



Introduction

With the help of AI

Self-compassion and Your PhD Journey

A Workshop to support the Well-being of Academics

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Founder of Infinite GRADitude, LLC

Brown University, EEOB

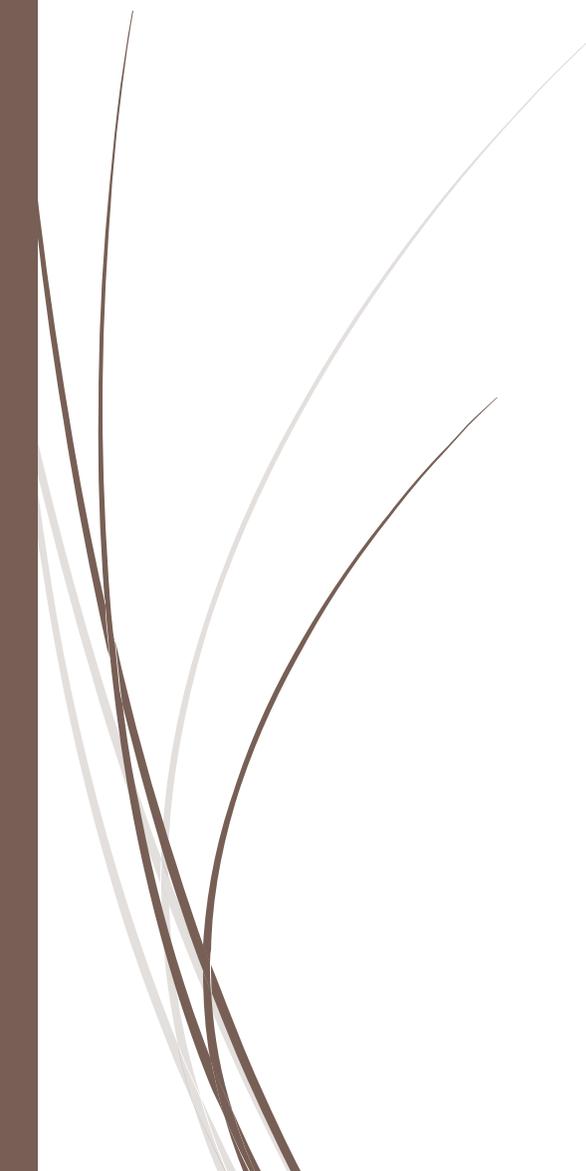
December 5, 2025



BROWN



Workshop Flow



Outline

- Navigating Chronic Stress
- Self-compassion
- Self-care
- Mindfulness
- An effective Gratitude Practice

Outcomes

- ❁ Understand the benefits of self-compassion, mindfulness, and an effective gratitude practice
- ❁ Expand your toolkit of coping mechanisms and self-care strategies
- ❁ Feel a sense of shared community

Acknowledgement

You are not required to share any personal anecdotes about your mental healthy journey but I encourage active participation about the topics covered in this workshop.



A Brave Space

Encourage reflection
and curiosity



A Safe Space

Create dialog, not
debate.



A Transformative Space

Inspire action

Assume best intent and ask clarifying questions.

The State of Graduate Student Mental Health

Oswalt and Riddock (2006) and Kernan et al. (2011) both found that about 75% of graduate students reported being stressed or very stressed.

A meta-analysis reported 41% of PhD students displayed clinically significant symptoms of anxiety and depression (Satinsky et al., 2021)

PhD students from historically marginalized groups exhibit significantly higher rates of anxiety and depression (Schad et al., 2022 and Evans et al., 2018)

Aspects of Systemic Change



Modify policies and processes

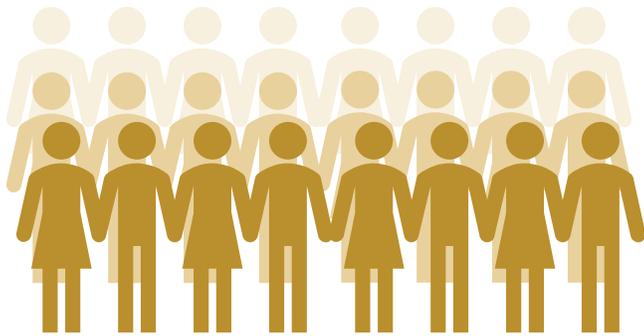
- Providing infrastructure to address bullying and harassment
- Streamlining management training for faculty and post-docs
- Incentivizing research programs that prioritize community and collaboration



Shift relationships and mindsets

- Counteracting overwork/burnout culture
- Creating clear straightforward process to accessing mental health resources
- Destigmatizing; discussions about mental health in the scientific community

Aspects of Systemic Change



Shift relationships and mindsets

Is it possible to maintain my overall well-being through shifting how I relate to the academic environment and myself?



Navigating Chronic Stress

Long-term stress alters brain circuits involved in emotion regulation, leading to anxiety depression, and cognitive impairment.

(S. J. Lupien et al. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* (2009))

Signs and symptoms of stress

PHYSICAL	EMOTIONAL	BEHAVIORAL	COGNITIVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Stomachache, headache, dizziness, eye strain· Insomnia/oversleeping· Difficulty concentrating	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Mood swings· Anxiousness· Irritable or hostile· Fearfulness (i.e., afraid to make decisions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Being defensive· Withdrawing socially· Working harder but getting less done· Blaming others or being hyper-critical· Having fights (about everything and nothing)· Pretending that nothing is wrong (denial)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Negative self-talk<ul style="list-style-type: none">- This is horrible.- I'm not good enough.

How does stress manifest for you most often?

(discuss with the person sitting next to you)



