

# CAREGIVER STRESS... TAKING CARE OF YOU

Aaron A. Harris, PhD  
Clinical Psychologist  
Executive Director  
EIRMC Behavioral Health Center



# Objectives

- Recognize the signs and symptoms of chronic stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout in yourself
- Identify coping strategies that you can use to increase your resiliency through balance in life
- Develop ways to find support for yourself and give support to your colleagues

# Helpers Can Get Tired of Helping!

- ◎ Working in high-stress situations and environments leads to varying levels of (di)stress
  - Burnout
    - First studied in 1970s
  - Compassion fatigue
    - Introduced in 1992 from nursing
  - Secondary (vicarious) traumatization
    - Research emerged in the 1990s



Let's learn from the Doctor...



# OH, THE PLACES YOU'LL GO!

You'll be on your way up!

You'll be seeing great sights!

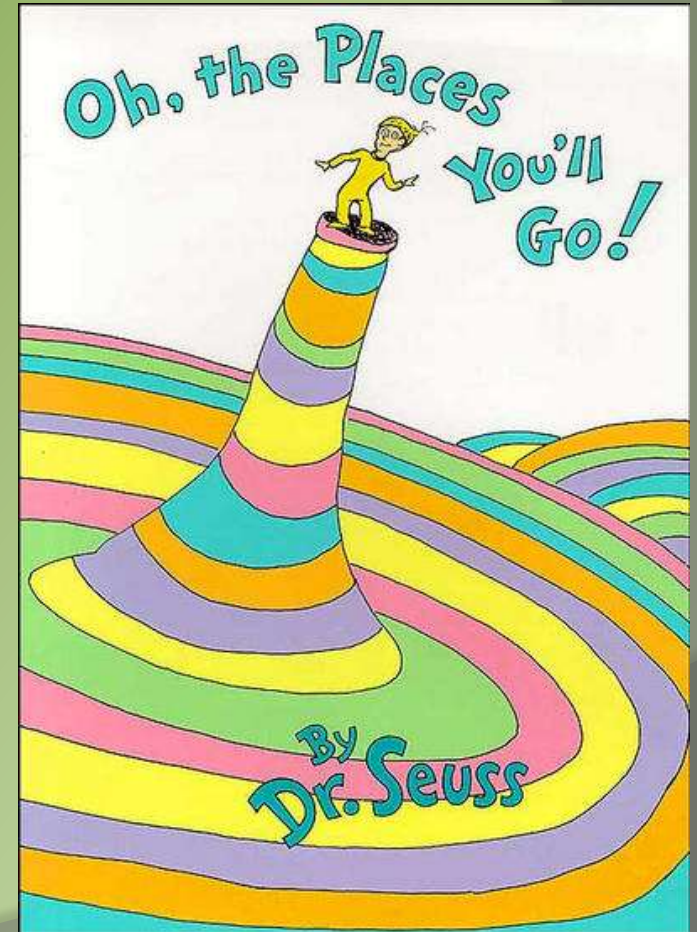
You'll join the high fliers who soar to high heights.

You won't lag behind, because you'll have the speed.

You'll pass the whole gang and you'll soon take the lead.

Wherever you fly, you'll be the best of the best.

Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.



# OH, THE PLACES YOU'LL GO!



Except when you don't  
because, sometimes, you  
won't.

I'm sorry to say so but, sadly,  
it's true and hang-ups can  
happen to you.

You can get all hung up in a  
prickle-ly perch.

And your gang will fly on.

You'll be left in a Lurch.

