



# Embedding a Culture of Kindness in the University Curriculum

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# Background

- ▶ Around three-quarters of adults with a mental illness in the UK **first experience symptoms before the age of 25** (Thorley, 2017)
- ▶ There has been **an increase over time in the prevalence of mental disorder in 5 to 15 year olds** (9.7% in 1999 to 11.2% in 2017) (NHS Digital, 2018)
- ▶ In 2017, **64 suicides of 15 to 24-year-olds were registered in Scotland** (Information Services Division, 2017)
- ▶ In 2017, **one in eight (12.8%) 5 to 19-year-olds in England had at least one mental disorder** (NHS Digital, 2018)



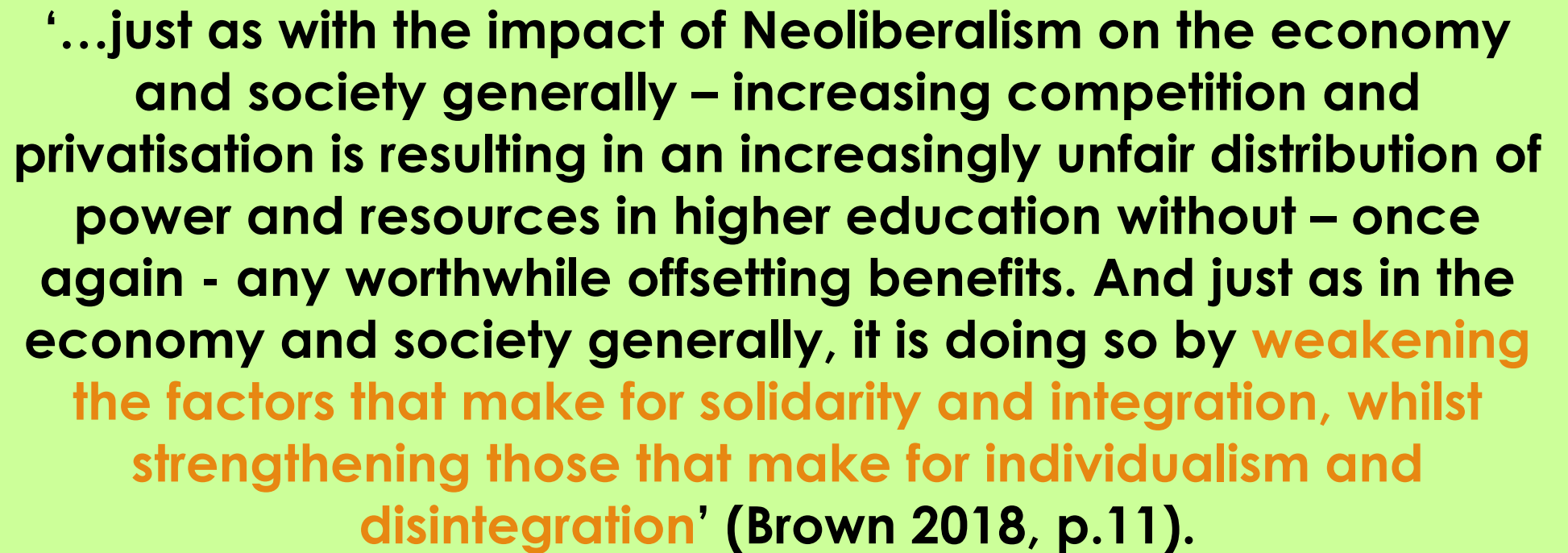


# Background

- ▶ **15,395** UK-domiciled first-year students disclosed a mental health condition in 2015/16 – almost five times the number in 2006/07 (Thorley, 2017)
- ▶ **94%** of universities (n= 26) report an **increase in demand** for counselling services, while 61% report an increase of over 25% in the last 5 years (Thorley, 2017)



