

Building Organizations That Sustain Their People:

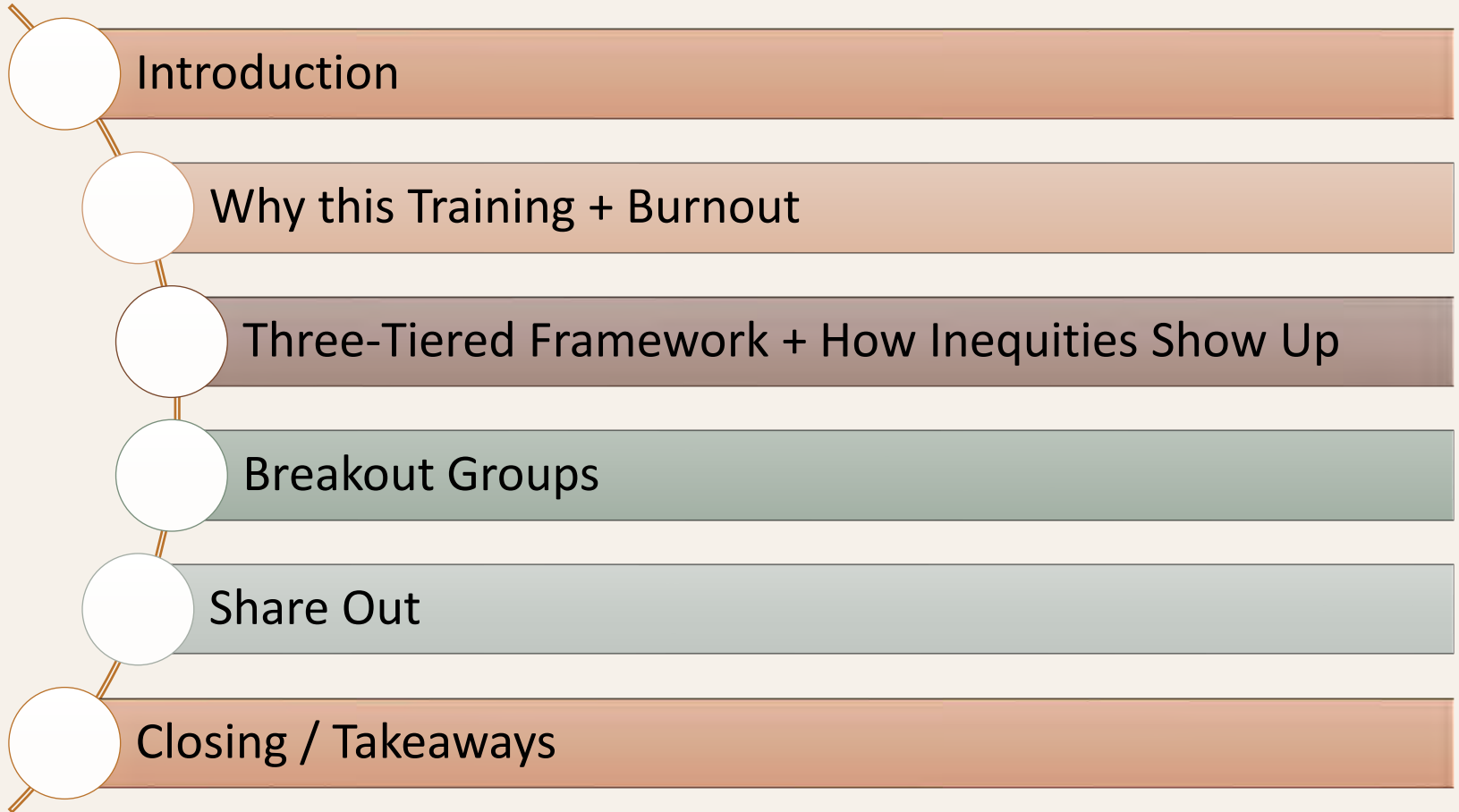
A Three-Tiered Approach to Preventing Burnout in Homeless Services Work

