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A Deeper Purpose

January 4-7, 2026 • Signia by Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek • Orlando, FL



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Building a Resilient Campus Culture

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**Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE):
Support undergraduates as they explore and discern their many callings in life.**



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Building a Resilient Campus Culture

Presenters

Emiliana R. Simon-Thomas, Science Director, Greater Good Science Center

Kia Afcari, Director, Greater Good Workplaces, Greater Good Science Center

Thank you to our sponsor



Hello and Welcome!



Hello and Welcome!

Please turn to your neighbor, shake hands, and for the next **3 minutes** share a microdose of information about these 3 things with each other:

1. Your **name**, **hometown**, and **namesake**
2. What makes you **laugh**
3. Where do you go/what do you do to feel **awe-inspired**



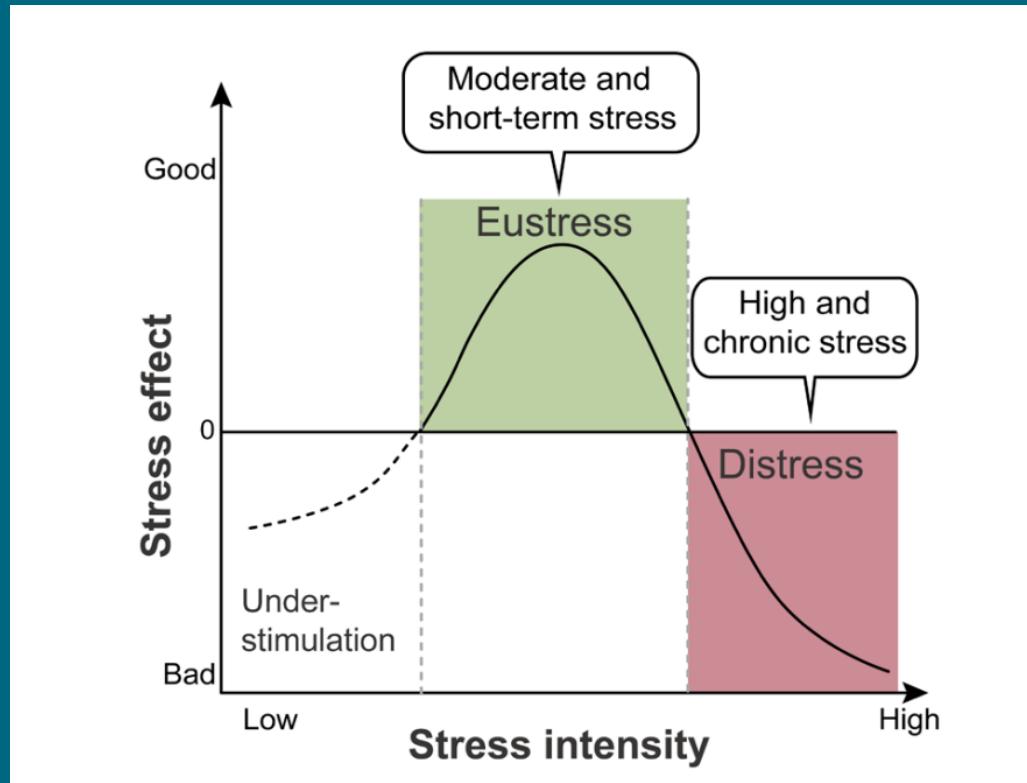
What you can expect from today's plenary session

1. An overview of the science of resilience
1. Practices and rituals for strengthening your own resilience, and building a culture of resilience on campus



A refresher on stress

Feeling like the demands in front of us outweigh the resources we have available. Stress is a healthy, adaptive part of everyday life.



Eustress: the response to exciting events and potentially positive challenges; it's invigorating, inspiring, and promotes resilience.

Problematic stress

Persistently worrying that the demands in front of us outweigh the resources we **had, have, or ever will have** - is detrimental to mental and physical health.

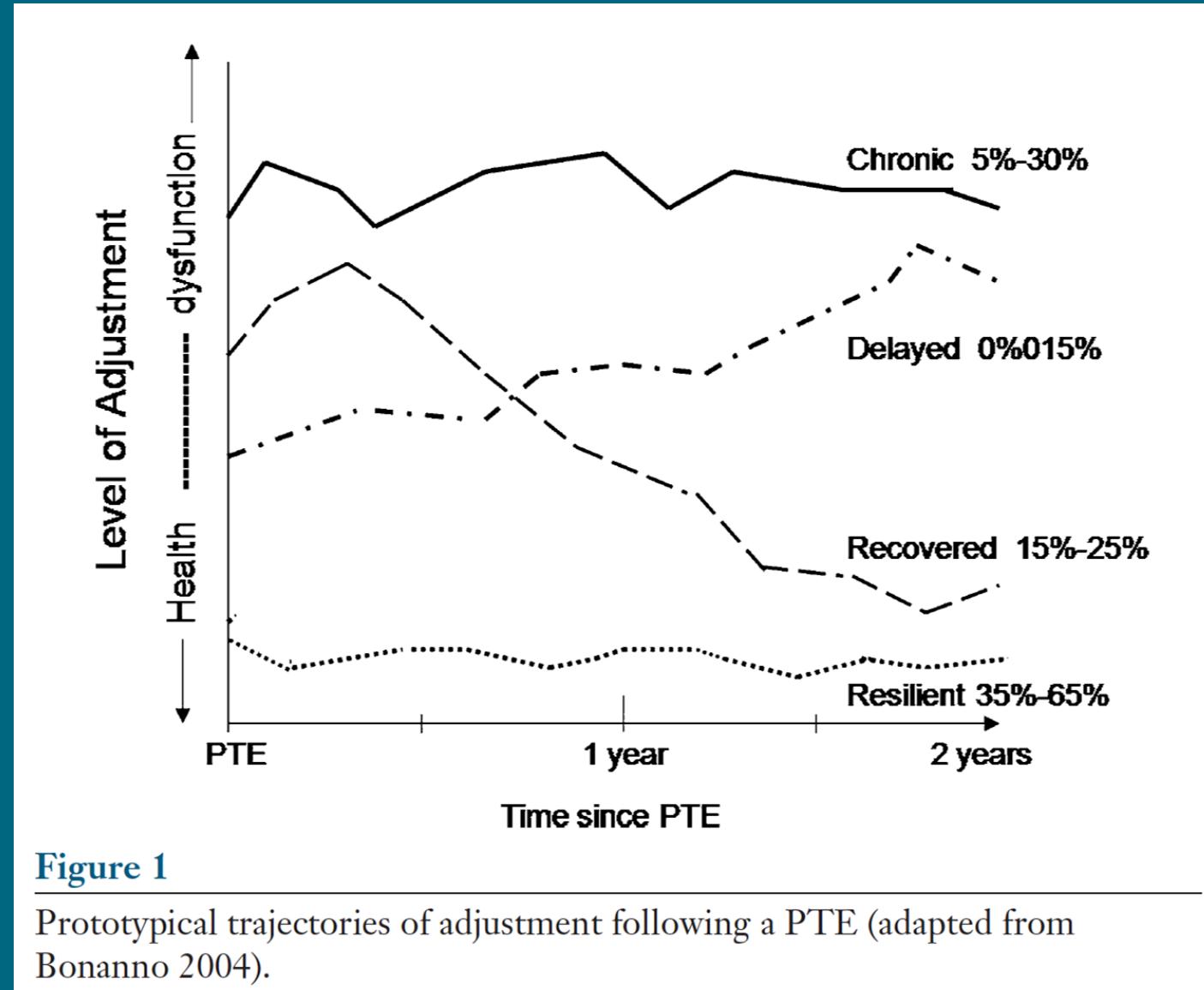
Chronic distress: Mental and physical responses to intense and enduring threat that are harmful to health and well-being.



