

# Burnout, Emotional Trauma and Moral Injury: Is There a Way Out?

Holger Link, MD



# Disclosures and Conflict of Interest

**I am not a Mental Health Professional**

**I have experienced burnout, emotional  
trauma and moral injury**

# Objectives

Define burnout, emotional trauma and moral injury through stories and examples

Discuss a matrix of institutional and individual challenges and opportunities

Review effective exercises to improve resilience

# Objectives

OHSU

Define burnout, emotional trauma and moral injury through stories and examples

CPD

# Burnout

“Syndrome of physical and emotional exhaustion, involving the development of negative self concept, negative job attitudes and loss of concern and feelings for clients”

Ayala Pines, PhD

Christina Maslach, PhD



# Burnout

Is diagnosing burnout in health care professionals helpful?

# What Does Your Inner Critic Say?



# Original Burnout Study

*76 Staff Members in mental health facilities  
in the San Francisco area*



# Institutional Variables Contributed to Burnout

Patient to staff  
ratio

How sick  
patients are

Time in direct  
patient contact

Work  
relationships  
(fewer patients =  
better)

Work schedule

Work sharing

Administrative  
time

Breaks from  
direct patient  
care

**Staff who liked their work very much had a smaller percentage of schizophrenic patients, worked fewer hours a day, and spent less time in administrative work. They tended to have positive attitudes toward other staff.**



