

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

WA State Psychiatric Association, June 4, 2022

Michele Bedard-Gilligan, Ph.D.

Trauma Recovery Innovations

UW Dept of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences



# Acknowledgments



## Intervention Strategies Adapted from:

*-SPR Field Operations Guide, National Center for PTSD*

*-National Child Traumatic Stress Network*

## Thanks to:

Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences

Drs. Kristen Lindgren, Emily Dworkin, Lori Zoellner (University of Washington)

Dr. Debra Kaysen (Stanford University)



# 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**

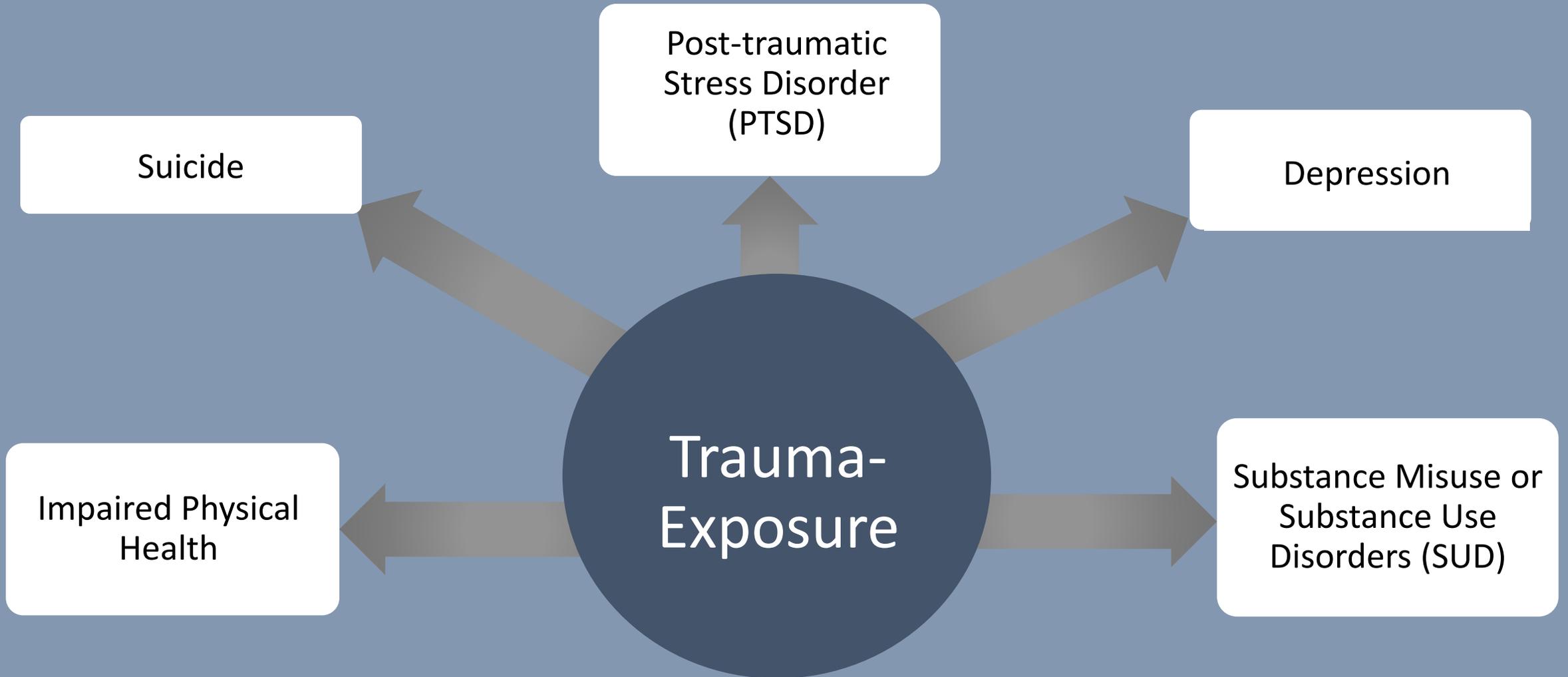


