

# Self-Care in Action: Practical Tools for Counselors Working with Sex Trafficking



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# Introduction of CAST Speakers



**Dr. Devon E. Romero**



**Dr. Claudia G. Interiano-  
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**Andrea Mendoza**

# Objectives

**1**

Attendees will increase their awareness of sex trafficking in the United States, drawing on both the counseling literature and the presenters' empirical research.

**2**

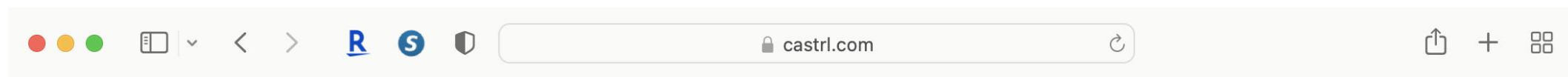
Increase awareness of the counselors' experiences working with sex trafficking survivors, using findings from qualitative interviews.

**3**

Become familiar with strategies for counselors' wellness and own self-care practices when working with sex trafficking survivors based on empirical findings.

# Sex Trafficking – Foundational Knowledge





**Counselors Against Sex Trafficking**

Research Lab

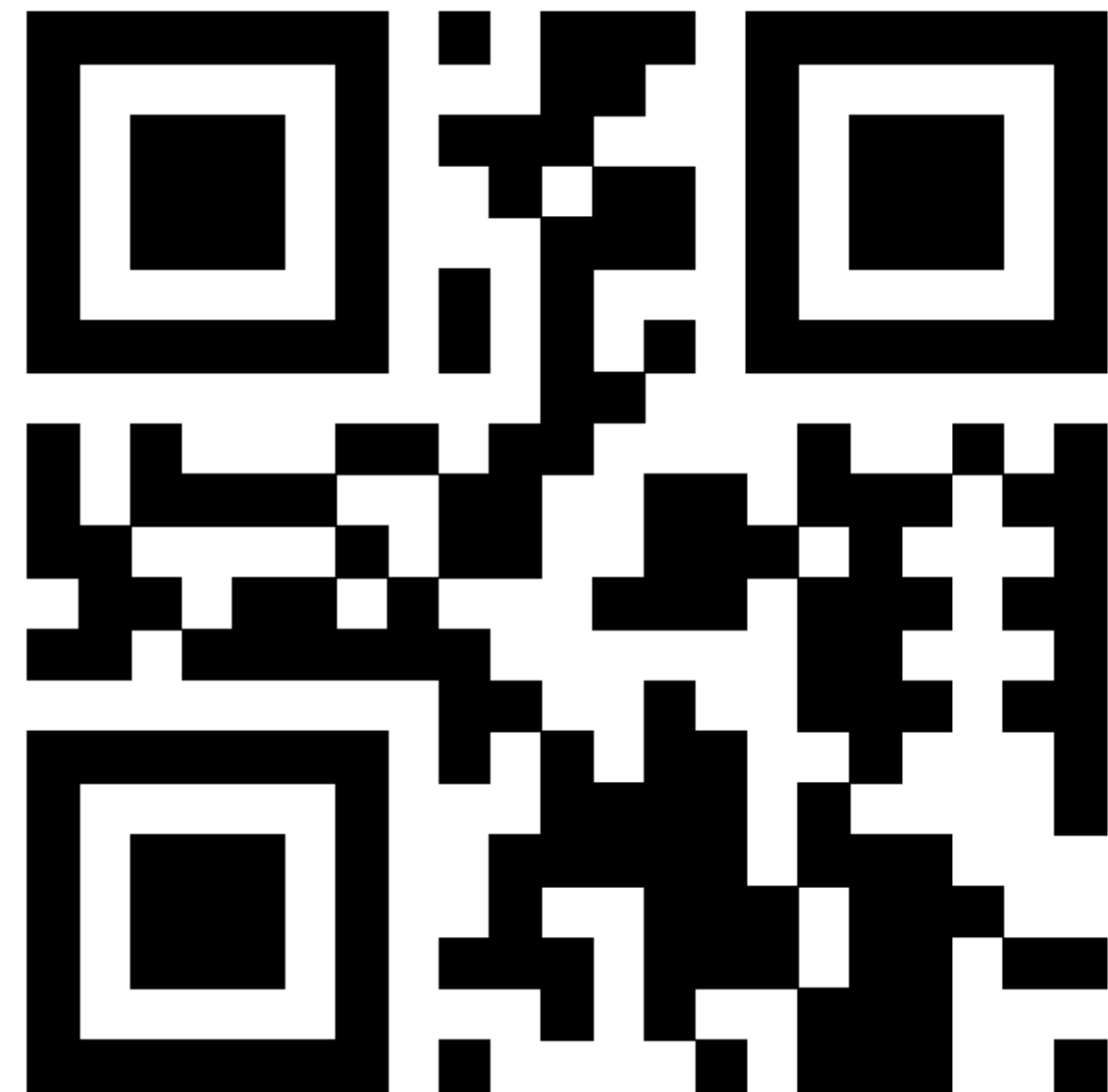
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# COUNSELORS AGAINST SEX TRAFFICKING RESEARCH LAB

We focus on developing research towards improving the identification,  
intervention, and advocacy to reduce sex trafficking in the United States.