# Burnout?



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# Burnout



***Are we doing/feeling better compared to 48  
years ago when burnout was first described?***

# Then what do we call it?

**Emotional trauma**

**Moral injury**

# Emotional Trauma

## Adverse Childhood Events (ACEs)

Dr. Link



# Adverse Childhood Events

**ABUSE**



Physical



Emotional



Sexual

**NEGLECT**



Physical



Emotional

**HOUSEHOLD CHALLENGES**



Mental Illness



Parent Treated Violently



Divorce



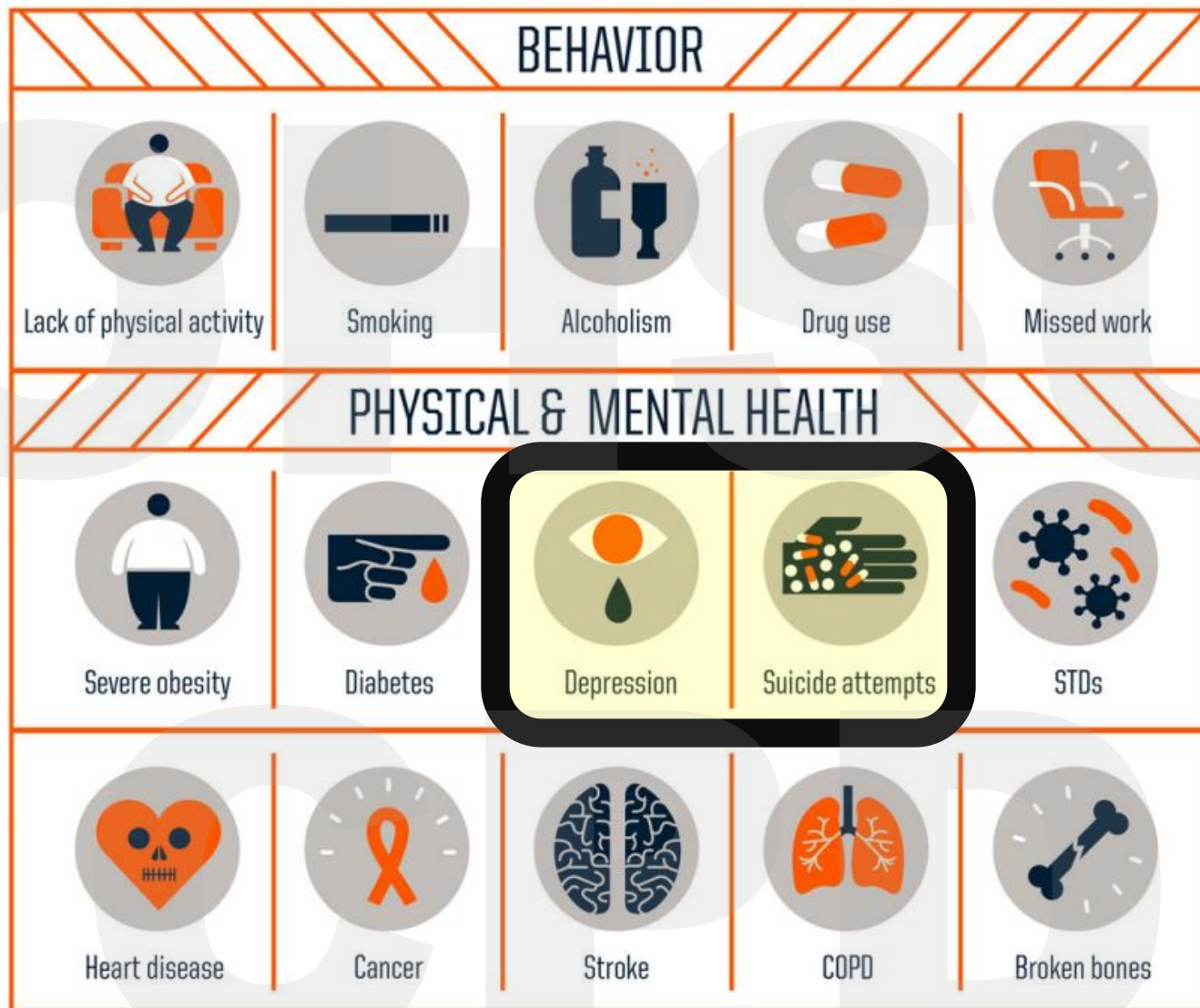
Incarcerated Relative



Substance Abuse



