

# Your Emotional First Aid Handbook

*A self-care handbook for healthcare  
providers*

During this time of unprecedented stress healthcare providers must also take care of ourselves – our patients and co-workers are depending on us. Read this simple practical handbook and learn effective methods you can use right away to keep yourself whole and healthy.



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# Our Co-Organizers:

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Kiwanis is a Global Organization of Volunteers dedicated to Improving the World One Child and One Community at a time.



Penang Care Alliance, an alliance of like-minded non-governmental organizations (“NGOs”) and institutions, was formed on 16 July 2021, to address the short and long-term needs related to Mental Health, Food Aid and Employment, which have been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. PgCare Alliance is established to assist the families and individuals who have been greatly affected by the pandemic and the prolonged lockdown.



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Established in 1974, Pantai Hospital Kuala Lumpur (PHKL) is one of the pioneer private hospitals in Klang Valley and a trusted partner in the healthcare journey of its patients for more than 45 years. PHKL has 335 beds and is supported by over 200 specialist doctors. PHKL prides on being a one-stop integrated healthcare provider, covering a wide-range of medical and surgical disciplines which are complemented by cutting-edge medical equipment and specialised services.



HighScope Indonesia is the pioneer of active learning in Indonesia, and has been established for over 25 years. Providing learners from preschool to high school with developmentally-appropriate opportunities to make decisions in an academic setting that shape both mind and character with life skills to face the current and future challenges.



ARTDO INTERNATIONAL, formerly known as Asian Regional Training and Development Organization was founded in 1974 as an international non-profit NGO umbrella body comprising national training organizations, training and education institutions, HRD practitioners and multi-national companies from over 40 countries. ARTDO International Secretariat based in Manila, Philippines.



The Penang Family Health Development Association (FHDA) is an NGO established in 1961 then known as Family Planning Association. VISION: To be a leading NGO in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights. MISSION: A caring and effective NGO in community health. Motto: My Body, My Responsibility



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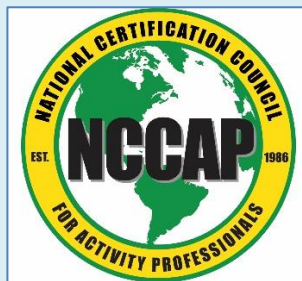
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# Forward

I went through the valuable 'Emotional First Aid Handbook' several times. It is written in a very user-friendly clear language. There is very high credibility in its content, as it is the personal experience of a licensed mental health professional, consultant and international speaker who gave workshops to healthcare professionals throughout the United States, the Middle East and SE Asia, and who has himself overcome burn out, severe and persistent depression.

I liked Karl LaRowe's golden sentence '*we are just as deserving of the care and concern we provide for others*'. The Handbook provided more prevention and palliative treatment than just first aid, as it helps to discharge the stress before it accumulates in your nervous system. Its hyperlinks are very powerful and informative.

I practiced and confirm the immediate benefits of Karl's FlowMotion, proactive breathing, creative

visualization and connection. Reading Karl LaRowe's 'Emotional First Aid Handbook', enables me to start my day by energizing my body and mind with positive energy and make me able to feel that 'I am good Enough'!

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# Your Emotional First Aid Handbook

*A self-care handbook for caregivers*

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## Introduction

**D**uring this time of unprecedented stress, healthcare professionals are on the front line doing their very best to help others. As is so consistent with our personalities, we often do not focus on our own self-care. This handbook is both a reminder and a guide to help us provide better care for our patients by caring for ourselves.

## Compassion Fatigue

Healthcare providers, especially those working on the front line are more susceptible to experiencing compassion fatigue

which is defined as: “The physical and mental exhaustion and emotional withdrawal experienced by those who care for sick or traumatized people over an extended period of time”<sup>1</sup> and can be characterized by: “exhaustion, anger and irritability, negative coping behaviours including alcohol and drug abuse, reduced ability to feel sympathy and empathy, a diminished sense of enjoyment or satisfaction with work, increased absenteeism, and an impaired ability to make decisions and care for patients.”<sup>2</sup> For more information see:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4924075/>

## The Caregiving Personality

Yet, despite our greater vulnerability to this kind of burnout, healthcare providers are often surprisingly resistant to learning and practicing effective self-care. As I state in my previous book on compassion fatigue; “Some of the personality traits that attracted us to care giving as a

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary

<sup>2</sup> Mathieu F. Running on Empty: Compassion Fatigue in Health Professionals. Rehab Community Care Med. 2007;4:1–7

profession are the very same traits that can render us vulnerable to stress, burnout and depression.”

Some of these traits include the tendency to put other people’s concerns ahead of our own and/or downplay what we need; to minimize our own internal distress; to over-estimate how much we can and should be able to do. We are very good at taking care of other people, not so good about taking care of ourselves.

## **You Are Good Enough!**

One of the first things we must change to take better care of ourselves is our self-perception. In researching our latest book<sup>3</sup> [“You Are Good Enough: Embracing Who You Really Are”](#), we discovered that many very successful people from all walks of life share a common hidden belief; that who they

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<sup>3</sup> My co-author and I did several years of research conducting an international survey with hundreds of highly successful leaders in business, healthcare government and non-profit. We found a large percentage of these highly successful leaders harboured the belief that who they were, as a person, a human being was not good enough.

were underneath all of their success was not good enough. Healthcare providers are no different.

Many of us, myself included, share the belief that in order to be a good doctor, nurse, clinician, etc., we should never show any signs of weakness or vulnerability that may interfere with caring for our patients. Too often this unfortunately translates into: “I shouldn’t need to practice self-care, I am a healthcare professional.”

One of the most unfortunate beliefs I hear over and over again in my workshops can be stated as:

*“As a healthcare professional I should have no emotional problems myself and should feel guilty and ashamed if I do. I should not have to ask for advice or support either professionally or personally.”*

In order to really take care of ourselves we need to release this unrealistic expectation and know in our hearts that we are just as deserving of the care and concern we provide for others.

