

TYES Frontline Workers' Toolkit

Vicarious Trauma and Self-Care Toolkit

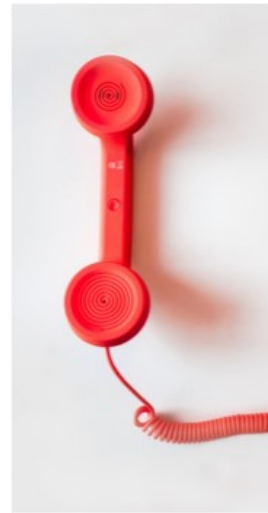




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INTRODUCTION

This toolkit was created by **Chris Leonard** in partnership with the City of Toronto through the **Toronto Youth Equity Strategy (TYES)** and **Youth Employment Partnerships (YEP)**. The **Toronto Youth Equity Strategy** aims to build resiliency and access to supportive systems for youth most vulnerable to involvement in serious violence and crime (MVP youth). TYES includes 28 recommendations and 110 actions the City of Toronto will take to provide better services and outcomes for vulnerable youth. TYES was adopted unanimously by City Council in February 2014.

The **TYES Creative Report** can be found online at: toronto.ca

TYES is on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram at: TorontoTYES

Youth Employment Partnerships is a neighbourhood-based youth employment network that offers job placement and staffing services to organizations throughout Toronto. Supporting hundreds of employers and thousands of Toronto youth annually, YEP connects employers with local or city wide employment services. Striving to improve employment retention, YEP has the flexibility to offer subsidized or unsubsidized job placements to all eligible Toronto employers with many additional benefits and supports to job seekers and employers for each new hire during the first few months of employment.

This toolkit aims to provide information and practical tools to assist workers dealing with stressors and challenges resulting from bearing witness to traumatic experiences or listening to painful stories shared by people they work with.

Most people come to this work because they want to make a difference in this world but working with communities impacted by loss and on-going traumatic events, takes a toll. The human reaction to suffering frontline workers encounter in the course of performing their duties have a profound impact, physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually, when left unattended.

This resource is intended as a guide for workers seeking information on vicarious trauma and self-care tools to assist with unpacking the impact of work. It contains easy to use practical activities that can be used individually or collectively as a team, to normalize and make it ok for workers to be able to talk about how they are doing really to lessen the trauma impact of the work.

Trauma

Trauma refers to experiences or events that by definition are out of the ordinary in terms of their overwhelming nature. They are more than merely stressful—they are also shocking, terrifying, and devastating to the victim, resulting in profoundly upsetting feelings of terror, shame, helplessness and powerlessness." (Courtois, 1999)

A trauma event involves a single experience, or enduring or repeated events, that completely overwhelm the individual's ability to cope or integrate the ideas and emotions involved in that experience.

Traumatizing events can take a serious emotional toll on those involved, even if the event did not cause physical damage.

(Adapted from Trauma-informed The Trauma Toolkit, Klinik Community Health Centre)

When death and loss come to work!

Grief, loss and traumatic events come to work in a variety of painful ways. Traumatic events, client deaths, loss of a colleague, and when you are called on to support bereaved clients who have experienced a personal or community loss.



This Work Costs: The Volatile Reality of Frontline Workers

Supporting youth and families in communities impacted by loss due to violence, accidents, suicide, and opioid poisonings leads to workers being overwhelmed, stressed and burnt-out by their role as witness to immense pain and suffering.

Homicide: “The city has seen 342 shootings in 2019, so far the highest year-to-date number since 2014.” **(The Toronto Star, October 1, 2019)**

Traffic Fatalities: “As of today, the number is six — as in six pedestrians, every day, injured or killed by a car. And the city is on pace to surpass last year’s total of 41 deaths.” **(CityNews September, 2019)**

Opioid Epidemic: Toronto Paramedics have responded to 110 suspected fatal and 2979 suspected non-fatal opioid overdose calls as of September 29, 2019. **(Toronto Public Health October 3, 2019)**

Domestic Violence: “Six of 12 confirmed homicides in the first half of 2019 were believed to be “domestic.” **(MacLean’s News, September 2019)**

Responding to grief and loss due to traumatic community events such as shootings, intimate partner violence, opioid related deaths and other traumatic events, have become increasingly common in the course of a regular day in the life of community workers these days.

