How the Best User Research is *User Therapy*
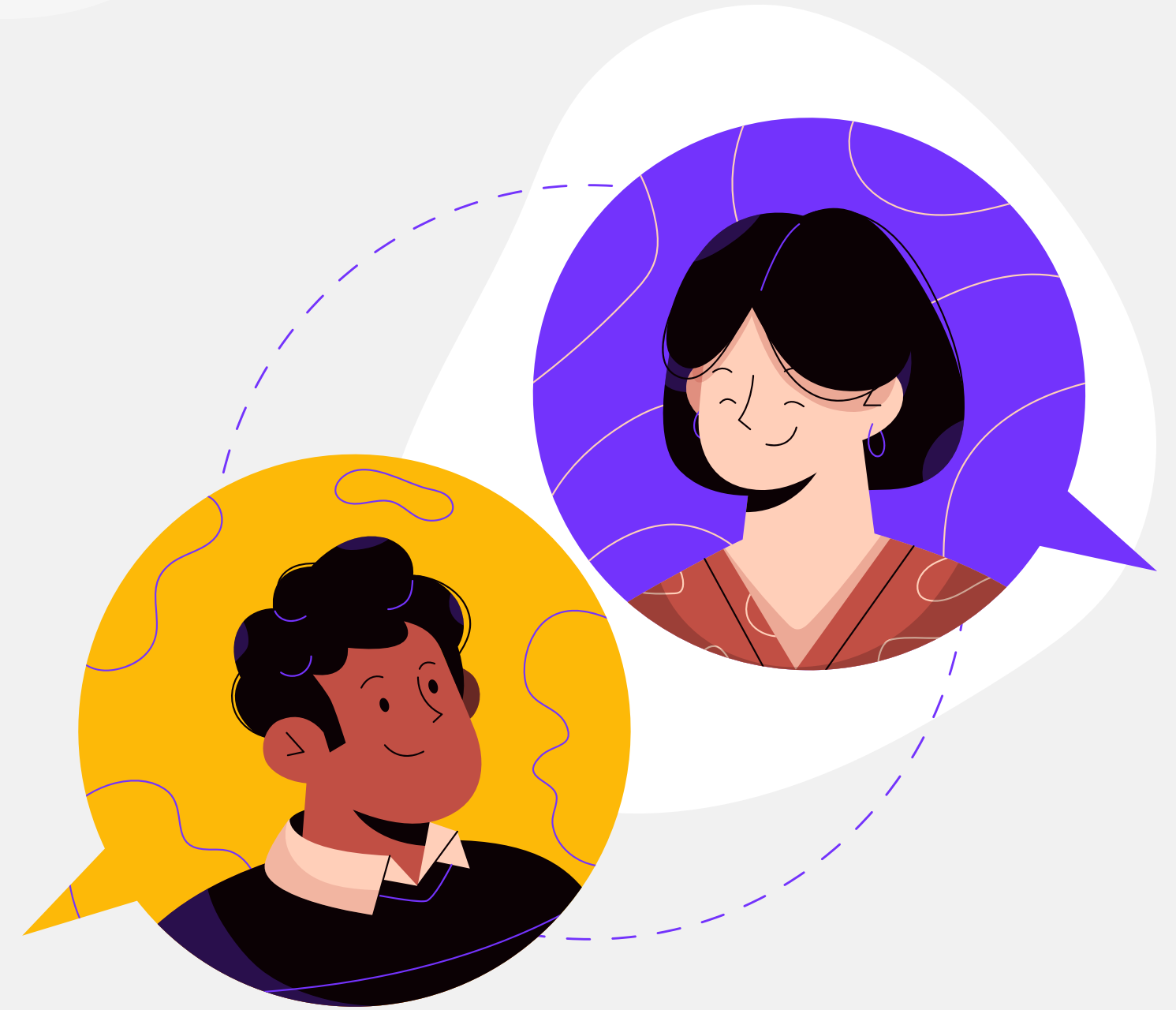
Cheryl Abellanoza, PhD
cherylabellanoza.com

Verizon Connect

2010   2020
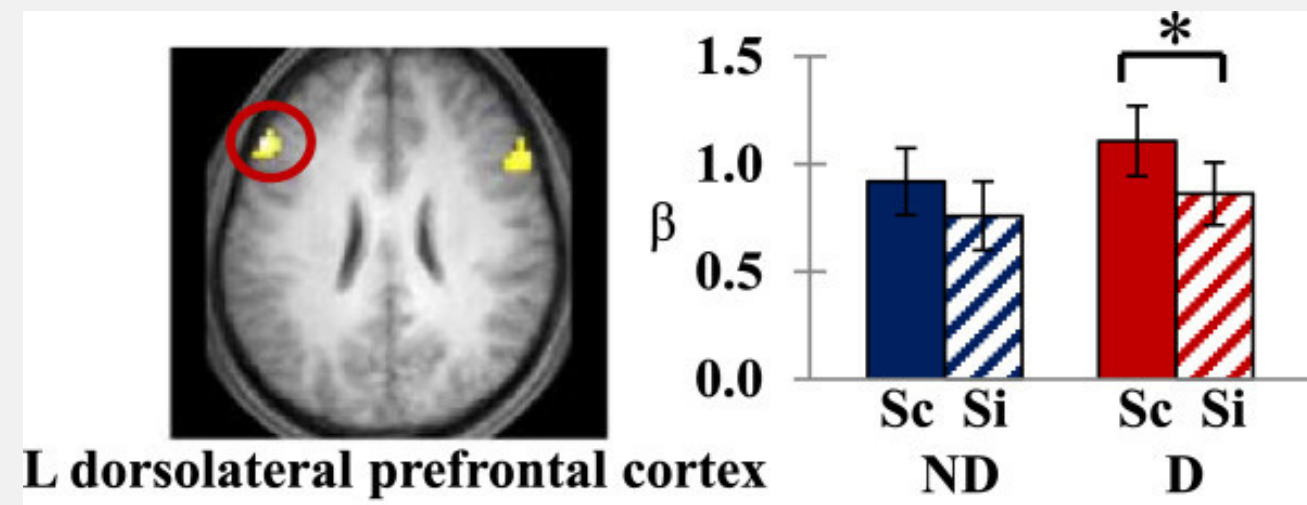
My Story
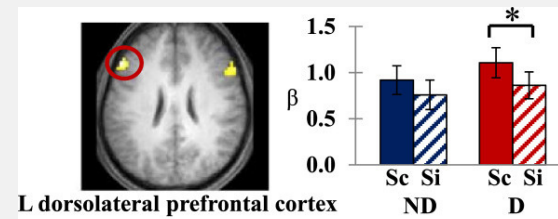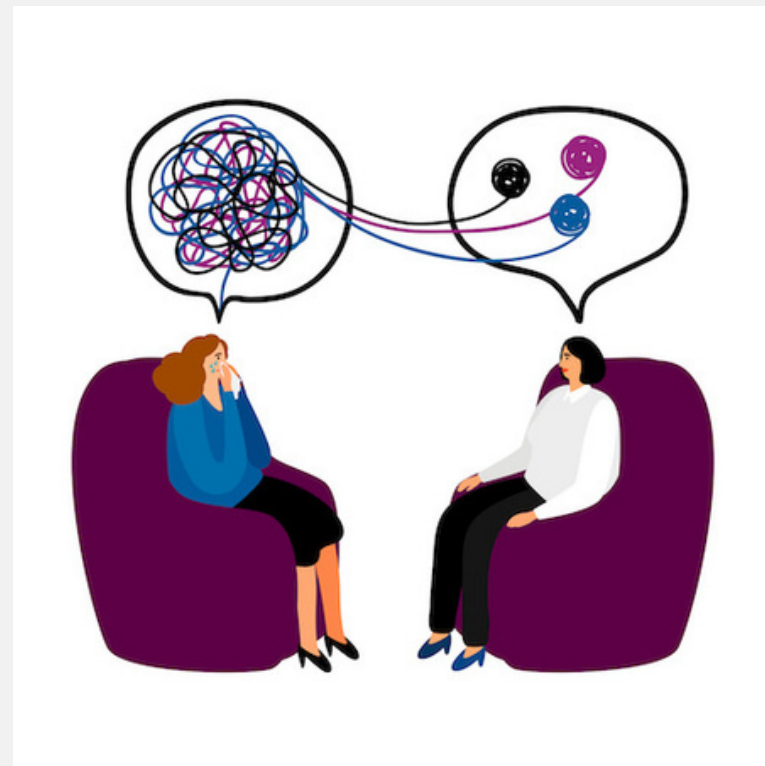
Cognitive Neuroscience / HCI

