Exhaustion, Burnout, and Transformation: A Conversation

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Biology Leadership Community

Mays Imad, PhD :: **mimad@conncoll.edu** :: **@lrningsanctuary**

1

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

"What does it mean to be human in the aftermath of mass trauma and violence?"

– Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition

2

1

● March 27, 2024

All Eyes on Loneliness

The next step in addressing student mental health is to focus more on loneliness, Daniel Eisenberg, Joe Behen, Jan Collins Eaglin, Zainab Okolo and Jeremy Nobel write.

By Daniel Eisenberg , Joe Behen , Jan Collins Eaglin , Zainab Okolo and Jeremy Nobel

Article | Published: 23 November 2020

Acute social isolation evokes midbrain craving responses similar to hunger

Livia Tomova ✉, Kimberly L. Wang, Todd Thompson, Gillian A. Matthews, Atsushi Takahashi, Kay M. Tye & Rebecca Saxe

74k Accesses | **110** Citations | **1533** Altmetric | Metrics

3

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scientific reports

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OPEN

Zoomed out: digital media use and depersonalization experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown

Anna Ciaunica[1,2,3,11]✉, Luke McEllin[4,5,11], Julian Kiverstein[6,7], Vittorio Gallese[8], Jakob Hohwy[9,10] & Mateusz Woźniak[5,9]✉

Depersonalisation is a common dissociative experience characterised by distressing feelings of being detached or 'estranged' from one's self and body and/or the world. The COVID-19 pandemic forcing millions of people to socially distance themselves from others and to change their lifestyle habits. We have conducted an online study of 622 participants worldwide to investigate the relationship between digital media-based activities, distal social interactions and peoples' sense of self during the lockdown as contrasted with before the pandemic. We found that increased use of digital media-based activities and online social e-meetings correlated with higher feelings of depersonalisation. We also found that the participants reporting higher experiences of depersonalisation, also reported enhanced vividness of negative emotions (as opposed to positive emotions). Finally, participants who reported that lockdown influenced their life to a greater extent had higher occurrences of depersonalisation experiences. Our findings may help to address key questions regarding well-being during a lockdown, in the general population. Our study points to potential risks related to overly sedentary, and hyper-digitalised lifestyle habits that may induce feelings of living in one's 'head' (mind), disconnected from one's body, self and the world.

4

Consciousness and Cognition
Volume 91, May 2021, 103117

The first prior: From co-embodiment to co-homeostasis in early life

Anna Ciaunica [a] [b] , Axel Constant [c], Hubert Preissl [d], Katerina Fotopoulou [e]

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2021.103117 ↗   Get rights and content ↗

Highlights

- The paper is a predictive processing investigation of perceptual experiences in utero.

- Primitive experiences are co-embodied in a strong ontological sense.

- Homeostatic self-regulation first emerges within and through another human body.

- The concepts of co-embodiment and co-homeostasis are introduced.

- The 'first prior' is strongly dependent on co-embodiment and co-homeostasis.

5

'Everybody has a breaking point': how the climate crisis affects our brains

Researchers measuring the effect of Hurricane Sandy on children in utero at the time reported: 'Our findings are extremely alarming.' Illustration: Ngadi Smart/The Guardian

Are growing rates of anxiety, depression, ADHD, PTSD, Alzheimer's and motor neurone disease related to rising temperatures and other extreme environmental changes?

The Guardian

6

Consider:

Jordan, a sophomore majoring in Biology, was known for their enthusiasm and engagement during their first year. However, in the current semester, noticeable changes have emerged.

Jordan has been increasingly disengaged in classes, missing assignments, and showing signs of distress. They appear overwhelmed by minor tasks and have difficulty managing time effectively. Despite this, Jordan has not sought help or communicated their struggles to instructors or peers even when their advisor tried to reach out to them on more than one occasion.

Erik, a junior majoring in Economics, is viewed as a high-achieving and well-adjusted student. They are active in several campus organizations and maintain a high GPA.

Despite outward appearances, during one conversation Erik had with their professor, they shared that they have been struggling with feelings of disconnection, loneliness, and difficulty in finding genuine engagement. They have maintained their academic and extracurricular activities but often feel a "lack of fulfillment or meaningful connections."

9

Alex entered their Ph.D. program in neuroscience with enthusiasm and dreams of making groundbreaking discoveries. They were known among peers for their sharp intellect and unwavering dedication. But as months turned into years, the relentless pursuit of academic career began to take a toll.

Every day, Alex is juggling multiple roles: researcher, teaching assistant, student, parent. They're often the first to arrive at the lab and the last to leave, squeezing in time to mentor undergraduates and fulfill committee responsibilities. Meals are often skipped or replaced with whatever can be grabbed quickly. Sleep is erratic—dominated by thoughts of experiments, grant writing, job security, publishing, and the next day's obligations.

10

Lately, Alex has noticed a shift. The data that once sparked excitement now feels like an endless mountain that grows with every experiment. The short breaks scrolling through social media reveal peers attending conferences, winning awards, or publishing papers, amplifying a sense of inadequacy and isolation.

One morning, Alex sits before their computer, the cursor blinking mockingly on a blank document meant to be their thesis proposal. They can't seem to type a word. Their mind is foggy; the usual morning coffee does nothing to stir their thoughts. There's a tightness in their chest that doesn't fade even when they pause to breathe.

Alex feels numb, disconnected from the passion that once defined them. The thought lingers: "Is this all worth it?"

11

Thinking of yourself and your students, what, if any, resonates with you from the three cases?

