

# Distressed - Not Defeated: Neurobiology of our Caretaking Professions

*13TH ANNUAL HEALTHCARE PREPAREDNESS  
SYMPOSIUM*



*#RHPC2022*

# Thank You *for your* Precious Gift: Your Time!

## *H2 Disclosures:*

- No financial or research conflicts to disclose.
- Any slights of people, professions, or organizations are wholly unintentional.
- Information based on current findings: knowledge evolves over time.
- Learning does not constitute mental health therapy; if needed, the services of a fully qualified professional should be sought.



*Lacey A. Hart, M.B.A., D.D. h.c*



*Jessie Thielen, MBA, PMP*

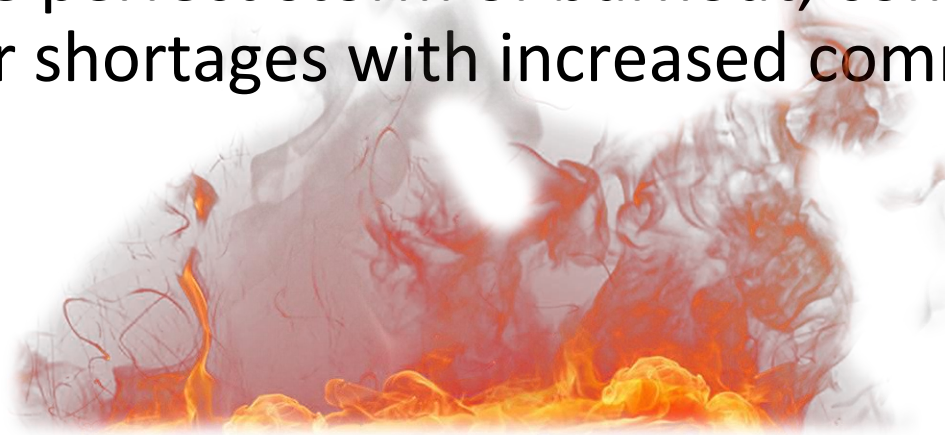


*Shelby Hart, M.S.*

# Burning Platform: Healers are Hurting!

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- Individuals who dedicate their lives to helping others and are at high risk for burnout, compassion fatigue, moral distress, and PTSD.
- Healing professions such as Doctors, Nurses, Veterinarians and First Responders have the highest rate of suicide over any other professions.
- COVID fueled the perfect storm of burnout, compassion fatigue, mental fatigue and labor shortages with increased community service demands



# Burnout

Burnout –Burnout refers specifically to a phenomena in the **occupational** context

- Originates from occupational stress - caused by work-related attributes, including workload, poor working culture, coworker conflict, and poor management. It can often result in a lack of drive, enthusiasm, and fatigue.
- It is cumulative, relatively predictable
- Does not necessarily alter our view of the world, but our view of the workplace
- Burnout Fixes – vacation, get a new job
- The remedy is more complex, personal requiring deeper exploration





# Compassion Fatigue

Negative aspect of helping those who experience traumatic stress and suffering. Unique to helping professions. Compassion fatigue is more profound – Impacts both work and personal life

- Sometimes referred to as secondary traumatic stress
- Similar to PTSD
- Can trigger our old unresolved trauma
- Pronounced change in the helper's ability to feel empathy for their patients, their loved ones and their coworkers.
- Compassion fatigue is a term that describes **the physical, emotional, and psychological impact of helping others** — often through experiences of stress or trauma. Compassion fatigue is often mistaken for burnout, which is a cumulative sense of fatigue or dissatisfaction.