Verizon Connect

2010

2020

My Story

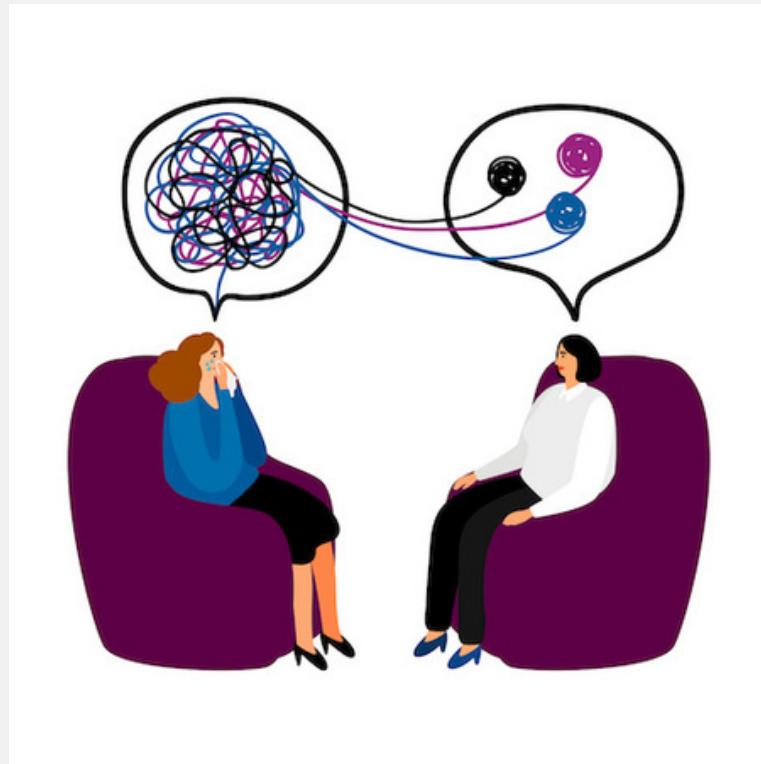Clinical Psychology

Cognitive Neuroscience / HCI

Verizon Connect

2010

2020

My Story

Clinical Psychology

2010   2020

Interviewing skills
Individual and group dynamics
Conversation facilitation
Probing questions for further clarification
Digging into needs-based statements
Systematic framework
Dissecting and coding statements
Short-term synthesis (real-time)
Long-term synthesis (continuous)
De-escalation and conflict resolution techniques
Lasting change/engagement
Cognitive frameworks
Motivational frameworks
Existential frameworks
Staying in the moment
Mental awareness
Physical awareness
Relaxation techniques
Helpful terminology to describe phenomena
Understanding of variance in what is "normal"
Identifying behavioral benchmarks and progress
Labeling antecedents, behavior, cognitions, and consequences
Understanding decision-making
A great poker face

My Story

Researcher: Do you subscribe to music streaming platforms?

Alexa Carleo

Researcher: Do you subscribe to music streaming platforms?

Customer: No, **I'm frugal by nature.** My **wife hates** when I say **cheap**, so frugal.

Researcher: Do you subscribe to music streaming platforms?

Customer: No, **I'm frugal by nature.** My **wife hates** when I say **cheap**, so frugal.

Identity statement

Importance of relationship

Connotation

Researcher: Do you subscribe to music streaming platforms?

Customer: No, I'm frugal by nature. My wife hates when I say cheap, so frugal.

Researcher: I'm curious to know what you're not frugal about.

Humanistic approach

Researcher: Do you subscribe to music streaming platforms?

Customer: No, I'm frugal by nature. My wife hates when I say cheap, so frugal.

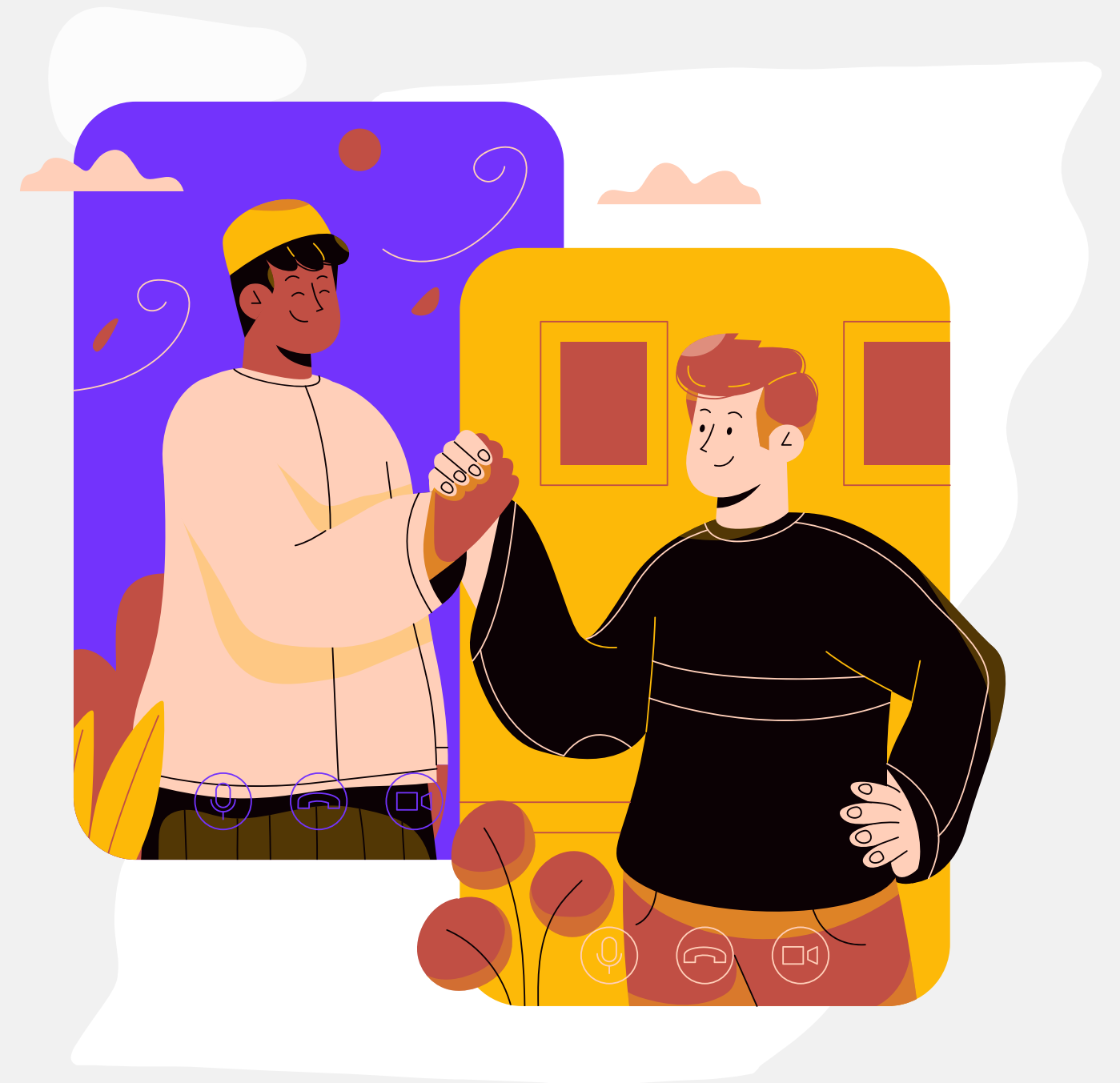**Researcher:** I'm curious to know what you're not frugal about.