“How do you let yourself open up about your feelings, when you’re constantly dealing with one trauma after another? In just one week, I had a youth shot, someone died suddenly from a suspected overdose and another one arrested!”



Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious trauma can be seen as an occupational hazard. Working with trauma survivors puts us at risk of developing vicarious trauma. This term refers to “the cumulative, transformative effect on the provider working with survivors of traumatic life events” **(Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996)**

Vicarious trauma is the experience of bearing witness to atrocities that are committed against others. It is the result of absorbing the sight, smell, sound, touch and feel of the stories told in detail by survivors who are searching for a way to release their own pain. (Health Canada, 2001). The more traumatic the event or material the provider is aware of, the more likely they are to develop vicarious trauma. This is normal and is completely manageable with strong workplace and social supports.

(Trauma-informed The Trauma Toolkit, Klinik Community Health Centre)

Every aspect of our being, physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and social is affected by this work of showing up, witnessing, responding and supporting the communities, we work with.



Managing Vicarious Trauma



Vicarious Trauma is manageable if the provider realizes it is impacting in a negative way, and then takes immediate steps to address it.

Just as we encourage those we work with to find ways to ground, center and take care of themselves, as providers we need to take our own medicine, and practice this too!

The ABCs Of Addressing Vicarious Trauma

⇒ **Awareness**

Being attuned to one's needs, limits, emotions and resources. Heed all levels of awareness and sources of information, cognitive, intuitive and somatic. Practice mindfulness and acceptance.

⇒ **Balance**

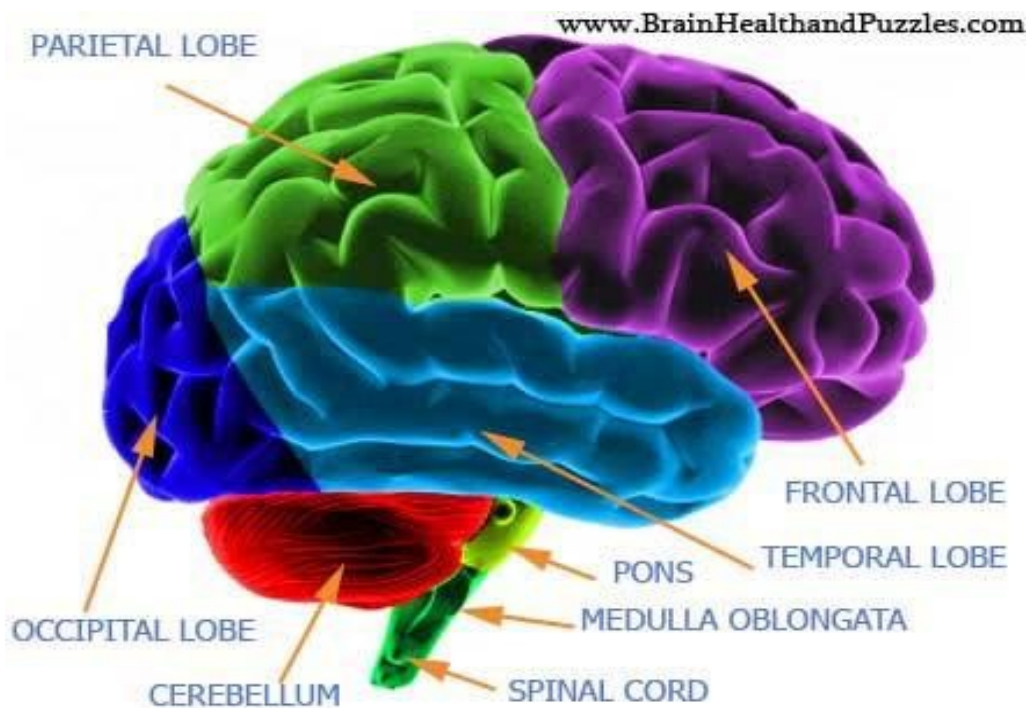
Maintaining balance among activities, especially work, play and rest. Inner balance allow attention to all aspects of oneself.

