SPARK

A self-care tool for professionals
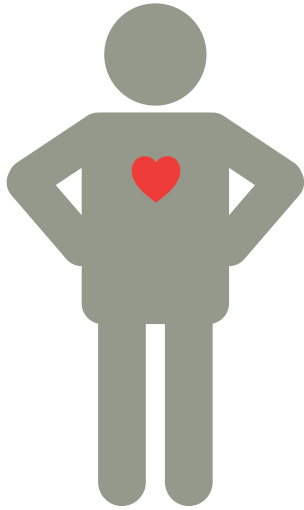

Self-reflection
Prevention
Assessment
Resilience
Kindness

The **SPARK** tool is a **self-reflective** evaluation tool for practitioners working in community and social services, supporting them to develop a tailored self-care plan. It aims to **prevent** excessive stress and burnout by encouraging practitioners to reflect on distinct areas in their personal and professional lives. Using evidence-informed prompts, practitioners can **assess**, what, if any, changes are necessary to improve their welfare. This tool aims to build personal **resilience** in practitioners as an ongoing process. It provides a reminder that **kindness and compassion** towards ourselves and others are essential components in our personal and professional satisfaction.

Being exposed to stressful workplaces and trauma cases can have a cumulative negative impact on practitioners' well-being. Developing and implementing a plan can help to express and process feelings, recover, re-energise, promote physical and mental health, develop a worker's resilience and ultimately improve practitioners' work. In essence, self-care helps to keep the **SPARK** alive, or rekindles it when energies run low.

A PDF version of the SPARK tool can be downloaded from: **http://ideachildrights.ucc.ie/resources/**

IDEA

Improving Decisions through Empowerment and Advocacy

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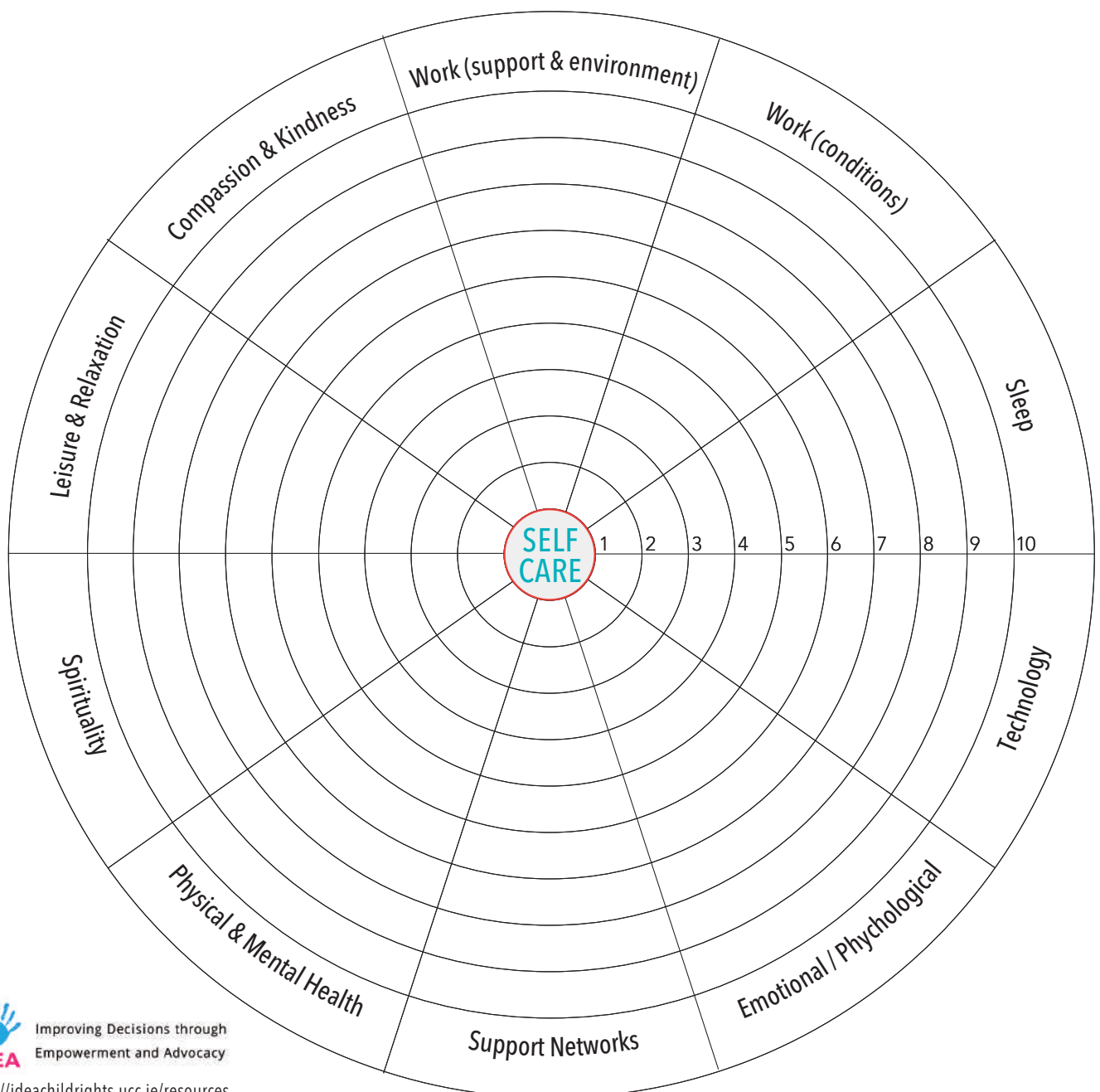
THE SPARK TOOL

