



The Cost of Caring: Understanding and Addressing Burnout in Professional Caregivers

Heather Haslem, MS, NBC-HWC, CWP
Well-being Coordinator, UNR Medicine

Learning Objectives

Define	Define the key differences between stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue in professional caregiving roles.
Explain	Explain the impact of chronic stress on brain and body function, including decision-making, emotional regulation, and health.
Recognize	Recognize early warning signs of burnout and identify personal and organizational risk factors.
Integrate	Integrate at least three evidence-informed strategies for regulating stress and promoting resilience (e.g., mindfulness, boundaries, recovery practices).
Apply	Apply trauma-informed principles—such as safety, choice, and self-compassion—to support their own well-being and model healthier workplace norms.
Reflect on	Reflect on their caregiving identity and re-align with a sense of purpose to reduce burnout and increase job satisfaction.



What is Stress?

“Stress is the body’s nonspecific response to ANY demand, whether it is caused by or results in pleasant or unpleasant stimuli.”

- Hans Selye, Physician & Researcher, International Institute of Stress

Stress

Stress happens when life or work piles on more than you feel you can handle with the time, energy, or resources you have. It's your body and mind's signal that the load feels heavier than your capacity to carry it.

It often shows up as:

- **Feeling pressured** – like there's always too much to do and not enough of you to do it.
- **Tension** – in your body (tight muscles, headaches) or mind (racing thoughts, worry).
- **Irritability or fatigue** – snapping more easily or feeling worn out even before the day begins.



The Job-Demand Resource Model (JD-R)

Excessive documentation and compliance requirements, high caseloads, insurance billing, audits and regulatory demands, working in under-resourced or siloed systems, chronic underfunding, high staff turnover and team instability, lack of adequate support, limited opportunities for advancement, regular exposure to trauma, relapse, and client death, holding space for intense grief, and feeling personally responsible for client outcomes.

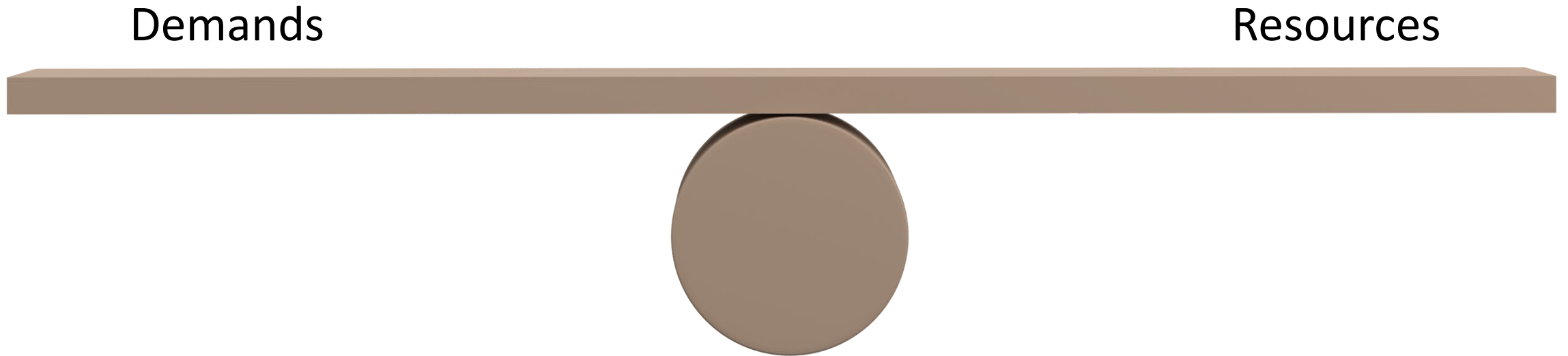
Manageable caseloads, training and education, access to mental health support, adequate staffing and funding, peer support, mentorship, supervision, autonomy, task variety, time for reflection, a mission-driven work culture, access to community resources, self-awareness, healthy boundaries, self-regulation skills, confidence in one's role and competence, stress management skills, a sense of purpose, and optimism.



