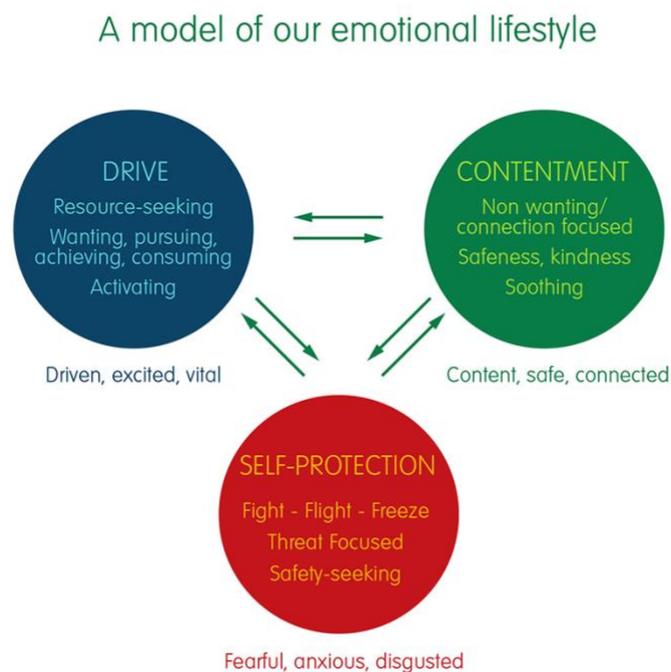


Which emotion system do you spend most time in?

A model for our emotional life style

To better understand the relationship between our mind, body and heart, I turn to psychologist Paul Gilbert's comprehensive book *The Compassionate Mind*. Based on evolutionary neuroscience, Gilbert has developed a practical tool to redress our inner balance (mind, body, heart). His model divides our emotions into three categories or emotion regulation systems shown below.

Which emotion system do you think you spend most time in?



The red system – self-protection

The emotions in the red system include fear, anxiety, anger, disgust, withdrawal etc. Emotions designed to protect ourselves and those we care for.

This emotion system is connected to one of the oldest parts of our brain: the amygdala, which is situated at the base of the skull. When we feel threatened, hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol are released into our bloodstream. Where these hormones were designed in evolutionary terms to give us a boost of energy to help us to respond rapidly: to escape, fight or hide, our amygdala can sometimes hijack our emotions when we feel threatened (we receive some negative feedback, a looming deadline, a missed train, illness, an argument), and if we are not careful, we find ourselves living with a constant feeling of anxiety, panic and stress.

The blue system – drive

The emotions in this system include desire (e.g. for praise, a fulfilling career, a home, holidays, a promotion), excitement (as we get closer to capturing what we want), joy and pleasure (when we get them).

The blue system motivates us to seek and get the good things in life and it rewards us when we do with the neurotransmitter dopamine, which makes us feel good and in turn gives us the motivation to pursue our goals.

The blue system is connected to the red system, in that, if someone or something prevents us from getting what we want, we may become frustrated or even angry. When this happens, both emotion systems are activated simultaneously.

This is one of the reasons why it's not a good idea to base our happiness on achieving goals and obtaining things, because we don't always get what we want. There is another reason too. Because dopamine feels good we will want to repeat the experience, and if the blue system is not balanced by the green (see below), then as soon as we get one thing, we start seeking another, never satisfied with what we have.

The green system – contentment

The emotions in this system include feeling safe, content, relaxed, connected, peaceful, fulfilled as well as emotions that connect us to others: kindness, affection, appreciation, gratitude, love, compassion... For this reason, it's called the calm and connect system. This system is activated when we feel safe and when we don't want anything.

Integral to the green system are endorphins and the hormone oxytocin known also as the 'love hormone', which is not only released between lovers but also by physical touch – a hug or putting one's hand on another person's arm or shoulder. When these hormones are released we experience a strong sense of well-being.

The green system does have a downside. If we spend too long in green (when we have lost our job, recovering from illness or have disengaged from work and/or social life) we can become apathetic and unmotivated which can lead to a loss of energy and a lowering of mood, eventually leading to depression. As human beings we need to have a sense of purpose, to be active, to make a contribution, to thrive (blue system).

When we help someone, are affectionate to someone we love or are playful, we are not trying to achieve any particular goal or outcome. The help we are giving, the affection and playfulness are their own reward.

Which emotion system do you spend most time in?

Our emotional life is intrinsically connected to our mental states.

Mindfulness and coaching can help us become more aware of our emotions and mental states so that we can notice when we are in red or blue emotional systems and when it's time to spend some time in the green, in order to care for ourselves.

Many of us spend more time in blue and red than in green. Clients often say that they spend 90% of their time in blue and red, and just 10% in green.

Here are some tips to help you spend more time in green:

- Have regular lunch breaks
- Spend regular time in a natural environment even if it's just a short walk through the park
- Make time to chat with a colleague
- Spend quality time with a close friend
- Take up exercise– keep it simple and manageable - cycling or walking to work
- Have a bath every now and then
- Prepare a nice meal
- Turn in early to bed
- Listen to music
- Allow yourself time to potter around the house
- Block out time at the weekend for down or me-time
- Have one or two evenings a week at home (I always have a note in my diary on two nights per week saying: 'Me-time at home')
- Take up or renew an old hobby (something you absolutely love doing and haven't done for a while)

Enjoy a balanced life...