

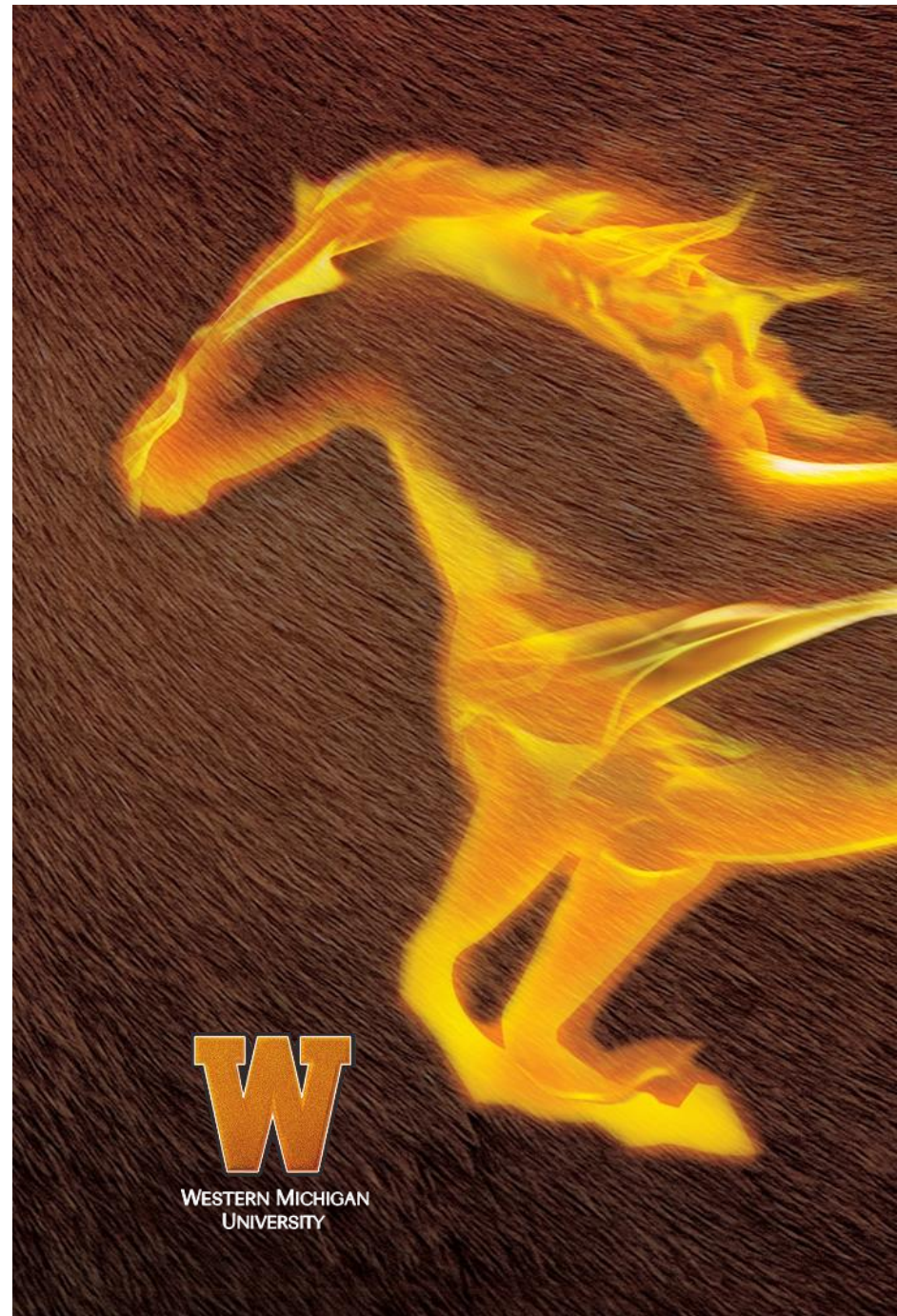
The Center for Fostering Success  
**Best Practice, Best Fit**  
Webinar Series



Discovery Driven Solutions Related  
to Educational Attainment for  
Students from Foster Care



