

# Mental Health and Political Polarization

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# Is polarization stressing us out?

- **77%** of adults in the US say the future of the country is a significant source of stress
- **74%** fear political divisions could lead to violence
- **50%** say tension around political topics makes it difficult to connect
- **32%** report stress within their own families over politics

*American Psychological Association, Stress in America report, 2024.*



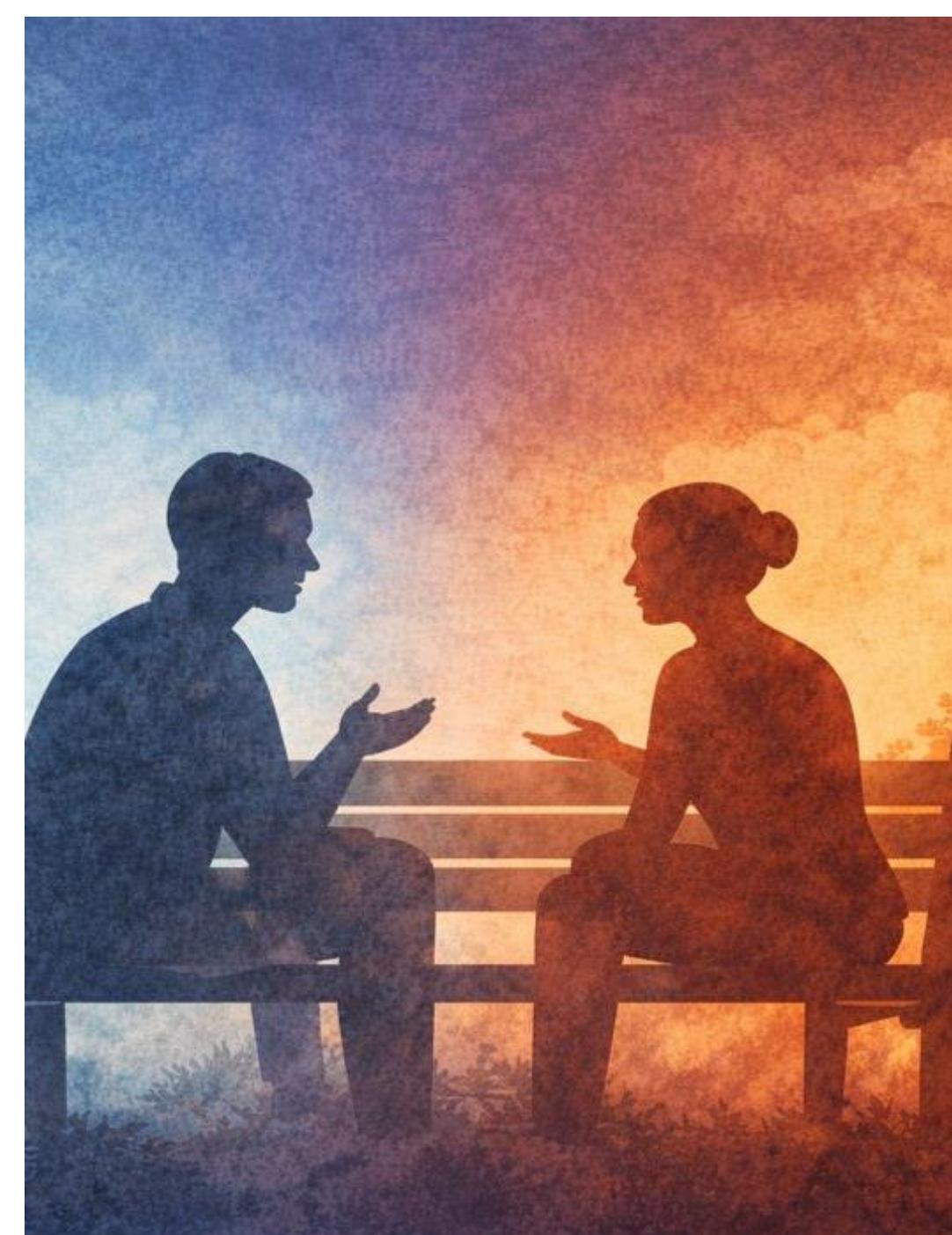
# In this training we will:

