

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

Motivational Systems (Emotional Regulation Systems)



Description

Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) builds upon evolutionary ideas about human brain function. Paul Gilbert argues that the human brain is a product of evolution and that our thoughts, emotions, motivations, and behaviors can be understood in terms of the advantages these ways of thinking, feeling, and acting posed for our ancestors. The model proposes human beings have a tripartite motivational system (which is sometimes referred to as an emotional regulation system) with different systems which can be conceptualized as 'mindsets'.

People can be in states of 'threat' (with a mindset focused on seeking protection from dangers), 'drive' (with a mindset attuned toward wanting, seeking, aspiring or striving), or 'soothing' (with a mindset attended to giving and receiving care, affecting, and nurturance). Importantly, healthy functioning of the soothing system is necessary for self-soothing – without it individuals are prone to self-criticism, self-attack, and shame.

Each of the states are associated with distinct feeling-states, motivations, behaviors, neuroanatomy and neurochemistry. CFT proposes that healthy functioning requires adaptive use of all three of these systems in appropriate measure. Dysfunction is said to come about because of limited flexibility, or over-use of one system to the detriment of others. A less functional or less active soothing system is often the result of trauma, neglect, or inadequate opportunities to learn soothing from important caregivers. Compassion Focused Therapy uses this tripartite motivational model as a foundation and encourage clients to develop a more compassionate mindset.

The *Motivational Systems (Emotional Regulation Systems)* information sheet is a simple outline of the CFT model which has been adapted from Paul Gilbert's original model. Clinicians should be aware that the notes regarding neuroanatomy and neurochemistry in this adaptation are necessarily speculative but are consistent with what is known about brain responses to threat, reward (wanting), and affiliation.

Instructions

This is a Psychology Tools information handout.

Suggested uses include:

- Client handout – use as a psychoeducation resource.
- Discussion point – use to provoke a discussion and explore client beliefs.
- Therapist learning tool – improve your familiarity with a psychological construct.
- Teaching resource – use as a learning tool during training.

References

Gilbert, P. (2009). Introducing compassion focused therapy. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, 15, 199-208

