Emotional Safety, Presence, and Joy: A Neurobiological and Psychological Model for Well-Being

In the pursuit of well-being, **emotional safety**, **presence**, and **joy** emerge as critical and interlocking factors. Contemporary neuroscience and psychology increasingly show that a *sense of safety* in our nervous system underpins our ability to be fully present and to experience deep joy[1]. This white paper synthesizes recent research to support the *Safety–Presence–Joy (SPJ)* model of well-being. We draw on advances in neurobiology (e.g. polyvagal theory, affective neuroscience), psychology (emotion regulation and trauma studies), and historical insights (from William James to Abraham Maslow) to illustrate how emotional safety is a prerequisite for mindful presence and authentic joy. We then examine the widespread *crisis of unsafety* in modern life and its toll on mental health, before presenting the scientific grounding for the SPJ model – including the **Chair of JOY®** method as an actionable practice to cultivate safety, presence, and joy in daily life.

1. Emotional Safety as a Prerequisite for Presence and Joy

Emotional safety refers to a fundamental sense of security, calm, and **freedom from threat** in one's body and social environment. Decades ago, Abraham *Maslow* placed safety just above physiological needs in his hierarchy: if a person's basic security needs are not met, higher experiences like love, presence, or joy become difficult to attain[2]. In fact, when safety needs are unmet, individuals tend to feel anxious and tense– a state incompatible with relaxation or happiness. Psychological thinkers from *Carl Rogers* to *Carl Jung* have similarly stressed that an environment of acceptance and security is necessary for individuals to explore themselves and reach deeper fulfillment. Feeling emotionally safe – *knowing that one is not under attack or judgment – opens up mental space for awareness and positive emotion*.

Modern neuroscience affirms this foundational role of safety. Dr. Stephen *Porges'* polyvagal theory demonstrates that our nervous system continually scans for *"cues of safety or threat"* (a process Porges calls *neuroception*) and switches body states accordingly[3]. When our brain-body system detects safety, it engages the **ventral vagal** pathway (the "social engagement" state of the parasympathetic nervous system) – we feel calm, open, and able to connect. In this state, **presence** (mindful awareness of the here-and-now) and positive social engagement become possible. By contrast, if we perceive danger, the sympathetic "fight-or-flight" or dorsal "shutdown" defenses take over, narrowing our focus to survival and making it nearly impossible to relax, learn, or feel joy[4] *In other words, a sense of safety is the doorway to presence and joy*. As one neurobiological account explains, *"true happiness is not an external achievement, but an internal dynamic characterized by a calm, regulated nervous system… the ability to feel alive, safe, and curious, engaging fully with oneself and others"*[4]. Only when the nervous

system is settled in safety can we fully **be present** (curious, attentive, "alive" to the moment) and allow authentic **joy** to emerge[5].

Historical perspectives echo this idea. *William James* notably suggested that our mental attitude can overpower stress – *"the greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another"*[6] – implying that in a secure state of mind, we can deliberately shift toward positive focus. *Abraham Maslow* observed that people free from insecurity can pursue growth, meaning, and peak experiences (akin to joy), whereas those chronically unsafe remain stuck addressing lower-level needs[7]. Even *Carl Jung* noted that one must confront and integrate fears (achieve inner safety) to attain wholeness and contentment. In sum, across time and disciplines, there is a consensus: **emotional safety is the bedrock** upon which higher well-being is built. Feeling safe allows one to **be present** – fully attentive and engaged – rather than consumed by anxiety. In turn, presence opens the possibility for **joy**, defined not as a superficial cheerfulness but as a deep, resilient positive state. JOYELY's own framework encapsulates this progression: *"Safety, Presence, and Joy – always in that order because the nervous system requires safety before it can fully engage"*[8]. First comes a sense of safety; from safety arises the ability to remain present; from sustained present-moment awareness, joy can *naturally emerge rather than be forced*[9].

It is important to distinguish **joy** in this context from momentary pleasure. Joy here is akin to what positive psychologists describe as a *stable positive affect* or fulfillment – *"a deeper, more stable emotional state that arises when people feel safe, seen, and supported"*. When one's environment and relationships provide genuine safety (being "seen and supported" without fear of judgment), the individual can relax defensive vigilance and engage with life wholeheartedly. This safe, present engagement often blossoms into joy – an uplifting emotion accompanied by curiosity, openness, and connection. Joy can be seen as both an outcome of sustained safety/presence and a reinforcing force that further improves well-being. As we will explore, *joy has measurable benefits for mind and body*, but it rests on the precondition of emotional safety. **In summary, emotional safety is the prerequisite that enables presence, and presence in turn allows joy**. This SPJ sequence aligns with both long-standing psychological theory and emerging neurobiological evidence.

