



# Emotional dysregulation, risky behaviour and issues of mental capacity

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# About me

- ▶ Consultant Clinical Psychologist
- ▶ Specialist field: Learning Disabilities, Autism and Challenging Behaviour including Offending Behaviour
- ▶ Special Visitor for the Office of the Public Guardian & Court of Protection

# Outline of presentation

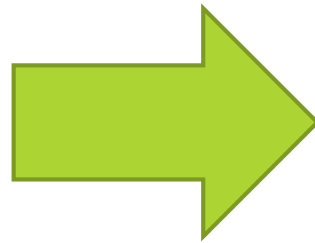
- ▶ Pathways to developing complex emotional needs i.e. difficulties regulating emotions and needing to use survival strategies (including risky ones)
- ▶ Consider the diagnosis of personality disorder and the usefulness of this concept for understanding people with complex emotional needs
- ▶ Consider the emotional impact of working with people with complex emotional needs and common personal and organisational responses
- ▶ Consider some of the issues I have come across in my practice of assessing mental capacity in people with complex emotional needs

# A case example

- ▶ P has a long history of childhood adversity and has grown up in care. She self harms by cutting herself when she is distressed
- ▶ P currently lives in sheltered accommodation with support workers coming in every day to help her
- ▶ P has come to the attention of social services because she keeps inviting people into her house who pose a risk to her
- ▶ P has been financially exploited, physically and emotionally abused and her tenancy has been put at risk
- ▶ P has recently been preventing her support working coming into the house

# Impact of childhood adversity

- Emotional abuse
- Sexual and physical abuse
- Witnessing violence in the home
- Bullying
- Everyday adversity

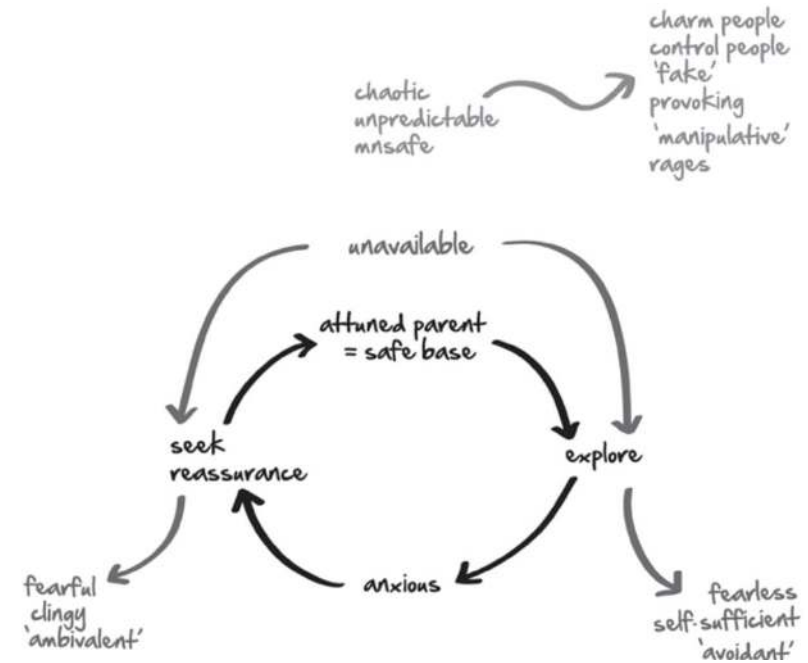


- Quality of attachments
- Negative views of the self



- Difficulty regulating emotions
- Survival strategies (including risky ones)

# Quality of attachments



Silver, M. (2013)

# Adult relational patterns

Loving



Loved

Caring



Cared for

Rejecting



Rejected

Controlling



Controlled

# Negative view of self

- ▶ Unsafe, afraid, attacked
- ▶ Abandoned, rejected
- ▶ Helpless, powerless
- ▶ Hopeless
- ▶ Invaded
- ▶ Controlled
- ▶ Emotionally overwhelmed
- ▶ Emotionally 'empty'
- ▶ Bad, unworthy
- ▶ Isolated, lonely
- ▶ Excluded, alienated
- ▶ Trapped
- ▶ Defeated
- ▶ Failed, inferior
- ▶ Guilty, blameworthy, responsible
- ▶ Betrayed
- ▶ Shamed, humiliated
- ▶ Sense of injustice/unfairness
- ▶ Sense of meaninglessness
- ▶ Contaminated, evil
- ▶ Alien, dangerous
- ▶ Different 'abnormal'