(7 minutes)

12

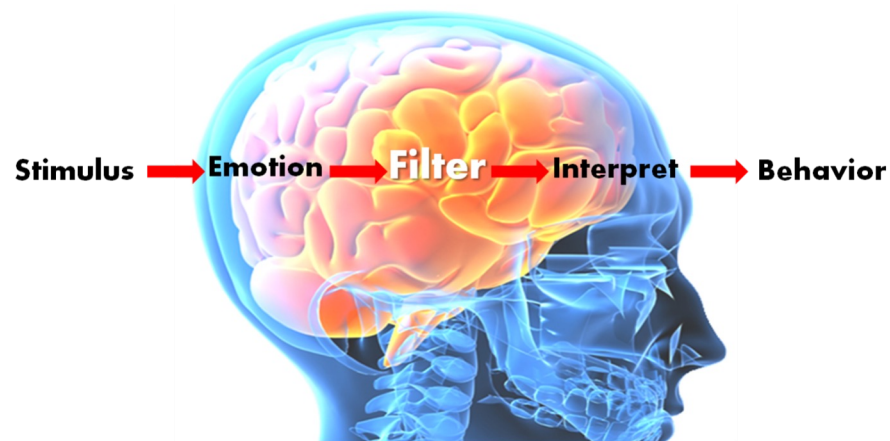What is going on with Alex, Erik, and Jordan?

13

How Do We Process Sensory Information (and the world around us)?

14

The processing of sensory information begins at the subconscious level before it is passed on to the conscious level of the brain.
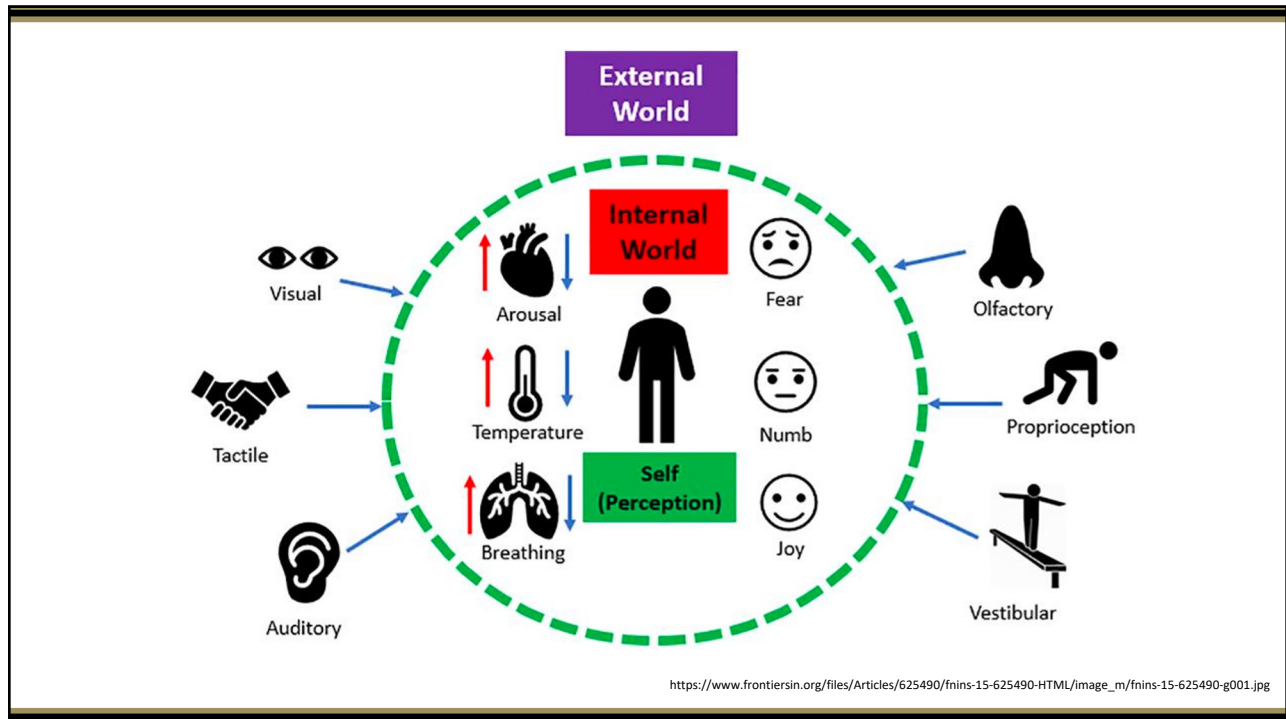
15

# We Feel, Then We Assign Meaning, Then We Act

Stimulus → Emotion → Filter → Interpret → Behavior

https://www.thetraderisk.com/how-to-optimize-your-emotional-capital/

16

https://www.frontiersin.org/files/Articles/625490/fnins-15-625490-HTML/image_m/fnins-15-625490-g001.jpg

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"Together, integrating inner affective sensations and external sensory information plays a pivotal role in shaping the perception of a sensory experience."

