Soothing the Emotions of a Pandemic

Amber Hunter-Crawford, LCSW-S
HealthPoint Employee Assistance Program
Where we’re going today

1) **Understand: Why do I feel this way?**
   - Our nervous system and polyvagal theory
   - Collective, on-going trauma
   - The Hand Model of the Brain

2) **Express: Bringing compassion to make space for feelings**
   - Window of Tolerance
   - The wide range of what is normal
   - Observe emotions with compassion
   - “Name it, to tame it”

3) **Soothe: Nourishing our Nervous System--How can I tend to what’s arising?**
   - Resources to support our daily rhythms, cognitions, beliefs, body, and relationships
1) Understand: Why do I feel this way?

“Demystifying people’s behavior helps to regulate it.”

-Stephen Porges, Ph.D.
The Marathon: Emotional Highs and Lows in Common Phases of Community Disaster Response
When we’re dealing with hardship we can assign moral meaning or judgment to how we’re coping (a myth that there’s a right way and a wrong way to be responding to the pandemic).

We need a full story that helps us understand the origins of our strategies for coping and surviving.

As we begin to know and befriend our nervous system, we may be able to turn towards ourselves with more compassion.

With greater understanding and compassion, more options are opened up that can help us connect with a sense of empowerment to bear the intensity, to navigate what arises and know how to offer ourselves soothing.
We are embodied and relational creatures

- **Embodied**: Our nervous systems are constantly scanning around us to notice what is familiar/unfamiliar and then assessing what feels safe/unsafe.

- **Relational**: We are also deeply wired for connection, the felt sense of presence and attunement through being with one another face-to-face. Much is expressed through nonverbal communication, below the level of consciousness.

- Our **sensations, emotions, and cognitions** are packets of information that communicate to us about our nervous systems’ perceptions of our inner worlds and the external world around us.
Our nervous system responds to protect us

Polyvagal theory helps us understand what happens in our body and nervous system when we get scared

• When something traumatic happens, our body and emotional self (accurately) perceives danger

• When the nervous system perceives intense danger like this it naturally generates PROTECTION from the danger through fight, flight and shutting down physical and emotional reactions
• Our nervous system is designed to prioritize safety above everything else

• Our body and emotions respond to perceived danger first on a survival level, beyond any thought or plan

• Then because our emotional, physical and behavioral responses may be strange and unfamiliar we create stories to try to make sense of what our body and emotions are doing
Multiple aspects of the current pandemic such as sudden physical distancing from our community, fear of a virus that’s wreaking havoc around the world, suddenly having to work from home, being an essential worker having to go to campus each day, and/or potentially being furloughed can generate overwhelming distress.

These feelings and sensations are simply signals of a perception of danger.

**These emotional reactions are not only “appropriate” and “normal” but are intelligent, adaptive and protective.**
Trauma can be described as an overwhelming experience that is:

1) Outside the bounds of normal
2) Experienced alone (absence or severing of relationships, and/or isolation)
3) We don’t know when it’s going to end (no time stamp)

The COVID-19 pandemic is still an ongoing and unfolding trauma. It has not ended.
“It’s easier being in each other’s presence, or in each other’s absence, than in the constant presence of each other’s absence.”
-Gianpiero Petriglieri, Italian management professor

Zoom, Facetime and social media don’t offer our nervous system’s the rich sense of connection of being in the same room face-to-face. Many of us are feeling this acutely with “Zoom fatigue”

Our minds are tricked into the idea of being together when our bodies feel we’re not. The dissonance is exhausting. We sense too little and can’t imagine enough. This deprivation requires a lot of effort
Impact of the unknowns

Our brains are prediction machines. Uncertainty is more dysregulating for us than physical pain.

It’s common to feel a variety of emotional response to uncertainty (such as anxiety or fear) because we are unconsciously remaining vigilant to unpredictable circumstances so that we can survive and so we can protect the lives of those we care about.
The Hand Model of the Brain

What happens when we “flip our lid”

When our brain is working efficiently both the upper and mid brain are communicating effectively. Information comes in and is processed logically. Sometimes too much information is coming in for the Upper brain to process and it disconnects. We “flip our lid” and can no longer access the functions provided by the upper brain.

