

Climate Anxiety, Grief and Trauma

Broadening the Lens

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My eco-anxiety has stopped me from having children

Future Loss: Grieving A Changing Climate

Climate grief expected to be widespread soon but it's still not openly acknowledged

How to Heal Emotional Trauma After a Climate Disaster

Climate Grief: Our Greatest Ally?

Terrified of Climate Change? You Might Have Eco-Anxiety

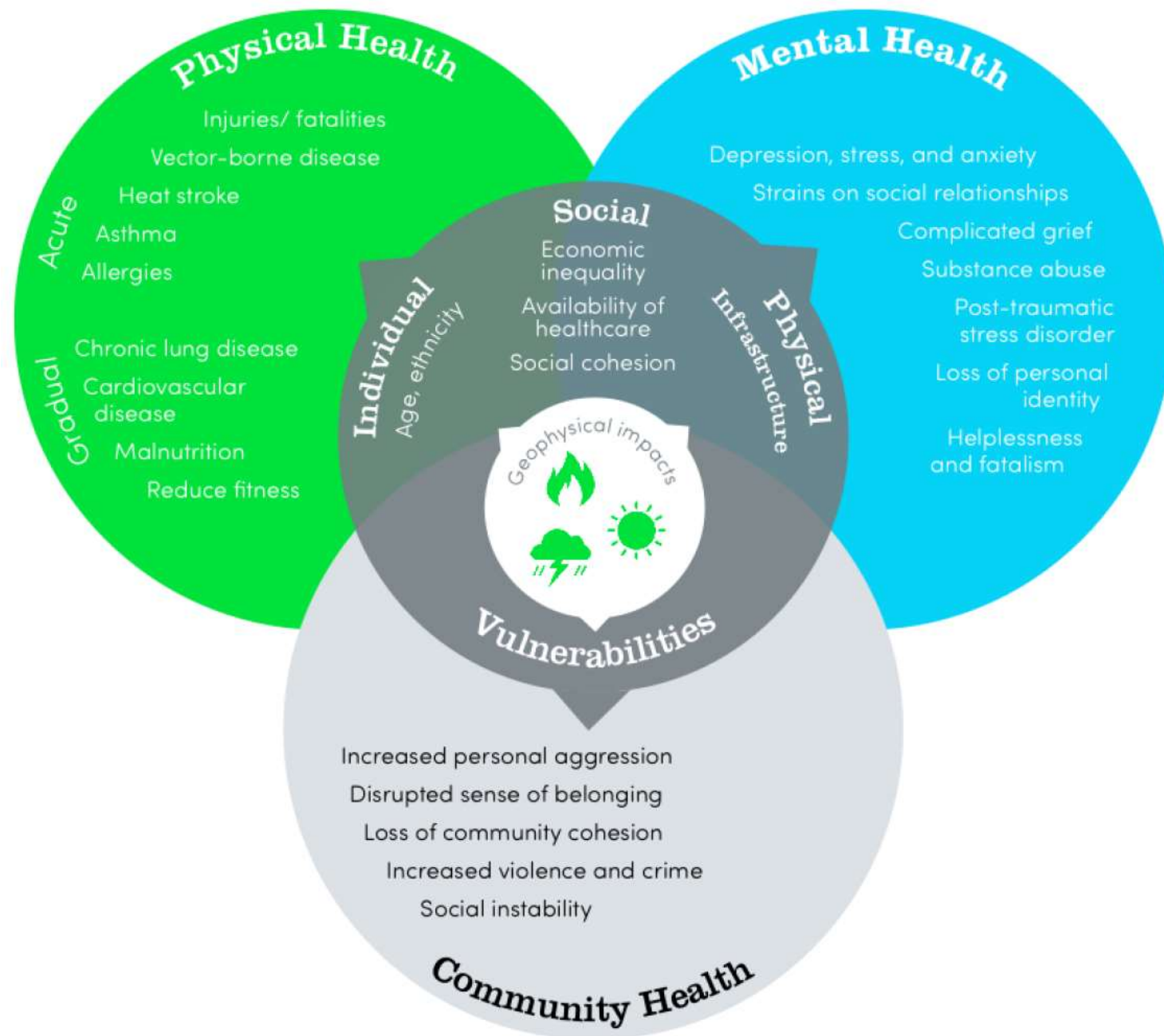
Every Kind of Feeling about Climate Change

“Negative” Emotions

- Amazement, Surprise, Disappointment, Confusion
- Shock, Trauma, Overwhelm, Feeling Isolated
- Fear, Worry, Anxiety, Powerlessness, Dread
- Sadness, Grief, Yearning, Solastalgia
- Strong Anxiety, Depression, Despair
- Guilt, Shame, Feeling Inadequate, Regret
- Feeling Betrayed, Disillusion, Disgust
- Anger, Rage, Frustration
- Hostility, Contempt, Feeling Discontent, Aversion
- Envy, Jealousy, Admiration

“Positive” Emotions

- Motivation, Urge to Act, Determination
- Pleasure, Joy, Pride
- Hope, Optimism, Empowerment
- Belonging, Togetherness, Connection
- Love, Empathy, Caring, Compassion



Climate Anxiety

The experience of challenging emotions, experienced to a significant degree, due to environmental issues and the threats they pose.

