

**An Approach to Mental Health Recovery
and Cultivating “Emotional Fitness” –
for Wellness Recovery Action Plan ® (WRAP) Users
... and Anyone Else!**

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A more in-depth introduction--the handout to my 2014 Alternatives workshop, “Mental Health Recovery and Emotional Fitness: Practicing Compassion for Ourselves”—and other resources are available at www.researchgate.net/profile/Jim_Probert/publications

Learning Objectives

--After the workshop, participants will have considered, reviewed--or perhaps even improved--a plan to remind ourselves of practices which support trauma recovery when we are overwhelmed.

--After the workshop, participants will have also worked on a plan to acknowledge, accept, or even reclaim all thoughts, feelings, sensations, and other experiences, within our own worldviews, even when we feel overwhelmed.

--After the workshop, participants will have worked on a plan to remind ourselves of our own intentions, to practice standing up to intense oppositional forces, and to move toward living intentionally, especially when we feel overwhelmed.

--After the workshop, participants will have worked on a plan to move toward practicing unconditional self-acceptance or other approaches which support recovery and wellness in similar ways.

**An Approach to “Emotional Fitness.” Including the
“Two Story” Approach to Trauma Recovery**

- Please, feel supported to use whatever of this is helpful and to discard the rest.
- The British Psychological Society has reported mounting evidence which supports re-visioning human distress--conventionally diagnosed exclusively as mental illness--“as a response to psychosocial factors such as loss, trauma, poverty, inequality, unemployment, discrimination” and other factors which disproportionately impact individuals from marginalized groups. Accordingly, it may be healing for human beings, when we are distressed, to move toward coming to terms with whatever internal and external experiences have overwhelmed our capacity to cope.

- John Read has reported evidence from large-scale general population studies that symptoms of “psychosis” are just as strongly related to childhood abuse and neglect as the symptoms of other mental health difficulties: “For some, simply making a connection between their life history and their previously incomprehensible symptoms may have a significant therapeutic effect.”
- Vincent Felitti: “At higher ACE [Adverse Childhood Experiences] Scores, the prevalence of attempted suicide increases 30-51fold (3,000-5,100%)! Our article describing this staggering effect was published in a recent issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association.”
- Peter Levine describes post-traumatic stress as involving powerful, instinctive responses—as much in our body as in our mind. When wild prey animals experience inescapable defeat--when they are pursued by a predator and fight or flight are not possible--they may fall into a powerful, instinctive immobility or freezing response. Yet, when wild prey animals are not devoured by the predator, this brief freezing response is almost always followed by a powerful, instinctive return to full vitality. (When the lion is no longer *right here, right now* an immobilized zebra will explode back out of immobility, into fight or flight, shake off all the remaining alarm system energy and bound back to the herd, re-vitalized!)
- Unfortunately, humans easily get stuck—as our reasoning minds are shut down and awareness is flooded by "primitive" forces and experiences. And, from Levine’s perspective, even when human beings know intellectually that an immediate danger has passed, these overwhelming forces and experiences will return--over and over, as triggering/ activation and re-enactment/re-experiencing--until the deep animal levels of our being complete the alarm response on their own terms.
- Peter Levine: ". . . it is universally true that the renegotiation of trauma is an inherently mythic-poetic-heroic journey. . . it is to our detriment that we live in a culture that does not honor the internal world. In many cultures, the internal world of dreams, feelings, images, and sensations is sacred. Yet, most of us are only peripherally aware of its existence. We have little or no experience of finding our way around in this internal landscape."

**A way to understand trauma recovery as involving
“two stories” which each deserve attention**

We might choose our perspective(s)--moving beyond only being overwhelmed by thoughts, feelings, sensations, and other experiences of inescapable defeat--to also recognizing the return of these experiences as an opportunity for trauma renegotiation. (Then, knowing that trauma keeps returning until it is resolved is no longer only bad news. We may come to recognize this process as the body’s effort to heal itself.) **A prey animal that is aware of both** (1) *the continued visceral experiences of the freezing/ immobility response* and (2) *relative safety--*

that the predator has at least moved some distance away--will emerge through fight or flight back into vitality. (This is the way out!)

Unfortunately, **human beings often get stuck** in this process. We may tune out or block these deeply visceral experiences. Or, we may respond to (a) the freezing response (e.g. hopelessness, feelings like death, awareness of “extreme” or “primitive” experiences) and to (b) periodic movements into fight (rage)/flight (terror)/ecstatic release as if these inner responses were an external danger. We may respond to our own “internal”/private experiences as if they were an external/material predator, still *right here, right now* and fall back or fall even more deeply into immobility. (We may also find ourselves being driven toward suicide by these powerful forces and the overwhelming experience of inescapable defeat.)

