

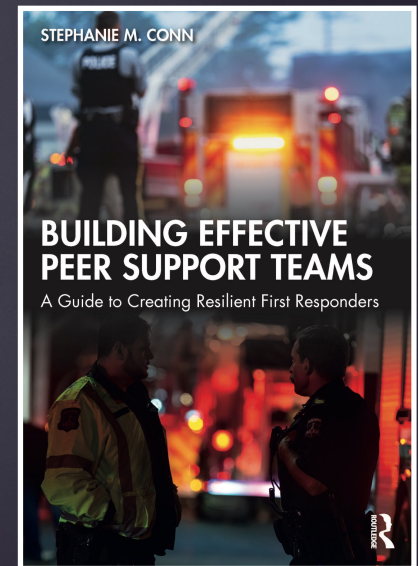
# Optimizing Readiness & Recovery

## From a Critical Incident



Stephanie M. Conn, PhD, ABPP  
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Licensed Psychologist OR 2825  
First Responder Psychology

[www.firstresponderpsychology.com](http://www.firstresponderpsychology.com)  
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# READINESS FOR THE CRITICAL INCIDENT



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY](#)

**The best prediction of how you'll be two years after a major disruption, whether as an individual or as an organization, is how you were doing two days before.**

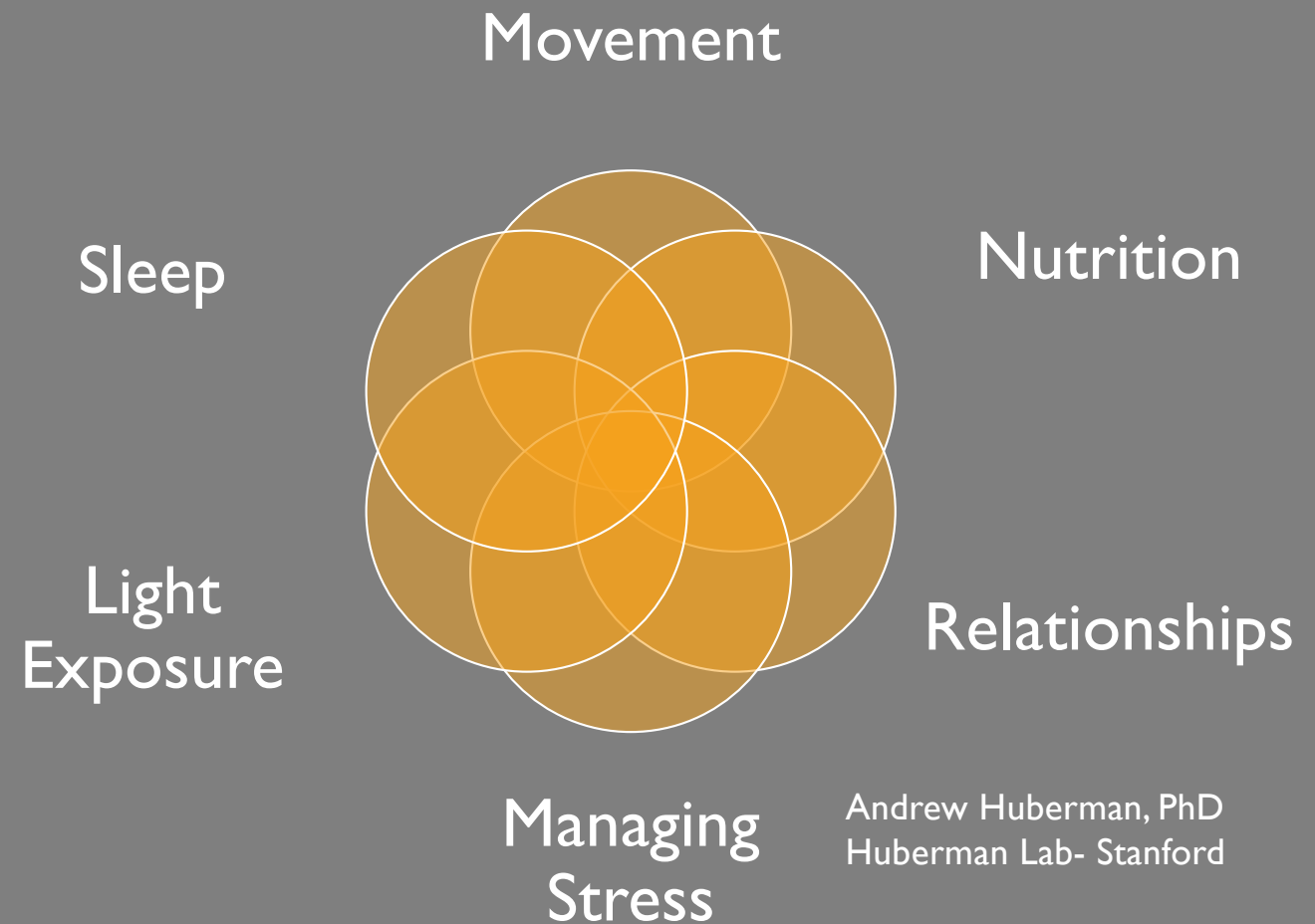
**Build on the basics.**

~Gist, Taylor, Watson & Leto (2019).  
*Understanding Suicide & Fire Service.*

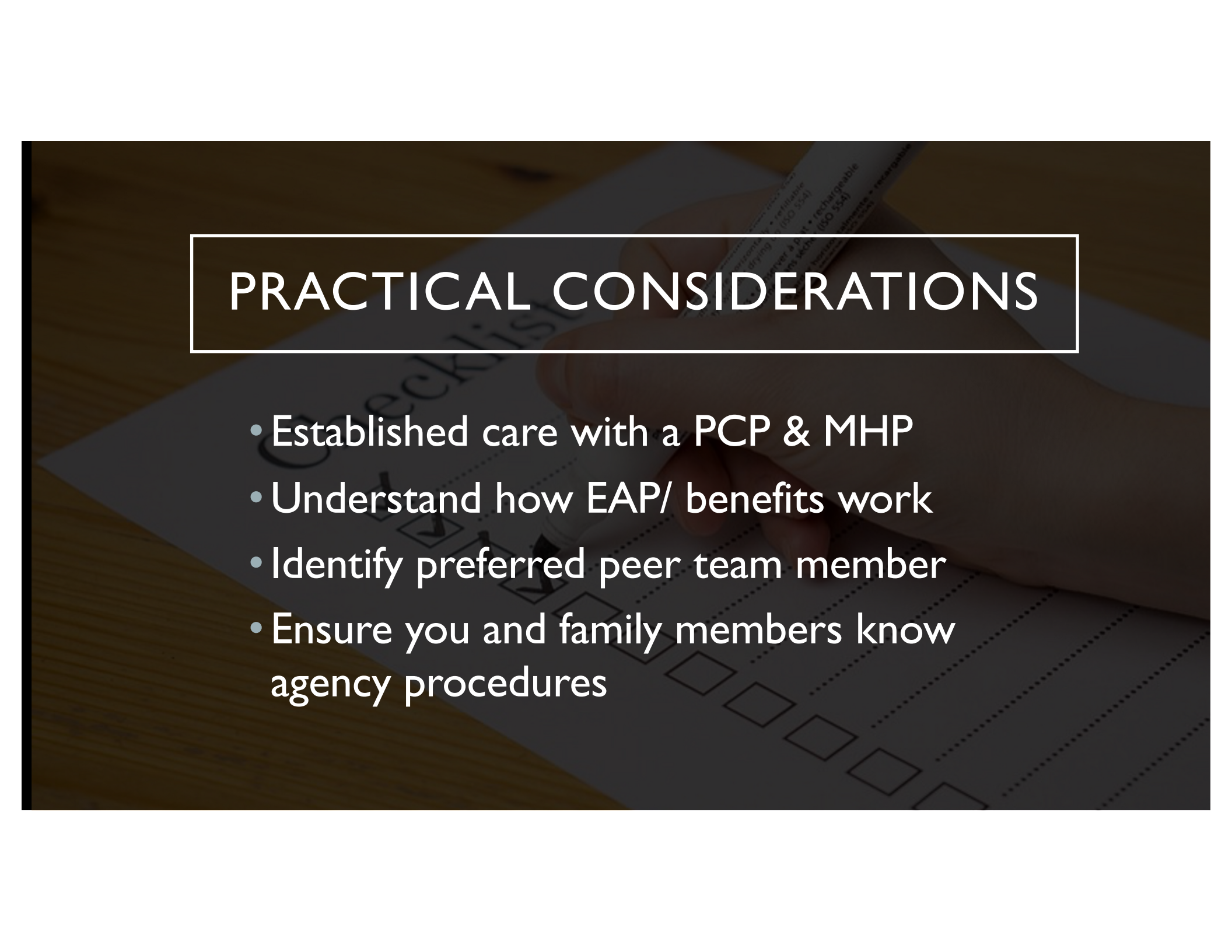


So....

What are  
the basics?



Andrew Huberman, PhD  
Huberman Lab- Stanford

The background of the slide is a photograph of a wooden desk. On the desk, there is a checklist with several rows of checkboxes. A hand is holding a pen, poised to check off one of the items. The text 'Checklist' is visible on the paper. The overall tone is professional and focused on task completion.

# PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Established care with a PCP & MHP
- Understand how EAP/ benefits work
- Identify preferred peer team member
- Ensure you and family members know agency procedures

# CULTIVATE INTERNAL SITUATIONAL AWARENESS



Breathing rate/ quality



Muscle tension



HRV (watch trackers, etc.)



Thoughts

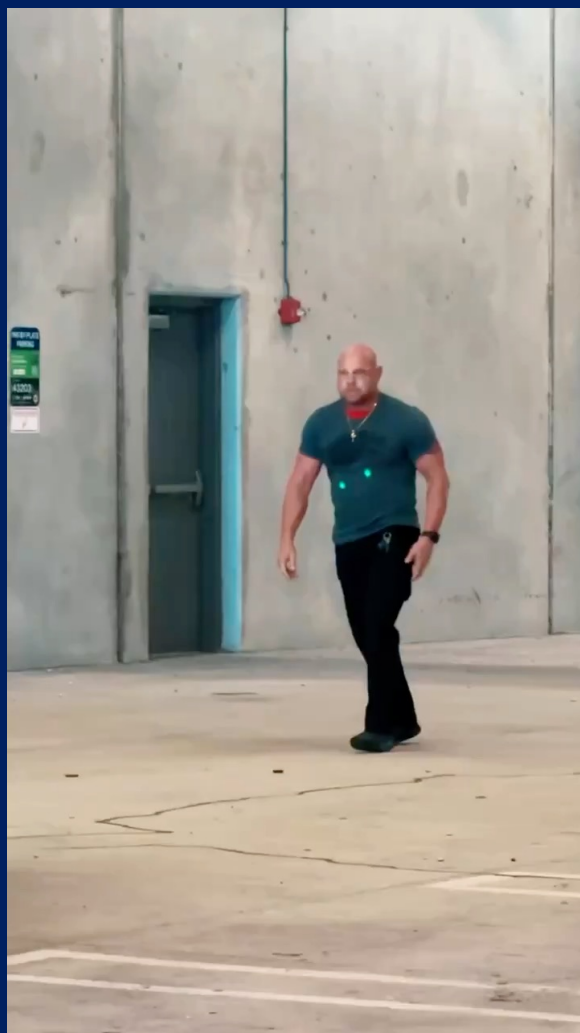
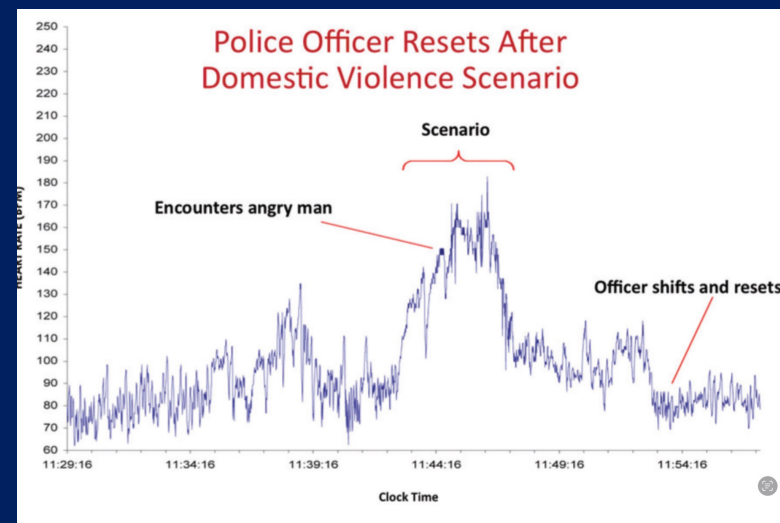


Frankl's "*Inner Hold*"- *rigorous control of his own inner state, a disciplined defense of his own integrity\**

# HOW TECHNOLOGY HELPS

- Oura
- Whoop
- Apple / Garmin/ FitBit Watch
- HeartMath
- Alpha Stim
- Neurosmart





NEUROSMART



# HORMETIC STRESS

- Small doses of stress that strengthens us
  - Exercise (low intensity improves PNS- walking, swimming, yoga, etc.)
  - Cold shock
  - Hot shock
  - Learning a new task
  - Being bored

**By replacing your morning coffee with green tea, you can lose up to 87% of what little joy you still have left in your life.**

# TACTICAL PERFORMANCE IMAGERY



Relaxation



Performance



TPI Article on Police I



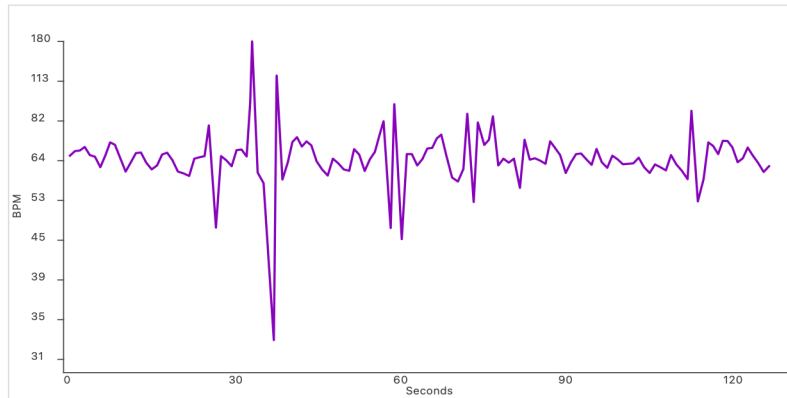
TPI Article on American Police Beat



#### HRV Assessment

Name Class Demo Date February 13, 2024 9:44:01 AM PST  
Gender Female Duration 2:05 Minutes  
Age 51

