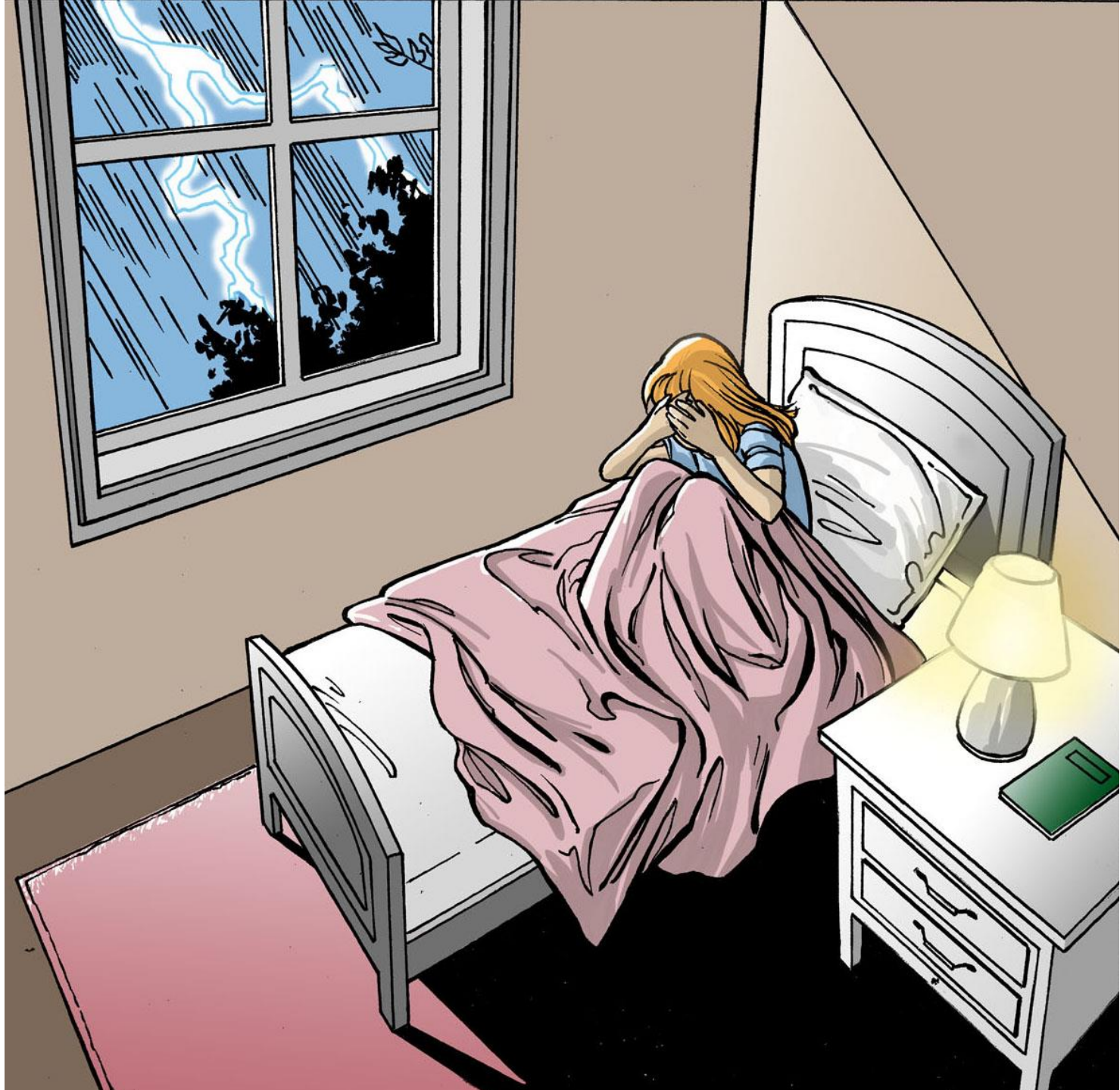# Origin Stories
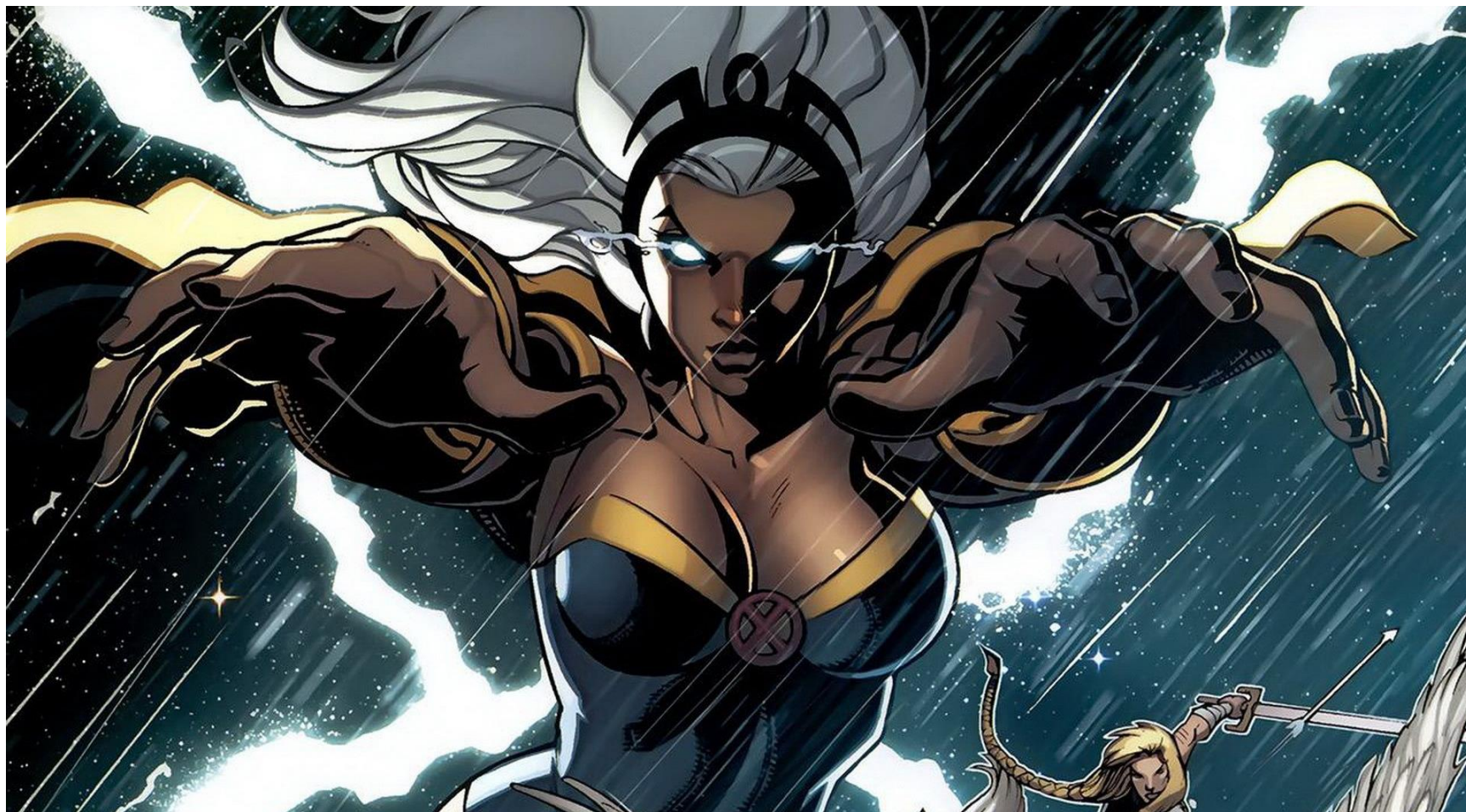
# Origin Stories
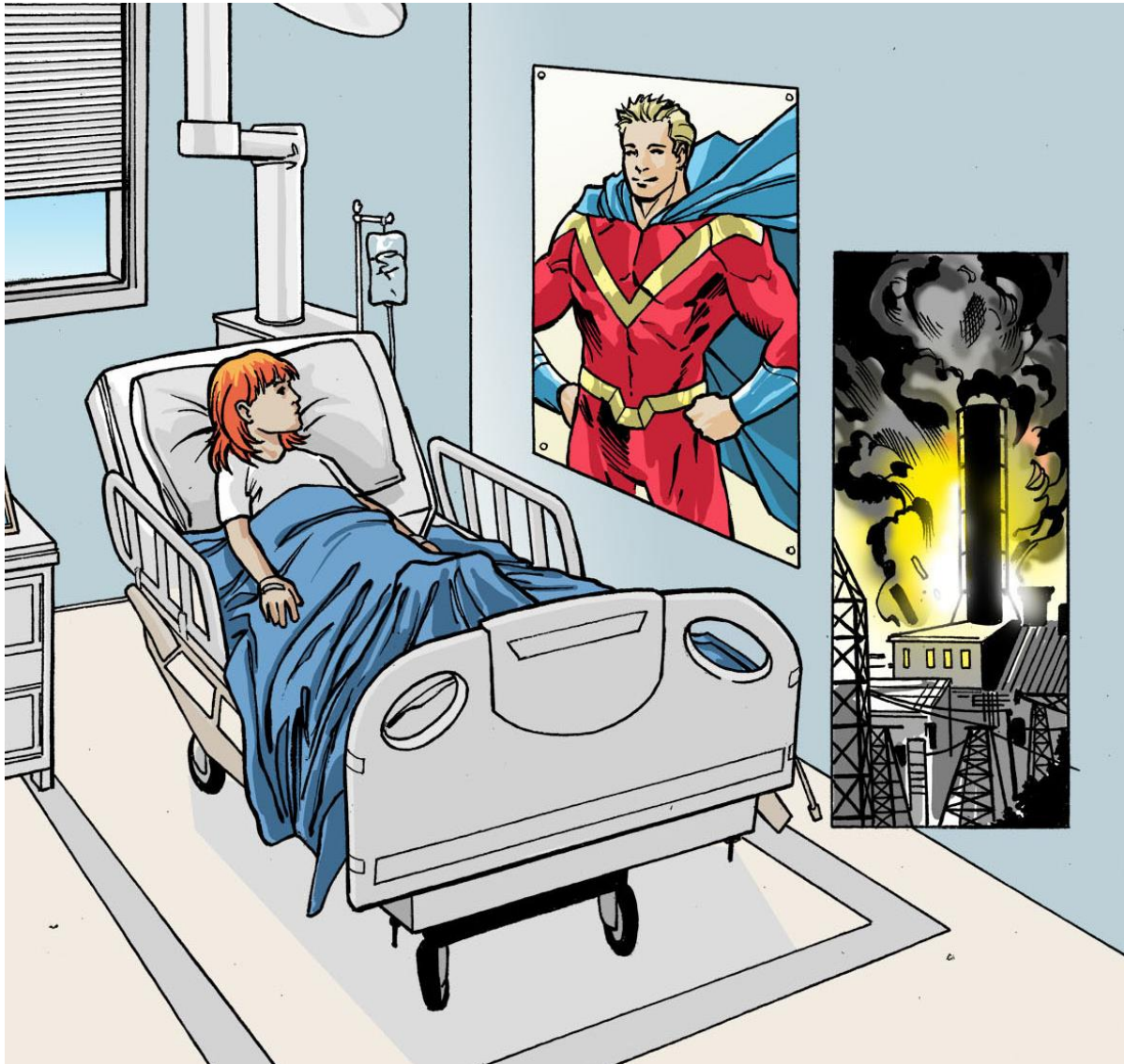
X-MEN