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## A Review of Child Sex Trafficking Instruments

Devon E. Romero<sup>a</sup>, Claudia G. Interiano-Shiverdecker<sup>a</sup>, Nancy E. Castellon<sup>a</sup>, and Julie Strentzsch<sup>b</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Child sex trafficking (CST) has continued to exist in plain sight and often goes unidentified or misidentified in mental health settings. Often generalized as human trafficking, official statistics of children who fall victim of sex trafficking remains unknown and understudied. With social platforms becoming more available to youth, children are increasingly vulnerable to CST and are unaware of their exposure to victimization. Counselors working with children and adolescents are in a unique position to prevent and disrupt CST if detected in the counseling relationship, but the lack of CST assessment tools hinders an accurate assessment of CST. Therefore, the authors reviewed existing published screening or identification tools for CST available and applicable for mental health and school settings. At the completion of an expansive search of tools, the authors excluded results that did not meet the strict criteria. This paper reviews the four remaining instruments and presents information on their scope, reliability, validity, strengths, limitations, and source. The authors also discuss considerations for each instrument in clinical practice, providing a resource for counselors seeking a CST assessment tool that best fits their population and setting.

### KEYWORDS

Child sex-trafficking;  
commercial sexual  
exploitation; screening tool

Child and adolescent sex trafficking (CST) is an epidemic taking away freedoms and livelihoods from youth in the United States, and beyond. Sex trafficking is a subtype of human trafficking and it is described by the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (V-TVPA) of 2000 (Pub. L. No. 106–386) as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act.” In 2017, the International Labor Organization estimated 4.8 million victims in sex trafficking worldwide, with one of four being children (International Labour Organization, 2017). The exact prevalence in the United States is unknown. Yet, law enforcement estimates help us gain a better understanding by reporting that over 85% of initiated criminal human trafficking cases involved sex trafficking, with 51% of these cases involving only children (U.S. Department of State, 2019). These global and national statistics strongly suggest that children and adolescents are significantly at risk of becoming victims of sex trafficking.

A need exists for counselors working with at-risk children (e.g., low socio-economic status, clients with substance use in the family, and a history of homelessness and trauma) to act as first responders in the identification and treatment of CST (Thompson & Haley, 2018). Sex trafficking is highly correlated with different forms of substance use (Cole, Sprang,

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE



## A Content Analysis of Sex Trafficking Instruments

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### Abstract

This content analysis examined assessments available for the screening of sex trafficking to provide professional counselors further insight into the features of sex trafficking and how to best identify and measure this phenomenon. The authors reviewed 12 articles that included a complete or partial use of 13 instruments and completed a content analysis using Krippendorff’s procedures. The final analysis resulted in five overarching categories: (a) commercial sexual exploitation, (b) risk factors, (c) forms of abuse, (d) mental and physical health assessment, and (e) unstable living conditions and caregiving. The authors also provide psychometric information for each available sex trafficking instrument. Discussion, implications for clinical practice, and recommendations for future research are provided.

**Keywords** Content analysis · Counselors · Sex trafficking · Commercial sexual exploitation · Instrument

Sex trafficking (ST) is one of the most misunderstood and damaging forms of human trafficking. The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (V-TVPA) of 2000 (V-TVPA, 2000) described ST as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act” (§ 103). Examples of ST include prostitution and the production of pornography that may occur in brothels, strip clubs, and in illicit massage businesses (Polaris Project, 2020). Yet, estimates of ST prevalence are often unreliable. Many people experience coercion, engage in multiple illegal behaviors, and/or view ST as a viable means to meet daily needs (e.g., food and shelter; Lutnik, 2016). Fear of personal or legal repercussions therefore obfuscate true rates of ST. Albeit conservative, the International Labour Organization (2017) estimated in 2016 a total of 40.3 million victims

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## Original Research

## Development of Child Sex Trafficking Counseling Competencies in the United States: A Delphi Study

Claudia G. Interiano-Shiverdecker<sup>1</sup>,  
Devon E. Romero<sup>1</sup>, and Jordan Elliott<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Child sex trafficking (CST), the unlawful recruitment of a minor to engage in commercial sexual exploitation through force, fraud, or coercion, is a growing epidemic worldwide. Sex trafficking can have devastating consequences for children, including long-lasting physical and psychological trauma. Counselors working in clinical and school settings have first-hand access to a number of at-risk populations due to the nature of their work. Yet, counselors in the United States report lack of training on CST as a limitation to their ability to identify and effectively work with CST victims. Limited training derives from the absence of competency standards to guide counselors working with CST victims. To address this critical gap, this research study utilized expert consensus to develop an initial list of CST competencies for counselors working in the United States. A heterogeneous sample of 19-CST experts participated in a four-round Delphi process. The expert panel reached a consensus on 128 CST competency statements organized into five domains: (a) *intervention strategies and the helping relationship*, (b) *trauma and sex*

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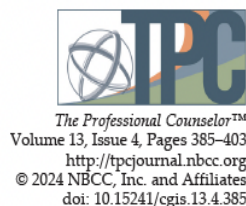
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## “A Learning Curve”: Counselors’ Experiences Working With Sex Trafficking

Claudia G. Interiano-Shiverdecker, Devon E. Romero, Katherine E. McVay, Emily Satel, Kendra Smith



In this transcendental phenomenological study, we interviewed 10 counselors who have clinical experience working with sex trafficking survivors. Through in-depth individual interviews, participants discussed their lived experiences providing counseling to this population. Our analysis revealed four primary themes: (a) counselor knowledge: “learning curve,” (b) counselor skills: “creating a safe space to dive into work,” (c) counselor attitudes: “being able to listen to the client’s story,” and (d) counselor action: “more than just a counselor.” The findings indicated that counselors working with sex trafficking survivors needed to understand and address the different aspects of trauma. Our findings also demonstrate that working with sex trafficking survivors requires additional competencies such as recognizing the signs of sex trafficking, vulnerable populations, and the processes by which traffickers force people into sex trafficking. We discuss these findings in more detail and identify implications for counselor training and practice.

