

Skills for Psychological Recovery: A Brief Intervention for Acute Reactions to Traumatic and Stressful Events

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Trauma Recovery Innovations

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Acknowledgments



Intervention Strategies Adapted from:

-SPR Field Operations Guide, National Center for PTSD

-National Child Traumatic Stress Network

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Trauma Exposure and Reactions

Trauma exposure is common in the US.

In a national sample of U.S. adults (N = 2,953)

89.7%

endorsed DSM-5 trauma exposure

Multiple event types was the norm

Traumatic events and stressors are experienced on a continuum



Stressors

Traumatic events

Acute and chronic, destabilizing, distressing, commonly occur

Examples of Stressors and Traumatic Events



Stressors

- Loss of employment/housing
- Death or illness of a loved one
- Listening to stories of distress and destabilization from others

Traumatic events

- Life threatening injury/illness
- Rape or sexual assault
- Suicide or other traumatic loss of a loved one

Distressing reactions following trauma and stressors is normal



Unwanted memories



Negative changes in thoughts & mood

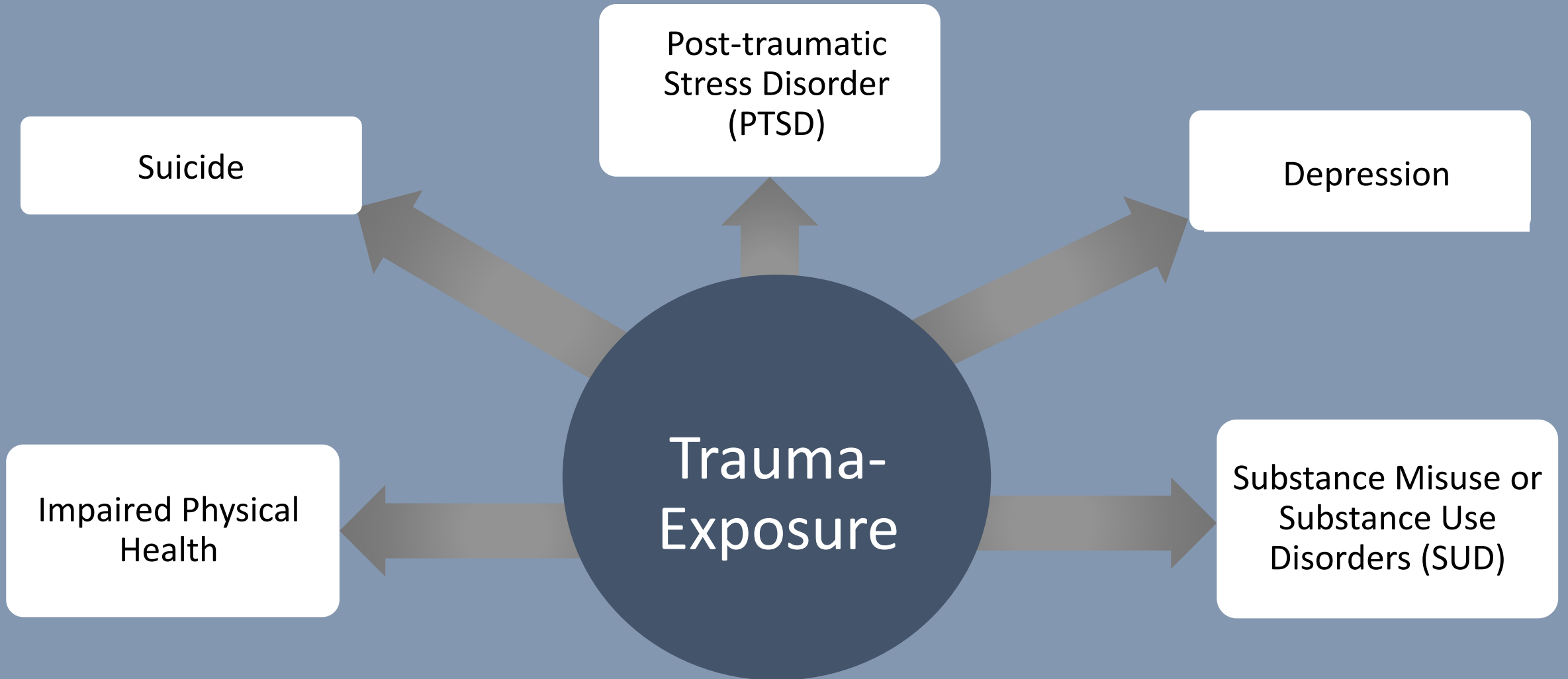


Increases in arousal & anxiety



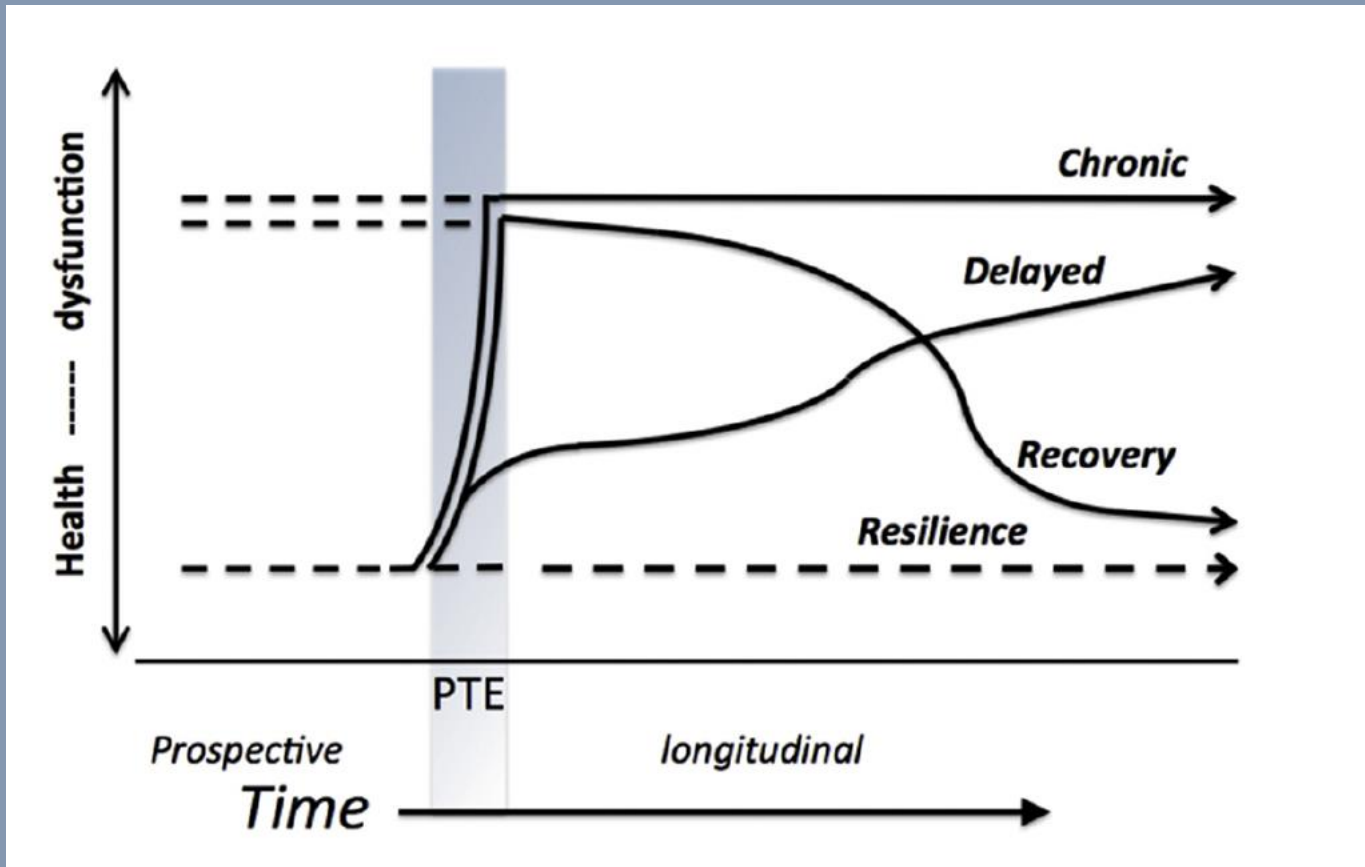
Avoidance

Exposure to traumatic events puts one at risk for negative outcomes.



Most people are resilient

(Bonanno, 2004; Galatzer-Levy et al.; 2018)



Prospective and Longitudinal Studies
($k = 54$, $N = 76,435$)

- **65.7% resilient**
- **20.8% recovery**
- 10.6% chronic
- 8.9% delayed onset

Individual factors predict **resilience** after an event

(Feder et al., 2019; Kalisch et al., 2019)

COMT
Genotype

5-
HTTLPR
Genotype

Immune-
related
Gene

Cortisol

Glucocorticoid
receptors

Cytokines

Attend Threat

Self-Efficacy

Male

Reappraisal

Perceived
Health

Individual factors also predict **vulnerability** (e.g., PTSD) (Brewin et al., 2000; Ozer et al., 2003; Trickey et al., 2014)

