



# **Vulnerability, Fragility and the Potential for Change**

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**„V° ENCONTRO DAS SECÇÕES”**

**Sociedade Portuguesa de  
Psiquiatria e Saude Mental**

**Peniche 22.3.2024**

# Agenda

- Definition and history of fragility and vulnerability
- Fragility and self-consciousness
- Humiliation and depression / shame: the fragile collusion of self-image and ideal image
- Interdependence in psychotherapy
- The potential of fragility and vulnerability

# Human Fragility and Vulnerability

- **Fragility** (from lat. fragilis = fragile) refers to the physical or mental danger of an inner break-up, splitting or dissociation.

*Used as a term for a fundamental human problem since Roman antiquity and Middle ages (e.g. Seneca, Cicero, Augustine, Montaigne). Ancient Greece knew only weakness.*

- **Vulnerability** (from lat. vulnus = wound) refers to a danger from the outside, physically as a result of accidents and mentally as an interpersonal consequence of bad treatment.

*A term only recently (since 1980) used in medicine and psychology.*

# Fragility in history of philosophy and theology

For **Seneca and other Stoics**, fragility is a fundamental aspect of human beings, not just a psychological characteristic.

Only those who recognize their own fragility (e.g. mortality) can build an inner attitude (an "inner acropolis") against it so as not to be afraid.

For the **Church Fathers** (e.g. St Augustine), moral fragility took centre stage.

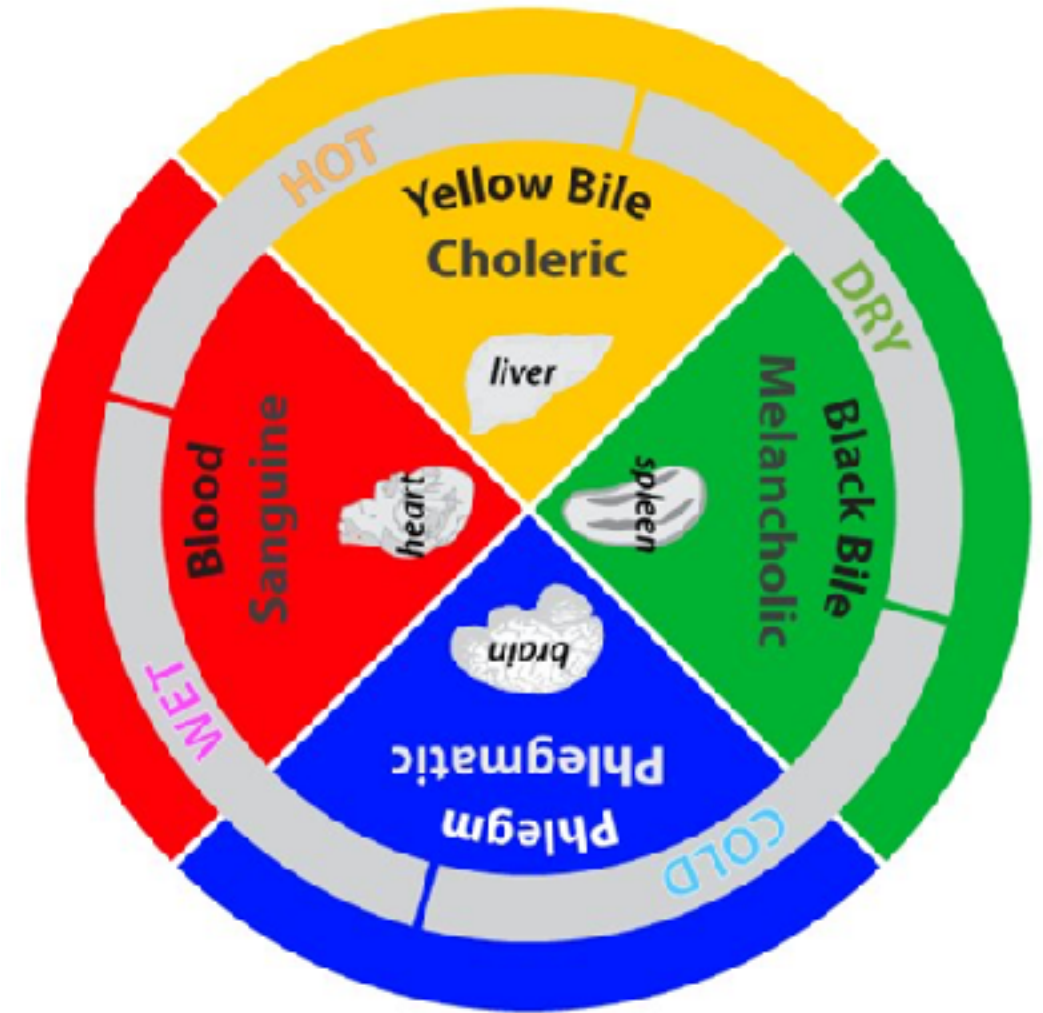
People can perish morally, but they can also endeavour to act ethically in the knowledge of their fragility.

## Fragility in medical history

Physiological and psychological imbalances can cause fragility for fractures and infirmities.

In the medicine of Greco-Roman antiquity and the Middle Ages, the cause of mental disorders was the imbalance of bodily fluids.

Melancholia was a disbalance of black bile.

