

content notes

I'm going to be talking about:

- The COVID19 pandemic
- Natural and human-made disasters
- Health problems, injuries, or death
- Trauma, both accidental and inflicted on purpose
- Burnout
- Capitalism

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Hopefully the title and description of this talk prepared you a little bit: this is going to be emotionally intense. I will be discussing things that are current and raw for many people, including:

- the pandemic
- trauma
- burnout
- and capitalism.

If you need to leave at any time, including right now, please do so.

I am going to attempt not to cry during this talk, but if I fail, please know that I will be okay- that is a sign of how much I care about this topic.

Burnout at Scale: What to Try When You Just Can't

Courtney Eckhardt (she/her or they/them)

@hashoctorpe

( and )

@hashoctorpe

Welcome to Burnout at Scale: what to try when you just can't

where this talk came from

@hashocthorpe

SREcon has been asking for stories of scaling during the pandemic, both the good and the bad. I have not been part of any successful scaling operations in the last few years, and I think we need to talk about some of the things that aren't working well.

what has not scaled well

people

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I'm a manager, and at work and in my personal life, I've been watching people (myself included) *go through it*. Individually and collectively, at home, at work, and in between, we are nearly all running out of coping skills, hitting walls, and falling down. We're exhausted, afraid, lonely, angry, traumatized, and worried about the world and the future.

what has not scaled well

~~capitalism~~ our institutions

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The companies we work for, the businesses we buy from, the restaurants we eat at, the governments we rely on for public health information and drivers' licensing, NGOs, shipping companies, basically every kind of organization I can think of is struggling

and mostly, we can feel it

@hashocthorpe

We can feel that individually, most of us are having a harder time- more worried, anxious, snappish

We can see that other people are having a harder time

We can clock the extra hours spent waiting on hold for “the next available agent”

Some of us have even gotten bored of talking about supply chain shortages

We ask each other: do you feel it? am I imagining it?

it's real!

@hashocthorpe

Yes, I feel it also
Yes, it's real
yes

but what is “it”?

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What are we all feeling? What's making it harder for us to deal with our everyday stuff, the unusual stuff, the shocking stuff, and everyone else's STUFF? Can we define the problem?

there are several factors
as always!

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we all started in different places

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Whatever was wrong for us before the pandemic started still needed to be addressed
(or is still going wrong)

we all had different pandemics

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Each of us had our own, very specific experiences during this pandemic

- some of us were all alone
- some of us lost people or pets to death
- some of us lost friends or family members to conspiracy theories
- some of us were struggling to take care of children or parents or both
- some of us were working more than usual, some of us were working less or not at all
- some of us lived with people who were unkind, or abusive
- some people are refugees, or their countries are at war, or experiencing civil unrest
- and some of us got sick while others have managed to avoid it so far

the places we lived all did different things at different times

@hashocthorpe

Different countries, states, and cities had different responses at different moments. Sometimes that was due to specific local conditions. Sometimes it was due to different ideas about what made a good response. Probably none of us felt safe or endangered at the same time that our friends and family members felt the same way even if we lived with those people!

The differences in pandemic response between regions and governments adds to a feeling of disconnection from people we love in other places. We went through this together, but we could not have the same experiences at the same times, and some of our relationships may never recover from that added distance.

And now, after most countries in the world have set aside pandemic response and declared the pandemic over, we are faced with understanding what happened to us, deciding whether we felt safe or protected, deciding whether we are angry or just want to move on. Some of us are afraid we can never move on- that our chronic illnesses or disabilities may keep us in an ugly, isolated place indefinitely.

if we feel betrayed by our
leaders, that compounds
the trauma

@hashocthorpe

compound like interest

some of us had other trauma
before the pandemic
and some of us didn't

@hashocthorpe

and some of us who'd had traumatic experiences had processed or integrated those experiences into the stories of our lives, and were able to apply those skills to this new situation

some of us had not, and now have more traumatizing experiences to try to understand

but wait, how did we go from talking about burnout to trauma?

@hashocthorpe

before the pandemic, the SRE industry was talking a lot about burnout- both how to manage it on a personal level, and how to avoid inflicting it with org charts and oncall responsibilities. So burnout was already with us. People were already seeking solutions.

