

# A mindfulness-based approach for promoting healing after incarceration

Dan Grupe, Ph.D.  
Center for Healthy Minds  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
ACCJH, March 16, 2026

Center for  
**healthyminds**  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON





# Cultivating Justice CoLaboratory

at the Center for Healthy Minds



Christy Wilson-Mendenhall



Mia Lauder



Patrick Nolan



Aaron Hicks



Carmen Alonso



Deb Mejchar



Karen Reece



Virginia Medinilla

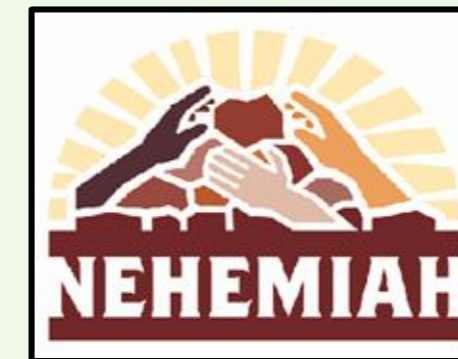


Pajarita Charles

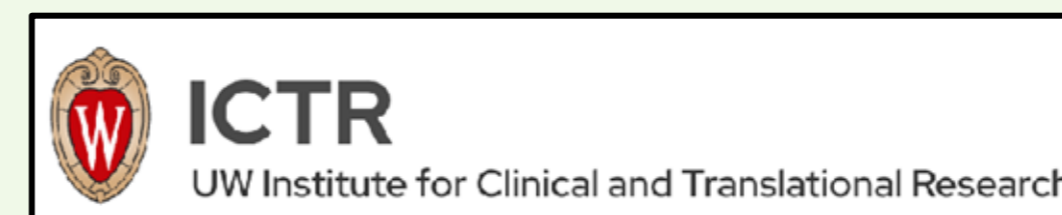
## Community advisory board

Delilah, Dennis, Dennis, Janie, JenAnn, Johnnie, Kim

## Community partners



## Funders



# The ripple effects of trauma and incarceration

Trauma is pervasive among system-impacted people

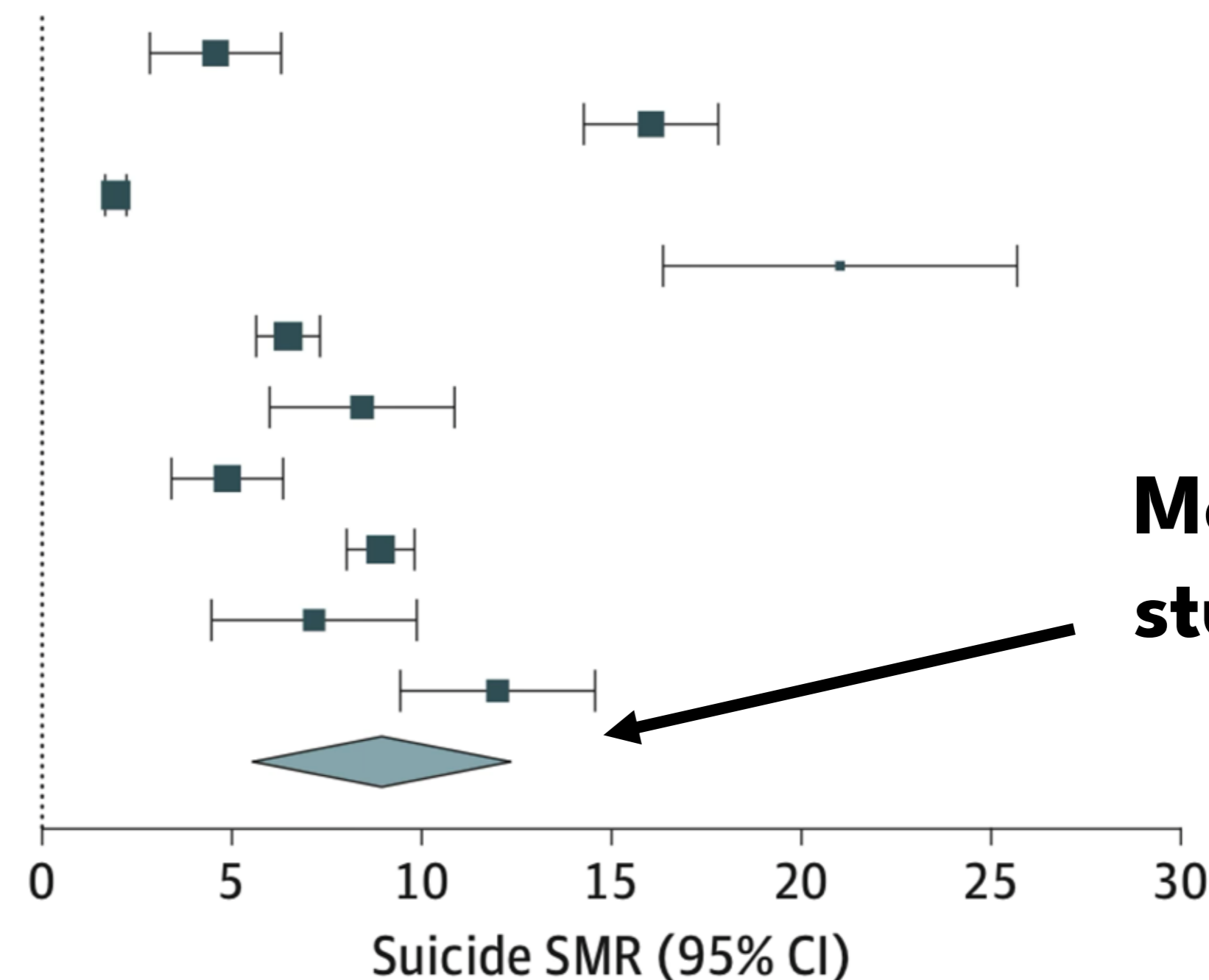
Experiences of incarceration exacerbate trauma symptoms

