

# The elephant in language education: Teacher stress and wellbeing



Sarah Mercer  
CEBS, Bad Hofgastein, Oct 2023

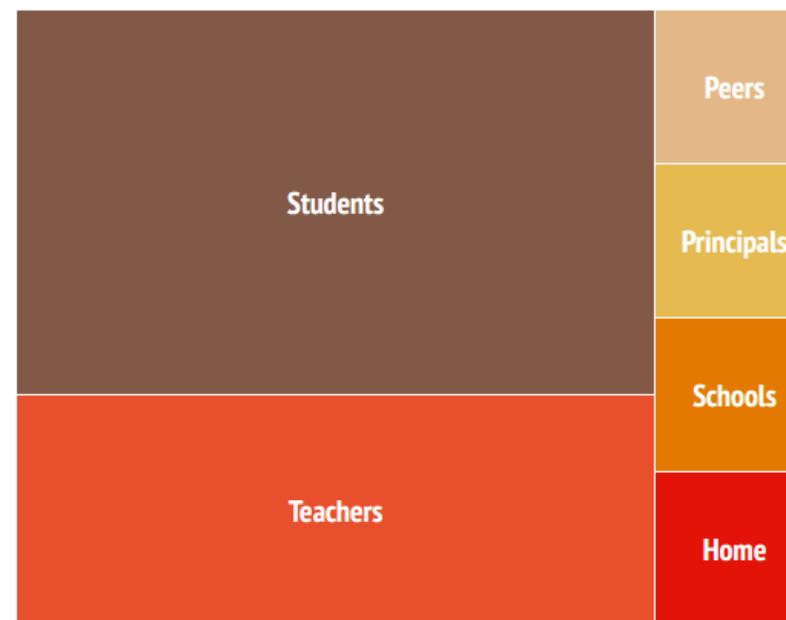


What do you think has the biggest impact on student achievement?

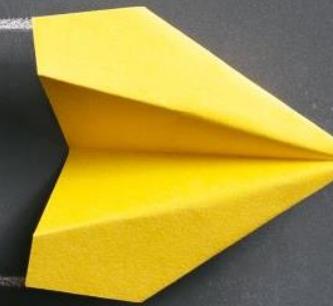
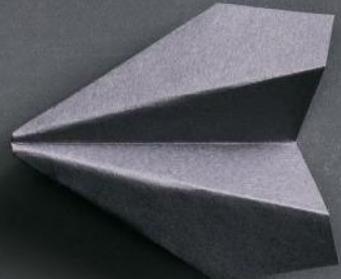
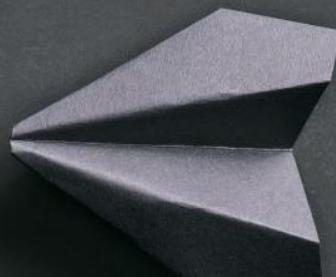
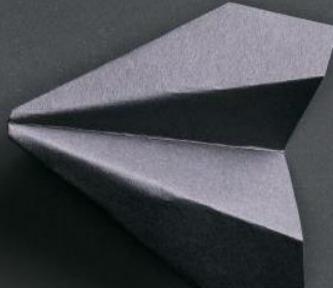
# According to Hattie (2018)...

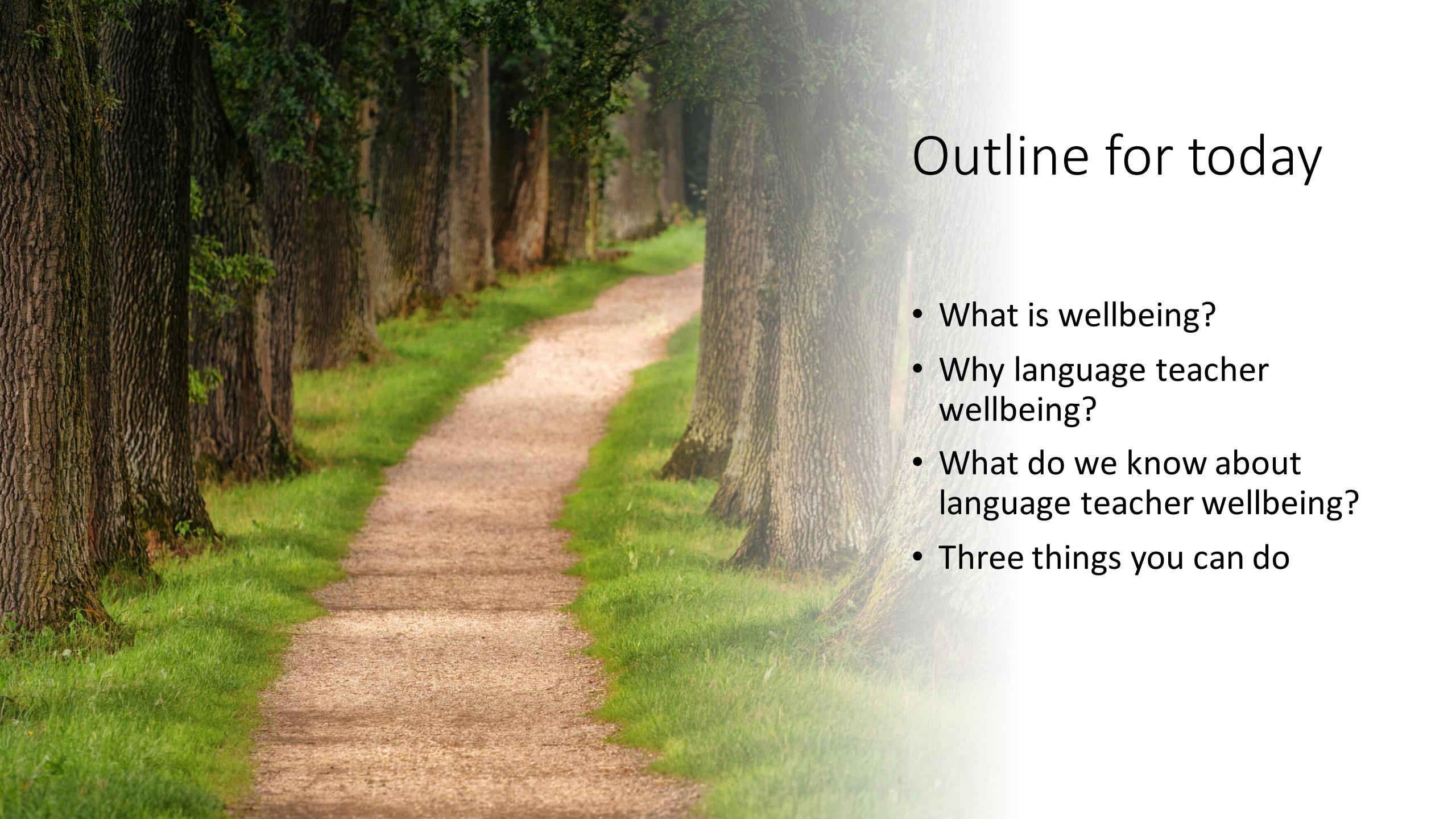
- The largest impact is the student themselves (50%)
- The second largest is the teacher (30%)

**Identifying what matters most?  
Achievement variance in %**



Teachers matter!  
A LOT!



A photograph of a dirt path winding through a dense forest. The path is flanked by tall, mature trees with thick trunks and lush green foliage. The ground is covered in a mix of dirt and fallen leaves. The perspective of the path leads the eye into the distance, suggesting a journey or a way forward.

# Outline for today

- What is wellbeing?
- Why language teacher wellbeing?
- What do we know about language teacher wellbeing?
- Three things you can do



What do you understand by  
wellbeing?



# Wellbeing

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- Two main perspectives (Ryan & Deci, 2001)
  - **Hedonic – Pleasure**
  - **Eudemonic – Meaning**



# Hedonic

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- Subjective well-being (SWB) most common construct
- Perception of balance between positive/negative emotions and overall sense of life satisfaction (Diener et al., 2009)
- Personal subjective experience of positivity



# Eudaimonic

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- Self-actualization – Finding meaning and purpose (Ryff, 1989; Waterman, 1993)
- PERMA (Seligman, 2011)
  - Positive emotions
  - Engagement
  - Relationships
  - Meaning
  - Accomplishment
  - Vitality (Butler & Kern, 2016)





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Tension: Wellbeing self and system

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Wellbeing –  
It is not just  
your  
responsibility!

