




Self as Context

ACBS Montreal 2016




Psychological Flexibility



“The general goal of ACT is to increase **psychological flexibility** – the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behavior when doing so serves valued ends.”




Synergy of Psychological and Physiological Flexibility

- Recently there has been recognition that the ability to respond flexibly **physiologically** complements the ability to respond flexibly **psychologically**.
 - E.g. Porges polyvagal theory, Thayer neurovisceral integration
- 



Our Premise Here

- **Self as Context is Psychological**
 - **And**
 - **Physiological**
- 



“You are the sky
everything else,
it’s just the weather”



True?


False?



Premise: To Be the Sky, I Must Feel Safe

Self as context is: "...a sense of self that is a safe and consistent perspective from which to observe and accept all changing inner experiences." (from ACBS website)

- We must **FEEL SAFE ENOUGH** in order to **OBSERVE & BE WILLING** to have unwanted thoughts, feelings, sensations.

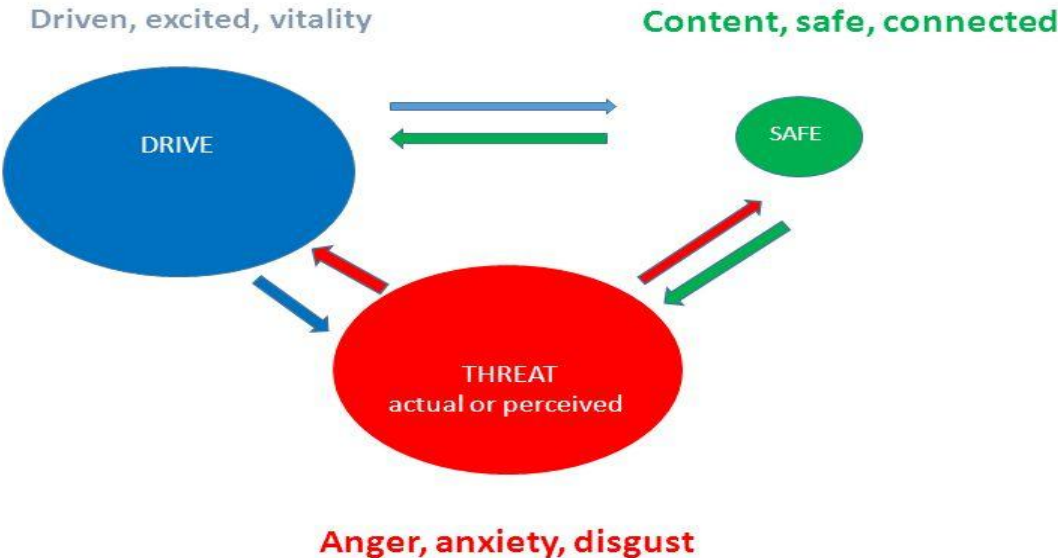
- 
- Feeling safe and connected is at least as physiological as it is a psychological state.
 - Paul Gilbert makes this point:

Three Types of Emotion Regulation System
Interactions between different types of emotional regulation systems
Paul Gilbert, PhD