Failure to provide opportunities for healing contributes to profound suffering during & after incarceration

**96% of men in a maximum security prison reported experiences of victimization or abuse prior to incarceration, with 90% of those men reporting abuse in childhood or adolescence**

Yu et al., Clin Psychol. Psychother. (2021)

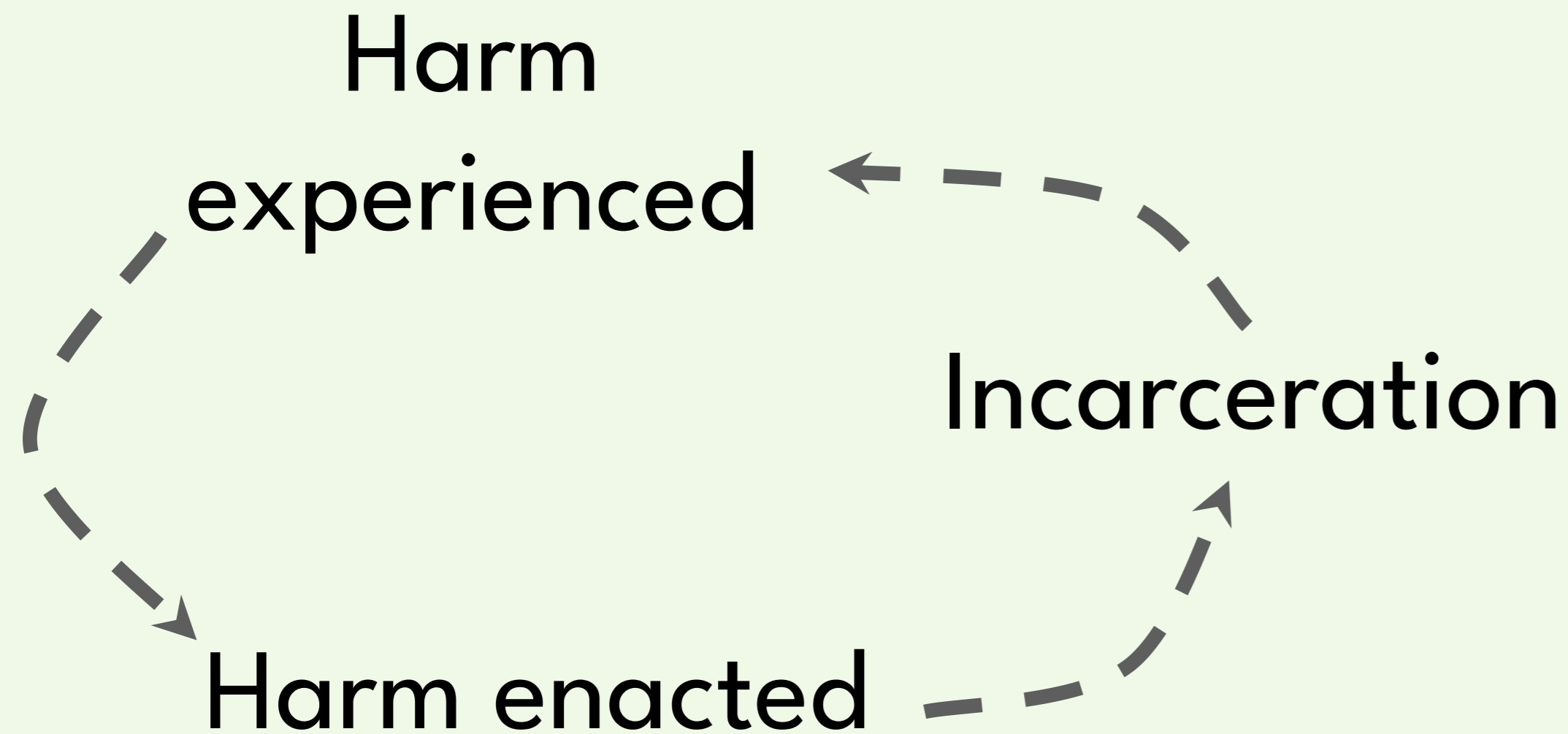
Suicide among adults within 1 y of release vs general public



**Mean O.R. across studies = 8.95**

Miller et al. (2024), JAMA Network Open

# The ripple effects of trauma and incarceration



**“Healing [is] among the most pragmatic priorities of a culture that values safety.”**

Danielle Sered, *Until We Reckon*

76% of incarcerated men who had experienced victimization “reported their abuse experience **directly contributed to their choice to harm others** and/or engage in crime.”

Yu et al., *Clin Psychol. Psychother.* (2021)

“[This group] has shown me that every offender has been a victim at some point. And that victimization of that offender in part led them down the path to their offense. In retrospect there is a revolving cycle of cause and effect.”

