

# Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness

# Safety First!

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START WHERE

YOU ARE

### Mindfulness Definition:

‘Mindfulness means paying attention to what’s happening in the present moment in the mind, body and external environment, with an attitude of curiosity and kindness.’ *The Mindfulness Initiative*, 2015, p.6

- Reflect on this definition as if mindfulness is new to you.
- How might someone with a history of trauma feel challenged by what is required to be mindfully aware?
- Have there been experiences in your life where being ‘fully’ mindfully aware would not have been kind to yourself?

The Mindfulness Initiative (2015). Mindful Nation UK Report by the Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group. Retrieved 10 February, 2016, from [http://theminfulnessinitiative.org.uk/images/reports/Mindfulness-APPG-Report\\_Mindful-Nation-UK\\_Oct2015.pdf](http://theminfulnessinitiative.org.uk/images/reports/Mindfulness-APPG-Report_Mindful-Nation-UK_Oct2015.pdf)

# Mindfulness: does it feel safe?

- Is the **present moment** safe to notice or overwhelming?
- Does my **mind** feel safe to notice?
- Does my **body** feel safe to notice?
- Does the **external environment** feel safe to notice?
- Have I experience of **curiosity** being safe?
- Do I associate **kindness** with safety?
- Does **kindness** to self feel safe to experience?

**If I do not feel safe, what do I do to get through this moment?**

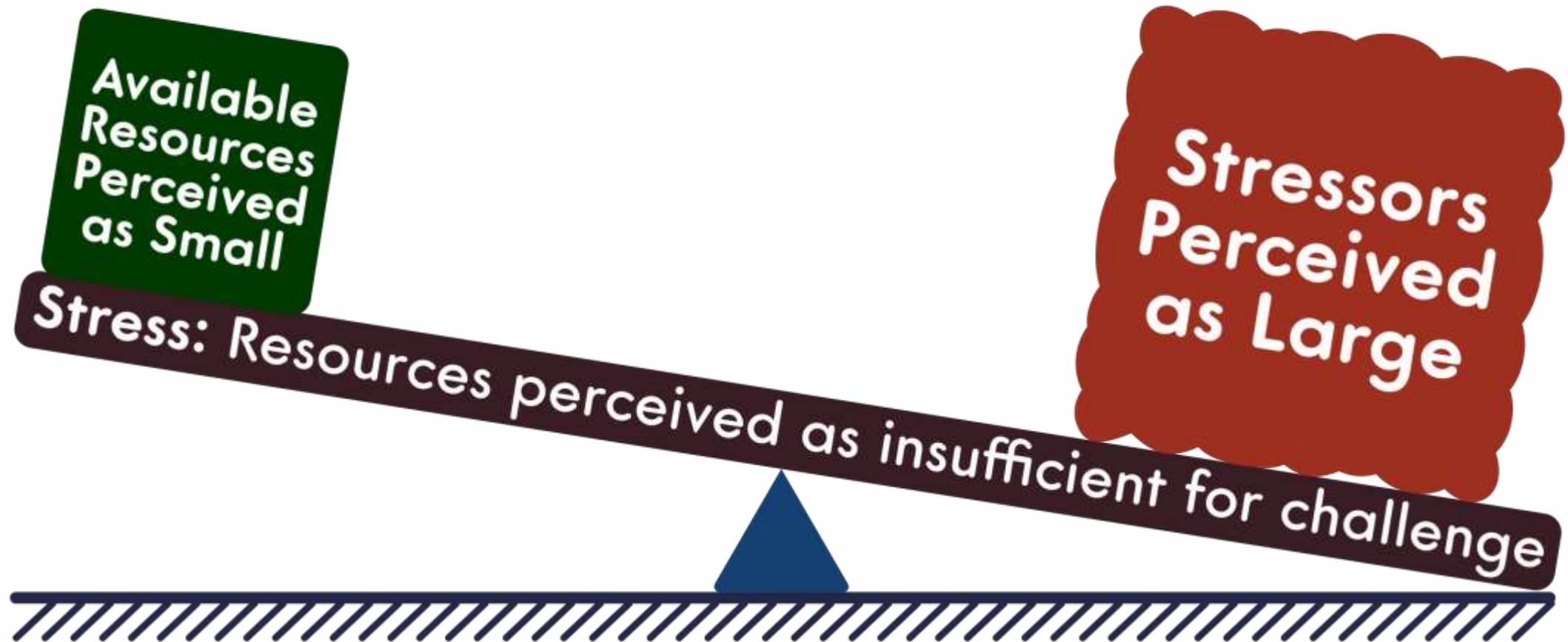
# Mindfulness: Awareness vs Practice

- Mindfulness practice cultivates mindfulness awareness.
- The cultivation of mindfulness awareness is, implicitly or explicitly, part of the process of trauma recovery.
  - Meeting the experience of past trauma as it is, with kindness and curiosity, is essential for trauma recovery.