Your brain working in harmony. All parts are connected and talking. The upper part of the brain can be accessed for logic, socialising and reasoning. Our upper brain is hugging our mid brain, making it feel safe.

The Cerebrum or Neo Cortex
- Cerebral cortex
- Prefronatal cortex
- Upper brain
  - “Logic centre”
  - “Thinking brain”
  - “Upstairs brain”

The Cerebellum or Limbic Regions
- Hippo campus
- Amygdala
- Mid brain
  - “Big feelings”
  - “Cave man” brain
  - “Downstairs brain”
- Information dump from the Central Nervous System
An invitation to a new story

- Rather than self-judging, can we become self-reassuring, telling ourselves

“...My emotions and reactions are actually my body taking care of itself in a situation fraught with danger. I can learn new tools to work with these feelings (to bear the intensity, to soothe myself, to nourish my nervous system) so they can guide me to safety and healing.”

-adapted from the work of Candyce Ossefort-Russell, L.P.C.-S

HealthPoint
Balance & Well-Being in Work & Life
Pause for two minutes and reflect on what information your nervous system has been giving you over the past week. If you feel comfortable, you are welcome to share your response in chat:

“In the last week, my nervous system response to the pandemic has included
__________________________________________”
2) Express: Bringing compassion to make space for feelings

“Strong emotions require compassion to feel safe or soothed.”

— Janina Fisher, Ph.D.
Polyvagal theory helps us know that aspects of emotional responses to the pandemic are universal, other aspects are unique to each of us.

What’s arising for us is going to be shaped by all our history with big emotions, our current social environment, our current physical environment, past traumas, and current grief over other losses.
Window of Tolerance

HYPERAROUSAL
Anxious, Angry, Out of Control, Overwhelmed
Your body wants to fight or run away. It’s not something you choose – these reactions just take over.

HYPOAROUSAL
Spacy, Zoned Out, Numb, Frozen
Your body wants to shut down. It’s not something you choose – these reactions just take over.

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE
When you are in your Window of Tolerance, you feel like you can deal with whatever’s happening in your life. You might feel stress or pressure, but it doesn’t bother you too much. This is the ideal place to be.

Working with a practitioner can help expand your window of tolerance so that you are more able to cope with challenges.
• Comparing our own emotional response to someone else doesn’t make sense because our emotional and physical response to frightening situations are just that: **Ours**

• Perhaps this new story can be more normalizing as we can express appreciation for our unique bodily and emotional wisdom within chaos. It may look messy, and yet we may just need support to bear the intensity
In the context of the pandemic there is a wide range of what is normal:

• Fear and anxiety are normal
• Feeling okay and energetic is normal
• Feeling more tired and sluggish than usual is normal
• Struggling with fatigue or insomnia is normal
• Feeling less motivated and being less productive is normal

These feelings are our minds and bodies responding to what our nervous system is perceiving.

Our brain and nervous systems are being taxed by the stress of many things including: physical distancing, uncertainty, confusing/conflicting information, disrupted rhythms, duality of holding threat and safety.
It’s also completely normal to potentially feel more than one emotion at the same time (the both/and):

• to feel grief and gratitude
• to feel despair and hope
• to feel fear and faith

Our cognitions, emotions, sensations, and sense of energy can also very normally ebb and flow during a day or week. We may wake up feeling one thing, go to work, read some news and then be left feeling something very different. This is our mind and body ever responding to the information received from our nervous system.
• When our amygdala (in our lower brain) is activated and distressed it needs to “feel felt” in order to be soothed

• To “feel felt” means to offer compassionate connection from your high brain self to your low brain self (or from another person to your low brain self)

• Using gentle logic with your higher brain helps bring understanding to our lower brains
Name it (with kindness), to tame it

• When we turn toward ourselves with compassion and accurately name the emotions of what we’re feeling, our brain responds by sending neurotransmitters into the right lower brain to help soothe it

• “Naming it, to tame it” begins the process of allowing ourselves to make sense of the emotion(s)

• As we make sense of the emotion(s) we can begin to discern what actions, emotional expression, distraction or coping will truly help us move through the feelings or bear the on-going emotional state

• Our right brains want to be known— to feel felt
“When we feel felt, we are not alone. What is shareable becomes bearable.”

