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BURNOUT IN YOUTHWORK

Sailing without losing direction

A Notebook for Preventing Difficult
Moments and Burnout in Youth Work



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Burnout in Youth Work*

Why this notebook?

Youth work is often described as a profession driven by passion, values, and human connection. Youth workers, educators, facilitators, trainers, social workers, volunteers, and project coordinators dedicate their time and energy to supporting young people, creating opportunities for participation, learning, inclusion, and personal growth.

At the same time, working closely with people means being constantly exposed to emotions, expectations, conflicts, uncertainties, and sometimes difficult life stories. While this can be deeply meaningful and rewarding, it can also become emotionally demanding. Over time, stress, fatigue, frustration, and a sense of overload may accumulate, affecting not only professional performance but also personal well-being. The idea behind this notebook emerged from a simple but important question: How can youth workers continue supporting others without losing sight of their own needs, limits, and well-being?

This publication was developed within the Erasmus+ Small Scale Partnership project *Burnout in Youth Work*, implemented by Cooperativa Sociale Arnera (Italy) and Associação Bloom (Portugal). The project was created in response to a growing concern shared by both organizations: the increasing levels of stress and emotional fatigue experienced by professionals working with young people and vulnerable communities.

Rather than focusing only on burnout as a problem, the project aimed to better understand the everyday realities of youth work and identify practical strategies that can help professionals maintain their motivation, resilience, and sense of purpose.

Understanding burnout in youth work

Burnout is not simply a bad day, a temporary period of stress, or feeling tired after an intense week. It is a gradual process that can develop when professional demands consistently exceed the resources available to cope with them.

In helping professions, burnout is often associated with three interconnected dimensions:

- Emotional exhaustion;
- Detachment or distancing from work and beneficiaries;
- Reduced sense of effectiveness and accomplishment.

For youth workers, these experiences may manifest in different ways. Some professionals report feeling emotionally drained after repeated exposure to challenging situations. Others experience difficulties disconnecting from work during their personal time. Some begin questioning the value of their efforts or feel frustrated by the limitations of the systems in which they operate.

Youth work presents specific challenges that can increase vulnerability to burnout. Professionals often work with young people experiencing social exclusion, discrimination, economic difficulties, migration-related challenges, disabilities, mental health issues, or family problems. In many cases, youth workers are expected to provide support while managing limited resources, unstable funding, administrative burdens, and demanding schedules.

Despite the importance of their role, discussions about well-being and mental health among youth workers are still relatively limited. The culture of helping professions sometimes encourages people to prioritize the needs of others while neglecting their own.

This project sought to challenge that perspective.

What we learned from the research

As part of the project, an international research process was conducted involving professionals from Italy, Portugal, and other European countries. The objective was to better understand the factors

contributing to stress and burnout and to identify existing coping strategies and prevention needs.

The first phase of the research involved a structured questionnaire distributed among professionals working in youth work, education, social services, inclusion projects, disability services, healthcare settings, and community-based organizations.

The results highlighted several important trends.

Many participants reported experiencing moderate to high levels of stress in their daily work. In Portugal, stress levels were frequently reported between 7 and 8 on a scale from 1 to 10, while Italian participants commonly indicated levels between 5 and 7, with some reporting even higher scores. Similar concerns emerged across the wider European sample.

Fatigue was another recurring theme. Many respondents stated that they experience physical, emotional, or mental exhaustion several times per week, and in some cases even daily. These findings suggest that fatigue is not an occasional challenge but a regular component of professional life for many youth and social workers.

The research also identified common sources of distress across different countries. Among the most frequently mentioned factors were:

- Excessive workload;
- Persistent stress;
- Emotional overload;
- Unclear professional roles;
- Difficult communication within teams;
- Organizational challenges and lack of structure;
- Limited recognition and appreciation of professional efforts.

At the same time, participants highlighted several protective factors that help them cope with difficult situations. These included supportive colleagues, opportunities for reflection, supervision, emotional support, time spent in nature, mindfulness practices, physical activity, and clear organizational structures.

Perhaps most importantly, the research demonstrated that burnout is rarely the result of individual weakness. Instead, it emerges from the interaction between personal, relational, and organizational factors. This means that prevention cannot rely exclusively on

individual resilience; it also requires supportive environments, healthy team dynamics, and organizational cultures that value well-being.

From research to practice

While the research provided valuable insights, it also raised another question:

How can these findings be translated into practical tools that youth workers can use in their everyday lives?

