

# It's not my fault but it is my problem: The role of self compassion in a VUCA world

By Dr Nelisha Wickremasinghe

*Most of our problems in and beyond the workplace arise because our body and mind is over exposed to real or imagined threat. Leaders need to support their employees to notice, understand and regulate their threat response in order to stay centred when experiencing, for example, work load pressure, performance anxiety, disruptive global trends, team conflict and rapid change. Research shows that self compassion triggers neurological activity in our 'safe brain' that regulates threat and restores emotional equilibrium. By cultivating our safe brain we increase individual and group resilience and with it, the potential to thrive and succeed in today's VUCA<sup>1</sup> environments.*

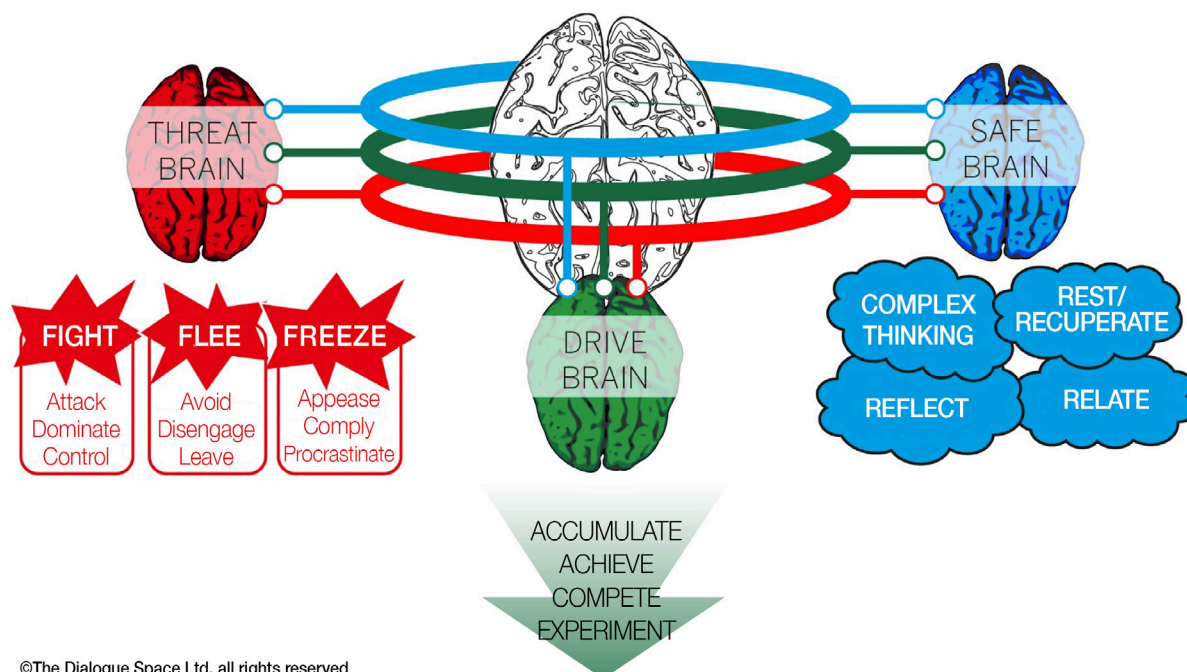
It is not our fault that stock markets crash, share prices drop or our best staff leave and will not be replaced. Neither is it our fault that we hardly see our families, that we are constantly tired, easily irritated and sometimes anxious and afraid. It is not our *fault* because we did not necessarily choose the events and experiences that impact and influence our lives yet it becomes our *problem* if we cannot effectively manage the stress that results from unwanted, unexpected and unpleasant life experiences. Understanding how

our brain has evolved over millions of years can help us appreciate why we react in the way we do and how we can regulate our feelings and thoughts to become more effective.

## Emotions motivate us

Without motivations we would not be alive. Living creatures need to experience the energy and desire to seek food, stay safe and if possible, reproduce. In organisms with nervous systems it is the brain which mediates motivation through three neurological systems which I call the threat, the drive and the safe brain<sup>2</sup> (figure one). In reality they are all part of one interconnected system but to begin with it helps to understand their various functions by separating them.

