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WELLBEING REFLECTION

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The purpose of this resource is to increase awareness of different ways of being with ourselves and others. Informed by the window of tolerance (Ogden & Fisher, 2015) and polyvagal theory (Porges, 2011), this Wellbeing Reflection offers a continuum of states, from being present, to being entangled, to being avoidant. It invites us to notice where we are, and what we need, so we are better able to offer support to ourselves and to others.

I've recently been reflecting on the "paradoxical theory of change" (Beisser, 1970). This is the idea that change is made possible when we allow ourselves to be exactly where we are and who we are, when we "become fully aware of who or what that is" (Mackewn, 1997). The paradoxical theory of change suggests that trying to move on, without first acknowledging where we are, is unlikely, if not impossible.

For example, if my car is bogged, accelerating to get out of the mud will only spin the wheels, digging a hole, deeper and deeper. To get un-bogged I first need to acknowledge that I *am* bogged. Change will come not from acceleration, but from its opposite: pausing, noticing and accepting where I am. Then, I can look for ways to build points of traction. And to create traction, I need resources to draw upon.

While it might sound obvious in theory, I find the paradoxical theory of change challenging in practice. Pausing, noticing and accepting are especially difficult when I feel bogged down by the complexity of a child's situation, or I'm unsure how to help a Care Team who are struggling with blame and shame. Often, it feels safer to avoid the feelings, to work even harder, to do more research, to file, shred, or re-write my to-do list. These attempts to restore a sense of order, like the bogged yet accelerating car, can dig me deeper and deeper into a hole of exhaustion.

As Emily & Amelia Nagoski state, "denying that you experience the stress prevents you from dealing with the stress" (2020, p.41). So, if I'm to move out of a state of anxiety, and to offer myself support – so I will then be able to offer others support – I first need to notice how I'm feeling. A starting point might be to notice what's happening in my body and mind, to become present enough to make space for whatever is there. As Christopher Germer put it: "pain is like an angry bull: when it's confined to a tight stall, it will be wild and try to escape. When it's in a wide-open field, it will calm down" (2009, p.55).

This Wellbeing Reflection is an invitation to pause and to make space for our discomfort, to notice, with curiosity and non-judgement, possible signals that we might be losing our sense of presence. I'd also like to acknowledge that the very nature of educators' work with children and families impacted by trauma, shifts us away from a state of presence. Our movement into instinctive responses – such as entangled and avoidant responses – are our brains' best efforts to protect us. As you read through the examples in the tables, you might notice that avoidance seems like a form of refuge, when we have tried so hard, for so long and are too exhausted to take another step. It's also important to note that our experience is likely to be a mixture of presence, entanglement and avoidance.

The problem arises when we get stuck in entangled or avoidant states and lose our sense of direction (e.g. in vicarious trauma), when we lose a sense of the wholeness of our being.

Wherever we might recognise ourselves in the tables that follow, the key question is: *Are you present?* (i.e. can you do the things under the heading of presence, e.g. can you listen and take in things in?). Two further questions to consider include: *How do you know that you're coping? How do you know that you're not coping?*

Not only do we need to be in our window of tolerance enough to be able to answer these questions, we also need to notice the early warning signs quickly enough to take corrective action. If we miss that moment, our sense of reality can shift and we might start to normalise unhealthy patterns, e.g. I'm always anxious on Sunday afternoon; I'm always exhausted. If we can notice early enough, there's an opportunity to help ourselves and each other to return to a state of presence.

By presence, I mean what Marie-Anne Chidiac and Sally Denham-Vaughan (2007) have defined as a “*process of presence*”, that is, our “energetic availability and fluid responsiveness” (p.10). Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan's definition sent me back to Dan Siegel's acronym for integration: FACES: “flexible, adaptive, coherent, energised and stable” (Siegel, 2012, AI-32). Perhaps there is a resonance here, where integration forms a foundation for presence.

The invitation is to use our individual and collective awareness and intention to offer ourselves and to others, the resources we need to find our way back toward a state of presence.

