



VICARIOUS TRAUMA & SELF CARE

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Plan

- Introduction - Who am I
- What is vicarious trauma?
- How to recognize it and address it
- Importance of self-care, balance & connection.
- Cultural Teachings on Self Care – Using the medicine wheel for wellness



Me during 1990 crisis



A part of my story...

What is Vicarious Trauma



“...the process of change that happens because you care about other people who have been hurt, and feel committed or responsible to help them.

Over time this process can lead to changes in your psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being”

(Pearlman & McKay, 2008,p.7)

Vicarious Trauma (VT) Defined

Process of Change – “Vicarious trauma is an ongoing process of change over time that results from witnessing or hearing about other people’s suffering and need” (p.7)

- **Cumulative effect** - process that unfolds over time, not just to one person, story or situation that you hear day after day, year after year
- **Ongoing** – process is ongoing, your experiences of VT are constantly being impacted by your life experiences

(Pearlman & McKay, 2008)

Vicarious Trauma (VT) Defined

Empathy – “Vicarious trauma happens because you care about people who have been hurt.”^(p.8)

- Involves the ability to identify with another person, to understand and feel another person’s pain and joy.
- Does not mean feeling exactly what another is feeling, but when you care you relate to another’s experiences, reactions and feelings
- When you care and identify with the pain of people who have endured terrible things, you bring their grief, fear, anger and despair into your own awareness and experience.

(Pearlman & McKay, 2008)

Vicarious Trauma (VT) Defined

Commitment/Responsible to help – “Vicarious trauma happens not only because you care about people who have been hurt, but because you feel committed or responsible to help”(p.8)

- At its core, the point of any humanitarian work is to serve and collaborate with people who need help.
- Many humanitarian workers are very committed to their work and take this responsibility very deeply.
- This can contribute to the process of vicarious trauma as it can lead to very high (sometimes unrealistic) expectations of yourself, others, and for the results you want to see from your work
- Your commitment and sense of responsibility can lead to high expectations and eventually contribute to your feeling burdened, overwhelmed, and perhaps hopeless.

(Pearlman & McKay, 2008)

Vicarious Trauma (VT) Defined

Changes in spirituality - “Over time, vicarious trauma can lead to changes in your own psychological and spiritual well-being” (p.9).

- Vicarious trauma, like experiencing trauma directly, can deeply impact the way you see the world and your sense of meaning and hope.
 - **Positive Impacts** – Many people grow, mature or gain broader more balanced view on life, and better able to understand and empathize with others
 - **Negative Impacts** – Some come to question deepest beliefs about life and the Universe, existence, and nature of meaning and hope.

(Pearlman & McKay, 2008)



