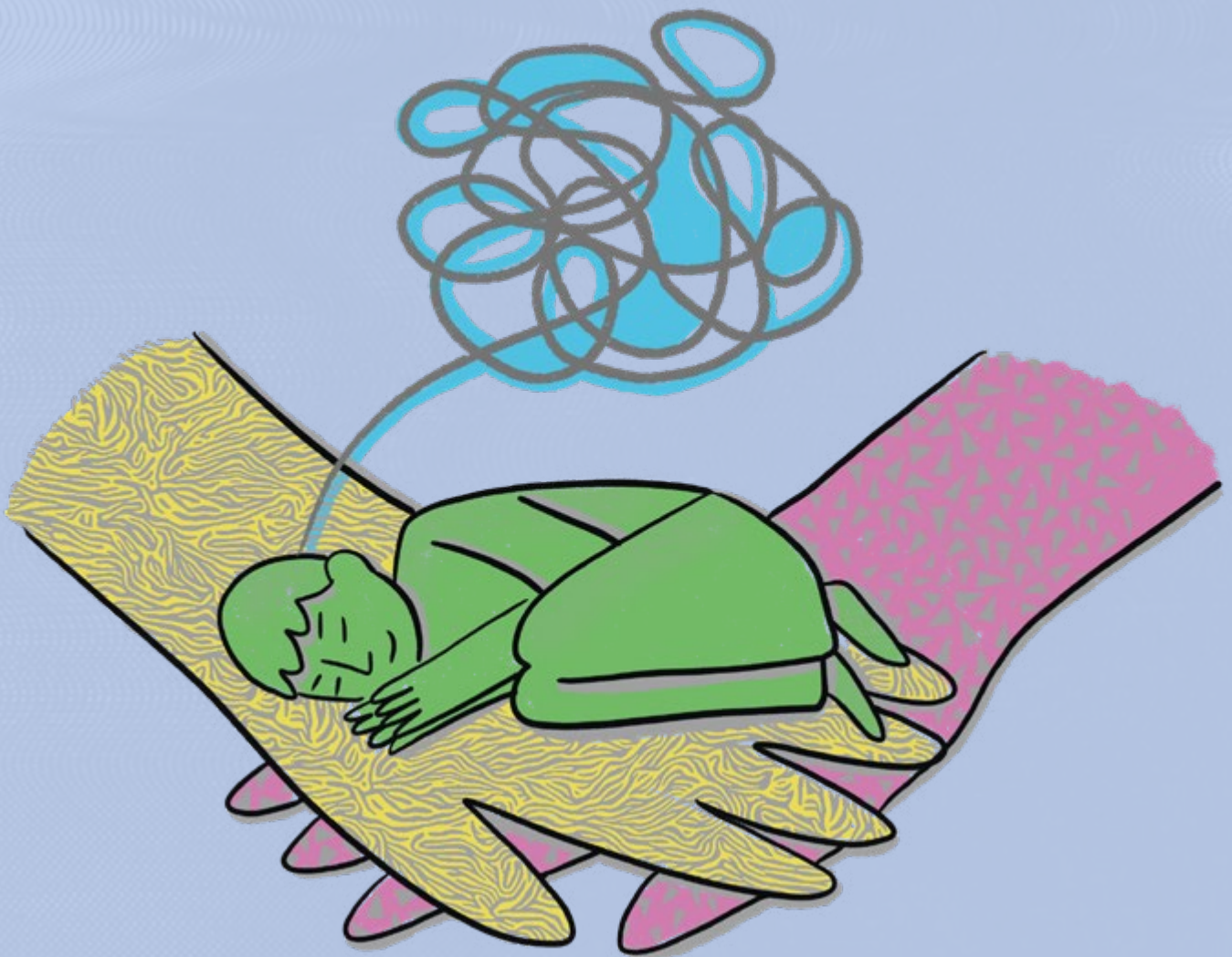


Christa Cocciole, Bětka Wójcik

UNDERSTANDING STRESS AND TRAUMA RESPONSES TO STRENGTHEN RESILIENCE IN UNCERTAIN TIMES



#trauma

#resilience

#stress

#burnout

#trauma_informed

#resilient_organisation

#resilience_online

#body_awareness

About the authors



(Photo Credit: Agata Maziarz)

CHRISTA COCCIOLE

is a Berlin-based Body Oriented Systems Therapist and consultant for Embodied Leadership. Her background as a dancer, choreographer, and social activist, combined with her spiritual practice, is woven into the approach she has coined "Radical Presence: moving with playful compassion." Her work supports organizations and communities to strengthen their resilience and systemic social impact.

Her 30+ years of international experience as a movement therapist with a specialty in trauma has taken her to places like Bosnia-Herzegovina during and after the war. She also worked in psychiatric hospitals and team and community building around embodied social justice issues in the USA and throughout Europe. She is currently working as a therapist and trainer in her private practice (live and online) with individuals, teams, groups, and organizations.



(Photo Credit: Martin Poloha)

BĚTKA WÓJCIK'S

background is in pedagogy and she has worked as an educator and facilitator since 2010. Her topical expertise includes dialogue and empathic communication, conflict transformation, youth empowerment, and civic and non-formal education. She is passionate about creating safe spaces for authentic exchange and learning together. Most of all, she enjoys working with young people and all those who support their growth and development – trainers, educators, and teachers. Several years ago, Bětka encountered the field of non-violent communication and it became the essence of her life and work with people. In her work, she observes how it changes people's lives, relationships, and communities. The dream of creating a world where everybody's needs matter drives and motivates her work.

In her community work, Bětka supports and co-creates projects and designs programs that empower young people, changemakers, and communities in Poland and Georgia. She feels at home in different places across the world, and most of all, she enjoys spending time with her children, the greatest teachers in her life.

Note for the reader:

Bětka Wójcik and Christa Cocciole are the authors of two articles that are linked and complementary to each other and, for this reason, have a shared bibliography. The first part explores some of the skills we need to understand our own and others' responses to stress and trauma. The authors define how stress and trauma can influence the body and the mind.

The second article concerns resilience – the quality of dealing with life's obstacles and unexpected changes, which seems even more critical than ever. Both parts include a practical component, ie. A stress test and a collection of short exercises and practices can help build awareness, strengthen resilience, and deal with difficult or stressful situations.

horizontal talks

S2 E2:



Tea Talk with Christa and Bětka How can we be more mindful of ourselves and others?

Grab a tea and listen to Bětka and Christa sharing their experience and observations of how working in teams has changed in recent years. This episode of the horizontal talks podcasts is complementary to the two chapters in this article. Scan the QR code or click here to listen:

horizontal.school/podcasts/s02e02



CHAPTER 1: ON THE WAY TO A TRAUMA IN A FORMED SOCIETY: UNDERSTANDING STRESS AND TRAUMA RESPONSES

Christa Cocciolo, Bětko Wójcik

In this chapter, we will explore some of the skills we need to understand our own and others' responses to stress and trauma. Now more than ever, when acting as a facilitator or in group settings it is important to know exactly what stress and trauma do to the body and the mind. In our years of work in the field, we have noticed that many activists are fueled by their own trauma. The positive side of this is that it often motivates individuals to strive for social change. Yet, it can also be difficult to regulate stress and avoid burnout over time when working in civil education fields. To make this crucial type of work sustainable, we need to understand our relationship to our stress and trauma and foster our awareness of trauma response signals for the people we intend to support.

While reading the following text, you may recognize or begin to understand some of your responses to adverse situations. It might also bring up thoughts or memories that could be stressful. We ask you to be as kind and compassionate to yourself as possible at this moment. If now is not the time to address these topics, then please skip to page 30 and practice one of our grounding exercises. Or reach out to another being, human or not, and nourish your sense of safety, dignity, and connection – the three basic needs to thrive. You will know when the time is right to dive into some of the difficult aspects of being human in a complex world.

