



From Resistance to Retention: Addressing Hidden Grief and Burnout in Change

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CUPA-HR Webinar

Presenter



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Objectives

- Distinguish hidden grief and burnout from behavioral resistance (and help leaders do the same)
- Recognize three common leadership responses that quietly make things worse
- Apply a grief- and burnout-informed communication approach you can use immediately



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- The content is proprietary and not to be replicated or used for any other purposes outside of the originally intended educational purpose for this webinar.
- All view are my own and do not represent Duke University or past organizations I've worked for.
- I can't provide answers to specific, individual situations – this is for broad educational purposes, not a consultation.





**What are you seeing most of in
your work setting right now?**

Are these all the same?

If not, how are they different, and does it matter?

Burnout
Grief
Stress
Depression
Anxiety

Disrespect / incivility
incivility
Absenteeism
Quiet quitting
Disengagement
Low morale
Change resistance

LOOK BENEATH THE SURFACE

Differentiate:

Observable Behavior

Vs. Emotional Response

Vs. Root Cause

Observable: Burnout, Quiet Quitting, declining morale, increased departures, fractured team cohesion, absenteeism, disengagement, change resistance, incivility, bullying, blaming, gossip....

Emotional Response: anger, frustration, sadness, fear, loss, guilt

Root cause: poorly managed layoffs, reorgs, or M&A's, poor people management, unwanted change, insufficient resources

BURNOUT

BURNOUT FROM A *SYMPTOM* PERSPECTIVE

Interpersonal Distress / Exhaustion

- ✓ conflict
- ✓ disrespect
- ✓ outbursts
- ✓ irritability
- ✓ low morale
- ✓ more sick leave/FMLA