**Keywords:** sex trafficking survivors, counseling, phenomenological, trauma, competencies

Sex trafficking of any individual is a significant concern globally. In 2000, the United States government enacted the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, which defined sex trafficking as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery” or “when the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age” (§ 103). Although the United States’s efforts fully meet the minimum standards established by the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 to eliminate severe forms of trafficking, the Department of Justice initiated a total of 210 federal human trafficking prosecutions in 2020, of which 195 involved predominantly sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2021). As stated in the *Trafficking in Persons Report* (U.S. Department of State, 2021), all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories have reported all forms of human trafficking over the past 5 years. With an estimated 4.8 million people victimized by sex trafficking (International Labour Organization, 2017), it is important to understand how counselors identify, provide services to, and advocate on behalf of sex trafficking survivors within the counseling setting.

### Sex Trafficking and Mental Health

As a form of human trafficking, sex trafficking exposes individuals to torture; kidnapping; and severe psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. Physical health consequences of sex trafficking include general health complications (e.g., malnutrition), reproductive health consequences (e.g., sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies), substance abuse, and physical injuries (Grosso et al., 2018; Lutnik, 2016; Muftić & Finn, 2013). Psychological abuses are numerous and can include intimidation, threats against loved ones, lies, deception, blackmail, isolation, and forced dependency (Thompson & Haley, 2018).

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## Child Sex Trafficking and Professional School Counselor Preparedness in Texas

Devon E. Romero, Claudia G. Interiano-Shiverdecker, Katherine E. McVay, Brenda Jones

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### Abstract

Professional school counselors in Texas responded to a questionnaire about training received and their needs concerning preparedness to identify and work with youth exposed to child sex trafficking (CST). The study utilized a convergent parallel mixed methods design. Quantitative results indicated many participants did not find that their graduate degree program prepared them to work with CST and less than half felt their school and/or district provided adequate training opportunities. In addition, thematic analysis revealed two themes characterizing Texas school counselors’ needs to identify and work with CST: (a) *concerning preparedness: “so much going on”* and (b) *“specific training”: a comprehensive review of CST*. This article concludes with implications and recommendations for practice and future research.

**Keywords:** child sex trafficking, school counselor, training, school counselor preparedness, at-risk youth

No child is immune to child sex trafficking (CST), regardless of the child’s race, age, socioeconomic status, or location, and every child involved in this form of exploitation is a victim (U. S. Department of State, 2022). CST, defined by the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (Pub. L. No. 106-386, § 103) as any commercial sex act induced by force, fraud, or coercion on a person who has not attained 18 years of age, continues to rise in all countries including the United States. The 2022 trafficking profile for the United States listed the United States among the top three countries of origin of victims along with Mexico and Honduras (U. S. Department of State, 2022). In 2021, the Polaris-operated National Human Trafficking Hotline identified 11,278 victims and survivors involved in sex trafficking through phone, webchats, web forms, text, and email reports, a

majority of whom were minors when first entering trafficking (Polaris, 2021). Relevant to the current study, as one of the largest hubs for sex trafficking, Texas has been found to contain around 25% of all trafficked persons in the United States at any given time (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2016). In 2016, it was estimated that approximately 79,000 minor and youth victims of sex trafficking were in Texas (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2016). Although some statistics exist from federally reported cases (U. S. Department of State, 2022) and human trafficking hotlines (Polaris, 2021), it is estimated that less than 1% of survivors of trafficking cases across the world are ever identified (Bedbible Research Center, 2023).

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## A Scoping Review: Implications for the Development of Sex Trafficking Interventions and Training Programs for Mental Health Professionals

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### ABSTRACT

Sex trafficking (ST) is a form of modern-day slavery, and the service needs of individuals impacted by ST are both unique and complex. Despite the complexities and comprehensiveness of these needs, there is a lack of understanding regarding the effective components of theoretical frameworks and models for serving clients affected by ST. Such understanding is instrumental in developing training programs for mental health providers. Therefore, we conducted a scoping review of sex trafficking studies related to mental health, focusing on the modalities and frameworks referenced for client services and analyzing the methodologies and core components within these models. We completed a comprehensive search of databases to identify relevant studies, screening a total of 2,818 records, with 21 studies included for data extraction. Our findings highlighted the significance of incorporating a comprehensive, multidimensional, and multidisciplinary approach to providing services to clients affected by ST. We offer considerations for practice, research, and policy.

### KEYWORDS

Sex trafficking; scoping review; theory; frameworks; models; mental health

In the United States, sex trafficking (ST) is defined as recruiting, harboring, transporting, or obtaining an individual for sex through force, fraud, or coercion (Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, 2000). ST endangers the safety, security, and well-being of individuals around the globe. Sex trafficking violates both international and United States federal laws (Goździak & Vogel, 2020; Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, 2000) and affects an estimated 4.8 million individuals forced into sexual exploitation (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018), making it challenging to combat. An inability to get accurate numbers due to methodological, transparency, and reliability concerns contributes to why the United States no longer gives estimates in its official publications (Farrell & De Vries, 2020). Moreover, many individuals who meet the criteria for ST victimization remain unrecognized by the criminal, legal, and healthcare systems as they often label these victims “prostitutes,” “sex workers,” or participants in “sex trading” or “survival sex” (Litam et al., 2023). This divergence from a semantic scholarly argument is significant within the context of this review article, as it is essential to accurately define the problem.