## Possible Risk Outcomes:



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Credit: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

# Many People Report ACEs

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



[https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/72/wr/mm7226a2.htm?s\\_cid=mm7226a2\\_w](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/72/wr/mm7226a2.htm?s_cid=mm7226a2_w)

# Health Care professionals frequently experience and witness suffering and trauma

**AAEE**

**Adverse Adult  
Emotional Event**

**Emotional Trauma**

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

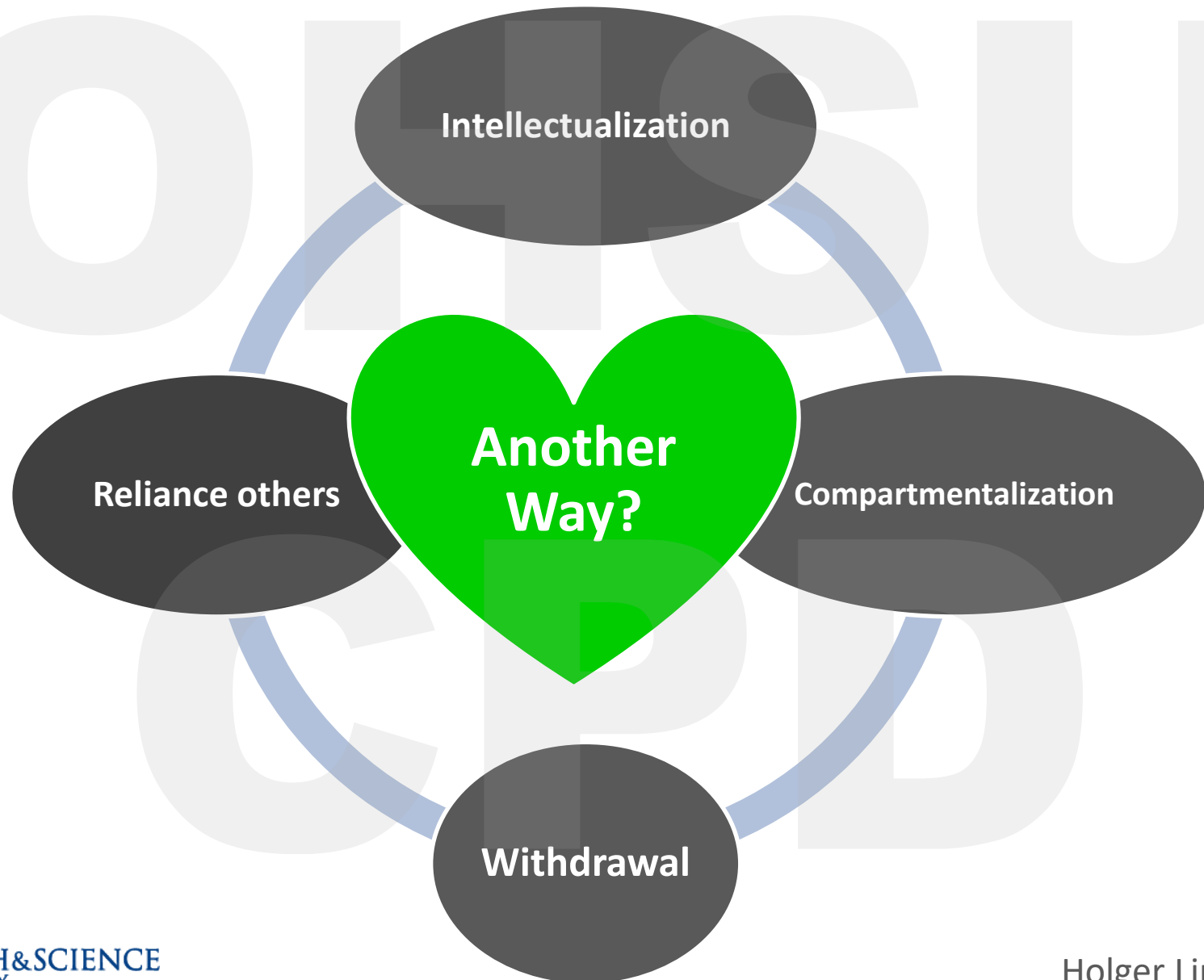
# WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?

