

Protecting Against Vicarious Trauma:  
Tools and Strategies for Providers Working with Survivors of  
Domestic Violence, Sexual Abuse, and Trafficking

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*This project is also supported by Grant No. SJI-22-T-037 from the State Justice Institute. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed by program faculty and in program materials are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the State Justice Institute.*

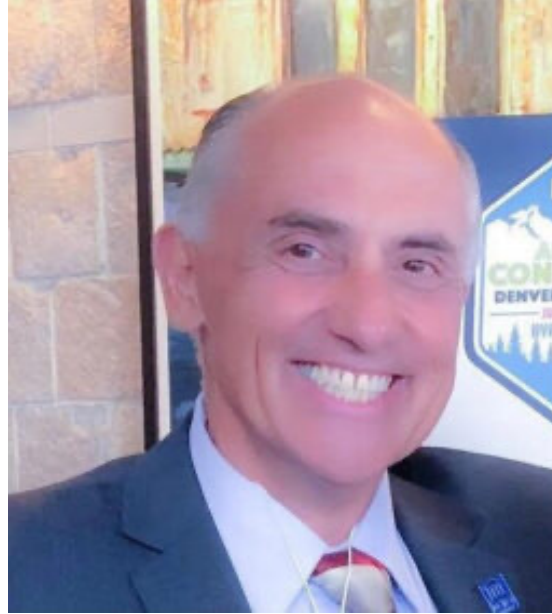
# Today's Faculty



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# Overview: Protecting against vicarious trauma symptoms

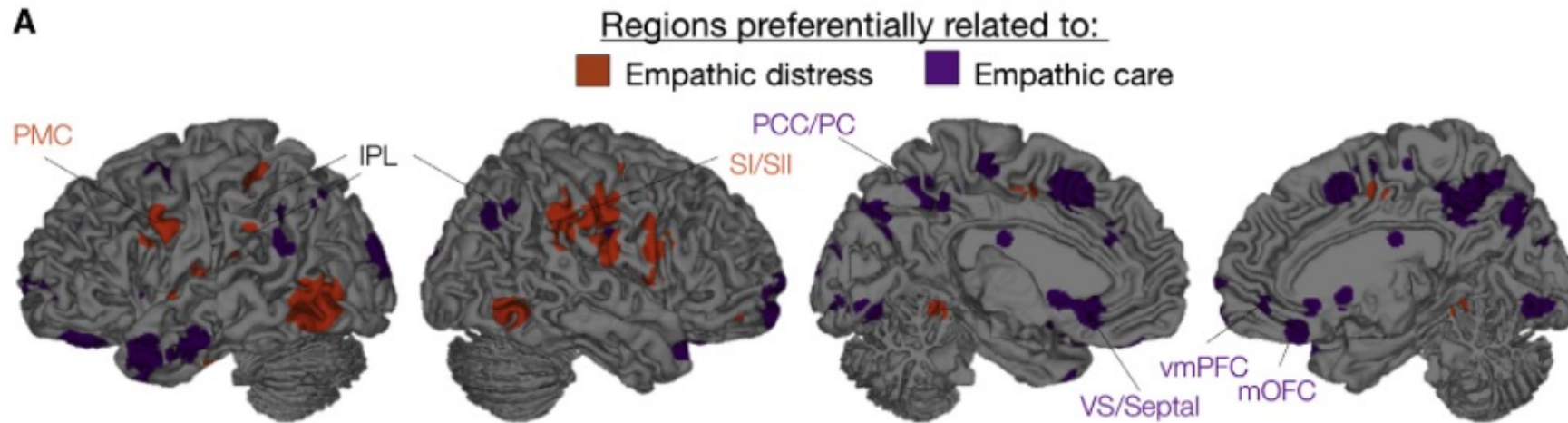
- I. Vicarious traumatization and ways it can manifest among service providers
- II. Role of the nervous system in manifestation and mitigation of vicarious trauma symptoms
- III. Tools and strategies to increase wellbeing and strengthen resilience

How can routine exposure to indirect trauma impact providers?

**Vicarious Traumatization:** Traumatic responses we can experience due to exposure to the suffering of others or the graphic details of their experience

- Empathic Distress Fatigue
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD, DSM-5)
- Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)

# Empathy: two distinguishable pathways



## Empathic Distress (affective empathy system)

- Self-oriented emotional response to a person's suffering (i.e., walks *in* another's shoes)
- Desire to withdraw from the situation and disconnect from the suffering individual to reduce personal distress
- Self-other distinction is blurred (self same as other)
- Neurobiological substrates: Premotor and Somatosensory cortical activity

## Empathic Care (cognitive empathy system)

- Other-oriented emotional response to a person's suffering (i.e., walks *beside another*, not *in* their shoes)
- Altruistic motivation to see that suffering relieved (for a review see Baston, Ahmad & Lishner, 2009)
- Neurobiological substrates: Ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC), Medial Orbitofrontal Cortex (mOFC), Nucleus Accumbens (Nac)

Image from: Ashar, Y. K., Andrews-Hanna, J. R., Dimidjian, S., & Wager, T. D. (2017). Empathic care and distress: predictive brain markers and dissociable brain systems. *Neuron*, 94(6), 1263-1273.

Singer, T., & Klimecki, O. M. (2014). Empathy and compassion. *Current Biology*, 24(18), R875-R878.

# Empathic Distress Fatigue

Can be caused by prolonged or chronic exposure to the suffering of others

Signs and symptoms:

- Feeling numb or disconnected
- Isolating from others
- Lack of energy
- Feeling overwhelmed, powerless, or hopeless
- Fatigue
- Trouble focusing
- Headaches

From a neuroscientific standpoint “compassion fatigue” is more accurately labeled Empathic Distress Fatigue (e.g., Hofmeyer, Kennedy & Taylor, 2019)

# Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

In the *Fifth Edition* of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013)*, repeated or extreme indirect exposure to aversive details of a trauma can now constitute a qualifying “criterion A” trauma exposure

Four symptom clusters:

- (1) Reexperiencing
- (2) Avoidance
- (3) Negative alterations in mood and cognition
- (4) Alterations in arousal

A minimum number of symptoms must be present from each of the four symptom clusters, last for more than one month, and cause functional impairment in one or more important life domains



# Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)

Similar to PTSD but is induced only by secondary, rather than primary, exposure to trauma (Baird & Kracen, 2006; Figley, 1995)

