

# Taking Care of Yourself Helps You Help Others

## *The Ethics of Wellness among Rehabilitation Counselors*

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# Agenda

- What is counselor “burnout”?
- Burnout as an ethical issue for counselors
- What is the impact of burnout?
- What are the factors that lead to burnout?
- How do you know if you are burnt out?
- What can you do to avoid/minimize burnout?
- Steps/strategies to taking care of yourself

# Job Burnout

- First recognized by Freudenberger (1974)
- Defined as:

A syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with people in some capacity

# Burnout as a Multidimensional Construct

- Emotional exhaustion
  - Inability to feel or express empathy toward clients
- Depersonalization
  - Results in detachment from clients and negative attitudes towards clients and the work itself
- Reduced personal accomplishment
  - Low evaluation of self and work

# In order words...

- Burnout is a slow degradation of a counselor's ability to empathize with clients over time

(Lawson, 2011)

# Burnout vs. Depression

- Results from problems within the employment setting
- Specific to work and is focused on relationships within the work environment



# Burnout

- Affects individuals who do not acknowledge, or adequately deal with, the stress associated with his/her job
- More prevalent among workers in intense and continuous human contact (e.g., rehabilitation counselors)

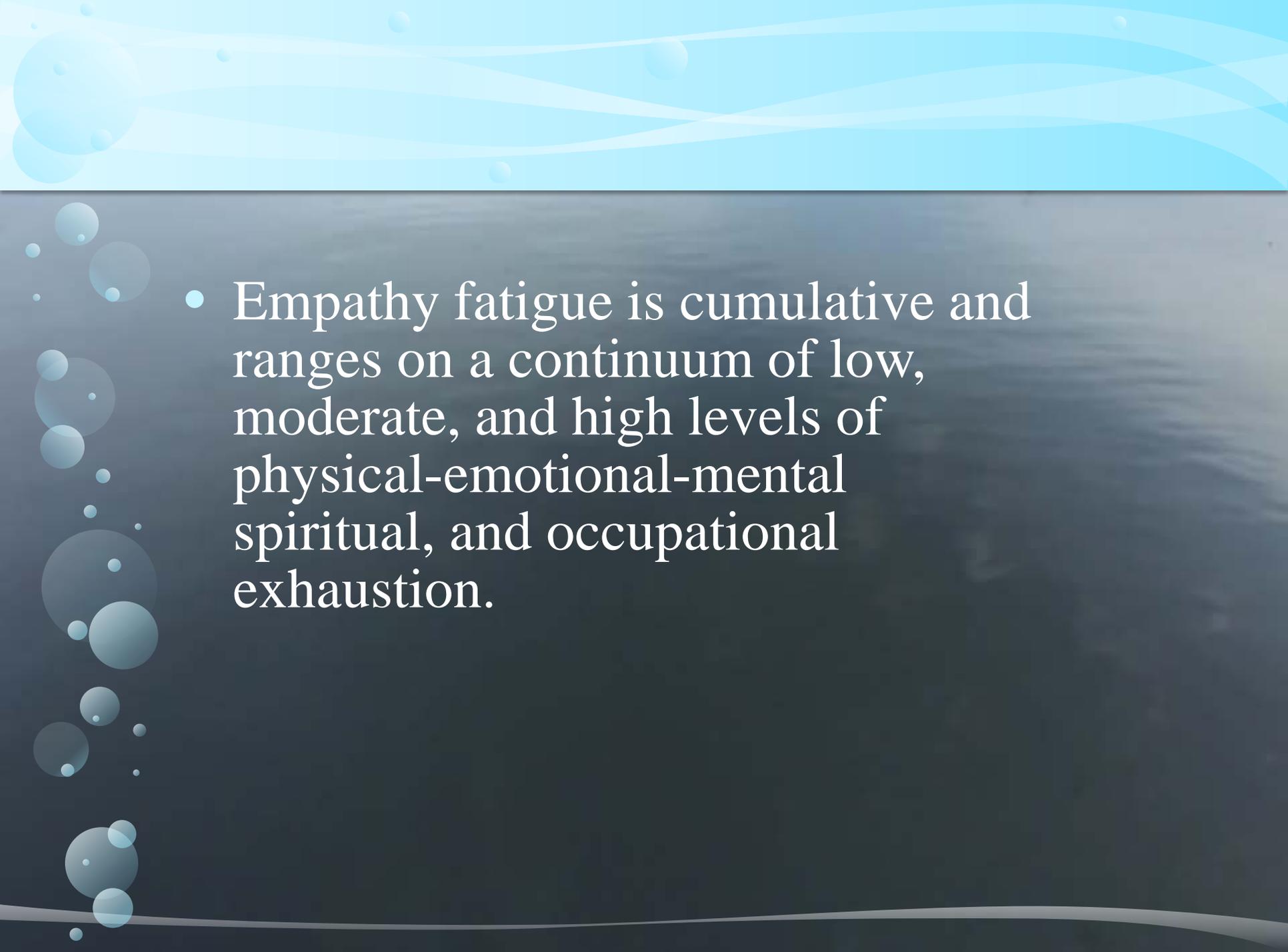
# Empathy Fatigue (EF)

