



## Helping Professions:

It is easy to help others but not always  
as easy to help ourselves

**White Paper was written by  
Thriving Teams Institute**



Empower Fort Worth

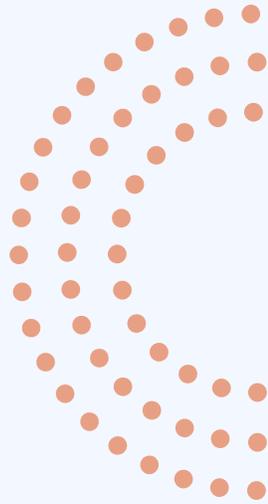
Thriving Teams Institute

University of North Texas Health  
Science Center-Department of  
Lifestyle Health Sciences

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# Introduction

Empower Fort Worth is a non-profit that was formed around the mission of empowering our helping professionals by building their resilience and combating the stigma around seeking help.



My emotional injuries are often invisible to me...

(a helping professional in Fort Worth)



## Our Partnership

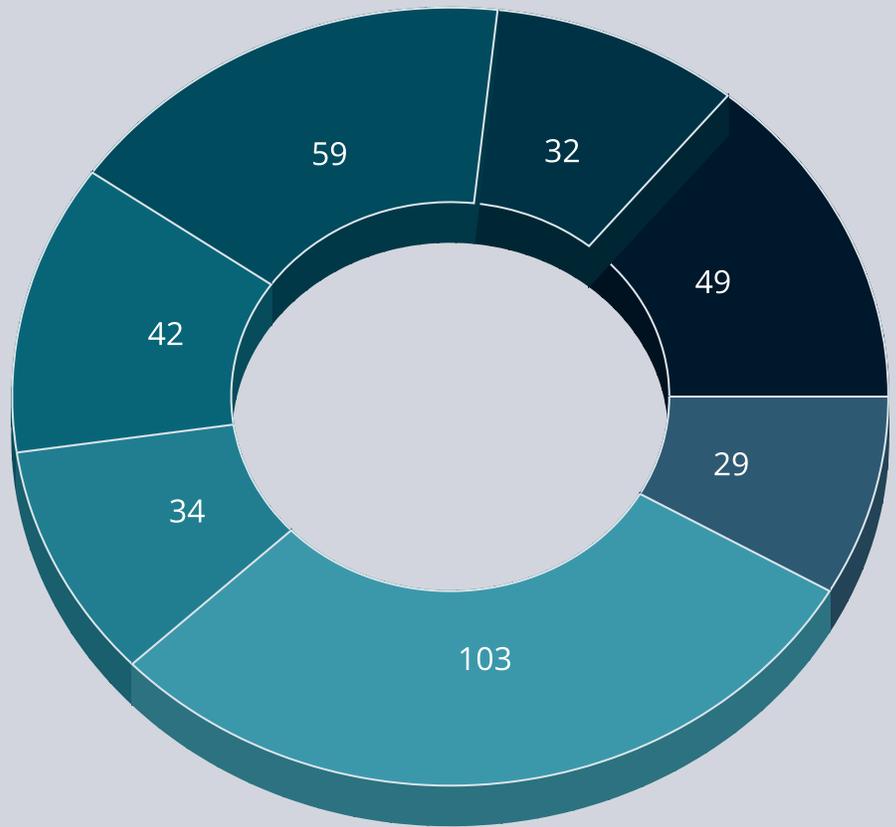
A partnership emerged between Empower Fort Worth (EFW), Thriving Teams Institute, and the University of North Texas Health Science Center's Department of Lifestyle Health Sciences program to explore how might EFW build the resilience of helping professionals and combat the stigma around seeking help in the Fort Worth Area? This white paper shares the findings of our exploration.



### What is Resilience?

- > flexible thinking
- > pro-active about self-care
- > self-compassion along with compassion for others
- > learning and adapting during challenges
- > knowing your self-worth
- > ability to make sense of experiences
- > ability to face, overcome, and be strengthened by adverse experiences

Healthcare	29
Police	103
EMT	34
Firefighters	42
Educators/Social Workers/ Therapists	59
Lawyers	32
Other	49

