From Suffering to Strength: Transforming Workplace Adversity into Positive Altruism

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Agenda

- Define altruism and explain what motivates it
- Describe the benefits of altruism
- Define altruism born of suffering (ABS) and the conditions that foster it (Staub & Vollhardt, 2008)
- Describe the individual and organizational processes that foster compassion in the workplace (Dutton et al., 2014)
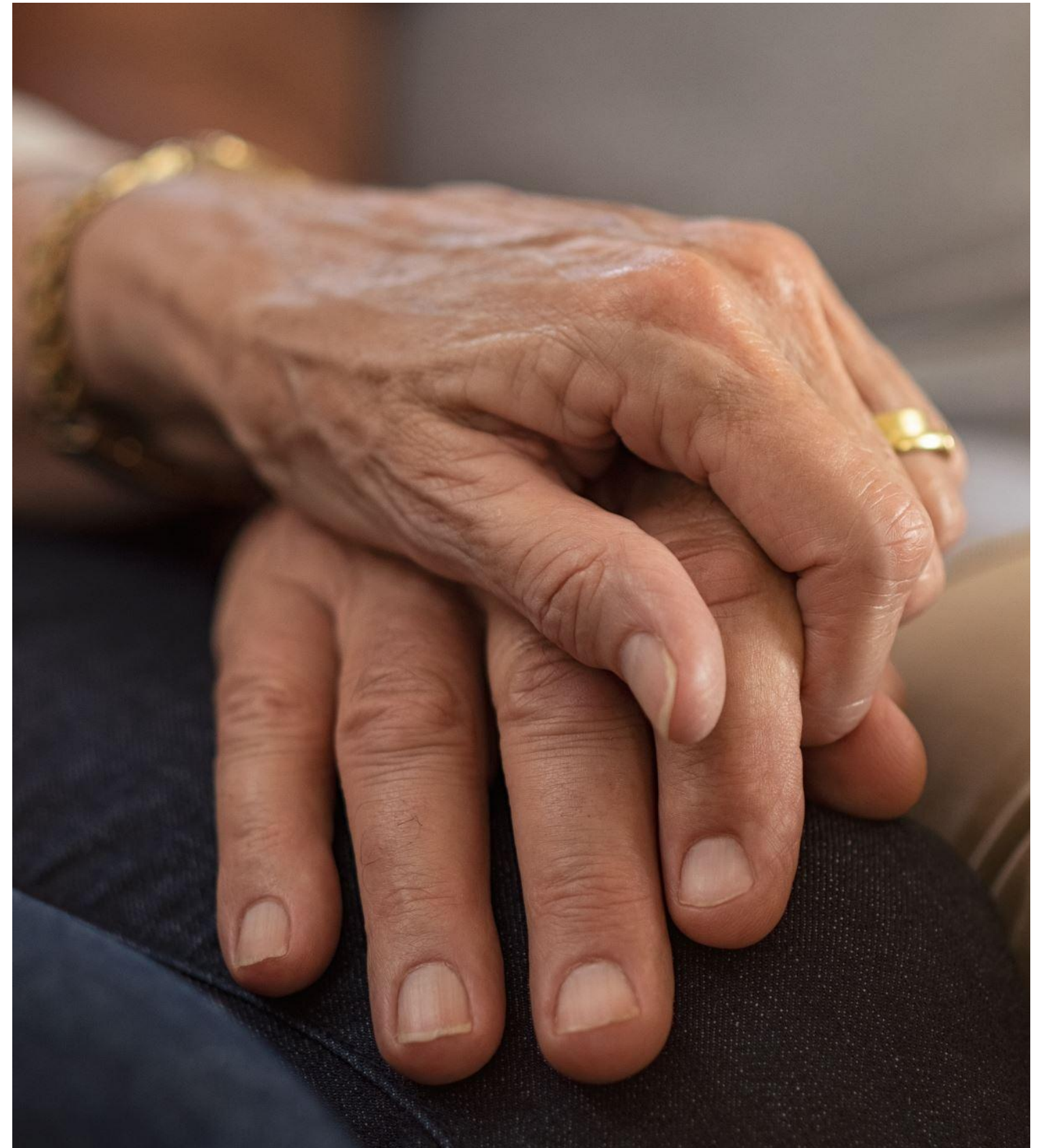
Altruism

Altruism is behavior motivated by the end goal of increasing another person's welfare (Batson & Shaw, 1991).

