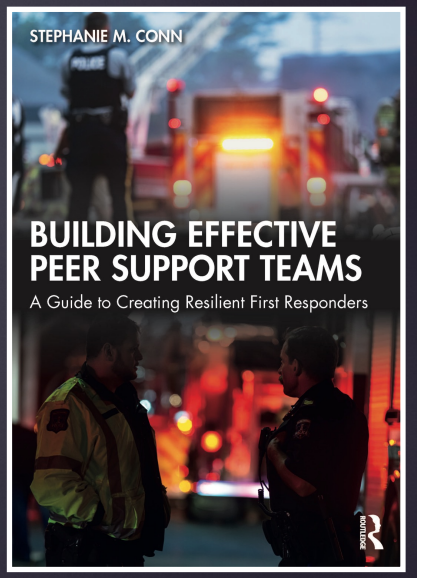
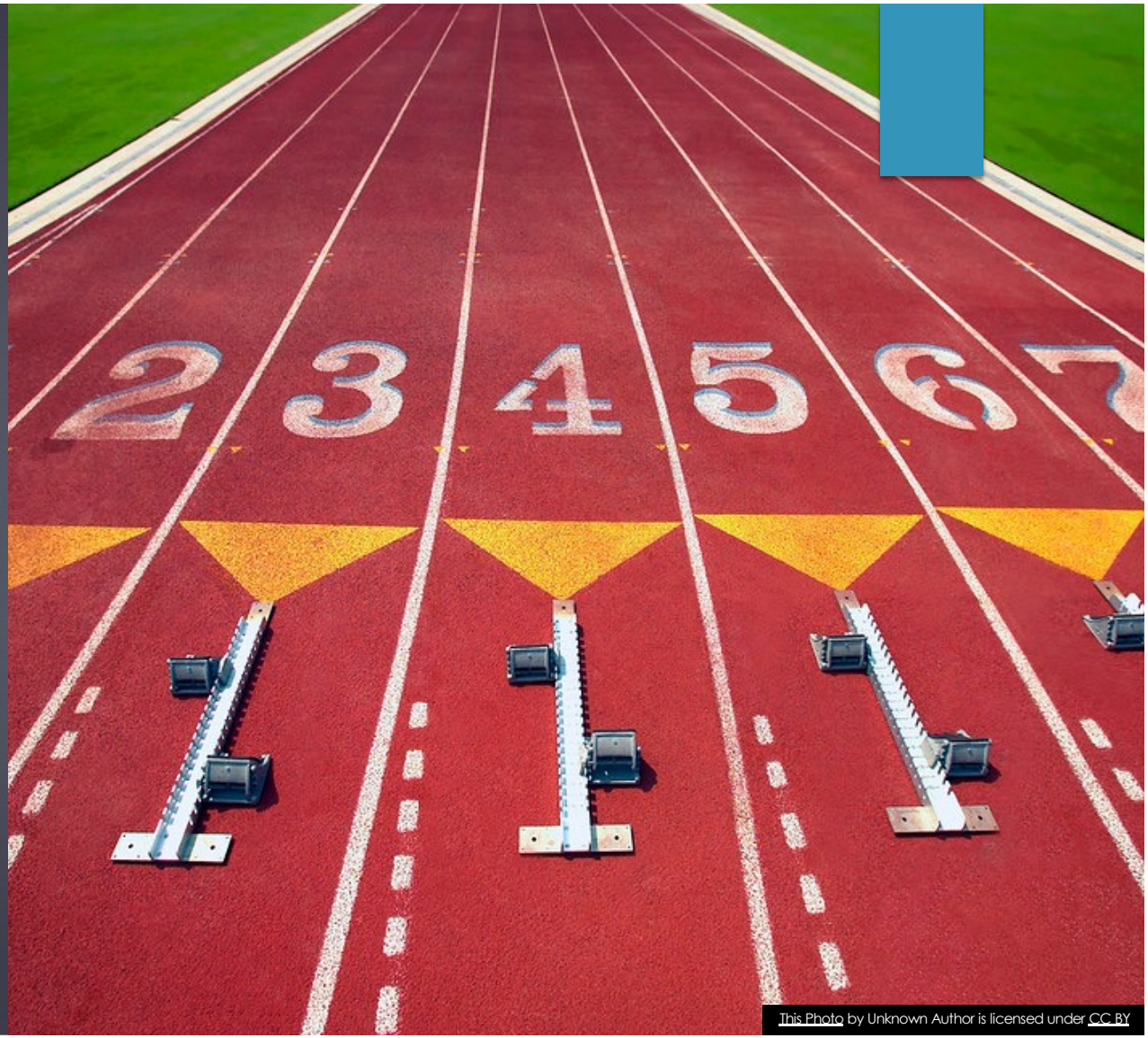
Optimizing Readiness & Recovery From a Critical Incident

Stephanie M. Conn, PhD, ABPP
Board Certified in Police & Public Safety
Licensed Psychologist OR 2825
First Responder Psychology
www.firstresponderpsychology.com
firstresponderpsych@gmail.com