 Center for Fostering Success  
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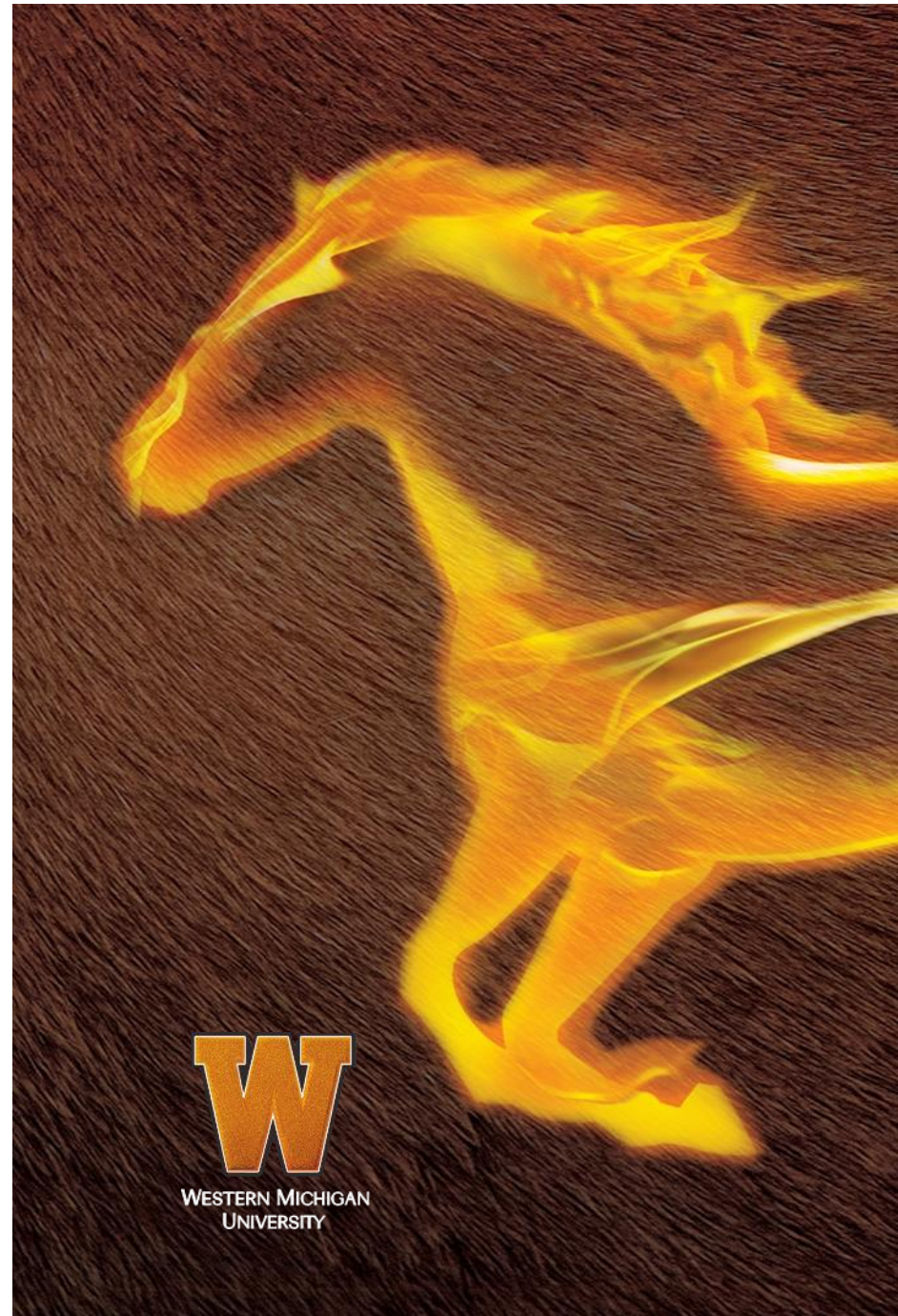
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# Body Based Strategies to Mental Health Stressors Among College Students with Foster Care Histories