Distinguished from PTSD:

- Secondary exposure to aversive details needn't be repeated or extreme
- STS symptoms related to secondary trauma can include mild and subclinical symptoms

Definition is still debated in the literature

# Perceived threat and the alarm system

## “Fight-or-Flight”

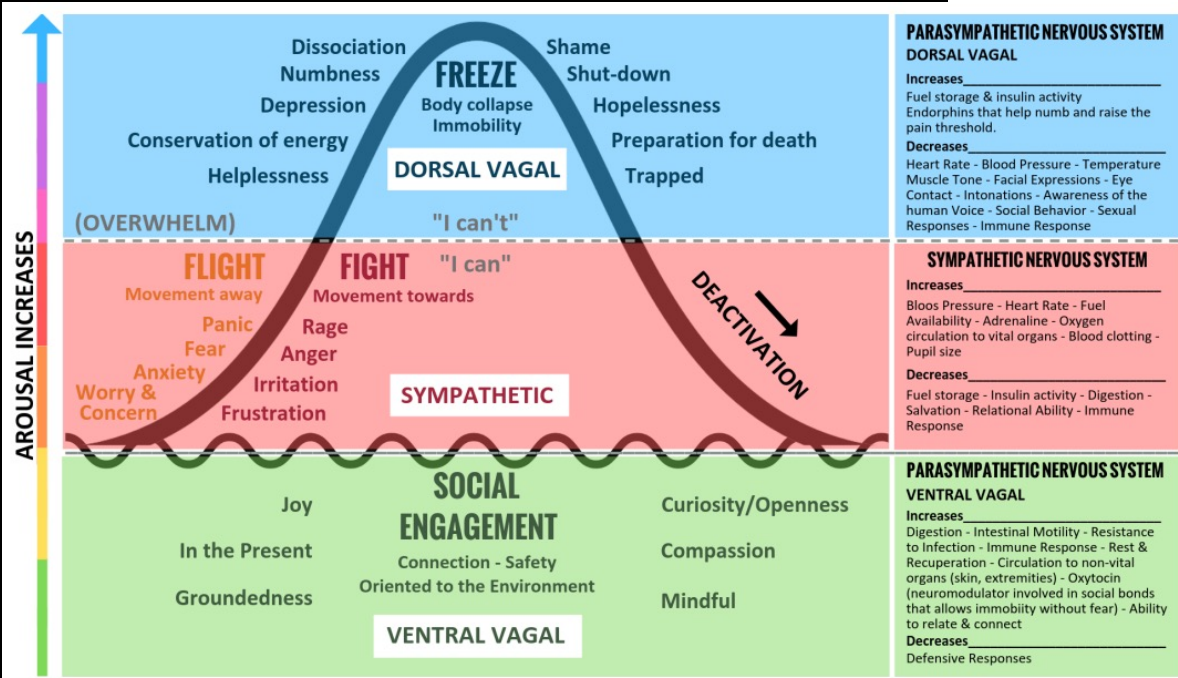


Fig. 1 - Adapted from Ruby Jo Walker, Cheryl Sanders, Steve Hoskinson, Steven Porges, and Peter Levine

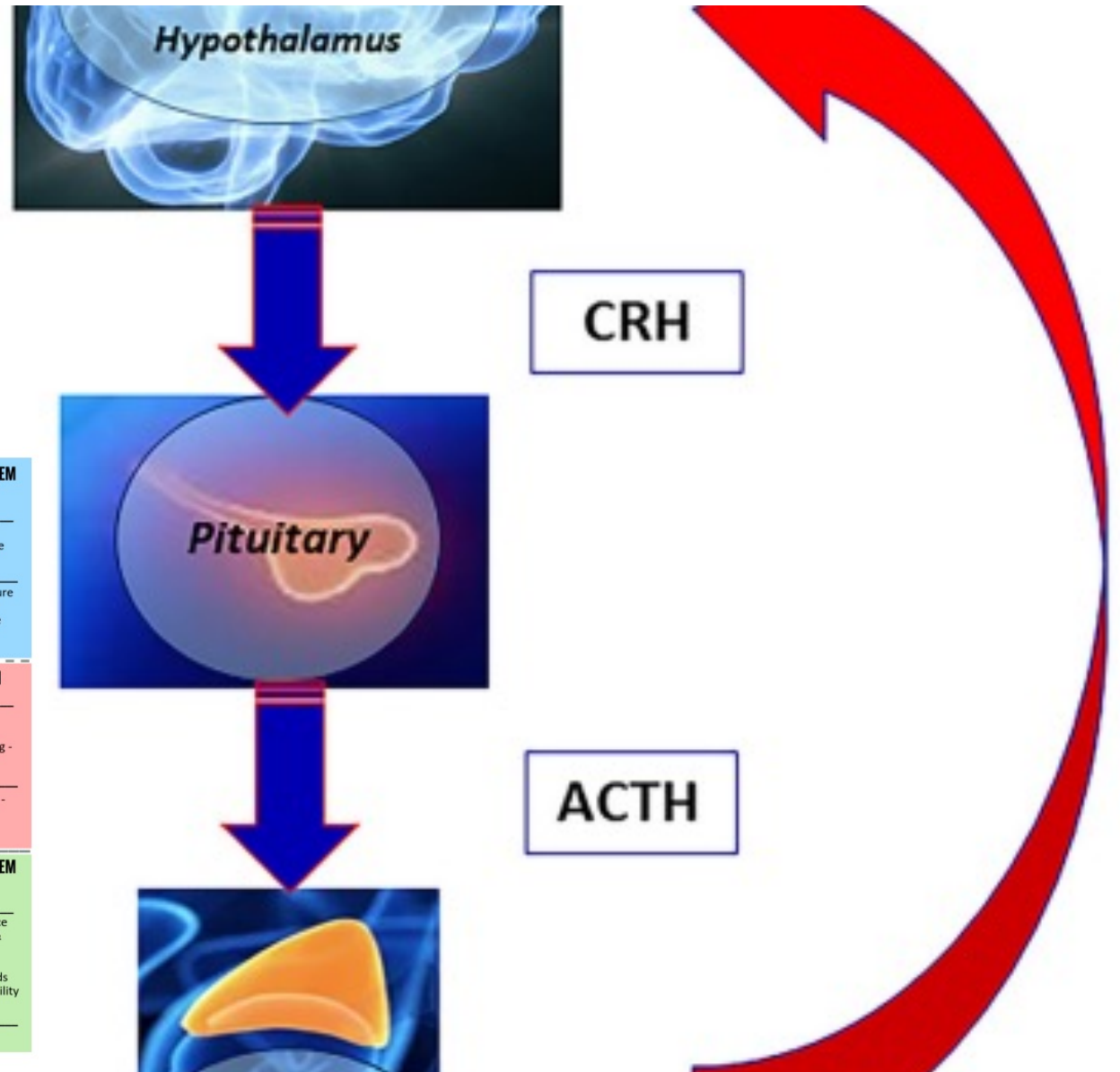


Image above adapted from: McEwen, B. S., & Akil, H. (2020). Revisiting the stress concept: implications for affective disorders. *Journal of Neuroscience*, 40(1),12-21