Checking in

On a scale of 1–10, where 1 means that you are exhausted, tired and stressed and 10 means that you are energised, feel healthy and are not stressed today, where would you rate yourself on this scale? _____

How you are feeling will influence how you complete this tool. This rating will also provide you with useful context on how you were feeling when you review your completed SPARK tool.

Instructions

SPARK is best used as a reflective tool, rather than focusing on a total result. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is weak and 10 is strong, where would you rate yourself in each domain in terms of your self-care? Why are you placing yourself at each point? What could you do to move 1–2 points higher?

The prompts in each domain are *suggestions* only and are not a list of everything you could be doing. Completing this tool may take time: allow as much time as is necessary to make this a meaningful process for you. If you find yourself avoiding a prompt or question, try and explore why this might be. If you feel overwhelmed with the breadth of prompts overleaf, try and focus on a few: small changes in your life can make a big difference.

Wheel diagram with "SELF CARE" at centre and a scale from 1 to 10 radiating outward. Domains around the wheel: Work (support & environment), Work (conditions), Sleep, Technology, Emotional / Psychological, Support Networks, Physical & Mental Health, Spirituality, Leisure & Relaxation, Compassion & Kindness.

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PROMPTS

Work (support & environment)

Supportive supervisor/colleagues; friendships through work; professional supervision (supervisor, peer or group); peer mentoring (being a mentor or a mentee); workplace morale; debriefing opportunities; noticing and valuing small successes; developing a continuing professional development (CPD) plan; attending CPD events; learning opportunities and being open to learning; developing your ability to receive critical feedback; identifying what is positive in your work environment.

Work (conditions)

Sufficient resources to complete the work; manageable workload; participating in a project that has a start, middle and end; taking your annual leave; job rotation; sufficient resources; employment contract conditions; salary and benefits; security of tenure; induction, mentoring and protected workload for new and newly-qualified staff; quality of the physical environment; learning to say no to unreasonable requests; working a reasonable amount of hours; family-friendly employment policies; access to useful human resource and employee support services.

Sleep

Quality and sufficient sleep (8 hours is recommended); turning off your mobile/screens while sleeping; taking a screen break one hour before bedtime; avoiding stimulants and exercise before bedtime; keeping a consistent sleep schedule; if you are worried about something, write it down and come back to it when you wake up.

Technology

Turning off your work phone at the end of the working day; evaluate your overall time spent on screens; keeping screens out of places of sleep and rest; examine the positive or negative impact of social media on your welfare; assess the impact on your leisure time of regularly checking work emails and working late.

Emotional/Psychological

Being mindful; sense of humour and having fun; access to and quality of professional supervision; talking with a trusted person; counselling; keeping a reflective journal; developing a clear understanding of your needs; investing time and energy into relationships that are rewarding and energy-giving; rest and relaxation; expressing your emotions; identifying what gives you comfort.