**Increases in arousal & anxiety**



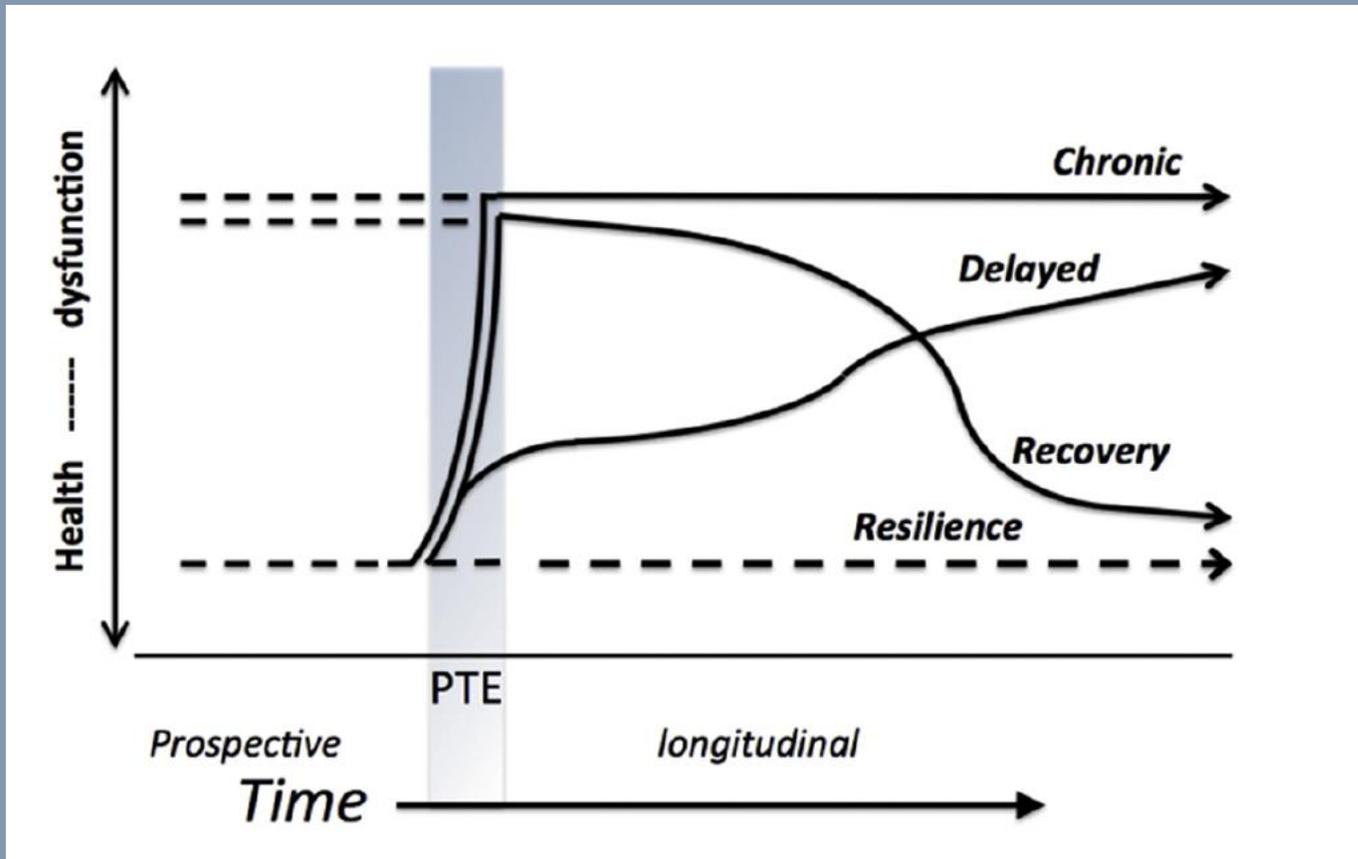
**Avoidance**

# 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

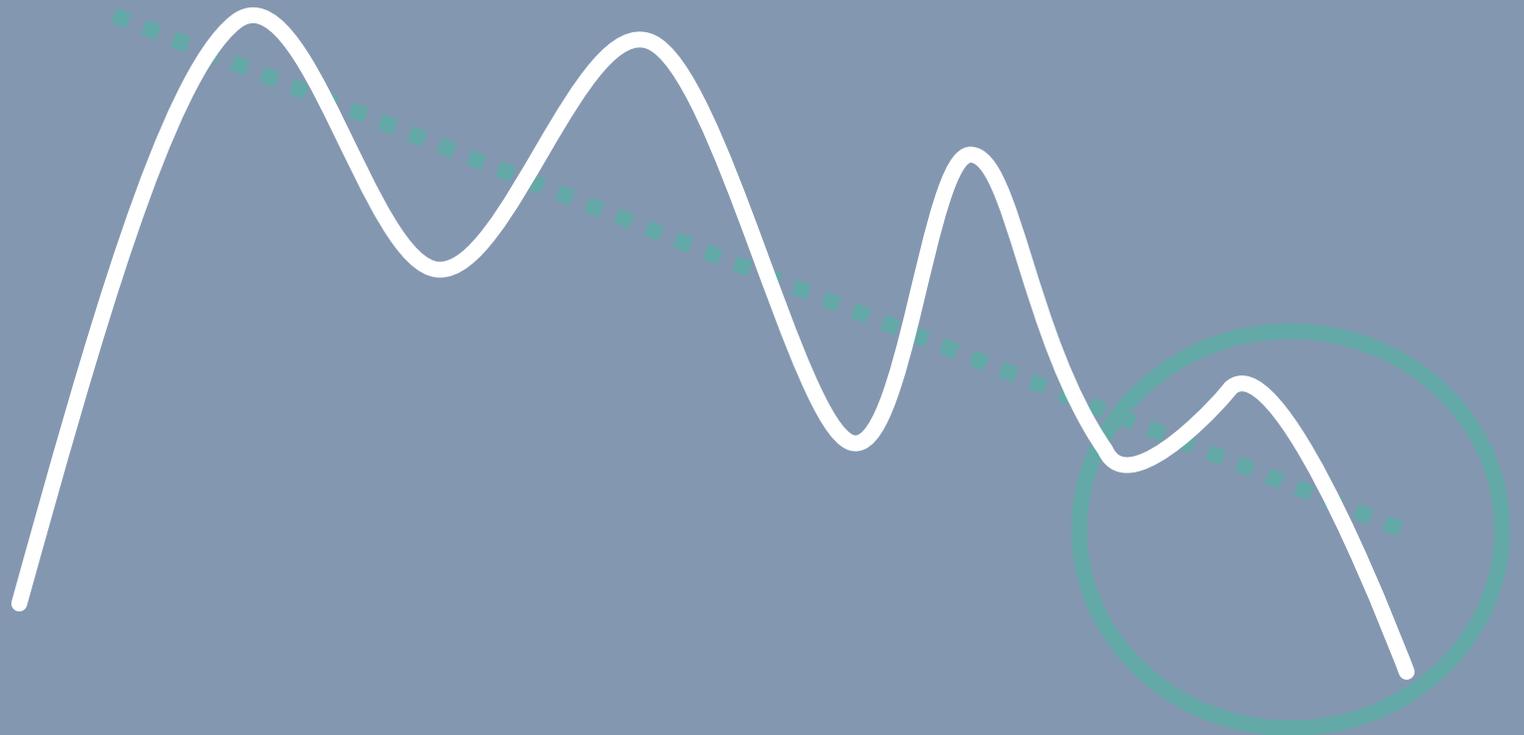
Lack of  
Social  
Support



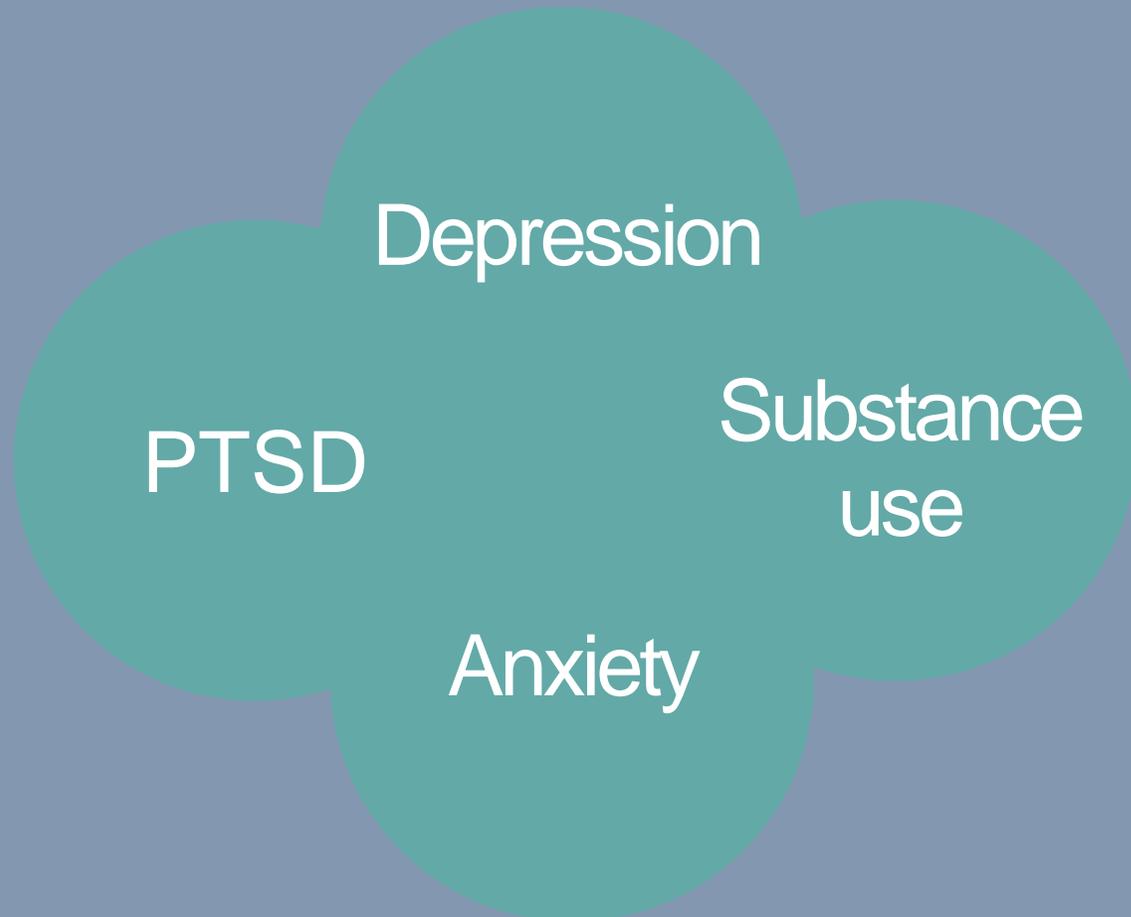
# Promoting Recovery

# 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

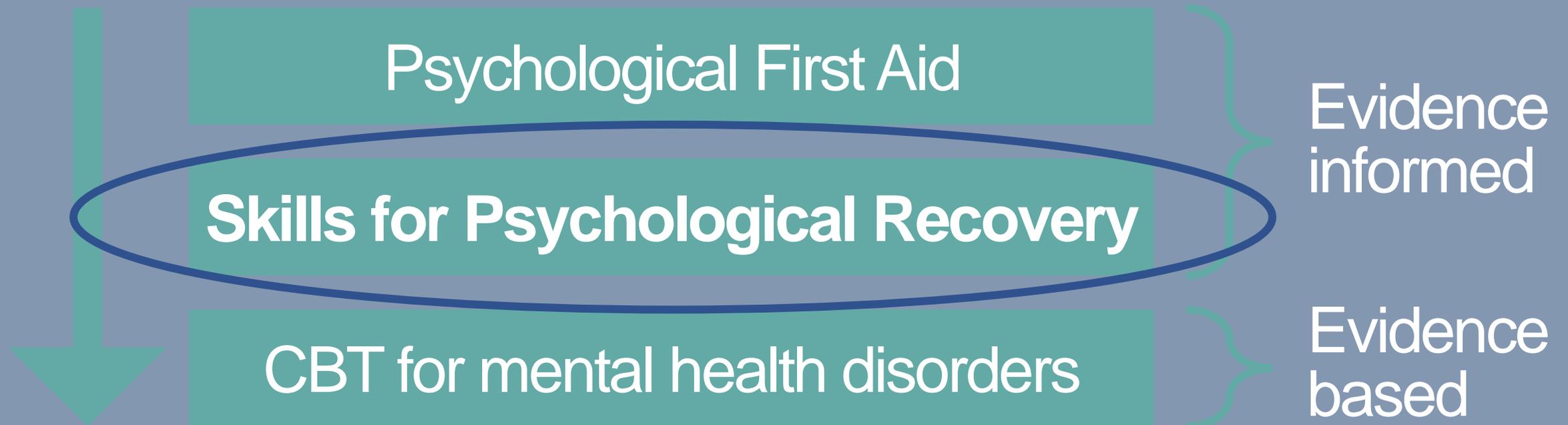