2. Neurobiological and Psychological Mechanisms of Emotional Safety

Achieving emotional safety triggers a cascade of adaptive changes in the brain and body. **Neurobiologically, safety is a state of regulation**: heart rate slows, breathing deepens, stress hormones drop, and brain systems balance. A core player in this process is the **vagus nerve** – the large cranial nerve that governs parasympathetic ("rest and digest") functions. Research in the last few years has illuminated how high *vagal tone* (indicative of greater vagus nerve activity) correlates with calm emotional states, resilience, and quicker recovery from stress[10]. When we feel safe, the ventral vagal pathway activates, promoting relaxation, social engagement, digestion, and other restorative processes. *Heart-rate variability* (HRV), a noninvasive measure of vagal tone, tends to increase, reflecting a flexible, healthy autonomic nervous system. In fact, interventions like slow *deep breathing* and biofeedback that increase HRV have been shown to reduce anxiety and improve emotional regulation by enhancing vagal

activity[11]. Through this vagal mechanism, a sense of safety directly translates into physiological calm and primes the brain for positive interactions.

Concurrently, feeling safe engages the brain's *"social connection"* circuitry. When the environment signals comfort (e.g. friendly faces, supportive voice tones, or familiar settings), the brain's limbic system (emotional centers) and prefrontal cortex coordinate to down-shift the defense response. **Polyvagal theory** describes how safety cues (like gentle eye contact or a soothing voice) activate the ventral vagal complex, which in turn inhibits the amygdala's fear signals and calms the heart[12]. *Stephen Porges* notes that in a state of perceived safety, the body *"optimizes itself for growth and restoration," whereas feeling unsafe "triggers defense systems that impair health and function"*[13]. In other words, chronic threat mode puts the body in wear-and-tear state (elevated cortisol, blood pressure, inflammation) at the expense of long-term well-being. By contrast, safety mode allows maintenance and healing processes (cell repair, immune balance) to proceed effectively[14]. This aligns with evolutionary biology: only when an organism detects safety will it invest resources in growth, learning, or exploration.

At the neural level, **emotional safety supports higher brain functioning**. In safe states, the prefrontal cortex (PFC) – responsible for reasoning, impulse control, and mindful awareness – stays online and well-integrated with emotional centers. Stress or fear can temporarily "hijack" the brain, leading the amygdala and reflexive circuits to dominate (often termed *amygdala hijack*). But in safety, the PFC can exert top-down regulation, meaning we can reflect on feelings rather than be driven by them. Neuroimaging studies show that practices which cultivate safety (such as mindfulness meditation, breathing exercises, or supportive social interaction) increase activation in regions like the anterior cingulate cortex and ventromedial PFC – areas involved in attention, emotion processing, and conscious awareness of bodily states[15]. As one report described, adding a *visualization or focus component* to mindfulness (thereby enhancing a sense of comfort or safety) engages the ACC and insula, improving attention and emotional insight[16]. These brain changes underpin greater **emotional regulation**, allowing a person to experience and name emotions without being overwhelmed. Neuroscientist *Lisa Feldman Barrett's* work on constructed emotion also suggests that when the brain has predictable, benign inputs (a steady "body budget" with no threat to resources), it is more likely to construct experiences of calm or positive affect rather than anxiety. In essence, a well-regulated nervous system – achieved through safety – is capable of generating *grounded emotions* and cognitive clarity.