# Elephant in the Room

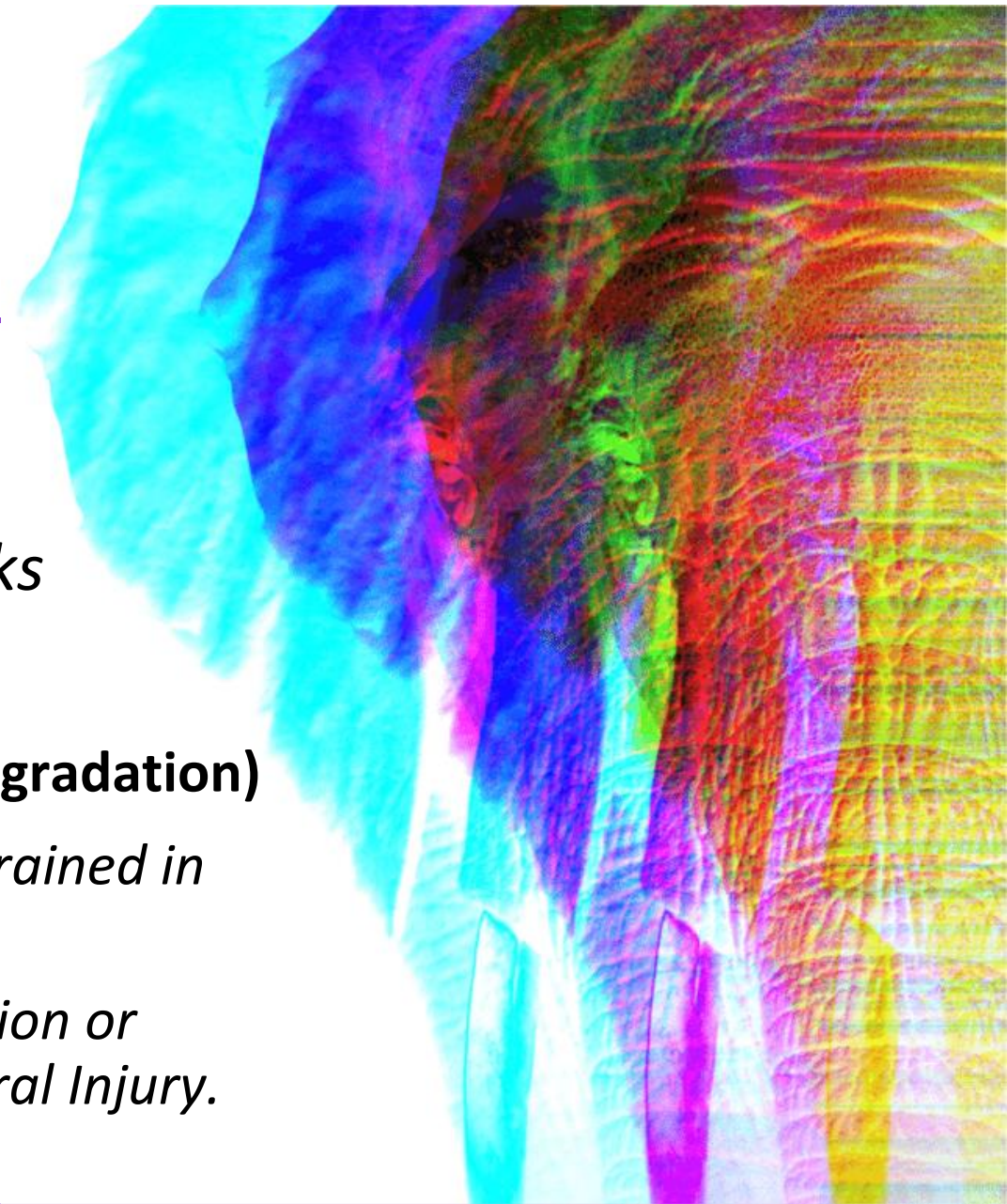
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## Professional Dissonance

- *discomfort arising from the conflict between **professional values** and **job** tasks*

## Moral Distress > Moral Injury (Trauma & Degradation)

- *identify an ethically correct action but are constrained in their ability to take that action.*
- *sustained moral distress leads to impaired function or longer-term psychological harm resulting in Moral Injury.*





# *An Opportunity for:* **Post Traumatic Growth**

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Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) is the positive psychological change that some individuals experience after a life crisis or traumatic event. Post-traumatic growth doesn't deny deep distress, but rather posits that adversity can unintentionally yield changes in understanding oneself, others, and the world.

## *The coronavirus has offered an opportunity to reconsider:*

- Greater appreciation of life
- Greater appreciation and strengthening of close relationships
- The identification of new possibilities or a purpose in life
- Greater awareness and utilization of personal strengths
- Enhanced spiritual development
- Creative growth



## *Call to Action:*

# Distressed not Defeated!

COVID fueled the perfect storm of burnout, compassion fatigue, mental fatigue and labor shortages with increased community service demands and expectations.

**Healing, Resiliency and Compassion Renewal** are imperative skills to ensure our *precious caregiving resources* may fulfill their purpose and we may preserve these critical services for humanity with respect.







