

WELLNESS PACKAGE

for

***Muskoka/Parry Sound
Sexual Assault Services***

(March 2010)



Wellness Package

May I be filled with loving kindness.

May I be well.

May I be peaceful and at ease.

May I be happy.

When we experience stress or trauma, it can affect us in many ways. If the associated emotions are too intense, we often cope by dealing with them “later”. This could be hours, days, or even years after the initial trauma has occurred – when we’re better able to deal with the trauma or when something triggers a memory and we painfully recall a traumatic event (and must then address it).

Although we may not remember everything about a stressful or traumatic experience, the memories and emotions are stored in the brain. Whether or not we are aware of it, they continue to influence us emotionally, physically, and cognitively. This can negatively affect our relationships with others and how we feel about ourselves.

Wellness is about supporting the entire being, not just our physical body; therefore, it is just as important to nurture our emotional, cognitive, and spiritual selves as it is to care for our physical selves.

This wellness package is meant as a support and offers concrete tools to help you cope with some of the stress and/or trauma you may be experiencing. It shouldn’t replace professional assistance from a counsellor or healthcare provider, but it can be utilized to begin and build upon healthy forms of self-care.

Most women are not used to self-care as we are conditioned to meet everyone else’s needs before nurturing ourselves. Self-care is, however, essential for survival. When we take the time to look after our own needs, only then can we choose to give from a place of abundance.

“Do not accept the conventional wisdom.

Do not accept the idea that something can’t be accomplished
because the scientific literature says it can’t.

Trust your instincts. Allow yourself a wide latitude in your speculations.

Don’t depend on the literature. It could be right or it could be completely wrong.

Spread all your hunches out before you,
and go with the ones that you think are the most probable.

Select the one that you can test easily and quickly.

Don’t assume that it has to be overly complicated to be of value,
since the simplest experiments may yield the most unequivocal results.

Just do the experiment!” (Candace Pert)

You Are Not Alone

- 89% of abused women do not report the violence or enter a shelter. (*YWCA Canada, 2006*)
- 1 in 4 Canadian women will be sexually assaulted in their respective lifetimes – half of such assaults will be against females under the age of 16. (*Ontario Women's Directorate, 1995*)
- Approximately 80% of sexual assaults against women are committed by people known to the women – dates, boyfriends, marital partners, friends, family members, neighbours, and co-workers. (*Statistics Canada, 2003*)
- Less than 10% of Canadian women who are sexually assaulted report this to police. (*Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for the Status of Women, 2002*)

Women's Shelters in Muskoka and Parry Sound

BRACEBRIDGE

Muskoka Interval House

(705) 645-4461 or 1-800-461-1740

HUNTSVILLE

Chrysalis

(705) 789-8488 or 1-866-789-8488

PARRY SOUND

Esprit Place Family Resource Centre

(705) 746-4800 or 1-800-461-1707

Muskoka Interval House and Chrysalis shelter for women and children accommodated 170 residents in 2007-2008, including 60 children. The shelters were over capacity for 21 days of the year and answered 1401 crisis calls. Their outreach services also worked with 257 non-resident women in 2008 (Muskoka Women's Advocacy Group).

"I have met brave women who are exploring the outer edge of human possibility, with no history to guide them, and with a courage to make themselves vulnerable that I find moving beyond words." (Gloria Steinem)

Safety Planning

A "safety plan" can help to increase the security of both you and your children, whenever the possibility of abuse is identified. You should become familiar with, and review (or revise) your "safety plan" regularly, because abusive situations and risk factors can change so quickly. It is also advisable to ensure that your children's schools and/or daycare centres are aware of any abuse situation, and have copies of all relevant documents (e.g., custody orders).

Abusers often become more violent when a partner prepares to leave and/or after she leaves. These are the most dangerous times for women and children. Your fears are well justified; so, when you leave, DO NOT return home unless accompanied by the police. In addition, obtaining a "no-contact" order (e.g., restraining order) after leaving your abuser can be a protective strategy, and may help you to begin your healing process.

PROTECTION WHILE LIVING WITH AN ABUSER:

- ✓ Tell others you trust about the abuse. Also, ask neighbours or friends to call the police if they hear fighting or loud noises (or see anything suspicious).
- ✓ Contact a women's shelter or crisis line to discuss your situation, and to get advice and assistance re: leaving the abuser. This can be done anonymously.
- ✓ Have a list of numbers on hand to call for help (e.g., trusted friends, family, police).
- ✓ Memorize the phone number of a local women's shelter or safe home.
- ✓ Develop an "emergency escape plan" (just in case you need to leave suddenly), and practice it with your children. Have a back-up plan, as well.
- ✓ Call 911 if you/your children are in danger, and teach the children to do likewise.
- ✓ Tell your children not to get between you and your partner if there is violence. Establish a code word to signal that they should leave the situation immediately and/or get help.
- ✓ If a conflict with the abuser is developing, move to a space where you can easily get away and avoid going into rooms with potential weapons (e.g., kitchen, workshop, bathroom).
- ✓ Park your car by backing it into the driveway, and keep the gas tank full.
- ✓ Hide your keys, cell phone, and some money near your escape route.

EMERGENCY ESCAPE PLAN:

Think ahead of time about a safe place where your abuser can't find you such as: a friend or relative's home; a women's shelter, safe home, or hostel; or, another town or city.

Before you leave your partner:

- ❖ Hide some money (a little at a time) in a secure place.
- ❖ Gradually move out some of your belongings (e.g., personal identification and other items that your abuser will not notice are missing).
- ❖ Contact your local social services office re: financial or other assistance they can provide.
- ❖ Record details about the abuse (e.g., dates, specific threats and incidents, witnesses), if you can do this safely.
- ❖ Get legal advice about your situation (e.g., through legal aid services).
- ❖ Ask a local animal shelter or veterinarian to help temporarily with pets.