Altruism follows a predictable path:

Observation

↓

Emotional Response

↓

Motivation

↓

Action
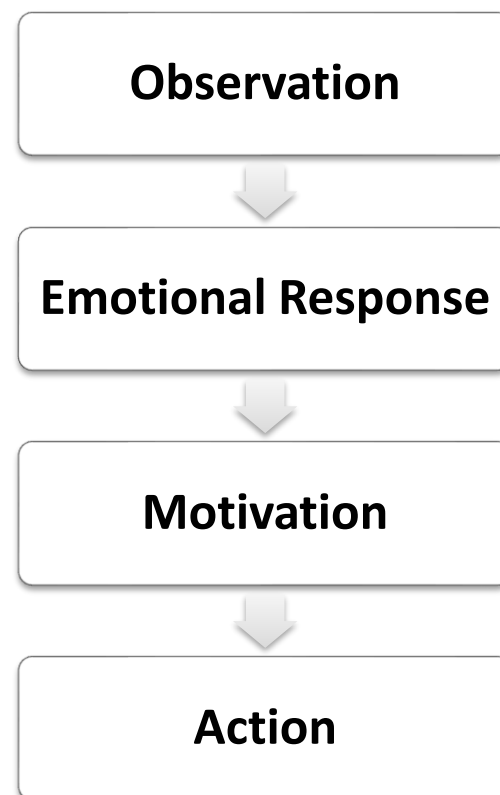
The Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis

The empathy-altruism hypothesis states that empathic emotion induces altruistic motivation to help the person for whom we feel empathy (Batson, 1987).

The Benefits of Altruism

Altruistic behaviors have numerous benefits for *the giver*, not just the receiver, including improvements in:

- **Psychological well-being**
  - Gratitude and perspective
  - Improved mood
  - Self-efficacy
  - Social integration
  - Meaning

- **Physical health**
  - Lower risk of illness or premature death
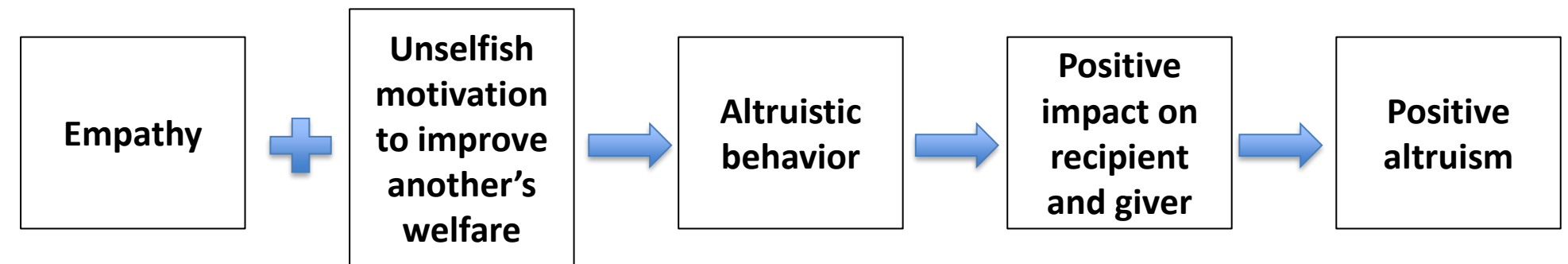 - Stronger health outcomes

Mentimeter

Think of a time you helped someone else. What, if anything, did you gain from that experience?