CONVERSATIONS ON TRAUMA,  
RESILIENCE, AND HEALING

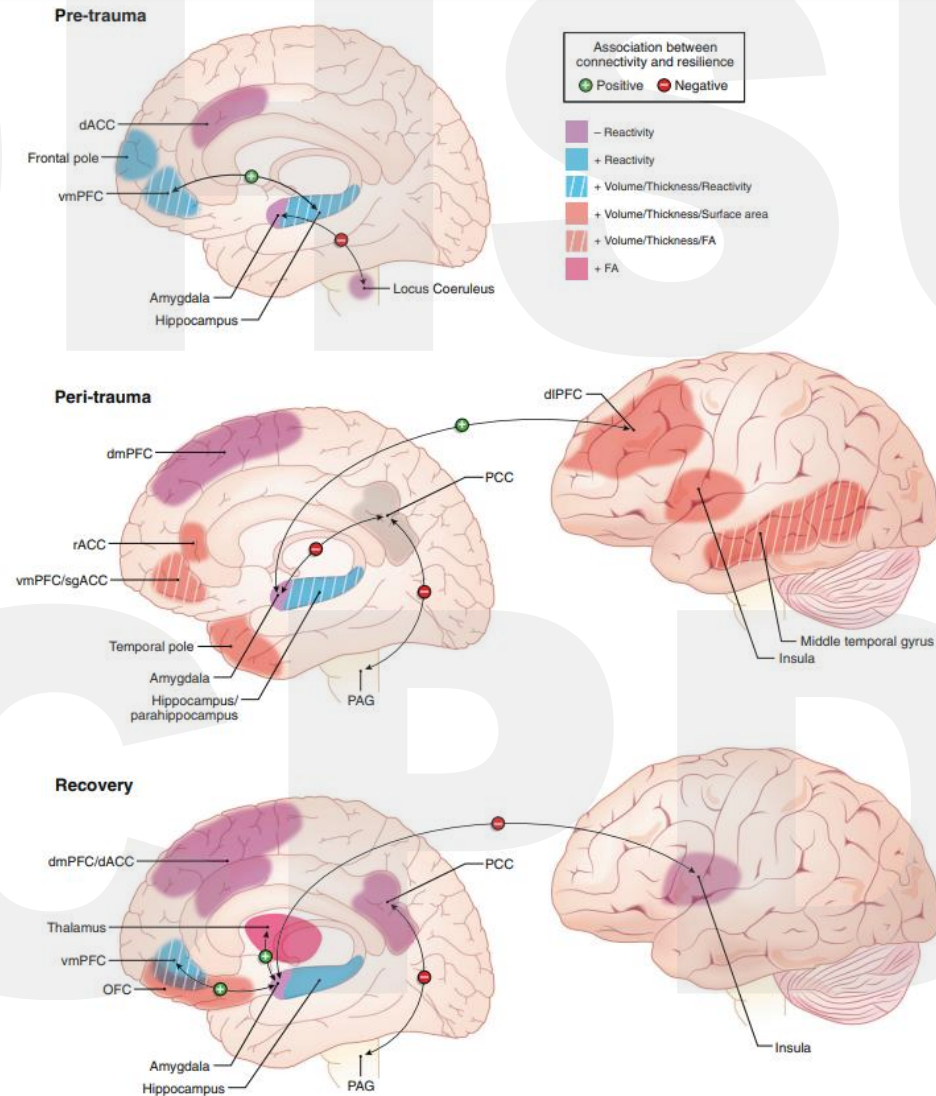


BRUCE D. PERRY, M.D., Ph.D.  
OPRAH WINFREY

# Coping with difficult emotions



# What is emotional trauma?





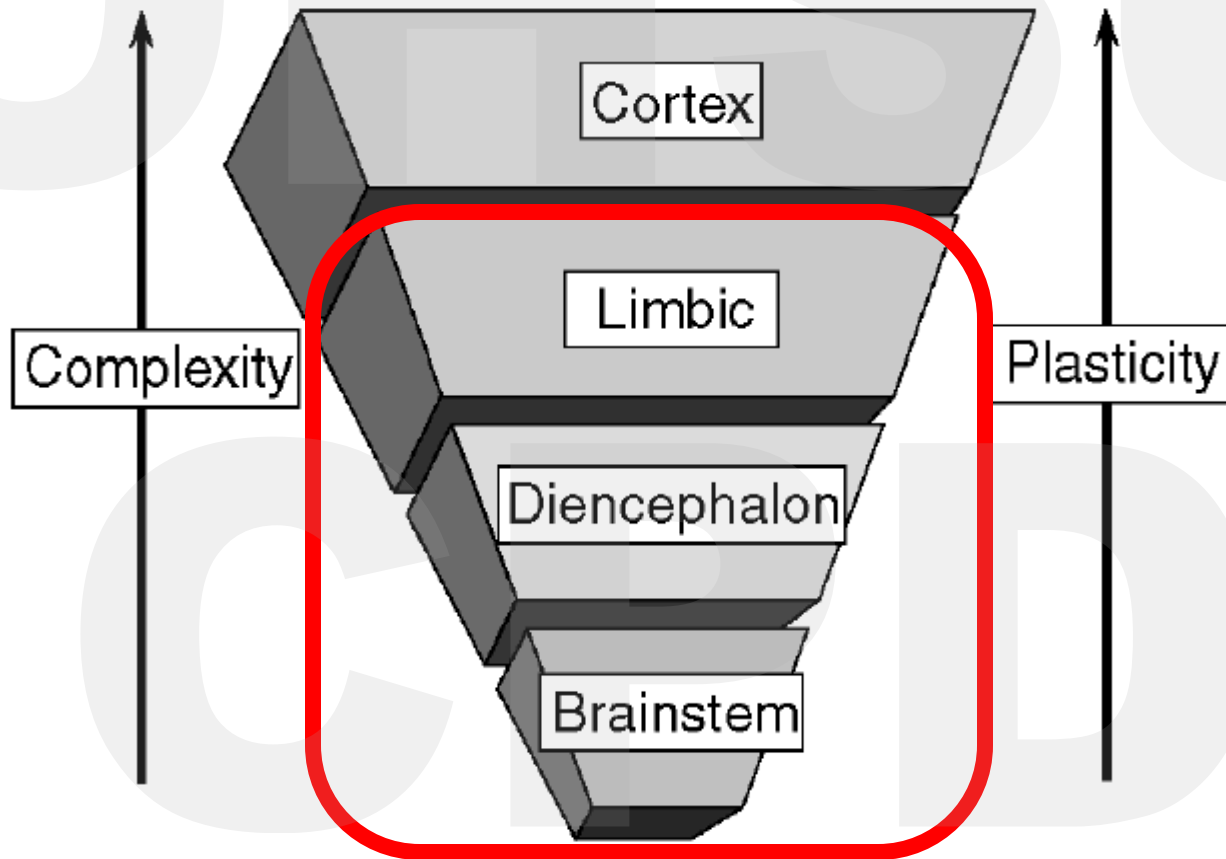
# What is emotional trauma?

“Simply put, when a person experiences something traumatic, adrenalin and other neurotransmitters rush to the brain to print a picture there.

The traumatic memory loops in the emotional side of the brain, disconnecting it from the part of the brain that conducts reasoning and cognitive processing.

The reasonable part of the brain is unable to help the emotionally loaded part of the brain get away from the trauma”

# You can't think your way out of emotional trauma







# Moral Injury

The challenge of simultaneously knowing what care patients need but being unable to provide it due to constraints that are beyond our control

*Clin Psychol Rev* 2009; 29: 695–706

*Fed Pract* 2019; 36(9): 400–402

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**Epic**

Productivity

Insurance

Profit



# Moral Injury Versus Burnout

“Burnout suggests that the problem resides within the individual, who is in some way deficient. It implies that the individual lacks the resources or resilience to withstand the work environment”

“Moral injury, on the other hand, describes the challenge of simultaneously knowing what care patients need but being unable to provide it due to constraints that are beyond our control”

*Fed Pract* 2019; 36(9): 400–402

<https://www.statnews.com/2018/07/26/physicians-not-burning-out-they-are-suffering-moral-injury/>

