



# Strong Women



## Social Support Group Workbook

# Introduction

*Welcome to the Strong Women Workbook, for women who have faced both intimate partner violence and problems with substance use, including alcohol and tobacco. It makes connections between these issues and offers support for your recovery, growth, and wellness. It has been created for women who are participating in the Strong Women Virtual Support Group but can be used by any woman facing these issues.*

As you open these pages, you will be taken on a journey about finding connection, information, and deepening self-compassion. This journey assumes that women know themselves best, have tremendous wisdom and resilience, and can act to make lasting change.

The workbook is structured into six chapters, each one corresponding to a session in the six-session virtual social support group. Each chapter offers information on substance use, intimate partner violence and their many connections, inspiring quotes, song suggestions, as well as reflection exercises and actions for you to think about, and work through.

We trust that every woman will navigate their own journey through in the way that works best for them. Dip in and out of the chapters as you please. Pick the reflection exercises that feel safe and useful to you. You know what you need.



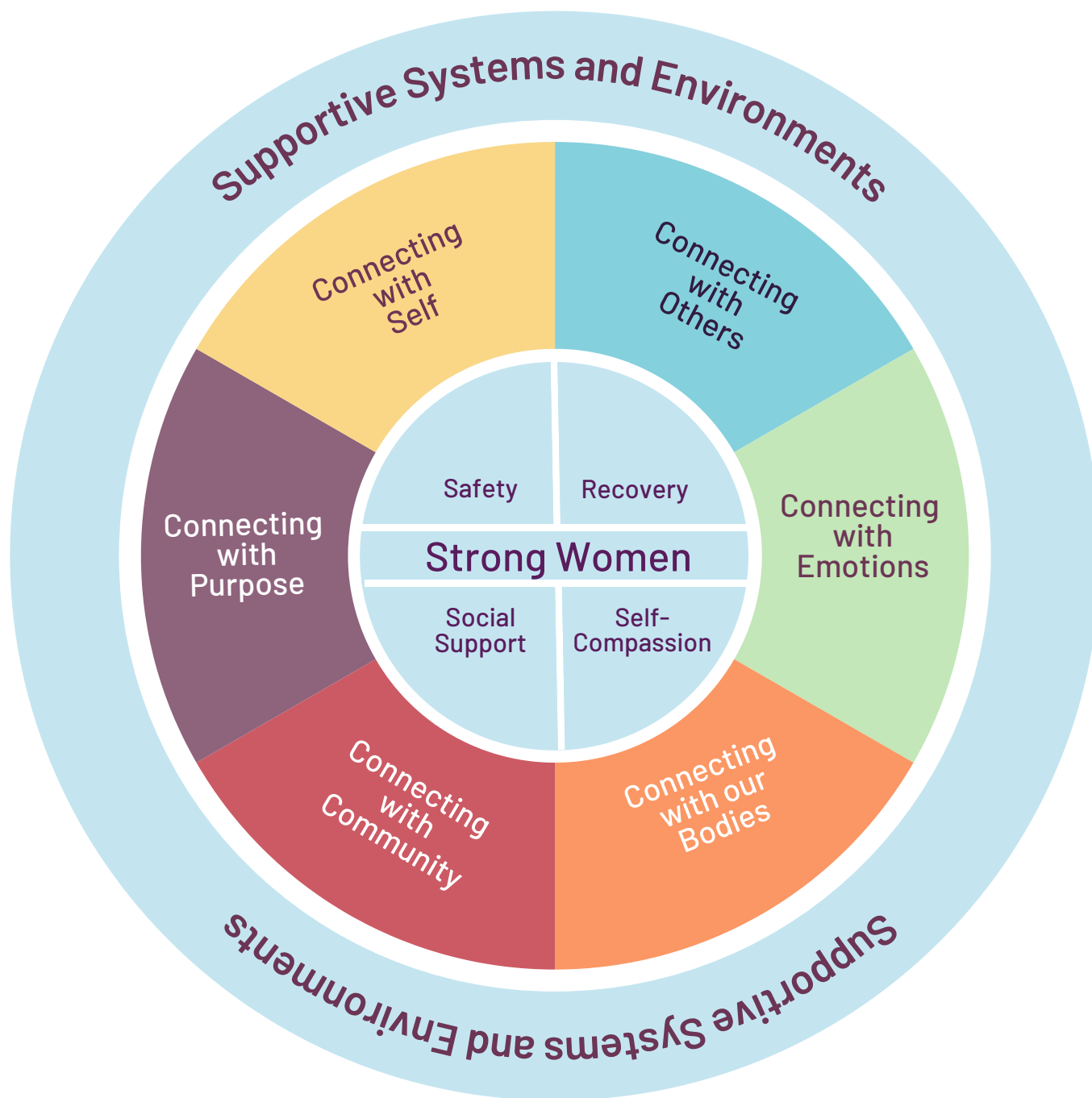
## Strong Women

*Strong Women was developed by the Centre of Excellence for Women's Health and is based on research, the insights of service providers, and the wisdom of women with lived experience. The Centre of Excellence for Women's Health is a research centre focused on improving girls' and women's health and increasing gender equity.*

*The Strong Women workbook was developed with funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada.*

# Strong Women

The foundational values of the Strong Women approach are in the centre of this image. The six chapter topics can be seen in the ring around the values. Realizing these values, and making changes in these life areas, are more possible when supported by our systems and environments.



# The Chapters

1

The journey begins with *Connecting with Self*. In this chapter, we begin to think about identity, and values, and what brings you happiness. We consider negative and positive self-talk, what accountability means, and we introduce the practice of mindful self-compassion.

2

The lens widens to *Connecting with Others* in relationship. In this chapter, we look at the characteristics of healthy, unhealthy, and unsafe relationships. We consider power, control, and equity. We share information on boundary setting, self-compassion in relationships, and cultivating “growth-fostering” relationships.

3

Centering on *Connecting with Emotions*. In this chapter, we look at the challenges and opportunities of naming and being with all our complex feelings. We consider the challenges and gifts of shame, anger, loss and grief, gratitude, and joy.

4

Centering in on *Connecting with Our Bodies*. In this chapter, we talk about how trauma, alcohol, and tobacco impact women’s bodies. We consider how to soothe and ground our bodies, how to offer our bodies compassion, and how to care for our bodies with restorative sleep, healthy nutrition, exercise, and medical care.

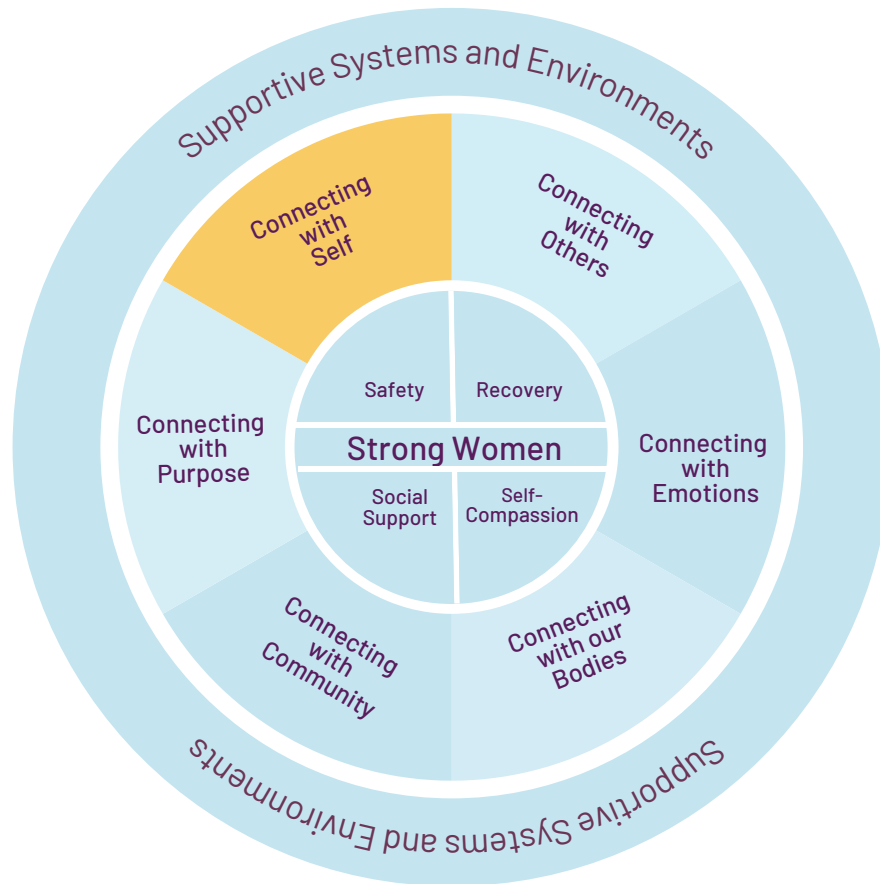
5

The lens widens to *Connecting with Community*. In this chapter, we talk about our need to belong, and how important it is to develop wider connections. We look at societal roots of violence and addiction. We offer suggestions for cultivating connections with recovery communities and the natural world, and taking action.

6

The journey concludes with *Connecting with Purpose*. In this chapter, we consider the process of transformation and how we can rewrite our stories in recovery. We offer suggestions for how to step forward, make social change, and generate vision and purpose in our lives.

# Chapter 1



In this chapter, you will:

1. Explore the nature of self and identify values and passions.
2. Reflect on positive and negative self-talk.
3. Explore the practice of self-compassion and its role in well-being.
4. Expand practices for compassionate self-care.



Strong Women

# Welcome

*Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women.*

– Maya Angelou



Chapter Song: Not Your Little Girl by Jann Arden



This workbook has been designed for women who have faced intimate partner violence and struggle with alcohol or tobacco use. It is designed to help women make the connections between these issues, and to get support for moving on from both issues, with the support of other women.

As you open this workbook, you are embarking on a journey alongside many other women. If you are here as a member of a social support group, you may meet a few of these other women, either virtually or in-person. If you come to this book alone, as a personal inquiry, you may not. Either way, know that you are one of many.

These other women are just like you, and very different too. Young women, middle-aged women, older women. Women raised in many different families and cultural traditions, or perhaps without family or tradition. Each woman carries her unique gifts and challenges.

All women have suffered and struggled at times. In times of emergency and crisis, women often bear a greater burden than men, acting as “shock absorbers,” as our caregiving roles grow, and our supports and resources diminish.

For many women, the COVID-19 pandemic made our suffering larger, our struggles harder. Schools closed and we took on the double duty of childcare and work simultaneously. Lockdowns removed safe spaces and community supports, escalating our substance use, mental health challenges, and a “shadow pandemic” of violence against women.

Our struggles have also shown us that we are *Strong Women*. We are all surviving. We are all on a path to thriving. We are each strong in ourselves and even stronger together.

This workbook will help you build on the strengths that you already possess. It is an offering — of evidence-based information, reflection exercises, capacity-building activities, and suggestions for action.

We aim to help you strengthen your self-awareness, your relationships, your community connections, and your unique vision for your future.



# Who Am I?

*Who Am I?* This question has been asked by humans all over the earth, throughout time. *Where do I belong?*

We begin here because connecting with ourselves and understanding ourselves is so incredibly important – if we want to lead meaningful, fulfilling lives. This is especially true for women on any journey of healing and recovery.

*Who am I?* Taking time to ask and answer such questions can seem impossible, even frivolous, when we are bogged down with the challenges of daily life: paying the rent or finding a place to live, navigating complex relationships at home and at work.

Those of us with experiences of substance use problems, violence, and trauma, may also feel confused or scared by this question because we no longer recognize ourselves. We might feel a sense of disconnection. We may not know who we are, used to be, or want to become.

It's OK to be honest about these kinds of feelings as you work through this chapter. In fact, it is essential. When we know where we are, we can begin to chart a path forward.

When we begin to share our feelings with other women, each of us owning and speaking our truth, we can start to build powerful connections, and ultimately take individual and collective action.



# Your Identity

“ I don't like labels at all so I believe that a woman and a girl can do anything.

-P!nk ”

We all have such complex identities. For those of us who were raised as women, our identities have been shaped, at least in part, by the views of our caregivers, communities, and wider cultures – on how a girl should behave in the world.

**We may have been told a variety of things:**

*Girls should look pretty.*

*Girls should be nice.*

*Girls should obey.*

*Girls should fight for their rights.*

*Girls should be caring.*

*Girls should toil in the field.*

*Girls should crack the glass ceiling.*

Wherever you were raised, the people around you likely had ideas about what girls *should* do.

We also have multiple inner dimensions – our thoughts, values, beliefs, bodily sensations, emotions, cultural and spiritual teachings. And these are always shifting, as we travel from place to place, switch between roles, and move through time.

Our sense of self can shift dramatically from one moment to the next. We can be so anxious and scared while we wait for the results of a mammogram; so relieved and overjoyed when we receive a clean bill of health.

It is natural for our self-understandings to build and shift slowly as we age. How would you have described yourself, as an 11-year-old girl? Likely quite differently to now.

And yet some parts of you may have stayed the same. Maybe you still feel a deep love for cats. Maybe you are still shy among strangers. Maybe you have always felt a burst of joy on glimpsing the ocean, or the stars.



# Your Identity Reflection Exercise

- Write down five words you might use to describe yourself today.
- List some of the key places, people, and experiences that have shaped who you are today. You could also draw pictures or find photographs that capture some important moments or relationships.
- Has your experience of being raised as a girl, of living as a woman, in a world dominated by men, shaped your sense of identity? What have you been told, either by caregivers or by the wider culture and media, about who you must be, because you are a woman?



# Your Values

What do you care the most about? What defines you at your core?  
Our values influence and shape our lives in many ways – from the decisions we make, to finding meaning in our lives.

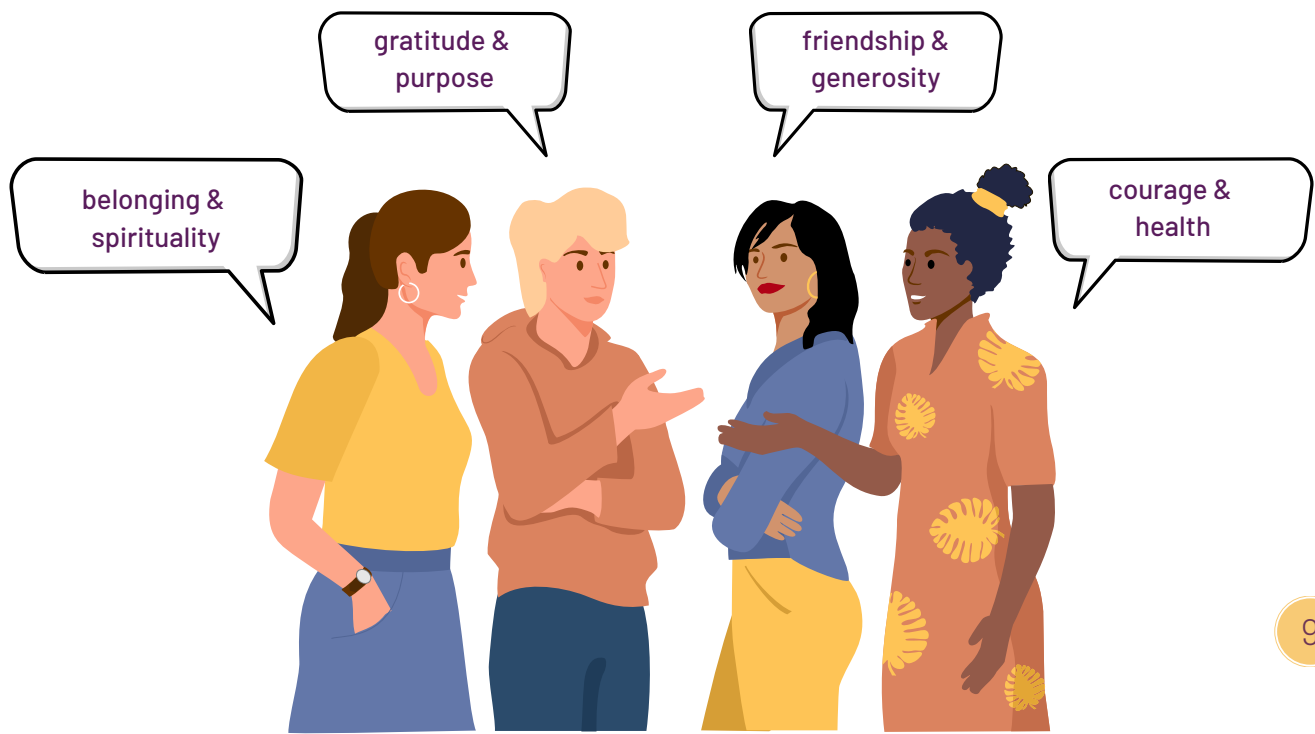
When we identify our values, we can purposefully find ways to honour them, creating a sense of integrity. We can start to identify what we need. And, in times when our behaviours, situations, or choices do not align with whom we know ourselves to be, our values can help guide us back.

Knowing our values helps us to ground ourselves in times of uncertainty and begin trusting ourselves to make healthy decisions.

## What are your core values?

[Check out this core values list](#) to see which ones resonate with you!

Below are some examples of core values.



# Your Values Reflection Exercise

Review the core values list below and circle five to 10 top values – values that you could not compromise around. Then, choose 3 (or more if you like) to go a little deeper.

[Find the Core Values List Here](#)

Value:

How do you express this value in your life? Where does it show up?

How could you have this value more in your life?

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How could you have this value more in your life?



# Seven Sacred Teachings

Many Indigenous communities and organizations have adapted the seven sacred teachings as guiding principles, as a cultural foundation, and as a system of values.

**Love** is the gift from the Eagle. Love is a force that is undeniable. With love all things are possible. It is everyone's right to have and experience it.

**Respect** is the gift from the Buffalo. In all life, respect is the first and foremost. Respect oneself and respect will be bestowed (i.e. treat your body with respect and it will look after itself; treat it with poison and it will destroy itself).

**Courage** is carried by the Bear. We seek the strength and courage to face our greatest enemy-oneself. The bear will give us the understanding to seek resolutions through spiritual intervention: hence, spiritual healing to deal with anger, pain, and ourselves.

**Honesty** is carried by the Sabe (Sasquatch). It is from within and not to be confused with truth (law). In the wilderness, one either knows survival, or one does not. Presently, man as a being is living on the edge, simply because he is not honest with himself.

**Wisdom** is carried by the Beaver. Wisdom is not to be confused with knowledge. Wisdom is the gained experience and knowledge is to know the difference and accept responsibility and accountability. When one pollutes the water, one does not break a human law, but the law of nature, which states that to poison the water, is to destroy oneself.

**Humility** is carried by the Wolf. Central to the wolf is the family pack. To ensure survival, the pack must be as one. In one's life, much the same as the wolf, we need to understand humility.

**Truth** is carried by the Turtle. Truth is symbolic of law and principle. Since the beginning of time, the turtle has been able to adapt to change without changing; thus he represents truth. He also represents time. His shell has thirteen big plates, symbolizing the thirteen moons in one year.



# Your Happiness

“Joy has the power to open our hearts, remove fear, instill hope, and foster healing. Joy leads us to wisdom, because it connects us to all we are -- our mind, heart, power, and spirit. Joy stimulates our immune system, increases our energy, and gives us mental clarity.

-Charlotte Kasl

What makes you happy? What are the activities, relationships, sensations, that bring you joy? What brings you energy or makes you smile?

We all have different passions –playing the drums, dancing, knitting, video games, singing in the shower, soccer, baking cakes, bowling, gathering medicines, or reading.

Maybe it feels like nothing makes you happy. Sometimes joy can feel like something foreign, out of reach. Maybe you used to love something that has long been lost from your life. Or you’ve been taught that happiness is something you don’t deserve.

As psychologist Charlotte Kasl writes in her book, *Finding Joy: 101 Ways to Free Your Spirit and Dance with Life*, our culture prioritizes competition, control, obedience, and productivity. As women, many of us grew up feeling that we must focus on striving and achieving. We learned that pleasure is somehow a crime.

And yet repressing our passions can make us feel stuck, sluggish, anxious, or depressed. This can lead us to seek shortcuts to pleasure such as substance use, sex, shopping, and gambling. Such forms of pleasure are often short-lived and unhealthy.

Play is good for us. Joy empowers us, offering energy, clarity, and access to our inner wisdom. Happiness helps us forge authentic connections and strengthens our immune systems. Our happiness is also contagious, spreading to those around us, building communities of kindness.

Joy does not have to involve time or money. Delight can be found in the ugliest, dirtiest environments. The warm sun on your face. Silly jokes at the bus stop. Helping an elderly woman at a busy intersection. A slug inching through the mud. The swing of your hips as you dance to Bollywood tunes. The hoot of an owl at night. Laughing with your girlfriends.

If we reflect on what activities or people bring us joy, we can use these as a resource to help ourselves through the toughest times. We can take steps to bring more joy into our lives and help ourselves along our recovery journeys.

# Your Happiness Reflection Exercise

- Think of something (as simple as hearing a good song or eating a juicy apple) that made you smile, or feel a moment of delight, in the last week. Describe the experience.
- Do you have any activities you do semi-regularly that bring you joy? (These can be as simple as reading a book or walking in the park.)
- Are there any people in your life who bring you joy? (Family, friends, co-workers, the guy in the grocery store who always remembers your name?)
- What types of activities have brought you joy in the past? Can you bring any back into your life over the next few weeks? What new activities you might like to try out?
- What are your top five happy songs?





# Your Self Talk



Every time a diminishing thought arises, I repeat the vow:  
'I will not harbor unhealthy thoughts anymore.'

-Elizabeth Gilbert



Many of us walk around with a running commentary inside our heads – of beliefs and judgments about ourselves. Sometimes it's our own voice, and sometimes it's the voices of others that have taken over our own.

If you grew up in a supportive family, securely attached to kind caregivers who were reliably present and emotionally attuned, you may hold kind and gentle voices in your head. Your thoughts about yourself may be positive and encouraging. *I'm really good at this* when you ace the accounting exam. *I'm rocking this Mom* thing when you lovingly hold space for your child's tantrum in the grocery store.

For many of us though, negative thoughts can be frequent. *Oh, I'm such a jerk*, when we accidentally offend a friend. *I'm always so unlucky* when we arrive out-of-breath to see the bus driving away. *I'm too fat or too skinny* if the jeans in our size don't fit right in the change room.

Perhaps we learned to judge ourselves harshly because we had family members who criticized us. Maybe we were bullied at school. Perhaps we have experienced a lot of verbal violence – at work, from an intimate partner, on the street, or even in treatment for substance use.

Our sense of self can also be hugely impacted by major events, crises, accidents, violence, oppression, illness, and addiction. These events can lead to traumas that are deeply personal and they can also cause collective and intergenerational traumas.

If you are using this workbook, then you may have some experience of using substances such as alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs. You may be in relationship with someone who does. You may also have experienced violence in a relationship. If so, it is likely that your identity and beliefs about yourself have been challenged or even changed as a result.

# Your Self Talk

When we are told we are stupid, or ugly, or worthless, again and again, we naturally internalize these messages. We begin to repeat them to ourselves. And when we talk negatively to ourselves, this has the same harmful impact as somebody else doing it! It damages our self-esteem and self-confidence, and can cause anxiety, depression, and social isolation.

This can make it even harder to think positive and self-compassionate thoughts about ourselves. *I'm sad I didn't get the job I wanted but I'm proud of myself for working hard on the application and for getting an interview.* Supportive comments like this might be easy to say to friends or loved ones and impossible to say to ourselves.

Chances are, we might even feel bad about thinking good thoughts about ourselves! Many women have learned to equate valuing ourselves with being "full of ourselves" or "self-absorbed" or "selfish" at some stage in our lives.

The good news is that our beliefs about ourselves can and do change. The way in which we talk to ourselves influences that change. Below are some examples of how we can speak to ourselves in a supportive way.

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <div>I eat healthy</div> <div>I keep my body active</div> <div>I get enough rest</div> <div>I love my body</div>                | <div>I ask for help</div> <div>I stay focused on the present</div> <div>I do one thing at a time</div> <div>I set goals</div>                            |
| <div>I am confident</div> <div>I talk about my feelings</div> <div>I can laugh and have fun</div> <div>I feel my emotions</div> | <div>I'm proud of my culture</div> <div>I look to my culture for healing</div> <div>I am connected to my traditions</div> <div>I respect my Elders</div> |

Adapted from: [NWAC-You-Are-Not-Alone-Handbook-with-weblinks.pdf](#)

# Self-Talk Reflection Exercise

- When you are being hard on yourself, what words or phrases do you say to yourself? (For example, *I'm so indecisive, I should have known better...*)
- How do you think your experiences of substance use and/or intimate partner violence may have shaped how you speak to yourself?
- Think of someone in your life who loves or thinks highly of you. Circle or highlight a few of the supportive words they might use to describe you. Then add some of your own.

Wise  
Open-Minded  
Reliable  
Cooperative  
Grateful  
Athletic  
Flexible  
Helpful  
Playful  
Strong  
Respectful  
Courageous  
Decisive  
Cheerful  
Fun  
Creative  
Persistent  
Loving  
Forgiving

Funny  
Logical  
Adventurous  
Keen to Learn  
Self-Controlled  
Beautiful  
Powerful  
Motivated  
Careful  
Realistic  
Accepting  
Curious  
Enthusiastic  
Socially Aware  
Modest  
Ambitious  
Assertive  
Optimistic  
Critical Thinker

Hopeful  
Purposeful  
Trustworthy  
Tender  
Thoughtful  
Precise  
Hilarious  
Honest  
Empathetic  
Fair  
Practical  
Confident  
Gentle  
Disciplined  
Team Player  
Happy  
Appreciative  
Sincere  
Nurturing

Encouraging  
Visionary  
Understanding  
Kind  
Leader  
Brave  
Patient  
Intelligent  
Independent  
Resilient  
Industrious  
Generous  
Loyal  
Supportive  
Feisty  
Inspiring  
Organized  
Authentic



# Self-Compassion

“When we are mindful of our struggles, and respond to ourselves with compassion, kindness, and support in times of difficulty, things start to change.

