



An excerpt from the workbook, *Oxygen for Caregivers:
A Toolkit to Guard Against Burnout and Sustain Compassion*

Patterns of Evasion

*Whichever modality of treatment people choose. . .
the key to healing is the individual's active, free and informed choice.*

— Gabor Maté, MD, *When The Body Says No*

The evasion of this choice is the greatest obstacle to wellness. Parker Palmer, in his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, describes this pattern of evasion as follows:

“Once I have seen my dividedness [warning signs, inner pain, exhaustion, trauma, burnout] do I continue to live a contradiction – or do I try to bring my inner and outer worlds back into harmony? Being whole is a self-evident good, so the answer would seem to be clear. And yet, as we all know, it is not. Time after time we choose against wholeness by slipping into a familiar pattern of evasion:

1. First comes **denial**: surely what I have seen about myself cannot be true!
2. Next comes **equivocation**: the inner voice speaks softly, and truth is a subtle, slippery thing, so how can I be sure of what my soul is saying?
3. Next comes **fear**: if I let that inner voice dictate the shape of my life, what price might I have to pay in a world that sometimes punishes authenticity?
4. Next comes **cowardice**: the divided life may be destructive, but at least I know the territory, while what lies beyond it is terra incognita.
5. Then comes **avarice**: in some situations, I am rewarded for being willing to stifle my soul.

This pattern of self-evasion is powerful and persistent.”

It is a pattern that is prevalent among caregivers. Noticing where we are conflicted, isolated, bitter, or blind is uncomfortable, and most of us simply don't like feeling that way. We would rather stay in the comfort zone of our own expertise, for which we are admired and rewarded. The more highly educated and accomplished we become, the greater the temptation not to stray from this privileged role, because the contrast is so painfully humbling: to feel like a novice again, losing one's way, stumbling in the dark, and having no special privileges or respect.

There are many self-care practices, but we have found that the ones that work best are those that help to overcome this pattern of evasion – by going in exactly the opposite direction and actually getting closer to where it hurts. In fact, they embody Abbot Fintan's thousand-year-old Irish blessing, which is the antithesis of evasion:

*May you have the commitment to know what has hurt you;
to allow it to come closer to you, and in the end, to become one with you.*

The four elements of self-awareness (see next page) help us overcome this tendency to recoil from or indulge in our own weaknesses, and instead bring a kind, keen, unflinching awareness there. These 4A's allow us, without any self-pity, to continue to stay in touch with those wounds while they begin to heal.

*Resilience comes from attending to our suffering, not avoiding it.
Warriors run towards danger. Healers lean into the pain.*

The Four A's of Self-Awareness



THE PROCESS

We build self-awareness by using four key principles to check our bearings as we take steps to implement our chosen self-care strategies.

1. **ATTENTION** is the conscious choice to become aware of all aspects of yourself and your life story: the physical, social, psychological, and spiritual. Paying attention to both the blessings and the failings in your life protects you from the dangers of living in denial, becoming entranced by the superficial, and drifting through life on autopilot.
2. **ACKNOWLEDGMENT** is the conscious choice to honestly reflect on all you have witnessed and gain insight into your experience. Acknowledging (literally, confessing knowledge) what you have become aware of protects you from ignoring what you see, invalidating your experience, failing to recognize what is happening, and fooling yourself.
3. **AFFECTION** is the conscious choice to be wholehearted and look upon yourself and your experiences with kindness and warmth. Having affection protects you from embitterment and being too hard on yourself when you make mistakes or fall short of expectations – which, without affection, would otherwise cause you never to dare to look too closely ever again.
4. **ACCEPTANCE** is the conscious choice to be at peace and welcome all aspects of yourself and your life just as you are. Accepting your gifts and your imperfections protects you from pretense, envy, judgmentalism, impatience, hubris, victim mentality, and blame.

Whatever strategies of self-care you choose to practice, they will become ever more powerful and rewarding if you apply the four key principles. These 4A's are your compass – 4 cardinal principles that help you navigate your experience and derive greatest value from it. These are the four elements of self-awareness that build resilience, connection, and compassion. They are the essence of living wholeheartedly.

Without exception, all four elements must be present for self-awareness to grow. Like the water, soil, air, and sunlight a tree needs to grow, they are the minimum number of things you must do to develop self-awareness.

It is likely that the element that feels most unfamiliar to you is the one in which you are most deficient. Making an effort to practice that forgotten skill will accelerate your growth the most.

THE CONTEXT

To sharpen focus and give perspective.

1. You will think there are more important things you should be doing instead.
Most people on the front lines of health care or emergency services will feel the need to justify the time spent on self-care, because instead that time could be used to save lives, alleviate suffering, or help people to heal. So the bar is set high, and for your self-care practices to be truly worthy of your time, they must be meaningful, personally satisfying, and make you a better, longer-lasting instrument for delivering quality care.
2. You will change: self-care is a journey, not a regimen.
As you age, your body, interests, abilities, relationships, and responsibilities will change. Your self-care practices will need to change with them. In the second half of life, we all come to a point where we are no longer gaining strength, speed, and keener senses every year. We encounter humbling events such as illness, injury, or loss, and we begin what some call the path of descent. Whichever self-care practices you choose, they should serve you well on both the ascending and descending paths of life so that loss can be transformed into gratitude, wisdom, and love.
3. You will die.
This life is finite. *Memento mori*. Ancient merchants often wrote this in large letters on the first page of their accounting books. It means, “think of death.” Carlos Castaneda said, “Death is the only real and wise advisor that we have. An immense amount of pettiness is dropped if you catch a glimpse of it as your companion.”

*... Gather yourself
And decide carefully
How you now can live
The life you would love
To look back on
From your deathbed.*

— John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*

Imagine looking back at your life from your deathbed. How will your self-care strategies look to you? Do they have sufficient heart and soul? Have they helped you become more “free and equal to the call of your destiny,” as John O’Donohue suggests? In the end, will you be glad for the choices you made?



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