# Behavioral System

Panic is body's natural alarm response when it perceives imminent threat

Behavioral action tendency associated with panic is *escape* oriented

*Fight* off threat or *Flee* from threat

*Freeze* (dissociative/numbing response): escape cognitively when fight or flight is unviable

Source: Telch, M. J. The Nature and Causes of Anxiety and Panic.

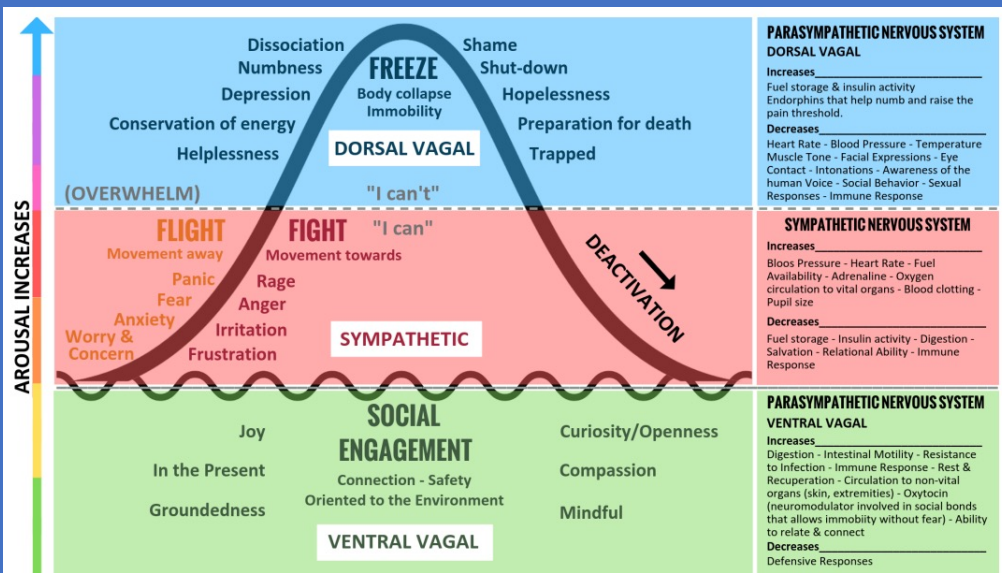


Fig. 1 - Adapted from Ruby Jo Walker, Cheryl Sanders, Steve Hoskinson, Steven Porges, and Peter Levine

# Cognitive System

Shifts in attention and orienting response promote vigilance and scanning the environment for potential threat. Narrowing the field of consciousness in response to stimuli that are perceived to resemble potential threat

Form protective cognitions (“core beliefs”) about safety from threat informed from prior experiences

These changes in core beliefs can reinforce recurring-traumatic stress reactivity because of their role in perpetuating exaggerated perceptions of imminent threat after the original threatening event or danger period has passed

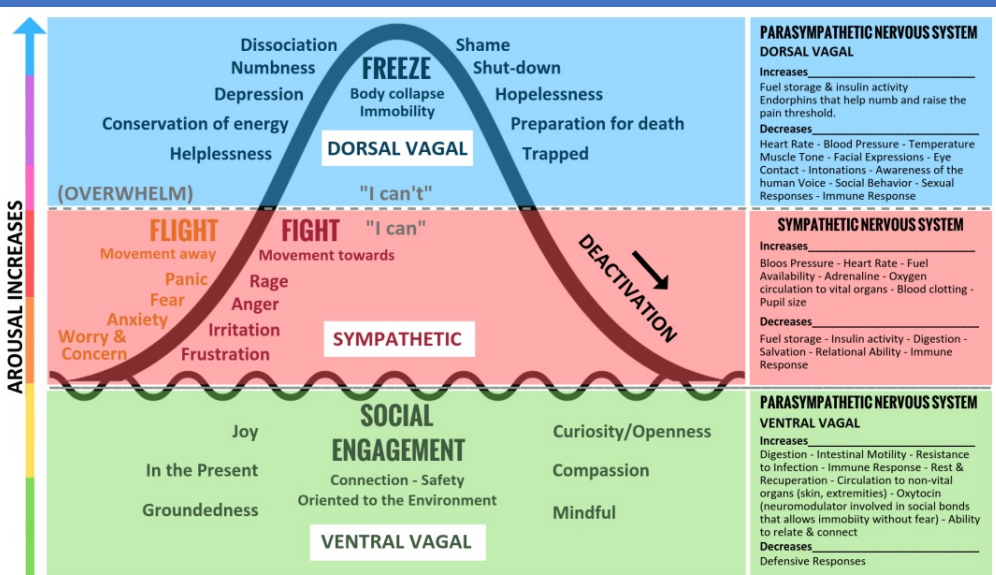


Fig. 1 - Adapted from Ruby Jo Walker, Cheryl Sanders, Steve Hoskinson, Steven Porges, and Peter Levine

Source: Telch, M. J. The Nature and Causes of Anxiety and Panic.

