



Calm Pathways

Zone Model

A Compassionate and Polyvagal-Informed Guide for Supporting Young People

Calm Pathways: Zone Model Manual

This manual integrates Polyvagal Theory (Porges) and Paul Gilbert's Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) to provide a clear, practical model for understanding and supporting young people in different states of regulation. It reframes behaviour as survival responses rather than defiance, and provides staff, carers, teachers, youth workers, and families with strategies to guide young people back to safety and connection.



Why This Matters?

Young people often display behaviours that are challenging — shouting, withdrawing, running, refusing to engage.

Traditionally these have been labelled as defiance, opposition, or poor attitude. Modern neuroscience and psychology offer a different view: these behaviours are survival strategies, rooted in the nervous system. When a young person perceives threat (real or imagined), their body reacts automatically.

By shifting from blame to understanding, we empower staff and carers to respond more effectively. The Calm Pathways Zone Model brings together Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory with Paul Gilbert's Compassion Focused Therapy. This integration provides a science-based yet compassionate framework that is easy to apply in schools, care homes, youth services, and families.

The Zone Model

The model identifies four main zones:

● Safe & Social Zone

Physiology: Ventral Vagal activation (Polyvagal); Soothing System (CFT).

State: Calm, connected, open to learning and relationships.

Signs: Relaxed posture, steady breath, balanced energy, eye contact, playful tone.

● Fight-or-Flight Zone

Physiology: Sympathetic activation (Polyvagal); Threat System (CFT).

State: Mobilised survival mode, high energy, preparing for defence.

Signs: Fast breathing, loud voice, shouting, pacing, clenched fists, aggression, restlessness.

■ Shutdown / Freeze Zone

Physiology: Dorsal Vagal activation (Polyvagal); Threat System (collapse form in CFT).

State: Withdrawal, numbness, disconnection, energy collapse.

Signs: Slumped posture, blank stare, very quiet or mute, low energy, 'I don't care' language.

⚡ Drive Zone

Physiology: Sympathetic mobilisation without threat; Drive/Resource-Seeking System (CFT).

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State: Striving, motivated, ambitious, but can tip into Red Zone under stress.

Signs: High focus on achievement, restlessness if goals blocked, intense pursuit of rewards.

Theoretical Foundations

This model is based on two key frameworks:

Polyvagal Theory (Stephen Porges, 2011): describes how the autonomic nervous system is hierarchical:

- Ventral Vagal: supports safety, social engagement, and connection.
- Sympathetic: mobilises fight-or-flight survival responses.
- Dorsal Vagal: triggers shutdown or collapse when escape feels impossible.

Compassion Focused Therapy (Paul Gilbert, 2009, 2014): describes three evolved systems of emotional regulation:

- Threat/Protection: detects danger and activates defensive responses.
- Drive/Resource-Seeking: motivates us to pursue goals and rewards.
- Soothing/Safeness: promotes affiliation, calm, and compassion.

These frameworks overlap. For example, Polyvagal's ventral vagal system aligns with Gilbert's Soothing system. Polyvagal's sympathetic mobilisation aligns with Gilbert's Threat and Drive systems. Polyvagal's dorsal vagal shutdown aligns with the collapse version of the Threat system.



Spotting the Zones

Staff and carers can learn to recognise zones by observing:

- Posture (upright vs. slumped)
- Breathing (steady vs. shallow vs. absent)
- Tone of voice (warm vs. sharp vs. muted)
- Energy levels (balanced vs. restless vs. flat)
- Eye contact (steady vs. glaring vs. absent)
- Behaviour (engaging vs. pacing/shouting vs. withdrawn)

Supporting the Zones

● Safe & Social Zone

What it is: This is the body's optimal state for learning, growth, and connection. It is supported by ventral vagal activation (Polyvagal) and Gilbert's Soothing System. Here, the young person feels safe enough to explore, play, and engage with others.