Prior
Mental
Health
Concerns

Past
Trauma
Exposure

Severity
of
Trauma

Higher
Life
Stress

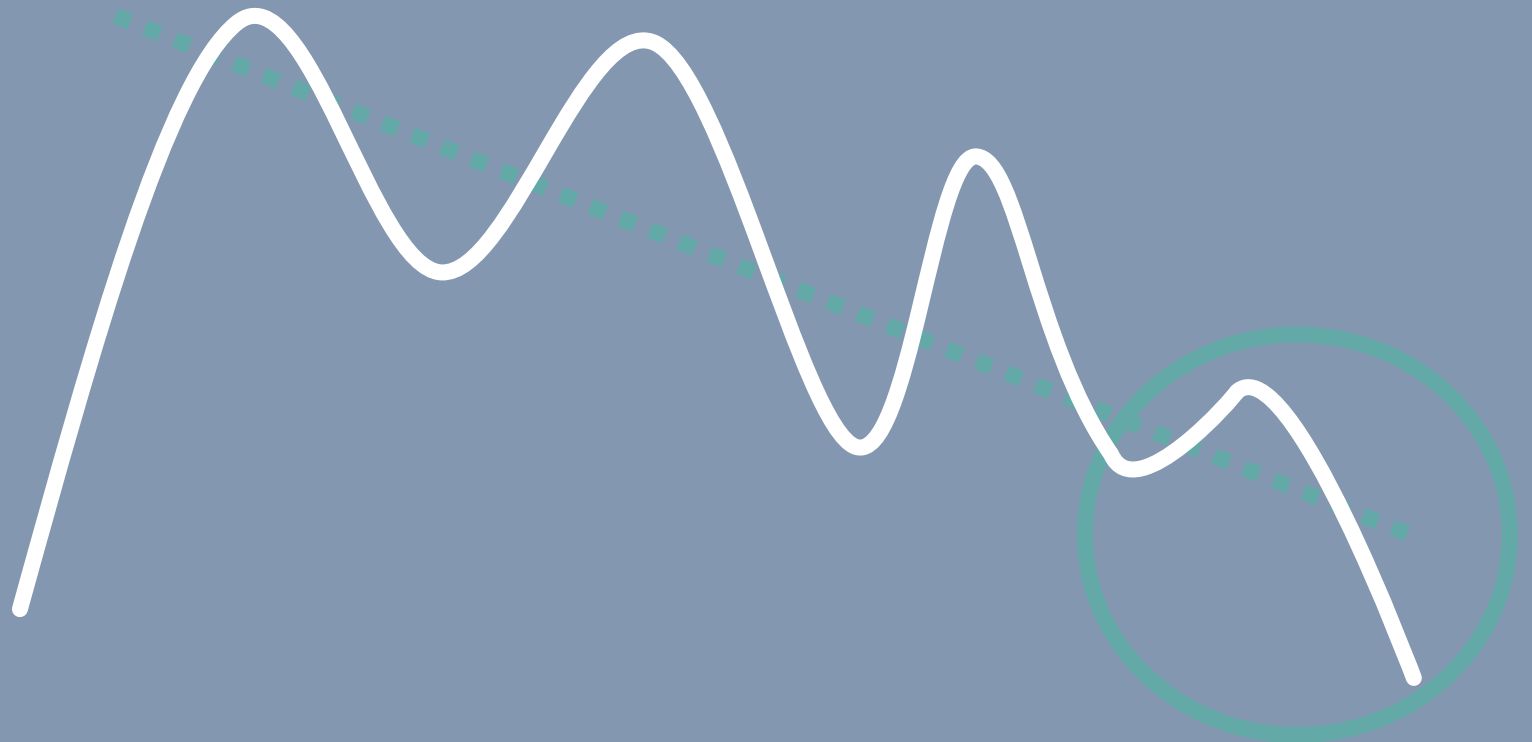
Lack of
Social
Support



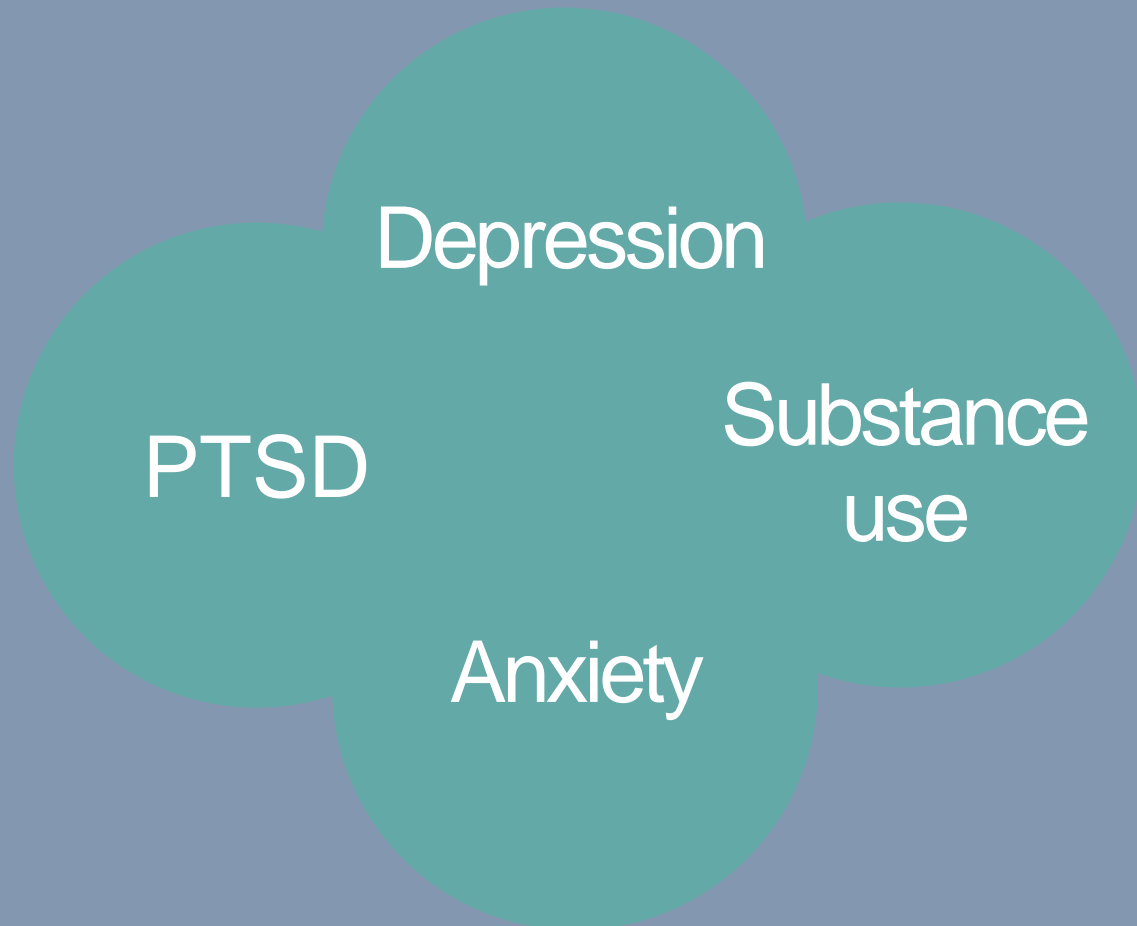
Promoting Recovery

ACUTE INTERVENTION GOAL: Promote resilience and decrease vulnerability to long-term effects.

Remember that **resilience** is the most common outcome of traumas and stressors.



Common elements in treatments for **trauma-related mental health symptoms.**



