

# Navigating the Inner Emotional Landscape in a Globalized World

*Eva Röttgers, Institut IGOR Frankfurt – Feb. 2019*<sup>1</sup>

Are we living in really special times or is it only our perception that something unusual is going on in our own life and work worlds—even in the world at large?

I frequently hear friends and colleagues bemoan, “I feel unsettled. I am in a transition. I do not know what will come next.” I often read the same sentiment in blogs and newspapers.

For many, daily life is routine: They are raising kids, working, meeting friends and enjoying family. However, for many others there is uneasiness or even fear about what is going on in their worlds. If their lives are undergoing a big transition, they are excited about promising new opportunities or feel threatened by an uncertain future.

We are undeniably experiencing large-scale changes—technologically, environmentally, economically, culturally and politically. But are these changes more intense and of greater magnitude than we have experienced during the past 70 years or are we merely more aware of the increasing complexity in the larger environment? And does that have a direct effect on our state of mind and behaviors, regardless of our country, religion, gender, class, age or profession?

Gestalt psychology answers these questions by viewing the way we process information as a holistic phenomenon: perception of the whole is radically different from the perception of its component parts<sup>2</sup>. In the Gestalt approach, we see the human organism as a self-regulating entity with the need to open and close its boundaries towards the environment for an exchange in order to stay alive. At the contact boundary of organism-environment field polarized forces are seen as drivers and regulators for this exchange with the opening up and closing down process.

Gestalt as a holistic approach opens our horizon for a systemic perspective: the Gestalt model does not solely consider an individual as a dynamic integrated organism, but also other human systems such as groups, teams, organizations, nations, etc. Applying Gestalt principles to larger “wholes” help us to see how “themes = conflicting needs” or “polarized forces” on one level of a human system are expressed as well as on other levels of the system, a sort of holographic phenomena.

Polarities in organizations can be addressed by:

- Integration to create a synergetic system;
- Ignoring or even deleting one pole with presumptive negative effects;
- Organizing it in a hierarchical order, e.g.: “one is more important than the other.”

A healthy organization needs a “living equilibrium” of contradicting needs before it can achieve predefined goals and allow space and time for learning. These tensions can be perceived on different levels of a system: For the individual, tension could appear when making decisions such as how to use available time for learning, making money or both. For the organization, questions about investing in education as a collective and learning for the good of everybody could drive the tension, especially if challenged to consider factors such as: Does “common sense” dictate that learning is mainly an individual decision and needs to be done outside of work time with own resources?

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is published in “Gestalt Practice: Living and Working in Pursuit of Holism” Libri Publishing 2019

<sup>2</sup> wikipedia “Gestalt psychology is an attempt to understand the laws behind the ability to acquire and maintain meaningful perceptions in an apparently chaotic world. The central principle of Gestalt Psychology is that the mind forms a global whole with self-organizing tendencies.” “Gestalt psychologists have sought to understand the organization of cognitive processes.... Our brain is capable of generating whole forms, particularly with respect to the visual recognition of global figures instead of just collections of simpler and unrelated elements (points, lines, curves, etc.)”

For centuries cultures, nations, organizations, individuals have developed mechanisms to deal with inherent polarities of human life and to find creative solutions how to adapt to a changing environment. Is there a significant difference nowadays? The perception is that the tensions between the polarities and their awareness on a large scale are increasing exponentially on all levels: globally, within nations, in companies, in individuals. The need for understanding the information processing mechanisms and the effects of increasing tensions on human systems is growing as they can generate energies for transformative developments for humanity or create fragmentation and destructive tendencies with potential negative outcomes.

This article wants to build on the Gestalt body of knowledge about perception and information processing and offers a map for understanding our capacity to digest the increasing complexity of the internal and external environment. The map will enable us to navigate through our inner physical, emotional and mental landscape on an individual and collective level in a VUCA-world. From my coaching and consulting experiences, this map has enabled people to broaden their perception of reality and to allow new choices. This is especially relevant for organizations where digitalization, acceleration of changes and disruptive developments require new approaches. This model supports ways of dealing constructively with stuck states and all kinds of human defense mechanisms.

