

**Keeping the Lights on:
Managing Burnout in a World
Under Stress**

Virtual Grand Rounds
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Ours is a traumatic environment

“Psychological trauma [in the pandemic era] is **the unique individual experience of . . . a set of enduring conditions**, in which:

- [Our] **ability to tolerate or integrate the emotional and physical experience is overwhelmed**, and/or
- [We] **experience a sense of threat to life, bodily integrity, or sanity.”**

Saakvitne et al, 2000
Sensorimotor Psychotherapy™ Institute 2012

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Trauma’s Different Sources Ogden 2002

Attack	Inside Threat	Loss/ Death
Child Abuse	Group	
Neglect	Natural Disaster	Witnessing Violence
Torture, Captivity	Pandemic	Terrorism
Trans-generational	Racial	Pre/Perinatal
Medical	Trauma	Accidents
Vicarious Trauma	War	Persecution

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“Outside” Threats

- **When we think about danger, we usually assume that the threat will come from the outside:** we will be mugged, attacked, assaulted or killed
- **The most common ‘outside’ threats include:** child abuse, domestic violence, racial trauma, war-related or neighborhood violence, terrorism, and assault
- **In 2020, we added another outside threat: the COVID virus.** Like war or terrorism, it is everywhere, lurking in our neighborhoods and stalking our streets.
- **Like war or racial trauma, COVID is always ‘there’** even when we are safe in a given moment

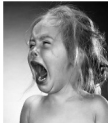
Fisher, 2020

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Humans depend upon the same defensive responses as animals

We either cry for help,



Fight for our lives



Or flee



If we are small, we freeze to become invisible



When there is no way out, we submit and ‘play dead’

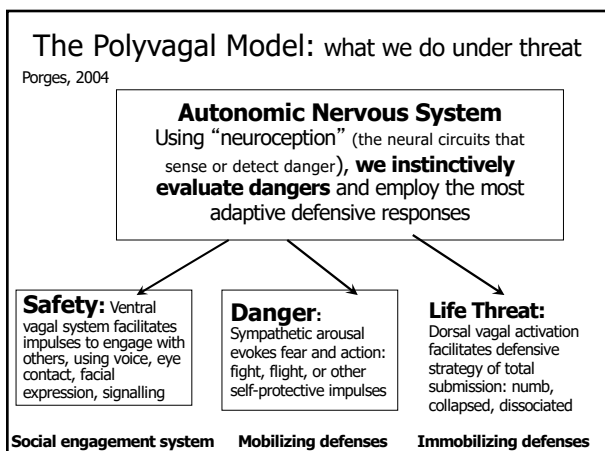
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“Outside” Threats, cont.

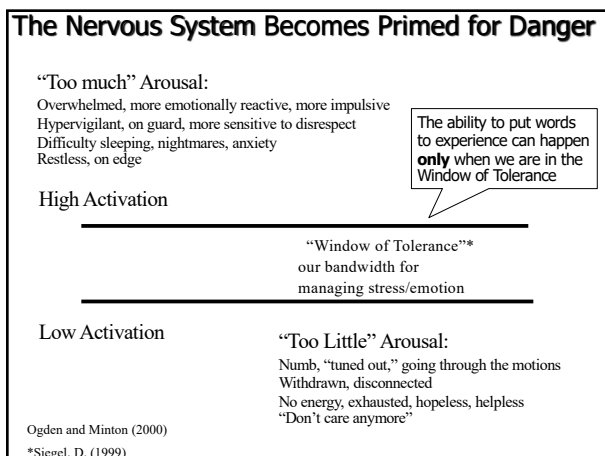
- When we work in the mental health system, **we are working with young people and adults who have experienced a lifetime of outside threats**
- **The effects of violence on our clients include a tendency to more violence:** suicidality, self-harm, and violence toward others are all associated with trauma
- **In 2020, we added yet another outside threat: loss of staff due to COVID.** Now, fewer staff are asked to work longer hours with clients who are triggered by our unsafe world and thus more unsafe in their behavior
- **We are exposed to even more threat than ever before**

Fisher, 2022

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The Reality of Long-term Stress

- But the reality is: even if our bodies feel safe, **there is no time or opportunity for social engagement.**
- **Mobilizing defenses are problematic for mental health professionals:** we can’t flee or fight our vulnerable clients, as much as we might the impulse to do so. We can’t resort to violence in the face of violence, so we ‘snap’ at clients or family and we shut down
- **That leaves us with only total submission responses:** resigned, resentful, collapsed, hopeless, exhausted
- **And when we say, “I’m burned out,” we only feel more hopeless and exhausted!**

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Exposure to Violence Dysregulates Us, Too

Hyperarousal-Related Symptoms:

CHILDREN: more impulsivity, risk-taking, poor judgment, self-destructive behavior, hypervigilance, fear of abandonment, dread of closeness

CAREGIVERS: difficulty sleeping, irritability, more reactive, quicker to anger/frustration
More hypervigilance, fear/dread of relationships with kids, quicker to judgment

Sympathetic Hyperarousal

“Window of Tolerance”
gets smaller and smaller

Parasympathetic
Hypoarousal

Hypoarousal-Related Symptoms:

CHILDREN: flat affect, numb, “not there,”
passive, no initiative or motivation, victim identity

CAREGIVERS: loss of interest, detachment, ‘just do
what I have to do,’ loss of hope, no energy, less joy or
playfulness, it all feels overwhelming

Ogden and Minton (2000);
Fisher, 2006
*Siegel (1999)

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**Regulating Trauma-related
Activation in Ourselves—for Us!**

•It is hard to regulate our nervous systems under prolonged stress on the job, at home, and in the world. It is even harder when we are dysregulated by our clients’ trauma-related acting out behavior.

