John Sommers-Flanagan, Ph.D.
Phyllis J. Washington
Center for the Advancement of Positive Education
University of Montana
John.sf@mso.umt.edu
**Free Resources:**
**https://johnsommersflanagan.com**



# Redirecting the Bad News Brain:

## How to Pursue Greater Happiness for Yourself and Others

2026 Virginia Counseling Association – Norfolk

Phyllis J. Washington
CAPE
Center for the Advancement of Positive Education

# Gratitude

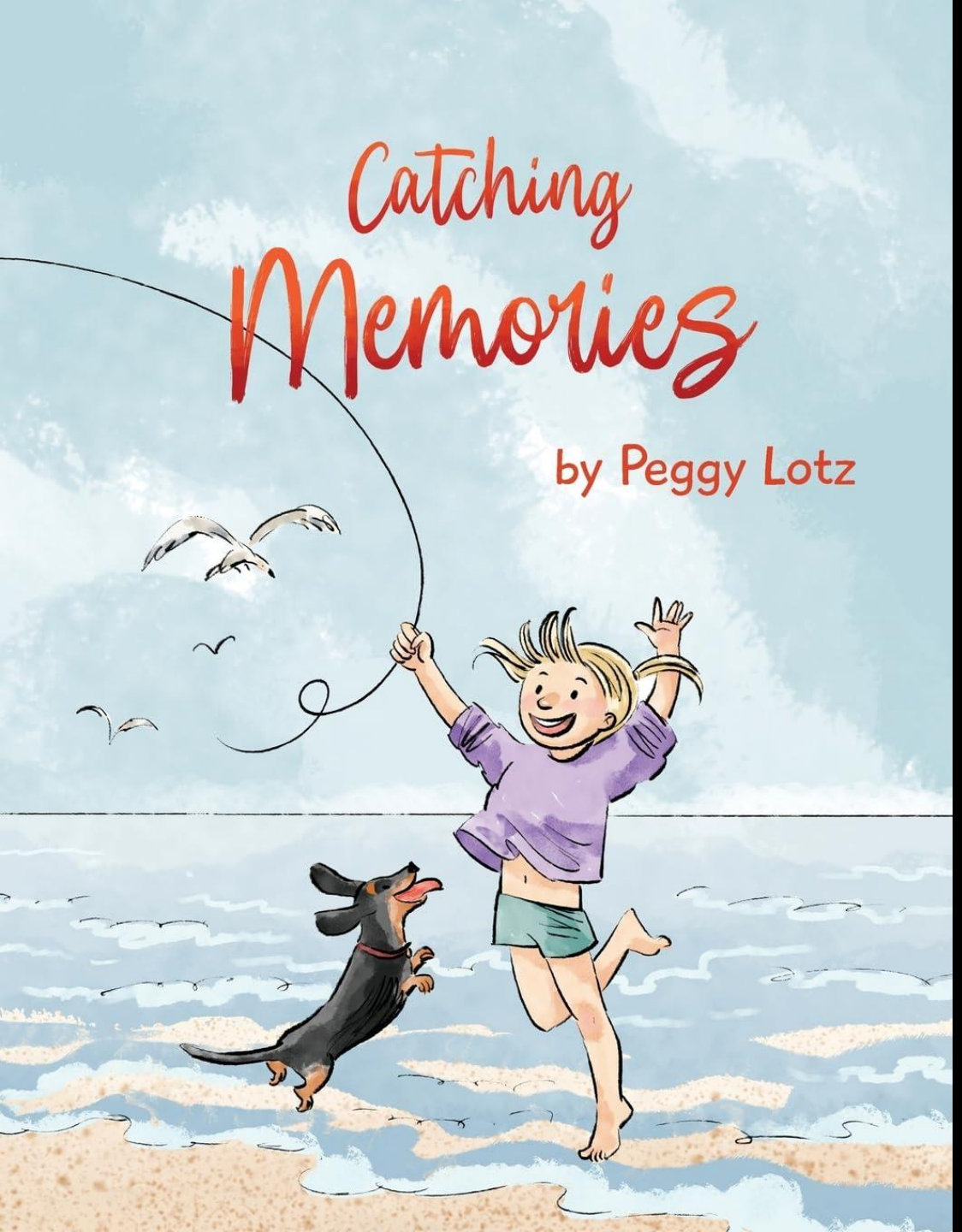
# First




Thanks again to the conference organizers

Thanks again to CAPE

Thanks again to YOU




# Remember . . .

- **Strength warnings** are suggestions about how learning new knowledge and gaining experiences **can make you STRONGER**

