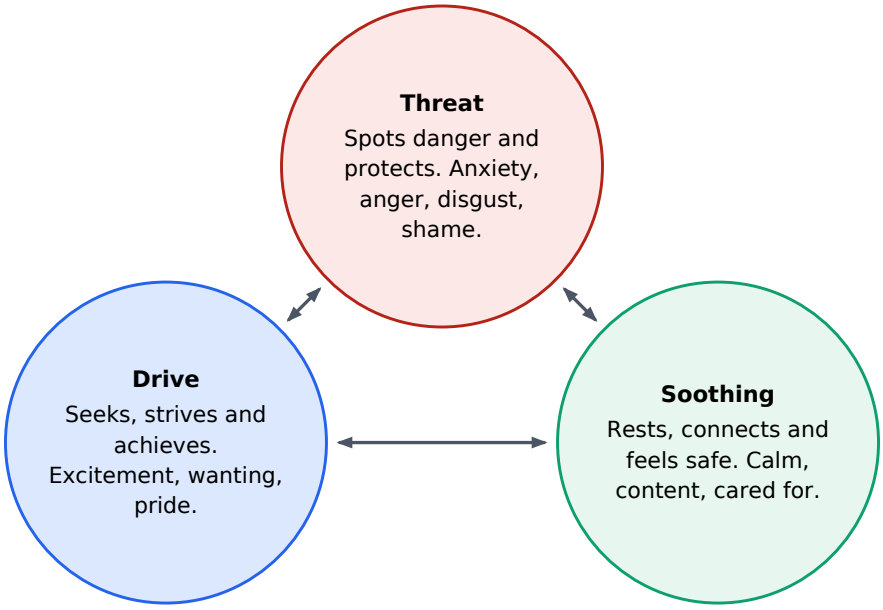
The three emotion systems

The threat, drive and soothing systems, and what happens when they are out of balance.

Our brains have three main systems for managing emotions. Each evolved for a reason, and each has its own feelings and body chemistry.



When the systems are out of balance

- The **threat** system is the fastest and loudest. It is built to be over-cautious: better safe than sorry.
- Many of us use **drive** to keep threat quiet. We achieve, please and keep busy so as not to feel like a failure. It works until we stop or fall short.
- The **soothing** system is what settles threat. It grows through experiences of warmth, safety and care. If those were in short supply early on, it may be under-developed. It can be built at any age.

Self-criticism and the threat system

Your brain reacts to an attack from inside much as it does to one from outside. Self-criticism keeps the threat system switched on. Kindness towards yourself activates soothing.

Building the soothing system

- Slow, steady breathing
- Kind, warm self-talk
- Time with people and animals you feel safe with
- Compassionate imagery
- Rest that is really rest

> **Not your fault**
> You did not choose your brain, your genes or your early life. You are still responsible for what you do now, and you can take that on without shaming yourself.

The three systems model comes from Compassion Focused Therapy, developed by Paul Gilbert.

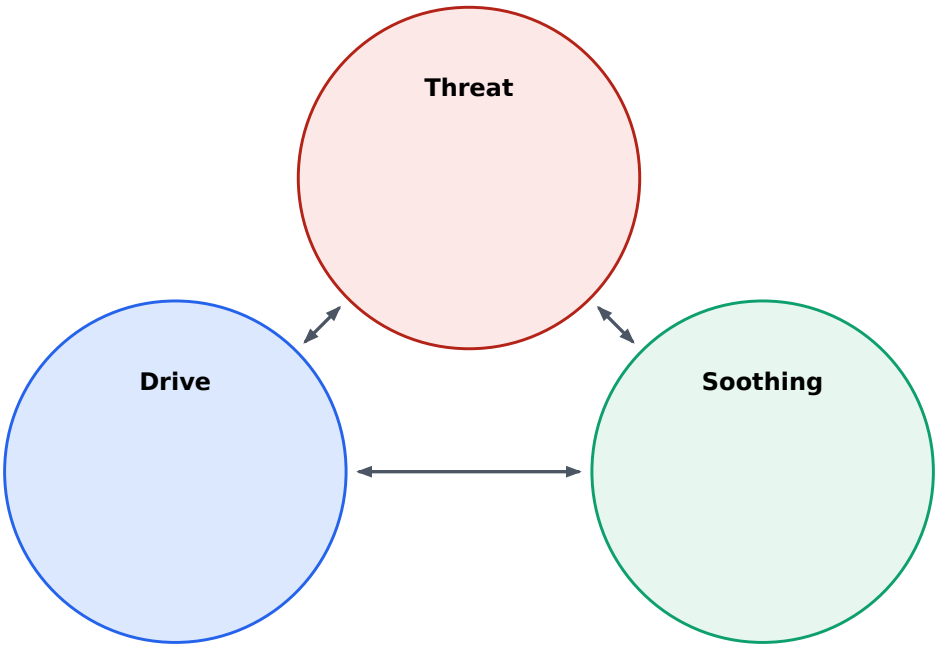
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My three systems

How big is each circle in your life at the moment?