⇒ **Connection**

Connection with yourself, to others and to something larger. Communication is part of connection and breaks the silence of unacknowledged pain. These connections offset isolation and increase validation and hope.

(Taken from Trauma-informed, The Trauma Toolkit, Klinik Community Health Centre)

Stress, Trauma & The Brain



When we are in a trauma loop, our brain becomes somewhat disorganized and overwhelmed. The body goes into a survival mode and shuts down the higher reasoning and language structures of the brain. The result of the metabolic shutdown is a profound imprinted stress response.

The rational part of our brain is the **prefrontal cortex**. This is the front part of our brain, where consciousness lives, processing and reasoning occur, and we make meaning of language. When a trauma occurs, people enter into a **fight, flight, or freeze** state, which can result in the prefrontal cortex shutting down.

(Adapted from [The Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors](#))

Fight



Flight



Freeze



We all experience stress

Stress is often described as a feeling of being overloaded, wound up tight, tense and worried. Our bodies respond to stress by activating the nervous system and releasing hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol. Chronic stress can wreak havoc on your mind and body, and can be harmful to our ability to get on with life if it persists for too long.

The key is understanding what we are dealing with by becoming aware of what we are feeling and finding supports. All of us doing this work, should have **'go to'** people to reach out to. Having people to unburden with who can help us make meaning of our experiences in the work, helps to build personal resilience strategies for responding and coping.

(Adapted from [The Australian Psychological Society](#))

“I can’t stand it!”

“I can’t stop it!”

“But I can deal with it!”

1. Change the Channel:

- ⇒ Physical activity
- ⇒ Stress reduction techniques/ Learn and practice techniques to refocus and recharge

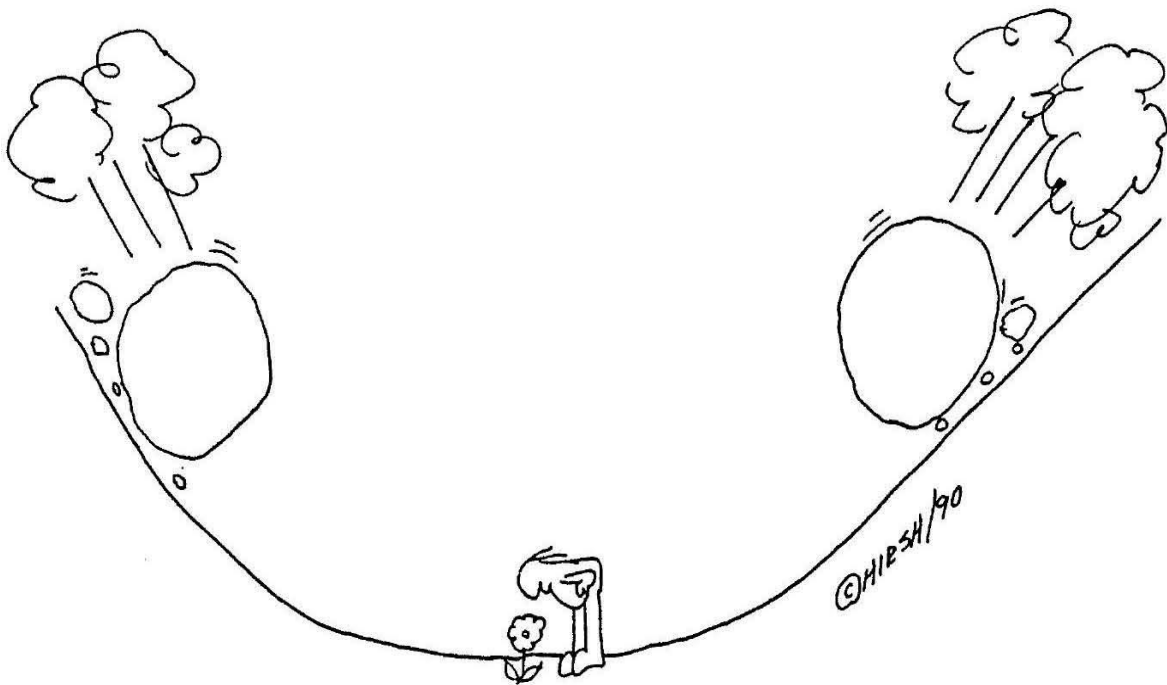
2. Get Outside Support:

- ⇒ Debriefing and supervision
- ⇒ Peer-based sessions-Taking the Cork Out! (finding ways to process the heavy emotions/situations that come up at work)
- ⇒ Seeking one-on-one support (from a colleague or EAP, etc.)

