

Presence, Authenticity, & Joy in Turbulent Times

Dr. Liz Norell

UTM: Ready, Set, Teach!

August 24, 2026



A few notes before we begin:

- You're welcome to **stand, pace** at the back, sit or lay on the floor, or **leave** the room if you need a break. Please make yourself comfortable.
- Slides will be **shared** on the next slide and at the end of the slides.
- You'll be invited to **talk to your neighbors** at **2 points** during this keynote. You'll also be invited to **stand and move**. All of these are true invitations and thus fully **optional**.

Want the slides?

I'll show this again at the end.

<https://bit.ly/UTMkeynote>





Who am I?

**Associate Director of
Instructional Support
University of Mississippi**

I work with instructors who want to **improve their teaching**. I've been teaching at the college level since 2000.

I'm also a political scientist, a yoga teacher, a coach, and a writer.

I'm autistic, ADHD, and have chronic anxiety.

Poll

**the temptation is
strong to just ...**



This is more than just a funny GIF, though.

Many of our colleagues worry about surveillance of their teaching.

Others justifiably feel unequipped to handle increasing mental health challenges and their impacts on learning and teaching.



A photograph of a child swinging on a swing set in a park. The child is in mid-swing, and their hair is blurred. The ground is covered in wood chips, and a wooden fence is in the background.

Yes, and...



David R. MacIver

@DRMacIver

The modern condition is mostly trying to do things on your own that people have historically achieved with a large support network and wondering why you're tired all the time.

Each of us is central to creating a culture of learning

Educators are those individuals with specific **abilities, skills, knowledge, training, or experience**, who **design** learning materials and programs, **foster** productive learning environments, and **promote** individual growth and development.





Hiding does not serve students' learning

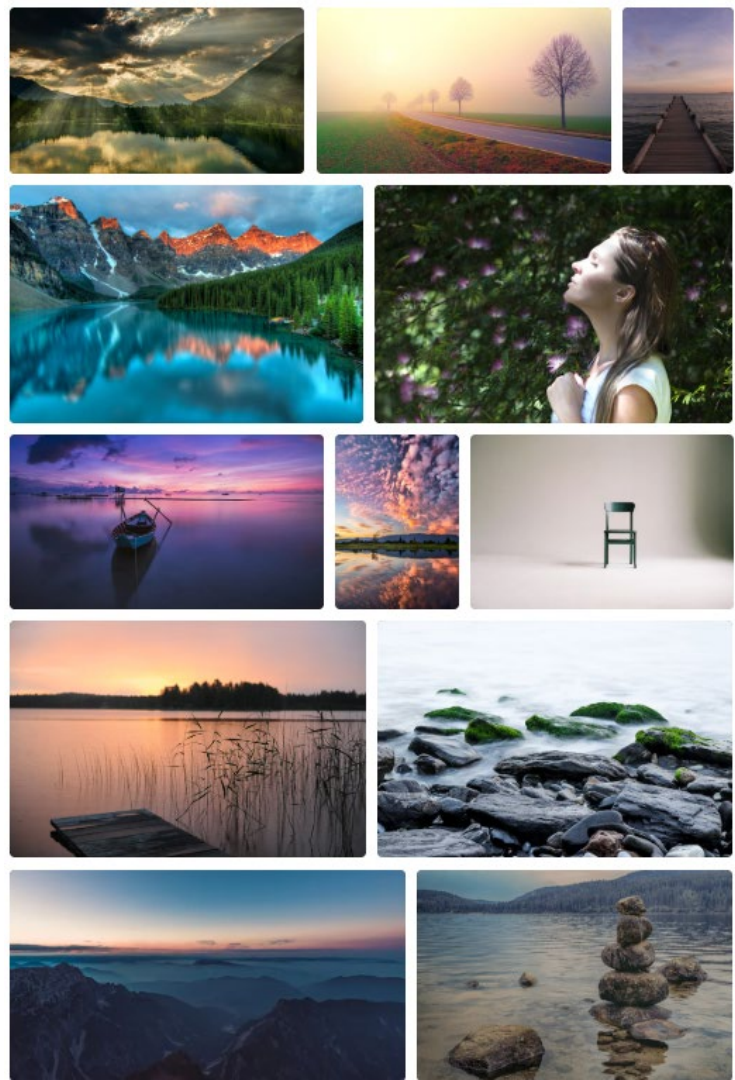
"We, as teachers, need to be living examples of people who it is worthwhile to become like..."

That, of course, puts a big burden on teachers to actually do their own work and to take care of their own issues."

— *Bessel van der Kolk*

Your wellbeing matters, too!

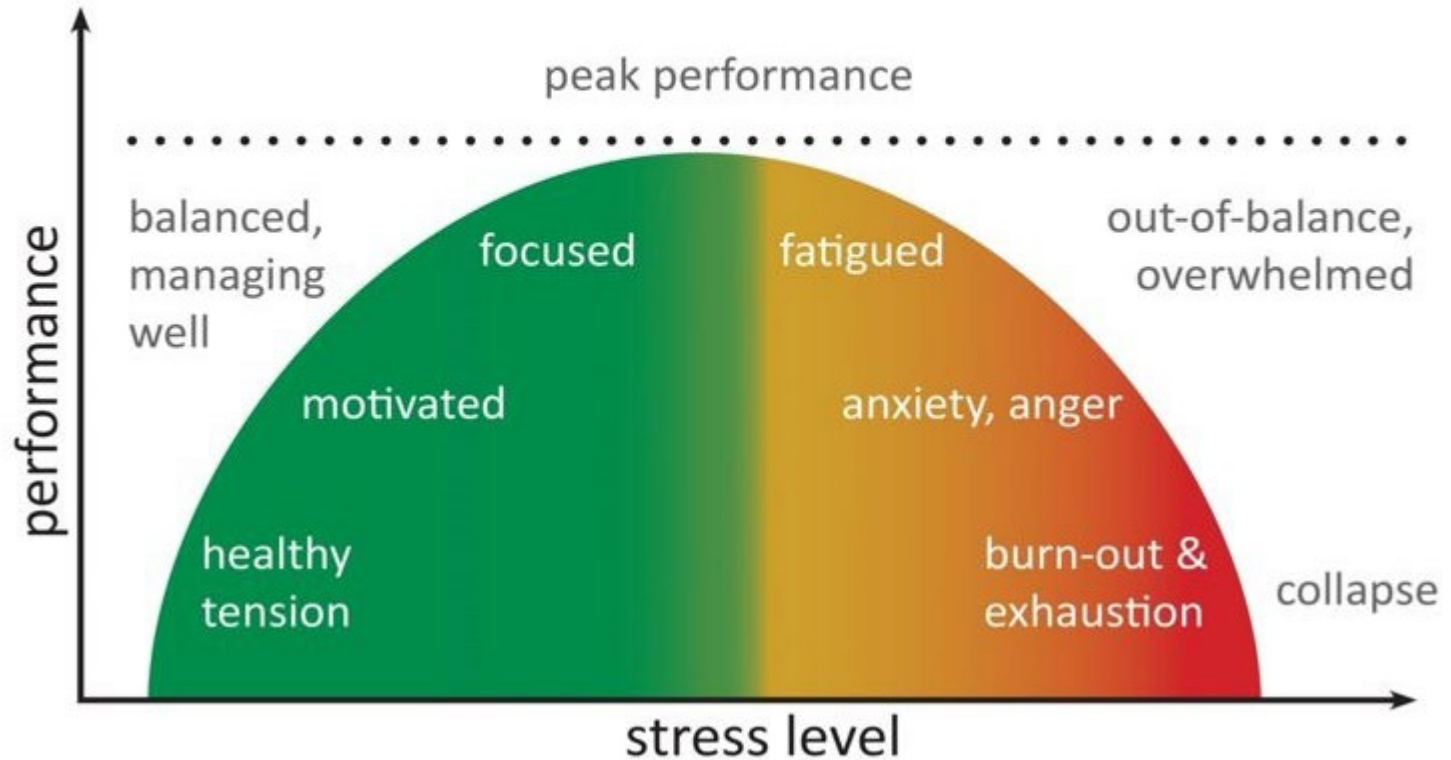
What do you notice about these pictures?





Please don't make me say it.

