



# Creative Self Care

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**‘Caring for myself is not  
self-indulgence, it is  
self-preservation, and that is  
an act of political warfare’  
Audre Lorde**

## INTRODUCTION

*Social work is a demanding profession* because it involves dealing with human suffering and managing risk, uncertainty, harm, neglect and abuse in ways that can make us vulnerable to compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), burnout and other forms of ill-health.

In recent times the pressures in social work have been compounded by:

- The impact of a decade of austerity which has deepened inequality and made the lives of the poorest and most marginalised even more difficult.
- The Covid-19 global pandemic/trauma.
- Social injustice – a heightened awareness of racial and other forms of identity based trauma.
- Environmental degradation – growing concern about the state of the planet engendering climate change anxiety and eco-grief.

*The exceptional time we have recently lived through*, where we have practiced ‘social work in extremis’ calls for an exceptional response, namely Radical, Authentic Self-Care (RASC).

The purpose of this learning tool is to:

- Help you reflect on what you have learned about yourself during the recent era.
- Underline the importance of RASC for social work practitioners and help harness learning to support post traumatic growth.

This resource starts with a set of questions to help you evaluate what you have learned about yourself and your stress patterns during 2020/21. You are then encouraged to build on this learning to develop a comprehensive, bespoke, RASC plan based on *Newell's Ecological Self-Care Framework (2017)*.

It is suggested that you re-visit this plan on a monthly basis to assess the extent to which you are investing in the behaviours and creative activities you have identified as essential to your overall wellbeing. This audit tool and RASC plan could be completed on your own as a self-reflective exercise or could form the basis of a supervision session or team discussion.

Lastly you will find a set of questions to support a 5 minute 'pulse reading' at the end of each day to ensure you are prioritising the health-promoting behaviours and creative activities you have identified as key to your professional growth, vitality and resilience.



Remember: Whatever We Choose To Water Will Grow

Gratitude

Mindfulness

Healthy eating

Self-compassion

Exercise

Self-care

Sleep

Your inner cheerleader

Worries

Isolation

Resentments

Regrets

Negative self-talk

Self-doubt

Your inner critic

Unhealthy consumption (of food, news, social media etc.)

**Two key concepts underpin this learning tool: (1) Trauma  
(2) Radical Authentic Self-Care (RASC) for social work practitioners.**

## 1 TRAUMA

We think it is appropriate to use the term “trauma” to describe the impact of the pandemics we have lived through in 2020/21 because of the significant neurophysiological toll these events will have taken on most of us, at both a conscious and an unconscious level.

The following diagram (Dezelic, 2013) describes what happens when the body’s stress response is activated. The term “window of tolerance” describes the desired state of emotional regulation, resilience and psychological flexibility (our comfort zone) and how trauma and stressful events can take us out of our comfort zone into a state of emotional and psychological ‘dysregulation’.

The diagram outlines the importance of being able to return to our emotionally regulated, comfort zone following a stressful event through self-soothing and self-regulating behaviours.

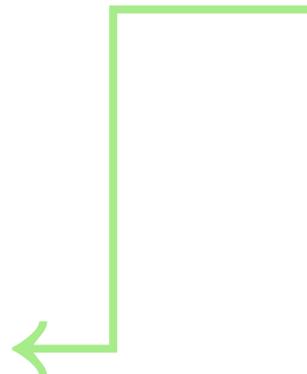
**WINDOW OF TOLERANCE -  
Trauma / Anxiety Related Responses:  
Widening the Comfort Zone for Increased Flexibility**

To stay in the window of tolerance:

- + Mindfulness – being present, in here-n-now
- + Grounding exercises
- + Techniques for self-soothing, calming the body & emotional regulation
- + Deep, slow breathing
- + Recognise limiting beliefs, counter with positive statements about self, new choices

Causes to go out of the window of tolerance:

- + Fear of...  
*Unconscious thought & bodily feeling: control, unsafe, I do not exist, abandonment, rejection.*
- + Trauma-related core beliefs about self are triggered:  
*Emotional & psychological dysregulation occurs.*



- + Anxiety
- + Overwhelmed
- + Chaotic responses
- + Outbursts (emotional or aggressive)
- + Anger/aggression/rage

## HYPER-AROUSSED

### Fight / Flight Response

- + Rigidity
- + Obsessive-compulsive behaviour or thoughts
- + Over-eating / restricting
- + Addictions
- + Impulsivity