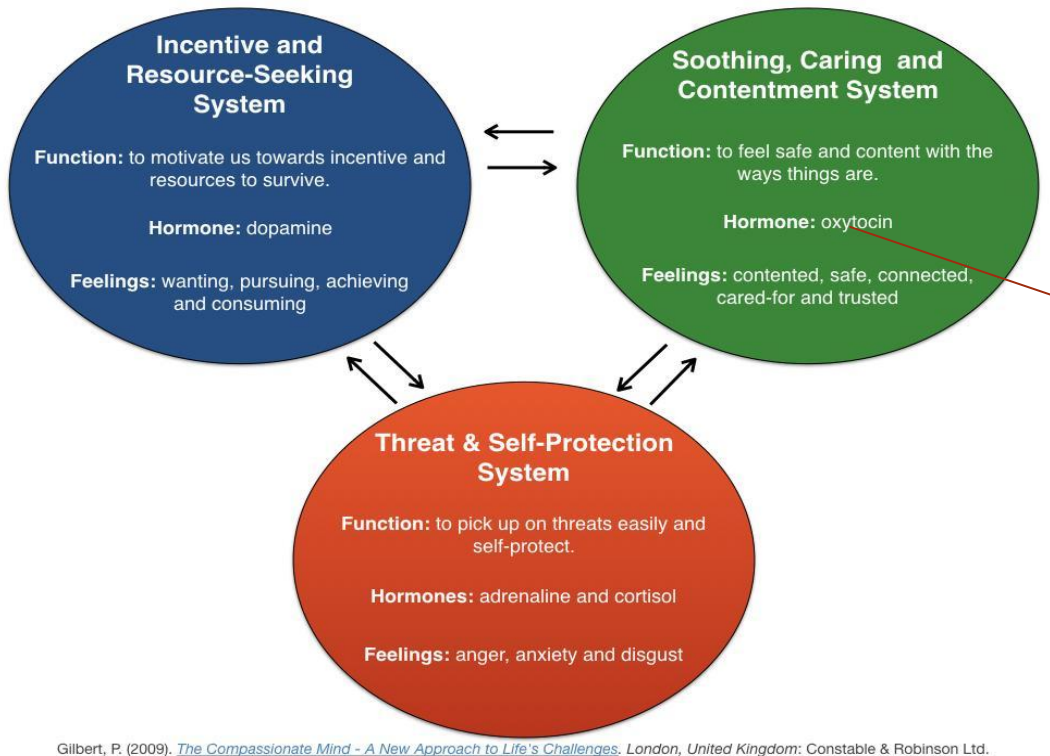


Where do you spend most of your time?

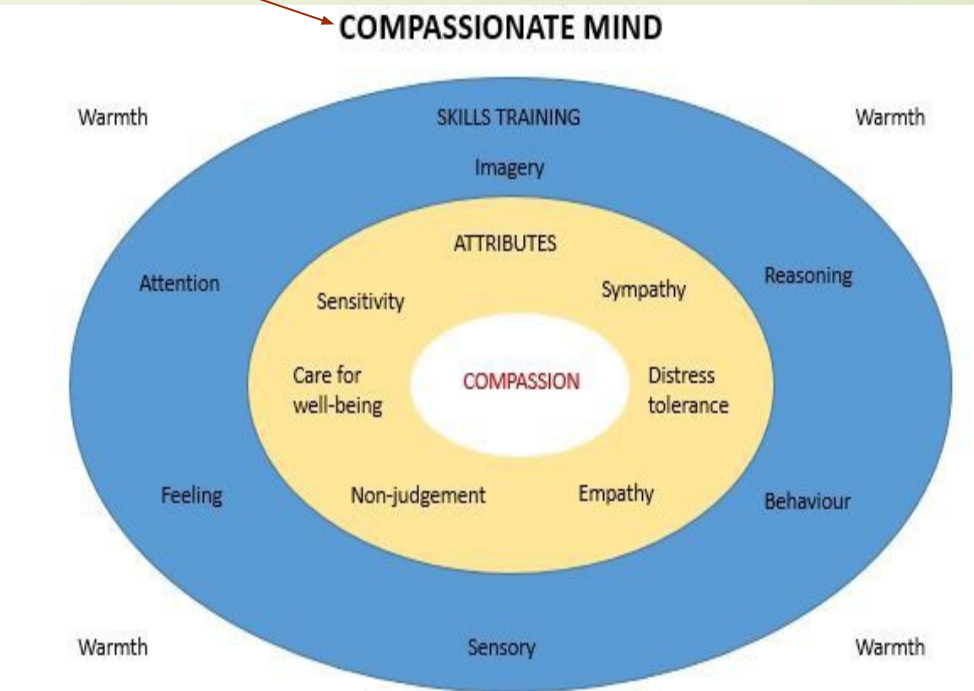
Three Types of Emotion Regulation System
Interactions between different types of emotional regulation systems
Paul Gilbert, PhD



This me on a good day.



Gilbert, P. (2009). *The Compassionate Mind - A New Approach to Life's Challenges*. London, United Kingdom: Constable & Robinson Ltd.






The Safe, Connected Physiological System is Where Self-Compassion and Self as Context Reside


Our safe, connected, affiliative system is as evolutionarily wired as the threat or drive systems.

It's based in our early attachments and in the importance of social connections and affiliation for human survival.

Unfortunately, unlike zebras (who apparently don't get ulcers), human relational framing can make it difficult to feel present, safe, connected.




