

Trauma-Informed and Community-Centered Responses to Immigration-Related Stress

Three-Part Series

Witnessing: Understanding the
Effects of Overexposure to
Stories of Suffering and Trauma

Thursday, August 27, 2026

12 pm PT/ 1 pm MT/ 2 pm CT/ 3 pm ET & AT



Meet the presenters



Jessica Calderon



Pamela Secada-Sayles, EdD, MPH

The series at a glance



SESSION 1

**Trauma-Informed
Care in Health Care
Settings: A Panel
Discussion**



SESSION 2

**Best Practices for
Community-Based
Participatory
Campaigns**

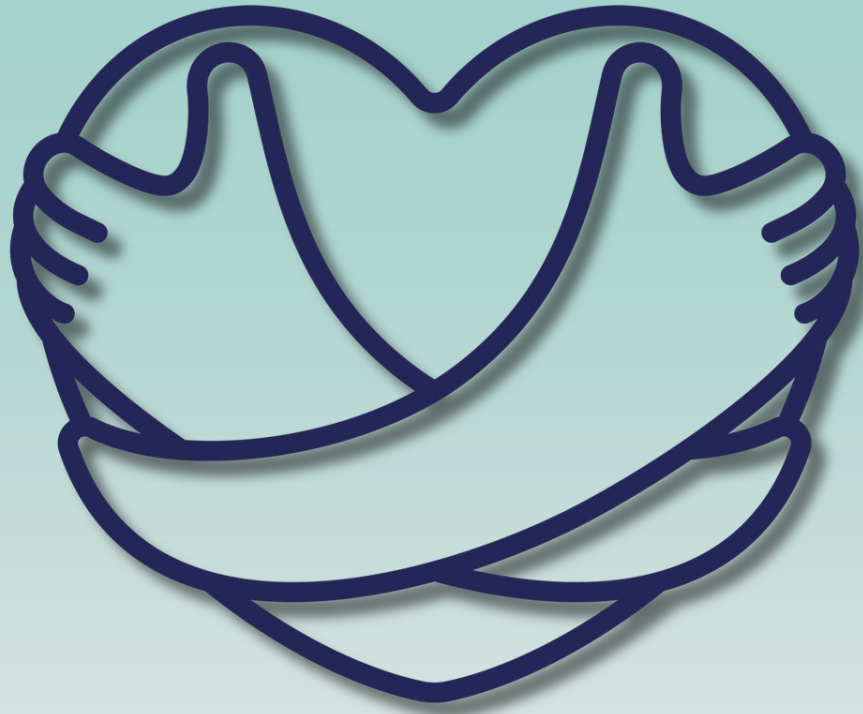


SESSION 3 – YOU ARE HERE

**Witnessing:
Understanding the
Effects of
Overexposure to
Stories of Suffering
and Trauma**

During the session...

- **Describe how repeated exposure to stories of hardship, trauma, and suffering can affect clinicians, CHWs, and other health care workers.**
- **Recognize signs of stress, distress, and overwhelm that may arise when supporting patients and families in difficult circumstances.**
- **Apply the Witnessing model to identify practical ways to stay grounded, compassionate, and connected to reasonable hope in the context of care.**



A NOTE BEFORE WE BEGIN

**Please take care of yourself
throughout today's session.**



zoom

POLL

What kind of repeated exposure is most present in your work right now?

- 1 Patient or family stories of trauma, fear, grief, or loss
- 2 System barriers that keep people from getting what they need
- 3 Community stressors such as immigration, disasters, violence, or poverty
- 4 Team stress, workload, or staff shortages
- 5 News, policy changes, or “inbox trauma” that affects the work

