Choicefullness:
Mindfulness in Action

Tim Duerden

Senior Lecturer University of Salford

School of Health & Society

Lead trainer Integrated Mindfulness Ltd. & Mindful Resilience Enhancement

This presentation will be available at

www.mindingthegaps.uk

Is there such a thing as a bad habit?

- Is there such a thing as a bad habit?
- The function of the internal or external behaviour underlying a habit is arguably always pro-survival – at least from the perspective immediate instinctive survival.
- Habits become problematic when the direction these automatic reactions take us in is away from our values – away from who or what matters to us.
- When habitual reaction support us doing what really matters to us then, in this context, they are helpful.
  - Driving on autopilot is helpful when talking about important stuff with a friend.
  - Driving on autopilot is less helpful when you end up driving to work when you meant to go elsewhere.

Stress Reactions & Habits

- Instinctive, in-built stress reactions give rise to fight, flight, freeze, flop reactions when a threat is detected.
  - These stress reactions actively inhibit our capacity to make conscious choices in case the threat needs immediate, pre-conscious actions.
- Stress reactions easily become linked to specific features of stressful situations through conditioning.
  - This results in having habitual stress reactions triggered by these specific features - whether physically present or present in the mind as a memory or imagined scenario.
- This result is our capacity to make conscious choices being lost when these stress reactions are triggered.

Choice, Trigger and Habit Zones

	Choice Zone	Habit Trigger Zone	Habit Hijack Zone
Choice	Maximum choices available.	Harder to focus/make choices.	Minimal/no choices available.
Habits	Can press pause on habits quite easily.	Continual effort needed to choose not to go with urge to act habitually.	Habits completely take over – until things change you're hijacked and on autopilot.
Actions	Can do what matters to you.	Harder to do what matters to you.	Can't do what matters to you.
Feeling	Feeling curious, alert, calm, resilient. Can feel excited about a challenge being met or ok about being a bit uncomfortable.	Feeling bothered or stressed – and bothered about feeling like this	Intense stress/survival reactions: fight, flight, freeze, flop.

Choice, Trigger and Habit Zones: Heat Example

	Choice Zone	Habit Trigger Zone	Habit Hijack Zone
Choice	Even though the room is getting hotter, you can still easily focus on doing what is important to you. Even if you are a bit uncomfortable, you don't need to do anything about the heat while you do what matters.	The room is now so hot you start to focus more on how uncomfortable it is and the urge to do something about it starts to dominate – it's harder to keep focusing on doing what is important to you. Resilience to heat is cultivated by gradually staying longer in the heat and not acting on triggers.	It's so hot you get taken over by doing something to cool down or get out of the heat – you are hijacked by these behaviours. Only after you feel less overheated do you start to feel you get some choices back.