The Stress Continuum

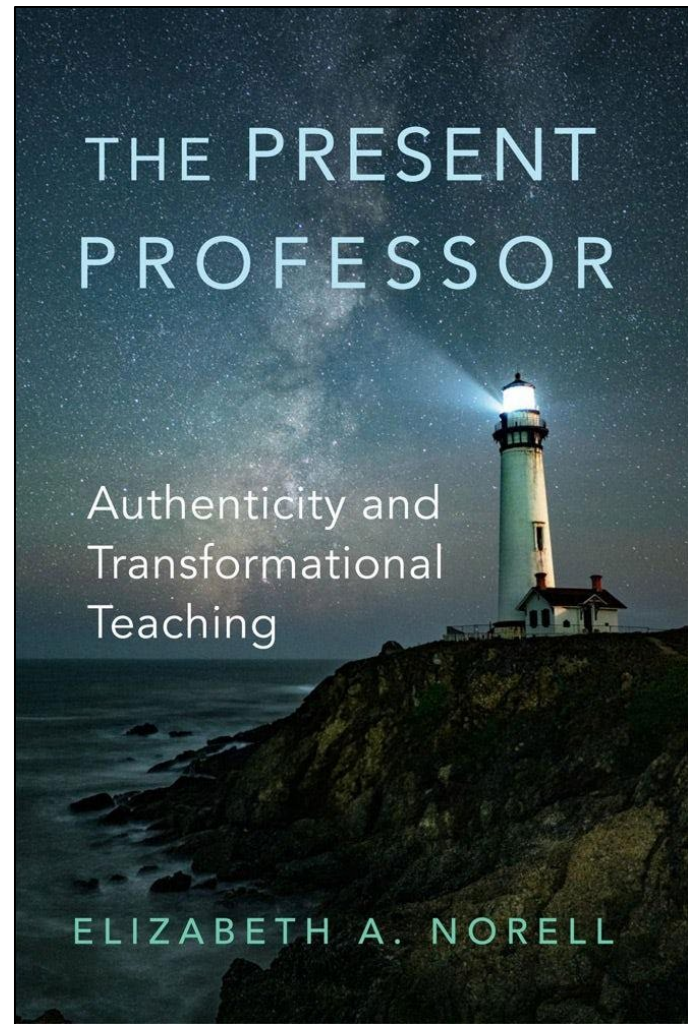


From Cornell, "[Manage Stress to Flourish](#)"

Poll

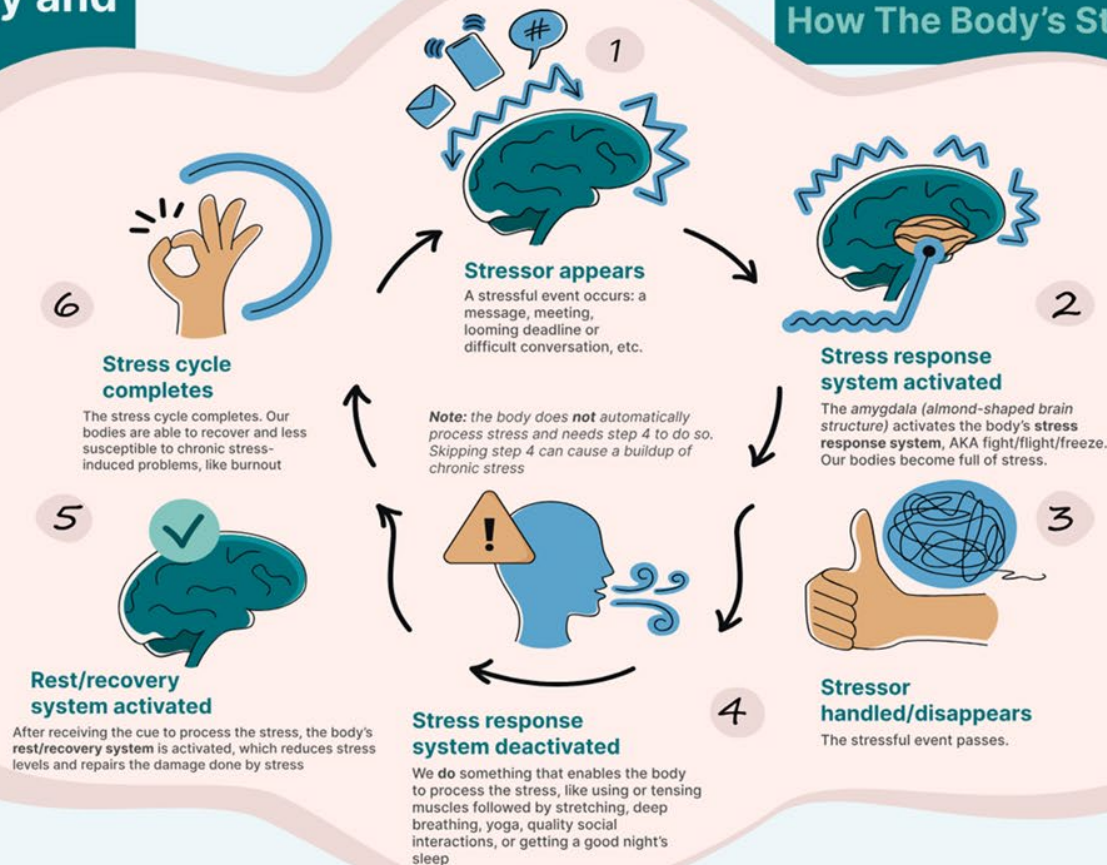
**“We cannot teach
brains hijacked by
stress.”**

**... nor can we teach
effectively when our
brains are hijacked by
stress.**



Burnout Recovery and Prevention Tips

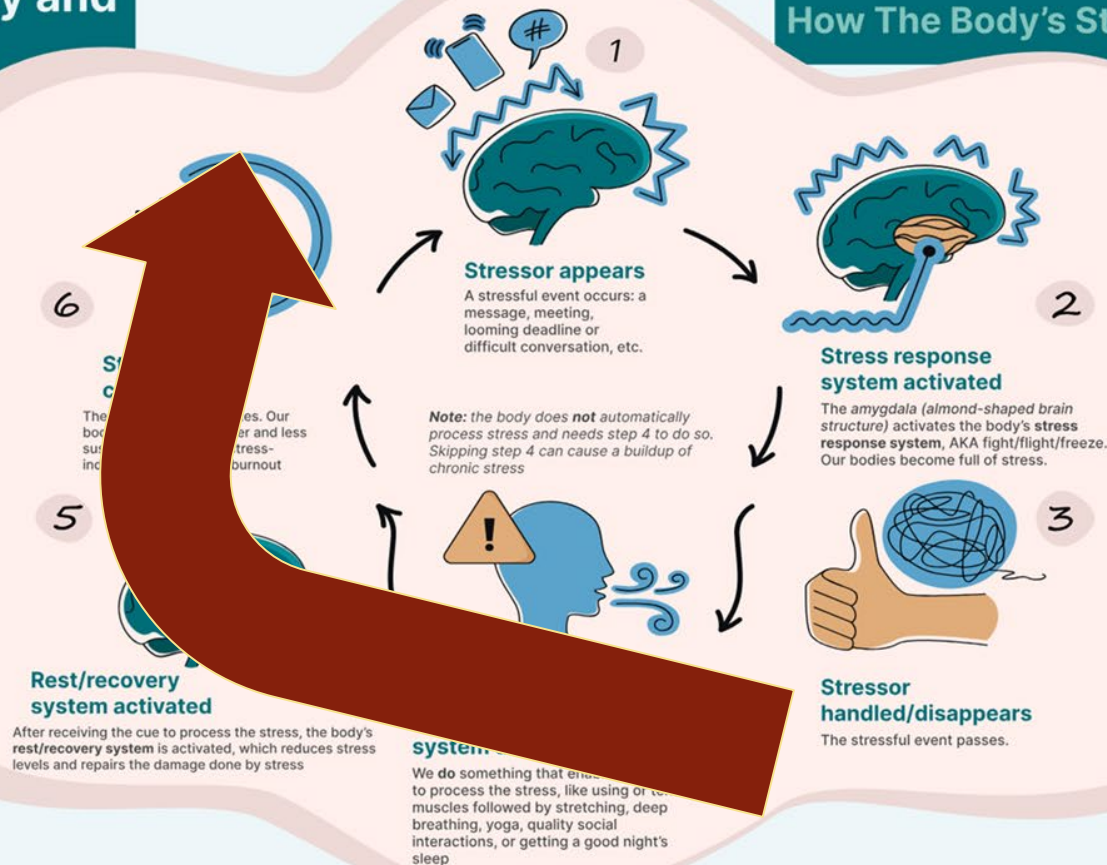
How The Body's Stress Cycle Works



Based on research by Emily and Amelia Nagoski, authors of "Burnout: the secret to unlocking the stress cycle"

Burnout Recovery and Prevention Tips

How The Body's Stress Cycle Works



Based on research by Emily and Amelia Nagoski, authors of "Burnout: the secret to unlocking the stress cycle"



Physical activity

Getting your heart rate up helps your body process the adrenaline / stress hormones and reset the brain.