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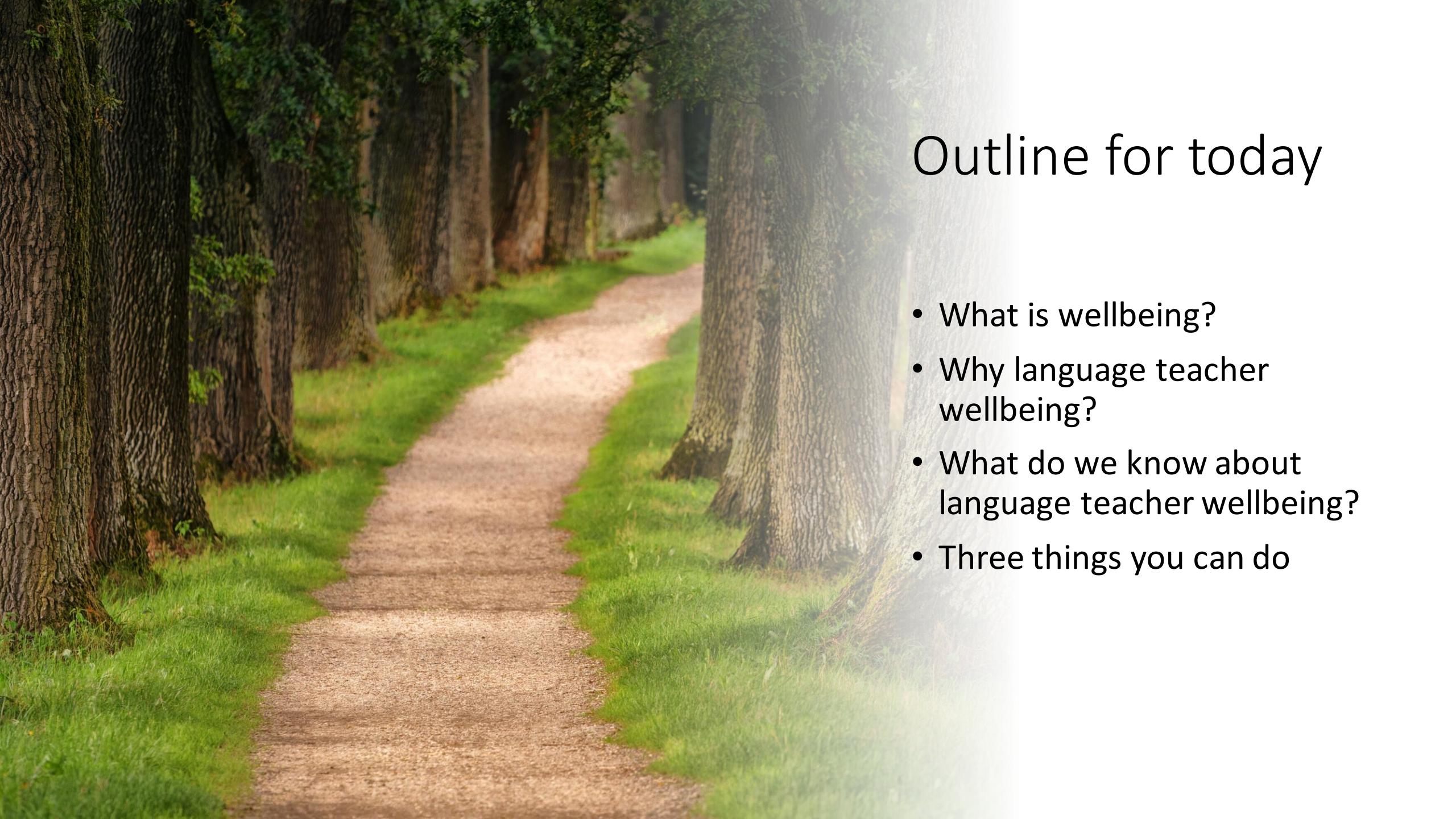


# A working definition

- Wellbeing - a sense of happiness, satisfaction, and meaning which emerges from the dynamic interplay of personal characteristics and socio-contextual factors

(Mercer, 2021, p. 7)



A photograph of a dirt path winding through a dense forest. The path is flanked by tall, mature trees with thick trunks and lush green foliage. The ground is covered in a mix of dirt and patches of green grass. In the distance, the path disappears into a hazy, misty area, suggesting a deep forest or a clearing ahead.

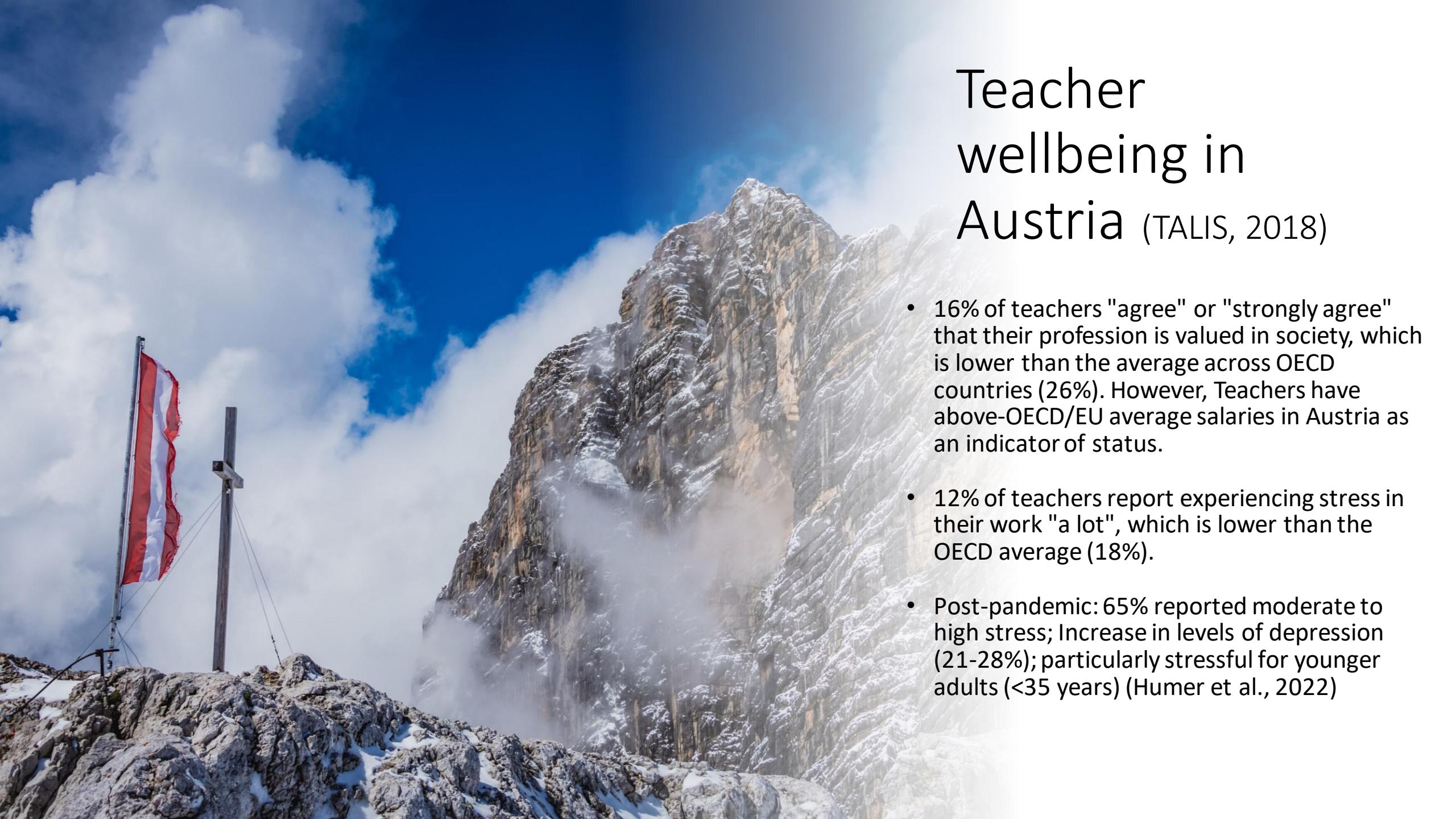
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# Why teacher wellbeing matters?

- Teachers with high wellbeing:
  - Teach more creatively (Bajorek et al., 2014)
  - Cultivate better relationships in the classroom (DeVries & Zan, 1995)
  - Attain higher levels of achievement among learners (Briner & Dewberry, 2007; Carprara et al., 2006)
  - Have fewer discipline problems (Kern et al., 2014)
  - Have students with higher wellbeing and lower psychological distress (Harding et al., 2019)





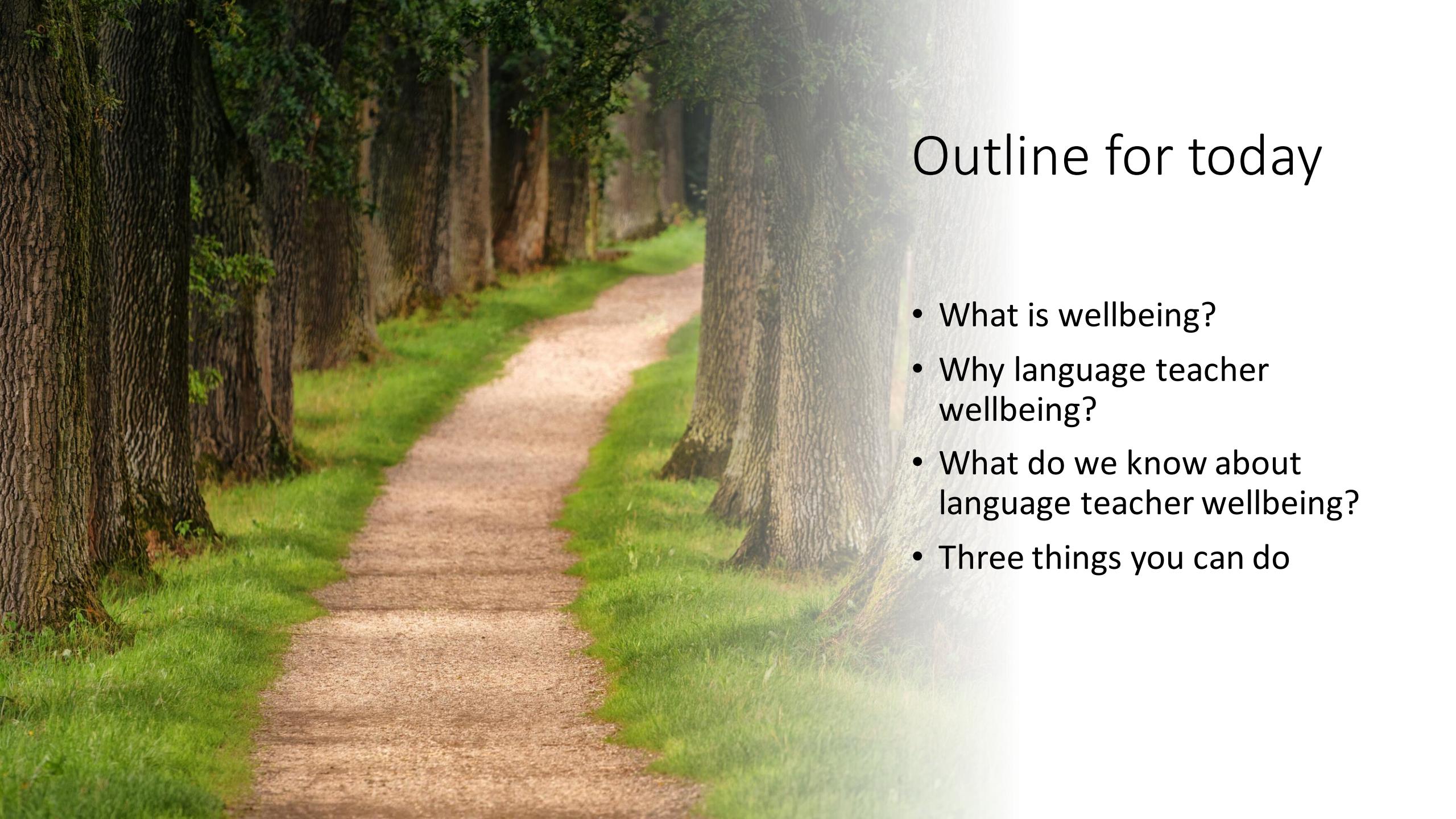
# Teacher wellbeing in Austria (TALIS, 2018)

