

A project of the Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute (CTRI)

SELF-CARE TRANSFORMED

A Place for Meaning, Joy, and Community
in the Helping Professions

MARWA FADOL
VICKI ENNS



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*To our peers, colleagues, and fellow helpers, the community
we have with you is what allows us to keep doing what we do.
Thank you for sharing of yourselves and holding space for us to do the same.*

*To our family and friends, thank you for being a safe place
for us to land when we need rest.*

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INTRODUCTION

HOW ARE YOU? IS A QUESTION WE ASK, OR GET ASKED, MANY TIMES A DAY.

When those of us who support others physically, emotionally, and spiritually ask this question, we're prepared for a more honest answer and, perhaps, a more vulnerable conversation. But when we're on the receiving end of this question, many of us tend to respond automatically without taking the time to stop and consider, *How am I really doing?* It's a ritual greeting in which we aren't often mindfully engaged.

When we started discussing this book, we were in the middle of a global pandemic, and this question was front and center of many conversations. We thought about how we were doing personally, but also how we were doing as people who support others' well-being. The work we do profoundly impacts how we are, particularly for those of us who care for the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being of other people.

By now, you've probably heard about the importance of self-care and

wellness. Perhaps you've read books on the subject, and maybe you've had some conversations about it. So, how will this book add to the discussion?

You might be familiar with this parable: A helper is walking by a river and notices someone drowning. As the helper jumps in to save them, they notice another person drowning and try to save them too. Soon the helper is overwhelmed with trying to save people from drowning. At some point, a second helper joins in trying to save the drowning people. But after some time, the second helper gets out of the water and starts walking upstream. The first helper asks what they're doing, to which they reply: "I'm going to see if I can find out *why* people are falling in the river."

This parable is best summarized by a quote attributed to the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu: "There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in." When we were discussing this book, we decided we wanted to take this approach – we wanted to go beyond taking bubble baths or getting pedicures, watching sports or getting a hobby; we wanted to offer more than taking deep breaths or doing something nice for yourself. Although these steps can help, we didn't want to only talk about how to react and respond to stress. We wanted to explore our relationship to wellness and stress, the values and core beliefs that influence our approach, and our concepts of rest and resilience. We also wanted to speak about community and the importance of caring for one another as part of our wellness.

"Self-care is often discussed and illustrated as individual activities performed to 'treat' oneself. Unfortunately, this, in combination with a growing wellness industry, perpetuates a culture of self-care based on individualism, capitalism, and consumerism."

—WYATT & AMPADU

WHO WE ARE

We are Marwa and Vicki, two mental health professionals who have been in this field for a combined 45 years.

I (Marwa) am a Sudanese-Canadian Black Muslim woman, and I've lived in Canada since I was 12 years old. I remember being told since my adolescence

that I was a great listener and helper. Combine that with my faith-based and cultural traditions, which taught me the virtue of helping and uplifting others, and it's no wonder I chose this field. I have been passionate about wellness for many years, particularly after my own experiences with burnout and vicarious trauma. In my journey of recovery and return to work, I realized that many of my conversations about this subject looked at burnout as inevitable and considered self-care to be a reactive and surface-level intervention. That didn't fit for me. I'm always in favor of a good massage, but that wasn't sustainable self-care for me, and I needed to find something that was.

I (Vicki) am a white woman born to a second-generation settler farming family. I grew up rural, in the Northern prairies of Canada. From my Mennonite heritage, I absorbed messages throughout my life on the importance of looking after each other as a group and considering community harmony as paramount to every person's survival and success. My counseling work – which has largely focused on trauma healing and understanding the potentially dangerous influences of power – has greatly shaped my thinking about wellness. In my work, I have also learned the importance of individual voices and choices that might go against dominant broader messages. I too have had several episodes of vicarious trauma, burnout, and empathy fatigue over the years. Through these experiences, I have learned how imperative it is for me to stay connected to meaning and joy – and they left me hungry to keep learning about what it means to stay well.

As it turns out, we feel very similarly about burnout and vicarious trauma. Combined with the clear need for more conversations about these topics, as well as a desire to speak to individual, community, and systemic issues that could impact wellness, the idea for this book was born!

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

Many of us use different words and language to define and describe our roles. Are you a helper? A healer? Caregiver? Counselor? Therapist? Pastor? Spiritual guide? Frontline worker? However you see yourself and your role, whatever title you use, however long you've been doing what you do, this book is for you.

If you're anything like us, you've grappled with the idea of self-care at many points in your life. Maybe you've heard someone talk about how you can't

help others if you don't take care of yourself. Maybe they've used the airplane safety analogy to describe the importance of self-care to you – you have to put on your own oxygen mask first before you put one on others.

We've both struggled with balancing our desire to help others with the need to take care of ourselves. We've likely all dealt with the guilt that comes with wanting to take time off, and the guilt that comes with not taking care of ourselves. The goal for this book is to speak to those common experiences and tell the stories that highlight our struggles, as well as our resilience.

