



Witnessing: Understanding the Effects of Overexposure
to Stories of Hardship and Trauma and What to Do
About It

Kaethe Weingarten, PhD



Conflict of Interest Disclosure

We have no real or perceived vested interests that relate to this presentation nor do we have any relationships with pharmaceutical companies, biomedical device manufacturers and/or other corporations whose products or services are related to pertinent therapeutic areas.



MIGRANT CLINICIANS NETWORK



A force for health justice

**Somos una fuerza dedicada a la
justicia en salud**

Our mission is to create practical solutions at the intersection of vulnerability, migration, and health.

We envision a world based on health justice and equity, where migration is never an impediment to well-being.

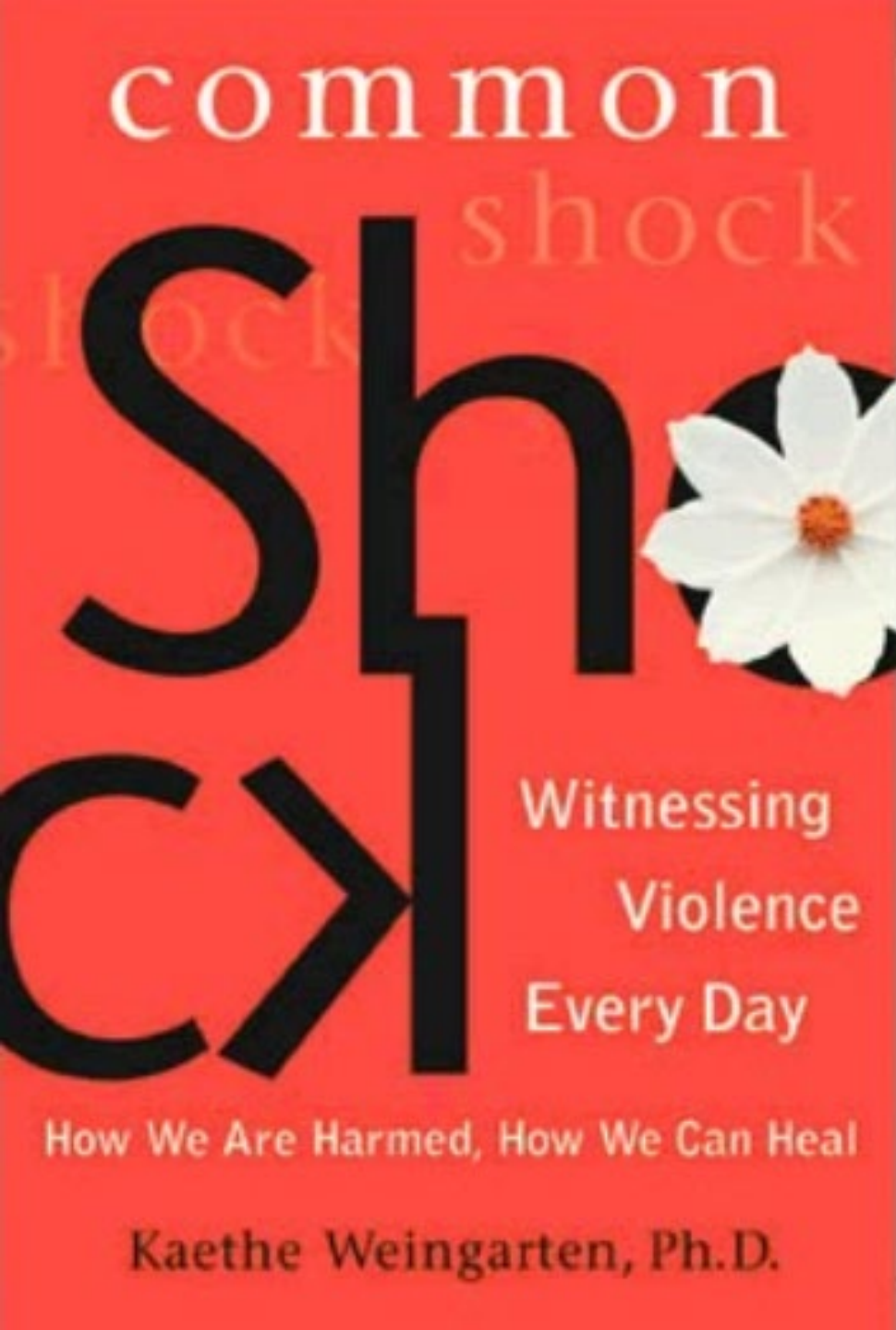
THE
witness to witness
PROGRAM



Kaethe Weingarten, Ph.D.

Founder and Director of the
Witness to Witness Program

<https://www.migrantclinician.org/witness-to-witness>



Dr. Weingarten's Work

- **Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology, Harvard Medical School, 1981 – 2017**
- **Taught the Program in Families, Trauma and Resilience at the Family Institute of Cambridge**
- **Author of *Common Shock: Witnessing Violence Every Day – How We Are Harmed, How We Can Heal***



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO SET
THE STAGE OF OUR CURRENT
CONTEXT?

BECAUSE WE ARE
WITNESSES TO THE
SUFFERING AND
TROUBLES OF THOSE WE
SERVE



Take a Moment:

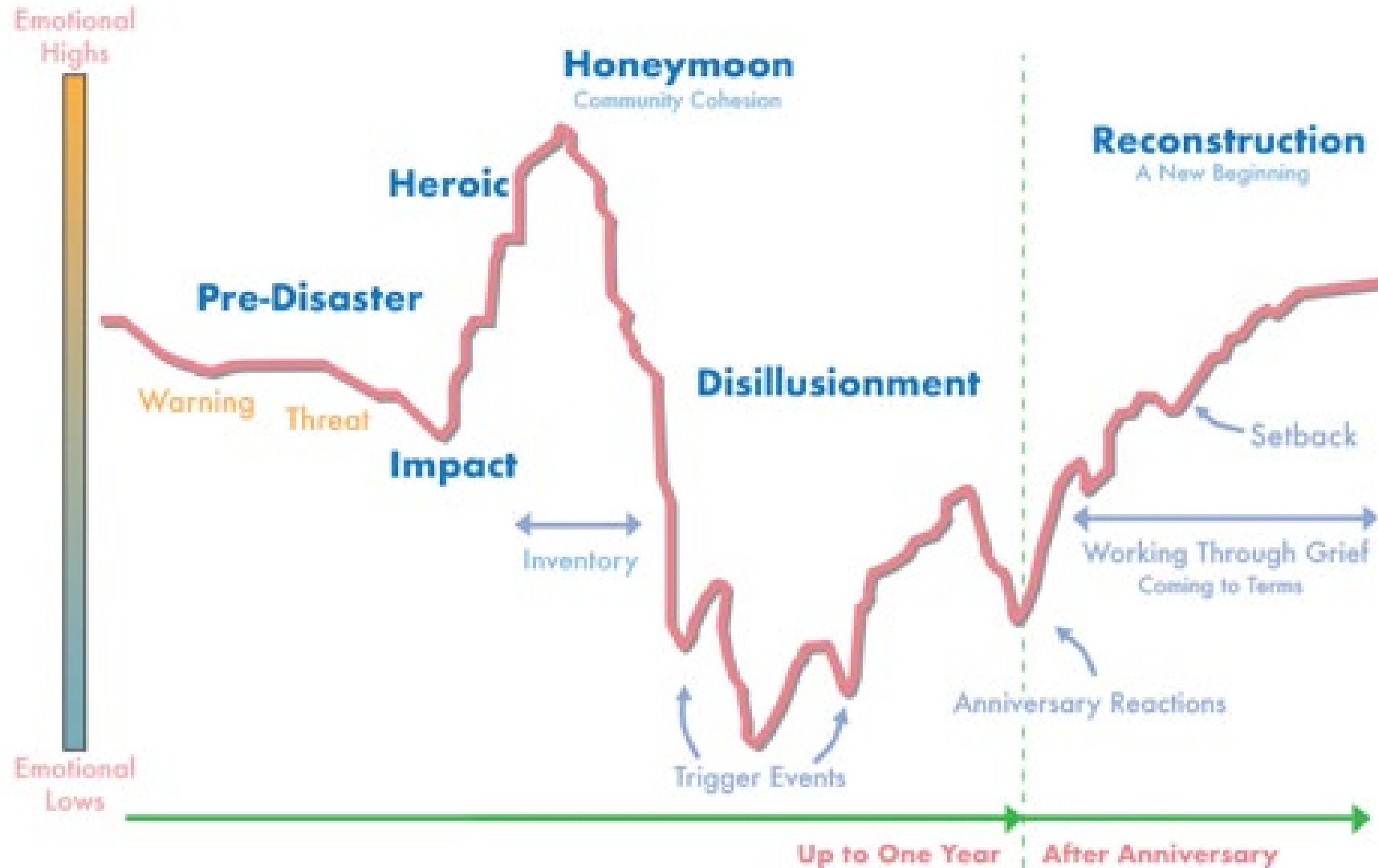
What has it been like for you
when you have been truly
witnessed...someone has listened
to you with compassion

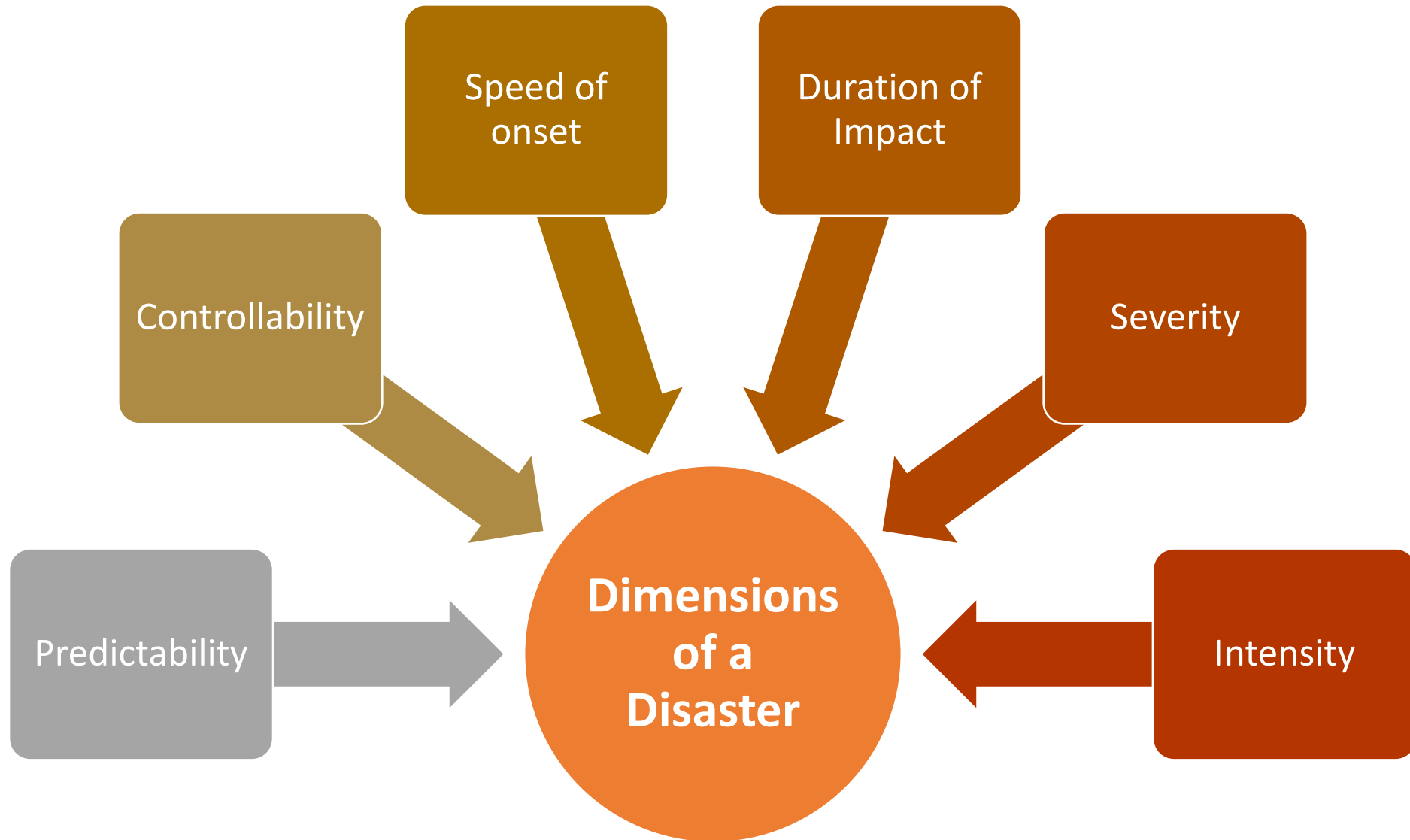
What has it been like for you
when you have fully witnessed
someone?

