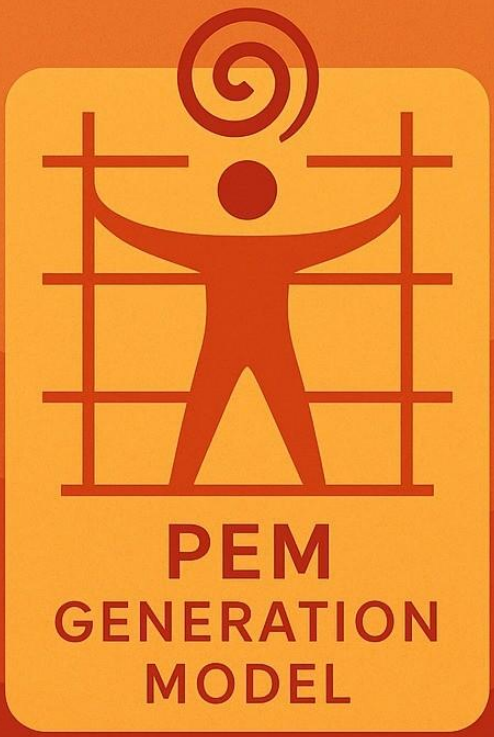
Foundations of PEM System Logics

A Framework for Understanding and Transforming Systems through Human Meaning



Anthonie Torré

Anthonie Torre PhD
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He developed an innovative model that connects personal experiences with societal systems, aimed at fostering sustainable resilience and justice. His approach is applied in healthcare, education, and sustainable employment
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"Suffering is not an individual failure, but a signal of system tension. When we learn to listen to what pain is telling us, space opens up for true transformation."
.
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Currently, Lavinia serves in an Administration Support role where she continues to build resilient systems and foster productive collaborations. Beyond her professional pursuits, she is deeply passionate about mental health and women's empowerment, having founded and led a Kenyan-based mental health NGO dedicated to advocating for initiatives that promote well-being and gender equality. Having navigated diverse administrative and financial landscapes in Kenya, Lavinia is committed to making a tangible difference in her community.

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Privacy Statement: PEM-VRR Precision Analysis & PEM Generation Kenya

CoVince B.V., Nexus NextGen B.V. and Elevate SMEs Ltd, as implementing partners of the PEM Generation project, fully comply with:

- the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as enshrined in Dutch and EU legislation;
- the Kenya Data Protection Act (DPA, 2019);
- and relevant international standards including the UN Guidelines for the Regulation of Computerized Personal Data Files and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs).

The PEM System Logic and the PEM-VRR Precision Analysis Methodology are built on the principles of privacy by design and privacy by default. All personal data processing adheres to:

- Purpose limitation: data is collected only for clear, justified purposes;
- Data minimization: we never process more than necessary;
- Consent: processing is based on explicit, informed consent;
- Security: data is protected through appropriate safeguards;
- Transparency: individuals are clearly informed about what data is collected and why.

Within PEM, privacy is considered not only a legal obligation but a fundamental human right. This care is essential in education, healthcare, youth support and social services. All data is processed within a strictly legal and ethical framework.

1. Introduction

1.1. Why PEM System Logics?

We live in a time when our systems are under strain. Healthcare, education, employment, and safety are all becoming overloaded. People feel exhausted, disconnected, or dispensable. But what if these are not signs of personal failure, but symptoms of systemic dysfunction?

PEM System Logics offers a new way of thinking in the old world. It starts from a radically different view of the human being: not as a problem to be fixed, but as a bearer of meaning within dynamic systems. It is not the individual that needs to be repaired, but the structure that must learn to listen. Suffering is not a defect but feedback. Stress is not noise but a directional signal. And transformation is not idealism, but necessity.

What sets PEM System Logics apart from other frameworks is precisely this shift: PEM System Logics focuses on systemic feedback rather than individual deficits, and it works through a narrative-based approach that sees every symptom, story, and signal as meaningful. It doesn't reduce people to diagnoses or data points but invites us to explore how meaning is made and where it breaks down, within real-life systems under stress.

In a world where systems often try to control what they do not understand, PEM System Logics offers a radically different lens: not focused on disorders or performance, but on meaning, relationship, and recovery. This framework shifts attention from the individual to the interaction between person and system and invites us to listen precisely to where the tension lies. Personal evolution becomes visible as societal navigation. Suffering as a signal. System tension as a pathway of learning.

This paper explains how PEM System Logics makes layered suffering visible, guides processes of meaning-making, and supports system renewal, ranging from Dutch care professionals and their clients to Kenyan youth and health workers. It is an invitation to develop system wisdom: to see trauma as language, data as dialogue, and growth as

a collective movement. PEM System Logics is not a method. It is a way of seeing. And when we see differently, we can begin to build differently.

1.2. Who Is this for?

This is an invitation for anyone who feels that the old systems are failing in care, education, labor, and public policy. A call to reimagine how we look, think, and act. To co-create a new logic: one that does not begin with control or efficiency, but with meaning, vulnerability, and resilience as building blocks of human development.

Whether you are a scholar exploring the intersections of psychology, sociology, gender, or decolonial Thoughts; a practitioner working with trauma, learning, or community care; a policymaker navigating reforms in mental health, education, or gender equity, particularly in African contexts; or simply someone grappling with Imposter Syndrome, burnout, or a deeper search for meaning, this book speaks to your reality. It is time for a new definition of value. A shift from fear and exclusion to trust, shared humanity, and systemic support for resilience.

PEM System Logics offers a bridge between disciplines and domains, between theory and practice, between individual pain and collective transformation. It is an invitation to ignite this transformation from within, to see suffering not as a defect, but as a signal and to build systems that support, rather than punish, human strength.

1.3. Structure

"Autonomy, compassion, and resilience are not luxuries, but essential foundations for human flourishing and social recovery." -Michaéla Schippers (2020)

In times of rising mental strain, economic insecurity, and social fragmentation, the urgency grows to look beyond individual symptoms and address the structural systems beneath. In terms of care, policy, and education, the focus often lies on individual diagnosis, largely driven by system pressures from insurance and funding models. This leads to suffering being medicalized or psychologized, with structural and contextual causes going unnoticed.

Critics like Dutch psychiatrist Jim van Os (2014, 2016) and Belgium psychiatrist René van den Bosch van Fenema (2021) warn that this diagnosis-driven approach often blocks recovery, reducing meaningful distress to disorders rather than responses to systemic pressure or life conditions. Public health expert Johan Mackenbach (2019) argues that health disparities across Europe are mainly explained not by lifestyle choices but by structural inequalities in income, education, and labor.

In education, the emphasis on measurability and competition fosters early performance pressure and contributes to youth mental health issues (Education Inspectorate, 2022). While individual therapy or resilience training can help, the system itself remains unchanged, causing patterns to repeat.

Healthcare professionals face similar challenges. Reports from the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP, 2021) point to a care system centered on efficiency, control, and output rather than relational care and autonomy. Burnout, moral stress, and turnover are treated individually, but their roots lie in a system no longer serving people.

The economic system plays a major role as well. Job insecurity and the erosion of social safety nets have created a generation living in chronic uncertainty. The WRR (2020) warns that many workers face layered insecurities, temporary contracts, unpredictable hours, limited

say over conditions. These systemic stressors are rarely addressed in psychological frameworks yet deeply shaped mental well-being.
C. Wright Mills formulated it in his book The Sociological Imagination (1959) as follows: “Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others; they have to do with his self and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware. A trouble is a private matter. Issues have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life.”
The ability to connect individual experiences of suffering to broader societal structures is essential, not only to alleviate the symptoms, but also to address the root causes.
PEM System Logics, short for Personal Evolution Modeling, is both an analytical and transformative framework that views personal development as embedded in social, institutional, and power structures. It is based on the premise that psychological suffering and stagnation are not isolated phenomena, but signals of systemic imbalance a view echoed by authors like Van Os (2014), Foucault (1975), and Schippers (2016).
Drawing from Foucault, PEM System Logics analyzes how normalizing power shapes our subjectivity through care, education, and policy. Jim van Os criticizes DSM 5 classification logic and emphasizes shared meaning-making in relational networks, reflected in PEM System Logics' contextual development models. Edith Schippers (2011) and others advocate for institutional responsibility to accommodate human diversity rather than regulate it through standardization (WRR, 2020; RVS, 2017).
PEM System Logics introduces three forms of system dysfunction that render systemic suffering visible:

- **System blindness** – the inability to recognize structural influences on individual functioning
- **System tension** – friction between personal development and collective expectations
- **System decay** – erosion of systems that have lost their original purpose (Biesta, 2012; Illich, 1971)

This analysis reframes suffering as system feedback, not personal failure.
But PEM System Logics goes further. It moves beyond strengthening individual resilience toward system transformation: from control to meaning, from adaptation to positioning (Rosa, 2016; Illouz, 2007). To enable this, PEM System Logics offers a precision analysis that not only understands systems but equips people to reorient within them.

The PEM-VRR methodology offers a four-part compass for healing, reorientation, and repositioning. Where critique exposes pressure points, this method provides paths toward flow:

1. **PEM – Personal Employability Mapping**
   Reveals how someone's inner potential, skills, and values relate to their social and institutional context. It provides direction through self-knowledge, not as self-optimization, but as meaningful positioning.
   VRR – Vulnerability–Resilience–Risk Analysis
   Maps the dynamic between vulnerability, resilience, and risk, both personally and in context, revealing where support is needed and where growth is possible.
2. **The mental model of universal suffering**
   Reframes psychological or social suffering as relational and meaningful, allowing the transition from existential struggle to insight, meaning making, and action.
3. **The three modes of suffering**
   Show how suffering evolves from lived experience (**Mode I: Existential experience**), to labeled identity (**Mode II: Diagnostic object**), to manageable system object (**Mode III: Strategic claim**). These modes reveal how meaning-making can shift under the pressure of diagnosis, institutionalization, and social norming, from personal ownership to external control.

Within PEM System Logics, these modes are key to understanding how suffering can be distorted, fixed, or liberated, depending on how much space systems allow for human meaning.

When this precision analysis is integrated with systemic diagnostics, a coherent framework that emerges:

- suffering is seen as a sign of disharmony
- healing begins with language and insight
- personal and economic relevance are reactivated.

The individual is no longer reduced to a symptom carrier but restored as a bearer of meaning. This fosters not only personal growth, but system wisdom.

4. **Compassion Focused Coaching (CFC)** is an applied method within the broader PEM System Logics methodology. CFC is designed to support individuals and groups in navigating system tension and existential suffering, focusing on the development of *functional compassion*. In this approach, compassion is not merely understood as empathetic concern, but as a systemic and practicable capacity to perceive both personal vulnerability and structural patterns clearly, and to act within them with conscious self-regulation. CFC integrates insights from psychology, philosophy, and systems theory, positioning itself as a coaching form that combines narrative reflection, precision analysis, and action-oriented guidance within complex societal contexts.

A special note of gratitude goes to Margaret Mutheu, whose deep insight and lived experience have shaped this chapter in profound ways. Her work with women entrepreneurs navigating imposter feelings, through the lens of PEM System Logics, is not only groundbreaking, but also deeply human. With clarity, courage, and compassion, she shows how inner doubt often reflects outer exclusion, and how women can reclaim their space, voice, and power through narrative and systemic transformation. This chapter would not exist in its current form without her contribution.

1.4. Final remarks

The concepts presented here show how systems, such as healthcare, education, employment, and safety are gradually losing the ability to operate on a human scale. They fail to recognize their own dysfunction (blindness), create friction with human experience (tension), and eventually lose legitimacy and effectiveness (decay).

Autonomy, compassion, and resilience are not accidentally eroded; they are systematically undermined by a dominant logic rooted in control, fragmentation, and standardization.

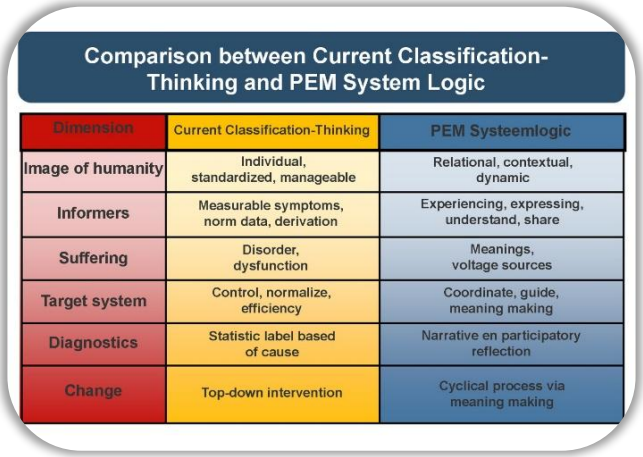
As Rosa (2016) notes, the modern obsession with predictability and control leads to alienation and loss of human resonance. Foucault (1975) demonstrates how power structures operate not through force, but through normalization and measurability, narrowing individual freedom. In education, Biesta (2012) critiques the reduction of pedagogy to outputs and tests, where telling is replaced by counting. Illouz (2007) shows how compassion is subordinated to efficiency through emotional bureaucracy. And Illich (1971) argues that systems designed to serve people can end up disabling them through functional overreach.

Thus, resilience is not strengthened but hollowed out by systems that trade relational meaning for functional control. PEM System Logics invites us to reverse this logic.

2. PEM System Logics as an alternative framework

In a world where suffering is mostly something to be managed, PEM System Logics offers a radically different starting point: not the individual as the problem, but the system as a bearer of meaning. Where traditional models focus on symptom control, PEM System Logics seeks to reveal deeper patterns of stress, stagnation, and resilience patterns embedded within social, institutional, and cultural structures.

This framework is not a diagnostic tool, but a way of seeing. A lens through which human behavior becomes understandable as system feedback, and personal development is redefined as a relational and contextual process.



Comparison between Current Classification-Thinking and PEM System Logic

Dimension	Current Classification-Thinking	PEM Systeemlogic
Image of humanity	Individual, standardized, manageable	Relational, contextual, dynamic
Informers	Measurable symptoms, norm data, derivation	Experiencing, expressing, understand, share
Suffering	Disorder, dysfunction	Meanings, voltage sources
Target system	Control, normalize, efficiency	Coordinate, guide, meaning making
Diagnostics	Statistic label based of cause	Narrative en participatory reflection
Change	Top-down intervention	Cyclical process via meaning making

Figure: Classification Thinking vs. PEM System Logics

2.1. Personal evolution vs. personal development

PEM System Logics (Personal Evolution Modeling) is an analytical, transformative, and practical framework that approaches personal growth as inseparably connected to social, institutional, and power structures. It does not place the individual at the center as an isolated

entity, but as a meaning-making being continuously interacting with its environment.

In many sectors, people are viewed either as economic subjects (productivity, cost factors) or passive recipients of care. In public policy, the term personal development is often used with the implicit assumption that it is a linear, measurable, and functional process, skills acquisition, goal achievement, or improved performance within standardized systems.

While such schemas offer clarity on causality, they fail to capture the complexity of human life. The linear approach assumes a direct input-output relationship, treating people as mechanical systems. In reality, humans live within dynamic ecosystems of constant interplay, disruption, and feedback.

Unlike static, linear concepts of development focused on measurable growth or conformity, personal relevance emphasizes meaning, context, and one's unique positioning in relation to others and the world. Economic relevance describes how systems value and utilizes people, often along lines of productivity or perceived risk.

PEM System Logics reframes personal development as **personal evolution**, a continuous alignment between inner and outer worlds, between vulnerability and strength, between self and system. Evolution here is not linear progress, but a wave-like movement of tension, resistance, and transformation. It calls us to grow ‘with’ the friction, not despite it.

This idea draws on broader theories of biological, cultural, and moral evolution, where change is cyclical**,** contextual, and emergent, not smooth but shaped by disruption. Influenced by complexity theory (Kauffman, 1995), moral development (Kohlberg, 1984), and evolutionary biology (Gould, 2002), PEM System Logics views growth as arising through rupture, not in spite of it.

PEM System Logics defines the human being as one who continuously navigates between personal relevance (Who am I? What matters?) and economic relevance (How am I valued or utilized?). It invites systems not to reduce individuals to roles or labels, but to recognize them as nodes in an ever-evolving web of relationships and meanings.

This creates space for adaptive justice: systems that do not standardize but recalibrate over and over based on what it truly means to be human.

Four distinguishing characteristics of personal evolution:

- **Non-linear but cyclical**: Evolution embraces relapses, stagnation, and redirection as natural parts of growth.
- **Relational, not isolated**: Growth unfolds in relationships with others, systems, and the rhythms of life. The "other" is not noise, but co-creator.
- **Normatively open**: Rather than asking "Are you good enough?", it asks "What wants to emerge through you?", unlocking potential beyond performance.
- **System-sensitive**: Personal evolution challenges systems to remain human-scale and meaning-oriented. The system itself becomes subject to transformation.

This approach shifts attention not just to the person, but to the structural conditions they live within. It opens space for an ethics of growth that is at once individual, collective, embodied, and institutional.

2.2. From relevant to accurate information

Against this background, PEM System Logics stresses the importance of distinguishing between two fundamentally different types of information:

Relevant information supports system functionality: statistics, risk profiles, performance metrics, checklists. This data is standardized, quantitative, and control oriented. Examples include absence days, test results, or employment outcomes.

In care and policy, relevant information also includes classification data: DSM 5 diagnoses, behavioral labels, functioning scores. This kind of information is presented as objective, yet often reduces complex lived realities to what systems can recognize and manage. It reflects not the person's truth, but the system's capacity to record.

Accurate information is grounded in the lived reality of the person. It includes emotions, relationships, life stories, and meaning making, qualitative data that cannot be reduced to numbers, but which guides real change.
For example, a young person who is consistently late, not because of apathy, but because they are caring for a sick parent. No one has ever asked. The system sees only non-compliance.
PEM System Logics argues that system transformation is only possible when accurate information is treated as legitimate knowledge. Where this lived reality is welcomed, collective learning can emerge. PEM System Logics shows how systems fall short and how they can be recalibrated to support the people within them.

2.3. Human meaning in care and policy

PEM System Logics posits that both personal and economic relevance must be understood in relation not in isolation. Only then can policy do justice to the interplay of life, suffering, and system design. A society that recognizes both dimensions has a stronger moral and strategic compass.
We already see this in early childhood. When economic relevance is minimal, everything revolves around personal relevance: being seen, feeling safe, learning at one's own pace, finding meaning through relationships. As the child grows, the frame shifts towards employability, efficiency, and productivity standards.
PEM System Logics shows that imbalance between these two forms of relevance often leads to system failure. For instance, when a struggling student is seen not as a whole person but reduced to an "underperformer".
René van den Bosch van Fenema (2021) argues that psychological suffering should not be treated primarily as a disorder, but as an intelligible response to lived experience and social context. This perspective aligns with PEM System Logics' core idea: suffering is system feedback, not individual malfunction.

Van den Bosch van Fenema advocates for personal diagnostics, moving beyond checklists like DSM-5 classification to honor the person's narrative, context, and subjectivity.
Recognizing the value of accurate information offers methodological tools to see individuals not as symptom-bearers, but as meaning-makers with potential, resilience, and context-bound development. This resonates with movements around lived experience expertise, contextual psychiatry, and narrative care, areas in which Van den Bosch van Fenema plays an active role.
Thus, PEM System Logics opens space for systems that do more than manage systems that understand. As a guiding framework, PEM System Logics views personal evolution as a relational process, where individuals shape and are shaped by their environments. Where development assumes conformity to systems, PEM System Logics invites systems to transform alongside the human being.
This resonates with the ethics of care, which asserts that growth is not merely an individual achievement, but a moral and social process occurring in the space between people (Tronto, 1993).

3. Universal human suffering

There is no single, universally accepted definition of human suffering. Yet at its core, it refers to experiences that are inherent to being human: loss, rejection, existential confusion, the confrontation with mortality, or feelings of meaninglessness. These are not anomalies of human functioning, but structural aspects of life itself. They are not peripheral, but central to human experience.

Within PEM System Logics, this type of suffering is not seen as something that must be "cured" by default, as is often the case in medical or psychological frameworks. On the contrary, universal human suffering is both an analytical and existential starting point. Why? Because suffering reveals something otherwise invisible: it shows us where tension exists between what a person needs in order to feel human, and what the system or culture does, or does not make possible.

Suffering thus serves as a signal function: it points to a mismatch between the human being and their context. This is not just on a psychological level, but within the social, cultural, and institutional dimensions of life. PEM System Logics makes this clear: suffering is never purely individual; it is always relational and systemic.