Social Relevance:

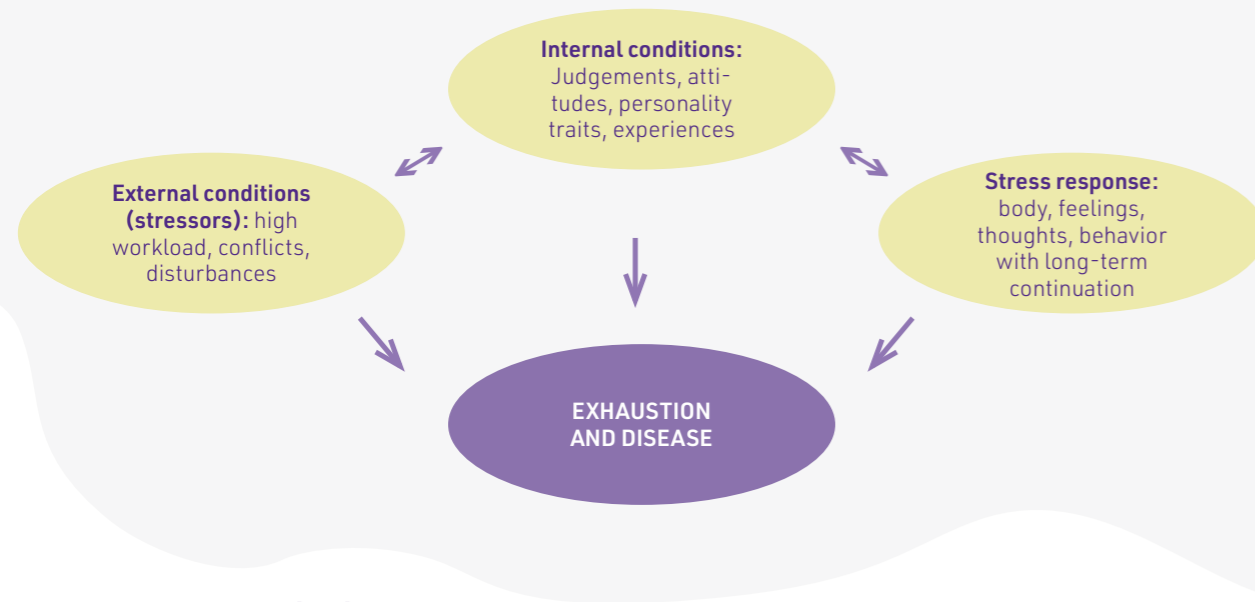
You might be asking yourself, “what do trauma and stress responses have to do with my work?” or “why do I need to be aware of one more thing in these already difficult times?” These are valid and common questions when we begin to talk about the skills we believe are necessary for facilitation in current times of uncertainty. You see, as the demands that we face become more complex, we become overextended in our capacity to navigate them.

What we have found in the past to adapt to situations and regulate our nervous system might no longer be available to us, for example working in an office with colleagues or seeing people's faces (without a mask) to check for safety cues on the train to name a few. We not only have our own personal challenges, but we are also holding space for people who themselves are stretched to their capacities. We might be increasingly working with displaced persons in our groups, with various languages or trauma from their experiences. This can result in heated situations resulting from reactions from the past, or an overloaded nervous system from the present.

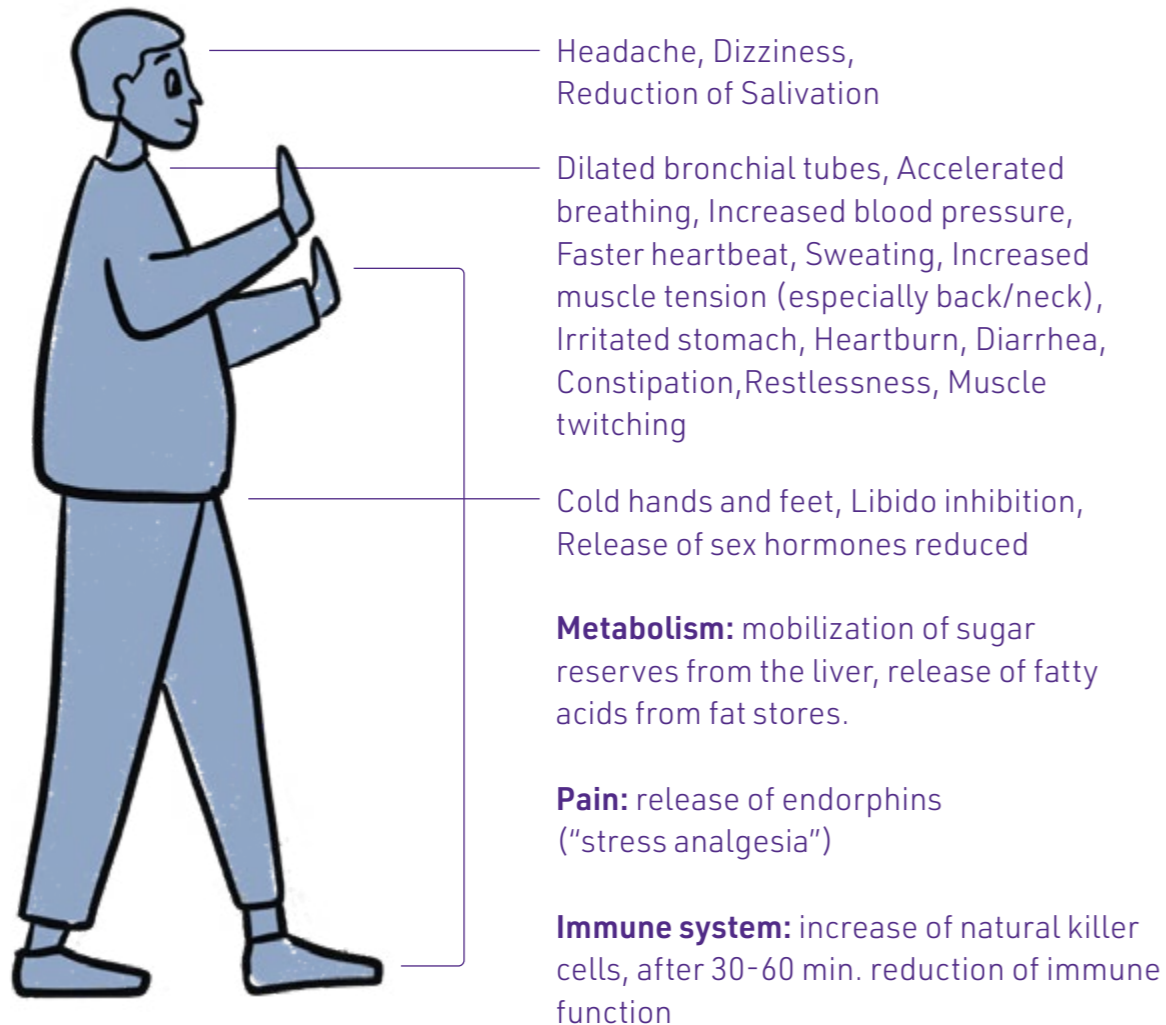
Once there is heightened awareness of this topic, we begin to strengthen our ability to respond in the present moment with the intention of self and co-regulating, as well as possibly assist in harm reduction in the already stressful environments we move in. This can help to prevent burnout and support regenerative group behaviors to tackle the mountain of issues that we want to transform in the world. Through

understanding our own and others' responses, we can recognize when members of our groups are triggered (exhibiting an intense emotional response often related to a memory of past adverse events) or perhaps we unknowingly trigger others through language or content we bring to the group. This increases the chances of finding ways to support collective safety to avoid or address these triggers. In the past, we have seen great organizations lose traction in their mission because of burnout and a lack of personal and collective resilience in turbulent times. Our understanding of human science is constantly evolving. What is now known about neurobiology can help us to work together in agile ways that are more supportive of our needs, instead of the former way of fighting or ignoring what our bodies or minds presented in adverse situations. This applies to the individual as well as collective perspectives. Having briefly covered the basic facts of stress, burnout, and trauma responses, we invite the readers to explore the listed references at the end of the article for more insights into this ever-evolving topic. Learning about personal trauma and stress responses is best done with guidance and support from others, whether it is with a professional or a colleague who you can share information with along your journey. Professional sharing groups and intervision are still not so common in many organizations and projects – we want to encourage you to create such spaces in your work and we hope it will become the new normal. This is an important ingredient for trust to build trauma-informed and resilient teams.

What is Stress¹:



How we can recognize it:



¹ Inspired by Gert Kaluza, *Stressbewältigung: Trainingsmanual Zur Psychologischen Gesundheitsförderung* [Stress management: training manual for psychological health promotion], (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2011).

Stress and trauma responses defined:

All living beings have an innate physical response system to stress or perceived dangers. This function is intended to help us survive and go about our daily lives. Unfortunately, we humans rarely give ourselves enough time to recover from a stressor, whether a perceived danger (hard day at work, traffic jam, etc.), a real threat such as war, or an accident.