Breathing

Deep, slow breaths down-regulate the stress reaction. Try box breathing or abdominal breathing.



Social interaction

Social interactions cue us to recognize the rest of the world as a trustworthy, low-threat place, which can reset the nervous system.



Laughter

Deep belly laughter releases dopamine, reinforces social bonds, and helps regulate emotions. It creates a sense of safety and ease.



Affection

A deeper connection with a loving presence can ground you. Try a 20+ second hug with someone you love or cuddling with a snuggly pet.



Creative expression

Creativity provides opportunities to externalize, express, and integrate big emotions.



Have a big ol' cry

The physiological release of crying releases the stress hormones accumulated during the stress reaction. Try not to dwell on the story you're telling yourself about the stressor.

A man with dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt and dark pants, stands barefoot in the center of a room. He is facing the camera with a neutral expression. The room has light green walls, a polished wooden floor, and a large wooden door to the left. Behind him is a wooden bookshelf filled with books, flanked by two potted plants. To the right is a window with a wooden frame and light-colored curtains. The text 'Qigong Shaking For Stress Relief' is overlaid in the center of the image.

Qigong Shaking

For Stress Relief



Physical activity

Getting your heart rate up helps your body process the adrenaline / stress hormones and reset the brain.



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One definition of trauma



overwhelm

+



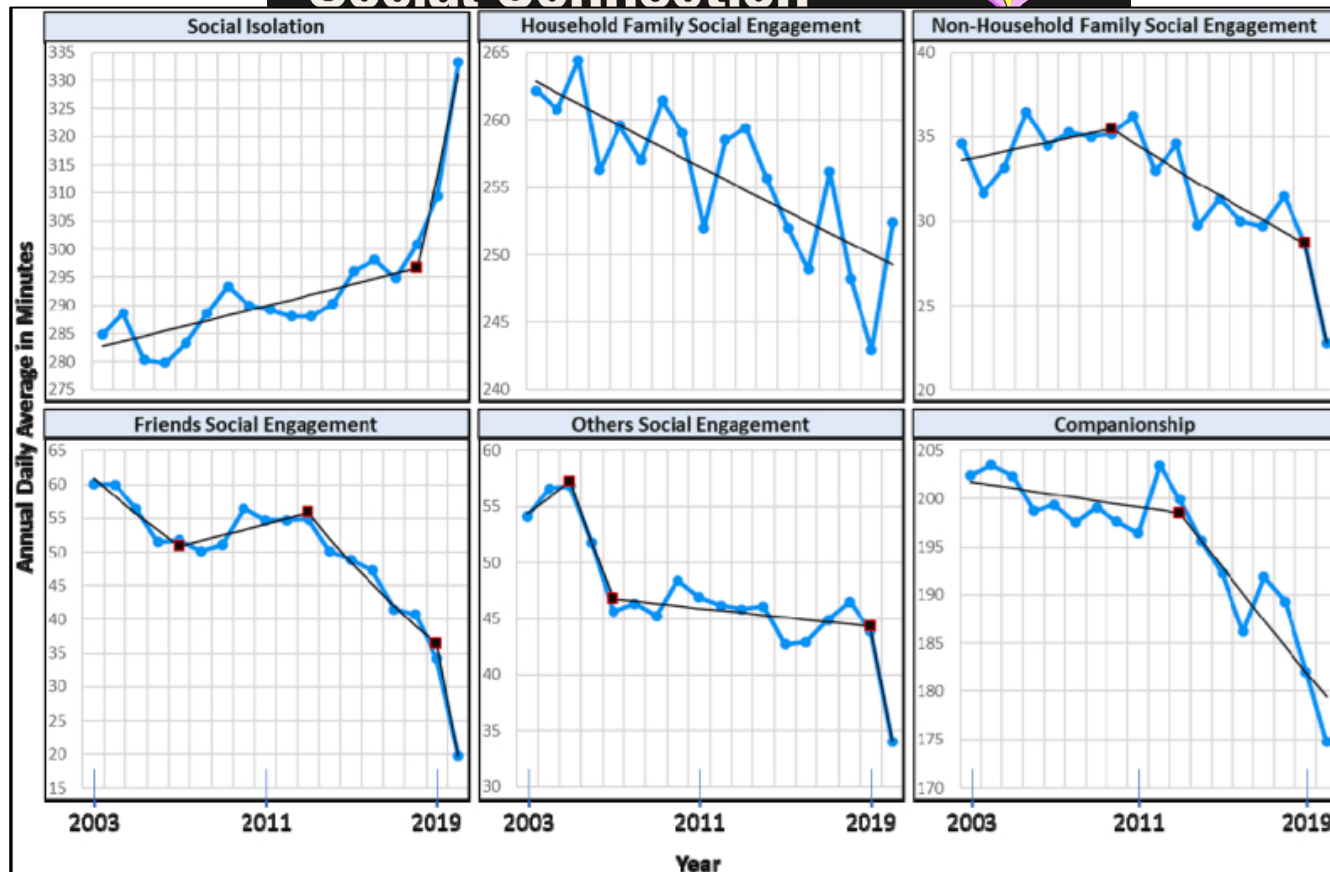
isolation



Social isolation

An epidemic of loneliness?

National Trends for Social Connection



Source: Adapted from Viji Diane Kannan, Peter J. Veazie, US Trends in Social Isolation, Social Engagement, and Companionship: Nationally and by Age, Sex, Race/ethnicity, Family Income, and Work Hours, 2003-2020, SSM - Population Health, Volume 21, 2023. The joinpoints are visual approximations.

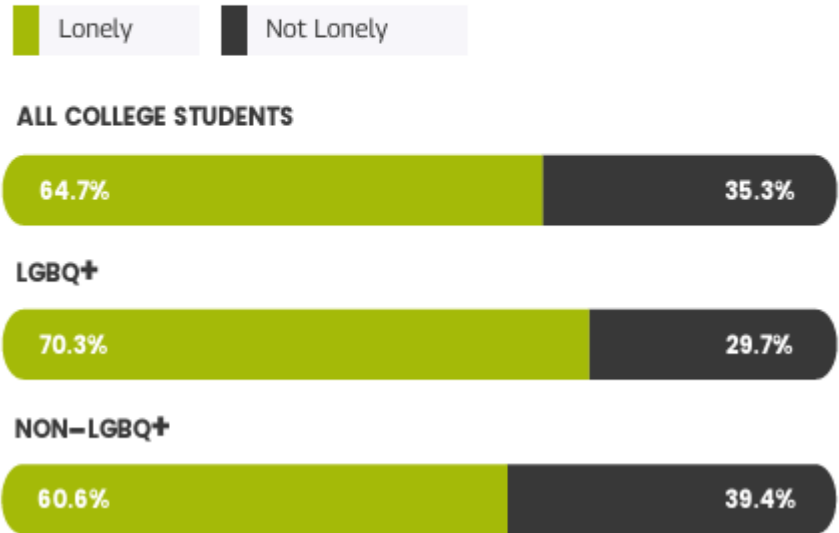


Office of the
U.S. Surgeon General

Loneliness on campus

“When a student’s online life is significantly more active than their social experiences ‘in real life,’ that student’s emotional balance has often tipped toward depression or another psychiatric issue.”
— Doris Iarovici

COLLEGE STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCE WITH **LONELINESS** BY SEXUAL ORIENTATION



[Source: Active Minds survey of 1084 US college & university students](#)

Ugh. But what about the Generative AI of it all?



We anthropomorphize AI easily and unconsciously

Consider how we seamlessly use humanized language for generative AI tools:

- *I asked* ChatGPT
- ChatGPT's *replies*
- its language using human sensory experiences: *I see you, it looks like...*, etc.

All of this is built on a human cognition system that heavily favors sociality and relationship-building.

Large language models (LLMs) are **not human** and **do not think or feel**.

They **cannot see** and **do not write**.

We **naturally** anthropomorphize generative AI, but we should **resist this impulse**.

We have to **work hard** to **resist the lure of social connection** with **non-human technology**.

A lush garden scene with dense green foliage. In the background, a person wearing a purple shirt is partially visible through the leaves. The word "friend" is overlaid in a large, white, serif font across the center of the image.

friend

Palate cleanser



McDad

@mcdadstuff

Hacker: Give us your password or else

30 minutes later...

Me: OK, now try 1987 and three exclamation points

Three key tools:



authenticity

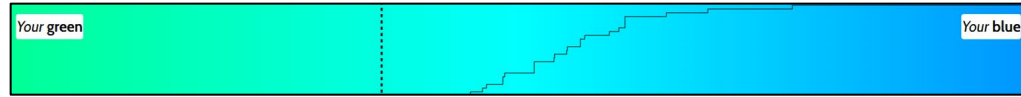


presence



trust

Authenticity as a spectrum



Authenticity means you are **not pretending** to be someone you're not.

