

# **Trauma and the Wounded Helper: Understanding and Coping with Secondary Trauma**

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**Wisconsin Department of Health Services  
Division of Care and Treatment Services**

# Agenda

- Trauma overview
- Trauma in the workplace
- Vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout
- Moral injury
- Trauma-informed supervision
- Self-care



- Breathe
- Self-empathy
- Count to ten
- Put lotion on hands
- Fidgets
- Doodle
- Walk around



# Trauma Defined

# Trauma

- A wound
- More about the reaction than the event
- Disease of disconnection (Judith Herman, MD)
- Subjective
- Lives in the body
- Affects relationships
- You question your place in the world



# Why are so many talking about trauma?

- Disclosure
- Prevalence
- Science
- Services
- Hope

# Father Gregory Boyle



Photo: Homeboy Industries

# The Many Faces of Trauma

- Acute
- Complex
- Historical
- Sanctuary
- Vicarious
- Collective



# Acute Trauma



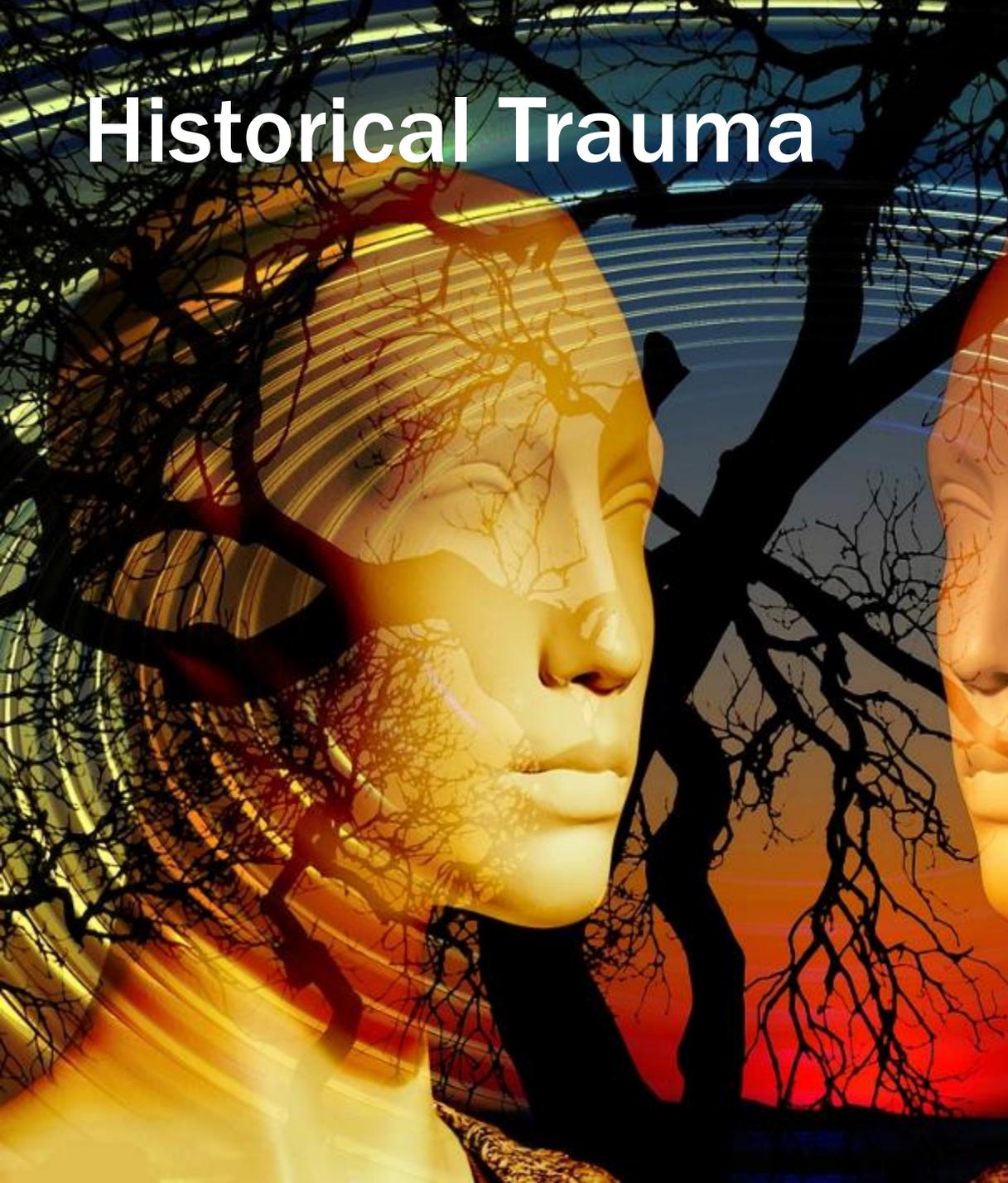
- Adult onset
- Single event
- Adequate child development