READINESS FOR THE CRITICAL INCIDENT



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY

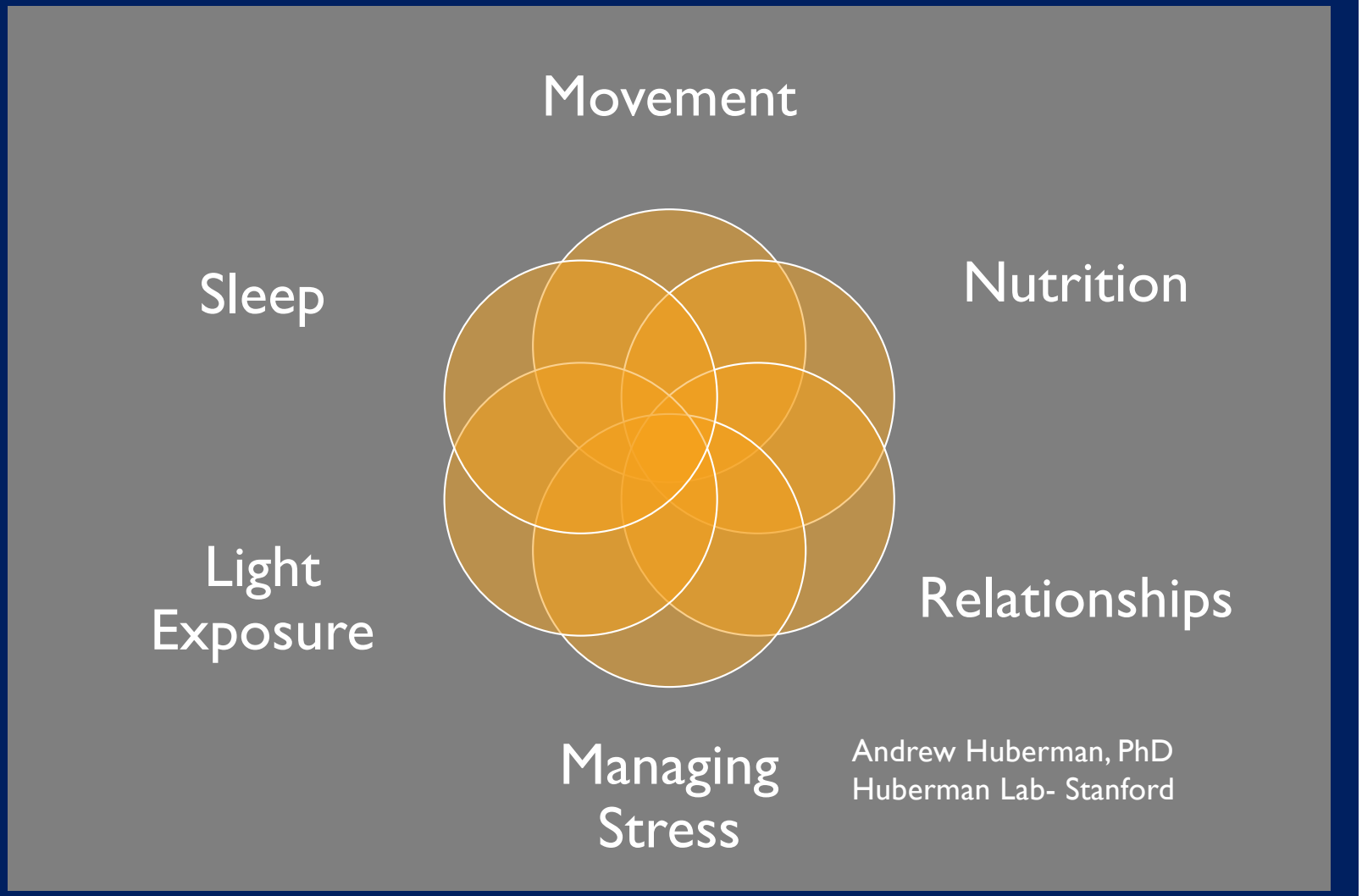
The best prediction of how you'll be two years after a major disruption, whether as an individual or as an organization, is how you were doing two days before.

Build on the basics.

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

So….

What are the basics?



PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

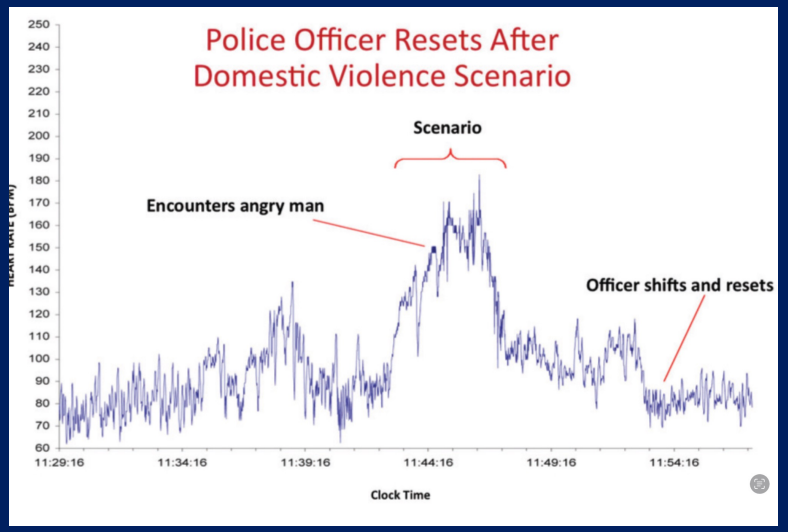
- Established care with a PCP & MHP
- Understand how EAP/ benefits work
- Identify preferred peer team member
- Ensure you and family members know agency procedures

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

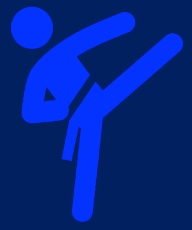

Police Officer Resets After
Domestic Violence Scenario
Scenario
Encounters angry man
Officer shifts and resets
250
240
230
220
210
200
190
180
170
160
150
140
130
120
110
100
90
80
70
60
11:29:16
11:34:16
11:39:16
11:44:16
11:49:16
11:54:16
Clock Time