What you can do: Reinforce safety with rituals such as morning greetings and end-of-day check-ins. Encourage expression through art, storytelling, or roleplay. Celebrate small wins, such as when a young person uses a calming tool independently. Offer opportunities for leadership or responsibility, which strengthen their sense of agency.

● **Fight-or-Flight Zone**

What it is: This zone represents mobilised survival energy, driven by sympathetic activation. It is part of Gilbert's Threat System. The young person's body is primed to fight or flee.

What you can do: First, regulate yourself - slow your breathing, lower your voice, soften your shoulders. Use short, simple phrases such as 'You're safe' or 'I'll help you.' Allow safe physical outlets like walking, stomping, or squeezing a stress ball. Disrupt escalation with humour or distraction. Use co-regulated breathing: match their pace, then gradually slow yours. Avoid lecturing, shouting, or demanding stillness.

■ **Shutdown / Freeze Zone**

What it is: This is the collapse response, driven by dorsal vagal activation and the Threat System in its freeze form. The young person withdraws or disconnects because the nervous system has detected overwhelming threat.

What you can do: Offer presence before pressure — sit nearby calmly, showing you are there without demands. Provide small, safe choices such as 'chair or beanbag?' Offer sensory grounding tools (blanket, soft toy, weighted cushion). Use a warm, slow voice: 'I'll stay here with you.' Avoid forcing responses or insisting on eye contact. Patience is crucial here.

⚡ **Drive Zone**

What it is: This is sympathetic mobilisation without immediate threat. It aligns with Gilbert's Drive System. It fuels ambition, focus, and achievement. However, if unbalanced, it can tip into the Fight-or-Flight Zone.

What you can do: Channel energy into constructive outlets — sports, creative projects, leadership roles. Teach balance between activity and rest, using mindfulness or grounding practices. Celebrate effort, not only outcomes. Encourage reflection on feelings when goals are blocked, to prevent tipping into threat.

Staff Language

Words shape nervous system states. Language should be simple, clear, and matched to the zone. Below are 10 examples of supportive phrases for each zone.

● **Safe & Social Zone Phrases**

- I love how calm you are right now.
- It feels good to be together.
- You can share your ideas — I'm listening.
- I noticed you took a deep breath — that helps.
- Let's try this new skill while you're feeling steady.
- I appreciate the way you joined in.
- You're safe here, and it shows in your smile.

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- You handled that really well — thank you.
- Let's celebrate this small step forward.
- I can see you're ready to learn.

● **Fight-or-Flight Zone Phrases**

- You're safe. I'm right here with you.
- Let's take one step at a time.
- You can walk/stomp/squeeze if your body needs to move.
- I see you're upset. Let's slow down together.
- Your breathing is fast — I'll match you, then we'll slow down.
- It's okay to be angry, and I'll help you stay safe.
- We can pause for a moment until it feels calmer.
- I'm not going anywhere — I'll stay with you.
- Let's use our strong energy in a safe way.
- You're not alone in this. We'll figure it out together.



■ **Shutdown / Freeze Zone Phrases**

- I'll stay here with you.
- Would you like the chair or the beanbag?
- It's okay to be quiet — you don't need to talk yet.
- Here's something soft to hold if you want.
- When you're ready, I'd love to hear what you need.
- You don't have to do anything right now.
- I'll check in again in a little while — no rush.
- You are safe even if you don't feel it yet.
- It's okay to rest your body until you're ready.
- I'm glad you're here, even if it feels hard.

⚡ **Drive Zone Phrases**


- I can see how motivated you are.
- Your effort really matters here.

- It's great to see you focused.
- Remember to take breaks too.
- You don't have to do everything perfectly.
- Let's enjoy the process, not just the goal.
- I can see you're giving this your best.
- It's okay if things feel tough — effort is progress.
- Let's balance hard work with rest.
- You're learning as you go, and that's what counts.