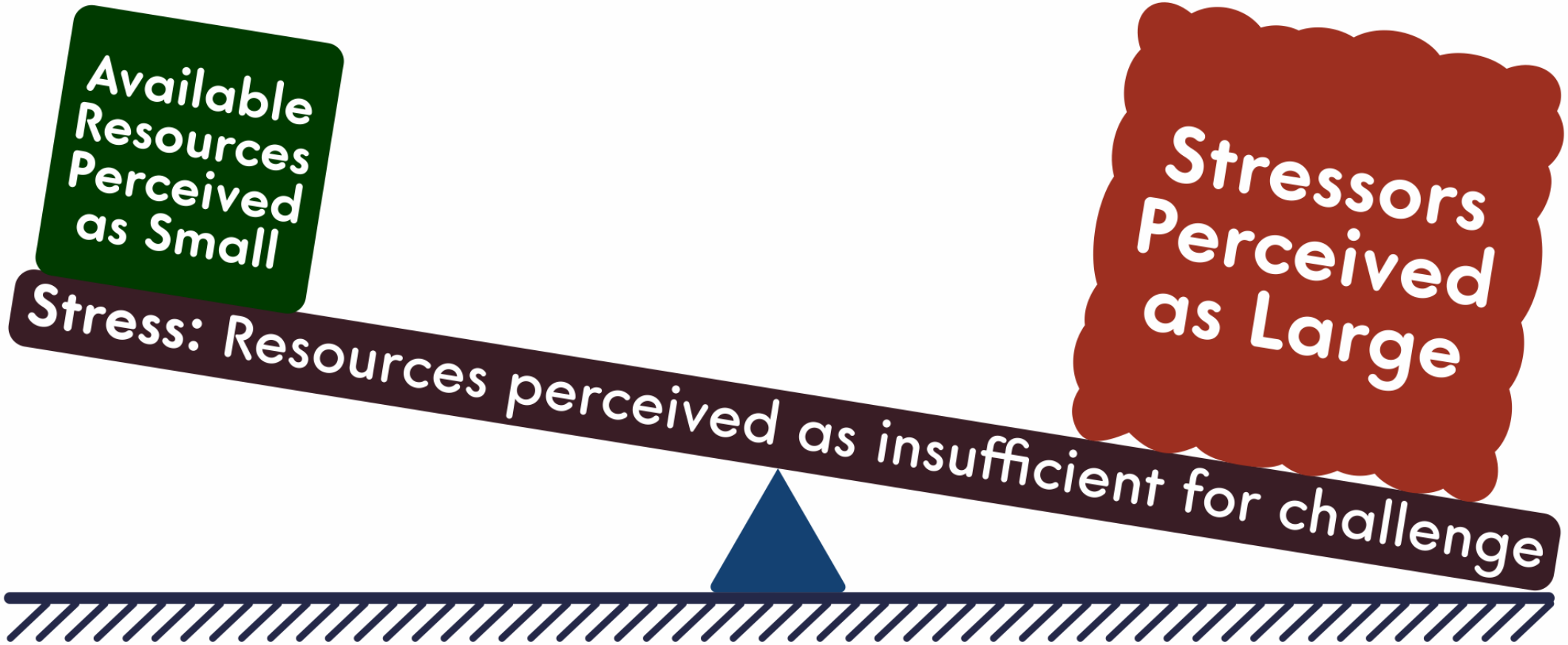
Choice, Trigger and Habit Zones: Learning

	Choice Zone	Habit Trigger Zone	Habit Hijack Zone
Learning	Learning new responses possible.	Learning new responses very difficult, mainly reinforces habitual stress and survival reactions.	Learning new responses impossible, just reinforcement of habitual stress and survival reactions.
Implication for Mindfulness Teaching	Can only effectively learn a new skill like mindfulness in the Choice Zone	Choosing to be mindfully aware of how move from Choice Zone into and back from Trigger Zone cultivates resilience	No real learning so best can do is be increasingly aware of what leads to entering Hijack Zone and learning to steady self after leave it.

Mindfulness = Choicefulness

- Within Buddhism, some definitions of mindfulness include intentionally holding our values in awareness.
  - Links to the value related concept of moving towards who or what matters to us.
- Mindful awareness is a friendly curiosity that takes in all that is present right now and connects us to our resources so we are more able to choose how we will respond to whatever is happening.