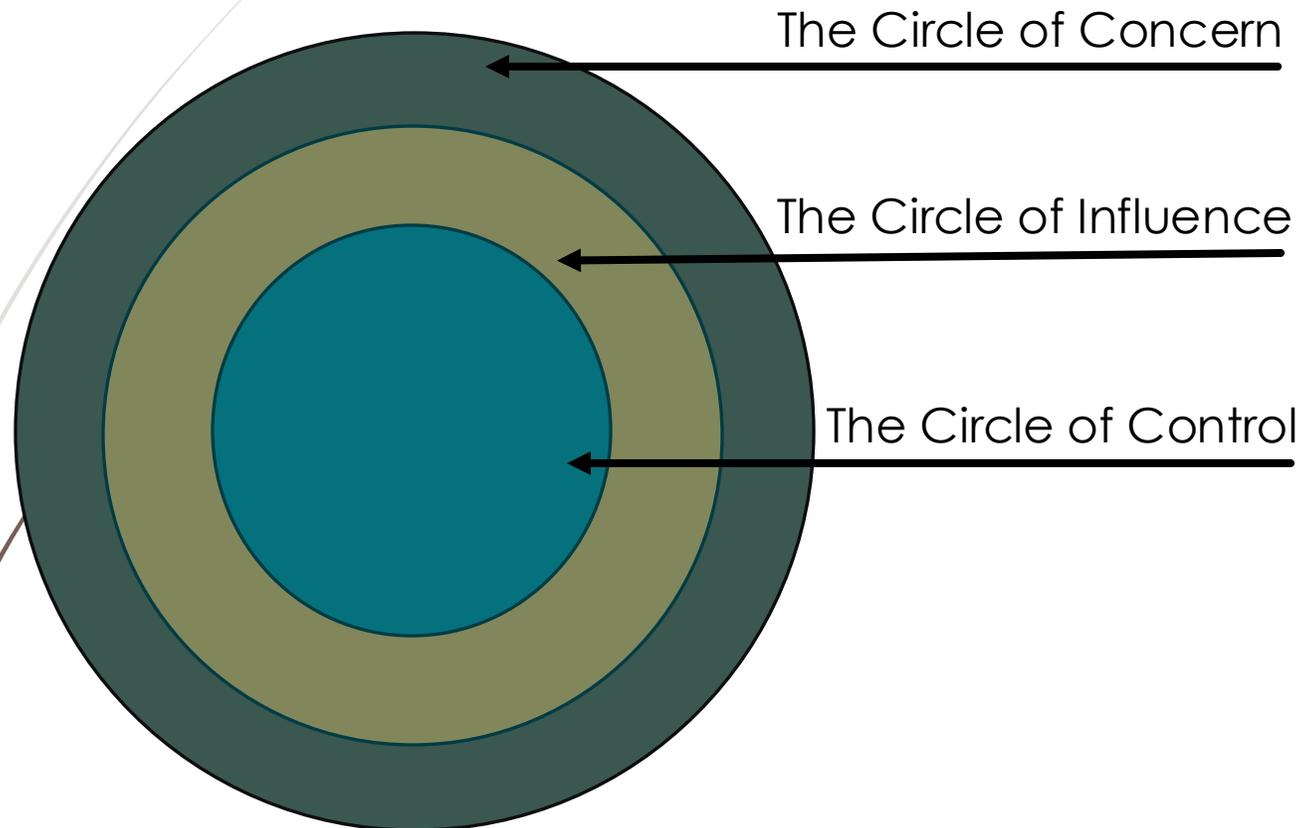
What are your main sources of stress at this stage in your academic career?



Write down 3-4 of your main stressors on the sticky notes in front of you.

Goal: Bring awareness to our stressors so that we can manage them better

The Circle of Control Theory (Stephen Covey)



- **Ex. Economy, climate change, actions and reactions of other people, etc**
- **Ex. Choose to apply to graduate school but cannot control who accepts us into their program**
- **Ex. Thoughts, beliefs, emotions, interpretations**

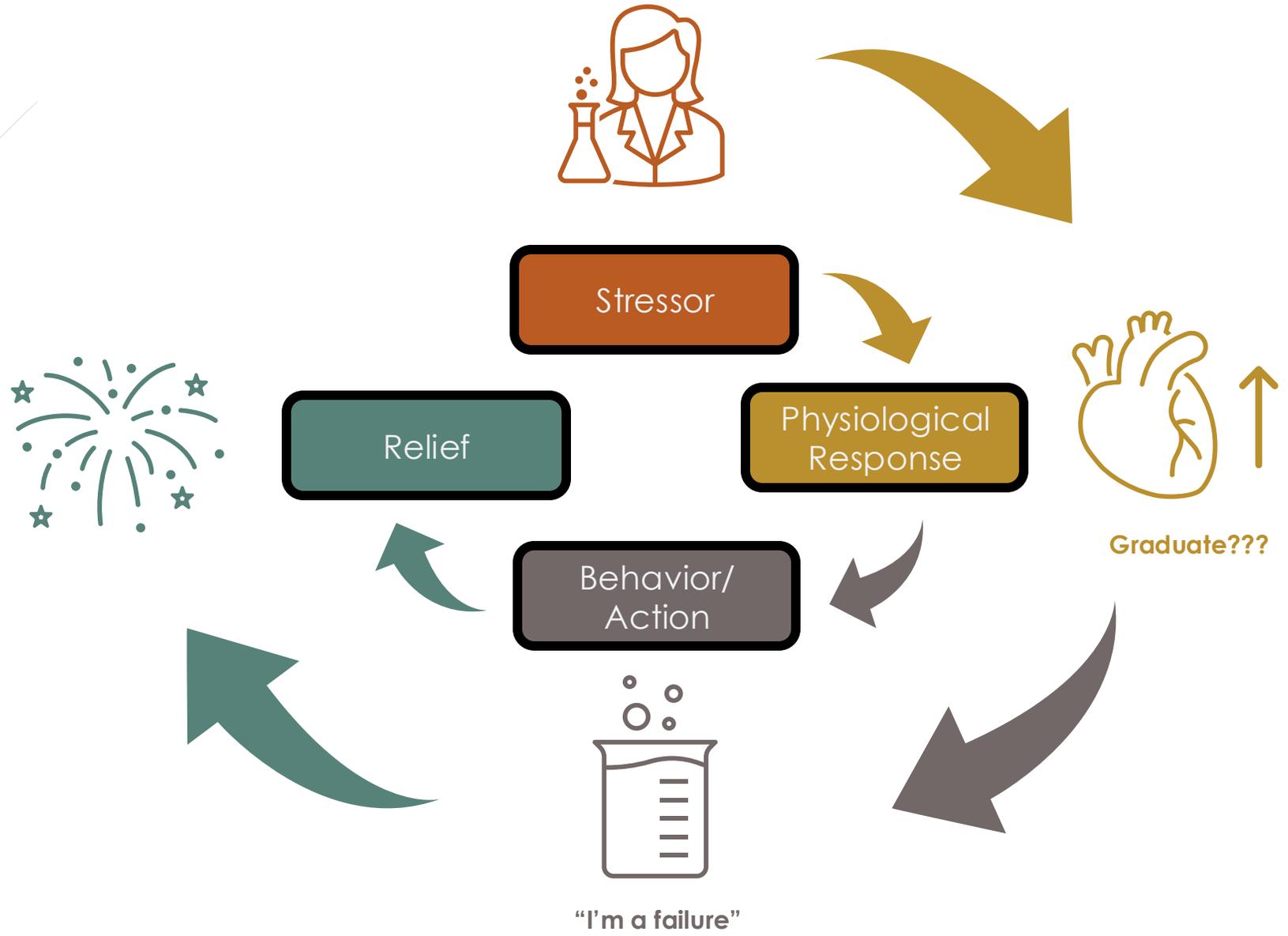
“Perceived control is an important facet of physical health and psychological well-being.” (Pagnini, et al., *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*. 2016)