- *“ A dynamic state of psychological, emotional, social, physical, occupational, and spiritual exhaustion that occurs on a continuum, resulting from the helpers’ own wounds that are continually revisited by their client’s life-stories of stress, chronic illness, mental/physical disability, trauma, grief, and loss. ”*

(Stebnicki, 2000)

# EF Theory

- Persons who work in “high touch” professions are more vulnerable than those that don’t...
- A natural artifact of working with patients that have intense acute and chronic physical conditions, mental health conditions, and behavioral health issues.
- Many times an unconscious process where the professional and those around them may not recognize.

- 
- Empathy fatigue is cumulative and ranges on a continuum of low, moderate, and high levels of physical-emotional-mental spiritual, and occupational exhaustion.

- More prevalent among counselors who facilitate empathic approaches, cultivating client connections and relationships
- Attending, listening, acting empathically to help our clients gain insight into their stress, grief, loss, or traumatic experiences
- *The search for personal meaning and purpose of our client's pain and suffering may contribute to the helper's spiritual fatigue experience.*



FreakingNews.com

# Why is this an important issue?

- Impact on service provider's psychological and physical health and wellbeing
- Effect on quality of service provided to client
  - Counselors may deny clients' traumatic experience
  - Overdiagnose and pathologize clients
  - Become increasingly less attuned and empathic
- Effects counselors ethical responsibility
  - Counselors may tend to their own issues at the expense of the clients' issue (if you're depressed, will you recognize your client's depressive symptomology?)

# Ethical responsibility

- SECTION A: THE COUNSELING RELATIONSHIP
  - A.1. CLIENT WELFARE
    - a. Primary Responsibility: The primary responsibility of rehabilitation counselors is to respect the dignity and to promote the welfare of clients.

# Section D: Professional Responsibility

## D.1. PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE

- d. MONITOR EFFECTIVENESS: Rehabilitation counselors continually monitor their effectiveness as professionals and take steps to improve when necessary. Rehabilitation counselors take reasonable steps to seek peer supervision as needed to evaluate their efficacy as rehabilitation counselors.

## Section D3: FUNCTIONAL COMPETENCE

### a. Impairment:

*Rehabilitation counselors are alert to the signs of impairment from their own physical, mental, or emotional problems, and refrain from offering or providing professional services when such impairment is likely to harm clients or others. They seek assistance for problems that reach the level of professional impairment, and, if necessary, they limit, suspend, or terminate their professional responsibilities until such time it is determined that they may safely resume their work.*

## Section D3: FUNCTIONAL COMPETENCE

### a. Impairment (cont'd)

Rehabilitation counselors assist colleagues or supervisors in recognizing their own professional impairment and provide consultation and assistance when warranted with colleagues or supervisors showing signs of impairment and intervene as appropriate to prevent harm to clients.



# Consequences of: burnout, empathy fatigue, compassion fatigue

- Poor job performance
- Low productivity
- Ineffectiveness
- Increased absenteeism
- Turnover
- Seek administrative jobs
- Feelings of guilt
- Family problems
- Social and personal dysfunction
- Complacency
- Poor health and wellbeing

# Symptoms of Burnout

(Have you experienced any of these lately?)

- Affective

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Inability to show empathy
- Problems with self-esteem
- Difficulty hiding negative feelings toward clients
- May show hostility
- Boredom
- Apathy
- Cynicism

- Cognitive

- Feelings of failure
  - Feelings of not being in control
  - Lack of concentration
  - Forgetfulness
  - Detachment
  - Poor decision-making
- Less likely to acknowledge or discuss these symptoms

- Behaviors

- Impulsivity
- Change in eating habits
- May show more aggression
- Isolation from co-workers
- Hyper/Hypoactivity
- Development of addictive behaviors
- Lack of motivation
- Low productivity

- Physical

- Fatigue
- Psychosomatic disorders
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Headaches
- Back pains
- Exacerbations of diseases (e.g., asthma)

# Primary factors associated with burnout

- Size of caseload
- Difficulty of client problems
- Clients with excessive demands
- Time spent in direct care of clients
- Working in rural settings (lack of available resources)
- Lack of supervisor support
- Lack of recognition for good work

- Amount of education and training received
- Unrealistic expectations
- Perceived lack of control over work
- Unclear work procedures and policies
- Years on the job (equivocal findings)
  - Newer counselors at more risk of burnout
  - Counselors with longer years on the job may experience burnout due to lack of advancement opportunities
- Lack of family support

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So what can you do?