- "What I wouldn't give to be normal"
  - Mystique and Beast (First Class)

# Post-Traumatic Growth

# Superman: Clinical Application

- "I wanted to be Superman… I failed"

# Superman: Clinical Application

- "I wanted to be Superman, I failed"

- Invincible

# Superman: Clinical Application

- "I wanted to be Superman, I failed"
- Invincible

- Kryptonite

# What is Superhero Therapy?

Using popular culture (books, TV shows, movies, and video games examples) in evidence-based therapies (CBT, ACT, prosocial research)

For "KIDS" of all ages
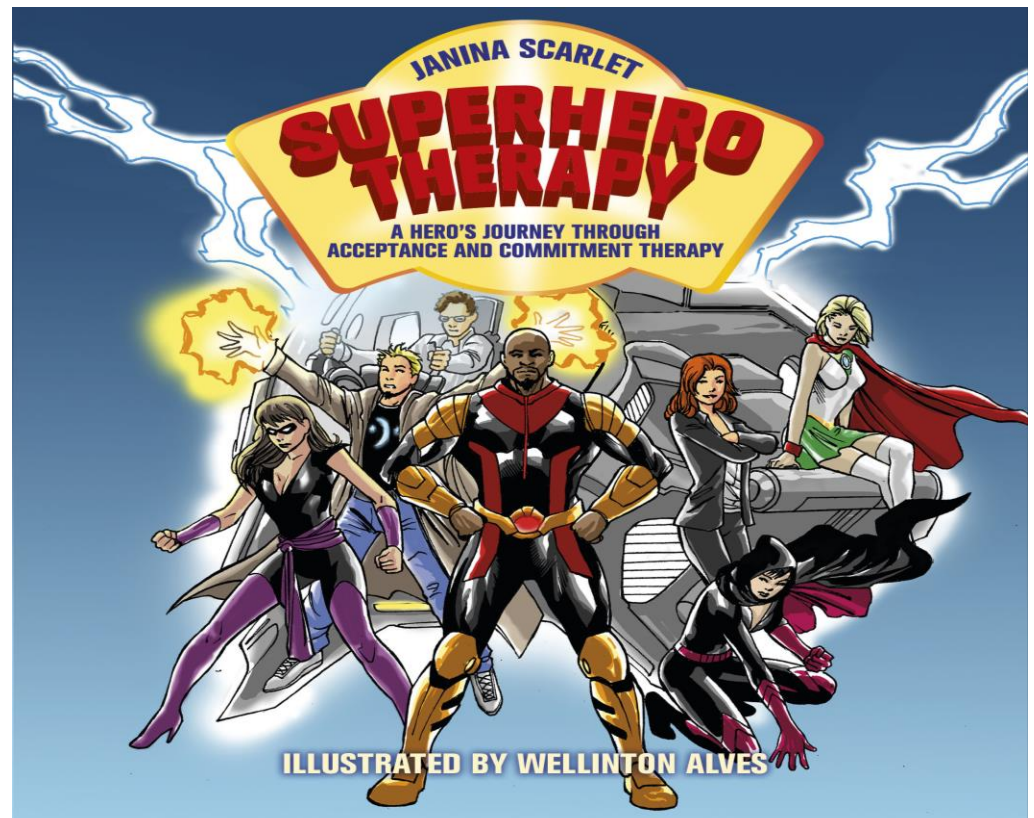
# Most Important Rule:

- You don't have to be the expert in pop culture
- The client is the expert !

# Why Superhero Therapy?

- During most difficult times, people feel alone

- Shame is a common feature

Shame: I am bad.
Guilt: I did something bad.

# Brene Brown's Research



- *"We deny our loneliness. We feel shame around being lonely even when it's caused by grief, loss, or heartbreak" Brené Brown*
- Many people suffer from periodic shame
  - Shame is "under the radar", difficult to talk about
  - The less it's talked about, the more shame compounds
- Shame has negative effects
  - May underlie low mood, low self esteem, alienation
  - Drives negative behavior, compensatory attention seeking

# Potential Triggers for Shame
## Experiences of Not Fitting In related to:

- Appearance
- Body Image
- Money
- Mental health
- Physical health
- Addiction
- Homelessness

- Sex (including "slut-shaming")
- Gender identity/sexual orientation
- Religion/Cultural identity
- Surviving/experiencing trauma
- Race/ethnicity
- Divorce
- Incarceration

# How shame shows up in mental health

# Brooklyn College Example

# Social Connection

- Getting connected with people and meaningful activities helps restore functioning
- *"It's not that misery loves company, it's that company is the antidote to misery"*

  *- Kristin Neff*

# Ant-Man Example

# RESEARCH

# Parasocial Relationships & Social Surrogacy
## Why do we grieve fictional deaths?



Leave me alone to mourn the deaths of fictional characters I have become overly attached to.

your ecards
someecards.com
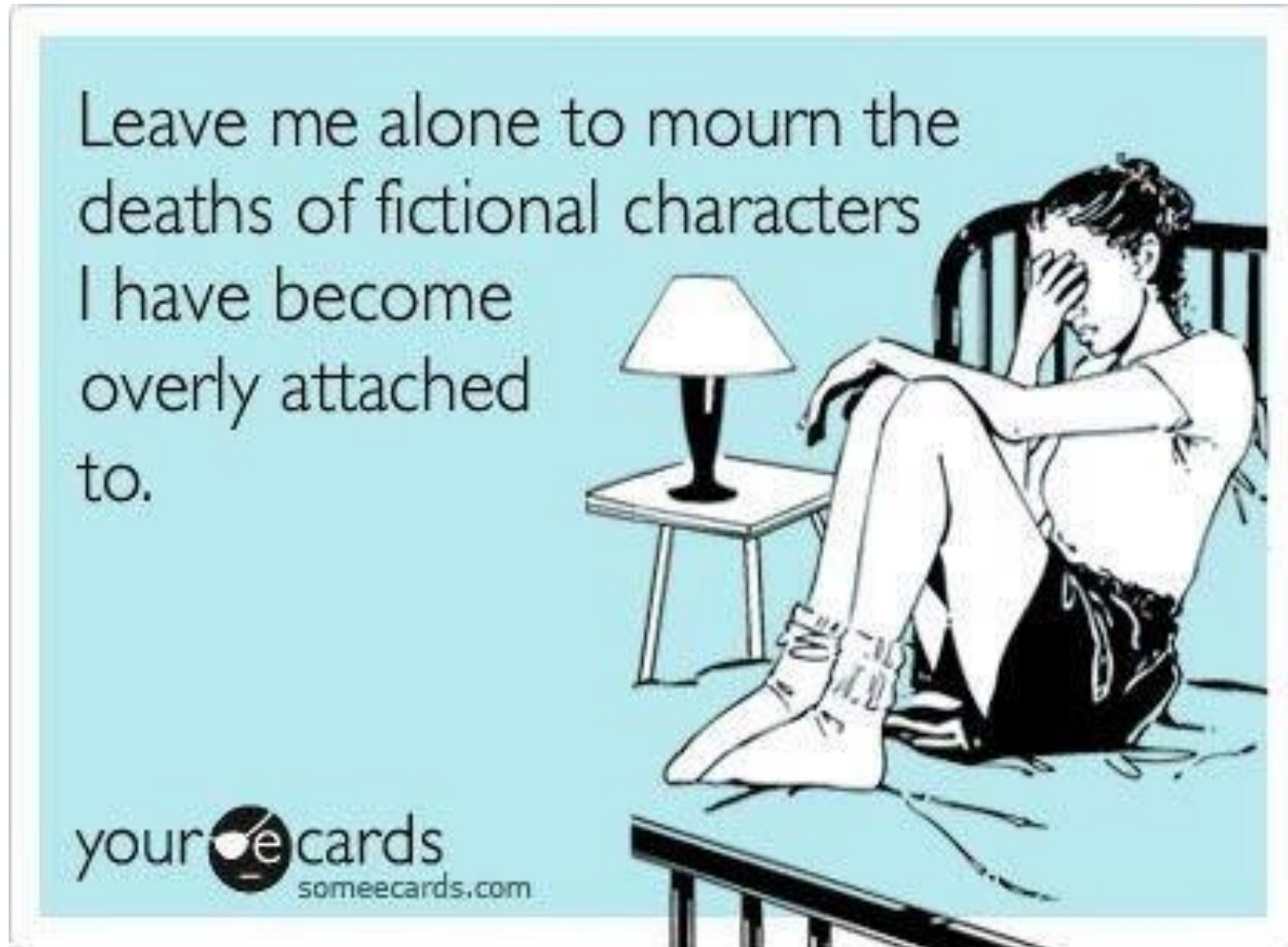
# Friendships & Fandoms
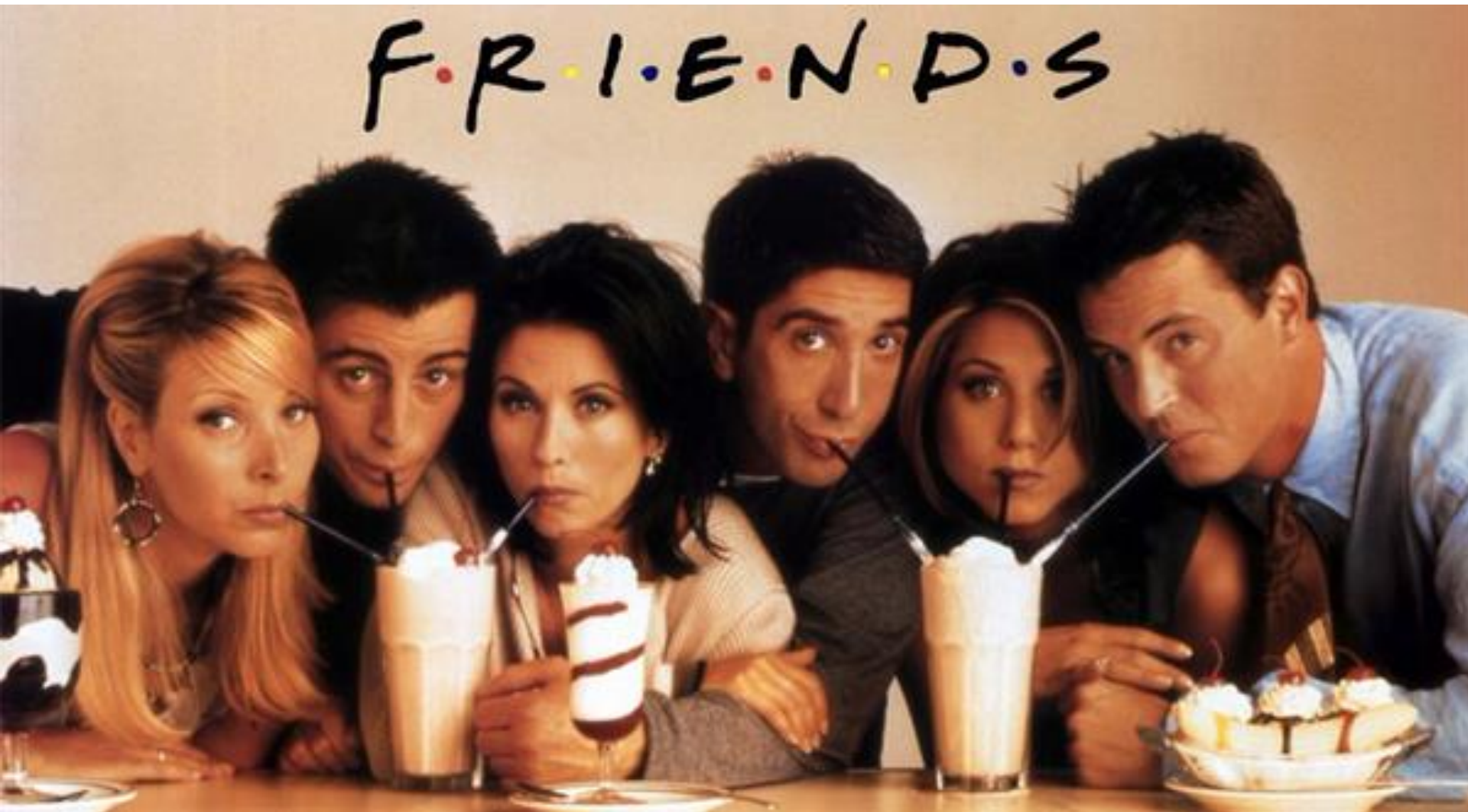
# Reduced Loneliness/Rejection Feelings

