



# VICARIOUS TRAUMA:

Managing the Impact of Trauma Exposure  
on CASA and FCRB volunteers

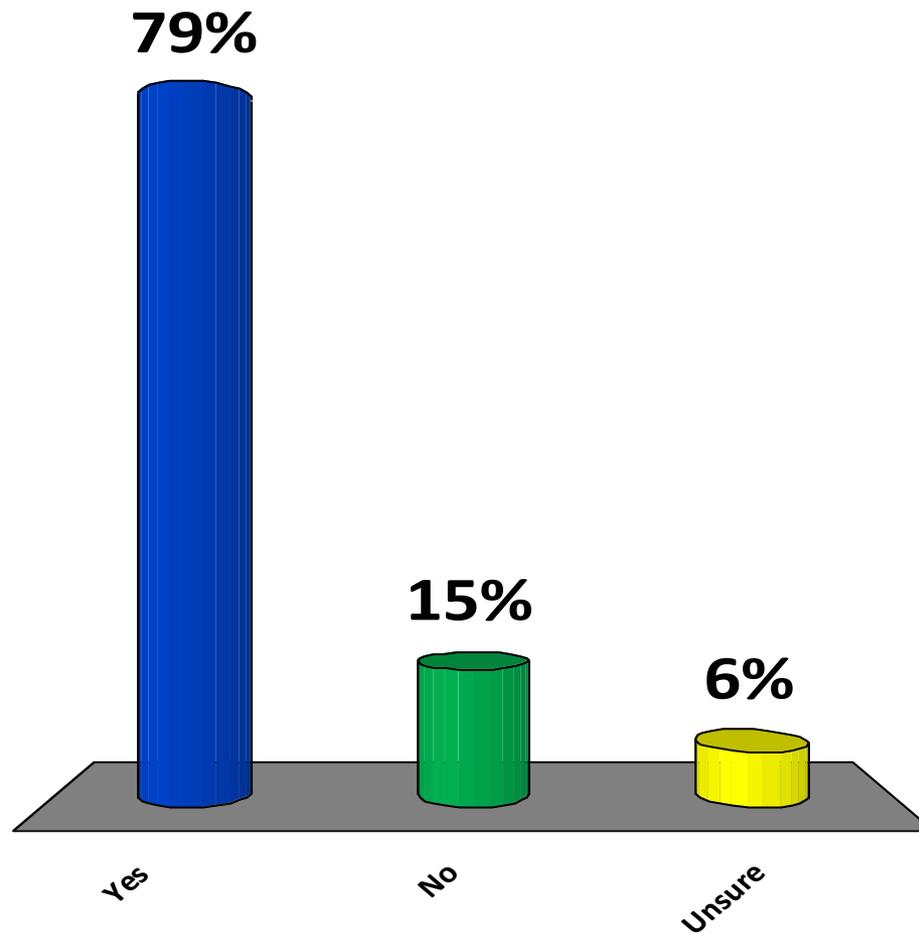
**Kirsten Lewis, M.Ed**

KSL Research, Training, & Consultation, LLC

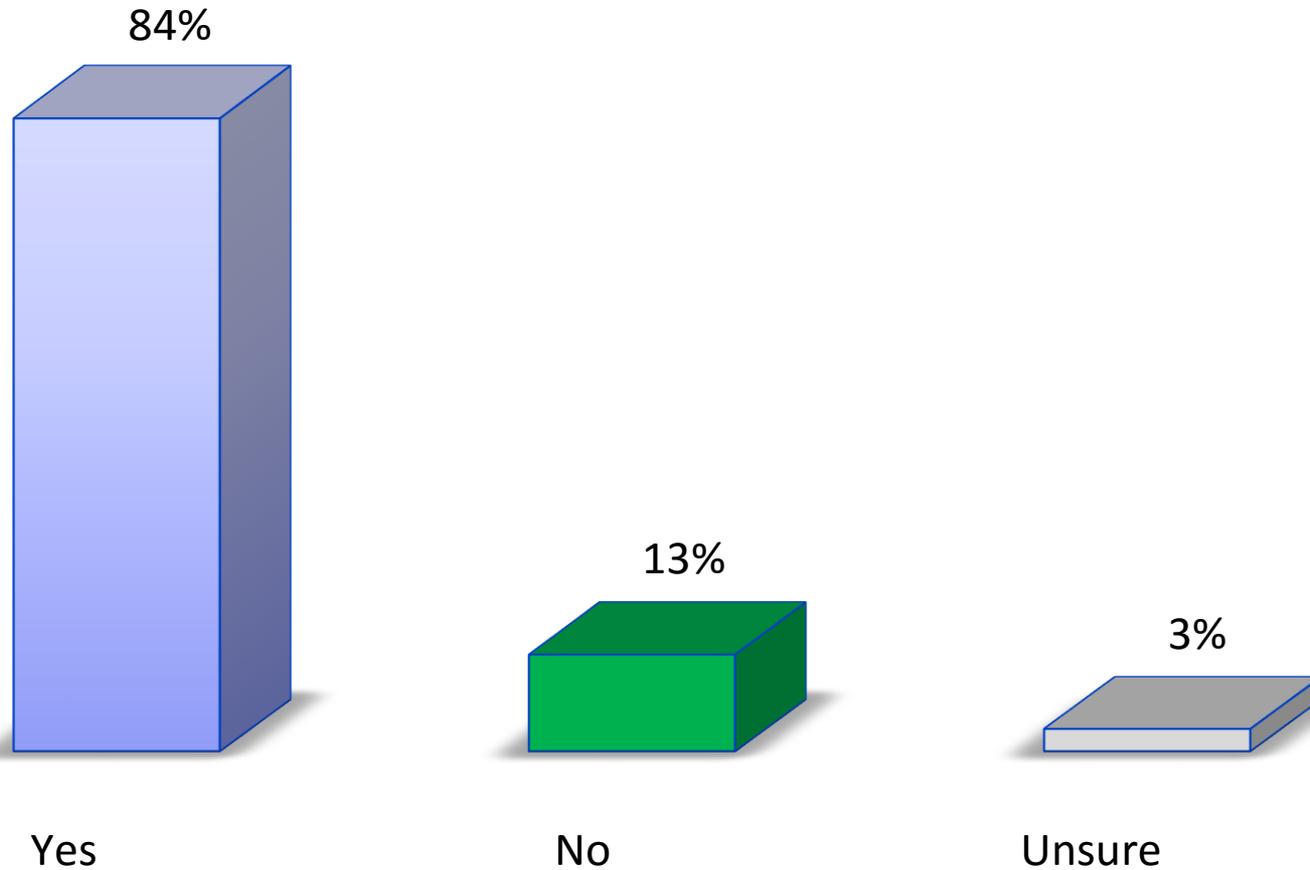
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# Do you believe that working with the court has changed the way you view the world?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Unsure



# Do you believe that working with the court has changed the way you view the world?



N=624

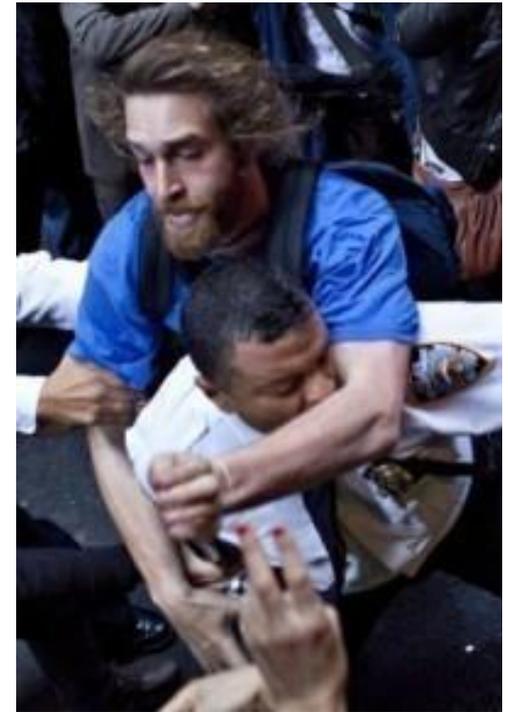
# TRAUMATIC STRESS

- ▶ Traumatic stress differs from organizational stress in a number of ways:
  1. The event is often sudden or unexpected
  2. Creates some level of distress
  3. Can overwhelm coping capacity
  4. Has the potential to alter the way one views the world
- ▶ What constitutes a traumatic event is in the eye of the beholder

