This document has been written for clinicians. The content was developed by the Integrative Medicine Program, Department of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health in cooperation with Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, under contract to the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, Veterans Health Administration.

Information is organized according to the diagram above, the *Components of Proactive Health and Well-Being*. While conventional treatments may be covered to some degree, the focus is on other areas of Whole Health that are less likely to be covered elsewhere and may be less familiar to most readers. There is no intention to dismiss what conventional care has to offer. Rather, you are encouraged to learn more about other approaches and how they may be used to complement conventional care. The ultimate decision to use a given approach should be based on many factors, including patient preferences, clinician comfort level, efficacy data, safety, and accessibility. No one approach is right for everyone; personalizing care is of fundamental importance.
WHOLE HEALTH: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION

Spiritual Anchors

Clinical Tool

As clinicians we continually witness the highs and lows of human existence; we confront suffering, experience a great deal of stress, and are often pushed to the limits in terms of our emotional and physical stamina. This clinical tool offers some exercises you can do, either individually or as part of a group, to help to ground yourself in some of the core healing principles that most likely led you to want to become a clinician in the first place. The two exercises presented here encourage you to use objects, symbols, or various practices as anchors that keep you oriented on your core values or beliefs when you are under duress.

The Healer’s Art, a course designed by Rachel Remen, MD, was first taught to medical students as a medical school elective course in 1991. Now, well over 88 medical schools offer the course.1 The goals of the course are:2

1. To support students (and faculty) in recognizing, valuing, and preserving the human dimension of their work
2. To enable them to experience and connect with core values of compassion, service, doing no harm, love, and justice. To make these a way of life.
3. To enable them to be in relationships with colleagues that are nonjudgmental, noncompetitive, and harmless.
4. To enable students and faculty to explore the true meaning of healing and how to be in relationships that optimally promote it.

You may notice that many of these goals resonate with the goals of the Whole Health: Change the Conversation program, which was designed with the intention of providing a similar opportunity to clinicians with an array of different backgrounds and levels of training. It is certainly true that the Healer’s Art faculty benefit greatly from the course, just as the students do, and there is a profound need for experiences that foster care for the caregiver at all levels of training.3

1. Anchoring Exercise: A Sacred Object

At the completion of the Healer’s Art course, participants are given a small item—often a small plush heart sewn by a volunteer. This is their anchor, something that they can carry with them (e.g., in the pocket of their white coat) to remind them of what matters most to them in their work and in general, during challenging times.

Choose an object that reminds you of your own meaning and purpose. It should symbolize health and well-being for you in some way. Examples include:

- A photograph of a loved one
- A stone from a favorite place
WHOLE HEALTH: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION  
Clinical Tool: Spiritual Anchors

- A special piece of jewelry
- A copy of a poem or piece of artwork
- An affirmation or poem written by a loved one

Resolve to keep that object with you on a routine basis. Wear it, carry it in your wallet or purse, put it in your pocket, or display it in a place at work where you spend a significant amount of time. The key is to have it situated where you can bring your awareness to it as needed.

A great group activity for a care team (e.g., a patient-aligned care team), a hospital rounding team, a nursing meeting, or even for an ice breaker before a larger meeting, is to have people take turns sharing about their anchors/sacred objects. In the right circumstances, it can even be done with a group of patients.

- Be clear, before beginning, that what is shared should be treated as confidential. Many people feel vulnerable sharing in this way. Gently encourage everyone to share, but allow people to “pass” if they wish.
- Keep the groups small. If there are more than six or seven people, consider dividing into multiple groups. This can also be done in pairs, where each member of the pair takes turns sharing.
- Be sure to designate a length of time for each person to share. This activity almost always takes longer than one might expect.
- Consider having each person follow a general outline when they share. For example:
  - Describe the history of the object. What is it? Where did you get it?
  - Explain why the object is important to you. How does it connect you with your sense of meaning and purpose at work, and in other aspects of your life?
  - Discuss what you can do to keep the object in your awareness. Is it in a pocket where you can easily reach for it? Is it on display somewhere you will frequently see it? Do you set a reminder on your smartphone to think about it at regular intervals?

2. Anchoring Exercise: Other Ways to Anchor

While it can be helpful for many people to have a physical object as an anchor, there are other types of anchors as well. In a group setting, people can define together what these “other anchors” could be. Members of a group can follow similar instructions on sharing as listed in the first exercise, but rather than displaying or passing around objects, each person can choose to discuss one of the following instead. The list is by no means exhaustive—be creative!

- A breathing exercise that you can use when things become stressful. See the clinical tool, Breathing for ideas.

- A gesture, hand movement or body position that can serve as an anchor. In some mindful awareness practices, mudras—special hand positions—are used. Some
people prefer to gently squeeze the area between their thumb and index finger on one hand between the thumb and index finger of the other hand. Placing one’s hand over one’s heart can also be a powerful reminder to bring the heart back into a given experience.

- **A mindful awareness practice** that can be done routinely. For example, during a difficult situation a person might do a loving-kindness meditation or compassion practice. Another option is for clinicians to ground themselves every time they cross a threshold into a new room, or when they use their stethoscope, or when they sit in a particular seat. See the clinical tools Compassion Practice and Bringing Mindful Awareness into Clinical Work.

- Going to a **specific location** can also be helpful. Every VA Hospital has a chapel or meditation room. If it feels appropriate to you, visit it from time to time to anchor yourself. Some clinicians like to sit in the waiting room or the cafeteria for a few moments, to reclaim the patient perspective. It can also help to anchor to a favorite piece of art that one passes on a routine basis.

- Play a specific **song**. In this era of smartphones and laptops that have music files, taking a few minutes to play a favorite piece of music can serve as an excellent anchor.

- **Pray, take a moment of silence, or simply be still**, when appropriate. How to do any of these is a deeply personal preference. Some clinicians set the intention of simply thinking “I wish you well,” or “I wish you your highest good” every time they come into contact with a new patient or colleague.

Again, these two anchoring exercises are just suggestions. Let your own wisdom and the wisdom of your group, if you are doing this as a group exercise, guide you. There are many other potential anchors out there; see how many you can find!

### Whole Health: Change the Conversation Website

Interested in learning more about Whole Health? Browse our website for information on personal and professional care.


This clinical tool was written by J. Adam Rindfleisch, MPhil, MD, Associate Professor and Director of the Academic Integrative Medicine Fellowship Program, Department of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health, and Assistant Director and faculty for the VHA Whole Health: Change the Conversation clinical program.
References