A night sky filled with stars and the Milky Way galaxy, with a dark silhouette of a forest at the bottom. The text "Overview of Where We are Now" is centered in white.

Overview of Where We are Now

Phases of Disaster





How would you rank this pandemic along these dimensions?

During late June, 40% of U.S. adults reported struggling with mental health or substance use*

ANXIETY/DEPRESSION SYMPTOMS



STARTED OR INCREASED SUBSTANCE USE



TRAUMA/STRESSOR-RELATED DISORDER SYMPTOMS



SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED SUICIDE†



*Based on a survey of U.S. adults aged ≥18 years during June 24-30, 2020

†In the 30 days prior to survey

For stress and coping strategies: bit.ly/dailylifecoping

CDC.GOV

bit.ly/MMWR81320

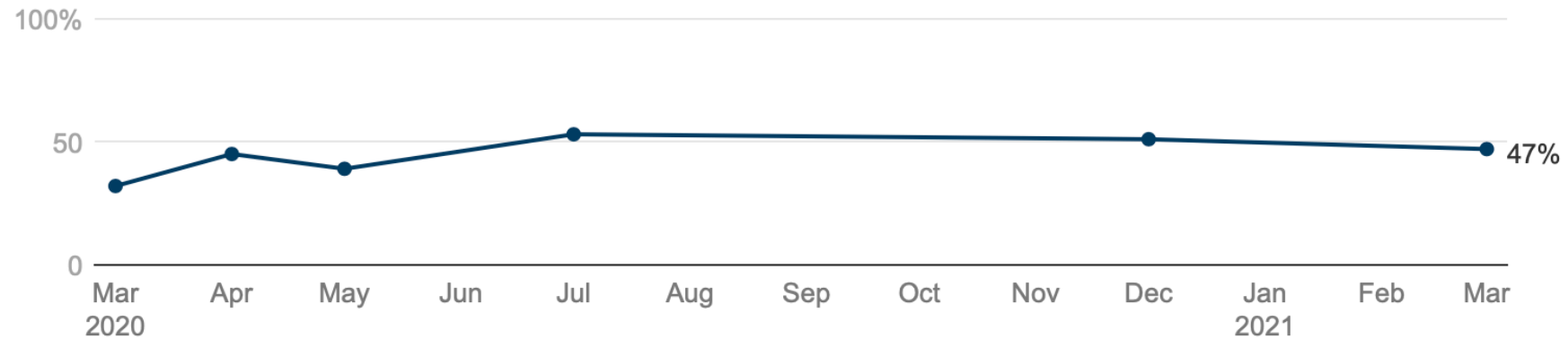
MMWR

• June, 2020

Figure 1

Mental Health Impacts Of Pandemic Rose During The Summer; Has Remained At About Half Of The Public Reporting Negative Impacts

Percent who say they feel that worry or stress related to coronavirus has had a **major** or **minor** negative impact on their mental health:



NOTE: See topline for full question wording.

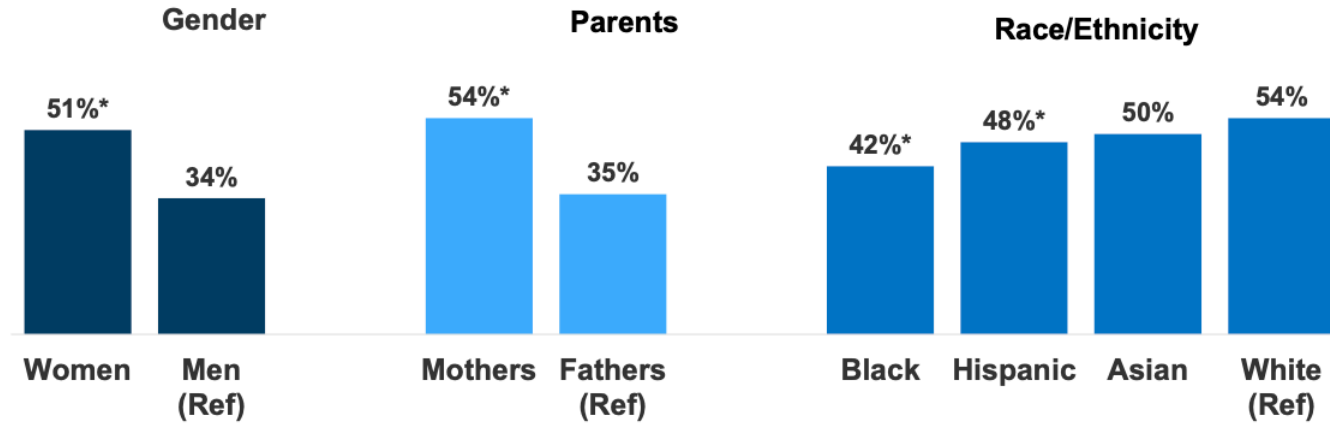
SOURCE: KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor (March 15-22, 2021) • [Download PNG](#)

[KFF COVID-19
Vaccine Monitor](#)

• **March, 2021**

More Than Half of Women Say That Worry or Stress Related to Coronavirus Affected Their Mental Health

Share who say that worry or stress related to coronavirus affected their mental health



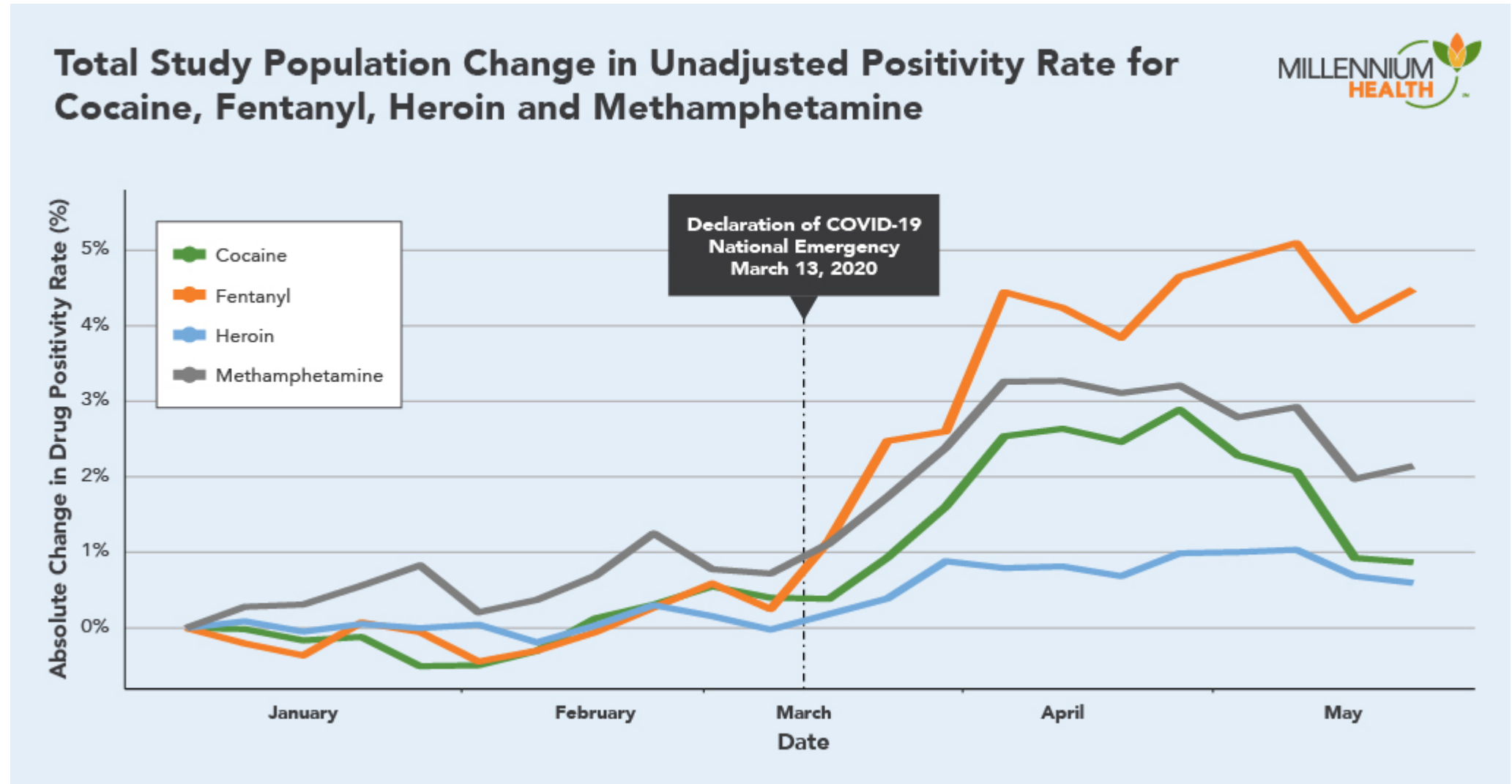
NOTE: *Estimate is statistically different than estimate for Men, White, and Fathers within group ($p < 0.05$). Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race; other groups are non-Hispanic.

SOURCE: [Women's Experiences with Health Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Findings from the KFF Women's Health Survey](#) and [Women, Work, and Family During COVID-19: Findings from the KFF Women's Health Survey](#)

KFF

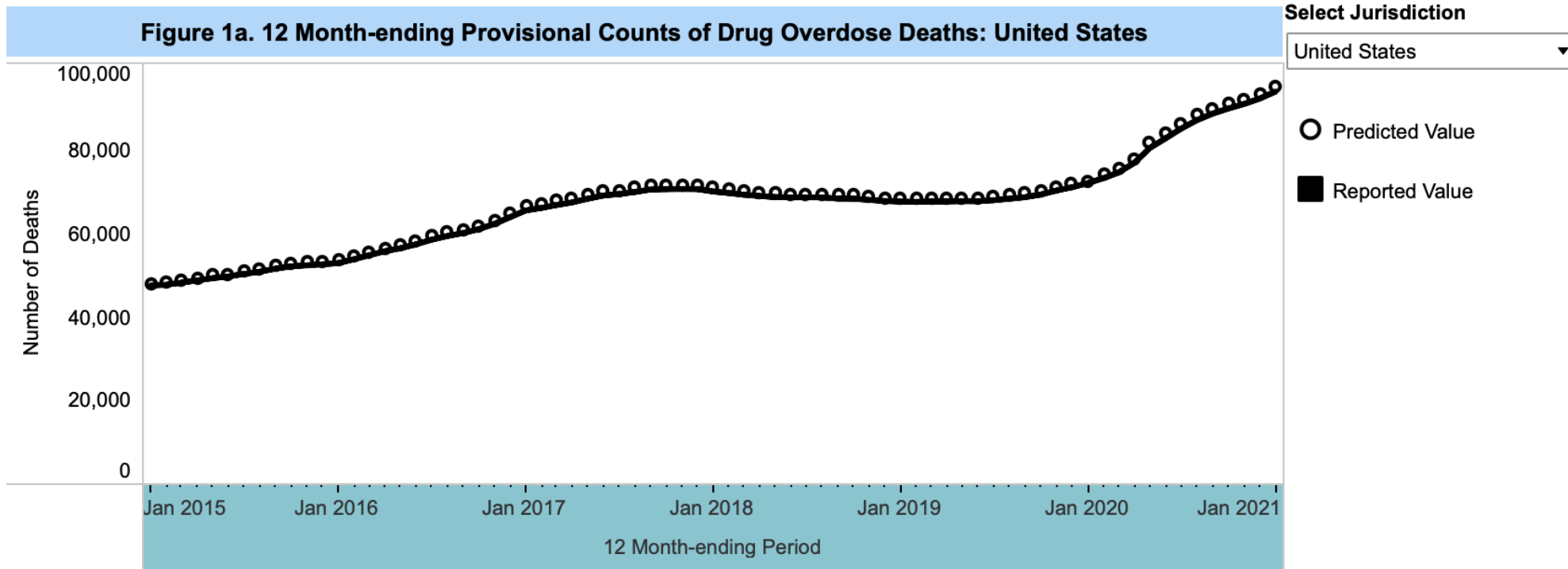
• March, 2021

Millennium Health's Signals Report™ COVID-19 Special Edition Reveals Significant Changes in Drug Use During the Pandemic