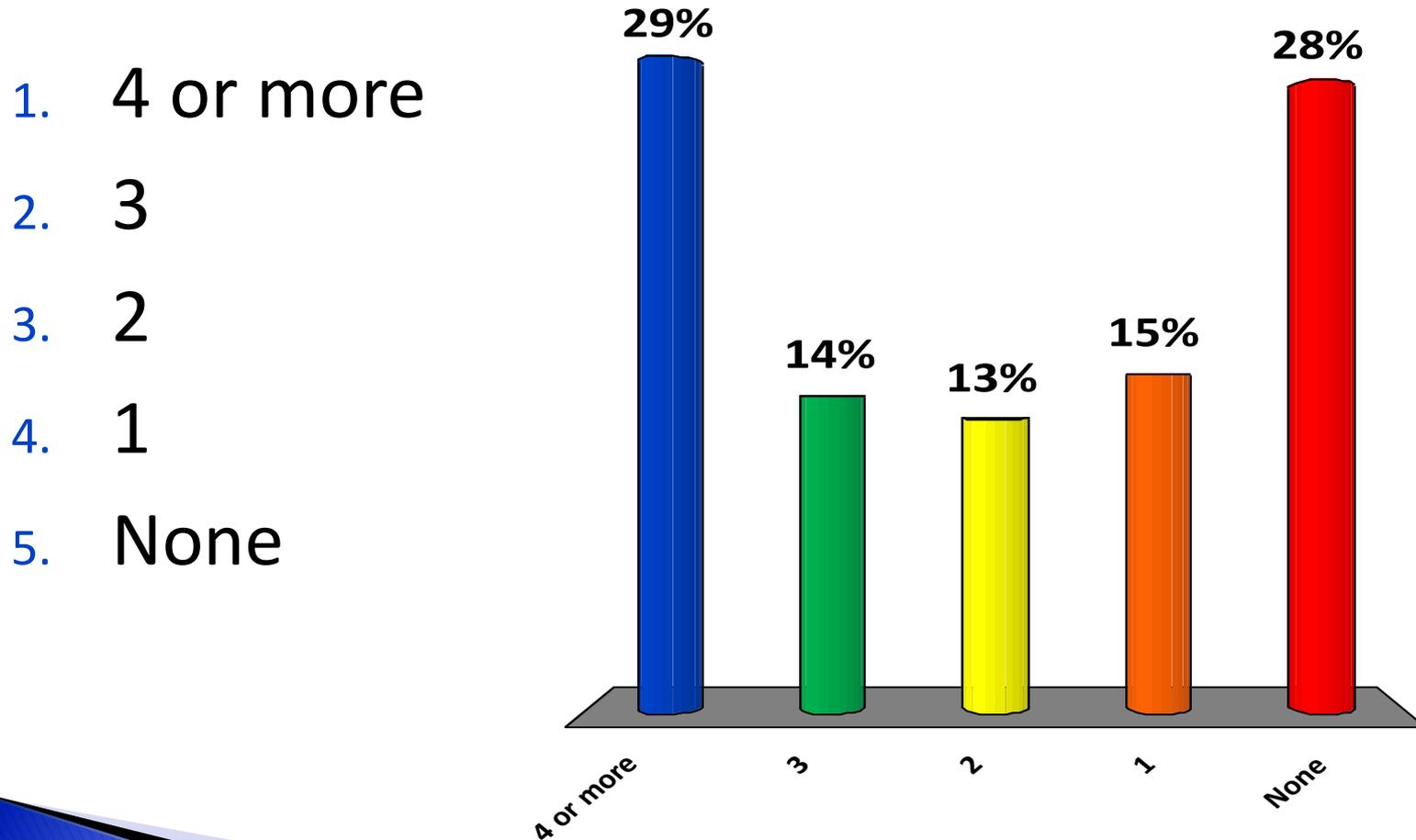


# PRIMARY TRAUMATIC STRESS

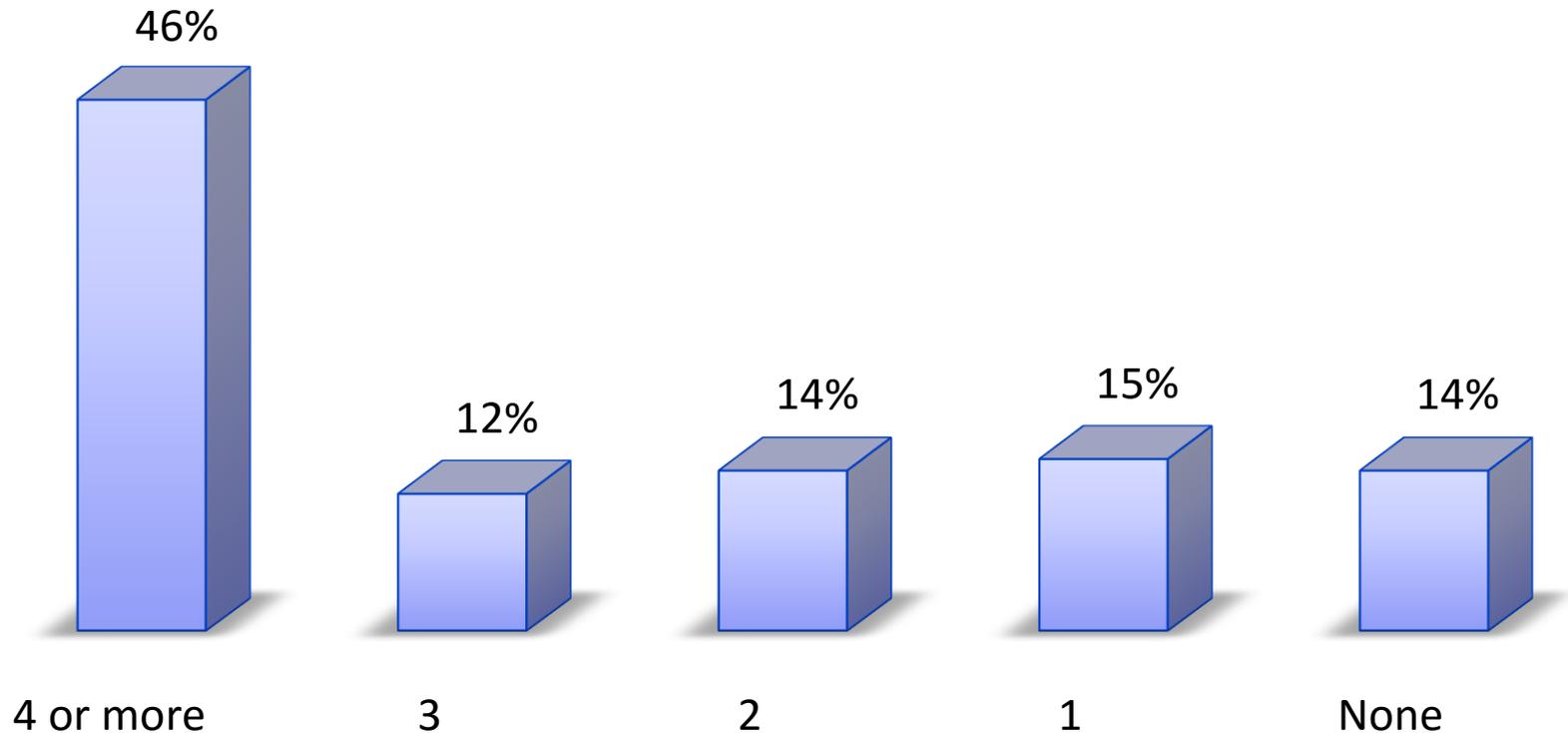
- ▶ Primary traumatic stress can occur when personally experiencing or observing a disturbing incident
  - Observing violence in the courtroom
  - Receiving threats
  - Experiencing hostile/aggressive conduct from lawyers or litigants
  - Witnessing unstable and/or unpredictable behavior
  - Observing medical emergencies (staff or public)



# How many primary traumatic events have you experienced as a volunteer?



# How many primary traumatic events have you experienced in your career?



N=831

# PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA

- ▶ Headache
- ▶ Muscle tension
- ▶ Increased heart rate
- ▶ Higher blood pressure
- ▶ Fatigue
- ▶ Exhaustion



# COGNITIVE SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA

- ▶ Shock, disbelief, and numbness
  - Especially for unexpected events
- ▶ Intrusive imagery of the event
- ▶ Rumination
  - Trying to make sense of it
- ▶ Questioning one's world views
  - Viewing the world and the people in it as less predictable and less controllable



(Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999)

# EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA

- ▶ Anger
- ▶ Anxiety
- ▶ Irritability
- ▶ Depression
- ▶ Sadness
- ▶ Guilt



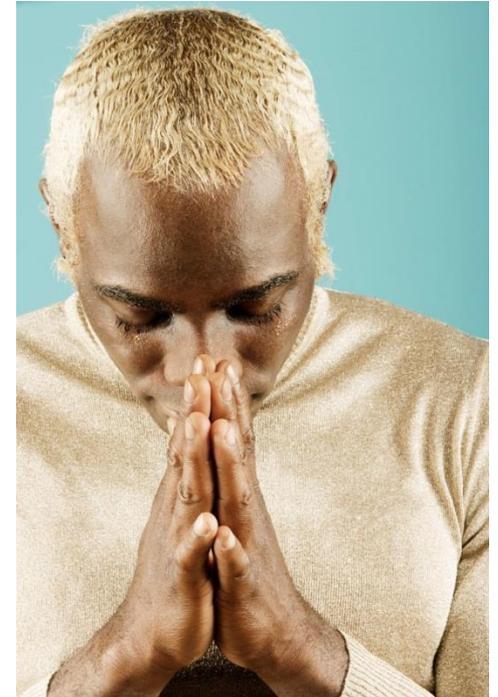
# BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA

- ▶ Decreased or excessive eating
- ▶ Alcohol / drug use
- ▶ Hyper-startle
- ▶ 1000-yard stare
- ▶ Sleep disturbance
- ▶ Withdrawal
- ▶ Family discord
- ▶ Crying spells
- ▶ Hyper-vigilance
- ▶ Violence



# SPIRITUAL SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA

- ▶ Anger at God or spiritual equivalent
- ▶ Question world view
- ▶ Withdrawal from faith-based community
- ▶ Cessation of faith-related practices





# **SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS**

THE IMPACT ON PROFESSIONALS

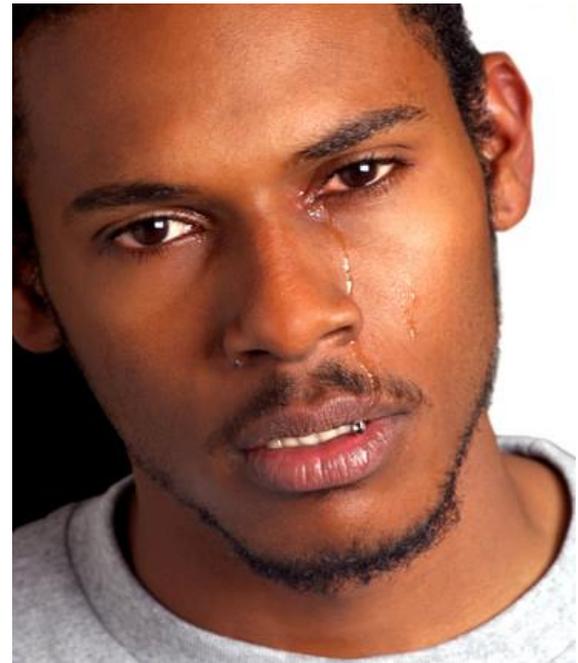
# SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS “COMPASSION FATIGUE”

- ▶ Professionals begin to experience trauma symptoms themselves due to their secondary exposure to human suffering
  - Hyper-vigilance
  - Intrusive thoughts
  - Feeling detached and numb
  - Difficulty falling or staying asleep
  - Irritability or outbursts of anger
  - Difficulty concentrating