- 16% of teachers "agree" or "strongly agree" that their profession is valued in society, which is lower than the average across OECD countries (26%). However, Teachers have above-OECD/EU average salaries in Austria as an indicator of status.
- 12% of teachers report experiencing stress in their work "a lot", which is lower than the OECD average (18%).
- Post-pandemic: 65% reported moderate to high stress; Increase in levels of depression (21-28%); particularly stressful for younger adults (<35 years) (Humer et al., 2022)

Teachers'  
wellbeing  
is the  
foundation  
of good  
practice

N. Iber © 2018



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# LANGUAGE TEACHER WELLBEING ACROSS THE CAREER SPAN

Giulia Sullis, Sarah Mercer, Sonja Babic and  
Astrid Mairitsch



PSYCHOLOGY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

Three-year study investigating the  
wellbeing of EFL and FL teachers  
across the career trajectory

- Two main qualitative data sets combined:
  - In-depth interviews with Austrian EFL (=30) and UK MFL teachers (n=28)
  - Final corpus: approx. 500,000 words
- In-depth interviews (n=22) with teachers from across the globe during pandemic
- Final corpus: approx. 210,000 words

# Dynamic balance between challenge and resources (Dodge et al., 2012)

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**Figure 4. Definition of Wellbeing**



# Teachers' professional life phases (Day, 2017)

Pre-service: Combination of studies and practica

Early-career: 0-3 and 4-7 years of teaching experience

Mid-career: 8-15 and 16-23 years of teaching experience

Late-career: 24-30 and 31+ years of teaching experience

# Resources and challenges across the career trajectory<sup>+</sup>

(Sulis et al., 2023)



- Resources**
  - Growth mindset
  - Motivation/enthusiasm
  - Social capital
  - Sense of agency
- Challenges**
  - Uncertainty future
  - Lack of confidence
  - Need to build skills
  - Lack of wellbeing awareness

- Resources**
  - Realism – letting go of perfection
  - Guidance – mentors (formal & informal)
  - More financial stability
  - Growing confidence and resilience
- Challenges**
  - Poor work/life balance
  - Finding position in school in practical terms
  - Developing professional identity
  - Dissatisfaction with teacher status

- Resources**
  - High levels of self-efficacy
  - Sense of pride and accomplishment
  - Range of coping strategies
  - Strong social network within professional domain
  - CPD opportunities
- Challenges**
  - Balancing personal & professional commitments
  - New responsibilities adding to workload
  - Slowing down physically
  - Problematic work/life balance

- Resources**
  - Extensive experience and subsequent skills and confidence
  - Sense of meaning from life's work
  - Self-awareness of needs and wants
- Challenges**
  - Decreasing patience (in class and CPD!)
  - Changes in family set up
  - Health issues
  - Educational innovations to cope with
  - Looking ahead to retirement

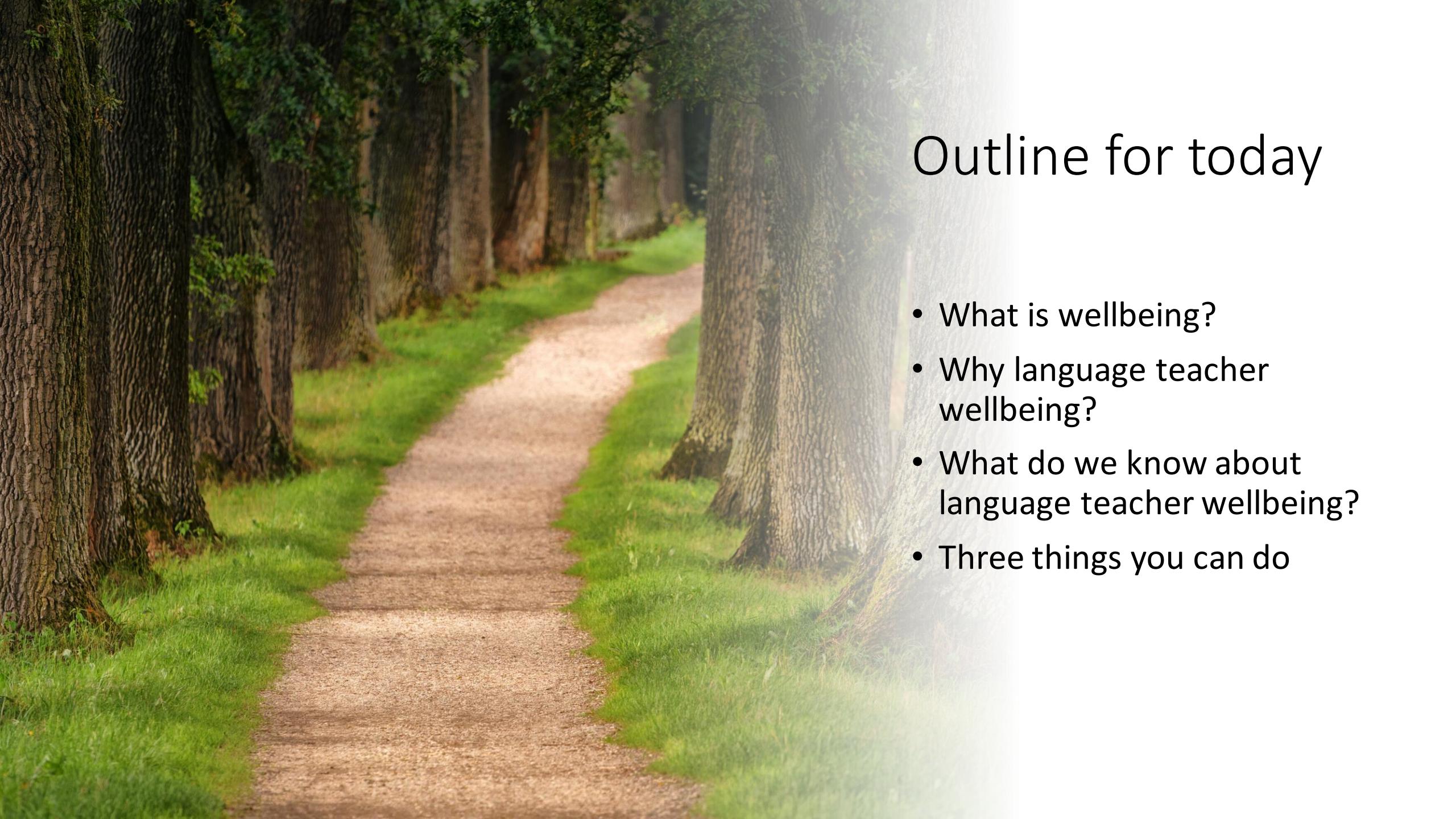
# Key issues comparing UK and Austrian data

- Educational system (organization, training, and support)
- Socialisation processes and job commitment – Future selves
- Inspection bodies (e.g., OFSTED)
- Standardised tests (e.g., Matura) or educational reform
- EFL vs MFL (language motivation and status)
- Financial and teacher status
- School climate/leadership



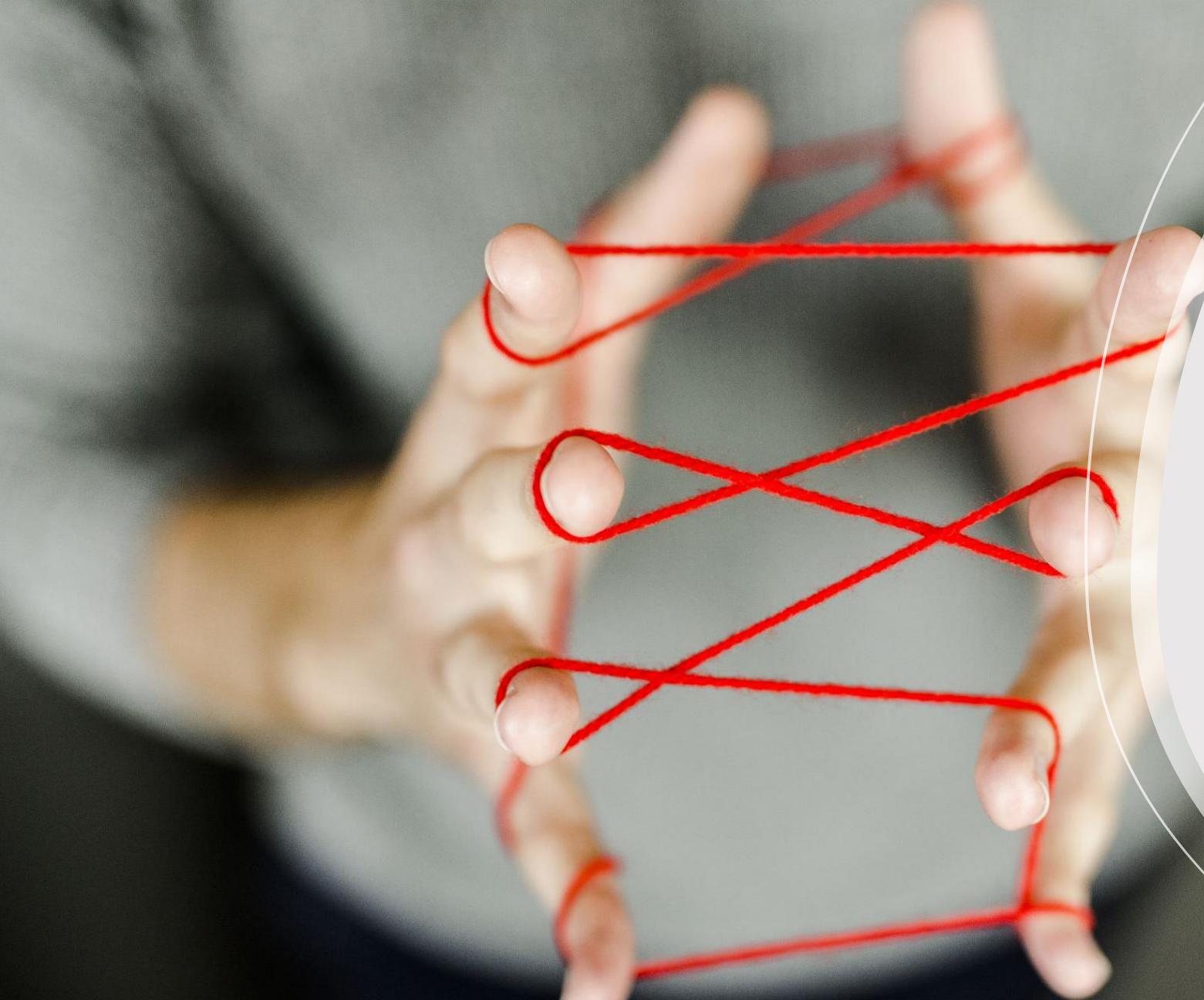
Understanding  
teacher  
wellbeing:  
Context matters