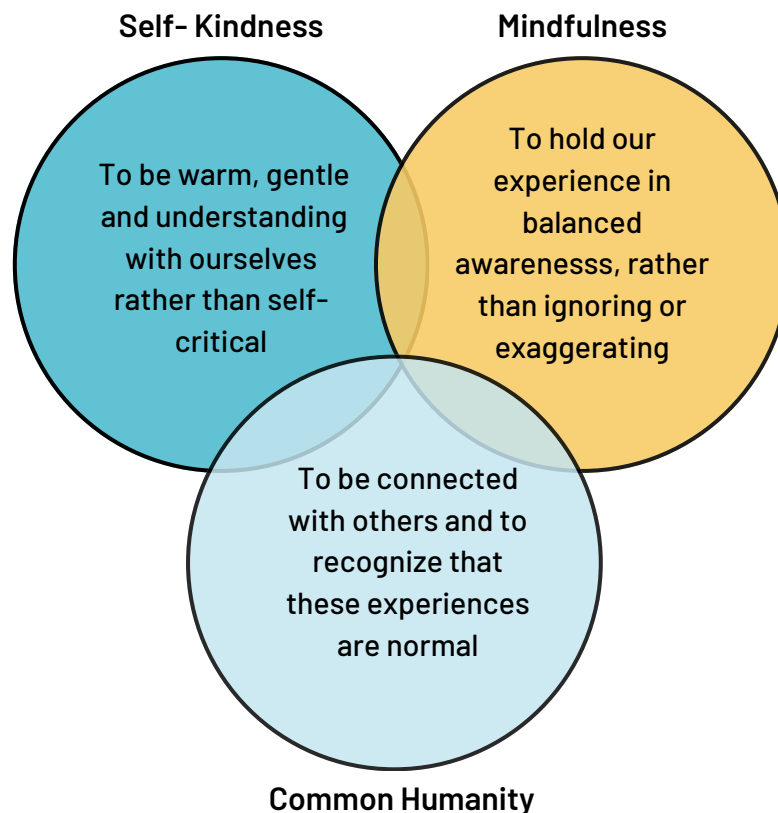
—Kristin Neff & Chris Germer

If you struggle with a sprinkling (or a daily avalanche) of negative beliefs and thoughts about yourself, the practice of self-compassion can be very helpful.

*Self-compassion? What does it mean?* The concept might seem a little scary, but really it just means learning to be a kind and supportive friend to yourself.

Many women find this hard. We have been taught to put the needs of others first. Research shows women to be more compassionate to others, and less self-compassionate, than men. We regularly go out of our way to help others – we stay up late to support friends in crisis, go without dinner so our kids can eat. We just need to shine a little of that love on ourselves.

Kristen Neff and Christopher Germer, two psychologists who have spent their careers researching self-compassion describe it as becoming, “an inner ally rather than an inner enemy.” They define three core features: mindfulness, common humanity, and kindness.



# Choosing Self-Compassion

Most of us do mess up, regularly. We forget to call a parent on their birthday. We slam on our brakes at a crosswalk, scaring a child, because we were lost in our thoughts. We offend a customer at work. We yell at our kids. We burn the eggs.

And then we have a choice. We can get mad at ourselves for our mistakes. Or we can acknowledge that we are human. We can allow the feelings of frustration, guilt, anger, shame, fear, or grief that arise. We can wrap our arms gently around ourselves and speak kindly.

## Reflection Exercise

Close your eyes and think of a situation recently when you responded with critical thoughts and harsh words to yourself. What did you say?

- *(Maybe... I can't believe I'm late to work again. I'm so hopeless. I'm such a loser.)*

Imagine it was your friend who was in this situation. What would you say to them?

- *(Maybe... Don't be so hard on yourself. You're exhausted from working two jobs and doing all the housework. And you were taking care of your sick kid. You're a hero making it to work at all.)*

Now rewrite this using "I" instead of "you" – to address yourself.

- *(E.g. I'm exhausted, working two jobs, and managing everything at home, and my kid was sick. I'm a hero for making it to work today! Tomorrow I will be on time.)*



# Did You Know? The Benefits of Self-Compassion

People who are more self-compassionate tend to be:

- Happier, more hopeful, and optimistic.
- More satisfied and grateful for their lives.
- Less anxious, depressed, stressed, and fearful.
- Less likely to abuse drugs or alcohol to cope.
- Wiser and more emotionally intelligent.
- More positive about their body image.
- More able to make clear decisions.
- Physically healthier (sleep better, fewer colds, stronger immune systems).
- More motivated, conscientious, and responsible for themselves.
- More resilient when faced with life challenges.
- More determined to reach their goals.
- In closer, more functional relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners.
- More forgiving, empathetic, and able to take others' perspectives.
- More compassionate to others and able to caretake others without burnout.



This list is adapted from (Neff, 2021, p. 24).  
For more information, see [self-compassion.org](https://self-compassion.org)



# Self-Accountability



Strong communities are born out of individuals being their best selves.

-Leanne Betasamosake Simpson



Self-compassion is not about letting ourselves  
off the hook.

It is not about “being lazy” or “self-indulgent” or abandoning our goals. It is not about accepting substance misuse, violence, or other unsafe behaviours or relationships. Not when, deep down, we are all women who yearn to change and grow into health.

Being good friends to ourselves sometimes involves accountability. Sometimes it involves gently encouraging positive change.

Imagine you’re trying not to drink alcohol and you’ve succeeded for three months. An old drinking buddy calls, offering to buy you dinner. You’re exhausted, struggling financially, worried about layoffs at work, and grieving your beloved dog’s death. You deeply long to say yes. You know that for a few hours your troubles would vanish.

You might think, *Oh I should be kind to myself and go out. I could just eat dinner. I don’t have to drink. I deserve some fun.*

This is not kindness. It is not self-compassion. You risk compromising your goals and hard work.

*"I really want to say yes. I'm longing to relax and have fun. But I know I will drink if I go. I've worked so hard on my recovery. This friend is not safe for me right now. I will say no, graciously. I will call my sister who is likely to be supportive. Maybe we can have fun together instead."*

This is self-compassion.

# Self-Accountability

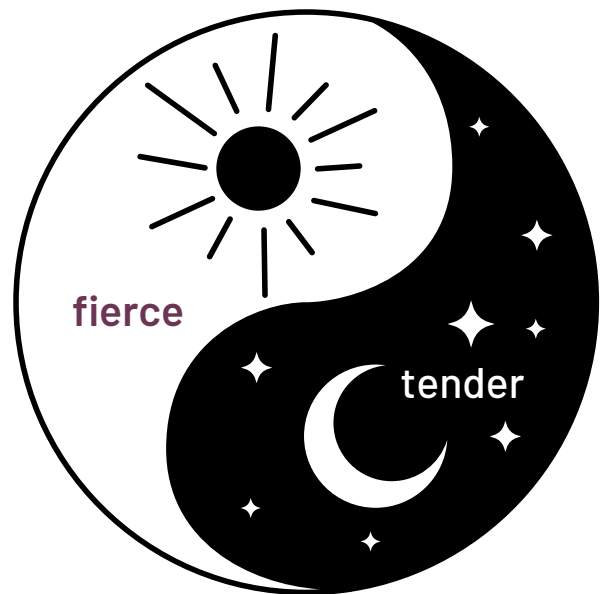


Imagine yourself as a rose, blessed with both tender, delicately scented, petals and sharp protective thorns. Your petals are your gentle healing energy. They represent your capacity to be present to your painful emotions and nurture yourself tenderly.

Your thorns are your fierce healing energy. They represent your capacity to set powerful boundaries, to motivate and encourage yourself into action, and to protect yourself from harm.

Kristin Neff borrows the concept of yin and yang from ancient Chinese philosophy to describe these dual aspects of self-compassion. Sometimes we need stillness and the “yin of tender self-compassion” – to be with what arises, accept our common humanity and be kind to ourselves.

Other times we need the “yang of fierce self-compassion” – to protect ourselves bravely, provide for ourselves and fulfil our needs, or encourage and motivate ourselves to change.



Source: Neff, K. (2021). *Fierce self-compassion: How women can harness kindness to speak up, claim their power, and thrive*. For more information, see [self-compassion.org](https://self-compassion.org)

# Self-Accountability Reflection Exercise

- Close your eyes and focus on a problem you are grappling with in your life right now. It can be a big challenge, like leaving an unhealthy relationship, or a smaller one, like the fact that your partner is not doing any of the cooking and laundry. Which aspect of self-compassion – tender self-compassion or fierce self-compassion – do you most need?
- Is there a song that expresses this tender or fierce self-compassion energy for you? *Lose You to Love* by Selena Gomez? *Roar* by Katy Perry? What are your own favourites?
- Is there an image, an animal, a person, or a plant that symbolizes either tender or fierce self-compassion for you? A jaguar tattoo? A soft blanket? A prickly thistle in the alley? Something personal to you?



# Take it Slowly

“  
As long as our orientation is toward perfection or success,  
we will never learn about unconditional friendship with ourselves...”

—Pema Chodron

Self-compassion can be very hard to begin. It can feel uncomfortable when you are not used to it. It can even trigger more negative thoughts about yourself. *I feel ridiculous! I'm terrible at this! I'm hopeless!* If this happens, just keep trying to be kind to yourself, like a good friend.

It can help to imagine you are talking to an actual friend who is struggling with something: *"This is new for you. I see you're feeling like a failure again and finding it hard to be kind to yourself. It's ok. It's part of the process. You've got this. I believe in you."*

Don't worry if your words feel fake or hollow at first, or if it feels silly to talk to yourself this way. Eventually, you will get better at self-compassion. Being kind to yourself might even become a habit!

When you begin to offer yourself compassion, old pains and traumas can also rise to the surface. This can lead to intense or overwhelming emotions. It might not be possible to welcome all the feelings that arise with loving acceptance right away.

If this happens it is important to slow down. Take a self-care break and come back later. Be kind to yourself by taking this work slowly.

As Kristin Neff writes in *Fierce Self-Compassion*, "You want to practice self-compassion in a way that feels safe, or else you're not being self-compassionate!"

# Take it Slow Reflection Exercise

- How did it feel to speak compassionately to yourself, in the exercises in this chapter?
- How might self-compassion support women in their healing from experiences of intimate partner violence and/or substance use? How might it support you?
- What are some beginning ideas and practices you can use to care for yourself? Circle a few that might work for you. Add some of your own ideas. Can you identify one you would like to try over the next week? Or write one in you'd like to do?



# Further Practice & Resources to Explore

## Further Practice

- **Write a self-compassion journal.** Try writing in a journal at the end of every day for a week. Reflect on any times during the day you felt bad or judged yourself. Write some words to yourself that:
  - Accept your experience and all your feelings (e.g. *I feel ashamed of myself and angry with myself for smoking last night when I promised myself I wouldn't*).
  - Acknowledge how this experience was another step on the path of being an imperfect human being (e.g. it is hard not to smoke when my friends are smoking; every human being fails to stick to their goals sometimes).
  - Offer gentle kindness and understanding (e.g. I accept myself, my shame, and anger; I'm a good human being; giving up smoking is a long process and I will get there).
- Try this [Affectionate Breathing audio meditation \(20 mins\)](#), guided by Kristin Neff.
- Try this [Loving Kindness meditation \(20 mins\)](#), guided by Kristin Neff.
- Sign up for [free daily self-compassion circles](#).
- Read [73 ways to celebrate and create a connection with yourself](#) from the SHE RECOVERS Foundation. Commit to trying one new one this upcoming week.

## Resources

### Substance Use

- Substance Use in Women – [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#).
- Infographic – [Linking Practices on IPV and Substance Use](#).

### Violence Against Women

- [You are Not Alone: A toolkit for Indigenous women, girls and gender diverse people escaping domestic violence](#). Native Women's Association of Canada.
- [When Love Hurts: A Woman's Guide to Understanding Abuse in Relationships](#).

### Self-Compassion

- [Centre for Mindful Self Compassion](#).



# Notes

*This notes section is for you to record your thoughts as you participate in the Strong Women social support group and use the workbook. The notes section and questions will be repeated at the end of each chapter of the workbook, so you can continue to reflect as you continue to participate.*

*These notes may also be helpful if you want to share your reflections when you will be invited to the focus group at the end of the Strong Women pilot.*

Overall, how would you describe your experience being in the Strong Women group and using the workbook so far?

What has been your favourite part so far?

What have you learned so far?

Is there anything you have learned that you have found helpful to act on in your life?

# Notes

When did you feel most engaged in the group this week? Why?

When did you feel least engaged? Why?

Which activities in this workbook chapter did you find most helpful? Why?

What would you like more of in the workbook? Less of?

What have you learned from, and with, other women in the Strong Women group so far?

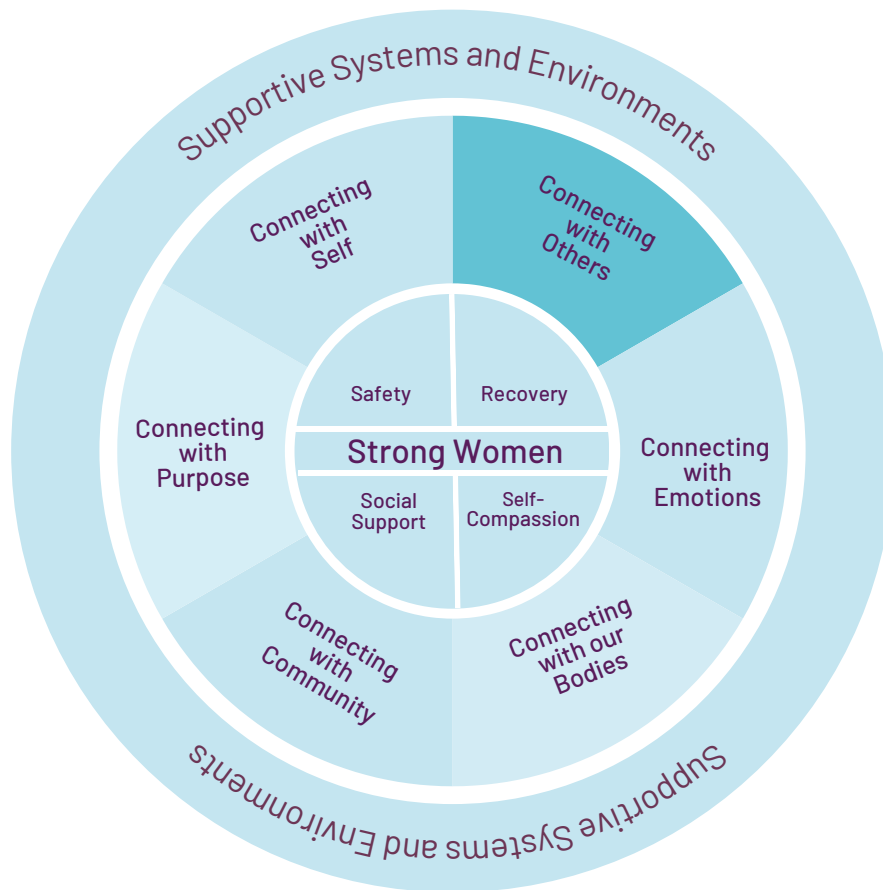
Additional Reflections

# Notes

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# Chapter 2



## In this chapter, you will:

1. Explore the importance of connection for health and well-being.
2. Reflect on the variety and qualities of relationships in our lives.
3. Explore the gendered dimensions of power and control in relationships.
4. Expand practices for fierce self-compassion in relationships.
5. Expand capacity for setting effective boundaries, saying no, and ending relationships.
6. Expand capacity for creating growth-supporting relationships.



Strong Women

# Women in Relationships

*I envision a world where women are travelling alone and meeting each other on the path.*

-SARK



Chapter Song: HISTORY by Beatrice Deer



As women, we are wired for connection. Our survival has always depended on connection and cooperation, especially with other women.

Women have always shared chores, stories, and resources – from cooking, beading, knitting, and caring for children together in our homes and communities, to supporting each other in hospitals, army barracks, and corporate boardrooms.

Relationships with others help us survive the harsh realities of modern life – roommates to pay the rent, friends to take our kids for playdates, and colleagues to share our workload. Relationships also give purpose and meaning to our lives. Without them, we feel isolated, lonely, and powerless.

Research shows that women who have positive relationships are happier, healthier, better able to deal with stress, and even live longer.

Our brains are so wired for connection that when we feel disconnected in relationship – rejected, excluded, isolated, alone – this causes us pain. Our brains register this emotional pain in the same way they register lack of air or water and physical pain.

Women with experience of substance misuse and intimate partner violence often suffer many kinds of disconnection in relationships.

For example, relationship disconnection can lead us to seek comfort in alcohol, tobacco, and other substances. Problematic use of these substances can in turn lead to isolation and relationship breakdown. Coercive isolation and disconnection are also central power and control dynamics in unsafe relationships. Unsafe relationships can also involve substance use coercion.

This section of the workbook will help you think through the many relationships in your lives right now, and consider which ones might be healthy, unhealthy, or unsafe. It will offer some practises for using self-compassion in relationships, for working with boundaries while staying safe, and for creating growth-fostering relationships. It may even spur some ideas on what needs to change society to support women better.



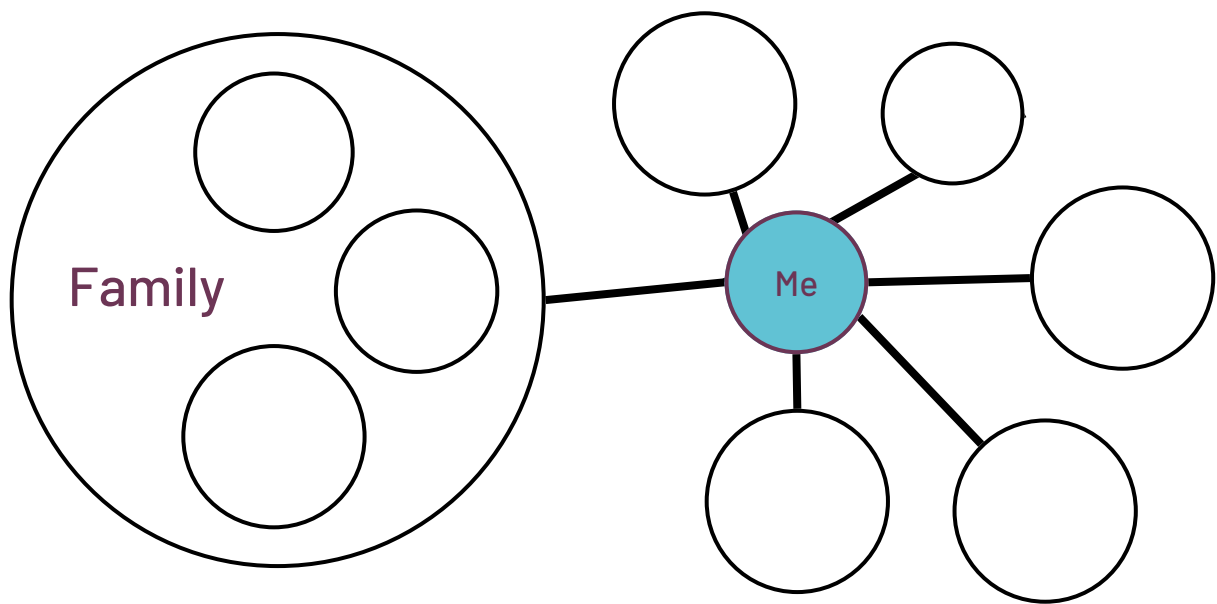
# Varieties of Relationship

Most of us have many different types of relationships in our lives. They often have different levels and intensities of connection.

They can include relationships with spouses and partners, family members, work colleagues, childcare providers, doctors, counsellors, sponsors, children's teachers, sports coaches, neighbours, friends, people we see regularly at the gym.

## Reflection Exercise

- Take a large sheet of paper and create a map of the important relationships in your lives. If you wish you can include important past as well as present relationships. You can include people who live far away and relationships that are online. Add as many circles as you need. Group them however makes sense to you.



# Qualities of Relationships

*Connection is the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.*

*-Brené Brown*

Healthy relationships are essential to our physical and mental health, and to our recovery from trauma, violence, and substance misuse. Healthy relationships can take many forms – from friends who help you relax and have fun, to trustworthy childcare providers who enable you to work, to a therapist who listens with kindness and focused attention.

Healthy relationships are generally supportive and energizing. According to Dr. Stephanie Covington, they involve respect for each other, *compassion* for each other's suffering, and *mutuality* – an equal investment of time and care in the relationship.

Here are some of the qualities of healthy, unhealthy, and unsafe relationships. See if you can think of any other qualities.

## Healthy

**In a healthy relationship, both you and your partner experience:**

- Safety
- Care
- Support
- Respect
- Trust
- Compromise
- Clear communication
- Freedom to choose and to be yourself
- Love for self and others

## Unhealthy

**You may be in an unhealthy relationship if you feel:**

- Disrespected
- Judged, criticized, never good enough
- Distrustful
- Lack of communication
- Unsupported
- Alone, even when you are together
- Attacked for spending time with others
- Exhausted from being in charge
- Incapable of making decisions
- Unequal economically
- Common addictive behaviour
- Arguments are vengeful or cruel

## Abusive

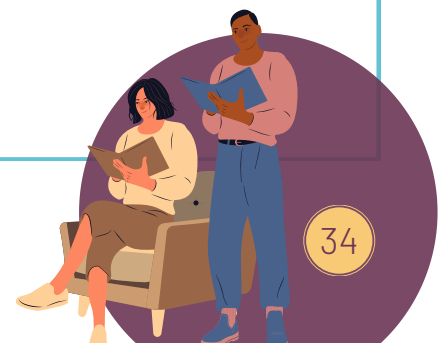
**A relationship is abusive if your partner is:**

- Controlling you
- Isolating you from others
- Calling you names, belittling you
- Hurting you or someone close to you
- Physically attacking you
- Accusing you of cheating when it is untrue
- Depriving you of access to money or work
- Making you feel afraid to ask for help
- Denying their abuse

# Qualities of Relationship Reflection Exercise

- What are the three most important relationships in your life right now? If you completed the map above, look back over it. Can you tell if these relationships are healthy, unhealthy, or unsafe? Be honest. If a relationship shows characteristics from more than one category, you can always list it as healthy/unhealthy or unhealthy/unsafe.

| Who      | Healthy,<br>Unhealthy,<br>Safe | Why |
|----------|--------------------------------|-----|
| Person 1 |                                |     |
| Person 2 |                                |     |
| Person 3 |                                |     |



# Survivor Stories

## "I am a survivor of domestic violence"

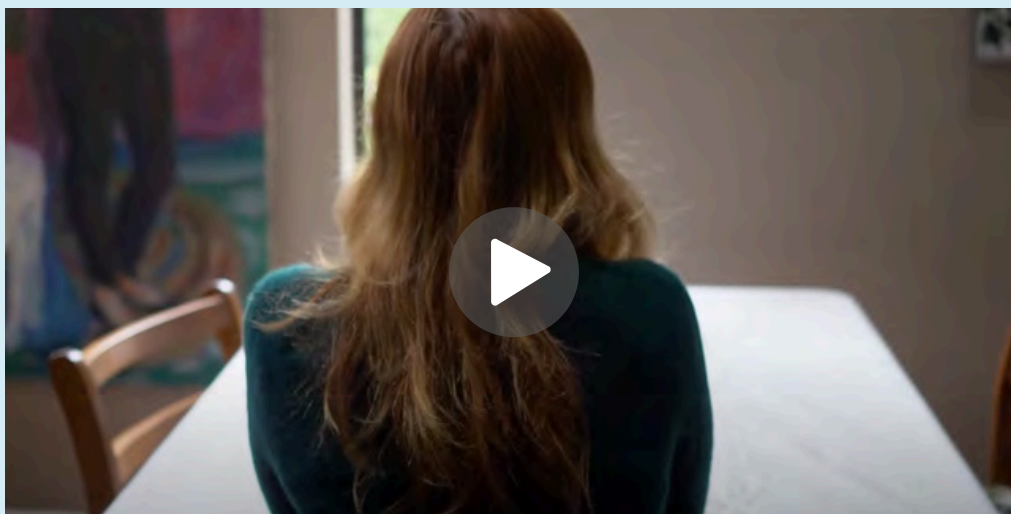
In this [video](#), a woman shares her experiences with intimate partner violence and, for the first time, calls herself a survivor.



Use this QR code to find the video.

## "A letter from Jane"

In this [video](#), service providers read a compilation of stories from women who used substances and their transformational journeys of healing while accessing programming at HerWay Home in Victoria, BC



Use this QR code to find the video.

# Power and Control

*One of the greatest risks for women is the abuse and violence that happens in relationships.*

—Stephanie S. Covington

One in three women worldwide experience violence, mostly by an intimate partner. As such, violence against women has been named a public health issue (UN Women).

As women, we can experience power and control issues in many of our relationships.

In unhealthy or unsafe relationships, power and control dynamics are weighty and central. This Power and Control Wheel documents some common strategies in abusive relationships.

Intimidation occurs when a partner makes us feel afraid — using aggressive facial expressions, destroying our property, hurting our kids or pets, or verbally abusing us.

Emotional abuse can involve name calling, humiliation, guilt, or manipulative mind games.

Economic abuse might involve restricting access to a partner's finances, preventing employment, or refusing to work and abusing a partner's credit.



Source: <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheel-gallery/>

If a partner tries to control who we see and talk to — such as preventing us from seeing family or friends — they are using isolation as a strategy.

A controlling partner might threaten to hurt us or our family members, might threaten to commit suicide, threaten to leave us, or threaten to report us for working illegally.

A coercive partner will persuade us to do something we really don't want to do, using force or threats. We might be forced to lie, steal, sell illegal substances, or have sex with partners or strangers when we don't want to. We may be forced to forego contraception, or get an abortion, or have an unwanted pregnancy.

Increasingly, technology is used to assert power and control in each area of this wheel. This can involve control of a partner's technology and social media use, spreading defamatory messages about a partner online, cyberbullying, and cyberstalking.

