

Enhancing the Wellbeing of Support People

breakthesilenceNS.ca

By engaging in this work, you are making a difference in someone's life, your community, and society as a whole.

People can and do grow from working with victims/survivors of sexual violence.

We can become more compassionate, aware of our own values, and politically conscious of unfairness and injustice. We can deepen spiritually from our interactions with victims/survivors and through working to make a better world.

Regularly witnessing people's trauma and working to dismantle rape culture, can also be heart-wrenching and result in distress.

As people who support survivors of sexual violence, it is important to discuss how we care for ourselves and each other.

Self-care is critical for our survival, wellbeing, and growth.

So is community.

It is also vital that we recognize, understand and address the signs of distress and how our work impacts our body and mind as well as our behaviours and relationships.

As support people we need to take care of ourselves in order to care for others.

Taking care of yourself

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare."

Audre Lorde

Black, lesbian, feminist writer, scholar, and activist

Self-care is about taking care of ourselves, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. It is about (re)-learning how to be gentle with ourselves and, paying attention to and tending to our needs.

Self-care is crucial for our survival, wellbeing, and growth.

It can be hard to set aside time for ourselves when the people and communities we work with are in crisis or when we're trying to change systems of oppression. It can also be difficult to maintain boundaries when the people we are supporting are friends, family, or community members. It's okay to feel conflicted.

As active members of our communities, when we take care of ourselves, we are taking caring of others.

Practicing self care

Self-care is many things to many people:

Mind:

- Setting boundaries for, or taking breaks from, social media
- Journaling
- Setting, and working towards, personal goals
- Doing volunteer work that is different from your paid work
- Engaging in your hobbies/interests

Body:

- Eating regularly/ food that makes you feel good
- Drinking plenty of water
- Getting enough rest
- Being physically active
- Relaxing (taking a bath or hot shower, getting a massage, drinking a hot cup of tea)

Spirit:

- Practicing spirituality/faith
- Making time for self-reflection
- Meditating
- Connecting with nature
- Mi'kmaq, and other Indigenous people, can utilize traditional cultural and spiritual practices. Download the **Indigenous Perspectives** handout for a more in depth discussion of Mi'kmaq and Indigenous ways of maintaining mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing.

Emotions:

- Taking time to process your emotions
- Expressing gratitude (for friends, family and coworkers etc.)
- Practicing mindfulness
- Asking for help at work and in your personal life
- Expressing yourself creatively

Relationships:

- Connecting with friends
- Embracing fun
- Laughing

Work:

- Noticing the joys and achievements of the work
- Connecting with allies at work

- Delegating at work and in your volunteer roles
- Setting, and sticking to, limits when it comes to paid and volunteer work

(Many of these suggestions are from When Compassion Hurts by the Best Start Resource Centre and Green Cross Academy of Traumatology's Standards of Self Care Guidelines)

"Self-care is about creating and maintaining practices that help you sustain your energy and spirit in whatever life path you choose. It also makes you a better friend, community member, lover, partner and caregiver. When you give to others but neglect yourself, feelings of resentment can arise because you sacrifice your own needs."

Farrah Khan

Caring For Yourself is a Radical Act, Artreach.org

Let go of judgement and be gentle

As support people, professional helpers and activists, many of us set high bars for ourselves and others. It is important to be gentle with yourself, and others, when it comes to practicing self-care.

See the end of this handout for customizable self-care and emergency self-care worksheets.

Creating a circle of care

Creating a circle of care is listening to the needs of, and caring for, each other. It shifts the responsibility of care from the individual and centres the importance of caring for each other in community.

It means checking in with each other, asking what people need and respecting their answers, and creating spaces where we can heal collectively.

Some people are born into communities, with long-standing traditions, cultural practices and ceremonies. Download the **Indigenous Perspectives** handout for examples.

Many people find community and support through their place of worship.

Some groups - such as people with disabilities, LGBTQIA2S+ people, people of colour, victims/survivors of sexual violence - find or create community. These communities, too, have rich histories, elders/forebearers, knowledge, and resources that may aid in your wellbeing.