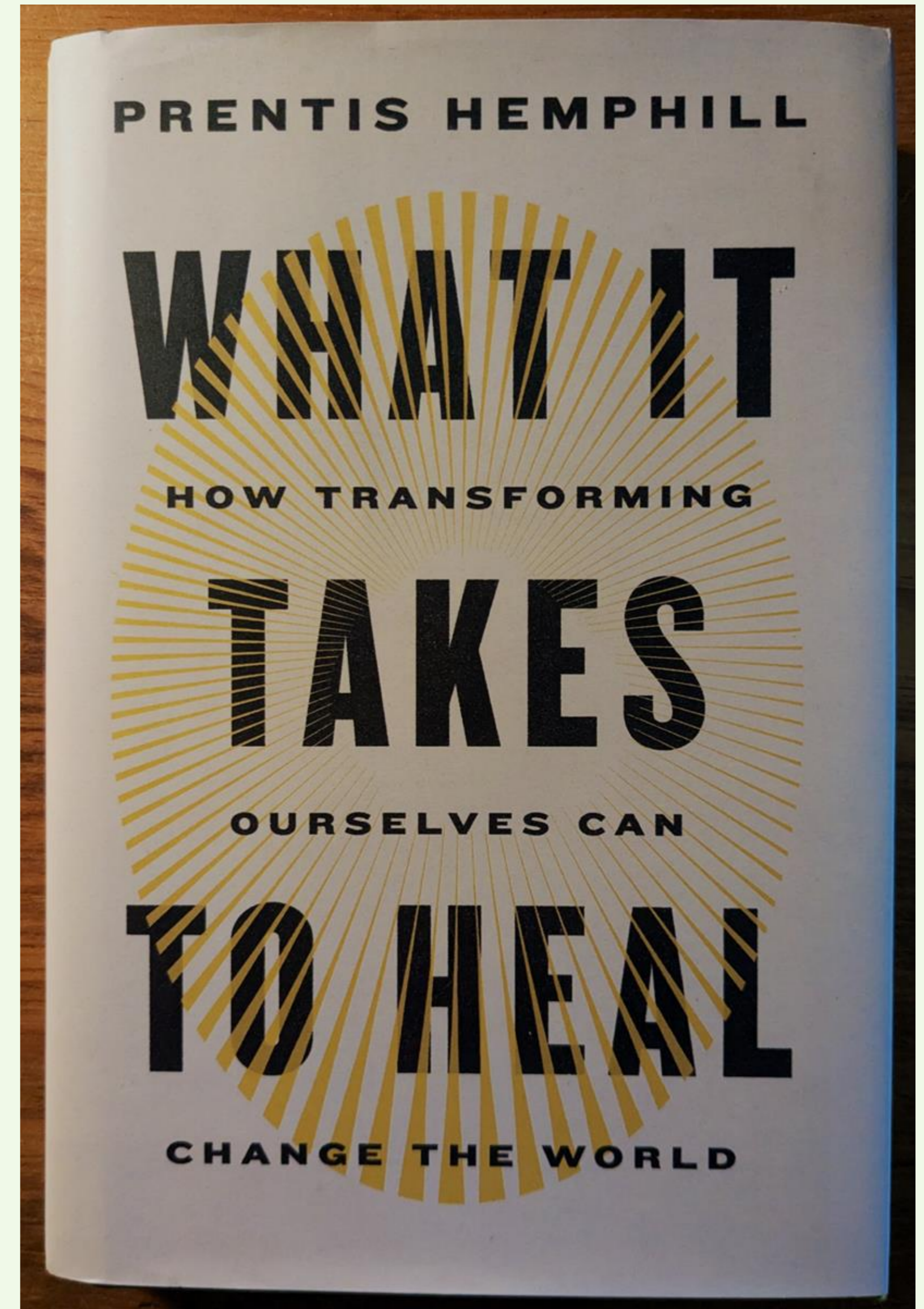
Group participant, 2024

# What does it mean to heal?

“Trauma breaks apart our ability to experience **safety, belonging, and dignity...**

“These needs are core to our ability to develop as human beings, grow, create, engage with others and the world, and express and protect ourselves...

