





**CHW Solutions** 

Witnessing: Understanding the Effects of Overexposure to Stories of Hardship and Trauma and What to Do

About It Kaethe Weingarten, PhD

### Conflict of Interest Disclosure

We have no real or perceived vested interests that relate to this presentation nor do we have any relationships with pharmaceutical companies, biomedical device manufacturers and/or other corporations whose products or services are related to pertinent therapeutic areas.



MIGRANT CLINICIANS NETWORK



A force for health justice

Somos una fuerza dedicada a la justicia en salud

**Our mission** is to create practical solutions at the intersection of vulnerability, migration, and health.

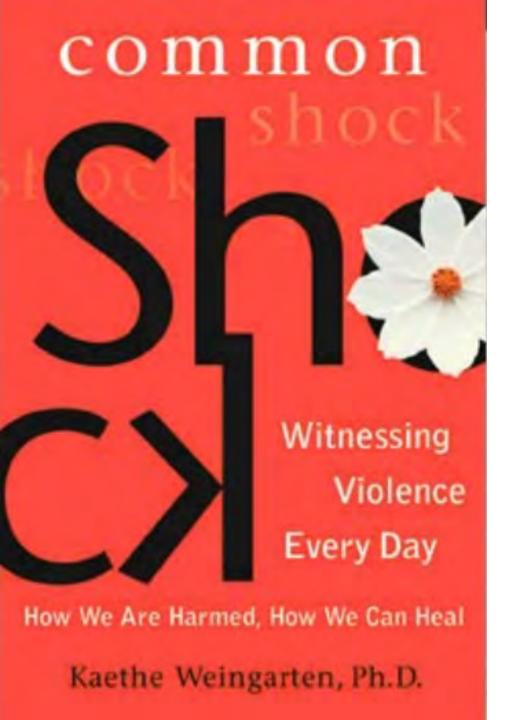
**We envision** a world based on health justice and equity, where migration is never an impediment to well-being.





Kaethe Weingarten, Ph.D.

Founder and Director of the Witness to Witness Program https://www.migrantclinician.org/witness-to-witness



### Dr. Weingarten's Work

- Associate Clinical Professor of
   Psychology, Harvard Medical School, 1981
   2017
- Taught the Program in Families, Trauma and Resilience at the Family Institute of Cambridge
- Author of Common Shock: Witnessing Violence Every Day – How We Are Harmed, How We Can Heal



### Take a Moment:

What has it been like for you when you have been truly witnessed...someone has listened to you with compassion

What has it been like for you when you have fully witnessed someone?



### Two sides to the witnessing coin:

One is compassionate witnessing

The other is toxic witnessing



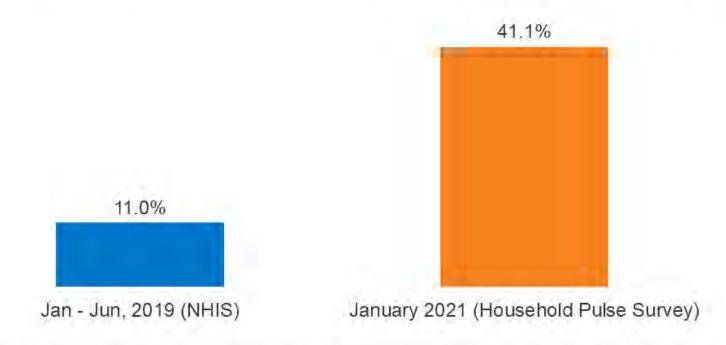
### Overview of Where We are Now

### **Phases of Disaster**



Figure 1

### Average Share of Adults Reporting Symptoms of Anxiety Disorder and/or Depressive Disorder, January-June 2019 vs. January 2021



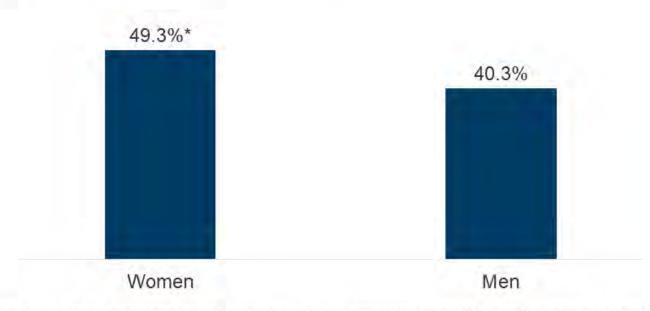
NOTES: Percentages are based on responses to the GAD-2 and PHQ-2 scales. Pulse findings (shown here for January 6 – 18, 2021) have been stable overall since data collection began in April 2020.

SOURCE: NHIS Early Release Program and U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey. For more detail on methods, see: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhis/earlyrelease/ERmentalhealth-508.pdf

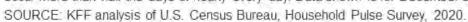


Figure 6

Share of Adults in Households with Children Under the Age of 18 Who Report Symptoms of Anxiety and/or Depressive Disorder During the COVID-19 Pandemic, by Gender



NOTES: \*Indicates a statistically significant difference between women in households with children under the age of 18, and men in households with children under the age of 18, at the p<0.05 level. These women and men, ages 18+, have symptoms of anxiety and/or depressive disorder that generally occur more than half the days or nearly every day. Data shown is for December 9-21, 2020.





