





Perspective *in a* Disorienting World

By Rebecca Kase, LCSW

I am facilitating an EMDR consultation group and starting with a check-in. I ask one of the consultees how they are and what they need from the group. They respond, “I am out of f*%\$’s to give. Can you help me with that?” Everyone in the group giggles validates and resonates.

I am an EMDR trainer and consultant, and many of my consultations these days focus on the burdens of burnout. Clinicians are weary, tired, a bit cynical, and overwhelmed. I am sure you can resonate on some level with this sentiment.

As someone who spends a lot of time with clinicians, I have observed this growing theme since the pandemic’s beginning. Over the past few years, therapists have been navigating a pandemic, climate catastrophes, civil unrest, countless acts of gun violence, overdue racial reckonings, a constitutional crisis, and threats to democracy. It is a lot to process as a human and a lot to hold space for as a helper.

We work in a field prone to burnout during a time of heightened burnout risk. And, as EMDR therapists who identify as trauma experts and

specialists, we are at even greater risk for burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma. A 2020 Gallup poll found America’s mental health to be the worst in two decades (Brenan, 2020). The events of the last few years have increased addiction, depression, and anxiety. The influx of clients has created a shortage of available therapists, leaving clinicians overwhelmed with full caseloads, long waitlists, and no reprieve in sight. It has been exhausting, and burnout and compassion fatigue have hit us all. A study by Summers et al. (2020) identified that 78 percent of counselors surveyed reported high levels of burnout. Three-quarters of our profession is sizzling on the frying pan. We seek ways to get centered and grounded, only to find ourselves topsy turvy again, whisked away by another wave of trauma and a new existential threat. It feels like a never-ending parade of absurdity. We are living in a trauma cycle.

I am not here to sugarcoat anything, tell you to create a gratitude journal, get a massage, or take a vacation. Those things alone just do not cut it.

What I find helpful personally and professionally has a different tone than what you're probably used to hearing. Let's get real for a moment and be honest about some things.

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS BALANCE

Life is not a grounding, balancing, or centering experience. So let's get rid of the notion that being off-kilter is bad. While it does not feel good to be imbalanced, it is part of the human experience. Part of living is experiencing adversity and stress. If that were not part of the deal, we would not have a nervous system wired to respond to stress. Fight, flight, freeze, and collapse would not be physiological functions of our biology if we were meant to live in the window of tolerance 100 percent of the time. Holding yourself to the expectation that you should be centered and balanced is like expecting to swim through water without getting wet. It's impossible.

Mindfulness and meditation are well-known methods for cultivating balance and battling burnout. But remember, they are practices. Why? Because balance is fleeting and impermanent. These practices require consistent application and practice because life is stressful and dysregulating. Period. Paying attention to the state of the world while navigating your life and holding compassionate space for others is hard work. It is normal to be affected. Just like a rollercoaster can make you feel disoriented, this work and world can make you dizzy. Getting centered is more of a practice than an outcome.

Radical acceptance of these truths allows you to avoid holding unrealistic expectations while also embracing the reality that life is uncentering. While practicing balance is essential and necessary, recognize that moments of groundedness are temporary. The imbalance is a sign you're living.

THE BURNOUT NARRATIVE

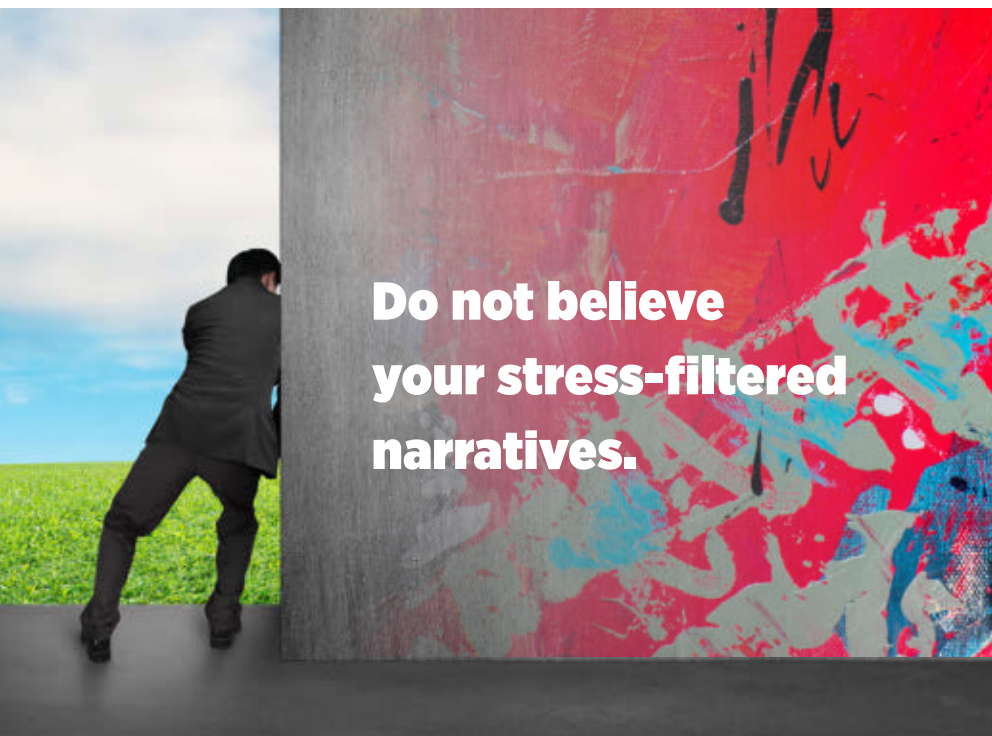
As EMDR therapists, we know that our physiology changes in response to extreme stress and adversity. Hard-wired responses for survival take over when our nervous system perceives a threat. Fight or flight responses mobilize us with racing thoughts, hypervigilance, anxiety, restlessness, sleep troubles, reduced appetite, increased heart rate, and tension. Collapse responses immobilize us with disengagement, fatigue, depression, dissociation, slowed metabolism, increased appetite, and numbness. Burnout and compassion fatigue all fit within these physiological stress responses.