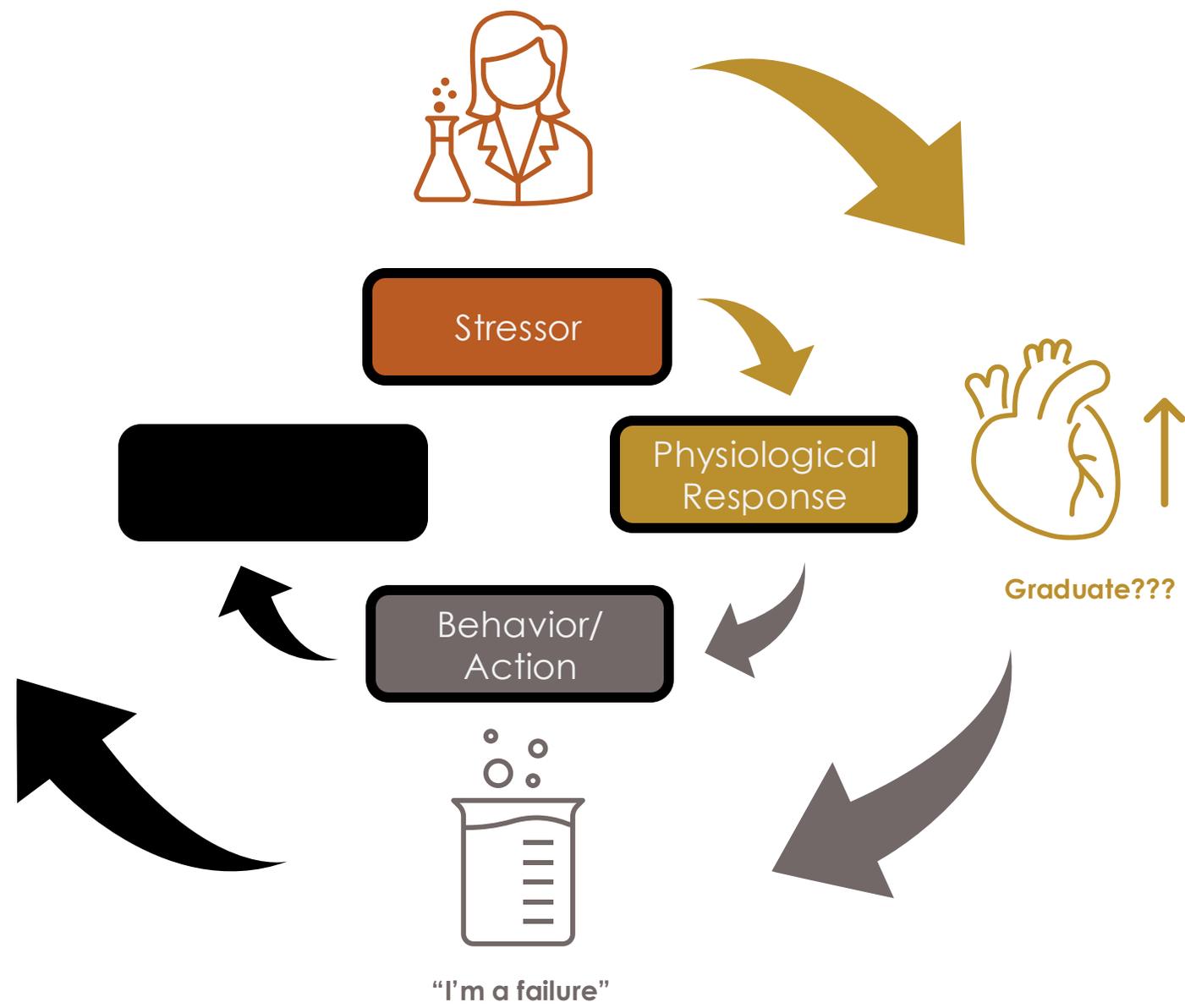
Previous Activity: What are your main sources of stress at this stage in your academic career?

Place your sticky notes under
“CAN CONTROL” or **“CAN’T CONTROL”**
on either side of the room

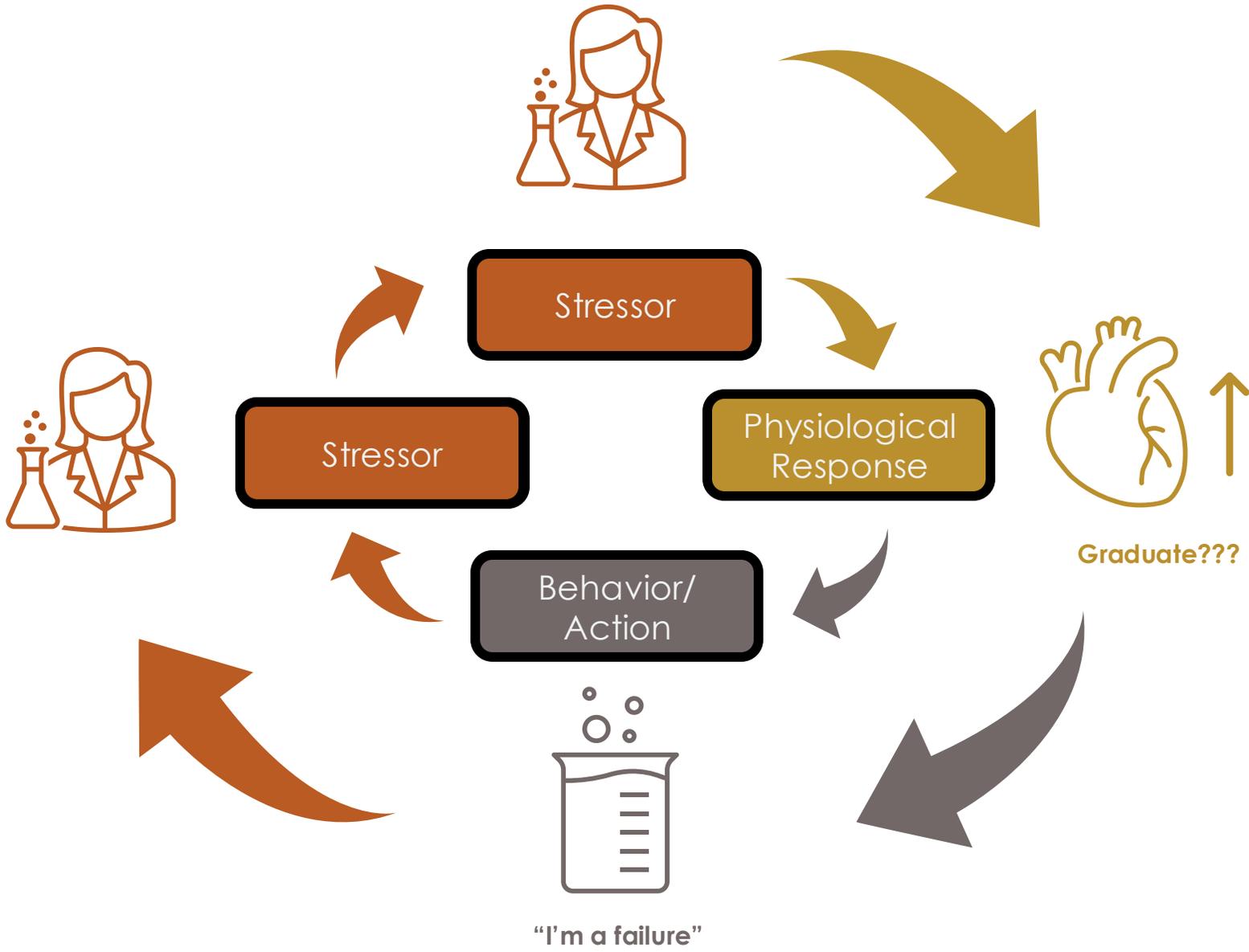
Interrupting the Stress Cycle as Academics