Demands

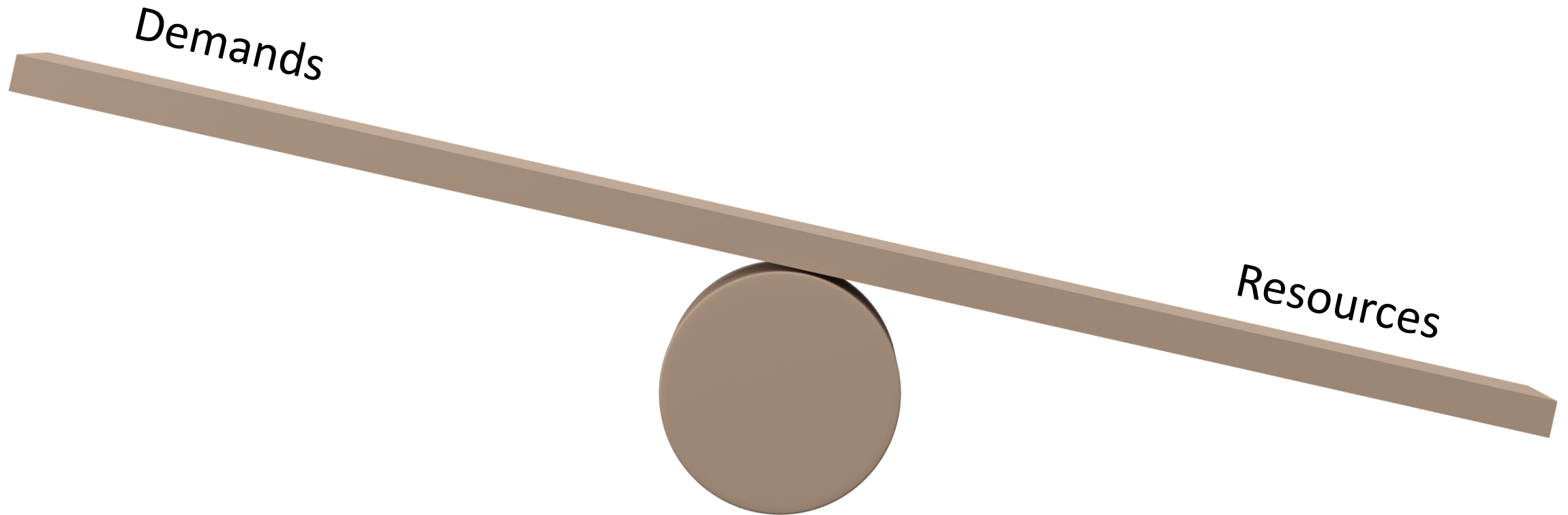
Resources

Eustress



Positive stress that enhances motivation and performance.