# Caregivers are Precious Resources

*“Compassion is an act of courage  
in that we deliberately turn  
towards suffering rather than  
averting our gaze.” McGonigal*

Physician Distress and Burnout: The Neurobiological Perspective  
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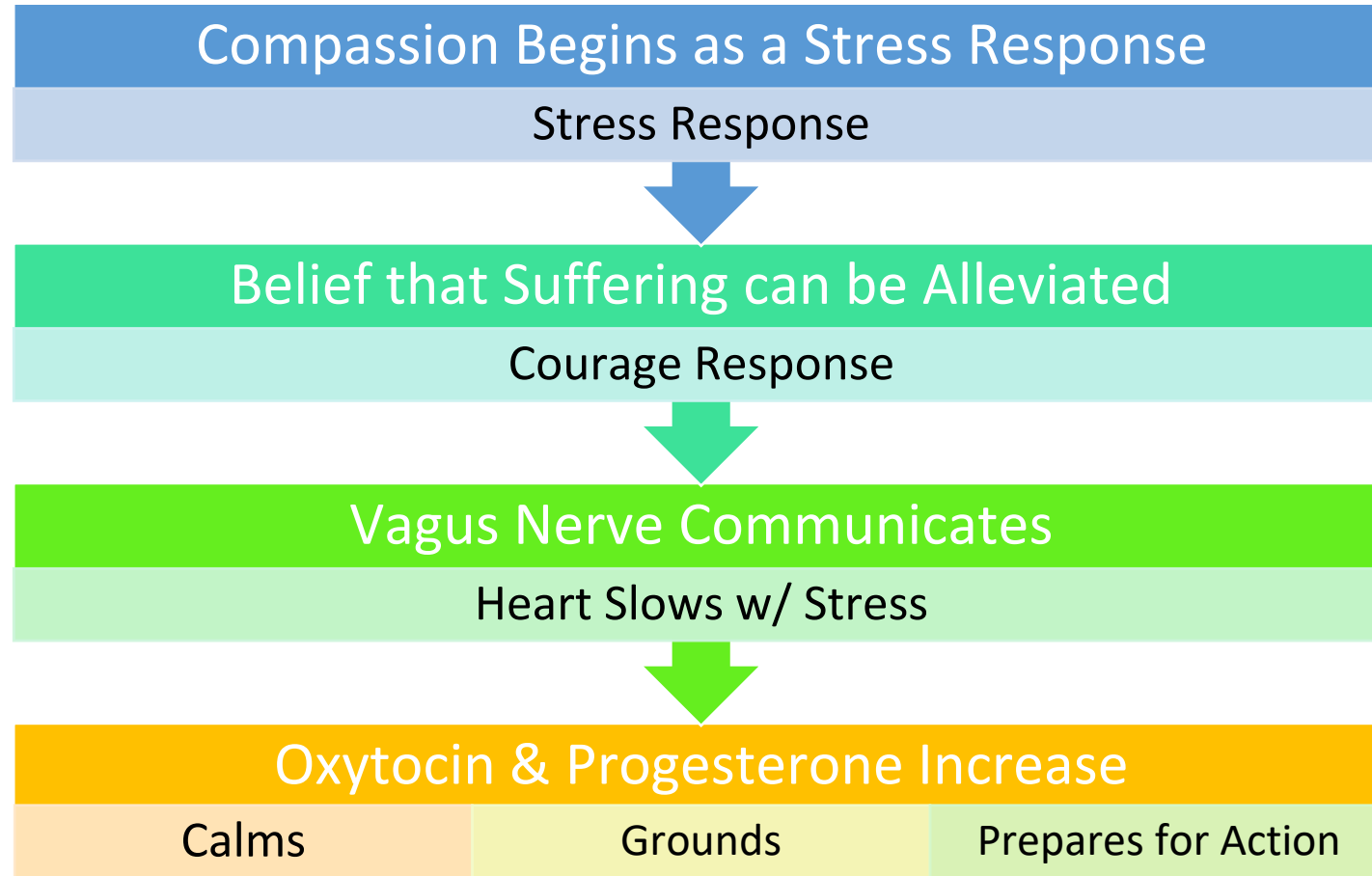
# Community Needs: Caregiving Professions

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- Educators
- Emergency Medics
- Chaplains & Clergy
- Firefighters
- Healthcare
- Law Enforcement
- Veterans
- Veterinarians



# Physiology of Compassion: Blessing & Curse



© McGonigal, 2019



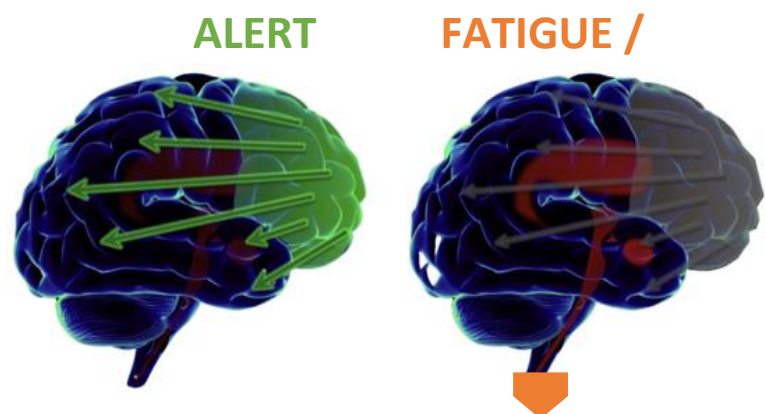
# Caregiving “Heroes”

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- Our society needs these professions for our very survival!
- *Yet, they are not Super-heroes with super-human abilities*
- They are humans, caring for humans (or fur-babies) and they need care too!