Customer: Yeah, (laughs) now you're **Freuding** me.
[shares more detail on things of value]

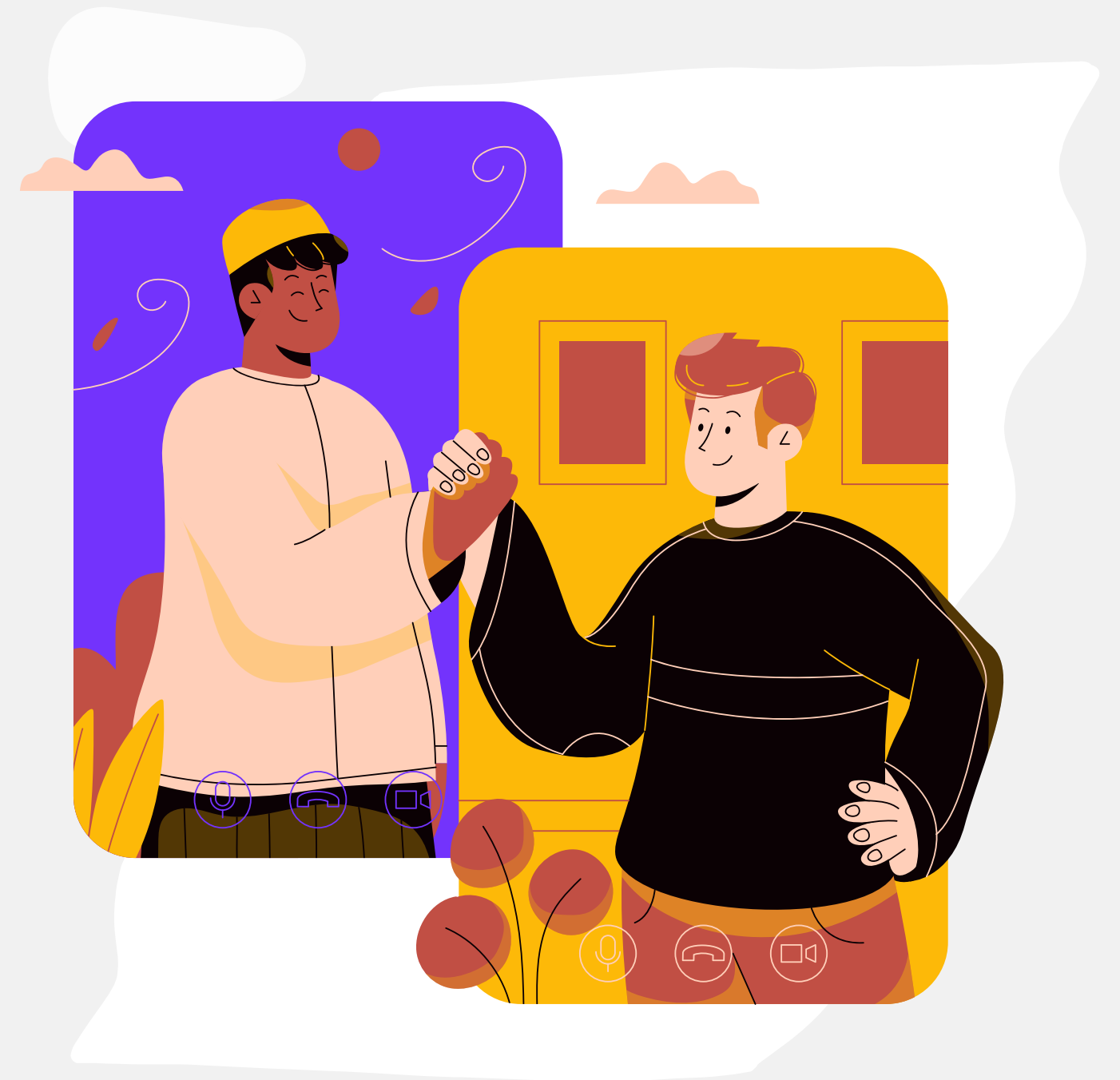**Researcher:** How has **driving** changed since Covid?

CBT approach

Researcher: How has driving changed since Covid?

Customer: The amount of Instacart orders have increased because **people are looking for grocery delivery more;** they don't want to go out as much. So there's been some very **vulnerable** households or group homes, places I've had to deliver out **because they can't go out themselves.**

Driving as a service

Researcher: How has driving changed since Covid?

Customer: The amount of Instacart orders have increased because people are looking for grocery delivery more; they don't want to go out as much. So there's been some very vulnerable households or group homes, places I've had to deliver out because they can't go out themselves.