HOW TO RECOGNIZE VICARIOUS TRAUMA

Signs & Symptoms

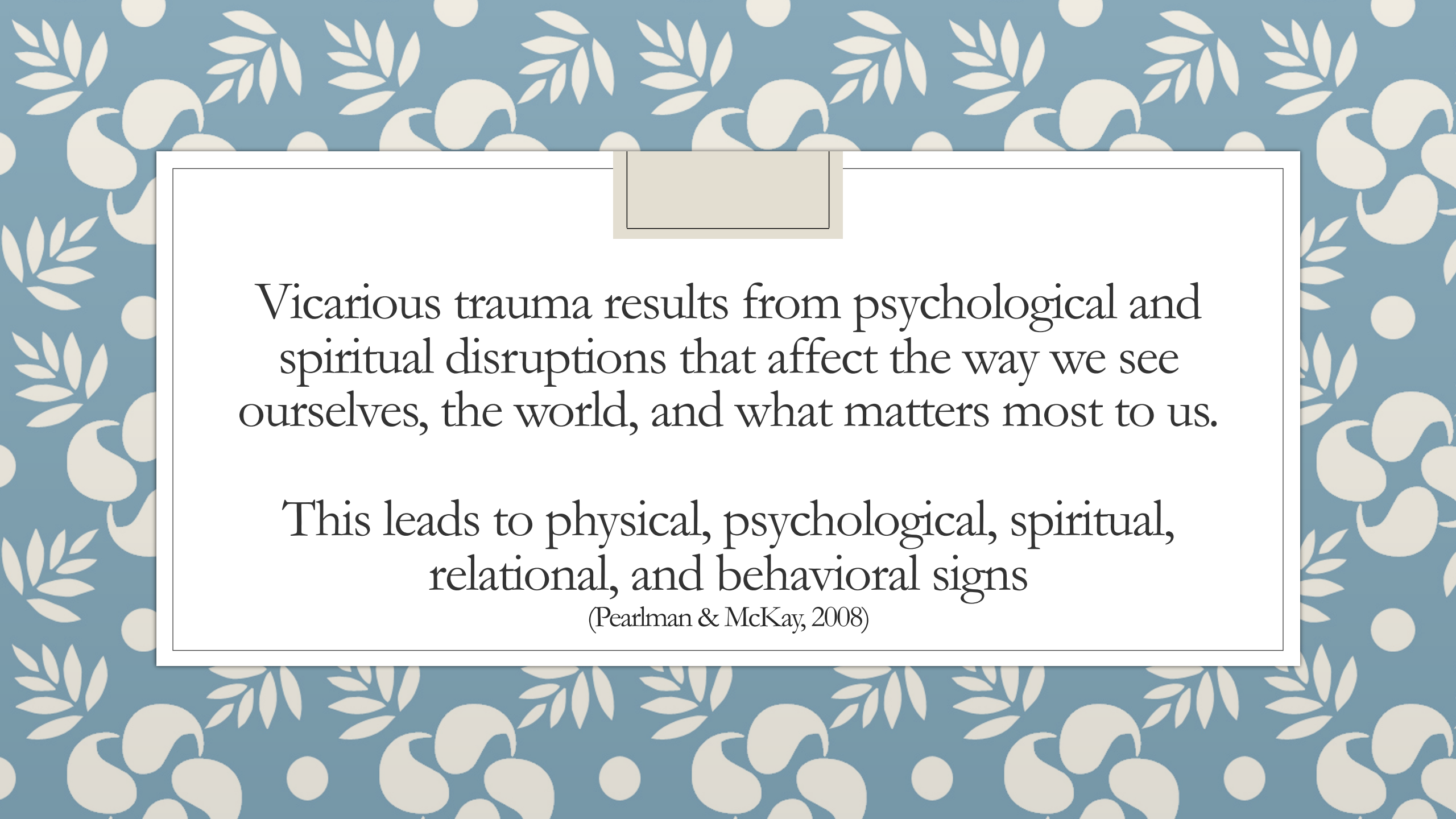
Experiencing Vicarious Trauma

- Difficulty managing your emotions
- Difficulty accepting or feeling okay about yourself
- Difficulty making good decisions
- Problems managing the boundaries between yourself & others (e.g., taking on too much responsibility, having difficulty leaving work at the end of the day, trying to step in and control other's lives)
- Problems in relationships
- Physical problems such as aches & pains, illnesses, accidents
- Difficulty feeling connected to what's going on around & within you
- Loss of meaning & hope

Experiencing Vicarious Trauma

- No one will experience difficulties in all of these areas
- There are individual differences in what contributes to vicarious trauma
- There are also individual differences in how you experience and express VT
 - One person may primarily experience VT **physically** — through illness, pains, trouble sleeping, etc.
 - Another may primarily show VT in **relationships** – by withdrawing from others or being irritable.
 - For others, VT may express itself in **mood** – through depression or anxiety.

“The way we experience stress and distress is also influenced by our culture(s).” (p.18)



Vicarious trauma results from psychological and spiritual disruptions that affect the way we see ourselves, the world, and what matters most to us.

This leads to physical, psychological, spiritual, relational, and behavioral signs

(Pearlman & McKay, 2008)

Common Signs of Vicarious Trauma

CHANGES IN WORLDVIEW OR FRAME OF REFERENCE

Changes in Spirituality

- Beliefs about meaning, purpose, causality, connection, hope & faith
- Questioning prior beliefs, meaning & purpose in life, leading to a sense of loss of purpose, hopelessness, & cynicism

Changes in Identity

- Ways you practice & think about your role as a professional, friend, family member
- I.e. most of your time/energy is spent in your professional role because you feel disconnected or uncomfortable in other roles or identities

Changes in Beliefs relate to Psychological Needs

- Beliefs regarding safety, control, trust, esteem & intimacy
- I.e. changes in how vulnerable you believe you (and others you care about) are to harm which can influence your thoughts and actions (e.g. worrying about safety issues, mistrust of strangers leading to being more protective of your children).

(Pearlman & McKay, 2008)

Common Signs of Vicarious Trauma

PHYSICAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGNS

- Hyperarousal symptoms (e.g., nightmares, difficulty concentrating, being easily startled, sleep difficulties)
- Repeated thoughts or images regarding traumatic events especially when you are trying not to think about it
- Feeling numb
- Feeling unable to tolerate strong emotions
- Increased sensitivity to violence
- Cynicism
- Generalized despair and hopelessness, and loss of idealism
- Guilt regarding your own survival and/or pleasure
- Anger, Disgust, Fear

(Pearlman & McKay, 2008)

Common Signs of Vicarious Trauma

BEHAVIOR AND RELATIONSHIP SIGNS

- Difficulty setting boundaries and separating work from personal life
- Feeling like you never have time or energy for yourself.
- Feeling disconnected from loved ones, even when communicating with them
- Increased conflict in relationships
- General social withdrawal
- Experiencing the “silencing response” - finding yourself unable to pay attention to other’s distressing stories because they seem overwhelming and incomprehensible; and directing people to talk about less distressing material
- Decreased interest in activities that used to bring pleasure, enjoyment, or relaxation
- Irritable, intolerant, agitated, impatient, needy, and/or moody
- Increased dependencies or addictions involving nicotine, alcohol, food, sex, shopping , internet, and/or other substances
- Sexual difficulties
- Impulsivity

(Pearlman & McKay, 2008)