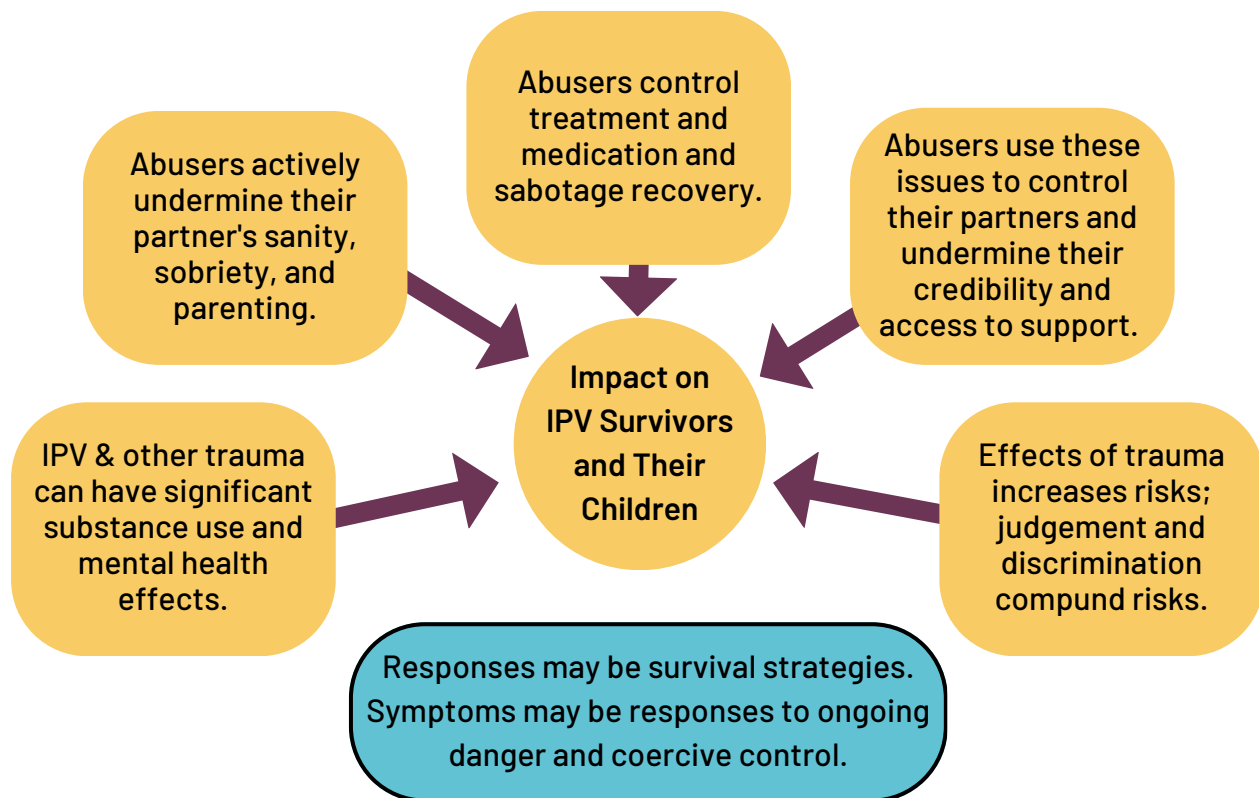
# Substance Use Coercion

If a partner forces or pressures you to use substances, deliberately sabotages your recovery, or refuses to provide childcare or transport needed to attend treatment, this is **substance use coercion**.

A 2012 survey of callers to the National Domestic Violence Hotline in the United States revealed that 43% had experienced at least one of these three types of substance use coercion:

- A partner pressured or forced them to use substances.
- A partner threatened to report their substance use to the authorities to prevent them getting something they wanted or needed (e.g., custody of children or a job).
- They have been afraid to call the police for help because a partner said they would not believe them or would arrest them for being under the influence of substances.

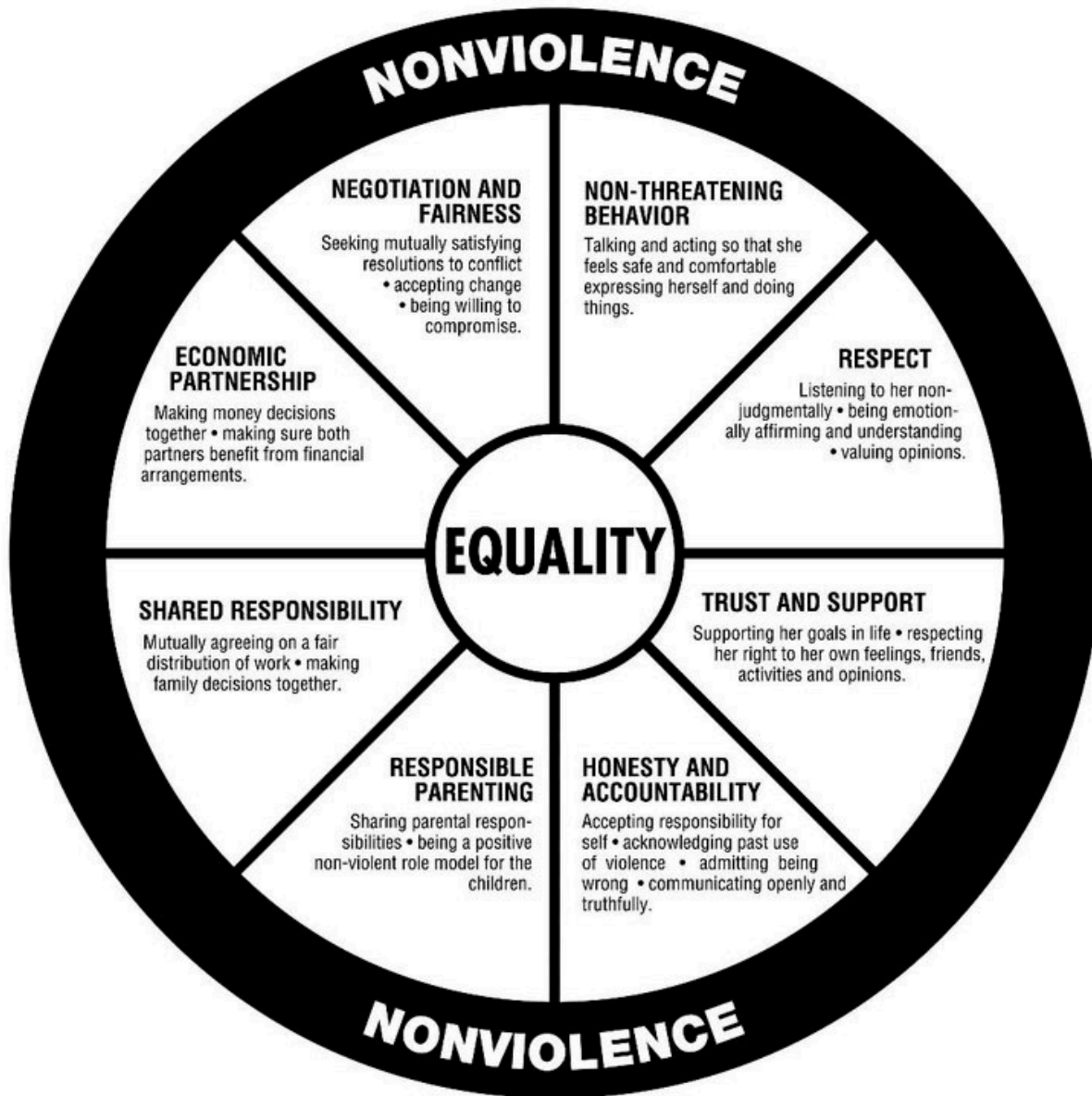
## Trauma, Substance Use, and IPV: Examining the Connections



Adapted from: <https://ncdvtmh.org/>

# Equality

The alternative to a relationship of power and control is a relationship of equality.  
The Equality Wheel illustrates what this looks like.



Source: <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheel-gallery/>



# Acting in Relationships



*Women are strong. We handle the pain of bearing children. We hold families together and skillfully navigate interpersonal conflict and adversity. But until we learn how to stand up for ourselves with the same fierce energy we use to care for others, our ability to take on the world's big challenges will remain limited.*

*-Kristin Neff*



It might be hard to be honest with yourself about some of your relationships, especially if they are what you have always known. No relationship is always perfect, and even healthy relationships involve feelings of dissatisfaction or boredom, or moments of argument and conflict.

But if one of your relationships is clearly unhealthy or unsafe, or makes you feel anxious or apprehensive, even writing this down might bring up anger, grief, shame, fear – or even paralysis at the idea of change. Many women struggle to acknowledge they are in an unsafe or abusive relationship, and there are good reasons for ongoing denial.

Shame can be overwhelming. So can fear of further violence, against yourself, your children, or even your pets. So can leaving a relationship, with the challenges of finding housing, work, childcare, and community support if you are isolated and emotionally and economically vulnerable.





# Acting in Relationships

Self-compassion practices can help in relationships too.

Tender self-compassion can help you to “be with” the reality of your situation and the feelings that come up, without judging or shaming yourself. Fierce self-compassion can help you to protect yourself, stand in your power, and motivate yourself to change.

Mindful self-compassion might mean allowing yourself to fully feel your rage at the injustice of the situation and your sadness that your boyfriend seems to care so little about you.

It might mean talking to yourself with words of love, while fiercely resolving to set firm boundaries around communication and childcare responsibilities as soon as your boyfriend is sober.

Tender self-compassion might mean acknowledging your fear, if this boyfriend often gets physically violent after drinking, and doing a breathing exercise to calm your nervous system. Fierce self-compassion might mean quietly leaving the room to protect yourself. It might mean immediately calling a crisis line to seek counselling and support to leave the relationship. It might mean creating a safety plan.

## Reflection Exercise

- Try this guided Protective Self-Compassion Break audio exercise (8 minutes).  
<https://self-compassion.org/practices/protective-self-compassion-break-2/>



# Setting Effective Boundaries



*Boundaries are a prerequisite for compassion and empathy. We can't connect with someone unless we're clear about where we end and they begin. If there's no autonomy between people, then there's no compassion or empathy, just enmeshment.*

—Brené Brown



The process of setting effective boundaries is central to healthy relationships. Other people cannot know what you want or need unless you tell them.

Communicating your boundaries with people is positive and healthy, as long as it does not put you in an unsafe situation. If you are currently living in an abusive, violent, or otherwise unsafe relationship, your focus should be on safety. Always check in with yourself first – is this safe, or will it cause me harm?

Remember, there is no excuse for abuse. Violence is always the fault of the abuser, regardless of whether you clearly express your boundaries.

Setting boundaries can be harder for women than men because of the way we have been socialized. Women who speak up are often described in a negative light as overly demanding or emotional or nagging, whereas men are more likely to be seen as assertive and driven.

Your boundaries are borders you can draw around yourself. They are the limits you can set with other people. They mark out where you end and where they begin.

There are many kinds of boundaries. They can be physical – as you decide how close you wish to be to someone in physical space, and if and where they may touch you. Boundaries can be emotional, sexual, or spiritual. They can relate to your finances, your family, your workplace, your living space, what you believe in, your values, your goals, your online behaviours, or how you use your time.

# Setting Effective Boundaries

Boundaries come in all different forms, and may include boundaries around your time, your privacy, your body, your personal space, etc. Boundaries can be hard to form and you might need to repeat your boundaries at first, firmly and kindly, especially if the other person is trying but has trouble remembering or changing their behaviour.

"I" statements can be very helpful, if someone is having trouble accepting your choices. *I need to exercise every day. I want to learn to drive. I do not want to smoke anymore. I need to hang out with other friends.*

## Steps to Setting a Boundary:

1. The first step is to *identify your needs*.
2. The second step is to *name the problem*.
3. The third step is to *direct the other person to the behaviour you would like*.

For example:

1. **Identify:** *I need to be able to have a private space in this house.*
2. **Name:** *I don't like that my roommates wander into my room whenever they feel like it.*
3. **Direct:** *Please don't enter my room without knocking and being invited in.*

Remember, in a healthy relationship you have the right to make personal choices about every aspect of your life, within the limits of your finances and abilities. You choose whether to dye your hair and the clothes you wear. You choose where you live and who with. You choose the work or studies that you want to pursue and how to spend your money.

You also might not have the strength, energy, or be in a safe enough space to set a boundary. Remember, communicating a boundary is not a positive step if it will put you in an unsafe situation. Always check in with yourself first — is this safe, or will it cause me harm?

# The Right to Say No

Setting a boundary might involve saying no to someone. It can be very hard to say no, especially if you are afraid of the other person's disappointment, sadness, or anger.

You might not want to drink alcohol or go to see a movie that features violence. You might not want to be a stay-at-home parent. You might not want to work night shifts with a manager you distrust.

Sometimes people might bulldoze your boundaries regardless of your efforts. Maybe they refuse to acknowledge your needs. Maybe you feel violated or controlled. This is an unhealthy or unsafe relationship.

Again, remember that violence is always the fault of the abuser, regardless of whether you clearly express your boundaries.

It doesn't matter how large or small the issue is.  
You always have the right to say no.



# The Right to Say No Reflection Exercise

- How easy is it for you to say no? Are there any things or people you find it hard to say no to even when you want to say no? (*Examples could include sexual advances, medical procedures, your boss, your partner, your child begging for screen time, alcohol, cigarettes, etc.*)
- Describe an example of something you did when you didn't want to because you were afraid to say no.
- What might have happened if you had said no? Would this have been worse than going along with it? Would you have been unsafe?
- Is there a way you could have said no while keeping yourself safe?
- Practice saying no in a firm way, to someone you have trouble saying no to. Speak out loud to a photograph of them if you have one. Draw a picture of them if you don't.



# Ending Relationships



*Anything I cannot transform into something marvelous, I let go.*

-Anais Nin



If you already know you have unhealthy or unsafe relationships in your life right now, or you have identified them in this chapter, you might need to take action.

Perhaps you just need to create more distance, maybe assert clearer boundaries around your time, emotional, or physical involvement.

Maybe there is a relationship you need to leave. If so, you need to seek out support and create a safety plan first, to leave safely.

For most people leaving is a very difficult process. Often, we have conflicting feelings, even in unsafe or unhealthy relationships. Just thinking about ending a relationship might trigger a confusing mix of emotions – love and fear, desire and rage, comfort and anxiety, guilt, shame, joy, regret, sadness, or even gratitude.

Or your feelings might be simple and clear – a longing to leave, tempered by fear of an angry, blaming, or violent response. Or you might be afraid of not being able to house, feed and support yourself and your children or other family members.

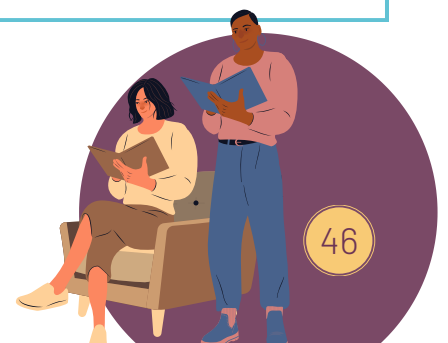
If this is a relationship in which you have no safety concerns, it is generally best to be direct, honest, and kind. Take personal responsibility, speak with “I” statements, and be appreciative for any gifts or beautiful moments in the relationship.

If you have safety concerns, it is important to find support and create a safety plan before you attempt to leave. It is important to prepare yourself, gather and reach out to trusted friends and family members. Go to: <https://sheltersafe.ca/> to find a shelter or service near you.

Women in violent relationships are at greatest risk of further violence when they say they want to leave, or if they have just left. It is very important not to say you want to leave, try to end an unhealthy or unsafe relationship, or leave, until you have a safety plan.

# Ending Relationships Reflection Exercise

- Are there any relationships in your life that you would like to end?
- What feelings arise when you think about this?
- Do you have safety concerns about ending this relationship?
- List three trusted friends, family members, or community support resources you can approach to begin this process in a safe way.



# Growth-Fostering Relationships

*Love is a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust.*

*-bell hooks*

Do you have relationships that feel supportive? Are there people in your life who are reliable, who help you out when you are in need, and who always encourage you to believe in yourself and your healing? People whose company makes you feel energized and alive?

These are growth-fostering relationships. These are relationships to nurture if you have them already. Maybe you would like to bring one or two of these relationships into your life if you don't have any yet?

## Five good things:

Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues, who co-developed a new feminist psychology for women in the 1970s, characterized "five good things" in mutually growth-fostering relationships:

1. Zest (energy, vitality).
2. Clarity (knowledge) of self and other.
3. Increased sense of worth.
4. Productivity (empowerment and action).
5. Desire for more growth-fostering relationships.

We can cultivate growth-fostering relationships in many parts of our lives. They can be friendships in which we check in with each other regularly, share our hearts authentically, and listen to each other with interest and compassion.

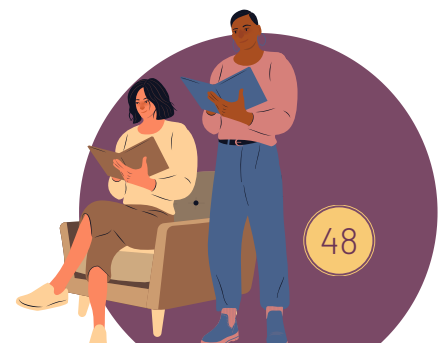
They can be romantic partnerships in which we reflect back to each other the gifts we each have and encourage each other to step out in the world and become our best selves.

They can be found in a variety of places. Exercise buddies who run or train together, co-workers developing a project together, neighbours helping each other with community gardening or eldercare, groups dedicated to taking action for social change... all are possibilities for creating growth-fostering relationships.



# Growth-Fostering Relationships Reflection Exercise

- Are there any relationships in your life that already contain the “five good things”?
- Are there any relationships in your life that are healthy and have one or more of the “five good things?” Might you be able to nurture this relationship into a growth-fostering relationship?
- Are there any people you know, or places you go, where there might be possibilities for generating some new growth-fostering relationships?



# Further Practice & Resources to Explore

## Further Practice

- Watch *The Power in Developing Personal Boundaries* with Darlene Lancer on YouTube. She Recovers Foundation Mental Health Mondays educational series.
- Listen to this guided *Fierce Friend* self-compassion audio meditation (15 mins) from Kristin Neff's self-compassion.org.
- Try this guided mindfulness and compassion audio meditation (20 mins) from Tara Brach; <https://www.tarabrach.com/meditation-practice-rain/>

## Resources

*Here are some links to resources about moving forth from alcohol and tobacco use and partner violence, and building relational and coping skills.*

- *Women and Alcohol: A Women's Health Resource* - Centre of Excellence for Women's Health.
- *Liberation! Helping women quit smoking* - Centre of Excellence for Women's Health.
- *Women and Alcohol, Tobacco, Cannabis and Prescription Opioids sheets* (when pregnant, parenting, and breastfeeding) - Centre of Excellence for Women's Health.
- *When Love Hurts* – book and resources for women.
- *Safety on Line: The Technology Safety and Privacy Toolkit* - BC Society of Transition Houses.
- *Safety Planning* - Shelter Safe.
- *Safe Coping Skills sheets* - Seeking Safety.
- *Finding your Best Self: Recovery from Addiction, Trauma or Both* – book by Dr Lisa Najavits can be ordered online.

# Notes

*This notes section is for you to record your thoughts as you participate in the Strong Women social support group and use the workbook. The notes section and questions will be repeated at the end of each chapter of the workbook, so you can continue to reflect as you continue to participate.*

*These notes may also be helpful if you want to share your reflections when you will be invited to the focus group at the end of the Strong Women pilot.*

Overall, how would you describe your experience being in the Strong Women group and using the workbook so far?

What has been your favourite part so far?

What have you learned so far?

Is there anything you have learned that you have found helpful to act on in your life?

# Notes

When did you feel most engaged in the group this week? Why?

When did you feel least engaged? Why?

Which activities in this workbook chapter did you find most helpful? Why?

What would you like more of in the workbook? Less of?

What have you learned from, and with, other women in the Strong Women group so far?

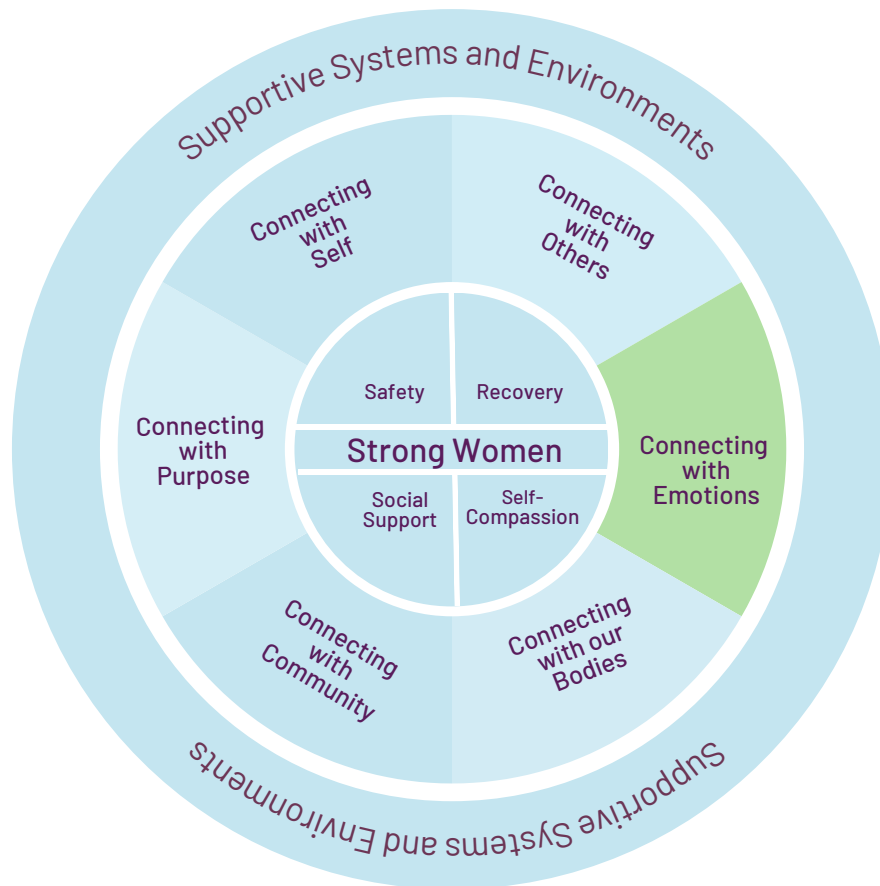
Additional Reflections

# Notes

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# Chapter 3



In this chapter, you will:

1. Identify and name emotions.
2. Explore the links between their emotions, SU, and IPV.
3. Reflect on experiences of shame, anger, grief, gratitude, and joy.
4. Expand practices for self-compassion and grounding.
5. Expand capacity to be with emotions and build wellness.



Strong Women

# Connecting with our Emotions

*Our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge.*

—Audre Lorde



Chapter Song: Recovering by Celine Dion



Our emotions are very important for our health and wellness. They help to keep us safe. They offer a map for living a fulfilling life.

Each emotion can offer us many different insights. For example, fear can alert us to the danger of a situation. Grief can show us what is precious to us. Shame can reveal when we stray from our own or our culture's core values. Joy can guide us towards fulfilling work and relationships.

From an Indigenous perspective, our emotions are one of the four pillars of wellness, along with our mind, body, and spirit. Emotional wellness helps us to create and feel belonging.



Elder Jim Dumont writes that: "Wellness from an Indigenous perspective is a whole and healthy person expressed through a sense of balance of spirit, emotion, mind and body. Central to wellness is belief in one's connection to language, land, beings of creation, and ancestry, supported by a caring family and environment."

Source: [https://cyfn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Growing-Wellness-Activity\\_Guide\\_DIGITAL\\_FILE.pdf](https://cyfn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Growing-Wellness-Activity_Guide_DIGITAL_FILE.pdf)



# Feeling Our Emotions

Our lives are also full of chores and obligations, responsibilities, and struggles. It is often not easy to fully attend to our more difficult emotions when they arise.

We cannot grieve openly when we are serving coffee to a customer. We cannot express anger when teaching a class or feeding a baby. We cannot express fear, or anger, or grief in an unsafe relationship, especially if these are triggers for a partner's violence. We end up suppressing or pushing our feelings away.

Even when we have time and space, it is not easy to be with intense feelings. If we did not have loving and attuned caregivers as children, we might never have had our strong emotions held in a safe way. We might have learned to be afraid of some emotions. Maybe it was ok in your family to feel sadness, but fear was banished. Or joy was encouraged but anger was forbidden.

For those of us who have experienced both substance use and intimate partner violence, our emotions in relation to these issues can be very complex.

For example, some women use substances to numb their feelings of sadness, fear, or anger in a violent relationship. Some women find substance use leads to heightened emotions and an increase of violence in their relationship.

Many women feel shame, grief, and anger about their experiences of substance misuse and intimate partner violence, while these are occurring, and after, while recovering.

Many girls and women were also raised with a cultural ideal that we are sweet, nurturing, compassionate, quiet, gentle, and helpful. Our anger disturbs this ideal. We have few outlets for the healthy expression of rage.

# Feeling Our Emotions Reflection Exercise

- How were your emotions responded to when you were a child? Do you remember your parents or caregivers providing a safe space for you to feel any emotions? (*Maybe someone would hold you while you cried, or would laugh at jokes with you?*)
- Do you remember which emotions were dismissed or discouraged when you were a girl? (*Maybe you got in trouble for being angry, or your fears were laughed at?*)



# Being With Our Emotions

*In blocking off what hurts us, we think we are walling ourselves off from pain. But in the long run the wall, which prevents growth, hurts us more than the pain, which, if we will only bear it, soon passes over us. Washes over us and is gone.”*

—Alice Walker

In times of trauma or crisis, if we don't have a strong enough container to hold and feel our emotions, they split off from us. This can happen if we are living in a traumatic situation today — with a violent partner, in poverty, grappling with trauma, or substance use, or addiction.

When our fear, grief, shame, and rage feel like they are too much, when they feel unsafe or overwhelming, we try to push them away. We do everything we can to feel better and be in the world. Sometimes this process is essential for our safety and well-being at the time.