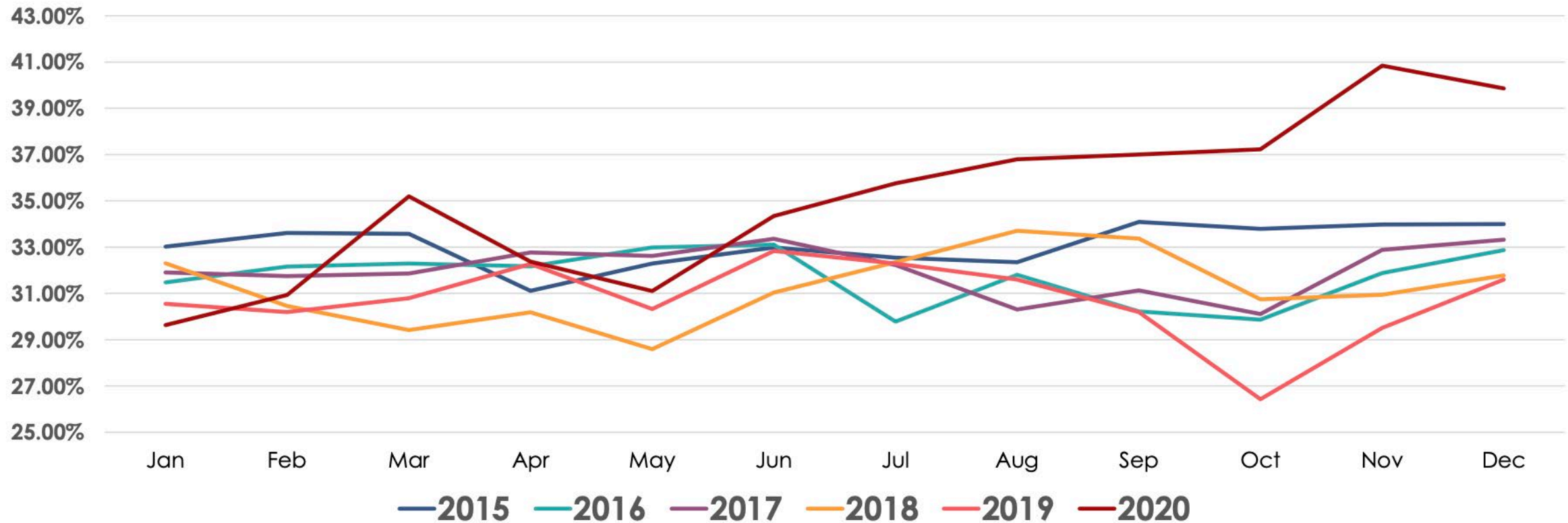
12 Month-ending Provisional Number of Drug Overdose Deaths

Based on data available for analysis on: **8/1/2021**



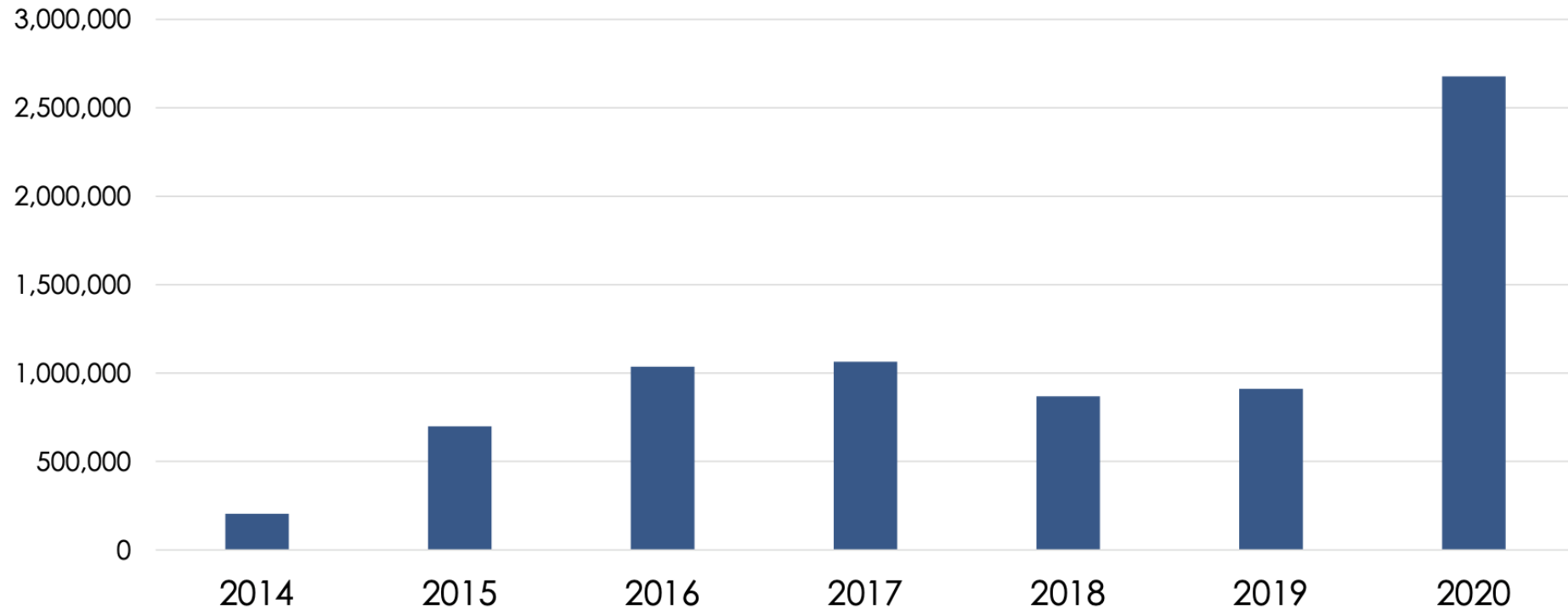
Suicidal Ideation at Highest Rate Since Launch of Screening

Percentage Reporting Suicidal Ideation More Than Half or Nearly Every Day
2015-2020



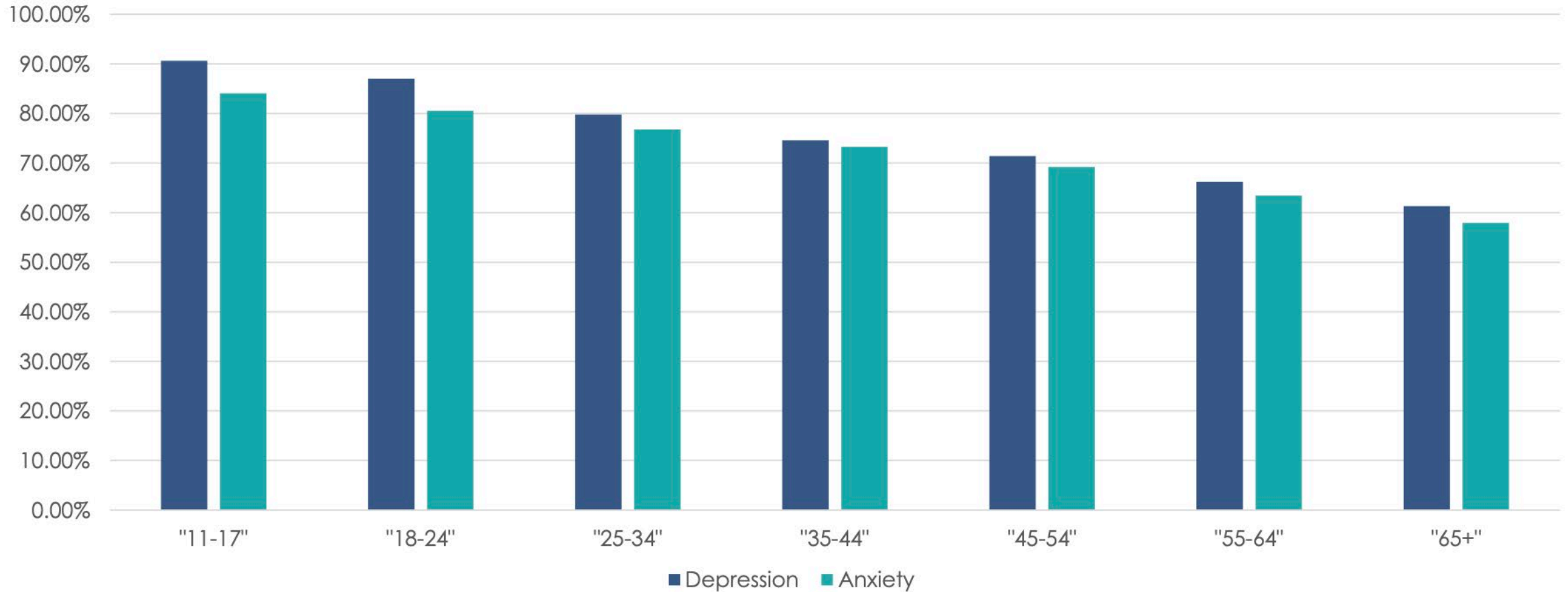
Number of People Looking for Help Increased Dramatically in 2020

Total Number of Screens 2014-2020



Young People Disproportionately Experiencing Depression and Anxiety

Percent Scoring Moderate to Severe



Main Concerns Are Different Across Race/Ethnicity

May-December 2020, N=1,129,790

Black or African American screeners cite financial concerns at highest rate

Native American or American Indian screeners report more past trauma

White, Hispanic or Latinx screeners more worried about COVID-19

Hispanic or Latinx screeners cite loneliness or isolation at highest rates

Native American or American Indian screeners report most grief or loss

Factors Affecting Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities

- Discrimination: systemic racism creates barriers and chronic stress
- Health care access and use: multiple barriers
- Occupation: working certain jobs creates greater exposure
- Housing: crowded housing makes separation difficult
- Educational, income, wealth gaps: can't afford to take time off