This reorients the central question, not "How do we fix this suffering?" but rather:

"What does this suffering reveal about the systemic dynamics in which this person is embedded?"

Suffering becomes not the end point of care or analysis, but the starting point for meaning-making, reorientation, and potential systemic transformation.

From this perspective, the following sections introduce a layered model of universal human suffering. It serves as a mental map within the PEM System Logics methodology, helping us understand suffering as embodied experience, relational rupture, and moral compass.

3.1. The nature of human vulnerability

Suffering is not a sign that something is "wrong" with an individual, but a fundamental part of the human condition**.** It arises from self-awareness, from the awareness of death, from the longing for connection and meaning, and from the encounter with uncontrollable realities. PEM System Logics encourages us to see suffering not as pathological or failure, but as an essential expression of vulnerability, a vulnerability that is personal, relational, and systemic.

Edith Stein's phenomenology (Stein, 1917/1989) shows that self-awareness is always born in relation to the Other. Suffering, then, is not only a personal experience, but a bridge, it carries within it the potential to deeply understand the suffering of another. According to Stein, empathy is not projection, but a direct recognition of the other as a meaning-bearing subject of suffering. From this recognition springs moral and existential responsibility.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1945) breaks from the body–mind dualism: the body is not merely the carrier of pain; it is the subject of experience itself**.** We do not suffer *next to* our body, but *in and through* it. Suffering manifests in tension, rigidity, the disruption of movement, or the altered way we relate to the world. Suffering is relational, it transforms our way of being-in-the-world and how the world responds to us.

From the perspective of polyvagal theory (Porges, 2011), suffering is viewed as dysregulation of the autonomic nervous system, often a response to perceived threat or social unsafety. The body shifts unconsciously between connection (ventral vagal state), protection (sympathetic activation), and collapse (dorsal vagal shutdown). Suffering arises when the system is trapped in stress responses without opportunities for relational repair and safety. In this sense, suffering is a neurophysiological signal of social disconnection, and healing occurs primarily in the context of recognition, safety, and co-regulation.

Trauma theory, especially in the work of Bessel van der Kolk (Van der Kolk, 2014), deepens this embodied view. Trauma, as an intense form of suffering, is not in the story, but in the body." It disrupts our ability to

feel, relate, articulate, and regulate. Suffering can thus not always be verbalized; it shows itself in behavior, muscle tension, sleeplessness, dissociation, or chronic physical symptoms. *"The body keeps the score."*

Relational theories such as Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy-Nagy's contextual therapy (Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy-Nagy,1986) argue that suffering often stems from imbalances in giving and receiving, loyalty, and recognition across generations. When injuries go unacknowledged, they take root as a deep sense of injustice. Here, suffering is embedded in the relational-ethical field, where healing requires doing justice to the story and position of the other.

Existential thinkers like Viktor Frankl (1946) and Irvin Yalom (1980) speak of suffering as a necessary encounter with life's core questions: freedom, mortality, responsibility, and meaning. Frankl (1946) observed that even in extreme conditions, humans continue to search for meaning, not as an escape from suffering, but as a response to it. In this view, suffering is not to be overcome, but to be positioned meaningfully.

Together, these perspectives affirm the core stance of PEM System Logics: suffering is not just a symptom, but a systemic and existential signal. A point of rupture where the human longing for connection, justice, and meaning comes under pressure. But also, a point of insight into who we are, where we're stuck, and where new space is needed.

PEM System Logics embraces a layered and coherent view of suffering as a central human experience. Whether we approach it as embodied experience (Merleau-Ponty, Van der Kolk), relational responsibility (Stein, Nagy), neurophysiological reaction (Porges), or existential tension (Frankl, Yalom), we are reminded again and again: suffering is not an anomaly. It is a meaningful, universal part of being human**.**

PEM System Logics offers the following working definition: **"**Universal human suffering is the inevitable experience of vulnerability, loss, and existential tension that arises from our awareness of self, others, and the finiteness of life. It is not a deviation, but a feature of our shared humanity, with both psychological and existential dimensions."

3.2. Historical, philosophical, and intercultural perspectives

Across the centuries, suffering has been a central theme in philosophy, theology, psychology, and literature. Diverse traditions have tried to make sense of suffering, not only as a personal experience, but as a cultural, spiritual, and social phenomenon.

In **Buddhism**, life is described as *Dukkha* fundamentally marked by suffering, instability, and incompleteness. According to the Four Noble Truths, suffering arises from craving, attachment, and the desire to control impermanence. Liberation is found in letting go and cultivating deep insight into the nature of reality (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000).

Arthur Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation* (1819), wrote that suffering is inherent to existence because it stems from the Will, a blind, irrational force underlying all life. As long as we identify with this Will, we are doomed to suffer. Only through detachment, asceticism, or aesthetic contemplation can temporary relief be found.

Existentialism also offers profound insights. Søren Kierkegaard spoke of existential anxiety as a kind of spiritual vertigo, the dizzying awareness of radical freedom and responsibility. Albert Camus**,** in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), argued that life is absurd: the human hunger for meaning clashes with a silent universe. Yet he calls on us to defiantly embrace this absurdity, without illusions. Jean-Paul Sartre said that we are "condemned to be free," and that this very freedom produces anxiety, doubt, and alienation.

What these thinkers share is the belief that suffering is not an error, but a fundamental aspect of existence.

Another crucial voice is Michel Foucault, who shifted the question from "what is suffering?" to "who defines suffering, and for what purpose?" In works such as *Madness and Civilization* (1961) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault shows how suffering is never just medical or moral but shaped by institutions and power structures. What counts as a disorder or deviation reflects the interests of the system as much as the reality of the individual (Foucault, 1961/2006; 1975/1995).

His analysis shows that suffering is also produced by normalizing power via classification, control, treatment, or exclusion. Foucault opens the possibility of reading suffering not only existentially or psychologically, but politically and institutionally: who decides what suffering is, and to what end?

In PEM System Logics, recognizing suffering as system feedback is not a side note is central. Suffering is not just a personal feeling or clinical symptom, but a form of meaningful resistance. It tells us something not only about the individual, but about the system they live within.

From this point of view, suffering should not be silenced or "treated away", but interrogated: What does this pain reveal about the boundaries, pressures, or blind spots of the system? What forms of humanity are excluded or denied?

Universal suffering, then, is not only insight into the human condition but into the systems we build. It is a signal of systemic tension, a rupture between human values and institutional structures. Suffering becomes a moral and analytical compass, showing where the fabric tears, where stagnation occurs, and where reorientation is needed.

3.3. Suffering as a system signal

Yet in most social, medical, and institutional systems, suffering is still seen as something to be eliminated or managed. It is objectified, categorized, and institutionalized malfunction to be resolved quickly. This severs it from its deeper meaning and existential depth.

In PEM System Logics, suffering is acknowledged as a signal of system tensional rupture between what someone needs in order to feel human, and what the system offers or demands.

Suffering arises when basic human needs recognition, safety, connection, meaning, bodily integrity, are ignored, denied, or excluded. This systemic interpretation aligns with Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility: the dynamic interrelation between body and world. Suffering disturbs the attuned "being-in-the-world," signaling that the alignment between body, environment, and meaning has broken (Merleau-Ponty, 1968).

Edith Stein (Stein, 1922) might describe this as a disruption of inner equilibrium, a rift between essence and expression. In that tension, the desire for transformation and meaning emerges.

3.4. Metaphor: suffering as a compass needle in a distorted magnetic field

Imagine that every person carries an inner compass sensitive instrument attuned to what they need in order to feel safe, connected, and meaningful.

This compass is not just guided by internal values or emotions. It is constantly influenced by the environment: family, work, policy, systems, culture. When the magnetic field is coherent, the compass works well. People know where they stand, what they feel, what matters.

But when the system, healthcare, education, labor, policy applies distorting pressure, the field becomes unstable. The compass trembles, spins, gets stuck, or swings erratically.

Suffering is that trembling needle, a signal that something in the environment clashes with one's inner sense of coherence. It does not necessarily mean the individual is broken; it means the alignment is broken.

In PEM System Logics, this inner compass is taken seriously. Not as poetic metaphor, but as a practical model: suffering is read as systemic feedback. It highlights blind spots, ruptures, and the need for reorientation, within both the person and the system. It reminds us that not all suffering results from measurable harm, sometimes it is the subtle signal that a system needs attention before harm becomes irreversible.

3.5. Universal suffering: a layered model

Suffering is rarely confined to a single dimension. An individual trauma may be rooted in structural injustice while simultaneously raising existential questions. PEM System Logics does not reduce suffering to a personal defect or clinical symptom, but understands it as a layered

and relational phenomenon, with psychological, existential, and systemic dimensions that influence and reinforce one another.
A multidimensional approach is essential for recognition, healing, and transformation, not by fragmenting suffering into separate domains, but by cultivating awareness of how these layers intertwine and interact.
This is why PEM System Logics proposes a layered model of universal human suffering, distinguishing three fundamental and interconnected layers:

- **The psychological layer**

This layer concerns the inner world: personal pain, trauma, loss, and emotional wounds. It includes internal conflicts, attachment issues, grief, coping strategies, and identity struggles, emerging in relation to oneself and significant others.
Examples:
A teenager who feels chronically rejected by an emotionally unavailable parent.
Someone who develops perfectionism as a survival strategy after early rejection.
Grief over the death of a parent that could never be fully processed.
Anxiety is rooted in insecure attachment.
This layer is about the inner experience of suffering: the narratives one has come to believe about oneself, the ways we protect ourselves from pain, and the invisible scars that shape daily life.

- **The existential layer**

This layer transcends personal biography and touches universal human tensions: the awareness of mortality, freedom, emptiness, and the confrontation with the Other. It revolves around the question:
"How do I relate to the fact that I exist?"
Examples:
Someone asking, "What is the meaning of my life?" despite an apparently successful career.
A student falling into crisis after graduation.
A caregiver feeling guilt and self-loss while caring for others.
A young person who doesn't identify with societal norms and questions whether they are truly "seen" by the world.
Where the psychological layer asks, "Why do I feel this way?", the existential layer asks, "What does this mean in the light of my existence?"

- **The systemic layer**

This layer explores how individual and existential pain intertwine with social structures, power dynamics, exclusion, norms, and institutional roles. It includes institutional violence, poverty, transgenerational transmission, and family or organizational patterns that suppress or pass on suffering.
Examples:

- A healthcare worker experiencing burnout in a system driven purely by productivity.
- A migrant-background youth excluded from school systems that fail to recognize their trauma.
- A woman carrying responsibility for multiple generations, repeating patterns inherited from her mother, with no words for her exhaustion.
- A child showing "difficult" behavior as a response to long-standing intergenerational tension.

This layer shows that suffering is not an individual flaw, but often a rational response to structural conditions.

Suffering is rarely confined to a single layer. A personal trauma (psychological) may stem from systemic injustice (systemic) and provoke existential questions about meaning (existential).
PEM System Logics advocates a multidimensional approach, in which recognition, processing, and transformation become possible through awareness of this layering.
By treating these layers not in isolation but in dynamic relation, suffering becomes visible as a signal of disharmony between inner and outer worlds, between personal experience and systemic context.
This approach aligns with the thinking of Abraham Maslow (1943), who proposed that humans have universal needs that function both hierarchically and interdependently. PEM System Logics builds on this by showing how unmet psychological, existential, and systemic needs manifest in overlapping forms of distress and how healing requires attention to all three.



Figure: Maslow

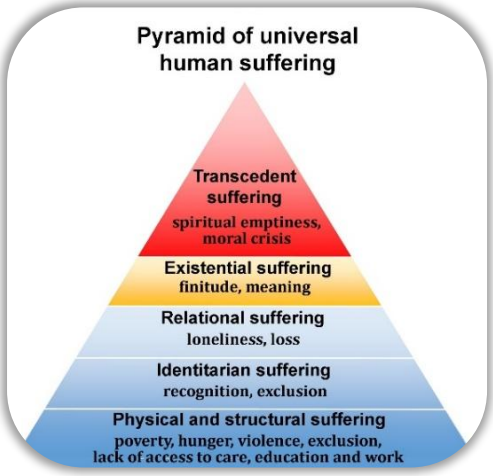


Figure: Human suffering

When basic needs such as safety, connection, or recognition are frustrated, psychological suffering emerges. When the need for self-actualization or meaning is undermined, existential suffering arises. At the systemic level, suffering is generated when fundamental human needs are structurally ignored, suppressed, or rendered inaccessible by the functioning of social, cultural, or economic systems.
Maslow himself later acknowledged that his pyramid was not a static hierarchy, people constantly move back and forth between levels. This aligns with how PEM System Logics approaches suffering: as dynamic, relational, and contextual. In this way, suffering is not merely a lack of something, but a signpost pointing to what is missing or excluded in the alignment between person and system.

When basic needs such as safety, connection, or recognition are frustrated, psychological suffering arises. When the need for self-actualization or meaning is undermined, existential suffering emerges. At the systemic level, suffering occurs when fundamental human needs are structurally ignored, suppressed, or made inaccessible through the functioning of social, cultural, or economic systems.
Maslow himself later acknowledged that his hierarchy was not a static model, but that people constantly move back and forth between layers, precisely how PEM System Logics understands suffering: as dynamic, relational, and contextual.
Thus, suffering is not merely a sign of something missing, it also serves as a pointer to what is excluded or misaligned in the relationship between person and system.

4. Suffering as system feedback: The three modes of suffering

Suffering is a fundamental aspect of human existence. It is not merely a medical or psychological problem, but an existential reality: people suffer because they are vulnerable, because they try to make sense of loss, failure, absence, or confusion. Instead of viewing suffering solely as an individual defect or symptom, PEM System Logics approaches suffering as system feedback, a signal of friction or imbalance between the individual and their environment.

This feedback may arise from personal experience, relational tension, or systemic structures. It signals a mismatch between who someone is (or wants to be) and the context in which they live, learn, or work. PEM System Logics does not treat this mismatch as merely a problem to be solved, but as a source of meaning and direction, if we learn to listen to what the suffering is trying to tell us.

The model below visualizes how universal human suffering, under increasing system pressure, can shift from a raw existential experience to a medicalized and eventually structurally embedded phenomenon within institutions.

The model distinguishes three modes of suffering:

- **Existential experience**:
  Suffering as a raw, inner experience that calls for personal processing and meaning-making.
  Examples: grief after loss, existential doubt, moral confusion, fear of death.
  In this mode, suffering remains closely tied to the personal story, without immediate need for classification or justification.
- **Diagnostic object**:
  Suffering becomes objectified and categorized within medical or psychological systems. It is given a diagnosis, a disorder, a treatable "problem."
  Examples: depression, ADHD, dyslexia.
  This objectification (e.g., via DSM-5; see Insel, 2013) can

provide structure and clarity but also risk reduction. The person's unique story may be overshadowed by classification.

- **Strategic claim**:
  Suffering becomes instrumentalized within systems of recognition, compensation, or entitlement. It gains strategic value in procedures or policy.
  While often legitimate, this mode raises ethical concerns about authenticity, institutional pressure, and the politics of recognition.

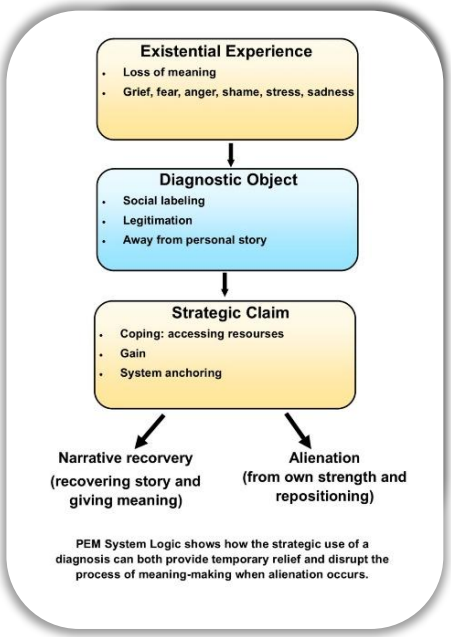


Figure: The Three Modes of Suffering

These three modes form an analytical framework for understanding how suffering is acknowledged, or erased, within systems. This is the terrain in which PEM System Logics operates: it takes the individual's

experience seriously, explores the narratives that emerge from it, and interrogates the systemic logic that either captures or excludes those stories.

By recognizing suffering as system feedback, PEM opens space for transformative meaning-making, the ability to use suffering not as a pathologized endpoint, but as a resource for personal growth, relational attunement, and structural innovation.

This movement from experience, to disorder, to institutional logic, exposes how loss of meaning and repetition of suffering can arise, even within care systems meant to heal. The task of PEM System Logics is to recognize**,** question, and reorient these modes, bringing us back to the original meaning layer: the embodied and relational nature of suffering as a key to system renewal.

4.1. From classification to reconnection

Read the model top to bottom, it describes a process many clients experience:
The vertical line shows the path from crisis to coping.
The branches at the bottom show two possible long-term outcomes: either narrative recovery or alienation. The core message: the way a diagnosis is used significantly shapes a person's recovery process.

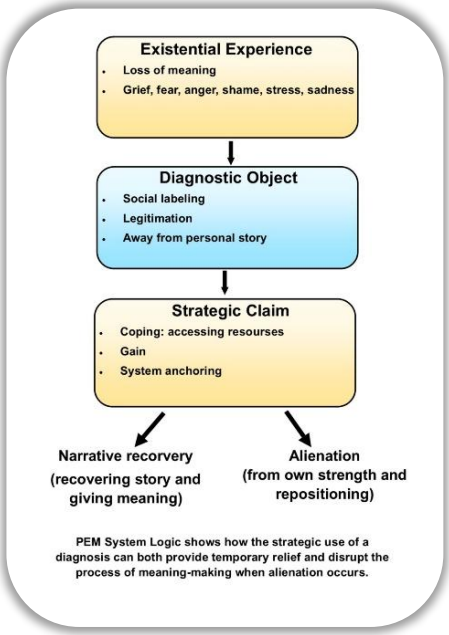


Figure: The Three Modes of Suffering

1. Existential experience *(top yellow box)*
This is the starting point: a deep personal crisis or rupture. What's happening here?
A loss of meaning occurs due to illness, unemployment, divorce, trauma, or other disruptive events.

Emotions like grief, fear, anger, shame, stress, and sadness are intense.
The person is in a phase of existential uncertainty.
This is a moment of vulnerability, where people are seeking grounding or support.

2. Diagnosis *(middle blue box)*
The next step is the assignment of a formal or informal diagnosis.
What's happening here?
The person receives a social label ("depressed", "burned out", "problem case").
There is legitimation: the person is recognized as someone entitled to receive help.
At the same time, the personal narrative loses power: the individual's unique life story is subordinated to a medical or societal label.
The diagnosis grants access to care but may also contribute to alienation.

3. Strategic claim *(bottom yellow box)*
The diagnosis is then used as a means to access help or maintain position.
What's happening here?
Coping: the diagnosis is used to gain access to support systems.
Benefit: it can offer social, financial, or practical advantages.
System embedding: the diagnosis becomes embedded across different systems, healthcare, labor, family, education, and social relations, eventually becoming an organizing principle in one's life.
Examples**:**
In healthcare, the diagnosis determines treatment options.
In the family, a child's behavior is increasingly interpreted through the diagnostic lens.
In education, a person may receive extra support, or limitations, based on the label.
In social relationships, others may approach the person as "impaired" or "a problem."

4. Two possible directions

The model shows two potential outcomes:

Narrative recovery

"Rediscovering one's story and creating meaning"

The person regains personal meaning in their narrative. Growth, healing, and self-direction become possible often supported through PEM methods.

Alienation

"Entrapped in the system, losing oneself"

The person becomes alienated from their identity and story, locked into the system and the diagnosis. Recovery then requires conscious repositioning and detachment from the label.

"PEM System Logics shows how the strategic use of a diagnosis can offers temporary relief but may also disrupt the process of meaning-making when alienation occurs."

In other words: a diagnosis can help, but it may also block personal recovery if one becomes overidentified with it or clings to it as a fixed identity.

5. System blindness, systemic tension, and system decay

Across all societal domains, from healthcare and education to economy and security, the absence of accurate and multidimensional information about human suffering leads to blind spots in both policy and practice. What is often missing is the lived narrative of individuals about their suffering in direct relation to the social, economic, and cultural context in which that suffering arises and persists. This kind of knowledge rarely fits into standardized questions or classification systems, but rather reveals itself through experience, meaning-making, and bodily signals. Yet, policy and care systems often continue to operate based on abstract indicators, model-based thinking, or standardized intake procedures, while the true meaning of stress, loss, or trauma is hidden within the lived world of the individual. Poverty, debt, exclusion, or relational loss not only affect someone's sense of security, but also their physical and psychological resilience. Nevertheless, such factors are rarely integrated into how suffering is understood or treated.