In this book, we use the language of *helper* or *healer* to describe anyone who considers themselves to be in a helping role. We feel these terms are broad enough to encapsulate most of the work in a variety of roles, but we also understand that, while these words may fit for some, they may not fit for everyone. We also use the term *clients* for those that we are supporting, though for you they might be patients, students, or any other recipients of your services or support.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN THIS BOOK

The first part of the book focuses on self-awareness. You'll have the opportunity to reflect on how you define wellness and how you make sense of stress. We'll invite you to unpack some of your beliefs and understandings about yourself, your purpose, your work, and your worth. The second half of the book will invite more thought about actions and steps to move you towards wellness.

We've worked really hard to make this book feel like a conversation between you and us. In our preparation, we invited people from diverse personal and professional backgrounds to complete a survey about the different positive and negative impacts they experienced as a result of their work. We received over 1,500 responses, which surprised us a bit at first! Then, as we read the answers, it became clear that this topic resonates with many helpers and healers. Their responses gave us insightful things to consider and challenged us to deepen our understanding of what wellness could really look like.

The survey included questions regarding helpers' beliefs about the role of self-care and which factors contribute to their state of wellness. Throughout this book, we've included some of the common responses, as well as unique perspectives. Additionally, we've included excerpts from follow-up interviews,

which more deeply explore the diverse stories we've heard. We've also shared some of our own stories and experiences to illustrate what we're writing about. We aim to be authentic and vulnerable in sharing our perspectives and struggles we've faced in our own journeys. We hope this invites you to do the same.

Throughout the book, you'll also notice themes that come up again and again. One central theme is *awareness* – it's difficult to enact change in our lives without first having some self-awareness about our current state of affairs. After all, we can't change what we're not aware of. You'll see many invitations and opportunities to reflect and shine a light on those unconscious patterns that may be driving some of your reactions.

"Awareness is like the sun. When it shines on things, they are transformed."

—THICH NHAT HANH

Connected to that, another theme you'll find is *choice*. Once we are aware of ourselves, our patterns, our relationships, our reactions, etc., we can then choose to continue on that path or take a different one. Choice is empowering.

Think back to a time when you didn't have a choice about something – perhaps when you were told to do something you didn't want to do. You had a *no* inside you, but you didn't get the chance to express it. When we find ourselves experiencing feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, choice is the antidote – you'll see us refer to it repeatedly in the coming chapters.

Choice also brings more freedom and joy. We believe this work can be joyful and life-giving, but we're also aware that it doesn't always feel that way. We recognize and want to name that some things in each of our contexts may feel bigger and may be beyond our immediate capacity to change.

As Emily and Amelia Nagoski (2019) share in their book, *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*, the "game" is rigged. There are large systems in effect that impact our wellness and our ability to live, work, and play in safe, healthy, and joyful ways – systems that uphold white supremacy and patriarchy; capitalist systems that promote productivity and hustle culture at the cost of our own wellness; and systems that accelerate food and home insecurity. It's beyond the scope of this book to give a detailed exploration of each of these

realities, but we acknowledge that they exist and create additional barriers on our path to wellness and our ability to care for ourselves and one another. We do, however, speak to how we can create space for joy in spite of these barriers throughout the book.

WHAT LIES AHEAD

Once you get into the book, you'll notice that we begin each chapter by sharing some information about the topic at hand. We encourage you to be open to a different way of considering wellness and self-care. It may feel exciting, but it may also feel uncomfortable, and that's okay – bring your curiosity to the table. Each chapter includes some stories – from us and our survey participants, as well as from our interviews – to help bring the information to life.

Towards the end of each chapter, we'll invite you to participate in some self-reflection through questions, journal prompts, mapping activities, and some other options. Our intention is to have you engage with the material because we want this to be more than just a book you read once. We hope you can engage with the concepts, think and reflect on them, and then take action to make whatever changes you deem necessary in how you think about and live out wellness.

In order to get the most out of these self-reflections, we invite you to complete the activities as you go along, as some of the later activities will build on earlier ones. We also want you to start putting what you learn into action right away. We end each chapter with a direct invitation for you to rest, take a break, get some water, or move your body so you can absorb the information before moving on. Again, our wish is that this book will be a turning point in how you care for yourself and those around you.

BEFORE YOU KEEP READING

As you move on to the first chapter, take a minute, breathe, and think about what made you pick up this book. What drew you to it? What are your intentions for reading this book? What do you need or want to learn from it? Set that intention in your mind, and we'll check in on it again at the end of the book. In the meantime, we're so happy you're here, and we're excited to share our passion for this book with you.

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS WELLNESS?

WELLNESS CAN MEAN MANY THINGS DEPENDING ON WHO IS USING THE TERM and in what context. Historically, the concept of wellness has been defined in contrast to, and as prevention for, illness. In the broader context of overall health, the World Health Organization has expanded the concept of wellness beyond the absence of illness to a positive state that includes actively contributing to one's world with a sense of meaning and purpose (n.d.).

