

TYES Frontline Workers' Toolkit

VICARIOUS TRAUMA &

SELF-CARE TOOLKIT



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INTRODUCTION

We are living through some of the most intense and difficult times many of us have ever experienced in our lifetime. There are many factors that are contributing to the physical, mental and emotional toll on community workers, including: the emotional weight of working during a pandemic; racial tensions and protests; providing support following traumatic community loss events related to gun violence; and the overdose and mental health crisis. Community workers are also being challenged to navigate restrictions and disruptions to the way their work is delivered given the current realities.

This toolkit was updated by **Chris Leonard**, in partnership with the City of Toronto through the **Toronto Youth Equity Strategy (TYES)** to provide tools and resources to help minimize the stressors and challenges related to working in these current realities and context.

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](#)

This toolkit aims to provide information and practical tools to assist workers dealing with stressors and challenges resulting from bearing witness to current and ongoing traumatic experiences related to their work.

Most people come to this work because they want to make a difference in this world, but working with communities impacted by multiple on-going traumatic loss events takes a toll. This resource is intended as a guide for those seeking information on vicarious trauma, and practical self-care tools to lessen the trauma impact of the work.

THIS WORK COSTS!

The reality of frontline work has shifted significantly over the last seven months. Navigating these times of uncertainty as well as the myriad issues such as ongoing community violence, suicide, substance use, a growing overdose crisis, human trafficking and sexual violence have challenged us all. Having to adjust to doing the work in the midst of a global pandemic, and protests against racial injustice have cost us all.

Yet we show up with heart, shift after shift, not for the paycheque, but because we're committed to doing the best we can, with meaning and purpose, to make a difference. However, the cost of caring, of doing Social (Soul) Work, in these difficult times, is taking a toll. Chronic stress, feeling overwhelmed, triggered and traumatized by the pain and despair in the work, and the world around us is real!

- **Covid-19 Pandemic:** As of October 27th, the number of confirmed cumulated cases in Toronto were 25,919, with 313 newly diagnosed on the same day. (Ontario Ministry of Health, Integrated Public Health Information Systems)
- **Anti-Black Racism:** Toronto Board of Health declared anti-Black racism Public Health Crisis. (CBC June 8, 2020 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/board-of-health-anti-black-racism-1.5603383>)
- **Community Violence:** As of September 26th, there were 56 homicides in the city and an infinite amount of gunplay. (Toronto Sun October 1, 2020)
- **Overdose crisis:** Toronto Paramedic Services data estimates that 132 people died of suspected opioid overdoses between April 1 and September 30, 2020. This is more than double the number (59) reported for the same period in 2019. Overall, paramedics attended to 383 fatal and non-fatal opioid overdose-related calls in September 2020, the highest number of monthly calls to date in 2020. (Toronto Drug Alert https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/9028-Drug-Alert_October15_2020.pdf (Toronto Public Health October 3, 2020))

**“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!”**

*(YOUTH WORKER PARTICIPATING IN COMMUNI-
IMPACT DEBRIEFING SESSION JULY 2019)*



PHOTO BY NATASHA KASIM ON UNSPLASH

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a grey sweater, is shown in a dark setting. She has her hand pressed against her face, covering her eyes, suggesting a state of grief or emotional distress. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows.

GRIEF AND LOSS COMES TO WORK!

Grief and loss comes to work in a variety of painful, overwhelming and traumatic ways for community workers. Client deaths, loss of colleagues, family members, job loss, funding cuts, and traumatic community loss events, all have a major impact on workers. In the recent months, unanticipated losses related to a global public health disaster, overdoses, and killings of Black, Indigenous and racialized peoples, have added to the emotional weight of grief and loss in the workplace.

