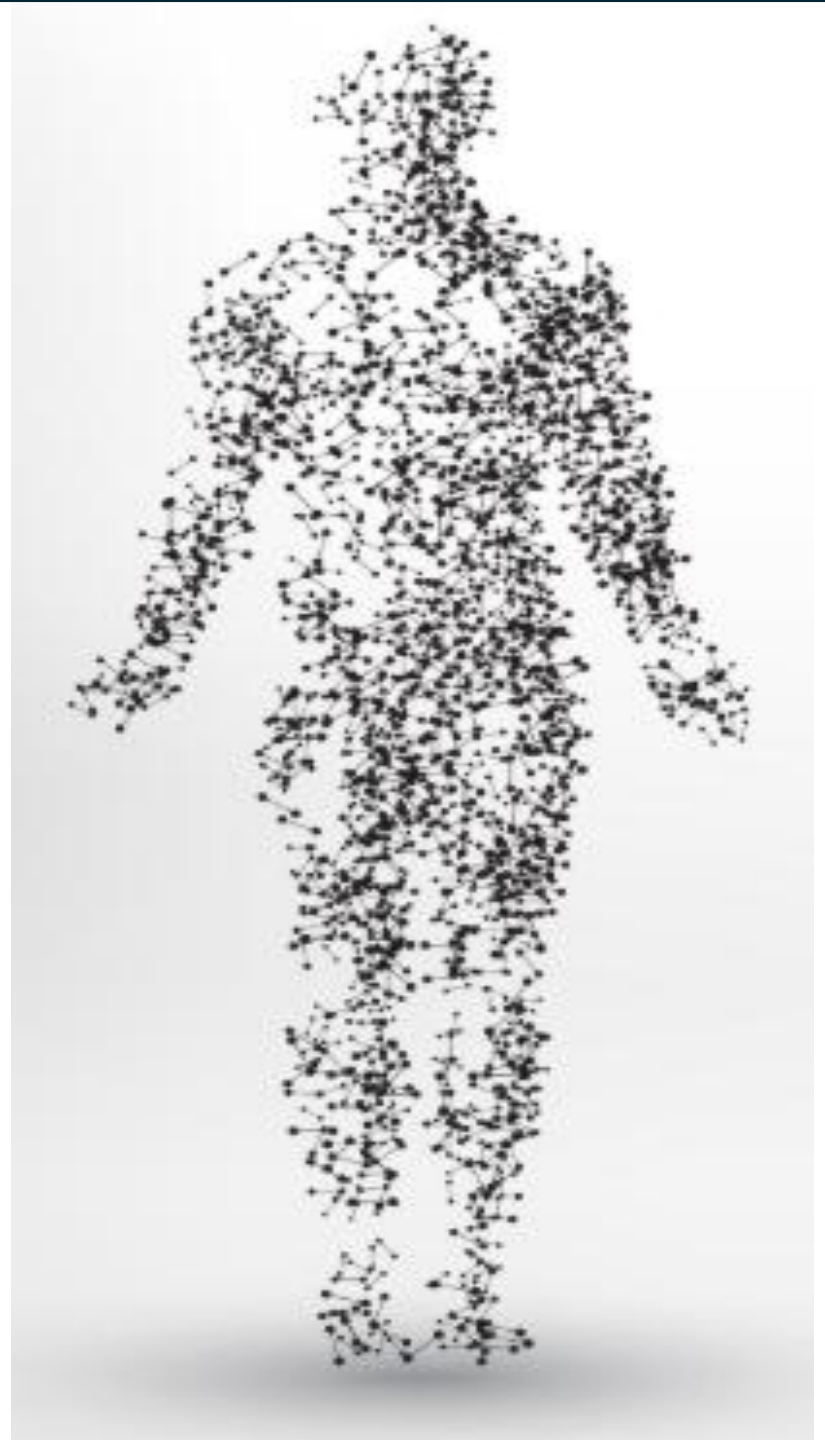
The Complex Interconnections Between Nonsuicidal Self-Injury, Suicide, and Body Image Disturbance



Jennifer J. Muehlenkamp, PhD

May 20, 2026

National Self-Injury Conference

Aarhus, Denmark

AGENDA

- NSSI & Suicide Relationship
- Why focus on the body (theory)
- Key Studies w/Treatment Strategies
- Additional Treatment Ideas

NSSI & Suicide

NSSI & Suicide Overlap

DEFINITION

- Behavior that is self-directed and deliberately results in injury or the potential for injury to oneself.

Suicide

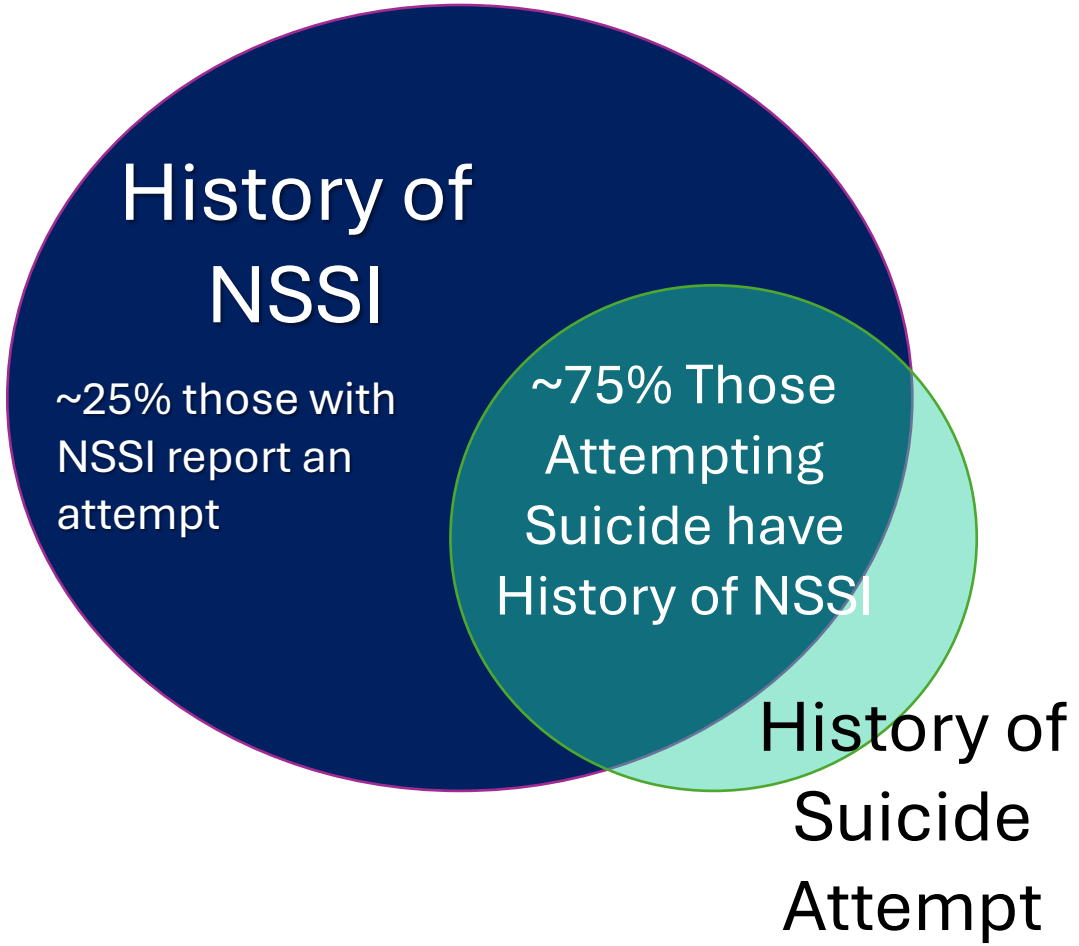
*There is evidence, whether implicit or explicit, **of suicidal intent**