But these feelings don't really go away. When they surface, we might try to avoid them again by smoking a cigarette, distract ourselves with technology, or go shopping. We might numb them with food, alcohol, and other drugs. We continue to find familiar ways to adapt until other alternatives are available.

This image shows how substance use can change, so that what began as social, becomes problematic or dependent in nature. Substance use can become problematic when used to cope with pain or negative situations. A cycle can develop — of substance use, worsening relationships and health, and increased use — to cope with the pain of this and to avoid withdrawal effects. When this cycle is understood, it can be seen that stepping off the go-around at any point is a possibility.



Avoidance or repression of emotion impacts our mental and physical health. Research shows that repressed emotions can lead to depression and anxiety and play a role in physical illnesses such as autoimmune disorders, heart disease, and gastrointestinal disorders. And if we keep using food or substances to avoid our emotions, this can lead us into addictions and/or eating disorders.

On the other hand, *so long as we are in a safe place*, if we can learn to *be with* our difficult emotions, they can become a source of energy, beauty, connection, and healing.

# Being With Our Emotions Reflection Exercise

- Which of these methods have you used to avoid or control overwhelming emotions? Circle or highlight the ones that you use. What other methods would you add? Write them in the blank box.

- Watching too much TV
- Smoking cigarettes
- Vaping
- Exercising too much
- Eating too much
- Staying in bed
- Leaving a relationship
- Staying in a relationship
- Sleeping too much
- Blaming others
- Smoking marijuana
- Avoiding people
- Gambling

- Worrying obsessively
- Drinking alcohol
- Using drugs
- Cutting or harming yourself
- Shopping
- Scrolling social media
- Storming out of the room
- Lying about your feelings
- Skipping work



- What role have strong emotions played in your journey with substance use and/or intimate partner violence? List as many as you can think of.



# Naming Our Emotions

*Language shows us that naming an experience doesn't give the experience more power, it gives us the power of understanding and meaning.*

—Brené Brown

*The first step in being with our emotions in a healthy way is being able to identify them.*

We experience many emotions. We feel them in varying degrees of intensity. The more words we can access to describe our feelings, the better.

We need words like guilt, wonder, awe, stress, love, anxiety, despair, nostalgia, and triumph to make sense of our experiences and share them with others. We need words like boredom, confusion, contempt, and craving too.

In fact, research shows that language does not simply communicate emotion, it also shapes what we are feeling and our ability to ask for help.

Language helps us process sensory information and interpret emotional input; it helps us identify others' emotions and manage our own emotional experiences.

## Reflection Exercise

A table of words that describe emotions is included on the following page.

- Circle or highlight the emotional states you feel, either regularly, or from time to time. What else would you add to the table?
- Of these feelings, which are the hardest? Which do you avoid, numb, or suppress?
- Which emotions do you feel more of?



# Naming Our Emotions Reflection Exercise

|              |             |            |             |               |            |
|--------------|-------------|------------|-------------|---------------|------------|
| Loving       | Afraid      | Angry      | Ashamed     | Sad           | Happy      |
| Warm         | Anxious     | Hateful    | Hurt        | Grieving      | Joyful     |
| Courageous   | Worried     | Jealous    | Guilty      | Sympathetic   | Excited    |
| Caring       | Cautious    | Envious    | Embarrassed | Disgusted     | Wonderous  |
| Relieved     | Confused    | Enraged    | Shy         | Craving       | Awed       |
| Patient      | Distrustful | Frustrated | Fragile     | Nostalgic     | Hopeful    |
| Safe         | Courageous  | Shocked    | Isolated    | Bored         | Triumphant |
| Adoring      | Stressed    | Bitter     | Awkward     | Brokenhearted | Surprised  |
| Confident    | Horried     | Annoyed    | Humiliated  | Depressed     | Calm       |
| Creative     | Nervous     | Betrayed   | Remorseful  | Empty         | Glad       |
| Romantic     | Startled    | Indignant  | Degraded    | Hopeless      | Curious    |
| Appreciative | Terrified   | Furious    | Judged      | Lonely        | Delighted  |
| Relaxed      | Uncertain   | Resentful  | Worthless   | Tearful       | Content    |
| Proud        | Suspicious  | Vengeful   | Ridiculed   | Discouraged   | Serene     |
| Valued       | Numb        | Irritated  | Devalued    | Disappointed  | Grateful   |



# Naming Our Emotions Reflection Exercise

- Which of these emotions are connected to substance use for you, or to your experiences of intimate partner violence? (E.g., *Do you smoke or vape or drink when you feel sad, angry, embarrassed, guilty, or ashamed? Are there emotions in you or your partner that trigger violence or result from violence?*)
- Pick one of these difficult emotions and draw a picture to express how it feels. Use colours and think about using metaphors (e.g. *Does your anger feel like a chainsaw or a volcano? Is your sadness like a whirlpool or a muddy bog? Is there an animal or a colour or shape that represents your fear?*)

- Now pick an emotion you would like to feel more of and do the same.



# Grounding and Soothing Exercises

If you feel overwhelmed or flooded by a strong and difficult emotion, these exercises can help you soothe and ground yourself – into a more calm, centered place.

| Physical<br>(Focusing on your senses)   | Mental<br>(Focusing on your mind)  | Self-Soothing<br>(Calming Yourself)  |
|---|--|--|
| Walk slowly, noticing each footstep, saying 'left' and 'right' with each step.  | Stop and listen. Notice and name what you can hear nearby and in the distance.   | Imagine yourself in a familiar, comfortable place. Relax in this safe space.   |
| Rub your palms together; clap your hands. Listen to the sound. Feel the sensation.  | Name your favorite sounds. What are your three favorite colours?   | Comfort yourself as you would comfort a child. "I am loved. I am safe here."   |
| Dig your feet into the ground. Feel supported, rooted, connected to the earth.  | Change the "channel" in your mind or visualize your fear dissolving like a melting ice cube.   | Carry a grounding object such as a stone in your pocket. Touch it for comfort when you need it.  |
| Rub cool or warm water over your hands.   | Describe step-by-step and in great detail how to make a favorite dish.   | Look at a calming photo.   |
| Take a deep breath in through your nose. As you breathe out through your mouth, make a sound like the ocean. Feel the rhythm of your breathing, like ocean waves moving in and out. | Talk yourself through what you are experiencing. "My heart is pounding. It's slowing down as I breathe in and out. These feelings will pass. I will get through this." | Try a butterfly hug by crossing your arms (as if giving yourself a hug) and alternately tapping your left and right upper arm. Breathe and gently tap for a minute or two. |



# Self-Compassion for Emotion

*The heart that breaks open can contain the whole universe.*

*—Joanna Macy*

Turning towards difficult emotions and welcoming them, rather than suppressing or running from them, is important for healing. It is also challenging. It is a process we must always approach gently, gradually, and with self-compassion. And only when we are in a safe space.

Cultivating an awareness of emotions in our bodies is an important step. It can be easier to bring awareness to a feeling in our physical body than trying to work with our spinning thoughts.

When you feel sad, angry, or joyous, what sensations show up in your physical body? An ache in the heart? A tension in the belly? An emptiness, or pressure in the chest? A bounce in your step? Does this feeling have a shape? Is it soft, hard, rough, smooth, light, or heavy?

When you sense an emotion in your body, you can also start to bring in mindful self-compassion.

Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer suggest doing this through a process of “soften-soothe-allow.”

Say you are feeling grief and it is showing up as a pressure in your chest. The first step is to *soften* into this feeling. Breathe slowly and deeply into your chest and softly breathe out any tension. Relax.

The next step is to *soothe* yourself. You can place a gentle hand on your chest where you feel the pressure and send love to this feeling.

Speak words of gentle kindness to yourself — as you would to a friend. *Oh, this is hard. It’s ok. You are loved.* Finally, just *allow* everything that is occurring — the feeling, the pain or pressure in your body, any thoughts that might be arising. Just allow them to be, without any need to leave or get better.

## Soften, Soothe, Allow



Focus on the area of your body where you feel the negative emotion most strongly.

Soften into the place. Imagine applying heat to that area, like you would to a sore muscle.

# Self-Compassion for Emotion Exercise

- Choose an emotion that feels uncomfortable for you (but not overwhelming). Visualise yourself in a situation where you recently felt this emotion. (*Maybe the last time you felt anger when you didn't feel heard, or anxious before speaking in front of others.*) Now practice self-compassion towards this feeling in your body. *Soften* into the feeling. *Soothe* yourself gently. *Allow* all that arises.



# Deepening Into Our Emotions: Working with Shame

Shame is the feeling that there is something intrinsically wrong with us. We might feel invisible, misunderstood, left out, inadequate, or unimportant. Shame thrives in the shadows – on secrecy and silence.

Research has shown that women are more likely to feel shame. For example, you might be trying to quit smoking. You succeed in going without a cigarette for a whole week and then you go to a party and smoke a full pack in one evening. Shame screams *I am a failure* rather than seeing that you had a setback in achieving your goal.

We have all felt this emotion.

Shame depends on others' judgments of us and so it can be weaponized against us. For example, if a partner threatens to call the police, we may fear the shame of being labelled crazy, or being perceived as a 'bad' mother for using drugs.

## Shame vs. Guilt

### Understanding the difference

#### Shame

Shame is feeling bad about yourself as a person

#### Guilt

Guilt is feeling bad about what you did

### Why it matters?

When we understand the difference between these powerful feelings, we begin to understand and eliminate negative self-judgement and self-talk.

### What to do when you experience...

#### Shame

- Exercise self-compassion
- Recognize shame as a survival tactic
- Seek healthy connections with others
- Talk to your therapist

#### Guilt

- Admit you are wrong
- Take responsibility
- Seek forgiveness
- Change your behaviour

# Working with Shame Reflection Exercise

- Describe how shame has been present in your life.
- How did shame feel in your body?
- What negative thoughts were running through your head?

At the end of this chapter, there are statements from the *16 steps for Discovery and Empowerment* that may be useful to you when thinking about shame.



# Healing Shame with Self-Compassion

Shame draws us inwards. When we feel it, we can't properly empathise with another person's experience as we are consumed by how they are judging us. Shame also fuels perfectionism as we work harder and harder to look good and gain approval from others.

Women with high levels of shame also have a high likelihood of experiencing depression, anxiety, substance use, and eating disorders.

If we hide our shame, it grows. If we share our shame with an empathetic listener, it lessens.

The first step is to reveal our shame to ourselves. We need to understand how much of our shame comes from the judgments of others, and how much from our own negative core beliefs. Shame can also arise when our lives are not reflecting our values.

Research shows that offering ourselves self-compassion works to reduce feelings of shame.

1. Self-compassion first helps us remember that **every woman feels shame** and every woman feels the threat of being publicly shamed. *Shame is a universal human emotion. People all over the world have felt this and are feeling it right now. I am not alone.*
2. Second, we can **mindfully** experience feeling bad – without the thought that we are bad. *I feel so bad that I got drunk last night. I'm finding it hard to admit that I let myself down. I don't want anyone to know. I want to hide in a dark room.*
3. Finally, we can offer ourselves **kindness**, releasing judgment. *I'm angry with myself for putting up with coercive behaviours from him, and not standing up for myself. But it's complicated to figure this out and I will keep trying. I'm still a good person, worthy of love.*

## Reframing Shame into Self-Compassion

### Shame Voice

I made a fool of myself and failed yet again. I can't really do this. I'm a burden.

I must have offended my friend (or partner or colleague). I'm so stupid. I don't deserve good relationships.

I'm so pathetic and useless, here I go again ruining every single thing.

I don't deserve to feel joy or be happy, I haven't proved or earned it.

### Self-Compassion Voice

It hurts when you feel like nothing is working. You are worthy so keep going.

You did not intend to hurt anyone's feelings. It was a mistake. You can apologize and communicate with them.

It's okay to make mistakes, no one is perfect or gets it right all the time.

You are deserving. You are worthy of love, joy, and compassion.

Adapted from: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLM5iRqs1bj/?hl=en>

# Healing Shame with Self-Compassion

This leads us to the gift of shame. Shame can sometimes be a powerful teacher, helping to keep us in check and align our behaviours with our values. Shame can alert us to actions that might harm ourselves and/or others.

If you feel shame about having an affair, or smoking cigarettes, gossiping about your best friend behind her back, or drinking alcohol... this might be a signal that *for you* this action is not aligned with your beliefs and values.

It is possible to learn from shame, to change a behaviour or repair a rupture, while holding onto the truth that we are worthy and good.

## Reflection Exercise

- Think of a time when you felt strong feelings of shame. Place your hand on your body wherever you feel the shame (or simply on your heart). Offer yourself self-compassion.



# Understanding Women's Anger

“—

*There is not a woman alive who does not understand that women's anger is openly reviled.*

—Soraya Chemaly

—”

Crazy. Irrational. Hysterical. Drama Queen. Illogical. Aggressive. Explosive. Exaggerating.  
High maintenance. Over-sensitive. Mad. Hormonal. Disruptive.

We live in a society where women's anger is dismissed, laughed at, or made into an illness.

This begins when we are very small. Research shows that people see fussy baby boys as angry and fussy baby girls as frightened or sad.

Adults expect girls to be cooperative, pleasant, and gentle. Baby girls are rewarded with food and smiles when they show positive emotions. By the time they enter school, girls are expected to be quiet, helpful, and “nice.”

Because we are laughed at when we outwardly express anger, we often learn to express anger passively. As pre-teens, we learn to use gossip, inuendo, and quiet exclusion.

Or we learn to turn anger inwards, on ourselves. Many adolescent girls struggle with depression, anxiety, panic attacks, self-harming behaviours, and eating disorders.

This gendered expectation around anger continues into adulthood. Angry women are unacceptable. So, we often suppress our anger and feel powerless and diminished. Or we bottle it up until it explodes in a way that feels alien and out-of-control. Or we continue to turn it against ourselves and abuse ourselves.

For Black women, it is even worse. Black women are often stereotyped as angry. Police take intimate partner violence accusations less seriously from Black than white women.

Yet women have much to be angry about. We all still live in a deeply patriarchal and racist society. Many of us experiencing substance use and intimate partner violence have been treated unjustly, disrespectfully, or abusively by social services and/or the justice and healthcare systems, as well as by family members and partners.

# Understanding Women's Anger

Your anger is valid and should be respected.

"A society that does not respect women's anger is one that does not respect women..." writes Soraya Chemaly. "Not as human beings, thinkers, knowers, active participants, or citizens."

## Anger Styles

### **Aggressive:**

When you're angry, everyone knows it. You might yell or throw things. There's a need to control the situation.

### **Passive:**

You keep your anger to yourself and shove it down to avoid it. It wears away at you from the inside out.

### **Passive Aggressive:**

You express your anger indirectly. You might say one thing and then do another.

### **Projective Aggressive:**

You give your anger to others to deal with, or you get others angry so you aren't the bad guy.

### **Assertive:**

You openly express your anger and then try to work it out with the other person and move forward.

Source: <https://www.selfloverainbow.com/anger-styles-whats-yours/>



# Understanding Women's Anger Reflection Exercise

- What were the messages about anger that you received as a girl?
- How did you learn to express your anger, and how did people respond?
- How do you express anger now?
- How does it feel to think about the way our society treats women's anger?
- Think of a situation where anger has mobilized women to fight for a change.



# Anger and Social Justice

“*Anger calls things like they are. It allows us to see when we’re being discriminated against or treated unfairly – and to fight against it. If women don’t get angry, it means our wants, needs, and desires don’t count. It means we can’t effectively change our situation.*

–Kristin Neff



Women’s anger is very powerful. Our anger alerts us to danger. It energizes us and helps us to act. It helps us to tell others something is wrong. It helps us overcome fear and fight back.

Of course, our anger can be a negative and unhelpful force in our lives. If we rage out of control. If we reject and blame others mindlessly. Then we cause only hurt. If we focus only on punishing others, we destroy relationships. This kind of anger can also lead to ill health – hypertension, heart disease, and immune disorders.

In unsafe relationships, expressing our anger can also be dangerous. We may need to suppress our anger, to avoid being hurt by a violent partner. We may need to learn to bottle up our anger to survive. This is wise in the short term until we are safe.

Anger can also be constructive, once we are in a safe situation. If we remain open to understanding others’ points of view, and seek to understand what is happening, we can channel our anger – to stand up for ourselves, set clear boundaries, and resolve conflicts. We can protect ourselves without violence.

Anger enables us to address our own needs in life and to fight for social justice.



Source: <https://www.mindful.org/why-women-should-embrace-their-anger>

This kind of anger is good for our health. It is cathartic and empowering. And, it can draw women together to take collective action.

The gift of anger is that it shows us what we really care about, what we want to protect, and what we are willing to fight for.

# Anger and Social Justice Reflection Exercise

- Think of a time you got angry recently. Pick an example that is of medium intensity – not an anger that will overwhelm you if you feel it again. How did you express your anger? Was it destructive or constructive?
- Does this anger show you something you want to protect or fight for, something you care deeply about? (*E.g. your children's wellbeing, your own dignity and needs, your right to an education....*)
- Can you imagine how this anger could fuel constructive and collective action for change?



# Anger as a Secondary Emotion

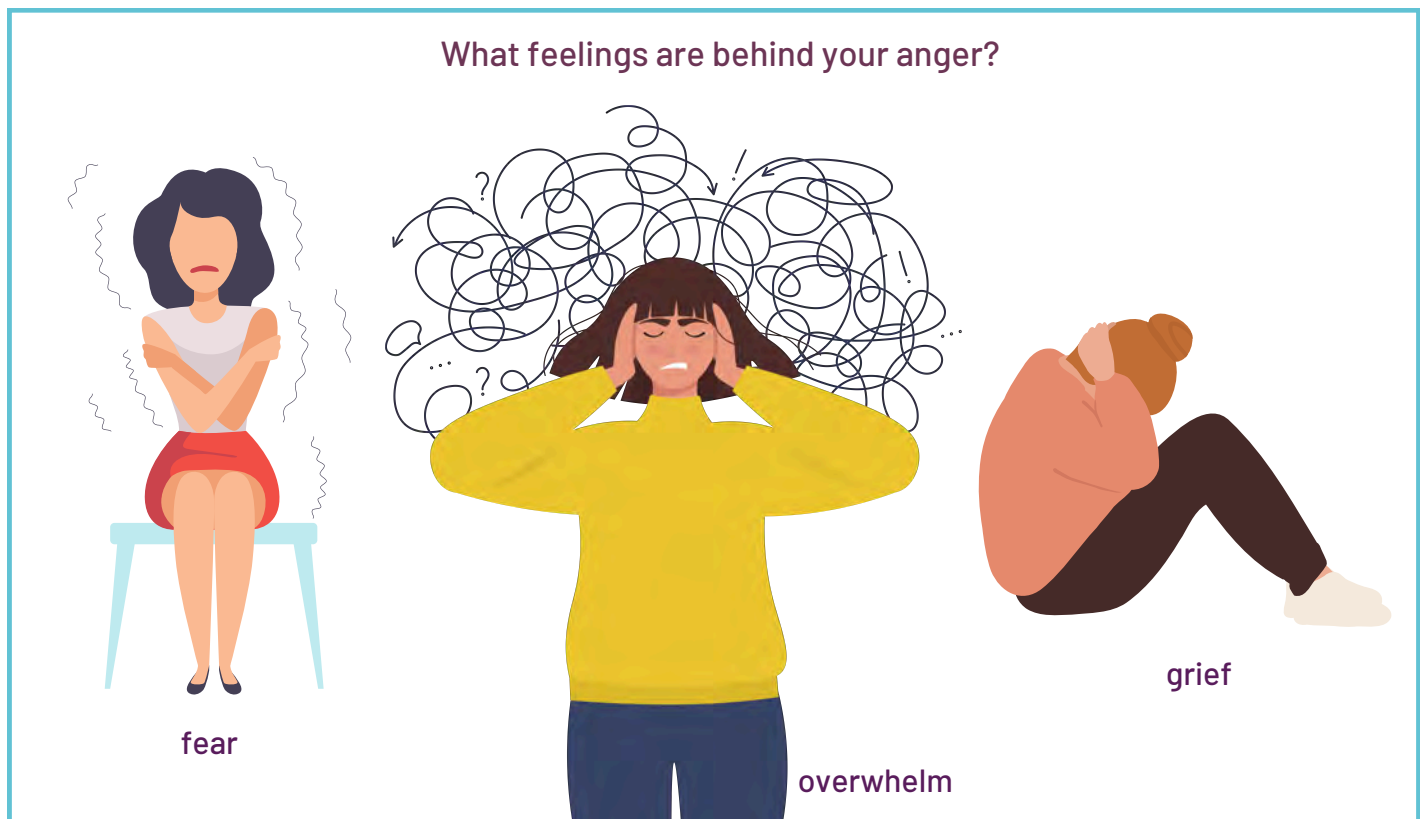
Anger can also be a secondary emotion; with a primary emotion such as fear or grief hiding underneath. For some women, it is easier to be angry than to feel or share uncomfortably vulnerable feelings such as fear or grief.

Perhaps you are going through a difficult separation from an abusive partner, and feeling financially insecure, and you bring a list of concerns to your lawyer. He dismisses your main worries. You feel rage rising inside of you. *How dare he say that? I'm paying him to represent me.*

The anger is justified and important. But the anger may hide more vulnerable feelings. *I feel all alone in this separation. Now even my lawyer isn't listening to me. I feel abandoned again. Maybe nobody will support me.*

Whatever the situation, your anger is always valid. Yet if anger is the only feeling you are consciously aware of, this may hinder your healing process.

You might have lots of contradictory feelings at the same time – for example sadness, anger, betrayal, and love towards a former partner. It is important to try and tune into each of these feelings and offer each one some space and attention.



# Anger Reflection Exercise

- Think of a time you got angry recently. Again, pick an example that is of medium intensity – not an anger that will overwhelm you if you feel it again. Are there any more vulnerable emotions underneath this anger? What are they?



Source: <https://wholetherapyottawa.com/eft-and-anger-part-2-the-anger-iceberg>.



# Strategies for Releasing Anger

If you identify other complex and more vulnerable feelings underneath your anger, you might feel ready to let the anger go, or use it as fuel for action. Here are a few strategies:

- Remind yourself that what angered you is in the past.
- Find a creative outlet to express your anger — painting, collaging, writing, singing.
- Engage in physical exercise — dancing, running, yoga, walking, martial arts.
- Use grounding or soothing exercises.
- Use mindful self-compassion.
- Talk with a friend or counsellor.

## Strategies for Using Anger

You can use your anger as fuel, and join with others to take a stand, or rectify an injustice, or make change.

- Use your anger to motivate yourself and others to take action.
- Seek other women who may feel similar anger, and share experiences.
- Join an organization or group that is fighting for a change.
- Write about the injustice, and share your work.

## Useful Exercises for Coping with Anger



jumping rope



tai chi



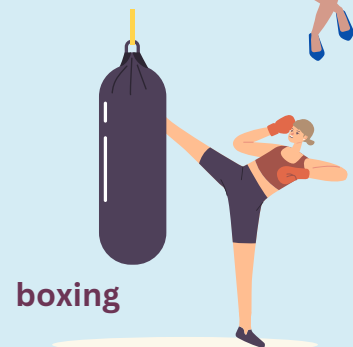
dancing



yoga



walking



boxing

# Loss and Grief

*When our grief cannot be spoken, it falls into the shadow and re-arises in us as symptoms. So many of us are depressed, anxious, and lonely. We struggle with addictions and find ourselves moving at a breathless pace, trying to keep up with the machinery of culture.*

—Francis Weller

Loss is a big part of every woman's life. We move homes, change jobs, lose friends and partners, our children leave home, loved ones die. We lose trust when people betray us, lose confidence in ourselves when we experience failure or rejection.

At some point in our lives most of us lose security, dreams, innocence, and happiness due to traumatic events or relationships.



We also live in a time when the news is dominated by loss —species extinction, melting glaciers, brutal wars, famine and conflict around the world, and death and illness from the COVID-19 pandemic.

# Loss, Substances Use, and Violence

Substance use and intimate partner violence are often entwined with many different experiences of loss and grief. Sometimes a major loss in our lives may lead us to use substances such as tobacco and alcohol in unhealthy ways because the grief feels so painful. We may seek to cope, soothe ourselves, or numb the pain.

Often the misuse of substances can lead to further losses – of jobs, friendships, partners, financial stability, children, and housing. We might get caught in a “loss-addiction cycle” – loss drives addiction, the addiction creates more loss, and the cycle continues.

The experience of a violent relationship can also involve many losses. Many women find that an abusive partner will restrict their access to family, friends, community, employment, and other activities – leading to further loss – of autonomy, self-worth, confidence, safety, financial security, freedom, and even hope.

Loss, in turn, can trigger strong emotions that fuel conflict and violence. Even the ending of a violent relationship can involve feelings of loss.

We live in a culture that does not offer much support for the grief that results. The grief can feel overwhelming like it will swallow us up. Often, we try to hold grief at a distance, to avoid drowning in it. Sometimes we revert to a childlike state – ashamed, panicked, hopeless, lonely.

If we are unable to deal with our grief, it can also express itself as physical symptoms, such as depression and anxiety.



# Reflection Exercise

- What roles have alcohol and/or tobacco played after losing someone or something? (*A relationship, a job, an identity, a home etc.*) When?
- How has substance use contributed to losses in your life? (*People, relationships, jobs, communities, homes, money, investments, parts of yourself?*)
- Has loss or grief been related to intimate partner violence in your life?



# Finding Meaning

“  
If grief can be a doorway to love, then let us all weep for the world we are breaking apart  
so we can love it back to wholeness again.  
—Robin Wall Kimmerer

Grief is a complicated, messy process. In their book *On Grief and Grieving*, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler described five key stages to grief.