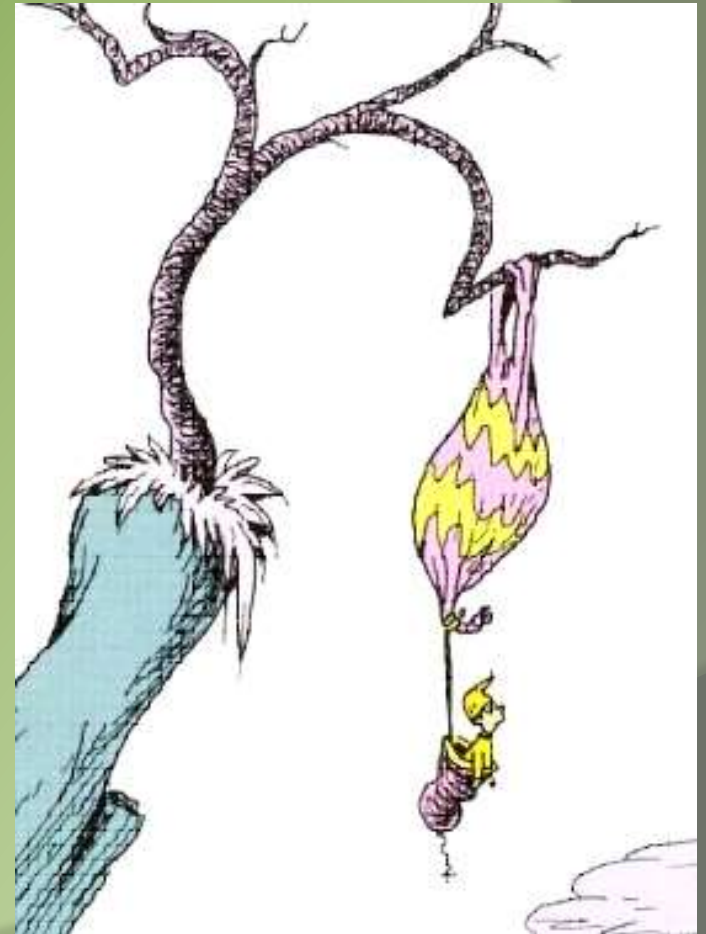
# OH, THE PLACES YOU'LL GO!

You'll come down from the Lurch with an unpleasant bump.

And the chances are, then, that you'll be in a Slump.

And when you're in a Slump, you're not in for much fun.

Un-slumping yourself is not easily done.



# Helpers Can Get Tired of Helping!

- ◎ Estimated more than 60% of helping professionals adversely affected by work
  - “The cost of caring”
- ◎ The professional work centered on the relief of emotional suffering of clients automatically includes **absorbing** information that is about suffering. Often it includes that **suffering** as well.
  - Charles Figley, 1995



# ABC's of Prevention

- ⦿ A = Awareness
- ⦿ B = Balance
- ⦿ C = Connections





Awareness...

# Awareness

- What types of situations contribute to your stress level?
- How does your work or caregiving impact your stress level?
- When does this stress surpass your abilities to cope effectively?
- What are your symptoms?

**Awareness if the key!**



# Common Symptoms

- ◎ Emotional lability
  - Mood swings, grief, sadness
  - Self-doubt, loss of motivation
- ◎ Cognitive impairments
  - Memory, concentration/focus problems
  - Internal noise & intrusive thoughts
- ◎ Physical problems
- ◎ Behavior & judgment problems
  - Complacency, isolation
  - Escape or avoidance behaviors



“Care providers are unique people. We have the gift of being able to connect with others in ways that are difficult to explain and even more difficult for others to understand. Our unique ability to emotionally join with our clients that allows us a near first-hand experience of their inner world is perhaps our greatest gift; it is also our greatest challenge.”