1. Explore why polarization and division feel **stressful** and impact our **mental health**
2. Understand why facts and arguments alone will not build **connection with others**
3. Learn how to **re-humanize** interactions and protect ourselves to stay **effective** in this work



# Why this matters:

- Polarization is not just political; it's psychological
- Political division activate stress, fear, and perceived threat
- We can counter polarization by re-humanizing one another



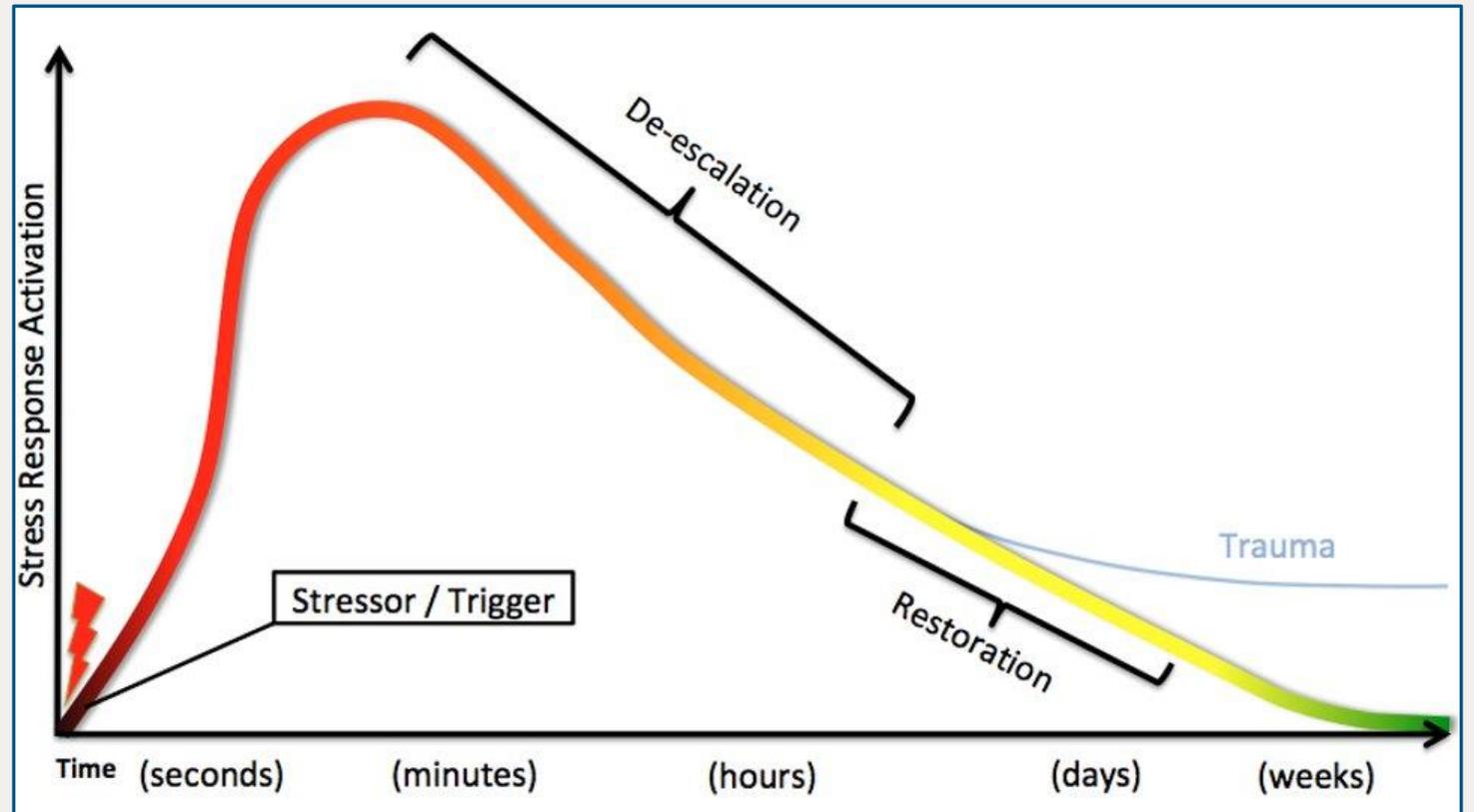
# What does this have to do with mental health?

- Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) is a broad spectrum of interventions
- Includes prevention, promotion, and treatment
- **MHPSS helps create conditions (i.e. reduce/manage stress) for people to think and relate to one another in a positive manner**



# Stress is part of being human

- But, if stress is extreme or prolonged, our nervous systems can become dysregulated



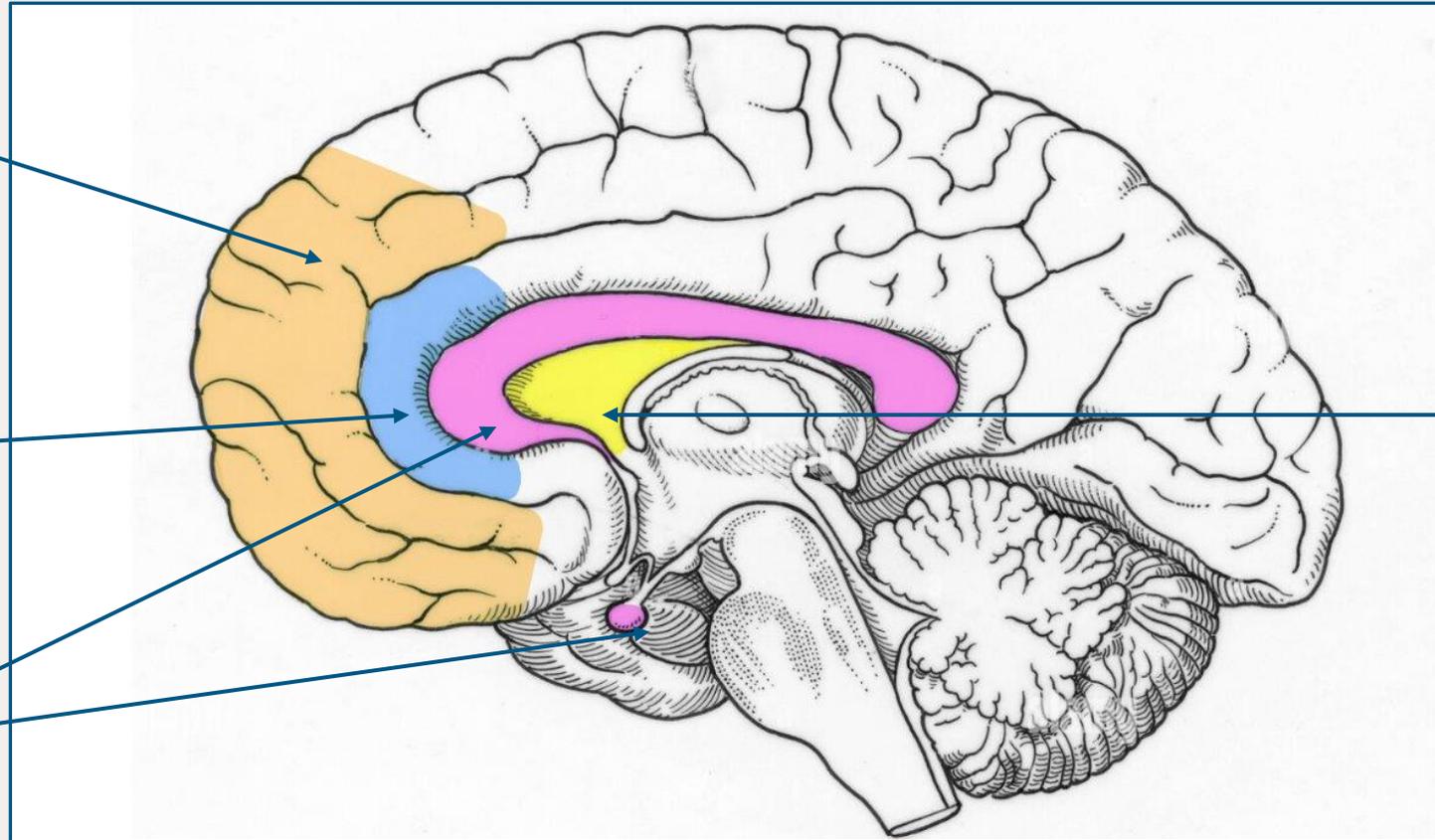
# Polarizing content feels like a threat