When you leave your partner, try to bring with you:

- ❖ clothing and personal-care items (e.g., toiletries) for you and the children;
- ❖ valued pictures, jewellery, and objects of sentimental value;
- ❖ the children's favourite toys, blankets, or other comforts;
- ❖ money, bank books, keys, and address/telephone books;
- ❖ any medications needed by you and the children;
- ❖ important documents – birth certificates, health cards, Social Insurance cards, your driver's licence, credit cards, passports, and immigration documents and work permits;
- ❖ school and medical records, and photos of the children;
- ❖ court documents (e.g., from family-law proceedings and/or criminal matters);
- ❖ house deed or apartment lease, insurance papers, financial information, marriage certificate or divorce papers, copy of partner's most recent income tax return;
- ❖ picture of your abuser, and any proof of the abuse (e.g., photos of injuries, threatening notes, taped telephone messages or conversations);
- ❖ the names and badge numbers of police officers with whom you have spoken.

Create Feelings of Safety

A safe place is different for everyone. Many abuse survivors say they have never felt a feeling of safety and can't relate to it. Some people feel safer being around others, so a coffee shop, shopping mall, or library might be places where they would feel more comfortable. Others feel more at ease being alone in a place where they won't be disturbed (e.g., a room at home where the door can be locked to prevent interruptions). Some feel more comfortable inside, while others are able to relax by being outdoors.

Take the time to determine the strategies that will make you feel safe and sheltered from harm, and relaxed and protected enough to take manageable steps toward healing. Here are some suggestions to help create these feelings of safety in the present:

- Ensure that you are safe in your present environment (see "Safety Planning" section).
- Think of a time when you felt safest (e.g., being with a trusted friend) and replicate this.
- Identify what helps you feel safer (e.g., certain people or pets; doing specific activities, such as a craft or a sport; being in a particular place, such as outside in the sunshine; having certain objects with you, such as blankets, photos, or other treasured items).
- Sit in a place that feels safe to you. Feel your feet on the floor and your body making contact with the chair. Keep your eyes open, and calmly and gently look around.
- To separate feelings of the past from your present reality, find a small "safety" object (e.g., photo of children or pets, car key) that represents the adult that you are today. The object will help to remind you that things are different now, and that your trauma was in the past. Carry the object with you so that you can touch and look at it if you start to feel vulnerable.
- Keep several of these "safety" objects where you will see them each day (e.g., on a desk, bookshelf, or dresser) as further reminders of your current safety.
- Create a collage using images from magazines, photos, or brochures that represent safety to you. Hang it somewhere special, and look at it whenever you need to feel safer.
- Think about a real or imaginary safe place. Visualize yourself in this place using as much detail as possible (e.g., sounds, colours, smells, sights). Go there whenever you need to.
- Create a safe area in your house (e.g., the corner of a room). If there is a colour that represents safety to you, paint the area accordingly, and/or place coloured fabric or cushions there. Perhaps this is where you could also hang your collage or place your "safety" objects. Listen to soothing music here. Go to this spot to feel safer and calmer.
- Write out statements of comfort and security in a journal or on a series of cards. Although this might not feel realistic at first, writing them repeatedly can help you to focus and gradually feel safer and less anxious. Read them to yourself whenever you need to. Examples of such statements include: "I am calm", "I am in a safe place in the present", "I am an adult and have control over what happens to me", and "I am worthy."
- Imagine a protective "force field" surrounding you and protecting you from harm. This can be useful if you have difficulty feeling safe at night. The "force field" can be a soothing colour and as large as you require. Only you choose what and who can enter the space.
- Name five things in your present environment that you can see, five things you can hear, and five things you can feel. Repeat this with four, three, two, and then one thing.
- Practice slow, deep breathing. Focus on inhalation for five counts, pause for five counts, and then focus on exhalation for five counts. Do this ten times (or more) if you need to.
- Buy a blank journal and write down inspiring thoughts, quotations, statements, and ideas. This can also be a great place to safely express yourself and your thoughts and emotions.

Reducing Stress through Diet and Nutrition

A well-balanced diet is crucial in preserving health and helping to reduce stress. Certain foods and drinks act as powerful stimulants to the body and are a direct cause of stress. This stimulation, although quite pleasurable in the short term, may be quite harmful in the long run.

THINGS TO AVOID:

Caffeine

This is found in such things as coffee, tea, chocolate, and colas. Caffeine causes the release of adrenaline, and, when taken in moderation, can increase your alertness. Consuming too much caffeine, however, has the same effect as long-term stress. There may also be a link between caffeine intake and high blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

Use caution when decreasing caffeine consumption. Cutting it off abruptly can result in your experiencing withdrawal symptoms. Reduce the consumption slowly over a period of time.

Alcohol

Like caffeine, alcohol consumed in moderation can be reasonably safe. Although most people drink alcohol to combat stress, over consumption may make things worse in this regard. Alcohol is a depressant and can be quite deadly for some people. It also stimulates the secretion of adrenaline which results in tension, irritability, and insomnia. Excess use of alcohol increases fatty deposits in the heart and reduces immune function, thereby increasing the chance of illness. Alcohol limits the liver's ability to remove toxins from the body, as well.

Smoking

Many people use cigarettes as a coping mechanism. In the short-term, smoking seems to relieve stress, but in the long-term smoking is very harmful. Its disadvantages far outweigh its short-term benefits. Cigarette smoking is responsible for a variety of cancers, hypertension, respiratory illness, and heart disease.

Sugar

Sugar has no essential nutrients. It provides a short-term boost of energy, followed by a drop in energy. This can result in irritability, poor concentration, and depression. High sugar consumption puts a severe strain on the pancreas and increases the possibility of developing diabetes. It's best to keep blood sugar levels stable by not using sugar as a "pick me up".