Mild(er)

- occasional insomnia
- sadness, restlessness (milder symptoms of anxiety), inability to calm > overstimulation
- effects on mood
- occasional decreased levels of functioning, temporary paralysis, for example, when making moral decisions
- milder symptomatic behavior, e.g. single action bias (heightened need to recycle efficiently) or mild dissociation
- decreased energy levels

Severe

- significant psychosomatic symptoms: serious insomnia, states of clinical depression
- definable anxiety (“Climate Anxiety Disorder”)
- difficulty maintaining functioning, especially when faced with news about climate change, its consequences and threat scenarios
- compulsive behavior, including behaviors that have been called “climate anorexia” or “climate orthorexia”
- self-destructive behaviors, for example, substance abuse and self-harming, suicidality

From various losses... ... to the wild west of grief

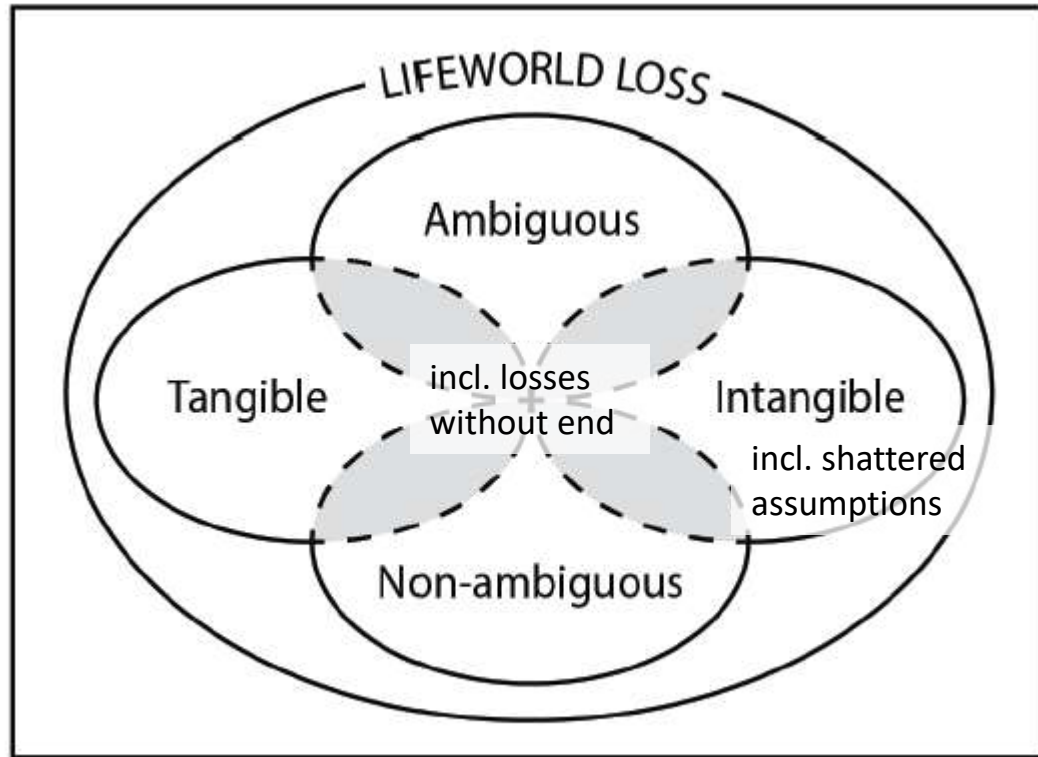


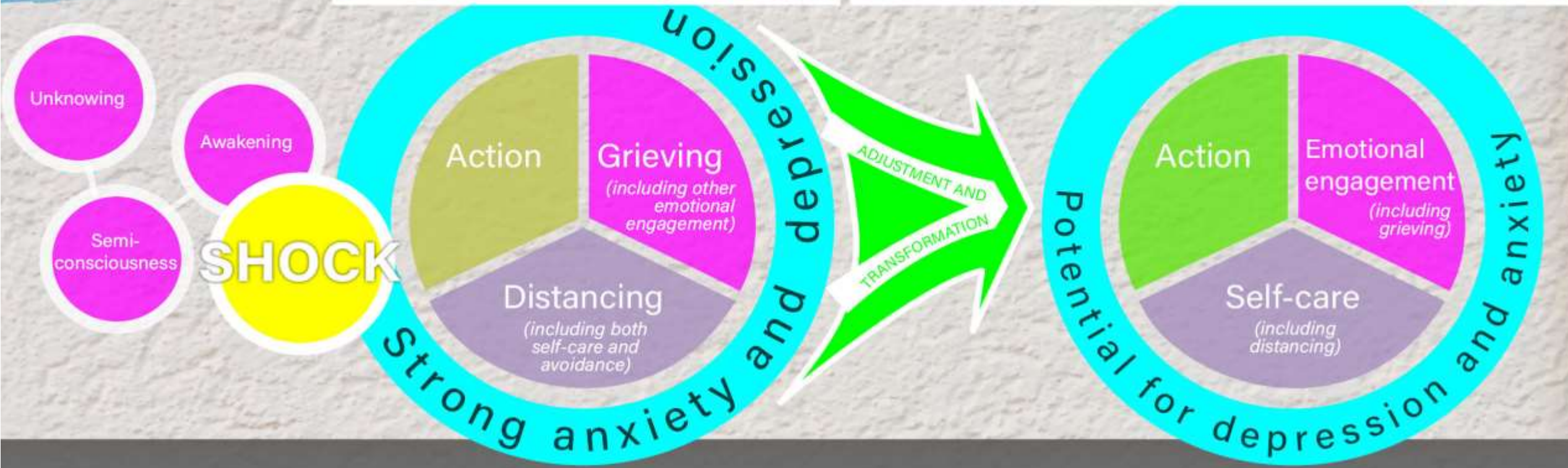
Figure 2. Possible aspects of ecological loss.

