

# A Capacity Focused Approach to Teaching Mindfulness

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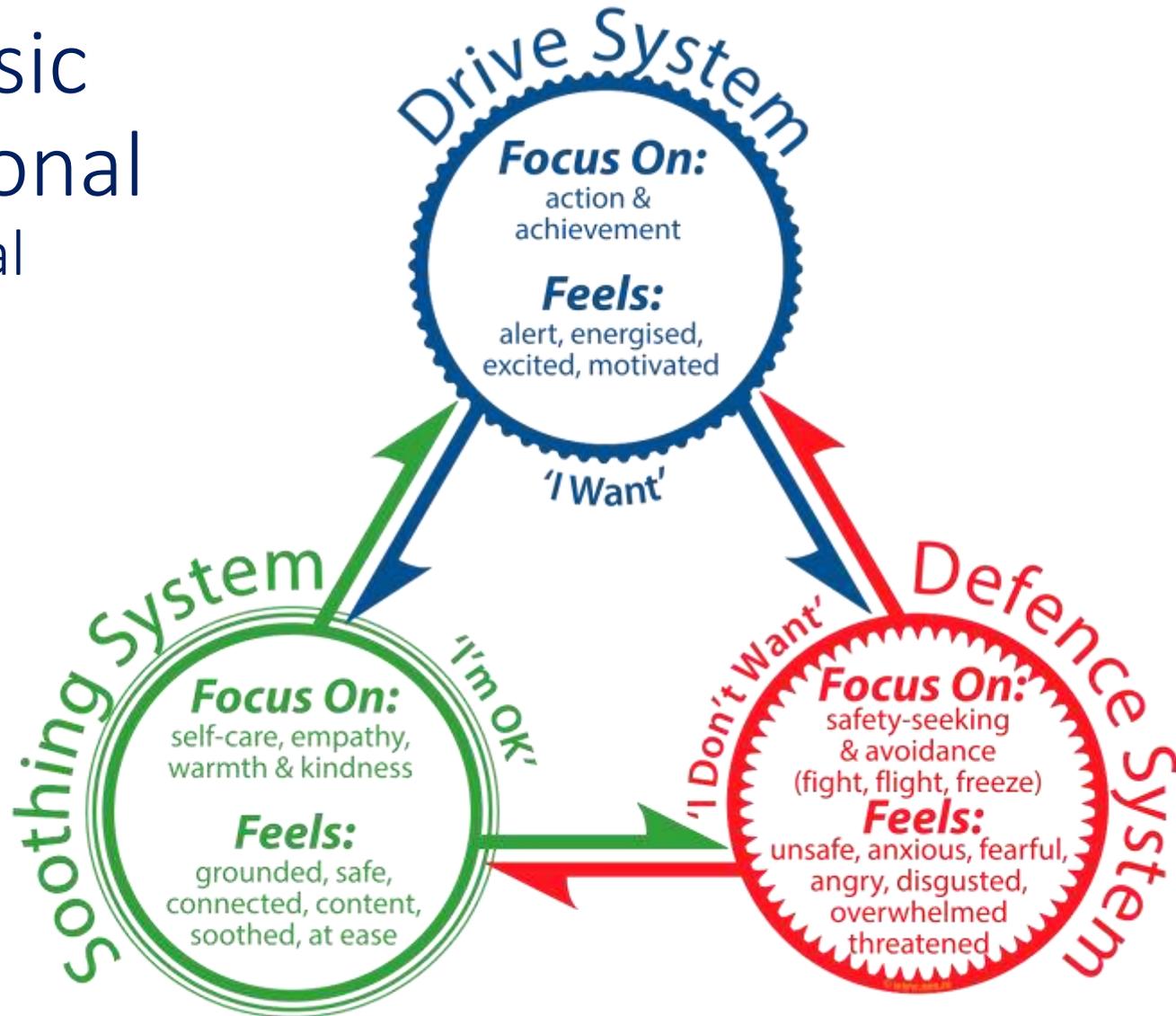
Lead trainer Integrated Mindfulness Ltd. & Mindful Resilience Enhancement

## Pete's Experience...

“The body scan was the worst for me. I used to claw at my arms or clench my fists to detract from the unpleasant feelings when doing the shared practice, and the only way I could get through the longer sessions was to actively follow train of thought and refrain from focusing on the body as it bough on the discomfort and tension.”