## How to Use This Book

This E-book is written from personal experience. As a crisis mental health professional working in a very busy inner-city ER, I developed compassion fatigue and burned out. In my recovery I read everything that was available and went to every workshop I could find on self-care (there was very little back then!) For the past 25 years I've been giving workshops to healthcare professionals throughout the United States, the Middle East and SE Asia. This E-book is a snap-shot of that experience.

This is a practical, how-to-do handbook that focuses on practice rather than theory. The first section will describe several simple yet very effective methods for managing the stress of working in a highly demanding profession during extraordinary circumstances. Section two will provide some ideas about how to apply those methods during your pressurized, chaotic work day. Give them an honest try. I am sure you will feel better for it.



# Section 1: The Methods

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## Somatic Awareness

**T**he first and possibly most important skill to learn is how to become more aware of your feelings, sensations and emotions. When we are acutely stressed and/or traumatized we automatically [dissociate](#) from our physical experience. We distance our awareness from what we are experiencing in our bodies. While this can provide an immediate sense of detachment from the stress it can result in long term disconnection from our feelings and emotions.

Somatic Awareness is the process of bringing your attention into your body to become more aware of what you are experiencing *as you are experiencing it*. This will allow you to

be aware of and discharge the stress before it accumulates in the nervous system as [energy residue](#).<sup>4</sup>

The essential process of somatic awareness is *shifting your attention* from inside your head where we are often preoccupied with all of our anxious, obsessive thinking to inside your body to become more aware of what you are experiencing – *as you are experiencing it*.

To begin, take a long, slow, deep breath from your diaphragm and slowly exhale (more on conscious breathing will be described later). Breathe slowly and smoothly through your nose as you inhale to a count of four and release your breath through your mouth to a count of six. As you exhale make a silent “Ahhh” sound as though you were releasing all of your stress. Repeat the breath again.

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<sup>4</sup> Energy residue is a term coined by Dr. Peter Levine who describes it as: “the frozen residue of energy that has not been resolved and discharged; this residue remains trapped in the nervous system where it can wreak havoc on our bodies and spirits.”

As your breathing slows so will some of the frantic activity inside your head. Allow your attention to shift from inside your head to inside your body. Just extend your awareness from inside your head to your neck, chest, shoulders, arms, back, stomach, legs and feet. It takes very little time to do this. It's just a matter of shifting your awareness and allowing it to flow through your body.

As your awareness flows through your body pay particular attention to known stress “hot spots;” your neck and shoulders – particularly the back of your neck and your Trapezius muscles; your chest – particularly the area around your heart; and your stomach. These areas are known stress hot spots where we often hold energy residue.

As you bring your attention to these hot spots just observe what you are experiencing. As non-judgmentally as possible, notice the physical sensations you are experiencing. Often there will be sensations of tension, tightness, soreness,

tingling, cold and even numbness.<sup>5</sup> Each of these sensations are an indication that there is built-up stress (energy residue) that needs to be discharged and released. Allow your attention to surround these hotspots without judging or trying to make them go away. This exercise is just to increase your awareness of what you are feeling as you are feeling it.

## Discharging Energy Residue

**E**nergy residue is cumulative stress and trauma that has built up in the nervous system and needs to be discharged. The place in the body where most people are able to immediately identify energy residue is the neck, shoulders and Trapezius muscle that connects the two. It is worth asking yourself why this is so.

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<sup>5</sup> The “natural” feeling we should be experiencing when we are fully connected to ourselves – physically, mentally and emotionally, is the experience of flowing energy and awareness. We should be experiencing the feeling of being comfortable and “at home” inside ourselves. The natural state as I now understand it and experience it is one of flowing energy through the body.

Why is it, that almost everyone can feel the tension, tightness almost frozen, sore muscles in their neck, shoulders and Trapezius? What must we be doing to make them so stiff and sore? The answer of course is that we are (usually subconsciously) tensing and tightening these muscles over and over throughout the day<sup>6</sup> in a type of bracing reaction. We are literally bracing ourselves for the next unexpected stress that we didn't see coming.

As you begin to increase your somatic awareness you will begin to notice how often and in which circumstances you are tensing and tightening these muscles. In addition you may also notice that you are tightening the muscles in your stomach and restricting your breathing as well. In fact, we are chronically holding in and restricting our breathing.<sup>7</sup> We have just gotten so used to it we call it “normal.”

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<sup>6</sup> It is estimated that we go into a stress reaction up to 60 times a day.

<sup>7</sup> To observe “natural” breathing watch a baby or young child breathe. Notice how easily and naturally their abdomens' extend with each breath. We have lost this capacity because of the chronic tension we hold in our stomachs.

To discharge energy residue from your neck and shoulders allow your attention to imaginatively enter into muscle itself. Imagine that you can sense and feel the residue of stress that is causing the tension, tightness, stiffness, pain or numbness. Allow your attention to surround this energy residue.

As you draw in a long, slow, deep, full breath from your diaphragm, begin to slowly pull your shoulders up toward your ears in concert with your breathing. As you slowly pull your shoulders up as far as you can, visualize, sense and feel that you are pulling all of the stress out of your neck and shoulders. Try to touch your ears with your shoulders.

Simultaneously, allow your attention to focus on the sensation of hardened energy residue breaking up into pieces as you pull your shoulders up to your ears. Sense and feel the hardened tension, tightness and stiffness breaking up and liquefying with the upward movement of your shoulders. Pull your shoulders up as far as they can go and breathe in as fully as you can to a count of four.

When you've pulled your shoulders up as far as they can go and have breathed in as deeply as you can, allow your shoulders to relax down to a resting position and the air to discharge from your mouth in a sigh of relief. Push all of the oxygen from your lungs as you exhale. As you discharge your air, visualize, sense and feel all of your stress and tension being released with your breath.