For helpers and healers, the concept of wellness comes up in response to something being wrong – that we are inevitably harmed by doing this work, and we should pay some attention to that. There seems to be a belief that we will inevitably experience negative impacts (stress, burnout, vicarious trauma) from our work, and that we need to practice “self-care” in response to these impacts. The path to wellness, however, is usually unclear.

Self-care is often depicted as “greedy, self-indulgent, weak or even self-pitying” (Hersh, 2022, p. 33). For helpers, paying attention to our wellness can

seem as obvious as our need for oxygen. However, for so many, the concept is an invisible and unspoken part of what keeps us going. When we were starting to work on this book, we were both struck by how often we received comments from our colleagues and friends saying that this was a refreshing, much-needed, and often ignored area of our field. It seems important to note that we began this project during the “tail end” of the COVID-19 pandemic. As many places in the world are shifting into a different phase of response, for many people this is a time to finally reflect and make some sense of what the years of 2020–2023 have been like, what we went through, and what we learned.

The pandemic sparked a global conversation about the impact of prolonged stress on mental health and overall well-being in many contexts. For example, collective conversations popped up about the experience of *languishing*, described as a state of joyless, stagnant, and unmotivated malaise so many of us experienced (Grant, 2021). Perhaps this heightened recognition of the impacts of anxiety, uncertainty, and loss for ourselves and loved ones has given us permission to speak more openly about these experiences. Mental, physical, and spiritual health care providers have also been more needed and overloaded during this time. This reality has only underlined the importance of this conversation and the need for all of us to pay close attention to our own wellness.

Given the range of ways people may connect to wellness, we want to draw on the themes from our survey participants. They come from a variety of personal and professional backgrounds and have helped us define wellness for this book. They also reaffirmed the importance of paying attention to wellness so we can keep doing this work. Ninety-five percent of our survey respondents agreed with the statement, “It is important to give extra attention to my personal wellness because of what I do in my helping work.” And 97 percent agreed with, “What I do in my helping work has purpose and meaning to me.” Our wellness is fundamental to how we sustain ourselves in these roles.

We’ll also share our evolving understanding of wellness from our own experiences. We hope this will help you consider how you think of wellness, whether it’s similar to these themes or if you’ve defined it differently up to this point.

As helpers and healers, we may be considering wellness through a particular lens – some of us may think of wellness as our capacity to do our work;

others might consider wellness as the often-discussed work-life balance; others still may think of wellness as a literal marker of how well we feel physically, emotionally, spiritually, etc.

Drawing from key themes we noticed from our survey responses, being well in our roles means taking a wholistic approach and paying attention to balance, engagement, and boundaries. We explore these four areas throughout this chapter.

WELLNESS IS WHOLISTIC

Wellness has historically focused on physical health and the absence of physical ailments. As noted earlier, more general definitions have recently expanded to also include mental health. For our survey respondents, it is clear that the dominant way to think about wellness is through a *wholistic* lens that includes attention to physical, mental, emotional, relational, and spiritual health.*

SURVEY QUOTE



Wellness means that I intentionally plan for nurturing my entire well-being, including care for my whole self (physical, social, emotional, spiritual), in order to have the capacity and resources to serve and care for others.

PHYSICAL

When describing physical health, it is common to focus on the presence or absence of illness. However, we now know that our physical well-being encompasses so much more.

- How's our energy level?
- How are we eating?

* By using the term *wholistic*, we hope to underscore the interconnected nature of our physical, mental, emotional, relational, and spiritual selves. We believe this term recognizes their harmonious interdependence and cohesive integration.

- What about our sleep?
- Do our bodies hurt?
- Do our bodies have persistent aches, pains, or tension?

All of these factors affect our physical wellness.

When I (Marwa) consider my physical health, I think about how I'm feeling. I consider my ability to get through my day and accomplish what I need to get done without feeling tired or lethargic. I think about what I'm putting into my body. Am I eating a reasonably balanced diet, or am I resorting to emotional eating, craving high-fat and high-carb foods? I also think about how often I'm eating and when I eat. I reflect on how much I sleep, how rested I feel, and whether or not my sleep is uninterrupted.

For me (Vicki), I'm also aware of the changing realities in different parts of my physical health. I pay different attention to how much sleep, energy, and activity I have now in my 50s compared to when I was in my 30s. I draw different meaning from waking with an aching back now than I might have 10 years ago. And it matters differently to me. I've always gone through cycles of having difficulty sleeping, but it matters a lot more to me now. I notice the impact differently. In contrast, I'm less impacted by other aspects of physical health as I've become more comfortable in my own skin over time.

MENTAL

Mental or cognitive wellness is all about our ability to manage our thinking. As many of us now know, the way we think about ourselves and the world around us can have a profound impact on our emotional state, as well as how we act.

- Do we have a positive or realistic mindset about our lives?
- Do we have a tendency to perceive things through a negative lens?
- Do we have enough awareness about our thinking to recognize when our thoughts about a situation are accurate or not? In fact, do we even think about our thinking or is it automatic?
- Do we recognize our ability to change our own thinking about things?