- ✓ Time limited
- ✓ Present focused
- ✓ Structured and skills oriented
- ✓ Practice outside session
- ✓ Delivered by a trained person

Transdiagnostic principles promote recovery.



Decreasing unhelpful avoidance



Shifting negative beliefs and meaning

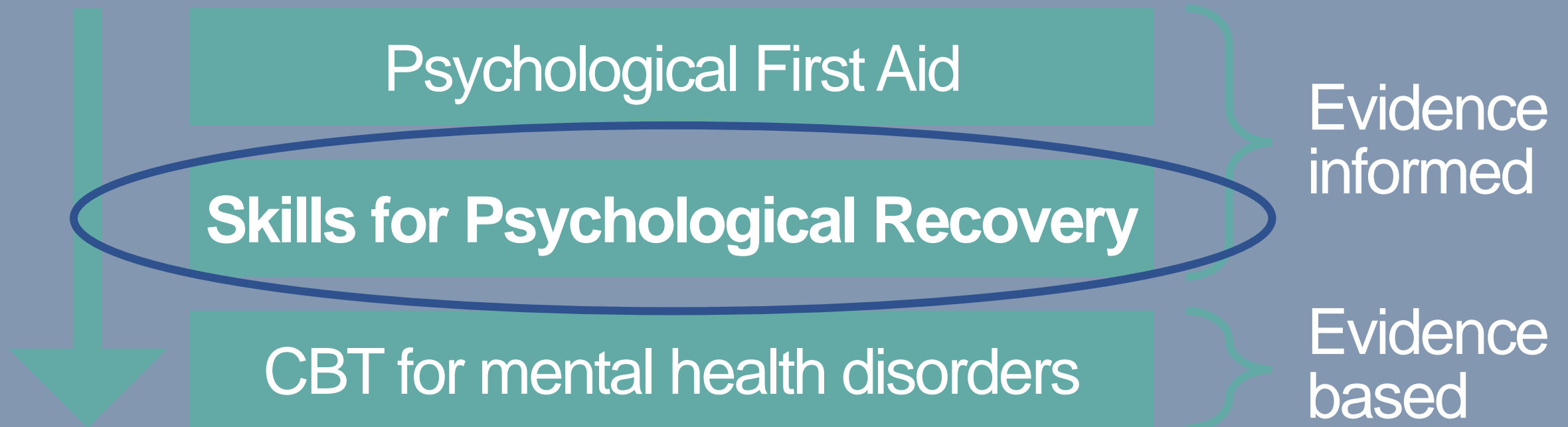


Increasing positive rewards



Regulating negative emotions

Different behavioral approaches are indicated depending on **timing & severity** of trauma or stressor exposure.



