

# CHAIR WORK

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*The following slides were used to support clinicians during a research trial*

# MULTIPLE-SELVES CHAIRWORK IN COMPASSION FOCUSED THERAPY

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*With thanks to Prof. Paul Gilbert and  
everyone at the Compassionate Mind  
Foundation*



# Multiple selves chairwork

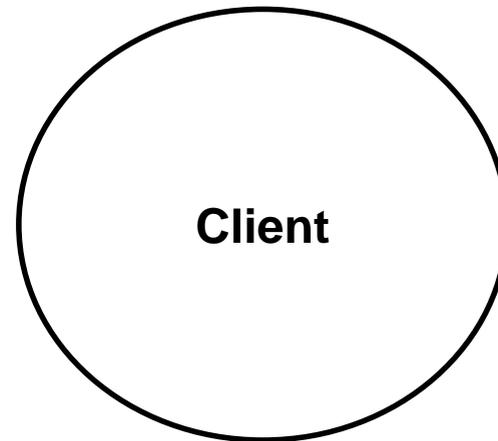
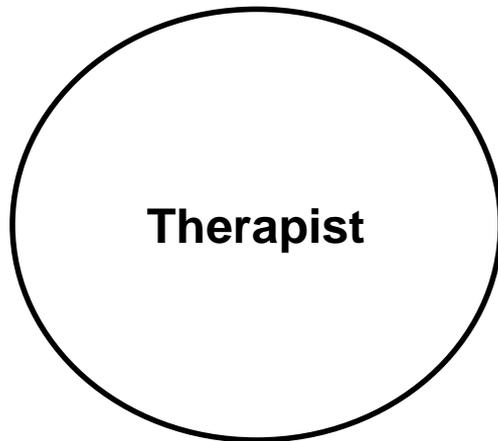
(Gilbert, 2010; Kolts, 2016)

## Aims:

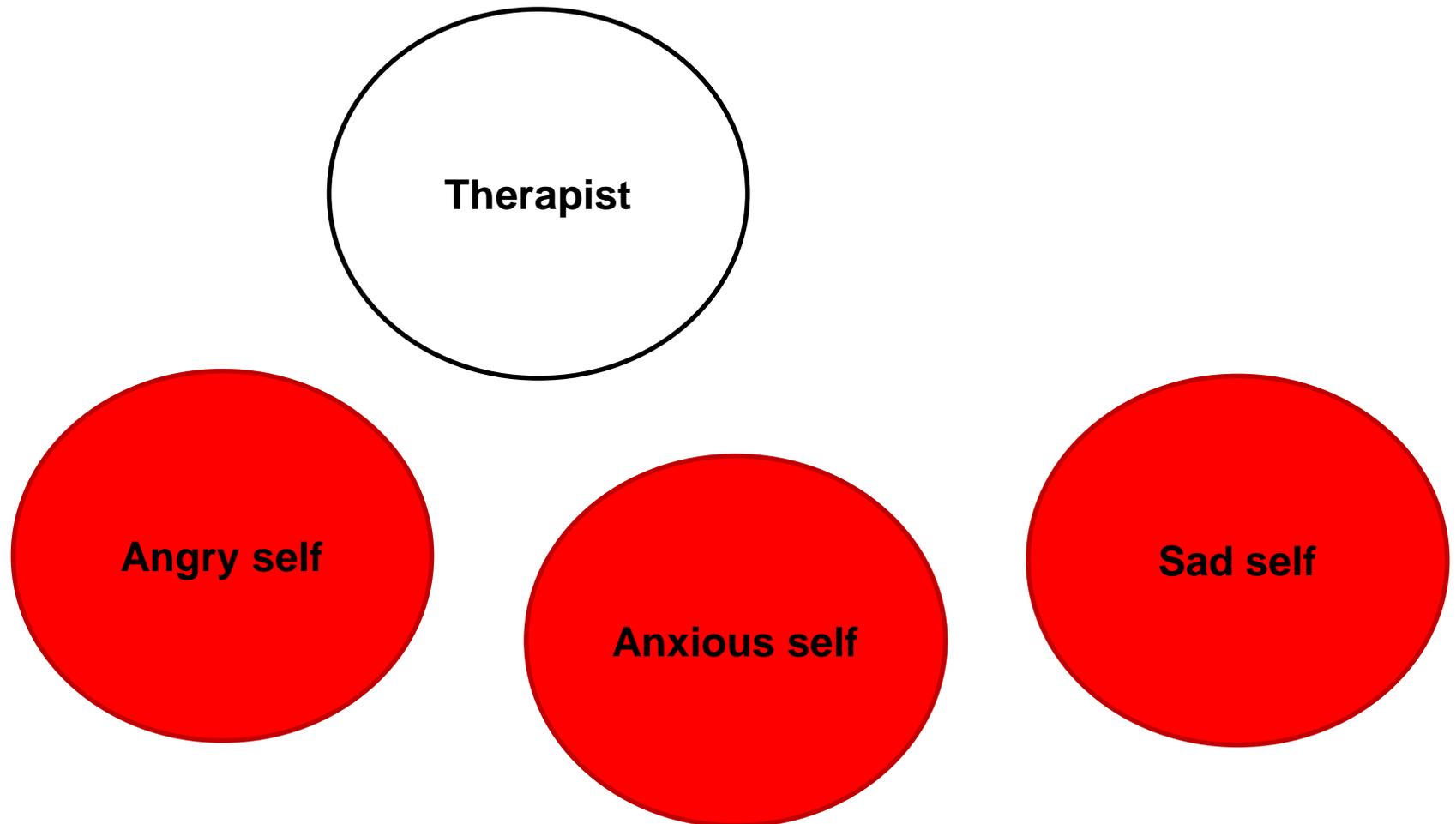
- Identify and differentiate threat emotions
- Explore how they shape the mind and impact the body in different ways (insight into evolved function of emotions)
- Explore blocks and interactions between threat emotions
- Develop confidence in shifting in and out of different emotional experiences and perspectives
- Developing and expressing compassion for different emotional selves: for emotional regulation; to integrate avoided aspects of the self
- Embodying and experiencing the compassionate self