compassion   great

understanding

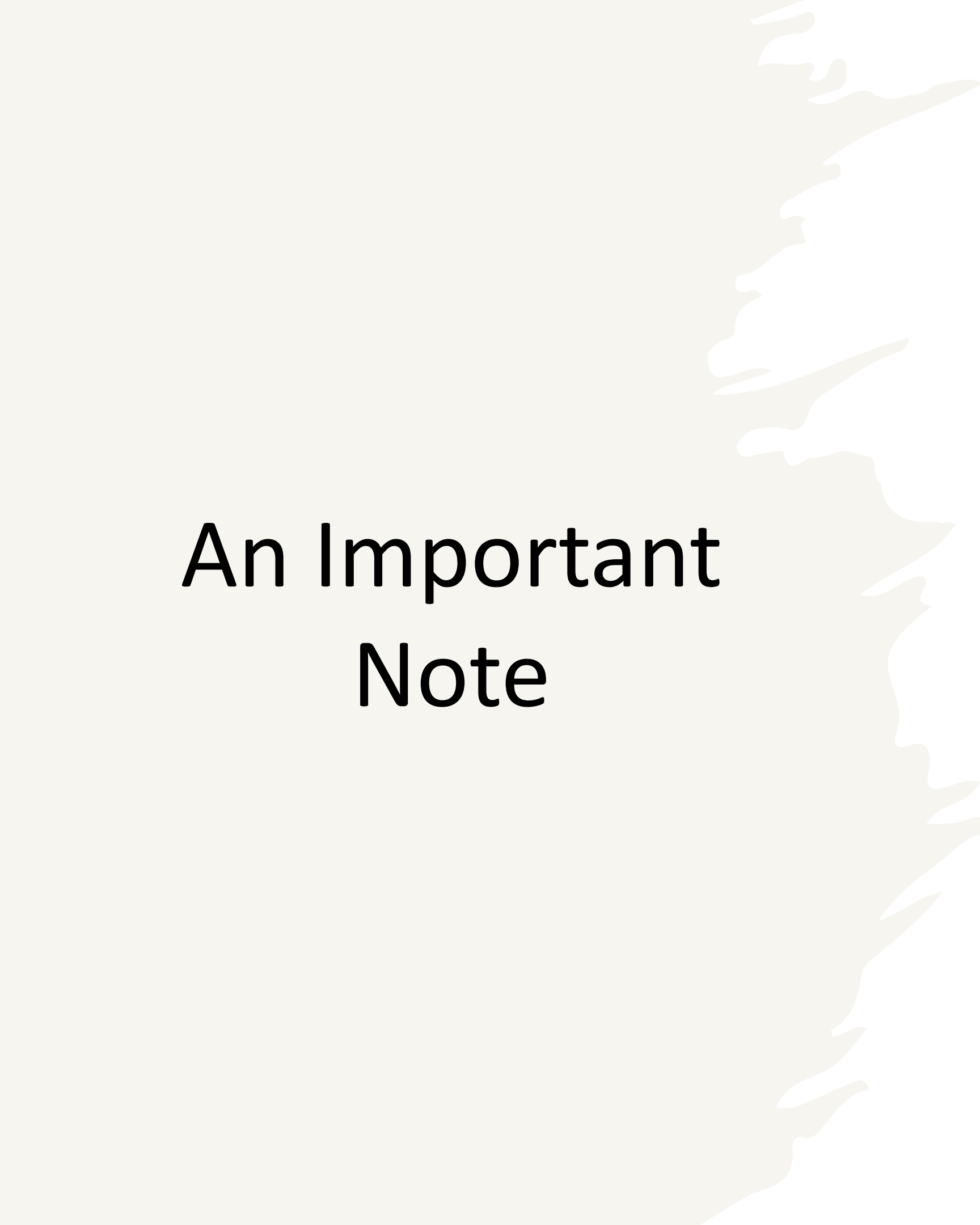positive

Positive Altruism

Positive altruism occurs when altruistic behavior positively increases the welfare of both the recipient and the giver.

This figure outlines the emotions, behaviors, and events that lead to positive altruism (Irani, 2018).

Empathy ➕ Unselfish motivation to improve another's welfare ➡ Altruistic behavior ➡ Positive impact on recipient and giver ➡ Positive altruism

An Important Note

The purpose of this presentation is not to idealize suffering, nor suggest that anyone *should* respond with altruism.

Altruistic action must come from within—it should never be forced or expected.