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A close-up photograph of two hands, one light-skinned and one dark-skinned, holding a piece of red string. The string is knotted in a complex, symmetrical pattern, resembling a reef knot or a series of interlocking loops. The hands are positioned in the center-left of the frame, with the string extending from the bottom left towards the top right.

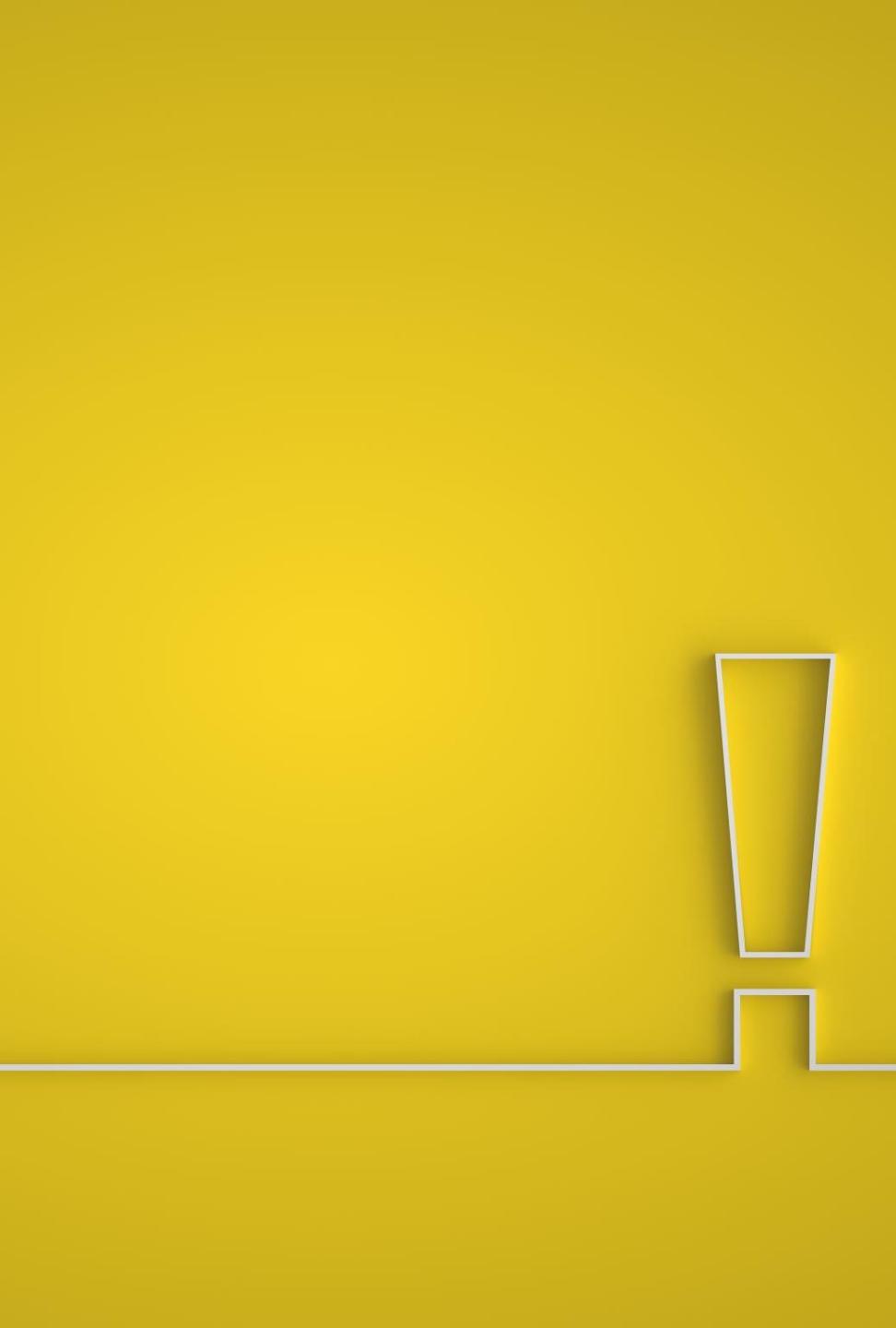
## Two strands of action

- Personal actions
- Structural/systemic change/support



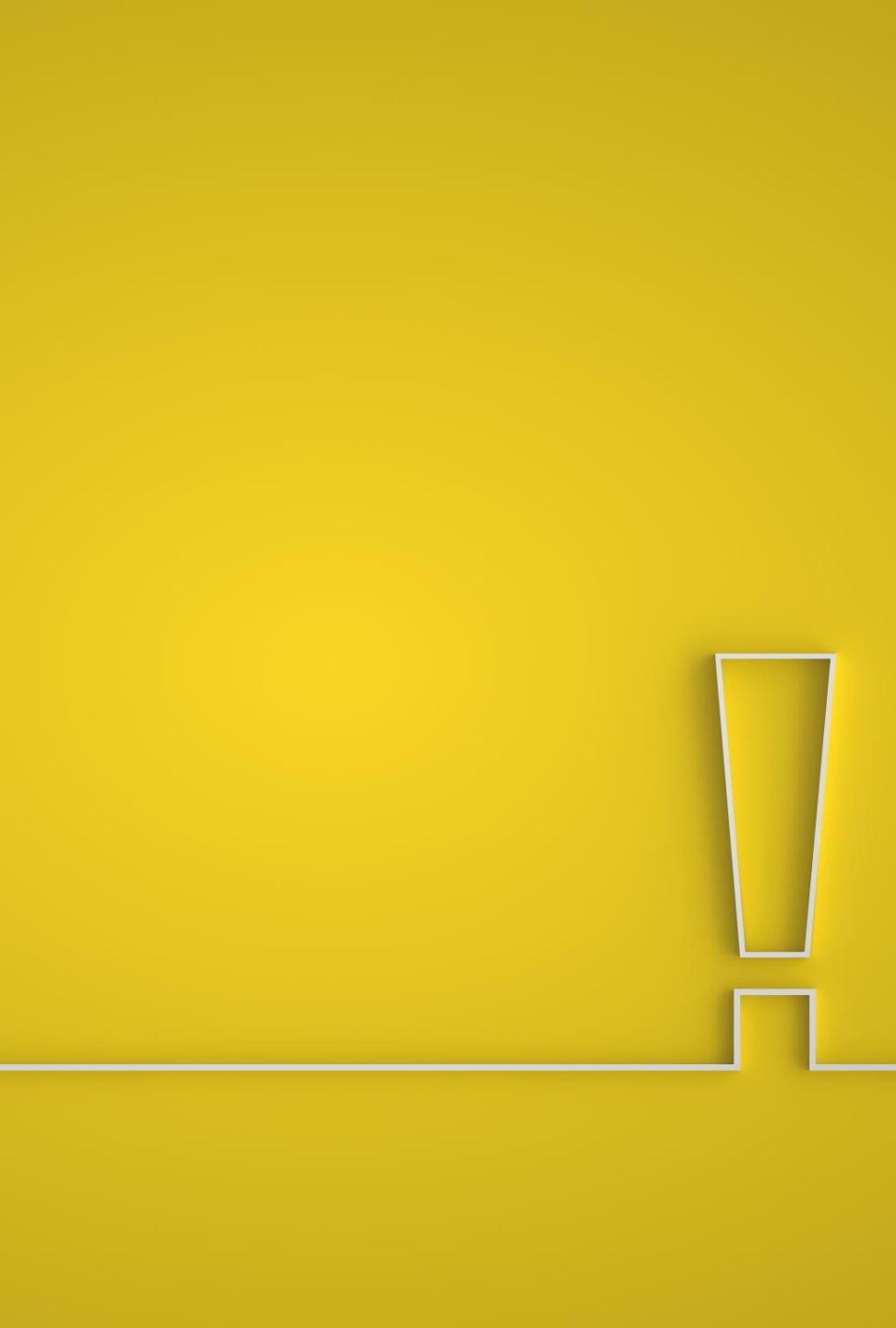
# Mental health issues / wellbeing

Please do not be afraid or embarrassed to seek help



# 3 Things I can change

- What I pay attention to (positivity)
- How I interact with others (relationships)
- How I manage my time (recharging my batteries)