# Physical System

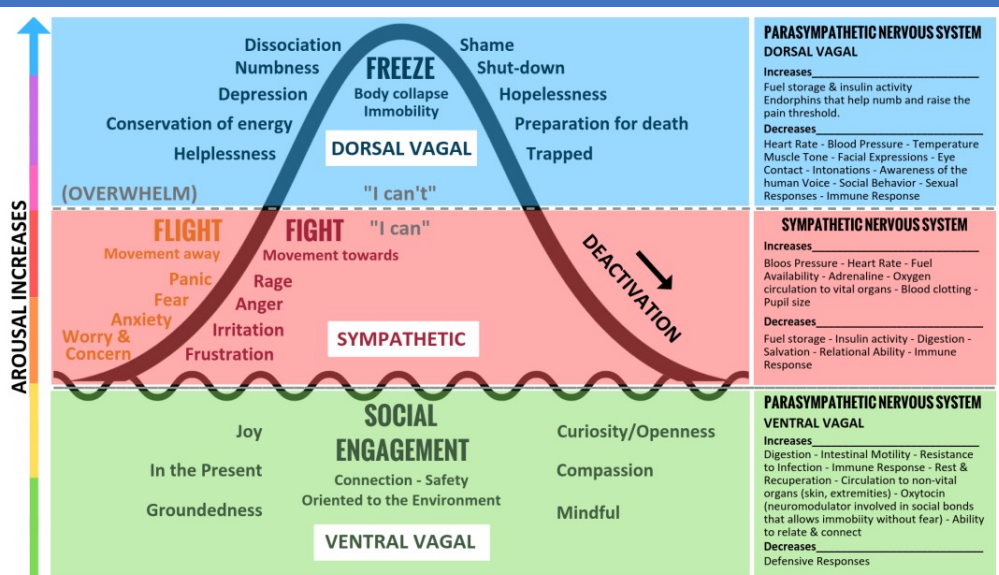


Fig. 1 - Adapted from Ruby Jo Walker, Cheryl Sanders, Steve Hoskinson, Steven Porges, and Peter Levine

In preparation for fighting off or fleeing from threat...

Blood from the digestive system is diverted to large muscle groups

Rapid heartrate and increased blood pressure facilitate:

- Release of adrenaline throughout the body
- Increase oxygen supply to large muscles

Blood vessels in the skin, intestines, and extremities constrict

Glucose is secreted by the liver into the bloodstream to facilitate stamina

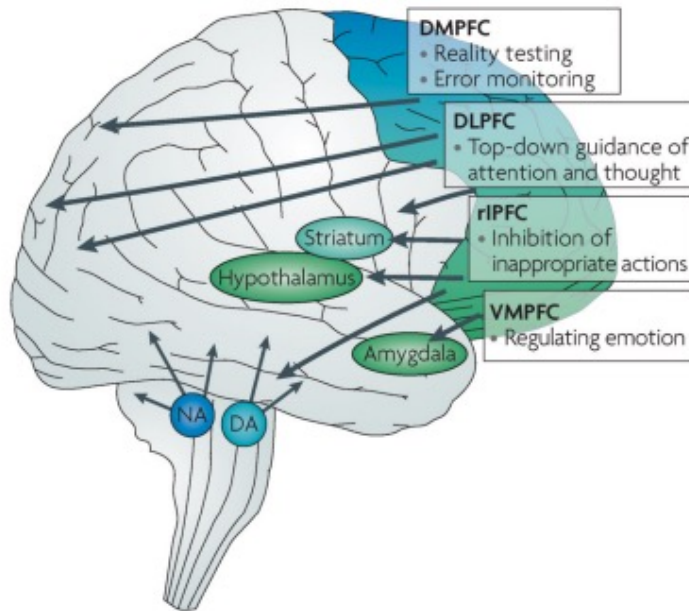
Release of analgesic neurochemicals

Source: Telch, M. J. The Nature and Causes of Anxiety and Panic.

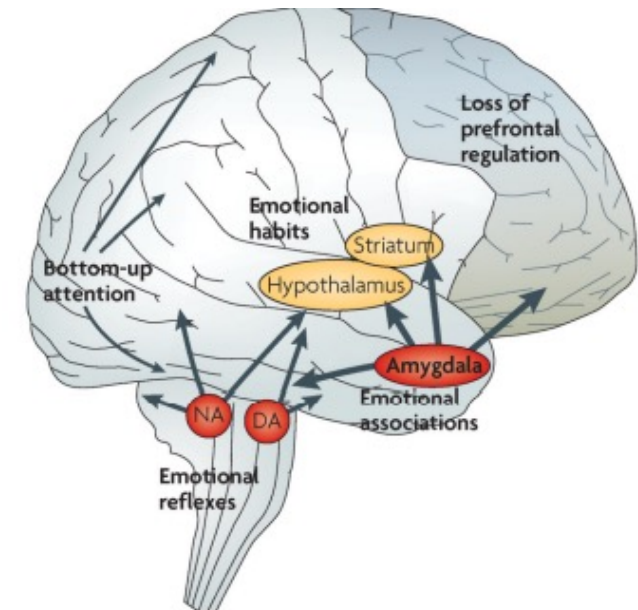
# Activation of Alarm System, cont.

Protective but activation *in the absence of true danger* (“false alarms”), can be disruptive to our daily lives, decision-making, and overall wellbeing

