

***Super-Hero Therapy: Combining
Evidence Based Therapy with Pop
Culture Narratives to Help Clients
Heal from PTSD***

Janina Scarlet, Ph.D.

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Financial disclosure

- I receive royalties on books I've published in relation to this topic
- I teach courses on Superhero Therapy

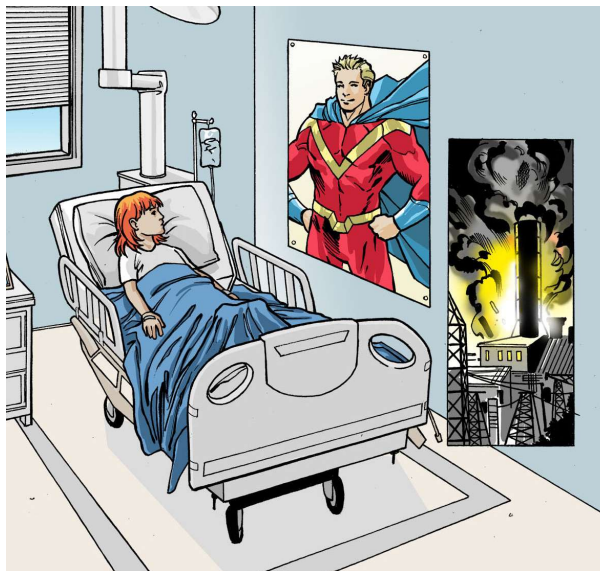
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Trauma as an origin story

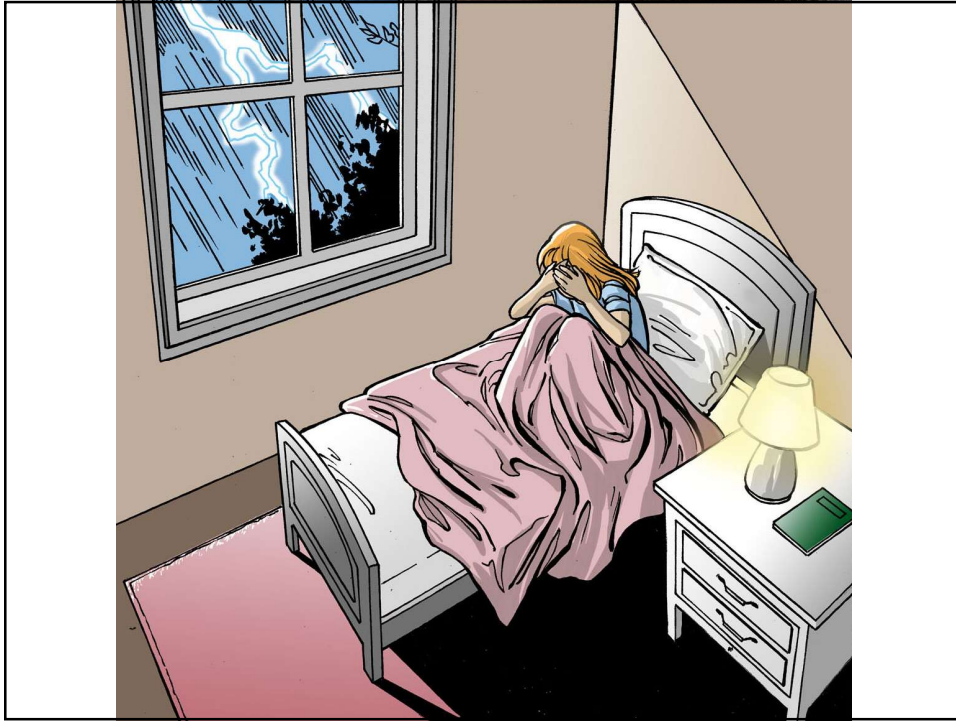


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Origin Stories



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Chronic Illness, Immigration, and Bullying

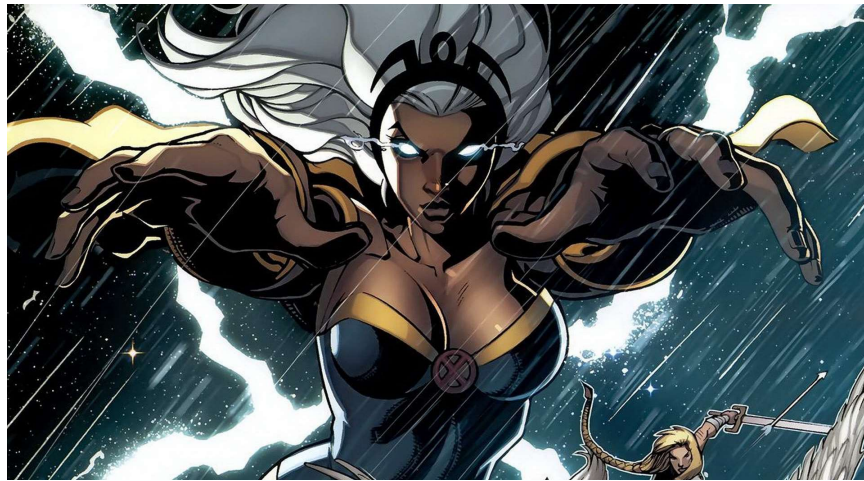


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Posttraumatic Growth



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Superman: Clinical Application

- “I wanted to be Superman... I failed”



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Superman: Clinical Application

- “I wanted to be Superman, I failed”
- Invincible



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Superman: Clinical Application

- “I wanted to be Superman, I failed”
- Invincible
- Kryptonite

“Scarier than combat”



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What is Superhero Therapy?