This notebook represents one possible answer.

Rather than offering theoretical explanations alone, it aims to transform research findings into opportunities for reflection, self-awareness, and action.

The metaphor of sailing was chosen intentionally. Working with young people can sometimes feel like navigating open waters. There are periods of calm, moments of uncertainty, changing weather conditions, and unexpected storms. There is rarely a perfectly straight route from departure to destination.

In the same way, professional well-being is not a fixed state that can be achieved once and maintained forever. It requires continuous attention, adjustment, and care.

A sailor regularly checks the weather, monitors the condition of the boat, and adjusts the sails when necessary. Similarly, youth workers need opportunities to pause, recognize signs of stress, acknowledge their emotional state, and identify resources that can help them stay balanced.

This notebook is designed to support that process.

How to use this notebook

The activities and reflection prompts included in the following pages are not tests and there are no right or wrong answers. They are invitations to explore your experiences, your strengths, your challenges, and your personal strategies for maintaining well-being.

Some exercises can be completed individually, while others may be used during training courses, team meetings, supervision sessions, or professional development activities.

As the notebook comes from a process that featured project-specific research and training, every main topic will be introduced by a small 3-item box: 'Why this question?', brief evidence from the research, and a mini completed example. This is designed to help readers better understand the rationale behind each topic and how to apply the notebook.

You may choose to work through the notebook from beginning to end or return to specific sections whenever you need them. Some pages may resonate strongly at certain moments of your professional journey and less at others. This is natural.

The purpose is not to eliminate stress completely. Stress is a normal part of life and can even be motivating when managed effectively. The goal is instead to develop greater awareness, identify warning signs before they become overwhelming, and strengthen the personal and collective resources that support sustainable youth work.

Ultimately, caring for yourself is not separate from caring for others.

When youth workers feel supported, valued, and emotionally healthy, they are better equipped to create meaningful learning experiences, build trusting relationships, and contribute positively to the lives of young people.

We hope that this notebook can become a useful companion on that journey—a practical tool to help you navigate challenges, maintain direction, and continue sailing with confidence, even when the waters become difficult.

We hope this toolkit serves as a valuable companion in your daily practice, sparking new ideas and supporting you in your vital work with young people.

Enjoy the journey!

The Authors
A. Remorini & S. Echi

"There is no favorable wind for the sailor who doesn't know which port he's sailing to".

(Seneca)

Professional Resilience Notebook for Youth Workers

Reference period: _____

Service / Project / Territory: : _____

"Not everything that is possible is also sustainable."

Instructions for use

This notebook is a working tool. It does not need to be filled out perfectly every day, nor does it need to be followed rigidly. It is designed to accompany educational work, support emotional resilience, and help make realistic decisions in highly complex environments. As mentioned in the introduction, every macro-topic will be introduced with research references and a practical example, helping you better understand how to work through the exercises

Use it:

- On ordinary days, taking just a few minutes;
- In moments of overload, as a containment tool;
- Without judgment regarding what you write or do not write.

My Self-Care Commitment: A Gentle Pact With Myself

In helping professions fatigue easily becomes normalized or something to simply endure. This section is not meant to be another item on your daily to-do list: instead, think of it as an internal anchor or a gentle reminder that caring for yourself is essential to caring for others.

Example: *I commit to listening to my physical fatigue, taking my breaks without guilt, and asking my team for support before reaching my limit.*

To work sustainably and keep my passion alive, I choose to make these promises to myself:

- I commit to listening to my fatigue: I will honor my early warning signs (body stress, irritability, boundary loss) as valid signals to pause, not as personal failures.
- I commit to protecting my boundaries: I will keep a healthy line between my professional role and my personal life. Rest is sacred.
- I commit to asking for help early: I will not carry structural or emotional burdens alone. Reaching out to my team or supervisor is a sign of awareness, not weakness.
- I commit to gentleness: I will treat myself with the same empathy and patience I extend to others.

Signed with care: _____

Date: _____

Remember:

"I cannot navigate stormy waters if I neglect my own vessel."

Part 1

Professional Framework

Notebook question: *My role today / Implicit expectations of the context / My real margin of choice*

Connection with the research/training. The research identifies role clarity as a key training area and shows that understaffing, precarious employment and limited organizational structure can push workers to take on tasks outside their role. Making explicit what depends on me and what depends on the system helps prevent every organizational problem from becoming a personal responsibility.