Share of Adults Reporting Symptoms of Anxiety and/or Depressive Disorder During the COVID-19 Pandemic, by Race/Ethnicity

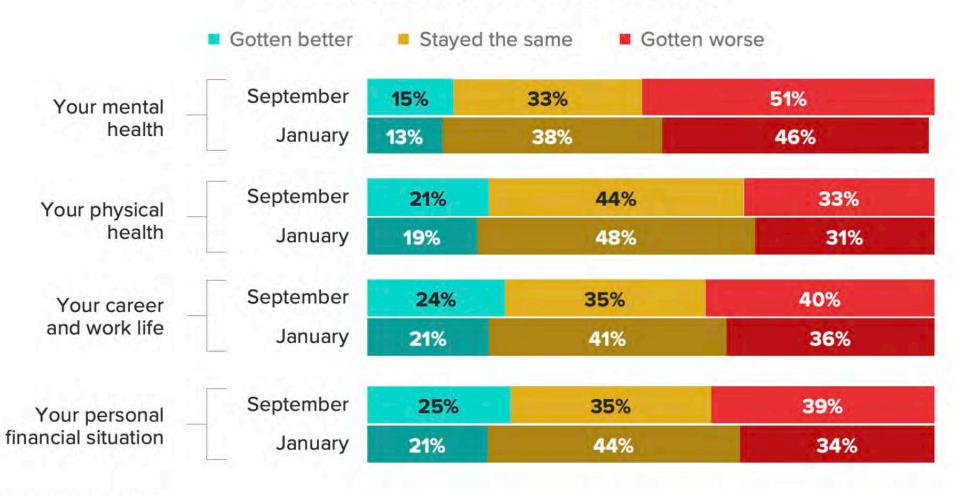


NOTES: \*Indicates a statistically significant difference relative to Non-Hispanic White adults at the p<0.05 level. These adults (ages 18+) report symptoms of anxiety and/or depressive disorder generally occurring more than half the days or nearly every day. "Other Non-Hispanic" includes people of other races and multiple races. Data shown are for December 9 – 21, 2020.

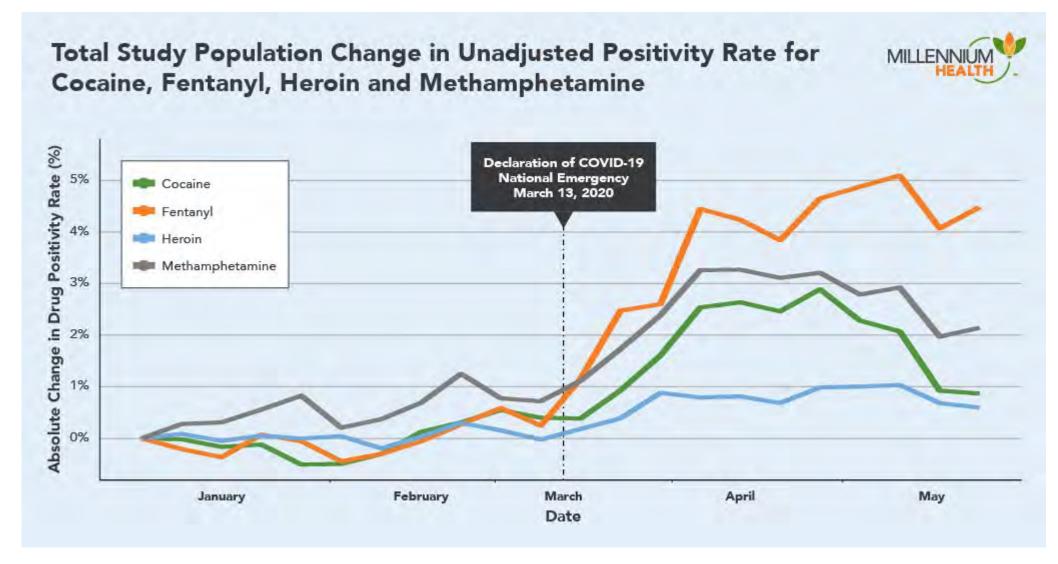
SOURCE: KFF analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey, 2020.



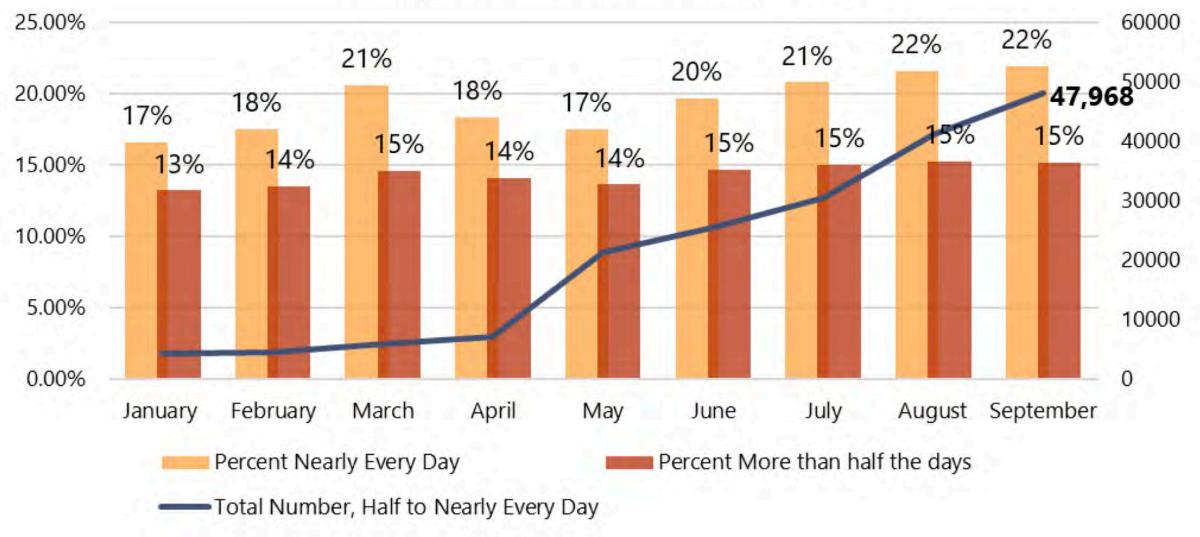
### Health care workers were asked how the following parts of their lives have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Millennium Health's Signals Report<sup>TM</sup> COVID-19 Special Edition Reveals Significant Changes in Drug Use During the Pandemic