Interrupting the Stress Cycle as Academics



Interrupting the Stress Cycle as Academics



Interrupting the Stress Cycle as Academics

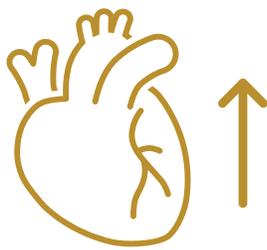


"I'm a failure"

Behavior/
Action

Stressor

Physiological
Response



Graduate???



Interrupting the Stress Cycle as Academics



"I'm a failure"

Behavior/
Action

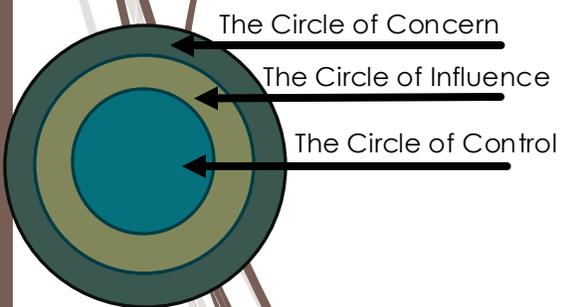
Stressor

Physiological
Response



Graduate???

What factors CAN we control?



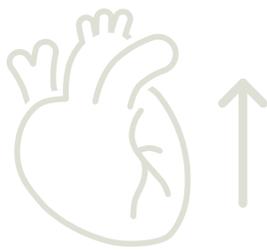
Interrupting the Stress Cycle as Academics



CAN'T control Experimental Outcomes

Stressor

Physiological Response



Graduate???

Behavior/ Action

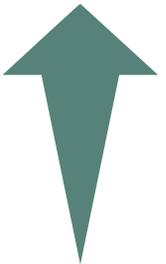
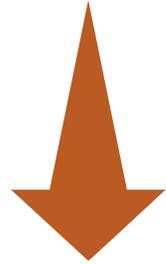


"I'm a failure"

CAN control our actions

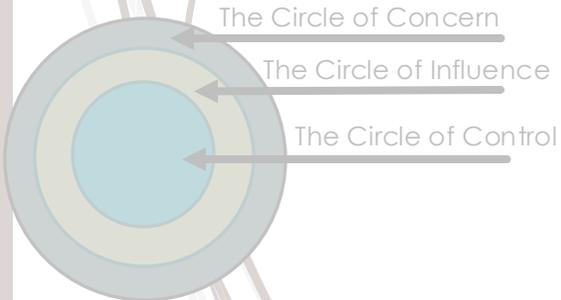
CAN'T control Physiological Response to stress

STRESS



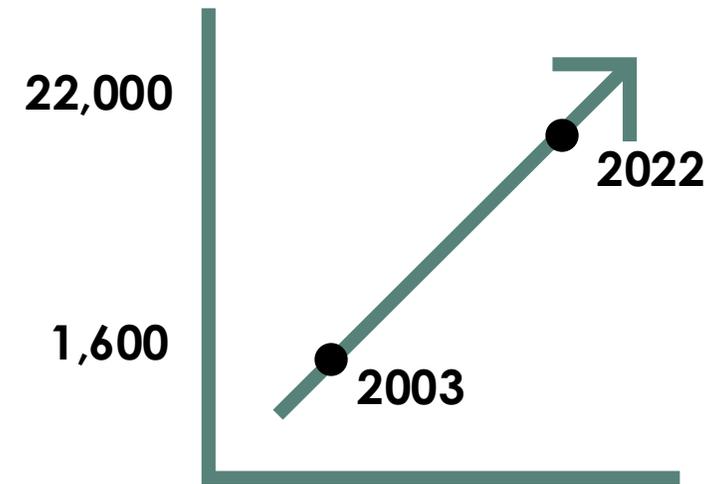
WELL-BEING

What factors CAN we control?



“Well-being”

Number of publications that mentioned the term “well-being”



(Bautista, et al., J Clin Trans Sci. (2023))

What does *well-being* mean to you?



When poll is active respond at **PollEv.com** /**daniellew002**

Send **daniellew002** and your message to **37607**



How do you define well-being?

“[Well-being is] the presence of positive emotions and moods, the absence of negative emotions, satisfaction with life, fulfillment, and positive functioning.”

– Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

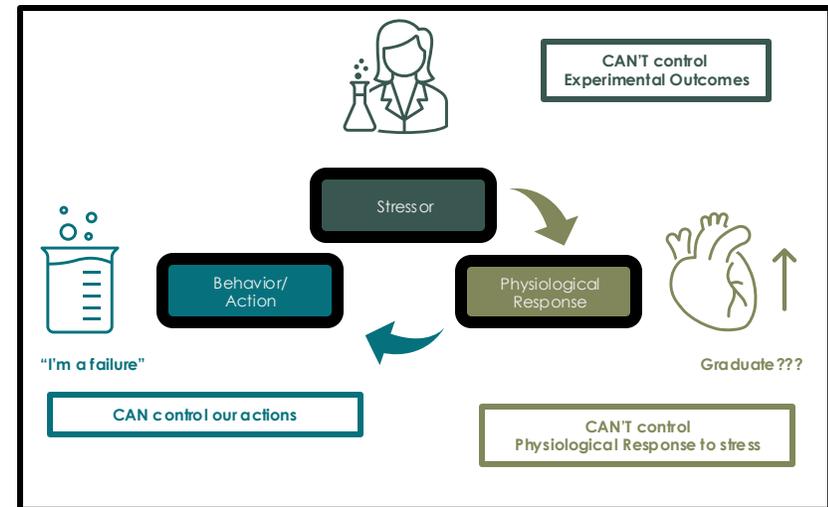
“Well-being is a skill”

– Richard Davidson, PhD; University of Wisconsin-Madison

2 Build skills to cultivate well-being

Self-compassion

1 Identify Stressors within our control





Self-compassion

Self-compassion refers to being supportive toward oneself when experiencing suffering or pain- be it caused by personal mistakes or inadequacies or external life challenges (Neff 2023)

Self-compassion Scale



Scan me!