1

Professional Framework - making role, expectations and room for choice visible

To make the purpose of the question clear

The interviews report that understaffing often leads workers to take on tasks outside their responsibilities, sometimes carrying higher levels of responsibility without corresponding recognition or support. In the research on street work, role confusion is identified as a risk that requires clear professional boundaries.

Example

Example: My formal role today is to facilitate the youth activity and follow up with two participants. I am also being implicitly asked to cover reception and solve an urgent staffing gap. I can decide the order of my tasks, ask a colleague to share the situation, and postpone a non-urgent report. I cannot decide the staffing level or how a young person will react.

Source: Interviews report, p. 2; A research on Burnout in Youth Work, p. 10; training proposal, pp. 20-21.

Part 1

Professional Framework

My role today

(Not my formal one, but what's really required to me)

Implicit expectations of the context

My real margin of choice

- Things I can decide:

- Things that do not depend on me:

My Personal Signs of Burnout / Fatigue

- ☐ Persistent fatigue
- ☐ Irritability / Withdrawal
- ☐ Cynicism / Detachment
- ☐ Taking too much
- ☐ Inability to switch off
- ☐ Other:

Part 2

Daily Check-in / Check-out

2

Daily Check-in / Check-out - noticing fatigue before it becomes “normal”

Notebook question: *How do I arrive at work today? / Emotional energy level / Expected level of relational exposure / A resource I can activate today*

Connection with the research/training. The check-in directly translates the training area “self-awareness and personal resources” into practice: recognizing early signs, assessing available energy and anticipating relational exposure. The quantitative research shows that fatigue is frequent and risks becoming normalized.

To make the purpose of the question clear

In the Portuguese sample, most participants report fatigue several times a week; in Italy, many participants report feeling drained daily or several times a week. The purpose of the check-in is therefore to detect a pattern, not to judge a single day.

Example

Example: I arrive tired, not fully depleted. Emotional energy: 2/5. Relational exposure: high. A difficult family meeting may challenge me today. Resource I can activate: 10 minutes with a colleague before the meeting. What I can choose not to do: rewrite the non-urgent activity plan today.

Source: *Final Report questionnaires, p. 17; A research on Burnout in Youth Work, p. 20*

Part 2

Daily Check-in / Check-out

Date: _____

How do I arrive at work today?

- ☐ Drained / Depleted
- ☐ Fatigued / Exhausted
- ☐ Overwhelmed
- ☐ Present

Emotional energy level (1 - low / 5 - high)

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

Expected level of relational exposure

low ☐ medium ☐ high ☐

A situation that could challenge me / put me in difficulty today

A resource I can activate today

What I can choose not to do today

(Things I can postpone, do just well enough, or decline to take on)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