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

TACTICAL PERFORMANCE IMAGERY



Relaxation

Performance

TPI Article on Police 1

TPI Article on American Police Beat

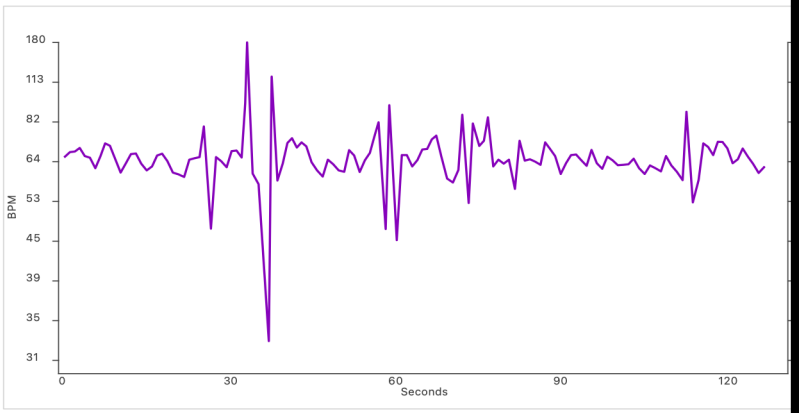
HeartMath®

Certified Practitioner

HRV Assessment

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

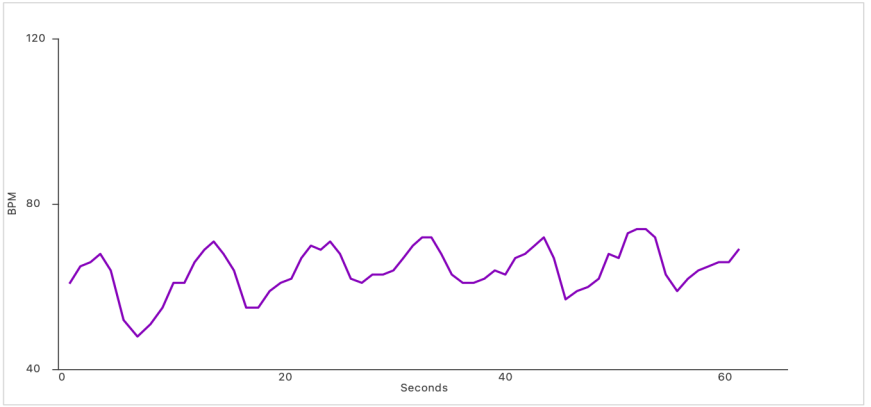
HRV



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

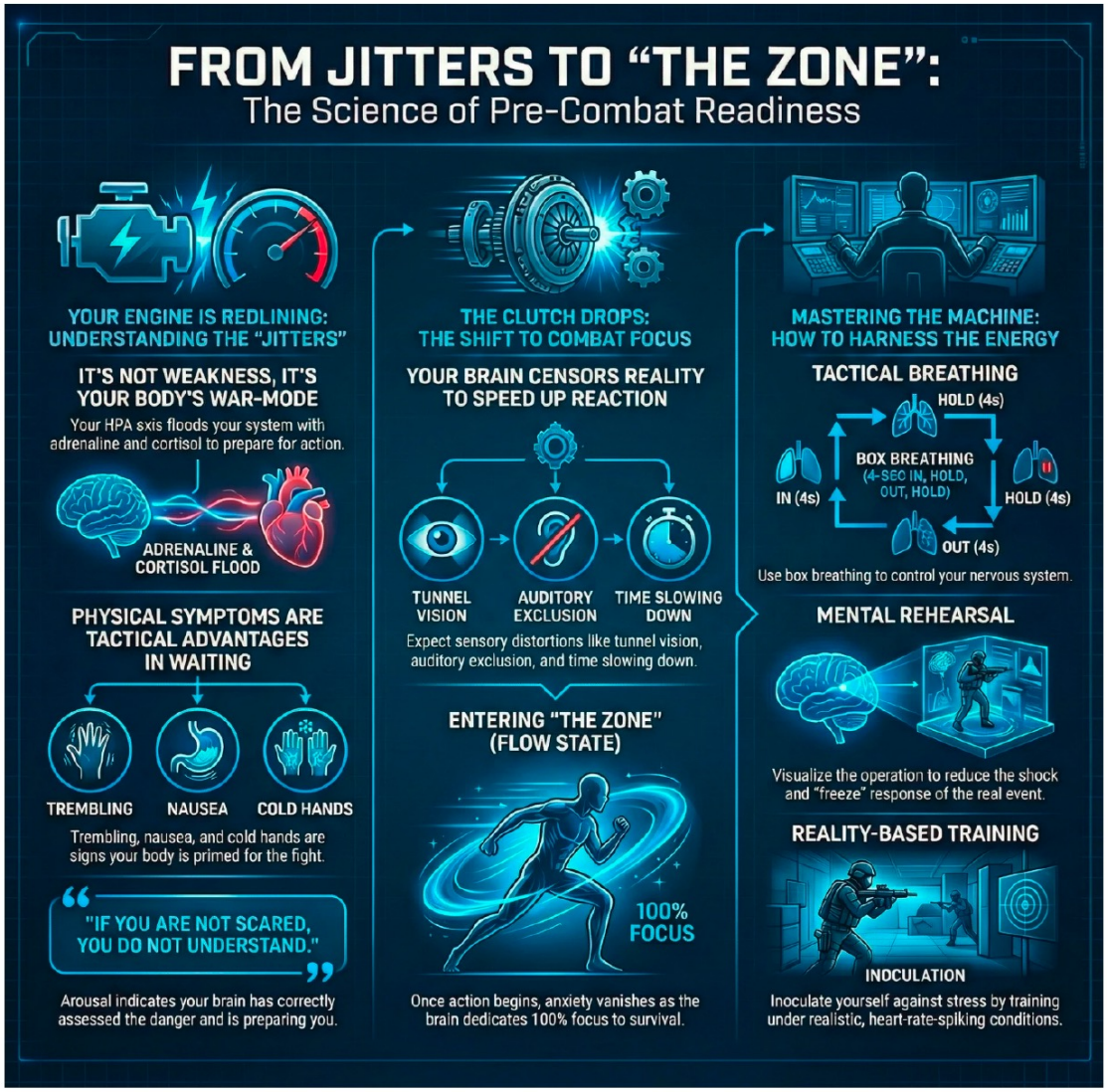
Cortisol & adrenaline dump primes body for explosive movement/ action

- Becomes shakes when not in use

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

Normalize & then mobilize

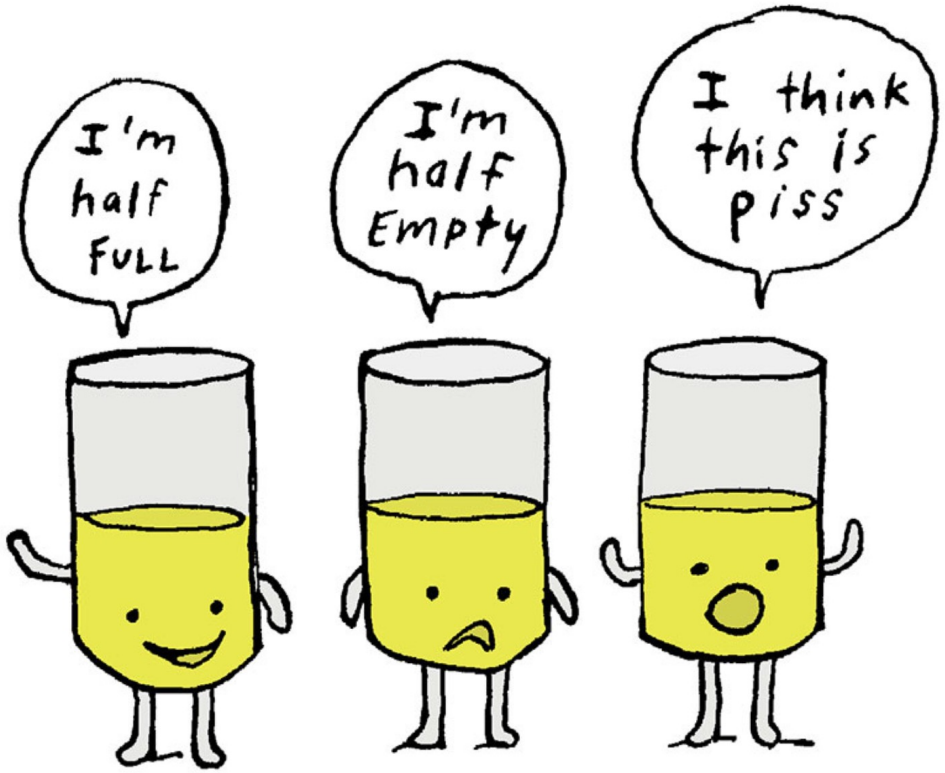
Police 1 Article:
Redlining in Neutral.
Why You Shake Before the Fight