# Multiple selves: socialisation

**Step 1:** Identify a recent distressing (interpersonal) situation



**Step 2:** The client is supported to explore how he/she experiences the difficult situation from each emotional self (one-by-one)



# Step 2: focus for each emotional self

*Bring to mind the difficult situation*

**Thoughts**

**Body state/feelings**

**Behaviour and action**

**Memories**

**Best outcome/what does the self really want**

*(Some CFT therapists start with body feelings and then move to thoughts)*

## Step 2: example questions

### **Thoughts:**

*As angry self- what do you think about the situation? If your angry self had a voice what would you say? Angry self- what is going on in your mind? What aggressive thoughts or fantasies are you having?*

### **Body state/feelings:**

*Where are you in the body angry self? Where is that in the body? How are you moving the body angry self? What is your angry facial expression- could you do that now? And your voice tone? If this anger was to build and build (turning it up to 10/10) where would it go in the body?*

### **Behaviour and action**

*What do you want to do angry self? If you had complete control, what would you do? If you weren't worried about the outcome- how would you act? What do you feel like doing?*

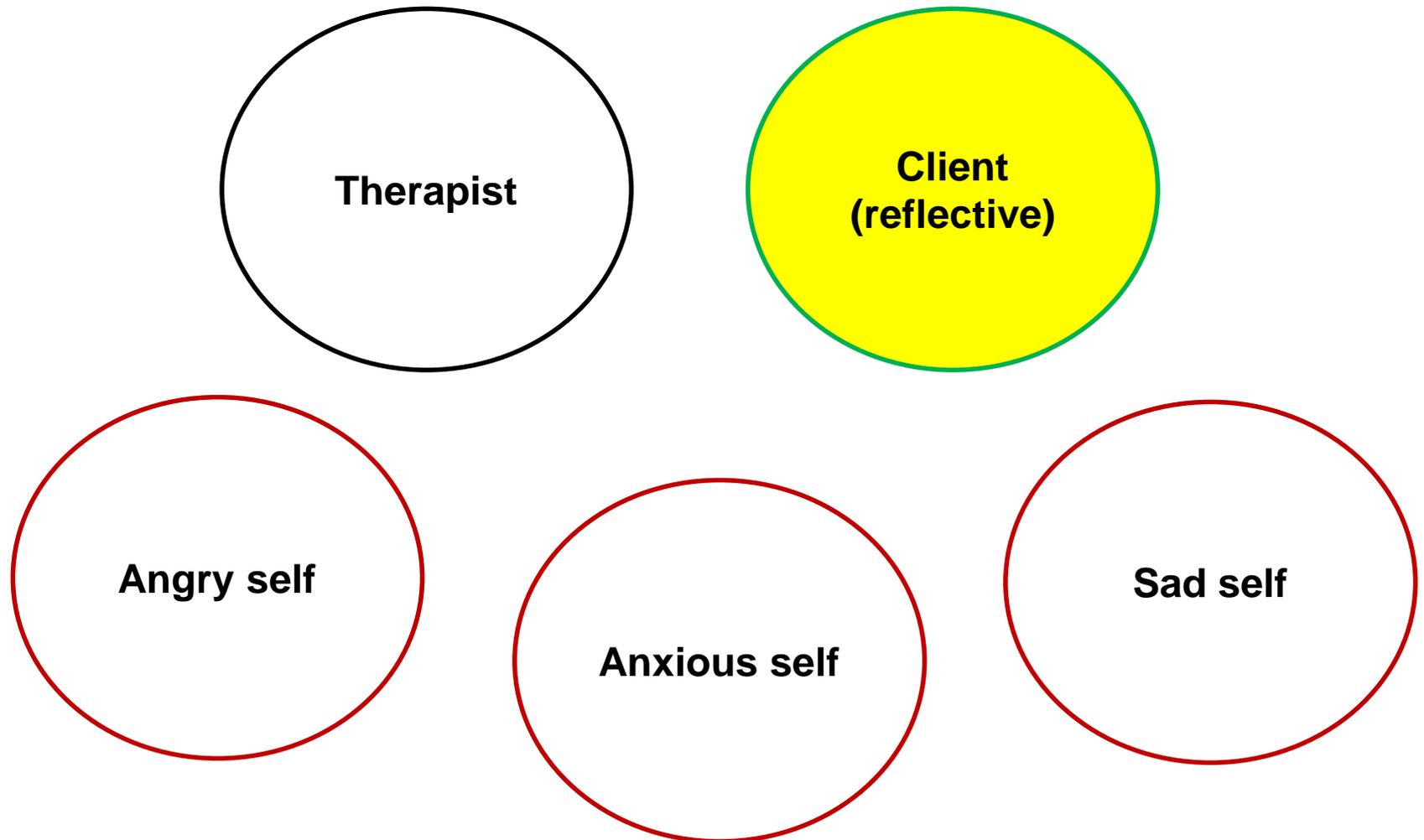
## **Memories**

*When anger is in your body like this, and you are having these angry thoughts, what memories come to mind? Are there any memories that you associate with feeling angry that stand out for you? Holding in mind this angry part- what memories arise? How far does this go back in time? To childhood?*

## **Best outcome/what does the self really want**

*Angry self- what do you see as a good outcome to this situation? What do you want to happen? What would help you settle? What do you need?*

**Step 3:** In a separate chair reflect on the process and the conflict between emotional selves



# Step 3: reflection questions

## **Start with general questions:**

*Having a chance to stand back- what do you make of your experiences? Did anything stand out?*

## **Explore differences between emotional 'patterns' and their different 'motives':**

*What sense do you make of these different emotional parts of you? What were the difference between them? Why might that be? Why might the anxious self seek reassurance?*