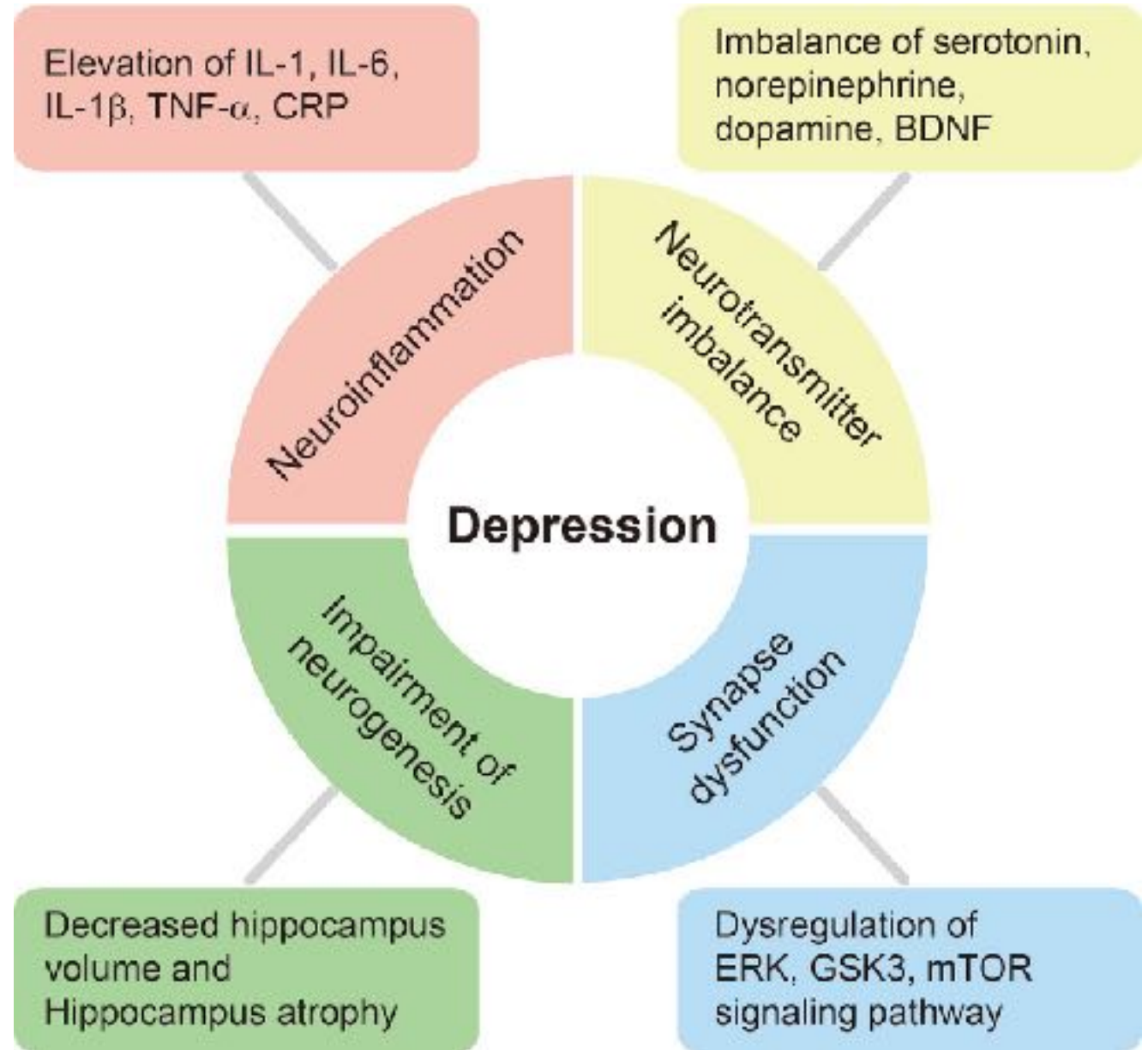


# Fragility in modern medicine

E.g. imbalance of neurotransmitters in depression (Janowsky's imbalance hypotheses):

*Low serotonin level*

*(High acetylcholine level)*



# Psychological Fragility and Vulnerability

Psychological **fragility** means a threat to psychological cohesion, a fragility of the person as a whole.

Fragility is an internal dynamism. Especially fragile are identity, coherence, vitality and activity of a person.

Psychological **vulnerability** is the risk of being hurt by other people. Externally vulnerable are the ego boundaries, with a potential threat to inner balance.

Fragility  
(split, dissociation)  
in  
psychiatry and  
psychotherapy

- Classical psychiatry was strongly **inward-looking**. It was mainly based on physical or mental problems (e.g. schizophrenia, endogenous depression).
  - Traditional psychoanalysis also attributed neurotic disorders primarily to inner conflicts (between ego, id and superego).
- Current psychiatry is increasingly using **external stresses and injuries** to explain psychiatric disorders. Recently, dissociative disorders (as a disorder of fragility) have been associated with traumatization or serious injury.
  - Affective and anxiety disorders are also increasingly attributed to biographical and situational influences.