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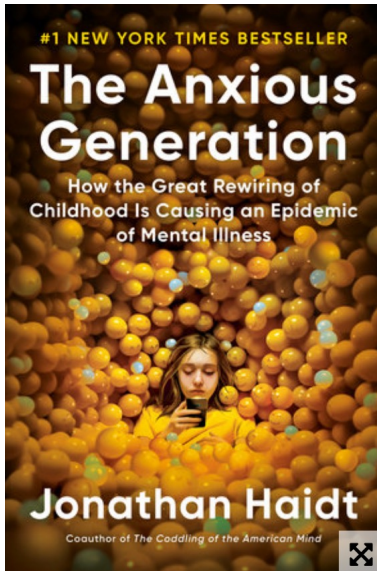
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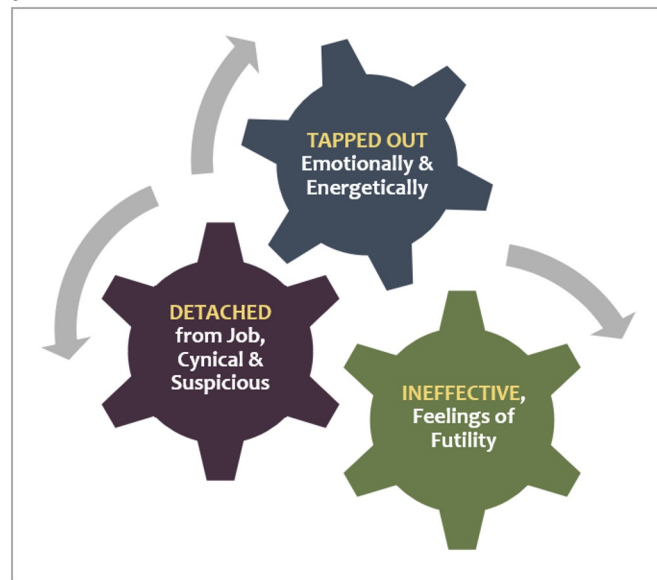# What is going on with Alex, Erik, and Jordan?

20

Burnout

a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by chronic stress in the workplace

21

3 Dimensions of Burnout

https://www.recovertolead.com/articles/the-burnout-epidemic-burned-out-is-too-late-and-self-care-isnt-enough

22

Table 1

Burnout dimensions.

Dimension	Definition
Emotional exhaustion	This dimension manifests in the form of feelings and sensation of being exhausted by the psychological efforts made at work. It is also described in terms of weariness, tiredness, fatigue, weakening, and the subjects who manifest this type of feelings show difficulties in adapting to the work environment since they lack sufficient emotional energy to cope with work tasks.
Cynicism or depersonalization	This dimension, the interpersonal component of burnout, is defined as a response of detachment, indifference and unconcern towards the work being performed and/or the people who receive it. It translates into negative or inappropriate attitudes and behaviors, irritability, loss of idealism, and interpersonal avoidance usually towards service users, patients, and/or clients.
Reduced personal achievement	This dimension is reflected in a negative professional self-evaluation and doubts about the ability to perform the job effectively, as well as a greater tendency to evaluate results negatively. It also translates into a decrease in productivity and capabilities, low morale, as well as lower coping skills.

Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2022 Feb; 19(3): 1780.

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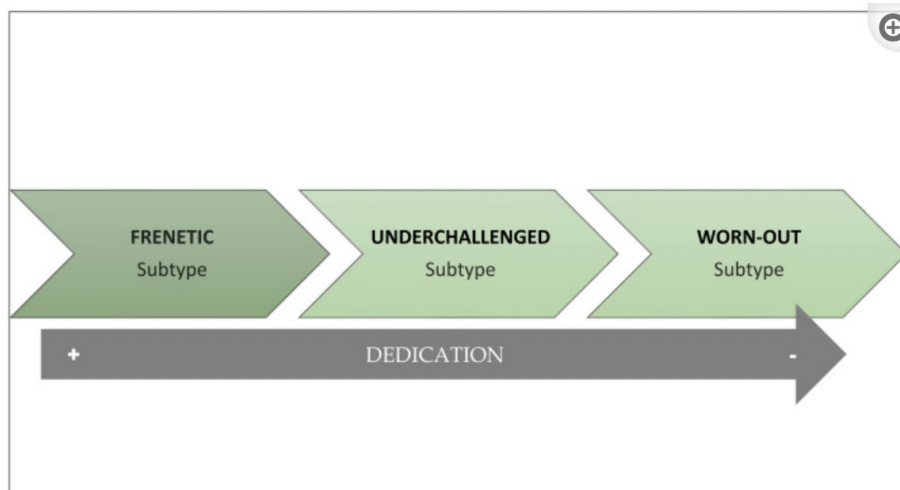
Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2022 Feb; 19(3): 1780.
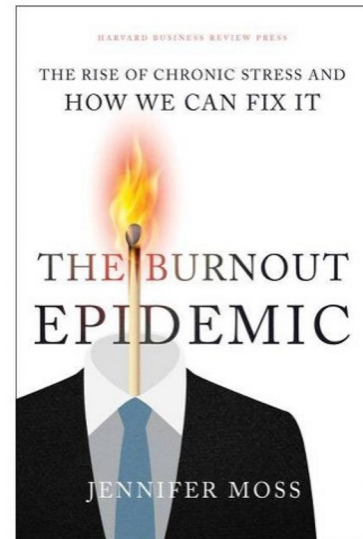
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What contributes to burnout?

25

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1. Emotional exhaustion
   - High workload
   - Emotional labor
2. Depersonalization
   - Lack of connection with others
   - Institutional bureaucracy
3. Reduced personal accomplishment
   - Lack of recognition
   - Limited career growth opportunities
4. External factors
   - Societal expectations and pressures
   - Technological changes and online teaching

26

1. Excessive workload.
2. Actual or perceived lack of control & agency.
3. Lack of meaningful connections & relationships.
4. Lack of recognition.
5. Lack of fairness.
6. Values & skills mismatch.

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

THE RISE OF CHRONIC STRESS AND
HOW WE CAN FIX IT

THE BURNOUT
EPIDEMIC

JENNIFER MOSS

27

What are you noticing about burnout in your personal and/or professional communities?

Reflect on the impact that this burnout is having on (a) you and (b) one or more of your communities.

(7 minutes)

28

Signs of Burnout and Apathy:

Decreased Performance: A significant drop in academic performance, with multiple missed assignments and low participation in class.