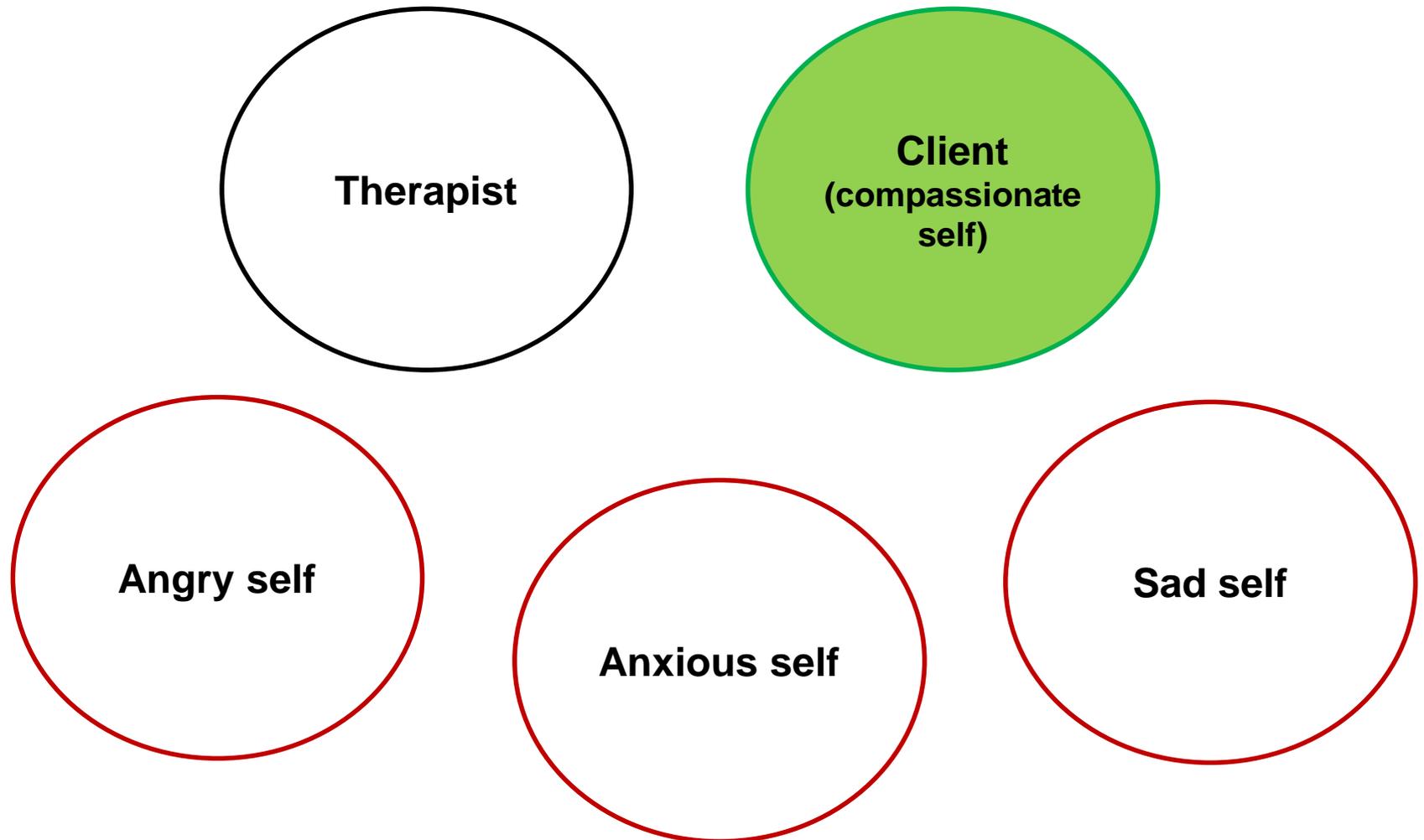
## **Explore and highlight conflict:**

*What does the angry self think and feel towards the anxious self? What would angry self like to do with anxious self? Etc..*

## **Reflect on individual patterns:**

*What emotional self was easiest for you? Which was the most difficult? Which other self did you notice tried to turn up when you were your sad self? Is that a pattern for you?*

