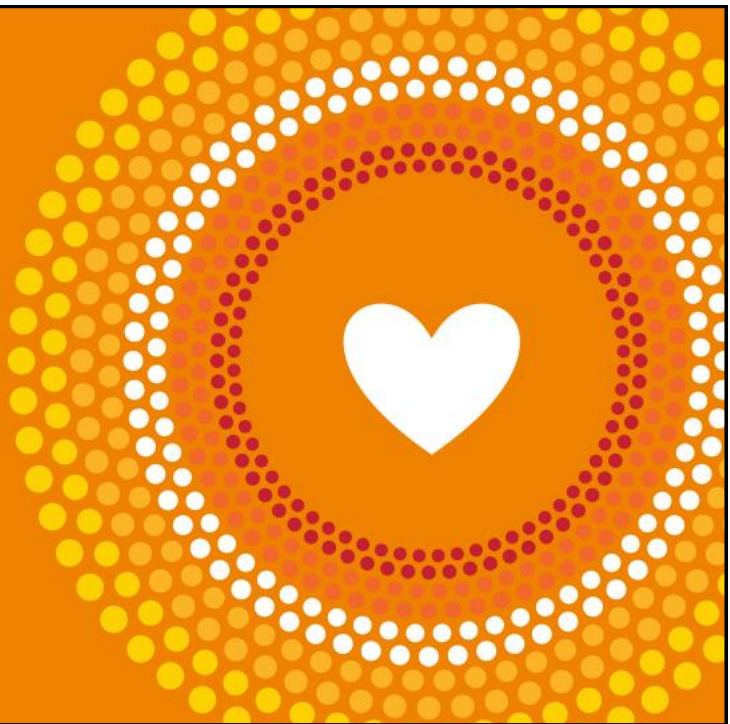


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# The Neurobiology of Self Care

Understanding and responding to the impacts of our work and the environments around us

Anglicare NSW October 2021



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**The Australian Childhood Foundation acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional custodians of this land and we pay our respect to their Elders past, present and future.**



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## Learning outcomes

- ✓ Explore the neurobiological impacts of working with and experiencing both client and personal stress and trauma
- ✓ Understand the personal, professional and organisational contributors to vicarious trauma and how we might mitigate these factors
- ✓ Explore strategies and activities that can support staff across a range of environments
- ✓ Utilise tools to assess wellbeing and develop a self-care plan
- ✓ Link this knowledge to your current practice and to trauma-responsive leadership strategies



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## Principles guiding this session

**Your emotional safety is paramount**  
**Our learning is about shared wisdom**  
**Curiosity and learning build our brains**



Image source: ©2021 ACF



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# Community Meeting Group Check in

What brings you to this work?

Why do you do what you do?

What makes it worthwhile?

What makes it feel successful?

What are the benefits of your job?

How do you know when you need a break?

- How are you feeling?
- What's your goals or learning outcomes for today?
- Who will you connect with after today's session?



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# Levels of Impact




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 <p><b>Stress</b> Something that challenges our capacity to cope</p>	 <p><b>Secondary Traumatic Stress</b> Adverse reactions to clients' traumatic material with symptoms that parallel PTSD.</p>
 <p><b>Trauma</b> Something that overwhelms our capacity to cope</p>	 <p><b>Compassion Fatigue</b> A state of exhaustion &amp; dysfunction – biologically, psychologically, &amp; socially – as a result of prolonged exposure to compassion stress (Figley)</p>
 <p><b>Vicarious Trauma</b> Adverse reactions to clients' traumatic material which brings about change in therapist inner experiences, core beliefs.</p>	 <p><b>Burnout</b> Related to a feeling of being overloaded which is primary to client problems of chronicity and complexity, but can occur in any profession</p>