*It can bypass the brain's logic centers & provoke strong emotions (fight, flight, freeze)*

**Prefrontal Cortex:**  
Reasoning

**Anterior Cingulate:**  
Conflict and  
discomfort

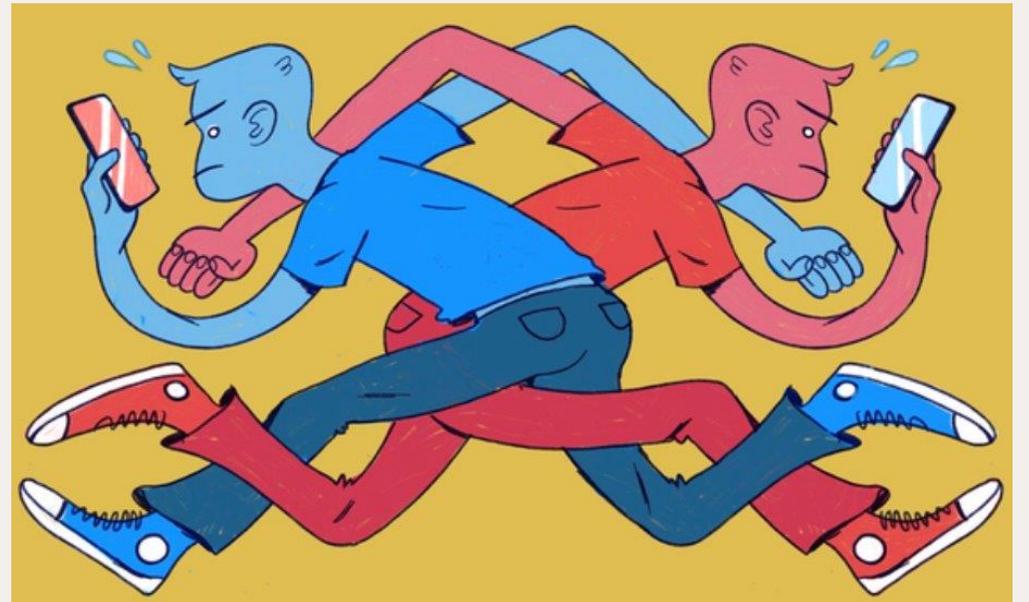
**Striatum and  
Amygdala:**  
Emotion



**Anterior  
Insula:**  
Social  
connection and  
belonging

# Screens & social media tap into our stress response

- Short-form, emotionally charged content provides a "hit" of dopamine.
- "Likes" clearly signal in and out groups.
- Seeing "our side" win reinforces our sense of belonging.
- Mental health vulnerabilities make people more sensitive to social approval and threat.



Haidt 2024; Wilmer et al 2020.