Watch a video demonstrating Discharging Energy Residue:

<https://youtu.be/G71OvpnZMyE>

## Dynamic Tension

For many of us energy residue has become chronic and “hardened” into our muscles and nervous systems. Simple movement may not be enough to release the buried energy residue. Progressive muscle relaxation<sup>8</sup> is a technique that utilizes tightening, moving and releasing a specific muscle

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/muscle-relaxation-for-stress-insomnia>

group to relieve embedded stress and tension. This type of movement is called dynamic (moving) tension.

To discharge embedded energy residue utilizing dynamic tension follow the same instructions as before. Except this time, as you pull your shoulders up toward your ears, consciously tighten the Trapezius muscles with as much tension as you are comfortable with as you sharply draw in a deep breath from your diaphragm. When you've pulled your shoulders as close to your ears as you can, discharge your air and release the shoulders with a whoosh as you expel your stress.

Watch a video on utilizing dynamic tension:

<https://youtu.be/lWkXFKXp1uo>

## Recharging with Mindful Movement

**A**fter I burned out of the ER and developed severe and persistent depression, I quit my profession and moved to Singapore. There, I met a Qigong master



and learned Qigong. As a western trained psychotherapist I knew nothing about Qi and did not believe in “Chinese hocus pocus.” After six months of Qigong I threw away my Prozac and have not taken it since (30 years).

Qigong is a form of mindful movement. Although I was an athlete and had studied martial arts for over 20 years before learning Qigong there is no comparison between “regular” exercise and mindful movement. Mindful movement is in a class all by itself.

Mindful movement is conscious, intentional and focused where you become completely absorbed in the exercise itself. Most exercises are done to get a certain result such as weight training or running. They are often done distracting yourself watching TV while on a treadmill. They are usually not done for the intrinsic sense of energy, awareness, strength, flexibility and flow that comes from the very activity itself.

The mindful movement I now do is what I call “FlowMotion.” It is a modified Qigong exercise that I can do anytime,

anywhere and it takes just a few minutes to get into that sense of Flow. The link below will take you to a video I recently made that illustrates the Joy of FlowMotion:

<https://youtu.be/MQgCCRJr-Ug>

Any kind of mindful movement will produce a sense of flow; yoga, tai chi, dance, even walking and running if it is done for the intrinsic enjoyment and positive energy produced by the activity. I choose FlowMotion because it is so simple and easy to do and has almost immediate benefits; just a couple of minutes of FlowMotion and I feel immediately energized.

The importance of mindful movement in combating stress cannot be understated.

More than any other method, mindful movement is possibly the most powerful, direct and immediate way to release energy residue and activate positive energy that can have far reaching beneficial effects physically and psychologically. Like any other method it requires getting over the mind-set of: “I don’t have the time,” or “It won’t work for me,” or...

## FlowMotion

*“FlowMotion is the practice of inducing the physical state of flow that can’t help but evoke mental and emotional flow. It is the alignment and focus of physical and psychic energy into a fluid, spontaneous motion that over a period of practice will transform the frozen energy of depression into the fluid, alive energy of flow.”*

- Karl LaRowe: Breath of Relief

**F**lowMotion is natural movement, a physical flow that creatively expresses the essence of your natural self. The harder you try to do FlowMotion, the more difficult it becomes. The more you surrender to the natural rhythm that is already playing within your body and mind, the more natural and spontaneous your motions become.

FlowMotion is centered and connected, it’s a movement that begins in your core and flows up through the center of your body, connecting all parts of your body together in motion and rhythm, while remaining anchored to your core.

Each part of your body is separate, with its own individual awareness and intelligence, and simultaneously connected, immediately responsive to every other part of your body. No part of your body moves in complete isolation. Every movement influence and shapes every other movement.

FlowMotion is fun, containing at its heart a sense of playfulness, an almost childlike abandon to and trust of your body-mind and the sensation of motion. At times it can start to feel like you're floating. It's exciting, new, refreshing, and invigorating each time you engage in the movement. There is a very deep, almost cellular, longing in the body for the creative flow of intelligent energy.

As you begin to follow the flow of energy from your core out into conscious movement, you'll start to notice different qualities of the energy emerging in response to your breathing and the motions your body spontaneously creates. As you begin to trust and rely fully on the natural intelligence of your body-mind (includes the natural intelligence of your

body), you can surrender completely to a continuously evolving movement, a sense of motion that, over time, will create itself.

### **The Practice: Breath of Relief**

*"Qi is the Chinese word for 'life energy.' According to Chinese medicine, qi is the animating power that flows through all living things. Gong, means 'work' or 'benefits acquired through perseverance and practice.' Thus, qigong means working with the life energy, learning how to control the flow and distribution of qi to improve health and harmony of mind and body."*

— *The Way of Qigong by Kenneth Cohen, MA, Ballantine Books*

Breath of Relief is the first movement in the practice of FlowMotion which is comprised of four interdependent movements. To begin Breath of Relief, hold your hands in front of you as though you were holding a large beach ball out from your body. Your hands should be about 18 inches apart from each other elbows slightly bent, palms facing towards

each other and slightly down. Allow your arms and shoulders to relax. Relax your neck and straighten your back as you allow your core center to “float.”

Now allow your awareness to expand to include sensing the energy that is literally absorbed into, and radiating out from, the earth. Sense your personal connection with the earth and with this energy; do you experience yourself as a part of, even an extension of, this living earth upon which we live? Or, do you feel disconnected from this enormous energy source?

Consciously engage your creative imagination to extend and attune your awareness to sense alive, flowing, energy that is constantly radiating up from the earth. Visualize and imaginatively sense this energy penetrate the soles of your feet and extend through your knees and thighs to your core.

Breath and motion have an intimate relationship; you tend to move with the same force, fluidity and connectedness as you breathe. When you are anxious and breathing in short, shallow, uneven breaths, your movements will also tend to be

jerky and uneven. When you consciously breathe smooth, flowing and connected breaths your motion is also more likely to be smooth, flowing and connected. Begin this movement starting from the original standing position with your arms extended, elbows bent and your hands held in front of you as though you were lightly holding onto a large beach ball. Your knees are slightly bent and you feel as though you can float the center of your body.