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

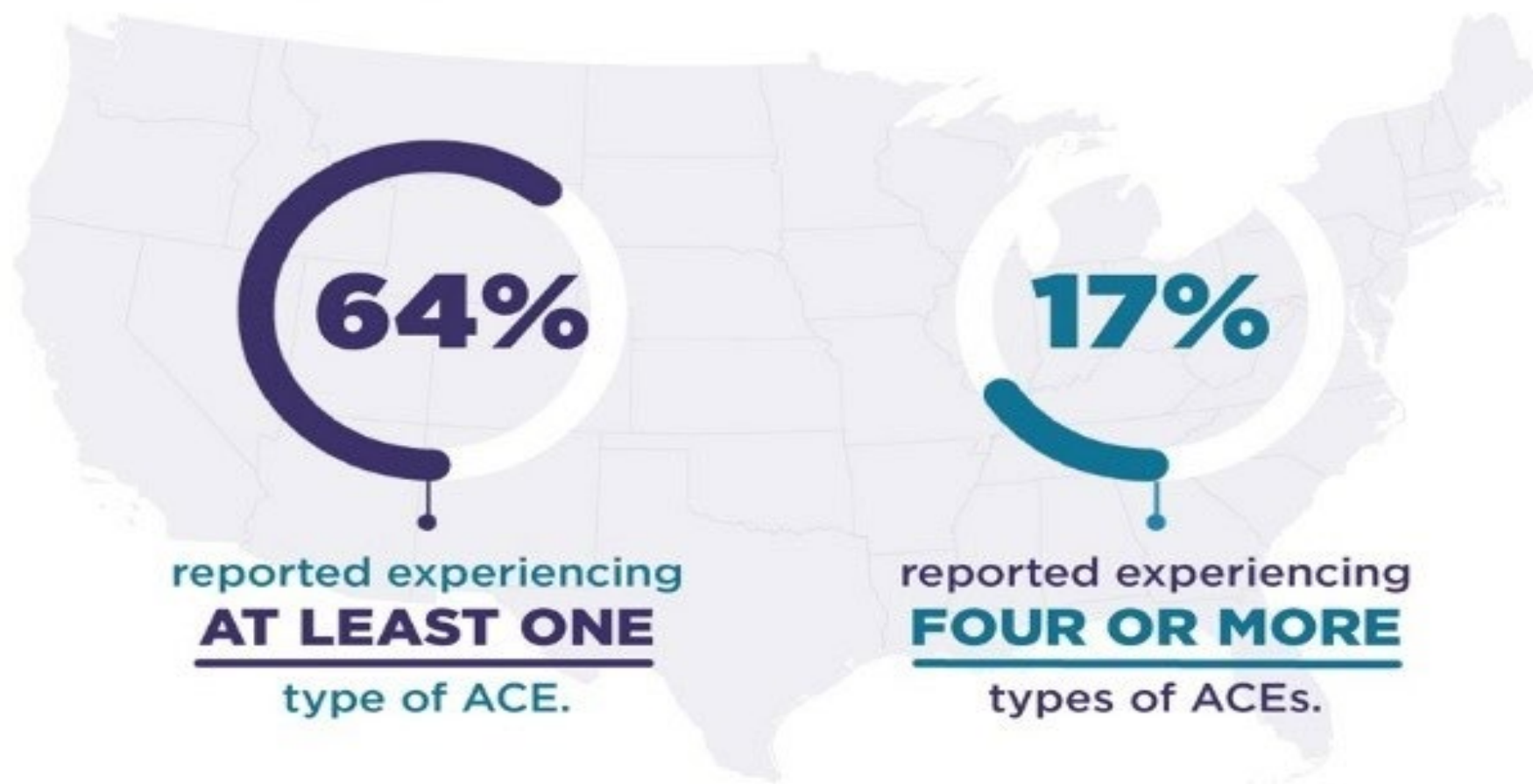
Adverse experiences lived before the age of 18

- Abuse: physical, emotional, and sexual
- Negligence: Physical and Emotional
- Challenges at home
- Imprisonment
- Mental illness
- Substance dependence
- Separation/divorce
- Intimate Partner Violence



Many People Report ACEs

According to data collected from **adults across all 50 states and the District of Columbia** between 2011 and 2020:



ICE Enforcement Is Reaching More Community Spaces

Trump authorizes ICE to target courthouses, schools and churches

DHS said it would roll back a policy prohibiting arrests in "sensitive" areas.