Customer: I've been driving more obviously in the grocery store parking lots. *[discussion about avoiding pedestrians, shopping carts]* **It's made me more cautious.**
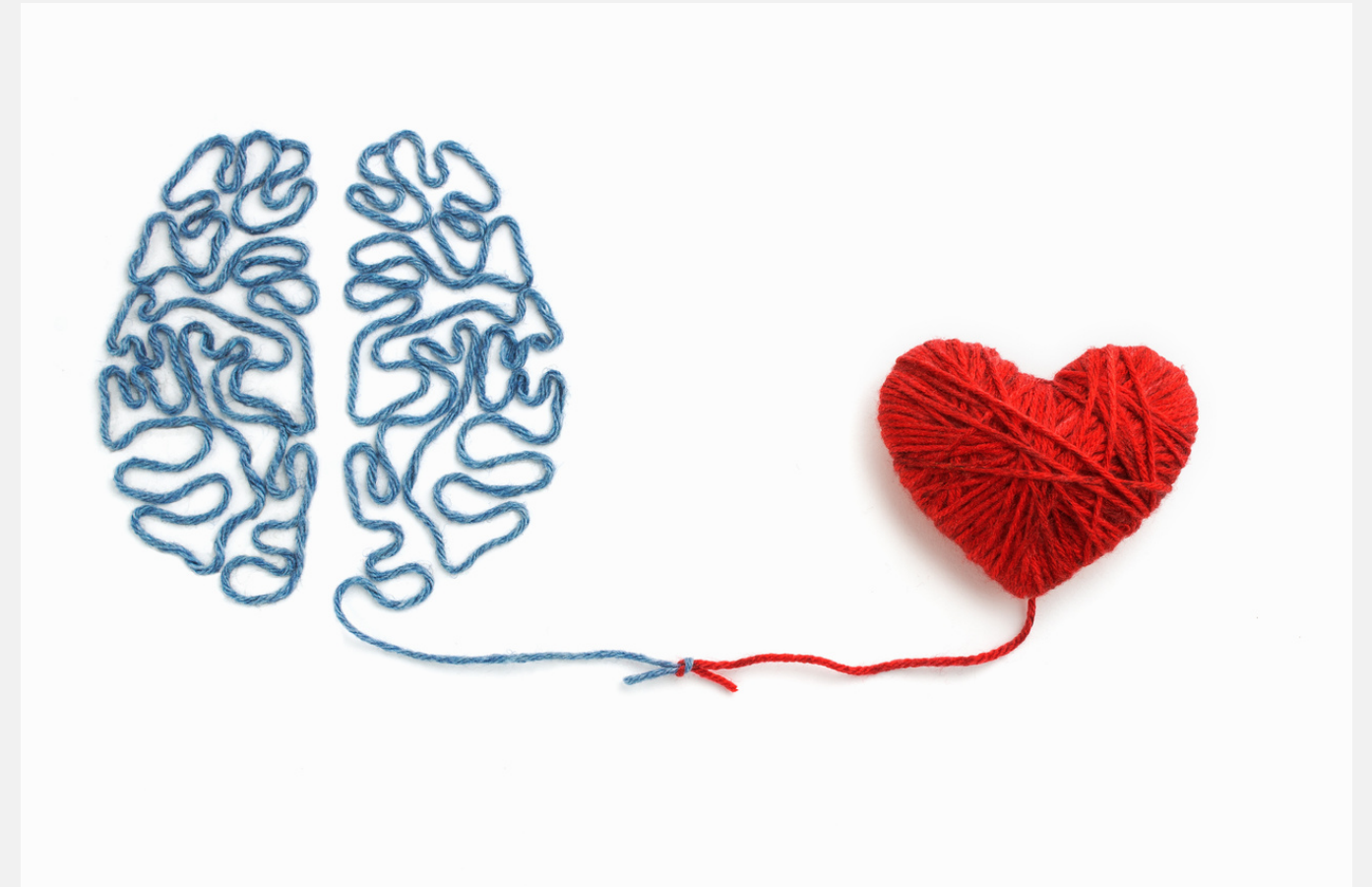
Shift in driver identity
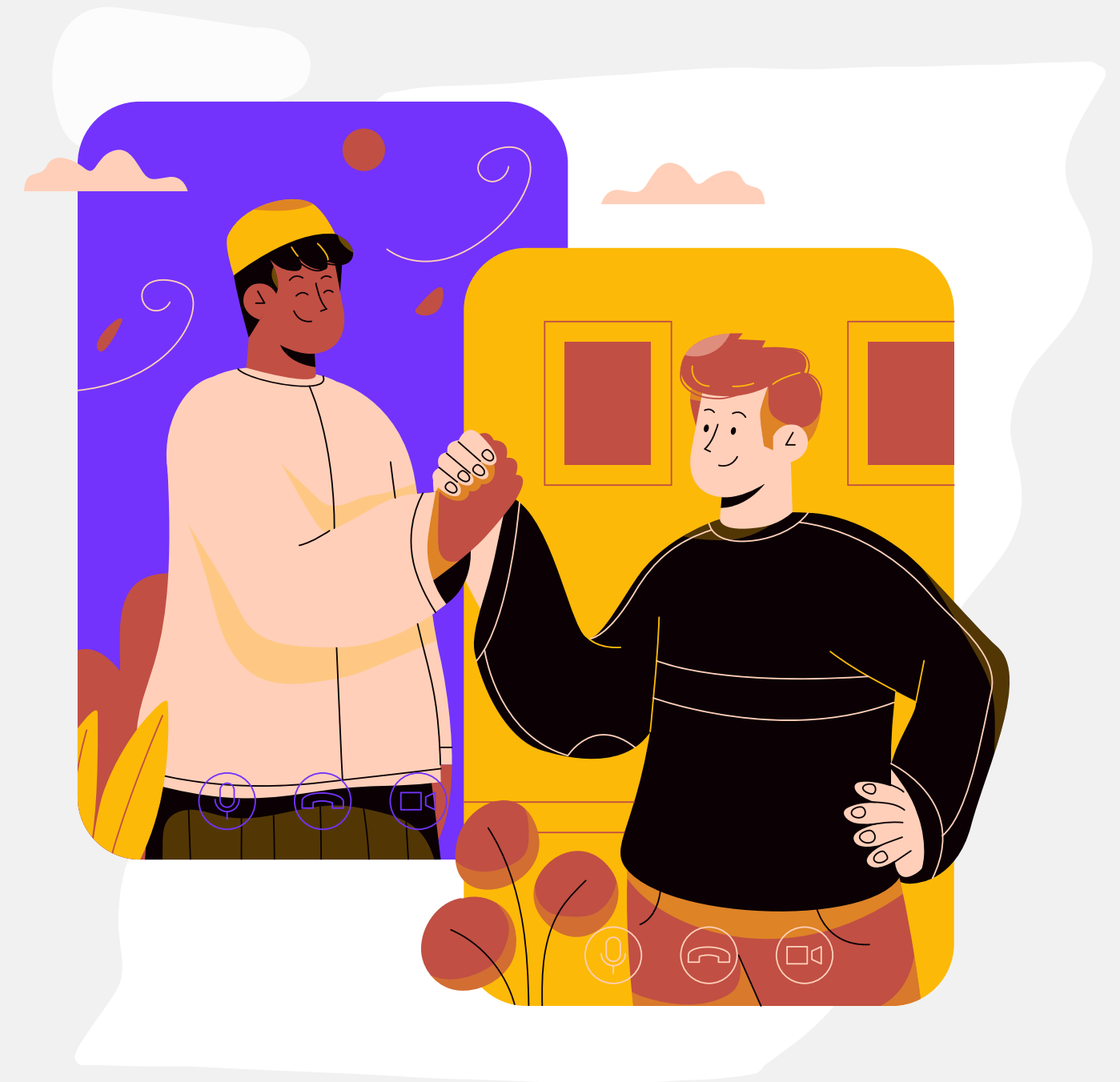
Researcher: What do you **think** about driving?

CBT approach

Researcher: What do you think about driving?

Teen: I'm excited. It's going to be nice to get to be able to go places and **not have to rely on other people** to get you there, **like my other friends.**
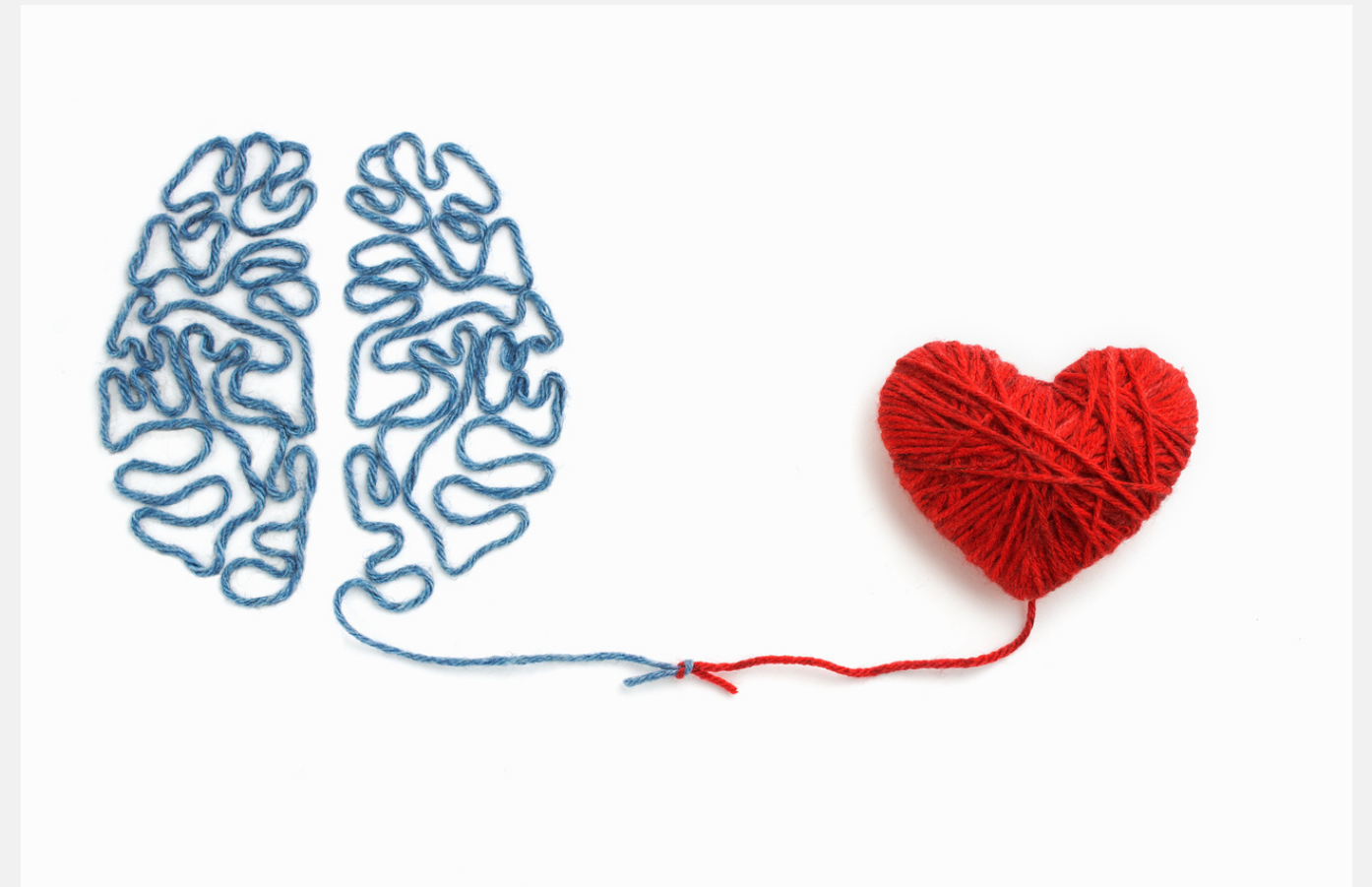
Driving = independence

Driving = group assimilation

Researcher: What do you think about driving?