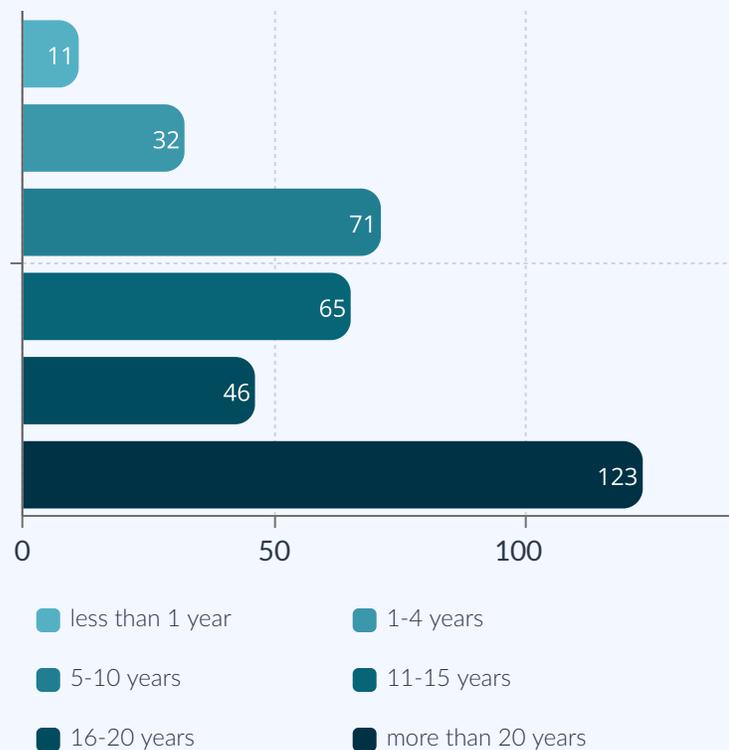


# Helping Professionals

For this exploration, our team sent a survey with an option for a follow-up interview to helping professionals across the Fort Worth Area. Responses from first responders, as well as other helping professionals, were included in the analysis. Those identified as the "other" category were professionals such as spiritual advisors and support staff for the first responders.

This study obtained perspectives from helping professionals across the spectrum of their careers. We had 348 participants with completed survey data in this study.

Years of Service



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# Helping Professionals

Helping professionals often join the profession to make a difference and help others have a better life, but often they don't take into account the emotional toll of entering that helping profession. As natural "givers" to others, they often fail at giving to themselves. As they progress through their career, the impacts of the vicarious trauma often become more noticeable.



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“ We are human and make mistakes just like everyone else in the world. We only get a fraction of a second to make a decision that will be judged and watched in slow motion by the whole world. We are husbands/wives, mothers/fathers and not people looking to hurt anyone. ”

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## Vicarious Trauma

Here are some of their reflections on what they wish others understood about their profession:

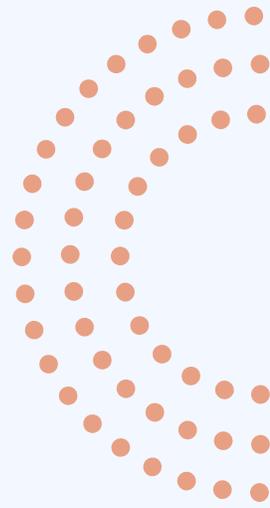
- exposure to so much sadness comes at a price emotionally and physically
- losses stay with you forever- wins not so long
- What you see can't be erased from your mind even when you go home
- over the years, trauma builds up and compounds

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## Forgetting their humanity and expectation of perfection

An overwhelming theme in this research was a desire to understand their humanity and that mistakes will happen. Here are some quotes from the study:

- We are human, too; no one wakes up wishing they were in a deadly situation
- We are human, too...we are not perfect, we make mistakes, learn and do better
- Expectation to always be on "A" game, day in and day out, makes it feel impossible at times
- We are human and will have human responses to situations no matter what training we have received
- It is hard to go to work when you are having a bad day at home, and it is hard to go home when you have a bad day at work
- One error can ruin my career or my life



# Burnout

## Research Analysis

Burnout is, in essence, a *pandemic* affecting large amounts of people across the globe. More research is being done on the causes of burnout, and the cost of dealing with the ripple effect of burnout is increasing exponentially. One participant shared, "it takes a lot of boundary setting to keep from getting burned out," but unfortunately, the ability to set boundaries to maintain a healthy work/life balance simply doesn't exist within our systems. Some of the systemic issues limiting the ability to set boundaries identified in this research were:



- Understaffing, so must work overtime
- Pay is often minimal for many helping professionals, forcing them to work multiple jobs
- Amount of paperwork is increasing but no other parts of the workload are decreasing
- Leadership does not value well-being over performance



believe it is likely or very likely that those in their profession will experience burnout



of Healthcare Professionals, EMT, and Police Officers think it is likely that those in their profession will experience burnout



of 18-34 years old helping professionals think it is likely those in their profession will experience burnout

# Support that Would Promote the Well-Being of Helping Professionals

Helping professionals were asked what resources, support, or experiences would support their or their co-worker's well-being and prevent burnout. Highlights of the responses are below, which depicts how the solution to promoting well-being and minimizing the burnout of helping professionals must include multiple approaches.

<b>Time</b>	Adequate Staffing to Minimize Need for Overtime	Time for all the "paperwork"	Access to self-care and mental health support in evenings or weekends	Provide time for self-care during the day (exercise, mental health, etc.)	Easier access to all the resources available, including same/next day support options
<b>Value</b>	Better Pay	Invest in our Well-Being and Health	Not questioning reason for needing time off	More people standing up for them and voicing their value	Better medical benefits
<b>Opportunity</b>	Easier access to healthy meals	Extra support for those early in their career	Trainings on mindfulness, compassion fatigue, secondary trauma	Time between calls/events to debrief or de-stress	Provide on-site /mandatory mental health support
<b>Support</b>	Collaborative groups where won't be judged but understood	Leadership express care for mental health, not help continue the stigma of a psych evaluation	Grace for our mistakes	Help the professionals know they are not alone, others struggle with similar things	Mental Health Support that knows our context

# Well-Being Practices

Participants were surveyed in their confidence to implement lifestyle health habits. The following is a list of those practices from least confident in implementation to most confident in implementation.



# Most Likely Ways of Coping with Stress:

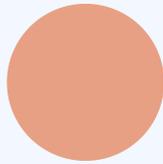
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**Watch TV or  
Movies**



**Walk/Exercise**



**Spend time with  
family and friends**



**Read**



**Sleep**



**Drink Alcohol**



## Least Likely Ways of Coping with Stress:

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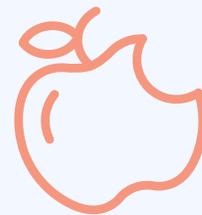
**Create Art**



**Write/Journal**



**Meditate**



**Cook/Food Prep**



*mindfulness*

## How to transition from work to home?



The transition from work to home has always been important, but with COVID changing the nature of work, it took on new meaning as previous routines were disrupted. The survey responses were split between those that do not do anything intentionally and those that do something intentionally. The other response was I drive home but do not really use it effectively as a transition.

This work-home transition is often more critical for helping professionals that experience challenging and potentially traumatizing events while at work. Some research has found that the cause of many distressed couples is due to those first few exchanges during the transition. Being intentional about the transition helps to set you up for success.

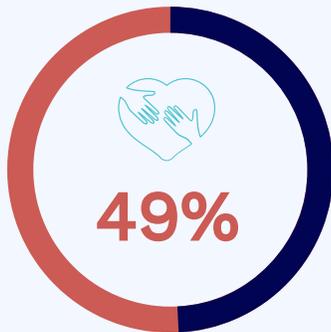
Work often requires mental intensity, so we try to transition by finding ways to relax. While relaxing techniques can be effective, it is finding ways that match the mental intensity of the workday but are unrelated to work that will help us effectively transition. People first associate this with the idea that they can't exercise as a transition strategy, but that would be inaccurate. The exercise has to provide the mental intensity to help shift the brain, and often it does. What is an effective transition strategy for you?

## Strategies that the Helping Professionals Surveyed Use

- Workout
- Meditate
- Music
- Garden
- Call Friends
- Social Media
- Read a Magazine
- Engage with Pet
- Listen to a Podcast
- Cook a Meal
- Watch TV
- Drink Wine
- Do a Puzzle/Crossword
- Put on Comfy Clothes
- Video Games
- Clean
- Shower



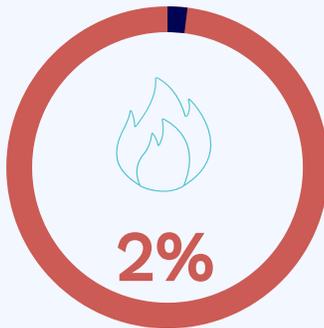
# Stigma with Asking for Help



agreed or strongly agreed that those in their profession would struggle to ask for help



were unlikely or very unlikely to see mental health support



of firefighters thought that those in their profession were likely to seek mental health support



of police officers thought that those in their profession were likely to seek mental health support