Increasing positive rewards



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:**

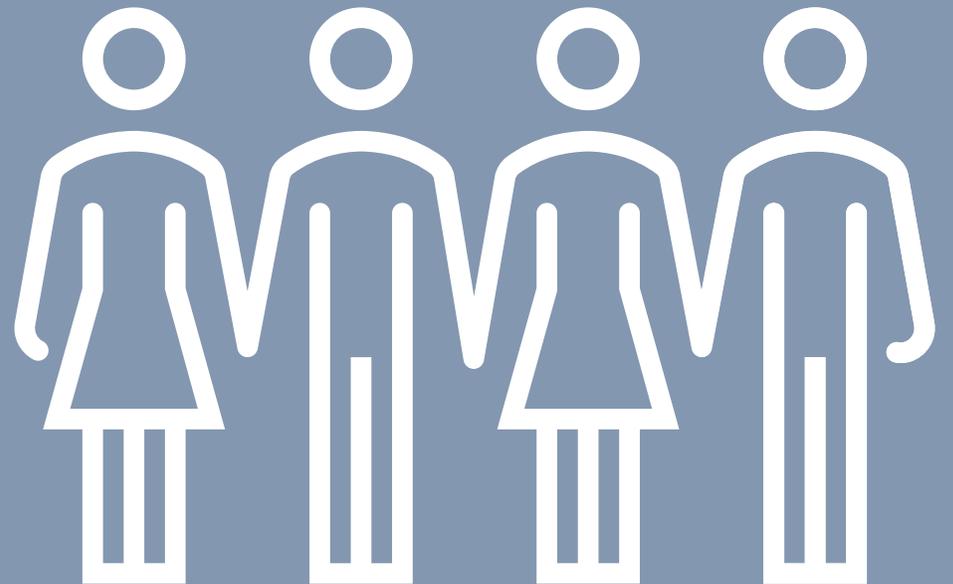
- **Outpatients:** Medication management, existing patients who need extra structured support, former patients needing boosters
- **Consult patients:** non-specialty clinics, acute care settings
- **Inpatients:** Groups and or individual sessions