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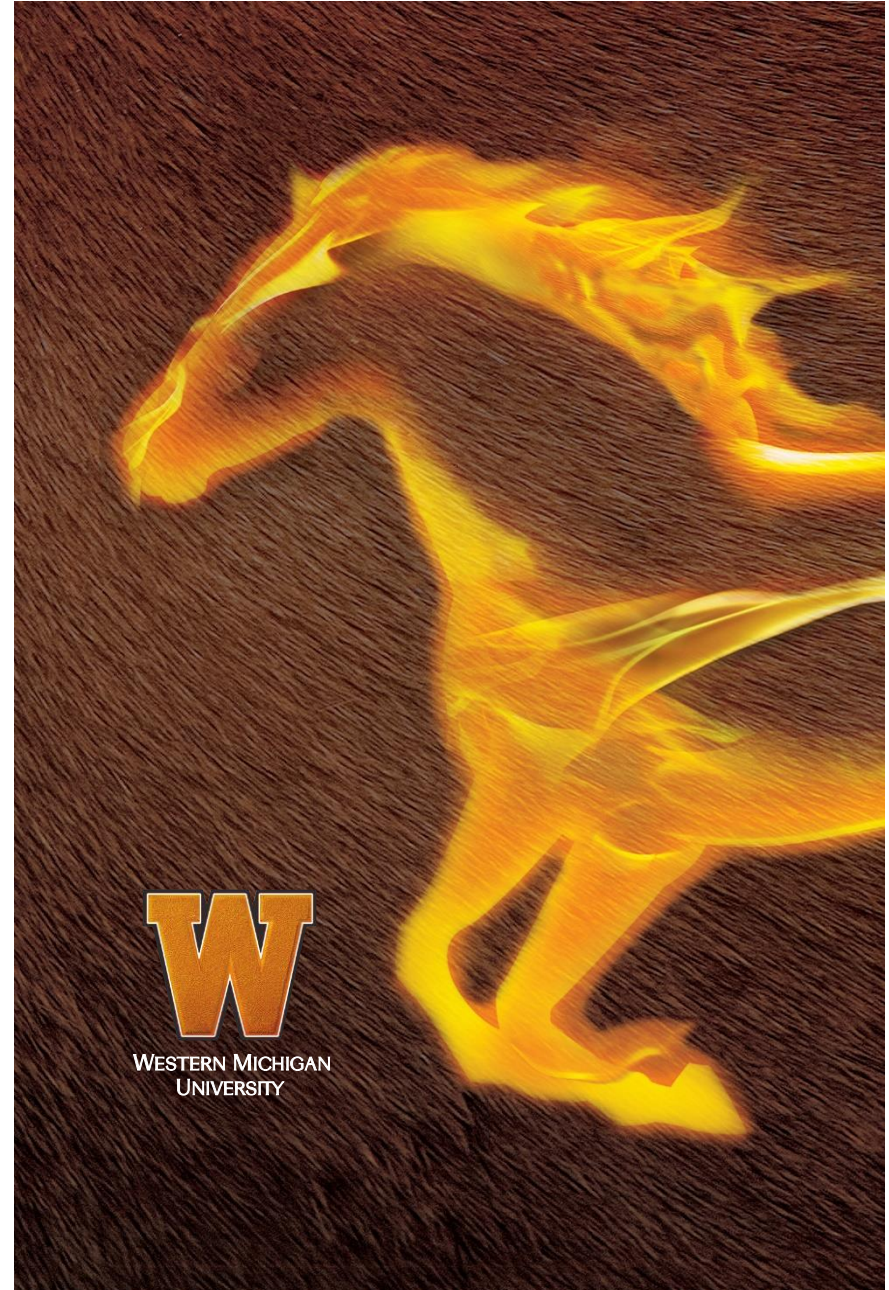
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Fostering Success Michigan  
Best Practice Best Fit Series

*May 2, 2017*



# Agenda

- Highlight findings from a pilot research study that took place at the Seita Scholars Program during early 2016. The study aimed to learn more about perceptions about mental health challenges experienced by college students who have foster care histories.
- Share mindfulness-centered body-based approach to addressing mental health stressors.



# Mental Health Study

- Key questions
  - *Resiliency: How do students from foster care perceive their ability to function under stress and manage difficult emotions compared to their peers?*
  - *Seeking Help: How likely are college students from foster care to seek support during episodes of challenge and adversity?*
  - *Relationships with Helping Professionals: How do college students with foster care histories view mental health professionals?*
- Spring 2016, 15 students from foster care
  - Focus groups & Interviews