# Those who work with abused and neglected children are called upon to “bear witness to the crime”

-Judith Herman, 1992



# VOLUNTEERS WITH THE COURT

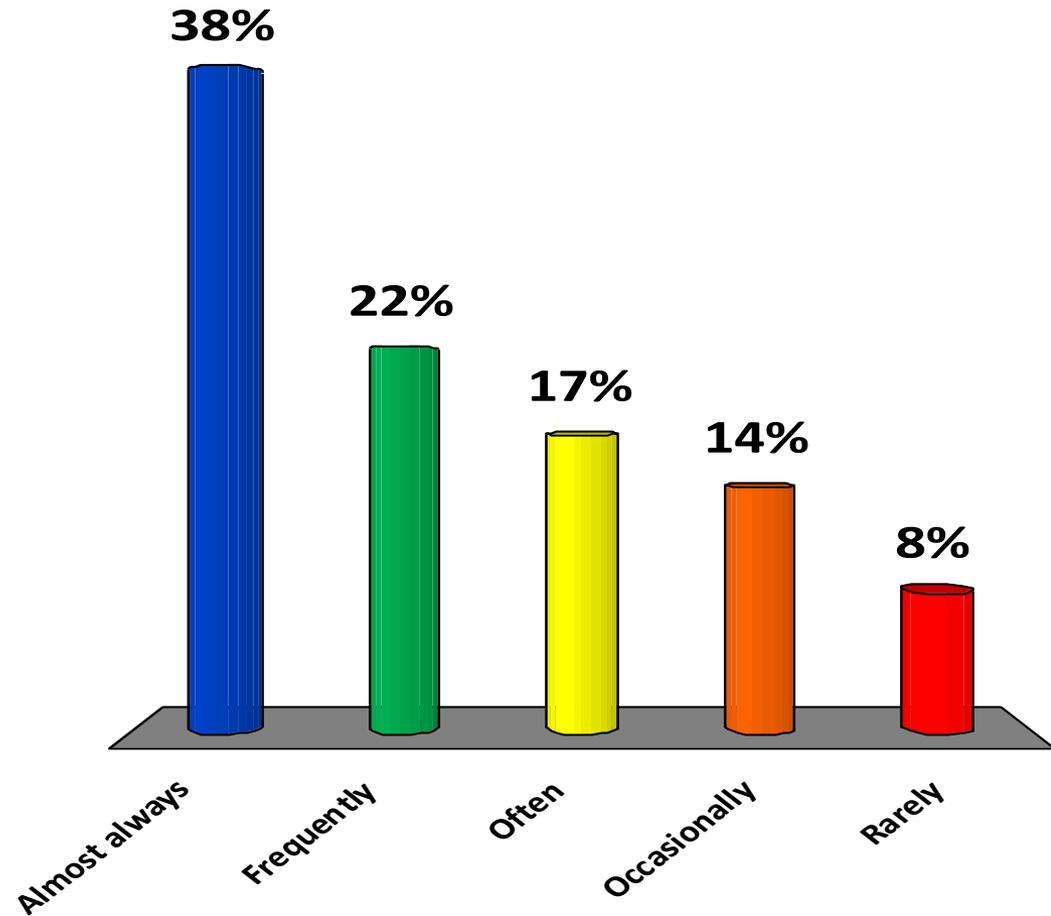
Exposed to disturbing aspects of human behavior

- ▶ Review documents and reports
- ▶ Interview children, family members, and professionals
- ▶ Appear in court
- ▶ Follow up to ensure plans are being followed and mandated review hearing are being held
- ▶ Update the court
- ▶ Bear witness to injustice

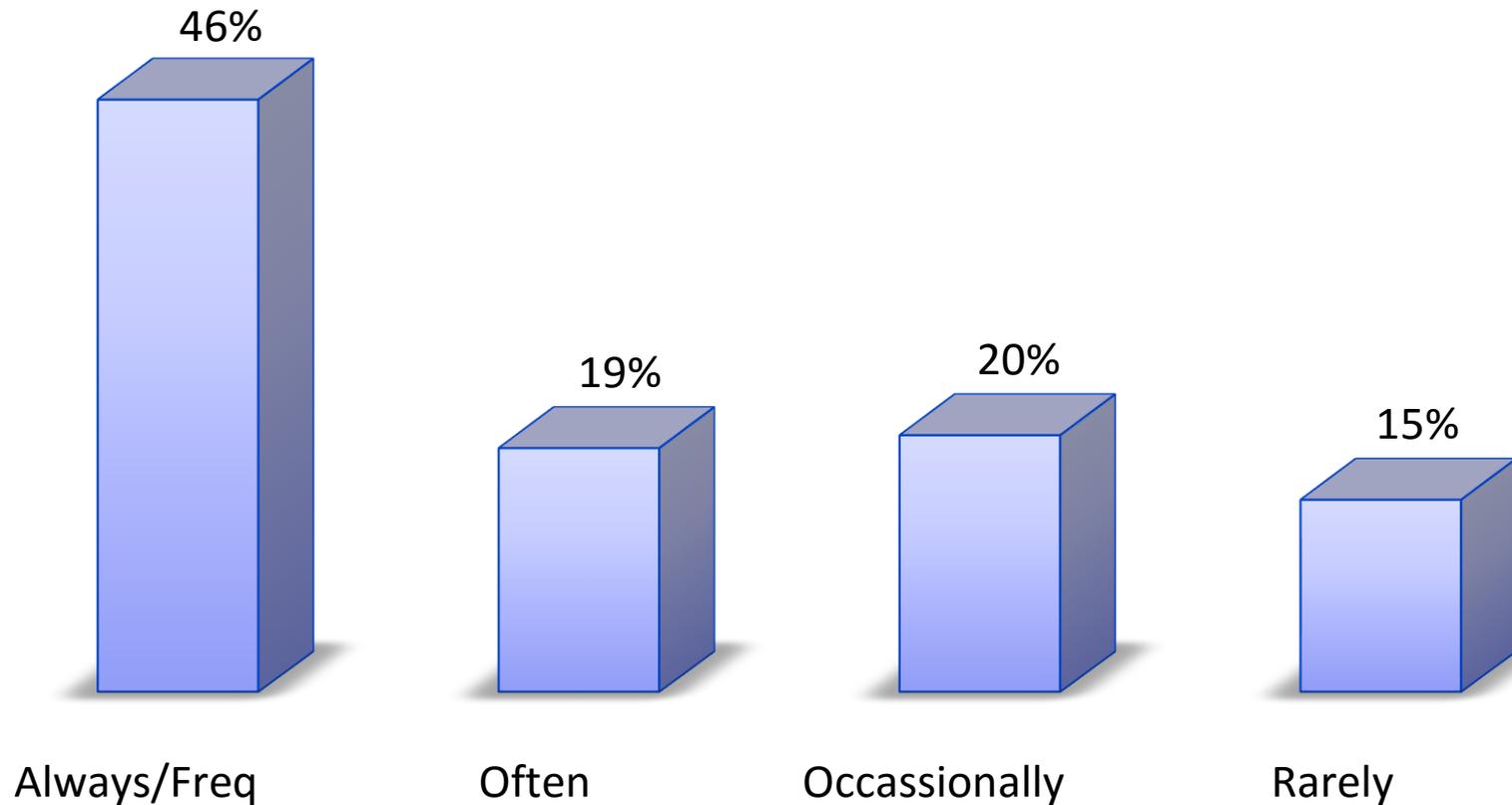


# In the course of your work, how often are you exposed to traumatic material?

1. Almost always
2. Frequently
3. Often
4. Occasionally
5. Rarely



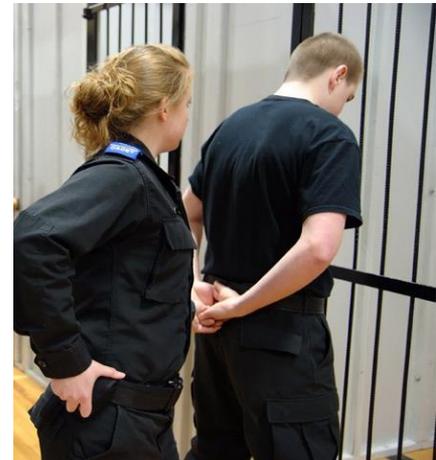
# In the course of your day, how often are you exposed to traumatic material?



