

Wellness and Resilience Strategies: Strength

Section 10



In the compass model, the four sectors – Mind, Spirit, Strength, and Heart – not only contribute to your overall wellness, but also provide guidance on strategies to help build your compassion resilience. Strength is one of the sectors. Strength encompasses stress resilience and care for the body. Developing our ability to care for our bodies and listen to the signs that our bodies give us, supports our whole health, and minimizes any unhealthy responses to stress. Although certain levels of stress can create a barrier to our productivity, motivation, and aspirations, research also suggests a level of stress that provides a healthy amount of pressure to reach a goal, can provide great benefits. The ability to maintain stress resilience allows us to maintain a non-anxious presence as we encounter the inevitable stressors of our job.

Becoming stress resilient and caring for our bodies often requires assistance from others. Help seeking is a key skill for both of the areas in the strength section of the Wellness Compass. There is also a systemic responsibility to be sure that stress does not reach unreasonable levels. If you think back to Sections 5 and 6, managing your expectations of yourself and others as well setting compassionate boundaries can help reduce feelings of stress. It is a shared responsibility between yourself, your team, and your leaders to engage in these conversations.



Distribute this document to all participants to explore prior to the following application activities.



Key Activity

[Listening and Responding to Stress in Your Body \(10-15 minutes\)](#)

Wellness Practice

[Care for Body – Develop Your Plan \(10-15 minutes\)](#)

Circle Agenda

[Staff Circle Agenda, Section Ten](#)

Core Content Visual

[Choose Nourishing vs. Depleting! – Use this Visual and Display in Staff Break Areas](#)

Posting this visual in common staff areas will serve as a reminder of content covered to staff and perhaps serve as a future conversation started for deeper reflection among staff members.

Supplementary Activities/Handouts

[Writing and Sharing Staff Resilience Stories \(30-60 minutes\)](#)

One of our pilot schools for this toolkit experimented with an activity that went so well, they want to share it with other schools. Staff were asked to write a short story about an obstacle they faced and overcame. The stories were submitted anonymously and shared with students by random staff in various classes. The next day the homeroom teachers led a community building circle to talk about what the students had heard and what it meant to them.

[Why it is so hard for teachers to take care of themselves?](#)

Dr. Kelly McGonigal's [TED Talk](#) on How to Make Stress Your Friend explores a perspective shift when the healthy pressure of growth in your work place feels overwhelming.



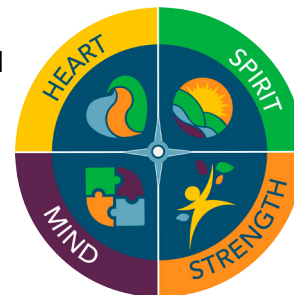
For links to additional resources, please visit the Toolkit online.

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Developing our ability to care for our bodies and listen to the signs that our bodies give us, support our whole health, and minimize any unhealthy responses to stress. Becoming stress resilient and caring for our bodies often require assistance from others. Help seeking is a key skill for both of the areas in the strength section of the Wellness Compass.



Stress is a normal aspect of life that we all feel and experience at times. Our bodies have many ways to send us signals that things are out of balance. Learning to be attuned to our body so we pick-up on the clues is a key skill needed to become stress resilient.

Our body sends [warning signs](#) when we are under stress. Some physical or emotional responses might include muscle tension, eating too much or too little, anger, irritability, insomnia, headaches, or a general lack of focus. Practicing mindfulness helps us to recognize these signs.

There are three questions to ask ourselves when our body is sending us those signals. First, ask ourselves *“is it possible for me to avoid this situation right now?”* While that often sounds like an easy yes or no answer, many people continue in situations that lead to high levels of stress and do not or cannot make the choice to walk away. If avoiding the cause of stress is not applicable, move to asking ourselves, *“what might be another way of thinking about this situation?”* Switching our perspective could help us to embrace any positives related to the stressor. This too can sound easy yet it requires willingness to give up the narrative that we have developed about the situation. Here’s a [fascinating TED Talk](#) by Kelly McGonigal on making stress our friend. [This video](#) was referenced in Section 7. If you didn’t get a chance to view it then, it may be helpful to view it now.

Finally, if we can neither avoid the situation nor change our perspective in a way that in turn reduces any negative impact of the stress, adjusting our lifestyle may be beneficial. Ask ourselves *“what changes could I make to my lifestyle that could help minimize the impact of the stress I am feeling?”* There are many strategies to help adapt our lifestyle to build our stress resilience.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a therapeutic approach that can inform our understanding of stress resilience. One aspect of ACT that is particularly relevant is the emphasis on acceptance. By mindfully accepting a feeling or thought we allow ourselves to feel the pain, naming it for what it is, “this is stress” or “this hurts,” without trying to change it in that moment. This gives us a bit of space needed to relate more positively to the stress. The practice of listening to and accepting the signs our body sends are important in our ability to be stress resilient.

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When we take a moment to name and accept the reality of our uncomfortable feelings or thoughts, we are more likely to recognize that we have a choice of how we respond to a stressful situation. We have the opportunity to consider other strategies to help us approach the situation with a level of calm.

