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SPARK²

A self-care tool for professionals

The **SPARK²** tool is a **self-reflective** evaluation tool for professionals working in community and social services, supporting them to develop a tailored self-care plan. It aims to **prevent** burnout, secondary trauma, vicarious trauma, and moral injury by encouraging professionals to reflect on distinct areas in their personal and professional lives. Using evidence-informed prompts, practitioners can **assess**, what, if any, changes are necessary to improve their welfare. This tool aims to build personal **resilience** in professionals as an ongoing process. It provides a reminder that **kindness and compassion** towards ourselves and others are essential components in our personal and professional satisfaction.

Self-reflection
Prevention
Assessment
Resilience
Kindness

Being exposed to stressful workplaces and trauma cases can have a cumulative negative impact on a professional's well-being. Developing and implementing a plan can help to express and process feelings, recover, re-energise, promote physical and mental health, develop a worker's resilience and ultimately improve professionals' work.

In essence, self-care helps to keep the **SPARK** alive, or rekindles it when energies run low.

Download the **SPARK²** tool:
https://www.ucc.ie/en/ideachildrights/resources/

Version 2 (2026)

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THE SPARK² TOOL

Checking in

How you are feeling will influence how you complete this tool. This rating will also provide you with useful context on how you were feeling when you review your completed SPARK² tool.

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

Instructions

SPARK² is best used as a reflective tool, rather than focusing on a total result. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is weak and 10 is strong, where would you rate yourself in each domain in terms of your self-care? Why are you placing yourself at each point? What could you do to move 1–2 points higher? Work through the tool alone, or with a supervisor, and return to it over time to keep it up-to-date.

The evidence-informed prompts in each domain on page 3 are suggestions only and are not a list of everything you could be doing. Completing this tool may take time: allow as much time as is necessary to make this a meaningful process for you. If you find yourself avoiding a prompt or question, try and explore why this might be. If you feel overwhelmed with the breadth of prompts overleaf, try and focus on two to three domains as a start: small changes in your life can make a big difference. *Note:* SPARK² was not designed as a psychometric tool.



Work

Supportive supervisor/colleagues; friendships through work; professional supervision (supervisor, peer or group); peer mentoring (being a mentor or a mentee); workplace morale; debriefing opportunities; noticing and valuing small successes; developing a continuing professional development (CPD) plan; being open to learning; developing your ability to receive critical feedback; identifying what is positive in your work environment; sufficient resources to complete the work; manageable workload and hours; participating in a project that has a start, middle and end; taking your annual leave; job rotation; employment contract conditions; salary and benefits; security of tenure; induction, mentoring and protected workload for new and newly-qualified staff; quality of the physical environment; learning to say no to unreasonable requests; family-friendly employment policies; access to useful human resource and employee support services; learning to prioritise; time- and diary-management skills.

Sleep

Quality and sufficient sleep (most adults need 7-9 hours; however, your own pattern matters); turning off your mobile/screens while sleeping; taking a screen break one hour before bedtime; avoiding stimulants and exercise before bedtime; keeping a consistent sleep schedule; if you are worried about something, write it down and come back to it when you wake up.

Technology

Turning off your work devices at the end of the working day; evaluate your overall time spent on screens; videoconferencing fatigue; digital platform boundary setting (mute, close, set availability, right to disconnect); avoid blurring the boundary between home and work life; digital monitoring by employers; balance of remote/hybrid working to avoid social isolation; assess positive or negative impact of social media on your mood, safety, and self-perception on your welfare (e.g., cyberbullying, digital stalking, doxxing, 'doom' / compulsive scrolling, abuse and harassment).

Emotional/Psychological

Being mindful; sense of humour and having fun; access to and quality of professional supervision; talking with a trusted person; counselling; keeping a reflective journal; developing a clear understanding of your needs; investing time and energy into relationships that are rewarding and energy-giving; work-related nightmares; rest and relaxation; expressing your emotions; identifying what gives you comfort; noticing signs of secondary traumatic stress - intrusive thoughts about cases, emotional numbing, difficulty leaving work behind mentally, avoidance (situations, thoughts, cases), or dreading particular case types; distinguishing exhaustion (burnout) from a sense of having been prevented from doing right by someone in your care (moral injury); cumulative emotional and psychological impact to the traumatic experiences of others (vicarious trauma); reflecting on whether institutional constraints are in conflict with your professional values, and finding an appropriate way to name or address this; seeking support that goes beyond peer conversation when needed.