Dominant Methods:
Firearms, Suffocation

NSSI

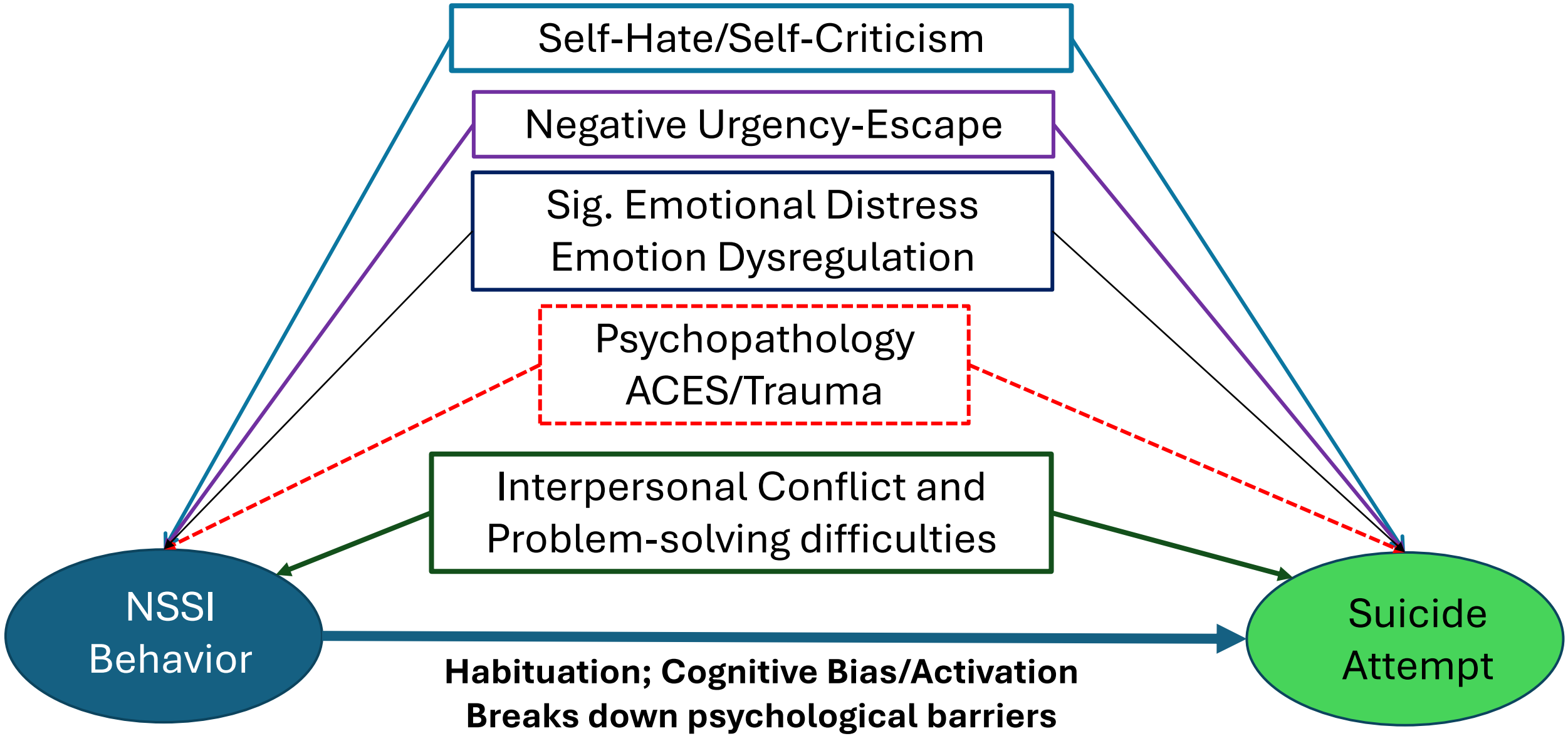
*There is **no evidence**, whether implicit or explicit, of suicidal intent

Dominant Methods:
Cutting, Self-Burning

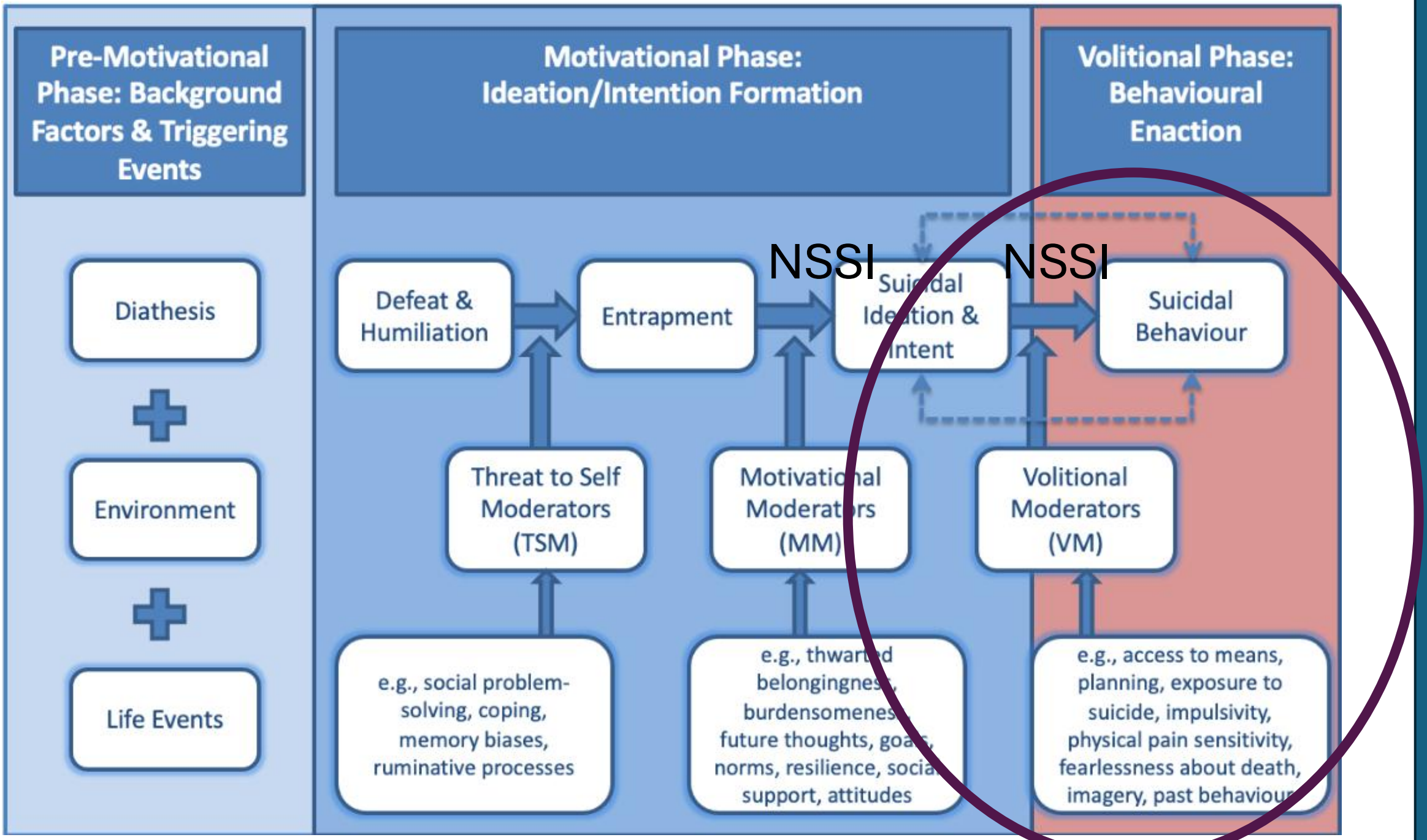


CDC, 2025; Kiekens et al., 2018; Muehlenkamp & Brausch 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2016; Whitlock, Muehlenkamp et al., 2013

