



CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION
discovery college
KELOWNA

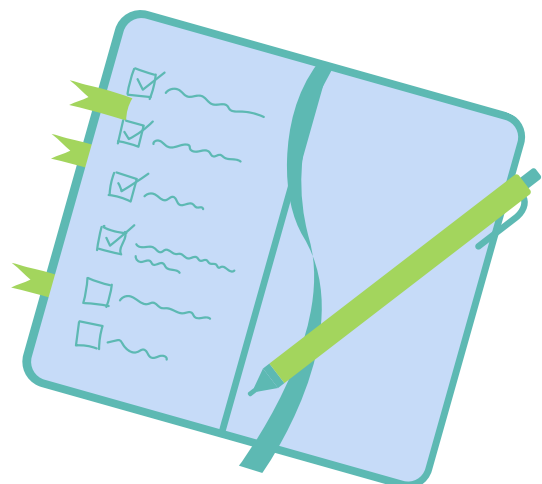
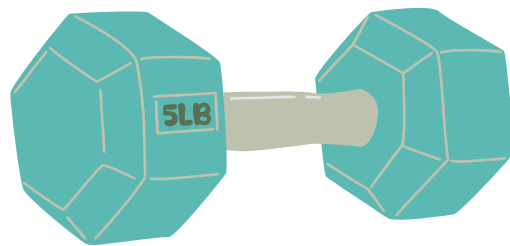
SELF-CARE FOR FIREFIGHTERS

Participant Workbook



A GUIDE TO RESILIENCE AND WELL-BEING

Firefighters face constant stress, grief, and trauma, but you don't have to carry it alone. Building resilience through self-care, joy, and stress management helps you thrive, support your team, and stay strong at work and at home. This guide offers practical strategies to recharge, stay balanced, and strengthen mental well-being.



UNDERSTANDING SELF-CARE

Self-care refers to the deliberate actions we take to maintain our physical, emotional, and mental well-being. For firefighters and first responders, who face high-stress situations, trauma exposure, and irregular schedules, self-care is not a luxury—it's essential. Regular self-care helps prevent burnout, reduces stress, supports mental resilience, and ensures personnel can perform their duties safely and effectively.

Examples of Healthy Self-Care

- Regular exercise, adequate sleep, balanced nutrition, staying hydrated.
- Mindfulness practices, journaling/reflection, therapy or counseling, taking mental health days.
- Spending quality time with loved ones, maintaining friendships, and peer support networks.
- Setting boundaries, debriefing after critical incidents, and engaging in continued education, self exploration or skill-building.



SELF-SOOTHING ACTIVITIES

Self-soothing involves strategies to calm yourself quickly in moments of stress, anxiety, or emotional overwhelm. For first responders, having accessible self-soothing tools is crucial— often needing to regulate your emotional state on the fly, whether during or after high-pressure calls.

Having a mental or physical list of self-soothing strategies allows for quick and effective responses to stress, rather than relying on unhealthy coping mechanisms. By knowing which tools work for you personally, you can maintain emotional balance, protect your long-term mental health, and perform safely on the job.

Healthy vs Unhealthy Soothing Strategies

- Deep breathing exercises
- Grounding techniques (e.g., 5-4-3-2-1 sensory method)
- Listening to calming music or nature sounds
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Mindful stretching or a quick walk
- Positive self-talk or visualization
- Excessive alcohol or substance use
- Overeating or binge eating
- Withdrawing socially or isolating completely
- Aggressive behaviors or venting destructively
- Impulsive spending or risk-taking



SHIFT WORK SLEEP SUPPORT

Firefighters often work long and/or overnight shifts that disrupt normal sleep patterns. Being “on” and in high-alert mode for extended periods makes it difficult to transition into rest mode, both mentally and physically. Chronic sleep disruption can affect mental health, decision-making, and overall wellbeing.

Shift work can disrupt the body’s natural sleep–wake cycle, leading to poor-quality and fragmented sleep. This fatigue affects emotional regulation and concentration, increasing the risk of irritability, burnout, and mental health challenges. Physically, ongoing sleep loss weakens the immune system, strains the heart, and impacts metabolism, making it harder for the body to recover from the demands of the job.