Your wellness is your response - ability!

# What is your stress-coping style?

- Problem-focused coping
  - Aimed at problem solving or doing something to alter the source of stress. Strategies include:
    - Planning, taking direct action, suppression of competing activities (i.e., keeping yourself from being distracted)
- Emotion-focused coping
  - Aimed at reducing or managing the emotional distress that is associated with by the situation. Strategies include:
    - Seeking social support for emotional reasons, venting

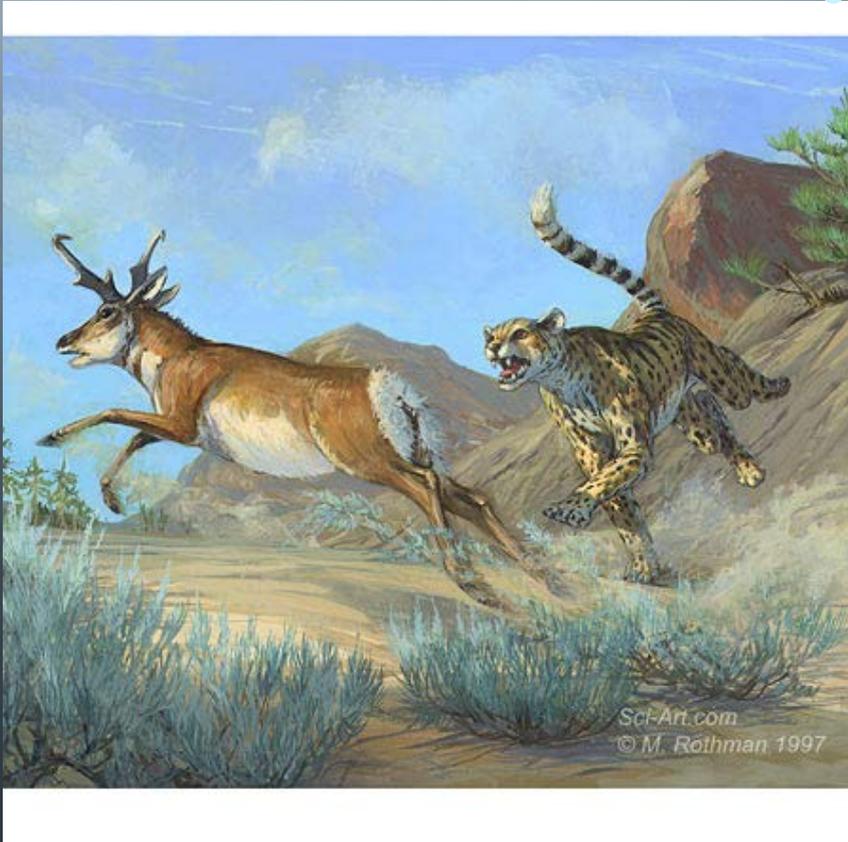
- Avoidant coping
  - Reducing one's efforts to deal with the stressor, even giving up the attempt to attain goals with which the stressor is interfering. Strategies include:
    - Denial, behavioral disengagement, mental disengagement (e.g., turning on TV instead of dealing with stressor), alcohol-drug disengagement.
- Which coping style do you predominantly use?

How's that working for you?