Katricia Stewart, PhD

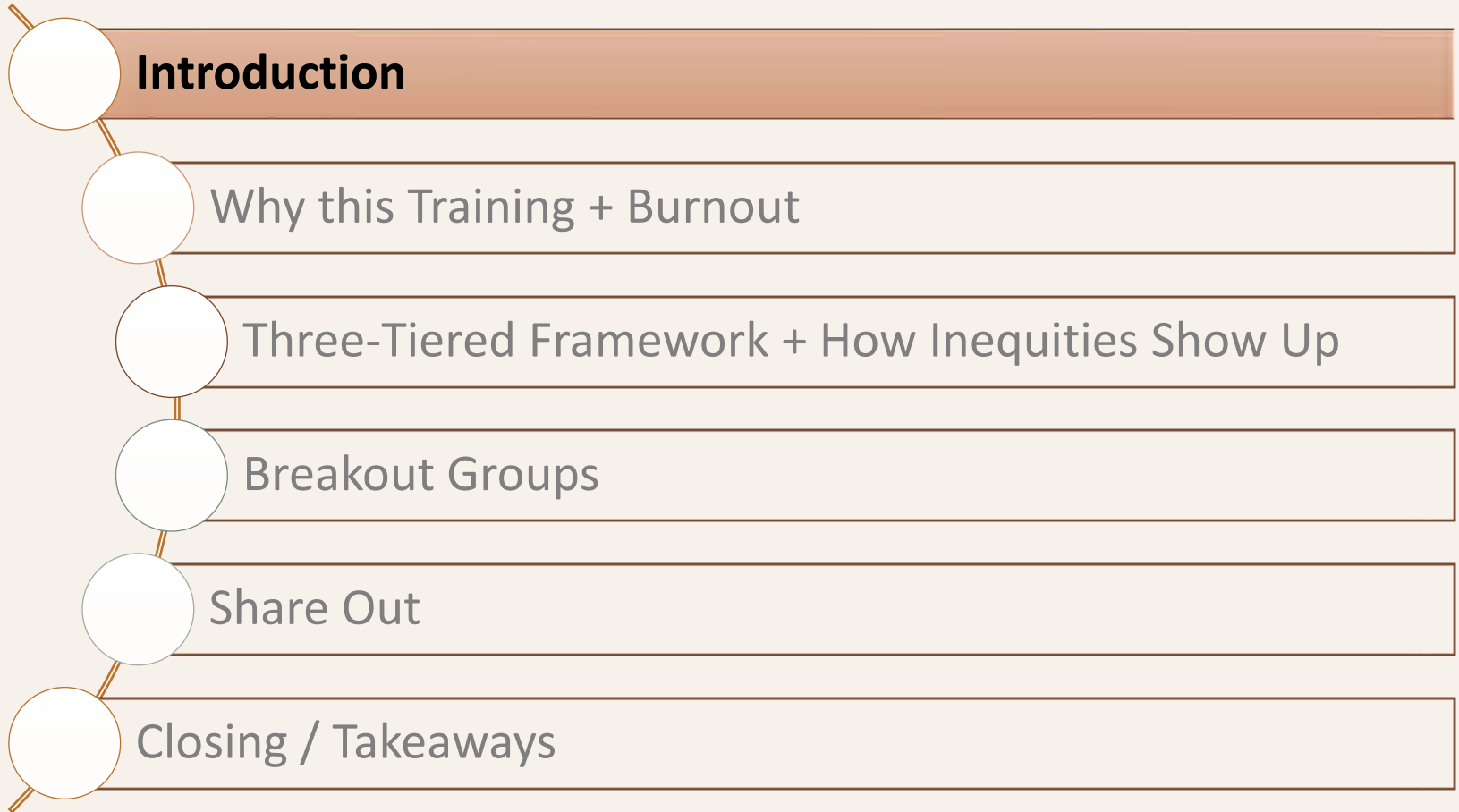
www.communitywellbeingrec.com

HSD Provider Conference | June 16, 2026

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About Katricia

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- **PhD, Community Psychology:** specialization in wellbeing, systems-level research, and diverse populations.
- **14 years of applied research, evaluation, and consulting.**
 - Expert in well-being, burnout, sense of community, social support, organizational development, and homelessness.
- **Community-based researcher, evaluator, trainer, intervention scientist.** Previous roles:
 - Director, Advocates for Human Potential
 - Senior Research & Evaluation Analyst, Homebase
 - Researcher, Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative (PSU)

Norms for Today

Speak from your own professional experience.

Value confidentiality: personal sharing will stay in the group when we leave.

Please engage! Ask questions, respond to others, etc.

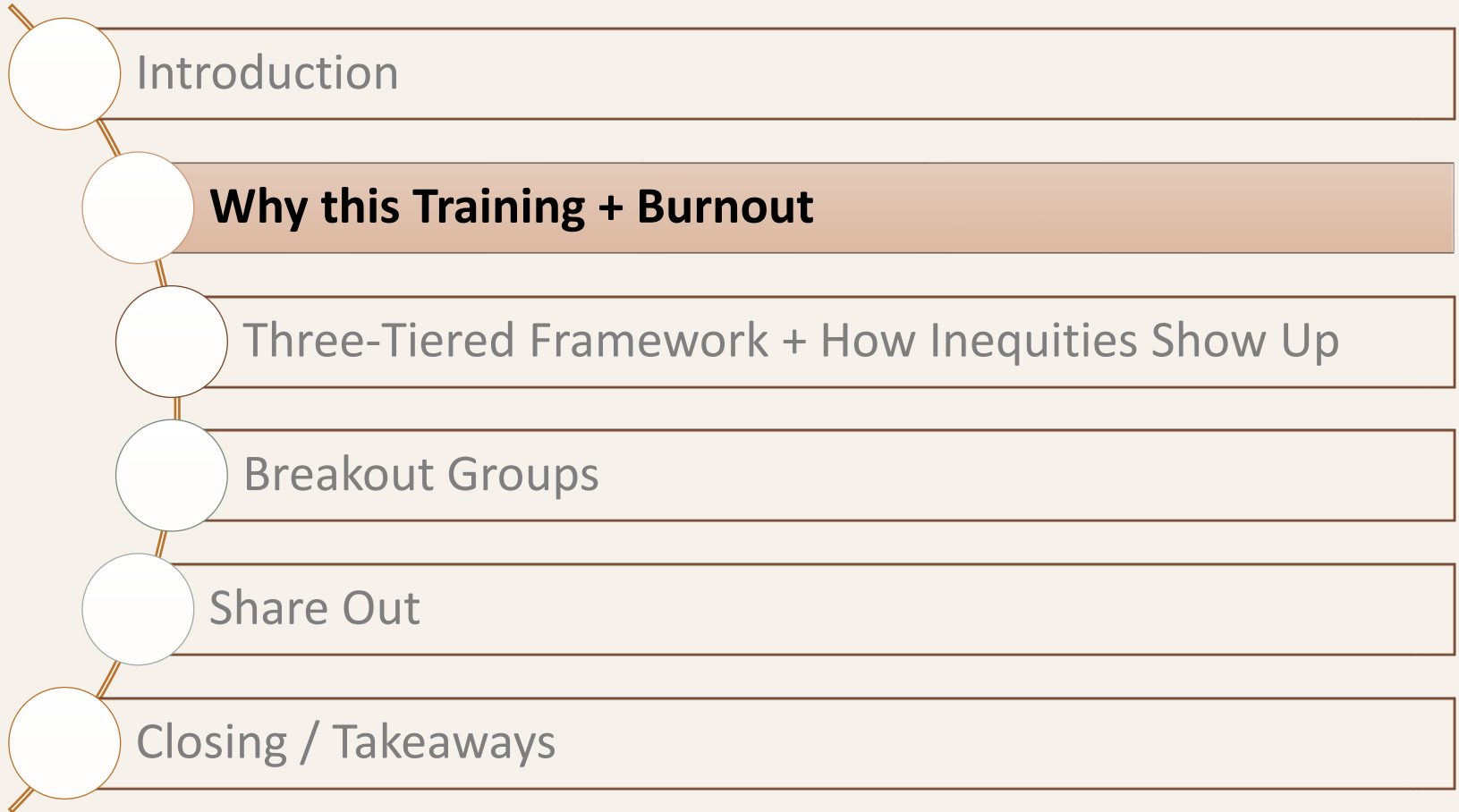
Disclaimer: The information and support provided in this presentation and session is meant for educational purposes only and should not be considered therapy. If you experience distress, please contact a mental health professional.

Introductions – 3 minutes



What is one uplifting thing that happened in the past week?

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Why this training?



Burnout impacts all professions, especially “helping” professions – e.g., workplaces where there are front-line staff supporting individuals experiencing trauma and hardships.



Burnout happens because of a lack of support at the **structural**, **relational**, *and* **personal** levels. Most burnout prevention work targets the **personal** or individual level, when what is needed are **structural** and **relational** interventions.



This training introduces a framework for understanding what causes burnout and where organizations can act to prevent burnout and retain a strong workforce.

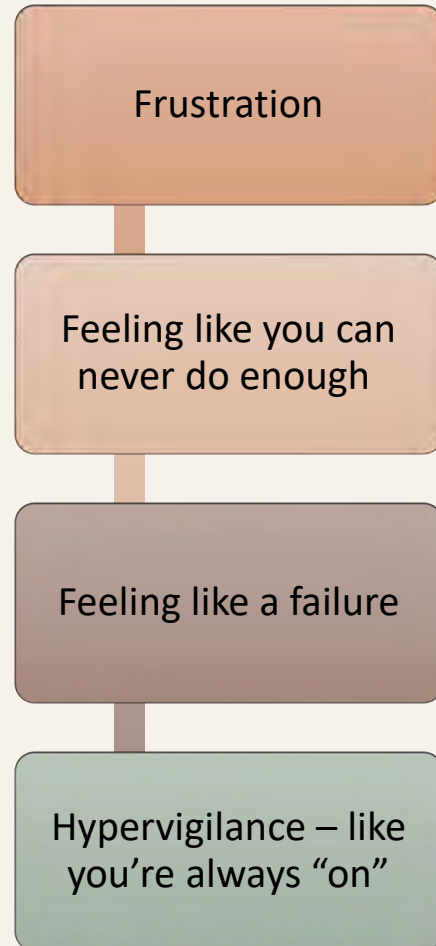
Burnout

State of emotional, mental, and often physical exhaustion brought on by prolonged or repeated stress.