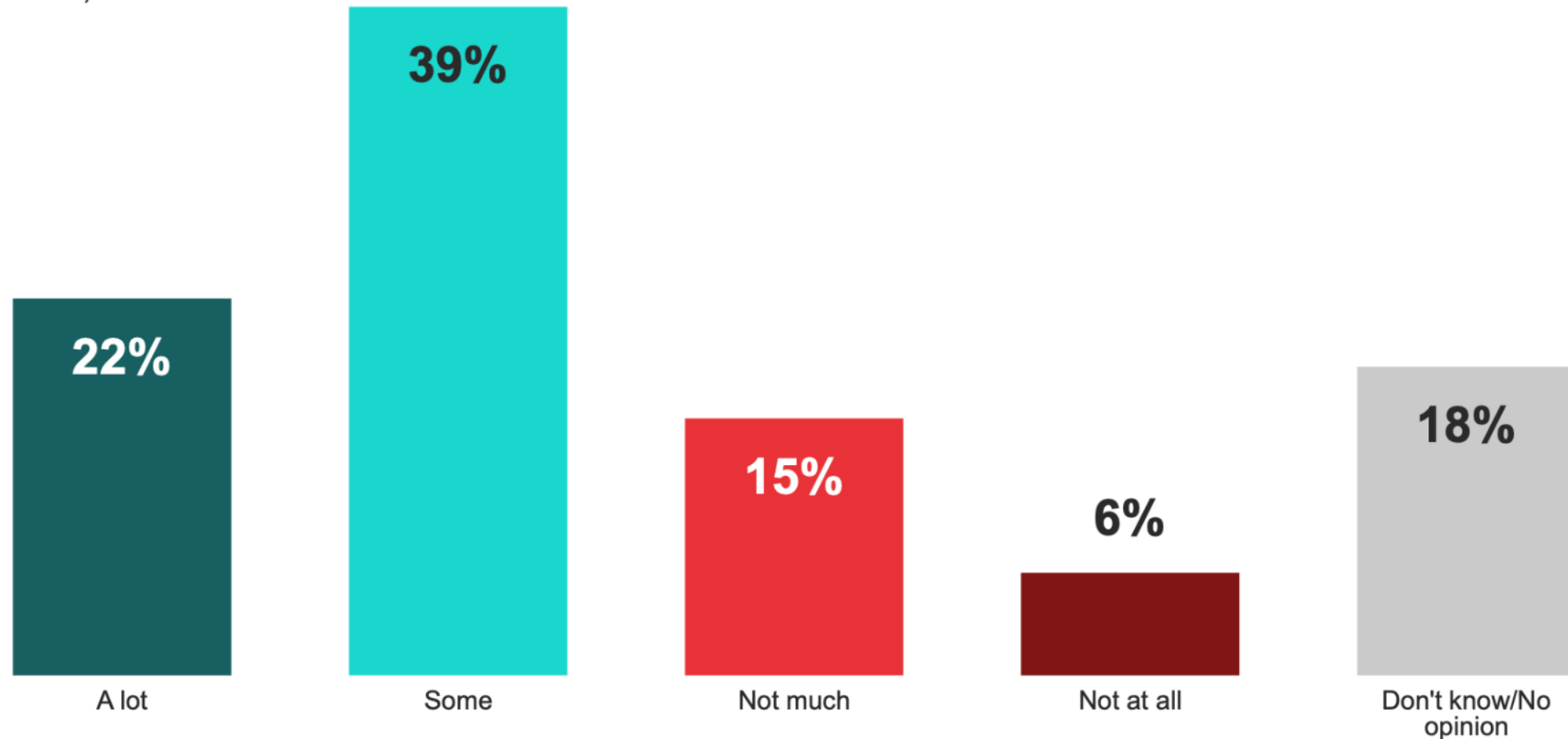
STRESS IN AMERICA SURVEY: One Year Later, A New Wave of Pandemic Health Concerns


- **A majority of adults (61%) reported experiencing undesired weight changes since the start of the pandemic**, with more than 2 in 5 (42%) saying they gained more weight than they intended. Of this group, adults reported gaining an average of 29 pounds (with a typical gain of 15 pounds, which is the median).
- **Two in 3 Americans (67%) said they are sleeping more or less than they wanted to since the pandemic started.** Similar proportions reported less (35%) and more (31%) sleep than desired. Nearly 1 in 4 adults (23%) reported drinking more alcohol to cope with their stress during the coronavirus pandemic.
- **Nearly half of Americans (47%) said they delayed or canceled health care services** since the pandemic started.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MENTAL HEALTH

Three in five rural adults (61%) say the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the mental health in rural communities *a lot or some*.

Thinking about rural communities, based on what you know, how much has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted mental health in rural communities, if at all?





**We do this work
in our bodies**

Every Day Witnessing



Ordinary

Extraordinary



Witness

- Simultaneous observation: see or hear
- Learn after the event
- Recognition that one has witnessed violence and violation occurs at the time
- Recognition delayed



Empirical research on being the victim of or witness to violence

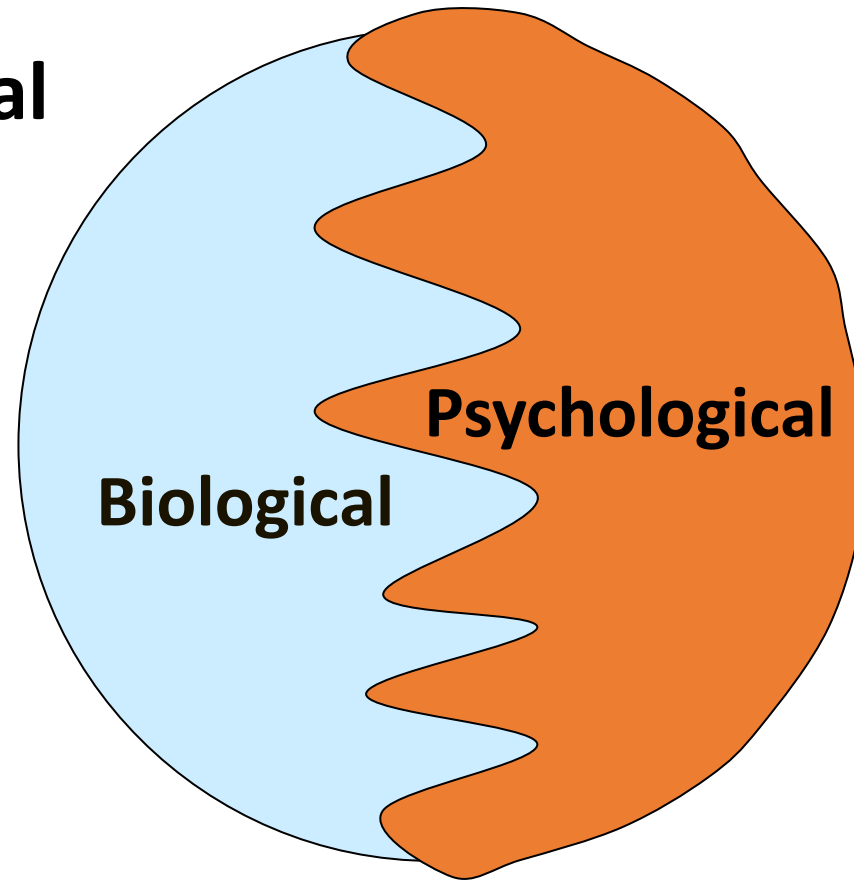
Outcomes are
similar for both

forms of exposure
to violence



Interpersonal

Spiritual



The Individual

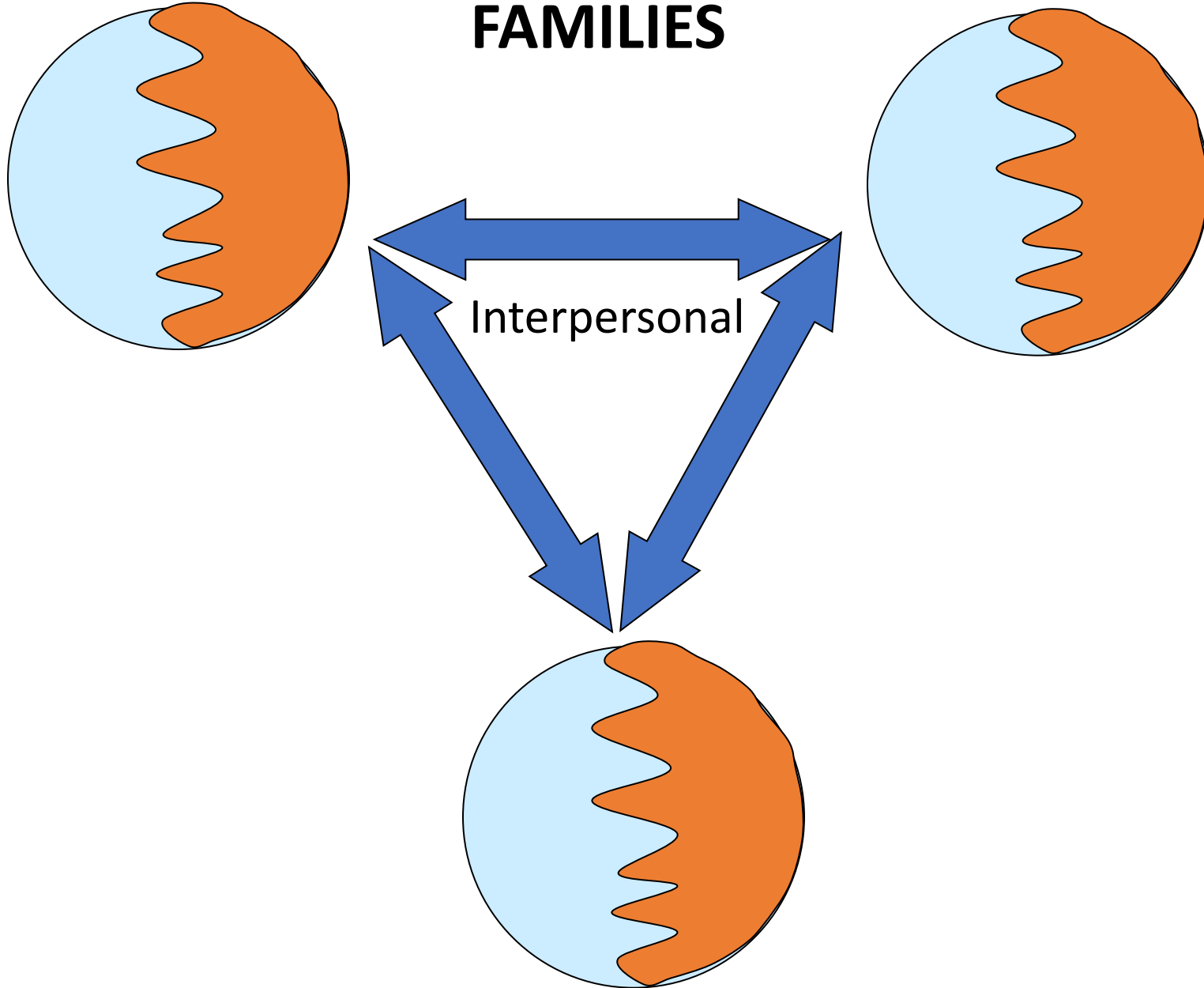
Sensations in the Body

- Clamminess or chilliness
- Exaggerated startle
- Fear responses to non-threatening stimuli
- Hyper-arousal
- Hyper-vigilance
- Lethargy
- Muscle aches and pains
- Numbness
- Poor concentration
- Rapid heartbeat
- Spacey feeling
- Sweating
- Tingling
- Sudden cold or hot

Psychological Experiences

- Aggression
- Anger
- Disbelief
- Fear
- Grief
- Guilt
- Helplessness
- Memory alterations
- Numbing
- Rage
- Sadness
- Shame
- Vulnerability
- Worry/ Anxiety

FAMILIES

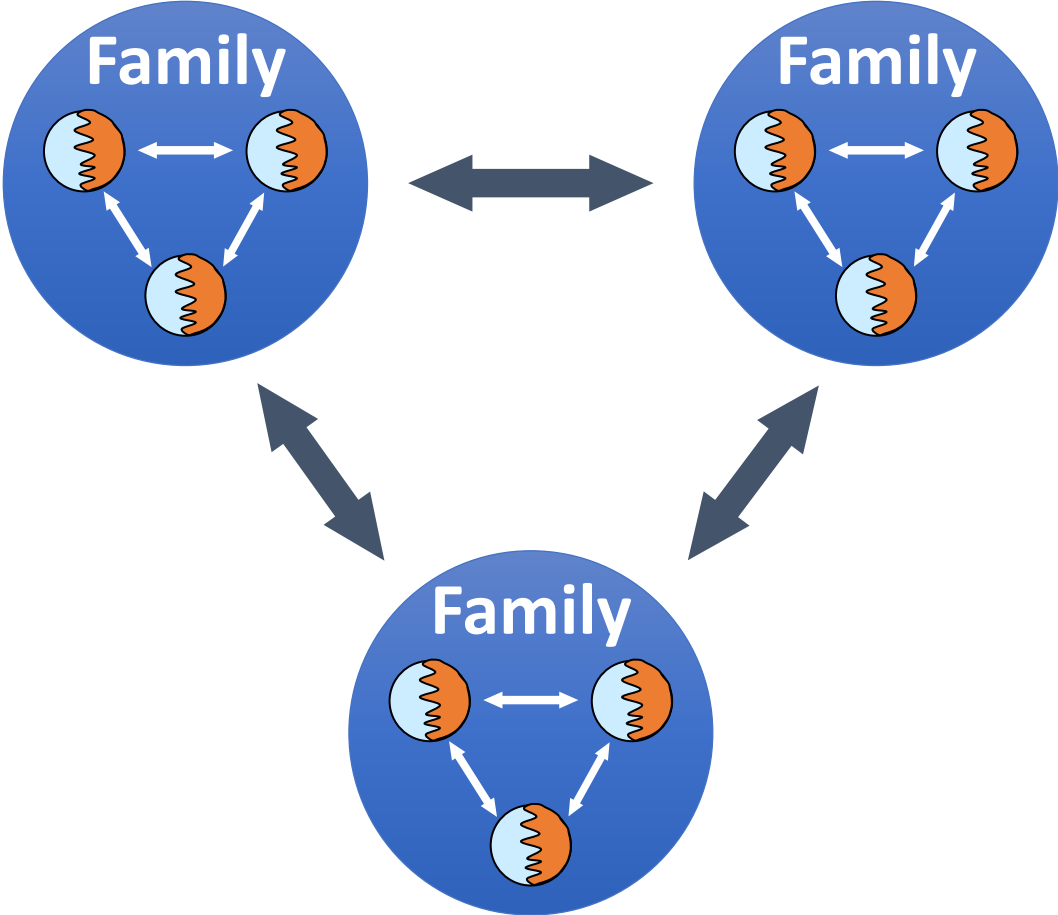


Family Exposure to Disaster or Crises

Family members may have different ways of responding to distress which can lead to:

- misunderstandings
- conflict
- out of synch with each other
- difficulty meeting each others' needs
- limited resources to relate to the community.