I (Marwa) have actually struggled quite a lot with this part of myself.

Of all the elements of wellness, this is the one that I have had to put the most energy into.

Historically, I hadn't really realized how impactful my thoughts were on my well-being. I know it seems so obvious now, but I think, for me, part of the struggle was that I was really not *at all* in tune with my own thoughts and cognitions – I wasn't attentive to the background scripts running in my mind, commenting on my day, my performance, my interactions, and influencing me in all the same ways. It was as though I was functioning on autopilot in some ways. Funnily enough, it was in doing this work consistently and advising numerous clients about the importance of paying attention to their thoughts and how their thinking can influence their emotional state that it eventually hit me – *I could do the same thing!*

I started tuning into my thoughts, and, let me tell you, it was incredibly challenging and exhausting. But the more I did it, the easier it got. I started to notice the connection between my thoughts and my mood, my energy, and my belief in myself. My thoughts had a tendency to be quite self-critical and self-blaming, which was a revelation because I'd always thought of myself as a fairly self-confident individual. One of the most powerful things I've learned is this simple idea: *Just because I have a thought about something doesn't make it true.* Mind blown!

This is still a steep learning curve for me. Even as I write this book, I am paying close attention to my thoughts and inner narrative, and how they impact my feelings and confidence about what I'm writing. The kinder and more self-compassionate my thoughts are, the better I feel about what I write and the more at ease I am about the process.

EMOTIONAL

Emotional wellness refers to how we manage our emotions. In this case, if we reflect on our emotional state, we consider our patterns of emotional regulation or dysregulation.

- Do we feel settled? Overwhelmed? Numb? Engaged?
- How do we identify or recognize our own emotions?
- How do we express them?

Emotions are fluid, which means they move and shift in their tone and intensity. This is normal and inherent in what emotions are – the active part of feelings and the behavioral urges that come from our internal states. Feelings emerge from the constant communication between our nervous system and our body, meaning they are a result of us being “feeling creatures that think and thinking creatures that feel” (Damasio, 2021, p. 7). As we move through any given day – going about our different tasks, interacting with others, having memories, anticipating new challenges – our internal environment constantly responds to our experiences. Our instincts and intuition may propel us into quick reactions. Other times, we may pause and weigh out an interplay of several different feelings at once.

We can also feel more comfortable with some emotions than others. This is because our emotions can remind us of past experiences, which influence how we feel in the present moment. Or our beliefs about emotions can lead us to either accept or avoid them. Our emotional wellness reflects how we navigate the interwoven communication between our feelings, thoughts, memories, and relationships. This is a fluid and ever-changing inner dynamic that includes our shifting ability to manage and express our emotions as we address life’s challenges, make decisions, and engage with others.

For me (Vicki), emotions started out as confusing. I grew up in a culture that did not emphasize overtly talking about emotions. As I entered a room, I learned to sense in my gut how people were doing, what was expected, and how I could best navigate the relationships around me. I was motivated to do what I could to help others be okay, so I would feel more settled as well. I didn’t have language for this early on, but I developed behavioral patterns to manage it. This likely motivated my interest in learning about emotions, engaging with psychology and relationship studies, and entering this field of professional work.

I can see now how these same intuitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns are there for me when I enter a counseling session or walk into a staff meeting. What has become key for me to learn in my adult years is how to discern my own experience as separate from others’ experiences, and to be able to trust that I can own or express my emotions and not be responsible for the emotions

of others. This continues to be part of my own *self-of-the-counselor** work as I support others with their own dysregulated and unconscious emotional patterns, and it's a great contributor to my sense of emotional wellness.

Like Vicki, I (Marwa) also didn't grow up with a lot of conversations around emotions or discussions about how to best express them. Any learning I had was more implicit, more absorbed by what I observed in my family and friends. I learned what was acceptable and what wasn't, what emotions were welcome, and which ones weren't. As a result, I also developed my own patterns around which emotions I entertained and which emotions I could not tolerate. It influenced my desire to be a peacemaker and help mediate conflict, which eventually evolved into a career of supporting others with their emotional and mental distress, walking alongside them as they discover their own relationship with emotions.

As I grew and did my own emotional work, I recognized and learned (and am still learning) my own patterns, the interplay between my previous learnings, and how I want to be with my emotions. This, for me, is my barometer of emotional wellness – am I falling into previous patterns or am I more intentional and mindful, more kind and graceful, with the emotions that exist within me?

RELATIONAL

Relational wellness refers to the state of our relationships. It is an important component of our wellness because, as social beings, we exist in relationships. Physiologically speaking, when we are safe enough and our survival is not in question, the social engagement branch of our nervous system[†] comes online (Porges, 2022). This facilitates our human need to seek connectedness, reassurance, and nurturance from our people, whoever they may be. It enables us

* *Self of the counselor* is the intentional reflection on the part of the counselor to become consciously aware of patterns and influences from family or caregivers growing up, as well as historical, ancestral patterns that may impact how we perceive others and provide care. It's important to be aware of these patterns as they can highlight both our strengths and constraints that influence our current perspective and responses.