--Karl LaRowe



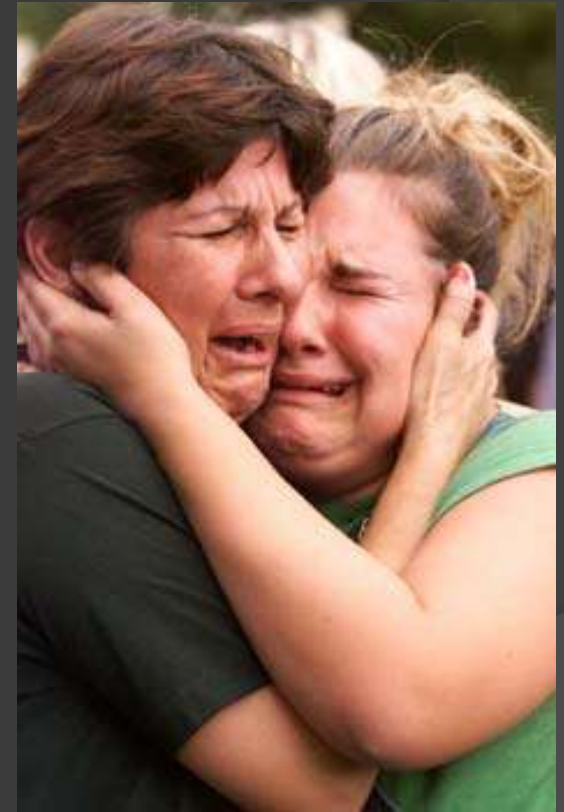
# Stress-Response Symptoms

- ⦿ Flight-or-fight response
  - Adrenaline rush and crash
  - Muscle tension
- ⦿ Hypervigilance
- ⦿ Nervous system arousal
  - Increased heart rate
  - Shallow breathing
  - Blood flow to limbs
- ⦿ Compromised immune system



# Long-term Problems

- ⦿ Sleep disruption
- ⦿ Depression (3X as likely)
  - Loss of hope, lethargy, numbness
- ⦿ Anxiety
  - PTSD, flooding
  - Anger, agitation, irritability
- ⦿ Addiction
- ⦿ Self-destructiveness
- ⦿ Physical illness
  - GI problems
  - Headaches