“ We need to be able to ask for help without career consequences. ”

“ We need emotional and social support without fear of penalty. ”

# Preference for seeking and receiving health information



Health Care Provider



Family/Friends



Professional Colleagues/Organizations



Therapist/Counselor



Health Organization Websites



# How we can shift the Stigma?

Shifting the stigma around asking for help is one of the most critical issues facing not only our helping professionals, but society as a whole. The stresses and demands of our work continually increase, the traumas we experience are often more frequent, but the apprehension to seeking help limits our ability to experience well-being. The stigma around asking for help has emerged from our current systems and the fear is consistently reinforced by the decisions and actions that take place within our personal and societal environments. In the survey and interviews, helping professionals helped shed light on the current barriers and potential opportunities to shifting this stigma.

## BARRIERS



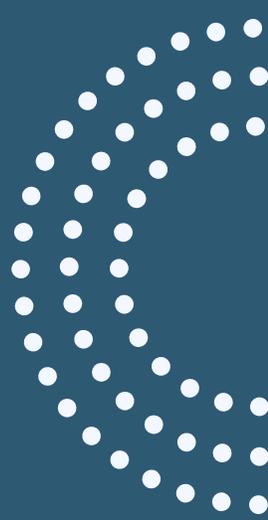
- Lack of Time
- Consequences of seeking help
- Lack of trust of employer and counselor to not hurt their career
- Available help does not understand our work context
- Minimize the cost



## OPPORTUNITIES

- Support in the early career
- Share stories so helping professionals do not think they are alone
- "Off the record" support
- Build support into the workday
- Make it easier to find resources that know our context

# The Balance Between Valuing the Humanity of those Serve and Having Your Own Humanity Valued



*When you're taking care of others and their futures and happiness, it doesn't leave anybody to take care of you. (a helping professional)*

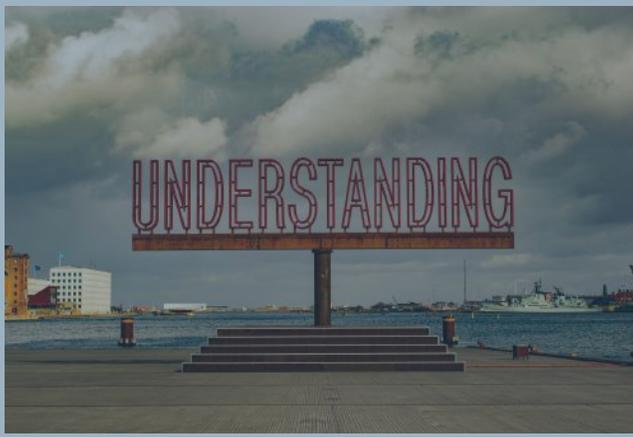
At the core of many of the qualitative responses from the survey was the theme of being human and all needs that come from being human: **being valued, being supported/cared for, and being heard**. Burnout is minimized, and well-being is maximized when our needs as humans are acknowledged and met. The themes all represent challenges that stem from their demanding jobs and those influencing their working environment. In *Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf writes, "Stress is a condition of most modern life, and if one is a servant-leader and carrying the burdens of other people – going out ahead to show the way, one takes the rough and tumble." Many of the responses from the helping professionals reflected their wish that the community acknowledge the 'rough and tumble,' the stress of their jobs, and value them for what they do. The stress of their career, the magnitude of their mistakes, and the unrealistic expectations are all worth it for them because they believe in the power of helping people. They feel they have a responsibility for the community's well-being and that through their actions, they create value for the community.