Scientists speak of the 6Fs we use to navigate stress². Here are their primal functions and how they can show up in everyday life:

- **Fight:** Gathering strength to protect yourself against harm like a big mammoth beast. Today, this might look like a personality trait of being a difficult person who often argues or is fighting with the world around them. Positive aspects are someone who has strong boundaries, is a clear leader, or has "protector" qualities when necessary.
- **Flight:** This is an innate ability to escape harm or the beast. It can present itself, for instance, as running away or avoiding a situation. It can be exhibited as avoiding feelings that feel threatening by constantly being busy or bingeing on Netflix to avoid the harm in feeling uncomfortable emotions. A positive aspect of the flight response is that it enables us to quickly assess danger or disengage from unhealthy situations or relationships.

→ **Freeze:** Helps us to not be detected by threats. Imagine it like the stillness you might have been able to muster up while playing hide-and-go-seek as a child. When not done consciously, it can manifest as being physically overwhelmed, for example when one loses one's ability to talk or communicate in stressful meetings. A healthy freeze response can manifest itself as mindfulness or suspending action while being fully present, or as an impulse to retreat for a while until a sense of safety returns.

→ **Friend:** This is our built-in sense to tag along with bigger or stronger people or perhaps a group to increase our chances of survival. It is a way of conforming to be safe. This is manifested, for example, in behaviors such as a colleague who always agrees with the boss or with teenagers that wear the right styles to fit in. The affirming side of the friend response could be a healthy sense of community and belonging in the circles one moves in.

→ **Fawn:** This one is a bit tricky to detect. It is like when a dog lies down offering its belly to indicate to another dangerous dog that it's not a threat. It is the act of changing one's behavior to ensure others will minimize the way they may harm us. You might call this a people pleaser strategy, but what's behind it can be traces of a survival mode. A healthy fawning response can facilitate compassion for others, flexibility, or willingness to compromise in difficult situations, or being an active

² See Staci Haines, Poo, and Strozzi-Heckler, *The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing, and Social Justice* (Amsterdam: Adfo Books, 2019).

listener with a discerning awareness for others.

- **Flop:** This is a powerful response when we realize we cannot escape harm. We minimize our own suffering by mentally escaping a situation, either by collapsing (passing out) or, even more complex, by going through the motions yet having no conscious connection to self or others. We call this disassociation. Often it is difficult to recognize it in oneself or others. Sometimes, however, people may look as if they are in zombie mode or simply not there. A mild and sometimes useful form of flopping is daydreaming or retreating to an inner realm that is often creative and full of freedom.

If you've observed your responses to the complexities we have faced in the past few years, you've probably noticed yourself and the people around you moving in and out of different survival modes. We will go into detail about these in a bit, but first, here is an example that might make stress responses clearer:

Imagine you and a friend are tossing a ball back and forth. Then someone comes along and begins to throw another ball into the game. And another and another. What would YOUR response be? This is where it becomes interesting. We all respond differently to stressful situations. Responses consist of many factors. Some are what we learned from our primary caregivers, what is culturally appropriate, how much tension or sense of safety we feel at a given moment. If we stay with the game of catch metaphor, some responses could be:

- **Fight:** Yelling at the person throwing extra balls in the game

- **Flight:** Running away from the situation
- **Freeze:** A physically overwhelming sensation that inhibits the ability to move, thus probably dropping all the balls
- **Friend:** Acting like it's not a big deal, asking the person their name. Gaining safety through connection
- **Fawn:** Trying to please the intruder by keeping up with all the ball throwing. Maybe even pretending it's kind of fun, or genuinely reacting with laughter
- **Flop:** Similar to freeze but the mind "checks out" for a while. The body could still be going through the motions, but it is numb or disconnected from feelings or sensations.

This type of situation happens to us all the time. Whether in our professional or private lives, we have moments or phases where we are responding to stress. Our nervous system is there to support us to survive these challenges. There are two problems associated with this process. Firstly, the patterns of response that show up reflect our core needs for safety, dignity, and belonging at the time they were imprinted. These strategies were useful at some point in our lives. If they are generalized as intrinsic choreographies and go-to-solutions, they may not be appropriate in the here and now and can become part of the problem rather than the solution. Secondly, not every stress situation is manageable. It gets tricky when we have experienced situations of extreme stress and our nervous system hasn't been able to recover or return to an inner state of balance. It would be like after the game of catch, a wild boar came out of nowhere and began chasing you. And you still are forced to play the game of

catch! When we have one or many layers of stressors that we haven't had the time to process, we can experience burnout, trauma, or even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

When things are going well, our brain works to navigate in the world around us. But when we are in a state of stress and/

or have a history of trauma, our brain may begin to malfunction. Therefore, developing a practice and strengthening awareness and grounding can re-wire our brains to return to our full capacity of showing up to the world with presence. This, in turn, expands our resources to deal with complexities.

Burnout and trauma defined:

Burnout is defined as a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that can be caused by being in a draining role for a sustained amount of time. Some signs of burnout can be:³

- **Feeling tired or drained most of the time:** This causes a vicious circle when there is no energy for the things that bring you joy, causing you to feel more drained.
- **Feeling helpless, trapped and/or defeated:** This can occur in the morning before work or a nagging feeling of dread thinking about your work week can creep up on Sunday, causing a feeling of being trapped.
- **Feeling detached or alone in the world:** This can come from the negative feedback loop of not feeling well enough to reach out to the people that care about us.

- **Having a cynical or negative outlook:** Sometimes what is considered dark humor can be a way of trying to cope with a difficult or maybe impossible situation. Unfortunately, this can cause more feelings of defeat and helplessness.
- **Self-doubt:** When one is not feeling at full capacity, it is easy to slip into insecurities.
- **Procrastinating and taking longer to get things done:** When in burnout, everything can feel like a chore. It can also be compounded by self-doubt. This can lead to setting up good reasons to put off things that feel as impossible challenges.
- **Feeling overwhelmed:** This can feel like anything is too much or impossible. It can present itself as an inability to act, or in becoming extremely angry with our colleagues or with people we love.

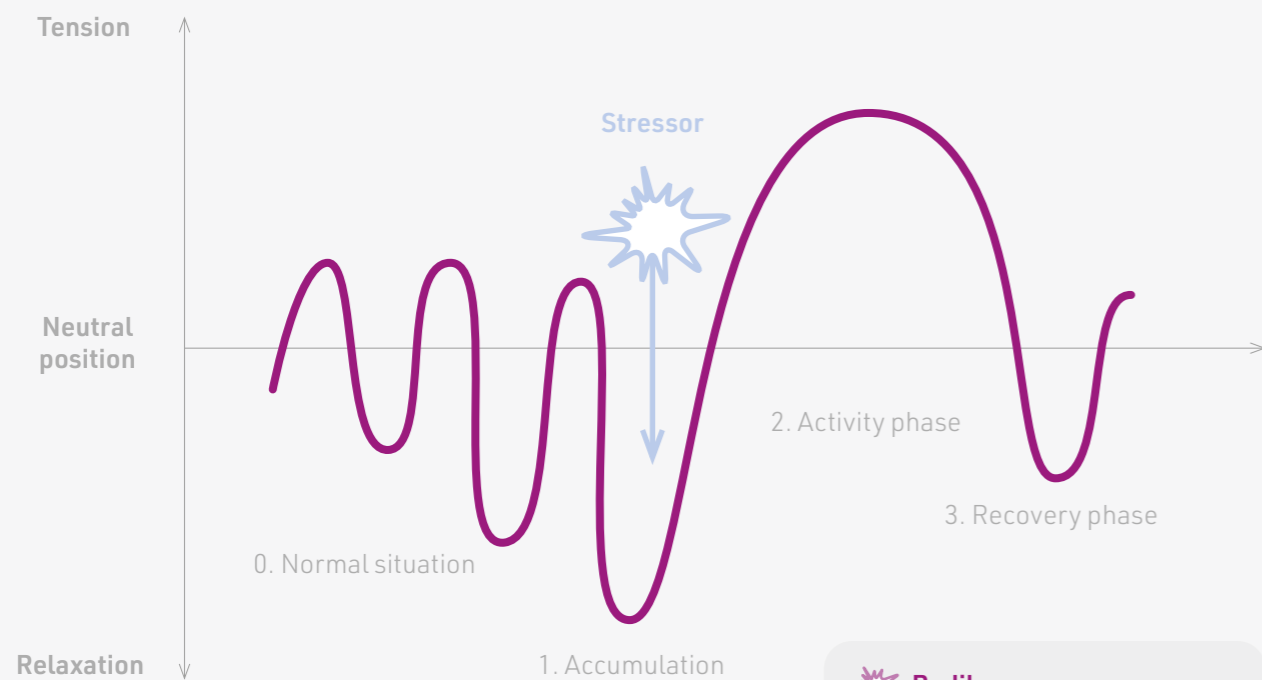
³ Mental Health UK, "Burnout," July 1, 2022, <https://mentalhealth-uk.org/burnout/>.