3. See the Bigger picture:

- ⇒ Set life goals
- ⇒ Time to stop, reflect, make meaning and integrate
- ⇒ Soul/spiritual connection and de-stress throughout your day
- ⇒ Build in time-outs and time-off

(Taken from When Grief Comes To Work, ABRPO 2011)



**The real enemy of resiliency is not the presence of stress,
rather the problem is the absence of disciplined, intermittent,
recovery.**

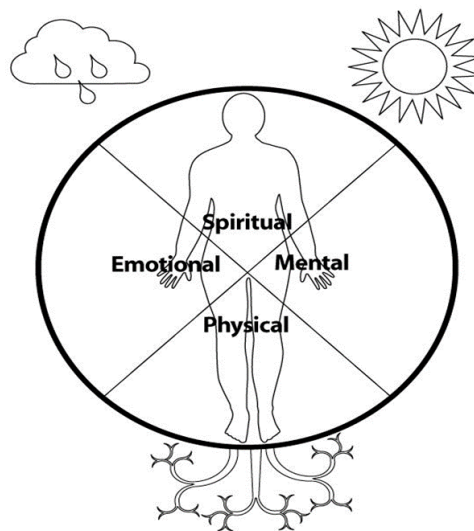
— Frost



In a 'hit' of stress, it is easy to forget our 'whole' selves. Most of us generally relate to the world focusing on only one aspect of our being. However, when we acknowledge other parts of ourselves, and most importantly, when we choose to relate to our whole being, mind, body, emotions, and spirit, we tap into our greater capacity to strengthen our coping strategies.

Wholistic Check-in

This Holistic Health model reflects an Indigenous world view. We are deeply grateful that these teachings have been shared with us The AIDS Bereavement and Resiliency Program of Ontario



How are you doing? Really?

Self-Reflection Exercise

1. The work-related stressors and traumatic event(s) most present with me today are.....
2. The conversation I have been carrying around in my head/ heart that I have not been able to have with others is.....
3. When I am dealing with loss and other work-related stressors, this is what others might notice about me in the workplace.....
4. When I am under a lot of stress as a result of loss and other stressors at work, this is what I need from others..... and what I don't need from others.....

(Adapted from When Grief Comes To Work, ABRPO 2011)

Self-Awareness is the Competency!

Self-Awareness is the first step in creating what we want and mastering our lives by tuning in before doing anything.

Self Awareness is having a clear understanding of ourselves, our thoughts, emotions, strengths, weaknesses, motivations.

Self Awareness helps us to 'notice' what's rising inside and helps us to get the message, when we see or hear something that touches or triggers us.

Self Awareness is being able to turn our gaze 'inward', and being present to start observing where we're putting our energy.

Resilience in the workplace starts with self and ripples out to self in relation to others!

BEATTIE BLVD.



"How are we supposed to know you're suffering from burnout? You keep painting that smile on your face."

TYES Frontline Workers Toolkit Series

The Emotional Wheel

"Relating To The Emotional Dimension"

The emotion I am least and most comfortably witnessing being expressed
is _____

The emotion I am least and most comfortable expressing
is _____

The Emotional Wheel is a tool used to bring the concept of emotions into teams.

It shows the four core areas of emotional expression and reminds us that these emotions are linked to our bodies.

All emotions are just information about our direct experience in relation to a situation. All emotions exists along a continuum.

