

# The Way Forward Beyond The Dysfunctions Of Modern Culture

## Part I: Savvy About Psychodynamics

Dr Robert Gilman – November 9, 2021  
The Stoa's Philosopher in Residence series

# Psychodynamics

**“The conscious and subconscious  
mental and emotional forces  
that determine personality and motivation”**

# Being Savvy about Psychodynamics

Huge personal benefits

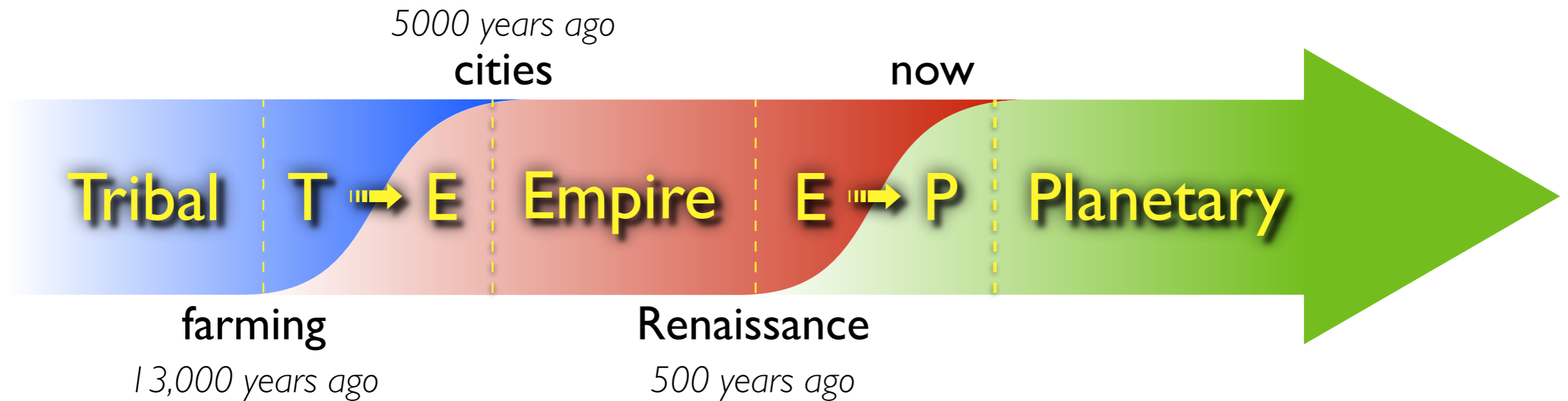
*and*

Huge benefits for the culture

# Personal Benefits

- more ease, aliveness and agency
- easier, deeper relationships and more productive collaborations
- a stronger capacity to make a difference on big issues

# The Cultural Context



# Empire-to-Planetary Transition

Reformation

Empire

Planetary


Renaissance

Enlightenment

printing press, natural sciences,  
political revolutions, industrial revolution,  
market economy, representative government

But modern culture has now created a world  
beyond its capacity to cope

# The Polycrisis



**Climate Change**  
**Social Injustice**  
**Species Extinction**  
**Unsustainable Economy**  
**Deforestation**  
**Dysfunctional Governments**  
**Nuclear Weapons**  
**Soil Depletion**  
**Runaway Technology**  
**and on and on ...**

**These are all human-created problems  
and signs of deep cultural dysfunction**



# AoE/Modernist Dysfunctions

- Clueless about psychodynamics
- Narrow modes of cognition
- Outmoded strategy for success

# The Way Forward with 3 New Capacities

- Savvy about psychodynamics
- Skillful with diverse modes of cognition
- Adept at the new strategy for success

Today is for  
“Savvy about psychodynamics”