Were your results expected or unexpected? Discuss with your partner.

Define Self-compassion



Kristin Neff, PhD

Associate Professor, University of Texas at Austin

- A pioneer for empirical studies on self-compassion
- Developed the self-compassion scale over 20 years ago
- Describes self-compassion in 3 parts



Being supportive and understanding while taking action to care for yourself like you would a close friend

+



Recognizing challenges and suffering are part of being human

+



Balanced awareness that neither avoids nor exaggerates the discomfort of an experience

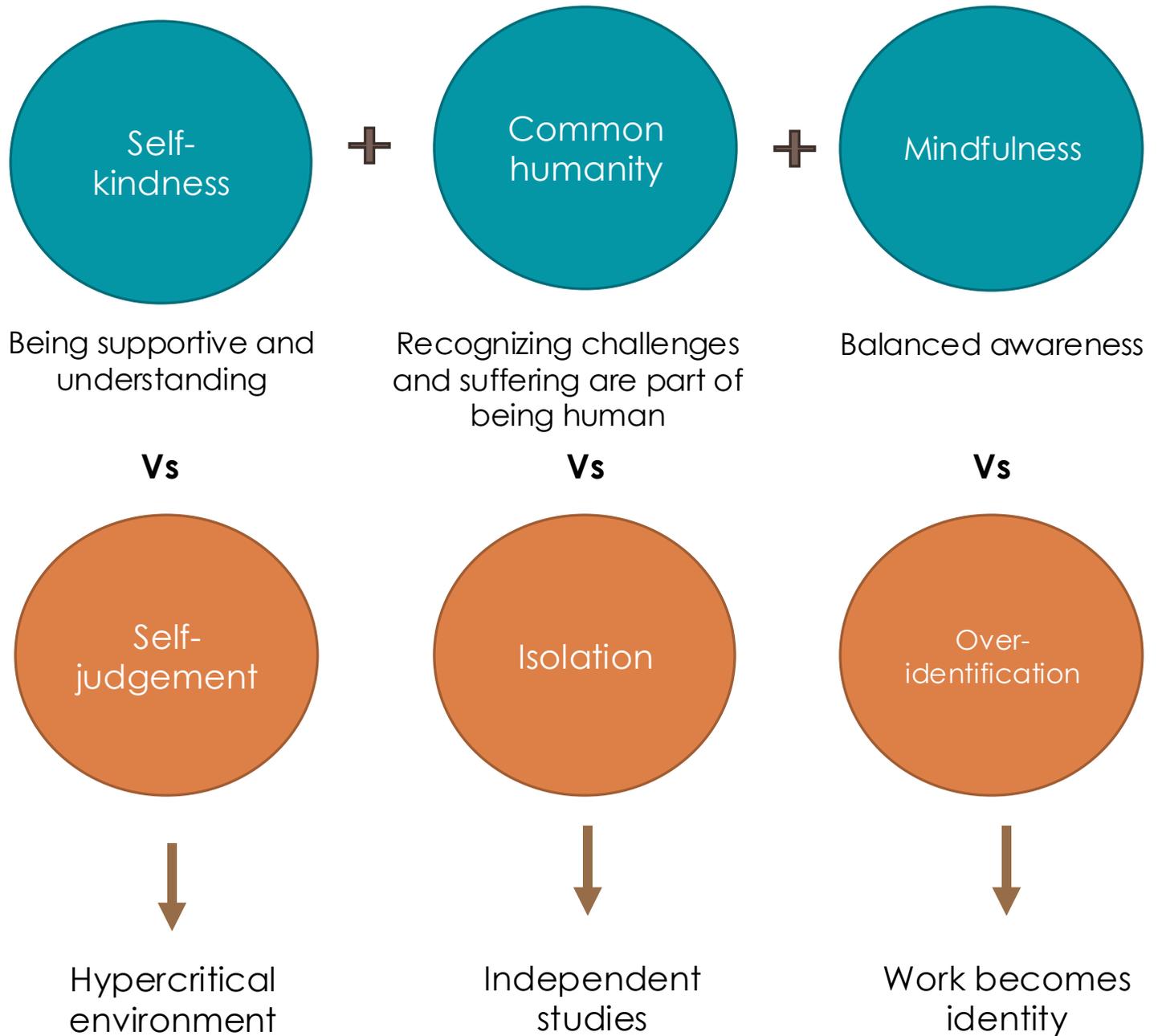
Self-compassion

linked to reduced psychopathology

lessens automatic and negative thinking

can alleviate stress and symptoms of burnout

As an Academic



Self-compassion

linked to reduced psychopathology

lessens automatic and thinking

can alleviate stress and of burnout



Balanced awareness

Practicing self-compassion requires deep intention as an academic

Vs



Hypercritical environment

Independent studies

Work becomes identity

As

The Mindful **PhD** Journal

Inner Critic vs. Affirmation

I am **incapable** of doing
good science

No one understands
how difficult this
experience is

I am **capable** of doing
good science

Many people understand
how difficult this
experience is

Case Study #1

Maya (she/her) is a 3rd-year PhD student in an Ecology/Evolution program. She was invited to give her first conference talk at the annual Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology meeting—a big deal in her subfield.

On the morning of her talk, the projector wasn't recognizing her HDMI adapter, and it took two AV staff members several minutes to fix the issue. She started 4 minutes late, feeling flustered.

During the talk, she tried to include a new set of preliminary data she analyzed the night before. When she got to the slide, she realized the figure wasn't labeled clearly. As she tried to explain it on the fly, she lost her train of thought twice and skipped to the next slide.

In the Q&A, she received six questions and confidently answered four. For the last two, she froze. She apologized, said she “should know this,” and stepped away from the podium embarrassed.

Thoughts running through Maya's mind afterward:

“Everyone could tell I was unprepared.”