⚡ QUICK TAKES

“The presence of ICE at hospitals and health care facilities represents a reversal in policy under the Trump administration from previous policy that had protected against enforcement in these and other ‘sensitive locations’ like schools and places of worship.”

Drishti Pillai

Associate Director, Racial Equity and Health Policy; Director, Immigrant Health Policy, KFF

KFF

Every Day Witnessing



Ordinary

Extraordinary



(ENGLISH) In one or two words, what has it been like for you when you have been truly witnessed...someone has listened to you with compassion?

(ESPAÑOL) En una o dos palabras, ¿cómo se ha sentido cuando alguien realmente le ha escuchado con atención y compasión?



(ENGLISH) In one or two words, what has it been like for you when you have fully witnessed someone else?

(ESPAÑOL) En una o dos palabras, ¿cómo se ha sentido cuando ha acompañado y escuchado plenamente a otra persona?

Two sides to the witnessing coin

Compassionate
witnessing

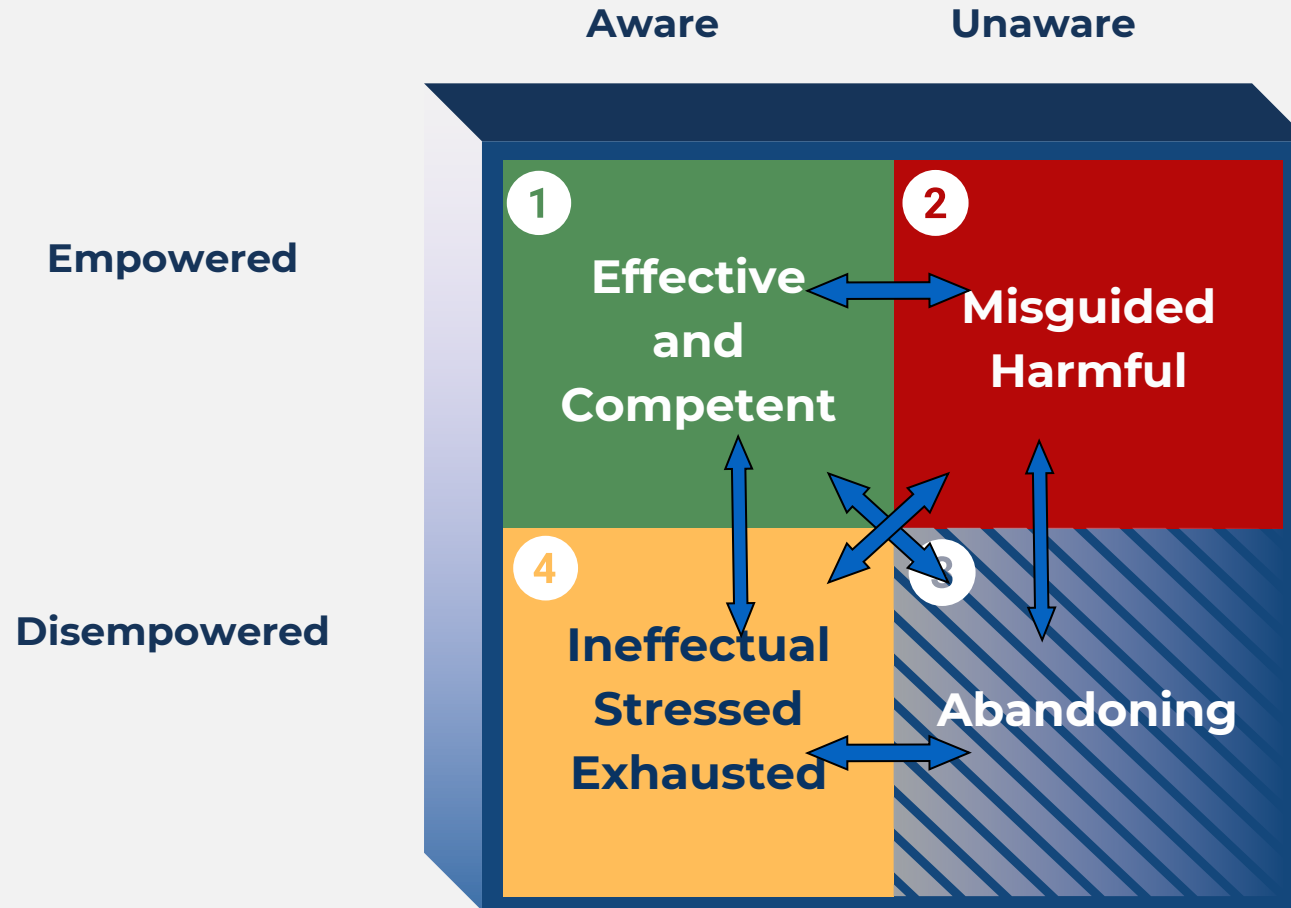


Overwhelmed
by witnessing

Overwhelmed by Witnessing

You are witnesses to the suffering and troubles of those you serve, and you have your own troubles and suffering.

The four witness positions





POLL

Which witness position do you find yourself in most often at work?

- 1 Effective & Competent — aware and empowered**