VICARIOUS TRAUMA

“Vicarious Trauma is the experience of bearing witness to atrocities that are committed against others. It is the result of absorbing the sight, sound, smell, 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**)

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, trans- formative effect on the provider working with survivors of traumatic life events” (**Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996**)

Responding to trauma and loss in the work is not new to those of us working on the frontline. However the events of the past seven months with a global pandemic, the amplification of racial injustice here is here in Canada and the US, even as we continue to loss people in our communities to violence, suicide and overdose, is triggering and exhausting. **We’ve all been holding too much for too long!**

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE WORK

In this time of high anxiety, and adjusting to restrictions and disruptions due to the pandemic, nothing has been business as usual. Seeking new ways of continue meaningfully engaging communities we support during the lockdown was stressful for everyone. **Frontline work is relational.** So where workers in other sectors were able to transition almost effortlessly to remote work, that was certainly not the case for us. Meeting people where they’re at, to deliver services and support related to Harm Reduction, Violence Prevention, or Library services, etc., while maintaining requirements to practice physical distancing, was challenging, to say the least. **Community work was never meant to be delivered out virtually,** but program activities needed to be adjusted as best as possible. This highlighted equity and access issues for both workers and communities around connectivity, not having the right hardware, updated software, or access to proper remote workspaces.

RACIAL TRAUMA

Also at this critical moment in time, the emotional weight of witnessing racial injustice against Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities while holding space for community members triggered by those events, and also grappling with personal triggers related to their experiences of racial injury, disheartening.

In a timely piece titled, “The Four Bodies: A Holistic Toolkit for Coping with Racial Trauma”, Jacquelyn Iyamah Ogorchukue, a UX designer and writer committed to redesigning wellness, speaks to racial injury and the impact of anti-Black racism on our entire being, *“I call racism “the multifaceted abuser” because it has emotional, physical, mental and spiritual effects on our community. Research shows that racism can lead to anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, chronic stress, chronic fatigue, bodily inflammation, internalized racism and symptoms similar to post traumatic stress disorder. This is called racial trauma.”*

(The Four Bodies: A holistic Toolkit For Coping with Racial Trauma, by Jacquelyn Iyamah Ogorchukwu)

PHOTO BY JULIAN MYLES ON UNSPLASH

MANAGING VICARIOUS TRAUMA

Just as we encourage those we support to find ways to take care of themselves, as providers we need to take some of our own medicine. It matters for our physical, emotional and mental well-being. This work touches us profoundly and it will take us down, physically, emotionally and mentally, if we fail to take steps to support ourselves to minimize the risk associated with doing this work.

Activities such as meditation, yoga, massages, or journaling, will not work for everyone and that's ok. Self-care is a personal choice and requires us to take our time to reflect on what that could look like for us. We are more likely to commit to whatever we decide to do to help us hold steady, if the activities in our personal wellness toolkits, are ones we enjoy and can be integrated into our daily schedule with ease.

“The real enemy of resiliency is not the presence of stress, rather the problem is the absence of disciplined, intermittent, recovery.” (Frost)

PHOTO BY **NECHIRWAN KAVIAN** ON **UNSPLASH**



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. Innerbalance allow attention to all aspects of oneself.

CONNECTION

Connection with oneself, 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.

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

R

Reaching out to a counsellor or therapist who can make space for you to process.

E

Excusing yourself and setting boundaries from being around triggering people, experiences and spaces.

S

Seeking out support from loved ones who are able to make space for you.

T

Taking time to make space to relax, rest and nourish yourself

(taken from: "Coping Strategies for Racial Trauma" Jacquelyn Iyamah Ogorchukwu <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rckV6-n33rE>)

WE ALL EXPERIENCE STRESS

“Stress leaves us feeling 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 our mind and body, and can be harmful to our ability to get on with life if it persists for too long.”

In the early months of the pandemic, we were all using “**surge capacity**” to adapt and respond to our new normal. However, as [Ann Masten, PhD](#), a psychologist and professor of child development at the University of Minnesota, calls it. Surge capacity is a collection of adaptive systems, mental and physical, that we draw on **for short-term survival** in acutely stressful situations. However, with the end of the pandemic still uncertain, we will have to strengthen our resilience and capacity to manage the stressors and challenges ahead as our surge capacity runs out.

