

# Evaluating and treating psychosomatic symptoms through ISTDP

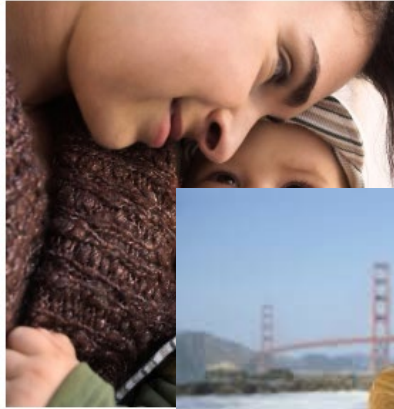
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Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada  
[www.allanabbass.com](http://www.allanabbass.com)

# Central Points

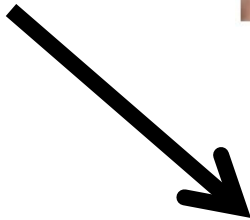
- There are specific patterns of unconscious anxiety and defense which occur together
- The somatic experience of unprocessed rage, guilt and grief overcomes somatic symptoms

# Intensive Short-term Dynamic Psychotherapy

- Developed through 4 decades of video based research on thousands of patients
- >40 Randomized Controlled Trials:
  - Outperforms controls
  - Outperforms other treatments in follow-up Lilliengren et al, 2016
- 19 studies of somatic symptom conditions
- 25 cost effectiveness studies
- Powerful single session Trial Therapy
  - Determine treatment pathway needed
  - Provide a session of therapy
  - Gather information



**BOND  
With  
Parents**



**BOND  
With  
Others**



BOND  
With  
Parents

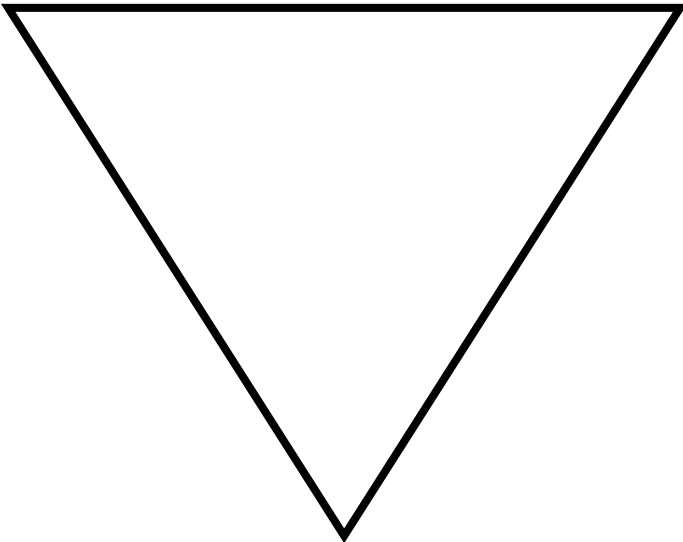
Trauma

PAIN  
FEAR

Rage, Remorse  
about the Rage

Character Disorder  
+ Symptoms

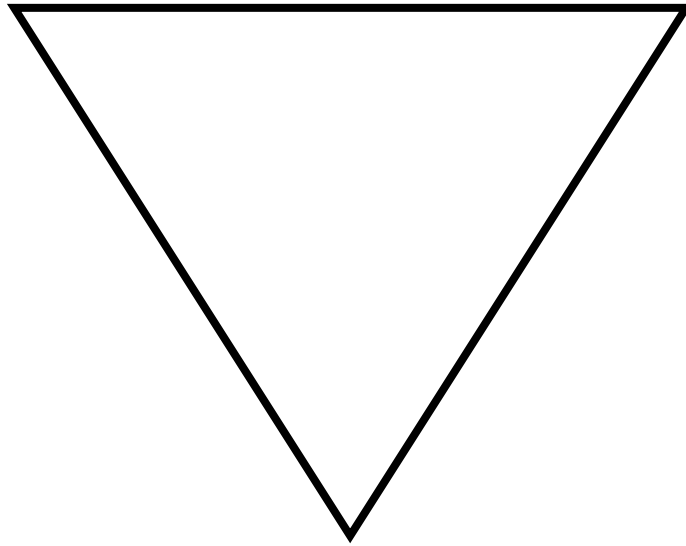
Transference  
(Therapist/  
Doctor)



Current  
person

Past  
person

Unconscious  
Defense



Unconscious  
Anxiety

Unconscious  
Impulses & Feelings

# Helping your patient stir up Complex Transference Feelings (CTF)

- Mixed feelings toward therapist linked to the past bond, trauma, pain, rage and guilt about rage.
- Appreciation and irritation because of the support plus challenge to defenses



# If those feelings can be felt it activates the Unconscious Therapeutic Alliance (UTA)

- This is the unconscious healing force in the patient
- UTA is mobilized in proportion to the complex feelings
- Brings mental images and clear linkages to trauma

4 Response  
Patterns

```
graph LR; A[4 Response Patterns] --> B[Avoid feeling the feelings -> Low Resistance]; A --> C[Become tense in muscles and avoid You! -> Moderate and High Resistance]; A --> D[Become tired, weak, depressed or sick in body -> High Resistance with Repression]; A --> E[Become confused, lose senses and become afraid -> Fragile Character Structure];
```

Avoid feeling  
the feelings → Low Resistance

Become tense in muscles and  
avoid You! → Moderate and High  
Resistance

Become tired, weak,  
depressed or sick in body → High  
Resistance with Repression

Become confused,  
lose senses and  
become afraid → Fragile  
Character Structure

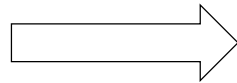
*2. Monitor Anxiety & Defense responses*