•**Even if we handle the situation and our jobs well, it will take a toll on us**—especially after two long years!

•**Our beliefs or thoughts also contribute to regulating or increasing our arousal:** if we have negative thoughts, our tension levels will increase. With no time for social engagement or opportunities to acknowledge the stress, we can’t process the stress of the ‘system’ and the clients

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Care for the Caregiver

•Experts agree that **attitude and belief profoundly affect the nervous system and therefore the stress response.**

•**But how do we cultivate positive beliefs and curiosity about inappropriate behavior? Or a pandemic? Or a war?** How do we cultivate curiosity or gratitude in the face of what we are going through?? Where do we get the energy to keep going?

•We can **use an adaptation model that widens our perspective.** An adaptation model assumes that **all behavior in the human animal arises as the best possible adaptation to the environment.** Even the most bizarre behavior is trying to serve an adaptive purpose Fisher, 2022

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Care for the Caregiver, cont.

- **But how could burnout exist for a positive reason???**
- **Neuroscience suggests that parasympathetic shutting down is meant to conserve energy, to help us endure.** Being disconnected from our emotions or caring less means less work for the nervous system.
- Sympathetic hyperarousal is the body's attempt to give us a burst of energy to flee or fight or hide. Even irritability is its attempt to defend against threat! The problem is that prolonged sympathetic activation is exhausting. . .
- If burnout is the body's way of telling us to slow down and conserve energy, maybe we can see it as a friend, not a sign that we need another kind of job

Fisher, 2022

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Care for the Caregiver, p. 3

- It's difficult to hear the body's message when we are under stress and when we have to keep going day after day after day, but it helps to think: **How can I conserve energy while still doing my job?**
- **Make it OK with you to work less hard when you're working too much. See what happens if you acknowledge to the clients that you're tired and your brain isn't working.** Some will be triggered, but some will appreciate the authenticity especially if you're relaxed about it. We can't all be "on" all the time!
- Cultivate a system of meaning that helps you remember that you are doing something important for the human race at the hardest possible time in recent history

Fisher, 2022

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Why it's good to be good to ourselves

- **Research has consistently shown a relationship between more stress and decreased immune system functioning.** In a 1984 study of medical students, **loneliness** was also associated with a lowered immune system response
- **Tendencies toward optimism and pessimism also affect the immune system.** A study of short-term vs. persistent stress found that **optimism lessened the negative effects of persistent stress.**
- Another study found that **self-affirmation** down-regulated persistent sympathetic arousal

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Why it's good to be good to ourselves,
cont.

- **These findings demonstrate the crucial importance of not only helping our clients learn to regulate their fear and anxiety**, and their depressive states—for their safety as well as well-being. But we can't forget our own nervous systems!
- **Optimism or self-affirmation can be hard to find a time of stress, but we can cultivate those qualities in ourselves. How do we do that?**
- **Practice seeing the glass as half-full instead of empty!**
"This sucks, but I'm doing it," "It will all get done somehow some way," "I'm doing the best I can"

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Why it's good to be good to ourselves,
p. 3

- **Breathe. . . Catch yourself tensing up or giving up, and just pause and take a breath.** Even in a crisis, there is time to breathe, and oxygen helps with stress
- **Pat yourself on the back each day for just getting through the challenges**
- **Laugh at the worst moments—laugh when you want to lash out or walk away or don't care anymore.** The more we smile and laugh, the more the body will believe we're getting through it.
- **Relax your body even if its just for a minute here and there.** Even in a crisis, it helps

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Why it's good to be good to ourselves,
p. 4

- **Avoid believing that you are burned out! What we believe affects the body and nervous system.** "I can't do it" increases the impulse to collapse or walk away. "I'm burning out" increasing parasympathetic activation
- **"My nervous system is freaking out"** is a more accurate description of what's happening to us all. We can help our nervous systems by slowing down when they tell us, too. Keep doing what you have to do but do it slower. That tells your nervous system that you're not in danger
- **Someday, we'll be proud of how we all got through this time, and we'll tell our grandchildren the story**

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*“Your role as
helper is to BE
things, not to DO
things”*

Nar-Anon

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“The primary therapeutic attitude [that
needs to be] demonstrated [by the
therapist] throughout a session is one of :

P = playfulness
A = acceptance
C = curiosity
E = empathy

Daniel Hughes, 2006

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“Leavening” Distress States with Positive
States

“Playful interactions, focused on positive
affective experiences, are never forgotten . . .
Shame is always met with empathy, followed
by curiosity. . . . All communication is
‘embodied’ within the nonverbal. . . . **All
resistance is met with [playfulness,
acceptance, curiosity, and empathy],
rather than being confronted.**”

Hughes, 2006

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