This is not a random failure of systems. Within PEM System Logics, this is seen as a structural dynamic that unfolds on three levels:

- **System blindness:** the inability of institutions to see people's actual suffering, because it lies beyond the parameters of formal knowledge, measurement tools, or classifications.
- **System tension**: the growing pressure that arises when the subjective, embodied, and relational nature of suffering clashes with the system's logic of recognition and validation.
- **System decay**: the moment when this tension is not addressed but becomes frozen in bureaucratic inertia, repetitive re-diagnosis, or exclusion, causing the original suffering to become institutionally reproduced.

The dominant "disorder logic," as sharply criticized by Van Os (2014) and Fenema (2022), reinforces this dynamic: it individualizes, medicalizes, and decontextualizes suffering. There is no room for meaning-making, embodiment, or socio-cultural context as legitimate

sources of knowledge. The system cannot hear what it is not designed or willing to perceive. And this is exactly what PEM System Logics seeks to interrupt, not by forcing individuals to fit into classifications, but by making the system receptive to relational, contextual, and embodied complexity.

From this perspective, suffering becomes visible as a signal of system relations, not merely as a personal experience, but as an indicator of structural imbalance. This opens a new paradigm for care, policy, and analysis, one that works from dynamic understanding rather than static defects.

In the next section, we unpack how this dynamic unfolds: What causal patterns create systemic tension? And how can we trace them in terms of vulnerability, resilience, and risk.

Phase	Concept	Definition	Implications	PEM approach
1. Beginning of alienation	System blindness	Inabilty of sytems to own dysfuntion in recognize.	Symptom control, medicalization, marginalization of experiential knowledge.	Legitimizes personal stories, physical signals and cultural meaning as knowledge sources.
2. Escalating mismatch	System voltage	Friction between human experiences and system structures.	Burnout, dropout, dropouts, growing distrust and not being heard.	Precision analysis (VRR,PEM): relational (context) tuning, meaning and system reflection.
3. Structural dysfunction	System decay	Structural loss of legitimacy and responsiveness of systems.	Institutional inertia, loss of confidence, legitimacy crisis, democratic deficit.	Co-creative system design based on relational ethics, self-management and restoration of compassion, autonomy and resilience.

Figure: PEM System Logics Approach

5.1. Causal dynamics of system failure

When systems lack access to accurate information about human suffering, specifically the lived reality of individuals in relation to their social, cultural, and economic context, a phenomenon called system blindness occurs: the inability to see where the real friction lies. Instead

of responsiveness, we see fixation on abstract indicators, classifications, or behavioral labels.

As Shonkoff et al. (2009) states: “The absence of lived experience in institutional feedback loops undermines the system’s capacity to respond meaningfully, eventually corroding its legitimacy.”

PEM System Logics does not view this as an incidental error, but rather as a structural dynamic that unfolds through three stages:

System blindness: Systems are tuned to abstractions and protocols, not to embodied human experience.

Systemic tension: Individuals and professionals experience increasing pressure when their reality conflicts with what the system recognizes or allows.

System decay: When this tension remains structurally unresolved, the system loses its legitimacy, effectiveness, and human resilience.

As Foucault (1975) described, institutions generate their own reality through classification, normalization, and exclusion. Today, this is reflected in standard intakes, risk profiles, DSM 5 diagnoses, or production quotas, frameworks in which the human story often doesn’t fit.

Mental healthcare is a telling example. According to Jim van Os (2014) and Fenema (2022), psychological suffering is too often reduced to a DSM-5 diagnosis, stripping it off its social, cultural, and personal significance. The result is a medicalized practice that fails to listen to the stories behind behaviors.

The consequences are tangible:

- A young person living in poverty is labeled as "unfocused."
- A family breaks down because loyalty dynamics don't fit into a protocol.
- A care provider burns out in a system that allows no time for connection.

The root of system failure lies not in unwillingness, but in structural simplification. What is excluded is precisely that which carries meaning.

5.2. Stress as a feedback signal

Within PEM System Logics, stress is not primarily viewed as an individual symptom, but as the embodied expression of systemic tension, a signal of dissonance between what people need in order to feel human and what the system actually enables.
As Van der Kolk (2014) puts it: “Behavior is the language of unprocessed pain.”
When such behavior is not understood as a signal, but treated as deviation or resistance, we miss the opportunity to see where the system fails to align with human need. Stress then loses its signaling function and becomes reduced to a malfunction, something to be fixed or suppressed.
PEM System Logics interprets stress differently: as a sensitive sensor of mismatch, for example:

- Young people who withdraw because the school system offers no safety or flexibility.
- Parents who get stuck because of youth care ignore complexity or family loyalty dynamics.
- Professionals who are structurally in conflict with their own ethical compass.

But in practice, stress is often not fresh or temporary. Many individuals enter care systems with long-term stress histories. They carry loads of disappointment, repeated helplessness, and abandonment, often resulting from:

- The sudden withdrawal of trusted professionals.
- Transitions between agencies without proper handover.
- Failing quality of care. Interference from systems like juvenile courts or police.

A complete lack of change in their living environment.
In such cases, we speak of secondary and tertiary traumatization:

- **Secondary traumatization** occurs when systems themselves cause harm through powerlessness, pathologization, or bureaucratic inertia.

- **Tertiary traumatization** refers to the system's failure to relieve or transform suffering meaningfully leaving the context unchanged, deepening despair, and destroying trust in help or healing.

What began as a natural reaction to crisis becomes a chronic pattern of repetition and disruption. The stress people experience is not only due to the original event, but to the fact that they were not seen, not heard, and not helped in its aftermath.

Instead of medicalizing or managing stress, PEM System Logics invites us to listen to what it truly communicates:

- Where was meaning denied?
- Where was safety absent?
- Where did the context remain static?

Chronic and recurring stress is often the result of systemic failures, not individual weaknesses. This kind of stress demands a system that can learn, adapt, and attune, not through control or standard solutions, but

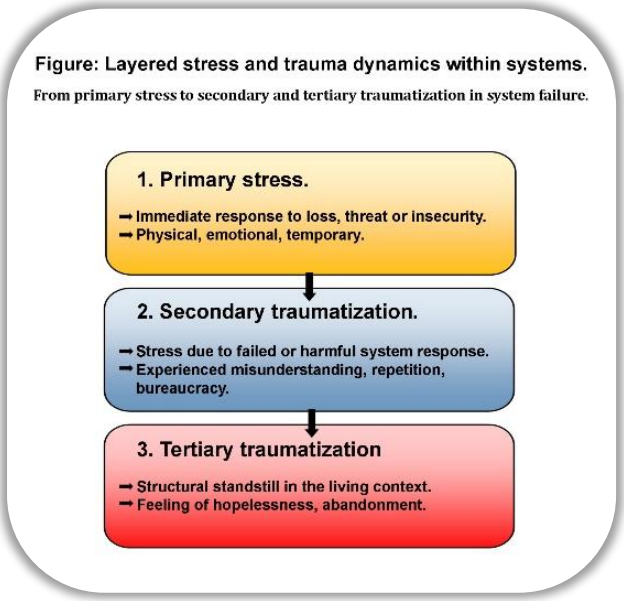


Figure: Layered stress and trauma dynamics within systems.
From primary stress to secondary and tertiary traumatization in system failure.

through sensitivity, flexibility, and the understanding that suffering always arises in relation.

The model helps us understand that trauma does not stem solely from the event itself, but more so from how systems respond, or fail to respond. By recognizing these layers, we can intervene earlier and prevent temporary stress from evolving into deep, chronic wounding.

6. Livelihood security, stress-trauma, and system transformation

Stress and trauma are not separate phenomena but two sides of the same systemic response.

In classical approaches, stress is often seen as a temporary state of tension, while trauma is viewed as a psychological wound caused by an extreme event. Within PEM System Logics and in light of epigenetic research, these experiences are understood as fundamentally interwoven. Trauma is not an isolated incident but the accumulation and internalization of stress that is too intense, too prolonged, or too unpredictable to process.

Stress and trauma do not emerge in a vacuum. They arise in contexts that fail to provide the basic conditions needed for regulation. When systems, such as healthcare, education, work, or government do not offer safety, rhythm, recognition, or meaning, people become dysregulated. Especially when livelihood security is under structural pressure, due to poverty, exclusion, violence, or institutional distrust, stress becomes chronic. This chronic stress becomes trauma when the body and mind can no longer find a path toward recovery.

PEM System Logics reads stress-trauma as system feedback. It signals where systems fail in their core function: to carry and regulate human vulnerability. Instead of individualizing trauma or reducing it to a medical diagnosis, PEM System Logics makes visible where structural imbalances exist and where change is needed, not as a personal solution, but as a collective responsibility.

This perspective demands a fundamentally different approach to care, education, and public policy:

Not: “What’s wrong with you?”

But: “What went wrong in the system that failed to protect you?”

Not symptom control, but systemic restoration. In this view, trauma is not only a wound, but also a guidepost. It points us toward where humanity was systemically missed and where it can be re-embedded.

Examples of contextual stress-trauma:

- A young person with complex PTSD after years of sexual abuse in an unsafe home, who receives no support at school and is labeled as “difficult.”
- A survivor of partner violence who constantly has to “prove” their story to receive help, deepening the trauma rather than healing it.
- People who live in prolonged uncertainty about housing or residency status, becoming chronically stressed, not because they are “mentally weak,” but because the systems around them are persistently unsafe.

In short: trauma is not a sign of individual weakness. It is often a logical response to an unsafe or fragmented environment. PEM System Logics helps make those contexts visible and shows the path toward systemic healing: by restoring safety, rhythm, and meaning in people’s environments.

6.1. Stress-trauma as a guide for system transformation

Trauma is more than a wound, it is a messenger. As Bessel van der Kolk (2014) powerfully shows, “the body keeps the score”, it remembers what went wrong. Trauma is not only personal suffering, but a reflection of social**,** relational, and structural breakdowns. It unmistakably shows us where systems fail to provide safety, meaning, or connection.

Systemic practitioner Els van Steijn (2020) emphasizes that disruptions in the order, connection, or balance of systems will eventually surface, often through symptoms like stress, blockages, or repetition. If we learn to listen to what trauma is trying to tell us, it becomes a compass, not a final diagnosis, but a starting point for redesigning.

In PEM System Logics, stress-trauma is therefore a teacher, revealing where healing is possible and necessary. Not just for individuals, but for communities and institutions. Trauma shows us:

where systems fail to listen, where safety is absent,

where rhythm is disrupted, where recognition was denied.

When trauma is seen as feedback rather than failure, it opens a different kind of knowledge: relational, sensitive, and directional. In this way, trauma is not the end of a story, but the beginning of systemic awareness.

PEM System Logics views trauma not only as a burden, but also as a signal, it shows where systems break, where fractures lie, and where restoration is needed. Trauma reminds us that people are not meant to function apart from their context. When systems fail to offer safety, recognition, or perspective, people will survive instead of live. A society that acknowledges trauma also recognizes its own capacity for transformation.

One example is the blended family, a setting where multiple loyalties, grief processes, and attachment patterns converge. Tensions often arise between stepparents and children, or between biological parents and new partners, precisely because the system does not allow for these complex dynamics to be positioned safely and meaningfully. The points of pain, conflicts, withdrawal, loyalty dilemmas are not individual failures, but signals of system tension. When this tension is not suppressed but understood as a directional sign, the blended family can evolve into a resilient system in which differences are acknowledged, new bonds can emerge, and every member's position is granted meaning and safety.

6.2. Livelihood (In)security as a traumatic context

Livelihood security means having access to a stable foundation in life. It includes the availability of essential conditions that allow individuals to live independently, with dignity, and with a sense of future. A reliable income plays a crucial role; it allows people to meet their daily needs without the constant worry about money. A safe and affordable home is also an essential place of rest, retreat, and belonging.

Access to quality healthcare, including mental health support, is critical for well-being. Education creates pathways for personal development and access to the job market. And just as important is social embeddedness: the experience of being part of a community, of

mattering, of having relationships where one can be authentic and take on meaningful roles.

When this foundation is solid, people experience a sense of safety and trust. They dare to plan for the future, take initiative, and feel competent, connected, and able to contribute.

When these conditions are missing or undermined, a traumatic context arises in which people are exposed to ongoing stress, unpredictability, and loss of agency.

The constant uncertainty around income, housing, healthcare, or connection activates the body's stress system continuously. People become trapped in a state of chronic hypervigilance or shutdown, which shows up as restlessness, sleep problems, irritability, and heightened threat perception (hyperarousal), or emotional numbing, passivity, and withdrawal (hyperarousal). In both cases, this is toxic stress, stress that persists without room for recovery, with damaging effects on body and mind (Shonkoff et al., 2012; Keles, Friborg & Idsøe, 2020).

This stressful context also impairs the ability to think clearly and maintain control over daily life. Chronic livelihood insecurity undermines the ability to plan, to structure one's life, and to trust in the future. People lose their capacity for emotional regulation, focus, and motivation, which may appear as unwillingness or inability, but in fact are the natural outcomes of chronic stress (Keles et al., 2020).

In addition, those living in insecurity are often excluded from meaningful social roles. Without access to work, education, or active participation in community life, they not only lose income or routine, but also a key part of their identity. They feel less valued, less recognized, and lack a sense of belonging (Nussbaum, 2011; WRR, 2020). This exclusion deepens feelings of shame, powerlessness, and isolation. People begin to believe that their situation is their own fault, that they have failed. Trust in the support system fades, especially when previous attempts to seek help have been met with bureaucracy, misunderstanding, or stigma. As a result, people isolate themselves socially, avoid contact, and gradually withdraw from society (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Movisie, 2022).

What makes this situation especially painful is that this kind of suffering is rarely recognized as legitimate. In many support systems, the focus lies on the individual: seeking psychological disorders, behavioral issues, or medical causes, while the social and structural origins of complaints remain invisible. Symptoms like fatigue, concentration problems, overthinking, low mood, or irritability are then labeled as depression, burnout, ADHD/ADD, or other DSM diagnoses, not as logical responses to an unlivable environment (Dehue, 2008; Van Os, 2014).

This creates a tragic paradox: people are treated for symptoms of a system that simultaneously obstructs their recovery. Rather than improving the foundations of life, financial stability, housing, social connection, help is focused on adapting the individual to a harmful context. This leads to symptom management, medical labeling, and self-stigmatization, while the real causes remain unaddressed (Putters, 2023).

7. Emotion Regulation, Tension Release, and Feedback Discharge in PEM System Logics

This chapter focuses on the dynamics of emotion regulation, tension release, and feedback discharge as essential core themes within PEM System Logics and the Compassion-Focused Coaching (CFC) model. The aim is to clarify how human systems, individuals, families, and organizations, constantly balance between building up, processing, and releasing emotional and affective tensions.

In PEM System Logics, emotions and affects are not merely individual experiences; they are fundamental carriers of information in the broader systemic process of meaning-making, stress regulation, and adaptation. Without effective emotion regulation, the system becomes imbalanced, tension accumulates, internal communication stagnates, and both physical and psychological complaints may arise.

Tension release refers to the natural processes through which a system discharges accumulated tension and restores itself through expression, movement, conversation, ritual, or silence. Feedback discharge is the broader mechanism through which internal signals are once again shared externally, allowing the system to recalibrate itself.

7.1. Emotion and Affect: The Basis of Mind-Body Communication

Within PEM System Logics, we distinguish between emotion and affect. Affect refers to the initial, bodily tension or sensation that arises before one can put it into words. For example: sudden trembling, a clenched jaw, a dry mouth, or a lump in the throat, without knowing exactly why. Affect is physically felt before words (pre-verbal) or meanings are attached to it.

Emotion is the conscious feeling that emerges from this, wrapped in a narrative. Emotions are feelings we can usually name: anger, sadness, fear, or joy. For example: “I feel angry because someone crossed my boundary.”

Emotions arise in response to a situation, contain a clear narrative, and are consciously experienced.
This distinction helps professionals identify exactly where someone is stuck in their emotion regulation process.
When affect regulation is disrupted, the connection between body and psyche becomes disturbed. That's why within PEM System Logics, the focus often begins with learning to recognize and regulate bodily signals before there is space to name or understand emotions.
This approach aligns with Silvan S. Tomkins' affect theory, which describes affect as a primary, bodily-physiological signal that precedes conscious emotional experience (Tomkins, 1962–1992). Neurologist Antonio Damasio also emphasizes the importance of this body-psyche connection. In his 'somatic marker hypothesis,' he demonstrates that disrupted body-psyche communication leads to dysregulation in decision-making, self-regulation, and social functioning (Damasio, 1994).
Within PEM System Logics, this distinction helps to more precisely analyze which interventions are necessary to restore body-psyche communication. Sometimes talking or giving meaning is not the first step. Sometimes recovery begins precisely with regulating bodily signals and relearning how to feel at a pre-verbal level.

7.2. Emotions as System Data within PEM System Logics

In PEM System Logics, emotions are not seen as disruptive by-products but as guiding sources of information. They tell us something fundamental about the state of our internal system and our positioning within broader social, relational, and cultural systems.
Through the PEM VRR Precision Analysis, this data is linked to mental and physical vulnerability patterns and connected to system contexts (see also chapter 10).
Emotions therefore provide essential precision data within PEM System Logics about what is happening both internally and externally. In coaching and guidance, the goal is to make this data conscious and

usable, so that clients do not remain stuck in diffuse tensions but can consciously, so they can act from self-awareness and systemic understanding.
Within the PEM-VRR Precision Analysis methodology, this data is systematically interpreted by linking signals of mental and physical vulnerability to systemic contexts.

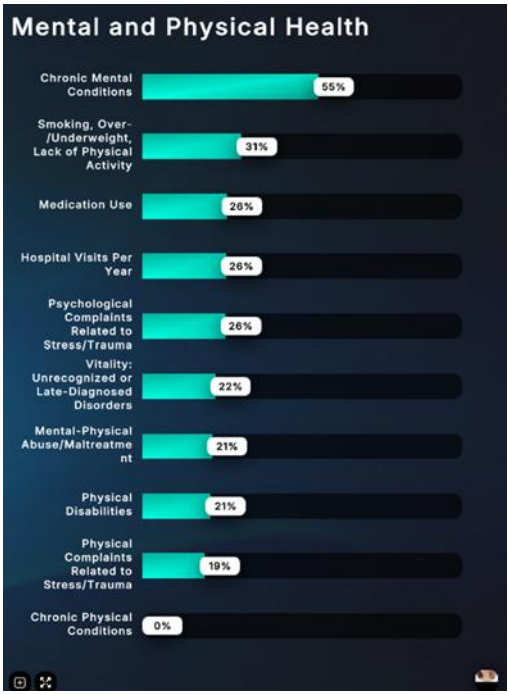


Figure: Mental and Physical Health

The graph ‘Mental and Physical Vulnerability’ concerns the analysis of one specific case: a 43-year-old woman, single mother of three children, who has been on medical leave for 1.5 years due to burnout and depression. In her case, 55% of chronic mental conditions and 0% of chronic physical conditions are reported.

What stands out is that she does experience physical complaints, such as headaches, muscle tension, and fatigue, but does not recognize or interpret these as part of her psychological state. This points to a disrupted body-psyched interaction: there is little or no integration between emotional signals and bodily awareness.
Within PEM System Logics, this case would be understood as a pattern of long-term affective dysregulation and systemic alienation, where the complaints are real but indicate fundamentally disrupted emotion regulation and systemic feedback. It was already known that medical causes had been ruled out. This suggests a pattern where emotional signals such as fear, sadness, or frustration are insufficiently recognized or integrated and manifest only at the mental level.
The data from PEM-VRR Precision Analysis helps make such patterns visible and traceable back to systemic dynamics within her relational context.