Self-Talk Toolkit for Adults/Staff

Self-talk is a powerful regulation tool for adults. By using grounding internal phrases, staff and carers can stay calm and steady, providing the co-regulation young people need. Below are 10 examples of self-talk statements for each zone.

● **Safe & Social Zone Self-Talk**

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- I'm calm, and that calm is contagious.
 - This is a moment to connect, not to rush.
 - I can enjoy this steady rhythm.
 - The young person feels safe because I am steady.
 - I can notice and celebrate the small wins.
 - This is the time to teach, not during crisis.
 - My breath can keep us both steady.
 - I'm building trust one small step at a time.
 - I don't need to do everything — being present is enough.
 - Safety is the soil; learning grows from here.

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● **Fight-or-Flight Zone Self-Talk**

- I need to soften my shoulders first.
- My breath sets the rhythm — slow and steady.
- This isn't about me; it's the nervous system speaking.
- Less talk, more calm presence.
- Short phrases, not lectures.
- I can allow safe movement without taking it personally.
- Humour or lightness can break the storm.
- I'm the anchor; the child is the wave.
- I can lower my voice to guide the energy down.
- Stay steady — the storm will pass.

■ **Shutdown / Freeze Zone Self-Talk**

- Silence is not rejection — it's protection.
- My steady presence is enough right now.
- I don't need to fix this instantly.
- Small choices can help bring control back.
- I can slow my pace and match their quiet.
- Warmth matters more than words.
- They may not respond, but they feel my safety.
- Gentle patience builds trust.
- I can sit with this stillness without rushing.
- Connection can grow even in silence.



⚡ Drive Zone Self-Talk

- Ambition is good, but balance is better.
- I can pause without losing progress.
- Effort is more important than perfection.
- Rest is part of growth.
- I don't need to chase every goal at once.
- Pace matters as much as direction.
- I can enjoy the process, not just the result.
- I don't have to prove my worth through doing.
- Balance keeps me steady and effective.
- Sustainable energy is stronger than bursts of effort.



Strategies

Different approaches to support can be described as structured, protective, directive or nurturing, soothing, relational. Both are important, and the most effective adults blend these modes. These terms are not about gender, but about styles of support that can be used by anyone.

● Safe & Social Zone

- Set routines that give predictability.
- Encourage responsibility ('Can you help with this task?').
- Model calm posture and steady breath.
- Reinforce boundaries clearly.
- Celebrate progress with structured feedback.
- Use warm greetings and eye contact.
- Offer playful choices ('Shall we draw or talk?').
- Praise emotional awareness ('You noticed your feelings — well done').
 - Share joy and humour.
 - Encourage self-expression through art, role play, storytelling.

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● **Fight-or-Flight Zone**

- Step in as protector ('I'll keep us safe').
- Use clear, short commands ('Stop. Breathe. Walk.').
- Create safe outlets for energy (push wall, stomp, squeeze ball).
- Stay grounded, don't mirror chaos.
- Provide physical boundaries if needed.
- Match the young person's breath, then gradually slow yours.
- Soften tone and shoulders to invite calm.
- Use reassurance: 'You're safe, I'm here.'
- Offer gentle humour or distraction.
- Invite co-regulation: 'Shall we breathe together?'

■ **Shutdown / Freeze Zone**

- Offer small, structured choices ('Chair or beanbag?').
- Set gentle tasks to encourage re-engagement.
- Maintain presence without over-talking.
- Keep routines predictable and reliable.
- Acknowledge the freeze as survival, not defiance.
- Sit nearby in quiet companionship.
- Use soft, slow voice: 'I'll stay with you.'
- Provide soothing sensory support (blanket, soft toy).
- Allow silence and don't force responses.
- Offer validation: 'It's okay to rest.'