Gently bend your knees and allow gravity to pull your center slowly toward the ground as you breathe in to a count of four. Breathe energy in from the earth through the soles of your feet, up your ankles and knees to your core.

Simultaneously, allow your hands to flow in toward your chest pulling in vital new energy through your palms into your heart center. Coordinate your movements so that your hands and arms are contracting toward your heart center as your knees are slowly bending to the force of gravity lowering your center of gravity towards the ground.

Open your core and your heart to alive, intelligent, nurturing and connecting energy as you breathe in fully from your diaphragm. Sense, feel and visualize this energy being drawn up from the ground through your feet and in through your palms as your legs and arms contract in harmony.

Bend your knees and lower your center of gravity only to the degree you are comfortable. Do not push or strain for results. If you cannot bend down very far at first that is completely fine. If you have pain or injury to your back or knees, consult your healthcare provider before doing this exercise.

As you bend your knees and lower your center of gravity pay attention to your back and your balance. It is the tendency for beginners to bend forward as they lower their center of gravity and lose their alignment.

As you bend your knees and lower your center of gravity, hold your back with a little arch so that your pelvis is slightly tilted forward. Allow gravity to do its work – you just supply the brakes. As you slowly bend your knees, keeping a slight arch



in your back, allow gravity to slowly, smoothly and gently pull you towards the ground.

When you reach that place where you cannot comfortably bend your legs and knees, allow your center to slow its momentum. Your hands are pulled in towards your chest. Your lungs are filled with fresh oxygen and your core and your heart are charged with energy.

Just as the momentum in your legs begins to transition from down to up, allow your legs to gently, slowly and smoothly bounce during the space that your in-breath is transitioning to out-breath. During this point of transition from down to up, in, to out, inhale to exhale, there is a sweet moment of weightlessness and timelessness as breath, energy, motion and momentum are suspended in time and motion.

As you complete the gentle bounce, begin breathing out as you sense the momentum in your legs pushing you up. As much as you can, “ride” on the momentum created by the downward motion. Convert the downward energy into

upward energy by “bouncing” on the ball of energy that has been created by your breath, energy and motion.

Breathe energy and awareness from your core into your thighs, knees, ankles and back as you begin to stand; just as your momentum carries you out of the gentle bounce to standing, visualize you are consciously breathing awareness-energy into the muscles of your thighs, knees, ankles and back actually propelling them into a standing position. Use minimal muscle energy to lift your body upwards. Open yourself to a different kind of energy that is created and directed by breath, energy and motion. It is the energy of effortless effort, the energy of flow.

Simultaneously, breathe energy-awareness from your heart center into your hands as your arms begin to straighten effortlessly. Allow this energy-awareness to propel your arms and hands forward with as little consciously directed effort on your part as possible.

Breathe out slowly, smoothly and continuously to a count of six. Activate your felt-sense and visualize your breath energy releasing old, stagnant freeze-energy from your heart. Imagine this energy being dispelled as you are slowly, sighing out a deep, resonate, breath of relief.

As your legs and arms straighten in harmony with the slow releasing of your breath, allow your attention to rest in your core. From your core expand your awareness in all directions in a kind of holographic attention where you are instantly and simultaneously connected to your breath, energy and motion that is in every part of your body.

From hands to feet, elbows to ankles, all parts of the body flow together as one, while retaining their identity as separate individual units. Without any sense of fragmentation, your awareness is able to move fluidly from experiencing your body as separate, individual parts, to experiencing your body as one whole, indivisible unit, to experiencing your body as both, simultaneously.

As your breath empties out completely, and you return to your original starting position, feel the full completion of the movement. Do not rush or try to get finished with it. Allow the movement to complete itself.

Just as the last of your oxygen is being discharged and you are standing with knees slightly bent and arms held out in front of you as though you were holding onto a large beach ball, place your attention into your core; Is the earth calling to you again? If you intuitively sense that it is, allow the momentum of your upward motion to seamlessly transition into downward motion as you open your core, heart and lungs to fresh, new, vital Energy in MOTION.

With each slow, fluid repetition of the movement, surrender to the flow of the motion. The basics of Breath of Relief are very simple; keep your back straight and aligned as you draw in, circulate and exhale the vital energy of your breath in flowing harmony with your movements.

As you master the mechanics of the movement allow your attention to sink into your core center again and again. Continually align your attention and your intention to sense the release and transformation of energy residue. Each time that you can align body and breath with energy and motion, you are transforming stagnant energy residue into positive energy flow. For a video to guide you on practicing breath of relief click on: <https://youtu.be/3M7fugDnXDU>

For me the best time to practice Breath of Relief is in the morning just after I get up. I personally can't think of a better way to get myself into the flow of my day than practicing FlowMotion. When you start your day by opening your body and mind to the flow of positive energy you can't help but be influenced in a positive way.

In my way of thinking today, there is absolutely nothing more important to thriving than transforming the frozen energy residue of chronic stress and depression into the vital energy of flow through the practice of mindful movement.

## Conscious Breathing

**B**reathing consciously is a stress management technique because most of us, most of the time breathe unconsciously and incorrectly. We breathe short, shallow and often rapid breaths in response to the chronic stress we are experiencing in our lives in general and in times of crisis specifically.

As we discovered in the previous chapters, we often react automatically and usually unconsciously to stress by tensing and tightening our bodies thereby restricting the flow of oxygen and energy. The way in which we breathe is a major source of our energy; short, shallow breathing restricts the flow and absorption of energy giving oxygen. To have more and better, calmer energy, we must become aware of how we breathe and learn to breathe consciously; fully, deeply and slowly.

You can practice conscious breathing anytime and anywhere. Simply extend your awareness from your head into your

midsection as you learned from somatic awareness. Focus your attention on your abdomen: What do you sense and notice? Does it feel relaxed, open and responsive, or does it feel tense and tight as if it were holding something in? Really focus intuitively as you direct your [“felt-sense”](#) into your midsection – your abdomen and diaphragm.