Within Compassion-Focused Coaching (CFC), tension release and feedback discharge are systematically guided through:

- Body-oriented observation
- Affect recognition
- Narrative feedback discharge
- Systemic integration

Recognizing and modulating affective signals is crucial within Compassion Focused Coaching for sustainable system transformation. Emotion regulation here means developing the skill to receive, tolerate, influence, and integrate affective and emotional signals.
This is not just about suppressing or expressing emotions, but primarily about learning to regulate them in relation to both internal states and external contexts.
For example: someone who tends to express anger under tension learns within PEM to slow down and attune instead of acting immediately. According to Van der Kolk (2014) and Schore (2003), this requires awareness of one's own autonomic state (such as fight or

flight response) and practicing regulation through body-oriented and relational interventions.
Within PEM System Logics, affect modulation refers to absorbing, adjusting, and releasing tensions and feelings in the body. This happens automatically via the nervous system (such as breathing, heart rate, and muscle tension) but also consciously through how one deals with emotions.
Affect modulation thus means maintaining a healthy balance between feeling tension, expressing or regulating that tension, and giving it meaning.
This balance is essential for feeling mentally and physically healthy. The concept is supported by, among others:

- Schore (2003), who positions affect modulation within the affective neurobiology of attachment,
- Porges (2011), who elaborates the importance of autonomic regulation via polyvagal theory,
- Bessel van der Kolk (2014), who places affect modulation at the center of trauma recovery and body-oriented therapies such as somatic experiencing and yoga therapy.

PEM System Logics emphasizes that emotion must not only be approached cognitively but also physiologically and relationally. An emotion such as fear or sadness is not just a thought or feeling but also a bodily signal and a relational expression.

7.3. The Systemic Aspect of Emotion

The systemic aspect of emotion within PEM System Logics refers to the fact that emotions always function within a broader social and relational context. Emotions are not merely individual phenomena; they are shaped, regulated, and expressed in interaction with systems such as families, teams, or cultural structures.
For example: if within an organization anger is not discussable, individual anger will manifest through indirect behaviors such as sarcasm, withdrawal, or physical complaints. This mutual process is called systemic-emotional feedback.

Emotions do not function solely at the individual level; they are always part of broader systemic dynamics. When an individual experiences anger or sadness, for example, this is both influenced by and has an impact on the social and relational system in which that person exists. Within PEM System Logics, this is considered a reciprocal feedback loop:

- From System to Person: Cultural norms, family patterns, and social expectations strongly determine which emotions a person learns to recognize, express, or suppress.
- From Person to System: The way someone regulates their emotions contributes to the dynamics within groups, teams, families, and organizations. For example, chronic withdrawal or emotional outbursts affect the safety and effectiveness of the system.

7.4. Personal Consequences of Disturbed Systemic Emotion Regulation

While the systemic aspect of emotion describes the interaction between individual and system, this section specifically addresses the personal consequences when emotion regulation within the system is chronically disturbed. This means when emotional expression and processing are structurally limited, suppressed, or redirected by social patterns, rules, or expectations.

The consequences for the individual affect three layers: physical, psychological, and existential. Think of identity loss, burnout, physical complaints, or a sense of inner emptiness.

In summary:

- Systemic aspect: How emotions function within a broader social context and how systems shape emotional expression.
- Personal consequences: How these systemic patterns impact an individual's well-being, identity, and health.

When emotions are not allowed to flow freely within the system, they are often internalized. This has concrete personal impact.

People may carry tension for long periods, which accumulates in the body. This often manifests persistent stress symptoms, headaches, sleep problems, or physical pain without clear medical cause. The body, as it were, continues to hold onto unprocessed emotions.

Additionally, confusion about one's own identity can arise. When someone repeatedly learns that certain feelings are not allowed to exist, their connection to their own needs and boundaries fades. They no longer clearly know where they begin and end in relation to others.

Finally, relationships may come under strain. Because emotions are not openly expressed, patterns of withdrawal, dependency on others, or recurring conflicts emerge. There is no longer an open and safe space to share feelings, leading to further isolation or struggle.

Emotion regulation within PEM System Logics is more than an individual skill. It is a systemic process in which personal, relational, and societal layers influence each other. Recovery begins with affect recognition, tension release, and rediscovering one's own original narrative.

8. The mental model

Every system is built upon a particular image of the human being. And every image of the human being is rooted in a mental model silent set of assumptions about what is 'normal,' what constitutes 'deviation,' and how we deal with pain, loss, and behaviors that fall outside accepted boundaries.

In most healthcare and education systems, this mental model is implicitly based on deficit thinking, where suffering is primarily viewed as a symptom of defects within the individual.

PEM System Logics offers a fundamentally different perspective: a human image in which suffering is not something to be fought, but something that seeks to be understood, not as a malfunction, but as a signal; not as personal failure, but as relational feedback.

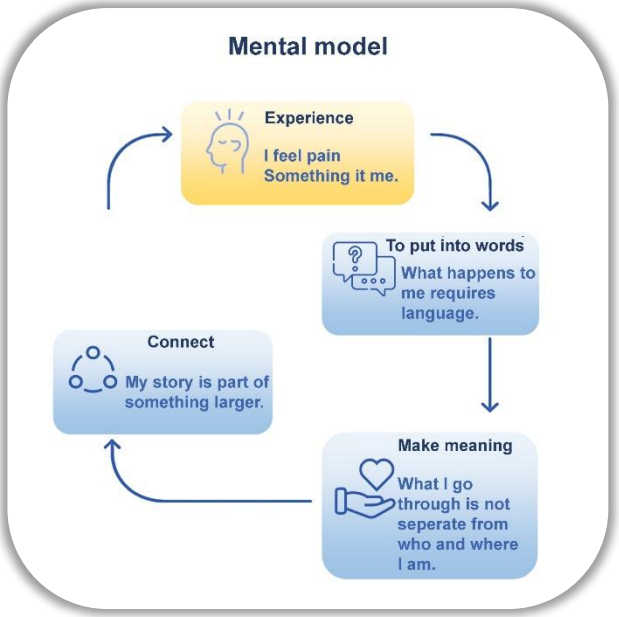


Figure: Mental model

The mental model proposed here lies at the heart of PEM System Logics. It provides language and structure to stop reducing suffering to diagnostic labels and instead reposition it as a meaningful process. A compass. An entry point to what is misaligned, not only within the individual, but also within the system that surrounds them.

8.1. Meaning-making as a cyclical process

Within PEM System Logics, the focus is not on the cause of suffering but on how a person relates to it. Suffering is not merely a symptom or problem to be solved, it is an experience that demands meaning. If suffering goes unspoken, it continues to circulate as symptoms, silence, or tension.

The process of meaning-making is therefore at the core of the mental model used in PEM System Logics. This model applies across types of suffering, from personal grief to societal exclusion and is based on four essential functions, illustrated in Figure 2: Experiencing, Articulating, Understanding, and Connecting. These form a dynamic and cyclical process, not a linear path. Through this cycle, suffering is transformed into capacity and insight.

- **Experiencing**

"I FEEL PAIN. SOMETHING IS OFF."

The individual becomes aware of suffering, whether somatic, psychological, existential, or systemic. Often, this is felt before it can be named.

Goal: Create space to simply feel, unburdened by analysis.

- **Articulating**

"WHAT I'M GOING THROUGH NEEDS LANGUAGE."

The person seeks words, metaphors, symbols, or narratives to shape the suffering. This is the beginning of narrative work.

Goal: Make suffering expressible and shareable, thereby more bearable.

- **Meaning-making**

"WHAT I'M EXPERIENCING IS PART OF WHO I AM AND WHERE I AM."
Reflect on the narrative within biographical, social, historical, and spiritual contexts. This affords insight into patterns and meaning-making.
Goal: Recognize and situate suffering without needing immediate resolution.

- **Connecting**

"MY STORY IS PART OF SOMETHING LARGER."
Suffering is linked to others, collective narratives, values, or meaning. This can lead to solidarity, compassion, action, or inner peace.
Goal: Transform suffering through connection, cultivating personal and systemic transformation.

8.2. The body as carrier of compassion

Many struggles with emptiness, exhaustion, or lack of direction. PEM System Logics invites a radical shift: not seeing the individual as broken, but the system as reflective. Suffering is not meant to be fought but understood. Every person carries a story yearning to be heard and embodied.
The mental model outlined here maps an inner journey: from raw experience → words → meaning → connection. This process helps undo the alienation from self and agency that systems often enforce. Centering the existential experience in the lived personal narrative opens space for autonomy, direction, and resilience.
This approach manifests directly in Compassion-Focused Coaching (CFC), where self-compassion and inner safety are seen as the foundation for growth. Scientific insights, such as the polyvagal theory and epigenetics, support this perspective and show that the body is not an obstacle, but a powerful ally in healing.

8.3. Compassion-Focused Coaching (CFC)

CFC is derived from Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT) by Paul Gilbert (2018). It integrates cognitive therapy, evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, and Buddhist psychology. Initially developed for clients struggling with shame and self-criticism, it has been adapted here for coaching, emphasizing inner safety, self-compassion, and resilience as prerequisites for leadership and growth.

Traditional coaching often targets behavior, beliefs, and goals, but real change requires a reassuring bodily foundation. Compassion is not just intellectual, it's embodied. Coaches must tune into the client's physiology (stress levels, safety, social engagement). Using polyvagal theory and epigenetics, CFC fosters trauma-aware, system-sensitive coaching.

8.4. Polyvagal Theory

Stephen Porges (2011) outlines three primary autonomic states:

- **Ventral-vagal**: calm, social engagement, learning, compassion.
- **Sympathetic activation**: fight-or-flight—fear, anger, tension.
- **Dorsal-vagal shutdown**: freeze, collapse, dissociation.

Our nervous system continuously and unconsciously evaluates safety, this is called neuroception. In CFC, coaches first detect the client's neurophysiological state before intervening, enabling regulation, safety, and trust. Compassionate coaching based on this theory means first learning to recognize the state someone is in before intervening. A coach or practitioner who understands the physiological logic of stress can more precisely attune to the client's nervous system state, enabling safety, regulation, and growth.

Deb Dana's work (Dana, D., 2018) in The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy: Engaging the Rhythm of Regulation offers an exceptionally clear and practical guide to applying these insights in therapeutic and coaching contexts. For CfC within PEM System Logics, Dana's emphasis on mapping client states, using state-specific interventions,

and fostering an environment where ventral-vagal activation can re-emerge is essential. It strengthens the relational foundation required for deep transformation in both individual and systemic coaching processes.

8.5. Epigenetics and intergenerational transmission

Epigenetics examines how experiences, such as stress, trauma, care affect gene expression, without altering the DNA sequence. These biological scars not only stem from early life but can echo across generations.

In coaching, this means working with more than the “now”, people’s biological sensitivities, history, and current context. Chronic early stress can permanently sensitise the stress system; yet positive relational experiences can also recalibrate it.

What does this mean in practice:

- Understand distinctions between born identity and contextual adaptation.
- Identify inherited patterns vs. personal choices.
- Recognize echoes from ancestral pain and ways to return the agency to clients.
- Develop sensitivity to how stress-patterns mirror relational systems, not personal deficits.

Thus, coaching becomes multilayered and relational: helping clients reposition themselves within their life narratives and networks, not from distance, but through embodied, compassionate collaboration.

9. Compassion Focused Coaching in practice: a brief illustration

We often assume that people who show "lack of motivation," "resistance," or "procrastination" simply don't want to act. That they're lazy, less driven, or just not trying hard enough.
But what if such behavior is not rooted in unwillingness, but in unsafety?

Insights from polyvagal theory and epigenetics show us that much of this behavior is biologically anchored. The body reacts to tension, to threat, even to cues we're not consciously aware of. A person who has experienced stress, rejection, or unpredictability from an early age may unconsciously shift into a state of freeze or withdrawal.

This might manifest as not replying to messages, postponing schoolwork, or suddenly dropping out of a project. Not because they don't want to, but because their nervous system blocks access to action mode at that moment.

Once we understand this, everything changes. We no longer see problem behavior, but protective behavior.

Instead of asking: "Why are you doing nothing?", we ask: "What do you need to feel safe enough to move again?"

Below are some core themes and practical principles drawn from Compassion Focused Coaching (CFC) training.

Practical methods for compassion coaches and practitioners:

- **State tracking**
  Help clients recognize their autonomic state through bodily signals (e.g., heart rate, muscle tension, breathing).
- **Embodied interventions**
  Use breathwork, gentle movement, or visualizations of safety (e.g., the "safe place").
- **Vocal modulation**
  Speak slowly, with warmth; use humming or sighing together to co-regulate.

- **Co-regulation**
  The coach's calm, non-judgmental presence provides a secure anchor.
- **Compassionate self-talk**
  Encourage language that evokes safety and kindness, tailored to the client's current state.

Application within the mental model:

- **Experiencing**:
  Make space for bodily sensations without judgment.
- **Articulating**:
  Use safe language and tone to help clients express inner experience.
- **Meaning-making**:
  Understand physiological responses as meaningful signals, not as "weakness."
- **Connecting**:
  Restore relational safety to make room for collective meaning and healing.

9.1. Exercises and application

Exercise 1 – State mapping in the mental model
Invite the client to revisit a recent stressful or emotional experience and map it:

- What bodily sensations were present? (Experiencing)
- What words came up? What was said, internally or externally? (Articulating)
- What did this experience mean to you? What was your interpretation? (Meaning-Making)
- To whom or what did you feel connected, or disconnected, at that moment? (Connecting)

Reflect together on the shift in autonomic state using the polyvagal framework. (See chapter 7.4)

Identify the dominant emotion (anger, sadness, fear, stress, shame) and rank them in order of intensity.

Exercise 2 – Precision analysis through the lens of compassion
Use the PEM Precision Analysis framework to explore the client's vulnerability, resilience, and risk patterns. Then, ask the client to formulate a compassionate response for each domain:

- What do you need right now?
- What could you kindly say to yourself?

Exercise 3 – Exploring epigenetic echoes
Work with intergenerational patterns:

- What themes or reactions do you recognize in yourself that also appeared in (grand)parents?
- In what contexts did you learn to suppress stress, shame, or pain?
- What would it mean for you to approach this differently?

Use visualizations or letter-writing to explore compassionate breaks in these inherited chains.

9.2. Summary and application

- **Compassion is rooted in physiology**: we can only feel and express it when our nervous system experiences safety.
- **Polyvagal theory** helps coaches identify a client's current state and choose the appropriate intervention.
- **Epigenetics** underlines the importance of relational and environmental safety for lasting change.
- The **mental model** provides a guiding structure: from unspoken-raw experience → language → meaning → connection.
- Compassionate coaching is both regulating and healing, offering new embodied experiences for mind and body.

This knowledge is essential in any context involving vulnerability, development, and personal leadership.
For professionals, this chapter offers a scientific and embodied foundation for taking compassionate coaching seriously, not only psychologically, but biologically.

10. The PEM-VRR Methodology- From Classification to Embodied Meaning

PEM System Logics frames suffering as a multidimensional phenomenon rooted in systemic, psychological, and existential layers. It does not reduce suffering to an individual disorder but understands it as meaningful feedback on the imbalance between person and context. PEM and VRR form the analytical core: they reveal causal relationships and correlations between system factors and individual experiences, making visible what previously remained hidden, the story behind behavior, the pattern behind vulnerability, and the potential behind stagnation. For example addressing urban poverty requires integrated analysis and response across all layers, not symptom-based actions.

Personal Employability Mapping (PEM) provides people with insight into their path of personal growth. Not as a judgement, but as an illuminating mirror. By systematically relating traits, preferences, learning capacity, and abilities to environmental expectations, a clear view emerges of where someone stands, what they can do, and what they need. PEM makes inner direction tangible, which is often lacking when suffering dominates.

Vulnerability–Resilience–Risk (VRR) reveals another layer: the relational, social, and structural dynamics that either amplify or mitigate vulnerability. VRR makes it clear that vulnerability never exists in isolation but is shaped by systemic pressure, social context, or pattern repetition. Where PEM maps the inner world, VRR connects it to the outer world.

Together, they form a powerful precision instrument, allowing suffering to be acknowledged, understood, and re-positioned:

In the existential mode of suffering, PEM helps to regain direction and meaning, and VRR provides space for vulnerability without medicalizing it.

In the diagnostic mode, they jointly break the fixation on classification by uncovering the story behind symptoms and exposing system interaction.
In the strategic claim, they prevent diagnosis from becoming an endpoint. They offer a perspective on growth, restored agency, and renewed relevance, personally and economically.
PEM and VRR enable people to return to their original narrative: not as a patient, problem, or profile, but as a meaningful human being in development. This is the essence of precision analysis within PEM System Logic: focused, relational, and radically humane.

10.1. PEM: Personal Employability Mapping

PEM is a data-driven observation and analysis method that maps the personal and economic relevance of the individual. It measures traits, capacities, preferences, and behaviors in relation to the living, learning, and working environment. PEM provides direct insights into talents, learning potential, resilience, and career opportunities. Results are linked to 16 universal organizational competencies and displayed in a personal dashboard. The user receives a clear overview of 54 underlying personal competencies, skills, and traits. PEM helps people recognize and purposefully develop their potential, with a view toward employability and sustainable choices.
It is specifically designed for individuals in learning or transitional phases, such as youth, job seekers, or recovering professionals. This method promotes self-direction, increases agency, and supports psychological safety. For professionals, PEM offers sharp, reliable data for guidance and intervention.
Organizations use PEM for better matching, prevention, and positioning in healthcare, education, and labor. PEM is deployed in various countries, including the Netherlands, Kenya, India, and Sri Lanka.
It works in conjunction with tools such as VRR (Vulnerability–Resilience–Risk) and the AI Personal Buddy. PEM reveals patterns in behavior, motivation, and context that would otherwise remain

invisible. It translates personal data into concrete action perspectives on both individual and systemic levels. The method is evidence-informed and grounded in an ethical and relational framework.
PEM offers people language, insight, and direction in their personal development.

10.2. VRR: Vulnerability–Resilience–Risk Analysis

VRR is an advanced analysis method that clarifies an individual's vulnerability, resilience, and risks. The analysis shows how someone navigates between stress and capacity, based on personal and contextual factors.
Through a digital questionnaire, scores are generated and processed in real time in a personal dashboard. The results reveal patterns that often go unnoticed, such as overload, underlying stress, or hidden resources. VRR supports the individual in the crucial steps of recognition, acknowledgment, and insight, fundamental for recovery and growth.
The method complies with GDPR standards and ensures that all data is validated and securely processed. The results are applicable both quantitatively and narratively: they guide personal reflection and professional support.
VRR helps distinguish between genuine vulnerability and logical responses to systemic pressure or context. It clarifies where risks accumulate and where resilience is already present. Professionals use VRR to more quickly reach the core in coaching, therapy, or support. For organizations, it offers valuable data for prevention, stress management, and systemic improvement.
The analysis supports sustainable decision-making in care, education, work, and well-being. In combination with PEM, VRR serves as a precision tool for both personal and collective development. The model is applicable in individual support as well as in large-scale policy contexts. VRR makes vulnerability discussable and resilience visible.

This methodology forms the backbone of PEM System Logics. It creates a common language for understanding suffering not just as a symptom, but as structured feedback, embedded in human development, social context, and institutional design.
In the next chapters, we move from this conceptual and methodological foundation to concrete expressions of suffering in specific contexts, beginning with Imposter Syndrome as a poignant example. There, PEM and VRR illuminate how individual doubt is deeply intertwined with structural exclusion, and how precision analysis can help reclaim personal and collective agency.

10.3. From data to dialogue

The Precision Analysis Methodology is the foundation of this approach. By integrating personal data (such as scores, words used, choices, and contextual characteristics) with existing models (like the three modes of suffering), a rich and layered picture emerges. The AI Buddy does not convert this data into standard advice, but into invitations for dialogue. What does this outcome mean to you? How do you feel about it? What's the part of your story that hasn't yet been told?
This transforms technology from a tool of control into a catalyst for meaning making. The buddy helps the individual connect feelings to actions, past to future, personal experience to societal context. This fosters not only recovery of self-agency but also yields valuable systemic insights for professionals, policymakers, and support staff. The technology is developed within ethical frameworks that align with the core values of PEM System Logic: relational, careful, pluralistic, and transparent. The AI Buddy embodies these principles not by imposing norms, but by asking questions; not by controlling, but by supporting. In this approach, the human being leads, and AI is in service to the unfolding self in relation to the larger whole.

10.4. The AI Buddy as an ethical compass for self-directed development

The rise of artificial intelligence presents unprecedented opportunities to enhance self-direction, understand system dynamics, and make guidance more accessible and continuous. Within PEM System Logic, the development of an AI Personal Buddy is underway, a digital companion that supports people in understanding, structuring, and directing their personal narrative.

The buddy functions as an "in-between space" where the individual develops direction aligned with their unique path. This buddy is explicitly not a replacement for human guidance but an additional space where data, dialogue, and meaning-making converge. It serves as mirror, memory, and guide, not by merely offering answers but by asking questions that lead to insight. These are questions that help people view vulnerability, resilience, and potential in coherence with their context, experiences, and values.