### ST Grooming and Recruitment

There is no single common profile for perpetrators or survivors of ST. ST exists internationally, in every city and community (Cameron et al., 2015), with offending perpetrators belonging, without

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Interiano-Shiverdecker et al.: Multidimensional Impact of Sex Trafficking

## Unveiling the Multidimensional Impact of Sex Trafficking: Insights from Survivors

Claudia G. Interiano-Shiverdecker  | Devon E. Romero  | John J. S. Harrichand  | Jessica Martin  | David J. Thompson 

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### Abstract

This transcendental phenomenological study delves into the lived experiences of 10 women who experienced sex trafficking. Through in-depth individual interviews, participants unveiled a narrative marked by coercion, manipulation, and multifaceted abuse. Despite variations in the duration and onset of their ordeals, participants uniformly expressed the profound and lasting impact of sex trafficking across numerous facets of their lives. Psychological distress, physical ailments, disrupted vocational trajectories, strained relationships, and spiritual upheaval were recurrent themes, illustrating the pervasive nature of their trauma. This research highlights the urgent necessity for holistic support and intervention strategies tailored to the intricate and multidimensional needs of sex trafficking survivors as they embark on the arduous journey toward recovery and healing. The findings underscore the imperative for counselor training programs to incorporate a nuanced understanding of sex trafficking trauma and its far-reaching implications, thereby fostering more effective therapeutic approaches. This study contributes to a deeper comprehension of the challenges faced by survivors and advocates for systemic changes to enhance the support framework available to them.

### KEYWORDS

sex trafficking, survivors, phenomenological, mental health, trauma

Sex trafficking is arguably one of the most misunderstood and damaging forms of human trafficking. Sex trafficking is defined as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act” (Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, 2000, Section 103). This form of modern-day slavery impacts millions of people globally and is especially a large concern

within our own communities in the United States (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2023). Due to the underground nature, limited community awareness, and survivors’ reluctance to disclose, approximately less than 1% of survivors of human trafficking cases in the world are ever identified (Bedbible Research Center, 2023). From what we do know from federally reported cases, research,

## Coming Soon:

- *Relational healing: Survivors of sex trafficking and their experiences of connection, disconnection, and growth*
- *Post-traumatic growth among sex trafficking survivors in the U.S.*
- *Social determinants of health with sex trafficking survivors in the U.S.*
- *Self-care practices of counselors working with sex trafficking survivors*



# Current Research Efforts

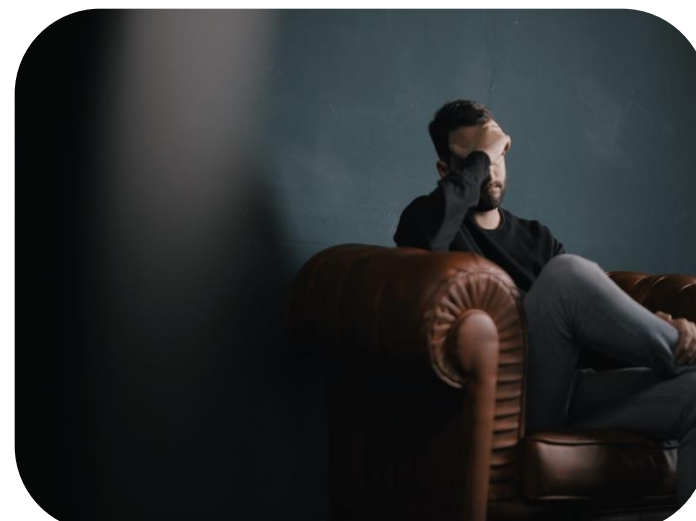


## Training Program

- Developing sex trafficking counseling competency
- Developing intellectual humility, quiet ego, and emotional intelligence
- Counselor advocacy identity development
- Challenging the perceived misconceptions of sex trafficking



## Development and validation of the Child Sex Trafficking Competency Scale



## Legal professionals' experiences and training needs in working with sex trafficking survivors

Law enforcement perspectives on supporting sex trafficking survivors with intersecting identities.



## Counseling survivors of sex trafficking: A qualitative exploration of clinical practice, identity, and advocacy through an intersectional lens

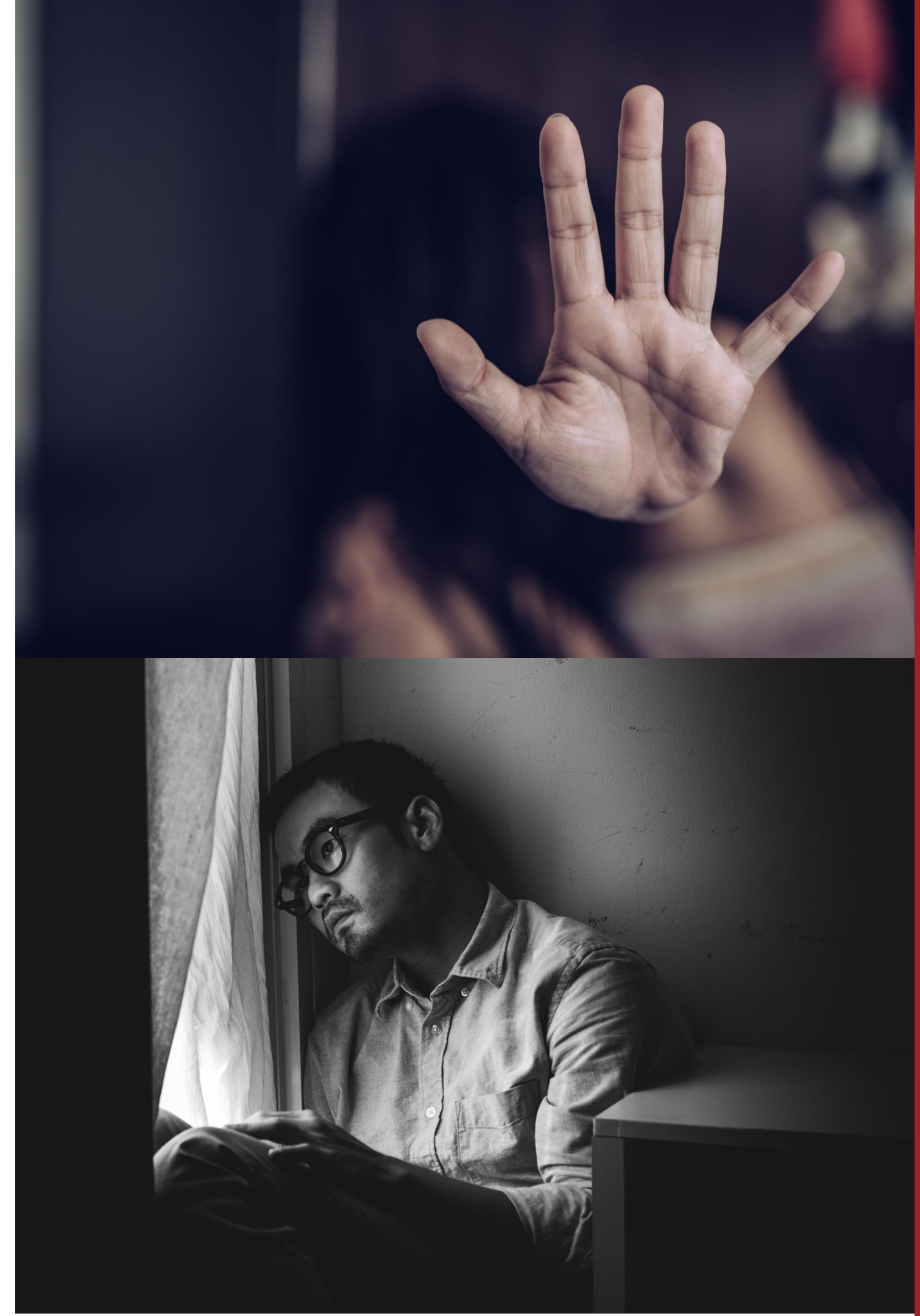
A qualitative exploration of identity, healing, and support among sex trafficking survivors