Now we've had a pandemic, which could also be described as a mass traumatizing event. Those of us who were burned out before the pandemic (myself very much included) have the emotional pain, fear, and stress of a pandemic on top of that burnout.

burnout

- emotional exhaustion
- depersonalization- depletion of empathy, caring and compassion
- decreased sense of accomplishment/feeling that nothing you do makes any difference

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But also, let's define some terms

Burnout is commonly understood to contain:

- emotional exhaustion
- depersonalization- depletion of empathy, caring and compassion
- decreased sense of accomplishment/feeling that nothing you do makes any difference

how do you get there?

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you have the same emotions too intensely and for too long

People need variety in what they do and how they feel, and when you grind too hard and too long on the same things, you get burnt out

This happens faster if your job (or your role in your family, or both!) is about taking care of other people's needs

trauma

when your nervous system is overwhelmed by more input than it can handle

PTSD

when your nervous system gets stuck under the weight of all that stuff and you can't find your way out

@hashocthorpe

this can involve the classic symptoms of irritability and flashbacks, but also less cinematic symptoms, like dissociation and derealization (moments when you aren't sure what around you is real or fake)

It's important to realize that not all people who have PTSD are aware of that (many people become aware of it over time). In addition, many people who have PTSD (especially if they were traumatized as children) don't necessarily know what activates their trauma responses, and may not realize when they're dissociating or having other symptoms. I can't give advice about this as a general case, try to catch me privately later on if you want to talk about this

anyone at all can become traumatized

@hashocthorpe

it's important for me to pause here and note that having trauma is not about your personal willpower, your strength, or your perseverance, and it's not a failure.

Several people who have the same experience may not all end up traumatized, but there's no one who *cannot* be traumatized. Trauma is not something to be ashamed of (as much as possible), it's something to be faced and addressed.

it doesn't matter what caused your trauma, it's still trauma

@hashocthorpe

When I first began reading about trauma, one of the things that blew my mind was that some of the best clinicians studying trauma considered there to be *no meaningful distinction* between things like trauma from being a soldier, or being a prisoner, or being an abused spouse or child.

Some of the work the traumatized person needs to do to recover will be different (what kinds of trust or relationship skills they need to learn or repair might vary) but the problem is basically the same and the path out is very similar.

some routes to trauma

- isolation, fear, and stress
- gaslighting
- surveillance and control over your personal routines/bodily needs
- feeling both endangered and helpless

sideline: some other potentially relevant things

- betrayal trauma
- moral injury
- survivor's guilt

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There's a few related concepts that aren't usually brought up in the context of work or a pandemic, but I think are worth discussing briefly:

Betrayal trauma is usually considered in romantic or familial relationships, but I think it's relevant here for people who have felt betrayed by their government's response to the pandemic

Moral injury is usually understood in terms of war, being forced to stand by or even participate in actions that contravene your values (or that contravene the values you develop later on, causing you intense shame and remorse over your past actions). I felt this very keenly in the early stages of the pandemic, where I could stay in and did, but tons of other people with dangerous, low-wage jobs could not- and some of them were also disabled or chronically ill

Survivor's guilt is usually understood in the context of war or natural disaster: it is the feeling of "why did I make it when my buddy or family member didn't? they should have lived, not me".

if these things feel relevant to you, it's probably a good idea to start with a web search for more information and potentially places to get help.

what has been the prescription?

- “be more empathetic to everyone, everyone’s trying as hard as they can”
- “take a break”

@hashocthorpe

in the Western, English-language press, the prescriptions I’ve seen most often are

- “be more empathetic to everyone, everyone’s trying as hard as they can”
- “take a break”

BUT

- the people who are going to follow “be more empathetic” are probably already doing this *too much*
- you can’t be more empathetic to *everyone*
- what does “more” even mean? do it harder? more often? how do you know when you’ve done enough “more”?
- a rest, how do you take a rest when you have kids and/or parents to take care of, or your job just had layoffs and you have more work, or you *were* laid off and now you need to scramble for a new job?

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there are lots of problems with this!

you're only one person

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the biggest problem with the advice as given is that you're only one person.