Through responsive conversations, the AI Buddy assists users in articulating their experiences, drawing connections between inner life and context, and revealing signals of systemic tension. The AI Buddy does not steer but invites reflection, meaning-making, and self-leadership.

Integrated with the PEM and VRR precision analysis methodology, the Buddy can recognize, clarify, and visualize vulnerabilities, strengths, risks, and protective factors. It supports both individual learning and collective reflection on a systemic level. Topics such as stress, exclusion, or overload, as well as motivation, potential, and connection are addressed.

What makes this technology special is that it is grounded in solid scientific foundations. The core models, including PEM and VRR, are the result of years of development and applied research in psychiatry, behavioral sciences, labor market intervention, and AI applications. The AI Buddy combines these foundations with the latest insights from behavioral psychology, positive psychology, systems thinking, and ethical AI design.

It is developed within ethical frameworks aligned with PEM System Logic's values: relational, careful, pluralistic, and transparent.
For users, this means a digital companion that helps them understand, articulate, and deepen their personal story, in language that resonates with them. For coaches, guides, and professionals, it offers access to richer contextual data, making interventions more effective, humane, and tailored.
The AI Buddy does not standardize technology, it emancipates. It gives voice to what was previously silent. And it turns personal experience into a source of direction, for both the individual and the systems in which they live, learn, and work.
The AI Personal Buddy already offers a broad range of functions for users (clients, students, professionals) as well as for coaches, guides, or counselors:
Accessible explanations and Q&A: The user can ask anything about stress, symptoms, system dynamics, or development themes and receive reliable, personalized answers.
Identifying causal relationships and vulnerability patterns: The Buddy clarifies links between symptoms, context, behavior, and underlying causes using validated models like VRR and PEM.
Identifying significant correlations between variables: For example, the relationship between lifestyle, self-image, contextual pressure, and stress response and how these influence one another.
Providing concrete action perspectives: The Buddy translates insights into practical assignments, exercises, or structured programs aligned with the user's process.
Matching with work, education, and training: Based on personal profiles and PEM insights, the Buddy suggests tailored next steps in personal and economic development.
Supporting the articulation of help requests: The Buddy helps users formulate their needs clearly and in their own words, ready to bring to a coach, therapist, or guide.

Dialogue as a bridge to recovery: The Buddy facilitates meaningful conversations that help users understand themselves, recognize patterns, and take steps toward resilience and autonomy.

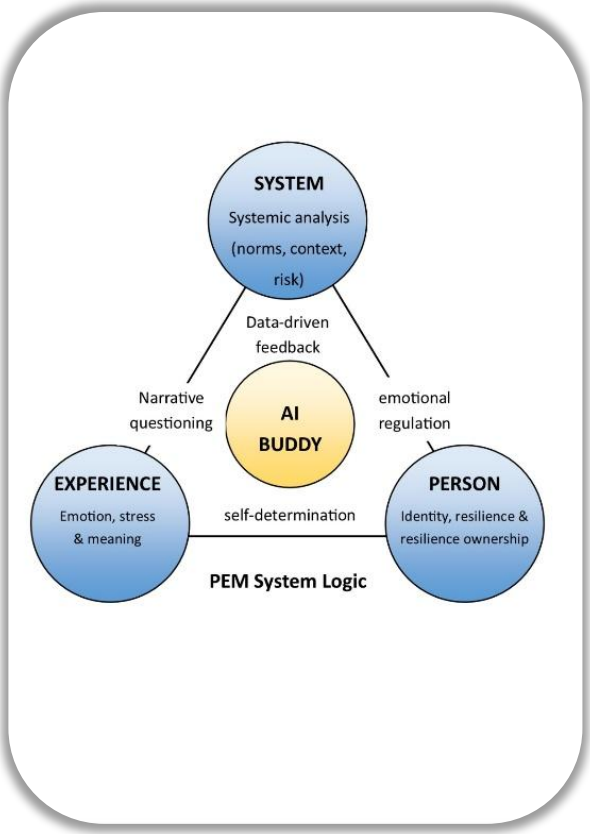


Figure: Personal Buddy

10.5. Innovation in practice: AI Buddy functionality

The innovation team at Nexus NextGen and Covince is currently developing the following features:

For the user:

- **Reflective dialogue**: The buddy asks open-ended questions that activate self-inquiry, without judgment or steering.
- **Structuring experience**: Emotions, events, and thoughts can be organized narratively, labeled, and stored.
- **State tracking**: Through daily check-ins, the buddy identifies signals of stress, overload, or resilience and links them to the user's polyvagal profile.
- **Visualizations of growth**: Progress is displayed in clear graphs, word clouds, or timelines.
- **Guidance through the mental model**: The buddy supports the four steps of experiencing, expressing, making meaning, and connecting.
- **Mirroring contextual influences**: The user gains insight into how social, institutional, or cultural factors contribute to tension or recovery.
- **Notifications for co-regulation**: In moments of emotional spikes or shutdowns, the buddy prompts the user to breathe, move, or reach out for contact.

For the coach:

- **Insights into emotional state and patterns**: The VRR dashboard displays layered stress levels, risk profiles, and resilience resources.
- **Narrative analysis**: The AI identifies recurring themes and underlying meaning structures in the user's entries.
- **Contextual overview**: PEM data maps how personal traits, preferences, and learning potential relate to systemic pressures.

- **Escalation alerts**: With consent, the buddy can notify the coach in cases of prolonged stress, withdrawal, or loss of self-coherence.
- **Support for precision analysis**: The AI generates automated reports integrating PEM and VRR insights into actionable reflection points.
- **Time efficiency and depth**: Since much data and reflection occur beforehand, contact time can be used for deeper positioning and insight.

10.6. The power of connection: coach, AI Buddy, and precision analysis as pillars of self-agency

At the heart of PEM System Logic are three guiding pillars that support the transformation of human suffering into recovery and growth: the coach-mentor, the AI Personal Buddy, and the precision analysis via PEM-VRR. Each fulfills a unique function, but their synergy is where the true power of this approach lies.

The coach-mentor serves as the human bridge between personal experience and systemic context. Not as an all-knowing expert, but as a compassionate guide who helps clarify, strengthen, and reposition. Especially in times of stress or trauma, the coach is often the first to restore safety, rhythm, and recognition in a dysregulated inner world. Simultaneously, the coach acts as a systemic mirror, someone who gently reflects the patterns that hinder recovery and connects them to broader family, organizational, or policy dynamics.

The AI Personal Buddy adds an innovative dimension. This digital companion is not a replacement, but a reinforcement of self-agency. It activates reflection, asks insight-provoking questions, and supports users in organizing their experiences, patterns, and context. Integrated with VRR analysis and PEM data, the buddy reveals the deeper layers in how vulnerability, resilience, and systemic pressure interrelate, and how change becomes possible. The feedback evolves iteratively with the user, remaining relational and ethically responsible. Technology becomes not a tool of control, but a fellow traveler in the process of development.

The precision analysis is the foundation that underpins this guidance. By connecting personal data with contextual factors and layered interpretation, it creates a deeper understanding of who someone is, what they are going through, and what they need to reposition themselves. The data are never read in isolation, they are always interpreted through the lens of the user's narrative, not from a protocol. What unites these pillars is a shared commitment to self-agency: the capacity of individuals to regain a sense of direction, choice, and belonging. Not by imposing external control, but by recognizing internal truths. Self-agency grows where there is space to take one's own story seriously, where guides listen instead of dictate, and where technology supports meaning, not just efficiency.

In this approach, the individual is no longer seen as an object of care or correction, but as a co-designer of their own development and of the systems in which they live. This creates a new language for identifying, acknowledging, and transforming vulnerability patterns, with a focus on growth, engagement, and meaningful alignment between person and system.

11. PEM Generation in the Kenyan context

In Kenya, where youth aged 13 to 34 form the backbone of society, challenges around unemployment, mental health, inequality, and trust in governance are deeply and urgently felt. In response, the initiative 'PEM Generation' was launched, a collective movement that transforms personal vulnerability into societal strength.

Across many regions of Kenya, economic inequality, limited access to healthcare and education, and political instability intensify feelings of insecurity and exclusion. This environment creates a fertile, yet risky, ground for stress and trauma, not as isolated incidents but as collective experiences. PEM System Logic offers a guiding framework in this context. By approaching youth not as a "target group" but as knowledge bearers of their own reality, space is created for genuine co-creation.

Using tools such as the VRR Analysis (Vulnerability–Resilience–Risk), thousands of young people are mapping their own stories, sources of

tension, and resilience profiles. These insights are shared back with policymakers and systems, ensuring that experiential knowledge becomes truly direction-setting.

The development of PEM Generation Kenya is supported by a broad ecosystem of collaborative partners. In the education sector, there is close cooperation with schools, universities, and teachers. Curricula are being adapted to make space for personal evolution, psychosocial awareness, and collective resilience. Young people are no longer seen merely as students, but as co-constructors of a learning society.
In the fields of education, employment, and healthcare, PEM Generation Kenya is supported by both public and private sector partners who are jointly exploring new approaches to value creation, employability, and local economy building. The aim is a sustainable society that is not only productive, but also restorative and meaningful. Young people are being prepared for employment from a position of strength, not deficit. Employers are encouraged to view resilience not as a cost, but as capital.
International institutions such as the European Union (EU), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), SCEJU, and Kenyatta University are actively contributing to the strategic and substantive development of this movement. From different perspectives, ranging from democratic citizenship and psychosocial healing to youth participation and collective resilience, they recognize the value of PEM System Logic as a transformative framework for youth policy, employment, education, and care.

PEM Generation is now active in multiple Kenyan counties, with pilots underway in schools, communities, and local governments. A key role in this movement is played by the Youth Data Agents, young people trained to collect, interpret, and relay personal and contextual data. They serve as a bridge between individual stories and system-level insight, connecting youth with educational institutions, local governments, healthcare providers, and employers. As intermediaries,

they help make systemic tension visible and contribute to developing solutions that emerge directly from the field.

In doing so, they support the embedding of PEM System Logic not only as a conceptual framework, but also as a practical tool within the broader societal ecosystem. These youth are not only being heard, but they are also being trained as analysts and changemakers. They gather and translate personal data into actionable system insights, creating a living ecosystem where personal evolution and societal structure remain in constant dialogue.

The Kenyan implementation of PEM System Logic demonstrates how the same systemic logics are under pressure globally and how it is often young people, because of their experience and positionality, who hold the key to sustainable transformation. The development of PEM Generation Kenya is still in its early stages, but the first contours of impact are already visible are becoming visible.

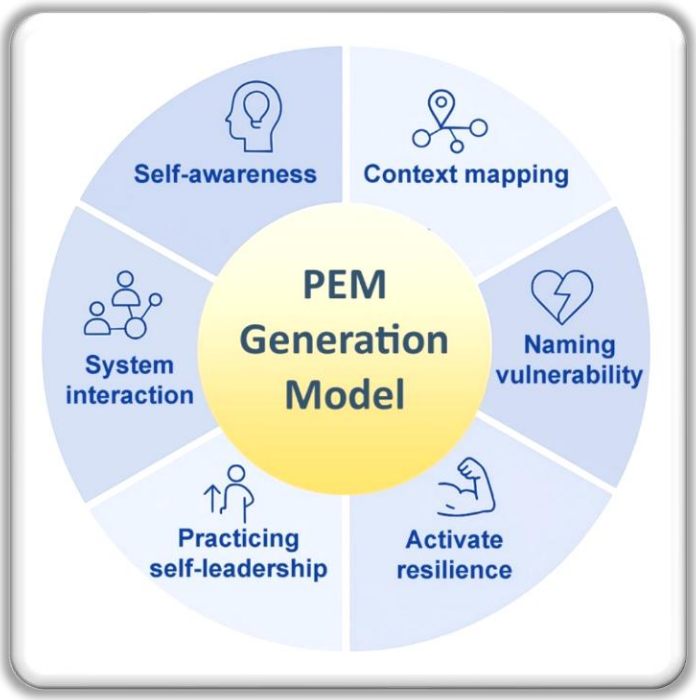


Figure: PEM Generation Model

Pilot programs in schools are creating space for young people to explore their own resilience narratives and connect them to their learning environments. In communities, intergenerational dialogues are emerging, giving room to lived experience and collective care. Local governments are learning to listen to youth voices in new ways and are beginning to structurally involve young people in shaping policy.

At the national level, there is a growing recognition that youth participation is not merely desirable, it is essential for future-proof policymaking. These pilots are not just experimental spaces; they are catalysts for systemic renewal. They are the places where the language of PEM Generation becomes tangible, where young people

are not just a target group, but co-designers of a society that truly takes them seriously.

11.1. Youth as data agents

A key element of the approach is the deployment of Youth Data Agents, young people trained to collect, interpret, and relay both personal and contextual data. Using instruments such as the VRR Analysis (Vulnerability–Resilience–Risk) and PEM (Personal Employability Mapping), they map their own resilience profiles, stress factors, and systemic tensions. These data points handled with respect for privacy and ownership are translated into insights that benefit not only the youth themselves but also caregivers, educators, employers, and policymakers working toward sustainable development. The collaboration with PEM Generation Kenya illustrates how powerful this role can be. Through sector-specific programs (such as digital freelancing and customer service), young people acquire not only practical skills but also deeper insight into their own potential, obstacles, and opportunities. The emphasis on self-regulation, digital learning formats, and behavioral skills aligns seamlessly with the PEM System Logic vision of employability as a process of self-directed development.

Key Sector	Role of PEM	Role of VRR	Role of Youth Data Agents
Health	Maps care-related competencies, learnability, and personal meaningmaking.	Analyses psychosocial stress and resilience within healthcare context and living environment.	Identify systemic pressure on acces te care, mental health, and safety.
Education	Connects learning style, preference, and system expectations to development and identity.	Makes performance pressure, stress factors, and protective elements in education visible.	Collect data on learning stress, social support, and system experiences in education.
Employment	Reveals potential and motivation in relation to the labour market and employability.	Map risks, opportunities, and social context factors influencing labour participation.	Provide feedback on employment barriers, percieved oppotunities, and local economic dynamics.
Sustainability	Positions the individual in relation to sustainable employability and system impact.	Shows the connection between system pressure, personal resilience, and social vulnerability.	Map local context, social sustainability, and intergenerational tensions.

Figure: Youth Data Agents serve as pivotal connectors in the PEM ecosystem

11.2. Pilot projects and local impact

The implementation of PEM Generation unfolds through various regional pilots, impacting schools, healthcare institutions, communities, and local governments.

In the education sector, curricula are being revised to include psychosocial awareness, personal development, and collective resilience. Youth are no longer perceived merely as students but as actors in a learning society.

Within healthcare settings, open dialogue emerges around mental health, relational safety, and the normalization of vulnerability as a shared human experience. In communities, awareness grows that healing is not solely an individual task but requires a collective infrastructure.

In the realm of employment, public and private sector partners collaborate to build a labor market that is not only productive but also restorative and meaningful. Young people are prepared for work based on their strengths, not deficits. Here, sustainability plays a central role, not just as an ecological concern, but as a call for sustainable employability, social structures, and future-proof systems.

PEM Generation Kenya strengthens this model through a precision-based approach to training opportunities, access to employment, and context-specific career development. This integrated methodology serves as a bridge between individual employability and collective resilience.

11.3. From experience to policy influence

The power of PEM Generation lies in its movement from experience to influence. Young people not only learn to articulate their stories but also to link those stories to collective data and to translate that data into policy-relevant knowledge.

Youth Data Agents play a crucial role in this process: they transform experiential insights into system feedback and relay it back to care structures, education systems, labor market frameworks, and policy domains focused on sustainable development.

This directly aligns with the approach of PEM Generation Kenya, which collaborates at a systemic level with TVET institutions, government bodies, and employers. Not only are young people being empowered, but the systems themselves are being challenged to become more inclusive, future-oriented, and resilient.

International partners actively support this process. They recognize PEM System Logic not only as a model for individual support, but also

as a structural framework for transformation across youth policy, labor, education, health, and sustainability.

By combining local experiential data with system-level analysis, a new generation of policy advocacy emerges from the ground up, informed by real-life insights. PEM Generation in Kenya demonstrates that young people can be the key to sustainable change, not just in their own lives, but in the very fabric of society itself.

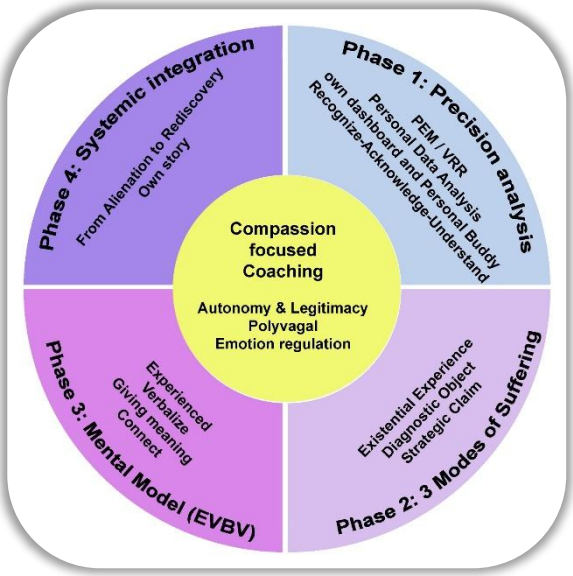
12. Practical application in guidance and recovery: The ethics of system awareness

The application process can be divided into four clearly distinguishable phases. Each phase has its own dynamic, focus, and transitional moment. This structure not only provides clarity but also creates space for step-by-step integration of meaning-making and recovery.

To effectively implement the principles of PEM System Logic in practice, it is essential to offer coaches, therapists, and clients a clear framework. Before applying the methodology to recovery work, a certification training is offered, focused on using the dashboard, interpreting and understanding the data, and presenting it meaningfully to the client. This revolves around three key elements: Recognize, Acknowledge, and Understand from the client's perspective.

Figure: Four phases with CfC (Context for Change) phase at the center.

This structure consists of four interconnected components:



- **Phase 1: Precision analysis with the support of a personal buddy.**

What happens in this phase?
The client is supported in collecting, organizing, and interpreting life data, symptoms, and context. With the help of a personal or digital buddy, their story is made visible in relation to vulnerabilities, resilience, and systemic influences.
Transition to the next phase:
When the client experiences clarity and is willing to further explore the story in relation to their suffering, phase 2 can begin.
Key actions:
Organize personal and economic relevance (potential and growth).
Recognize vulnerabilities, resilience, and risks (VRR).
Stimulate reflection: “What do I see in my behavior and emotions, and what does that mean in my context?”

- **Phase 2: Working with the model of the three modes of suffering.**

What happens in this phase?
The client investigates the three levels in which their suffering manifests: as existential experience, as diagnostic object, and as strategic system position. This is mapped both narratively and analytically.
Transition to the next phase:
When the client becomes aware of how meaning and labels evolve over time and is able to reflect and find language for this, the process moves into the application of the mental model (Phase 3).
Guided reflection on three levels of suffering:
Existential experience: What did you truly feel? What impacted you? What was (not) seen?
Diagnostic object: What diagnoses were given? Was your story heard by professionals? How were you treated?

Strategic claim: How did your suffering function in the system? What did it yield (coping, recognition, access to care)? How has this shaped you? What's the impact now?
This analysis is written narratively to raise awareness of how meaning-making, classification, and systemic functioning influence each other.

- **Phase 3: Applying the mental model (EVBV).**

What happens in this phase?
The client walks through the process of Experiencing, Verbalizing, Meaning-Making, and Connecting, both individually and in relation to their social context. Each step is deepened with personal reflection and relational dialogue.
Transition to the next phase:
When the client experiences meaningful recovery, gains insight, and is open to dialogue or repositioning within their broader system, phase 4 can begin.
Client activities:
Experiencing: Pause and feel the raw, original experience.
Verbalizing: Put feelings and events into words.
Meaning-Making: Integrate the experience into your personal story and context.
Connecting: Reconnect with self, others, and the world.
Reflection prompts for systemic connection:
What is needed to share this with family, friends, or others in your system?
Stimulate self-direction: "What would you like to tell your parents about your path?"

- **Phase 4: Systemic integration and self-agency.**

What happens in this phase?
The client shares insights and experiences with their social network. The focus is on strengthening self-agency and repositioning within systems like family, work, and care.
Indicator of completion:
When narrative healing, sustainable connections, and active

repositioning within the personal system are visible, the PEM process in this cycle is considered complete.
This practical guide provides a concrete foundation for making PEM System Logic tangible, actionable, and human-centered in coaching, therapy, and recovery-oriented care.