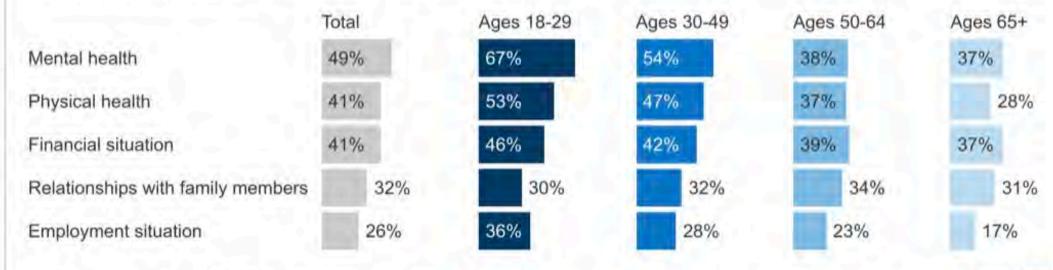


### Thoughts of Suicide or Self-Harm More than Half or Nearly Every Day, Jan-Sep 2020



#### Two-Thirds Of Young Adults Report Negative Impacts From The COVID-19 Pandemic On Their Mental Health

Percent who say the pandemic has had a negative effect on their...



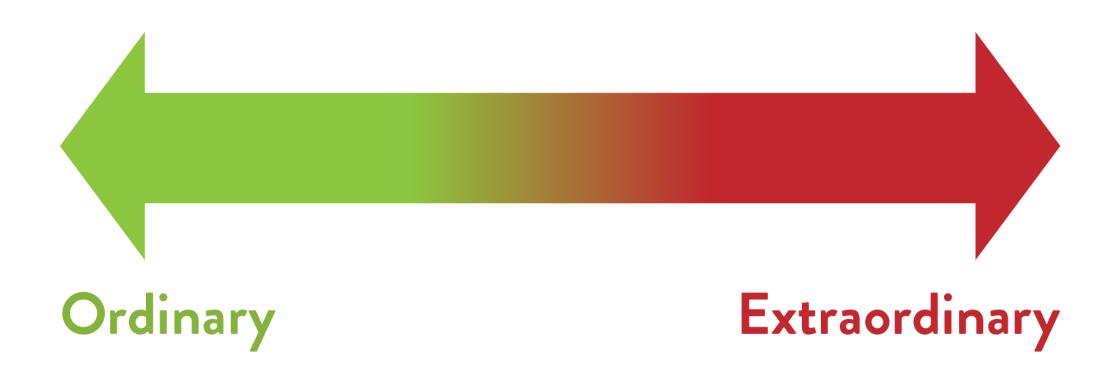
NOTE: See topline for full question wording.

SOURCE: KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor (March 15-22, 2022)

KFF COVID-19
Vaccine Monitor

# We do this work in our bodies

### **Every Day Witnessing**





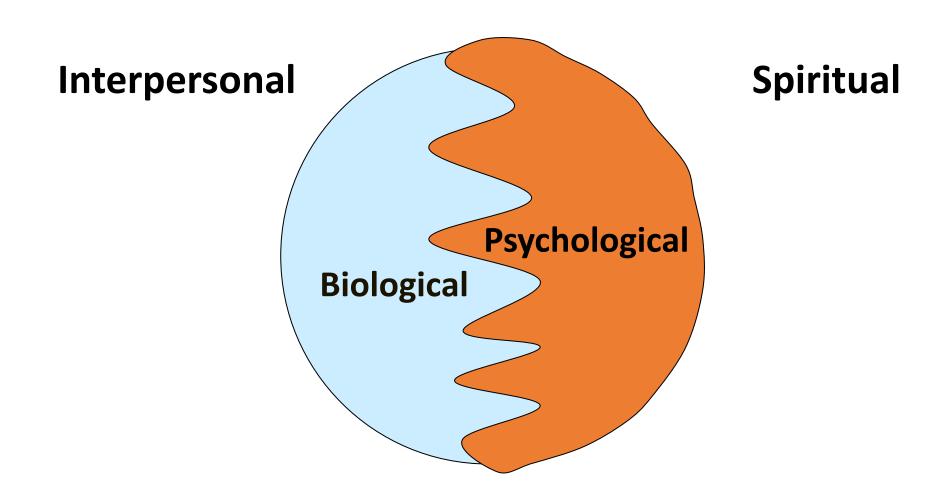
### Witness

- Simultaneous observation: see or hear
- Learn after the event
- Recognition that one has witnessed a troubling situation or heard a stressing story
- Recognition delayed

Empirical research on being the victim of or witness to traumatic events

Outcomes are similar for both forms of exposure





The Individual

# Sensations in the Body

- Clamminess or chilliness
- Exaggerated startle
- Fear responses to nonthreatening stimuli
- Hyper-arousal
- Hyper-vigilance
- Lethargy

- Muscle aches and pains
- Numbness
- Poor concentration
- Rapid heartbeat
- Spacey feeling
- Sweating
- Tingling
- Sudden cold or hot

### Psychological Experiences

- Aggression
- Anger
- Disbelief
- Fear
- Grief
- Guilt
- Helplessness

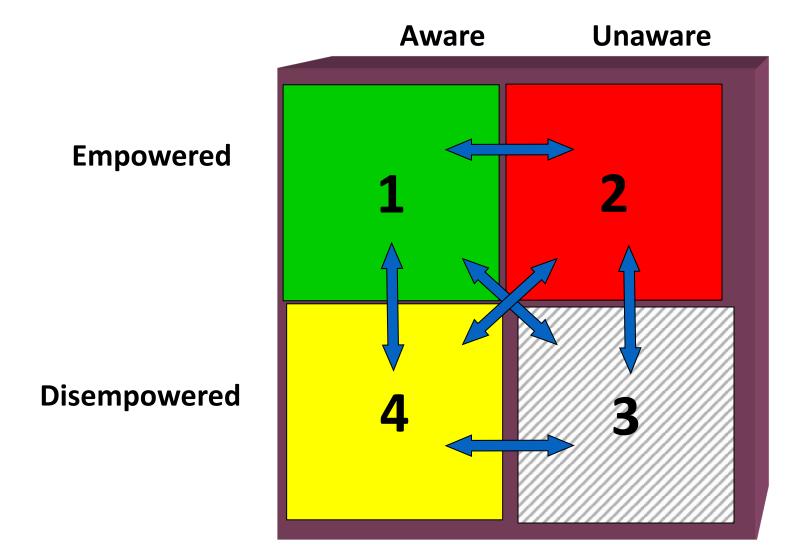
- Memory alterations
- Numbing
- Rage
- Sadness
- Shame
- Vulnerability
- Worry/ Anxiety