Salt

Too much salt increases blood pressure and depletes the adrenal glands. Use a natural sea salt, and avoid foods with a high salt content such as chips, bacon, ham, and pickles.

Saturated Fats

Avoid eating foods high in saturated fats. Such fats may cause obesity, putting unnecessary stress on the cardiovascular system, and contribute to the development of some cancers.

Feminist Model of the Twelve Steps

It is not uncommon for trauma survivors to have addiction issues. When an experience is too horrible to face, a common way to try to cope is by escaping through the use of drugs, alcohol, food, or other substances that distract us from the pain.

The feminist model of the traditional twelve-step programs may be more useful for female trauma survivors, and includes the following concepts:

1. admitting that we have a problem and recognizing that our social environment contributes to our problem
2. recognizing that help is available and there are other ways of coping
3. becoming willing to change and ask for help
4. looking at both our healthy and unhealthy behaviours and coping skills
5. breaking the silence by sharing our lives, our pain, and our joy with others
6. becoming teachable by being willing to learn new, healthy behaviours to replace our unhealthy ones
7. beginning to forgive ourselves and others
8. accepting responsibility for the harm we caused ourselves and others, while recognizing that we do not need to take responsibility for those who harmed us
9. doing what we can, without harming ourselves or others, to repair these damages, and not repeating the unhealthy behaviours
10. taking responsibility for our day-to-day behaviours and recognizing both our healthy and unhealthy behaviours
11. developing our individual spirituality and seeking inner wisdom and strength
12. as a result of ongoing healing and growth, trying to live a happier, healthier life; learning to love and accept ourselves as we are

“Reaching for that drink or cigarette or joint is usually precipitated by some disturbing and unacceptable feeling that we don’t know how to deal with, and so we get rid of it in ways we know ‘work’. What if we stopped and checked in with our feelings to ask ourselves what emotions are present before using an artificial substance to alter our mood? If we can bring this level of awareness to our habitual use of substances, then we have a chance, a possibility, of making another choice.

By continually ignoring feelings, we have none.” (Candace Pert)

Nutrition That Your Body Needs

Balanced nutrition is essential to maintain good health. Eating well can increase physical and mental energy, stabilize moods, and positively affect one's capacity to cope with stress.

Water: Because toxins build up in the body when we are stressed or don't eat properly, drinking plenty of water every day helps to flush out these substances.

Carbohydrates: Eat carbohydrates in moderation. Although they trigger the release of the neurotransmitter Serotonin, which has a calming effect, managing carbohydrate consumption helps to regulate blood sugar. Good sources of carbohydrates include whole-grain rice, pasta, and breads, and potatoes and air-popped popcorn. The carbohydrates present in a baked potato or a cup of spaghetti may be enough to relieve the anxiety of a stressful day.

Fiber: Eat foods that are high in fiber (e.g., fruits, vegetables, grains). Stress can create stomach cramps and constipation, and eating more fiber keeps your digestive system moving. At breakfast, for example, eat whole fruits instead of juice, and whole-grain cereals and toast.

Vegetables: Eat more vegetables. This helps to boost your immune system. To get as many nutrients and vitamins as possible, eat fresh veggies of all colours, as follows: greens (e.g., lettuce, cucumber, zucchini, beans, celery); yellows (e.g., peppers, squash); reds (e.g., peppers, tomatoes); purples (e.g., cabbage, eggplant); oranges (e.g., sweet potatoes, squash, peppers, carrots); and, whites (e.g., garlic).

Vitamins and Minerals: To offset some of the damage caused by stress, the following daily supplements may help: liquid B-complex (including vitamins B6 and B12), which helps the body to cope with depression, anxiety, and fatigue; vitamin C, which helps boost the immune system; and, a multi-vitamin, which will supplement a daily diet of fresh foods. Be sure to consult your doctor before consuming any of these supplements.

MORE FOODS TO EAT:

Try to maintain a diet of mostly whole (unprocessed) foods.

Omega 3 and 6 essential fatty acids from oils, seeds, and fish help with optimal brain function by enhancing brain-cell communication. This positively affects cognitive abilities and mood.

Whole grains promote the production of Serotonin, which increases your sense of well-being.

Stress depletes the body's stores of nutrients (especially B vitamins), which can be replaced by eating bananas, fish, potatoes, avocados, chicken, and dark, leafy, green vegetables.

If you are under prolonged stress, consume foods that are high in potassium (e.g., orange juice, squash, apricots, limes, bananas, avocados, tomatoes, peaches). Also increase your intake of calcium (found in nuts, broccoli, yogurt, cheese, tofu, beans, and chickpeas).

Herbal teas such as chamomile, fennel, or a blend of herbs often found in a "bedtime tea" can be quite soothing. Herbal teas are also helpful for digestion, and those which help ease an upset stomach include mint, fennel, licorice, chamomile, and ginger.

Getting a Good Night's Sleep

We all have difficulty sleeping at times, especially during stress; this can be especially true for female survivors of trauma. One of the most powerful ways in which we can improve sleep is to make small changes in everyday behaviours that impact how fast we fall asleep and whether or not we stay asleep. The goal is to increase the behaviours that improve sleep while reducing the behaviours that are interfering with sleep.

TIPS FOR BETTER DAYTIME HABITS:

Don't nap during the day. If you are having trouble sleeping at night, try not to nap during the day as it will make it even more difficult to sleep at night. If you are especially tired, and feel as though you must nap, try to sleep for less than 30 minutes early in the day.

Keep a regular schedule. Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even on the weekends. Keeping a regular schedule will help your body expect sleep at the same time each day. Don't oversleep to make up for a poor night's sleep – doing that for even a couple of days can reset your body clock and make it hard for you to get to sleep at night.