Image/Steve Tidwell

Source: Police 1, April 27, 2206

Mindset



© jimbenton.com

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

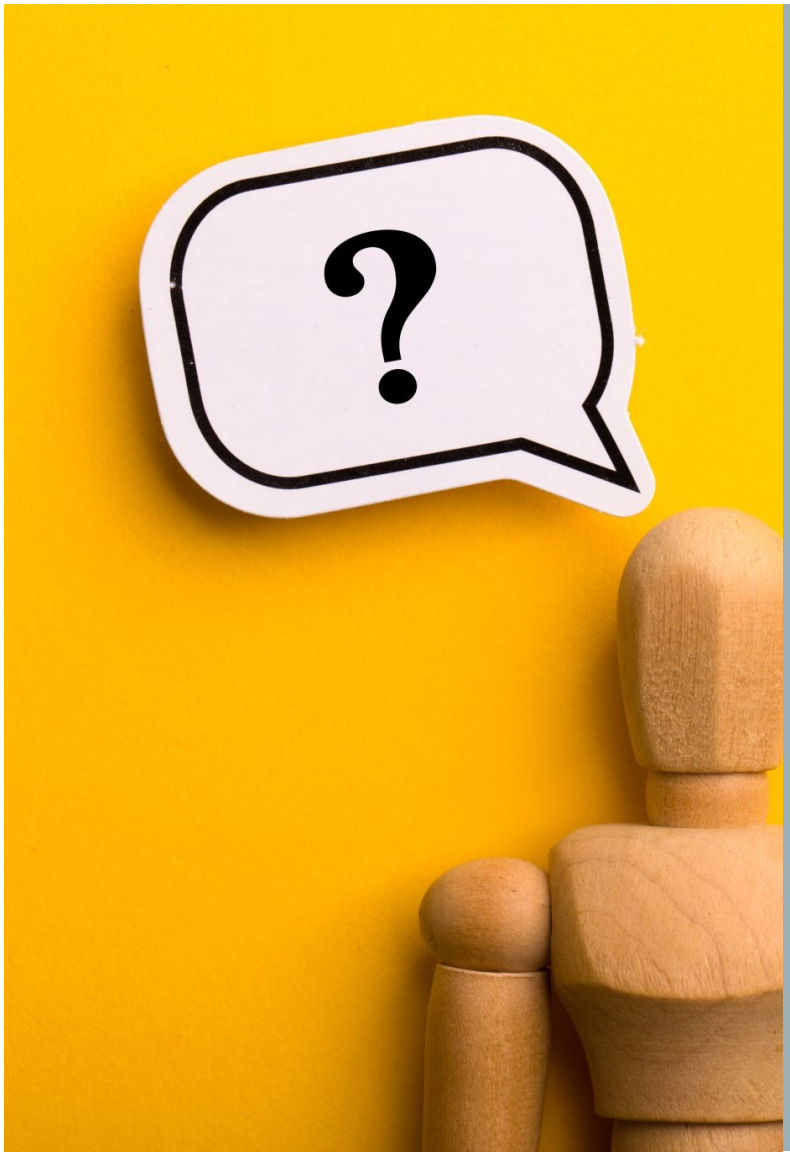
"If only I had …"

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"

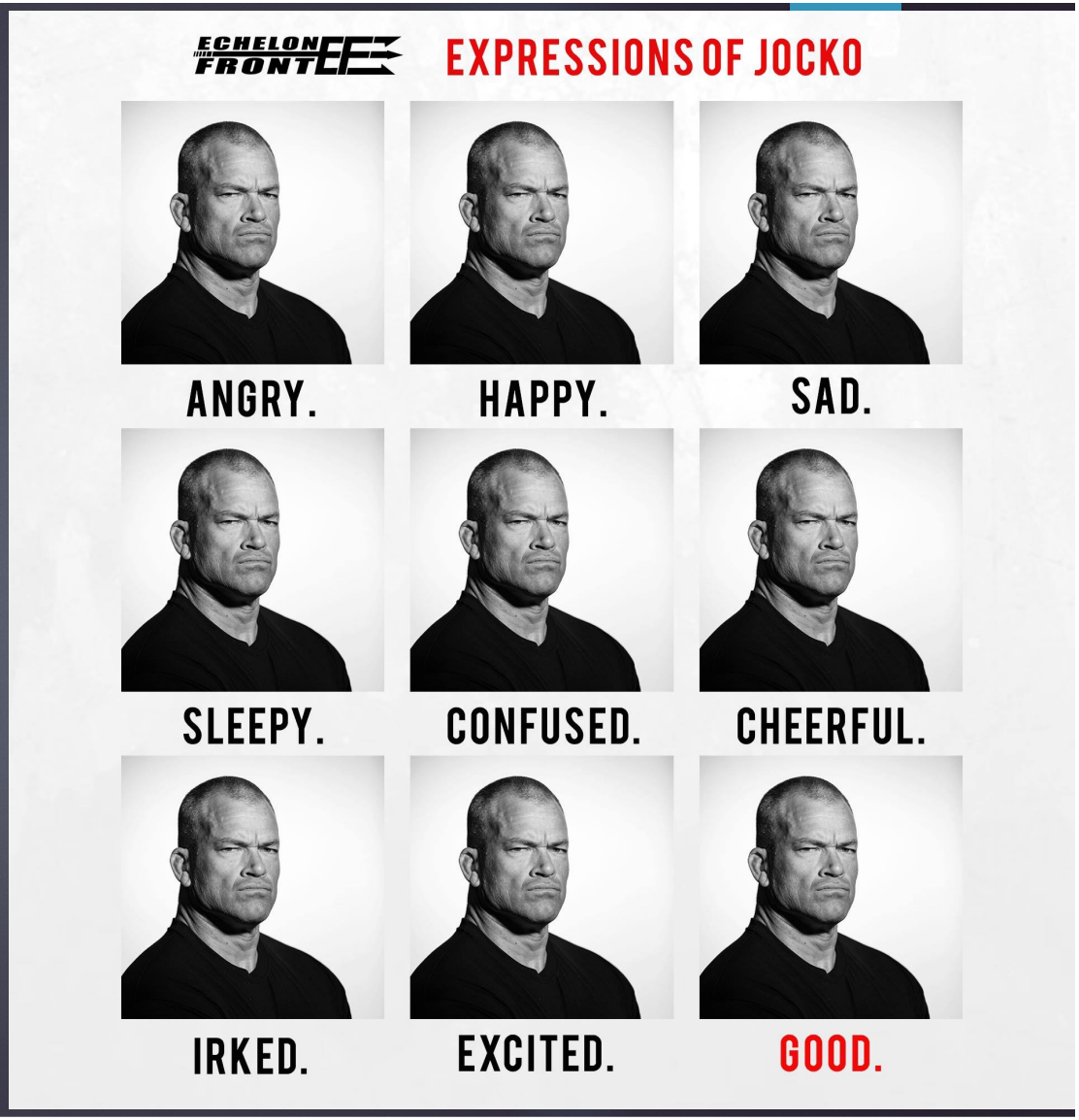
- Everyone is doing fine.