What do you notice as you bring your attention into your midsection? Can you sense and feel the years of energy residue that has accumulated into a kind of rigid inflexibility? Let go of the chronic hardened tension. Allow a warm sensation of loosening and letting go to form in your stomach and allow that feeling to sink deeply into your [core](#).<sup>9</sup>

Allow your stomach to deeply relax. As your attention focuses on the energy that you are feeling from your core, allow a breath to begin to arise from your abdomen. You do not need to push or force the breath, just allow your abdomen to

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<sup>9</sup> I am using the word core to describe a feeling-sensation of strength and consolidation that seems to come from deep inside ourselves and can be felt around the area of your heart and/or stomach.

expand naturally. Allow your diaphragm to open as your stomach expands to allow in the oxygen. As you breathe in through your nose, open your imagination to sense and feel the energy of the oxygen as it slowly fills your lungs to a count of four.

Visualize how the oxygen is entering your lungs to its natural capacity, entering your blood stream and being carried to every cell in your body with its life-giving energy. Imagine that energy feeding and nurturing your mind, body and spirit.

When you have breathed in as much as you can, allow your breath to transition naturally from inhaling to exhaling. Allow the “old” breath, carbon dioxide and “spent energy” to slowly escape through your mouth to a count of six. Feel a sense of release as you exhale all of your tired, spent energy back into the atmosphere.

Empty yourself completely. We often hold onto our breath and our emotions rather than completely let them go. Give yourself permission to completely let go of your stress and



exhaustion. Allow the energy residue that has built up in your stomach to break free and escape with your breath.

As you completely empty out, once again allow your breath and energy to arise from your diaphragm to begin another conscious breath. Give yourself at least five minutes of conscious breathing when feeling stressed and tired.

## Pause, Breathe, Relax, Reflect, Respond

**O**ne of the most important things we can do when we are stressed out is, take just a couple of seconds to pause, breathe and relax. Yet, it is one of the hardest things to do because when we feel the urgency and pressure to take action – particularly as healthcare providers to help patients – *we become convinced that we don't have even a couple of seconds to take care of ourselves.*

**This is a false belief that we must learn to overcome.**

The truth is, we must find or make the time to take care of ourselves. If we don't take care of ourselves, we cannot effectively take care of others.

**Pause.** Learning to just pause when you are right on the edge of an “[emotional hijacking](#)<sup>10</sup>” is just about impossible. When our emotions are at a boiling point, it is very difficult to think clearly and take appropriate action. It is much better to learn to identify the signs of stress before you reach this point.

As you practice somatic awareness, you will become more familiar with the physical sensations that develop as your stress level increases. You will notice the tension and tightening in your neck and shoulders, the sense of pressure in your chest or heart area, the restriction of your breathing. You will also begin to notice the increased sense of emotional

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<sup>10</sup> An emotional hijacking originally coined by Harvard Psychologist Daniel Goleman in his international best seller: Emotional Intelligence,” refers to the process in which our emotions can interfere with the functioning of our brain and clear thinking.

urgency and possibly even the tirade of anxious, negative thinking. *This is the time to pause.*

**Breathe.** The best way to pause is to breathe mindfully. Simply pause what you are doing for a second and take a deep, mindful breath from your diaphragm to a count of four. Sense and feel the calm, soothing energy flow through your body and then release your breath and all of the stress in your body as you exhale to a count of six.

**Relax.** As you breathe mindfully, you will automatically begin to relax. It can be very useful to help that relaxation by discharging the energy residue in your neck and shoulders. Take another deep breath and pull your shoulders up as though you could touch your ears. Sense and feel all of the hardened tension in your neck and shoulders begin to break up into little pieces. As you release your shoulders and your breath simultaneously, allow all of that built-up energy residue escape with your breath as you exhale and slowly let your shoulders back down.

**Reflect.** With just a couple of breaths your stress level will be at a much lower level. You are now in a better place to think clearly about what you *really* want to do at this moment. Bring your thinking brain back on-line and consider your options.

**Respond.** Responding is taking conscious action. It is aligning your intention with your attention and making the best choices available to you. Pause, breathe, relax, reflect and respond is probably most useful in our decision-making and our interactions with others. Each time you practice this, you are deactivating the old stress-reaction brain circuit and establishing a new neural-emotional response.

## Grounding

**G**rounding is a method that was developed to help therapists who work with trauma survivors keep themselves focused in their here and now present reality rather than [dissociating](#) as a defensive mechanism to the secondary trauma they may be experiencing.

Dissociation is essentially a defensive mechanism to disconnect from chronic and/or overwhelming anxiety or trauma. When our here and now, in-the-body experience is too stressful and/or our resilience is compromised, our attention can take flight away from our immediate experience. We can lose focus, go blank, feel numb and/or become disconnected and disengaged. We can begin to feel like robots.

**Grounding** can help us reconnect with ourselves and find safety and comfort inside our own body and mind. The best way to understand the psychological process of grounding is to compare it with its electrical counterpart; grounding electricity. Lightning rods are a common way to allow the energy of lightning to pass harmlessly through the rod into the ground. In a similar way, psychological grounding allows the energy of stress and trauma to pass harmlessly through us.

Some of the benefits of grounding include:

- Sense of connection, feeling solid and safe within the body;
- Connected with external reality by facilitating an external focus of sights and sounds;
- Developing a here/now orientation; and,
- Sympathetic de-activation.

Grounding techniques include:

- Pay attention to body sensations - feet on the floor, body weight, posture and position.
- Sensing your boundary at skin level.
- Rubbing surface of skin (not massaging muscles) - with own hand, towel, pillow, against wall.
- Feeling where clothes touch skin; where body meets chair.
- Sense the solidity of bones, by tapping bones at elbow, wrist, knee or ankle.
- Tensing parts of the body which feel vulnerable / shaky.