### **Witness Positions**

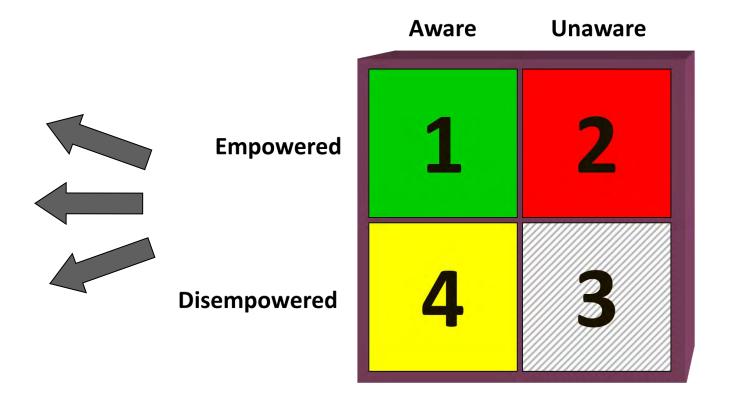
**Aware Unaware Empowered Disempowered** 

### **Changes in Witness Position**



### Each witness position affects:

- Self
- Partner
- Children
- Colleagues
- Friends
- Constituents/Clients
- Institution
- Society



### **Witness Positions**

**Unaware Aware Effective** Misguided and Harmful Competent Ineffectual **Stressed** Abandoning **Exhausted** 

**Empowered** 

**Disempowered** 

#### **Witness Positions**

**Unaware Aware Attuned Critical Thoughtful** Hurtful Helpful Cruel Withdrawn Confused **Passive Uncertain** Deny Inept Opt out

**Empowered** 

Disempowered



### WE CAN MANAGE OUR TOTAL OVERLOAD

### Note:

• I am not discussing burnout.

• Why?

• I believe that burnout is 90% about workplace conditions and not primarily about the individual.

• I am taking a stance, that I hope is supportive.

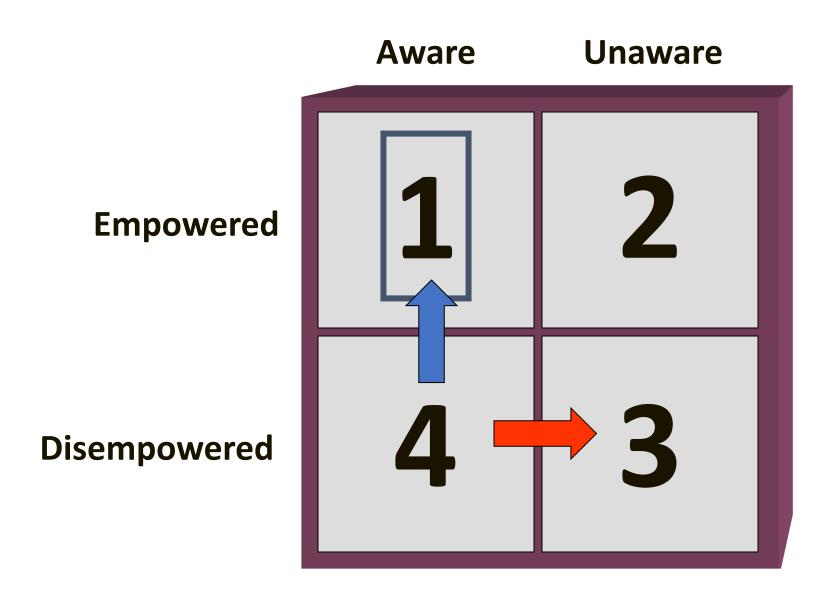
# Which sentence do you prefer?