# Objectives

Discuss a matrix of institutional and individual challenges and opportunities

# Your team

**Institution**

**Human**

Not helpful

Not helpful



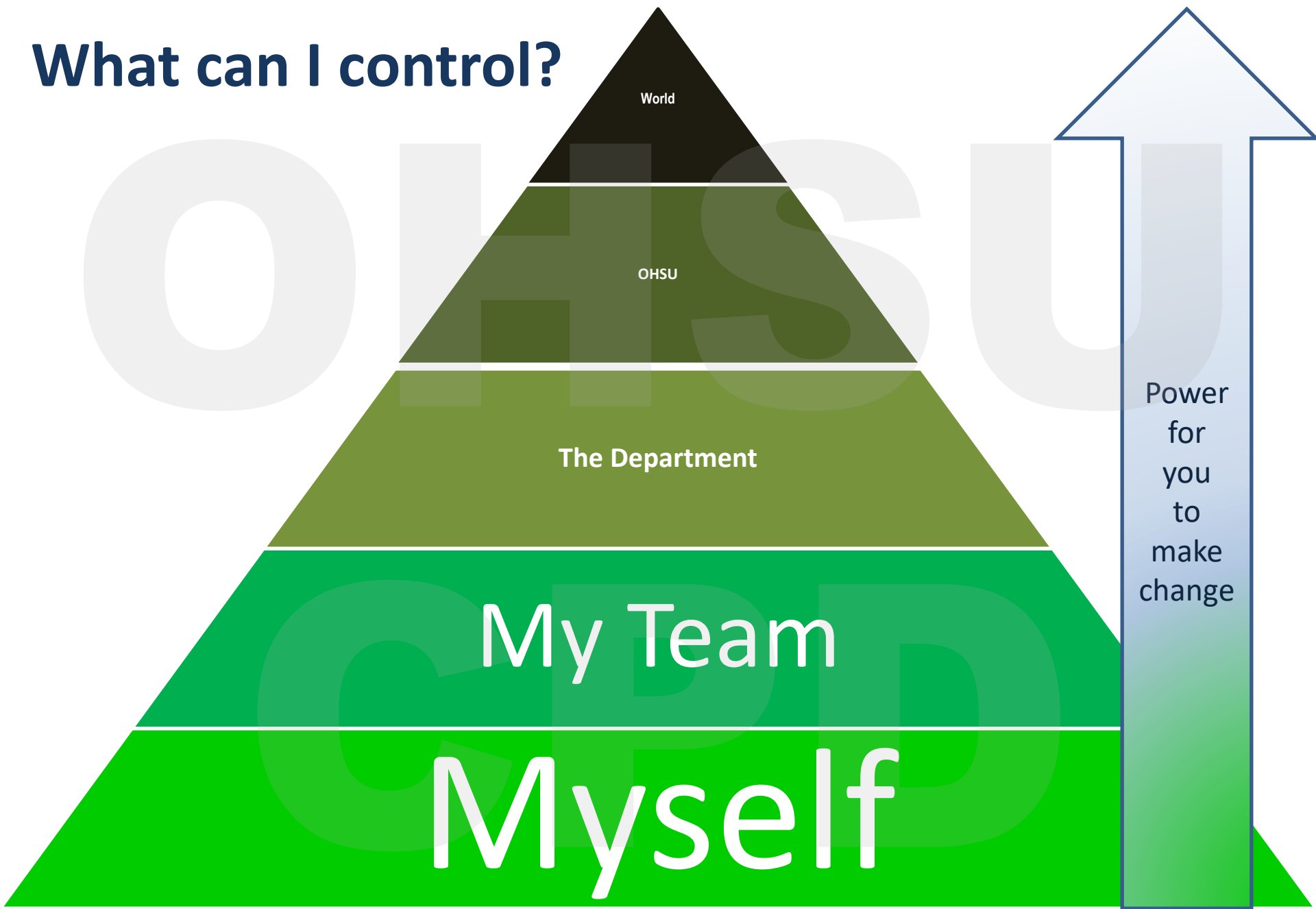
Helpful

Helpful

# Objectives

Review effective exercises to improve resilience

# What can I control?





# Setting Boundaries



# Expressive Writing



“write your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your entire life or an extremely important emotional issue that has affected you and your life. In your writing, I’d like you to really let go and explore your deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie your topic to your relationships with others, including parents, lovers, friends or relatives; to your past, your present or your future; or to who you have been, who you would like to be or who you are now. You may write about the same general issues or experiences on all days of writing or about different topics each day. All of your writing will be completely confidential. Don’t worry about spelling, grammar or sentence structure. The only rule is that once you begin writing, you continue until the time is up.”