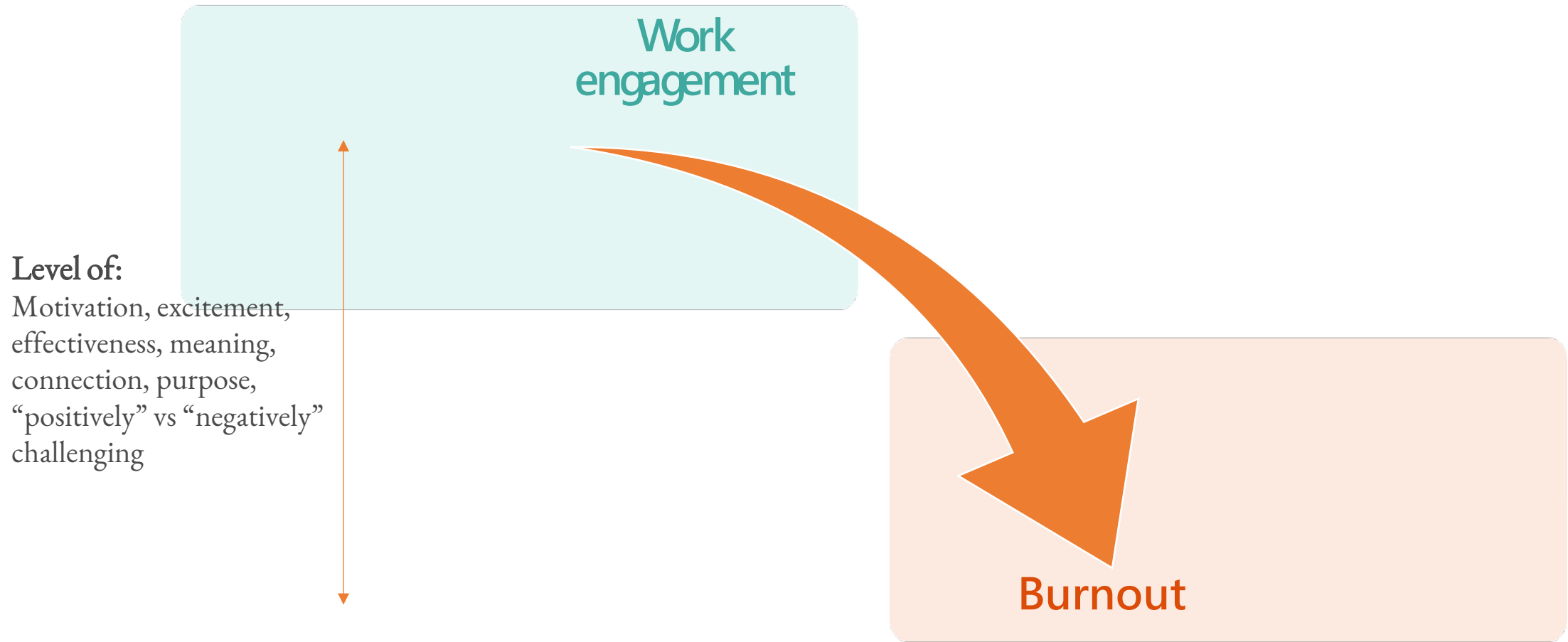
Depersonalization / Detachment

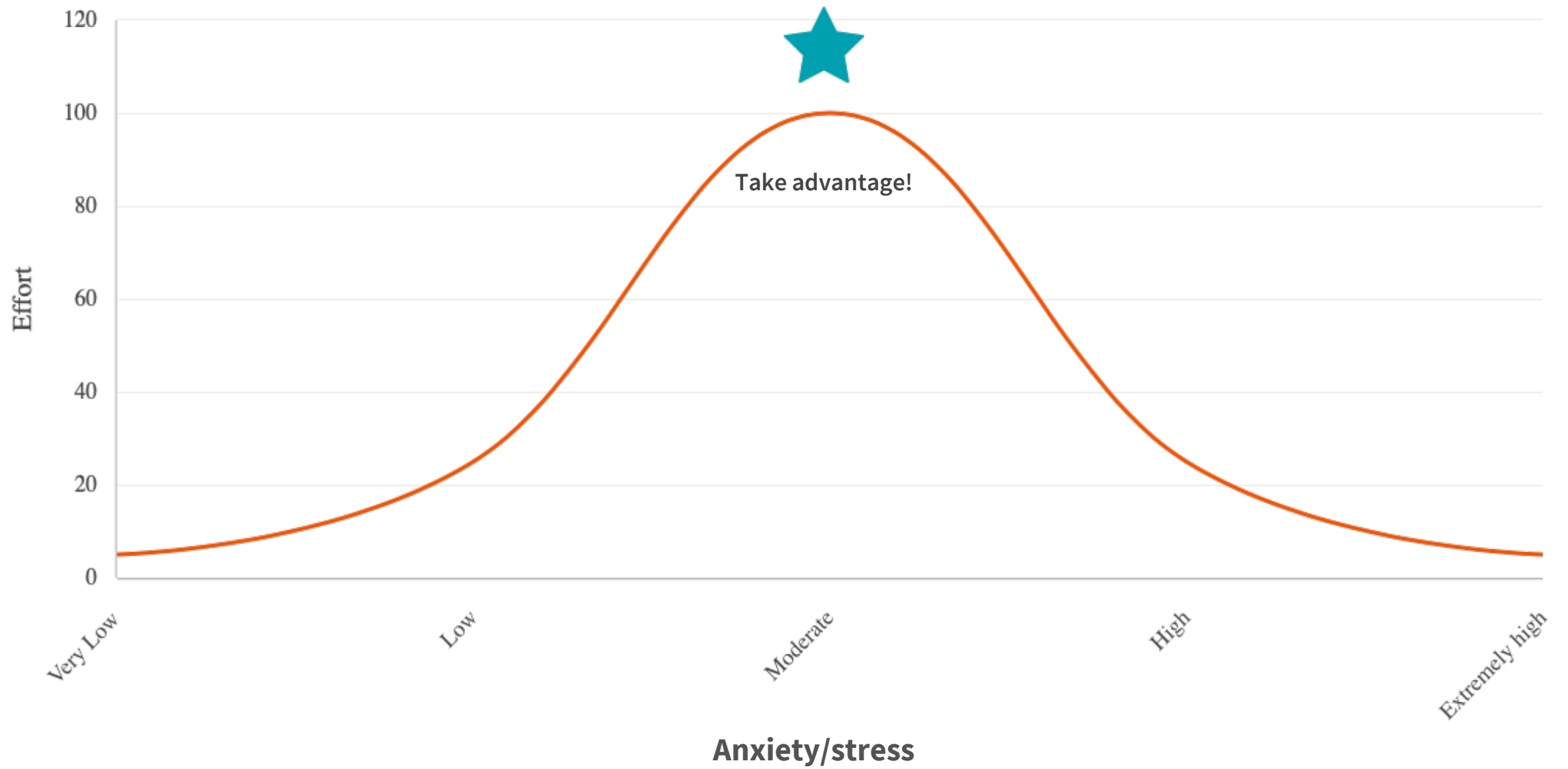
- ✓ increased cynicism
- ✓ Quiet quitting
- ✓ isolation
- ✓ short fuse
- ✓ non-responsiveness