Limit caffeine and alcohol. Avoid drinking caffeinated or alcoholic beverages for several hours before bedtime. Alcohol may initially be relaxing, but can interrupt your sleep patterns.

Nicotine is a stimulant. Avoid smoking around bedtime and when waking at night, as the nicotine will make it more difficult to fall asleep and stay asleep.

Avoid over-the-counter and prescription drugs. These substances may also disrupt sleep for some people or make you drowsy during the day.

Expose yourself to bright light or sunlight soon after waking. This will help to regulate your body's natural biological clock. Likewise, try to keep your bedroom dark while you are sleeping so that light will not interfere with your rest.

Exercise early in the day. Twenty to thirty minutes of exercise every day can help you sleep; even a short walk in the morning or afternoon is helpful. Vigorous exercise, however, is stimulating, and aerobic activity before bedtime may make falling asleep more difficult.

Check your iron levels. Women who have iron deficiencies tend to have more problems sleeping. If iron levels in your blood are low, a supplement might assist with your general health and your ability to sleep. This should first be checked with your doctor.

TIPS FOR A BETTER PRE-SLEEP RITUAL:

Earlier is better. Sleep that is experienced before midnight usually has a more profound impact on our well-being than sleep which occurs after midnight. If you are feeling sad, anxious, or unwell go to bed by 9:30 p.m., and get up earlier. Try this for a few nights in a row.

Create relaxing bedtime rituals. Calming activities, such as listening to soft music or sipping a cup of herbal tea, cue your body that it's time to slow down and begin to prepare for sleep. A hot bath taken 1 to 2 hours before bed also works for some people.

Relaxing before going to bed can make it easier to fall asleep. This may include meditation, relaxation and/or breathing exercises, listening to guided-imagery programs or soft music, and/or having a warm bath (which, when taken a half hour before bedtime, creates a subsequent drop in body temperature and can trick the brain into thinking it's time to sleep).

Keep your body temperature down. Since body temperature tends to decline as we approach sleep, anything that keeps it up (e.g., hot room temperature, vigorous exercise too close to bedtime) may inhibit sleep.

Don't eat a large, heavy meal before bed. This can cause indigestion and interfere with your normal sleep cycle. Try to eat your dinner at least two hours before bedtime. In addition, drinking too much fluid before bed can cause you to get up to urinate.

Light bedtime snacks can help. Tryptophan is an amino acid found in milk, turkey, and peanuts, and helps the brain produce Serotonin (which helps you relax). Drink a small cup of warm milk (the warmth may temporarily increase your body temperature, and the subsequent temperature drop may hasten sleep), or eat a small bowl of cereal or toast with peanut butter.

Don't watch the news. Watching or hearing about negative events creates a stress reaction in the body. If you enjoy the news, try viewing it earlier in the day so that the last thoughts and images you have in your mind before going to bed are positive, calming, and peaceful ones.

Jot down all of your concerns and worries. Anxiety stimulates the nervous system and makes you more alert. Write down your worries and possible solutions before you go to bed, so you don't need to think about them in the middle of the night. A journal or "to do" list may be very helpful in allowing you to set aside these concerns until the next day.

Avoid over-the-counter "sleep aids". It's also helpful to make sure that your prescribed medications do not cause insomnia (inability to get to sleep or stay asleep during the night). There is little evidence that supplements and other over-the-counter "sleep aids" are effective. In some cases, they present safety concerns, such as daytime drowsiness. Always talk to your doctor before using these substances.

TIPS FOR A BETTER SLEEP ENVIRONMENT:

Make sure your bed is comfortable and large enough. If you are disturbed by a restless bed mate, switch, if possible, to a larger bed. Test different types of mattresses. Try therapeutic, shaped foam pillows that cradle your neck or extra pillows that help you sleep on your side. Get comfortable cotton sheets and wash them regularly.

Make your bedroom primarily a place for sleeping. It is not a good idea to use your bed for working, paying bills, or watching TV. Help your body recognize this as the only place for rest or intimacy.

Keep your bedroom peaceful and comfortable. Make sure your room is well ventilated and at a comfortable temperature. Try to maintain it as a quiet, darkened, and calm space. A fan or relaxing music or sounds (e.g., ocean waves) creates white noise that might help block out other distracting sounds.

Hide your clock. A large, illuminated digital clock may cause you to focus on the time and make you feel stressed and anxious when you're having difficulties with sleep. Place your clock so that you can't see the time while in bed.

TIPS FOR GETTING BACK TO SLEEP:

Do visualization exercises. Focus all of your attention on your toes or visualize walking down an endless stairwell. Sometimes thinking about repetitive or mindless things helps your brain to shut down and adjust to sleep. Also, thinking about a safe and peaceful place, real or imagined, can help relax the mind and body.

Get out of bed if you are unable to sleep. Don't lie in bed awake. Go into another room and do something relaxing until you feel sleepy. Worrying about falling asleep actually keeps many people awake. Try not to get upset if you can't sleep, and take time to breathe deeply and think positive thoughts as much as possible.

Don't do anything stimulating. Don't read anything that is job related (or that will create stress). In addition, don't watch TV as commercials and news can be especially stimulating. Furthermore, don't expose yourself to bright light. The light gives cues to your brain that it is time to wake up.

Get up and eat a small snack. Some foods contain Tryptophan which helps cause feelings of sleepiness. Some of these foods include turkey, milk, cottage cheese, yogurt, chicken, cashews, soybeans, and tuna. Avoid eating sugar.

Coping with Stress

Tips for reducing stress and coping with stress include:

1. FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN DO.

There is usually something we can do to manage stress in most situations. Resist the urge to give up or run away from stressful situations because this may simply make the stress worse over the long term.