# Sex Trafficking

The legal definition of the term sex trafficking is **the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act.**

Any minor under the age of 18 **CAN NOT** consent to commercial sex and is considered a victim of sex trafficking regardless of whether force, fraud, or coercion is used.





# Sex Trafficking

6.3 million people are estimated to be trapped in forced sexual exploitation globally on any given day.

Texas contains around 25% of all trafficked persons in the United States at any given time.

The United States is listed among the top three countries of origin of victims along with Mexico and Honduras.

The age of onset has been reported as young as under the age of 8, with most individuals around 15–17 years of age when trafficking began.

1 in 6 runaways reported are probable victims of sex trafficking.





# Experiences of Sex Trafficking

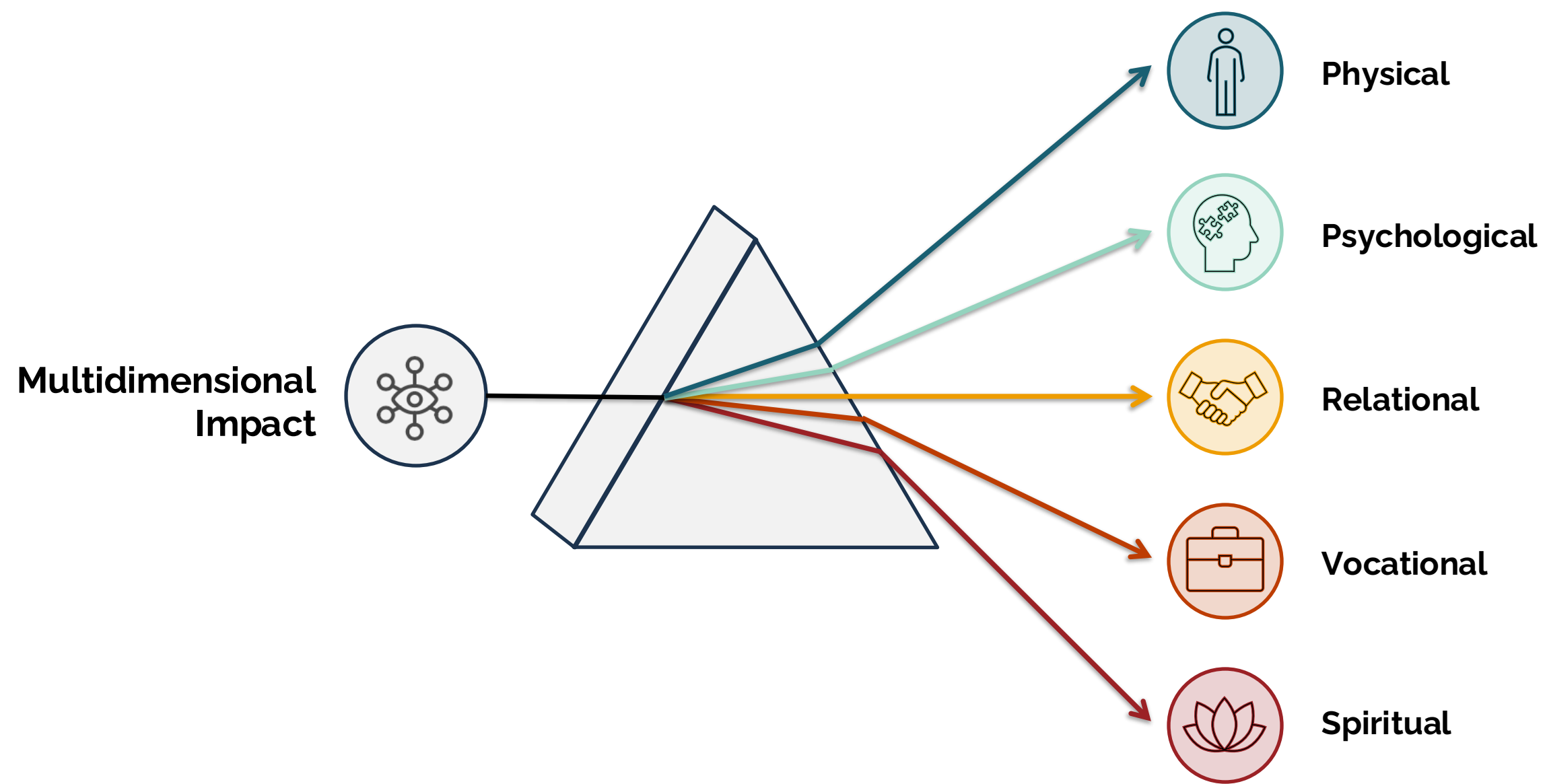
- ▶ **Recovery and Reintegration**  
Legal barriers and lack of trauma-informed care
- ▶ **Socioeconomic and Relational Impact**  
Financial dependency and difficulty forming relationships
- ▶ **Health and Somatic Consequences**  
Chronic pain and body  
Memories linked to trauma