After long stretches in adrenaline-fueled, high-stakes situations, the nervous system doesn’t immediately “switch off.” The body needs time to move from sympathetic activation (“fight or flight”) into parasympathetic rest (“rest and digest”).



SLEEP TIPS FOR RECOVERY

Transition Routine

- Create a short post-shift ritual to help your body unwind (e.g., warm shower, change clothes, calming music).

Breathing & Grounding

- Use simple techniques like box breathing or 5-4-3-2-1 grounding to calm the nervous system and return to the present.

Sleep Hygiene

- Keep your sleep space dark and quiet.
- Limit screens before bed.
- Use relaxation if you can't sleep right away.

Strategic Napping

- Take short 20–30 min naps to boost alertness & avoid long naps close to bedtime.

Post-Shift Recovery

- Hydrate and eat light, give yourself 30–60 min to wind down before sleeping.
- Try gentle movement (stretching, walking, yoga).



MEDITATIVE/ SLEEP PODCASTS

Sleep with Me – “The Podcast That Puts You to Sleep”

Why it works: A guy tells boring, meandering stories to gently distract your brain from racing thoughts. It’s weirdly effective. Male voice, dry humor, intentionally dull.

Nothing Much Happens

Why it works: Calm, repetitive stories told slowly and softly.

The Calm Collective – Men’s Series

Why it works: Talks about stress, masculinity, and sleep from a grounded, thoughtful place. Respectful, honest, not preachy.
Episodes to try: Anything from the “Men & Emotions” or “Grief” categories.



Set the Scene: Before you hit play, dim the lights, put your phone on DND, and make sure you're physically comfortable—this signals your nervous system it's time to power down. If you're on shift and can't fully unplug, even just lowering the lights and closing your eyes can help.

Drop the Pressure: You don't have to “meditate perfectly” or fall asleep right away. Just press play and let the voice or sound guide you. Think of it like a reset button—something you get to do, not another task.

MEDITATIVE/ SLEEP APPS

Calm App

Features: Guided sleep meditations, breathing exercises, soundscapes, and stories read by male voices (LeBron James, Matthew McConaughey, etc.).

Headspace

Features: Entire sleep section with sleepcasts, calming music, white noise and sleep sounds, wind down meditations and more.

Insight Timer

Features: 100% free access to sleep meditations + soundscapes. Male narrated content.

What to Try: “Yoga Nidra for Sleep,” “Deep Sleep with Steve Taylor,” or “Fireplace with Rain.”

Endel

Features: Personalized soundscapes based on circadian rhythms, time of day, and user feedback.

Sound options: “Wind Down,” “Deep Work,” and “Sleep.”

Good for: People who prefer sounds over talking or guided meditation.

Bonus: Headspace Guide to Sleep on Netflix

The science behind a healthy night's sleep and friendly tips on how to get the best-ever sleep; an exploration of different aspects of sleep, such as insomnia, stress, phones, and sleeping pills, followed by a guided wind-down.

ADDITIONAL SLEEP INFO

Melatonin

Melatonin is a hormone your body produces naturally that signals to your brain that it's time to sleep. Time of day influences this hormone's cycle of production and release — melatonin levels naturally rise in the evening and fall in the morning.

Magnesium

Magnesium is a mineral involved in hundreds of processes in the human body, and it's important for brain function and heart health. It may also help quiet the mind and body, making it easier to fall asleep.

Studies show that magnesium's relaxing effect may be partly due to its ability to regulate melatonin production. Magnesium is known to relax muscles and induce sleep. Magnesium Glycinate is best form for sleep (taken 1-2 hours before bed)

please consult with a medical professional prior to taking these supplements

Kelowna Sleep Clinic

All the doctor visits and sleep studies are covered under the Medical Services Plan of BC. Patients must be referred by a physician.

Phone: (250) 862-3052
info@kelownasleepclinic.ca

Snore MD Sleep Apnea Clinic

Comprised of clinical coordinators, Respiratory Therapists and Registered Nurses.

Phone: (778) 754-7595

Email:

kelowna@snoremdcanada.ca

WELLNESS PODCASTS

First Responder Wellness Podcast

Host: Conrad Weaver a passionate advocate for mental health in public safety.

Focus: Mental health, resilience, and leadership challenges faced by first responders. Through engaging conversations with police, fire, EMS, dispatch, and wellness experts.