Community Is Made Up of Multiple Stressed Families





Some Useful Frameworks

Witness Positions

Aware

Unaware

Empowered

1

2

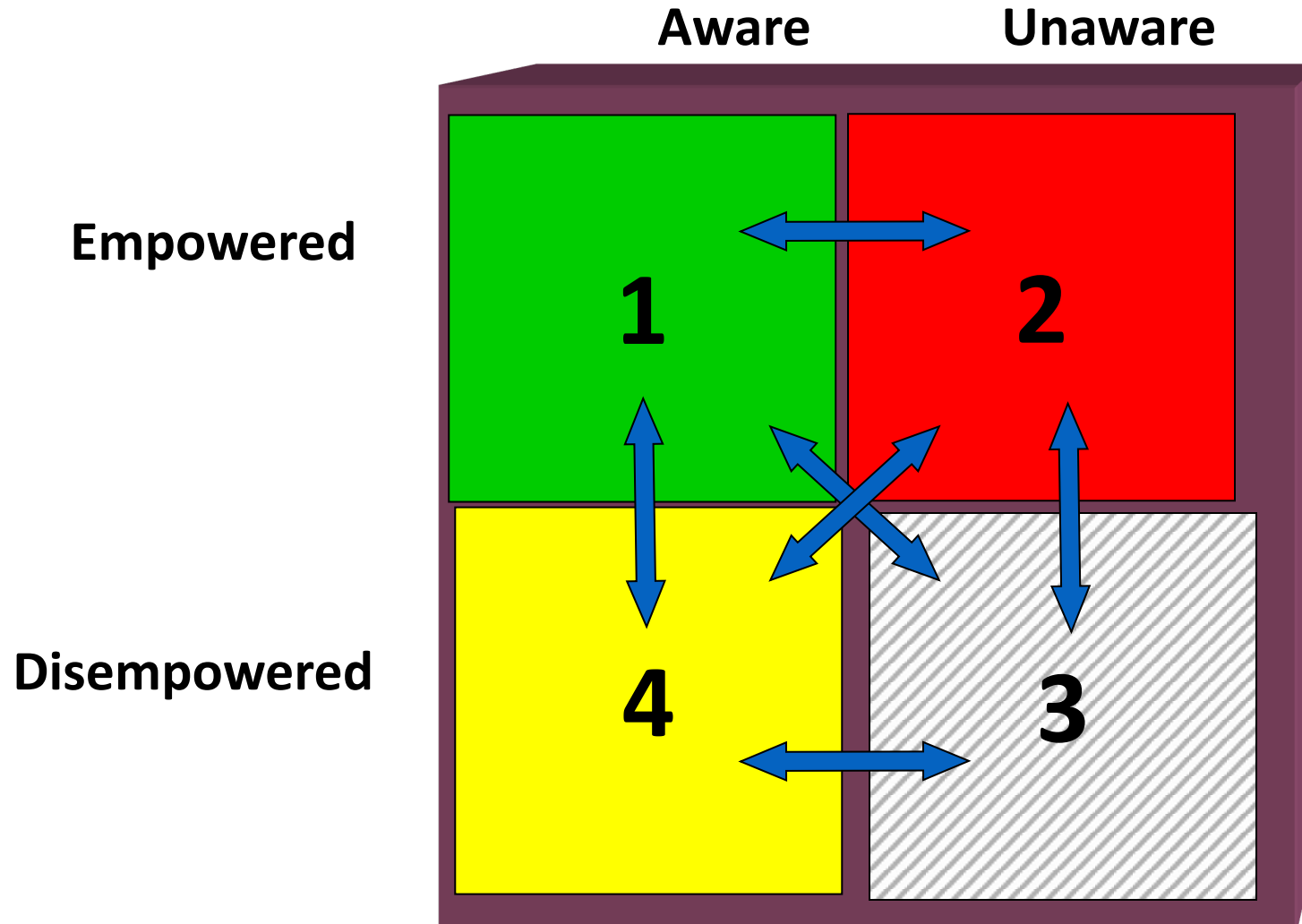
Disempowered

4

3

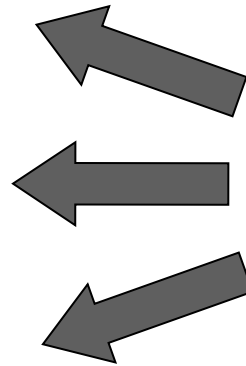


Changes in Witness Position

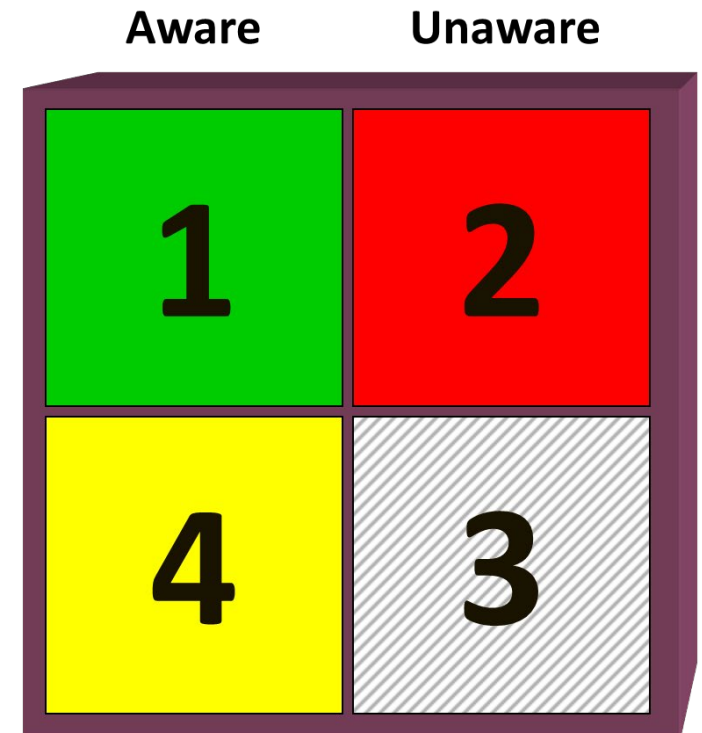


Each witness position affects:

- Self
- Partner
- Children
- Colleagues
- Friends
- Constituents/Clients
- Institution
- Society