These systems produce *emotions* which are the body's neurochemical responses to its experience. The production of adrenalin in response to danger, for example, supports the fight or flee response and endorphins, produced as a response to the experience of pain, enable rest and recovery. The purpose of an emotion then is to activate our threat, drive and safe brain to achieve basic goals including survival, accumulation and affiliation. Our emotions, operating through these three systems, are important because they are responsible for directing our feelings, thoughts and actions. Self compassion, stimulates emotions motivating our safe



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**Figure one:** Three motivation systems. Our threat brain system is our earliest, our safe and drive brain systems followed and have continued to evolve.

brain and enables us, as we will see, to regulate debilitating threat or drive experiences.

### Threat Brain – fight, flee, freeze

The brain's oldest and primary purpose is to ensure survival of the species. In order to do this it must sense, process and store information that enables us to detect and respond to threat, to find a mate and to protect our off spring. Of these three functions or motives the most significant is avoidance of threat and danger. The organism has to remain *alive* as it's first priority. Our earliest ancestors, living in harsh environments amongst numerous predators, needed to be highly vigilant, cautious and ready to attack or run. Their sensitivity to danger and reflex response to threat are still at the core of our brain function and our being, even though the contexts in which we live have changed considerably.

The physiological reactions triggered by short term emergencies are highly effective. The combination of cortisol (a steroid hormone), adrenaline and noraadrenaline increase blood pressure, blood sugar level, breathing rate and muscle contraction. This gives you a boost of energy and prepares your body to act fast. These chemicals also narrow your attention (to focus on the threat), impact your memory (to store only threat related information), impair digestion, lower sex drive and suppress the immune system (to save energy and keep you alert and awake). In sum, the threat response stops any bodily function, feeling, thought or behaviour that might 'waste' energy and detract from either fighting or escaping danger. *When in threat your emotional, cognitive and behavioural range is significantly reduced.*

It is good to be hyper alert and to respond with speed and strength when we are in life threatening physical danger. However, our mind can turn on this physical reaction simply by imagining, worrying or ruminating. A zebra does not get stress related illness because once the danger of being eaten by a lion has passed he resumes his relatively peaceful grazing life. We, on the other hand, have a tendency to think about and anticipate danger even when it has passed or does not exist. Threat brain was originally designed to respond to acute physiological emergencies and not to the psychological stress that comes from imagining and worrying about problems. There is now a significant body of evidence to show that stress-related illness arises if we regularly 'turn on' our threat system by experiencing our internal and external world as hostile, dangerous or in crisis. The net result is that *our stress response can become more damaging than the stressor itself*.<sup>3</sup>

People frequently experience threat at work and in their personal lives yet these threats are complex and rarely dealt with by simply fighting, running away or giving in. For example, during this volatile economic period many people have feared losing their job or being demoted. Job insecurity, when handled through our threat brain, may motivate us to compete aggressively, treat others ruthlessly or obsequiously or to become so consumed by anxiety and fear that the quality of our work and relationships suffer. These threat brain reactions are unlikely to secure us the outcome we seek and so our problems compound and our fears are fulfilled. It is not our fault that our threat brain kicks in to gear but it can become our problem.

Luckily, we don't have to rely on our threat brain. As we evolved we learned that different motivations, not just threat, can enhance our survival prospects. Initially caring for our young and living in larger social groups evolved our safe and drive brain capabilities and significantly improved our chances of staying alive and controlling essential resources. Now, our progressive potential to learn, reflect and collaborate can help us develop even more accurate, creative and effective responses when faced with complex challenges. However, to access this capability we first need to regulate our threat reactions. It is safe brain that helps us to do this.

### Safe Brain – rest, recuperate, reflect, relate

Our safe brain motivations emerged to support warm blooded mammals to look after and nurture their young. Caring evolved because of the genetic benefits it conveyed to those expressing it. In other words, caring helps your offspring survive for longer and increases their chances of reaching maturation and reproducing. This is in contrast to and a developmental leap from reptilian (threat brain) strategy.