— Daniel Siegel, M.D.
Common emotions during times of uncertainty

- Grief
  Sadness (deprived, desolate)
  Protest (anger, outrage)
  Shock
  Longing or yearning (reaching)
  Despair
  Hopelessness
  Determination (mobilization)

- Disappointment
  Anguish
  Thwarted
  Let down
• Loneliness
  Longing

• Fear

• Relief, gratitude, appreciation, tenderness, compassion, vulnerability
Looking at the Emotion Wheel, what are the top 3 emotions you have been experiencing most strongly in the last two weeks?

You can use the annotation tool to mark next to it.

If the emotion you’re feeling isn’t on the wheel, feel free to list it in the chat.
Before we move to the third section, I want to make space for questions. You’re welcome to type them into chat.
To soothe is rooted in bringing a **compassionate curiosity** to befriend our nervous system—to notice what we are feeling, thinking and sensing in our bodies.

When we are aware of what is arising we can ask what might be needed to bear the intensity of the feeling, to offer care and looking for ways to meet the need.

Soothing is utilizing coping skills to support our nervous system *to return to within our window of tolerance* and/or *to widen our window of tolerance* so we have more capacity.

When we’re within our window of tolerance we feel open, curious, fluid, capable, calm, available for connection, relaxed yet alert, and able to be present.
Coping takes a lot of emotional energy. **We need to spend our coping energy wisely**, so that the effort we put forth has the most impact.

**Have a realistic view of coping**—we’re looking for what eases the distress, even a little bit, to support what we are experiencing. We’ll use a variety of different resources and tools each day and each week to help meet our needs. There is unfortunately no “silver bullet” that will soothe all our distress.

**We need the tools we use to match the level of our distress**. Higher level of distress means we may need more and/or stronger supports. Lower levels of distress may be managed by our daily self-care practices.
Do what works for you. **We’re all uniquely wired** and different things will resonate with each of us on different days.

**What might you already know about yourself:** Is there something that offered support in the past that you have stopped doing? Could you try it or another variation of it now?

**Just telling ourselves that everything is okay is not enough**—our body has to feel the physiological shift.
Noticing where we are in the three states of our nervous system can help inform which coping skill(s) might best meet our current need.

- **Dorsal immobilization** (when we’re feeling hopeless, out of energy, sense of despair, spacey, numb, stuck or like we want to give up)
  Does this idea feel like it could offer a gentle return of energy?

- **Sympathetic Mobilization** (when we’re feeling keyed up, on edge, overwhelmed, a flood of energy)
  Does this idea feel like it could help me discharge energy in a safe, organized way?

- **Vagal Regulation** (when we’re feeling connected, creative and compassionate)
  Does this idea feel like it could help me deepen or savor a safe, connected or creative experience?
Because we’re embodied and relational creatures, we oftentimes will need resources on several levels:

- to attend to our daily rhythms
- support for our thoughts and cognitions
- nourishment for our values and beliefs about the world (may include spirituality)
- resources to respond to the information our body is giving us (somatic)
- support for our relationships with the people important to us

Tending to our whole selves
Support for our daily rhythms

Engage with ritual and routine for the week
Notice what routine allows you to move into the work day and transition out of it back home

Creating time stamps
Time feels slippery or wonky right now, because we’ve lost cues on the passage of time being shut indoors and on screens. We can help our brains and bodies orient by reminding ourselves what day it is, tethering ourselves to chronology of when things occurred. This creates the time stamp that our minds desperately need of how long things have been occurring and where we are in the process.