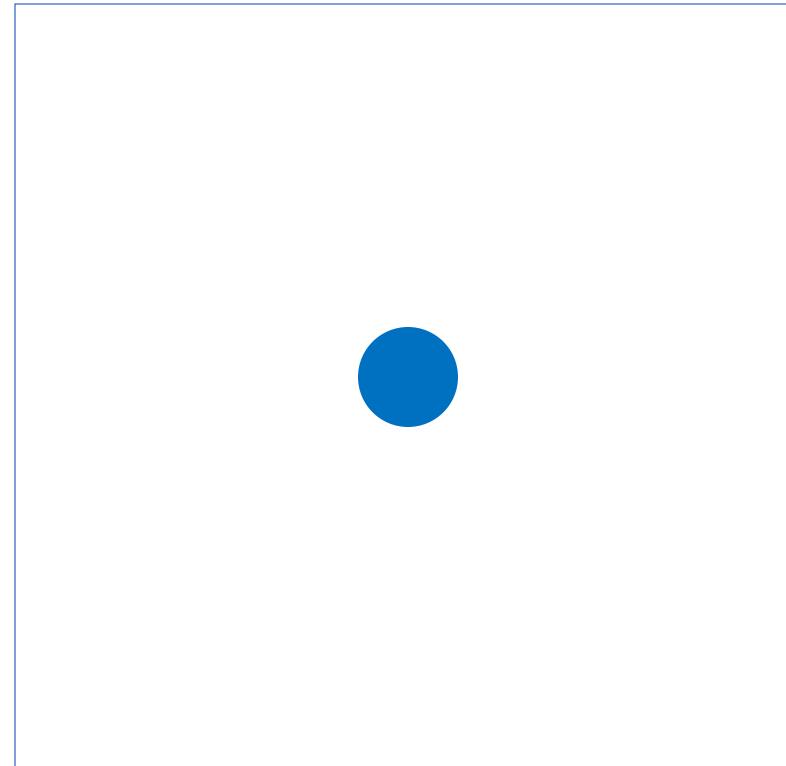


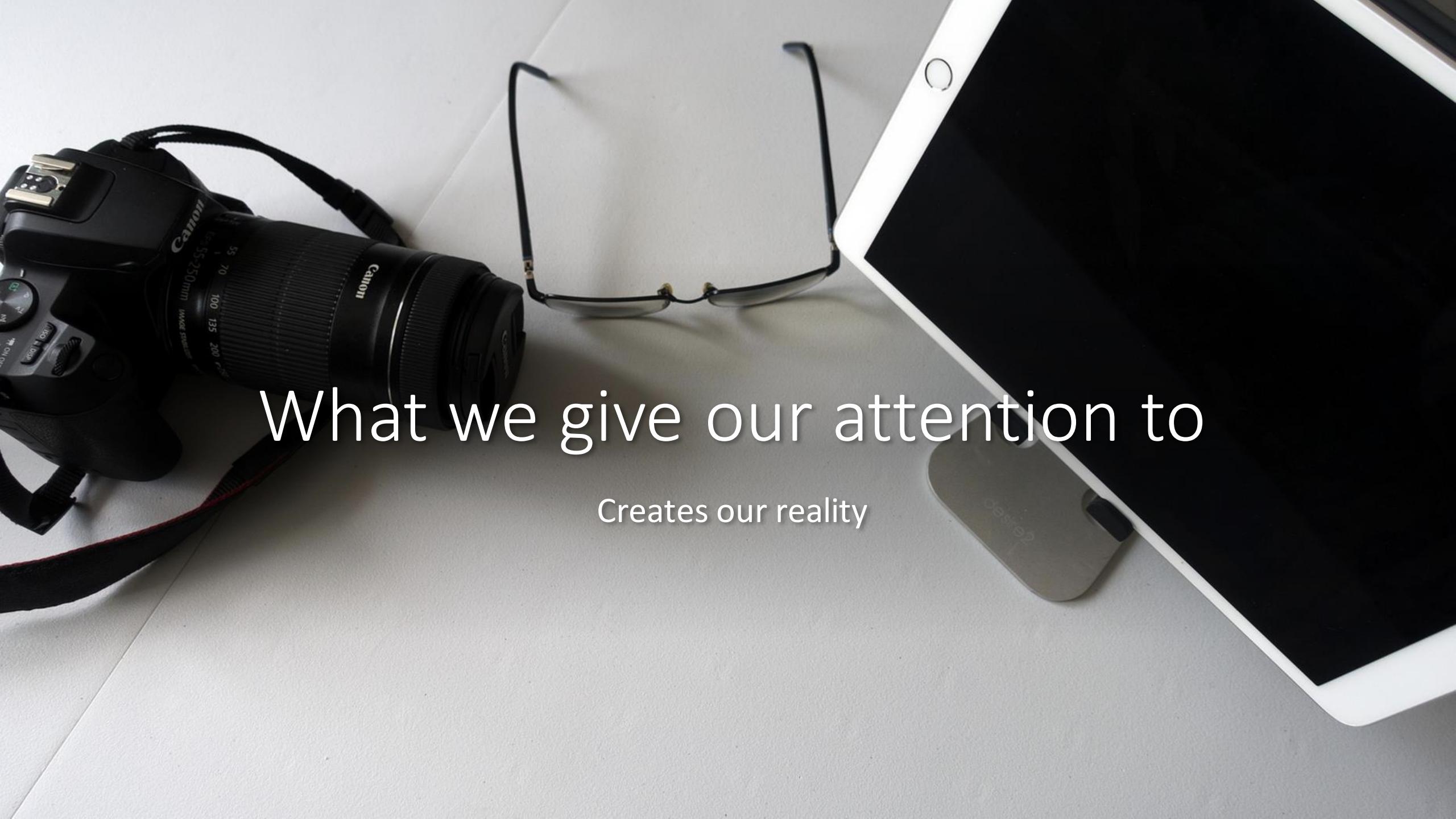
# 3 Things I can change

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# Example: Something I can change

- What I focus my attention on



A photograph of a Canon DSLR camera with a 55-250mm lens, a pair of black-rimmed glasses, and a white tablet with a black screen, all resting on a light-colored surface.

What we give our attention to  
Creates our reality

Focus on the  
positives



Focus on the  
positives is  
not...



Give yourself  
'permission  
to feel'  
(Brackett, 2019)

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# Gratitude practices



# Savouring (Bryant & Veroff, 2006)

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# Savour a positive moment

- From the **past**... Good memory
- From the **present**... Something enjoying now
- From the **future**... Something looking forward to





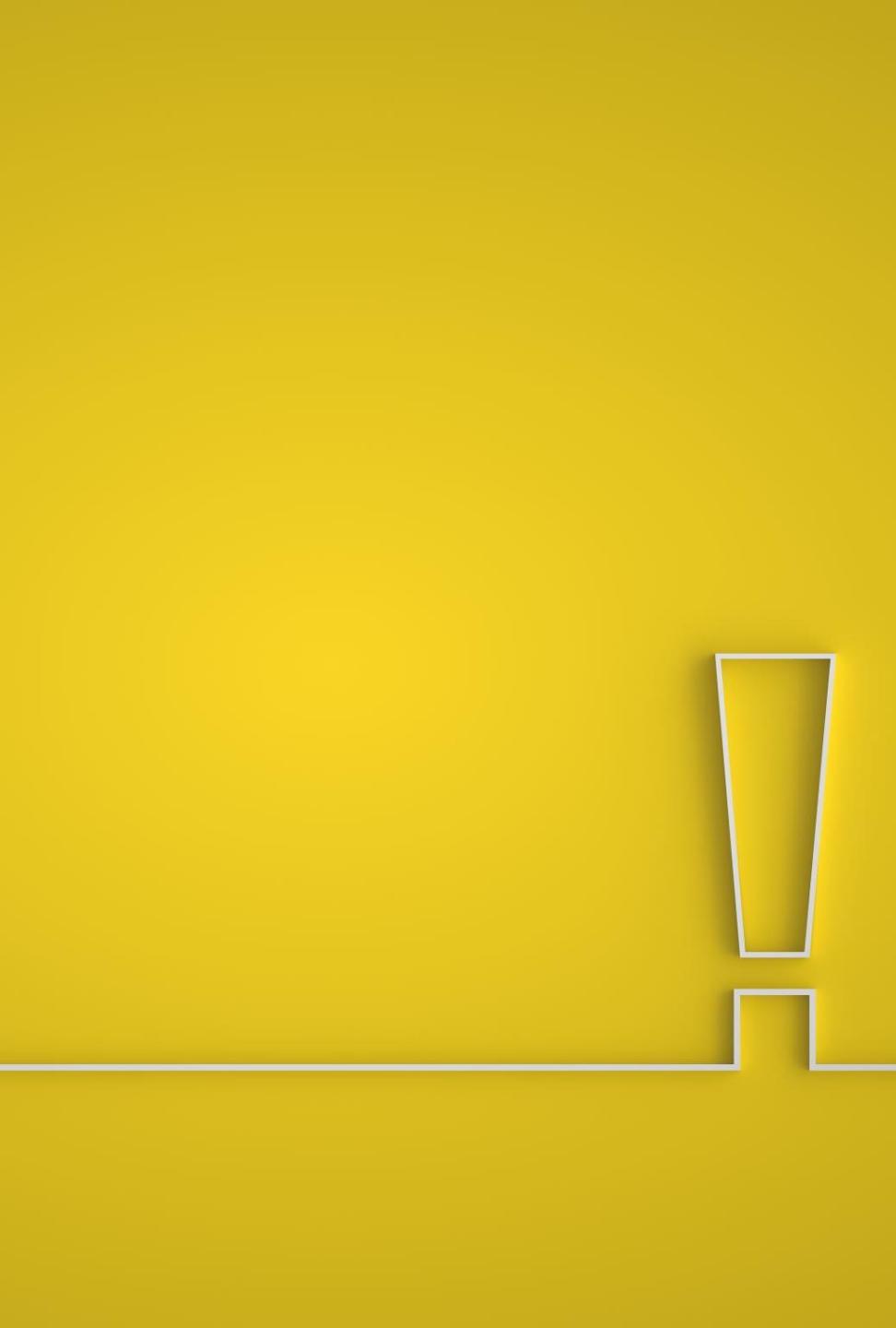
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What is your teacher strength?