Unconscious  
Defense

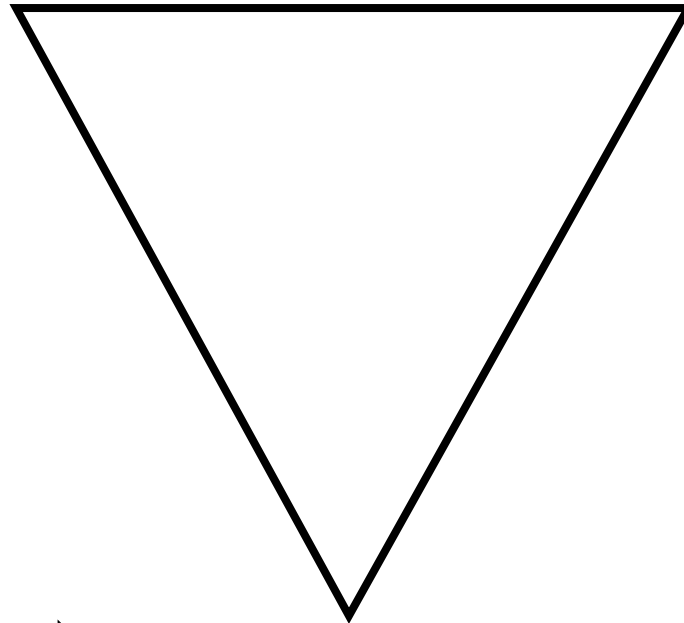
Unconscious  
Anxiety



*1. Pressure on  
Feelings  
or Defenses*



Unconscious  
Impulses & Feelings

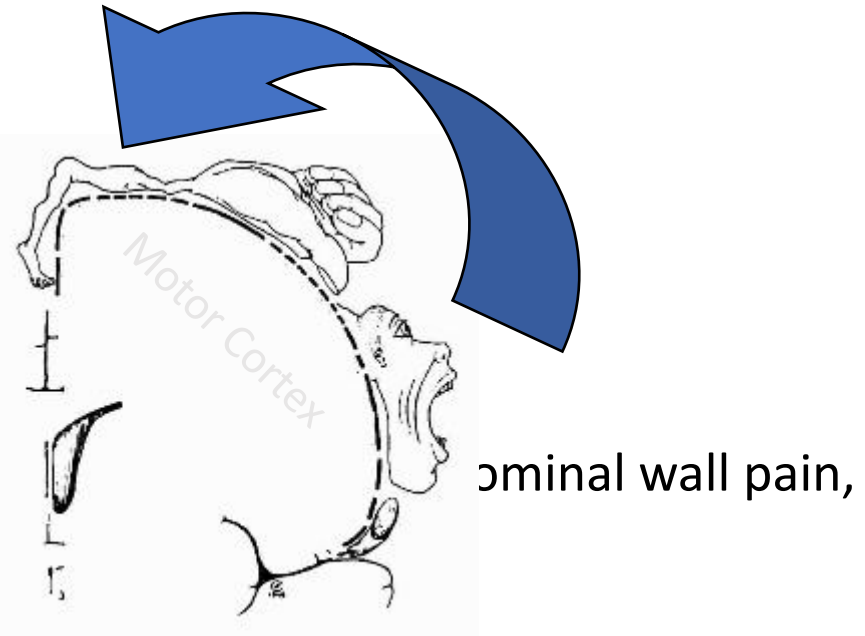


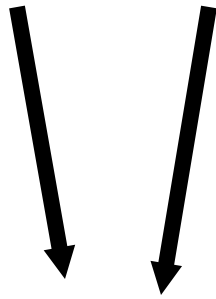
# Striated Muscle Unconscious Anxiety

- **Hands Clench**
- Arms, Shoulders, Neck
- Intercostal: **Sigh**
- Abdomen, back
- Legs and Feet

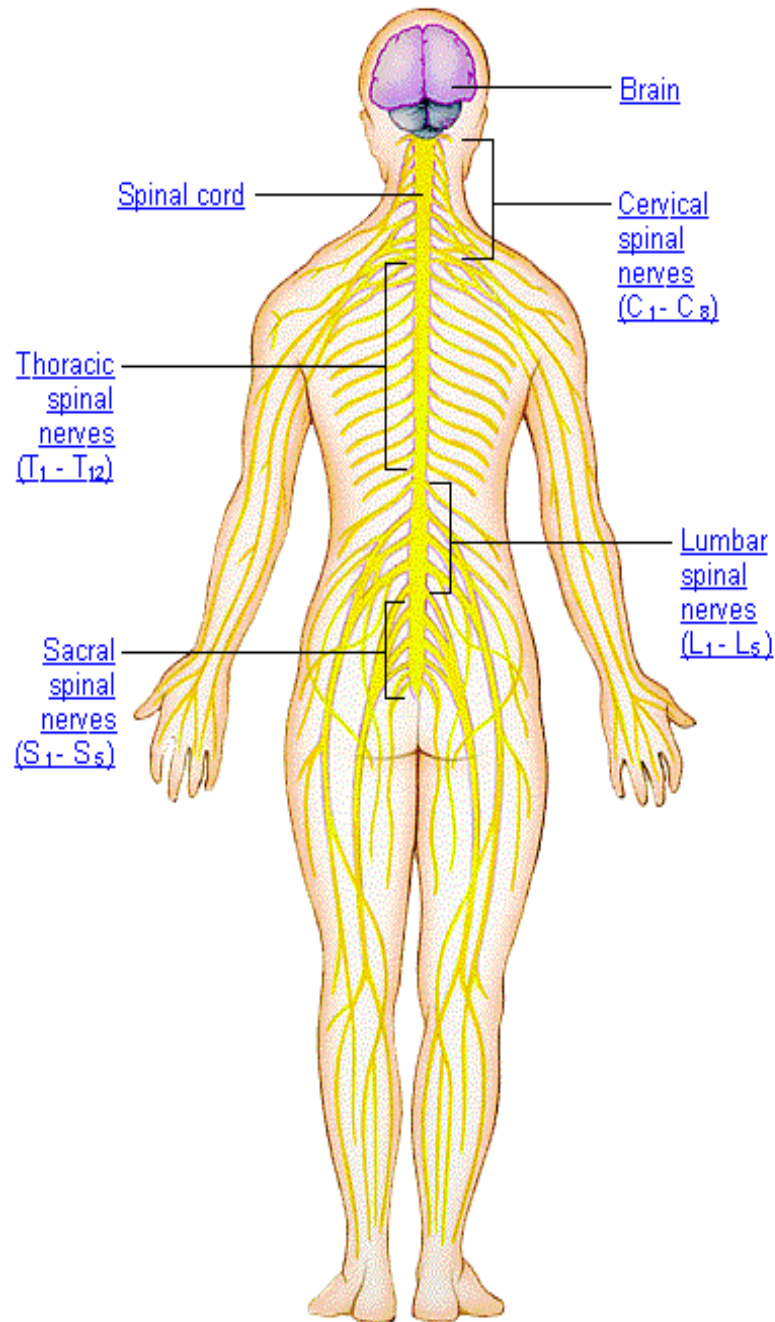
→ Hyperventilation, Fibromyalgia, headache, tremor, tics, pain

- See with Isolation of Affect: intellectual

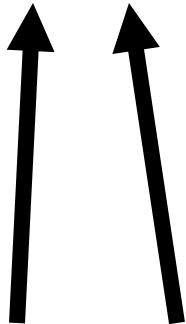




Striated Muscle  
Anxiety  
Goes Down Body



Neurobiological  
Pathway of  
Rage goes up  
Same system:  
Displacing somatization