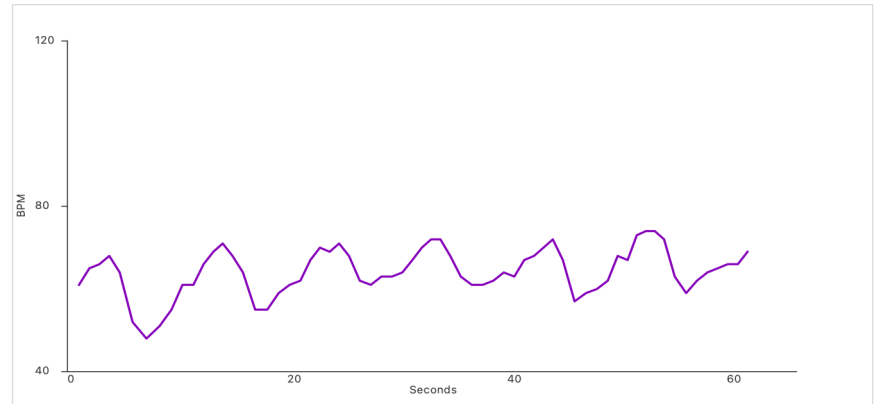
HRV

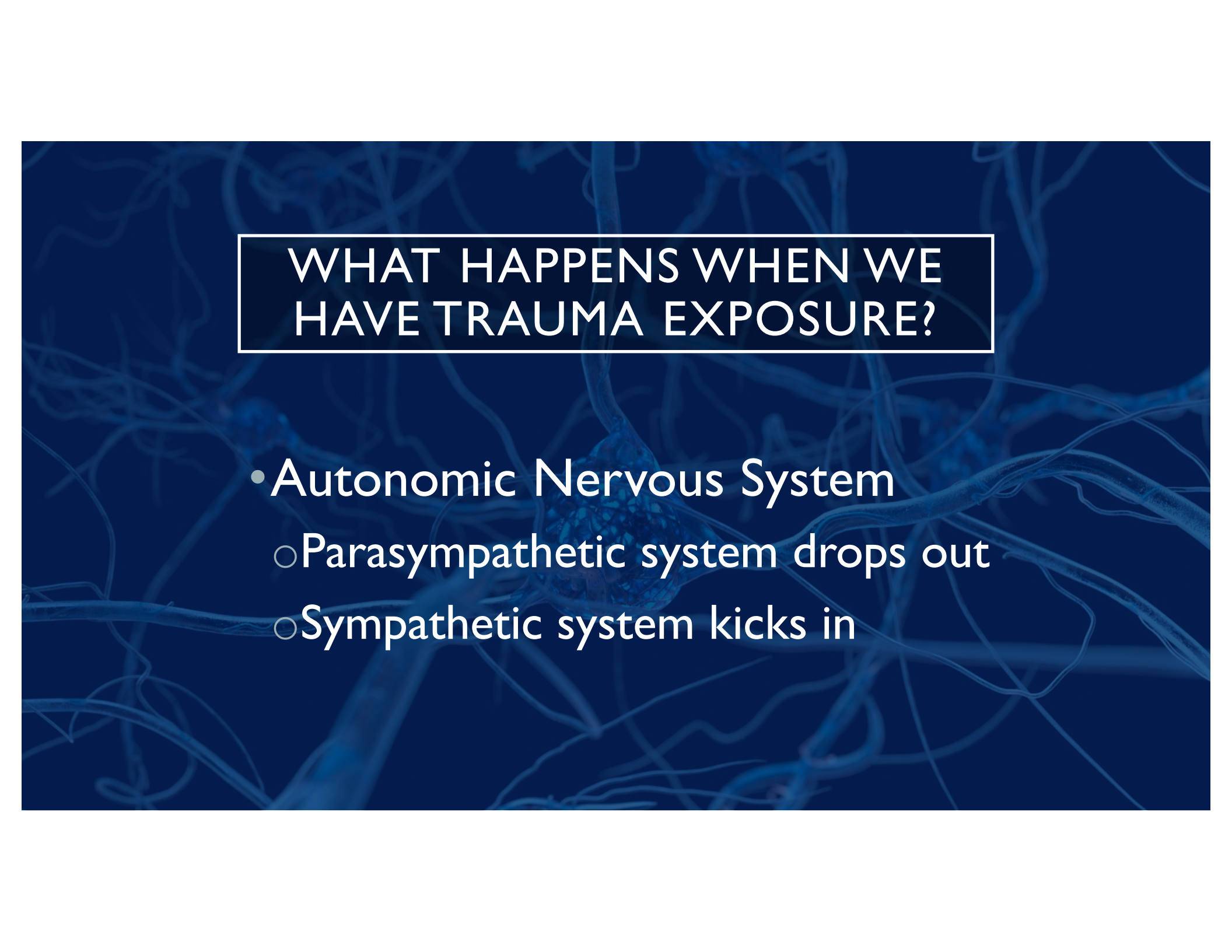


#### 1-Minute HRV Deep Breathing Assessment

Name Class Demo Date February 13, 2024 9:47:04 AM PST  
Gender Female Duration 1:00 Minute  
Age 51

HRV





## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE HAVE TRAUMA EXPOSURE?

- Autonomic Nervous System
  - Parasympathetic system drops out
  - Sympathetic system kicks in



55 Strategies Online Article  
Dr. Linnea Passaler  
Heal Your Nervous System

STRENGTHENING THE PARASYMPATHETIC

# REFRAMING PRE-ACTION JITTERS

Cortisol & adrenaline dump  
primes body for explosive  
movement/ action

- Becomes shakes when not in use



Shaking reflects readiness,  
true appreciation of the  
threat (you're NOT  
complacent)



Normalize & then mobilize



**Police I Article:  
Redlining in Neutral.  
Why You Shake Before the Fight**

# FROM JITTERS TO "THE ZONE": The Science of Pre-Combat Readiness



## YOUR ENGINE IS REDLINING: UNDERSTANDING THE "JITTERS"

### IT'S NOT WEAKNESS, IT'S YOUR BODY'S WAR-MODE

Your HPA axis floods your system with adrenaline and cortisol to prepare for action.



## PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS ARE TACTICAL ADVANTAGES IN WAITING



**TREMBLING    NAUSEA    COLD HANDS**

Trembling, nausea, and cold hands are signs your body is primed for the fight.

**"IF YOU ARE NOT SCARED,  
YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND."**

Arousal indicates your brain has correctly assessed the danger and is preparing you.



## THE CLUTCH DROPS: THE SHIFT TO COMBAT FOCUS

### YOUR BRAIN CENSORS REALITY TO SPEED UP REACTION



**TUNNEL VISION    AUDITORY EXCLUSION    TIME SLOWING DOWN**

Expect sensory distortions like tunnel vision, auditory exclusion, and time slowing down.

## ENTERING "THE ZONE" (FLOW STATE)



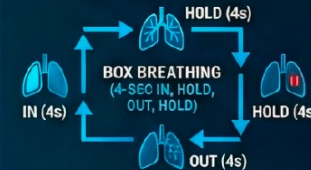
**100% FOCUS**

Once action begins, anxiety vanishes as the brain dedicates 100% focus to survival.



## MASTERING THE MACHINE: HOW TO HARNESS THE ENERGY

### TACTICAL BREATHING



Use box breathing to control your nervous system.

### MENTAL REHEARSAL



Visualize the operation to reduce the shock and "freeze" response of the real event.