12.1. Looking ahead: The CfC phase and the restoration of autonomy and legitimacy

For many people, suffering is perpetuated because their autonomy and legitimacy have not yet been acknowledged or touched. The CfC Phase (Context for Change) centers around restoring these fundamental existential conditions.
Autonomy and legitimacy go hand in hand: only when individuals see themselves and are seen as legitimate subjects within their own context can lasting change begin.
This phase involves:

- Utilizing previously gathered narrative and systemic data.
- Integrating insights from Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2011; Dana, 2018) and epigenetics.
- Practicing exercises that support and rewire the autonomic nervous system (safety, rhythm, co-regulation).
- Investing in emotion regulation, reducing stress responses and enabling deeper integration.

The CfC phase is therefore not merely an extension, but a necessary deepening, the moment where the recovery narrative becomes embodied.

13. Understanding Imposter Syndrome: a hidden struggle behind success

Co-authors: **Margaret Mutheu**; CEO Elevate SMES Ke and **Lavinia Ngari;** Operations Architect Elevate SMES Ke

13.1. Introduction

In the broader lens of PEM System Logics, personal suffering is never just personal. It is a form of systemic feedback, a signal that something in the surrounding structures fails to reflect, support, or validate the human being within them.

Imposter Syndrome, often dismissed as a private psychological issue, becomes a powerful example of this. It reveals how high-performing individuals, especially those from structurally excluded or epistemically marginalized groups, can feel unseen, fraudulent, or undeserving, not because they lack competence, but because their environments fail to affirm their legitimacy.

This chapter builds directly on the core of PEM Systemlogics: the idea that suffering unfolds in three modes experienced, diagnosed, and narrative and that healing requires both inner meaning-making and external system change.

By interpreting imposter feelings through the PEM/VRR framework, we begin to see them not as private insecurities, but as relational tensions, symptoms of systemic structures that reward overperformance while silencing self-doubt. This reframing opens a path toward recognition, restoration, and redesign: not only of self-image, but of the systems that shape it.

In what follows, we explore how Imposter Syndrome manifests, how it has been critiqued and reframed, especially by African and diasporic scholars and how PEM Systemlogics offers tools to turn this hidden struggle into a site of transformation.

Imposter Syndrome, also known as the Impostor Phenomenon, is a deeply internalized experience in which individuals, despite clear evidence of their competence and accomplishments, feel unworthy of their success. They live with persistent self-doubt, fear of being exposed as a "fraud," and struggle to truly believe they deserve the recognition they receive. This dissonance between outer achievement and inner insecurity can quietly erode confidence and well-being.

The concept was first introduced in 1978 by psychologists Dr. Pauline Clance and Dr. Suzanne Imes, who observed the pattern in high-achieving women. Since then, scholars such as Valerie Young, Kevin Cokley, and Bravata et al. have expanded the understanding of imposterism across race, gender, and professional domains, showing it can affect anyone, from students to CEOs, from artists to scientists.

Although Imposter Syndrome is not formally classified as a mental disorder (such as in the DSM-5 classification), it is widely acknowledged as a powerful psychological pattern. It reveals how identity, expectation, and performance can become entangled and how even the most capable individuals can feel like they don't belong in the very spaces they've earned their place in.

However, African and diasporic scholars have increasingly challenged the idea that Imposter Syndrome is merely an internal psychological phenomenon. They argue that feelings of fraudulence are often embedded in histories of epistemic exclusion and systemic marginalization.

- **Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni** (Zimbabwe) reframes imposter feelings as a product of epistemic displacement, where non-Western knowledge systems and identities are systematically delegitimized. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the sense of "not belonging" is not pathology, it is a predictable outcome of coloniality in education and professional life.
- **Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela** (South Africa) adds that true healing from self-doubt and internalized inferiority requires collective recognition of historical pain and the restoration of dignity through *narrative and witnessing*.

- **Amina Mama** and **Bibi Bakare-Yusuf** (Nigeria) critique psychology itself for reproducing colonial and patriarchal norms, calling for a decolonial feminist psychology that centers embodied experience and structural critique.
- **Akosua Adomako Ampofo** (Ghana) and **Peace Amadi** (Nigerian diaspora/USA) emphasize the role of cultural expectations and postcolonial gender dynamics in shaping the pressure to "prove oneself" in elite or patriarchal institutions, often while being structurally excluded from them.

These insights resonate strongly with findings from **Kenyan scholars and organizations**, whose work further destabilizes the notion of imposterism as an individual flaw:

- **Joy Muthoni et al.** (2023) documented how Kenyan women in urban workplaces frequently experience imposter feelings as a response to structural racism, gender bias, and workplace gatekeeping. Their findings, based at the University of Nairobi, emphasize that these feelings are often intensified in hybrid cultural environments where professional spaces uphold Eurocentric standards.
- **Mary Wambui** (2020) explored how Kenyan women in academia navigate exclusion, expectation, and self-erasure in male-dominated university structures. Her research shows that *imposterism often reflects institutional non-belonging*, not individual delusion.
- **Prof. Mary N. Kinyanjui** has long argued that the informal economy, where many women operate is not a deficit space but a *system of invisible innovation*. Yet, the lack of formal recognition of these contributions leads to internalized inferiority and marginalization.
- **Akili Dada's** (2023) leadership programs reveal that young women leaders across Kenya often carry imposter feelings not because they are unqualified, but because *they rarely see themselves mirrored in power structures*.

- Similarly, **FEMNET** (2023) shows that Kenya's tech sector remains male-dominated, where women's competence is regularly questioned or hyper-surveilled, fostering cycles of perfectionism and self-doubt.
- The **ILO's 2023 report** on women entrepreneurs in Kenya outlines how structural barriers (lack of financing, limited networks, discriminatory regulation) create a context where imposter syndrome is not irrational, but a logical reflection of one's reality.

Together, these contributions press us to reframe Imposter Syndrome not as a flaw in the individual, but as a *symptom of system blindness*, a failure of institutions to reflect, value, and affirm the people within them.

This is where PEM System Logics enters the conversation. By treating imposter feelings as system feedback rather than private pathology, it connects internal experiences of doubt to external architectures of exclusion. It also offers tools, such as narrative recovery and structural mapping, that empower individuals not just to "overcome" imposterism, but to reclaim authorship and belonging within their own histories, identities, and knowledge systems.

PEM System Logics understands Imposter Syndrome not as a dysfunction of the self, but as system feedback signals, a reflection of the invisible pressures, exclusions, and contradictions within the environments individuals must navigate. Through the PEM/VRR framework (Personal Employability Mapping / Vulnerability–Resilience–Risk analysis), imposter feelings are interpreted as:

- **Mode 1: Experienced Suffering** – The individual feels invisible, unsupported, and isolated. ("I'm performing, but no one sees my struggle.")
- **Mode 2: Diagnosed Suffering** – Burnout, depression or breakdown becomes the moment of recognition. ("They see me only when I collapse.")

- **Mode 3: Narrative Suffering** – The person attempts to reshape their story but finds no language or structure to claim legitimacy. ("I say I belong, but the system doesn't echo it.")

The Mental Model of PEM System Logics adds a crucial lens: systems that reward only productivity and perfection offer no space for ambiguity, failure, or non-conforming identities. Imposter Syndrome emerges here as a coping strategy, a way to survive in a world that refuses to mirror one's inherent worth.
In this view, healing from imposterism requires not only inner reframing, but systemic transformation: creating environments where visibility, belonging, and epistemic freedom are not earned through overperformance, but inherently granted. Imposter Syndrome is not a personal flaw. It is a relational tension, a reflection of systems that reward masks and punish complexity. PEM System Logics invites us to listen to that tension as the starting point for collective change.

13.2. Imposter Syndrome: A definition

Imposter Syndrome (also called Impostor Phenomenon) is the internal experience of believing that you are not as competent as others perceive you to be. It involves chronic self-doubt, fear of being exposed as a "fraud," and difficulty internalizing success, despite evident accomplishments.
At the heart of Imposter Syndrome lies a persistent, often paralyzing fear: the fear of being exposed as a fraud. Individuals who experience it tend to internalize the belief that their achievements are unearned, the result of luck, timing, or others' misjudgment, rather than a reflection of their actual capabilities. This inner narrative fosters ongoing anxiety, especially in high-stakes or high-visibility environments.

Core Characteristics include:

- A chronic fear of being "found out" or exposed
- Attributing accomplishments to luck, charm, or external help

- Difficulty accepting praise or recognition
- Overworking or underpreparing in an effort to “compensate”
- Coping strategies such as perfectionism or procrastination

These behavioral patterns are not isolated but stem from deeper psychological roots. Research suggests that early family dynamics, such as conditional praise, high parental expectations, or constant comparison with siblings, can contribute to internalized beliefs of inadequacy (Clance & Imes, 1978). Similarly, low self-esteem, perfectionism, and distorted thinking styles, including all-or-nothing reasoning or discounting positive feedback are commonly observed in individuals who report imposter feelings (Parkman, 2016; Sakulku & Alexander, 2011).

Moreover, the modern socio-cultural context plays a crucial role. The internal struggle of Imposter Syndrome is often amplified by systemic inequalities such as racism, sexism, elitism, and classism. When individuals from historically marginalized backgrounds enter elite or competitive spaces, they may internalize exclusionary cues and interpret their presence as undeserved, a psychological echo of societal structures that signal, “You don’t belong here” (Cokley et al., 2013; Tulshyan & Burey, 2021).

13.3. Who experiences Imposter Syndrome?

Imposter Syndrome does not discriminate by field or profession, but it disproportionately affects individuals who are either high-performing, underrepresented, or both. Commonly impacted groups include:

- High achievers and perfectionists, who set impossibly high standards and link worth to flawless performance
- First-generation students or professionals, who may lack role models or feel pressure to represent their entire community
- Individuals from marginalized backgrounds (e.g., racial, gender, class, disability) in elite or exclusive spaces
- Entrepreneurs and creatives, where work is deeply personal and success often publicly measured

- STEM and academic professionals, who operate in competitive, high-stakes, peer-evaluated environments
- Leaders and executives, who fear being "exposed" despite objective authority

Research shows that imposter feelings are prevalent across sectors such as healthcare, education, business, sports, and technology (Bravata et al., 2020). The more visible, underrepresented, or high-pressure the environment, the greater the likelihood of internalized fraudulence.

13.4. Effects of Imposter Syndrome

Imposter Syndrome is more than an internal annoyance, it can have profound effects on mental health, career development, and interpersonal functioning. Common consequences include:

- Chronic stress and burnout, due to relentless overcompensation
- Anxiety and depression, stemming from constant fear of inadequacy
- Career stagnation, as individuals avoid advancement or downplay achievements
- Self-sabotage, such as procrastination or declining opportunities
- Leadership inhibition, with reduced assertiveness and reluctance to claim space

These outcomes not only impact individuals but can ripple through teams, institutions, and communities that depend on their contributions (Vergauwe et al., 2015). This is echoed in Kenyan research, for example Ndaita & Chebet (2024) show how women's education generates multifaceted ripple effects across families and communities, while Tavneet Suri's work on digital interventions highlights broader economic and social spill-overs.

13.5. Comparative overview: women (Aged 17–34) from five Kenyan communities with absent fathers

This comparative snapshot is based on qualitative data from a group of 100 young women across five Kenyan communities: Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya, Kalenjin, and Coastal (Swahili/Mijikenda). While culturally diverse, all participants share a common formative experience, growing up without a present father figure.

The absence of the father, whether due to abandonment, death, or social distance, created not only material and emotional gaps but also deeply shaped identity formation, belonging, and coping strategies. These individual stories reveal how systemic gender expectations, cultural scripts, and historical structures intersect to generate patterned responses to loss, pressure, and survival. The findings are structured using the PEM (Personal Employability Mapping) and VRR (Vulnerability-Resilience-Risk) framework, with a gender-sensitive lens incorporating child marriage, social exclusion, and economic insecurity.

By applying the PEM System Logics framework, including the PEM/VRR (Personal Employability Mapping / Vulnerability–Resilience–Risk) model, the Three Modes of Suffering, and the Mental Model of Social Feedback, we can better understand how different communities produce distinct yet interconnected patterns of:

- Coping and performance behavior (PEM)
- Hidden emotional and social vulnerabilities (VRR)
- Unspoken psychosocial risks linked to identity and gendered expectation

Comparative Overview – Women (Aged 17–34) from 5 Kenyan Communities with Absent Fathers

Community	Socio-Cultural Context	Impact of Father Absence	Typical Coping (PEM)	Hidden Vulnerability (VRR)	Unique Risks
Kikuyu (38)	Central Kenya, entrepreneurial, semi-individualistic	Social shame, maternal pressure	Overachievement in school/work	Suppressed emotional life	Identity tied to status; burnout risk
Luo (21)	Patriarchal, strong clan lineage	Loss of social legitimacy and inheritance	Performing for approval	Existential insecurity, exclusion	No land rights without father's name
Luhya (11)	Collectivist, extended family systems	Mothers blamed; girls step in early	Early adulthood, caregiving roles	Parentification, emotional neglect	Overburdened identity, dependency patterns
Kalenjin (14)	Conservative, gender-segregated roles	Paternal figure is highly authoritative	Emotional self-silencing	Fear of failure, perfectionism	Isolation, difficulty with trust
Coastal (16) (Swahili, Mijikenda)	Islamic-influenced, polygamy partially normalized	Emotional detachment normalized, but economic neglect harsh	Self-reliance, reliance on matriarchs	Conflicted identity around gender and loyalty	Distrust toward men, internalized ambivalence

Cross-Cutting PEM/VRR Analysis

- **Common Patterns**

Most women develop a performance-based identity to prove worth and earn space.

Father absence leads to a deep emotional void, often managed through productivity or self-silencing.
A shared experience of not belonging unless they "earn it" is present across regions.

- **Cultural Differentiations**

In Luo communities, the loss of clan legitimacy creates structural and existential exclusion.
In Luhya families, the emotional burden shifts heavily onto the eldest daughter.
Among Kalenjin and Swahili women, father absence is often normalized or silenced, complicating emotional recognition and healing.
This overview is not exhaustive, but illustrative: it makes visible how system blindness, cultural pressure, and invisible loss shape the inner worlds of women who carry both responsibility and silence. It offers a diagnostic lens and a starting point for targeted healing, support, and structural change.

13.6. Integrated analysis: women at risk: a PEM/VRR-based gender vulnerability profile in Kenya.

The impacts of father absence, emotional neglect, and performance-driven identity among these Kenyan women (ages 17–34) manifest in multi-layered vulnerability patterns and life risks. All share a history of father absence, emotionally unavailable caregiving, and culturally specific gender dynamics.
These must be viewed through the lenses of personal development, mental health, relationships, livelihood, and systemic interaction particularly within patriarchal, communal, and resource-scarce contexts.
Below is a structured overview based on collected data, integrating PEM/VRR logic:

I. Vulnerability patterns
(Latent conditions that predispose distress or dysfunction)
1. Attachment vulnerability
Disrupted primary attachment (father left, emotionally absent mother)
Leads to internalized beliefs like: "I am unworthy of care unless I earn it."
2. Emotional vulnerability
Low emotional literacy and suppressed self-expression
Fear of vulnerability = fear of exposure or rejection
Emotional needs consistently deprioritized in upbringing
3. Relational vulnerability
Difficulty trusting others or asking for help
Hyper-independence (avoidance of intimacy)
Overidentification with caregiving or responsibility roles (especially in Luhya, Kalenjin, Coastal contexts)
4. Existential vulnerability
Sense of "not belonging" to a father's name, land, or legacy (e.g., among Luo women)
Chronic insecurity about self-worth and identity
Performance replaces purpose

II. Life Risks
*(*Potential consequences when vulnerabilities are unaddressed or misunderstood*)*
1. Psychological risks
Anxiety, panic, obsessive thinking about failure or inadequacy
Depression, including suicidal ideation ("If I stop performing, I disappear")
Identity collapse during life transitions (e.g., motherhood, job loss, relationship breakdown)
2. Behavioral risks
Workaholism, perfectionism, and over-functioning as a trauma response
Procrastination or fear-based avoidance when internal standards can't be met

Emotional self-neglect or self-punishment for "weakness"

3. Relational risks

Codependency: attracting partners who replicate early neglect

Emotional unavailability: inability to sustain safe, trusting relationships

Social withdrawal masked as independence

4. Economic and livelihood risks

Burnout and breakdowns due to unrecognized internal fragility

Undermining one's value in negotiation, leadership, or career advancement (imposter syndrome)

Underutilization of voice in community development, policy, and leadership roles

5. Systemic risks

Misinterpretation by professionals: high performance mistaken for resilience

No access to psychosocial support due to lack of "visible" distress

Structural exclusion (especially among women who lack legal/inheritance status through the father)

III Gendered structural risks

1. Child marriage and early sexualization

In some communities, father absence correlates with vulnerability to early marriage, often seen as economic relief.

Girls become wives or mothers before fully developing personal identity or autonomy.

This deepens dependency cycles and educational discontinuity.

2. Economic exploitation and informal labor

Without inheritance or formal support, many women enter informal, underpaid labor sectors.

Those who are educated may still feel undeserving or imposters in professional settings.

3. Gender-based violence and silencing

Emotional and physical abuse are often normalized or silenced, especially in patriarchal or religiously conservative settings.

Limited access to justice, healing, or support services.

4. Social stigma and exclusion

Unmarried mothers, single daughters, or women without male "anchors" are often ostracized.

Reputation, not emotional health, becomes the metric of acceptance.

Hidden psychological risks (VRR Dimension)

Vulnerability	Resilience	Risk
Early abandonment, emotional neglect	High-functioning leadership, survival skills	Anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation
Cultural displacement, social silence	Strategic overperformance	Identity fragmentation, relational collapse
Parental role-reversal, caregiver burden	Capacity to lead and manage	Emotional numbness, compassion fatigue

These risks often go undetected because the women appear "successful." Institutions, teachers, NGOs, and employers may fail to see the distress beneath competence.
These women are not weak and not broken, they are survivors of broken systems and "underseen". Their pain is in their silence, not in their failure.
The PEM/VRR lens helps reveal the invisible cost of father absence, cultural pressure, and gendered survival. True empowerment begins by making their pain visible, their stories valid, and their healing systemic.

Imposter Syndrome is often mischaracterized as a purely individual psychological problem, a private crisis of confidence. Yet behind the internal voice of self-doubt often lies an external system that subtly, or explicitly, communicates: "You don't belong here." To truly understand imposter feelings, we must explore their entanglement with identity, belonging, and social context.
Imposter Syndrome is not evenly distributed. It disproportionately affects those whose identities deviate from the dominant norm in a given context. The experience is shaped and intensified by intersecting systems of power, including race, gender, neurodivergence, and class.

- Race: People of color navigating predominantly white institutions (Europe) frequently encounter microaggressions, implicit bias, and stereotype threat. These environmental signals fuel internal doubts, even in the face of excellence. As one scholar noted,

"Imposter syndrome is not an individual pathology but a reflection of institutional systems that were not built for those who now must navigate them." (Tulshyan, R., & Burey, J. 2021)

- Gender: Women and nonbinary professionals in male-dominated fields (e.g., tech, politics, engineering) report higher rates of imposter feelings. When success is met with surprise or scrutiny rather than affirmation, it sends a clear message: you are the exception, not the standard.
- Neurodivergence: Individuals with ADHD, autism, or other neurodevelopmental differences often grow up internalizing their differences as deficits. Struggling with traditional educational or social norms can deepen the belief that their way of thinking is "wrong," even when they are highly capable.
- Socioeconomic Background: First-generation students and professionals from low-income environments may lack the cultural capital or social cues that signal "belonging" in elite spaces. Even as they gain access, they often carry a sense of conditional acceptance and are never fully entitled to the space they occupy.

13.7. Coping and Overcoming Strategies

While Imposter Syndrome is deeply embedded in psychological and social narratives, it is not immutable. A combination of cognitive, behavioral, and relational strategies can help individuals reframe their internal stories and reduce the intensity of imposter feelings.

a. Cognitive-Behavioral Approaches

- Identify and challenge negative self-talk ("I don't deserve this")
- Reframe failure as learning: shifting from "I'm failing" to "I'm developing"
- Track accomplishments in an achievement journal to make success visible and internal

b. Normalize the Experience

Many high-profile individuals have spoken openly about their imposter feelings, including Maya Angelou, Albert Einstein, and Sheryl

Sandberg. Knowing it's common among successful people can reduce shame and isolation.