The Transaction Model of Stress: **Stress**

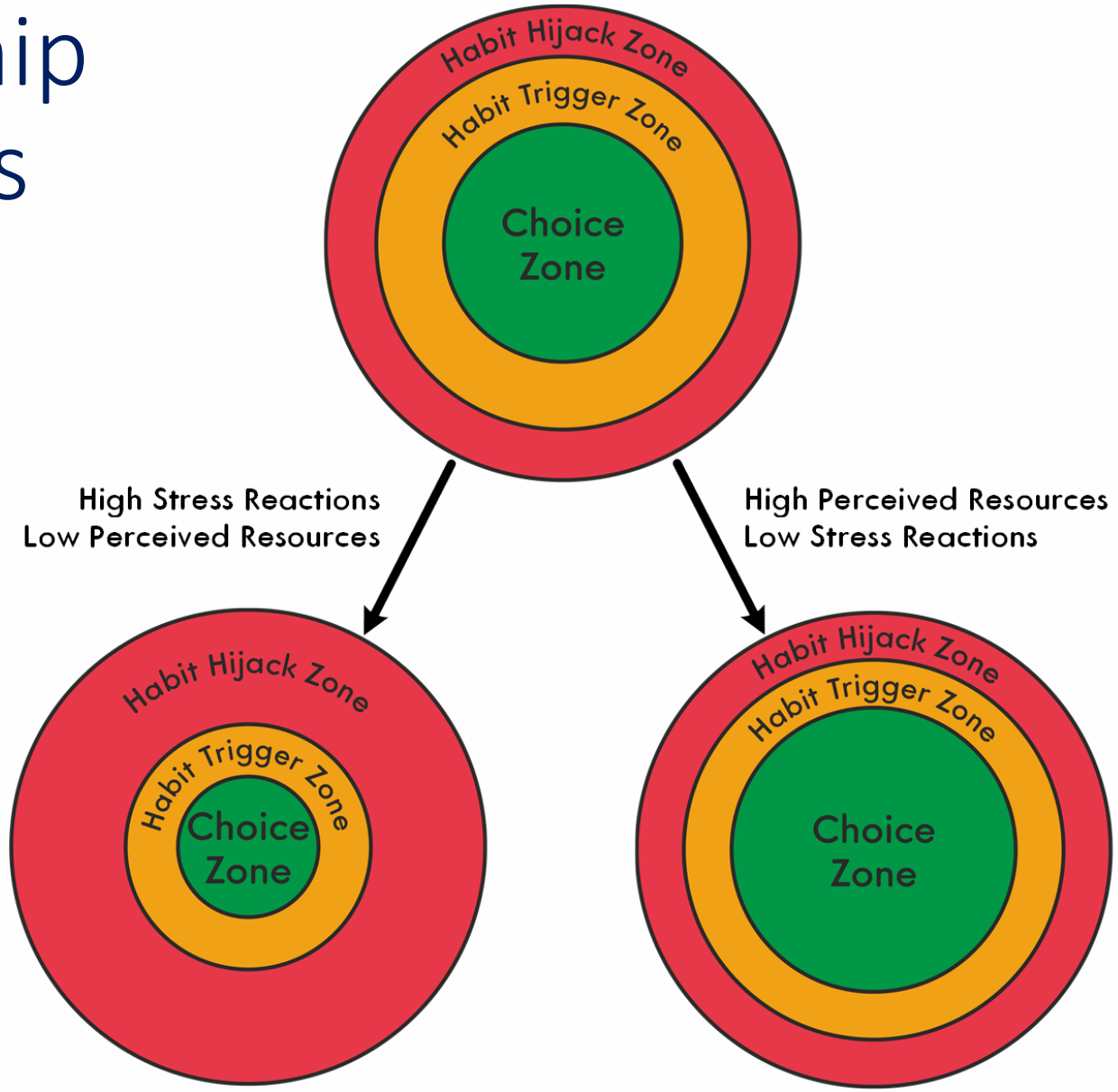


Lazarus, R. & Folkman, S. (1984) *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York: Springer Pub