# SPR is appropriate for many, but not all.

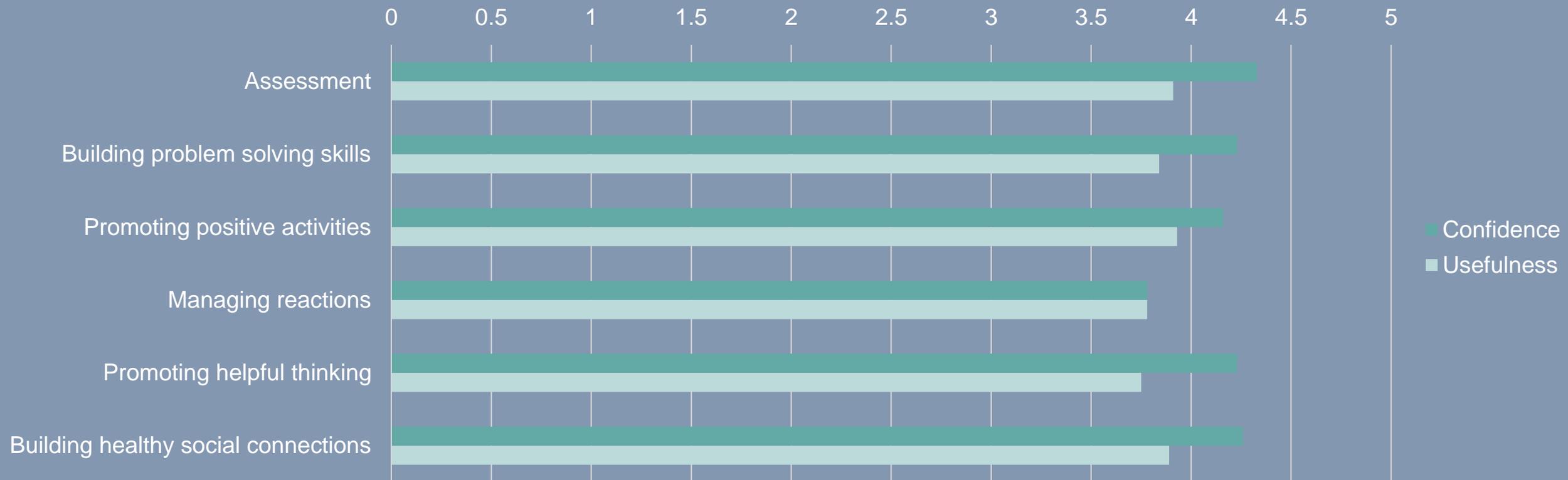
✓ People in **chronic phase** of crisis

⊘ Not a **danger** to self/others

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



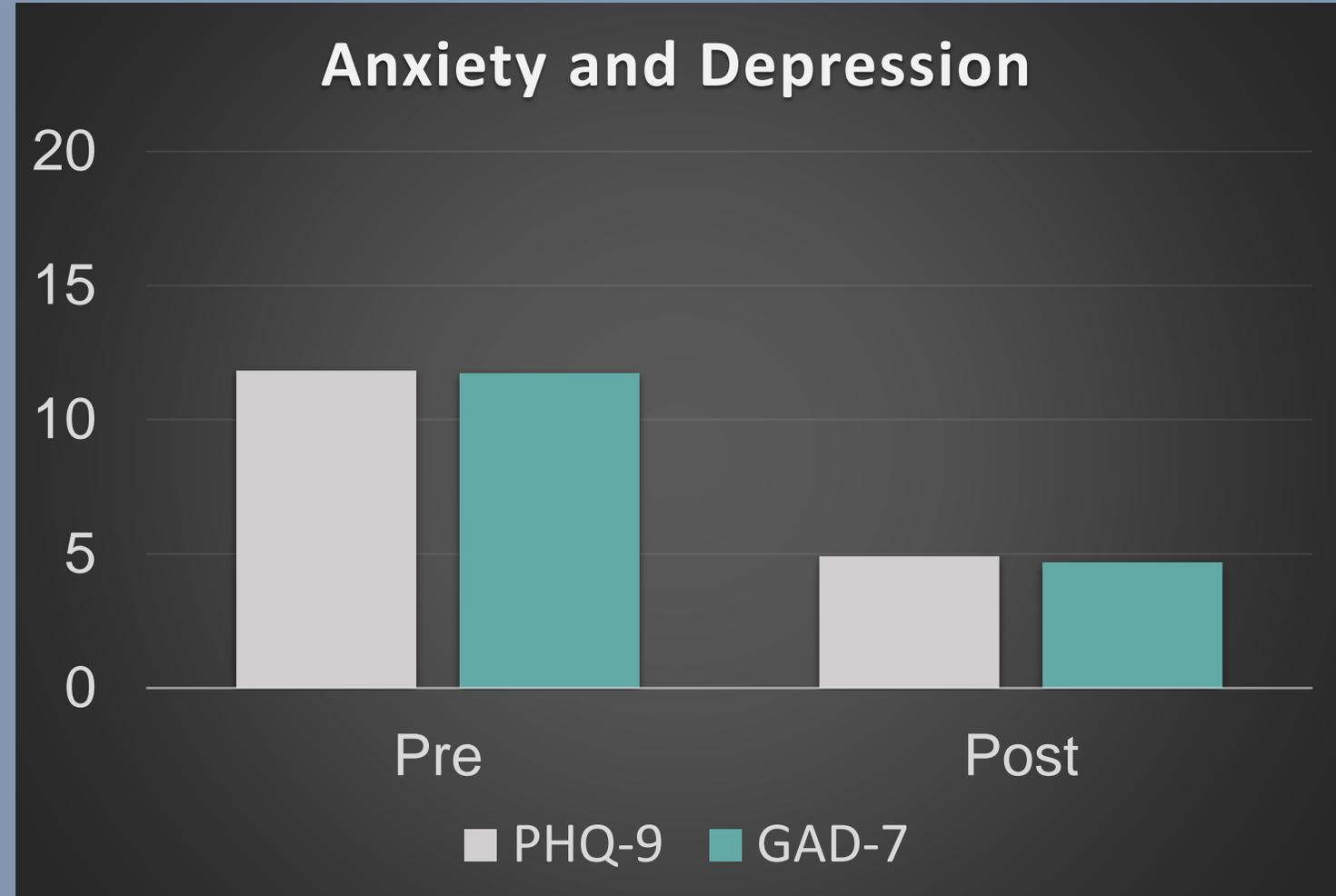
# SPR is seen as useful and helpful by providers following disasters (Forbes et al., 2010)



# 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.



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Which one of these areas is most bothersome?

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Is there one that needs to be dealt with sooner?