## **Information processing systems from the perspective of Gestalt concepts and recent brain research**

The Gestalt Approach focuses on the boundary where exchange takes place. Every organism lives by digesting, assimilating and integrating something new whether it is food, experiences, information, influences, conflicts, ideas or theories. Thus, the organism is able to reproduce, preserve and grow itself. This process requires adapting "new" elements by perceiving what is digestible and what is not and decomposing existing forms into assimilable or integrable elements.

One of the main membranes to the outer world is the human brain. Our senses and nerves supply our brain with about 20 million bits of information from the internal and external stimuli every second. The brain processes information as physical, emotional and mental signals and impulses for acting, relating, talking and responding. As we are exposed to a multitude of data at the same time, for example an internal signal for "hunger", noises from a construction site and and and...., the brain had to develop a mechanism to avoid being paralyzed by a data overload. Thus, only a few elements of the incoming data become conscious, while the rest will be digested subconsciously<sup>3</sup>. And by growing up we learn how to organize this information processing.

### **Neurological development of human information processing system**

Among mammals, humans have a long socialization process, which means they're not being able to survive that period without social caring. Openness for incoming data and learning how to deal with all the information is crucial for early childhood development. Observing very small children, we can see that they will take in data without filters and their reactions will be direct and instantaneous. Although some instinctual reactions and extraordinary robustness are "built in", little children have limited capacities to differentiate what is ok and what is not. They can become easily overwhelmed by too much data or being exposed to critical situations - hopefully their caretakers will ensure that they are protected from serious threats to their lives.

Growing up is mainly a learning process to gain autonomy, self-empowerment, adaptability to changing circumstances, capabilities for self-protection and connecting to the social

---

<sup>3</sup> Some researchers say 95% of internal and external data are processed unconsciously.

environment. As we grow older, we develop a semi-permeable boundary as a result of our experiences and received teachings. We learn to open up when it is appropriate and to close down by reducing our contact to the environment as a protection mechanism. This is mainly an unconscious, physical process of relaxation and contraction accompanied by emotional and mental equivalents.

As grownups, our brain has developed specific processing mechanisms for incoming information. First it will scan incoming data and its interpretation follows a clear hierarchy of needs. Protection of one's physical existence has absolute priority. Initially, an instinctive and quick decision is made unconsciously, based on stored past experiences of safety or danger. If

- a signal for danger is identified, an emergency program of heightened alertness or reaction will kick-in within milliseconds
- nothing is flagged, the data will be processed slower and more differentiated.

Depending on incoming signals, our "psychic immune system" regulates whether we open up or close down to whatever happens around us and within our body. This system works automatically to ensure that our life will be secure and vibrant with relatively easy adaptive responses to whatever circumstances we are in.

At the organism-environment boundary, information will be channeled through the "data scanner" of our organism. Depending on the decoding of the signals, different degrees of permeability are triggered:

- If this self-regulation mechanism of opening-up and closing-down is flexible and dynamic, the system has access to information and resources of the outer and inner environment, resulting in a "living equilibrium" of a healthy system
- If all types of non-filtered data are entering, the system is in constant overload with a high probability of collapsing
- If it is more or less closed to external impulses, the system has to draw upon its own inner resources and in a long run it simply dies.

### Different zones of our "psychic immune system"



#### **Zone of open mindedness with an "agile mindset" for learning and growth.**

In a state of openness, we can consciously hold all kinds of perspectives, polarities and data without identifying and needing to act upon them. When I am relaxed, my attitude towards whatever happens in and around me is characterized by interest and curiosity. Depending on the 'newness' of the stimuli this could be accompanied with excitement and insecurity without interrupting the "approach posture". The field of open-mindedness is the space of potentiality, creativity, possibilities, resources, unknown territory. It is the field of experiments, new challenges, new options and choices. In

this stage a variety of emotions, body sensations, mental activities are conscious. If mindfulness and reflective behavior are in the foreground -, we are able to face a huge amount of data and the increasing complexity in our environment without feeling overwhelmed. On the other hand this wide open awareness might lead to an experience of "opening a Pandora Box". A lot of past experiences what are buried in the unconsciousness are showing up with the challenge to hold it without repeating the same behavior and emotions of the original experience.