Community can show up for you when you have trouble showing up, or can't show up, for yourself. Community can provide you with the needed encouragement and accountability to realize your self-care goals.

"I am fighting for an interdependence that embraces need and tells the truth: no one does it on their own and the myth of independence is just that, a myth."

Mia Mingus

Writer, educator, and organizer working for disability justice and transformative justice responses to child sexual abuse | leavingevidence.wordpress.com

Some examples of creating a circle of care include:

- Cooking a meal together or preparing and delivering a meal to a friend.
- Offering rides to and from work, meetings, and events.
- Driving someone to and from the grocery store.
- Helping with child-care.

- Accompanying a friend to the doctor, especially if they have had negative experiences with the health care system.
- Helping a friend or community member with a task that makes them feel anxious.

When caring for each other, it is also important to maintain our own boundaries.

Note: Many of these things are necessary accommodations for people living with disabilities. This includes disabilities that you may not know about and/or that are invisible, including chronic illness and pain; depression, anxiety and other challenges with mental health; neurodiverse people; and people with environmental illnesses.

People with disabilities, and disability justice activists, have led, and continue to lead, the way in terms of self and community care (circles of care).

Collective action as care

Taking collective action can be essential to some people's self and community care.

Engaging in community healing, advocacy, and/or social justice activism can also allow support people to act on their deeply held values as well as counter feelings of frustration, anger, powerlessness, and vicarious trauma.

Collective action and social movement building offer learning, growth and meaning-making that can build resilience, hope and belonging.

Signs of distress in support people

How we are impacted by supporting others can depend on a variety of factors including: individual character traits, personal history, current circumstances, and our experiences with systemic oppression. It can also depend on the environment in which we work as well as larger community, political and/or economic contexts.

People experience stress and trauma in different ways, in our bodies and minds, and in our behaviours and relationships. We may show just one or two signs, or many signs at once.

"Recognizing that it is a part of the work to be affected is the most important coping skill that you can give to yourself. It's okay to feel outraged, horrified, shocked, saddened, exhausted or vulnerable."

Farrah Khan

Caring For Yourself is a Radical Act, Artreach.org

Body and mind signs

- Chronic exhaustion and physical ailments
- Feelings of fear, anger or rage
- Feeling numb
- Feeling powerless
- Feeling hopeless and helpless
- Feeling that you can never do enough
- Difficulty managing emotions
- Cynicism
- Loss of meaning/value in life
- Sensitivity to violence
- Feeling irritable or moody
- Guilt (especially re: experiencing pleasure or success)
- Not feeling okay about yourself
- Sense of persecution
- Unable to focus
- Difficulty problem solving
- Inability to embrace complexity, viewing things as starkly “us” and “them” or right and wrong, etc.
- Hyperarousal (startling easily, difficulty sleeping, nightmares)
- Hypervigilance
- Dissociation
- Decrease in pleasurable activities

Behaviour and relationship signs

- Withdrawing socially
- Avoiding strong emotions
- Relationship problems (feeling disconnected, sexual difficulties, increased conflict)
- Unclear work/home boundaries
- Repeated unwanted thoughts or images of the sexual violence/trauma
- Inability to listen and/or empathize
- Impulsivity
- Increased dependencies or addictions
- Obsessive behavior
- Accident prone

- Redirecting distressful conversations
- Trying to control the lives of others
- Reduced creativity
- Taking on too much responsibility
- Absence from work
- Having the same trauma responses and/or triggers as the victim/survivor

Many of these signs are from *When Compassion Hurts* by the Best Start Resource Centre and Green Cross Academy of Traumatology's Standards of Self Care Guidelines.

These symptoms may be the result of:

- Long-term, cumulative stress that feels inescapable.
- Working within institutions and systems that make it difficult for victims/survivors to get the support they need and prevent support people and advocates from doing what they think is right.
- Listening empathetically to stories of trauma, suffering, and violence.