**a. Prefrontal regulation during alert, non-stress conditions**



**b. Amygdala control during stress conditions**

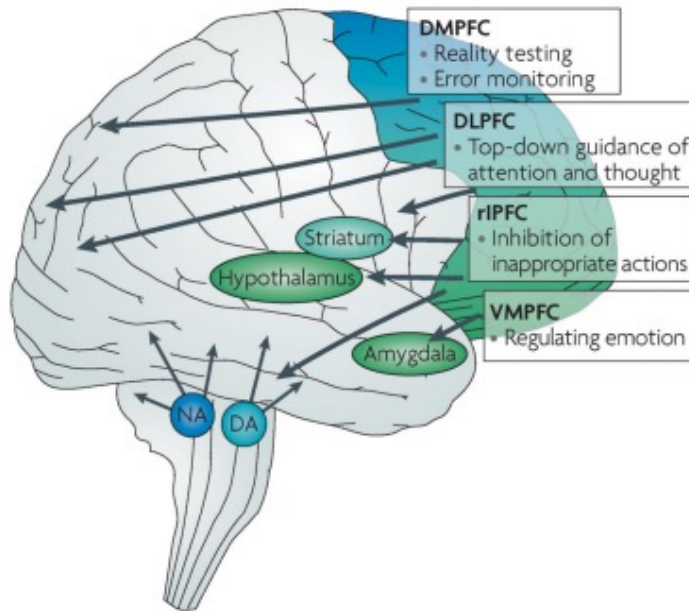


Figures adapted from: Arnsten, 2009, Nature Reviews Neuroscience

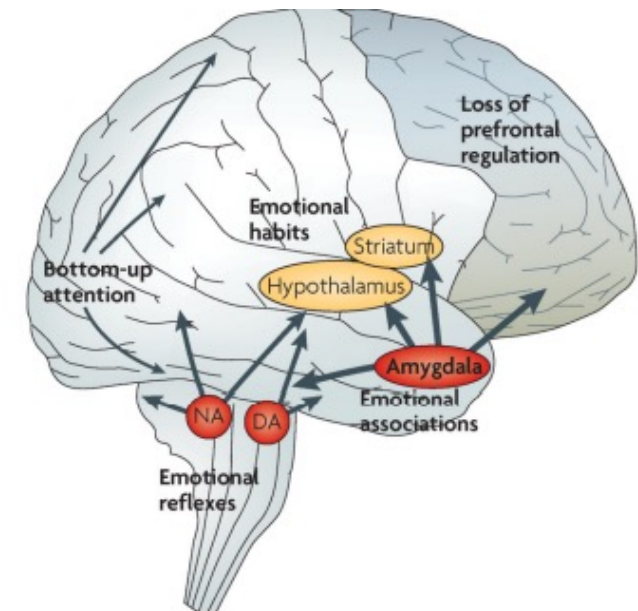
# Relevance to vicarious trauma responses

Frequent, unregulated, activation (“false alarms”) can become a form of chronic stress, which is linked to an array of adverse outcomes including chronic diseases and compromised immunity

## a. Prefrontal regulation during alert, non-stress conditions



## b. Amygdala control during stress conditions



Figures adapted from: Arnsten, 2009, Nature Reviews Neuroscience

# Allostatic Load

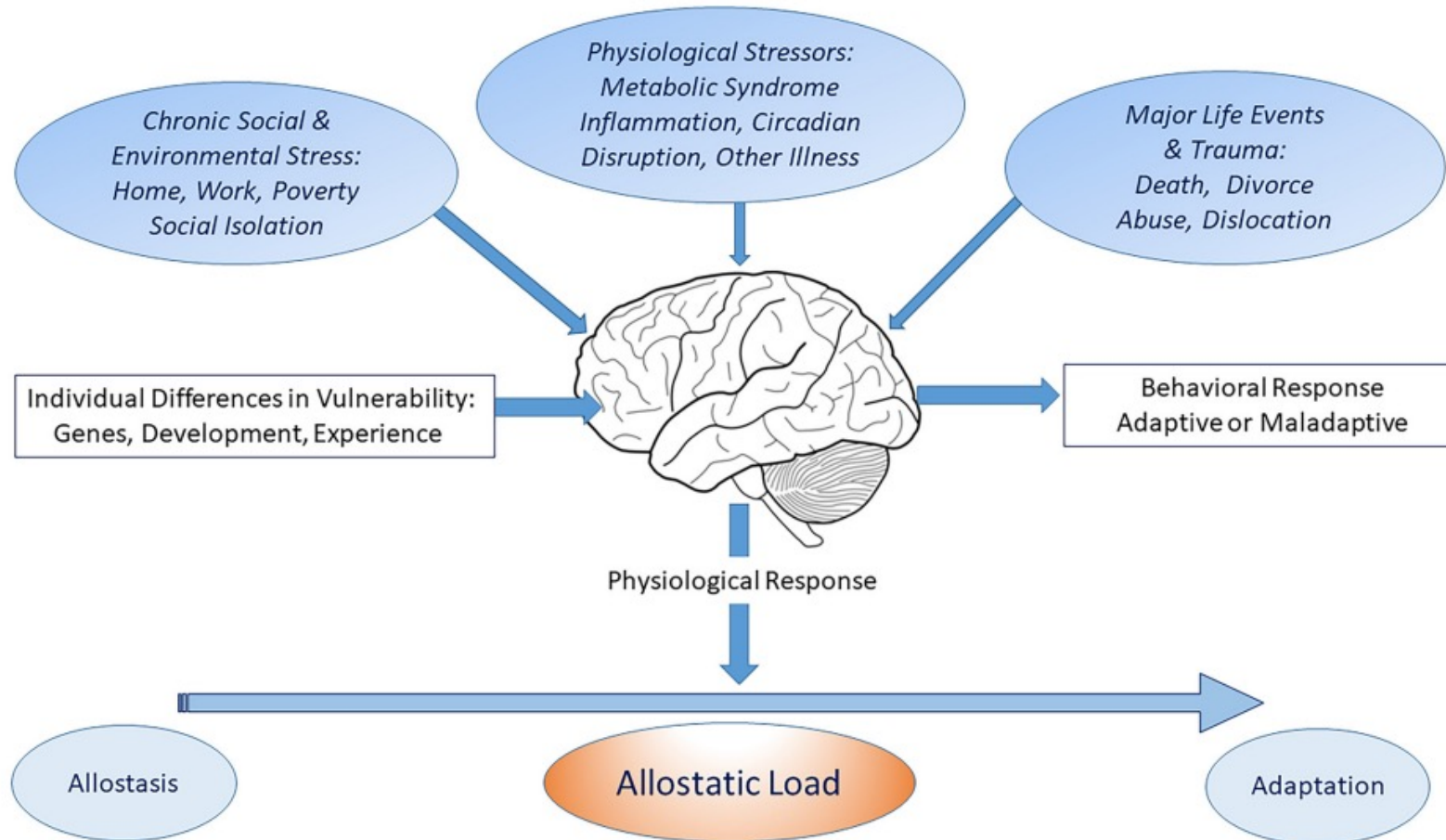


Image adapted from: McEwen, B. S., & Akil, H. (2020). Revisiting the stress concept: implications for affective disorders. *Journal of Neuroscience*, 40(1), 12-21.



