

Burnout to Breakthrough

[A Wellbeing & Resilience Workshop](#)

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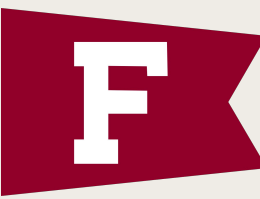
which one best describes you?



Meet Your Presenter: Susan Finley, EdD, NCC

Associate Professor, Counseling · POCR Reviewer · AI Coach · Santa Monica College
Health Educator · UCLA Semel Institute Neuroscience & Human Behavior





A Little About Me



2007

Began teaching psychology in New York City

2013

Joined Santa Monica College as Counseling Instructor

2022- Present

Health Educator at UCLA

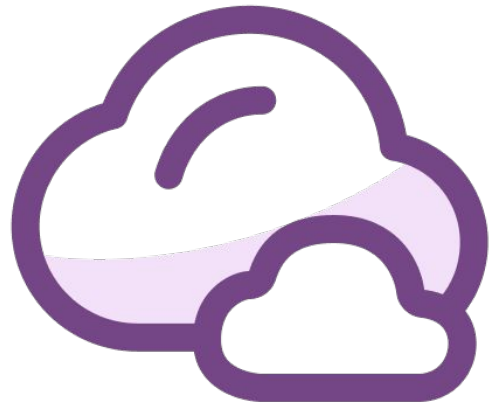
My Professional Focus

course design | curriculum development | distance education | teaching & learning | wellness & wellbeing | health education



Learning Objectives

- ★ Recognize the signs and symptoms of burnout in individuals and teams.
- ★ Demonstrate knowledge of self-care and evidence based stress-mitigation strategies that can enhance overall wellbeing, build resilience, and prevent burnout.
- ★ Identify organizational factors contributing to burnout and describe strategies to address them.
- ★ Describe prevention of burnout in the context of implementing trauma-informed care.



What word(s) come to mind when you hear "Burnout?"

SAMHSA

Substance Abuse and Mental Health
Services Administration



World Health Organization

Defining Burnout in the Higher Education Context

Burnout is not merely "work fatigue." It is a **chronic occupational stress reaction** resulting from prolonged activation of the stress response system (WHO)— and it manifests across three core dimensions (SAMHSA):

Exhaustion

Profound depletion stemming from the "always-on" demands of student support, intensive research cycles, and high-volume grading.

Depersonalization

Psychological withdrawal — detachment from students, callousness toward colleagues, and a growing disconnect from the institution's educational mission.

Professional Inefficacy

A reduced sense of accomplishment. Contributions to teaching, research, or administration no longer feel meaningful — despite significant effort.



Burnout: What does it look like?

Cognitive & Physical Signs

- ★ "Mental fog" impairing decision-making and administrative recall
- ★ Headaches, gastrointestinal distress, and chronic sleep disruption



Recognizing it in Colleagues

- ★ Irritability over minor requests; withdrawal from faculty meetings
- ★ Declining judgment quality; increased substance use, neglected self-care or frequent sick leave



Root Causes and Systemic Drivers

Excessive Workloads

The "triple threat" of teaching, research, and service — amplified by always-on digital communication and student email volume.

Administrative Burden

Grant reporting, tenure dossiers, accreditation cycles, and bureaucratic digitization of tasks drain cognitive reserves.

Limited Autonomy

Centralized decision-making reduces academic freedom and flexibility in scheduling and instructional methods.

The COVID-19 Legacy

Irregular hours, high-stress hybrid environments, and increased harassment from students, parents, and external stakeholders.

As mental health concerns and attrition rates rise, higher education must reckon with the unsustainable conditions it has created.