Specific distress can cause various mental and emotional disorders

**Humiliation** is one of the most common causes of depression.

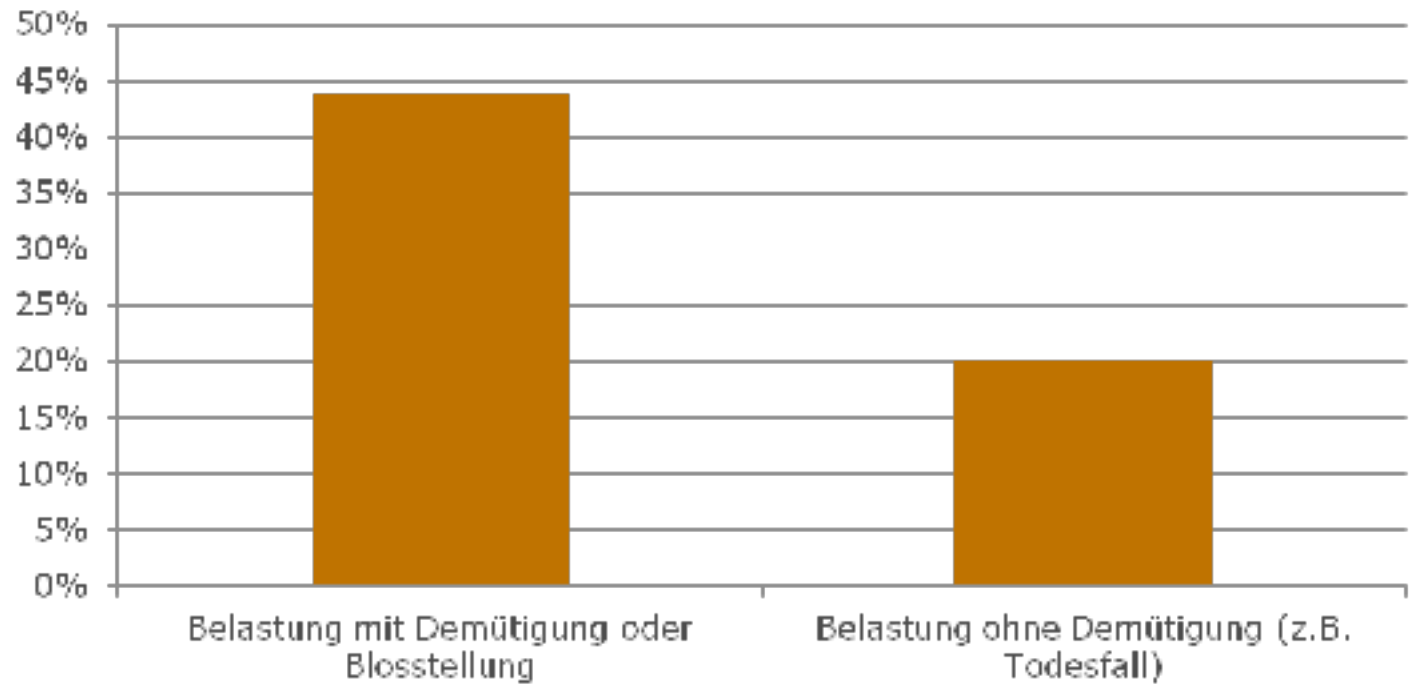
Brown 2004, Kendler et al. 2003, Hell 2019



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Rate of depression depending on different stress (Brown et al. 2009)

### Depressionsrate nach Belastung



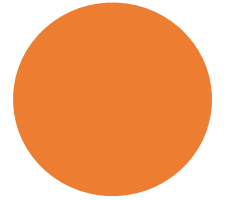
**Insult as stress**

**Loss as stress**

# Fragility and self-consciousness

Psychological fragility is **related to reflexive self-consciousness**. Because people (from the age of 2/3 y., mirror-stadium) have a conscious idea of themselves and develop a self-image or self-concept, they can also come into conflict with themselves.

For example, they may desperately not want to be the way they imagine themselves to be. They may be questioned in their self-images or humiliated by other people, etc.



# Critical components of the self

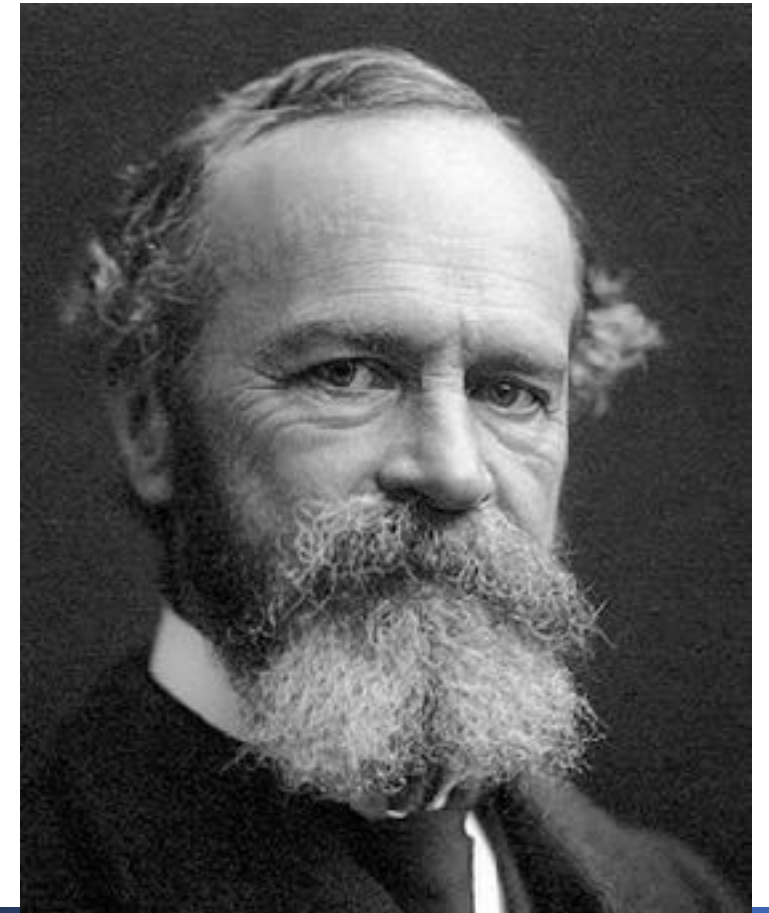
(James, 1892)

- Subjective self (the 'I')
  - Self as 'knower'
- Objective self (the 'me')
  - Self as 'known'