- **We naturally** overfocus on what's wrong, find what we look for, pursue the wrong happiness, grow the negative, and try to shrink undesirable behaviors

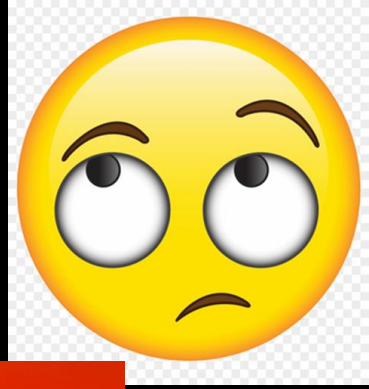


# Opening Story

The 3-Step Emotional Change Trick

A Story about Bad Moods and the CAPE Philosophy

# Emotions are Difficult



Anyone here ever had someone tell you to "Cheer Up?!"



or "Smile!"





# Emotions – 2

Ever get stuck in a bad mood?

What if YOU could be

THE CAPTAIN

of your own emotional ship

# The Three-Step Emotional Change Trick

## Step One

## Honor YOUR Emotion

# The Three-Step Emotional Change Trick

## Step Two

**Think a New Thought . . . or**
**Do Something Different**
**(grow positive emotions)**

# The Three-Step Emotional Change Trick

## Step Three

## Share the Good Mood

The Three-Step Emotional Change Trick is ubiquitous – we do it all the time

Bad moods impair learning

**Step Four**

**Teach Someone the 3 Steps**

# Let’s Experiment with Some Positive Interventions!



# 1. Witness Something Inspiring




- Like joyspotting, intention-setting, or recovery-CBT
- **Your job**: Reflect on what sorts of things, if/when you see them, feed your soul or your emotional wellbeing
- It can help to focus first on those things that disappoint or annoy you because you can set your intention to find the opposite
- What do you want to watch for? – Now in pairs. . .



# 2. Gratitude




- Do you want to increase optimism, improve life satisfaction, be healthier, exercise more, and be happier?
- Weave intentional gratitude into your life!

# Gratitude Practice

- Who is someone toward whom you feel appreciation and gratitude?
- Why do you feel gratitude for them? Be specific!
- This afternoon, evening, or some time tomorrow find this person and share your gratitude, but only if you want to.
- Or…you might write a gratitude letter or call . . . Or?



# USE COLLABORATION

Have you tried . . . ?

[Never . . . ]

Add “What”

What have you tried?

# USE EXPERIMENTATION (MI)

Would you be willing to try this idea?

We should track how it works for you



# Bonus: Negative Languaging and How Anxiety and Fear Work

- Anxiety is mostly driven by thoughts
- Amygdala hijack and brain shutdown?
- Adolescent brains not fully wired?
- The *Anxious Generation*
- "Spiking cortisol"
- All research says. . . It's the fear of the fear
- And mostly we're teaching youth and young adults that they should fear the fear

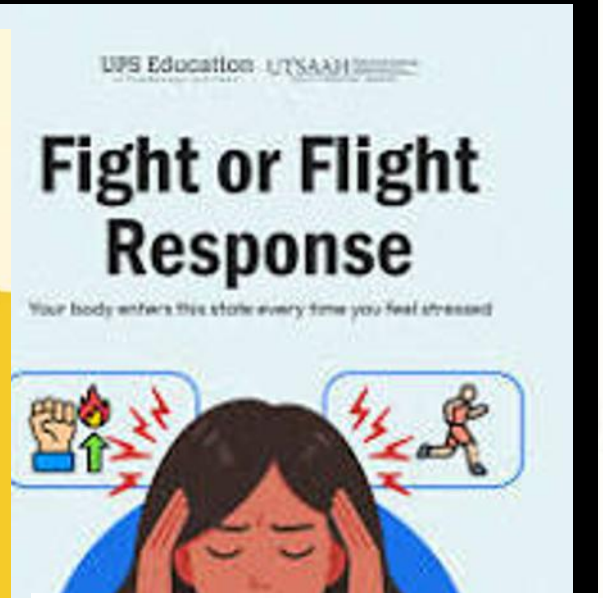
# Ever Heard of Fight-or-Flight?