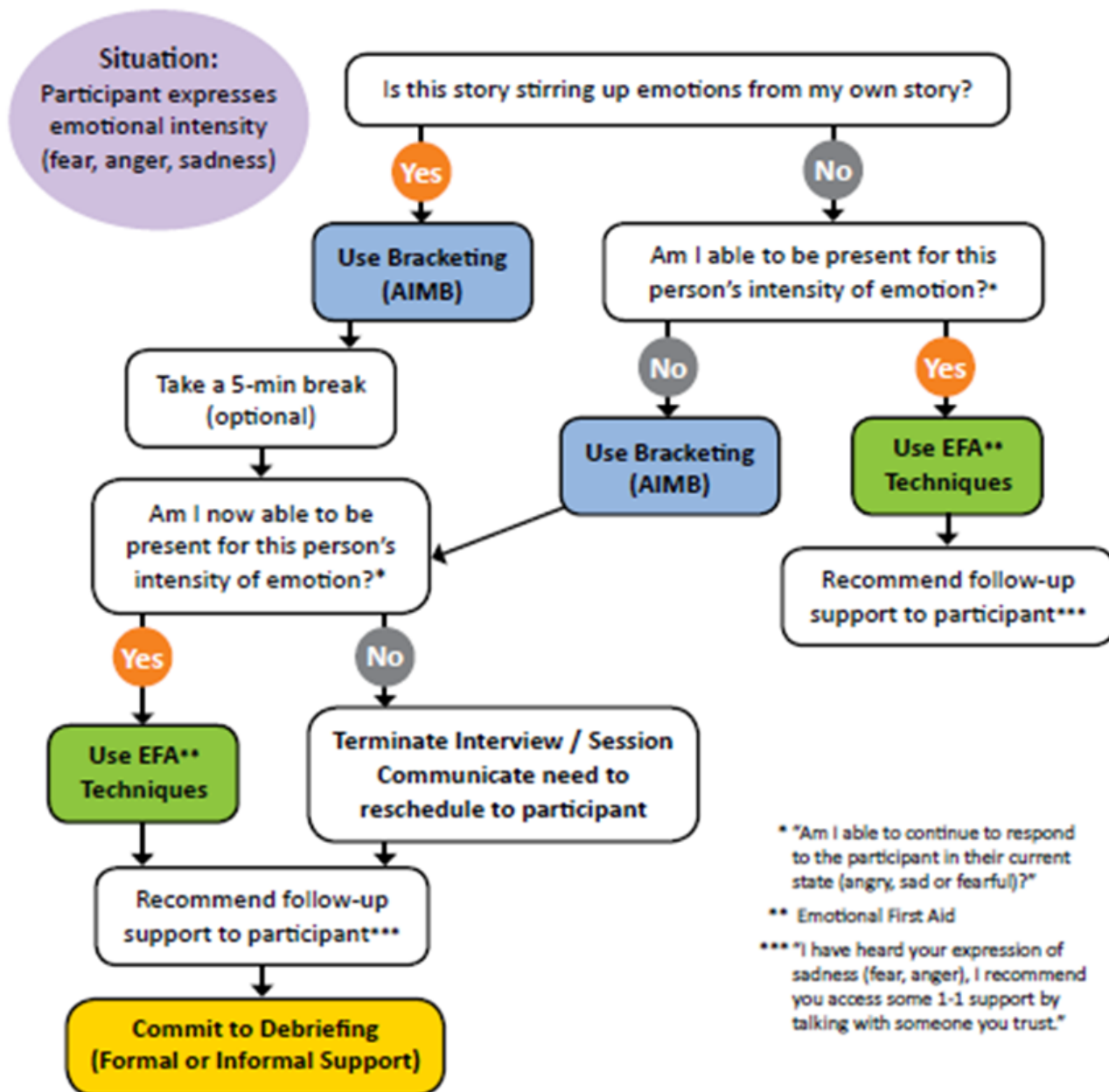
As workers, it is important to build up our personal awareness of how and when we experience emotions, and of how others express these emotions as well.

(Taken from **When Grief Comes To Work, ABRPO 2011**)



Navigating Emotional Triggers

Assessing personal capacity to respond to participants experiencing emotional distress



Bracketing

Bracketing is a process where a person notices an issue that is contributing to feelings of sadness, fear or anger, and they temporarily put aside the issue, so that they can pay attention to the present situation.