- When lonely, participants watched favorite TV show (eg FRIENDS) rather than "whatever was on TV"
  - Not escapism, but a need for connection

- Watching favorite TV show allowed for participants to feel significantly less lonely

Derrick, J. E., Gabriel, S., & Hugenberg, K. (2009).

# Reduced Loneliness/Rejection Feelings

- When recalling a fight with a loved one, felt *rejected* and *lonely*

- Significant reductions in these when writing about favorite TV show (FRIENDS) but not neutral show nor academic achievement

Derrick, J. E., Gabriel, S., & Hugenberg, K. (2009).

# Awe-Related Experiences

- Research by Stellar, et al., (2015) from UC Berkeley:
  - Connecting with art and nature can create an influx of positive emotions, a sense of awe
  - Related to decrease in pro-inflammatory cytokines, specifically Interleukin 6, a marker of inflammation
- Inflammation is related to health issues
  - autoimmune disorders, like Celiac, Graves, MS, Lupus, arthritis, etc.
- Inflammation is related to behavioral health issues
  - depression, anxiety, panic d/o, poor sleep quality, eating disorders, chronic pain, and appetite increase

# Conflict Resolution



Bauer, K. & Dettore, E. (1997)

# Superhero Priming





- Superhero priming (e.g through pretending to be one or playing VR game) increases helping Bx (eg in pencil drop)
  - Rosenberg et al (2013)

- Superhero poses can increase helping Bx (Peña & Chen, 2017) & self-esteem (Cuddy et al, 2015)

# Healthier Food Choices



- Cornell University
- Children were asked to pick between apples and French fries
- Only 9% chose apples
- When primed with admirable heroes, like Batman, nearly 50% chose apples

Wansink et al. (2012)

- *Dressing up also helps maintain attention on task

White & Carlson (2015)

# Self-control



Derrick (2013)

# Sexual Assault Awareness for Children

- Marvel and National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse (NCPCA)( 1984 and 1985 )
- Spider-Man discovers that a little boy was sexually abused by his babysitter
- Spider-Man shares with him his own story of being sexually abused by a young man
- Boy is later able to report the incident to his parents with Spider-Man's help
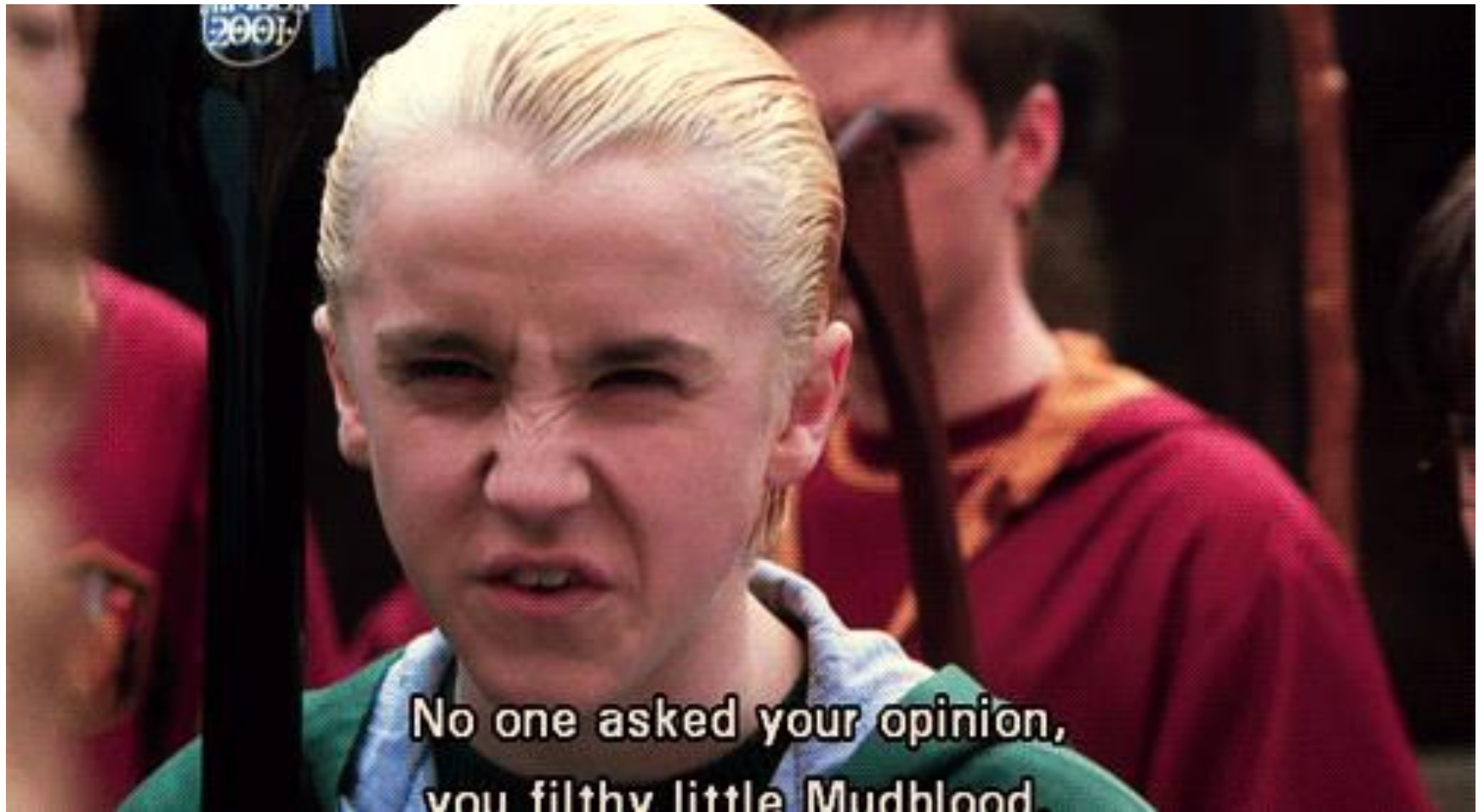
# "Doctor Who" Research Study

- Both academic and psychological effects
  - Depression
  - Compassion toward others
  - Social Connectedness

# Research: HP Boosts Compassion



No one asked your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood.

# Research: HP Boosts Compassion

- Reading about Harry Potter's struggles activated compassion and empathy centers of the brain (anterior insula and cingulate cortex)
  - – Hsu et al., 2014

- Reading Harry Potter also increased the activation in the left amygdala, related to conscious emotion processing and pleasure
  - -Hsu et al, 2015

# Neuroimaging

# PTSD + Loneliness = Social Surrogacy



- College students filled out self-assessments
  - Trauma history, loneliness, social surrogacy via books, TV, etc. for connection
- Results: people w/trauma exposure more likely to turn to social surrogacy when lonely.