Ineffectiveness / Decreased Accomplishment

- ✓ work performance
- ✓ productivity
- ✓ procrastination
- ✓ task aversion
- ✓ turnover
- ✓ absenteeism

Burnout is the **gradual depletion of energy & resources** to manage work demands





The stress → distress → impairment continuum

STRESS

Routine. We need some of it.

- ❑ Tension; routine concerns or challenges
- ❑ Goes away once the acute stressor is addressed
- ❑ Can still regulate emotions

DISTRESS

Draining energy, interest, coping.

- ❑ Less energy to get the work done
- ❑ Getting sick more often
- ❑ Harder to focus
- ❑ Harder to regulate emotions → conflict, outbursts, irritability, snapping, crying

IMPAIRMENT

Health, performance, coping decline.

- ❑ Increased PTO, FMLA, mental & physical health problems
- ❑ Decreased work performance, absenteeism, output
- ❑ Poor emotion regulation: cynicism, sarcasm, incivility, strained relationships

ORGANIZATIONAL GRIEF



Think about the entirety of your professional life. What work experiences have you mourned the loss of (and maybe still mourn)?

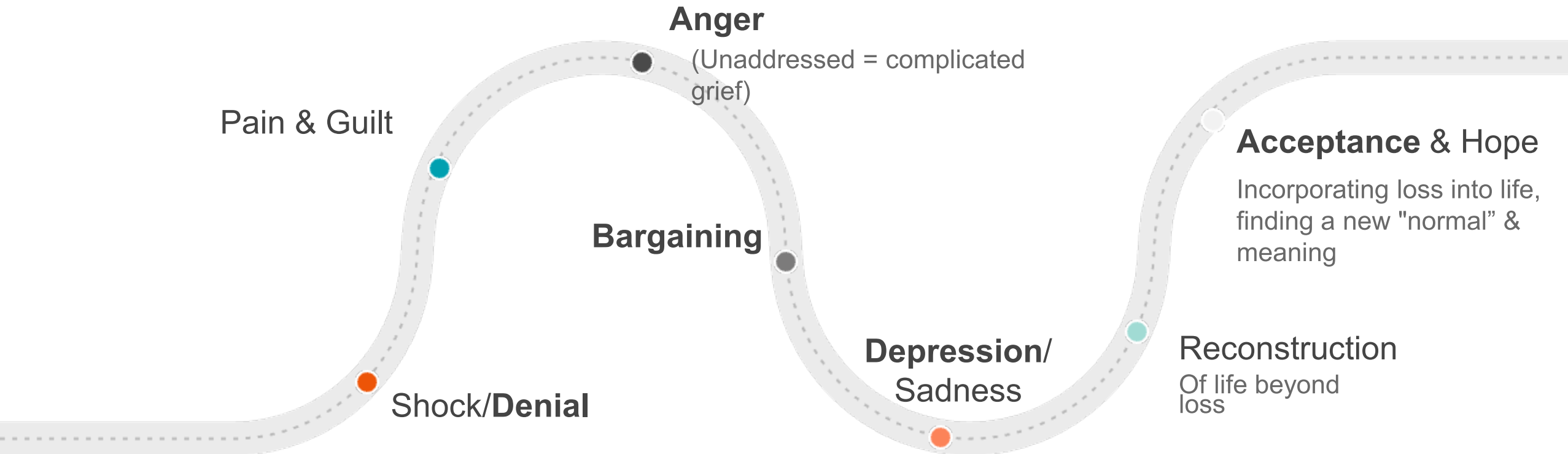
Past Data

Top 4:

1. A close colleague leaving (43-71%)
2. Merger/reorg (61-76%)
3. Losing a mentor (35-48%)
4. Losing a friend or work you loved due to a promotion (36-45%)

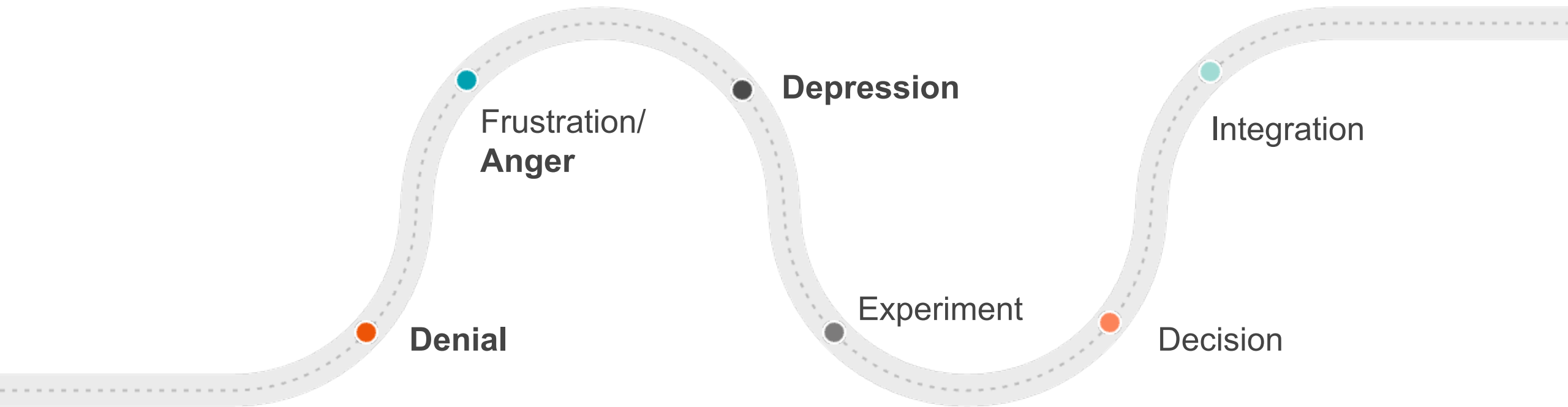
Kübler-Ross Grief/Loss Model

1969 and beyond (e.g., Parkes & Prigerson, 2010)



Kübler-Ross Change Curve Model

1980s



“

All change involves loss, and
all loss must be grieved.

HARRY LEVINSON (1957), ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE CONSULTANT



Ambiguous Grief and Loss

DEFINITION

Ambiguous loss

Losing someone or something in a way that stays unfinished or unresolved:

- A lack of facts about the loss.
- A lack of certainty about whether what's gone might return to the way it was.

Prevents resolution, prolongs/freezes grief process.

“With ambiguous loss, there is no closure; the challenge is to learn how to live with the ambiguity.”

Pauline Boss, Ph.D

Two types of ambiguous loss

1 · Physical absence

Loss of physical contact — the body or person is gone.

e.g., war, kidnapping, natural disasters, divorce, immigration.

2 · Psychological absence

Physically present, but emotionally or cognitively gone.

e.g., dementia, addiction, traumatic brain injury.

What can be lost and mourned at work:

- Structures / Processes
- Leadership
- Mission
- Resources
- Relationships / valued team / social support
- Security
- Belief in system
- Work identity

**Most organizations experience 2-3 simultaneously due to certain changes.*

Case Example

- Observable behavior?
- Emotional experience?
- Root cause of the disengagement?
- Grief, Burnout, or Resistance?



Observed: "Hostile and toxic work environment," bullying, paranoia, angry comments, blaming, gossiping, constant reporting.

Emotional Response: Ambiguous loss, anger, fear, sadness, pain, guilt

Root cause: organizational trauma, lack of accountability, poor management of funds



**LEADERSHIP RESPONSES THAT
EXACERBATE BEHAVIORAL
RESISTANCE MASKING GRIEF AND
BURNOUT**



Have you ever had a boss who dismissed, ignored, avoided, denied, or expressed frustration about people's reactions to those or any other types of changes?

