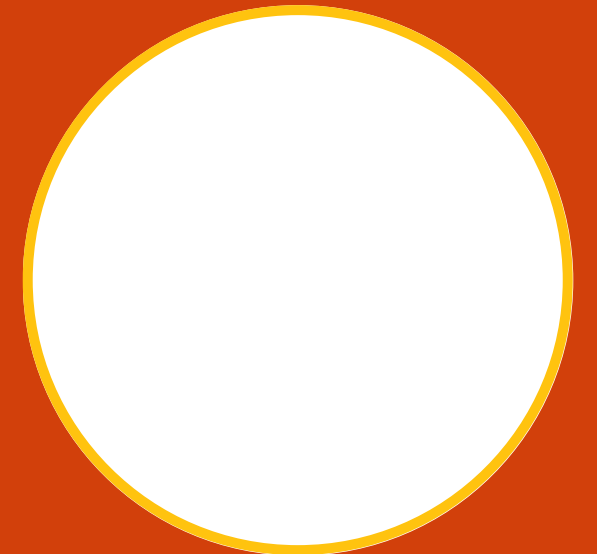




# capitalism and mental health

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*counseling ~ services*





## **Session 1: Capitalism and Mental Health**

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# TODAY'S objectives

at the end of this workshop, the learner will be able to:

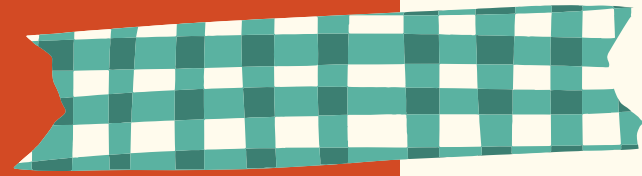
- ✦ describe the impact of profit-driven economic and social structures on mental health
- ✦ discuss how capitalism limits and narrows access to mental health care and influences treatment models
- ✦ identify possible interventions and clinical approaches, policies, and personal strategies which can refute self-commodification, improve mental health care, and advocate for mental wellness



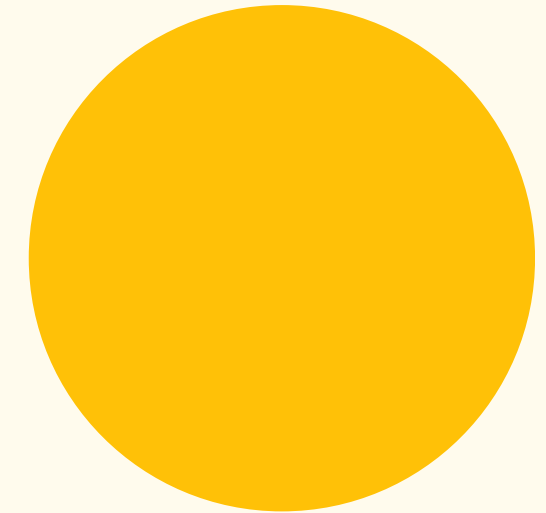


**your surroundings  
impact your mental  
health!**





# american capitalism



**it's called a lot of things...**

- ✦ selfish capitalism
- ✦ neoliberal capitalism
- ✦ late capitalism

**some main tenants are...**

- ✦ a coordinated drive to privatize collective goods and services, along with health care
- ✦ minimal regulation of financial services and labor markets, including working practices which strongly favor employers and disfavor unions, permitting ease of hiring and firing
- ✦ assumes that consumption and market choices can meet human needs of almost every kind, 'social responsibility' is devalued
- ✦ incorporates theories of eliminating all restrictions on the market and decreasing government assistance programs, while the government acts to allow for more market expansion





# societal impact

***core tenants of capitalism become intrinsically linked to the way we operate day to day***

## **individualism**

- ✦ independence, self-reliance, and maximizing individual pleasure and satisfaction are core beliefs

## **competition**

- ✦ other members of society are seen as obstacles to advancement to compete for scarce resources
- ✦ divides and isolates people from forming solidarity, finding common purpose and struggle

## **consumerism**

- ✦ becomes the principle method where individuals form identity
- ✦ consumption is addictive but ultimately unsatisfying, creating cycles of anticipation and disappointment