Systemic causes of distress

Professional helpers can feel anguish that their workplaces have insufficient resources and staffing levels or inadequate policies that are barriers for the people they serve.

They may also recognize that the systems, institutions, and groups that respond to victims/survivors of sexual violence reproduce forms of oppression.

These feelings and realizations can conflict with deeply held morals and cause or heighten feelings of powerlessness or hopelessness.

Organizational strategies to foster mental and physical wellbeing

Think about current care practices that your workplace builds into daily or weekly routines. What has worked? What has been challenging? Where are the opportunities to shift and change?

Here are additional ways in which organizations can foster the emotional and physical wellbeing of employees and volunteers.

- Provide staff and volunteers with the resources they need to do their jobs
- Ensure that staff and volunteers are/feel adequately supported (this can include effective supervision, team meetings, access to professional development)
- Train supervisors/managers in how to address employee/volunteer distress
- Facilitate conversations and/or trainings regarding workplace stress, trauma, and self-care
- Foster positive relationships in the workplace
- Incorporate humour and fun
- Practice open and clear communication

- Allow workers to say “no”
- Provide paid mental health days
- Offer free health and wellbeing activities at the workplace such as yoga, meditation or walking groups
- Be alert to signs of heightened stress or workplace related trauma in employees; don't wait for people to come forward
- Connect staff and volunteers with role models and/or mentors
- Give staff access to mental health supports (for example, through a workplace health plan)
- Debrief stressful events automatically as a team
- Ensure that people's workloads and volunteer responsibilities are varied and balanced

Many of these strategies are from *When Compassion Hurts* by the Best Start Resource Centre and Green Cross Academy of Traumatology's Standards of Self Care Guidelines

Additional self-care tools

“Self-care is about self determination, you define how you will take care of yourself and what your needs are. Using a harm reduction approach means that we look at the ways we cope not from a bad or good lens. It is recognizing that how we deal with trauma might not always be nourishing for us; we might be able to cope in safer ways. Harm reduction is trying to think of ways we can be in control of our choices and make the best decisions we can in every situation. It is about honouring the ways we survive under systems we did not create.”

Farrah Khan

Caring For Yourself is a Radical Act, Artreach.org

Identifying your self-care needs

Take a moment to consider what you value and need in your everyday life (daily self-care needs) versus what you value and need in the event of a crisis (emergency self-care needs). Self-care goes far beyond your basic physical needs: remember your mind, emotions, body, and spirit.

Community can provide encouragement and accountability to realize self-care goals.

Building a self-care plan

Self-care is made up of the practices we deliberately engage in on a regular basis to maintain and enhance our health and wellbeing.

Your self-care plan can be as simple or complex as you need it to be. You may choose to keep a detailed plan at home and carry a simplified version in your wallet, in your purse, or on your phone.

Emergency self-care

It can also be helpful to have strategies to ensure that you practice self-care in times of heightened stress. If you develop a plan in advance, it will be there when you need it.

Questions to ask when you're not OK

(These questions and solutions are based on the blog post Everything Is Awful and I'm Not Okay: questions to ask before giving up, Eponis Sinope blog)

Am I hydrated?

If not, have a glass of water.

Have I eaten in the past three hours?

If not, get some food.

Have you bathed recently?

If not, take a shower, bath, or wash your face whenever you have the opportunity.

Have you stretched or moved your body recently?

If not, do some stretches and/or wiggle different parts of your body.

Have you left your office recently?

If not, go out and/or grab something to eat.

Have you been on your computer or phone all day?

If so, take a break from the screen.
Look out a window if possible.

Do you feel ineffective?

Complete a small task and check it off your To Do list.

Have you said something nice to someone recently?

If not, try it, whether in person or online. It should be genuine, so don't force it.

If nighttime: are you sleepy but resisting going to sleep?

Turn off or put away your electronics, put on something comfortable, make yourself cozy in bed, and close your eyes for fifteen minutes. If that doesn't work, you can get up, no pressure.

Have you over-exerted yourself lately – physically, emotionally, socially, or intellectually?