**Step 4:** Client reviews the difficulty (and the mind of the other) as the compassionate self



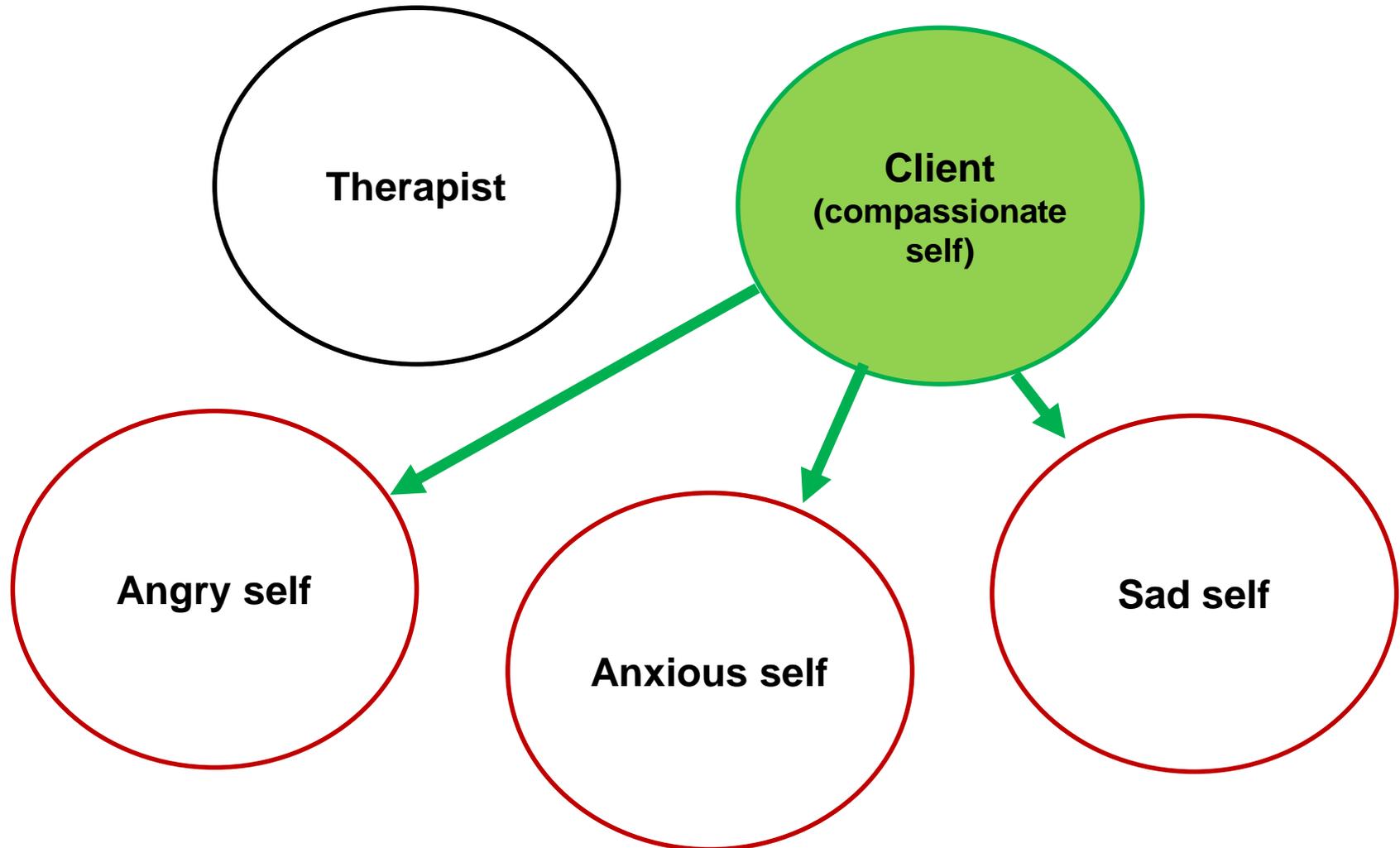
## Step 4: access/explore the compassionate self

Access the compassionate self (soothing-rhythm breathing, facial expression, posture; help the client access wisdom, strength and commitment to work with emotions)

Explore the **thoughts, body-state, behaviours, memories, best outcome** for the compassionate self with regard to the situation

When working through thoughts include: empathy for and mentalization of the other person (*‘from your compassionate self do you have any thoughts about what might be happening in the mind of the other person? What might be causing them to act in that way?’*), acknowledgement of own role in argument and consequences of own behaviour (*‘we-ness’*)