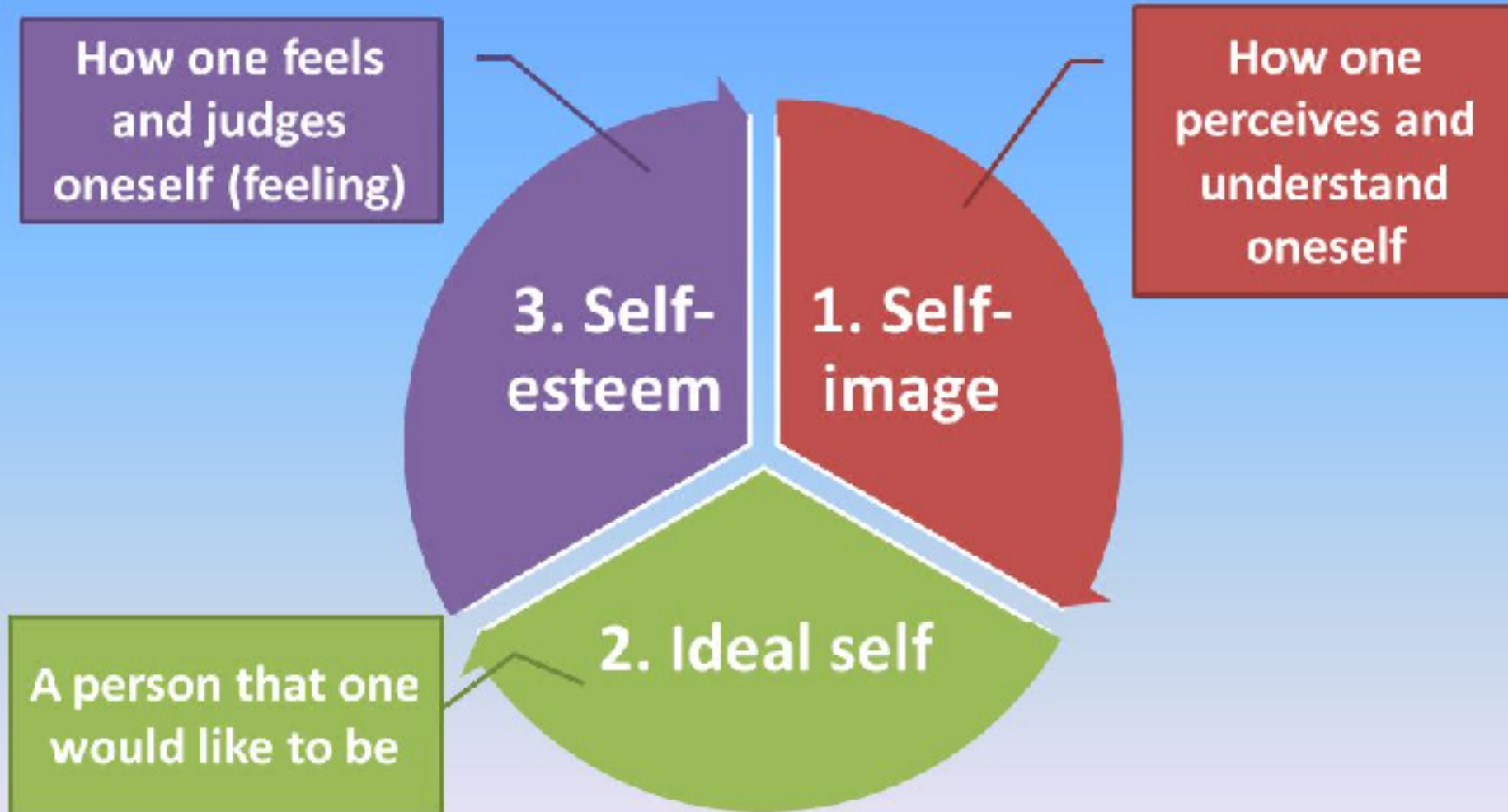
*Whenever I think about something, "I" am always the subject of consciousness, and one of the things I may be consciously attending to is "me"* (Franzoi, 2000, p. 39).

