



FINDING OUR POWER TOGETHER

HELP FOR THE HELPER

RESEARCH REPORT
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Written by
Jennifer Luft B.Sc., MHA(cc)

INTRODUCTION

Helpers in Indigenous communities are the people who take on formal and informal roles to ensure the wellbeing of community members. Helpers include nurses, personal support workers, social workers, harm reduction workers, child and youth workers, paramedics, teachers, security people, and family caregivers. Helpers in professional roles often have to leave their communities to study at mainstream schools. Professional Helpers in licensed professions have the responsibility to adhere to mainstream professional standards to remain in their roles. Helpers are people who care about their communities and are dedicated to see them thrive. Because of their dedication, community based Helpers, in particular, are key to Indigenous communities recovering from the trauma of colonialism including the reserve system, residential schools, biased child welfare policies and other forms of systemic discrimination through their identification with the communities they serve (18).

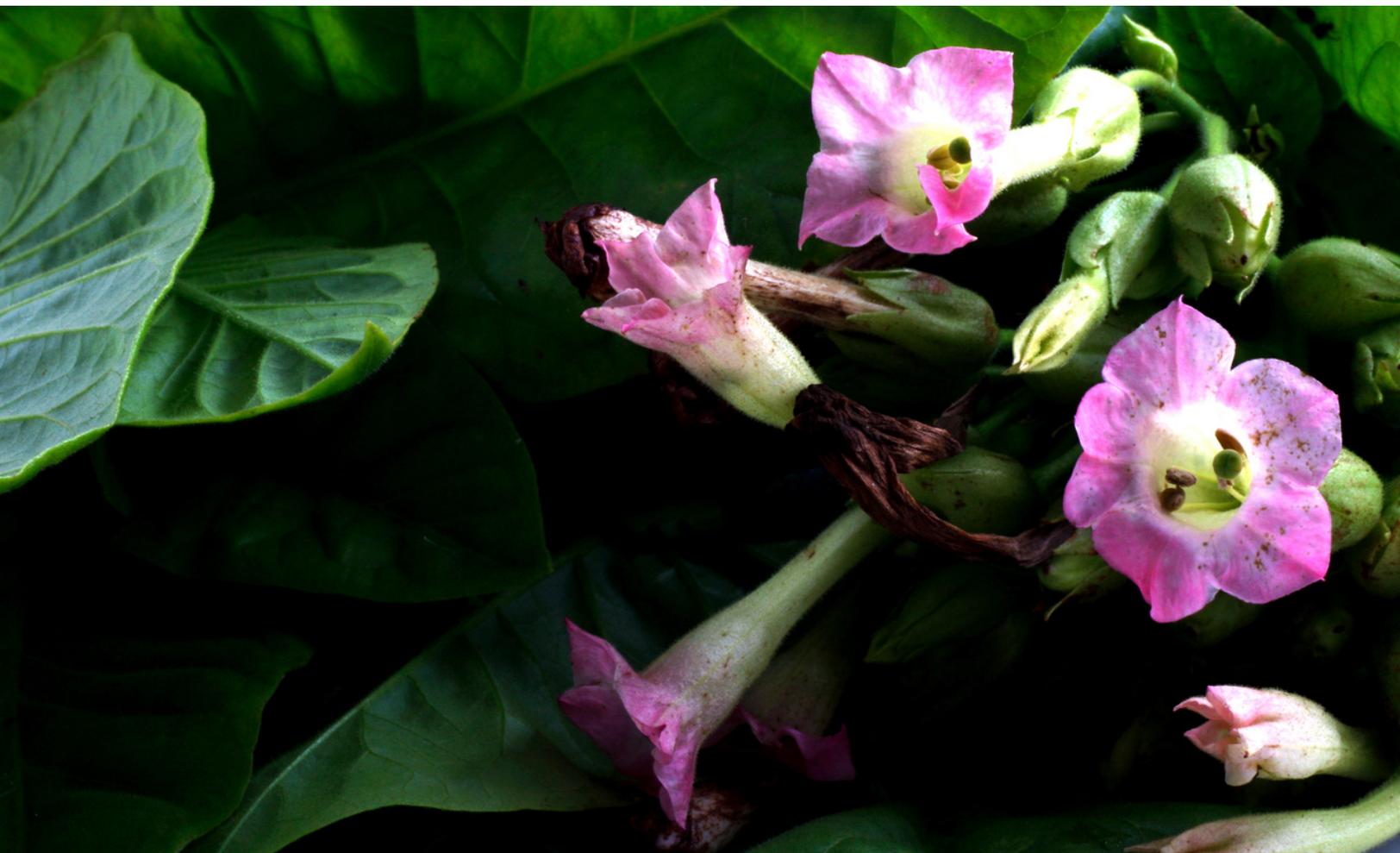
The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted both the important role that Helpers play in ensuring community wellbeing and the risks to their own wellbeing as a result of these roles. This research is intended to support Helpers working within Indigenous communities by acknowledging their struggles and by offering culturally-informed ideas to ensure that Helpers continue to feel well about themselves in the role they play within community. This resource recognizes that Indigenous peoples have a multitude of cultures that are characterized by the land, their language and their Nation. Reference to wisdom of different First Nations within this document is intended to recognize this plurality and to potentially further the sense of connection that different First Nations have with each other.