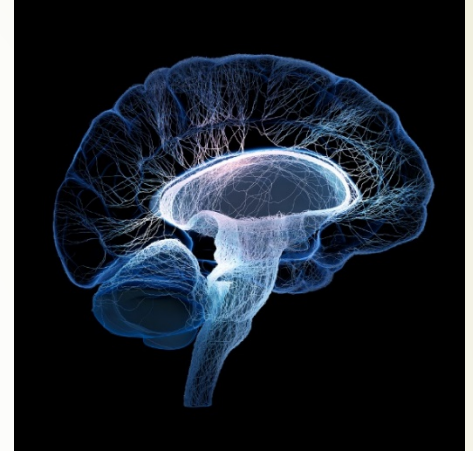
# Background

- ▶ **The marketisation of higher education** (HE) has eroded the premise that universities ought to be 'caregiving organisations' that promote the practice of compassionate pedagogy (Waddington, 2018)
- ▶ The **strong emphasis on competition and striving for prestige and dominance in HE cultures** has been identified by researchers to stifle the conditions in which compassionate pedagogy can survive and flourish (Bergquist & Pawlack, 2008)




**‘...just as with the impact of Neoliberalism on the economy and society generally – increasing competition and privatisation is resulting in an increasingly unfair distribution of power and resources in higher education without – once again - any worthwhile offsetting benefits. And just as in the economy and society generally, it is doing so by **weakening the factors that make for solidarity and integration, whilst strengthening those that make for individualism and disintegration**’ (Brown 2018, p.11).**