- Localized and personal grief
- Global and collective grief
- Anticipatory grief
- Disenfranchised grief
- Chronic ecological grief
- Complicated grief

Direction chronologically →

Coping and changing

Living with the ecological crisis



Process Model of Eco-anxiety and Ecological Grief

Source: Pihkala (2022)

The emotional coping trajectory of climate anxiety

from avoidance to facing the situation and from denial to acceptance

from anxiety to fear (i.e. experiencing healthy fear)

from sadness to courage and unlocking resources

from trauma or a great shock to post-traumatic growth

from a feeling of inadequacy to accepting incompleteness

from paralysing guilt to animating guilt

from incapacitating shame to feeling one is good enough

from anger and frustration to action against injustice

from helplessness to empowerment

from meaninglessness to experiencing meaningfulness

What is Trauma?

3 E's

The **experience** of an **event** that is physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse **effects** on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

An unbearable, intolerable experience that exceeds a person's coping capacities

Types of Trauma

- Physical and/or mental
- Complex/developmental
- Personal/individual
- Collective
- Cultural
- Transgenerational
- Intergenerational
- Climate



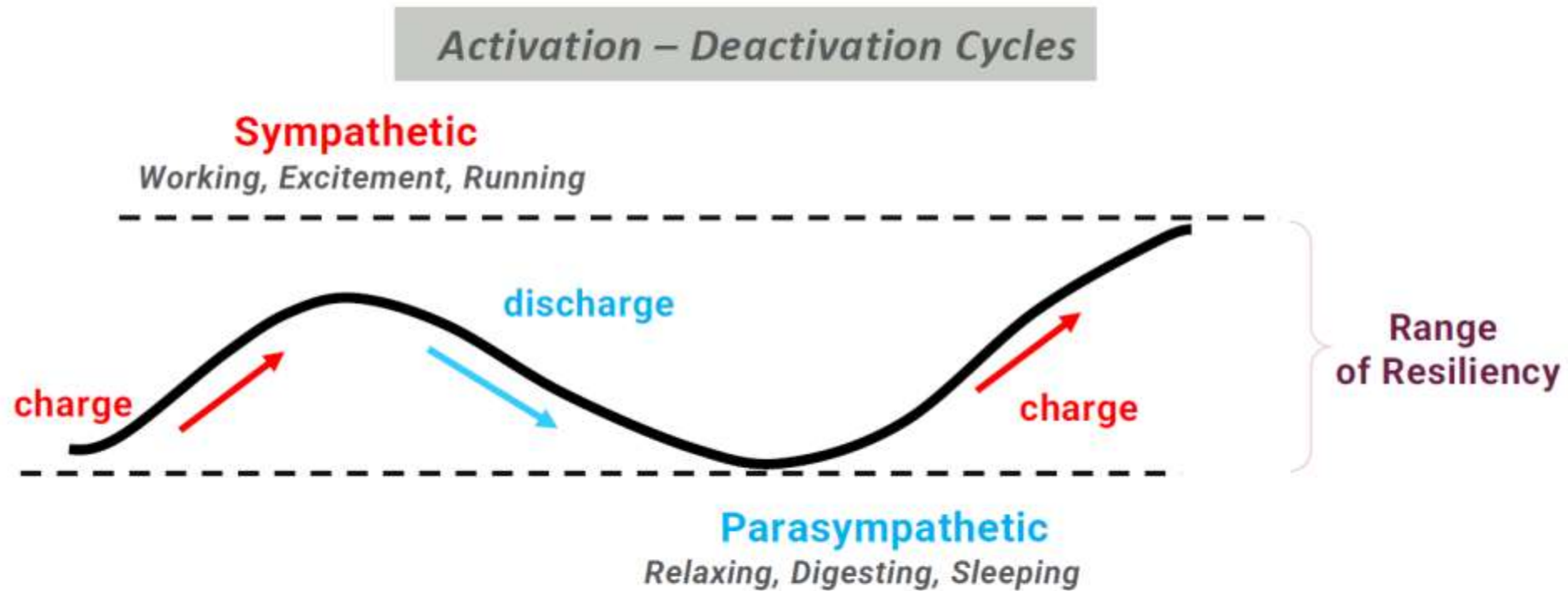
Experience of an Emergency

(*Potentially* traumatizing event, i.e. a situation where our survival needs are not met)