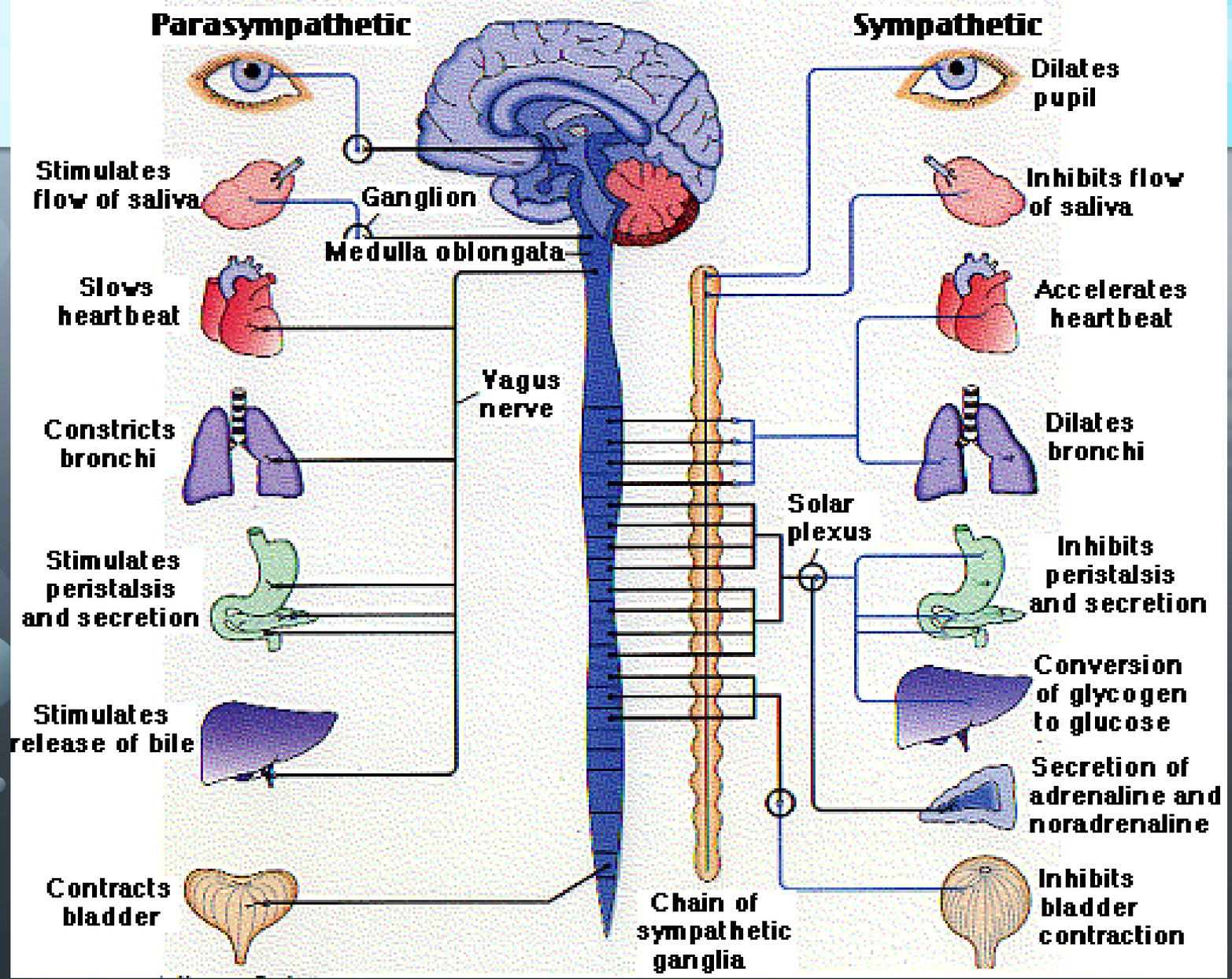
# The impact of stress

- Autonomic Nervous System (ANS)
  - Sympathetic Nervous System
    - Fight or Flight; gas pedal
  - Parasympathetic Nervous System
    - Rest and Digest; brakes