Arcs of resilience

Recovery from upset, drawing upon beliefs and thought habits that support *“the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress.”*

(Bonanno, 2010)



What impacts resilience?

Extends & Enhances Stress	Channels Stress for Success
Shallow fast breathing	Full breath, slower exhale
Emotion suppression & Surface acting	Emotion labelling & Disclosure
Catastrophizing	Perspective, Self-distancing, Decentering
Self-focus, isolation	Shared humanity, Interdependence
Pessimism, overestimating cost	Optimism, Psychological Richness
Self-criticism	Self-compassion

Resilience on campus

A culture where norms and expectations champion

1. Resilient beliefs and thought habits; leaders model key skills and behaviors through the course of their work (e.g. communications, meetings, policy decisions)
2. Rituals, both every day and special occasion, for engaging in resilience-building behaviors and activities

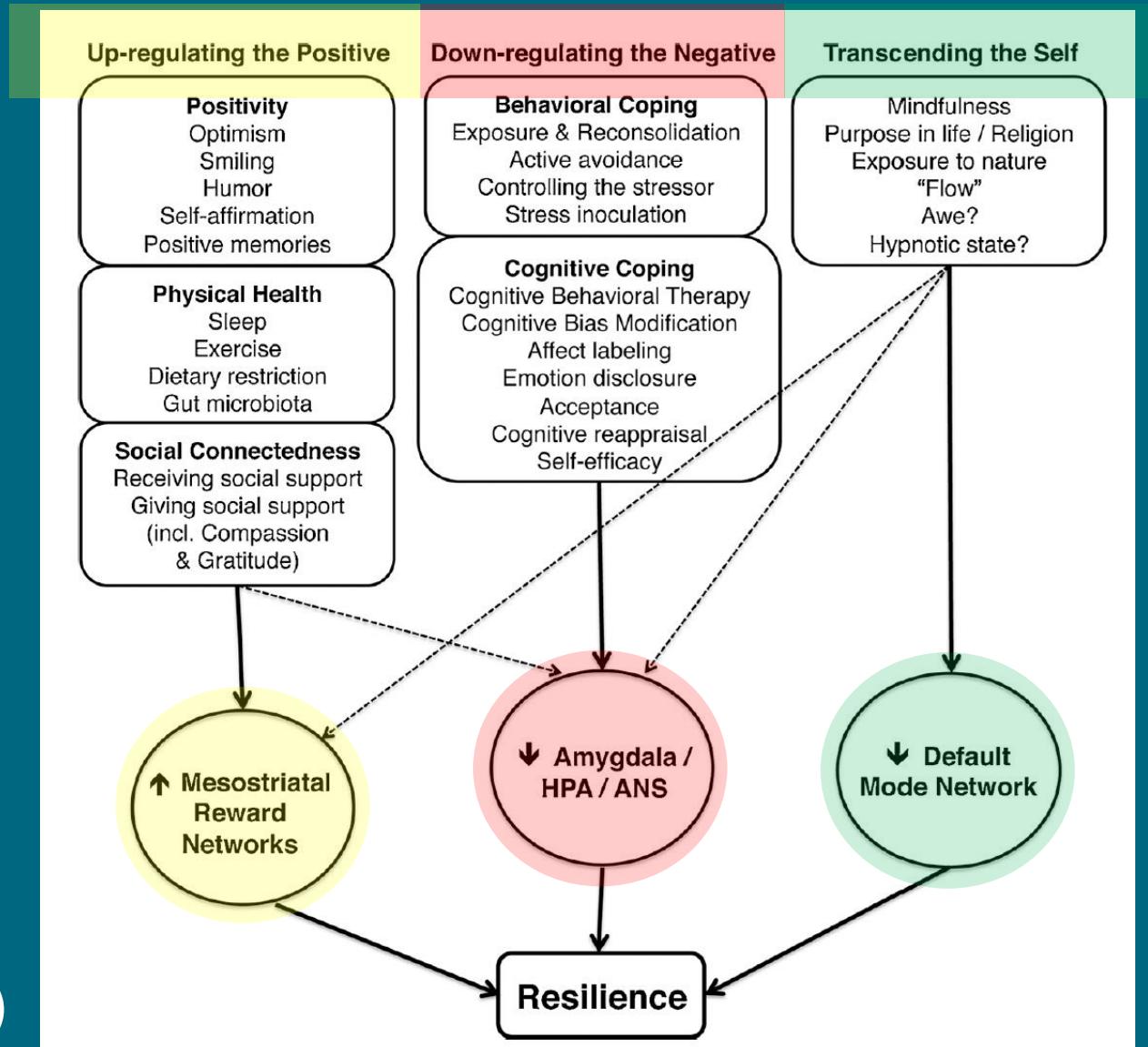


Strengthening resilience

There are three distinct categories of resilience-building strategies that can **change how key brain regions/systems function**:

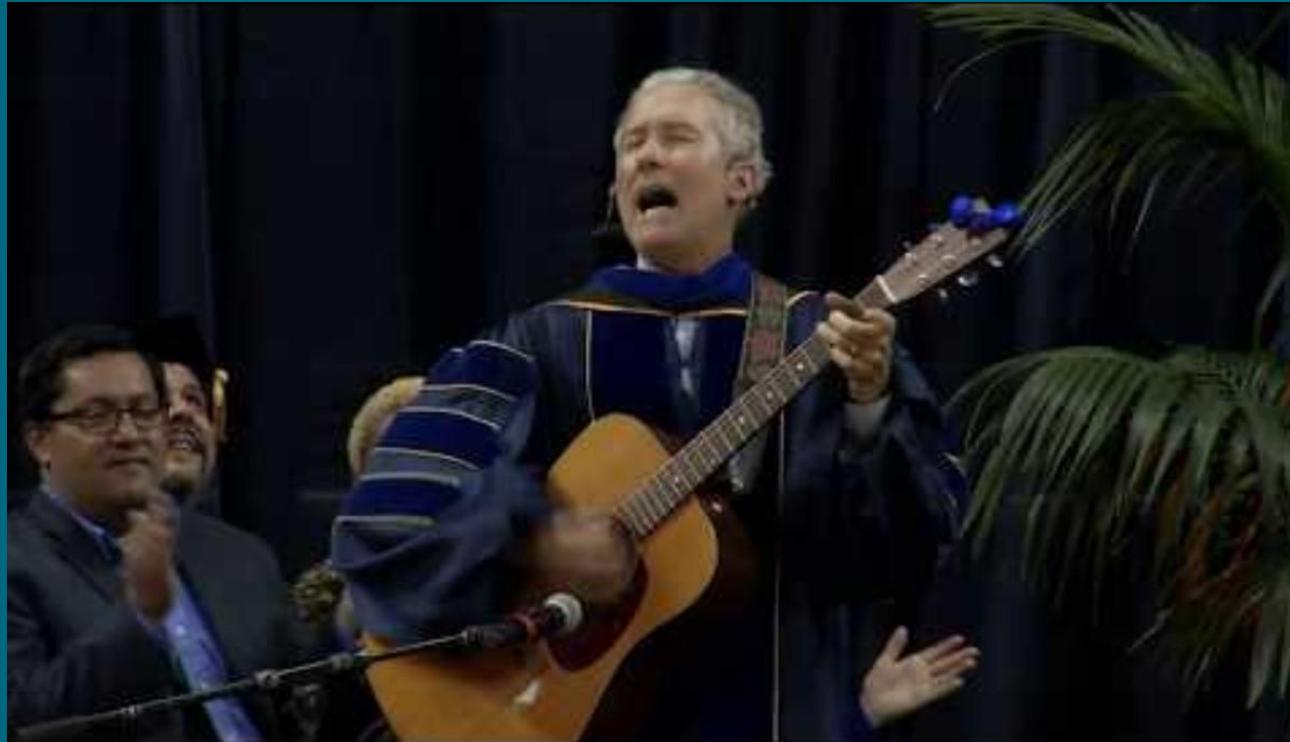
- Up-regulating the positive
- Down-regulating the negative
- Transcending self-focus

(Tabibnia, 2020)



**Up-regulating
the Positive**

Up-regulating the positive: Levity & Play



Dean Rich Lyons performs "The 'Bear' Necessities" at Golden Bear Orientation



Up-regulating the positive: Laughter

Table 10.1 Core habits from the 7 Humor Habits Program

- 1 Surround yourself with humor (and think about the nature of your sense of humor).
- 2 Cultivate a playful attitude.
- 3 Laugh more often and more heartily.
- 4 Create your own verbal humor.
- 5 Look for humor in everyday life.
- 6 Take yourself lightly: laugh at yourself.
- 7 Find humor in the midst of stress.

(Ruch, 2014)

- Quick series of exhales and increased Oxygen intake = relaxes stress physiology, stimulates organs, releases endorphins
- The act of laughing = induces feelings of ease, safety, and enjoyment
- Laughter expression = evokes social trust, friendliness, and common humanity



Up-regulating the positive: Gratitude

*“These analyses showed that (trait) gratitude predicted **lower heart rate and systolic and diastolic blood pressure, better sleep quality, more moderate and vigorous exercise, lower stress frequency, less stress intensity, greater expectations for the day, higher ratings of pleasantness of the best experience of the day, lower ratings of unpleasantness of the worst experience of the day, and greater feelings of appreciation toward a particularly close other.**”*

(Newman, 2021)

Up-regulating the positive: Hope & Optimism

Uncertain outcomes? Forecast potential goodness from whatever plays out.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics by Condition (Study 4).

Condition	Waiting M (SD)			Post-news M (SD)					
	PBF (n = 99)	Negative (n = 93)	Control (n = 101)	PBF (n = 49)	Negative (n = 51) Good news	Control (n = 49)	PBF (n = 50)	Negative (n = 42) Bad news	Control (n = 52)
PBF	4.75 (1.06)	4.35 (1.02)	4.12 (1.15)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Positive emotion	3.94 (1.16)	3.81 (1.04)	3.79 (1.16)	4.25 (1.15)	4.28 (1.15)	4.14 (1.23)	4.03 (1.30)	3.60 (1.05)	3.71 (1.10)
Negative emotion	2.30 (0.97)	2.40 (1.15)	2.40 (1.12)	1.95 (1.07)	2.11 (1.09)	2.22 (1.07)	2.67 (0.87)	2.51 (1.04)	2.71 (1.25)

Note. PBF was assessed only following game play. PBF = preemptive benefit finding; NA = not applicable.

(Rankin, 2022)

Preemptive Benefit Framing (PBF) reduces negative emotion in response to good news and increases positive emotion in response to bad news - without strong effects on matching emotions (i.e. does not cause “head in the sand”).

Culture-Building Ritual: “Appreciation Go-Around”

In meetings with 10 people or fewer (who mostly know each other) take the first 5 minutes to:

1. Appreciate the person to your left
2. Have that person appreciate the next person
3. Have that person appreciate a third...

...and so on, until everyone gets appreciated.



Notice how **starting with appreciation** shifts the feel and function of the meeting!