Gabriel et al. (2017)

# Fandom & connection

# Superhero Therapy Model

# Example: Jessica Jones



Origin Story

Monsters

Setbacks & hopelessmess

Finding a hero role model

Skills & training

Defining purpose

Becoming a Superhero IRL
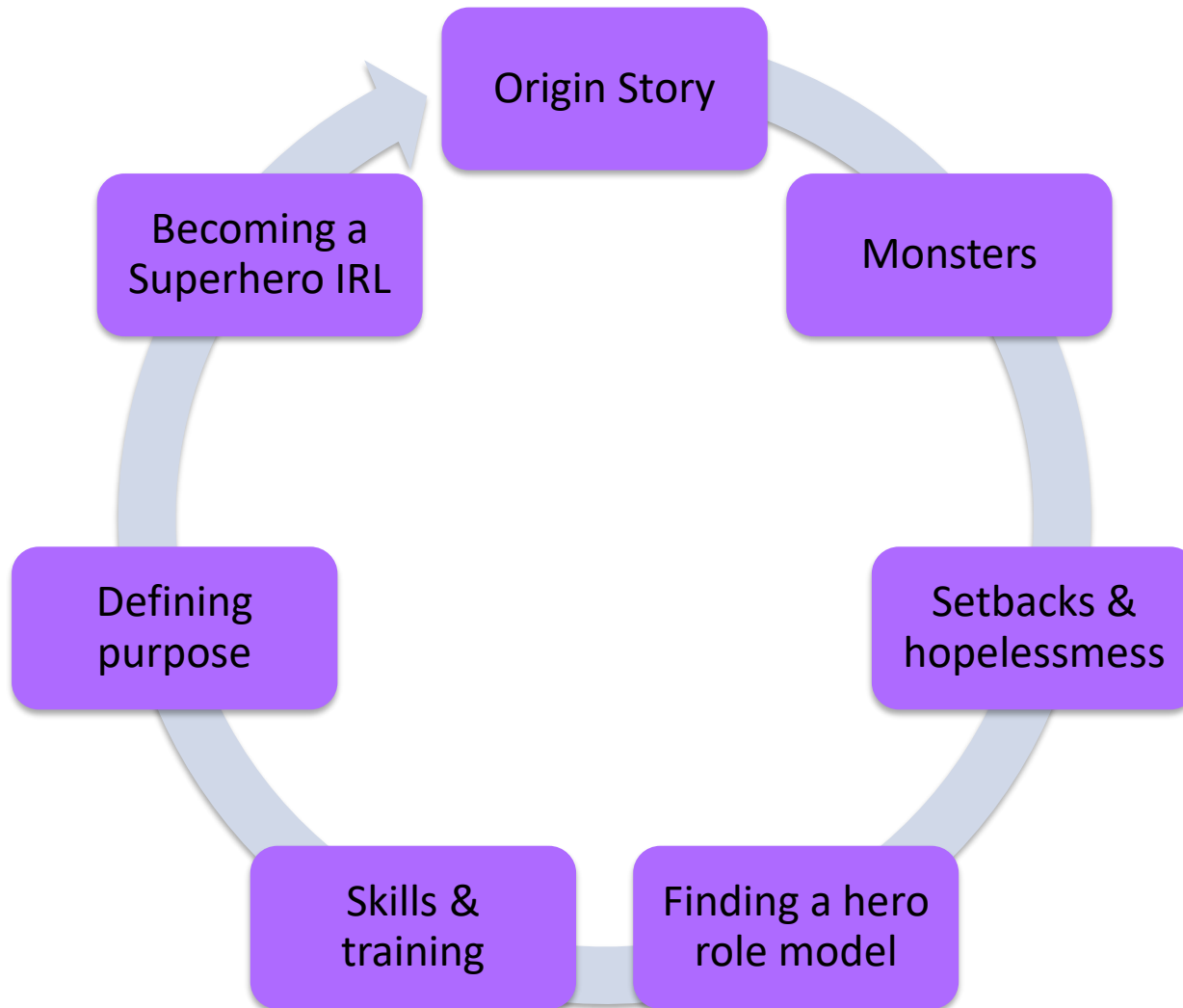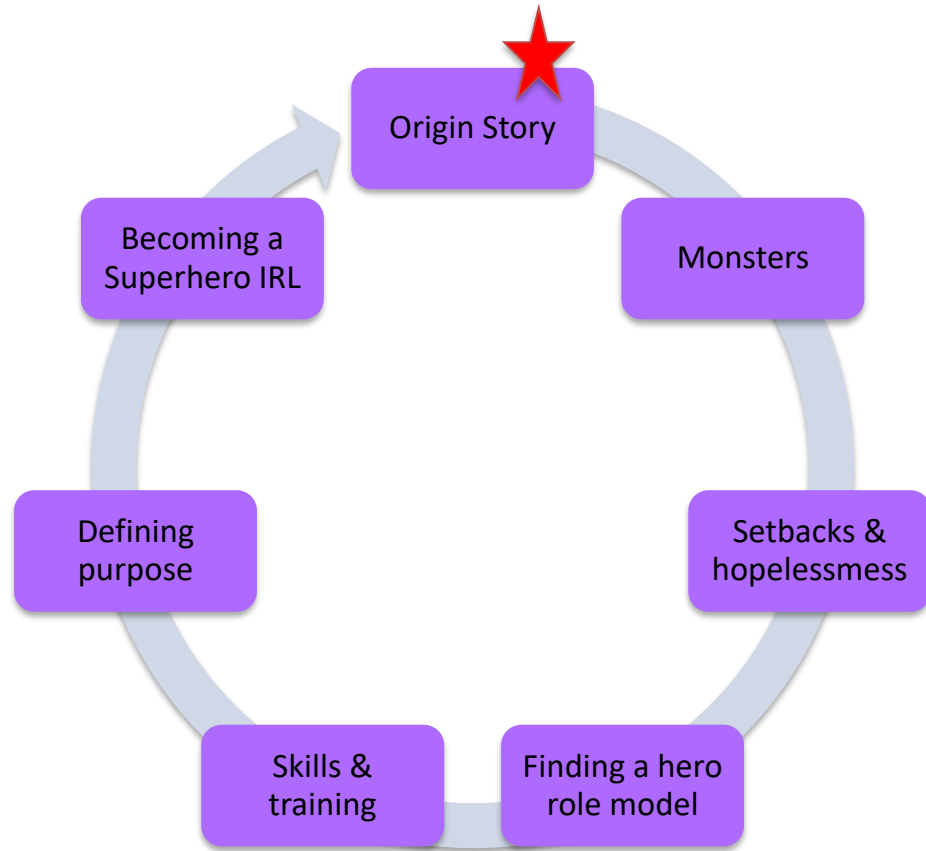
# Defining One's Own Superhero Origin Story

**Telling and retelling our "origin story" can reduce PTSD symptoms**

# Scripting One's Own Origin Story

# Who is Your (Super)Hero ?

- Can be real life or fictional
- Someone who is a figure of great strength and wisdom
- What do you admire about them ?

# Your Hero's Message

# Small group discussions

# Large group discussion

# Hope

# What if my clt likes a villain?

- Joker
- Harley Quinn
- Dexter
- Darth Vader
- Voldemort

# What is it that the clt likes?

- Rarely do they like that the character is a killer, so not usually an indication of HI

- Usually, an unmet need: feeling constrained by work and other obligations (Harley beating up people who didn't visit her clt in the hospital)

- Often, wanting to play more, wanting to be free, and wanting to be ok with having more fun

# Tea/Coffee Break

# Superhero Therapy Model
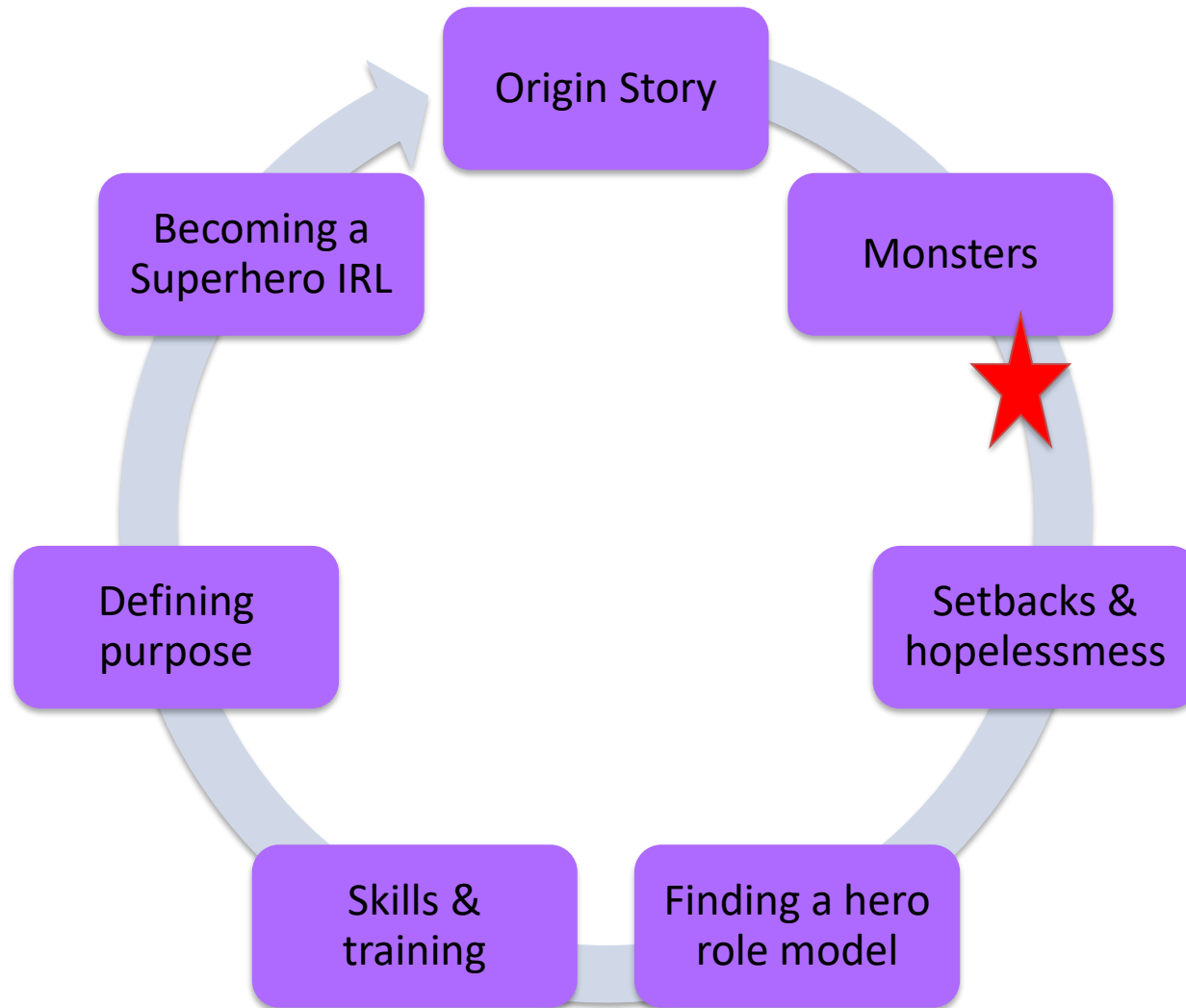
# Identifying "monsters"



Anxiety, shame, anger, and depression

# Hopelessness and setbacks

Hopelessness



Creative hopelessness

# Creative Hopelessness

- What are your monsters?