# The Neuroscience of Learning

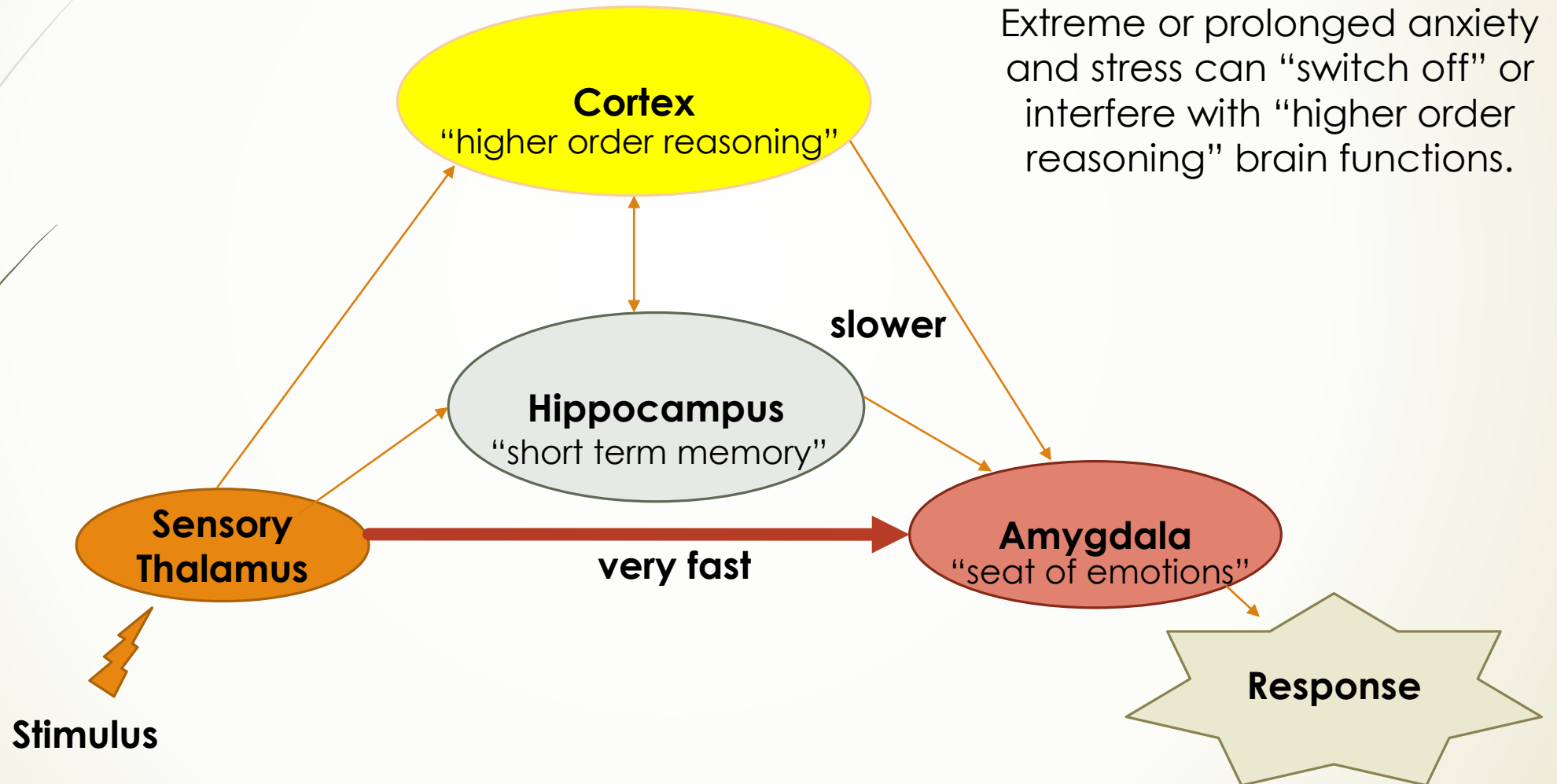


- **Learning** is essentially a process of **rewiring the brain**. The more **a neural pathway is followed through repetition**, the more engrained it becomes. As students learn, they create new neural pathways.
- **Neural plasticity** reflects the ability of neurons to change their structure and relationships to one another in **an experience-dependent manner according to environmental demands** (Buonomano & Merzenich, 1998; Trojan & Pokorny, 1999)

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- The brain is a social organ innately **designed to learn through shared experiences**
  - Although **many lecturers consciously focus on what they are teaching**, the evolution and structure of the brain suggests that **who students are may be far more important** to their learning
  - People engage more effectively in brain-altering learning when they are **face-to-face, mind-to-mind, and heart-to-heart**
  - From a neurobiological perspective, **the role of the mentor/educator in adult brain development may be likened to the role of a primary nurturer in a child's brain development**
  - Both offer a **safe haven**, emotional attunement, and a scaffold to support the learning process

'Neuroscience and Adult Learning', Cozolino & Sprokay (2006)

