

Integrative Approaches to Thriving with Chronic Illness

Addressing the Mental, Emotional, and Relational Aspects of our Journey

Jessie Wells, LCSW, INHC
Sept 14, 2019



Introduction



My journey

Objectives

- *Gain an understanding of how chronic pain and illness impact emotional world*
- *Explore Resilience and how to enhance Resilience*
- *Explore tools to engage and train the Nervous System through mindfulness and exercises that address the Vagus Nerve*
- *Discuss Specific coping tools to cope and even thrive in the midst of pain and suffering in order to enhance resilience*

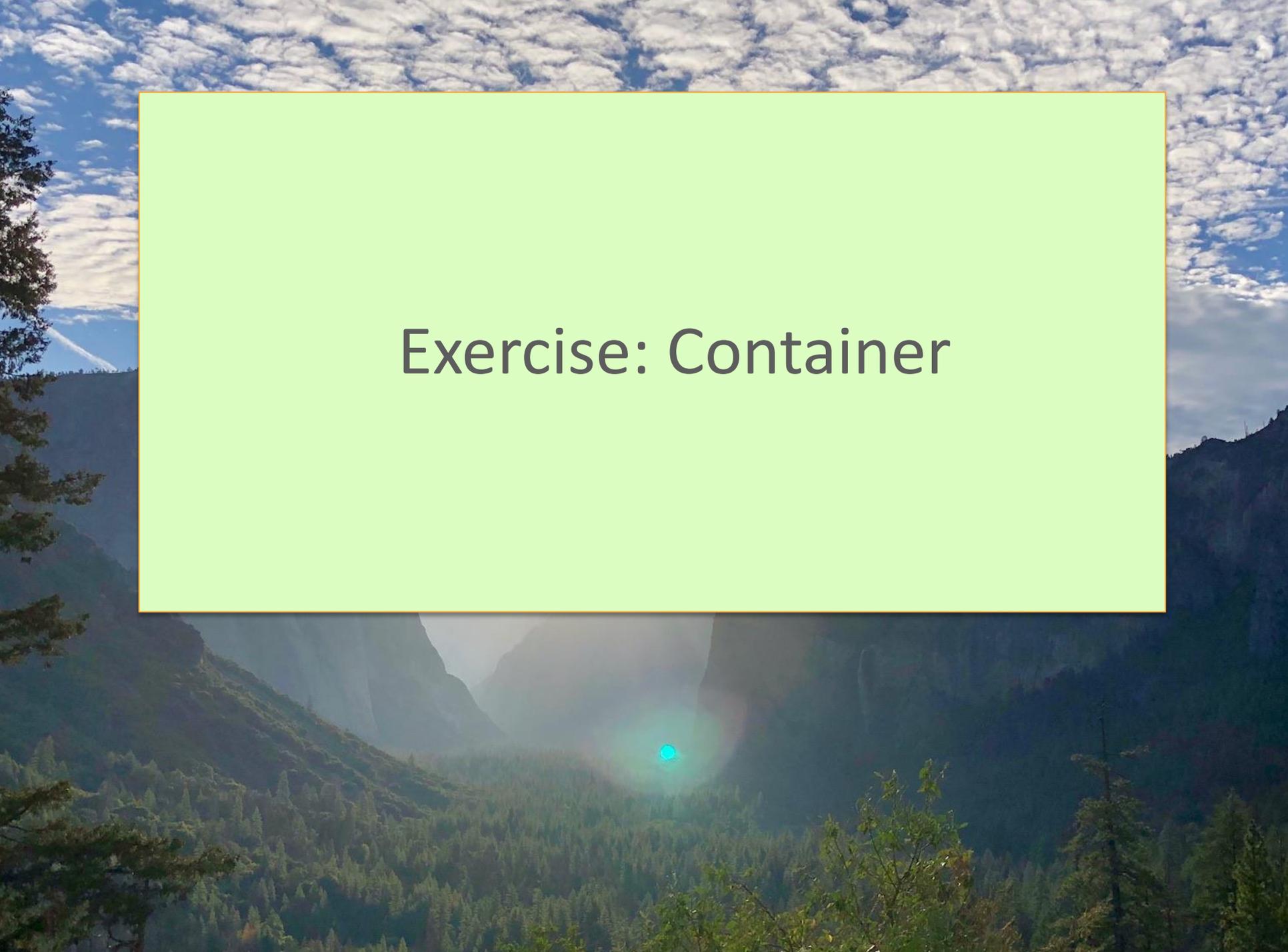
Exercise: SIFT

Sensations

Images

Feelings

Thoughts

A scenic mountain landscape with a green rectangular overlay containing the text "Exercise: Container". The background shows a valley with a dense forest of evergreen trees, surrounded by steep, rocky mountains. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. A small, bright blue light is visible in the distance, near the center of the valley.