“I shouldn't have shared preliminary data. I made a fool of myself.”

“Real scientists can answer every question. Maybe I'm not cut out for this.”

How can Maya reframe these thoughts with self-compassion? What would a compassionate academic culture look like in this moment? What would you say to Maya knowing she was having these thoughts, as faculty, a fellow graduate student, as an undergrad in his lab?

Please take 3-5 mins to brainstorm and prepare thoughts to share with the Group

Cultivating a Compassionate Academic Culture involves...

- 
- Being aware of the suffering other's may experience
 - Being non-judgmental
 - Tolerating personal distress
 - Being empathetic
 - Taking appropriate action

Compassionate Phrases

- ▶ You're making total sense.
- ▶ I wish you didn't have to go through that.
- ▶ What do you need from me right now?
- ▶ That sounds frustrating.
- ▶ What I admire most about what you're doing is...
- ▶ I support you
- ▶ You deserve rest
- ▶ That sounds really challenging
- ▶ Tell me what you see as your options.
- ▶ How are you feeling about it?
- ▶ Thank you for sharing with me.

Case Study #2

Alex (they/them) is a 2nd-year graduate student in the Ecology & Evolution department. This summer was their first independent field season, studying pollinator visitation rates across three alpine meadows.

They spent months preparing; ordering equipment, coordinating permits, arranging transportation, and practicing their sampling protocol. They felt proud and excited to finally collect data for their thesis.

But once in the field, things quickly went off-plan:

- Unseasonal rain washed out the trail to one of their three meadows, cutting their planned sampling area by a third.
- Their camera traps malfunctioned, leaving them with only partial data from the first two weeks.
- A group of hikers accidentally disturbed a row of experimental plots, forcing Alex to restart part of the study.

Despite their best efforts, Alex ended the season with less than half of the dataset they were expecting.

Their PI's response to Alex's update email was brief:

"We really needed a full dataset this season. We'll have to rethink the project."

Thoughts circulating in Alex's mind:

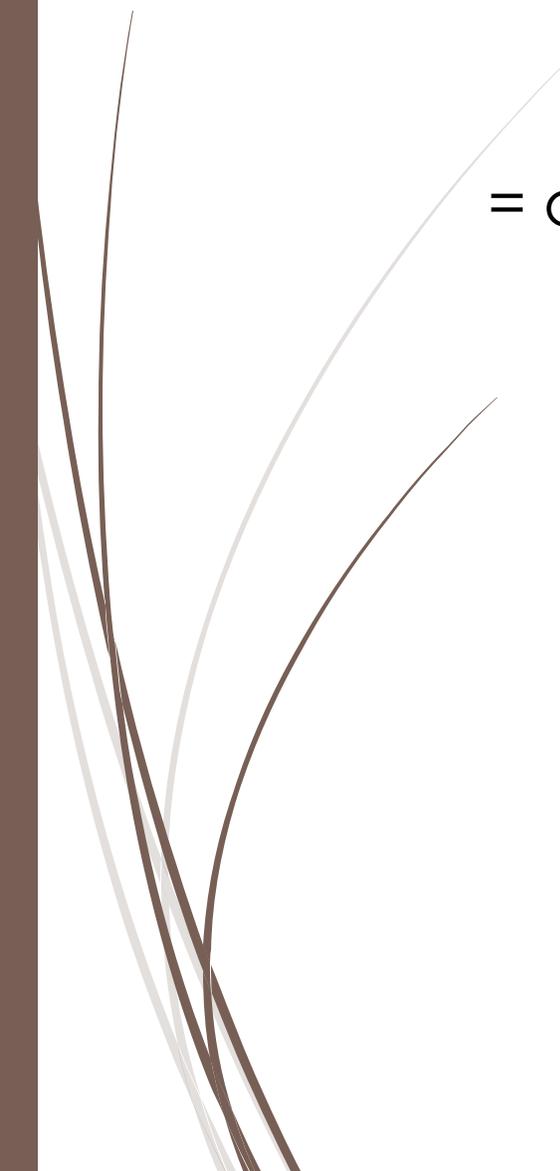
- *"I should have anticipated these problems. A real field ecologist would've been prepared."*
- *"My PI is disappointed in me... I've wasted their time and the lab's resources."*
- *"I failed at something everyone else seems able to do."*
- *"Maybe I'm not cut out for fieldwork."*

What would you tell a friend who had this exact field season? What parts of this situation were outside Alex's control? How might Alex acknowledge their effort, not just the outcome? How could a PI respond supportively after unexpected field setbacks?



Self-compassion

= an attitude of kindness and consideration toward oneself



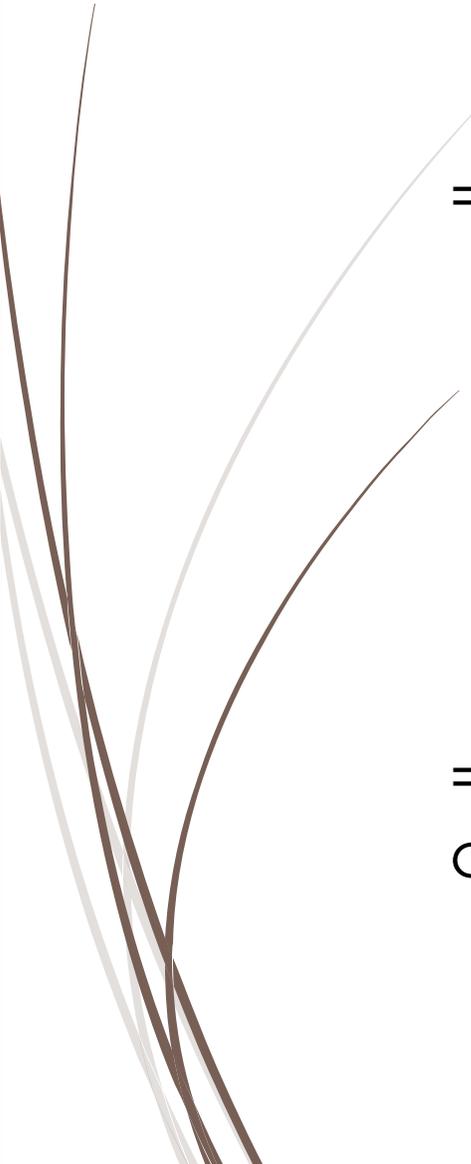


Self-compassion

= an **attitude** of kindness and consideration toward oneself

Self-care

= the **action** and approach that embody kindness and consideration toward oneself





Self-care

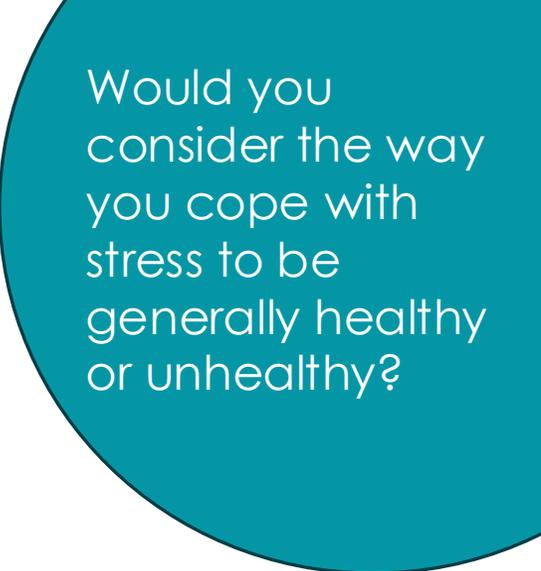
= the action and approach that embody kindness and consideration toward oneself

Self-care is largely preventative.