- 2 Misguided & Harmful — empowered but unaware**
- 3 Abandoning — unaware and disempowered**
- 4 Ineffectual, Stressed, Exhausted — aware but disempowered**

Your body's alarm response

Fight-or-flight

- Stress is an alarm reaction to something the body reads as threatening.
- It triggers a cascade of sympathetic nervous system firings and stress hormones like adrenaline.
- Pupils dilate, heart rate and breathing increase — the body prepares for defense.
- Normally, once danger passes, the body halts the alarm and returns to rest.

When the alarm won't switch off

- Deeply distressing witnessing can make it hard to fully halt the stress response.
- Small, surprising triggers can set it off — a headline, an image caught out of the corner of your eye.
- The amygdala, the brain's fear center, can wire a fear response to elements of a threat — without any conscious awareness this is happening.



(ENGLISH) In one or two words, what is a sign that this work may be starting to affect us?

(ESPAÑOL) En una o dos palabras, ¿qué señal nos puede indicar que este trabajo está empezando a afectarnos?



Sensations in the Body



Sweating



**Poor
Concentration**



**Clamminess
or Chilliness**



Spacey Feeling



**Rapid
Heartbeat**



**Exaggerated
Startle**



Psychological Experiences



Trauma-Informed Perspective

These reactions may be the body's way of trying to protect us.