- ▶ **Recruitment and Entrapment**  
False promises and manipulation leading to exploitation
- ▶ **Control and Coercion**  
Constant monitoring and threats to enforce compliance
- ▶ **Physical and Psychological Abuse**  
Repeated violence and Emotional degradation
- ▶ **Psychological and Emotional Effects**  
Complex trauma symptoms and identity confusion



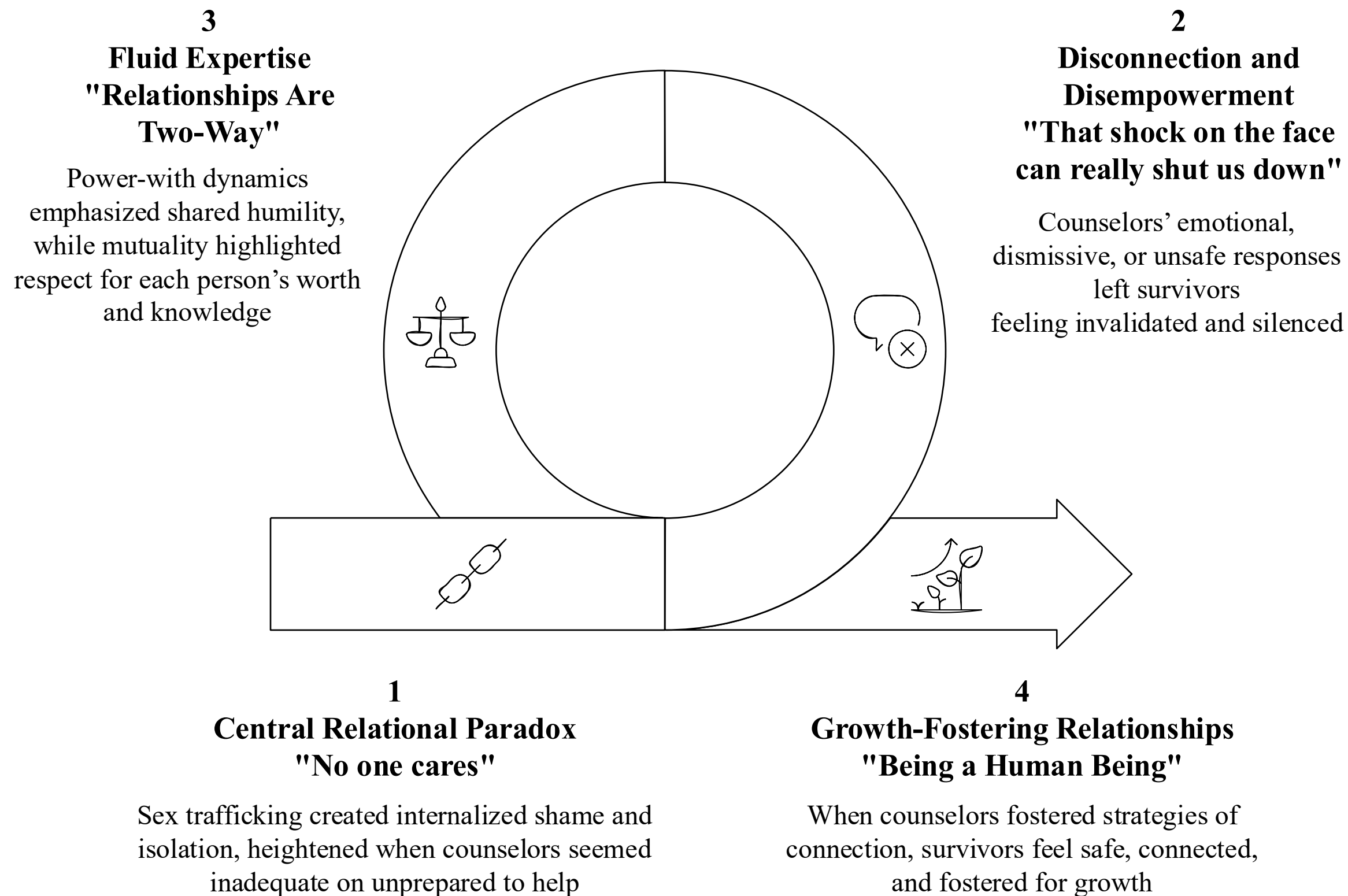
# Multidimensional Impact of Sex Trafficking



"I struggle with my faith. Part of the work that we do at our church is helping our church understand that everybody doesn't come from a safe place. We've gotten so accustomed to surviving, to being in fear from flight to trauma, and the pretty honest word is, 'I don't have faith, I would have protected me as a child, just trust in God.' So when you still struggle, you now question your faith in addition to it."



# Relational Healing Among Sex Trafficking Survivors in Counseling





# Counselors' Experiences and Considerations



## Counselor's Knowledge: "Learning Curve"

- Counselors described a steep learning curve when first working with sex trafficking survivors.
- They realized the need for *specialized trauma-informed and sex trafficking knowledge* (e.g., coercion, control, trauma bonding).