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



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.

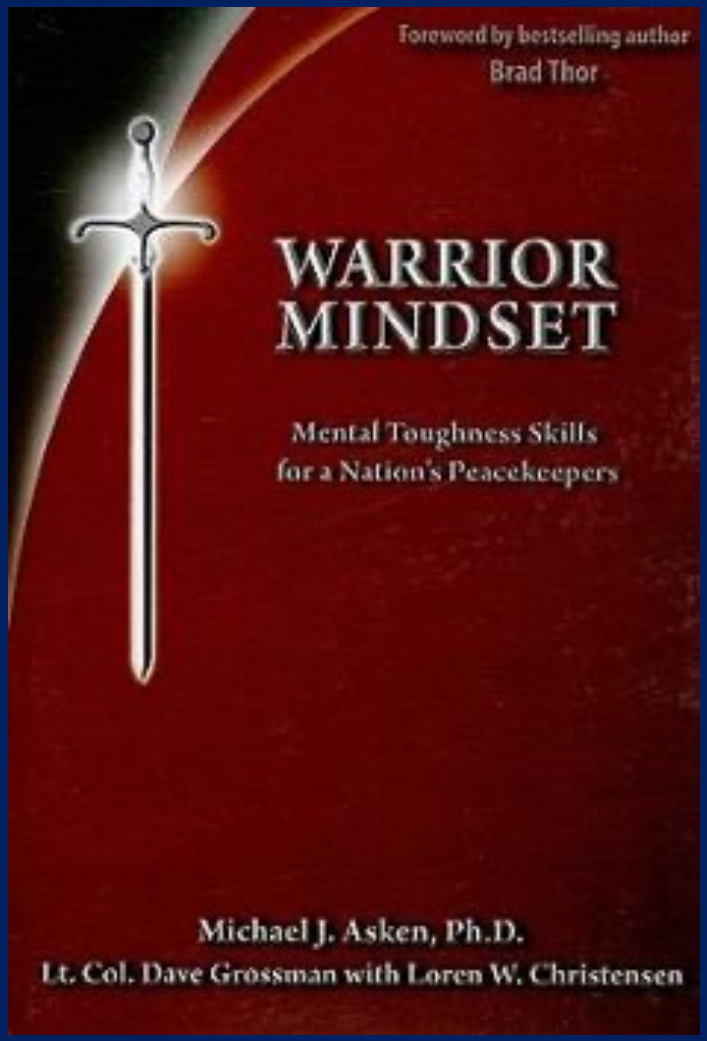
Instructive

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

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

nature

Explore content | About the journal | Publish with us | Subscribe

nature > articles > article

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

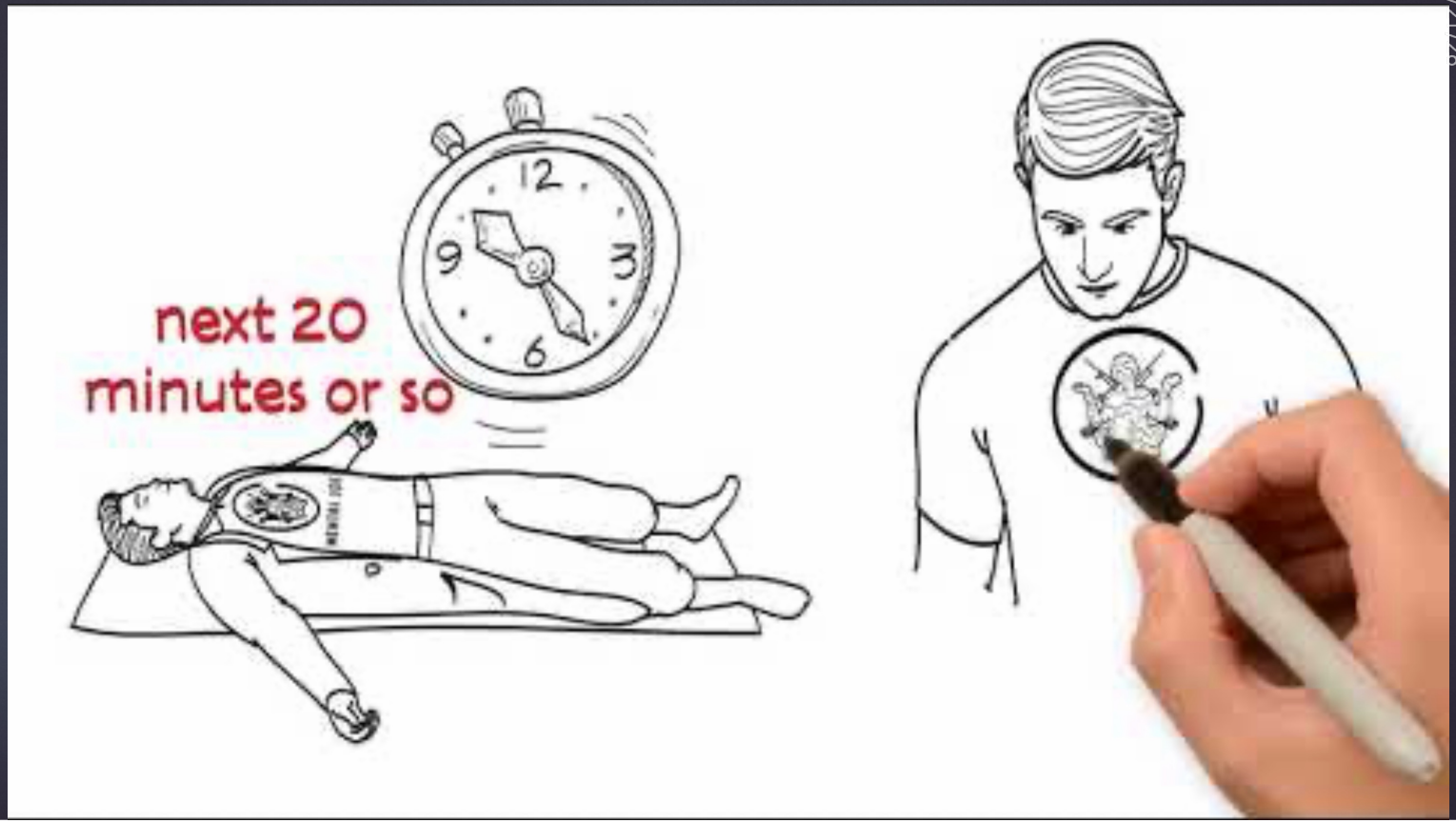
- Physiological sigh (cyclic)
- 5-second breath (10)
- 4x7x8 breathing
- Non-sleep deep rest (NSDR) (AKA Yoga Nidra)