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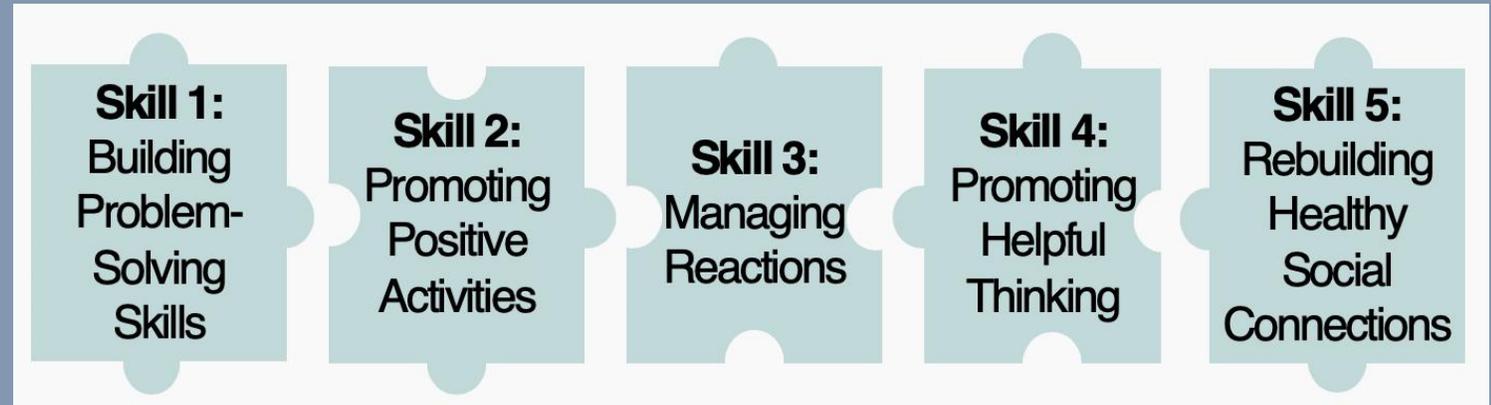
Is there one problem that seems to be getting worse?

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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

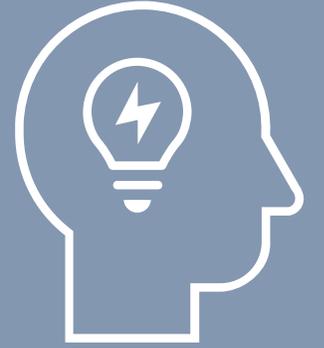
## SKILL SELECTION TOOL

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.

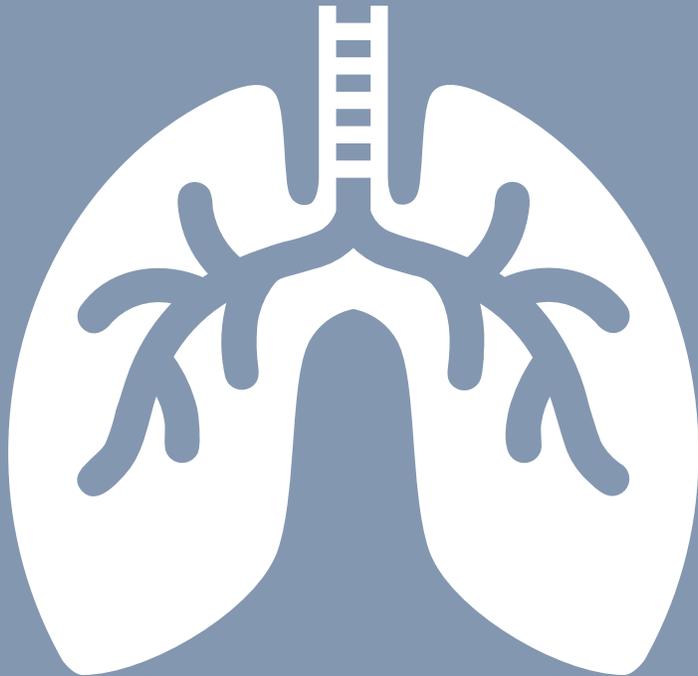
Discuss **triggers** for that reaction.

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**

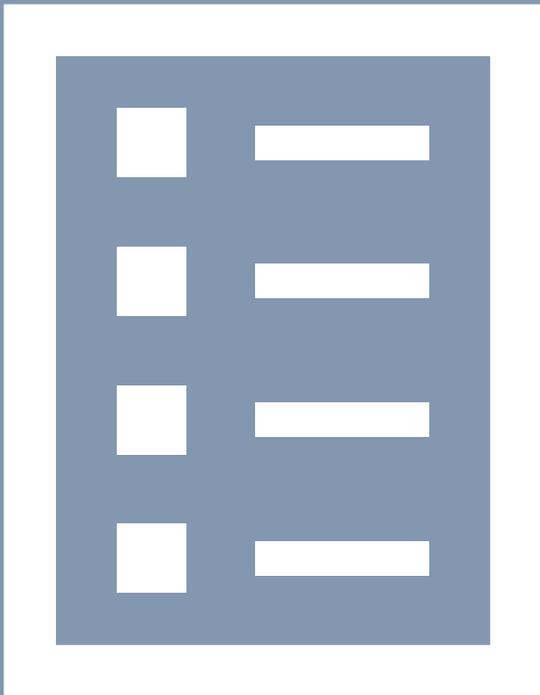
Write about **whatever is distressing you**

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.