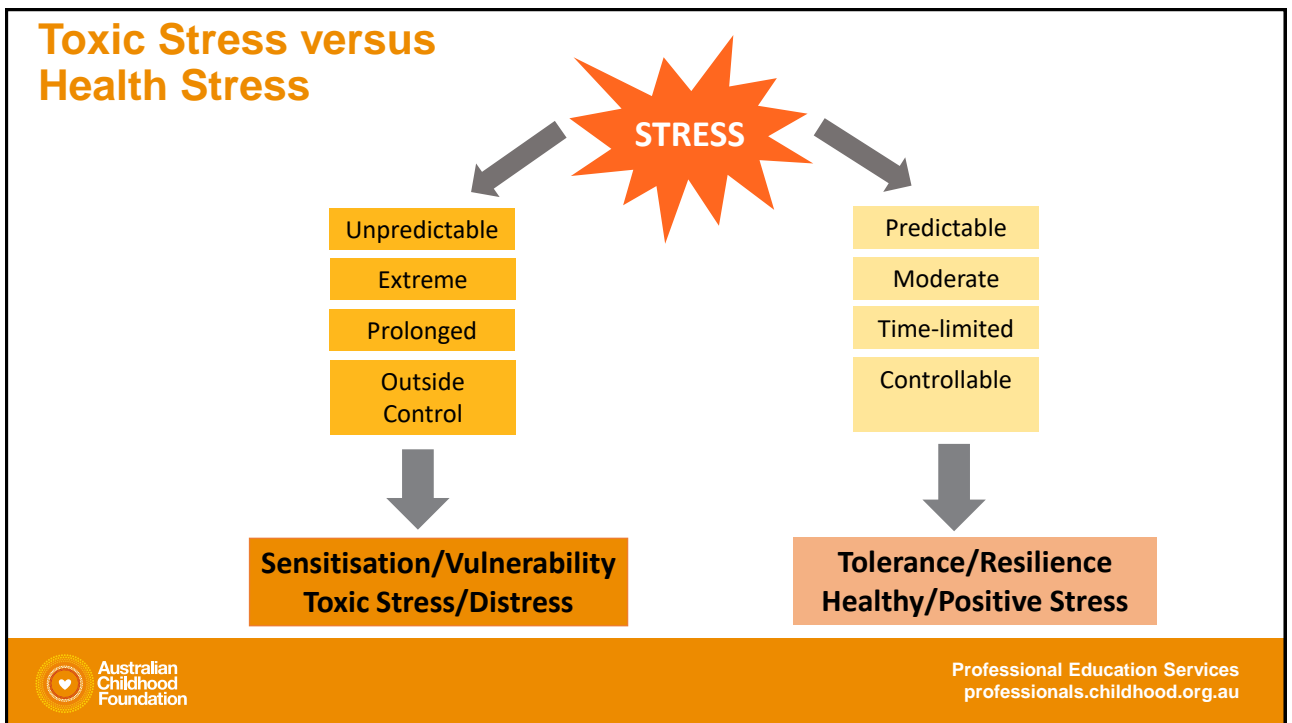
*'Compassion fatigue', 'Secondary Traumatic Stress' & 'Vicarious Trauma' are often used interchangeably. (Figley 1995; McCann & Saakvitne, 1995)*



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## Empathy – a strength and a vulnerability

*If empathy is to ‘walk a mile in someone’s shoes’ we need to ensure we step out of those shoes at the end of the mile or we will wear those shoes all the time....and that is vicarious trauma.*

- **Somatic empathy**
- **Limbic resonance**
- **Cortical empathy**



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## Somatic Empathy

(SUB-CORTICAL)

a movement-based layer of empathy –

- Reflexive mirroring of posture and facial expression



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## Somatic Empathy – mirroring body states

- An angry parent
- An exhausted Carer
- A frightened child
- A depressed teenager
- A calm, relaxed worker



### Limbic Resonance (SUB-CORTICAL)

Our emotional state adjusts to match the emotional state of the person or people we are with

### Cortical Empathy (PRE-FRONTAL CORTEX - CORTICAL)

Our attempts to step outside our own experiences and imagine the experience and perspective of others

## Stress and our brains – the BIG 4!

### Prefrontal cortex

Responsible for executive functions, such as judgement, reasoning, and self awareness. Goes offline under stress impacting the ability to think and reason.

### Hippocampus

Consolidates memory by providing the context/ sequential data for episodic memories. Goes offline if trauma overwhelms and disrupts cortex.