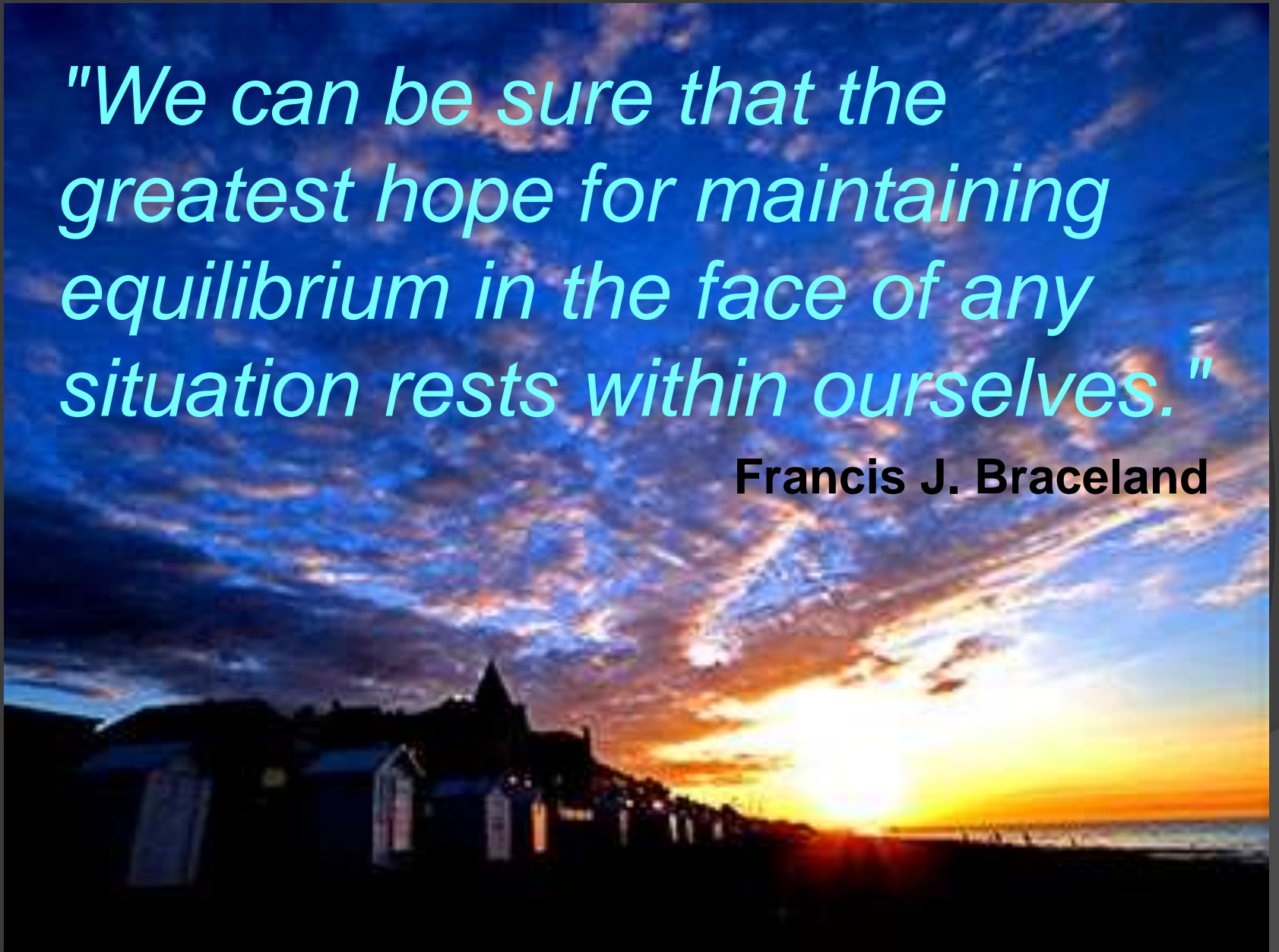
# Awareness

- ⦿ Prevention is the ideal but not often realistic
- ⦿ Vulnerability factors:
  - Exposure: cumulative vs. episodic
  - Empathy
  - Emotional state
  - Poor self-care
- ⦿ Know your patterns and respect your limits
  - Their emergency is not necessarily your emergency!



*"We can be sure that the greatest hope for maintaining equilibrium in the face of any situation rests within ourselves."*

**Francis J. Braceland**





# Balance...

# Balance

- ◎ Practice excellent self-care
- ◎ Listen to your emotions: they tell us a lot about ourselves
- ◎ Keep good boundaries
- ◎ Nurturing yourself with a balance of activities in life, especially pleasurable and relaxing diversions
- ◎ Stay physically active
- ◎ Take breaks
- ◎ Challenge your thinking

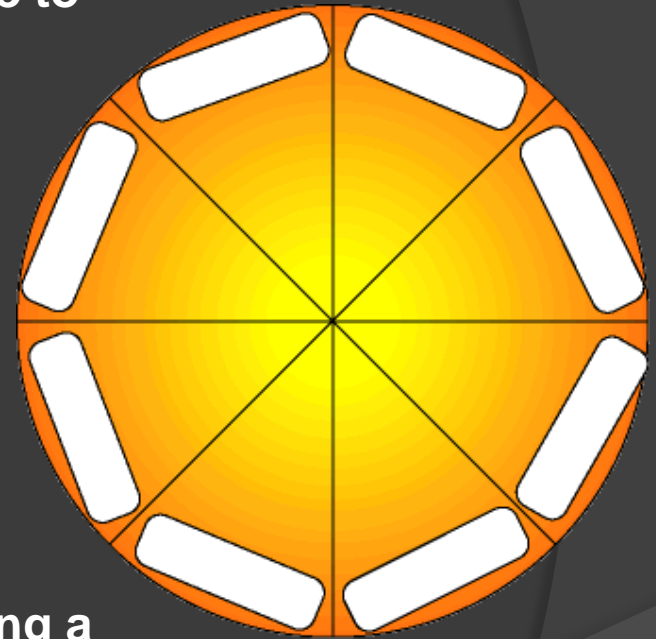


# Life Balance Tool

Place each aspect of your life in the space in each segment. Some suggestions follow. Modify these to represent those that are meaningful to you.

- Self Care
- Work
- Intimate Partner/Family
- Friends/Social Life
- Financial Aspects
- Health & Wellness/Body Image
- Spiritual Aspects
- Community/Service

Now rate your satisfaction with each aspect, using a scale from zero to ten, with ten being very satisfied and zero being completely unsatisfied. Place a mark indicating your choice in each segment of the circle, with zero at the center and ten at the rim. Connect all of the marks around the circle to see how balanced your wheel is.