It **does NOT** mean you are bringing your **whole self** to work.

It **DOES** mean exploring **safe** and **appropriate** ways to let your genuine **personality** shine in a particular **context**.

Authenticity is identity & context dependent.

The **safety** and **permission** to be authentic is **not equally distributed** on campus.

Nobody owes another person—nor certainly any institution—their fully authentic self.

I have learned a lot from [Jodi-Ann Burey](#), who [writes about the myth of bringing your “full self to work”](#) from the perspective of a woman of color.



Examples of authenticity:



I no longer wear (or even own) hard pants.



I use a hidden disabilities lanyard when I travel (& haven't forgotten it)



I share memes with students & colleagues

Being *more* authentic matters.



authenticity

Case in point: The Circle (Netflix show) season 1



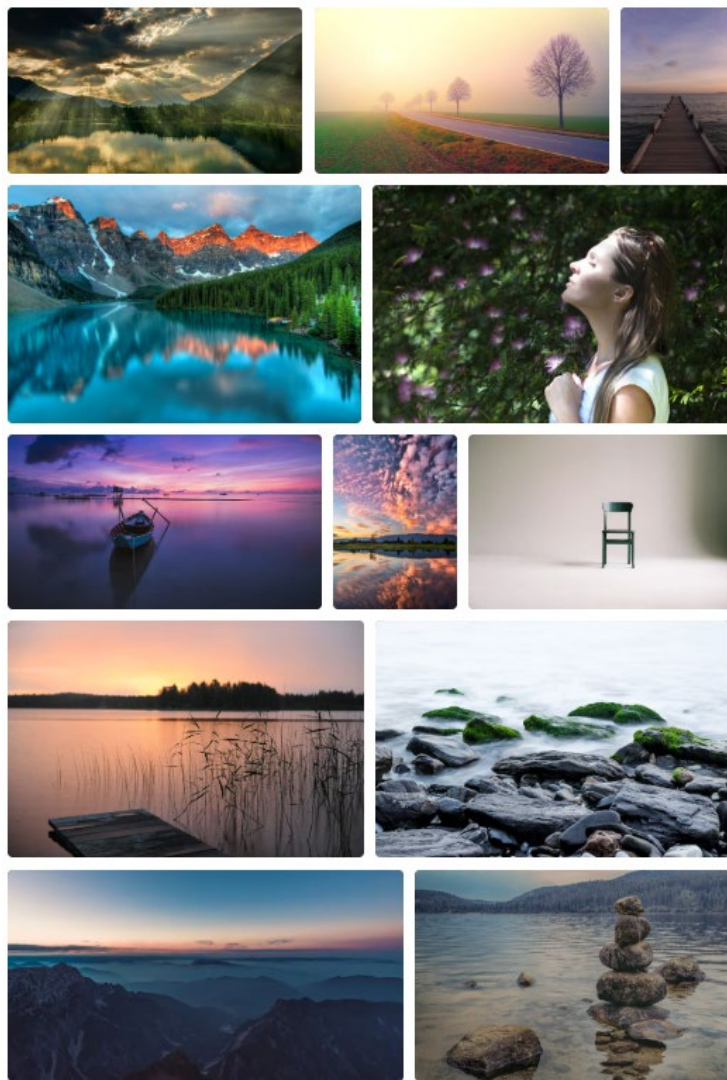
Remember: Calm is not other people.

As **innately social** creatures, when other people are around, we **modify** our **behavior**.

We want to **feel like we belong**.

That means there is **no such thing** as FULL authenticity* with others.

* I'm not even sure **full authenticity** actually exists.



Presence

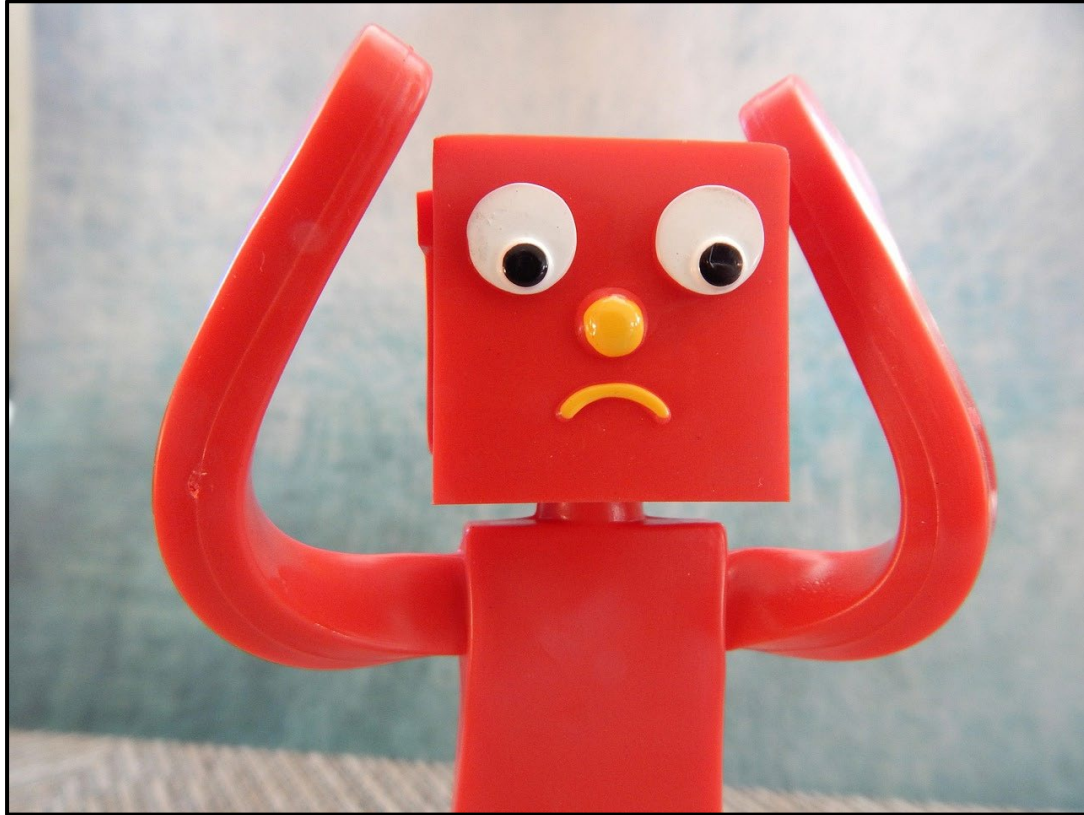


Presence means maintaining awareness **of this moment**, as it's happening.

Presence is **CHALLENGING**.

Why?