# Mindfulness: Awareness vs Practice

- Depending on the appropriateness of the practice for the individual's needs, mindfulness practices may be:
  - **Detraumatizing** – help integrate traumatic experiences, promoting healing.
  - **Re-traumatizing** – trigger trauma memories and feelings in a way that reinforces the traumatic experiences and undermines healing.
  - **Traumatizing** in their own right – new traumatic experiences result from the mindfulness practice.
- Practice context and structure are critical. For example:
  - Mindfully walking the dog **vs** slow group mindful 'zombie' walking.
  - Mindfully tensing and loosening foot and hand muscles with eyes open in a chair for 10 minutes **vs** a 45 minute body scan lying down on the floor on your back with eyes closed in a group in session 1.

# The Transaction Model of Stress: **Stress**



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

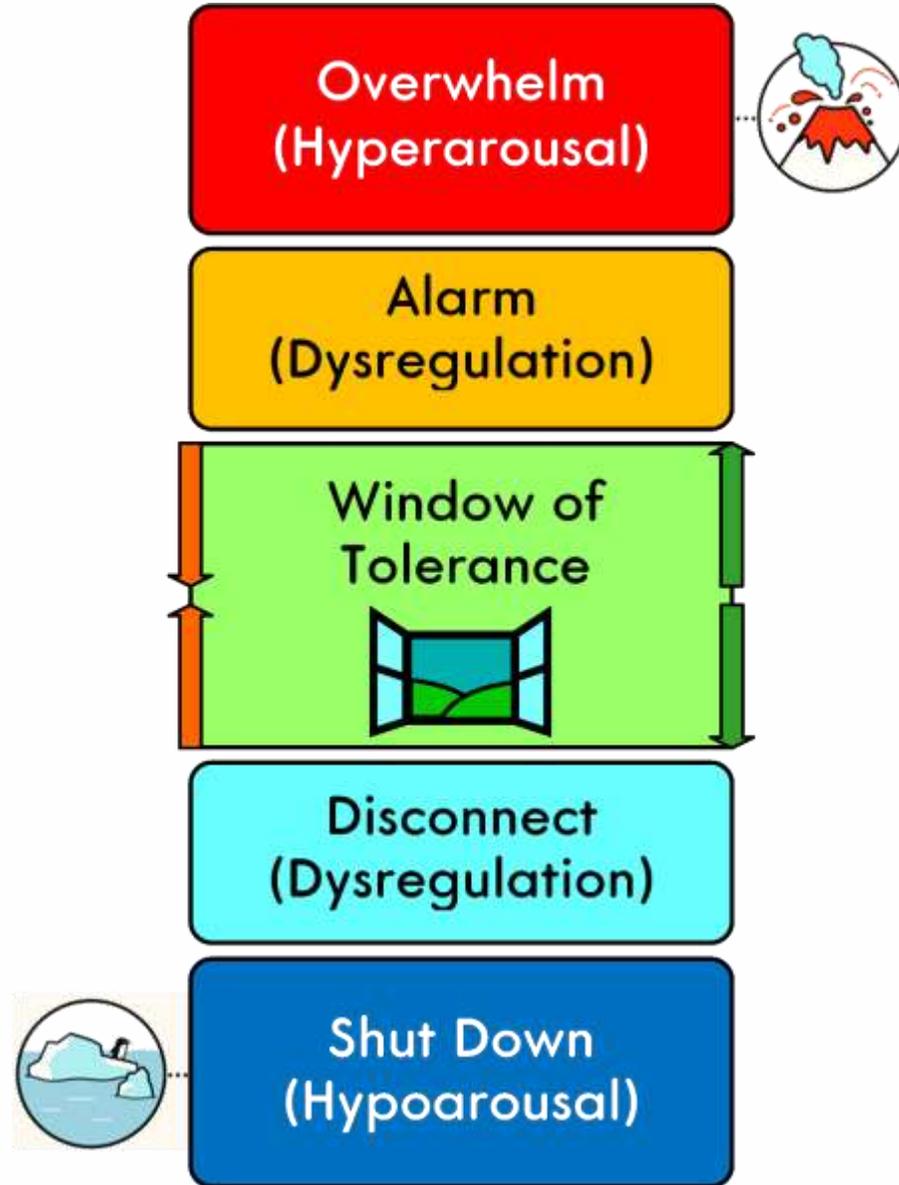
# The Transaction Model of Stress: Coping