Schedule time for informal chats/collaborations

Take 10 minute breaks to refuel
Deep breathing, a snack, a glass of water, grounding exercises or movement
Get fresh air-- open a window or door, sit outside, consider moving outdoors

Sit in the sun, which offers extra Vitamin D into our body, to support mood

Nourish yourself with food the color of the rainbow, even if small meals or snacks

Drink lots of water

Limit stimulants and depressants
Sleep
- Create a rhythm of wake-up time, a wind-down time and a consistent bedtime to turn out the lights
- Reserve your bed for sleep. Don’t allow yourself to work from bed. Limit bringing your laptop to bed to watch Netflix or a movie. If you’re tossing and turning for more than 20 minutes get out of bed and try something relaxing with low light
- See the light: exposure to daylight plays a crucial role in regulating melatonin and our sleep rhythms. This can be opening windows and doors
- Be mindful of screen time due to the blue light produced that blocks the natural secretion of melatonin. Consider blue light blocking glasses
- Incorporate movement for 20 minutes a day to help discharge stress hormones
- Consider deep breathing, guided meditation, quiet reading or calming music before bed
Permission to feel

- Reactions vary from person to person. Some of us may experience intense feelings while others experience nothing at all. There is generous permission to acknowledge whatever your truth is. It is also very normal for cognitions, emotions and sensations to ebb and flow in any given day.

Realistic expectations

- The pandemic is still unfolding and on-going, it is regenerating itself every day with a new manifestation of trauma. These events are not complete yet, allowing them to be relegated to the past. Making space for compassion, potentially allows more realistic expectation of ourselves that this is a marathon that requires even more tender care and attentiveness to what helps us soothe.
Mindful Connection
• Bring intentionality into where and for how long you are exposing yourself to activating interactions, situations or news consumption. Check-in internally to notice if a fight, flight or collapse response is being intensified. Consider setting boundaries that protect your energy and time.

Notice your thoughts
• Tune in to what we are focusing on
• Be aware of the protectors of catastrophizing, black and white thinking, generalizing, jumping to conclusions, reductionism

Stay in the present moment as much as you can, remembering experiences in which you coped well in the past. What was helpful then?
Partializing
We can’t digest the on-going trauma in one big meal. We have to take it a bite at a time.

Partializing is the process of coming into contact with what is happening (the pain), then going away and doing something else to cope or distract or soothe, and then coming back to the information about the reality of what is unfolding.

These movements back and forth help our nervous system regulate by giving us space to metabolize the pain. It’s an inherent wisdom of the body that we may already be doing naturally.

If we’ve experienced previous overwhelming events we may get stuck in one of these movements (either in the pain or avoiding the pain) and retreat into styles of coping that can help us survive in the short-term but can be costly in the long-term if we get stuck there.
Bring your attention back to the certainty of what is known and in our control

- Our brains are prediction machines that mostly want to survive. Uncertainty increases a sense of dysregulation. Return focus to what is within our control and what is within the next 48 hours.

Make space to engage with the possibility of a positive future

- Bring curiosity to moments that don’t feel quite so hopeless or helpless. Is there any space to contemplate a positive future? If we find ourselves only sitting with the darkest parts, can we also sit with the light?
Support for our values and beliefs

Protectors, Nurturers

• Reflect on people (either in your life, from spiritual beliefs, or from inspiring fiction/poetry/movies) who convey a sense of strength, comfort and protection.
• Are there people in power who share your views and can offer support, even if proverbially or from a distance? There’s lots of really smart people all around the world working on all the layers of the pandemic.

Anchor points

• Reflect on your personal values and internal qualities—what are the known stable, core truths about you (and/or you and your family)? Are there practices you can engage in to connect more strongly with your values?
Orienting
A variety of practices that can offer gentle cues of safety by orienting to the present moment. This can help our systems hold the duality of on-going threat and current safety.

• **Bring ourselves back to what is true in this moment** by reminding ourselves of the date, time, where we are, who is with us, what was just happening and that we felt x, y, z. If we are in a safe place, allow yourself to say that “In this moment, I am safe.”