Starting with cognitive load



**What's in your
students'
cognitive load?**

**More
importantly:
What's in
yours?**

cognitive load

mcdreeamiemusings.com @mcdreeamie



Maslow's hierarchy

Self-

Este

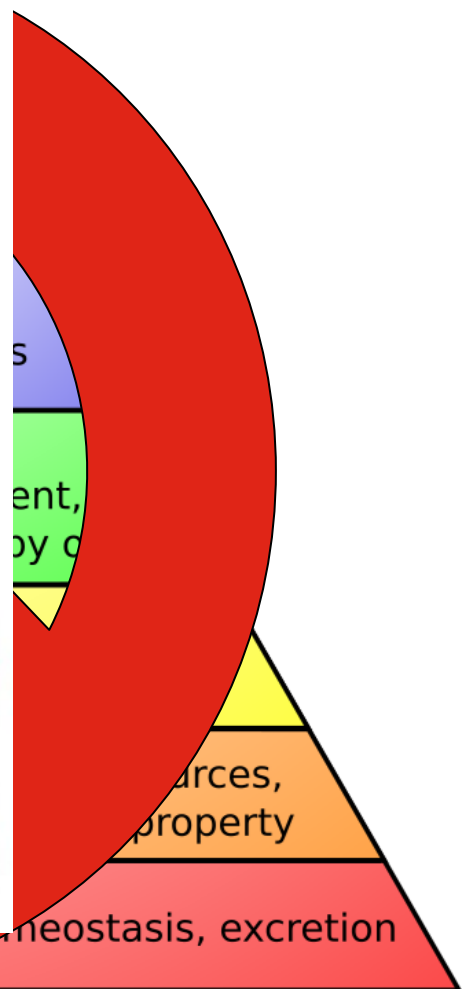
Love

Safe

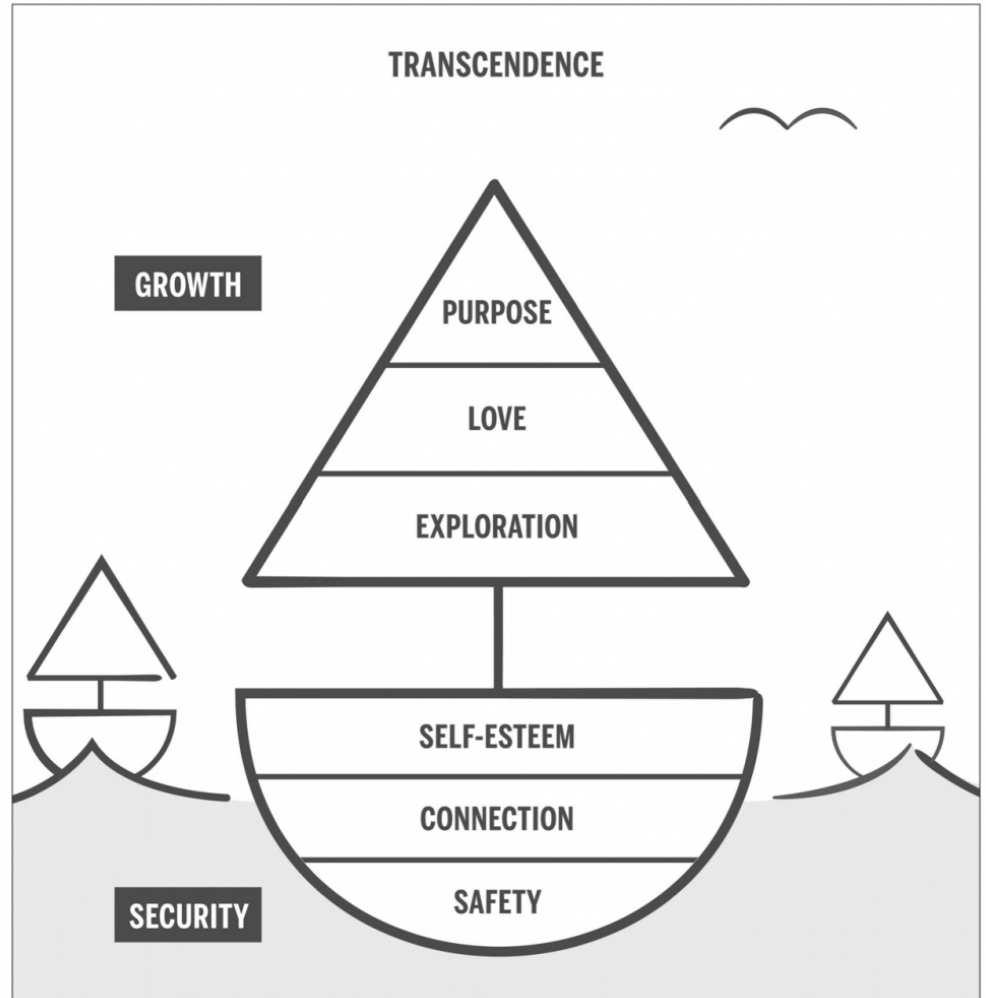
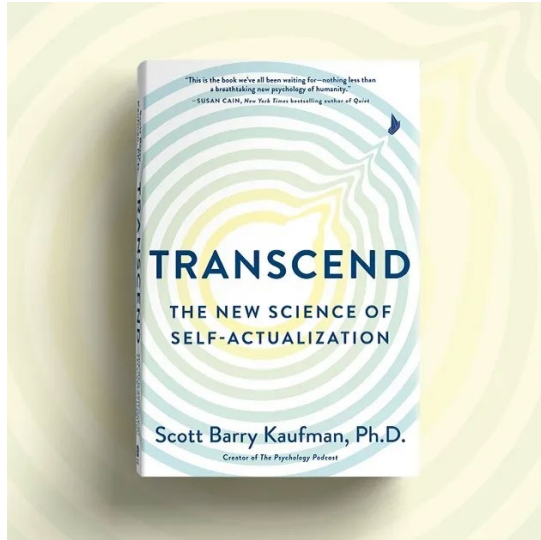
Physiological



WiFi



Maslow's hierarchy reconceptualized

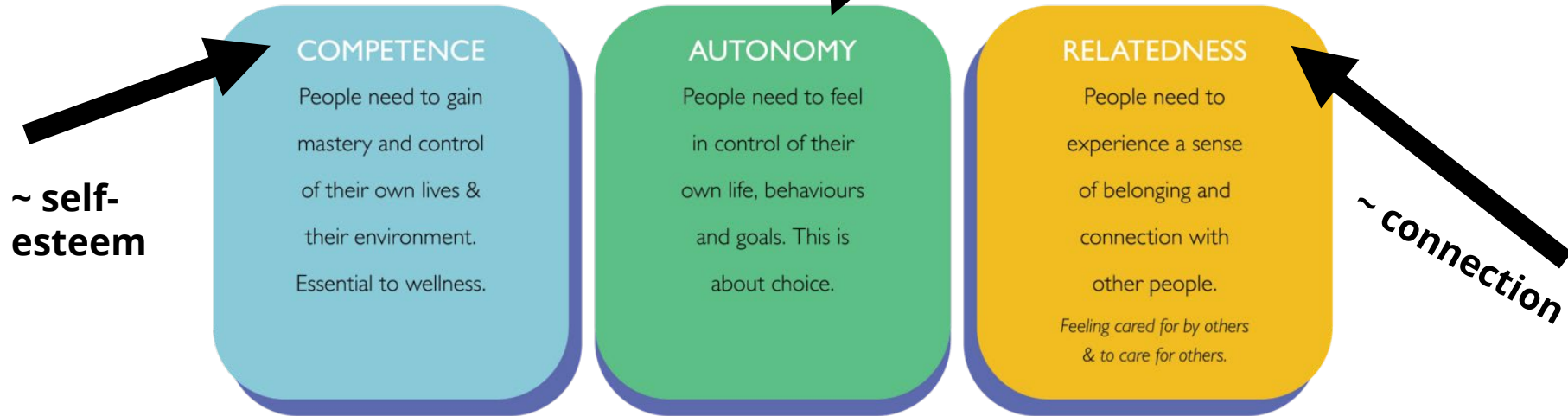


Self-determination theory

(compliments Maslow nicely)

self-determination theory

HUMAN BEINGS HAVE THREE BASIC NEEDS:



Based on the work of Richard Ryan and Edward Deci.

Take 3 minutes to think:

Where are your workplace pockets of

- Safety/autonomy
- Self-esteem/competence
- Connection/relatedness

You might think of these as your *shelters* (see Chapter 3 of *The Present Professor*).

How might you prioritize work in these pockets in the semester ahead?

Trust

Think of trust as the ballast of our sailboat. It keeps us upright and less susceptible to a great big wave...

or, even, just leaving the harbor!



The Vasa, an enormous and intricate Swedish ship, sank less than a mile into its maiden voyage in 1628 because it had almost no ballast.

Policies can undermine trust

[Eric Hudson writes:](#)

“Using policy to encourage certain behavior can result in what Frances Fukuyama calls ‘trust substitutes’: **‘People who do not trust** one another will end up **cooperating only** under a system of **formal rules and regulations**, which have to be negotiated, agreed to, **litigated**, and **enforced**, sometimes by **coercive** means.’

Trust



trust

Trust generators:

- **Selective vulnerability:** sharing a personal experience that demonstrates you are human, not perfect.
- **Familiarity:** becoming a more familiar fixture in another person's life through everyday interactions.
- **Similarity of interests:** sharing likes, dislikes, hobbies, and other personal details.
- **Concern:** demonstrating genuine concern for issues or events important to another person.
- **Competence:** exuding skill, knowledge, and the will to help and support others.

Trust
steadies
the system,
calms the
brain, and
creates the
conditions
for learning
and growth.

This is your brain on **trust.**



Ready
for Rigor™

THE ANXIETY RESPONSE

(AN AMYGDALA HIJACK)

- RACING HEART
- TUNNEL VISION
- STRESS OVERLOAD
- LEARNING STALLS

THE TRUST RESPONSE

(AN OXYTOCIN SURGE)

- OXYTOCIN RELEASE
- CALM FOCUS
- OPENNESS
- DEEPER LEARNING

JOIN THE **READY4RIGOR** MAILING LIST AT bit.ly/ready4rigor

From Zaretta Hammond, [Ready for Rigor](#)

Re-examining our expectations

Many of us have forgotten what it's like to be a beginner in our disciplines.



Think aloud experiment

Matthew Monito, a graduating philosophy major



Think aloud experiment

Ann Cahill, a philosophy professor



**Turn & talk: When
is the last time
you tried
something
new/as a novice?
What was that
like?**



“If we want to grow as teachers—we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives—risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract.”



Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*

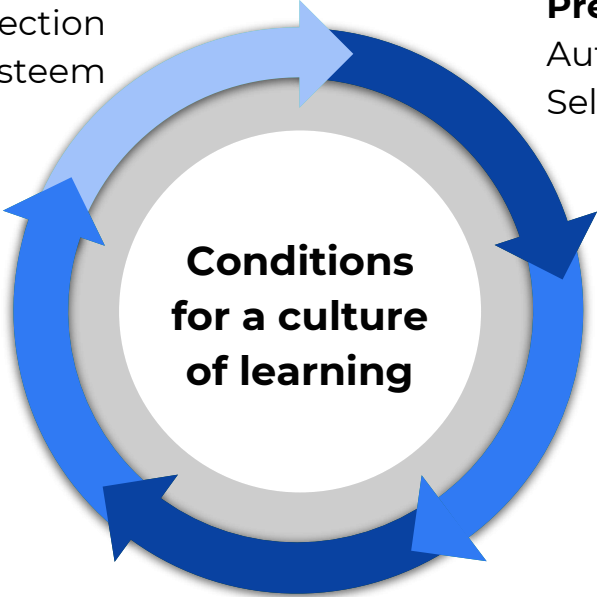
Putting it all together

Social determination theory/Maslow:

Safety
Belonging/connection
Competence/self-esteem

Presence

Authenticity increases
Selective vulnerability



**Conditions
for a culture
of learning**

Self regulation:

Deeper self-knowledge
Greater ego management
Less defensive
More open

Pro-social conditions:

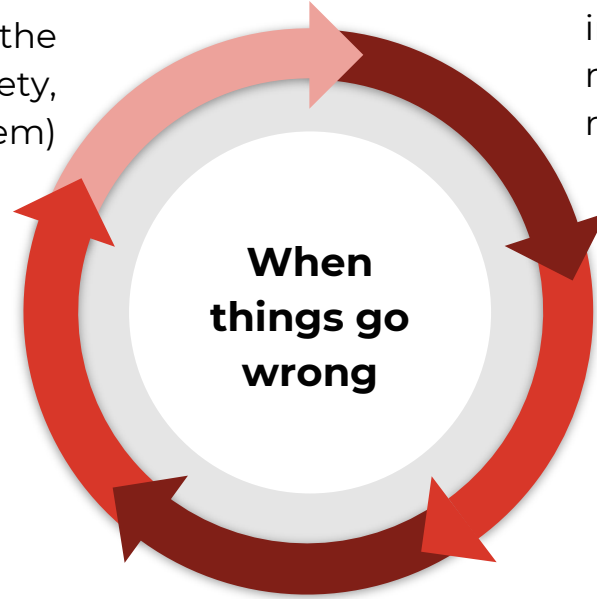
Trust
Relationship building
Psychological safety

Emotional regulation
(and co-regulation)

**Social determination
theory/Maslow:**

Working or life context
fractures one or more of the
three components (safety,
belonging, self-esteem)

Presence diminishes as we engage
in more defensive environmental
monitoring. We withdraw into a
role to guard ourselves.



Feeling unsafe, the ego
steps in to protect our sense
of self. We become more
closed off & less trusting of
our own perceptions &
instincts. We adopt mental
stories of persecution.

Our defensiveness signals an
untrusting, psychologically
unsafe environment,
degrading relationships and
increasing suspicion

**Emotions become more
dysregulated**, leading to
burnout, overwhelm, and/or
meltdowns

Social determination

theory/Melrose

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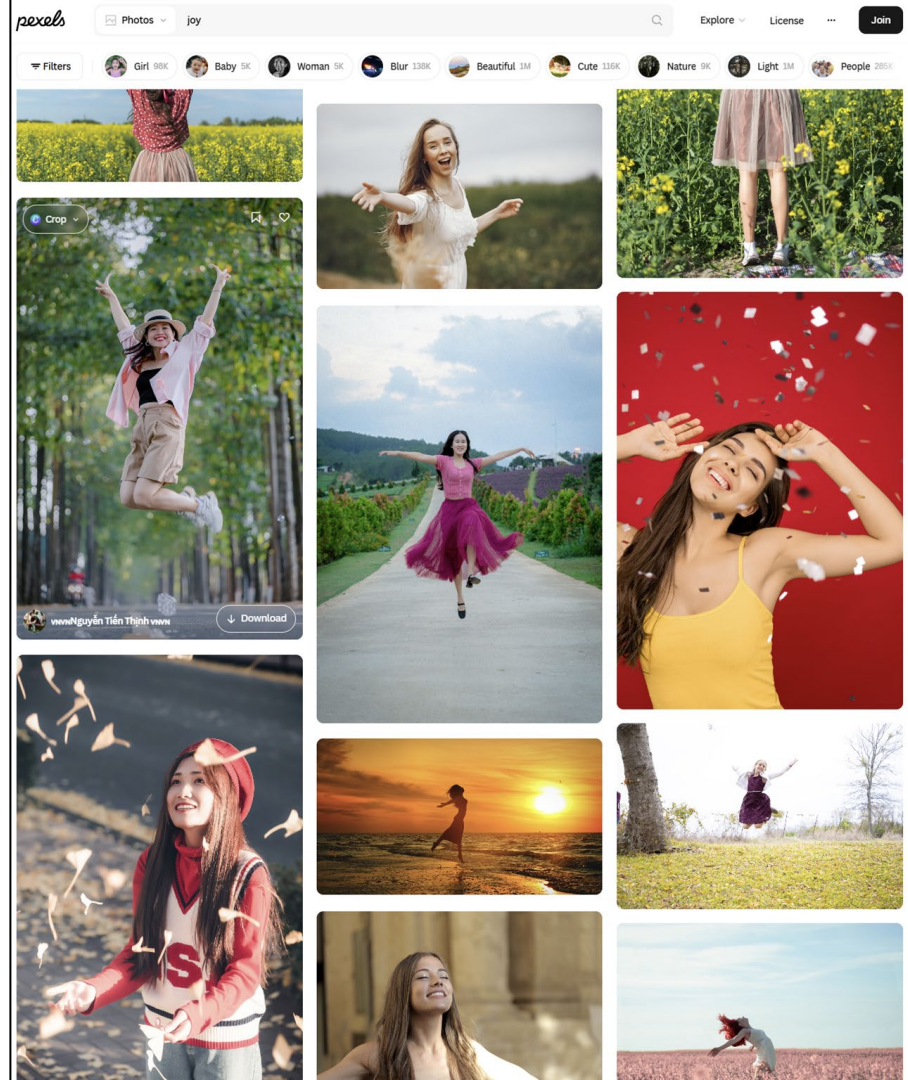
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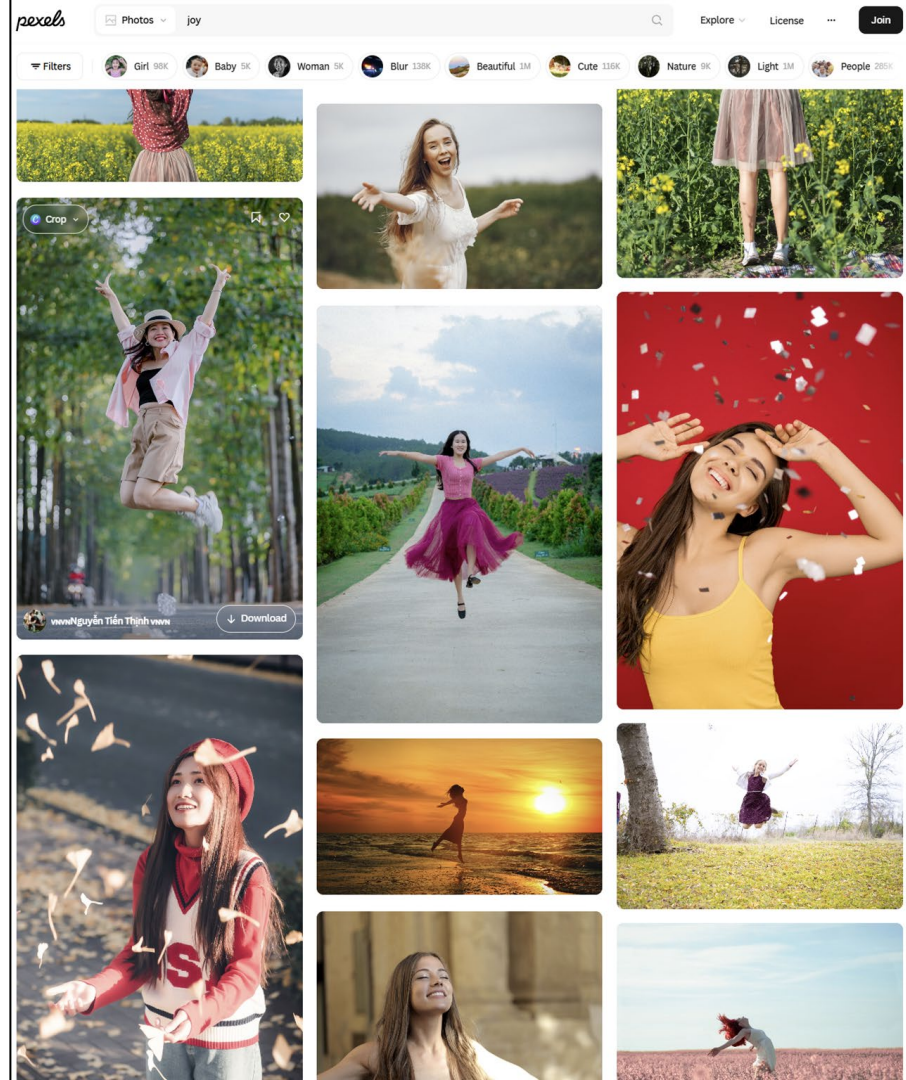
burnout, overwhelm,
and/or meltdowns

Let's talk about joy!