† *Polyvagal theory* has helped us understand how one part of our nervous system (the ventral vagal branch) includes the social engagement system. This is integral to our ability to become calm and engage with our relationships when our environment does not include threats to our life and safety. Through these relationships, we can connect, co-regulate, and nurture one another.

to be co-regulated by those we turn to when we're experiencing distress or dysregulation, which, in turn, impacts our wellness. When assessing our relational wellness, it's important to consider if we have nourishing relationships in our lives that can meet these needs.

- Do we have healthy, secure attachments?
- Do we feel a sense of belonging?
- Do we have relationships in which we can rest and be ourselves?

Another part of assessing our relational wellness is reflecting on the people in our lives who may not be positive or nurturing influences. As with many things in our lives, relationships that are less healthy can drain us and challenge our capacity to engage with people. The impact of these relationships can also leak into other parts of our lives, which is why we need to pay attention to the nature of our relationships.

- How much energy and time do we devote to these relationships?
- Are we able to limit the impact they have on us?

We'd like to emphasize that when we are describing the nature of our relationships, whether positive or challenging, we are talking more about the quality of our relationships with other people (as opposed to the quantity).

I (Marwa) often consider relational wellness to be a strong indicator of my overall wellness. When I was younger, I had a complicated relationship with the people in my life, mostly due to the underdeveloped relationship I had with myself. I put an incredible amount of pressure on those relationships, and when they experienced hiccups or ended, I took it very hard. I poured a lot of myself into these relationships, and I took it personally if something went wrong, because I didn't understand my own nature and needs. My boundaries were chaotic to say the least, and my pendulum would swing from one extreme – *all* of the socializing, *all* of the pouring into others – to the other – isolation, not responding to people, not engaging or maintaining relationships. As you can imagine, this was exhausting and unsustainable.

Since then, through my own therapy and self-reflection, I have learned more about myself and my patterns with other people. I am an introvert, which means I value my alone time as an opportunity to recharge and restore myself. But I also love my people, and I am fulfilled in such a powerful and different way when I have meaningful interactions with the important people in my life.

The most valuable questions I ask myself now when thinking of healthy, nurturing relationships for myself are, *Can I be vulnerable with this person? Can I share parts of myself and be authentic? Can I be at rest in this relationship?* I've also learned that I can have different levels of relationships with people. For instance, not every relationship needs to be at the deepest level – there is still beauty in healthy, balanced relationships, even if we aren't all best friends. To that end, I have learned another important lesson, which is that relationships have seasons – they come and go, and not every ending is a mark of failure. Some relationships come into our lives, they serve a purpose and we learn from them, and then they end. And that's alright.

SPIRITUAL

Spiritual well-being is all about our sense of purpose and where we find meaning in our lives. For some of us, this may be through connection to a higher power. For others, it might be identifying what grounds us and gives us a sense of meaning and connection to something greater than ourselves.

When thinking about spiritual wellness, we might consider some questions that feel pretty big:

- What is my purpose in life?
- How do I feel grounded in connection to myself? To others?
To the world?
- What gives my life a sense of meaning?
- How do I make sense of the many difficult challenges I might face over the course of my life?

For me (Marwa), my spiritual wellness resides in my connection with my faith. My faith encompasses all parts of my life, work included. I notice that my spiritual well-being is deeply connected to my sense of hope at work and

my trust in the process. My faith is also my solace when I'm feeling sad and overwhelmed by some of the stories I hear.

If I'm not grounded in faith and practicing the rituals and acts of worship associated with it, I feel heavy and lean towards despair and hopelessness – I find myself questioning what kind of world we live in and what the point of it all is. When my connection to my faith is strong, I feel more hopeful, and I find myself more resilient and grounded in gratitude and joy. I am able to rest in the reality that I am not in control of everything, and I can direct my energy to affect change in the areas that I do have control over.

For me (Vicki), this area has always felt interwoven with being involved in helping work and continually learning about life in general. I have always had a sense of questioning – asking myself, *Why am I here? Why are we all here? What am I meant to do? How can I make my daily life part of a meaningful whole?*

These questions follow me into counseling conversations, and I hear them in other people's stories and reflections. I used to feel there would be a time I would know the answers and find some certainty. I think what is emerging for me now is more of a comfort with being uncertain, of being more comfortable with the uncomfortable questions. I'm embracing the actual process of seeking and continuing to ask questions.

My current growing edge in this area is exploring this more collectively. How do I connect with the spiritual part of myself while also connecting with others? What does it mean to be part of a community? How do I do that and not lose myself in the process? How do I connect deeply with a spiritual part of myself and be in connection with others who may define their spirituality differently?

Connecting the Five Areas of Wholistic Wellness

It is striking how interwoven all these areas can be. When thinking about wellness wholistically, most would consider the five areas we just discussed. However, we could include additional areas, such as finances, leisure, and occupation. For ease of discussion, we've talked about each of these areas individually, but it's important to note that they are all naturally connected to one another. Health in one area will impact health in others.