# Stay Physically Active

- ⦿ Exercise: #1 stress management behavior
  - Reduce tension
  - Feel good
  - Weight management
  - Increased activity levels
  - Eat better
  - Sleep better
- ⦿ Good nutrition and hydration
- ⦿ Sleep
  - Environment management
  - Bio-rhythms crave consistency
- ⦿ Good medical and preventative care



# Take Breaks

- ⦿ Always have a “break” to look forward to
- ⦿ Take a “mental health” day
- ⦿ Maximize your alone time...
  - Distraction
  - Relaxation techniques... control these 3 things:
    - Breathing
    - Muscle Tension
      - Stretching
      - Exercise
    - Mind
      - Mindfulness
      - Imagery
      - Music



# Example: Mother Teresa

- Required each of her nuns to take a mandatory year off from their duties, every 3-5 years, to allow them to heal from the effects of their caregiving work



# Challenge Your Thinking

- ⦿ Challenge your beliefs and expectations about your stressors
  - “This is the way things should/shouldn’t be...”
- ⦿ Challenge negative thinking
  - “This stinks, but...”
- ⦿ Let go of that which you cannot control
- ⦿ Find gratitude





# Challenge Your Thinking

- ◎ Put yourself first!
  - Chinese proverb: *Without your health, you have nothing.*
- ◎ Find meaning in your work
- ◎ Look at situations as challenges and opportunities, not problems or stresses
- ◎ Maintain a clear focus on your goals and personal mission





Connections...

# Connections

- ◎ Connect with yourself... **mindfulness!**
- ◎ Build a positive support system
  - Unfortunately, relationships are most often are biggest stressors
- ◎ Seek help!
  - Social
  - Professional
  - Medical / Mental Health
- ◎ Find resources:
  - [www.compassionfatigue.org](http://www.compassionfatigue.org)
  - [www.caregiverstress.com](http://www.caregiverstress.com)
  - [www.self-compassion.org](http://www.self-compassion.org)



# Connections

- ◎ Write in a journal, blog or social space
- ◎ Benefits of communicating with others?
  - Get things “out of our head”
    - Process (*sort through*) thoughts and emotions
    - Receive 3<sup>rd</sup> party feedback
  - Promotes increased activity levels
  - Receive support/encouragement/help
  - Decreases stress of dealing alone
  - Increase validation and hope

Hope does not  
take away your  
problems.