SPR can be useful in a **variety of settings.**

Can be useful for diverse **patients:**

- **Outpatients:** Medication management, existing patients who need extra structured support, former patients needing boosters
- **Consult patients:** non-specialty clinics, acute care settings
- **Inpatients:** Groups and or individual sessions

SPR is appropriate for many, but not all.

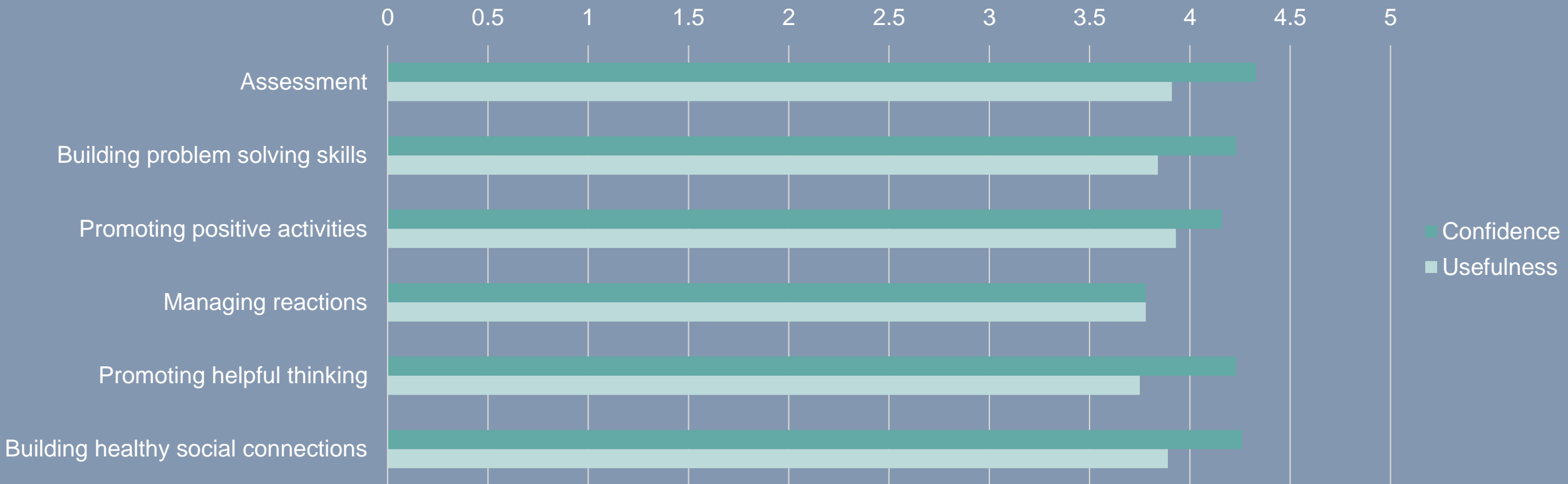
✓ People in **chronic phase** of crisis

⊘ Not a **danger** to self/others

⊘ Not acutely **psychotic** or severely **cognitively disabled**



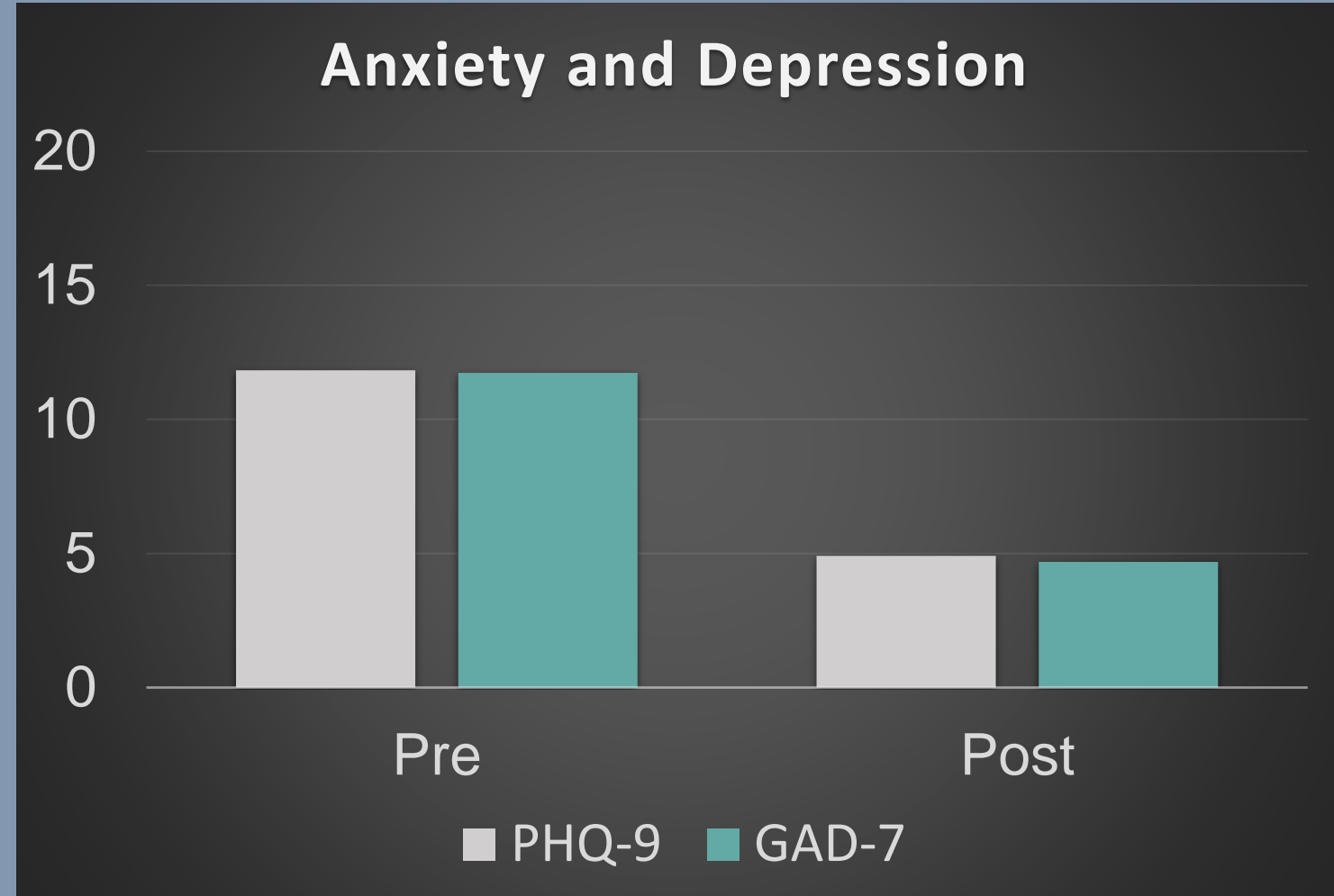
SPR is seen as useful and helpful by providers following disasters (Forbes et al., 2010)