ADDRESSING VICARIOUS TRAUMA

STRATEGIES THAT CAN HELP

Trauma Informed Care

- Takes into account worker's own experiences of trauma
- Work experiences, and hearing of others' life stories can be triggering of one's own traumatic experiences & memories
- Self-awareness & understanding is key for safe & ethical practice
- Knowing one's own triggers, capacities, limitations, etc. brings awareness to where & when you might need extra self care, support, or setting a personal boundary

Addressing Vicarious Trauma

- Awareness & understanding is a great first step - This can help you decide what you need to best prevent & address your experiences of vicarious trauma.
- Know the risk factors and what contributes to your experiences of VT
- Know the signs and symptoms of VT to be aware of your early warning signs
- Organizational and managerial support
- Awareness and addressing VT in an ongoing manner goes a long way toward preventing burnout, feeling crushed by vicarious trauma, or unintentionally harming others because of its effects

(Pearlman & McKay, 2008)

Addressing Vicarious Trauma

- Risk factors for VT are unique – different people have different risk factors.
- What will help address VT is unique to each person – options/solutions should reflect your own needs, experiences, interests, resources, culture and values.
- Two related aspects when addressing VT:
 1. Coping
 2. Transforming

Coping with Vicarious Trauma

- Accepting VT as part of the work and learning to manage it effectively in daily ways
- Learning to live with this process so that you can do your job safely & ethically
- Identifying strategies that both prevent VT from becoming severe or problematic, and help manage VT when times are more stressful or problematic.

Coping with Vicarious Trauma

Best coping strategies are those that help you take care of yourself – especially those that help you **escape**, **rest**, and **play** in a healthy way.

- **Escape**: Getting away from it all, physically or mentally (books or films, taking a day or a week off, playing video games, talking to friends about things other than work)
- **Rest**: Having no goal or time-line, or doing things you find relaxing (lying on the grass watching the clouds, sipping a cup of tea, taking a nap, getting a massage);
- **Play**: Engaging in activities that make you laugh or lighten your spirits (sharing funny stories with a friend, playing with a child, being creative, being physically active)

Transforming Vicarious Trauma

- Identifying ways to nurture a sense of meaning and hope
- Seeking to find what gives life and work meaning for you
- What instills or renews your hope
- Having a framework or guiding principles can help you face tough questions and/or situations

“Finding ways to stay connected to important sources of meaning and hope in your life, even when you are being deeply challenged, will help you transform vicarious trauma.”

(Pearlman & McKay, 2008, p.24).

Ways to Connect

Ways to connect to sources of meaning, purpose, hope, and perspective

- Reminding yourself of the importance and value of your work
- Staying connected with family, friends, and colleagues
- Noticing and deliberately paying attention to the “little things” – small moments like sipping a cup of coffee, the sound of the wind in the trees, or brief connections with others
- Marking transitions, celebrating joys, and mourning losses with people you care about through traditions, rituals, or ceremonies
- Taking time to reflect (e.g., by reading, writing, prayer, and meditation)
- Identifying and challenging your own cynical beliefs
- Undertaking growth-promoting activities (learning, writing in a journal, being creative and artistic).

Work Strategies to Prevent & Manage Vicarious Trauma

- **Change some of the things that bother you:** Things that you can control that bother you (e.g., if your work place is grim and dirty, clean it up) Change what you can.
- **Intentionally make choices when you can:** Make choices about things you can control (e.g., when to break for lunch).
- **Connect with (or disconnect from) people:** If you work mostly alone, find ways to connect with people during the day. If you work mostly with people, take small breaks, including time out from conversation during which you let your mind go to positive, secure, or comforting thoughts.

Work Strategies to Prevent & Manage Vicarious Trauma

- **Try something different at work:** Look for opportunities to do something different from your usual work (e.g., write an article, offer to teach a workshop, collaborate with a colleague on a project, ask someone new for assistance). If you are in a job that's very routine, try changing the order in which you do your usual tasks.
- **Write about your experiences at work:** Even making brief notes about your experiences at work can be helpful. It can be a good way to record something important and move it out of the center of your attention. Over time it can also help you learn about your job and yourself.