Empowered
Disempowered



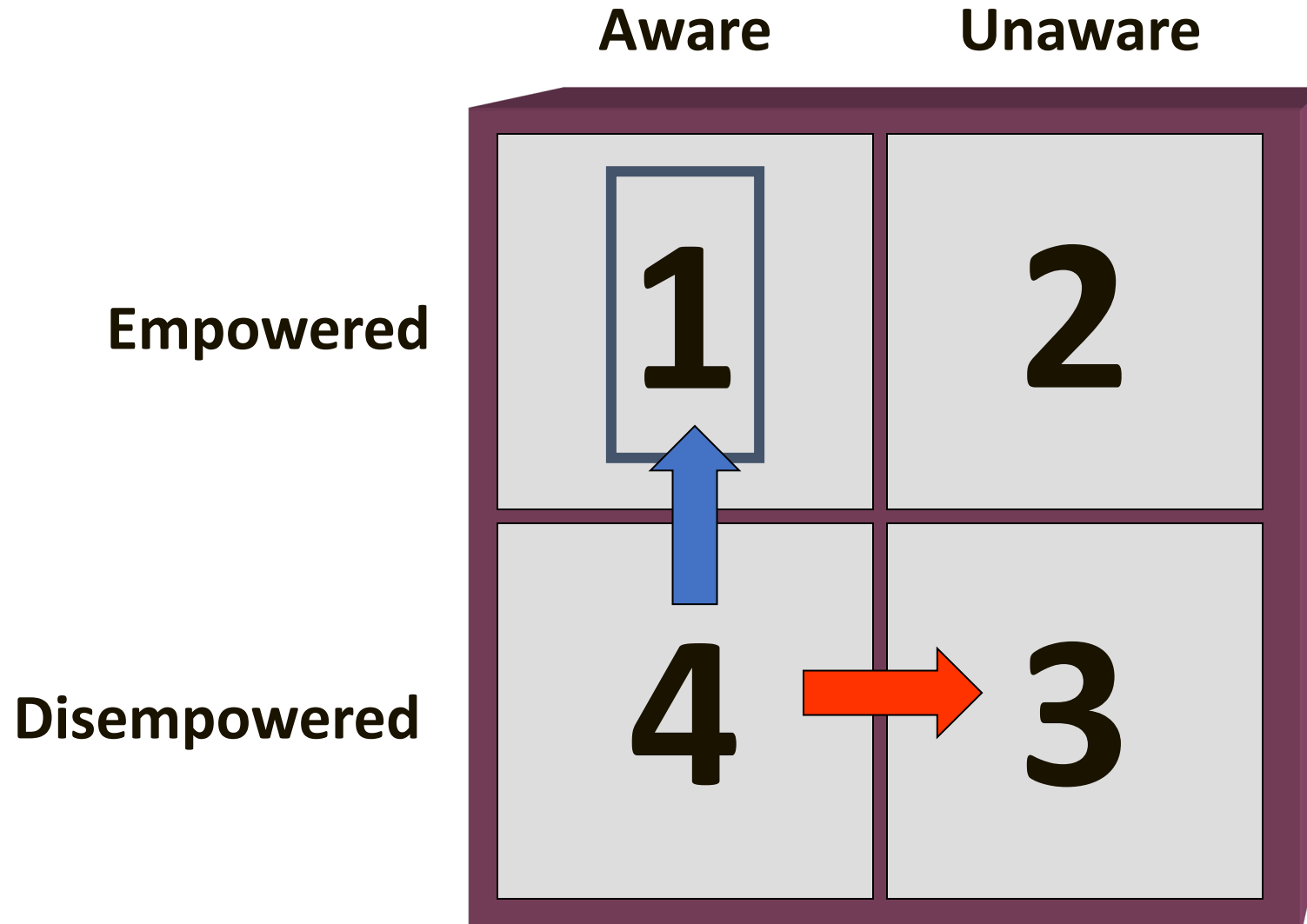
Witness Positions

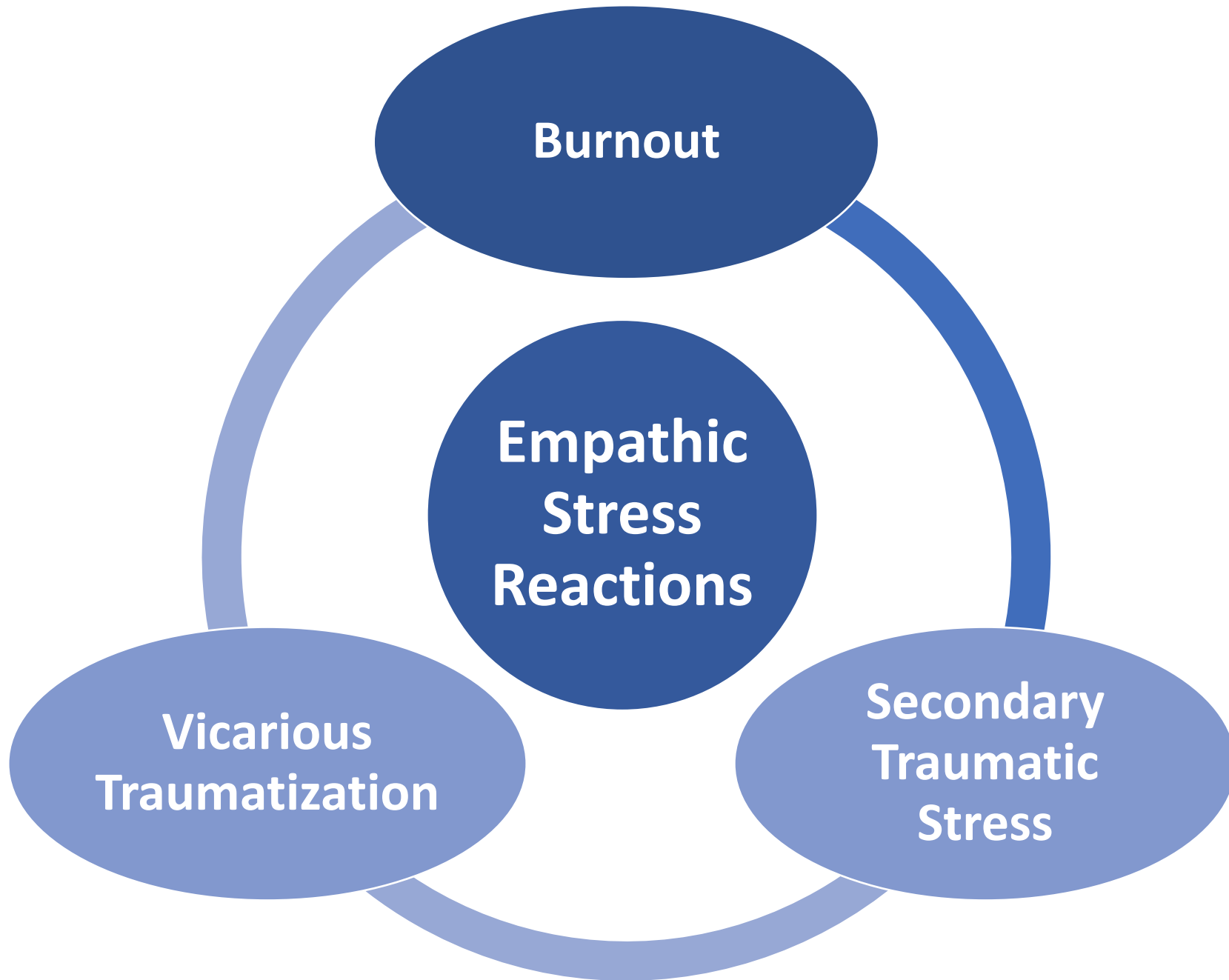
	Aware	Unaware
Empowered	Effective and Competent	Misguided Harmful
Disempowered	Ineffectual Stressed Exhausted	Abandoning

Witness Positions

	Aware	Unaware
Empowered	Attuned Thoughtful Helpful	Critical Hurtful Cruel
Disempowered	Confused Uncertain Inept	Withdrawn Passive Deny Opt out

Options from Position 4





Definition of Empathy

Empathy refers to the capacity to understand and respond to the unique emotional experiences of another person.



Self vs Other


Imagining

Imagining how another person feels and Imagining how one would feel in a particular situation are distinctly different forms of perspective-taking that likely carry different emotional consequences.

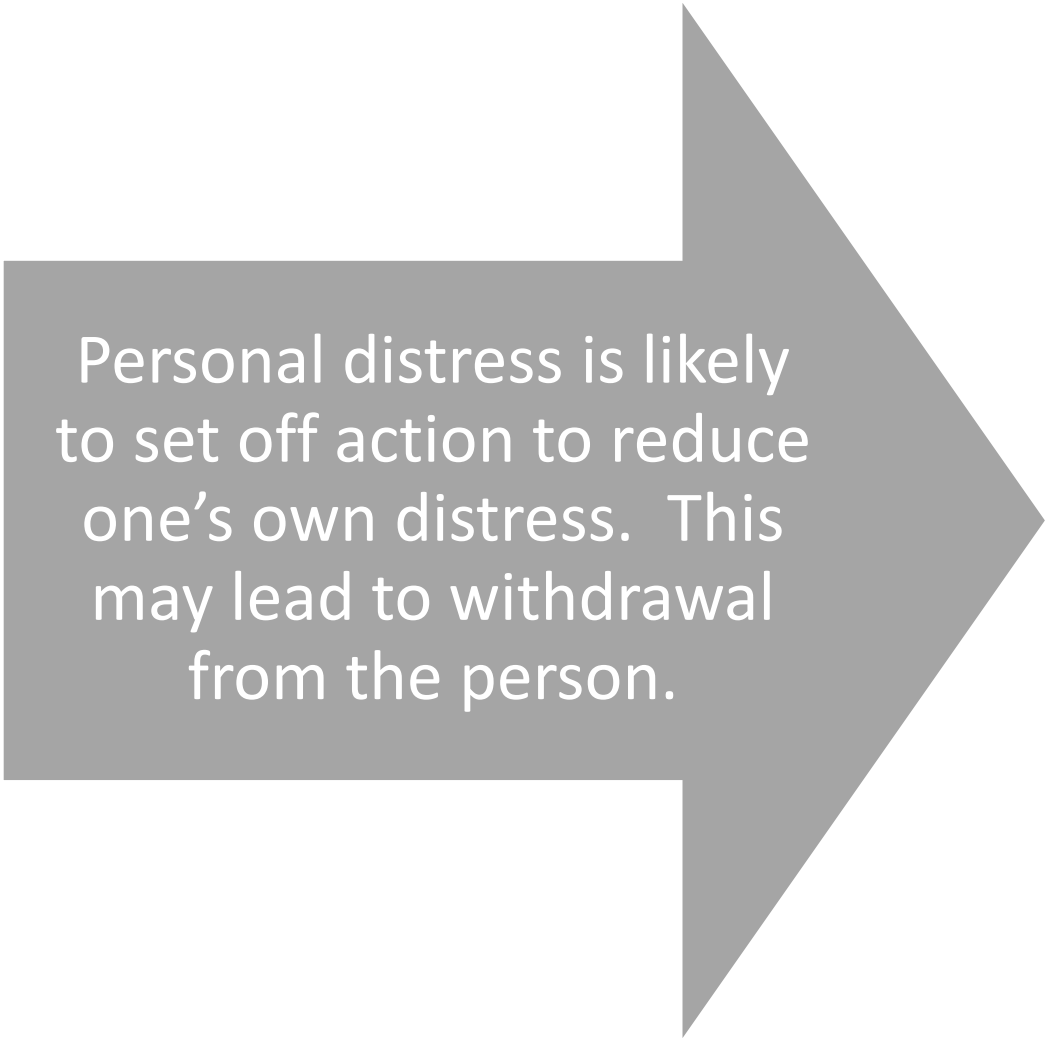
Consequence

Imagining how another person feels evokes empathic concern.
Imagining how one would feel in a particular situation induces both empathic concern and personal distress

Empathic Concern vs Personal Distress



Empathic concern is likely to inspire a desire to help the other person



Personal distress is likely to set off action to reduce one's own distress. This may lead to withdrawal from the person.

Compassion Fatigue?

- Compassion doesn't fatigue.
- Empathy can turn into personal distress and that does get to be too much.
- **It's what we cannot do not what we can do that exhausts us.**





Moral Injury for Care Providers

Failing to consistently meet the needs of the people we serve due to inadequacies in the systems of which we are a part, be it a health care organization or insurance system or social service agency or other larger system.

Moral injury can lead to moral outrage

Demoralization

- Demoralization is a normal reaction to overwhelming circumstances when the way to solve the problem is unclear or hard to do.
- If you are demoralized, when the situation changes, you will feel better.
- Many people are demoralized now and will feel better when the coronavirus danger has passed



Languishing

- Feeling blah
- Lacking in focus and energy
- Joyless
- Aimless
- Muddling through life
- Indifferent to your indifference
- The absence of well-being

Worry



Helps you to get what you want

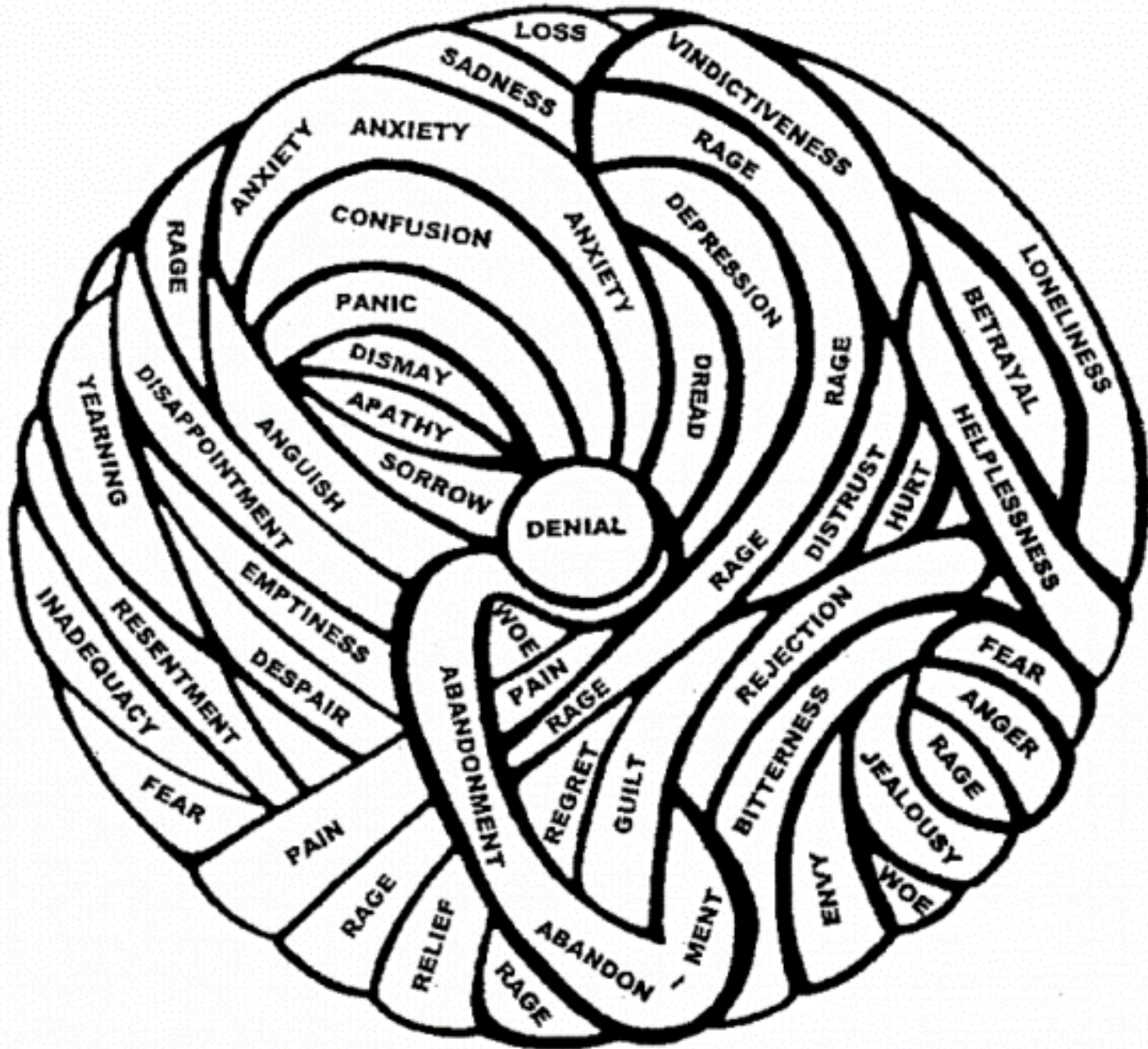
Leaves you feeling demoralized,
upset, or exhausted

Helps you to solve problems in
your life

Gets in the way of living the life
you want to lead



GRIEF



Grief...A tangled “Ball” of Emotions

Loss in the Future

- Some people are anticipating loss.
- It is hard to know what the world will be like when we are no longer coping with a global pandemic.