Advances in Psychiatric Treatment (2005), vol.  
11, 338–346

# Quote from a study subject

“This was useful - it felt like an opportunity to 'tidy up' and close the loop on the emotional experience. It's helpful to feel like you've acknowledged the pain that's there and also found a healthy perspective on it”

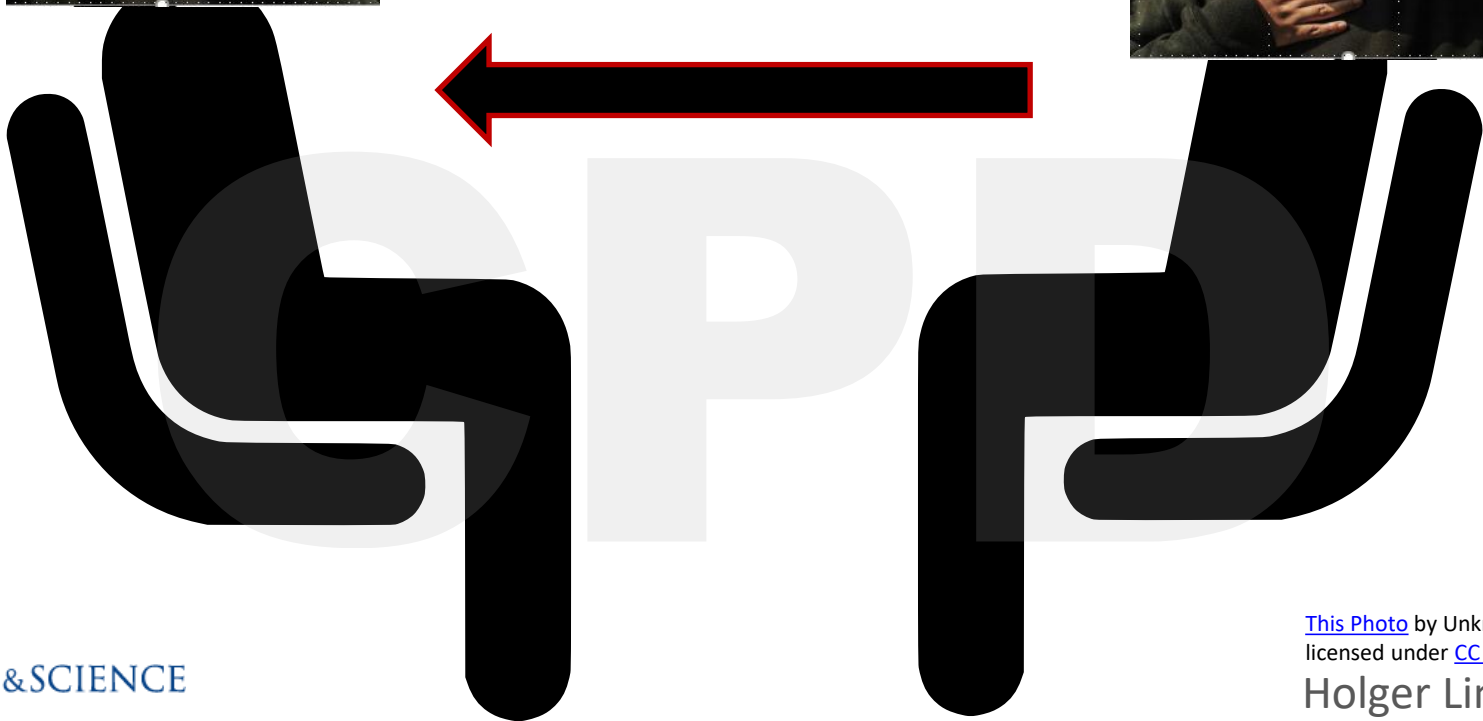
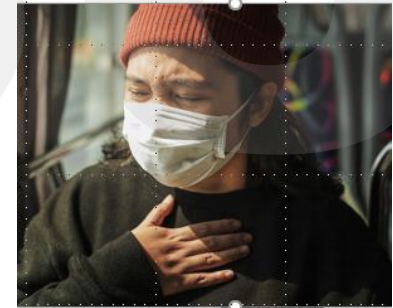
# OHSU