David Kessler later added a sixth in his book *Finding Meaning* - the stage of meaning. These stages can happen in any order:

- **Denial:** *It's not that big a deal. I'm better off without him. I'm doing ok.*
- **Anger:** *I hate him for leaving me. Life's not fair.*
- **Bargaining:** *If I sort myself out, he will come back.*
- **Depression:** *I can't be bothered to eat. I don't want to get out of bed.*
- **Acceptance:** *He's dead. I will never see him again. I'm devastated.*
- **Meaning:** *I'm so grateful for the time we had together, and how he taught me about nature and gardening. I'm going to plant an apple tree to remind me of him.*

The process of finding meaning can be slow and very personal. It might involve finding ways to commemorate a loss, or making changes in your life to honour what is gone. It might mean finding gratitude for what was lost, or gratitude for what you still have.

For women recovering from substance use and intimate partner violence, this process might even involve welcoming back lost parts of yourself that had been erased, such as – feelings of confidence, self-worth, and freedom.

Sometimes, grief brings the gift of stripping us of all ego and artifice, revealing to us what is most authentic about ourselves.

Sometimes in our sorrow, we find it easier to develop intimate connections with others. Sometimes, loss and grief can spur us to change things, and take action with other like-minded women.

Sometimes grief can bring us deep gratitude for the beauty and preciousness of life.

# Finding Meaning Reflection Exercise

- Have any of the losses in your life brought you gifts in your life or gratitude? What are they? (E.g. a deepened relationship with someone, gratitude to be alive, a new set of friends, etc.)
- Are there losses you have not yet accepted, or have not yet made meaning out of?
- Think of an individual action you could take this week to begin to honour and make meaning from this loss. (E.g. write in your journal, watch a significant movie, talk to a friend or a counsellor about the loss.)
- Think of actions you could take with others to deal with the loss (E.g. to change a law, or a situation, or an injustice).



# Practicing Gratitude

“ This is a wonderful day. I have never seen this one before.  
-Maya Angelou ”

Gratitude is an emotion. It is an emotion that, in the words of Brené Brown, “reflects our deep appreciation for what we value, what brings meaning to our lives, and what makes us feel connected to ourselves and others.”

Gratitude makes us feel lighter and happier, more connected, and more alive. It is good for our health too. Research shows that gratitude lowers blood pressure, and risks of heart attacks, and boosts the immune system.

Gratitude can also be a huge challenge when we are struggling. Of course, there are times when gratitude feels impossible – if we are living with the trauma of violence in our home, if we have just lost a loved one, or have had our children removed.

There may be little to be grateful for if we are living with stress, homelessness, poverty, hunger, illness, or abuse.

Sometimes it is hard to feel grateful even when we are healthy, employed, housed, and fed. Perhaps you are grinding away in a job in which you are belittled. Maybe your ex-partner sends you threatening text messages daily. Maybe your teenager is skipping school and lying to you. Maybe you are deeply exhausted from night shifts and disconnected from your friends.

However, even in the most difficult circumstances, you might find that there is something small to be grateful for. Perhaps it is:

- A neighbour who smiles at you.
- A glimpse of the sky.
- The song of a bird.
- A song on the radio that you love.
- An old memory.

Gratitude is cultivated through practice. As Brené Brown notes, it is “a way of doing, trying, failing, and trying again.”

# Gratitude Reflection Exercise

- What can you find to be grateful for, right here and now? It can be a small thing.
- Try this exercise once a day for a week. Try to find three things you are grateful for each time (people, moments, experiences, sensations, feelings....).
- Try the gratitude walk and gratitude journal exercises below.



# Take a Gratitude Walk

*Time required: 20 minutes daily for at least one week.*

Set aside 20 minutes to take a walk outside by yourself every day for a week. This might be on your way to work or to buy groceries, or on a lunch break. It might be with your children.

As you walk, try to notice as many positive things around you as you can. These can be sights, sounds, smells, or other sensations.

For example, you could focus on the breathtaking height of a tree you never really noticed before, the intricate architecture of a building on your block, the dance of sunshine off a window or puddle, the smell of grass or flowers, or the way other people look out for each other as they navigate crowded streets.

As you notice each of these positive things, acknowledge each one in your mind – don't just let them slip past you. Pause for a moment as you hear or see each thing and really take it in.

Try to identify what makes it pleasurable to you. Let the sensations around you conjure up feelings of gratitude for the gift of life and living that they represent.

Explore ways that you can respond in gratitude, perhaps with a silent positive thought directed at whom and what you see.

Try to walk a different route each day so you can find different things that are pleasurable to you.

Adapted from the Greater Good Science Center website Greater Good in Action. Practice originally created by Fred Bryant, Ph.D., of Loyola University Chicago. [https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Gratitude\\_as\\_Medicine\\_Survival\\_Kit.pdf](https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Gratitude_as_Medicine_Survival_Kit.pdf).

# Write a Gratitude Journal

*Spend 10 to 30 minutes a day writing a gratitude journal. If it feels challenging, try these prompts:*

1. What is your favourite song and why?
2. What have others done in your life that you're grateful for?
3. Who really listens when you talk, and how does that affect you?
4. What's the best thing about your living situation, that you are grateful for?
5. Name a book that you loved reading and why.
6. What's a hard lesson that you were grateful to learn?
7. What's an aspect of your physical health that you feel grateful for?
8. What skill are you grateful for and why?
9. What's an aspect of how you were parented for which you feel grateful?

# Finding Joy

*There is a wild woman under our skin who wants nothing more than to dance until her feet are sore, sing her beautiful grief into the rafters, and offer the bottomless cup of her creativity as a way of life.*

-Toko-pa Turner



Joy might not spring to mind as a difficult emotion, like anger, or shame, or grief. And yet joy can be hard to access for many women.

Those of us who are dealing with substance use, loss, poverty, stigma, racism, unemployment, illness, and/or violence in our lives can find it especially hard. Often it feels like there is nothing to be joyful about.

Or maybe you associate laughing and being joyful with partying, and partying with drinking and smoking. Or maybe your partner doesn't like it when you are happy, so you try not to be.

Joy can be frightening too. "When we lose our tolerance for vulnerability," writes Brené Brown, "joy becomes foreboding..." and "...we believe if we allow ourselves to feel joy, we are inviting disaster."

We spend our days preparing for the worst. We prepare for tragedy and invite drama. We push away happiness and don't allow ourselves to smile. Laughing feels somehow wrong.

And yet, in truth, laughter is exceptionally good for our physical and mental health. The good news is that practicing gratitude expands our capacity for joy.

And, while singing and dancing in ecstasy might be amazing, joy is more often found in ordinary places. Holding hands with someone you love. Watching a child or a puppy play. Walking in the sunshine. Laughing at a joke.



# Finding Joy Reflection Exercise

- Think of a moment today, or in the last week, when something or someone brought a smile to your face. What was it?
- List five “little things” that often spark joy for you.
- List three people, who have made you laugh in the past.
- Commit to one action that will bring more joy into your life over the next week. (*This could be as simple as doing something for someone else, smiling at a stranger, dancing in your living room, or calling a friend.*)





# Recovering from IPV and Substance Use: Addressing Shame

Shame is often a central feeling for women, as a result of our socialization, and the many messages of shame we receive throughout our lives. Moving forward from problematic substance use and experiences of intimate partner violence can bring this feeling back.

Several of the *16 Steps for Discovery and Empowerment* statements, created by Dr Charlotte Kasl, are designed to support women who have experienced trauma, violence, and substance use problems, in thinking about shame and empowerment.

Here are eight of the 16 Statements that are relevant to addressing shame.

- We share with another person and the Universe all those things inside us for which we feel shame and guilt.
- We affirm and enjoy our strengths, talents, and creativity, striving not to hide these qualities to protect others' egos.
- We become willing to let go of shame, guilt, and any behavior that keeps us from loving ourselves and others.
- We continue to trust our reality and daily affirm that we see what we see, we know what we know, and we feel what we feel.
- We promptly acknowledge our mistakes and make amends when appropriate, but we do not say we are sorry for things we have not done and we do not cover up, analyze, or take responsibility for the shortcomings of others.
- We seek out situations, jobs, and people that affirm our intelligence, perceptions, and self-worth and avoid situations or people who are hurtful, harmful, or demeaning to us.
- We take steps to heal our physical bodies, organize our lives, reduce stress, and have fun.
- We accept the ups and downs of life as natural events that can be used as lessons for our growth.

Source: Kasl, Charlotte Davis. (1992). *Many Roads One Journey: Moving Beyond the 12 Steps*. New York. HarperCollins Publishers.

# Further Practice & Resources to Explore

## Audio

- [Soften, Soothe, Allow](#) meditation with Chris Germer on YouTube
- [Soften, Soothe, Allow](#) meditation with Kristin Neff  
<https://self-compassion.org/wp-test/wp-content/uploads/soften,soothe,allow.MP3>

## Video

- Watch [What is Emotional Sobriety?](#) with Veronica Valli. SHE RECOVERS Foundation Mental Health Mondays educational series.
- Watch [Leaning into Grief as Self Care](#) with Dr. Mekel Harris. SHE RECOVERS Foundation Mental Health Mondays educational series.
- Watch [Grief is Love](#) with Marisa Renee Lee. SHE RECOVERS Foundation Mental Health Mondays educational series.
- Watch [The Four Steps of Shame Resilience](#) with Andrea Owen. SHE RECOVERS Foundation Mental Health Mondays educational series.
- Watch [Dr. Kristin Neff on Anger](#) with Dr. Diana Hill on YouTube.

# Notes

*This notes section is for you to record your thoughts as you participate in the Strong Women social support group and use the workbook. The notes section and questions will be repeated at the end of each chapter of the workbook, so you can continue to reflect as you continue to participate.*

*These notes may also be helpful if you want to share your reflections when you will be invited to the focus group at the end of the Strong Women pilot.*

Overall, how would you describe your experience being in the Strong Women group and using the workbook so far?

What has been your favourite part so far?

What have you learned so far?

Is there anything you have learned that you have found helpful to act on in your life?

# Notes

When did you feel most engaged in the group this week? Why?

When did you feel least engaged? Why?

Which activities in this workbook chapter did you find most helpful? Why?

What would you like more of in the workbook? Less of?

What have you learned from, and with, other women in the Strong Women group so far?

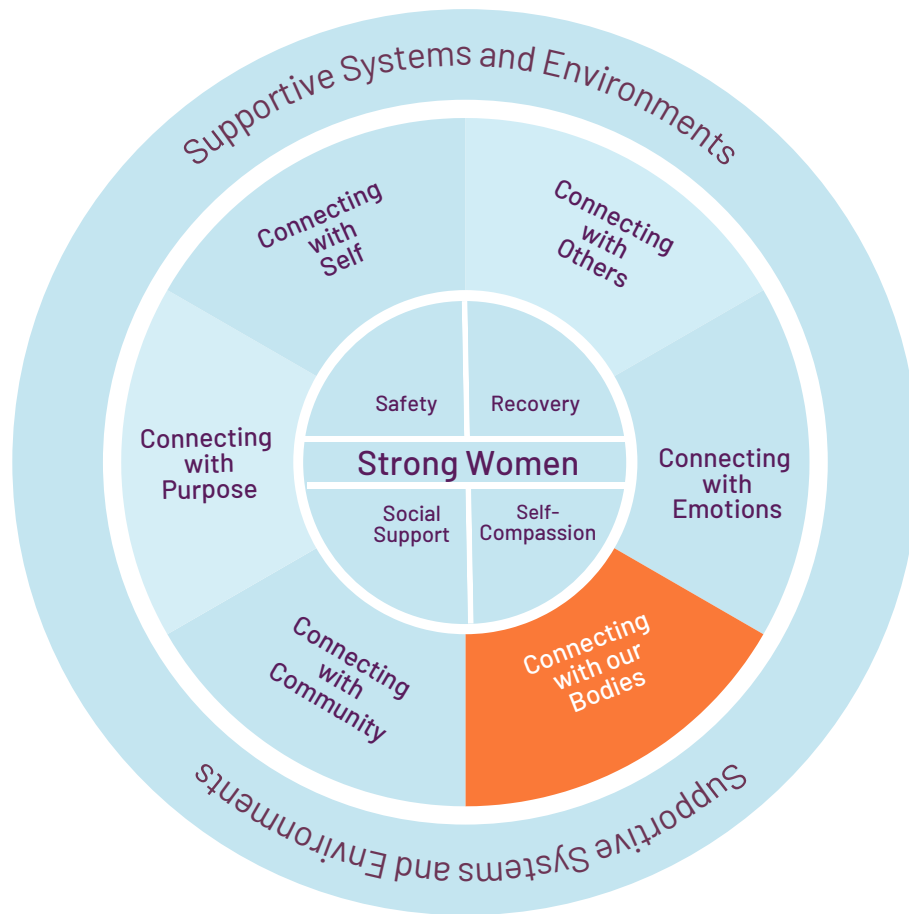
Additional Reflections

# Notes

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# Chapter 4



In this chapter, you will:

1. Explore the impact of trauma, substance use, and violence on the body.
2. Expand practices for honouring and caring for the body.
3. Practice self-compassion.



Strong Women

# Our Bodies

*No matter how much trauma or addiction you've had, you can learn to live in harmony with your body.*

-Lisa M. Najavits



Chapter Song: Scars to Your Beautiful by Alessia Cara



Women's bodies are magnificent. Every move we make, every word we speak, every mouthful of food we eat and digest, every breath we take, is the result of an incredible choreography of interconnected cells, systems, and organs.

Our bodies can grow and birth and nurse babies. Our bodies can offer rich sensory pleasures.

Our bodies are also a source of, and repository for, pain. We get sick, live with chronic illness and/or disabilities. And sometimes our body is the place where negative thoughts, anxieties, past traumas, substance misuse, violence, and assault play out.

As women, our bodies can often feel like they are not our own. Throughout history and across the globe, women's bodies continue to be both idolized and violated by men, religious and cultural practices, and societal pressures and trends that idealize female beauty myths.

Often, what women have been allowed to do with our bodies has been dictated by men, including what we wear and what we eat, whether we can get abortions, how we give birth or modify our bodies.

Many of us internalize these pressures from outside, engaging in self-harming behaviours – including misusing substances like alcohol and tobacco, or disordered eating.

And yet whatever your relationship with your body has been in the past, whatever struggles and pain your body may carry, every day carries new possibilities. Over time, women have collectively challenged these pressures of patriarchy, and reclaimed, or are reclaiming, body image, reproduction, health care, representation in movies and ads, and fashion.

When we connect with others, we can change our collective autonomy.



# Body Relationships

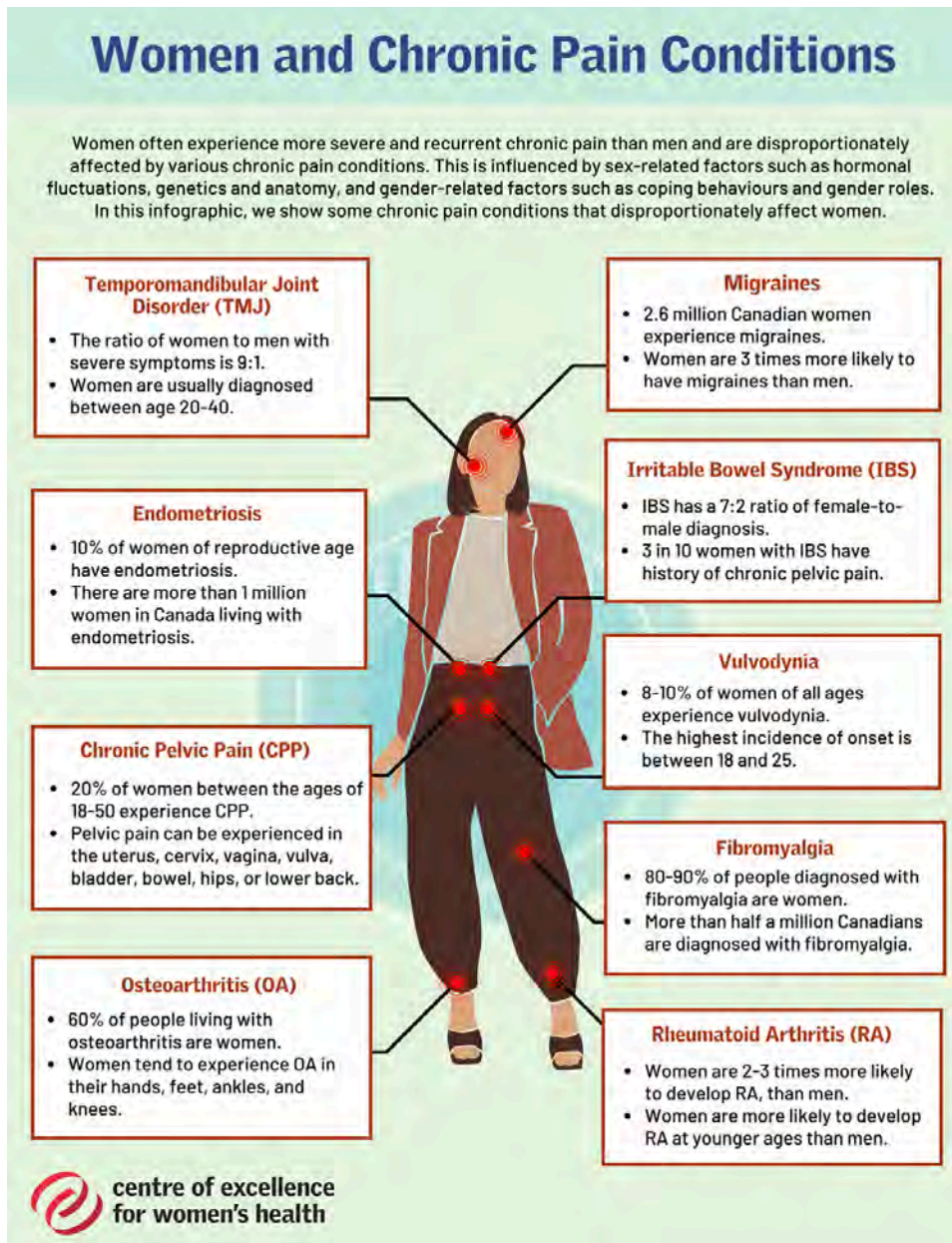
How do you relate to your body? What has this relationship been like in the past? How would you like your relationship with your body to be in the future?

The following questions may help you think about your relationship to your body and your health and wellness.

|    | Questions   | Yes | No |
|----|---|-----|----|
| 1  | Are you aware of your body, its changes, sensations . . .?  |     |    |
| 2  | Do you tend to ignore body pain or injuries?  |     |    |
| 3  | Do you have a lot of stress in your life?   |     |    |
| 4  | Do you have chronic medical conditions (chronic pain, traumatic brain injury, diabetes . . . )?                             |     |    |
| 5  | Are you taking good care of your body?  |     |    |
| 6  | Are you getting medical care for any health conditions?   |     |    |
| 7  | Are you doing health promoting activities other than accessing medical care (meditation, exercise, walks in nature . . . )? |     |    |
| 8  | Are you getting ongoing support for substance use concerns (from peers, counsellors, medical practitioners . . . )?         |     |    |
| 9  | Are you responsible for taking care of others?  |     |    |
| 10 | Are you getting enough sleep?   |     |    |
| 11 | Do you feel comfortable being touched by someone you like?  |     |    |
| 12 | Do you appreciate your body - imperfections and all?  |     |    |

# Body Relationships

Nearly 8 million people in Canada live with chronic pain. Women, people who have experienced trauma or violence, and people living with mental health and substance use disorders are more likely to experience chronic pain.



# Listening to Our Bodies

We will talk more about trauma and the body below. While your relationship with your body might be suffering from the impacts of trauma, illness, injury, addiction, chronic pain, and/or mental health conditions, you can always improve your relationship with your body. This is a gentle process and you can start right now.

One way to begin, is to start by listening carefully. What is your body saying? What is your body needing?

If you can, close your eyes right now and take a few slow deep breaths, in through your nose and out through your mouth. As you breathe in, focus your attention on a different part of your body, beginning with the crown of your head and working down.

Is there any pain in this body part? Any tension? How does it feel to breathe slowly into it? Do any memories or emotions arise as you focus on this area? Does it feel nurtured, nourished and rested? Or in need of some love and attention?

Every day, try to spend some time mindfully listening to your body. You can still do this if you lead a very busy life – you can listen to your body while walking the dog, cooking dinner, taking a shower, or lying in bed before sleep.



# Listening Exercise

- Take a mindful shower — close your eyes and feel the water fall on your head, your shoulders, your back. Listen to how your body responds to the temperature and the texture of water.
  - Are there parts of your body that ache or cry for attention? What do they need? A medical checkup? A walk? More sleep, more stretching, or a little sunshine?
- Eat a mindful meal or snack. Take a piece of food in your fingers gently and focus on how it feels. Is it smooth, rough, bumpy, slimy, soft? Then lift the piece of food to your nose — how does it smell? Take a few breaths to savour the scent. Then place the food on your tongue and let it rest there for a few seconds before chewing.
  - Savour the taste of this food and listen to all the signals your body is giving about the nutrition it needs and the sensory pleasures of eating.



# How Alcohol and Tobacco Affect Women's Bodies

## Alcohol

- Women get drunk faster. This is because our bodies have less water and more fat, and less ability to break down alcohol in the stomach.
- Women can become dependent after a shorter period of use, and on lower amounts of alcohol compared to men. This is called 'telescoping.'
- Women process alcohol more slowly and have a higher risk of liver problems compared to males.
- Memory is more negatively affected by heavy alcohol use in women than in men.
- Women and girls are more likely to use alcohol to cope with depression.

## Nicotine and Tobacco

- Girls and women have smaller lungs and smaller airways, so vaping or smoking does more damage.
- Quitting nicotine is harder for women and success at quitting is affected by the menstrual cycle.
- Girls and women smoke to control negative moods and emotions more often than men and boys.
- Women are more likely to be afraid to quit because they think it will make them gain weight, compared to men.

### Women and Alcohol

**Alcohol**

- Alcohol is widely used in Canada, and is deeply embedded into our society.
- Although alcoholic drinks come in various forms (e.g., in beer, wine, rum, cocktails), they all contain ethanol, thus the health effects and risks are the same regardless of the type of alcoholic drink consumed.
- Alcohol is a "depressant" drug that slows down parts of your brain that affect your thinking and behaviour as well as your breathing and heart rate.
- Many people drink alcohol for relaxing tension and making them feel more at ease or outgoing.
- Drinking alcohol can also make you feel "drunk" or intoxicated. Signs of being drunk include flushed skin, impaired judgment, reduced inhibition, reduced muscle control, slowed reflexes, problems walking, slurred speech, and double or blurred vision.
- Signs of being heavily intoxicated include difficulty standing, throwing up, blacking out, and having no memory of what you said or did while drinking. Heavy drinking can lead to coma and death.
- Drinking can sometimes result in a "hangover" about eight to ten hours after your last drink. Symptoms can include headache, nausea, dizziness, dehydration, shakiness, and vomiting.
- It is possible to develop a physical and psychological dependence (addiction) on alcohol.

**Alcohol and Your Health**

- Alcohol affects people differently. The way alcohol affects you depends on many factors, including:
  - Your sex, age, body weight and size, organ function and metabolism
  - Your sensitivity to alcohol
  - The type and amount of food in your stomach
  - How much and how often you drink
  - How long you've been drinking
  - Who you are with, where you are, and what you are doing
  - How you expect the alcohol to make you feel
  - Whether you've taken any other substances (e.g., cannabis, prescribed drugs, illicit substances, etc.)
  - Your family history
- There are risks of alcohol use for everyone but alcohol affects females more negatively than males. Women experience more negative health effects earlier, after drinking lesser amounts of alcohol.
- Factors such as body size, hormonal effects and enzymes that break down alcohol result in higher blood alcohol levels and faster intoxication for women. Similar factors raise the risk of alcohol-related diseases.
- Many serious illnesses and chronic health conditions are linked to drinking, even at low levels:
  - Alcohol can cause several types of cancer, such as breast, colon, mouth and throat, larynx, esophagus, liver, and rectum.
  - Drinking alcohol can also increase your risk of stroke and heart disease.
- Drinking is related to numerous other serious health conditions (e.g., diabetes, hypertension, epilepsy, stroke, pneumonia, dysfibrinosis and liver disease and cirrhosis).
- Women experience more liver injury from lower levels of alcohol, compared to men.

**Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health**

The Guidance acknowledges that deciding to drink is a personal choice and that there is a continuum of risk associated with weekly alcohol use. The Guidance can help women think about their drinking and reduce immediate and long-term alcohol-related harms.

Some key points from the Guidance include:

- Your risk of developing several types of cancer, including breast and colon cancer, increases at 3-6 standard drinks per week.
- There are benefits to your health and wellbeing if you do not drink at all.
- When pregnant or trying to get pregnant, there is no known safe amount of alcohol use.
- No matter where you are on the continuum of risk, any reduction in alcohol use is beneficial to your health.

**Standard Drink Equivalents:**

- Beer (5% alcohol content): 125 mL (4.2 oz)
- Wine (12% alcohol content): 150 mL (5.1 oz)
- Spirits (40% alcohol content): 40 mL (1.4 oz)

### Women, Nicotine & Tobacco

**Tobacco and Nicotine**

There are many types of tobacco. Cultivated tobacco is used to make commercial cigarettes, cigars, and bidis. In some Indigenous cultures, traditional and sacred uses of tobacco include ceremony, ritual, gifting, and prayer.

Tobacco contains nicotine, a highly addictive stimulant that produces a feeling of well-being. Other ways to ingest nicotine include waterpipes or hookahs, smokeless forms of tobacco such as snuff, chewing tobacco, and snus, and vaping. Nicotine dependence makes it difficult to quit smoking or vaping.

Cigarettes and cigars contain over 7,000 toxic chemicals, including over 70 carcinogens that harm nearly every organ in the human body. More than 40 debilitating and fatal diseases are linked to tobacco use. Tobacco use is the leading cause of preventable disease and death. It is estimated that 1 in 2 smokers will die from smoking-related causes. The risks of premature death and disease increase with the number of cigarettes smoked, but even low levels of consumption can cause significant harm.

Second-hand smoke (SHS) from the burning end of a cigarette and the smoke that smokers breathe out, is also harmful. All of those who breathe it in absorb the same toxins and are at risk for serious health consequences.