Loss Now

Some people have already experienced terrible losses:

- of their jobs,
- of food and housing security,
- of family and friends, of their health,
- of connections with neighbors,
- of faith in leadership to keep them safe.



Head off PTSD

Current conditions of the pandemic lend themselves to forming the ground out of which people may develop PTSD

Leading trauma expert, Bessel van der Kolk, MD, says we can take action now to mitigate that risk.



Five Major Take- Aways

- Accept your feelings
- Activate your body
- Self-compassion
- Maintain relationships
- Sleep or rest



Studies suggest that undiagnosed and untreated sleep disorders are associated with occupational burnout among service providers.





Supports Right Now!



Two Sides of the Witnessing Coin

Unintentional Witnessing: often toxic

Committed Witnessing: often healing

Committed witnessing can transform experiences of being overwhelmed by what we choose to “take in”




Committed Witnessing Must Be Compassionate

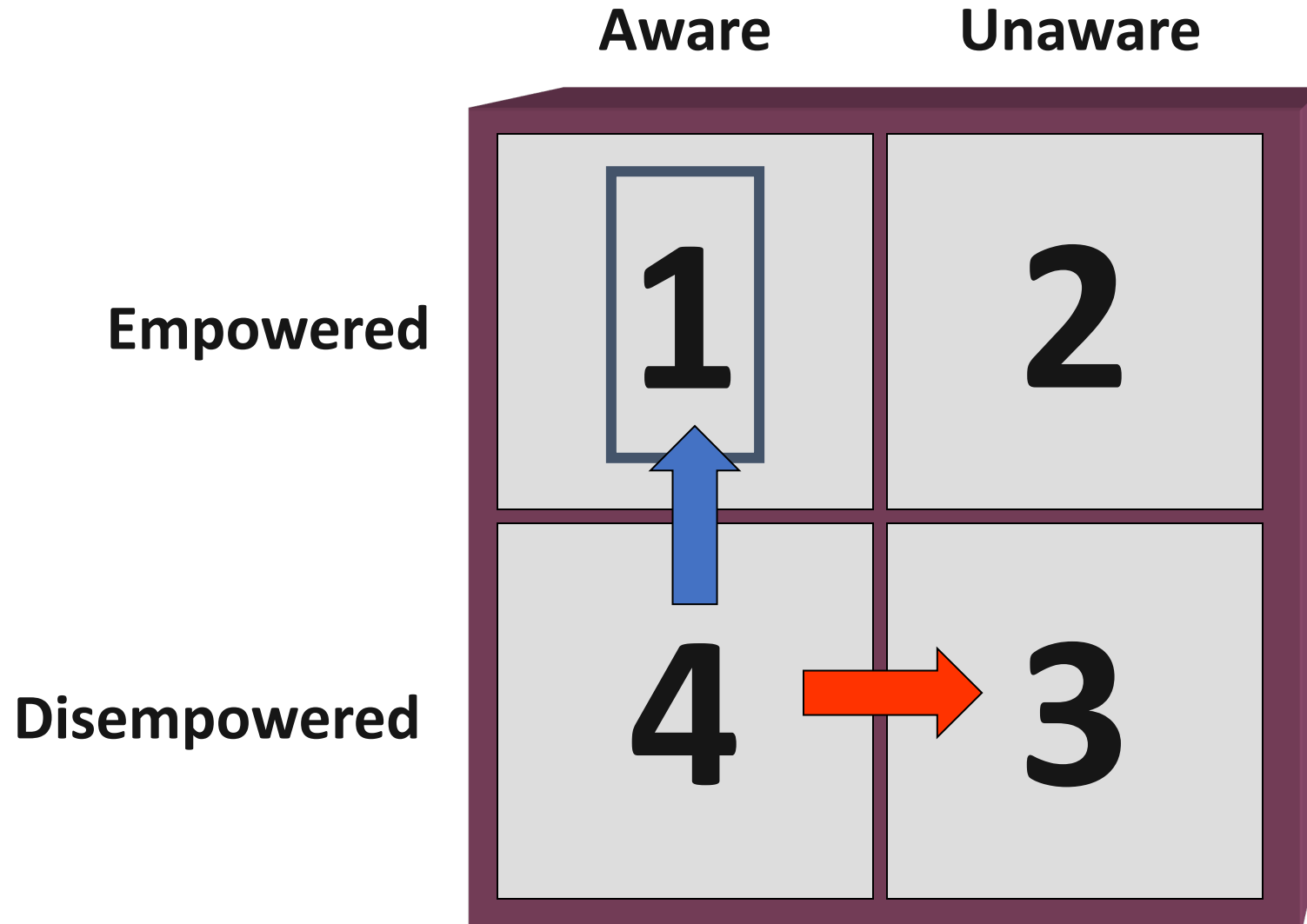
- **To others**
- **To the self**



Flipping the Witnessing Coin

- From passive witnessing to effective action
 - Move up not over
- 
- A close-up, artistic photograph of a dandelion seed head, showing the intricate structure of the seeds and their fine, hair-like pappus. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and white, creating a serene and contemplative atmosphere.

Options from Position 4



Witness Positions

Aware

Unaware

Empowered

Moments of
Effectiveness

2

Disempowered

4

3



Resilience





All Effectiveness Starts with the Body

We feel best, do our best work and are our best with our friends and family when we are in our resilient zone in mind/body.

We don't want to be too hyper and/or too low key.

Good self care keeps us in our resilient zone.

No one is resilient all of the time.



Everyone Has Strengths in a Crisis

What is your strength?

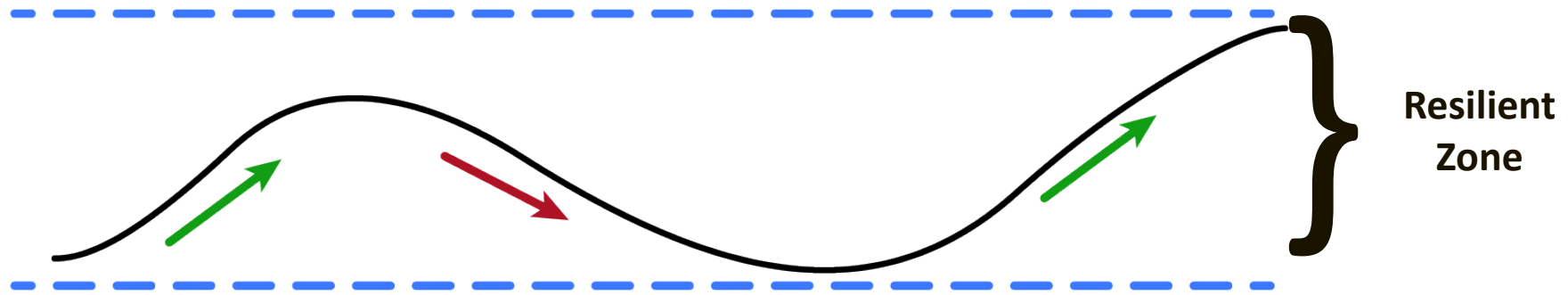
Here are some examples:

Planning, Responsive to others,
Compassion, Spirituality, Faith, Caring,
Resistance, Altruism, Mindfulness, Humor,
Good Communication, Self-Awareness,
Creativity, Finding meaning, Sense of
purpose, Flexibility, Resourcefulness,
Empathy, Insight, Logical thinking,
Imagination, Writing, Solitude...other