3 Leadership Mistakes That Make it Worse

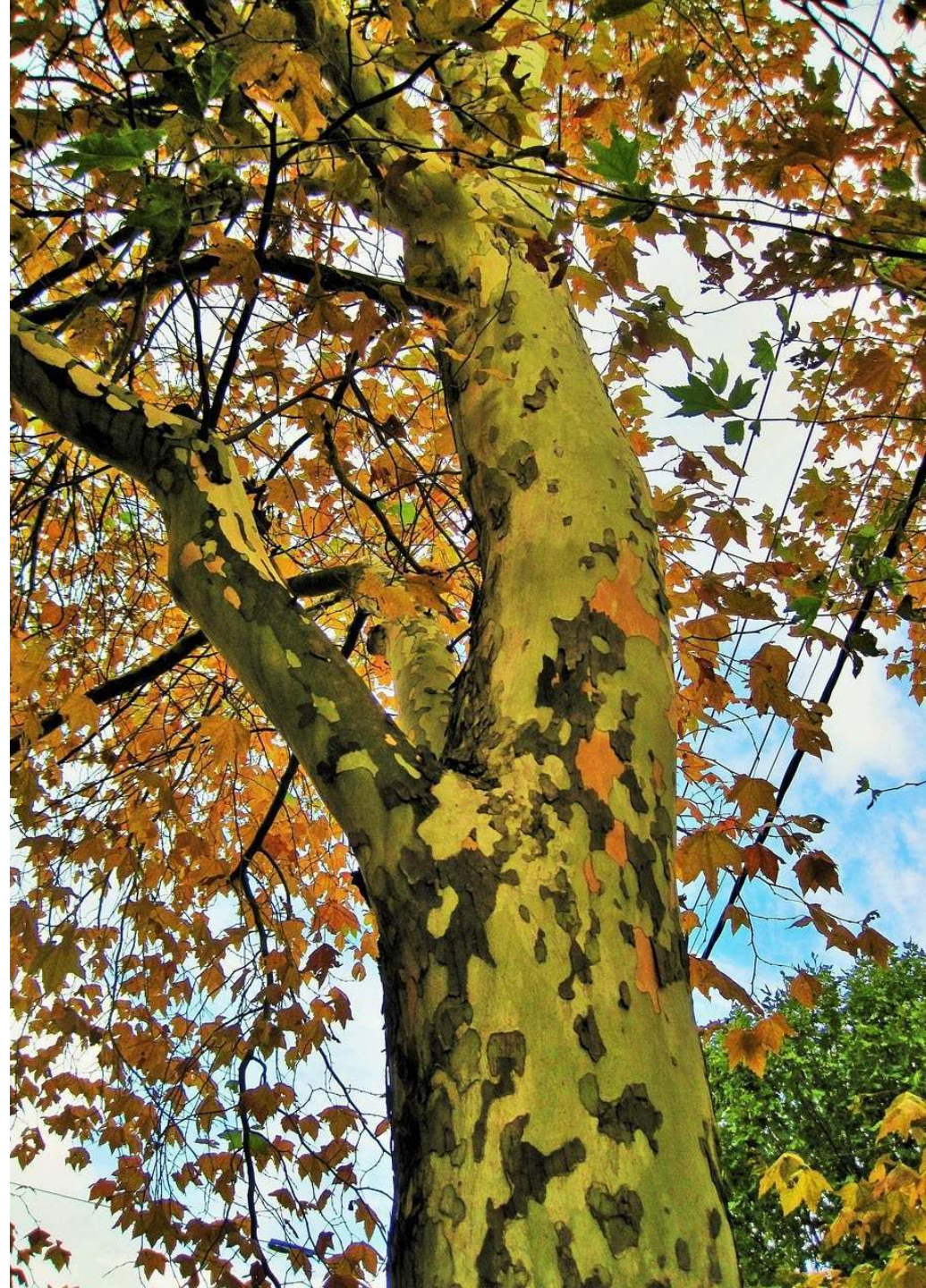
1. The Minimizer
2. The False Optimist
3. The Conflict Avoider



“

[We] must be **masters of change**
that in turn requires us to be
masters of the management of
loss and the experience of grief,
our own and that of the people
with whom we work.