You have 24 hours in a day, you probably need to spend about 8 of those sleeping, you probably need to spend at least two more of those in productive downtime (exercising, doing a hobby, reading, playing a game), you need to eat, you need to work, you may have caring or volunteer commitments- there's no spare time or energy to extract that "more" from.

You, as a person, are zero-sum. There is an absolute cap on what you can do in a day and in your life. It's not the same as my cap, but we both have one, and doing more than that cap is only possible on a very short-term basis. You can get better at some things, so that they take less time and energy to do, but there's a pretty hard limit to that too.

organizations have access to economies of scale, but they are not using them

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an economy of scale is when an organization gets really good at doing something it does a lot, and can make that more effective- can produce widgets faster, or use less material to do it, or achieve higher quality. It does this by having lots of people so that individuals can take sick days or parental leave

and employers are starting to demand more from us

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return to office, longer hours, layoffs resulting in more work, cuts to travel and other discretionary budgets that make teamwork harder to achieve

Corporations were running lean before the pandemic, and now (the large ones particularly) are dramatically leaner. Some have had layoffs (quietly or loudly), and organizations are struggling with more people getting sick (even if they haven't had layoffs).

This means that the advice to us as people- "be more empathetic" and "take a break"- is telling us as people to figure out how to solve a problem that is created *at the level of the leaders of the organizations we work for*. The solution to the problem of organizations is being pushed out to employees, customers, vendors, etc to figure out.

that's not a problem we as
individuals can solve

@hashocthorpe

those of us here, at this conference, who are mostly not executives? we can't solve this problem for our employers or for society, even if that responsibility is being put on us. We probably can't cause our employers to hire more staff in order to cover for more sick time, we can't give ourselves more leave, we can't implement a 4-day work week, we can't raise our own salaries.

That's depressing and scary to come right out and say, but I think it helps to name problems, especially ones that we can't solve ourselves. It can be easier to remind ourselves that this problem isn't of our making and can't be directly addressed by us.

what about self-care?

@hashoctothorpe

Self care has recently gotten a pretty deservedly bad rap- you can't bubble-bath and face-mask your way out of depression or poverty

And disabled activists point out that a lot of things that are suggested to us as self-care in fact require money, time, and energy to access, which can make things worse (how often do you clean your tub so you can have a nice relaxing bubble bath? I never have the energy to clean mine)

Activists also point out that putting the burden of self-care on the individual makes people responsible for managing themselves when institutions don't want to help them

putting the burden of self-care
on the individual makes people
responsible for managing
themselves when institutions
don't want to help them

@hashocthorpe

I'm going to highlight that last point one more time: *putting the burden of self-care on the individual makes people responsible for managing themselves when institutions don't want to help them*

so that's where we are

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it sounds very grim when I lay it all out like that

and it is grim

we are in a very tough place

and we have to acknowledge the truth of that in order to start to get out of it

now what?

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let's go back to empathy for a moment

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people tend to think that being listened to, feeling seen and heard, will make them feel less lonely. And that's true, but the research shows it's only part of what you need, because if you're the one doing all the talking, you're not making a connection with another person.

so you need to give empathy to
make connections

@hashocthorpe

This means you need to listen to other people, fully, in such a way that you do feel some of their feelings, some of their joy and pain and fear and hope. This is LEGIT HARD and also LEGIT PAINFUL, but it's the thing that helps make connections, create community, make you not alone.

in order to address loneliness you need multiple, mutual connections

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as a person, you need to have

- people (multiple) who you talk to honestly about things that are important and maybe painful to you, AND
- people who you LISTEN to honestly about things that are important and maybe painful to them

you need to be able to listen actively

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you also need to be able to listen to people and let the conversation be about them, their feelings, their needs- not leaping to compare experiences, not giving advice, not trying to cheer them up

you need to be available to them, without being pulled completely into the feelings they're having

this is tough!

not just romantic partners and coworkers

@hashocthorpe

ideally you should have relationships that are reciprocal in this way on average, and I cannot stress this enough, they can't just be coworkers or romantic partners!