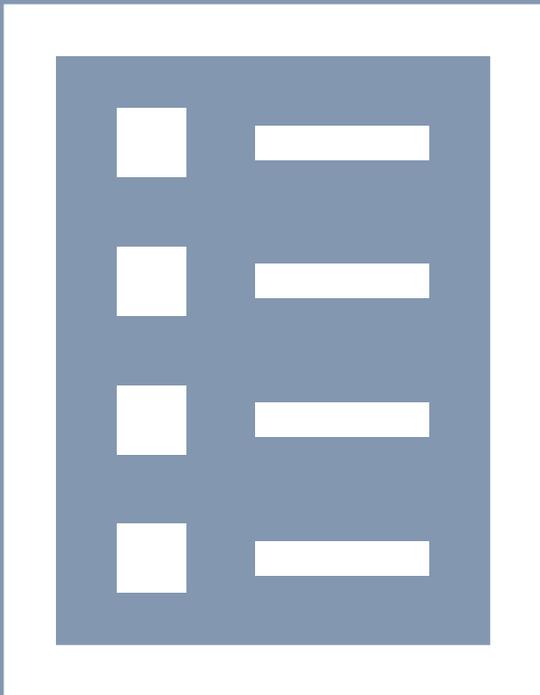
Brainstorm **good, culturally-aware self-care** to reduce your reactivity to triggers.

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.



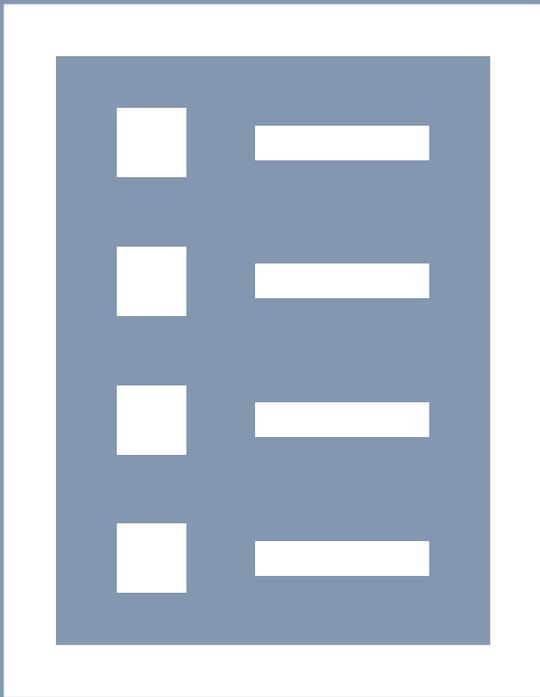
Create a **plan** to deal with triggers as they come up.

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.



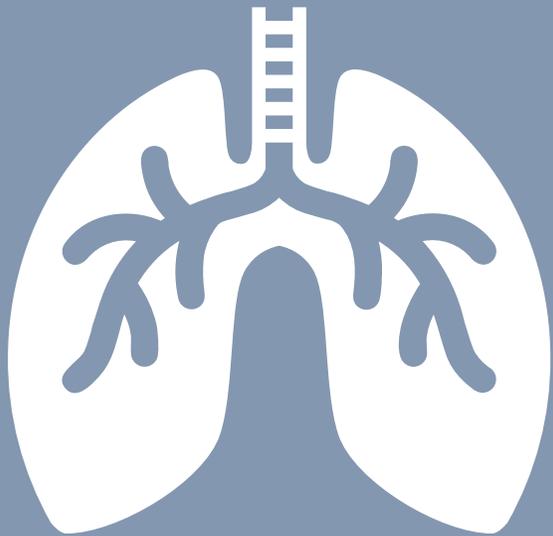
Emphasize the need for **time to recover** after the trigger

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

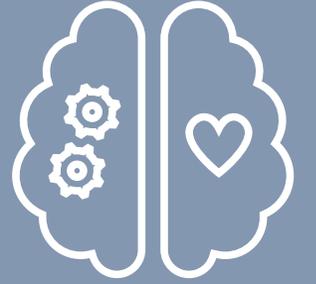
**Intensity and consequences** of reaction





**CORE  
SKILL 4:  
Promoting  
Helpful  
Thinking**

# **Rationale:** Changing thoughts changes mood and reactions

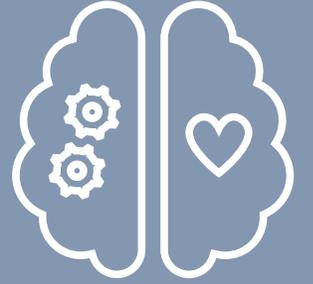


**Increases adaptive meaning** around stressors

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

**Promote positive behaviors**

# STEP 1: Identify unhelpful thoughts.



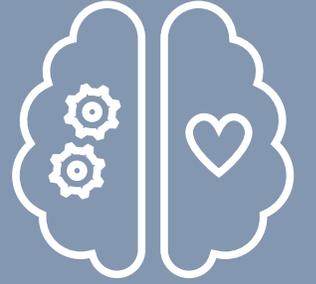
Situation → Painful Emotions

*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?