#### **Comfort Zone** of habits and beliefs – based on past experiences - to stay safe in familiar circumstances.

When we rely on proven habits and beliefs, our body "rewards" us with feelings of well-being by disposing of dopamine and endogenous opiates. Stored behavioral routines and beliefs can be retrieved easily

and fast by autopilot. When I get into the car, I don't have to think about how driving works, it's stored in my whole body. I can drive a car and have a lively conversation at the same time. In order not to disturb these routines, the mind has well-suitable tools like mottos "Don't touch a running system" or "Only facts, no feelings". By blocking all data that contradict my habits and convictions, being with people of a similar mindset and doing activities I feel competent in, I increase the comfort in my daily life. Polarities are being "handled" by differentiating what is "good and bad", "right and wrong", "first and then" with a clear either-or-decision.



**Stress Zone** where our body provides additional energy to address actual challenges.

If something happens in the environment, which is perceived as strange or hostile, stress reactions are activated by providing additional energy. For example, an office worker looks forward to meeting a friend at 7pm. Just as he is about to leave the office, he receives a call from his boss asking for a presentation, to be done by tomorrow morning. Suddenly we

have a mind-body-reaction, the adrenaline goes up, emotions like anger raise. "No, I'm not going to do that, I have a right to leave work!" Or, "Maybe I can do it, if I work fast and do a quick & dirty version" or doubts arise, such as "What could happen, if I don't do it?" These polarized, internal needs cause physical, emotional and mental stress with the perception an immediate response would be required. Stress reactions are helpful in mobilizing instant energy, but not support taking time for decision making. They can become a problem if the person is not aware of the pressure, the inner conflicts are not explicitly addressed or the person feels paralyzed between the different needs. If these experiences are repeated again and again, it can lead to somatic symptoms and eventually to a burnout.

**Survival Zone**, where all energies are mobilized within an instant when our instincts signal our life is in danger.

If a person or a system gets into a life-threatening situation, instinctual fight-flight-freeze responses will be triggered, mobilizing all energies to generate necessary defense reactions. As this is a very adequate body response, for some people this experience of feeling overwhelmed by a sudden, out-of-control event can become a serious problem. This happens if the realization that the event is over does not take place but incoming data are chronically perceived as similar life threatening. It is a reaction like a "record with a crack" repeating only a certain part of the song over and over again with the only choice between the extreme polarity of "live or die". The person is caught in a vicious circle of trauma responses, what can lead to addiction or serious illness.



## Creative Adaption as a Human Capacity

Having described these neurobiological mechanisms, how can they help us understand and adapt to our increasingly complex environment?

The states we have described – openness, comfort, stress and survival zone - are helpful, necessary and make sense when dealing with the challenges of daily life. The question is: how can we as individuals remain fluid between the different zones in face of the increasing complexity of our world?

Or as the goal of Gestalt therapy describes it *"... to become more fully and creatively alive and to become free from the blocks and unfinished business that may diminish satisfaction, fulfillment, and growth, and to experiment with new ways of being"*<sup>4</sup>

The idea is not to stay all the time in the zone of openness, learning and development. There are situations where automatic behaviour patterns make a lot of sense, such as:

---

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia

- driving a car without having to think where the brakes are, how do I steer in the left direction etc.
- walking in the woods where wild boars live and cautious behaviour is appropriate.
- being able to run to catch the bus, so that you arrive on time for a concert

Unfortunately, people could lose this fluidity. Automatic reactivity fuelled out of unconscious patterns is dominating our responses. We could become more or less stuck i.g. in the “comfort zone”. The need for feeling secure might dominate many of our activities. Beliefs, habits and behaviours, experienced in the past that ensured safety, will be consciously or unconsciously our favorite choice. We justify them as the “right” and “the only way” without allowing a moment of consideration of other options. Or impulses of our internal or external environment trigger constant feelings of stress or even posttraumatic stress responses — an endless repetition of a threatening situations, experienced in the past.

