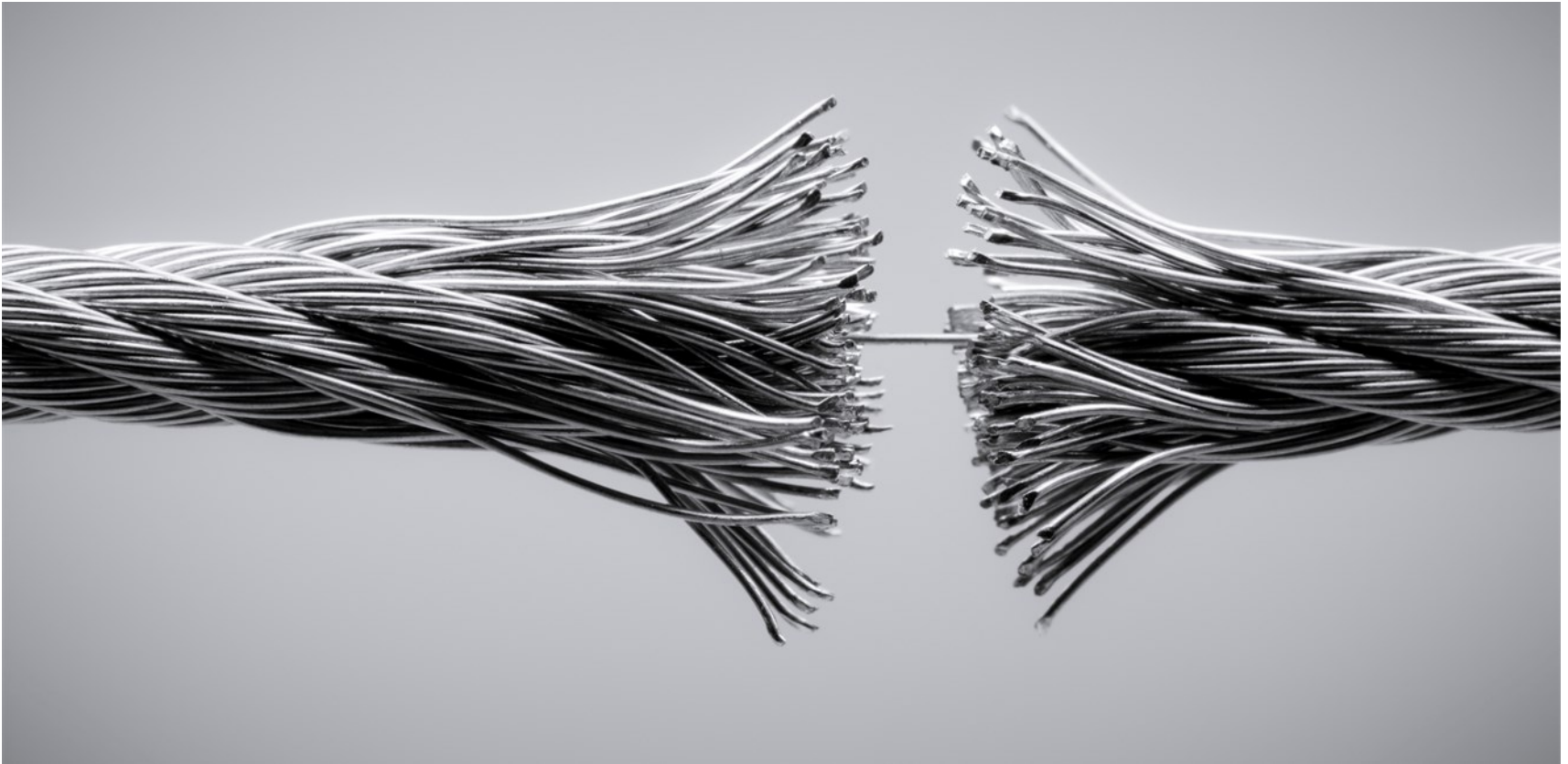


# **Why Trauma-Informed Understanding Matters in Foster Care**

**Youth in Care & Trauma:  
Supporting Resilience and Wellbeing in  
Educational Foster Care Environments**



## **Compassion Fatigue: The Cost of Caring**



## Moving Against the Current

# Impact of Youth in Care Trauma

Disruption of relationships and attachment experiences

Unresolved loss and grief that remains with the youth

Avoidance and social withdrawal

PTSD

A host of mental health and behavioral issues



# Impact on Advocates

Educators

Social  
Workers

Foster  
Caregivers

Advocates

Manage the imbalance in our own threat detection systems

# There is Work to Do, But First ...

## **Understand Trauma**

Recognizing how trauma affects student behavior, learning, and relationships is essential for effective care.