I (Vicki) will most often notice a shift in my wellness linked to physical energy and fatigue levels. I think this is my starting point to tune in. My attention shifts very quickly to my mental focus and how I might be struggling to concentrate or be clear about how I want to approach a situation. I find this can very quickly organize my mood and emotional wellness, my perception of whether I'm looking forward to or dreading the day ahead, or how I judge how the day has gone. If it has been a struggle, and there have been a string of those days, I find myself sliding quickly into big questions which link to spiritual wellness: *Am I in the right profession? Am I doing what I'm supposed to be doing? Should I be doing something entirely different?* I can zip around this thought wheel in the span of an hour.

LIFE-WORK BALANCE

Another prominent theme from our survey is the importance of living a balanced life. Most respondents who mentioned this also referenced the concept of work-life balance. Namely, they spoke about the importance of not compromising their personal lives by giving too much time and energy to work. Hence the heading we've chosen for this section, where life comes before work.

Sometimes, we think of balance as having two things in equal measure. However, when considering the balance between our work and personal lives, most people would not expect them to be equal.

SURVEY QUOTES



I used to wait until I hit a wall. Now I've learned to be proactive in my approaches to avoid doing that! Very clear boundaries between work and home have been an essential part of this process.

Wellness to me means pouring from a full cup – taking time to rest, breathe, and connect with others so I can return to work with patience, understanding, and focus.

Different folks have varying expectations for what they want to get out of their work, as well as what they want from their personal lives. For instance, I (Marwa) went through a period of time in my life in which work was my primary focus – it was something I was passionate about and I was happy to spend the majority of my energy focused on work-related tasks.

Although I am still very passionate about my work, my balance has shifted to spending more of my time and energy on other areas of my life. I would say that in both cases, I had the balance I wanted, given what I needed at the time. Today, however, I'm more concerned with putting "life" first – if I felt that most of my available time was spent on work-related tasks, I would feel out of balance. The thing about balance is that it often shifts, which, in this case, is a good thing. When we are in a place of wellness, we want the balance between our work and personal time to be fluid enough to shift between the ever-changing circumstances in our lives.

ENGAGEMENT

The importance of being engaged and present arose in our survey responses and our interviews. In this context, when speaking about their wellness, many people referenced their ability to be active participants in their own lives. Many of us sometimes find ourselves operating on autopilot, particularly when we have reduced mental bandwidth. Or we may find that we have to be so present and engaged in our work lives that we've used up our capacity for being turned on and tuned in when we get home. As such, we are more checked out or more unavailable, whether intentionally or not.

SURVEY QUOTE

Wellness is the ability to still enjoy my life and relationships in spite of the grief and sadness of others that I shoulder.



For those of us who already have some experience with not feeling engaged in our personal lives, we may notice our own warning signs and take action. But for others, it can take someone else pointing out our lack of presence for us to realize that we're disengaged. This disengagement can also happen to varying degrees.

When we're in a state of wellness and actively engaged in our lives, we're present during interactions with our loved ones – we make intentional choices about our actions and behaviors.

SURVEY QUOTE



Wellness is not the absence of negative experiences or low moments of mental health. Rather, it's the ability to proactively work towards the maintenance of good mental health and deal with negative experiences and emotions in healthy and productive ways.

BOUNDARIES

It can be helpful to think of *boundaries* as the places where we end and others begin. They are the rules or limits we set around what we find acceptable, including what sort of treatment and interactions we're willing to tolerate from other people. There may be times when this is less of a cognitive process and more of a felt experience – we might sense when our boundaries are being pressured intuitively before we put words to why that is. The discomfort we sometimes instinctively feel is an invitation to pay attention to and reflect on what's happening: *How does what's happening fit with my beliefs about my limits, my comfort, and my choice about what I want and/or deserve?*

When we're well, it's easier to have clear boundaries that reflect how we want to be treated, both personally and professionally. When we experience stress, burnout, or general unwellness, we're more likely to compromise our boundaries, either by making them more rigid or more chaotic. Healthy boundaries reflect our connection to our values and our ability to protect them from being compromised.

SURVEY QUOTE

Having healthy boundaries means taking responsibility for all aspects of my life so that I can do my work and live my personal life effectively according to my values and beliefs.

When we aren't well, our ability to consistently act in line with our values and desires becomes more difficult. We might find ourselves saying *yes* to something a colleague or boss asks us to do when internally we're very much feeling a *no*. Or we may slide down the slippery slope of self-disclosure with clients, sharing personal information that isn't in their best interest. Alternately, we might also become more rigid, less tolerant of change, and unable to pivot when our clients or workplaces require some flexibility with things like scheduling.