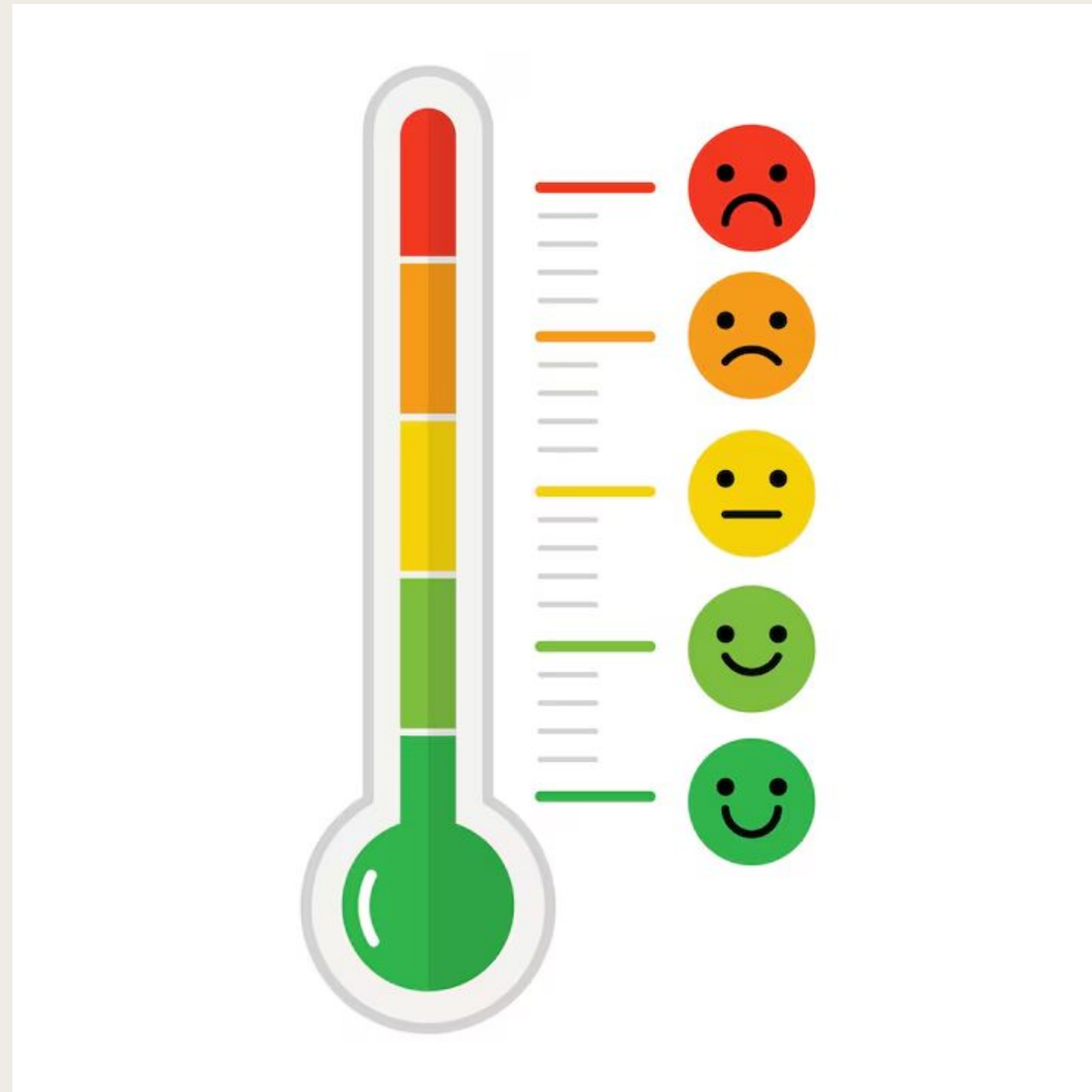
A culture that normalizes overwork





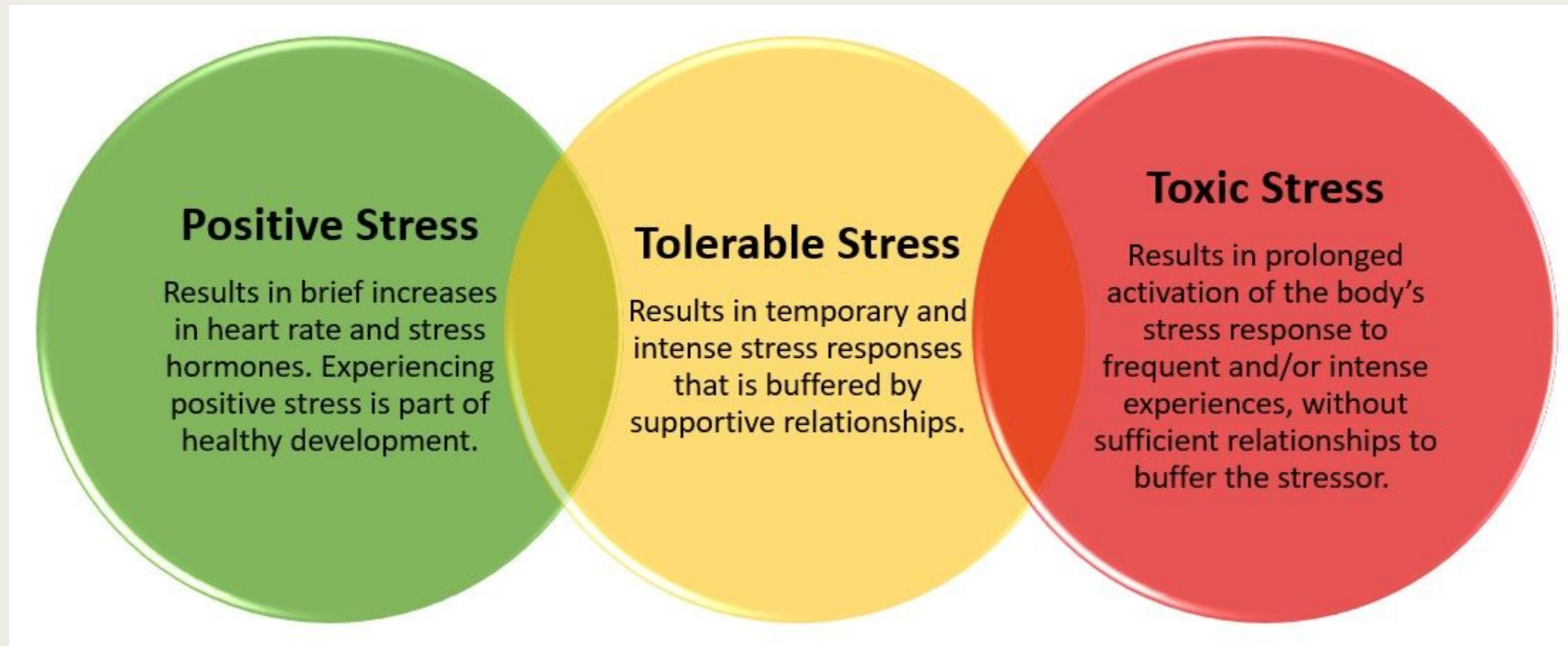
How would you rate your current stress level related to work?

Feeling Thermometer



- ★ FT is a useful way to communicate feelings
- ★ Experiences that are more distressing/uncomfortable are located higher on the FT in the orange or red
- ★ Less distressing, more comfortable experiences are lower on the FT in the green or yellow
- ★ FT creates a shared emotional vocabulary