# Imperative to Care Continuation



Prefrontal cortex (PFC) are impaired by fatigue or uncontrollable stress, posing potential ramifications to clinical practice.

Examples of Distress	Examples of Clinical Consequences
Forgetful, concrete Thinking	Potential for medical errors
Difficulty concentrating, disorganized	Harder to manage complex tasks
Impaired decision making	Suboptimal care, medical errors
Reduced judgement, moral conscience	Decreased commitment to professionalism
Decreased empathy and compassion	Impaired communications with patients / team
Decreased optimism and persistence	Cynicism and decreased engagement
Decreased self-regulation	Increased likelihood of unprofessional behavior

Physician Distress and Burnout: The Neurobiological Perspective

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# Resources are Neglected

*“There is a cost to caring. ...  
Sometimes we feel we are  
losing our own sense of self  
to those we serve.” Figley*





# *A Roadmap for Resilience:* **Ability, Behaviors, Community and ‘Sustainability**

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Would you drive your car without lessons or directions?

You can't fill your tank, if you can't get to the fuel/electric station.



*Of course not!*

So why do we believe that *telling* folks they need to transform to the future and that self-care and resiliency is enough? ...

We need to start with a **manual**, allow the **time to practice**, and provide a **community of support!**

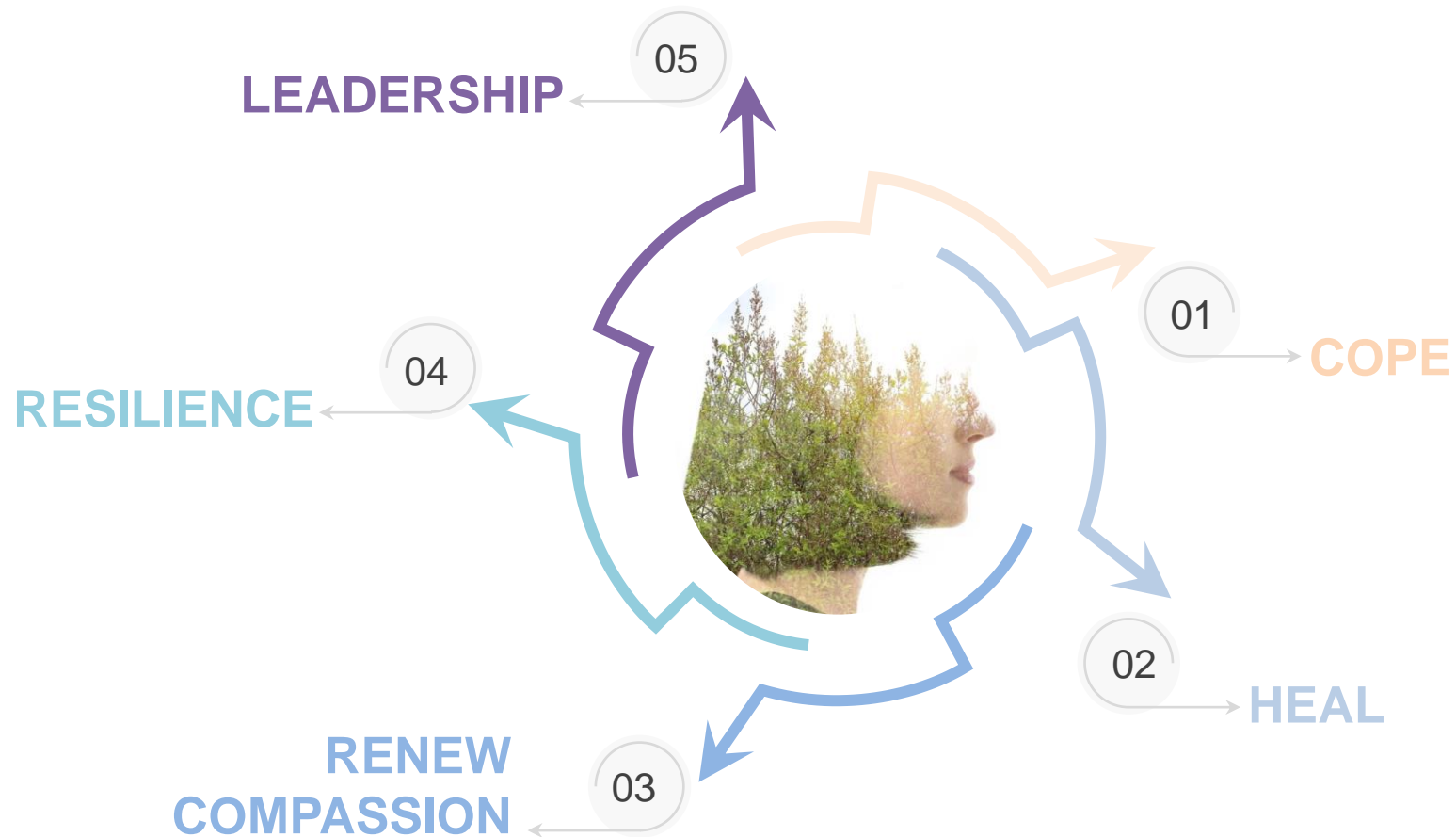

Developing resilience is both complex and personal. A combination of factors contributes to building resilience.

# *It's A New Day:* A.B.C.'s

Many services are popping up around burnout and labor shortages but *fall short* in addressing the unique needs of humans who are **wired** for caregiving. Prompted us to bring to all those in caregiving capacities the coping, healing, resilience support and spiritual heightening.

ABILITIES	BEHAVIORS	COMMUNITY	SUSTAINABILITY
Skills Learning through <i>Mindset Frameworks</i>	<i>Restorative Practices</i> Reinforce Resilience Skills	<i>Support</i> and Accountability with Peers in Small Groups	Learners become Teachers Model

# Ability: Getting 'Unstuck' Through *Mindset Frameworks*


**Class 1 | Introduction to GRAC<sub>3</sub>E™**  
Learn the basics compassion resilience and the GRAC<sub>3</sub>E™ framework approach and how to apply it in your professional and personal life.

**Class 2 | "G" Is for Gratitude**  
Cultivate the ability to recognize gratitude-inspiring events and practice Gratitude.

**Class 3 | "R" Is for Reflection**  
Learn how reflective thinking allows you progress, to identify your support network, & remove bias.