It is important that we recognize and take care of these 'emotional triggers'.

Bracketing is a process where a person notices an issue that is contributing to feelings of sadness, fear or anger, and they temporarily put aside the issue, so that they can pay attention to the present situation.

We must have the intention of returning to remove the brackets (un-bracket), which means that we then experience our own feelings and reactions at some time more suitable, convenient or appropriate.

Steps of Bracketing

Acknowledge that there is an issue that needs bracketing. *"I am feeling sad/angry/etc. at what I am hearing..."*

Identify what part of your own story is being triggered. *"This is reminding me about..."*

Continue internal dialogue – *"I am not going to relate to this experience right now; I will remain focused on the person in front of me."*

Make a contract with yourself to later remove the brackets and access personal supports (informal or formal). *"When can I look at these feelings and what or who will support me to do that?"*

Breathe, Ground

(Adapted from: Essential Tools for Worker Stability- ABRPO, Women's Health In Women's Hands, U of T Dalla Lana School of Public Health)

Debriefing: Essential Tool

Debriefing is a process when a person is supported to reflect on what has happened for them in a particular situation. It is a container where a person can experience their own feelings and reactions, without judgement, in order to make sense of their responses to a crisis or a challenging/disturbing event.

The goal of impact debriefing

is to provide support and stability to individuals involved in a critical or traumatic incident, such as an overdose, either as a direct responder, a witness, or as the person being revived.

Impact Debriefing

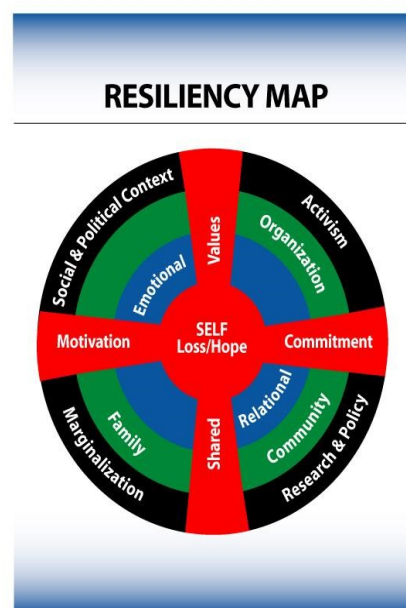
processes are part of an integrated overall agency strategy. As part of a Harm Reduction approach, Impact Debriefing can be added to the skill-sets accompanying Naloxone training and clear opioid overdose protocols so workers feel confident in responding to critical incidents. The agency will also have formal **Incident Debriefing** protocols to help assess what can be improved from an organizational perspective.

Commit to Each Other's Wellbeing and Resilience

Debriefing should take place immediately following an overdose incident. Make a commitment to check in with each other in a structured, meaningful way. People respond to critical situations differently. Some people can appear fine in the crisis, but will react later on. Others have intense responses at the time which quickly dissipate. Know your team mates. Learn each other's reactions and support needs.

When do you need to debrief?

- ⇒ Feeling shaky or anxious
- ⇒ Feeling numb, disconnected
- ⇒ Repeating aspects of the situation in your mind
- ⇒ Feeling ungrounded or reactive



When does the other person need debriefing?

Telling big stories, seems emotionally charged
Not paying attention or seeming distracted
Seem not themselves; high tone of voice, agitated

Communication is Key: Structure for Impact Debriefing

A) Find a quiet setting for a committed amount of time for debriefing. Start with **getting grounded** – spend a few minutes making contact in a way that helps the person know you are present and willing to spend time focusing on their well-being. Take a few deep breaths with long exhales and have your feet on the floor.