- Share experiences in safe settings
- Destigmatize the conversation in professional development contexts

c. Mentorship & Community

Social validation plays a critical role in reframing identity:

- Seek mentors or sponsors who can affirm value and challenge distorted thinking
- Representation matters: seeing people who "look like you" succeed helps build internal permission to belong (Cokley et al., 2013)

d. Behavioral Interventions

- Celebrate small wins, to rewire the brain toward internal recognition
- Practice self-compassion, particularly after mistakes
- Set realistic goals and standards to reduce perfectionistic pressure

These practices align with compassion-based treatment that treat imposter beliefs as learned narratives rather than core truths (Neff, 2003).

e. Therapy

For individuals whose imposter feelings impact daily life, therapy can be transformative:

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) challenges cognitive distortions
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) fosters detachment from self-critical narratives
- Psychodynamic therapy explores deeper relational and identity roots

Engaging in therapy also affirms that imposter feelings are not a weakness, but a common human struggle with identity and belonging.

f. Compassion-Focused Coaching (PEM Systemlogics)
For individuals whose imposter feelings affect their daily functioning, Compassion-Focused Coaching within the PEM System Logics framework offers a transformative approach. Rather than treating imposter syndrome as a disorder to be corrected, this method views it as relational suffering, a systemic and emotional feedback signal that must be met with safety, meaning, and acknowledgment.
Key elements include:

- **Narrative deconstruction**
  Exploring the origin of internal beliefs such as "I am not enough" or "I don't belong," and situating them in social, familial, and cultural scripts.
- **Systemic reflection and repositioning**
  Mapping how vulnerability, performance, and pressure interact in the individual's system context (family, education, work) using the PEM/VRR model. This allows clients to see their coping not as failure, but as intelligent adaptation.
- **Self-compassion practices**
  Introducing techniques that soothe shame and perfectionism. These include guided journaling, voice dialogue, and embodied practices that affirm worth independent of performance.
- **Reclaiming subjectivity**
  Using the **Three Modes of Suffering**, clients learn to speak from lived experience (Modus 1), make meaning of their story (Modus 2), and recognize when systems reduce them to a diagnosis or label (Modus 3). This restores agency and voice.
- **Compassionate accountability**
  Clients are supported in developing realistic, affirming standards for themselves, replacing chronic self-monitoring with internal permission to grow, rest, and belong.

This coaching model is especially powerful for individuals from marginalized or high-pressure backgrounds, where imposterism reflects deeper tensions between personal identity and external expectations. It shifts the focus from fixing the person to reframing the

pain as a signal worth listening to. **"**You are not broken. You adapted in silence. Let's make that adaptation speak."

13.8. Beyond the Individual: The Need for Systemic Reform

While imposter feelings manifest internally, they are often born from environments that invalidate, exclude, or isolate. Coping strategies like journaling or cognitive reframing are important but insufficient without parallel efforts to change the systems that reproduce these feelings.

Systemic triggers include:

- Lack of representation in leadership: When leadership bodies are homogenous, they reinforce implicit standards of who is seen as credible or capable.
- Toxic work and academic cultures: Environments that reward overwork, perfectionism, or hyper-competition feed the anxiety and self-erasure at the core of imposterism.
- Gatekeeping structures: Exclusive norms around language, dress, credentials, or behavior, especially in academia and elite professions, communicate who does and doesn't belong.
- Lack of inclusive mentorship: Without mentors who reflect and affirm diverse identities, individuals lack the mirrors necessary to internalize their own legitimacy.

13.9. From Coping to Cultural Change

To truly address Imposter Syndrome, we must move from individual adaptation to collective transformation. This means:

- Redesigning workplaces and institutions to value "belonging over fitting in"
- Embedding inclusive practices in leadership development and hiring
- Normalizing vulnerability, mentorship, and storytelling across all levels
- Creating feedback cultures that affirm effort, growth, and diverse ways of knowing

As long as people must constantly prove their right to exist in a space, imposter feelings will not disappear. The goal is not to make individuals more "resilient" to exclusion, but to build systems that no longer produce it.

13.10. Integrating African Knowledge Systems with PEM Systemlogics to Reframe Imposter Syndrome

Imposter Syndrome is often approached as an individual psychological challenge, a private crisis of confidence. Yet, as argued by African and diasporic scholars, imposterism is not merely an internal distortion, it is a signal of systemic exclusion, historical erasure, and epistemic violence. The PEM System Logics framework allows us to move from coping to meaning making, from pathology to pattern, and from isolation to transformation.

This chapter integrates the contributions of African thinkers with the structural and narrative tools of PEM System Logics, offering a powerful reframe imposter syndrome is not a flaw within the person, but a feedback signal from a system that does not mirror them back.

13.11. Epistemic Displacement and the Loss of Internal Authority

Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni introduces the concept of epistemic freedom, the right and capacity to define reality in one's own terms. Within many colonial and postcolonial institutions, knowledge and legitimacy have been historically defined by Eurocentric norms. For many women, particularly from underrepresented or Global South contexts, the internalized feeling of being an "imposter" is actually a rational reaction to the delegitimization of their knowledge, ways of knowing, and cultural narratives.

In Kenya, Mary Wambui (2020) documents how women in academia face persistent marginalization and tokenism, reinforcing the idea that their knowledge is conditional and externally validated. Similarly,

Muthoni et al. (2023) explore how imposterism is intensified by structural inequalities in urban workplaces.
PEM-VRR: The Mental Model of PEM System Logics frames this as "system feedback": the system lacks a language for what does not resemble it. Instead of affirming difference, it pathologizes it.
Example: A first-generation university student from the Luo community excels academically but feels deeply fraudulent because her cultural forms of intelligence (oral storytelling, community-based ethics) are not reflected in the institution's structure. Through PEM System Logics coaching, she learns to reframe her performance not as proof of her exceptionality, but as testimony to a knowledge system that has survived in silence.

13.12. Acknowledgment as Healing

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela emphasizes that healing requires acknowledgment, both personal and public. For women carrying generations of emotional neglect, abuse, and systemic silencing, imposter syndrome often begins as a whisper: "You don't deserve to be here."
Akili Dada (2023), a Kenyan organization supporting young women leaders, stresses that the absence of mentorship and social recognition feeds internalized doubt among high-potential youth. Healing requires not just opportunity, but narrative visibility.
PEM-VRR: In the Three Modes of Suffering within PEM Systemlogics, this manifests as Modus 1 (existential suffering) and Modus 2 (Diagnostic object). Without acknowledgment, pain becomes internalized. Through shared storytelling and narrative witnessing, Modus 2 allows the woman to restore her subjectivity.
Example: A Kalenjin woman in a competitive urban law firm constantly fears dismissal. In coaching, she shares that no one in her community ever said, "I see you." She begins to speak her story within a group setting, finds language for her experience, and realizes that her silence was a strategy of survival, not a sign of inadequacy.

13.13. Gendered Resistance and Cultural Belonging

Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Amina Mama, and Akosua Adomako Ampofo have all written on how African women navigate postcolonial systems with internalized conflict, striving for success in institutions that often mirror patriarchal, elitist, or Western logics. Imposterism here reflects a gendered misfit, not a personal flaw.

In Kenya, Mary N. Kinyanjui (2016) highlights how women in the informal economy are structurally invisible despite being economic backbones. Their knowledge is practical, communal, and underappreciated by formal metrics of success.

FEMNET (2023) reports that in Kenya's tech industry, women are often subject to gendered scrutiny and exclusion, fueling imposter feelings despite skill and competence.

PEM-VRR: Through the VRR model (Vulnerability–Resilience–Risk), we map how cultural pressure and gendered expectation intersect with performance behavior. The PEM lens helps reveal overperformance as coping, and perfectionism as protection.

System Blindness: These women are rarely seen in their full context. Institutions celebrate their outcomes but ignore their invisible burdens.

By integrating both continental African and Kenyan scholarship, we move toward a more context-sensitive and justice-oriented understanding of imposterism, one that honours lived experience, demands structural change, and reframes suffering as systemic feedback rather than personal failure.

13.14. Trauma-Informed Community Empowerment

Peace Amadi and Sibongile Mkhabela offer practical frameworks grounded in psychology, faith, and youth advocacy. They teach us that imposterism cannot be separated from trauma, especially unacknowledged emotional loss, broken family systems, or collective narratives of silence.

PEM-VRR: PEM System Logics emphasizes the role of *relational ecology*. Support networks, mentors, and mirrored belonging are crucial. Without systemic compassion, imposterism festers.
Example: In a coastal community, a young woman raised by her grandmother enters a global fellowship. She excels but feels fake. PEM coaching helps her link this feeling to a lifetime of emotional self-erasure. Through compassion-focused mapping and collective witnessing, she begins to reclaim her story.

Matrix: Imposter Syndrome through the Lens of African and Kenyan Scholarship

Dimension	Internal Experience	External/Structural Insight	Key Thinker/ Source
Belonging and Knowledge	"I don't think the way they do. Maybe I don't belong here."	*Epistemic displacement*: marginal identities are disconnected from their ways of knowing and judged by external norms	Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018); Mary Wambui (2020) – marginalization in Kenyan academia
Recognition of Pain	"No one really sees what I've survived to get here."	*Collective suffering is invisibilized*; healing requires public witnessing and social recognition	Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2003**);** Akili Dada **(**2023) – leadership trauma among Kenyan youth
Role of Systemic Norms	"I always feel I'm being tested to prove I'm not a fraud."	*Coloniality and patriarchy* create gatekeeping norms that devalue lived experience and alternative intelligences	Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni**;** FEMNET (2023) – tech industry bias against Kenyan women

Dimension	Internal Experience	External/Structural Insight	Key Thinker/ Source
Narrative Healing	"Even in therapy, I don't have words for what I carry."	*Storytelling as justice*: trauma must be voiced, named, and socially mirrored to restore agency	Gobodo-Madikizela; Peace Amadi; Kinyanjui (2016) – informal economy as narrative silence
Path to Empowerment	"If I speak, will it cost me my place here?"	*Epistemic freedom* is reclaiming authorship over identity and truth beyond institutional permission	Ndlovu-Gatsheni; Muthoni et al. (2023) – Kenyan women silenced in corporate culture
Performance Pressure	"I must do twice as much to be seen as half as capable."	*Systemic undervaluation* leads to overcompensation and burnout	Mary N. Kinyanjui – Invisible labor of women in the informal sector
Cultural Dissonance	"Success feels like betrayal of where I come from."	*Cultural estrangement*: success in elite spaces can estrange women from home communities	Wambui (2020); Bakare-Yusuf – postcolonial belonging and tension

By integrating African scholarship with PEM System Logics, we begin to unmask imposter syndrome as a structural echo, not a personal failure. The goal is not to simply empower individuals to survive oppressive systems, it is to build new systems where they no longer have to question their right to belong.

13.15. From Imposterism to Systemic Modes of Suffering: A PEM System logics Transition

Imposter Syndrome, when viewed through the lens of PEM System Logics, becomes more than an individual crisis of confidence, it is a coded signal of deeper systemic misrecognition. Women from underrepresented or historically marginalized communities are not merely "doubting themselves." They are living in systems that have failed to see, reflect, and name them as a whole.

Each imposter thought: "I don't belong," "They will find out," "I must overperform to be accepted", can be reinterpreted as a feedback loop between personal experience and structural neglect. This is where the Three Modes of Suffering in PEM System Logics become essential. They offer a way to map, name, and transform the trajectory of invisible pain into acknowledged reality:

- **Modus 1 – Lived but Unseen Suffering**: (Experiential Experience)
  The inner ache of not being mirrored, the silent resilience behind the performance, here, imposterism lives as a private storm.
- **Modus 2 – Narrative Conflict**: (Diagnostic object) When one starts to speak the story, in therapy, in community, or through coaching, a struggle begins to integrate personal experience with public identity. This is the space of meaning-making.
- **Modus 3 – Diagnostic Collapse or Social Withdrawal**: (Strategic claim)
  If unacknowledged, the pressure fractures into burnout, depression, or exit. The individual is finally noticed, but only as a crisis, not as a full subject.

By transitioning from the analysis of imposterism into these modes, we begin to see the deeper architecture of psychic erosion and identity fatigue, not as personal failure, but as evidence system blindness, system tension**,** and ultimately system decay**.** What is needed is not only individual resilience, but systemic responsiveness: spaces where stories can be spoken before they break the speaker.

Let us now enter the framework of the Three Modes of Suffering, to understand how pain moves and how it can be re-authored toward healing.

13.16. From Imposterism to Systemic Modes of Suffering: Mapping the Inner Landscape of Misrecognition

When women from historically marginalized or underrepresented communities' express feelings of being a "fraud" or "not good enough," this should not be dismissed as mere self-doubt. Rather, Imposter Syndrome can be reframed as a symptom of systemic invisibility, were inner experience clashes with outer recognition. In PEM System Logics, this misalignment is understood through three modes of suffering, each representing a developmental stage in how pain is carried, expressed, or transformed.

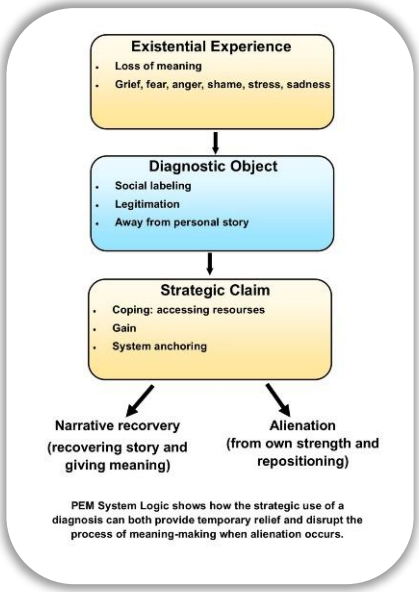


Figure: Three Modi of Suffering

Modus 1: Existential Experience - Lived but Unseen
At this stage, the individual carries an intensely personal but invisible burden. There is:

- **Loss of meaning**: "Why do I feel so disconnected even when I succeed?"
- **Emotional landscape**: Grief, fear, shame, anxiety, and sadness
- **Imposter thought**: *"*I don't belong here.*"*

In this mode, there is no diagnosis, no external validation. The suffering remains internal and unspoken. For many young women, especially those growing up without recognition of their cultural, emotional, or familial narratives, this silence is survival. But it is also the beginning of alienation from self, from identity, from strength.

Modus 2: Diagnostic Object - Narrative Disruption
At this level, suffering begins to receive external form, often through:

- **Social labeling**: "You're just anxious," "You lack confidence."
- **Legitimation by external systems**: medical, academic, therapeutic
- A shift **away from the personal story**, toward clinical or institutional categories

Here, the imposter feeling becomes a diagnosis. This provides temporary structure, but it also risks fragmenting meaning. The woman is now seen, but not as a subject, as an object within a system.
Imposter thought: *"*They say I'm anxious, but that's not the full story."
This mode is fragile: if the diagnostic story replaces the personal one, the individual may internalize a fixed identity of dysfunction, which can deepen disempowerment.

Modus 3: Strategic Claim - Collapse or Coping
If unresolved, the suffering evolves into:

- **Strategic claiming**: using a diagnosis or label to gain access to resources or legitimacy

- **Coping**: overworking, perfectionism, masking
- **System anchoring**: identity becomes tied to the label or the performance around it

This is where burnout, withdrawal, or institutional crisis often occurs. The woman is finally recognized, but only through crisis.

Imposter thought: *"*Maybe they'll only believe I'm struggling when I collapse."

At this stage, the risk of **f**ull alienation from self becomes high. The pain has been seen but not integrated. The system has responded, but only after the speaker has broken.

13.17. The Turning Point: Recovery or Alienation

From here, two pathways diverge:

- **Narrative Recovery**
  Where a woman is supported to reclaim her story, reframe her pain, and reconnect her inner voice with outer context, healing becomes possible. She moves from being labeled to becoming a narrator of her own experience.
  "Imposter Syndrome isn't who I am. It's how the system forgot to reflect me."
- **Alienation:** If her voice is not mirrored, or if the system treats her pain only as dysfunction, she may disconnect entirely from help, from meaning, from her own strength.

PEM Systemlogics as Integrative Lens

PEM Systemlogics allows us to:

- Understand suffering not as dysfunction, but as system feedback
- Track the mental model: from feeling to diagnosis to strategy
- Reconnect personal pain to its structural and narrative context
- Provide tools for meaning making before collapse, not after

13.18. Case Study: Wanjiru – A Kikuyu Woman Navigating Invisible Strain

Wanjiru, a 28-year-old Kikuyu woman from Nyeri County in central Kenya, grew up in a semi-rural setting under the care of her mother after her father abandoned the family when she was just five years old. In Kikuyu traditions, lineage and inheritance follow the paternal line. Without her father's name, Wanjiru was denied land rights, community recognition, and the economic stability typically associated with clan-based legitimacy.

Despite these constraints, Wanjiru excelled in school and later pursued a degree in sociology. Now employed as a junior researcher at a public university, she conducts community-based studies focused on gender and development. While her academic credentials position her as a

success story, she remains the sole provider for her family, supporting her two younger siblings and covering her mother's medical expenses. When her project stipend was delayed for several months due to administrative inefficiencies, Wanjiru did not protest. Speaking up risked her professional reputation and the only stable income for her family. Without land of her own, formal protection, or access to counseling, she navigated life with quiet endurance.

Behind her composed façade, however, Wanjiru lived in Modus 1 of the PEM System Logics: a state of existential suffering. She felt invisible, as though her sacrifices were expected but never acknowledged. Her identity, competent, generous, hardworking ; masked a growing void.

Years later, after a particularly harsh rainy season destroyed the family's rented crops and left them in debt, Wanjiru reached a breaking point. Her suicide attempt was the first moment she was publicly "seen." Yet this visibility came not through affirmation, but as crisis. She had moved into Modus 2: being reduced to a diagnostic object, where her pain was categorized, but her story remained untold.

Even after stabilization, Wanjiru's identity was reshaped by external labels. Though she was now receiving support, it came at the cost of internal disorientation. Her role shifted from a resilient caretaker to a passive recipient of aid a transition that failed to honor her earlier strength or contextual burden. She entered Modus 3, the Strategic Claim phase, but risked Alienation: accessing institutional help while drifting further from her own meaning, story, and sense of authorship.

Systemic Constraints in Kikuyu Contexts

The following socio-economic barriers shaped Wanjiru's trajectory, many of which are common across central Kenya's Kikuyu communities:

- No Land Inheritance: Without her father's recognition or clan anchor, Wanjiru had no claim to ancestral land, a major source of economic security in Kikuyu society.
- Informal Labor Dependency: Though highly educated, her academic contract lacked benefits and long-term stability.
- Educational Interruption Risk: Had she experienced early pregnancy or family crisis, Wanjiru's path to higher education could have easily been derailed.
- Caregiver Burden: As firstborn daughter, cultural norms dictated that she assumes caregiving roles, often at the cost of her own growth.
- Mental Health Invisibility: Emotional suffering is frequently minimized within Kikuyu families, especially when the person is seen as "strong" or "holding the family together."

PEM–VRR Analysis

Dimension	Wanjiru's Experience	PEM/VRR Reflection
Existential Mode	Sense of invisibility, survival through duty	Modus 1: Unseen pain masked by resilience
Diagnostic Shift	Only recognized after suicide attempt	Modus 2: Objectified by crisis, not acknowledged as subject
Strategic Claim	Perceived as "strong" caregiver – not allowed to collapse	Modus 3: Institutional help risks alienation without narrative integration
Resilience Masking Risk	Performed excellence to hide systemic tension	VRR: Performance mode conceals vulnerability, blocking access to healing resources
Risk of Alienation	Lost access to personal agency and internal worth	Alienation: From one's own story and strength due to external definitions

Narrative Recovery Through Compassion-Focused Coaching

Wanjiru's healing began when she engaged in Compassion-Focused Coaching, a narrative-based approach within PEM System Logics that centers story ownership, contextual meaning, and systemic insight. Her coach used the mental model as a guide:

- Experience: Wanjiru began by reconnecting with the raw emotional truth of her life: "I feel pain. Something happened to me."
- To Put into Words: She was gently supported by articulating what had been unspeakable: her isolation, fear, and the burden of being everyone's anchor.
- Make Meaning: Through reflection, she began to see that her pain was not a failure, but a reflection of systemic exclusion, cultural expectation, and gendered sacrifice.
- Connect: Wanjiru saw her experience mirrored in others. Her story was no longer a solitary wound but part of a larger pattern of structural neglect and gendered resilience.