Huberman NSDR Video

Critical Incident Brochure

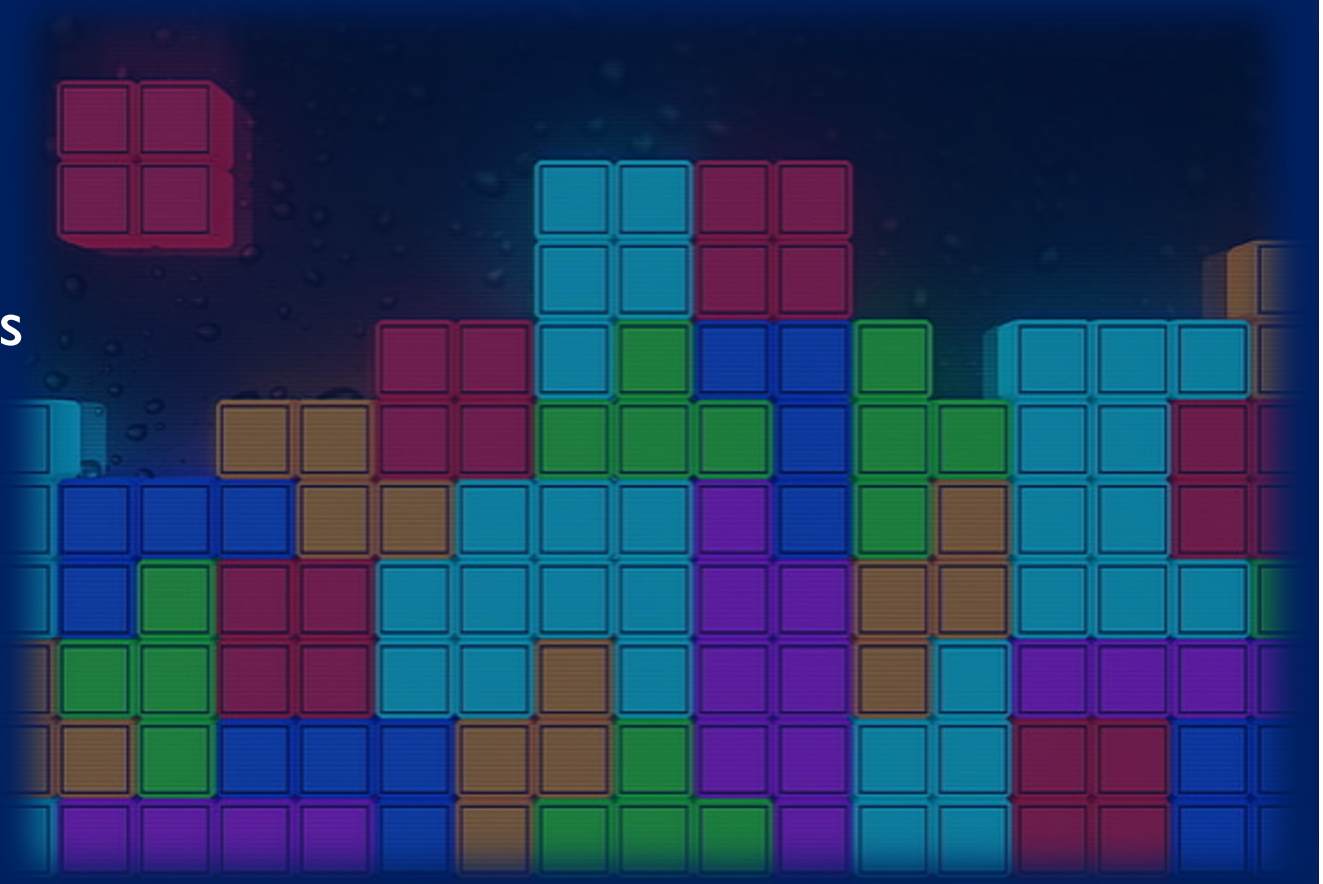
Tension-Trauma Releasing Exercises (TRE)

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
- 1st 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 AND Tools

Practices
Self-care activities, providing a baseline of wellness

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

EXERCISE

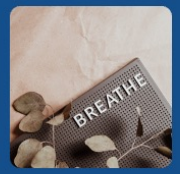
Cardio & strength-training improve sleep, mood, energy, & mental clarity.

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



BREATHWORK

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

SELF-TALK

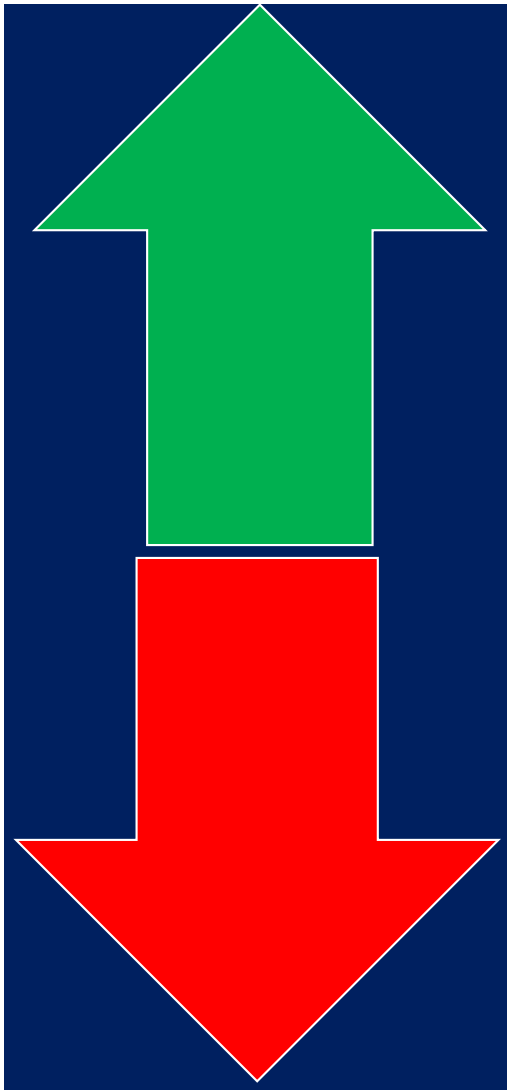
Research shows that self-talk that affirms strengths &/or gives instructions improves performance & reduces stress. Ex.-"I trained for this" or "I do hard things"

TACTICAL PERFORMANCE IMAGERY

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

www.firstresponderpsychology.com

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

ASK FOR AN ASSIST

E.M.D.R.