Coping

= is how we respond to negative or stressful situations

Coping is largely reactive



Would you consider the way you cope with stress to be generally healthy or unhealthy?



What coping mechanisms do you use to manage stress?

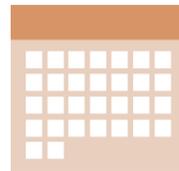
Discuss with the person sitting next to you

Self-care Strategies

Problem-focused



Set Goals



Get Organized



Rest

Emotion-focused



Journaling



Positive Affirmations:



Exercise

Support-seeking



Meet w/ a Mentor



Therapy



Spend time with friends

Meaning-focused



Meditation



Personal development



Less Screen time

The Difference between Self-care and Coping is the Context

Self-care

= the action and approach that embody kindness and consideration toward oneself

Preventative Self-care: Journaling every other day to manage thoughts, plan, clear your mind, etc

Coping

= is how we respond to negative or stressful situations

Reactive Coping: Furiously and angrily journaling after an experiment failed for the 14th time



Journaling

Self-care & My PhD

Personal examples

Emotional

Brain Dump

Allow myself to cry

Daily Meditation

Physical

Meal-prep every Sunday

Exercise 4-5x per week

Mental

Audiobooks

Google Calendar

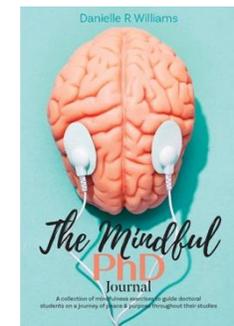
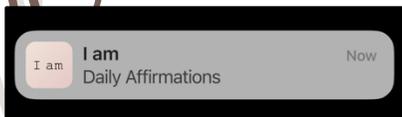
To-Do lists

Social

Create community in lab

Schedule time with friends

Social media



A decorative graphic on the left side of the slide. It features a solid teal arrow pointing to the right, positioned horizontally. Behind the arrow and extending downwards and to the right are several thin, curved lines in shades of brown and grey, resembling stylized grass or reeds.

What are the barriers to
implementing a self-care routine?



When poll is active respond at PollEv.com/daniellew002

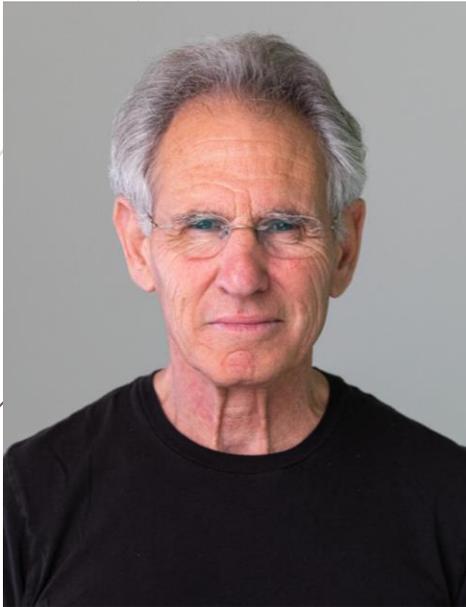


What are the main barriers you face when trying to practice self-care?

Nobody has responded yet.

Hang tight! Responses are coming in.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)



- ▶ Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D. is Professor of Medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School
 - ▶ Founded MBSR Clinic in 1979
- ▶ "A universal approach toward suffering"
- Jon Kabat-Zinn

"[Mindfulness is] the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally." - Jon Kabat-Zinn

>3,000 studies

Mindfulness

Increased emotional regulation

Stress reduction

Increased attention span

Examples of MBSR Activities



Sitting meditation



Mindful eating



Mindful walking



Body scan meditation



Mindful breathing



Mindful movement



An “Effective” GRADitude Practice



Gratitude

A generalized tendency to recognize and respond with **grateful emotion** to the roles of other people's benevolence **[kindness]** in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains (McCullough et al., 2002)

IDR Labs Gratitude Test (IDR-GT) Scale



Scan me!

Were your results expected or unexpected? Discuss with a partner.

Define Gratitude



Robert Emmons, PhD

Professor Emeritus, University of California Davis

- “Father of Gratitude”
- One of the founders of positive psychology
 - *Positive psychology: a focus on the strengths, virtues, and talents that contribute to flourishing*
- A pioneer for empirical studies on gratitude and well-being
- Describes gratitude in 2 parts



We affirm the good things
we've received



We acknowledge the role
other people play in
providing our lives with
goodness

Gratitude

Increased positive emotions

Increased resilience to trauma

Enhanced psychological well-being

Higher life satisfaction

Decreased negative emotions





Gratitude Activity

Take 3 mins to write down all the "negatives" you've experienced as a PhD student

Take 3 mins to write down all the "positives" you've experienced as a PhD student

Right down each experience on a separate sticky note.