### Amygdala

Survival response centre within the limbic lobe that becomes enlarged and more sensitive the more it is activated through responding to threats

### Brainstem

Regulates heart rate, breathing, sleep cycles. Dysregulation occurs in these areas under stress – irregular, fast or slower heart rates, irregular breathing and sleep disturbances

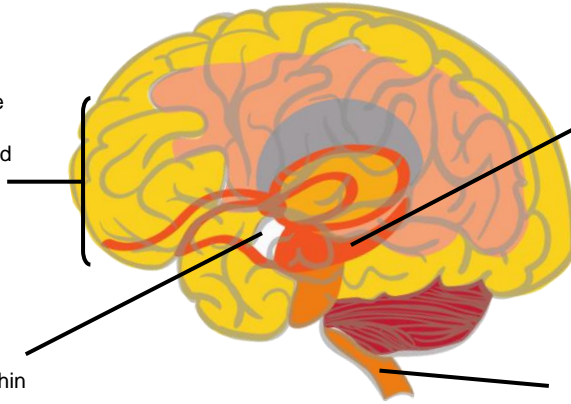


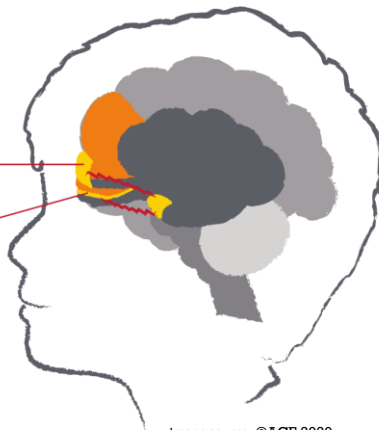
Image source: ©ACF 2021



## The role of Mindfulness is Self Care - Medial Pre-frontal Cortex

**Medial Pre-Frontal Cortex**  
(the centre of Mindfulness/ Self awareness)

**Right Orbitofrontal Cortex**  
(Regulation of Arousal)



- Mindful awareness/ meditation de-activates the amygdala
- Quality co-regulation de-activates the amygdala

Image source: ©ACF 2020

## Four threat to our brains....

How might these, not only on their own, but all of them together show up in our lives and in the work that we do...?

- Physical Safety
- Perceptions in the unknown
- Incongruence in the environment
- Shoulds and unmet Expectations

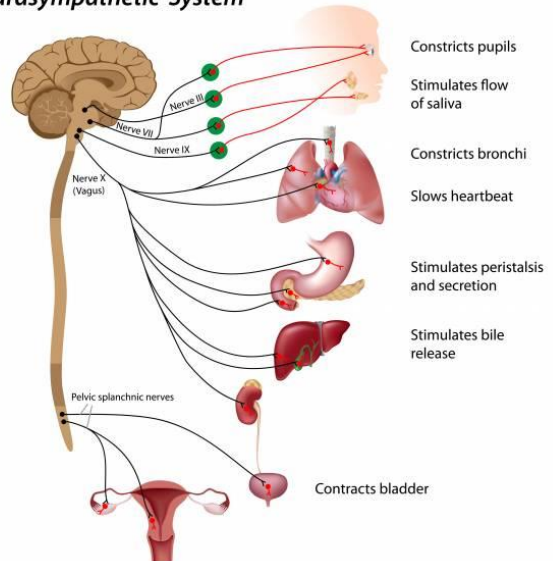




# Our amazing Vagus nerve...



## Parasympathetic System



<http://lewisinstitute.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/img-strategies2.jpg>