2. MANAGE YOUR EMOTIONS.

Feelings of sadness, anger, fear, and other forms of distress are common when coping with stress. During this time it is more difficult to feel happiness, contentment, or joy.

Try not to “bottle up” your emotions – instead communicate your feelings by writing them down or expressing them in a safe manner (e.g., yelling into a pillow, crying with a friend).

“When emotions are expressed ... all systems are united and made whole. When emotions are repressed, denied, not allowed to be whatever they may be, our network pathways get blocked, stopping the flow of the vital, feel-good, unifying chemicals that run both our biology and our behavior. Emotions are trapped in the physical body and can be released physically, through loud, emotive expressions. The result (is) a freer, more abundantly flowing sense of energy.” (Candace Pert)

Try not to lash out at other people as yelling or swearing tend to push people away when we might need them the most.

3. SEEK SUPPORT BY CONNECTING WITH FRIENDS AND COMMUNITY.

Seeking social and emotional support from other people is helpful – especially when we feel we can't cope on our own. Studies have shown that women respond differently to stress than men, and that hanging out with other female friends can release hormones that actually counter daily stress. Family, friends, co-workers, and health professionals can all be important sources of support and information. Ask someone you trust to listen to your story and for her/his opinion on how to handle a particular situation. In addition, accept help with daily tasks and responsibilities (e.g., chores, child care) to reduce stress.

Those with a strong sense of community and social ties: get sick less often; have a reduced risk of disease as a result of lower blood pressure, cholesterol, and heart rate; feel a reduction in their overall stress levels; and, may live longer. Reach out for community supports in areas that interest you. It can be a great way to meet others with common interests or experiences. Some of these supports might include:

- sport teams or exercise groups (e.g., running, baseball, hockey, swimming, Yoga)
- artistic or crafts groups (e.g., scrap booking, quilting, theatre, a choir, dance classes)
- special interests (e.g., classes through a local college or university, online courses)
- volunteering (e.g., hospices, animal shelters, food banks, literacy groups)
- survivor groups (e.g., AA, women's support groups, stroke recovery groups)

4. FOCUS ON THE POSITIVES.

This may be very difficult to do when coping with stress. Dwelling on the negatives often adds to our stress and takes away our motivation to make things better.

- Focus on strengths rather than weaknesses. Remind yourself that no one is perfect and that feeling overwhelmed is okay; it's something all people go through.
- Recognize that you have strength and resiliency.
- Try to keep a sense of humour.
- Remind yourself that you are likely doing the best you can, given the circumstances.

5. DEVELOP A PLAN OF ACTION.

Problem-solving with respect to things that you are able to control is one of the most effective ways to lower stress. Try breaking a stressful problem into manageable chunks. A good plan of action can involve putting other tasks on hold to concentrate on the main problem or waiting for the right time and place to act.

- Identify and define the problem. Then select your goal.
- Brainstorm possible solutions. Consider the pros and cons of each.
- Choose the *best* solution for you at this time – the “perfect” solution rarely exists.
- Put your plan into action.
- Evaluate your efforts and choose another strategy if needed. Be open to new ideas.

6. PRACTICE SELF-CARE.

We can't cope well if we don't take good care of ourselves. This can be difficult during stressful times, but if we don't balance work with play we may experience burnout.

- Eat healthy foods and drink lots of water throughout the day to maintain your energy.
- Exercise or do something active on a regular basis.
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs as a way of coping.
- Practice meditation, Yoga, or other relaxation techniques.
- If possible, take regular breaks from work.
- Try to take time out of your busy day for yourself; even 5 minutes can make a difference.
- Plan enjoyable activities and hobbies so that you have them to look forward to.
- Get a good night's sleep.

7. TAKE CARE OF YOUR RELATIONSHIPS.

Family, friends, and co-workers can be negatively affected by our stress; but, they can also be part of the problem. Although you may wish to keep the feelings and needs of others in mind when coping with stress, balance them with your own feelings and needs.

- Be assertive about your needs rather than aggressive or passive.
- Try not to confront others in a mean-spirited manner.
- Accept responsibility, apologize, or try to put things right when it's appropriate.
- Communicate with others who are involved, and keep them informed about your decisions.

8. UTILIZE RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL PRACTICES.

People who include religious or spiritual practices in their daily lives often experience lower levels of distress and other benefits such as social support. You might benefit from:

- prayer or meditation
- going to your place of worship and talking with your religious/spiritual leader
- having faith in God or your higher power
- getting together with others of the same faith or spiritual orientation

9. TRY ACCEPTANCE.

Accepting those things we cannot change can be one of the most challenging aspects of coping with stress. Sometimes all we can do is manage our distress or grief. Remember:

- Denying problems exist only prolongs suffering and interferes with our ability to take action.
- Acceptance is a process that takes time, so be patient with yourself and the process.
- Death, illness, or major losses and life changes can be particularly difficult to accept.
- Try not to get caught up in wishful thinking or dwelling on what could have been; focus on the reality of the situation in the present.

10. USE HEALTHY DISTRACTION TECHNIQUES.

Distraction can be helpful when coping with short-term stress we can't control (e.g., reading a magazine while getting dental work done).

Distraction can be harmful if it interferes with us taking action over things under our control (e.g., watching TV when we have school work or other deadlines to meet).

Distraction through the use of drugs or alcohol or by over-eating usually leads to more stress and problems in the long-term.

Distraction by overworking at school or on the job can lead to burnout or other problems (e.g., family resentment).

Almost anything can be useful as a way of taking our minds off our problems. When utilized for short periods of time, many of the following forms of distraction create opportunities to take a break and refuel, which is an important part of self-care.