# The threat doesn't have to be physical...



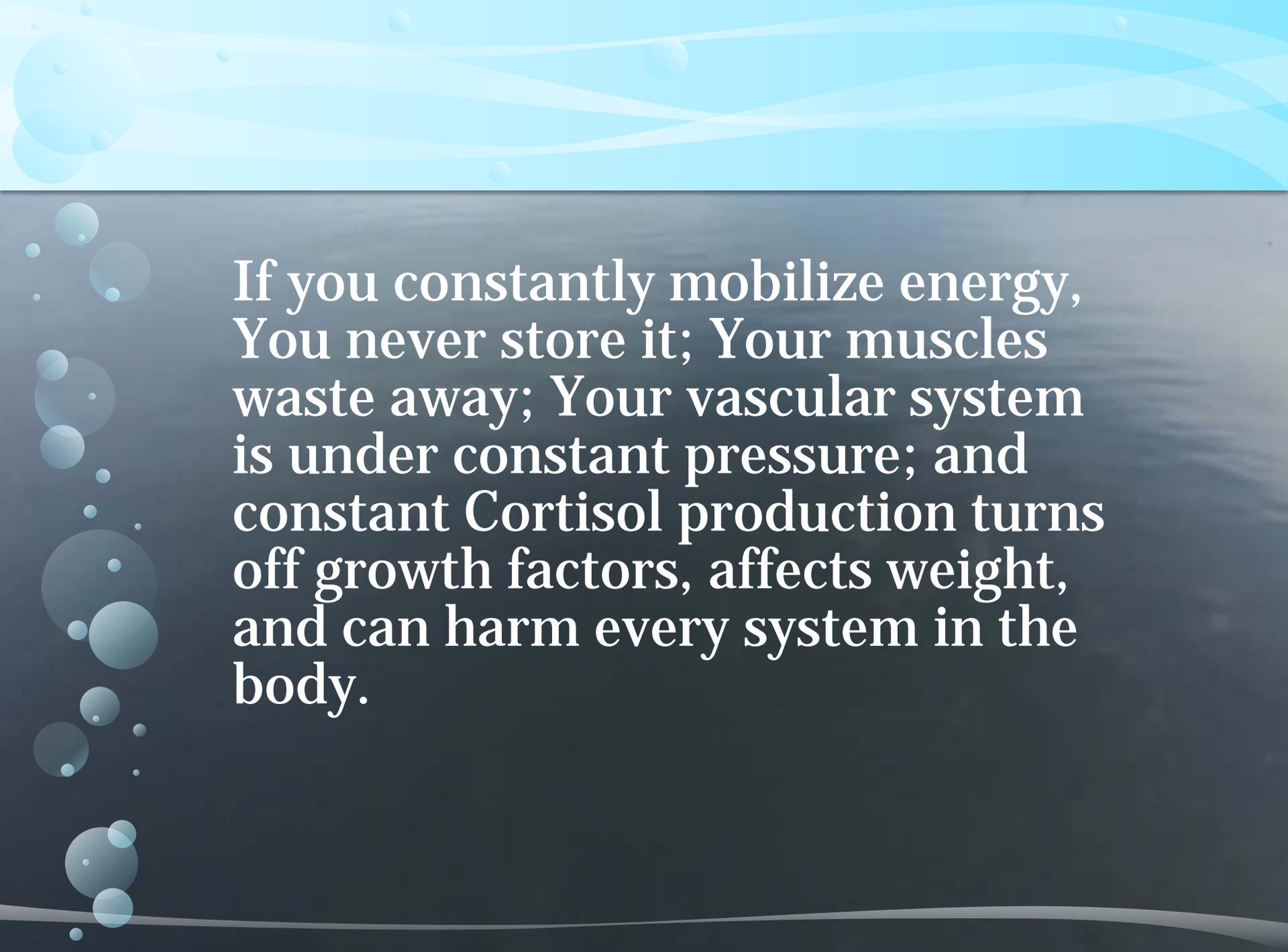
- The brain doesn't distinguish between an actual threat or a mental representation of a threat – the body will still react by initiating the sympathetic nervous system (flight or fight response)



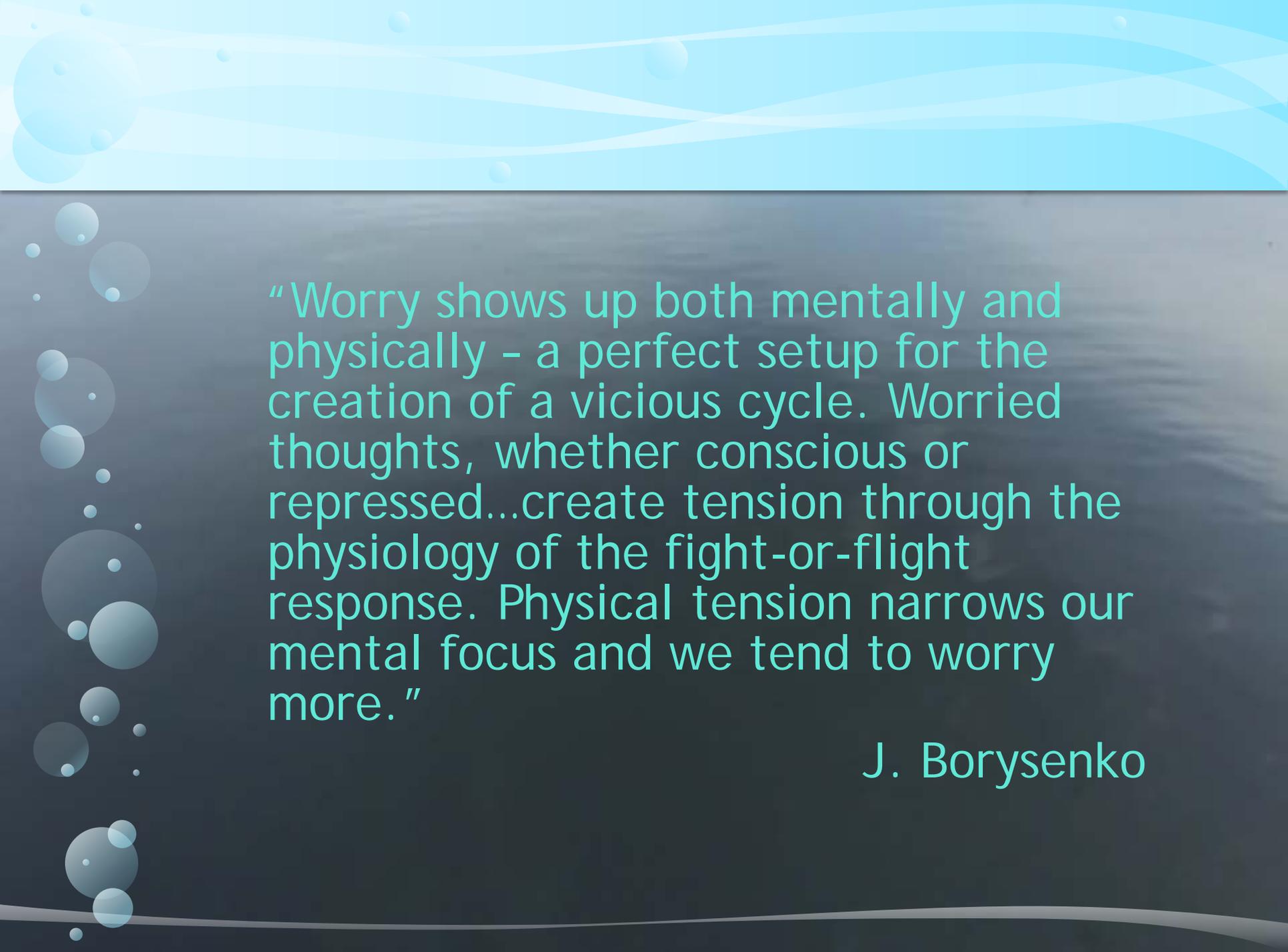
# We are affected by thoughts and emotions around us