## Being Valued

*You can survive being overwhelmed if people appreciate your efforts (a helping professional)*

A core need of all humans is to know they are valued. Feeling valued helps us securely attach to our purpose and provides the motivation to endure the difficulties. Depending on your work, you know that not everyone will see your work as valuable, but you can look past that if you believe in the higher value or purpose of the work. For example, one helping professional shared, "the stress of dealing with people and incidents could be excessive; there are strong possibilities of being infected by various diseases when dealing with individuals, the dangers of dealing with unstable individuals and situations, and trying to get individuals to understand that we are there to help them and get them helpful information than to harm them." For many helping professionals, the benefits of making a difference outweigh the risks they assume each day. They feel valued through the success stories. But this can often become diminished by influences outside of who they are helping. Some examples shared were:

- Lack of appreciation from bosses
- Pay that keeps us just above the poverty line
- Amount of work done (overtime, demands) compared to what is paid does not align
- Some helping professions seem to be more respected than others
- Employers want warm bodies to fill a slot. We are just a number
- Demand over time regardless of the home situation
- Everyone outside the profession thinks they could do a better job, but they do not sign up to do the job



## Being Supported/Cared For

We are human and will have human responses to situations no matter what training we receive. (a helping professional)

When we feel supported or cared for, we are more likely to sustain in challenging conditions, reducing burnout rates. One area that seems to keep helping professionals from feeling supported and cared for is leadership. Some of the helping professionals' perspectives on leadership included:

- They only care about protecting and promoting each other
- We need strong leadership that can make decisions and stand up for the right things
- We need leadership that remembers where they came from
- They say they support us until something controversial happens, and then they don't back us.
- The stressors from within the organization are far more significant than the external ones. The administration often makes it harder than it has to be

## Being Heard/Understood

*We are normal people who wish to serve our fellow human beings, and we have feelings. We must live and work every day knowing we might hurt or even kill someone. (a survey participant)*

Consistently across the surveys, helping professionals wished others understood their context and the realities of their job. When someone understands our reality, they are also more likely to give grace and compassion, whereas when they do not have an understanding, they are likely to judge and criticize unfairly. As we look to design pathways forward that lead to more well-being for community members, this place of understanding across all perspectives becomes critical. Some of the helping professionals' views on helping others gain understanding and perspective of their context included:

- Leadership should do the work of different levels, so they gain empathy for what their people are up against
- You truly can't understand it, so please don't pretend to
- It is not like the TV shows; please don't assume it is
- It is demoralizing to hear that everyone in our profession is bad constantly, don't generalize

Some of the things helping professionals wish you knew about their context:

- We make a lot of personal sacrifices to do our job
- Pace of work is rushed, and it is not possible to do the amount of work in the time allotted
- Emotional and mental toll it takes to do our jobs
- We are all human, and most of us are doing the very best we can
- We are too busy to take care of ourselves
- What we see can't be erased from your mind even after you go home
- It is more than a job, and to some extent, we are always on duty

# Psychological Safety for Those Providing Safety

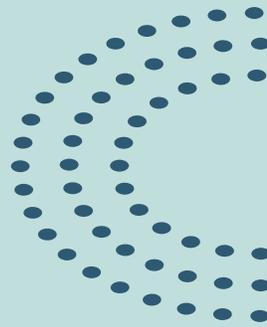


When we know it is not safe to make a mistake at work, Amy Edmondson states there is a lack of psychological safety. Working in an environment with a lack of psychological safety prevents us from learning and iterating towards more effective solutions. Somehow in many helping professions, the professions meant to create security for others, we have created the opposite of a psychologically safe environment. This is probably one of, if not the most critical aspects to restore within the helping professions. While all helping professions have cases of people who cross the line and intentionally hurt those they are supposed to be serving, many who make a genuine mistake because of their humanity are grouped together and dealt with in the same manner, creating an environment that almost becomes impossible to work in. This lack of security contributes to the mass exodus from these professions and puts our society at risk of not having access to the help when we need it. One helping professional shared, “we are real people. That mistakes happen, and that doesn’t make us evil.” Another helping professional wrote, “the more you work, the more likely you will make a mistake and wind up fired or in prison.”

Every human can make a mistake, and that mistake does not make them evil. We must create a society where they are not made out to be evil. There is a fair distance between a mistake and evil, but that space has been extinguished somehow. True justice and the path to a society being at its best will require that space to re-emerge, to be handled with grace and compassion, and for each person’s humanity to be given value. This is true for not only helping professions but all of humanity.