Shared Vulnerabilities & Risks

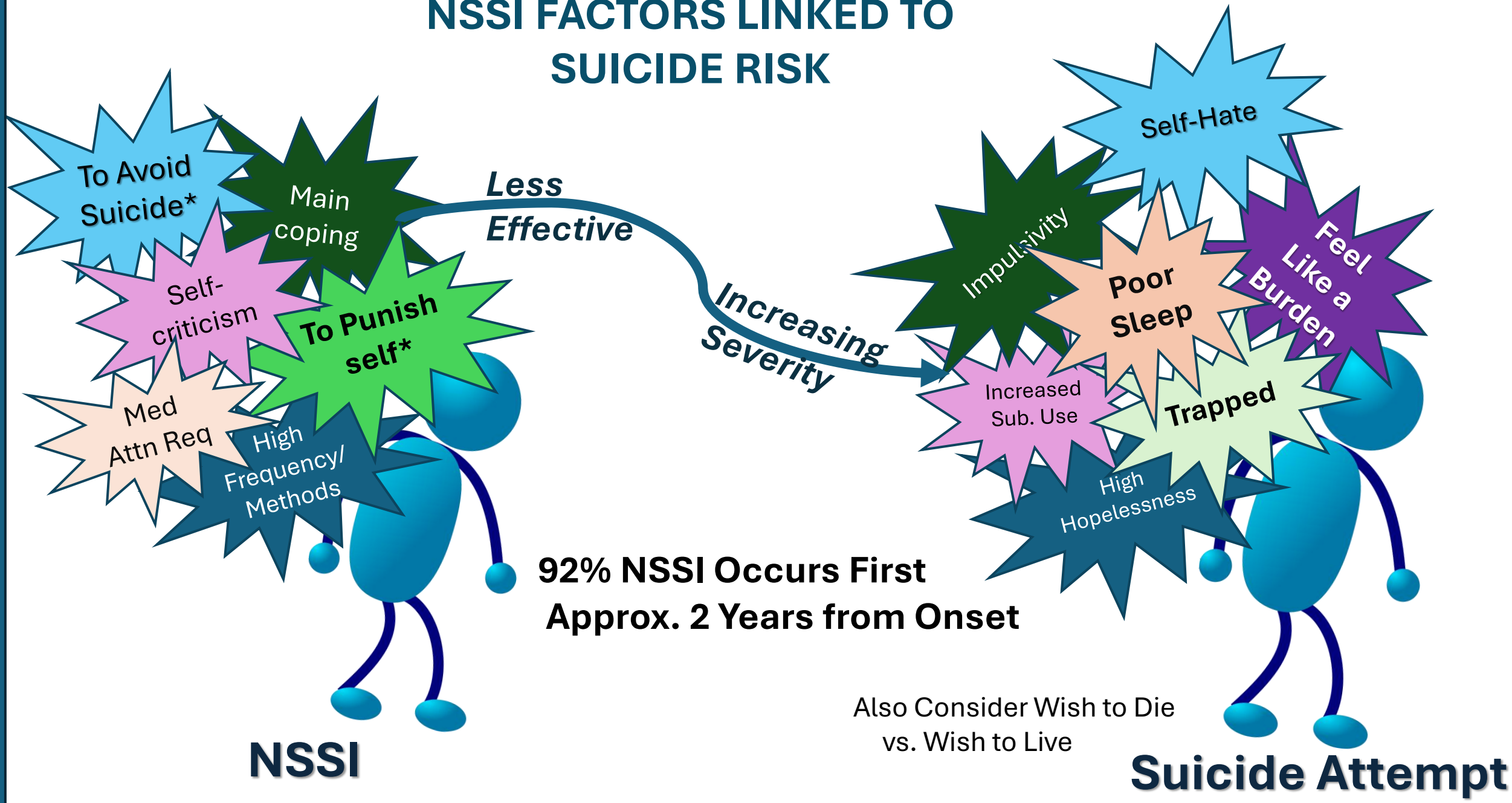


Brausch & Muehlenkamp, 2019; Joiner et al., 2013; Kiekens et al., 2018; Taliaferro & Muehlenkamp, 2015



O'Connor, 2011; O'Connor & Kirtley, 2018

NSSI FACTORS LINKED TO SUICIDE RISK



Ammerman et al., 2025; Brausch & Muehlenkamp, 2018; Kiekens et al., 2018; Muehlenkamp et al., in review; Paul et al., 2015; Turner et al., 2016; Victor et al., 2015; Whitlock, Muehlenkamp et al., 2008 & 2013; Wilkinson et al., 2012

Clinical Translation: Monitoring for Suicide Risk

- Marcus, 27 yo, has a history of burning self to "cope with stress" and a prior attempt at age 17 after suffering years of physical abuse/neglect. Lots of recent stress at work and a romantic break up. Is having mild suicidal thoughts and started scraping/cutting his forearm and wrists with a paper clip when frustrated at himself and angry with his failures in his relationships. Hasn't been sleeping well, is irritable, feeling emotional volatile and is isolating. Marcus says his injuries don't need medical attention and work well to help him avoid doing "something stupid to myself or someone else, as well as help him feel alive." He wishes others would notice his injuries and offer support.

Client: Marcus Clinician: J.M. Date: 3/16/2025 Time: 11:00

Suicide Monitoring & Check-In Form

Rate your current wish to die: Not at all 0 1 2 3 (4) 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Much

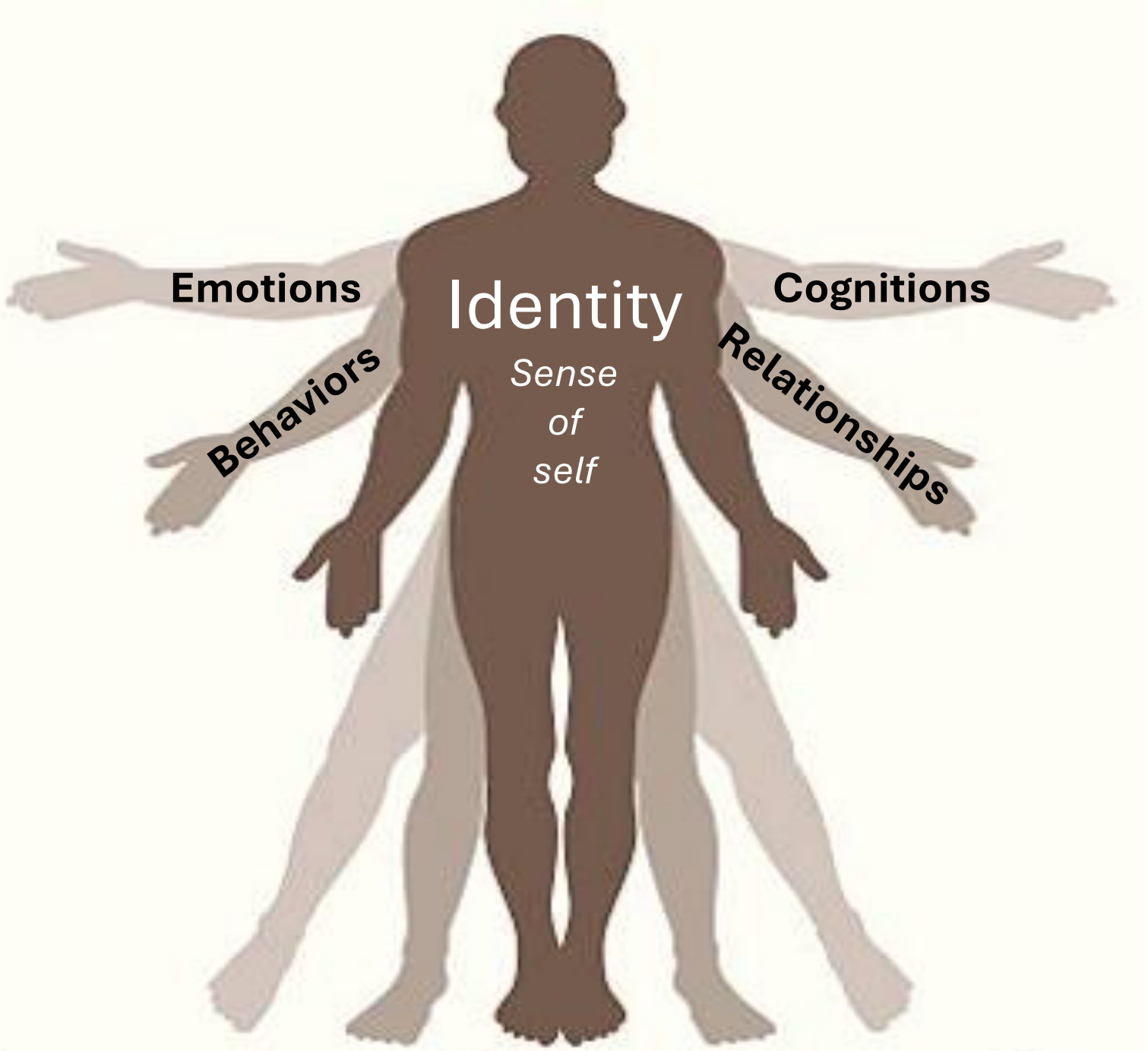
Rate your current wish to live: Not at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 (7) 8 9 10 Very Much

Rate on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 10 (all the time) how frequently you experienced each of the following since our last session together:

Thoughts about wanting to die	0 1 2 3 4 (5) 6 7 8 9 10
Cut or burned self	0 1 2 3 (4) 5 6 7 8 9 10
If Self-injured: because of self-hate	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 (9) 10
If Self-injured: to avoid suicide attempt	0 (1) 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
If Self-injured: how effective was it	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (8) 9 10
Tried other coping strategies (list): Called Jon, Went for a run Watched TV	0 1 2 (3) 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Comments: Used crisis coping strategies when urges were high during the week

Adapted from Jobes, 2022 – CAMS Tool

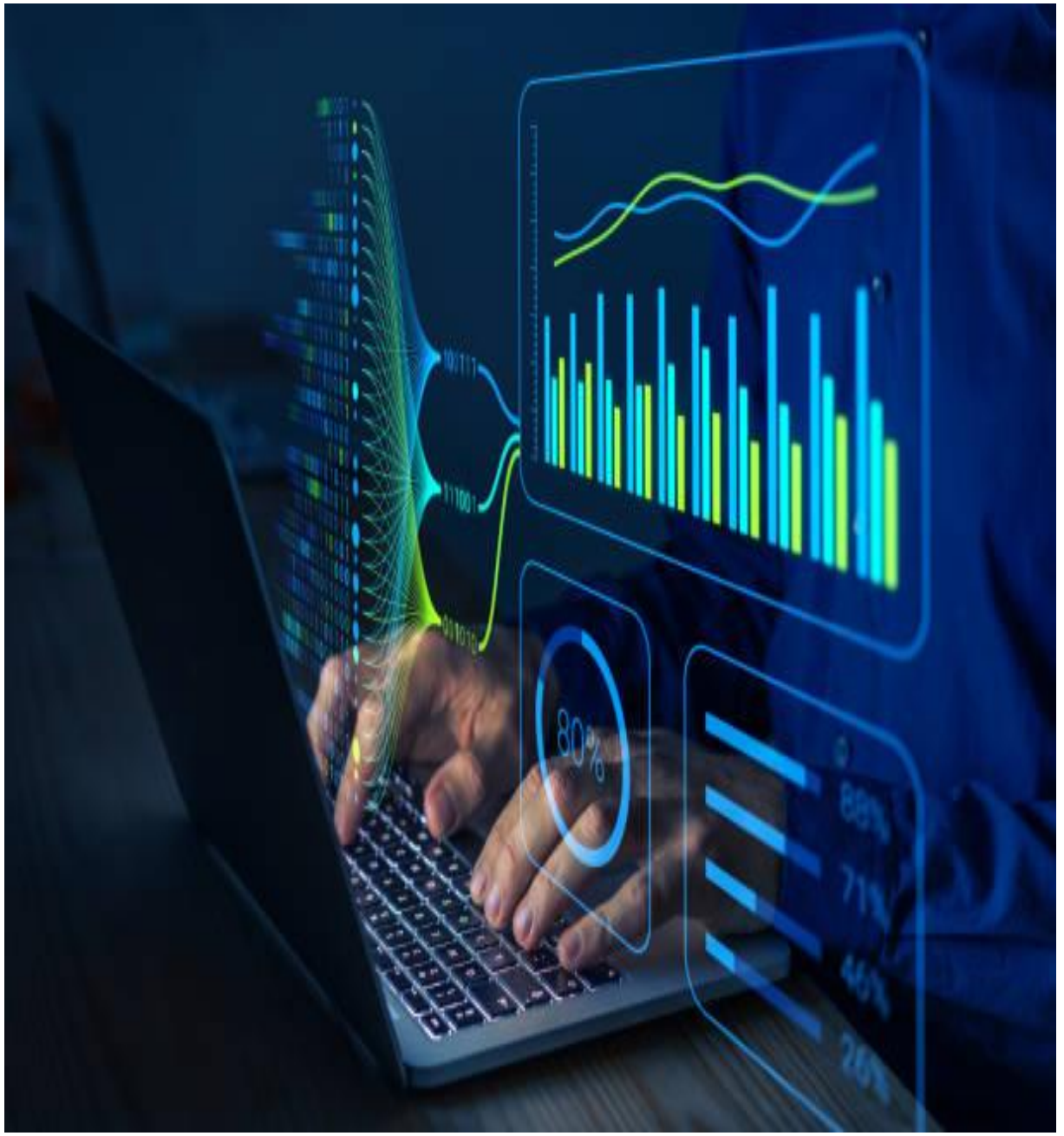


WHY the Body?

Self-preservation requires an active attitude toward body respect, protection, and value.
Critical physical & psychological barrier to acts of self-injury

Muehlenkamp, 2012; Orbach, 1995

- Populations with high rates of NSSI/Suicide report body image disturbances
- Disrupted body experiences consistently linked to NSSI & suicide
- Examined in isolation, other mediating risk factors, few longitudinal studies
- Body Regard rarely examined as protective moderator of risk as theories suggest



Akram et al., 2022; Black et al., 2019; Brausch et al., 2021; Gioia et al., 2022; Heilscher et al., 2019; Muehlenkamp & Brausch, 2012; Nelson & Muehlenkamp, 2012 ; Ren et al., 2024

Theoretical Questions

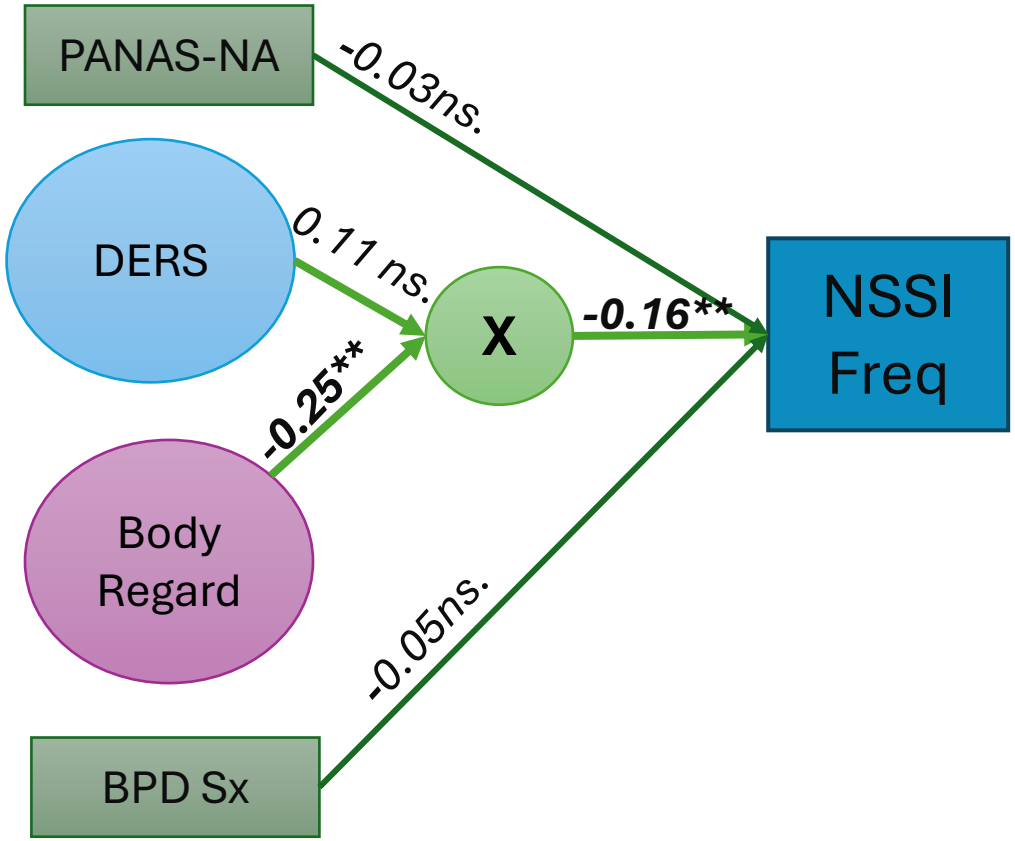
Does body regard change how emotional and cognitive risk-processes relate to NSSI?