- Ours is a sympathetic nervous system dominated society
- Chronic state of flight-or-fight

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If you constantly mobilize energy,  
You never store it; Your muscles  
waste away; Your vascular system  
is under constant pressure; and  
constant Cortisol production turns  
off growth factors, affects weight,  
and can harm every system in the  
body.



"Worry shows up both mentally and physically - a perfect setup for the creation of a vicious cycle. Worried thoughts, whether conscious or repressed...create tension through the physiology of the fight-or-flight response. Physical tension narrows our mental focus and we tend to worry more."

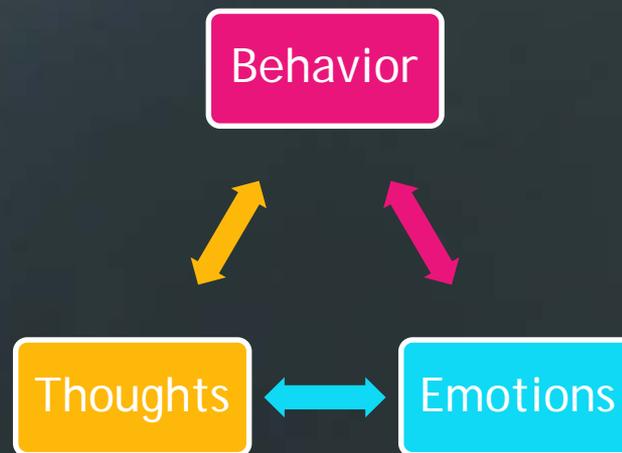
J. Borysenko

# What can you achieve by paying attention to your breathing?

- Feeling relaxed, positive, secure, confident
- Allows 2 branches of ANS to get in sync
- Heart and breathing rhythms = smooth/even
- Eases tension/balances hormones
- Experience sense of well-being

# Reframing thoughts

- Am I thinking rationally?
- Remember that your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors each affect the other - by changing your behavior or thoughts, you can change your emotions.



# Consequences of Healthy/Positive Emotions

- Improved memory
- Improved performance and achievement
- Better decision-making
- Increased mental flexibility
- Improved immune system function
- Lower blood pressure
- Improved hormonal balance
- Longer life span

# Broaden-and-Build Theory

- Barbara Fredrickson (2003)
- Experiences of positive emotions broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires, which in turn serves to build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources
- Positive affect produces a broad, flexible cognitive organization and ability to integrate diverse material, where as negative emotions tend to narrow people's attention (not seeing the forest for the trees)

# Promoting positive affect/emotions:

- Some positive psychology exercises
  - “3 things a day”
    - Write down each night 3 things that went well that day and what YOU did to contribute to that.
  - Gratitude journal/letter
    - Write a sincere letter of gratitude to someone and read it to them.
  - Savoring (vs. mindless eating)
    - Next time you eat something, take the time to truly taste and enjoy it. Slow down!