The aim is to explore the potential for growth and healing that can emerge from suffering, and to advocate for compassionate responses to suffering that already exists.
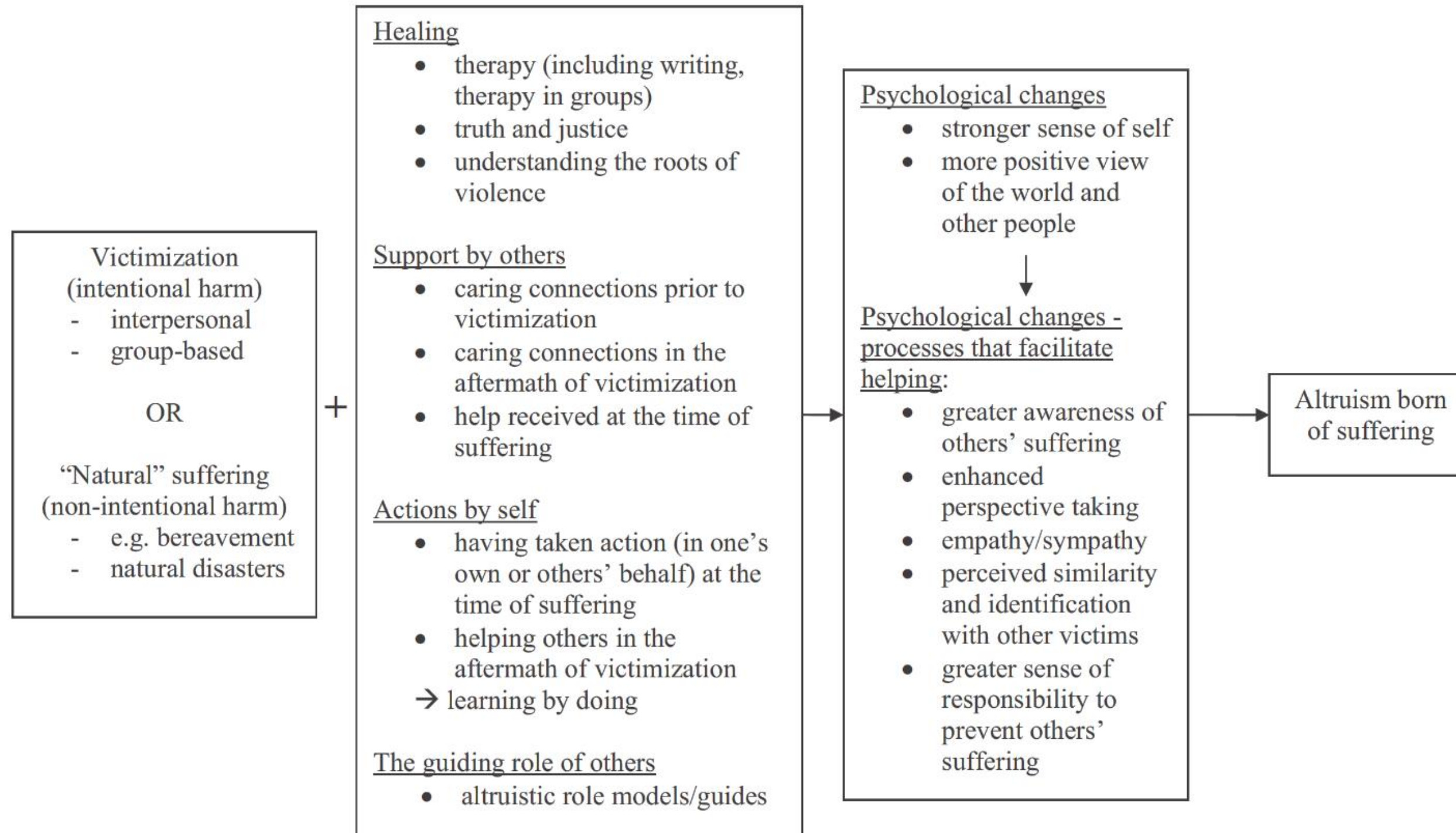
Altruism Born of Suffering (ABS)

ABS is the phenomenon that occurs when those who have suffered recover meaning and become caring and helping towards others (Staub & Vollhardt, 2008).

What promotes ABS?

Altruism Born of Suffering (ABS)

Suffering + Experiences promoting psychological change → Psychological processes → Altruism born of suffering

Victimization
(intentional harm)
- interpersonal
- group-based

OR

"Natural" suffering
(non-intentional harm)
- e.g. bereavement
- natural disasters

+

Healing
- therapy (including writing, therapy in groups)
- truth and justice
- understanding the roots of violence

Support by others
- caring connections prior to victimization
- caring connections in the aftermath of victimization
- help received at the time of suffering

Actions by self
- having taken action (in one's own or others' behalf) at the time of suffering
- helping others in the aftermath of victimization
→ learning by doing

The guiding role of others
- altruistic role models/guides

Psychological changes
- stronger sense of self
- more positive view of the world and other people

Psychological changes -
processes that facilitate helping:
- greater awareness of others' suffering
- enhanced perspective taking
- empathy/sympathy
- perceived similarity and identification with other victims
- greater sense of responsibility to prevent others' suffering

Altruism born of suffering

Source: Staub & Vollhardt, 2008

Experiences Promoting ABS

Healing or psychological recovery after intense suffering:

- Therapy (including writing, therapy in groups)

- Truth and justice

- Understanding the roots of violence

Source: Staub & Vollhardt, 2008

Experiences Promoting ABS

Supportive and guiding influence of others:

- Loving connections and social support before or after victimization

- Help received at the time of one's suffering

- Altruistic models or guides

Source: Staub & Vollhardt, 2008

Experiences Promoting ABS

Actions by self:

- Having taken action at the time of suffering
- Helping others in the aftermath of victimization -> Learning by doing

Source: Staub & Vollhardt, 2008

Psychological Effects of ABS Promoting Experiences

1. Greater salience and awareness of suffering
2. Increased perspective-taking, empathy, and sympathy
3. Perceived similarity and identification with other victims
4. Greater sense of responsibility for others' suffering

Compassion in the Workplace

Compassion is a dynamic interpersonal process that begins with recognizing suffering. It then leads to empathic concern and culminates in action to alleviate that suffering. This process unfolds within individual, relational, and organizational contexts that either hinder or facilitate it (Dutton et al., 2014).