Why joy?

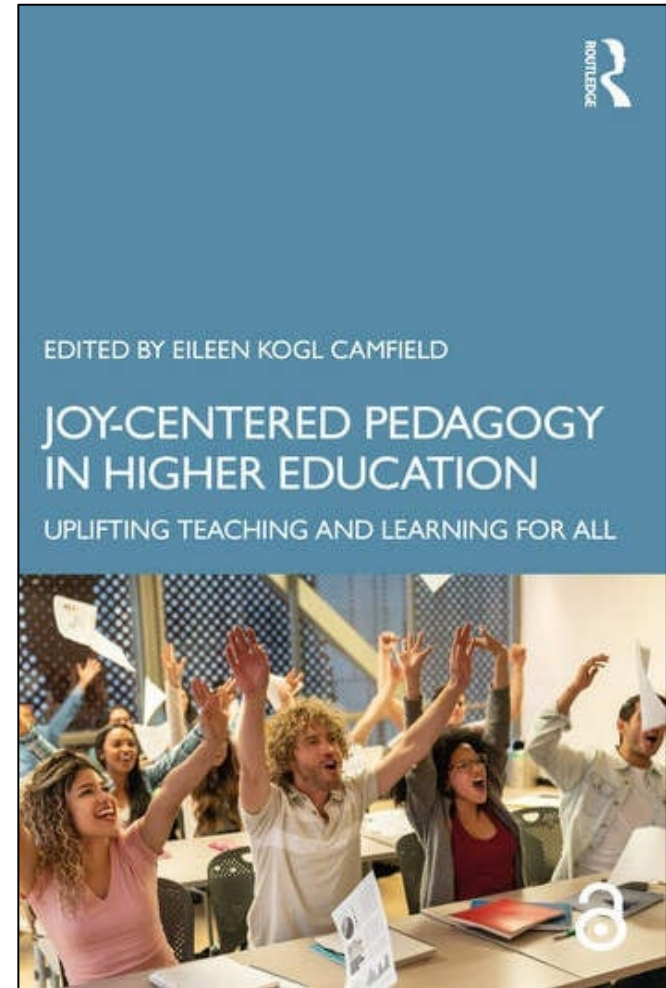
- Linked to gratitude
- Promotes well-being
- Boosts immune system
- Fights stress & pain
- Supports longevity
- Encourages the nervous system to relax



Infusing joy

This recently released edited volume—which is available as an **open-access eBook** and can be downloaded as a PDF (!)—has a number of great ideas about **infusing joy** into our teaching work.

A link to this is in the presenter notes



On the next slide, we're going to watch 80 seconds of a video.

As you watch, think about what in this video feels emotionally resonant for you.

Come back later and watch the whole video.
Please trust me that the five minutes are worth it.

Maybe watch it with your team, your students, or when you need a boost.



Pyongyang, North Korea

How synchronized moves bring joy

Let's dance: synchronised movement helps us tolerate pain and foster friendship

Publication date: 2016

THE CONVERSATION

Bronwyn Tarr, Post-doctoral Research Associate, Department of Experimental Psychology,
University of Oxford



How synchronized moves bring joy

So far, our testing of the “social bonding” hypothesis of dance has focused on one particular aspect: synchronisation with other people. It turns out that **when you synchronise even a small movement**, like the tapping of your finger in time with someone else, you **feel closer** and **more trusting** of that person than if you had tapped out of time.

This is because when we watch someone else do the same thing at the same time as us, our brain ends up with a **merged sense of us** and them. It feels like **we “become one”**. Anyone who has ever rowed might be familiar with that moment when you hit a state of perfect synchronisation with your rowing team. **Suddenly you feel like you are part of something bigger than just yourself, and that you belong.**

— Bronwyn Tarr, “Let’s dance: synchronised movement helps us tolerate pain and foster friendship”

Q

&

A



Eden Dranger ✓

@Eden_Eats

Adulthood is basically just trying to fall asleep at night and stay awake during the day.



L

@Ann_Hedonia1

I don't think I've ever been at the beginning of my rope tbh

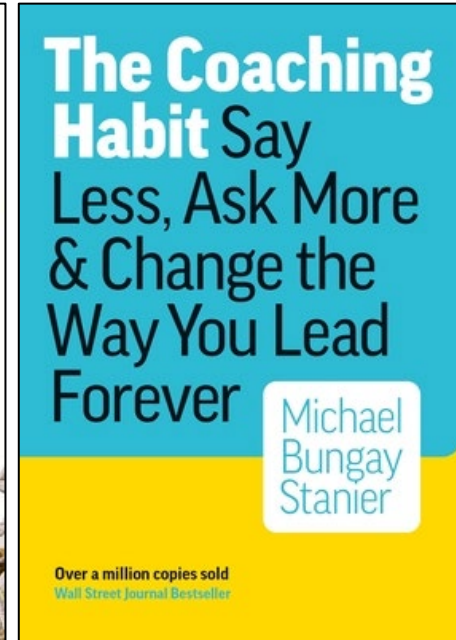
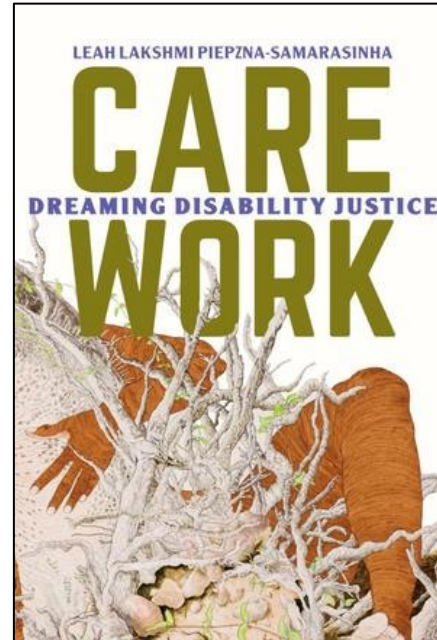
Join a reading group!

I'm facilitating two virtual fall reading groups:

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's book, [*Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*](#).

Michael Bungay Stanier's book, [*The Coaching Habit: Say Less, Ask More, and Change the Way You Lead Forever*](#)

Email me if you want to join:
eanorell@olemiss.edu



Want the slides?

<https://bit.ly/UTMkeynote>



Stay in touch!