# societal impact

## ***capitalism is intrinsically linked to white supremacy***

- ✦ the market is run by and engaged with by humans therefore the relationships and politics of community life bleed into market outcomes - perpetuating racism, colonialism, sexism, ableism, classism
- ✦ normalizes, empowers, and encourages the exploitation, abuse, and dehumanization of nonwhite people, specifically Black and Indigenous folks
- ✦ creates income inequality, disempowerment of workers, outsourcing of manufacturing jobs, inadequate social services, mass incarceration and an expensive and ineffective healthcare system
- ✦ concentrates wealth in elites of very rich citizens while increasing debt and decreasing savings for the average citizen

# precarity & well-being

## noticing it in our daily lives

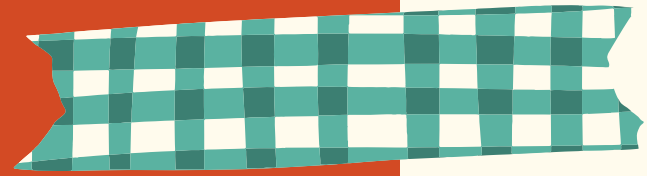
- ✦ feelings of job insecurity, leading to common phrases like “not in this economy!”
- ✦ homelessness and visible poverty
- ✦ reserve army of labor

## impacts

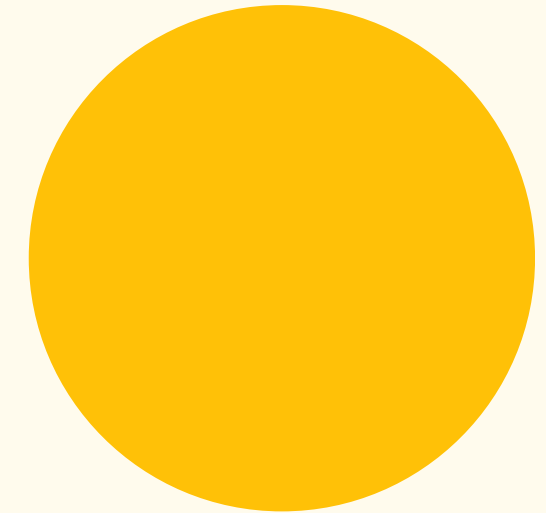
- ✦ negative impact on overall health
- ✦ feelings of powerlessness over one’s environment
- ✦ reduced self-esteem and **internalized capitalism**
- ✦ sense of ‘futurelessness’ - every generation has less wealth and opportunities than those preceding them

Marx’s **theory of alienation** states that under capitalism, workers are alienated – or separated – from the fruit of their labor (as the capitalist takes both what workers create and most of the profit that is made from their work), from themselves (their needs and desires) and from others (such as other workers, friends, family, and community)

***This leads to feelings of powerlessness, isolation, and meaninglessness***



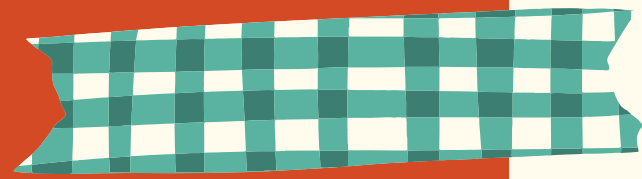
# alienation theory



**a core feature of capitalist societies, alienation manifests as estrangement from the world around you, including fellow humans**

- ✦ core human desires are not satisfied
- ✦ growing sense of meaninglessness and disconnection
- ✦ communities are built in an isolating fashion, lacking spaces to congregate and connect without spending money
- ✦ social interactions feel frivolous and perfunctory, “fake nice”
- ✦ disconnection from meaning in your work, “bullshit jobs”
- ✦ dominance of spectacle in society; entertainment and amusement fulfill a need for meaning and to distract from distress
- ✦ spectacle provides a simulation of human needs: belonging, socializing, political action, self-actualization, but does not fully fulfill these needs





