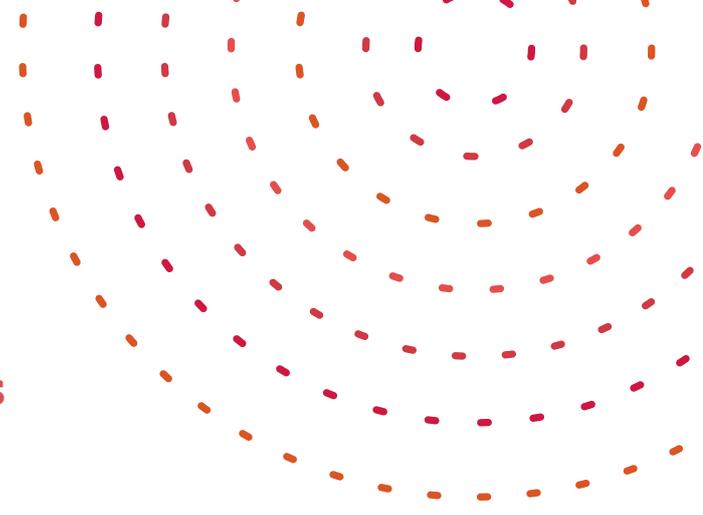


Stress management and burnout prevention
for those working on issues of gender
and sexuality in India

A Guidance Note for Organisational Intervention

(2020)

TARSHI AND NAZARIYA



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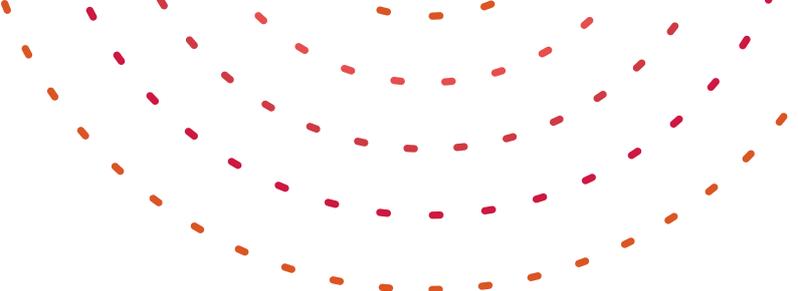
Foreword

In 2018 and 2019, going forward from previous interventions on stress and burnout, TARSHI collaborated with Nazariya: A Queer Feminist Resource Group¹ to conduct needs assessment workshops in Delhi, Guwahati, and in Hyderabad. The focus of this needs assessment was to identify the self-care and burnout prevention needs of human rights activists, caseworkers, and community members who work on gender, sexuality and rights, with a particular focus on issues of sex work, LGBT*QIA+ issues, gender-based violence and/or Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). Through mapping and documenting the unique stressors faced by people working in areas related to sexuality, across different socio-political and regional contexts, we are able to develop resources that can be shared with other organisations and used to inform future programmes.

This Guidance Note is prepared with the intention of creating:

1. Awareness of the importance of self-care and burnout prevention among activists and organisations
2. Spaces for dialogue, planning, and implementation of stress management and self-care programs in organisations, collectives, and networks
3. Practical tips and tools for stress management and self-care that are economical and self-sustaining

The intended reader of this document may or may not have experience in stress management and burnout prevention work. This document has been deliberately kept brief and we assume that the user of this guidance has given some thought to the subject prior to reading this. The report² of our Needs Assessment workshops is available online and may be accessed by anyone who would like a more detailed orientation to the context and issues involved.



Understanding stress and burnout

Familiar ways of referring to stress are feeling tense, pressured, being mentally, emotionally or physically stretched, under-resourced, and unsupported. This may be experienced by an individual due to personal, physical, occupational, social, financial, environmental and other such life factors.

Burnout may be best understood as the result of prolonged stress, leading to feeling fatigued, not just physically, but mentally and emotionally, a state of exhaustion and an inability to maintain interest, or motivation, in areas that were once engaging, or that the individual was deeply committed to.

Stress and burnout in human rights work

Stress and burnout are particularly relevant to the life experiences of those who pursue human rights work, and who may have clients across a spectrum of needs and vulnerabilities.

- In the roles of the activist, the rights advocate, and social worker, the individual is exposed to stories and experiences of trauma, helplessness, and injustice without adequate resources or capacity to address these at their root.
- Social workers suffer the consequences of having to meet unrealistic expectations that are associated with their work. They are expected to be committed to supporting others for

‘Burnout may be best understood as the result of prolonged stress, leading to feeling fatigued’



extended hours/periods of time and any hint of self-care, or feeling of stress is met with cynicism and accusation from clients and communities. This creates the added stress of guilt.

