


Mental health in healthcare workers


KARL TECHNAU
27TH JULY 2024




25 - 28 July 2024
Wits University Education Campus
Public Health Auditorium

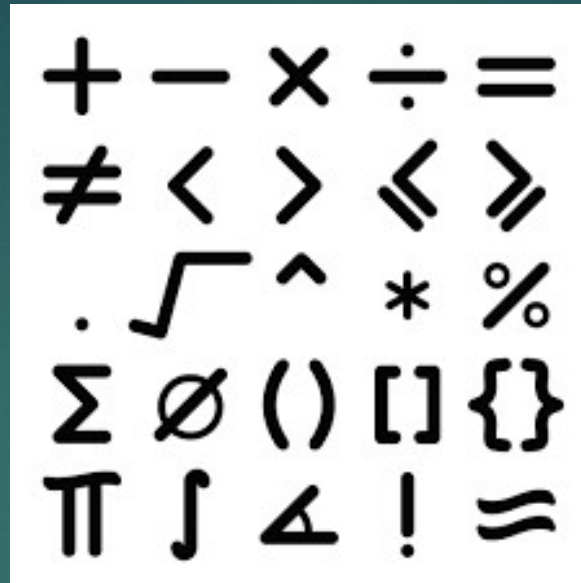

$$\sqrt{64} + \frac{25}{5} + 3^3$$


$$63 \div 7 + 2$$


$$\sqrt{25} + \frac{12 + 3}{5} + 3^2$$

$$\left(\sqrt[3]{27} \right)$$


$$\frac{81}{9} + 31$$



The mathematician

A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT BY SIMONE WEIL





- ▶ How did it feel to be the mathematician?
- ▶ What are your options if your full time job was to be this mathematician and the crowd was responsible for your salary?
- ▶ Who is the crowd?
- ▶ Does this feel like something that happens in our work?

First Point – What does the mathematician teach us?

- ▶ Ambiguity, confusion in our environment “moral and intellectual challenges in modern society – what it may cost us to search for the truth over conformity (Stephen West on Simone Weil)
- ▶ A metaphor for moral injury
- ▶ Who is the crowd?
 - ▶ Patients
 - ▶ Peers
 - ▶ Seniors

First Point – What does the mathematician teach us?

- ▶ What are the consequences?
 - ▶ Self doubt
 - ▶ Confusion
 - ▶ Fear
 - ▶ Suppression of critical thinking
- ▶ How do we adapt to “evade” the crowd’s punishment?
- ▶ Living and working in a world like this is **STRESSFUL!!** And deserves some acknowledgement and compassion

One step back

- ▶ A theoretical topic? A medical or psychological condition?
- ▶ Hard to speak about like other topics
- ▶ Relevant to me for other reasons than technical expertise:
 - ▶ Own experience of anguish related to mental health symptoms
 - ▶ Experience of colleagues suffering
 - ▶ Experience of effects at home or work due to own or other person's mental health issues
 - ▶ Suspicion: a few of us today might be battling with the odd issue
 - ▶ Yes, someone sitting here may be in distress right now
- ▶ Hence its not just a topic, its more than that – all around

So the point?

- ▶ Not an expert in mental health – psychiatry, psychology
- ▶ Share prompts to reflection that have helped me
- ▶ Encourage a spirit of discovering ourselves within our environment with compassion

Research

- ▶ Significant writing about healthcare worker mental health interventions
- ▶ Recent Systematic review:

Addressing Health Care Workers' Mental Health: A Systematic Review of Evidence-Based Interventions and Current Resources. 2024 Am J Public Health. Anger et al