# Complex Trauma



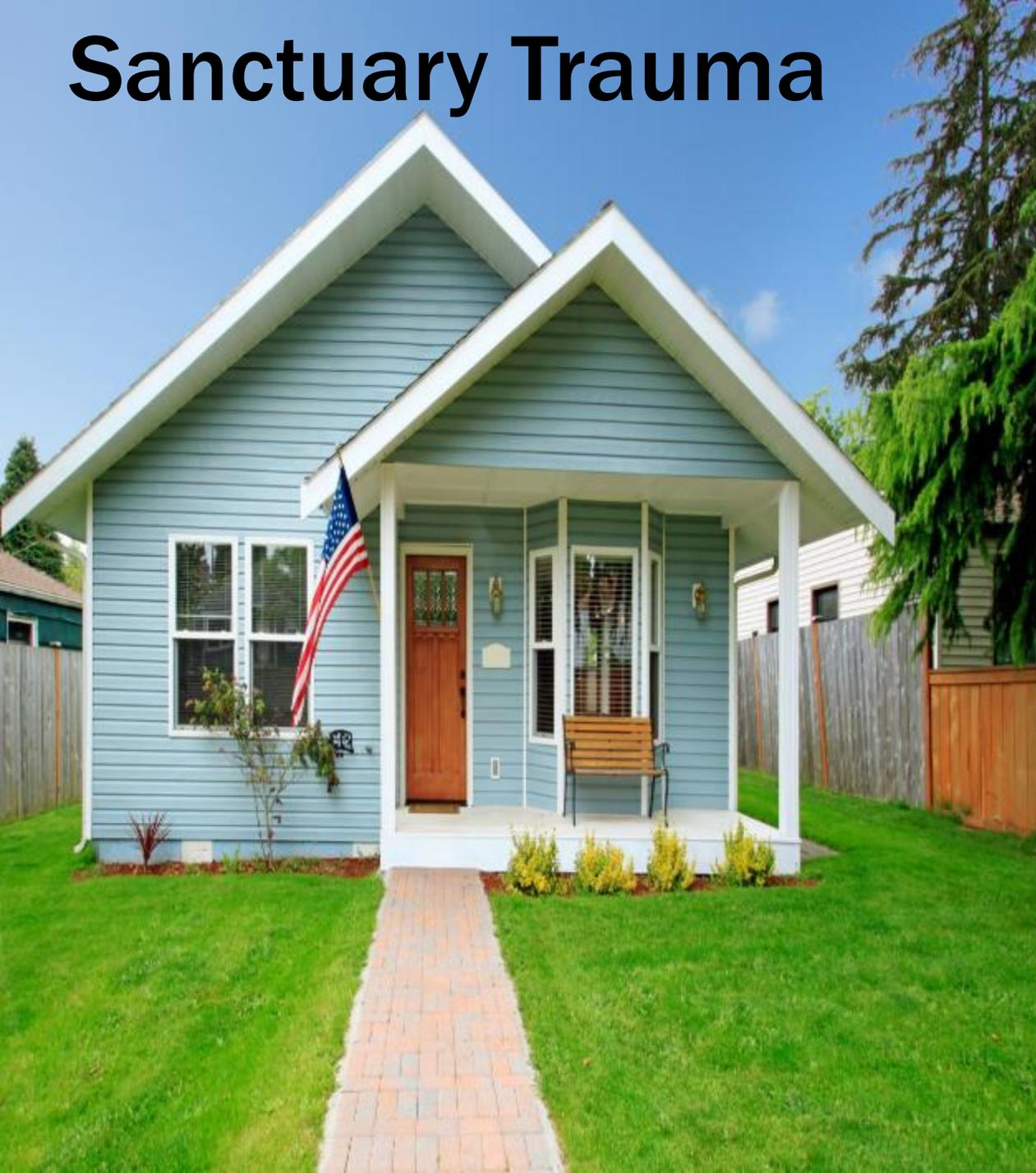
- Early onset
- Multiple events
- Not time limited
- Highly invasive
- Interpersonal
- Stigmatizing (shame)

# Historical Trauma



- Collective and cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations
- Creates survivor guilt, depression, low self-esteem, numbing out, and anger

# Sanctuary Trauma



Wounding in settings believed to be safe:

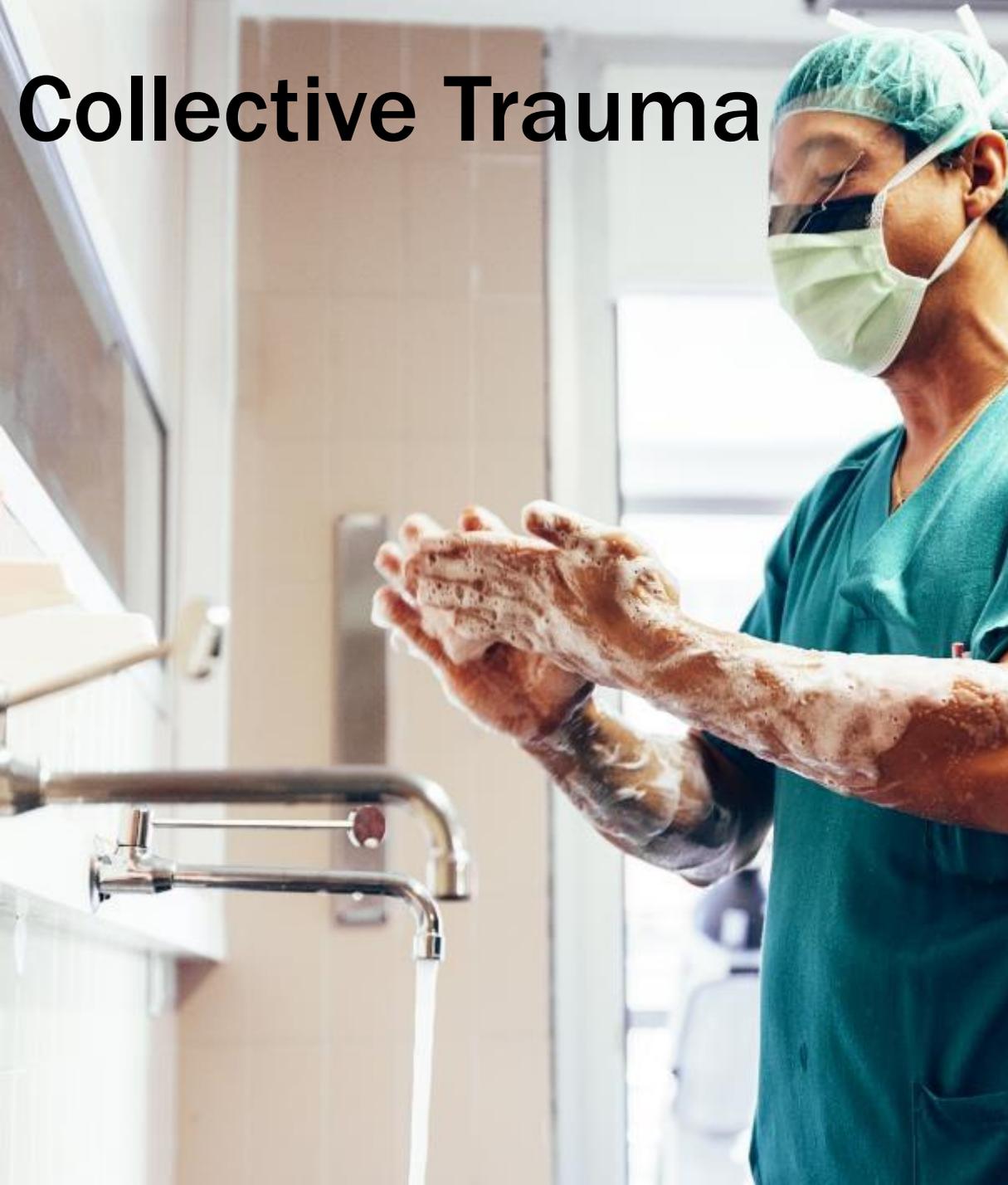
- Home
- Medical services
- Mental health services
- Substance use disorder services
- Foster care
- Schools
- Places of worship

# Vicarious Trauma



The experience of learning about another person's trauma and experiencing trauma-related distress as a result of this exposure.

# Collective Trauma



- Multi-layered
- Negatively impacts entire societies or groups of people
- Two components:
  - Inability to escape
  - Unable to make sense of it

# Collective Trauma

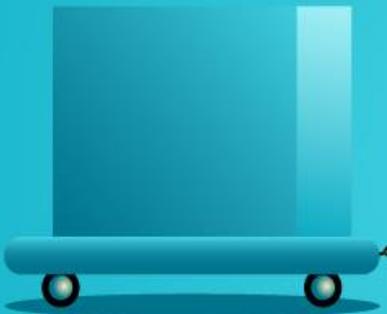
- A situation that elicits psychological trauma that “violates the familiar ideas and expectations about the world of an individual or society, plunging them into a state of extreme confusion and uncertainty.”
- Examples:
  - War
  - Mass violence
  - Genocide
  - Pandemics

(Aydin, 2017)