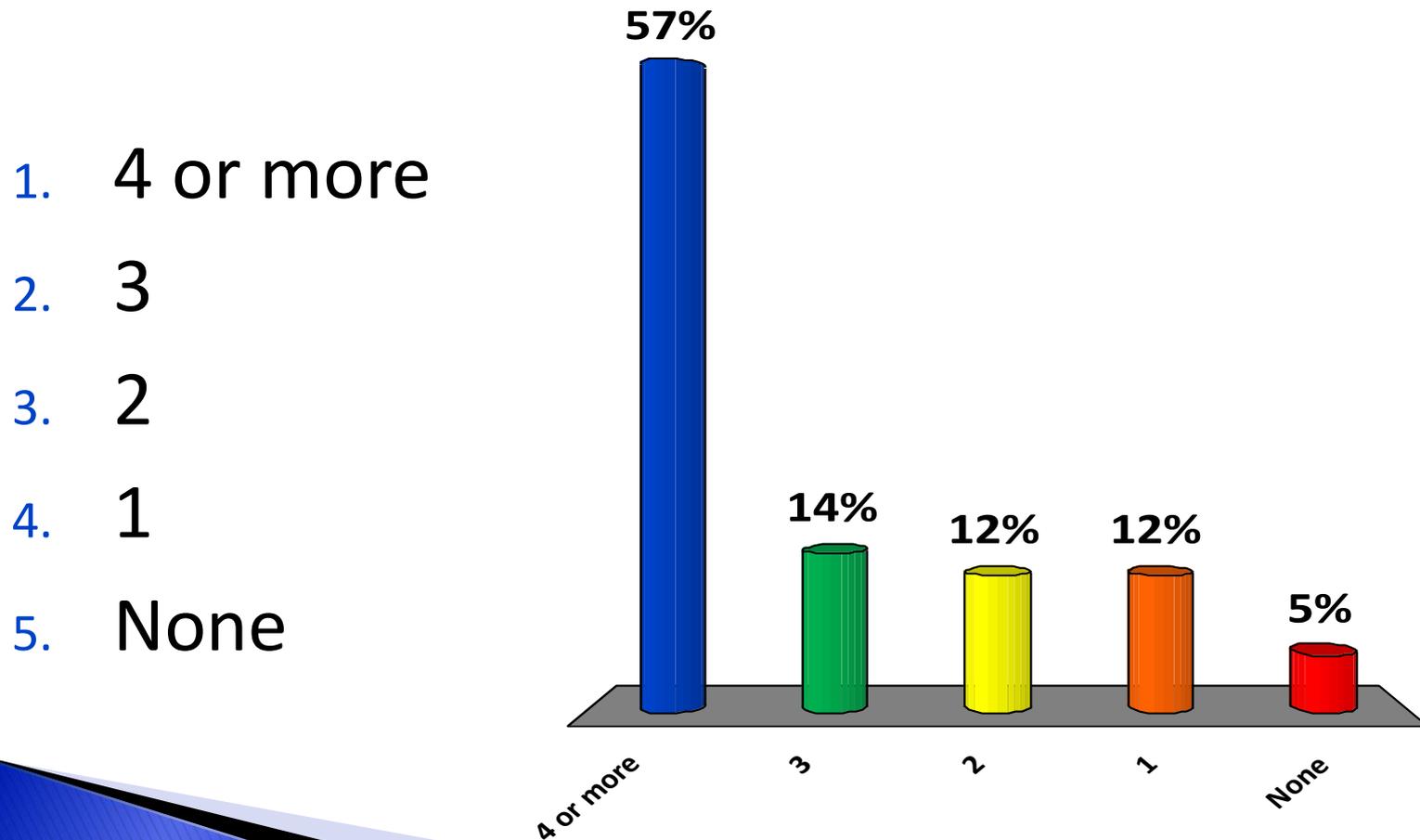
N=825

# SECONDARY TRAUMATIC EVENTS

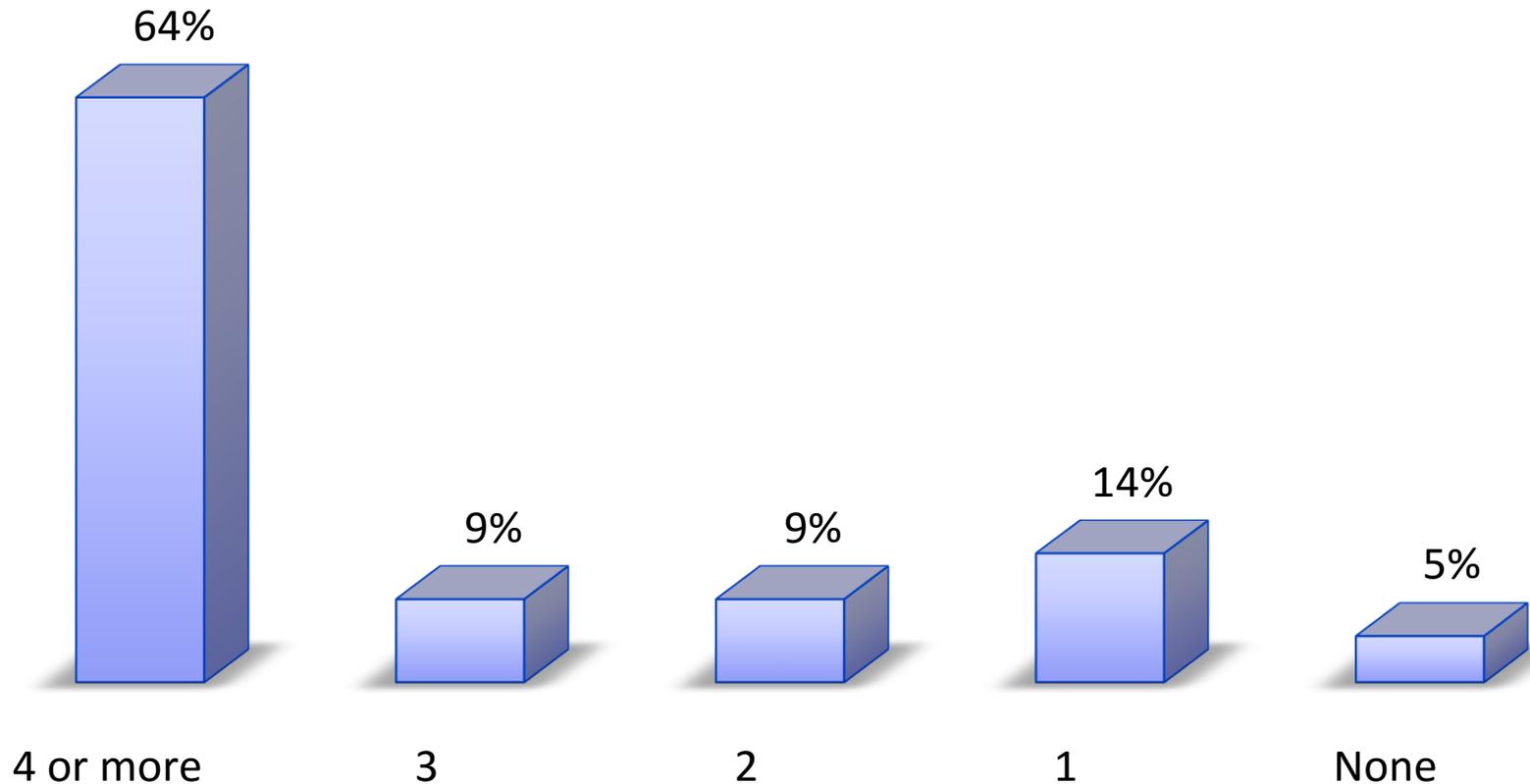
- ▶ Traumatic stress that results from indirect exposure to disturbing incidents
  - Self-destructive behavior of a child
  - Re-victimization of a child after court intervention
  - Death of a child or child's loved one
    - (murder, suicide, accident, drug overdose)
  - Post office effect
    - Feeling like the onslaught of cases and abused children is never-ending



# How many secondary traumatic events have you experienced as a volunteer?



# How many secondary traumatic events have you experienced in your career?



N=811

# Secondary Trauma Symptoms

## Court (N=72)

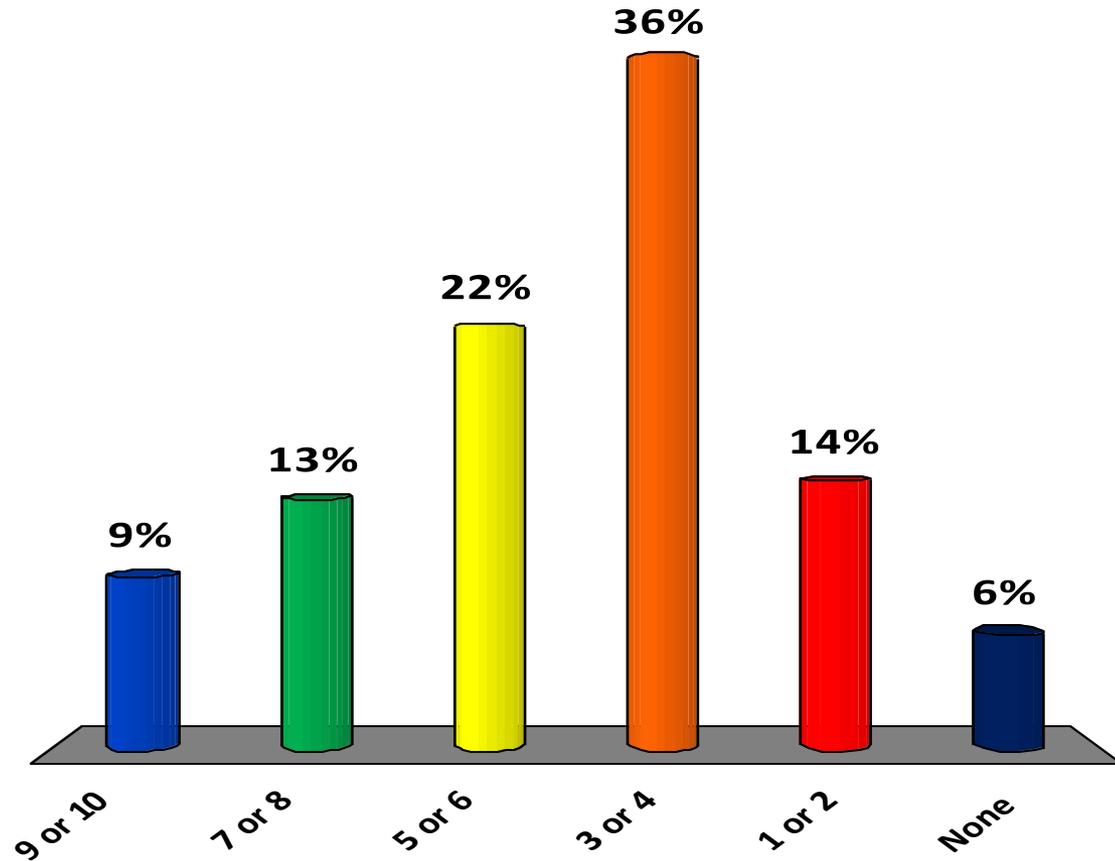
1. Sleep disturbances (65%)
2. Increased anger, disgust, sadness, and/or distress (63%)
3. Loss of trust (58%)
4. Lower concentration (58%)
5. Feeling detached or numb (54%)
6. Hyper-vigilance (53%)
7. Avoidant behavior(s) (51%)
8. Chronic exhaustion (44%)
9. Preoccupation with trauma (43%)
10. Loss of innocence (42%)

## CASA/FCRB (N=207)

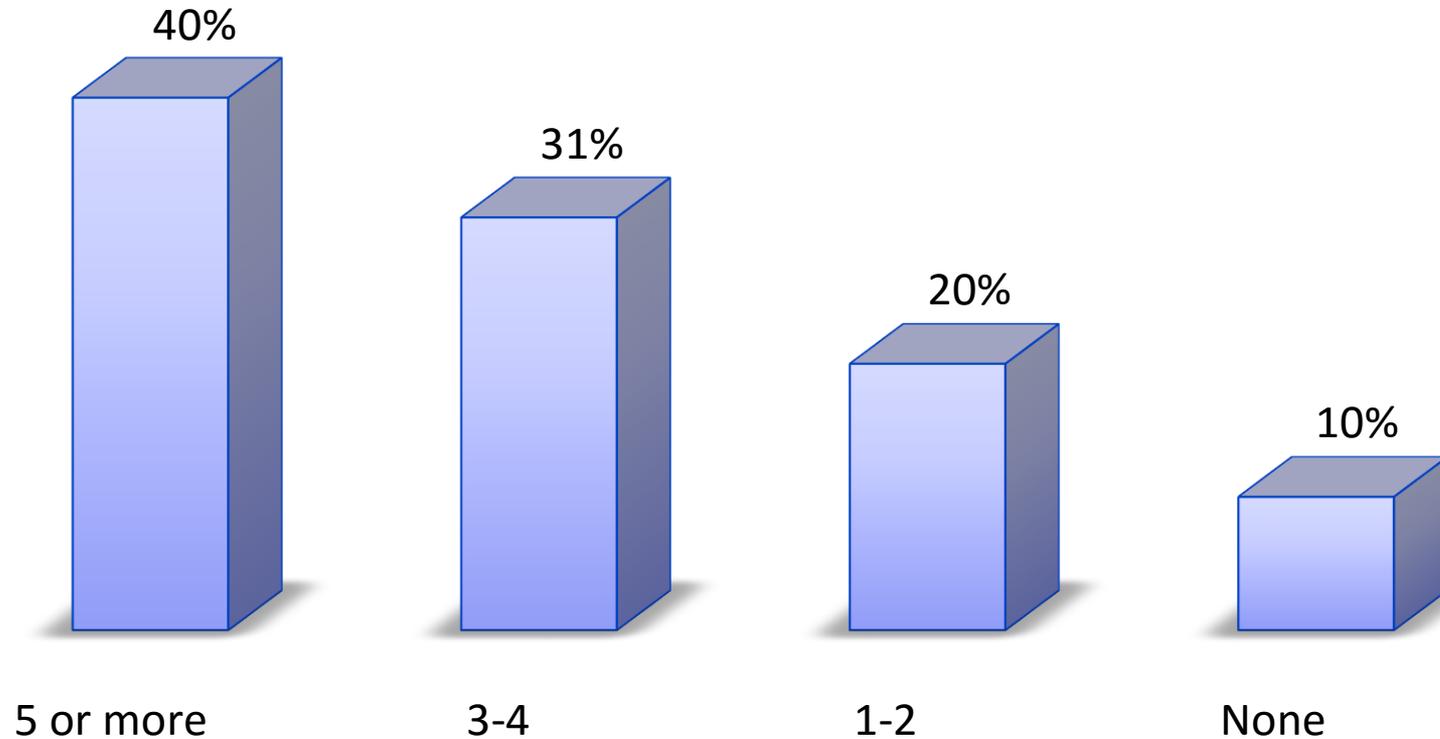
1. Increased anger, disgust, sadness, and/or distress (59%)
2. Loss of trust (53%)
3. Sleep disturbances (52%)
4. Feeling detached or numb (36%)
5. Lower concentration (36%)
6. Chronic exhaustion (34%)
7. Preoccupation with trauma (34%)
8. Loss of innocence (31%)
9. Avoidant behavior(s) (27%)
10. Hyper-vigilance (26%)