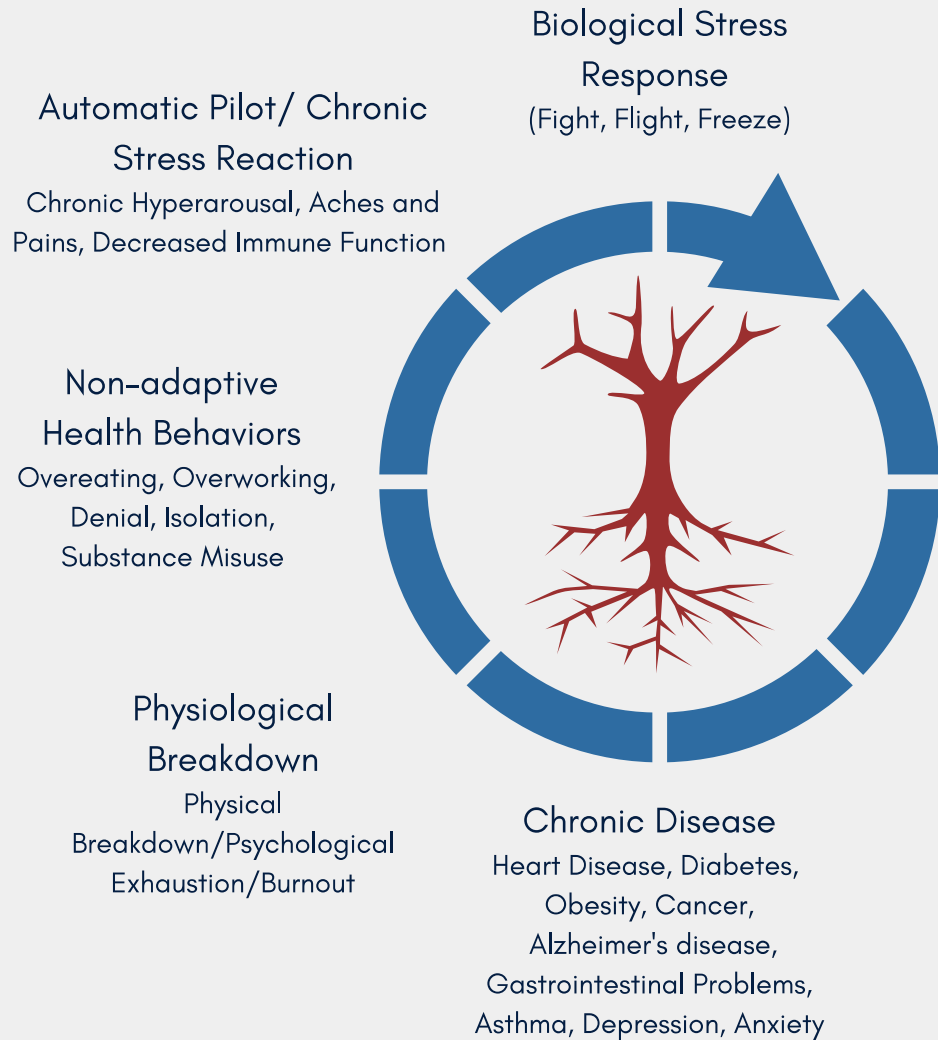
Distress



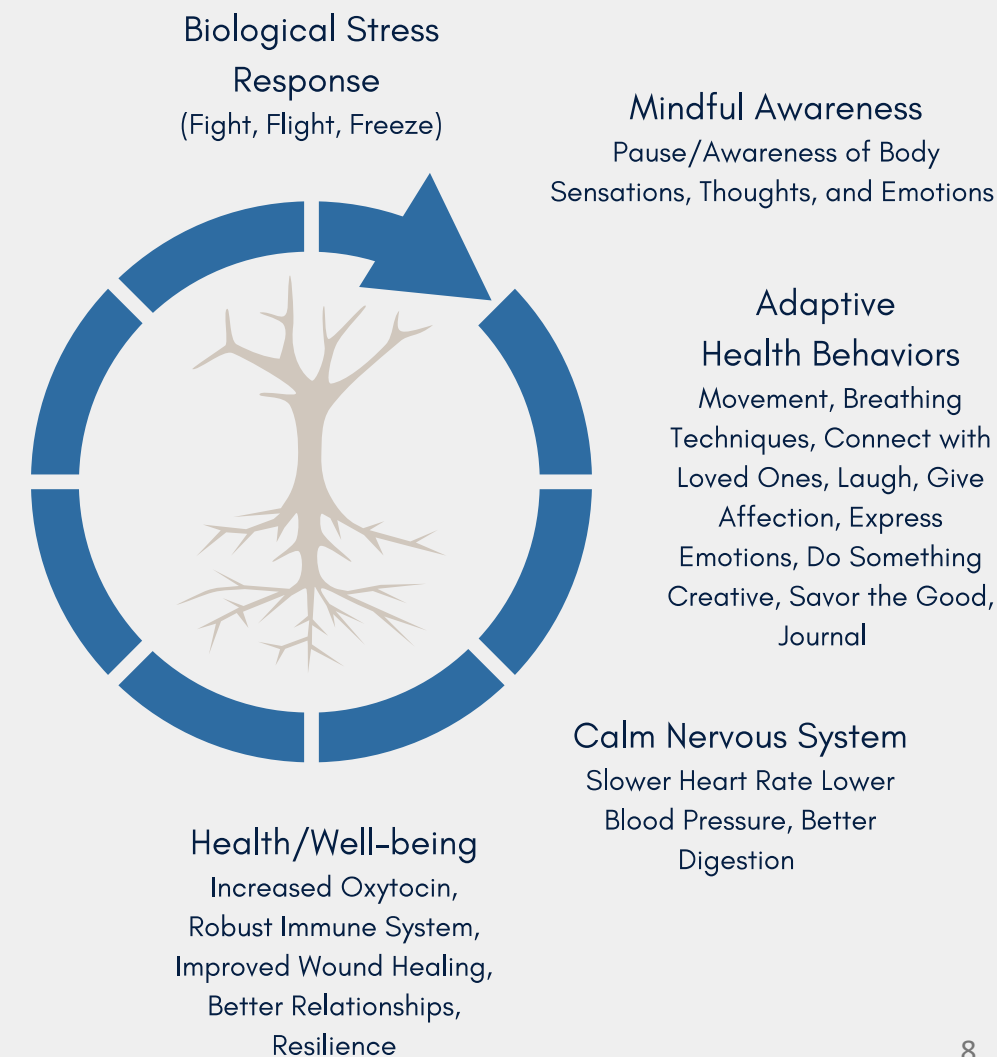
Negative stress that overwhelms a person's ability to cope,
leading to mental or physical strain.