**Class 4 | "A" Is for Acceptance**  
Embrace and take advantage of opportunities to do better flourishing despite circumstances.

**Class 5 | "C<sub>3</sub>" Is for Curiosity, Compassion, and Courage**  
Can we bring genuine interest through empathy and



**1 | Introduction to HEAR<sub>2</sub>T™**

**2 | "H" Is for Harbor**  
Providing a Safe Haven for your work.

**3 | "E" Is for Envision**  
Practice Envisioning Success.

**4 | "A" Is for Appreciate**  
Appreciate yourself and others.

**5 | "R<sub>2</sub>" Is for Rescue and Recover**  
Learn how to rescue and recover when things don't go as planned.

**6 | "T" Is for Transparency**  
Honor transparency for trust.

**7 | Practicing HEAR<sub>2</sub>T™ for Healers**  
Practice bringing everything you've learned together and into your healing profession.

© H<sub>2</sub> Foundation | [www.h2hopetohealing.org](http://www.h2hopetohealing.org)

<https://www.h2hopetohealing.org/frameworks>



# Just let it RAIN

- Recognize
- Accept
- Interest
- Non-Identification



# Recognition

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When considering the risks and rewards of being in a helping profession, it's important to recognize that some of the very same aspects of the work that can be the most rewarding can also be the most increase of our risk for compassion fatigue.

*“As helpers, one needs to be realistic about the risks inherent in the work as helpers.”*

***Self-Awareness*** helps you understand what you bring to your role. Understanding your strengths in both industry skills and knowledge as well as personal characteristics.

# Acceptance

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The messiness that is 'you' is a perfect blend of thoughts, experiences, beliefs, and personal traits. Accepting means letting the thoughts, emotions, feelings, or sensations we have recognized simply be there.

*"Learning to recognize that we are at war with ourselves is quite empowering."*

***Self- Acceptance:*** A prerequisite for non-judgement and accepting others is learning to accept ourselves and give ourselves a break.



# Interest

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Pure exploration has no agenda to decrease pain or increase pleasure. Interest recognizes that every experience is worthy of our attention.

*“If we can bring this numbness into the fold of our tender observation, it loses its power and is no longer an enemy – just a confused and scared friend.”*

**Self-compassion** means offering yourself some friendliness, generosity, and sympathy. It is not self-pity; rather, it is a recognition and acceptance of your humanness, your imperfection, and your suffering.

