

# 5RF WORKBOOK

IMPROVING RESILIENT COPING  
IN PARAMEDIC SERVICES



# A Self-Care Workbook



**Dan Bilsker PhD**

**Merv Gilbert PhD**

Vancouver Psych Safety Consulting  
[www.psychhealthandsafety.org](http://www.psychhealthandsafety.org)

*Dan is a psychologist who works as a psychotherapist and researcher. His research is focused on improving psychological self-care and understanding men's psychological health.*

*Merv worked as a psychologist with children, youth and adults for 30 years. He currently consults and conducts research in the area of psychological health and safety in the workplace.*

*This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is provided with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering psychological or other professional services. If expert assistance or treatment is needed, the services of a competent professional should be sought.*

Funding for this book was provided by WorkSafeBC, with the support of the BC First Responders Mental Health Committee.

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# What are the Psychological Hazards of Paramedic Services?

A psychological hazard is a stressful feature of the workplace that may cause psychological injury. Paramedic Services personnel are exposed to a greater intensity and frequency of psychological hazard than are workers in most other sectors. Severe motor vehicle accidents, suicides, drug overdoses, etc., are just part of the job for Paramedic Services workers. A more common stress is caring for vulnerable groups – like fragile elderly and children – but not being able to keep them entirely safe. Paramedic Services personnel share this high stress exposure with other first responders like firefighters and police officers.

**Critical Incidents.** Intense and sometimes overwhelming situations in which individuals are subject to the threat or reality of severe harm. Certain critical incidents are especially stressful such as serious injury to a child.

**Chronic or Cumulative Stress.** Repeated exposure to stress such that the individual feels progressively worn down and more vulnerable to stress. With this kind of buildup, the next incident might be the final straw, enough to overwhelm this person's coping ability.

**Organizational Stress.** Ongoing stress associated with the workplace: shift-work, communication system failures, increased workload, staff shortages, etc.

Any of these hazards can impact the psychological functioning of Paramedic Services personnel. When stress threatens to overwhelm an individual's coping ability, we describe the situation as psychologically hazardous. Intense or cumulative stress can lead to a psychological injury:

a negative impact upon the person's emotional, cognitive or behavioral functioning. It may present as overwhelming worry, self-doubt, low mood, alcohol or drug misuse, burnout or excessive anger.

If psychological injuries do not resolve, they can transition to conditions requiring treatment. Low mood → depression; worry → anxiety disorder, etc. If effective treatment is not provided, a worker may experience reduced work function ('presenteeism'), absenteeism or disability.

Addressing psychological hazards is the responsibility of both the employer and employee. The employer must make a systematic effort to minimize the risk from hazards that are an intrinsic part of the job. The paramedic service organization is responsible for mitigating the psychological hazards of Paramedic Services work. Employers are responsible for implementing a psychological health & safety program and ensuring that the right support is available to first responders. (That might include training the skills in this workbook.) Employers establish peer support and Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) programs; create Paramedic Services environments where exercise, adequate nutrition or relaxation are possible; determine schedules that allow adequate sleep and downtime; and provide employee assistance programs and benefits that support appropriate psychological treatment.

The responsibility of the employee is to inform the employer of possible hazards and participate in activities to reduce risk.



# What is Psychological Resilience?

Psychological Resilience is the capacity to withstand high stress exposure: (i) able to get through a high stress situation without being psychologically injured; (ii) able to “bounce back” from a psychological injury and return to your usual self. The skills taught by this workbook can increase your Psychological Resilience.

You’ve probably heard of Psychological Resilience – because members of the Paramedic Services community want staff to be equipped with skills

to resist and recover from high-stress exposure. Psychological Resilience helps Paramedic Services personnel handle exposure to intense stress, whether critical incidents, cumulative build-up or workplace conflicts.

We will focus on **resilient coping**—that is, coping with stressful situations in a way that supports resilience. Practicing resilient coping can help prevent psychological injury.



# What is the 5RF Workbook?

This workbook is a self-care guide for enhancing Psychological Resilience in Paramedic Services workers. It builds on a research project to identify critical resilient coping skills in the Paramedic Services workforce. The research project was conducted by Vancouver Psych Safety Consulting in collaboration with British Columbia Emergency Health Services (BCEHS), University of British Columbia Department of Psychology and Ambulance Paramedics of British Columbia (CUPE 873). The research was funded by WorkSafeBC through its First Responder Mental Health Committee.

The research team which carried out the research project included:

1. Dr. Dan Bilsker and Dr. Merv Gilbert of Vancouver Psych Safety;
2. Dr. Ingrid Sochting and Dr. Lynn Alden of the University of British Columbia, who generously shared time and knowledge.

The project findings can be found in two publications:

Bilsker D, Gilbert M, Alden L, Sochting I, Khalis A. (2019) Basic dimensions of resilient coping in paramedics and dispatchers. *Australasian Journal of Paramedicine*. Jun 3;16. 2.

Bilsker D, Gilbert M, McCall, M (2019) What makes paramedics and dispatchers resilient? *Canadian Paramedicine News*, February/March: 27-29.

In the research project, we set out to answer one key question: Which coping behaviours of Paramedic Services personnel contribute to resilience? We used several research methods:

- interviewed paramedics, call-takers and dispatchers from urban and rural settings;
- consulted with union, management and clinical experts;
- administered a survey of resilient coping to Paramedic Services personnel in B.C. (700 responded!), including a text box where respondents could share their ways of coping with stress.

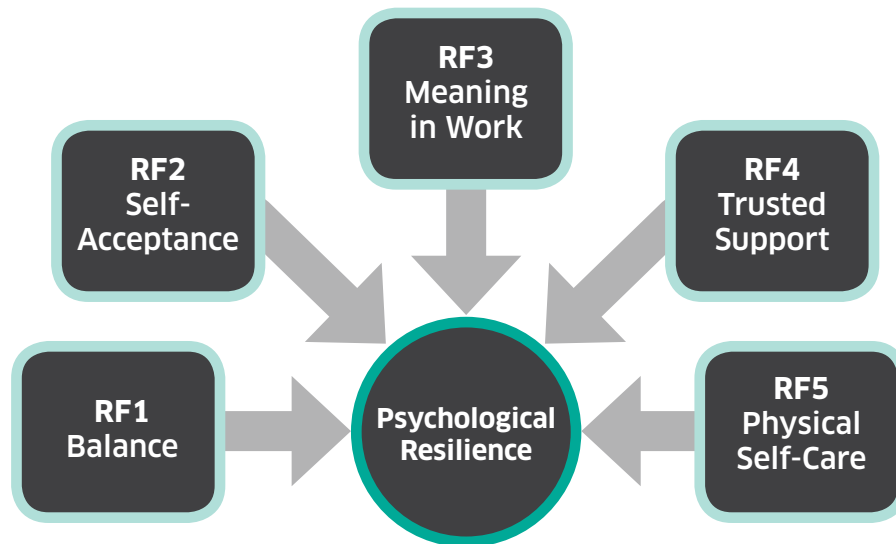
We identified **5 Resilience Factors (5 RFs)** critical to effective coping with Paramedic Services work stress. These RFs help Paramedic Services personnel to be psychologically resilient, reducing the risk of psychological injury.

This workbook:

1. Tells the story of Paramedic Services personnel coping with high levels of stress in a resilient way.
2. Provides a framework for understanding resilience.
3. Teaches a set of skills for resilient coping with Paramedic Services stress.
4. Shares the words of Paramedic Services personnel about how they cope with stress



# What are the 5 Resilience Factors?



**1 Balance:** maintaining balance between work and personal life. Building balance will increase your ability to recover after a demanding shift and make the most of your personal time.

**2 Self-Acceptance:** *not* being harshly self-critical of yourself nor feeling demoralized after performing less than perfectly – having a compassionate attitude towards yourself. Building this coping factor will increase your ability to judge yourself in a fair and self-accepting way.

**3 Meaning in Work:** continuing to find meaning in your work, having a sense of purpose that is compatible with personal values. Building this coping factor will increase your ability to match your values and personal goals to the job you are doing.

**4 Trusted Support:** having a supportive social group of individuals whom you trust. Building this coping factor will increase your ability to connect with co-workers, friends or family members who can provide the support you (*we all*) need.

**5 Physical Self-Care:** protecting your physical health through exercise, nutrition and rest. Building this coping factor will increase your ability to stay fit and energized even after years in the job.



# How to Use the 5RF Workbook

The 5RF workbook was developed for Paramedic Services personnel: paramedics, dispatchers and call-takers. Its goal is to enhance your resilient coping.

The 5RF has been created from three essential ingredients:

- 1 Practical Knowledge of psychologists who work to enhance resilient coping.
- 2 Scientific Knowledge of researchers who study resilience in Paramedic Services.
- 3 Personal Knowledge of Paramedic Services workers who shared their hard-won wisdom.

The 5RF consists of five modules, one for each of the Resilience Factors. Each module includes a description of the factor, quotes from Paramedic Services personnel, practical skills, worksheets and a story to illustrate the factor.

**Note** that if you are reading the e-version of this workbook (PDF file) on your computer, then the worksheets can be filled-in and the file saved.

**But beware:** if you share the workbook with a peer, remember to send only a copy from which you have deleted the personal content from your worksheets.

You might start by skimming through the book to get an idea of the content. When you are done, you can go back to the start and work through each section at your own pace. Or you might decide to focus on one of the RFs that seems most relevant.

You may want to discuss the 5RF with a trusted colleague, family member or friend. If you are involved with a mental health professional (such as a psychologist) or a service provided by your employer (such as counselling or peer support), you may want to use the 5RF to guide the work you do.