Huberman Lab

Host: Dr. Andrew Huberman – a neuroscientist and tenured professor at Stanford University’s School of Medicine. He specializes in brain function, neural plasticity, vision, and stress response.

Focus: The podcast translates complex neuroscience research into practical tools that listeners can use to improve mental and physical well-being. It’s science-based but very approachable.

The Firefighter Deconstructed

Host: Christy Warren

Focus: Christy is a retired fire captain and PTSD survivor, and she digs into how the job impacts mental, emotional, physical health, and how to navigate those challenges.

The Mel Robbins Podcast

Host: Mel Robbins well-known motivational speaker and author.

Focus: Broadly applicable, lots of actionable mindset, habit, personal development and motivation strategies.

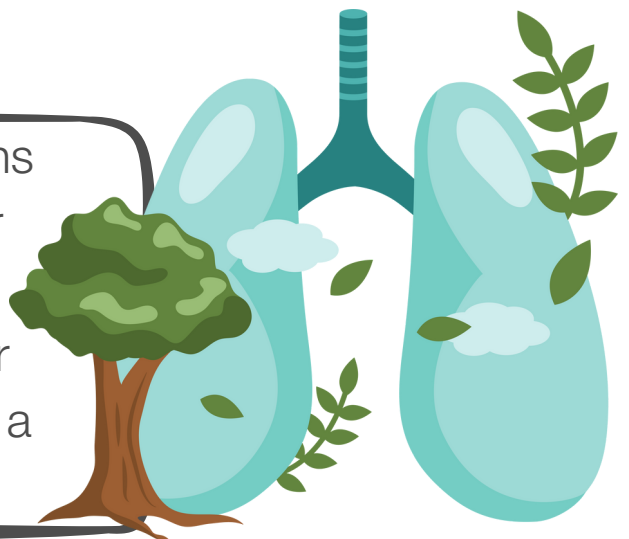
MINDFULNESS + GROUNDING

Mindfulness and grounding techniques help you focus on the present moment and your surroundings, promoting calmness and emotional regulation, especially when feeling overwhelmed or anxious.



Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to the present moment without judgement. It can help reduce stress, improve focus and enhance emotional regulation.

Grounding techniques are specific actions you can take to help you focus on your environment and the present moment, especially when feeling overwhelmed or disconnected. They can help you regain a sense of control and calmness.



MINDFUL + GROUNDING TECHNIQUES

Meditation

Sit quietly for a few minutes. Focus on your breathing, the way your body feels, or even an object in front of you (like your helmet or a cup of coffee). When your mind wanders — which it will — just bring your attention back without judgment. Even 2–3 minutes can make a difference.

Body Scan

Bring your attention through your body, head to toe. Notice if your jaw is tight, shoulders tense, or if your legs feel heavy. Don't try to “fix” anything — just notice it. This helps you connect with your body and catch tension before it builds up.