# Ways to protect against or mitigate vicarious traumatization & promote resilience: An Overview

- Recognize the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma responses

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# Ways to protect against or mitigate vicarious traumatization & promote resilience: An Overview

- Recognize the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma responses
- Strengthen healthy self-regulation strategies
- Cultivate empathic concern (compassion)
- Strengthen social supports
- Structural / organizational level policies that foster a secure work environment

# Strategies & Tools: Strengthen healthy self-regulation strategies

**Strategy:** Prioritize the foundation: nutrition, exercise, hydration, sleep

## Tools:

- Goal setting (SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound)
- Self-monitoring
- Water bottle to promote and gauge daily water intake
- Learn sleep hygiene practices to promote regular, quality, sleep in accordance with your circadian rhythm

# Strategies & Tools: Strengthen healthy self-regulation strategies


**Strategy:** Practice emotion regulation skills

*Part I: Self-awareness.* Practice noticing your current state of physiological activation

**Tools:** Self-monitoring practices that strengthen self-awareness / mindful awareness

**Examples:**

- Self Awareness Scale (SAS; Logan & Tollison, 2016)
- Body scan
- Progressive muscle relaxation



## Self Awareness Scale (SAS)

- 1 Now I'm checking in with feeling **Low Arousal**.  
I feel a little numb.
  - 2 - 3 Now I'm checking in with a, **Calm, relaxed nervous system**.  
My breathing is easy; my heart rate is slow.
  - 4 - 5 Now I am checking in with **Mild to Moderate Arousal**.  
My breathing and/or heart rate may quicken.  
I feel some emotional discomfort; or a bit agitated.
  - 6 - 8 Now I am checking in with **Moderate to High Arousal**.  
My breathing and heart rate are accelerating. I may also have sweating. I feel agitated; or quite anxious.
  - 9 -10 Now I am checking in with **Extremely High Arousal, hyper-arousal**.  
My heart rate and respiration are accelerated; possible cold sweat. I feel extreme agitation; or emotional distress.
- More than
- 10 Now I am extremely distressed with **endangering hyper-arousal** –  
I may have slow heart rate; or I may slow heart rate with rapid breathing; or very slow breathing and rapid heart rate.

Reprinted with permission from: Logan, G. & Tollison, P.K. (2016).  
Contemplative Based Trauma and Resiliency Training, International  
Center for Mental Health and Human Rights



# Strategies & Tools: Strengthen healthy self-regulation strategies

**Strategy:** Practice emotion regulation skills

*Part II:* Intervene to self-regulate your level of physiological arousal/activation

## **Tools:**

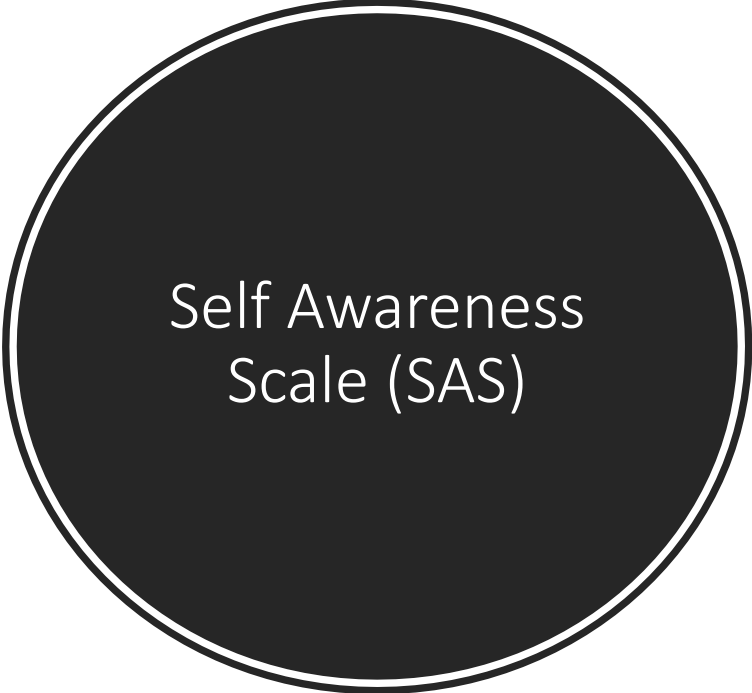
Examples for in the moment / “on demand” strategies:

- Breath work
- Grounding strategies
- Sanctuary / Safe place

# Breath work and grounding exercise

Slow down our breathing to  
strengthen our calm

From: Logan, G. & Tollison, P.K. (2016). Contemplative Based Trauma and Resiliency  
Training (CBTRT): Portable Calm



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Scale (SAS)

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# Strategies & Tools: Strengthen healthy self-regulation strategies

**Strategy:** Practice emotion regulation skills

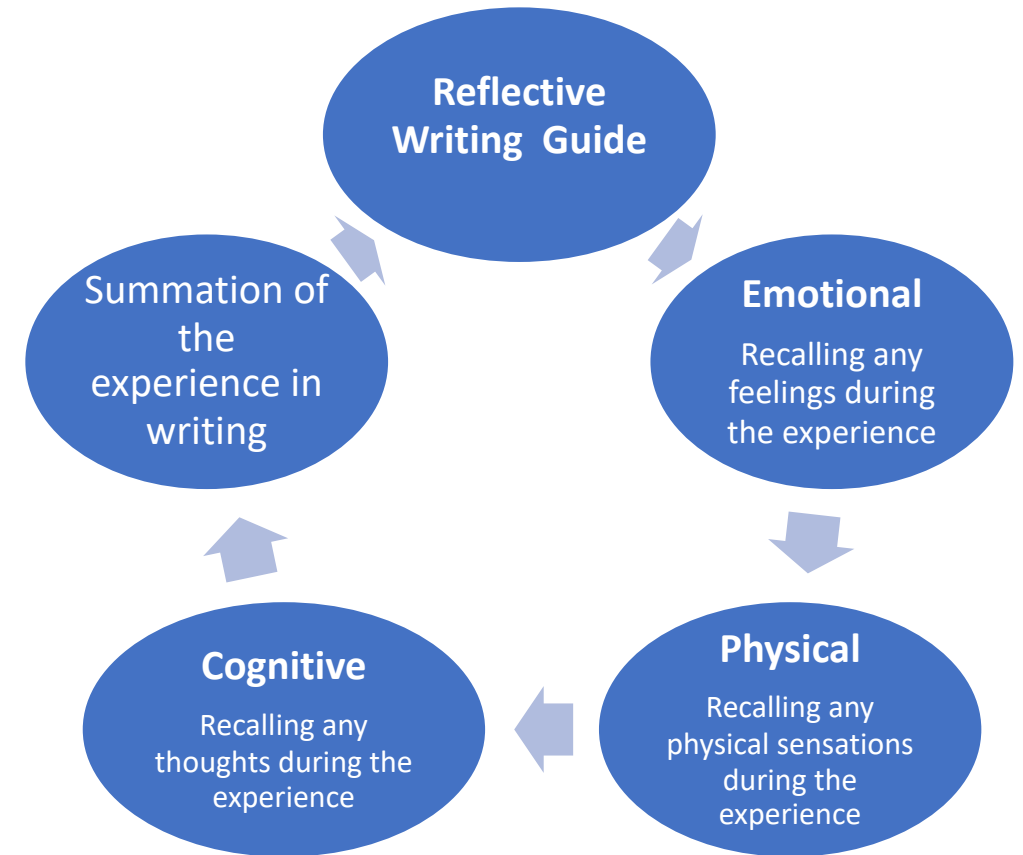
*Part II:* Practice strategies to strengthen self-regulation of your physiological arousal/activation