Other key mechanisms link safety to psychological well-being. **Oxytocin**, sometimes called the "bonding hormone," is released during safe social contact (e.g. warm hugs, trust in relationships) and has anxiolytic (anxiety-reducing) effects. Oxytocin activity in the brain can suppress amygdala fear responses and promote feelings of trust and connection. This neurochemical pathway explains why being with supportive loved ones makes us feel safe and why *social support is a potent regulator* of stress responses. Psychologists speak of **co-regulation**: the process by which people calm each other. For example, a frightened child's heartbeat slows down when held by a calm caregiver – the caregiver's regulated nervous system transmits safety signals to the child. Co-regulation in adulthood (like a colleague offering empathy during a crisis) similarly leverages our social brains to restore calm. *Allan Schore's* affect regulation theory emphasizes that in early development, the infant's brain learns to self-regulate through attuned interactions with caregivers (right brain to right brain communication). When those early relationships provide safety, the child's neural circuits for handling stress become robust; if not,

emotional dysregulation can become a lifelong challenge. Indeed, inadequate safety in early life is strongly linked to later psychopathology[17]. Secure attachment – essentially the *feeling of safety in relationships* – predicts better emotional regulation capacity and resilience, whereas chronic insecurity or trauma predicts anxiety, depression, and PTSD[18].

Psychologically, **feeling safe expands one's capacities**, whereas feeling unsafe contracts them. The *"window of tolerance"* concept (coined by *Dan Siegel*) illustrates this well. Within a given range of arousal (heart rate, emotional intensity) – the window of tolerance – a person can tolerate and integrate emotional experiences without becoming overwhelmed. Safety keeps us within this optimal zone, where we can face life's ups and downs with *mindful presence*. If arousal goes too high (panic, rage) or too low (numbness, dissociation) – often due to triggers of unsafety – we exit this window and can no longer process experiences effectively[19]. Siegel notes that trauma shrinks the window of tolerance, making even mild stressors feel overwhelming, whereas practices that enhance safety (deep breathing, grounding, therapy) help expand this window again. Thus, mechanisms of safety include learned **self-soothing skills** (breathing techniques, positive self-talk) and **interoception** (the ability to notice and interpret one's internal signals). Developing *interoceptive awareness* – for example, recognizing "my heart is racing, maybe I am feeling unsafe" – is key to regaining regulation. Studies indicate that mindfulness and somatic practices can strengthen interoceptive brain circuits, effectively teaching the brain that bodily cues of calm are *valuable information* for maintaining equilibrium[20]. By learning to *"recognize and disrupt threat response cycles,"* individuals can return to a regulated baseline and *"open the door to a sustainable, embodied joy"*. In summary, emotional safety operates through concrete biological systems – vagal tone, hormones, brain networks – and these in turn support the psychological experiences of presence (open attention) and joy. Feeling safe *literally changes* how our body and mind function: it shifts us out of survival mode into a state where we can connect, learn, and flourish.

3. The Pervasive Crisis of Unsafety in Daily Life and Its Costs

Despite the known importance of emotional safety, many modern environments – workplaces, schools, and communities – suffer from a *pervasive lack of psychological safety*. We are living through what many call a mental health crisis. A 2023 survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that **90% of U.S. adults believe the country is facing a mental health crisis**, with large numbers reporting persistent anxiety, stress, and sadness in their own lives. The COVID-19 pandemic and other societal stressors have left a baseline of uncertainty and threat. In that poll, *half of young adults* reported feeling persistent anxiety in the past year[21] – a striking indicator of how unsafe and overwhelmed the emerging generation is feeling. What these numbers reflect is an ambient atmosphere of unsafety: economic instability, public health threats, social conflict, and information overload all contribute to people feeling constantly on edge. When the *nervous system perceives chronic threat*, it can lead to hypervigilance, sleep disturbances, and burnout. As NIMH director Joshua Gordon noted, given recent circumstances, *"feeling anxious is part of a normal response to what's going on"*[22]. Unfortunately, this *normalized anxiety* has serious costs: we see rising rates of clinical depression, anxiety disorders, trauma-related disorders, and even "deaths of despair."

In the **workplace**, the lack of emotional safety and high stress levels are exacting a heavy toll. Employee burnout rates in the U.S. have spiked to around **45%** in recent years[23], driven by factors like workload, job insecurity, and poor work-life balance[24]. A culture of fear or chronic pressure in organizations leads to disengagement, absenteeism, and turnover. In fact, the *American Institute of Stress* estimates job stress now costs U.S. businesses over **$300 billion annually** in healthcare, absenteeism, and lost productivity. When workers do not feel psychologically safe – for example, fearing punishment if they speak up with an idea or concern – creativity and morale plummet. Conversely, studies have shown that teams with high **psychological safety** (where individuals trust that they can take interpersonal risks without ridicule) are among the best-performing and most innovative. Nearly *90% of high-performing teams* report that psychological safety is a priority in their culture[25]. They benefit from more open communication and collaboration. By contrast, *unsafe work environments* contribute to a vicious cycle of stress: employees hide mistakes, conflict festers, and mental health issues like anxiety and burnout worsen. One 2024 workplace survey noted that **89% of employees** consider psychological safety *crucial*, and when it's lacking, it *"exacerbates mental health symptoms, increases workplace violence and results in higher turnover"*[26]. Thus, there is a clear business and humanitarian case for addressing unsafety at work.