Stress Cycle

Dysregulated Stress Response



Regulated Stress Response

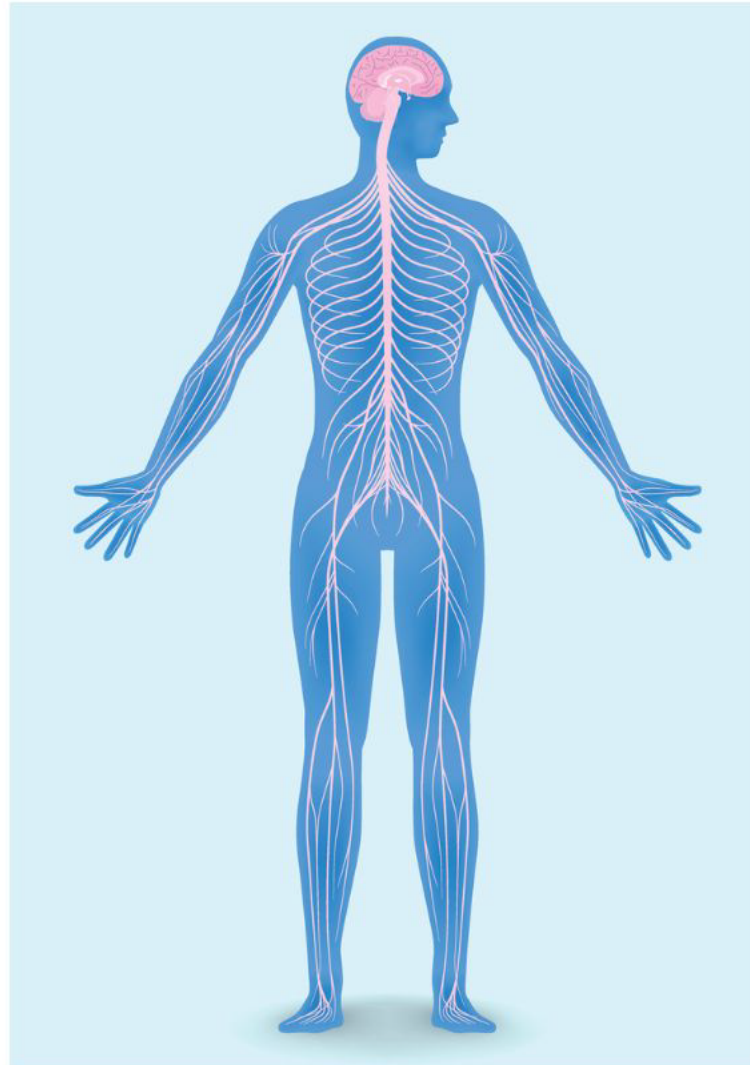


SIGNS OF A DYSREGULATED NERVOUS SYSTEM



HYPERAROUSAL SYMPTOMS

FIGHT/FLIGHT
ANGER/OUTBURSTS
IMPULSIVITY
HYPERVIGILANCE
EXCESSIVE STARTLE REFLEX
ATTENTION ISSUES
SLEEP DIFFICULTIES
INABILITY TO RELAX
ANXIETY
EMOTIONAL OVERWHELM
TIGHT MUSCLES
HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE
ACCELERATED HEART BEAT
SHORTNESS OF BREATH
SWEATY PALMS



HYPOAROUSAL SYMPTOMS

FREEZE
NUMBNESS
EMPTINESS
FLACCID BODY
BLANK STARE
DECREASED REACTIONS
DEPRESSED, HELPLESS
AUTOPILOT RESPONSES
NO DISPLAY OF EMOTIONS
INABILITY TO SPEAK
DISSOCIATION
EXHAUSTION
LOW ENERGY
SLOW HEARTBEAT
LOW BLOOD PRESSURE

Window of Tolerance

HYPERAROUSAL
Fight, Flight Stress Response
Angry, scared,
anxious, fired up, out
of control,
overwhelmed, stuck in
your own experience



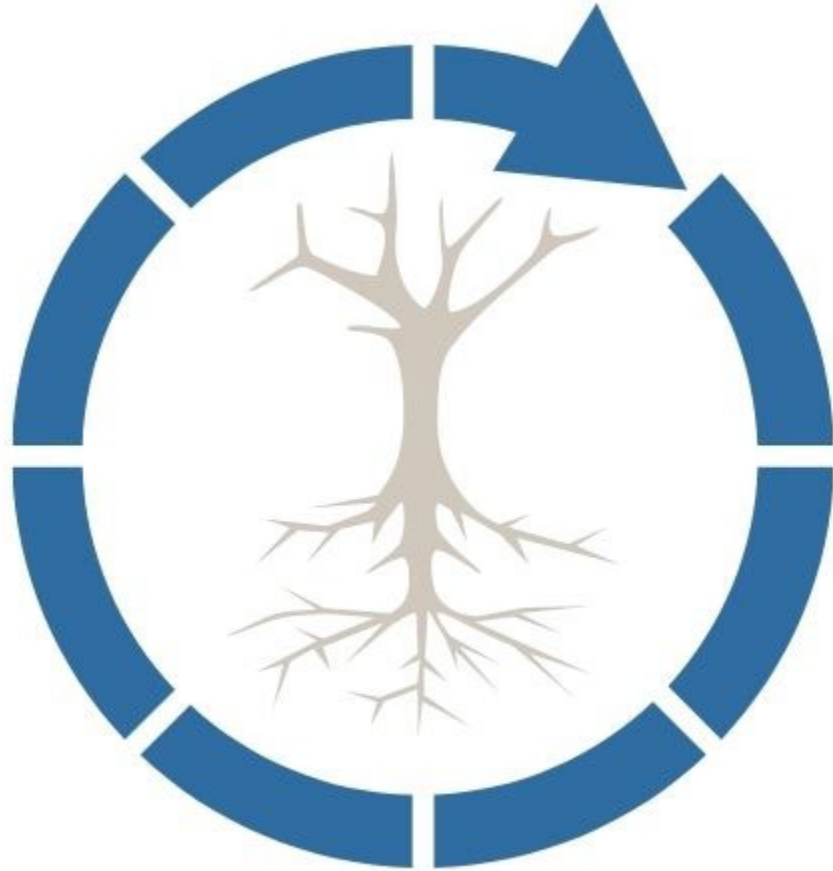
WITHIN YOUR WINDOW
Regulated nervous system
Calm, cool, collected,
empathetic, open and
present, self-aware, feel safe