- Hahahahaha
- Fight-or-Flight-or-Fawn-or-Freeze is one of the most common ways we talk about stress and the stress response.
- Fight-or-Flight is NORMALIZED as a stress response, but is it NORMAL or COMMON?



# Fight-or-Flight Content is EVERYWHERE













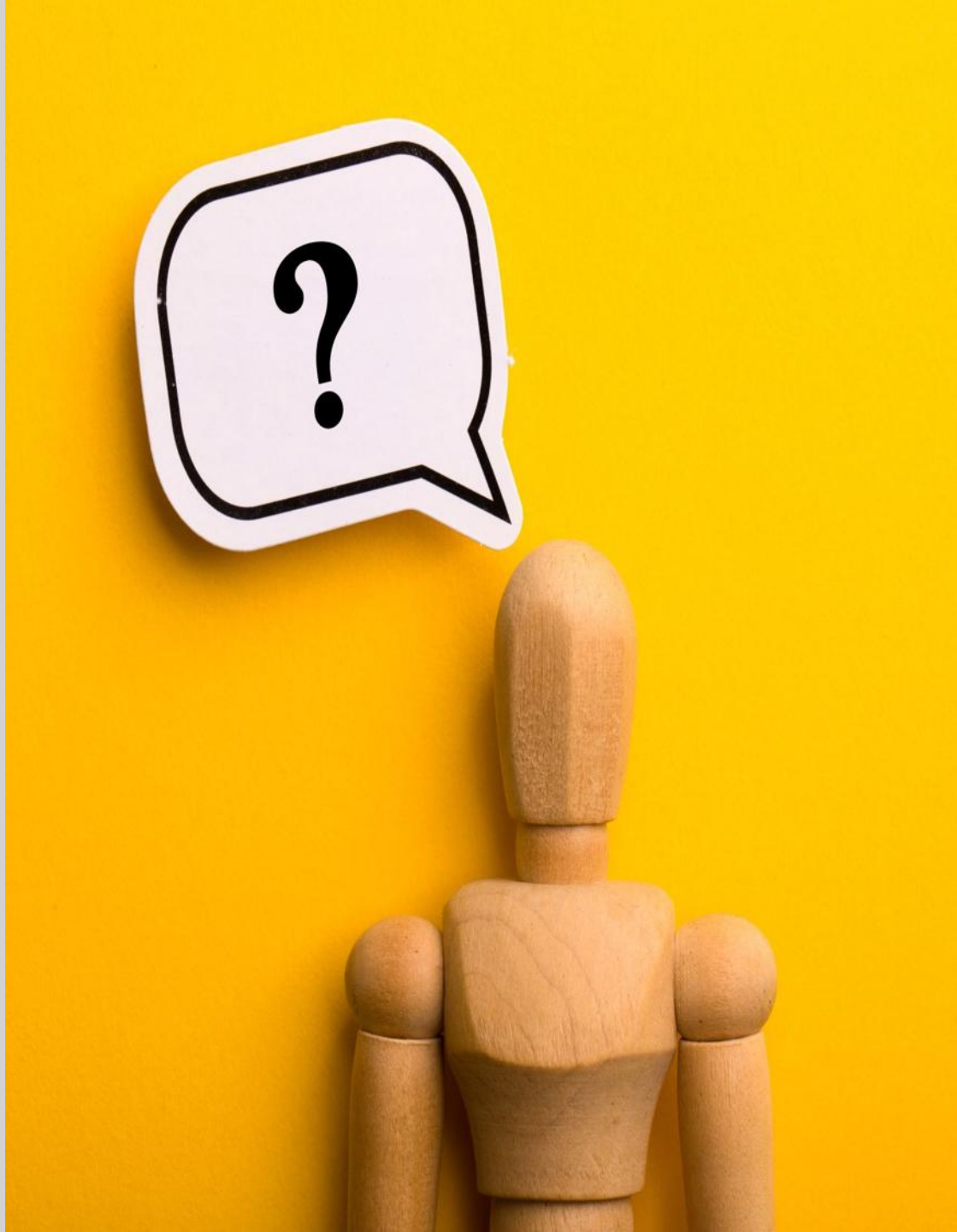





# Fight-or-Flight

Do you know the research population upon which much of the Fight-or-Flight phenomena is based?