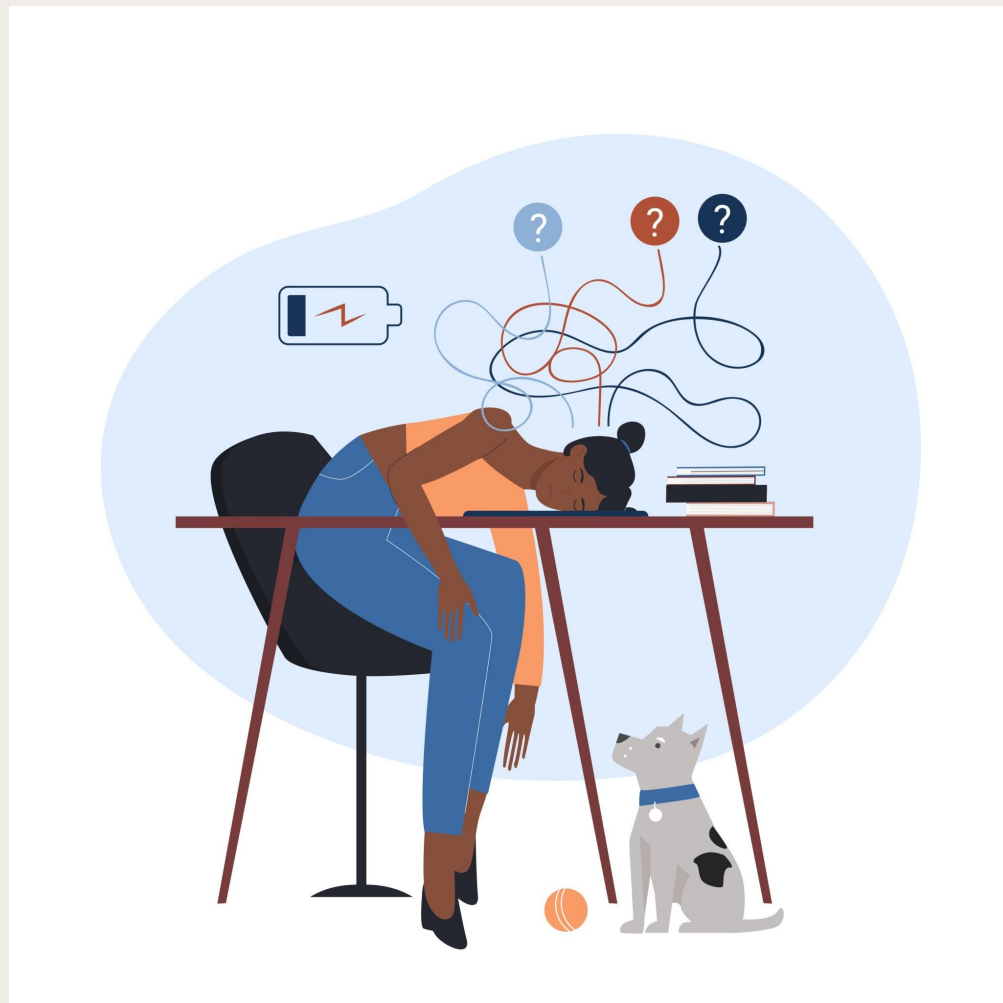
Stress Response



Toxic stress disrupts the endocrine and immune systems, elevating clinical anxiety and professional withdrawal.

Multidimensional Impacts of Burnout

The consequences of unaddressed burnout extend beyond the individual affecting *educational quality, student outcomes, and institutional stability*.



Impacts on Professionals

- ★ **Physical Health:** Elevated risk for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, musculoskeletal pain, and chronic insomnia
- ★ **Mental Health:** Depression, substance misuse, and in severe cases, suicidal ideation
- ★ **Occupational:** Sustained emotional exhaustion, high turnover, and loss of confidence in the institutional mission

More Impacts of Burnout

Ask Yourself: Are there ways to lighten your workload?



Impacts on Students & the Institution

- ★ **Educational Quality:** Impaired faculty cognition reduces instructional rigor and academic engagement
- ★ **Reduced Empathy:** Exhausted faculty connect less with student needs, harming retention and mentorship
- ★ **Institutional Stability:** Absenteeism and the high cost of replacing faculty and staff compound over time

There is a Solution





- ★ Burnout in academia is rarely an individual failure. It is a **systemic outcome** of the institutional environment shaped by structural inequities, policy gaps, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ★ Use evidence-based strategies that address the root environment, not just individual symptoms.

Strategic Organizational Interventions

Institutional change requires **structural commitment**

- ★ Foster autonomy through clear goals and anonymous feedback mechanisms.
- ★ Prioritize living wages and protection from harassment.
- ★ Ensure full confidentiality in wellness reporting.
- ★ Launch peer-mentoring programs and staff "huddles" to combat isolation across departments.
- ★ Streamline committee loads and curriculum review cycles.
- ★ Optimize academic technology to serve the user — not add burden.
- ★ Implement equity-centered data systems tracking outcomes.
- ★ Enforce zero tolerance for discriminatory conduct.