### REALITY-BASED TRAINING



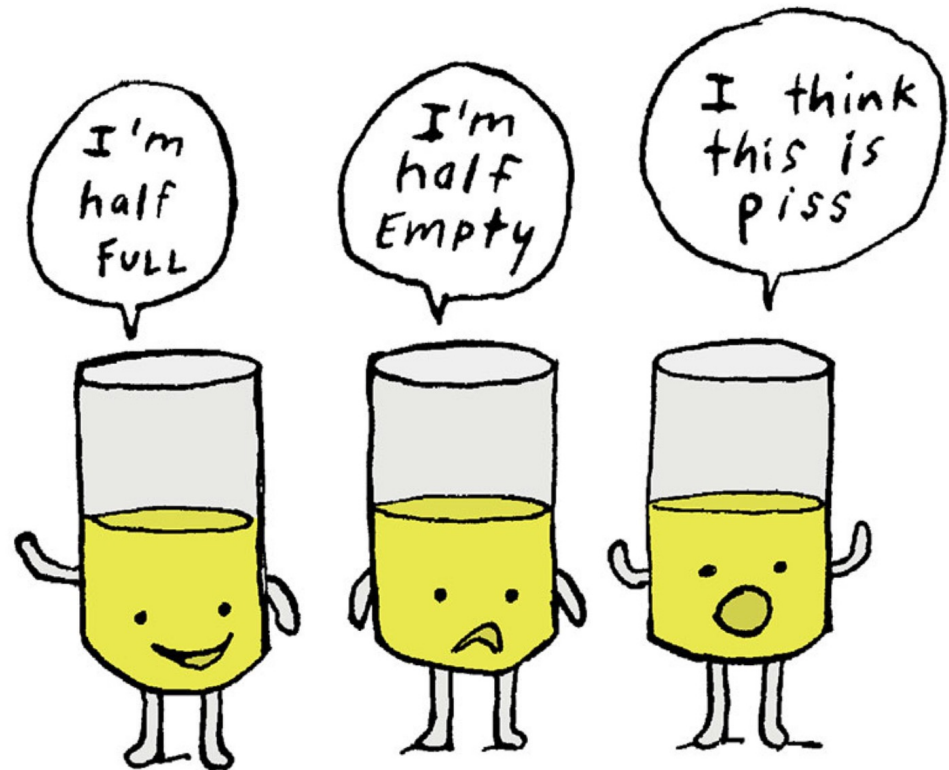
### INOCULATION

Inoculate yourself against stress by training under realistic, heart-rate-spiking conditions.

Image/Steve Tidwell

Source: Police 1,  
April 27, 2206

# Mindset



# FAULTY THINKING

(KIRSCHMAN, KAMENA & FAY, 2013)



## Incident Envy

Downplaying own  
incident / needs  
problems

You're just as dead  
from drowning in  
7ft of water as 20



## Curse of Omnipotence

Not  
recognizing  
own limits

*"If only I had  
..."*



## Rescuing Others

Don't want  
to "burden"  
others with  
their  
problems



## Myth of Uniqueness

Comparing  
their insides  
to other's  
outsides



*YOU'D RATHER  
FEEL GUILTY  
THAN HELPLESS.*

# Fallacies of:



## Uniqueness

I'm the only one  
who feels this way.

## Consensus

- ▶ Everyone feels this way.

Everyone else agrees with him.

They all think I'm "off-duty mad"

- ▶ Everyone is doing fine.

# A Healthy View of Trauma / Stressors

- ▶ Salutogenic
  - ▶ Presumes ability
  - ▶ Recognizes the goal of symptoms
  - ▶ Recognizes post-traumatic growth potential
  - ▶ Builds on Existing Resources (Internal & External)



# Emotions

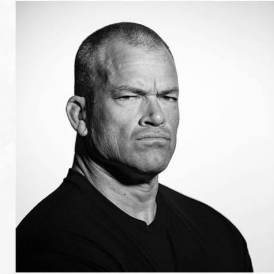
- ▶ *E-moter* “to move”
- ▶ Emotions are information
  - ▶ Values, danger, etc. (something is important to you)
- ▶ Embrace pain, boredom, adversity, frustration

**ECHELON  
THE FRONTIER**

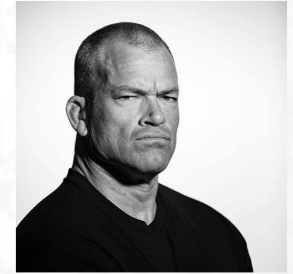
**EXPRESSIONS OF JOCKO**



**ANGRY.**



**HAPPY.**



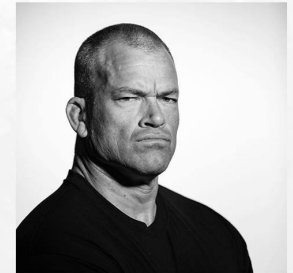
**SAD.**



**SLEEPY.**



**CONFUSED.**



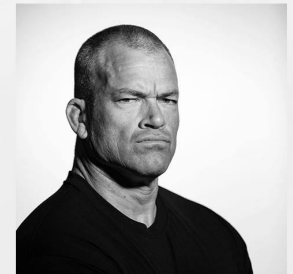
**CHEERFUL.**



**IRKED.**



**EXCITED.**



**GOOD.**



Pain does not result in suffering  
Thinking about pain  
repeatedly results in suffering.

Eric Greitens, Author of *Resilience: Hard  
Won Wisdom for Living a better life*

# During The Critical Incident



MITIGATING EXPOSURE

# PERFORMANCE LANGUAGE

Affirmative:

I do hard  
things.