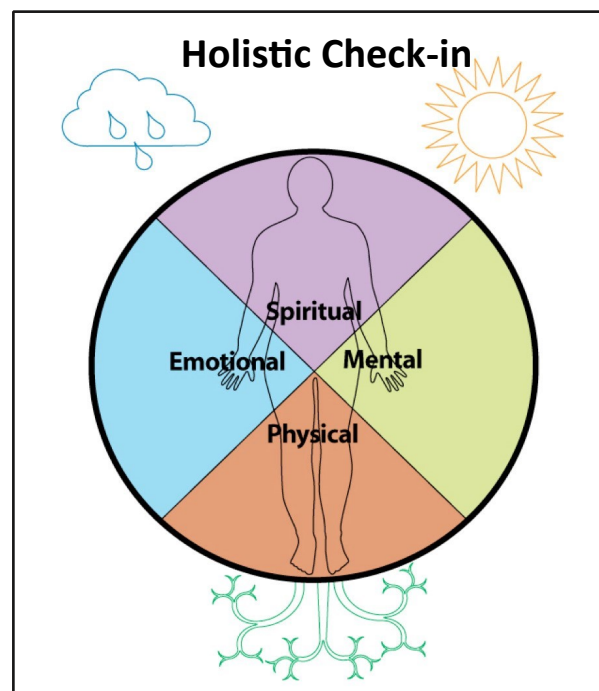
B) Our aim is to connect in support and solidarity and not to go over all the details. Support someone to use “*I statements*” to describe their own direct experience rather than getting lost in recounting details of a situation. *“This incident happened. Before we move into reviewing the event itself, we have a commitment to care for each other, and I’d like to check in about what the impact was on you?”*

How are you doing in relation to the event?

- Physically
- Emotionally
- Mentally
- Spiritually/Sense of Connection

Use reflective listening

“*I hear a lot of frustration in your voice*” to make sure that the person feels validated and that you are understanding them clearly. Notice where they are able to connect with themselves and reflect this back to them. “*I notice that your breathing has slowed down and you seem less anxious now*”. Affirm that they have done well in a challenging situation. The intention is to provide space for their range of experiences without deepening or problem solving at this stage. Their ability to connect with themselves and with others is key at this time.



- c) **Ask:** How do you take care of yourself in this type of situation? Is there any other support you might need right now? Any next steps? Further informal or formal debriefing support?

Offer choices if your partner is struggling with **containment or reconnection**. When people are overwhelmed it's not easy for them to say what they need- but having choices offered is useful: physical contact/touch, a glass of water, phone call to a friend, fresh air, clearing such as smudging... think of useful immediate things that you can provide. When someone seems well connected to themselves, support them in their next steps: *"Would staying here at work but not on the front lines be helpful?" "Would you like to leave this space? How will you get home or to a friend's place?"*

(Adapted from: The Impact Debriefing Guide, Good Grief Care Pilot, ABRPO)

Self-Care

Stress Release = Stress Relief = Stress Resilience

Self-Care Is a Personal Matter

While it is true that our organizations should work play a significant role in attending to our well-being, it is equally important that we take good individual care of ourselves

Everyone's approach to care for ourselves will be different.

It really about what we choose to do at work and outside of work, to look after our physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing so that we can meet our personal and professional commitments with ease.



Learning To React To Stress in Healthy Ways

Stressful events are facts of life. And you may not be able to change your current situation. But you can take steps to manage the impact these events have on you.

Practicing relaxation techniques such as trying yoga, practicing deep breathing, learning self-acupressure or how meditate

- ⇒ Making time to relax
- ⇒ Fostering healthy friendships
- ⇒ Having a sense of humor
- ⇒ Volunteering in your community
- ⇒ Seeking professional counseling when needed
- ⇒ The reward for learning to manage stress is peace of mind and perhaps a longer, healthier life.

(Adapted from [Mayo Clinic](#))

Over the long term, our ability to cope with stressors hinges, not just on our skills and knowledge, but also on our ability to be mindful and resilient

To recover, remain focused, stay energized, and show up motivated every day.



The skills associated with being present in the moment and resilient in the face of high-pressure situations can be learned, practiced and mastered.

MY SELF-CARE ACTION PLAN

What I will do:	When & how often I will do it:		Supports & Resources to help stay on track:

Maintaining My Self-Care Plan

Once you have created a self-care plan it is important to ask yourself:

What might get in the way?

What can I do to remove these barriers?

If you can't remove them you might want to adjust your strategies.

Think honestly about whether any of your strategies are negative and how you can adjust your plan to avoid or minimize their impact.