- Using stories from popular culture AKA Parasocial relationships (books, TV shows, movies, and video games examples) in evidence-based therapies (CBT, ACT, DBT, Narrative Exposure Therapy, etc.)
- To help client become a version of a hero IRL
- For people of all ages



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Most important rule of Superhero Therapy

- You don't have to be the expert
 - The client is the expert
- The only requirement:
 - Open-minded
 - Curious



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Case Study: "Emily"

- 17 yr. old Neurodivergent Hispanic female
- Adopted along with older sister
- Hx. of abandonment
- Recently separated from sister again
- Social avoidance, emotional shut down
- Behavioral regression

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Anime – Demon Slayer



Tanjiro

Nezuko

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Anime – Demon Slayer

- Protagonist Tanjiro, had most of his family killed by an evil demon
- The demon also turned his sister, Nezuko, into a demon
- Rather than killing Nezuko, Tanjiro fights to save her, risking his life, looking for a cure for her
- He never gives up on her

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Anime

- Summaries of shows in session
- Becoming a demon slayer IRL
- Communicating with family & sister
 - Reading her letter and writing back
 - Game nights with family

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Emily - Self-Expression

- “When my dog died, I didn’t cry. When my aunt died, I didn’t cry.
- But when someone dies in anime, it’s like a balloon that explodes all of the sudden and then you just cry.
- It’s like all the tears I’ve been holding back that entire time finally explode.”

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Why Superhero Therapy?

- During most difficult times, people feel **alone**
- Especially when facing trauma



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Suicide Risk Factors Reorganized

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| • Prior suicide attempt | • Recent loss/breakup |
| • Family history of suicide | • Lack of social support |
| • Access to lethal means | • Trauma/anxiety |
| | • Depression/Insomnia |
| | • Substance use |
| | • Bullying |
| | • Stigma |
| | • Barriers to accessing services |
| | • Struggling with sexual orientation or gender identity |

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Suicide Risk Factors Reorganized

LONELINESS

- Prior suicide attempt
- Family history of suicide
- Access to lethal means
- Recent loss/breakup
- Lack of social support
- Trauma/anxiety
- Depression/Insomnia
- Substance use
- Bullying
- Stigma
- Barriers to accessing services
- Struggling with sexual orientation or gender identity

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Perceived loneliness and health

- Cardiovascular risk factors
- Higher risk of Alzheimer's Disease,
- Increased mental health pathology, including depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation or attempts
- Assumptions of worthlessness and burdensomeness
- Inflammation and immune problems
- Higher risk of premature mortality in older adults

(Cacioppo, et al., 2009).

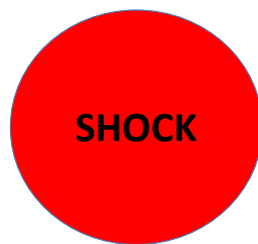
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“Loneliness is the new smoking”

- Meta-analysis of 300,000 patients – perceived social isolation poses as high of a mortality risk
- Health risks as high as chronic smoking or alcohol abuse (Friedmann, et al., 2006; Tate (2018)).
- Loneliness/disconnection = physical pain – Tylenol (Eisenberger, 2012)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k67aDQ9oOTQ>

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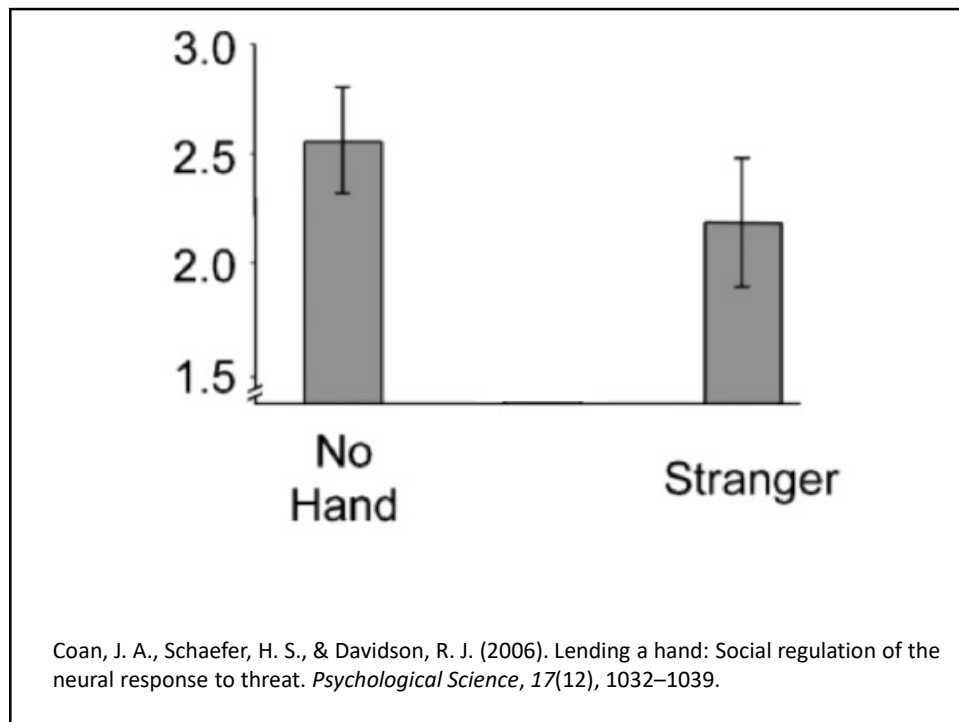
MRI Pain Study