Consider, for example, that a turtle – a member of the reptile family – lays hundreds of eggs but once hatched the young are left to fend for themselves and only a small percentage survive. In 2016, the BBC Planet Earth documentary highlighted the plight of baby turtles in Barbados. In this programme we see distressing footage of hatchlings emerging from their solitary shells and becoming quickly disorientated by the city lights. Instinct should propel them towards the luminescence of the moon and the relative safety of the shoreline but on this Barbados beach they mistake neon for moonlight and turn away from the sea towards the busy road. With no parent to guide them, most of the hatchlings meet their end under the wheels of the oncoming vehicles or fall through the grills of the urban drainage

system. These turtles are at the mercy of their basic brain which is not equipped to deal with an increasingly complex environment. Without the help of conservation projects they would be extinct.

The first mammalian caring capabilities were effective but fairly basic – feed and defend the nest. By the time we get to humans this caring relationship and social mentality has evolved into a much more complex set of emotions and capabilities. *Compassion, altruism* and *love* represent evolutionarily recent safe brain motives.

Safe brain emotions are triggered by the activity of the *parasympathetic nervous system* (PNS) which releases feel good hormones such as oxytocin and endorphins that help us to feel calm and relaxed. The PNS conserves energy in our body, is responsible for ongoing, mellow, steady state activity and is associated with a feeling of contentment. A calm and stress free environment and the experience of kindness and love can activate our PNS. We can also induce its activation through meditation, deep breathing, gentle exercise and restful sleep.

When our safe brain is active we are better able to bond and collaborate with others, care for ourselves, rest and reflect. In addition a calm brain provides optimal conditions for the growth and function of our *pre frontal cortex* which is the newest part of our brain enabling us to focus attention, think creatively and solve complex problems.

### Drive Brain – compete, accumulate, achieve, experiment

Our third motivational system, *drive brain*, produces emotions that encourage us to compete, accumulate resources, achieve and experiment. These basic motivations emerged early in our evolution and like those of threat and safe brain have become more complex over time. Early drive brain helped us to learn (animals use play to teach and learn) and motivated us to join and manage our social status in groups.

The drive brain motivation system is potentially a great asset. It is responsible for fuelling the energetic, progressive, inventive, risk taking aspects of our personality and at its best enables us to participate fully in life and to experience the rich varieties and challenges of the world in a healthy way.

The drive brain is a reward based system and uses the potency of the neuro transmitter *dopamine* to make us curious, excited and brave. Drugs such as cocaine and speed mimic the effect of dopamine yet it is naturally stimulated when we win, fall in love, get promoted or enjoy extreme sports. However these natural dopamine ‘highs’ are as

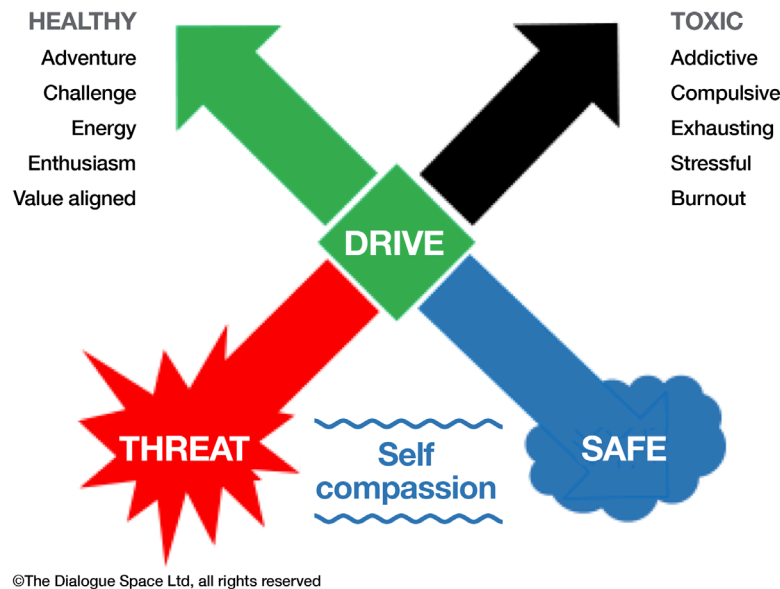
potentially addictive as the synthetic ones. The feelings of excitement dopamine produces and the ‘hyped up’ sense of pleasure it brings can lead us to want more and more. We become over attached to computer games, twelve hour days, alcohol, Facebook, shopping and checking our phones because when we stop these activities we experience unpleasant withdrawal symptoms such as boredom, restlessness, inability to concentrate and anxiety. We can get rid of these uncomfortable feelings by continuing the dopamine stimulating activity and in doing so the addictive cycle is strengthened and sustained.