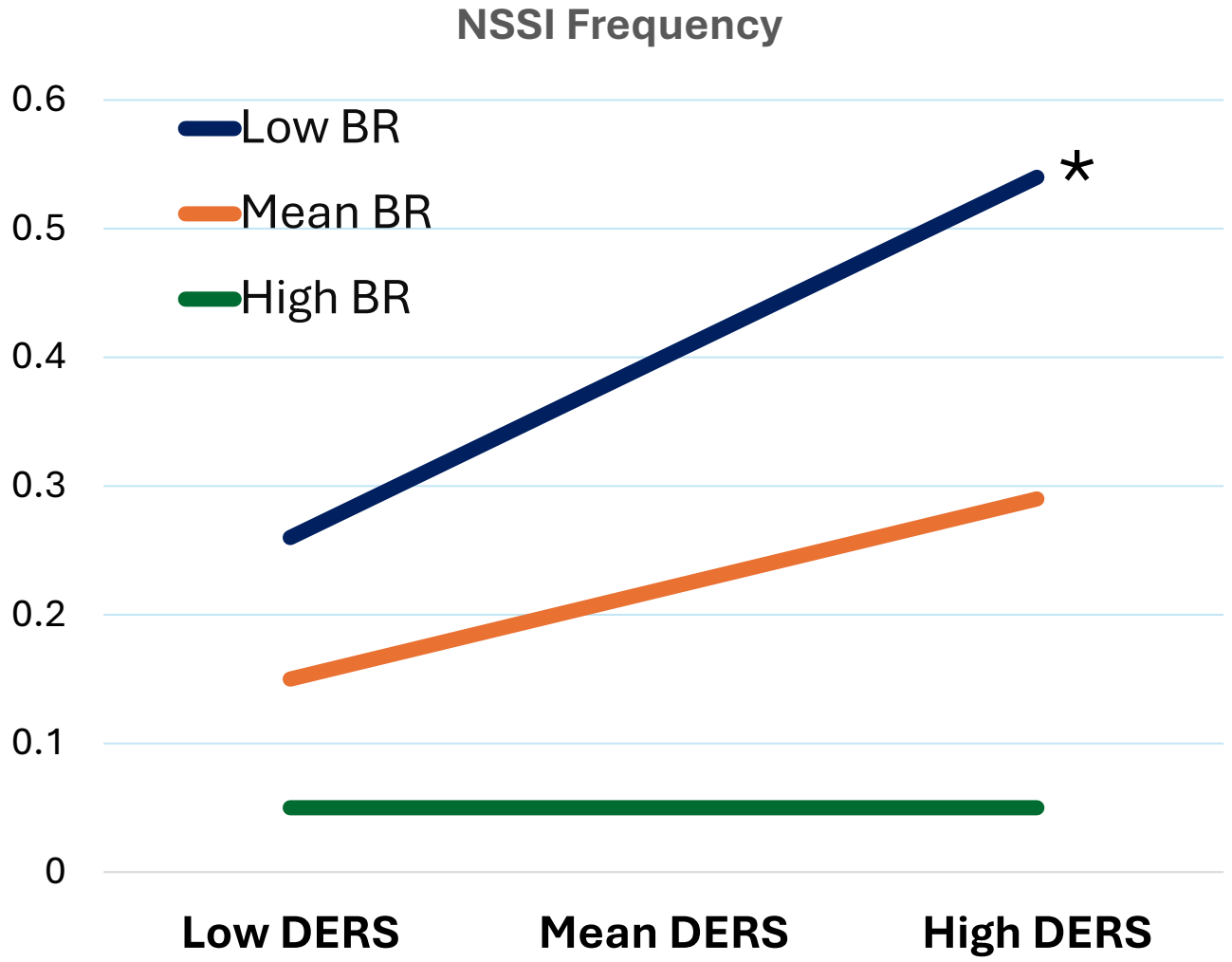
Body Regard:

Body Acceptance
Competence/Athleticism
Body Care
Body Connection

Body Regard Mitigates Risk of Emotion Regulation on NSSI

398 University Students; M_{age} = 20.25 (2.5yrs); 74.6% Female
26% reported NSSI, Avg. Freq = 25.16 acts





Muehlenkamp, et al., 2013; see also Mynetti & Muehlenkamp, 2023

Clinical Translation: Emotion Resilience

Somatic Resourcing & Mindful Movement

Wait it Out: DEAL

Deep Breaths

Encouragement

-sensory or verbal

Attend to sensations

-focus can help dissipate

Listen for the quiet

-senses of safety, stability

Prove to self that one can tolerate difficult sensations and thereby emotions.

Authentic Movement

-Focus on sensation

-Body dictates moves

-Joyful movements

Next Step: Establish Possible Causality/Protection

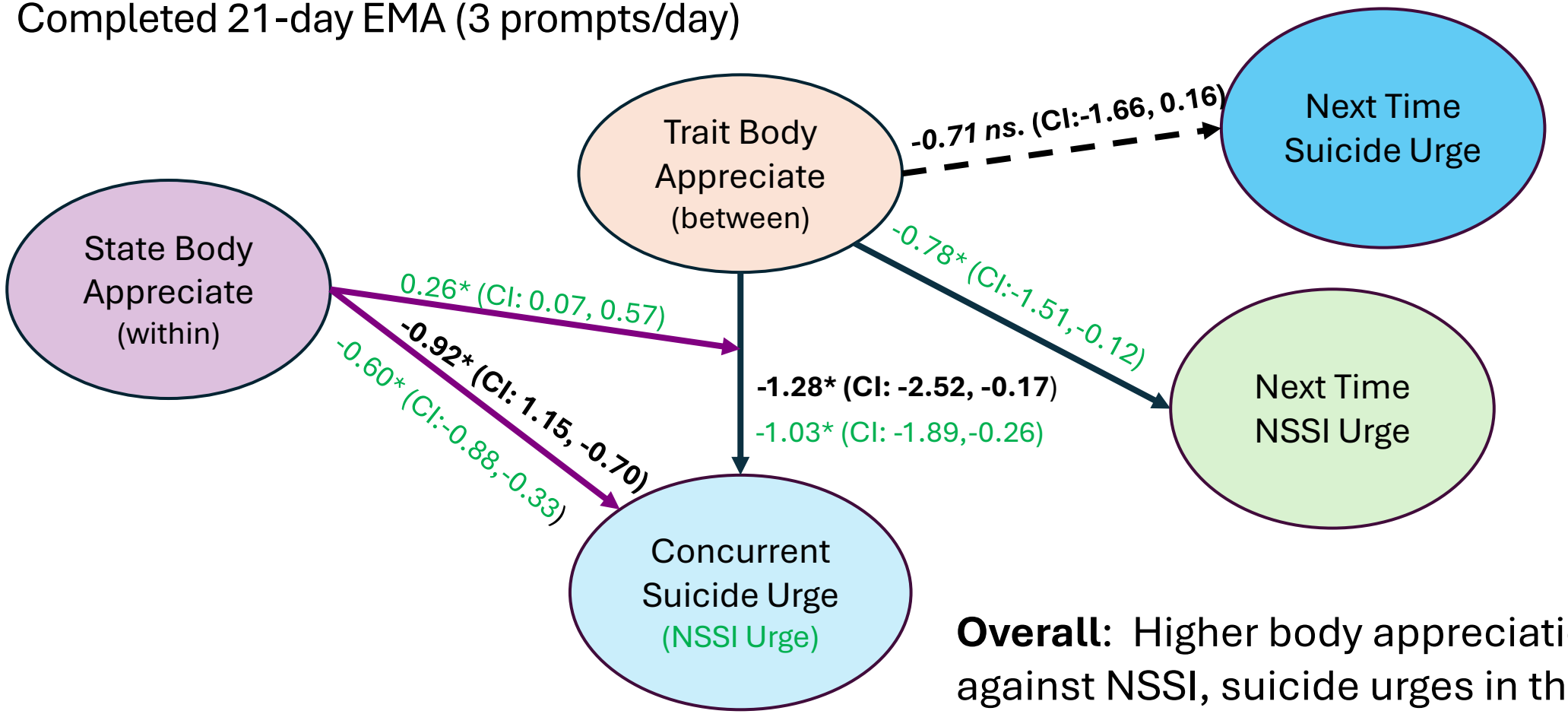
Do positive body perspectives protect against NSSI and/or Suicide Risk in the short term?

