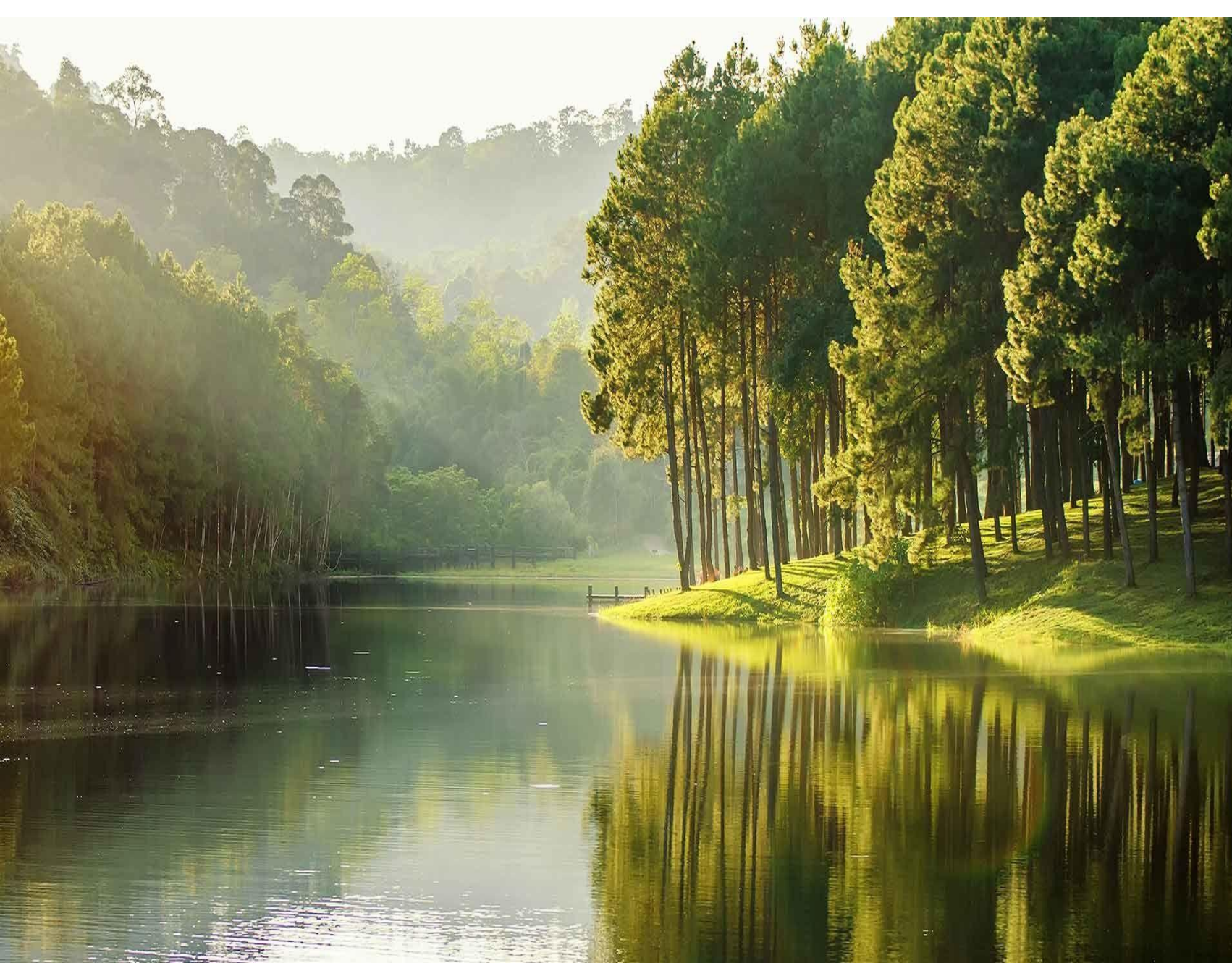


Fostering Compassion and Strategic Thinking

“Boots on the Ground from All Around” – MNCHWA Rural
Conference

November 6, 2025

Suzanne Koepplinger
Catalyst North Consulting



Grounding

SAMHSA's Definition of Trauma

Individual trauma results from an event, a series of events or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual wellbeing". [SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach | SAMHSA Publications and Digital Products](#)