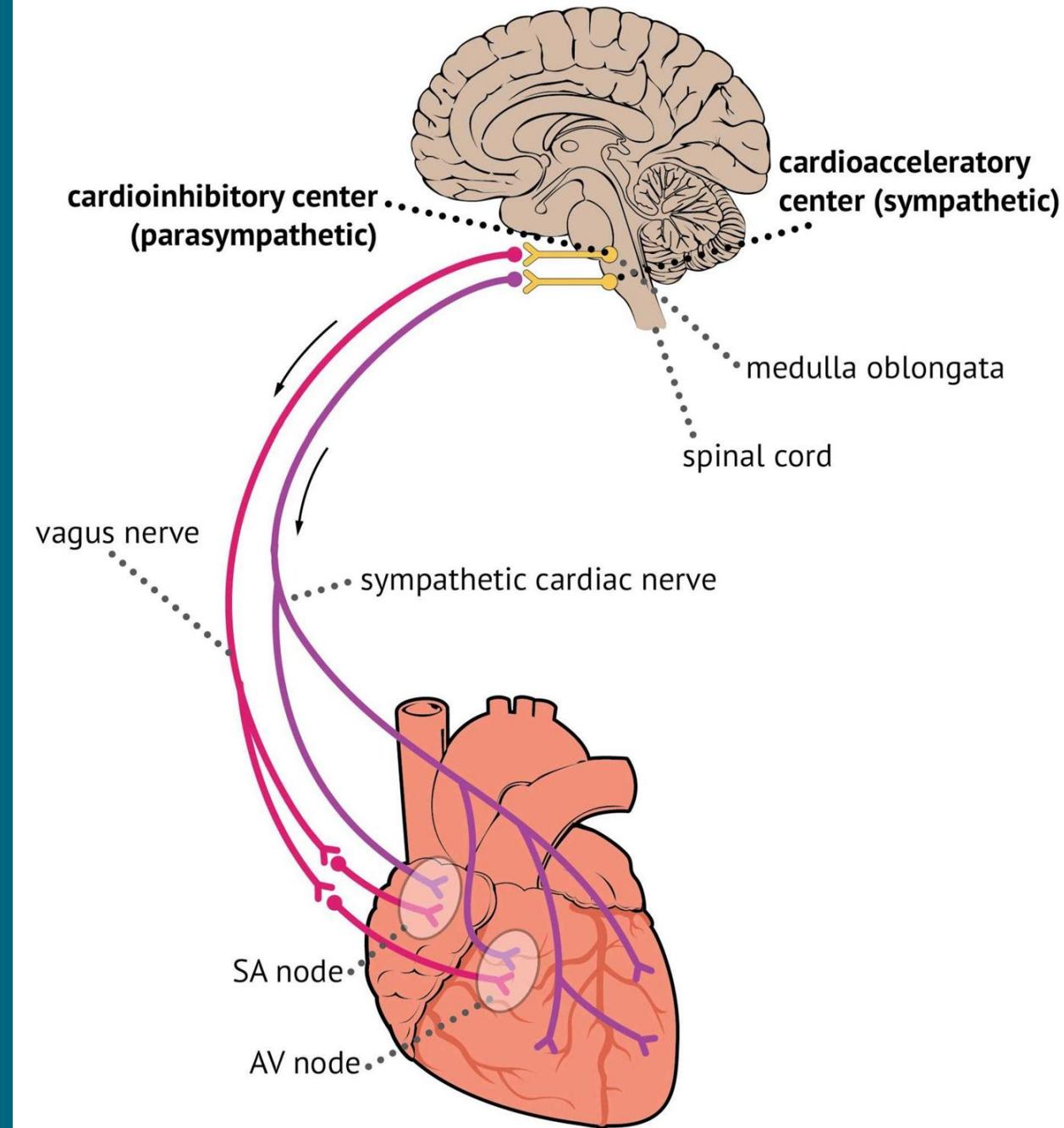
Down-regulating the Negative

Down-regulating the Negative: Breathing

Breathe: exhale more slowly than you inhale to activate the Vagus Nerve and engage cardioinhibitory pathways.

*Bonus: Bring **supportive, comforting people** (i.e. attachment figures) to mind.

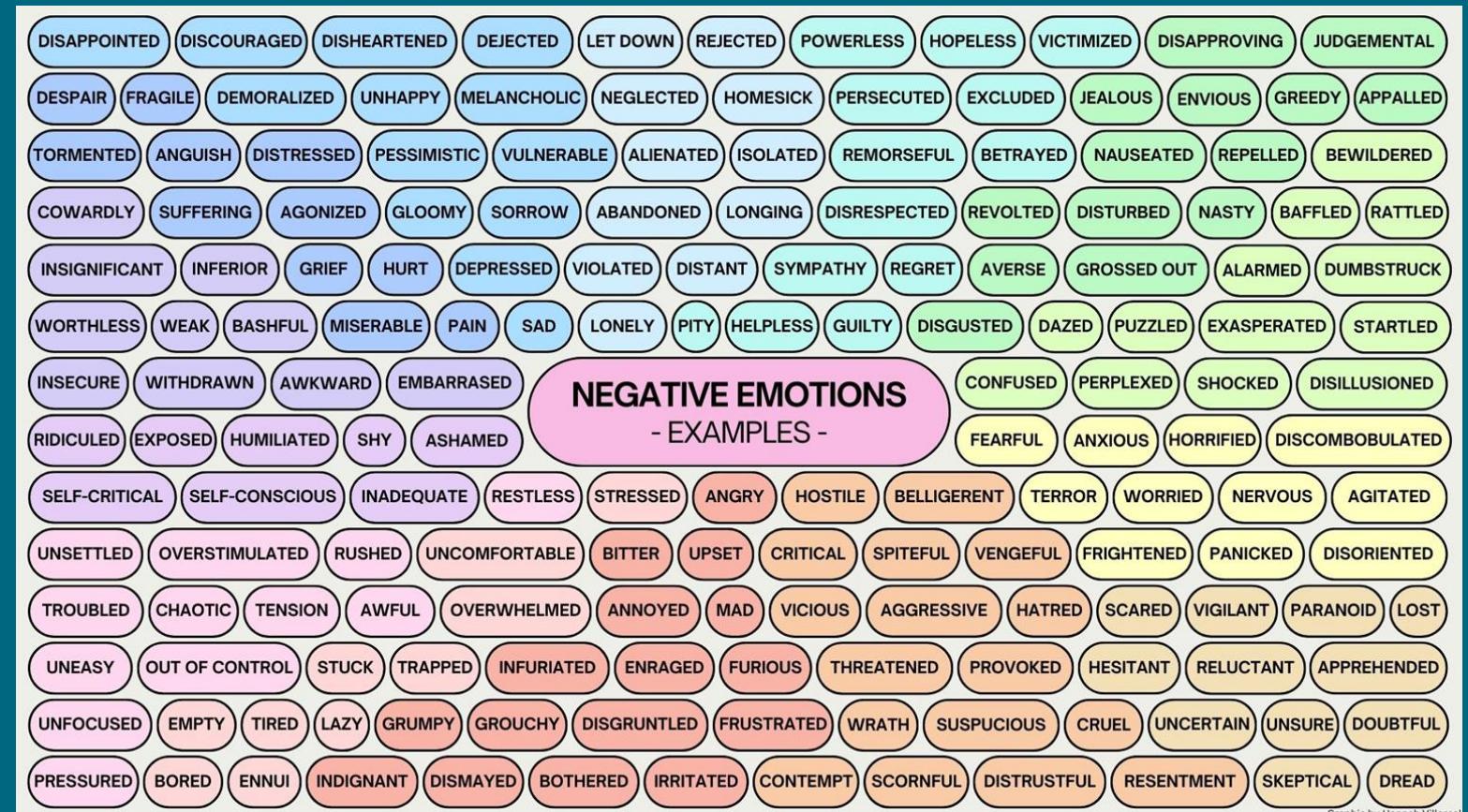
Bonus II: Place your hand on your chest in a **self-nurturing way



Down-regulating the negative: Labelling

Bring to mind a recent difficult and unpleasant experience (something relatively low stakes/not too serious)

1. Silently in your mind, **label the specific** feelings you had during this experience: Choose 3 words more **granular** than “bad” or “upset” that match how you felt.