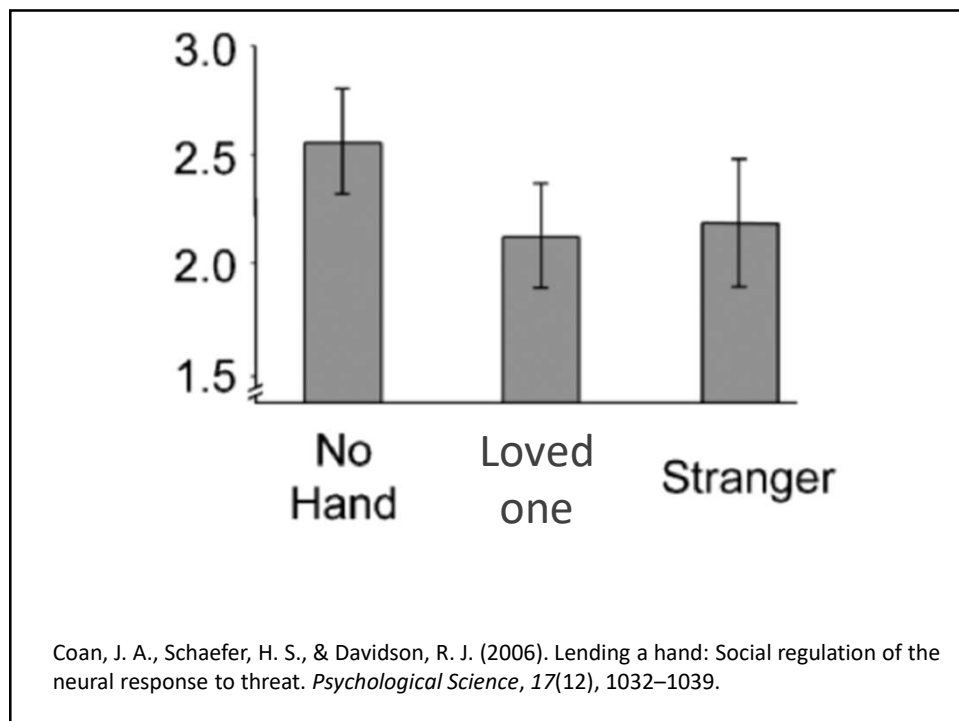
- *These are not the actual images used in the experiment

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Perceived social connection/belonging

- Inverse effects to perceived loneliness
- Improved health
- Improved mood
- Reduced physical and mental health symptoms
- Increased longevity
- Opiate and oxytocin levels increase

Bellosta-Batalla, et al., 2020; Xu & Roberts, 2010

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Building sidekicks/Social groups

- Stable social connection = resilience
 - Longevity
 - Stressful events (death, divorce, poverty, etc) can lead to shorter lifespan
 - Ability to experience positive affect reduces the risk of premature mortality
 - People with stronger social connections also have longer lifespan

Xu & Roberts, 2010

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Building sidekicks/Social groups

- Social connection and resilience
 - Biomarkers of stress resilience and wellbeing
 - Inflammation
 - Telomere length
 - Gene expression
 - Slow necrosis (cell death) due to an injury or stress
 - Most can worsen with toxic stress, such as bullying or exclusion
 - Most can be remedied by stress resilience skills, esp. social connection

Eppel & Lithgow, 2014

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Telomeres can actually lengthen!

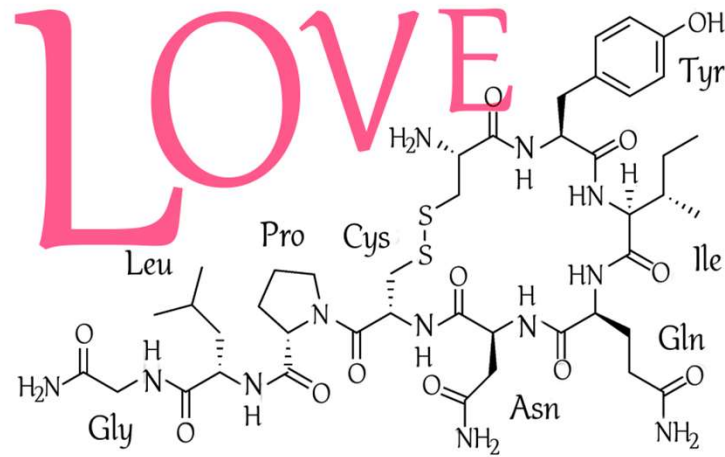
- 1 group of men in their 60s: exercise 30 mins/day, healthy diet, yoga, meditation, therapy/socialization
- Control group: as usual
- 5 years later:
 - Control group: 3% shrinkage as expected
 - Experimental group: 10% increase from original length

Coghlan, 2013

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Love =
Most powerful
Source
Of magic

Oxytocin



CONNECTION

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Oxytocin

- Involved in:
 - Bonding
 - Recognition of kin (and preference twd people with similar values)
 - Affection/empathy/caretaking/altruistic behavior
 - Childbirth
 - Sex/orgasm
 - Breast feeding
 - Stress resilience/recovery/soothing
- Reward-system (for helping/soothing)