# RF1 Balance

The first RF is **Balance**, maintaining balance between work and personal life. This could involve: taking appropriate breaks from the job; finding ways to relax during or after the workday; or staying engaged with hobbies and family life

If the balance between work and personal life becomes destabilized, you can feel mentally exhausted or overwhelmed. As one paramedic told us: “I know too many paramedics who, through overwork/no work-life balance, are killing their minds and bodies”. Balance increases your sense of satisfaction, makes you less likely to be impacted by a workplace stressor, helps you unwind after a bad shift, gives you reinforcement when the job is frustrating, and adds meaning to your life. When you have balance, you are stronger, more resilient, mentally healthier and (last but not least) *happier*.

If imbalance continues, you may reach the state of *burnout*. When you burn out, you feel exhausted: physically, mentally and emotionally. It becomes hard to commit yourself to the job or to care about co-workers and patients. You might become cynical or bitter about the work and the workplace.

Imbalance between work and personal life can happen because:

**1** **You are overwhelmed by job demands.**  
The demands become so intense that you don't have time or energy left for personal life – friends, family, self-care and recreation. Over the course of time, you may feel like you have no personal life, that you live only to work.

*“I remember I had a very hard shift and when I left the shift a co-worker said ‘that door is closed, leave it behind’. That really helped, I’ve never forgotten that. There needs to be a separation between work and your life.”*

*- Paramedic Services dispatcher*

**2** **You are over-identified with work.**  
You feel so committed to the job that you place less priority on personal life. You experience your personal life as less meaningful, less real, than your work life. Your work seems like the place where you authentically live and your personal life (romantic partner, friends, family, recreation) merely a place where you wait between shifts.

*“When I don’t set goals outside of the EMS, it begins consuming my life – I love the work so it’s like a comfort blanket. Focusing on other things is my best coping strategy”*

*- Paramedic Services paramedic*

We all need to balance work and personal life in order to be emotionally healthy. If a total focus on work becomes your normal way of living, you become “emotionally undernourished”. Then the risk of stress disorders or physical injury is increased. Balance means taking appropriate breaks from work, finding ways to relax during or after a shift, maintaining both work and personal life and engaging with hobbies and family life.

**This module teaches the skill of improving Balance.**



# RF1 Balance

To begin, here is a quick self-assessment to estimate how you are doing with Balance, compared to our Paramedic Services research sample. Indicate your level of agreement with each of the following 3 statements. Then add up your Total score. This will help you spot an opportunity for change.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I make time for my personal and family life, even when the job is very demanding.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I make an effort to get a normal sleep, even when the job is very demanding.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I have hobbies or interests that I pursue, even when the job is very demanding.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

TOTAL	LOW					LOW AVERAGE					HIGH AVERAGE					HIGH				
	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	

# RF1 Balance

## Improving Balance

### 1. Identify activities to increase

One part of improving Balance is increasing your level of non-work activity. This could mean becoming more involved in your existing personal activities or finding time for new activities that you will find enjoyable.

There are three areas where you might increase your activity. These are: Involvement with Family & Friends; Personally Rewarding Activities; and Self-Care.

#### **Involvement with family and friends**

Go out to dinner with a romantic partner. Stay in touch with family by phone, email or social media. Invite co-workers over to hang out. Participate in activities in your community (e.g. join a drop-in soccer or frisbee team, take an online class).



*“Play with the kids, hang with friends.”*

*“Create a place separate from work, to not talk about work—a group of friends, a hobby...”*

*“I take shifts off and engage in community activities. It helps me breathe.”*

*“I do not bring home my work and take it out on my family.”*

#### **Increasing your social involvement will make a difference because:**

1. It helps you stay connected to others who are there for you
2. It gives you an opportunity to meet new people
3. It allows you to focus on interests other than your work

# RF1 Balance

## Improving Balance

### Personally Rewarding Activities

Walk or run in a park. Do hobbies or crafts (*make stuff*). Plan travel (*palm trees are helpful*). Go to a movie or concert.



*“Make fun a priority in your life.”*

*“Walk/hike alone (preferably in the wilderness) to clear and work through your thoughts.”*

*“Make time to pursue hobbies that fit around a schedule, ones that can be done quickly and calmly.”*

*“Put on a full album from start to finish or a movie for a full self care session.”*

*“Do a trip and leave the job and the home city behind and hit the ‘reset’ button.”*



# RF1 Balance

## Improving Balance

### Self-Care

#### Examples:

Practice a relaxation method, like deep breathing, meditation or yoga (yes, yoga). Learn to prepare healthy meals.

*“Mindfulness and meditation programs should be offered and I almost think mandatory.”*

*“I have found a float (sensory deprivation) chamber to be beneficial in calming my mind.”*

### Increasing your activity in the area of self-care will make a difference because:

1. It will directly enhance your sense of well-being
2. It allows you to recover your energy



### Relaxation Methods

Learning to relax (body and mind) enhances your ability to recover from demanding shifts. A number of relaxation methods have been shown to be effective: Progressive Muscle Relaxation, Diaphragmatic Breathing, Meditation, Mindfulness, etc. It's really about individual preference – what a person is most comfortable with. Some prefer to work with breath, others with muscle release or mental focus...

There is a lot of information about relaxation on the web: much of it helpful, some inaccurate or flaky. So a 'buyer beware' attitude is appropriate. If you don't already have a favourite relaxation method, here are a couple of resources to consider:

- The Calm App. This inexpensive app has a constantly-evolving collection of tools to foster relaxation and sleep. Search “Calm Meditation and Sleep Stories”.
- A free-download Relaxation Training audiofile. It walks you through a combination of several effective relaxation methods. Search “relaxation audio pchc”.



# RF1 Balance

## Improving Balance

### 2. Choose two activities

Pick two activities that are most practical for you to begin changing now. Your first two choices should be from different areas. Write them down.



**Activity 1:**

**Activity 2:**

# RF1 Balance

## Improving Balance

### 3. Set realistic goals

For each of the activities you have chosen, set a manageable goal for the coming week. Most of us have a tendency to set overly ambitious goals, ones not likely to be sustainable over time. For example, anyone who frequents a gym will notice that it gets super-busy in January, then empties out over the next few months as the “New Year’s Resolution” people get discouraged.

The secret is to set a small goal, carry it out reliably, then gradually increase the goal. You want the new behaviour to become a **habit**. If you are doing the behaviour regularly and rewarding yourself generously (*self-praise or pizza*), the behaviour will become part of your life. Whether it is exercising, practicing a hobby, hanging out with friends, or whatever gives you balance, approaching the behaviour in a thoughtful way will make it more powerful in your life.

So, set your goals at a fairly low level. If you are already engaging in these activities, set a goal to increase the type or frequency, by a small amount. We recognize that the new goal activity has to fit in with your shift schedule- there is a limit to what new activity you can add. Use the time you do have in a planned and focused way. *Know your limit, set goals within it.*

Let’s say you would like to start riding your mountain-bike again (it’s been hanging sadly on the garage wall). Your first goal might be to see whether it needs any repairs. If you would like to catch up with a group of old friends, your first goal might be to call one friend on the phone for five minutes.

#### To succeed, your goals must be:

#### 1 Specific

When we are stressed out, setting new goals can seem overwhelming. You need to have a clear idea of your goals so that you will know you have succeeded.

#### 2 Realistic

Your goals should be achievable. You might start with the goal of gathering information related to the activity: for example, checking out

what courses are available from a local college or finding a yoga class that doesn’t require you to stretch (*good luck*).

#### 3 Scheduled

You should have a clear idea of when and how you are going to carry out your goal. “Run Thursday evening for 20 minutes” is better than “Run a lot.”

# RF1 Balance

## Improving Balance

Try setting a couple of goals that would be realistic. Decide how often or for how long you will do the activity, and when you will do it.



Activity	How Often?	When, exactly?

Think of your activity goals as appointments with yourself. Treat these goals as respectfully as you would an appointment with your physician or a date with your partner. If you must cancel one of these appointments with yourself, reschedule immediately and don't miss it.

It's a good idea to use your smartphone or physical calendar to keep track of your goals. When you've done the goal, check it off to show yourself what you've accomplished – in the early stages of creating balance, **that's** the reward.

Note: Don't give yourself extra credit for doing more than the goal you set. If you do more, that's fine, but that doesn't allow you to miss the next appointment. If you let that kind of trade-off happen, your goals will soon be neglected.





# RF1 Balance

## Improving Balance

### 4. Carry out your goals

It's important to realize that you may not "feel like" doing your activity goals, especially given your demanding job. But if you wait until you feel like it, most likely nothing will happen. Do the activity \*because you set a goal for yourself, \*because it's part of your training, \*because it makes you stronger and \*because it will help you be more resilient. After you've done and checked off each goal, you will see what you've accomplished.

If you completed a goal, did you congratulate yourself? If not, do so now. You may tend to focus on the things you haven't done and ignore or downplay your accomplishments. Deliberately remind yourself of achievements. Don't ignore small victories or think they don't count.

If you didn't succeed, what got in the way? What can you do to make the goal easier? Recognize that your goal may have been too ambitious. Try making it smaller for next week or substitute a different goal. People often set their goals too high, fail to reach them, and become discouraged.

Scale back to something you are sure you can do, even if you have no more time this week than you did last week: Walk a couple of miles; Call up a friend to talk; Attend a fitness class: these are all reasonable goals. Allow yourself to get started slowly.

# RF1 Balance

## Improving Balance

### 5. Review your goals

After two weeks of doing these goals, review the situation:

- Do you want to increase the goals slightly or keep doing them at the same level until it feels pretty comfortable? It's your choice.
- This is a good time to add another goal. Pick one from another area. For example, if you had Self-Care and Personally Rewarding Activities goals before, choose one from Involvement with Family and Friends.



New Activity	How Often?	When, exactly?

Write the new goal into your schedule along with the two continuing goals. Remember, check off the activity goal as you do it and praise yourself for completing it. After two weeks of doing these goals, review the situation again. Are there any goals that were not getting done? What got in the way? Do you need to reduce or change the goals?