The effects of overexertion can linger for days. Give yourself a break in that area.

Do you usually see a therapist or a support group that helps? Have you seen them/gone lately? Same goes for other health and mental health care professionals.

If not, think about booking an appointment and/or going.

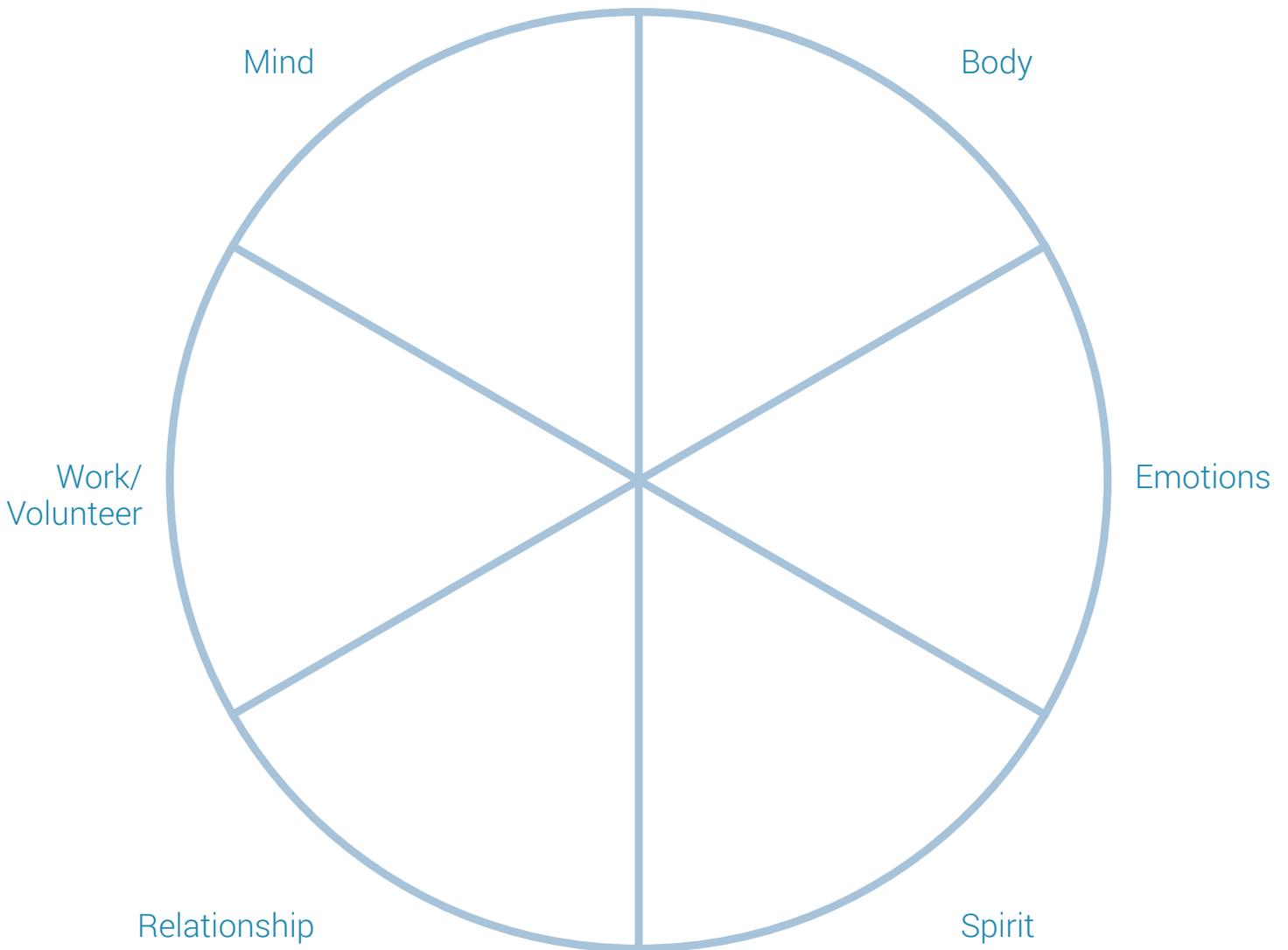
Have you reached out to friends or family outside of work recently?

