



The Capacity Lexicon™



A translation system for
understanding your nervous system,
relationships, and yourself.



Because understanding
begins with language.



A Note About This Work

This lexicon has grown through years of client conversations, facilitated workshops, exchanges on social media, study, reflection, and lived experience.

It is offered freely because I believe language can reduce shame and increase understanding.

If this work supports you, I ask that you honour it by not reproducing or selling it as your own. Please feel free to share it by linking back to the original source rather than reposting the document.

Thank you for helping protect the integrity of this growing body of work.

~ **Meaghan Pawlowsky**

BEFORE YOU READ THIS

This is a living lexicon.

These definitions are not absolute. As capacity is dynamic and changing so is the language used when speaking about it.

You are not meant to use this as a dictionary of words to memorize. You are invited to use it as language to recognize yourself in.

The capacity lexicon relies on a non-linear format. You can jump around in it and return to it when something inside you feels confusing, intense, or unnamed.

This lexicon will offer you:

- Recognition
- Orientation
- Language for experiences
- A way back to yourself

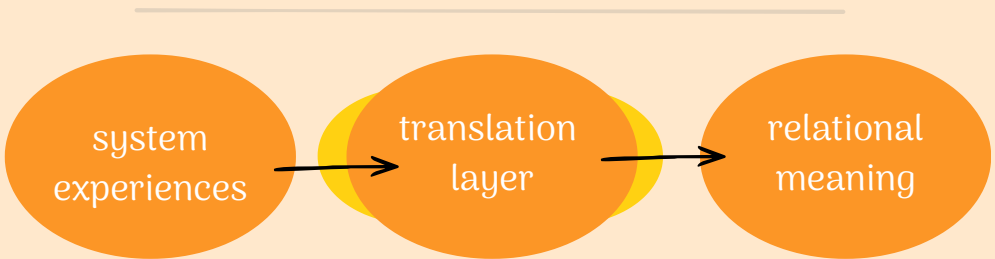
WHY CAPACITY LANGUAGE MATTERS

We live in a world with more information than ever before. Information, knowledge, and insight at our fingertips, and yet people still struggle...

Information alone doesn't expand capacity and people are lacking a compassionate framework for interpreting their experience.

Without language:

- We self-blame & shame ourselves
- We collapse complexity into identity
- We confuse system states with truth
- We confuse activation with incompatibility



This lexicon is a translation of system experiences to relational meaning



CAPACITY

DEFINITION

Capacity is your system's ability to stay connected to yourself, other people, and the present moment while encountering difficult, intense or meaningful experiences.

IN THE BODY

In your body, capacity often feels like having more than one possible response. You can pause, notice what's happening, and choose what feels most aligned instead of reacting automatically.

IN RELATIONSHIPS

Capacity helps you stay connected to another person without losing connection to yourself.

Capacity changes with what your system is carrying.



ORIENTATION

DEFINITION

Orientation is your system's ability to recognize where you are, what you're feeling, and what is happening in the present moment.

IN THE BODY

- Feeling grounded
- Feeling present and aware
- Knowing what you're noticing inside and around you
- Being able to pause before reacting

WHEN ORIENTATION SHIFTS

People often describe:

“I lose myself”

“I can't think clearly”

“I don't know what I need”

“I'm just reacting”

REFLECTION

Where in your life do you feel most like yourself?

Where do you lose that feeling most quickly?

CAPACITY IS A STATE OF MOVEMENT

States influence each other, and movement is not always linear

EXPANSION

You feel more open, curious, connected, and resourced. You have more capacity to engage.

CONTRACTION

You pull back to protect yourself. You may feel guarded, cautious, or hesitant to engage.