William James

1842 -1910



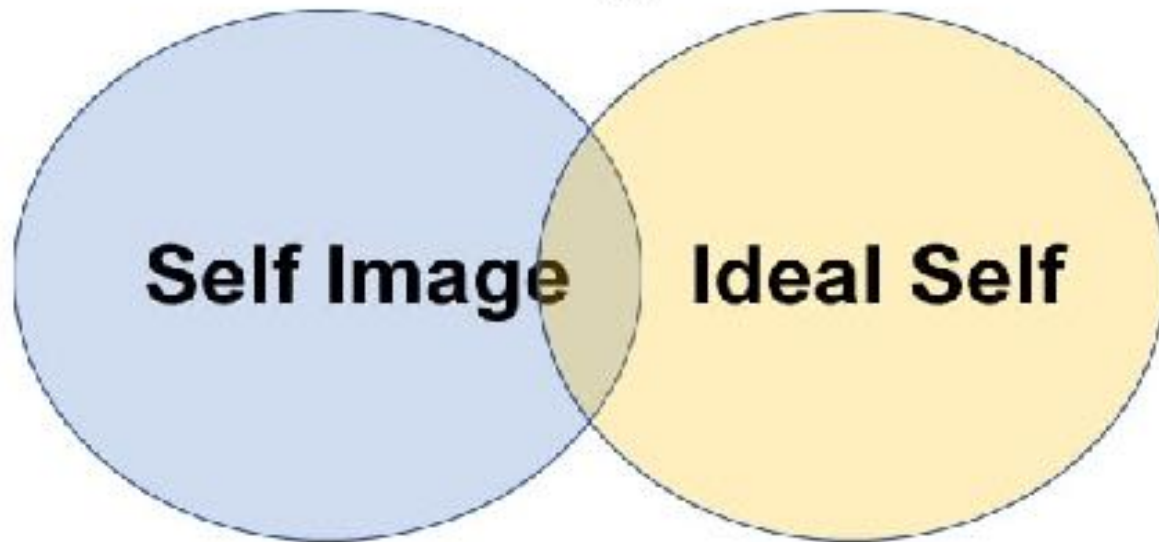
# Self-concept – 3 dimensions



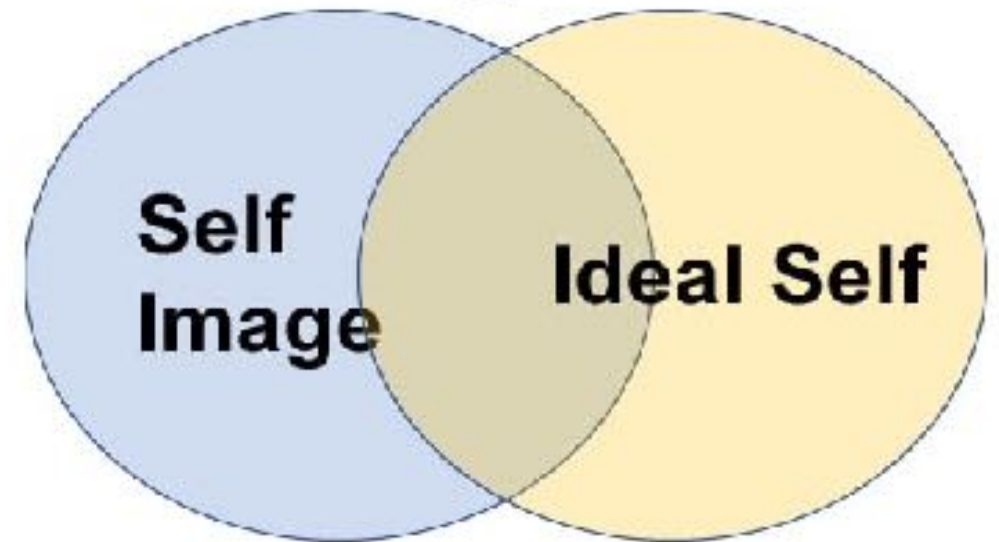
# Fragile Collusion of Self Image and Ideal Self

Shame is a sensor of this kind of fragility

## Incongruence



## Congruence



# Shame – a difficult but important feeling

- All too often, *the feeling of shame is still seen as the cause of a problem rather than an indicator of an existing problem* (e.g. loss of self-respect or loss of respect from others). People therefore often confuse cause and consequence and treat the symptom instead of the cause.
- *When shame is warded off, the person lacks a clue to clarify a stressful situation.* The defense against moderate shame can exacerbate a psychological problem and, in extremis, lead to problems of narcissistic regression or even substance dependencies.

# Shame in therapy



- An ***empathetic and mindful approach to shame*** is extremely important in therapy. It is often not the shame that needs to be questioned, but what someone is ashamed of (e.g. adopted norms and stigmas).
- Psychotherapy often proceeds along the path of shame.
- ***Mild or moderate shame can indicate a cautious approach ... to an important issue.***



# The Potential of Fragility

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Fragility is not only a danger, but also a prerequisite for flexibility and creativity. The opposite of fragility is not weakness, but “infragility”. (You can be both strong and fragile).

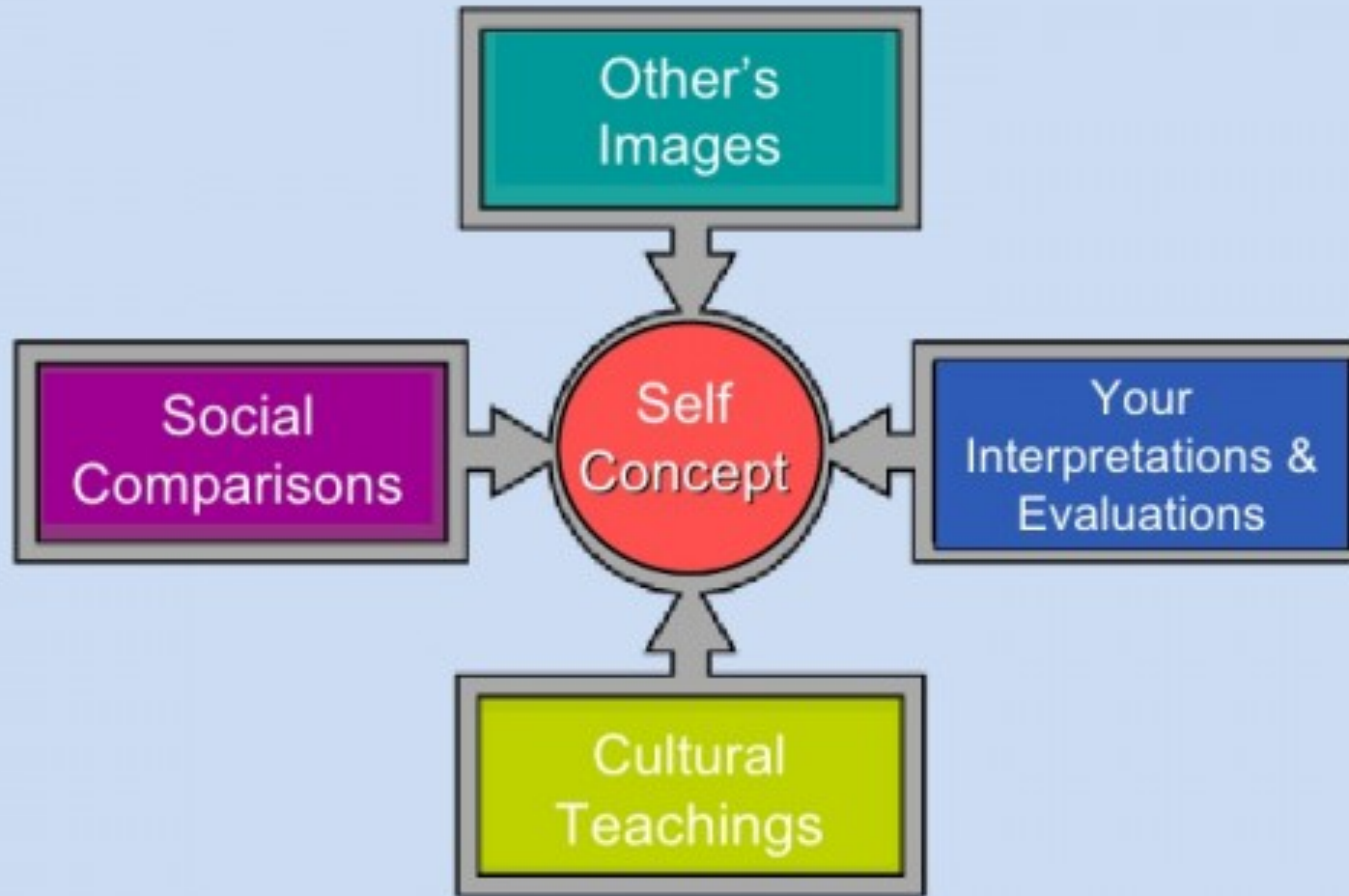
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“Infragility” (not being fragile) can contribute to a blockage of affective and cognitive dynamics (e.g. in obsessive-compulsive disorder or chronic melancholic depression).