•I AM BURNT OUT

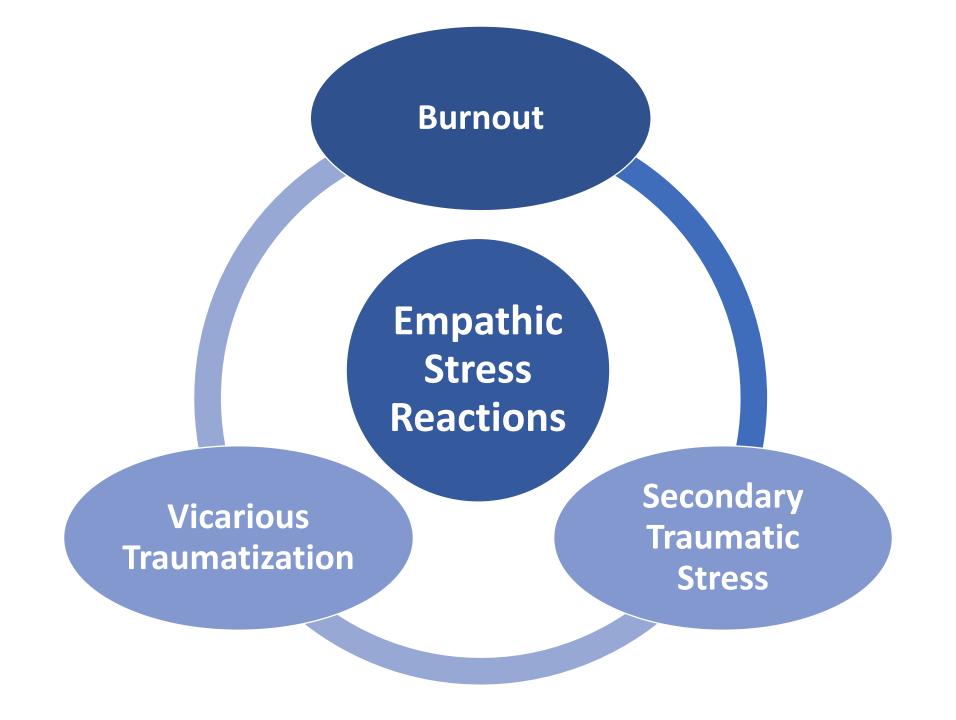
 THE CONDITIONS OF MY WORK BURN ME OUT



### **Options from Position 4**



## Use Empathy Wisely



### **Definition of Empathy**

Empathy refers to the capacity to understand and respond to the unique emotional experiences of another person.



# Two Different Psychological States

Imagining how one would think and feel in another's situation or "shoes."

Imagining how another person thinks or feels given his or her situation.

### Empathic Concern vs Personal Distress

Empathic concern is likely to inspire a desire to help the other person

Personal distress is likely to set off action to reduce one's own distress. This may lead to withdrawal from the person.

# Compassion Fatigue?

- Compassion doesn't fatigue.
- Empathy can turn into personal distress and that does get to be too much.
- It's what we cannot do not what we can do that exhausts us.





## Moral Injury for Care Providers

Failing to consistently meet the needs of the people we serve due to inadequacies in the systems of which we are a part, be it a health care organization or insurance system or social service agency or other larger system.

## Moral injury can lead to moral outrage or apathy



#### **Coping with Moral Injury**

- Start each day by remembering that your intention is to offer compassionate, competent care.
- Notice sensations in the body that are signaling that you are in distress. Pause and take a few full breaths.
- Listen for your internal self-talk. If it is harsh, judging you negatively, blaming or shaming you, kindly tell that inner critic that you and everyone else are doing the best they can under challenging circumstances.
- Create a buddy system for each shift and check in, even briefly, with your buddy regularly through your shift.
- Think of how much a loved one cares for you every time you wash your hands.
- 6. Recognize that circumstances, not you, may produce harms.
- 7. Repeat: Everyone, including you, is just doing the best that one can do.
- 8. Be kind to others and yourself whenever possible.
- Designate someone on each shift or at the end of a work day to offer a brief appreciation to those who have served. Preferably the acknowledgment and appreciation can be observed by at least one other person.
- When you leave work, take good care of your body, mind and spirit.
   Sit in silence to allow your soul to catch up with you.

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The Witness to Witness Program | https://www.migrantclinician.org/witness-to-witness

### Demoralization

- Demoralization is a normal reaction to overwhelming circumstances when the way to solve the problem is unclear or hard to do.
- If you are demoralized, when the situation changes, you will feel better.
- Many people are demoralized now and will feel better when the coronavirus danger has passed

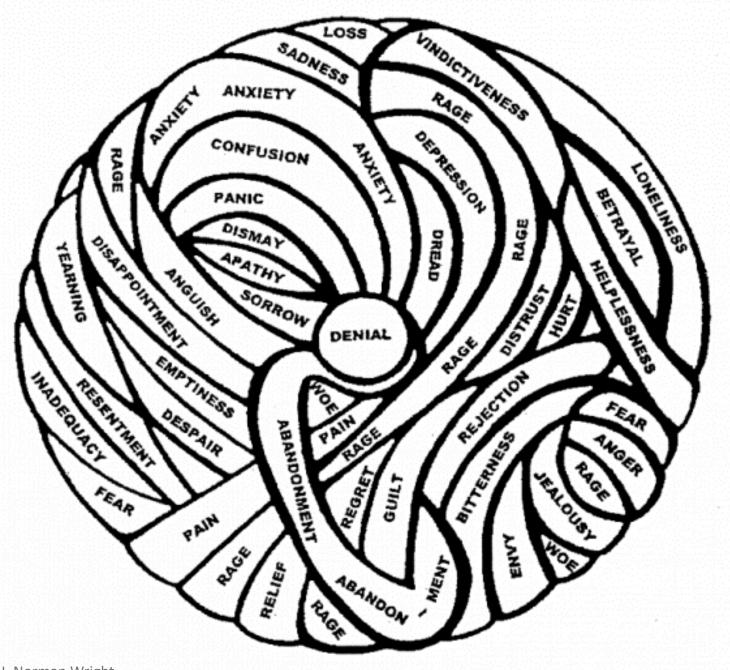


## Languishing

- Feeling blah
- Lacking in focus and energy
- Joyless
- Aimless
- Muddling through life
- Indifferent to your indifference
- The absence of well-being







Grief...A tangled "Ball" of Emotions Why am I irritated and angry all of the time?

Because you have experienced physical violence, verbal abuse, demands for alternative treatment that are not acceptable or approved.

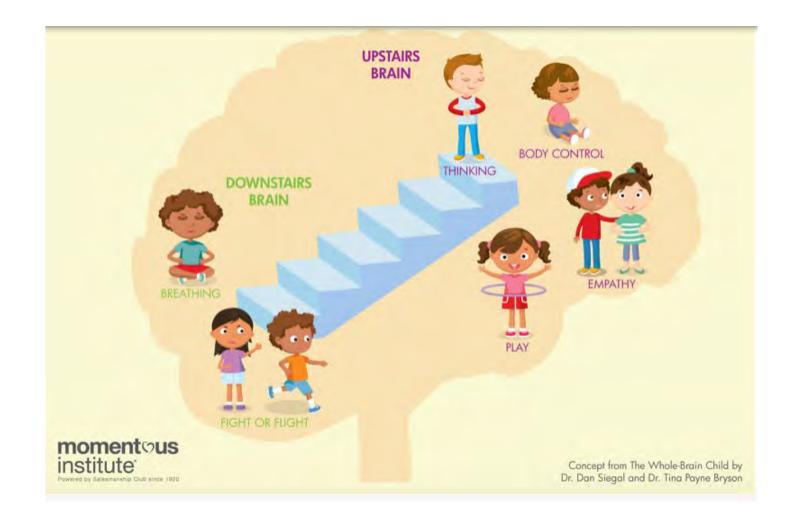
Because you are frustrated with those who propagate misinformation that is costing people their lives.