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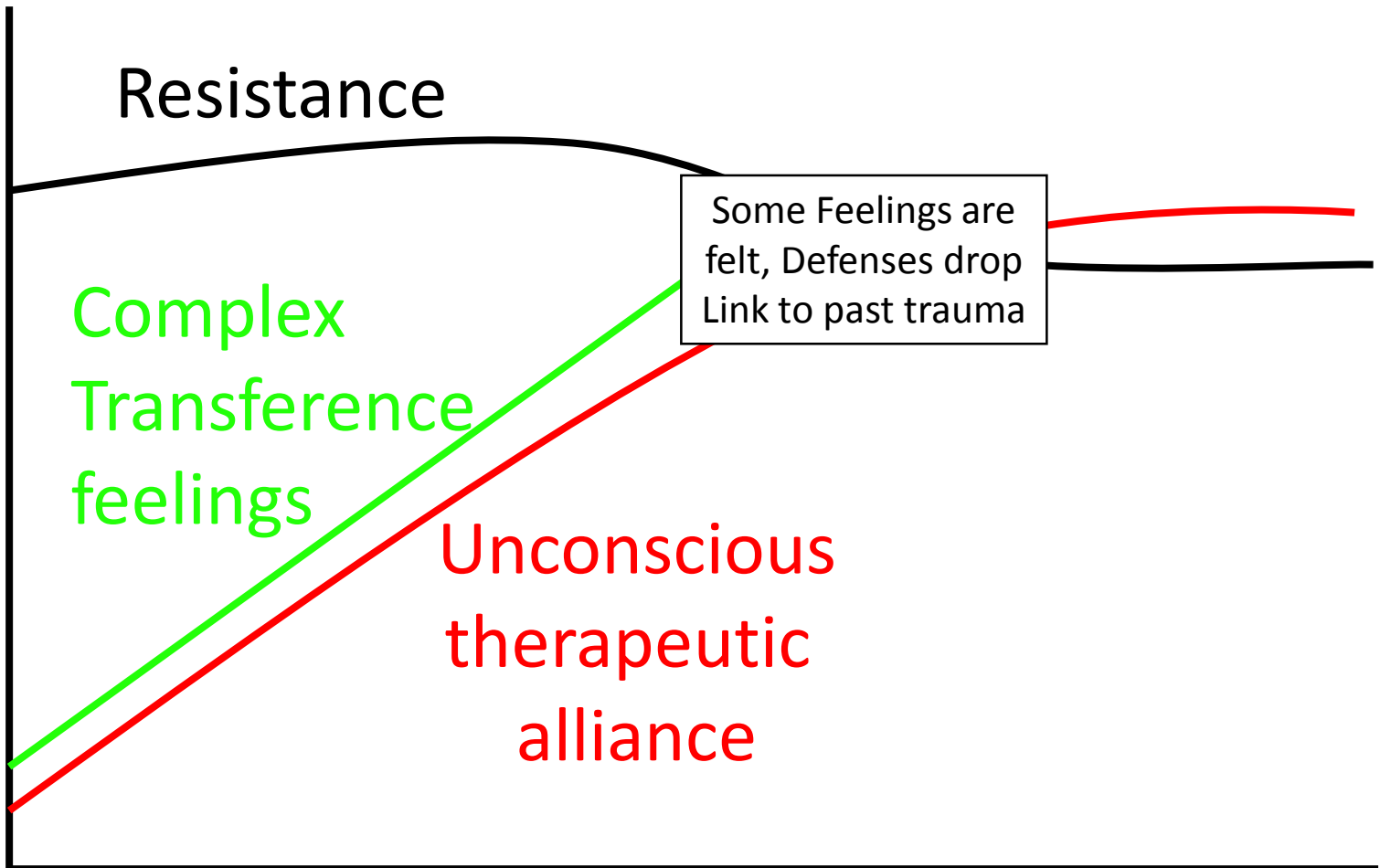
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Resistance with Repression

Become confused,  
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Character Structure

# Moderate resistant patients

- Buried rage, guilt about rage and grief
- Anxiety is all in voluntary muscles
- Main defense is isolation of affect and intellectualization
- Focusing on underlying feelings mobilizes the unconscious therapeutic alliance
- If defenses rise then need to clarify and challenge the defences

# First breakthrough







BOND  
With  
Parents

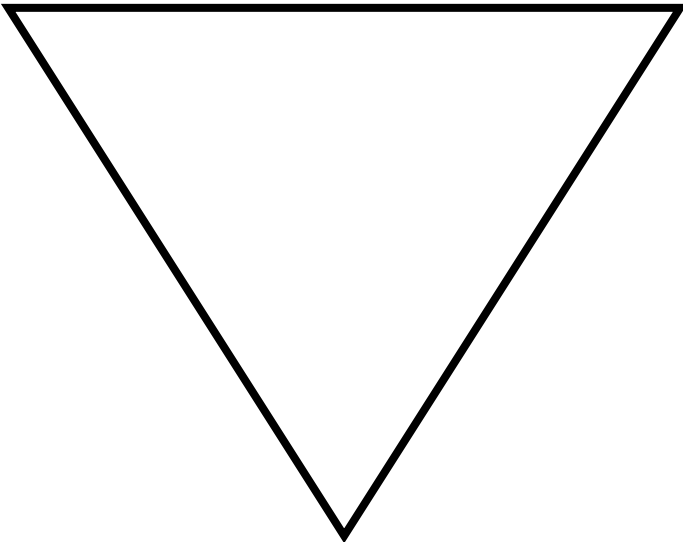
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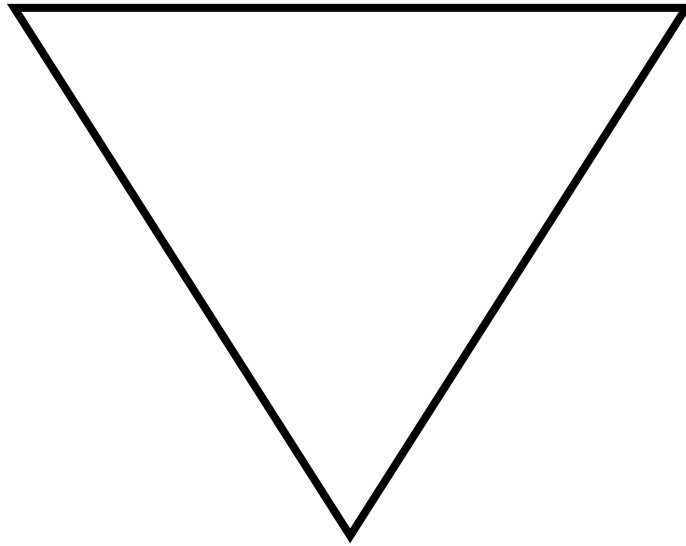
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Character Structure