We oxytocin for
a living! ☺

Crespi, 2015

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Oxytocin



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Oxytocin



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Oxytocin



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Friendships



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And arguably also

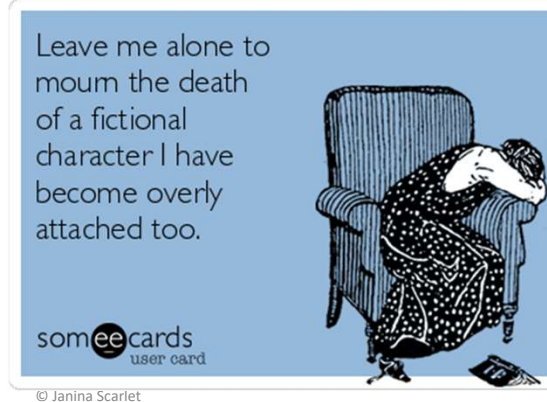
- Parasocial Relationships (PSRs)

Serve as Social Surrogates

- Friend
- Family member
- Support group

Ever want to stay upset?

Grief connection > distraction



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Social Connection

- Creates common humanity – we are not alone
 - Increases oxytocin
 - Destigmatizes the experience
 - Promotes hope & meaning making
 - *"It's not that misery loves company, it's that company is the antidote to misery"*
- Kristin Neff

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RESEARCH



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HP boosts compassion for immigrants, LGBTQIA, low
SES, and homeless individuals



Vezzali, et al., 2015

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Exposure Therapy – Specific Phobia Showing Spider-Man videos reduces phobia



Hoffman, Y. S., Pitcho-Prelorentzos, S., Ring, L., & Ben-Ezra, M. (2019)

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Harry Potter and Neuroimaging

- Reading about Harry Potter's struggles activated compassion and empathy centers of the brain (anterior insula and cingulate cortex) – Hsu et al., 2014
- Reading Harry Potter also increased the activation in the left amygdala, related to conscious emotion processing and pleasure - Hsu et al, 2015
- ~ Reading makes the characters real

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When thinking about close friends

- Increased activity in the ventral medial prefrontal cortex (vMPFC)
 - When thinking about the self (introspecting)
 - When thinking about close friends
 - When thinking about beloved TV characters**
 - Parasocial relationships

Broom, et al., 2021

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Reduced loneliness/rejection feelings

- When lonely, participants watched favorite TV show (eg FRIENDS) rather than “whatever was on TV”
 - Not escapism, but a need for connection
- Watching favorite TV show allowed for participants to feel significantly less lonely

Derrick, J. E., Gabriel, S., & Hugenberg, K. (2009).

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Reduced loneliness/rejection feelings

- When recalling a fight with a loved one, felt *rejected* and *lonely*
- Significant reductions in these when writing about favorite TV show (FRIENDS) but not neutral show nor academic achievement

Derrick, J. E., Gabriel, S., & Hugenberg, K. (2009).

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Superhero Priming



- **Superhero priming** (e.g. through pretending to be one or playing VR game) increases helping Bx (eg in pencil drop) – Rosenberg et al (2013)
- **Superhero poses** can increase helping Bx (Peña & Chen, 2017) & self-esteem (Cuddy et al, 2015)

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Superhero Priming: Healthier Food Choices



- Cornell University
- Children were asked to pick between apples and French fries
- Only 9% chose apples
- When primed with admirable heroes, like Batman, nearly 50% chose apples

Wansink et al. (2012)

- *Dressing up also helps maintain attention on task

White & Carlson (2015)

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Second Life helps people with disabilities to live vicariously or do exposures



Stewart, et al., 2010

Image source: Linden Labs, Used with Permission

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Anxiety & Panic

- Minecraft
- Animal Crossing
- Candy Crush
- Angry Birds* (including pediatric preop pediatric patients)



Lee, et al. (2013)

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PTSD



Undergraduate students who were exposed to trauma

Stronger connection to PSRs than classmates

Gabriel, et al. (2017).

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Waiting Room example



Travis

Homeless Veteran

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PTSD Rates

- Spiking now
- Will likely continue to spike during and after the pandemic
- International mental health crisis

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Superhero Therapy

- Need to help clients in ways to make therapy non-threatening and approachable
- Might need to be flexible and willing in our approaches
- Using the client's culture and passions as a strength and core values
- Using stories like *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, *Avengers*, etc. as a way to motivate change inspire hope

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Ant-Man Example



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PTSD and Shame

- PTSD -> Shame
- Shame -> Experiential avoidance & loneliness
- Experiential avoidance -> prolonged/worsened symptoms

Thompson & Waltz (2008)

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Superhero Therapy elicits common humanity and can reduce shame

- Can reduce shame by pointing out that even superheroes have vulnerabilities
- Seeing how fictional characters process grief, loss, and other mental health struggles

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Posttraumatic Growth

- Meaning making
- Predictor of recovery/reduced symptomatology

Park & Ai (2006)

- PTG is like a Hero's Journey
 - We don't choose the call
 - Choose how to answer it