Steps of Closure: Saying a Good Goodbye

⇒ **Gains & Achievements**

What I have gained/achieved as a result of this experience

⇒ **Appreciations**

What I appreciate about myself and/or others

⇒ **Unfinished business**

Naming what is unfinished helps to leave it behind

⇒ **Regrets**

Any regrets I carry from this time

⇒ **Resentments**

What I resent about this experience

⇒ **Ghosts of closures or endings past**

Other similar experiences/closures that are present for me now

⇒ **Moving on - what's next?**

As this experience is ending I can name what is beginning, and what I will carry forward

⇒ **8. 'Ritual'/Symbolic event that has meaning**

Any deliberate action which has meaning in relation to closing on the experience

(Taken from When Grief Comes To Work, ABRPO 2011)

Acupressure For Stress Relief

Wrist Point is useful to get relief in anxiety and fear.

Acupressure Wrist Point is situated on the fold of the wrist. The exact place of Wrist Point is on the forearm in the line to last finger (pinky). You can easily find the Acupressure Wrist Point as displayed in the below picture. Apply mild pressure on Wrist Point to relieve anxiety as well as lack of memory.

Applying pressure on Wrist Point every day will help you to heal fearfulness, emotional stress, anxiety, memory loss, tension etc.

Union Valley— This point is located in the webbing between the thumb and the index finger. Stimulating this point helps in reducing muscle tension and relieving stress.



Three Mile Point — This point is located two finger width below the knee cap and four finger widths towards the outside region of the leg. Applying pressure at this point increases and regulates energy flow, relieves fatigue and [helps in increasing concentration](#). Apply pressure for 1 minute and move to the next point.



Heart 7 (HT 7) — This acupuncture point is fantastic for calming the mind and helping to resolve emotional related symptoms such as anxiety, worry, panic attacks, and heart palpitations. Because Heart 7 it is the source point for the Heart channel it also helps regulate any condition related to the heart and the circulation of blood throughout the body. Examples include high blood pressure, low blood pressure, anemia, varicose veins, etc.

(To find more information about acupressure for self-care strategies, click [here](#).)

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is being in the present moment. The quality of my **presence** determines the quality of the moment.

- ⇒ *Watch my reactions,*
- ⇒ *Choose my Response*
- ⇒ *And just be with my Experience!*

The practice is a continual letting go of what we think should be happening, and to keep coming back to the breath, and being with whatever is happening in an honest way by, **letting go and, letting go and, letting go some more.**

Mindfulness Exercise

Place your attention just below your navel.

Exhale fully, then slowly inhale a long, deep breath.

Exhale fully, relaxing your jaws, let your shoulders and entire body relax.

Continue breathing in and out, letting yourself let go and relax even more on each exhalation.

Repeat long, deep inhalation and exhalation, until you feel calm, relaxed, fully present and connected with your breath and body.

This is the place of solid grounded energy that we can return to as often as we need to throughout our day. Especially when responding to a crisis situation or holding space as witness for someone sharing a painful story.

(Source unknown)



As I breathe in, I am aware of myself breathing in

As I breathe out, I am aware of myself breathing out

As I breathe in, my breath goes deep

As I breathe out, my breath goes slow

As I breathe in, I feel calm

As I breathe out, I feel ease

As I breathe in, I smile

As I breathe out, I release

As I breathe in, I focus on the Present Moment

As I breathe out, I know it is a wonderful moment

Summary

In our roles in community, we open ourselves to other people's stories which include stories of loss, trauma. Relating to the people we work with will impact us. It is important that we acknowledge the impact of the work on our physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. It is equally important that we take all steps necessary to address it. It is also important that we have organizational policies, practices and supports in place aimed at building our capacity and enhancing our well-being in the workplace.

It is hoped that this toolkit will be a useful guide to help plant seeds of possibilities. More importantly, I hope it will help to normalize that is ok for us as workers, to be able to say how we are doing, **really**. It is my hope that folks will go away and think about how you can support each other to '**take the cork out**'. Being intentional in carving out time to practice **self-care and collective care**, will help strengthen individual and team resilience and capacity to respond to stressors and challenges of the work.

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

Laozi, Chinese Daoist Philosopher

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