These days our drive brain is frequently over stimulated because we live in a society that encourages us to want more, have more and be more. Brene Brown describes this as a ‘scarcity culture’ where, *‘Everyone is hyper aware of lack. Everything from safety and love to money and resources feels restricted or lacking. We spend inordinate amounts of time calculating how much we have, want and don’t have and how much everyone else has, needs and wants.’*<sup>4</sup>

Social comparison *can* be useful in helping us gauge how to fit in and belong to groups however it becomes debilitating and addictive when, as in Brene Brown’s version, we compare ourselves to unattainable, media driven images of perfection. Under these conditions our drive brain is constantly active. We push ourselves to achieve, accumulate and compete but we never feel that we measure up to the marketing standard. Feeling not good enough can trigger a threat reaction which is related to the fear of rejection or abandonment. These fears are deeply embedded in our threat brain templates. To be excluded from our group can constitute a life threatening danger.

### Threat and drive brain looping – a toxic combination

When our motivation to compete, achieve and prosper is supported by safe brain logic, focus and calm then our drive brain works well and feels rewarding. *Healthy drive* promotes value aligned achievement, prudent risk taking and the enjoyment of and energy for new challenges. However, when our drive brain is fuelled by *threat* our motivation to achieve and compete becomes ruthless, exhausting, addictive and compulsive. Toxic drive is a common experience amongst employees who feel constantly stressed, over worked and controlled by external expectations. An example of this is when we are compelled to work long hours not because of a positive joy in our work but because we are fearful of losing our job or being judged incompetent. Toxic drive is also a common experience in today’s volatile,



**Figure two:** Self compassion regulates threat and stimulates safe brain/healthy drive

uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environments. VUCA conditions stimulate threat based emotions which, if left unregulated, lead to reactive, divisive and error prone actions. We get caught in ‘toxic loops’ because of the power threat brain has when it is in control. Our earliest motivation system is also the strongest.

### Emotional Integrity

When our threat, drive and safe brain motivating systems are working well and regulating each other we experience emotional *integrity*. Our feelings, thoughts and actions become more coherent, calm and considered. We feel centred and at peace with ourselves. The neurologist, Andrew Curran describes this as, *a state of being where your entire brain is harmonic with itself*<sup>5</sup>. This state could also be described as ‘flow’ or ‘optimal experience’ and usually it is when we are most effective<sup>6</sup>.

It is only when a situation demands extreme and intense focus or response that over activity in parts of the motivation system may be useful. If I am climbing Mount Everest or about to give a crucial presentation to my board of directors I may want my drive brain to be working hard for me. I need a good dose of dopamine to keep me alert, enthused and energised. If I have just given birth or I’m managing the fall out of a mass organisational redundancy programme I need my safe brain to do a little over time. I’ll need some oxytocin supporting excellent relational skills to soothe a

troubled team or a new born. If I am stepping in to a busy road and notice a bus a few feet away then I want my threat brain to kick in quickly. Cortisol and adrenalin will get me moving fast. These are all moments when I may be ‘off centre’ in a useful way. I can focus my attention and energy on a situation that is specific, transient and legitimately demanding of a particular neurobiological and behavioural response set. If, however, I find myself ‘off centre’ most of the time I will start to experience difficulties. Work-aholism, compassion fatigue (‘caring too much’) and anxiety disorders are recognisable examples of when our drive, safe and threat brain emotions are in a ‘dis-integrated’ state.