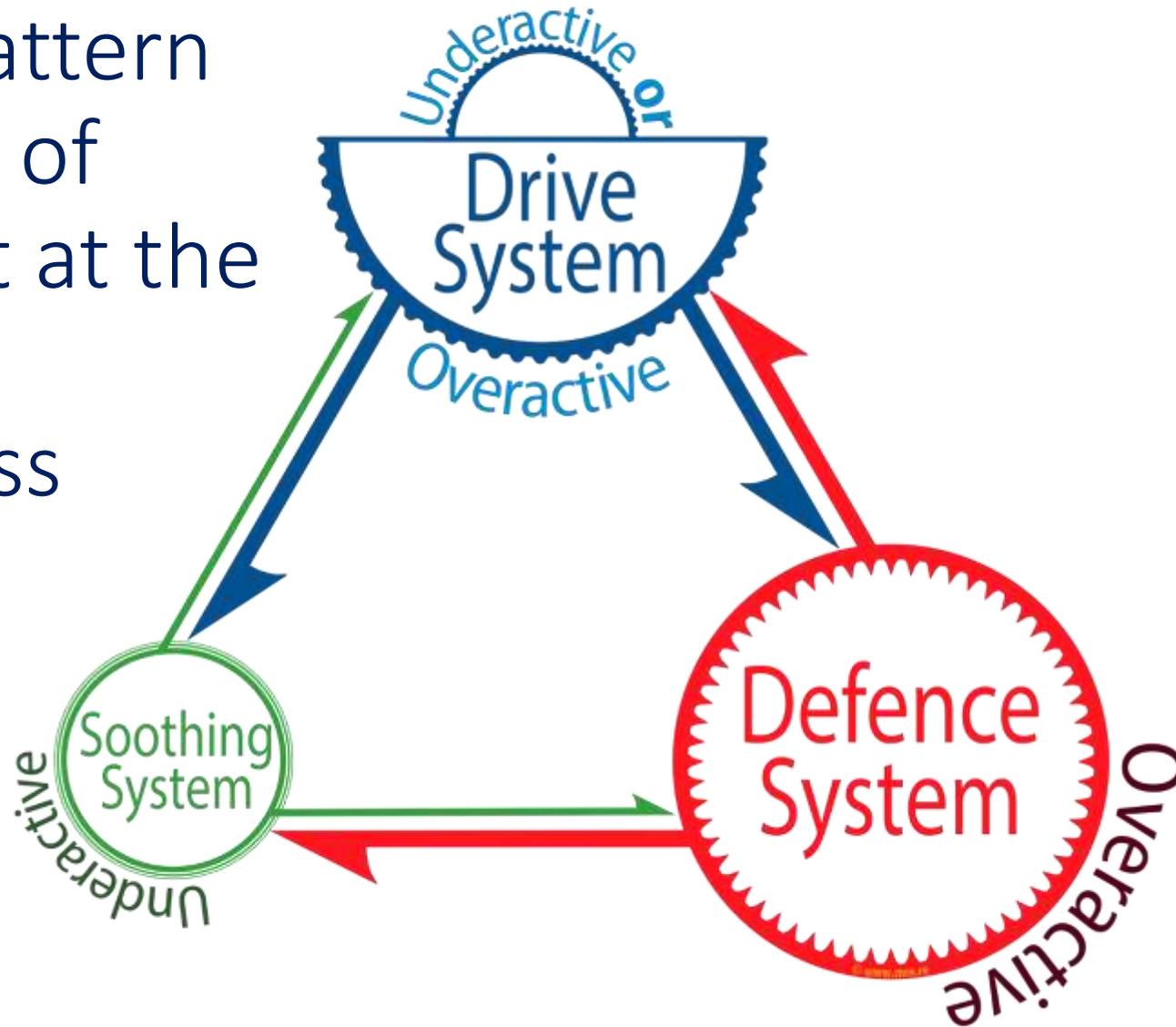
PeterMABH. (2016, June 1). *Discomfort during body scan*. Retrieved June 12, 2016, from Everyday Mindfulness, <https://www.everyday-mindfulness.org/forum/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=4561>