“Top down” rational control may allow us to rebuild our external lives, but, by itself, may not support a deeper recovery from trauma. **What may help more is both** (1) **mindful awareness of our “inner”/private experience**—which can also make the material world look and feel like inescapable defeat—and (2) **continuing to manage our life according to our intentions and current external circumstances.**

In-Between (Bessel Van der Kolk): We might gain just enough perspective on our “inner” thoughts/feelings/experiences of inescapable defeat that we can observe our sensations/emotions/experiences without either (1) being completely overwhelmed and “losing our wits” entirely or (2) engaging in “avoidance maneuvers” and disconnecting from them entirely. **Or Back-and-Forth** (Peter Levine): The idea of “pendulation” that we might move naturally or intentionally back and forth between the overwhelming experience of defeat and immobility and cultivating experiences of (relative) safety, comfort, and vitality.

The “**Two Stories**” in which we live while recovering from trauma are like the children's book by Maurice Sendak. We learn to (1) face and come to terms with overwhelming thoughts/emotions/experiences “**where the wild things are**” and to (2) cultivate a life to which we may return, (relatively) safely to **where we are “loved most of all”** (at least by ourselves), as we work toward living more intentionally. The Gestalt therapy dialogue/ “two chairs” technique can also support this process--from which meaning, direction and self-healing often emerge, over time.

Ways to understand living mindfully with emotion/experience:

It is like **surfing a 20-foot wave**. We cannot control that wave with our mind, either, but we can learn to surf (and to get back up when we fall).

It is like **sailing**. It is important to be aware of the wind (how strong it is, what direction it is blowing). And, with experience, we can learn to sail in different directions than the way the wind is blowing.

This approach is also like the children's book, **Where the Wild Things Are**. We can think of the place "where the wild things are" and also the place where the main character is back home, safe and "loved most of all" as two different spheres or stories within our lives. With practice, we can learn different skills for building, cultivating, or attending to both stories. Although we usually experience both stories at once, it may be helpful having these methods available, especially when one or the other stories needs more attention.

In time, **meaning, direction and self-healing** can often emerge from these practices of wholeness. At the same time, it may be valuable to learn to "stand up to" thoughts, emotions, and other experiences when they berate us, or push us to behave in potentially harmful ways, or to adopt new beliefs, without reflection.

Ways of living intentionally and/or "standing up" to emotion/experience:

We may use a **mindfulness journal** (see p. 9-10, below), to move toward becoming more aware, at the same time, of both *our consciously chosen intentions* and those *thoughts, emotions, and other experiences which come into awareness without our intending them*—or to practice pendulating between them.

We can read about or participate in **hearing voices groups** or other forms of peer support to move toward acknowledging or accepting—and if we choose, reclaiming the meaning of--our experiences, within our own freely chosen and developing worldview. We may also move toward standing up to thoughts, feelings, sensations, voices or other "inner"/private experiences when they disparage us, block us from following our intentions, or push us toward destructive acts. We can apply these approaches not only to experiences which are often called "psychotic," but also to all our experiences, including those often called "depression" or "anxiety."

Like a "**pinhole of light**," we can practice holding onto a valued image or statement--onto anything intentional, however small--in the face of intense thoughts/emotion/experience which might sweep it away.

We can learn to stand up to intense thoughts/emotion/experience by developing a "**short list**" of "**bare necessities/essentials**" that we can learn to practice even during stormy times (like getting out of bed; exercising even a little; making some social contact; taking any step toward a goal; eventually, even making it to work, class, or another valued activity).

We can learn to stand up to disparaging thoughts/emotions/experience--and those which push us toward destructive acts--with statements of **Unconditional Self-Acceptance**. We can practice deciding to value ourselves and to believe in our own basic potentials no matter what happens and no matter how we feel. We can learn to practice this even while experiencing repeated obstacles, setbacks, or failures:

Two decisions supporting a practice of Unconditional Self-Acceptance

--"I have decided to believe my life is worth living and I am worth loving no matter what happens and no matter what I feel."

--"I have decided to believe the potentials for 'love' (mutual connection), 'work' (a valued social role/activity/identity) and coping with emotions (even during periods of distress) are within me."

The Albert Ellis description of Unconditional Self-Acceptance

"Accept yourself as good, worthy, or deserving of life and enjoyment just because you are human, alive, and a unique person; and don't evaluate, rate, or measure your self or personhood at all, but only [rate] your individual thoughts, feelings and behaviors on the basis of your chosen goals and purposes."