Protection Against Proximal Risk in Clinical Sample of Adults: EMA Study

25 Adult Outpatients; M_{age} = 35.6 (14.3 yrs); 60% Female

63.3% reported NSSI past year, 16% past year suicide attempt

Completed 21-day EMA (3 prompts/day)



Overall: Higher body appreciation protective against NSSI, suicide urges in the moment. Those with higher body regard in general are less likely to have urges to engage in self-injury.

Muehlenkamp, Jacobucci, & Ammerman, 2024

Clinical Translation:
Body Gratitude Journaling

Write down daily body appreciations

-doesn't matter how small
-can translate into compassionate affirmations

Include:

* How their body helped them during the day
* Focus on functionality vs. appearance
* Aspect of the body they can respect/value

"My legs allowed me to hike today"
"I was strong enough to carry groceries home myself"

Aligns with building mastery approaches

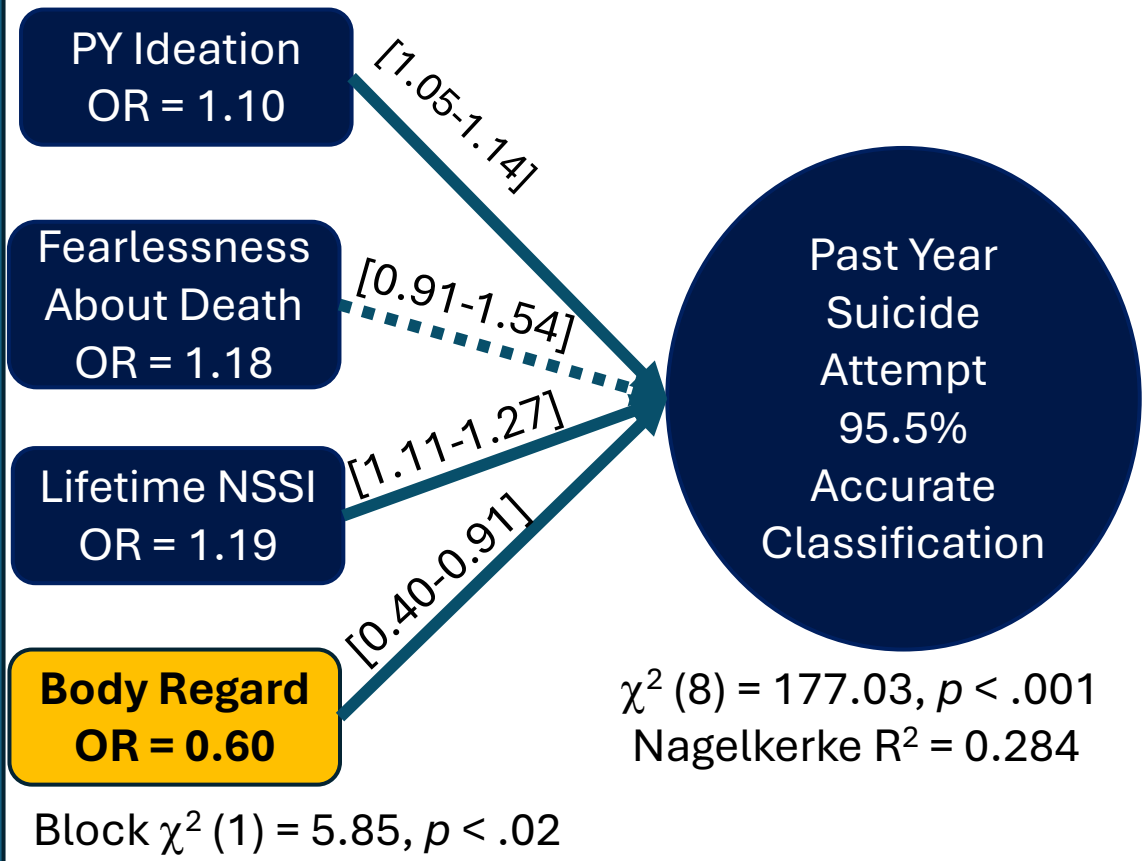
Next Step:

Does positive Body Regard protect against mechanisms of Suicide Risk?

Body Regard as possible Volitional Factor

2,021 Young Adults; M_{age} = 19.52 (2.3 yrs); 76.8% Female

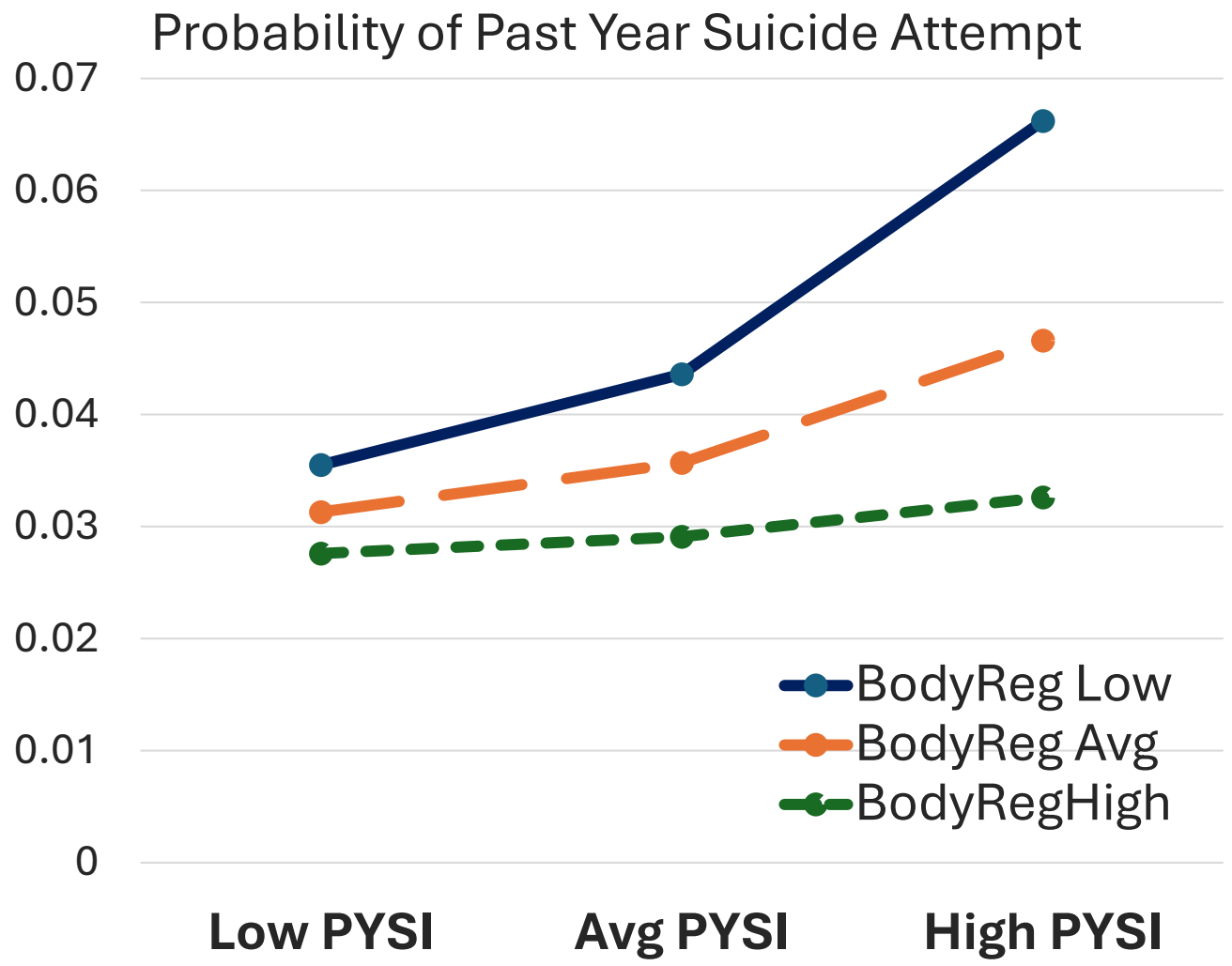
33% reported NSSI, 12% PY Ideation, 5% PY Attempt