## Tools:

Examples of longer-term strategies:

- Meditation, yoga
- Expressive writing (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011)

# Reflective Writing Guide (Mollica and Augusterfer, 2019)

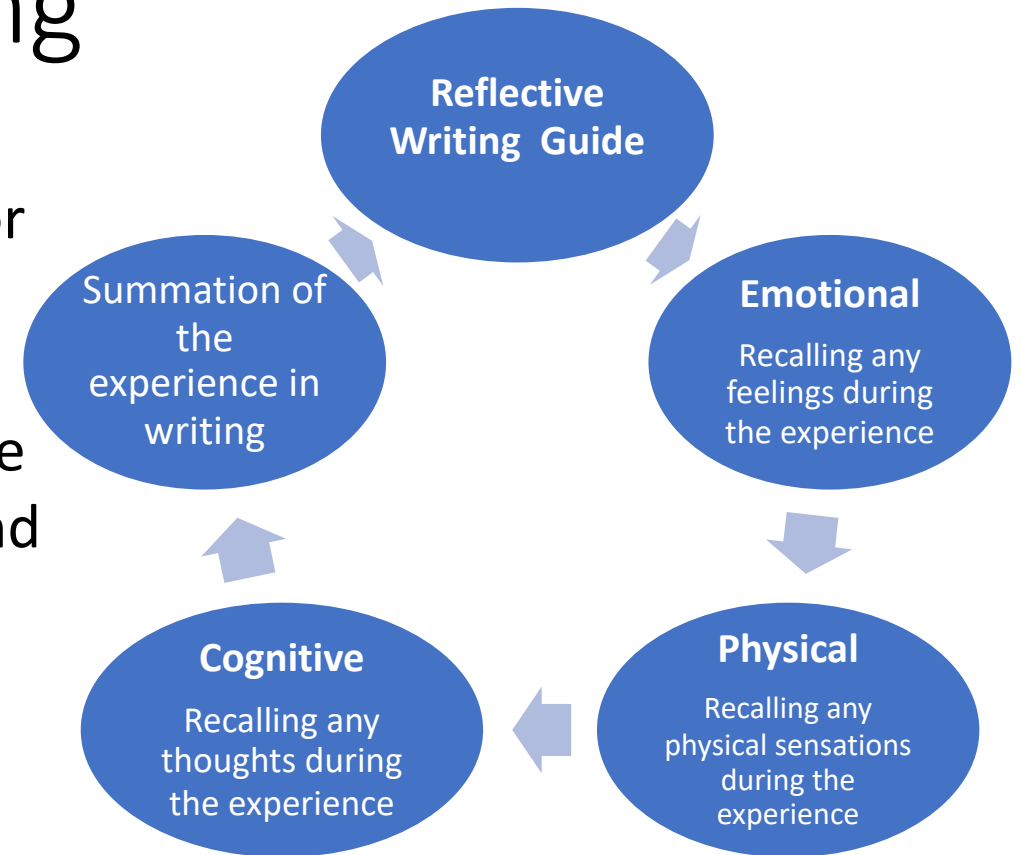


Adapted from: Mollica, R.F. & Augusterfer, E.F. (2019). The Science of Empathy, Empathic Reflection and Empathic Regulation in Clinical Care [Webinar]. HealTorture, National Capacity Building Project.

Pennebaker, J. W., & Chung, C. K. (2011). Expressive writing: Connections to physical and mental health. In H. S. Friedman (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of health psychology* (pp. 417–437). Oxford University Press.

# Practice: Reflective writing

- Think of a recent experience with a client or a situation in which you experienced secondhand exposure to a person's trauma
- Using the Reflective Writing Guide, take five minutes to write about what comes to mind about that experience
- Do your best to write for the full five minutes



Adapted from Mollica, R.F. and Augusterfer, E.F. (2019). The Science of Empathy, Empathic Reflection and Empathic Regulation in Clinical Care [Webinar]. HealTorture, National Capacity Building Project.

# Strategies & Tools: Strengthen Compassion

**Strategy:** Cultivate / strengthen compassion.

Compassion strengthening practices are a key intervention for empathic distress fatigue (Hofmeyer, Kennedy & Taylor, 2019)

## Tools:

- Loving Kindness Meditation
- Yoga

# Strategies & Tools: Strengthen social support

**Strategy:** Develop regular forms of social connection into your weekly routine

## Tools:

- Peer support group
- Join a meet up group in your city
- Schedule regular weekly meet ups with friends (zoom or phone works for long-distance friends)
- Daily or weekly tea or coffee breaks with colleagues



# Strategies & Tools: Secure work environment

**Strategy:** Structural and organizational policies that promote:

- Trust among colleagues
- Nurturing environment
- Manageable workload
- Collaboration and shared power
- Attention to aesthetics (windows, colors, artwork, plants, snacks, tea, etc.)

## **Tools:**

- Supervision / Consultation
- Group consultation
- The Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL)

# Putting it all together

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Develop a tailored plan that plays to your **strengths** and **personal goals** and incorporates some of the **concrete tools** reviewed herein

## Creating a Personal Care Plan

### **START:**

What new behaviors would I like to start?

### **STOP:**

What unhelpful behaviors would I like to stop?

### **KEEP:**

What helpful behaviors would I like to maintain and develop?

### **MY AGENCY:**

What do I need from my colleagues?

What do I need from my supervisor?

What do I need from my organization?



National Capacity Building Project

Source: Higson-Smith, C. and Nicholson Sullivan, M.J. (2016). Healthy organizations: beyond individual self-care [Webinar]. National Capacity Building Project.

<https://healtorture.org/sites/healtorture.org/files/HealthyOrganizations%20PPT>.