- What have you tried to do to get rid of them?

- What were the costs of those practices?

- What were the results?

    ->Illustrate the avoidance trap

Hayes, S. C., & Wilson, K. G. (1994). Acceptance and commitment therapy: Altering the verbal support for experiential avoidance. *The Behavior Analyst*, *17*(2), 289-303.

# Superhero Therapy Model

# Finding heroic role model & creating a treatment plan

- Evaluation session (Session 1)
  - Passions, interests, heroes
- Session 2: Origin Story
- Session 3: Identifying monsters
- Sessions 4-10*: Building skills
- Session 11: Becoming a Superhero IRL
- Last session: Retelling of the origin story

  * Amount of sessions is dependent on client needs

# Building a treatment plan

– Incorporating origin story and "monsters" into Tx plan

– Common humanity connection stories – heroes

– Skills

– Sense of purpose

– Superhero IRL

# Example

- "Chuck" – 29 year old Marine w/PTSD
- Origin Story:
  - Physical injury
- Monsters:
  - Depression, PTSD, shame
  - Believes himself to be "weak" and "broken"
- Hopelessness & setback
  - Isolating
  - Withdrawing from military activities
  - Not spending time with family
  - Refusing to be in wheelchair, refusing to get a handicapped sticker

# Finding a mentor - Batgirl

# Batgirl -> Oracle

# Skills & Superheroing

- Skills:
  - Focus on mindfulness and acceptance of condition, as well as any grief that comes with it
  - Cognitive restructuring/defusion practice with thoughts, such as "I'm weak, I am broken"
  - Explore his identity as a "hero"
- Sense of purpose
  - Focus on core values – family, career
- Superhero IRL
  - Set up committed actions to honor his core values
- Tie into his origin story

# Results



"Wheelchair Man" by Afghanistan-born Boston resident Mohammad Sayed

# Storm Example – origin story

# Storm Example

- Origin:
  - "Katrina" – 19 year old female
  - Car accident 2 years prior
- "Monsters"
  - Panic attacks when driven on freeway
  - Thoughts: "If I drive, I'm going to get into an accident"
- Setback & hopelessness
  - Refused to drive
  - Avoids similar makes and models of the car, similar color cars, intersection, avoids being driven on the freeway

# Tx Plan

- Identify Origin stories, monsters, and setbacks
- Find hero(s): Storm in this case
- Skills:
  - Focus on mindfulness and acceptance of anxiety symptoms
  - Cognitive restructuring/defusion practice with thoughts, such as "I'm weak, I am broken"
  - Explore her identity as a "hero" and "friend"
- Sense of purpose
  - Focus on core values – friends, college
- Superhero IRL
  - Set up committed actions/exposures to honor her core values – driving to college and to see friends
- Rewrite Origin Story

# Results

# Spider-Man Example – origin story

# Spider-Man Example

- "Jared" – 16 year old male with OCD and Social Anxiety D/O
- Failed 2 classes due to not showing up to class presentation
- Overanalyzes social interactions
- Thoughts: "If I try to talk to someone, I will come across as stupid or awkward" and "People hate me"
- Avoids social interactions

# Small groups practice & discussion

- You are a (superheroic) treatment team
- Practice creating a treatment plan for "Jared"
- Which questions would you want to ask him? Which skills would you want to help him work on?
- What would the treatment plan look like?

# Results



4K images are from PS4 Pro. 4K display device required to view in 4K.

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# Popular examples and mental health

# Skills:
# Mindfulness

- Using superheroes to identify thoughts, emotions, and internal and external experiences

- Metaphors
  - Superhero skills
  - Magic spells
  - Jedi Practice
    - Connection with the Force
  - Ask clients to help you elicit more examples, e.g. Steven Universe

# Skills:
## Defusion & Cognitive restructuring



**Unreliable psychic**

# Defining a sense of purpose: Core values

- What is all of this for?



- What is your quest about?

# Becoming a Superhero IRL

- Taking action in order to fulfill your quest
- Overcoming phobias through exposures like Batman
- Following your heart like Wonder Woman*
- Standing up for what is right like Harry Potter or Luke Skywalker

# Harry Potter

# Child Abuse*





*An often forgotten but crucial
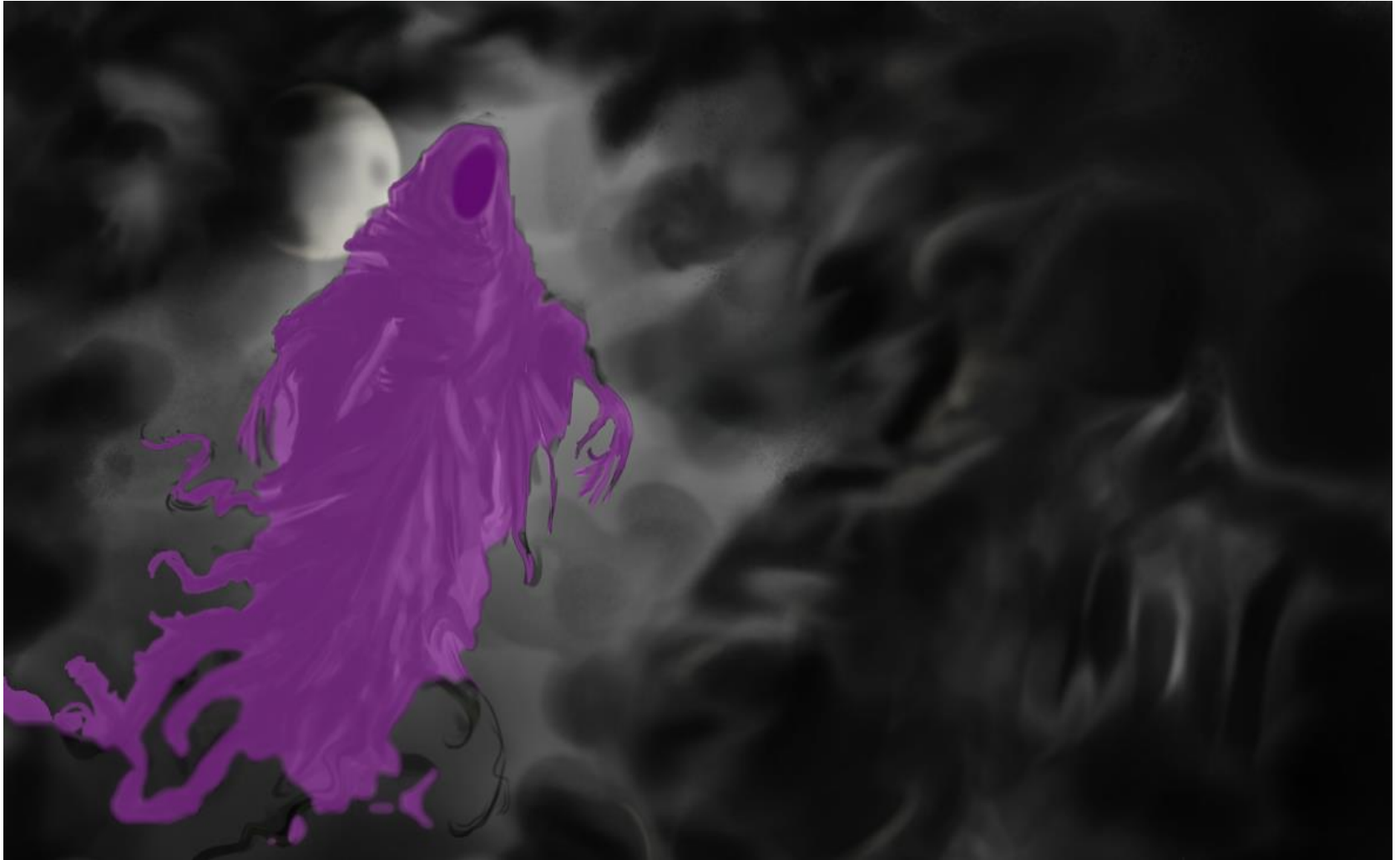Origin story

# Tragic losses

# Depression

# Pink Dementor – example for avoidance and creative hopelessness exercises

# Patronus

# Chocolate

# Phobias

# Phobias

# Skill building

- Boggarts
  - Defense Against the Dark Arts

# Hero example: Buffy the Vampire Slayer

# Friendly Reminder:

- You don't have to be the expert
- The client is the expert

# Pair up practice

- Role play: Practice creative hopelessness and introducing the idea of pop culture role models for your "client"
  - Using a fictional role model of your choice
  - Using your theoretical orientation

# Villain example: Kylo Ren (Star Wars)

# Examples for kids

- Squirrel Girl
- Diary of a Wimpy Kid
- Steven Universe

# Moral injury

- Moral injury – feelings of guilt over an immoral act, for acting against one's moral code, or for being unable to act in accordance to one's moral code
- Can bring on feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, depression, anger, and suicidal ideation

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- Military
- Mental health professionals

# Working through moral injury

- Awareness of burnout

- Burnout as a medical diagnosis

- Self-compassion as investment
  in your work

# Working through moral injury

- Awareness of burnout

- Burnout as a medical diagnosis

- Self-compassion as investment in your work

- You are not alone

- Even Superman needs the Justice League

# Lunch Break

# Harry Potter meditation

# Gaming

- Playfulness
  - Value that often gets ignored
  - Animals play
  - Playfulness and health
  - Games and learning

# Gamify

- *"The opposite of play isn't work. It's depression."*

  -Psychologist Brian Sutton-Smith (1960s)

  -Game researcher/play theorist from New Zealand

  -Discussed games as necessary for emotional survival

  - Play: pretend, role-play, sports, festivals/LARP, imaginary, gambling

  - Form of self-expression

# Gamify

- *"The opposite of play isn't work. It's depression."*

  -Psychologist Brian Sutton-Smith (1960s)

# Are games a form of escapism?

- Most play to "escape"
- Find connection
- Discover sense of purpose

# Criticism

- Face criticism from family members, educators and therapists:
  - "Put down the game and do something real"
  - "Stop wasting so much time"

# Sutton-Smith's research

- Play Behavior
  - More self-confidence
  - More true to ourselves
  - Increased physical energy
  - More positive emotions (curiosity, optimism, excitement)

# Benefits of playing video games:

- Improves memory, coordination, & concentration (receiving instructions from the game)
- Problem-solving skills
- Helps with multitasking
- Helps with social skills
- Improves cognitive processing

# Types of Games

- Tabletop
- LARP
- Computer/Video Games
- Mobile App
- Role-play/Imagination
- Sports
- Gambling

# Tabletop Games

# Tabletop Games

- Board games
  - Monopoly, Chess, Checkers, Clue

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- **Board games**
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- **Dice Games**
  - Backgammon, Yahtzee

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  - Magic the Gathering, Munchkin, Yu-Gi-Oh

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- Deck
  - Magic the Gathering, Munchkin, Yu-Gi-Oh
- Pencil-paper
  - Tic-Tac-Toe, Hangman
- Role-playing games
  - Dungeons & Dragons

# Game-Based Rehabilitation for Stroke

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQqisA89pAw
- For OTs
- How can it be applied to mental health professionals?