Historic and Collective Trauma

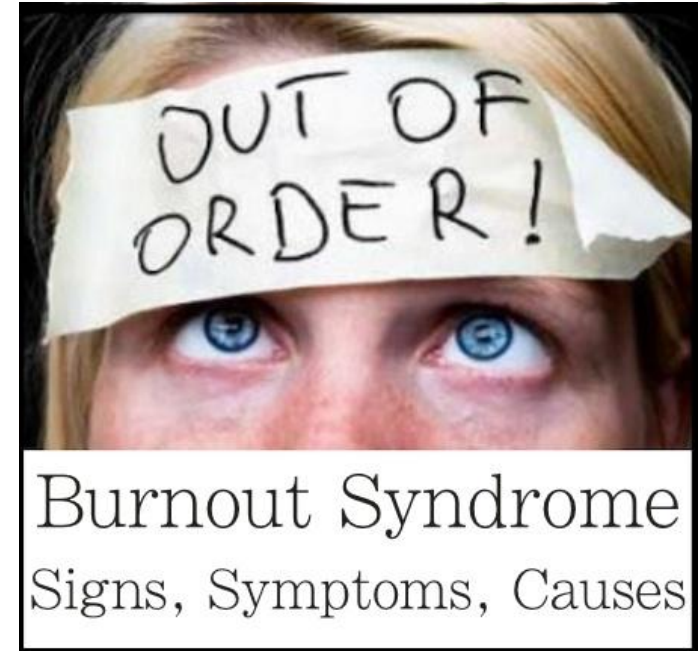
Historic Trauma: refers to the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding of an individual or generation caused by traumatic experience or event. Dr. Donald Warne on Impact of Unresolved Trauma on American Indian Health Equity: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fS7WKxDtkwY>

Collective Trauma: happens to large groups of individuals and can be transmitted inter-generationally and across communities. War, genocide, slavery, terrorism and natural disasters can cause collective trauma. <https://www.preventioninstitute.org/publications/adverse-community-experiences-and-resilience-framework-addressing-and-preventing>

Vicarious or secondary trauma

“is a process by which a professional’s inner experience is negatively transformed through empathic engagement with client’s trauma material” (Killian, K. 2008).

It shows up as anxiety, trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating, anger. It can accumulate over time.



Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Can cause changes in the architecture of the brain that affect everything from physical growth to emotional development to the capacity to make healthy decisions as an adult.

It also increases the risk of alcoholism, depression, liver disease, intimate partner violence, STIs, smoking and suicide.

(MDH Health Disparities Report, 2013)

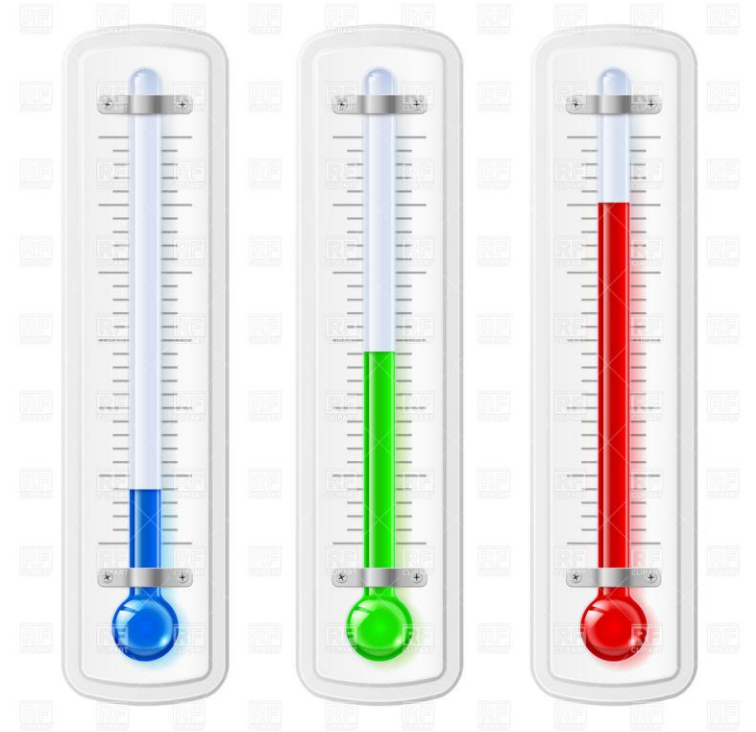
Why Self-care?

- ✓ 80% of chronic disease can be related to stress.
- ✓ Toxic stress known to impair brain development in children.
- ✓ You cannot be strategic if you are in turmoil.

Accumulating or unresolved stress

It comes out anonymously,
or to those closest to us.

If your barometer is set high all the time,
no possibility of going to zero or resetting.