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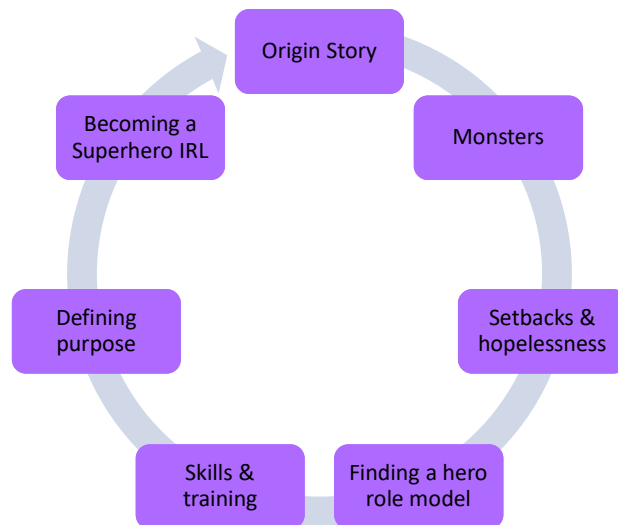
Ways we can incorporate ST into treatment

- Identify origin stories
- Find willingness to face difficult emotion monsters
- Find their own hero's path through a sense of purpose
 - Do exposures
 - Meaning making
 - Reconnecting with friends and hobbies

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Superhero Therapy Model, how it relates to stories and Treatment



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Scripting One's Own Origin Story

- **Not necessarily the biggest event**
- **Can also be “death by a thousand cuts”**
 - **Abandonment**
 - **Rejection**
 - **Prejudice**
 - **Being made to feel “not enough”**



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Who is Your (Super)Hero ?

- Can be real life or fictional
- Someone who is a figure of compassion and wisdom
- What do you admire about them ?

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Your Hero's Message



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Case Study: “Juan”



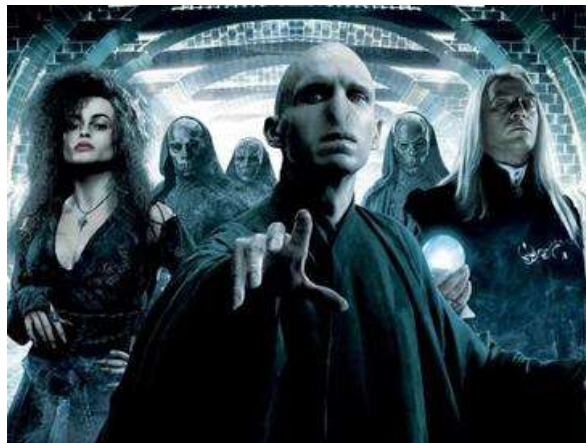
Grew up in Central America

Childhood trauma - ACEs

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What if my client likes a villain?

- Joker
- Harley Quinn
- Darth Vader
- Voldemort
- Bellatrix



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Villain example: Kylo Ren (Star Wars)



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Identifying “monsters”

- “Monsters” are any unwanted feelings, emotions, sensations, and thoughts that the client may want to get rid of
 - “Monsters” are not perpetrators of abuse, they are the result of it

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Willingness to face emotions

Experiential
Avoidance
doesn't
work



The only
way out is
through



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Counting dragons



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Counting dragons

- How many dragons did you have to fight today just to get here?
- Some people just get up and to go work or school. Others have to fight a whole bunch of dragons just to get here.
- How many dragons did you already fight today? That's impressive!!!

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Dementor



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Pink Dementor/Pink Unicorn



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Patronus



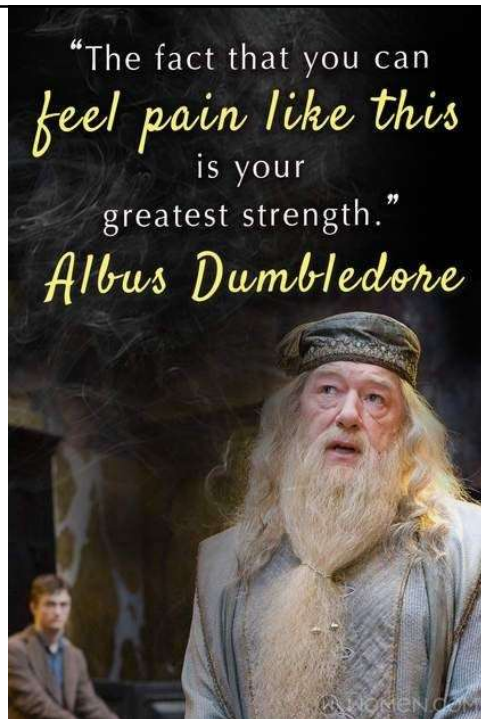
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Chocolate



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Willingness
instead of
avoidance



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Feelings are magical*

- Obscurus monster in Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them = suppressed magic potential
 - Obscurial – **fusion** with the Obscurus
- Realizing that you are a wizard = discovering your magical potential

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Suppressed emotions and their reactions

FEELINGS ARE MEANT TO BE FELT

Initial emotion	Emotion resulting from suppression
Grief/sadness	Depression; panic; anger
Anxiety/fear	Panic; phobia; irritability
Loneliness/sadness	Depression; irritability
Self-doubt; embarrassment	Shame; depression
Annoyance; frustration	Anger; rage

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Feelings are magical exercise

- Have you experienced any of these emotions?
 - Grief/sadness
 - Anxiety/fear
 - Loneliness/sadness
 - Self-doubt; embarrassment
 - Annoyance; frustration

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Feelings are magical exercise

- What are some of the examples of situations in which you experienced these emotions?

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Feeling are magical exercise

- All of these emotions – sadness, anger, or fear, are important and useful because they are telling us what we need.
- In that sense, they are magical.
 - Like Spidey senses or like J.A.R.V.I.S.*
- Everyone feels these emotions, even superheroes and other fictional characters.