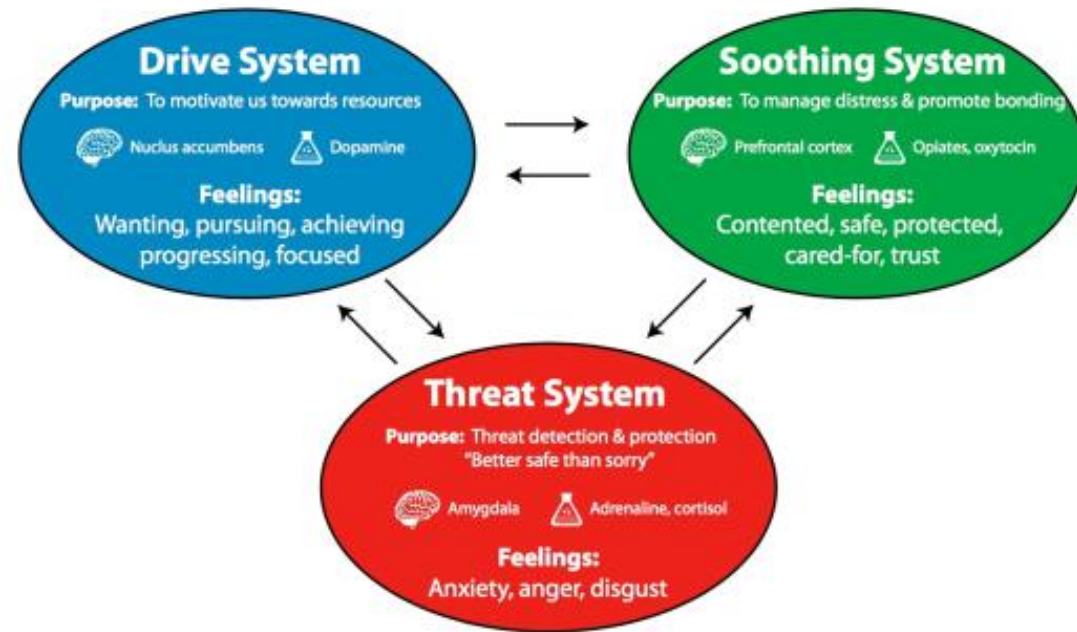


# Difficulties regulating emotions: Stress vulnerability

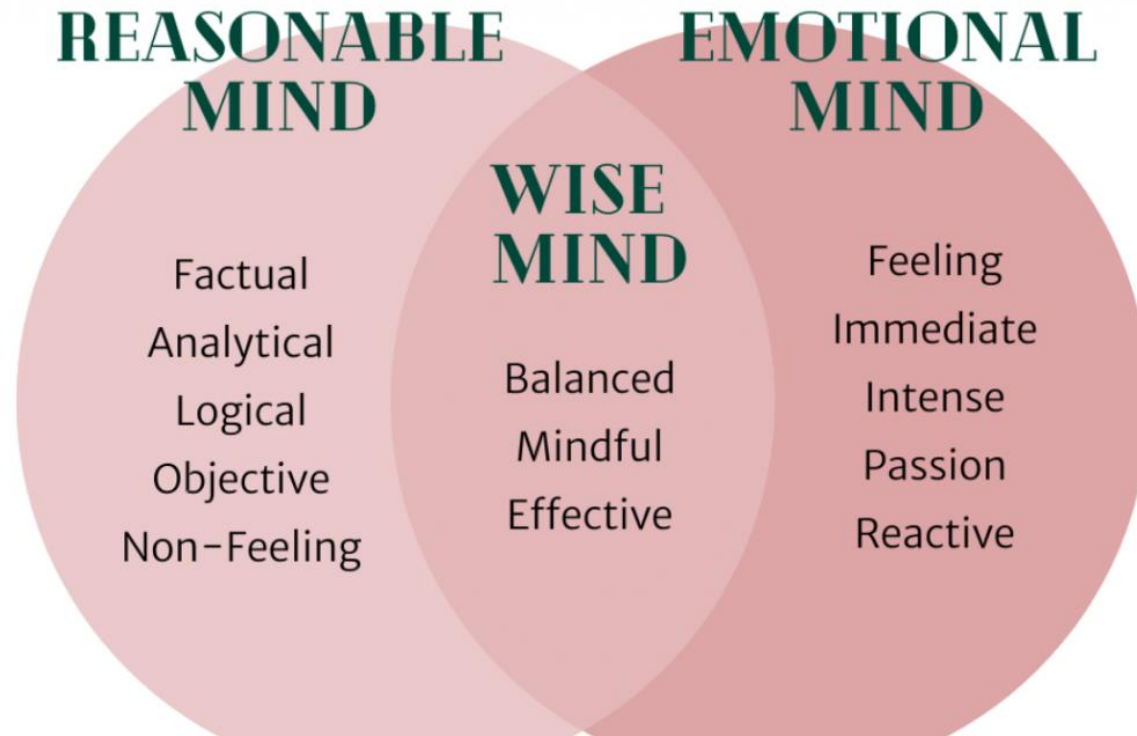
- ▶ Our life experiences tell our body how ready for fight or flight we need to be
- ▶ The more adverse experiences the less empathy and ability to reason and more tendency to see situations and other people as a threat
- ▶ People have less attention & concentration and are more impulsive