- Muscular resistance in legs, arms, by squeezing the muscles.
- Refocus eyes - move gaze around room.
- Reconnect to sights, sounds and sensations.
- Shift position in chair - sit upright.
- Take a deep breath - follow breath in body.
- Wiggle toes.
- Touch watch, ring, arm of chair, clothing.
- Pinch muscle between thumb and forefinger.

As simple as these techniques are, they can be remarkably effective in refocusing your attention from the internal distraction of all the chaos and noise inside and outside your head to a greater sense of calm and safety that you can begin to develop within yourself.

When these simple, easy methods are combined with somatic awareness, discharging energy residue, mindful movement, conscious breathing and pause, breathe, relax, reflect and respond, you will be learning to consciously regulate your

nervous system. Psychologically, you will be less prone to acute stress, anger and frustration. You will begin to experience a deeper sense of calm, inner strength and resilience.

## Creative Visualization

**C** [reative visualization](#) is another powerful method that is often underestimated. Almost every serious athlete utilizes it because it is remarkably effective in decreasing stress and enhancing performance. The fact is *everybody utilizes visualization*, although it tends to be reactive rather than creative.

Reactive visualization is what most of us do most of the time. It often begins the moment we get up to go to work and the same, repetitive, reactive thoughts, feelings and images come to mind; we visualize how tough and stressful work is going to be seeing the images in our mind, feeling the stress in our bodies and sometimes even saying to ourselves: “It’s going to be another one of those days!”



Creative visualization takes a different approach. Rather than automatically reacting to repetitive thoughts and images that are driven by memories of negative experiences, creative visualization consciously creates a new “program” for your subconscious mind to work from. This requires conscious, creative thinking, feeling, imaging and behaving.

It is best to practice creative visualization in concert with several of the methods previously described; somatic awareness, discharging energy residue, conscious breathing and pause, breathe, relax, reflect and respond; it is very difficult if not impossible to be truly creative when feeling stressed and overwhelmed.

To practice creative visualization, pick a time when you will not be disturbed for a couple of minutes – just before your shift or just after you get up in the morning is the best time. Scan your body utilizing somatic awareness to identify your stress hot spots. Discharge and release the stress. Relax. Breathe a sense of calm-alertness into your body and mind.

With clear intent, visualize in your mind how you want to feel and respond to the potential stresses you are probably going to encounter during your day.

Creative visualization is much more than just seeing pictures in your mind; it also involves your feelings, emotions and body sensations. As you are previewing your day, you will no doubt experience tension, tightness, and anxiety anticipating what may happen. You might also feel a sense of dread, deep fatigue, anger and helplessness.

As these feelings and the images that accompany them come into you mind and body, acknowledge them – do not ignore them or pretend they don't exist. But, do your best not to get caught up in them and frantically replay them over and over again. This is called [gratuitous negativity](#)<sup>11</sup> and it can spiral down into hopelessness, rage and depression. If you find

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<sup>11</sup> Gratuitous negativity is described by Dr. Barbara Fredrickson in her book: "Positivity: Top Notch Research Reveals the 3-to-1 Ratio That Will Change Your Life," as: "predictable patterns of negative thinking that breed negative emotions."

yourself caught up in them, pause, breathe, relax, discharge the energy residue, allow your mind to calm and soothe and then continue with the visualization.

As you let go of the obsessive negative feelings, sensations and images, re-direct your attention toward a creative response. Visualize yourself in a *realistic positive way* that is most consistent with your natural way of thinking, feeling and acting.

If you are previewing how you will better manage yourself in the midst of chaos when you come into work for instance, visualize how you can remain calmer, more centered, more attentive and focused on patients' needs. It is not helpful to visualize yourself as completely immune or untouched by the chaos and suffering you encounter every day. The goal is realistic optimism<sup>12</sup> not an imaginary panacea.

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<sup>12</sup> Realistic optimism is based on having a positive view based on what is actually happening. Pretending that everything is OK when it clearly isn't is actually harmful.

As you visualize yourself responding more in alignment with your better self, also do your best to imagine feeling calmer, more centered and grounded. If you have difficulty in accessing these emotions remember a time that was less stressful and chaotic in which you did experience those emotions and sensations. Borrow that memory to help you with this visualization.

As you visualize, open your mind and your heart to allowing in these sensations, emotions and images even if they feel foreign and unfamiliar at first. Do your best to suspend feelings of pessimism and disbelief. Simply the practice of soothing negative emotions and re-focusing on a more positive outcome is beneficial and will result in developing greater resilience.

## Self-Compassion

The final method for self-care is literally learning to care for ourselves with self-compassion. Self-compassion is the act of treating ourselves with kindness, understanding and forgiveness rather than self-judgment and criticism. As self-compassion researcher Dr Kristen Neff states:

*“Instead of mercilessly judging and criticizing yourself for various inadequacies or shortcomings, self-compassion means you are kind and understanding when confronted with personal failings...”<sup>13</sup>*

Although the philosophy of self-compassion is ancient, recent research on the practice of self-compassion has shown that people who regularly practice self-compassion are less likely to be depressed, anxious and stressed. As a result, they are more likely to be happy, resilient and optimistic about the

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<sup>13</sup> <https://self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2/> <https://self-compassion.org/tips-for-practice/>

future. In the end, those who are self-compassionate experience better mental health.<sup>14</sup> This is especially important when we are facing down high levels of stress and uncertainty every day which, by default, will trigger our negative thinking and emotional patterns. Mindful self-compassion is the science behind how to support ourselves especially during times of stress and pain.

*“With self-compassion we mindfully accept that the moment is painful, and embrace ourselves with kindness and care in response, remembering that imperfection is part of the shared human experience. This allows us to hold ourselves in love and connection, giving ourselves the support and comfort needed to bear the pain, while providing the optimal conditions for growth and transformation.”<sup>15</sup>*

The best time to utilize self-compassion is when you are being harsh, judgmental and critical of yourself for not doing or

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<sup>14</sup> <https://positivepsychology.com/self-compassion-research/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2/>

being good enough. We are harshest with ourselves when we don't fulfil our self-expectations. Most of us have internalized a critical inner voice that believes our personal value is based upon what we do rather than who we are. When we are routinely confronted with situations in which there is no possible way to do (good) enough, we whip ourselves with our inner-critic that who we are isn't good enough.