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Psychotherapy does not aim to eliminate the patient's fragility. It has to favourably influence its effects. Resilience is not resistance but acceptance.

## Sources of Self Concept



# Are autonomy and dependence mutually exclusive?



## Meaning of Autonomy and Dependency

- Autonomy is the capacity to function independently and be free from the undue influence of others
  - Self-Reliance, Self-Governance
  - Separation/Individuation
  - At the extreme, becomes counterdependence
- Dependency is extent to which one requires others to function effectively
  - “Physical” (money, food, shelter)
  - Emotional Support and Approval
  - At extreme, becomes enmeshed/self-other fusion



## Secure

- Warm & Caring
- Trusting & Forgiving
- Good boundaries
- Manage emotions well
- Responsive
- Honest & open

## Anxious

- Relationship insecurities
- Fear of abandonment
- Lack boundaries
- Mood fluctuation
- Highly sensitive
- Overly accomodating

# Attachment Styles

[www.parahcounseling.com](http://www.parahcounseling.com)

## Avoidant

- Fear of closeness
- Distant & Withdrawn
- Avoid conflict
- Extreme Independence
- Emotionally distant
- Unresponsive to partner
- Logical

## Disorganized

- Unable to self regulate
- Find intimacy & trust difficult
- Tendency to dissociate
- Lack of empathy
- Wants closeness but fearful of others.

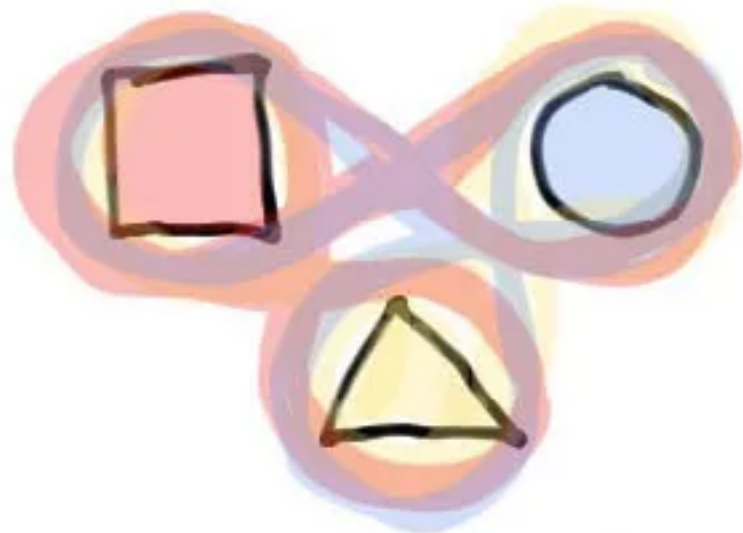
# THREE PHASES OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT



• DEPENDENCE

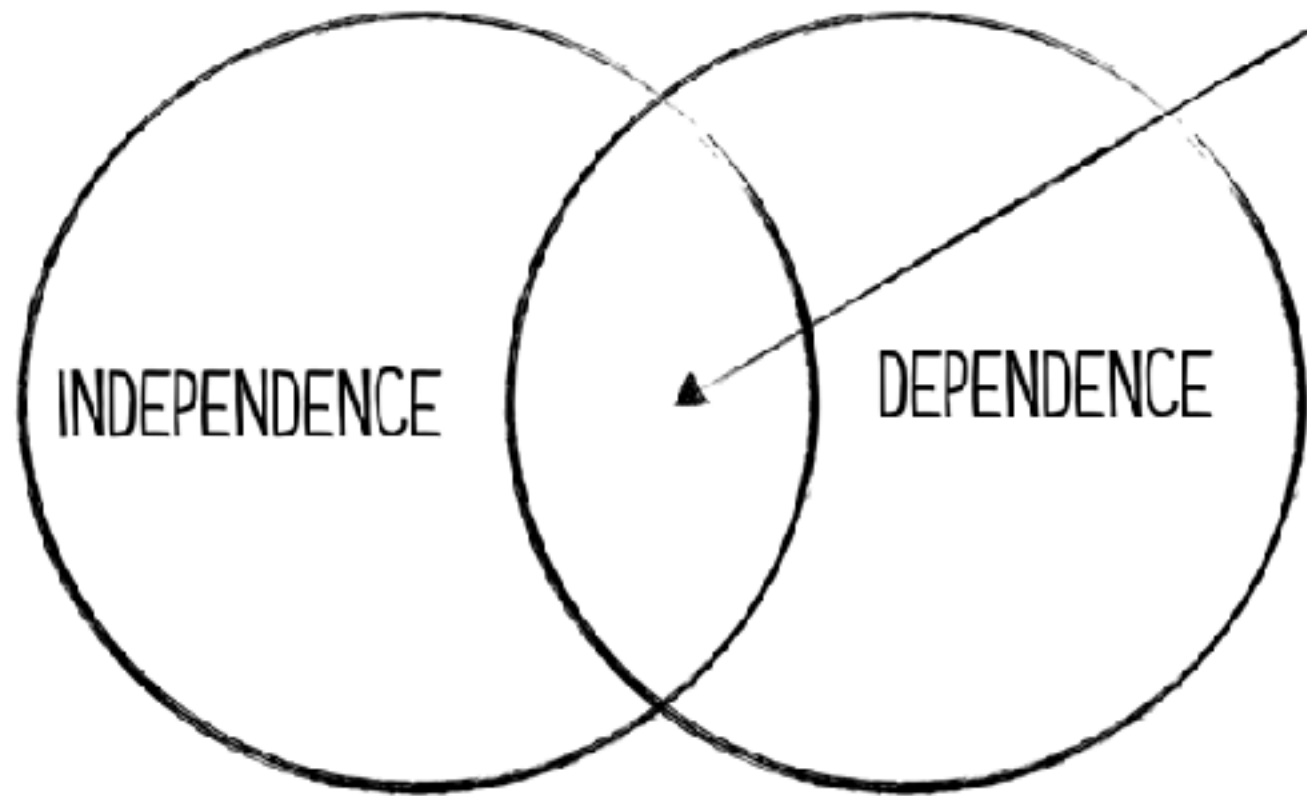


• INDEPENDENCE



• INTERDEPENDENCE

# INTERDEPENDENCE

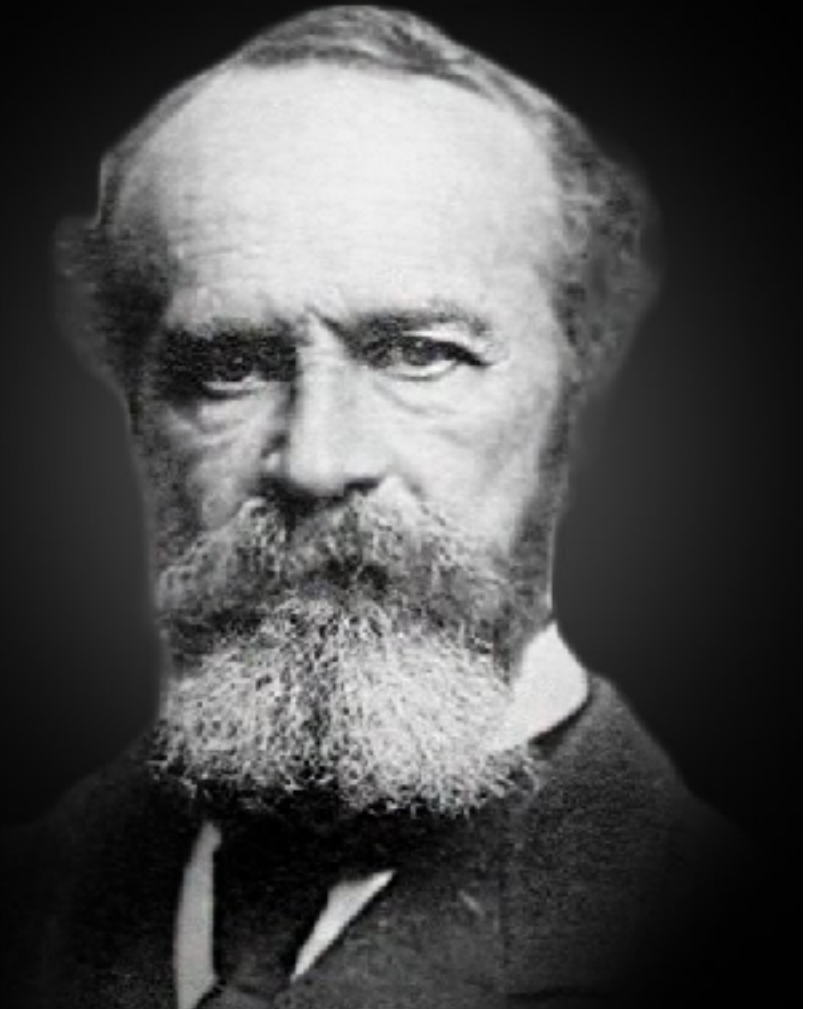


# Interdependence in psychotherapy

- A major shift in psychotherapy in recent years has been **towards greater mutuality**: therapist and patient are more equal partners in the therapeutic process. The patient is no longer primarily dependent, the therapist independent, especially in progressive stages of therapy.
- What the therapist does in terms of methods does not exist apart from the relationship. In other words, "**treatment methods are relational acts**".
- A meta-analysis of 21 studies (Hill et al., 2018):  
“When therapists commit to being a partner, collaborate on the patient's goals and disclose their feeling about the patient and the ongoing relationship, the most common subsequent processes were enhanced therapy relationship, improved client mental health functioning, gains in insight, and overall helpfulness.”
- This suggests that **therapist self-disclosure and immediacy** are most often followed by positive and beneficial therapeutic processes.

The deepest principle  
in **human nature** is the craving  
to **be appreciated.**

*William James*





# Fragile persons in therapy

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- Interdependence, which also involves dependence, makes us **vulnerable** to rejection, denial and especially to exposure and insults.
- People who have been psychologically injured and feel fragile experience their dependency in a particularly negative way. To counteract this experience, they want above all **to be accepted as an autonomous person**. They expect the therapist to put himself or herself in their shoes in order to understand them, but not to judge them. They need **recognition and trust**.
- Only when they have gained trust can they allow their fragile situation to be examined from another perspective.

# So-called narcissistic insult

- So-called narcissistic insults can be understood in the context of people's **basic need for recognition**. Depending on one's biography and living conditions, disregard and humiliation can affect a person particularly deeply.
- Narcissistic insult or suffering should be understood as a **psychosocial problem**. It is related to human fragility and interdependence. As an individualised term, it falls short.
- In my perception, therapeutic treatment of psychologically injured people is made easier if the **focus is not on self-centeredness but on psychosocial interdependence**.