- daydreaming
- going for a walk or performing other types of exercise
- participating in leisure activities or hobbies
- completing housework, yard work, or gardening
- watching TV or movies, or playing video games.
- reading a book or magazine
- spending time with friends and/or family members (including pets)
- surfing the Internet or writing e-mails
- taking a short nap

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

After experiencing a situation that is dangerous, frightening, or very distressing, it is normal to feel some fear, confusion, helplessness, or anxiety. With PTSD, the criteria described in sections A through D (below) persist for at least one month and can cause significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other functioning.

A. Exposure to a traumatic event in which both of the following were present:

- you experienced, witnessed, or were confronted with an event(s) that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of yourself or others; AND,
- your response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror, or your perception of the event led to these emotions.

Examples: natural catastrophes – hurricanes, earthquakes; man-made catastrophes – war, concentration camp experiences, sexual assault; vehicular accidents; violent crimes; the loss of a loved one; witnessing trauma on a daily basis – medical professionals, rescue workers.

B. Re-experiencing the trauma in one or more of the following ways:

- through recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions;
- through recurrent distressing dreams of the event;
- you act or feel as though the traumatic event is recurring, and you may have a sense of reliving the experience through flashbacks and/or hallucinations;
- you experience intense psychological distress or bodily reactions when exposed to “triggers” – cues that symbolize an aspect of the traumatic event (e.g., sights, smells).

Intrusive re-experiencing of the trauma is then followed by conscious or sub-conscious attempts to suppress these memories and their associated feelings. In addition, during the times when you re-experience the trauma, you may feel some emotions that you did not experience with the original trauma occurrence (or experienced to only a small degree). You may encounter intense feelings of anger, fear, sadness, and guilt, despite the fact that the actual event is no longer occurring. In response, you may shut down just as you may have done during the initial trauma.

C: Displaying avoidance and numbing behaviours, where you persistently avoid any reminders (“triggers”) associated with the trauma and subsequently numb your responses in three or more of the following ways:

- making a great effort to avoid thoughts, feelings, conversations, activities, places, or people associated with the trauma;
- inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma;
- feeling detached or estranged from others;
- your ability to feel emotion is restricted, as is your range of emotions (e.g., you are unable to have loving feelings);
- you have a sense of a “shortened” future and cannot envision your life in the distant future (e.g., you do not expect to have a career, marriage, children, or a normal life span).

D: Experiencing hyperarousal symptoms in which you encounter persistent symptoms of increased physical arousal or alertness (“hyperarousal”) that were not present before the trauma, as indicated by two or more of the following symptoms:

- difficulty falling or staying asleep;
- irritability and/or outbursts of anger;
- difficulty concentrating;
- hyper-vigilance (i.e., being overly watchful or alert);
- an exaggerated startle response (being “jumpy”);
- physiological reactions (e.g., sweating, nausea, anxiety).

Emotions that are generated by trauma – fear, anxiety and anger – have a strong physiological component. In some dangerous situations, you may react by “freezing”, where thinking and moving is difficult or impossible (sometimes described as a sensation of slow motion).

Alternatively, because more adrenaline is produced (thereby increasing your heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, and blood sugar levels), you experience physiological arousal and, therefore, may be able to react more quickly. A trauma survivor may become accustomed to (and sometimes enjoy) achieving this state of arousal, and, in some cases, engages in risky behaviours (e.g., excessive speeding while driving) to reproduce these sensations.

FLASHBACKS:

A “flashback” is a sudden, vivid recollection of a past traumatic event that intrudes into the present and makes the past seem as if it were actually occurring in the here and now. A flashback is usually accompanied by a strong emotional component.

During a flashback, traumas get replayed with great intensity, and a person may re-experience the scene of the trauma, with its sights, smells, and sounds. The flashback can last from a few seconds to several hours. In some instances, it may be difficult to separate the details of the flashback from reality, thereby reinforcing the impact of the original traumatic event.

Another form of flashback exists at the subconscious level, and consists of suddenly experiencing such feelings as anger or sadness that do not seem clearly related to any particular memory. For example, you could be irritable, and have panic attacks, rage reactions, or intense pain, without any conscious thought of the previous trauma.

It may be very important for the survivor to learn to realize that the trauma is NOT occurring in the present time (i.e., “dual awareness”). This helps the survivor to examine and work on reducing her/his trauma symptoms, while being secure in the knowledge that s/he is really in the present day.

GROUNDING TECHNIQUES:

“Grounding techniques” can be used to deal with flashbacks when a trauma survivor has repeated memories and dreams of the trauma event, experiences novel aspects of the event while awake or asleep, reacts to triggers associated with the original traumatic experience, and/or is very nervous or uncomfortable in any situation that reminds them of the trauma.

An example of this sort of technique involves placing the traumatic memories on an imaginary VCR tape or DVD. The person can then “play” the memory in small sections using “fast forward”, “rewind”, or “stop” options. This provides a sense of choice and control about remembering. The person can also add something else to the memory (e.g., a different outcome to the traumatic event).

The last page in this package (“Managing Flashbacks”) contains ideas to help you feel grounded and in the present during a flashback. Other “grounding techniques” include:

- * self-reassurance which reinforces the fact that a flashback is taking place and that the traumatic situation is no longer occurring
- * re-orienting to the present by using all five senses (e.g., looking at, and touching, objects in the room; listening to nearby sounds)
- * naming nearby objects out loud
- * changing the position of the body or moving vigorously (e.g., stamping feet, standing up and walking around, clapping hands)
- * washing the face with cold water
- * going to a place that feels safe
- * using deep-breathing and other relaxation techniques
- * drawing or writing details of the flashback on a piece of paper, and then shredding, burning, or burying the paper
- * putting the flashback into a vault or other secure container (either real or imaginary)

TRIGGERS:

A “trigger” is an internal or external cue that symbolizes or resembles an aspect of the traumatic event (e.g., a sight, smell, sound, date, location). The trigger can cause a person to experience memories and emotions associated with the event (sometimes in the form of a flashback). When a trigger initiates a flashback, the trauma survivor may be re-traumatized when s/he once again has to endure the feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, confusion, numbness, and/or sense of “spacing out” (dissociation) that resulted from the original trauma.