A healthy individual is present in his/her life with an attitude of openness for what is happening and is able to shift to behaviors of another layer according to the changes in the internal or external environment.

### **Strategies that support this fluidity**

- **Relaxation, relaxation, relaxation:** When I am in a relaxed state, I open up physically, emotionally and mentally. This allows me to become aware of new stimuli in a calm, neutral way. Even when my learned reaction of attraction or repulsion shows up I can be aware of it without an instant judgment of good or bad or a habit of “what’s-wrong-attention” with the corresponding routines and stress reactions. The antidote to automatic defense reactivity would be to slow down, to sense what’s happening in our body, feel the ground under our feet, breathe and stay in touch with what is present. The more we develop different ways to soothe ourselves and get back to a relaxed physiological state, the easier it is to experience the state of open-mindedness and fluid movements between the different zones.
- **Awareness, awareness, awareness:** to see, hear, sense, smell, taste as much as possible with a wide-angle lens observing what is happening in my internal and external environment. This intensified contact with reality in the here-and-now leads to an experience of a constant information flow. Reflecting about the incoming data can help us know one’s trigger for high arousal reactions or “amygdala hijacks” without needing to react. This leads to more chances of discovering choices and support within the environment. When the awareness of the here-and-now is reduced, proven, familiar solutions from the past seem to be appropriate for today. Our thoughts move to past or future events and narrow the available potential of what the environment has to offer in this moment.
- **Change to an “Approach State” and train your ability to shift between different zones:** by increasing our awareness, we can identify if we act out of our comfort zone or with a stress reaction or even feel trapped in a victim-perpetrator-reaction formation. By reflecting the context, we might see what triggered our closing down reaction is based in memories of the past. Addressing the “old Gestalt” and separating the “here-and-now” conditions from the “then-and-there” situation might help to widen our horizon and increase our ability to choose between a variety of scenarios.

Once, we feel relaxed, open for the unknown and remain flexible, also in new, unfamiliar and even extreme situations, we can access the space of potentialities and possibilities.

### **The Holistic Approach: Application for larger systems**

In the business world, new technological and social developments require innovations as well as the ability to differentiate what we need to continue and what we need to change. Relying on familiar, proven products, processes and business models will not guarantee the future survival of an organization.

Members of innovative startups get very excited about new opportunities and see big chances to grow into new, unknown fields. Even large corporations start risky experiments with

disruptive business models. For companies an open mindset of their executives and employees with the ability to be aware of the complex interconnectedness around us is seen as a requirement for their survival.

At the same time, predictions that up to 70% of actual jobs might be gone within the next years due to the artificial intelligence revolution. It's no surprise that anxiety and stress responses are rising on a large scale.

Using the described map "Navigating the inner emotional landscape," we can differentiate organizational cultures dealing with these challenges along the different zones of the psychic immune system:

- An agile mindset with open-mindedness is widespread in **startup cultures**. This mindset can be described as enthusiastic, a risk-friendly attitude for entering new territories, high adaptability with fast pivots for new opportunities, intrinsic motivation as a drive for passionate engagement, a team approach with iterative, experiential learning cycles with continuous feedback, self-empowerment and working in networks with less hierarchical structures. Others would describe the effects as chaotic, more buzzwords than reality, reduced performance and cost consciousness, not predictable outcomes, more a playground than a serious business environment.
- **Bureaucratic organizations** are in contrary characterized by predictable procedures and routines to ensure the stability of the organization. Well-defined responsibilities in different functions are organized in silos planning their next steps. Top-down-leadership style, limited engagement of employees and conflict avoidance are mechanisms to guarantee stable circumstances. If performance problems or a crisis cannot be ignored, individuals are made accountable for causing the trouble and/or being responsible for finding solutions.
- **Action-oriented organizational cultures** are in most cases very performance oriented with a high risk for stressful work conditions. Operative hectic with little prioritization along available resources, long-working hours often combined with a lot of work for the wastebasket, micromanagement leadership style, political games and power struggles between different interest's groups etc. are all a setup for burnout of their members. Escalation of conflicts to top management creates bottle-necks of decision taking. These organizations sometimes end up in a situation of a "rocket chair" = constant movement getting no-where.
- **Trapped organizations** are stuck in traumatic events in the organizational life cycle, like bankruptcy or a merger process. These organizations celebrate their "heroes" who are able to perform "last-minute-rescue-operations" without being aware that this need for fire-fighting might be due to internal dysfunctional patterns. Main issues are the missing cooperation of disintegrated parts of company and an internal ignorance in face of important signals from the environment. If management asks for new solutions and taking risks, the "Not possible"-answer of direct reports are often justified by a story happened long ago in the history of the company, e.g. where a manager was fired because of making an error or failed with a new strategy. The whole company can be described as paralyzed, energies blocked, new ideas are encountered with a pessimistic outlook, people with talents and ambitions leave the company – a vicious circle with little light at the end of the tunnel.

## **Strategies of healthy organizations dealing with complexity in our environment**

As we are in a transformational period we can see all kind of experiments and innovations of business models, organizational structures and culture. As countries, industries, professions etc. are in different developmental phases with specific characteristics, for each of these conditions different approaches might be suitable: there seems to be no one 'right' or 'wrong' model. Each organization has to find their own way for their development depending on the specific circumstances.

Different authors have described important qualities of a healthy organizational culture:

- Dynamic Robustness by oscillating between open-mindedness and reliable processes with highly adaptive and resilient capabilities of their members. Contradicting perceptions, needs, interests and goals of the different involved stakeholders require constant balancing efforts, learning and communication in order to find creative solutions which lead to thought-through decisions. So called “High Reliability Organizations” could be studied as role models for this kind of adaptive processes, structures and their culture of collective mindfulness<sup>5</sup>.
- The Gestalt Approach to Organizational Development has been built on Kurt Lewin’s change model “unfreeze-transform-refreeze”, but the capability for not only one change effort, but a continuous creative adaption attitude is seen as one of the cornerstones of this approach. The Gestalt Cycle of Experience can be described as an iterative learning process with a diagnostic perspective to identify interruptions of the “contacting process”, which block the fluidity of the process on different system levels. The knowledge and experiences about interventions on the intrapersonal, interpersonal and the level of the whole system provide a rich tool set for supporting healthy organizations in a fast-changing environment.
- Theory U is an approach Otto Scharmer has developed where openness for new data and the wellbeing of the whole system is seen as a priority<sup>6</sup>. The journey through the U-Process is about allowing new unfamiliar behavior and solutions with an
  - open mind = encounter persons and situations with curiosity and set aside the voice of judgement to allow creativity and presence
  - open heart = allow compassion for your environment and dare to be vulnerable
  - open will = have the courage to allow emergence and co-creation with others and letting go of predetermined solutions.
- Approaches which describe evolutionary stages of organizations as a growing capacity of a system to deal with the complexity of the environment are more and more recognized in the corporate world as helpful models to understand and deal with the culturally diverse dynamics of their stakeholders<sup>7</sup>

## Developments in our larger context

In a world with an accelerated, increasing complexity, where the majority chooses unconsciously the path of closing down, the effects will be fragmentation, splitting and a slowed down development<sup>8</sup>:

- the gap between rich and poor seems to grow with different political approaches on how to address social inequality;
- the relationship between men and women, the MeToo movement and gender equality have become hot topics in the last years;
- the opinions about climate change vary – will it effects our region or far away regions like the South Pacific Islands or has the turning point already been crossed?
- the advances made through internet, social media, IT-technology, artificial intelligence are seen by some as a blessing for mankind, for others as means for a totalitarian surveillance state
- do we have a growing number of left-behind, marginalized parts of the population and a global elite which is busy in their limited bubble?