# Difficulties regulating emotions: Threat based emotional regulation



# Difficulties regulating emotions: Wise mind



# Survival strategies (including risky ones)

**Regulating overwhelming feelings** – dissociation, self injury, use of alcohol and drugs, denial, projection and splitting

**Maintaining a sense of control**  
– self-starvation, rituals, violence and dominance in relationships

**Protection against hurt and abandonment** – rejecting others, distrust, seeking care and emotional responses, promiscuous behaviour, submission and interpersonal violence

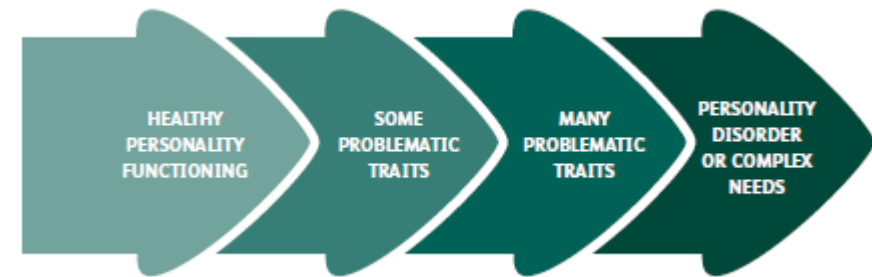
**Self soothing** – rocking, self-harm, alcohol use and over-eating

# Case example formulation



# Diagnosis of Personality Disorder

- ▶ These complex emotional needs may become a personality disorder when they are **persistent, pervasive and problematic**
- ▶ While there are sometimes benefits of establishing a formal diagnosis, this can be stigmatising
- ▶ It is often more helpful to think about these people as having complex emotional needs and to work with the person to arrive at a formulation of their difficulties