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# Appreciative inquiry





# 3 Things I can change

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A photograph of three women of diverse ethnicities, all with dark hair, smiling and blowing colorful confetti from their hands. They are outdoors, with green foliage and a wooden structure in the background. The confetti is falling in front of them, creating a festive and celebratory atmosphere. The women are wearing casual clothing, including a white t-shirt, a grey top, and a light-colored top. They are also wearing various accessories like bracelets and a necklace.

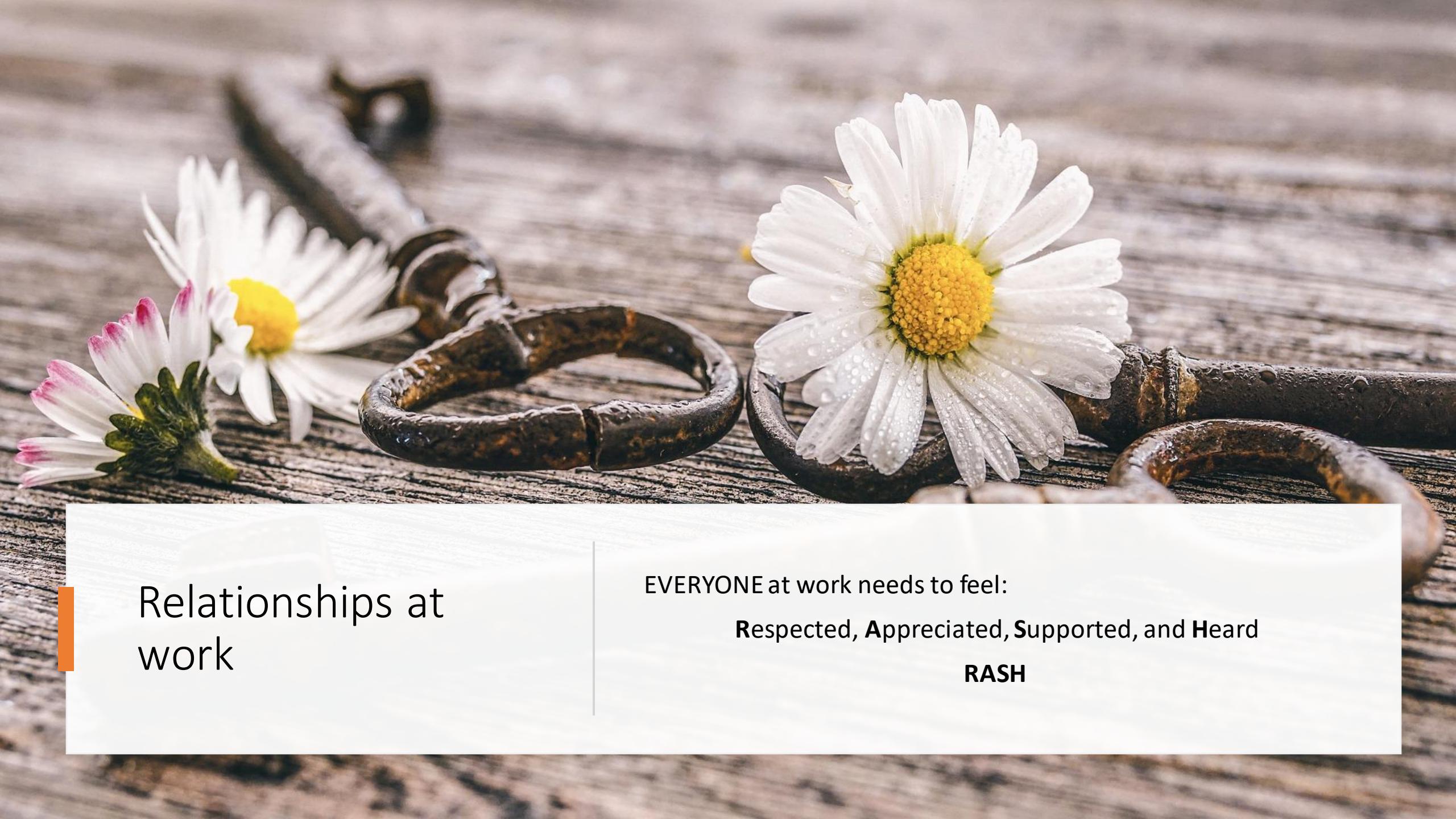
Relationships vital for wellbeing



All relationships are effortful



What are the characteristics of your ideal colleague?



## Relationships at work

EVERYONE at work needs to feel:  
**Respected, Appreciated, Supported, and Heard**  
**RASH**



Even small acts of kindness  
can make a profound  
difference to somebody else.

Misha Collins



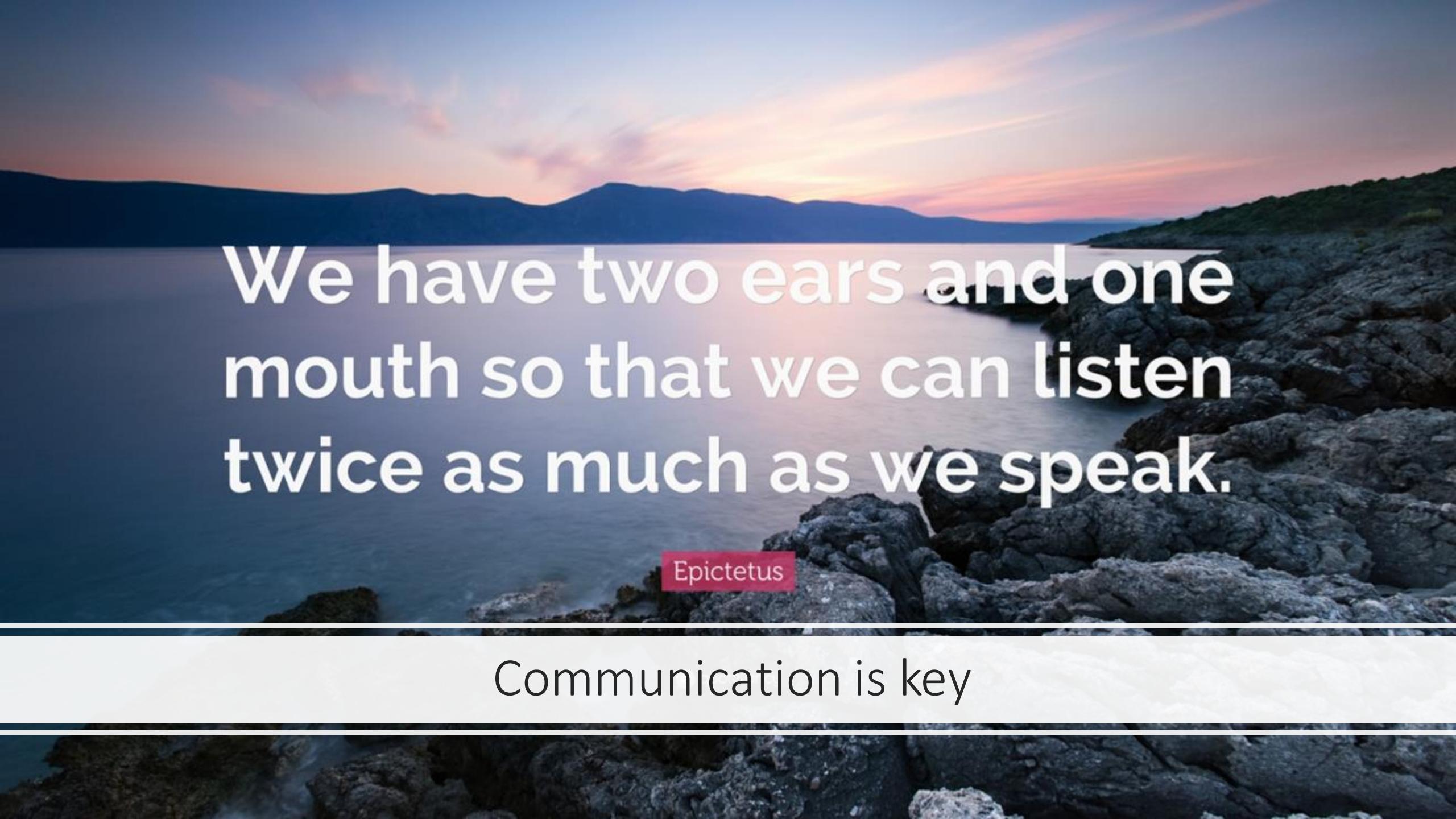
Who is important  
to you and who  
deserves more of  
your quality time?

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A photograph of a wooden fence with a heart-shaped opening. Through the opening, a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds is visible. The wood grain of the fence is clearly visible, and the overall image has a warm, natural feel.