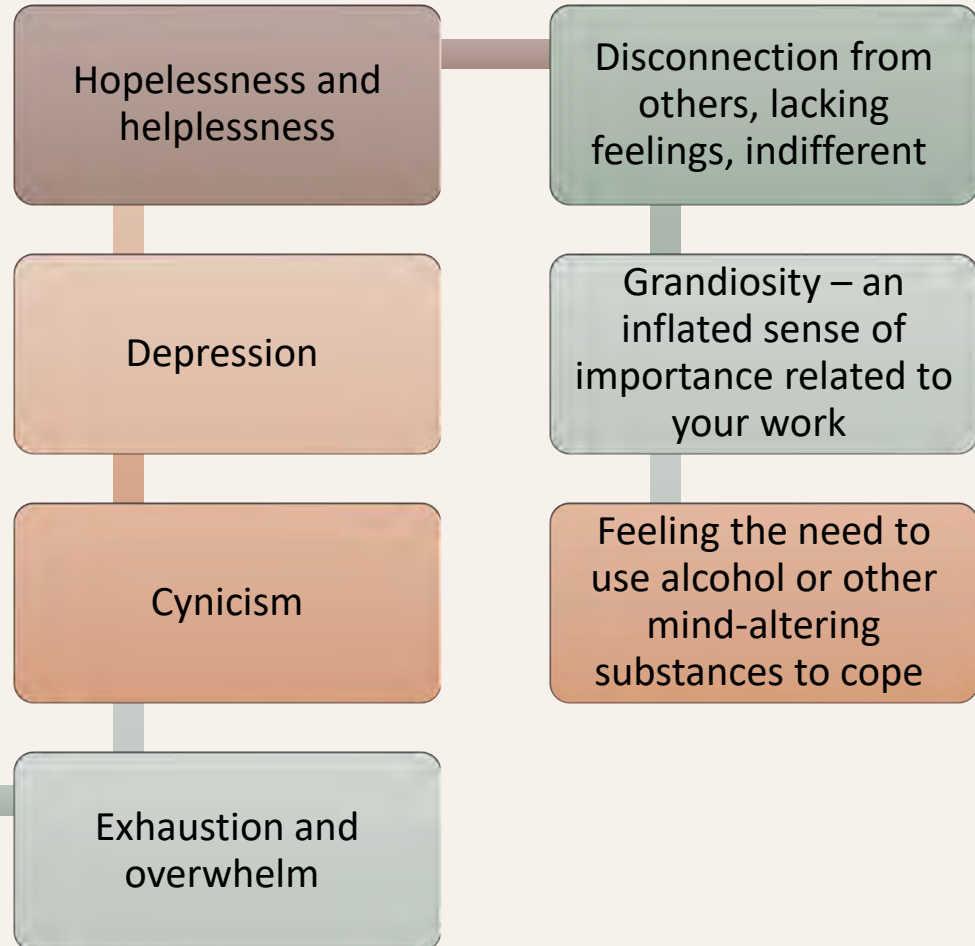
Burnout is not a personal failing. It is a predictable response to sustained exposure to conditions that exceed a person's capacity to cope — and those conditions are largely organizational.

What can Burnout look like?

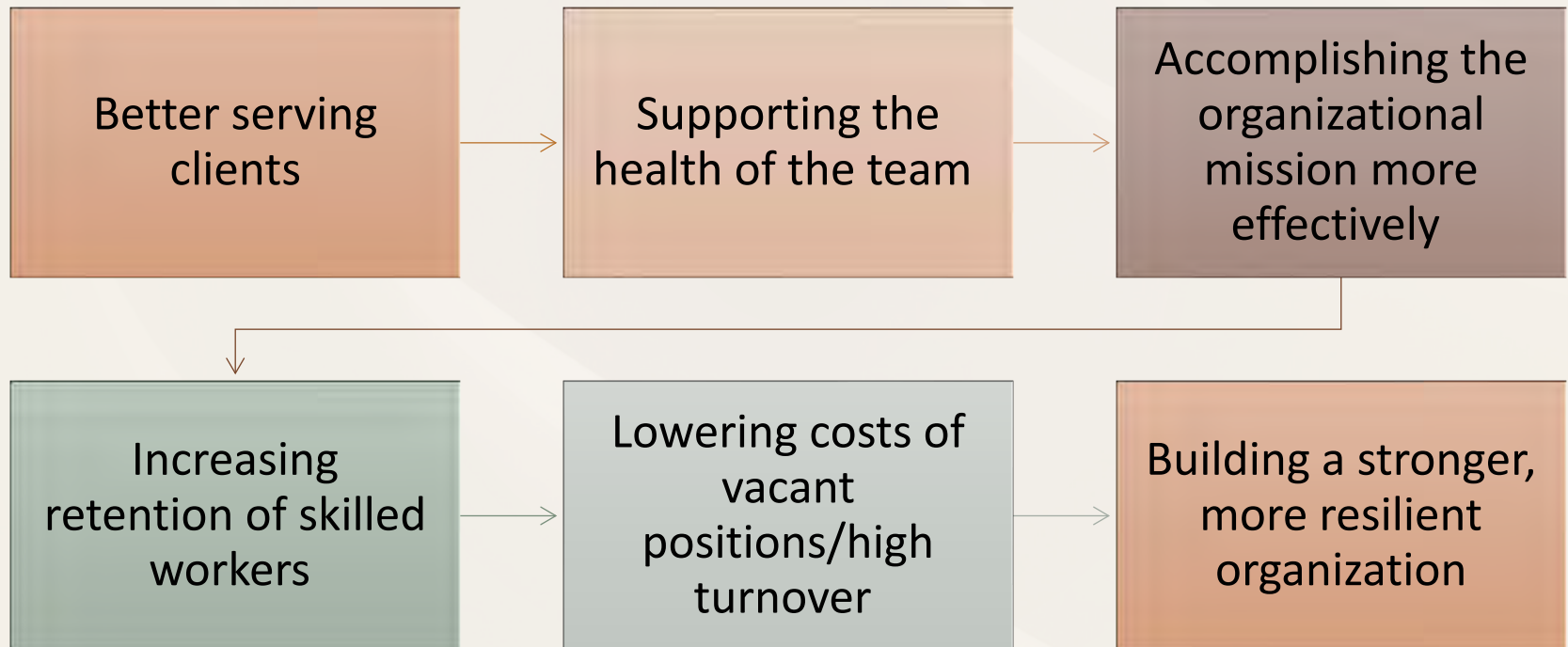
Early stages:



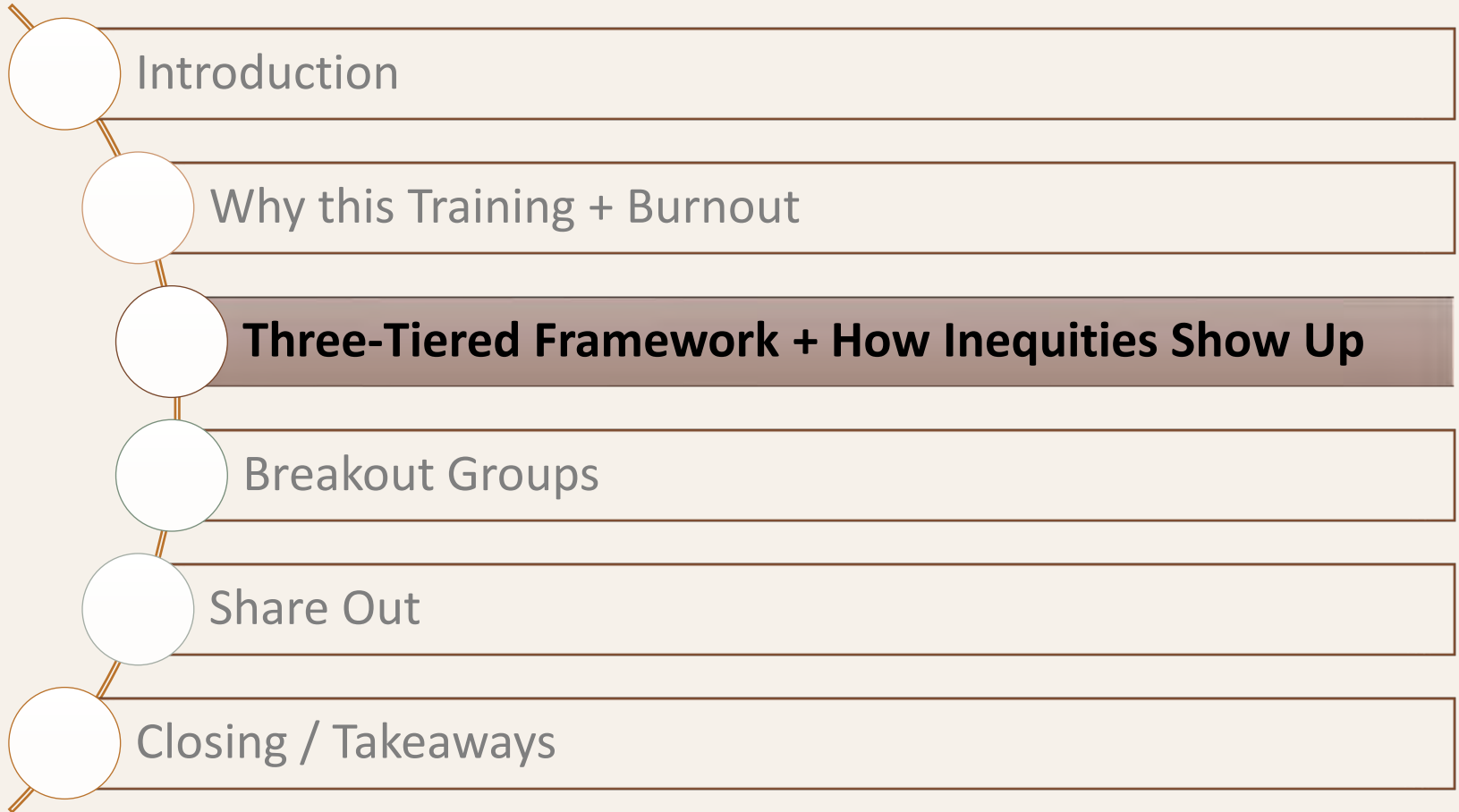
Later stages:



Why is addressing burnout important?



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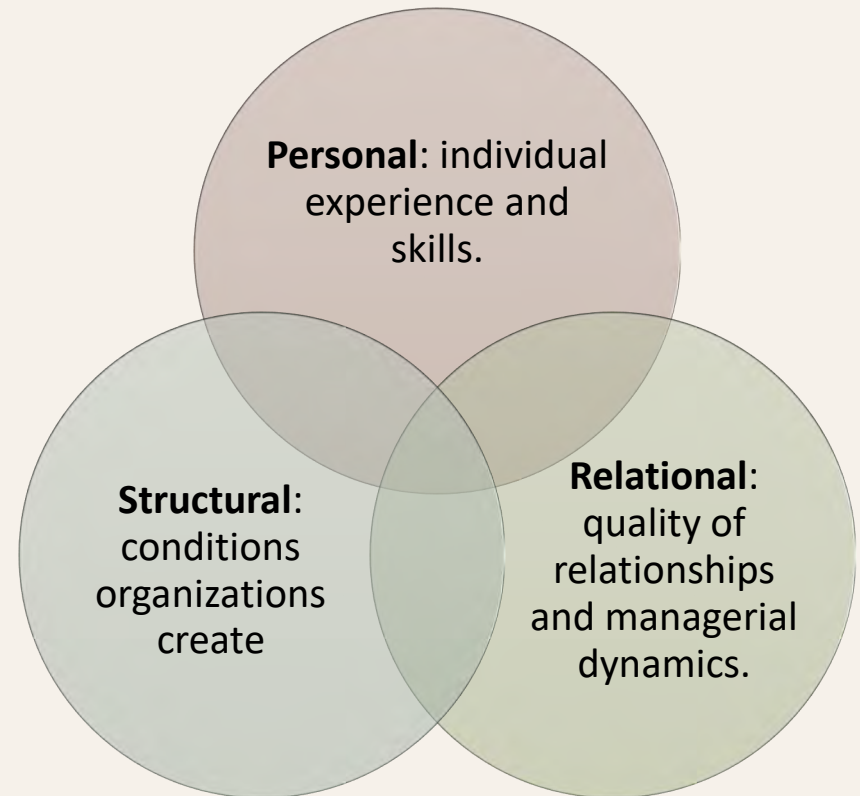


How do we address burnout?

Burnout rarely has a single cause. Sustainable organizations address burnout across three levels:

- **Structural** — the conditions organizations create.
- **Relational** — the quality of connection at work and how structures are implemented.
- **Personal** — individual experience, skills, and coping strategies.

Organizations have the most control at the structural and relational levels. That's where this session focuses.