Teen: I'm excited. It's going to be nice to get to be able to go places and not have to rely on other people to get you there, like my other friends.

Parent: Am I excited? **Yes and no.** I mean, well... my daughter, she's in college... she just got into a car accident on Sunday. [emotional processing]

Driving as threat
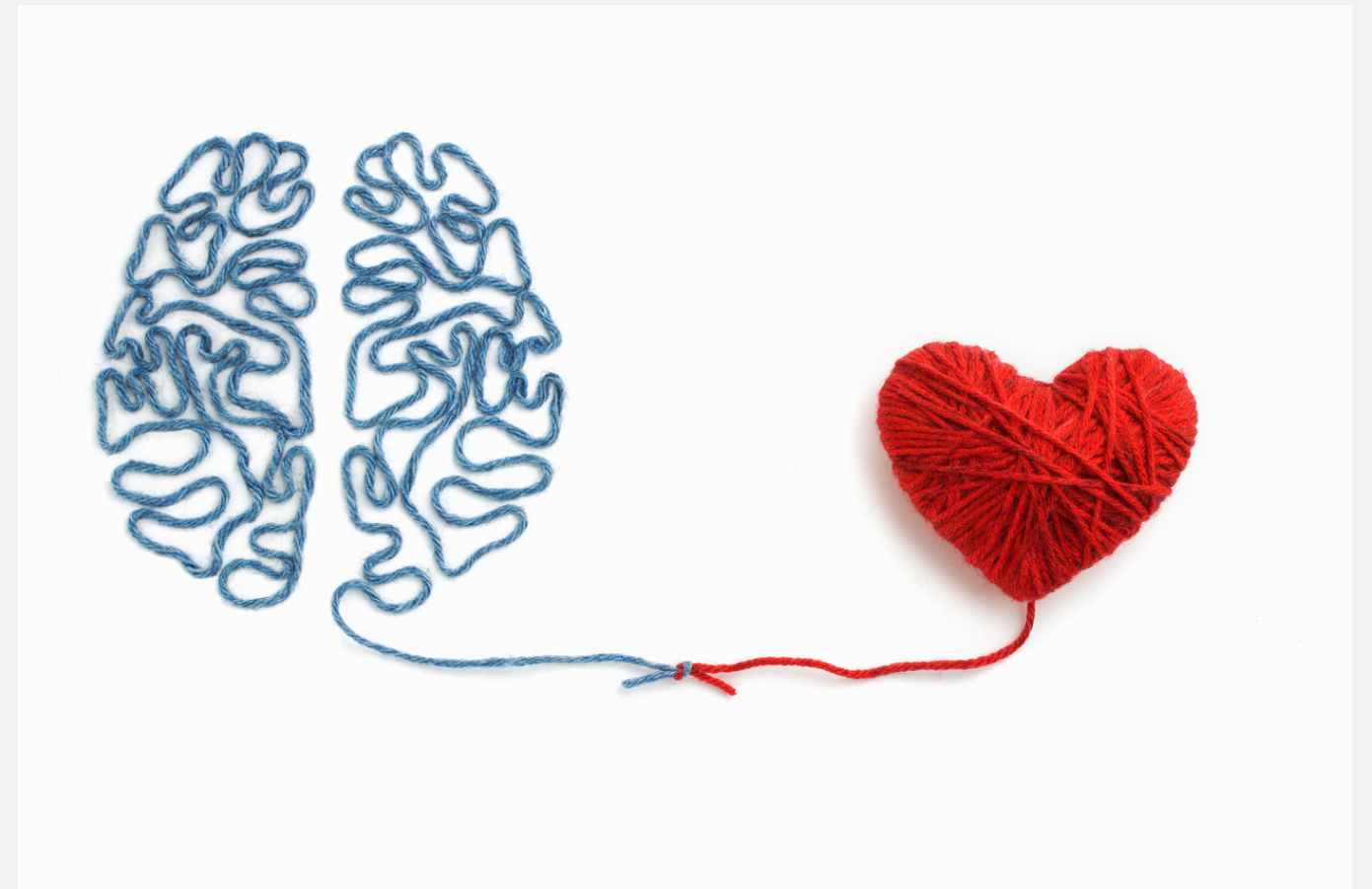
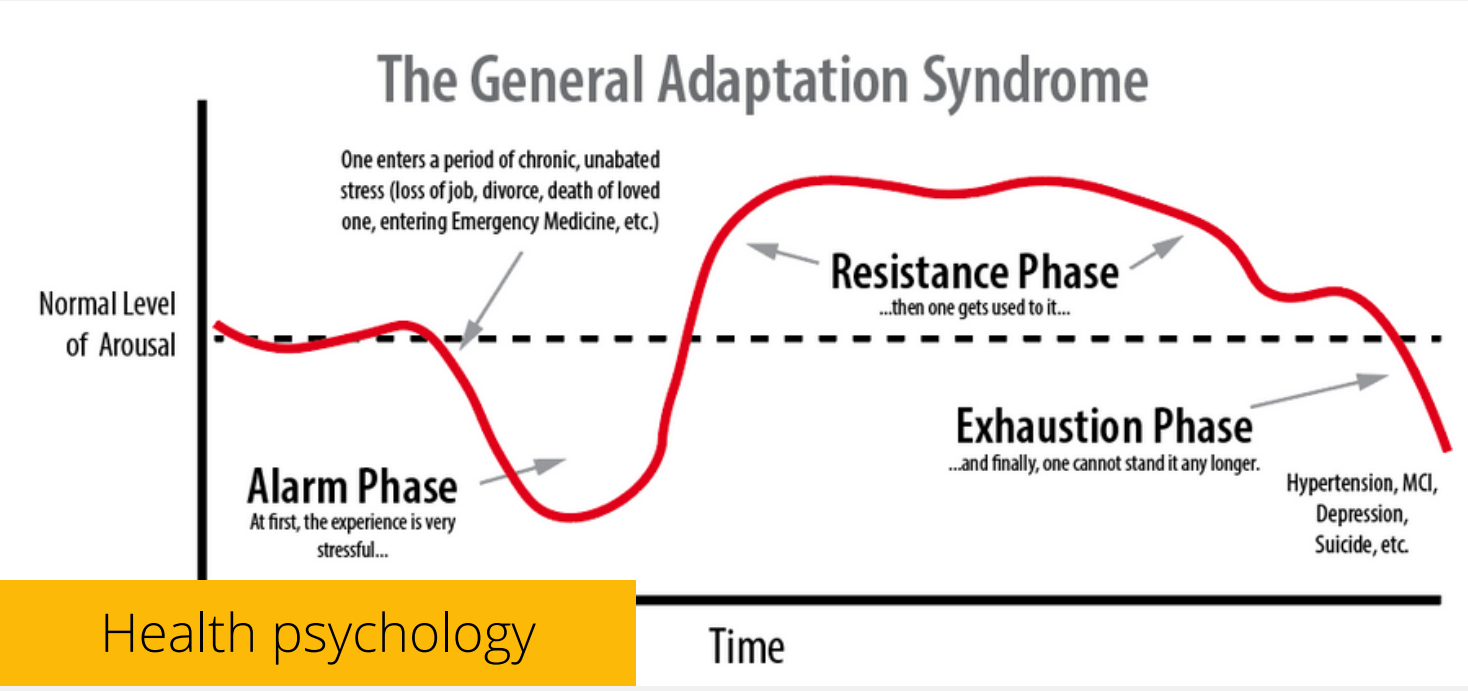What is the goal of user research?