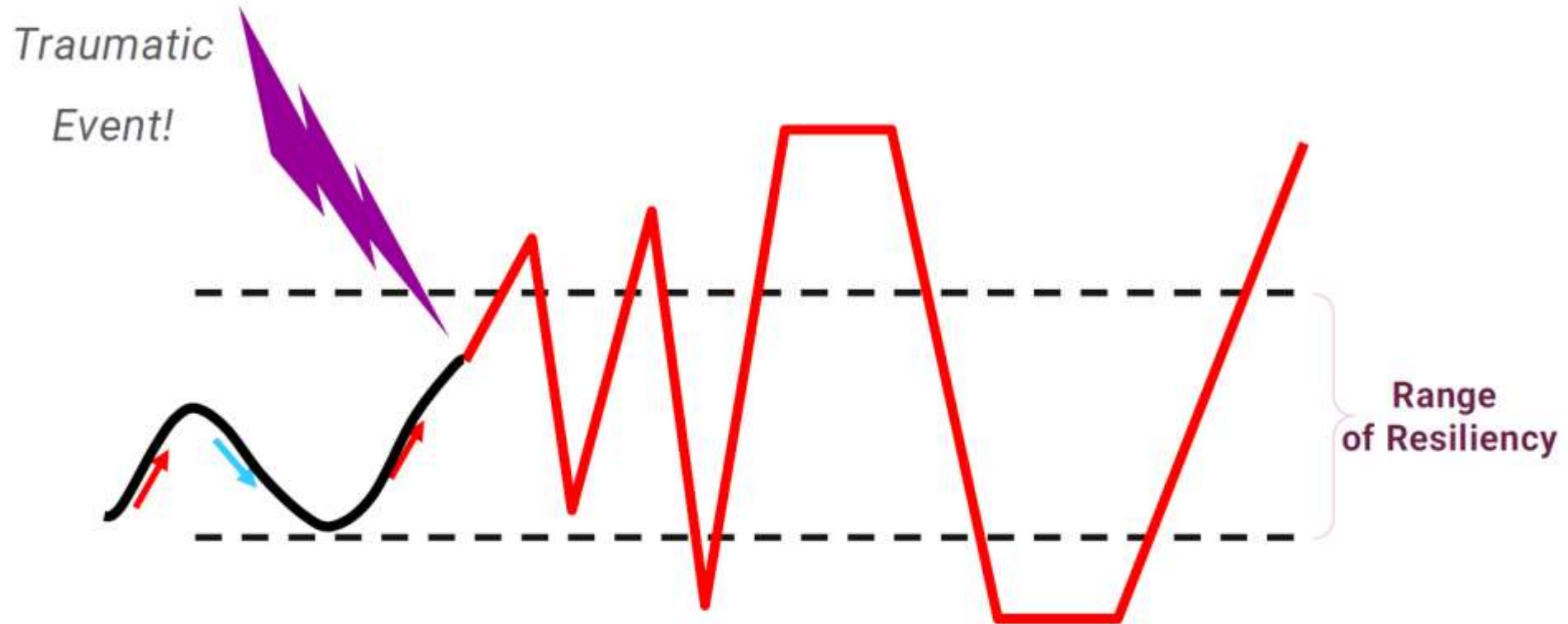


Prevailing ANS Response	Experienced Symptoms and Observed Signs
BeFriend	Impulse to reach out, connect Fear/anxiety calm down Return to safety, calm, and pleasure
Flight	Trembling, shaking, twisting Impulse to flee, back/turn away, fly, not stop moving Sense of urgency Fear, anxiety, and restlessness
Fight	Tension in muscles Impulse to kick, shout, bite, push, claw, strangle Holding breath, shallow breathing Aggression, anger and rage
Freeze	Paralysis, shut-down, frozen, still Impulse to get small, hide, disappear Numbing and disassociation Shock, panic, overwhelm

The Regulatory Process of the Autonomic Nervous System (Sympathetic and Parasympathetic)



TRAUMA is any experience that overwhelms our capacity to cope.



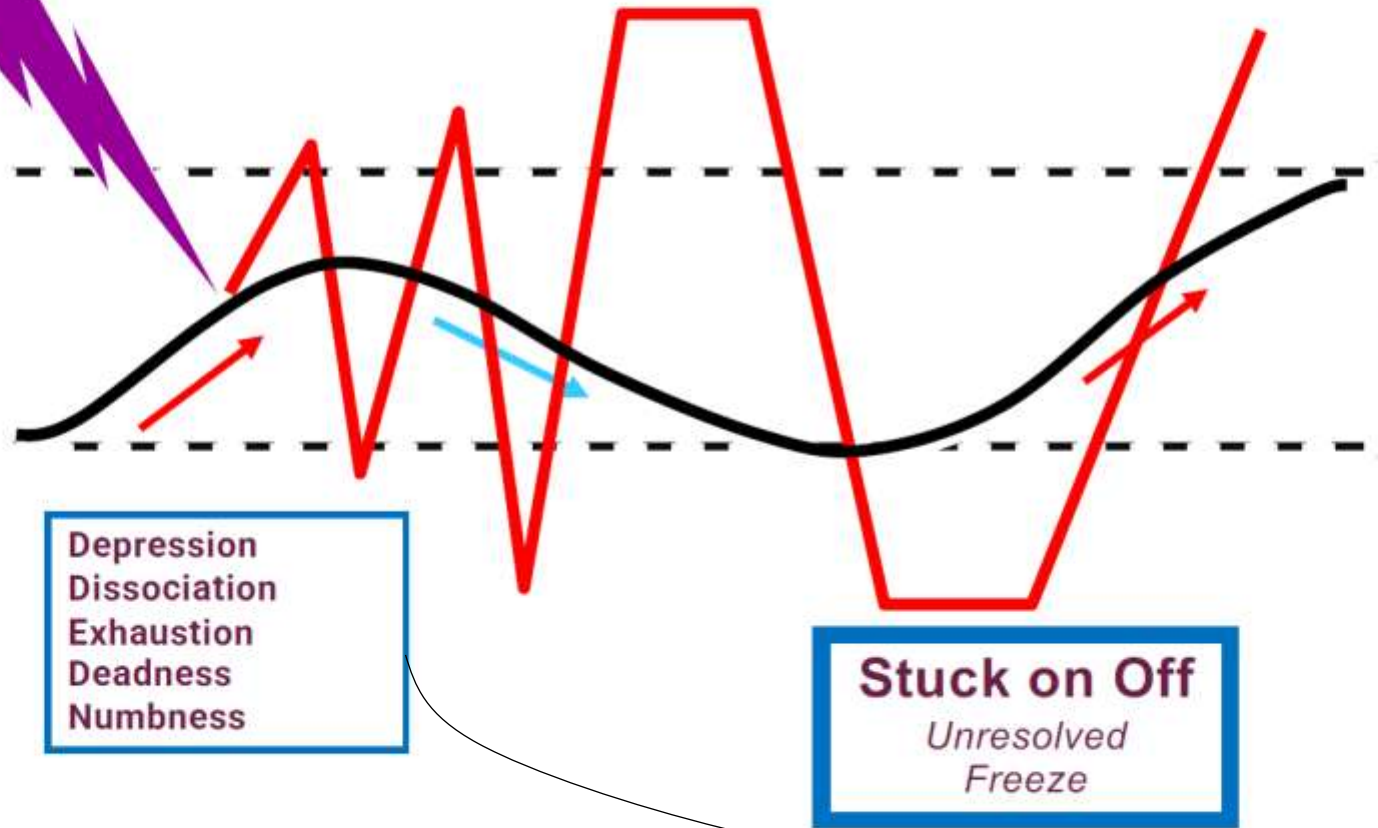
Traumatic
Event!