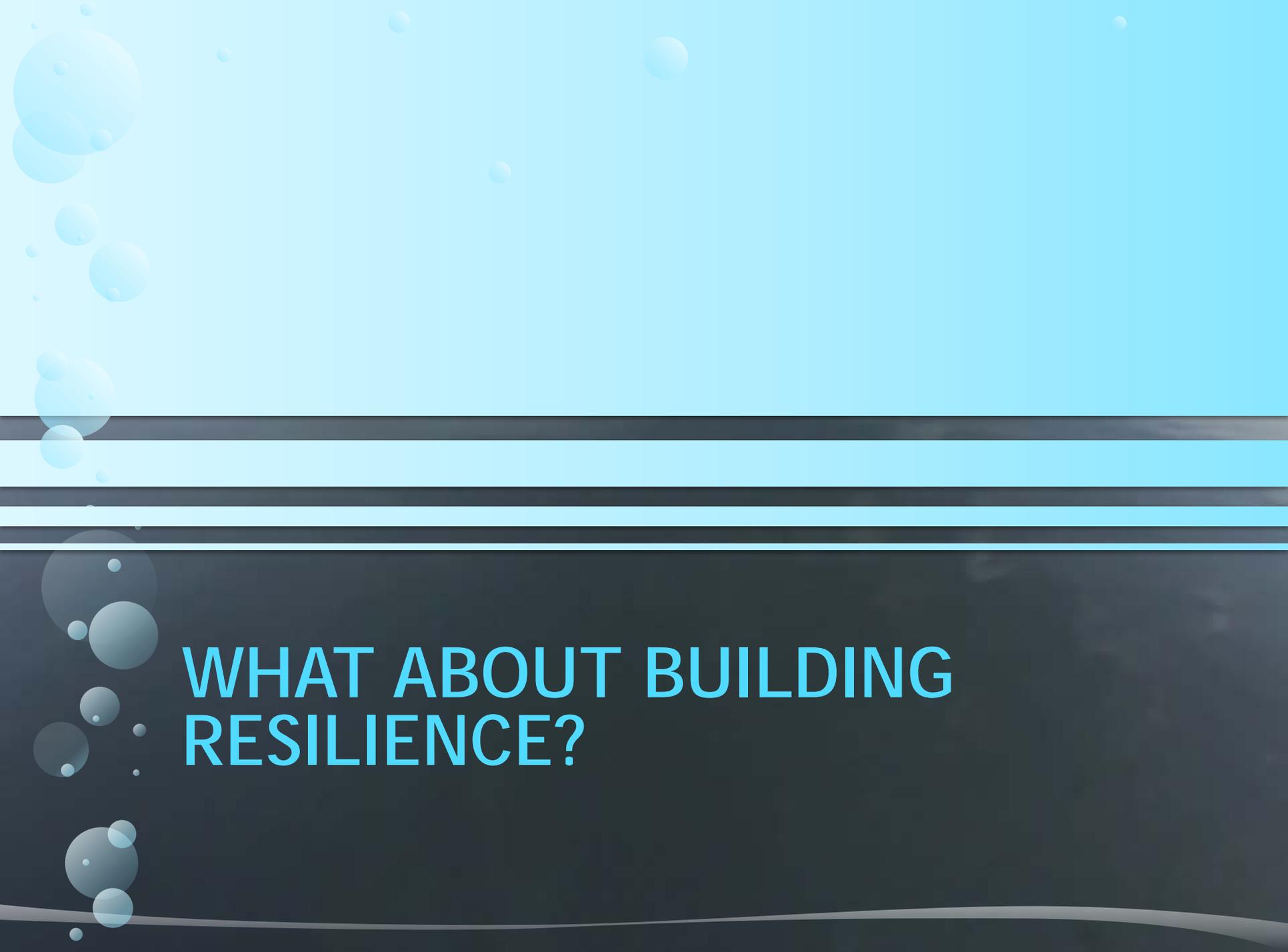
# Achieve Personal Wellness

- Stay in the present
- Exercise (your mind as well as your body)
- Get adequate rest and sleep
- Focus on a healthy diet (increase fruits, vegetables, whole grains; decrease sugars, fats)
- Develop a supportive network
- Recreation and enjoyable activities
- Relaxation and stress management