χ^2 (8) = 177.03, p < .001

Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.284

Block χ^2 (1) = 5.85, p < .02

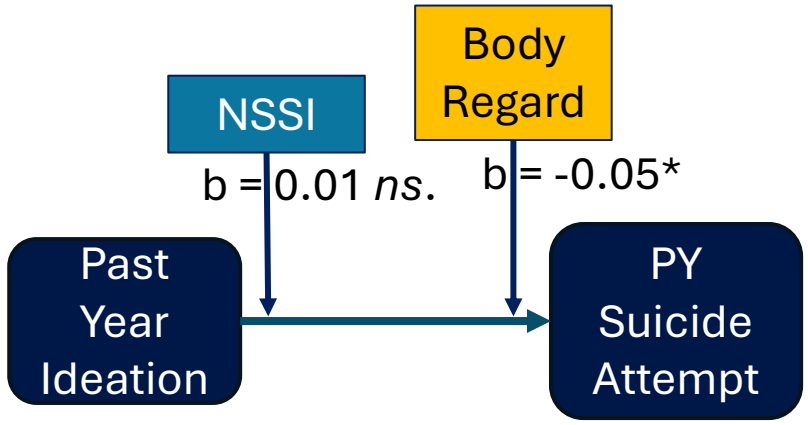


Mendes & Muehlenkamp, 2025

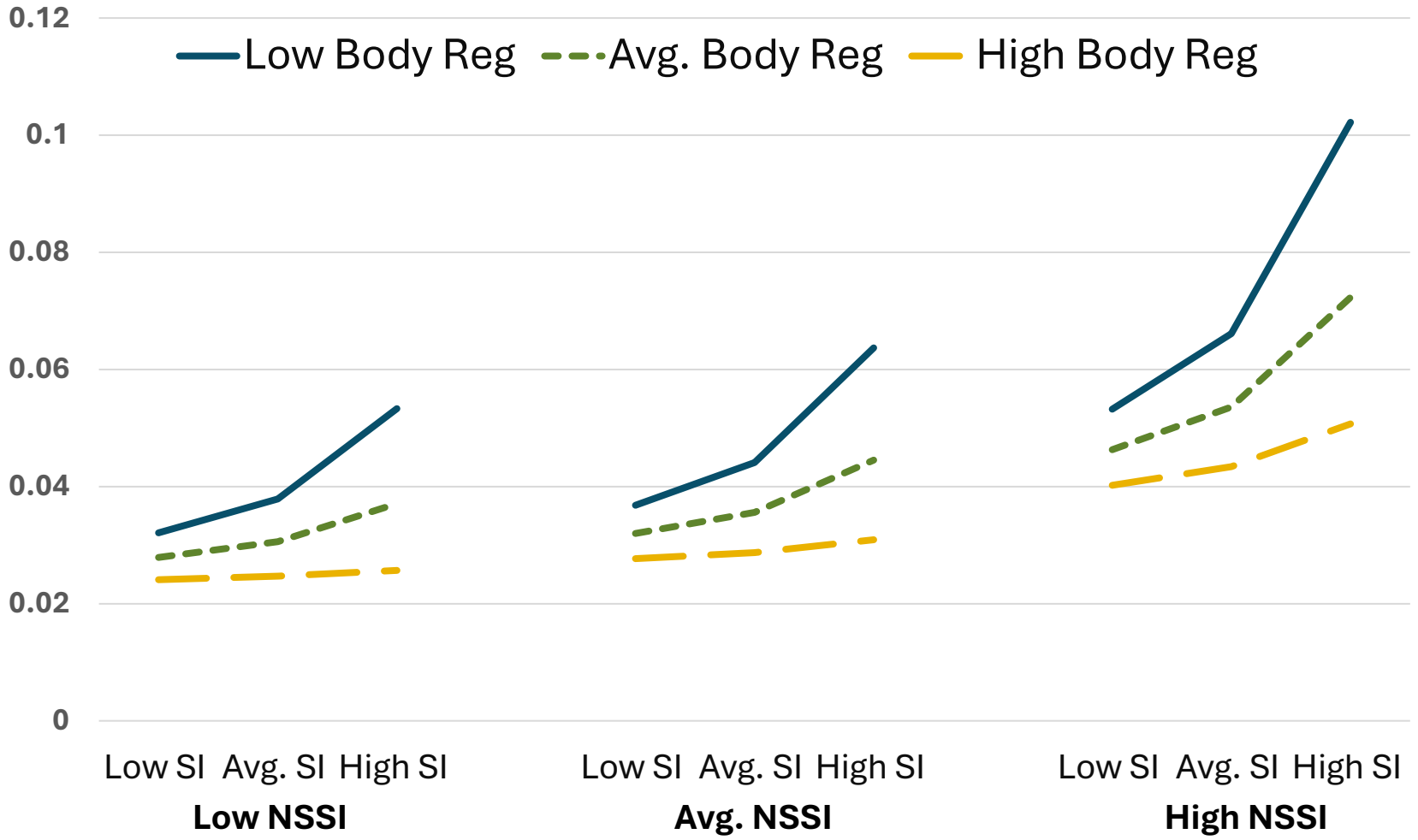
Body Regard as possible Volitional Factor

Does the moderating effect of Body Regard add to the prediction of past year suicide attempt above and beyond moderating effect of NSSI, while controlling for FAD, DASS, Demographics?

Parallel Moderated Regression (Process Model 2)



Full Model: -2LL = 550.22, $p < .001$
Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.294$
NSSI had significant direct effect



Mendes & Muehlenkamp, 2025

What does this mean?

- Respectful (positive) relationship with the body may acts as a critical barrier.
- Body Regard may help protect against NSSI and/or Suicide in context of distress, risk factors.
- Integrate & enhance body connection, care, and valuing into interventions.

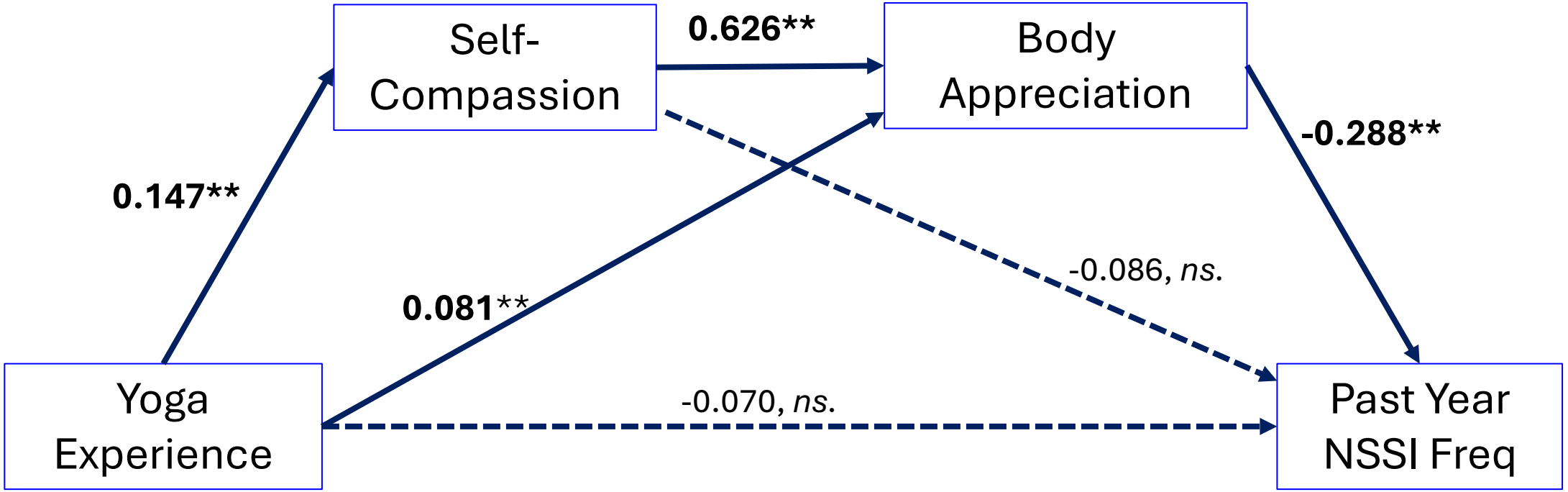
Embodied Interventions may help reduce risk and offer new avenues for prevention and treatment