Keep going! Continue to set your ongoing goals and consider adding goals as your time limits permit. If you complete a goal (for example, you have gathered information about recreational activities in your community), then move on to a new one. But not too many! Most people can manage 2-3 goals at a time.



# Adam's Story

Adam has been a paramedic for 4 years. He is highly identified with the role and finds it very challenging in a positive way. He loves the unpredictable and high-stim aspects of the job and feels more alive in the job than in the rest of his life. But his wife of 8 years tells him that he seems detached and passive at home and he knows he is feeling less close to his 6-year-old son. His other activities have also suffered: he dropped off the soccer team and rarely goes to the gym.

Over the last few years, the negative stuff of the job is more obvious to him: inappropriate calls ("I just need a ride to the hospital"); frustrating ones (e.g., repeated opioid overdoses); and emotionally upsetting ones (such as serious injuries to children). He has been missing the soothing effect of time with his family and friends. He knows something isn't right... but can't name it. He feels more tense and irritable.

He reaches out to Ben, another paramedic whom he really trusts. Ben tells him to download the 5RF and offers to walk him through it. "It worked for me". Ben suggests the Balance module as especially worth checking out.

Adam digs into the 5RF with Ben's encouragement and sets goals to improve his work/life balance. He cuts back on some extra shifts so he can plan more activities with his family. Adam rejoins a pick-up soccer team and starts dropping into his gym for brief high intensity workouts – during on days and off days. He downloads a relaxation training module he finds online and listens to it twice per week.

Several weeks later, Adam notices he is feeling more connected to his wife and son. The soccer team lets him drop in when he can and the team fellowship feels great. The high intensity workouts improve his flexibility and strengthen his core, making him physically as well as psychologically safer. He is on the path to true resilience.



# Mary's Story

Mary is a dispatcher. She works in an urban location which has become a rising source of emergency calls over the last 6 years: cardiac arrests, fentanyl ODs, MVAs, suicidal individuals...it feels like the full range of human suffering. Mary is very skilled at her job, able to keep a mental map of the available resources and deploy these in a prioritized and efficient way. But she has been responding to the increased demand by increasing her hours, taking on more shifts. She has been feeling more wired, hyper-aroused and almost unable to 'switch off' her high-energized state. Her sleep has suffered, as has her involvement in activities outside the workplace. She barely sees her friends and her husband tells her she is not 'there' emotionally.

She finally realizes that her life is going off-track. She speaks to her supervisor, who recommends that she talk with the peer support program (and, of course, points her to the 5RF). The peer supporter suggests she take a close look at the Balance module.

Because she is a fast learner and a self-starter, she gets the key messages and begins to make change. She adopts a relaxation method as part of her routine. She cuts back on extra shifts. She takes a fatigue management webinar and learns to rest and recover more effectively. She sets goals for shared activities with her husband (*yes, including that*). Her work/personal balance steadily improves and she becomes more resilient and happier.





## RF2 Self-Acceptance

In the course of your work in Paramedic Services, you will be repeatedly exposed to situations where you do not achieve the result you are aiming for. Perhaps you find yourself unable to save the life of an individual in a motor vehicle accident. Perhaps you deal with a call about a badly hurt child, but never learn the outcome. Perhaps you resuscitate someone who had suffered a heart attack, but they are left with brain damage. Or there was an angry interaction with a doctor who implied you should have transported the patient sooner, although the road conditions prevented that.

For any of the calls with which you deal, you may feel that you have not accomplished your mission, that you have not assisted people in danger – or not to your own standard. The difference is what you are able to realistically accomplish vs. what you believe should be accomplished. This is true whether the outcome was due to lack of resources, time pressure, conflicting calls, insufficient training, fatigue... or just the reality of random unpredictable events. Sometimes the patient is too badly injured for rescue.

Whatever the source, you may judge yourself in a hyper-critical way. You may go over the situation in your mind, rehashing it, harshly criticizing your own performance, unfairly blaming yourself... This kind of thinking is called Negative Self Talk (**NST**).

NST leads to some painful feelings: anger, sadness, shame, sense of inadequacy or a sense that you're somehow unsuited to this work. These feelings can lead to emotional detachment, cynicism, withdrawal from others, abandonment of enjoyable activities, outbursts of anger and

*"As long as I know I did the best I could, I can sleep."*

burnout. NST may also have physical impacts like poor sleep, reduced appetite or binge eating.

Sometimes a single highly stressful incident will trigger NST and lead to the effects described above – but more often there is an accumulation of negative self-judgment that leads to psychological suffering.

Countering the effects of NST is an approach called Self-Acceptance. **Self-Acceptance** is a form of coping where you think about your own performance in a *fair, realistic* and *helpful* manner. Self-Acceptance is:

**1 Fair** because you look at your behavior in a balanced way, recognizing the limits on what you can accomplish when there is insufficient time or resources, fatigue and competing demands.

*"I'm only human and I make mistakes. It's ok to make mistakes as long as I learn from them."*

*"One of the strategies I employ is not to be judgmental or impatient when faced with my personal limitations but to take it as a challenge to improve the skill I feel lacking."*



# RF2 Self-Acceptance

**2 Realistic** because you recognize that in many circumstances a 100% or even 80% success rate is simply not feasible. Not every vulnerable individual will be saved, not every victim will be rescued. Your role is to do the job - respond to emergencies, stabilize, resuscitate, transport to definitive care, provide comfort, reduce suffering of the family – not to guarantee a positive outcome.

**3 Helpful** because you talk to yourself in a manner that encourages your continued efforts to do the job as well as possible, mitigates the risk of psychological injury, prevents unnecessary emotional suffering and allows you to move forward in a competent and confident manner.

*“Early on in my career I learned; regardless of the situation that the client is in I did not put them into that position. Everything I do to assist them from their situation is done with my best intentions.”*

*“I cannot save everyone, but I treat everyone with respect, and if I can make a difference in one person’s life, then I have done my job well.”*

*“It is a way to make something just a little bit better. That may be just holding someone’s hand while they die so they are not alone or letting a cardiac arrest family know they did everything right.”*

*“I base my self-evaluation on what I did not the outcome for the patient. Yes, emergency aid helps—but if it is too late, that is not my fault if I have been as quick as I could be.”*

*“Making light fun, and sometimes/often dark humor, out of bad situations relieves and makes the situation feel less damaging.”*

*“If we would just learn to be as forgiving, caring, supportive and loving towards ourselves, as we are to others, we would make life so much easier for ourselves.”*

*“It’s ok to make mistakes as long as I learn from them... sharing those mistakes with others not only helps me defuse but makes me feel better if can prevent someone from making the same mistakes.”*

This module teaches the skill of thinking about yourself and your situation in a **Self-Accepting** way.



# RF2 Self-Acceptance

To begin, here is a quick self-assessment to estimate how you are doing with Self-Acceptance, compared to our Paramedic Services research sample. Indicate your level of agreement with each of the following 3 statements. Then add up your Total score. This will help you spot an opportunity for change. (Note: this scale is reverse-scored)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies.	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
When I'm feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong.	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
When I fail at something important to me I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

TOTAL	LOW			LOW AVERAGE			HIGH AVERAGE							HIGH						
	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	



# RF2 Self-Acceptance

## Improving Self-Acceptance

### 1. Learn to identify Negative Self-Talk

NST is unrealistic, unfair and unhelpful. It is an inaccurate reflection of how the world is or how you are. Some common forms of NST include:

#### Filtering

In this kind of thinking, you only look at the worst aspects of situations, never the parts that were adequate or even positive: maybe the outcome would have been worse if not for actions by you or your team. Maybe you acted in a courageous, compassionate and skilled way and yet the outcome was negative. Self-Acceptance balances the positive and negative aspects of the situation.

#### All or Nothing

You see your work in terms of extremes. You are either incompetent or first-rate, cowardly or fearless, caring or hardened etc. There is no in-between. Gradual progress is never enough because only a complete change will do. “Who cares that I helped to prevent more severe injury? People were injured!” Self-Acceptance sees people and events as falling somewhere between the extremes, towards the middle, where most things are found.

#### Labeling

You talk to yourself in a harsh way, referring to yourself with names like “idiot”, “coward”, or other insulting (and possibly colourful) insults. You talk to yourself in a way that you would likely not talk to anyone else. Self-Acceptance recognizes that this talk is unnecessarily discouraging.

#### Mind-reading

You feel that you know what others are thinking about you, and it’s always negative. So you react to what you *imagine* they think, without bothering to check. Self-Acceptance recognizes that guessing what others think about you is likely to be inaccurate, especially when you are stressed.

#### Perfectionism

It’s only good enough if it’s perfect. And because you can’t make most things perfect, you’re rarely satisfied and can rarely take pride in your efforts. But Self-Acceptance gives credit for accomplishments, even if the result is less than perfect. You may not approach perfection, but your achievements are meaningful. And you are always learning more!

#### Shoulds

You know how the world should be, and it isn’t like that. You *know* how calls should work out, but often they don’t. As a result, you are constantly disappointed and angry with yourself and everyone around you. Self-Acceptance understands the limitations of the world and of yourself — trying for improvement but also accepting how things are.





# RF2 Self-Acceptance

## Improving Self-Acceptance

### 2. Recognize your NST and how it triggers negative emotions

Most thinking is so quick and so automatic that we don't even realize we are doing it. We must learn to become aware of NST as it occurs. An excellent strategy is to make notes on paper or in your phone for a week.

What were you saying to yourself? What were you reacting to? Perhaps you are mentally re-running a tough call and you have the thought that *If I reacted even faster I might have saved an accident victim*. Write it down.

Keep recording your thoughts until you notice that the same kinds of NST come up again and again. You might find yourself placing a check-mark beside some of the thoughts you wrote down.

"Oh, that one again." When this happens, you have probably identified the most common kinds of NST you do.