- Often those who take up social work and rights activism, treat it as a 'calling' and are able to connect it to their own lives, both as survivors or as allies/supporters and witnesses to injustice and rights violations.
- Rights based work and activism in India has to contend with constraints and threats particular and unique to country and regional contexts.

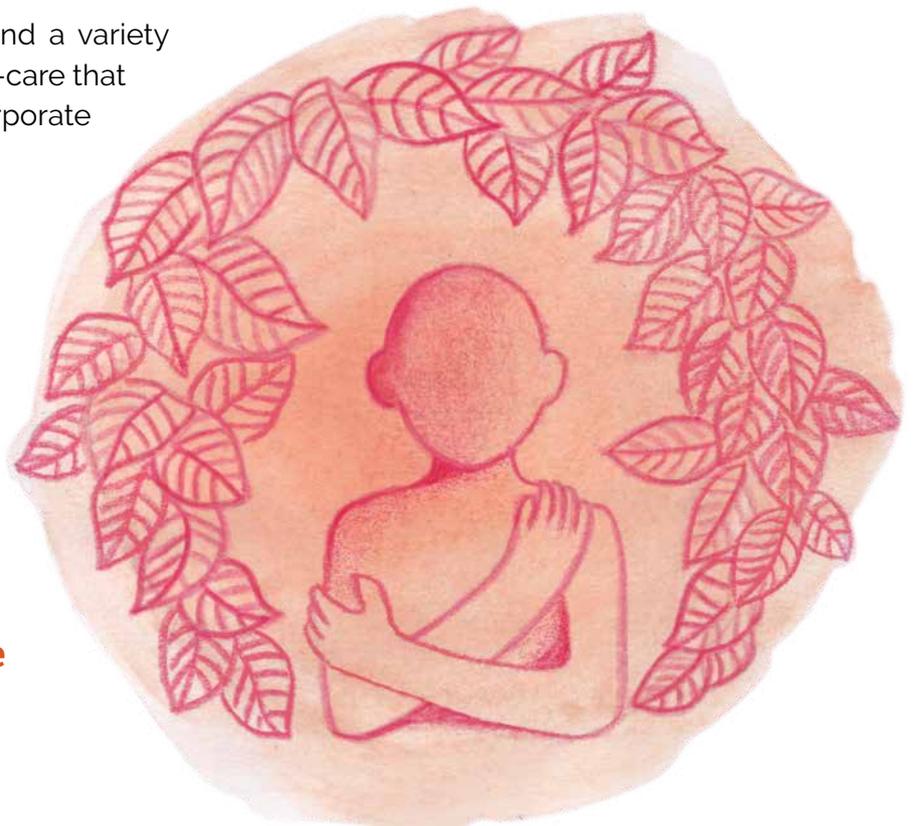
Insights from our needs assessment

Over the decades, attitudes towards issues of stress and burnout, including as documented through our work, have begun to change. Some aspects of stress are familiar and shared across communities and contexts, but there are unique differences that are due to diverse socio-cultural and political environments. Added to this, the intersectional nature of stress, i.e., the influence of multiple identities and circumstances that cause a person to be discriminated against, such as race, caste, gender, social and political situations, cause individuals and groups to experience stress in unique ways. In particular, the Covid-19 global pandemic is a source of stress, impacting each individual, organisational entity and all established systems and processes in multiple different ways. More than at any other recent time in history, the issue of stress and burnout needs to be prioritised.

Therefore, the need is for:

- Identified and acknowledged importance of non-judgmental, safe spaces where stress and burnout can be discussed.
- Learning how to manage one's stress and to learn how to thrive.
- Diverse support systems and a variety of tools/techniques for self-care that are easy to use and incorporate into one's life

'the influence of multiple identities and circumstances that cause a person to be discriminated against, such as race, caste, gender, social and political situations, cause individuals and groups to experience stress in unique ways.'



Intersection of environment, organisation, individual

Stress and burnout are experienced by the individual, but the impact is much wider. While self-care is about the self, it is an error to think that the entire responsibility for self-care, for preventing and coping with stress and burnout, rests upon the individual. Self-care is about the personal, socio-cultural, physical, work related, psycho-social, and also emotional and spiritual components of life experiences. This points to the tremendous role of society and systems in alleviating and preventing the experience of stress through opportunities and encouragement of self-care.

The exploration of tools and practices that support and contribute to self-care and wellbeing, has therefore included a spectrum of diverse possibilities such as meditation, exercise, self-reflection, recreation, support groups, supportive strategies at work, even including the assistance of animals by providing the space for pets at the workplace. It is important to understand that the strategies for self-care need to be different for different people and personalities, and are likely to vary across organisations, environment and culture.