Before beginning the reflective conversation, you might like to reflect together with your team, about ways to introduce this experience so it feels invitational, supportive and inclusive. What ideas might your team have, about ways to provide a sense of safety for this conversation?

Invitation for individual reflection

- How do you know you're traveling well?
- How do you know you're *not* traveling well?
- What are the *first signs* that you're not travelling well? E.g. Are you sleeping?
- How do you monitor and support your wellbeing: e.g. Co-counselling, reflective practice, educational supervision, Employee Assistance Program, after staff de-brief?
- As you read through the tables which follow, which words or phrases resonate most with your own experience?

N.B. The examples provided in the tables are starting points only. Space is provided at the bottom of each column for you to make your own meaning with your own examples.

- As your stress increases and you struggle to be present, where do you tend to move to: entangled or avoidant?
- When you think back to times when you've been stuck, what resources or supports helped you to move back toward a state of presence?
 - Who were your relational supports?
 - What calmed your body?
 - How did you know your body was being calmed? (i.e. what felt good, what helped you sleep better?)
 - How did you use your body to calm yourself? How did you use your breath (e.g. square breathing, take 5 breathing), sight (e.g. holiday photo on desk, flower in vase, walk in school garden), scent (e.g. crushed rosemary from herb garden, coffee), sounds/music (Spotify playlist to let off steam, to soothe, or sing along to), taste (e.g. comfort food), touch (e.g. pat the school dog, feel movement of breath with hand on heart and hand on belly), gravity/movement/balance (e.g.

bounce on rebounder, yoga pose, lie in hammock), movement/strength (e.g. ride your bike, run, lift weights, dance, dig in the garden)?

- How did you use your mind to calm yourself?

(E.g. stopped what you were doing, noticed that you were out of your window of tolerance; labelled your emotion. "I feel anxious and frustrated". Then used directed mindful awareness to shift your focus from what is wrong, to what is right. Reminded yourself that: *At this moment, on Sunday night, I am safe. Right here, right now, I am safe.* Ended each day sharing three gratitude with a colleague. Or, used all your senses to savour a new brand of chocolate.

- Out of everything you've used in the past, what were the three things you found most helpful?

Invitation for team reflection

- What ongoing, proactive, check-in structures do you currently have, to monitor and support your team's wellbeing?
- Reflecting collectively, in which areas (relationship, body, breath, senses, mind) does your team feel:
 - most resourced?
 - least resourced?
- Thinking together with your team, in which two areas might your team most benefit from strengthening its resources?
- What are your current resources in this area? What might you be able to teach each other or share with each other?
- Who do you know who seems to have strong resources in this area?

- What forms of professional learning might assist your team to strengthen both individual and collective wellbeing? What different approaches might be considered so everyone feels included?
- Where else might you go to explore new resources for your own wellbeing and that of your team?
- Who else might you know who is already doing similar professional learning? How might they support your learning?
- What kind of check-in structure might feel most supportive for you and your team, as you begin to apply what you're learning?

Other words to describe this state

Present

in your window of tolerance

responsive

flowing

socially engaged

integrated

Other words:

wise owl

Other images:

Entangled

hyper-aroused

reactive

whirlpool

mobilised

chaotic

guard dog

Avoidant

hypo-aroused

shut down

frozen

immobilised (Porges, 2011)

rigid (Siegel, 2012)

Tortoise head retracted into its shell.

Images might include

When we are in this state it might look like...

Present

Calm, alert, curious, flexible and focused attention

Prioritises and completes tasks, able to say “no” to new tasks to protect wellbeing and honour current priorities

Awareness of self, other and situation. Mindful of physical and social surroundings; connects socially

Monitors energy levels, takes breaks to rest and refresh

“Greater emotional expressivity” (Porges, 2011, p.283), able to be calm, engaged, grounded

Entangled

Easily distracted, easily startled, difficult to focus

Works harder and harder, difficult to complete tasks, gets lost in work activity, takes on too much

In own world, limited awareness of self, other or situation

Forgets to monitor needs of self, others, situation. Difficult to pause and take a break.