Trauma-Informed Environment: Anchor all policies in Safety, Trust, Peer Support, Collaboration, and Cultural Sensitivity. Wellness is a prerequisite for academic excellence — not a benefit.

Societal & Research Strategies: Call to Action



Institutional change does not stop at the campus gate. Higher education leaders must champion a broader advocacy agenda. Here's how:

1 Collaborative Research

Advocate for the development of **nationally validated burnout assessment tools** across diverse academic sociodemographic groups — moving beyond single-institution data toward systemic insight.

2 Confront Misinformation

Institutions must act as **trusted messengers of scientific evidence** actively combating misinformation and fostering trust between the college and the broader community.

3 Sustain the Commitment

Burnout prevention is not a one-time initiative. It demands **sustained organizational will**, continuous measurement, equity-centered policy reform, and leadership accountability at every level.





Measuring and Tracking Institutional Burnout

Departments must move beyond anecdotal evidence. Use validated instruments aggregated at the departmental level to identify **burnout hotspots** while preserving individual anonymity.

Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)

The gold-standard clinical tool, assessing **three** validated subscales:

1. **Exhaustion:** "I feel emotionally drained from my work."
2. **Depersonalization:** "I've become more callous toward students and colleagues."
3. **Professional Inefficacy:** Low scores signal high burnout risk.

Wellbeing Index (WBI) Self-Assessment

During the past month, have you...

- ★ Felt burned out from your work?
- ★ Worried your work is hardening you emotionally?
- ★ Felt down, depressed, or hopeless?
- ★ Felt academic demands were insurmountable?
- ★ Been bothered by anxiety or irritability?
- ★ Had physical health interfere with your teaching?

Peer Support: The 3Rs Approach

Provide a safe space to discuss challenges. When supporting a colleague in distress, use this **neurobiological sequence** to activate the appropriate brain systems (Bruce Perry)



1. Regulate

First, regulate your own nervous system. Create physical and emotional safety through a calm tone and non-threatening body language.



2. Relate

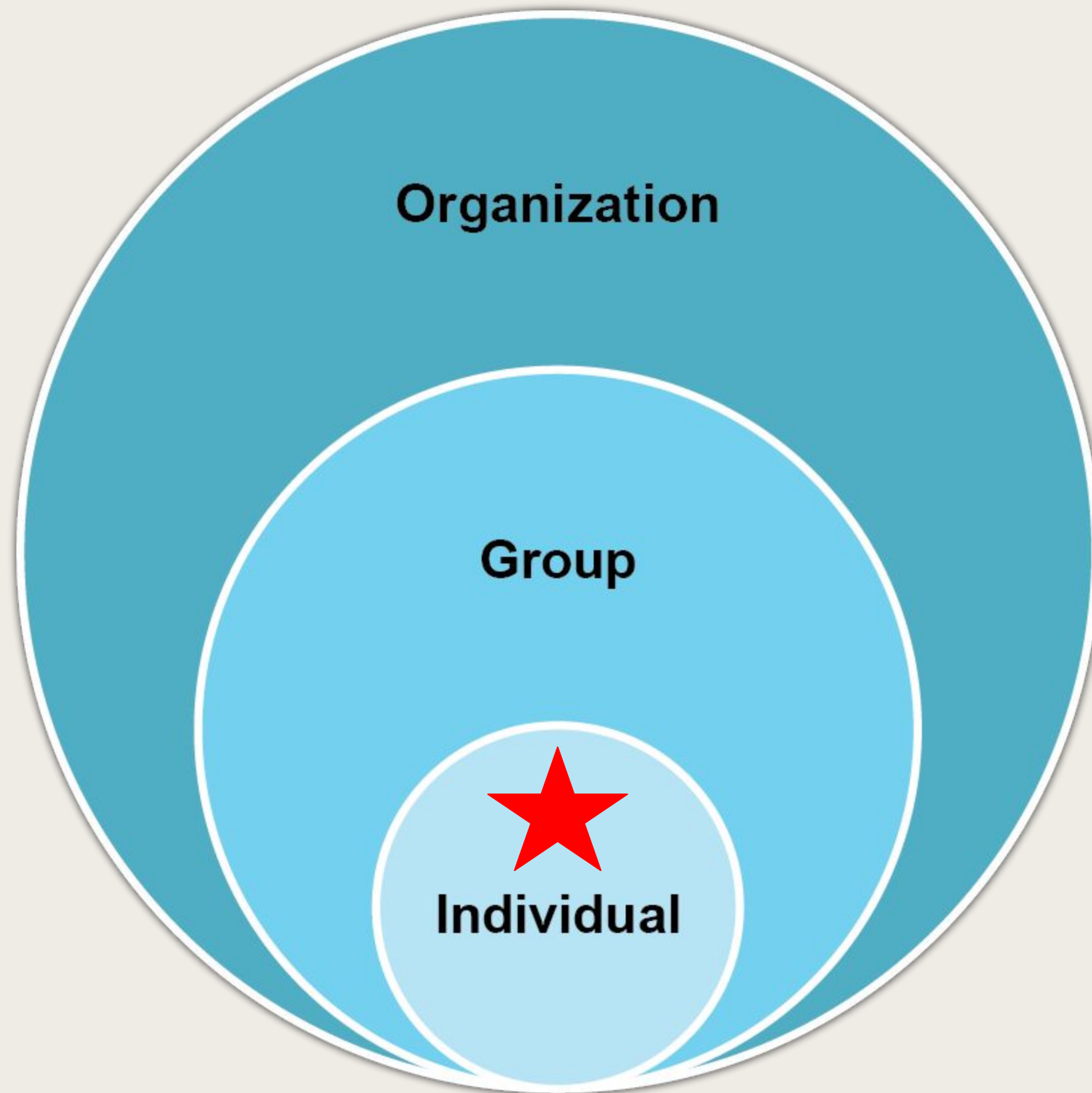
Engage the limbic (emotional) brain through empathy and active listening. Validation before problem-solving is essential.