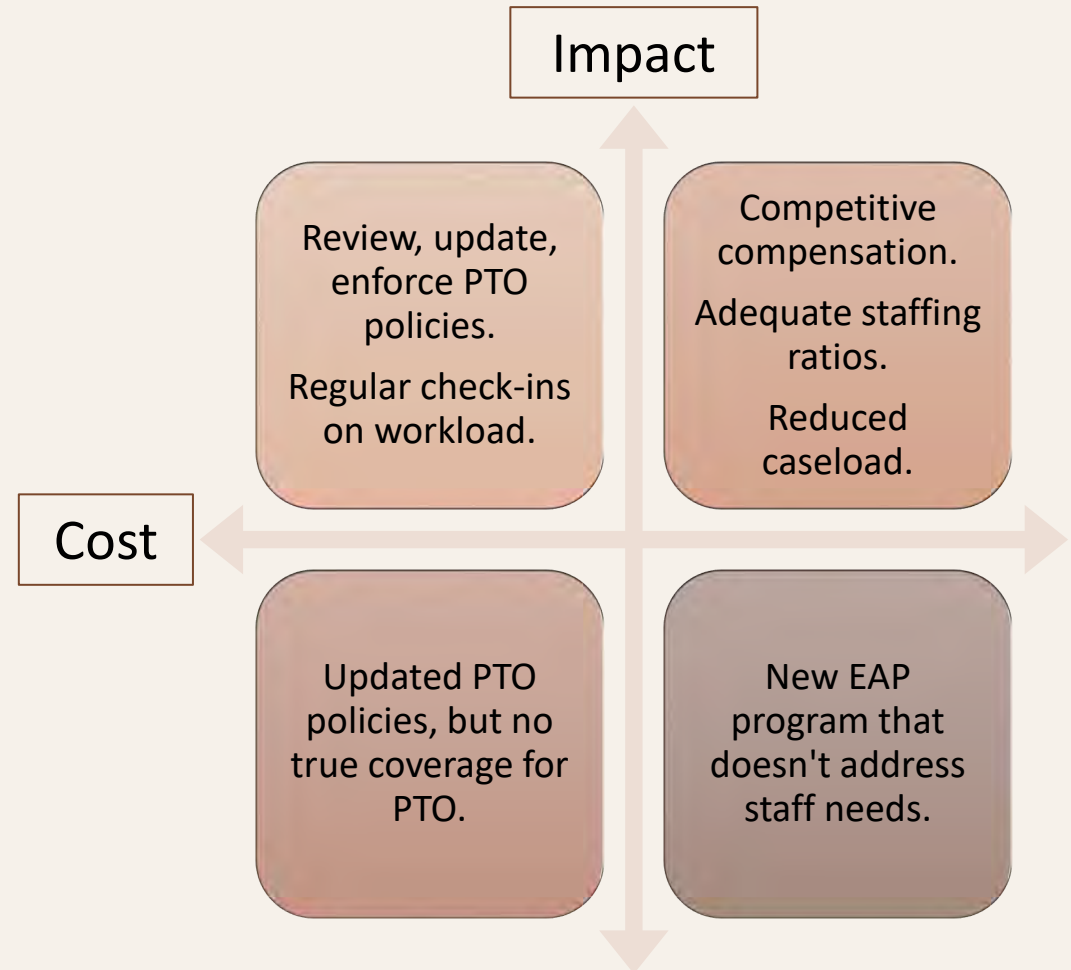
Causes of Burnout

	Structural	Relational	Personal
Inadequate compensation	x		
Insufficient recovery time	x		
Unsustainable workload	x		
Lack of autonomy	x	x	
Lack of recognition	x	x	
Team conflict and dysfunction	x	x	
Isolation	x	x	
Weak or inconsistent supervision		x	
Low psychological safety		x	
Poor manager-staff relationships		x	
Values misalignment or moral injury	x		x
Empathy fatigue, STS, vicarious trauma	x		x
Identity-related labor	x		x
Values-driven overextension			x
Limited recovery capacity	x		x

Structural

The conditions that organizations build — or fail to build — around their people to prevent burnout.

- **Workloads** are regularly reviewed and adjusted; caseloads have ceilings.
- **Compensation** reflects the emotional and physical demands of the work.
- Staff have genuine **input** into decisions that affect their day-to-day work.
- **Policies** exist for time off, mental health support, and recovery — and staff use them without penalty.
- **Leadership** models sustainable work practices rather than glorifying overwork.



Structural Equity

Do our policies and systems protect everyone in the ways they need, given their background, identities, and current experience?

Compensation disparities:

- direct service roles, disproportionately held by staff who may already have marginalized backgrounds, are often the lowest paid despite carrying the highest emotional load.

Advancement barriers:

- limited pathways into supervisory or leadership roles, limiting both opportunity and organizational representation.

Policy gaps:

- leave policies, mental health benefits, and accommodation processes may exist on paper but be inaccessible in practice for hourly or part-time staff.

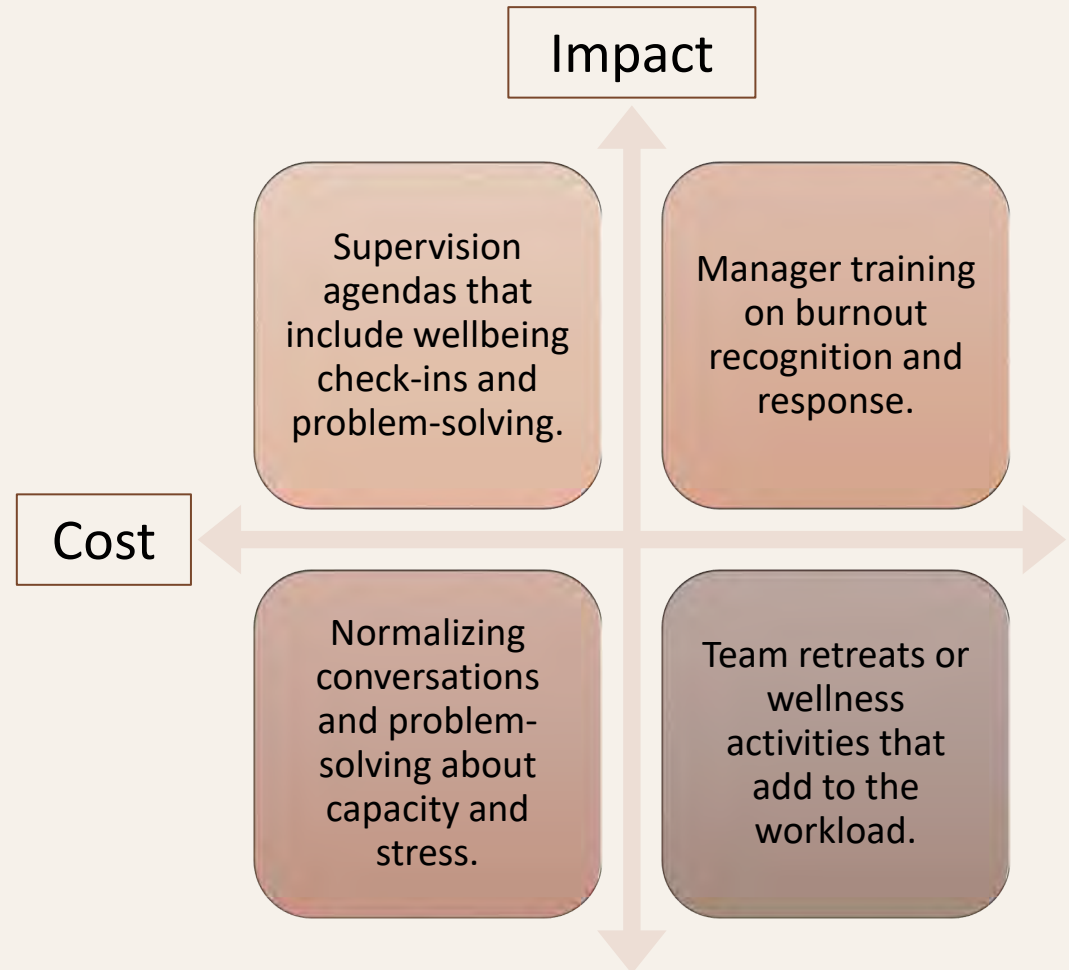
Decision-making exclusion:

- staff most affected by organizational decisions are often least included in making them.