**Vaping**

Electronic cigarettes, or vapes, are devices that heat up liquids containing nicotine, producing a vapour to inhale. The long-term impacts of vaping are unknown. The effects of vaping depend on the type of device and liquid used, the temperature setting, and vaping patterns. Vaping nicotine during pregnancy may affect fetal development, including premature birth and having a low birth weight. It may also affect your infant's lung health. The health risks of exposure to second-hand vapour are not yet fully known. It is best to avoid vaping in enclosed spaces. Vaping in areas where smoking is prohibited is illegal in many provinces and municipalities.

Vaping nicotine is currently considered less harmful than cigarettes and is suggested as harm reduction for those trying to quit cigarettes, together with behavioural approaches.

Over use of cigarettes and vapes is harmful and should be avoided. It is best to switch completely from smoking to vaping only.

For those who vape, it is best to stop or switch to safer alternatives such as Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT).

**Tobacco and Your Health**

Tobacco use has a wide range of adverse health effects—some more pronounced for women, such as heart and lung disease.

- Women who smoke are at increased risk for both stroke and cardiovascular disease, including high blood pressure and heart attacks.
- Smoking can lead to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) such as emphysema, bronchitis, and asthmatic bronchitis. Women who smoke are more likely to get COPD than male smokers and to develop COPD at a younger age.
- Women who smoke are at risk of breast cancer at an earlier age and of developing cervical and vulvar cancer. Other cancers linked to smoking include mouth, throat, lungs, pancreas, bladder, liver, and kidney cancer.
- Women who smoke experience higher rates of osteoporosis.
- Women who smoke and use oral contraceptives (birth control pills) are at a much higher risk of heart attack, stroke, or blood clots.
- Tobacco use can affect your period. Women who smoke are more likely to experience irregular and shorter menstrual cycles and earlier menopause, as well as premenstrual disorders and more painful menstrual cramps, compared to non-smokers.
- Tobacco use can reduce fertility and ability to conceive. Smoking also permanently affects egg quality.

Source: <https://cewh.ca>



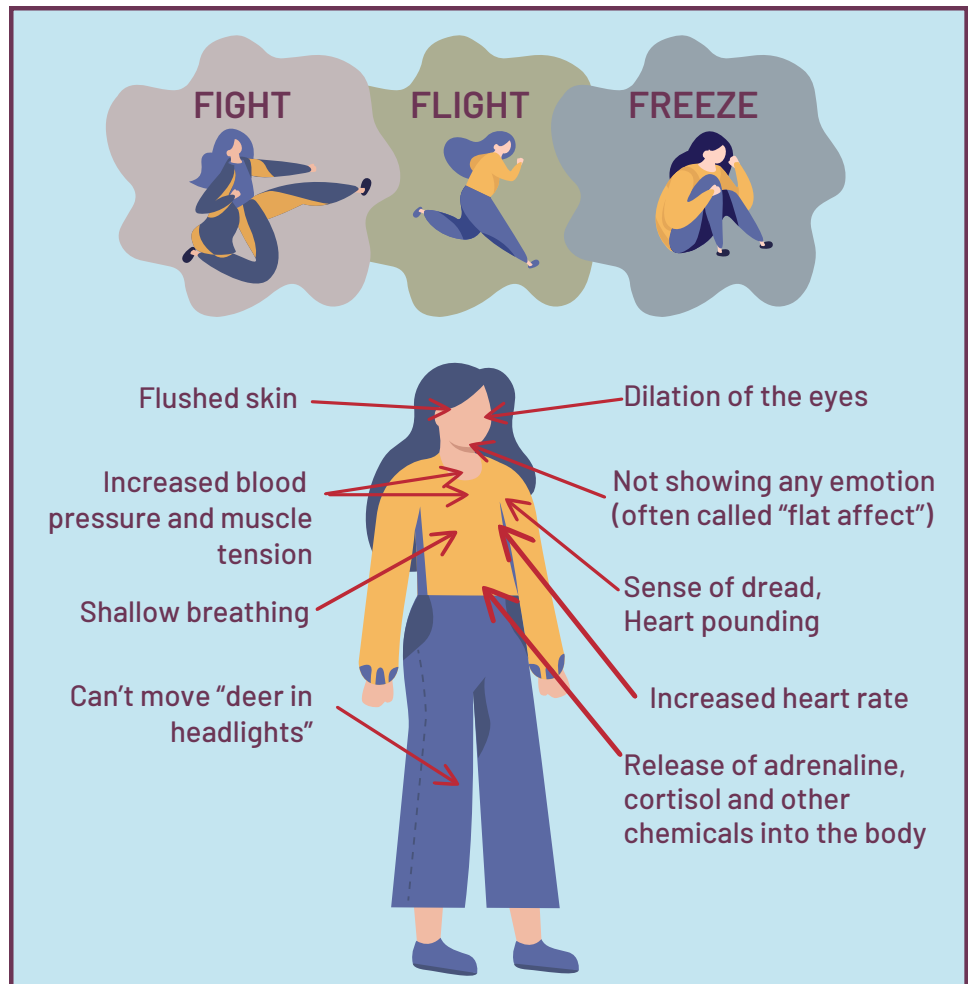
# Trauma and The Body

Most women with experiences of substance misuse and intimate partner violence have noticed how trauma affects the body, as well as the mind, relationships, and spirit.

The word trauma comes from the Greek word for wound. Trauma is a normal reaction to harmful or overwhelming events. This can include trauma early in life (including child abuse, neglect, and witnessing violence) as well as accidents, natural disaster, or sudden unexpected loss later in life.

For many Indigenous people, experiences of trauma and violence can be directly or indirectly linked to colonization, including interactions with child welfare, family involvement with residential schools, and intergenerational trauma related to loss of land, language, and identity.

Trauma impacts many areas of our lives, including our physical and mental health, relationships, ability to learn and make decisions, and sense of safety and trust.



In the moment, trauma can show up in our bodies as a fight, flight, or freeze response. This is an autonomic response where our body reacts for survival, putting our thinking brain on pause.

# Trauma and The Body

Our bodies respond this way when we perceive threats to our safety, feel stuck or trapped, are being harmed, ignored, treated unfairly, or are reminded of previous harm.

There are several things we can do – to calm and ground ourselves, or to come back into our bodies – when our bodies respond this way.

## Fight or Flight Response

- Feel anxious or overwhelmed
- Feel angry, and want to yell or fight
- Have thoughts that we can't "turn off"
- Have a hard time concentrating
- Have trouble finding the right words
- Be over-reactive to what is happening

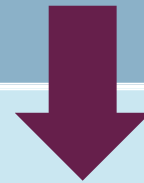


### What Helps?

- Move our body to let out excess energy
- Go for a walk/run
- Do push-ups against a wall
- Dance or shake it out
- Squeeze a stress ball
- Take deep breaths, focusing on long exhale
- Name our fears, concerns, and frustrations
- Remove ourselves from the situation

## Freeze Response

- Feel zoned-out, or numb
- Feel unmotivated
- Have a hard time remembering things
- Seem emotionless
- Feel disconnected from ourselves



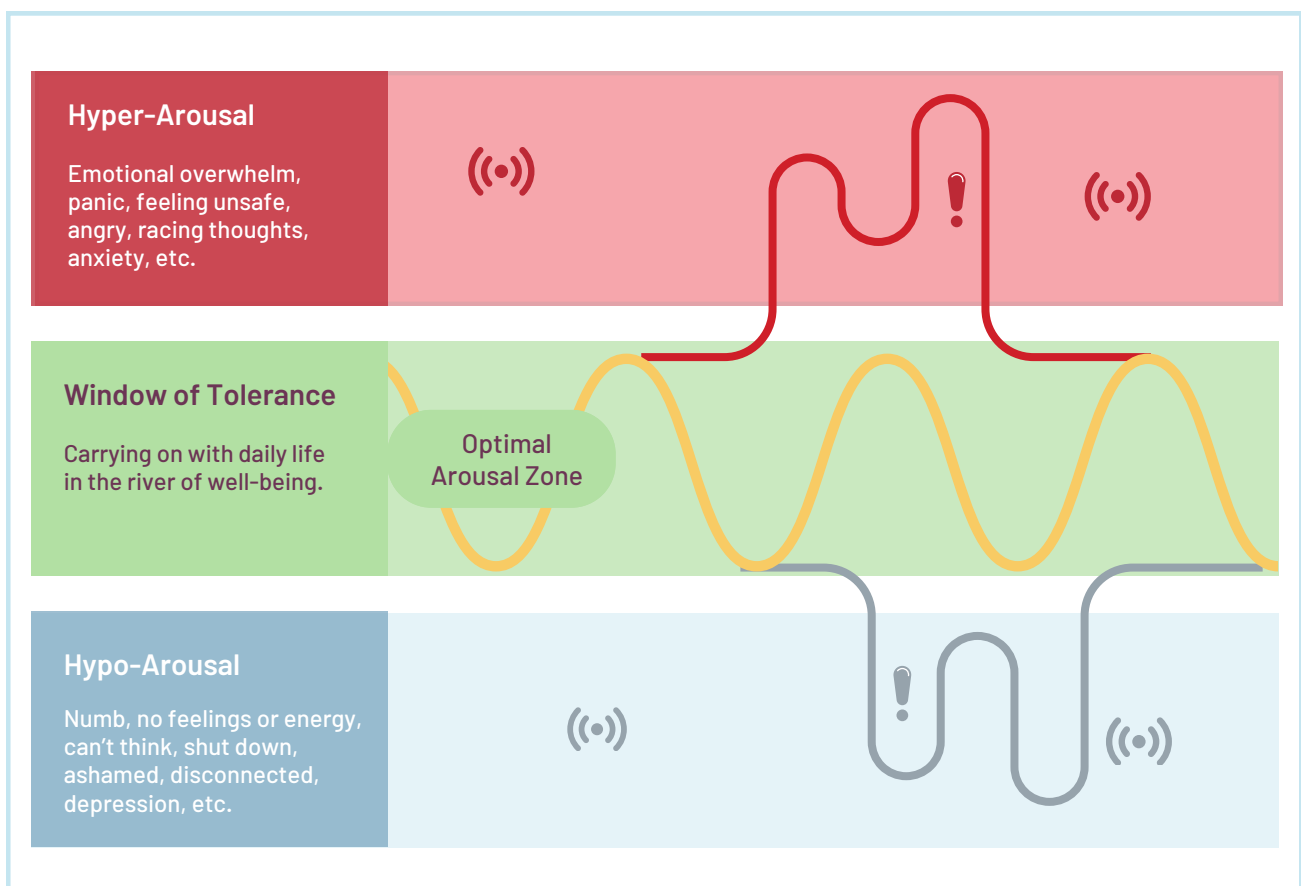
### What Helps?

- Press our hands on to our arms, legs, hands
- Push our feet into the ground, wiggle toes
- Count to 10 and then back down again
- Describe the things you can see around you
- Drink a cool glass of water
- Stretch our arms out and up
- Take deep breaths, focusing on long exhale
- Colour/paint a picture
- Smell pleasing smells (essential oils, or spices like cinnamon)

# Trauma and The Body

Dr. Dan Siegel helped us see the fight/flight and freeze responses as common. We have an optimal zone of arousal, a “window of tolerance,” where we can effectively manage our emotions. When we have experiences of trauma, we can find it hard to regulate our emotion, to stay grounded, and instead react to stress with “hyper” or “hypo” arousal responses.

Learn more at: <https://drdansiegel.com>.



Short bursts of physical activity, grounding activities, meditation, visualization, and mindful self-compassion activities are the best ways to return to the window of tolerance for most women.



# Thanking Our Bodies

In-between the aches and pains, the cravings and emotional overwhelm, the bruises and the fractures, our bodies continue to offer us all so many gifts.

Minute by minute, day by day, we breathe, our hearts pump blood around our bodies, we move our limbs, we speak and listen and read, we taste and digest food, we smell and touch and feel.

Just take a minute now to become aware of your body and each of your senses. What can you see? What can you smell, taste, touch, and hear, right here and now? What beautiful sights, tender moments, or interesting places has your body given you access to in the last week?

These don't have to be glamorous. You don't have to have climbed Mount Everest or had dinner in Vegas. It could be that your legs helped you walk to the corner of the street for a delicious slice of pizza, or your arms held your sweet grandchild.

Maybe your fingers knitted a scarf or finished some beadwork, or your eyes read an email from a good friend. Perhaps your mind helped you find your way out of a sticky situation.

Practicing gratitude towards our bodies helps us to connect with them, to be in good relationship with them, and to heal.

## Reflection Exercises

- Make a list of five things you are grateful to your body for.
- Write a letter to your body, or to a part of your body. Offer thanks for all the gifts your body has given you throughout your life.



# Self-Compassion and the Body

Self-compassion is an effective way to counteract the fight/flight/freeze human threat responses.

As mammals, we have a system that when activated releases oxytocin (the love hormone) and endorphins (feel-good opiates) into our bodies, reducing stress and increasing our feelings of safety. Soothing touch and gentle sounds help to activate this care system. So does compassion.

In her book, *Fierce Self Compassion*, Kristin Neff writes that, “when people are compassionate towards themselves after experiencing a trauma, they’re less likely to develop PTSD, enabling them to remain on stable footing.”

When we criticize ourselves, this also triggers the fight/flight/freeze threat responses. The three components of self-compassion – self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness – work to calm our systems in response.

| Stress Response | Stress Response Turned Inward | Self-Compassion |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| Fight           | Self-Criticism                | Self-Kindness   |
| Flight          | Isolation                     | Common Humanity |
| Freeze          | Rumination                    | Mindfulness     |

Self-compassion also works to combat the effects of intimate partner violence. Kristin Neff describes a research study with women in a domestic violence shelter who met for six weeks in a self-compassion support group:

“After the training, the women felt more empowered (in particular, more comfortable confronting others), more positive and confident, and more emotionally and physically safe.”

See more at [self-compassion.org](http://self-compassion.org)

# 25 Soothing and Grounding Exercises

1. Drink 3 glasses of water, slowly.
2. Use strong sensory input to quickly ground. Place your hands in a bowl full of ice and water. Suck on an ice cube.
3. Peel an orange or a lemon; notice the smell; take a bite.
4. Change your environment. Get outside. Go for a walk.
5. Breathe slowly, consciously, in part awareness: breathe in for a count of two; hold for a count of two, breathe out for a count of two, hold out for a count of two.
6. Spend time with a pet.
7. Take an unhurried shower or a bath. Sense a full connection with the water.
8. Play your favourite upbeat song and sing along.
9. Move around. Feel your body. Experience a full stretch of your arms, hands, fingers.
10. Splash water on your face.
11. Hug a tree.
12. Describe what is around you in the smallest detail.
13. Picture your calm place. Look at an actual picture of a vacation spot, child, or pet. Carry this picture with you.
14. Carry a grounding object in your pocket. Touch it for grounding.
15. Walk very slowly, noticing the sensations as your heel lifts, your weight shifts through the arch and into your toes, the foot lifts. Marvel at the body's precision.
16. Buy one beautiful flower.
17. Light a candle and study the flame. Notice the darker inner flame.
18. Feel the aliveness of green grass on bare feet.
19. Name your 3 favourite colours, foods, animals, etc.
20. Really listen to nature's sounds: waves, wind, birds, rain.
21. Boil cinnamon in water. Enjoy the fragrance. Google the exotic history of cinnamon.
22. Sample flavours in an ice cream store.
23. Suck on a piece of your favourite hard candy.
24. Really taste the food you eat; chew slowly and mindfully.
25. Develop an inner smile.

Source: Trauma Informed Practice Guide [https://cewh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2013\\_TIP-Guide.pdf](https://cewh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2013_TIP-Guide.pdf)

## Self-Compassion Exercises

- Try the **Compassionate Body Scan audio meditation (24 mins)** from the Centre for Mindful Self Compassion.
- Try the **Soles of the Feet audio meditation (5 mins)** from Self-Compassion.org.

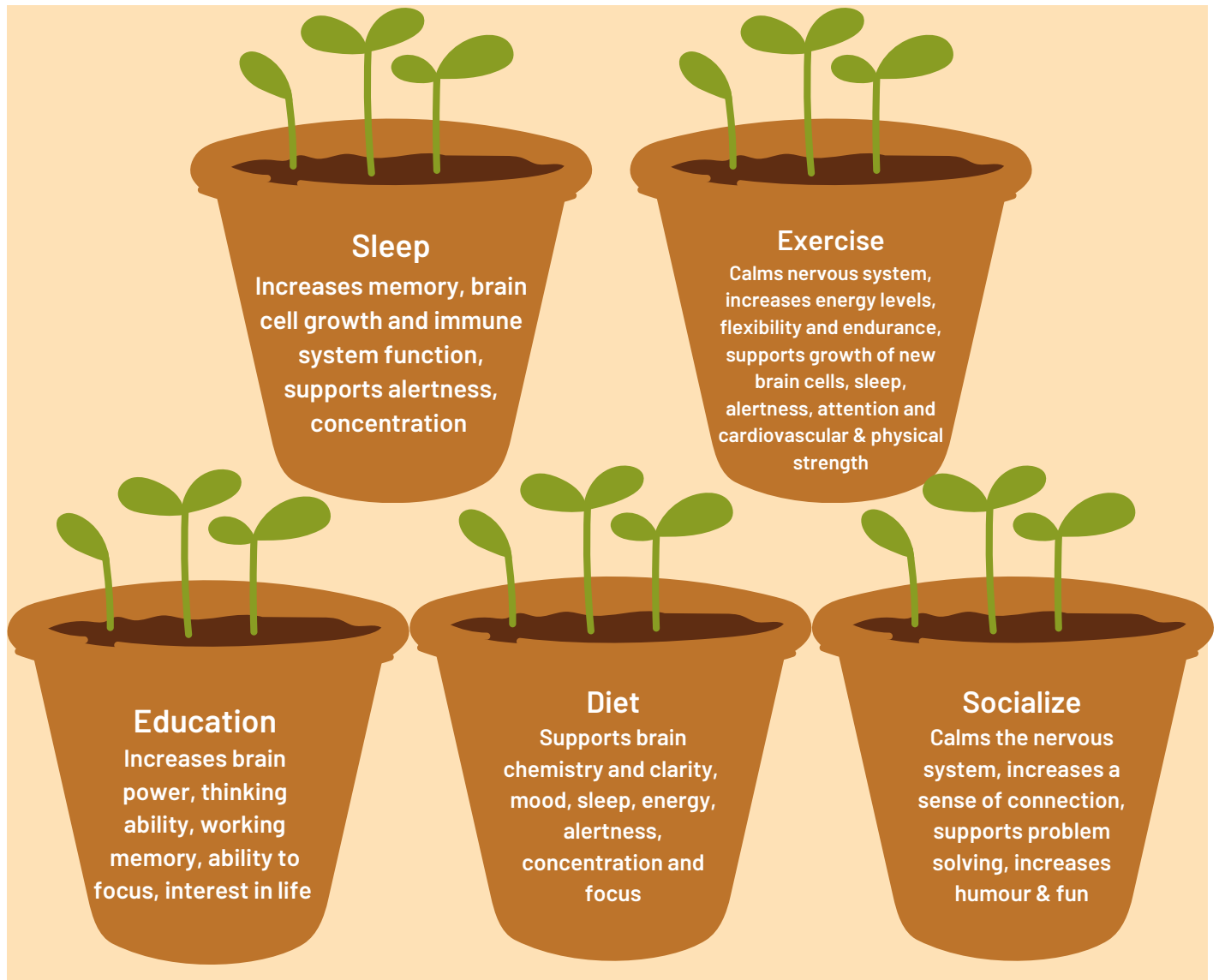
# Practical Body Care

Sometimes, as women, we can be so busy caring for children or elders, or struggling to make ends meet, that we don't manage the basics of taking good care of our bodies.

A central part of connecting with our bodies and taking good care of them is making sure that we get: good quality sleep, regular exercise, healthy nutrition, and regular medical checkups.

Our brains are part of our bodies too. Dr. John Arden, a neuropsychologist who wrote *Rewire Your Brain*, suggests nurturing five SEEDS (sleep, exercise, education, diet, and socialize) to help the body and brain heal from trauma: social connectivity, exercise, education, diet, and sleep.

Dr Arden also indicates how hormones such as oxytocin and cortisol, and neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine, are involved in the SEEDS areas, contributing to these effects.



# Sleep, Activity and Nutrition

Are you able to get regular deep sleep every night?

Sleep doesn't just make us feel less tired, it boosts our immune systems, and is important for the proper functioning of our brains, hearts, lungs, metabolism, and endocrine systems.

Sleep is a vital ingredient for good mental health. When we are well rested we are also more able to respond to stress, be with our emotions, and engage in healthy relationships.

Physical activity is very helpful for recovery from substance misuse, and for improving mental and physical wellness.

It helps to reduce stress, improve sleep and energy levels, boost your immune system, and prevent relapse.

After your body has felt the effects of substance use, intimate partner violence, and stress, it can take a while to feel these positive effects. You may feel really out-of-shape at the start.

Begin slowly. Even 30 minutes a week helps. Exercise can be as simple as taking a walk. Or you can try a new activity – from lifting weights, to doing yoga, to taking an aerobics class. It is good to have a plan for exercise, when you will do it each day, and what form it will take.

Are you managing to eat regularly, and well including some proteins, whole grains, and fresh fruits and vegetables?

Substance use, and stress from the experience of violence, can impact our health in many ways – including our access to healthy foods and capacity to consume and absorb the nutrients our bodies need.

The recommendations from the Canada Food Guide can be used as guidelines and inspiration for taking steps towards healthier nutrition that will strengthen your body and give you energy and boost your mood.

It is important to be gentle with yourself here too. Your diet does not need to be perfect, especially if you are struggling financially.

# Medical Care

As women, we often prioritize others' medical needs over our own.

Those of us with experiences of substance misuse and/or intimate partner violence may not have seen a doctor in a while.

Perhaps your partner has prevented you from accessing medical care. Perhaps you have been under too much stress to find the time for routine checkups. Perhaps you have felt shame, or stigma relating to substance use. Perhaps you have no family doctor and cannot afford the time waiting in walk-in clinics.

Every woman is deserving of medical care. Finding a way to have regular medical checkups – including Pap tests and mammograms – is another important step in connecting with our bodies and building a good relationship with them. It is never too late to begin.

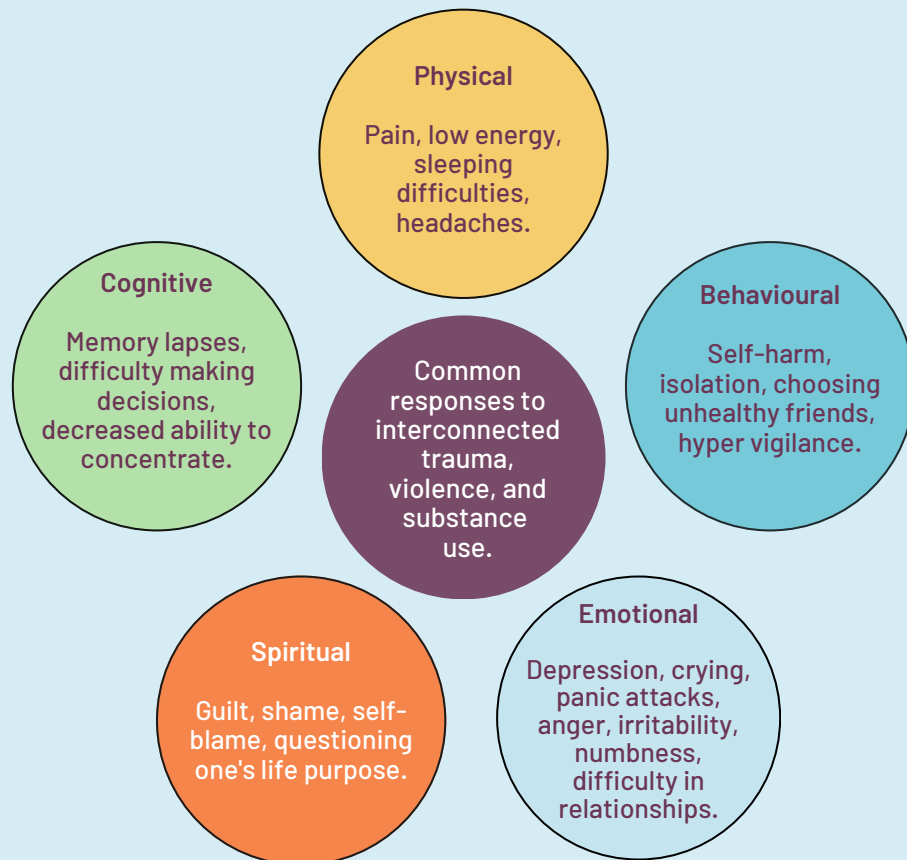
## Reflection Exercise

- Are there any medical appointments you need to make? Any irregularities or pains in your body that you should get checked out? Can you make a call to a health-care provider now, to set this in process?
- What thoughts do you have on the impact of alcohol and nicotine and experience of violence on women's bodies?



# Healing our Bodies from Trauma, Violence, and Substance Use

Trauma, violence, and substance use can affect our health in so many domains: physical, emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and spiritual. Taking care of our bodies is one direct way to support our healing, growth, and recovery.



## "I'm Beautiful Inside and Out"

Tips for connecting, respecting, and even loving your body adapted from [The US National Eating Disorders Association](#):

1. Your body is extraordinary—begin to respect and appreciate it.
2. Become aware of what your body can do each day.
3. Find a method of exercise that you enjoy and do it regularly. Don't exercise to lose weight or to fight your body. Do it to make your body healthy and strong and because it makes you feel good.
4. Wear comfortable clothes that you like, that express your personal style, and that feel good to your body.
5. Count your blessings, not your blemishes.
6. Be your body's friend and supporter, not its enemy.
7. Eat when you are hungry. Rest when you are tired. Surround yourself with people that remind you of your inner strength and beauty.

# Further Practice & Resources to Explore

## Women's Health

- *Our Bodies Ourselves: A Book By and For Women* was an accessible document about all aspects of women's health published in 1971 by the Boston Women's Health Collective. It became a key source of knowledge about women's bodies at a time when women's health had been largely ignored. Many updates have been made over the years and there is now a website dedicated to this info <https://www.ourbodiesourselves.org>.

