

BEN REA, LCSW

Licensed Clinical Social Worker

“An optional hour focused on wellness education, including physical and mental wellness and wellbeing or stress management, in the context of the practice of law and the impact these issues can have on an attorney’s ability to perform legal services with competence (wellness competence)”



Central Coast Healthy Minds

BENJAMIN S REA • LCSW

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Title: *“Making Sense of Distress and Its Relationship with Addiction and Self-Care and Addiction”*

Brief Program Description: Using the metaphor of a water glass and Alka-Seltzers, this program is an introduction to the basics of emotional distress and emotional well-being. In the presentation hour, Ben will outline clearly how distress manifests for people, how this can lead to addiction, and how we can all live a life with a greater sense of consciousness and control.

Bio:

Ben was born in South Africa but his upbringing was split between Omaha, Nebraska, and various French-speaking African countries. He graduated Magna Cum Laude from the University of Virginia with dual Bachelor’s degrees in Psychology and Studio Art. Ben’s graduate thesis on "Indirect Interpersonal Conflict and its Effects on Children," was acclaimed and awarded a "Highest Honors" distinction.

Following undergraduate work, Ben’s journey took him into both the realms of professional artistry, showcasing in prominent galleries across the United States, and psychology research, with publications from esteemed institutions like the University of Georgia, Emory University, Georgia State University, and the University of Denver. He had the privilege of presenting his research at international conferences while pursuing his MSW from the University of Georgia, where I completed two Master's theses.

For Ben’s years post-licensure, he has established private practices in San Francisco and San Luis Obispo, California. He is now happily married with three children, while remaining deeply involved in the field, embracing the vibrant community and serene landscapes that define the "SLO lifestyle."

Two Page Handout:

The Water Glass Analogy and Distress:

Over the past 20 years in my practice as a licensed clinical social worker, I've been developing a model – I call it the Water Glass Analogy. The analogy attempts to describe the nature of emotional dysregulation and how to address it.

The Water Glass

Imagine yourself as a water glass filled with gross water. The water is murky and discolored. This murky water represents our level of distress, while the glass itself – the container – represents our ability to contain the distress.

Now imagine that resting on the bottom of this glass are Alka-Seltzers. Here, the tablets are not medicine to make someone feel better. Rather, they represent psychological stressors. As they bubble and fizz, they raise the level of the water – the amount of distress – in the glass. As the water level rises, distress increases. As a result, people find it harder and harder to regulate the distressing emotions that they experience.

Said in another way, the more stressors that are activated, the more the Alka-Seltzers fizz. The more the Alka-Seltzers fizz, the higher the water level gets. The higher the water level gets relative to the side of the glass, the more emotional distress a person will experience. Make sense?

Psychological Distress:

“A state of emotional suffering characterized by symptoms of anxiety, irritability, and/or depression.”

All of the uncomfortable emotions we experience can be boiled down to these three core distressing emotions.

The reason people only experience these three forms of distress is because they map perfectly onto the Fight, Flight, and Freeze response.

- Anxiety = Flight
- Irritability = Fight
- Depression = Freeze

To illustrate, consider this example: Imagine you are a caveman or cavewoman. As you are out collecting berries, you hear a rustling in the woods next to you. Immediately, your parasympathetic nervous system turns off and your sympathetic nervous system kicks in. Our body does this to prepare to survive should the rustling prove dangerous. However, there are limited choices...

- You can run away.
- You can fight.
- You can play dead/attempt to be blend in or not be noticed

People don't often run into dangerous things in the bushes. However, the brain still has this old "reptilian" response to perceived threat. In the modern era, the perceived threats come more commonly in the form of stressors. Even more typically, our old flight, fight, freeze response is in response to multiple simultaneous stressors.

Notice how this might then map. When anxious, the body wants to run away. Even though we can't run away from stressors, as discussed earlier, the body will still act in ways that represent the running instinct. For example, people that are anxious tend to be fidgety and struggle to sit still. Biting of finger nails, bouncing of knees, pacing, talking quickly, darting eyes, racing thoughts, and tensing muscles are common features.

For folks who respond to distress with irritability, this simply maps onto the fight response. Notice how irritable or angry people act as though they are preparing to attack or tackle the thing or person they perceive to be the source of the threat. Clenching of the jaw and fists, increasing the volume of one's voice, the urge to dominate or overpower, and menacing facial expressions are all examples of this.

When people are depressed, their behavior mirrors the freeze state. Depressed people tend to move, talk, and think more slowly. Everything feels heavy and requires more effort. Sleeping more, lack of motivation, even for food and sex, decrease. These are common symptoms for people experiencing depression.