# How many symptoms of secondary trauma have you experienced in the past 2 months?

1. 9 or 10
2. 7 or 8
3. 5 or 6
4. 3 or 4
5. 1 or 2
6. None



# How many symptoms of secondary trauma have you experienced in the past 2 months?



N=804

# VICARIOUS TRAUMA

- ▶ Exposure to the trauma of someone else can cause people to vicariously experience a change in their own world view
  - Beliefs about humanity
  - Views of the world (safety)
  - Chronic suspicion
  - Cynicism
  - Loss of empathy



(McCann & Pearlman, 1995)

# Vicarious Trauma Symptoms

## Court (N=72)

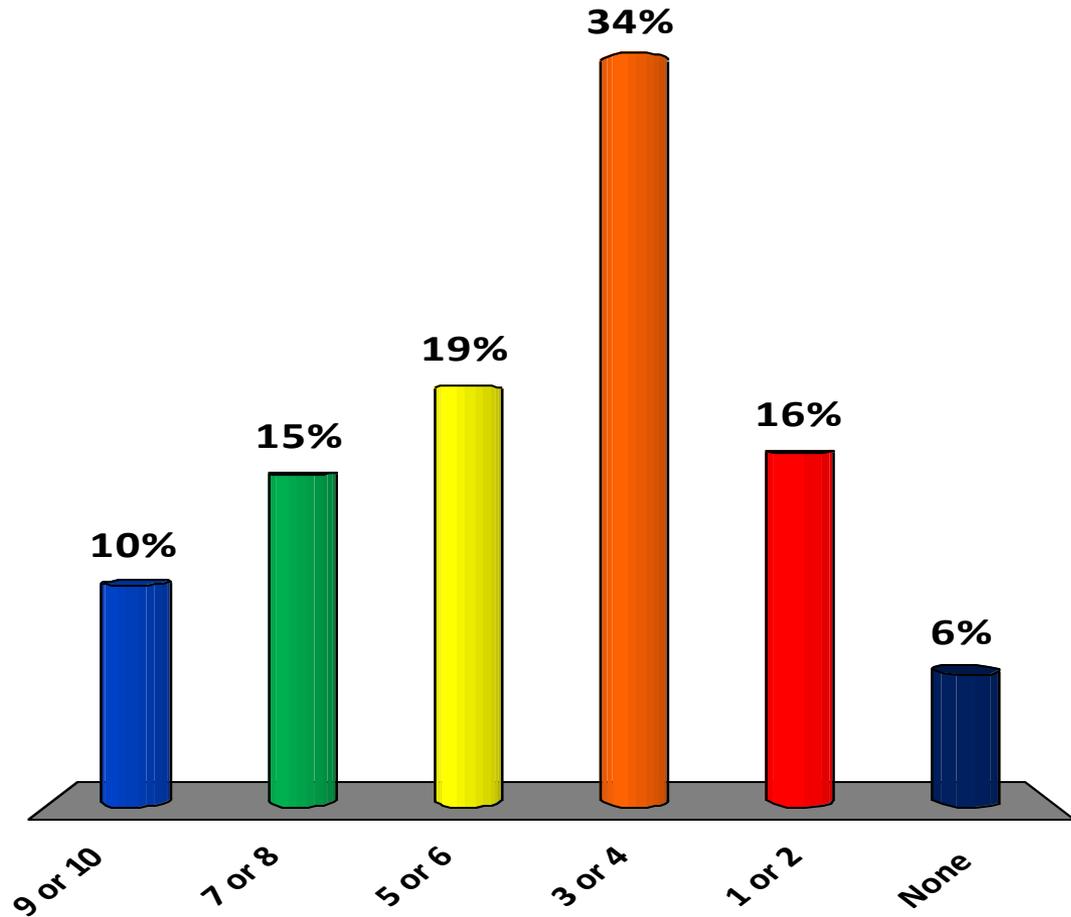
1. Less tolerant (74%)
2. Increased cynicism (72%)
3. Feeling desensitized (68%)
4. Loss of empathy (63%)
5. Chronic suspicion (60%)
6. Distorted world view (58%)
7. Intrusive thoughts (50%)
8. Intrusive imagery (42%)
9. Interpersonal relationship problems (38%)
10. Question spirituality (26%)

## CASA/FCRB (N=207)

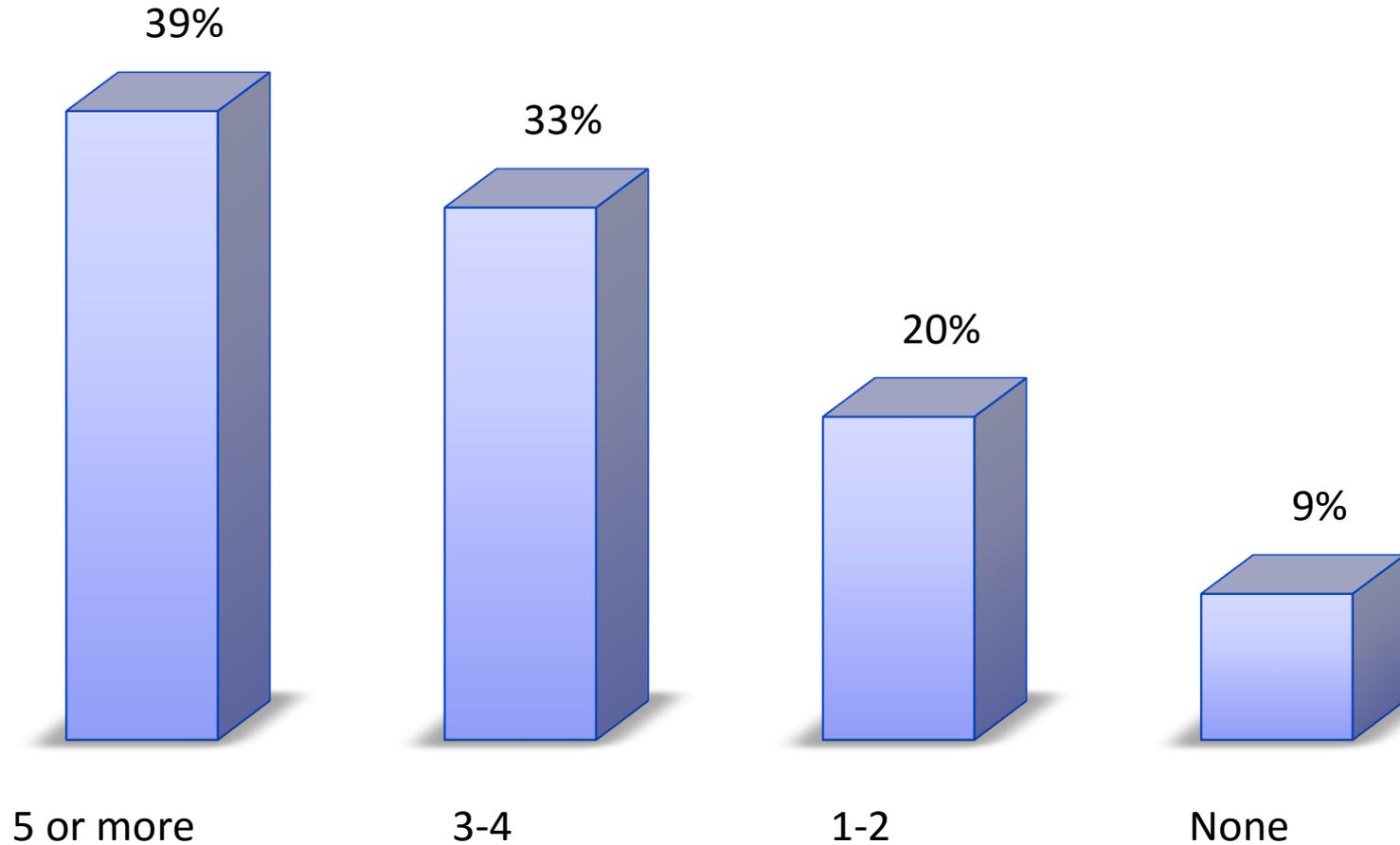
1. Increased cynicism (61%)
2. Less tolerant (48%)
3. Feeling desensitized (45%)
4. Distorted world view (43%)
5. Chronic suspicion (33%)
6. Intrusive thoughts (33%)
7. Loss of empathy (28%)
8. Intrusive imagery (22%)
9. Interpersonal relationship problems (22%)
10. Question spirituality (19%)