GRATITUDE FOR THE HELPERS

Thank You to the Helpers. You are people who care very much about their communities. We acknowledge Helpers and the traditional role that you play in the wellness of our communities. Helpers make personal sacrifices to become professionals, including leaving their communities to go to mainstream schools in order to gain tools and make alliances that will be of benefit to the community.

Sometimes being a Helper can be challenging, this resource is dedicated to supporting the wellbeing of community helpers.



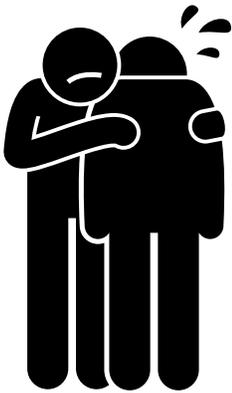
OCCUPATIONAL RISKS TO HELPER WELLBEING

Colonialism is the primary determinant of health for Indigenous peoples because it is colonial policies intended to destroy Indigenous communities and families that are responsible for the socio-economic circumstances in which many Indigenous communities currently live (8). Helpers within Indigenous communities face ongoing challenges including lack of adequate staffing, an inability to separate work from life (16) along with having the need to heal like the very community members they are helping (3).

As Helpers, it is important to be aware of challenges that may arise when in a helping role. As Indigenous Helpers, you are more vulnerable to emotional exhaustion than your settler counterparts (32). You may be at risk for vicarious trauma, burnout, and moral distress. It is important to name these occupational risks so that you can acknowledge them when they are happening to you and you can take action to nourish your spirit in order to continue to work with the community you love.



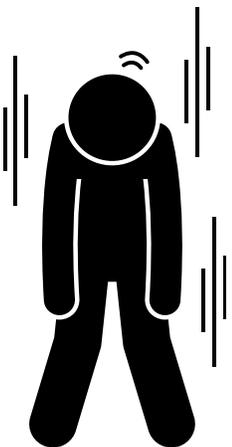
VICARIOUS TRAUMA, BURNOUT AND MORAL DISTRESS



Vicarious Trauma – changes in attitude and behaviour that come from engagement with survivors of trauma. While compassion and empathy are emotions that are protective (40), helpers can become vulnerable to vicarious or secondary trauma.

Signs of vicarious trauma include (4):

- Feelings of guilt, shame, and self-doubt
- Preoccupation with work during personal time
- Loss of hope, pessimism, and cynicism
- Being distant, detached and feeling numb.



Burnout – is a type of stress connected to the work environment which is characterized by feelings of exhaustion and feelings that nothing is being accomplished. Burnout can be caused by unclear job expectations, lack of resources, lack of control, workplace dynamics, lack of social support and work-life imbalance (31).

Signs of burnout include:

- Sadness, anger or irritability
- Difficulty concentrating
- Lack of energy
- Trouble sleeping



Moral Distress – occurs when a helper feels unable to do what they believe is right, including avoiding harm, because of institutional obstacles (7). Moral distress is experienced by a feeling of complicity in wrongdoing, a lack of voice in the situation, an inability to apply best practices and is compounded by repeated incidences of institutional obstruction.

Signs of moral distress include feelings of:

- Inability to do the right thing.
- Sense of compromised or undermined values.
- Inability to be the Helper you want to be.