Work Strategies to Prevent & Manage Vicarious Trauma

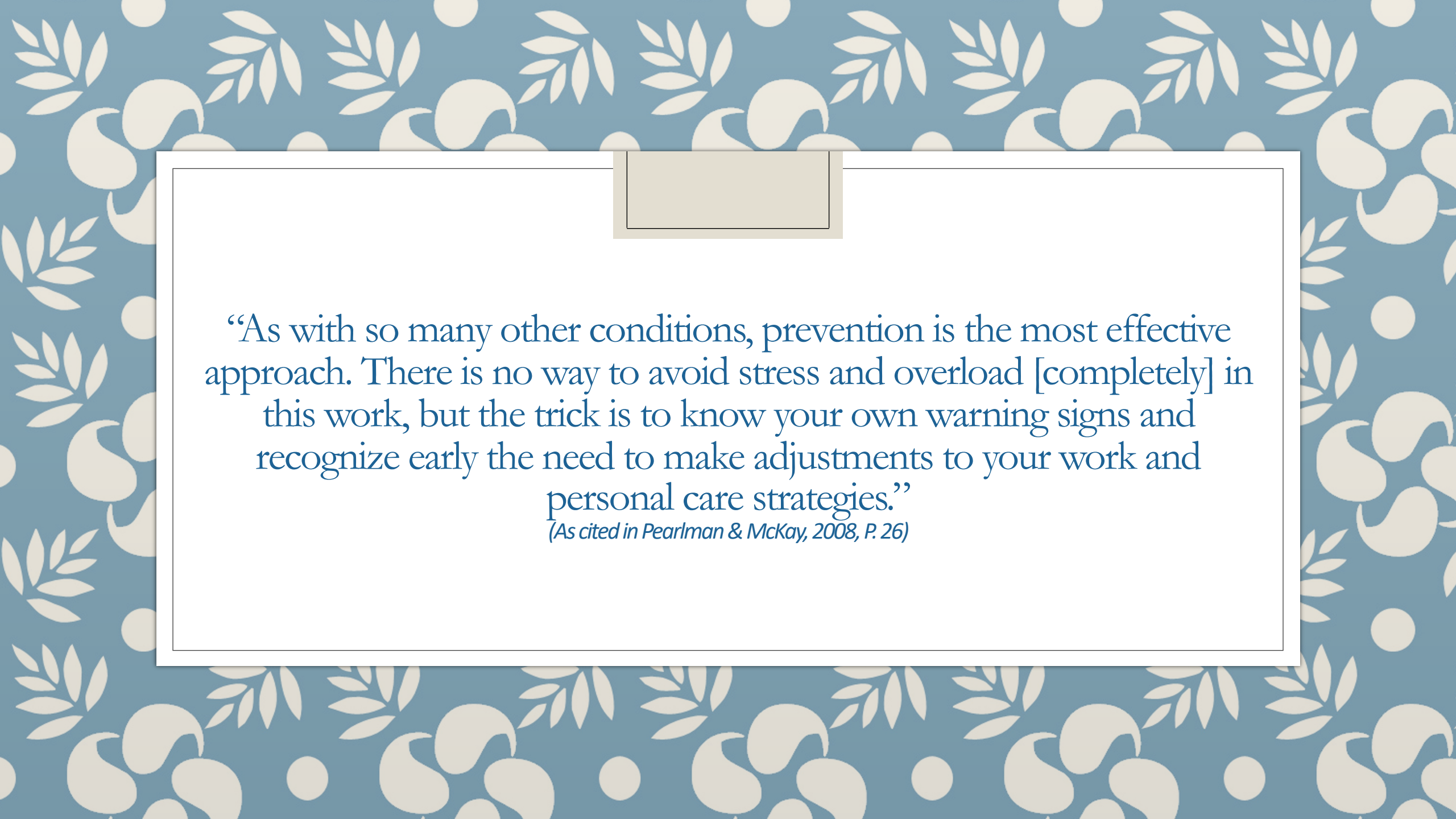
- **Find ways to retain or regain perspective during the day:** Find little ways to connect briefly with things or thoughts that nurture or refresh your spirit and help you see work in the context of the bigger picture. (i.e. pictures of loved ones, praying or meditating, imagining themselves in a refreshing place, and breathing exercises.) These activities can help you calm your body as well as ground your mind.
- **Invest in professional networks and relationships with colleagues:** Knowing people who do similar work and sharing resources, strategies, and stories help bridge the sense of isolation that is often a part of vicarious trauma. Sharing some non-work experiences with colleagues can also help you feel more like a whole person at work.
- **Find more than one healthy habit:** One good strategy will not be enough to protect you effectively from vicarious trauma. Make sure you are practicing several different healthy working habits.

“Healthy thinking is good on its own, but even better if it’s linked to healthy practice at work. Make sure you are practicing several different healthy working habits.”



DESIGNING AN ACTION PLAN

What is your Self Care Plan?



“As with so many other conditions, prevention is the most effective approach. There is no way to avoid stress and overload [completely] in this work, but the trick is to know your own warning signs and recognize early the need to make adjustments to your work and personal care strategies.”

(As cited in Pearlman & McKay, 2008, P. 26)

Cultural Teachings



Holistic Self Care

Belonging

I loved/valued

Achieving

I can succeed

Relying

I believe in others

Believing

I have power

Giving

I have purpose

Seeing

I know myself



Self-Care Planning

Three important parts in effective action plan for vicarious trauma: awareness, balance & connection

Awareness

- Check in with yourself regularly to ask: How are you feeling (physically and emotionally)? Can you figure out at least some of the reasons why you might be feeling this way?
- Notice early when something is getting to you – making you tense, uncomfortable, distressed, annoyed, or tired, for example – the easier it is to prevent bigger problems.
- Self awareness can help you know your potential risk factors, as well as how you are responding
- Understanding your responses & what might be contributing to them can lead you to a sense of what you need, and how to change what's happening or manage your own responses so that things don't get worse.
- Being aware of what you're doing while you're doing it, deliberately keeping your mind & your body in the same place.