• **5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Exercise**
[https://insighttimer.com/blog/54321-grounding-technique/](https://insighttimer.com/blog/54321-grounding-technique/)
Engage smells that are calming and soothing

- Olfactory inputs, unlike the other basic senses, are sent directly to the part of the brain that processes our sense of alertness and/or relaxation.

As such, smell can be a powerful factor in both activating past overwhelm as well as anchoring ourselves to calming and grounding self-states in the present.

Identifying pleasing smells, be they in the form of a candle, tea, food, or essential oils, and accessing these with consciousness, can be a significant resource to bring us back into our bodies.
**Breathe deep**

When facing many unknowns and uncertainties, one of the most powerful tools we continually have access to is our breath. By noticing our breath and bringing intentionality to how we breathe, we are able to help calm our nervous system and allow an opportunity for regulation.

Some options to consider are incorporating breathwork practices such as:
- The 4-7-8 breath: [https://www.drweil.com/videos-features/videos/breathing-exercises-4-7-8-breath/](https://www.drweil.com/videos-features/videos/breathing-exercises-4-7-8-breath/)
- Square breathing: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgzhKW08bMQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgzhKW08bMQ)
- 5 finger breath: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqariSXiSvs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqariSXiSvs)

Some of us may find that guided meditation are supportive. Many apps offer free guided meditations and breathwork, such as Calm, Headspace and Insight Timer.
Progressive muscle relaxation
Our muscles and sinews respond to the neurochemicals released when we are in situations of high stress, and can become overly tense or too loose. Brining focused attention to the major muscle groups allows the muscles to re-set, offering regulation. An audio recording of this exercise is available on UT’s CMHC website: https://cmhc.utexas.edu/mindbodylab.html

Legs up the wall
A posture from yoga that can offer regulation and relaxation is lifting our legs above the heart, by putting them up a wall. There are many adaptations of this position that can be modified for different abilities. https://www.drweil.com/health-wellness/balanced-living/exercise-fitness/legs-up-the-wall-pose/

Cold showers or running hands under cold water

Creative expression through coloring, writing, cooking, baking, and/or art making
Affection

Laughter, play, levity

Discharge Energy

• Find ways to move your body and exert physical energy, go for a 20 minute walk or run. Yoga or qigong, cardio or walking on hilly terrain or up and down stairs. Consider dancing or moving to favorite songs in your living room. Many gyms and yoga studios are offering online classes or short workouts.
Increase proprioceptive input

- Proprioception is the brain’s map for where the body is in space. When we are feeling more out of our bodies, it can be difficult to sense our own tissues. More specifically, passive proprioceptive input can be offered through the addition of weight or compression, such as a weighted ball or blanket, rolling on a foam roller, or wearing compressive clothing such as T-shirts or leggings with a high spandex-like “squeeze” factor.

Other ways to activate proprioception are by drinking through a straw or chewing gum, doing heel drops or wall push-ups.
Since we are relational beings, we rely on nonverbal and social cues to support our nervous system’s social engagement system. This system helps to promote resilience, nourishment to our nervous system, support for our immune system and is responsible for providing us with rest.

Ways we can begin to take in cues of relative safety and connection are:
- Making eye contact whenever we can
- Waving and acknowledging others
- Smiling with our eyes
- Becoming aware of open, relaxed and calm body postures
- Avoid multi-tasking on Zoom, Teams or Skype for Business to allow ourselves to notice and take in the other people on the call with us
- Noticing acts of kindness in our neighborhood, community or around the world
- Pausing to appreciate different expressions of human compassion and empathy
Questions you can ask yourself to nourish your relationships and increase your sense of connection are:

• Who are the people in your life you feel connected to?
• What can you do with these people to maintain the connection?
• Who might you like to invite into connection?
• Who might you be able to check in on today?
• Who might you benefit from connecting with?
1. On your own spend 2-3 minutes reflecting on “What are you doing already that feels like it’s supporting your nervous system? Which of the five areas is it supporting?”