Widening the window for psychological flexibility

## COMFORT ZONE Emotionally Regulated

**CALM,  
COOL, COLLECTED,  
CONNECTED**

### ABILITY TO SELF-SOOTHE Ability to regulate Emotional State

Staying within the window allows for better relationship interactions

- + Feign Death Response
- + Dissociation
- + Not present
- + Unavailable/ Shut down
- + Memory Loss
- + Auto pilot

## HYPO-AROUSSED

### Freeze Response

- + Disconnected
- + No display of emotions / flat
- + Separation from self, feelings & emotions

Outside Window of Tolerance

Window of Tolerance

Window of Tolerance



## 2 RADICAL AUTHENTIC SELF-CARE (RASC) FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTITIONERS

*Radical self-care* involves intentionally and consistently prioritising health and sustainability on a personal, community, professional and planetary basis. It is a disposition, an attitude, or ongoing state of body and mind. It encompasses an unwavering commitment to creating a lifestyle that supports the flourishing of self, others and the planet and optimising our health, vitality and wellbeing.

*Radical self-care* also relates to the importance of a comprehensive, holistic approach which acknowledges the interconnectedness of mind, body, spirit and therefore pays attention to all seven, interdependent domains of existence e.g. the biological, interpersonal, organisational, familial, spiritual, recreational and ritual.

*Authentic self-care* refers to the need to stay true to our core values and maintain a connection with our body (twinges, aches and pains) and our inner compass (e.g. our intuition, inner wisdom). It is imperative that we pay attention to messages from our body and ‘gut feelings’ rather than ignore or override them.

Another essential, yet frequently overlooked, aspect of RASC is to take time to promote the positive and rewarding aspects of direct social work practice. This can be achieved by ensuring time is spent during supervision and team meetings celebrating breakthroughs, interventions we are proud of and effective working relationships. It is also important for us to showcase experiences of compassion satisfaction, vicarious resilience and post-traumatic growth as a way of guarding against compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder.

## ACTIVITES

Next you will find an outline of the following four activities to support you in developing and implementing a successful radical, authentic self-care plan:

- 0 A grounding exercise,
- 1 A self-care audit tool
- 2 A suggestion for how to develop a plan of self-care and a template to develop your own Bespoke Radical, Authentic Self-Care Plan.
- 3 A self-care pulse reading exercise to complete at the end of each day (5–10 minutes)



## 0. A GROUNDING EXERCISE

Before you engage in exercises 1–3 (outlined below), you may find it helpful to take a few minutes to ground yourself, clear your mind and release tension in your body through the following 4–7–8 breathing method.

### 4-7-8 Breathing Method

- 1. To start, put one hand on your belly and the other on your chest.**
- 2. Exhale deeply, letting out all the air in your lungs. Allow yourself to make a “whoosh” sound as you exhale.**
- 3. Take a deep, slow breath from your belly, and silently count to 4 as you breathe in.**
- 4. Hold your breath and count from 1 to 7.**
- 5. Breathe out completely as you count from 1 to 8 letting all the air out. Allow yourself to make noise or a “whoosh” sound as you exhale.**
- 6. Repeat 3–6 times or until you feel calm.**

## 1. A POST PANDEMIC REFLECTIVE SELF-AUDIT TOOL

Throughout 2020/21 what have I learned about myself in terms of my stress patterns and level of resourcefulness and resilience?

What are the signs that I am over-extended and under-resourced in terms of the demands on my time and energy? Which parts of my body provide an early warning signal and how do I respond?

Having reflected on the above Window of Tolerance diagram, how much time have I spent in each of the three zones outlined? Am I more prone to hyper-arousal or hypo-arousal? What do I need to do to spend more time in my comfort zone and increase my window of tolerance?

Will I look back on 2020/21 as having resulted in personal and professional, post-traumatic stress or post-traumatic growth? How come?