Relational

The quality of human connection within the organization — how people are supervised, supported, and seen.

- **Supervision** is consistent and includes space for emotional processing — not just case review.
- **Staff feel safe** naming when they are struggling without fear of being seen as weak or incompetent.
- **Teams have norms** around mutual support, not just task completion.
- **Recognition** is specific, timely, and genuine — not performative.
- **Managers are trained** to notice early warning signs of burnout and respond proactively.
- **Policies are implemented** equitably, clearly, and in a timely manner.



Relational Equity

Do all staff have access to the supportive, psychologically safe managerial and peer relationships that work for them? Are policies implemented fairly across staff?

Invisible labor:

- Staff with specific identifies or backgrounds may be called on to serve as cultural liaisons, translate for clients, or navigate difficult situations because of their identity — work that may not be acknowledged or compensated.

Supervision gaps:

- Staff with specific identifies or backgrounds may have fewer supervisors who share their experience or can meaningfully support the specific emotional demands they face.

Psychological safety disparities:

- Who feels safe naming burnout, asking for reduced caseloads, or setting limits without consequence is not uniform across a team.

Belonging and isolation:

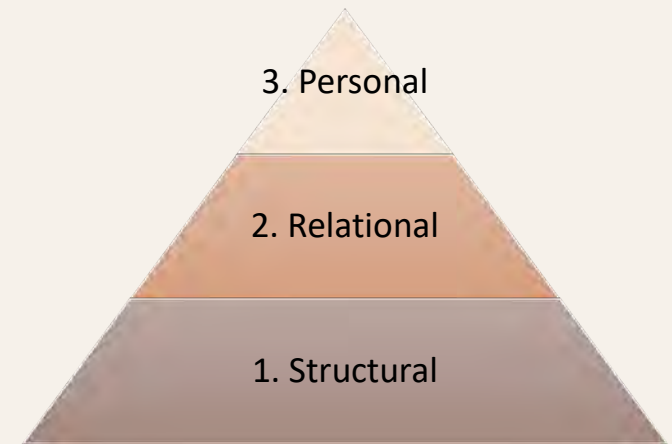
- Staff with specific identities or backgrounds may experience chronic low-level exclusion that compounds the stress of the work itself.

Personal

How individuals experience / respond to the demands of the work — shaped in part by what's happening at the structural and relational levels.

- **Individual coping strategies and resilience** — but these are not a substitute for structural and relational support.
- A person's **sense of meaning and connection to the mission**.
- How the person **aligns with the workplace policies and culture** (not every place is for every person).

Structural and Relational strategies should happen first.



Personal-tier strategies — self-care, mindfulness, resilience training — are **valuable but insufficient on their own.**

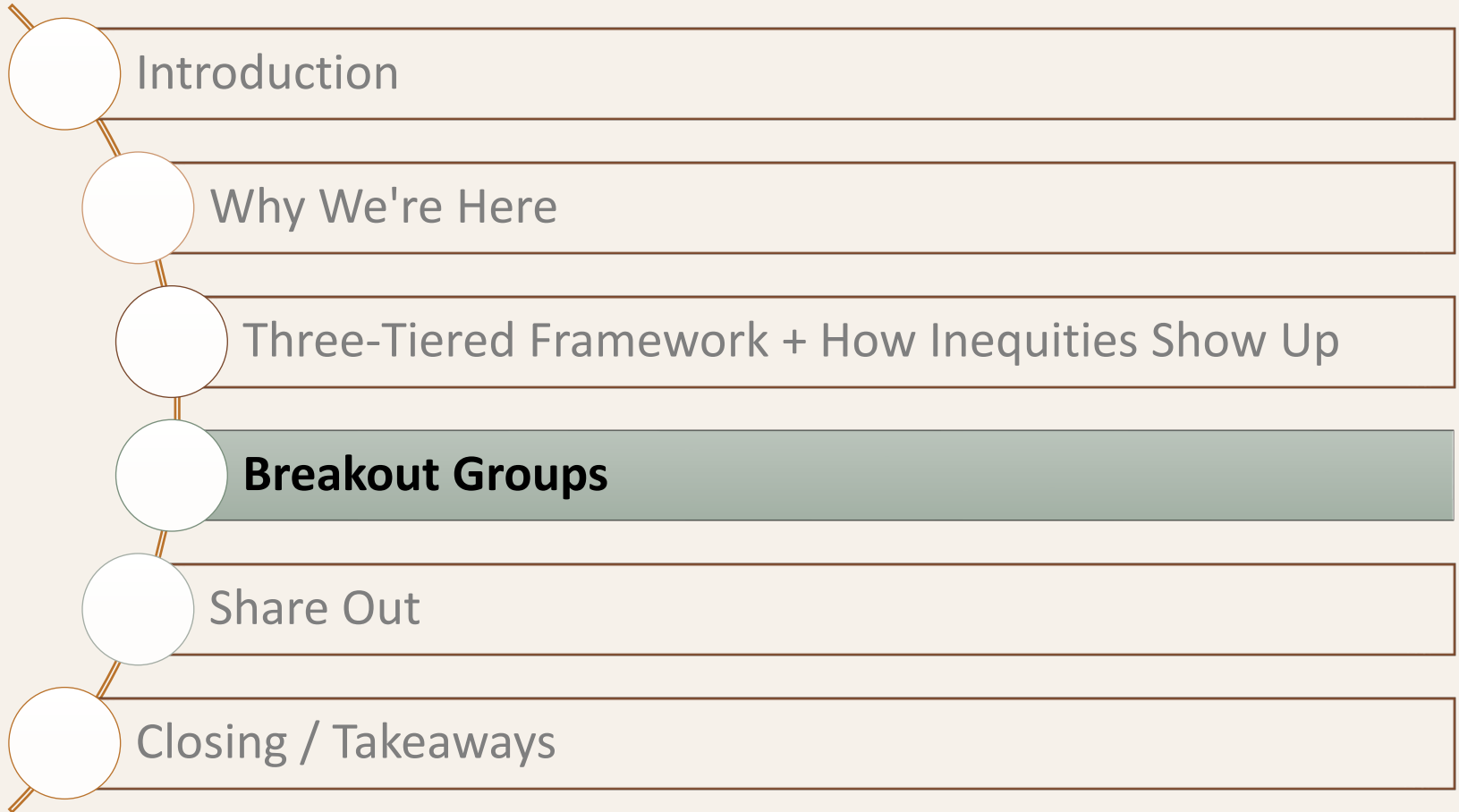


When organizations rely on them as the primary response to burnout, they put the burden on individuals.