KILBURG & LEVINSON (2008), "EXECUTIVE DILEMMAS: COACHING AND THE
PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF HARRY LEVINSON"



HOW TO BETTER ADDRESS BEHAVIORAL RESISTANCE & HELP WITH RETENTION

Search for reason & meaning

Undo/Deny

Over-Control

Over-generalize

Avoid

[ANGER]

sadness → depression

loss

lost

fear → paranoia

burnout → exhaustion

on edge

disappointment

disillusioned → cynical

- Work with what we know – you may never know the full reason.
- Self-care
 - Therapy, Spirituality
 - Social/family support, connection
 - Physical health
- End rumors, gossip, blame, second hand info
- Re-dedicate to mission, passion

The Investigative Process



Findings



Five things grief- and trauma-informed leaders do



Name it to Tame it

(but don't assume everyone feels the same)



Be the Emotional Container

(space to talk; you won't have all the answers; you're not the therapist)



Communicate Meaning & Identity

(not Closure)



Model Vulnerable Leadership

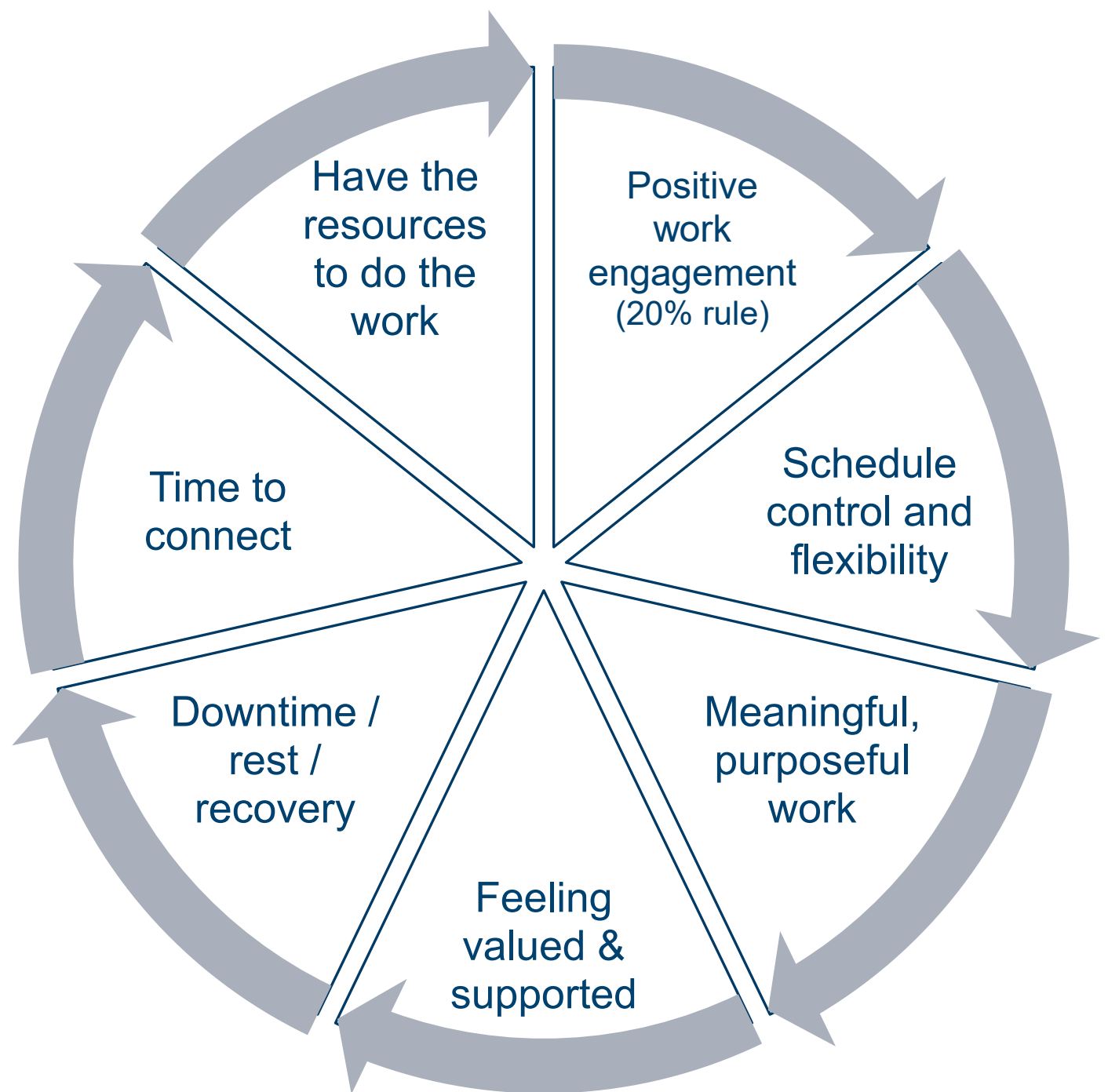
(safety through honesty more important than Transformational Leadership)