# Trauma and the Workplace



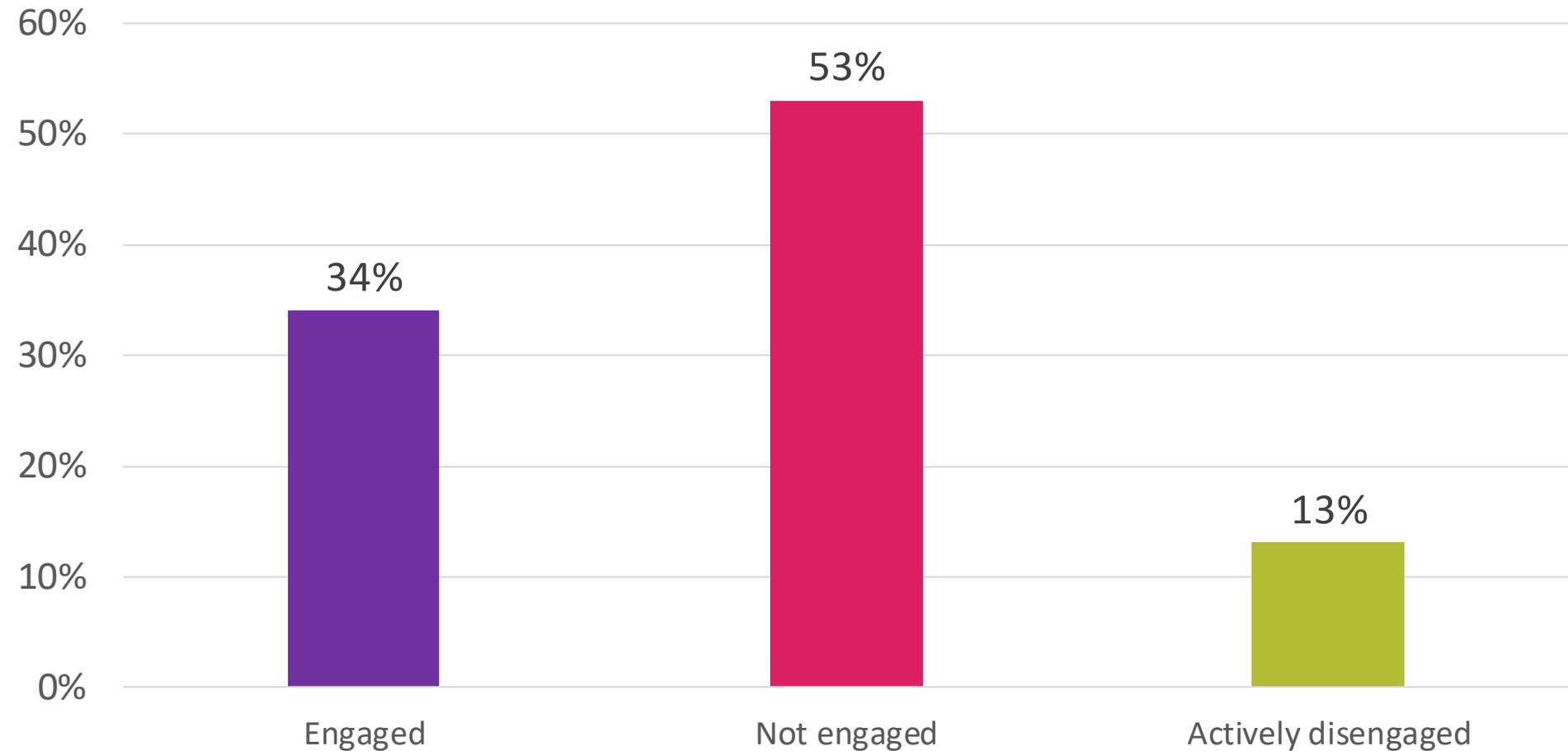
Boss



Leader



# Employee Engagement in U.S.



# Engagement

# 51%

of employees are  
searching for new  
jobs or watching for  
openings



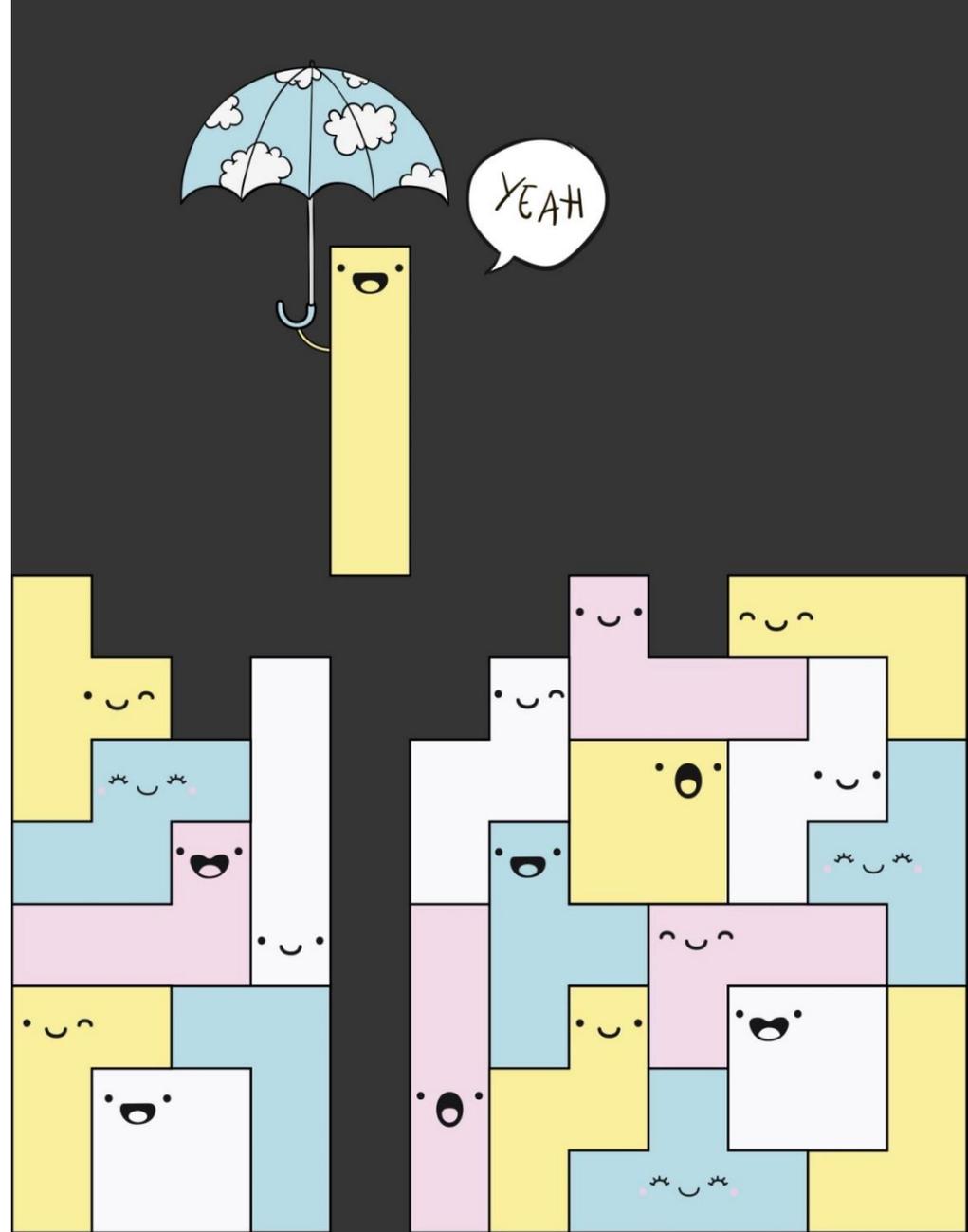
# Trauma in Organizations

- Resist change
- Resist new leadership
- Become trauma-organized
  - Reactivity replaces strategy
  - Us versus them mentality
  - Loss of healthy communication (gossip fills the void)
  - Interpersonal conflicts erupt and aren't dealt with

# The Tetris Effect

*“The Tetris Effect is a metaphor for being stuck in a pattern of thought or behavior. When we are looking for something, we see it everywhere.”*