The others in the coming weeks

# Keys to Becoming Savvy about Psychodynamics

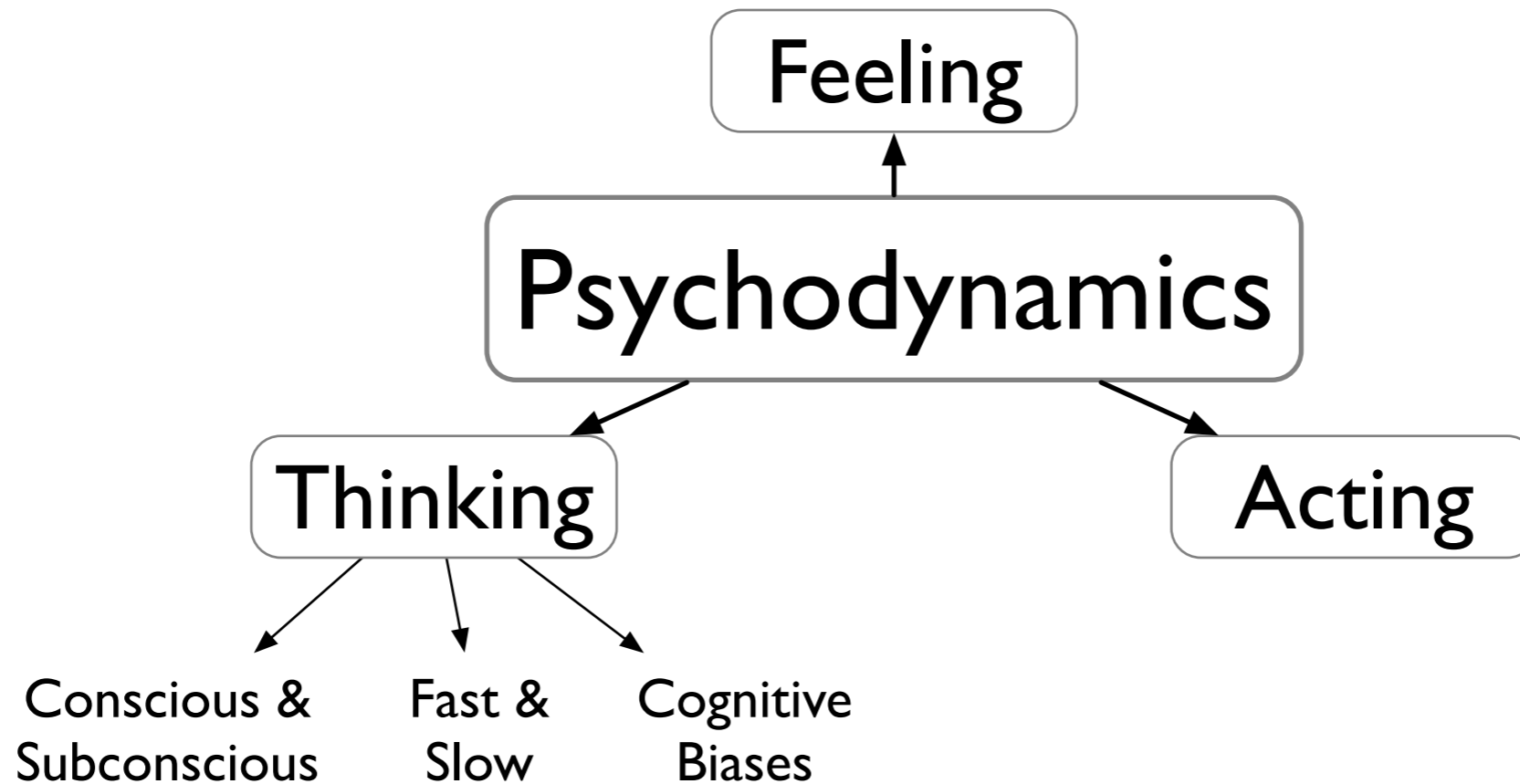


**Frameworks**

**Practice**

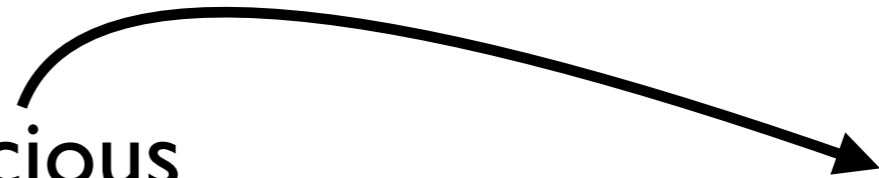
**Self-awareness**

# Savvy about Psychodynamics



# Conscious and Subconscious

conscious

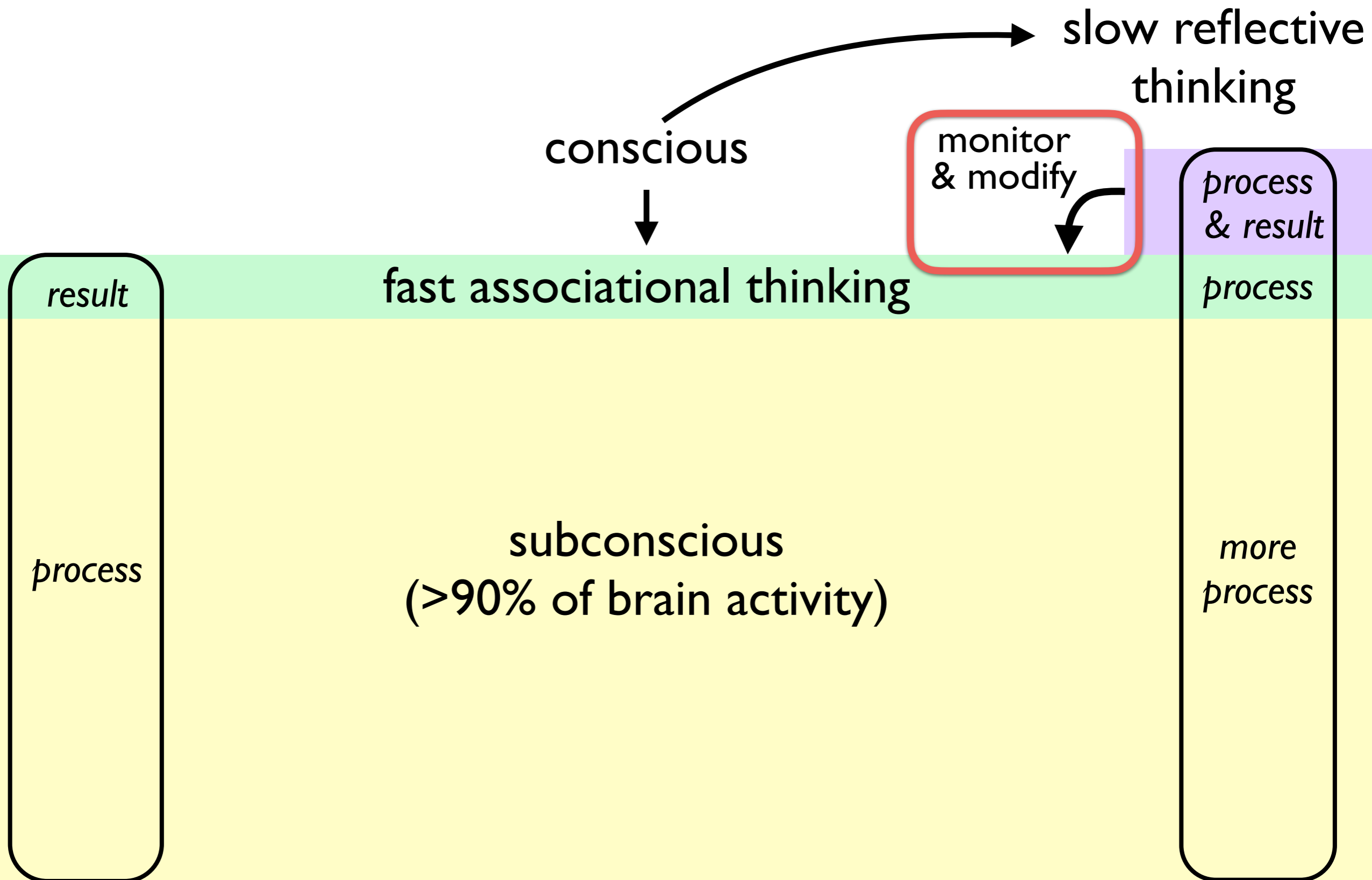


subconscious  
(>90% of brain activity)

# Subconscious

- Evolved for survival, not accuracy
- Contains many functions: some built-in, some learned
- Uses quick, usually-good-enough pattern-recognition that connects the present to past learnings
- Some of those learnings are rules or heuristics that guide action; many were learned in childhood
- It functions automatically, yet its learnings can be intentionally refreshed and updated