# Motor Conversion: Muscle weakness

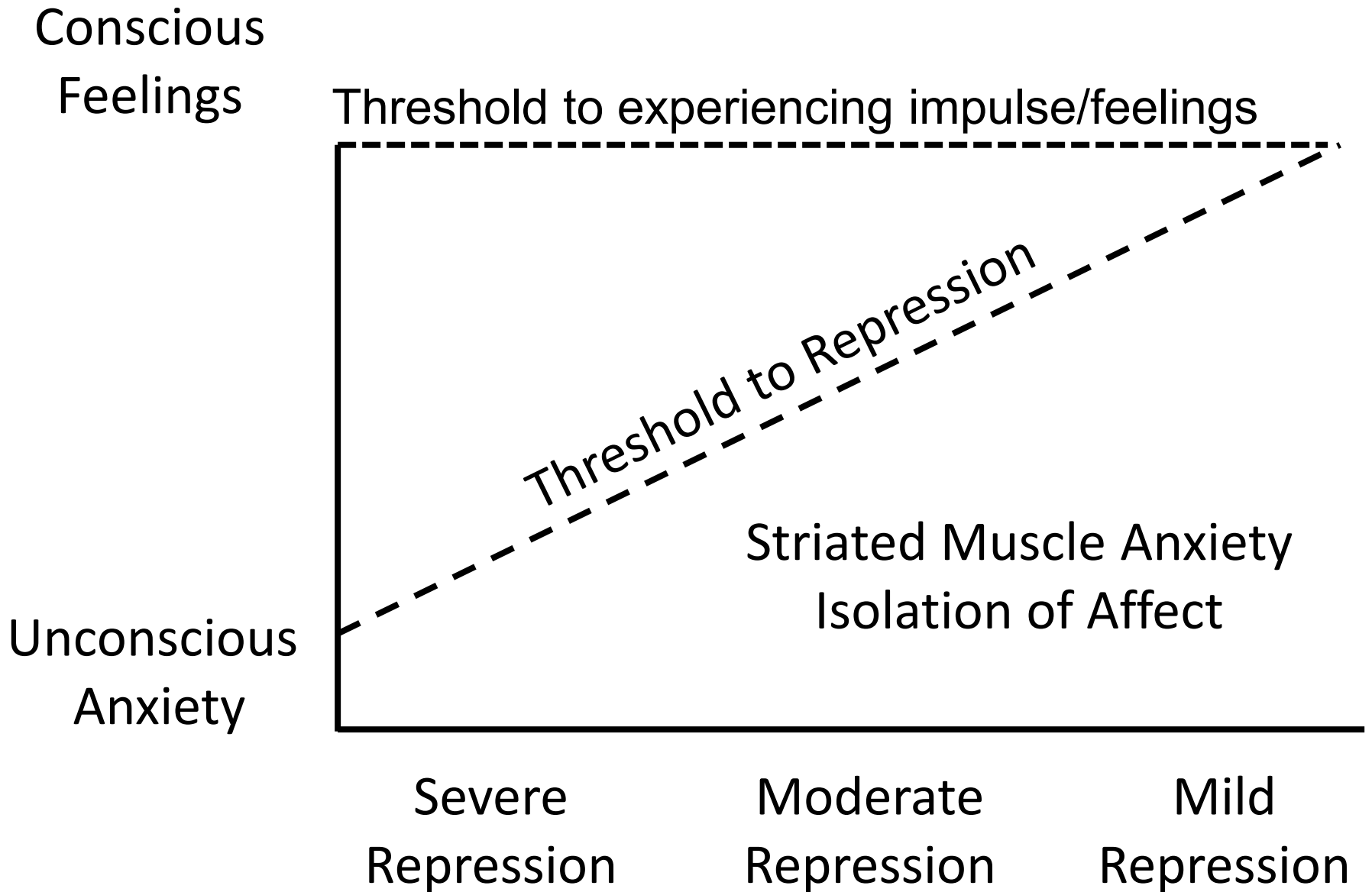
- → Neurology Consultation and Emergency Departments
- Seen with Repression
- No striated anxiety when conversion is active

# Cognitive-perceptual Disruption

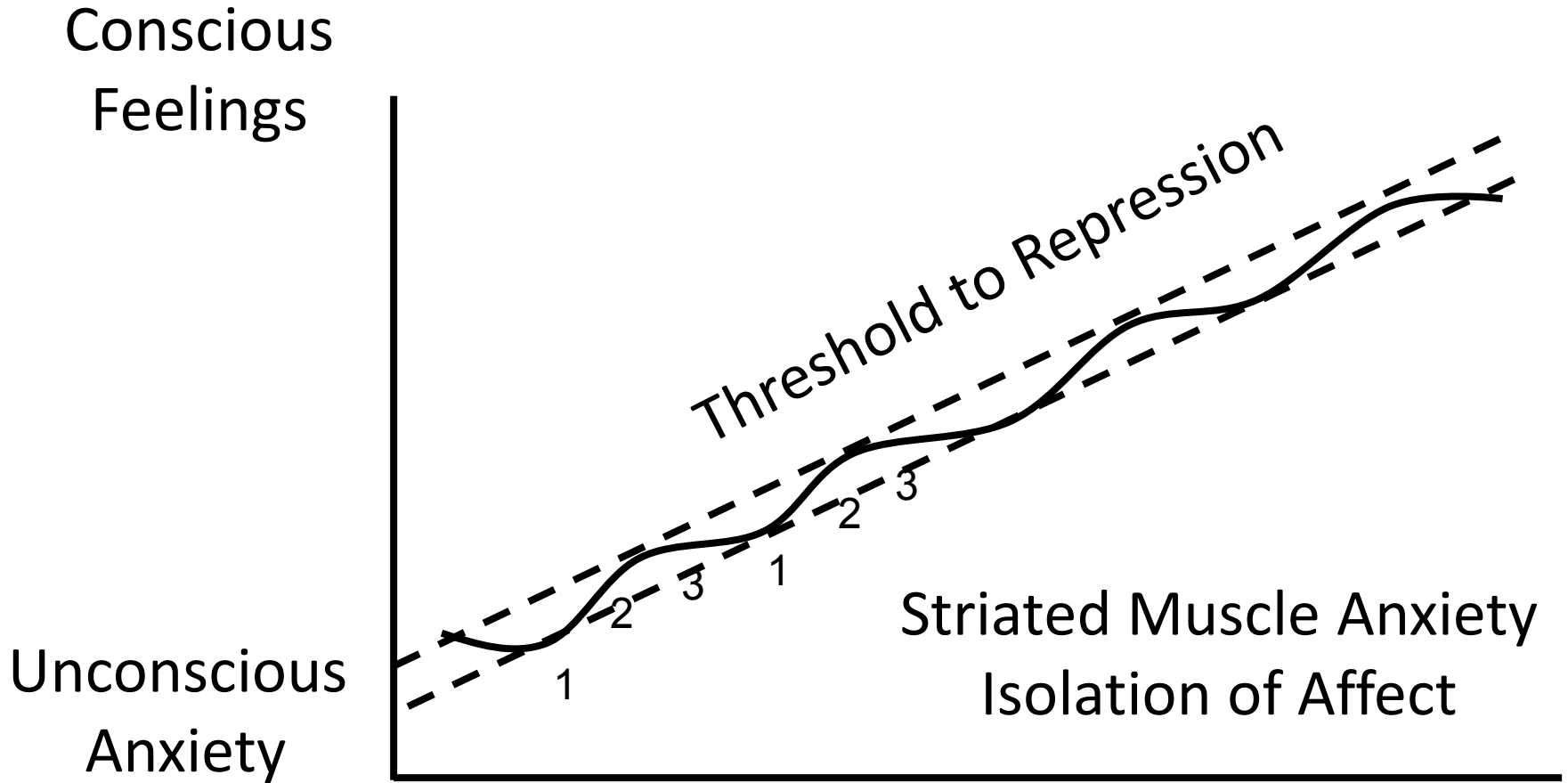
- Dissociation, losing track of thoughts, poor memory, fainting
- Visual blurring, blindness
- Dysfunction of other senses
- Hallucinations in all 5 senses
  