# Game-Based CBT

- For children who survived Childhood sexual Assault (CSA)
  - For kids
  - But can also be used for teens and adults

# Building empathy: Crystals of Kaydor

- Reading facial expressions and building communication skills
- [https://youtu.be/463Bl7GAYgc](https://youtu.be/463Bl7GAYgc)
  - Based on the Facial Action Coding System (Eckman)
  - In just 2 weeks kids (11-14) who play this game show greater empathy and perspective taking neuroactivity (posterior cingulate – mPFC) in fMRI
  - Altered neuroactivity within neural networks linked with emotion regulation (amygdala-mPFC)

https://www.nature.com/articles/s41539-018-0029-6

# Building Emotional Intelligence

# Superbetter



https://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_the_game_that_can_give_you_10_extra_years_of_life?language=en

# Games in Tx
## (Tetris for PTSD, D&D for social skills)

# PTSD

# Schizophrenia

- http://www.bbc.com/news/health-42097781
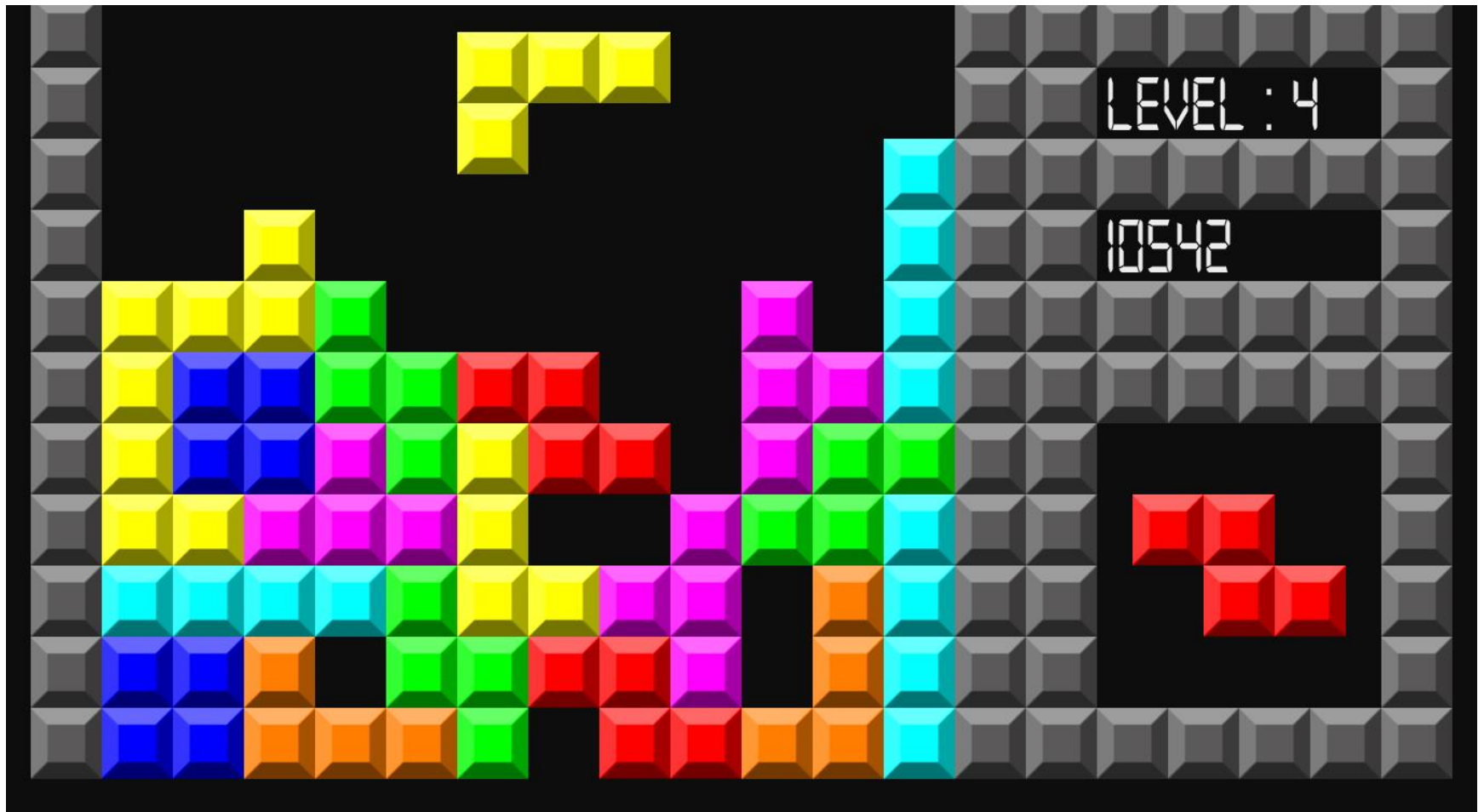
- Addressing Avatars reduces distress and believability of auditory hallucinations

# Grief

# Pokémon Go/Wizards Unite – for depression and anxiety

# Games with clients

- Can establish rapport and trust
- Can ease client to process emotions and trauma
- Can improve mood
- Munchkin EXAMPLE

# Games with groups

- Line Up
- Fun Facts Ball
- Pandemic
- D&D

# Role-Playing Games

- D&D

  Mayim Bialik explains D&D

  – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mu1QT11DPK
    A

# Role-playing games (RPGs)

- D&D
  - Impulsivity control (consequences)
  - Communication (to get information)
  - Collaboration (to complete a quest)
  - Decision making
  - Compassion/Empathy

# Kids on Bikes

# Character Sheets

- Filling out character sheets can help clts in treatment

# Therapy Quest



A Robinson Self-help Guide

THERAPY QUEST
JANINA SCARLET

An Interactive Quest Through Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

# THERAPY QUEST

you are HERE

CHARACTER NAME      MAGICAL RACE      CLASS      ALIGNMENT

## MAGIC ABILITY

| SCORE | | WISDOM | INNER STRENGTH | COURAGE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | MAGIC = | + | | + |

## OBSTACLES / TRAPS AND CURSES

| OBSTACLES | TRAPS AND CURSES |
|---|---|
| DEPRESSION | AVOIDANCE |
| ANXIETY | NUMBING |
| TRAUMA | NOT MINDFUL |
| SELF-BULLYING | EMPATHIC DISTRESS |
| LACK OF SUPPORT | NOT SUPPORTING OTHERS |
| ADDICTION | FUSION |
| HEALTH PROBLEMS | IMPULSIVITY/INACTION |
| CORE BELIEFS | OVERIDENTIFIED SELF |
| OTHER | LACK OF CORE VALUES |

## INNER STRENGTH

- VULNERABILITY
- SELF-COMPASSION
- COMPASSION TOWARD OTHERS
- CORE VALUES

## COURAGE

- ACCEPTANCE
- SUPPORTING OTHERS
- DEFUSION
- COMMITTED ACTION

### WISDOM

- MINDFULNESS
- WILLINGNESS TO "FACE IT"
- SELF-COMPASSION
- SELF-AS-CONTEXT
- WEIGHING OUT OPTIONS

## SKILLS

| SKILL NAME |
|---|
| ANIMAL CONNECTION |
| COLORING |
| COMPASSION/HEALING |
| COOKING |
| FAMILY |
| FRIENDSHIP |
| GAMES |
| GEEKING OUT |
| JUSTICE/LOYALTY |
| MINDFULNESS |
| NATURE |
| PAINTING/ART/MUSIC |
| PHOTOGRAPHY |
| READING |
| STEM |
| TRAVEL |
| VOLUNTEERING |
| WRITING |
| YOGA |
| OTHER |