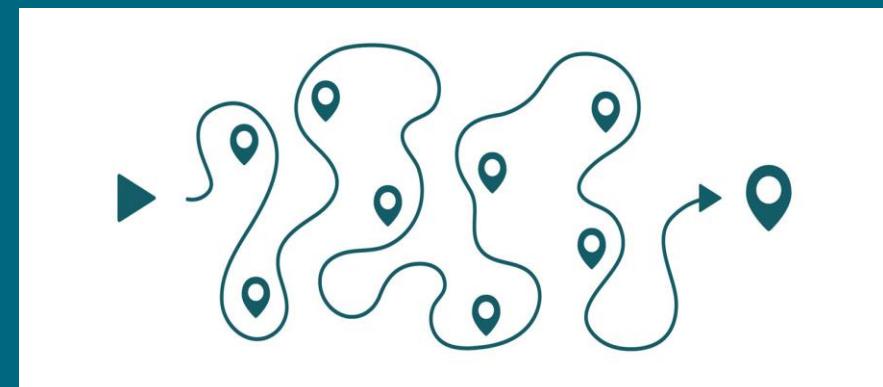


Down-regulating the negative: Psychological distancing (a.k.a. decentering)

Keeping this difficult and unpleasant experience and the three emotion words that you chose in mind:



2. With your inner voice, silently say: “{Your own name} felt {emotion 1}, {Your own name} felt {emotion 2}, and {Your own name} felt {emotion 3}.
3. In your mind’s eye, **zoom out** on this experience picturing that moment from afar - as just brief segment in the grand timeline of your life.



Down-regulating the negative: Psychological distancing

Using a distanced inner voice reduces unpleasant feelings and leads to seeing difficulties more as surmountable “challenges” than “threats”.

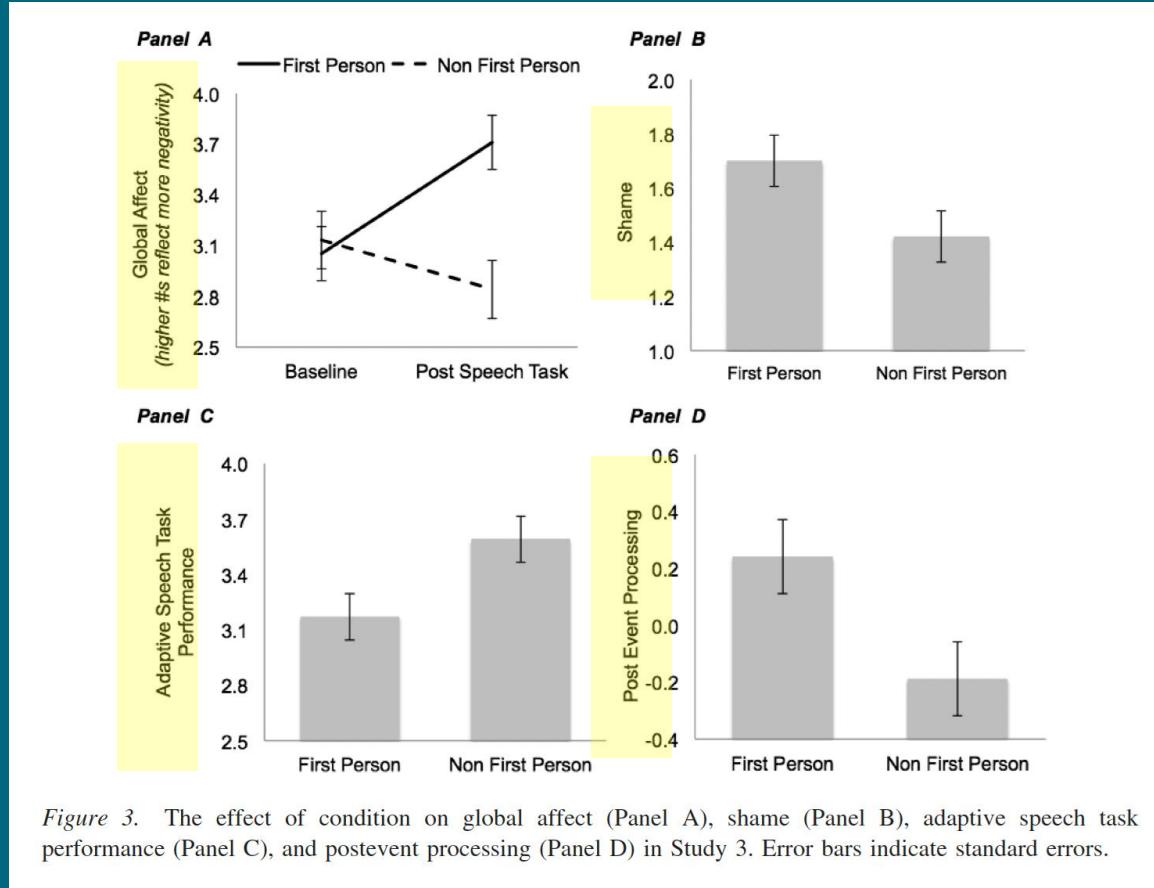


Figure 3. The effect of condition on global affect (Panel A), shame (Panel B), adaptive speech task performance (Panel C), and postevent processing (Panel D) in Study 3. Error bars indicate standard errors.