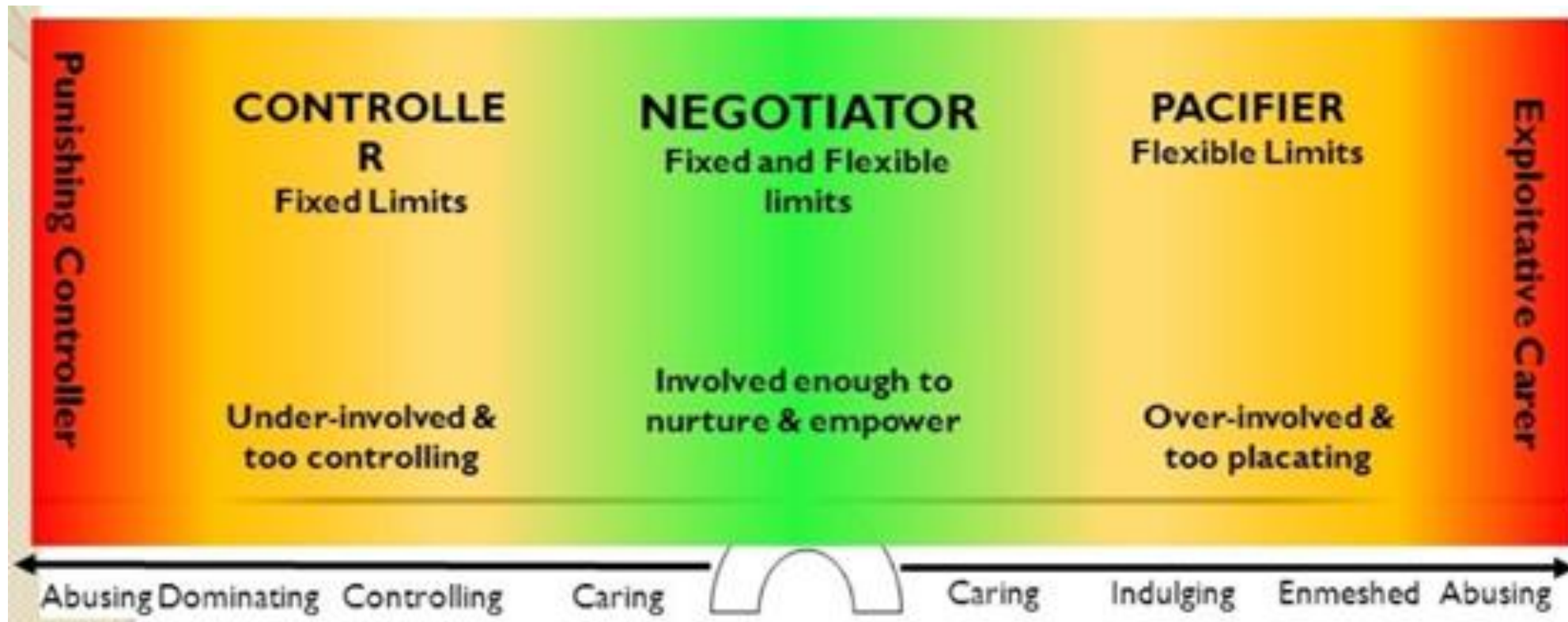


# Emotional impact of working with these people

- ▶ Most people who work with these people will have encountered service users in relation to whom at times they felt:
- ▶ **Guilt that they are not offering enough**
- ▶ **Anxious about the outcome of the risky behaviour**
- ▶ **Frustrated**
- ▶ **Hopeless**
- ▶ **Confused**
- ▶ **Angry and resentful that the service user seems ungrateful**



# Common responses: The boundary seesaw model





# Issues of mental capacity

- ▶ Consider the impact of organisational dynamics
- ▶ Ability to make unwise decisions
- ▶ Supporting decision making
- ▶ Fluctuating ability to make decisions
- ▶ Relevance of executive functioning



Mental Capacity Act 2005

# Impact of individual and organisational dynamics

- ▶ Individual practitioners and organisations can unconsciously begin to act out P's internal mental state by becoming 'split' on issues of capacity
- ▶ This is It is important that steps are taken to avoid 'splits' including staff training, reflective spaces to discuss complex cases and clinical supervision



# Ability to make unwise decisions

- ▶ The psychological understanding of Ps clinical presentation can help tease apart an unwise decision from an incapacitous one
- ▶ **May be incapacitous** - if the decision is related to a survival strategy and if P cannot use and weigh the risks and benefits of using this survival strategy
- ▶ **May be unwise** - if the decision is clearly unrelated to a survival strategy

HE CAN'T STOP GIVING PEOPLE GIFTS...  
I'M WORRIED ABOUT HIS MENTAL  
CAPACITY



# Supporting decision making

- ▶ The psychological understanding of Ps clinical presentation can guide interventions which may support decision making
- ▶ There may be relatively simple changes to someone's care that reduce their emotional dysregulation overall so that they can make informed decisions



# Fluctuating ability to make decisions

Fluctuates temporarily

Fluctuates on a predictable basis

Fluctuates unpredictability

# Relevance of executive functioning

- ▶ People with complex emotional needs can have impairments in executive functioning
- ▶ This means they sometimes cannot understand or use and weigh the information, that they cannot implement what they will say they do in the abstract, or that when needed, they are unable to bring to mind the information needed to implement the decision



# Take home messages

- ▶ **People with complex emotional needs are surviving in ways which are the only ways they know how**
- ▶ **The diagnosis of personality disorder on its own without a psychological formulation has limitations in being able to support someone**
- ▶ **Working with people with complex emotional needs results in high levels of emotion and we can all end up acting out the persons internal emotional state in our work if we don't stop and reflect**
- ▶ **Mental capacity assessments in people with complex emotional needs requires specialist assessment of the link between the psychological formulation and the decision making**



# Contact me

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# Key reference 1: Working with Personality Difficulties



- ▶ *Meeting the Challenge – Making a Difference* is a new practitioner guide offering information, advice and guidance for those working with people with personality difficulties in community settings. The guide, commissioned by the Department of Health, brings together up to date thinking about personality disorder with practical advice to support staff and organisations working across health and social care services.
- ▶ Accessed online: <http://repository.tavistockandportman.ac.uk/864/>

# Key reference 2: The Boundary Seesaw Model



EDITED BY ALLISON TENNANT  
AND KEVIN HOWELLS

THE WILEY  
SERIES IN  
PERSONALITY  
DISORDERS

## USING TIME, NOT DOING TIME

PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES ON PERSONALITY DISORDER AND RISK

WILEY-BLACKWELL

- ▶ Hamilton, L. (2010). The boundary seesaw model: Good fences make for good neighbours. *Using time, not doing time: Practitioner perspectives on personality disorder and risk*, 181-194.

# Key reference 3: 39 Essex Street Mental Capacity Guidelines



## CARRYING OUT CAPACITY ASSESSMENTS – JANUARY 2021

[Home](#) // Carrying Out Capacity Assessments – January 2021

- ▶ **Main Guide** - Accessed online: <https://www.39essex.com/mental-capacity-guidance-note-brief-guide-carrying-capacity-assessments/>
- ▶ **Fluctuating mental capacity** – Accessed online: <https://1f2ca7mxjow42e65q49871m1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Fluctuating-capacity-19.6.19-paper-final.pdf>

# Other references:

- ▶ Silver, M. (2013). *Attachment in common sense and doodles: A practical guide*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.