## ORIGIN STORY

## WHAT YOU OVERCAME

## LANGUAGES KNOWN

# Break

# Superhero Therapy Model



Origin Story

Monsters

Becoming a
Superhero IRL

Setbacks &
hopelessmess

Defining
purpose

**PREPARATORY**
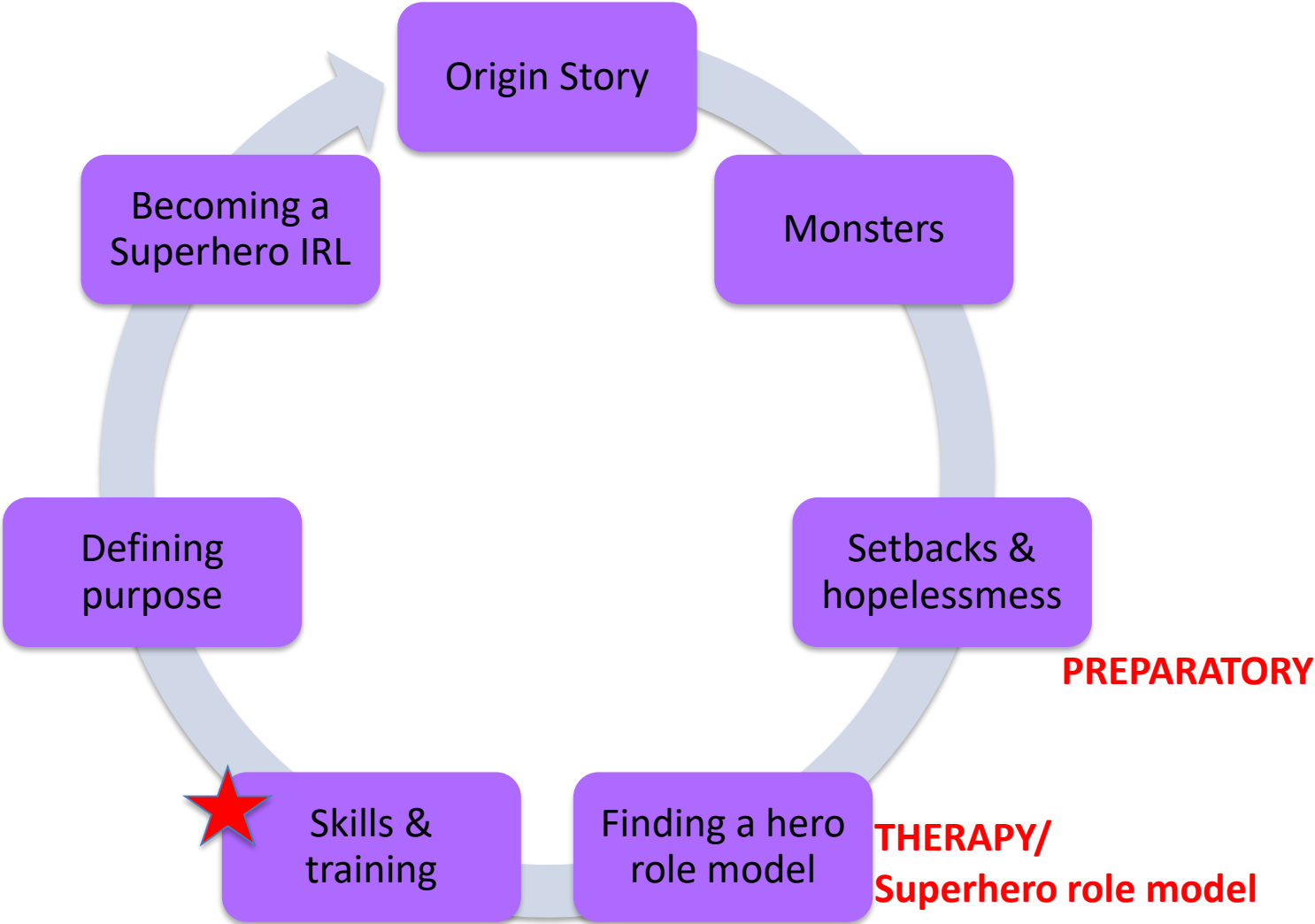
Skills &
training

Finding a hero
role model

**THERAPY/
Superhero role model**

# Superhero Narrative

- Based on Narrative Therapy

- Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET)

- Hero's Journey

# Narrative Therapy

- Has been shown to be helpful with rewriting the client's narrative
- Helpful with anxiety, depression, PTSD
- Complex PTSD

Neuner, et al., 2004

# (Super)hero Narrative

- Helpful to allow the clt to become the hero of their own journey

Robbins (2005); Rubin (2008); Scarlet (2016; 2019)

# Origin Story

- Can help understand the developed story clts tell themselves

- Can also help understand the clts core values
  - That which is most vulnerable, that which is most pained is indicative of what we care about the most
  - E.g. connection, safety, closeness, responsibility

# Timeline exercise

- In order

- Painful memories

- Beautiful memories

# Memories (NET)

- Hot Memory
  - Flight-flight-freeze response
  - Can be implicit (e.g. people are dangerous)

- Cold Memory
  - Factual memory
  - Explicit
  - Lower arousal

# Narrative Exposure Therapy

- Record Timeline events

- Process "hot memories"

- Turn "hot memories" into "cold memories"

# Example: Jessica Jones

- Timeline
  - Family died in a car crash
  - Experiments
  - Obtained Superpowers
  - Lived with best friend, Patsy
  - Became a superhero
  - Assaulted by Kilgrave/Purple Man

# Superhero Therapy: Jessica Jones

- Record Timeline events
- Process painful memories
- Turn painful experiences into (just) *experiences*
  - Processing
  - Exposure
  - Changing the relationship with her trauma
- Content *and* context

# Skills: Externalizing "monsters"

- "Monsters" are any unwanted feelings, emotions, sensations, and thoughts that the client may want to get rid of
  - "Monsters" are not perpetrators of abuse, they are the result of it
  - Initially, helping the client to identify these can allow for rapport building (the client may view these as monstrous)

# On Fire

Johnny Storm

"The Human Torch"

-Fantastic Four



Monster

Vs.

Being on fire

# Changing the relationship with the monsters

- Identifying
- Externalizing
- Compassion
- *Riddikulus* storylines

# Externalizing the monster(s)

- Most people fuse with their stories
  - E.g. "I am a loser" or "I am not good enough" or "I am an amateur"
- Need to help clt to separate their story from themselves
- E.g., Instead of "I am stupid," change to "My anxiety told me that I am stupid"
- OR "My depression told me that I am a loser"

# Externalizing the monster(s)

- Drawing

- Writing

- Naming



Anxiety, shame, anger, and depression

# Steven Universe



Amethyst

Garnet (Ruby & Sapphire)

Pearl

Cartoon Network

# Steven Universe

- Steven – half gem
- Gems – alien warriors set to protect the world from monsters
- Can fuse together – combine together to form new gems
  - When fused, hard to see the individual gems
  - Defusion allows to see separate gems (thoughts, feelings, etc)
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rds7V5Sxu-4

# Steven Universe

- One of the first openly LGBTQ characters in a children's cartoon
    - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tfv8CaPINWw

# Example

- "Jean" – 37 yr. old bisexual female
- Multiple Hx of sexual and physical assault
- Hx of DV
- PTSD
- Nurse
- In a healthy relationship w/male partner
- Triggers: loud noise, yelling, people's frustrations, arguments, assertive or aggressive tone

# Example

- "I always have to be on guard. It's like I am always looking for danger. If my boyfriend is mad or if we are fighting, I flinch. I expect him to hit me. He never has.

- "When anyone yells at me or has an aggressive tone, I feel unsafe. I start apologizing, I talk fast, explaining myself. I'm scared to stop explaining. Then I cry."

# Discussion

# Compassion for the monster

# Compassion for the monster

- Are monsters really *monsters?*
  - Or are they scary because we are scared & hurtful because we are hurt?


- There's a Nightmare in my closet

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmYQzNQiPqk&t=14s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmYQzNQiPqk&t=14s)

# Compassion for the monster

**Experiential exercise**

- Pen & paper

# Compassion for the monster

**Experiential exercise**

1. Who are your monsters?

2. What are the monsters telling you? What are some of the messages?

# Compassion for the monster

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1. Who are your monsters?

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3. What do they need? Attention/love/support?

# Compassion for the monster

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3. What do they need? Attention/love/support?

4. What are they trying to protect you from?

# Compassion for the monster

**Experiential exercise**

1. Who are your monsters?
2. What are the monsters telling you? What are some of the messages?
3. What do they need? Attention/love/support?
4. What are they trying to protect you from?
5. Giving it reassurance & gratitude

# From monster to best friend

# Discussion

# Making the "monster" *Riddikulus*

- *Only for anxiety*

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doxxfXqpKYA&t=74s

# Making the "monster" riddikulus

- "Katie" – 22 year old female
- Hx of Schizoaffective D/O (in remission)
- Hx of family bullying her over her weight
- Currently, struggles with MDD and OCD
- Intrusive thoughts, "I am fat" "I need to exercise every day"

# Making the "monster" riddikulus
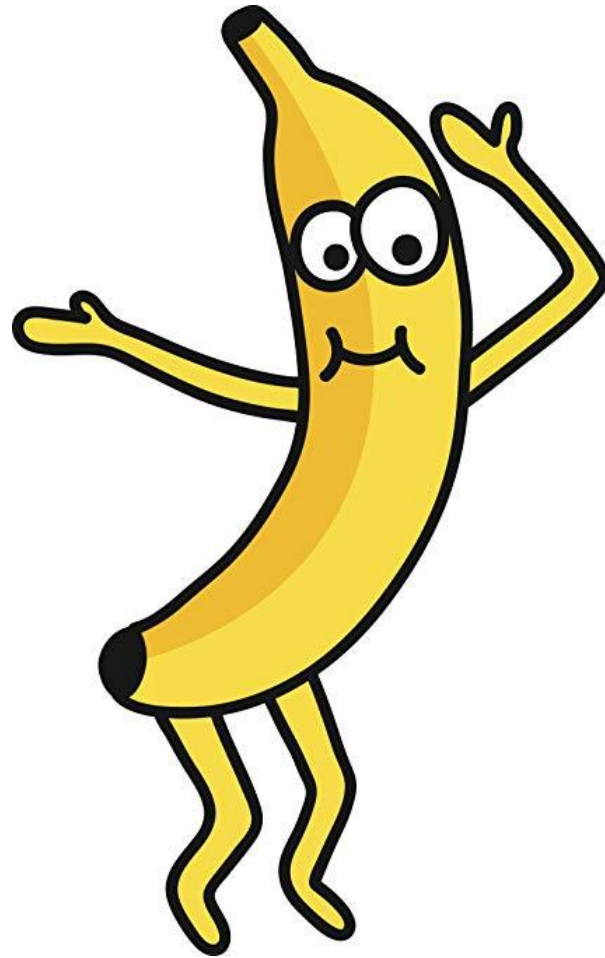
# Making the "monster" riddikulus

- E.g. "Lisa" – 18 year old student
- Struggles with anxiety (OCD)
- Intrusive thoughts, such as "what if I fall through the floor"
- Obsessions get in the way of her ability to focus in class, do homework, cause her extreme distress, and she often looks for reassurance that these events won't come true