Wait for it. . .



# Fight-or-Flight

White

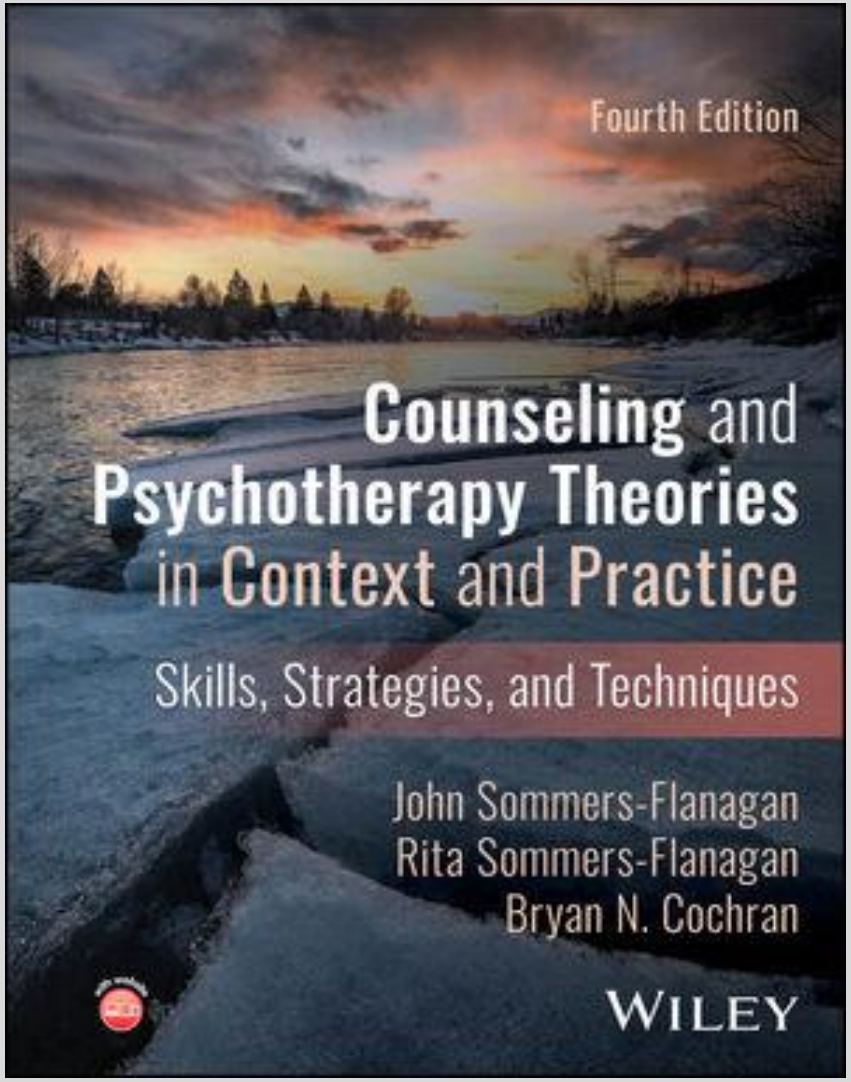
Male

Rats



# Enter: Shelley E. Taylor of UCLA









# Tend-and-Befriend

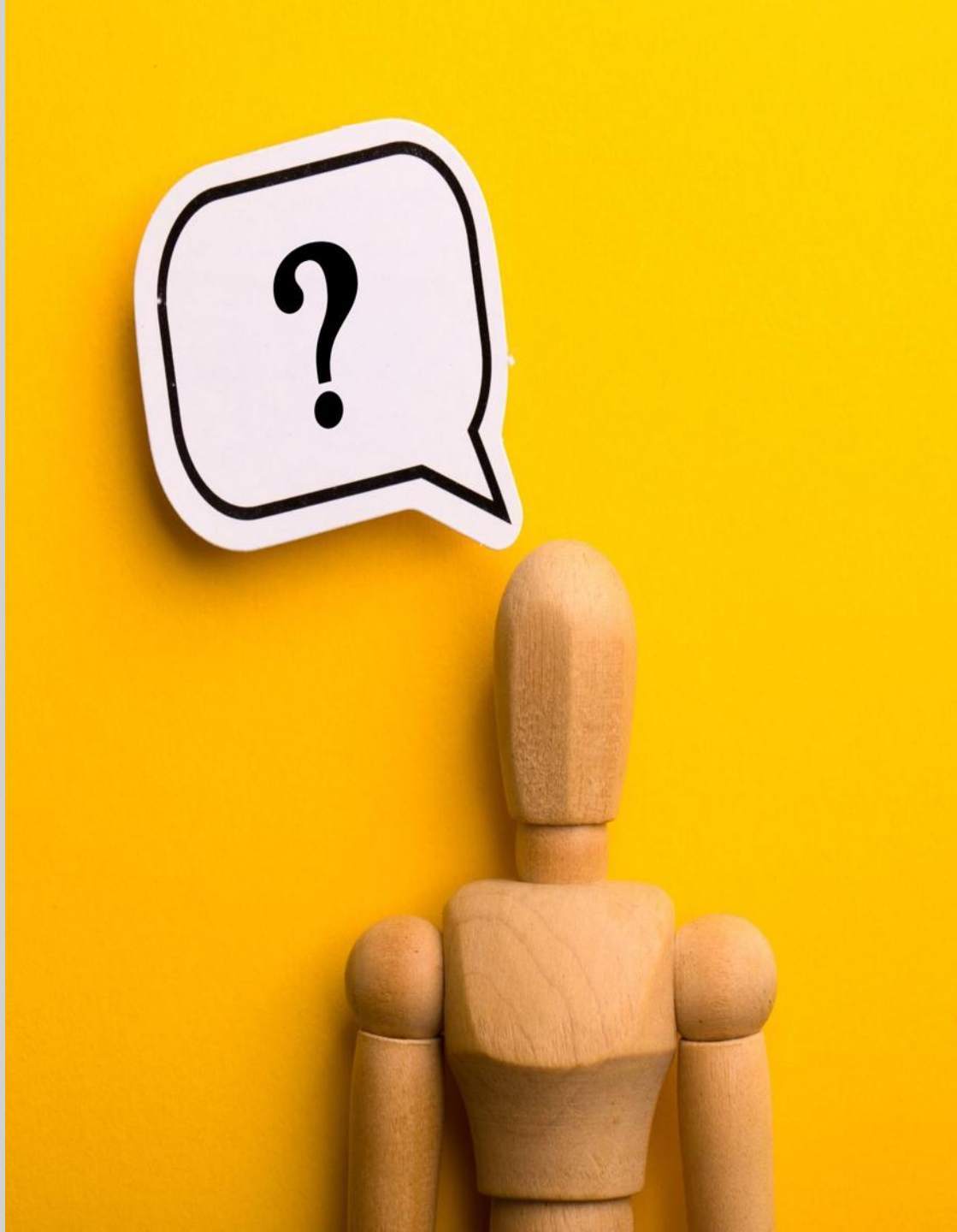
**Dr. Taylor conducted new research using . . . FEMALE RATS!**

**She found a different response to stress and called it “Tend-and-Befriend.”**

**But how much can we generalize research on rats to humans?**

# The Frontal Lobe

**AI says**: The absolute size of a white rat's frontal lobe is vastly smaller than a human; the two species show dramatic differences in relative brain proportions and structural complexity. **[Who knew?]**