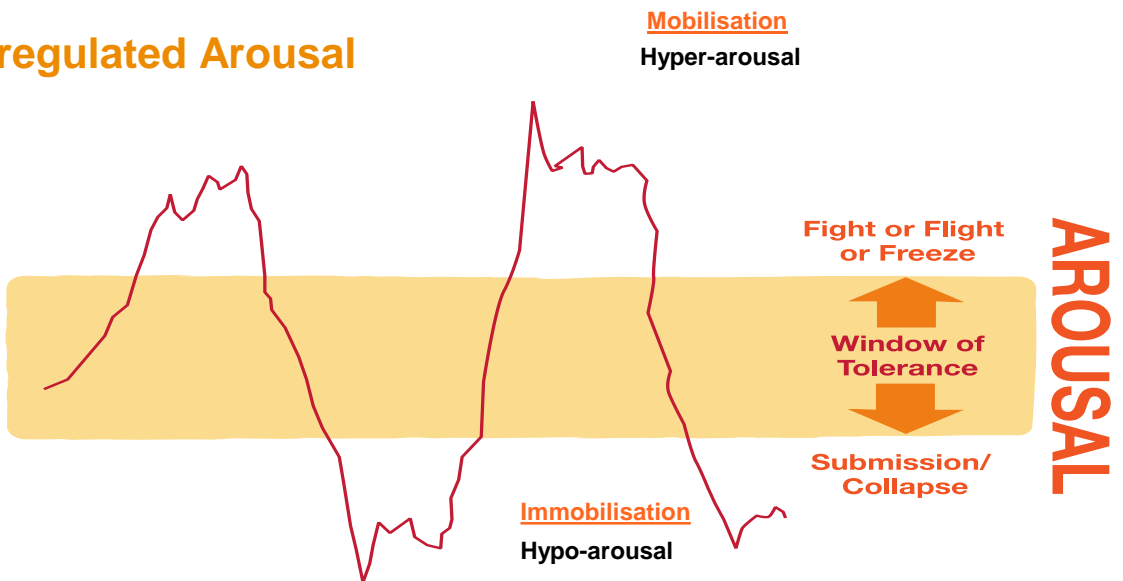


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# Dys-regulated Arousal

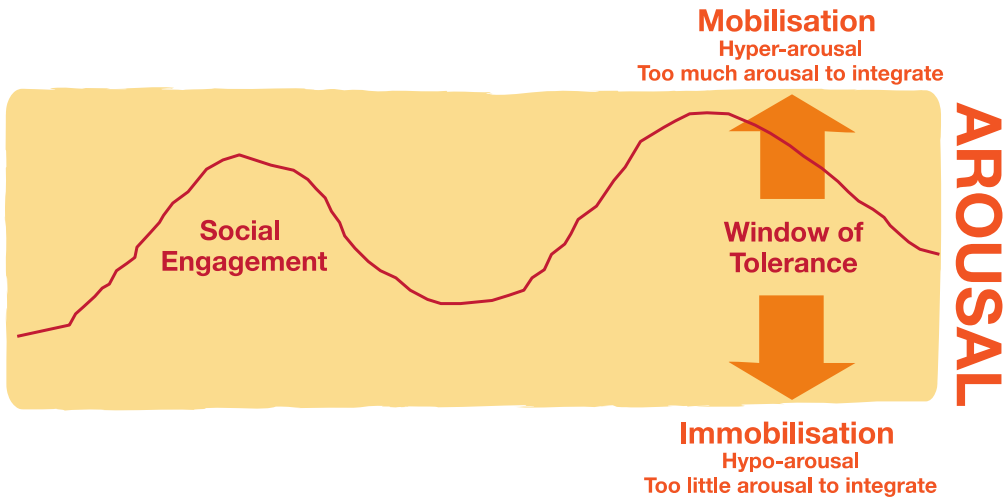


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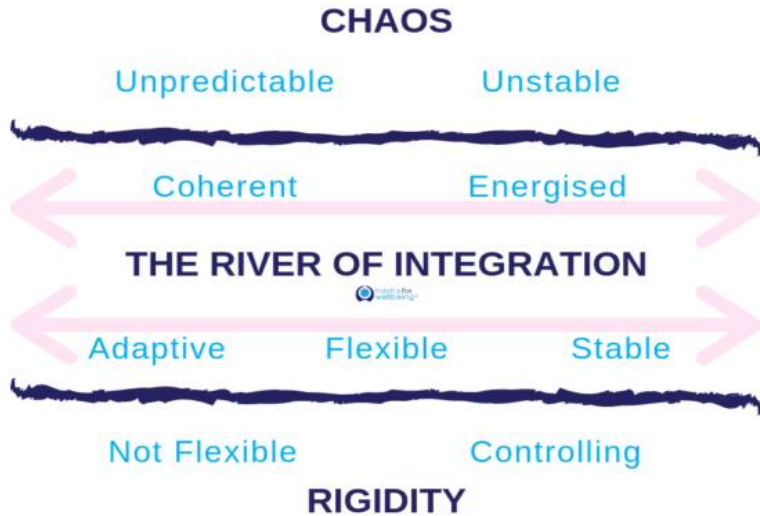
# Regulated Arousal



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# Wellbeing – The River of Integration

(Dan Siegel)



Adapted from - Siegel, D. (2009). Mindsight - The New Science of Personal Transformation. NSW, Australia: Scribe Publications.