CHECKING IN ON YOUR OWN WELLBEING

Two-Eyed seeing with I'M SAFE and HELPERS checklists

The TEAMSTEPPS Canada™ "I'M SAFE" checklist (43) is a simple way to evaluate the status of your wellbeing in your helping role. TEAMSTEPPS is an evidence based framework for teamwork that has been shown to empower frontline workers (6), to strengthen and improve communication (5) and increase workplace civility (27).

This checklist is a reminder that your wellbeing as a helper ensures the wellbeing of the people you help. The "I'M SAFE" framework is easy to remember and can serve as an affirmation of your wellbeing.

I'M SAFE

I - Illness

M - Medication

S - Stress

A - Alcohol/drugs

F - Fatigue

E - Eating and Elimination

Illness – Can I perform my duties or am I feeling too bad?

Medication – Is the medication I am taking affecting my ability to perform as a helper?

Stress – Is there something that is making me lose focus while at work?

Alcohol/Drugs – Am engaged in addictive behaviours that affects my focus?

Fatigue – Am I tired? Do I need to alert my team that I have had little sleep?

Eating and Elimination – When was the last time I ate, drank fluids, or used the restroom?



Two-Eyed Seeing involves seeing with one eye the strengths of Indigenous ways while using the other eye to see with the strengths of Western ways (30).

The HELPERS checklist was developed by Finding Our Power Together's Nicole Ineese-Nash in response to concerns about appropriateness of the use of a mainstream wellbeing checklist.

H – Health
E – Emotional Regulation
L – Look for Support
P – Prayer/Spirituality
E – Examine
R – Rest and Relaxation
S – Seek Balance

Health - Am I healthy enough?

Emotional Regulation - Are my emotions clouding my ability to help others safely?

Look for Support - Who are the helpers in my life that I can turn to for support when I need it?

Prayer/Spirituality - Have I taken time to pray, smudge, meditate or show gratitude?

Examine - Have I taken the time to examine how I am doing?

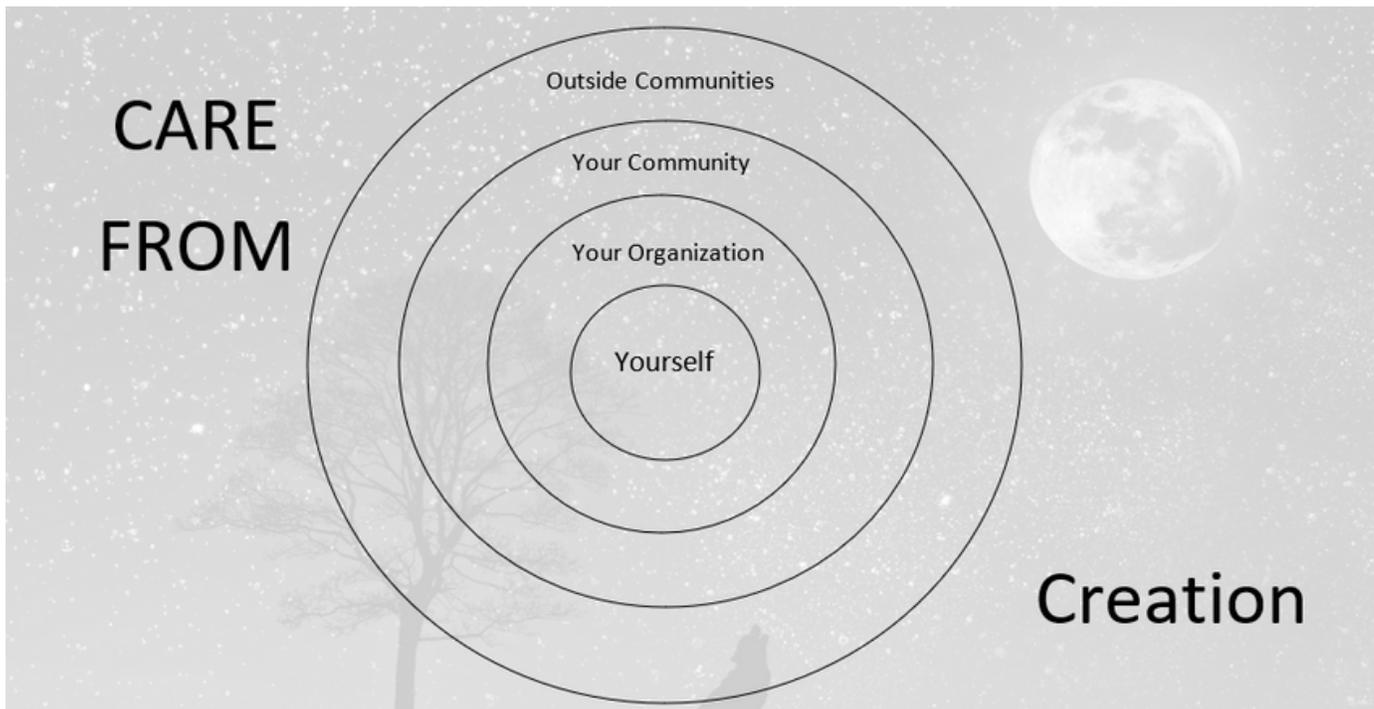
Rest and Relaxation - Have I had enough rest and leisure to recharge myself so I can help others?