Name _____ Date _____

For each system, note what switches it on for you and what you do when you are in it.



System	What sets it off for me	How much of my week I spend here
Threat		
Drive		
Soothing		

What do I notice about the balance?

Ways I could give the soothing system more time: people, places, activities, and how I talk to myself

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What is self-compassion?

Treating yourself the way you would treat someone you care about.

Compassion is noticing suffering and wanting to help. Self-compassion is turning that same attitude towards yourself when you are struggling, have failed, or do not like something about yourself.

Three parts

Kindness, not judgement
Being warm and understanding with yourself when things go wrong, instead of attacking.

Common humanity, not isolation
Remembering that struggling, failing and feeling inadequate are part of being human. You are not the only one.

Mindful awareness, not over-identifying
Seeing your pain clearly, without ignoring it and without being swept away by it.

What it is not

The worry	What the evidence suggests
"It is self-pity."	Self-pity says "poor me, nobody suffers like I do". Self-compassion says "this is hard, and everyone has hard times".
"It is letting myself off the hook."	People who are kinder to themselves are more able to admit mistakes and put them right, because they can bear to look.
"I will lose my drive."	Self-compassionate people are just as motivated. They are less afraid of failing, so they try more and bounce back faster.
"It is selfish."	It leaves you with more to give to other people.
"It is weak."	Facing your own pain with kindness takes courage.

Starting small

- Notice when you are having a hard time, and say so: "This is difficult."
- Ask: "What would I say to a friend in this exact position?"
- Put a hand on your chest and slow your breathing.
- Ask: "What do I need right now?"

If it feels strange or upsetting
That is common, especially if kindness was scarce when you were growing up. Go gently. It gets easier with practice.

The three elements of self-compassion were described by Kristin Neff.

My notes and questions

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What gets in the way of being kind to myself

Fears about self-compassion are common, and worth looking at.

Name _____ Date _____

For many people, being kind to themselves feels wrong, dangerous or just impossible. Tick anything you recognise.

- [ ] If I am kind to myself, I will become lazy or lower my standards
- [ ] I do not deserve kindness
- [ ] If I stop criticising myself, I will make more mistakes
- [ ] Kindness feels unfamiliar and uncomfortable
- [ ] When I am kind to myself, I feel sad or tearful
- [ ] It feels self-indulgent or selfish
- [ ] If I let my guard down, something bad will happen
- [ ] I am afraid I will become dependent on it
- [ ] Other people matter more than I do
- [ ] I do not know how

The block that is strongest for me

Where might it have come from? What did I learn about kindness growing up?

What I fear would happen if I were kinder to myself	What might actually happen

One small act of kindness to myself I am willing to try this week, as an experiment

Feeling sad when you are kind to yourself is a recognised reaction. It is common in people who did not get much kindness earlier in life.

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Soothing rhythm breathing

A slower, deeper breathing rhythm that settles the body.

This is the foundation for the other compassion practices. The aim is to slow down enough for your body to feel steadier and safer. You do not need to relax completely.

1. Sit upright and comfortable, feet on the floor, shoulders back and down. Chest open.
2. Let your face soften. Try a slight, friendly half-smile.
3. Breathe a little more slowly and deeply than usual. Find a rhythm that feels soothing to you: perhaps in for 4 or 5, out for 4 or 5.
4. Let the breath be smooth and even. Feel it move down into your belly.
5. Notice your body slowing down. Feel the weight of your body held by the chair.
6. When your mind wanders, which it will, gently bring it back. No telling off.
7. If you like, on each out-breath say to yourself, in a warm inner voice, "slowing down" or "mind slowing, body slowing".
8. Carry on for two to five minutes.

Tips

- Short and often works best. Try a minute, several times a day.
- Practise when things are fine, so it is there when they are not.
- If focusing on the breath makes you anxious, focus on your feet on the floor or an object in your hand instead.

Day	When I practised	What I noticed
Mon		
Tue		
Wed		
Thu		
Fri		
Sat		
Sun		

From Compassion Focused Therapy, developed by Paul Gilbert.