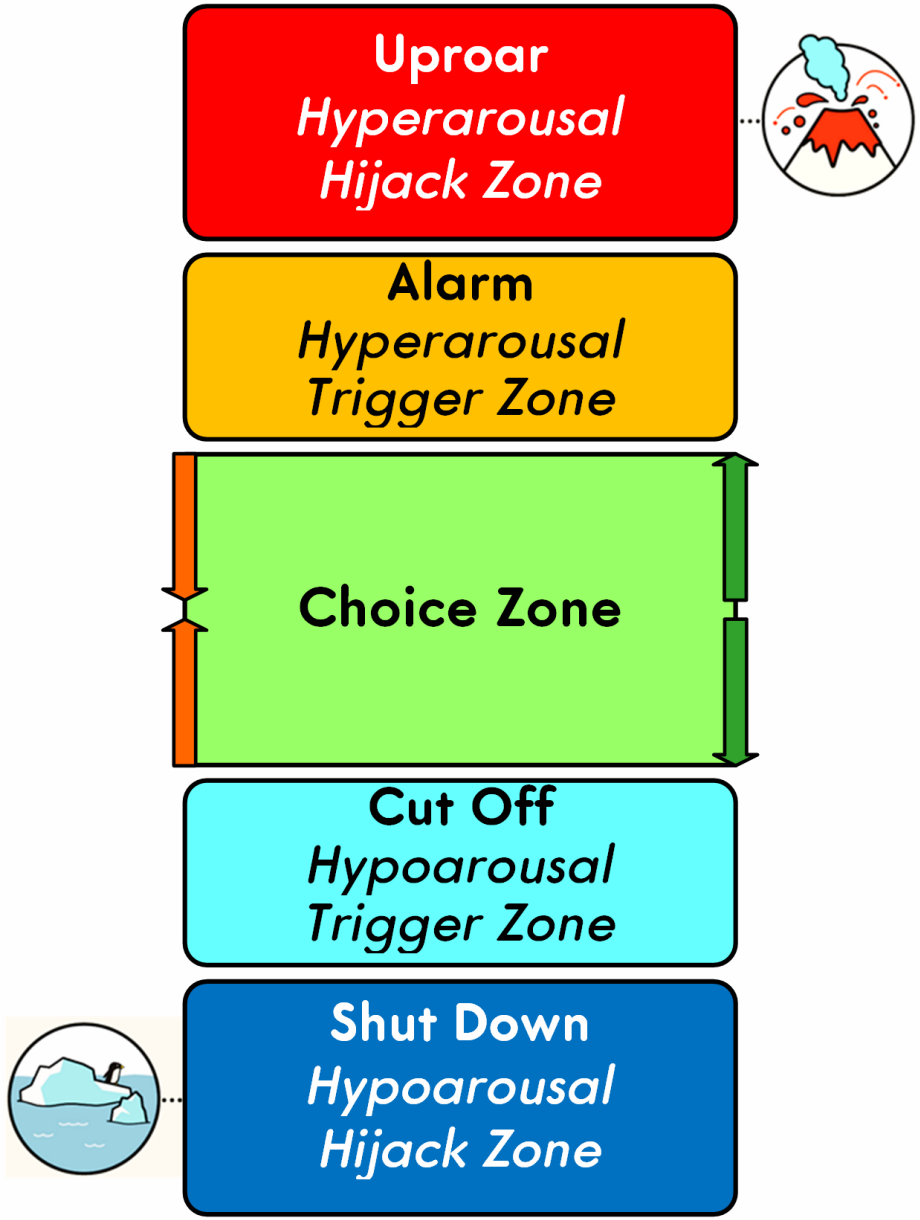
The Transaction Model of Stress: **Coping**