Leisure & Relaxation

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

Support Networks (family, friends and colleagues)

Willingness to ask for support; being a support/peer mentor to others; volunteering and contributing to your local community; developing your work and non-work support networks; joining a support group; making sufficient time for leisure; investing time in, and nurturing, relationships with friends and family; contributing to change beyond your immediate workplace through professional associations, advocacy, or community action.

Physical & Mental Health

This domain covers the full range of what keeps you well. For example: assess your alcohol/substance consumption; looking after your physical, dental and mental health; exercise: the WHO recommend at least 150 minutes of moderate intensive physical activity a week; talking with a supportive person; quality of food and eating schedules; sexuality, intimacy and sexual health; time with animals/pets; trying out or rekindling your interest in hobbies, activities, social events or sport; keeping a journal; making time for creativity, whether or not you think of yourself as artistic.

Compassion & Kindness

Being compassionate and kind to yourself; treating yourself; not taking responsibility for things outside of your control; sufficient capacity to have compassion for others/ability to empathise; demonstrating compassion and kindness in your work; reflecting on what initially drew you to this work; rekindling/reconnecting with your sense of meaning from this work; reflecting on how having sustained contact with people in difficulty has affected you (positives and negatives).

Spirituality

Reflecting on whatever connects you to something larger than yourself, whether that is religious faith, cultural tradition, community belonging, nature, or personal practice; being part of a spiritual or religious community; yoga; mindfulness; prayer; gratitude journal; forgiveness for yourself and others; time in nature/outdoors; reading; finding something to be hopeful about; reflection; meditation; looking at the 'bigger picture'; focusing on what is positive in your life and community.

Supervision

Frequency and regularity of supervision; access to individual, peer, and group supervision formats; whether your supervision feels safe enough to discuss difficult or distressing cases honestly; whether there is reflective space in your supervision or whether it is limited to case management; feeling heard and supported rather than only monitored or evaluated; whether your workload and your emotional responses to clients are adequately explored; clarity about your professional role and boundaries; identifying the gap between the supervision you receive and the supervision you need; advocating for improved supervision arrangements where current provision is inadequate; if you are a supervisor yourself, reflecting on the quality and safety of the supervision space you offer others; consider whether external professional supervision would be helpful; if you have no access to reflective supervision, what steps could you take to advocate for or access it?

THE SPARK² TOOL

Reflective questions

1. How might your current energy level (see your check-in score on page 2) be influencing which domains on page 3 feel most pressing for you?
2. Now that you have completed the tool, what surprised you about your answers?
3. What three things would you like to improve that are within your control? How exactly will you make these changes?
4. What works for you to promote your health and welfare?
5. What sources of support do you find most helpful?
6. What coping mechanisms are you using that are harmful/not working?
7. Do you still get a sense of satisfaction and/or meaning from this work?
8. What are the personal warning signs when you start to feel like your self-care is slipping?
9. Are your / your employer's / society's expectations of what you can achieve reasonable?
10. What is not within your control and will require structural changes to the workplace/policies/ resources/management/etc.?

Record your new self-care plan here

What will I do?

By when?

How will I know it is working?

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.

Date:_____ Review date (every 6 months): _____

When a self-care plan is not enough

For some professionals, a focus on self-care can make things worse rather than better. If the problem is in the workplace, being asked to manage your response to it can feel like blame. Sometimes, it is workplace environment issues that are the problem and these may not always be within a worker's responsibility or control. Staff members can only do so much to look after themselves: employers and the state are also responsible for ensuring that professionals are provided with adequate resources and environments to perform their roles. Even with the best self-care plan, some work contexts can be overwhelming: sometimes the work is hard because of workloads that are unsustainable or due to inadequate support, poor or toxic management, and/or insufficient resources. In such circumstances, recourse to professional associations and/or a trade union, or collective action for change, may be the most appropriate mechanisms to improve professionals' welfare. Such collective change may be difficult or even unsafe in some contexts/countries.

If you are in a work environment which you believe is causing you harm, or your health is deteriorating, or you feel burnt out, and/or you feel that your practice is unsafe due to your health, you should consult your supervisor/manager/employee assistance department/doctor/crisis support service/counsellor.

Such a step may be hard, and you may feel further exposed, but it is important to access appropriate supports when necessary.

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