Impact of dialogue

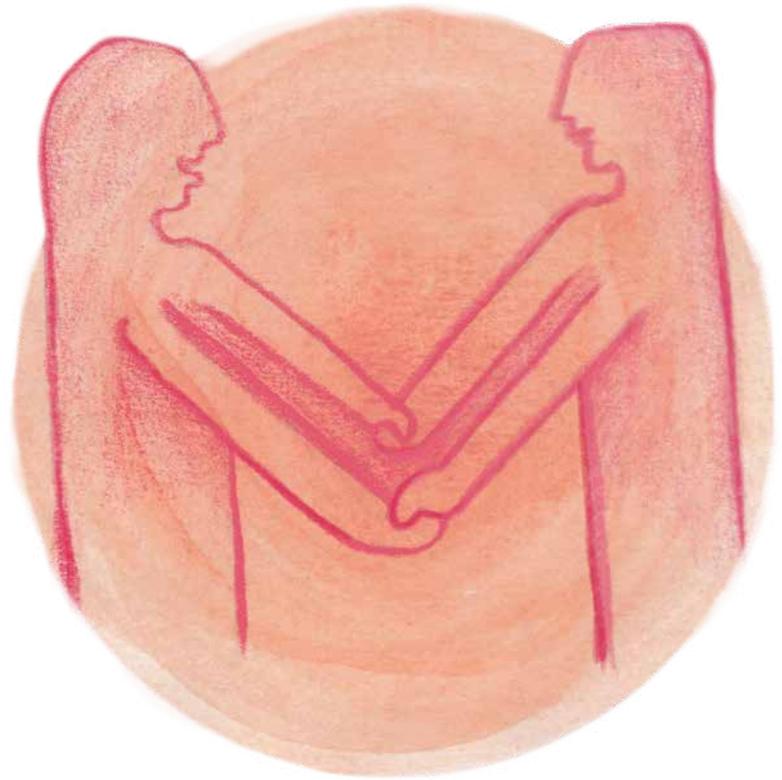
Organisations and teams would need to be prepared for a variety of responses and conversations that will emerge as a result of initiating dialogue on stress and burnout. In particular it is important to keep in mind that:

- It would be important to come to some agreements at the very beginning of the process and decide the elements needed to create a safe space for all.
- Discussing stress may by itself be stressful, and may allow difficult feelings to emerge, including grief, anger, guilt and other such. It is important to make space and time for stress relieving methods. These could be as simple as a group deciding to spend time sharing favourite food recipes at the end of a discussion on stress management.
- The opportunity to avail counselling which is culturally appropriate, client focused, leading to positive outcomes, and based on experience and best-practices, is a positive and preventive measure.

Internal assessment and parameters

Stress and burnout may not be approached in a narrow, medicalised way, focusing only on physical / physiological elements, or on the familiar understanding of illness, pathology and diagnosis. This area of work requires a comprehensive approach, looking at the individual as whole, integrating and connecting physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions, then looking at the environment and interactions across individuals and organisations, as well as the issues that are the focus of human rights work.

‘It is important to understand that the strategies for self-care need to be different for different people and personalities, and are likely to vary across organisations, environment and culture.’



To begin the process of discussion, some of the parameters of internal assessment would include:

Specific to the organisation and work

Physical / work space environment

- Hygiene
- Physical ambience including the basics, such as lighting and ventilation
- Basic comfort through maintenance of infrastructure, enabling work efficiency and effectiveness

Work profile

- Existence of stigma (sex worker rights, LGBT*QIA rights work)
- Potential for conflict and violence (LGBT*QIA rights work, civil rights activism)
- Degree of social and emotional interaction and engagement with others (counsellors, legal aid, first responders / crisis response teams)
- Complex psychosocial issues (suicide, self-harm, mental illness, trauma survivors)
- Community demographics and intersectionality (Working with older people, children with disabilities, migrants, LGBT*QIA issues)

Culture of the organisation

- Flexible / tightly controlled
- Inclusion and acceptance of diversity
- Existence of formal and informal support systems for teams
- Conflict resolution processes
- Do employees feel valued?

Profile of team members

- Age
- Gender identity
- Potential stressors outside the workspace (Eg, domestic violence; constraints of working from home during Covid-19; childhood trauma; being LGBT*QIA; facing violence; caregiving)

Self-assessment by team members

Self-assessment details need to be approached with care as some individuals may feel wary of sharing the truth with those they report to and their colleagues.