The Transaction Model of Stress: **Resilience**

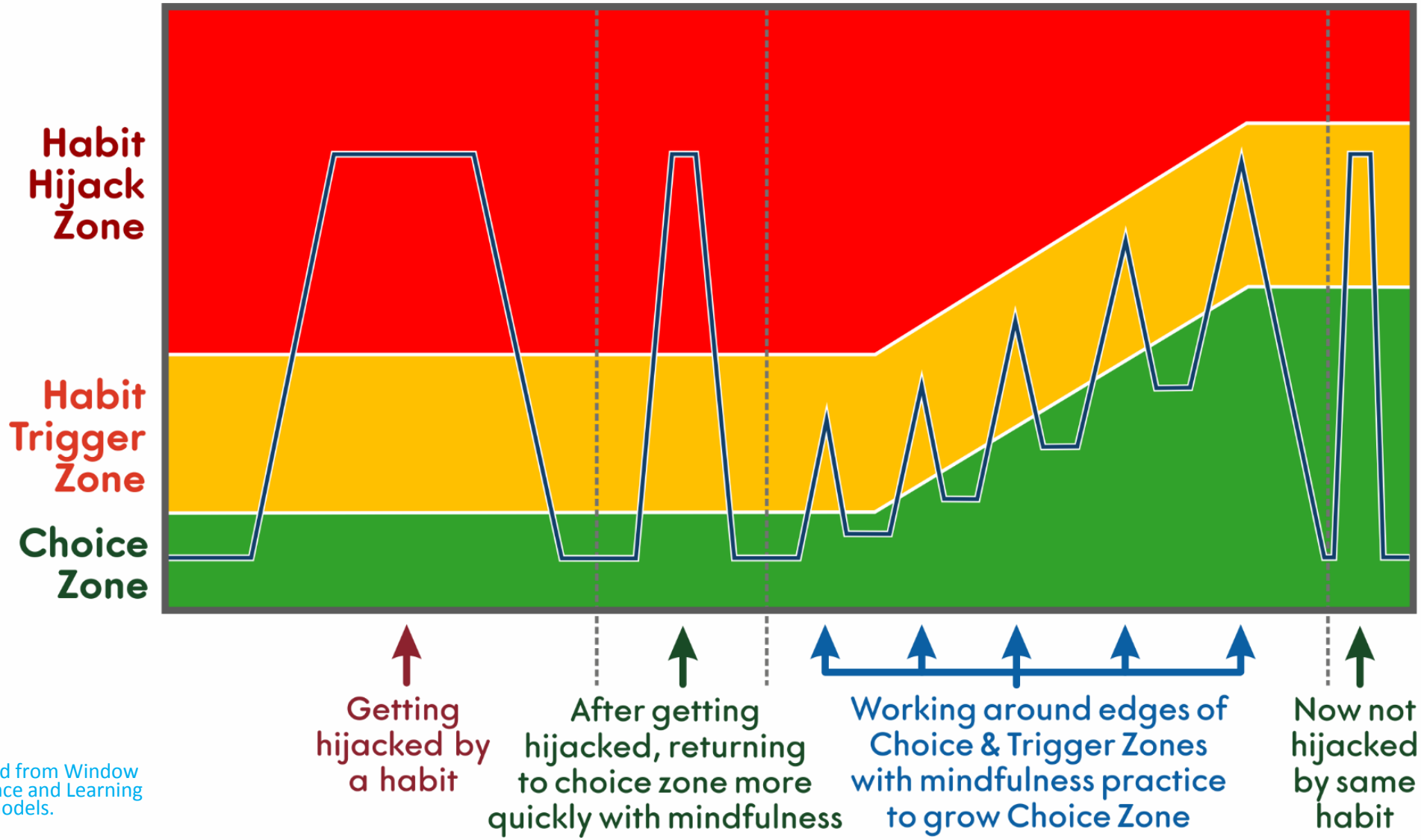
Relationship with Zones and Resources



Zones and Link to Stress Reactions



Growing the Choice Zone



Adapted from Window Tolerance and Learning Zone models.