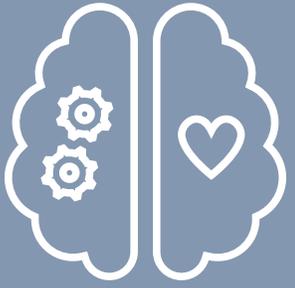
What do I **have control** over?

Watch out for **Pollyanna thoughts!**

~~I'll be fine!~~

~~Cheer up, you tried.~~

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



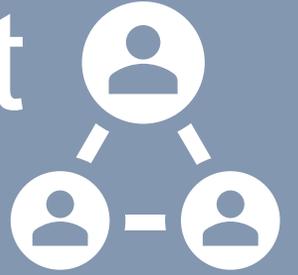
**Imagine** the trigger situation and say the helpful thought **out loud**.

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



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

**Rationale:** Improving social support  
is protective

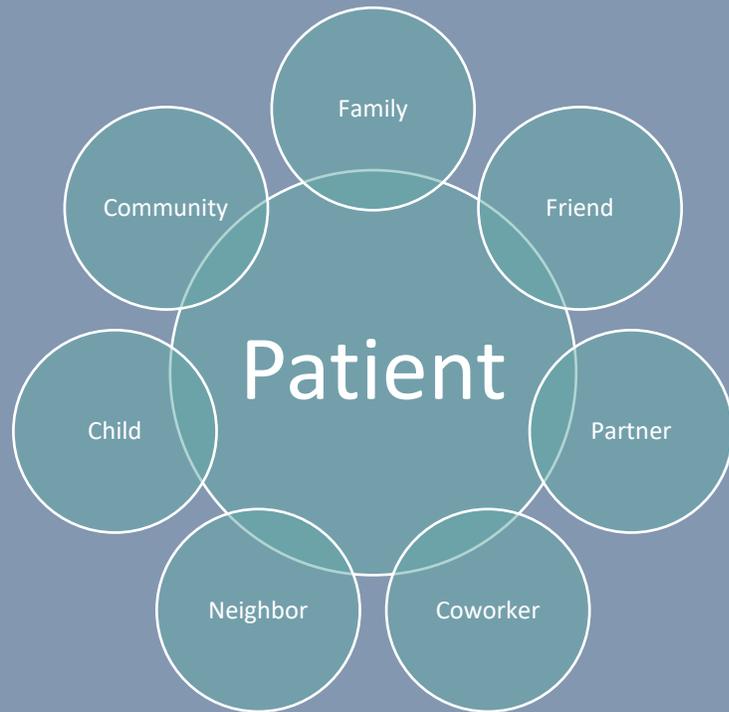


**Decrease social isolation/avoidance**

**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

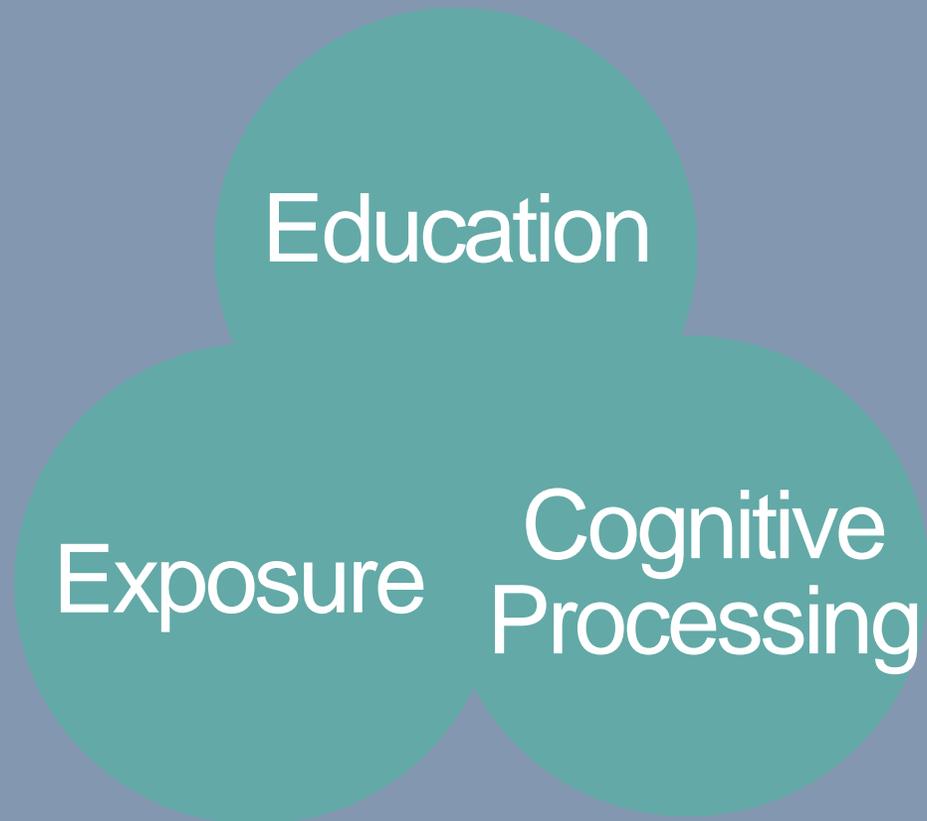


Regulating negative emotions



# 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



Michele Bedard-Gilligan; mab29@uw.edu

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