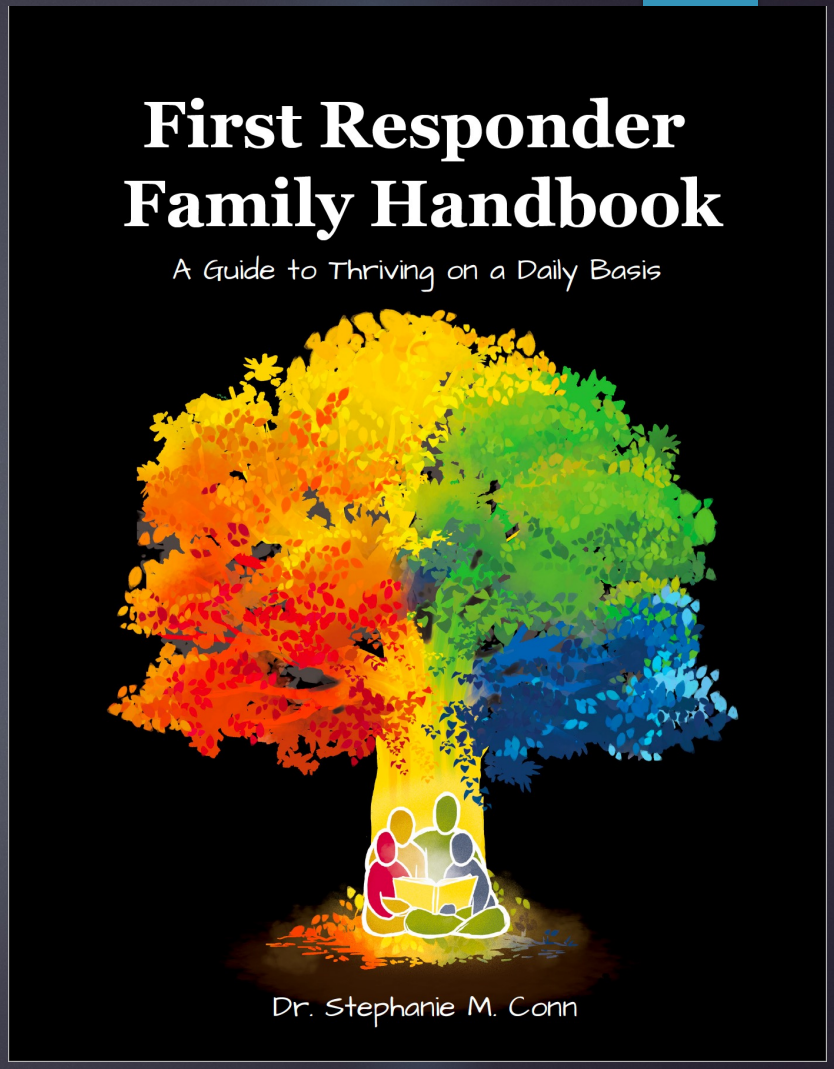
Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing

- 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

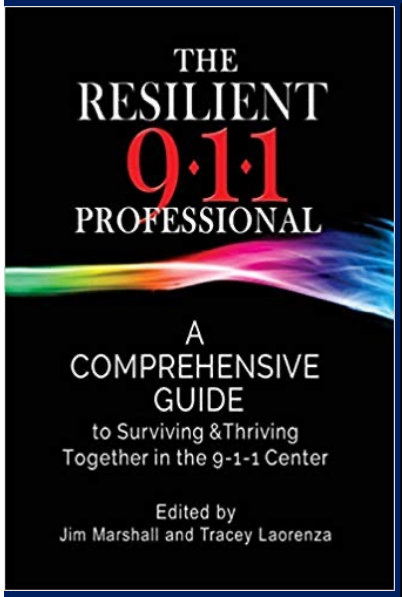
Download for FREE

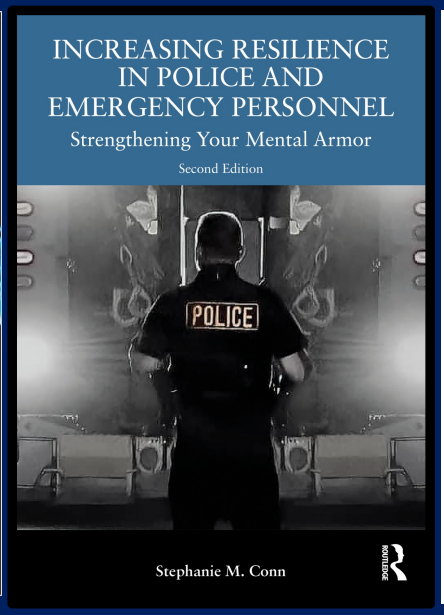
Insight Timer is the world's leading well-being app for sleep, stress, trauma, and anxiety. It has the largest, most diverse content library with over 300,000 relaxing music, breathwork exercises, mindfulness practices, and courses from leading psychologists, researchers, musicians, and wellness experts.

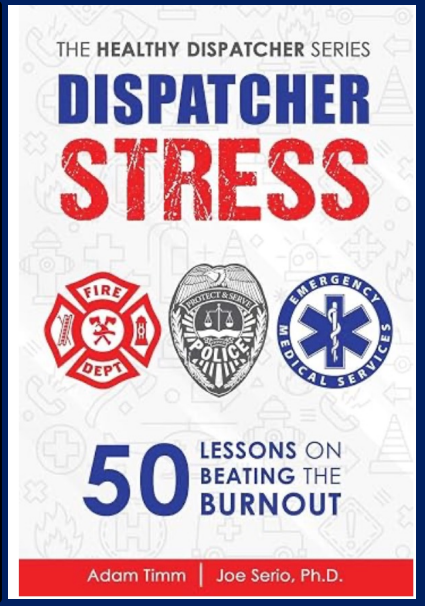
Experience powerful practices led by teachers from diverse cultures and backgrounds, including neuroscientists, and influential professors from the Universities of Oxford, Harvard, and Stanford.