# Between Stimulus and Response



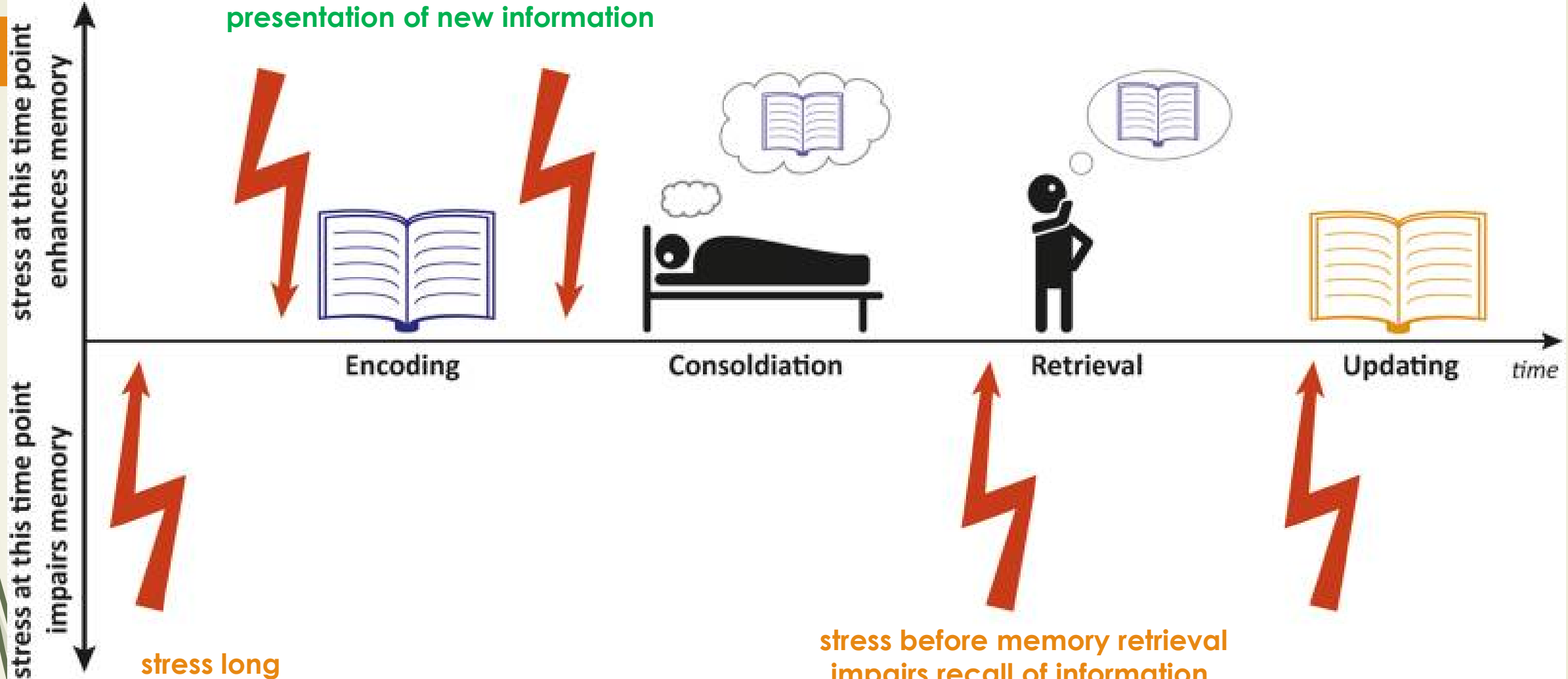




# Stress and Learning

- ▶ Stress in the learning environment, negative memories from past learning experiences, or problems in a student's life can truncate learning ability (Cozolino & Sprokay, 2006)
- ▶ Studies demonstrate that stress changes the nature or quality of memories (Vogel & Schwabe, 2016)
- ▶ **Prolonged psychological distress impacts students' capacity to learn** and academic participation by impairing information processing, attention, memory, decision-making, motivation, and impulse control (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Marin et al., 2011)

stress just before or after presentation of new information



stress long before encoding

stress before memory retrieval impairs recall of information

integration of new information relating to prior knowledge impaired by stress



# The Principals Of Learning That Enhance Neural Plasticity

- ▶ **A safe and trusting relationship with an attuned other**
  - activates neural circuitry, priming it for neuroplastic processes
- ▶ **Maintenance of a moderate level of arousal**
  - maximises the biochemical processes that drive the protein synthesis necessary for modifying neural structures
- ▶ **Activation of both thinking and feeling**
  - allows executive brain systems to coordinate their activity in support of learning
- ▶ **A language of self-reflection**
  - plays an important role in integrating multiple processing networks of memory, affect regulation, and organisation
- ▶ **Co-construction of narrative that reflects a positive and optimistic self**
  - support memory function and serve as a guide for future behavior

Cozolino & Sprokay (2006)

# Kindness



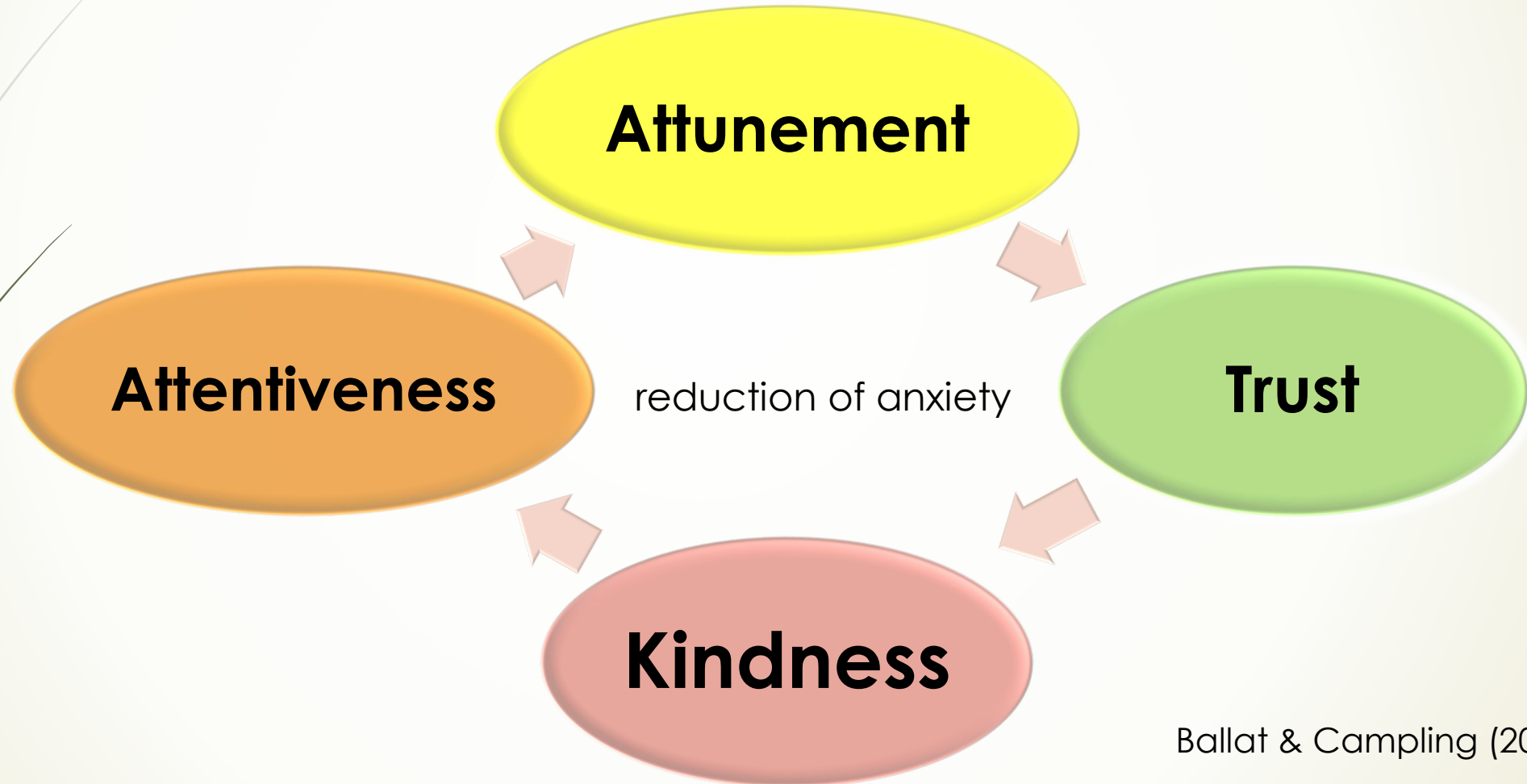
- ▶ The **ability to bear the vulnerability of others**, and therefore of oneself (Phillips & Taylor, 2009)
- ▶ The **recognition of being of the same nature as others, being of a kind, in kinship** (Campling, 2015)
- ▶ People are motivated by that recognition **to cooperate, to treat others as members of the family, to be generous and thoughtful**