Anxious, angry, frustrated, irritable, wound-up

Avoidant

Unable to focus and think, could be ready for a nap

Procrastinates, might forget tasks, or not notice tasks

In other world, disconnected from self, other and situation; may appear clumsy or accident prone

Numb pain through excessive: screen time, alcohol and other drugs, food, exercise or work

Emotionally flat, bored, disengaged, depressed, unmotivated (Ogden & Fisher, 2015, p. 231)

What else might you notice:

When we are in this state it might sound like...

Present	Entangled	Avoidant
Easier to listen and absorb what others are saying (Porges, 2011, p. 283) “I’m curious about ___ can you say more about ___?”	“Sorry, can you say that again?”	“Did you just say something?”
More musical voice (i.e. increased vocal prosody, Porges, 2011)	Snappy comments, loud voice, may be a flood of speech, could be stuck on one topic	Dismissive comments, flat tone, increased periods of silence
“I’ve been feeling ...”	“I can’t concentrate” “What’s that noise?” Blame	“I’m fine!” “What do you mean, what do I feel?”
Active listening	Planning what to do say next while the other person speaks	Switched off, socially disengaged
Offering help, asking what a person might find helpful	Offering help and forgetting to check what the person might find helpful; controlling	Not noticing someone might need help; disorganised
Remembers important events	Forgets important events because energy is focused on survival in the here and now	“Sorry, did we have a meeting?” “Was I meant to be on duty?” “Have you seen my ...?”
Assertive, can say no	Can’t say no. Overwhelmed, lack energy to set boundaries	Can’t say no. Passive due to lack of awareness of self, other, situation
What else might you notice:		

When we are in this state it might feel like...

Present	Entangled	Avoidant
Balanced energy	Energy expending (Schoore, 2012, p.193)	Energy conserving (ibid), i.e. low energy, low action, heavy body
In step with self and others, can notice when to step back or step forward	Out of step with self and others and might over-step	Stepped down or stepped back
Able to turn toward and move through feelings	Stuck in a feeling	Beyond feeling (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020)
Emotional equanimity (Siegel, 2012); calm, capable, grounded	Irritable, uneasy, anxious, overwhelmed, angry, tense, disgusted	Numb, powerless, disconnected, depressed, shamed
Relaxed or toned muscles (Rothschild, 2017, p.39)	Tense or rigid muscles (ibid)	Floppy muscles
“Talking <i>with</i> ” (Freire, 1998, p.103)	“Talking <i>to</i> ” (ibid)	Unlikely or unable to listen and talk
“Being with” (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2007, p.10)	“Doing” (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2007, p.10)	Turning away, retreat, isolation
“Alert and calm. Attentive to, and connecting to, others” (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2007, p.10)	“Being for-, against-, not mattering-to-one-another” (Heidegger, 1953/1996, p. 114)	Being “without-one-another, passing-one-another-by” (ibid)
Other words:		

When we are in this state we might think thoughts such as ...

Present

What is my sphere of influence here?

This is tough and I can ask for help. What are my options?

What does my gut brain say about taking on extra duties at the moment?

I can “hold uncertainty and the space for others to step towards, and away” (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2020, p.28).

I *wonder* how our experience might be different?

I accept my “unfinishedness” (Freire, 1998, p.54)

What do I need to help sustain me in my work?

Other words:

Entangled

If I work harder and longer the situation will change.

Things would be better if someone else changes.
If only ...

I’m under so much pressure right now, so *no*, I can’t do one more thing!

They just need to follow the plan!
The problem with X is Y.
If they hadn’t ...

I know ...

I know...

I have to keep going, there’s no option!
No-one else can do this except me.

Avoidant

Why bother?

It’s not an issue!
What’s the point? Nothing ever works.
Indecisive or not thinking, cognitively shut down

What’s the point?
May as well save my energy

I don’t have the energy or capacity to think at the moment

No idea

I can’t think, my brain’s shut down

I can’t take another step

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