# How many symptoms of vicarious trauma have you experienced in the past 2 months?

1. 9 or 10
2. 7 or 8
3. 5 or 6
4. 3 or 4
5. 1 or 2
6. None



# How many symptoms of vicarious trauma have you experienced in the past 2 months?



N=788

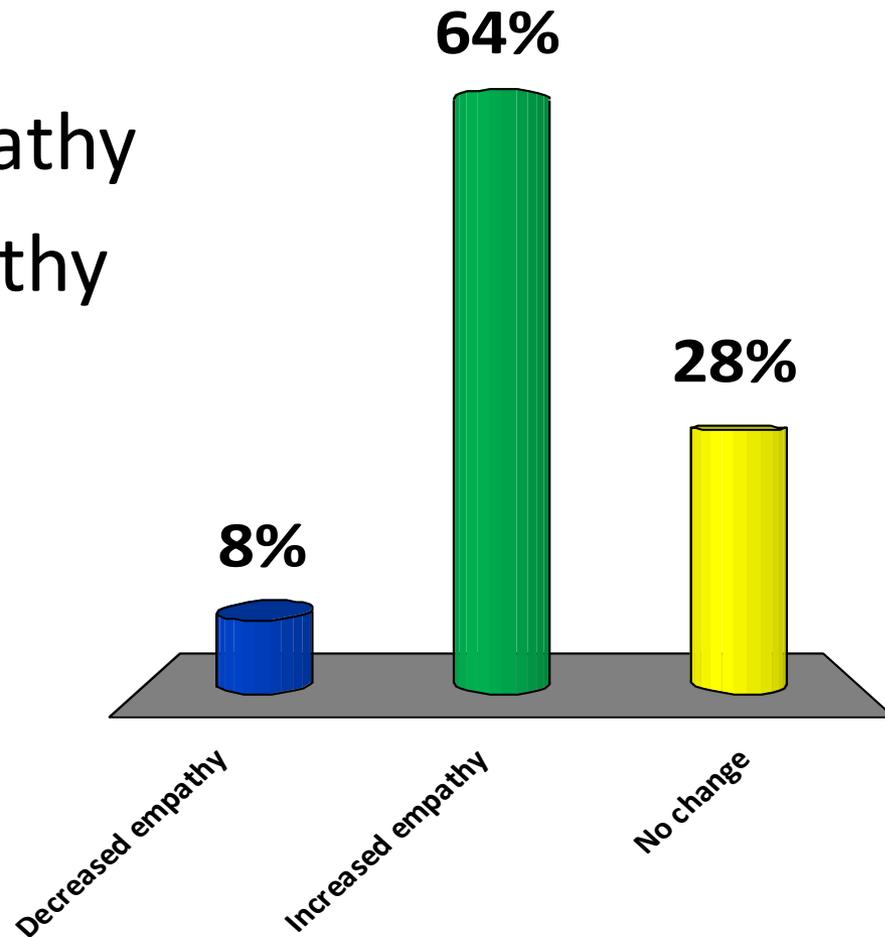


# EMPATHY

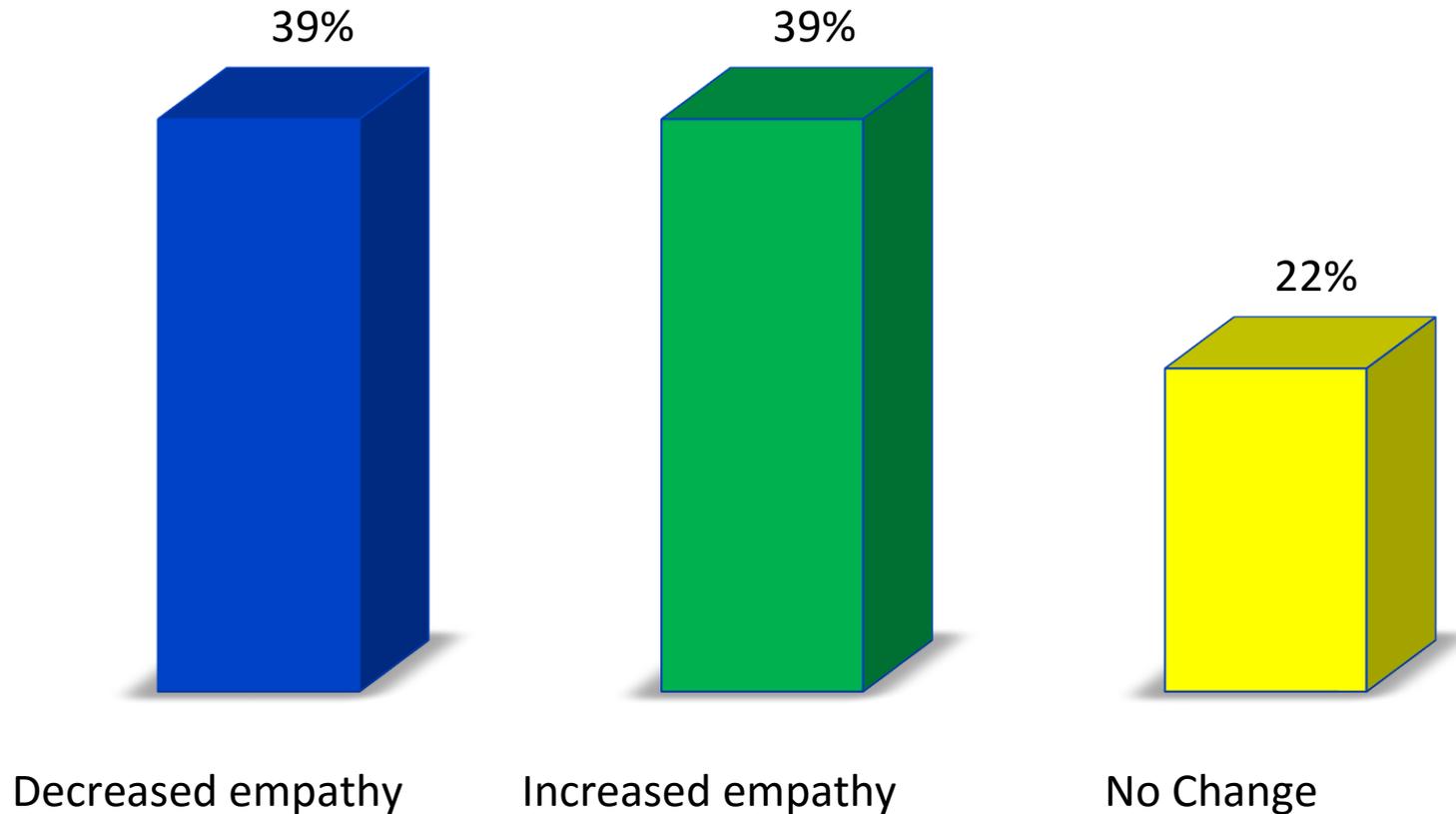
A Double-Edged Sword

# Have your empathetic abilities toward the youth you work with changed over your career?

1. Decreased empathy
2. Increased empathy
3. No change



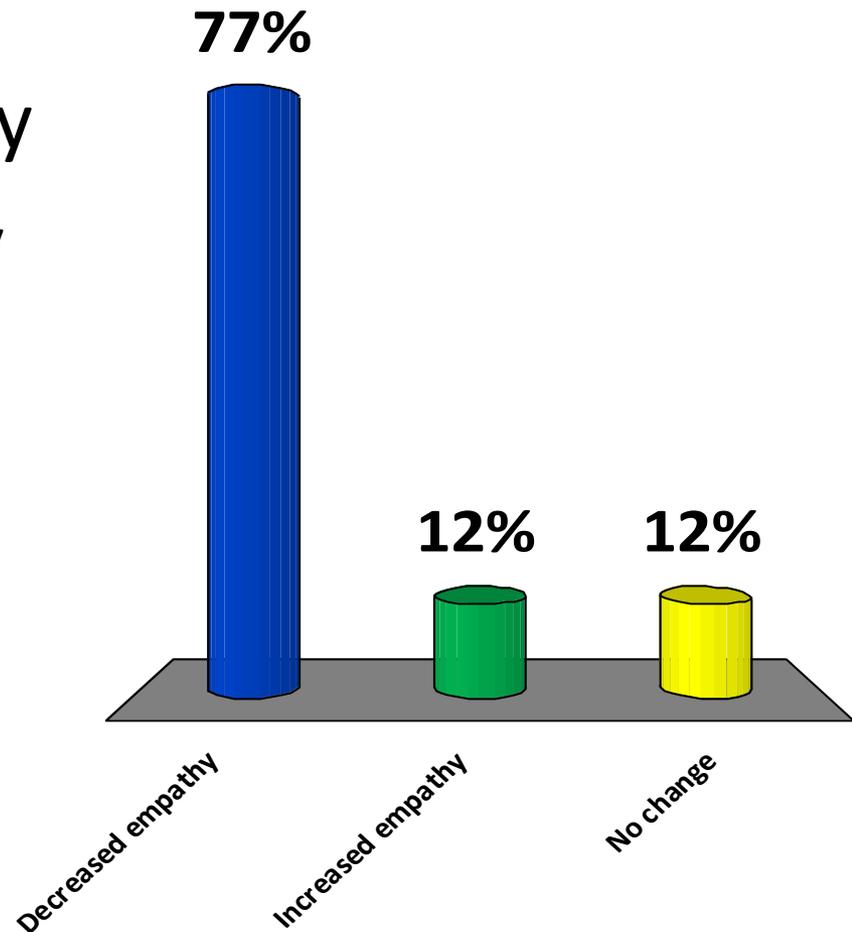
# Have your empathetic abilities toward the youth you work with changed over your career?



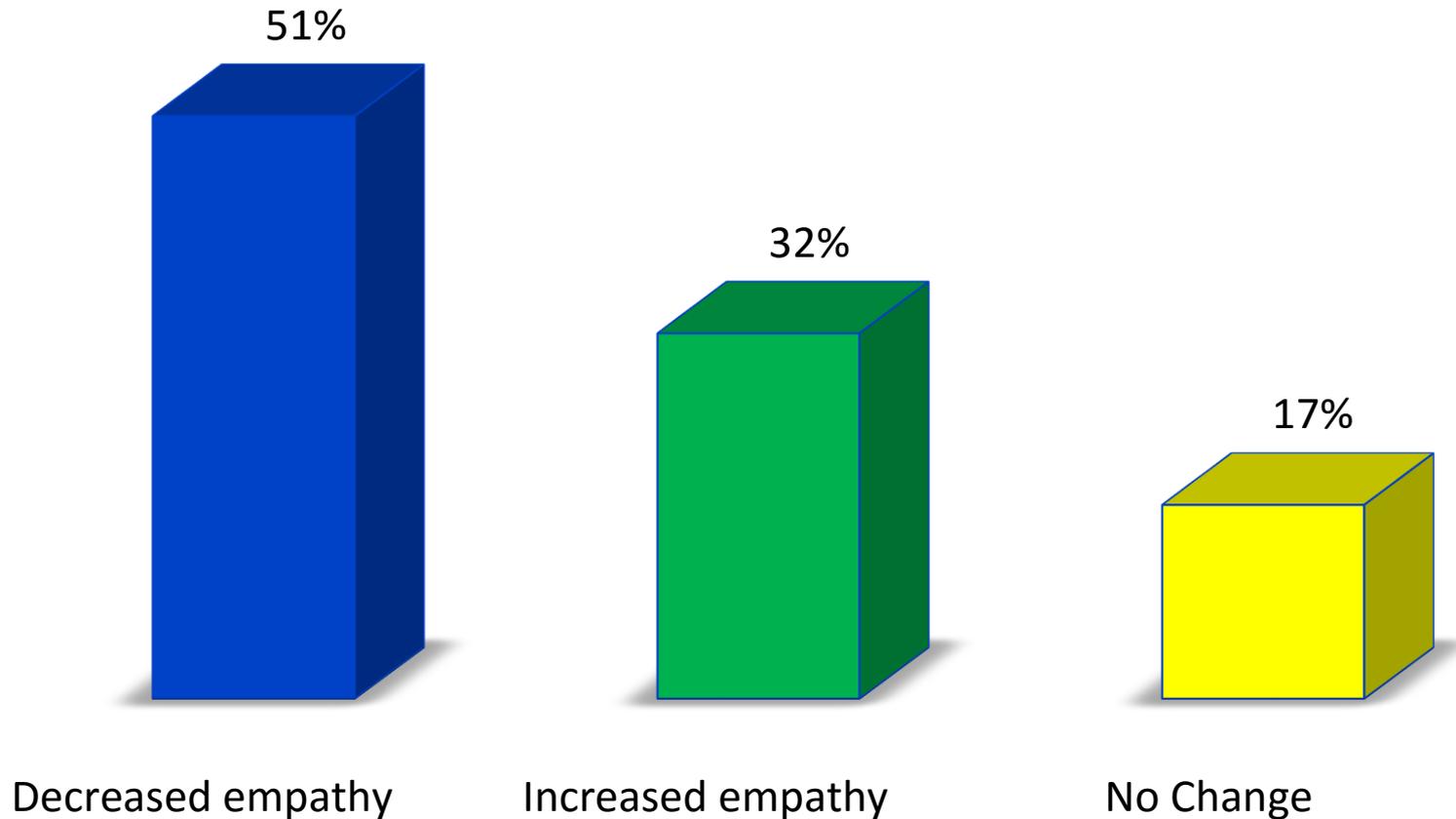
N= 366

# Have your empathetic abilities toward the parents you work with changed over your career?

1. Decreased empathy
2. Increased empathy
3. No change



# Have your empathetic abilities toward the parents you work with changed over your career?



N=311

# EMPATHY

- ▶ Empathy is the pathway through which trauma is vicariously transferred
- ▶ Ironically, the very quality that allows professionals to be most effective in their work also makes them the most vulnerable