(Pearlman & McKay, 2008)

Self-Care Planning

Balance

- An effective approach to addressing VT is to **find the right balance for you as often as you can**
- Balancing your work with the rest of your life & also balancing demanding work with less challenging work.
- You should aim to take breaks (daily, weekly, monthly, and annually) to balance the rest of your life with your work. This means:
 - Work day includes some breaks for meals & physical activity or rest (depending on what you're taking a break from)
 - Taking time away from work for rest and relaxation, for friends and family, for spiritual renewal, and for professional development.
 - In particular, it's important to spend time with people whom you don't have to take care of or rescue.
 - There are times when this is not possible. This can become dangerous when chronic – when you are not able to find a balance between caring for others and being cared for.

(Pearlman & McKay, 2008)

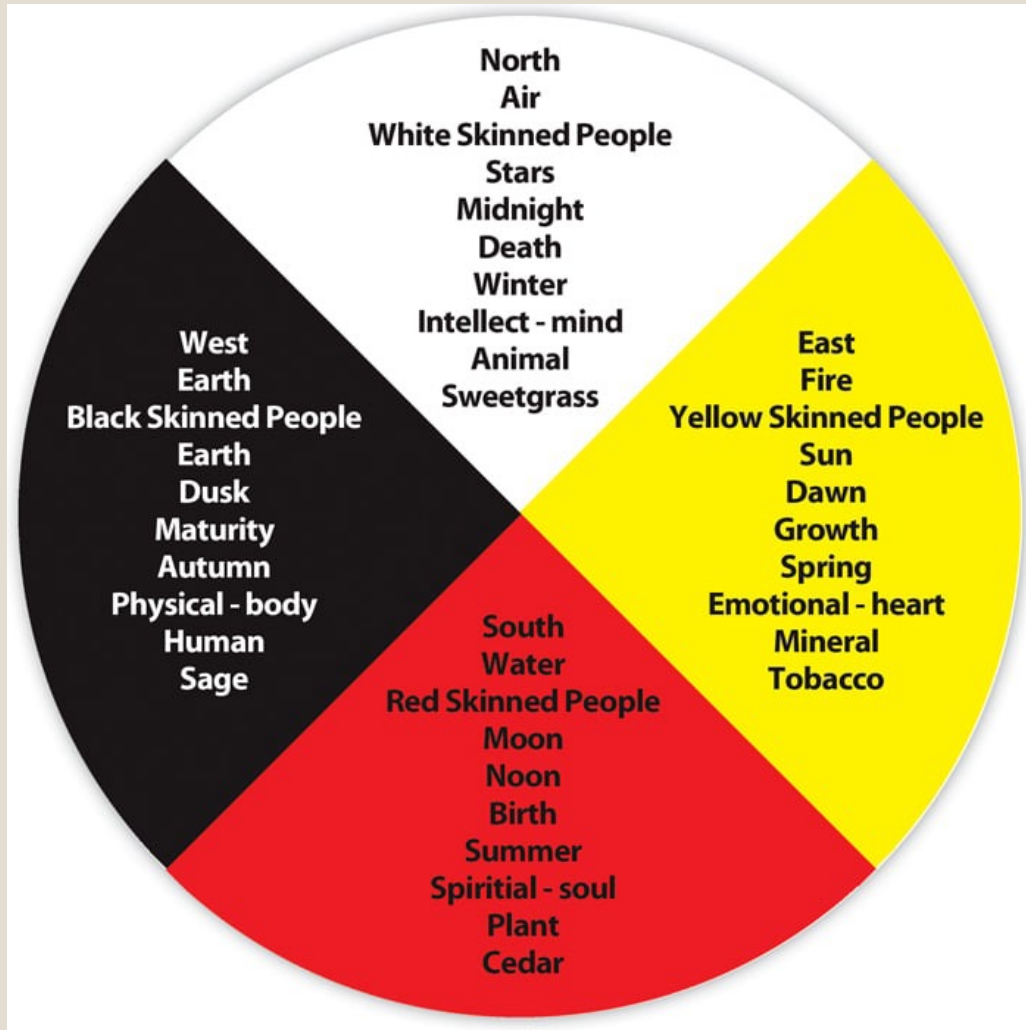
Self-Care Planning

Connection

- **Maintaining nurturing relationships & meaningful contact with family, friends, & colleagues**
- Goes beyond our relationships with other people
- Important to feel connected to whatever nurtures or anchors you – be that God, faith, nature, humanity, or another source or meaning and purpose
- Spiritual connection can help prevent & fight the loss of meaning & hope at the heart of vicarious trauma.
- An essential part of a spiritual connection is to find one's own path to connecting with a sense of awe, joy, wonder, purpose, meaning, and/or hope, and revisit it regularly and frequently.