## **Build Multi-Level Advocate Support**

Developing supports at classroom, team, and system levels ensures sustainable trauma-informed care.

## **Identifying Trauma-Informed Responses**

Implementing strategies that promote predictability, emotional safety, and empowerment.

## **Shifting to Relationship - Centered Care**

Moving from reactive discipline to proactive, empathy-driven approaches: fosters stability and belonging.

# Why are Youth in Foster Care?

- **Abuse & Neglect**
  - ✓ Emotional
  - ✓ Verbal
  - ✓ Physical
  - ✓ Sexual
- Basic needs (food, hygiene, safe environment)
- Abandonment
- **Substance** abuse/addiction
- Death (of a family member)
- Exposure to **family violence**
- **Incarceration** of a parent
- Severe illness
- **Juvenile offenses**

**What we might  
see above the  
surface...**

Tantrums  
Challenges connecting with others  
Irritability  
Self-blame  
Challenges with emotion regulation  
Sadness  
Clingy-ness  
Disconnection  
Anger  
Being mean  
Big reactions to loud noises  
Fear  
Inability to concentrate  
Yelling  
Tiredness  
Shyness

**...may be the  
result of what's  
underneath the  
surface.**

Poverty  
Abuse  
Unstable housing  
Medical illness  
Accidents  
Unsafe neighborhood  
Caregiver with health challenge  
Bullying  
Violence  
Family impacted by deportation  
War  
Assault  
Incarcerated family member  
Neglect  
Divorce  
Death of a loved one

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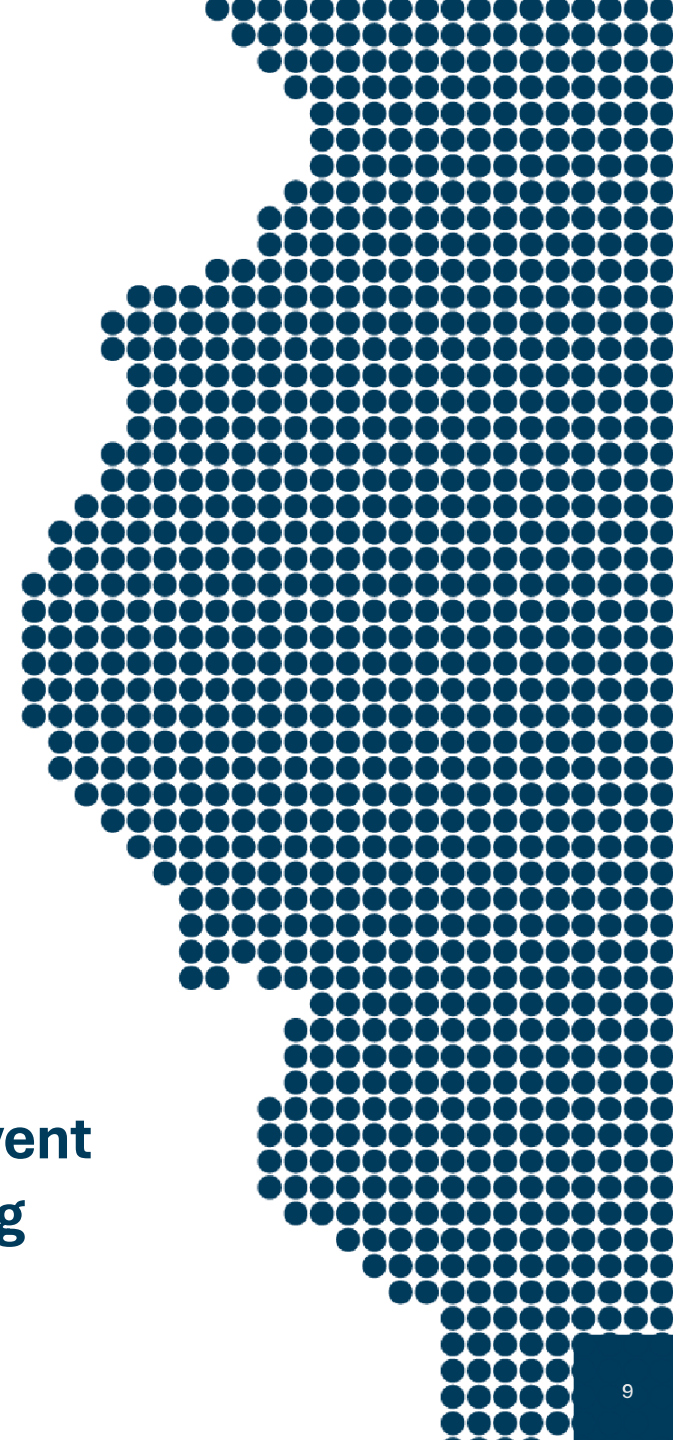