To protect and  
nurture ALL  
relationships

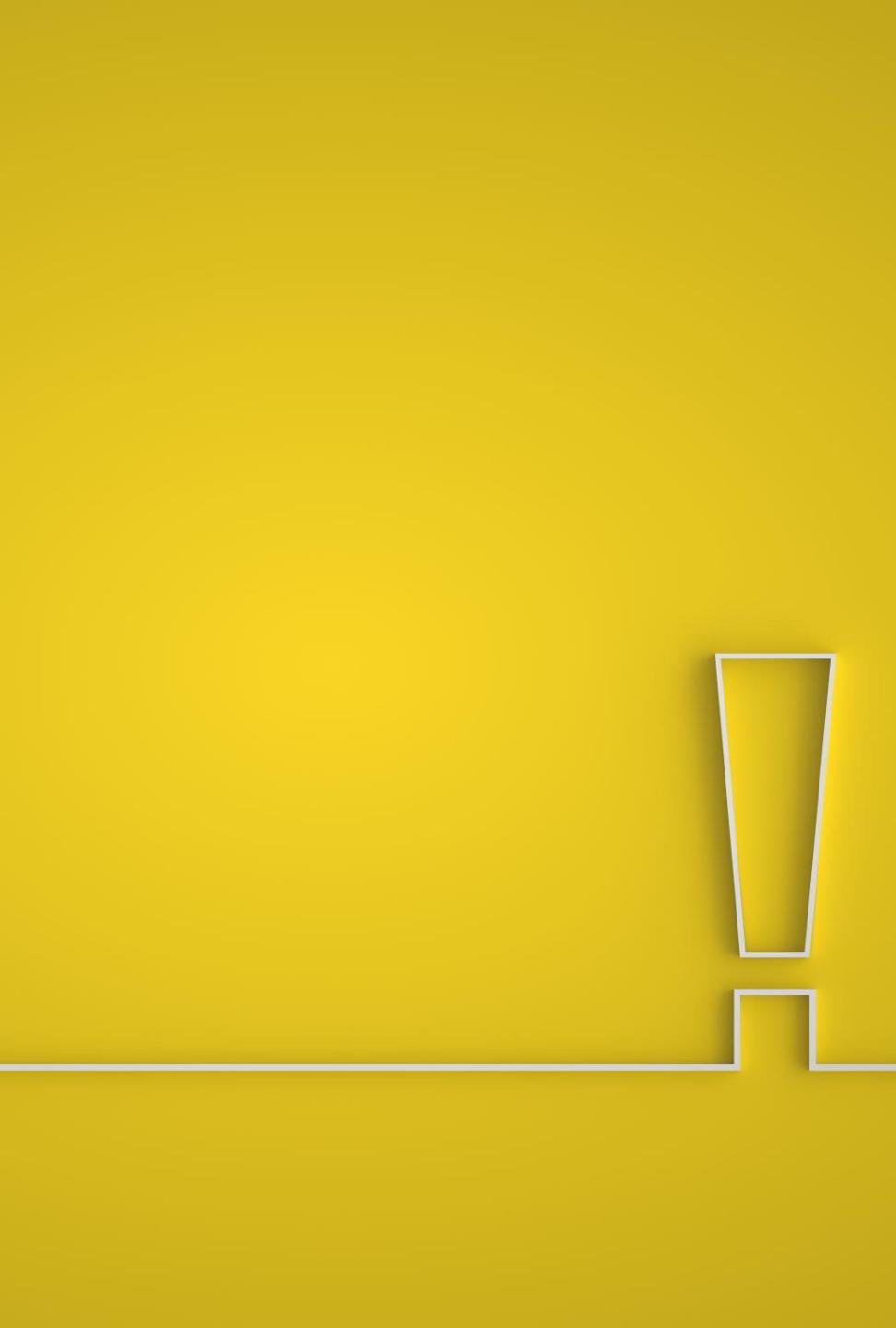
- Invest energy and time in the relationship
- Spend *quality* time together
- Work on communication
- Empathy – Try perspective switching
- Engage in acts of kindness

A wide-angle photograph of a coastal landscape at sunset. The sky is filled with soft, pastel-colored clouds in shades of pink, orange, and yellow. In the background, a range of mountains is visible across a body of water. The foreground is dominated by dark, rugged rocks and a rocky shoreline. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and contemplative.

We have two ears and one  
mouth so that we can listen  
twice as much as we speak.

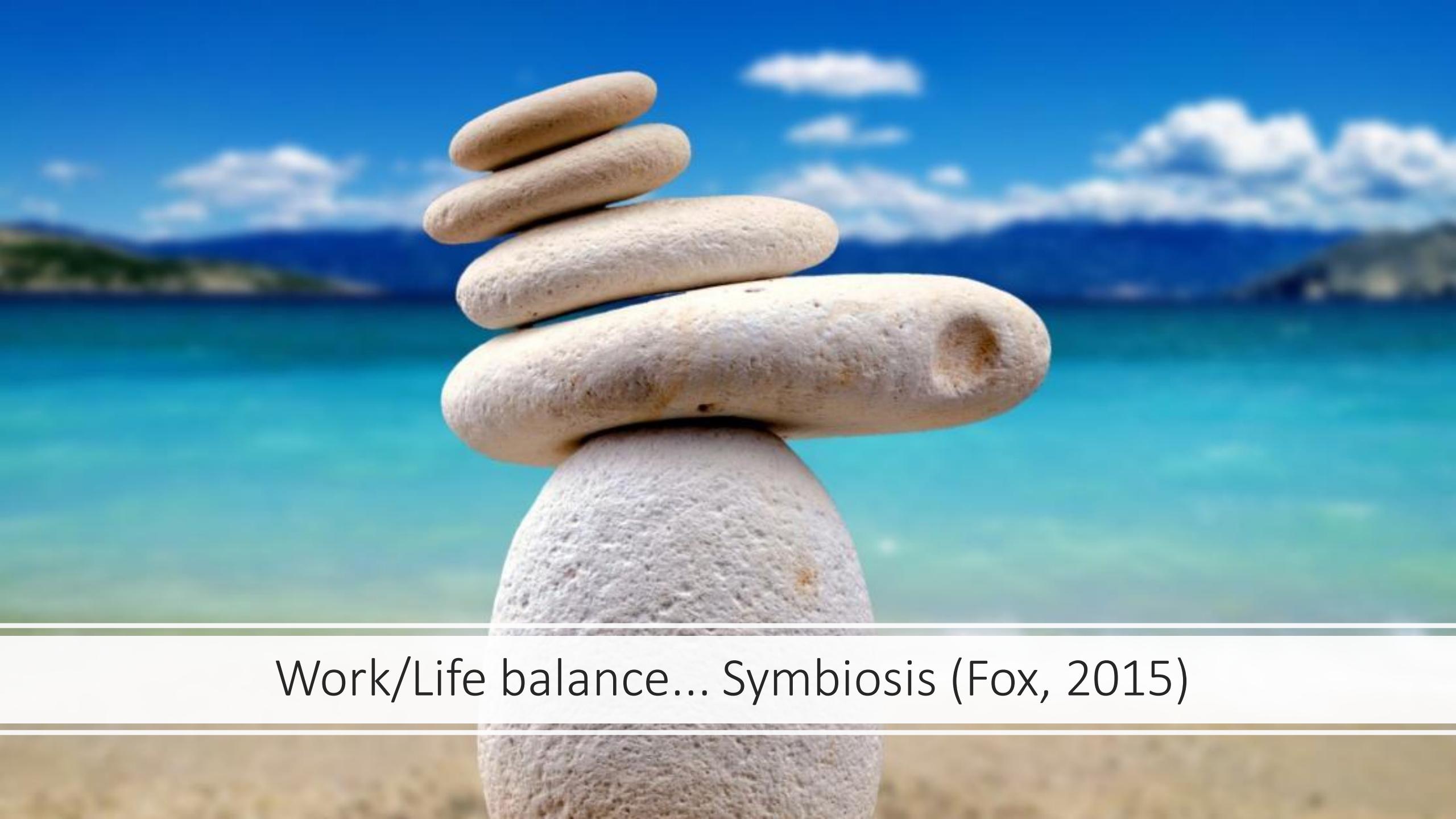
Epictetus

Communication is key



# 3 Things I can change

- What I pay attention to (positivity)
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- How I manage my time (recharging my batteries)



Work/Life balance... Symbiosis (Fox, 2015)

# Time Management



- Is about setting priorities
- Allocating time for work and non-work
- Not to do *more* work, to work more *efficiently* so time for leisure
- Parkinson's law
  - "*Work expands to fill the time you make available for it*"

# Making time *for* leisure

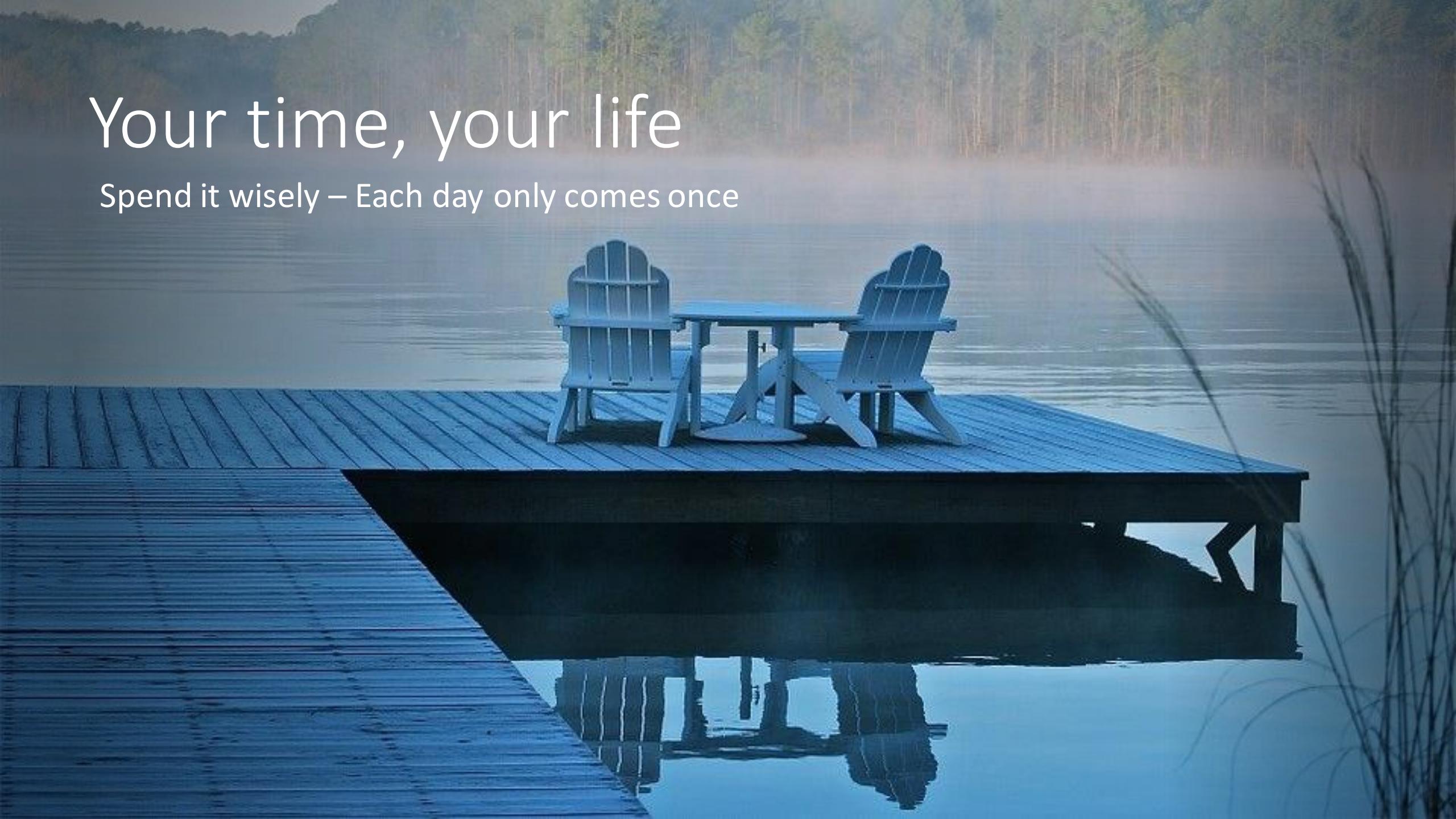
What are your time management tips?