Our physiology and psychology change in response to stress and internal narratives. The stories we hold about ourselves, others, and the world are products of our experiences and physiological state. Consider your narrative about yourself, others, and the world when you're free of threats and anchored in your window of tolerance. This is where I feel confident, I am trusting of others, and I can find good in the world.

How does that narrative change when you are in a hyperaroused, fight-or-flight stress response? Do you become critical of yourself and others? Does the world become unsafe and dangerous? Is the future one of fire and brimstone?

And how about when you move into hypoarousal and collapse? What happens to your narrative about yourself, others, and the world? Is it hopeless? Do you feel helpless or shameful here? Do you lose the capacity to empathize? Is everything futile, and there is no way out?

If your narrative changes in response to physiology, it is not necessarily accurate when you're in a stress response. Truth is truth and does not ebb and flow depending on



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the day's circumstances. No matter how you feel, $2 + 2 = 4$, and north is north because those are truths and facts. When you experience others as terrible, the world and humanity to be hopeless, and you cannot stand yourself, recognize those thoughts and beliefs are filtered by your physiological stress response. They are not necessarily accurate appraisals.

When I find myself thinking things like "People are terrible," "It's hopeless," "This is the worst it's been," or "I'm not enough," I pause for a moment and ask, "*Is this a narrative from my window of tolerance?*" If it is not, I remind myself that while those thoughts and beliefs may feel true in the moment, they are the products of my stressed-out physiology.

Do not believe your stress-filtered narratives.

PERSPECTIVE

A fallacy of the human condition is our tendency to be near-sighted. Our nervous systems are terrible at staying tethered to the big picture and remaining objective when we get stressed and scared. When we get overwhelmed, our survival instincts hone in on the threat, which can have a blinder effect and skew our perspective.

When I notice I have blinders on because all I can focus on is the news, the problem, the overwhelm, or the threat, I seek out ways to expand my perspective with intentionality. I like to do this through a process I call *Zooming Out*. Here is how I do this:

- Get quiet for a moment and turn inside.
- See yourself from above. Observe yourself and your space from above.
- Zoom out and notice the building you are in.

- Zoom out and notice the city you are in.
- Zoom out and notice the country, continent, and planet.
- Zoom out again and notice the universe.
- Pause and take in this perspective. What wisdom or new truths are available to you as you take in this perspective? What do you notice? When I *Zoom Out* I am reminded that I am just a tiny spec, on a tiny blue dot, in a vast universe. I am reminded that the universe is chaotic with stars collapsing, gases colliding, and black holes engulfing. It created all life on earth, and we are inseparable from its ways. Its tendencies are paralleled in our societies and clinical offices. We also experience violence, collision, and destruction in our world. The sometimes traumatic collision of

opposing forces and beliefs are all fractals of our existence. It is all a parallel process of the larger picture within which we exist.

Suffering is part of life. Many spiritual and religious practices teach this. It is easy for us to get lost in the day-to-day crises and fires and think it's the worst it is ever been and that our suffering is unique. But that's a near-sighted perspective. From plagues to famine, to slavery, to wars and genocide, to the Great Depression and the Holocaust, there has been no shortage of suffering in human existence. The flavor of suffering right now may be unique, but it is not necessarily the worst it has ever been. With social media at our fingertips, and people flocking

endured, but we also lose sight of the wins and triumphs.