- Understanding what is meant by stress, burnout and self-care.
- Stress check on a 1-10 scale, asking simple questions such as 'How stressed out do I feel on an average day?' and 'I feel overwhelmed by stress' and 'I take time out to rest and do something enjoyable every day'.
- Support check on a scale of 1-10, asking simple questions such as 'I have the support I need at work to help me with my workload' and 'I have emotional support at work when I feel overwhelmed by my client's trauma.'
- Self-care reflections, based on simple guiding statements such as 'I would be less stressed out if (list three points)' and 'I would be happier if I could (list three points)'

Funding and resources

- Adequacy of infrastructure (availability of tools, supplies and resources)
- Salaries and dues to external service providers
- Programme resourcing
- Quality of engagement with funders

Factors external to the organisation

Socio-political context of the macro environment

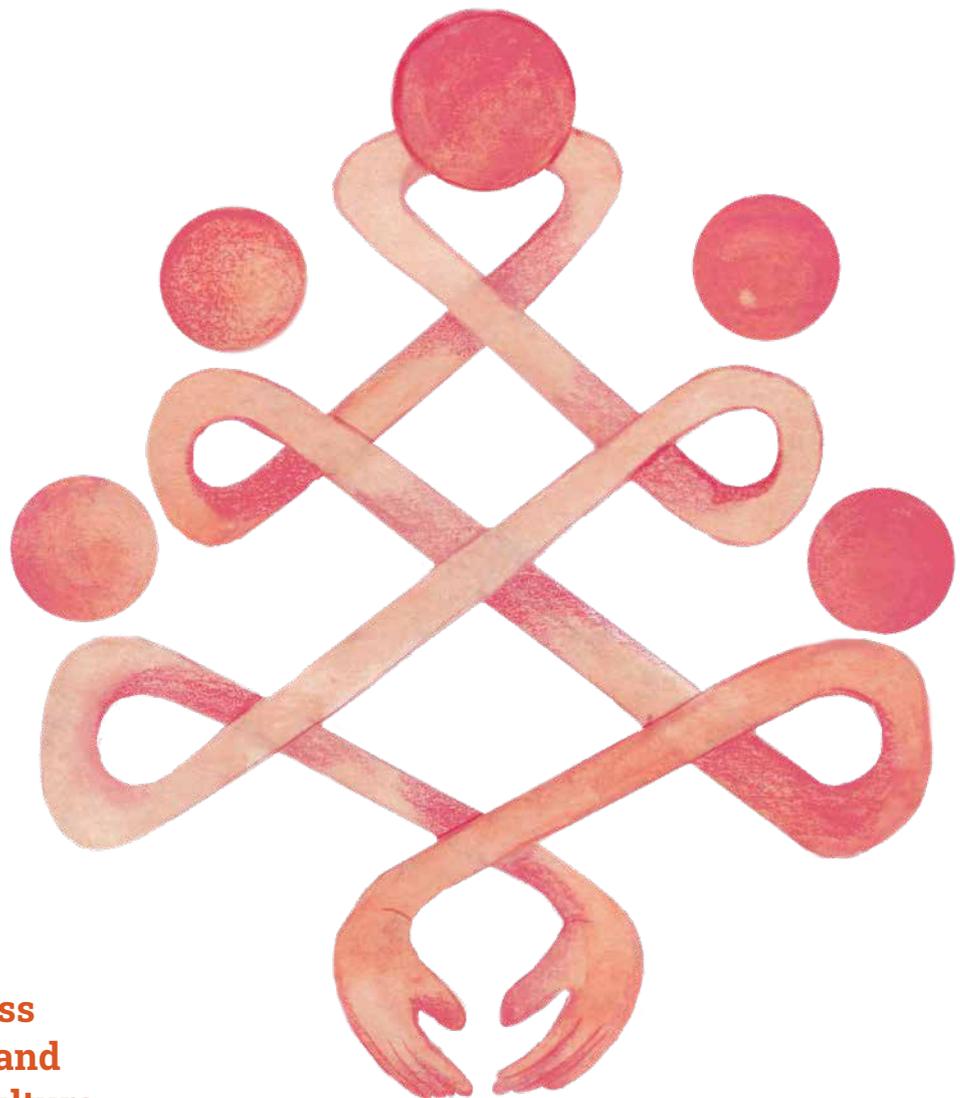
- Potential for / existence of conflict and violence
- Availability of support and prevention / protection mechanisms
- Interconnections between rights violations, law and enforcement and the politics of power

Designing the change

Points to address when designing the intervention:

- This is work-in-progress and an ongoing process.
- This intervention may require a culture and attitude change within the organisation, so as to integrate an understanding, and the vocabulary of well-being, into all planning and monitoring of work and productivity.
- Everybody in the organisation, across levels, influences and is influenced by culture change. Everybody must be included and supported.
- Leadership commitment is crucial. This change of culture and attitude must be practiced and demonstrated including through staff policies..