Emotional Exhaustion: Jordan expresses feelings of being overwhelmed by even the simplest tasks and appears emotionally drained.

Withdrawal: Reduced interaction with classmates and professors, and reluctance to engage in group activities or discussions.

Lack of Initiative: Despite falling behind, Jordan hasn't reached out for help or utilized campus resources like tutoring or counseling services

29

Signs of Concealed Struggle:

Superficial Engagement: Participation in numerous activities without deep involvement or emotional connection.

Perfectionism: An excessive focus on maintaining high grades and a perfect image, masking underlying distress.

Social Isolation: Despite being surrounded by peers, Erik feels isolated and struggles to form meaningful relationships.

Internalized Pressure: A constant sense of pressure to perform and keep up appearances, leading to internal distress.

30

31

The British Psychological Society

www.wileyonlinelibrary.com

Special issue paper

The mind in psychotherapy: An interpersonal neurobiology framework for understanding and cultivating mental health
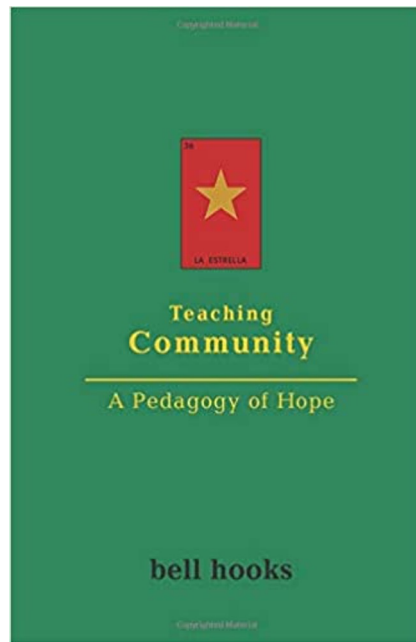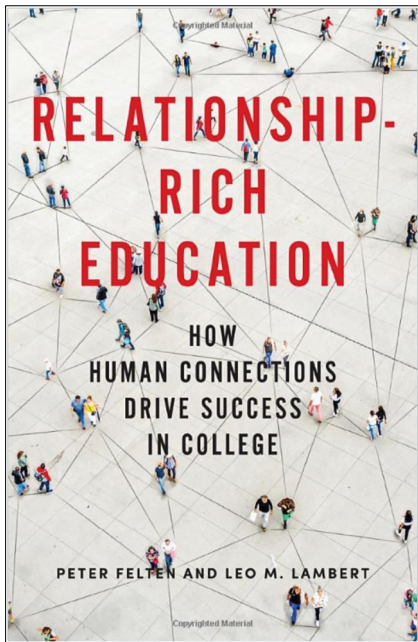
Daniel J. Siegel* iD

Mindsight Institute, Santa Monica, California, USA

In this brief overview, I offer a conceptual approach to the mind that can support whatever clinical, research, public policy, or other approach you may be involved with. It seeks to

32

Healing is Relational

33

34

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"Treat me like a person, rather than another number": university student perceptions of inclusive classroom practices

Sandra L. Faulkner, Wendy K. Watson, Madison A. Pollino and Jaclyn R. Shetterly

School of Media and Communication, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, USA

"A welcoming and inclusive classroom means **centering student** experiences, identities, and concerns, being a reflexive and responsive instructor, and focusing on the **interpersonal relationship** between instructor and students."

35

"Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves."