- *Be realistic about workload expectations*
- *Set boundaries to weekend/evening*
- *Fix time for hobbies, sport, family, and friends*
- *Timebox work*
- *Let go perfection*
- *Learn to say 'no'!*
- *Think about your priorities!*

# Your time, your life

Spend it wisely – Each day only comes once

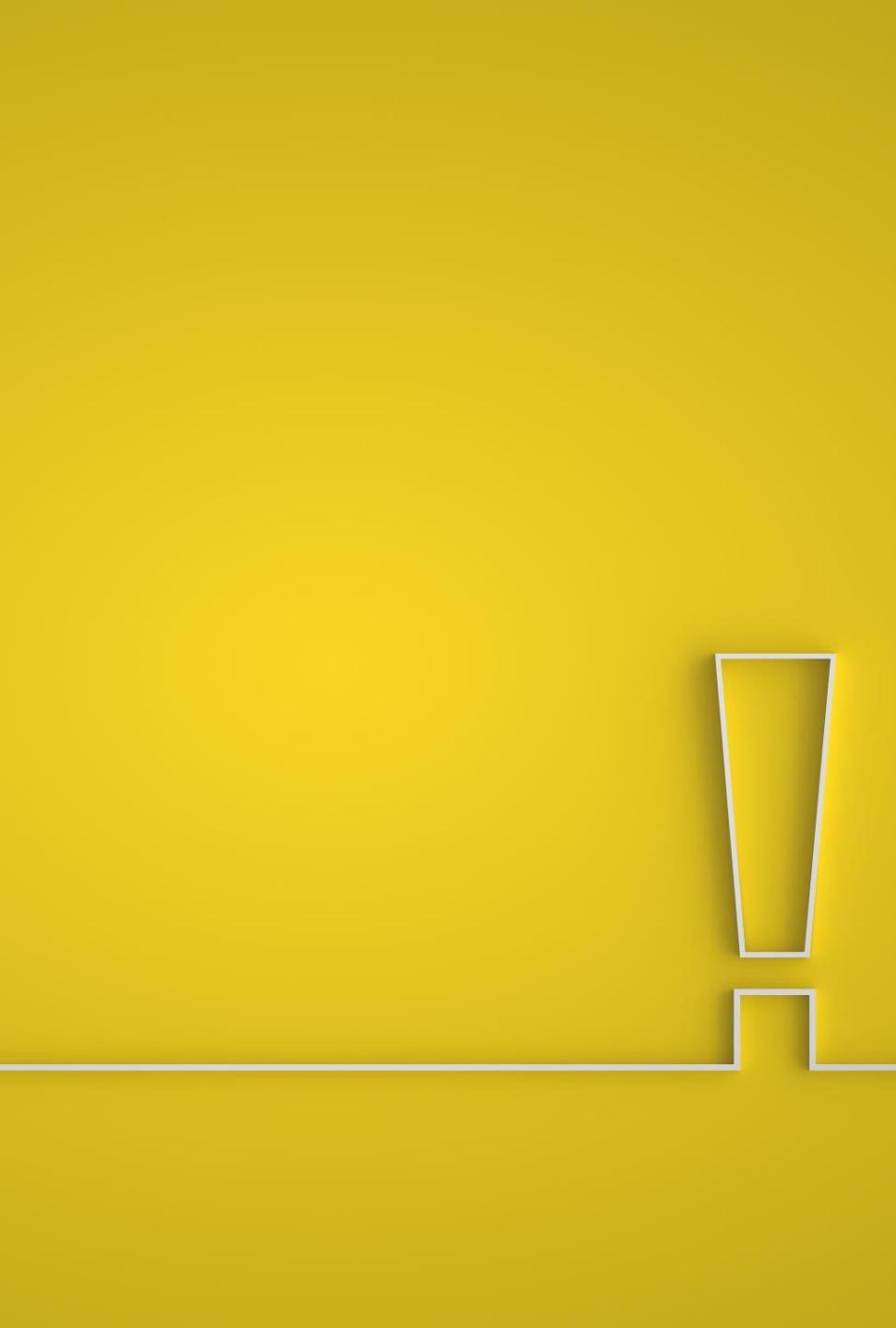


POSITIVELY PANICKED.COM



You can't pour  
from an empty  
cup.

SELF-CARE ISN'T SELFISH. IT'S NECESSARY.



# 3 Things I can change

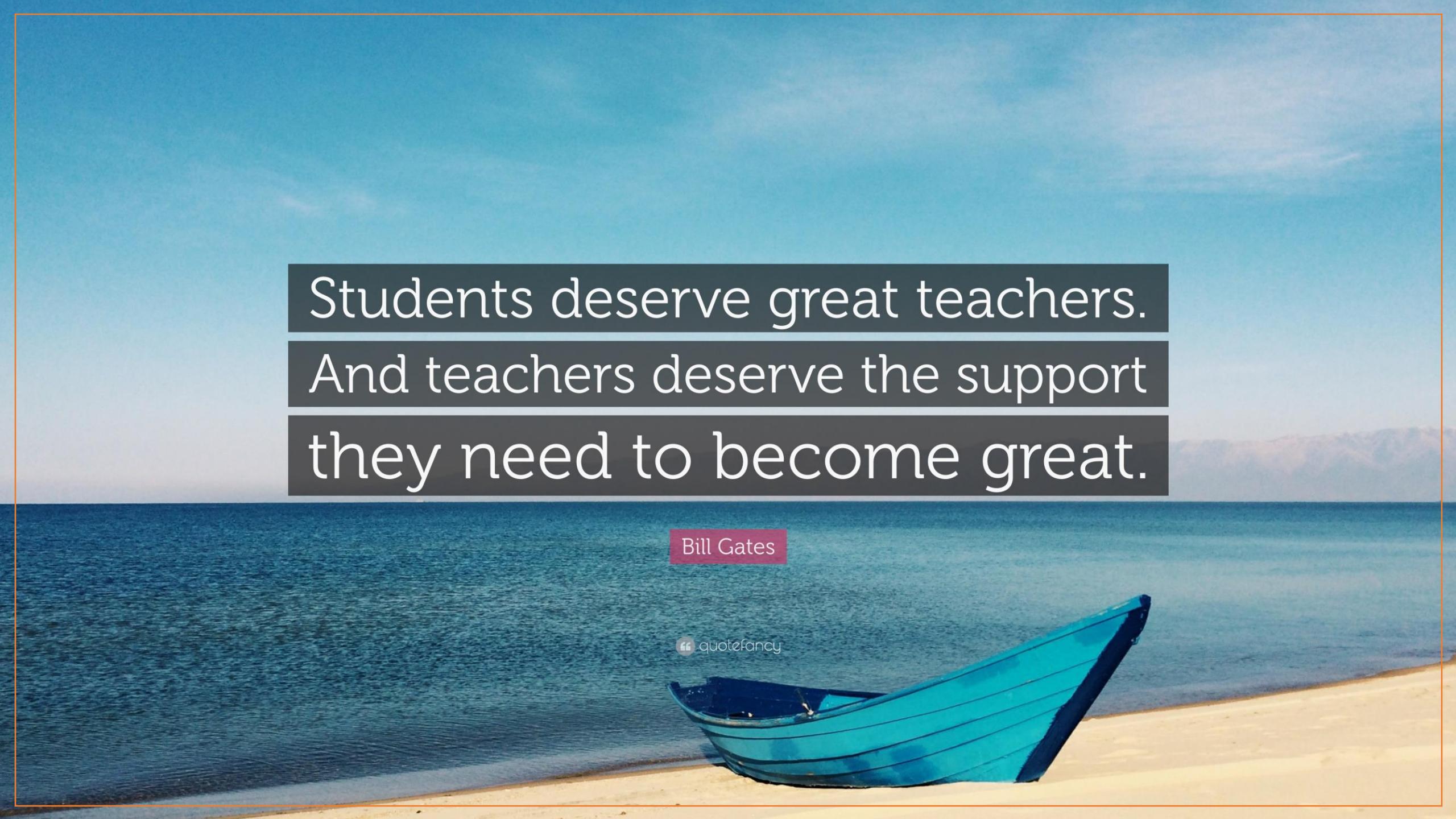
- What I pay attention to (positivity)
- How I interact with others (relationships)
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Teacher wellbeing is  
a form of social  
justice

- “Caring for my self is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare.” – Audre Lorde

It is political



Students deserve great teachers.  
And teachers deserve the support  
they need to become great.

Bill Gates

If you would like  
to learn more  
about teacher  
wellbeing



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