Loving-Kindness Meditation

- A mindfulness-based practice that fosters kindness toward self and others
- Enhances empathy, compassion, and emotional regulation
- Helps prevent emotional burnout from empathy-based distress
- Improves noticing and feeling the pain of others at work (Atkins & Parker, 2012)
- Increases prosocial responses to suffering (Condon et al., 2013)

Free Guided Loving Kindness Meditations led by Dr. Barbara Fredrickson: https://www.positivityresonance.com/meditations.html

One Minute Loving Kindness Meditation

Guided by Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar

Embedding the Compassion Process in the Workplace

Research suggests that six features can foster more compassion in the workplace (Dutton et al., 2014):

1. Shared values
2. Shared beliefs
3. Norms
4. Organizational Practices
5. Structure and quality of relationships
6. Leaders' behaviors

Organizational Practices that Foster Compassion

- Hire for Compassionate Capacity

- Provide Employee Support Systems

- Create Notification of Harm Protocols

- Reward and Recognize Helping

Organizational Practices that Embed Compassion

1

Hire for Compassionate Capacity

- Select employees based on relational skills and alignment with caring values.
- Example: Behavioral interviews assess empathy and fit with a compassionate culture. (McClelland, 2012)

2

Provide Employee Support Systems

- Provide emotional and material aid through formal programs (e.g., peer funds, assistance programs).
- Boosts prosocial identity and caring behavior. (Grant et al., 2008; McClelland, 2012)

3

Create Notification of Harm Protocols

- Ensure leaders and peers are alerted when someone is in distress.
- Example: Cisco's CEO was personally informed of employee tragedies to offer direct support. (Dutton et al., 2002)

4

Reward and Recognize Helping

- Reward and celebrate acts of care and support.
- Normalizes compassionate behavior and reinforces that suffering is real and worth responding to. (McClelland, 2012)

Reflection: Compassion in Action

- Which of the four practices—hiring, support systems, notification, recognition—could you begin to influence?
- What is one small step you could take in the next month to enhance compassionate capacity within your organization?
- Who could you partner with to make this change sustainable?
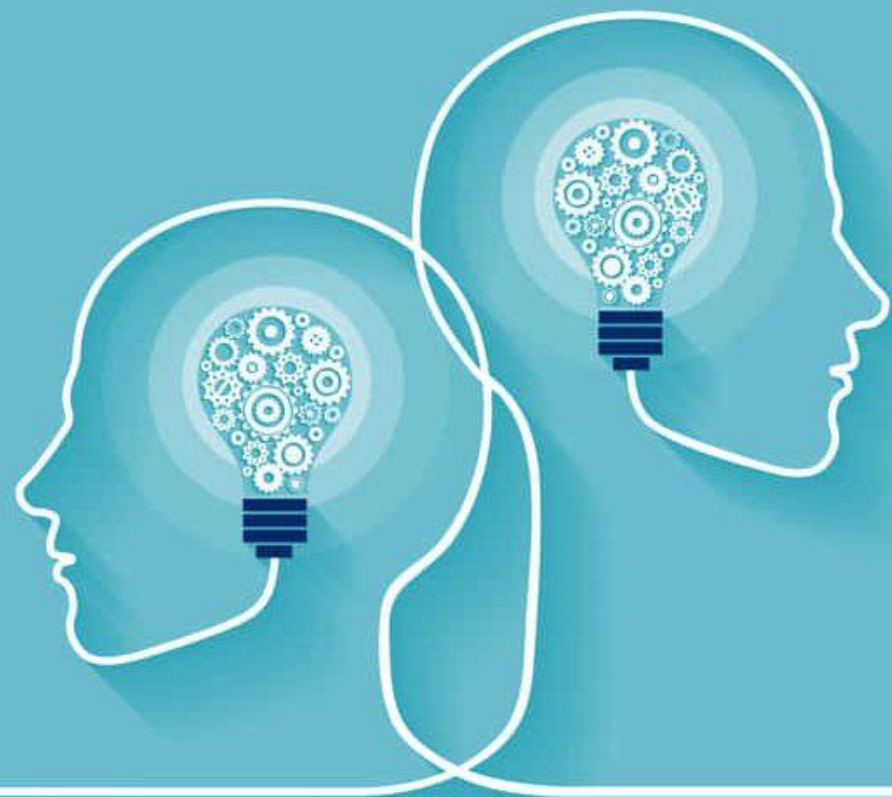
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