# Making the "monster" riddikulus

- Lisa wrote out her story with a silly ending:
  - "I fall through the floor and go down, down, down a deep tunnel. I keep falling for hours and I get hungry. I find a vending machine on the way down and get a snack. I then see a white rabbit who invites me to go to a ball. I don't have a ball gown but agree to go anyway. When the desk finally lands, I am able to dance with the white rabbit and we eat strawberries for dinner."
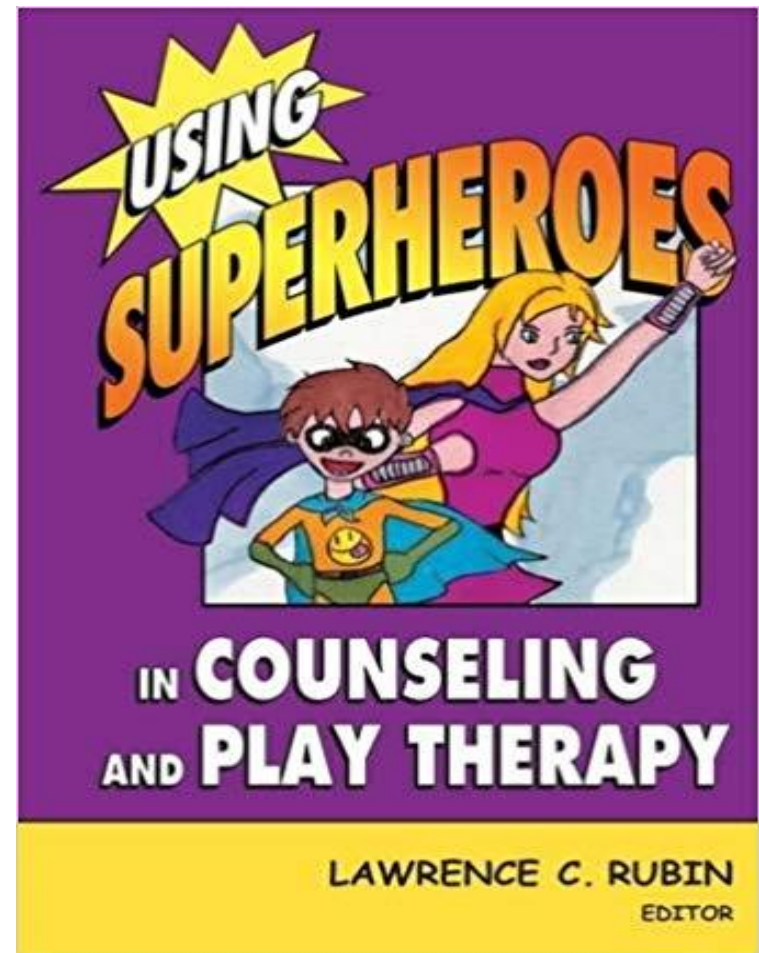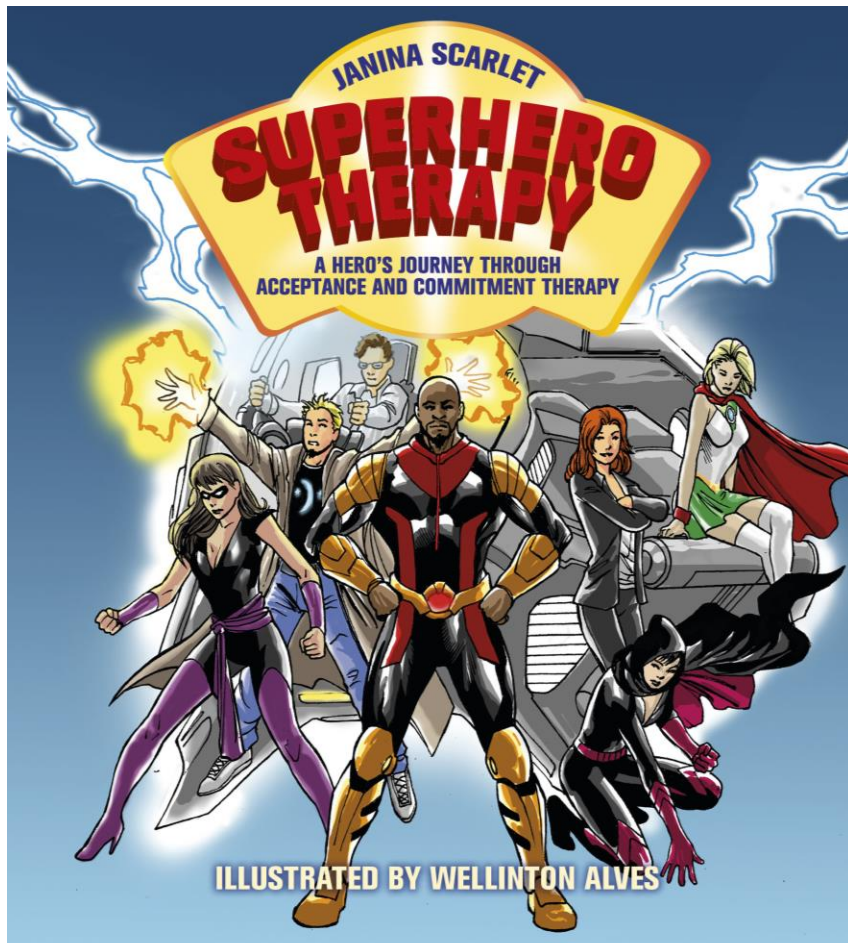
# Practice

- *For anxiety only*
- Start with a simple worry (e.g., being late), not the biggest catastrophizing thought
- Write out the worry
- Create a silly continuation for this scene. Don't sensor yourself and don't try to have it make sense. Just write. The sillier and the more out there, the better.
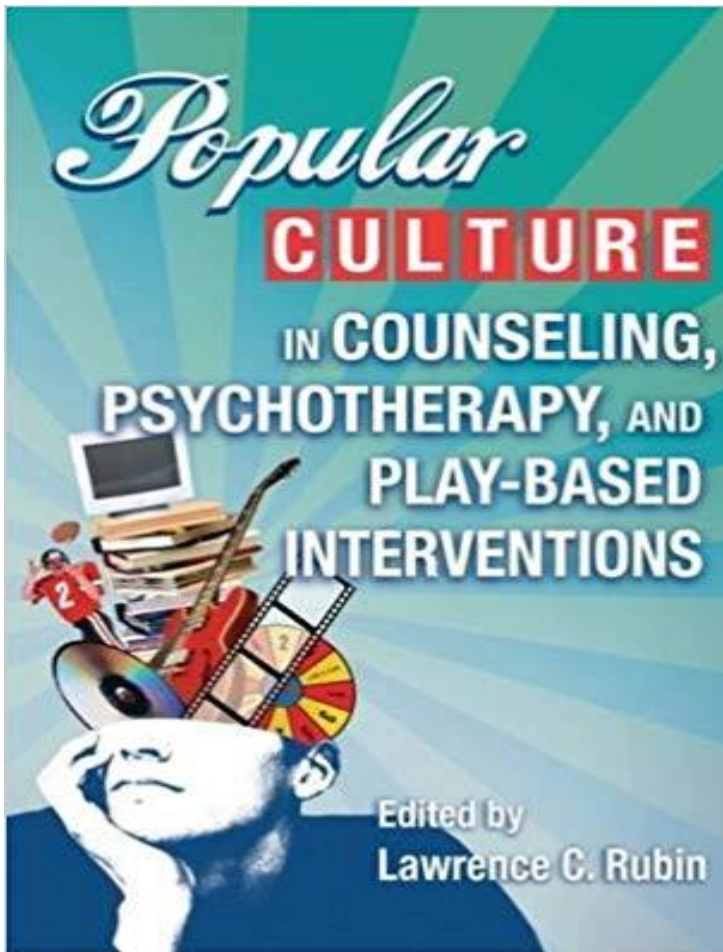
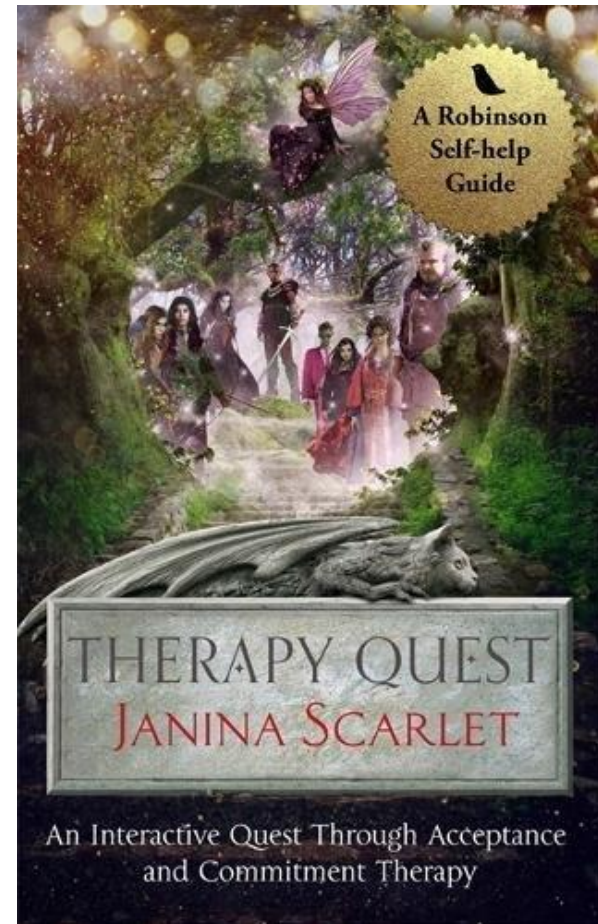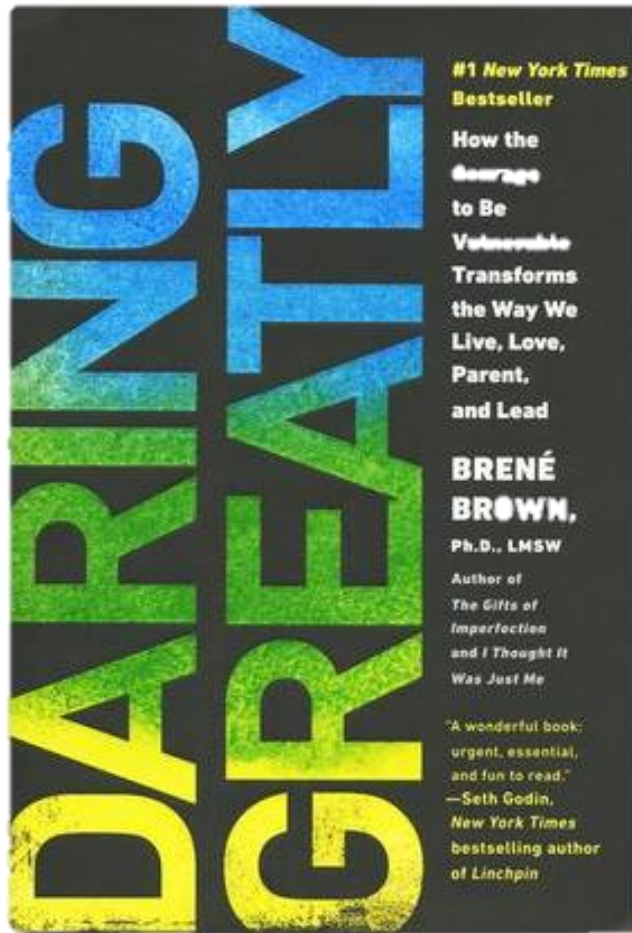# Case Consultation/Discussion

# Additional resources

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