Sustainable organizations invest at all three tiers. The structural and relational levels create the conditions for personal-level strategies to be effective.

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Group Discussion (5 minutes)

	What does your organization currently have in place that works well?	What could be improved, added, or removed to better support staff and prevent burnout?
Structural: Policies, workload distribution, staffing, compensation, leadership accountability, decision-making processes		
Relational: Supervision quality, team culture, peer support, communication norms, recognition, psychological safety		

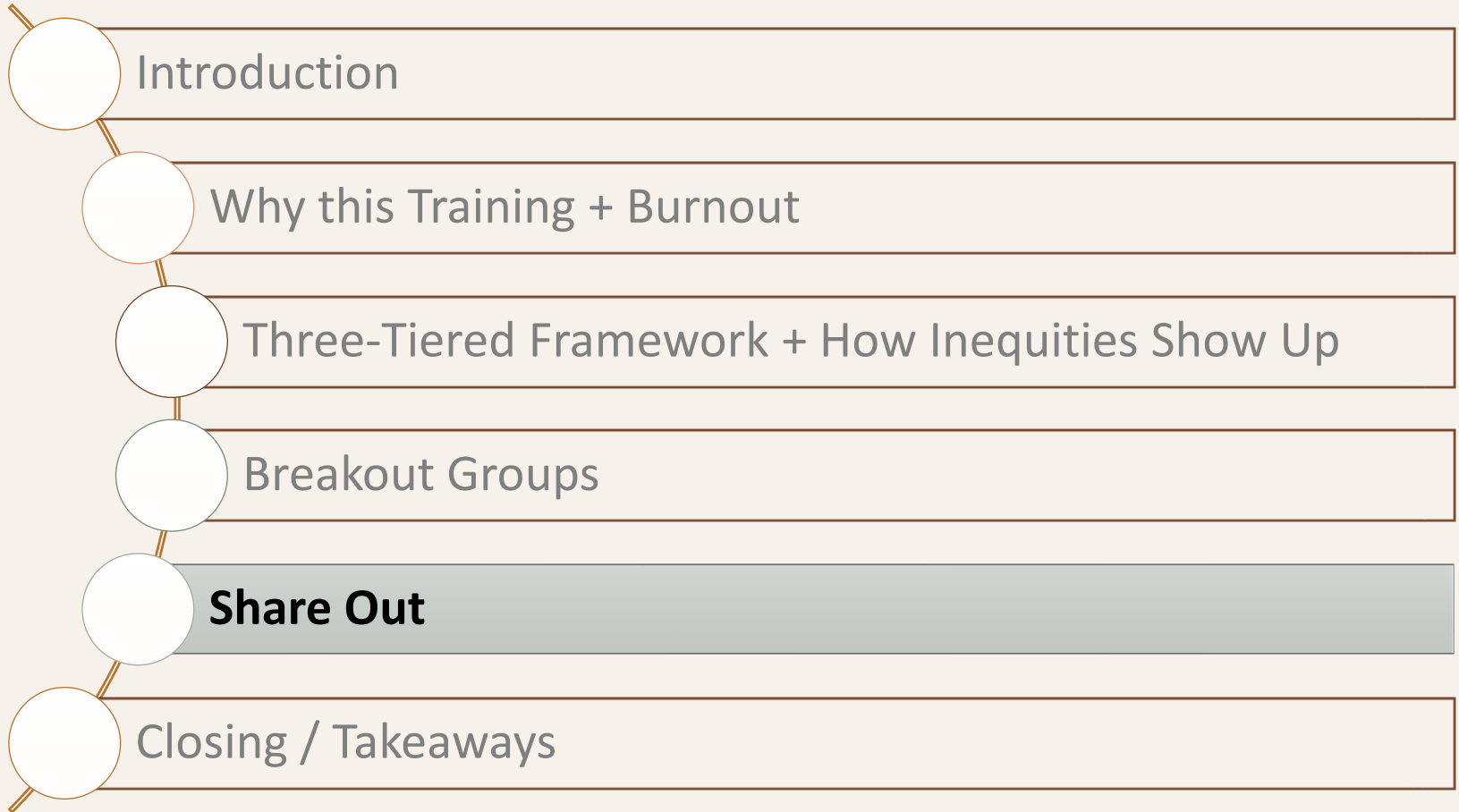
Group Discussion (10 minutes)

		Cost	
		Low cost	High cost
Impact	High impact	<i>Start here</i>	<i>Build toward this</i>
	Low impact	<i>Nice to have</i>	<i>Deprioritize for now</i>

Group Discussion (5 minutes)

- 1 Who in your organization is most at risk of burnout — and are your current supports reaching them?
- 2 Do all staff have equal access to the structural and relational supports you identify?
- 3 What would it look like to design your systems with your most burdened staff members in mind first?