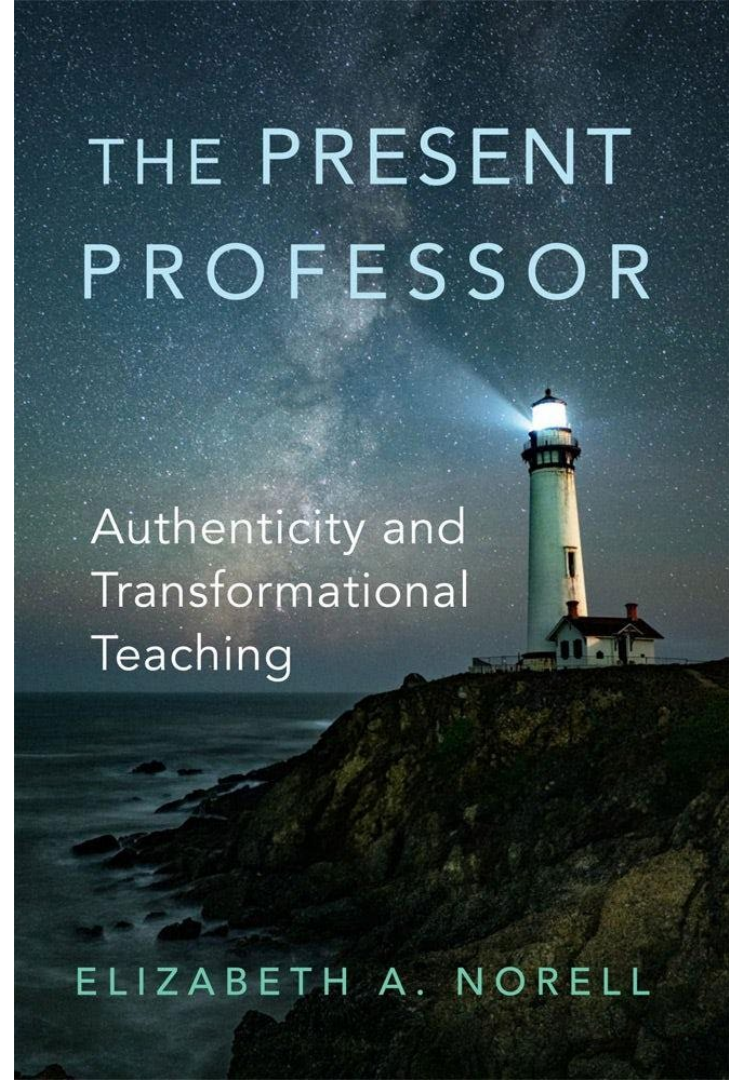
eanorell@olemiss.edu (work)
liznorell@gmail.com (personal)
liznorell.com

@liznorell on most social
media platforms

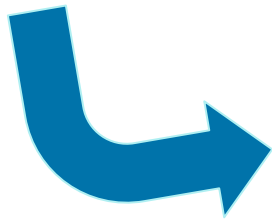
THE PRESENT PROFESSOR

Authenticity and
Transformational
Teaching

ELIZABETH A. NORELL



**Oodles of
materials from
the book!**



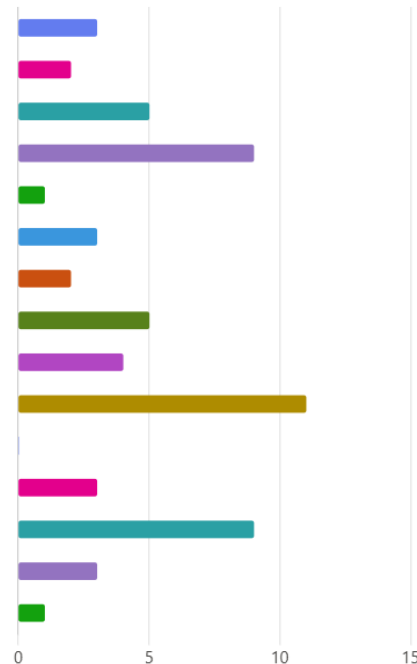
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1tFQGI2mUyE2JK5Pyal5qRa7RbRJNwUxZ?usp=sharing>

Get-to-know-you questionnaire

This is [a PDF of the questions I ask students at the start of the semester](#). All of the questions are optional, but most share answers. I show a frequency graph of the answers to the question about anticipated challenges. (example at right from this fall)

8. What challenges do you think you may face this semester? Choose all that apply (or that you think MIGHT apply).

Homesickness	3
Roommate issues	2
Dating/relationship challenges	5
Frequent procrastination/time-management struggles	9
Feeling isolated/alone or having very few friends	1
Pressure or hassle from my parents	3
Dealing with my professors (in general, not a specific one)	2
Struggling to keep up with my classes	5
Low motivation to do academic work	4
Feeling overwhelmed by everything I need to do	11
Finding childcare/adult care	0
Not having enough money, food, or place to live	3
Mental health challenges (such as anxiety, depression, disordered eating, insomnia,...)	9
I have ADHD, autism, or other neurodivergence.	3
Other	1



Helping vs. serving

Read this later (full essay
linked in slide notes)

Serving is different from **helping**. **Helping is based on inequality**; it is not a relationship between equals. When you help, you use your own strength to help those of lesser strength. If I'm attentive to what's going on inside of me when I'm helping, I find that I'm always **helping someone who's not as strong as I am**, who is needier than I am.

People feel this inequality. When we help we may inadvertently take away from people more than we could ever give them; we may **diminish** their **self-esteem**, their sense of **worth**, **integrity** and **wholeness**. When I help I am very aware of my own strength. But we don't serve with our strength, **we serve with ourselves**. We draw from all of our experiences. Our **limitations** serve, our **wounds** serve, even our **darkness** can serve. The wholeness in us serves the wholeness in others and the wholeness in life. The wholeness in you is the same as the wholeness in me. **Service is a relationship between equals.**

The disease of being busy

Read this later (full essay
linked in slide notes)

We need a different relationship to work, to technology. We know what we want: **a meaningful life**, a **sense of community**, a balanced existence. It's not just about "leaning in" or faster iPhones. We want to be truly human.

W. B. Yeats once wrote: "It takes **more courage** to **examine** the **dark corners** of your **own soul** than it does for a soldier to fight on a battlefield."

How exactly are we supposed to examine the dark corners of our soul **when we are so busy**? How are we supposed to **live the examined life**?

Let's go to Alligator River!

Once there was a girl named **Alice** who was in love with a boy named **Gregory**. One day, while playing ball, Gregory broke his glasses. Being a good friend, Alice volunteered to get his glasses fixed. Unfortunately, the nearest repair shop was across Alligator River, and the bridge had washed away. **Slick** offered to row her across if she agreed to get him an iPhone. She explained that she had no money, but he simply replied she would have to steal one, then. Weeping piteously, Alice turned to **Chris**, who had a boat, and explained Gregory's plight and Slick's offer, asking Chris to row her across.

Chris didn't want to get involved and wanted to get home to play World of Warcraft instead, so simply left. Feeling she had no other choice, Alice agreed to Slick's terms. She got Gregory's glasses fixed, stole an iPhone for Slick and returned home. After giving Gregory his glasses, Alice explained what she had gone through. Disgusted, Gregory called her a thief and shouted that he never wanted to see her again. Broken-hearted, Alice turned to **Sluggo** with her tale of woe. Sluggo stomped off to find Gregory, called him an ungrateful pig, and punched him in the nose. Thus, breaking Gregory's glasses.

Let's go to Alligator River!

Take **3 minutes** to **rank** each person in this story from **best to worst**, using whatever criteria you want. No ties allowed.

Once there was a girl named **Alice** who was in love with a boy named **Gregory**. One day, while playing ball, Gregory broke his glasses. Being a good friend, Alice volunteered to get his glasses fixed. Unfortunately, the nearest repair shop was across Alligator River, and the bridge had washed away. **Slick** offered to row her across if she agreed to get him an iPhone. She explained that she had no money, but he simply replied she would have to steal one, then. Weeping piteously, Alice turned to **Chris**, who had a boat, and explained Gregory's plight and Slick's offer, asking Chris to row her across.

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Let's go to Alligator River!

In groups of 3-4, take 15 minutes to come to a **consensus** on a ranking of each person from best to worst. Be prepared to share with others.

Once there was a girl named **Alice** who was in love with a boy named **Gregory**. One day, while playing ball, Gregory broke his glasses. Being a good friend, Alice volunteered to get his glasses fixed. Unfortunately, the nearest repair shop was across Alligator River, and the bridge had washed away. **Slick** offered to row her across if she agreed to get him an iPhone. She explained that she had no money, but he simply replied she would have to steal one, then. Weeping piteously, Alice turned to **Chris**, who had a boat, and explained Gregory's plight and Slick's offer, asking Chris to row her across.

Chris didn't want to get involved and wanted to get home to play World of Warcraft instead, so simply left. Feeling she had no other choice, Alice agreed to Slick's terms. She got Gregory's glasses fixed, stole an iPhone for Slick and returned home. After giving Gregory his glasses, Alice explained what she had gone through. Disgusted, Gregory called her a thief and shouted that he never wanted to see her again. Broken-hearted, Alice turned to **Sluggo** with her tale of woe. Sluggo stomped off to find Gregory, called him an ungrateful pig, and punched him in the nose. Thus, breaking Gregory's glasses.

Rankings

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Alice	1	1	3	1
Gregory	4	4	1	2
Chris	2	3	2	5
Slick	5	5	5	3
Sluggo	3	2	4	4

Debrief

- How did this activity *feel*?
- What components of this activity helped you **negotiate discomfort**?
- What **skills** did this activity build?
- How might you **use** this activity, or something **like it**?



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I think the elephant really ties the room together.

8:21 PM · Nov 18, 2025



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