(Pearlman & McKay, 2008)

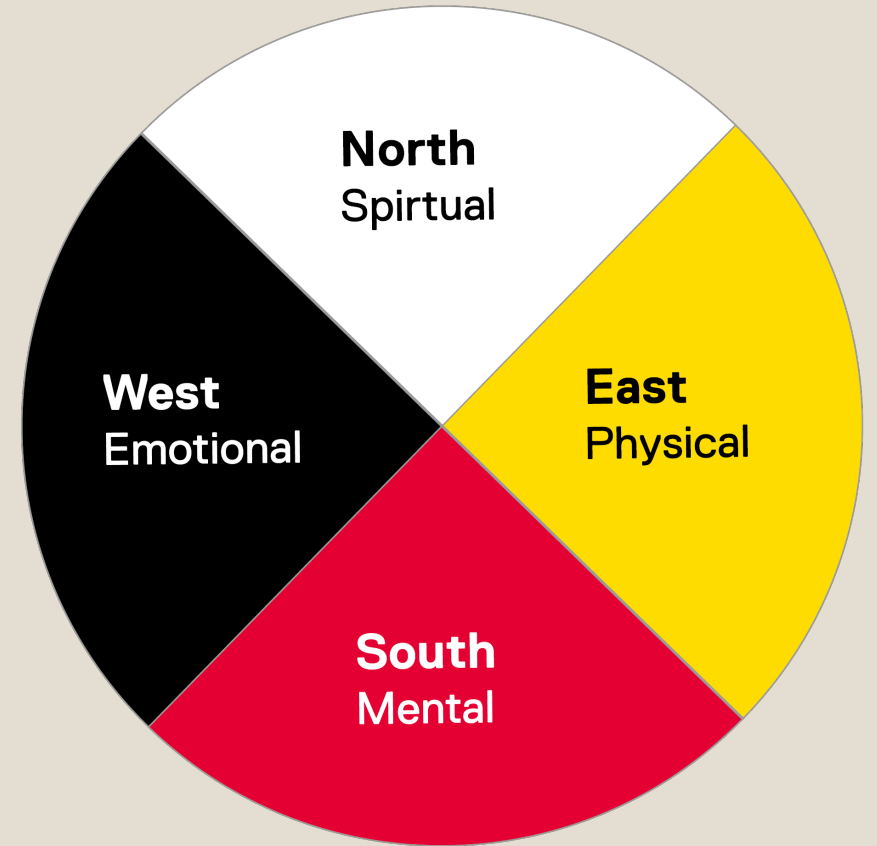
Cultural Teachings on Self-Care



Using the Medicine Wheel for Self Care

Medicine Wheel Activity

- Let us put all this into practice!
- Create your own self-care/self care plan
- Example of how we can use the medicine wheel as an intervention tool
 - Can be used by workers to assess own balance in their life and self care needs
 - Can be used for assessment and goal setting too





1. Please draw a similar circle
2. For each section, I will ask you to rate from 1-10 how well you care for each part of your well being
 - Rate 1 for little to no attention
 - Rate 10 for full attention
 - Starting from the center, color the number of lines to match your rating in each section
3. I will ask questions to guide you & for reflection
4. Feel free to note thoughts, feelings or just words as we go

Reflection Questions

Mental - Contains Thoughts, Consciousness, & Values

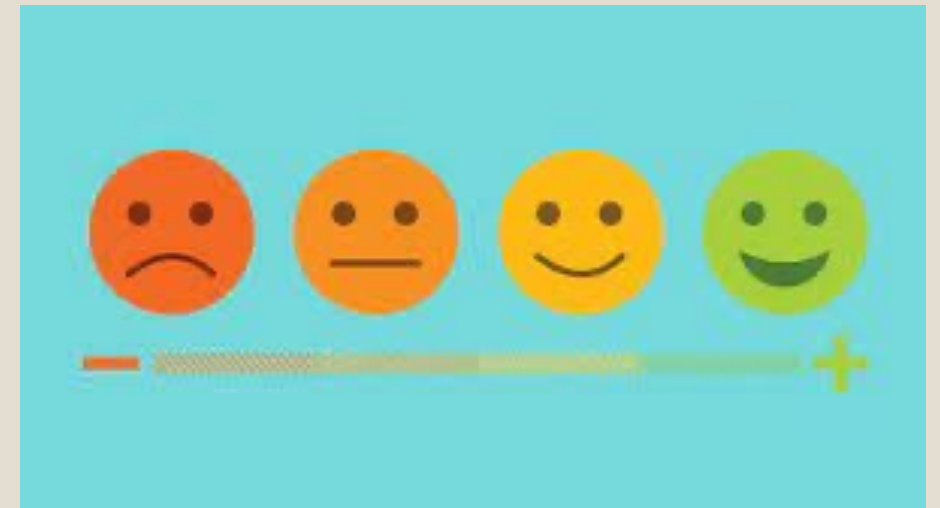
- What do you do to care for your mind & your thoughts?
- Are you in touch with your deeper desires & beliefs?
- Are you able to make decisions & move towards your goals & values?
- Do you experience anxiety, stress or self-doubt or other negative thoughts that hinder you?
- Do you get stuck in thought loops that get in the way of your goals?
- Do you live with self-doubt/does it prevent you from reaching your deeper goals & desires?
- Do you have access/time with a psychologist, therapist or other professional support person?
- Do you acknowledge and name the things you are grateful for?
- Do you acknowledge what you can and can't control? Things you worry about?
- Do you seek to expand your mind through education, reading or writing?
- Do you practice setting goals?
- Do you take time to journal, meditate, be creative, get outside, etc.?
- What else would fall in this category for you and your life?



