

## Emotional Brain Circuits

Why self-compassion? Paul Gilbert (2010) proposed a model of emotion regulation that includes three core systems: drive, threat, and soothing. These systems shape our emotions and can significantly impact our mental health. Each is designed to do different things, and each system interacts with and influences the other. Let's explore these systems and their effects, including the importance of self-compassion.

### **Drive System (or drive mind)**

Our drive system is associated with motivation, goal pursuit, and achievement. It initiates and maintains our desires, ambitions, and passions. Dopamine is the reward chemical we experience when we achieve something that we set out to pursue. We feel excitement and pleasure if we win a competition, pass an exam, or go out with a desired person. When our drive system is activated in a balanced way, it can lead to a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

Excessive or unrelenting drive, however, without self-compassion, can lead to feelings of stress, burnout, and self-criticism. For example, a person driven by their ambitions to succeed in their career might work long hours, neglect self-care, and constantly push themselves beyond their limits. If they make mistakes or encounter setbacks or failures, the lack of self-compassion could lead to intense self-criticism and feelings of inadequacy, adversely affecting their mental health.

### **Threat System (or threat mind)**

Our threat system is always on to protect us, scanning and looking for potential environmental dangers or threats. It evolved as a survival mechanism to keep us safe from harm. A better safe than sorry strategy is at the core of our threat system. When it detects something dangerous or threatening, it selects a response like fight, flight, freeze, or shut down. We experience bursts of emotions, such as anger, fear, or anxiety. Our body floods with hormones like adrenaline and cortisol to help us take action.

Our threat system can become overactive in modern life, leading to excessive anger, anxiety, fear, and hypervigilance. When our threat system dominates, it can result in chronic stress and a heightened sense of vulnerability. For example, imagine someone who worries excessively and anticipates adverse outcomes constantly. Their hyperactive threat system might lead to chronic anxiety and even panic attacks. Without self-compassion, they might criticize themselves for feeling anxious, which only amplifies their distress.

When things block us from what we want or pursue, our threat system can activate to help us remove perceived blocks. It remains engaged until we overcome the block or disengage from the goal and choose a different, more realistic plan. We might experience anger, anxiety, or self-criticism or feel depressed when our drive system continues to pursue an unrealistic goal.

## **Soothing System (or content mind)**

Our soothing system provides comfort, safety, and a sense of security. It's associated with the experience of giving or receiving care, soothing ourselves or others, and feeling happy or content with things the way they are. In evolutionary terms, this system is our mammalian caregiving system. It's activated when we experience kindness, warmth, encouragement, support, and compassion from others and toward ourselves. It operates normally when there are no threats to defend against or goals to pursue. Nurturing this system can help reduce stress and promote inner balance.

Oxytocin and endorphins, for example, are feel-good neurochemicals we experience when content. Unlike our drive and threat systems that activate us, our soothing system deactivates us. Feeling safe, calm, content, and at peace helps restore inner balance. This is different from low threat, which is associated with feelings like boredom or emptiness. When we practice mindfulness and slow down, people report not wanting or striving, feeling calmer and connected to others.

A deficiency in our soothing system might lead to difficulty experiencing painful thoughts and feelings and finding comfort in challenging times. For example, consider a person going through a difficult breakup. Suppose they lack self-compassion and constantly criticize themselves for feeling upset. In that case, finding comfort and feeling positive feelings becomes more challenging. However, suppose they can access their soothing system through self-compassion and seeking support from loved ones. In that case, they are more likely to relate to painful thoughts and feelings effectively.

## **In Summary**

The three emotion regulation systems proposed by Gilbert (2010) emphasize the importance of self-compassion and balanced activation of the drive, threat, and soothing systems. Our drive and soothing systems prioritize our threat system and help it detect and respond to perceived threats. Learning how to allow and work with unpleasant feelings is important. Painful thoughts or feelings are not necessarily evidence that something is wrong but can be normal responses to things you care about.

Cultivating self-compassion can help you respond to painful thoughts and feelings with understanding and care, leading to better mental health outcomes. By recognizing and balancing the drive, threat, and soothing systems, you can build emotional resilience and foster healthier relationships with yourself and others.

## References

Gallo, F. J. (2016). *A practitioner's guide to using the acceptance and commitment therapy matrix model*. Frank J. Gallo.

Gilbert, P. (2010). *Compassion focused therapy*. New York, NY: Routledge.

## Disclaimer

The content in this handout is strictly educational in nature. We are NOT providing psychological services or medical advice or establishing a relationship of any kind, including doctor-patient or student-teacher. Please see our [Company Policies](#) for more information.