# Thinking, Fast and Slow





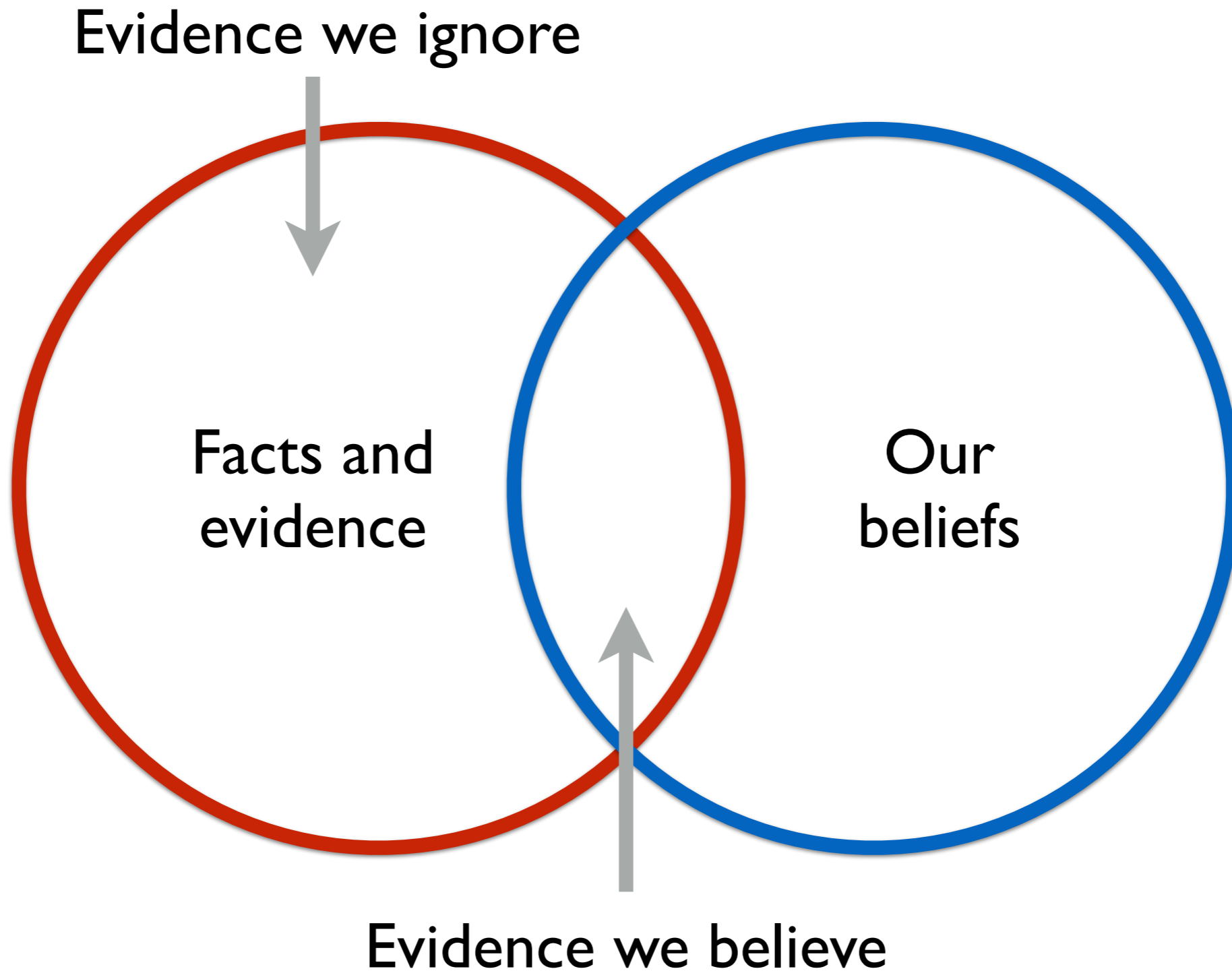
# Cognitive Biases

Quick-but-sloppy subconscious in action

Systematically inaccurate thinking

Over 200 types in Wikipedia list

# Confirmation Bias



# Framing Effect

Consent Form

90% chance of success

Consent Form

10% chance of complications

Patient signature

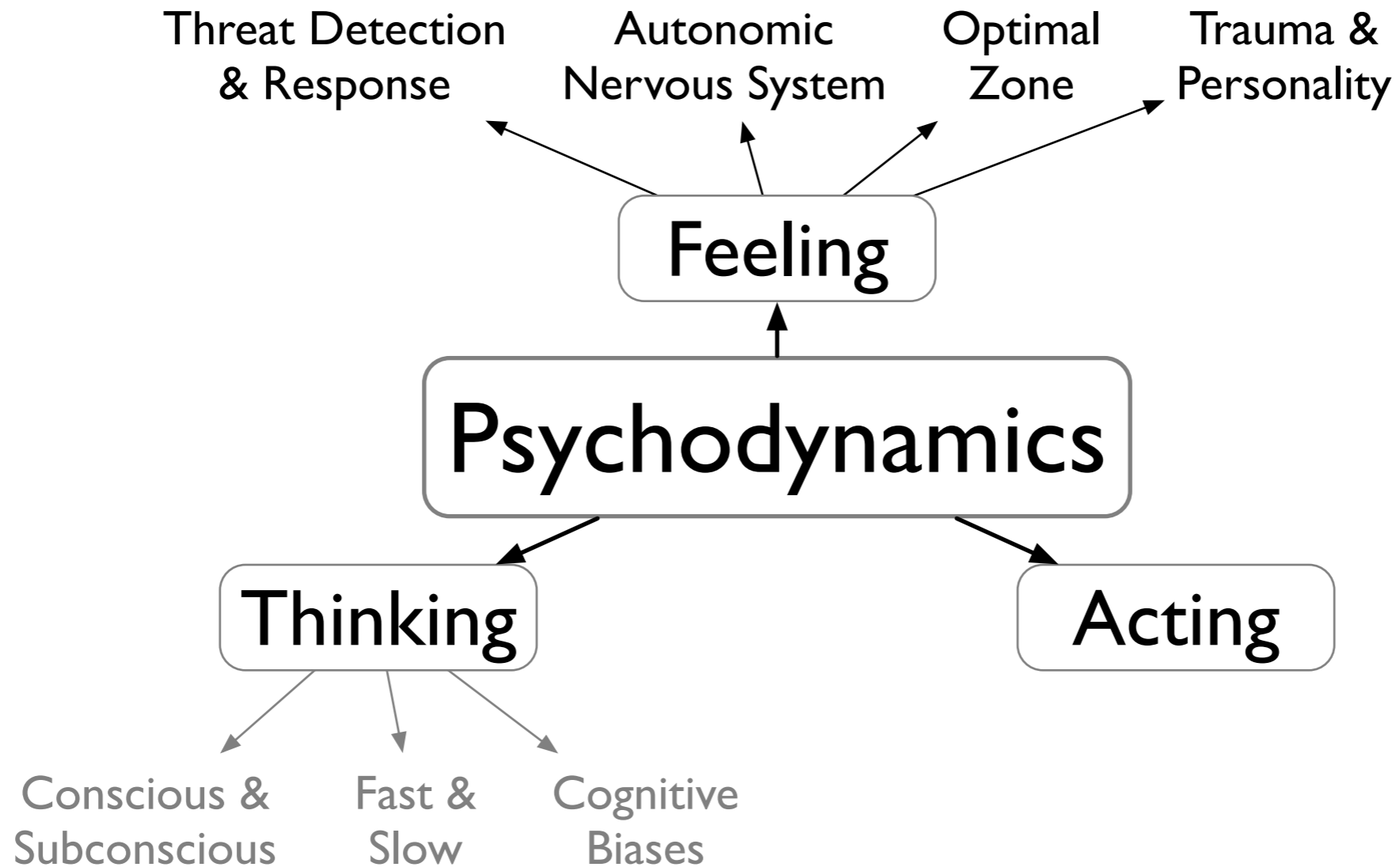
# AoE/Modernist Dysfunctions

- The assumption that *humans are reliably rational* badly misrepresents real behavior
- Yet that assumption is embedded in our political, economic and legal institutions, leaving them inept and open to manipulation – the Polycrisis is the result
- It also induces people to try to convince other people through “rational” argument rather than begin by understanding their psychodynamics – ineffective politics is the result

# Savvy Take-aways

- We're all dependent on error-prone fast-thinking and subconscious processes
- Compensate for it with self-awareness, humility and slow thinking
- Refresh/update your subconscious with new skills
- Give your subconscious a chance to do better

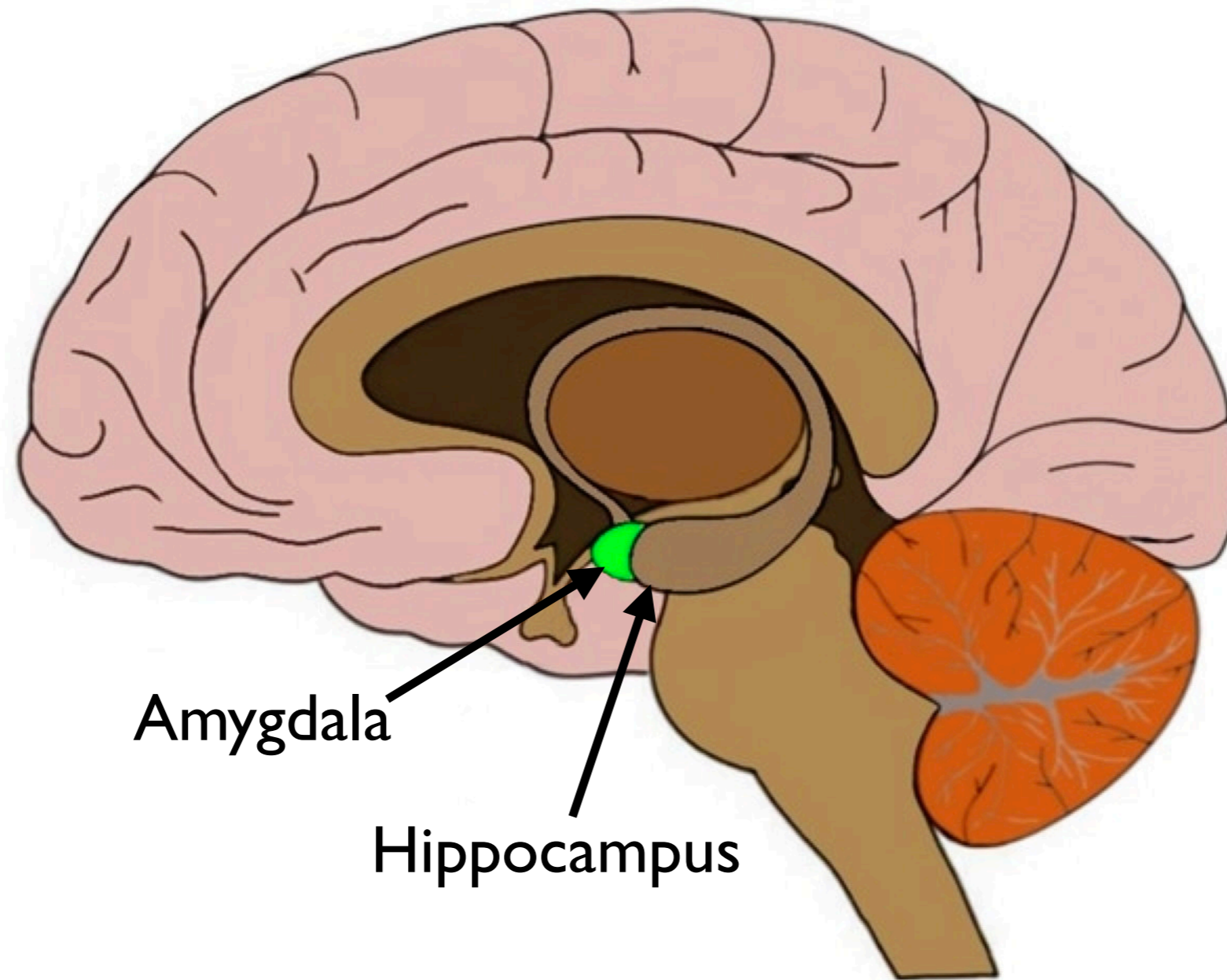
# Savvy about Psychodynamics



# Threat Detection & Response

- Part of our subconscious
- Evolved over hundreds of millions of years for immediate physical threats
- Uses fast, automatic pattern recognition
- Response involves many hormonal, nervous, brain, circulatory, etc. changes

# Threat Detection & Response



Amygdala

Hippocampus

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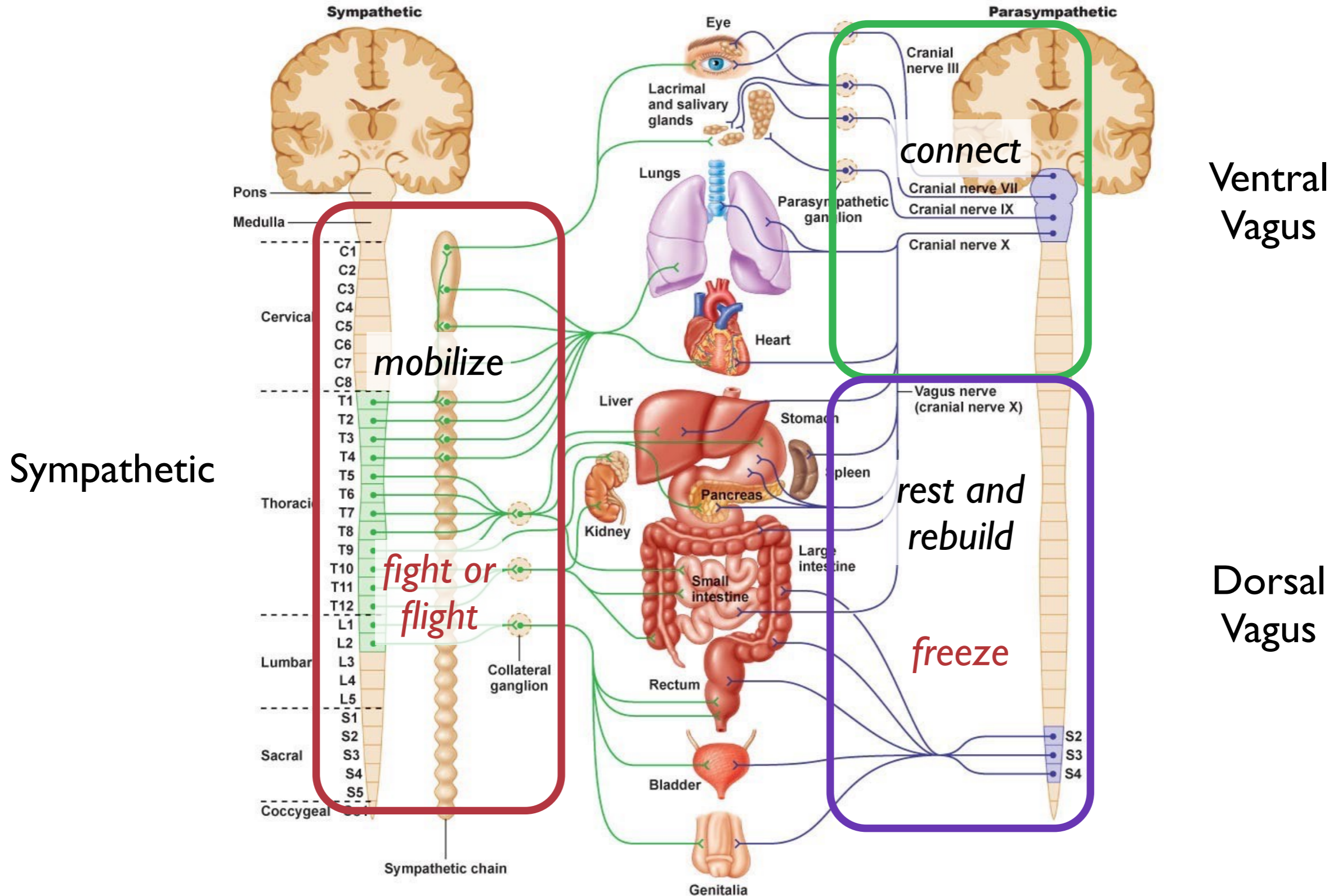
Neuroception