(Adapted from: [Your Surge Capacity is Depleted-It's Why You Feel Awful https://elemental.medium.com/yoursurge-capacity-is-depleted-it-s-why-you-feel-awful-de285d542f4c](https://elemental.medium.com/yoursurge-capacity-is-depleted-it-s-why-you-feel-awful-de285d542f4c))



In a ‘hit’ of stress, it is easy to forget our ‘whole’ selves. Most of us generally relate to the world focusing on just 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 respond from a more grounded and steady place.

REACTING TO STRESS IN HEALTHY WAYS

Stressful events are facts of life. We may not be able to change our current situation, but we can take steps to manage the impact those events have on us. Having wellness tools in our toolkit that we can access in moments when we need to respond in a calm, grounded way is crucial.

Practicing relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, self and body awareness, self-acupres-sure, and/or mindfulness meditation can help us to re-center ourselves, especially during situations where we may have been triggered and are experiencing a 'hit of stress'.

Of course we want to avoid the anxiety and stress of this work.



Over the long term, our ability to cope with stressors hinges, not just on our skills and knowl-edge, but also on our ability to be mindful and resilient, to recover and remain focused, stay energized, and show up grounded and motivated every day.

*“I can’t stand it!” “I can’t stop it!”
“But I can deal with it!”*

1. CHANGE THE CHANNEL:

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

2. GET OUTSIDE SUPPORT:

- Debriefing and supervision
- Peer-based sessions. Making time as a team, to **“Take the Cork Out”**, to process the heavy
- Emotions and situations that come up at work
- Seeking one-on-one support (from a colleague, EAP, or other support, etc.)

3. SEE THE BIGGER PICTURE:

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

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

SELF-AWARENESS 'IS' THE COMPETENCY!

During these trying times, many of us are living with a stressed out brain. It is important to practice self-awareness, to notice how we're really doing, and commit to taking the necessary steps to care for ourselves. Building self-care into our daily routine, is a key to resetting when we become aware that we're stressed, anxious, or triggered. This is only possible if we give ourselves permission to stop and make time for frequent check-ins with ourselves, and as a team, to become aware of how we're being impacted.

- Self-Awareness is the first step in mastering our lives by tuning in before doing anything.
- Self Awareness helps us to 'notice' what's rising inside and helps us to respond to those messages, 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 our relationship with others!

There's no need to pretend we are not being impacted by this work. Giving ourselves permission to reach out for support, when we feel we're going under, is a radical act of self-care. It also matters that we walk our talk, and model the way for those we are always ready to show to support.

PHOTO BY KEVIN TURCIOS ON UNSPLASH



*“In truth, our experiences are real, our trauma is real,
and the healing we deserve is real”*

(Jacquelyn Iyamah Ogorchukwu)

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 AM I DOING, REALLY?