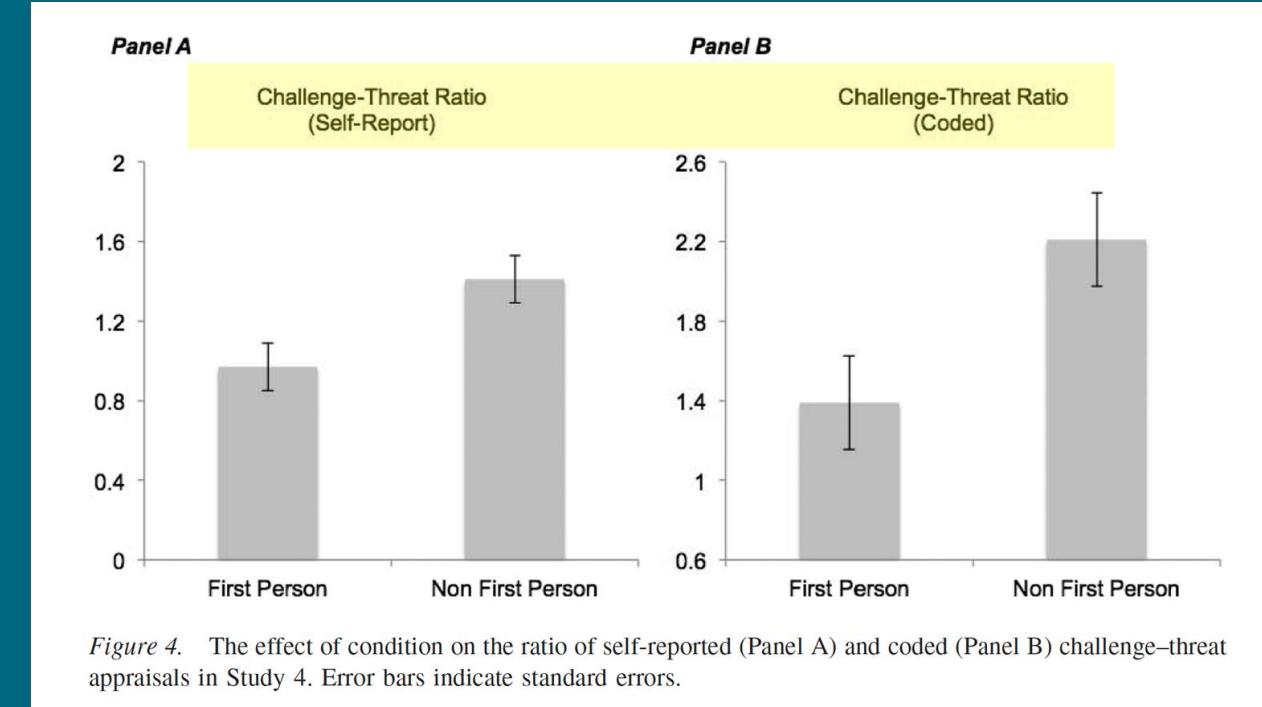


Figure 4. The effect of condition on the ratio of self-reported (Panel A) and coded (Panel B) challenge–threat appraisals in Study 4. Error bars indicate standard errors.

(Kross, 2014)

Down-regulating the negative: Reappraisal

Emotional experiences are shaped how we **appraise** (interpret and make sense of) sensations and context.

Examples of ways to reappraise unpleasant experiences include:

- Acceptance
- Reframing
- Problem-solving
- Learning
- Distancing*
- Unexpected positive outcome*

All of which can **reduce threat signaling** in the brain

Figure 2. Results of the meta-analysis of brain regions modulated by reappraisal



(Buhle, 2014)

Down-regulating the negative: Self-Compassion

Quieting the inner critic, replacing it with a voice of support, understanding, and care for oneself

“We found an overall magnitude of the relationship between self-compassion and well-being of $r = 0.47$.”

(Zessin, 2014)



Self-Compassion Science

Increases/Improves	Decreases/Reduces
Emotion regulation, coping	Psychopathology: Depression, anxiety, stress, suicidal ideation, self-harm
Happiness, positive affect, life satisfaction	Loneliness
Kindness, connection	PTSD
Authenticity, presence, self-worth	Eating disorders, body image concerns
Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness	Shame

(Neff, 2023)

Culture-Building Ritual: Pre-Exam Centering

Help students get centered and channel their stress into success before starting an exam:

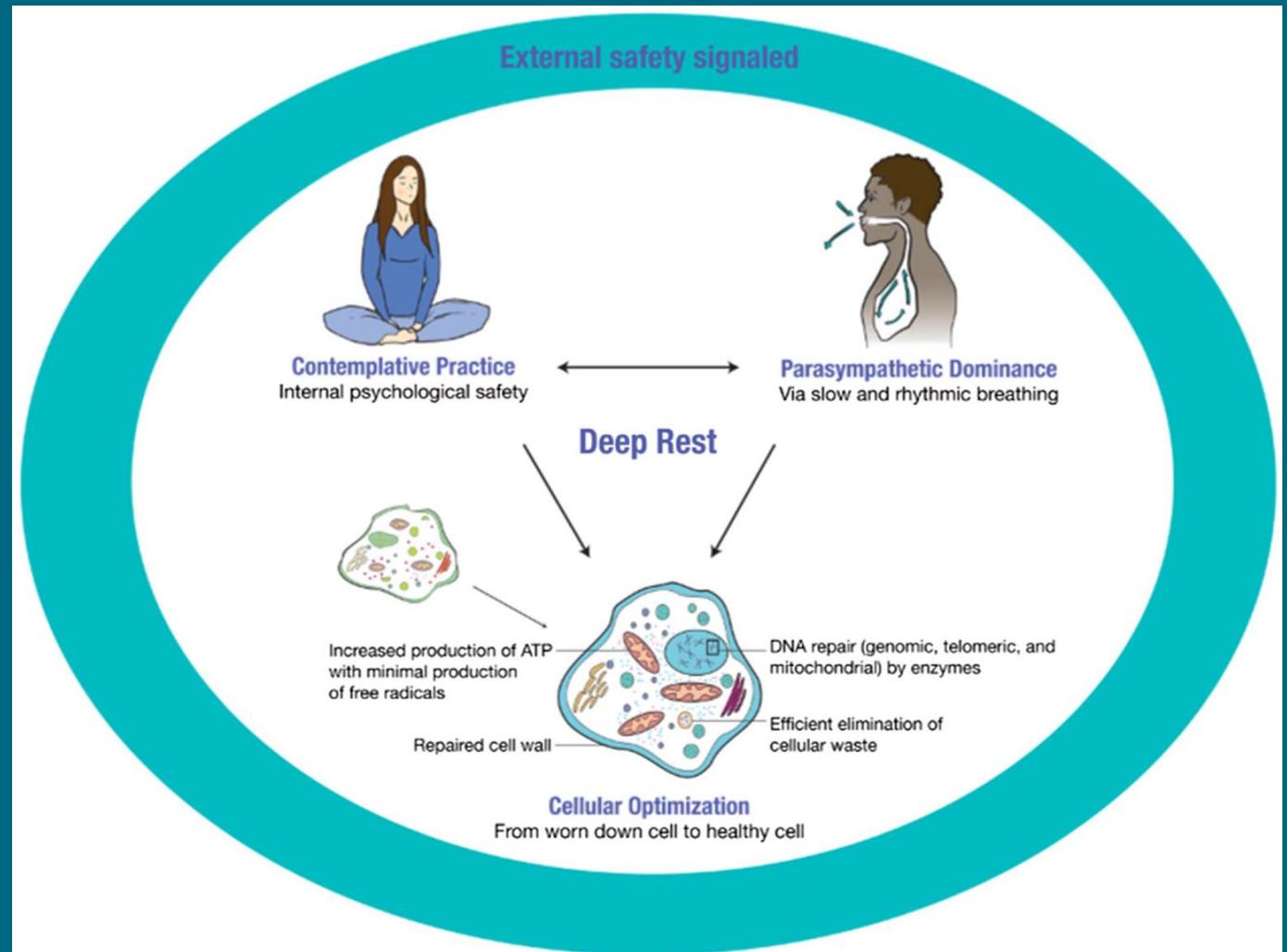
1. Offer 2-3 minutes of guided breathing (eg. 5 sec inhale→ 8 second exhale)
1. Encourage **acceptance, agency, self-compassion, and optimism/appreciation for learning**