Social Media and Mental Health

Negative impacts:

- Increased anxiety, depression, body image issues, sleep disturbances. Isolation.
- Higher risk for adolescent brains and excessive users (doom scrolling) .

Positive impacts:

- Identity and support, connection with community, help seeking behaviors.

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7785056/>

<https://law.stanford.edu/2024/05/20/social-media-addiction-and-mental-health-the-growing-concern-for-youth-well-being/>

Survival Brain

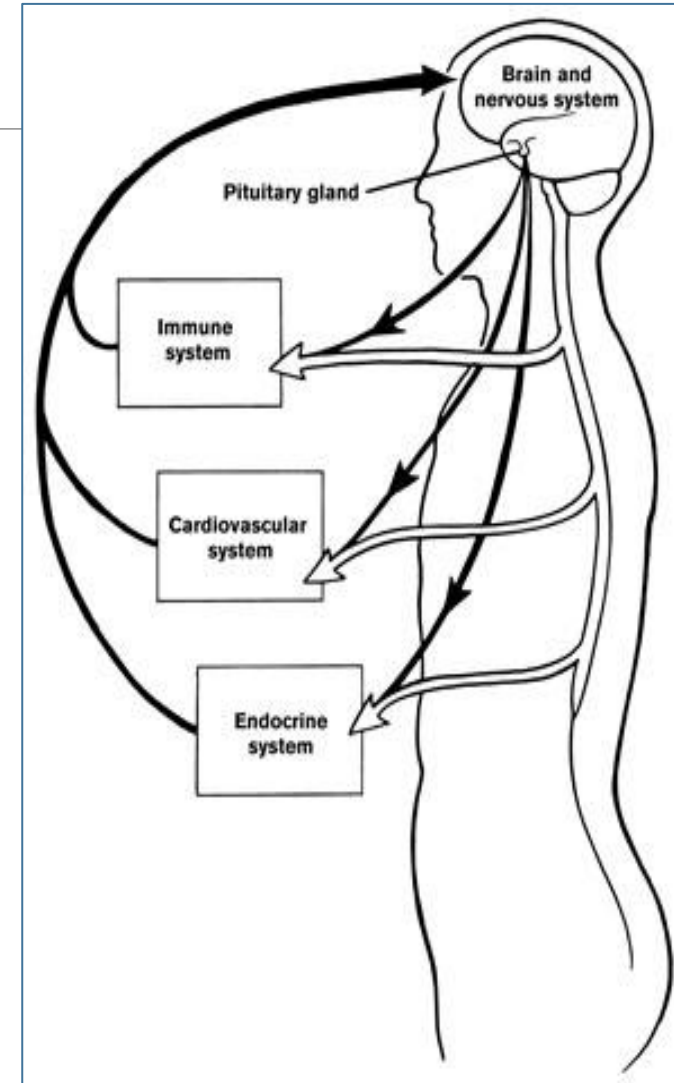


Our response to danger

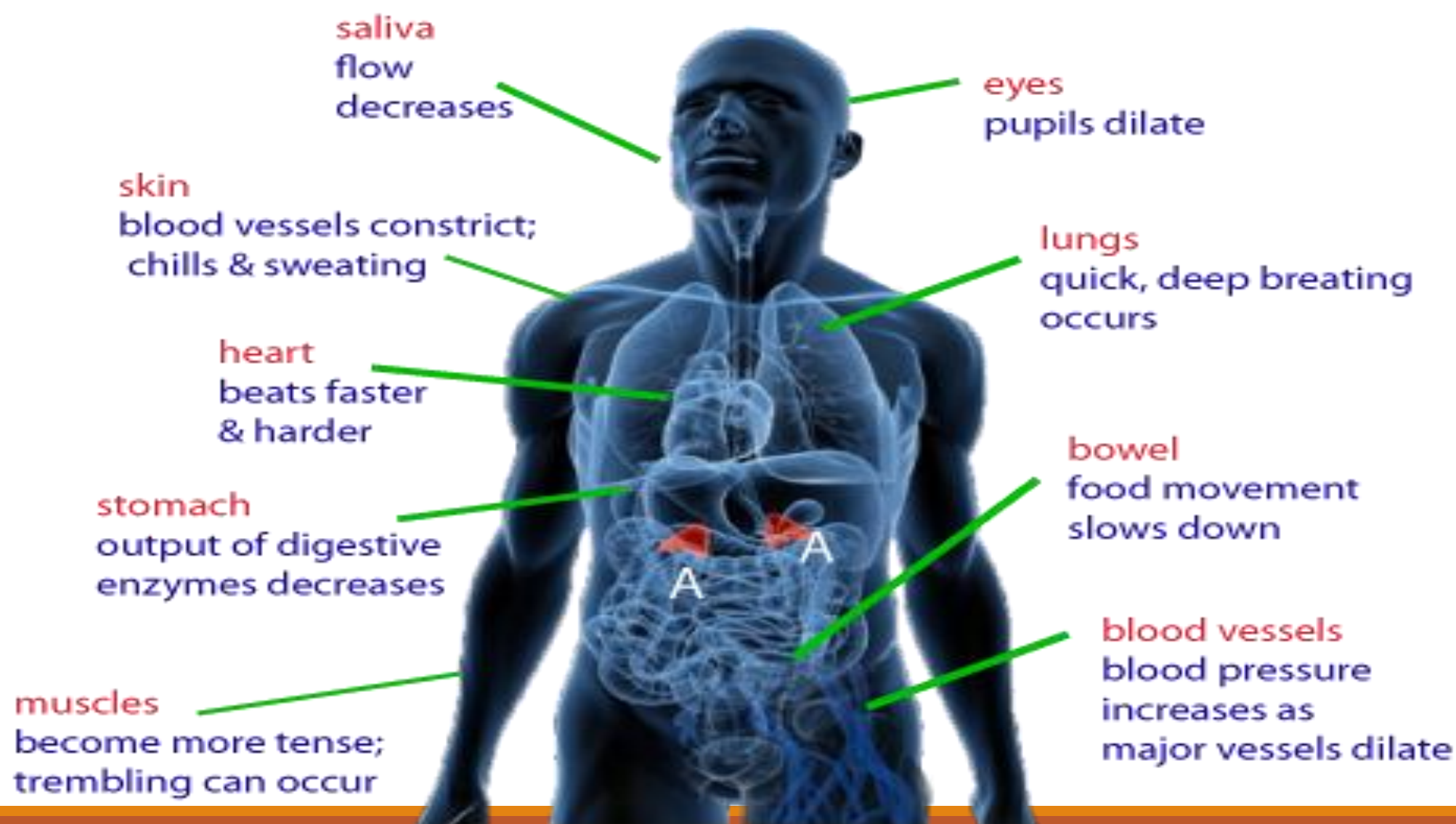
Danger signals the body's response – hormones released for ACTION.

Fight/flight/freeze response natural and normal, except when it isn't.

Fear or anxiety triggers the body to maintain levels of cortisol and adrenaline, resulting in inflammation and reduced immune functions.