**Write some of your NST thoughts here:**


Then what? Some of your NST thoughts may seem obviously distorted. It can sometimes be enough just to know that your mind generates NST in certain situations. Try to become aware of the NST as it happens and remind yourself where it comes from. "I think this way because I'm feeling discouraged and because I really want to do this job well."



# RF2 Self-Acceptance

## Improving Self-Acceptance

### 3. Learn to challenge Negative Self-Talk and replace it with Self-Acceptance.

Challenging NST involves deliberately rethinking the situation that got you upset. Take a piece of paper and divide it into columns, like the example below.

First, make a brief note of the situation. Some examples: “Talking to a suicidal person,” “Resuscitating a fentanyl OD,” “Short staffed... again”, “Trying to be professional while helping a rude caller”.

Next, write down the negative thoughts that seem related to how you feel. You can try to classify the type of NST involved (as shown in Step 1).

Finally, think about what happened and try to come up with a more realistic, fair and helpful assessment of the situation. Hint: NST often goes way beyond the facts. Sometimes the realistic thought is simply to remind yourself that you don’t have enough information to know for certain what’s happening. “I don’t know why this person called 911 again, I don’t know his story”. Write down the difference, in emotions, actions and results, between NST and Self-Acceptance.



# RF2 Self-Acceptance

## Improving Self-Acceptance

Here is an example:

### CHALLENGING NST

**Situation**      *Attended a tough MVA call last week, we lost the victim, he died at the crash site.*

	Negative Self Talk	Self-Acceptance
<b>Thoughts</b>	<p>If only I'd driven faster, I would have saved the patient. <i>(Unrealistic, Unfair)</i></p> <p>What's the point, if I can't save patients? <i>(Unfair, All-Or-Nothing)</i></p> <p>I can't talk about this feeling, to do so would be Weak <i>(Unhelpful, Labeling)</i></p>	<p>Wait, I drove as fast as I safely could, it's not fair to expect myself to be a super-hero (like The Flash?). <i>(Realistic, Fair)</i></p> <p>It's very unlikely that even The Flash would have been able to save him. <i>(Realistic)</i></p> <p>I can't save all patients but I make a big difference to the many people I can help. <i>(Fair)</i></p> <p>It's critical to get support from those I trust – if I don't I will be less safe and raise my risk of psychological injury. <i>(Helpful)</i></p>
<b>Emotions</b>	Discouraged Demoralized	More confident Higher morale
<b>Actions</b>	Talk less with team members Show less of yourself Be less involved in role	Share more freely with trusted colleagues Seize opportunities for skill or role enhancement
<b>Results</b>	If NST continues, less committed to the job, more self-doubt	More committed to the job




# RF2 Self-Acceptance

## Improving Self-Acceptance

Calling yourself insulting names causes you to feel more discouraged; as a result, you may give up on a task. But giving yourself encouragement and fair evaluation is likely to result in trying harder, which increases the odds of a successful outcome.

When you're under stress, it's not easy to come up with fair, helpful and realistic thoughts.

Here are some questions that will help you do this:

 NST Thought
Can I get more evidence, like asking someone about the situation?
Would most people agree with this thought? If not, what would they say?
We are often much more realistic about other people than about ourselves. What would I say to a friend in a similar situation?
What is another way of thinking that is more encouraging or useful?



# RF2 Self-Acceptance

## Improving Self-Acceptance

Now use these questions to come up with more realistic ways of thinking about a situation that upset you. Notice that it usually feels better to think Self-Acceptance thoughts than NST.

<b>Situation:</b>		
	<b>Negative Self Talk</b>	<b>Self-Acceptance</b>
<i>Thoughts</i>		
<i>Emotions</i>	↓	↓
<i>Actions</i>		
<i>Results</i>		





# RF2 Self-Acceptance

## Improving Self-Acceptance

### 4. Practice Self-Acceptance

It's not enough to come up with a fair, helpful and realistic thought just once. NST gets repeated over and over, sometimes for years, until it becomes automatic. More realistic thinking will help you to feel better, but it won't be automatic – at least not for a while. The good news is that learning Self-Acceptance doesn't take years: in fact, people often notice emotional and behavioural differences after only a few weeks of practicing this skill.

Certain kinds of situations can really trigger NST. Situations likely to trigger NST might include a performance appraisal by your supervisor, disagreement with a team member or a stressful call. To get the greatest benefit, you must catch yourself in situations that normally trigger NST.

Try to think of a few situations where you often have Negative Self-Talk.



**Write them here:**

1.

2.

3.

When you find yourself in these situations, rehearse your fair, helpful and realistic thinking. Don't assume that it will happen on its own. You have to tell yourself how to look at the situation, just as you might give advice or encouragement to a friend.



# RF2 Self-Acceptance

## Improving Self-Acceptance

### Talk back to NST

Don't allow NST to happen without replying to it. Every time you talk back, you make NST weaker and Self-Acceptance stronger. But it takes time before Self-Acceptance has more influence over you than NST. You will probably find at first that Self-Acceptance sounds false. For example: you've been thinking in a perfectionistic way, telling yourself "my work has to be 100% or it's worthless," – but you don't have enough time to complete each task perfectly, so you feel like a failure. You realize this is unrealistic thinking and come up with the fair and realistic thought that

"achieving 80% is acceptable in this job, given the time I have; that's all anyone else accomplishes." At first, this realistic thought will seem false, as though you are just fooling yourself. Only with time and repetition does realistic thinking – the truth – begin to feel true to you. Eventually you will learn to feel comfortable with Self-Acceptance.



# Amy's Story

Amy, a call taker, deals with a call from a suicidal adolescent girl who is standing with a sharp knife, ready to cut her wrist. Amy redirects the call to the Police Department. Amy keeps the young woman talking, terrified that the girl will kill herself. Amy feels that she is in over her head and that her training in this area is inadequate. As they are speaking, the girl states that she is going to cut herself now! Just then the police arrive...and Amy goes on to the next call. Amy feels distraught inside while maintaining a calm surface. Returning home after her shift, she wonders how the situation turned out. She keeps thinking over whether she handled the situation correctly and criticizes herself for not having more skill to handle such calls. This becomes a nightmarish movie in her head, that makes her more upset each time she watches it.

Amy contacts a co-worker who is part of the peer support team. This co-worker gives her a copy of the 5RF workbook and suggests the Self-Acceptance module. Over the next month, Amy works the steps of this module, learning to talk to herself in a fair, realistic and helpful way. She sets the goal of improving her skill in dealing with suicidal crises, signing up for a skills workshop (ASIST, Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training). She becomes more comfortable in this area.

She knows that she has done her best to learn relevant skills, while also becoming more skilled at accepting her limits. She has become more self-accepting and resilient.



## RF3 Meaning in Work

Meaning in Work involves finding and maintaining a sense of purpose in your work, consistent with your values and goals. You likely entered Paramedic Services with a clear sense of how it fit with your values and goals (how you would help others, the challenge of endlessly different patient situations, the personal and professional freedom) but the passage of time and job challenges make it hard to stay in touch with what the job meant to you. This may be especially true as Paramedic Services personnel move through their careers and take on new professional and personal roles: supervisory responsibilities, parenthood, etc.. Some experiences in Paramedic Services can trigger moral distress, where you feel that your values are inconsistent with what you've had to do or experience.

But if you stay connected to how your job matches your values, you will be more capable of coping with job stresses and more able to get satisfaction and meaning from the job. You will be at less risk of psychological injury.

For some, the meaning of the job comes from being of service to those in need, helping people in what may be the most difficult and traumatic situations they have ever experienced.

*"I had a stressful situation that had been haunting me until just recently, the partner of our patient came up to me and thanked me for my help and did not blame me for the unfortunate outcome."*

*"The patient is on a journey and we as caregivers are there to facilitate that journey in a compassionate but not emotionally attached way."*

*"If I can make a difference in one person's life, then I have done my job well."*

*"Some of my best calls were when I was able to comfort families - they would send me a letter a week later saying that my Mum, who was dying, and me walking in a room and having her smile and holding her and trying to get her on a stretcher and making her laugh, those last few hours of her life - was huge for me, huge...it's being with people that just need someone in there to take away their stress."*

*- a paramedic interviewed in The Other Side of The Hero (2017), a documentary by Karen Shopsowitz*



## RF3 Meaning in Work

For others, meaning comes from learning new and complex skills and applying them in tough or dangerous situations.

*“Even the ‘difficult’ calls are good cause that is what I wanted to do.”*

*“I tell myself that I am privileged to be with people when they are dying or at their worst.”*

*“Not to be judgmental or impatient when faced with my personal limitations but to take it as a challenge to improve the skill I feel lacking.”*

For still others, meaning comes from relating the job to your spiritual beliefs, seeing it as consistent with your spiritual values and contributing to your community.

There are many sources of meaning and each Paramedic Services worker will have a particular way of finding meaning in the job.

**This module describes a method to enhance and sustain your sense of Meaning in Work.**

Confidence in the meaning of your work may be reduced by over-focusing on situations where you didn’t perform to your own or patients’ expectations, the outcome was negative or others let you down. This is especially true if you pay little attention to situations that went well, treating them as merely what is expected. By focusing mostly on negative results and paying little attention to positive ones, you create a bias that undermines the value of your efforts.

*“I have a strong faith. I am able to then put it in the right perspective... A strong understanding of who you are and the impact you wish to have in this world fuels you to do and be more than simply ‘living aimlessly’.”*

*“I have found over the course of my career, particularly the last 5 years or so, a stronger relationship with my creator, God. There is no question that my faith in him has sustained me in some very trying calls.”*

*“I have found peace and healing through First Nations Culture.”*

*“Prayer and meditation. We all need to learn to look inside, see things for what they are and accept who we are.”*

*“Having a strong belief system and praying about situations is invaluable in allowing oneself to forge ahead. It is why I have a rewarding career in EMS.”*





# RF3 Meaning in Work

To begin, here is a quick self-assessment to estimate how you are doing with Meaning in Work, compared to our Paramedic Services research sample. Indicate your level of agreement with each of the following 3 statements. Then add up your Total score. This will help you spot an opportunity for change.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The work that I do helps to fulfill my sense of purpose in life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The work that I do fits well with my personal values and beliefs.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My work setting is somewhere where I feel that I belong.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

TOTAL	LOW										LOW AVERAGE			HIGH AVERAGE			HIGH			
	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	



# RF3 Meaning in Work

## Improving Meaning in Work

### 1. Recall your proudest moments

We're going to ask you to think of the three proudest experiences from your work in Paramedic Services.<sup>1</sup> Write them down below. For each of the experiences, answer the questions in the box below:



#### Proud Moment #1

What was the situation (people involved, challenges, what you and others did, the outcome)?