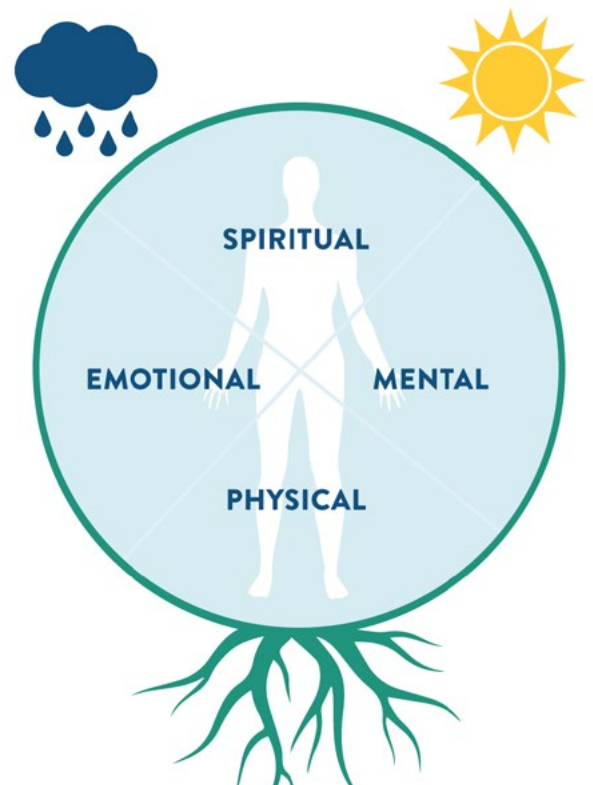
PHYSICALLY _____

EMOTIONALLY _____

MENTALLY _____

SPIRITUALLY _____

SOCIALLY _____



SELF-REFLECTION EXERCISE

1. The work-related stressors and traumatic event(s) most present with me today are...

2. The conversation I've 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, what I need from others is..... and, what I don't need from others is.....

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

THE EMOTIONAL WHEEL

“Relating To The Emotional Dimension”

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 exist along a continuum. They are simply information about our direct experience in relation to a situation. Given the nature of this work, having an awareness of our relationship with emotions is a personal resiliency strategy. Knowing the emotions we are most comfortable expressing and witnessing, and especially, the ones we are least comfortable with, is critical information to have in our wellness toolkit. The Emotional Wheel exercise is also great team activity that provides valuable information about how other members in the team relate to these emotions.

- The emotion I'm least comfortably witnessing is
- The emotion I'm most comfortably witnessing is
- The emotion I'm least comfortable expressing is
- The emotion I'm most comfortable expressing is

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



SELF-CARE & COLLECTIVE CARE

Stress Release = Stress Relief = Stress Resilience

SELF-CARE IS CRITICAL TO STRENGTHENING INDIVIDUAL RESILIENCE

- It is 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.
- Everyone's approach to self-care will be different

COLLECTIVE CARE IS CRITICAL TO STRENGTHENING TEAM RESILIENCE

- It matters that organizations commit to the well-being of their workers.
- Allocation of resources and supports to foster individual and collective worker wellness
- Employee Assistance Programs, health benefits, wellness policies and initiatives at work, including off-site staff retreats, team days are some examples of ways to support and care for the well-being of workers R.E.S.T.

R

Reaching out to a counsellor or therapist who can make space for you to process.

E

Excusing yourself and setting boundaries from being around triggering people, experiences and spaces.

S

Seeking out support from loved ones who are able to make space for you.

T

Taking time to make space to relax, rest and nourish yourself

("Coping Strategies for Racial Trauma", Jacquelyn Iyamah Ogorchukwu, youtube.com)

DIGITAL DETOX

Working remotely, constantly on screens for work and on our personal devices, checking and responding to emails, text messages, social media, and also spending way too much time in virtual meetings, is creating added mental strain and stress in our work day. These technologically related activities are calling us away from our bodies, as many of us are literally holding our breaths as we're checking our devices.

Have you reflected on how you interact with screens each day? Do you reach for your phone before you get out of bed, or have you made a commitment to resist looking at your phone right after waking up? Are you on your device right up until you retire at night? Do you sleep with your phone next to you, or are you intentional about giving yourself downtime from all screens (phones, tablets, TV, laptops, etc.) before going to bed?

SIGNS YOU MIGHT NEED A DIGITAL DETOX

- You feel anxious or stressed out if you can't find your phone
- You feel compelled to check your phone every few minutes
- You feel depressed, anxious, or angry after spending time on social media
- You are preoccupied with the like, comment, or reshare counts on your social posts
- You're afraid that you'll miss something if you don't keep checking your device
- You often find yourself staying up late or getting up early to play on your phone
- You have trouble concentrating on one thing without having to check your phone

A digital detox can be whatever you want it to be and can take many forms. You might want to try giving up all digital devices for a time, including television, mobile phones, and social media. In other cases, you might want to focus on restricting your use of just one type of digital device such as your phone or your gaming console.