# Autonomic Nervous System

accelerator

brake



# Autonomic Nervous System

- Dorsal vagus activation – prepares the body for physical inaction
- Sympathetic activation – prepares the body for intense physical action
- Ventral vagus activation – creates a sense of safety, allows for positive social connections

# What ANS states *feel* like

sense of  
safety

*Optimal Zone*

flow/create

connect

mellow

activate

rest & digest

worry

freeze

sense of  
threat

fight/flight

*Defensive Zone*

shutdown

sympathetic  
dominant

dorsal vagus  
dominant

# Optimal Zone

curious

calm

clear-headed

connected

confident

courageous

creative

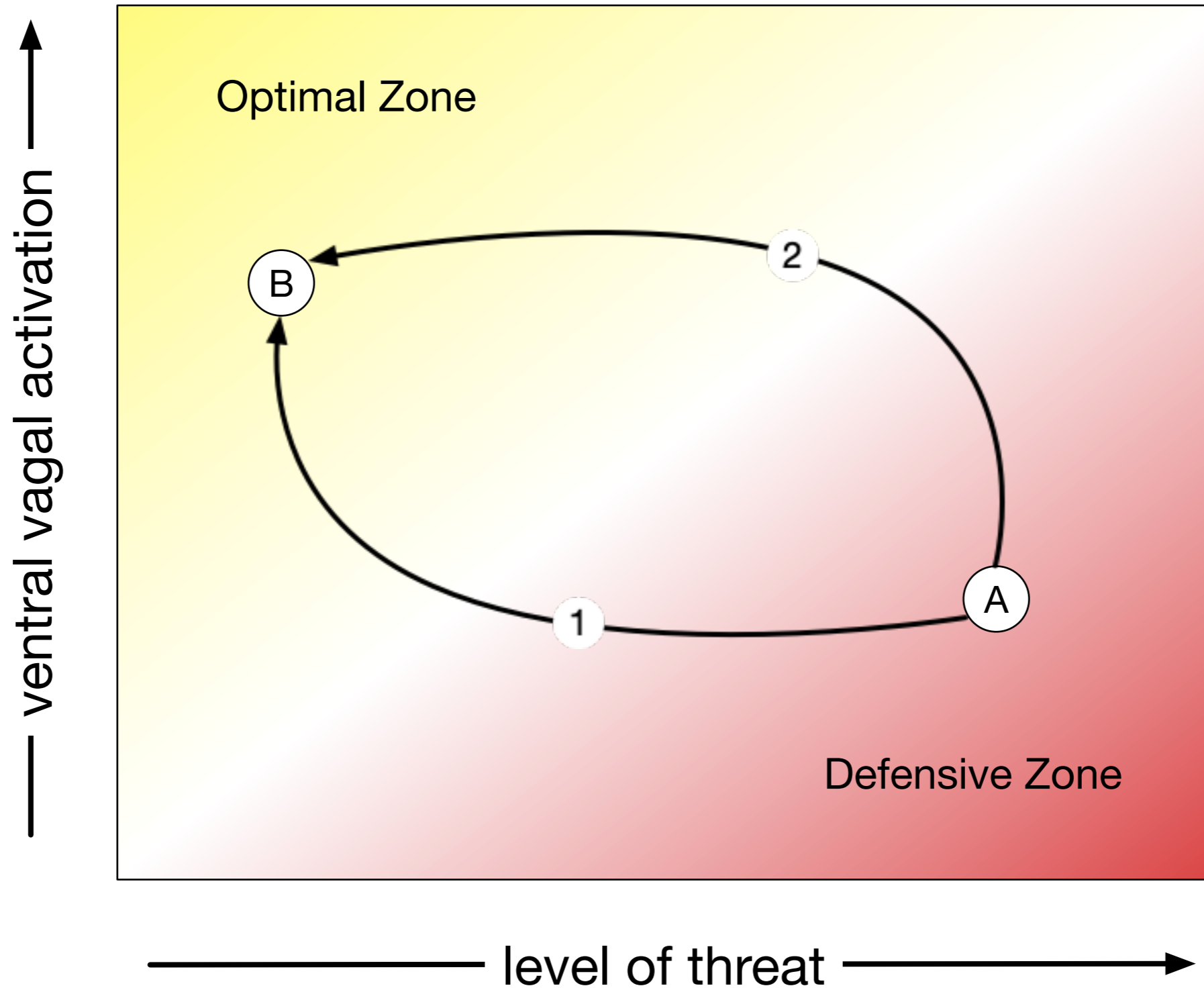
compassionate

# Optimal Zone

Where you are most useful  
to yourself *and* the world

Where you can  
have fun *and* get things done

# Pathways to Safety



# Neurological Reset

- Cross your hands over your upper chest in a gentle self-hug
- Tell your body,  
“In this moment, I am physically safe”
- Wiggle your nose and cheeks to stimulate your facial muscles and ventral vagus nerve
- Breathe in through your nose and, more slowly, out through your mouth
- Continue the self-hug  
Do three cycles of wiggle and breathe

So why don't we spend more  
time in the Optimal Zone?

As humans, we're often triggered  
by imagined threats that are  
neither immediate nor physical

We all carry unresolved trauma  
that keeps us on alert



Do you sometimes feel...

fearful of life,  
not seen,  
not belonging,  
no one cares,  
you want to flee physically  
or into an inner world?

Do you sometimes feel ...

you aren't good enough,  
you can't do it,  
fearful of being alone,  
you'll never get what you need/want?

Do you sometimes feel ...

heavy,  
stuck,  
overpowered,  
easily humiliated,  
not wanting to be seen,  
compliant outside but raging inside?

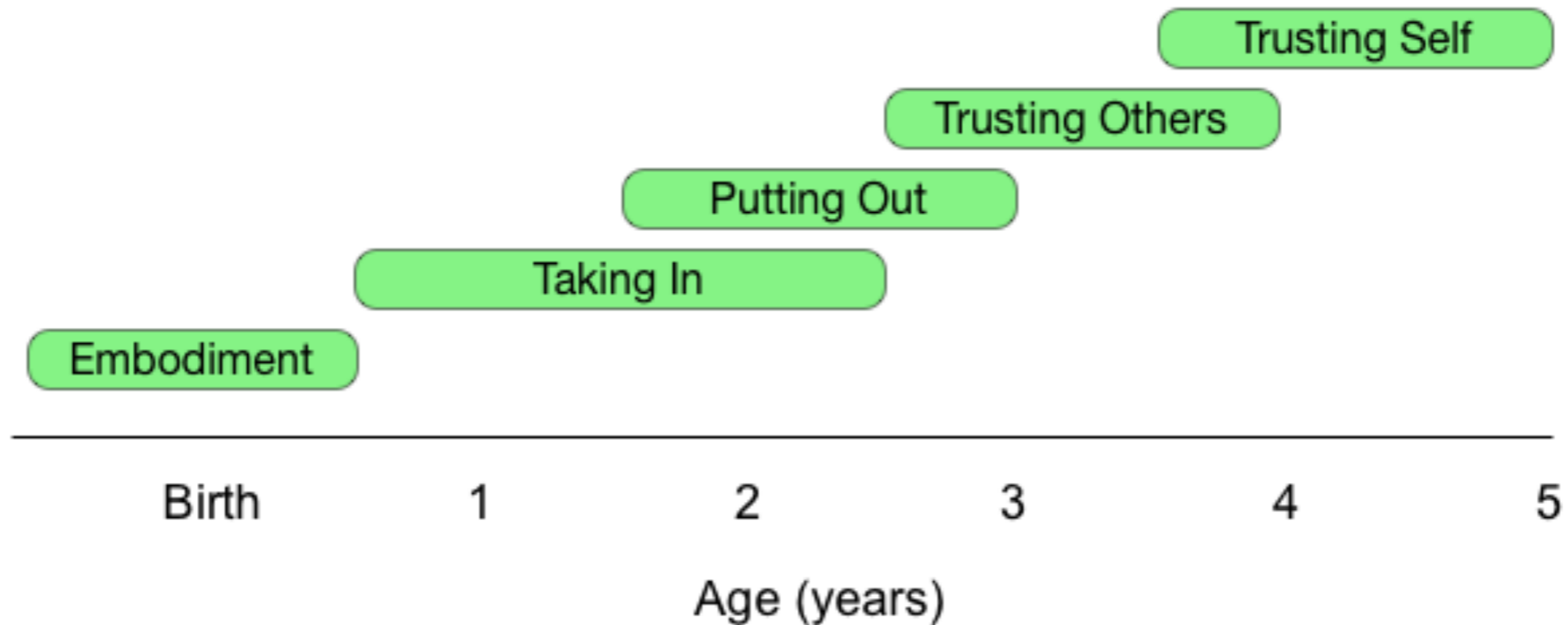
Do you sometimes feel ...

you can't trust others,  
you need to dominate or go it alone,  
will-power is the answer,  
“I'll do it myself”?