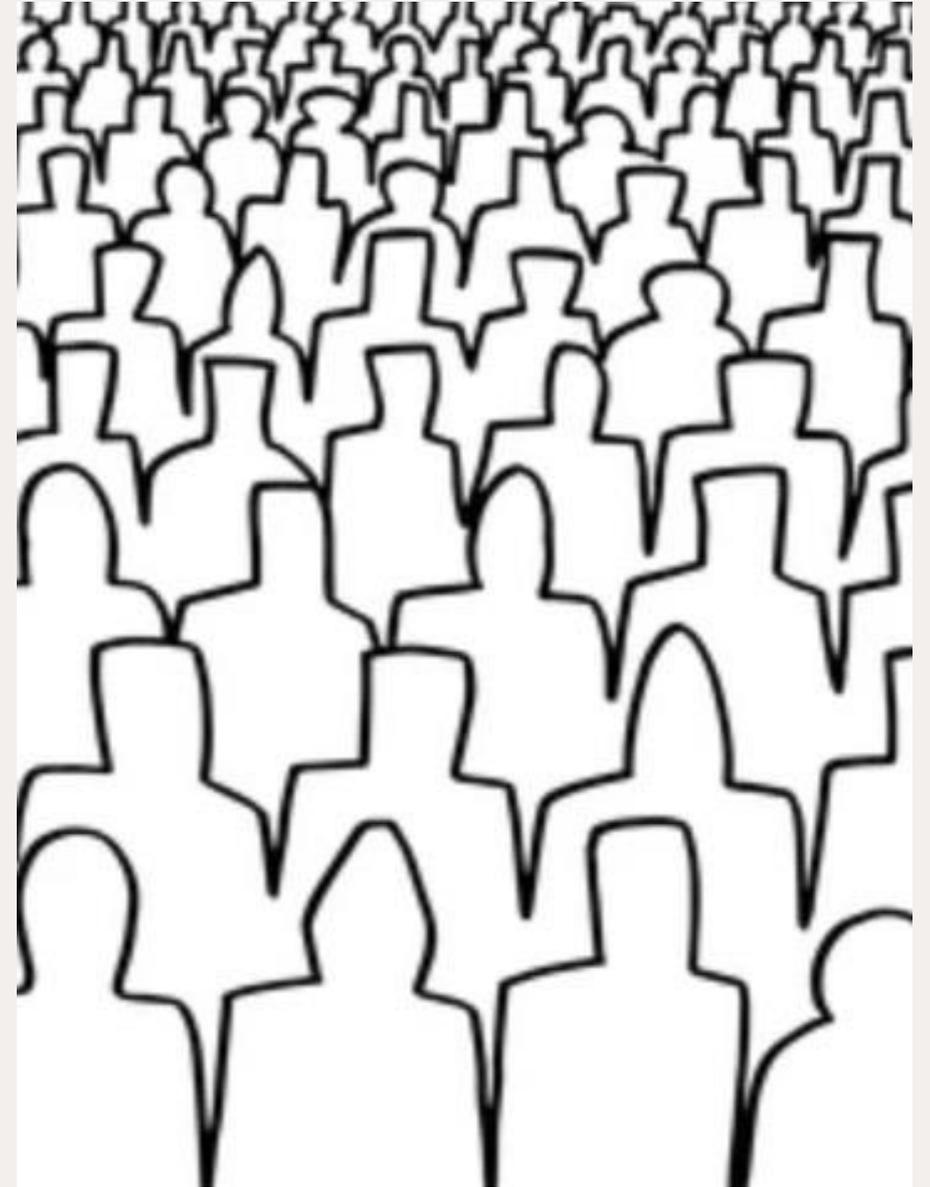
# Extreme political views; similar brain patterns

- A 2025 study conducted MRIs of 44 people watching politically charged media content.
- People with very strong political views processed the information in similar ways, with more intense activation of the brain's emotional centers.
- Political moderates showed more varied and flexible brain responses.