Consider this quote by Viktor Frankl, author of *Man’s Search for Meaning*:

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

In order to respond with a level of calm, despite the stressful situation, it is helpful to know our core values and to have clarified our goals. Knowing what is important to us will help guide our response in stressful situations. In the section on Spirit, we had the opportunity to develop a Professional Mission Statement (activity in preceding section: Spirit). Reflecting on our statement may give us guidance as we choose our response to situations that cause stress in our day-to-day work.

[This blog](#), from a well-respected resource on wellness and mindfulness, offers a summary of some of these ideas and a few others!

We know that physical movement has many benefits to our mind and bodies. As we consider building upon our stress resilience and caring for our body, research is profoundly clear that physical activity is important to our physical and mental health, emotional well-being, and ability to grow our stress resilience.



Wellness and Resilience Strategies: Heart – Relationships and Emotions. The concept of self-compassion will be further explored.

Activity: Listening and Responding to Your Body's Stress Alarm

The human body is amazing and often recognizes that it is undergoing stress before you are cognitively aware of it – and it will give you signs. Becoming aware of the signs your body gives is one of the steps in becoming stress resilient. Each person may experience varying levels of comfort in listening to and trusting their body's signals of stress based on your personal experiences. It is also important to remember that your body can send you false alarms. That why is may be important for you to take the time to reflect on what your body is signaling to you in times of stress and practice reframing how you perceive the impact of stress.

1. We experience stress in different ways. How does your body let you know that you are experiencing stress?

Often, we adjust our habits related to caring for our body in response to stress. What patterns do you notice in the following three areas of your health habits?

2. Which are you most likely to tell yourself when you realize you are experiencing stress?

- I have done it again! What is wrong with me that I can't stop from feeling stressed? Or...
- Stress is a normal part of life's ups and downs; sometimes it can even be helpful.

3. What are two positive outcomes you have experienced as a result of feeling stress?

Often our health habits change during times of stress. What patterns do you notice in the following three areas? *Circle your answer.*

4. What do you notice about your eating habits when you are stressed?

- I typically eat more foods that are less healthy for me.
- I typically eat less food than I know I need to keep my energy up.
- I typically recognize that I need to maintain a healthy diet when stressed to care for my body.

5. What do you notice about your physical exercise habits when you are stressed?

- I typically exercise less.
- I typically exercise more to burn off some of the stress energy.
- I do not make changes to my exercise based on the stress I am feeling.

6. How about your sleep pattern?

- I typically have a difficult time getting enough sleep.
- I typically sleep more than I do when I am not stressed.
- I typically am able to maintain my sleep pattern.



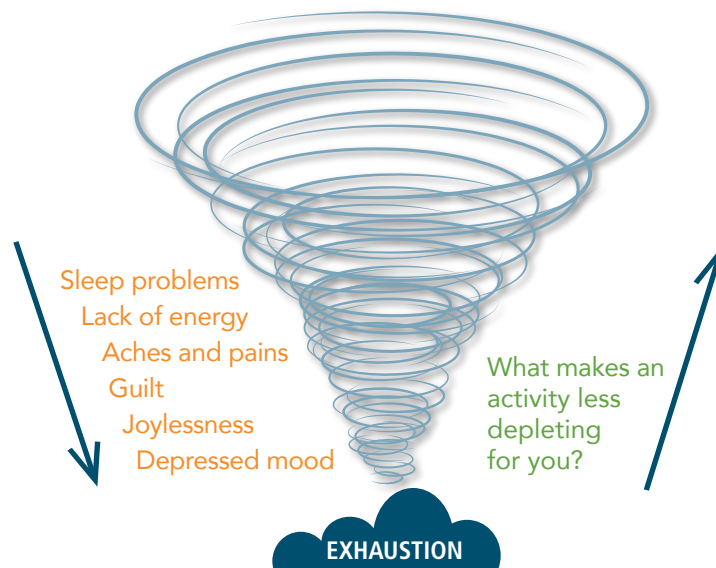
As you review your answers, identify:

7. What responses to stress do you want to do more of to build your stress resilience?

8. What responses would you like to change?

Choose Nourishing vs. Depleting!

In our demanding lives, we can easily get caught in simply getting the tasks done and losing all enjoyment. We can get sucked into an **Exhaustion Funnel**, a term coined by Marie Asberg, Karolinska Institute, Stockholm.



Our colleagues can help us transform depleting activities into more nourishing ones.



What activities do your colleagues find depleting that you do not?

Which do they seem to do without feeling exhaustion?

What are different ways your colleagues approach an activity that is typically depleting for you but not for them?

Activity: Aspiring toward Nourishment

Finding balance between those tasks that feel depleting and those that rejuvenate you is a skill developed over time. Reflecting on the key questions below with someone who inspires you, may offer a perspective shift on certain tasks that proves to be beneficial to your wellbeing. Additionally, taking time to step away from your desk and into a space that brings you joy, can provide a new vantage point. For this activity, choose a colleague and space that leaves you feeling nourished and reflect together on the following questions:

- What job-related task does one of you find challenging, mindless, or exhausting that the other enjoys, finds nourishing, or gets excited about? Be sure to identify one thing that is nourishing for each person but depleting for the other.
- When you hold the depleting perspective, become curious about what your partner finds pleasurable about the task.
- When has a perspective shift of mundane tasks been helpful and what allowed you to see the tasks in a new light?
- What brings you back to a place of nourishment when feeling depleted?