## Indigenous Women's Health

- [Sacred and Strong – Upholding our Matriarchal Roles: The Health and Wellness Journeys of First Nations Women and Girls Living in BC](#) is a report about the health and wellness of First Nations women and girls living in BC. Grounded in First Nations perspectives of wellness, it contains data, stories, and teachings about the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health and well-being of First Nations women at every phase of life.

## Tobacco

- [Smokestack Sandra](#): This podcast tracks Sandra Teegee, Deputy Chief of Takla Lake First Nation, as she commits to quitting commercial tobacco.

## Alcohol

- [Ted Talk: Gray Area Drinking](#): Jolene Park explains “gray area drinking” —where there’s no rock bottom, but you drink to manage anxiety and then regret it. She explains how to nourish your body with nature, breath, touch, food, movement, stillness, and creativity – to boost your neurotransmitters (GABA, serotonin, and dopamine) naturally so you don’t need to use alcohol.

## Healthy Sleep

- [The Canadian Sleep Campaign](#) website offers a wealth of information about sleep.

## Nutrition

- [Canada's Food Guide](#) offers healthy eating recommendations and recipes.

## Trauma

- [What are the Effects of Trauma?](#) This poster shows some of the many effects of trauma.

## Yoga in Recovery

- This Creative Wellness Services [conversation with Taryn Strong](#) of the SHE RECOVERS Foundation explains the benefits of yoga for recovery.



# Notes

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*These notes may also be helpful if you want to share your reflections when you will be invited to the focus group at the end of the Strong Women pilot.*

Overall, how would you describe your experience being in the Strong Women group and using the workbook so far?

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What have you learned so far?

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# Notes

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When did you feel least engaged? Why?

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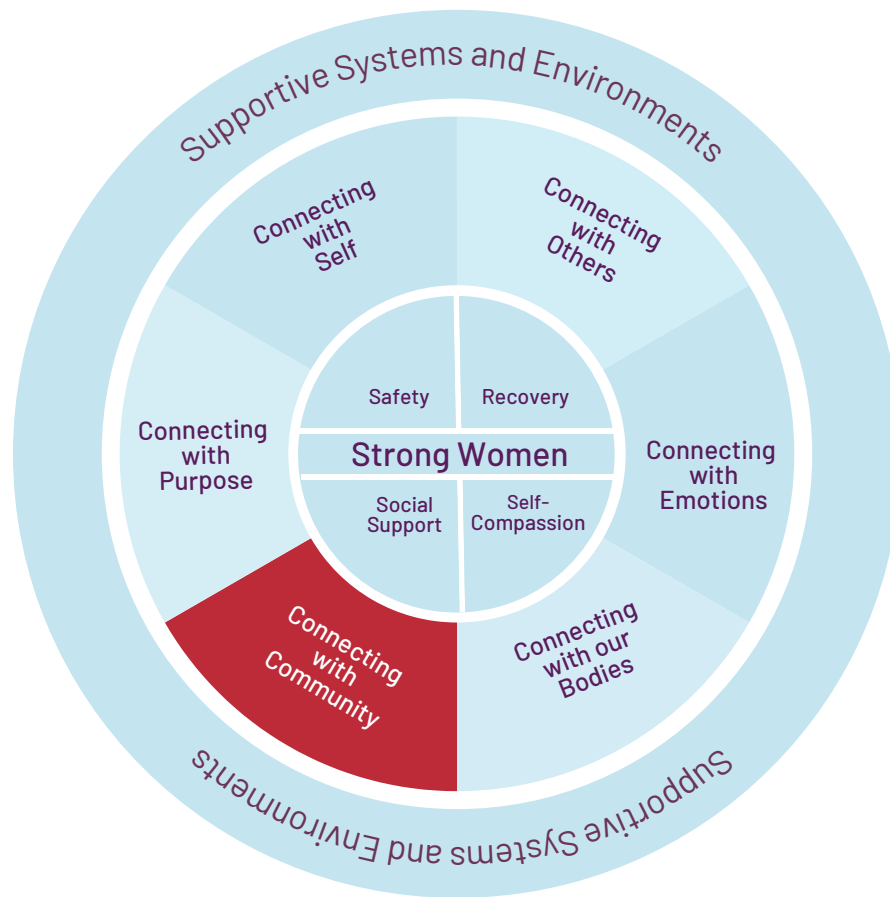
Additional Reflections

# Notes

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# Chapter 5



In this chapter, you will:

1. Explore the importance of belonging in community.
2. Explore connections between culture, society, and violence.
3. Explore connections between media, society, and substance use.
4. Expand ideas for positive community connections.
5. Expand ideas for connecting with the natural world.
6. Practice self-compassion and walking meditation.



Strong Women

# Belonging in Community

*Most of us think of belonging as a mythical place, that if we keep diligently searching for, we might eventually find. But what if belonging isn't a place at all, but a skill: a set of competencies that we, in modern life, have lost or forgotten?*

-Toko Pa Turner



Chapter Song: Done by Frazey Ford



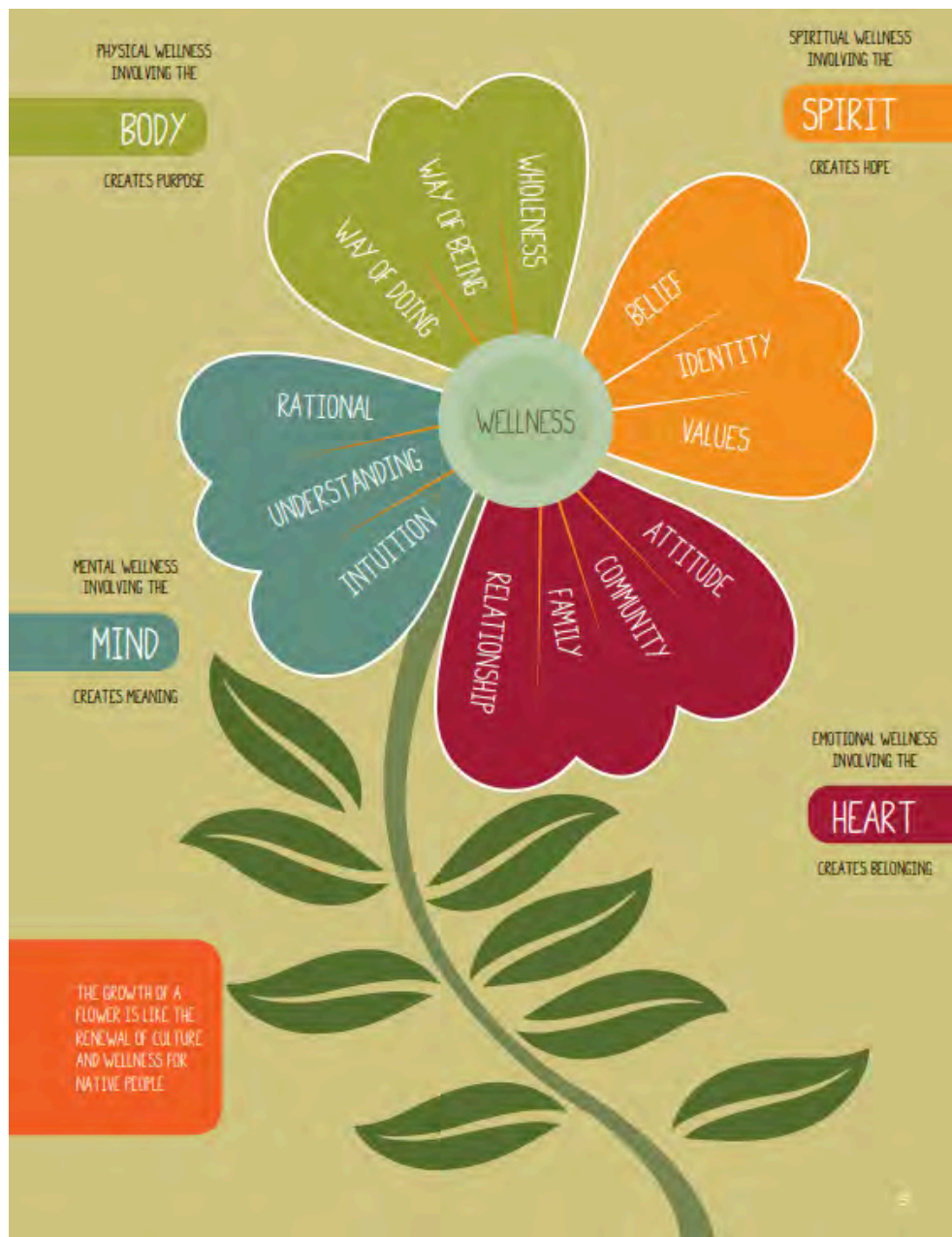
As women wired for connection, we need to belong. We need to relate to our families and our friendships. We need to belong to our wider cultures and societies. We urgently need communities to share experiences, and develop our identities, thoughts and actions.

Just as we need food, sleep, money, and a home to live in, we also need to be loved and to belong. Women simply cannot thrive in isolation.



# Belonging in Community

From an Indigenous perspective, belonging is equally vital. Wellness can be described as a flower with four important petals: emotional, physical, spiritual, and mental. Emotional wellness – involving the heart – is the source of belonging.



Source: [https://cyfn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Growing-Wellness-Activity\\_Guide\\_DIGITAL\\_FILE.pdf](https://cyfn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Growing-Wellness-Activity_Guide_DIGITAL_FILE.pdf)

# Belonging in Community

So where do you belong? Which communities are you part of, or do you want to become part of?

Community can look like many different things to different women. Community may be connected to your nation, ethnicity, or religion; it may be connected to your interests, to your children's lives, to your work or education. It may be virtual.

Here are a few examples of places you might find community.

|                                   |                       |                      |                                  |                             |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Parenting Group                   | Recovery Group        | Dance Class          | Soccer Team                      | Kids' School                |
| Church, temple, synagogue, mosque | Community Choir       | Community Kitchen    | Apartment/Condo building council | Community Garden            |
| Drum Circle                       | Disease Support Group | Sweat/Moon Lodge     | Powwow                           | Workplace                   |
| Art Class                         | Hockey Team           | Skateboard Park      | Gaming Community                 | Social Justice Action Group |
| Book Club                         | University class      | Swimming Pool        | Community Centre                 | Gym                         |
| Local Park                        | Coffee Shop           | Street/Neighbourhood | Facebook                         | Instagram                   |
| Whatsapp group                    | Volunteer Group       | College              | Beading Group                    | Foodbank                    |
| Parent Advisory Committee         | Support Group         | Bowling              | Walking Group                    | Health Clinic               |



# Community Reflection Exercise

- Make a map of all the places that you *belong* to in some way, outside of your home and your immediate family. Include as many places as you can think of – including geographical places and virtual spaces. Draw a shape for each community or place of belonging. It doesn't matter how few or how many you have.
  - You can include places you haven't been to (*maybe your Dad is from Norway and you haven't been there*), places you no longer go but still feel connected to (*maybe you haven't been to ceremony, or temple, or an AA meeting for a while*), places you would like to go to (*you love swimming but haven't found the time or courage to go to aqua-aerobics*) and places you don't like going (*a parent's home, medical clinic, women's shelter, food bank*).

Me



# Belonging in Practice

"Our yearning for belonging is so hard-wired," writes Brené Brown, "that we often try to acquire it by any means possible, including trying to fit in and hustling for approval and acceptance."

## Fitting in

is becoming who you think you need to be in order to be accepted.

## Belonging

is being your authentic self and knowing that no matter what happens, you belong to you.

-Dr. Brene Brown

Often as women we might try to change ourselves — our dress, our behaviours, our opinions — to maintain relationships with others. We swallow our true feelings to keep the peace.

This might keep a partner or mother-in-law happy. It might help us blend into a social group. But if we are not being authentic, it is not true belonging, and we aren't reaping the benefits.

True belonging starts with self-acceptance. It involves hard work and vulnerability rather than passively going with the flow.

"Belonging is a practice," writes Brown, "that requires us to be vulnerable, get uncomfortable, and learn how to be present with people without sacrificing who we are."



# Belonging in Practice

From an Indigenous perspective, belonging is also a practice of cultivating emotional wellness that happens in relationship. This includes relationship with other people, animals, plants, and the earth herself.

The Indigenous Wellness Framework suggests four types of actions we can take to support our emotional wellness, and our belonging:

| Action       | Explanation  | Examples   |
|--------------|--|--|
| Relationship | Our identity is nurtured through our relationship to the land and all that lives on the land we come from.   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Experiencing the healing of the drum.</li><li>• Learning about medicine plants.</li></ul>  |
| Family       | Our family extends beyond our biological family. Our extended family includes the clan family and the way we relate respectfully to friends as "cousins, auntie, uncle, grandmother, grandfather." | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Telling stories about our ancestors.</li><li>• Spending time together in important family places.</li></ul>  |
| Community    | Community is the land and people we come from. Our identity is connected to the story of our community and the land and beings that live on that land. It's a place that we spiritually belong to. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participating in community events.</li><li>• Knowing the story of our community (How did our community arrive on its land? How does our community relate to those around us and to other nations?)</li></ul>     |
| Attitude     | Our attitude towards life is nurtured through our relationships with family, community, and creation. These connections motivate us to live life to the fullest.                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fulfilling our roles and responsibilities as we know them through our identity - our Nation, spirit name and clan.</li><li>• Understanding our gifts, personality and uniqueness through our identity.</li></ul> |

# Belonging Reflection Exercise

- Look back at the map you created of your places and communities of belonging. Which are places of true belonging, where you can be yourself? Which ones involve you pretending to be something you are not, to fit in?
- How might you be more authentic in any of these communities?
- How might you link up with others in these communities?
- What actions might you take in any one or more of the four areas above –relationship, family, community, attitude – to strengthen your belonging in community? List them.



# Culture, Society, and Violence

It can be difficult, as a woman recovering from intimate partner violence, to find safety and belong in communities in an authentic way, especially if the wider culture and society is not supportive.

Women don't experience intimate partner violence and/or substance misuse in isolation, or in individual ways.

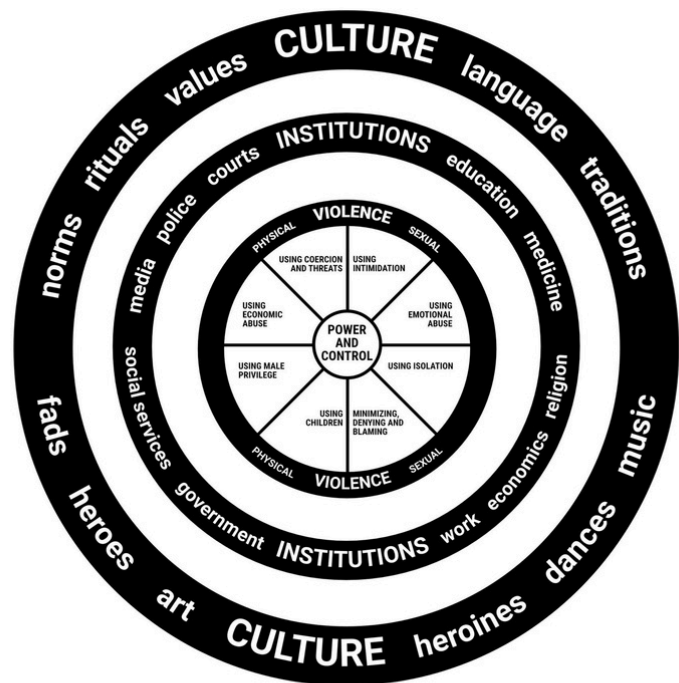
Our culture and our societal institutions create the conditions that increase the risks of intimate partner violence and substance use happening to any of us.

Some of the factors that increase a woman's risk of violence include:

- Racist and sexist ideas.
- Economic and social policies that create poverty and gender inequality.
- Culturally accepted practices of male dominance over women.
- Gender stereotypes about women and men.
- Religious or family pressures that limit women's roles.

Remember the Power and Control Wheel? This Culture Wheel shows how our social institutions – such as the police, social services, governments, courts, and religious institutions – wield similar power and control.

The Culture Wheel also shows how our cultural traditions, values, and rituals play their part.



Source: <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheel-gallery>

# Media, Society, and Substance Use

*We swim in an ocean of advertising, and that advertising says one thing: drink, and great thing will happen. We absorb this in our pores. In fact it is so prevalent, we barely notice it.*

—Ann Dowsett Johnston

We are all bombarded with many media and cultural influences – including billboards, TV shows and movies, magazines, bar and pub culture, workplace culture, and social media feeds.

Women are under tremendous pressure to perform and conform to many unrealistic, contradictory, and unhealthy ideals.

Some of these images and influences suggest that smoking cigarettes, vaping, and drinking alcohol will help us fit in, or will turn us into successful, beautiful, thin, sexy, and desirable women.

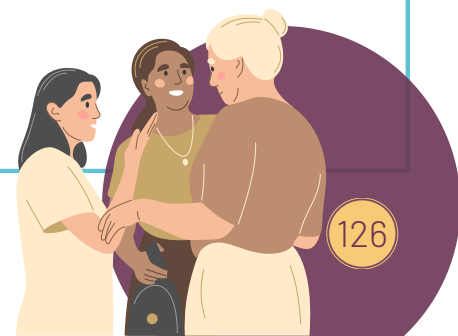
Some of these images and influences simply put us under so much pressure that we run to substances to escape, or to soothe ourselves in despair when we fail to match up.

This image from COPE magazine published by the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute, shows a woman facing media messages about alcohol that associates alcohol with sexiness, thinness, being overpowered, wickedness, outdoor activities, and fulfilling men's sexual needs.



# Media, Society, and Substance Use Reflection Exercise

- Do any of the communities you drew on your map above prevent you from moving forward and being strong in your recovery because they wield power and control in oppressive ways? (*E.g., a belief that men are superior to women, or that men controlling women is ok.*)
- Do any of the communities you drew on your map above prevent you from being strong in your recovery because they promote unhealthy use of substances? (*E.g., a culture of binge drinking or chain smoking, or vaping?*)
- Now you have noticed how it feels to belong in each of these places, are there any that you would like to withdraw your energy from, even for a while?
- What are some of the messages and influences in the wider culture and/or media about women that you have struggle with?





# Connecting with Recovery Communities

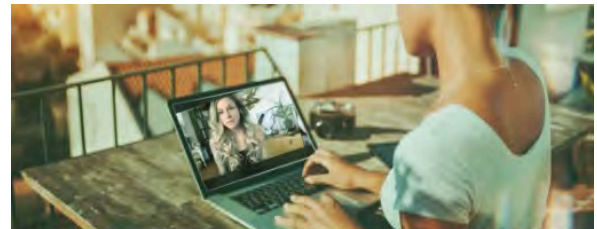
Participation in support groups significantly increases women's chances of continued recovery and wellness.

They support your health, safety, and wellbeing. They challenge the negative messaging you might be bombarded with in mainstream culture and media. They support you in belonging to a community in an authentic way. In these groups, you can be exactly who you are. You can be who you are, with all your strengths and flaws, gifts, and struggles.

You might already be aware of the many groups and programs available to women in your neighbourhood that focus on recovery from intimate partner violence and substance use. These might include AA, SMART recovery, and 16-step meetings, along with other in-person and virtual social support groups run by local non-profit agencies.

There are groups like AA, SMART recovery, and 16-step meetings, along with other in-person and virtual social support groups run by non-profit agencies to support recovery from substance use. There are other programs you can access online, such as Zoom recovery meetings, recovery yoga and dance classes run by organizations such as [SHE RECOVERS Foundation](#) and [Hola Sober](#).

There are also several recovery apps you can use on a smartphone to connect to other women in recovery from substance misuse, such as [Sober Buddy](#), [BETTER App](#), and [Loosid](#).



**Ready to join the SoberBuddy World?**

Live Zoom Groups, sober skill building challenges, motivational memes, peer support communities, and a confetti sober tracker down to the second. Let's goooo!

Available on iTunes

GET IT ON Google Play

## SHERECOVERS® TOGETHER

ONLINE ZOOM GATHERINGS  
FACILITATED BY SHE RECOVERS® COACHES

Join a volunteer SHE RECOVERS® Coach and the SHE RECOVERS Community for a recovery-focused gathering and experience the connection, support, and empowerment cultivated within a welcoming and supportive environment.

JOIN A GATHERING

JOIN FACEBOOK GROUP

Source: <https://yoursoberbuddy.com/>

Source: <https://Sherecovers.org>



# Reflection Exercise

- Have you participated in any recovery groups for substance use online or in person? Which ones have you found to be most helpful and why?
- How might you continue to build your social support and recovery community?
- Have you accessed information or gotten support for violence concerns? What was most helpful? How might you build on this?



# Connecting with Nature

*The land knows you, even when you are lost.*

—Robin Wall Kimmerer

Our communities are not limited to other humans. Many women have strong attachment relationships with pets (who may also have been subjected to violence). Many women also find solace, connection, and belonging when they spend time in the natural world.

It might be a park you walk through daily on the way to buy groceries. It might be a tree next to your apartment building or a beach you visit on vacation. It might be time spent out on the land or in a garden.

Sometimes we can be feeling intensely alone, and then a bird will sing in the trees overhead and we realize that we are surrounded by life.

Sometimes we can be feeling that we have no energy or motivation to do anything. Time spent in a forest or on a beach can be revitalizing.

Sometimes we can be wound tight with stress, buzzing with anxiety, struggling with negative thoughts that spin around repetitively in our heads. We step into a city park and start to walk. The green of the grass and the leaves of the trees soothes our eyes, the sky lifts our spirits.



# Connecting with the Land

For Indigenous Peoples, connection with land signifies connection to culture, social systems, relationships, and ecosystems. The importance of connecting with the land is expressed through principles such as “All my Relations” and “Earth Connection”. “All my Relations” and “Earth Connection” are two of the foundational beliefs of many First Nations Peoples in Canada, as described in the *Indigenous Wellness Framework Reference Guide* published by the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation.

## All My Relations

is about how we are connected to all things – people, plants, trees, animals, and rocks. We are all related to one another and need to look after each other.

## Earth Connection

is about how we are part of the balance of nature and must find a special yet interconnected place within the whole. Indigenous identity is defined by the land and the connection to the natural world. We're all relatives because we're all part of Mother Earth.

See: <https://docs.fntn.ca/VC16995/Handouts/Indigenous%20Wellness%20Framework%20Reference%20Guide.pdf>

If you are an Indigenous woman, you may not be connected to your culture and traditions, or you may already derive great support and spiritual nourishment from them.

Regardless, these wise and powerful foundational beliefs – and how you choose to connect with the land – can be supportive to your recovery.



For more information about Indigenous approaches to recovery:

The Thunderbird Partnership Foundation is a non-profit organization that is committed to working with First Nations to further the capacity of communities to address substance use and addiction. They promote a holistic approach to healing and wellness that values culture, respect, community, and compassion <https://thunderbirdpf.org/>.

# Violence Against the Earth and Women



*There is a direct connection between violence against the Earth and violence against women.*

-Lee Maracle



Many indigenous writers, academic, and activists have drawn connections between violence against the earth and violence against women.

Lee Maracle, from the Stó:lō nation in the area now known as British Columbia, has written and lectured on the ill health that results in our bodies when we lose connection inside of us to the animals, the plants, the grass, and the trees:

"It begins with the connection to the earth. It moves on to connection to the animal world. It moves on to connection to the sky world. And then each other. We need those connections for our bodies to be at peace."

She describes the experience of visiting the West Coast of British Columbia and witnessing the bald, logged, mountains:

"I got out of the car and I was broken with grief. Broken with grief. On the West Coast where 200 inches of rain falls every year there is drought. Where are the highest suicides, and violence and murder of women? In those forest areas that are clear-cut. Along that Highway of Tears."

## Reflection Exercise

Watch Lee Maracle speak about the connections between violence against the earth and violence against women. What does this bring up for you?

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdxJYhbTvYw&ab\\_channel=IPSMO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdxJYhbTvYw&ab_channel=IPSMO)



# Nature, Belonging, and Health

All women benefit from nature connection, regardless of ancestry and upbringing. It doesn't matter if you grew up on a farm, out on the land, on a reserve, or in an inner-city environment.

It doesn't matter if you feel a spiritual connection to the earth or you just like the peace and quiet of the woods, or the soothing sound of a rushing river, or the scent of wild roses.

There is more and more research evidence from around the world that nature offers many benefits for both physical and mental health.

In her TED Talk, [Gray Area Drinking](#), Jolene Park explains how just 20 minutes spent close to a large body of water such as the ocean, or a large density of trees, raises our levels of neurotransmitters responsible for pleasure, happiness, and focus, and how this can help women reduce their drinking.

Nature connection also boosts our immune systems, helps us sleep better, and protects our bones.

## 8 Ways Nature Benefits Your Well-Being

Activates areas of the brain associated with self-awareness, emotions, and empathy

Exposure to plants may suppress the sympathetic nervous system, lowering cortisol levels, heart rate, and blood pressure

Practicing grounding, or paying attention to your connection and contact to the Earth, may reduce pain and inflammation

Being near water can signal the brain to reduce stress hormones, bringing on a meditative state

Moderate exposure to the sun produces vitamin D, which is good for your bones

Sunlight stimulates mood-boosting hormones and can help regulate sleep

Can foster feelings of connectedness with ourselves, community, and the earth

Exposure to fresh air can benefit our body and minds

Adapted from St. Luke's Health  
<https://www.stlukeshealth.org/resources/the-great-outdoors-8-ways-nature-benefits-your-well-being>

# Nature, Belonging, and Health Reflection Exercise

- Are there any places in nature you feel especially connected to? Where you feel safe? These could be places from your childhood or your life now. Pick one and write a few words about how you feel in this place.
- How could you increase the time you spend in connection with nature? Make a list of three places you could go in the next month. Make a note of the activities you could do there (*walk? run? paint? swim in a river or the ocean? sit in silence? camp overnight?*).