Burnout can also present as depression or anxiety (an overwhelming sense of fear or circling thoughts marked by physical sensations such as tension, high blood pressure,

etc.). The sooner these signs are detected and named, either by one's self or by a professional, the easier it is to get appropriate support to return to a healthy state.

When do stress and trauma become a problem:

THE STRESS CURVE: A NORMAL STRESS RESPONSE



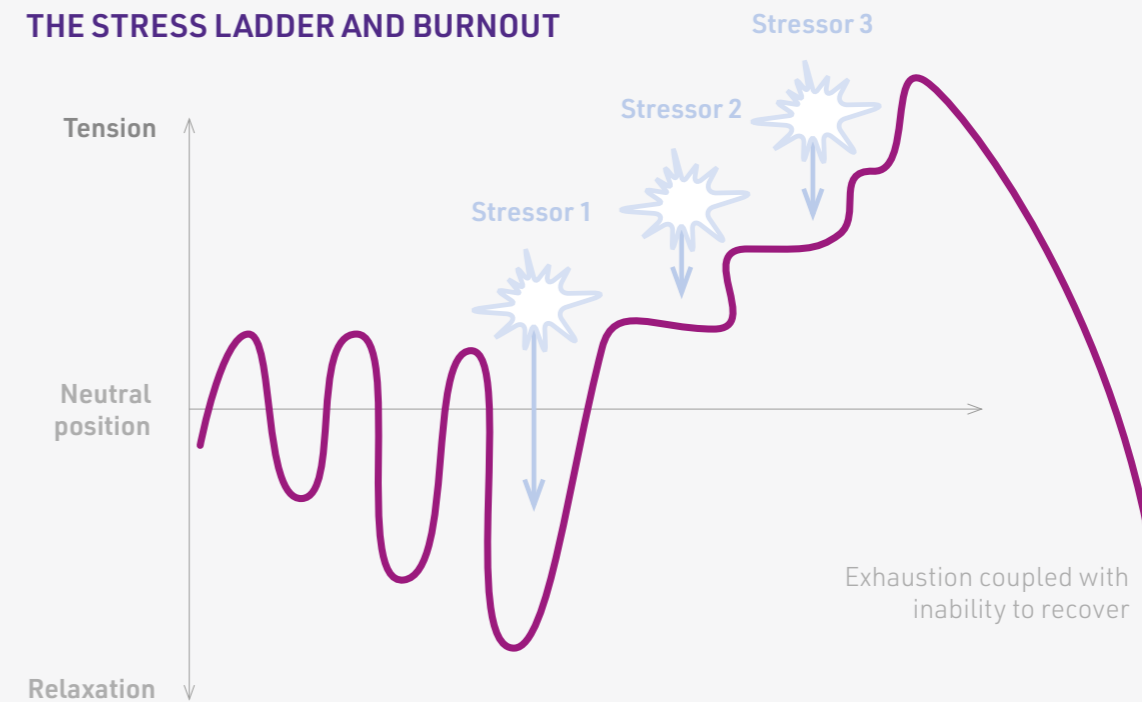
Bodily responses

Hormones are released

Heart rate rises

Breathing accelerates

THE STRESS LADDER AND BURNOUT



"I've done too much for too many others for too long with too little regard for myself"

When our system becomes accustomed to responding to stress in a certain way, we refer to this as a trauma response. Trauma is a response to events that have happened in our life that we did not have enough resources to process in our body and mind. When the arousal in our nervous system hasn't had a chance to neutralize or return to equilibrium and tension from the arousal has stayed in the body, this can manifest in automatic responses to stress that are no longer serving the individual or what is happening

at a given moment. It can be metaphorically compared to a wasp allergy: the reaction to the wasp sting is much too intense for the amount of toxins being fought, and it causes the whole system to be in an alarmed state, with potentially severe consequences. "Trauma is not what happens to you. Trauma is what happens inside you as a result of what happens to you."⁴ It is a response that happens in our nervous system and can show up in our body, emotions, thoughts, and/or behaviors throughout our life.

⁴ Gabor Maté, "Quote on Trauma," Instagram, July 1, 2021, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQwtOm8slji/?hl=en>

There can be different sources of trauma⁵:

- **Acute or shock trauma:** A singular event or accident. This is easier to identify and link the event connected to trauma responses.
- **Chronic or developmental trauma:** This can be more difficult to recognize because it happens over a prolonged period. In earlier stages of life it contributes to shaping the brain. It can be extended exposure to daily stress and it can become normalized, shaping how we see the world around us.
- **Attachment trauma:** This is the result of early separation from primary caregivers, such as through orphanages, institutions, or war. It can result in attachment disorders, such as extreme mistrust or an inability to form meaningful relationships.
- **Collective / societal / historical / intergenerational trauma:** The trauma that is passed down through genetic expression and socialization. Scientists have recently discovered that our ancestors' trauma can show up in our genes. This is called epigenetics.
- **Secondary or vicarious trauma:** Can be caused by acute or prolonged exposure to someone else's trauma (police, firefighters, therapists, etc.), witnessing another's trauma, or even hearing traumatic stories. This type of trauma is something that many people working in civil society realms tend to overlook as part-of-the-job stressors. We tell ourselves we need

to be tough enough to do our job, and fail to take into consideration what this is doing to our mental health.

- **Complex trauma:** Multiple intersecting traumas, making it difficult to detect, as well as understand the sources. It is defined as exposure to multiple, often interrelated forms of traumatic experiences, further enhanced by the difficulties that arise because of adapting to or surviving these experiences. The adverse experiences encapsulated by complex trauma typically begin in early childhood, are longstanding or recurrent, and are inflicted by others. This can be in subtle forms of abandonment or various instances of abuse, including verbal and emotional abuse. It often begins in the preverbal stages of development when a person experiences unsafe or chaotic bonding with a primary caregiver, making it impossible to talk about the trauma.

One manifested form of a trauma response is called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is triggered by either experiencing or witnessing a terrifying event. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts at least one month after the event. This may also show up more subtly as ingrained patterns that seem like personality traits or behaviors, yet are limiting the individual (or collective) in ways to respond to the world in the here and now.

Stress responses in groups, teams, organizations:

“

“Trauma in a person, decontextualized over time, looks like personality. Trauma in family, decontextualized over time, looks like family traits. Trauma in people, decontextualized over time, looks like culture.”

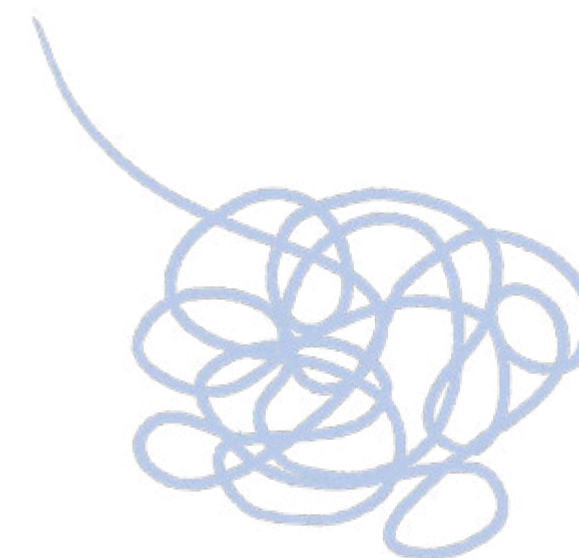
Resmaa Menakem

At times, the engrained individual patterns and imprinted response strategies make it very difficult for teams to work together. When people or groups are having stress and/or trauma responses to the tasks they face, it limits the possibilities and potential of the collective. It can lead to misunderstandings and absorb a lot of energy. When one is in a stress/trauma response or is being triggered, it is not possible to grow. One's need for safety becomes a priority. This makes it difficult to cooperate and strengthen the impact of the group in their planned intervention. As a participant, learning can become challenging if not impossible when the focus is on surviving. A general rule of thumb in holding spaces is that the tension in the room has priority. To learn, there needs to be a safe enough space to trust each other to make connections.