SPR reduces distress in patients

exposed to recent stressors (Sheerin et al., 2021)

- Small sample of adults during COVID-19 ($n = 26$)
 - 21/26 completed intended # of sessions ($M = 4.15$)
 - Effect sizes for pre-post change were large ($d = 1.17$ PHQ-9; $d = 1.30$ GAD-7)
 - Less effective in youth-higher dropout and smaller effects



Note: Range for PHQ-9 is 0-27; Range for GAD-7 is 0-21



SPR: Components and Structure

SPR begins with assessment.



Needs and
concerns

Top priorities

Action plan

SPR includes **5 individually-tailored** skill modules.

Skill 1:
Building
Problem-
Solving
Skills

Skill 2:
Promoting
Positive
Activities

Skill 3:
Managing
Reactions

Skill 4:
Promoting
Helpful
Thinking

Skill 5:
Rebuilding
Healthy
Social
Connections

The course of SPR is **both flexible and structured.**

Complete **1-5 sessions** as needed.

Sessions last **45-50 minutes.**

Practice is **assigned and reviewed** at each session.





Assessment

STEP 1: Identify needs and concerns.

Rationale: After a crisis there are **numerous demands and concerns**. Gathering information is needed to **target support**.

Does the person need a **referral** to a higher level or different type of care?



What are the person's **main needs**, concerns, and priorities?

STEP 2: Prioritize concerns.



Which one of these areas is most bothersome?

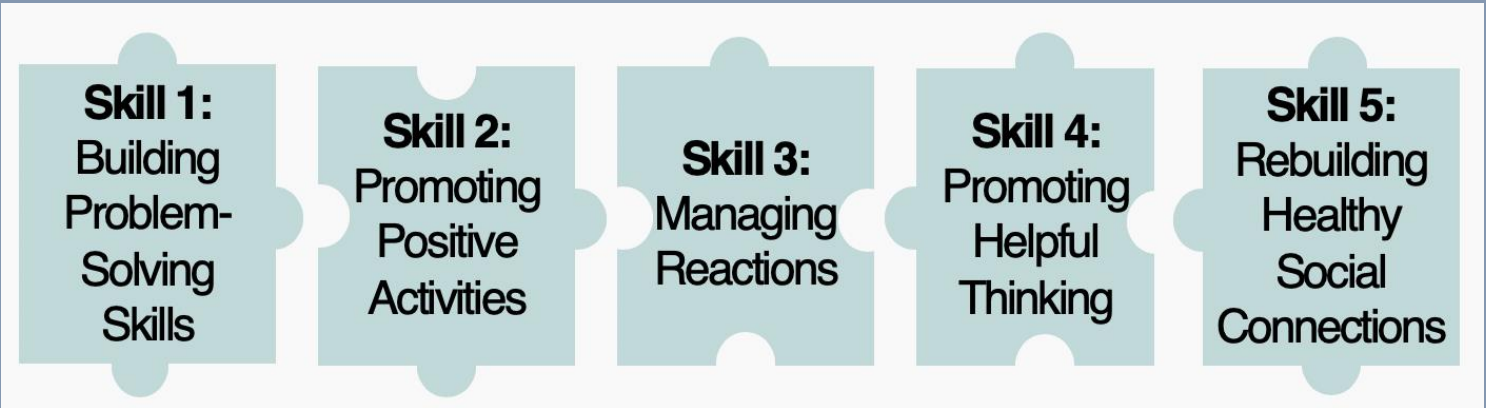
Is there one that needs to be dealt with sooner?

Is there one problem that seems to be getting worse?

Which problem would have most impact if it was solved?

STEP 3: Collaboratively make an action plan.

✓ Choose the most appropriate SPR skill(s)



✓ Agree on a tentative **number of meetings**

✓ **Make referrals** if needed

SKILLS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL RECOVERY

SKILL SELECTION TOOL

Presenting Concern	Primary Skill	Secondary Skill
A difficult but solvable problem	Problem Solving	Social Connections, Helpful Thinking
Intense or repeatedly upsetting reactions	Managing Reactions	Social Connections, Helpful Thinking
Not knowing how to connect with friends or family	Social Connections	Healthy Activities, Helpful Thinking
Not having enough people that care about them	Social Connections	Healthy Activities, Helpful Thinking
Feeling depressed, sad, or withdrawn	Healthy Activities	Problem Solving, Social Connections
Upsetting thoughts that make them feel bad or stop them from having more positive thoughts	Helpful Thinking	Managing Reactions, Healthy Activities
A serious physical, mental health, or substance abuse problem	Problem Solving (with referral)	Social Connections, Helpful Thinking
Significant current hardships or adversities	Problem Solving (with referral)	Social Connections, Helpful Thinking



**CORE
SKILL 1:
Building
Problem-
Solving Skills**

Rationale: Structured problem-solving helps when overwhelmed



Reduce negative impacts of environment

Teach patients to be **more self-sufficient**

Builds mastery, sense of control, and competence

STEP 1: Define the problem & decide ownership.