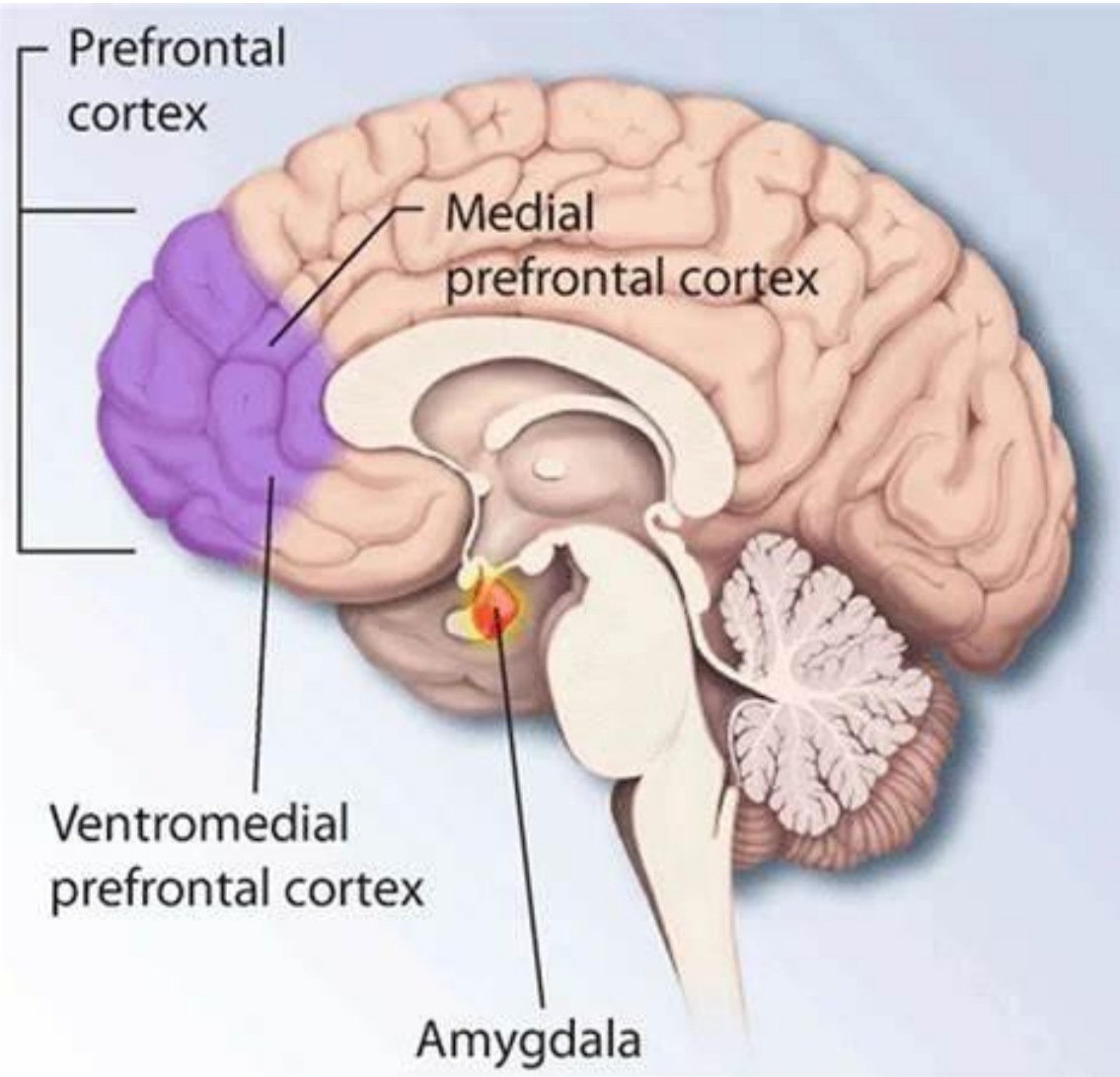


Fight or Flight Response



The Role of Cortisol

- Balanced levels of cortisol are **essential for the body to function properly.**
- When stressed for a long periods of time, the **brain's internal thermostat resets and tells the adrenal glands to maintain this higher level of cortisol as though it were normal.**
- Chronically elevated levels can impair: **immune function, reduce muscle mass, increase fat, impair memory and learning, destroy brain cells, cause anxiety and sleep problems, and damage stomach, kidneys, and heart.**



The Amygdala and the Pre-frontal Cortex.

Survival/reacting vs.
compassion, creative problem
solving, emotion and body
regulation.

The Vagus Nerve

- It connects your brain to your gut and can affect everything from mood and stress levels to digestion, heart rate and immune response.
- Helps manage the body's response to stress by regulating the heart and respiratory rate, can also influence mood and anxiety.
- In the brain it affects mood and is essential for human connection. It also slows down the heart rate, allows the lungs to breathe, promotes healthy digestion, and helps the gut bacteria communicate with the brain along the microbiome-gut-brain axis.

[The Vagus Nerve Explained in Plain English | Diet vs Disease](#)

TRIGGERS or REMINDERS

Events or situations that create highly emotional response.

Limbic system hijacks us, we are no longer in control.

Triggers are personal, often the result of past wounds.

Automatic reaction, but we can choose a response.

Develop discipline around not *reacting* and shift to more resourceful, strategic state before taking action.

A solid orange horizontal bar at the bottom of the slide.

How chronic stress informs choices

- Living in survival brain creates reactive, emotional choice patterns.
 - Behaviors become habitual, reliable.
 - Begin by noticing your habit patterns.

Habits

Habits are *unconscious, repetitive* actions.

Can be influenced by identity and gates.

Individuals, organizations, movements all have habits.



**Personal
Habits –
default to the
familiar**



Habits That Constrain

- Short term/incremental thinking,
- Speaking to the choir,
- Defining our work by that which we oppose,
- Defining campaigns around funding cycles or crisis (reactivity),
- Over-reliance on process and structure,
- Choice avoidance.



Margaret Wheatley

“The intent of any mindfulness practice is to learn to know yourself, not to become peaceful. Knowing how your mind works makes it possible to stay present and engaged in hypercharged situations without losing your cool”.