An example from our facilitation practice: Members of a team working closely with Russia and Ukraine when the war broke out

were confused as to why they were finding it difficult to work together. We noticed that some people were running around with three cell phones trying to solve everything (Fight). Others found it impossible to concentrate on work (Flight). Then, some members were overwhelmed and could not answer emails or calls (Freeze). Another response we noticed was longing for and sometimes demanding more “together time” to feel a sense of belonging and thus safety (Friend). Some people appeared unavailable even when they were right in front of their colleagues. They seemed checked out and unpredictable, forgetting about agreements that were made (Flop or disassociate). Finally, to some people's joy and others' annoyance, the think-positive-people-pleasers changed their behavior to ensure that their surroundings were safe enough (Fawn).

All these responses are useful as well as sometimes necessary and helpful when taking on tasks in a team. When we cannot understand why we or the people around us are doing what they are doing, we minimize our adaptability and freedom to show up as best as we can for each other.



⁵ Inspired by HealthMatch staff, “What Are the Different Types of Trauma?,” HealthMatch, September 1, 2022, <https://healthmatch.io/ptsd/different-types-of-trauma>.

Navigating and transforming stress and trauma:

Recognizing stress responses



“Neuroscience research shows that the only way we can change the way we feel is by becoming aware of our inner experience and learning to befriend what is going inside ourselves.”

Bessel A. van der Kolk

Once we begin to understand our automatic responses to challenges, we can begin to recognize that our response may have been helpful at a point in our lives, yet in the situation at this moment, it might not be as supportive for ourselves and/or others. Just as importantly, we begin to recognize the people around us and their patterns of response. We then can see their behavior for what it is, their personal skills for survival, making it easier to not get caught up in the behavior so we can provide the opportunity to co-regulate. By co-regulating, we can use our innate ability to tune into other beings to sync our nervous systems by sensing our connection. Remember how it might feel in your body when you're with someone you care about? Or the opposite, when you have the sense that someone or even a place has a “bad vibe?” This is our ability to co-regulate to keep us safe. Deepening our awareness of stress and trauma responses in ourselves and others can cultivate the inherent needs of humans: a sense of safety, dignity

and belonging/connection to ourselves and others. Our life's history and experience can, however, impact all three. Often the three basic needs play against each other in short-term situations, eventually causing more distress. We see this, for example, in situations where a person of authority is acting inappropriately, and the people with less power go along with the situation. They are focusing on safety and perhaps connection while dignity (our values and inherent worth) is being abused.

Working in the fields that we do, as trainers and facilitators, we notice an ever-increasing need for individuals and teams to raise awareness of stress and trauma responses, to strengthen resilience in these complex times. This not only supports us as individuals, but also nourishes a regenerative and collaborative culture in teams and organizations, giving us more creative possibilities.

To strengthen our ability to recognize stress levels in others, it is important to recognize our own. This can best be done by noticing physical sensations. What sensations are you aware of when tracking your breath? Can you feel the air passing through your nostrils or over your lips? Is it warm or cool? What is the position of your shoulders? Are you holding tension there? Without changing or judging or analyzing anything, simply notice what you are conscious of. Can you name it without judgment or needing to fix or solve what you are aware of? What can you do now to invite more ease into your body by navigating with your awareness? This simple practice is a quite complex neurobiological journey: By taking a moment to increase our awareness, we are creatively disrupting our survival patterns to show up to the present in what is needed now.

Now let's look at what happens when stress is held in the body. What would you estimate your own stress level is now? How do you notice this? Maybe your jaw is tight or your breathing is shallow? These are important cues that you can use to help down-regulate

your nervous system. We'd like to encourage you to observe yourself over the next few days with curiosity, to become familiar with your innate responses. This increased awareness might open more possibilities to navigate situations with more choices.

horizontal talks S2 E3:



Notice, Name and Navigate with Christa

Join this short exercise to become more aware of what your body needs at this moment and return to your grounded center. Thanks to Christa Cocciolo for guiding us through this exercise. This exercise is also available in Romanian, Ukrainian, German and Polish. Scan the QR code or click here to listen: horizontal.school/podcasts/s02e03



To take a 5-10 minute stress test to find out what your current state is, see the “Checklist for early signs and stress levels” on page 18.

Naming the response you are aware of can be the first step in transforming reactive

patterns and old memories in your nervous system. This takes a lot of practice and perhaps support from people around you or a professional to give guidance. It can be done reflectively and playfully, to notice what you are aware of and look behind the reaction, to practice other ways of responding.

Online:

You might be noticing surprising patterns showing up on- or offline as we adapt to our rapidly changing world. For some people, being in their own environment online could be supportive in finding more safety in groups. We have noticed, for example, that some colleagues who rarely spoke out in offline meetings are now quite vocal in online situations. This could be for many reasons: the body is well regulated because no travel was needed to another country/office/space, there are many safe anchor points in one's own space, etc. The opposite can also be true: Some people don't feel comfortable working online because of many things such as a lack of safety, connection, and a sense of dignity within online formats. This may exhibit itself as silence, or little input, maybe even as headaches or irritability. It could also show up in a flight response by multi-tasking while in online meetings. Again, this is important to be aware of and allow yourself time to adapt and strengthen your capabilities to adapt to new situations. You can cultivate safety and connections by being aware of the medium you are using with all its limitations and/or possibilities. While facilitating, it is important to take into consideration that people might have different responses and to create spaces where participants feel cared for.

Some practices that we have found useful are:

1. Having a co-host is ideal, or having someone in the group assigned to different roles. A very helpful role is a care person who is known by the group so they can reach out in a private message if needed. Or if a member of the call sees someone is having difficulty, they can contact the care person and not worry that the participant is alone with their pain. We learned to do this after what happened in our group when someone was struggling with a trigger. She received an overwhelming number of private messages from people asking if they could do something. She then expressed her gratitude to the group, but also that it wasn't helpful to get bombarded with private messages.
2. Having a check-in question at the beginning of the call to hear each voice in the space (whether in the chat or through the microphone) can establish a sense of dignity, belonging, and safety. This invested time can create more effective calls.
3. If you are having a longer call, an embodied practice in between the call can support presence and motivation.

Some practices for regulating on- and offline:

1. Again, if possible, have a co-host or an assigned person to ensure support for each other and the group. In live settings, we call this a space fairy or care creature who has the responsibility to attend to the group's needs. The group can contact them directly if triggers show up in the group or even the facilitator. It doesn't mean that they need to solve or fix anything. It is merely the contact person who will ensure the need is addressed with the appropriate person.
2. Transferring the weight of your feet from one side to another can give your nervous system a sense of safety and grounding by active parts of your brain. You can also bring your attention to your connection to your chair or the clothes on your skin. By leaning into your bodily awareness in the present, you are gently guiding yourself back to the here and now.
3. Looking over your shoulder can down-regulate your nervous system by scanning your surroundings for safety.
4. Standing in an open and dynamic posture with your arms out or up can disrupt flight/fight/freeze patterns.
5. A conscious and extended exhale calms you down (as it gets the parasympathetic system activated).

As you see, we are constantly updating our knowledge and understanding of the human experience. In a rapidly changing world, this can make expanding our possibilities of navigating complexity a very challenging experience. Our suggestion is to be as kind as possible to yourself and your experience. Give yourself permission to get it wrong and grow with your ever-evolving understanding.

Whether inherent or learned, the set of skills needed to regulate and transform a stress response to maintain freedom and choice is called resilience. You can learn more about how and why this is important in the following chapter.