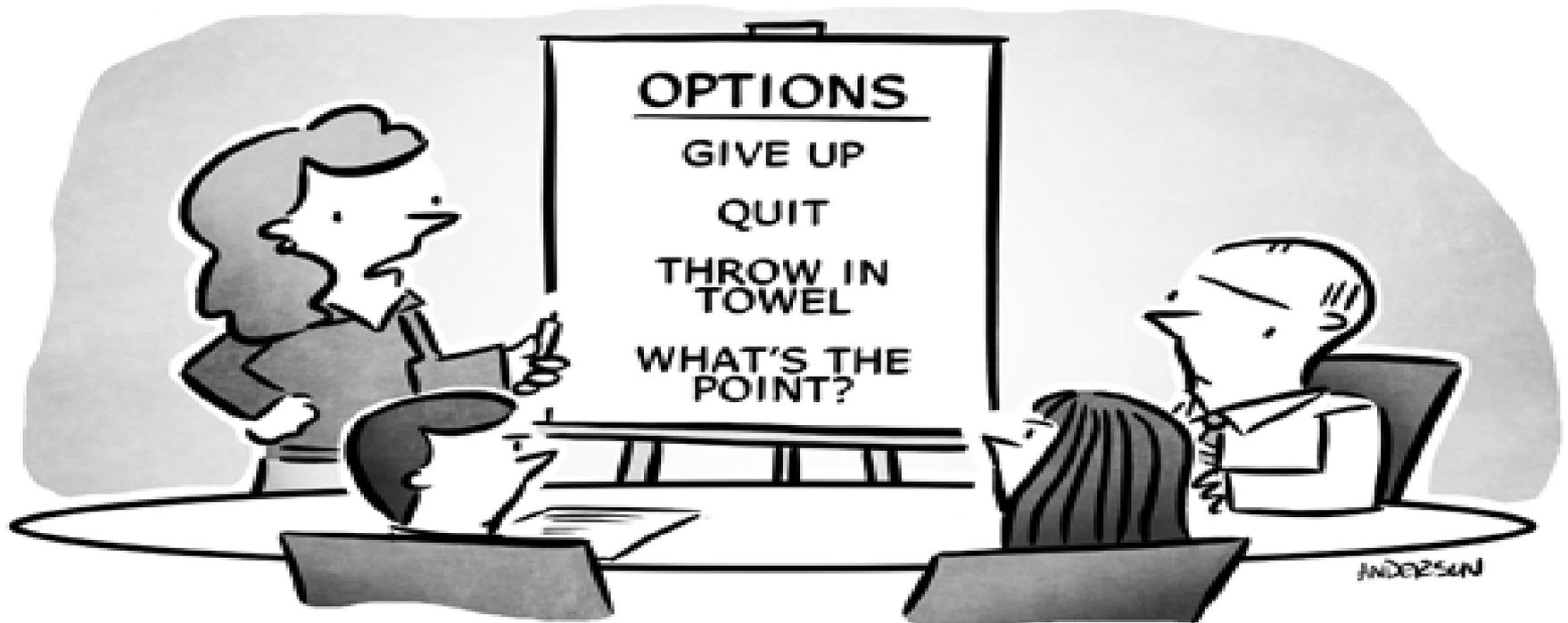
Source: The Happiness Advantage



# The Tetris Effect

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"OK, I'm sensing a lot of negativity."