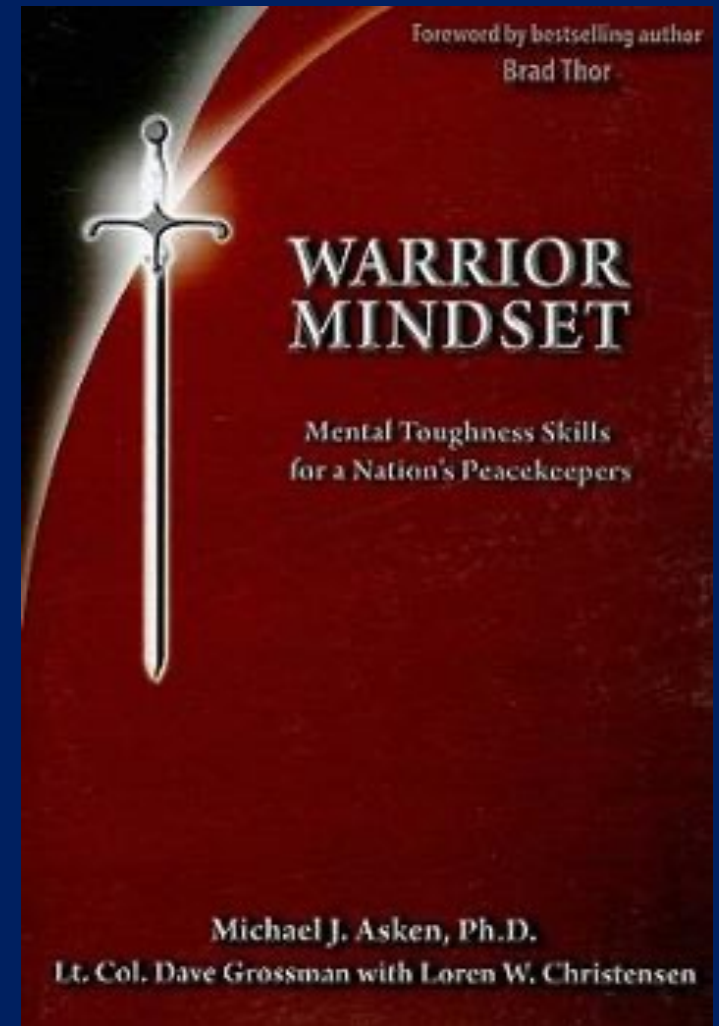
Instructive

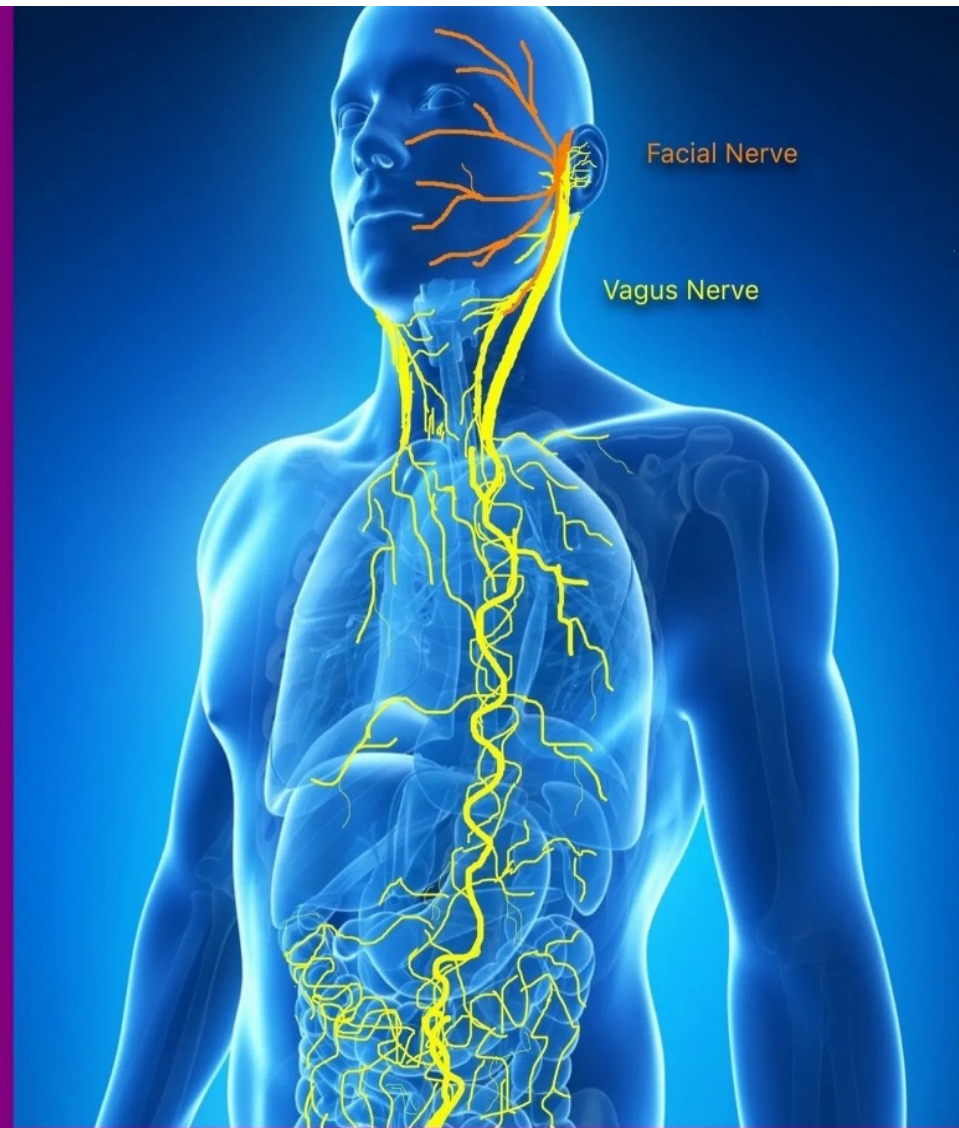
Work it, step  
by step.

# SELF-TALK FOR ENHANCED PERFORMANCE UNDER PRESSURE (STEP-UP)

~Dr. Michael Askin

Instructive: Focus. Breathe.  
Affirmative: You've got this.





## ACTIVATE YOUR VAGUS NERVE TO EASE STRESS

- Regulates HR, breathing, blood pressure, digestion & immunity
- Communicates from body to brain
- How?
  - Humming
  - Humming increases the release of nitric oxide in the nasal passages 15-fold.
  - Neck turns w/ eye turns
  - Ear pulls/ Ear Bone

A photograph of Scrabble tiles on a wooden surface. The word 'RECOVERY' is spelled out in a row of tiles. Other tiles with letters like 'S', 'E', 'R', 'Y', 'H', 'D', 'A', 'R', 'E', 'C', 'O', 'V', 'E', 'R', 'Y' are scattered around. A blue rectangular block is visible in the top right corner.

# RECOVERY FROM THE CRITICAL INCIDENT

# IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH OF TRAUMA CALL



Complete the fight/flight cycle



Do 10-15 minutes of exercise



Drink plenty of water



Allow hands to shake until they stop naturally.



Speak with others about your feelings



Accept that this is natural



10 minutes of Tetris



Alpha Stim

# BRIDGING

- ▶ Instead of sitting in car/rig/console/ detective office:
  - ▶ Moderate exercise
  - ▶ Walking on scene
  - ▶ Walking on treadmill at station
- ▶ Two or Three 5-second breaths



# A Case for Early Intervention: Prevent PTS from Becoming PTSD

- ▶ *Window of Plasticity/ Opportunity*
  - ▶ Interventions change brain structure & activity

OR

- ▶ Stress response gets stuck in “on” position
- ▶ “*Allostatic load*” = Disease
- ▶ Trauma stories become entrenched



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Article | Published: 26 November 2025

## Thalamocortical transcriptional gates coordinate memory stabilization

[Andrea Terceros](#), [Celine Chen](#), [Yujin Harada](#), [Tim Eilers](#), [Millennium Gebremedhin](#), [Pierre-Jacques Hamard](#), [Richard Koche](#), [Roshan Sharma](#) & [Priya Rajasethupathy](#) ✉

[Nature](#) **649**, 1254–1263 (2026) | [Cite this article](#)

# SHIFTING DOWN

- Physiological sigh (cyclic)
- 5-second breath (10)
- 4x7x8 breathing
- Non-sleep deep rest (NSDR) (AKA Yoga Nidra)