In **education**, psychological unsafety can derail learning and development. Students who feel threatened – whether due to bullying, identity-based discrimination, or harsh authoritarian climates – spend more mental energy on fear and self-protection than on exploration and growth. Research in educational psychology indicates that *lack of psychological safety in classrooms impairs academic performance* and engagement[27]. When a student is anxious about being embarrassed or punished, they are less likely to participate, ask questions, or take the intellectual risks needed for deep learning[28]. Conversely, a safe learning environment (where mistakes are treated as learning opportunities and students feel respected) correlates with greater intrinsic motivation and creativity. The current youth mental health statistics are alarming: beyond academic outcomes, we see rising rates of self-harm, anxiety, and depression among adolescents. A CDC survey of high school students found record levels of persistent sadness and hopelessness in the past decade. These trends are compounded in communities where students face external threats like community violence or systemic injustice. A *chronically unsafe environment* floods a young person's nervous system with stress, impairing memory, concentration, and emotional regulation – all critical for learning. The costs are not only personal (in terms of mental illness) but societal: lower educational attainment and lost human potential.

Trauma is a major factor in the unsafety crisis. Traumatic experiences – especially in childhood – can fundamentally alter a person's stress response for life. The landmark CDC-Kaiser **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study** showed that roughly **61% of adults** have experienced at least one category of childhood trauma, and about 1 in 6 (16%) have experienced four or more types of ACEs[29] These include abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction such as violence or addiction. The accumulation of trauma correlates strongly with adult mental health problems, chronic disease, and even reduced longevity[30]. In fact, CDC models suggest that preventing ACEs could *reduce the number of adults with depression by nearly half*[31] – an astonishing impact, highlighting trauma as a root cause of much suffering. Individuals with high ACE scores often live in a state of dysregulated stress reactivity: their baseline is one of unsafety, expecting danger even in benign situations. Without intervention, this can lead to cycles of re-traumatization and health breakdown. Moreover, trauma and emotional

dysregulation are not evenly distributed; they reflect **social inequities**. Marginalized and oppressed communities often experience higher levels of systemic unsafety – from racism, poverty, community violence, to historical traumas – leading to health disparities. For example, racial discrimination is a chronic stressor that contributes to higher rates of anxiety, hypertension, and other stress-related conditions among people of color. As one health analysis put it, *"racism is a public health crisis"* because experiencing or even witnessing racism triggers sustained stress responses and worsens both mental and physical health. This kind of **systemic unsafety** means entire populations may feel a baseline of threat (e.g., an LGBTQ+ individual in a hostile community, or a Black individual repeatedly exposed to discrimination). The result can be community-wide patterns of hypervigilance, trauma, and burnout.

All of these factors feed into a **wider crisis of unsafety** that manifests as rising mental health disorders, burnout, and social fragmentation. When people do not feel safe – in their bodies, jobs, schools, or neighborhoods – the human costs include reduced productivity, impaired learning, poor health, and lost quality of life. There are also significant economic and societal costs: stress-related illnesses strain healthcare systems, employee burnout undermines economic productivity, and untreated trauma can perpetuate cycles of violence or addiction. By one estimate, *workplace stress and burnout alone may cost companies up to $15 million per year for every 10,000 workers* through turnover and lost efficiency[32]. On a community level, lack of safety and trust erodes social cohesion and civic participation. It is clear that we face not just individual problems but a *collective challenge* to create conditions of psychological safety in our institutions. The evidence makes a compelling case that investing in emotional safety – trauma-informed practices, psychological safety training, inclusive and supportive policies – can pay off through better health, innovation, and human thriving[33] The next section will show that addressing unsafety is not merely an abstract ideal, but something we can tackle with *science-backed strategies* that bring about measurable improvements in well-being.