# Impact on Staff

## Cognitive

Negative

Pessimistic

Intrusive thoughts

Black and white thinking

## Social

Reduced collaboration

Withdrawn

Easily angered

## Emotional

Helplessness

Hopelessness

Depressed

Hyper vigilant

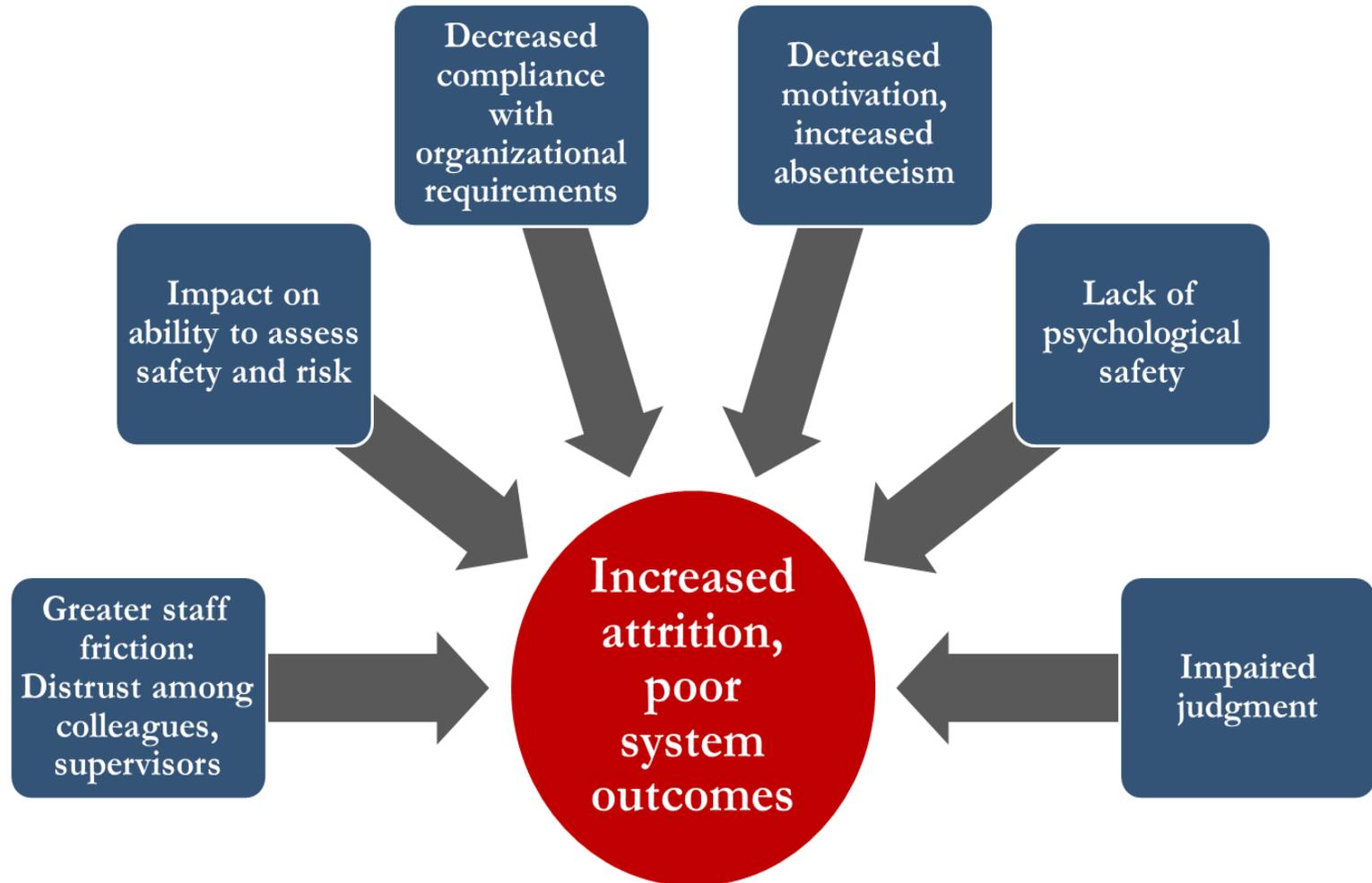
## Physical

Headaches

Tense muscles

Fatigue

# System Level Impact



# What We Know



We need each other.

“What is to give light must endure burning”  
-Viktor Frankl



# Interesting...

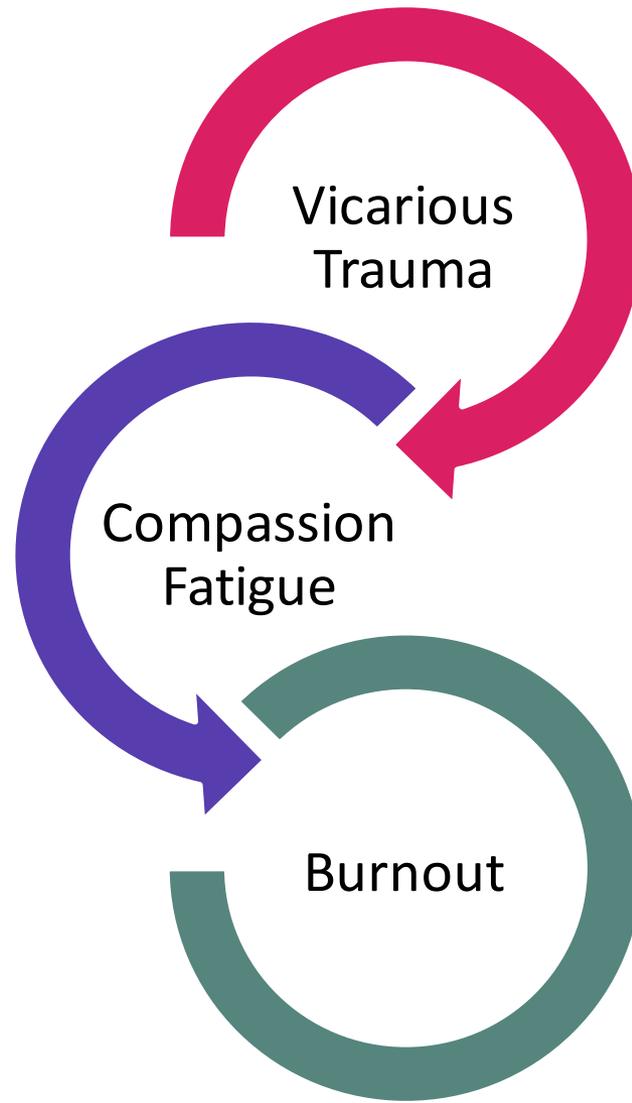
Research has shown that helping professionals with pre-existing anxiety disorders, mood disorders, or **personal trauma histories** are more susceptible to experiencing secondary traumatic stress, vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout.

"The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet."



R.N. Remen, M.D. 1996

# Downward Spiral



# Vicarious Trauma

The emotional residue of exposure that caseworkers have from working with people as they are hearing their trauma stories and become witness to the pain, fear, and terror that trauma survivors have endured.

(American Counseling association, October, 2011)

# Compassion Fatigue

The overall experience of emotional and physical fatigue that social service professionals experience due to the chronic use of empathy when working with clients who are suffering in some way.