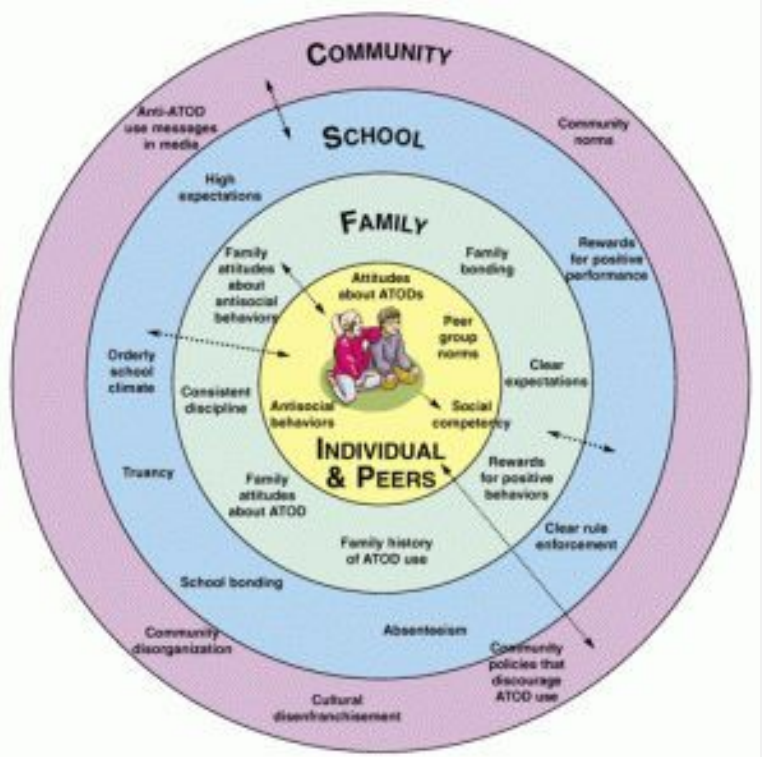Establishing empathy for users.

Our customers exist in systems

The General Adaptation Syndrome

Health psychology

Systems theory

The crash is more than just the crash

Crash

Post-Crash Life

Health

Trauma

Researchers are the sense organ of the business.
Paul Boshears

Listening, listening and more listening

Listening is one of the most powerful tools a therapist has at their disposal. The act of skilled listening can be psychologically healing for a person who has never been given the space to be thoughtfully heard. Listening is just that powerful.

Designers, like therapists, are "people of the ear." The design process, I am learning, is a collection of opportunities to listen: user interviews, design critique, usability testing, seeking out tried and true design patterns, etc... If you're a good listener, you can be a great designer.

User feelings lead to user needs

My personal therapy hero is the late Dr. Marshall Rosenberg. Dr. Rosenberg was obsessed with effective communication. He created an entire model of communication to help individuals, couples and groups communicate well through challenging circumstances.

Dr. Rosenberg believed that the wide variety of emotions we experience as human beings aren't terminal in and of themselves. Rosenberg's model states that our emotions lead us somewhere: to our needs.

As a user experience designer I have found that it is my job to quickly and comprehensively understand the needs of the people I am working for: a stakeholders need for specific feature sets, a user's need for a simpler interface, etc...

Storytelling is the bridge

Humans are storytelling creatures and storytelling in a therapeutic setting is essential. Hurting people often need to be able to share their experiences with therapists acting as guides who gently pull out details and context from their stories.
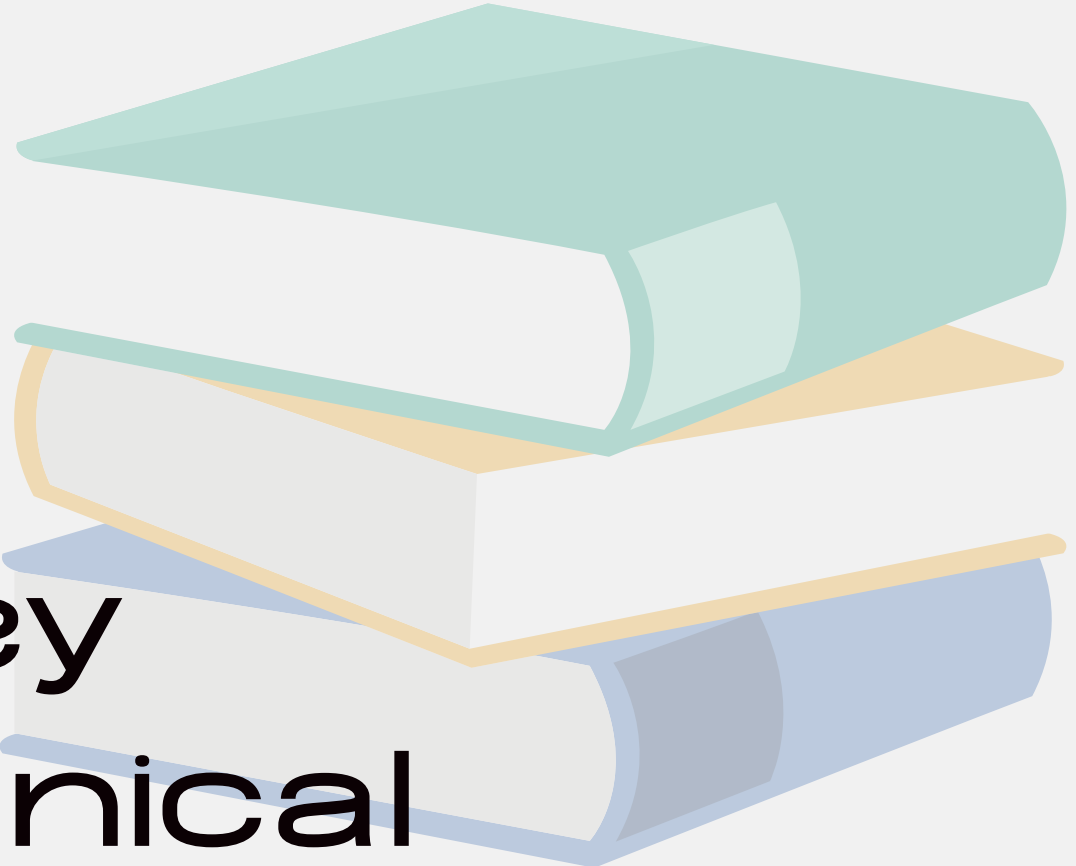
Jeremy Hamann, **Design Like a Therapist**

Table 1: Counseling skills that apply to user experience activities.

UX Research Activity	Therapy Modality	Counseling Skills
Focus group Participatory design	Family therapy Group therapy	Understanding personal motivations and interpersonal dynamics Encouraging engagement
In-depth interviews Usability testing	Individual therapy	Strength-based, "tell me more" Uncovering the story—connecting past, present, and future Truth only if you see it yourself Come to the conclusion on their own—indirectly exposed to new ways of thinking Motivational interviewing
Design sessions	Child therapy	Art therapy Play therapy Drawing
Ethnographic studies	Home visits Milieu therapy	Person-centered Humanistic

Lindsey Arnold, **Being a UXer: It's A Lot Like Being a Therapist**

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So, what are the
5 fundamentals of
in-depth interviews?