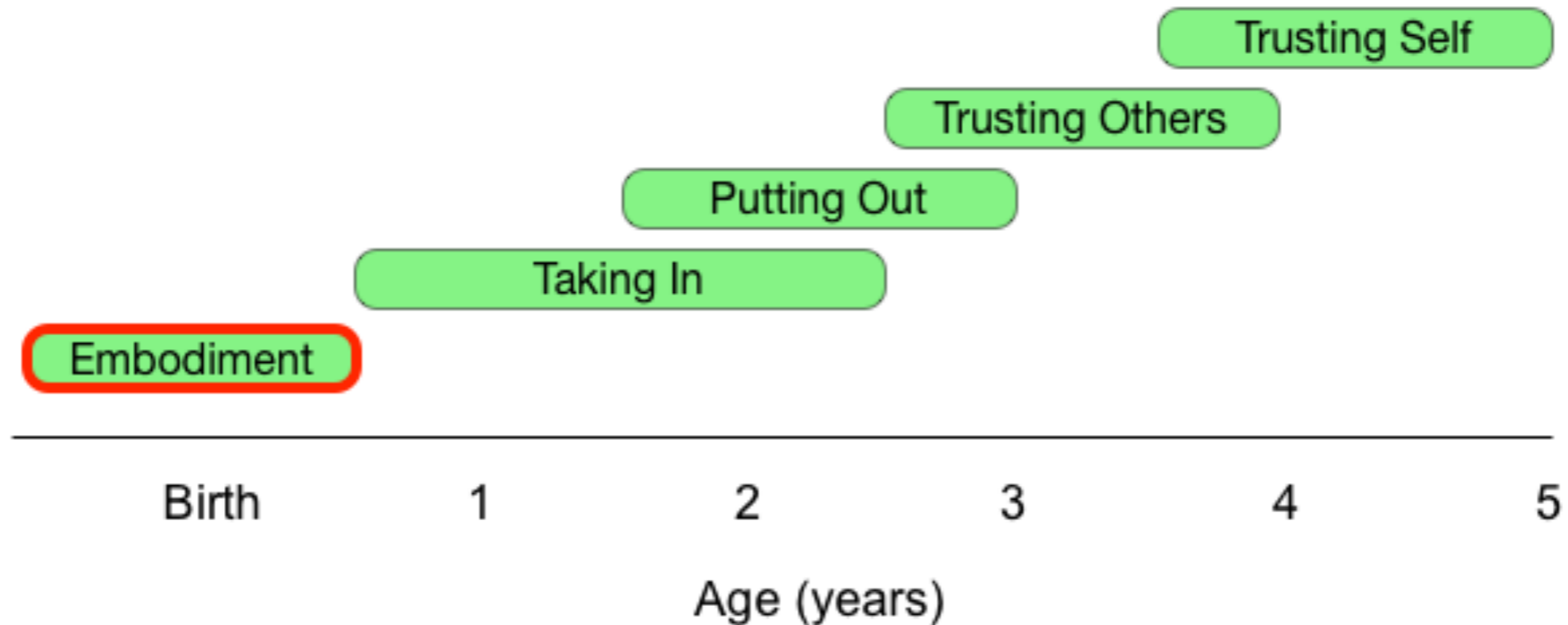
Do you sometimes feel ...

it's better  
to go by the rules,  
to perform well,  
to be orderly  
than follow your own inner direction?

# Developmental Tasks

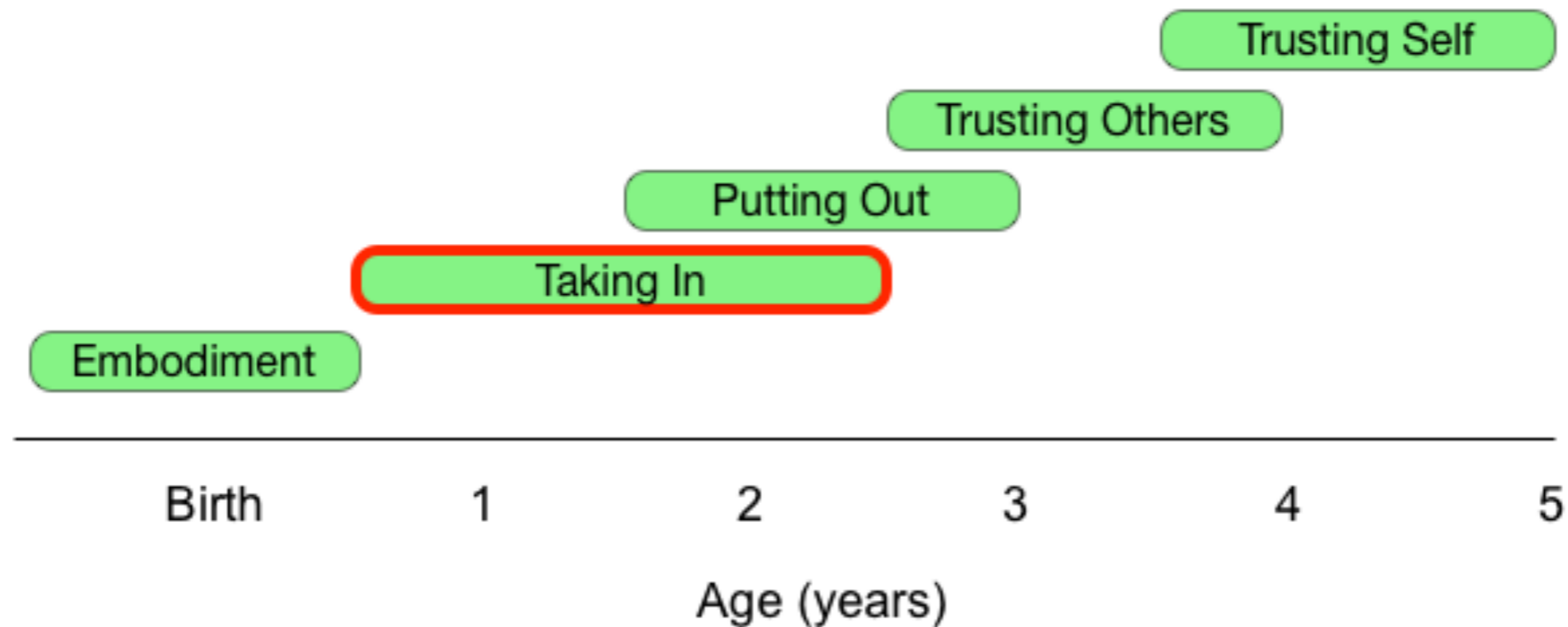


# Developmental Tasks



“I’m comfortable and safe in my body”

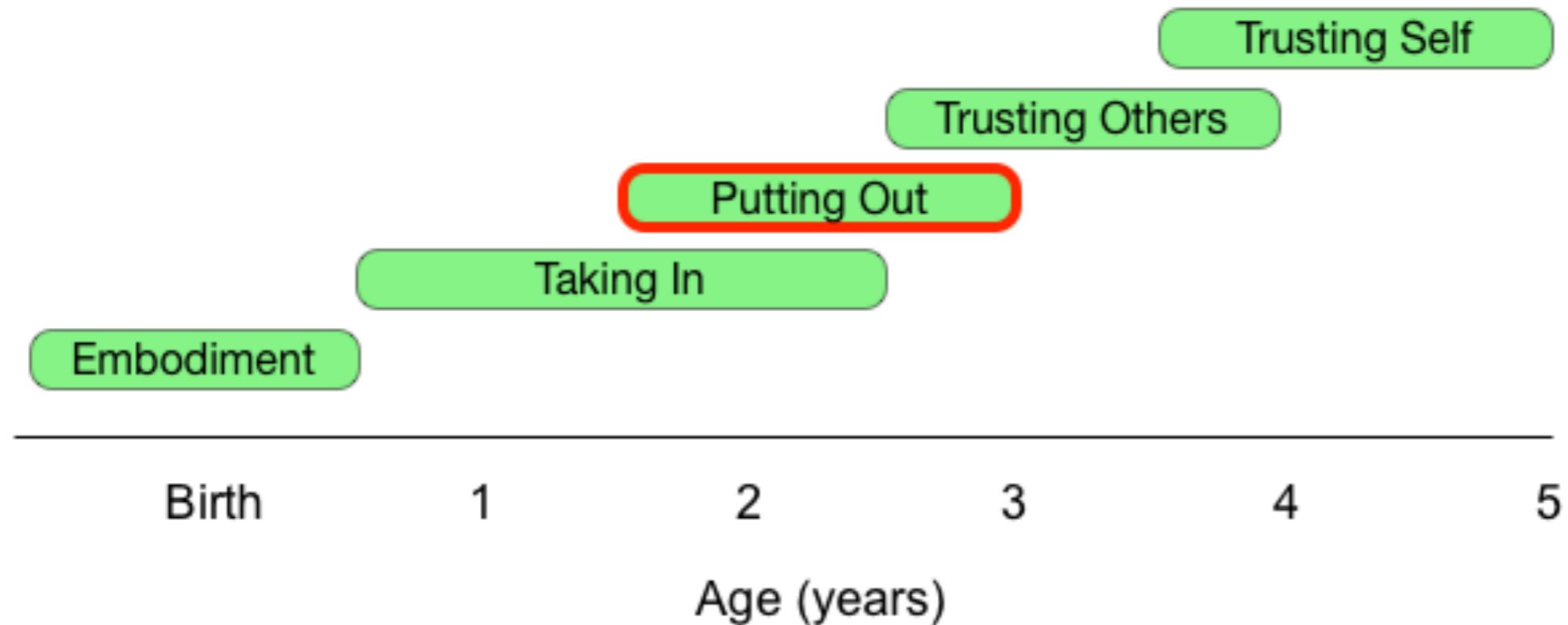
# Developmental Tasks



“I have enough and I am enough;  
I know how to be nourished and to nourish”