ACTIVATION

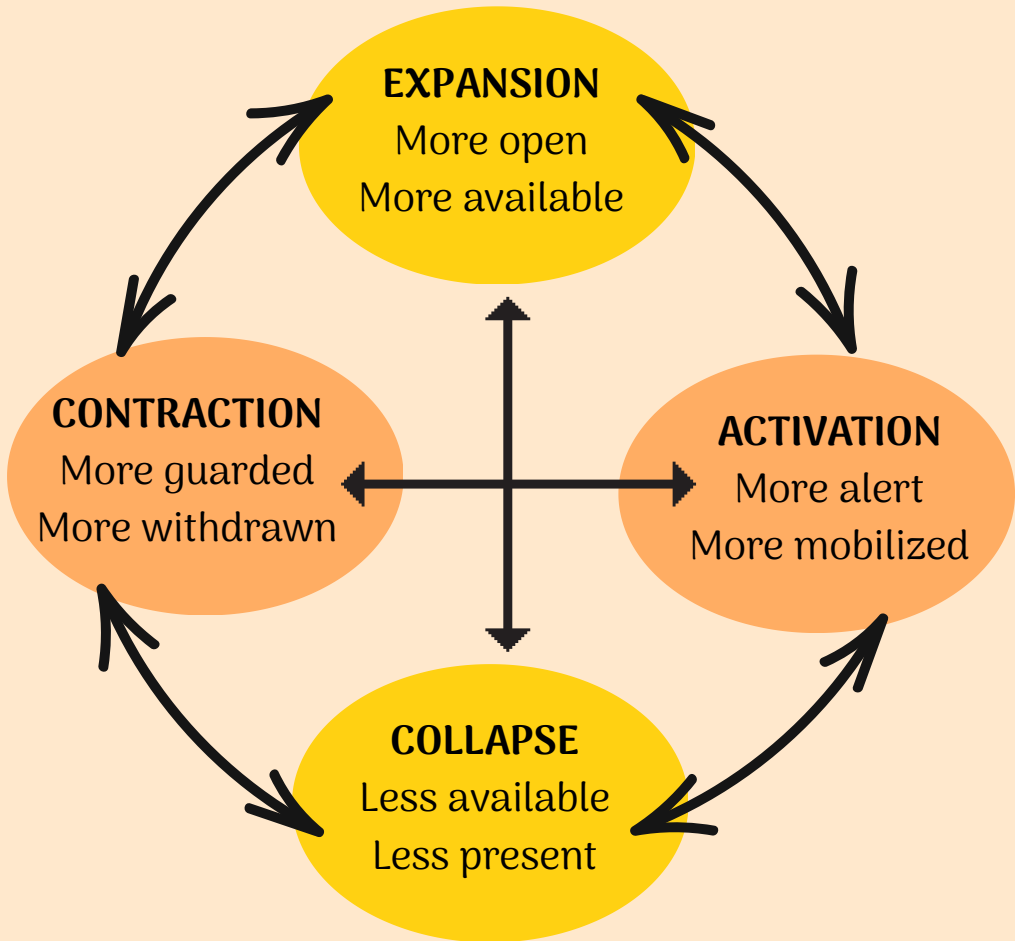
Your system is mobilized. You may feel urgency, stress, energy, or the need to solve or act.

COLLAPSE

Your system shuts down. You may feel numb, disconnected, or unable to respond.

CAPACITY SHIFTS MOMENT TO MOMENT

Arrows show possible movements, not
required paths.



You may move between these states
depending on your system, experience,
context, and resources.

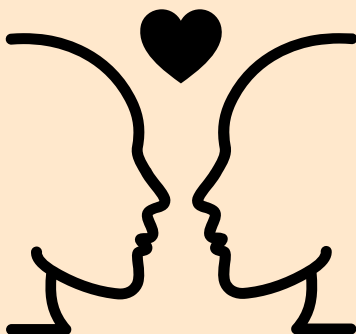
INTIMACY CAPACITY

THE FIELD OF INTIMACY

The ability to stay in contact with yourself and another person through emotional experiences, differences, uncertainty, rupture, and repair.



**EMOTIONAL
CAPACITY**



**RELATIONAL
CAPACITY**



**BOUNDARY
CAPACITY**



**REPAIR
CAPACITY**



**UNCERTAINTY
CAPACITY**

**Together, these capacities make
intimacy possible.**

EMOTIONAL CAPACITY



DEFINITION

Emotional Capacity is your ability to feel, and express your emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them or disconnected from yourself.

IN THE BODY

- You can notice your emotions without immediately reacting.
- You can cry, feel angry, or feel afraid without feeling completely overtaken.
- Your breathing may change, but you can still find your way back to it.
- You have enough space to sense and/or feel before you respond.

WHEN CAPACITY IS EXCEEDED

- Emotions can feel bigger than you can hold.
- You may react quickly or shut down completely.
- It becomes harder to think clearly or stay present.
- Your system shifts into protection.

Emotional capacity grows through experiences of being safely felt, expressed, and received.

BOUNDARY CAPACITY



DEFINITION

The ability to stay connected to yourself while sensing, communicating, and honouring your limits in relationship with yourself and others.

IN THE BODY

- A felt sense of inner space and self-contact.
- You can notice and express yes, no, maybe, not now
- There is orientation to your own internal line while still feeling connected to another person.

