Staff

EM LEDINGHAM & JENNY FIEBIG



Supporting Stress Injuries Through Connection

Understand the Barriers to Support

We must identify the stigma, shame, and cultural hurdles that prevent staff from seeking help in the workplace.

Insights Learned Through SOAR

Our SOAR program demonstrates that peer-led support models significantly improve long-term recovery and well-being outcomes.

How IFS Helps Us Turn Inward

Internal Family Systems helps us cultivate self-leadership, allowing us to turn inward and connect authentically with others.

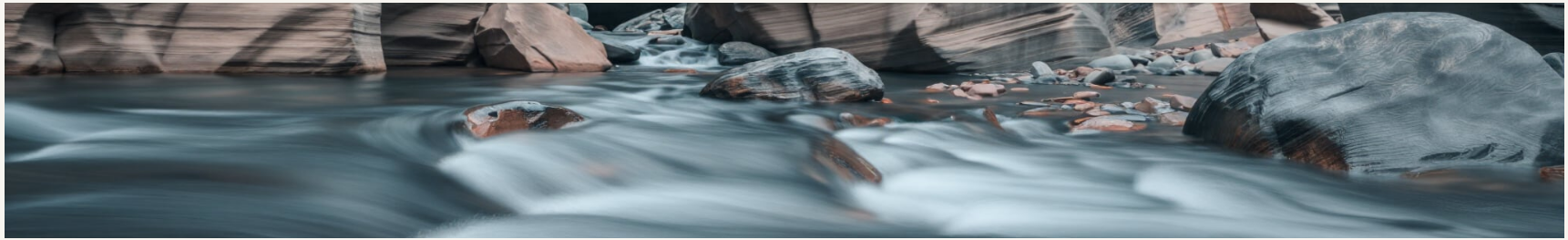


CONNECTION BEGINS WITH HOW WE SHOW UP.

What Is a Stress Injury?

A stress injury occurs when a difficult experience
— or accumulation of experiences — overwhelms our capacity to cope.

This leaves lasting impacts on our nervous system, emotions, relationships, or sense of safety.



Consider both acute incidents and cumulative experiences.



- What are examples of incidents or near misses that can lead to stress injuries.

- What comes up for you in the supporting role?

Barriers to Long-Term Support

Material & Logistical

Seasonal and distributed teams

Staff turnover and contract work

Limited benefits and continuity of care

Few outdoor-informed mental health resources

Loss of community when returning to the activity is difficult

Liability and legal concerns

Cultural & Behavioral

Stoicism and self-reliance

Pressure to remain calm and capable

Pushing through rather than processing

Fear of appearing weak or incompetent

Believing support requires expertise

Prioritizing performance over recovery

What We've Learned from SOAR Peer Support Groups

Safety is not the absence of threat, it is the presence of connection.

We heal in relationship, not only in isolation.

Being witnessed can matter more than being fixed.

Support needs to continue long after the incident.

We don't always need specialized expertise to offer meaningful human connection.



IFS: Understanding our Internal Reactions

Internal Family Systems (IFS) offers a way to understand what happens inside us under stress.

We all have different protective responses, or "parts."
These responses develop to help us navigate challenges and stay safe.

Under stress, protective strategies can take over. When we notice them with curiosity rather than judgment, we create more room for choice and connection.

The goal isn't to get rid of our protective responses. It's to develop a better relationship with them.



Case Scenario: After a Near Miss

Imagine an experienced river guide who was involved in a near miss several months ago.

Since the incident: Sleep has become difficult. Frustration and irritability are increasing. They avoid personal river trips. They feel burned out and less patient with clients. They're withdrawing from staff and team connection. They're still showing up for work. But something has changed.





Reflection: How would you support?

What support would you or your organization offer this person?

What comes up in you as you imagine supporting them?

OK, I have parts, Now What?

What's Happening Inside Me?

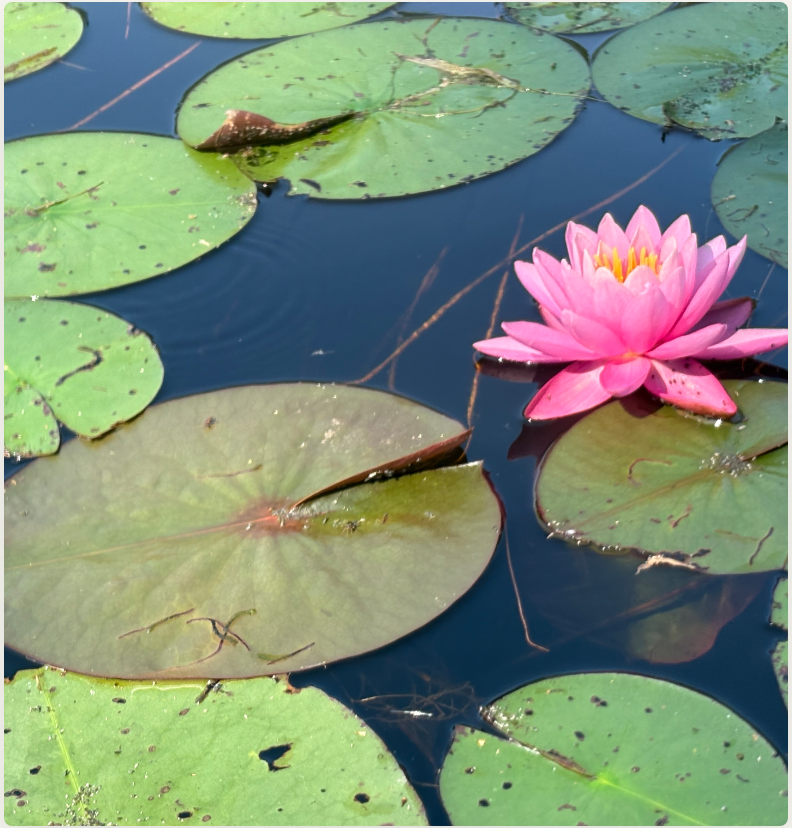
Nervous System Activation

Grounded: Present, flexible, engaged
Activated: Urgent, anxious, reactive
Shut down: Numb, distant, withdrawn

Capacity for Connection

Can I stay curious?
Am I feeling compelled to fix or avoid?
Can I notice my reactions without being overtaken?
Am I available to listen?

Notice your state before trying to change someone else's.





Working with our Parts

From Automatic Reaction to Connected Presence

Check your state. What's happening in your nervous system?

Find the strongest response. What has your attention right now?

Notice your response. What sensations, emotions, urges, or stories are showing up?

Get curious. What is this response trying to accomplish? What is it afraid might happen?

Check your relationship to it. How do you feel toward this response now?

We don't need to eliminate our protective responses. We need enough space to choose how we show up.

You Are Not an Island



What Will You Take Back With You?

What's one thing you can practice to become more present and available for connection?

What's one thing you can build into your workplace culture or incident response plan to support ongoing connection?

This concludes our look at supporting stress injuries. Use the links below to continue — listen, watch, or explore.

These are live links — click to open.

Listen →

Hear the full discussion on building sustainable mental health support.

Watch →

A guided walkthrough of response patterns and the power of connection.

RESOURCES

Explore →

Navigate the full presentation freely on the zooming canvas.

Ask the AI →

Deepen your understanding by asking specific questions about the content.