(Who Do We Chose to Be? p. 265. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017)

Benefits of Meditation/Breath work

Positive impact on depression, anxiety, pain management, substance abuse, ADHD

Changes brain activity, enhances functioning in conflict monitoring and improves attention

Results in decreased stress, lower blood pressure and blood sugar, and improved mood

([The Center for Mind Body Medicine](#))



Toxic Stress, Trauma and Nutrition

The Transformation, by James S. Gordon, M.D., Harper Collins, 2019



Damages the small intestine and interferes with the absorption of nutrients



Interferes with the production of digestive enzymes in liver and pancreas



Damages the microbiome, which plays a role in brain functioning

Restorative Sleep

- Turn off electronics 1 hour before sleep.
- Some studies link inadequate sleep to short term memory loss and weight gain.
- Sleep deprivation ramps up the amygdala.
- Teens reporting less than 8 hours per night more likely to report depression.



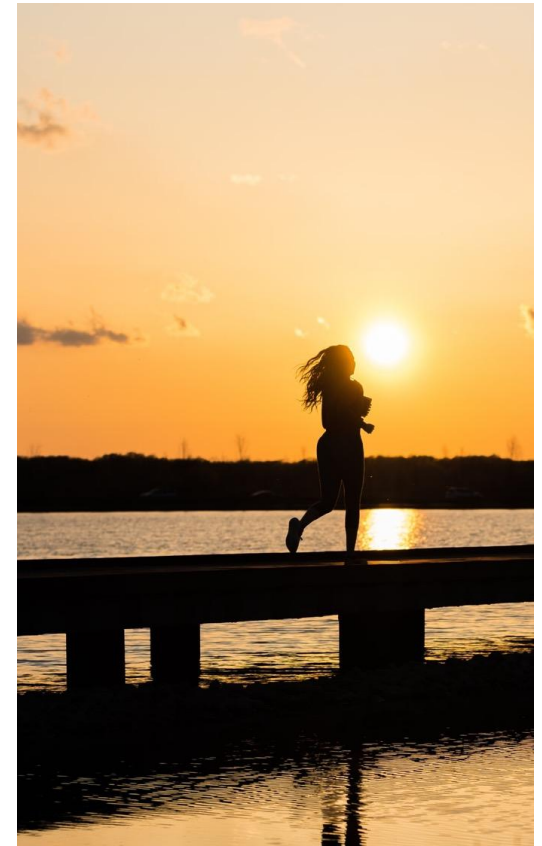
Movement is Essential

Increases the capacity of blood vessels, allowing for the delivery of oxygen, water and glucose to the brain,

Optimizes the brain's focus and performance,

Provides greater sense of mastery and confidence in the body,

Serotonin is released with movement, leading to a greater sense of well-being.



Interrupting Toxic Habits

The brain's biological tendency is to focus on the threat. We must be intentional about tending to our own care and interrupting toxic habits.

1. Splash cold water on your face
2. Stretch. Stand on one foot.
3. Take 5 low and slow breaths.
4. Take a walk. Go outside. Look at the sky.
5. Write down 3 things you are grateful for.
6. Listen to music. Hum along. Dance!

Radical Mending

Develop daily practices that allow us to live into the worldview we wish to create for the 7 generations to come.

You can only act strategically when not in a state of turmoil.

If we are to leave positive impact, what must we do in this moment to interrupt the transmission of trauma?



Healing Together

Bison will rush headlong into the storm together, knowing they will emerge on the other side intact.

The strength of the herd depends upon the strength of the individuals within.

Recommendations for Practical Self Care

Organizational	Individual
Leadership counts – modeling self-care shifts social norms.	10 - 15 minutes a day of spaciousness to start
Establish self-care as core competency – which does not reduce accountability to show up!	Music, movement, ceremony, nature, nutrition, sleep, gratitude, body work, reflection, prayer, social supports, breath work, art.
Actively address poor organizational habits.	Commit to identifying and shaving away negative personal habits. Practice noticing triggers and using new tools to self-regulate.
Invest in personal and professional skill building.	Read, experiment with new practices, find what resonates. Apps!

Links to explore

Stanford Social Innovation Review: [Addressing Trauma as a Pathway to Social Change \(ssir.org\)](#)

The Future of Healing: Shifting From Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement | [by Shawn Ginwright | Medium](#)

Collective Change Lab (webinars, research): <https://www.collectivechangelab.org/>

Center for Mind Body Medicine (research, trainings): <https://cmbm.org/>

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (research): <https://www.nccih.nih.gov/>

Clarissa Pinkola Estes

“Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely.”

Let's Continue the Conversation

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