Exercise: Container

Defining Resilience

Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. It means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences...

Being resilient does not mean that a person doesn't experience difficulty or distress. Emotional pain and sadness are common in people who have suffered major adversity or trauma in their lives. In fact, the road to resilience is likely to involve considerable emotional distress.

Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone.

American Psychological Association (APA, n.d.)

Resilience is NOT muscling through or ignoring problems

Resilience is the ability to respond in a way that moves through pain, suffering, and challenge as much as possible

Key traits in resilience:

Embracing limitations

Adjusting

Asking for help

Metaphor: Tightrope walker

“I can’t change the direction of the wind but I can adjust my sails to always reach my destination.”

Jimmy Dean

THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

Role of your Vagus Nerve In the Mind/Body Connection

Sympathetic – Gas Pedal	Sympathetic – Emergency Brake	Parasympathetic – Brake Pedal
Biological State: Engagement, Fight or Flight or Danger	Biological State: Life Threat or Freeze System for conservation withdrawal	Biological State: Safety or Rest and Digest
Nervous System Says: "Focus on the escape route" "I have to"	Nervous System Says: Conserve or check out "I might not survive"	Nervous System Says: "It's safe to love, play, or be present" "I am"
<p>State of hyperarousal</p> <p>Acceleration of autonomic nervous system (increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, blood leaves frontal lobe (brain is flipped) blood flow away from higher brain and visceral organs and into larger muscles to prepare for fighting or running</p> <p>Anxiety or Dread</p> <p>Perception of challenge</p> <p>Helps us get up and go</p> <p>Thinking is rigid or chaotic (tunnel vision)</p> <p>Poor judgment (thinking like a reptile verses a mammal)</p> <p>Racing thoughts</p> <p>Obsessive thinking and behaviors</p> <p>Intrusive emotions/images</p> <p>Emotional reactivity</p> <p>Brain is not receptive to new information</p> <p>Actions, emotions, or words are about survival</p> <p>Can not conceptualize the long term implications of actions</p> <p>Rage or panic</p> <p>Irritation or agitation</p> <p>Frustration</p> <p>Worry and Concern</p> <p>Cannot sit still</p> <p>Movement away or movement towards threat</p>	<p>Dissociation</p> <p>Numbness</p> <p>Depression</p> <p>Conservation of Energy</p> <p>Helplessness</p> <p>Shame</p> <p>Shut-down</p> <p>Hopelessness</p> <p>Preparation for trapped</p> <p>Biologically "freeze" and may actually appear frozen in space to others</p> <p>Secondary break (typically don't use if the initial break pedal doesn't work)</p>	<p>Can connect with others (Ventral Vagus Nerve Activation)</p> <p>Deceleration of autonomic nervous system</p> <p>Body is regulated and engages in healing, restoring, and resting</p> <p>Digestion picks up and cells take in nutrients</p> <p>Visceral organs increase in function</p> <p>Slowed breathing and heart rate</p> <p>Full activation of the pre-frontal cortex part of the brain</p> <p>Greater access to intuition and insight, calm, alert, relaxed, aware, creative, coherent</p> <p>Social Engagement system activated</p> <p>Self soothing/emotion regulation system activated, fear modulated, can connect deeply with others and move towards connection and love</p> <p>Able to see "all the options" notice small details</p> <p>Increases intestinal motility</p> <p>Increased resistance to infection</p> <p>Oxytocin increases</p> <p>Curiosity/Openness</p> <p>Compassion and</p> <p>Mindful and in the present</p> <p>Can view things as an objective observer</p> <p>Regulates stress response</p>

WAYS TO ENGAGE THE NERVOUS SYSTEM OR MOVE TOWARDS A PARASYMPATHETIC STATE

Vagal Nerve Stimulation/Increasing Vagal Tone



- *Biological*

- *Diaphragmatic/Belly Breathing*
- *Humming/Singing (religious rituals: chanting, hymns, etc)*
- *Some Exercise/Massage*
- *Laughter connection*

- *Attention/Mindfulness*

- *Becoming an Objective Observer (Awe, Nature therapy)*
- *Meditation*
- *Gratitude*

- *Connections*

- *Safe, Empathetic connection with others*
- *Deep supportive relationships*
- *Spiritual Life*
- *Self Compassion*

Biological Exercise: Diaphragmatic Breathing

“There appears to be potential for use of controlled slow breathing techniques as a means of optimizing physiological parameters that appear to be associated with health and longevity, and that may extend to disease states; however, there is a dire need for further research into the area.”