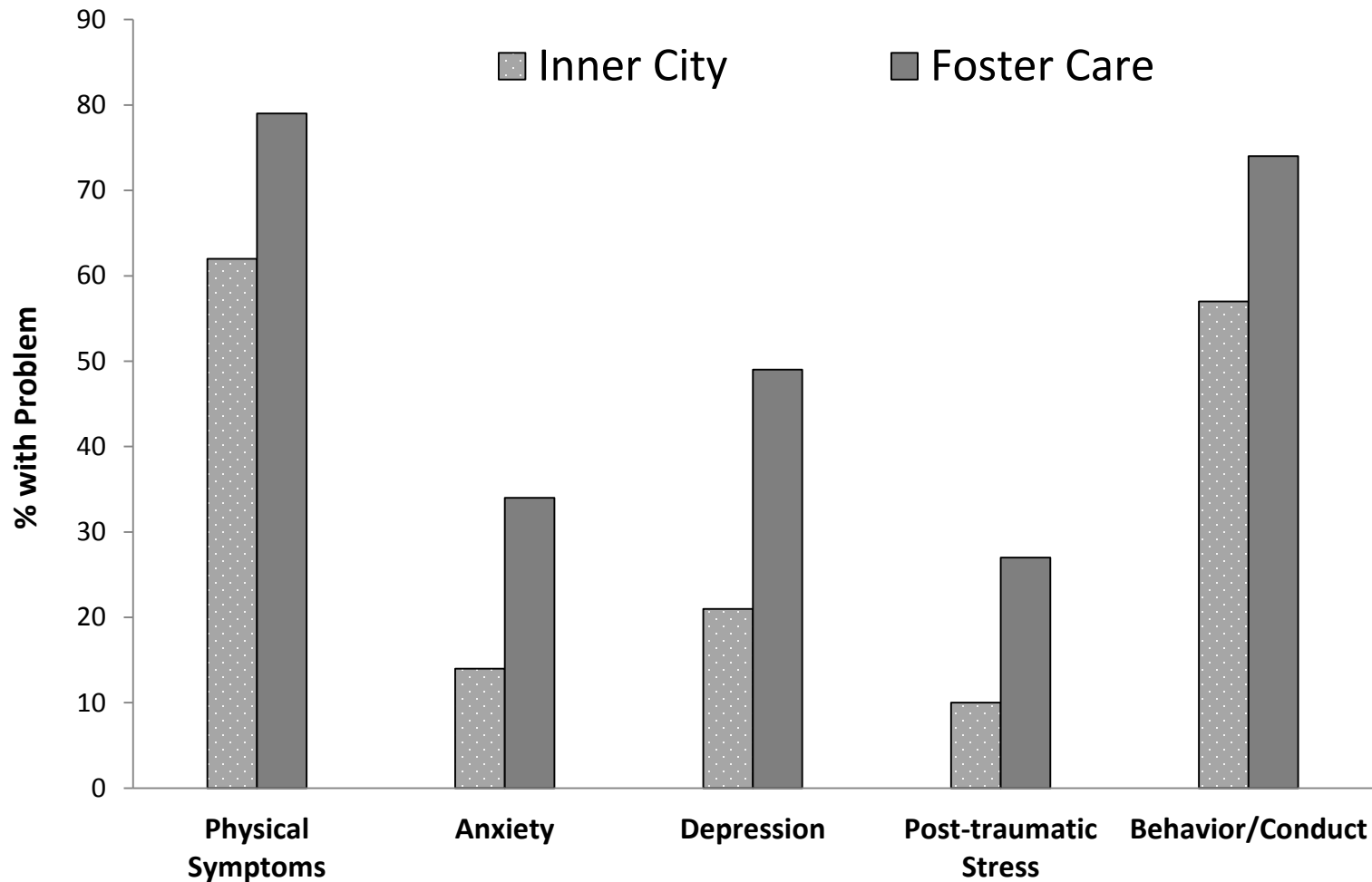


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# How Foster Care Impacts Prevalence



Source: Unrau & Grinnell (2005)

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# Prevalence of PTSD

- Trauma and Stress Related Disorder
- How common is PTSD?
  - ✓ Vary by demographic factors, populations
  - ✓ Example of PTSD Prevalence Rates

## General Population

6% for  
ages 13 – 29  
- Kessler et al., 2012

## Foster Care Population

14 – 15% for  
ages 15 – 18  
- McMillen et al., 2005  
- Kessler et al., 2010







- Defining “Trauma” as **extreme** stress that **overwhelms** a person’s ability to cope.
- What determines “extreme” and “overwhelms”
- Everyone experiences stress
- “What is important is your appraisal of the situation and your assessment of your coping strategies.” (Diego Pizzagalli, 2011)





# Trauma

- Trauma is the case of people's bodies getting stuck in a physiological stress response.
  - The natural response to connect with people close to you is interrupted.
  - The “physical escape response” fails and the body continues to be hyper aroused
  - “Black hole” of trauma response...when individuals replay negative scenarios
- Individuals with traumatic stress know they cannot control their arousal systems, and it leads to anxiety and unhelpful stress responses (e.g., difficult emotions, regrettable actions).

~ Bessel van der Kolk, 2013



# Stress – Trauma Continuum

## SELF CARE & SOCIAL SUPPORT

## PROFESSIONAL CARE

### HEALTHY

#### Normal Functioning

Normal mood fluctuations.  
Takes things in stride.  
Consistent performance.  
Normal sleep patterns.  
Physically and socially active. Usual self-confidence  
Comfortable with others.

### REACTING

#### Common & Reversible Distress

Irritable/Impatient.  
Nervousness, sadness, increased worrying.  
Procrastination, forgetfulness. Trouble sleeping (more often in falling asleep) Lowered energy. Difficulty in relaxing. Intrusive thoughts.  
Decreased social activity.

### INJURED

#### Significant Functional Impairment

Anger, anxiety. Lingering sadness, tearfulness, hopelessness, worthlessness.  
Preoccupation. Decreased performance in academics or at work. Significantly disturbed sleep (falling asleep and staying asleep).  
Avoidance of social situations, withdrawal.