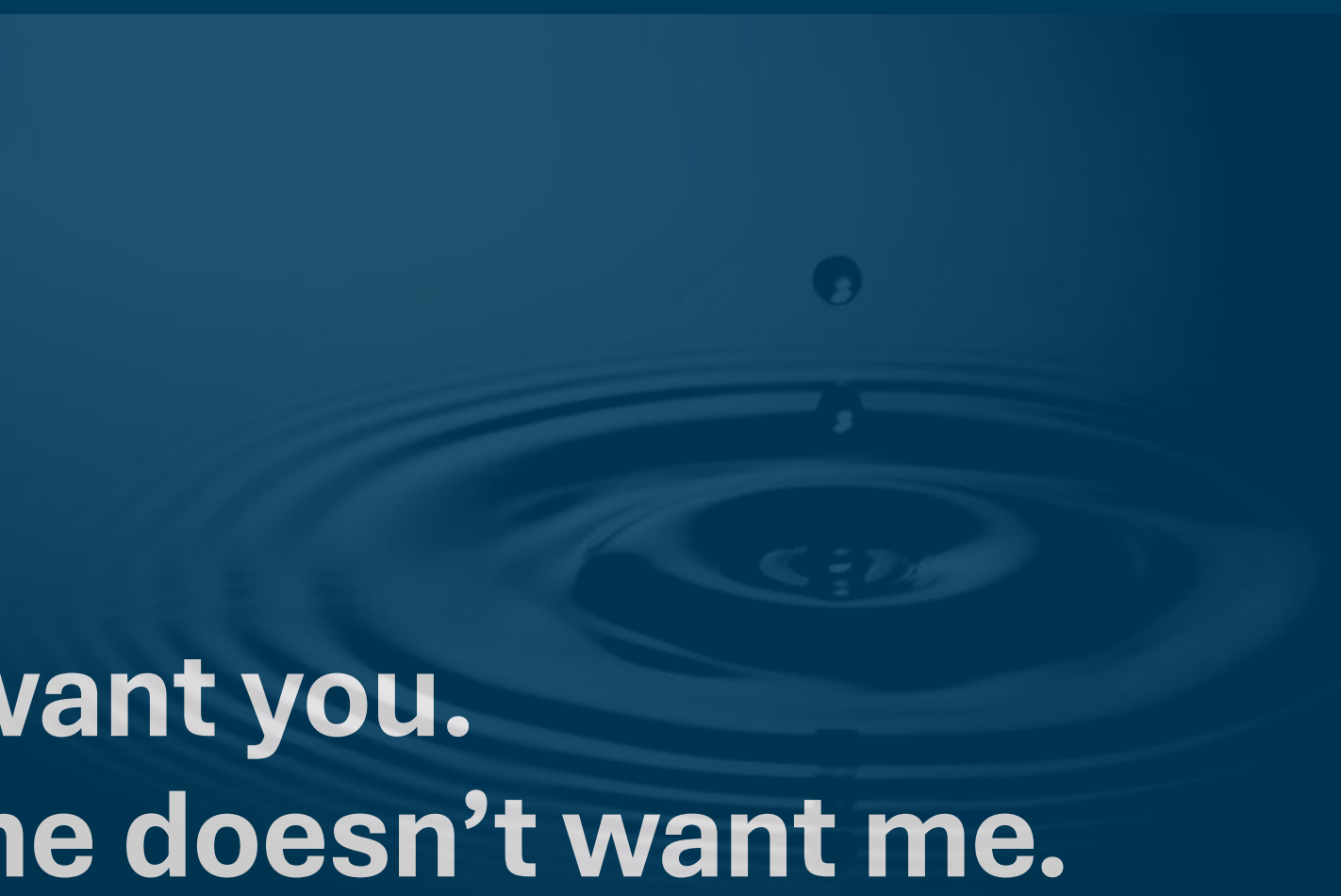
# What might be going on beneath the surface for a youth in care?

