



Cultivating Well-Being: *insights from neuroscience*

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Learning Objectives:

Neuroscience of Well-Being:

Discuss four scientifically validated dimensions of well-being

Discuss the distinction between empathy and compassion

Practical Applications:

Explore practices to manage stress,
enhance compassion and cultivate well-being



Why Well-Being?

The landscape of medicine,
our medical culture & Dr. B.



A practice from Mr. Rogers

Crossing the Unknown Sea - Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity

**At its simplest, good work is work that makes sense,
and that grants sense and meaning to the one who is doing it
and to those affected by it**

David Whyte

Dr. G.





Critical Levels of Distress, Disillusionment and Burnout

among physicians nationwide

Drivers of this Public Health Crisis

largely rooted within healthcare
organizations and systems

System & Cultural Changes

require large scale efforts
that often take years

Chronic Stress

negatively impacts our health

grief

Physician's Professional Grief

Moral Distress
Moral Injury

loss of autonomy
loss of agency
loss of safety

Disillusionment with practice
Partner or staff transitions
Loss of meaning in work
Patient mistrust

Good Grief

The Art of Healing Ourselves
From Personal or
Professional Loss

*Mounting losses and
unprocessed grief
can contribute to emotional
exhaustion and ultimately
burnout, but...*

...Connection and Compassion can Heal Us



A person wearing a red tank top, dark pants, and a yellow helmet is climbing a steep, overhanging rock face. They are secured by a rope and a harness. The background shows a lush green forest and a blue sky.

**How do we safeguard
our health and well-being**

***while navigating ongoing
stresses that we cannot easily
or immediately mitigate?***

A person with curly hair, wearing a yellow backpack and dark pants, stands with their back to the camera inside a large, arched rock overhang. They are looking out onto a desert landscape featuring several gnarled, green-leaved trees and red rock formations under a bright sky. The ground is sandy and uneven. The scene is framed by the warm, textured rock of the cave entrance.

Our Choice

A person is sitting on a rocky ledge, looking out over a vast, snowy mountain range. The person is wearing dark clothing and has their back to the camera. The mountains are covered in snow and have sharp, jagged peaks. The sky is clear and blue. The overall scene is one of solitude and natural beauty.

**Everything can be taken from a man but one thing:
*the last of the human freedoms -***

**to choose one's attitude
in any given set of circumstances**

**To Choose
One's Own Way**

Viktor Frankl



Between stimulus and response,
there is a space

In that space is our power
to choose our response

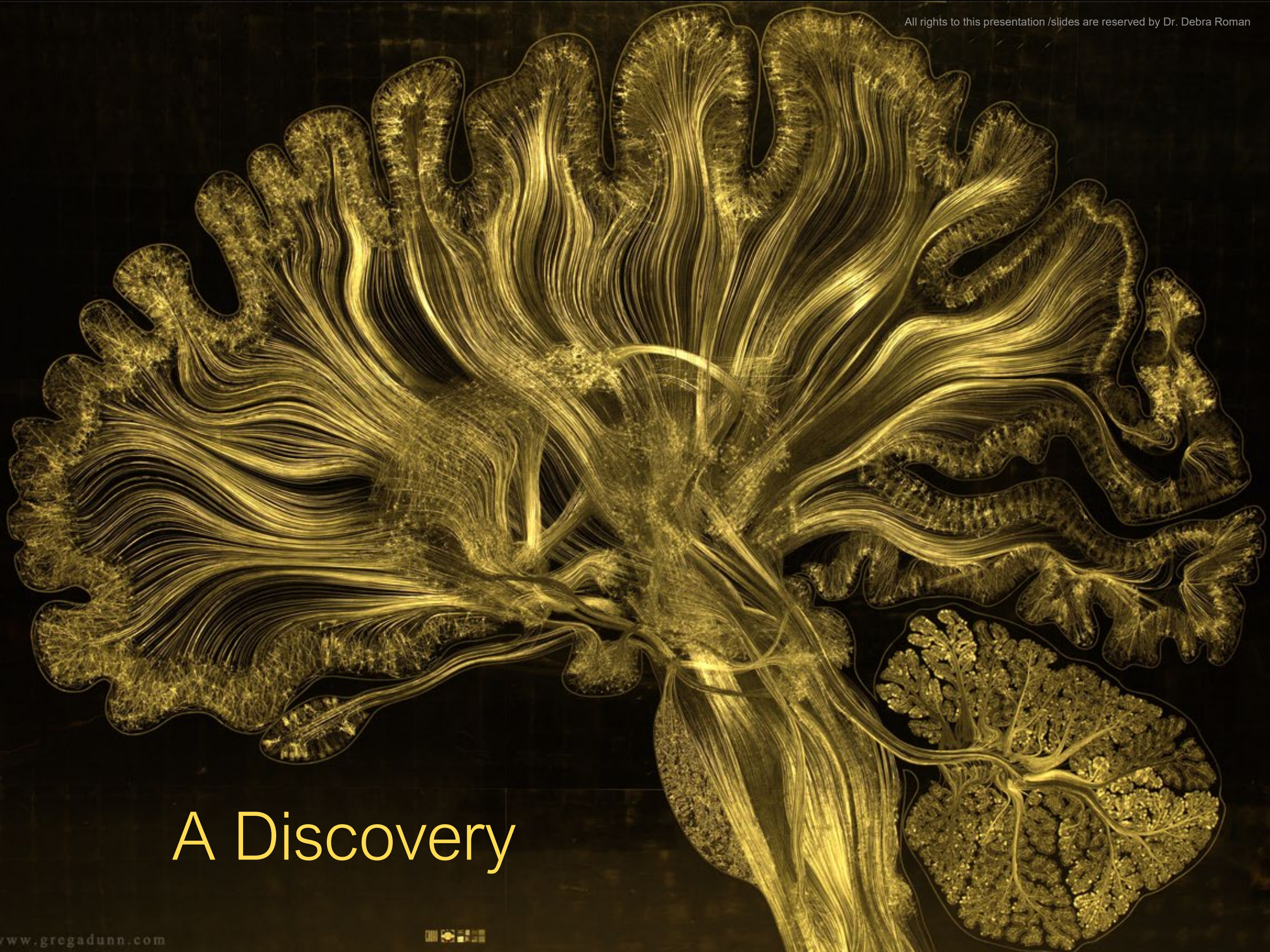
In our response lies our
growth and our freedom