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## Impacts - Possible indicators

### Multidimensional:

- Physical
- Sensory
- Emotional
- Cognitive
- Relational

### Can include:

- Fatigue
- impaired immune system
- sleep and appetite disturbances
- Anxiety
- hyper vigilance/control issues
- decreased self esteem
- loss of interest in tasks
- Avoidance – avoiding client contact or supervision



Not all indicators in isolation will determine vicarious trauma. However, experienced collectively, these can have a significant impact on the individual, the team and organisation.

## Self assessment

- Useful to monitor impact on the practitioner
- E.g. tools: **Self Assessment Tool** and **ProQoL** (Professional Quality of Life)

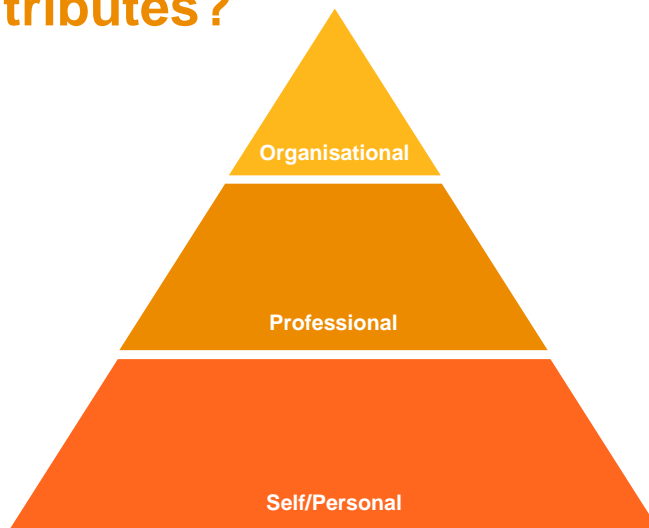
<https://www.proqol.org/>

Consider ways you might use these in your own workplace and/or practice



# Contributing and Protective Factors

## What Contributes?



## Organisational

- Poor caseload management
- Lack of reflective supervision
- Organisational culture that is not trauma-informed (impacts are not understood or acknowledged)
- Workplace culture promotes ineffective coping strategies such as minimising, denial or 'competitive stressing'
- High level unpredictability or inflexibility

## Professional

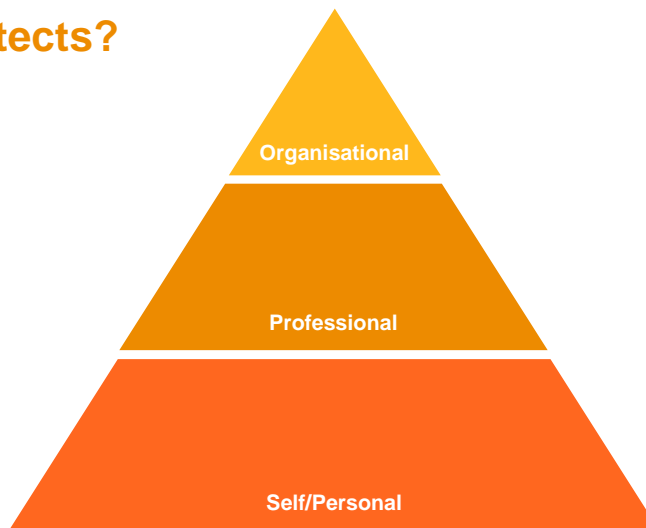
- Nature of work
- Complex client relationships
- Poor boundaries
- Not accessing or making the most of supervision



## Personal

- Lack of self-awareness (re levels of anxiety, stress and fatigue)
- Poor work-life boundaries and balance
- Ineffective coping strategies
- No built in self-care/wellbeing activities
- Unresolved or non-integrated personal trauma experiences
- Lack of social support
- Additional personal stressors such as health, family or finances

## What Protects?



## Organisational

- Effective caseload management
- Regular and effective reflective supervision
- Trauma-informed organisational culture
- Workplace culture promotes effective coping strategies such as self-care and honest debriefing
- Workplace characterised by predictability and flexibility

## Professional

?