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A self-compassion break

Three sentences for a difficult moment.

Use this whenever you notice you are stressed, hurting or being hard on yourself. It takes about a minute.

1. Notice	Say to yourself: "This is a hard moment." Or "This hurts." Or "This is stress." Naming it is mindfulness.
2. Connect	"Struggling is part of life. Other people feel this too. I am not alone." This is common humanity.
3. Be kind	Put a hand on your chest, or wherever feels soothing. Say: "May I be kind to myself." Or ask: "What do I need right now?"

Finding your own words

The exact phrases do not matter. What matters is that they sound like something you could say and mean.

My way of saying "this is hard"

My way of saying "I am not the only one"

My way of saying "may I be kind to myself"

When I tried it, what did I notice?

The self-compassion break was developed by Kristin Neff.

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Imagining my compassionate self

An imagery exercise for practising being wise, strong and kind towards yourself.

Actors step into a character by imagining how that person thinks, stands and speaks. You can do the same with your own compassionate side. It does not matter whether you feel compassionate. You are practising, as you would a skill.

1. Begin with a minute of soothing rhythm breathing.
2. Imagine you are a deeply compassionate person. Bring to mind three qualities:

- **Wisdom.** You understand that life is hard, that we did not choose our brains or our past, and that everyone is doing their best with what they have.
- **Strength.** You are steady and grounded, like a mountain or a deep-rooted tree. You can face difficult things.
- **Caring commitment.** You want to help, yourself and others, and not to condemn.

3. Sit as this person would sit. Let your face take on their expression.
4. Imagine their voice: warm, slow, steady.
5. From here, look at the part of you that is struggling. What do you see? What do you want for that part?

Wisdom	Strength	Caring
What does my compassionate self understand?	How does it stand, sit and breathe?	What does it want for me?

What its voice sounds like, and what it says to me

A situation this week where I could bring this part of me in

From Compassion Focused Therapy, developed by Paul Gilbert.

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Compassionate thought record

Answering self-criticism with understanding as well as evidence.

Name _____ Date _____

What happened?

What my critic said

How that left me feeling (0 to 10)

Take a minute of slow, soothing breathing. Then answer from your compassionate side, in a warm tone.

Understanding

Why does it make sense that I reacted this way, given my history and what was going on?

Not alone

How might other people feel in this situation?

A fairer view

What is a more balanced and kinder way of seeing it?

What would help

What do I need? What would a caring friend suggest I do?

How I feel now (0 to 10)

What I will do next

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A compassionate letter to myself

Writing to yourself as a wise and caring friend would.

Think of something you are struggling with or criticising yourself for. Now imagine someone who cares about you deeply and sees you clearly: your strengths, your flaws and everything you have been through. Write to yourself from their point of view.

What to include

1. **Acknowledge the difficulty.** "I can see how hard this has been."
2. **Make sense of it.** How do your history and circumstances explain why you feel and react this way?
3. **Remember you are not alone.** Others struggle with this too.
4. **Be warm.** Use the tone you would use with someone you love.
5. **Offer encouragement, not orders.** What would help? What do you need?

Write without stopping to edit. If the critic interrupts, notice it and carry on.

Dear me,

Afterwards

- Read it back slowly, out loud if you can, in a kind tone.
- Notice how it feels to receive it.
- Keep it, and read it again on a hard day.

Compassionate letter writing is used in Compassion Focused Therapy, developed by Paul Gilbert.

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Kinder things to say to myself

Fair and kind statements to use in place of harsh ones.

These are not empty affirmations. They are fair, kind statements that a good friend might say. Tick the ones you could imagine saying to yourself, and change the words to fit.

When I make a mistake
"That did not go how I wanted. Everyone gets things wrong. What can I learn, and what would help now?"

When I am struggling
"This is really hard. It makes sense that I am finding it hard."

When I compare myself
"I only see part of their life. Mine does not have to look like theirs."

When I am tired
"I have been carrying a lot. I am allowed to rest."

When I feel not good enough
"I do not have to be perfect to be worth something."

When I am anxious
"I am scared, and I am doing it anyway. That takes courage."

When I have let someone down
"I can be sorry and still be a decent person."

When nothing is going right
"This is one bad day. It will pass."

When I...	A kinder line I could use
Forget something important	*I have a lot on. I will write it down and sort it.*

Cut along the dashed lines. Keep a card in your wallet or phone case.

A kinder line to carry with me
The one I most need

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A kinder line to carry with me
The one I most need

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