WHEN CAPACITY IS EXCEEDED

- Over-giving or over-adapting to maintain connection
- Difficulty sensing or naming your limits in real time.
- Guilt, anxiety, or collapse when prioritizing yourself.
- Loss of self-contact in relationship.

Boundary capacity grows through experiences of having your limits noticed, respected, and supported without losing connection to yourself or the relationship.

REPAIR CAPACITY



DEFINITION

The ability to reconnect after conflict, hurt, or misunderstanding.

IN THE BODY

- You can stay present after conflict instead of shutting down or escaping
- You can tolerate the discomfort of talking about what happened
- You can both offer repair and receive it from someone else

WHEN CAPACITY IS EXCEEDED

- You over-function to fix the relationship.
- You stay stuck in what happened.
- You continue carrying the responsibility for repair alone.

Repair capacity grows through experiences of conflict being met with accountability, care, and a return to connection.

UNCERTAINTY CAPACITY



DEFINITION

The ability to stay connected to yourself when you don't know what will happen.

IN THE BODY

- You can stay present without needing immediate answers.
- Your breath stays available.
- You can be curious without needing certainty.
- You can tolerate not knowing.

WHEN CAPACITY IS EXCEEDED

- Your mind loops or overthinks.
- You seek constant reassurance.
- You feel an urgent need for answers.
- Uncertainty feels unsafe.

Uncertainty capacity grows through experiences of facing the unknown with enough safety and support that your system learns it doesn't need certainty to stay connected

RELATIONAL CAPACITY



DEFINITION

The ability to stay connected to another person without losing connection to yourself.

IN THE BODY

- You stay connected to yourself while connecting with someone else
- You can care without taking on someone else's experience
- You can stay present through differences
- You can be close without losing yourself

WHEN CAPACITY IS EXCEEDED

- You lose yourself in the relationship.
- You feel responsible for the other person's emotions.
- You abandon your own needs to maintain connection.

Relational capacity grows through experiences of being fully yourself while staying connected to another person.

WHAT YOUR SYSTEM MAY BE DOING (WITHOUT IT BEING WHO YOU ARE)



These are ways your system adapts when something feels too much, too fast, or too uncertain.

These are protective strategies your human body has intelligently learned to do in order to keep you safe.

You don't have to claim them as who you are. You can simply notice them with curiosity.

ACTIVATION



WHAT IT IS

Your system mobilizes to increase energy, attention, and readiness when something feels important, uncertain, or threatening.

IN THE BODY

- Your heart rate increases.
- Your mind speeds up.
- Urgency or pressure rises.
- Restlessness, tension, or agitation.

YOU MAY NOTICE

- Overthinking or racing thoughts.
- A strong need to solve, fix, or control.
- Difficulty slowing down or resting.
- Feeling "on edge" or unable to settle.

THE SYSTEM IS TRYING TO..

Restore safety, predictability, or control.

COLLAPSE



WHAT IT IS

Your system reduces energy and responsiveness when something feels too much, overwhelming, or unsafe to engage with.

IN THE BODY

- Energy drops.
- Movement slows or feels heavy.
- Breath becomes shallow or reduced.
- Muscles feel limp, numb, or disconnected.

YOU MAY NOTICE

- Difficulty initiating action.
- Feeling distant, foggy, or shut down.
- Emotional flatness or reduced feeling.
- Wanting to withdraw or not be perceived.

THE SYSTEM IS TRYING TO..

Conserve energy and reduce exposure to overwhelm.

EXPANSION



WHAT IT IS

Your system increases capacity for energy, connection, and experience when there is enough safety and support.

IN THE BODY

- Breath deepens.
- Sensation feels more open and full.
- Movement feels easier and more fluid.
- There is more space in the chest, belly, or throat.

YOU MAY NOTICE

More emotional range or openness.
Increased curiosity or aliveness.
Easier access to connection or expression.
Less effort to stay present.

THE SYSTEM IS TRYING TO..

Integrate more experience while maintaining safety and connection.

CONTRACTION



WHAT IT IS

Your system tightens and narrows to create protection, control, or containment when something feels uncertain or overwhelming.

IN THE BODY

- Muscles tense or brace.
- Breath becomes smaller or held.
- Jaw, chest, or belly may tighten.
- Movement feels restricted or guarded.

YOU MAY NOTICE

Pulling inward or becoming more guarded.

Increased caution or hyper-awareness.

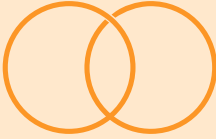
Less willingness to express or reach outward.