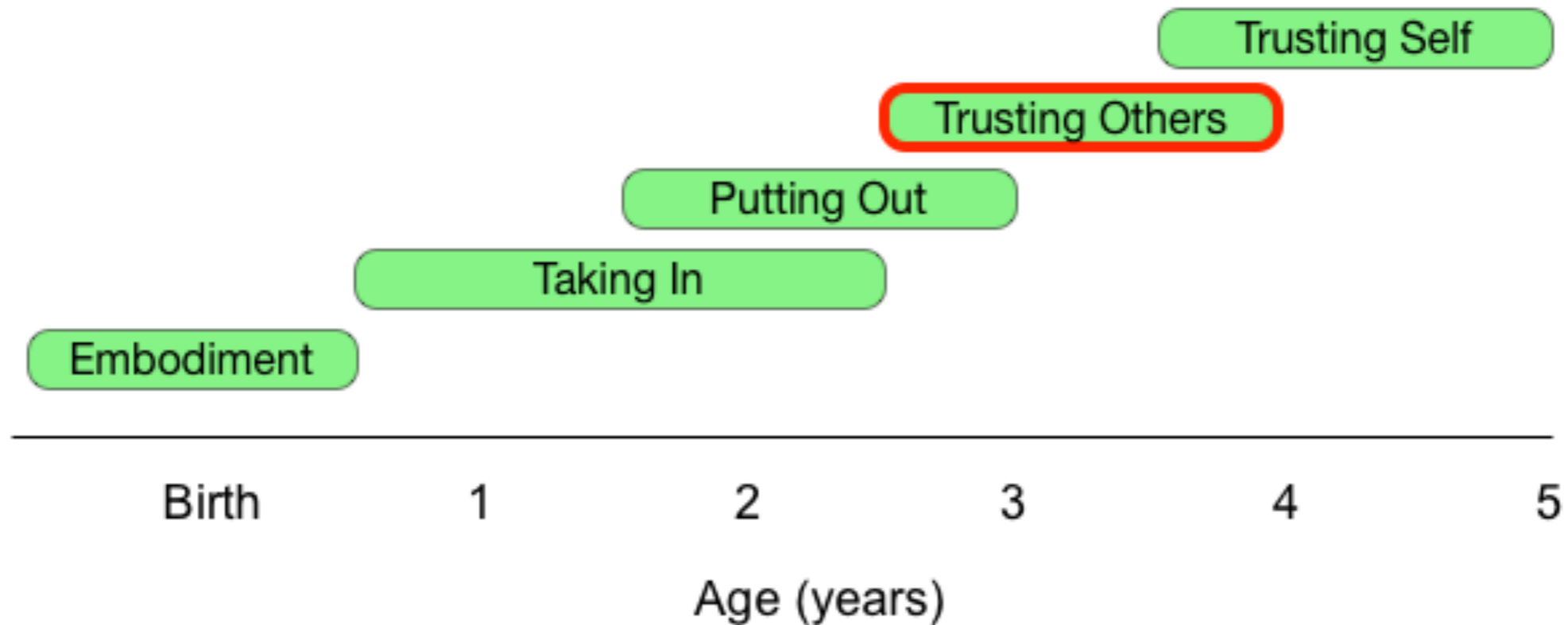


# Developmental Tasks



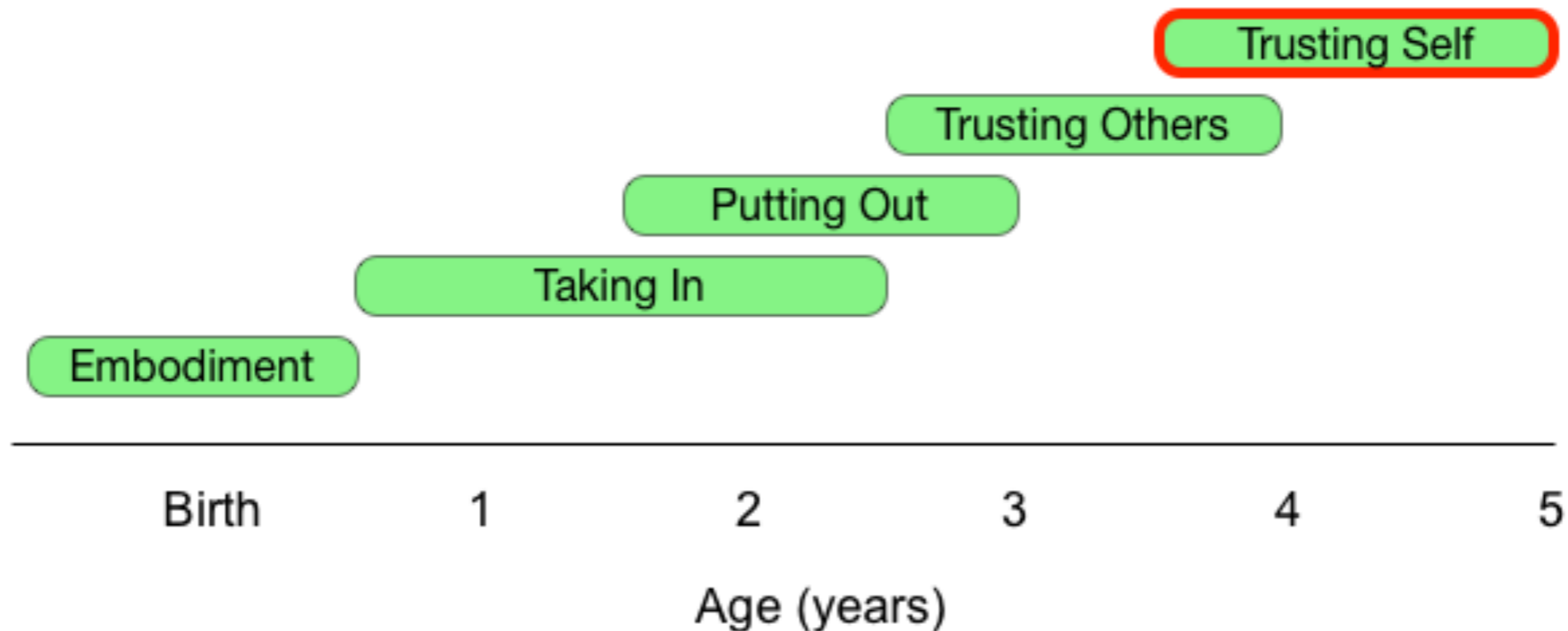
“I’m confident in my own creative capacity”

# Developmental Tasks



“I appropriately trust others and life”

# Developmental Tasks



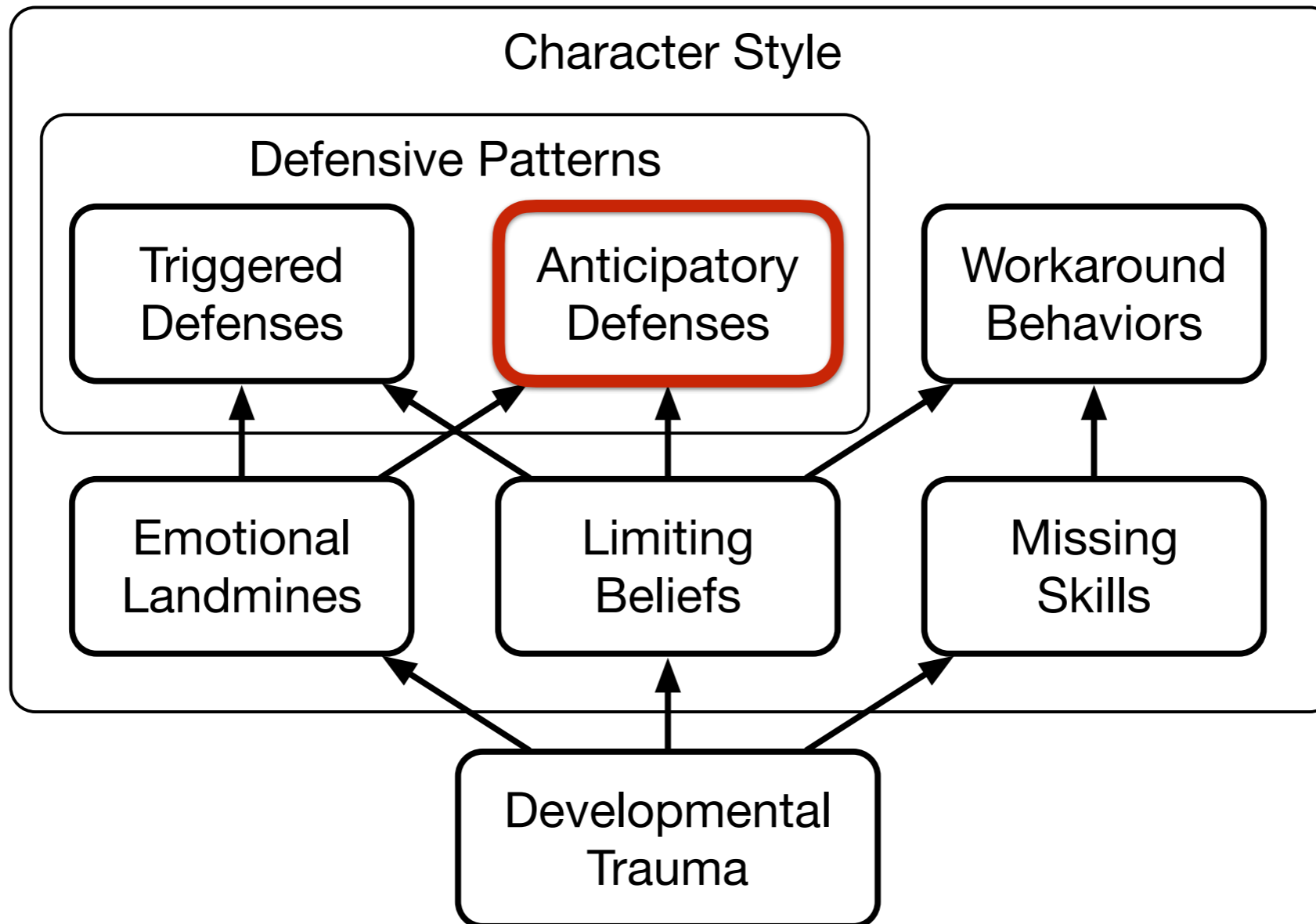
“I’m confident in my own inner direction”