HYPOAROUSAL
Freeze
Numb, shut-down,
internalized spacey,
zoned out,
internalized
anger/anxiety

Window of Tolerance



Ten Ways to Complete the Stress Cycle



1. Practice mindfulness
2. Move your body
3. Breathe
4. Connect with loved ones
5. Laugh
6. Give affection
7. Express emotions
8. Engage in creative expression
9. Savor the good
10. Journal

An aerial photograph of a dense forest of evergreen trees. The trees are mostly dark green, but one tree in the center is highlighted with a bright yellow glow. The text "Cyclic Sighing" is overlaid in white on the image.

Cyclic Sighing

Reflection

What signs tell you you're experiencing stress in your body or mind?

How do you usually respond to daily stressors — and which responses are most helpful vs. unhelpful?

What small practices help you reset or recharge when stress builds up?

Burnout

Burnout happens when the demands of caring for others pile up for so long that your own energy tank runs dry. It shows up as:

- **Exhaustion** – feeling physically and emotionally drained, with nothing left to give.
- **Disconnection** – starting to feel detached, cynical, or numb toward the people you're helping.
- **Loss of effectiveness** – questioning whether your efforts make a difference or feeling like you're not good at what you do anymore.



Early Warning Signs of Burnout



Physical: Fatigue, frequent headaches, sleep problems, muscle tension, stomach issues.



Emotional & Cognitive: Irritability, feeling numb, loss of motivation, forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating.



Behavioral & Relational: Withdrawal from colleagues, more mistakes, decreased empathy, arriving late/leaving early.

Risk Factors for Burnout

Personal Risk Factors

- Perfectionism / high self-expectations.
- Lack of boundaries.
- Limited coping strategies.
- Caregiver role overload (home + work).

Organizational Risk Factors

- Excessive workload & staffing shortages.
- Lack of autonomy or control.
- Poor leadership or communication.
- Little recognition or reward.
- Culture of overwork (no breaks, blurred work-life boundaries).

Reflection

Have you noticed yourself feeling emotionally drained, cynical, or less effective at work?

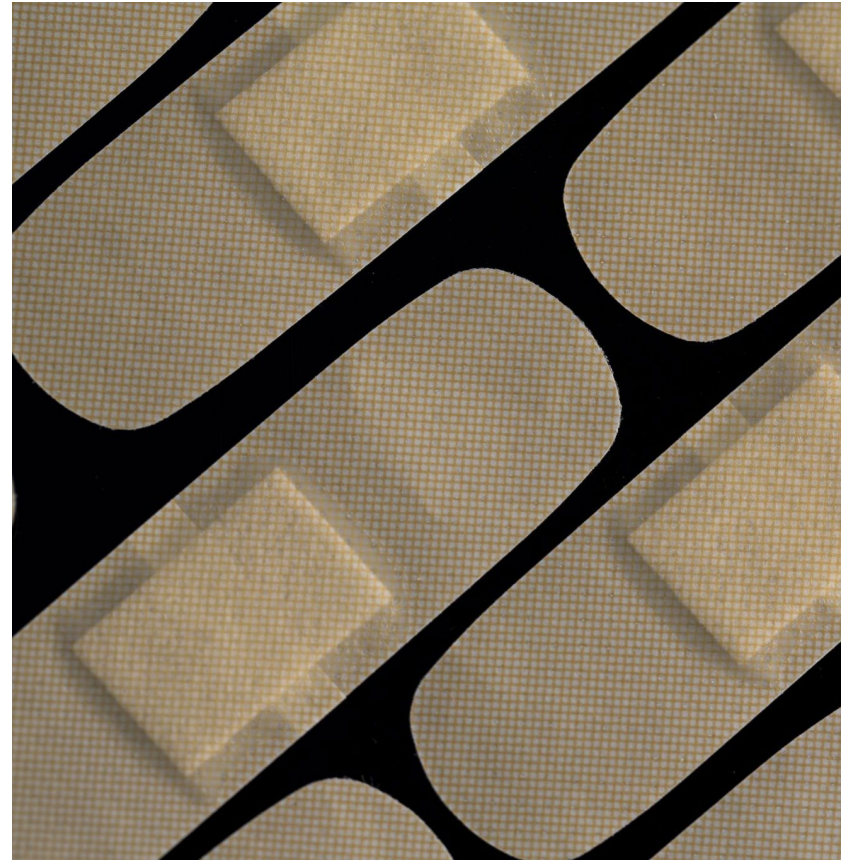
Which parts of your role give you energy — and which consistently deplete you?