Seek Balance - Am I seeking balance in my physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing?



EVERYONE PLAYS A ROLE IN HELPER WELLBEING

Imagining an interrelational model of care to support the wellbeing of community helpers



Care for the wellbeing of Helpers comes from:

Creation – supports the wellbeing of all, is always present, is always available and it exists without boundaries

Self – In order to help others, you need to come from a place of strength. By deepening the way you honour and nurture yourself through a commitment to self-awareness, spiritual development and conscious growth, you are able to “walk the talk” and show up relationally in your role as a Helper (34).

Organization - Supportive supervision that is concerned and responsive to the feelings of Helpers (3)

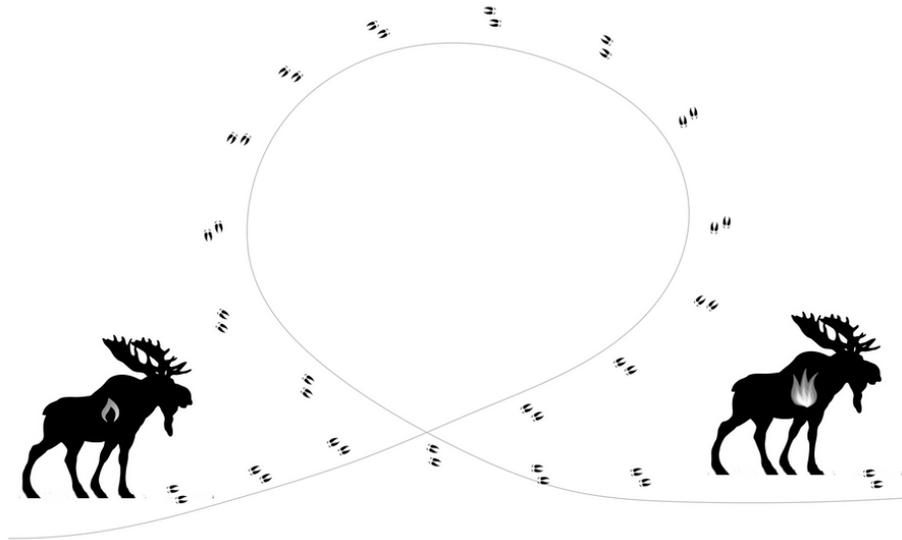
Community - Reciprocal relationships in which communities recognize and encourage Helpers to take care of themselves.

Outside Communities - Advocacy and support to improve working conditions (3).



MOOSE SPIRIT FRAMEWORK FOR HELPER WELLBEING

Teachings from Our More than Human Relations



One way to model the practice of wellbeing is to draw on teachings from our More Than Human relations (33).

The Moose, when startled, leaves its path to take care of its wellbeing and when the moose is ready, it circles back to its original path (20).

The Moose reminds us that it is natural to need self-care in order to continue along the path of being a Helper. It also reminds us that it is healthy to be affected by some of the things that happen when you are working in a Helper role. Practicing holistic self-care that is guided by traditional and land-based practices will help Helpers be spiritually stronger in their practice and bring them closer to the communities they work within.

The Mi'kmaq Legend of the First Moose

The Mi'kmaq people of Unama'ki tell a story of a time when families had just set up camp inland when a winter storm suddenly hit (28). The families had not yet harvested enough meat to survive until spring and they prayed to the Creator for help. The next morning, they woke up to see a beautiful moose. When asked if the moose was sent by the Creator, the moose replied yes, I am here to help you survive but before you harvest me, you must make me a promise. You must treat me with respect, use every part of me and not waste me. You must also never harvest more than you need of me.