Muehlenkamp, 2025

Yoga & NSSI: Self-Compassion & Body Appreciation

384 University Students; M_{age} = 19.98 (2.2yrs); 74.6% Female

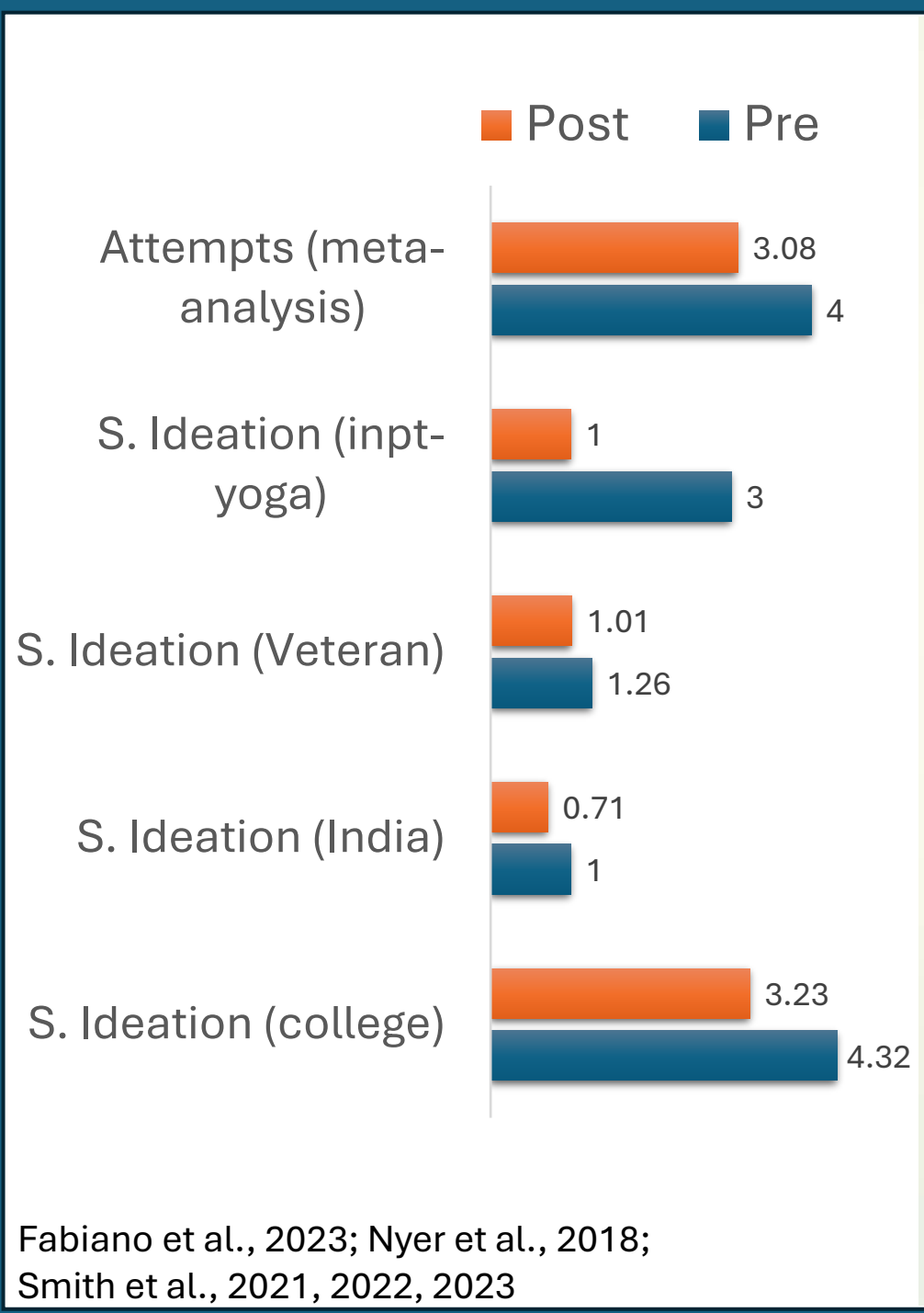
32.1% reported NSSI, Avg. Freq = 8.67 (*SD* = *22.9*) acts



Body appreciation held a dominant effect

- Accounted for most variance
- Mediated self-compassion's relationship to NSSI

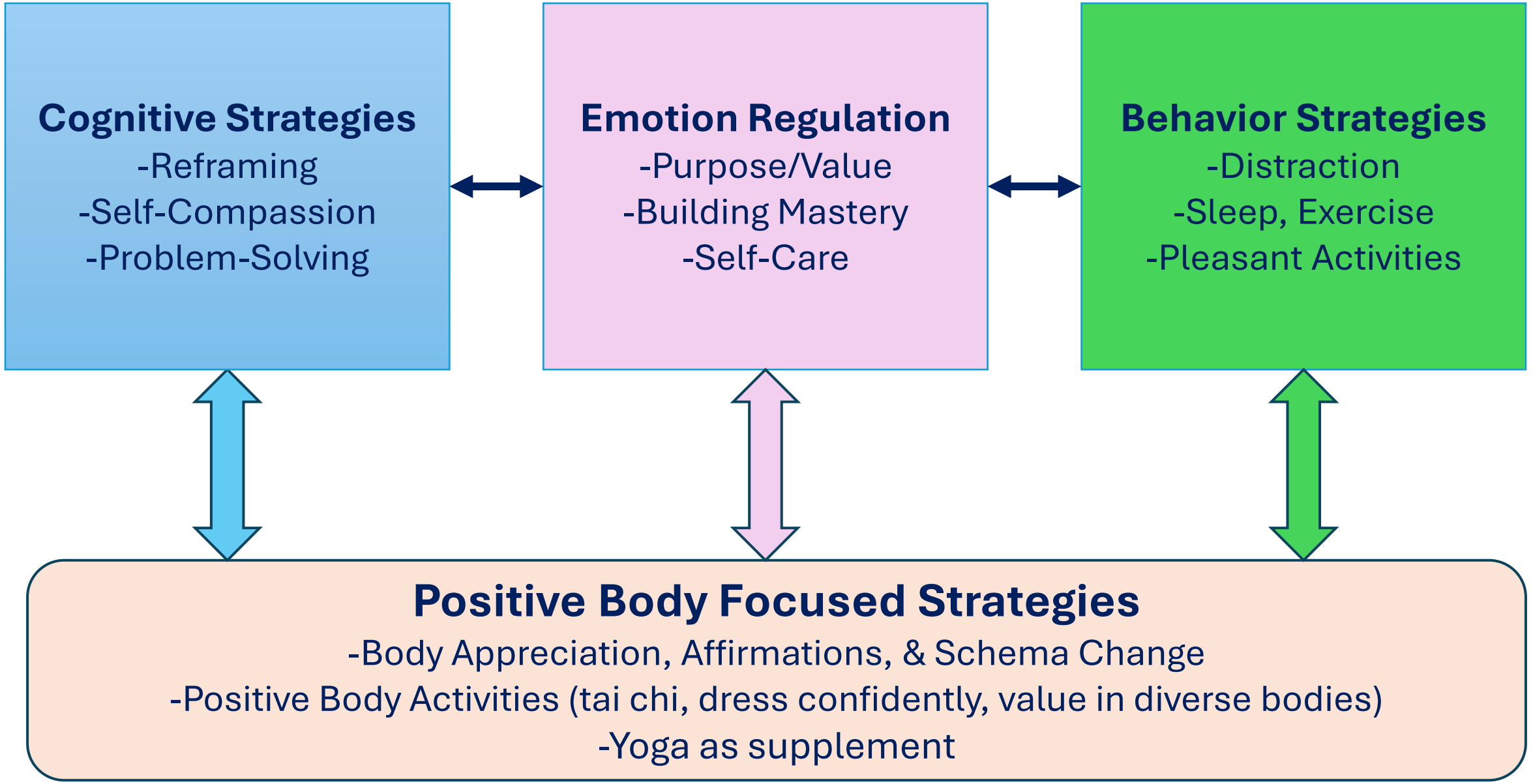
Muehlenkamp & Wagner, 2022



Studies testing effectiveness of positive body interventions for suicide & NSSI show promise.

Fabiano et al., 2023; Nyer et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2021, 2022, 2023

Comprehensive Treatment Approach: Integrate Body Focused Strategies



Clinical Recommendations

Assess body regard in clients with self-injury
Attend to bodily cues of distress
Inquire where in body suicide wish exists

Utilize trauma-informed embodiment strategies
Grounding techniques, sensory regulation
Corrective body care imagery
Adjunctive therapy: yoga, dance, tai chi, etc.

New Area to Explore:
Options if feeling “stuck”

Jennifer J. Muehlenkamp, PhD
Muehlejj@uwec.edu