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Feelings are magical exercise

- Can you think of an example when a fictional hero you like might have felt scared, angry, or sad?
- What was going on for this character?

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Feelings are magical exercise

- What do you think this character needed at the time? For example, support, protection, or maybe, a friend?

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Feelings are magical exercise

- What do you think this character needed at the time? For example, support, protection, or maybe, a friend?
- What would you say to this character? How would you support them at that time?

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Compassion for the monster



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Compassion for the monster

- Are monsters really *monsters*?
 - Or are they scary because we are scared & hurtful because we are hurt?
- There's a Nightmare in my closet
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmYQzNQiPgk&t=14s>

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Compassion for the monster

Experiential exercise

1. Who are your monsters?
2. What are the monsters telling you? What are some of the messages?

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Compassion for the monster

Experiential exercise

1. Who are your monsters?
2. What are the monsters telling you? What are some of the messages?
3. What do they need? Attention/love/support?

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Compassion for the monster

Experiential exercise

1. Who are your monsters?
2. What are the monsters telling you? What are some of the messages?
3. What do they need? Attention/love/support?
4. What are they trying to protect you from?

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Compassion for the monster

Experiential exercise

1. Who are your monsters?
2. What are the monsters telling you? What are some of the messages?
3. What do they need? Attention/love/support?
4. What are they trying to protect you from?
5. Giving it reassurance & gratitude

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From monster to best friend



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Discussion



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Storm Example – origin story



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Storm Example

- Origin:
 - “Katrina” – 19 year old Black, female
 - Car accident 2 years prior
- “Monsters”
 - Panic attacks when driven on freeway
 - Thoughts: “If I drive, I’m going to get into an accident”
- Setback & hopelessness
 - Refused to drive
 - Avoids similar makes and models of the car, similar color cars, intersection, avoids being driven on the freeway

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Tx Plan

- Identify Origin stories, monsters, and setbacks
- Find hero(s): Storm in this case
- Skills:
 - Focus on mindfulness and acceptance of anxiety symptoms
 - Cognitive restructuring/defusion practice with thoughts, such as “I’m weak, I am broken”
 - Explore her identity as a “hero” and “friend”
- Sense of purpose
 - Focus on core values – friends, college
- Superhero IRL
 - Set up committed actions/exposures to honor her core values – driving to college and to see friends
- Rewrite Origin Story

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Storm meditation



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Positive Emotion Exposure

- Patronus Charm – most meaningful memory
 - Exercise
 - Discussion



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Making therapy non-threatening

- Nearly 40% of trauma survivors drop out of exposure therapy, such as CPT because they find it “too distressing”
- Many also might struggle to trust their therapist
(Alpert, et al., 2020).
- ST can allow clients to not only share their traumatic experience in a safe way but to also change their trauma narrative to a more empowered perspective.

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Narrative Exposure Therapy

- Has been shown to be helpful with rewriting the client's narrative
- Helpful with anxiety, depression, PTSD
- Complex PTSD

Neuner, et al., 2004; McPherson, J. (2012).

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(Super)hero Narrative

- Helpful to allow the clt to become the hero of their own journey



Rubin (2008); Scarlet (2016; 2019)

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Origin Story

- Can help understand the developed story clts tell themselves
- Can also help understand the clts core values
 - That which is most vulnerable, that which is most pained is indicative of what we care about the most
 - E.g. connection, safety, closeness, responsibility

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Superhero Narrative

- Can help clients to see a “Zoomed out” view of how their trauma history shaped them
- Can allow the client to normalize their reactions
 - Normal reactions to abnormal events
 - Trauma/abuse can feel like the norm
 - Can’t keep running from it forever

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Changing the Trauma Narrative

- Record Timeline of events in bullet points only
- Process triggering and meaningful memories (hot memories)
- Turn all memories into a cohesive story
- Find safety in our body through mindfulness and embodying our heroes.
- Shift from “Broken” to “Empowered”

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Superhero Narrative

- Record Timeline events
- Process painful memories **with heroes**
 - Processing
 - Exposure
 - Changing the relationship with trauma
 - Adding a compassionate hero and self-compassionate dialogue
 - **Find meaning in giving something back**

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Case Example: “Sarah”

- 21 year old, Non-binary, college student
- Timeline
 - Assaulted by first boyfriend at 14
 - Friends didn’t believe them and slut-shamed them
 - Assaulted by a gym coach
 - Was in a school play
 - Bullied in school
 - Made new friends
 - Assaulted by someone they went on the first date with
 - Currently enjoys their new school and is active in a mental health club

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Case Example: “Sarah”

- Monsters: anxiety, dissociation, anger at herself
- Setbacks: struggles with assertiveness, avoids people, struggles with asking for help
- Hero: Jessica Jones

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Example: Jessica Jones

- Timeline
 - Family died in a car crash
 - Experiments
 - Obtained Superpowers
 - Lived with best friend, Patsy
 - Became a superhero
 - Assaulted by Kilgrave/Purple Man