(Figley, 1995)

# THE MIRROR NEURON SYSTEM

- ▶ A neural 'wi-fi' in the brain that monitors what is happening in other people
  - Emotions
  - Movement
  - Intention
- ▶ Observing others causes parallel stimulation of brain regions in the spectator to that of the person performing a behavior



# EMOTIONAL EMPATHY

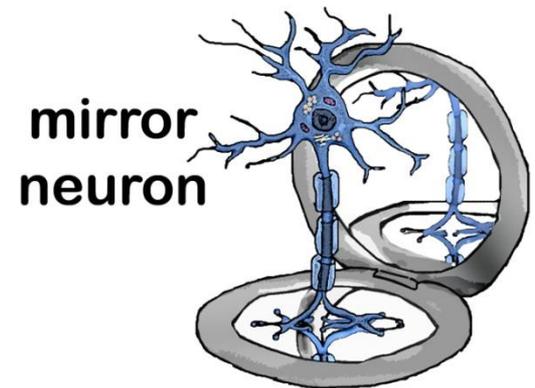
- ▶ Empathy is believed to be a special form of neural resonance
- ▶ Unconscious, intuitive knowledge is shockingly powerful
  - The conscious brain processes 50 bits of info/sec.
  - The unconscious brain processes 11 million bits of info/sec.
- ▶ Emotional neural resonance is fast, automatic, and pre-cognitive
  - Evolutionary function
  - Enables humans to understand and predict behavior



(Carter, 2015; Fogassi, 2011; Molnar-Szakacs, 2011)

# TRAUMA EXPOSURE

- ▶ Secondary (indirect) exposure to trauma can cause physiological stress responses in professionals that are similar to the responses of the person who experienced the primary (direct) traumatic event
- ▶ While the reactions to an event may be less intense through secondary exposure, they can be damaging to observers nonetheless
  - May result in depression and anxiety, as well as altering their values, beliefs, and world views



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# STRATEGIES

Managing Traumatic Stress

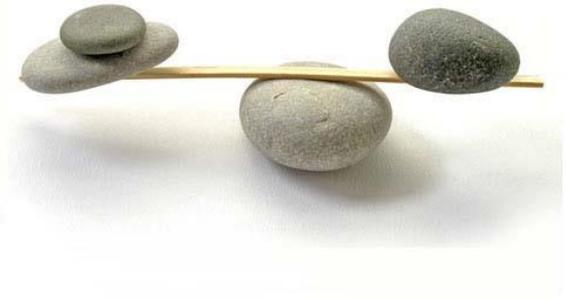
# UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS

- ▶ Reactions to trauma exposure are adaptive and protective
- ▶ Conscious awareness = conscious choice
- ▶ Cultivating a an environment that promotes healthy coping, awareness, and self-care practices
  - Addressing job impact is paramount to sustaining the highest quality of professionalism
- ▶ Removing the judgments and inhuman expectations are precursors to healing and living in an integrated state
  - Mind, body, emotion, and spirit



# BUILDING RESISTANCE TO STRESS

- Engaging in regular self care practices
  - Exercise
  - Healthy eating habits
  - Massage
  - Social activities that rejuvenate
  - Hobbies
  - Meditation
  - Journaling
- Consciously pay attention to positive experiences to attempt to balance the negativity-bias



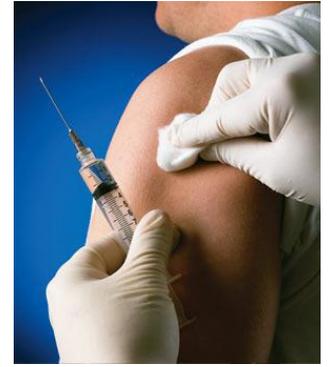
# CONNECTING WITH THE EARTH

- ▶ Grounding the to the Earth stabilizes bioelectrical and biochemical systems in the human body
  - Reduces inflammation
  - Decreases pain
  - Improves sleep
  - Promotes a shift from sympathetic to parasympathetic tone
  - Thins blood



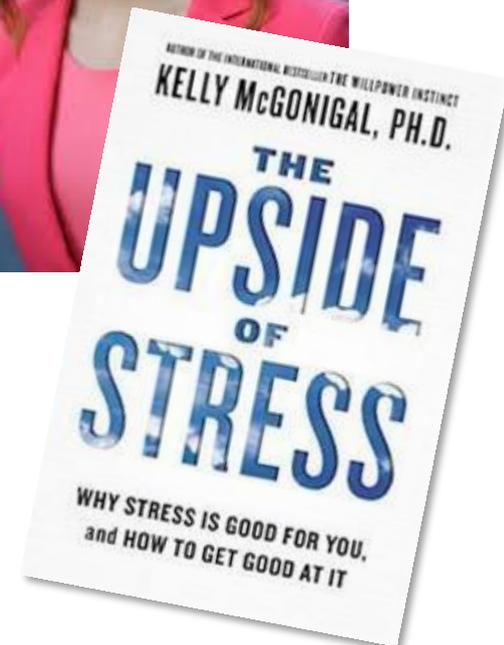
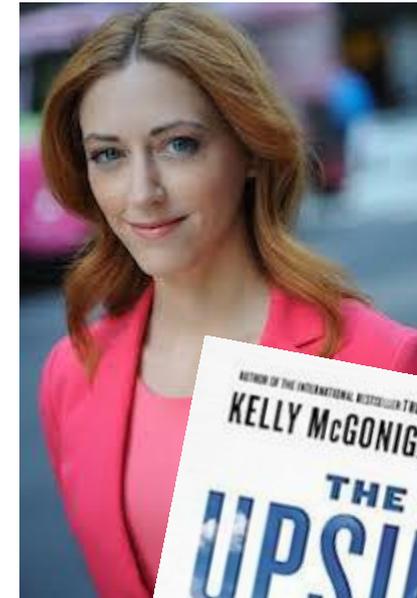
# TRAINING & EDUCATION

- ▶ Psychological inoculation
  - Mentally prepared, psychological body armor
- ▶ Normalize stress reactions
  - Prevents belief of being the only one impacted
  - Early recognition = early intervention
- ▶ Healthy Coping
  - Self-awareness
  - Mindset strategies



# REDEFINING STRESS

- ▶ Stress is what arises when something we care about is at stake
  - Includes thoughts, emotions, and physical reactions
- ▶ Stress and meaning are inextricably linked
  - We don't stress over things we don't care about
  - We can't create a meaningful life without experiencing some stress



(Kelly McGonigal, 2015 pp. xxi & xxii)

# HELPING HANDS, HEALTHY BODY

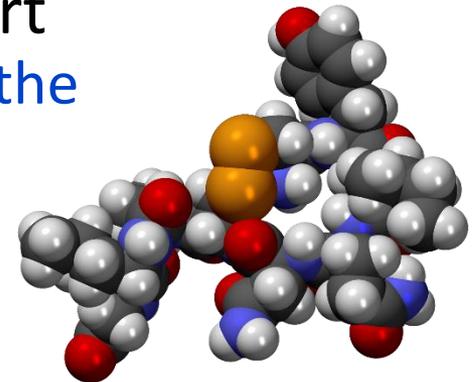
- ▶ Participants in a research study were assessed:
  - Stressful events in the past year
  - How much time spent helping others
- ▶ Participant mortality was tracked for 5 years
- ▶ Major life stress increased risk of death by 30%
- ▶ Stress did not predict mortality risk for participants who spent time caring for others



(Poulin, Brown, Dillard, & Smith, 2013)

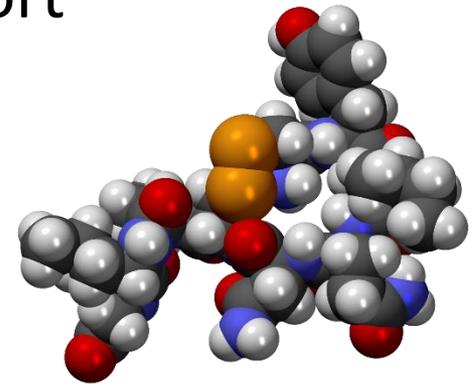
# OXYTOCIN

- ▶ Oxytocin is a neuro-hormone released under stress that binds to receptors in the brain
  - Helps bring the body back to homeostasis
  - Decreases amygdala activation
  - Stimulates neurogenesis in the hippocampus
- ▶ Oxytocin binds to receptors in the heart
  - Protects the cardiovascular system from the negative effects of stress
  - Anti-inflammatory properties
  - Increases vasodilation
  - Helps heart cells heal and regenerate after stress-induced damage



# OXYTOCIN

- ▶ The stress response has a built-in mechanism for stress resilience
  - Human connection
- ▶ Increased concentrations of oxytocin under stress prompt the desire to seek social support
- ▶ Social connection, in turn, increases oxytocin production
  - Giving and receiving social support