The video with the complete story can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7j_i2bvetfo
Another protocol of the Mi'kmaq people is non-interference. In the case of moose, it means leaving them to live their lives, not interfering with their habits or habitats and only harvesting them when necessary (38).



INDIGENOUS WELLBEING

Wellness is expressed through a balance of spirit, emotion, mind, and body.

Wellness is established through connection to ancestry, language, land, and beings of creation with the support of a caring family and environment.

(Elder Jim Dumont as cited in Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2020)



The Thunderbird Partnership Foundation (2020) has published a reference guide to support learning its Indigenous wellness framework. The reference guide offers common cultural interventions you can practice for self-care and community wellness.

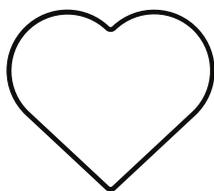
You can download the reference guide from the Thunderbird Foundation from <https://thunderbirdpf.org/IWF-ref-guide/>



SELF-CARE ACTIVITIES

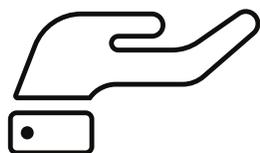
Suggested by Elders, Traditional Knowledge Keepers and other helpers

The following self-care activities were sourced from videos, webinars and articles printed for a general audience. The choice of Elders, Knowledge Keepers and other Helpers was determined by publication of their teachings for the general public and the relevance of their teachings to the wellbeing of Helpers during the COVID-19 pandemic. We tried to source advice that could be generally accepted within an Indigenous worldview from Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Helpers from a variety of Indigenous communities. This is an attempt to be inclusive and this document is open to contribution for continued representation of diversity.



Practice Gratitude

Elder Renee Thomas-Hill (45) of the Cayuga Nation says that giving thanks is important because Mother Earth gives you unconditional love and this love builds up your immune system.



Some of her teachings were shared in collaboration with the Indigenous Primary Health Council and the Indigenous Diabetes Health Circle <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66jGanl3p14>



Nourish Yourself

Get to know traditional foods and share them with others when you can. Plant a garden to increase food sovereignty.

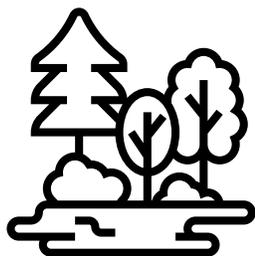
The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society (2021) encourages you to also plant hearts in the garden to remember residential school survivors, the children lost to the residential school system and to support the legacy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Read the First Nations Health Authority Guide for Planning for Food Security for ideas

<https://www.fnha.ca/WellnessSite/WellnessDocuments/FNHA-Planning-for-Food-Security-A-Toolkit-for-the-COVID-19-Pandemic.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0TTGJ>



SELF-CARE ACTIVITIES

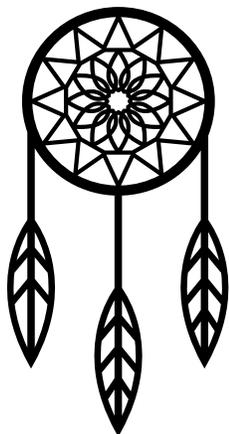
Suggested by Elders, Traditional Knowledge Keepers and other helpers



Connect to the Land

Traditional Knowledge Keeper Marie Eshkibok-Trudeau of the Wiikwemkong Nation (15) states that connection with the Earth is the 5th level of consciousness and the Earth is a teacher. An example of Mother Earth showing connection to you would be when notice a bird flying by your window.

Her teaching can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00ramxR1AuY>.

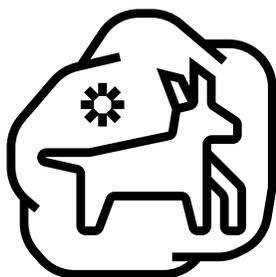


Dream

Knowledge Keeper Wilfred Buck (12) of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation says that when you dream your spirit connects you to Pakwan Kisik, the hole in the sky, which shows you the infinite possibilities of life. This connection happens even if you doze off for a few seconds.