### ILL

#### Clinical Disorder. Severe & Persistent Functional Impairment.

Significant difficulty with emotions, thinking High level of anxiety, Panic attacks. Depressed mood, feeling overwhelmed Constant fatigue. Disturbed contact with reality Significant disturbances in thinking Suicidal thoughts/intent/behaviour.

<http://www.bridgingthedistance.com/pages/peer.html>

# Effects of Stress

Cognitive Symptoms	Emotional Symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Memory problems</li><li>• Inability to concentrate</li><li>• Poor judgment</li><li>• Seeing only the negative</li><li>• Anxious thoughts, constant worrying</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Moodiness</li><li>• Irritability or short temper</li><li>• Agitation, inability to relax</li><li>• Feeling overwhelmed</li><li>• Loneliness, depressed feelings</li></ul>
Physical Symptoms	Behavioral Symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Aches and pains</li><li>• Diarrhea or constipation</li><li>• Nausea, dizziness</li><li>• Chest pain, rapid heartbeat</li><li>• Loss of sex drive</li><li>• Frequent colds</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Eating more or less</li><li>• Sleeping too much, too little</li><li>• Isolating from others</li><li>• Procrastinating</li><li>• Use alcohol or drugs to relax</li><li>• Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting)</li></ul>





# Functioning under stress



- Overall participants shared the perception that they do not manage stress as well as other college students.
- “...from my perspective, foster kids have to think a lot about *like a lot* of other stuff...regular kids don’t have to think about with their families and stuff...”.
- Some participants also associated stress with feeling a lack of control



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# Coping Strategies

- Participants named a wide range of strategies believed to be effective for managing, or “pushing through”, stress
- Strategies reported included; talking with others about stressors, physical remedies, cognitive strategies, and behavioral action
- Participants also admitted to using known unhealthy strategies when faced with stress and adversity, including: procrastination, avoidance, physical aggression, substance use, and self-medication.



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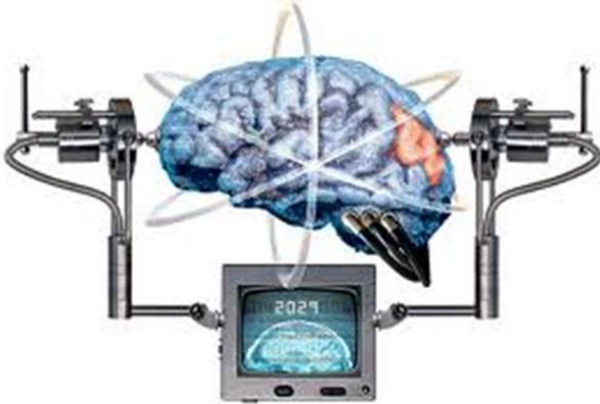
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# Mind



# Body



Thinking  
Intellectual  
Beliefs  
Mental  
Biography



Sensing  
Experiential  
Feelings  
Somatic  
Biology

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# Mind/Mental Experience

- What thoughts are present for you as we begin this webinar?
  - *Is this going to be worth my time?*
  - *I can multi-task in the next hour.*
  - *I'm curious or I'm bored*
  - *I look forward to learning something new*
  - *I wish this had CEUs attached to it*



# Body Experience

- **NOT** a thinking experience
  - Mind's attention is on the felt sense of the body
- Physical or physiological sensation
- Nervous system activation
- Received through the senses
  - Taste, Smell, Touch, Sight, Hearing



# Open Visual Senses



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# Open Visual Senses



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# Open to Touch Sense

- Feel the pressure or weight of your body seated in your chair
- Focus attention on your body posture, notice which parts of your body feel
  - Strain
  - Pressure points
- Adjust your physical position in any way to make sitting feel more comfortable



# Body Sensing Application

- Feel what it's like to be on the receiving end of advice by a 6-year old
- As you watch and listen, notice any physical sensations that show up in your body
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjsLYsiFtYE>





# Body Sensing Application

## Here-and-Now

- While you read this slide take note of what bodily sensations you are experiencing and any thoughts that may be travelling through your mind. Are you comfortable or is the way you have positioned your body causing tension in your back, neck and jaw? Do you wish you could change your posture, but choose not to because where you are reading this slide means that you are expected to sit in a chair in a particular way that is culturally appropriate?

~ Adapted from Mensinga, 2011



# Reaction Described

“Recently, my boyfriend and I were out to eat at a restaurant. I'm not sure what was said, what I observed, or what led me to "remember" everything, but suddenly **no matter how many deep breaths I took, it still felt like a portion of my body wasn't receiving enough air.** It didn't feel as though I was in a panic per say, but rather it felt physically and emotionally uncomfortable as **my mind and body merged my past and present experiences** in a way that made sense at the time.”