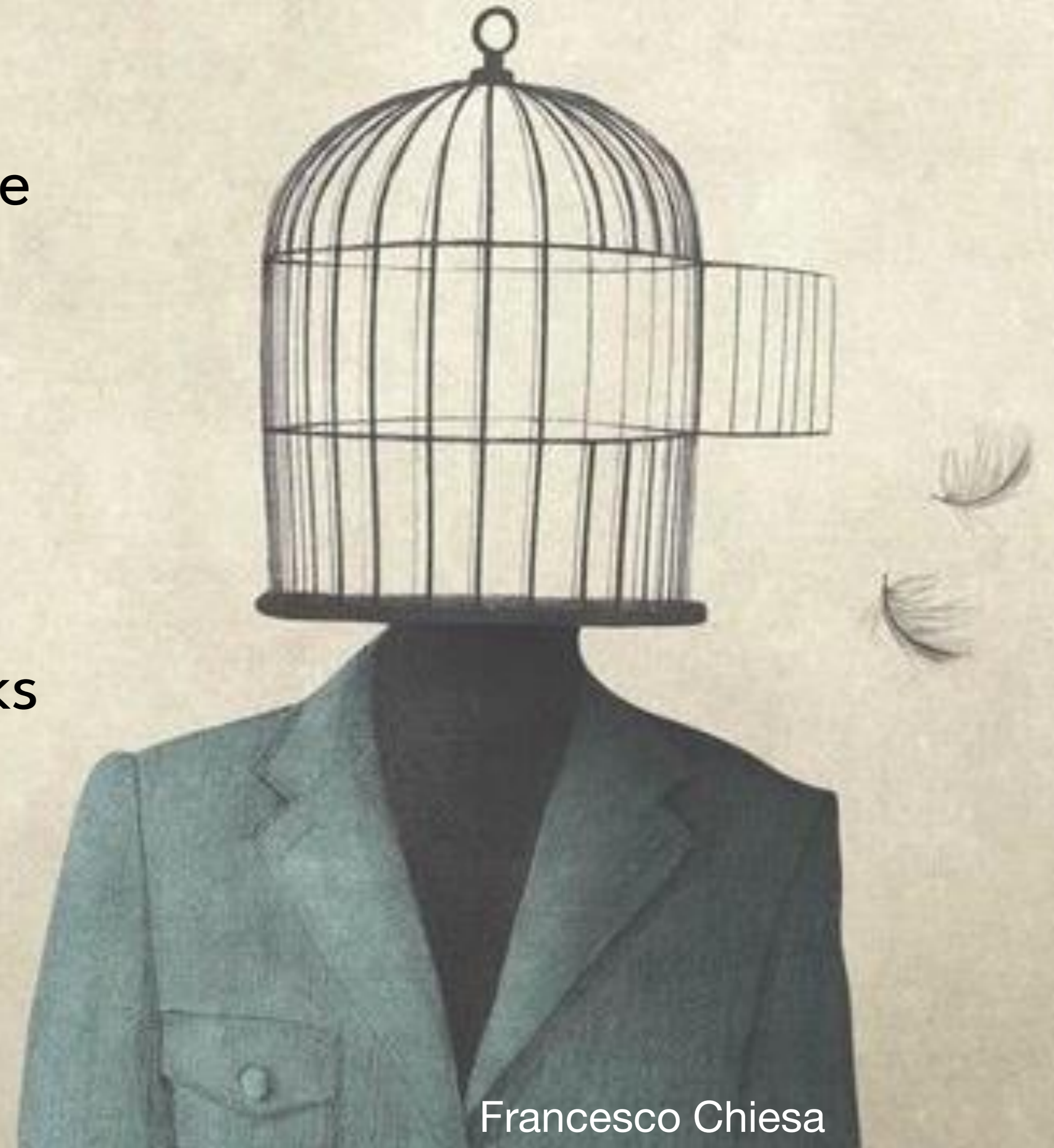
“Healing is the process, often lifelong, of **restoring and reawakening the capacities for safety, belonging, and dignity on the other side of trauma.**” (p 32, 40)



# Introducing mindfulness practices after incarceration

“When people think of [incarceration] we immediately think of a building. Right? But I realized, like, **incarceration started way before you ever hit the building. It started in your mind.**”