Starting there is fine, but make a real effort to meet neighbors, people at conferences, friends of friends or to reconnect with people you've lost touch with.

let's take a moment to talk about catastrophizing

@hashocthorpe

this has been a mass traumatic event, and trauma leads us to catastrophize- to be sure that the next shoe is on its way and the impact will be way worse
try to walk yourself back from that edge

- it's especially tough in this field! so many of us got here by being aware of the worst case scenario
- but remind yourself that catastrophizing makes it hard or impossible to get benefit from good things that happen, and it's contagious- it drags other people into the space of "we're all gonna die", which doesn't help

okay sure, that all sounds
convincing enough

but how do I do it?

the highest-level overview of stuff to try

@hashocthorpe

This is not very detailed and it is not intended as medical advice

Chapter 1

try to help yourself

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pull back where you can

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First, conserve your energy! If you go around extending personal active listening to everyone you meet, you will burn out (maybe you already do this and you already have).

Be selective about when and where to deploy the full active listening experience- it's not appropriate with strangers, not always appropriate at work, definitely appropriate with your partner(s), usually with close friends or family

Societies develop scripts for ordering coffee or dinner or buying a charging cable etc for a reason. Use these, try to be pleasant or at least polite, and as long as you aren't snapping at retail workers, try not to worry about it too much. Literally try to put it out of your mind. If you have anxiety, and your mind tries to get you fixated on how you said that one word funny or how the barista gave you an odd look? Nope! Wrench your mind onto another topic if you possibly can, and try to put the concern about stranger interactions down. We are all pretty weird at this point in the proceedings, and it's very very unlikely that the stranger in question is remembering *your* possible misstep- they are probably fixated on their own.

If you DO find yourself snapping at retail workers... that's probably the time to do a little incident retrospective with yourself about the interaction. What happened? When did it start to go badly? What could you try next time instead?

if you don't know how to listen
actively, learn to do that

@hashoctothorpe

there's a lot of information on active listening that you can find with a quick search online

but also: you can get trained in this in some places! It's called Mental Health First Aid, and it was developed first here in Australia.

There are courses in the US and Canada as well, and there may at this point be online courses that you can join from other countries. This will give you the skills to listen actively to someone who is in crisis and help you figure out how to connect them to more help if they need it

try to make connections

(even superficial ones)

@hashoctothorpe

If you're lonely and short on friends

reach out to people you miss and haven't talked to in a while

try greeting your neighbors if you don't usually

If you walk your dog, try to talk more with other dog walkers

Attempt brief, positive interactions with strangers- don't try to prolong them, try not to upset anyone, but try to practice your social skills in very small bursts

if you don't have a hobby, get one

@hashocthorpe

If you don't have a small thing you do for fun, preferably that makes something, try to find one

this might take several tries to come up with something that sticks

try taking a life drawing class or a digital illustration class, or pottery or woodworking
try to create something with your body that is not about work

if you're a parent or caretaker, try something very small- sketching for 5m a day or a very little cross stitch project

at first it won't be good, but try to find something that you like the *process* of so that you can stick with it long enough to enjoy getting better at it, and liking what you produce

This helps you recover from burnout and from trauma all at once! It helps you feel effective and accomplished, even in a very small way

And if you choose a group activity or something that involves a class, you can attempt small, positive interactions with the people you meet there

ask yourself:

am I on the high or the low side of this power differential?

@hashocthorpe

I'm not going to try to talk about privilege as an overall concept, because we're all from different places, interacting with different people, and privilege is pretty situational a lot of the time.

Because it's situational, if you take a moment to consider, you can usually figure out if you are on the more or less powerful end of a specific interaction. For instance, right now, I am on this stage, talking to all of you, and you are listening to me, so in this context, I have more power. But later, when I take my mobility scooter out to eat in the park, I will have significantly less power in every interaction with a walking person than I do in this moment. If I were your manager, I would have more power in a 1:1; but if we were to go out to dinner as a team, I would have to worry about whether I could enter the restaurant in a way that you might not.

If you are on the high side: do more! Listen more carefully, extend more empathy, offer specific help (not "if there's anything I can do").

If you are on the low side: pull back. People who are less powerful in a given interaction tend to offer more emotional and executive labor in response to the power differential. See if you can do a little less, and reserve some of that energy for other parts of your life.