~ Brittany's Blog "Standing Still" June 16, 2014  
<http://fosteringsuccessmichigan.com/stories/standing-still>

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# Body Sensation and “Sense-making”

“There is a reel of **jolting** memories playing in the back of my mind and sometimes I forget it’s there, but then it **catches** my attention and all I can do is watch as it replays. I would not describe this as a panic attack, exactly. It feels more like a **painful, captivating** reminder. The sensation reminds me of the common experience so many of us have when something bad happens in our lives and we go to sleep. When we wake, there’s a brief moment where we forget the tragedy or disappointment. Then, **suddenly**, we remember ... and those **uncomfortable feelings come rushing back**.”

~ Brittany’s Blog “Standing Still” June 16, 2014

<http://fosteringsuccessmichigan.com/stories/standing-still>

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# Benefits of Body-based practices

- improved academic performance among a sample of African American college students (Hall, 1999) .
- greater physiological relaxation and better mood as compared to listening to an audio book for females between the ages of 18 and 25 leads to (Borchardt, Patterson, Seng, 2012).
- 6-weeks of mind-body training significantly reduced psychological distress, state anxiety and perceived stress in college students (Deckro et al, 2002).
- positive effects on brain integration for young adults (Travis et al, 2009).
- reduced perceived stress, worry and depression and increased mindful skills in college students (Eastman-Mueller et al, 2013).





# Importance of Body Sensation

- Traumatized brain deactivates the parts of the brain that operate for self-knowledge, body awareness, body sensation.
- “If you don’t know what your body feels, what is going on inside of you, what is important to you, what is unimportant to you, nothing else much can be done.”

~ van der Kolk, 2013



# Why? Effective Student Support...

- ... calls for effective professional awareness
- If we as professionals are in tune with our own physiological arousal, then we are better able to create safe spaces of support for all students, especially students on the reacting, ill or injured phases of the stress-trauma continuum.
- Calm faces, calms others (mirror neurons)
  - As helpers, we need to carefully be attuned to how we receive and respond to students



# Emotional Hijack

*"Take leave of our senses"*



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# Managing Difficult Emotions

- Participants expressed a familiarity with difficult emotions (e.g., anger, anxiety, sadness, loneliness)
- Although the general consensus was that they manage difficult emotions “to the best of their ability,” most coping strategies discussed were not helpful or, worse, harmful.
- Several participants indicated feeling more comfortable “doing things alone” because they “don’t want to feel like a charity case or be seen as crazy by others.”



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# Managing Difficult Emotions cont.

- Participants were keenly aware that their ability to manage difficult emotions was connected to traumatic childhood experiences.
- Moreover, several participants explained that they never learned proper coping mechanisms to manage difficult emotions.
- One participant shared, “we have way more high levels of anxiety and depression and things like that because we have so many other things to think about and have to worry about.”