Because you are exhausted!

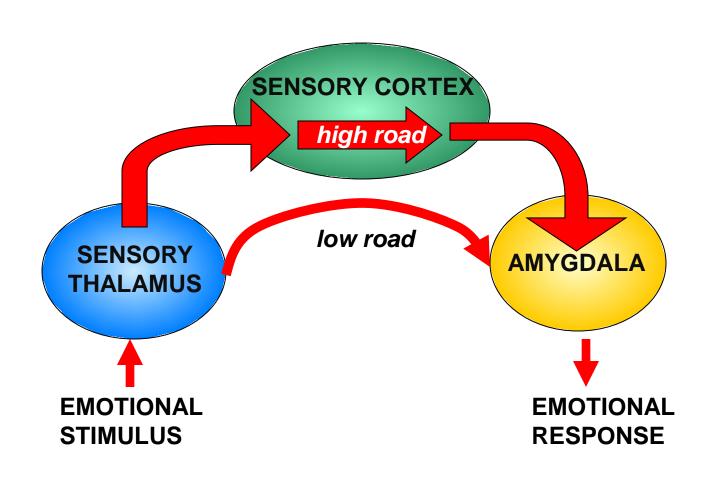
From research study: High anxiety made controlling anger harder, but HCWs were generally successful at doing this.



Triggered responses (highly distressed reactions) come from the downstairs not the upstairs brain



#### High and Low Roads to the Amygdala



 High road processing leads to the upstairs brain

### Our Brains

 Low road processing leads to the downstairs brain

#### FIGHT/FLIGHT/FREEZE

#### WHAT LEADS TO PTSD?

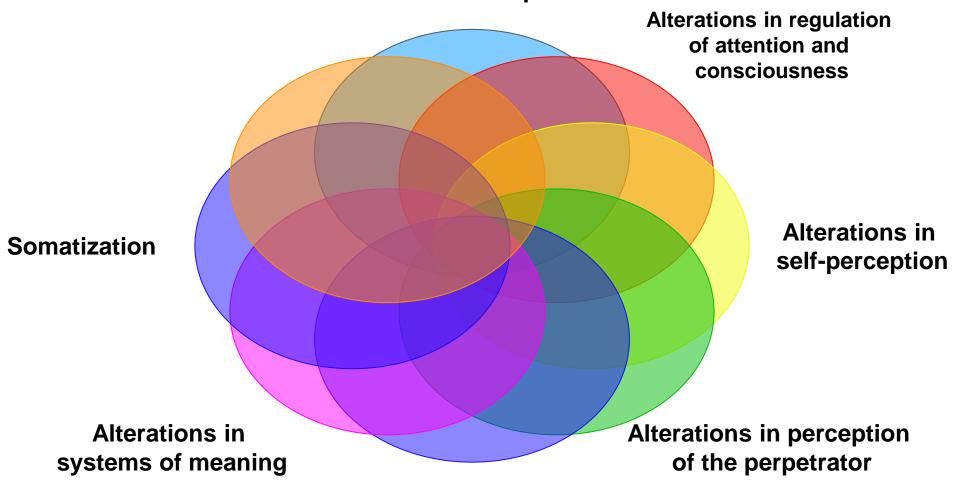
(POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER?)

When there is no real threat any more and our body and mind react as if there is, this can be understood as a kindof hijacking of the Nervous System.

Chronically being in fight/flight/freeze/ can lead to PTSD and continuous trauma.

#### Continuous Trauma –

Alterations to regulation of affect and impulses



**Alterations in relations with others** 

# HEAD OFF PTSD AND MANAGE CONTINUOUS TRAUMA

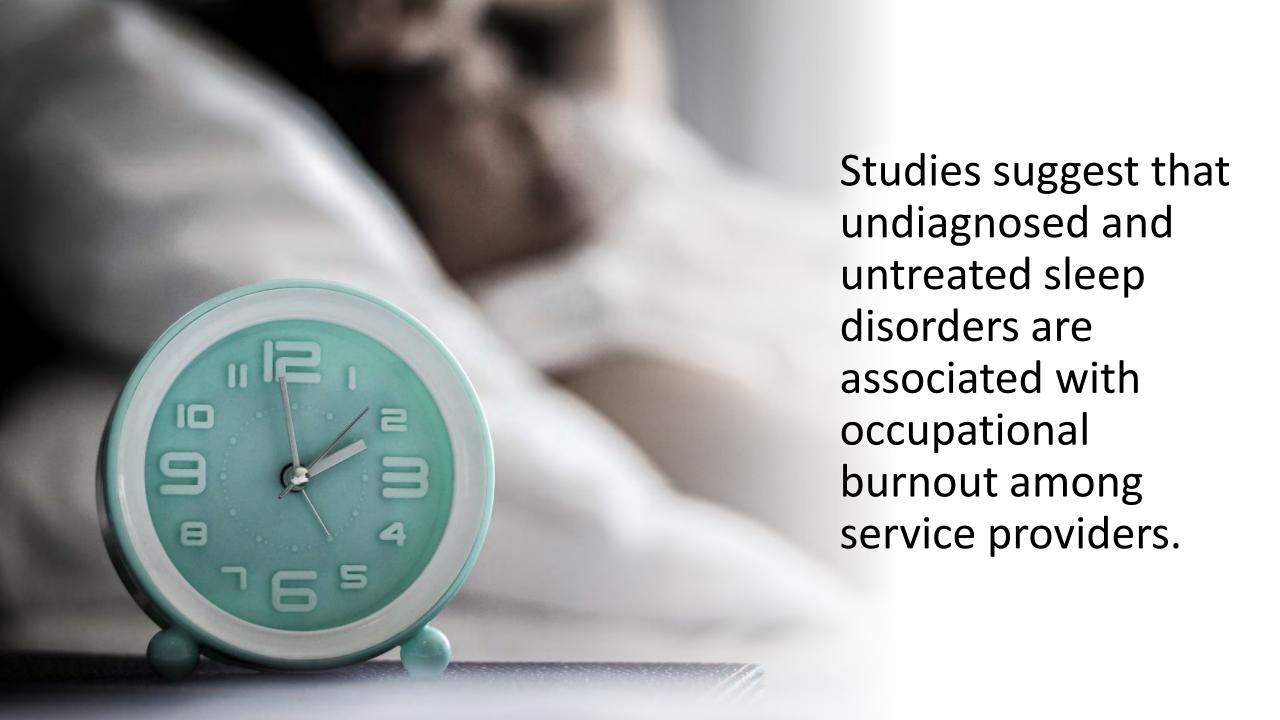
Current conditions of the pandemic can trigger PTSD or can produce a continuous trauma response