4. Scientific Grounding for the SPJ Model and the Chair of JOY® Experience as an Actionable Solution

The **Safety–Presence–Joy (SPJ)** model is grounded in the principle that human well-being follows a progression: **emotional safety first**, which enables mindful **presence**, which in turn allows authentic **joy** to flourish[34]. This model synthesizes the research we've reviewed: a regulated, safe nervous system (parasympathetic activation, low fear) is the platform upon which one can maintain awareness in the present moment and cultivate positive emotional states. *Each component of SPJ is supported by scientific findings.* When even one element is missing – for instance, if a person tries to practice joy without safety – the outcomes are likely to be shallow or unsustainable. But when all three build on each other, the result is a self-reinforcing cycle of resilience and well-being.

Emotional Safety: The SPJ model posits (and research confirms) that safety is *non-negotiable* for positive growth. Physiologically, a sense of safety corresponds to the **regulated nervous system state** discussed earlier – characterized by high vagal tone, balanced stress hormones, and synchrony between heart and brain rhythms. In safe states, the heart and brain exhibit coherent patterns; studies on *heart-brain coherence*

(often using HRV measures) show that fostering safety and calm (through techniques like slow breathing or loving meditation) produces orderly heart rhythms and favorable neural feedback, improving emotional stability and cognitive function[35]. When the body isn't busy defending against threat, it allocates resources to learning, immunity, and connection. Psychologically, safety underpins a **growth mindset** rather than a survival mindset. For example, trauma-informed therapies always begin by establishing a sense of safety for the client, because only then can deeper processing occur. Likewise, workplaces that establish psychological safety see greater **engagement and creativity**, because employees feel secure enough to contribute ideas and take learning risks. The SPJ model's emphasis on safety aligns with the consensus in organizational psychology that *"innovation requires risk-taking, vulnerability, and psychological safety—none of which thrive in fear-based environments."* In short, the scientific rationale for prioritizing safety is overwhelming: it optimizes neurophysiology for health, clears the mental cloud of fear, and lays the groundwork for presence and joy.

Presence: Once a baseline of safety is achieved, the next pillar is mindful **presence** – being mentally in the here-and-now with full awareness. Presence is essentially the state of *engaged attention* and *attunement* to one's current experience (both internal and external) without distraction or judgment. Neuroscience studies have shown that practices cultivating presence, such as mindfulness meditation, can remodel the brain (a demonstration of **neuroplasticity** in action). Regular mindfulness practice increases grey matter volume in areas related to attention and emotion regulation (like the prefrontal cortex and insula) and reduces reactivity in the amygdala. A 2021 meta-review noted that **meditative practices** can *"change patterns of brain function and ultimately support wellbeing"*[36]. By focusing attention (whether on the breath, a mantra, or simply the present task), individuals train the brain's networks for sustained attention and self-regulation. Presence also directly counters rumination and worry – mental states that often underlie anxiety and depression. When fully present, one is not dragged by regrets of the past or fears of the future. This confers what some psychologists call "attentional control," which is linked to lower stress. Indeed, even brief mindfulness interventions have been shown to reduce cortisol and improve mood by keeping people anchored in the moment. *William James* long ago emphasized the value of controlling one's attention for well-being, and modern science concurs: presence is a skill that can be learned, yielding greater cognitive clarity and emotional balance. In the SPJ model, presence serves as the bridge between safety and joy – it is the *active ingredient* that allows a person in a safe state to actually experience positive emotions fully. If safety provides the calm conditions, presence is the mindful engagement with those conditions, preventing one's mind from wandering back into fear or forward into craving. Thus, presence enables one to *savor* life. Notably, the concept of **flow** in positive psychology (total immersion in an activity) is a form of intense presence known to correlate with high satisfaction and even joy. Achieving flow requires enough safety (one must feel comfortable and competent in the task) and yields enjoyment. The SPJ model is consistent with this: safety sets the stage, and presence is the spotlight of consciousness illuminating the now.