## Counselor Skills – "Creating a Safe Space to Dive into Work"

- Establishing a safe environment demanded advanced relational skills such as attunement, boundary-setting, and emotional regulation.
- Participants discussed managing their own triggers and emotional responses to clients' traumatic stories while maintaining composure.

## Counselor Attitudes – "Being Able to Listen to the Client's Story"

- Counselors spoke about developing deep empathy, patience, and nonjudgment as they listened to survivors' stories.
- This openness often came with emotional cost—feelings of helplessness, sadness, and moral distress.

## Counselor Action – "More Than Just a Counselor"

- Counselors often assumed multiple roles—*advocate, educator, case manager, and activist*—to address survivors' holistic needs (e.g., housing, legal advocacy, safety).
- While these expanded roles aligned with their sense of purpose and social justice values, they also increased risk of burnout and blurred professional boundaries.

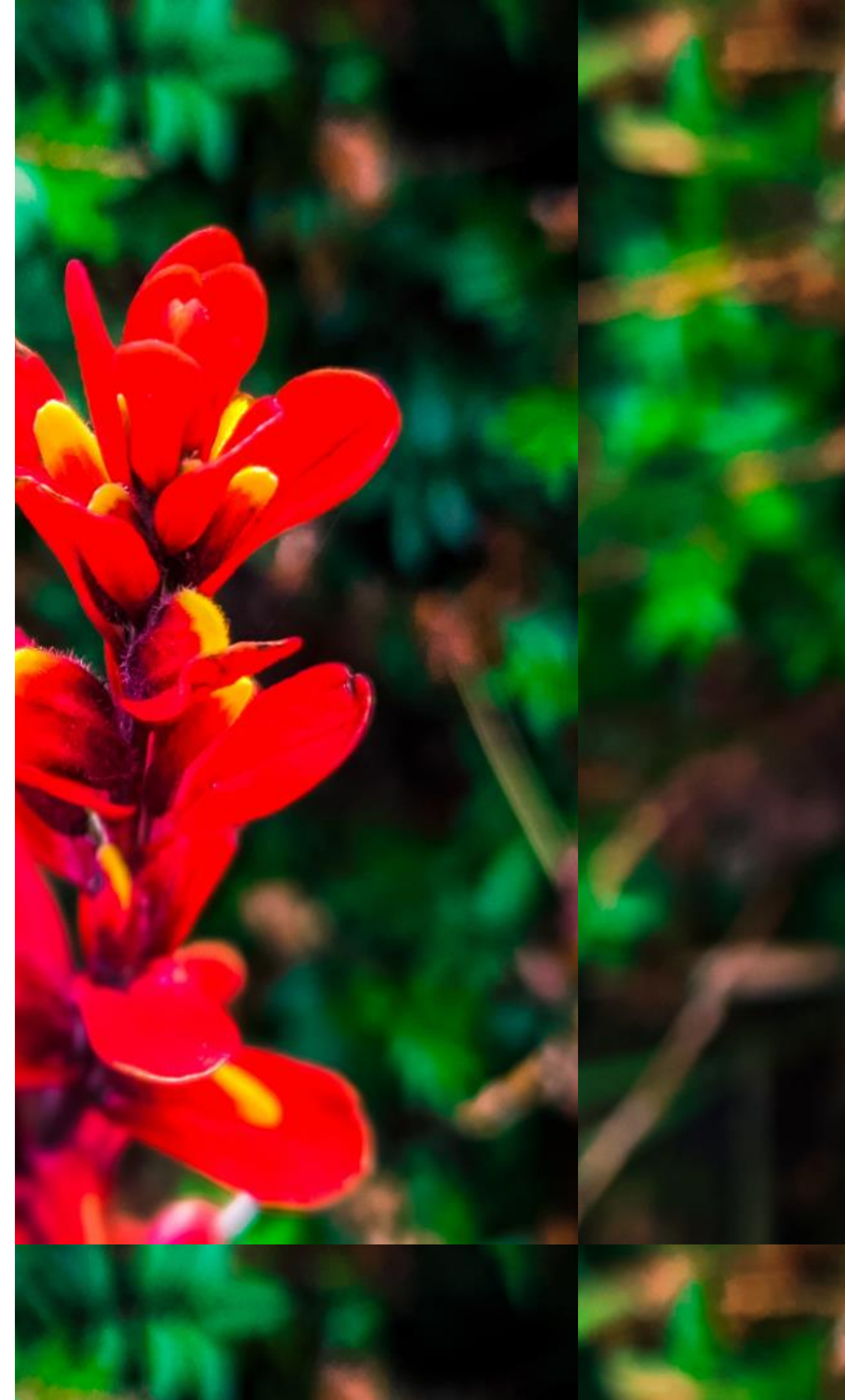


# Transcendental Phenomenology

- Intentionality
- Intuition
- Description
- Experiences
- Grounded Data

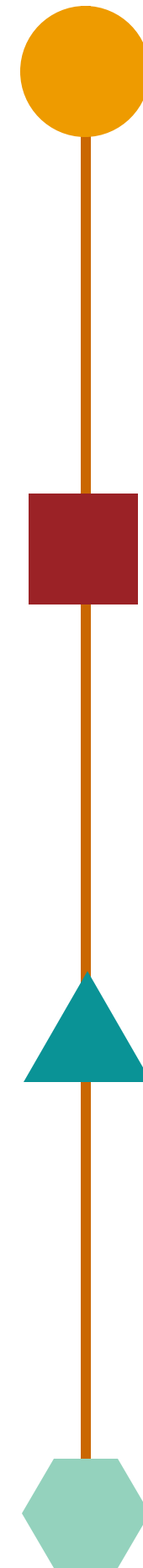
## **Purpose of our study:**

- What are the self-care practices of Licensed Counselors when working with survivors?





