



TRELLIS SOCIETY

Reflective Practice Toolkit for the Mentee

Prepared for the Trellis Society
Catamount: A Fellowship for Emerging Changemakers
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A Note on This Toolkit

This document was produced as part of the Catamount Fellowship for Emerging Changemakers at Mount Royal University, in community partnership with the Trellis Society and under the faculty mentorship of Dr. Leda Stawnychko. It is a companion document to the Reflective Practice Mentorship Companion Guide for the Mentee.

The author, Ayden Osvath, has a Bachelor in Communication, major in Information Design and minor in Social Innovation. This Toolkit and the recommendations that follow are not drawn from personal experience as a social service practitioner. They are grounded in a structured literature review and a review of best practices on reflective practice, mentorship, burnout, and early career support in social work and other social service fields. This document also incorporates feedback collected during a May 12, 2026, Trellis community engagement session.

A key feature of the proposed Reflective Practice Mentorship Program ("**Program**") is that it is designed to meet the organizational realities of Trellis while remaining adaptable and scalable to meet not just existing but also future needs of Trellis. Trellis' own knowledge of its organization, workforce, and culture will shape the implementation and management of the Program. That said, this Toolkit may be a helpful resource to you regardless of how the Program is implemented or adapted.

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How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is your own personal document. It is not a training manual, or a policy document, or even a performance checklist. It is a document that you may find helpful in navigating your first year or two of professional practice.

There is no right or wrong way to use this document. You may find it helpful to work through this document section by section. You may choose to look at this document whenever you experience some difficulty in your practice. You might choose to only work on certain prompts or all the prompts.

What is important to keep in mind is that you can keep everything you record or write down in this document private. There is no need to share anything in this document. On the other hand, you may find it helpful to share some of what you think about and record with your Reflective Practice Mentor ("**RPM**") in any upcoming reflective practice sessions you attend.

Part 1: The Theory to Practice Gap is Real

You studied hard. You did your practicum. You read about trauma-informed practice, attachment theory, systems thinking, and culturally responsive approaches. You care deeply about people.

And then you sat across from a family in crisis, and nothing felt like enough.

This gap — between what you knew and what the work actually requires — is one of the most disorienting experiences in early social service practice. And it is also one of the most normal.

Your academic training has provided you with most of the theory and many, but not all, of the cognitive tools that you will need in your social service practice. What academic training is unable to prepare you for is the emotion of this difficult but critical work you are going to do. You will be dealing with people who are going through very difficult times, you may become frustrated with the system, rules, and laws in which you and the families you serve have to operate, and you will likely feel exhausted from the emotions you will need to process. These difficulties have been researched, and it is not unique to Trellis, to Calgary, or even Canada, it is an international problem. And even though you may have studied the theory to practice gap, experiencing the gap is something you will have to navigate. [1]

This gap exists in part because the professional practice of social work requires lived professional experience that you will have to process and integrate into your practice.

Things That Are Normal in Year One

- Questioning whether you can do this work.
- Finding it hard to leave cases and files at work (mentally).
- Feeling incompetent even if you are doing well.
- Feeling incompetent when things are not going well.
- Experiencing unexpected emotions when dealing with specific clients.
- Grieving an outcome you have no control over.
- Feeling both deeply moved by the work and deeply tired by it
- Wondering why the system may not be working.

Reflection:

Is there an item on this list that resonates with you or that you are experiencing? What would you add to this list from your own experience so far? Come back to this reflection from time to time.

A Key Takeaway

Hiding your struggles is not a sign of strength. In the social work profession, knowing when you need help and then seeking help is the sign of strength. Over time, your goal is to develop your capacity to process the struggle of those you are helping as well as your own, without being consumed by the struggle. This capacity is built over time, through experience and reflection.

You are not behind. You are at the beginning.

Write:

Describe what has drawn you to this profession. Revisit your answer and rewrite, if necessary, six months from now and twelve months from now.

Part 2: What is Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is a habit you will develop where you will deliberately examine, process and integrate your experiences. You will consider what happened, what was your response, what does your response say about you, what will you learn from your response and what might you do different next time.

The academic research is consistent in its findings that in helping professions reflective practice that is supported through relational structures like reflective mentorship, will increase resilience, will build emotional reserves, and will improve the quality of your professional practice. It is one of the most studied protective factors against burnout in social work. [2]

Reflection is considered a survival tool, and you should not wait until you have extra time to apply this tool.