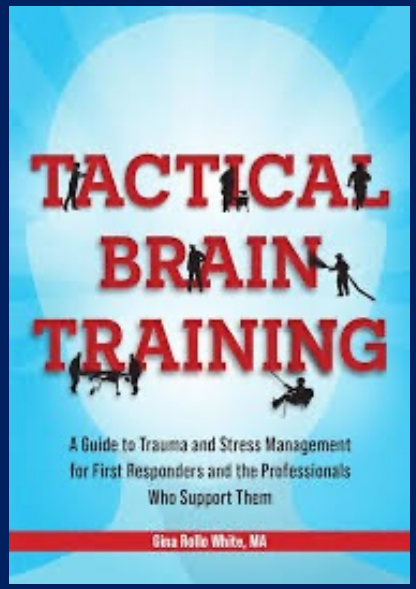
If you enjoy supporting your well-being through movement, check out the weekly live yoga classes. And be sure to set your daily reminders, content filters, and language preferences under Settings by clicking the Profile button and selecting the gear icon in the top right corner.

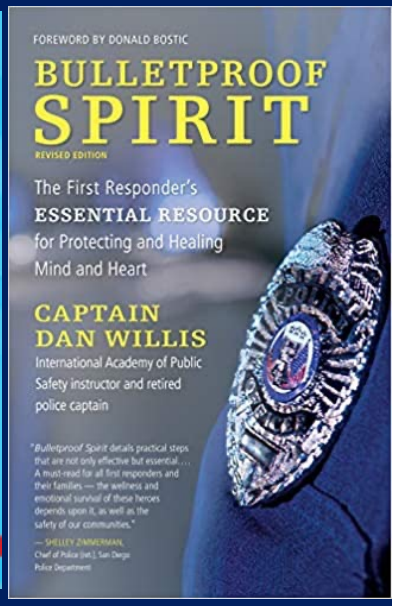
FIRST RESPONDER RESOURCES



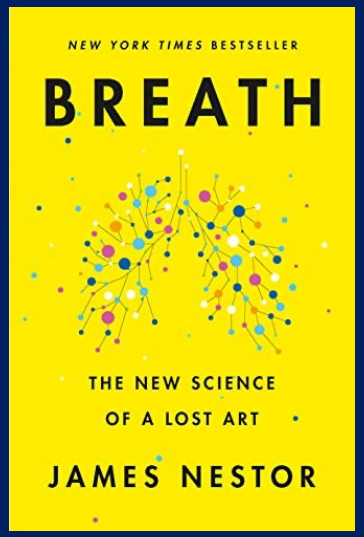


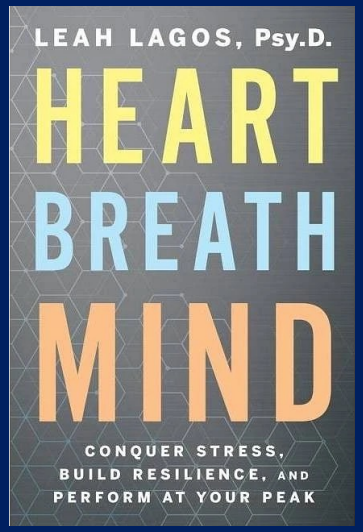






HEALTH


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
BREATH
THE NEW SCIENCE
OF A LOST ART
JAMES NESTOR


LEAH LAGOS, Psy.D.
HEART
BREATH
MIND
CONQUER STRESS,
BUILD RESILIENCE, AND
PERFORM AT YOUR PEAK

Training Your Brain and Body
to Thrive During Stress
and Recover from Trauma
WIDEN
THE
WINDOW
ELIZABETH A. STANLEY, PhD
FOREWORD BY BESSEL VAN DER KOLK, MD
New York Times–bestselling author of The Body Keeps the Score

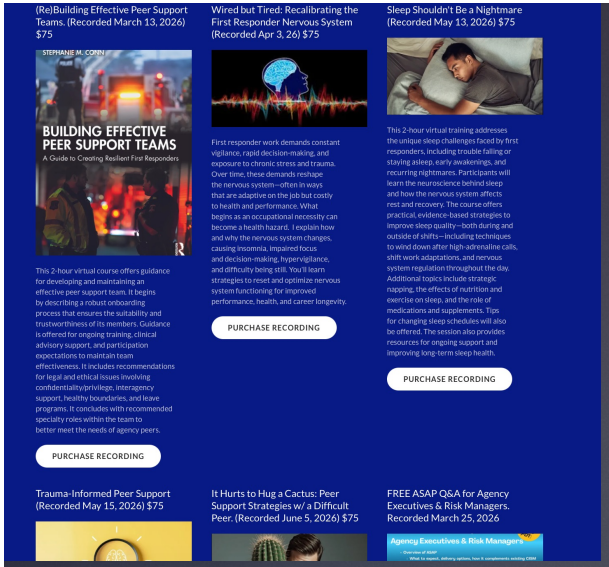
PODCASTS

Winning Mind Training

Brian Willis

Unbeatable Mind Podcast

Mark Divine



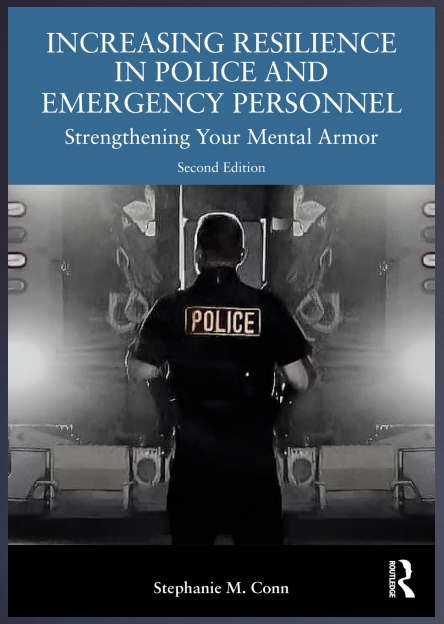
Double the Duty, Double the Weight: How Military Experience Shapes First Responders Nov. 9, 9-11am

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)

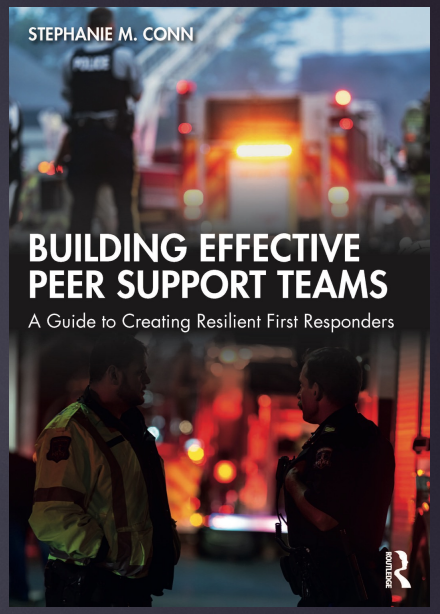


Stephanie M. Conn, PhD, ABPP

Licensed Psychologist

First Responder Psychology

www.firstresponderpsychology.com

firstresponderpsych@gmail.com

971-250-1519