Watch his talk on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzlc6k4IEMs>

Wilfred Buck's website can be found at <https://acakwuskwun.com/>



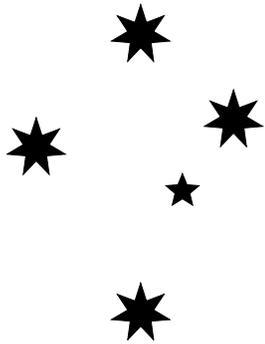
Practice Language and Culture

Elder Ilarion Mercurieff of the Unangan Aleut Nation says traditional culture is protective against burnout because it teaches the wisdom of the heart (21). Our interconnectedness is found through the heart and it is the heart that tells us to focus on making our dreams a reality. His teaching about burnout can be found at <https://transitionnetwork.org/news-and-blog/what-indigenous-cultures-can-teach-us-about-burnout/>



SELF-CARE ACTIVITIES

Suggested by Elders, Traditional Knowledge Keepers and other helpers



Connect to the Sky

Knowledge Keeper Wilfred Buck (12) of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation says that every atom in our bodies is in relation to the sky. It is important to connect with the sky because the sky has very important teachings for us.

Get involved in the Native Skywatchers Initiative
<https://www.nativeskywatchers.com/index.html>

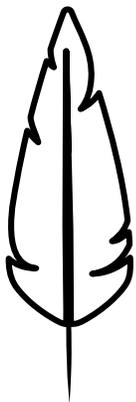


Move Your Body

Elders say your body is meant to move. Express yourself with dance, take a walk in the nature or do other activities you enjoy.

Indigenous Diabetes Health Circle has videos of several yoga routines and an aerobic workout. These can be found at <https://idhc.life/videos/>

The StyleHorse Collective has a series of Powwow Sweat fitness videos
<https://www.youtube.com/c/TheStyleHorseCollective/videos>



Share

Sharing is a great way to protect yourself from isolation. Sharing stories, laughter and food with your peers, community and loved-ones is a great way to relieve stress, bring people closer together and have fun (3). Sharing is a way to rekindle your ability to be fully present in your relationships.

By connecting with others to share, you are in a state of giving and receiving love. This giving and receiving of love is a right of Indigenous peoples to be recovered and reclaimed (11).



SELF-ADVOCACY

Tips from the Self-Help Alliance for you to advocate for your own needs (41).

Believe in yourself.

- Nurture your self-esteem and know you are worthwhile.
- Appreciate your gifts and what you have to offer.
- Be willing to take good care of yourself.

Decide what you want or what needs to change.

- Make a list of what you need and want for yourself.
- Ask yourself which of these things could be achieved by speaking out for yourself.
- Which of these wants or needs is the most important to you?

Get the facts.

- When you speak up for yourself, you need to make sure you have all the necessary information to support yourself.
- You can get information from people who have been in a similar situation, from someone who has some expertise, from books online resources and from organizations that specialize in advocacy and education.

Plan your strategy.

- What do you believe is the best strategy for getting what you want?
- Make a timeline and set small achievable goals.
- Ask others for suggestions and get feedback.

Gather support.

- It is both easier and more effective to get what you need for yourself if you have support from a least one other person.
- A good supporter is someone with whom you have a reciprocal relationship of respect and trust, who allows you the space to grow and lets you freely express yourself, who listens to you and respects your confidentiality and who assists you in taking action that will help you be better.
- Tell your supporter what you plan to advocate for and ask if they are willing to help you by listening to you, offering feedback and by being there when you want to take difficult steps.

Assert yourself calmly.

- You may be met with resistance, so it is important to keep calm and treat others with courtesy.
- Keep in mind that if you lose your temper, you will mischaracterize yourself and you will reduce your chances of getting what you need.

Be firm and persistent.

- Do not give up and keep asking until you get what you need.
- Sometimes it takes a short amount of time however success often takes a persistent effort over a longer period of time.



CARE FROM EMPLOYERS

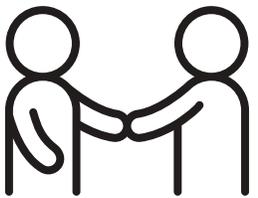
Organizations have an important role in helping the Helpers

The organizations that employ Helpers have a key role in supporting them. Organizations need to invest in worker wellbeing, a failure to do so can result in a loss of enthusiasm, ineffective teams, lack of proper documentation to support good care, complaints about standards of care as well as staff frustration, stress, and turnover (32). Marchand, Hughes, Blaney, Wetteland and Brown's (2017) study of frontline Indigenous service providers found that the majority of stressors were related to a feeling of not being supported in the workplace including not feeling able to adequately support the people they were employed to help. Cyndy Baskin (2016) believes that "Helpers need to be encouraged to ask for help when they are overwhelmed, and supervisors and managers need to welcome their calls for assistance" (p.44). Three ways organizations can help Helpers are to advocate the use of psychological PPE, encourage peer support, and the regular use of debriefing.