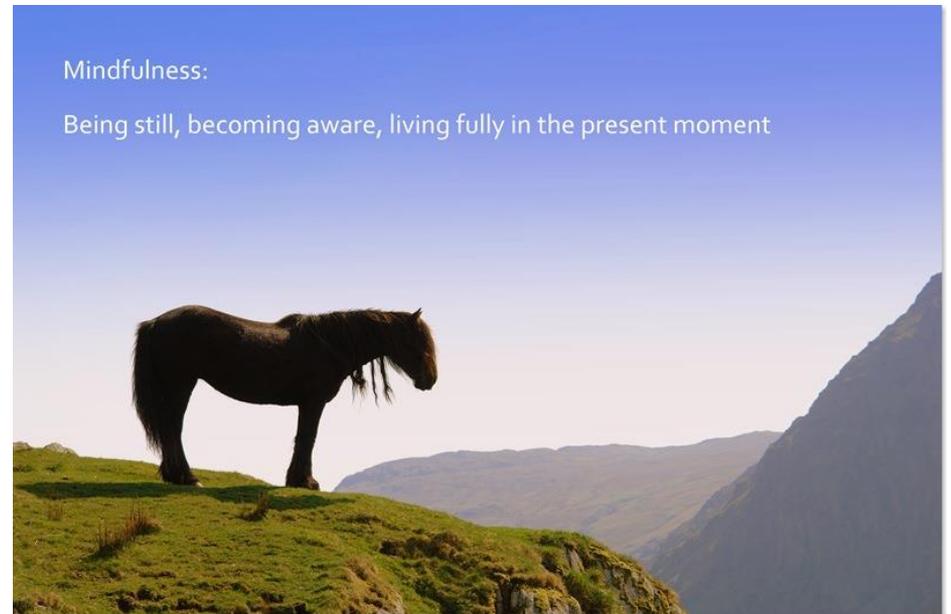
# MINDFULNESS

- ▶ Mindfulness is a method of mental training that increased awareness
  - Disconnecting from autopilot
  - Attention and focus on present moment experiences
  - Observing physical and emotional reactions with non-judgmental curiosity
- ▶ Being present can interrupt the negative consequences of trauma exposure
  - When we are numb, it is more difficult to understand or see when we are doing harm



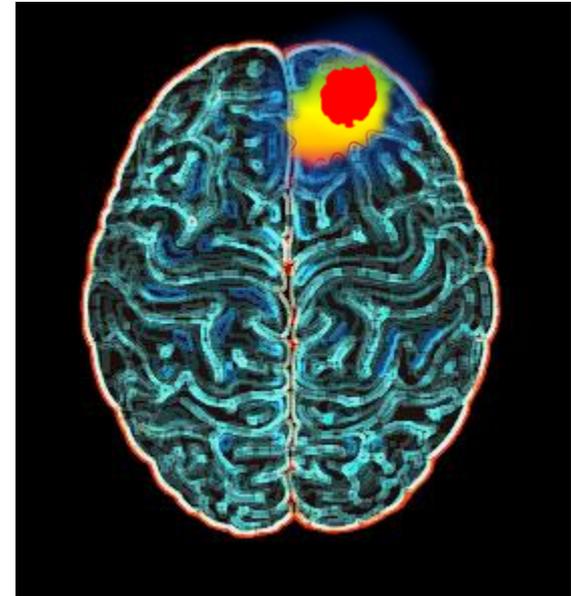
# MINDFULNESS

- ▶ Studies have shown mindfulness
  - Positively effects brain patterns
  - Calms down over-active amygdala
  - Improves physical effects of stress
  - Increases immunity
  - Prevents depression



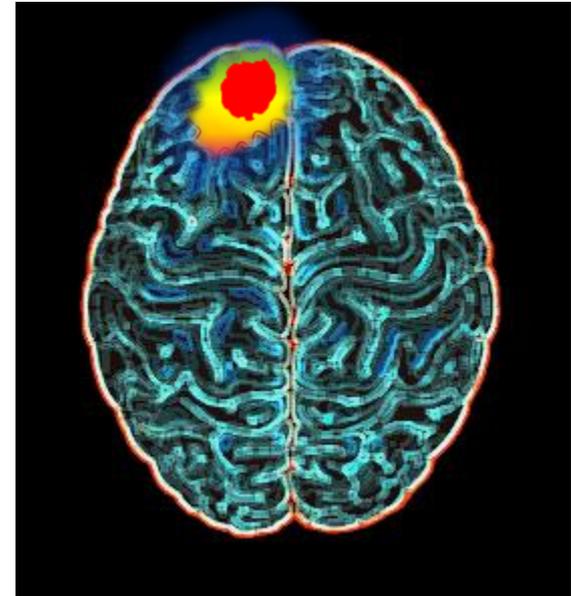
# MOOD AND BRAIN ACTIVITY

- ▶ Negative emotions are associated with heightened activity in the right prefrontal cortex
  - Anger
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
  - Withdrawal
  - Disconnection



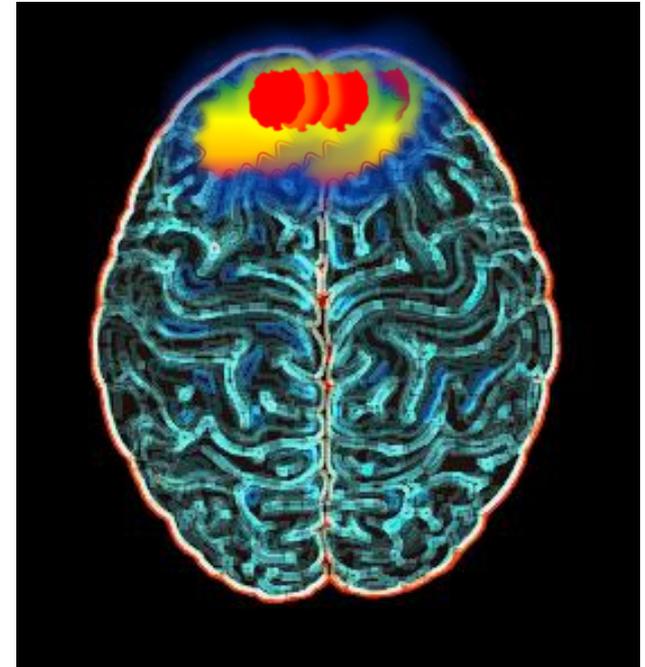
# MOOD AND BRAIN ACTIVITY

- ▶ When people are in a positive mood, the left prefrontal cortex lights up with activity
  - Happiness
  - Enthusiasm
  - Feeling energized
  - Connection
  - Empathy
- ▶ People with greater left-sided activity tend to have enhanced immune function



# MOOD AND BRAIN ACTIVITY

- ▶ Researchers examined the effect of mindfulness training on brain activity
- ▶ After 8 weeks of mindfulness training, brain activity shifted to the left
- ▶ Subjects reported feeling happier, less anxious, more energized, and engaged
- ▶ Increased concentrations of disease-fighting antibodies



# HAPPINESS AND LIFE SATISFACTION

- ▶ Studies have demonstrated significant improvements in optimism and life satisfaction by engaging in one of these activities every day for 3 weeks:
  - Write down 3 things for which you are grateful
  - Meditate for 3-minutes
  - Describe in a journal a meaningful experience of the day
  - Perform a random act of kindness
- ▶ Research suggests the brain can rewire, creating alternate pathways as new habits develop



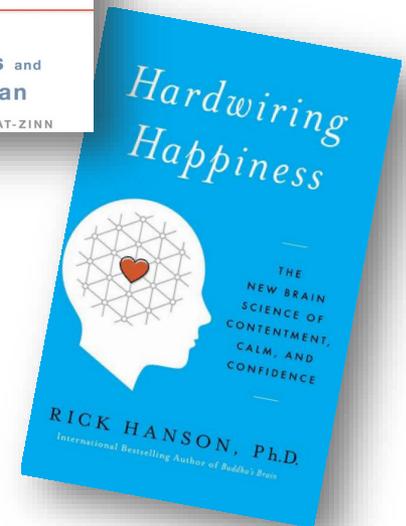
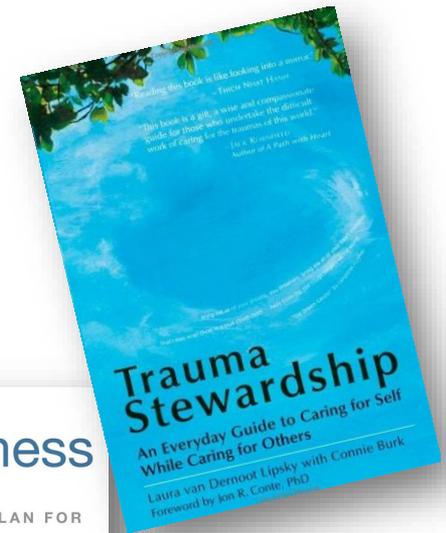
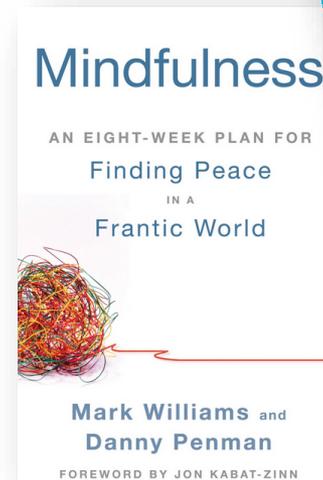
# RESOURCES

***Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others*** by Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk

***Mindfulness: An Eight-Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World*** by Mark Williams, Danny Penman and Jon Kabat-Zinn

- <http://rodalebooks.s3.amazonaws.com/mindfulness/index.html>

***Hardwiring Happiness*** by Rick Hanson

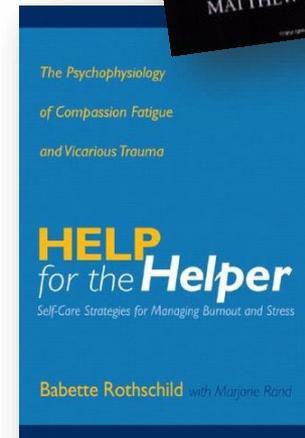
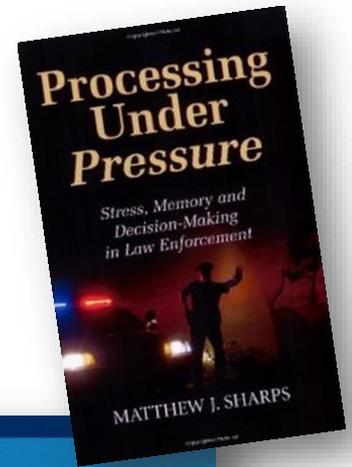


# RESOURCES

***Processing Under Pressure*** by Matthew J. Sharps

***Help for the Helper: The Psychophysiology of Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma*** by Babette Rothschild

***On Combat, The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and in Peace*** by Dave Grossman and Loren W. Christensen





# CONTACT INFORMATION

**Kirsten Lewis, M.Ed.**

KSL Research, Training, & Consultation, LLC  
24654 N Lake Pleasant Pkwy, Suite 103-238  
Peoria, AZ 85383

Phone: 602-525-1989

Email: [kirsten.lewis@kslresearch.org](mailto:kirsten.lewis@kslresearch.org)

Website: [www.kslresearch.org](http://www.kslresearch.org)