## Personal

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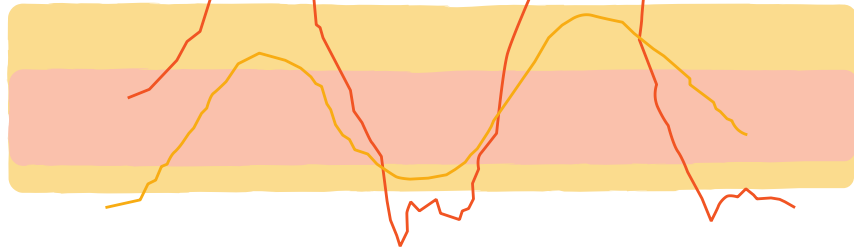
Why does it matter?  
...the impacts

## Why does how I'm doing matter?

In relationships, one's ability to regulate one's window of tolerance will affect the other's ability to regulate their own window of tolerance

Child's movement  
in her/his window

Movement in  
my window



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## The impacts in the workplace

Impacts of protective/defensive responses in the office – reduced team cohesion, poor morale, less collaboration

Impacts for clients: staff have reduced capacity for attunement, tolerance, problem solving. Clients stop experiencing safety in therapeutic relationship. 'Blocked care'

Impacts of rigidity – resistance to any changes (staff meetings changing format, new policies re room or car bookings, etc)

Impacts of chaos – paperwork not completed, meetings missed, 'contagious anxiety'

Reduced productivity, increased sick leave, poor client outcomes

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## Personal and Organisational Responses

- **Prevention**
- **Management**
- **Repair**

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## Prevention: Personal level

- Maintaining self care and prioritising healthy lifestyle/personal wellbeing
- Life outside of work incorporates: social, relaxing, spiritual, fun aspects
- Supportive and healthy relationships
- Work-life balance : maintaining healthy boundaries
- Personal & professional values align with the work
- Personal wellbeing plans are well-integrated & effective

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## Staying regulated

### IN THE MOMENT:

- Physically (regulate our body systems)
- Mentally (keeping our cortex online)

### AFTER THE MOMENT:

- Debrief (social engagement system!)
- Physically - regulate body systems

### BEFORE THE MOMENT (and all the time)

- Effective self care
- Organisational culture



## Prevention: Organisational Level

### Factors that contribute to an effective organisational culture:

- Clear organisational purpose
- Focus on empowerment
- Participation in decision making
- Promote sense of belonging
- Have trust and confidence in workers
- Recognition and reward
- Caring attitude
- Emphasize integrity
- Provide diversity
- Promote excellence

## Organisational factors

- Humour and fun
- Predictability and Flexibility
- Shared vulnerability – vicarious trauma is understood and acknowledged
- Acceptance rather than judgement
- Reflective supervision – accessible, regular and effective
- Supportive environment with shared goals and meaning
- Policies & procedures – protect workers, allow for flexibility, support healthy boundaries

## Management: Personal level

- Maintain self care routine and increase activities that promote wellbeing where possible
- Acknowledge impacts and practice self compassion
- Utilise leave entitlements, supervision, de-briefing
- Review boundaries and consider any changes that need to be made
- Regular mindfulness practice (set realistic goals for implementing this if not already part of daily routine)

## Management: Organisational Level

- Consider staff needs for: Trust/Dependence and Control
- Ensure access to supports: TIL, Annual Leave, Supervision, De-briefing
- Encourage self-care and support this however possible
- Create/maintain an environment of safety, predictability, openness

## Repair: Personal level

- Utilise leave entitlements
- Access therapy/counselling and/or external supervision
- Remember that VT is diagnostically almost identical to PTSD, so consider what you would recommend for a client with PTS response
- Activities/strategies that promote nervous system regulation
- Prioritise sleep, rest, healthy lifestyle (reduce/avoid alcohol, caffeine, etc)
- Remain socially connected

## Repair: Organisational Level

- Ensure access to leave – be flexible where possible or necessary
- Support access to external counselling and/or supervision
- Consider temporary changes to case load or work role
- Create and support opportunities for staff member/s (individual or team) to practice self-reflection

## Types of rest we need

### 7 TYPES OF REST WE ALL NEED

**PHYSICAL REST:** MORE SLEEP, NAPS, DEEP BREATHS, RELAXATION, STRETCHING

**MENTAL REST:** MUSIC, MEDITATION, SILENCE

**EMOTIONAL REST:** OFFLOADING EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE, TALKING TO A GOOD LISTENER, THERAPY

**SOCIAL REST:** CATCHING UP WITH AN OLD FRIEND OR CONVERSELY, TAKING A BREAK FROM SOCIALIZING

**CREATIVE REST:** READING A BOOK, TAKING A WALK IN NATURE

**SPIRITUAL REST:** DOING THINGS THAT GIVE YOU SENSE OF PURPOSE OR MEANING

**SENSORY REST:** TURNING OFF DEVICES AND SCREENS, FIND THE QUIET



### The 7 Types of Rest By Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith



@drlaurenfogelmersy

**ARTICLE:** <https://ideas.ted.com/the-7-types-of-rest-that-every-person-needs/>

**TED TALK:** <https://youtu.be/ZGNN4EPJzGk>

## Community Meeting Group – Check out

- What are you feeling now?
- What were the highlights from today's training?
- What will you take away from today's training that you will put in to practice?