# The 3 Basic Motivational (or Emotional Regulatory) Systems



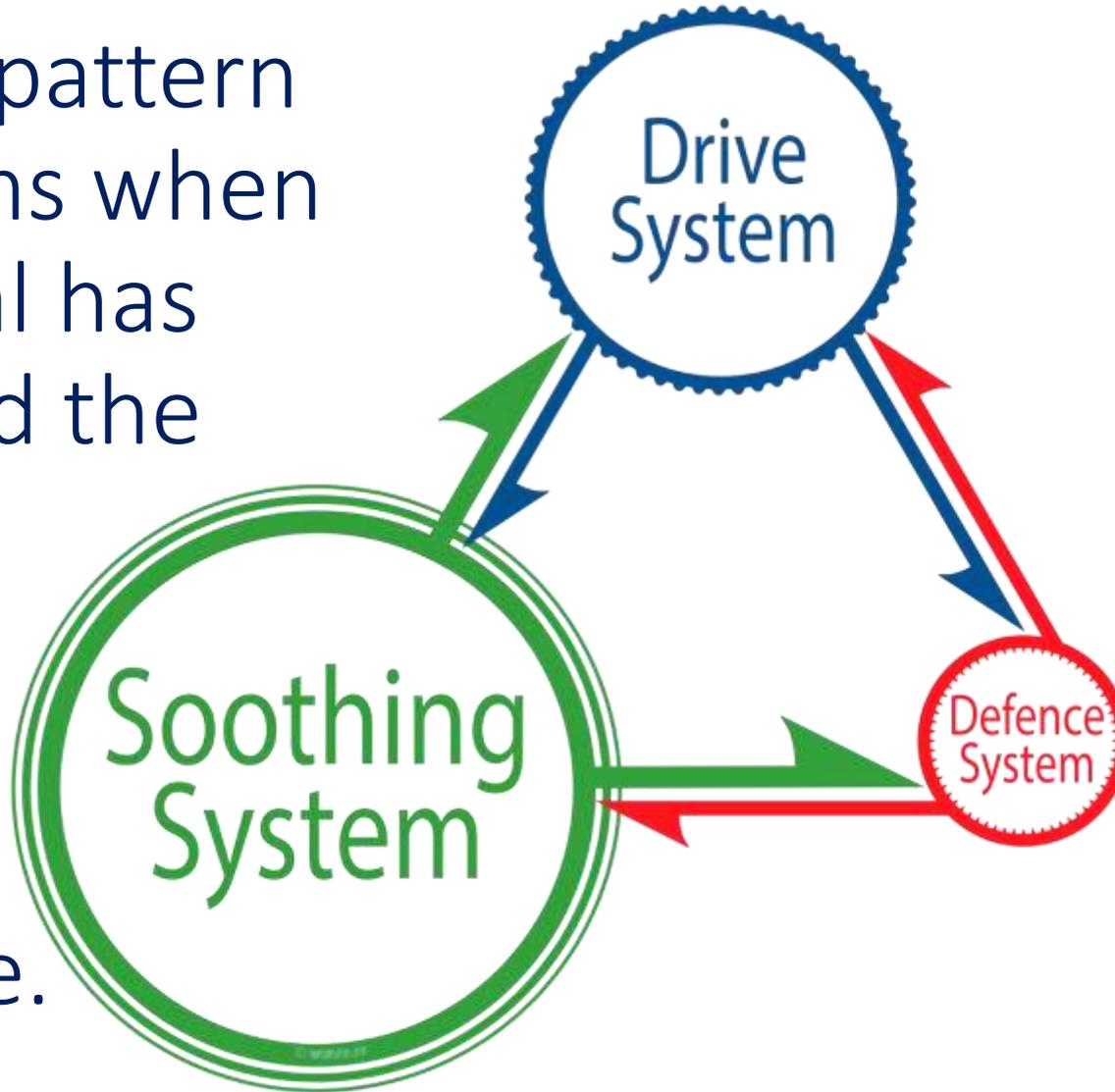
Adapted from Paul Gilbert's work. See Compassionate Mind Foundation.

Possible pattern  
of systems of  
participant at the  
start of a  
mindfulness  
course.  
Lower  
resilience.



Possible pattern  
of systems when  
individual has  
cultivated the  
Soothing  
System.

Higher  
resilience.



# What motivational systems are being activated here?

From Full Catastrophe Living (2009 & 2013):

“We sometimes put it this way to prospective participants before we admit them to the MBSR program:

You don't have to like the daily meditation practice schedule; **you just have to do it** [on the disciplined schedule you are agreeing to by signing up and then doing the best you can].

Then, at the end of the eight weeks, you can tell us whether it was a waste of time or not.