Stress Test:

CHECKLIST "EARLY SIGNS AND STRESS LEVEL"	STRONG	SLIGHT	SELDOM/ NEVER	POINTS
PHYSICAL REACTIONS				
Excessive perspiration	2	1	0	
Muscle tension	2	1	0	
Breathing difficulties	2	1	0	
Chronic tiredness	2	1	0	
Heart palpitations	2	1	0	
Stomach pain	2	1	0	
Loss of appetite	2	1	0	
Sexual dysfunction	2	1	0	
Excessive perspiration	2	1	0	
Digestive issues	2	1	0	
Headaches	2	1	0	
Back pain	2	1	0	
Cold hands or feet	2	1	0	
Tightness in the chest	2	1	0	
EMOTIONAL				
Nervousness or inner agitation	2	1	0	
Irritability, feelings of annoyance	2	1	0	
Anxiety, fear of failure	2	1	0	
Chronic tiredness	2	1	0	
Dissatisfaction/imbalance	2	1	0	
Lack of motivation	2	1	0	
Inner void	2	1	0	

COGNITIVE				
Mental vacancy	2	1	0	
Impaired concentration	2	1	0	
Loss of performance/frequent errors	2	1	0	
Daydreaming	2	1	0	
Nightmares	2	1	0	
Constantly racing thoughts/rumination	2	1	0	
BEHAVIOR				
Aggressive behavior, "flaring up"	2	1	0	
Consuming alcohol, drugs, or medications	2	1	0	
Neglecting private contacts	2	1	0	
Smoking more	2	1	0	
Eating irregularly	2	1	0	
Finger drumming, trembling, teeth grinding	2	1	0	
Fast speech, stuttering	2	1	0	
Interrupting others, not being able to listen	2	1	0	
Less sport and exercise than desired	2	1	0	
TOTAL POINTS				

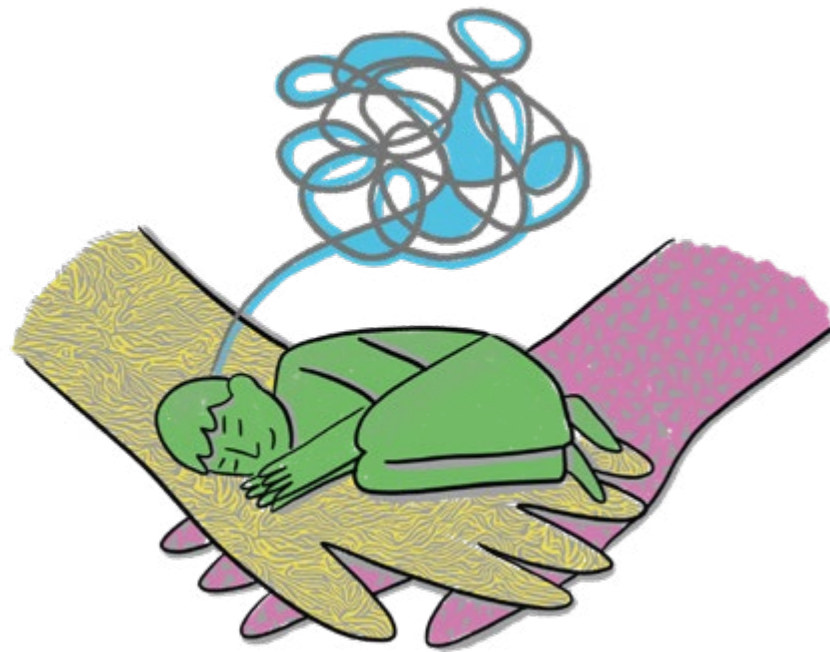
0-10 points: Your comparatively stable health is a cause for celebration. You can use stress management techniques primarily for prevention.

11-20 points: There currently appear to be physical, emotional, cognitive, and motor responses occurring in you. You should therefore apply and develop your skills in dealing with stress in the near future.

21 or more points: It appears you're having some significant emotional stress and health issues. It is much better to deal with this sooner rather than later, as the build-up of all these symptoms together will inevitably get worse. Delaying or avoiding this stress, even if that seems the easiest path, really is not. Think about simple steps you can take that will start to defuse stress with serenity and calm, to begin on a path to restoring your health.

CHAPTER 2: RESILIENCE – AN ESSENTIAL SKILL FOR UNCERTAIN TIMES

Christa Cocciolo, Bětko Wójcik



“

“Resilience is not just for surviving the worst day of your life, it’s for thriving every day of your life.”

Dr. Rick Hanson

We live in uncertain times. With the current and urgent challenges which we face in today’s world, we are constantly in a state of change. How we handle a crisis and deal with changes depends strongly on how much resilience we have.

Resilience is a necessary quality for coping with life’s obstacles and unexpected changes. It has always been important, but it may be even more important today.

Seeing this helps us to understand the importance of building and strengthening resilience, both on our personal level, but also on the level of our teams, groups and communities. Strengthening resilience could be a simple, hopeful, and practical action that we can undertake in the present moment.

Resilience defined:

Resilience is the ability to respond or adapt to challenges. It is our way of bouncing back after a difficult or traumatic event. It helps us to return to an inner equilibrium, which makes it possible for us to re-establish connections and take action toward safety within ourselves and with others. Resilience is not about always being in balance, rather it is about the capacity to recognize when one is out of balance as well as having the ability to recalibrate and return to a balanced state despite challenges. It is having a healthy inner and outer web of support and skills to digest and integrate experiences in order to strengthen and stretch our capacities.

With resilience, we perceive reality as it is and we are ready to deal with it thanks to the tools and skills we have, which are constantly evolving. Resilience is not just a form of resistance or defense, it is an awareness of reality and understanding its impact on us. With resilience, we can adapt to changing circumstances with flexibility and continue to learn to return to a state of equanimity.

Below you can find the 7 C’s model of resilience⁶ which might be helpful to understand what resilience is. According to this model, the following seven components make us resilient:

1. **Competencies:** the feeling of being competent and understanding how to handle difficult situations.
2. **Confidence:** self-awareness, trust and belief in one’s own capacities.

3. **Connection:** close relationships, fulfilled needs for safety and belonging.
4. **Character:** the integration of own values.
5. **Contribution:** awareness of interconnections between one and the world and experience and belief that one can contribute and bring something important and meaningful to the world and others.
6. **Coping:** the ability to cope with difficult situations, having different strategies and understanding when and how to use them.
7. **Control:** awareness of my field of influence and understanding of my responsibility for actions and decisions.

Individual resilience is a mix of constitution, personal history and environmental factors. Resilience doesn’t happen in a vacuum. It is interrelated and connected to all parts of all of our selves as well as to outer circumstances around us. We can say that resilience consists of inner capacities and outside factors.

Inner capacities include a set of skills, attitudes and competencies, such as:

- supporting beliefs – how do we perceive the world, others and ourselves
- curiosity and openness
- self-awareness – understanding ourselves, our emotions and our reactions
- consciousness about our stressors, triggers, traumas

⁶ Kenneth Ginsburg and Martha Jablo, *Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Kids Roots and Wings*, 4th ed. (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020).

- creativity and ability to see different options
- acceptance
- learning skills and ability to reflect
- ability to regulate and co-regulate
- openness and ability to search for help and support that is needed

A lot of those skills and competencies are developed during childhood. These skills are not necessarily accessible to everyone. Not everyone can grow up with access to learning these skills. Some people from marginalized groups (differently abled, persons of color, having a migration background, financially limited, LGBTQ+, etc.) might have their resilience affected from a young age. We can see that not everyone

has the same vulnerability to risks and access to strengthening their resilience. This is important to keep in mind when facilitating groups. By taking into consideration what capacities the participants have access to, we can better support an atmosphere of equity.

The amount of resilience one has is the result of many variables and is very individual. We know that some aspects make it easier or more difficult to build resilience, but there is no universal formula. In different situations, some people develop resilience while others do not. For some people, resilience is more available and for others, it is not. Nevertheless, because of brain neuroplasticity, everyone can strengthen their resilience, develop those competencies and learn new skills at any age.

The first step to resilience – understanding our nervous systems:

When talking about resilience, it helps to recall some basic knowledge about our nervous system and polyvagal theory which helps us to understand it. We find it very practical and useful in our work

with teachers and educators, as it helps to understand resilience and how we can strengthen it as well as provides the scientific background which is accessible, understandable and easily transformed into our educational practice.

The polyvagal theory was created by Stephen Porges and then developed and transformed in practice by others (such as Deb Dana and Daniel Siegel). Understanding our nervous system and its reactions helps us to understand ourselves and others. This theory teaches that we can differentiate three regulation states

that our nervous system uses in service of our survival and safety. It is happening all the time underneath our conscious control, without involving thinking parts of our brain and without our conscious awareness.

This simplified model shows us how our body deals with different challenges and what resources we have in every state to take care of ourselves.⁷



⁷ Arianne Missimer, "How to Map Your Own Nervous System: The Polyvagal Theory," The Movement Paradigm, December 13, 2021, <https://themovementparadigm.com/how-to-map-your-own-nervous-system-the-polyvagal-theory/>.