Figley, 2002b; Rothschild & Rand, 2006

# Burnout

Overwhelming emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of professional insufficiency

- Emotional exhaustion: A state that occurs when a practitioner's emotional resources become depleted by the chronic needs, demands, and expectations of their clients, supervisors, or organizations (Maslach, 1998)
- Depersonalization: The negative, cynical, or excessively detached responses to coworkers or clients and their situations (Maslach, 1998)

# More on Depersonalization

- If we can be tolerant of our client's maladaptive behavior because we understand this is a symptom of trauma, why not our leaders, supervisors, or co-workers?
- Do you recognize this in yourself?

# Moral Injury

# Moral Injury Defined

Moral injury is the damage done to one's conscience or moral compass when that person perpetrates, witnesses, or fails to prevent acts that transgress one's own moral beliefs, values, or ethical codes of conduct.

(Syracuse University: The Moral Injury Project)

# Moral Injury Defined

- Moral injury can occur when someone engages in, fails to prevent, or witnesses acts that conflict with their values or beliefs.
- Moral injury usually involves experiences that contradict an individual's personal or shared values or expectations.

# Symptoms of Moral Injury

- Loss of faith
- Depression
- Loss of meaning
- Guilt (“I made a mistake”)
- Shame (“I am a mistake”)
- Self-sabotage
- Substance use and abuse
- Anxiety
- Isolating behavior
- Feelings of profound despair
- Propensity to commit suicide
- Intrusive memories

# The Effects of Moral Injury

Experiencing moral injury can cause you or your staff to feel profound loss of meaningful purpose of what you (or they) felt was their calling. It could lead to you (or they) leaving the profession...or worse.

# Moral Injury in Healthcare

“I couldn’t help anyone. I couldn't do anything. I just wanted to help people, and I couldn’t do anything.”

# Workplace stressors

- Bureaucratic concerns
- COVID-19
- Lack of supervision
- Lack of resources for clients
- Lack of or poor workplace communication (gossip)
- Inadequate orientation and training for role

# Secondary Traumatic Stress

## Risk Factors

- Preexisting anxiety or mood disorders
- Prior history of personal trauma
- Uncertainty about the future (COVID-19)
- High caseloads of clients with trauma-related disorders
- Being younger in age and new to the field
- Unhealthy coping styles; e.g. distancing and detachment from clients and co-workers
- Lack of tolerance for strong emotions

# Trauma-Informed Supervision

# Trauma-Informed Supervision

- What it looks like:
  - Supporting staff – Relationship-based supervision
  - Reflective supervision – A trauma-informed supervisory model
- Aligns with the skills and principles emphasized in motivational interviewing

# Reflective Supervision Best Practices

- Hold regularly scheduled meetings with minimal interruptions
- Follow agreed upon agenda
- Be emotionally present
- Observe and listen closely
- Avoid judgment
- Be compassionate
- Respond with empathy
- Model open communication
- Use motivational interviewing techniques
- Focus on building the relationship and on being genuine
- Help employees find meaning in their work
- Provide supportive feedback

# Self-Care



You wouldn't let this happen to your phone...

Don't let this happen to you either

Self-care is a priority, not a luxury!

# Self-Care

- 
- A stack of smooth, dark grey stones is arranged vertically on a light-colored bamboo mat. The background is softly blurred, showing white flowers with yellow centers. The overall scene conveys a sense of calm and balance.
- Proper nutrition
  - Rest
  - Exercise
  - Avoid drugs and alcohol
  - Enjoyable activities
  - Setting limits
  - Reach out to those you trust
  - Journal thoughts and feelings

# Self-Care

## Feel good self-care

- Laughing
- Massage
- Deep breathing
- Drinking more water

## Smart self-care

- Establishing healthy boundaries
- Being vulnerable
- Avoid toxic relationships
- Develop strategies to address being over-reactive
- Be aware of personal numbing out
- How you define failure or success

# Well-being

Four constituents of well-being:

- **Resilience**

Rapid return to baseline equals higher levels of well-being

- **Outlook (Positive outlook)**

Loving kindness and compassion meditation help improve brain circuits rapidly (7 hours of training)

# Resilience

**Resilience** is the ability to overcome challenges of all kinds and to bounce back stronger, wiser, and more personally powerful.

**And...a protip...it's contagious.**



# Resiliency

- Nature
  - Forest bathing (mindful presence in nature)
  - Green and blue exercise
- Aerobic exercise
- Meditation (Loving kindness and compassion meditation)
- Gratitude and generosity

# Well-being

Four constituents of well-being:

- **Attention** – A wandering mind is an unhappy mind  
47 percent of adults waking life spent not paying attention to what they're doing
- **Generosity** – People doing generous, altruistic behaviors activates the brain circuits key to fostering wellbeing



**Questions?**



**THANK YOU!**

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