Aaron Hicks



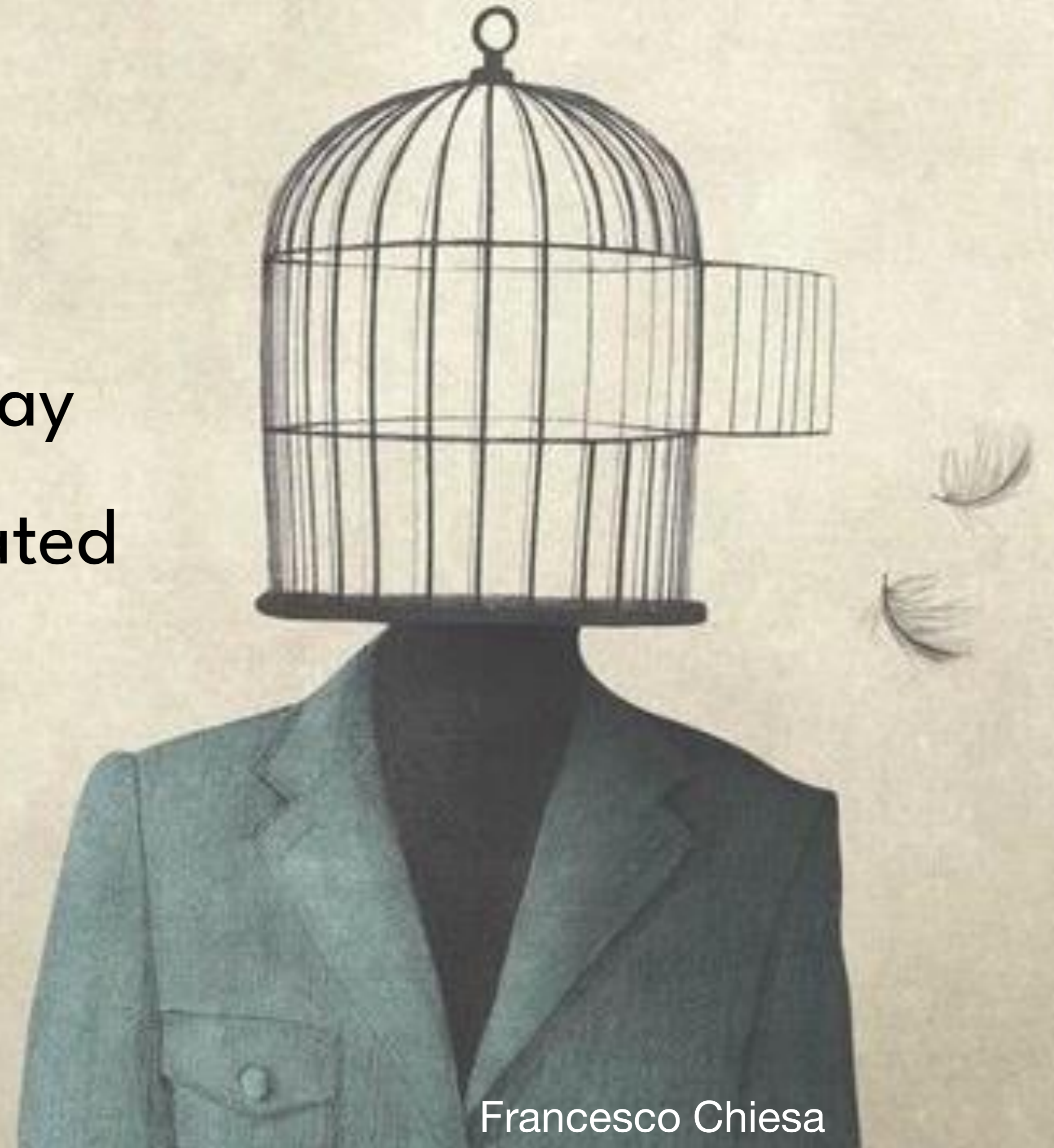
Francesco Chiesa

# Introducing mindfulness practices after incarceration

## What is mindfulness?

Awareness that arises by paying attention to present-moment experiences in a non-judgmental way

A natural ability that can be cultivated through practice

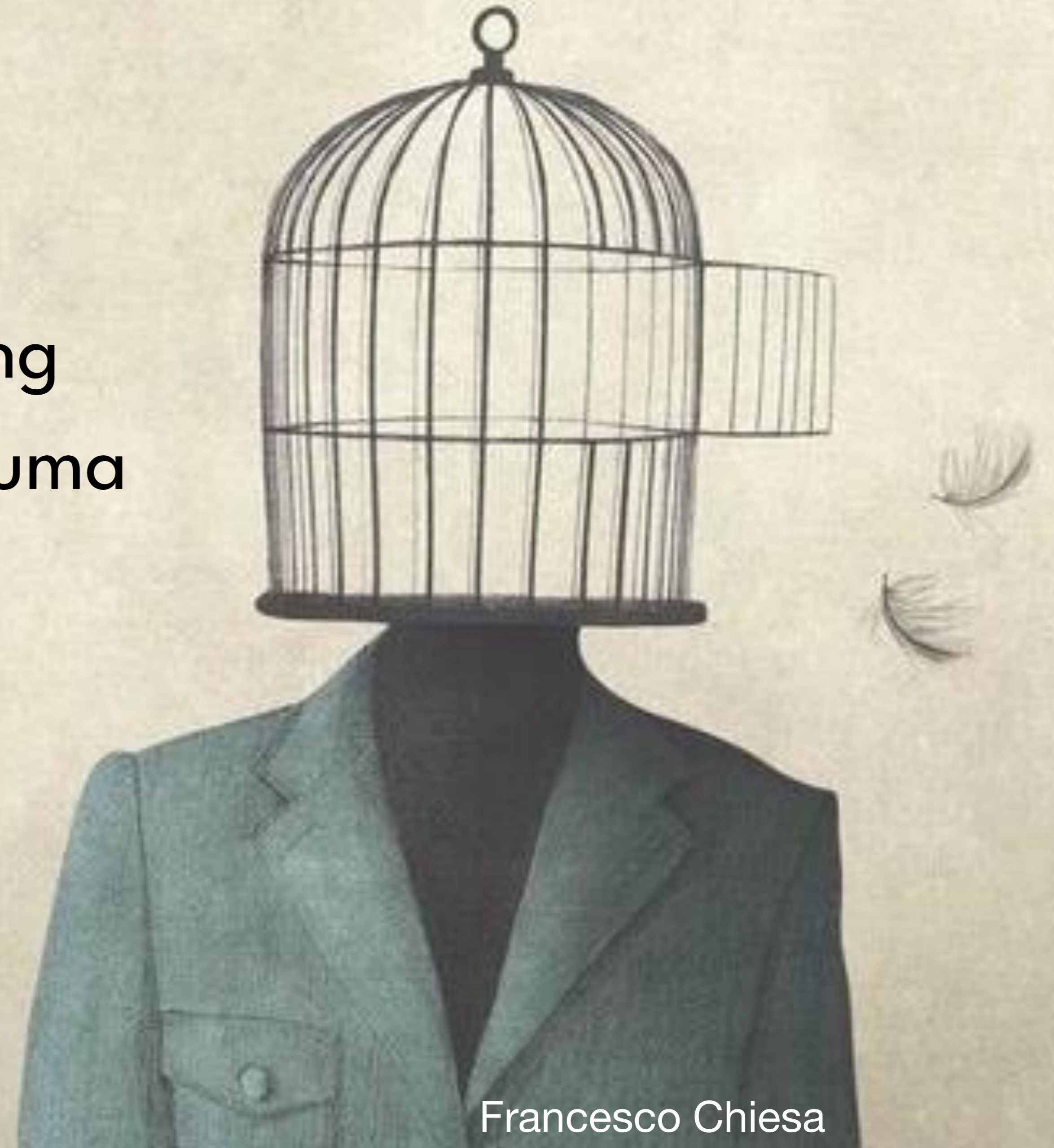


# Introducing mindfulness practices after incarceration

What is mindfulness?