# Recommendations: Organizational

- Supervisors play a key role
  - Create support systems for employees
  - Improve working relationships between staff members
  - Staff meetings could focus on allowing staff to provide feedback and support for each other
  - Provide performance feedback on a consistent basis
- Agency policies and procedures should be clearly defined and explained to new counselors; perform periodic updates

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- Decrease number of clients
  - Balance number of demanding clients among counselors
  - Hire additional staff to handle paperwork, etc.
  - Help newer counselors develop more realistic work expectations
  - More training on both positive and negative aspects of work
  - Promote having outside interests (e.g., exercise, social activities)
  - Agency wellness programs (e.g., DARS)
- 



**WHAT ABOUT BUILDING  
RESILIENCE?**

# An ecological perspective of resilience

*“In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways.” (Ungar, 2008, 2011)*

# ecological levels

## FOUR ECOLOGICAL LEVELS EXAMINED

- INDIVIDUAL LEVEL



(microsystem)

- PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS



(mesosystem)

- COMMUNITY LEVEL Schools

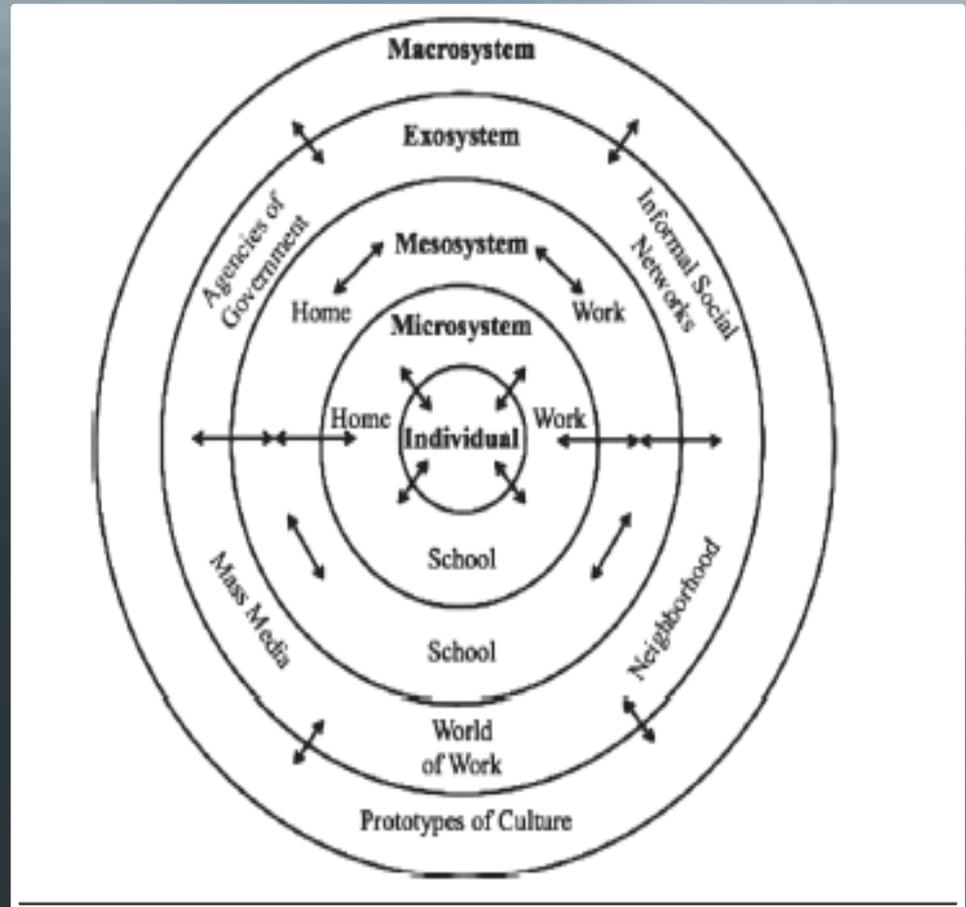
- Neighborhoods
- Churches
- Community programs



(exosystem)

- SOCIETAL LEVEL

- Governmental programs



Bronfenbrenner's (1979)  
Social Ecology Model

# Do our values and good intentions as counselors sometimes get in the way of our best ethical practice?

- Example: failure to observe appropriate boundaries with clients because we want to help them
- Example: always putting the needs of others ahead of our own needs so that there's never enough time for self-care

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What keeps me from  
taking better care of  
myself?

Specific barriers in my life?



What are some of the things I  
can do to avoid burnout and  
put some of these strategies  
into practice?



Individual level?

Relationship level?

Community level?



# Bottom line...

It is your ethical responsibility to be well,  
and to recognize signs of stress and overload.

Take care of yourself - both you and others  
will benefit!

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