* **Handout 4.1 Four Emotion Systems**

There are four basic emotion systems that are broadly agreed upon by neuroscientists.

These emotion systems are constantly being activated and influence how we perceive the world.

Our brains are “hard wired” to interpret cues in terms of these four emotion systems:

* When the **reward system** is activated, our brain has interpreted a cue to mean that something gratifying or pleasurable is available or potentially available
* When the **threat system** is activated, our brain has interpreted a cue to mean that something dangerous or damaging might happen
* When the **social safety** **system** is activated, our brain has interpreted a cue to mean that we are safe, loved, fulfilled, protected, or otherwise part of a tribe and it’s safe to relax
* When the **overwhelm system** is activated, our brain has interpreted a cue to mean that our life is in imminent danger and our body shuts down

Generally, when one of these systems is turned on, then the other systems tend to be turned off.



Example of overwhelm system

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| Emotions systems alert and arouse body  (Sympathetic nervous system) | Emotion systems that slow and quiet body  (parasympathetic nervous system) |
| **Threat/defensive arousal system**  Cue:   * Danger or potential harm (including social rejection or ostracism)   Action tendency   * Urge to flee or attack   Emotions   * Anxious, irritated, fearful, angry, shame   **Emotion system stimulated by self-criticism** | **Social/safety system**  Cue   * safe, loved, fulfilled, protected, or otherwise part of a tribe   Action tendency   * desire to relax “chill out”, explore, or socialize   Emotions   * contentment, warmth, calm, open, curious   **For high self-critics, this system is often chronically under activated**  **Alternately, it may be that this system is active toward others, but not toward oneself** |
| **Reward/Drive system**  Cue   * Something pleasurable or gratifying is available   Action tendency   * Urge to approach or pursue   Emotions   * Interested, excited, elated   **High self-critics often move into this system as a way to avoid rejection or failure and to feel good** | **Overwhelm**  Cue   * our life is in imminent danger   Action tendency   * urge to give up or shut down   Emotional response   * numb, disinterested, detachment, dissociation, intense shame   **Cues that activate this system are usually associated with past experiences of trauma** |