[From: Ellis, A., & Blau, S. (2001). *The Albert Ellis reader* . . . New York: Citadel]

Ways of changing our relationship with the stress/vitality system

One way of understanding stress, anxiety and even trauma is that the **fight/flight/freezing (alarm) response** of the deep body-mind easily gets **out of sync** with so many moment-to-moment challenges of our modern human lives. We can learn from wild prey animals, which orient toward unknown experiences with a "**What is that? response**"--asking with their senses, "Is it a lion? Is it another zebra or the wind?" (Lions or hyenas could attack, at any time. So, zebras cannot afford to waste the tremendous energy of a full-blown alarm response for every unknown experience which grabs their attention, dozens or hundreds of times a day.)

One part of getting ourselves more in-sync with the alarm response, as humans, is asking that same question--"**What is that? Is it a lion?**"--whenever we find ourselves becoming stressed. Involving our senses may help with this. *This is not asking, "Is this real?* Even for real experiences, of any kind, which bring genuine suffering, we can still ask ourselves, "Is this anything for which a powerful adrenaline/alarm response would be helpful right now?" Through this process we may gradually learn to work with these energies more effectively, more of the time.

There are always lions and hyenas *out there*, and from time to time they do come after a zebra. Then, a zebra may experience terror (flight) which empowers fast legs to escape. Lions are also fast, and so rage (fight) may empower a zebra to kick the lion fiercely enough to survive the attack. **These are natural responses** although they can be expressed destructively in human life. Yet, we can also learn to move toward channeling them in ways that are more life enhancing and may lead to release from trauma responses. (At times, at least sometimes, we may even avoid experiencing these forces as intensely in the first place by realizing, as soon as possible, when something is "not a lion.")

Zebras do not need meditation, yoga, or tai chi to release alarm energy and return to a state of **everyday vitality** (what we might understand or experience as being more relaxed, aware, and present in the moment) when there is no lion or when the lion is no longer *right here, right now*. Although our deep body-mind also knows what to do, humans do often need to develop some kind of regular practice to release that potential.

One simple practice of meditation is to focus on **what it FEELS like to breathe**. Distraction is inevitable. So, whenever we forget about breathing entirely, we can gently but firmly bring our focus back to how our body FEELS as we breathe into it. Sometimes, eventually, almost everything else may evaporate into stillness--except the awareness of breathing into our body. This can be a wonderful experience, but it is not the primary goal of this practice. The goal is **learning to sit with intense emotion without fleeing**, while gently but firmly, feeling ourself breathing *through* the turmoil.

We can borrow an idea from neuroscience, that human beings have a "triune brain"--including a human/reasoning brain, a mammal/emotion brain, and a reptile/instinct brain. When we perceive anything as a "lion," Peter Levine tells us—unless we learn and practice new responses--the reptile brain overrides emotion, reason and also the body's healing systems. The writer Matthew Fox has called meditation a practice of "**Nice Crocodile**"—sending a *relative* safety message to the inner reptile, especially when our experience is intense and chaotic. (For many of us--when we are re-experiencing intense impacts of trauma/adversity--meditation may bring us too intensely into contact with that overwhelming energy. Then, yoga, tai chi, mindful walking or other freely chosen wellness tools may move us toward this goal more effectively.)

Our **emotion/experience itself is never a "lion,"** never something from which an alarm response can actually defend us. (The more the alarm system is activated, the more it also tends to shut down those other resources which might support us to live more effectively and vitally, even when we are experiencing activation.) Reacting to our own emotion/experience as if it were a dangerous predator may create a vicious cycle, as more and more alarm energy makes our emotion/ experience more and more intense. We may become immobilized, again and again, as we experience our own emotion/experience itself as a source of inescapable defeat. We may also experience and re-experience thoughts of suicide and, for some, suicide attempts—driven by this experience of inescapable defeat. This may lead to an intensifying vicious cycle, as we become a literal and immediate life-threatening danger to ourselves—and as every external or internal event which activates thoughts of suicide becomes associated with immediate life-threatening danger.

Moving toward a **practice of unconditional self-acceptance**—or other practices which support recovery and wellness in similar ways--may not only save our lives. These practices may also support us to move gradually out of the vicious cycle. Meditation, yoga and other freely chosen wellness tools may also help ease us out of that cycle into a cycle of trauma recovery and healing.

Rather than literally practicing meditation--with the goal always being to cultivate stillness--we may understand mindfulness practices, in general, as **learning to become more aware when we experience periodic bursts of terror, rage, or wild, ecstatic images of escape**. We may eventually learn to channel and release these energies in relatively safer and more effective ways, rather than always and forever being carried instinctively by these forces into internal and external re-enactments of previous trauma/adversity/inescapable defeat.