Stuck on On

Unresolved
Fight/Flight

Anxiety/Panic
Restlessness
Hyperactivity
Hypervigilance
Rage

An emergency becomes
a trauma with lasting
effects if the normal
survival response is not
completed/unresolved.

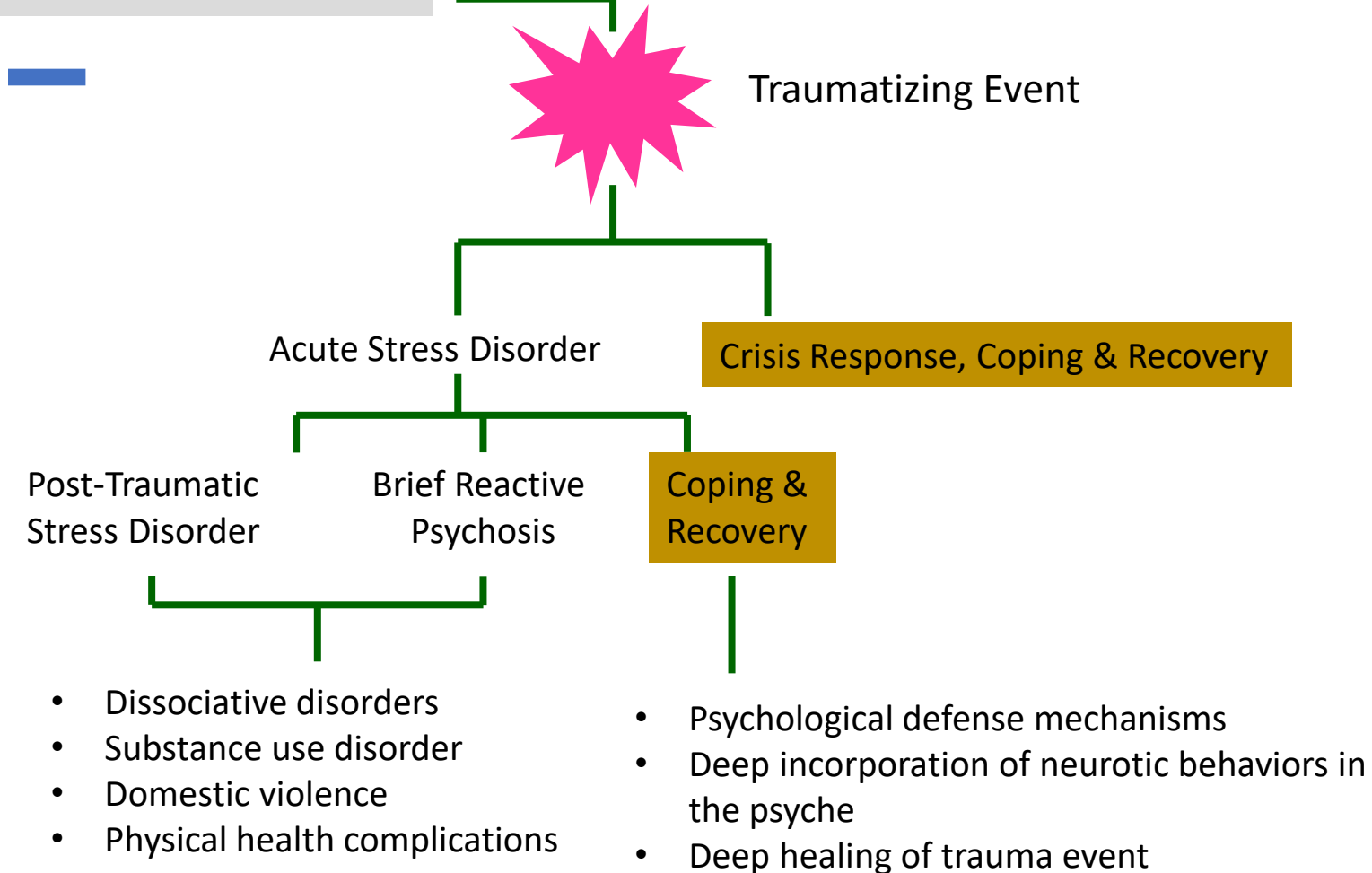


Signs of “PTSD”