Describe the problem **concretely** and **in detail**.

Break it down into manageable chunks and **pick one**.

STEP 1: Define the problem & decide ownership.



Is this...

A problem that
the person is
having?



Person can
work to solve it

A problem that
someone else
is having?



Someone else
needs to work
to solve it

STEP 2: Set the goal.



Clarify
**needs and
concerns**

“I want _____”

“I need _____”

“I feel concerned that _____”

“I am afraid that _____”

STEP 3 and 4: Brainstorm & evaluate options.



Write down **all possible options**

Do not restrict to just good or feasible options

Evaluate **pros and cons** of each option

Choose the **best solution** and try it out



**CORE
SKILL 2:
Promoting
Positive
Activities**

Rationale: Positive activities
improve mood & sense of control



Building positives is as important as
decreasing negatives

Challenges negative beliefs

Increases **rewards** and **positive mood**

STEP 1: Identify and plan one or more activities.



Review a list of activities.



Create

- Draw a picture
- Paint a portrait
- Take a photograph
- Doodle / sketch
- Organise photographs
- Make a photograph album
- Start a scrapbook
- Finish a project
- Do some sewing / knitting



Kindness

- Help a friend / neighbor / stranger
- Make a gift for someone
- Try a random act of kindness
- Do someone a favour
- Teach somebody a skill
- Do something nice for someone
- Plan a surprise for someone
- Make a list of your good points
- Make a list of things or people you are grateful for



Plan

- Set a goal
- Create a budget
- Make a 5 year plan
- Make a 'to do' list
- Make a 'bucket list'
- Make a shopping list



Write

- Write a letter with compliments
- Write a letter to your politician
- Write an angry letter
- Write a grateful letter
- Write a 'thank you' card
- Write a journal / diary
- Write your CV
- Start writing a book



Self care

- Take a bath
- Take a shower
- Wash your hair
- Give yourself a facial
- Trim your nails
- Sunbathe (wear sunscreen!)
- Take a nap

STEP 2: Schedule activities in a calendar.



Sun	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri	Sat

Help the person consider things that **increase the likelihood** that they will do each activity.

STEP 3: Observe outcomes of each activity



Sun	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri	Sat

How did it affect their mood and their beliefs?

-For that day? The next day?



CORE
SKILL 3:
Managing
Reactions

Rationale: Feeling your feelings helps with reminders



Normalizes distressing reactions

Promotes **adaptive processing** and **corrective learning**

Builds **distress tolerance** and **emotion regulation skills**

STEP 1: Identify distressing reactions
and their triggers.



Pick the **most distressing** reaction.

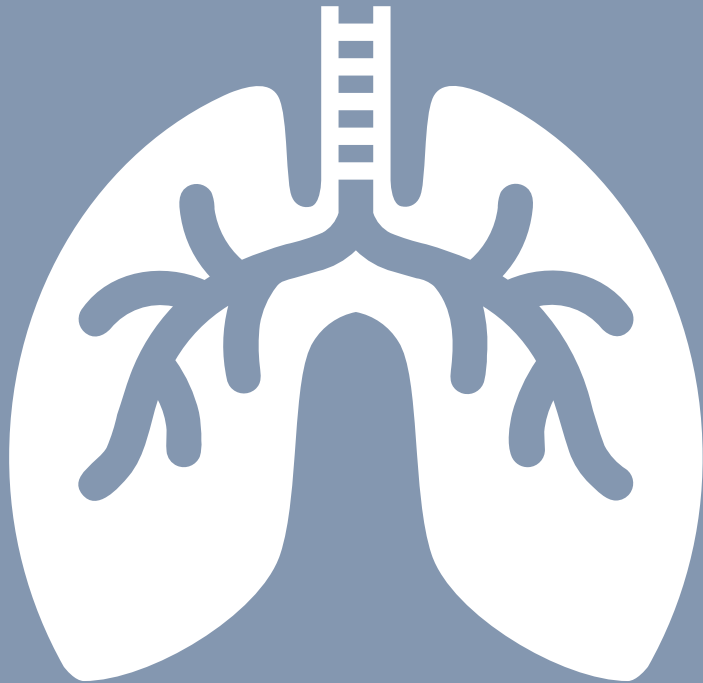
Discuss **triggers** for that reaction.

Explore **consequences** of that reaction

STEP 2: Teach skills to address distressing reactions.



Skill 1: Breathing



Get comfortable

Breathe in through your nose for 5, expanding your belly

Hold for 5

Exhale slowly for 7 while you say a soothing word

STEP 2: Teach skills to address distressing reactions.



Skill 2: Writing Exercise



Set aside **30 minutes**

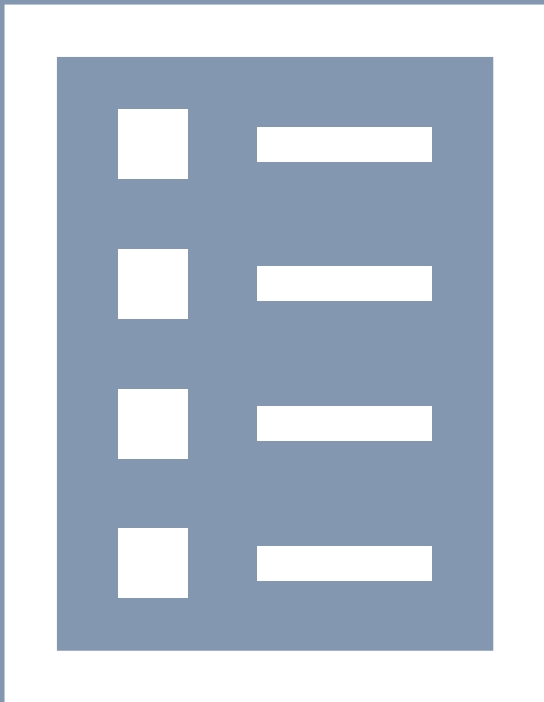
Write about **whatever is distressing you**

Give yourself space to **feel your emotions**

Consider the **things you did to help yourself or others**

Repeat, building in **new helpful thoughts**

STEP 3: Create a plan to manage a distressing reaction.