# Further Practice & Resources to Explore

## Practicing Self-Compassion in Nature

Why not bring together your self-compassion practice and your desire to get outdoors in nature more? The good news is that self-compassion does not have to be practiced sitting down in a chair, indoors.

You can bring the practice outdoors into your favorite green space or other natural environment. You can also do it while you walk.

- [In this audio meditation with Chris Germer](#), you can learn how to practice compassionate walking (Compassionate Walking (Audio Meditation) on YouTube).
- [Now try this walking meditation with Jack Kornfield](#) (<https://jackkornfield.com/walking-meditation-2/>)

Once you have tried it a couple of times, you can take this practice with you any time you go for a solitary walk.

## Further Resources

- **CBC Radio documentary recording:** [Ex-Wives Club](#). This is an interesting story of four women, married at different times to the same abusive man, who reached out to each other for support and to warn others about him.
- **Book:** [Quit Like a Woman: The radical choice not to drink in a culture obsessed by alcohol](#), by Holly Whitaker. See Chapter 14.
- **Book:** [Drink: The intimate relationship between women and alcohol](#), by Ann Dowsett Johnson.
- **Music Video:** [From Stilettos to Moccasins](#): The story of Indigenous women in recovery who found the RECLAIM principles helpful to their support (Empathy, Acceptance, Inspiration, Recognition of trauma, Communication, Care, Link to Spirituality and Momentum)

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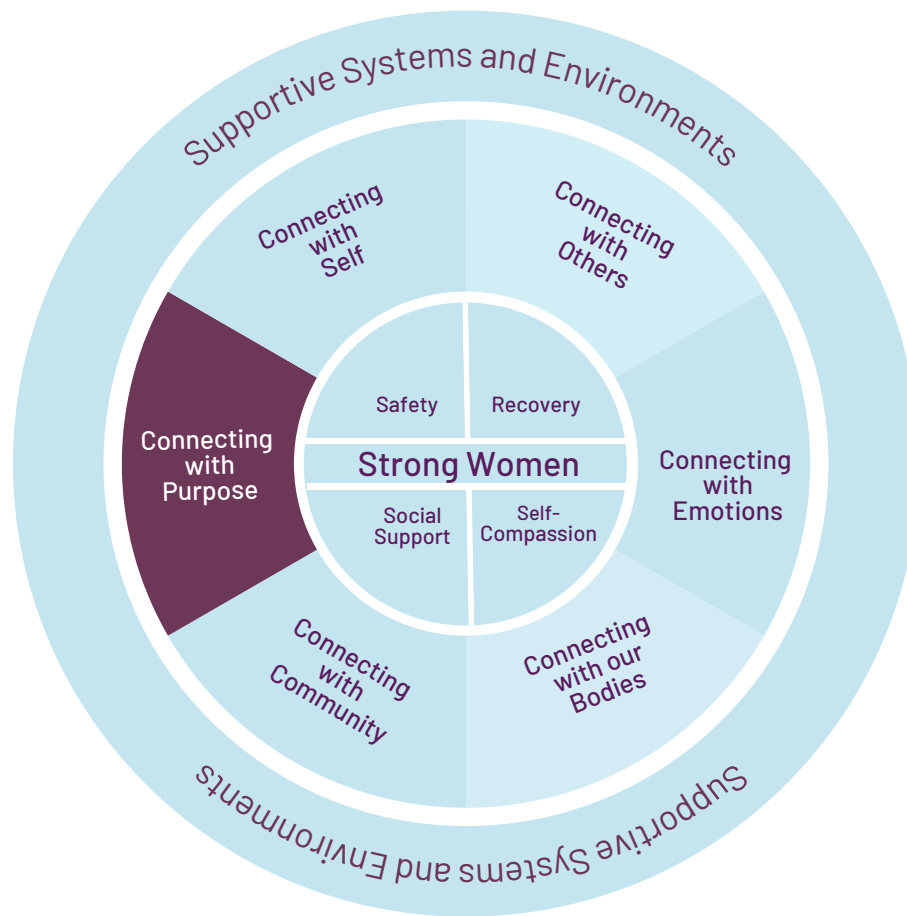
Additional Reflections

# Notes

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# Chapter 6



In this chapter, women will:

1. Explore possibilities of change and transformation.
2. Explore the meanings of post-traumatic growth and hope.
3. Practice the use of affirmations.
4. Create healing images for recovery.
5. Expand self-compassion practices for a growth mindset.
6. Consider possibilities of giving back, taking action, and finding meaning.



Strong Women

# Who Will You Become?

*You have to leave room in life to dream.*

—Buffy Sainte-Marie



Chapter Song: [O Siem Susan Aglukark](#)



As women in recovery from violence or substance use, we are in a constant process of change, growth, and evolution.

We are not who we used to be. We are not who we will be. Perhaps we are not yet who we would really like to become. It is a constant state of transformation. As we shift and transform, it is so important to have meaning and purpose in our lives.

In this chapter, we will think about who we want to be in the world, and how we would like our lives to look and feel. We will consider how much we have changed already during our journeys, and how much more we would like to change. We will consider how to make meaning among all these changes.

As you progress through this chapter, it might be helpful to think about yourself in relation to some of the core themes in this workbook:

- How do you want your **relationships** to feel?
- How would you like to relate to your **emotions**?
- How would you like to experience your **body**?
- What would your ideal **community** look like?

In other words, how do you want to live, love, work, and make change? This is a time to use your imagination. Research shows that imagination promotes wellness and creativity can facilitate healing. So, it is a time to dream a little and to create a powerful vision for the future.

Allow yourself to imagine where you would like to be — in six months, or one year, or five years' time — even if you don't quite know how you will get there. Often practical solutions suggest themselves once a vision has been created. Naming where we would like to go is the first step in getting there.

# Who Will You Become Reflection Exercise

- Write down five words you might use to describe yourself today.
- Look back at the first reflection exercise of Chapter 1 in this workbook. How did you answer the same question? What shifts do you notice in your sense of self and identity since you began this workbook?
- Write down five words to describe the person you would like to become. Allow yourself to dream and don't limit yourself here. *(It might feel like a stretch to write "confident" if you are struggling with anxiety, or "independent" if you are in debt, but write it anyway. Remember, naming where we would like to go is the first step to getting there.)*



# Rewrite Your Story

*I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me.*

—Zadie Smith

Recovery offers a chance to rewrite the story of who you are. This process is partially about changing your actions and behaviours. And it is also about how you relate to yourself and how you describe yourself.

For example, you can be a survivor instead of a victim. You can be powerful instead of powerless. You can be proactive instead of reactive. You can be vocal instead of silent.

Lisa Najavits in her book *Finding Your Best Self*, suggests that this process is also about recognizing your character traits and steering them from unhealthy to healthy expression. This doesn't mean changing yourself, so much as changing the emphasis and changing how you perceive yourself and how you present yourself.

For example, some women are very concerned with others' feelings and with others' views. This can lead to unhealthy "people pleasing," where women over-ride their own needs and preferences.

And yet the same personality trait holds the gift of being a "people person" — someone who values others and is good at connecting with others.

Another example is the behaviour of obsessive perfectionism, where nothing is ever good enough. Within this is the gift of being detail-oriented and attentive to quality. This personality trait can be channeled in many positive directions in a work environment where attention to detail is critical for success.

# Rewrite Your Story Reflection Exercise

- How are you rewriting your story during your recovery from violence and substance use? Mark on the line below where you are now on the continuum from victim to survivor. Mark where you started. And mark where you would like to get to.
- Do the same for the other continuums of identity shifts during recovery. You might not feel there have been any changes on some, or even all, of these lines and that is ok too. It can still be helpful to mark where you would like to move to.

|            |       |                    |
|------------|-------|--------------------|
| Victim     | _____ | Survivor           |
| Silence    | _____ | Finding Your Voice |
| Powerless  | _____ | Empowered          |
| Isolation  | _____ | Connection         |
| Hidden     | _____ | Known              |
| Fragmented | _____ | Whole              |



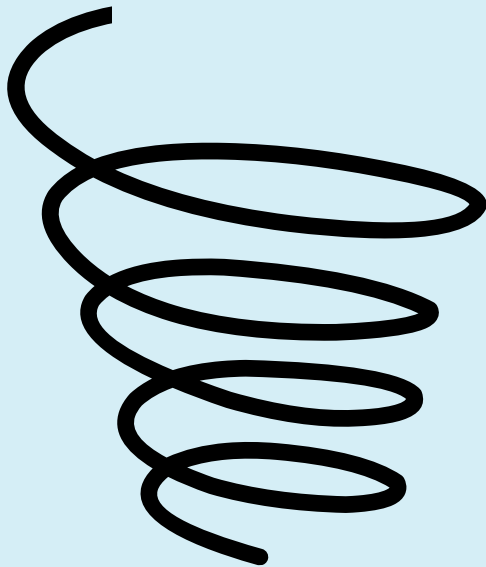


# Spirals of Transformation

“Energy moves in cycles, circles, spirals, vortexes, whirls, pulsations, waves, and rhythms—rarely if ever in simple straight lines.  
—Starhawk

## Spirals of Violence and Nonviolence

In her book, *Beyond Anger and Violence*, Dr. Stephanie Covington uses the image of a spiral to describe the experiences of violence, addiction, and trauma.



In her vision we can move away from the constriction that relationship violence brings and have the potential to move upwards, to expand. Our inner selves and outer lives become more spacious and expansive as we begin to heal from violence.

A spiral related to recovery from alcohol and nicotine addiction can also be seen this way. As we move into addiction our lives are more constricted. When we choose a recovery path, we travel upwards, into greater spaciousness.

While our prior experiences of violence or substance misuse will never completely leave us, our lives can become more expansive regardless.

As we shift upwards out of violence, and/or out of substance use, we shift internally as our external life shifts. We become different people.

# Post-Traumatic Growth

For many women, the journey of recovery offers more than survival, more than resilience even. This journey can offer the possibility of post-traumatic growth.

By actively searching for the good in something terrible,” writes Dr. Stephanie Covington, “a person can use adversity as a catalyst for advancing to a higher level of psychological functioning.”

This means that your experience of intimate partner violence and substance use might offer you an opportunity for deep transformation and healing, and new directions that you might not otherwise have encountered.

At the very least, perhaps consider what life lessons and wisdom you have gained. What new realizations have you had about yourself? Somehow you are here today, seeking support, and with a story to tell.

In her book, *Helping Women Recover*, Dr. Covington describes five positive changes that reveal post-traumatic growth:

1. “Personal strength” and a “boost” to self-confidence.
2. Deeper personal relationships.
3. “Greater life appreciation.” More gratitude and joy.
4. Change in beliefs. New vision of one’s role in the world.
5. Pursuit of new opportunities.

## Reflection Exercise

- Think about your journey through intimate partner violence and substance use, and your journey into safety and recovery.
- How have you grown in ways you never imagined? What new realizations have you had about yourself? What new opportunities have you found in this journey? What actions and social changes have you seen the need for, and thought about working on?



# Cultivate Hope

*We need hope like we need air.*

—Brené Brown

Hope is essential to recovery, transformation, and post-traumatic growth.

As women, we need to believe we have possibilities in front of us. We need to believe that we can grow. We need to believe that our life circumstances, our health, and our relationships can change.

We need to see that society can also be shifted and that women can be free.

The research of Dr. Brené Brown has revealed some interesting things about hope.

1. First, hope is not just a nice emotion that we either have or don't have. Hope is learned.
2. Second, hope "is a function of struggle," explains Dr. Brown in her book *Atlas of the Heart*. "We develop hope not during the easy or comfortable times, but through adversity and discomfort."

"Hope is forged when our goals, pathways, and agency are tested and when change is actually possible."

It can be easy to fall into hopelessness and despair when things don't work out the way we planned, sometimes for reasons that are completely beyond us.

It is important to learn that we can have setbacks and try again, many times over. Each step is one more learning to build on.

# Cultivating Hope Reflection Exercise

- Think of a time when you have struggled and when life has been uncomfortable, but you have succeeded in changing or growing towards wellness. (*Maybe you decided to reduce your drinking and you succeeded for one week. Maybe you reduced your cigarette consumption from 20 to 10 per day. Maybe you set a boundary with your partner. Maybe you joined a group.*) List as many of these successes as you can remember.
- Write this list on a piece of paper. Review it when you feel hopeless. See if you can add to it.



# Use Affirmations



*Am I good enough? Yes, I am.*

-Michelle Obama



We can use affirmations and positive self-talk to support any vision for growth and change. Remember, how we speak to ourselves and what we hear ourselves say influences how we make changes. We must become our own best self-advocate.

Repeat positive statements about yourself and your possibilities throughout the day, especially when you feel challenged – to remind yourself of your real capacity for health and wholeness.



# Using Affirmations Reflection Exercise

- Try saying each one of these affirmations in the image above out loud. How do they sound and feel?
- Create some more positive affirmations for yourself, based on your personal learnings from this workbook and this group. What would you add?



# Seven Sacred Teachings

We can also base our affirmations on the seven sacred teachings within many Indigenous cultures:

Truth, Love, Respect, Humility, Wisdom, Courage, and Honesty.



Source: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4085083>

Here are some examples of affirmations based on these teachings:

- Love:** *I am loved.*  
*I am at peace with all of creation.*
- Respect:** *I am worthy of respect.*  
*I am kind and respectful to everyone I meet.*
- Courage:** *I am strong.*  
*I have been given everything I need to succeed in life.*
- Honesty:** *I speak and act with a calm, bright heart.*  
*It's safe for me to be honest with myself and others.*
- Wisdom:** *I have purpose.*  
*My ancestors are proud of me. They gave me everything I need.*
- Humility:** *Today I will learn and grow.*  
*Everything I do is in honour of my ancestors.*
- Truth:** *Today, I am thankful.*  
*I belong. I am safe.*

# Visualize Your Healing

Research shows that visual imagery can play an important role in healing — from decreasing pain and stress to improving performance in tasks.

As women, we live in a very visual culture and most of us are bombarded with imagery from morning to night — on TV, billboards, on the side of buses, on all our social media feeds.

When we choose imagery that is important to us and surround ourselves with images that support our healing, we step into our power and direct our own recovery.

Close your eyes for a minute and imagine an image that feels inspiring. It could be a female astronaut landing on the moon, or it could be a mother owl vigilantly guarding her nest. It could be your daughter's smile on waking, or it could be a magnificent temple. It could be the rising sun. It could be an ocean.



Hold this image in your mind for a minute. How do you feel in your body and in your heart?

Imagine if you lived every single day guided only by inspiring imagery.



# Visualizing Healing Reflection Exercise

- Choose an image to represent your path forward in recovery. *(It can be anything – an eagle flying, a beach on a sunny day, an imaginary home.)* Why is this image meaningful to you? How will you bring the energy of this image into your daily life?
- Find a way to physically represent this image so you can see it every day. *(Use a photograph as a screensaver, print the image, or draw it and put it in your living space.)*
- If you have more time, it can be fun to make a healing collage. You will need a large sheet of card, a pile of old books or magazines, glue, and scissors. Flick through the magazines and cut/rip out images that feel good when you think of a healthy future. Don't think too much about why – just select the images that call to you. Then have fun arranging them on the card, in a way that feels like it expresses the life you would like to lead. Put your collage on the wall to inspire you!
- Alternatively, if it is easier or more comfortable for you to access a computer than card and glue, use the same process to make a board on Pinterest!

Source: These exercises are adapted from P. 183-6 of Najavits, L. M. (2019). *Finding your best self: Recovery from addiction, trauma, or both*. The Guilford Press.



# Practice Self-Compassion



*Each moment is an opportunity to make a fresh start.*

—Pema Chodron



As you continue in your healing journey, there will probably be days where you feel like you are powering forwards into wellness and wholeness, days where you feel like you are heading towards the life you want.

And there may be days where you feel like you are slipping backwards, tumbling down the spiral, or just stuck and not making any progress at all.

Remember the practice of self-compassion that you have learned. Remember how important it is to be your own “inner ally” and not an “inner enemy.”

Remember the three core features of self-compassion:

## **Mindfulness**

Being aware of the physical, emotional, or mental pain of the moment.

## **Self-Kindness**

Treating ourselves with kindness, considering our own needs.

## **Common Humanity**

Recognizing that these experiences are a normal part of being human.

Source: Adapted from: <https://attheu.utah.edu/facultystaff/how-to-practice-self-compassion>.

The practice of self-compassion doesn't just help you feel better, it helps you to heal and grow. Research by psychology professor Serena Chen has shown that self-compassion helps to foster a “growth mindset.”

# Practice Self-Compassion

As you step forward, remember yourself as a rose — blessed with both tender, delicately scented, petals and sharp protective thorns.

Your petals are your gentle healing energy. They represent your capacity to be present to your painful emotions and nurture yourself tenderly.

Your thorns are your fierce healing energy. They represent your capacity to set powerful boundaries, to motivate and encourage yourself into action, and to protect yourself from harm.

## Reflection Exercise

- **Identifying What We Really Want**: When you find yourself falling back into self-criticism, try this written mindful self-compassion exercise from Dr. Kristin Neff.
- **Motivating Self-Compassion Break** (7.21 mins): Try this audio self-compassion meditation with Dr. Kristin Neff.



# Make Change

As we heal – from violence, from substance use, from trauma – we transform. Slowly, we change the way we are in the world.

We change the way we relate to ourselves, our bodies, and our emotions. We change how we interact and connect with other people, the way we relate to the land and other living beings.

As we do so, we spread ripples of healing out around us.

As we heal, we can begin to understand these social issues facing women more clearly, and how they contribute to our own lives and those of other women. We see more clearly, and how they contribute to our own lives and those of other women. We see more clearly the injustices of sexism, racism, and gender inequality. We can help change these injustices by gathering with others in support groups, organizations for change, advocacy circles or protest groups. We can grow and change and understand the forces outside of our own lives and selves more clearly.

We can help change the world for other women, and for girls just growing up. Social action with other women is a way we can find meaning in our own journeys and derive purpose from them.

Some women do this on their own, by volunteering, or training in the helping professions. Some women do this by teaching or mothering in a way that reduces gender inequity going forward.

Other women do this by developing leadership skills, change skills and learning about root causes and solutions for issues facing women. There are no rules, but social action can sustain healing.

# Making Change Reflection Exercise

- How has your healing begun to help others in small ways? (E.g., perhaps you have more connected relationships or have begun to work again? Perhaps the kindness you are starting to show yourself is being reflected in your child?)
- How will you go forward in your recovery journey? What opportunities might there be, in community or relationships, to find meaning and purpose by sharing, supporting, and taking action together? What are your dreams?



# Further Practice & Resources to Explore

## Alcohol - Sobriety Books and Memoirs

- [How to Go Alcohol Free: 100 tips for a sober life](#) by Kate Bee.
- [Soberful: Uncover a Sustainable, Fulfilling Life Free of Alcohol](#) by Veronica Valli.
- [The Unexpected Joy of Being Sober](#) by Catherine Gray.
- [Glorious Rock Bottom](#) by Bryony Gordon.
- [This Naked Mind: Control Alcohol: Find Freedom, Discover Happiness, and Change your Life](#) by Annie Grace.
- [Blackout: Remembering the Things I Drank to Forget](#) by Sarah Hepola.
- [Never Enough: The Neuroscience and Experience of Addiction](#) by Judith Grisel.

## Sobriety Coaching

- [The Sober School](#) with Kate Bee offers *Getting Unstuck*, “an online course and coaching program for women who want to quit drinking – or take a break from booze – in a way that feels fun and empowering.”
- [Soberful Online Sobriety Programs](#) with Veronica Valli offers a free Facebook group and podcasts, and a subscription membership program based on the Soberful book
- [Ditched the Drink Coaching Program](#) with Heather Lowe. The website also offers free resource downloads.
- [GendHer](#) eight-week online recovery coaching program for, “women who wish to quit drinking and stay quit,” with Janet Christie. Website also offers free resources.
- [This Naked Mind Control Alcohol](#) program with Annie Grace. “Bestselling author Annie Grace invites you to explore the role of alcohol in our lives and culture without rules, pain, or judgment.” Her website has free podcast episodes and many free resources.

## Recovery Communities

- [SHE RECOVERS Foundation](#). “SHE RECOVERS is a non-profit movement dedicated to redefining recovery, inspiring hope, ending stigma and empowering women in or seeking recovery to increase their recovery capital, heal themselves and help other women to do the same.”
- [Hola! Sober](#). “Hola Sober is a band of badass women who are alcohol-free.”
- [Tempest Membership Community](#). “Tempest is clinically proven to help you quit or curb your drinking. Through expert-led lessons, a welcoming community, and supportive coaches, you’ll get the tools you need to build a life you love.”

# Notes

*This notes section is for you to record your thoughts as you participate in the Strong Women social support group and use the workbook. The notes section and questions will be repeated at the end of each chapter of the workbook, so you can continue to reflect as you continue to participate.*

*These notes may also be helpful if you want to share your reflections when you will be invited to the focus group at the end of the Strong Women pilot.*

Overall, how would you describe your experience being in the Strong Women group and using the workbook so far?

What has been your favourite part so far?

What have you learned so far?

Is there anything you have learned that you have found helpful to act on in your life?

# Notes

When did you feel most engaged in the group this week? Why?

When did you feel least engaged? Why?

Which activities in this workbook chapter did you find most helpful? Why?

What would you like more of in the workbook? Less of?

What have you learned from, and with, other women in the Strong Women group so far?

Additional Reflections



# Notes

# The Interconnections: Substance Use and Intimate Partner Violence

## *Understanding substance use and the links to experiences of violence*

- **Problematic use** – Not all substance use is problematic. But when we use alcohol, tobacco, and other substances to cope with stress, feelings, responsibilities or problems in relationships, we can begin to use more at higher doses, or combine substances, and a pattern of use that is problematic can develop. This can have consequences for our health, our work performance, our finances and other areas of our lives. Importantly, it can comprise our values, and affect who we want to be in the world.
- **Addiction or Dependency** – When we use alcohol and other substances to feel high, to avoid pain and withdrawal, to feel “normal”, to be able to function, to cope with violence, or to forget, more serious negative consequences can arise such as physical problems, social isolation, feelings of guilt and self-hate and legal problems. Substance use can become a preoccupation, activities other than substance use are avoided, and control is lost. This becomes addiction or dependency.

For more info on the spectrum of substance use, see: <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/hrs/if-hrs-spectrum-of-substance-use.pdf>.

## *Understanding substance use in the aftermath of experiencing violence*

- The Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime describes the emotional impact of victimization to include feelings of anger, fear, frustration, confusion, guilt or self-blame, shame and grief. There are stages talk about stages of coming to terms with these feelings – moving from initial reactions of helplessness and disbelief, to a period of understanding, and reconstruction of self. In addition to addressing these feelings, women who have experienced violence are often facing physical and/or mental health challenges, trauma, insomnia, headaches, stress, increase in substance use and social isolation.

## *The interconnections*

Research shows a close relationship between substance use and intimate partner violence:

- Women who experience intimate partner violence (IPV) are more likely to use alcohol, nicotine, and other drugs.
- One study in the U.S. found 70% of IPV survivors had a history of substance use.
- Women often use substances to cope with violence, and with symptoms of PTSD.
- Alcohol is often used to numb feelings or avoid thinking about IPV.
- Women also use substances to manage their pain so they can support their families.
- Women also use substances to cope with the stress of rebuilding a life (finding housing and employment).
- Sometimes women use alcohol to gain acceptance from their partner.
- Sometimes women are coerced into drinking by a violent partner.
- Often a partner’s violence will escalate while using substances such as alcohol.

# Empowerment through Group Connections with Other Women



Connecting to others is a strategy that support/recovery groups and supportive services see as key to growth and wellness.

## **Alcohol and group connection**

The peer support group Alcoholics Anonymous, describes itself as a “fellowship of people who come together to solve their drinking problem.” Within the group model, AA also promotes one-on-one peer support through sponsors, who act as confidants and encouragers.

<https://www.aa.org/>.

## **Tobacco and group connection**

Online group support for quitting tobacco is seen as important by provincial help lines such as QuitNow BC. <https://quitnow.ca/community-and-support/group-support-sessions>.

## **Violence/trauma/substance use group connection**

Groups such as 16 Steps for Discovery and Empowerment – which are sponsored by anti-violence and addiction services - support women to see the common dynamics in substance use problems and violent relationships for themselves, and with other women. The first statement of the 16 Steps for Discovery and Empowerment is: “We affirm we have the power to take charge of our lives and stop being dependent on substances or other people for our self-esteem and security.” The groups overall are about developing a strong sense of self and supporting other women who are on a similar journey. <https://atira.bc.ca/what-we-do/program/16-steps-for-discovery-and-empowerment/>

## **Wellness/recovery group connection**

The SHE RECOVERS Foundation says, “We are all recovering from something and you don’t have to recover alone.” SHE RECOVERS calls itself a “movement dedicated to redefining recovery, inspiring hope, ending stigma and empowering women in or seeking recovery to increase their recovery capital, heal themselves and help other women to do the same.”

<https://sherecovers.org/>



Listening to the experiences of other women and seeing the connections between our stories and those of others has a long tradition in the women's movement. For decades, in awareness raising or "consciousness raising" groups, women have been able to see that our challenges are not personal only, that they are related to how norms and systems hold power over us. It is important for us to understand how boys and girls are differentially taught to be "strong", kind, tough, helpful, etc., and how many systems based in male privilege, affect girls' and women's realities and options.

Empowerment is about promoting women's sense of self-worth, our ability to determine our own choices and our right to influence social change for ourselves and others. Often, it involves joining together with other women in the same situation.

In a study of about the experiences of violence and substance use issues concerns by women during COVID-19 restrictions, we found that both violence and substance use services used empowerment as one of six key approaches to service.



Source: <https://cewh.ca/recent-work/covid-19-substance-use-and-intimate-partner-violence/>

# Strong Women

May the sun bring you new energy by day,  
may the moon softly restore you by night,  
may the rain wash away your worries,  
may the breeze blow new strength into your being,  
may you walk gently through the world and  
know its beauty all the days of your life.

— Apache Blessing

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Do you want to listen to the Strong Women playlist?

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# Strong Women



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