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Staff Support



Circle Agenda

Circle Topic	CR Section 10: Wellness and Resilience Strategies: Strength
<p>Planning</p>	<p>Send the introduction document from Section 10 in the online toolkit at least 4 days prior to the circle to all participants.</p> <p>Hold a meeting with leadership to prepare for this section and invite the leader(s) to consider the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This section begins the wellness practices portion of the toolkit. Your participation in the conversations as a peer-learner for personal wellbeing will provide opportunity for you to make authentic and personal connections with the group. 2. The wellness sessions should give you insight into potential wellbeing supports that you can offer to all staff. <p>For the full leadership preparation document, please visit this page.</p>
<p>Purpose of Circle/ Learning Objectives</p>	<p>We are learning how to strengthen our stress resilience by developing additional ways to care for our bodies and listen for signs of stress to minimize unhealthy responses.</p>
<p>Materials/ Preparation/Time</p>	<p>Time: 45-50 minutes</p> <p>Materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Circle kit <input type="checkbox"/> Values and shared agreements created in first session <input type="checkbox"/> Copies of the following for all participants: Choose Nourishing vs. Depleting handout and either the Why it's so hard for teachers to take care of themselves article or the 5 principles of self-care for health professionals article, and if doing bonus activity Listening and Responding to Stress in Your Body <p>Set-up: Up to 15 chairs arranged in a circle without furniture in the middle.</p> <p>To consider: Understanding Your Social Location as a Facilitator – Active Bystander Intervention: Training and Facilitation Guide.</p>

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Circle Topic	CR Section 10: Wellness and Resilience Strategies: Strength
Welcome/Check-In (5 minutes)	<p><i>"Put yourself at the top of your to-do list every single day, and the rest will fall into place."</i> – Unknown</p> <p>(Go-around) Given our previous session's focus on our personal sense of purpose, did you have an experience since the last session that reinforced, reminded, or reconnected you to that purpose?</p>
Grounding/Wellness Practice (5 minutes)	<p>Ask participants to get into a comfortable position, take a few breaths, and focus in on this one activity. Take time to enjoy this article, Why it's so hard for teachers to take care of themselves or 5 principles of self-care for health professionals (facilitator selects whichever article is a better fit for the audience).</p> <p>If you would like to consider a different grounding practice, please review the mindfulness appendix for additional suggestions.</p>
Self-Care for CR, Part One and Guiding Questions (10 minutes)	<p>(Go-around) What is one statement from this article that resonated with you?</p> <p>(Pair share) Share a strategy from the article that you currently use or would like to practice.</p>
Self-Care for CR, Part Two and Putting it into Practice (25 minutes)	<p>Share: In our demanding lives, we can easily get caught in simply getting the tasks done and losing all enjoyment. We can get sucked into an "Exhaustion Funnel."</p> <p>Share Nourishing vs. Depleting handout.</p> <p>(Pair share) What job-related tasks does one of you find challenging, mindless or exhausting that the other enjoys, finds nourishing or gets excited about? Be sure to identify one thing that is nourishing for each person but depleting for the other. When you hold the depleting perspective, become curious about what your partner finds pleasurable about the task.</p> <p>(Go-around) How has (or could) a perspective shift helped a mundane and depleting task become more enjoyable?</p>
Closing (5 minutes)	<p>Pass a fist bump around the circle.</p> <p>Bonus Activity: Handout for reflection between sessions Listening and Responding to Stress in Your Body.</p>

Writing and Sharing Staff Resilience Stories

One of the schools that helped in the development of the toolkit by piloting it in its first year was Adams Friendship Middle School. They experimented with an activity the principal had suggested and it went so well, we want to share it with other schools.

1. Ask each staff member to write a short story about an obstacle they faced and overcame (or are overcoming on a daily basis, such as chronic illness) in their life.
2. Have a process where staff can submit their stories anonymously.
3. Share stories randomly with each class or grade level in the school. You may decide to share three or more stories with each group of students to heighten their sense of the breadth of resilience among the staff. Stories can be shared as “homework” to read and prepare for the next step.
4. Closely after the stories are shared with the students, preferably the next school day, set aside time for students to come together (possibly in a community building circle) to talk about what the students heard/read and what it meant to them.
5. Prepare classroom teachers to facilitate discussion using some of the following questions:



- a. What did you feel while reading these stories?
- b. What difference does it make to learn about how adults in this building have faced and overcome obstacles, or are living day-to-day with ongoing challenges?
- c. How is the school community impacted by such knowledge?
- d. Think to yourself but do not share: What story of resilience could you tell about your life? How do you think that has prepared you for future challenges?
- e. What happens when we think about each other as resilient people?
- f. What happens when you think of yourself as resilient?