We will often say horrible, insulting things to ourselves such as: "You stupid #!\* What's wrong with you?! How could you, why didn't you? You useless, worthless piece of #!!" (and much, much more). In addition to the harsh critical self-talk we may be experiencing feelings of guilt, shame, anger, self-loathing and disgust. There may also be deep feelings of hurt and heaviness in your chest, around your heart or in your stomach. You may literally feel "sick with yourself."

When you first notice this reaction: *Pause! Breathe. Relax.*

The most important thing you can do right away is to ease this negative reaction of setting yourself on fire. Each time you

can pause this highly energized automatic reaction the more you are taking control of your emotions and your reactions. Catching yourself in this automatic reaction and then finding the will to do something different may be the hardest part. It requires coming to the understanding within yourself that continually beating yourself up will not bring you the results that you want. You can never build yourself up by knocking yourself down.

When you do catch yourself, and are able to, pause, breathe and relax, it is useful to discharge the residual energy. If you can, doing a couple of dynamic tension shoulder rotations may help. If you are in a place where you do not feel comfortable doing the shoulder rotation, then take a couple of long, slow, deep breaths and let the air out very slowly.

After a couple of deep breaths bring your attention inside yourself; simply focus your awareness inside your body, around your heart. To the best of your ability visualize that you can surround your heart with the feelings of kindness and



compassion. Visualize a warm soothing feeling surrounding and penetrating your heart. Affirm to yourself that you are your most important resource in being able to help others. Develop an affirmation such as: “I am good enough,” or “I am doing the best I know how to do.” Repeat your affirmation several times with as much feeling of self-compassion as you can. Allow yourself to accept and internalize this affirmative compassion.

To watch a video on how to do self-compassion click on:

<https://youtu.be/tuRK9aRZnqI>

## Conclusion Part One

**T**hese eight methods just described are simple, easy to do and effective. The most difficult thing about them is to actually put them into practice. Stress and secondary trauma can breed negativity and a sense of helplessness. The most important and effective thing you can do right now, is to pick one or two of these methods and

commit to putting them into action. Make it your mission to start every shift with the intent of more effectively managing your stress. The following methods are just suggestions. You are invited to try out any and all of the methods described here in whatever order that makes most sense to you.

# Section 2: Application

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## Preparing for Work

**P**reparing for work is one of the most important things we can do to manage the stress and secondary trauma of our jobs, yet most of us scarcely give it a second thought. When we go to work on “automatic pilot” we are much more likely to fall into negative thinking, feeling and behaviour patterns and these patterns are deeply ingrained.

One of the first things I do every morning before I start my day is ten or fifteen minutes of mindful movement. I have found that it is crucial to start every day by energizing my body and mind with positive energy. Exercise is known to be one of the most vital things we can do to energize our [immune systems](#) and prevent [burnout](#) and [depression](#).<sup>16</sup> Mindful movement is the perfect exercise to do every morning

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<sup>16</sup> The clinical evidence is overwhelming on the many benefits of exercise in supporting our immune systems, preventing burnout and depression.

because it is so very simple and easy and it takes very little time to master. It also just feels good. If you have your own routine; DO IT. If you don't, give mine a try. Here is a video you can watch:

<https://youtu.be/3M7fugDnXDU>

After the mindful movement, when you are feeling relaxed and energized is the perfect time to do a couple of minutes of creative visualization. Simply rest for a couple of minutes and visualize, sense and feel how you want to respond to the multiple challenges you know you will be facing. Bring the positive energy you're feeling into your visualization. Rehearse how you want to respond to specific potential stressful situations.

**Prepare yourself for your shift.**

**Go in with your eyes open.**

**Expect to be tested.**

## Managing the Chaos

**O**nce you've arrived at work, how are you going to manage the chaos? What is your first reaction as you pull into the parking lot and/or walk through the doors? What are you feeling in your body?

Now is a perfect time to utilize somatic awareness. Actually, any time is a good time to utilize somatic awareness. The more you can begin to sense and feel how your body is reacting to the various stresses you are experiencing the sooner you will know when it is time to discharge energy residue that is building up in your body and mind.

The physical signals in your body are; tension and tightness in your neck and shoulders, pressure or heaviness in your chest or heart area, tightness or acid feeling in your stomach and/or restriction in your breathing. Emotionally you may be feeling anxious, upset and on edge. Mentally your mind may be racing, unfocused, anticipating; "What will go wrong next?"

When you notice these signals your body and mind are sending you, listen. They're trying to tell you something. Rather than ignore them and push on, take just a moment to discharge the energy residue. When you can, rotate your shoulders and release the stress as you exhale. If you need to, utilize dynamic tension. Those videos again are:

<https://youtu.be/G71OvpnZMyE> and,

<https://youtu.be/lWkXFKXp1uo>.

Whenever you can during your day, and really look for it, take a short break. As Loehr and Swartz state in their bestselling book: *The Power of Full Engagement*; *"It is not the intensity of energy expenditure that produces burnout, impaired performance and physical breakdown, but rather the duration of expenditure without recovery."*

When you find that your physical energy is low recover your energy with conscious breathing. Take in oxygen which is your best source of energy in long, slow, deep breaths. Nurture the energy. Allow the oxygen to be absorbed into your lungs and

from your lungs through your arteries to every cell in your body before you breathe out. As you release your breath, release the tension and stress that have accumulated in your body as energy residue. Push all of your breath out before you take in a new breath.