Leading trauma expert, Bessel van der Kolk, MD, says we can take action now to mitigate that risk.





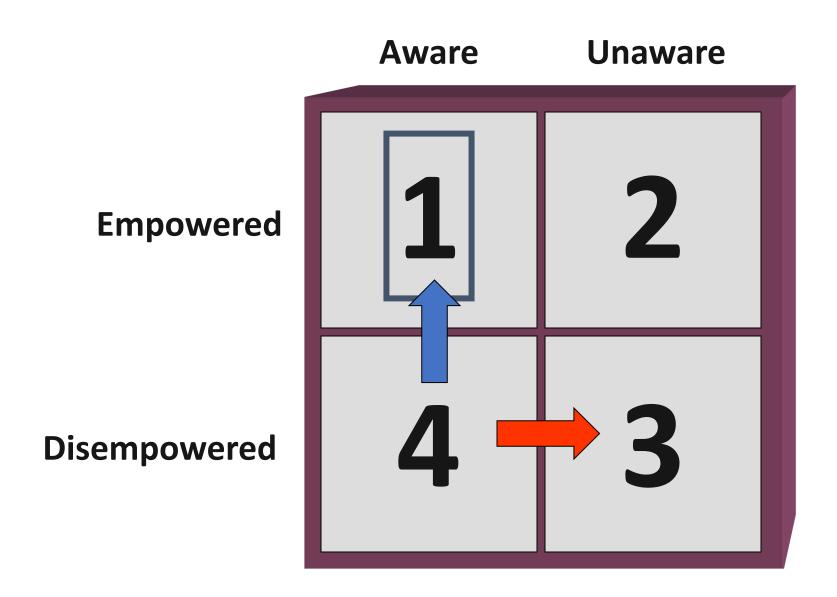
- Accept your feelings
- Activate your body
- Self-compassion
- Maintain relationships
- Sleep or rest





Supports Right Now!

## **Options from Position 4**



### **Witness Positions**

**Unaware Aware Moments of Empowered Effectiveness Disempowered** 





# All Effectiveness Starts with the Body

We feel best, do our best work and are our best with our friends and family when we are in our resilient zone in mind/body.

We don't want to be too hyper and/or too low key.

Good self care keeps us in our resilient zone.