Viktor Frankl

We have the POWER

**to ease
the impact of
current realities
of clinical practice**

**to diminish *and even reverse* adverse effects
on our bodies and our well-being**



A Discovery



neuroplasticity:

our nervous system is *dynamic*

**responds to external and internal stimuli by
reorganizing structure, function and connections**

**adaptive changes *throughout life*
in response to our experiences**



Greg Dunn's
Artwork

Examples of Neuroplasticity:

Remodeling
Dendrites and Synapses

Strengthening & Weakening
Neural Connections

Promoting and Inhibiting
Neurogenesis

amygdala

hippocampus

**prefrontal
cortex**



Dr. Roman

Stress

a *powerful* stimulus for neuroplastic change

a dance

Our neural circuits are continually
being *shaped* throughout our lives

Incidental and intentional influences
impact neural structure & function

A New Perspective:

Neuroplasticity illuminates the value
of choosing our responses

With *intentional* practices, habits and attitudes,
we can enhance our health and well-being

But how?

Well-Being

**Competencies
that enable us
to ameliorate
impact of adversity
&
*Flourish***

Dr. Richard Davidson

NEUROSCIENTIST
FOUNDER & DIRECTOR
CENTER FOR HEALTHY MINDS
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

well-being vs. happiness

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Qualities

attention

resilience

flexibility

adaptability

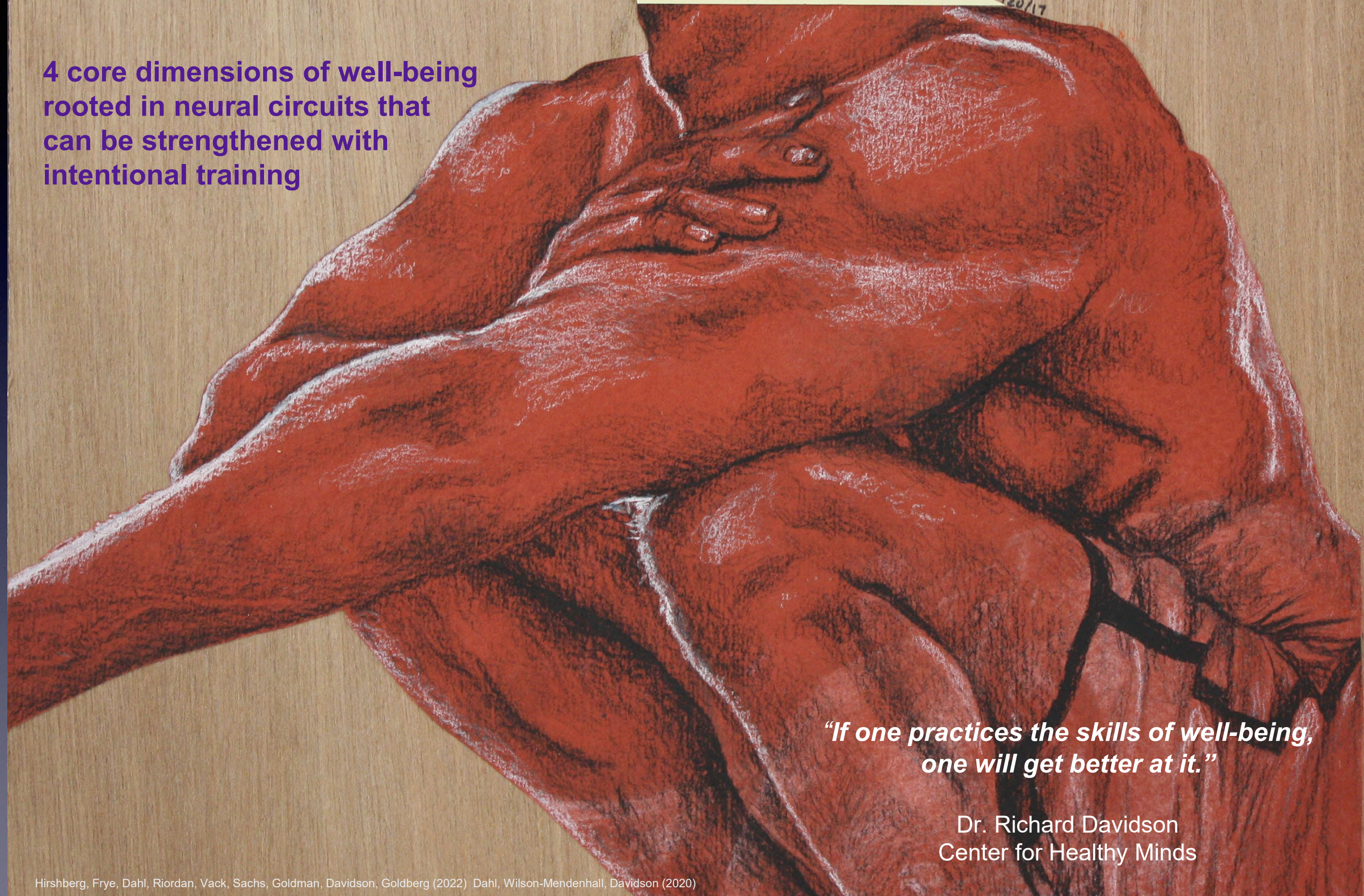
compassion

positive outlook

equanimity

The *Plasticity* of Well-Being

4 core dimensions of well-being
rooted in neural circuits that
can be strengthened with
intentional training



*“If one practices the skills of well-being,
one will get better at it.”*

Dr. Richard Davidson
Center for Healthy Minds

Awareness

Connection

Insight

Purpose

AWARENESS

Look at everything.
Don't close your eyes
to the world around you.
Look and become curious
and interested in
what there is to see.

John Cage
musical composer, artist, philosopher



Attention

**Mind
*Wandering***