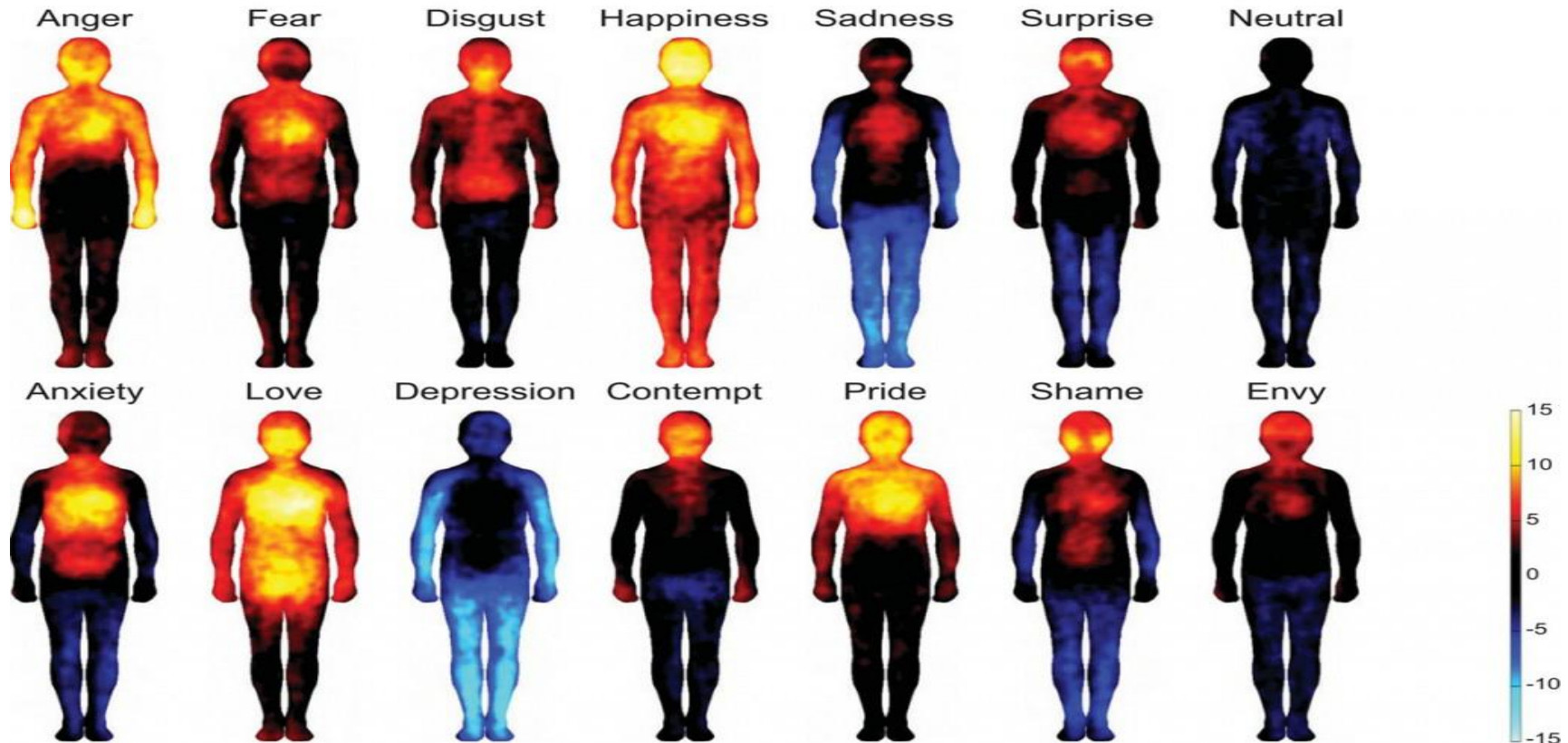


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# Get in tune with emotional sensation in your body



Nummenmaa, Glerean, Hari & Hietanen (2014)

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# Talk Therapy



Conventional treatment for traumatic stress is “talk therapy;” what is needed is a strategy to open the imagination, thoughts, feelings and memories to a different outcome.

~ Bessel van der Kolk, 2013

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# Aversion to Traditional “Talk Therapy”

- Additionally, there was a shared sentiment by some that traditional talk therapy was ineffective; something “you could do on your own” without a professional.
- There was also a perception that mental health is “not taken seriously” in foster care
- Experiences of having to repeat the telling about childhood traumatic experiences produced “feelings of exhaustion,” and not relief.



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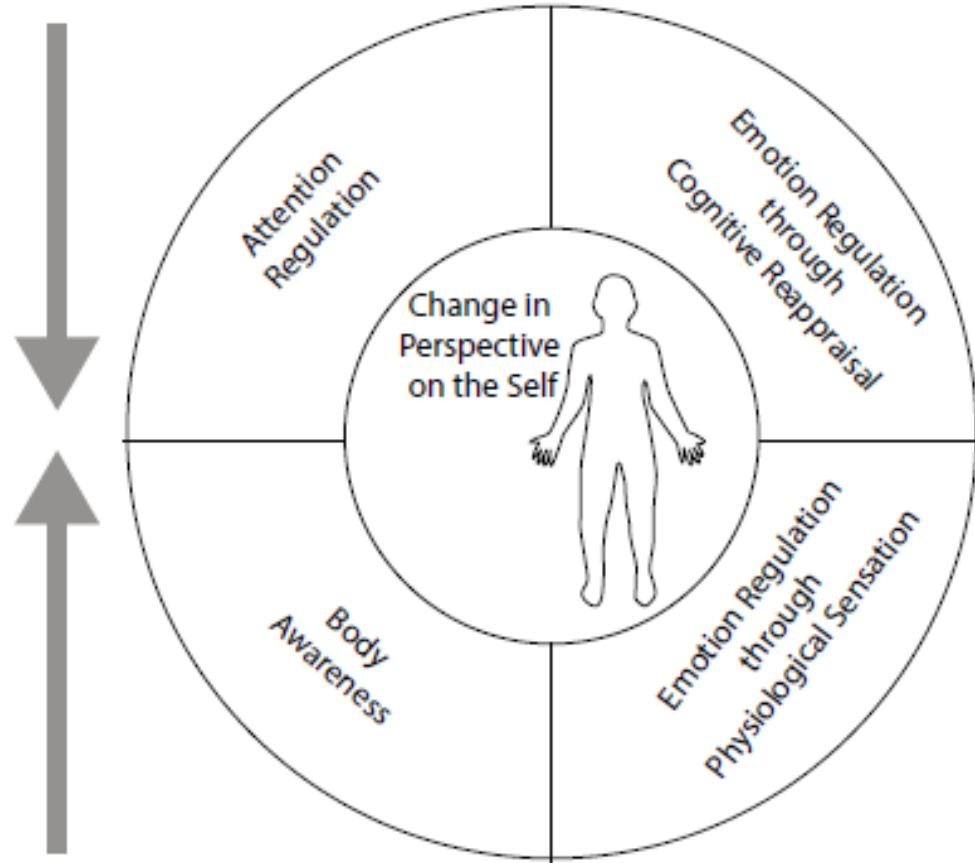
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# Environment-within-Person Map