Joy: The culmination of the SPJ sequence is **joy**, which in this model is the robust, enduring form of positive emotion that arises from a safe and present state. Scientific research on positive emotions – spearheaded by figures like *Barbara Fredrickson* – provides a rich understanding of joy's effects. Fredrickson's *"Broaden-and-Build" theory* demonstrates that **joy and other positive emotions broaden our thought-action repertoires** and build lasting personal resources. When people experience joy, even

mildly, they tend to think more creatively, see more possibilities, and build social connections. For instance, joy "opens up" our perspective (as opposed to fear, which narrows focus to a pinpoint). Over time, frequent moments of joy accumulate and can increase resilience, social support, and skills – essentially they *"build resources"* like optimism or problem-solving ability. Neurochemically, joy is associated with **dopamine** and **oxytocin** release in the brain, which reward us with feelings of pleasure, trust, and bonding. Dopamine reinforces behaviors that led to the positive emotion (motivating us to seek more engagement and growth), while oxytocin (as noted) enhances feelings of connection and safety with others. In a safe and present individual, these neurochemicals help solidify a positive feedback loop: joy makes the person even more likely to interact openly and explore, which in turn can generate more positive experiences. There's also evidence for what's called the *"undoing effect"* of positive emotions: experiencing a burst of joy or amusement after a stressor can accelerate cardiovascular recovery and return the body to baseline more quickly[37]. In essence, **joy is a natural antidote to stress** – it downregulates the lingering effects of negative emotions and restores homeostasis. However, genuine joy cannot be forced in a vacuum; it *emerges* when the conditions are right. That is why joy comes last in the SPJ formula. By first ensuring safety and presence, we create fertile ground for joy to arise spontaneously (rather than through artificial stimulation). Moreover, joy is not merely an end-state; it also reinforces safety and presence in a virtuous cycle. A joyful person tends to feel more secure and present, as joy reinforces the sense that the environment is friendly and life is meaningful. This positive cycle is what the SPJ model ultimately aims to promote – a self-sustaining loop of well-being where safety, presence, and joy continuously amplify one another.

With the SPJ model's rationale established, the question becomes: *How can we practically cultivate safety, presence, and joy?* One actionable method is the **Chair of JOY® experience**, a simple yet powerful practice developed by JOYELY that embodies the SPJ principles. The Chair of JOY method involves a brief, intentional routine of **seated rest, deep breathing, intentional focus, and emotional processing** – essentially a tangible way to invoke safety, presence, and joy on demand. Let's break down its core steps and the science behind each:

- **Sitting in a comfortable chair (Seated Rest):** The act of sitting down in a supportive chair in a safe space sends a signal to your body that it can pause and drop out of "fight or flight" mode. Posture and context matter – when you sit (rather than stand or run), you inherently tell your nervous system there is no immediate threat requiring movement. A comfortable, upright but relaxed posture encourages a balance between alertness and calm. Research on embodied cognition suggests that certain postures can influence mood; sitting with an open posture can increase feelings of security compared to a defensive, hunched posture. The Chair of JOY emphasizes creating a *"joyful, comfortable, and safe space to think and feel in the moment"*. This might be a special physical chair or simply a mental designation of "this is my safe spot." By routinely using the same chair or environment, one can condition the body to relax quickly when entering that space (a form of contextual cue for safety). In therapy and meditation, chairs or cushions often serve as "anchors" to help the mind associate that position with introspection and peace. Thus, the simple act of seated rest begins engaging the parasympathetic response, slowing the heart and grounding the individual.

- **Deep Breathing:** Once seated, the practice involves **deep, slow breathing** – a technique widely proven to increase vagal tone and induce calm. Deep breathing (especially exhaling slowly) activates the vagus nerve's influence on the heart, reducing heart rate and blood pressure. This is the physiology behind common relaxation techniques and why practices from yoga to mindfulness emphasize the breath. Recent studies on *resonant frequency breathing* and HRV biofeedback show that breathing around 5–6 breaths per minute maximizes heart rhythm coherence and vagal engagement. The result is a state of **cardiac coherence**, where oscillations in heart rate synchronize optimally with breathing cycles, sending a signal of safety to the brain. Participants often report an immediate reduction in stress and anxiety with just a few minutes of slow diaphragmatic breathing. By incorporating deep breathing, the Chair of JOY method ensures that the *body's relaxation response* is activated. Physiologically, this means higher oxygenation, the release of muscle tension, and a shift of brainwaves toward a calmer pattern. This breathing also enhances **interoceptive awareness** – as one focuses on breath, one naturally becomes more attuned to bodily sensations, which is a key aspect of presence.