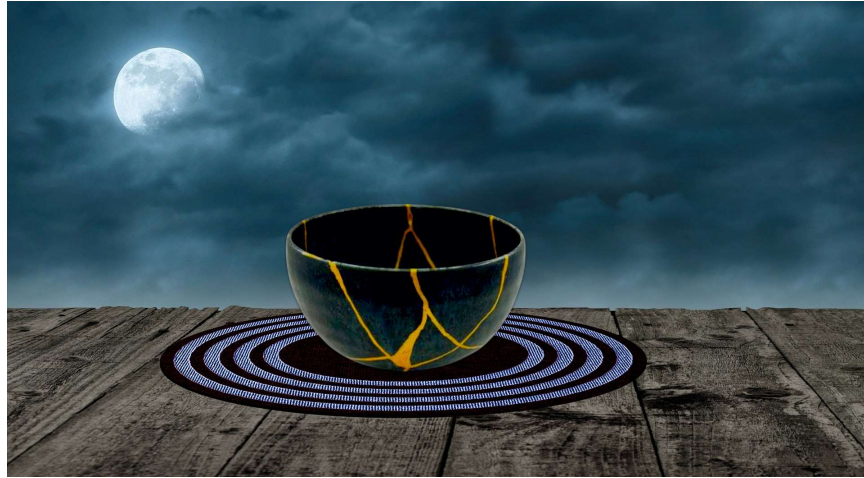
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Case Example: “Sarah”

- Superhero IRL steps:
 - Process trauma narrative
 - Find safety in their body
 - Safety Officer in sorority

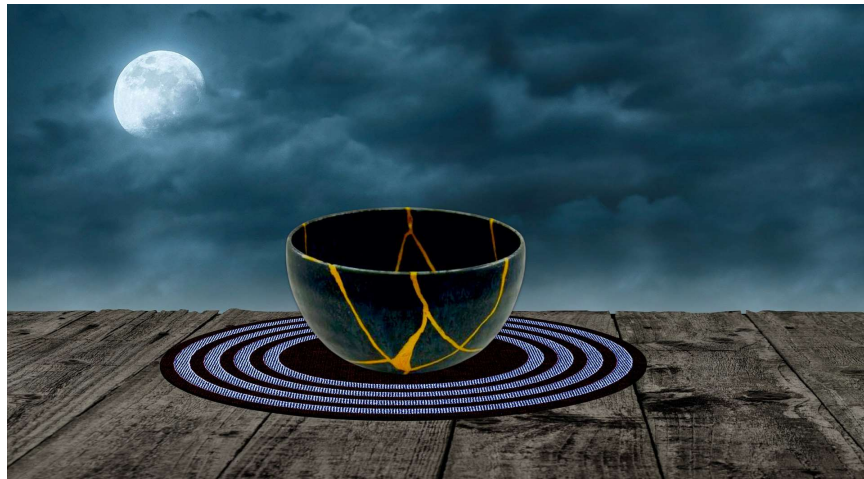
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Kintsugi



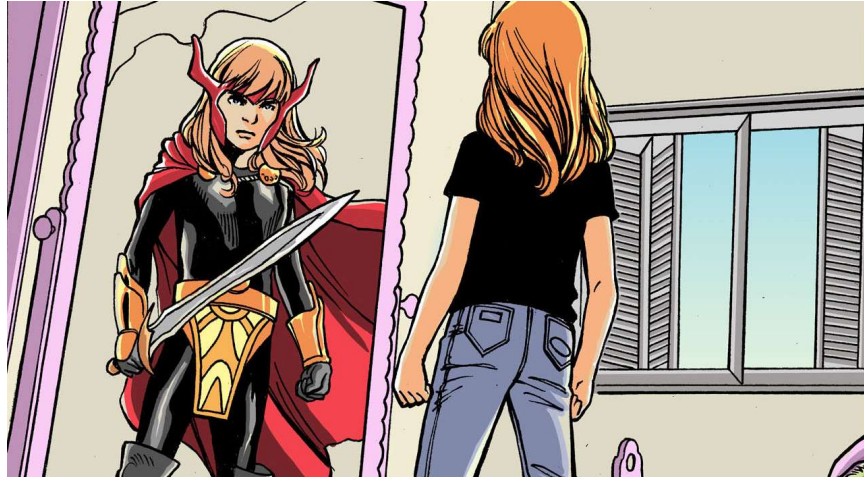
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Kintsugi: You were NEVER broken



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Sense of purpose



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Figuring out the kind of hero you want to be

- Sense of purpose -> road to posttraumatic growth
- Meaning making -> reduction in symptoms and reduction of suffering
- Giving back -> leads to healing

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Regrets of the dying (Bronnie Ware – palliative nurse)



Warren, 2012

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Regrets of the dying

- 1. I wish I hadn't worked so hard



"Star Trek"

Worf & son,
Alexander
Worf sent Alex away
after his mother was
killed
Missed his bday

Warren, 2012

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Regrets of the dying

- 1. I wish I hadn't worked so hard



Worf was initially angry at Alexander for stealing, acting out, and lying

Until he realized that his son needed him

Warren, 2012

113

Regrets of the dying

- 2. I wish I stayed in touch with my friends



Logan/Wolverine
X-Men

Warren, 2012

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Regrets of the dying

- 3. I wish I had the courage to express my true feelings

11th Doctor
"Doctor Who"



Warren, 2012

115

Regrets of the dying

- 4. I wish I had the courage to be myself, not what others expect of me



Jessica
"Fresh off the Boat"

Warren, 2012

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Regrets of the dying

- 5. I wish I had let myself be happier



Batman

Warren, 2012

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Life = Balancing act



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What gets in the way?