# Non-Identification

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Non-identification means not believing that your emotions “belong” to you, or labeling them as “me” or “mine.” It involves not taking emotions personally and understanding that “your” emotions are not really yours. The emotions you experience are also not unique to you but are instead shared and experienced by all humans.

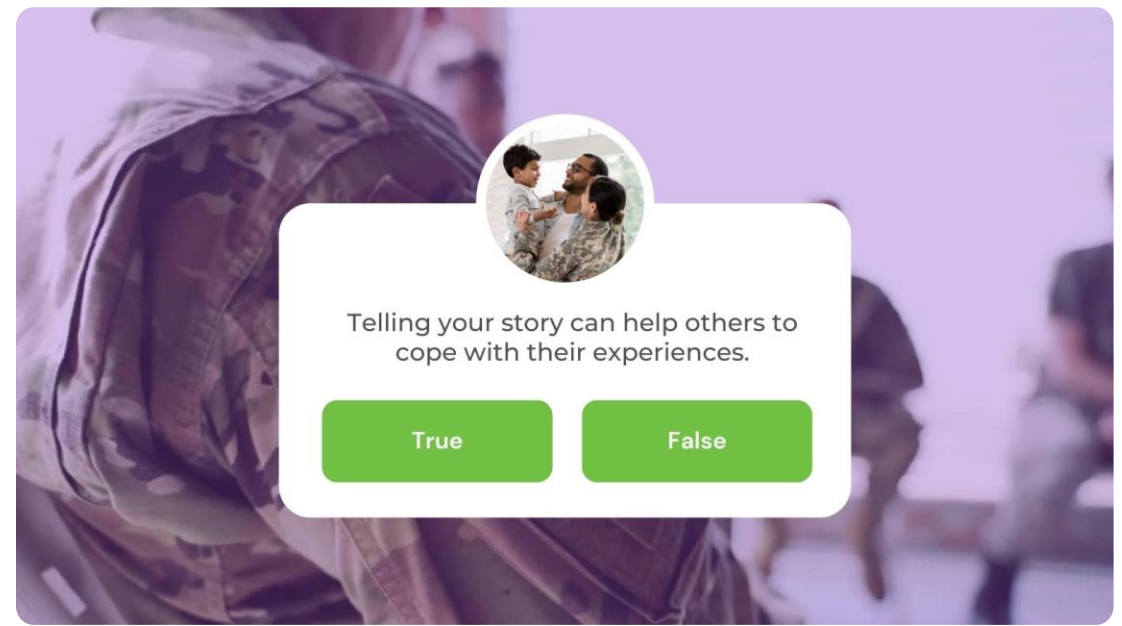
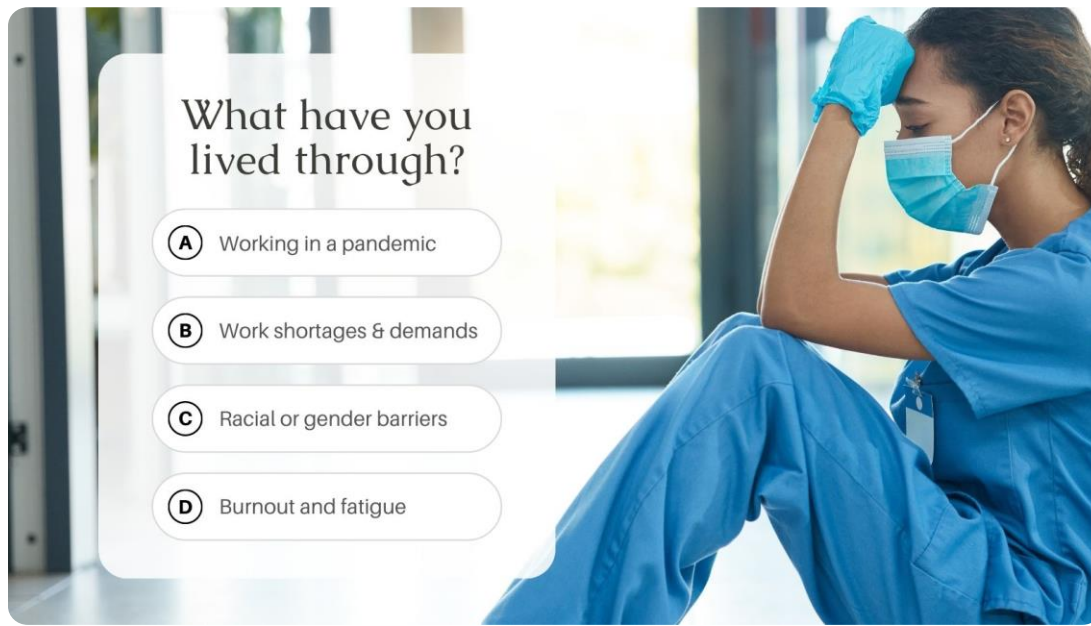
*“When you can place distance between what you are feeling and your physical person, you allow that emotion to fully process and move on.”*