Self-compassion allows us to feel safe enough to be the sky


- What is self-compassion?
 - “---being touched by and open to one's own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, [and] generating the desire to alleviate one's suffering and to heal oneself with kindness” (Neff, 2003a, p. 87) ...
 - Does this sound like Self as Context?
- 



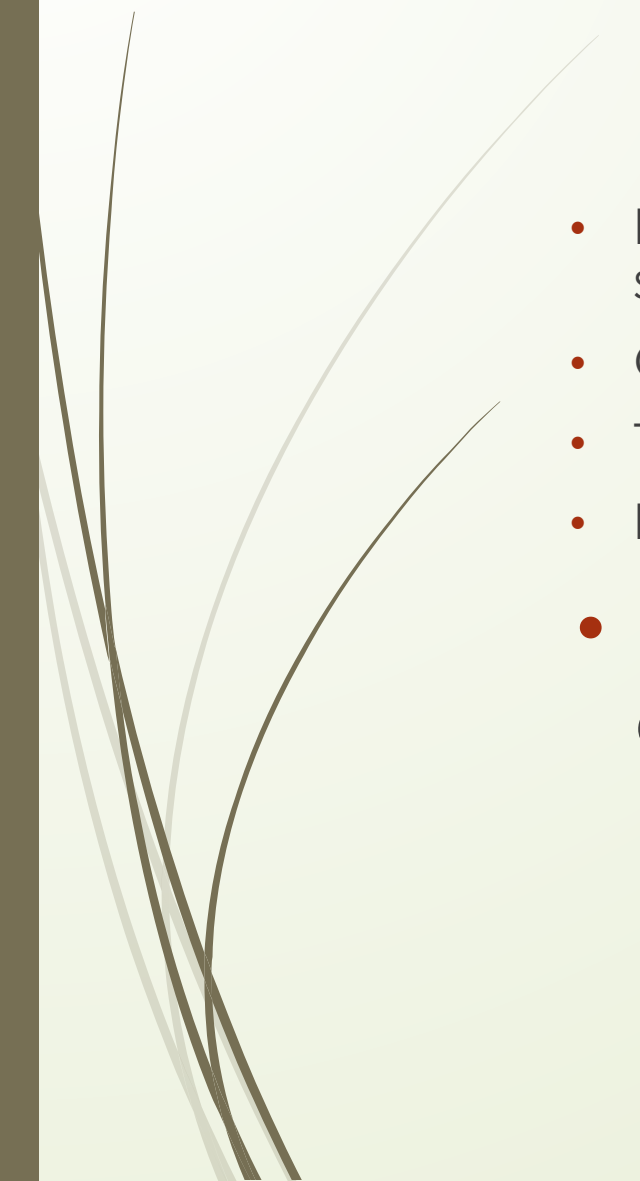
The Relationship between Self as context and Self-compassion

- “Upon considering the relationship between self-as-context and self-compassion, we can note that returning to an awareness of self-as-context offers us a non-attached and dis-identified relationship to our experiences. This allows the habitual stimulus functions of our painful private events and stories to hold less influence over us. From the perspective of the I-Here-Nowness of being, I can view my own suffering as I might view the suffering of another and be touched by the pain in that experience, without the dominant interference of my verbal learning history, with its potential for shaming self-evaluations (Vilardaga, 2009; Hayes, 2008).”
- Neff, K., & Tirsch, D. (2013). Self-compassion and ACT. *Mindfulness, acceptance, and positive psychology: The seven foundations of well-being*, 78-106.

- 
- SELF-COMPASSION AND THUS SELF AS CONTEXT ARE BASED ON FEELINGS AS MUCH AS THEY ARE BASED ON A DEICTIC I/HERE/NOW PERSPECTIVE.