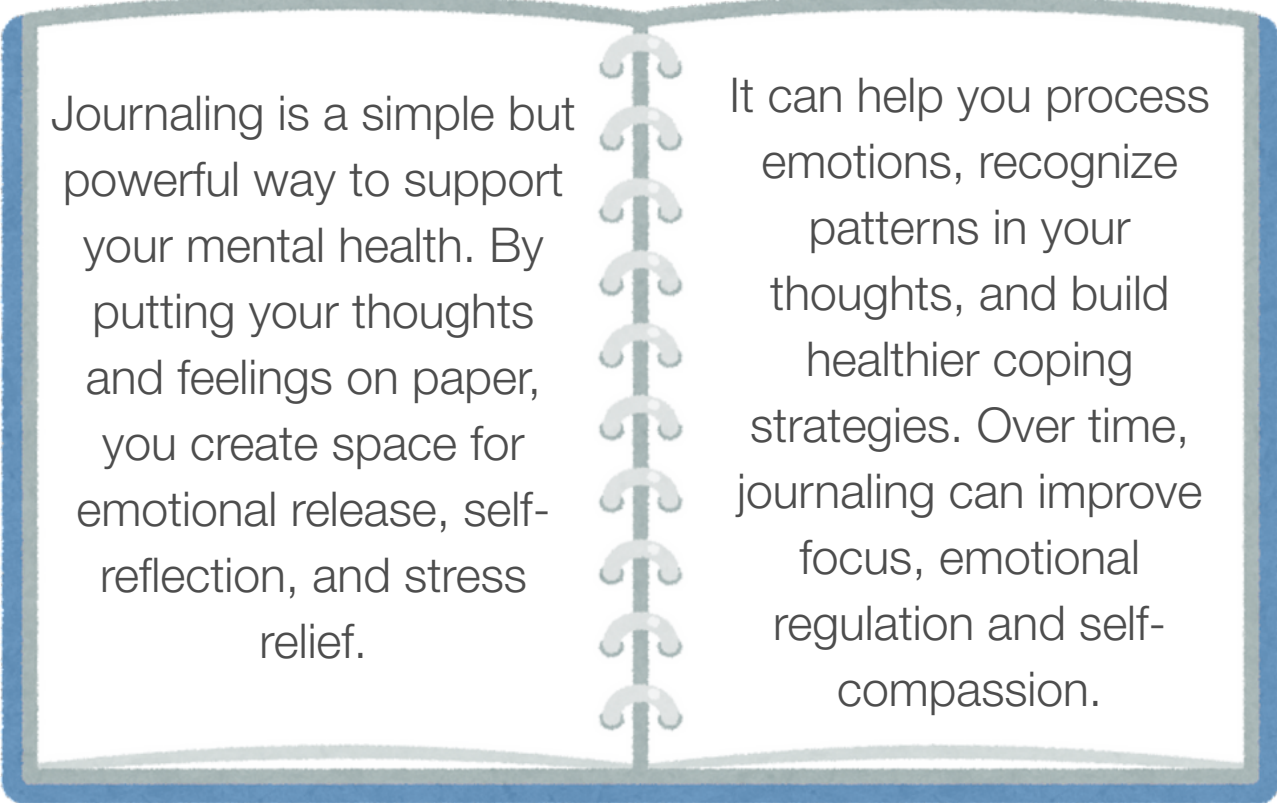
5 senses

Pick out one thing you can see, hear, smell, taste, and feel. For example: the hum of the trucks, the weight of your gear, or the smell of coffee brewing. This quick technique can pull you out of racing thoughts and ground you back into the present moment.

Deep Breathing

Take slow, steady breaths — in through your nose, out through your mouth. Focus on the rise and fall of your chest or the feeling of air moving in and out. Try counting to 4 as you breathe in, then to 4 as you breathe out. This slows your heart rate and tells your body it's safe to calm down.

JOURNALING + WELLBEING



Journaling is a simple but powerful way to support your mental health. By putting your thoughts and feelings on paper, you create space for emotional release, self-reflection, and stress relief.

It can help you process emotions, recognize patterns in your thoughts, and build healthier coping strategies. Over time, journaling can improve focus, emotional regulation and self-compassion.

There are many ways to journal and it is not about perfection or adding another task to your to-do list — it's about creating space to express yourself. A tool for completing the stress cycle, gaining new insights about yourself, and exploring your thoughts and feelings in a safe, creative way. Whether it's a few sentences, a quick list, or even sketches on a page, journaling works best when it feels like your outlet — not a chore.

JOURNALING STYLES

Gratitude

Focusing on the positive aspects of your life can boost your mood and overall well-being.

Dream

Recording and reflecting on your dreams can help you understand your subconscious and gain insights into your emotions and experiences.

Mindfulness

Paying attention to your thoughts and feelings in the present moment without judgement can cultivate self-awareness and reduce anxiety.

Prompt

Using prompts or questions to guide your writing can help you explore specific emotions or experiences.

Bullet

A bullet journal for planning and tracking goals, habits, and mood can promote organization and a sense of control.

Reflective

Examining your thoughts and feelings about past events or experiences can lead to greater self-understanding and emotional processing.

Expressive

Writing freely about your thoughts and emotions, without censoring yourself, can help release pent-up feelings and promote emotional healing.

Art

Combining journaling with creative expression like drawing or painting can be a therapeutic outlet for emotions.

NATURE BATHING “SHINRIN-YOKU”

Forest bathing, or shinrin-yoku, is a Japanese practice that encourages slowing down and fully immersing yourself in nature. It's not simply taking a walk in the woods, but intentionally engaging all your senses.