## Encountering Patients

**A**s routine as seeing patients may have become, it is worthwhile to be psychologically prepared for each encounter. Every patient, whether we are aware of it or not, represents more than “just another case.” Despite the tendency to sometimes depersonalize our patients, every one of them has some kind of emotional impact on us – particularly when they are suffering. Over time this vicarious trauma can result in [compassion fatigue](#) which is beautifully explained in this short video.

<https://youtu.be/kse7UE82UFU>

One of the most important things we can do is prepare ourselves before or even as we encounter each patient. Rather than meet a patient on “automatic pilot” we should *check in* with ourselves first; how are we feeling physically and emotionally about this encounter (somatic awareness); take a deep full breath if we are experiencing tension, and release the energy residue (conscious breathing, discharging energy residue).

Next as we meet the patient particularly if they are suffering, we may want to ground ourselves. It is often our tendency to dissociate from our feelings and emotions when we interact with patients and slip into our comfortable “tell me where it hurts” routine as a way of avoiding secondarily experiencing the patient’s suffering. The problem is, we often [mirror](#)<sup>17</sup> our patients whether we intend to or not or whether we are aware of it or not. We can either become aware of how and

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<sup>17</sup> Unconscious mirroring can result in vicarious trauma.



when we mirror our patients and prepare for it proactively, or we can deny it and fall victim to it.

Grounding helps us remain connected with our physical and emotional reactions rather than fall under the spell of dissociation. As you are interacting with your patient remember to bring your attention back inside your body:

- Pay attention to body sensations - feet on the floor, body weight, posture and position.
- Sensing your boundary at skin level.
- Feeling where clothes touch skin; where body meets chair.
- Refocus eyes - move gaze around room.
- Reconnect to sights, sounds and sensations.
- Take a deep breath - follow the breath in your body.

By grounding yourself, remaining relaxed and breathing fully and naturally, you may prevent an automatic [“freeze](#)

response<sup>18</sup> when you are interacting with your patients, which is the basis for secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue.

## The Art of Charting

**D**oes anybody here like to do charting? I used to ask that during my workshops on compassion fatigue and would always hear a groan. It seems EVERYBODY dislikes charting, but possibly not for the reason you may think; In addition to the extra time, energy and effort in an already overwhelming shift, charting also means that we have to re-visit the patient and their pain and suffering yet another time.

In other words, we are encountering the patient again, except this time it is through our charting. Each time we chart on a patient, we have to bring that patient back into our minds and recall what they were experiencing and how they were

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<sup>18</sup> The freeze response in an automatic reaction to traumatic threat when fight and flight are not available.

feeling. Even using highly technical medical terms does not prevent us from emotionally reacting as we write in the patients' medical chart.

In the same way as encountering patients requires a little preparation so does charting; somatic awareness, conscious breathing and discharging energy residue. This will help prepare you to flow with your feelings and emotions as you are writing rather than unconsciously tense, tighten and resist them.

As you sit to write or type into the chart allow the needed information along with your feelings, sensations and emotions to come into your awareness. If you feel yourself tensing up and holding back, breathe deeply and relax. Allow the images to form and the words to flow. Allow them to flow from your heart and your mind, into your arms out through your fingers into the pen or the keyboard.

As you recall, allow and express your experience with the patient to be transferred from inside of you to the chart,

visualize that you are emptying out all of the emotion or energy in ***motion*** you absorbed from the patient into the chart. When you have finished, say to yourself “I can now let go of this patient’s suffering,” and visualize, sense and feel that you have emptied out all-of-the energy residue associated with that patient into the chart. Allow yourself to feel free and clear.

## Leaving for Home

It is finally time to leave for home. There was so much to do, so many patients to see, so much pressure, so little time. There is always more to do than there is enough time and energy to do it. If we measure our personal sense of being good enough only by what we do or have, we will always be dissatisfied with ourselves. In our line of work, there is no such thing as being able to do enough, fast enough, thorough enough, compassionately enough...[good enough](#).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>We define (Good) Enoughness as: “an expression of our Authentic Self, experiencing the vibrant energy that at its core is a

For a short video clip on being good enough watch:

[https://youtu.be/m2oFpCDSt\\_o](https://youtu.be/m2oFpCDSt_o)

The way in which we prepare to leave work for home is as important, as the way in which we left home for work. If we have no method for discharging and releasing the energy residue that we accumulated that day and bring it home with us after work, it will accumulate and eventually lead to compassion fatigue, burnout and even depression.

**It is essential that you release energy residue each and every day before you leave your workplace.**

It is also vital that we acknowledge, allow and *embody* our good enoughness, each and every day. The active, regular practice of self-compassion is essential. In addition to the abbreviated version described, there is a longer, more detailed version described in this video:

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passion for living as we embrace a courageous willingness to actively accept and authentically live our lives with meaning and purpose.” (p. 92).

<https://youtu.be/tuRK9aRZnqI>

The essential process of self-compassion at the end of your day is to:

1. Bring your attention inside your body to sense and feel where you are holding energy residue;
2. Discharge energy residue (shoulder rotation);
3. Consciously breathe and center your awareness. Place one hand over your stomach and the other hand over heart;
4. Create a sense of safety and compassion within yourself by sensing and feeling safety and security in your stomach and compassion in your heart. Allow that feeling to grow;
5. Review your shift, bringing as much self-acceptance and compassion for yourself and those you worked with and helped as possible. Forgive yourself for the mistakes you made and do your best to forgive others for their mistakes.

6. Allow and embody your good-enoughness. Know in your heart that without any doubt who you are as a person is always, always good-enough.

## Conclusion Part Two

The Chinese character for Crisis is Danger and Opportunity.



The danger is clear and present. The opportunity however can be hidden. In my experience of 40 years in mental health, I am always amazed at

the strength and resilience demonstrated by healthcare professionals. It is truly our superpower. We will survive this crisis as well. But maybe, we can do more than just survive. Possibly, even with the impossible task set before us, the unreasonable demands and impossible expectations, through all of it, we can discover that at our core, who we truly are, is stronger, kinder, more compassionate and courageous than we ever imagined.