Are there boundaries you need to set (with time, workload, or relationships) to protect against burnout?

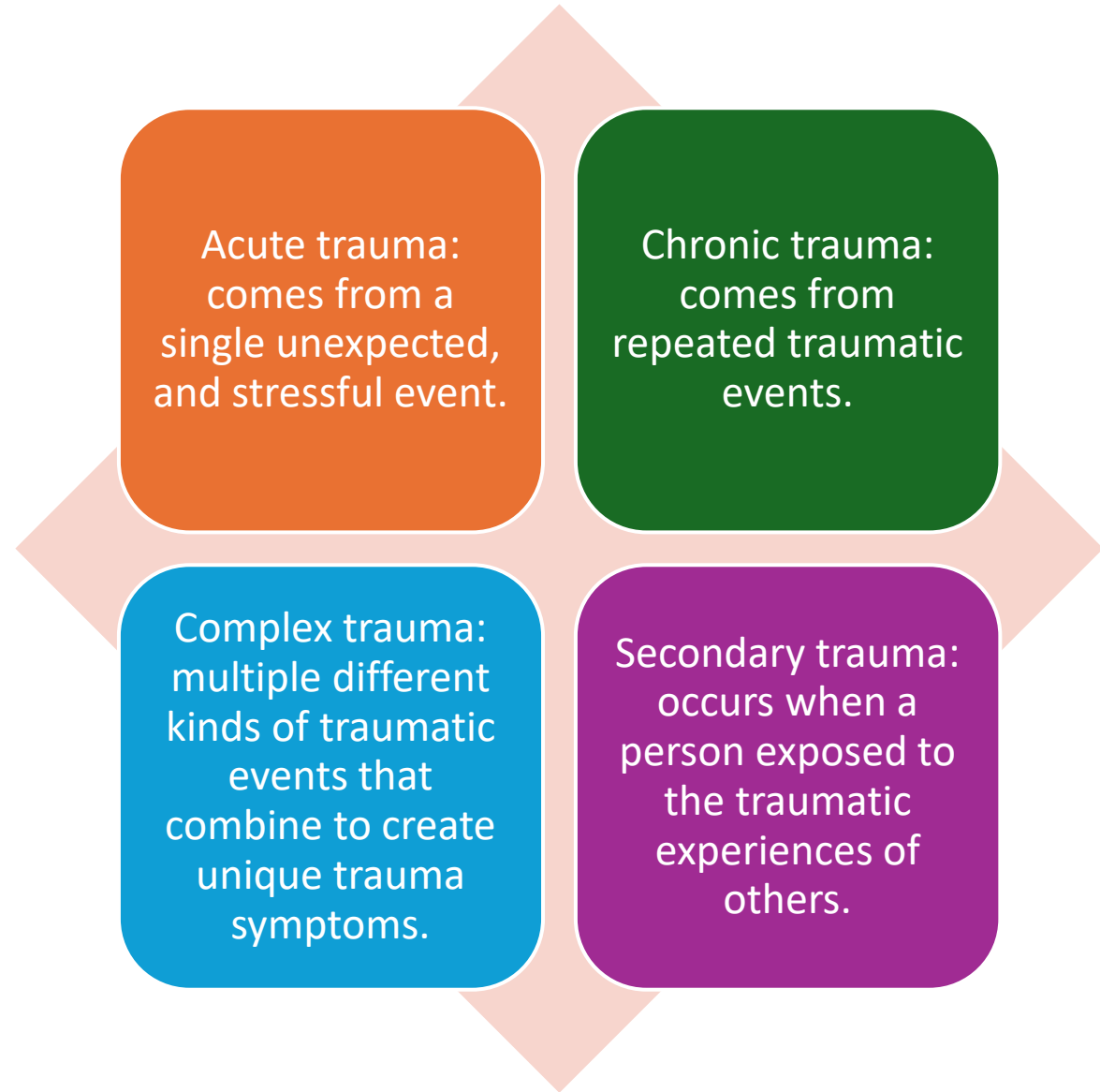
Trauma

“An inner injury, a lasting rupture or split with the self-due to difficult or hurtful events.”