## Compassion versus Empathy

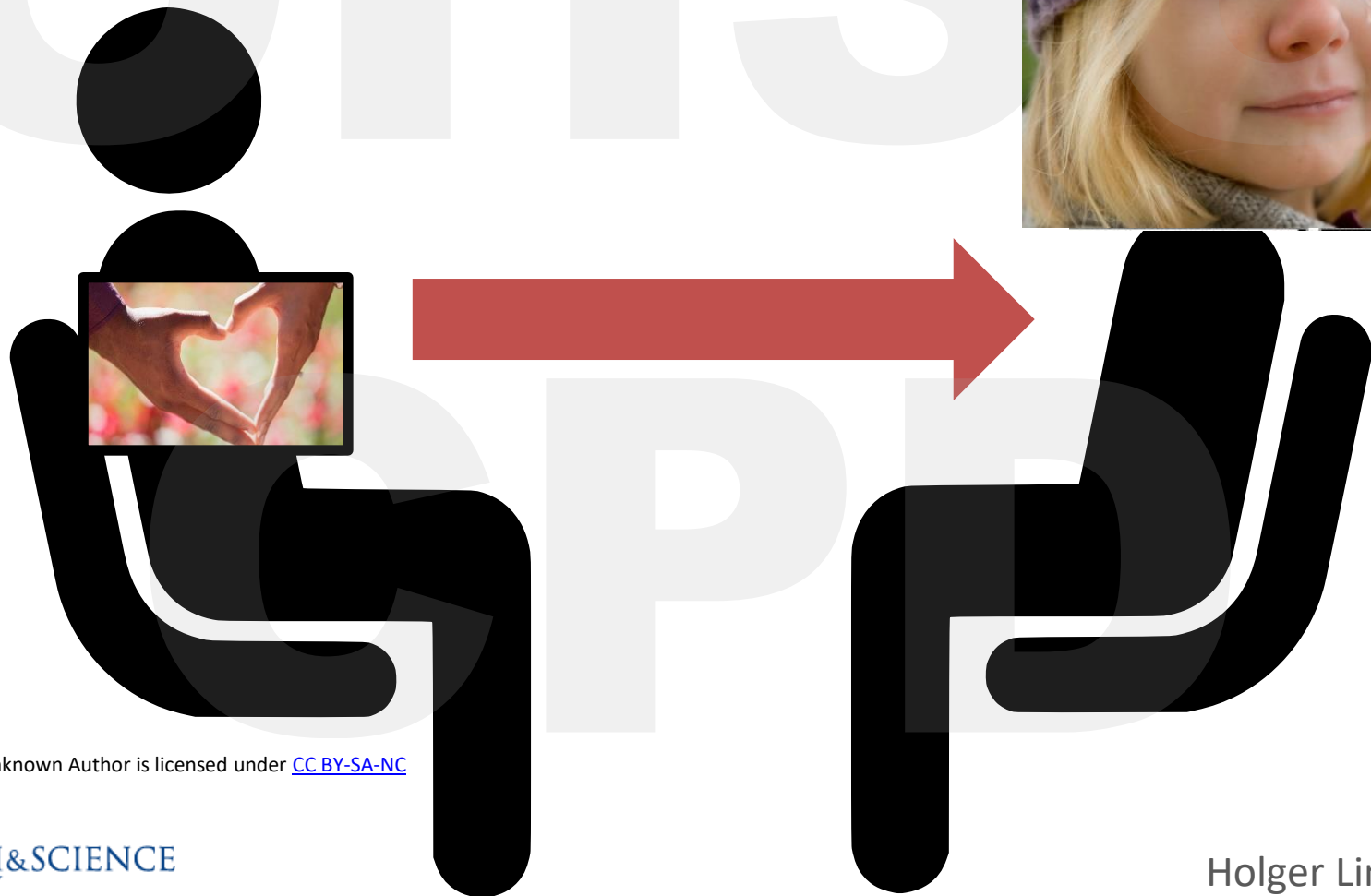
# CPD



# Empathy



# Compassion



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# Mindfulness Practices





# Mindful Self-Compassion



*This is a moment of suffering*

*It is not abnormal to feel this way  
This is part of being a human*

*I'm here for you, I care about you*

[www.self-compassion.org](http://www.self-compassion.org)



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Jan Chozen Bays, MD. Mindful Medicine. Shambhala Pub. Holger Link, MD ©