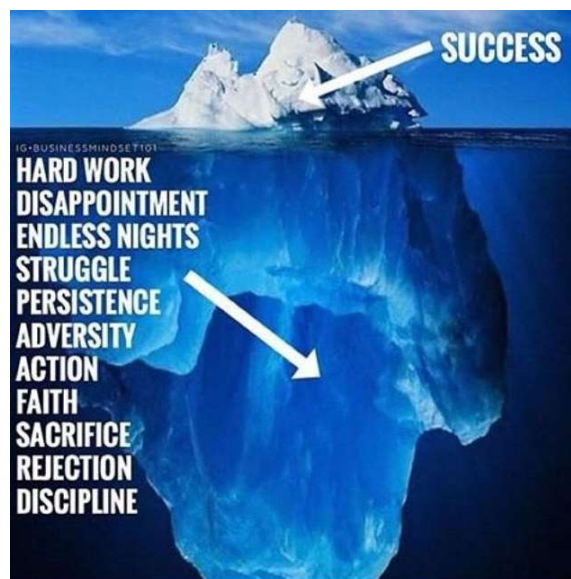
- Fear and “Imposter Syndrome”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZC6m4lm1Lo>



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Iceberg Model



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What gets in the way?

- Fear
- Self-shaming and “Imposter Syndrome”
- “Shoulds” and other monsters

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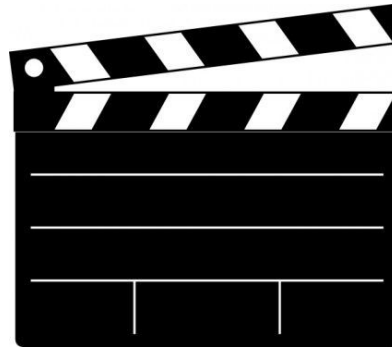
What gets in the way?

- Fear
- Self-shaming and “Imposter Syndrome”
- “Shoulds” and other monsters
- Beliefs that we don’t matter, that we cannot change the world
- Unwillingness to face the internal monsters

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Monsters as Movie Themes

- Belonging & Connection
- Achievement & Ability
- Self-Image
- Personal danger



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Monsters as Movie Themes

Belonging & Connection:

- ☐ I will make a mistake, it will be humiliating, and everyone will laugh at me and then reject and abandon me
- ☐ I will lose someone I care about (to death, abandonment, or rejection)
- ☐ I will be rejected from a group I want to be a part of or I won't be allowed to join a group I want to be a part of
- ☐ If people find out the truth about me, they will reject or abandon me

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Monsters as Movie Themes

Achievement, & Ability:

- ☐ If I try this and fail, I will lose something I care about (job, opportunity, status, etc.)
- ☐ If I try something/take a chance/try to change, I will fail

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Monsters as Movie Themes

Self-Image:

- ☐ This part of me is unacceptable and no one can love or accept me until I change this part of myself
- ☐ Until I can change this part of myself, I am not allowed to be happy or to do things that make me happy

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Monsters as Movie Themes

Personal Danger:

- ☐ If I trust someone, they will hurt me
- ☐ If I am not in control over this situation, I will not be safe
- ☐ Because I've been hurt before, it means that it is highly likely to happen again

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Finding core values in our fears

- **Step 1:** Identify some of your biggest fears
(For example, losing a loved one, being rejected or criticized, fear of making a mistake, fear of getting sick or dying).

Write down some of your biggest fears

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Finding core values in our fears

- **Step 2:** Turn your fears around as an indicator of what you care about.
- For example, if you fear getting rejected, it might mean that you care about connection, belonging and acceptance.
- If you fear losing a loved one, it might mean that this loved one is very important to you and you care about spending time with them.
- Take some time to turn your fears into indications of what you care about:

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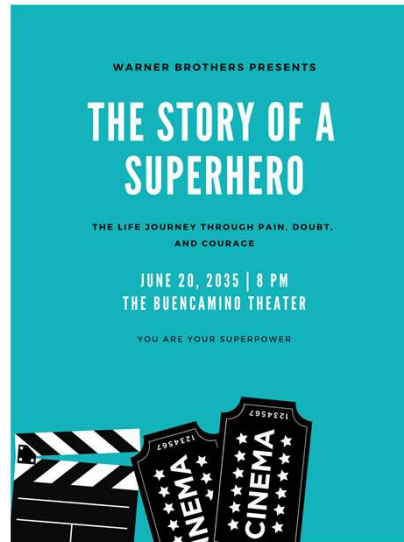
Finding core values in our fears

- **Step 3:** Identify small steps you can take to participate in activities that you care about.
- For example, if you realized that you care about acceptance and connection, it might mean spending some time with people you want to remain connected to.
- Write down a few ideas of superhero actions you can take to honor what you care about the most:

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Exercise - Finding a sense of purpose

- What if there will be a movie made about you in the future to inspire others?
- What would that movie be about?
- If it did exactly what it is supposed to, how would you want this movie to inspire/affect others?
- Discussion



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Identifying sense of purpose

- Imagine that you could be a real life superhero, witch, or Jedi



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Identifying sense of purpose

- If you could be granted a superpowers or a magical ability, what would you wish for?



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Identifying sense of purpose

- What would you do with these abilities?



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The bigger picture

- It's not about what you DO
- It's about what do FOR THE WORLD
- External focus
- Posttraumatic growth and meaning making

(Park & Ai, 2006).

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Veronica Mars EXAMPLE “Lily”



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What would Veronica do?



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Survivor story – Phoenix Moment



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Remember

- YOU are the Chosen One
- It has to be YOU
- YOU make a difference

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This is YOUR Heroic Journey too

- YOU make a difference every day
- Keep Superheroing and don't forget your cape



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