Research shows this mindful connection with the natural environment can lower stress hormones, reduce anxiety and depression, and improve mood. It can also lower blood pressure and heart rate, strengthen the immune system through natural plant compounds called phytoncides, improve sleep quality, and increase focus and concentration. By pausing to experience nature in this way, forest bathing offers a powerful reset for both body and mind.



1. Find a forest or natural area that you can visit
2. Take a slow, mindful walk, paying attention to your surroundings.
3. Engage your senses: notice the sights, sounds, smells and textures of the forest.
4. Take deep breaths and be present in the moment.
5. Consider activities like meditation, yoga or simply sitting and observing nature.

BENEFITS OF YOGA



Yoga is not limited to formal studio practice; even a brief 5–10 minute daily flow can have meaningful benefits. Through mindful movement, focused breathing, and concentrated attention, yoga helps regulate the nervous system, reduce stress and anxiety, and support emotional well-being. Consistent practice can enhance self-awareness, improve focus and concentration, promote restful sleep, and modulate the body’s “fight, flight, or freeze” response. Over time, these simple daily movements contribute to greater mental wellness and a stronger sense of connection to both body and environment.



5 STEP YOGA FLOW

Mountain Pose

1

Stand tall with feet about hip-width apart and arms relaxed. Breathe in slowly through your nose, letting your chest and belly rise. Breathe out gently through your mouth, letting your shoulders and jaw relax. Imagine your feet are rooted into the ground, helping you feel steady and calm.

Forward Fold + Shoulder Stretch

Bend forward from your hips, letting your head and arms hang loose. Bend your knees a little if your back feels tight. For a shoulder stretch, clasp your hands behind your back and gently lift them. You can also sway side to side to loosen up your back and legs.

2

Low Lunge Chest Opener

3

Step one foot forward into a lunge, keeping your back leg stretched behind you. Rest your hands on your front leg or reach your arms up to stretch your chest. As you exhale, gently sink deeper into the stretch. This helps open up your hips and chest—great after sitting or wearing heavy gear.

Cat Cow Spinal Mobility

Start on hands and knees in a tabletop position. Inhale and arch your back, lifting your head and tailbone (like a cow). Exhale and round your spine, tucking your chin and hips (like a cat). Keep moving with your breath to loosen up your spine, shoulders, and wrists.

4

Standing Side Stretch

5

Stand tall and reach your arms overhead. Clasp your hands or hold opposite elbows. Breathe out and gently bend to one side. Breathe in to come back to center, then switch sides. This stretch helps release tightness along your sides and lower back.

COMPLETING THE STRESS CYCLE

Stress is a biological process - when you face a challenge (physical, emotional, or mental), your body activates a stress response—heart rate increases, muscles tense, and adrenaline surges (fight/flight). But stress doesn't end when the stressor ends. Your body needs to complete the stress cycle to return to a state of calm. If you don't complete the cycle, stress builds up, leading to burnout.



TIPS TO COMPLETE THE STRESS CYCLE

1. Move your body

Walk, stretch, dance, lift, or flow. Moving stagnant energy in your body can reduce stress symptoms.

2. Eat well

Fuel your body with foods that support energy and mood.
(Limit processed foods, eating whole nutrient dense foods)

3. Avoid numbing habits

Alcohol, overeating, or overworking can mask stress short term but can be detrimental to long term health and increase risk of burnout.

4. Meditate or breathe deeply

Even a few breaths can complete the stress cycle.

5. Laugh & Connect

Watch something funny, share a joke and connect with people who get you.

6. Do something that matters to you

Align your actions with your values. This builds resilience.

VALUES ACTIVITY

Think of 5 of your values, write them below and consider how do they inform your actions?

Example: Belonging As a value

How I want to feel is accepted and valued for who I am, connected to others without fear of judgment, safe to share my thoughts, ideas, and emotions. How I want to show up: Be inclusive and make space for others' voices, invest in building trust and connection, create environments where others feel they belong too.