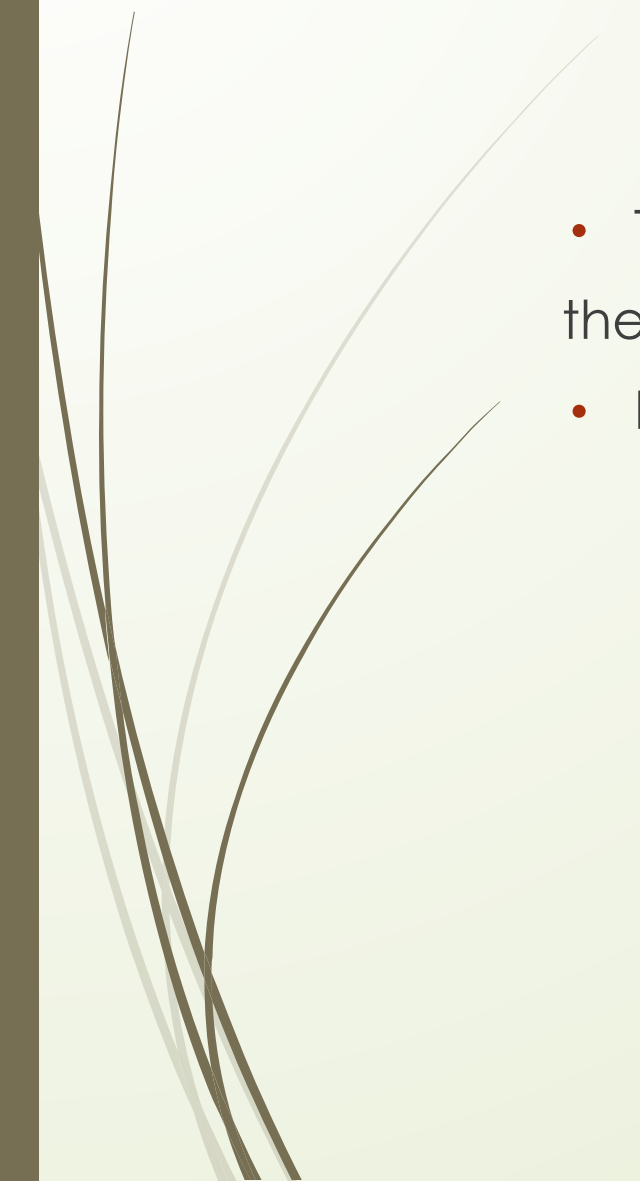


The Psycho-physiology of Self-compassion

- Like the fight-flight-freeze of the sympathetic nervous system's threat system-CARING, SAFETY, CONNECTEDNESS, COMPASSION are hardwired
 - Oxytocin
 - Thayer's Neurovisceral Integration
 - Porges' Polyvagal Theory
 - Unfortunately negativity and threat come more naturally and there is a clear bias toward threat and negativity
- 




Why Zebras don't get Ulcers

- The critical feature that distinguishes the adaptive (zebra) versus the maladaptive (human) response is flexibility.
 - Physiological as well as Psychological Flexibility
- 




Heart Rate Variability: A physiological index of **PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY**

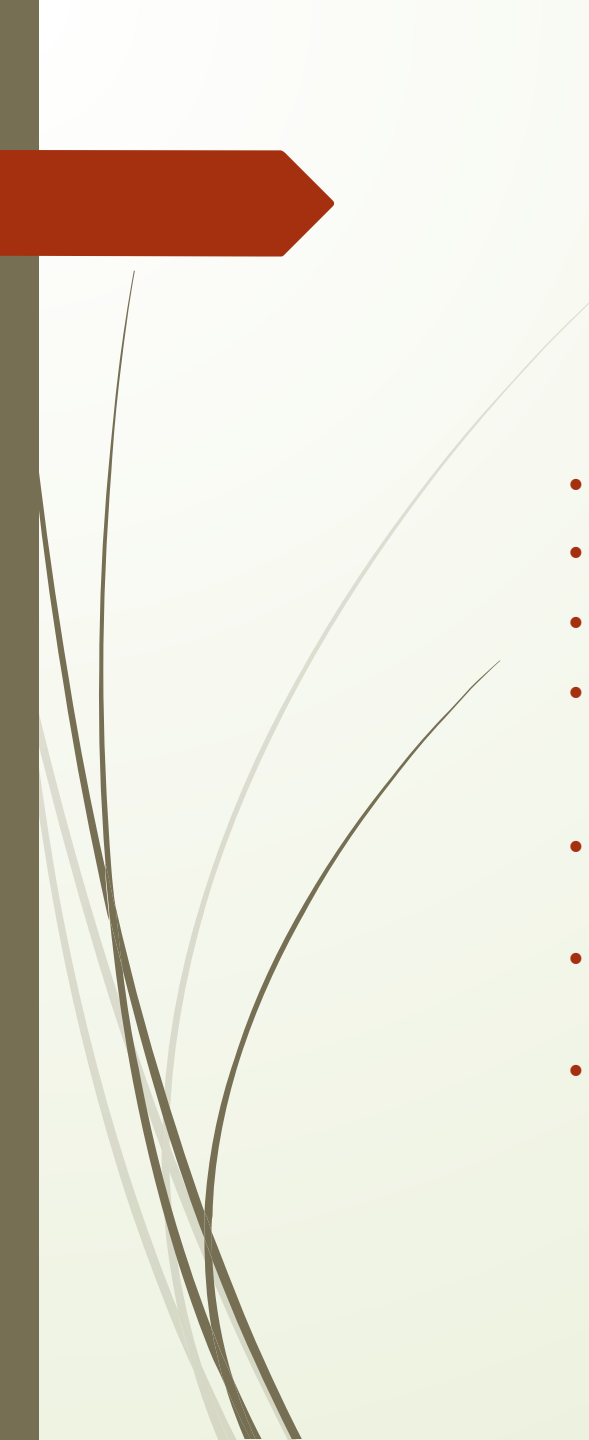
- If our hearts beat like a metronome, with little variation between beats, we are less physiologically flexible.
 - We are less able to move back and forth between threat (sympathetic nervous system) and safety (parasympathetic nervous system)
- 