# RAT BRAIN VS. HUMAN BRAIN

**Rat**

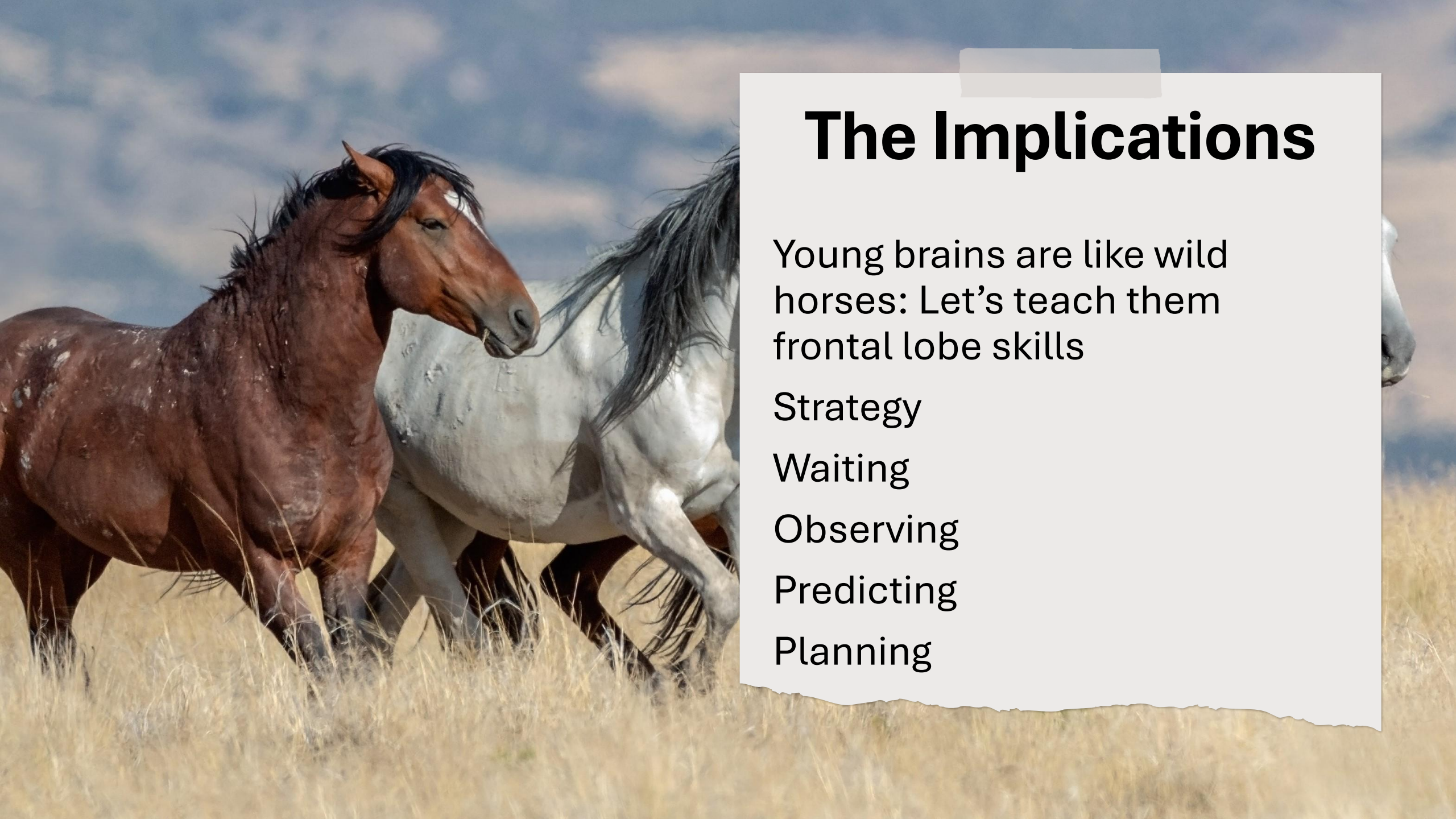
**Weight: 2 grams**

**F-lobe: 10-15%**

**Human**

**Weight: 1,400 grams**

**F-Lobe: 40-42%**



# The Implications

Young brains are like wild horses: Let's teach them frontal lobe skills

Strategy

Waiting

Observing

Predicting

Planning

# 3. SAVORING

Is the simplest intervention

How could it possibly treat depression? – Savor with me now





# What's Happening at CAPE?

## Collaboration Opportunities

# CAPE Vision 1: We want healthier educators who are eudaimonically happier. . .

Does a 3-Credit Grad Course on HFE Make a Difference?



# Our Outcomes



- **Before** the 3-credit course
- About **30%** of educators scored as **clinically depressed**
- 451+ educators

## After the Course

- **60% reduction in depression scores [to about 12%]**
- **But also, educators had:**
  - More hope, positive emotions, mindfulness, and social support
  - Better sleep, fewer headaches and sick days
  - Reduced gastrointestinal and respiratory distress
  - Med to Large Effect Sizes (*d*)

# SAVORING



It's not the dopamine
It's emotional agency and connection
Collaborate with CAPE



# Final Review

What Do YOU want to remember?

How will you remember it?

The Happiness Challenge: https://montanahappinessproject.com/the-happiness-challenge

# Closing Story

**Other People Matter or that Dog Don’t Hunt**

Grow Skills and Strengths