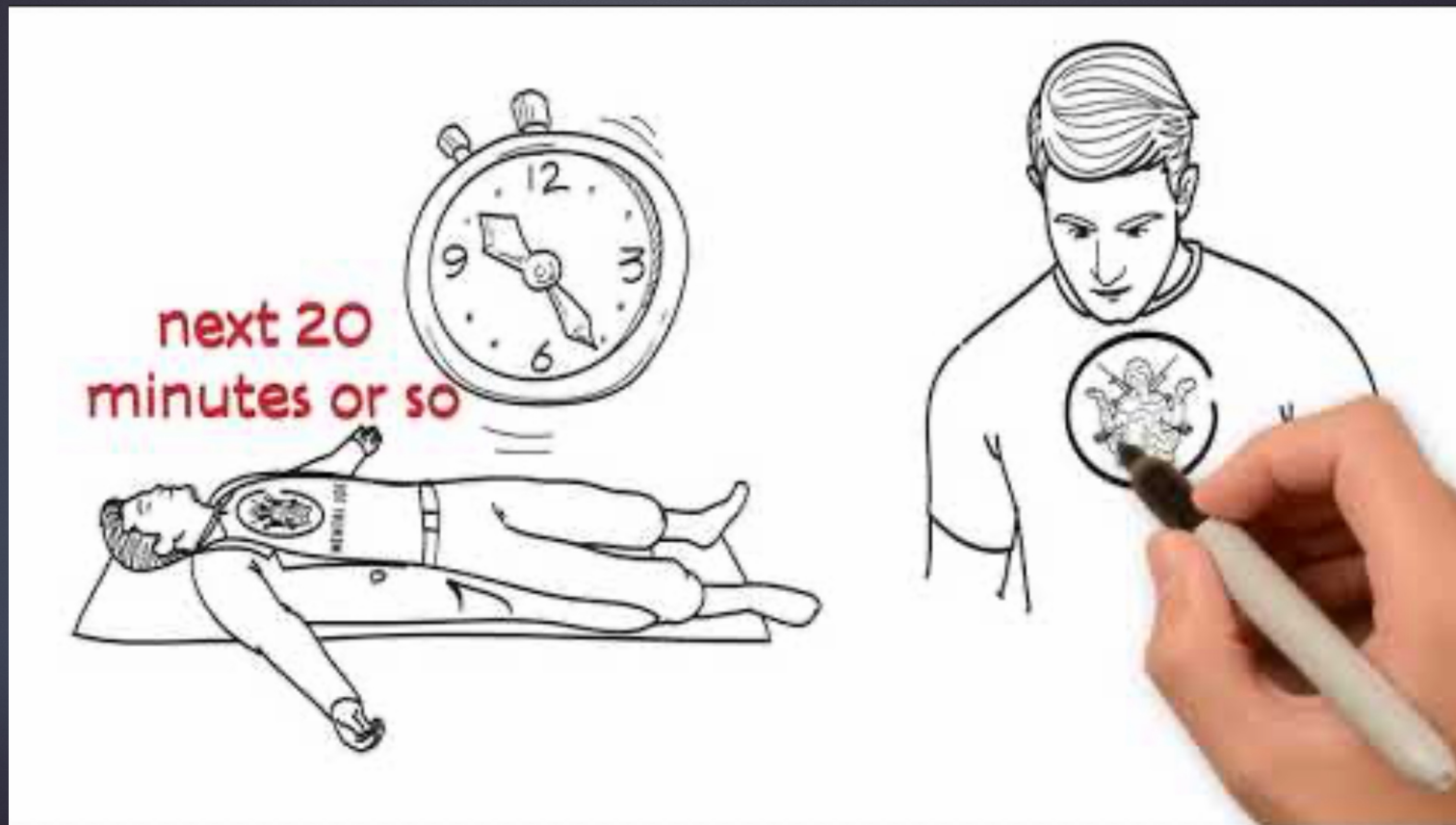


Huberman  
NSDR Video



Critical Incident Brochure

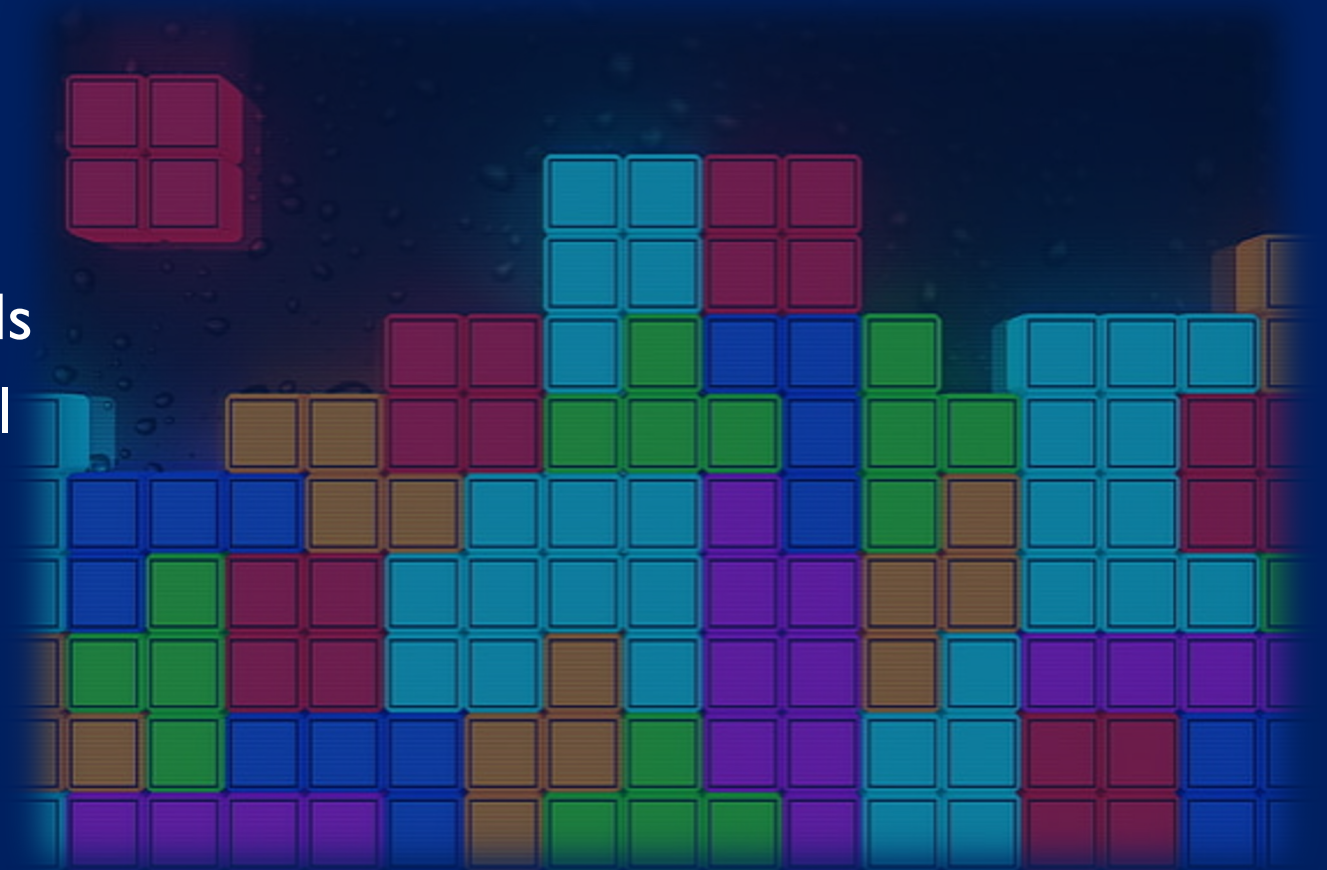
# Tension-Trauma Releasing Exercises (TRE)



10/21/26

# Tetris

- What the what?!?!?!?
- Within 6 hours
- Visuospatial, not words
- Increases hippocampal volume
  - Reduces PTSD (Butler et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2010)



## REPORT WRITING 2.0

- Written expression increases distress but lowers distress
- 4 days for 20 minutes
- 1<sup>st</sup> person, including emotions



## Dealing w/ Caring (NOSY) neighbors, family, friends

- ▶ Pocket statements
- ▶ Broken record technique
- ▶ Redirection



# Media Attention / Public Events

- ▶ Encourage peer & family to NOT follow media depictions of the event(s)
- ▶ Refrain from reading them, yourself





# RESILIENCE REQUIRES:

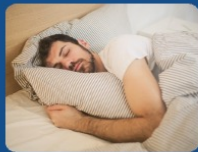
## Practices

Self-care activities, providing a baseline of wellness



### EXERCISE

Cardio & strength-training improve sleep, mood, energy, & mental clarity.