3. Reason

Only once the colleague feels safe and connected should you collaboratively problem-solve academic or administrative issues.







Individual Resilience: The Seven Stress Busters

Clinical and evidence-based interventions that restore equilibrium to stress hormones and mitigate the physiological effects of toxic stress, thus improving brain health and immune function (ACEs Aware)

Supportive Relationships



Sleep Hygiene



Nutrition



Physical Activity



Mindfulness



Nature Exposure



Mental Health Practices



Supportive Relationships



Social integration lowers cortisol. Being around people who support us can make us healthier by calming our brain and body when stressful things happen in our life. Research shows that having even one supportive relationship can help.

Schedule low-stakes peer lunches and utilize Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counseling.

Sleep Hygiene



We spend about a third of our life sleeping, yet many of us struggle to get a good night's rest. Quality sleep makes us feel rested and energized and can improve our health. ***Set a firm LMS log-off time. Establish grading cutoff hours to allow the brain to enter a rest state.***

The perfect nap, according to NASA, lasts for 26 minutes and can give you a 2-3 hour boost in energy and performance.

Nutrition



Eating foods that provide balanced nutrition gives us energy and makes us feel good. Anti-inflammatory diets are neuroprotective. *Keep healthy snacks at hand; switch to herbal tea during office hours.*

Physical Activity



Physical activity gives us energy and increases the production of endorphins, which make us feel good. Exercise metabolizes adrenaline and boosts executive cognition. ***Convert sit-down meetings into walking meetings.***

Nature Exposure



Being in nature and moving our bodies can make us feel good. Green spaces calm stress hormones. *Conduct outdoor office hours or take a weekly 20-minute savoring walk.*

Mental Health Practices

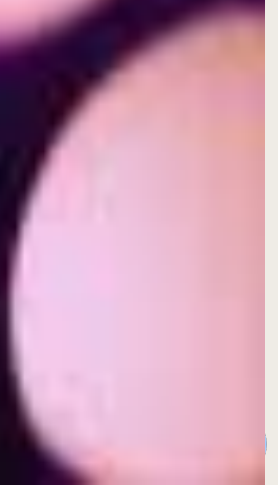


Mental and behavioral health care providers can help us build skills for resilience, provide a safe, supportive, and trusting relationship to discuss worries, and provide treatment for mental health issues. Psychosocial interventions reduce systemic inflammation. ***Keep a gratitude journal and seek trauma-informed Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counseling***