Key Clinical Psychology Terms

Rapport: a shared general understanding

Rapporter - to bring something back; to return

Unconditional Positive Regard: acceptance and support of a person regardless of what they say or do
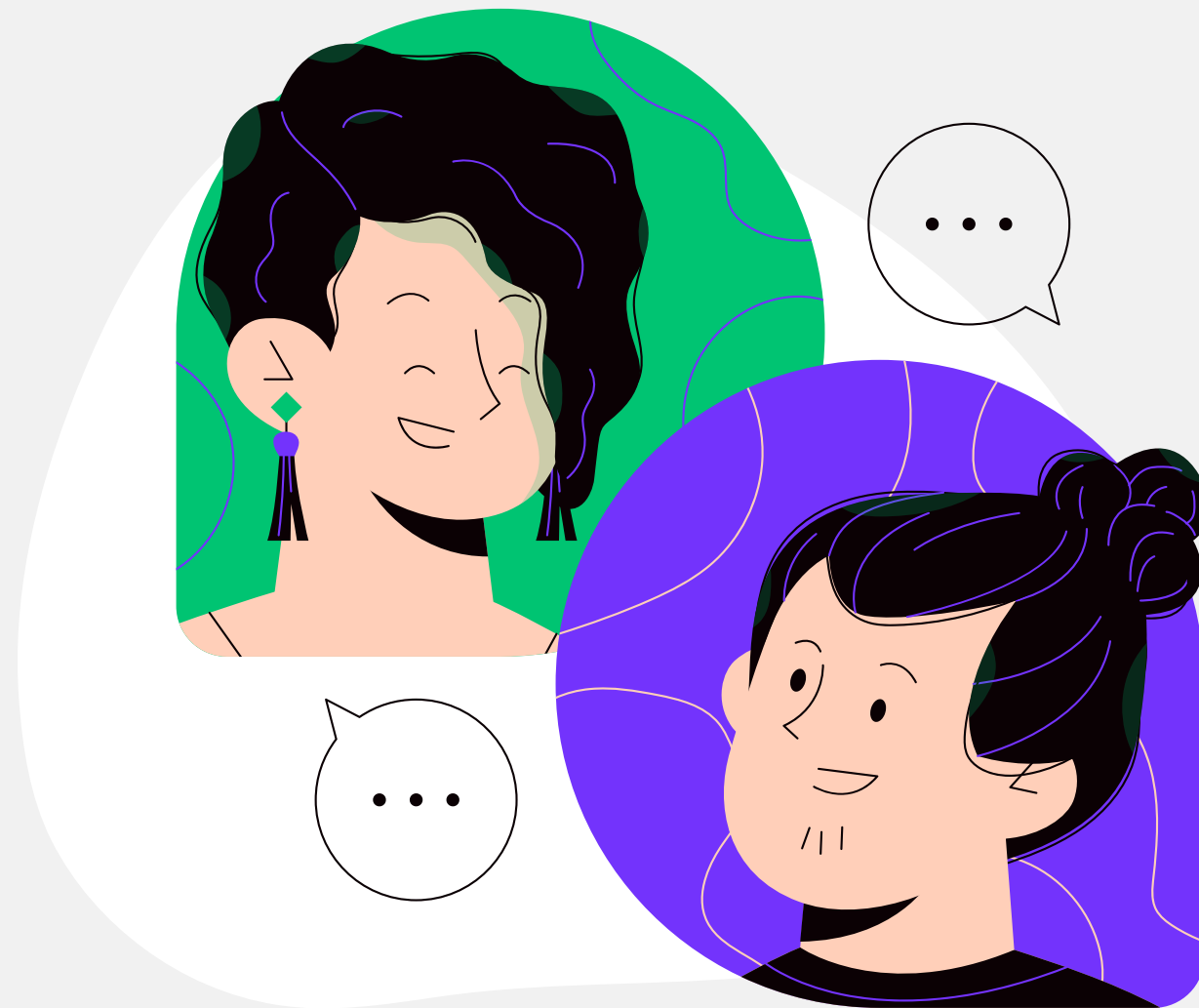
Carl Rogers / Rogerian therapy / Humanistic theory

Therapeutic Alliance: cooperative working relationship

*Therapist/client; researcher/customer; researcher/cross-functional team, or **CFT***

1. Create the discussion guide with your team

A collaborative approach leads to stakeholder awareness and **buy-in**

Templatizing your approach allows for adherence to best practices, as well as some standardization, which helps level-set **expectations**

The discussion guide is just that: a **guide!**

#TherapeuticAlliance

2. Establish rapport with your user

Spend a few minutes at the beginning of the session introducing yourself and **getting acquainted** (focus on good conversation!)

Establish **trust** by explaining your role, and every single step of your session to your user, no matter how seemingy trivial

Don't be afraid to **be authentic** in the room; reflect on surprising emotions or thoughts and check in with the user for understanding

Save time at the end to **summarize** the session, giving the user the ability to bring everything together, and for all of you to transition out of the interview space
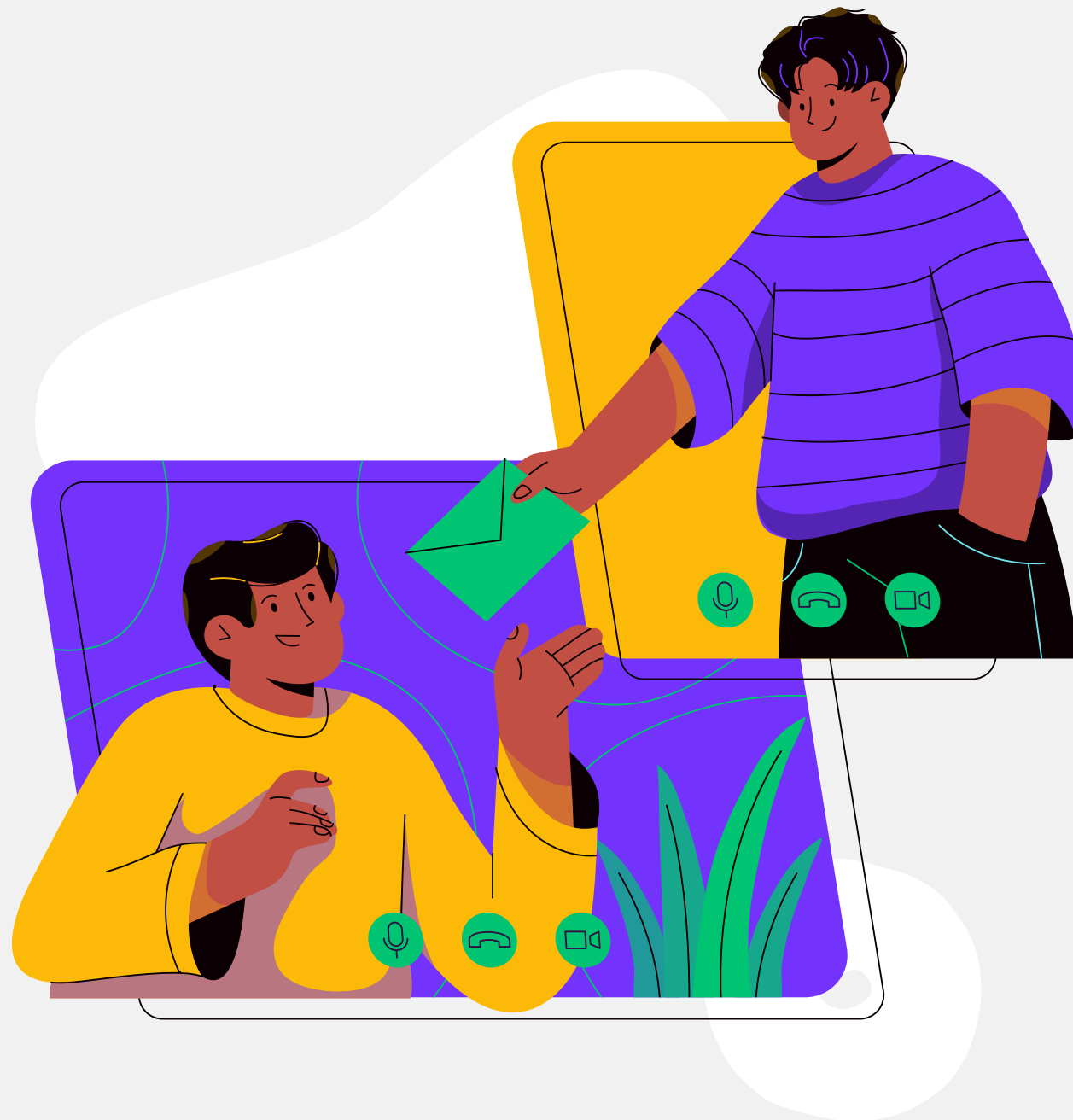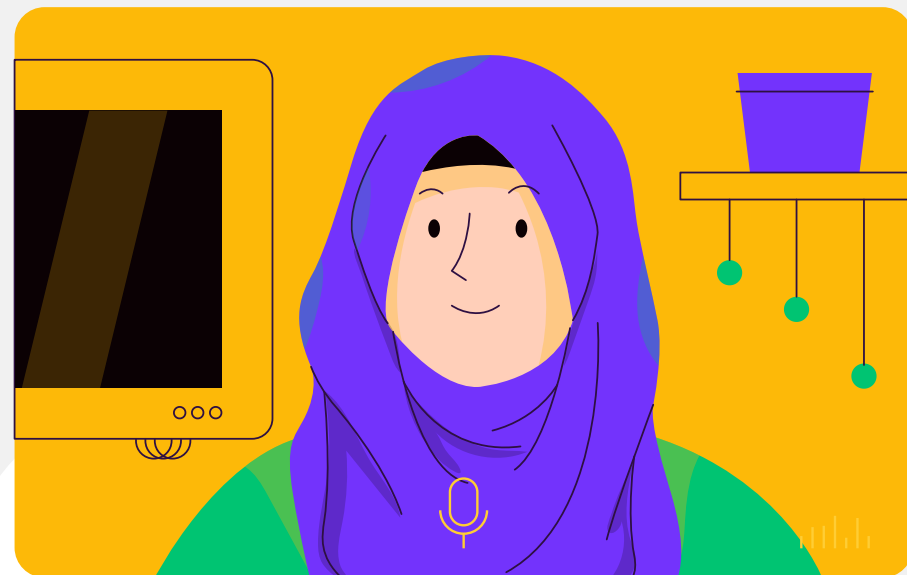
3. Be present for your user