Provide Hope & Co-Design the Path

(invitation to build what's next)

Research- Informed **Burnout** Buffers



Takeaways

- ✓ We identified warning signs: When you mislabel grief as 'resistance' or 'disengagement,' you implement the wrong solutions.
- ✓ We separated symptoms vs root cause.
- ✓ We identified common leadership mistakes that can make things worse.
- ✓ Use human need and motivation practices to address grief and burnout, and better help move people from resistance to retention.

Calls to Action

- ✓ Look for warning signs. Mislabeling grief or burnout as "resistance" or "disengagement" leads to the wrong solutions.
- ✓ Pause before assuming it's a work performance issue
- ✓ Watch out for sneaky or simple leadership mistakes
- ✓ More resources:
 - **Organizational Grief**
 - Psych Today post - [When Workplace Upheaval Turns into Unresolved Grief](#)
 - Workplace Grief Field Guide: <https://mailchi.mp/46873b910380/workplace-grief-field-guide>
 - YouTube Workplace Grief Series: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLoDAwljycbLAWP_fcPYIH64snr5EmhkiQ
 - **Burnout**
 - Burnout Root Cause Assessment: <https://mailchi.mp/29d7d18fae4a/burnout-root-cause-assessment>
 - YouTube Burnout Series: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLoDAwljycbLCfadvqaqKvHAe4Z6-LX0aN>
 - Anti-Burnout Leadership Course: <https://towerscope-leadership-academy.circle.so/checkout/anti-burnout-lab>

Have a Question?



Submit questions to our presenters
using the Chat.



Thank You

Mira Brancu, PhD, PCC – mira@gotowerscope.com

Please complete your event evaluation

Stats and References

Some experts also believe that younger workers are using FMLA for mental health-related reasons in response to workplace dissatisfaction. (Forbes)

At the core of both quiet quitting and resentment are common themes: burnout, feeling undervalued, and feeling unfulfilled.

47% of Gen Z respondents say they are coasting by at work, only 40% saying they are thriving.

<https://www.cnbc.com/2024/04/23/bosses-have-a-problem-gen-z-quiet-quitting-is-out-resenteeism-is-in.html>

Disengagement cost the world economy \$438 billion in 2024; Manager engagement fell from 30% to 27% in 2024. Young managers and female managers experienced the largest declines. \$9.6 trillion in productivity would be added to the economy if the global workforce was fully engaged - <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace.aspx>

Leave requests continued to climb in 2024, with 57% of HR managers reporting an increase. Top challenges include employee stress and burnout, retaining valuable employees, employee health and wellbeing, and providing a positive employee experience, all of which connect. <https://info.absencesoft.com/hubfs/content/reports-guides/2025-state-of-leave-and-accommodations-survey.pdf> ; <https://www.teamsense.com/blog/absenteeism-workplace-statistics>;
<https://www.teamsense.com/blog/the-causes-and-cost-of-absenteeism-in-the-workplace>

Disengaged workers cost their company the equivalent of 18% of their annual salary.

<https://business.kaiserpermanente.org/healthy-employees/health-plan-strategies/absenteeism-costs-what-you-can-do>

Rise of incivility at work - <https://www.shrm.org/enterprise-solutions/insights/cost-of-incivility-addressing-workplace-challenges-into-2025>

Supervisors face particularly acute challenges, with longer hours, greater expectations, and fewer opportunities to disconnect, raising ongoing concerns about burnout and the sustainability of supervisory roles. CUPA HR