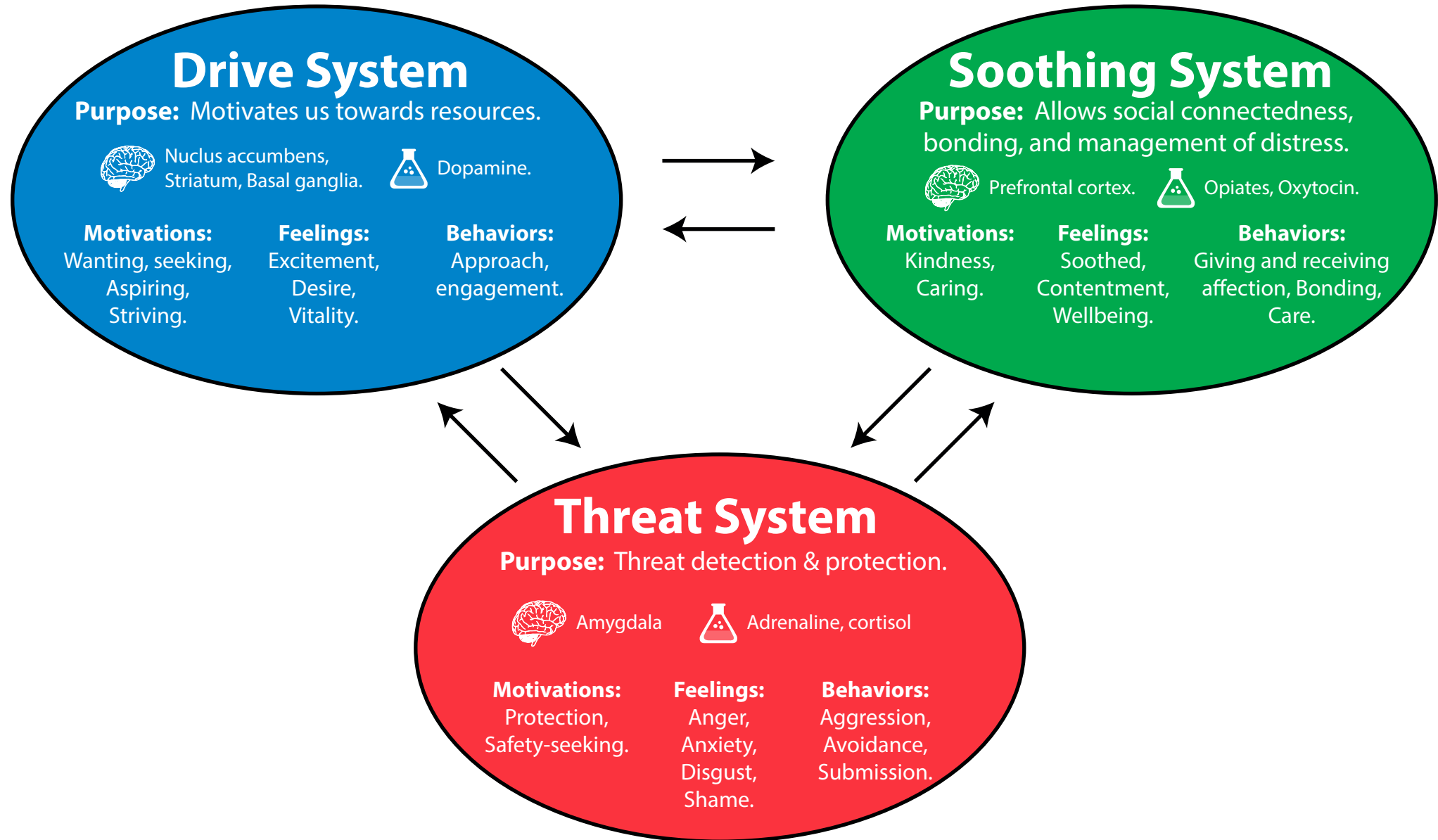
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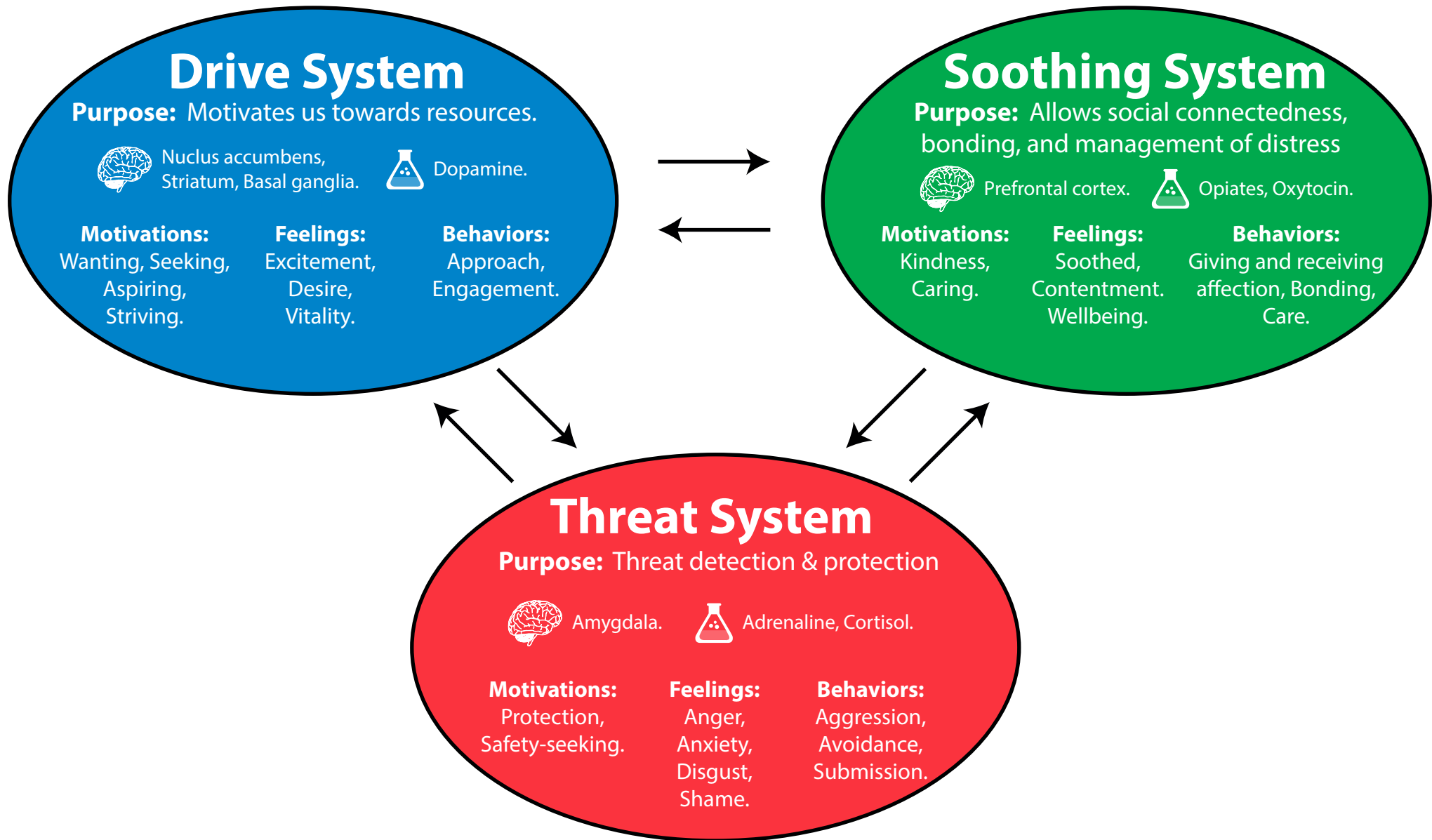
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Paul Gilbert's evolutionary model proposes that human brains have different *motivational systems* which helped our ancestors to survive and thrive – you can think of them as *mindsets*. We switch between the three systems to manage our lives and emotions. Each mindset is associated with different motivations, feelings, behaviors, and brain anatomy and chemistry. Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) proposes that distress is caused by imbalance between the systems – often associated with under-development of the soothing system.



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