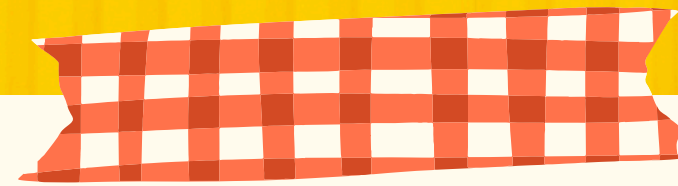
# internalized capitalism

**you are likely feeling the impact of internalized capitalism -  
here are some signs:**

- ✦ sunday scaries
- ✦ exhaustion
- ✦ chronic stress
- ✦ forgoing activities that bring you joy and pleasure, and instead choosing to focus on productive things
- ✦ worrying about maximizing your potential/not being “lazy”
- ✦ worrying about your value
- ✦ anxiety about being good enough at our jobs, being fired, having health insurance
- ✦ depression
- ✦ transactional thinking (ie., if I work out, then I deserve a donut)
- ✦ imposter syndrome
- ✦ keeping emotions in and repressing anger
- ✦ hustle culture
- ✦ isolating from others



# impact on our mental health



## **medicalizing normal responses to stressors under capitalism**

- ✦ the idea that you are ill and defective for not assimilating to harmful expectations and conditions, instead of addressing systemic problems under capitalism

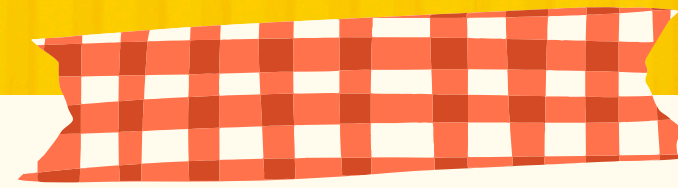
## **your class impacts your mental health care / issues discussed in counseling**

- ✦ being in “survival mode” and locked into poverty is miserable - it makes us depressed, anxious, and more prone to trauma
- ✦ when we are told that our social class is dependent on our hard work, we end up feeling defeated and blame ourselves for our misfortune - this creates a cycle of powerlessness and despair

## **isolation and being too busy**

- ✦ having to be productive, “well-rounded,” high achieving, efficient, and “always grinding” ensures that we miss out on time with loved ones, joy, rest, boredom, and enjoying nature

# impact on our mental health



## **increased rates of mental illness**

- ✦ risen steadily over past 15 years--symptom clusters spread as market spreads
- ✦ coincides with 1980s neoliberal turn toward eliminating market restrictions, cutting social spending

## **deaths of despair**

- ✦ suicide, alcoholism, drug overdose rates have dramatically risen

## **degraded social connections, increased loneliness**

- ✦ consumption is addictive but ultimately unsatisfying, creating cycles of anticipation and disappointment
- ✦ advances in technology further isolate and commodify our relationships, impair social skills and self-formation



# clinical examples



# **reflection questions for case examples**

**how might capitalism contribute to the mental health challenges described?**

**what other relevant information may be helpful in creating a treatment plan?**

**what role might class, financial pressure, or cultural expectations be playing in the distress faced by students?**

**how can counseling help students to navigate discussions about capitalism and mental health? which therapeutic techniques might be useful in this example?**

**what other resources and supports would you suggest (on or off campus)?**



# impact on the mental health field

Nearly 60 million adults and children living with mental illness go without treatment in the United States due to high rates of denial of care by insurance providers, high out-of-pocket costs, and problems finding in-network provider

## diagnosis

- ✦ the diagnosis of a mental illness is often contingent upon negatively affecting a person's performance at work, school, or home indicating that being unsuccessful within the system is an individual illness needing to be corrected rather than a problem with the social order itself

## treatment

- ✦ treatment is sought to be standardized, one-size-fits all to address specific diseases and diagnoses, which overlooks the subjective, human-centered art of therapy that thrives on connection and the complexity of the self

## increased costs

- ✦ the cost of health insurance and treatment is also a barrier for access to mental healthcare, often causing patients to wait to see a provider until an emergency occurs

# impact on the mental health field



## technology

- ✦ the rise of mental health apps has led to disconnect in therapist-client relationship, “Uber-fied” therapy, and selling of private client data

## “optimization of the self” and other cultural shifts

- ✦ seeing therapy as a means to optimize or perfect the self, a sign of a “good” person, a way to completely heal or eliminate suffering entirely
- ✦ proliferation of poor mental health advice, wellness influencer culture, static view of diagnoses, diagnoses as identity signifiers