My Values:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____



****Use the values list
on the next page to
help form your
own****



Abundance	Challenge	Excitement	Inclusion	Nature	Resilience	Tolerance
Acceptance	Choice	Expertise	Independence	Nurture	Resourcefulness	Togetherness
Achievement	Collaboration	Expressiveness	Influence	Optimism	Respect	Tradition
Adventure	Commitment	Fairness	Individuality	Open-minded	Responsibility	Travel
Advocacy	Communication	Faith	Innovation	Order	Risk	Trust
Affection	Community	Family	Initiative	Originality	Romance	Truth
Altruism	Compassion	Flexibility	Inspiration	Passion	Safety	Understanding
Ambition	Connection	Friendship	Intelligence	Peace	Security	Unity
Appreciation	Contribution	Freedom	Integrity	Perfection	Self Control	Uniqueness
Arts	Creativity	Fun	Intuition	Perseverance	Self Expression	Usefulness
Authenticity	Curiosity	Generosity	Joy	Play	Service	Variety
Autonomy	Daring	Grace	Justice	Pleasure	Sharing	Versatility
Balance	Decisiveness	Gratitude	Kindness	Power	Simplicity	Vision
Be the Best	Dedication	Growth	Knowledge	Pride	Solitude	Warmth
Beauty	Diversity	Happiness	Leadership	Proactive	Spirituality	Wealth
Belonging	Efficiency	Health	Learning	Productivity	Stability	Well-Being
Boldness	Equality	Helping Others	Love	Punctuality	Success	Wisdom
Brilliance	Equity	Honesty	Loyalty	Recognition	Support	Zeal
Calmness	Empathy	Hope	Meaning	Reflection	Teamwork	Zest
Caring	Enthusiasm	Humor	Mindfulness	Relationships	Thankfulness	
Celebration	Excellence	Imagination	Motivation	Religion	Time	

PHYSICAL SELF CARE

The Physical bucket focuses on maintaining healthy habits related to physical activity, nutrition, and sleep. Research shows the importance of regular exercise, balanced nutrition, and sufficient rest. Consistent attention to these areas is essential for overall well-being.

1. How can I be physically active?

2. How can I relax?

How do I fill my physical bucket?

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EMOTIONAL SELF CARE

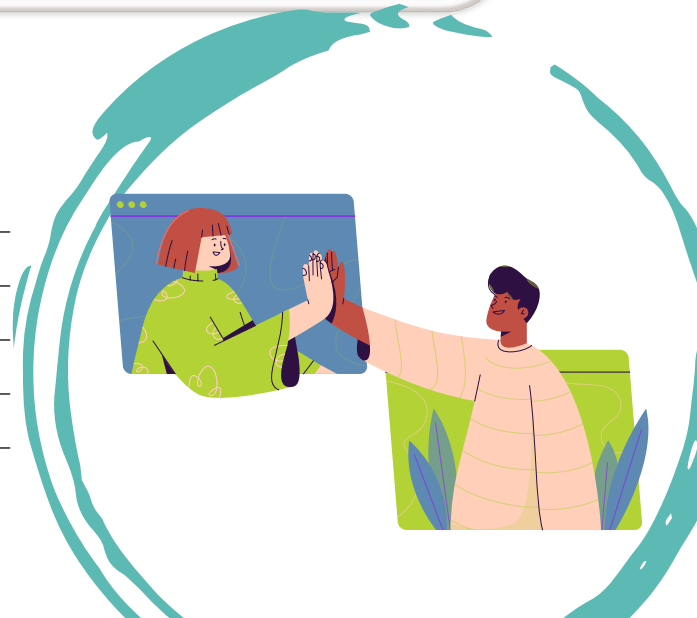
The Emotional bucket emphasizes allowing yourself to feel a range of emotions, both positive and negative. Emotional self-care ensures you're not suppressing difficult feelings but instead processing them in a healthy and balanced way.

1. How can I ensure I laugh?

2. How can I let myself worry in a healthy way?

How do I fill my emotional bucket?

- ---
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SPIRITUAL SELF CARE

The Spiritual bucket involves recognizing things beyond your daily life. It can encompass a range of meanings, for some, it's about connecting with nature; for others, it may include religion, spiritual practices/rituals such as smudging or finding purpose. It also emphasizes self-reflection and the importance of doing things for yourself, simply because you deserve it.

1. How can I recognize things outside of myself?

2. How can I prioritize myself and recognize that what I want matters?

How do I fill my spiritual bucket?

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