→ **Green zone** (Ventral Vagal path of our autonomic nervous system) – in that state we feel connected to the world and safe. This doesn't mean that everything is wonderful and we don't have any problems. But we feel empowered, we have the ability to acknowledge distress, explore options, reach out for help and choose the response to what is happening. We can see the bigger picture, explore different perspectives and look for win-win solutions. This is the state where we are grounded, mindful and in the present. We feel curiosity, joy and compassion. Our nervous system is regulated.

→ **Red zone** (Sympathetic path of our autonomic nervous system) – in that state, we get triggered and feel in danger – we need to take action, run or fight. There is a high level of mobilization. We feel fear, panic, anxiety, anger, frustration and irritation. The world seems dangerous, chaotic, and unfriendly. It is difficult to stay focused and impossible to see the bigger picture – we see only our own perspective and are focused on short-term actions. We need to protect ourselves. In our bodies adrenaline, blood pressure and heart rate increase. There are different reactions possible in this state (you can check stress responses in the previous article to find out more about it: fight, flight, fawn and friend responses all fit into this state).

→ **Blue zone** (Dorsal Vagal path of our autonomic nervous system) – in that state, we can't cope, we feel collapsed and trapped. We feel alone, we are dissociated and hopeless. We have no energy. This state can involve burnout, shutdown and depression (if we stay

in it for a longer period). There is a heightened sense of awareness, yet the inability to take action due to extreme stress (you can check stress responses in the previous article to find more about it: freeze and flop responses fit into this state).

As you can see, different regulation states influence our communication and behavior. The strategy by which we fulfill our needs depends on the state in which we are at the moment (in some states we have very limited possibilities).

Our nervous system has the ability to regulate and is linked with the nervous systems of other people; this is called co-regulation. Our nervous system is designed to co-regulate with others and with our environment from the very beginning when we come to this world.

For example, when a person is regulated (in the green zone), participants can use that individual's nervous system to balance their own nervous systems. Unfortunately, the opposite is true as well. If a colleague is dysregulated and one is unaware of the effects it has on them, they can become dysregulated themselves without even knowing why. It's not always possible to be conscious of what is happening – but if we build this awareness step by step, learn how to understand our body, ourselves and our reactions, and we practice embodied awareness, we can increase our ability to read our own signals and navigate our connections with others. This self-awareness is already something that strengthens our resilience.

Through the lenses of polyvagal theory, we can see resilience as the ability to return to the green zone after a challenge. The good news is that our nervous system is learning throughout our whole life (this

is called neuroplasticity). The more time we spend in the green zone, the easier it is for us to come back after stressful or challenging situations and feel safe again.

The crucial thing is to build this awareness and learn how to understand yourself, your body and reactions better. Take a moment and explore the following questions and write down your answers:

- How can you recognize those three states – what are your reactions, body sensations, emotions, how do you talk, which words do you use, how do you feel when in blue, red and green zones? What does it usually look like in your case?
- Try to think about what helps you to regulate and switch between zones. Think about your working environment so you are more aware of what can support you there and help you to regulate.
- Think also about your triggers, and about all those things that dysregulate you. Think about your working environment so you are more aware of what can trigger you there.

By regulating our own nervous system, we can strengthen our resilience. A regulated nervous system increases our ability to cooperate, learn, solve problems, take into consideration different points of view, create and connect with others within our communities, teams and societies. This means that in the context of our work, we must create safe spaces where others can learn, develop and strengthen their own resilience.

Understanding co-regulation is important for us as trainers and facilitators because for participants, it might be easier to co-regulate to the state in which we are as leaders. We can help others to regulate by showing their nervous system that we are in the green zone – it usually happens through non-verbal cues (calm voice, eye contact, body language, breath). To create supportive and safe learning spaces, we ourselves need to be in the green zone.



Strengthening our own resilience:

We believe resilience can be described as a set of skills: this means that we can learn and develop it. Resilience can be strengthened and cultivated with different practices and exercises: individually and in groups, teams and organizations. Thanks to these practices, we can feel more connected, open and safe and learn how to overcome everyday challenges. Practices that raise our self-awareness can help us to regenerate and be in contact with our bodies, thus cultivating more presence in the now.

In everyday life, we have different strategies to foster our resilience. You can check our short list below:

- Contact with other beings (human and animals)
- Being connected with others and building strong relationships and communities
- Physical well-being and healthy lifestyle (sleep, rest, healthy diet, physical activity)
- Spirituality and spiritual practices
- Sense of purpose and meaning
- Being in nature
- Reflection and making meaning of difficult situations in the past
- Community and collective experiences

Try to make your own list of resilience practices: those which you already have or would like to practice more. Think about 1-3 practices that you want to practice daily during the upcoming month. These can

be really small things, just make sure they bring you more connection, aliveness and pleasant feelings (and not more tension, numbness, or fewer feelings). The more we practice and use these skills, the easier it is for us to reach them during times of imbalance. Through committed and conscious action, we are building neural pathways in our brains to prepare us for future situations.

How can we shape our environments to nourish resilience?

As we mentioned before, resilience consists of inner capacities and outside factors. Sometimes we are limited in situations due to the factors that we are confronted with. The pandemic pointed out to many of us that there is only so much uncertainty that humans can digest. Moreover, being forced to move because of a war, for example, stretches the ability to be resilient and may push one over their limits.

It is important to remember the two elements which constitute our resilience: at times, it is easier to influence inner capacities (for example developing a new competence), and sometimes it is easier to influence or change the environment. This can affect one's state of inner resilience. These channels can leverage each other when striving to embody our full potential.

Take a moment to reflect on what exactly supports you in your environment? What does a good environment look like for you? When is it easier for you to come back to your center of equilibrium? Think also about your working situation and your professional environment. What supports you there? What type of setting is supportive for you to facilitate a group in?

How can we teach resilience:

Because resilience is a skill, we can also teach it, strengthen it and role model it as trainers and facilitators. Building resilience is also about empowering others, so they can face challenges and act in their daily lives. While leading groups or facilitating collective processes, we consciously or unconsciously lay out a framework in which we show up together. As trainers and facilitators, we can create safe spaces where core needs, such as dignity, safety and belonging can be met. In such an environment, people can naturally strengthen their capacities for resilience individually or collectively.

We believe that focusing on resilience and well-being (balance between activity and rest, sleep, healthy food, physical activities, and the number of stimuli) is an important part of education and can make it more sustainable and meaningful, especially during times of radical change, crisis, and challenges such as those we are facing today. In citizenship education, we already develop different skills, competencies and attitudes needed for resilience, such as self-awareness, proactivity, or cooperation. We believe that we need to sharpen our lens and make resilience a priority in order to be sustainable in our work and put forward a vision for civic education of the future.

Below we offer some ideas on how to foster resilience as trainers and facilitators:

- Create supportive and safe learning spaces where core needs (dignity, belonging, safety) can be met, where

people can learn and try new things, and where we can learn from mistakes and challenges by taking time to reflect on them.

- Name and set agreements and principles with the group, even when it seems obvious. This helps people to navigate and feel safe when something is happening in the group. For example: confidentially, consent, etc.
- Create space for reflection and dialogue. Seeing different perspectives and being seen with our opinions and thoughts helps us to build resilience.
- Develop a sense of belonging within the group. Seeing and understanding that we are part of something bigger helps us to be more resilient and proactive.
- Create opportunities to develop learning skills and name them. We need these for resilience as we learn new patterns and attitudes.
- Propose simple embodied practices. Involving the body in our activities and raising body consciousness helps us to build our self-awareness and resilience. Embodied practices give people time to arrive and tune in to themselves and others.
- Involve all parts of ourselves in the learning process (mind, body, emotions).
- Do a check in at the beginning of the session: this increases group cohesion and emotional intelligence
- Build connections with people on an individual level as well, for example by asking "How are you?", showing your interest, getting into contact.

- Practice co-facilitation if possible. This has many benefits, the most obvious one being that it is easier to handle a situation when somebody has a trauma response or when individual support is needed. It is also helpful while you as a facilitator face trauma response or experience a stress response in yourself.
- Be transparent and name what is happening and what you can observe (just be aware that you share your experience and observation, and not a diagnosis). An example of this could be: "it was an intense moment and I can observe that many of us, including myself, may need some grounding. Let's do some short breathing exercises."
- Invite pauses or breaks within discussions and notice strong emotions when they are happening.
- During educational events, remember about physical well-being which recognizes our humanness and the needs of our body: think about the length of sessions, when lunch is, if there is enough air and light in the space, etc.
- Help people to understand their field of influence and develop the acceptance of the current state and our capacities. It is much easier to learn and develop resilience from a place of acceptance, than from a place of fear and shame.
- Involve silent times and spaces for reflection when there might be a moving topic.
- Be aware of power differences and check if everyone has the space to talk and express themselves. In an

international space with multi-levels of skills in the spoken language, it is particularly important to be aware of this. Pay attention to other possible inequalities which may affect this, such as gender, age, position, etc.