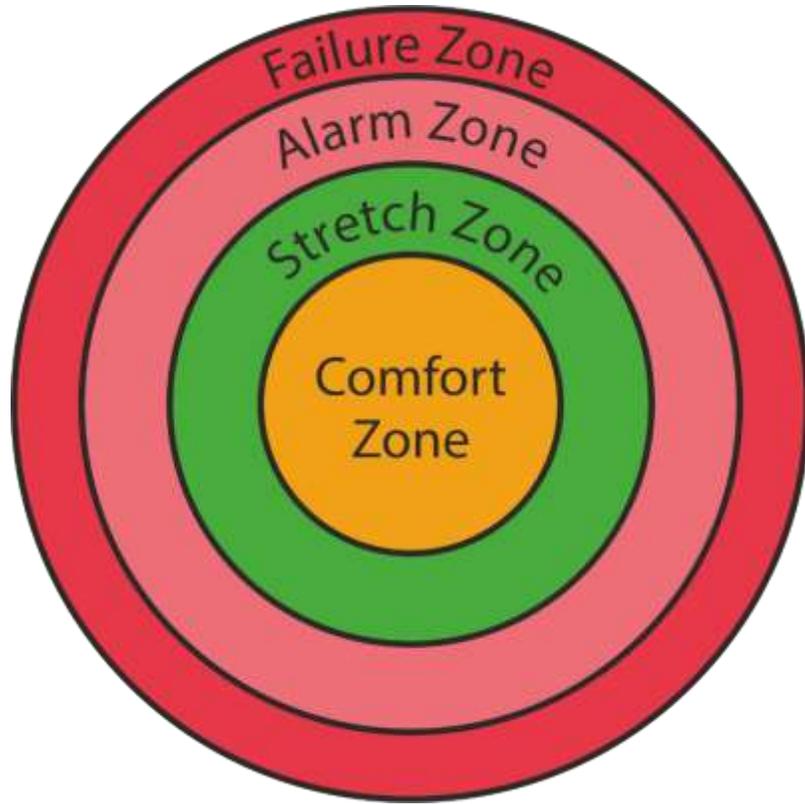
But in the interim, even if your mind is telling you constantly that it is stupid or a waste of time, practice anyway, and as wholeheartedly as possible, **as if your life depended on it.**

Because it does—in more ways than you think.”

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2009). *Full catastrophe living*. New York: Delta & Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living*. New York: Bantam.

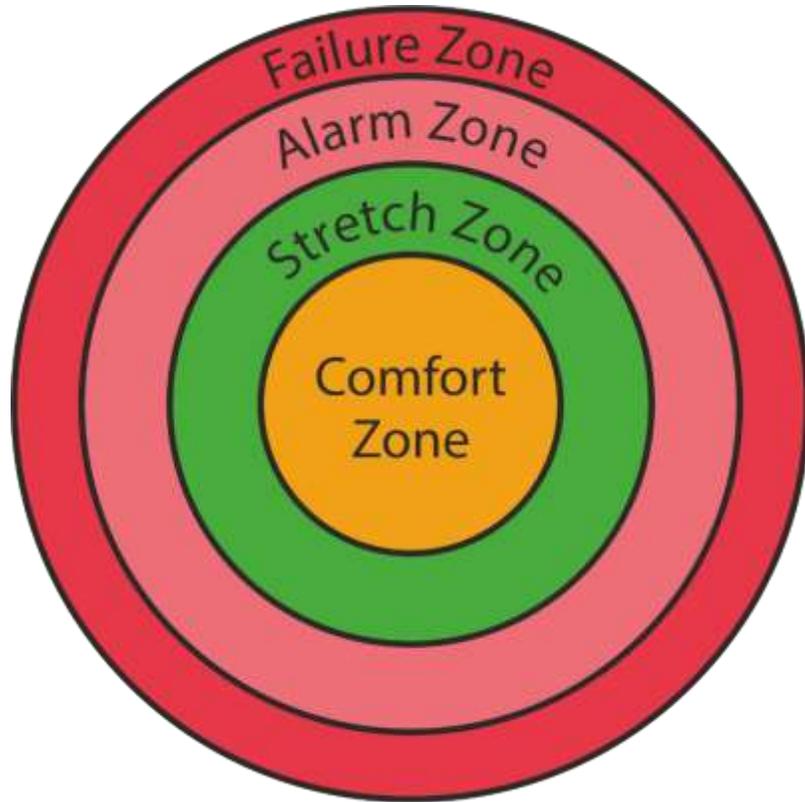
# Rogers on Learning

- We cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his [or her] learning.
  - The structure and organization of the self appears:
    - to become more rigid under threat;
    - to relax its boundaries when completely free from threat...
  - The educational situation which most effectively promotes significant learning is one in which
    1. threat to the self of the learner is reduced to a minimum, and
    2. differentiated perception of the field of experience is facilitated.
- Rogers, C. (1951) *Client-Centered Therapy*. p. 384-429. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.