The goal here is to even things out a little overall.

when you have a good interaction

have a nice little wallow in those feelings

@hashocthorpe

we've probably all heard people tell us about practicing gratitude- that's not what I mean here
what I mean is that trauma and burnout lie to us about the world- about whether we are appreciated or loved or respected
they encourage us (or force us) to fixate on bad interactions

So when something goes well, try to take a moment and just feel the good feelings that come from it
not GRATITUDE for them- this isn't about thanking someone or something for your good fortune!
Just try to enjoy the good feelings that come from a great coffee or being outside in great weather or a pleasant interaction with a stranger or a fun meal with friends or family. Take a moment to notice and truly be with those warm feelings whenever you get a chance. Remind the mean voices in your brain that there are good things in the world, for you and for people around you

try NOT to wallow in feeling helpless

@hashocthorpe

The biggest things a person can do in order to try to avoid taking trauma with them out of a bad experience are:

- look for a way to have a sense of purpose
- maintain connections to people who care about you

In studies of prisoners of conscience, who were imprisoned by states for their beliefs, the ones who did best were able to retain a sense of connection to people who loved them and maintain their sense of purpose in their confinement.

That doesn't mean that a sense of purpose should be grandiose ("gonna kick this in the TEETH")

a sense of purpose can be found in reminding yourself that staying inside is boring and lonely and might feel impossible, but it is the thing that you can do to help right now, so you're going to do it.

when you find yourself catastrophizing

@hashocthorpe

Take a little bit of time to explore that feeling. Is there something new you can learn about your situation from the disaster scenarios that are running through your brain? If so, great- try writing them down and keeping that information ready for the future.

If there's nothing new- run through them all, acknowledge that your brain is worried and trying to keep you safe, and try to turn your attention to other things.

when people reach out to you try to reach back!

@hashocthorpe

When we are burnt out and/or traumatized, it can seem like the best thing to do is to stay away from other people- either because they don't care about you enough to "put up with you" on a bad day, or because you don't want to bring them down.

resist this urge

When someone reaches out to see how you're doing or ask if you want to meet up, try to reply, and try to find a way to say yes. Try things like "can we get takeout and stay in today, I've had a bad a week but I still want to see you" or "thanks for asking- I'm not fine right now, can I tell you about it?" or "I'm not fine right now and I don't want to talk about it, can we watch Schitt's Creek again?"

Try not to blow up your social life because your trauma and burnout are telling you that no one cares about you or respects you!

if there's a little voice that tells you people can't be trusted

@hashoctothorpe

If there's a little voice in your head telling you that people can't be trusted, that no one is there for you, that there's only you to take care of you- that might be true, and if it is, I'm sorry. A lot of the advice in this section is geared toward proving that little voice wrong, and strengthening your connections with other people.

if you have that little voice, it's important to try as hard as you can to ignore it, and to search for people who will help you take care of you, and who you can help.

consider mental health care

@hashocthorpe

If you want mental health care and it's available to you, try to get it
This is tricky- plenty of places there's little to no institutional help, or the services on offer might not be helpful
You'll have to make a judgement call, and to be prepared to back out if you can

Chapter 2

try to reach out to other people

@hashocthorpe

There's a new kind of fear response that's been recently defined called "tend and befriend". The classic two fear responses are fight and flight, and fawn, or people pleasing, has been added to that

but tend and befriend is what I observed myself and most of my friends doing at the beginning of the pandemic. We reached out to our closest friends, to people we hadn't spoken to in years, to neighbors we barely knew, and to strangers, asking

- are you okay?
- do you need anything, can I help?
- will you tell me if you do find you need help?