How might frequent transitions and instability affect a students' disposition, behaviors, psyche or triggers?

What messages might students receive, intentionally or unintentionally – when systems fail to communicate about them?

Where do systemic breakdowns prevent educators and advocates from getting support?





**I don't want you.  
Someone doesn't want me.  
No one can care for me.  
Where do I go? (Unhoused)  
Where do I belong? (YIC)**

# Childhood Trauma and Chronic Adverse Reactions

“In addition to adverse effects on physical health, research indicates that early childhood trauma has particularly adverse effects on **adolescent self-esteem, coping skills, school performance, self-regulation, critical thinking, self-motivation, and the ability to build healthy relationships**” (Fratto, 2016, citing O'Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2009).

**Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE):** Early life stressors (Emotional, physical, sexual child abuse, neglect, divorce or separation, alcohol or substance abuse, incarceration, mental illness).

**Secondary traumatic stress (STS):** Can occur when you hear about the trauma others have experienced. Can lead to avoidance.

**Vicarious traumatization (VT)**

**Compassion Fatigue (CF)**

**Job Burnout (BO)**

**Desensitization:** Diminished or reduced emotional or cognitive responses to a stimulus. Example. As a society, we are collectively becoming increasingly desensitized to painful events (such as school shootings).

- Helplessness, being extremely tired, and feeling overwhelmed...
- Disorientation or confusion...
- Frustration, cynicism, anger, and irritability...
- Physical effects, such as shortness of breath, increased headaches, heart palpitations, trouble falling asleep, and muscle tension...

# True or False

1. Youth who seem emotionally detached or “unaffected” by their experiences typically have not been significantly impacted by trauma?

**False**

2. Trauma can disrupt executive functioning, which may lead to difficulties with tasks such as planning, memory, and impulse control.

**True**

3. Complex trauma from chronic adversity—such as neglect, repeated moves, or caregiver inconsistency—often has more long-term impact than a single traumatic incident.”

**True**

# True or False

1. Early signs of compassion fatigue usually show up as reduced empathy toward students or youth in care.

**False**

2. Compassion fatigue and burnout are the same phenomenon and should be treated the same way.

**False**

3. Compassion fatigue can develop even when educators and caregivers feel highly committed and emotionally connected to the youth they support.

**True**

# Compassion Fatigue

**Teachers** supporting trauma-impacted students experience significantly higher burnout, with greater **secondary traumatic stress (STS)**.

Over **70% of children in foster care** have experienced five or more ACEs.

International data show two-thirds of people have experienced at least one traumatic event by age 17, meaning **educators frequently work in classrooms where trauma is the norm, not the exception**—heightening burnout risk.

[USC - Mental Health Needs of Foster Youth](#)



# Awareness : Lessen the Impact of Trauma

“...establish professional relationships and empathize with people who have experienced or **are currently facing multiple traumas...**” (Wu & Lu, 2025).