Adapted from Tom Senninger's learning zone model, in turn adapted from Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development model.

- **Comfort Zone:** Low challenge, little learning. *Feeling tone:* calm / capable / stuck / bored
- **Stretch Zone:** Manageable challenge & risk, effective learning. *Feeling tone:* exciting / focused / interested / uncertain / clumsy
- **Alarm Zone:** High challenge, little learning; reinforcement of aversion. *Feeling tone:* fear / freeze / frustration / anger / self-criticism
- **Failure Zone:** Overwhelming challenge; no real learning, just aversion reinforcement. *Feeling tone:* panic / shame / guilt / rage / disgust / numb

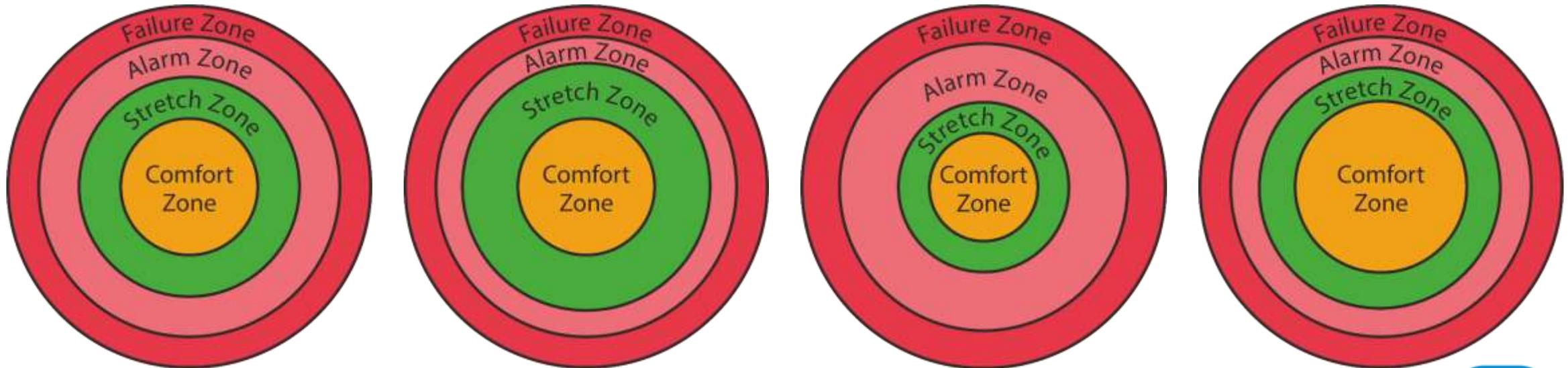


Adapted from Tom Senninger's learning zone model, in turn adapted from Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development model.

- **Comfort Zone:** Important for rest, recuperation, soothing and consolidating learning. Low challenge, little learning. *Feeling tone: restful / calm / soothing / capable / stuck / bored*
- **Stretch Zone:** Manageable challenge & risk, effective learning. *Feeling tone: exciting / focused / interested / uncertain / clumsy / confused*
- **Alarm Zone:** High challenge, little learning; reinforcement of stress reactions. *Feeling tone: fear / freeze / disconnected / disappointment / frustration / anger / self-criticism*
- **Failure Zone:** Overwhelming challenge, no real learning; just triggering and reinforcement of avoidance reactions. *Feeling tone: panic / shame / guilt / rage / disgust / numb / despair / isolation*

# Zone Variation

- Zones vary with each individual's experience and each situation...
- What is a rich learning experience in the Stretch Zone for one person can be an Alarm Zone experience for another that results in avoidant reactions or safety behaviours just being reinforced...



### Learning & Resilience Building

- Staying within the Stretch Zone.
- Soothing System is able to regulate flares of Defence or Drive System reactivity.
- Practicing up to edge of competency & capacity.
- Practicing with a predominant attitude of kindness & curiosity towards oneself.
- Stopping when to continue would require severity, forcefulness or harshness.