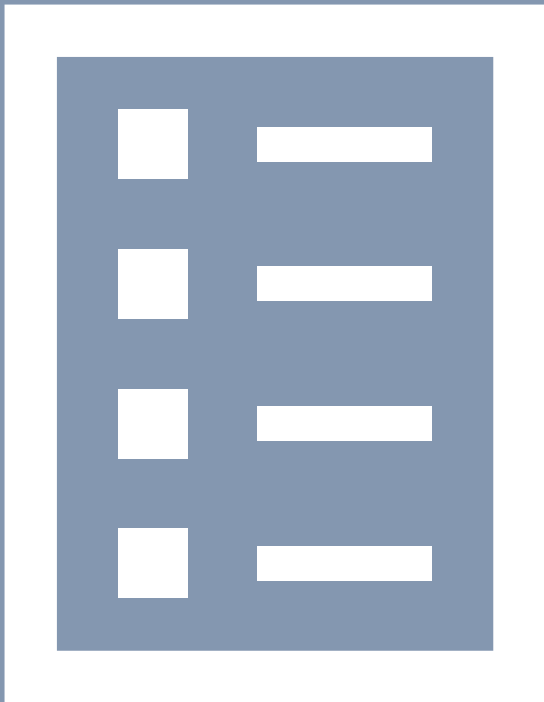
Brainstorm **good, culturally-aware self-care** to reduce your reactivity to triggers.

Meet basic
needs (eating,
sleeping,
health)

Regularly do
positive
activities

Talk to social
supporters
about feelings

STEP 3: Create a plan to manage a distressing reaction.



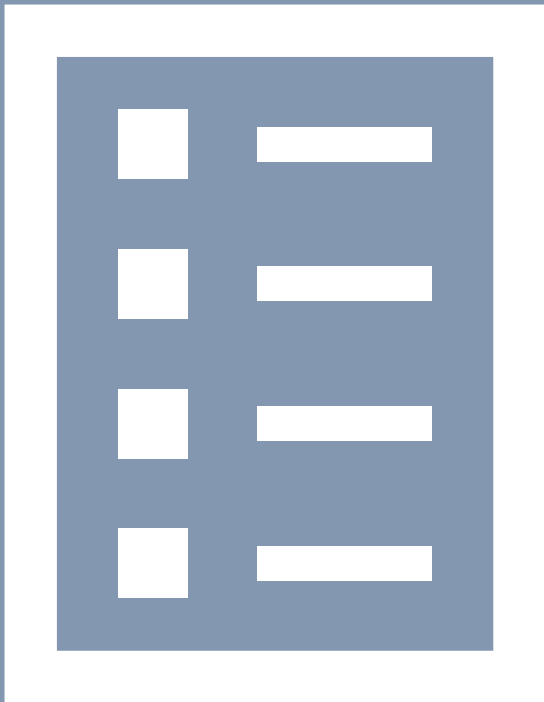
Create a **plan** to deal with triggers as they come up.

Differentiate between the current trigger & the past event

Can also use **helpful thinking** core skill

Write about how you feel

STEP 3: Create a plan to manage a distressing reaction.



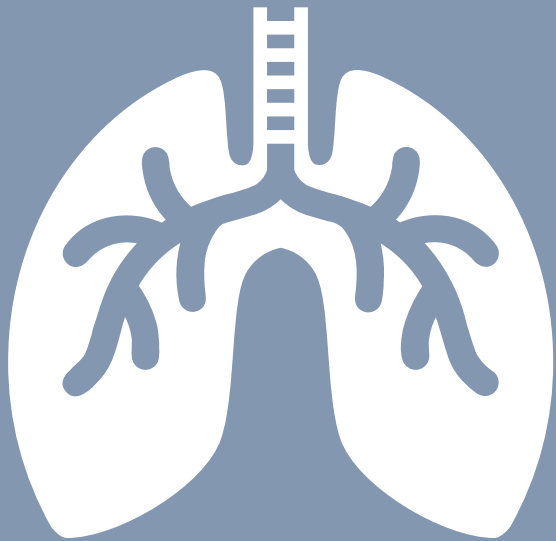
Emphasize the need for **time to recover** after the trigger

Use the
breathing skill
or practice
relaxation

Do a positive
activity

Talk to social
supporters
about how
you feel

NOTE: For most, both approaches are needed to manage reactions



Consider:

Short term vs long term benefit

Situation and context in which reaction is occurring

Intensity and consequences of reaction





**CORE
SKILL 4:
Promoting
Helpful
Thinking**

Rationale: Changing thoughts changes mood and reactions



Increases **adaptive meaning** around stressors

Decrease negative emotions (e.g., guilt, shame, fear)

Promote positive behaviors

STEP 1: Identify unhelpful thoughts.



Situation → Painful Emotions

Ask:

What thought goes along with the situation & emotions?

Situation → Thoughts → Painful Emotions

STEP 2: Explore more helpful thoughts.



Ask yourself: What would be **more helpful** thoughts?

What would I **say to a friend** in this situation?

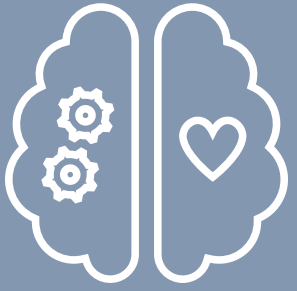
What do I **have control** over?

Watch out for **Pollyanna thoughts!**

~~I'll be fine!~~

~~Cheer up, you tried.~~

STEPS 3 & 4: Rehearse helpful thoughts and assign this as practice.



Imagine the trigger situation and say the helpful thought **out loud**.

Next time you're in a trigger situation, **practice the thought**.