THE COURAGE TO TEACH

EXPLORING
THE
INNER LANDSCAPE
OF
A TEACHER'S LIFE

PARKER J.
PALMER
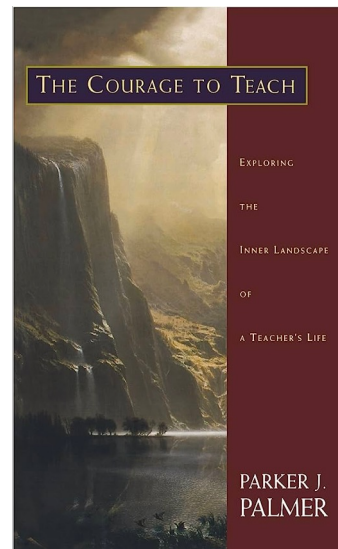
36

Institutional Betrayal

Carly Parnitzke Smith and Jennifer J. Freyd
University of Oregon

Betrayal of trust by an institution that is responsible for protecting individuals and upholding ethical standards. This can occur when an institution fails to address or prevent harm to individuals, or when it actively perpetuates or condones harmful behavior.
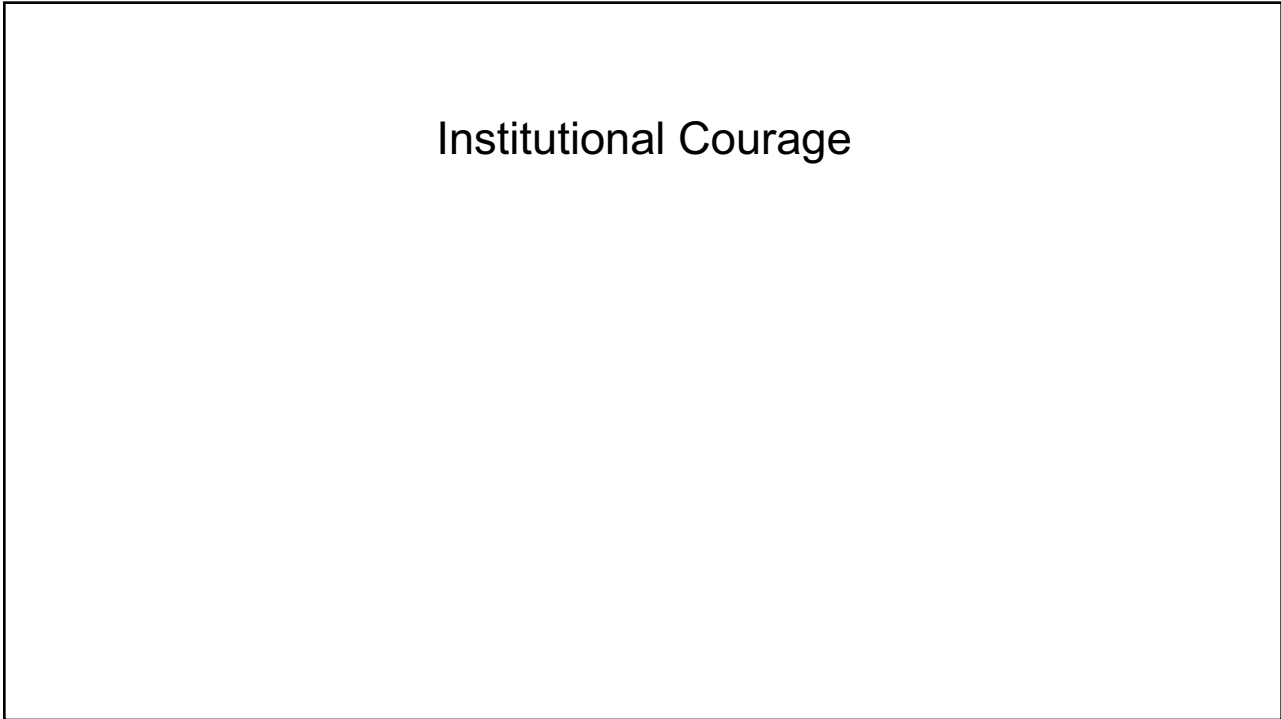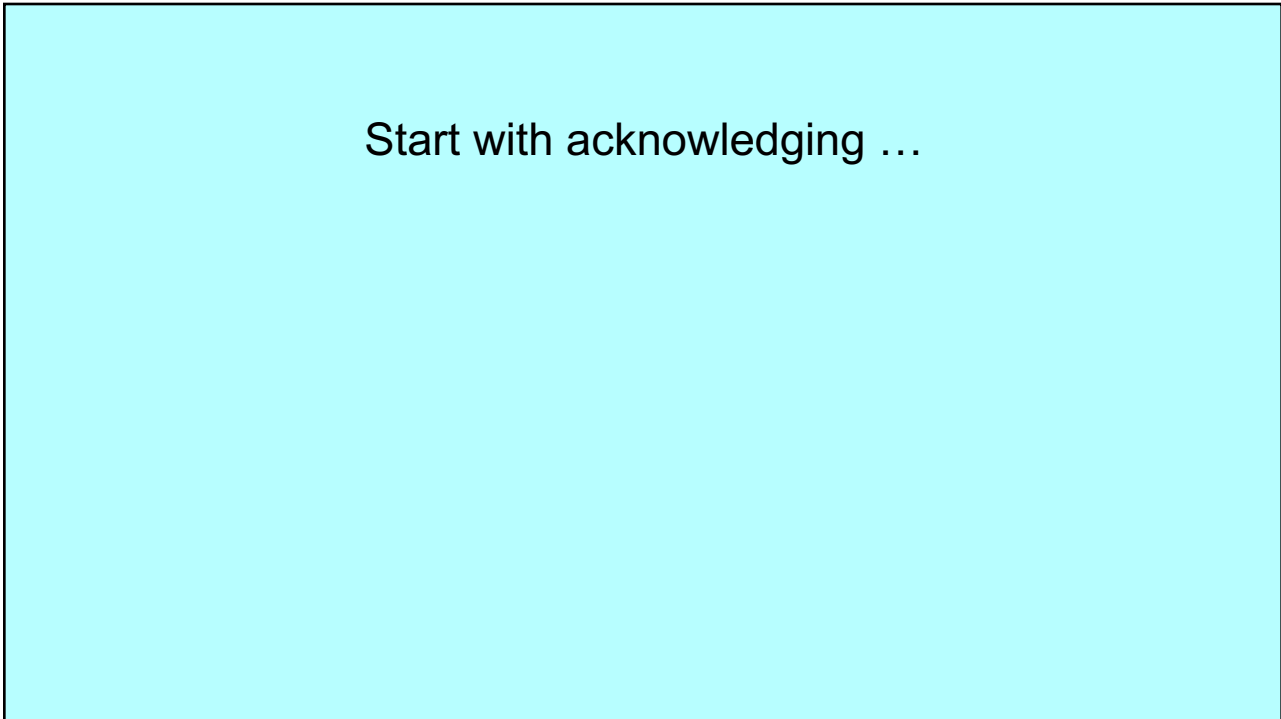
37

Higher education institutional betrayal occurs when an institution fails to adequately support and protect their students, often leading to negative impacts on their mental and emotional wellbeing (Adams-Clark & Freyd 2021)

38

Institutional Courage

39

Start with acknowledging …

40

When it comes to **student mental health**, what are your concerns and hopes?

Concerns:
- Lack of resilience and coping skills
- Impact of external stressors
- Poor communication and support seeking
- Inadequate Academic and institutional support

Hopes:
- Recovery and bouncing back
- Adapting to new realities
- Normalization and open communication about mental health
- Learning growth mindset and metacognitive skills

41

When it comes to **faculty wellbeing**, what are your concerns and hopes?