What went well?

What does it mean to you?

<sup>1</sup> This exercise was developed by Duncan Shields: Shields D, Westwood M. Counselling male military personnel and veterans: addressing challenges and enhancing engagement. In The Palgrave Handbook of Male Psychology and Mental Health 2019 (pp. 417-438). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.



# RF3 Meaning in Work

## Improving Meaning in Work



### Proud Moment #2

What was the situation (people involved, challenges, what you and others did, the outcome)?

What went well?

What does it mean to you?



# RF3 Meaning in Work

## Improving Meaning in Work



### Proud Moment #3

What was the situation (people involved, challenges, what you and others did, the outcome)?

What went well?

What does it mean to you?



# RF3 Meaning in Work

## Improving Meaning in Work

### 2. Reflect on what made these experiences so positive

What have you learned from these experiences that you might apply elsewhere?<sup>2</sup>

What could you do to enable more positive experiences like these?

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<sup>2</sup> Deppa KF, Saltzberg J. Resilience training for firefighters: An approach to prevent behavioral health problems. Springer; 2016 Jun 4.





# RF3 Meaning in Work

## Improving Meaning in Work

### 3. Review your sources of meaning

Here are sources of meaning that paramedics and dispatchers have described. Some are particular strengths or skills that have been used in the job. Some are personal values that can be fulfilled by the job.

Look these over and add any other sources of meaning that you have found important.

**Check each one that is important to you.**

Source of Meaning	✓	Source of Meaning	✓
I comfort people who are suffering		I stay in touch with my spiritual beliefs	
My courage is tested		I receive recognition from my employer	
I resuscitate and stabilize patients		I receive personal thanks from a patient's family	
I follow protocol and it works		I receive thank-you messages from patients or families.	
I make bad situations better		I serve my community	
I serve my patients		I am loyal to my team	
I do my best		I am always learning new skills	
I find my job exciting		Other:	
I apply the skills I've been taught		Other:	



# RF3 Meaning in Work

## Improving Meaning in Work

### **Thinking helpfully about stressful incidents**

When you think back on stressful incidents in your work, ones you've experienced weeks or hours ago, you might be tempted to focus only on the negative: what didn't work, the outcomes you wish hadn't happened.

But it's important to remember the positive outcomes that feed your sense of meaning. Try asking these critical questions:

How did you and your partner/team prevent a worse outcome? What would have happened if you hadn't been there?

What did you learn from this incident? How can you use the experience to improve the outcomes of future incidents?



# Tonia's Story

Tonia has been working as a paramedic for six years. She chose this career because it suited her strong need to be of service. She had previously volunteered for global health projects in developing countries, working under difficult or dangerous conditions, and found it highly rewarding to test herself in challenging circumstances and to be of service to others in need. These values led her to paramedic work. Her goals in paramedic work: To provide the best care she can, save as many lives as she can, support patients until she can pass them on to the hospital care team, support the patient's family and, ultimately, serve her home community.

But over these years on the job, she has become discouraged that not all situations turn out according to expectation. She has been tested by demanding calls and feels proud of how she has responded, but finds the disappointing outcomes hard to bear. She wonders whether she is in the right occupation, whether she has 'the right stuff' for paramedic work.

After a critical incident, she is contacted by the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) team to make sure she's OK. The CISM worker suggests she review the 5RF and they discuss the section on Meaning in Work. The CISM peer said she had also struggled with this – when she realized how much this influenced how she felt about her job, it saved her career. Tonia reflects on what makes work meaningful for her: the basic values it mostly satisfies, the strengths it calls upon and the goals it allows her to accomplish. She comes to recognize that perfectionistic thinking (expecting perfect outcomes) isn't realistic or helpful. She takes a different view now, expecting only what is realistic, and feels better about herself and the job. By focusing on what she is most proud of, she recalls the times when she felt deeply the meaning of this work. When Tonia feels fatigued or discouraged by a negative outcome or critical incident, she returns to these proudest experiences and how they made her feel. It puts the incident in perspective and helps her to stay psychologically safe.



# Gordon's Story

Gordon was a 40-year old paramedic. He responded to a call to resuscitate a man who had consumed an overdose of opioid medication. But Gordon had responded twice in the past month to overdoses involving this man. Since the last event, Gordon was wrestling with a sense of helplessness and doubting the value of his work.

His supervisor, noticing that Gordon seemed distracted and flat, asked him to have a coffee and talk. The supervisor listened respectfully and encouraged Gordon to get the 5RF workbook and contact a psychologist familiar with first responder work.

Gordon found the 5RF module on Meaning in Work to be especially relevant; and had very helpful conversations with the psychologist. He focused on reminding himself of the value of his work and the numerous occasions when he had contributed to a better outcome. He spoke to himself more fairly about the limits of what can be accomplished. He found a way to accept the real situation and it was enough to support his commitment to the work. He felt way better.



# RF4 Trusted Support

This resilience factor involves having a supportive network of people you trust. Building this factor will increase your ability to connect with co-workers, friends or family members who can provide the support you (we all) need. It is more difficult to cope with stress exposure when one does not feel able to talk about personal experiences, thoughts and feelings with others. This can happen because an Paramedic Services worker had few trusted relationships at the time of starting the career, does not want to burden others, is not sure whom to trust with their experiences or because the stress of the work caused the worker to withdraw from others.

High stress can lead to irritability or low mood, which, in turn, make it more difficult to make connections or maintain existing connections. Dealing with high stress exposure can place a strain on relationships. But having rewarding and positive relationships makes it easier to cope with high stress. For example, a study of healthcare workers facing moral challenges found that the level of social support was a critical determinant of psychological outcome. Another study found that good social support helps to protect against PTSD in first responders, “particularly when there is social support from superiors.”<sup>3</sup>

A careful review of the relationship between trusted social support and mental health in first responders concluded that social support has a positive influence on first responders’ interpretation of stressful work events. Supportive others provide advice and help to identify coping strategies.<sup>4</sup>

## Trusted support for Paramedic Services personnel may come from:

**1. Co-workers** who understand the job challenges and help you cope effectively with high-stress incidents. This could mean trusting your co-workers to have your back, be there for you in a tough situation, have the skills needed to complete tasks or keep what you disclose to them in confidence. Of course, a co-worker may not be fully trustworthy, so you need a strategy for finding trustworthy co-workers and deciding how they can be trusted. One person might be trusted to back you up on a call, another to keep your discussion private, another to provide mentorship about challenging aspects of the job, etc.

*“To build a circle of trust with as many co-workers as possible and make a point of inviting new people to allow them to establish their own peer groups.”*

*“One thing that I consider important is after call briefing or discussing. We got together and out of the discussion learned.”*

*“Instead of standing around the back of a truck after a tough call how about going to a station where there is more privacy for people to really open up about their feelings?”*

*“Trauma Therapy Slurpees. After a bad call or death. I buy & we talk.”*

<sup>3</sup> Kleim B, Westphal M. Mental health in first responders: A review and recommendation for prevention and intervention strategies. *Traumatology*. 2011 Dec;17(4):17-24.

<sup>4</sup> Prati G, Pietrantonio L. The relation of perceived and received social support to mental health among first responders: a meta-analytic review. *Journal of Community Psychology*. 2010 Apr;38(3):403-17





# RF4 Trusted Support

**2. Supervisors.** This requires trusting them to treat you in a fair, helpful and nonpunitive way. That trust may well depend on seeing evidence of fairness: do they follow protocols, do they listen to staff concerns, do they create an atmosphere of learning, etc.

*“Opportunities for informal interactions with managers... some make a point of dropping by stations just to chat. They become “real people” & create situations for crews to safely ask questions.”*

*“I think it is imperative that paramedics have mentorship.”*

*“Official debrief with colleagues, supervisors and members of other emergency agencies involved, after a serious incident.”*

**3. Nonwork friends, partner and family,** who have a special connection to you and are part of the larger world outside the Paramedic Services. This requires trusting them to keep what you tell them in confidence, reach out to you in a supportive way and react to information about high-stress situations in a calm manner that doesn’t intensify your emotional response or cause them distress.

*“As a long-time employee one strategy is to make sure I have close friends and activities outside of the service. “*

*“I have a supportive spouse and friends outside of work to whom I talk to after difficult calls. Talking through the call always helps.”*

*“So many of us feel the need to protect their wife, husband, etc, yet our family is the closest to us and usually the easiest to talk to. How about courses for how to effectively use them as part of CIS?”*



# RF4 Trusted Support

**4. Peer Support or Critical Incident Stress programs,** with peers or professionals trained to be helpful in dealing with high-stress situations. This requires trusting peer supporters to respect confidentiality, support compassionate self-judgement and avoid triggering intense negative emotional reactions to incidents.

*"A bright star has been the CIS program ... the Peer Team has been really good."*

*"Glad to see that the service has started a follow-up CIS program after a demanding call."*

*"I think it would be nice to have all employees given the tools that the CIS team is trained with."*

**5. Dogs.** This requires trusting dogs to respect confidentiality, listen without judgement and gaze up at you soulfully.<sup>5</sup>

*"My dog is my therapy, listens to me and doesn't repeat what I say, although she is not great in the advice department."*

*"I got a dog. I can tell her anything - no matter how gruesome or gory. She's a great, nonjudgmental listener. She motivates me to go outside, walk, enjoy the sunshine and the beach."*

*"Have a doggy friend you can snuggle with after a rough shift!!"*

<sup>5</sup> This is not to diminish the support of cats. (We have observed that cats are like Paramedic Services workers in reacting quickly to an emergency, but unlike in tending to run away from it.)