# Kindness and the Brain

- ▶ **Acts of kindness nourish our brains** - by triggering the release of endorphins and oxytocin (the chemical particularly responsible for the feeling of closeness) (Ballat & Campling, 2011)
- ▶ **Even imagining kindness activates the soothing and affiliation component of the emotional regulation system of the brain** (Gilbert, 2013)

# Virtuous Cycle of Kindness



Ballat & Campling (2011)



# Kindness in Schools

- ▶ Johansson *et al.*'s (2007) Swedish study of adolescent girls' and boys' perceptions of mental health found that when their respondents spoke of the relevance of school to mental health **they focused on their relationships with people in the school setting**
- ▶ **Good teachers were described as possessing such attributes as kindness, patience, or as being helpful and caring**
- ▶ Good teachers were characterised by their relationships with pupils, rather than by their knowledge or teaching skills



# Kindness and Compassion Enhance Resilience and Learning

- ▶ A supportive and caring relationship with another person **activates neural circuitry, priming it for neuroplastic processes** (Cozolino & Sprokay, 2006)
- ▶ The work of compassion, through **the gestures of emotional support and resulting sense of connection between one another, help people face the difficult**, without being overwhelmed (Haynes & Macleod-Johnstone, 2017)




# Kindness Reduces Anxiety

- ▶ A study conducted at the Iowa State University tested the efficacy of three 12-min walking contemplations with 496 students against a control condition (Gentile, Sweet, & He, 2019)
- ▶ The first experimental condition involved one wishing other people well whom one sees - Loving-Kindness (LK)
- ▶ Comparing the LK and Control conditions on anxiety and well-being indicators, **those who had wished others well showed lower state anxiety and higher state happiness**
- ▶ Comparing the LK and control conditions on social connection indicators, those in the **LK condition showed higher state empathy, higher feelings of caring and higher feelings of connectedness**



# Conclusions

- ▶ if our students learn to **embed a culture of kindness and (self)compassion** in their life-style, they will learn better, and become **life-long learners**
  - ▶ if our students learn to embed a culture of kindness and (self)compassion in their life-style, they will be **more resilient in the work place** and more employable
  - ▶ to help students embed a culture of kindness and (self)compassion, **lecturers should first embed this** in their own lives & in university culture, lead by example
  - ▶ **government policy** may influence how easily academics are able to embed a culture of kindness and (self-)compassion in their own working lives
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