<sup>5</sup> K.E.Weik/K.M.Sutcliffe described in “Managing the Unexpected” 2001 the characteristics of these kind of organizations; Guido Becke (Ed.) “Mindful Change in Times of Permanent Reorganization” 2014

<sup>6</sup> Scharmer, C. Otto “Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges” 2007

<sup>7</sup> R. Kegan/L. Lahey “An everyone culture” 2016;

F. Glas/B.Lievegoed “Dynamische Unternehmensentwicklung” 1993;

I.Adizes “Managing Corporate Life Cycles – how organizations grow, age and die” 2004;

D.Beck/C.Cowan “Spiraldynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership and Change” 2005;

K.Barta/T.Fallon “Shadow to Spirit: A Developmental Exploration” 2016

<sup>8</sup> Otto Scharmer described in his article “Axial Shift: the decline of Trump, the Rise of the Greens, and the New Coordinates of Societal Changes” (Nov.18) these phenomena in different countries



- do we care about migrants who had to leave their homes and countries because of war, poverty and climate change effects or do we think primarily of the welfare of our own people?

On a larger system level, all those phenomena are creating unprecedented tensions and pressures. Globalized interdependencies and its unpredictable consequences are shaking up political systems and socio-cultural relationships in many countries of the world.

One view is that fragmentation and social divide will increase internal and external tensions and lead to escalating and irreconcilable confrontations within a society.

Another movement we see, are all kind of activities to fight for the recognition of subgroups and liberation of individuals. Self-improving efforts, mindfulness training, coaching should provide support for individuals to thrive in a complex world but could turn paradoxically into mechanisms of defense reactions with limited effects.

For a holistic approach, integration of polarities and the well-being of the whole are the guiding principles. If members of a group, organization or community with different, even contradicting needs and opinions have an attitude of open mindedness and shared superordinate goals, there are chances to avoid fragmentation. By practicing dialogues, the involved people might be able to develop creative solutions instead of ignoring, shaming, hating, fighting or suppressing one pole. For these dialogues, we need to enhance our capacity to stay open in face of overwhelming complexity and contradicting opinions. We need to operate as empowered, autonomous individuals with agile mindsets in strong, dynamic collectives.

Promising approaches are the efforts of (local) communities, where members are committed to reflect and open themselves to enter unknown territories. Many organization - small or large, nonprofit or profit – are experimenting with the reduction and decentralization of hierarchical power structures and inviting their members to explore self- management and collective leadership.