Multi-Tasking:

the performance of two or more
discrete tasks simultaneously

increased stress
task incompleteness
increased risk of errors
slower task completion
reduced efficiency/accuracy

Multi-Tasking

Task-Switching

Mono-Tasking

Insight

DMN

self-related thinking
mind wandering

Purpose

**Strong connection to
enhanced health &
well-being**

Connection

kindness
gratitude
empathy
generosity
compassion
appreciation



Compassion is a verb

Thich Nhat Hanh

disengagement vs.
compassionate action

empathy

stress response
negative affect

pain centers
activated

compassion

overcome empathic distress
positive affect

affiliation, reward centers
activated

(*while exposed to
distressing stimuli*)



Well-being isn't just an internal state of mind

***It's also a way of leading a life &
a way of interacting with others***

John Dunne, Ph.D.
Center for Healthy Minds

G.R.A.C.E.

Joan Halifax, Ph.D.

**an active practice
applied in the moment**

**to help prevent burnout
and secondary trauma in clinicians &
cultivate an expanded capacity for compassion**

integrates the 4 dimensions of well-being

a patient
& practice



THANK YOU !!

A woman with dark hair tied back is lying in bed, smiling and looking towards the camera. She is wearing a black top and has a ring with a green stone on her finger. A black dog is resting its head on her arm, and a white dog with black spots is lying next to it. The bed has white pillows and a white blanket. The background is a plain wall.

**Self Care is never
a selfish act**

Anytime we can listen to the true self,
and give it the care it requires,
we do so not only for ourselves
but for the many lives we touch

Parker Palmer

An aerial photograph of a vast landscape featuring rolling green hills. The hills are partially shrouded in thick, white, ethereal clouds that drift through the valleys and over the ridges, creating a sense of depth and mystery. The lighting is soft, highlighting the textures of the grass and the billowing nature of the clouds.

Your Questions & Insights