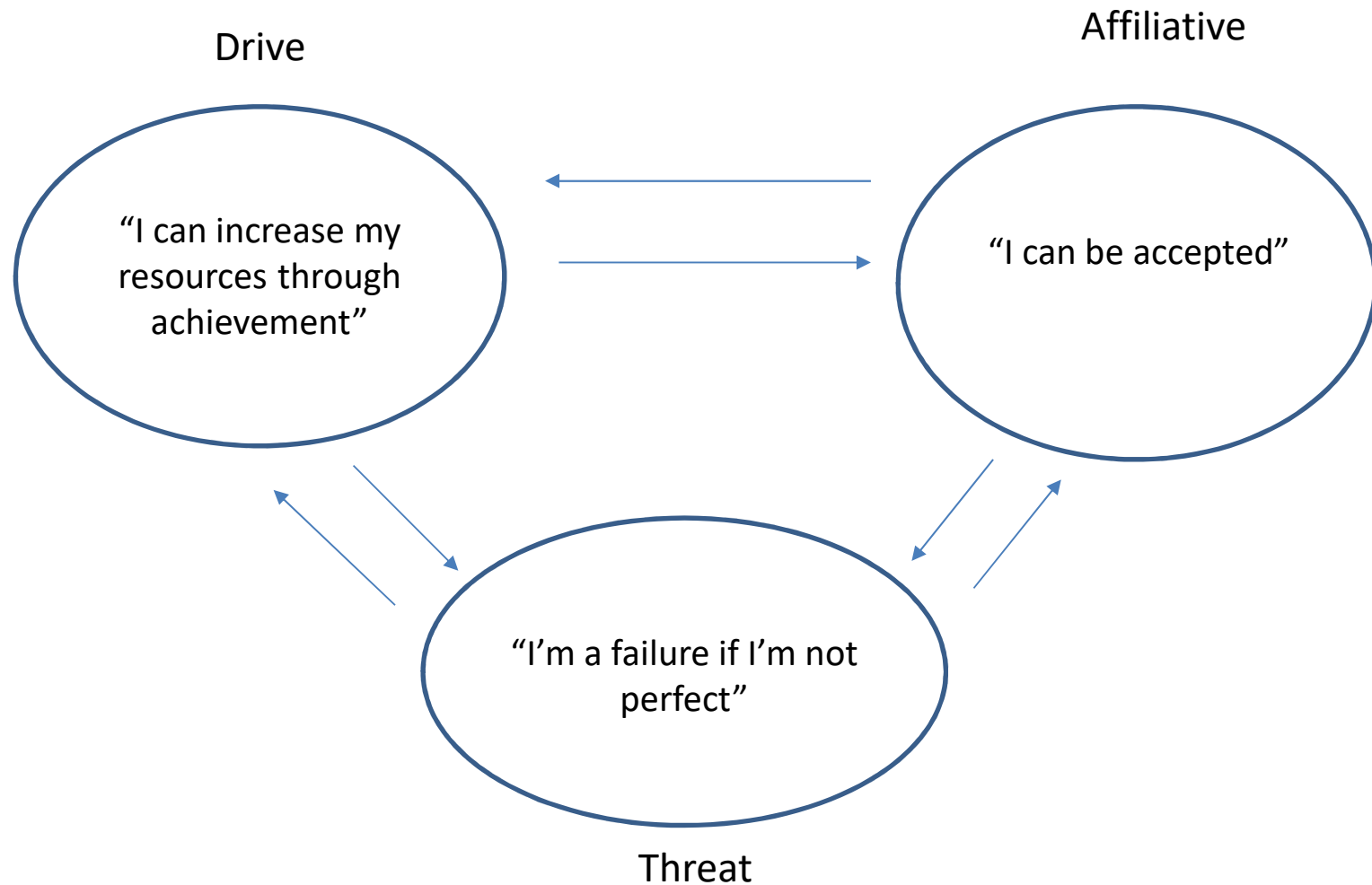
- **Self-criticism** when standards not achieved
- Self-worth dependent on achieving high standards
- Discounting achievements as “not good enough”



CFT: Affect Regulation System



CFT: Affect Regulation System



PART 3 – Perfectionism in the therapy room



Perfectionistic responding in the therapy room

Mindfulness for Two (Wilson, 2008)

As the therapist:

- Being (excessively) prepared
- Being under prepared
- Working much harder than the client
- Being (appearing) clever
- Chasing *perfect* understanding



Perfectionistic responding in the therapy room

- Needing the *perfect* solution
- Delivering *perfect* ACT therapy
- Avoiding complex clients believing we aren't sufficiently skilled (*risk of failure*)
- Avoiding tough conversations (*risk of failure*)



Self-reflection activity

In pairs, discuss

- What kind of strategies could help you with your own perfectionistic responding

And

- What would be one ~~small~~ tiny step you could take towards this **today**

And

- What could help you with this?
(Ask for what you need)

Summary

- By identifying patterns of unhelpful perfectionistic responding, we can help our clients *and ourselves* build flexible, compassionate alternative responses
- Perfectionistic responding can then be harnessed towards positive striving & thriving





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