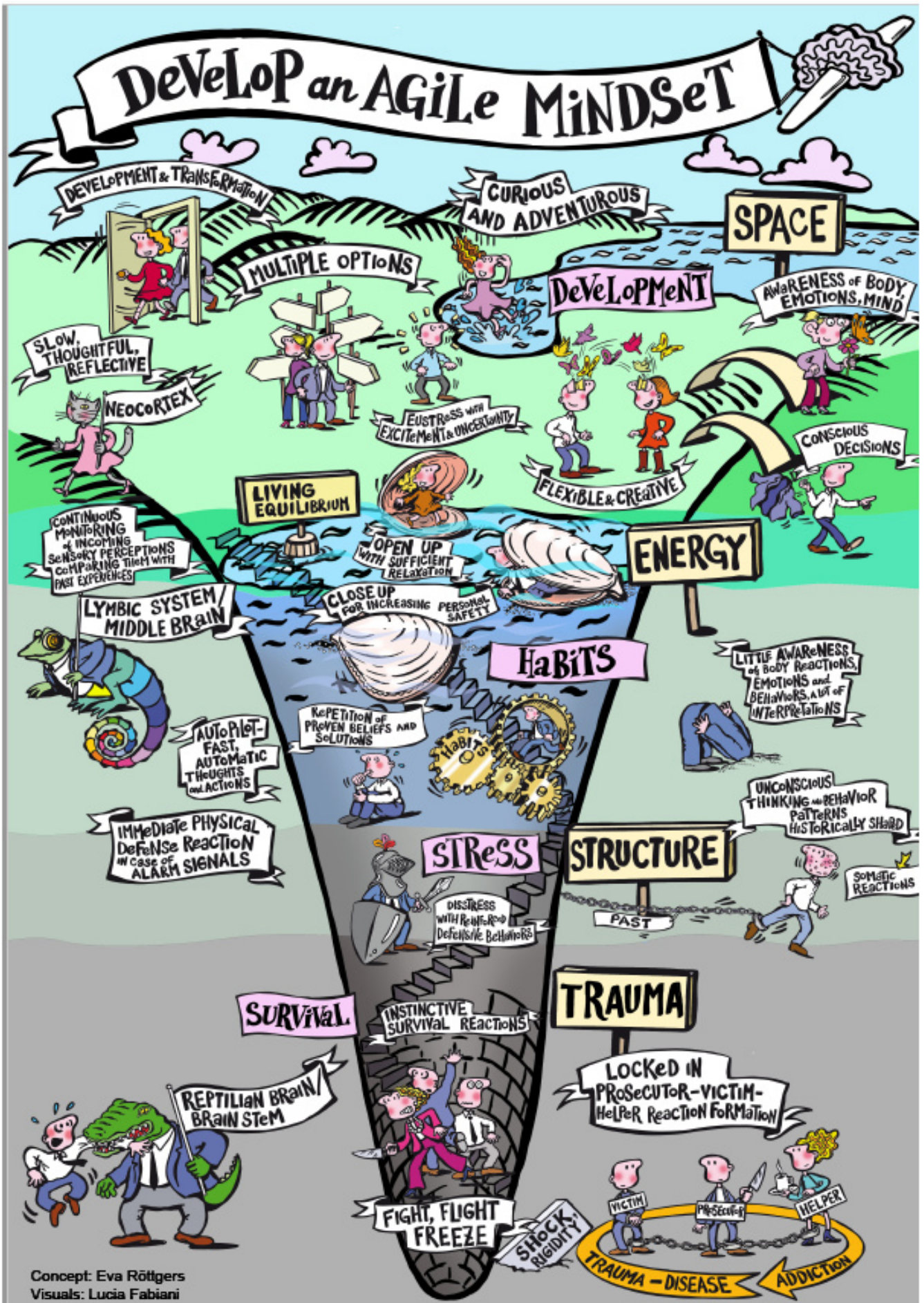
If we look at the model of the “psychic immune system”, we understand the automatic response of many individuals in these unsettling times with the belief that a secure future will be possible through protection of borders, maintaining familiar circumstances and be part of a like-minded community. On the other hand, having confidence, trust and excitement about new opportunities would be – in my eyes – a more promising mindset. Accompanied with the capabilities

- to stay in contact but grounded in an agitated world
- to trust that by embracing the inherent polarities and allow the dialogue between the different needs a next, meaningful step will show up
- to differentiate when it is safe to open up and when it makes sense to stick to proven processes and behaviors and when it is wise to protect one’s vulnerability
- for resilience to go back to “normal” after an unsettling experience, we have what is needed to navigate our inner emotional landscape.

This is an individual and a collective learning and developmental process.

If we as individuals and as collectives become conscious of our traditional neurological wiring with automatic defense responses this awareness might provide us with the capacity, willingness and competence to open ourselves up to the complex, paradoxical challenges we are all facing in a globalized world.





Concept: Eva Röttgers  
 Visuals: Lucia Fabiani