# How These Strategies and Tools Can Help Our Work as Judges, Attorneys, Victim Advocates, Law Enforcement and Prosecutors Working With Immigrant Survivors?



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McEwen, B. S., & Akil, H. (2020). Revisiting the stress concept: implications for affective disorders. *Journal of Neuroscience*, 40(1), 12-21.

Mollica, R.F. and Augusterfer, E.F. (2019). The Science of Empathy, Empathic Reflection and Empathic Regulation in Clinical Care [Webinar]. HealTorture, National Capacity Building Project.

Oriel FeldmanHall, Tim Dalgleish, Davy Evans, Dean Mobbs. Empathic concern drives costly altruism, *NeuroImage*, Volume 105, 2015, Pages 347-356, ISSN 1053-8119, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2014.10.043>.

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- Telch, M. J. *The Nature and Causes of Anxiety and Panic*.

# Resources & Links

## Self-Care & Resiliency

- CoLAP's 2019 National Judicial Stress and Resilience Survey: The Results are in! 2019 National Conference for Lawyer Assistance Programs, September 25, 2019, Austin, Texas:  
[file:///C:/Users/Marie/Downloads/national-judicial-stress-resilience-survey092319%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Marie/Downloads/national-judicial-stress-resilience-survey092319%20(1).pdf)
- Self Care for Providers from International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies: [ISTSS - Self-Care for Providers](#)
- Vicarious Trauma Toolkit from Office for Victims of Crime (OVC):  
[About the Toolkit | The Vicarious Trauma Toolkit | About the Toolkit | OVC \(ojp.gov\)](#)
- Reyes, V. (2022). How judges can mitigate vicarious trauma. Your Voice Column, *ABA Journal*, American Bar Association:  
<https://www.abajournal.com/voice/article/how-judges-can-mitigate-vicarious-trauma>



# Resources & Links

## **Mindfulness / Meditation Specific Resources**

- UCLA Health: [Guided Meditations - MARC | UCLA Health](#)
- UCSD Center for Mindfulness: <https://cih.ucst.edu/mindfulness>
- UMass Memorial Health Center for Mindfulness: <https://www.ummhealth.org/center-mindfulness>

## **Mindfulness and Judging**

- Federal Judicial Center, Mindfulness and Judging: <https://niwaplibrary.wcl.american.edu/pubs/mindfulness-and-judging>
- Mindfulness Training for Judges: Mind Wandering and the Development of Cognitive Resilience <https://niwaplibrary.wcl.american.edu/pubs/mindfulness-for-judges-cognitive-resilience>

## Resources & Links, cont.

### Contemplative Based Resiliency Training

- The Portable Calm: Contemplative Based Trauma and Resiliency Training: The Portable Calm. Eight-week training developed by Gaea Logan & Patricia Tollison, to help cultivate resilience by strengthening the capacity for self-regulation and building protective internal factors essential to the prevention of burnout: <https://sutra.co/circle/skhh24/register> [portablecalm.com](http://portablecalm.com)

### Webinars

- Mollica, R.F. and Augusterfer, E.F. (2019). The Science of Empathy, Empathic Reflection and Empathic Regulation in Clinical Care [Webinar]. HealTorture, National Capacity Building Project. <https://healtorture.org/webinar/science-empathy-empathic-reflection-and-empathic-regulation-clinical-care>
- Higson-Smith, C. and Nicholson Sullivan, M.J. (2016). Healthy organizations: beyond individual self-care [Webinar]. Healtorture, National Capacity Building Project. <https://healtorture.org/sites/healtorture.org/files/HealthyOrganizations%20PPT>.

## Resources & Links, cont.

### **Psychoeducation on the nature and causes of panic, anxiety, and the alarm system**

- <https://labs.la.utexas.edu/telch/files/2015/08/Nature-and-Causes-8.10.15.pdf>

### **Sleep hygiene**

- Sleep Hygiene Checklist: <https://sdlab.fas.harvard.edu/files/sdlab/files/sleephygienecheckliststriveweekly.pdf>
- 10 Tips for a Better Night's Sleep. National Sleep Foundation: <https://www.thensf.org/sleep-tips/>

### **SMART goal planning and action plan**

- <https://www.lssu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/SMART-Goals-Worksheet-1.pdf>

### **Other Resources**

- Healtorture.org

# Resources & Links, cont.

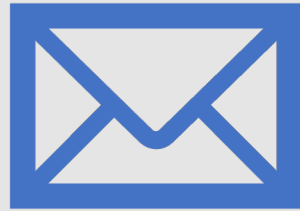
## **NIWAP Resources**

- [Advocate's and Attorney's Tool for Developing a Survivor's Story: Trauma Informed Approach](#)
- [Trauma Informed – Structured Interview Questionnaires for Immigration Cases \(SIQI\)\(July 12, 2018\)](#)

## **NIWAP Webinars**

- [\(October 30, 2013\): “Trauma-Informed Care: Promoting Healing While Strengthening Survivors’ Immigration Cases” \(Webinar\)](#)
- [\(March 19, 2014\): “Trauma-Informed Care, Part 2: The Nuts and Bolts of Immigration Story Writing Intervention” \(Webinar\)](#)
- [\(February 24, 2014\): “Helping Survivors in Crisis: Hands On Training for Advocates and Attorneys on Trauma-Informed Work with Immigrant Women Who Are Survivors of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault” \(Webinar\)](#)

Questions



[marie@cstnet.org](mailto:marie@cstnet.org)

# Thank You for Joining Us!

- Materials for this webinar and the webinar recording are available at:  
<https://niwaplibrary.wcl.american.edu/vicarious-trauma-work-with-immigrant-survivors>
- If you are a judicial officer, join the National Judicial Network!
  - Link to learn more:
    - <https://niwaplibrary.wcl.american.edu/pubs/njn-outreach-letter>
  - Link for judges and judicial officers to join:
    - <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/VGY9VJM>

# NIWAP Technical Assistance, Materials, and Training

- **Judicial training manuals, toolkits, bench card and materials at**
  - <https://niwaplibrary.wcl.american.edu/sji-njn-materials>
- **NIWAP Technical Assistance**
  - Call (202) 274-4457
  - E-mail [info@niwap.org](mailto:info@niwap.org)
- **Web Library:** [www.niwaplibrary.wcl.american.edu](http://www.niwaplibrary.wcl.american.edu)