## Compassion Fatigue

Emotional

Physical

Behavioral

Cognitive

## Impact on Practice:

Decision-making and judgement

Complexities of social work

Relationship strain with youth and families

Organizational consequences

Increase research enhances current knowledge and related theoretical models



## **High Emotional Stress**

64% of caregivers report emotional stress, with 75% experiencing anxiety and depression symptoms.

## **Lack of Formal Support**

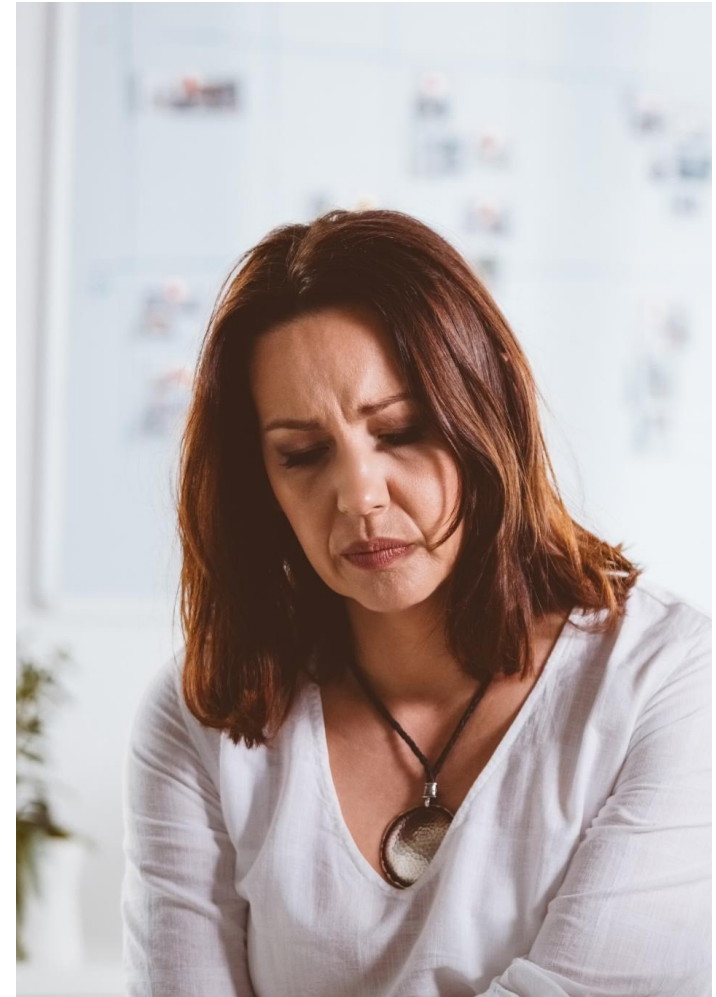
Nearly half of caregivers receive no formal support despite needing assistance to manage stress.

## **High Turnover Rates**

Child welfare agencies experience turnover rates of 30% to 65%, especially during peak periods.

## **Impact on Educators**

Educators face secondary traumatic stress, leading to attrition and reduced classroom effectiveness.



# Prevalence and Impact of Trauma on Youth in Care



## High Trauma Exposure

Nearly 90% of foster youth experience at least one trauma, with many facing multiple types of traumatic events. [snhhealthcare.com](https://www.snhhealthcare.com)

## PTSD Prevalence

About 50% of foster youth show PTSD symptoms, a rate much higher than the general population. [Foster Care Trauma Statistics](#)

## Placement Instability

Frequent placement changes increase instability and trauma, **averaging three or more moves per child in care.**

## Impact on Development

Trauma affects emotional regulation, **trust, and cognition**, leading to school and behavioral challenges.

# Behavioral and Educational Challenges for Youth in Care

## Trauma Effects on Behavior

Trauma in foster care often causes emotional dysregulation, **substance abuse**, aggression, and **school disengagement** among youth.

## Impact on Learning and Trust

Chronic instability undermines trust and concentration, **making** academic success and healthy **relationships difficult**.

## Importance of Supportive Interventions

Educators and caregivers must implement interventions prioritizing emotional safety and resilience to break trauma cycles.