Avoid trying to stick to a script, or trying to answer every single one of your team's questions in that session

Treat the session like a simple **conversation**, and work more like an investigator rather than a researcher
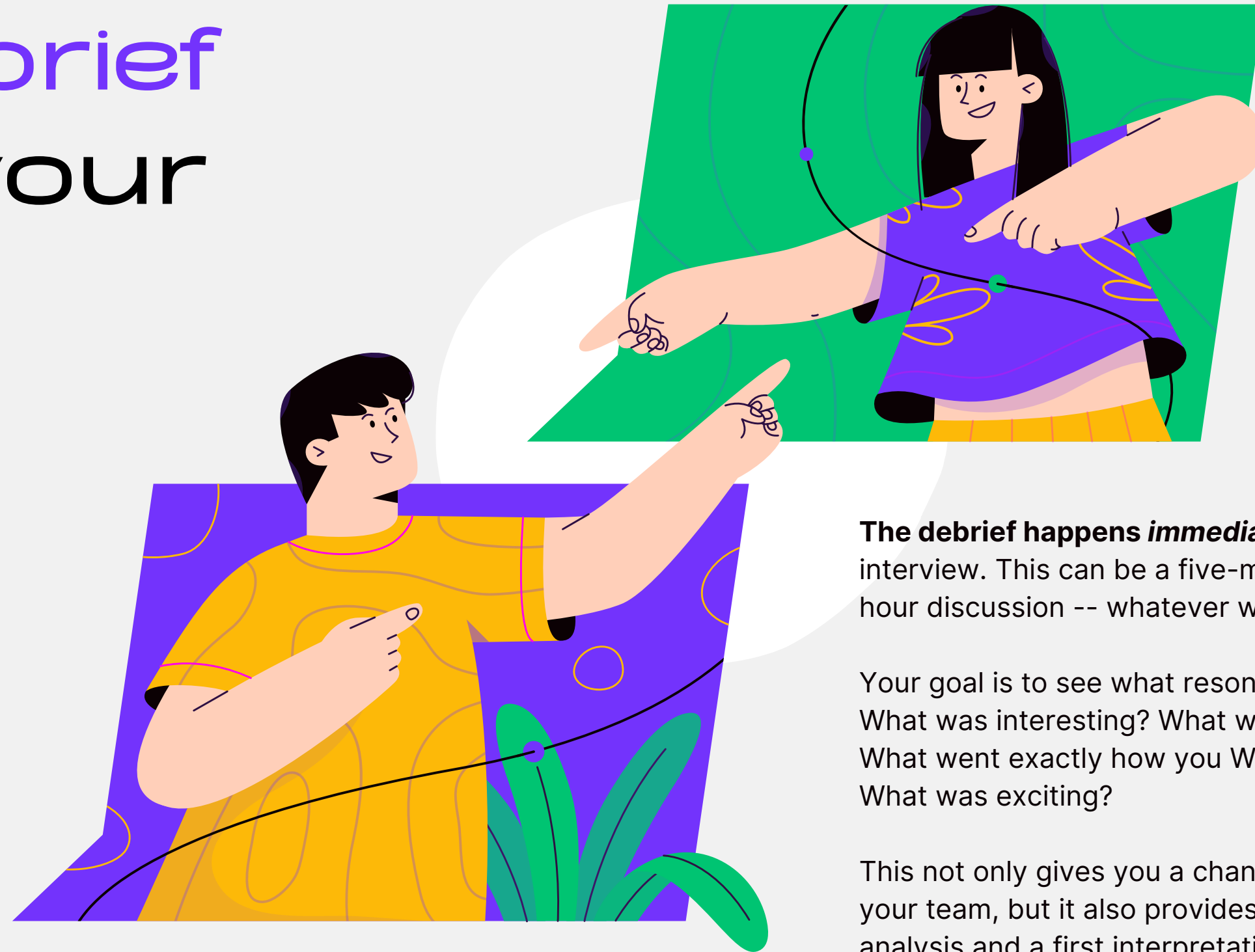
Babz Jewell

4. **Delegate** tasks to your team

Trying to do everything yourself is impossible and will keep you from being present. Delegate the following ResearchOps roles to your feelow researchers or cross-functional team:

- Greeter
- Note-taker
- Recorder
- Incentive provider/preparer
- Debrief facilitator

5. Debrief with your team

The debrief happens *immediately after* the interview. This can be a five-minute chat, or a half-hour discussion -- whatever works best for you

Your goal is to see what resonated with the team. What was interesting? What was unexpected? What went exactly how you What was frustrating? What was exciting?

This not only gives you a chance to check in with your team, but it also provides topline-level analysis and a first interpretation of your data while it's fresh in your mind

and don't forget to CELEBRATE!

Michael Snell

Have an **attitude of gratitude!** Your user could have done literally anything else with their time, and they chose to spend it with you

Thank your user for joining you for the session, and if appropriate, **invite them to join you for more sessions**, especially if they enjoyed the process or found it rewarding to provide feedback

Finally, teams benefit from **celebrating wins along the way,** especially when projects span bigger lengths of time, and if your work is at the top of the research funnel (e.g., discovery work), meaning that your insights may not be immediately visible in the product

#Rapport
#TherapeuticAlliance
#UnconditionalPositiveRegard

Thank you!

Cheryl Abellanoza, PhD

cherylabellanoza.com

medium article