- Policy and process changes in other functional areas, experiments with alternative methods of working and other such changes may be required.
- A pilot plan for a short period of time will be a good way to understand what is required for the long term.
- External resources may be required to help train and support team members and groups in self-care, stress management processes and to guide safe interpersonal interactions so that employees feel secure enough to discuss stress and self-care needs with colleagues, seniors and juniors. Such resources may include counsellors, stress management and self-care consultants, practitioners of tools and techniques for the management of stress and to strengthen resilience.
- Sources of stress in the external, socio-political macro-environment may be out of the influence of control of the organisation. Possible mitigatory measures may be identified as part of the intervention, as many organisations have done while dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.



‘Everybody in the organisation, across levels, influences and is influenced by culture change. Everybody must be included and supported.’

Implementing the change

This is an area of activity where the preparatory dialogue and assessment are in themselves an intervention. In spaces where dialogue and tools for stress management and self-care are not part of the systems and processes of working or have not received focus, the first time a group sits together to bring this focus will be the first intervention, the beginning of change!

Aspects to keep in mind at the beginning

- i. Each person understands and approaches stress and self-care in their own unique way.
- ii. Related concepts such as burnout, resilience, trauma, support, counselling, and safe spaces may be familiar to teams used to working on these themes with their clients and communities, but if this is the first time they are using these lenses to explore their own lives, there could be unforeseen challenges.
- iii. Most people may consider stress a good thing. This mindset and understanding is the first aspect that needs to change. A training workshop approach may be adopted. This should be facilitated by the persons most suited within the organisation to develop the agenda and content for this. Alternatively an external resource person may be brought in for this purpose.
- iv. It is important to start building a common vocabulary related to stress, burnout and self-care, where terms and words in the local language are included. This will be a continuously evolving vocabulary with evolving ideas and concepts.

Some points to address during implementation

- i. Documenting the process will enable monitoring, evaluation, and course correction.
- ii. Sustained implementation will require time and space for regular discussion.
- iii. A minimum required result of regular tasks and services meant for clients and the community must be identified and agreed upon even as self-care and stress management interventions are implemented.
- iv. It should not be taken for granted that team members will be able to handle this change and still continue their routines exactly as before. Managing this change is crucial. Due to the emotional and psychosocial impact on team members of this intervention theme, some people may feel overwhelmed. They may require support from the organisation and

other team members. This will ensure that clients and external service users continue to receive the content and quality of services that are committed to them. Internally, support groups, a buddy system, and self-care opportunities may be found to be useful. However, it is important to identify external resources, particularly for emotional and psychosocial wellbeing, that may be made available for team members.

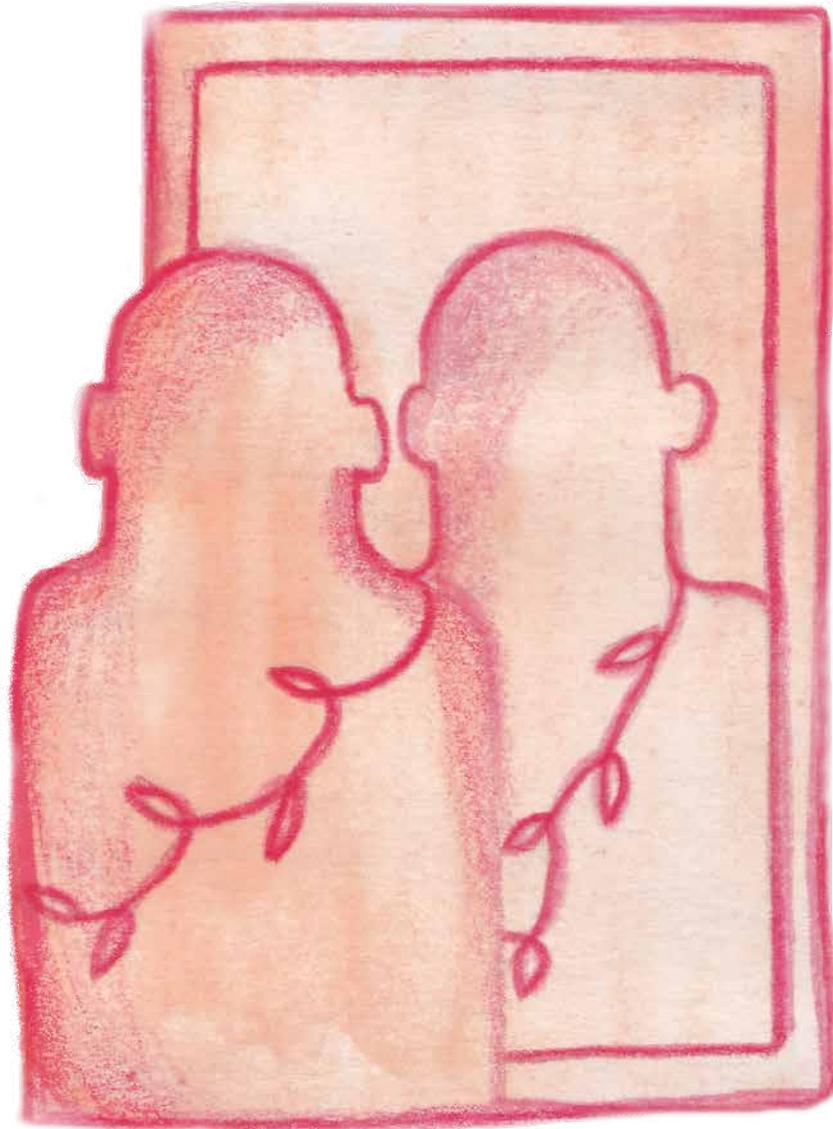
- v. This intervention will require investment of money, time, and other resources. Expecting team members to invest their own time outside of work to discuss these issues or practice tools and techniques may be counter productive.