2. In the main group chat, I invite you to respond to the prompt: “What’s a coping skill or practice or rhythm that feels like it’s working for you?”
3. On your own spend 2-3 minutes reflecting on an area you’d like more support. Look at the section of the handout and see if any of the listed practices stand out to you and make you curious.

What questions do you have about these practices or what might make them more accessible?
4. In small groups, take turns having one person briefly name an area where they’d like more support/that they’re working on. (This can be very short, ie. “I’m working on daily rhythms” or “I feel isolated from the people I care about”)

Take 2-3 minutes for other group members to share their experiences of that area—both challenges and what works for them.

Then rotate to the next person briefly naming an area where they’d like more support, followed by the group sharing.

Once each person in the group has shared and been responded to, come back to the main group.
5. As we gather back as a whole group, I invite you to respond via chat to the prompt “What’s one thing you want to try this week to access more supports for yourself?”
“It’s okay that I feel this way. These are scary times. I can listen to what my body is telling me I need to do (or not do) to cope with this abnormal situation. Coping is okay right now. I don’t have to worry whether it’s different from what my colleagues or friends are doing. My body and emotions are wise, and I’m able to learn new tools and strengthen existing ones for supporting myself by nourishing my nervous system in the midst of this difficult time.”

-adapted from the work of Candyce Ossefort-Russell, L.P.C.-S
Reflection

Via chat, I invite you to share with the group one thing you’re taking away from this presentation?
The COVID-19 pandemic is such an abnormal experience, so it makes sense you or your family members may be experiencing symptoms. The EAP is here if you need us, able to offer tailored support for what might be uniquely arising for you.

Benefits eligible employees and their dependents, as well as retirees, have access to confidential telehealth counseling at no charge.

To make an appointment
Email eap@austin.utexas.edu
Call 512-471-3366
If you are experiencing a crisis outside of business hours,
call the **EAP after-hours crisis line** at 512-471-3399
to speak to a crisis counselor.
If you’d like to connect with me individually, feel free to reach out:

Amber Hunter-Crawford, LCSW-S
Amber.HunterCrawford@austin.utexas.edu
512.475.8029
Material in this presentation is shaped and informed by the work of:
Mary Bade, Ph.D.
Bonnie Badenoch, Ph.D.
Brené Brown, Ph.D., L.M.S.W.
Deb Dana, L.C.S.W.
Heather Davies, L.C.S.W.-S
Jandri Fernandez, L.C.S.W.
Nancy Kelly, L.C.S.W., C.G.P.
Vanessa Joy, Psy.D., L.P.C.-S
Rick Levinson, L.C.S.W.
Kristin Neff, Ph.D.
Candyce Ossefort-Russell, L.P.C.-S
Stephen Porges, Ph.D.
Daniel Siegel, M.D.
Ann Stoneson, L.P.C.-S
Additional Resources

These are some websites, books, and a podcast if you’d like to continue engaging on the topic of how do we help ourselves cope through regulation of our nervous system:

• Brene Brown, Ph.D., L.M.S.W.’s podcast “Unlocking Us”  
  https://brenebrown.com/podcast/introducing-unlocking-us/

• Nityda Gessel, L.C.S.W., E-RYT Trauma Conscious Yoga  
  https://traumaconsciousyoga.com/resources/

• Kristin Neff, Ph.D.’s book “Self-Compassion” and website  
  https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/

• Lisa Olivera, L.M.F.T. offers a monthly newsletter and daily Instagram posts  
  https://mailchi.mp/7ee2400600d6/prompts-01 (newsletter sign up) and  
  https://www.instagram.com/lisaoliveratherapy/
• Daniel Siegel, M.D.’s book “Mindsight” and website https://www.drdansiegel.com/resources/everyday_mindsight_tools/

• Therapist Uncensored Podcast https://www.therapistuncensored.com/

• The EAP website now hosts a blog with several posts a week to relevant resources, supports, and practices to consider for additional nourishment, learning, and growth: https://eap.utexas.edu/posts