Concerns:
- Burnout and stress
- Lack of support
- Work-Life balance
- Valuation and compensation
- Aging and relevance
- Academic freedom

Hopes:
- Recovery and healing
- Enhanced support and resources
- Continued passion and effectiveness
- Professional development
- Community and cohesion
- Recognition of mental health

42

Empower with knowledge …

43

December 14, 2021

How to Help Students Develop 'Mental Immunity'

Colleges should educate students about toxic stress, the lasting effects of the pandemic and how to ameliorate the impact of those experiences on their learning, Mays Imad and her students write.

By Mays Imad and How to Help Students Develop 'Mental Immunity'

44

> " "Prior to the pandemic, I was a good student in the sense that I got all my work done on time and was super passionate about learning. Then I went home [when the pandemic hit] and tried to continue my work. It was horrible ... like all the missing assignments and lack of motivation and staring blankly at my work. I was trying to figure out what's wrong with me. Did I lose my cognitive function? So I was like, maybe this is the real me, maybe I'm actually really unmotivated and lazy and maybe I was never a good student. I felt lonely and embarrassed and scared."

45

ARTICLE
Teaching to Empower: Leveraging the Neuroscience of Now to Help Students Become Self-Regulated Learners

Mays Imad
Biology Department, Connecticut College. New London, CT 06320; Department of Life and Physical Science, Pima Community College. Tucson, AZ 85716.

In his book Descartes' Error, neurologist Antonio Damasio argues that humans do not make decisions by relying exclusively on the rational or reason-oriented parts of their brain (2008). Evidence from patients with brain damage reveal that our abilities to reason and make decisions are greatly influenced by our emotions (Damasio et al., 1990; Saver and Damasio, 1991). In fact, our emotions and how we feel act as a gateway to our thinking and learning by providing "the bridge between rational [prefrontal cortex] and nonrational processes" [brainstem and limbic structures]." (Damasio, 2008). Understanding the ways in which our brain processes sensory inputs and integrates those inputs into our ongoing emotional state is critical for helping students become self-regulated, sophisticated learners.

In the following article, I will begin by briefly summarizing the role of emotions in learning and the impact of toxic stress on our students' ability to engage, learn, and thrive. I will then define and present a trauma-informed teaching and learning paradigm with practical strategies that empower students to continue to learn and succeed. I will address a few misconceptions about trauma-informed education. I will conclude by making a plea to you, members of the undergraduate neuroscience community, by presenting a case for the utility and moral imperative of educating our students about the basic functioning of their brains, especially as it relates to emotional regulation and learning.

Key words: toxic stress; emotional valance; trauma; trauma-informed education; amygdala hijack; limbic brake.

46

What Is Your Why? A First-Day In-Class Activity

Mays Imad ▪ August 14, 2023

Like many people, I have days when the simple act of getting out of bed feels daunting, let alone going to campus, lecturing, meeting with students, attending faculty meetings, grading papers, and so on. These challenging days are often amplified by an internal dialogue questioning why I feel this way, despite recognizing the sacrifices my parents made to get me here, understanding that I should be grateful for my job, and acknowledging that others may be facing more arduous circumstances. While all

47

From Deficit to Empowerment: A Neuroscience Approach to Unveiling the Learning Brain