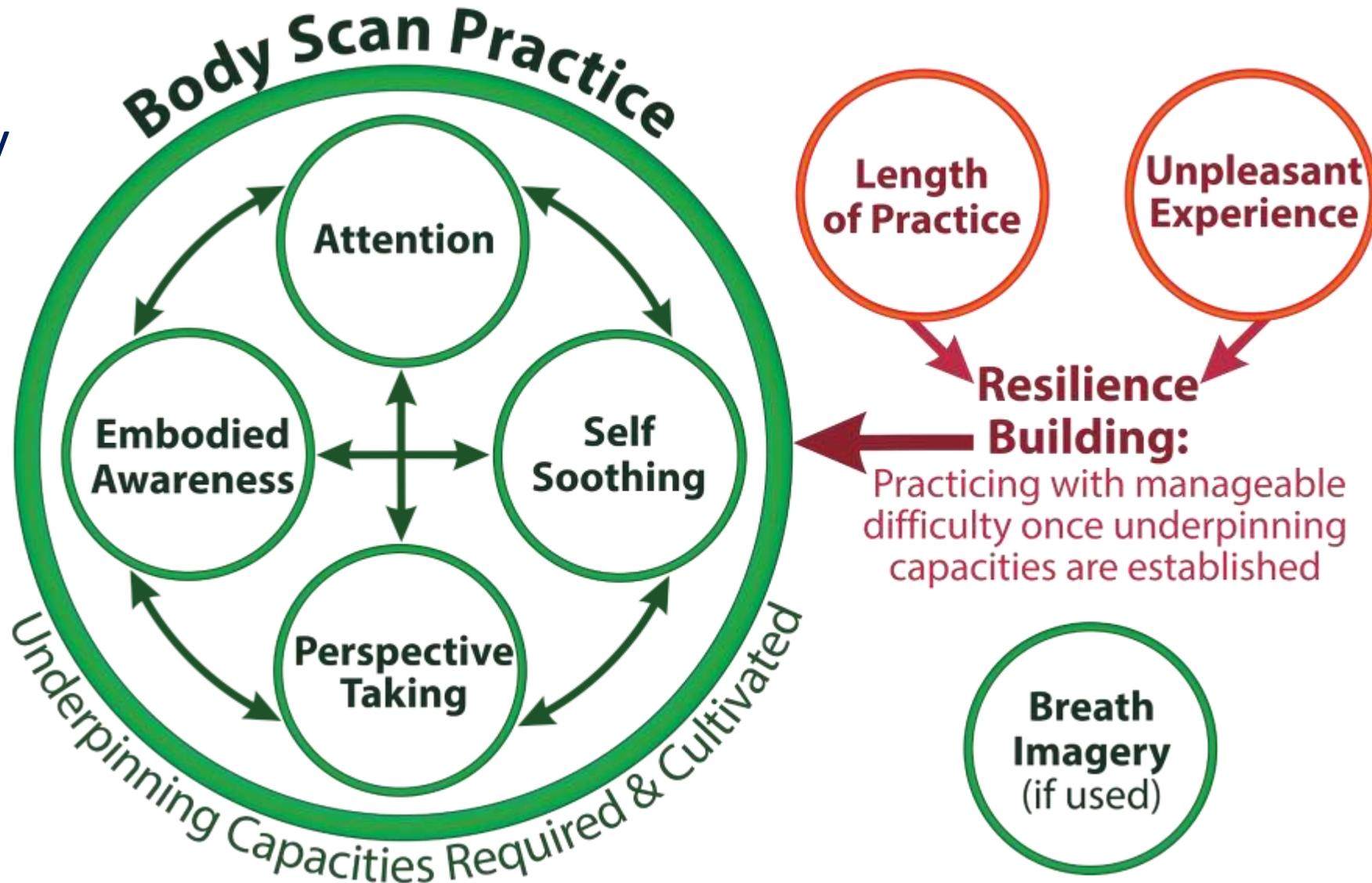
### Severity, Resistance or Aversion Reinforcement

- Entering Alarm or Failure Zones – unregulated Defence System activity.
- Practicing beyond competency & capacity.
- Practicing with a predominant attitude of severity, forcefulness, criticism or lack of acceptance towards oneself.
- Continuing when doing so requires severity, forcefulness or harshness.