Support Networks (family, friends and colleagues)

Willingness to ask for support; being a support/peer mentor to others; volunteering and contributing to your local community; developing your work and non-work support networks; joining a support group; making sufficient time for leisure; investing time in, and nurturing, relationships with friends and family; external professional supervision; participating in your professional association; participating in campaigns for community/issue-based/political reform.

Physical & Mental Health

Assess your alcohol/substance consumption; looking after your physical, dental and mental health; exercising; talking with a supportive person; quality of food and eating schedules; sexuality, intimacy and sexual health; time with animals/pets; trying out or rekindling your interest in hobbies, activities, social events or sport; keeping a journal; fostering your creative and artistic self.

Leisure & Relaxation

A mix of active leisure (e.g. physical activities) and passive leisure (e.g. watching a box set); time to relax; having fun; participating in activities that give you energy and where you meet people in person; developing your social network outside of your work peers; eating meals with family and friends; trying out new activities; participating in cultural events.

Compassion & Kindness

Being compassionate and kind to yourself; treating yourself; not taking responsibility for things outside of your control; demonstrating compassion and kindness in your work; reflecting on what initially drew you to this work; rekindling/reconnecting with your sense of meaning from this work.

Spirituality

Being part of a spiritual or religious community; yoga; mindfulness; prayer; gratitude journal; forgiveness for yourself and others; time in nature/outdoors; reading; finding something to be hopeful about; reflection; meditation; looking at the 'bigger picture'; focusing on what is positive in your life and community.

THE SPARK TOOL

Reflective questions

1. Now that you have completed the tool, what surprised you about your answers?

2. What three things would you like to improve that are within your control? How exactly will you make these changes (personal and professional?

3. What, through trial and error, have you found works for you to promote your health and welfare?

4. What sources of support do you find most helpful?

5. What coping mechanisms are you using that are harmful / not working? (e.g. smoking, gambling, excessive alcohol use, over-eating)

6. Reflect on what drew you to this work: do you still get a sense of satisfaction and/or meaning from this work? Why/why not?

7. What are the personal warning signs when you start to feel like your self-care is slipping?

8. What is not within your control and will require structural changes to the workplace/policies/resources/management/etc.?

Record your new daily/weekly self-care plan here

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Date: _____   Review Date (< 6 months): _____

When a self-care plan is not enough

A focus on self-care can contribute to some practitioners feeling worse as they may feel individually responsible for their circumstances. Sometimes it is workplace environment issues that are the problem and these may not always be within a worker's control. Staff members can only do so much to look after themselves: employers and the state are also responsible for ensuring that professionals are provided with adequate resources and environments to perform their roles. Even with the best self-care plan, some work contexts can be overwhelming: sometimes the work is hard because of workloads that are unsustainable or due to inadequate supports, poor management and insufficient resources. In such circumstances, recourse to professional associations and/or a trade unions, or collective action for change, may be the most appropriate mechanisms to improve professionals' welfare.

If you are in a work environment which you believe is causing you harm, or your health is deteriorating, or you feel burnt-out, and/or you feel that your practice is unsafe due to your health, you should consult your supervisor/manager/employee assistance department/doctor/counsellor. Such a step may be hard and you may feel further exposed, but it is important to access appropriate supports when necessary.

RESOURCES

1. Self-care starter kit: https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/resources/self-care-starter-kit.html
2. Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2016) The Resilient Practitioner: Burnout and Compassion Fatigue Prevention and Self-Care Strategies for the Helping Professions (3rd Edition), Routledge.
3. Apps: Headspace; Calm; Mindful; Self Help; PersonalZen; Moodnotes; Buddhify; Mute; Space.
4. National Institute of Health (2011) Your Guide to Healthy Sleep, https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/files/docs/public/sleep/healthy_sleep.pdf
5. Work PositiveCI: http://www.workpositive.ie
6. Health Service Executive – Your Mental Health: http://www.yourmentalhealth.ie
7. Additional IDEA project videos and tools are available on our website: http://ideachildrights.ucc.ie/resources/