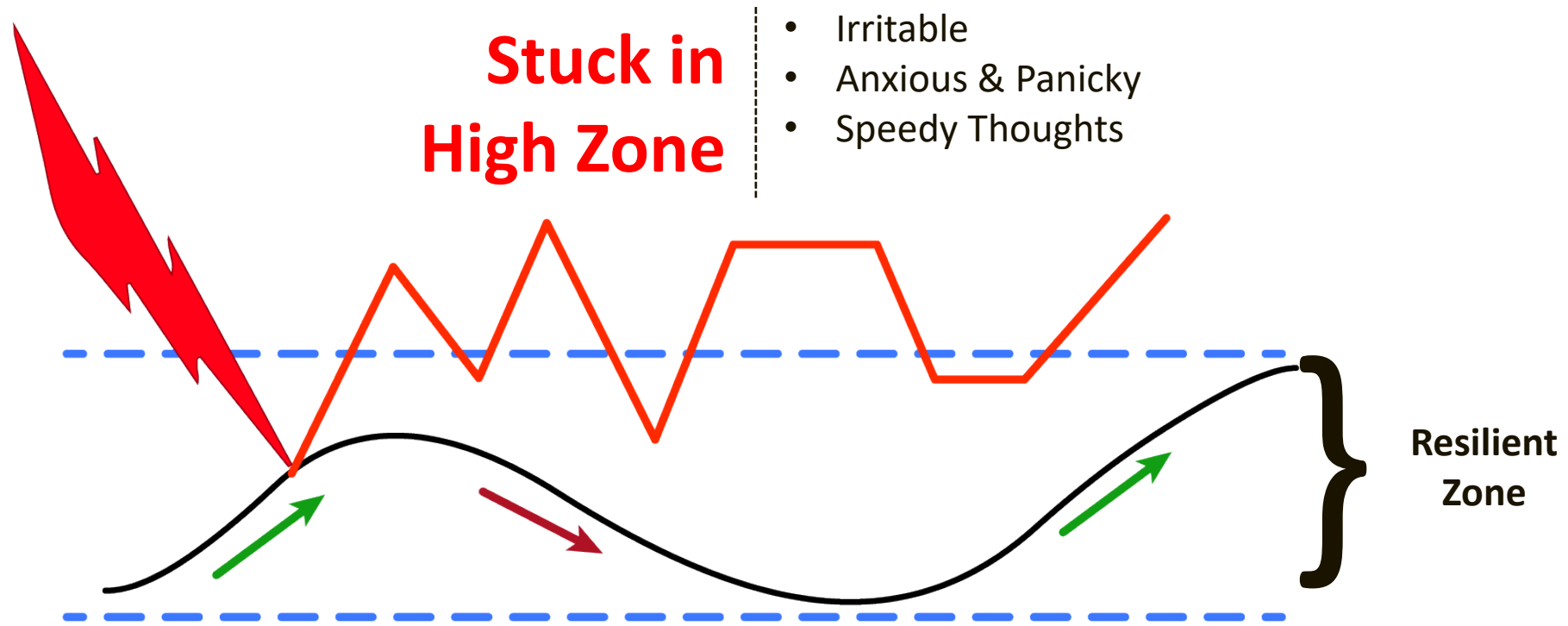
Traumatic / Stressful Event



Traumatic / Stressful Event



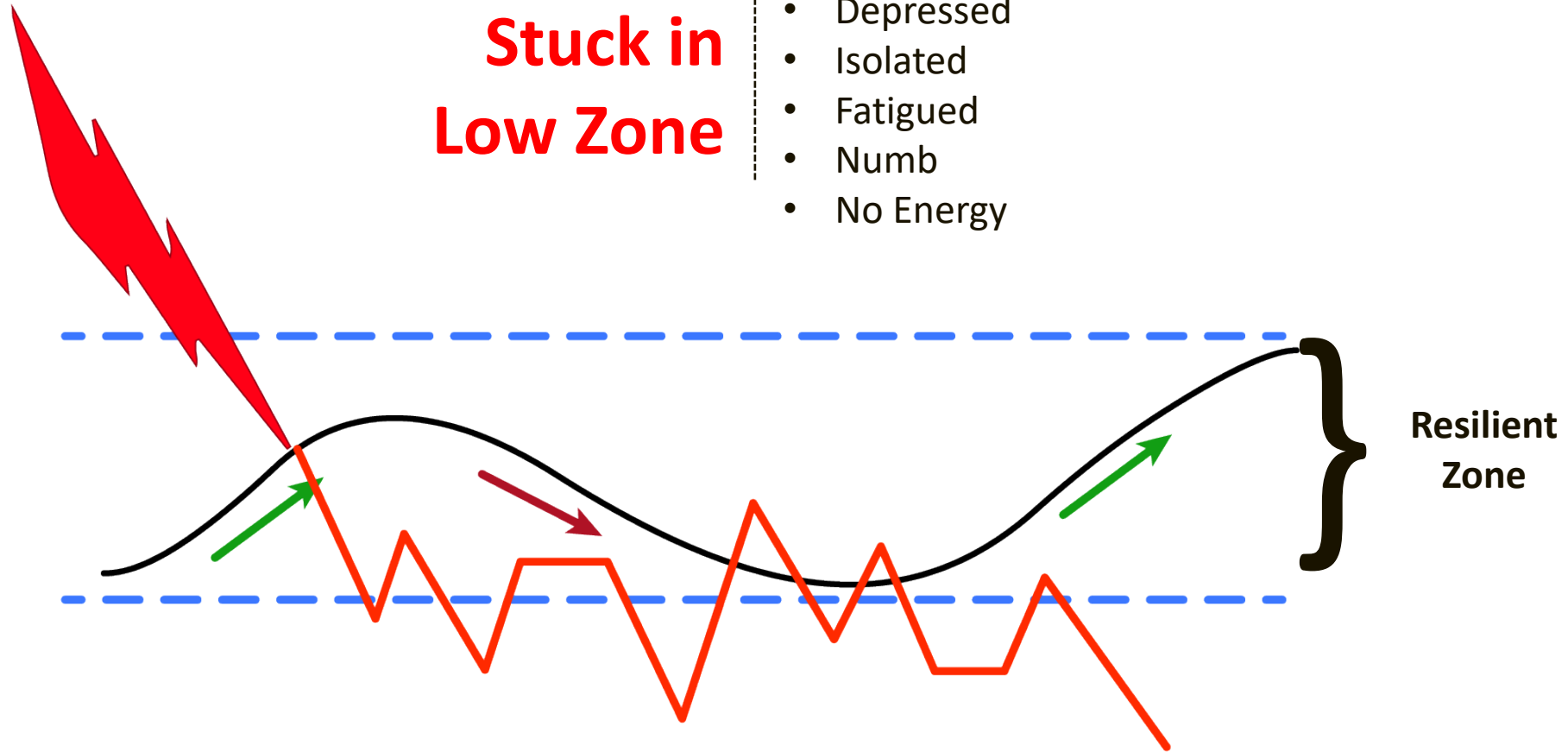
Traumatic / Stressful Event



Traumatic / Stressful Event

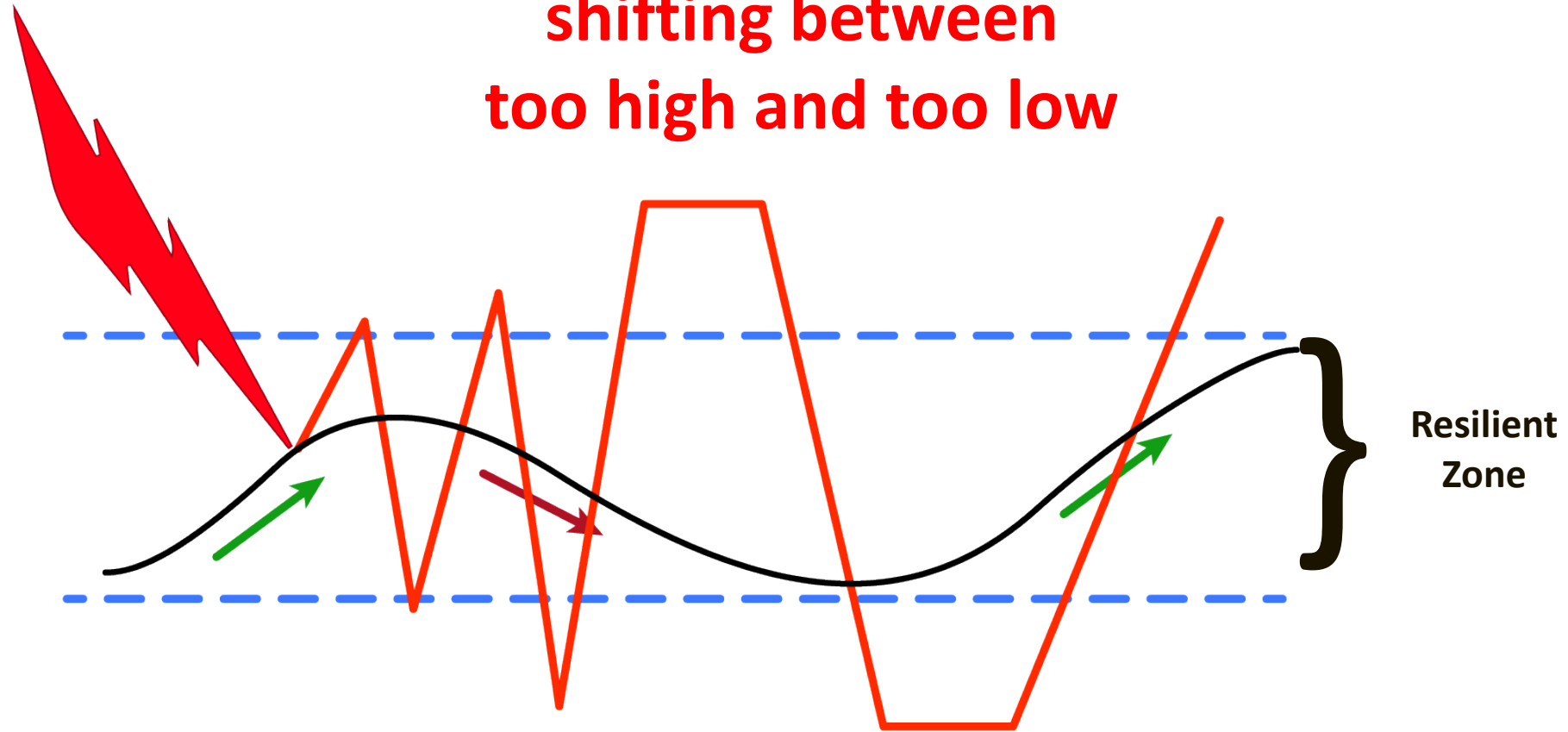
**Stuck in
Low Zone**

- Depressed
- Isolated
- Fatigued
- Numb
- No Energy



Traumatic / Stressful Event

shifting between
too high and too low





Resource List

- Breathing
- Butterfly hug
- Call someone
- Music
- Nature, running water
- Healthy comfort food
- Prayer



Resource List

- Breathing
- Kicking a ball
- Exercise
- Music
- Healthy comfort food
- Call someone
- Prayer



Resource List

- Breathing
- Meditate
- Call someone
- Yoga
- Nature
- Cook
- Nap



SOURCES OF RESILIENCE

- INDIVIDUAL
- FAMILY
- FRIENDS
- COMMUNITY
- CULTURAL
- RELIGIOUS
- SPIRITUAL
- NATURE
- ANCESTORS

VICARIOUS RESILIENCE

- The inspiration and strength that comes from noticing other people's capacity to withstand hardship or their way of just putting one foot in front of the other.
- "Drafting" on another's resilience



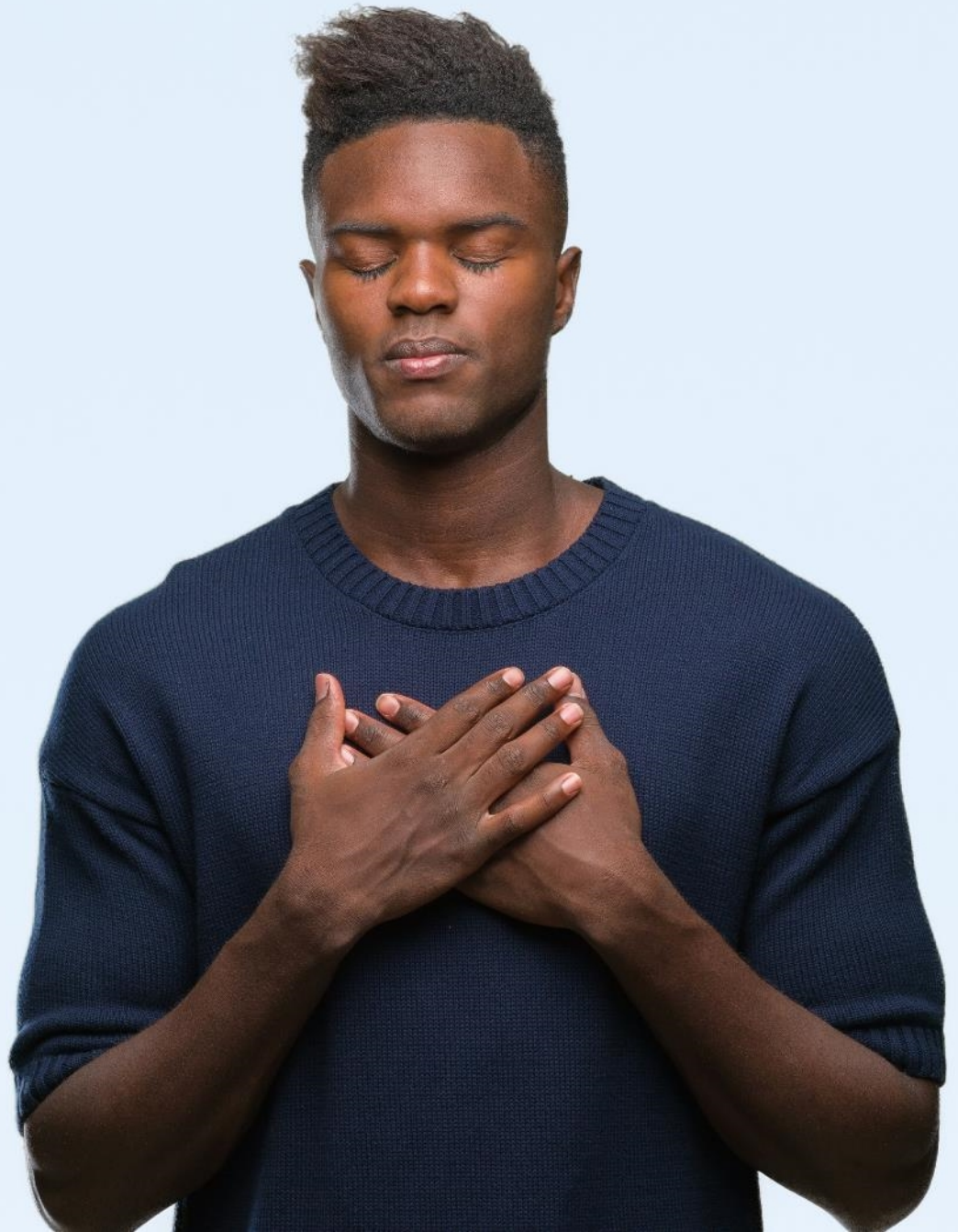




Helpful Self- Talk around Self-Care

- “Taking a break from this work will help me be more effective.”
- “Even though I feel fine I need to pace myself.”
- “I can better care for others if I also attend to my needs.”
- “I’m doing enough.”
- “I can contribute the most by pacing myself.”
- “Letting someone know how affected I am can help me.”
- “I can trust that others can fill in when it’s necessary.”

What will help
you practice
small acts of self-
care?



WHAT IS SELF-COMPASSION?

Being kind to yourself in the presence of your own suffering.

Self-compassion is like being your own best friend.

“What am I experiencing?
What do I need to feel better?”

Components of Self-Compassion

- Clearly seeing our own suffering
- A genuine desire to alleviate our own suffering
- A recognition that suffering is part of the human condition

Research on self-compassion shows:

- Reduces depression, anxiety and shame
- Increases happiness and life satisfaction
- Reduces social comparison
- Associated with healthier body image and less disordered eating
- Reduces caregiver burnout
- Associated with better physical health and immune function
- Associated with better sleep quality

How to Practice Self-Compassion

Be compassionate to others

Ask yourself these three questions:

- How would I treat a friend in this situation?
- What do I need to comfort myself?
- How do I care for myself already?

Self- Compassion Takes Practice





REASONABLE HOPE

HOPE IS SOMETHING WE DO TOGETHER

HOPE AS A VERB

NOT A NOUN

HOPE IS WHAT WE DO WITH OTHERS



Believe the small is not trivial

...And actions have
ripple effects
outward