Mays Imad ● September 11, 2023

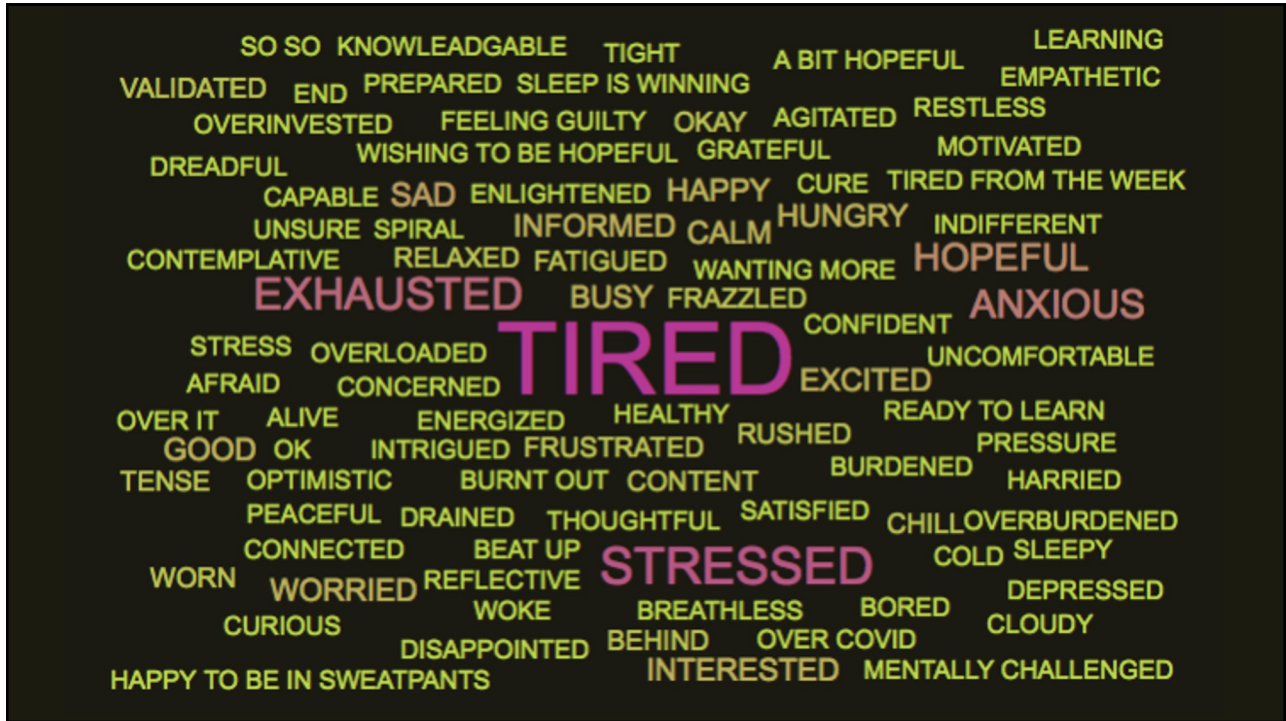As a student, I would often find myself buried in textbooks, meticulously reviewing notes, highlighting …
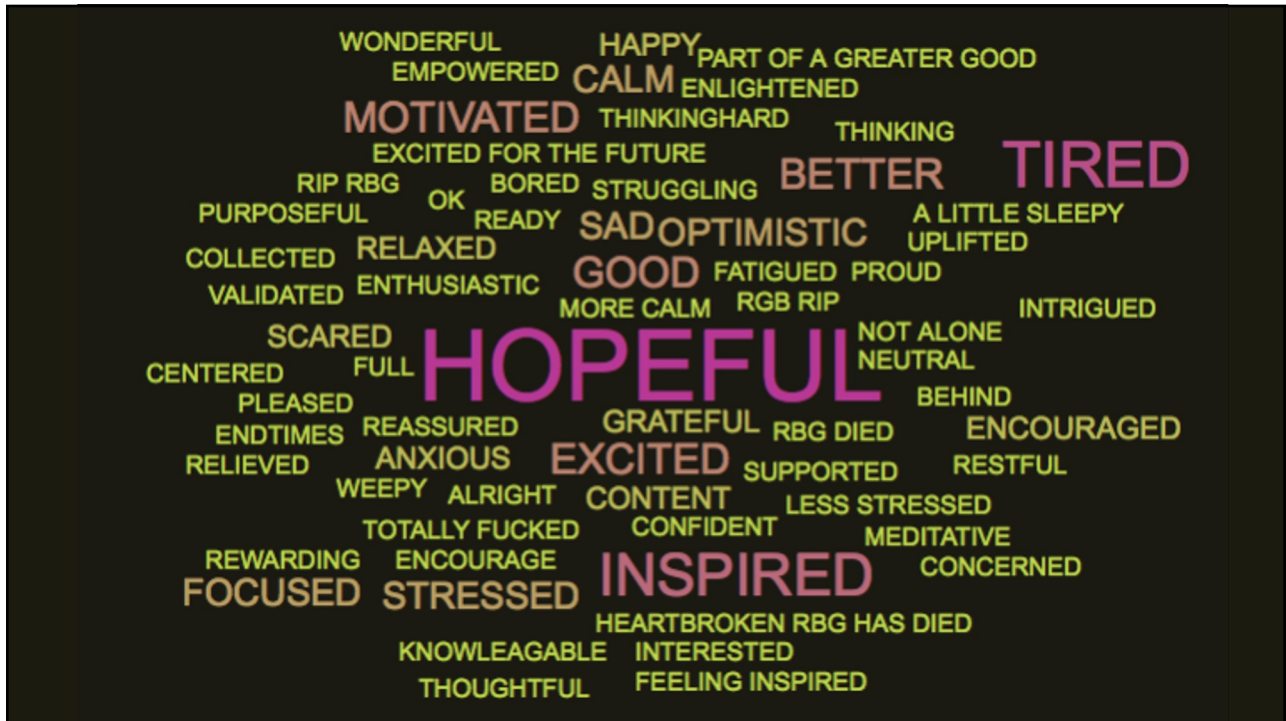
48

Pay attention to your own healing …

49

Co-regulation & Self-Regulation

50

51

52

Investigate the art of resilience …

53

The ability of an individual to bounce back from stress, adversity, failure, challenges, or even trauma.

54

When storm rages, a tree bends and sways, moving with the wind rather than against it. This flexibility is resilience.
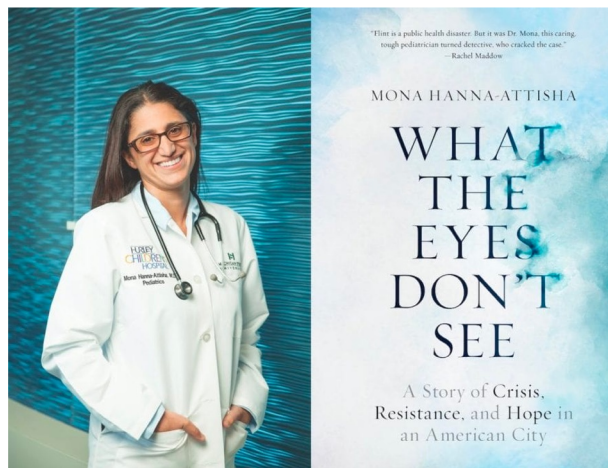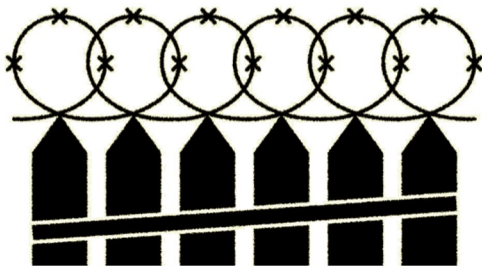

https://www.flickr.com/photos/fede_gen88/359789020

55

I'm Sick of Asking Children to Be Resilient

It's time for reparations and resources and to not expect kids to "rise above."

May 12, 2020

"Flint is a public health disaster. But it was Dr. Mona, this caring, tough pediatrician turned detective, who cracked the case."
— Rachel Maddow

MONA HANNA-ATTISHA

WHAT THE EYES DON'T SEE

A Story of Crisis, Resistance, and Hope in an American City

56

28

"Rather than hoping a child is tough enough to endure the insurmountable, we must build resilient places where all children can thrive."