We may use art, writing, or employ other forms of imagination in everyday life to explore, express, and release the energies from “where the wild things are” in ways that also respect our efforts to cultivate an intentional life where we are “loved most of all.” (For example, we might find ourselves hiding, as if someone who was dangerous during our childhood were still walking outside our room--when in fact we are living on our own, now, as an adult. Then, this practice might be as basic as finding a way to walk carefully and safely out of our room, now, in a way we never could as a child.)

When we fall into activation of the alarm response, we may **practice pendulation**, focusing our senses on a physical object that has previously evoked *any* movement toward experiencing relative calm, safety, or vitality. (It might be a shell or a stone. I have seen people use a religious icon--or a set of keys which symbolized a car they hoped to buy in the future.) In this way, even if we do not experience any immediate release, in the moment, we send a message--through the senses--to the deep parts of our body/mind. (It is like the zebra seeing--and smelling--a big stretch of empty tall grass where the lion used to be.) This allows our deep body/mind to experience both (1) the continued visceral experiences of the freezing/immobility response and (2) relative safety—sensory awareness that the predator has at least moved a far enough distance away. A prey animal that experiences both of these sensations at the same time will emerge, through fight or flight, back into vitality. Over time, this practice can also support us, gradually, to emerge back into vitality.

Peace of mind is not achieving complete stillness every time we practice mindfulness-- or practice whatever wellness tools work best for us as individuals. It is the process of practicing “nice crocodile.” It is not always making the waves of alarm system energy go away, but riding them out--in ways that, over time, may move us toward releasing that energy--as a gift to ourselves, especially when we are most stressed.

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Hearing Voices Network USA: Voices, Visions and Other Unusual or Extreme Experiences. Website available at <http://www.hearingvoicesusa.org/>

Intentional Peer Support. Website available at <http://www.intentionalpeersupport.org/>

Intervoice: The international community for hearing voices. Website available at <http://www.intervoiceonline.org>

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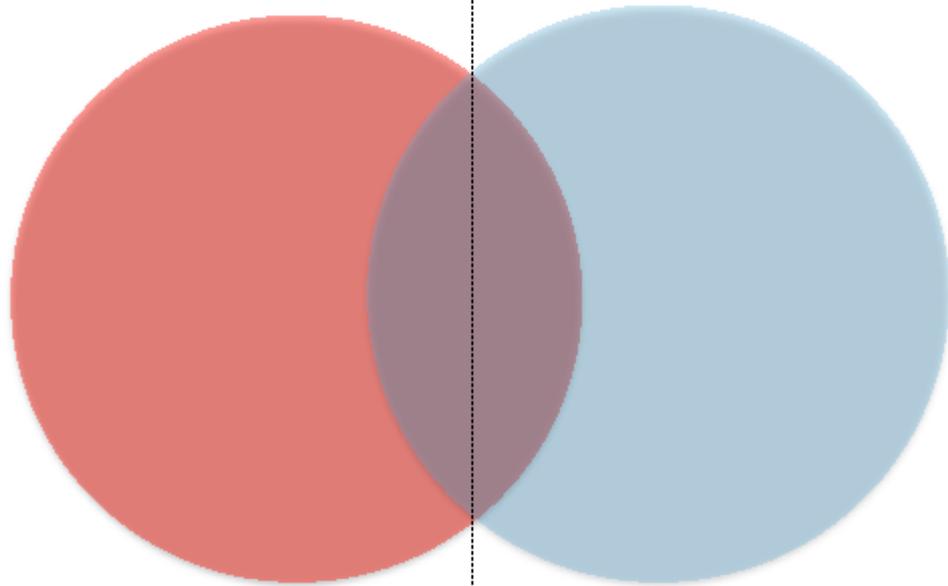
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Wellness Recovery Action Plan. Website available at <http://www.mentalhealthrecovery.com/wrap/>

Mindfulness Journal: Write on each side or use this page as a guide.

Emotion/Experience



Intention/Purpose

Mindfulness Journal : Write in each column or use this page as a guide.

1. What is it like?
Emotional feelings,
body sensations,
thoughts, other
experiences and
how I behaved in
any ways that went
along with this.
(Just observe the
experience.)

2. Did anything
appear to trigger the
experience? Any
outside event or
replay of a previous
event? (If unsure,
explore briefly.)

3. How did I behave
or how did I choose
to think in ways that
were mindful and
consistent with my
intentions?

4. What else might I
have done or do next
time? (How else
might I behave?
What can I “tell
myself”? What idea
might I have held
onto even while I
was experiencing
the emotion or
experience?)