Heart rate variability (HRV) as a physiological index of compassion & S-A-C

- Abstract from: Rockliff, H., **Gilbert, P.**, McEwan, K., Lightman, S., & Glover, D. (2008). A pilot exploration of heart rate variability and salivary cortisol responses to compassion-focused imagery. *Clinical Neuropsychiatry*, 5(3), 132-139.
- The evolution of mammalian caregiving involving hormones, such as oxytocin, vasopressin, and the myelinated vagal nerve as part of the ventral parasympathetic system, enables humans to connect, co-regulate each other's emotions and create prosociality. Compassion-based interventions draw upon a number of specific exercises and strategies to stimulate these physiological processes and create conditions of "interpersonal safeness," thereby helping people engage with, alleviate, and prevent suffering. Hence, compassion-based approaches are connected with our evolved caring motivation and attachment and our general affiliative systems that help regulate distress. Physiologically, they are connected to activity of the vagus nerve and corresponding adaptive heart rate variability (HRV). HRV is an important physiological marker for overall health, and the body-mind connection. Therefore, there is significant value of training compassion to increase HRV and training HRV to facilitate compassion. Despite the significance of compassion in alleviating and preventing suffering, there remain difficulties in its precise assessment. HRV offers a useful form of measurement to assess and train compassion. Specific examples of what exercises can facilitate HRV and how to measure HRV will be described. This paper argues that the field of compassion science needs to move toward including HRV as a primary outcome measure in its future assessment and training, due to its connection to vagal regulatory activity, and its link to overall health and well-being.

- 
- So - unlike being in threat mode - caring and self-compassion requires a choice and takes PRACTICE
 - Many ways of practicing being in a self-compassionate. self as context state:
 - Kristen Neff: <http://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/>
Chris Germer: <https://chrisgermer.com/meditations/>
Dennis Tirch: <http://www.mindfulcompassion.com/what-we-do-1-1/>
Paul Gilbert: <https://compassionatemind.co.uk/resources/audio>
Jason Luoma & Jenna LeJeune:
https://www.actwithcompassion.com/compassion_audio_recordings

- 
- Today Paul Gilbert's Soothing rhythms breathing & Heart Rate Variability:
 - When you slowly inhale: fast heart beats – sympathetic arousal
 - When you slowly exhale: slow heart beats - parasympathetic
 - When you have kind thoughts with slow breathing: you can increase physiological and PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY by moving flexibly to “self as compassion” when you need to
 - When we breathe slowly @ 5 sec inhale, 5 secs exhale we increase the variability of the interval between our heartbeats
 - This increase in HRV allows us to move more flexibly to self as context and self-compassion
 - So let's do it:
<https://soundcloud.com/compassionatemind/soothing-rhythm-breathing-practices/s-JA0g8?in=compassionatemind/sets/compassionate-minds>



Gilbert Breathing mp3