# Impact on the Foster Care System

Compassion fatigue isn't only a caregiver issue - its **effects ripple through the entire child welfare system:**

Higher risk of **placement disruption**

Lower caregiver well-being, which can **harm child outcomes**

Increased potentiality of caregivers considering **withdrawing from fostering**

**High turnover** in welfare agencies, leading to inconsistency and disruption in services

# What Foster Parents Navigate...

## Constant Exposure to Child Trauma

**Often absorb the emotional toll of their children's past trauma,** (secondary trauma or vicarious trauma). Many children in care have experienced multiple ACEs, and their trauma-related behaviors can overwhelm caregivers. [Caring for Traumatized Children](#)

## Emotional, Behavioral, and Relational Demands

Attachment challenges, behavioral dysregulation, complex relationships with biological families, **identity shifts in the parenting role.**

## Feeling Unsupported or Misunderstood

A 2025 report from the Oxford University Department of Education highlights that many foster carers **feel unsupported, blamed, judged, and often isolated**—factors that greatly increase compassion fatigue risk. [Education Oxford](#)



Heartbreaking,  
sometimes  
unpredictable  
separations

An unsupportive  
legal system

School placement  
that does not fit the  
needs of the child

Attachment issues

Complex kinship  
circumstances

Nowhere to go for  
resources

Reunification pain  
(Goodbye hurts)

Financial Strain

Impact on  
Marriage/Family

# Building Resilience: Evidence-Based Approaches



## Trauma-Informed Development

Professional development builds confidence and reduces emotional overload in educators and caregivers.

## Peer Support Networks

Peer collaboration combats isolation and fosters mutual support among educators and caregivers.

## Mindfulness and Stress Reduction

Mindfulness practices and stress-reduction improve resilience and emotional wellbeing.

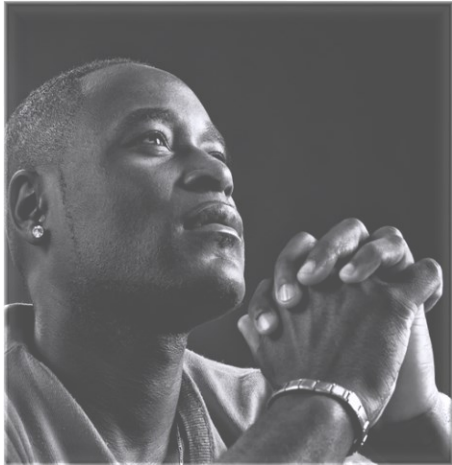
## Workload Adjustments

Reducing class sizes and protecting planning time help manage educator workload effectively.

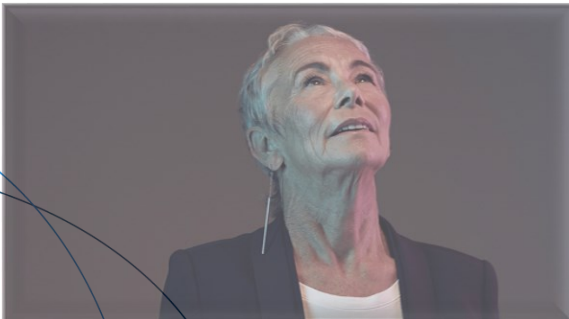
# Top-down Regulation



**5-4-3-2-1 Senses**



**Mental Exercises**



**Cognitive Grounding**



## Muscle Relaxation



## Belly Breathing



## Mind-Body Focus

## Bottom-up Regulation

## Limit/Control Sensory Intake

Recharge physically to counteract sedentary nature of paperwork.

## Leave Work at Work

Create mindful routines to end the workday. Shift the connection to family, friends, things you enjoy.

## Broaden your Identity Outside of Work

Volunteerism and participation in group activities.

## Set Boundaries at Work

Work/life balance.





## **Focus on What You Are Fighting “For”**

Rather than what you are fighting against.

## **Debrief with Coworkers**

You don't have to share the details of trauma but share how you're feeling about it.

## **Grounding Techniques**

Engage in breathing and grounding techniques (belly breathing, ratio breathing and muscle relaxation, 5-4-3-2-1 senses, body awareness).

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