**This module teaches the skill of improving Trusted Support.**



# RF4 Trusted Support

To begin, here is a quick self-assessment to estimate how you are doing with Trusted Support, compared to our Paramedic Services research sample. Indicate your level of agreement with each of the following 3 statements. Then add up your Total score. This will help you spot an opportunity for change.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I have friends at work I can rely on to support me when I need it.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I have a strong and reliable network of supportive colleagues at work.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My personal support network is important to my coping at work.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

TOTAL	LOW							LOW AVERAGE			HIGH AVERAGE					HIGH				
	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	



# RF4 Trusted Support

## Improving Trusted Support

It's more difficult to cope with stress exposure when you don't have people in your life with whom you can safely discuss your thoughts, feelings and concerns. This can happen because you had few relationships at the time you started your career or work stress caused you to withdraw from others. In either case, tension, irritability or low mood make it more difficult to make connections or maintain your existing connections to other people.

Dealing with high stress exposure can place a strain on relationships. The effects of high stress can make it hard to be with others. You might withdraw into yourself or just go flat. But having rewarding and positive relationships makes it easier to cope with high stress. So it makes sense to improve your relationships, to make them as positive and supportive as possible.



# RF4 Trusted Support

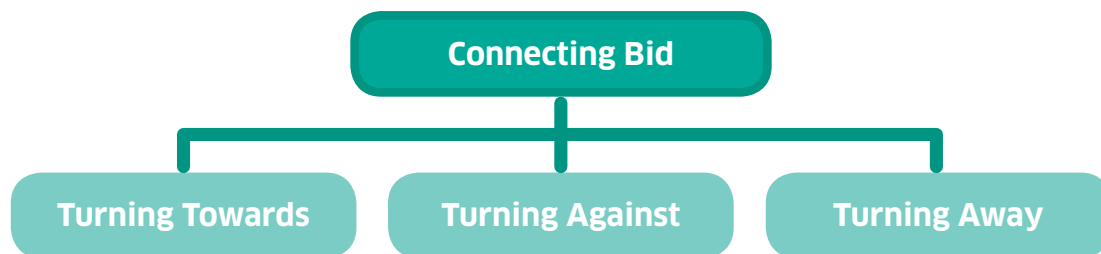
## Improving Trusted Support

### Increasing your ability to connect

We're going to show you an effective way to improve your relationships. It uses a method developed by a researcher who has studied this area for the last couple of decades, Dr. John Gottman.\* Dr. Gottman has discovered that relationships are built up from:

#### Connecting bids

A connecting bid happens when one person reaches out to another for contact. A bid could involve an expression of interest or affection, a request for information, a humorous comment or offer of assistance – all the ways people reach out to each other. For example, *“How did your shift go today?”* is a connecting bid.



When someone reaches out to you, you can respond in three different ways:

- 1 Turning Towards:** You respond to the bid in an accepting, encouraging or interested way.  
*“Thanks for checking. It was mostly OK, but there was one weird situation that sort of got to me.”*  
*Or “I can’t really talk about it now, need to unwind at the gym first - could we talk later?”*
- 2 Turning Against:** You respond to the bid in a rejecting, hostile, irritable or dismissive way.  
*“I don’t want to talk about anything.” “It was a rough day, you can’t help.”*
- 3 Turning Away:** You respond to the bid in an uninterested, ignoring way – maybe you don’t even notice the bid. *“A long day. What’s to eat?” “I’ll be off to the gym now.”*

People who respond more often with Turning Towards responses tend to get more support from others.

Another way to look at these responses is that Turning Against is *aggressive*; Turning Away is *passive*; and Turning Towards is *assertive*. Assertive wins every time!

Now that you’re familiar with these basic ideas, you can use them to improve the quality of your connections.



# RF4 Trusted Support

## Improving Trusted Support

### 1. Recognize connecting bids

A connecting bid may involve:

- Asking for information
- Expressing caring or support
- Offering assistance
- Making a humorous comment
- Showing interest in a person's opinion or preferences

There are other ways of seeking contact, but these are the ones we'll focus upon.

The first step is to identify connecting bids and how you respond to them. By learning more about your own responses, you will also get better at accepting connection.

As you go through your day, make a mental note each time someone makes one of the types of bids described in the list above. Then, when you get the chance, write a few notes about your response. Of course, you'll only be able to recall some of the bids, but it should give you a sense of your own way of responding to other people. For each of the bids you notice, write down what they said or did and what kind of response you made – was it Turning Towards, Turning Against or Turning Away?





# RF4 Trusted Support

## Improving Trusted Support

Here's an example of writing down connecting bids. John is a paramedic, age 30, who doesn't feel very connected to his co-workers and is really feeling the stress of the job.

This is what he wrote:

The Connecting Bid	My Response	Turning Towards	Turning Against	Turning Away
After a call, the CISM team called to check on me.	I said "I've got no problem" though I was still quite upset about the call outcome.			✓
A paramedic working with me asked me if I wanted to grab a coffee after our shift.	I was tired, but I said "sure" and we had a good talk about what went well that day.	✓		

Now it's your turn to write about some connecting bids:

The Connecting Bid	My Response	Turning Towards	Turning Against	Turning Away



# RF4 Trusted Support

## Improving Trusted Support

### 2. Make More Connecting Bids Yourself!

Since connecting bids are so important, it makes sense to make these bids often. Perhaps you already make a lot of connecting bids, but many people find that they don't make as many bids as they would like. Furthermore, facing high stress may cause a person to be so preoccupied with tension so that they make few connecting bids.

We'd like you to deliberately make two or three connecting bids during the next week. You might

ask someone a question about a trip they took, make a supportive comment about a tough call, give positive feedback about how they handled a situation, make a joke, etc. We're not talking about connecting bids that involve personal disclosure or risk – just the kind of connecting bids that happen in everyday conversation. Then, when you get a chance, *write down what you said or did, and how the other person responded.*

Try to identify at least three of your bids and write down the results. You can use the form below:

My Connecting Bid	How the other person responded		
	Turning Towards	Turning Against	Turning Away



# RF4 Trusted Support

## Improving Trusted Support

### 3. Keep Practicing Connecting Bids

If you want to achieve a lasting improvement in your connecting behaviour, set yourself the ongoing goal of making several connecting bids each week and writing down what happens.

Over time, you will become more skilled at making connecting bids and this will help build your relationships, especially when you combine it with the next step.

### 4. Make More Turning Towards Responses

Since Turning Towards responses have a positive effect on relationships, it makes sense to respond this way often. Of course, there are situations where Turning Towards responses don't make sense – we'll leave that up to you to decide.

Also, we can't tell you how many Turning Towards responses to make in the next week – that depends on how many bids other people make to you.

When someone makes a connecting bid during the next week, try to make a Turning Towards response. Remember, a Turning Towards response is one where you respond positively to that person's bid, indicating that you are pleased by it and interested in further contact with that

person. Even when you don't agree with that person's opinion or don't want to do something they suggest, still try to respond in a way that shows interest in connecting.

It's not always easy to express a Turning Towards response. Sometimes you're feeling resentful of the other person or fatigued or too low to care much about contact. But it's worth the effort to try this kind of responding to another person's bid for connection. The stronger your connections are to other people, the more you'll be able to get support with the burden of your high-stress job. It's a long journey – sharing the journey with others makes it easier.



# RF4 Trusted Support

## Trust

Deciding whether you can trust another person, whether a co-worker, peer supporter or acquaintance, is challenging. If you talk about a work experience with a neighbor, that person might break confidence and talk to others, causing you all sorts of difficulty. This is especially true in a small community. Or you might share your experience with a co-worker who responds in a critical and discouraging manner. You might choose to trust no one and hide emotional distress or concern about situations. Over-trusting is a risky thing to do.

But we encourage you to also consider the risk of under-trusting, that is, turning away from someone who would be truly caring, helpful and respectful of your confidence. If you reject compassionate support, you leave yourself more isolated and risk psychological suffering or injury. If you refuse to trust someone who in fact is trustworthy, you will be at greater risk.

In particular, consider talking to designated Critical Incident Stress or peer support colleagues—they have been selected for helpful qualities, trained in useful skills and held accountable for maintaining confidence and responding appropriately. You may at first feel uncertain of trusting these colleagues, but give them a chance.

Another way of building trust in your working team or partnership is to build your **own** trustworthiness. If someone on your team reaches out and wants you to listen, listen patiently and don't share what they tell you (unless they clearly ask you to). Respond to them in the same compassionate way you would want a partner to speak to you. Maybe refer them to the peer support program if you think they need more than you can give. Or suggest they reach out to the EAP or to a psychologist in the community.



# RF4 Trusted Support

## Conflict Resolution to Maintain Trust

Interpersonal conflict can be a major threat to the trust between co-workers, between staff and supervisors or among teams. It is difficult to trust another person if you feel that there is bullying, basic disagreement over how to deal with work situations, unfair blame for a bad outcome, etc. According to an excellent guide to conflict resolution, conflicts must be resolved in a timely way that leaves the people involved feeling that they have been heard and that the resolution process was fair.<sup>6</sup>

Five approaches to conflict resolution have been identified: *avoidance*, *accommodation*, *confrontation*, *compromise* and *collaboration*. We can look at these approaches in terms of the Three Connection Responses we discussed above:

First, one might respond to a conflict with **Turning Away**. This could involve avoidance, trying to ignore the problem and hoping it will go away. The downside is that conflicts often don't just go away, but instead fester and can poison the atmosphere of the workplace. This is bad for everyone involved.