The boundary between our work and personal lives can also quickly fall into the extremes of being too rigid or too open. For me (Vicki), my own tendency when feeling drained or oversaturated from work stress is to become more protective of my boundaries in all areas. At work, I'll write shorter and more cryptic emails, struggle to return phone calls, and stretch my lunch hour an extra 15 minutes. And then this follows me home. I'll avoid calling my mom, I'll put two blankets on me while watching TV on the couch, and I won't want to see any other humans, not even at a grocery store. I often struggle to share my life with friends, because the line between the confidential "stuff" that takes up a lot of my internal space gets blurred with my emotions and thoughts about my personal life. This can all leave me more isolated than I would hope to be. But it feels too exposing to open up at these times.

For myself (Marwa), my experience is often similar to Vicki's, with the added piece of my resistance to hearing anything heavy or weighty from my family or friends. When I'm well, I'm happy to have all sorts of conversations with my people, including ones in which they're authentic and vulnerable in their sharing. When I'm depleted, my tolerance for that shrinks considerably. I find myself avoiding conversations or giving indirect cues that I'm not present or available for those heavier topics. As you can guess, it doesn't feel good to shut down or respond to loved ones in this manner. However, when wellness

is present in my life, it can be incredibly rewarding to have the flexibility in my boundaries to share or not – to listen or not – depending on the context and circumstances.

CONNECTIONS

Now that we've spent some time talking about what wellness can look like, we want to share more about our own connections with wellness.

I (Marwa) have been working in the field of mental health for almost 16 years. During this time, my journey with wellness has taken a few turns. I was definitely not as conscious of my own state of wellness at the beginning of my career as I am now. In fact, due to my lack of insight and self-awareness, at one point in my journey (probably halfway through my career to date), I literally uprooted myself and moved cities to avoid dealing with what I can now see in hindsight was my vicarious trauma and burnout. Perhaps it's fair to say that it wasn't avoidance, but more so an unconscious attempt to cope with my state.

At the time, all I could recognize was that I was unhappy at work and felt like I wasn't making a difference (with a bit of compassion fatigue thrown in for good measure). In my personal life, I felt that I was stuck. I was overwhelmed and taxed in my social relationships. This lines up with what I know now: the two areas that are usually the most impacted, and in which I've grown the most, are my relational wellness and my boundaries.

More recently, as I've come to focus more on the importance of my own wellness, I have also grappled with larger systemic issues that impact my (and our) capacity to take care of ourselves and one another. I've struggled with the systems that are not responsive to us, systems that actually contribute to our lack of wellness and cause harm to us, systems that prioritize productivity and achievement over connection and well-being. Our society and culture emphasize our individual responsibility for caring for ourselves without acknowledging the many ways in which they are complicit in creating the very conditions that are detrimental to us. This has been a major shift in my perspective and has led to changes in the ways I take care of myself and others.

As a counselor, I (Vicki) have also gone through several stages on my wellness journey. Early in my 20+ years of working in this field, I think I just took wellness for granted. I assumed it would get harder as I went along, but that

I would also be okay for quite a while. It's not that I didn't feel stress or worry, but that I assumed I couldn't do much about it – it was just part of the job. And I was stubborn. I pushed through and kept going.

But it wasn't long into my career that I had a strong wake-up call. Only a few years into what I consider my first “real” job working at a women's shelter, I started having some recurring nightmares about the stories of the women I met there. That's when I first recognized the profound process of connection that can happen when we open ourselves to other people's stories, emotions, and energy.

I'm so grateful for the more experienced women working with me at the time – they provided guidance and helped me find my footing as I realized three key things:

- I wasn't invincible and shielded from impact just because I was young and “fresh” to the field. In fact, that may have made me more vulnerable in some ways.
- If I wanted to last in this work, I needed to start paying attention to and proactively managing my own wellness early.
- I needed community. I couldn't do this in a sustainable or joyful way alone.

I learned these lessons over and over again in the decades to follow. And in the last five years, I've learned a fourth key lesson about boundaries. I used to treat boundaries as walls that support and contain the different parts of my life. However, I've come to see that events in one area of my life absolutely trickle over into the others. I used to compartmentalize aspects of my life, thinking I was practicing “good boundaries.” And maybe I was, but those boundaries gave me an illusion of control. As I've been humbly “schooled” by life in the areas of social unrest, confronting my own unconscious bias, and facing the threat of loss of health and loved ones, I've learned the importance of embracing vulnerability. And it has prompted me to create more porous boundaries that allow the ebb and flow of changes, surprises, support, and challenges to happen more freely, without disrupting other areas of my life.

Although we've been talking about the importance of being proactive about our wellness, many of us have gotten used to pushing and persevering through difficult circumstances.

Consider the following example conversation with a client. Her workplace is short-staffed and she's doing double her workload. The counselor talks to her about her stress levels, specifically about the stress management strategies she could implement. However, the reality is that her sources of stress and anxiety are her work circumstances – circumstances she cannot change. She mentions that she's planning on going on stress leave from work, but only after another couple of months. The counselor asks why she wants to wait. Her instinct, like many of ours, is to push through her stress until she has no other choice, or until it's more convenient for others, or a combination of both.