Why mindfulness?

1. Strong evidence base for improving mental health and addressing trauma symptoms in similar populations
2. Strength-based, skill-focused approach
3. Practices for individual and collective healing and liberation



The background image shows a residential yard. In the foreground, there is a garden bed with dark soil and some dry mulch. To the left, a yellow wheelbarrow is parked on the grass. In the background, there is a house with grey siding and a window, and a tree. The overall scene is a typical suburban yard.

Phase 1: Community advisory board

Phase 2: Curriculum development

Phase 3: Pilot RCT

Cultivating community

# “Boundary spanners”

Deb Mejchar and Aaron Hicks



**Phase 1: Community  
advisory board**

## **Key characteristics**

Braided identity

Approachable

Available

Knowledgeable

Resourceful networker

Hears what others cannot

Committed

Balances power

Creates space for community knowledge

**Hatch et al. (2023) Ecology and Society 28:41**

# Directly impacted community advisory board

## Approach & methods

Deb & Aaron invite 7 peers to join CAB

4 men, 3 women

4 Black, 1 white, 1 Hispanic, 1 Native American

8 monthly meetings were recorded & transcribed

**Phase 1: Community advisory board**

There's something so profound ... once those relationships happen, then people say, **“Okay, I'll risk coming.”** And then once I get there, recognizing that [the UW researchers] are genuine ... **there's something so powerful about somebody beyond our own people who can see our value.**

# Directly impacted community advisory board

## Approach & methods

Deb & Aaron invite 7 peers to join CAB

4 men, 3 women

4 Black, 1 white, 1 Hispanic, 1 Native American

8 monthly meetings were recorded & transcribed

Content analysis focused on two questions:

1. What are the perceived benefits of a regular mindfulness practice after incarceration?
2. How can we maximize these benefits and address barriers to engagement?

**Phase 1: Community advisory board**

There's something so profound ... once those relationships happen, then people say, **“Okay, I'll risk coming.”** And then once I get there, recognizing that [the UW researchers] are genuine ... **there's something so powerful about somebody beyond our own people who can see our value.**

Check out Patrick's poster Tuesday!



# Why introduce mindfulness after incarceration?

## **Calm in the midst of chaos**



Created by graviso  
from Noun Project

I be all over the place, literally, in my head and outside of my head ... But **this right here helps me to like create that balance** ... It was the first time I was able to exhale.

## ***Respond* instead of *react***

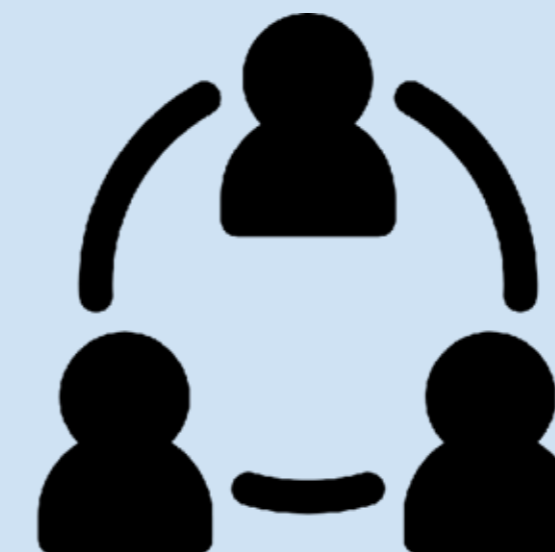
I call it **six seconds** before you react to something ... who wouldn't want to get six seconds back from something in their past?



Created by Smashicons  
from Noun Project

## **Cultivating community**

I would say addiction ... it's really about disconnection and not being connected to other human beings, not feeling a part of. **This can connect us to our body, keep us regulated to stay in community.**



Created by Larea Design  
from Noun Project

**Phase 1: Community  
advisory board**

# Curriculum development & field-testing

**The plasticity of well-being: A training-based framework for the cultivation of human flourishing**  
Cortland J. Dahl<sup>a,1</sup>, Christine D. Wilson-Mendenhall<sup>a</sup>, and Richard J. Davidson<sup>a,b,c,d,1</sup>  
Edited by Michael I. Posner, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, and approved October 29, 2020 (received for review August 19, 2020)

**Connection**

**Identity**

**Purpose**

**AWARENESS**  
of sensations, emotions, thoughts

Phase 1: Community advisory board

**Phase 2: Curriculum development**



Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, & Davidson, PNAS (2020)

# Curriculum development & field-testing

## Intervention content & structure

Eight-week, in-person group

Core practices/structure draws from Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction/derivative interventions (MBCT, MBRP)

90-minute weekly sessions at Center for Healthy Minds  
*+Dinner, childcare, transportation support*

Recorded meditation practices in between sessions

Co-facilitation model

Expert mindfulness instructor/clinical psychologist  
Formerly incarcerated peer support specialist(s)



Carmen Alonso



Christy Wilson-Mendenhall

Phase 1: Community  
advisory board

**Phase 2: Curriculum  
development**

# Focus group feedback

## Safe, sacred place

It was probably **the most safe, sacred place other than like going somewhere that actually is like a real sacred place** and practicing that I've ever felt.