Transcending the Self

Transcending the Self: Deep Rest

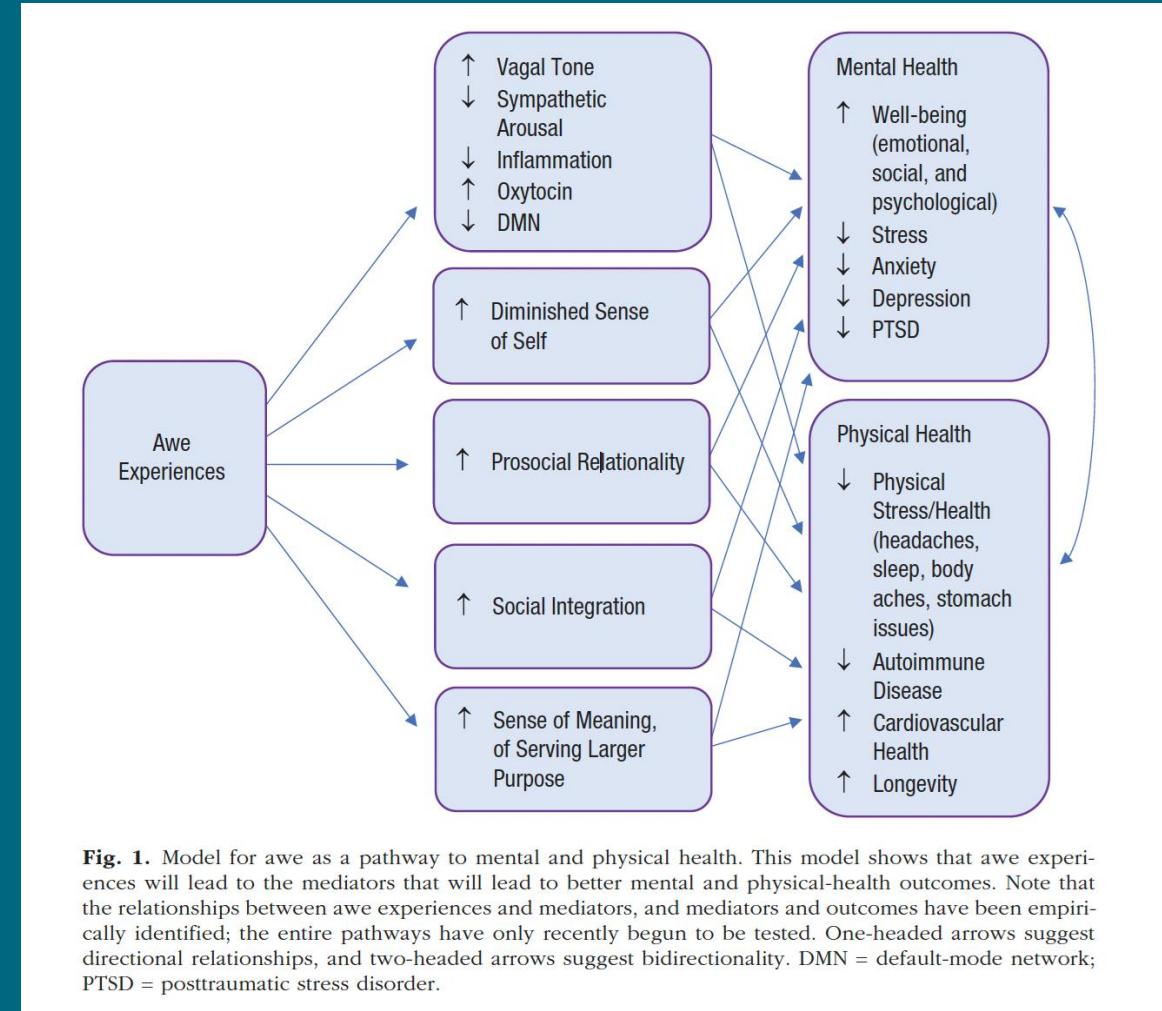
- Prioritize mentally restorative time and activities (unlinked to external indicators of status or self-worth)
- Question the implicitly present “super busy”, “hustle/grind”, “time fainted” mentality



(Crosswell, 2024)

Transcending Self-focus: Awe & Effervescent Assembly

- An experience of perceptual vastness that defies one's current frame of reference
- A sense of common humanity and sacredness while joining together with people around aesthetic, interest or value based, ideological, or morally aligned experiences



(Monroy, 2022)

Transcending the Self: Higher Purpose

Table 1. Sources of purpose in life.

Kind	Description
Self-improvement	<i>Becoming the best you can be; this may include pursuing knowledge for the sake of learning, broadening your horizons through travel, creative pursuits, or improving yourself through hobbies.</i>
Family	<i>Supporting and providing for your family (however you define it); having children; giving your children the best opportunity possible; caring for your parents.</i>
Relationships	<i>Searching for, finding, or maintaining close relationships (e.g. friendships or romantic relationships).</i>
Religion/Spirituality	<i>Living in accordance with and meeting the standards of your religious or spiritual beliefs.</i>
Recognition	<i>Being respected and having high status. Whether that be at work, in your community, at school, or with your peers.</i>
Happiness	<i>Being happy, enjoying life, and feeling good.</i>
Self-sufficiency	<i>Being able to take care of yourself physically, financially, and having the freedom to do as you wish.</i>
Material Wealth	<i>Getting rich, owning nice things, and buying whatever you want.</i>
Internal Standards	<i>Knowing who you are and what you stand for and living your life according to these principles; following your inner moral compass and living authentically.</i>
Positive Impact	<i>Making the world a better place. This includes, but is not limited to, charitable, political, environmental or scientific means.</i>
Mattering	<i>Inspiring others and leaving a legacy; making an impact.</i>
Occupational Fulfillment	<i>Finding your calling through work; doing your job well and working hard.</i>
Persevering	<i>Handling what life throws at you—not giving up and dealing with the struggles inherent in life.</i>
Physical Health	<i>Taking care of your body and being healthy.</i>
Inner Peace	<i>Being grateful for what you have and accepting what you can't change; trying to control your emotions; being mindful; appreciating and savouring positive experiences.</i>
Service	<i>Serving your country or community; contributing to and being a part of a larger group and fulfilling your resulting responsibilities.</i>

Transcending the Self: Higher Purpose

Correlations between sources of purpose and...