### SLEEP

Consistent 7-8 hours of sleep processes drama & trauma of the day. Sleep routines train the body for sleep



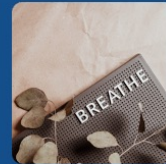
### NUTRITION

Food is medicine & energy or a toxin.  
Choose whole foods  
Meal prep  
Keep healthy food visible & less healthy food inaccessible

## AND

## Tools

Strategies needed in the moment to work through more difficult times.



### BREATHWORK

It calms the body, improving decision-making.  
Box Breathing  
4-7-8  
Physiological Sigh



### SELF-TALK

Research shows that self-talk that affirms strengths &/or gives instructions improves performance & reduces stress. Ex.-"I trained for this" or "I do hard things"



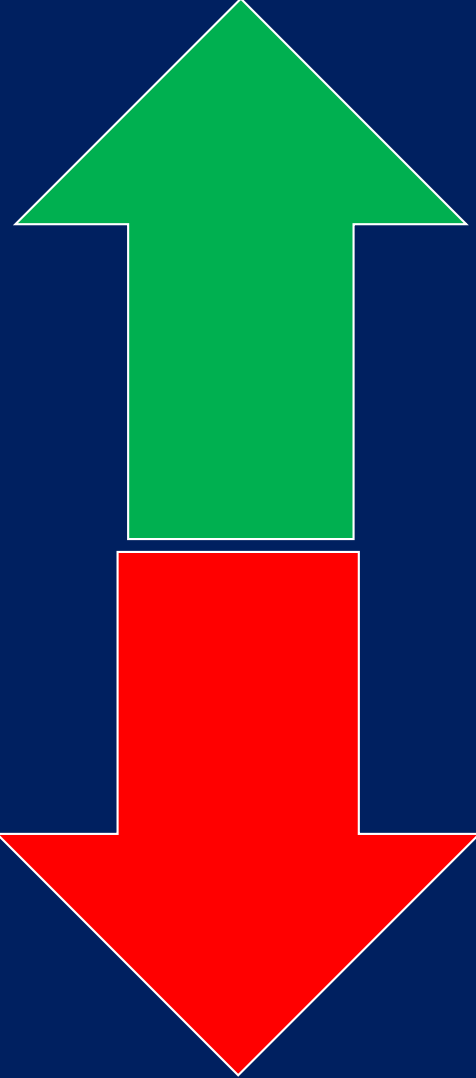
### TACTICAL PERFORMANCE IMAGERY

Elite performers, athletes, & first responders visualize themselves performing their skills successfully, including overcoming obstacles.

[www.firstresponderpsychology.com](http://www.firstresponderpsychology.com)



Digital Version  
with Hyperlinks



Awareness & Reflection Practices

Sleep, Exercise, Healthy Eating & Hydration

Quiet Time in Nature

Talking to a Friend / Confidant

Getting Bodywork / Massage

Enjoying a Hobby

Shopping

Habitual Eating

Binge TV Watching

Excessive Caffeine, Sugar, Tobacco, Alcohol or Other  
Substances

Adrenaline-seeking, violent or self-harming behaviors

**Elizabeth Stanley, PhD.**  
***Widen the Window***

A photograph of a person in a dark uniform, likely a police officer, sitting in the driver's seat of a vehicle. The officer is holding a handheld radio to their mouth with their right hand. The vehicle's dashboard and steering wheel are visible. A patch on the officer's sleeve reads "RCMP" and "POLICE". The image has a blue tint and a dark blue border on the right side. A white text box with a thin orange border is centered over the image.

**ASK FOR AN ASSIST**

E.M.D.R.

## Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing

- ▶ Treatment of choice for trauma (police, fire, military, crime victims)
- ▶ Accelerated processing (faster /more effective than talk therapy)
- ▶ Integrates fragmented memories



# ACUTE STRESS ADAPTIVE PROTOCOL (ASAP)

Created FOR first responder BY a first responder (peer supporter, chaplain, even clinician)

After 3 sleep cycles

Can be incident-driven or offered on a “drop-in” basis

Can be done as a group or 1-on-1

50-66% reduction in distress score after 1 session

44-50% reduction in PTSD scores after 4 sessions



**6-Minute Video  
on ASAP**





# First Responder Family Handbook

*A Guide to Thriving on a Daily Basis*



Dr. Stephanie M. Conn

# ALPHA-STIMULATORS

Mental sharpness and clarity are vital to the success of any job, but especially in the police world.

Just 20 min a day can reduce anxiety and insomnia.

Alpha-Stim® works with the body to help it regain a healthy circulatory current, simulate endorphin release, and rebalance neural firing patterns.



DEVICES ARE AVAILABLE FOR USE AT NORTH, CENTRAL, EAST, TRAFFIC, AND DETECTIVES

AVAILABLE FOR USE DURING WELLNESS HOURS

YOUR USAGE IS CONFIDENTIAL AND WILL NOT BE SHARED W/ SUPERVISORS OR WITH ANY PPB PERSONNEL.

CONTACT FIRST RESPONDER PSYCHOLOGY TO GAIN APPROVAL **BEFORE** USE

CRAIG DEARDORFF LCSW  
971-727-4197  
DR STEPHANIE CONN  
971-250-1519



Check out the  
**Wellness App**

# Insight Timer



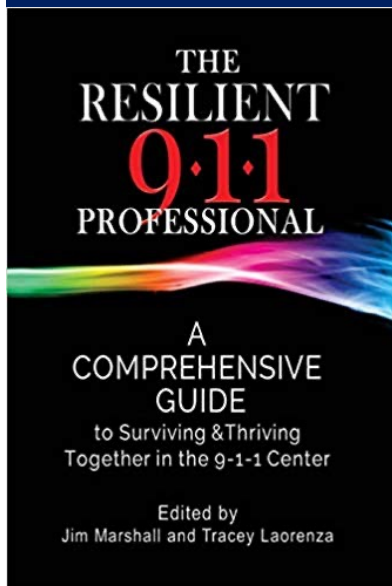
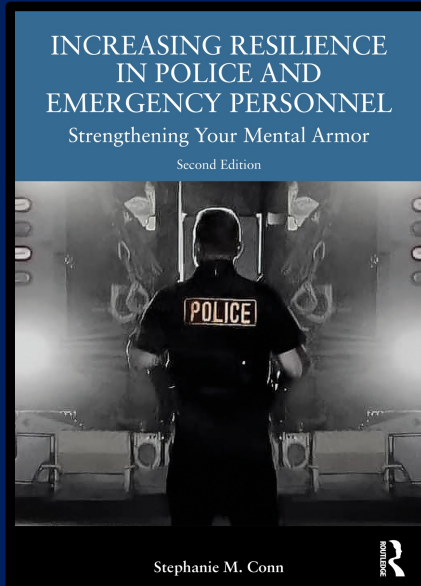
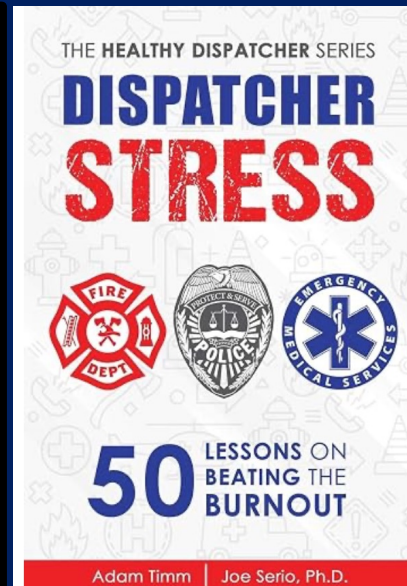
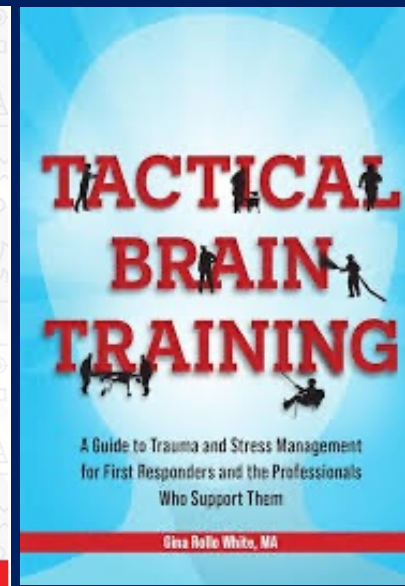
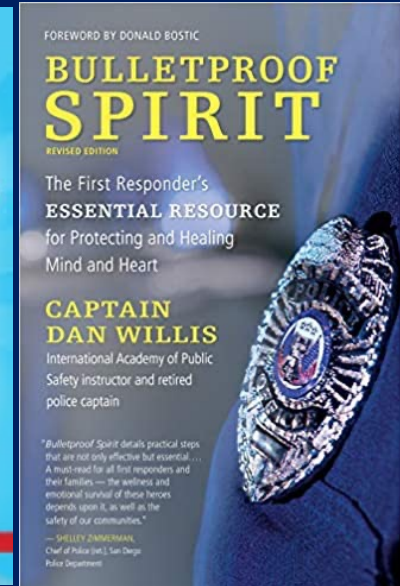
Download for FREE