'...concepts such as burnout, resilience, trauma, support, counselling, and safe spaces may be familiar to teams... but if this is the first time they are using these lenses to explore their own lives, there will be unforeseen challenges.'

Monitoring outcome

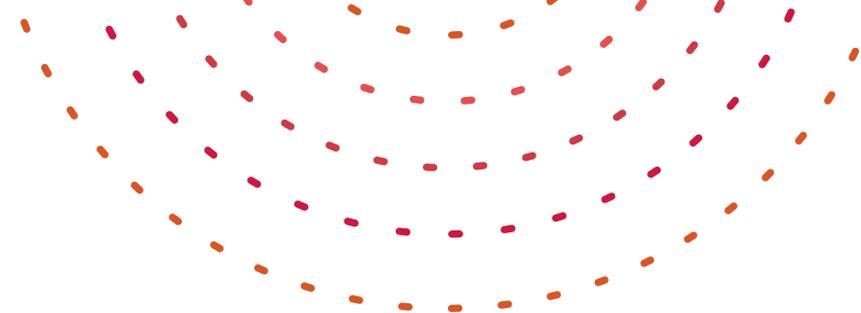
As mentioned earlier, pre-intervention assessments need to be recorded for the purpose of ongoing and regular evaluation of outcome and impact.

- Self-assessment by each team member, and organisational assessment according to existing performance assessment processes are suggested.
- The parameters identified for internal assessment at the planning stage may be used for periodic monitoring and evaluation purposes.
- Self-assessment details need not be shared with others but the results of whether there is felt improvement may be shared for the purpose of monitoring and evaluation.



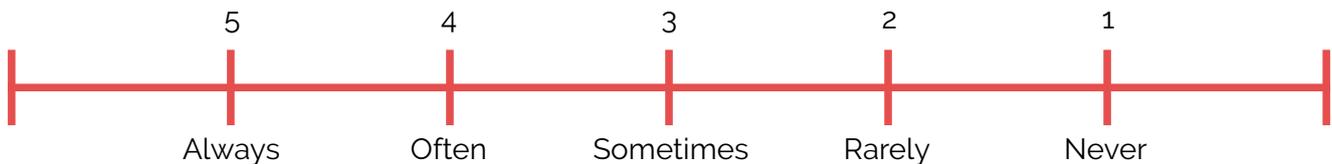
With this document we attach two inventories:

1. **Organizational Self--Care Assessment Tool:** This assessment tool provides an overview of strategies to create a healthy work environment where a culture of self-care is a priority.
2. **Personal Self-Care Assessment Tool:** This assessment tool provides an overview of effective strategies to maintain self-care.



Organizational Self-Care Assessment Tool

Using the scale below (1 = never, 5 = always), identify how frequently your organization engages in the listed activities that support organizational self-care.



Please note: Some of the questions may not apply to informal groups/collectives, and can be rated as a '1' in such cases

TRAINING AND EDUCATION

- The organization/collective conducts regular inputs with its employees/staff/members on stress and mental health.
- The organization/collective provides education to all its employees/staff/members about stress and its impact on health, well-being, burnout, and fatigue.
- The organization/collective provides all employees/staff/members with stress management training sessions or sends them to such training sessions.
- The organization/collective provides employees/staff/members with training or inputs related to their job profile/ responsibility in the collective.
- Employees/staff/members of the collective are given opportunities to attend refresher trainings on new topics related to their roles and responsibilities.
- There is a capacity building component for employees/staff/members in the programme budget/money raised for the collective.