- Seen with Primitive defenses including Projection of feelings and impulses

# Smooth Muscle Unconscious Anxiety

- Gastrointestinal
- Vascular, Coronary Arteries
- Bronchi
- Bladder
  
- Abdominal Pain, Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Dyspepsia, Migraine, Pelvic Pain
- Mediated by (unconscious) Repression of feelings

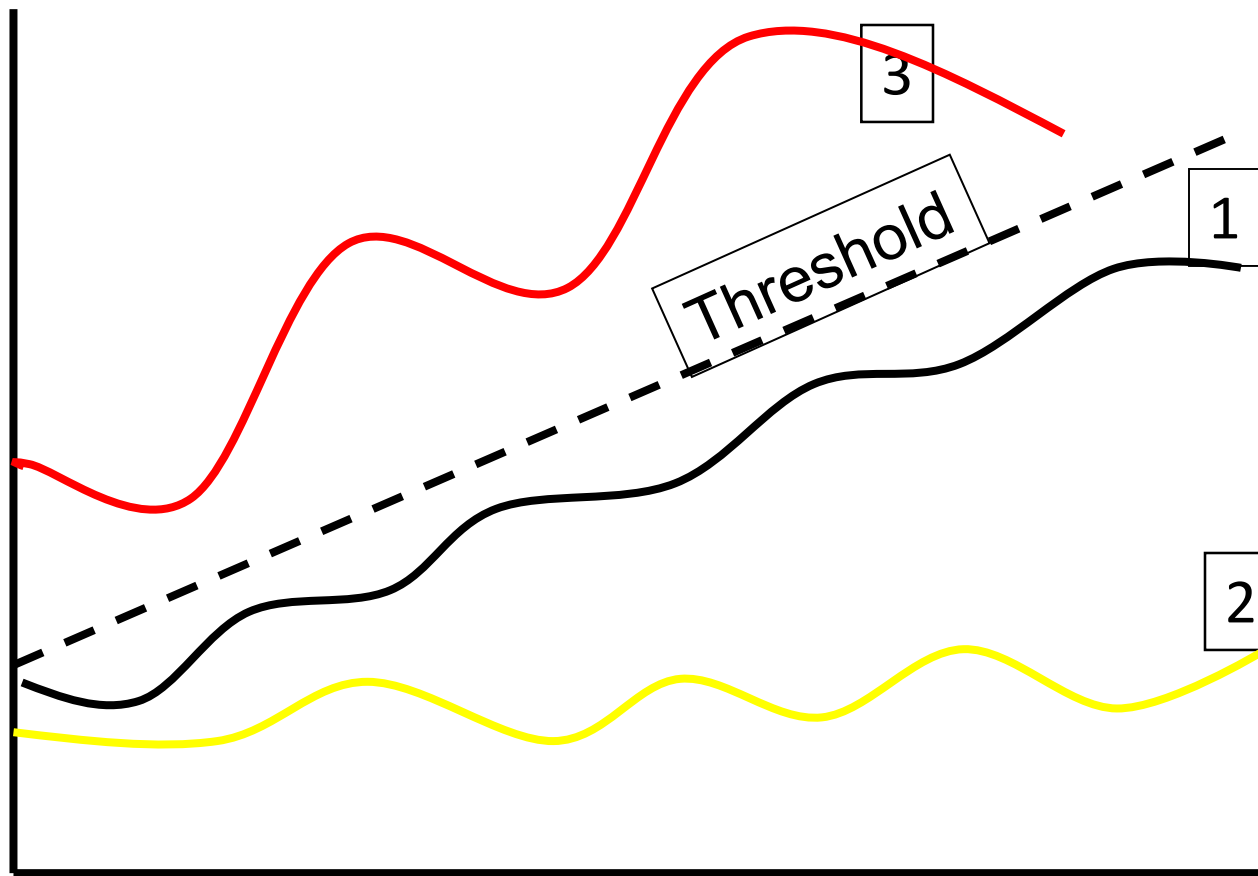




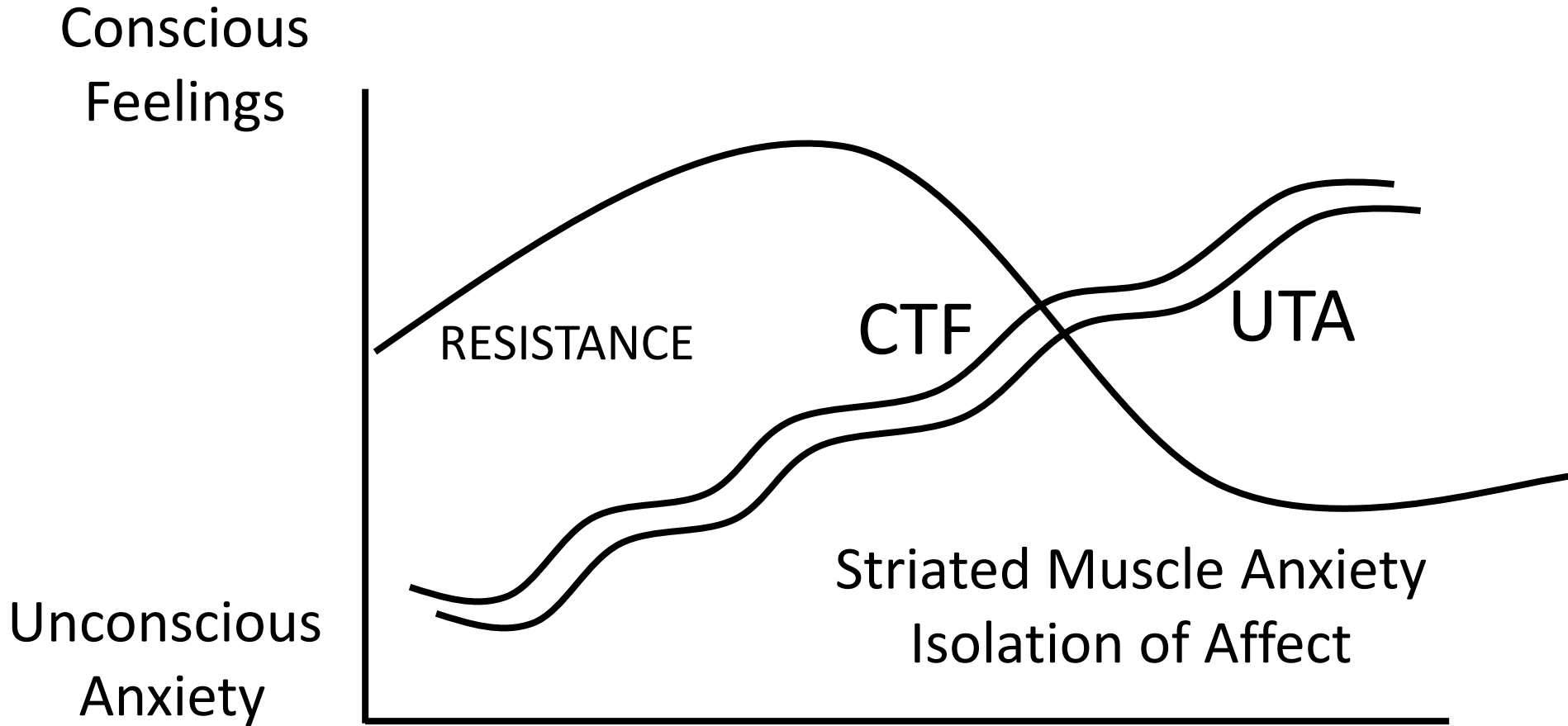


1. Pressure to feelings or to defenses
2. Rise in complex transference feelings and anxiety
3. Intellectual recap to bring isolation of affect