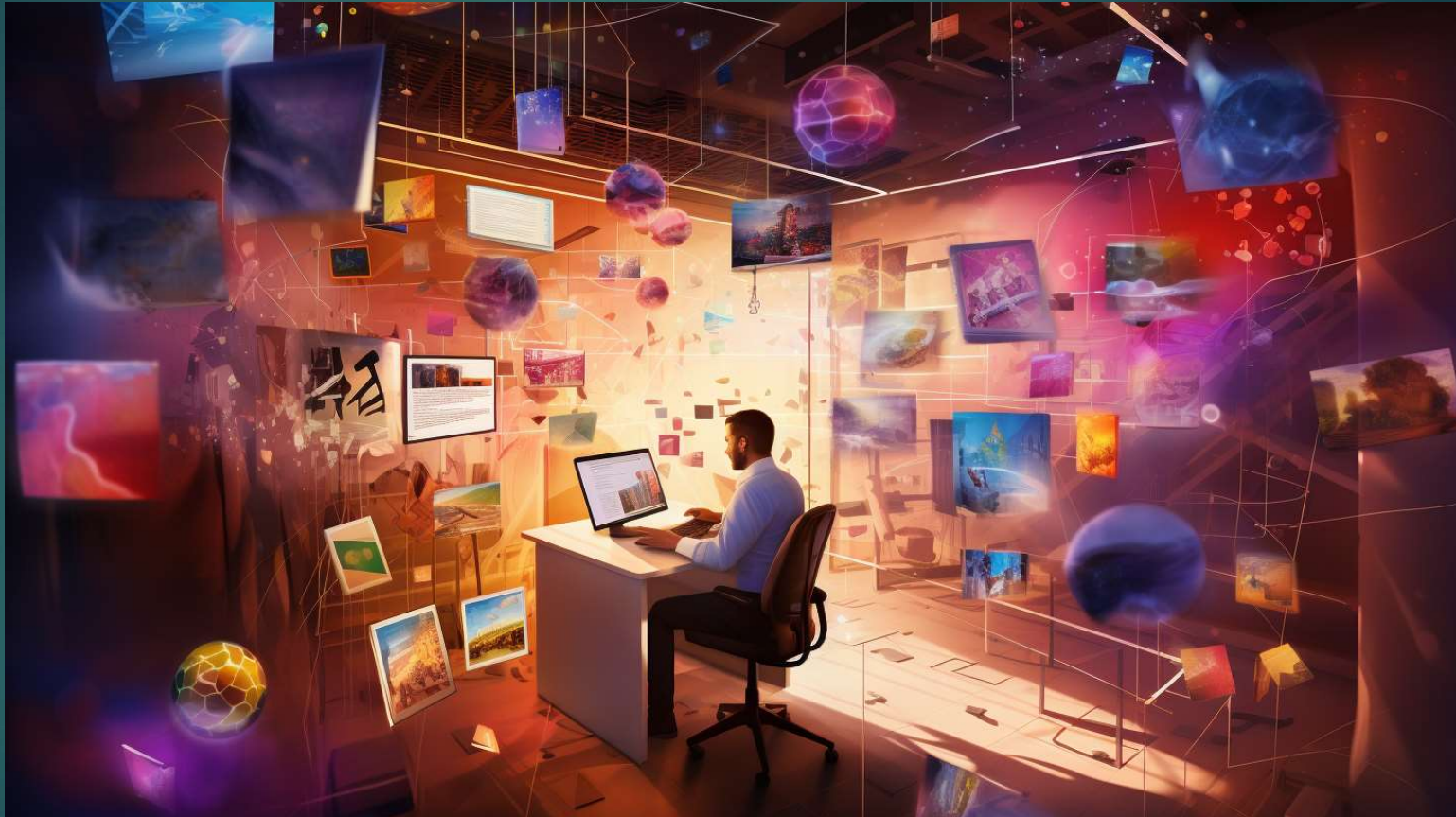
- ▶ Multiple interventions showing significant effects
 - ▶ Coping skills
 - ▶ Mindfulness
 - ▶ Reflection/Relaxation
 - ▶ Medical interventions
 - ▶ Health Literacy/anti-stigma
 - ▶ Peer support
 - ▶ System level interventions

▶ **CHALLENGE?**

▶ **How to implement practically**

▶ **How to establish a culture**

What do we experience every day?



▶ **Our experience is not virtual**

▶ <https://medium.com/@theostowell/a-complete-guide-to-minimising-digital-distractions-67889b5e48dc>

Who am I?

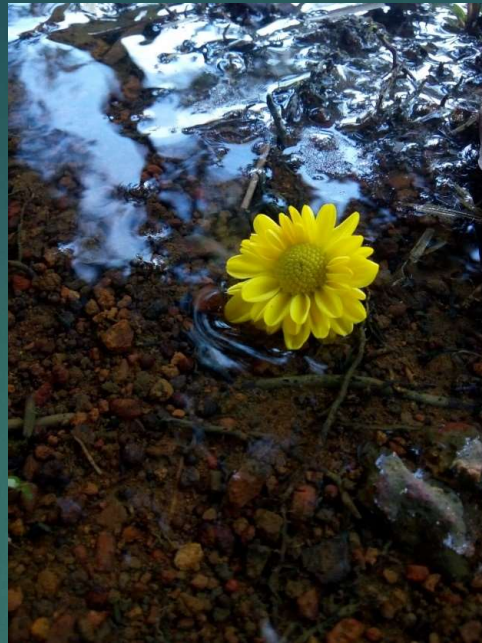


Photo by [Schayane Feitoza](#) on [Unsplash](#)



- ▶ A person willing to relate to and help other people
- ▶ Engaging fully in depth with a new person every few minutes
- ▶ At the coalface of some of the most difficult things
- ▶ Inequality
- ▶ Extreme suffering and deprivation
- ▶ Inadequate resources
- ▶ All life's other stressors
- ▶ Yet every day
 - ▶ You show up
 - ▶ Often silencing your needs
 - ▶ Working extreme hours

How do we share our reality

- ▶ Where is the chance to take things in, to slow down
- ▶ When do we mourn our patients
- ▶ When do we process our feelings or frustrations

- ▶ With our family? Frustration with us, frustration with them
- ▶ With our friends?
- ▶ They are often not ready to hear

- ▶ Reflecting and spending time is not really part of our lifestyle
- ▶ Are we permitted to slow down?