Phase 1: Community  
advisory board

Phase 2: Curriculum  
development

## Non-hierarchical co-learning space

Just, being a part of the group **not having ... like somebody is above you or higher than you ... genuinely it was like everyone was learning from each other ...** it wasn't like, "Well, I'm teaching you," it was, **We're all learning from each other."**

# Pilot RCT: 2026-2027

ClinicalTrials.gov  
#NCT06975657

60 formerly incarcerated adults - broad inclusion criteria

Random assignment to 8-week mindfulness group vs. waitlist control

## Primary outcomes

Well-being outcomes: Self-reported awareness, connection, insight, and purpose

Clinical outcomes: Self-reported psychological distress (depression/anxiety/stress)

## Long-term goal

Link target engagement & clinical improvement to successful real-world reentry outcomes



Phase 1: Community  
advisory board

Phase 2: Curriculum  
development

**Phase 3: Pilot RCT**

# Peer involvement throughout!



Peer-driven relational recruitment

Peer study navigators at intake visits

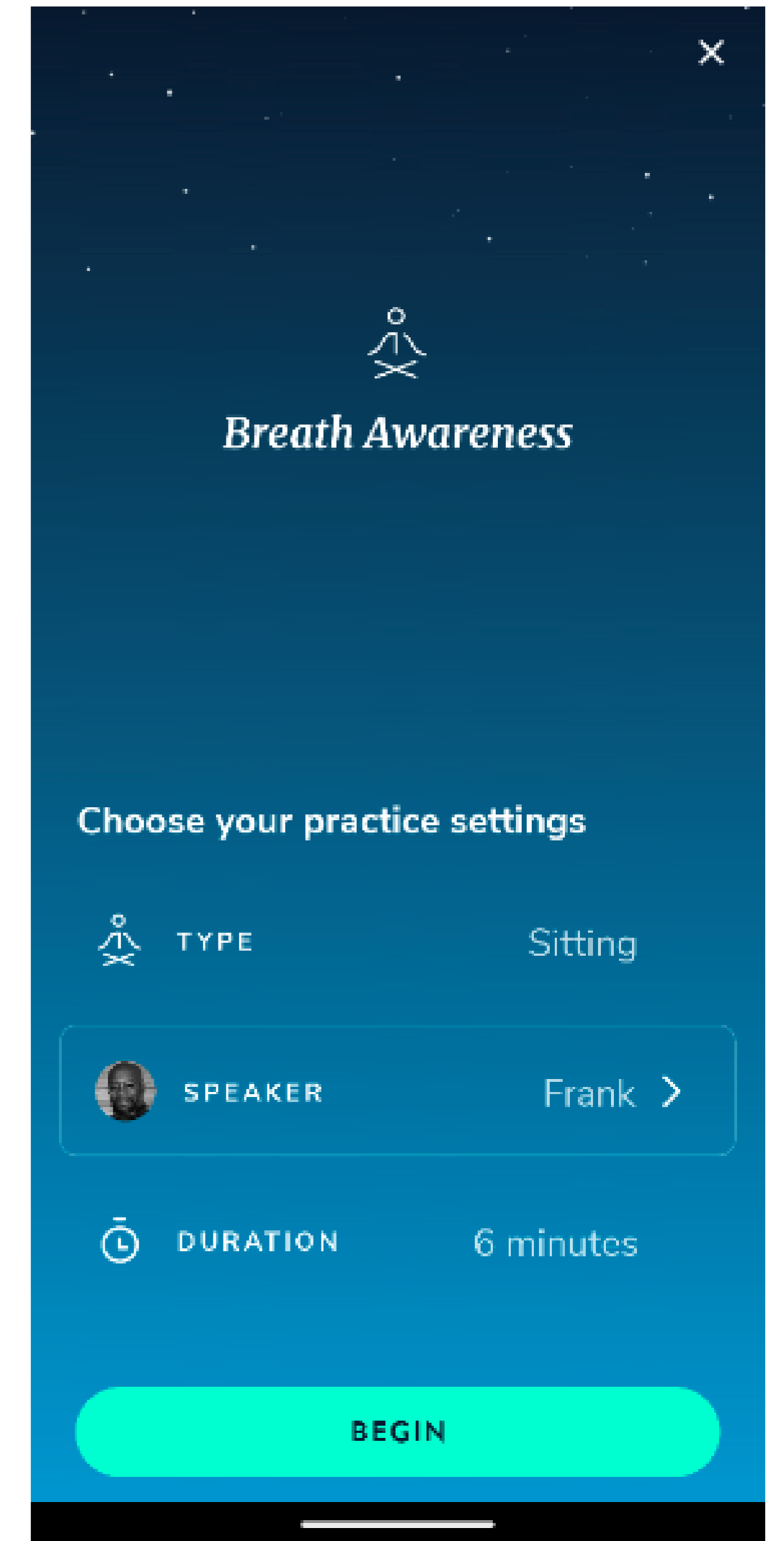
Peer co-facilitation and ongoing peer support