57

Resilience is Relational

58

Synthesis

Systemic resilience: principles and processes for a science of change in contexts of adversity

Michael Ungar [1]

ABSTRACT. Despite the increasing popularity of discussions of resilience in disciplines as diverse as ecology, psychology, economics, architecture, and genetics (among many others), researchers still lack a conceptual model to explain how the resilience of one system relates to the resilience of other cooccurring systems. Models that explain resilience within a single system are more robust and better studied. Although some researchers argue that both ontological and epistemological weaknesses prevent such an integrated model from being developed (the incommensurability hypothesis), others have carried out metasyntheses using techniques like network citation analysis to identify common principles and processes that are associated with resilience across disciplines. Although useful, metasyntheses have yet to identify sufficient commonalities across bodies of research to account for a single model of resilience. This paper adapts methods used for the thematic synthesis of qualitative data to critically analyze metasyntheses of resilience and identify principles that explain patterns of resilience of different systems (biological, psychological, social, cultural, economic, legal, communication, and ecological systems are all considered). Sixteen purposefully selected published syntheses were reviewed, along with dozens of other supporting peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, supplemented by consultations with knowledge experts. Seven common principles across systems were identified. These include: (1) resilience occurs in contexts of adversity; (2) resilience is a process; (3) there are trade-offs between systems when a system experiences resilience; (4) a resilient system is open, dynamic, and complex; (5) a resilient system promotes connectivity; (6) a resilient system demonstrates experimentation and learning; and (7) a resilient system includes diversity, redundancy, and participation. Where evidence refutes a principle, discordant findings are highlighted. Together, these principles account for resilience as a sequence of systemic interdependent interactions through which actors (whether persons, organisms, or ecosystems) secure the resources required for sustainability in stressed environments.

Key Words: *common principles; disaster management; ecology; psychology; resilience; social-ecological systems; systemic*

59

Common Principles

1) resilience occurs in contexts of challenge;

2) resilience is a non-linear process;

3) there are trade-offs between systems when a system experiences resilience;

4) a resilient system is open, dynamic, & complex;

5) a resilient system provides feedback and promotes connectivity;

6) a resilient system demonstrates experimentation & learning;

7) a resilient system includes diversity, redundancy, & participation.

60

How might we within our courses foster an environment–that **"resilient space"**–in which our students will be equipped with the necessary skills, resources, and support to not only navigate the various challenges they encounter but also to grow and learn from these experiences?
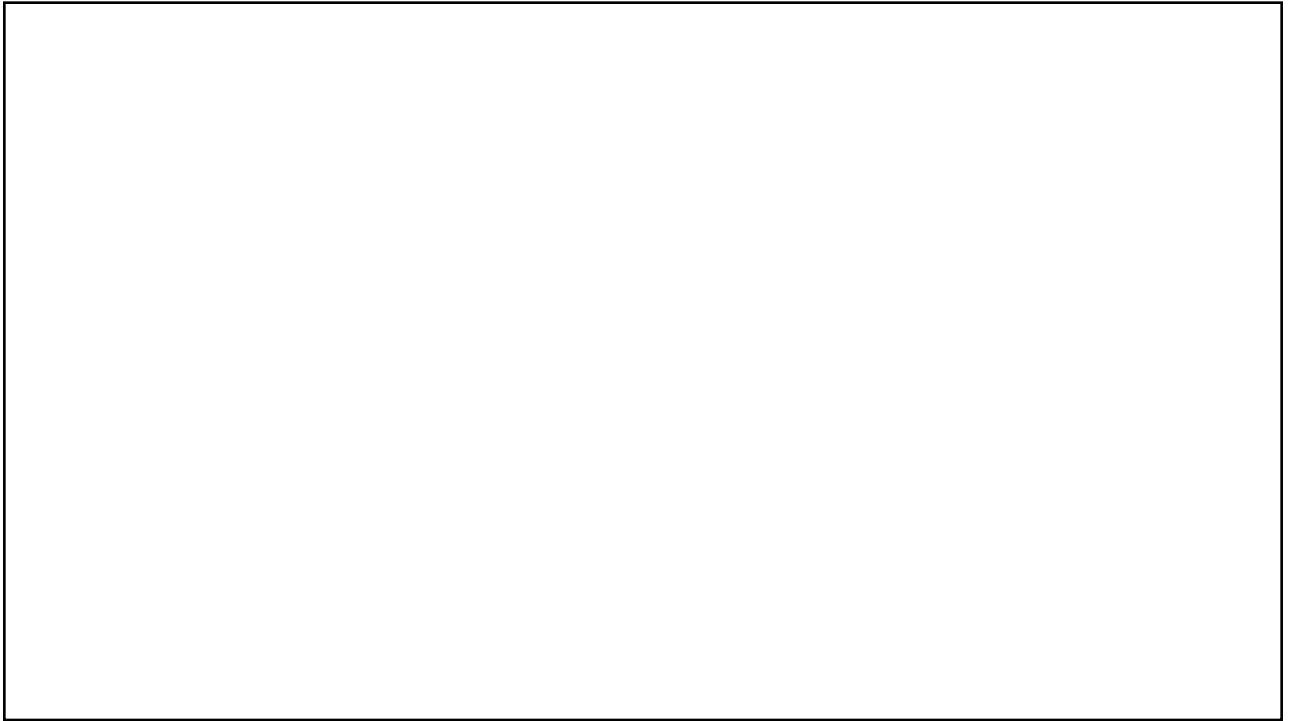
61

Three Flash cards:

Green: What has worked for you?
Orange: What has not worked for you?
Yellow: What questions do you have?

(10 minutes)

62

63