- ▶ Or are we left alone, to cry alone or process things without help
- ▶ Feelings associated with this state of mind and circumstances



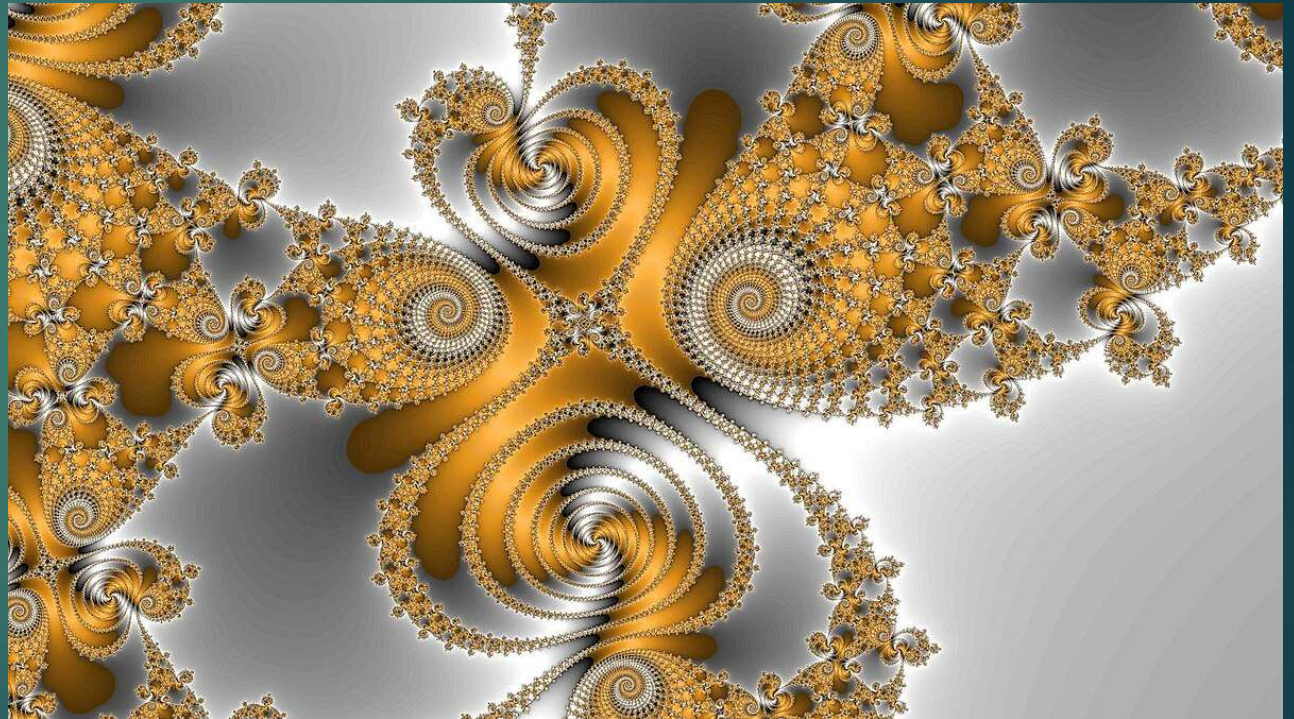
Second point

- ▶ We are constantly bombarded with experiences
- ▶ Our world is not very conducive to letting us deal with those
- ▶ The value of your presence cannot be measured



You as the Clinician/Researcher

- ▶ You have immeasurable effects on the world around you
- ▶ How many lives have you touched
- ▶ How many families exist because of you, how much suffering has been averted?
- ▶ Do you stop to recognize that occasionally
- ▶ Maybe now would be a good time



A note on failure

- ▶ Did the rock fail?
- ▶ Did the road fail?
- ▶ Did our plans fail?

- ▶ As perfectionists and high achievers drilled to work hard, failure is particularly painful

- ▶ Failure is one of the most meaningful things in this sometimes absurd and meaningless universe – it is so creative in its variety

Please consider embracing those



The points

- ▶ Ambiguity, moral injury, uncertainty – are very much part of our experience – navigating truth and morality in our environment and world can be very distressing
- ▶ Our experience is hard to share with others and ourselves
- ▶ You may not often acknowledge this but your presence is infinitely valuable
- ▶ One intervention that is often mentioned is reflection – may our own experiences and witnessing of suffering encourage us to do more to protect those entering the field and establish a sense of safety in the ranks of healthcare workers
- ▶ I have tried to give some prompts towards reflection
- ▶ There is a need for managers to look after their mental health but also to ensure that we do not generate a culture of acceptance of the unacceptable
- ▶ Resistance to change also has its roots in mental health – topic for another day

Seven years ago

- ▶ A talk on HIV PCR testing and PMTCT
- ▶ In the week after my daughter's birth
- ▶ Now, there is a seven year old
- ▶ A lot has happened in between – it is very special to stand here



Concluding remark

- ▶ The literature does speak of many reasons, symptoms and interventions for mental health
- ▶ Please pause and look into your life and your journey
- ▶ Your story and your experience of mental health is a unique and beautiful one
 - ▶ Sometimes it may be very painful – you are not a bother and there is always someone who is prepared to listen
 - ▶ Sometimes there may be very positive experiences and ideas – share them
 - ▶ There is a lot we can do together
- ▶ There is a lot of suffering that can be avoided

Any Questions?

24