# Developmental Tasks

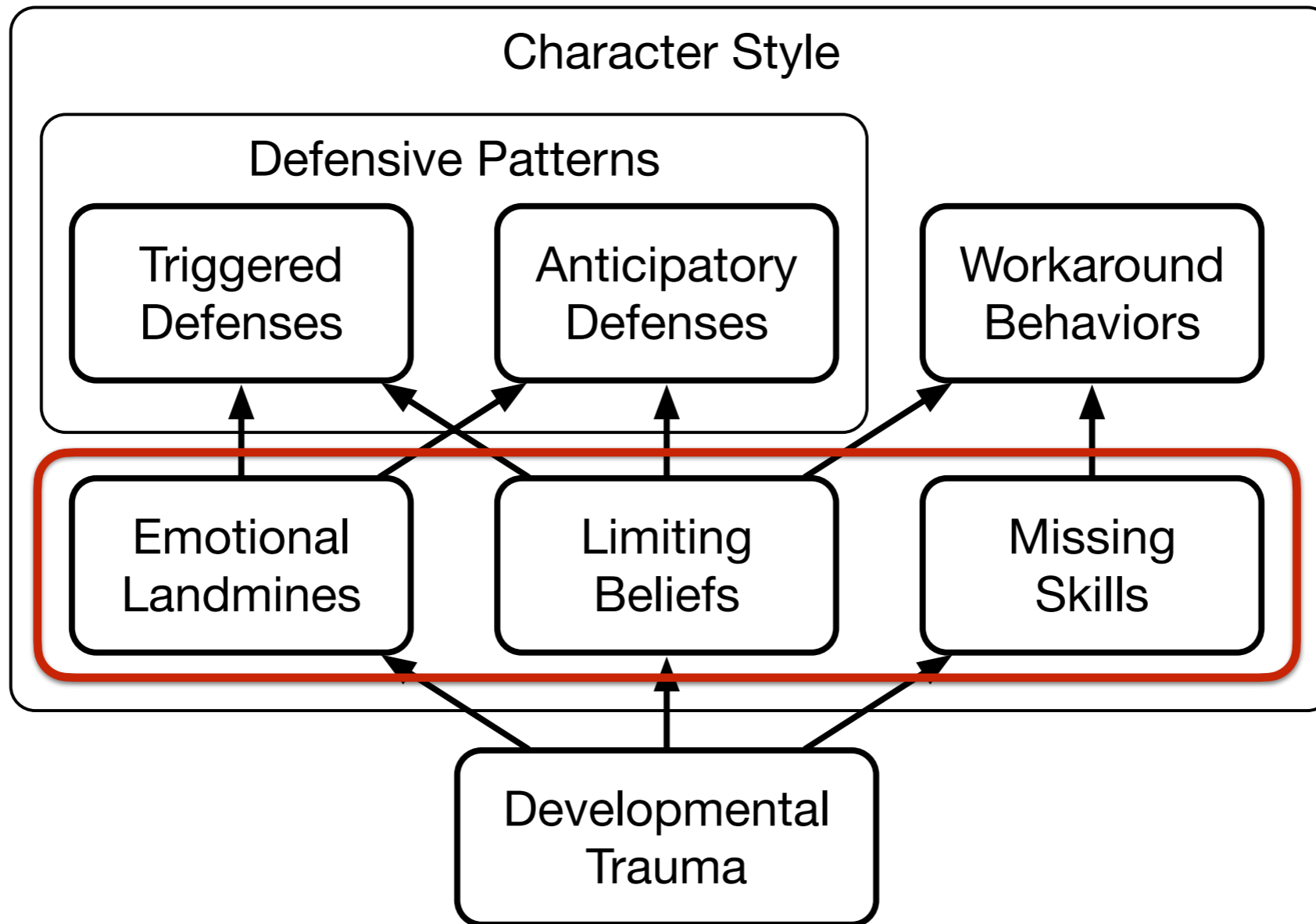
It's rare for anyone to truly complete these task and we all get some wounds along the way

We all wind up with some developmental trauma

# Character Styles



# Pathways To Healing



# AoE/Modernist Dysfunctions

- The failure to understand and support the psychodynamic development of children creates a culture full of traumatized adults
- The assumption that life is about dominance and power-struggles trains us for, and then keeps us in, the Defensive Zone
- The result is the Polycrisis

# Savvy Take-aways

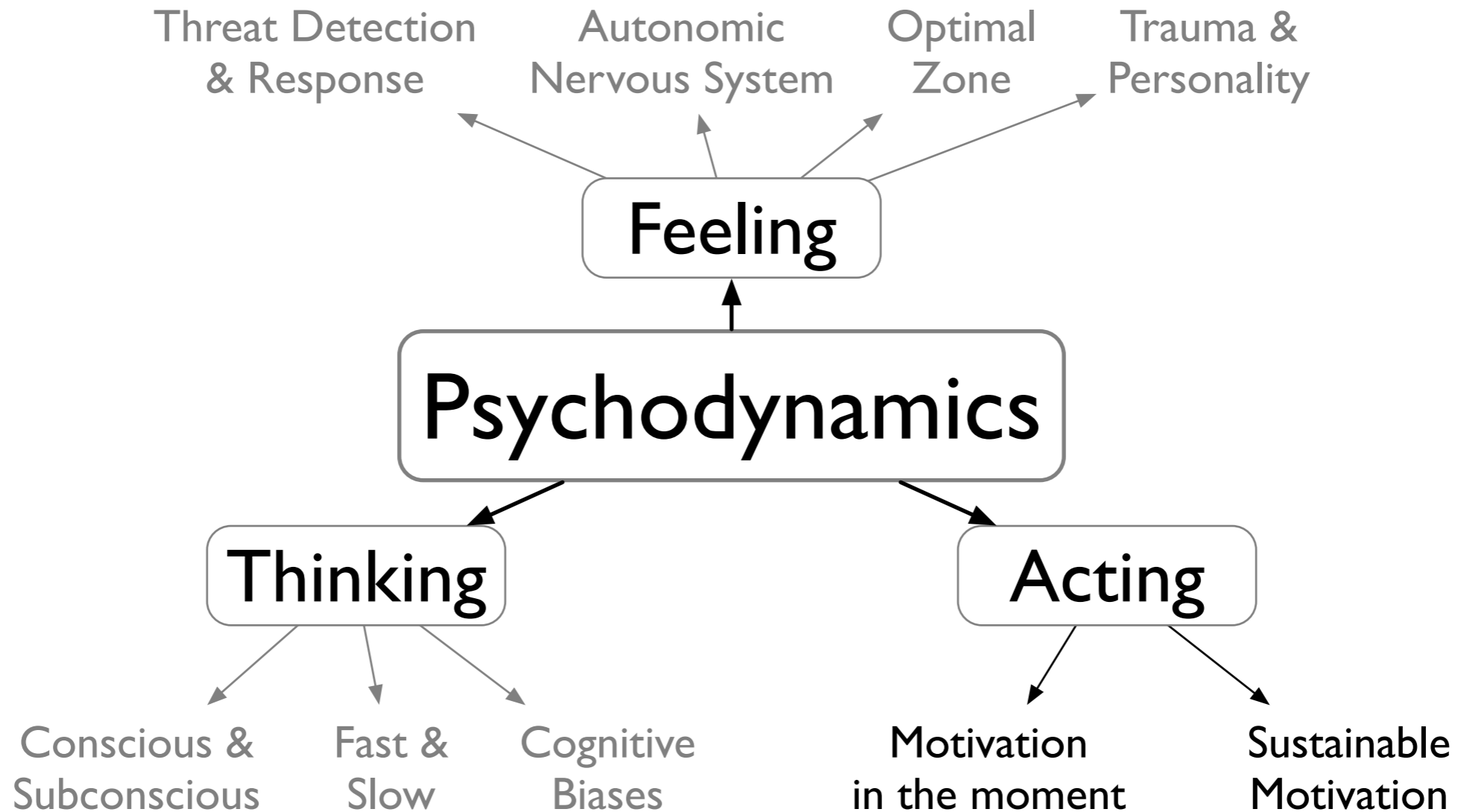
- If it's not an immediate physical threat, calm yourself first
- Develop a good self-awareness of your own defenses, hold them with compassion, help them relax and heal what you can
- The place to intervene for healing is with emotional landmines, limiting beliefs and missing skills *as a system*