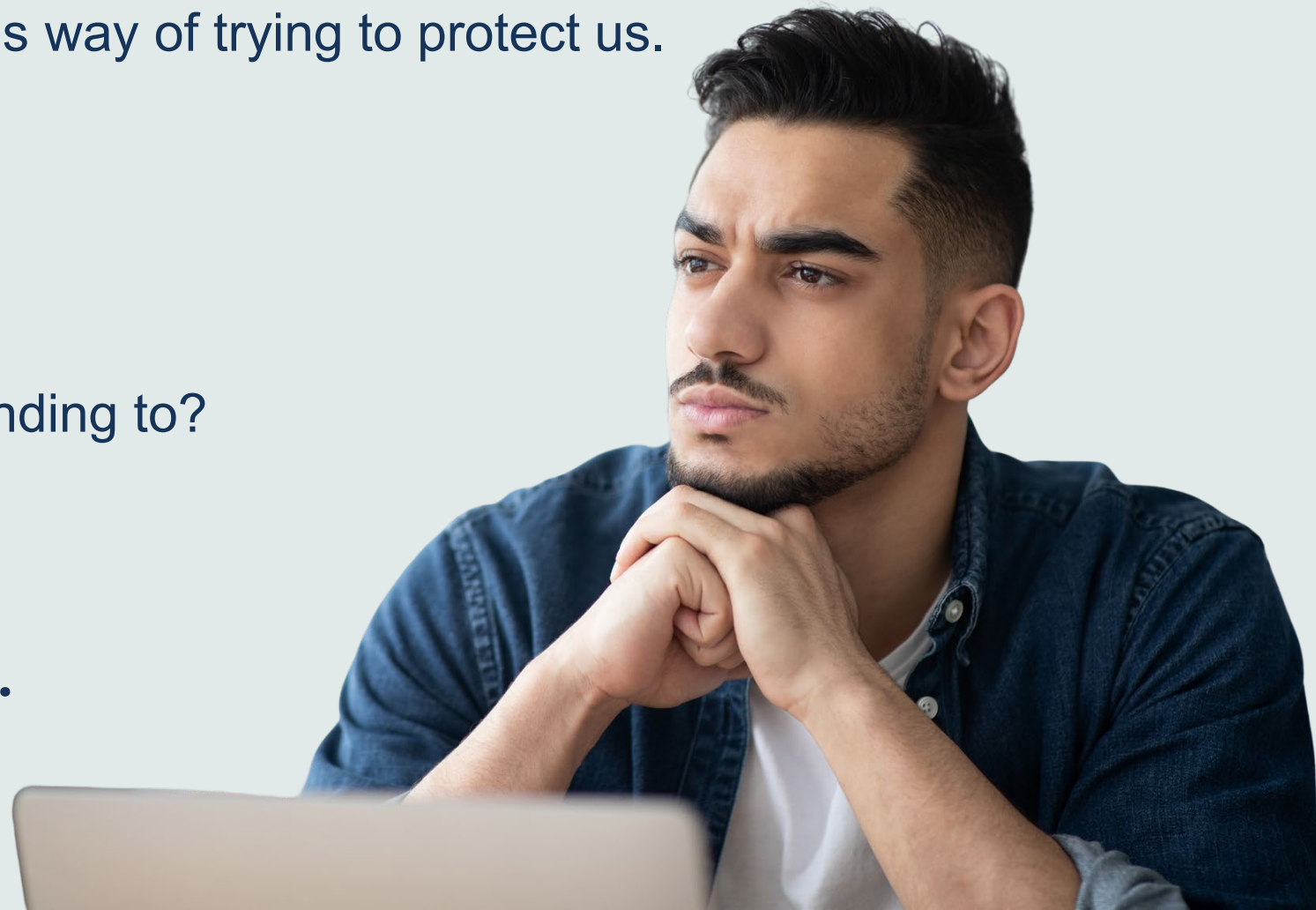
Instead of asking:

- What's wrong with me?

We can ask:

- What might my body be responding to?
- What might I need right now?

Recognition before judgment.
Curiosity before criticism



When should we pay closer attention

It is normal to have difficult reactions from time to time

Pay closer attention when the signs are:

- Frequent — happen repeatedly
- Intense — feel difficult to manage
- Persistent — don't go away easily
- Interfering — affect work, relationships, or life outside work



Recovery does not mean forgetting

- What happened is part of our story, but it does not have to control our present
- With time, support, and when needed, professional care, stress reactions can decrease
- Over time, we can feel safer, return to balance more easily after stress, and feel more present in our daily lives



Three empathic stress reactions

Helpers can experience any of these three reactions, or a combination — and all three are normal, common, and expectable.

1

Burnout

Feeling emotionally drained by the work over time — often as institutional barriers make it harder to reach your goals.

2

Moral Distress

Knowing what you believe should be done, but feeling unable to do it because of system, organizational, or other constraints.