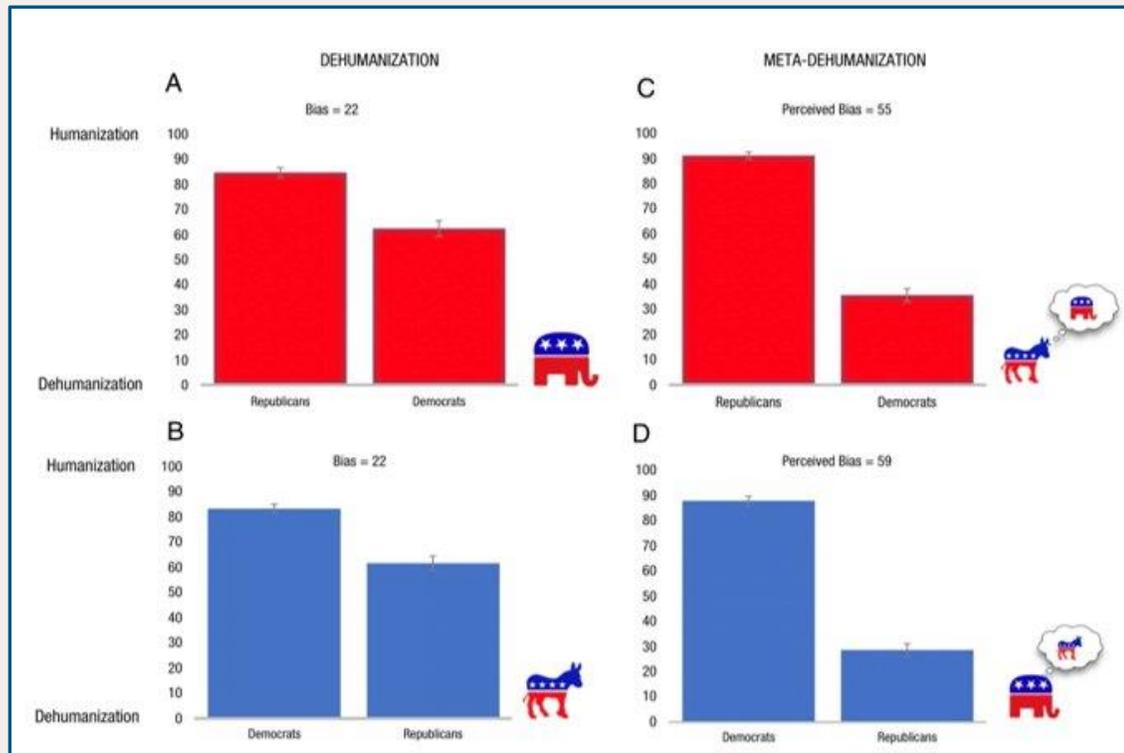


# Polarization makes dehumanization more likely

- A 2024 study asked Democrats and Republicans to define "America"
- People were more likely to rate members of the opposing party as less human when they thought that group's view of America was very different from a typical American.
- When a person perceives another as less than fully human, the brain turns off empathy circuits & triggers disgust



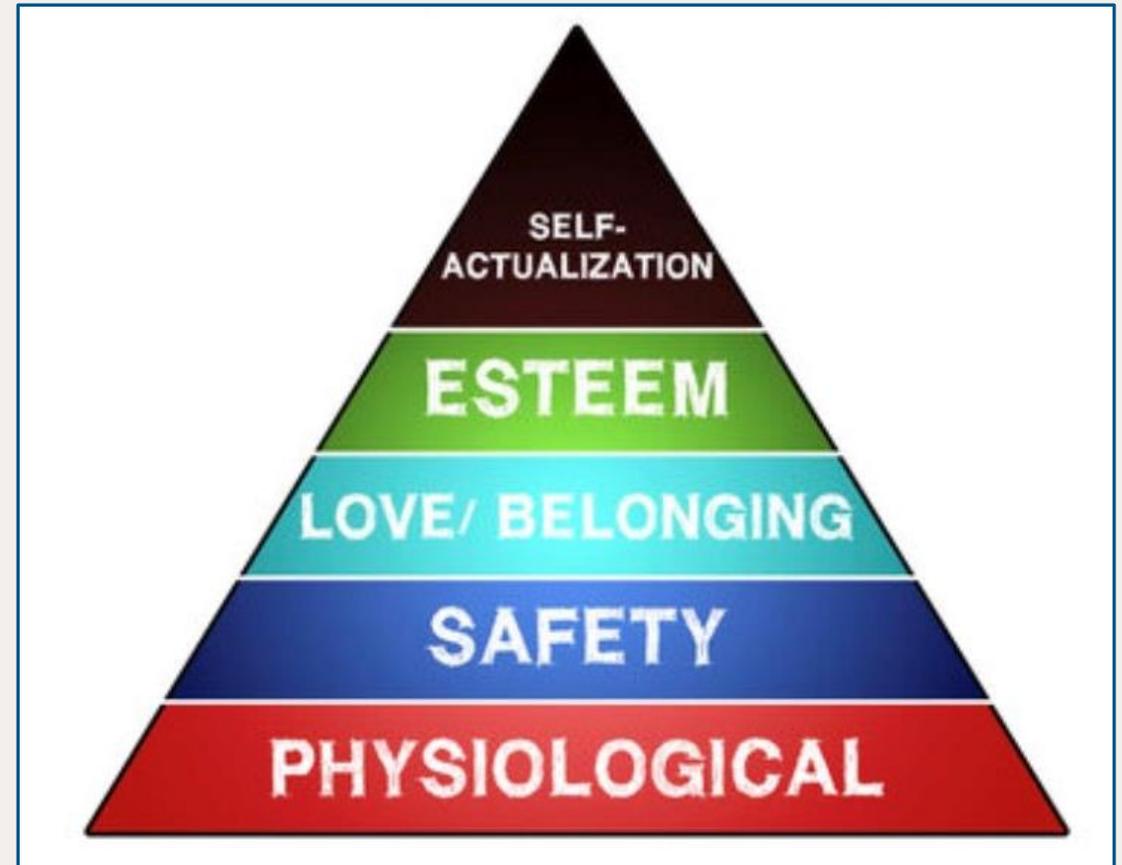
# ...but it's not as bad as we think:



- A 2020 study asked Republicans and Democrats to rank their rival group in terms of how “evolved” they considered them to be.
- Each group thought that the other group rated them 60 points below “fully human” when they really placed them only 30 points below.

# Summing up:

- Our brain processes information based on its alignment with our group identity
- Screens and social media are designed to bypass the brain's logic centers and go straight to our emotional centers
- Disagreements can feel like they define **who we are**, not just what we think





# Let's Discuss

- Was there anything you found surprising or compelling?
- How could you apply this information to your work?

# How do we de-polarize and re-humanize?

Increase  
awareness of  
neural plasticity

Cultivate  
empathy

Practice  
empathetic  
communication



# The good news: Neural Plasticity

Reorganizing brain structure  
and connections in response to  
stimuli, including practices for  
**self-care and empathy**

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Rahrig et al., 2024



# Empathy: The Two Types

Both types of empathy can be valuable in our interpersonal interactions, but the context may determine which is more useful in the moment.

## Cognitive empathy:

- *Understanding* someone else's perspective or feelings
- Associated with prosocial behavior + connection

(Brazil, Volk, & Dane, 2023)

## Affective empathy:

- *Feeling* the emotions of another person
- Greater affective empathy can make emotional regulation more challenging

(Thompson, van Reekum, & Chakrabarti, 2021)





# Cultivating Empathy Skills

Adopt a growth mindset & willingness to change

Engage in meditative practices

Immerse yourself in the world of another

Listen actively and ask open-ended questions

# Communicating with empathy: Observe without judgment

**Take note of your own emotions and needs  
and listen openly to the experiences of others**

Instead of, “You are spreading dangerous ideas!” try starting with, “I can hear how passionate you are about this issue.”



# Communicating with empathy: Recognize underlying needs

"We all have the same needs...The problem is in the strategies we use to meet our needs."

-Marshall Rosenberg



A word cloud containing various human needs and values. The words are arranged in a roughly rectangular shape, with some words being significantly larger than others. The colors of the words range from light green to dark purple. The words include: compassion, inclusion, clothing, play, stability, touch, agency, shelter, appreciation, food, independence, support, consideration, love, space, cooperation, belonging, understand, security, understood, rest, acceptance, respect, choice, trust, safety, and autonomy.