- Gabor & Daniel Mate



Types of Trauma



Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)

Emotional & Cognitive Changes

- ✓ Increased cynicism or hopelessness
- ✓ Feeling overwhelmed by the suffering of others
- ✓ Loss of empathy (“shutting down” to protect yourself)
- ✓ Questioning your own safety or the safety of loved ones

Physical Symptoms

- ✓ Chronic fatigue or headaches
- ✓ Stomach upset, muscle tension
- ✓ Lowered immunity / frequent illness

Intrusive Symptoms

- ✓ Replaying others’ trauma stories in your mind
- ✓ Disturbing dreams related to clients/patients
- ✓ Difficulty “shutting off” thoughts about work

Avoidance / Numbing

- ✓ Avoiding certain people, situations, or conversations that remind you of clients’ trauma
- ✓ Feeling emotionally numb or detached
- ✓ Using substances, overwork, or distraction to block out feelings

Arousal / Reactivity

- ✓ Trouble sleeping or frequent nightmares
- ✓ Hypervigilance (feeling on edge, easily startled)
- ✓ Irritability, anger, or difficulty concentrating

Reflection

Have you ever carried someone else's trauma story home with you?

Do you notice any signs of STS (e.g., trouble sleeping, avoidance, intrusive thoughts) after caregiving experiences?

What helps you release or process the weight of others' pain?



Compassion Fatigue (the Overlap)

- The *emotional cost of caring* — a combination of:
 - Chronic stress (overload),
 - Burnout (long-term depletion), and
 - Secondary Traumatic Stress (absorbing other people's trauma).
- Compassion fatigue is not just “being tired” — it’s a state where caring itself starts to feel painful, leading to emotional exhaustion, numbing, or withdrawal.



Compassion fatigue shows up as:

- **Emotional overload** – feeling overwhelmed by the suffering you witness.
- **Numbness or detachment** – shutting down or feeling less empathy because it's just too much.
- **Spillover stress** – carrying the pain and stories of others into your own life, making it harder to recharge.

Reflection

When(if ever) have you felt that caring itself has become heavy or overwhelming?

What helps you reconnect with the rewarding side of caregiving?

How can you remind yourself that you can care deeply without carrying everything alone?

Aspect	Stress	Burnout	Compassion Fatigue
Definition	Natural response when demands exceed resources	A state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by <i>long-term, unmanaged work stress</i>	Emotional exhaustion and strain from <i>caring deeply for those who are suffering or traumatized</i>
Timeframe	Can be short-term or ongoing	Develops gradually over months or years	Can appear more suddenly, often triggered by others' trauma
Core Experience	Feeling pressured, tense, or overwhelmed	Feeling drained, detached, and ineffective	Feeling emotionally heavy, numb, or carrying others' pain
Signs & Symptoms	Irritability, worry, fatigue, headaches, muscle tension	Exhaustion, cynicism, loss of motivation, reduced sense of accomplishment	Over-identification with others' pain, emotional overload, withdrawal, decreased empathy
Analogy	Carrying a heavy backpack that tires you out but you can still move	Carrying the backpack so long you stop caring whether you keep going	Picking up someone else's backpack on top of your own until you collapse

SAMHSA's Trauma-Informed Principles

Safety

Peer Support

Trustworthiness &
Transparency

Collaboration &
Mutuality

Cultural, Historical,
& Gender
Responsiveness

Empowerment,
Voice & Choice

Recovery Support for Stress

- **Physical regulation:** Exercise, stretching, yoga, or even short walks to discharge tension.
- **Breathing practices:** Box breathing, paced breathing, or mindfulness meditation.
- **Time management & boundaries:** Prioritizing tasks, saying no when needed, and setting limits on overtime.
- **Micro-breaks:** Short pauses during shifts for hydration, fresh air, or resetting posture.



Recovery Support for Burnout

Rest & Restoration: Protected time off, sleep hygiene, and restorative practices like massage or time in nature.

Workplace adjustments: Advocating for realistic workloads, role clarity, and adequate staffing.

Professional growth: Reconnecting with purpose through continuing education, mentoring, or new projects that bring meaning.

Peer/community support: Talking with trusted colleagues who understand the work culture and can normalize experiences.

Values check-in: Reflecting on alignment between personal values and current role; making changes if misalignment persists.

Recovery Support for Compassion Fatigue

Peer debriefing: Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM), Schwartz Rounds, or peer support groups to process experiences safely.

Emotional boundaries: Practicing letting go of what is not yours to carry (e.g., through visualization, rituals, or setting mental “off-duty” time).