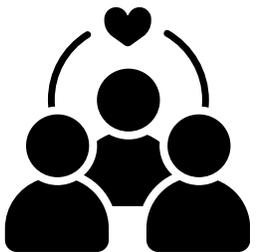
Psychological PPE

Psychological PPE is about organizations encouraging Helpers to develop a self-care plan of practices and routines to protect and nurture their wellbeing and supporting them in doing so (23).



Peer Support

A formalized process that encourages Helpers to talk with other Helpers allows space for the sharing of experiences, the affirmation of feelings and the opportunity to see situations from a different perspective (3).



Debriefing

Regular debriefing, beyond critical incidents, is necessary for organizations to understand the challenges their frontline workers are facing so as to better support them (29). Debriefing helps identify employee needs and areas where services need improvement. Debriefing allows the Helper to let go the emotion of the workday, it ensures workplace confidentiality and it assists the Helper enhancing work-life balance.



CARE FROM COMMUNITY

How Community can reciprocate the help from the Helper

A study of community helpers found that there is a sense that Helpers must be in their roles at all times and that from time to time their lives are held to a higher standard than everyone else in the community (16).

Helpers work for the wellbeing of the entire community, a community to which they belong. One way the community can express its wellness is in giving space to the Helper to be an average community member. By allowing the Helper periods of time where they are not expected to be exclusively in their Helper role, the community is showing that the helping is healing and that the community is recovering. All Helpers originally started off as regular community members, by giving Helpers space to be their original selves, it allows for a renewal of the vision that made them become Helpers in the first place. Helpers who have balanced lives with community are the inspiration for the next generation of Helpers.

CARE FROM OUTSIDE

How outside organizations and communities can help the Helpers

Organizations that represent professions, researchers that study service delivery and educational institutions that train Helpers all have roles in helping the Helper (3). Caring for Helpers can come in the form of advocacy, through creating opportunities to get Helpers connected with one another, by supporting working groups to research solutions to frontline worker problems and through professional development opportunities (3). Educational institutions that teach Helpers the skills they need to do their jobs can help by teaching students "how to be safe" within a helping role and how to maintain a passion for the work.

Professional organizations can also help Helpers, particularly those in remote communities, by being available to respond to the needs of communities when inequities create conditions that put Helpers in conditions of higher occupational risk to their wellbeing.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Know your risks for vicarious trauma, burnout and moral distress. Regularly check-in with yourself to see if you are showing any signs or symptoms

2

Practicing self-care is natural. Make a self-care plan grounded in traditional culture and land-based teachings.

3

Practice advocating for your wellbeing.
Find peers at work with whom you can practice peer support.
Ask your supervisor to hold regular debriefings.

4

Enjoy being a regular community member when you are not on the job. Show others that you are human and you need as much care as those you help.

CONCLUSION

As Helpers, you are people who care deeply about the communities you work within. Too many times you neglect your own wellbeing because of this love for people. Helpers are human and you are vulnerable to vicarious trauma, burnout, and moral distress.

A self-care practice that is balanced emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually can ensure that you maintain the inner fire that drives your work for your communities. Self-care is perfectly natural as evidenced by the teachings of the moose.

Helpers need to also recognize that all your relations have an active role in your wellbeing including the organization your work for and the community you work within. Self-care should be understood as a practice that strengthens your commitment to your role and to your community.

Sharing your experience of being cared for as a Helper can help others in helping roles and by successfully improving the care you receive, you can encourage the emergence of the next generation of Helpers.



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Written by: Jennifer Luft, B.Sc., MHA(cc)

Jennifer Luft is a settler participating in the Aboriginal Knowledges and Experiences Certificate program at X University. She joined this program out of a desire to take a more active role in Reconciliation. She has a Bachelor of Science from McGill University, a diploma in Gerontology from George Brown College and a Master of Health Administration (Community Care) from Ryerson University. Her past experiences include green business entrepreneurship and working with vulnerable adults in community care settings. Jennifer is the proud mother of one daughter.