INTENTIONAL SELF-REGULATION

A simple truth is that if you do not take care of your nervous system, you will feel pretty terrible and burn out in this field. Your nervous system is your greatest resiliency and most important means of clinical intervention. As EMDR therapists, we focus on the adaptive information processing model, a mechanism of the nervous system, and the storage of memory. The nervous system is the focus of our assessment, intervention, and outcome. But it's not only our clients' nervous systems we focus on. The health and wellness of our nervous systems

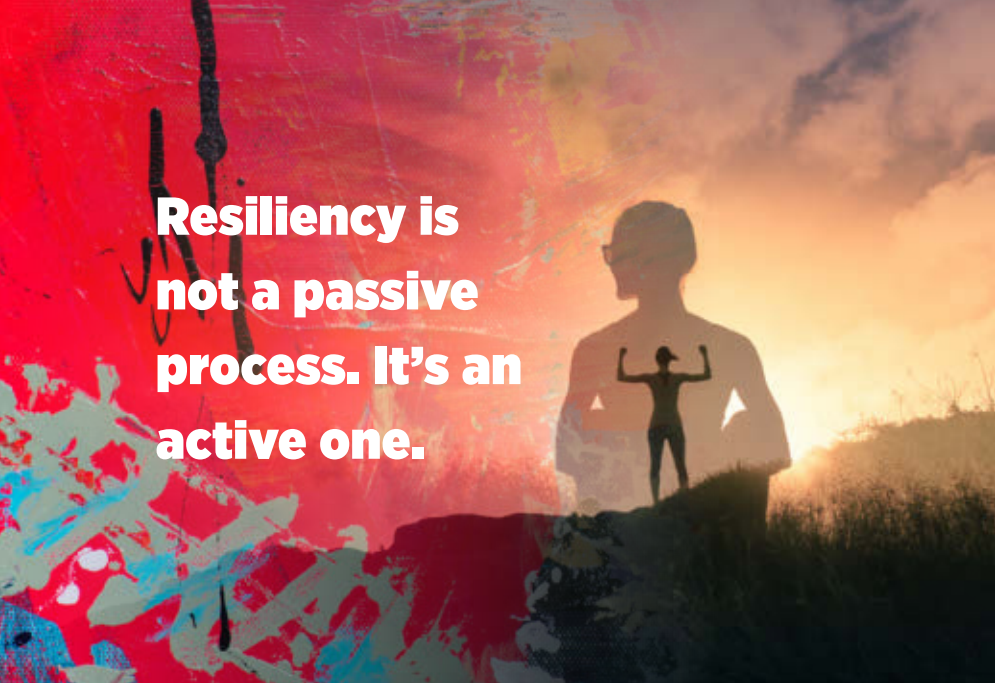
and we thrive in connection. Relationships are medicinal, which is one of the reasons therapy works. But relationships need to feel safe to be therapeutic, which requires a regulated therapist.

When clients come to counseling, we lend them our nervous system. Our regulated nervous system provides a life raft, offering co-regulating opportunities to connect clients to their window of tolerance. Coregulation paves the way to self-regulation (Dana, 2018). Therefore, the therapist's physiology becomes the intervention pathway. So, we must care for our minds and bodies to be effective helpers.

Recall a time you were taking a trip and searching for lodging. As you scrolled through hotel options, you probably weren't drawn to places that looked dirty, cluttered, or run down. You were likely drawn to clean, organized, and cared-for places. After all, you don't want to pay good money for an uninhabitable space. This metaphor applies to your nervous system and the counseling process. You do not want to loan your dysregulated nervous system to your clients. It just isn't therapeutic.

Self-care is a billion-dollar industry that evokes images of privilege and elitism. But let's reframe self-care as intentional self-regulation time. If every person on the planet practiced a little more self-regulation, what a difference that would make! As therapists, we have a duty to take care of our nervous systems because it is the vehicle through which we provide clinical interventions. It is your professional instrument. Consider self-care to be an ethical responsibility of the job.

Getting a massage and taking a vacation are certain forms of self-care. But not all self-care is equivalent to pampering. Self-care needs to



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not a passive
process. It's an
active one.**

to therapy, it can feel more terrible than ever. But just because it feels that way does not mean it is. Our near-sightedness can cause us to lose historical perspective. In doing so, we not only forget the many adversities people before us have

cannot be disregarded as required contributors to our clients' healing and transformation.