Mindfulness



“Mindfulness” – being aware and present in the moment – can help us take care of ourselves and lower our stress. It lowers blood pressure and improves self-regulation. *Use a two-minute meditation before lectures or difficult meetings for a quick emotional reset.*



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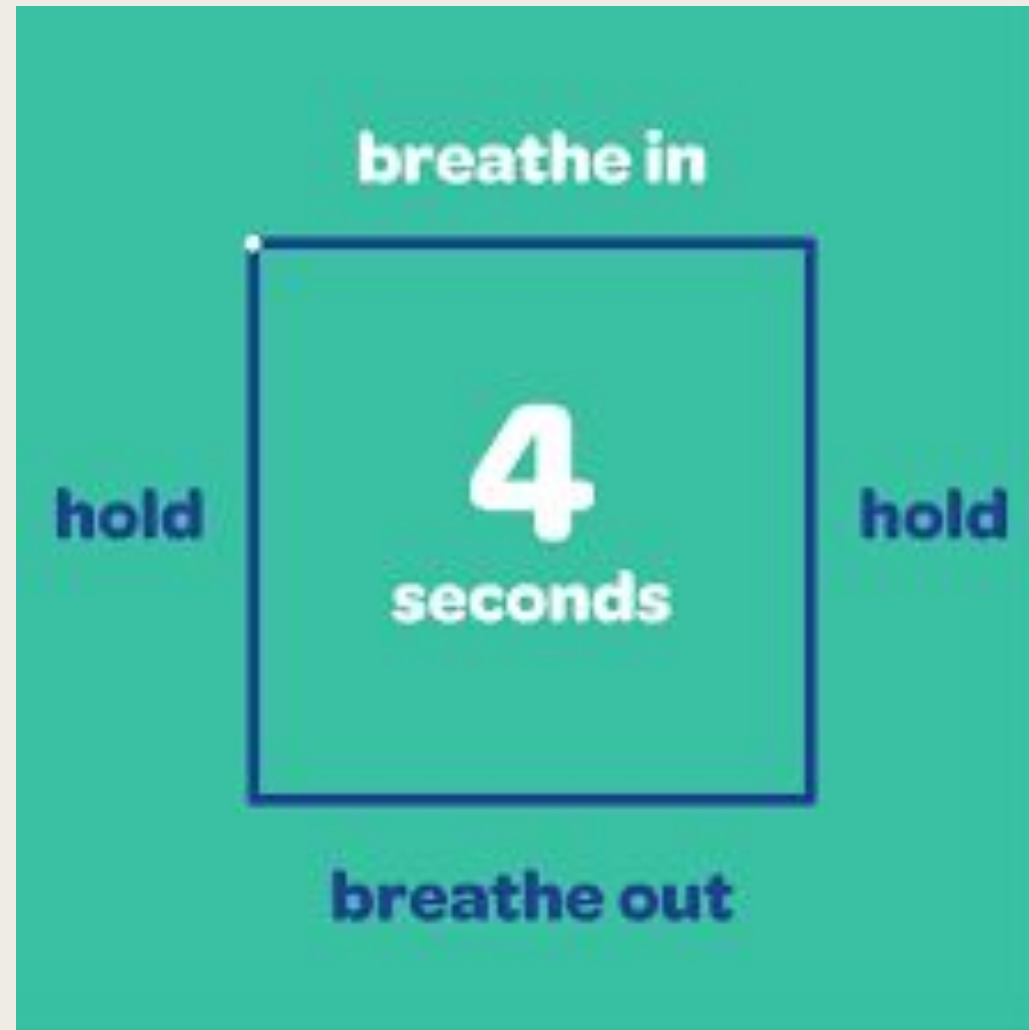


Manage Stress
Regulate Emotions
Improve Relationship Skills





Don't Forget to Breathe





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