To rid our world of pain (crime, disease, poverty, etc.), we create these helping professions and task them with carrying out complex missions that are often underfunded and traumatic, causing them to put their own well-being at risk. On top of giving up their well-being, they are often put in under-resourced situations and expected to perform as if it is a fully resourced situation. They work extra hours because we need to make sure every 911 call is answered, every student can read, every patient can get the care that gives them the best chance of life, etc., but we treat them as if they are given fully adequate rest, support, and resources to always be at their best. They are made to feel guilty for needing mental health support, a day off, or a change of position. They are made to feel as though they can’t ever be going through a rough time personally or admit when they are not emotionally capable of doing their job that day because they would have to give up on the career that gives them purpose and brings them joy. Safety is a fundamental human need, one they are tasked with providing in their profession, but because of the systems at play, they do not get to experience or benefit from that same safety. This critical conversation needs to be continued, and all perspectives heard as we re-imagine and re-design a future of well-being for all.

# Individual Resilience becoming Community Resilience



One helping professional shared that the “exposure to so much sadness comes at a price emotionally and physically.” Research has shown it also comes with other prices, increased chance of divorce, increased likelihood of addiction, early death, etc. Resilience is about how individuals rebound and recharge in the face of stressful and challenging circumstances. Resilience becomes observable after the pressure of challenging circumstances, but what about in the context of helping professionals who can be in challenging circumstances daily? Another helping professional shared they don’t want “self-care, burnout lectures. We all know all the evidence-based stuff; information is not the issue. Those generic conversations really just make it worse, as it often feels belittling. The reality is we do hard work, and they’re oftentimes not a way around it.”

The helping professionals that Empower Fort Worth serves face stressful and challenging circumstances almost daily. Their capacity for resilience diminishes when there are no systems in place for them to have the time and space to process their stress and recharge effectively. Their space for recharging is often during their off-duty time and during their work-to-home transition times (which range anywhere from 0-60 minutes, depending on their commute). In sharing their stories, some of the barriers to environments that support resilience emerged:

- Hard to leave work at work
- Vicarious trauma can’t be avoided
- Unrealistic expectations
- Short staffed is an ongoing issue
- Leadership often makes the job harder because of their behaviors and beliefs
  - o Care more about protecting and promoting themselves
  - o Demand work more hours, limit vacation
  - o See needing mental health resources as an indicator of inability to do the job and a possible end to their career
- Media

In addition to time, the helping professionals’ support networks often influence their ability to recharge and their overall levels of resilience. The helping professionals also shared their hope for systemic changes that would allow for the time and space to do the work to remain resilient and help those they serve in the best way possible. Often their solutions shed light on the systemic issues that are preventing our individuals and communities from being at their best:

- Less overtime, more time off
- Better pay so do not have to work extra jobs
- Mental Health workers that understand our context
- Collaboration groups where won’t be judged but understood
- Time for “all the paperwork and documentation” that keeps increasing each year
- Leadership that cares about Mental Health
- Asking for help without career consequences



# RESILIENCE

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Life is stressful, and we all need time and space to lean into resilience. In many ways, this became evident as we tackled the Covid Pandemic, but it has always been an underlying struggle our communities face. Looking to the future, by taking a more collective perspective on being resilient, we create the conditions for community sustainability. Shifting from a punitive culture to one of grace and compassion is needed not just for helping professionals but for all the Fort Worth community to create a more resilient community. Grace and compassion look to the future, focusing on what could be and becoming better both individually and as a team and organization. Whereas punitive measures look to the here and now, focused on control, reducing risk, minimizing mistakes, and maintaining the status quo. Somewhere along the way, that balance of the here and now and the future has gotten off, but in creating the environment for more resilient helping professionals, Empower Fort Worth can start bringing it back in balance.

Community resilience requires creating shared mental models of how helping professionals or community members can challenge and support each other. It is rallying around the core goal of a better Fort Worth so everyone can individually and collectively experience well-being. By shifting the focus to community resilience and sustainability, it becomes a way for community members and helping professionals to know they are not alone and feel like they can collectively build the capacity to endure and overcome pressures in a way that sustains the well-being of the Fort Worth community. Helping professionals believe in the power of the community so they are the perfect starting point for tackling community resilience.

# Designing a Path Forward

Community Well-Being and Community Resilience



Love and Support goes a  
long way

(a helping professional)

Love and support will go a long way to developing not only helping professional's well-being and resilience, but also the Fort Worth community's Well-Being and Resilience. When empathy, compassion, love and security start as the guiding principles of the systems in place, we will begin to see the systemic change that will allow for all to have the resilience to Empower Fort Worth.

This report was designed to share the voices of those surveyed and does not indicate that all helping professionals have the same opinion, needs, or thoughts about this issue. It is meant to be a start of a conversation that can continue to push towards a better place for all community members.