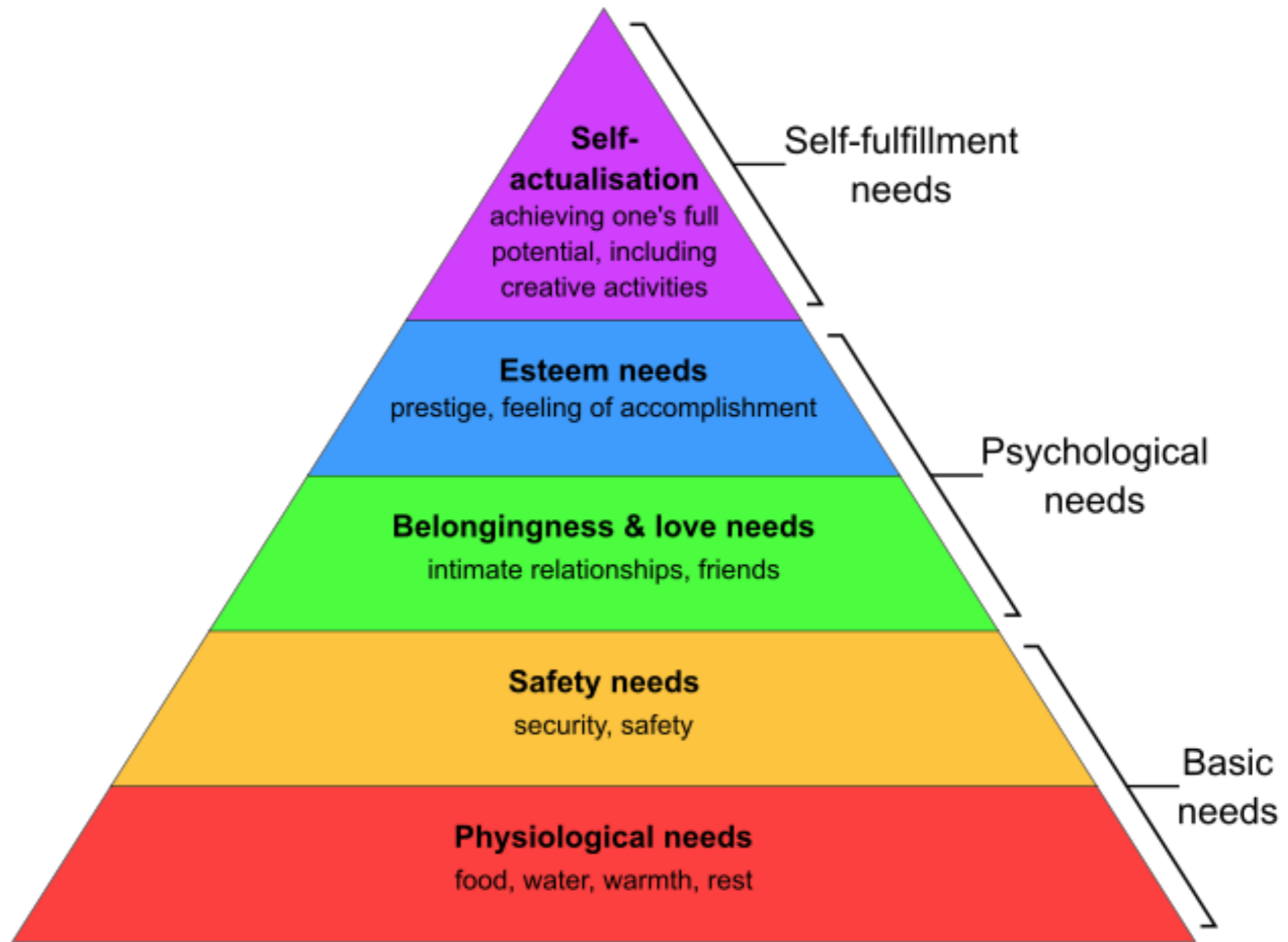
# Savvy Take-aways

- Optimal Zone living is much more about inner safety than outer
- Develop the capacity for Optimal Zone resilience in increasingly challenging environments
- A vibrant, resilient culture of creative, compassionate Optimal Zone adults is entirely possible

# Savvy about Psychodynamics



# Motivation in the moment

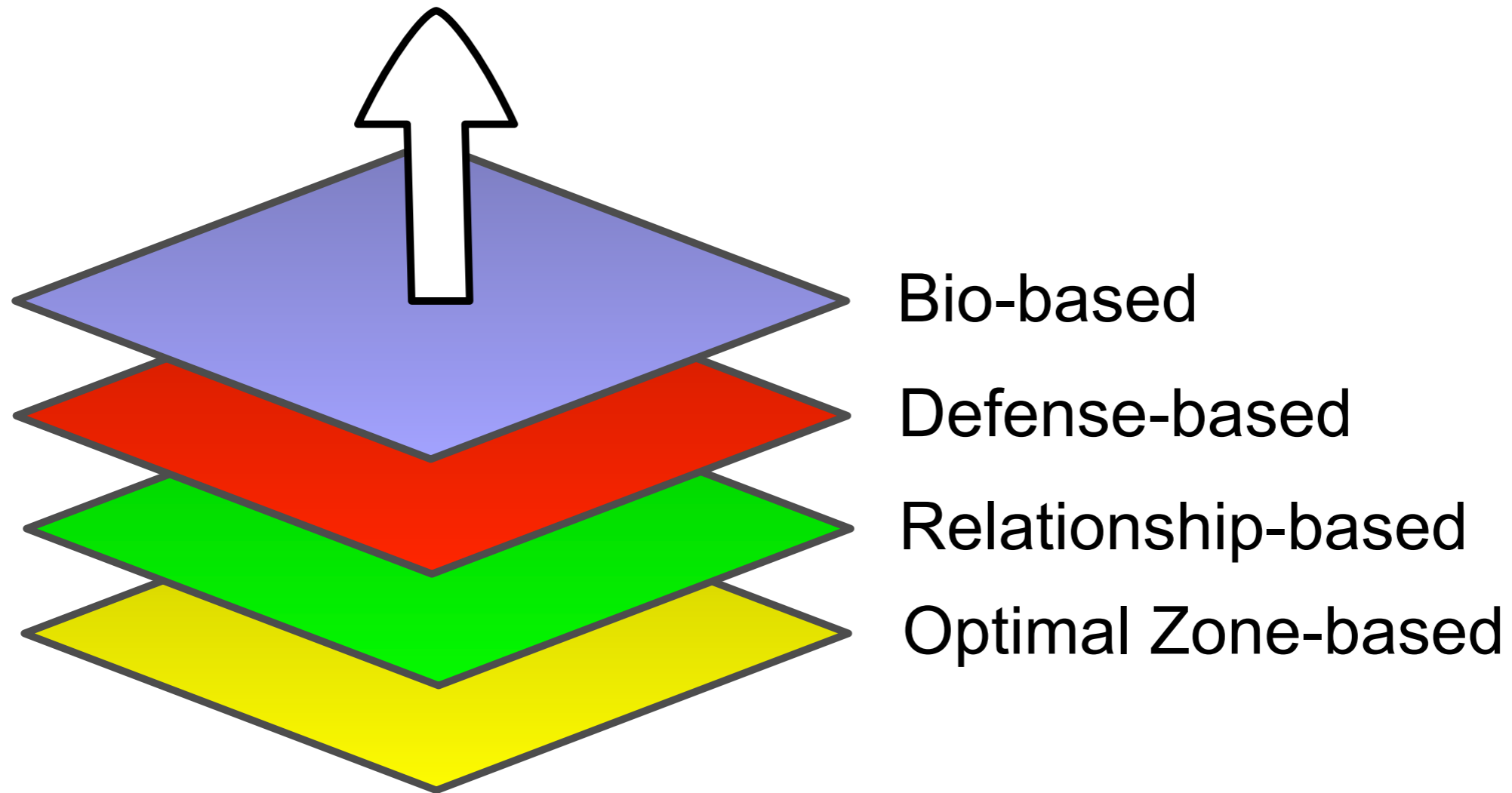


## Maslow's Hierarchy

# Problems with Maslow's Hierarchy

- Hierarchy is too rigid; “needs” overlap in dynamic ways
- Not culturally universal; too individualistic
- Not a complete inventory of “needs”
- “Needs” aren't the only motivator

# Motivation in the moment



**Layers of Motivation**

# Savvy Take-aways

- You need a good understanding of you own defense patterns and character styles to have a meaningful understanding of your own motivation
- Best to compassionately understand your own motivations before trying to understand others'
- An understanding of common patterns can help you respond constructively to others rather than react through your own defenses

# Savvy Take-aways

If you're making a significant choice:

- Move toward your Optimal Zone
- Meet your bio needs as best you can
- Scan to see how your defense patterns may be coloring your motivation
- Be conscious of any influences from your relationships

# Sustainable Motivation

- The Polycrisis issues are *long-arc urgencies*, not *emergencies*; so are many personal issues
- Long-term motivation via fear is counter-productive
  - \* The amygdala/sympathetic system is designed for split-second emergencies
  - \* Extended use leads to burnout and denial
- Optimal Zone motivation works for the long-haul
  - \* Tap into love, creativity and curiosity
  - \* Create future-pull with a clear sense of the opportunities



# AoE/Modernist Dysfunctions

- Motivations based on fear, greed and the need for control are all exploitations of our traumas
- Dependence on such motivations keeps the culture dysfunctional and stunted
- The result is the Polycrisis

# Savvy Take-aways

- Be motivated by what you want, not what you don't want; the practical pathway can be the same, the framing is different
- Base your motivations, for yourself and others, in Optimal Zone qualities – love, creativity, curiosity and future-pull
- Learn to recognize trauma-based motivations, keep their insights, translate into Optimal Zone qualities
- Keep reframing and envisioning until you've replaced as many trauma-based motivations with Optimal Zone motivations as you can

# Coming Up

- Skillful with diverse modes of cognition  
(Nov 16)
- Adept at the new strategy for success  
(Nov 23)
- Weaving the threads of the 3 capacities  
(Nov 30)

# Want To Go Deeper?

*Bright Future Now* Jan/Feb '22

Community-building and self-study  
begin as soon as you register

Experientials and group interaction  
start Jan 8 '22

Early-Bird registration ends Nov 27

[context.org](http://context.org)