**Self- Advocacy** does not allow these ‘things’ to steal our peace.

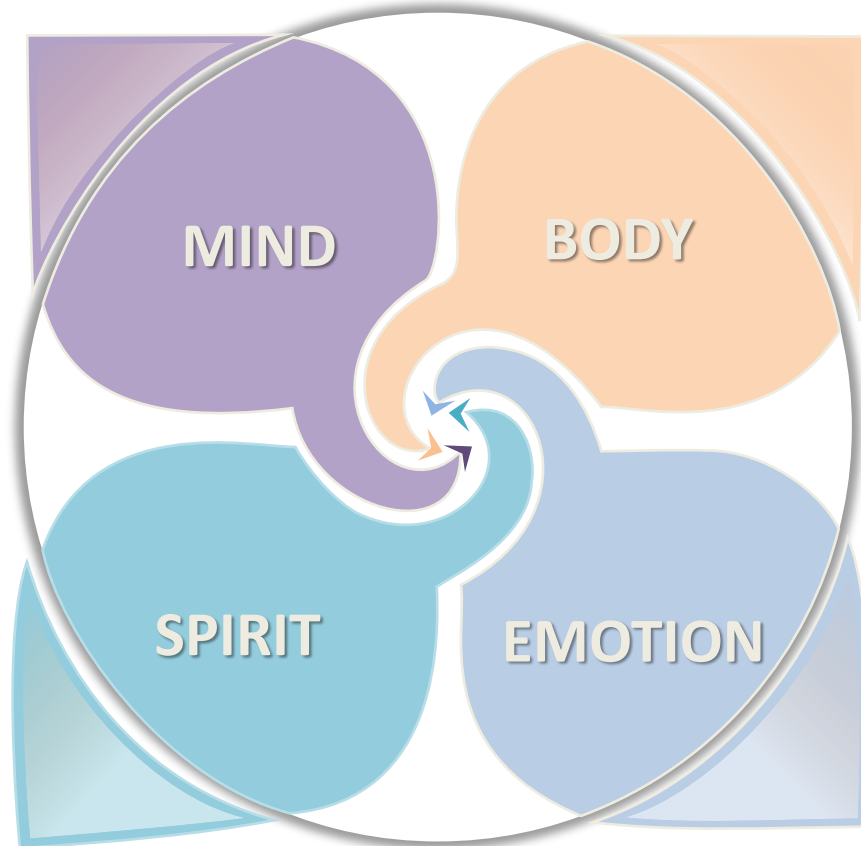
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# Feeling 'Heard'

45 YOF ED MD. Covering COVID Surge in East Coast Facility  
42 YOF COVID+. Full Code. Hospital Census RED. Flatline. Spouse MD.  
Day 2. ICU. Alone. Left Medicine.