SOME IDEAS THAT YOU MIGHT CONSIDER TRYING:

- **A digital fast:** Try giving up all digital devices for a short period of time, such as a day or up to a week
- **Recurrent digital abstinence:** Pick one day of the week to go device-free
- **A specific detox:** If one app, site, game, or digital tool is taking up too much of your time, focus on restricting your use of that problematic item
- **A social media detox:** Focus on restricting or even completely eliminating your social media use for a specific period of time (<https://www.verywellmind.com/why-and-how-to-do-a-digital-detox-4771321>)

TOOLS FOR SUPPORT & STABILITY

ACUPRESSURE FOR STRESS RELIEF



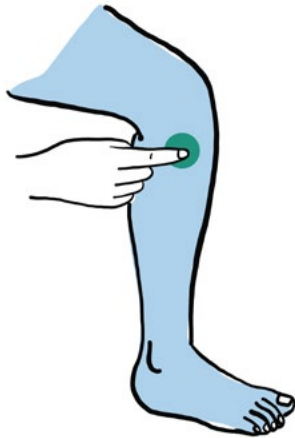
WRIST POINT

Is useful to get relief from anxiety and fear. Acupressure Wrist Point is situated on the fold of the wrist. The exact position of Wrist Point is on the forearm in line with the 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 and improve your memory. **Applying pressure on Wrist Point every day** will help to heal fearfulness, emotional stress, anxiety, memory loss, and tension.



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.



THE SYMPATHETIC POINT

Is a reset button for our nervous system. Stress is practically an epidemic, and this point can be used to bring the body back to relaxation following a chronic stress response. Its purpose is to bring about balance and appropriate autonomic response. Therefore, it is helpful for anything related to sleep and healing.

See YouTube link below for demonstration of the other self acupressure points to calm the **Sympathetic Nervous System** that's responsible for the fight or flight response in our body.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmKPknTSDEE> (To find more information about acupressure for self-care strategies, click [here.](#))



MINDFULNESS REST STOPS

Being present in the moment and resilient in the face of high-pressure situations can be learned, practiced and mastered. During these times of uncertainty and heightened anxiety—where our nervous system is constantly taxed with Zoom calls, multi-tasking, and constant interruptions as we're working remotely—taking time to **'Re-Center'**, even if it's just by taking a few minutes to look away from our screens and breathe deeply, is critical.

These few simple intentional acts will help to slow our heartrate, calm our breathing and reset our parasympathetic nervous system that's responsible for rest and recovery.

Finding just a few minutes throughout our day to **Stop and Breathe** is a simple resiliency strategy to re-center reset.

MEDITATION

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

(Thich Nhat Hanh)



SUMMARY

Our well-being matters! As we continue doing our best to respond in these challenging times of loss and change, tapping into our individual and collective resilience is key to rebuilding our surge capacity. We've made it this far, and we will make it to the other side of this moment, but we're not going to get there if we're running on empty. Finding ways to stop, reflect, unpack and replenish our energies, individually, and with our team is critical to holding steady.

Connection is key! As we continue bearing witness to traumatic losses in the work, and racial trauma continuing to unfold around us, we will continue to be touched profoundly by the work. Vicarious trauma is the cost of caring for the well-being of communities we support, but it is also manageable. We just need to give ourselves permission to stop painting a smile on our face and pretending we're 'ok', take the mask off (not our PPE), so we can show up for ourselves and each other.

“In truth, our experiences are real, our trauma is real, and the healing we deserve is real”

(Jacquelyn Iyamah Ogorchukwu)

We hope you find this toolkit helpful. We hope it helps normalize that it truly is ok for us to acknowledge and express how we're being affected by the work, and commit to being more intentional in how we care for ourselves to mitigate the mental and emotional impact on our well-being. We also hope your teams, will also continue being more intentional in creating times to step away from the work of supporting others, and turn towards each other to unpack the impact of conducting 'soul' work in these challenging times. Strengthening our individual and collective is a must if we are to remain resilient in the days and months ahead!

Let's give ourselves permission to breathe as if our lives depend on it!

Inhale, exhale!

Inhale, exhale! Inhale, exhale!

And keep breathing, fully, deeply, because it does!

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