# Capacity Analysis

- Any given mindfulness practice offers opportunities to cultivate specific capacities.
- Certain capacities depend on other capacities to have previously been established if they are .
  - For example, approaching unpleasant experience in the Stretch Zone requires self-soothing and perspective taking capacities to have been established.
  - If foundational capacities are not established then the individual may enter the Alarm or Failure Zones.
  - For some people body awareness (embodiment), breath awareness, longer practice periods and engagement with contents of the mind can be highly dysregulating.
  - It requires considerable self-confidence to disengage from a practice that is experienced as aversive let alone admit to this aversion in a group context.
- Analysing the capacities required to undertake a practice as a Stretch Zone learning experience would seem essential for safe practice when working with potentially vulnerable groups.

# Body Scan Capacity Analysis



# A Body Scan Capacity Analysis

- Possible issues with a typical 30-40 minute body scan (e.g. as used in MBSR or MBCT)
  - **Length** – if participants are not sufficiently self-confident to move, pain arising from immobile posture may dominate experience.
  - **Embodied focus** – for those with bodily pain or body-associated trauma the sustained body awareness may be dysregulating and participants may not have developed capacity to self-soothe or know how to disengage from overly painful or distressing areas.
  - **Mental Effort** – if the guidance only suggests focusing in to one body area and then another the capacity for maintaining sustained attention may be exceeded potentially leading to effortful practice, feelings of failure and/ or disengagement.
  - **Sleep** – While potentially beneficial in its own right, periods of sleep do not themselves usually help cultivate mindful awareness (apart from being mindful of being sleepy and of waking).

# '3 Loops' Body Scan Based on a Capacity Analysis

Arising from a capacity analysis we have developed a structured body scan that has the following format:

1. **Starting** – after settling the body and checking in to present experience, a focusing anchor is established as a 'Home Base' to return to if there are moments of difficulty (could be any suitable sensory focus – sound, body sensation, held object etc.). Invitations are made to move mindfully at any time and to skip past painful or distressing areas.
  2. **Leg Loop** – The attention is taken up one leg and down the other.
  3. **Widening Attention, Mindful Movement and Home Base** – Invitations to widen attention to the whole 'leg loop', then whole body, then room are followed by mindful movements and stretches and then the attention is returned to the Home Base focusing anchor.
  4. **Arm Loop** – The attention is taken up one arm and down the other
  5. **Widening Attention, Mindful Movement and Home Base** – Invitations to widen attention to the whole 'arm loop', then whole body, then room are followed by mindful movements and stretches and then the attention is returned to the Home Base focusing anchor.
  6. **Torso and Head Loop** – The attention is taken from the base of the torso up the back, around the head and then down the front of the body.
  7. **Widening Attention & Ending** – Invitations to widen attention to the whole 'torso and head loop', then whole body, then room are followed by mindful movements and ending.
- We find this format maintains wakefulness and facilitates the participant making effective self-care choices about their degree of engagement with the practice.
  - The diversity of experience also leads to a rich post-practice inquiry.
  - A version of this Body scan is available here: <https://soundcloud.com/resilienceplus/sets/body-scan-practices>

# MBCT Participant Experience – an example of working beyond present capacities resulting in Panic Zone experiences.

*Extracts from an email from participant sent to MBCT course teachers around week 5 [used with the participant's and the teachers' generous permissions]:*

- ...it isn't specifically the full day that bothers me, all of it bothers me.
- I haven't done any specific practices properly this week. I have tried a couple but apart from not having the motivation to do almost anything I didn't have to, I still find that trying to concentrate on either breathing or sitting or doing some other activity does nothing more than entice my brain into "bad" thoughts which I don't seem able to just "notice", let go and then continue concentrating on the practice. Once *my* "bad" thoughts are in my head, they are very difficult to get rid of in a short space of time. After most of the sessions so far I have found myself in quite a distressed state by the time I got home and which has often lasted into the next day.
- I'm finding that I spend most of the week dreading the next week's session because it feels so stressful for me. I'm not actually surprised. This is just how I found it to be when I did very brief mindfulness exercises in the past.
- I think I mentioned last week to you that I can often manage a maximum of 5 mins as a "one off", but I'm really struggling to get through almost two hours of it at a time. The longer I pursue it, the more distressed it makes me feel.
- I have no idea what to do....

MINDFULNESS  
*You just can't get it wrong...*