# Dangers of psychological insults in the long run

- **"Alarm mode"** with constant mental and physical tension, *passive aggression*
- *Withdrawal, isolation, bitterness*

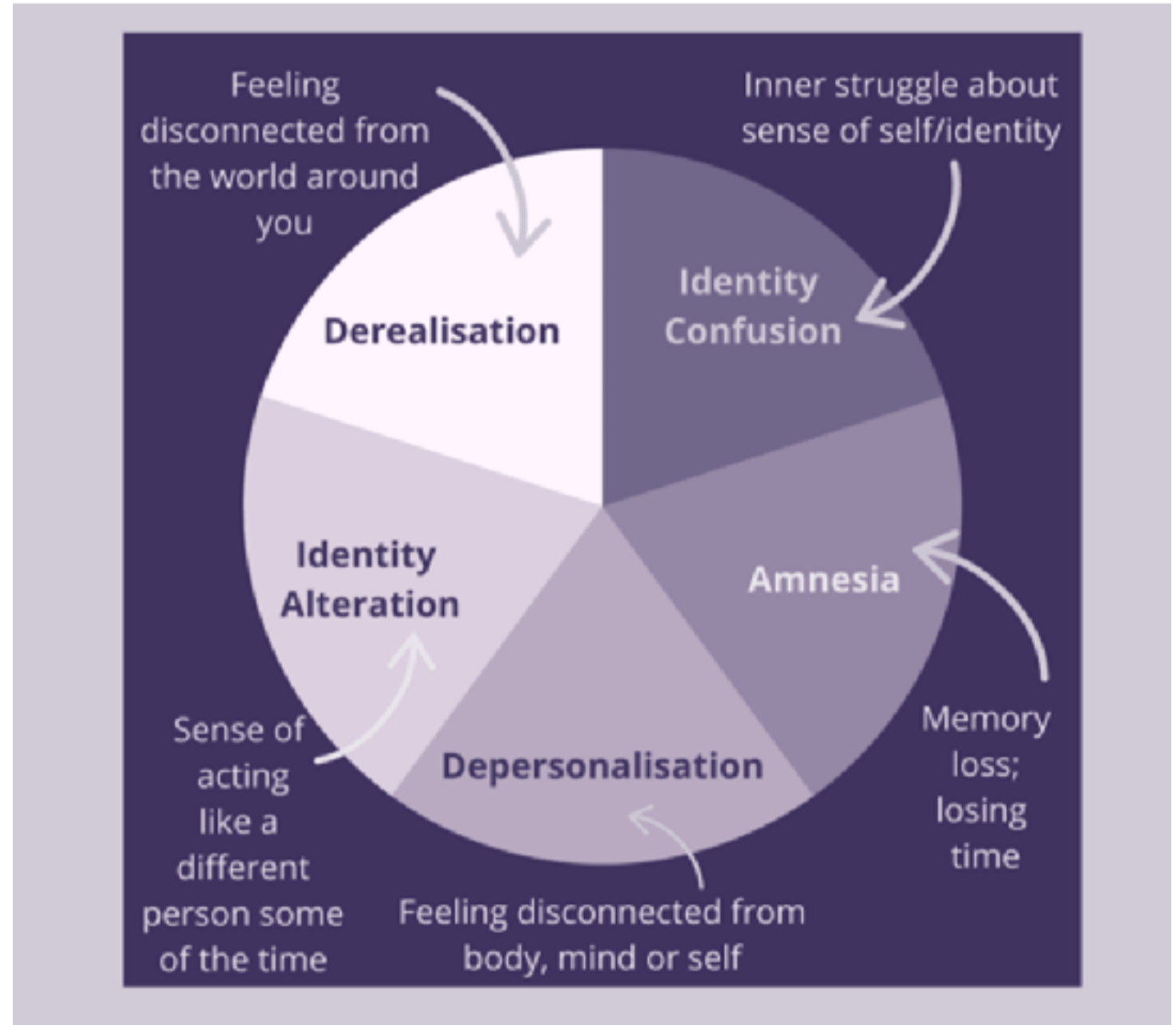
- **Cold rage**, *revenge fantasies*
- **Mutual insults** ("*frustration-insult spiral*")
- *Illnesses, e.g. depression*



# Severe psychological consequences of trauma

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- Human fragility has been researched in particular as a trauma-related disorder.
- It can lead to very different disorders with varying degrees of severity.



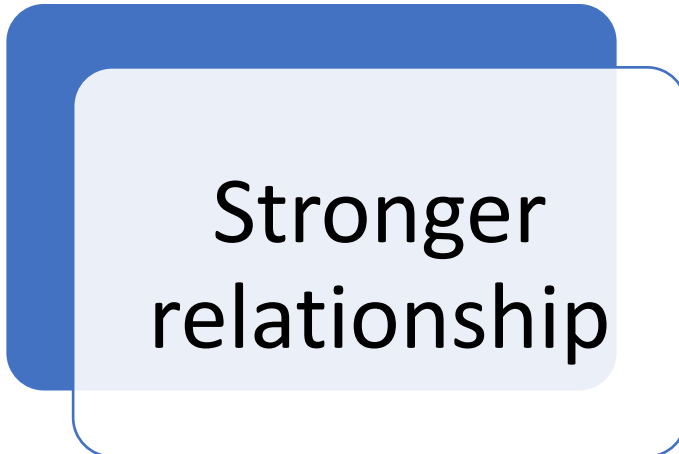


**Acceptance of vulnerability and fragility is difficult**, but can be important. It is precarious because it opens up and enables injury and trauma.

But it is a **condition for empathy and trust**. The courage, in a considered manner to be vulnerable and fragile, contributes to:



Improved self  
acceptance



Stronger  
relationship



Bigger  
resilience

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Thank you very much for  
your interest and  
participation

Keep in stable fragility