Reflection Questions

Emotional - Carries Feelings & Memories

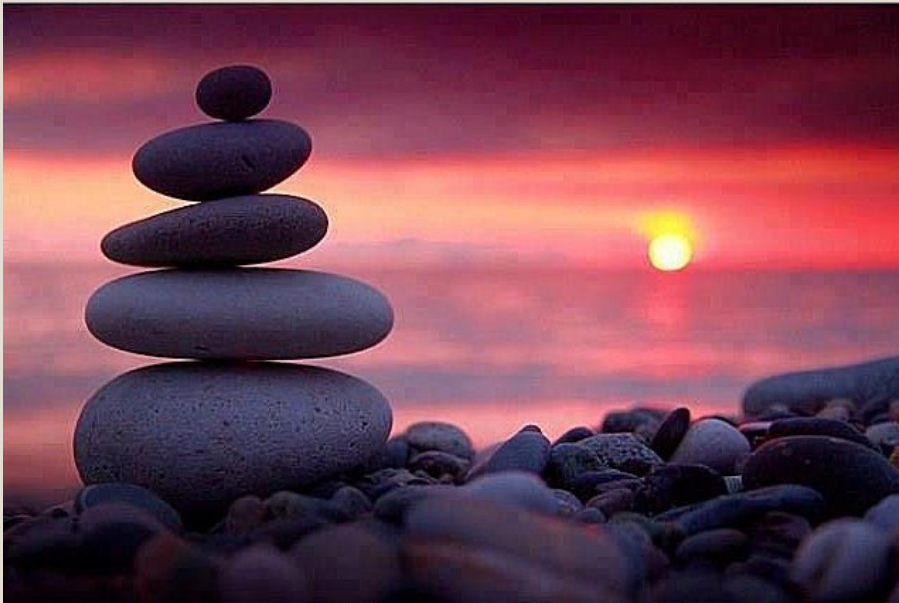
- What do you do to care for your emotional well being?
- Do you listen to your feelings & give them space to be & flow? Or do you deny, stuff down & try to repress emotions?
- Can you name your feelings?
- Do you feel numb or blocked?
- Do you struggle with certain emotional states? Which emotions are challenging for you?
- Do you have people in your life you trust & are safe to share & speak with & connect emotionally?
- Are you stuck in anger, fear or anxiety?
- Are you able to feel positive emotions such as pride, joy, or love?
- Do you practice self-reflection?
- Do you give time & space for the release of emotions?
- Are you able to ask for support?
- What else would fall in this category for you and your life?



Reflection Questions

Spiritual - Connection to Higher Power

- What do you do to care for your spirit?
- Do you feel connected to the greater world, or cosmos/universe?
- Do you feel connected to a higher power? (i.e. Creator/Creation, God, other, etc.)
- Do you use any traditional or alternative medicines?
- How are your energy levels?

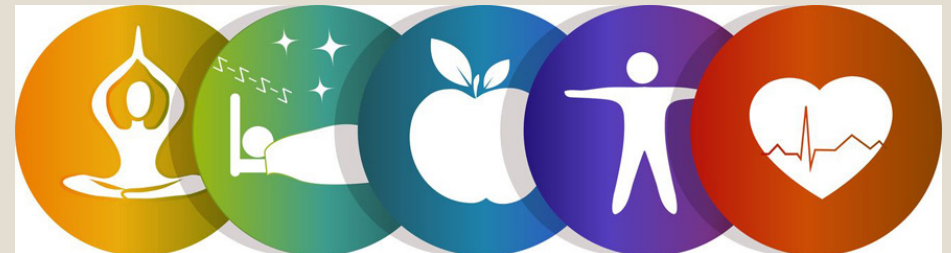


- Are you generally open & curious?
- Do you feel closed off, or indifferent?
- Do you have access/support from an Elder or traditional/spiritual person?
- Do you take time to sing, dance or play music?
- Do you make time for creative activities/outlets?
- What else would fall in this category for you and your life?

Reflection Questions

Physical - Your physical form that carries you through life

- What do you do to care for your physical self?
- Do you listen & take care of your basic needs – sleep & rest, balanced eating, practicing good hygiene, exercise, fresh air, asking for help when needed?
- Do you feel safe and/or comfortable physically; in your home, neighbourhood, relationship(s)?
- What of your physical space & environment? Do you have a space that brings you joy & peace of mind?
- Do you take time to go outside, be present & focused on your present & physical place, connected to Nature?
- Do you take care of your stress? Do you carry stress physically in your body? How does your body respond to stress?
- Do you include yoga or other forms of physical wellness activities?
- What else would fall in this category for you and your life?