Peer-recorded meditation practices in custom app

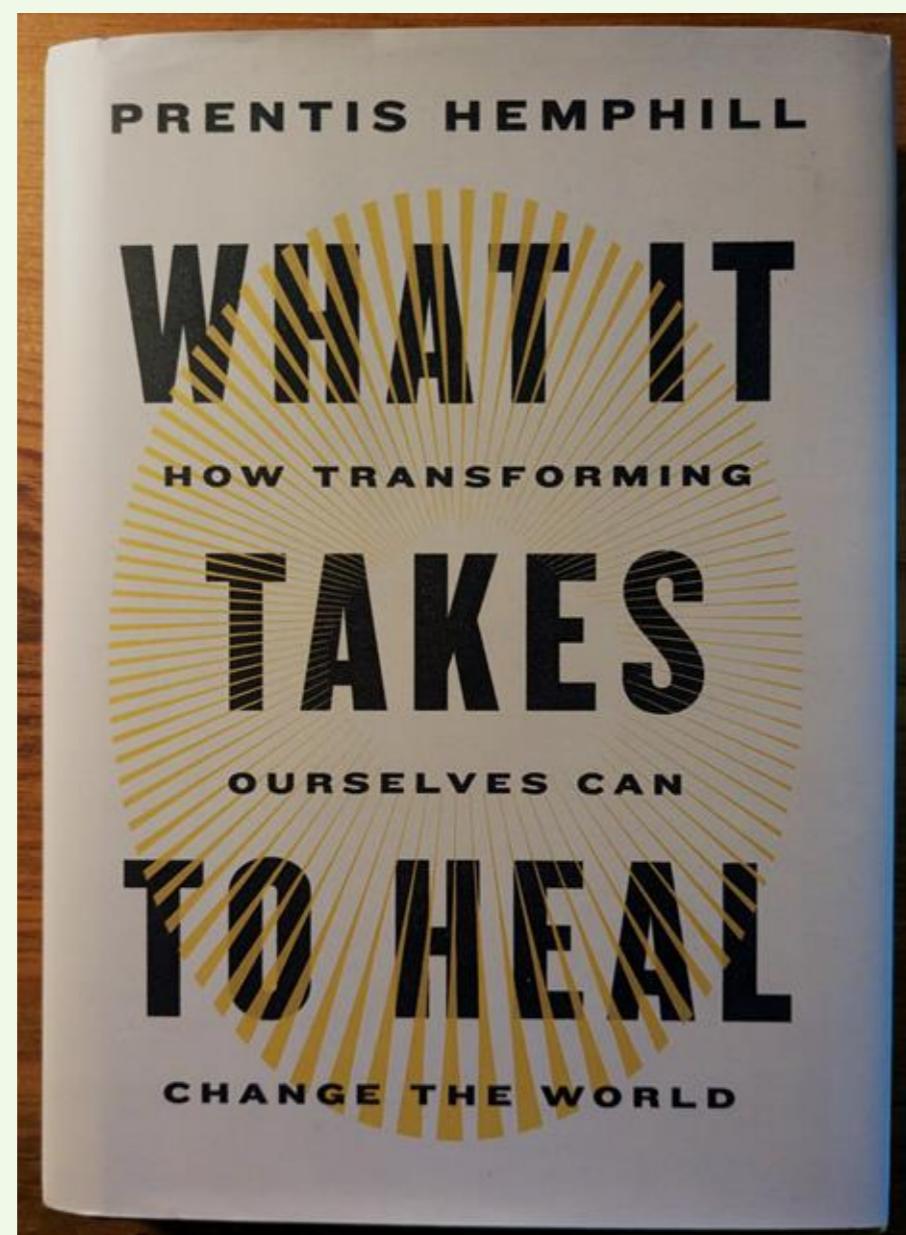
Phase 1: Community advisory board

Phase 2: Curriculum development

**Phase 3: Pilot RCT**



# Cultivating a community of healing



“Most of the time mainstream healing and wellness put the pressure on the individual to “heal: when really it’s about fitting into a society that may itself be the source of the trauma. **How can we best practice a culture that restores these capacities and build societies with these principles at the center?”**”

Phase 1: Community advisory board

Phase 2: Curriculum development

Phase 3: Pilot RCT

**Cultivating Community**

# Cultivating a community of healing

- Monthly drop-ins
- Immersion retreat
- Train-the-trainer



Phase 1: Community advisory board

Phase 2: Curriculum development

Phase 3: Pilot RCT

**Cultivating Community**



# Cultivating Justice CoLaboratory

at the Center for Healthy Minds



Christy Wilson-Mendenhall



Mia Lauder



Patrick Nolan



Aaron Hicks



Carmen Alonso



Deb Mejchar



Karen Reece



Virginia Medinilla

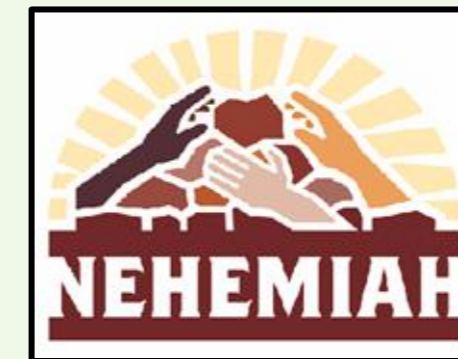


Pajarita Charles

## Community advisory board

Delilah, Dennis, Dennis, Janie, JenAnn, Johnnie, Kim

## Community partners



## Funders