It is helpful to keep a record which includes details of the circumstances leading up to a flashback (e.g., where you were, what you were doing, who was with you, and what exactly happened) in order to identify the stimulus that triggered it. Once you have identified a trigger(s), you can learn how to either diminish or neutralize its negative effects or avoid it all together. This may be accomplished over time with the assistance of a trained professional.

MANAGING TRIGGER EVENTS:

When you learn to manage your triggers, the trauma loses some of its power and control over you. If a trigger can be anticipated in advance, you may be able to develop a plan to reduce or negate its effects before actually encountering it.

Here are some strategies for managing triggers, which can be added to those that you may already be utilizing:

- * perform relaxation and breathing exercises
- * contact supportive people
- * establish manageable lists of priorities
- * avoid extra stress
- * read or listen to something uplifting to create a positive frame of mind
- * if possible, structure your life to avoid specific triggers

OTHER ASPECTS OF PTSD:

Because your body is experiencing stress from the trauma, it is in high alert – a natural response as your instincts prepare you to run or fight to protect your life. With PTSD you may experience this even when the danger is no longer present. You may also feel anxious, short-tempered, emotional, as though you're on a constant "caffeine buzz" and are too "wired" to think straight, and/or it may be difficult to fall asleep and stay sleeping throughout the night. Your breathing may be shallow and tight, and you may feel dizzy or have an upset stomach.

Your bodily sensations are supposed to let you know when you are hungry or full, tired or alert, cold or warm, comfortable or uncomfortable, and scared or calm. If you cannot determine which sensations are "normal", and which truly signal a dangerous situation, you may perceive them all negatively.

Life could be very dangerous if your sensations and emotions cannot be properly interpreted. Being aware of body sensations, and being able to properly interpret them, will also anchor you in the present. Learning to recognize feelings of high alert, or "hyper-arousal" is a body-awareness skill that can be developed over time through practice.

When the body is always on high alert, the adrenal glands become exhausted from continuously pumping adrenaline into the body, and digestion can become sluggish. When you add a lack of sleep, poor eating habits, environmental toxins, and emotional stress to the mix, it is no wonder that the immune system becomes overloaded and less effective, leaving the body susceptible to viruses and bacteria.

"A further sign of health is that we don't become undone by fear and trembling, but we take it as a message that it's time to stop struggling and look directly at what's threatening us." (Pema Chodron)

"History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived,
but if faced with courage, need not be lived again." (Maya Angelou)

Dissociation

Dissociation is a response to overwhelming stress or trauma. When people dissociate, their awareness, emotions, sensations, and memories “split” in some way, so that there is a separation of things that were previously related or “associated”. Most people have experienced minor dissociative moments with respect to awareness of their surroundings (e.g., when they “zone out” during a tiresome activity).

People may dissociate at a cognitive level when they remember only certain aspects of a traumatic experience. In addition, dissociation might occur at an emotional level when people find themselves in traumatic situations without experiencing fear, sadness, or other emotional responses. Furthermore, people may lack normal, physical sensations in their bodies (and simply feel “numb”) when encountering such situations. It is possible to dissociate in one or all of these levels at any point in time. “Grounding techniques” are useful in assisting someone to disconnect from a dissociative moment.

Dissociation is a normal and healthy response to stress or trauma, and is a creative, self-protection mechanism which helps people to manage the experience of being traumatized (e.g., through childhood sexual abuse). Dissociation is designed to get people through traumatic events while they are occurring. It is, however, only a temporary survival mechanism. Although it may allow people to temporarily escape from the immediate pain and fear of traumatic events, it does not permit the trauma to be properly processed. Instead, the trauma remains with the affected individuals. For some, healing may occur at some point in the future (when they are able to process the traumas), or it may never occur. The healing process may also require professional interventions.

Guilt and Shame

Guilt is the feeling you’ve made a mistake, while shame is feeling that you are a mistake. Shame is usually more intense than guilt and is often silencing. Most abuse survivors struggle with shame – the awful sense that there is something wrong deep inside them that caused the abuse. Although the belief is frequently held by abuse survivors, it is absolutely false.

Regardless of what you may have been told or have come to believe, the abuse you experienced was NOT your fault. Understanding that it wasn’t your fault is an integral part of creating wellness. Here are some suggestions for combating the guilt and shame that may follow sexual assault or other forms of abuse:

- ❖ Remember that you are not the one who committed the crime. The offender is the person who should feel guilty about his actions.
- ❖ Write down your feelings in a journal (e.g., “I feel ashamed because I told a friend about my abuse, and she seemed uncomfortable.”). Then write a paragraph to evaluate the situation (“I shouldn’t feel ashamed because I was abused, and my friend has difficulty in hearing about it. This is not an evaluation of me as a person.”). Follow this with affirmations such as, “I deserve to be good to myself” or “I deserve to be treated with respect and kindness.”
- ❖ Talk about your feelings with someone you trust, to help you make sense of them. Sometimes it’s useful to have another person tell you that the abuse was not your fault.

Mindfulness

Thought patterns can change the way the body feels. “Mindfulness” involves paying attention to moment-by-moment experiences to train the brain to focus on the present, rather than dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. It entails learning to observe emotions without judging them, suppressing them, or feeling consumed by them. “Mindfulness” also teaches people how to avoid feeling stuck in a cycle of unpleasant thoughts and emotions. By focusing on breathing and practicing a simple daily meditation, people are better able to accept experiences for what they are rather than labelling them as “good” or “bad”. This may enable some to develop a greater sense of well-being and cope more effectively with stress.