When we take this approach to our wellness, we end up reacting to stressful circumstances after we've already experienced negative impacts. This can leave us feeling disempowered, helpless, and frustrated. But if we are proactive in our self-care and pay attention to all areas of our wellness, we will be better equipped to deal with future challenges with a sense of empowerment, safety, and joy.

PRACTICE AND REFLECTION

"Awareness is the greatest agent for change."

—ECKHART TOLLE

THE WELLNESS WHEEL

How can you start proactively looking after your own well-being?

One thing you can do is turn inwards and pay honest attention to your current state of affairs. A simple way to do this is to practice using the wellness wheel. This is a commonly found exercise with a few versions, but here's our approach. We invite you to complete this activity before you read further so you can reflect on your discoveries.

- On a large piece of paper, draw out a full circle and divide it into eight equal slices (see the example below).
- Label each piece of the pie with an area of wellness that is relevant to you. Some of the most common are physical, mental, emotional, relational, spiritual, financial, work, leisure, home management, and personal development.
- For each piece, draw a line from the center of the circle to the edge of that piece to represent a scale, with the center being zero and the outer edge being a five (or use a larger scale if you prefer).
- For each area, rate your satisfaction, with five being satisfied and fulfilled, and zero being unsatisfied and lacking.

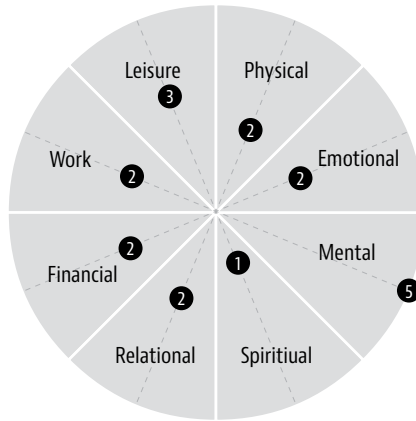
Some areas will be more satisfactory, and others will need work. The goal here isn't to have a perfectly balanced wheel, but to gain awareness that can lead to proactive attention and action.

We invite you to consider the following questions to help you pay close attention to how you're feeling as you complete this activity:

- Where do your thoughts go?
- Are there any areas of your body that draw your attention?
What's happening there?
- Does this bring up any emotions for you?
- Does the amount of energy you're investing in each area reflect your satisfaction with that area?

As you complete this exercise, we also invite you to notice any judgments you may have and suspend them. We encourage you to be gentle with yourself and treat yourself with compassion and grace, regardless of what this activity reveals to you.

Example



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Each chapter will include some questions at the end. We invite you to reflect on them as you absorb the material. You can use these questions as journal prompts, or you can contemplate them as you lie on your couch or go for a walk. Our hope is that they'll help you consider and actively engage with how the ideas in each chapter manifest in your life and guide you on your wellness journey.

1. How do you define wellness?
2. What has influenced and shaped this definition?
3. How has your approach to self-care changed over time?

BEFORE YOU KEEP READING

We've spent some time orienting ourselves to the concept of wellness, its common elements and themes, how we define it, and how we can proactively notice where we are in our wellness journey.

Now we'd like to shift the conversation to things that may influence our wellness – namely stress and our relationship with it. Before you turn the page, we invite you to close your eyes if it feels good for you to do so, take some deep breaths, and turn inwards. How are you doing? Are you ready to continue reading? Is there something you need before you turn the page? Perhaps you need to stretch, grab a glass of water, or get some fresh air. Take this time to do what you need, and we'll meet you in the next chapter.

ALTHOUGH HELPING OTHERS IS AN ENRICHING ROLE, it is not without its challenges. Burnout, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue are just some of the impacts we try to heal from through self-care. But what if we could take a more proactive approach to our well-being? One that allows us to grow our wellness and resilience as we help others.

In *Self-Care Transformed*, Psychologist Marwa Fadol and Therapist Vicki Enns go past the surface-level exploration of what it means to be well in a helping role. They provide a wholistic approach to helper well-being that includes creating space for grief, anger, and meaningful rest, and explore questions such as: “How can this work increase our overall health?” “How can we respond to our own wellness needs?” and “What role does community play in our individual wellness?”

This book is an opportunity to learn practical steps that will deepen your own sense of well-being. It offers both individual and collective strategies you can use to create a sustainable and ongoing approach to self-care. Whether you are a counselor, nurse, teacher, or any type of helper, this book is your compass to a more sustainable and fulfilling approach to wellness.



“If you’ve ever desperately googled ‘signs of burnout,’ only to be disappointed with what seemed like unfounded remedies, this book is for you.”

—Leigh van Rootselaar, MSW, RSW

“*Self-Care Transformed* provides a deeper and more profound understanding of wellness that moves beyond popularized descriptions of self-care. It explores ways we can build a wholistic understanding of wellness into all aspects of our work, so that we can be transformed by it rather than simply survive. I’d recommend the book to any caregiver – there’s something new for each of us to learn.”

—Heather Block, *Director of Strategic Initiatives, United Way*

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