The Tree of Trauma Effects

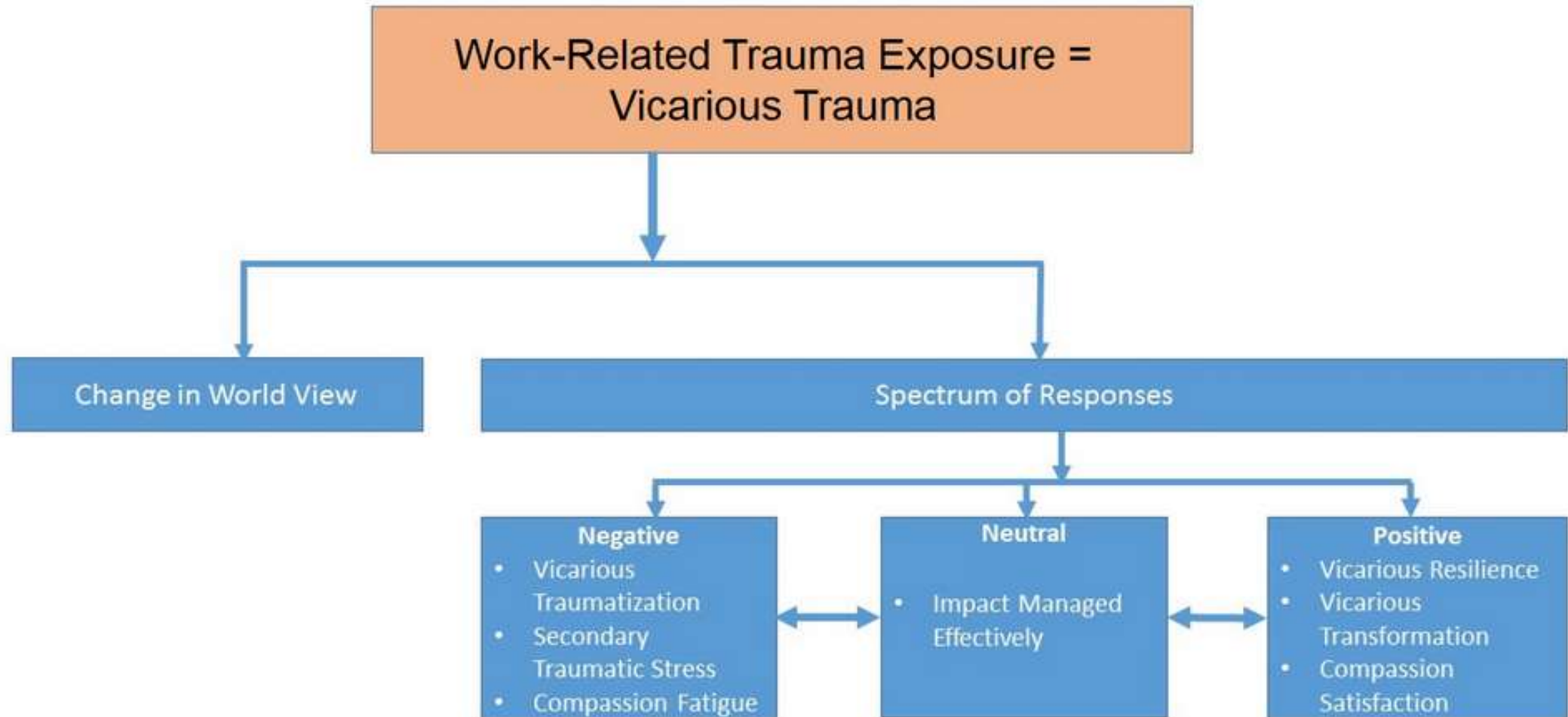
“Pre-Traumatic Stress”

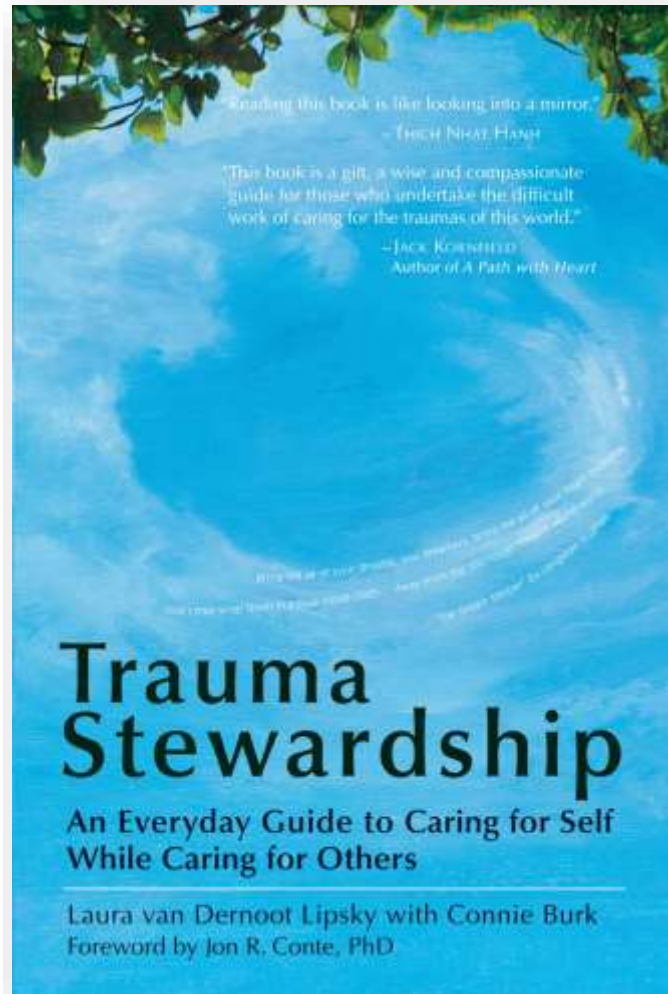


Some causes of trauma:

- Sexual violence
 - Relational/physical abuse
 - Severe illness/disease
 - Verbal/emotional abuse
 - Life-threatening accidents
 - Racism, discrimination
 - Extreme poverty
 - War, violence, shootings
 - Natural/human-made disasters
 - Displacement, refugee status
 - Climate change
-
- **Indirect/vicarious exposure**
 - **Secondary trauma**
 - **Chronic exposure**

Vicarious Trauma







Our Personal Stories of Climate Loss, Grief & Trauma

- Turn toward each other (groups of 4)
- Share your personal stories of a climate-related loss (anticipatory or actual), grief & trauma (if grounded and comfortable)

20 minutes

Time for Personal Reflection on Change/Loss

- Write a letter to a loved one that they will/could get in the future
- **Prompt:** Tell about a place you love that is changing - describing what it's like now, what makes it special to you, how you feel about the changes occurring, what you want others to know or remember about it
- If you have a photo of it with you, take it out to feed your writing
- 15 minutes





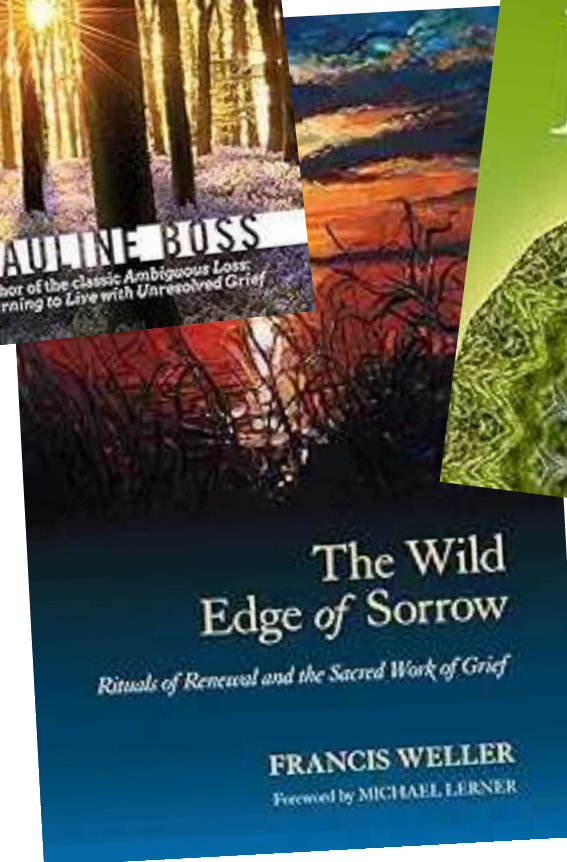
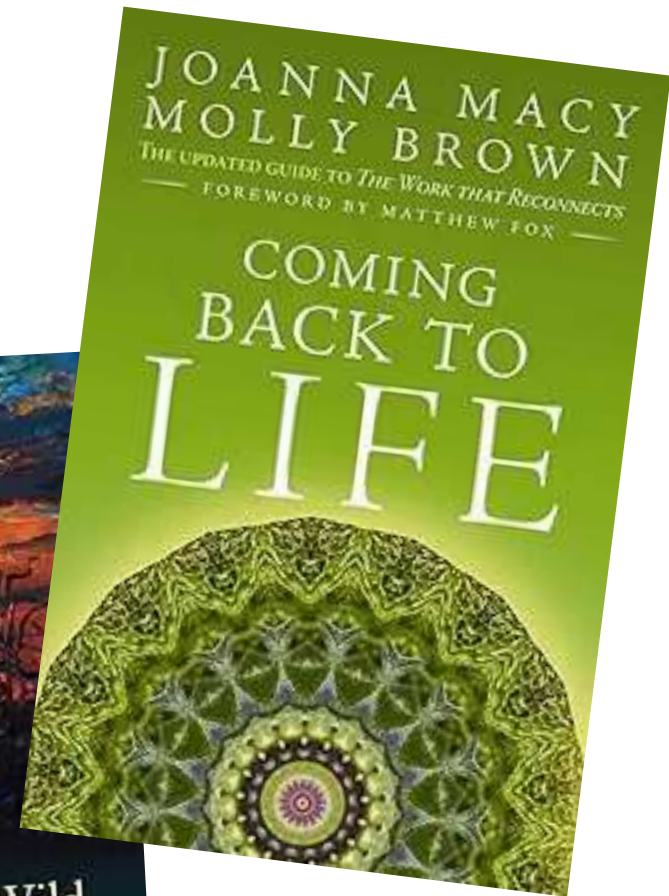
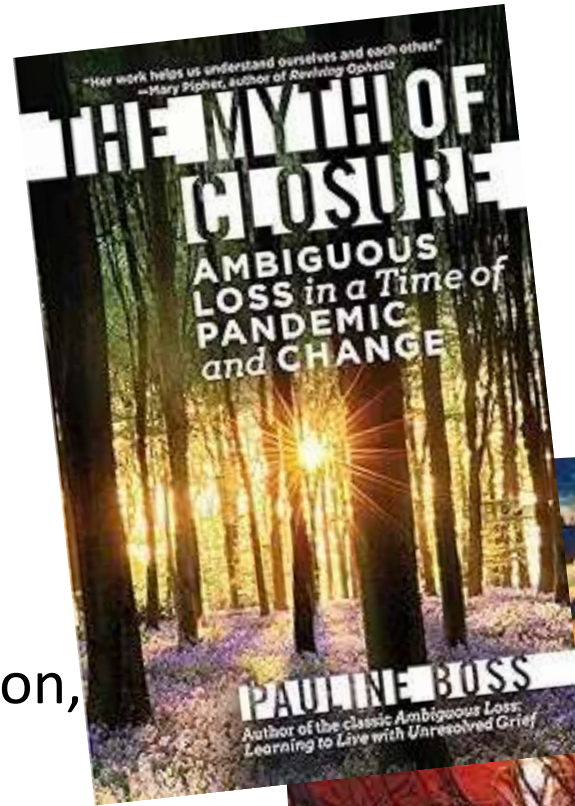
In Pairs