## 2. NEWELL'S (2017) SEVEN DOMAIN SELF-CARE FRAMEWORK

<i>Self-care domains</i>	<i>Suggested issues to consider within each domain</i>
BIOLOGICAL	Balanced diet, adequate sleep (being in bed by 10.30), regular exercise, adequate rest and recuperation, addressing any physical or mental health problem via investing in specialist support or therapy.
INTERPERSONAL	Investing time in nurturing key personal and professional relationships, maintaining professional boundaries, managing work related anxiety via mindfulness, yoga, taking regular breaks, making use of peer support, at times of extreme stress accessing mentoring or counselling via the Employee Assistance Programme.
ORGANISATIONAL	Seeking out employers and roles that are consistent with my personal values and career aspirations. Ongoing participation in education, training and professional development opportunities. Active participation in supervision. Monitoring stress levels, noting my body's early warning signs and responding accordingly. Setting realistic work related goals for the working week. Taking coffee breaks and lunch breaks (rather than working through them) and leaving work on time. Differentiating between work and "non-work" time whilst working from home. Sharing and celebrating successes and breakthroughs related to direct social work practice.
FAMILIAL	Ongoing support from my family of origin and/or my family of choice. Participate in stress-free family gatherings or schedule time to catch up with close, supportive friends and colleagues. Protecting time to celebrate special friend or family events such as birthdays, anniversaries. Enjoying time with pets.
SPIRITUAL	Engaging in meaningful forms of self-expression and re-vitalization such as prayer, meditation, yoga, breathwork, time spent in nature, philanthropic activities.
RECREATIONAL	Making time to participate in activities or creative pursuits that bring me joy – in order of priority Egyptian dancing, gallery visits, theatre trips, listening to music, singing, reading, painting, exercising, swimming, walking in the woods, watching films.
RITUAL	Developing a set of daily and weekly rituals that leave me feeling replenished, such as journaling first thing in the morning, meditating whilst brushing my teeth, keeping a gratitude diary. Treating myself to a weekly candle-lit bath or massage.

Having read through *Suggestions for Developing a Comprehensive Plan of Self-Care*, you are invited to develop your own Bespoke, Radical, Authentic Self-care plan. The idea is to identify a set of activities and develop an approach to self-care and that is specific to you. It is suggested that you include activities and behaviours that are achievable as well as enjoyable and that you review and updated your plan on a regular basis.



BIOLOGICAL	
INTERPERSONAL	
ORGANISATIONAL	
FAMILIAL	
SPIRITUAL	
RECREATIONAL	
RITUAL	

Table 2 *My Bespoke, Radical, Authentic Self-care Plan*



### 3. A SELF-CARE PULSE READING

It is suggested you spend 5–10 minutes at the end of each day reflecting on these questions to set your intention for the next day and keep your RASC plan on track.

How have I nurtured myself today? Have I made use of meditation, affirmations, visualisation, gratitude, movement, reading, journaling, prayer, tea, aromatherapy, breathing, time in nature or whatever else brings me tranquillity, relaxation and joy?

How have I expressed creativity today?

Did I drink enough water today?

Am I well rested?

Have I moved my body sufficiently?

Is what I am consuming ( food, drink, news, social media etc.) supporting my physical health and wellbeing? What adjustments would be beneficial?

What have I achieved today? What did I do at work today that I feel proud of ?

What am I grateful for personally and professionally?

In view of my response to the above questions what is my intention for tomorrow? What will I pay particular attention to?

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### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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Beck J (2020) *Re-Examining Mindfulness: A Tool for Self-Care During the Coronavirus Crisis and Beyond* <https://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/practice/reexamining-mindfulness-tool-self-care-during-coronavirus-crisis-beyond/>

Grant, L and G. Kinman (2019) *The Social Work Organisational Resilience Diagnostic project* <https://sword.researchinpractice.org.uk>

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### PRACTICAL RESILIENCE TOOLS AND EXERCISES

A Self-care zine [https://d6108e01-8fa8-4ad1-8dbf-21cdce724d61.filesusr.com/ugd/4c97ed\\_97bd30b7bff74758af69fdf-8da809164.pdf](https://d6108e01-8fa8-4ad1-8dbf-21cdce724d61.filesusr.com/ugd/4c97ed_97bd30b7bff74758af69fdf-8da809164.pdf)

Resilience and Emotional Well-Being Video Series <https://psychiatry.ucsf.edu/copingresources/videos?s=09>

Brief mindful breathing for anxiety <https://youtu.be/tc0oVE1WR5I?list=PLWXu8E-HZjBYpQZi9bs3XwtAssXY1wbTZV>

Brief positive meditation & bilateral stimulation [https://youtu.be/m9yOH\\_ScVms?list=PLWXu8E-HZjBYpQZi9bs3XwtAssXY1wbTZV](https://youtu.be/m9yOH_ScVms?list=PLWXu8E-HZjBYpQZi9bs3XwtAssXY1wbTZV)

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Designed by work-form





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