Previous Activity: What are the positive and negative aspects of your experience as a PhD student?2

Place your sticky notes under
“**Positive**” or “**Negative**” on either side
of the room

Feel free to look at what other people listed

Goal: Compare how quickly you can think of
negatives vs positives

Gratitude

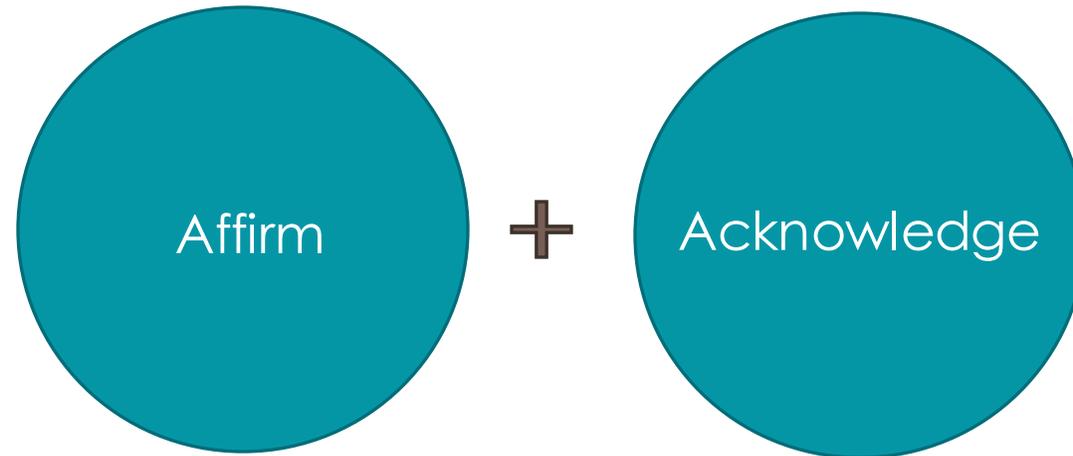
Increased positive emotions

Increased resilience to trauma

Enhanced psychological well-being

Higher life satisfaction

Decreased negative emotions



We affirm the **good** things we've received

We acknowledge the role other people play in providing our lives with **goodness**

Our brains are wired for survival, constantly looking for threats. Focusing on the "GOOD" is also a skill that can be developed over time

The Mindful PhD Journal

“Finding the Good”

Reflect on a time related to your PhD journey when you thought something would not work out in your favor and it did. Does this change your perception of what's going on right now in your PhD journey?

Gratitude

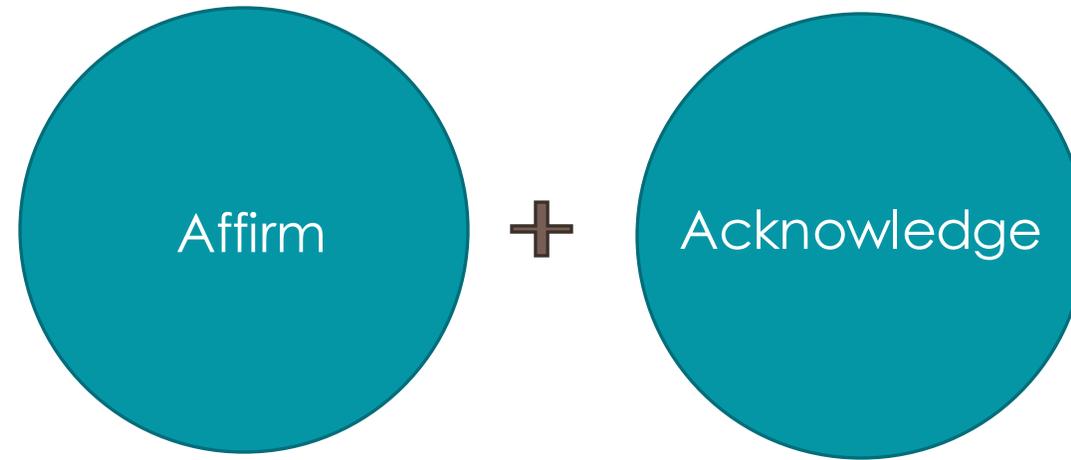
Increased positive emotions

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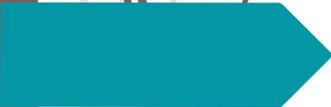


We affirm the good things we've received

We acknowledge the role other people play in providing our lives with goodness

A “Effective” Gratitude Practice

- 1) Requires Honesty (Can't fake it)
- 2) Most effective when received or witnessed

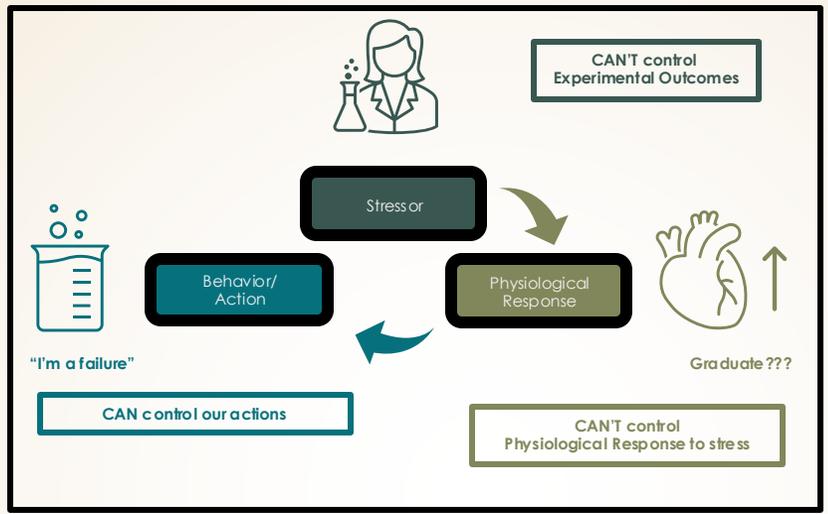


3 min Pause

For the next 3 minutes may practice self-compassion, mindfulness, or express gratitude for the next 3 mins.

Key Takeaways

1 Identify Stressors within our control



“Well-being is a skill”
– Richard Davidson, PhD;
University of Wisconsin-Madison

2 Build skills to cultivate well-being

- Self-care (Preventative)
- Healthy Coping (Reactive)
- Mindfulness (Time Efficient)
- Gratitude (Finding the Good)

3 Adopt an attitude of kindness and consideration toward oneself

Self-compassion



4 = sustainable actions and approaches that embody kindness and consideration toward oneself

We can contribute to systemic change

By shifting our mindset



Join by Web PollEv.com/daniellew002



What is one thing you learned today that you'll implement moving forward?

Nobody has responded yet.

Hang tight! Responses are coming in.

Physical health vs. Mental health



Experience physical pain



Seek medical attention, take time to heal, physical therapy, etc



Experience a shift in emotion, perception, thoughts, and relatedness



Seek medical attention, take time to heal, psychotherapy, etc

Acknowledgements



Zoe Silverman, LCSW
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Associate Professor, UNC

THANK YOU

The Mindful PhD

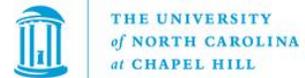
Let's connect!



drwill@email.unc.edu
Infinitegratitude.com

Previous Clients

Funding Sources:



infinitegraditude.com/eeob

Custom access link valid for 90 days (March 5th, 2026)

The access includes:

The Mindful PhD eJournal (digital edition for download)

Workshop slide deck with mindfulness and self-compassion frameworks

Curated reading list featuring evidence-based resources on mindfulness, self-compassion, and my personal book recommendations