Returning to the Choice Zone

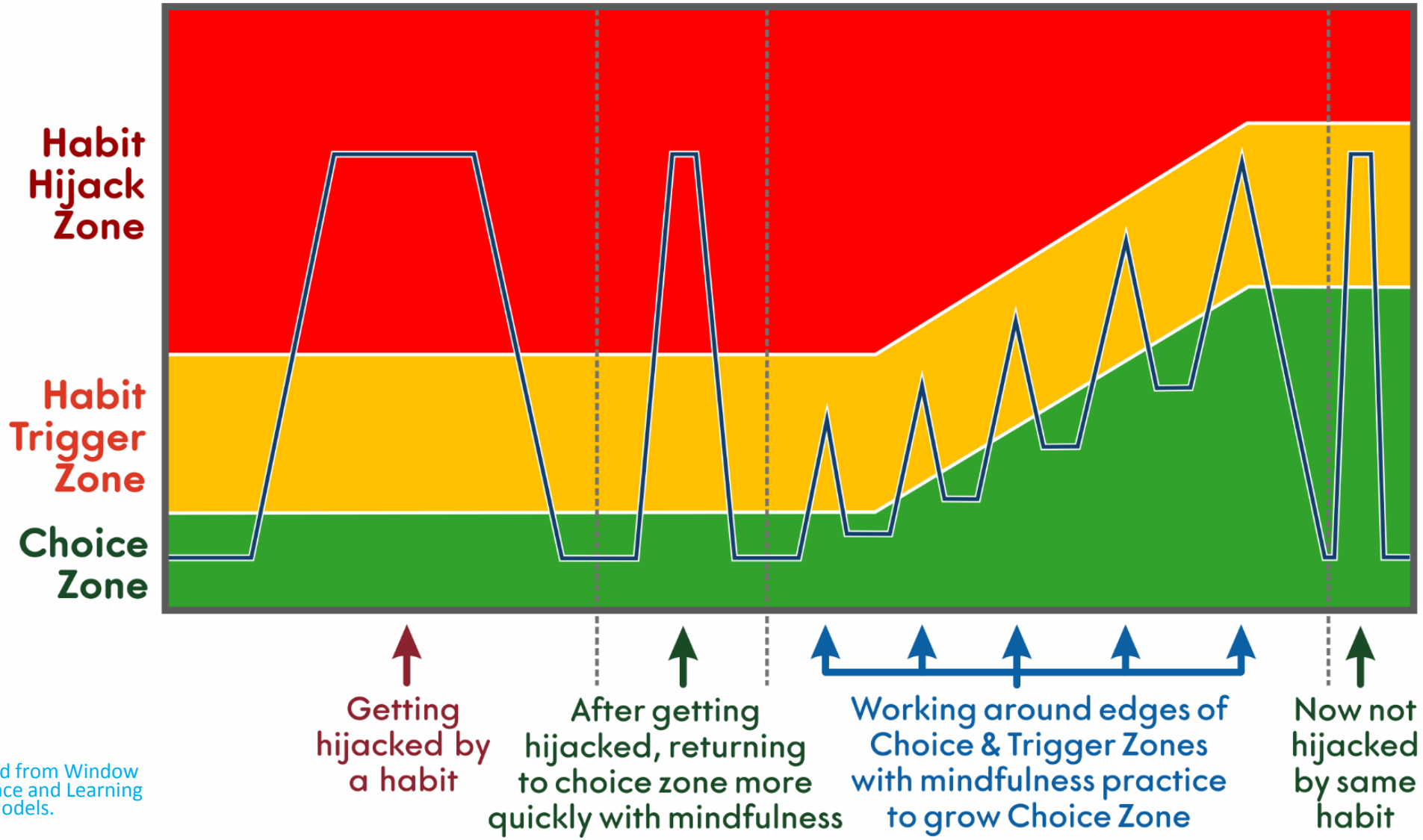
- When we have been hijacked or are being intensely triggered, how do we resource ourselves to return to the Choice Zone?
- How do we do this when, by definition, we have less capacity for making choices when we are in the Hijack Zone?
- Do we use the same means to return from Uproar as from Shut Down?
  - In the midst of panic, learning to observe the contents of the mind as passing events (defusion) can be very helpful.
  - In the midst of dissociative shut-down, observing could be hard to separate from dissociating.

Returning to the Choice Zone: *Resourcing Yourself*

- Brewin's (2006) Retrieval Competition Theory offers a useful perspective:
  - The relative activation of negative or positive internal representational images/memories associated with a specific situation determines the resulting emotional state.
  - Without association with positive representations, a person only has negative representations from which the emotional reaction will arise.
  - Cultivation of positive representational memories develops resources that enable a different emotional response.
    - E.g. cultivation of an inner compassionate coach that, in time, out-competes the bullying inner critic: the critic is not gone, just not what is accessed.
  - In streaming media terms: – what is at the top of your 'recents list' is what gets played…if there's only negative stuff, just something negative gets played.

Brewin, C.R. (2006) Understanding CBT: A retrieval competition account. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, *44*, 765-784.

Growing the Choice Zone: Establishing Positive Representations



Adapted from Window Tolerance and Learning Zone models.