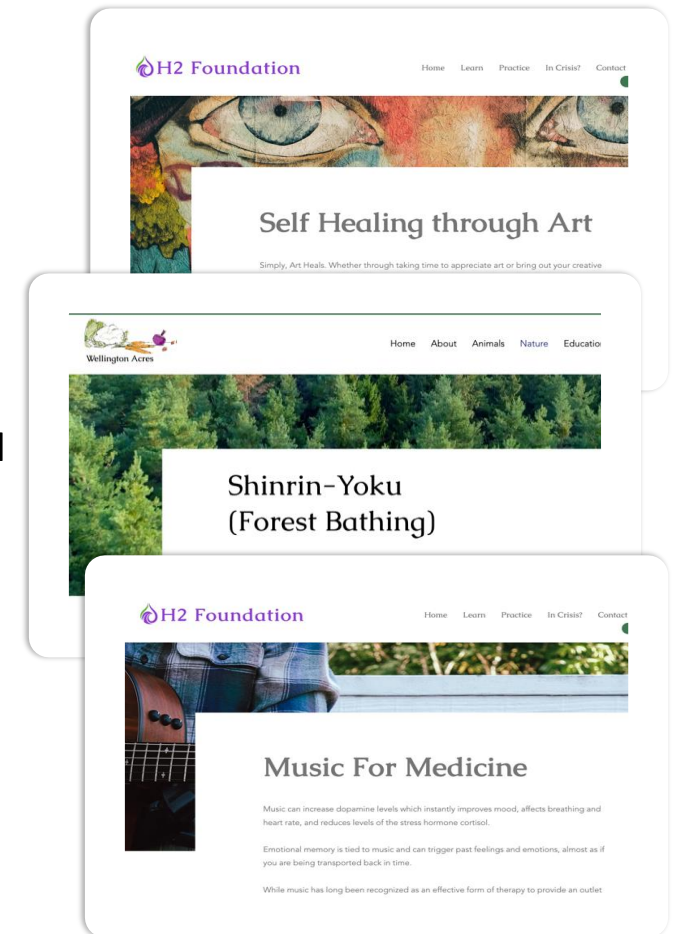


# Awareness-Balance-Connection: Behavior: Restorative Practices Reinforce Skills



- Understanding your own needs & vulnerabilities as a helper. (We all have them!)
- Give yourself permission to fully experience emotional reactions
- Inventory your current lifestyle choices & make necessary changes
- Recognize negative coping skills & avoid them
- Set realistic goals for yourself – know your limits & accept them
- Maintain clear boundaries. Avoid personal & professional isolation
- Remember your spiritual side

<https://www.h2hopetohealing.org/projects-6>





# Community: *Support* and Accountability

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- **Vulnerability is hard.** Sharing parts of ourselves that leave us feeling exposed and susceptible to hurt is not to be taken lightly.
- Compassion resilience is the ability to maintain your own well-being while responding compassionately to the suffering of others. Humans simply are not able to do this completely on their own.
- When you are able to share your most difficult feelings and experiences with another, and receive understanding in return, your resilience is strengthened.

# Journey Support – “Profession” Understanding



Strengthening our relationships with others is one of the most protective factors against stress. When we discuss our feelings and experiences with another, it regulates our emotions. Simply describing how we feel lowers our stress response.

Relying on social support includes ***allowing others to help you***. Those who are suffering merit your help—be sure to recognize your own deservingness of care.

# Build your Community

There are plenty of wonderful people in the world that would love to help you with any challenge you face. People like to help you. In fact, they are eager to assist you and be part of your life.

## *Self-Reflection Questions:*

1. In what areas of my life do I feel stuck? Whom can I ask for help with these challenges?
2. Am I comfortable asking for help? Why or why not?
3. What happened the last time I asked for help? Did that experience make me more or less likely to ask for help in the future?



# Compassion is the Antidote

## Witnessing Compassion

### Central Nervous System:

- Medial prefrontal cortex
- Amygdala

### Peripheral Nervous System

- Parasympathetic Nervous System Activation
- Vagal Brake

### Sympathetic Activation

- Heart Rate Acceleration
- Oxytocin Release



## Psycho-biological Impact

- Inhibits fear and activates courage
- Creates shifts in brain regions promoting emotional regulation & distress tolerance
- Increases heart rate variability
- Activates Reward Pathways
- In time, improves mental health psychosocial functioning

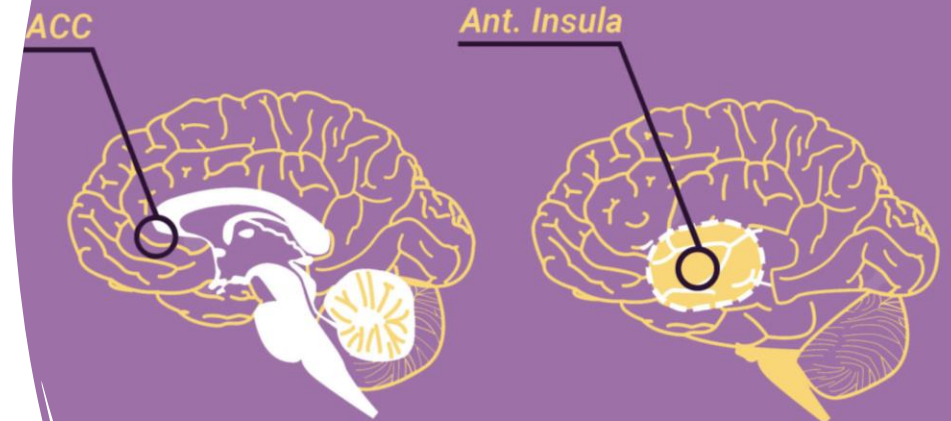
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# Sustainability: Learn ... Lead ... Renew

- Training to Facilitate Small Groups, the H2 Way:
  - Wisdom
  - Application
  - Yield
- Compassion Renewal
  - Witness Compassion
  - Moral Elevation

Understanding is a key part of empathic design but what happens in the brain when we try to understand another person?



© <https://designfactory.aalto.fi/2021/01/inside-the-empathic-brain/>

Thank You  
for Sharing  
This Time  
Together

you  
are  
amazing

REMEMBER THAT.