SUPPORT AND SUPERVISION

- All employees/staff/members have regular supervision/check-ins about work and general well-being
- Employee job descriptions and responsibilities are clearly defined.
- Part of supervision is used to address job profile stress and self-care strategies.
- Part of supervision is used for on-going assessment of workload and time needed to complete tasks.
- Staff/members are encouraged to understand their own stress reactions and take appropriate steps to develop their own self-care plan.
- Employees/staff/members are welcome to discuss concerns about the organization/collective or their job with administrators/other collective members without negative consequences (e.g., being treated differently, feeling like their job/group membership is in jeopardy or having it impact their role on the team).

- Employees/staff/members are encouraged to take breaks, including lunch and vacation time/in case of a collective, encouraged to take some time off the collective activities.
- The organisation supports peer-to-peer activities such as support group and mentoring.

EMPLOYEE/STAFF/MEMBER CONTROL AND INPUT

- The organization/collective provides opportunities for employees/staff/members to provide inputs on organization/collective policies and processes.
- The organization/collective reviews its policies on a regular basis to identify whether they are helpful or harmful to the health and wellbeing of its employees/staff/members.
- The organization/collective provides opportunities for staff members to identify their professional goals.

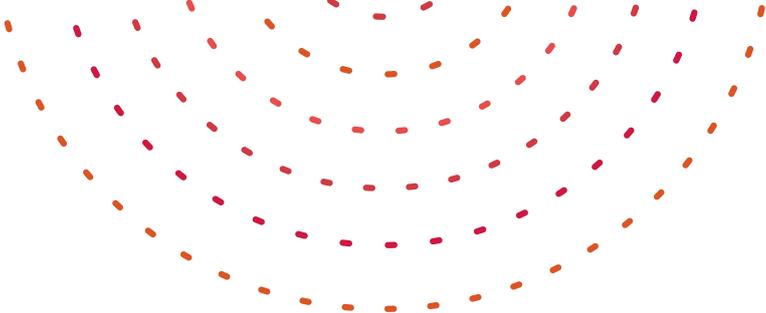
COMMUNICATION

- Employees/staff/members have regular team meetings.
- Topics related to self-care and stress management are addressed in team meetings.
- The organization/collective has a way of evaluating staff satisfaction on a regular basis.
- Regular discussions of how people and departments are communicating, and relaying information are addressed in team meetings.

WORK ENVIRONMENT

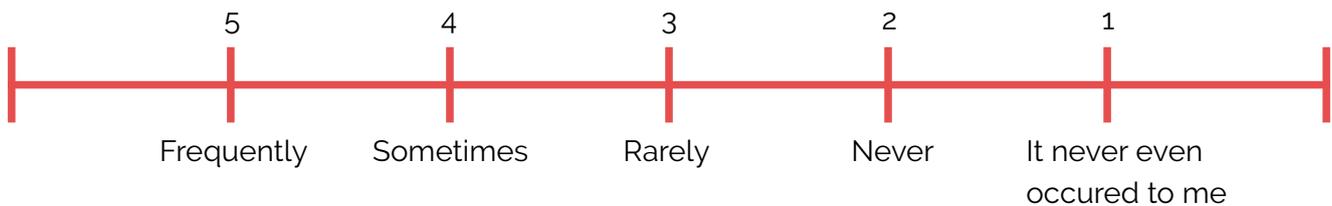
- The work environment is well-lit.
- The work environment is physically well-maintained (e.g., clean, secure, etc.).
- The workspace has a first-aid kit with basic medicines, sanitary napkins, and condoms.
- Information about self-care is posted in places that are visible or often referred to in discussions/meetings.
- You have access to information about employee/staff/members rights/entitlements (such as leave, benefits (insurance), etc.).
- The organization/collective provides opportunities for wellness and play amongst employees/staff/members.
- The organization/collective has a no-tolerance policy-process, attitude, and principles concerning sexual harassment.
- The organization/collective has a child-safeguarding policy.
- The organization/collective has a no-tolerance policy-process, attitude, and principles concerning discrimination and bullying.
- Workplace/group issues, including grievances and personal conflicts are managed appropriately and remain confidential.

Adapted from: https://ctacny.org/sites/default/files/trainings-pdf/org_and_personal_self_care_assessments_volk_et_al.pdf



Personal Self-Care Assessment Tool

How often do you do the following? (Rate, using the scale below):



PHYSICAL SELF-CARE

- Eat regularly (e.g. breakfast & lunch)
- Eat fresh and healthy food
- Exercise, or go to the gym, yoga, run, judo
- Get regular medical care for prevention
- Get medical care when needed
- Take time off when you're sick
- Get massages (e.g. hair massage, body massage, facial/face massage, spa)
- Do physical activity that is fun for you (e.g. dancing)
- Have sex/get intimate/masturbate
- Get enough sleep
- Wear clothes you like
- Take vacations
- Take day trips or mini-vacations
- Get away from technology such as, emails, work related/demanding phone calls
- Be able to switch off from social media (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, etc.)
- Anything else that you do (e.g. Watching films, listening to music, etc.)

PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF-CARE

- Take steps to decrease stress in your life
- Make time for self-reflection
- Go to see a psychotherapist or counselor for yourself
- Write in a journal
- Read material unrelated to work
- Have hobbies
- Say no to extra responsibilities sometimes (at home or at work)
- Anything else that you do

EMOTIONAL SELF-CARE

- Spend time with others whose company you enjoy
- Stay in contact with important people in your life
- Treat yourself kindly (supportive inner dialogue or self-talk)
- Feel proud of yourself
- Re-read favorite books, review favorite movies
- Identify and seek out comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places
- Allow yourself to cry. Find things that make you laugh
- Express your outrage in a constructive/creative way (activities that do not involve self-harm)
- Play with children
- Play with pets/animals
- Anything else that you do

SPIRITUAL SELF-CARE

- Make time for prayer, meditation, reflection/activities you find relaxing
- Spend time in nature
- Participate in a spiritual gathering, community, or group
- Be open to inspiration
- Cherish your optimism and hope
- Identify what is meaningful to you and notice its place in your life
- Express gratitude
- Celebrate milestones with rituals that are meaningful to you
- Remember and memorialize loved ones who have died
- Contribute to or participate in causes you believe in
- Read inspirational literature
- Anything else that you do

WORKPLACE/PROFESSIONAL SELF-CARE

- Take time to eat lunch
- Take time to chat with co-workers (nothing related to work)
- Make time to complete tasks
- Identify projects or tasks that are exciting, growth-promoting, and rewarding for you
- Set limits with clients and colleagues
- Balance your caseload so no one day is "too much!"
- Arrange your workspace so it is comfortable and comforting
- Get regular supervision or consultation
- Negotiate for your needs
- Have a peer support group (circle of friends/people you can talk to)
- Anything else that you do

Adapted from: <https://www.nami.org/getattachment/Extranet/Education,-Training-and-Outreach-Programs/Signature-Classes/NAMI-Homefront/HF-Additional-Resources/HF15AR6SelfCare.pdf>

TARSHI

TARSHI, founded in 1996, has firmly held an affirmative and rights-based approach to sexuality. Our perspective is sex-positive, non-heteronormative, pleasure-affirming, and not fear-based. We strongly believe in each individual's right to make their own choices in freedom and dignity. We work in the best interests of all, aim to be as inclusive as possible, remain non-judgemental, maintain boundaries and confidentiality, and treat each other with respect, in terms of the people we work with, directly and indirectly, or when it comes to reporting about people and incidents related to our work. We strive for high quality in our work, making sure that the information we give is both accurate and easily accessible – that is, readily available to those it is intended for, easy to understand, inclusive and audience-oriented.

Vision

TARSHI believes that all people have the right to sexual wellbeing and to a self-affirming and enjoyable sexuality.

Mission

TARSHI supports and enables people's control and agency over their sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing through information dissemination, knowledge and perspective building, within a human rights framework.

Nazariya

Nazariya was formed in October 2014 by a group of queer feminist activists. Located in Delhi/NCR with a South Asian presence, Nazariya was started to sensitise the work and culture of groups and individuals that are working on issues of gender based violence, livelihoods, education and health from a LBT perspective through research & evaluations, capacity building and advocacy. We believe that queer perspective with a focus on LBT issues will help build linkages between issues of people marginalised on the basis of gender and sexuality with the existing work on violence, livelihoods, education, health etc. and thereby impact the discourse on pleasure, desire, rights and entitlements.

Mission

Nazariya is a queer feminist organisation that believes all LBT* people have the innate capacity to understand, demand and access their rights. The organisation works towards affirming the rights of queer people (LBT) by making visible their lives and creating an enabling environment where queer lived realities is a non-negotiable and informs the work and discourse of organisations and institutions.

Visit the TARSHI (Website: <http://www.tarshi.net> Facebook: [@tarshingo](#), Instagram: [@tarshingo](#), Twitter: [@tarshingo](#), YouTube: [tarshingo](#)) and Nazariya (Facebook: [@NazariyaQFRG](#), Instagram: [@nazariya.qfrg](#), Twitter: [@NazariyaQFRG](#), YouTube: [Nazariya QFRG](#)) for more tools and resources on self-care.



TARSHI

N a z a r i y a

A Queer Feminist Resource Group