Start in the Choice Zone

- For people to cultivate mindfulness, especially when starting, it is important that the learning environment is one that helps them stay in their Choice Zone.
- Once someone learns that they can steady themselves and return to the Choice Zone, then the person can begin to practice holding steady in the Trigger Zone, growing their resilience.
  - This is essentially graded exposure.
  - Positive learning experiences in the Choice Zone form positive representations that can compete with long established negative representations.
- Individualisation is key – what is a Choice Zone experience for one person is a Hijack Zone experience for another.
  - The notions of ‘high-intensity / low-intensity’ or ‘low-does’ mindfulness courses clearly makes no sense in this framework.
  - The experience of intensity belongs to the person and is not a property of a course.

Suggested Requirements for Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness Practice in the Choice Zone

- **Person centred:** collaborative curriculum and mindfulness practices adapted to and emerging from identified individual need - and curriculum and practices continuing to be based on a process of co-creation between teacher and participants
- **Safe:** easily attainable, kind challenges offered with minimal risk of failure and maximum sense of personal choice to engage or disengage
- **Empowering:** Focusing on the principles not just the practice so participants can construct their own mindfulness practices from generic principles
- **Relational:** embedded in a trusting relationship with teacher and group that welcomes all experiences – positive or negative (and actively asks for negative as well as positive experiences)
- **Scaffolded:** Practice grows from familiar experiences within accessible psychoeducational framework and explanations of what practices will involve (no surprises), their rationale and with short practice 'test-drives' to allow for immediate feedback and learning
- **Gradual:** brief, repetitive practices, skills cultivated in small steps starting in low intensity, familiar contexts
- **Grounding:** helping each participant discover how they steady themselves; often, but not always, initially through practices with open eyes, movement, and/or external environment anchors

Registering Resourceful Feelings

- In Resilient, Rik Hanson (2018) suggests when practicing mindfulness we often miss out on growing our inner resources if we do not consciously register and linger attentively to our inner state after mindfulness (or any resilience-building) practice.
- We therefore miss out establishing positive representational resources to complete with negative representations.
  - Register where and how you feel a helpful feeling.
  - Play with allowing the feeling to grow and expand.
  - Allow the feeling to flow through you and soak in.
  - Perhaps bring imagery of your breath carrying the feeling through you, a sense of light, colour, temperature, or whatever you associate with the feeling.
  - Consciously remember what this inwardly feels like.

Hanson, R. (2018) *Resilient*. New York: Random House.

Grounding Anchors as Resources in Shut Down

- Shutting down, numbing or dissociation is often associated with intense intrusive imagery/memories in one or more modalities flooding our awareness.
- Identifying the most intense sensory modality or modalities associated with the intrusive imagery/memories and then developing a repeated practiced grounding practice in that same modality/modalities can offer a resource to access, helping return to here and now awareness.
  - Consider sight, sounds, taste, touch, smell, body position, and movement/actions in developing a grounding practice.
  - Practice when the first feeling of shut down arises.
- Successful grounding develops positive representations of experiences of staying associated and coping when the memories/images are triggered.

Chessell, Z. J., Brady, F., Akbar, S., Stevens, A., & Young, K. (2019). A protocol for managing dissociative symptoms in refugee populations. the Cognitive Behaviour Therapist, 12.

Resourcing Practice Example: Being a Friend to Yourself

- Setup
  1. Identify a recent situation where you helped someone – ideally someone you care about or a pet.
  2. Identify a recent situation where you felt stressed or that was difficult: ideally one that you got through ok but was stressful while it was happening.
- Practice – please engage in this as little or as much as you wish, swapping to something else at any time.
  - You could instead: do another type of practice, doodle, sing a song in your head, do a shopping list, plan a trip, have a snooze, daydream, or something.

Thank You

This presentation will be available at
www.mindingingthegaps.uk
For access to other resources, sign up for our newsletter at this website.
Teacher training in trauma sensitive 1-2-1 mindfulness: search for mindfulness in courses via University of Salford website:
www.salford.ac.uk/pgt-courses/mindfulness-based-approaches-with-cbt-single-module

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