# Summary

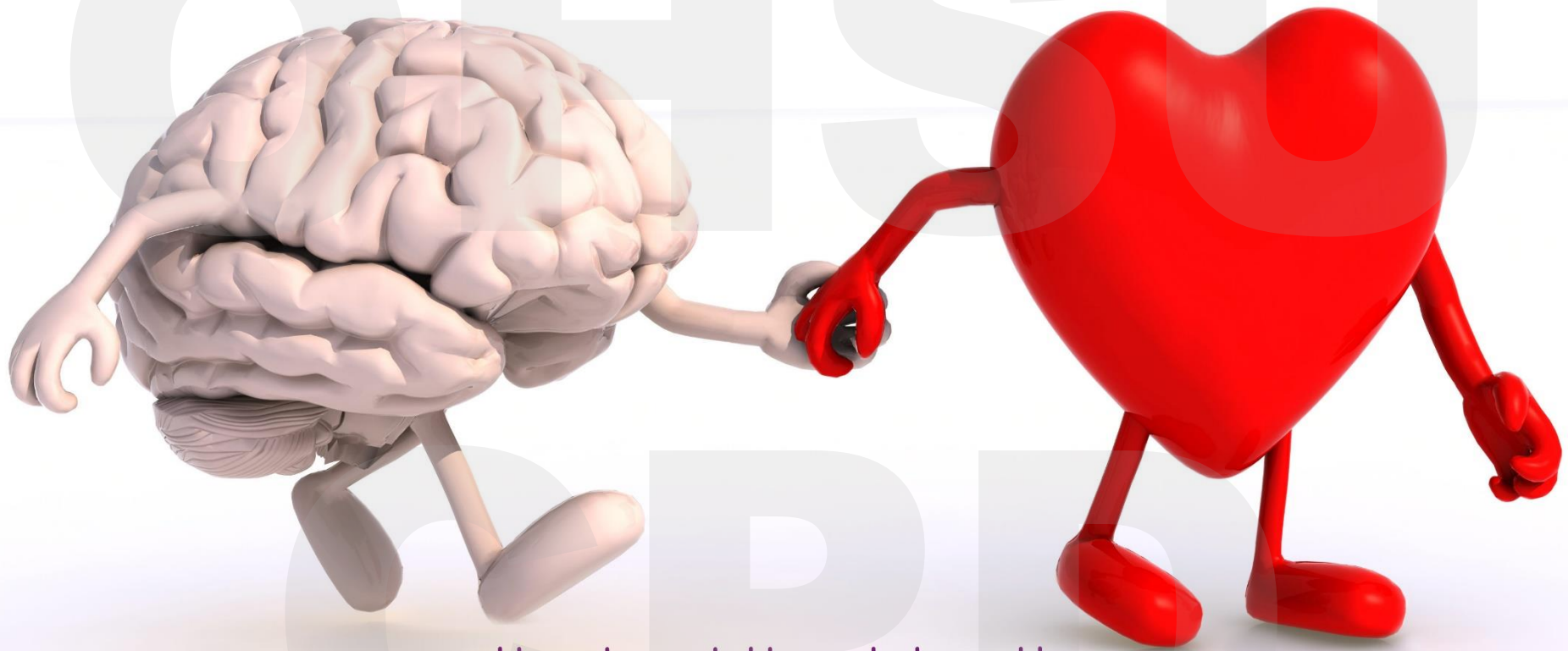
**Diagnosing burnout has not helped health care professionals**

**Past and present traumatic experiences shape our well being**

**It's not our fault if we are feeling overwhelmed, sad and stressed**

**Creating a strong team and coping practices that work for you  
can help**

**What can the institution do to support us?**



Head and Heart together

# Resources

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## THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE

BRAIN, MIND, AND BODY  
IN THE HEALING OF TRAUMA



BESSEL VAN DER KOLK, M.D.

"A MASTERPIECE THAT COMBINES THE BOUNDLESS CURIOSITY

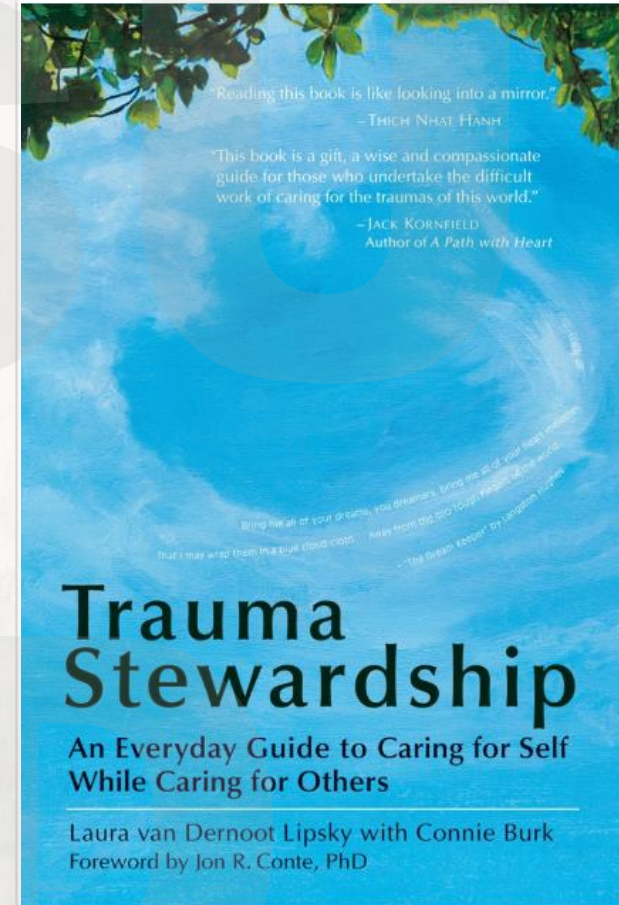
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JAN CHOZEN BAYS, MD  
author of *Mindfulness on the Go*



## Mindful Medicine

40 SIMPLE PRACTICES TO HELP  
HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS HEAL



[www.self-compassion.org](http://www.self-compassion.org)