Understanding your Assessment



- What do you see?
- Is it balanced or imbalanced?
- Which areas were rated higher and which lower?
- What did you learn about yourself?
- Where do you need to focus some of your care and attention?
- What strategies can you implement?

Medicine Wheel Self Care Strategies

Physical Wellness Strategies

- Breathing and relaxation techniques
- Exercise: walking, sports, or games of skill and endurance
- Hunting and camping, being on the land
- Healthy diet and nutrition, access to traditional food, community feasts
- Addiction recovery
- Medications (traditional or medical) if needed, to reduce reactivity and hyperarousal

Mental Wellness Strategies

- Cognitive strategies, such as journaling (in diary, in a log or notebook) to identify and chart thoughts and symptoms
- Exploring and developing awareness and understanding of own thoughts and their impacts on self
- Recognize source of thoughts and any distortions and/or lens that contribute
- Dream interpretations, vision quest, speaking to spirit guides, prayer for support and guidance
- Creating new life stories, maps or narratives to help process and integrate trauma and move towards healing
- Working with a counselor or Elder

Medicine Wheel Self Care Strategies

Emotional Wellness Strategies

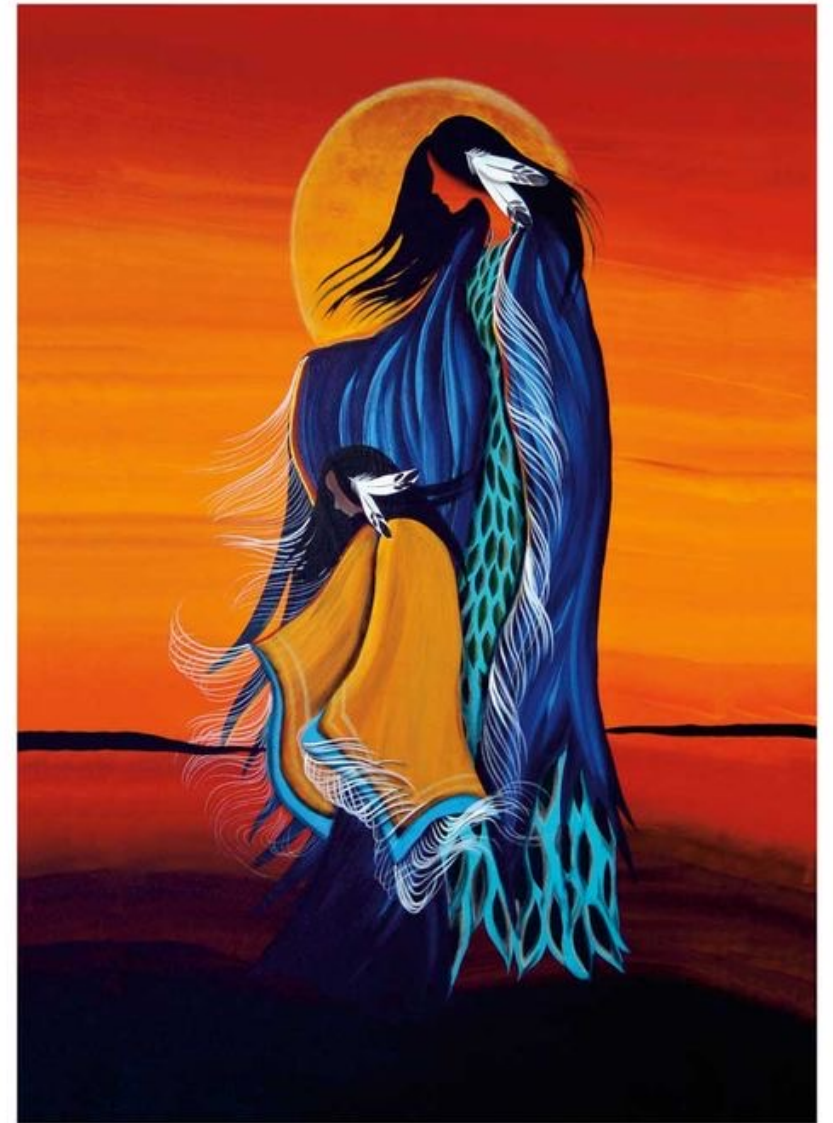
- Release and processing of emotions, such as anger release/management, grief, fear that may be blocked, unreleased and unprocessed
- Non-verbal expression through art and craft making, quilting, carving, song and dance, etc.
- Talking and sharing circles
- Restoring cultural pride and identity
- Affirming each person's unique gifts, strengths, and worth.

Spiritual Wellness Strategies

- Meditation, prayer and giving thanks.
- Burning medicines (First Nations practice) or the Quilliq (Inuit practice)
- Participating in ceremonies such as sweat lodge, Moon, smudging
- Guidance from Elders and traditional teachers

Wrap Up

- Anything else you'd like to share from doing the self care activity?
- One thing you are taking away with you today?
- Any comments, questions, or feedback?



Mother and Daughter

Betty Albert

Nia:wen / Thank you

For any further communication or questions, feel free to email me at pam_gabriel@hotmail.com