**CORE
SKILL 5:
Rebuilding
Healthy Social
Connections**

Rationale: Improving social support
is protective

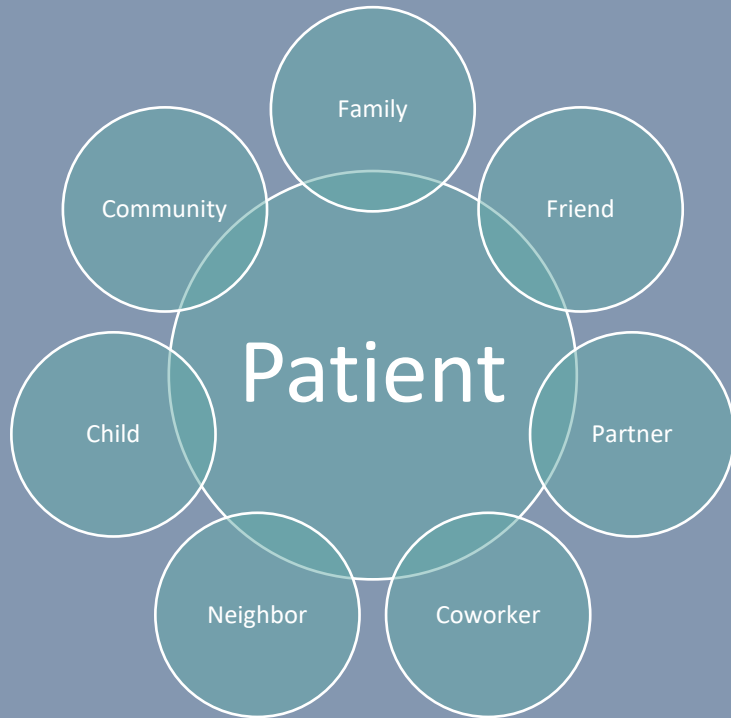


Decrease social isolation/avoidance

Meets practical and emotional needs

Decrease maladaptive coping

STEPS 1 & 2: Make & review a social connections map.



Who are your most important connections?

With whom can you share your feelings?

With whom do you want to be in touch?

Who might need your help or support?

Consider who and what is missing or needs to be changed.

STEP 3: Make a social support plan.



For different people on the map, think of what connection might look like.

Who?

What?

When?

Where?

Why?

How?



**Putting It All
Together**

The course of SPR is both **flexible and structured.**

First session: Introductions, assessment & planning, teach & practice a skill

Follow-up sessions: Review homework, re-assess, teach & practice a skill

Complete **1-5 sessions** as needed, incorporating **some or all of the skills.**

SPR uses transdiagnostic principles to promote early recovery.



Decreasing unhelpful avoidance



Shifting negative beliefs and meaning



Increasing positive rewards

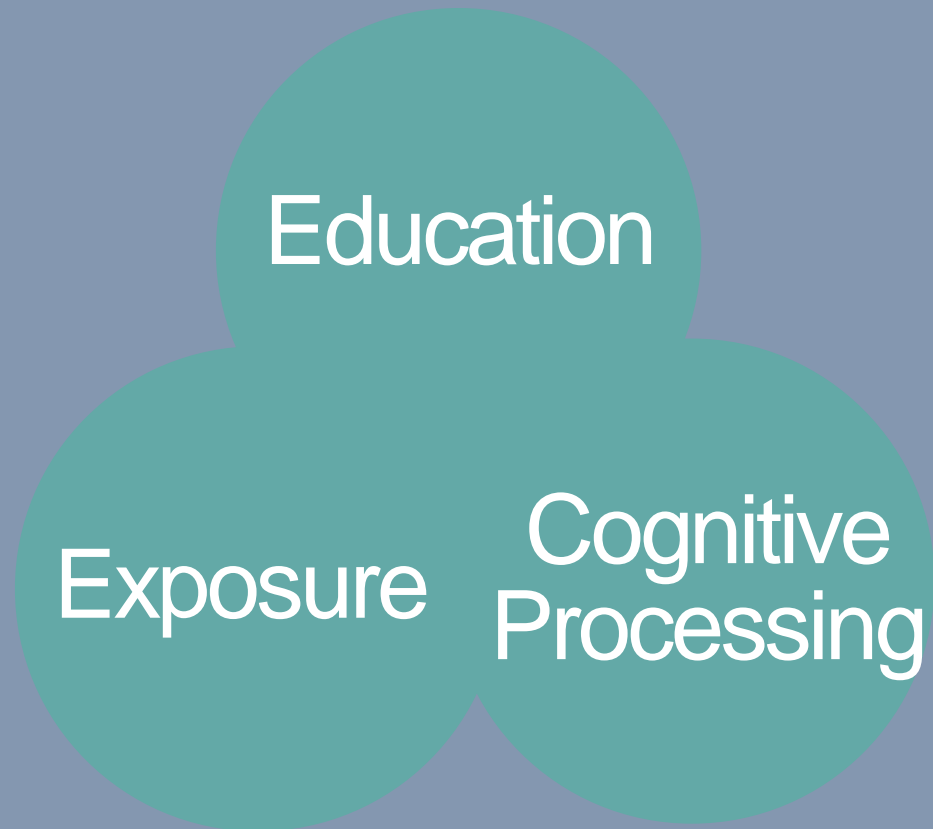


Regulating negative emotions



LAST THOUGHTS & RESOURCES

Therapy for mental health disorders following trauma is effective at reducing symptoms.



- ✓ Cognitive Processing Therapy
- ✓ Prolonged Exposure Therapy
- ✓ Written Exposure Therapy
- ✓ Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing
- ✓ Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Visit <https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline> for more information!

Mental health is sustained by ongoing, intentional efforts to cope adaptively despite setbacks and challenges.

“Mental health... is not a destination but a process. It’s about how you drive, not where you’re going.”

— Noam Shpancer, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, Otterbein University

RESOURCES

Skills for Psychological Recovery Field Guide:

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/skills-for-psychological-recovery>

Skills for Psychological Recovery Free Online Training:

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/skills-psychological-recovery-spr-online>

UW Department of Psychiatry COVID Resources:

<https://psychiatry.uw.edu/clinical-care-consultation/covid-19-resources-for-mental-well-being/>

Trauma Recovery App:

<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/trauma-recovery/id1292950621>



Thank you and questions



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<https://psychiatry.uw.edu/research/trauma-recovery-resilience-innovations/>