Insight Timer is the world's leading well-being app for sleep, stress, trauma, and anxiety. It has the largest, most diverse content library with over 300,000 relaxing music, breathwork exercises, mindfulness practices, and courses from leading psychologists, researchers, musicians, and wellness experts.

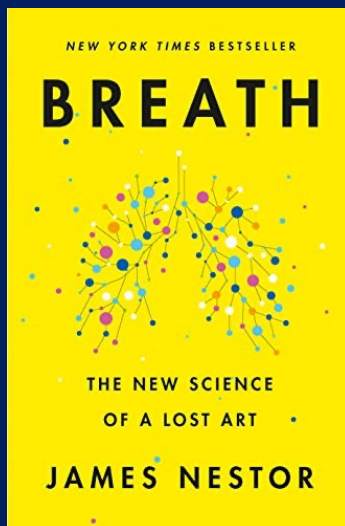
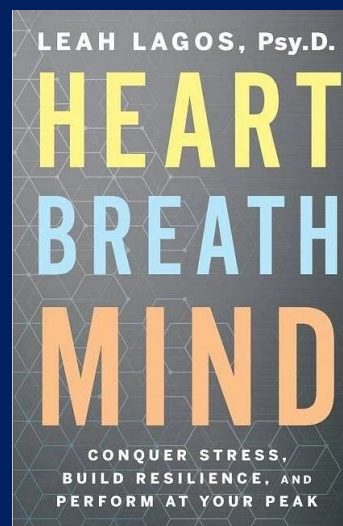
Experience powerful practices led by teachers from diverse cultures and backgrounds, including neuroscientists, and influential professors from the Universities of Oxford, Harvard, and Stanford.

If you enjoy supporting your well-being through movement, check out the weekly live yoga classes. And be sure to set your daily reminders, content filters, and language preferences under Settings by clicking the Profile button and selecting the gear icon in the top right corner.

# FIRST RESPONDER RESOURCES



# HEALTH



# PODCASTS

Winning Mind  
Training  
Brian Willis



Unbeatable Mind  
Podcast  
Mark Divine



(Re)Building Effective Peer Support Teams. (Recorded March 13, 2026) \$75



This 2-hour virtual course offers guidance for developing and maintaining an effective peer support team. It begins by describing a robust onboarding process that ensures the suitability and trustworthiness of its members. Guidance is offered for ongoing training, clinical advisory support, and participation expectations to maintain team effectiveness. It includes recommendations for legal and ethical issues involving confidentiality/privilege, interagency support, healthy boundaries, and leave programs. It concludes with recommended specialty roles within the team to better meet the needs of agency peers.

PURCHASE RECORDING

Trauma-Informed Peer Support (Recorded May 15, 2026) \$75



Wired but Tired: Recalibrating the First Responder Nervous System (Recorded Apr 3, 2026) \$75



First responder work demands constant vigilance, rapid decision-making, and exposure to chronic stress and trauma. Over time, these demands reshape the nervous system—often in ways that are adaptive on the job but costly to health and performance. What begins as an occupational necessity can become a health hazard. I explain how and why the nervous system changes, causing insomnia, impaired focus and decision-making, hypervigilance, and difficulty being still. You'll learn strategies to reset and optimize nervous system functioning for improved performance, health, and career longevity.

PURCHASE RECORDING

Sleep Shouldn't Be a Nightmare (Recorded May 13, 2026) \$75



This 2-hour virtual training addresses the unique sleep challenges faced by first responders, including trouble falling or staying asleep, early awakenings, and recurring nightmares. Participants will learn the neuroscience behind sleep and how the nervous system affects rest and recovery. The course offers practical, evidence-based strategies to improve sleep quality—both during and outside of shifts—including techniques to wind down after high-adrenaline calls, shift work adaptations, and nervous system regulation throughout the day. Additional topics include strategic napping, the effects of nutrition and exercise on sleep, and the role of medications and supplements. Tips for changing sleep schedules will also be offered. The session also provides resources for ongoing support and improving long-term sleep health.

PURCHASE RECORDING

FREE ASAP Q&A for Agency Executives & Risk Managers. Recorded March 25, 2026



**Double the Duty,  
Double the Weight:  
How Military Experience  
Shapes First Responders**  
Nov. 9, 9-11am



**Training  
Schedule**



**Sleep Shouldn't  
Be a Nightmare**  
(Recorded 05/13)



**Trauma Informed  
Peer Support (Recorded 05/15)**

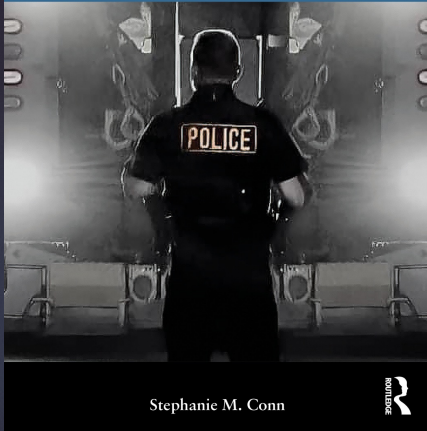


**(Re)Building  
Peer Support**  
(Recorded 03/13/26)

INCREASING RESILIENCE  
IN POLICE AND  
EMERGENCY PERSONNEL

Strengthening Your Mental Armor

Second Edition



Stephanie M. Conn, PhD, ABPP

Licensed Psychologist

First Responder Psychology

[www.firstresponderpsychology.com](http://www.firstresponderpsychology.com)

[firstresponderpsych@gmail.com](mailto:firstresponderpsych@gmail.com)

971-250-1519



STEPHANIE M. CONN

**BUILDING EFFECTIVE  
PEER SUPPORT TEAMS**

A Guide to Creating Resilient First Responders