Reflection Is Not ...

Reflection is not perseverating and circling around the same painful thoughts without an actual resolution. Reflection is structured, purposeful, and is meant to provide a path for future action. Again, the questions being asked include: What happened? What does it mean? What might I learn?

Reflection is also not a diary, a journal, or a record of your thoughts. Reflection deliberately examines your own experience without judgment. Your examination is based on curiosity about yourself and what you can learn by the things that affect you.

A Simple Reflective Cycle

There are many different frameworks that can be used for reflective practice. An example of a simple but widely used framework is the Experience–Reflection–Action (ERA) cycle. It consists of three easily remembered stages. [3] There may be other frameworks that might work better for you. Remember, what works, works.

EXPERIENCE

Something happened. What was it — the situation, the moment, the encounter? What occurred?

REFLECTION	What were your responses — in your body, your thoughts, your emotions? What feelings came up? What might be underneath those reactions?
ACTION	What might you do differently next time? What will you carry forward into the next situation? What's the small step?

Reflect:

Think of a work experience from the past two weeks that has stuck with you. Analyze it using the three stages, Experience-Reflection-Action, and the prompts above. What do you notice? What is your Action going forward?

Building Your Own Reflection Habit

Depending on your specific experiences, reflection does not necessarily require a lot of time. More important is to develop the habit of regularly following a consistent process. Spend ten minutes at the end of your shift. Or run through the three stages of, Experience-Reflection-

Action, on your commute home. Depending on how you best process and remember thoughts, emotions and ideas you may want to write down your reflection in a dedicated notebook, or you might prefer to make voice memos on your smart phone. Do what works for you and what is easy for you.

Write:

What is a realistic reflection habit that you can consistently incorporate into your day? Be as specific as possible and include, when, where and how. In a month's time revisit this prompt and amend it as needed.

Part 3: Reflection Prompts to Help get your Reflection Started

The following questions are suggestions that may help you start a reflection session. These questions are categorized based on emotions or experiences that you, the early career social worker, will likely need to process. Over time you will develop your own prompts that best help you process your lived professional practice. Remember you can also use these questions as you prepare for a session with your RPM, or even during your session with your RPM.

When You don't Know What to Do

When you feel unprepared or can't find the right answer.

- "Do you experience a physical reaction or change when you feel stuck and don't know what to do? What or where do you feel this?"
- "Do you react different when you might not know enough to make a decision versus being unable to choose between options? How do you tell the difference between these two struggles?"
- "Instead of a perfect decision, what does a good enough decision look like?"

When the Work Follows you Home

For when your mind keeps thinking about a case or file at home.

- "What case, individual, or family, are you still thinking about right now? What is it about this case, individual or family that you are having trouble letting go?"
- "How does a difficult meeting, session, or visit impact your mood? Do you feel a physical reaction or impact?"
- "Is there something specific that helps you leave work at work? Does it work all the time, most of the time, some of the time? Is there something else you could try?"

When the Power Dynamic Troubles You

Navigating your own power and authority over families and individuals.

- "Imagine what it might be like for you to meet with someone who has your power or authority over you or your family?"
- "When does having power or authority feel uncomfortable to you? What do you think this discomfort is signalling to you?"
- "How do you do this job and stay the person you are or want to be? How can you make this happen? What might prevent you from letting this happen?"

When a File Hits Close to Home

When a client or their story raises unexpected emotions.

- "Is there a specific individual or family that is impacting you more than others? Do you have a sense of why?"
- "Have you caught yourself reacting more strongly than usual toward a specific individual or family?"
- "When you realize a case, individual or family triggers something personal what do you do? Who do you talk to? Who should you talk to?"

When a Case Ends Poorly

Working through outcomes that you cannot control.

- "What do you do with any grief you may experience when a poor outcome was out of your hands or control?"
- "Can you tell the difference between what was in your power and control versus what is not?"
- "Was there anything, big or small, that you were able to offer the individual or family that may have mattered to them?"

When You Wonder Why You Are Doing This

For those moments of doubt about your career choices.

- "What brought you to this profession in the first place? Is that why you are still here now?"
- "Think back over the last week, or the last month and is there a moment, big or small, where you believe you may have made a difference?"
- "What does it look like to be doing this work 'well' in five years? What do you think you will have learned by then that is missing right now?"