Meaning in Life

^Overall	
Purpose	r
Mattering	.36***
Perseverance	.35***
Service	.34***
Positive Impact	.32***
Religion/Spirituality	.32***
Inner Peace	.32***
Internal Standards	.31***
Relationships	.31***
Physical Health	.31***
Occupation	.29***
Self-improvement	.27***
Family	.27***
Recognition	.26***
Happiness	.24***
Self-sufficiency	.16***
Material Wealth	.12***

Happiness

^Overall	
Purpose	r
Inner Peace	.30***
Positive Impact	.29***
Physical Health	.29***
Happiness	.29***
Mattering	.28***
Service	.28***
Relationships	.26***
Self-improvement	.25***
Religion/Spirituality	.24***
Perseverance	.24***
Internal Standards	.24***
Recognition	.23***
Occupation	.20***
Self-sufficiency	.17***
Family	.16***
Material Wealth	.14***

Psychological Richness

^Overall	
Purpose	r
Service	.37***
Mattering	.36***
Self-improvement	.35***
Relationships	.34***
Positive Impact	.33***
Internal Standards	.33***
Perseverance	.33***
Inner Peace	.29***
Occupation	.29***
Recognition	.28***
Physical Health	.27***
Religion/Spirituality	.27***
Happiness	.25***
Family	.24***
Self-sufficiency	.20***
Material Wealth	.17***

Other-focused and resilience related sources of purpose are more strongly associated with well-being

(Mask, 2025)

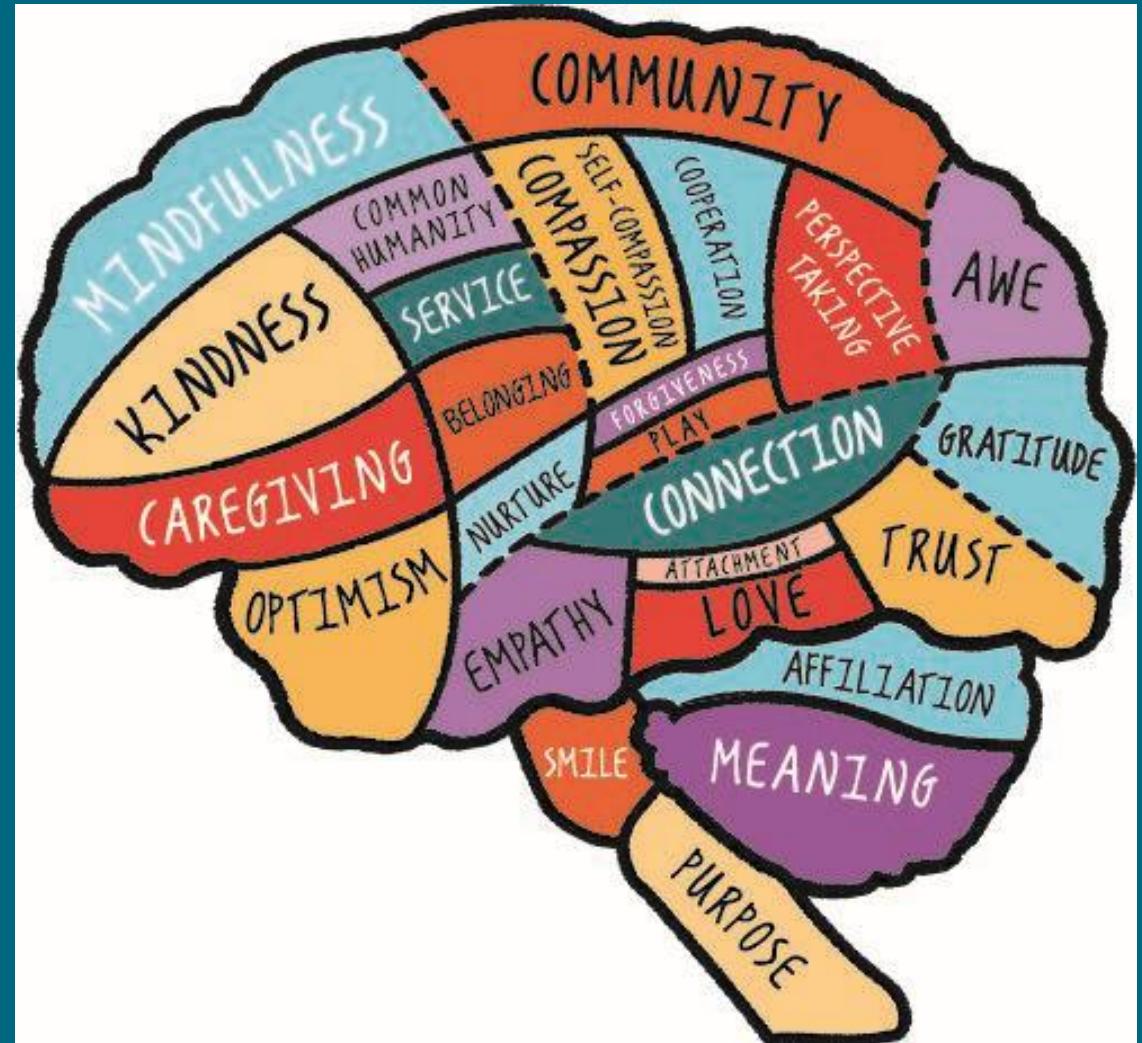
Culture-Building Ritual: Celebrating Service

Create a campus-wide narrative that highlights and accentuates meaningful sources of purpose in life:

- Tell “**Service Stories**” (newsletters, meetings, etc.) about the how people’s work contributes to *Making the world a better place*
- **Reward** (e.g. ceremonially, through funding opportunities or bonuses) students, staff, faculty, and administrators whose work has a **significant positive impact** on others

Building a Resilient Campus Culture

1. Steward resilient beliefs, thought habits, key skills and behaviors
2. Implement rituals that involve resilience-building behaviors and activities
 - Up-regulating the positive
 - Down-regulating the negative
 - Transcending self-focus



Bridging Differences Higher Ed Playbook



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Q&A



Please complete our quick 5-question survey

**Thank you for attending
this session!**