Many of my relationships changed for the BETTER over the course of this pandemic, as I set up recurring video or audio calls with friends I had previously only spoken to when I was visiting their city. I had a rich support network before, but now it's even deeper and more vibrant.

sometimes, this will fail 🙄

@hashocthorpe

some of the friends I reached out to had become conspiracy theorists

or were pulled under by the weight of traumas past and present and shut me out or were cruel to me

some didn't respond

this fucking hurts

@hashocthorpe

there's no way around it- when tend and befriend fails, it's very painful

but it succeeded much more
than it failed

@hashocthorpe

and that helped me survive the pain of the failures

if you really aren't sure how to
reach out

consider volunteering or activism

@hashocthorpe

If none of the suggestions about how to reach out and help other people that I just listed feel right to you, consider some kind of volunteering or political activism. Find a cause that matters to you and try to figure out how to get involved. Try to get involved from the bottom, not the top- don't try to start a whole new NGO to address ocean microplastics (unless you have significant expertise in filtering ocean microplastics). Volunteer to serve food at a community center. Try to do something that's humble and helpful.

back to the original problem

why are we being told that more empathy
fixes what's wrong with our world?

@hashoctothorpe

why are we being told that more empathy fixes this?

1. it individualizes the problem- makes this big societal issue one that single people are supposed to solve ourselves, it is a faux solution that keeps people busy
2. BUT also it is the only solution. We are social creatures, and we can only hold ourselves and our communities together by creating and tending social bonds. This is a time of incredible disruption for those bonds, coming after a long period of emphasis on only the bonds of economics. We have to try to restore our bonds with each other as human animals.

this is all so. much. work.

@hashoctothorpe

I want to acknowledge that everything I've outlined here is both only the highlights reel and a lot of damn work

if you do all that
what do you get?

@hashoctothorpe

so if you start down this very hard road, and you try to do this work on top of EVERYTHING else you have going on... what do you get for it?

hope

@hashocthorpe

I think my definition of hope is “the knowledge that the future can and will be different from the past”

humans need novelty and variation in what they see and do.

If we can say that burnout comes from doing the same thing too hard for too long

and trauma comes from danger and unfairness that we don't know how to resist

then hope, allowing the future to be different from the past, is both something that we truly need AND part of the solution.

and joy!

@hashocthorpe

Connecting with other people in a positive way satisfies our inner primates! Research on humans conclusively shows that we are a social species- we will literally wither and die without help from each other, and without BEING ABLE to help each other. We are altruistic- we give things to each other because it feels good to give, because the act of giving sustains us emotionally.

Capitalism makes us afraid to give, afraid to connect with people whose needs might be greater than we can help individually.

But we don't have to (and we cannot) solve another person's entire problem on our own!

We can, and must, join together to help each other solve our collective problems together. I don't know what exactly that will look like... but I know that if we can do it even a little, it will be amazing and rewarding

things I didn't have time for (I'm sorry)

@hashocthorpe

There's so much I learned in my research that I didn't have time to cover in this talk

- elite panic, the way that the reaction of the power structure in times of emergency often compounds the tragedy because the powerful want to retain power
- when a natural disaster or other major event happens, some people hoard and other people share- and which you are is determined by whether you believe people are inherently selfish and cruel or whether you believe people are compassionate and altruistic
 - it also depends on who, in this world, is a person to you. Am I, on my mobility scooter, a person to you? Or only while I'm on this stage, showing that I am a productive member of society?
- Feelings- they are temporary, and feelings that feel bad to experience might not be bad for you, and feelings that feel good to experience might not be good for you
- Feelings- don't argue with them in yourself or others, but do ask questions about where they come from and what meanings they might have
- Completing the stress cycle- how to deal with the stress held in your body after you address a problem like a mature, capable adult instead of hitting the person who's upset you
- and so much more

Further resources

- *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* by Rebecca Solnit
- *Let's Talk About Hard Things* by Anna Sale (also the Death, Sex, and Money podcast)
- [Wired: Why Are Rich People So Mean?](#), Excerpted from *Civilized to Death: The Price of Progress* by Christopher Ryan.
- *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* by Judith Lewis Herman, MD
- *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle* by Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski

@hashoctothorpe

Here's some of what I read to put this talk together:

- *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* by Rebecca Solnit
- *Let's Talk About Hard Things* by Anna Sale (also the Death, Sex, and Money podcast)
- *Wired: Why Are Rich People So Mean?* at <https://www.wired.com/story/why-are-rich-people-so-mean/>
- *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* by Judith Lewis Herman, MD
- *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle* by Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski

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Franklin Habit at <http://franklinhabit.com/>

Marc Mancuso at <http://www.marcmanuso.com/>

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Questions?

@hashocthorpe