## No one is reslient all of the time.

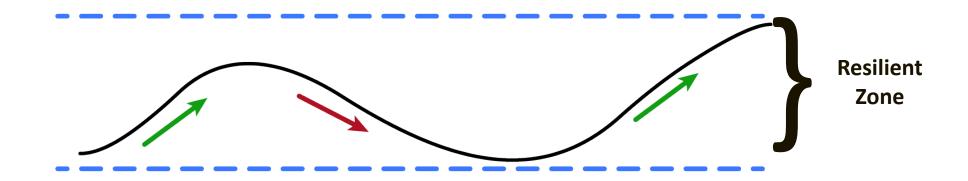


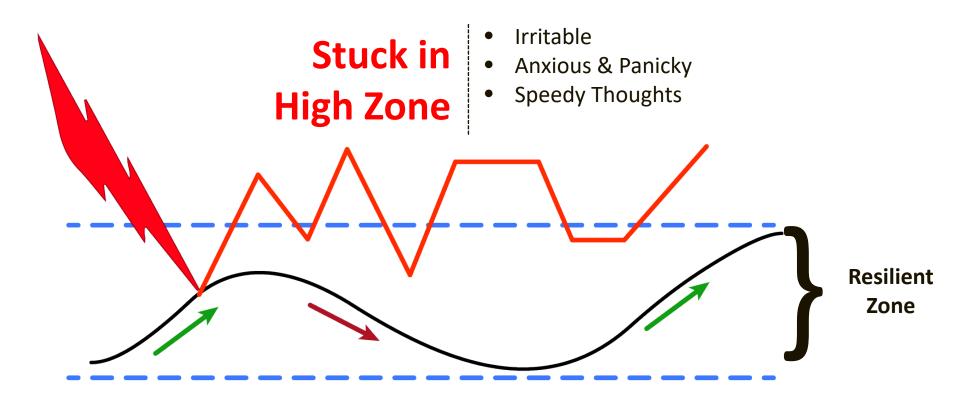
## Everyone Has Strengths in a Crisis

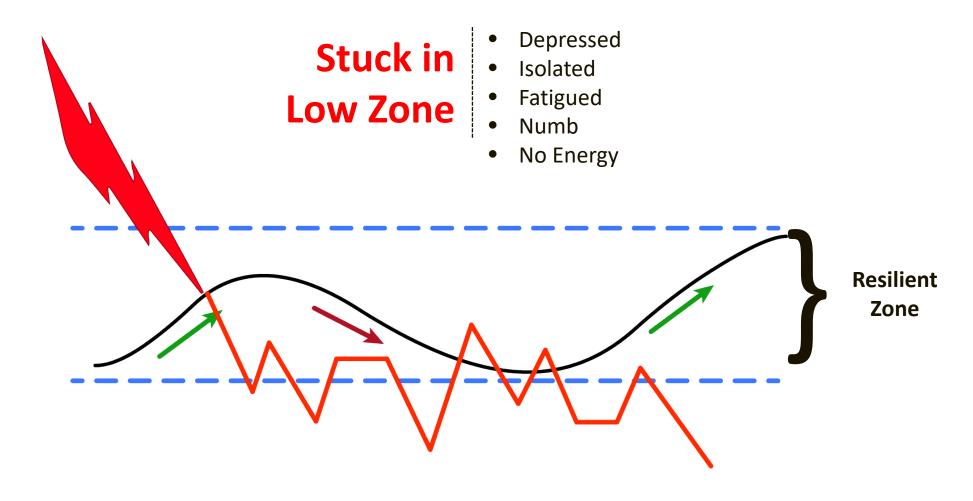
## What is your strength? Here are some examples:

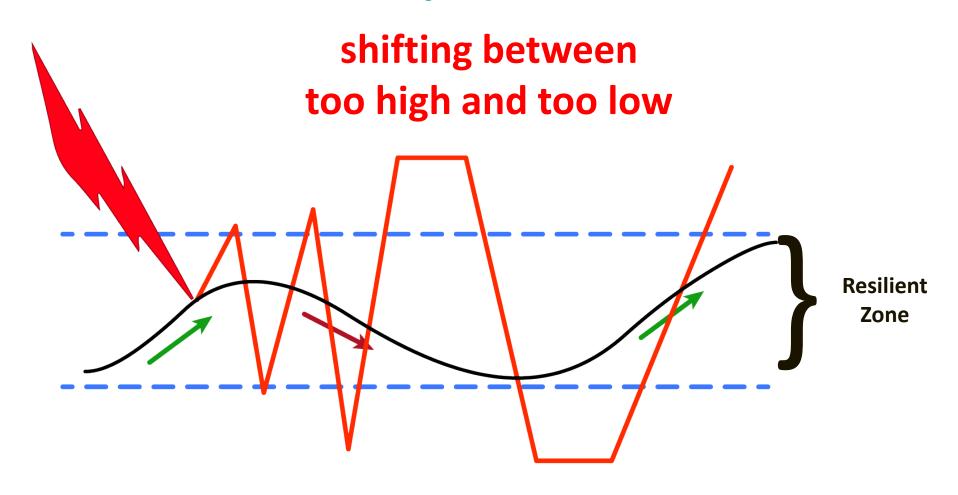
Planning, Responsive to others,
Compassion, Spirituality, Faith, Caring,
Resistance, Altruism, Mindfulness, Humor,
Good Communication, Self-Awareness,
Creativity, Finding meaning, Sense of
purpose, Flexibility, Resourcefulness,
Empathy, Insight, Logical thinking,
Imagination, Writing, Solitude...other











### **Resource List**

- Breathing
- Butterfly hug
- Call someone
- Music
- Nature, running water
- Healthy comfort food
- Prayer



## VICARIOUS RESILIENCE

- The inspiration and strength that comes from noticing other people's capacity to withstand hardship or their way of just putting one foot in front of the other.
- "Drafting" on another's resilience



I'm Fine

I'm alright

Why talk about this

I want to forget

Why can't you leave me alone!

Why? Why? Why me?

ANGER

Will i ever feel normal again?

I can't sleep

FEAR

I feel so alone

I hurt

GUILT

No-one understands

Am I different?

SADNESS

Why can't i stop crying and feeling this way?

Will I have flashbacks?

RAGE

Isn't anything predictable?

DAMAGED SELF-IMAGE

No-one understands

# HOW DO WE TAKE CARE OF OURSELVES?

Simple actions we can take.

HOW MANY OF YOU TALK YOURSELF OUT OF SIMPLE SELF CARE PRACTICES DAILY?



# WHAT SELF-CARE IS NOT

### IT IS NOT SELFISH

IT DOES NOT
TAKE A LOT OF
TIME



What will help you practice small acts of self-care?



#### How to Practice Self-Compassion

Ask yourself these three questions:

- How would I treat a friend in this situation?
- What do I need to comfort myself?
- How do I care for myself already?







#### A DAILY PRACTICE TO RESTORE EQUANIMITY

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The Witness to Witness Program

https://www.migrantclinician.org/witness-to-witness

- Start each day by remembering that your intention is to offer compassionate, competent care to those you serve.
- 2. Notice sensations in the body that are signaling that you are in distress.

  Pause and take a few, full breaths.
- If possible, create a buddy system so that you are able to check in with someone about what is challenging for you.
- 4. Take a moment at a specified time each day brushing your teeth in the morning, at lunch –to think about how much a loved one cares for you.
- 5. Recognize that circumstances, not you, may produce harms.
- 6. Repeat: Everyone, including you, is just doing the best that one can do.
- 7. Be kind to others and yourself whenever possible.
- 8. Find one thing that one person did that day and offer a verbal, brief appreciation. It's particularly good if this acknowledgment and appreciation can be observed by at least one other person.
- When you leave work, take good care of your body, mind and spirit. Take a moment of silence to allow your soul to catch up with you.

#### https://www.migrantclinician.org/COVID-19-pandemic#Emotional-Support

















## Believe the small is not trivial

...And actions have ripple effects outward

### Quick Ways to Feel Better Right Away

- Help someone
- Set a goal and plan for it
- Laugh
- Write down 2 things you are grateful for
- Notice something beautiful
- Jump in place
- Nap
- Give, get or watch a hug



### Evaluation