# impact on the mental health field



**In 2024, the pharmaceutical/health products field spent \$387.47M on lobbying efforts, with the help of 1,814 lobbyists - over half of which used to be government employees.**

## pharmacology

- ✦ the biochemical model of mental healthcare posits that mental illnesses are caused by an imbalance of neurochemicals and can only be treated by using psychotropics like antidepressants, or mood stabilizers or anti-psychotics
- ✦ prescribing mental health medication has become a “solution” to dealing with symptoms that stem from capitalism, further perpetuating the system
- ✦ mental health medications are often advertised as a way for people to be more competitive and successful
- ✦ changing expectations for children’s behavior, leading to increased diagnosis and medication intervention at earlier ages

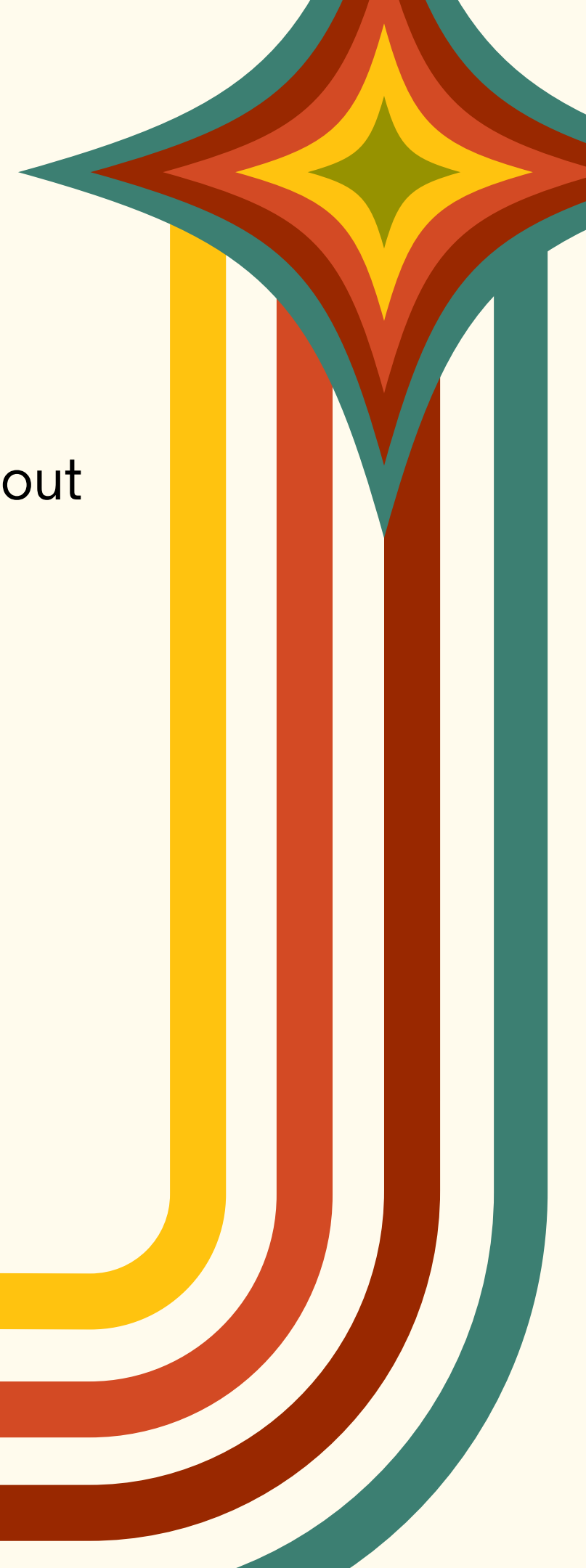


what do we  
do about it?