3

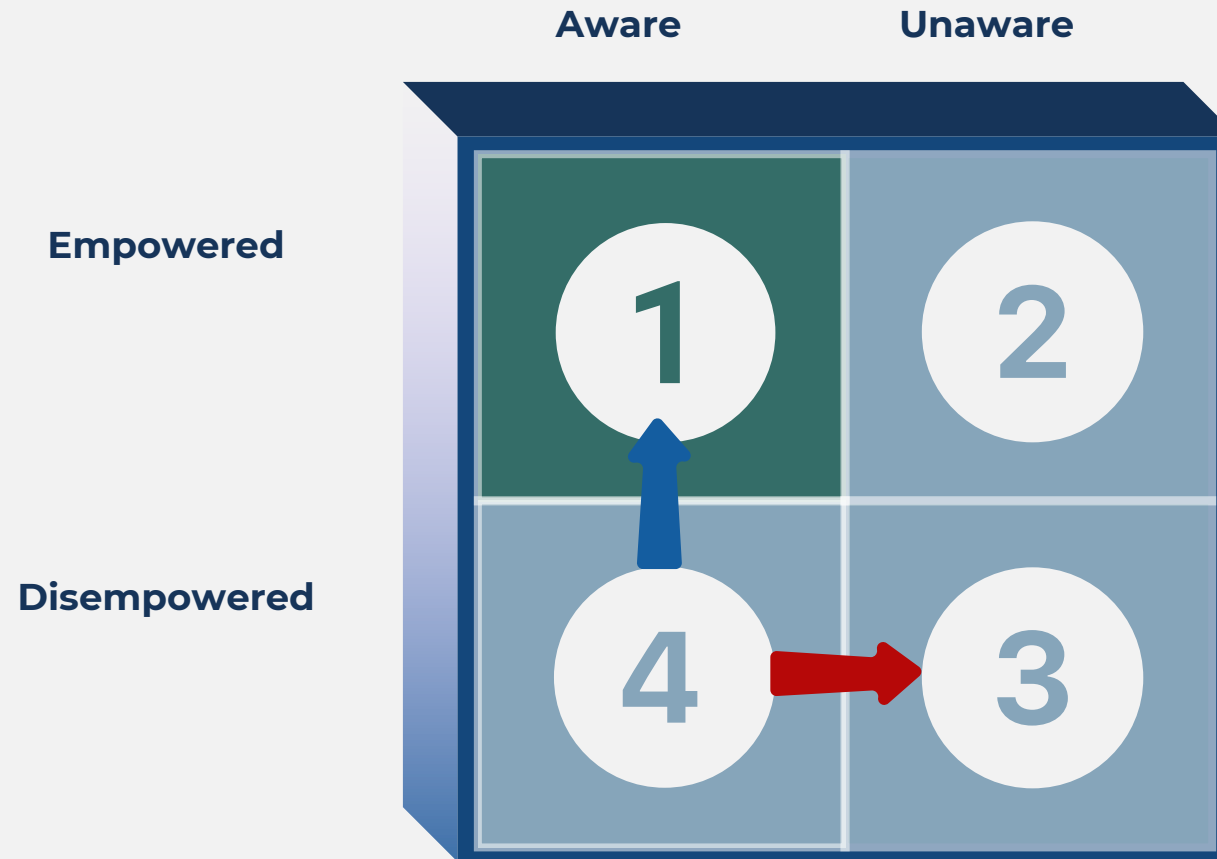
Vicarious Traumatization

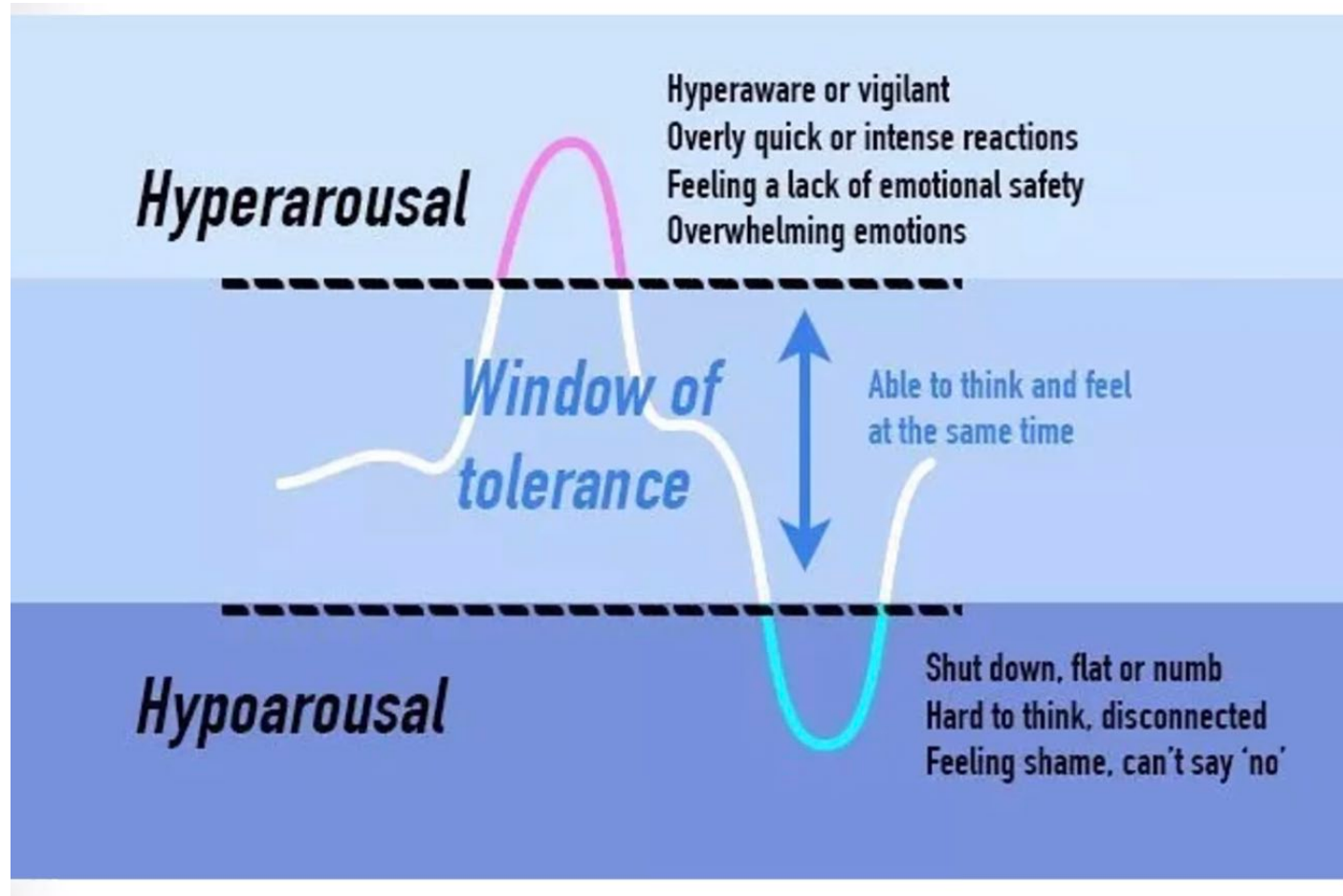
A cumulative shift, over time, in your own worldview from repeated empathic exposure to others' trauma.



**WHAT TO DO ABOUT
THESE EXPERIENCES**

The move that matters





- Perception of danger.
- Heightened senses.
- Body tenses.
- Fight/Flight response leading to high physiological discomfort.

- Arousal is regulated as no danger/threat is perceived.
- Able to enter novel situations.
- Feel grounded.

- Become immobile as response to perceived life threats.
- Unable to activate defence response of fight/flight.
- Reduced awareness of surroundings..
- Feel numb, empty, unreal

What actually helps



Individual self-care

- Practice self-compassion
- Ground yourself through rest, movement, breathing, and connection
- Talk about what you're carrying, instead of carrying it alone
- Actively move toward awareness and action, not away from it



Team & organizational support

- Build a culture of compassion
- Create psychological safety so staff can ask for help and raise concerns
- Create regular peer-support and reflective spaces
- Provide supportive supervision that includes check-ins about well-being, not only performance

Evaluation





Becky Stewart,
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Rising Up Together

A Conversation with MCN Leadership

Wednesday, September 23, 2026

4 pm PT / 5 pm MT / 6 pm CT / 7 pm ET & AT

migrantclinician.org/together-conversation





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