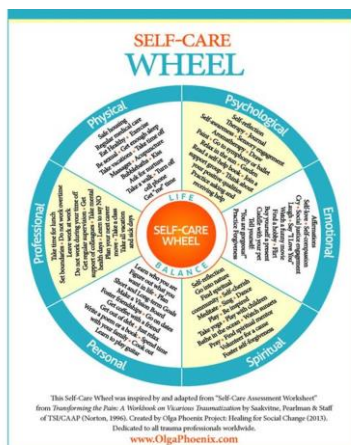
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## Community Meeting Group – Self Care

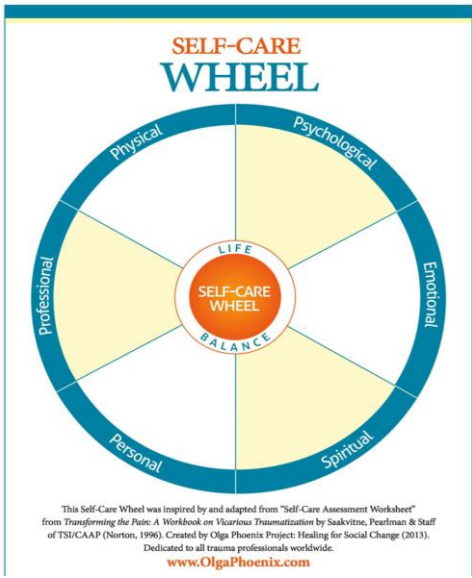
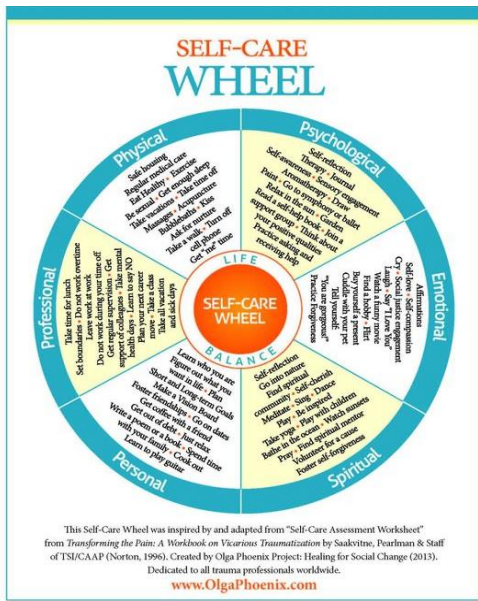
**What will you do for self care after today's training?**



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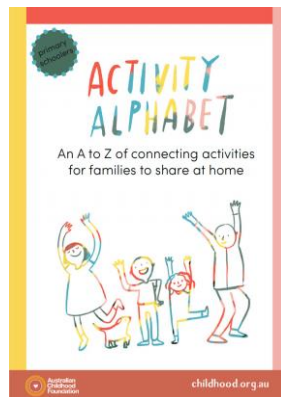
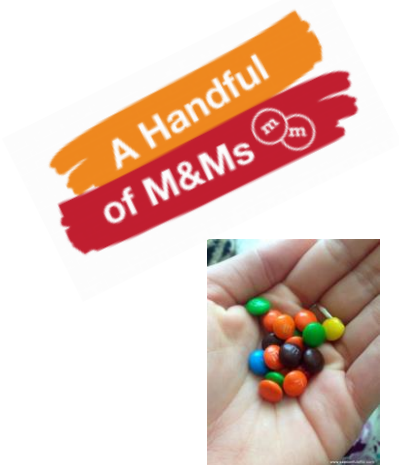
# Self Care – Fun Group Check out



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# Take away resources



<https://www.childhood.org.au/covid-19/>



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Thank you for your participation today

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