- Share what emotions you encountered writing the letter, what you noticed, what insights you carry away from it

10 minutes

Processing Grief

- Naming and validating grief
- Normalizing the ongoing and/or ambiguous nature of loss while recognizing what is not lost
- Finding/offering support, connection, resources
- Creating rituals for grief, honoring, beauty
- Finding/making meaning
- Adjusting mastery (agency)
- Reconstructing identity
- Revising attachment
- Discovering new hope, new purpose



Complementarity of “Top-Down” and “Bottom-Up” Approaches to Processing Traumatic Events

Cognitive Approaches:

- ▶ Focus on how thoughts influence emotions and behaviors (“top-down”)
- ▶ Help identify distorted cognitive beliefs and maladaptive behaviors
- ▶ Target reduction of symptoms
- ▶ Help create more adaptive self-beliefs and behaviors
- ▶ **Rely on insight and behavior change**

Somatic Approaches:

- ▶ Focus on how the body influences thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (“bottom-up”)
- ▶ Help people become aware of body sensations and procedural memories
- ▶ Target underlying dysregulation in the nervous system that causes/maintains symptoms
- ▶ Help create a greater control over debilitating symptoms and unconscious dynamics
- ▶ **Rely on body awareness & physiological regulation**



Elements of a Whole-Person Approach to Trauma

Observation/Awareness/Remembering

Containment and Regaining Control

Strength-Based Restoration

Physical Self-Care and Movement

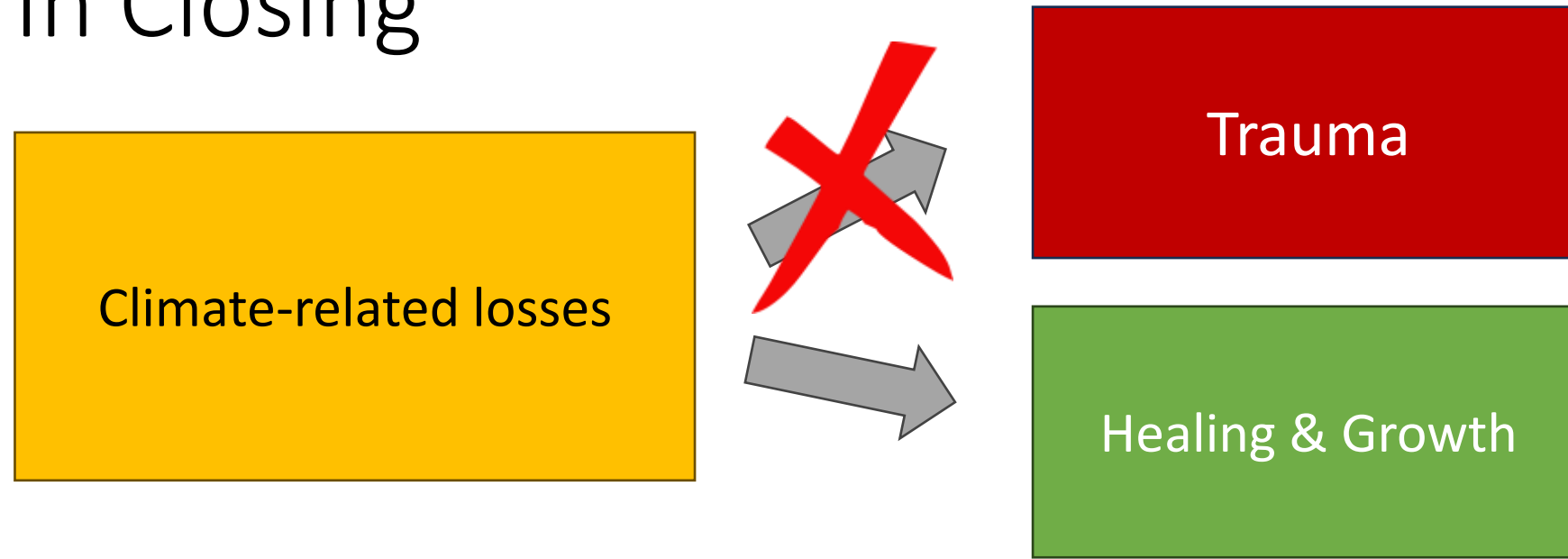
Meaning-Making and Mentalizing

6 Key Principles of Trauma-Informed Work



1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and Transparency
3. Peer Support
4. Collaboration and Mutuality
5. Empowerment, Voice, and Choice
6. Cultural, Historical, and Gender Sensitivity

In Closing



- Every (conscious, subconscious) loss causes grief; it needs and wants to be witnessed and processed
- Unprocessed grief can cause depression, isolation, despair, anger, overwhelm etc.
- Unacknowledged loss and grief, which leave people alone, isolated, disconnected, overwhelmed and hopeless, can result in or add to trauma from disastrous events
- Trauma, if not resolved, leaves lasting negative mental, physical health and social impacts
- We can intervene in supportive, creative, healing ways so this does not have to happen



Thank you!

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