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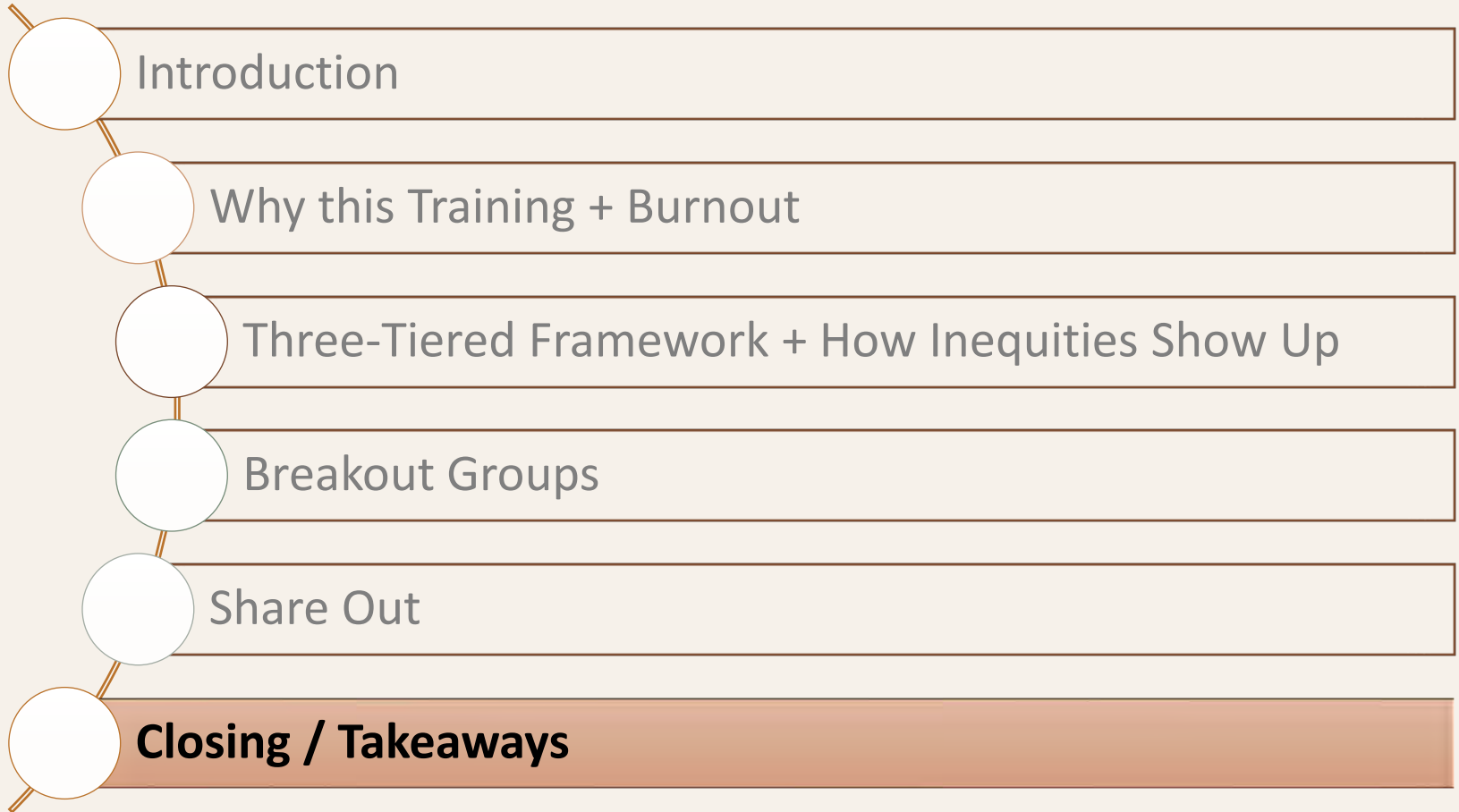


Share Out

	Low cost	High cost
High impact	<i>Start here</i>	<i>Build toward this</i>
Low impact	<i>Nice to have</i>	<i>Deprioritize for now</i>

1. What showed up in the upper-left?
2. What's in the upper-right that's worth planning or advocating for?
3. How can we work together – across organizations – to make these changes?

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Takeaways

Burnout in homeless services work is not inevitable — but preventing it requires organizations to look honestly at the conditions they've created and the relationships they've built.

- 1. Burnout has a cause — usually more than one.** The factors that drive it are largely organizational, not personal.
- 2. The structural and relational tiers are where organizations have the most leverage.** Personal-level strategies matter, but they can't do the work of structural and relational change.
- 3. What's already working is a starting point.** Your organization has strengths to build on.
- 4. Low-cost, high-impact changes exist.** You don't have to wait for a budget cycle or a leadership overhaul to take a meaningful next step.
- 5. Equity isn't a separate conversation.** Who burnout falls hardest on, and whose wellbeing your systems center, should shape every decision you make at every tier.
- 6. This work is collective.** The problems are organizational — so are the solutions. Lasting change happens when people across roles and organizations are working toward the same thing.

Causes of Burnout (1 of 3)

- **Inadequate compensation (S)** When wages don't reflect the emotional and physical demands of the work, staff absorb financial stress on top of occupational stress — a double burden that erodes capacity over time. Pay is one of the clearest signals an organization sends about how much it values its people.
- **Insufficient recovery time (S)** Without protected time to decompress — between clients, between shifts, through actual use of leave — the nervous system never fully resets. Burnout accelerates when rest is structurally unavailable, not just personally neglected.
- **Unsustainable workload (S)** Caseloads and task demands that chronically exceed what one person can reasonably manage are among the strongest predictors of burnout.
- **Lack of autonomy (S/R)** Staff who have little control over how, when, or where they do their work are more vulnerable to burnout — even when the workload itself is manageable. Autonomy operates at the structural level through policy, and at the relational level through how supervisors treat staff day to day.
- **Lack of recognition (S/R)** Feeling invisible — whether your effort, your impact, or your identity goes unacknowledged — is a consistent driver of disengagement and burnout. Recognition is structurally shaped by compensation and advancement systems, and relationally shaped by whether supervisors and peers notice and name what staff contribute.

Causes of Burnout (2 of 3)

- **Team conflict and dysfunction (S/R)** Chronic interpersonal tension, unclear roles, and unresolved conflict create a low-grade drain that compounds the stress of already demanding work. This is partly a structural problem — organizations that don't have clear role definitions or conflict resolution processes set teams up for dysfunction — and partly relational, depending on how leadership and management respond when conflict surfaces.
- **Isolation (S/R)** Doing emotionally demanding work without meaningful peer connection is a significant burnout risk. Isolation can be structurally built in — remote work, solo caseloads, siloed teams — or relationally produced when team culture doesn't create genuine belonging.
- **Weak or inconsistent supervision (R)** Supervision that focuses only on compliance and task completion, or that happens sporadically, leaves staff without a critical source of support. Good supervision is one of the most protective relational factors against burnout — its absence is one of the most corrosive.
- **Low psychological safety (R)** When staff can't name that they're struggling, ask for help, or push back on unreasonable demands without social or professional risk, burnout goes underground. It doesn't stop — it just becomes invisible until it becomes turnover.
- **Poor manager-staff relationships (R)** The relationship between a staff member and their direct supervisor is one of the strongest predictors of both burnout and retention. Supervisors who are themselves burned out, undertrained, or unsupported pass that strain downward — often without intending to.

Causes of Burnout (3 of 3)

- **Values misalignment or moral injury (S/P)** Moral injury occurs when staff are repeatedly asked to act in ways that conflict with their values — knowing what a client needs and being unable to provide it, implementing policies they believe cause harm, or watching systemic failures they can't fix. This is structurally produced but personally experienced.
- **Empathy fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, vicarious trauma (S/P)** These are the specific costs of sustained emotional presence with people in crisis and trauma — absorbing others' pain without adequate structural support to process it. They are occupational hazards and they require organizational-level responses, not just individual coping strategies.
- **Identity-related labor (S/P)** Staff whose identities are connected to the communities they serve often carry unacknowledged emotional labor — navigating their own experiences while supporting clients who reflect them, serving as cultural translators, or managing the weight of representation. This labor is real, rarely compensated, and structurally overlooked.
- **Values-driven overextension (P)** A deep commitment to the mission can lead staff to absorb unreasonable demands rather than push back — staying late, skipping breaks, taking on more than is sustainable — because the work feels too important to say no to. This is personal in expression but often produced by structural conditions that exploit that commitment.
- **Limited recovery capacity (S/P)** What happens outside of work shapes how much a person can absorb at work. Financial stress, caregiving responsibilities, inadequate sleep, lack of social support — these reduce the buffer between demand and depletion. Personal capacity is itself shaped by broader conditions: additional structural supports may be needed for staff facing additional personal barriers to recovery time.