- **Intentional Focus (Presence Exercise):** The next element is guiding the mind to an **intentional focus**, often through *visualization or positive reflection*. The Chair of JOY might prompt individuals to recall a joyful memory, visualize a peaceful scene, or concentrate on something they feel grateful for. This step directly cultivates *mindful presence* by redirecting attention to a chosen positive or neutral object, rather than letting the mind ruminate on worries. Neuroscience supports the power of guided visualization: imagining positive or calming scenes engages many of the same brain areas as actually experiencing them, including the insula and cingulate cortex which process emotional salience. By visualizing a *"serene lake, a park, or the beach – wherever one is most comfortable and can experience a sense of calm and joy"*, a person in the Chair of JOY is effectively telling their brain that they are *in a safe, pleasurable environment*. This strengthens the safety signal in the nervous system and further quiets the threat detection circuits. Moreover, focusing on a memory of joy or a source of gratitude will naturally spark mild positive emotion. Psychology research shows that **gratitude exercises** and positive imagery can boost mood and reduce stress by shifting cognitive appraisals. The key is that this focus is *intentional* and *present-centered* – one is actively guiding the mind, which reinforces cognitive control. It's the opposite of passively stewing on negative thoughts. Over time, practicing intentional positive focus can build mental habits of optimism and resilience (essentially *neuroplasticity* at work, rewiring the brain toward positive patterns). JOYELY's Chair of JOY technique explicitly adds this visualization component to traditional mindfulness, aiming to be *"a more efficient means of promoting well-being and reducing negative mental states."*.

- **Emotional Processing (Feeling and Releasing):** The Chair of JOY experience encourages not just thinking of a joy moment but also **feeling it deeply** – letting positive emotions percolate and even expressing them (through a smile, laughter, or verbal affirmation). This step is about **embodied emotion** – allowing oneself to fully experience the felt sense of joy or peace in the body. By doing so, individuals practice *emotional regulation*: they learn how to shift from a negative

or neutral state to a positive one through internal methods. Emotional processing might also involve acknowledging any negative feelings that are present ("naming to tame" as some therapists say) and gently letting them go, returning focus to the positive anchor. This aligns with techniques in CBT and mindfulness-based stress reduction, where individuals observe and label their emotions in order to diffuse their power. The physiological benefit of properly processing emotions is significant – it prevents the build-up of internalized stress. For example, expressive writing or talking about feelings has been shown to improve immune function and mood, presumably because it reduces the load on the amygdala and increases PFC integration. In the Chair of JOY, by focusing on joy or gratitude, one is not ignoring problems but rather *strengthening the neural pathways of positive affect*. Over repeated practice, this can increase one's "set point" for joy. Importantly, the method's guidance that one *"think and feel" in the safe space of the chair implies a full psychological safety to confront whatever arises internally. Knowing you are in a safe context (physically and emotionally) allows any difficult feelings to be processed more easily and positive feelings to be amplified.

This four-step sequence – *sitting, breathing, focusing, feeling* – typically takes only a few minutes, yet encapsulates a wealth of scientific wisdom. It mirrors techniques found effective in various research: **breathwork** for vagal activation, **mindfulness** for attention control, **positive psychology** exercises for boosting affect, and **visualization** for cognitive reframing. The simplicity means it can be done **autonomously, anywhere, and without special training**. As a result, the Chair of JOY practice is highly accessible – an employee could do it at their desk during a stressful day, a student could do it before an exam, or a parent could do it in the morning to center themselves. JOYELY has already applied this method in organizational settings, noting that it can *"increase productivity and build upon profitability strategies while decreasing turnover,"* by creating a healthier emotional culture. These claims resonate with the broader evidence that improving workers' emotional well-being (making them feel safe, present, and valued) translates into tangible improvements in engagement and retention.

In essence, the Chair of JOY is a practical vehicle for the SPJ model: it *induces a sense of safety* (comfortable seat, relaxed breathing), *guides one into presence* (focused attention on a visualization), and *elicits joy* (through recalling positive experiences and allowing uplifting emotion). By practicing this regularly, individuals train their nervous systems to more readily enter the beneficial state we've described. It's a form of **neuroplastic reconditioning** – moving from default threat and distraction toward safety and mindful joy. Over time, such practice could potentially increase baseline vagal tone and resilience. Even short-term, the benefits are palpable: many report that taking a "JOY break" lowers their stress and re-energizes them, breaking the cycle of chronic unsafety that they might have been unconsciously stuck in. The Chair of JOY method also inherently **promotes self-awareness**: by routinely checking in with oneself (How do I feel? What does joy feel like now?), people become more emotionally intelligent and better at recognizing when they are off-balance and need a reset.