*It can lift you  
above them.*

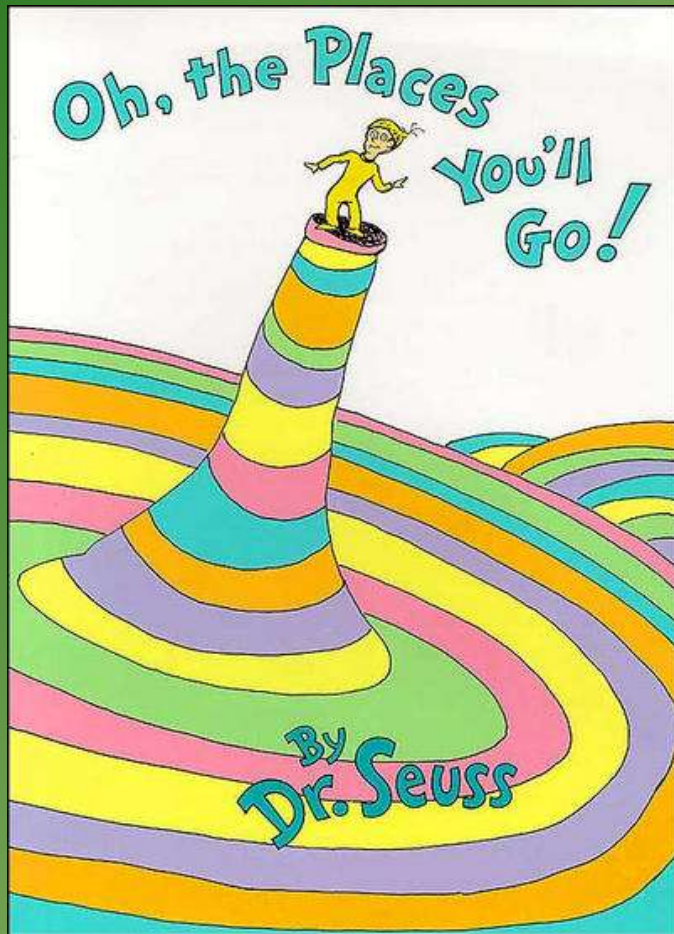
- Maya Angelou



Let's got back to the Doctor...



# OH, THE PLACES YOU'LL GO!



But on you will go though the weather be foul

On you will go though your enemies prowl

On you will go though the Hakken-Kraks howl

Onward up many a frightening creek, though your arms may get sore and your sneakers may leak.

# OH, THE PLACES YOU'LL GO!

You'll get mixed up, of course, as you already know.

You'll get mixed up with many strange birds as you go.

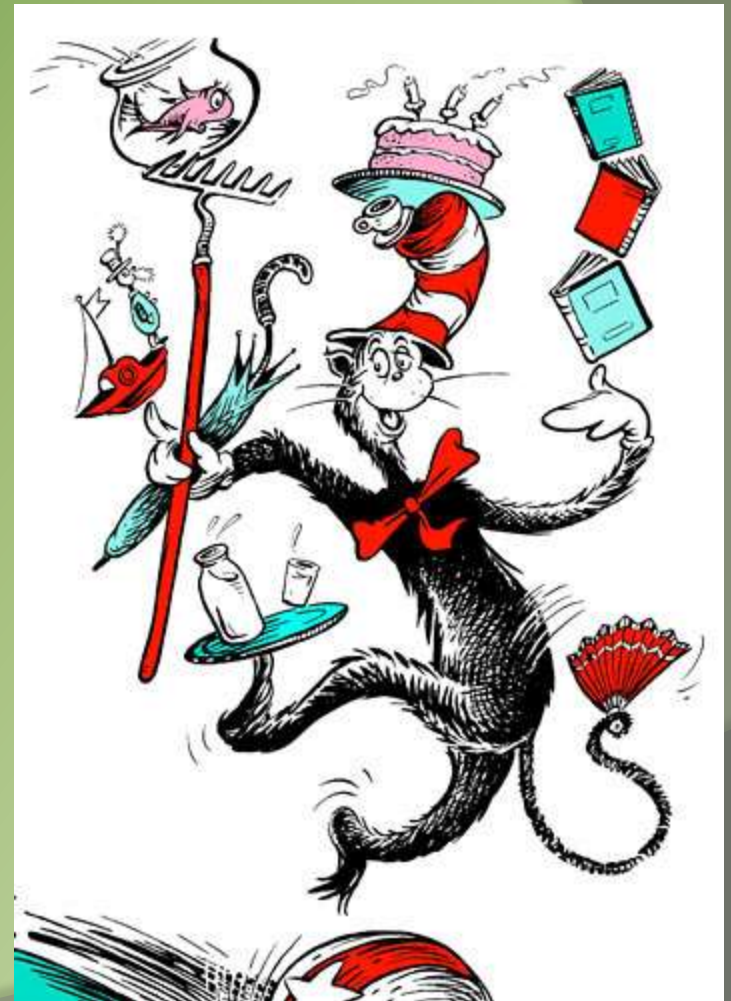
So be sure when you step. Step with care and great tact and remember that **Life's a Great Balancing Act.**

Just never forget to be dexterous and deft. And never mix up your right foot with your left.

And will you succeed?

Yes! You will, indeed!

(98 and 3/4 percent guaranteed.)





Dish: \_\_\_\_\_

# Recipe

Serves: \_\_\_\_\_

**Write your recipe for  
resiliency and recovery...**

- 1) Awareness**
- 2) Balance**
- 3) Connections**