### The role of Self Compassion in a VUCA world

VUCA is an acronym for *volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous* and has been used in both military and business contexts to describe today’s challenging and unpredictable global environment. VUCA conditions can trigger our threat brain response and produce ‘toxic drive’ behaviours that overtime become ineffective and sometimes harmful. Unfortunately many of us do not see or understand how threat brain motivations restrict our potential and thus we apply toxic drive brain ‘solutions’ that fail to achieve their intended results. This is not our fault. It is mostly the result of a cultural pressure or norm to manage threat by doing, achieving, consuming and accumulating more. This creates the typical and exhausting threat-toxic drive brain loop that is particularly visible in organisational life.



We may, for example, try to deal with VUCA by micro managing our team or increasing corporate bureaucracy to feel in control. Or, we work longer and longer hours in order to keep the job we fear losing and use alcohol and sleeping pills to quieten our anxious mind at night. We may also silence colleagues who think differently or prematurely force solutions and 'closure' in our effort to simplify problems. Sometimes we become overly compliant or disengaged as a way of coping with multiple demands and competing commitments.

To interrupt this loop we need to manage our threat response. Research shows that a compassionate inner voice can trigger our parasympathetic nervous system which, as we have seen, supports safe brain function and regulates the threat and drive systems. Self criticism, the voice of our threat brain, does the opposite. It triggers our sympathetic nervous system which floods our body with stress and toxic drive hormones and significantly narrows our emotional and behavioural range.<sup>7</sup>

The way we talk to ourselves has a significant impact on how we make sense of and respond to our experiences.<sup>8</sup> There is growing evidence to show that people who are self compassionate (kind self talk) are more motivated than those who are not. Self compassion enhances *healthy* drive behaviours including a willingness to take risks and learn from mistakes, greater initiative and clarity around personal goals and fewer self handicapping strategies such as procrastination and pessimism.<sup>9</sup>

By cultivating self compassion and diminishing self criticism we create the personal conditions that support us to feel, think and act in ways that are less destructive to our self and others. If our threat and drive brain are in charge we will end up in loops of defensive activity that may well keep us alive but are unlikely to help us flourish. It is our safe brain that motivates us to pause, reflect and think deeply. Ultimately it is our safe brain, nurtured by self compassion, that meditates our emotions and our life experience in the service of our creativity and well being.

### Cultivating self compassion – three simple practices

Dr Kristin Neff, who pioneered research in to self compassion over a decade ago, defines self compassion as comprising three qualities; self kindness, mindfulness and feelings of common humanity. *Self kindness* means being caring, understanding and appreciative towards ourselves rather than harshly critical or judgemental. Our inner voice is warm, soft and soothing. *Mindfulness* involves noticing and accepting our thoughts and feelings in the present moment

without judging, analysing, distorting or denying them. Mindfulness prevents '*being swept up and carried away by the storyline of our own pain*'.<sup>10</sup> One of the reasons why we get caught in threat brain 'loops' is because we re-tell the same story about our life and often that story serves to justify, rationalise and entrench our habits. This can be good for us when our stories of *appreciation* and *gratitude*, for example, create *virtuous* loops defined by hope and optimism but when our stories are imbued with *bitterness*, *blame* and *anger* they often perpetuate *vicious* circles of thought and action. The third quality, feelings of *common humanity*, recognises that all people fail, make mistakes and feel inadequate at times. Imperfection and suffering are understood as shared and inevitable human experiences and we accept that we are not alone with our problems.

We can practice self compassion in small, practical ways each day. We can listen to the quality and tone of our inner conversations and start to notice when our critic is giving us a hard time. When it does, we can soften its harsh voice by introducing appreciative and kind commentary. The next time you make a mistake or feel inadequate try blocking your inner critic by softly repeating 'it's OK', 'it's not my fault' or whatever soothing words come to mind. If you struggle to find such words imagine what you would say to a friend who was suffering. At first you may not believe in the kind words, yet research shows that if we practice the behaviours and thoughts that we would like to have, eventually they start to feel our own.<sup>11</sup>

We can become more mindful by developing a relaxation response which helps focus our attention and prevents us being distracted or overwhelmed by our feelings and thoughts. The most basic and effective way to stimulate relaxation is deep and rhythmic breathing. This is because slow, measured breathing stimulates your vagus nerve which controls the parasympathetic nervous system and activates the relaxation response. Signals are sent to the brain and body suggesting that the environment is threat free.