⚡ **Drive Zone**

- Encourage structured goal setting.
- Provide time limits to prevent overdrive.
- Use accountability (check-ins, progress updates).
- Reinforce balance between work and rest.
- Emphasise persistence over perfection.
- Encourage reflection on feelings around goals.
- Use warm encouragement ('I see how hard you're trying').
- Highlight effort as success, not just outcome.
- Promote balance with playful breaks.
- Validate struggles without judgement.



Blending structure and nurture is the most effective way to support young people through difficulty.

Training Activities

Training ensures staff, carers, and youth workers can confidently apply the Zone Model. These activities build awareness, empathy, and practical skills.

1. Cue Spotting: Trainers demonstrate postures, breathing styles, and tone of voice. Participants identify which zone is being displayed.
2. Breathing Co-Regulation: In pairs, one person breathes quickly (Red Zone). The partner

matches the pace, then gradually slows. Both notice how calm returns.

3. Shutdown Role play: One acts withdrawn and mute (Blue Zone). The partner practices sitting nearby, offering gentle presence and micro-choices.

4. Escalation Role play: One acts agitated (Red Zone). The partner practices using short phrases, grounding posture, and allowing safe movement.

5. Self-Reflection: Participants consider which zone they personally default to under stress. They share strategies that help bring them back to balance.

Embedding Practices Across Settings

For the model to succeed, it must be woven into daily practice. Below are strategies for different settings.

Colleges / Further Education (Teenagers & Young Adults)

- **Wellbeing Check-Ins:** Begin classes or tutorials with quick 1–5 “zone ratings” or mood check-ins.
- **Quiet Spaces:** Provide access to “regulation rooms” or calm zones for overwhelmed students during the day.
- **Peer Regulation:** Train peer mentors to recognise zones and offer safe support (e.g., walking together, grounding prompts).
- **Exam & Study Stress:** Teach pacing, breath resets, and self-talk strategies for use before and during assessments.
- **Independence & Identity:** Encourage students to name their own strategies that help them return to Green Zone (music, movement, journaling).
- **Staff Consistency:** Ensure lecturers, tutors, and pastoral staff all use shared scripts and the same “zone language” for predictability.
- **Transition Support:** Use the model during big life shifts (moving classes, applying for university/apprenticeships) to frame stress as natural nervous-system responses, not weakness.

Schools

- Begin each day with a ritual of safety (greetings, check-ins).
- Create calming corners with sensory tools.
- Teach regulation skills in PSHE or wellbeing lessons.
- Use consistent scripts across staff ('You're safe. I'm here.').

Care Homes

- Embed check-ins at meal times and bedtime.
- Provide safe, low-stimulation spaces.
- Train all staff in spotting cues.
- Build routines that increase predictability for young people.

Youth Clubs & Sports

- Use physical activity to channel Drive and Red Zone energy safely.
- Encourage peer support and mentoring.
- Teach grounding as part of warm-ups and cool-downs.

Families

- Use short, predictable routines for transitions (bedtime, mealtimes).
- Model calm language and self-talk.
- Normalize talking about zones: 'I feel in Red Zone today, I need a walk.'



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- End-of-Shift Rituals: intentionally let go of stress before going home.
- & Reflection: safe spaces for staff to share challenges.

Section 12 – Leadership & Culture

Leaders play a critical role in embedding the Zone Model. Culture shifts when leaders consistently model calm, compassionate, and structured approaches.

- Training: Ensure all staff understand the model.
- Consistency: Use shared language across the organisation.
- Supervision: Offer reflective spaces after challenging incidents.
- Recognition: Celebrate staff who model calm regulation.
- Embedding: Include zone-awareness in policies, routines, and staff induction.

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- van der Kolk, B. (2014). 'The Body Keeps the Score'. New York: Viking.

What Next?

Webinars, in house training, coaching?

Everything can be tailored, whether you're working in schools, colleges, care homes, youth justice, or with families. If you'd like to explore how this could work for you, get in touch at hello@focusdaytraining.co.uk or visit www.focusdaytraining.co.uk

— because calm really is contagious, and together we can build calmer, more compassionate pathways.