Feeling “closed off” or self-protective.

THE SYSTEM IS TRYING TO...

Create safety through containment and reduced exposure.

CO-REGULATION



WHAT IT IS

Your system settles, organizes, or stabilizes through safe connection with another system.

IN THE BODY

- Breath may slow or synchronize.
- Muscles soften gradually.
- Warmth or steadiness may return.
- Sensation of grounding or settling in presence.

YOU MAY NOTICE

Feeling calmer in someone's presence.
Easier access to breath or emotion.
Less internal urgency or noise.
A sense of being “held” without words.

THE SYSTEM IS TRYING TO...

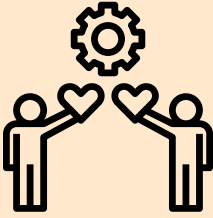
Restore regulation through relational safety and attunement.

**WHERE CONFUSION
BECOMES CLARITY**

Capacity Distinction™



Small shifts in understanding.
HUGE shifts in relationship.



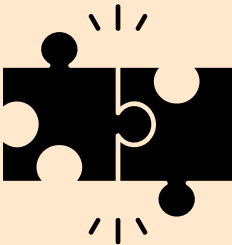
Capacity **VS** Willingness

- **Willingness** is your readiness to engage with something and its consequences.
- **Capacity** is what your system can hold while staying present, regulated, and connected.



Capacity **VS** Love

- **Love** is the felt experience of care, attachment, or connection.
- **Capacity** influences what that connection can sustain in practice.



Capacity **VS** Compatibility

- **Compatibility** is the alignment of direction, values, or needs between people or systems.
- **Capacity** is what each system can hold internally, regardless of alignment.



Capacity **VS** Desire

- **Desire** is the pull toward something, the felt sense of wanting, longing, or being drawn to an experience.
- **Capacity** is what your system can actually hold, sustain, and move through without overwhelm or shutdown.



Capacity **VS** Accountability

- **Accountability** is the act of taking responsibility through words, repair, or action.
- **Capacity** supports our ability to consistently practice accountability.



Capacity **VS** Readiness

- **Readiness** is the felt sense of being prepared in time to engage something.
- **Capacity** is what your system can hold in the present moment, regardless of timing.

RELATIONAL PATTERNS

RUPTURE/REPAIR

Disconnection is a natural part of relating. Repair is what brings people back into connection.

ATTUNEMENT/MISATTUNEMENT

Connection deepens when we are accurately felt and understood. Misattunement happens when we miss or lose contact with each other's inner experience.

PROJECTION/ FANTASY

Sometimes we relate to who someone is. Sometimes we relate to the story we've created about them.

EXTRACTION/ RECIPROCITY

Relating can move toward taking without mutual exchange, or toward mutual giving and receiving that supports both people.

WHERE THIS CONTINUES

Notice where you feel resistance, that may be an edge. Notice where you feel relief, that may be clarity. Notice where your body feels expansion, that may be curiosity.



What comes next is lived experience.

Take your Capacity Profile™ Assessment

If you haven't already

Join a Taboo Table Talk in-person

Practice language in community

1:1 Somatic Intimacy Coaching Sessions with Me

For deeper, personalized support

This is an introduction.

The language continues to evolve.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & INFLUENCES

The Capacity Lexicon™ is an original framework created by Meaghan Pawlowsky.

While the concepts, language, and organization presented in this lexicon are original, they have been shaped by years of study across the fields of interpersonal neurobiology, attachment theory, somatic psychology, trauma, sexuality, and relational neuroscience. This work has been particularly informed by the contributions of:

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Dr. Peter A. Levine – Somatic Experiencing®

Dr. Dan Siegel – Interpersonal Neurobiology

Dr. Diane Poole Heller – Attachment and Developmental Trauma

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk – Trauma and the Body

Dr. Gabor Maté – Trauma, Stress, and Emotional Health

Dr. Sue Johnson – Emotionally Focused Therapy

Esther Perel – Relationships, Intimacy, and Erotic Intelligence

Dr. Emily Nagoski – Sexual Wellbeing and Responsive Desire

Brené Brown – Shame, Vulnerability, Courage, and Belonging

The Somatica® Institute and the work of **Dr. Danielle Harel** and **Celeste Hirschman**

The Capacity Framework™, Capacity Profile™, Capacity Distinctions™, and The Capacity Lexicon™ represent my own synthesis, language, observations, and clinical coaching experience. Any errors or interpretations are my own.



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