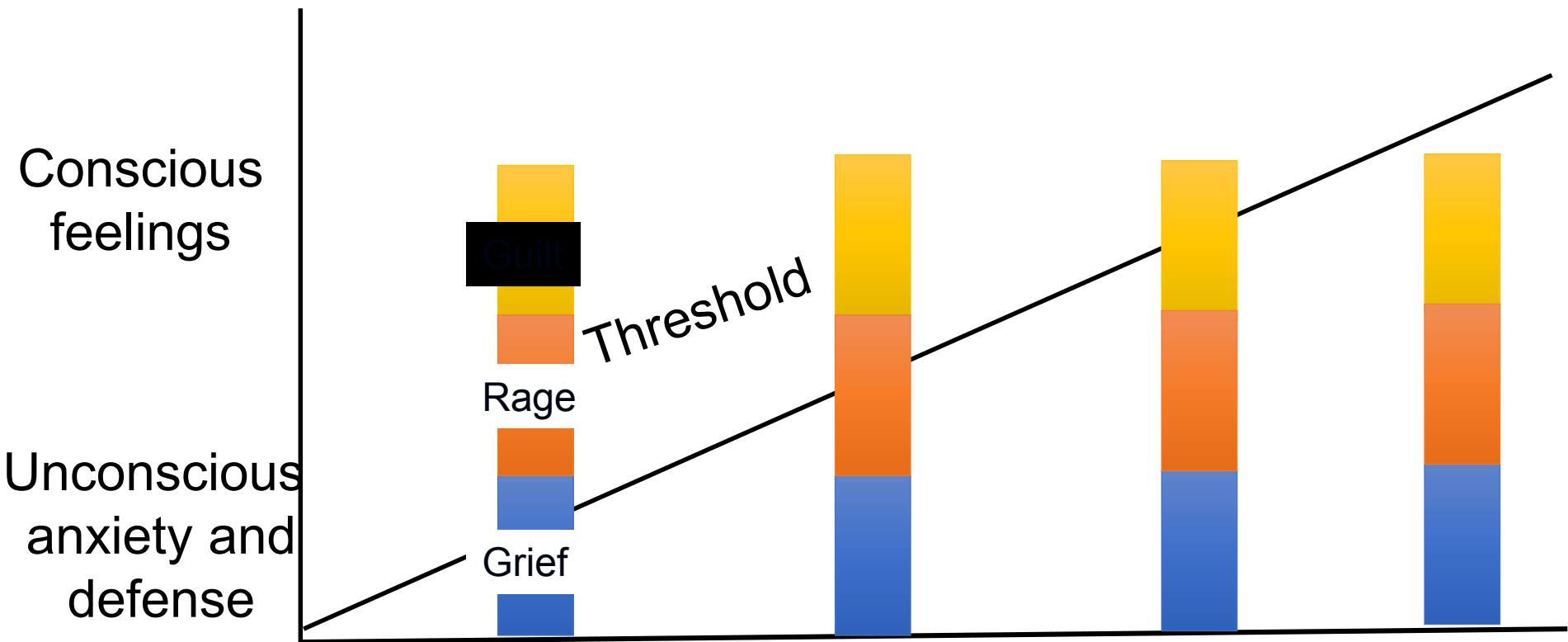
Conscious  
Feelings



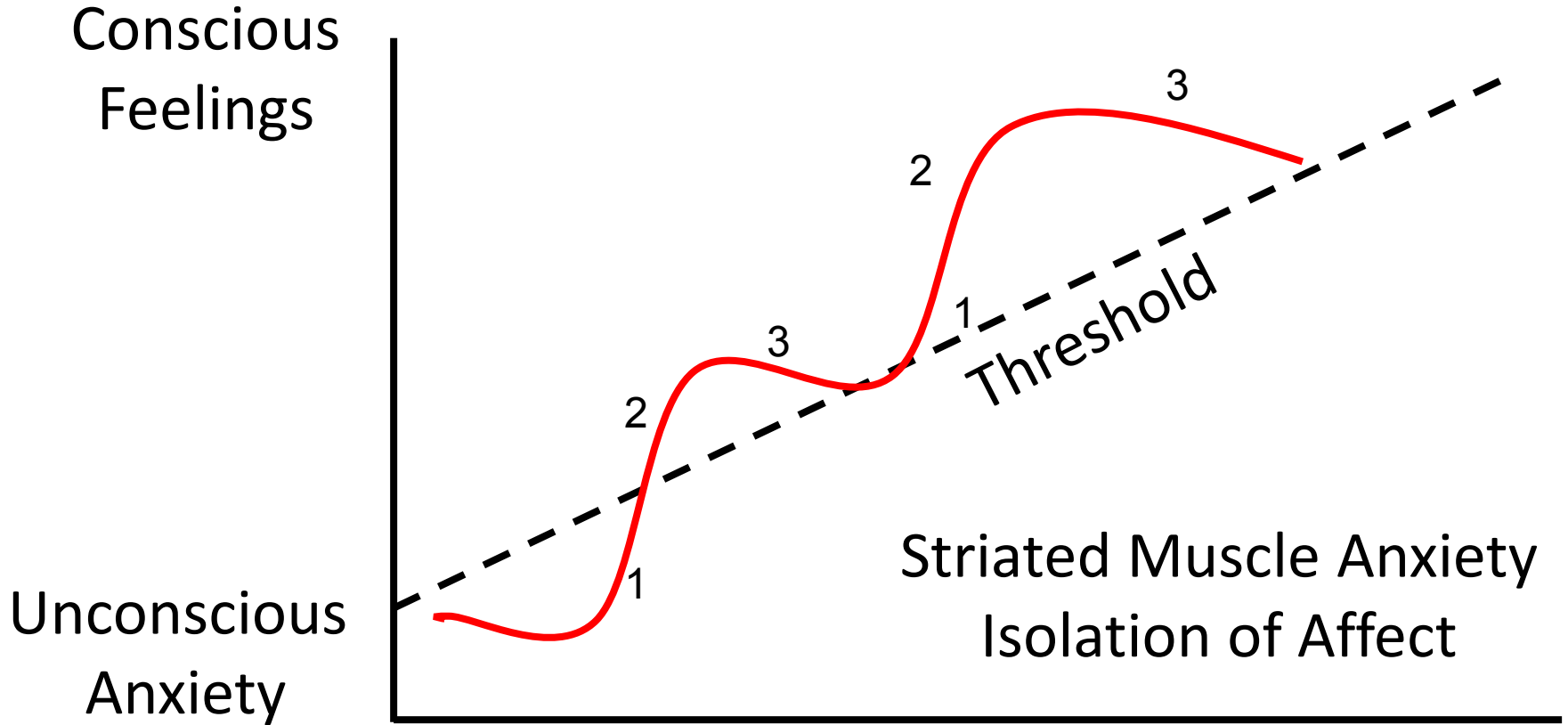
Unconscious  
Anxiety



1. Pressure to feelings or to defenses
2. Rise in complex transference feelings
3. Intellectual recap



# Immersive Approach to Building Capacity



1. Pressure to rage
2. Rise to above threshold
3. Press to Guilt and regulate down anxiety as needed
4. Extensive Recapping

# How to Reduce Anxiety

- Talk
- Let the patient talk
- Change Stations  $C \rightarrow T$  or  $T \rightarrow C$  or  $C \rightarrow C$
- Focus on bodily cues
- Recapitulate on what happened P-C-T and I/F- Anxiety- Defence
- Stay off feelings for a moment

# Sympathy symptoms

- Guilt about rage causes the same symptoms as a person unconsciously wanted to induce in another.
- Common Examples:
  - Strangling → Choking
  - Head damage → headache
  - Chest damage → chest pain
- Management: pressure to feel guilt about the rage to remove or reduce pain

# When to Resume Pressure

- When tension is back in striated muscles
- When patient is actively isolating affect
- When the patient suggests we explore this more or expresses curiosity about “why that happens”
- When he expresses that he is ready for more pressure ” can you ask me that one more time?



# Portraying

- Imagery of what an urge wants to do
- A way to hold awareness and isolate the affect:  
desensitize
- Can be used with little to no experience of the rage.
- Increases isolation of affect and brings anxiety to striated muscles
- Raises threshold that he can use isolate affect and tolerate anxiety.

# Case of 67 yr old man with multiple symptoms and some repression

- Life long anxiety: medications for years
- Prostate pain: narcotics
- Irritable bowel
- Headaches
- Marital detachment
- Cant urinate in public washroom
- Chronic shyness