# practices & policies

- ✦ educate mental health providers about structural competency, which teaches about how social, economic, and political forces cause health inequalities
- ✦ providers should examine their own biases perpetuated by neoliberal capitalist ideologies and examine institutional attitudes that can interfere with treatment
- ✦ continue to look at social and environmental causes of mental illness through research and try to approach mental illness through multi-disciplinary care
- ✦ providers should also focus less on work and productivity as benchmarks for recovery



# practices & policies

- ✦ create community mental health centers to frame mental health as a community issue and for psychiatrists and other providers to take a more civically active role
- ✦ support policies that address the power dynamics between employers and employees, such as advocating for limitations on lobbying, unionization, cooperative business models, and regulation preventing industry monopolies
- ✦ support efforts such as state proposals to increase minimum wage and increase state spending on public services to decrease mental health burdens





# clinical approaches

- ◆ notice and challenge internalized shame and ‘bootstrap’ mentality in culture--don’t let ‘self care’ become self-blame
- ◆ normalize and incorporate concepts into psychoeducation
- ◆ emphasize genuine relationships and connections in your client’s life
- ◆ awareness of class in treatment and within therapeutic relationship
- ◆ allows for deeper insight into suffering and distress management





# clinical interventions

## **anti-capitalist theory**

- ✦ acknowledges the harmful impacts of capitalism, validates feelings, and seeks to provide an alternative framework that values collective healing and resistance over profit and productivity

## **constructivist theory & narrative therapy**

- ✦ explores what stories the client is carrying, identifies alternative stories, and views people as separate from their problems/behaviors

## **bibliotherapy**

- ✦ helps clients understand perspectives other than their own, make sense of difficult experiences, and contextualize symptoms.

## **mindfulness techniques**

- ✦ provides space for internal reflection, being in the here-and-now, and improves overall health & well-being
- ✦ loving-kindness practices are especially useful!

# personal strategies

*\*disclaimer: this is a societal problem and you are not responsible for individually “solving” these issues*

**struggles as a mental health professional are connected to capitalism, often leading to burn out, hopelessness, and helplessness - here are some ways we can take care of us:**

- ✦ affirm - you are allowed to need things
- ✦ rest - you do not need to earn your rest
- ✦ mindfulness practices - be present in the moment
- ✦ play & have fun
- ✦ permission-giving & shame-free self-talk
- ✦ sustainability practices - less participation in consumerism & more thoughtfulness
- ✦ organize & advocate



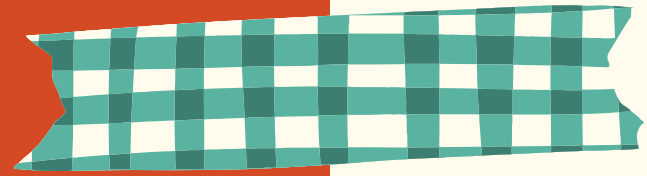
**You are not needed everywhere, but we are all needed somewhere. It's important to find your somewhere and plant yourself there.**

**When you find an issue, ask yourself:**

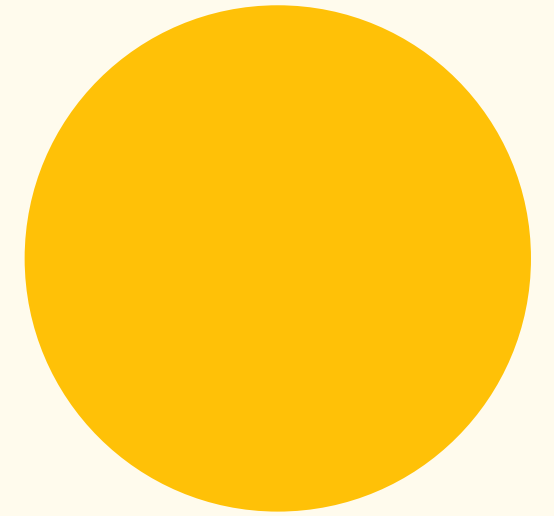
- 1) What resources exist so I can better educate myself?
- 2) Who's already doing work around this injustice?
- 3) Do I have the capacity to offer concrete support and help to them?
- 4) How can I be constructive?

**- Kelly Hayes & Mariame Kaba - *Let This Radicalize You***





# organizing & advocating



- ✦ advocate for working class clients and encourage universal care regardless of insurance
- ✦ donate your time to causes you believe in
- ✦ speak out against injustices where possible
- ✦ connect with mutual aid networks - they need trained mental health professionals
- ✦ encourage committees, organizations, and professional institutions to address material issues





# questions & discussion



# resource page



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