Gratitude

When you take time to feel grateful for things in your life, this awareness and recognition may create more gratitude. One simple method for creating gratitude is to make a gratitude list. Each morning, write a list of ten things you are grateful for in your life. You can write about anything, in any order, as it comes to mind. For example: I am grateful for my family and friends; I am grateful for my cat and dog; I am grateful for hot baths; I am grateful for safe, quiet spaces; I am grateful for a place to live; I am grateful for sunshine; I am grateful for good music; I am grateful for laughter; I am grateful for this cup of tea; I am grateful for chocolate.

Write a list every day for a month to see how this makes you feel. You may begin to notice things you are grateful for throughout the day that you didn’t previously pay much attention to, or you may feel a general sense of increased well-being. It may also be helpful to make a list before going to sleep so that the last things you think about each day are positive.

Wishing Wellness

Scientists now consider the brain to be “plastic” – meaning that we can create new ways of thinking and behaving with time and practice. Sometimes we think negative thoughts because we’ve gotten into the habit of thinking of all of the things that could go wrong in a situation. Over time, this thought process becomes like a well-worn “pathway” in the brain. We can, however, create new pathways and with repetition they can also become well-worn pathways.

Wishing wellness is one way to create these alternate thought patterns and brain pathways. For example, every time you worry or begin to have a negative thought that you know is unnecessary and stressful, try wishing wellness. You can recite the wellness meditation (below) for yourself, and could then wish it for others close to you such as children, a spouse, parents, and/or friends. Repeat this as often as you need to throughout the day.

When we wish wellness for ourselves and others we may attract greater well-being into our lives. Try this for at least a month to determine whether or not it works for you.

May I (or someone else) be filled with loving kindness.

May I (or someone else) be well.

May I (or someone else) be peaceful and at ease.

May I (or someone else) be happy.

Partners of Survivors

As a partner of an abuse survivor, although you will never fully know the suffering that your loved one has experienced or still experiences, you can certainly offer support to help her/him in the healing process. Everyone's progression will be different, but the more open you are to the idea of growth and change within your relationship, the more successful you'll become at being involved with your partner in this context. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- It's natural to empathize with your loved one's pain, anger, shame, and sadness. It's natural to feel outrage at the unfairness of the abuse. It's natural to feel compassion and want to make your partner better or to make her/his pain disappear.
- Healing is slow, and the beginning of the process is often the most difficult. Try to be patient with your partner while you continue to affirm your own needs and desires in the relationship. It's also natural to feel frustrated or challenged by the ups and downs your partner may experience.
- Be flexible and resourceful so that you can adjust your expectations of the relationship and find new ways of meeting your own, possibly neglected, needs.
- Understand that if your partner is unable to be sexually intimate with you at the present time, this may be because this activity triggers the memories and emotions of past sexual abuse. For many survivors, the resulting guilt may be overwhelming. In addition, s/he may assume that you will cheat if you are unable to meet your current sexual needs within the relationship. Working to build trust and self-esteem, both individually and as a couple, takes a great deal of time, compassion, patience, and kind reassurance. You may need to seek additional support with this.
- Humour is essential during the healing process, which can often feel very intense. Take time to laugh with your partner, and have fun and take breaks together. If this is too challenging for your partner, make sure you can find ways to create joy for yourself.
- Know your own limits. You can't provide 100% of the support your partner requires 100% of the time. It's important to know your boundaries, biases, areas of comfort, and limitations. Give yourself permission to take time out for yourself and re-fuel; you can't give from an empty cup.
- The following link provides online resources for partners of sexual abuse survivors:
<http://partners.aest.org.uk>

Other Online Resources

ABUSE INFORMATION:

Chrysalis Women's Shelter (Huntsville): www.chrysalishuntsville.com

Esprit Place Family Resource Centre (Parry Sound): www.psdssab.org/comserv/esprit.php

Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children: www.metrac.org

Muskoka Interval House (Bracebridge): <http://centraleastontario.cioc.ca/record/MUS0077>

Muskoka/Parry Sound Sexual Assault Services: www.daphnewymn.com

Shelternet: www.shelternet.ca/en/index.cfm

HEALTHY EATING AND WELLNESS:

Canada's Food Guide: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php

Christiane Northrup, M.D.: www.drnorthrup.com

Dieticians of Canada: www.dietitians.ca/public/content/eat_well_live_well/english/index.asp

Mindful Living Programs: www.mindfullivingprograms.com/index.php

Muskoka Mindfulness Community: meditation.huntsvilleontario.info/#med

National Sleep Foundation: www.sleepfoundation.org

STRESS AND POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD):

Anxiety Disorders Association of Canada: www.anxietycanada.ca

Canadian Mental Health Association: www.cmha.ca/english/coping_with_stress

Hope for Healing: www.hopeforhealing.org/ptsd.html

Mayo Clinic: www.mayoclinic.com/invoke.cfm?id=DS00246

Mind Tools Stress Management: www.mindtools.com/smpage.html

National Center for PTSD: www.ncptsd.va.gov

National Institute of Mental Health:
www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml

Stress Fact Sheet: www.heretohelp.bc.ca/publications/factsheets/stress

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CANDACE PERT

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GLORIA STEINEM:

www.feminist.com/gloriasteinem/

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Managing Flashbacks

This page contains ideas to help you feel grounded and in the present during a flashback. Detach and keep it on hand so that you can refer to it whenever you need to.

❖ Right now I am feeling ...

(Name the emotion – e.g., fear.)

❖ I am sensing in my body ...

(Describe the bodily sensations in detail.)

❖ Because I am remembering ...

(Name the trauma by title only; provide NO details.)

❖ But, I am here ...

(Describe the place in which you are right now.)