# Communication with empathy: Use requests to build connection

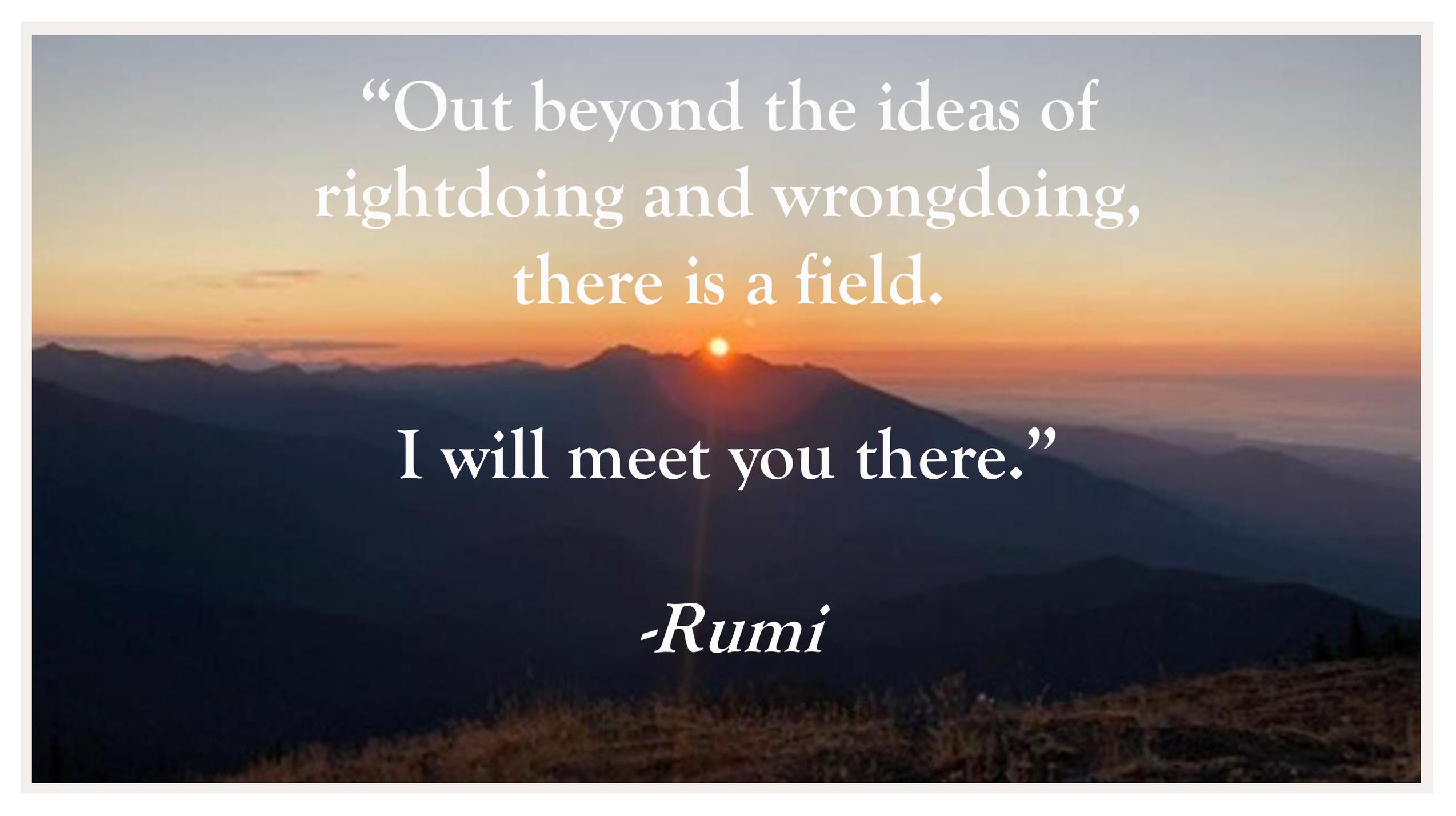
A “no” indicates that there is still an unmet need preventing the “yes.”  
Stay curious!



I want to understand how you came to care so deeply about this. Would you be willing to share the experiences and sources that informed your views?



I’m feeling misunderstood right now. Would you be willing to listen for a few minutes while I try to clearly communicate what I mean?



“Out beyond the ideas of  
rightdoing and wrongdoing,  
there is a field.

I will meet you there.”

*-Rumi*

# Helpful Resources

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Thank you



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