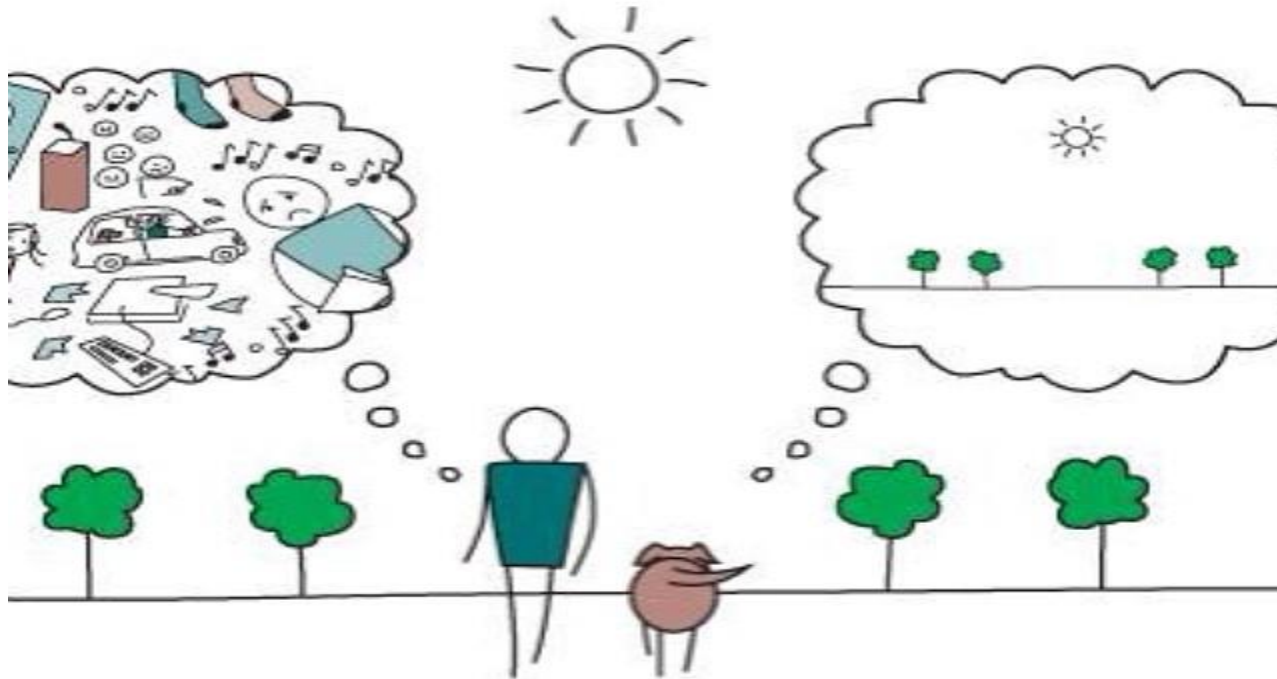
- **High-level** brain networks
- **Top-down** processing
- **Stress response**: negative appraisal, emotional reactivity, rumination
- **Stress response**: Visio/pulmonary constriction, inflammation, muscle tension, pain
- **Bottom-up** processing
- **Low-level** brain networks



Unrau & McCormick (2016)



# Shift Your Attention to Change Your Experience



Mind Full, or Mindful?



# Learn to Surf the ups-and-downs



<http://jennthebenn.wordpress.com/category/greatest-peanuts-strips/>



# Inner Resource

- All beings are innately whole and have the resources within themselves to heal
- Inner resource is a place of refuge, comfort, safety, stability, and peace that you carry with you throughout life and is unique to each individual
- Inner resource is a somatic experience that empowers you to feel in control and at ease with every experience you encounter; it provides support and a constant feeling of well being that can be tapped into any time
- It enables you to remember that security, perfect wholeness, and resilient well being are always available to you no matter what negative experience arises

~ Richard Miller (2015)

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# Other Body-Based Activities

- Body scanning, notice physical sensations
- Breathing movement
- Sensing your inner strength and wisdom
- Yoga or movement activity
- Walking in nature
- Mindfulness meditation
- iRest® Yoga Nidra





# STRESS REDUCTION METHODS



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<http://sites.uci.edu/uuzotblog/2011/02/>

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