You do not need to go on a course to learn how to breathe in a deep and rhythmic way but in order for it to make a difference it helps to practice this kind of breathing a few times a day. When you begin to do this you will probably notice your breathing is 'shallow' (high up in the chest) and that you often hold your breath. These short, sharp ways of using the breath are much more appropriate when we are in danger as they facilitate the hyper alert fight-flight reaction. Shallow or held breath is linked to higher levels of stress and anxiety.<sup>12</sup>

The next time you feel tense or anxious first try *deep breathing*. This means drawing your breath slowly through your nose and 'directing' it down in to your diaphragm so that you feel your stomach expand like a balloon. When you breathe out again through the nose, contract your navel towards your spine and imagine it is pressing the air out of your stomach. As you exhale, release the tension in your body through the outward breath. At first you may find it difficult to draw your breath deep in to your body and it may feel uncomfortable to expand your stomach as the air enters. This is because your diaphragm muscles are not used to breathing in this way and need some time to strengthen. Keep practising and you will soon feel the reassuring calm that arises from deep breath.

*Rhythmic breathing* is based on the natural flow of your breath. This kind of breathing helps you to reduce stress by ensuring regular and continuous air flow at a steady pace. It helps you avoid breathing too fast or holding your breath. Start by taking a few regular breaths in your normal way. Then alter your in and out rhythm so that you begin breathing in for the same number of counts as you breathe out. Find a number that works for you as each person has a different length of breath that feels right. For me it's four counts in and four counts out. With this kind of breathing you don't need to direct breath all the way to the stomach but it helps to fully fill your lungs. When you do this you will feel your chest and ribcage expand and contract.

These two methods of breathing will bring a number of noticeable benefits in your body functioning. Your muscles will become more relaxed and you will experience fewer back and neck aches. Oxygen delivery will improve which increases your mental concentration and physical stamina. Your blood pressure lowers because your muscles are letting go of tension causing blood vessels to dilate and Endorphins are released which provide natural pain relief and a sense of well being. You will also benefit from improved digestion as deep breathing stimulates the lymphatic system to detoxify and cleanse your body.

Finally, we can increase our feelings of common humanity by becoming more inquiring and curious. Most of the questions we ask are opinions or judgments in disguise. By practising what Edgar Schein calls 'humble inquiry'<sup>13</sup> we start to ask questions to which we genuinely do not know the answer. These kinds of questions invite others in to a more open, honest and trusting relationship because they convey that we are interested, vulnerable and willing to learn. It is in relationships characterised by humility and reciprocal

inquiry that we discover not only are our problems shared, they are also understood.

When we soothe our threatened brain we are more able to develop the courage and competence required to face the challenges of an increasingly VUCA world. Self compassion is the starting place for strengthening safe brain activity that restores, revitalises and redirects our energy. By managing our inner critic, using breathing to relax and by cultivating curiosity we will become more self compassionate and more centred in a world which is in perpetual flux and transition.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA)
- <sup>2</sup> An adaptation of Joseph LeDoux's research relating to the 'emotional brain' presented in (Ledoux, 1998)
- <sup>3</sup> (Sapolsky, 2004)
- <sup>4</sup> (Brown, 2012)
- <sup>5</sup> (Curran, 2008)
- <sup>6</sup> (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992)
- <sup>7</sup> (Longe, et al., 2010)
- <sup>8</sup> (Newberg & Waldman, 2012)
- <sup>9</sup> (Breines & Chen, 2012)
- <sup>10</sup> (Neff, 2011)
- <sup>11</sup> (Wilson, 2011)
- <sup>12</sup> (Ledoux, 2015)
- <sup>13</sup> (Schein, 2013)