Stephen Porges (2011) teaches us that we have a social engagement system that wires us for connection. Human beings are social creatures,

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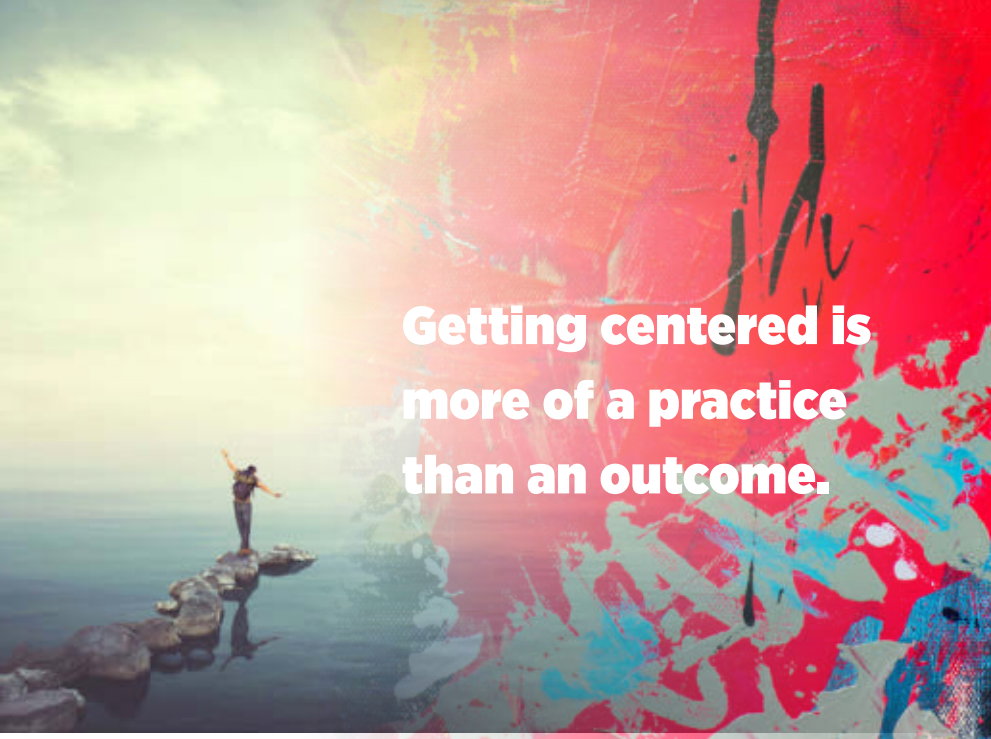
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Getting centered is more of a practice than an outcome.

be dosed daily, and not all self-care is fun. Eating something nutritious when you want fried food, getting to bed at a reasonable hour when you want to scroll social media, and hitting the gym when you'd rather hit up happy hour are all forms of self-care. We must create time for self-regulation to keep our clinical instrument, aka our nervous system, in good health.

Using skills and making time for self-regulation is important. But as EMDR therapists, we also know the importance of integrating experiences that hijack our nervous systems. Sometimes it's about skills, and sometimes it's about diving back into our personal counseling. Our clients' stories can get stuck in our system, leading to symptoms of vicarious trauma. We may over work to avoid our trauma or the state of the world. We may push ourselves in attempts to counter a negative belief we hold such as "I'm stupid" or "I'm not good enough." We likely have our own trauma histories and may find ourselves in an acute phase of healing after directly experiencing a

recent traumatic event. Just because you're an EMDR therapist and a trauma expert doesn't mean you're immune to the laws of neurobiology. You deserve to be happy and healthy, and you have a right to heal. And lucky you, you know about this amazing therapy called EMDR that could probably help.

Getting to your own counseling is a necessary ingredient to remain a helpful therapist. It is an ethical imperative and a required component of embodiment. Because we can't just talk the talk. We have to walk the walk.

WE CAN DO THIS

You are a renewable energy source. But you must take time to renew. You are not your fridge that can stay on 24/7. Like your clients, you are resilient. You can heal, overcome, and find ways forward. But it takes practice, and it takes commitment. Resiliency is not a passive process. It's an active one.

You, dear healer, make a difference. Every day you show up, whether big or small, you help make the

world better. Do not lose sight of that and the good happening, easily overlooked in the shadow of threat. Do not get swept away in the stormy waves of this impermanent moment. You are a valuable resource in this challenging world, and people need you. Though these times are uncertain and tumultuous, progress still happens, people heal, the sun rises, and the birds sing.

When the ocean of life gets choppy, do not abandon the ship. Build a bigger boat.

Rebecca Kase, LCSW, is an EMDR therapist, trainer, and consultant. Kase is the owner of Rebecca Kase & CO., an EMDR training and consultation provider. She specializes in yoga therapy, Polyvagal Theory, EMDR, and the importance of therapist self-care.

References/Resources

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"Let's Talk EMDR Podcast," Episode 6, "EMDR Therapists: Staying Centered in an Uncentered World" with Rebecca Kase, www.emdria.org/letstalkemdrpodcast