Part 4: Recognizing Your Own Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

Compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout do not arrive suddenly. It builds gradually, and you may have a difficult time recognizing that it is happening to you. Social service workers are particularly at risk because there is a culture that often rewards, rightly or wrongly, selflessness and stoicism while discouraging the acknowledgment of personal cost. [4]

This document is not a diagnostic tool. It is meant to encourage your self-awareness. It is also meant to tell you that compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, and burnout are not weaknesses. Instead, they are predictable responses to demanding relational work.

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue is the emotional exhaustion that comes from sustained exposure to others' suffering. It is not weakness or failure. It is what happens when the emotional reserves required to do relational work are depleted faster than they are replenished. [4, 5, 6]

Signs you may be experiencing compassion fatigue:

- Feeling numb or emotionally flat in situations that would previously have affected you.
- Increasing detachment from clients.
- Finding it hard to feel empathy in the way you used to.
- Dreading particular client contacts or entire workdays.
- Feeling like you are going through the motions.

Secondary Traumatic Stress

Secondary traumatic stress arises from indirect exposure to traumatic events through the stories of clients. It can look like acute trauma symptoms without the person experiencing anything directly traumatic themselves. [4, 5, 6]

Signs you may be experiencing secondary traumatic stress:

- Intrusive thoughts about a client's experience.
- Nightmares or disturbed sleep related to case content.
- Hypervigilance.
- Physical symptoms without clear medical cause.
- Difficulty tolerating news, media, or conversations that remind you of case content.

Early Burnout

Burnout is the chronic exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy that arise from prolonged occupational stress. It is a spectrum and it is reversible, especially when caught early. [4, 5, 6]

Signs of early burnout:

- Persistent exhaustion that rest does not resolve.
- Increasing cynicism about clients, colleagues, or the organization.
- A sense that your work does not matter or does not make a difference.
- Withdrawing from relationships at work.
- Reduced satisfaction with accomplishments that would previously have felt good.

Write:

What are your personal early warning signs? What do you notice first when you are approaching your limit?

What to Do With What You Notice

If you recognize any of the above happening to you the most important first step is to admit it to yourself and to someone safe. The relationship you are developing with your RPM is the right place for this. However, remember your RPM is not your therapist and their role is not to evaluate you. But they are there to help you navigate what is happening, why it may be happening and what you may need to do next.

If You Are in Crisis

If you are experiencing thoughts of self-harm, significant mental health symptoms, or anything that feels beyond what mentorship can hold, please access formal supports directly. If you feel you need help now, do not wait until the next session with your RPM.

Part 5: How to Ask For Help

Research on the retention of newly qualified social workers identifies the relational support around you which includes your own sense of making a difference, quality mentorship, supportive peers and a positive organizational culture as the pull factors that keep people in the profession. [7]

Your Reflective Practice Mentor

Your RPM will be a significant resource to you over the next two to three years. Your RPM is an experienced social worker (who is not your administrative supervisor) and who you will meet with regularly to talk about the relational and emotional dimensions of your practice. Your RPM holds no evaluative function and what you share with them will stay with them.

To gain the most from this relationship:

- Show up and be honest. How much you will get out of this relationship will be based on what you bring into the relationship.
- Discuss and explore actual difficulty instead of hiding it or downplaying it.
- Discuss and explore what is working for you. Your growth and your accomplishments are worth talking about and can be used as stepping stones to build even more accomplishments.
- Don't pretend to be okay. Your RPM cannot help you navigate what you may be hiding.

Your Administrative Supervisor

Your administrative supervisor's primary role is caseload management, compliance, and performance support. But good administrative supervisors will also notice the whole worker. If you are struggling, especially with case management decisions, it is appropriate to seek support through your administrative supervisor.

Peer Relationships

Your peers are going through what you are going through and will understand your experiences. Peer relationships help you appreciate that what you are going through is normal and it helps reduce any sense of isolation.

Personal Practices

Research on workforce wellbeing in helping professions consistently identifies personal restorative practices and recovery activities as meaningful buffers against burnout. But social service workers often experience a 'recovery paradox' where they are least likely to take advantage of available supports or to engage in recovery activities when they may need them most. [8]

Identify what works best for you personally to restore your emotional and physical reserves. Is it time in the gym, in nature, working with your hands, spending time with those outside your profession, sleep, solitude, community. What is important is that you make the time to do what restores you.

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