**Step 5:** Client relates compassionately to emotional selves and understands their reaction



# Step 5: compassion for emotions

Support the client's compassionate self to address each emotional self:

- Picture the emotional self in the chair

- Identify what is really upsetting or distressing the emotional self, what drives and triggers it, what sits behind it (e.g. *'what is the angry self most concerned about? What has hurt him? What is the biggest threat for him?'*)

- Offer understanding, explore function and aid integration: (*'why does it make sense that this angry self turned up? What role does anger play in us as humans (what would be the problem if we didn't have it)? Why does it make sense that anger is so prominent for you, given your personal history?'*)

- Explore how the compassionate self would like to help the emotional self (e.g. *'how would you most like to help this part of you? How would you like to respond when this pattern occurs?'*)

# Tips for the multiple-selves chair work process



# Exploring the selves: facilitation

(Adapted from Kolts, 2016)

- Provide reassurance that you will guide the client in and out of the exercise
- Begin with the emotion that the client finds easiest to connect with and then proceed to less familiar emotions
- When shifting from one self to another, encourage the client to let go of the 'role'/emotion: take a few breaths, shake the energy off from that emotion
- Offer a 'palate cleanser' between selves (e.g. being playful: 'send the angry self for a cup of tea')
- Reassure clients it is normal if certain emotions are 'sticky' and difficult to shift out of (this can be learnt from)
- Metaphor: compassionate self as captain of the ship

# Reflective or embodied

The exercise can be undertaken from an observer/reflective or embodied/experiencing stance

E.g. '*What does the sad mind think?*' (observer) or '*as sad self what are you thinking?*' (embodied). The 'embodied' option typically involves the use of 'first person' (e.g. '*I am thinking....*')

The embodied stance involves *becoming* and *inhabiting* (both physically and mentally) each self. This is preferable if tolerable.

The client can be shifted to an observer/reflective mode to manage emotional arousal

# External and internal

**Help clients distinguish from an internal and external focus:** e.g. does the client's anxious self focus on their own thoughts and feelings or are they more anxious about how the other person will react/respond?

Patterns can be identified and the client can be encouraged to shift their focus. Ideally, there is a focus on the external.

Particularly watch for anger turning inward as self-criticism, blocking the external expression of anger

# Turning it up

As a therapist, it can be helpful to model each emotion in your language, voice tone, gestures and postures

Extend and amplify the client's words when repeating them:

*'They don't seem to listen to me' = 'You are not fucking listening to me!'*

Coach the client to embody each emotional self, identifying and encouraging changes in their gestures and body-language (highlighting the social communication of their emotional expression)

Playfulness can break down blocks (e.g. self-consciousness)!!!

# Catch the leaks!

Leakage: when one emotional self turns up when working with another (e.g. becoming tearful when angry)

During the exercise, help the client to separate the emotions and return to the focus/stage of the exercise:

e.g. *'we are going to talk to anxious self in a moment, if we could stay with angry self'*

Use leakage for insight:

e.g. *'does this often happen to you when you feel angry, that you get anxious about these angry feelings? Is it difficult to stay focused on what you made you angry?'*

# Focus on process

Use the multiple-selves chair-work as a form of assessment:

- What emotions are dominant (most accessible)?
- What emotions are absent (least accessible)?
- Do other emotions arise when you try to access specific emotions?
- Does the client subtly avoid/dissociate with specific emotions?
- Are some emotions harder to leave than others?
- Emotions have a history: what memory/conditioning is opened when specific emotions are accessed?
- Check for the quality of different emotions: e.g. does anxiety become avoidant or reassurance seeking?

# Additional tips

Encourage clients to act 'as if' (people can worry they didn't feel that way during the actual argument): *'imagine how it would be if you were feeling sad about her leaving'*

There are a lot of parts present! Help clients with repeated orientations, labelling each self/chair: *'Anxious self- what do you want to do?'*

Distinguish between sadness and depression

Offer feeding lines, beginning of sentences or prompts if needed: e.g. *'Try repeating and finishing this sentence: I'm angry because.....'*