On the phone or in person, talking to and/or hanging out with someone who cares for you can feel good.

Your self-care plan

Once you've determined your personal needs and strategy, write it down. Your self-care plan can be as simple or complex as you need it to be. You may

choose to keep a detailed plan at home and carry a simplified version in your wallet, in your purse, or on your phone. Here is a template you can use:



Area of self-care plus examples

<p>Mind:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Setting boundaries for, or taking breaks from, social media• Journaling• Setting, and working towards, personal goals• Engaging in volunteer work that is different from your paid work	<p>Emotions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Taking time to process your emotions• Expressing yourself creatively• Expressing gratitude (for friends, family and coworkers, etc.)• Practicing mindfulness• Asking for help at work and in your personal life
<p>Body:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Eating regularly/ food that makes you feel good• Drinking plenty of water• Getting enough rest• Physical activity• Relaxing (taking a bath, getting a massage, drinking a hot cup of tea)	<p>Relationships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Connecting with friends• Having fun and laughing• Having hobbies/interests
<p>Spirit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practicing spirituality/faith• Making time for self-reflection• Meditating• Connecting with nature• Traditional cultural and spiritual practices	<p>Work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Noticing the joys and achievements of the work• Having allies at work• Delegating at work and in your volunteer roles• Setting, and sticking to, limits when it comes to paid and volunteer work

Identifying Your Self-Care Needs

Emergency Self-Care

It can be helpful to have strategies to ensure that you practice self-care, especially in times of heightened stress.

If you take time to develop a plan in advance, it will be there when you need it.



Emergency Self-Care Plan

List 3 people you can talk to, and include their phone number. This can include a support line.	List 3 activities that you find calming/grounding.	List 3 affirmation that you find comforting.
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.

Acknowledgments

This handout was created as part of Nova Scotia's Sexual Violence Strategy. It is one of the many components of the training course, *Supporting Survivors of Sexual Violence: A Nova Scotia Resource*.

A Provincial Committee made up of community members from across Nova Scotia dedicated nearly two years of time, energy and expertise to develop this important resource. It would not exist without their unwavering dedication and passion.

For more information contact:

Sexual Violence Prevention & Supports

strategy@novascotia.ca

902-424-6841

breakthesilencens.ca/training

Sources

Artreach.org, authored by Farrah Khan; *Caring for Yourself is a Radical Act*

<https://artreach2016.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/self-care-toolkit.pdf>

Best Start Resource Centre; *When Compassion Hurts: Burnout, Vicarious Trauma and Secondary Trauma in Prenatal and Early Childhood Service Providers*

http://www.beststart.org/resources/howto/pdf/Compassion_14MY01_Final.pdf

Adrienne Maree Brown, *How About a Beginning of Self-Determined Care?*

<http://www.organizingupgrade.com/index.php/modules-menu/community-care/item/739-how-about-a-beginning-of-self-determined-care?-%7C-adrienne-maree>

Eponis Sinope blog, *Everything Is Awful and I'm Not Okay: questions to ask before giving up*

<http://eponis.tumblr.com/post/113798088670/everything-is-awful-and-im-not-okay-questions-to>

Green Cross Academy; *Green Cross Academy of Traumatology Standards of Self Care Guidelines*

http://home.cogeco.ca/~cmc/Standards_of_Self_Care.pdf

Headington Institute, *Module Four: Understanding and Addressing Vicarious Trauma*

http://www.headington-institute.org/files/vtmoduletemplate2_ready_v2_85791.pdf

Klinic Community Health Centre; *The Trauma-Informed Toolkit, Second Edition*

http://trauma-informed.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Trauma-informed_Toolkit.pdf

Audre Lorde

Mia Mingus, *How our communities can move beyond access to wholeness*

<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/02/>