# The Transaction Model of Stress: Resilience



# Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness



# Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness Teaching:

- Has mindfulness practices that are experienced as being largely within the participants' Window of Tolerance.
  - Experience outside Window of Tolerance typically reinforces existing learned behaviours that gets the person through – but at what long term cost?
  - Participants are unlikely to be practicing mindfulness when outside their Window of Tolerance.
- Establishes practices that are steadying before introducing practices that aim to stretch the Window of Tolerance.
  - Many mindfulness programmes have session 1 content that requires the very mindfulness and self-soothing skills to mindfully practice that the whole course is designed to cultivate.
- Must accommodate individual differences in choice of focusing anchor and support participants opting out of any practice without shame.

# Graded Exposure: Care-Full Challenge

- The majority of psychotherapeutic approaches seek to help the client establish safety:
  - Safety in the relationship with the therapist
  - Safety in the learning experiences offered by the therapist
  - More broadly this is the foundation of all effective learning
- Graded Exposure means starting from where there is some sense of safety (however small) and gradually increasing the level of challenge.
  - This cultivates learned experiences of mastery and develops a sense of self-efficacy
- Effective learning happens when we are within our Window of Tolerance.
  - Graded exposure starts with learning experiences that are within our Window of Tolerance
  - **Pendulation** (Levine, 2010): swinging/dipping in-and-out of experiences that are just outside our Window of Tolerance is catalytic to effective learning

### Suggested Requirements for Teaching Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness Practice: **Person-centred**

- A collaborative curriculum and mindfulness practices adapted to, and emerging from, identified individual need
- Curriculum and practices continuing to be based on a process of co-creation between teacher and participants throughout the course
- Willingness to go at group's pace rather than forcing the curriculum's pace on the group

### Suggested Requirements for Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness Practice: **Safe**

- Easily attainable, kind challenges
- Minimal risk of failure
- Maximum sense of personal choice
- No required home practice – especially not longer home practices that may require participants to give up other established self-care routines to ‘carve out’ practice time (e.g. sleep, exercise, social life)
- No ‘just do it’ mentality!

### Suggested Requirements for Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness Practice: **Relational**

- Teaching embedded in a trusting relationship with teacher and group
- Unpleasant, contradictory experiences of participants actively sought in inquiry to minimise suffering in shamed silence

### Suggested Requirements for Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness Practice: **Scaffolded**

- Practice grows from familiar experiences within accessible psychoeducational framework
- Explanations of what practices will involve before practiced
- Alternatives and options to adapt/opt out clearly explained beforehand
- No surprises – beginner's mind is for seasoned practitioners!
- Short practice 'test-drives' before longer practices

### Suggested Requirements for Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness Practice: **Gradual**

- Brief practices
- Immediate repetition after inquiry consolidates learning, enhances safety
- Skills cultivated in small steps starting in low intensity, familiar contexts
- Stabilising practices established before more challenging practices offered

# Suggested Requirements for Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness Practice: **Grounding**

- Open eyed
- External senses before internal senses:
  - looking / listening before
  - tasting / smelling before
  - holding objects / contact points feet and sitting bones before
  - moving feet/hands in time with breath before
  - breath at nostrils before
  - breath in the back / breath movements under hands before
  - breath in general / torso as focus
- Multiple senses as anchor (e.g. looking, feeling (even hearing) as hold object)
- Vivid sensory anchors that attract attention
- Movement during practice

As mindfulness teachers, I believe we need to create a safe learning environment where the participants' experience is:

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

# Bessel van der Kolk: Trauma Recovery

The challenge of [trauma] recovery is to re-establish ownership of your body and your mind — of your self.

This means feeling free to **know what you know and to feel what you feel** without becoming overwhelmed, enraged, ashamed, or collapsed.

For most people this involves:

1. Finding a way to become calm and focused.
2. Learning to maintain that calm in response to images, thoughts, sounds, or physical sensations that remind you of the past.
3. Finding a way to be fully alive in the present and engaged with the people around you.
4. Not having to keep secrets from yourself, including secrets about the ways that you have managed to survive.

Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health. Safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives.

Van Der Kolk, B. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score*. New York, NY: Viking.

# Trauma Sensitive Practice: (Treleaven, 2018)

A programme, organization, or system that is trauma-informed:

- ***realises*** the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery;
- ***recognises*** the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system;
- ***responds*** by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices;
- and seeks to actively resist ***re-traumatization***.

Treleaven, D. (2018) Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness. New York: W. Norton Publishers.

U.S. National Center for Trauma-Informed Care. (2016). *Trauma-informed approach and trauma-specific interventions*. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/trauma-interventions>