The mental model helped her move from internalized imposterism to embodied insight. Through narrative recovery, she reclaimed authorship over her life story, not just as a survivor, but as a thinker, a daughter, a sister, and a change agent.

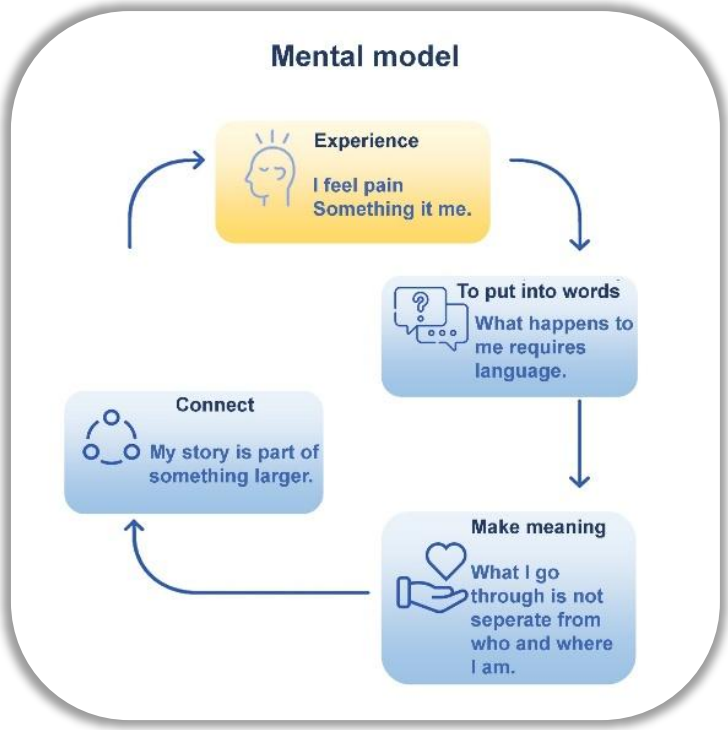


Figure: Mental Model

Conclusion: From Survival to Story

Wanjiru's case is not an isolated tragedy, it is a clear illustration of how system blindness, gendered expectations, and socio-economic exclusion combine to create psychic collapse beneath a surface of competence. Through the lens of PEM System Logics, her imposter

feelings and silent distress are not signs of personal weakness, but signals of system tension and impending system decay.

The path forward lies in narrative recovery: spaces where Wanjiru's strength is not only admired, but her story truly heard. This is where meaning, identity, and resilience can be reclaimed, not as coping mechanisms, but as legitimate anchors of belonging.

14. Entrepreneurship as a Compass: Reframing the Struggles of African Women Entrepreneurs through PEM System Logics

By Margaret Mutheu, Founder & CEO, Elevate SMEs Ltd; MPA Candidate, University of Birmingham

14.1. Introduction: A Different Kind of Struggle

Picture a young woman in Nairobi launching a health-tech startup, only to encounter resistance rooted in gender biases and inaccessible funding. Her struggle reflects what PEM System Logics terms "systemic tension," where institutional barriers obscure women's potential (Torre & Mutua, 2025, Chapter 3).

Elevate SMEs Ltd, an entrepreneurship support organization based in Kenya and founded in 2018, is committed to transforming the entrepreneurial landscape by equipping youth-led and women-led SMEs with the tools, skills, and opportunities they need to thrive in local and global markets. Through its Women Biz360 Hub, the company has supported over 3,000 women-owned businesses across Africa with training and initiatives focused on entrepreneurial leadership, procurement and investment readiness, export market preparation, financial management, digital marketing, crisis management, access to finance and markets, work-life balance, and closing mentorship gaps.

As the founder of Elevate SMEs Ltd, I have championed the advancement of over 4,000 women entrepreneurs in my role as Regional Director for Africa at WEConnect International, and through programs such as ITC SheTrades Commonwealth, the Academy for Women Entrepreneurs Kenya, and the African Women's Entrepreneurship Program Kenya. I also serve as a board member of the umbrella body One Voice Women Trade Network, supported by CBI Netherlands, where I advocate for gender-inclusive trade.

Most recently, I delivered a keynote address at the Sinapis Capital Connect Conference on Friday, June 26th, 2025, where I discussed how government policy, regulation, and ecosystem players critically influence access to finance for MSMEs. This engagement further underscored the systemic nature of barriers faced by women entrepreneurs and reinforced the need for ecosystem-wide shifts to unlock their full potential. This reality is not just theoretical; it echoes the countless stories I have encountered throughout my career. It is precisely why I write this chapter from the lens of lived experience, shaped by my engagement with thousands of women entrepreneurs across the globe. Through leading programs, facilitating trainings, and co-creating ecosystems that support women-led enterprises, I have witnessed both the systemic barriers they face and the extraordinary resilience they demonstrate. These insights ground the perspectives shared in this chapter, offering a practical and empathetic understanding of what it truly takes for women entrepreneurs to thrive. This chapter explores how technology and policy, guided by the Personal Employability Mapping (PEM) and Vulnerability-Resilience-Risk (VRR) frameworks can transform these barriers into resilience, offering policymakers, practitioners, and scholars a blueprint for inclusive systems (Marlow & McAdam, 2013; UNCTAD, 2021).

What kinds of economies could emerge if every woman's potential were fully recognized?

14.2. From Grit to Strain: The Hidden Layers of Women's Enterprise

In many parts of Africa, the entrepreneurial journey of women is often described through the lenses of grit, resourcefulness, and survival. Yet beneath the success stories and market statistics lies another reality, one marked by invisible stress, gendered expectations, institutional resistance, and systemic blind spots (Brush et al., 2018; Carter & Marlow, 2007). Women entrepreneurs are not only building businesses; they are navigating a web of inherited burdens, unmet needs, and misaligned systems.

Their struggle is not merely about access to capital or market readiness, but about being seen, acknowledged, and allowed to evolve in systems not designed for them. Through the lens of PEM System Logics, we can understand these struggles not as personal shortcomings, but as system feedback, signals that the structures meant to support enterprise and empowerment often suppress the very meaning-making processes that enable transformation (Kabeer, 1999; Torre & Mutua, 2025).

14.3. From Livelihood to Legitimacy: Layered Suffering in Women's Enterprise

Much like PEM's three-layered model of human suffering (psychological, existential, systemic), the suffering experienced by women entrepreneurs in Kenya and beyond is complex and often misunderstood:

a) Psychological Layer

Self-doubt, burnout, and imposter syndrome emerge not as weaknesses, but as echoes of repeated exclusion from decision-making tables and innovation ecosystems (Clance & Imes, 1978; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

b) Existential Layer

The question, "Am I allowed to lead?" resonates deeply. Internalized narratives inherited from family, culture, and history often suppress ambition and silence aspiration (Frankl, 1946; Bhavnani et al., 2003).

c) Systemic Layer

Regulatory barriers, inaccessible finance, patriarchal procurement systems, and tokenistic inclusion signal what PEM System Logics defines as system decay and system blindness (UNCTAD, 2021).

This layered suffering is not failure. It is a sign that the ecosystem has failed to recalibrate to the needs of the women it claims to serve.

Meaning-Making as Resistance

When women launch businesses with little more than an idea and social capital, they are not just pursuing income, they are engaging in existential agency (Kabeer, 1999). These actions represent Mode I in

PEM's "Three Modes of Suffering": existential experience. Yet as they engage in support systems, many are quickly classified (Mode II) or strategically labeled (Mode III). Their narratives become subordinated to grant templates, investment decks, and impact metrics that often fail to honor the full complexity of their lives (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).
Still, through cooperatives, socially driven models, and mentorship networks, African women entrepreneurs resist this reduction. These are not just acts of resilience; they are forms of meaning-making that reflect deep alignment with their communities and values (Scott et al., 2012).

Systemic Tension in Entrepreneurial Ecosystems
PEM System Logics identifies systemic tension as the friction between individual experience and system recognition. This is vividly seen in entrepreneurship support programs:

- Women with health-tech solutions are asked to justify their innovations through male-centric metrics of scalability (Brush et al., 2018).
- Pregnant entrepreneurs hide their motherhood out of fear of being disqualified.
- Rural entrepreneurs are excluded due to inaccessible digital formats or English-only application processes (UNCTAD, 2021).

These are not anomalies. They are embedded patterns of exclusion that reflect system design flaws. The resulting stress is not incidental, it is systemic.

14.4. Entrepreneurship as System Compass: Listening to Strategic Feedback

What if we treated women's businesses as compasses, revealing where development, policy, and justice intersect? In PEM terms, these ventures become strategic sites of system feedback.

- A solar entrepreneur in Turkana is not just in business, she is signaling gaps in energy access and gender equity (Mutua, 2023).

- A woman in Nairobi designing biodegradable packaging is not just innovating, she is responding to unspoken ecological and ethical blind spots in the market.

These stories represent strategic repositioning and adaptive justice, concepts central to PEM System Logics (Torre & Mutua, 2025).

Livelihood (In)Security and Entrepreneurial Trauma

Behind many business ventures is survival entrepreneurship, enterprises born from economic necessity, not market opportunity. Chronic uncertainty about income, security, and safety creates what PEM defines as a traumatic context (Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, 2012; Nussbaum, 2011).

For women, this includes caregiving burdens, gender-based violence, and lack of support. When such stress becomes normalized, trauma embeds itself in the entrepreneurial journey. Business support that ignores this dimension contributes to system blindness (Dehue, 2008; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

Toward Precision and Compassion in Ecosystem Design

PEM and VRR provide tools to rehumanize the entrepreneurship ecosystem:

- **PEM (Personal Employability Mapping)** reveals how an entrepreneur's traits, values, and capacity align or misalign with systemic structures.
- **VRR (Vulnerability–Resilience–Risk Analysis)** identifies where support, not pressure, is most needed (Mason & Brown, 2014).

These tools invite development practitioners and funders to move from generalized training to precision support rooted in dignity and accurate information (Carter & Marlow, 2007).

Listening to What Women's Enterprise Is Telling Us

The entrepreneurial journeys of African women are not problems to be solved, they are signals to be heard. They embody systemic feedback, relational wisdom, and cultural memory. We must stop asking, "Why

are women not scaling?" and start asking, "What about our systems prevents women from evolving?"

Entrepreneurship is not just about the economy. It is about belonging, visibility, dignity, and legacy. PEM System Logics reminds us: the suffering we ignore today becomes the breakdown of our systems tomorrow. But if we learn to listen with compassion, precision, and courage, we may begin to rebuild systems where every woman's potential is recognized, and every story becomes part of a more just and resilient future.

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Glossary

PEM System Logics

PEM System Logics is the foundational conceptual framework. It describes how human functioning is always embedded within systems, economic, social, psychological, and technological.

Core focus:

- Human development as personal evolution within system contexts
- Key concepts: system blindness, system tension, system decay
- Universally applicable to individuals, organizations, and societies

PEM & VRR Precision Analysis (Personal Employability Mapping & Vulnerability Resilience Risk Analysis)

PEM & VRR are the practical application method derived from PEM System Logics. Where PEM System Logics offers the "why" and "what," PEM & VRR delivers the "how."

Core focus:

- Practical tools and methodologies
- Mapping personal and systemic data (e.g., stress, security, resilience)
- Output: concrete insights, dashboards, resilience maps

Side-by-Side Overview:

Aspect	PEM System Logics	PEM & VRR Precision Analysis
Role	Philosophical/conceptual framework	Application method/tools
Focus	Understanding systemic dynamics	Measurable interventions and guidance
Output	Papers, models, narratives	Dashboards, maps, reports
Example Question	Why does stress emerge as a system issue?	How do we measure stress and risk profiles among youth?

PEM System Logics

A framework that interprets human suffering not as individual failure, but as system feedback, rooted in the interaction between people and structures.

1. System Blindness
   The inability of a system to recognize how its own operations negatively affect individuals, leading to misdiagnosis or marginalization.
2. System Tension
   The tension between human needs and the operational logic of institutions, such as efficiency, control, or standardization.
3. System Decay
   The erosion of a system's legitimacy is when it can no longer respond to people's realities or support meaningful development.

System Feedback (Signal)

A response from a system (such as education, healthcare, work, or family) that reveals tension, imbalance, or exclusion in the interaction between individuals and structures.

In PEM System Logics, suffering is not seen as an individual failure, but as meaningful feedback from the system itself.

Example: When a student drops out, it may not just be a personal issue, it could be feedback on a school system that doesn't accommodate different learning styles or paces.

Signal

A visible or felt expression that indicates something is going wrong beneath the surface. This could be an emotion (like fear or doubt), a behavior (like withdrawal or resistance), or even a diagnosis.

In PEM System Logics, a signal is not noisy to be silenced, but an invitation to listen more deeply to what the system may be failing to recognize.

Example: Feelings of imposterism are not irrational, they're signals that someone may be navigating an environment that fails to affirm their presence or value.

Three Modes of Suffering
A core model in PEM System Logics that explains how suffering evolves in relation to language, recognition, and systemic response. These are not chronological stages, but lenses to understand how suffering is framed and mobilized.

1. **Existential Experience**
   The silent, internal struggle that has not yet been named or recognized.
   "Something's wrong, but I don't know what."
2. **Diagnostic Object**
   When suffering becomes visible through a label, diagnosis, or formal recognition.
   "Now they see it, but only as a disorder."
3. **Strategic Claim**
   Reclaiming one's suffering as meaningful and using it to pursue change or transformation.
   "This experience can become a source of strength and impact."

Precision Analysis
An integrated method for analyzing suffering across personal, relational, and structural layers, offering both insight and direction.

- **PEM** (Personal Employability Mapping)
  A tool that maps personal traits, talents, and growth potential in relation to one's environment. It helps individuals and professionals make informed, sustainable decisions.
- **VRR** (Vulnerability–Resilience–Risk)
  A diagnostic framework that identifies sources of vulnerability, existing resilience, and emerging risks, on both individual and systemic levels.

Mental Model: Experience – Articulate – Give Meaning – Connect

1. **Experience**
   The immediate, raw feeling of discomfort or pain.
   "I feel something. It hurts."
2. **Articulate**
   Finding language for what's happening inside.
   "I need words to make sense of this."
3. **Give Meaning**
   Understanding the experience in light of who you are and where you are.
   "This isn't random, it's part of my story."
4. **Connect**
   Recognizing that your story is part of something larger.
   "I'm not alone. This connects to wider patterns."

Emotion Regulation
The ability to feel, understand, and express emotions such as anger, fear, or sadness in a healthy way, without becoming overwhelmed or suppressing those feelings.

Feedback Release
The process through which internal signals, tensions, or emotions are shared with the outside world, allowing the system to recalibrate itself. Examples include speaking up, crying, setting boundaries, or moving the body.

Personal Resilience
An individual's capacity to adapt to stress, loss, or change without becoming stuck. It involves recovery, the ability to create meaning, and remaining flexible in behavior and thinking.

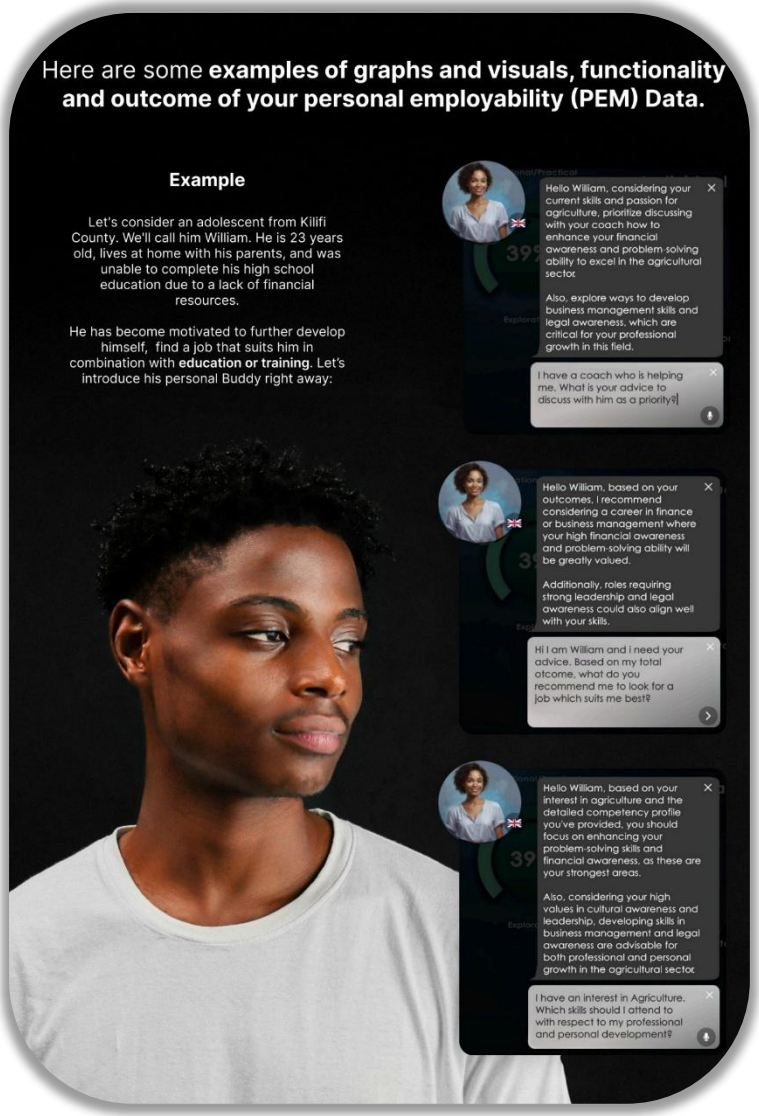
System Resilience
The collective resilience of a group, family, organization, or society to

absorb tension and adapt to change without breaking down or falling apart. It depends on communication, structure, and mutual support.

Emotion
A consciously experienced feeling tied to a specific situation, such as anger or joy. Emotions include cognitive, physical, and behavioral components and provide direction for action.

Affect
A pre-verbal, bodily-felt quality of mood or tension that does not yet have a clear name or story attached. Affect is the first physiological response to internal or external events, visible in facial expression, posture, or muscle tension.

Appendix


Here are some examples of graphs and visuals, functionality and outcome of your personal employability (PEM) Data.
Example
Let's consider an adolescent from Kilifi County. We'll call him William. He is 23 years old, lives at home with his parents, and was unable to complete his high school education due to a lack of financial resources.
He has become motivated to further develop himself, find a job that suits him in combination with education or training. Let's introduce his personal Buddy right away:
Hello William, considering your current skills and passion for agriculture, prioritize discussing with your coach how to enhance your financial awareness and problem-solving ability to excel in the agricultural sector.
Also, explore ways to develop business management skills and legal awareness, which are critical for your professional growth in this field.
I have a coach who is helping me. What is your advice to discuss with him as a priority?
Hello William, based on your outcomes, I recommend considering a career in finance or business management where your high financial awareness and problem-solving ability will be greatly valued.
Additionally, roles requiring strong leadership and legal awareness could also align well with your skills.
Hi I am William and i need your advice. Based on my total otcome, what do you recommend me to look for a job which suits me best?
Hello William, based on your interest in agriculture and the detailed competency profile you've provided, you should focus on enhancing your problem-solving skills and financial awareness, as these are your strongest areas.
Also, considering your high values in cultural awareness and leadership, developing skills in business management and legal awareness are advisable for both professional and personal growth in the agricultural sector.
I have an interest in Agriculture. Which skills should I attend to with respect to my professional and personal development?

Examples of PEM and VRR Precision Analysis:

Continuing examples of William's PEM outcome.

William's **employability profile** displays all relevant scores in relation to the previously shown 16 universal organizational competencies.

The **Entrepreneurial Button** on the left has been selected. On the right, you can see an overview of all the skills William uses when performing activities that involve entrepreneurial personal traits.

It's important to distinguish this from the **profession of an entrepreneur.** While entrepreneurial traits are essential for entrepreneurs, they are also valuable in many other professions and professional roles.









The **VRR** measures results based on William's answers and scores, which are displayed in graphs covering areas such as:
Vulnerability Factors
Mental and Physical Health
Presence of Stigma
Socio-Economic Status
Poverty
Coping with Adversity
Risk and Protective Factors
Depression and Fear Factors

Functionally, you can view cross-sections by clicking on specific buttons, depending on the information you're looking for.

In William's outcome example, **Psychological Complaints related to Stress/Trauma** was selected on the right. The next page will present the details.

Follow-up Example of VRR Outcomes and Precision Analysis for William