In conclusion, the SPJ model and the Chair of JOY® experience are supported by a convergence of scientific findings from multiple fields. **Neuroscience** validates that a state of safety is biologically distinct and beneficial, **psychology** shows that mindful presence and positive emotion enhance functioning, and **clinical research** on stress and trauma underscores the necessity of intentional practices to break free from chronic

dysregulation. The societal challenges of burnout, anxiety, and trauma call for interventions exactly like this – ones that treat the root cause (unsafety and dysregulation) rather than just the symptoms. By framing well-being in terms of Safety, Presence, and Joy, we acknowledge that *mental wellness is a whole-person, whole-system endeavor* involving body, mind, and relationships. The Chair of JOY is one actionable solution among others (such as therapy, community-building, and organizational change) that operationalizes this model. It gives individuals a tool to *take charge of their emotional state*, fostering a sense of agency and optimism. As the research and examples cited in this paper illustrate, **cultivating emotional safety, presence, and joy is not only possible – it is measurable, teachable, and profoundly impactful**. By making SPJ principles a deliberate part of our daily routines and organizational cultures, we can begin to alleviate the crisis of unsafety and unlock higher levels of wellness and performance. The science-backed message is hopeful: *when safety is established, presence and joy can become our natural way of being*, leading to healthier, more fulfilling lives for individuals and communities alike.

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4. Fiorillo, A. (2023). *The Functions of Safety in Psychotherapy: An Integrative Theoretical Perspective Across Therapeutic Schools*. Frontiers in Psychology, 14:10405669pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.govpmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov – Review highlighting safety as the basis for exploration, integration, and therapeutic change, noting that insufficient safety in development correlates with psychopathology.

5. Brim, M. (2024, Aug 7). **"Psychological safety is key for a supportive and productive workplace."** *Employee Benefit News*benefitnews.combenefitnews.com – Article reporting that 89% of employees consider psychological safety crucial; lack of it worsens mental health, increases turnover, and costs companies (citing an estimate of up to $15 million per year in losses).

6. DeMarco, M. (2024, Jan 14). **"What Happens When Your Stress Exceeds Your Window of Tolerance."** *Psychology Today*psychologytoday.compsychologytoday.com – Explains Dan Siegel's window of tolerance and shares data that 90% of U.S. adults see a mental health crisis, with half of young adults experiencing persistent anxiety (KFF 2023 poll).

7. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019). **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Vital Signs Report**cdc.govcdc.gov – Epidemiological data showing 61% of U.S. adults have ≥1 ACE, 16% have ≥4 ACEs, and modeling that preventing ACEs could reduce adult depression cases by 44%, among other health impacts.

8. Mansuri, A. (2024, Nov 22). **"How Can Stress from Racism Affect Health?"** *Healthline*healthline.comhealthline.com – Article reviewing research on racial discrimination as a chronic stressor that worsens mental and physical health and creates health disparities (supports systemic unsafety and mental health inequities discussion).

9. JOYELY (2023). **"Joy Intelligence™ and the SPJ Formula."** *JOYELY.com White Paper*joyely.comjoyely.com – Introduces the Safety–Presence–Joy framework (JQ Framework) and emphasizes that joy in organizations arises when people feel safe, seen, and supported. Describes the Chair of JOY® experience and its impact on workplace outcomes (e.g., increased engagement, reduced burnout).

10. JOYELY (2021). **"Mindfulness and How the Chair of Joy Can Promote Well-Being."** *JOYELY Blog*joyely.comjoyely.com – Outlines the Chair of JOY mindfulness technique (sitting, breathing, visualization, feeling) and cites neuroscience (ACC, vmPFC, insula activation) that supports adding visualization to mindfulness for greater effect.

11. Harrison, E. (2021). **"How Positive Emotions Promote Resiliency and Well-Being."** *TLC Resiliency Blog*tlcvirtualresiliency.comtlcvirtualresiliency.com – Summarizes Barbara Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory: joy and other positive emotions broaden thinking and build resources (creativity, social bonds) and can undo cardiovascular effects of stress, thereby enhancing resilience.

12. Ringer, J. et al. (2025). *Heart rate variability biofeedback in a global study of coherence and emotional state*. Scientific Reports, 15, Article 1234nature.comnature.com – Demonstrates that HRV biofeedback and resonant breathing techniques increase vagal activity, reduce stress, improve autonomic function, and highlight the importance of heart–brain interactions in emotional self-regulation.