# Research Timeline



## RECRUITING

- CESNET
- Social Media
- Snowball Sampling

## COLLECTING DATA

- Demographics
- 12 Open-Ended Questions Interview Protocol
- Zoom Interviews
- 54-72 Minutes

## ANALYSIS

- Transcription verbatim
- NVIVO individual initial coding of interviews
- Group consensus on categorization and reduction of codes
- Preliminary analysis of themes



# Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Gender	Race-Ethnicity
Eva	51	Female	Caucasian
Sarah	56	Female	Chinese-Jamaican
Cat	36	Female	White
Paedyn	37	Female	White
Grace	39	Female	Caucasian
Ava	37	Female	Euro-Canadian
Tina	31	Female	African American
Belle	41	Female	White
Sammy	36	Female	Hispanic/Native American
Tom	36	Male	Ashkenazi Jewish



# Major Themes



**Sex Trafficking Training**



**Impairment**



**Listening to Your Body**

# Sex Trafficking Training

(*n* = 5)

Counselors working with ST survivors must be knowledgeable in more ways than one

***"Understanding that there are so many different ways to be trafficked... being educated on how that happens"***

Participants emphasized how working with this population affects their self-care to varying degrees

***"Educating yourself, the lifestyle, the power and control, all of that is self-care. If you are going to work with this population you have to know what you're doing"***



# Impairment

(*n* = 5)

Houses all the burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma

The term impairment came from a participant when they were asked how they conceptualize burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma

***"Burnout as a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion from emotionally draining situations"***

***"Vicarious trauma, taking on the trauma of your clients, and being unable to separate yourself from their experiences"***

***"Compassion fatigue feeling burnout due to caring for others more than you have been able to care for your own needs"***

# Listening to Your Body

*(n = 5)*

Houses all the self-care strategies

Recognizing that self-care arises from listening to the signals of our mind, body, and spirit

**"Part of self-care is prevention. Part of prevention is being aware of your own self"**

**"Listening to my body and doing what I can within my means to take care of my body"**



# Strategies for Counselors' Wellness and Own Self- Care Practices



# Self-Care Strategies

## ***Professional Strategies***

- Maintaining boundaries
- Creating a supportive professional network
- Seeking regular supervision or consultation

## ***Personal Strategies***

- Regulating your nervous system
- Engaging in your own personal counseling
- Practicing self-compassion





# Mapping your Self-Care Network



# Professional Care

Which professional supports help you feel grounded or validated?

How do you prioritize professional boundaries to prevent burnout, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue?

What forms of professional care do you lean on most?

In what ways does imposter syndrome or burnout show up in this area?

What forms of professional care do you lean on most?



# Personal Care

Which personal strategies reliably help you regulate your nervous system?

How do you practice self-compassion, and what impact does it have on your well-being?

How do you know when you need rest versus connection versus creativity?

Where do you notice a gap between the self-care you *want* and the self-care you *actually practice*?

What practices currently help you feel most restored or connected

# Advocacy and Meaning

How do you celebrate small wins or moments of meaning in your work?

How do your advocacy activities connect with your personal values and sense of purpose?

What beliefs guide the boundaries you set with others?

In what ways has meaning-making changed over time in your career?

How do you decide when to say yes and when to say no?



# Questions?

# Thank you!

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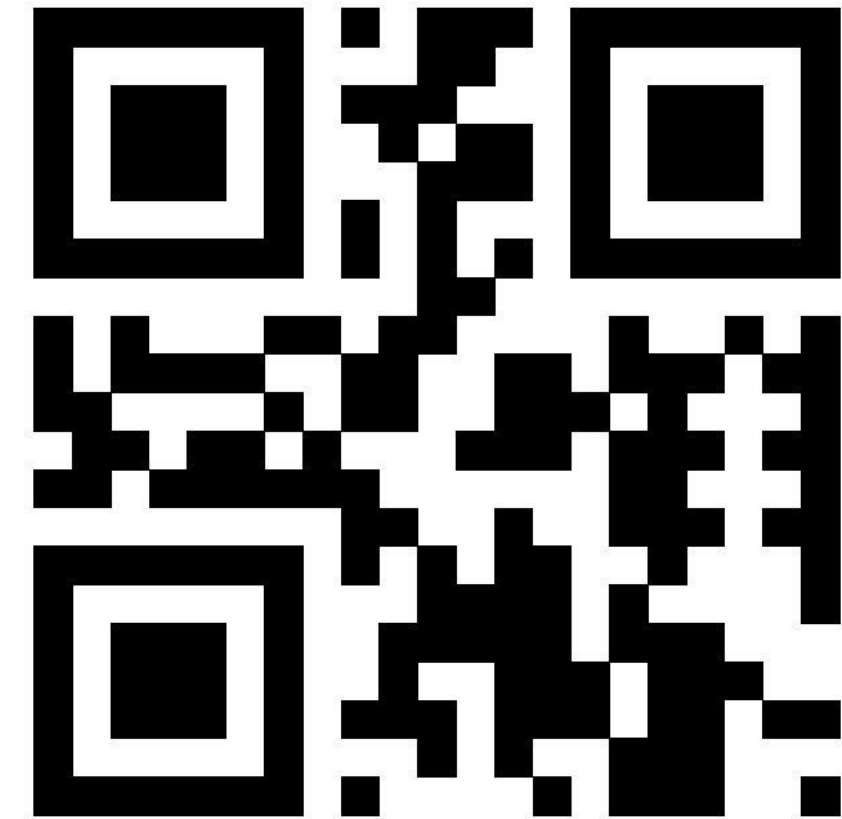
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