(Russo, Santarelli, & O'Rourke, 2017)

The Science of Attention

- Attention is like a muscle – It can be changed and grown
- When we imagine/think about something our body experiences it as if it were happening in present time
- What you think about grows that part of your brain and becomes easier to experience in the future
- What you think about creates biological changes that become your reality

Major implications for individuals with chronic pain and illness

Key Message: Meditation builds your attention muscles, improves mental health, and may assist you in your journey to resilience

A scenic mountain valley with a forest and a small blue light in the distance, overlaid with a light green text box.

Attention Exercise: Squares

Attention Exercise: Gratitude

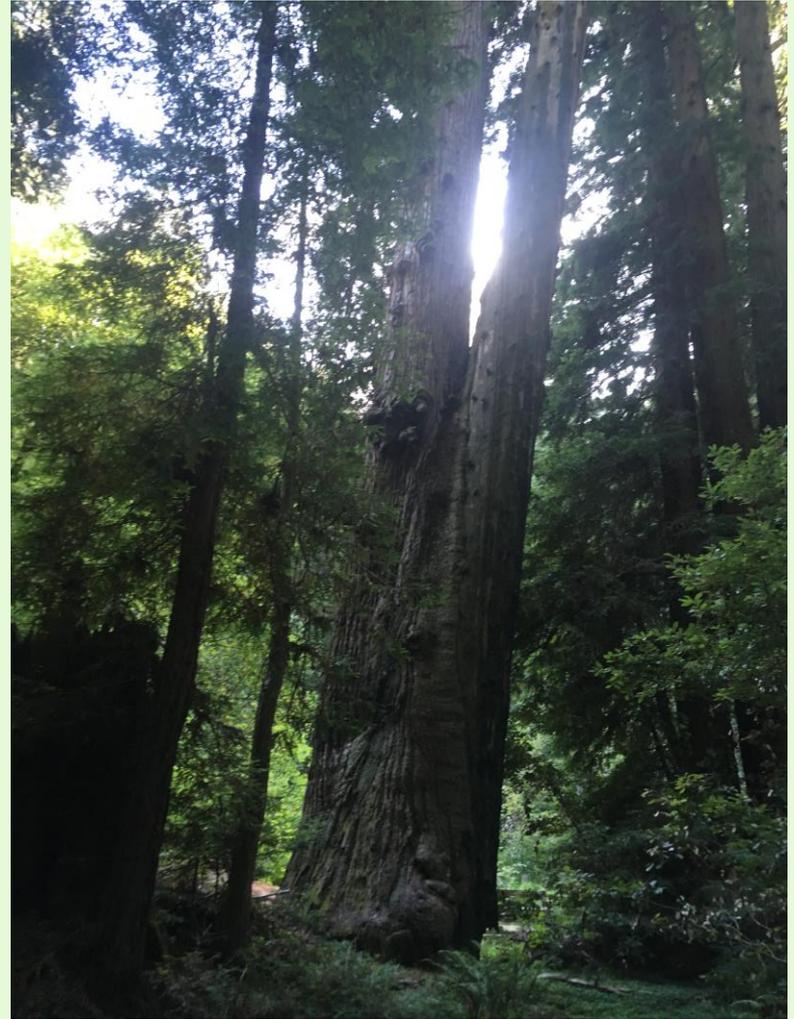
*"It is during our darkest moments that we must focus to see the light."
Aristotle Onassis*

Social Connections

*Humans Experience Safety &
Calming Through Nurture*

Pain Study

*Additional Benefit :
Contagion Theory of Lifestyle
Behaviors -
You become like who you
spend time with.*



Muir Woods, California

Exercise: Self-Compassion

Dr Kristen Neff: www.selfcompassion.org

“The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself.”

Anna Quindlen

A scenic mountain landscape with a valley, forest, and a bright light source in the distance, overlaid with a light green text box. The background shows a vast valley filled with a dense forest of evergreen trees. In the distance, a bright light source, possibly the sun or moon, is visible, creating a lens flare effect. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds. The text box is a light green rectangle with a thin orange border, centered on the page.

Exercise: Narrative Expressive Journaling



THANK YOU.

Additional Questions?

Send me an email at: jessie@jessiewells.com

Works Cited

- A. P. A. (Ed.). (n.d.). The Road to Resilience . Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience>
- Jewell, T. (2018, September 25). Diaphragmatic Breathing and Its Benefits. Retrieved from <https://www.healthline.com/health/diaphragmatic-breathing#benefits>
- Ma, X., Yue, Z. Q., Gong, Z. Q., Zhang, H., Duan, N. Y., Shi, Y. T., ... Li, Y. F. (2017). The Effect of Diaphragmatic Breathing on Attention, Negative Affect and Stress in Healthy Adults. *Frontiers in psychology*, 8, 874. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00874
- Russo, M. A., Santarelli, D. M., & O'Rourke, D. (2017, December 1). The physiological effects of slow breathing in the healthy human. Retrieved from <https://breathe.ersjournals.com/content/13/4/298>