- Help participants to take care of their boundaries. When proposing an exercise, remind them that it is ok not to take part or to step away when they don't feel comfortable. Remember that safe space is not only about accepting "no," but more about inviting "no" because people are used to crossing their boundaries way too often. Science has proven that we don't learn when we cross boundaries, we learn when we feel safe, open and curious – in the "green zone" mentioned below.
- Create the space for a range of emotions. Don't divide emotions into positive and negative, yet invite all of them as important signals which help us to understand ourselves, our reactions and needs. Help people to name them, to build emotional intelligence and self-awareness.
- Keep in mind that our brains have a negativity bias: it is natural for our brain to zoom in on all the difficult things, dangers, threats in order to keep us alive. It is how our brain works and it is useful in many situations. However, this also means that sometimes we are not able to see other parts of reality around us and we need to intentionally give them our awareness. This skill only comes with a lot of practice. Help people name their resources, skills, and competencies. It doesn't mean that we deny what is challenging, but that we build a wider picture of ourselves

and the situation around us. This helps us to build upon what is working, which in turn helps us to feel better and be more resilient.

- As a trainer and facilitator, develop skills to recognize signs of high stress

and trauma responses (you can find more information in the previous article). It is supportive to set up supervision, intervision and receive leadership coaching regularly, or organize a professional sharing group.

What is ahead?

We are not sure of what lies ahead of us in uncertain times. But we believe we can learn how to thrive and live our lives fully - and we are convinced we need resilience for this.

We believe resilient leaders can change systems so they don't create more stress and trauma and that our role as educators, activists and changemakers today is to contribute to building resilient and trauma-informed communities. We would like to recall Stephen Porges' words at the end:

"If you want to improve the world, start by making people feel safer."

Stephen Porges

We want to close this chapter with a collection of short exercises and practices which can be helpful in the process of building awareness, strengthening resilience, and dealing with difficult or stressful situations. Exercises and resources are listed for both articles (trauma and resilience).

We invite you to try them for yourself and weave them into your daily practice.

1. Gratitude practice – Non-Violent Communication

This exercise is based on the Nonviolent Communication approach (NVC). It helps us to build awareness of our feelings and needs and take responsibility for our actions. During this exercise, we recommend that you use a list of feelings and needs. You can search for it online in the language of your preference.

This exercise can be a daily practice. You can follow the guideline and write down your answers. If you practice it regularly, it becomes a habit.

- 1. Observations:** Write down what specifically you, or someone else, did that enriched your life. Make your observation as clear as possible. Try to describe the situations as though seen through a camera lens, without evaluation and judgment.
- 2. Needs:** Which needs of yours are met with someone else's, or your own actions or words? What needs were satisfied that way? Use the list of needs to name them.
- 3. Feelings:** How are you feeling right now? Are you feeling those fulfilled needs? What are your body sensations?

- 4. My contribution:** Write down what you did that helped to make this possible. Think for a while and try to name what you did do or didn't do and what made it possible. Increase your awareness of sharing power and interdependence.

2. Gratitude practice – positive neuroplasticity

This exercise is based on a positive neuroplasticity approach, which says that we can turn good experiences into resilience and happiness by changing the structure of our brains.

This exercise can be a daily practice.

- 1.** Find a moment during the day to stay longer with any positive experience. Recall a pleasant experience or something you are thankful for: it could be something from the past, a positive memory or a recent experience.
- 2.** Don't just notice that the experience was positive, stay with the experience longer, for at least 10-20 seconds. Try to feel it in your body. Maybe it is connected with some sensual experiences or body sensations? Try to recall them. Maybe you can somehow visualize it? Feel the experience in your body. Take a few breaths and let those feelings last. By doing this, you can make your experience more powerful and the memory system in your body and brain more receptive to it.
- 3.** Write down one word which stays with you after the practice. It can be a feeling, a thought you had or an image. You can write it down and just keep it at your desk today to remember it with gratitude.

- 4.** Keep practicing! Repeat the practice and come back to it in daily situations.

3. Self-empathy exercise

This exercise is based on the Nonviolent Communication approach (NVC). It helps us to build awareness of our feelings and needs and take responsibility for our actions. During this exercise, we recommend you use the list of feelings and needs that you can find in the additional materials and resources section. You can also search for it online in your own language.

How are you feeling here and now?

Pay attention to your thoughts, feelings and body sensations. Take a few conscious breaths and check how you are. What is alive in you? You can concentrate on this very moment or remember any other intense moment from your life. It can be the situation when you experienced a judgment (negative or positive) about yourself or something intense happened to you.

Try to follow the next steps and write your answers down:

- 1. Thoughts:** What are your thoughts? What thoughts do you have when you recall the situation? Let all the thoughts sound as they are, along with judgments, interpretations, evaluation. Express them fully.
- 2. Observations ("When I see, hear..."):** Now try to describe the situation as though it would be seen through a camera lens. Try to separate facts from interpretations.

- 3. Feelings ("I feel..."):** Before naming your feelings, check how your body is. What are your body sensations at the moment? Afterward, try to name your emotions (we recommend you use the list of feelings).

- 4. Needs ("Because I need..."):** After naming your feelings - try to find what may lie behind them. What needs of yours were met or unmet (we recommend you use the list of needs)?

- 5. Request:** After understanding what is important to you, check if there is something you would like to do to meet your needs and take care of what matters to you. Try to formulate the request to yourself or another person and make it specific, doable, and formulated in positive language.

4. "Notice-Name-Navigate"

This is a simple exercise to ground oneself in the present. Begin with noticing what you are aware of: an internal sensation or perhaps an aggressive person sitting next to you on the bus. Try to do this without judgment or analysis. Then, name what you are aware of: pain in the back from sitting or being scared of an aggressive person. This gives the "reptile brain" cognitive support and supports your nervous system to begin finding sense or solutions to the situation. Then navigate, meaning take conscious action, whether it's shifting your body to find more ease or standing up and moving seats on the bus. This can be a micro-intervention that comes from listening to your inner awareness and sensations.

5. "5 senses"

This short exercise helps us to ground ourselves in the present. Sit down and slowly look around, try to identify in your space 5 things that you can see. Then try to identify 4 "touches" which you can feel. Next try to identify 3 different sounds, 2 different smells and 1 taste that you can feel at the moment.

6. EmotionAid

– emotional first aid for stress management. It can be helpful to come back to emotional balance, enhance coping skills and resiliency and prevent a chain reaction of fear and stress⁸.

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S2 E4:

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Take a breath to be more present in the moment. Join Christa Cocciole on this episode of the *horizontal talks* podcast as she guides us through an exercise that helps us to listen more carefully to our body. Scan the QR code or click here to listen:

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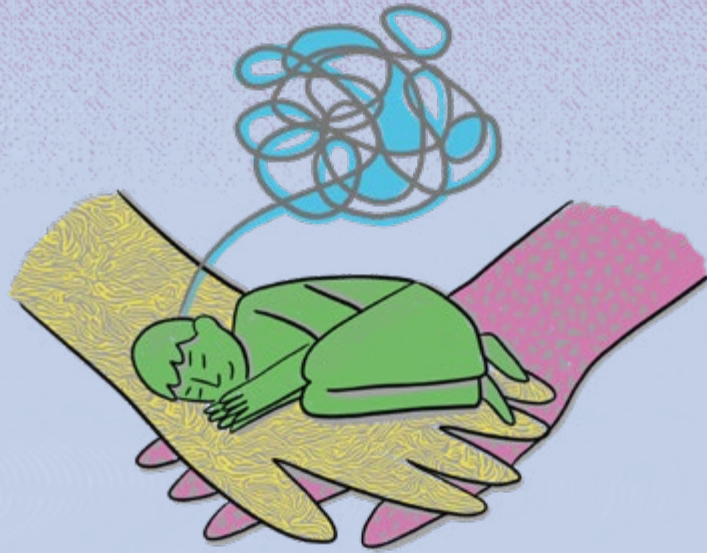
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**UNDERSTANDING STRESS
AND TRAUMA RESPONSES TO
STRENGTHEN RESILIENCE IN
UNCERTAIN TIMES**