Compassion satisfaction practices: Celebrating successes, gratitude journaling, meaning-making, and team recognition.

Creative outlets: Art, music, or writing as a release for accumulated emotions.

Trauma-informed self-care: Therapy, EMDR, or other modalities when secondary trauma symptoms are strong.

Universal Recovery Support

- **Healthy routines:** Regular sleep, nutrition, movement, and hydration.
- **Connection:** Family, friends, faith/spiritual community, or support groups.
- **Mind-body practices:** Meditation, tai chi, qigong, or grounding exercises.
- **Professional help:** Counseling, coaching, or EAP resources.
- **Nature connection:** Time outdoors for nervous system regulation and perspective.





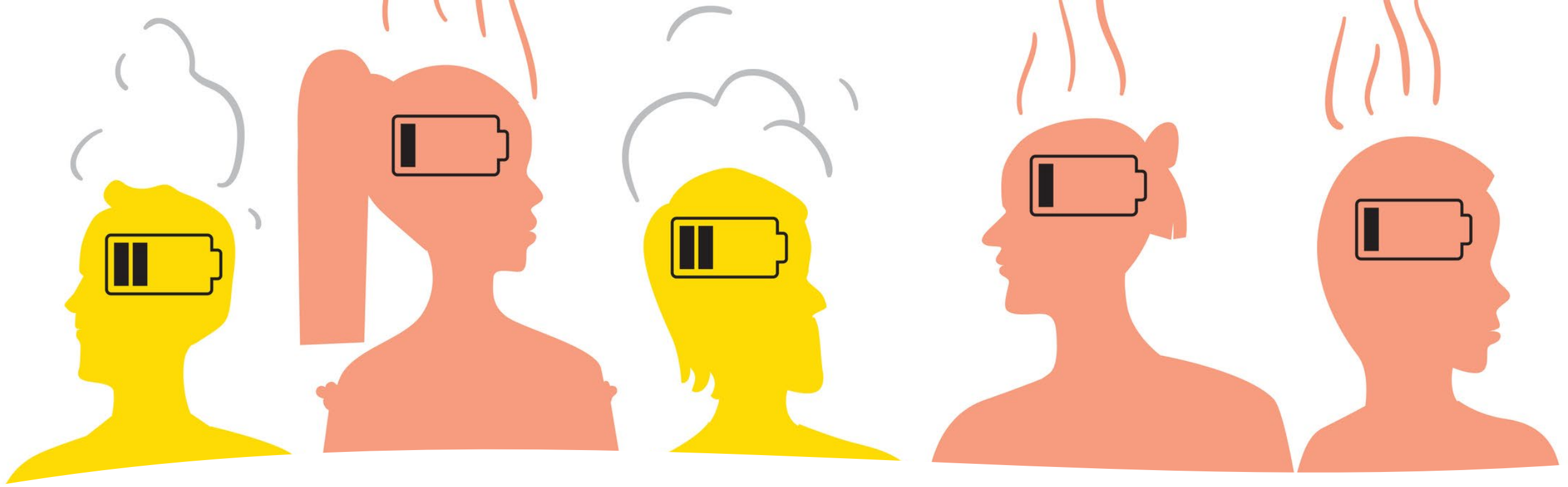
Develop a Recovery Plan

- What signals tell you that it's time to pause and care for yourself?
- Which practices help you release stress or the trauma you carry from others?
- Where do you need to set (or reset) boundaries to protect your energy?
- What reconnects you to the meaning and purpose in your caregiving work?
- What is one small recovery practice you can commit to this week?



Purpose

A sense of purpose is the **internal experience** of having a meaningful reason for living, working, or striving—a guiding direction that gives your actions coherence, significance, and motivation beyond the present moment.



Why Purpose Matters at Work

- Lower rates of burnout
- Greater resilience and mental health
- Lower turnover
- Higher engagement and job satisfaction
- Functions as a protective factor against emotional exhaustion
- Especially powerful in high-demand, low-resource settings



When Purpose Fades: Reconnecting with What Matters

- Even purpose-driven work can feel disconnected over time
- Chronic stress and emotional labor wear down our sense of meaning
- Common causes of “purpose drift”:
- Relentless workload, no time to reflect or recover
- Administrative demands eclipse relational connection
- Trauma exposure and loss without space to process
- Systemic frustration leads to disillusionment
- Over-identification with the helper role
- This isn’t failure—it’s a human response to long-term stress
- Reconnection happens in small, intentional moments

Reflection

What called you to this caregiving work in the first place?

In what ways does your caregiving role align (or misalign) with your deeper sense of purpose?

What one practice can help you realign with that purpose this week?

Connect

Heather Haslem, MS, NBC-
HWC, CWP

Wellbeing Coordinator, UNR
Medicine

hhaslem@unr.edu