Alternatively, one person in the conflict might be very *accommodating*, giving up their side of the

conflict. The downside of this approach is that the person who gave in may be feeling quietly resentful. If this leads to demoralization and less commitment to the job, the outcome will be bad for everyone.

Second, one might use a **Turning Against** response to the conflict. This would involve *confrontation*, in which individuals who are party to the conflict act in an aggressive way, "trying to win". The downside of this approach is that it damages the morale of the team and may lead to a pattern of bullying. The destructive effects of bullying are well known.

Third, one might use a **Turning Towards** response, listening respectfully to the argument of each person in the conflict, then *compromising* and *collaborating* so that everyone gives in to some extent. This is an assertive way to find a balance among the goals of the participants. To achieve this requires an attitude of cooperation and respect. This kind of balanced approach to resolving conflict is the most effective one, from the organizational, team and individual perspective.

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<sup>6</sup> Levi D. Group dynamics for teams. Sage Publications; 2015 Dec 15.



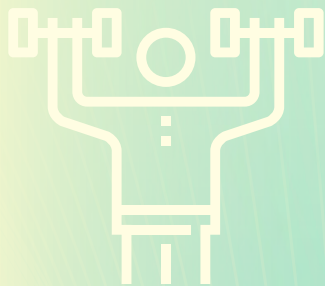
# Allan's Story

Allan works as a paramedic in a rural setting, serving a farming region. He sometimes attends calls with a partner, a nice guy, but Allan doesn't know him well and is reluctant to share his feelings about high-stress calls. Allan has been in that region for only a year and doesn't have any close friends. He has a girlfriend who lives a two hour drive away, and he sees her about once a week. Although he's never been that social, he is starting to feel cut off from others. Sometimes he needs to talk about what just happened on a difficult call, but he knows he has to be very careful what he says or word will spread quickly and his reputation will suffer.

After a critical incident (a child was severely injured in a domestic violence situation), he is contacted by the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) team. He finds it very helpful to talk with the CISM Peer – it's not just about how the call went, but about how he is doing. He views the CISM Peer as someone who really cares, listens without judgement, will guard his confidentiality and has good advice to offer. The worker suggests he get the 5RF with a focus on the Trusted Support and Balance modules.

Reviewing these modules, Allan realizes that he has not been connecting with his current paramedic partner, acting aloof and emotionally flat rather than interested and open to real discussion. He uses the Connecting skill with his partner—it feels a bit weird (“touchy-feely”) but this approach actually does encourage more sharing between them. This proves to be very helpful in dealing with emotional reactions to high-stress situations. Allan also begins to share more of his feelings about the job with his girlfriend (without the call details), and she is better able to handle the stories than he had expected. He realizes that she is there for him and provides a key support to him in his work.





# RF5 Physical Self-Care

Physical Self-Care involves maintaining your physical health through exercise, good nutrition, and restorative sleep. Paramedic Services personnel typically enter the job in a state of excellent physical fitness. Paramedics are physically tested to ensure that they are suited to the demands of the job. However, over time fitness can decline due to factors such as aging, cumulative injuries, shiftwork, and so on. This can occur without your realizing it.

Maintaining or enhancing physical activity contributes to your ability to manage high-stress exposures and recover from their negative impacts. As one researcher explained:

*Physical activity can provide considerable benefits to both physical and mental health and can buffer the negative effects of stress. It is important to note that physical activity includes more than aerobic activities. It can also include such activities as walking, yoga, bowling, dancing, and gardening.<sup>7</sup>*

*"The link between depression and sedentary lifestyle is strong enough that we should be encouraging 30 to 60 minutes of cardio activity per day."*

*"Yoga!"*

*"Yoga specific to the needs of first responders."*

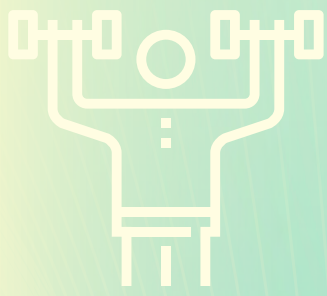
*"Exercise is the key... running, gym time, HIIT classes, yoga and daily meditation."*

*"I find Team sports with non-paramedics help me get away from work, build good friendships and allow stress release through exercise."*

*"It would be great if employees were encouraged and supported in fitness activities; gym memberships, wellness courses etc."*

*"Would love to have a designated area where I can workout, stretch, etc before or after my shifts so I don't have to travel an hour home and then go to a gym."*

<sup>7</sup> Robson S. Physical Fitness and Resilience. Rand Corporation; 2013.



# RF5 Physical Self-Care

Maintaining good nutrition is a challenge in the Paramedic Services setting, given extended and variable work schedules and difficulty accessing healthy food. The role of shift work in determining nutritional behaviour is highlighted in a recent study:

*As the shift work pattern may vary depending on the time of day, the rotation cycle and the direction of rotation of shifts, and may also involve a mobile working place, it creates additional challenges to the food situation at work.<sup>8</sup>*

*“Station gyms & fruit bowls at stations to encourage healthy snacking could do wonders.”*

*“Healthy food and good exercise are necessary to success in this line of work.”*

Maintaining restorative sleep is another key aspect of Physical Self Care. It is challenging for many Paramedic Services personnel, who report high levels of fatigue and poor sleep quality. Recent guidelines for improved fatigue management in Paramedic Services make several recommendations: some are in the hands of the employer (e.g., *“The panel recommends that, EMS personnel have the opportunity to nap while on duty to mitigate fatigue.”*) while one is relevant to the individual Paramedic Services worker (*“The panel recommends that EMS personnel receive education and training to mitigate fatigue and fatigue-related risks.”*).<sup>9</sup>

*“Making an effort to get a normal sleep even when the job is demanding is nowhere near the same as getting a normal sleep when the job isn’t demanding.”*

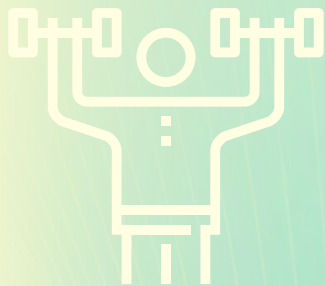
*“Yoga and meditation have helped me cope and relax to be able to sleep prior to working.”*

*“Use your GP for referrals to sleep clinics, especially when you are bouncing around shift patterns.”*

**This module teaches the skill of improving Physical Self-Care.**

8 Lassen AD, Fagt S, Lennernäs M, Nyberg M, Haapalar I, Thorsen AV, Møbjerg AC, Beck AM. The impact of worksite interventions promoting healthier food and/or physical activity habits among employees working ‘around the clock’ hours: a systematic review. Food & nutrition research. 2018;62.

9 P. Daniel Patterson, J. Stephen Higgins, Hans P. A. Van Dongen, Daniel J. Buysse, Ronald W. Thackery, Douglas F. Kupas, David S. Becker, Bradley E. Dean, George H. Lindbeck, Francis X. Guyette, Josef H. Penner, John M. Violanti, Eddy S. Lang & Christian Martin-Gill (2018) Evidence-Based Guidelines for Fatigue Risk Management in Emergency Medical Services, Prehospital Emergency Care, 22:sup1, 89-101, DOI: 10.1080/



# RF5 Physical Self-Care

To begin, here is a quick self-assessment to estimate how you are doing with Physical Self-Care, compared to our Paramedic Services research sample. Indicate your level of agreement with each of the following 3 statements. Then add up your Total score. This will help you spot an opportunity for change.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am careful to maintain a good level of physical fitness.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am careful about eating well and healthily.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I make a point of caring for myself even when the job is very demanding.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

TOTAL	LOW					LOW AVERAGE					HIGH AVERAGE					HIGH				
	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	

# RF5 Physical Self-Care

## Improving Physical Self-Care

### 1. Set your fitness goals

Research has shown that setting goals is critical for improving physical health and fitness. Your goals may involve increasing the time spent on exercise, changing the kind of exercises you do, making your diet healthier, improving your sleep, etc. You can't do them all, so targeting a few changes is most effective.

*Focus on breathing and rock that gym membership.*



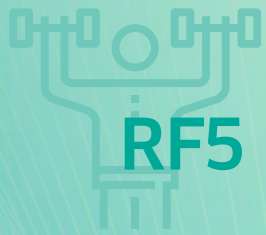
#### The Ready For Duty (R4D) App

A tool that will help you start a great exercise routine is the **Ready for Duty (R4D) App**. It's a free download. It is designed to help Paramedic Services personnel meet the fitness requirements of the job: "the R4D app includes high-quality video examples to help you adopt safe and effective, movement-centric resistance training exercise... Adopting a "train movements, not muscles" philosophy, the library includes exercises to improve strength and power through principal movements including pushing, pulling, hip hinging, lunging, and squatting. App users can easily access important movement coaching keys, save custom workouts, or access one of three pre-defined workouts to get started. Why does movement matter? Our research shows that paramedics who generate more work from the lower body when lifting experience lower loading on their spine. Our evidence also shows that those who complete routine strength and conditioning perform better."

Armstrong DP, Sinden KE, Sendsen J, MacPhee RS, Fischer SL. Evaluating the effect of a strength and conditioning program to improve paramedic candidates' physical readiness for duty. Work. 2019 Jan 1;63(4):623-33.

**Increasing your physical self-care, whether this involves exercise, nutrition or rest, will make a difference because:**

1. It directly enhances your sense of well-being
2. It reminds you that you are a competent and disciplined person
3. It reduces your vulnerability to physical injury
4. It increases your life expectancy (that is, years of high-quality life)



# RF5 Physical Self-Care

## Improving Physical Self-Care

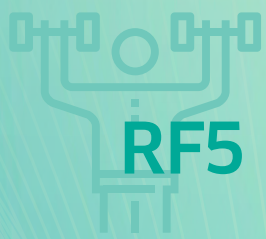
### 2. Choose two activities

Pick two activities that are most practical for you to begin changing now.