Conscious feelings

1. Pressure
2. Rise in CTF
3. Recap

Threshold to CPD or primitive defenses

Therapeutic window

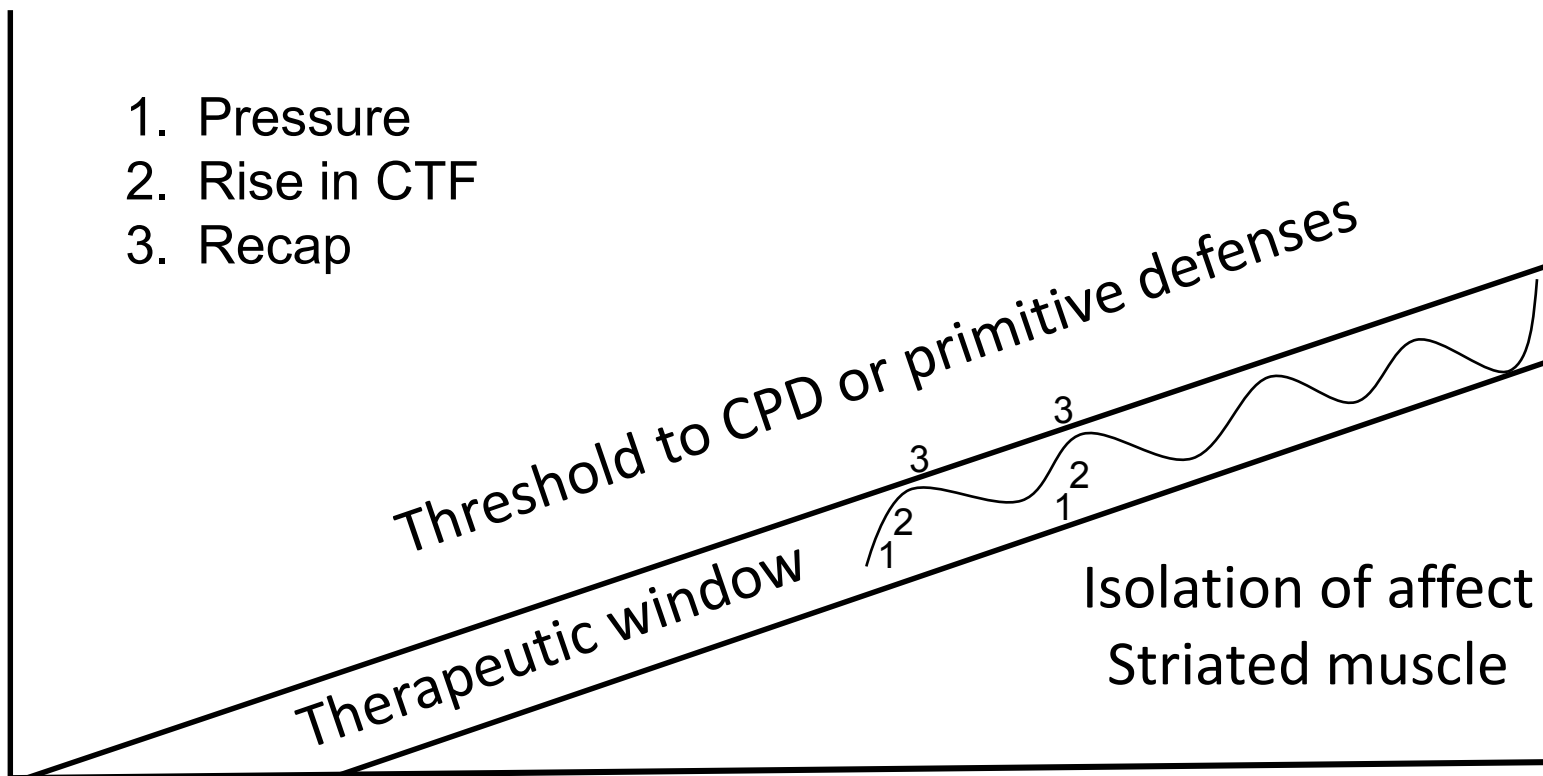
Isolation of affect  
Striated muscle

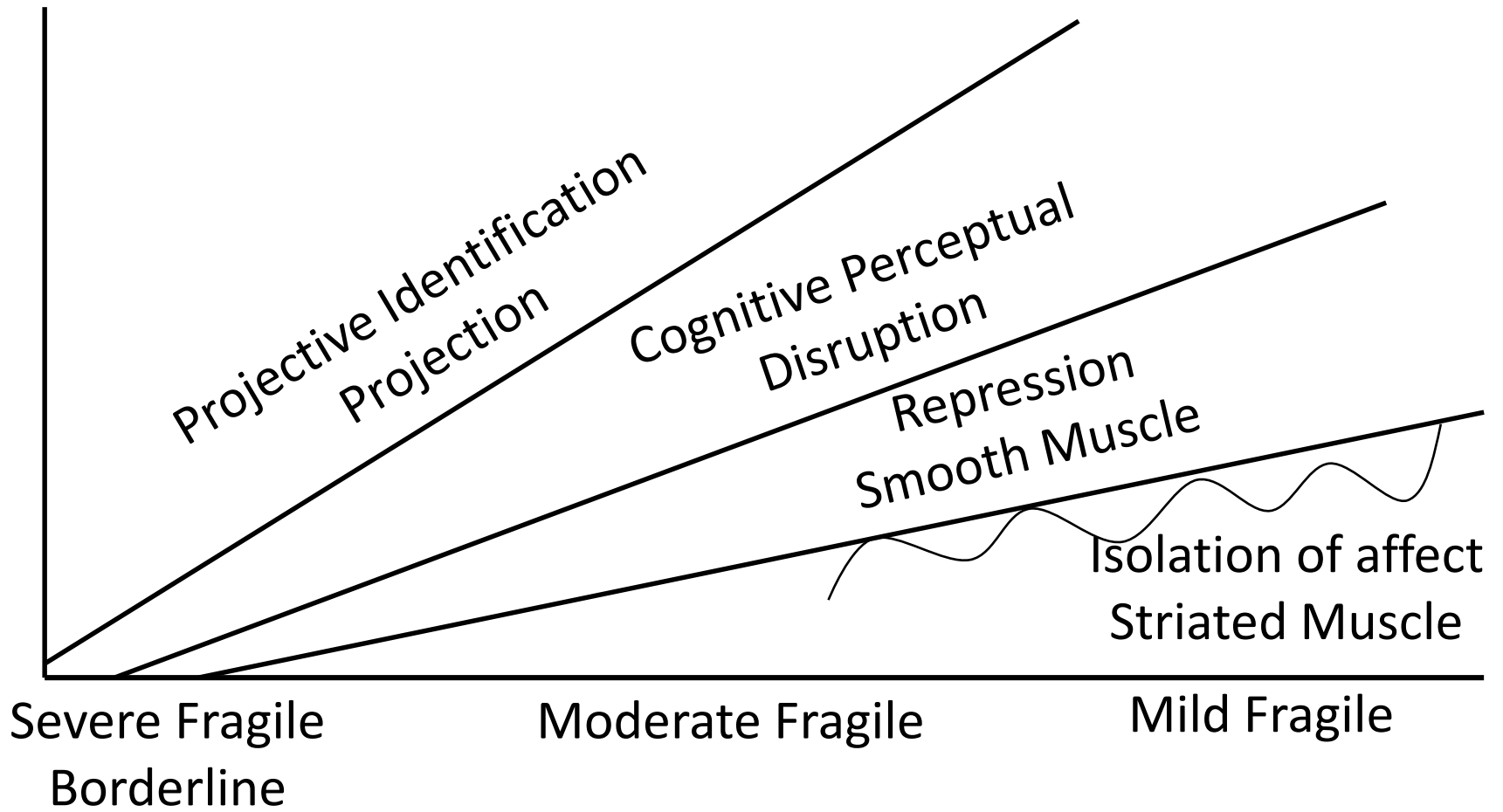
Severe fragile,  
borderline

Moderate  
fragile

Mild  
fragile

Unconscious anxiety and  
defense





# Rapidly Rotating Fronts