**Activity 1:**

**Activity 2:**



# RF5 Physical Self-Care

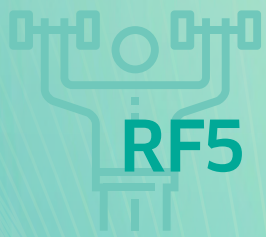
## Improving Physical Self-Care

### 3. Find your motivation

We know that adopting a new self-care behaviour, making it a part of your life, is challenging and complex. We have all started an ambitious self-care plan (a “New Year’s Resolution”) and seen it fade away following the initial burst of enthusiasm. The tendency to revert to old habits is a force of human nature. To make a lasting change requires planning, stubborn determination, awareness and self-compassion. But once a new activity has been practiced for a while, it becomes (**ta-da!**) a *habit*. That’s when you really see the benefits – when you find yourself doing a positive self-care activity because it feels normal. That’s the target.

- Once you’ve identified an activity (to work out more often, to add core strength exercises, to eat better food, to add stretching exercises, to find exercises that increase cardio-metabolism, whatever), think about **Why** you want to adopt this self-care activity. What are the benefits? It’s worth highlighting the benefits that matter to you.
- For each new activity, there are **barriers** to making it a part of your life. It’s worth identifying these barriers, features of your workplace, personal life, financial situation, or identity that make it harder to take on a helpful behaviour. Maybe there is little free time in your schedule, maybe you are sleep-deprived and lack energy, maybe you have always rewarded yourself with highly-sweet comfort food, maybe you find it weird to see flexibility as a fitness goal, etc.
- For each barrier, there are **ways to reduce the barrier**, things you can do to make it less of an obstacle to positive change. If you have little free time, maybe finding a brief but effective workout will allow change; if you are sleep-deprived, maybe getting better sleep is the first goal to focus on; if you are accustomed to unhealthy comfort food, maybe you need to research healthy comfort foods; if you doubt the relevance of flexibility, maybe you need to study its role in preventing injury, etc.





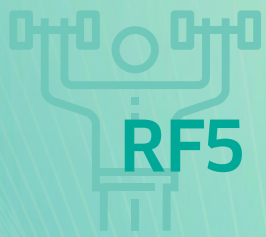
# RF5 Physical Self-Care

## Improving Physical Self-Care

Here is a worksheet for building your motivation for change:

<b>New Self-Care Activity:</b>
<b>Benefits</b>

Barriers to this new activity	How to reduce the barrier



# RF5 Physical Self-Care

## Improving Physical Self-Care

### 4. Set realistic goals

For each of the activities you have chosen, set a manageable goal for the coming week.

**To succeed, your goals must be:**

- **Specific**

You need to have a very clear idea of your goal so that you will know you have succeeded.

- **Realistic**

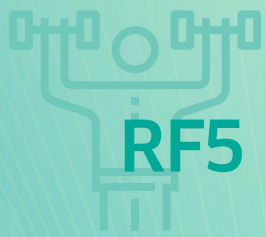
You may find it tempting to set your goals based on how much you think you should be able to accomplish. Don't. Your goals should be achievable even if you have a tough stretch of shifts. Sometimes it seems overwhelming to think of starting a new activity. In that case, try setting the goal of gathering information related to the activity: for example, finding out what sorts of exercise activities are available in your local community centre.

- **Scheduled**

You should have a clear idea when and how you are going to carry out your physical self-care goal. "Run Friday at 8am, after the shift" is much better than "Run more."

**Here is an example:**

Activity	How Often?	When, exactly?
Workout at workplace gym	3x/week	Monday after shift; Wednesday before shift; Sunday after shift
Eat a low-carb dinner	2x/week	Saturday, Wednesday evening



# RF5 Physical Self-Care

## Improving Physical Self-Care

Enter the goal activities in your physical or phone calendar. After each activity mark it as Completed.

Try setting some physical self-care goals that would be realistic to do this week.  
Decide how often or for how long you will do the activity, and when you will do it.

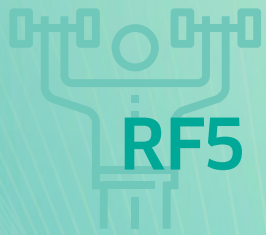


Activity	How Often?	When, exactly?

Think of your activity goals as appointments with yourself. Treat these goals as respectfully as you would an appointment with your physician. If you must cancel one of these appointments with yourself, reschedule immediately and don't miss it.

It's a good idea to use your smartphone or physical calendar to keep track of your goals. When you've done the goal, check it off in the calendar to show yourself what you've accomplished – in the early stages of improving physical self-care, **that's** the reward.

Note: Don't give yourself extra credit for doing more than the goal you set for yourself. If you do more, that's fine, but that doesn't allow you to miss the next appointment. If you let that kind of trade-off happen, your goals will soon be neglected.



# RF5 Physical Self-Care

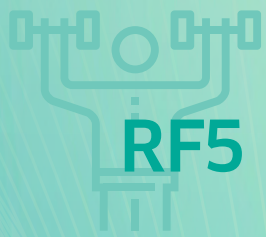
## Improving Physical Self-Care

### 5. Carry out your goals

It's important to realize that you may not "feel like" doing your self-care activity goals. But if you wait until you feel like it, most likely nothing will happen. Do the activity because you set a goal for yourself and because it will help you be more resilient. After you've done and checked off each goal, you will see what you've accomplished.

If you completed a goal, did you congratulate yourself? If not, do so now. Don't focus on the things you haven't done and ignore or downplay your accomplishments. Deliberately remind yourself of achievements, no matter how small they may seem. "All right, I planned to run and I did it. Good." Don't ignore small victories or think they don't count.

If you didn't succeed, what got in the way? What can you do to make the goal easier? Recognize that your goal may have been too ambitious. Try making it smaller for next week, or substitute a different goal. People often set their goals too high, fail to reach them, and become discouraged. Scale back to something you are sure you can do, even if you feel no more energized this week than you did last week: Walking a couple of miles; Attending a talk on better nutrition. Allow yourself to start slowly.



# RF5 Physical Self-Care

## Improving Physical Self-Care

### 6. Review your goals

After two weeks of doing these goals, review the situation:

- Do you want to increase the goals slightly or keep doing them at the same level until it feels pretty comfortable? It's your choice.
- This is a good time to add another goal. Pick one from another area. If you had Exercise before, choose Nutrition.



New Activity	How Often?	When, exactly?

Write the new goal into your schedule along with the 2 continuing goals. Remember, check off the activity goal as you do it and praise yourself for completing it. After two weeks of doing these goals, review the situation again. Are there any goals that were not getting done? What got in the way? Do you need to reduce or change the goal?

Keep going! Continue to set your ongoing goals, and consider adding additional goals as your energy permits. If you complete a task (for example, if you have now finished gathering information about recreational activities in your community), then move on to a new goal.

Keep using the procedure:

- Set your 3 goals.
- Write them in your schedule.
- Check off each goal as you do it.
- Praise yourself each time.
- Review the goals every two weeks to decide if they need modification and whether you are ready to add a new goal. Eventually, you'll be working on 2-3 goals at a time. Don't get carried away, though: having too many goals can get overwhelming





# Andrew's Story

Andrew had been a paramedic for 25 years and could see retirement looming ahead. He started his career in peak physical condition: eating a balanced diet, working out daily – keeping himself strong and limber. But over the years, his fitness level steadily deteriorated: infrequent workouts, unhealthy diet and way too much alcohol. He was no longer fit! This concerned him a great deal. He was highly skilled, performed at an impressive level, but felt embarrassed by his poor physical condition. He was frankly worried that he might suffer a serious injury that would make his retirement years much less enjoyable.

He searched the Web to find an exercise approach that would fit his busy schedule and need to slowly rebuild fitness. He chatted with co-worker Juliana, who enthused about High-Intensity Interval Training. This seemed too intense – but he then discovered HIIW: High-Intensity Interval Walking. This felt right. He started on a systematic regimen, alternating between a pace that would allow conversation to bursts of high-speed walking, gradually increasing (over months) the relative time spent at each pace. He combined this with dietary change: it was hard to reduce his favourite comfort foods, but he slowly replaced them with lower-calorie replacements (who knew you could look forward to a banana & protein-powder smoothie?).

After 6 months, he developed the habit of healthier living. Rain or shine, he did his walk (and rewarded himself with his favourite smoothie). He lost weight, gained strength in his legs and core, reduced his risk of injury and felt better about himself. Eventually he planned to broaden his range of exercise using the Fit4Duty app, but kept to a slow and steady approach.

Incidentally, as he became healthier, he became aware that overusing alcohol left him feeling hung-over and reduced his focus (not to mention contributing a weirdly-high number of calories!). So he found himself drinking less and feeling better.



# The end, which is just the beginning...

We hope that you found the materials in this workbook to be relevant, useful and clearly explained. Most of all, we hope that you use the workbook to make positive change as you move forward with your career (and your life). Real change takes time, determination and openness to doing things differently. This is the beginning of your journey to more resilient coping.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> To call this a “journey” may be a cliché, but it’s still true.



# The end, which is just the beginning...

## Acknowledgements

We thank British Columbia Emergency Health Services and Ambulance Paramedics of British Columbia/CUPE 873 leaders – who served as our advisory committee.

- Lindsay Kellosalmi Mental Health and Wellness Coordinator of APBC
- Marsha McCall MSN. Critical Incident Stress Program Manager BCEHS
- Mike Michalko Director of Business Standards and Evaluation BCEHS ,
- Bob Parkinson Director of Health and Wellness of APBC

We thank the University of B.C. research psychologists. Dr. Lynn Alden and Dr. Ingrid Sochting, who shared time and knowledge.

Most of all, we thank the 700 Paramedic Services personnel who shared their wise perspectives on resilient coping... and all the 4500 for helping to keep us safe.