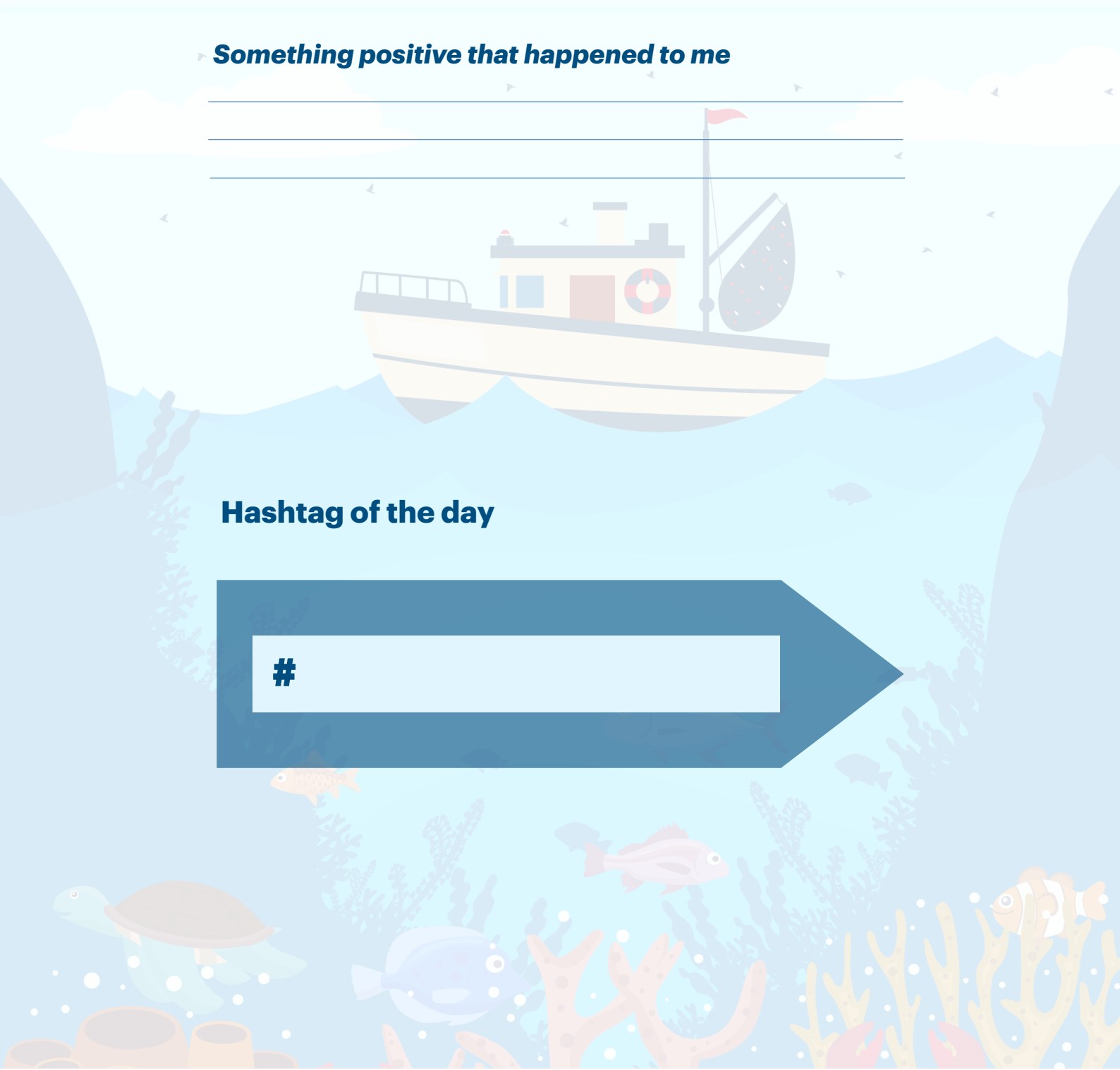
Why I can skip this today

Something positive about today
Something positive I did

Something positive that happened to me

Hashtag of the day

#



Part 3

After a complex meeting or difficult situation

3

After a complex meeting or difficult situation - separating emotional impact from responsibility

Notebook question: *What touched me personally, intimately / What was under my responsibility / What was not under my responsibility*

Connection with the research/training. Youth work requires emotional presence, self-regulation and decision-making in ambiguous situations. After a difficult episode, distinguishing “what touched me” from “what was actually under my responsibility” makes it possible to process the event without absorbing it entirely as a personal failure.

To make the purpose of the question clear

The qualitative research describes relationships with young people as the most rewarding and, at the same time, the most demanding part of the work. The interviews also highlight the value of team debriefing, shared responsibility and multiple perspectives.

Example

Example: A young person left the meeting angry after I set a limit. What touched me: I felt rejected and worried that I had damaged the relationship. Under my responsibility: staying calm, explaining the limit, checking safety, documenting the episode and discussing it with the team. Not under my responsibility: making the young person agree with me, removing all their frustration, or solving the wider family conflict.

Source: A research on Burnout in Youth Work, p. 18; Interviews report, p. 4.

Part 3

After a complex meeting or difficult situation

Situation *(title)*

What happened *(a short description)*

What touched me personally, intimately

What was under my responsibility

What was not under my responsibility

Part 4

Educational Workload map

4 Educational Workload map - distinguishing triggers, depletion and meaning

Notebook question: *Situations that trigger me / Situations that drain me / Situations that make my work meaningful*

Connection with the research/training. The map helps avoid treating all stress as the same. The interviews distinguish between distress and eustress: a challenge can be intense but also energizing when it increases the sense of efficacy and remains balanced by support, rest and personal agency.

To make the purpose of the question clear

The same relational dimension can have two sides: being present and available is described in the research as what gives the work the greatest meaning, but also as what consumes the most energy. The map helps make this distinction visible in one's own concrete experience.

Example

Example: Triggers me: sudden conflict in front of the group. Drains me: three emotionally intense one-to-one meetings in a row plus urgent paperwork. Makes my work meaningful: seeing a young person return after a difficult week, co-leading an activity with a colleague, noticing a small step of autonomy.

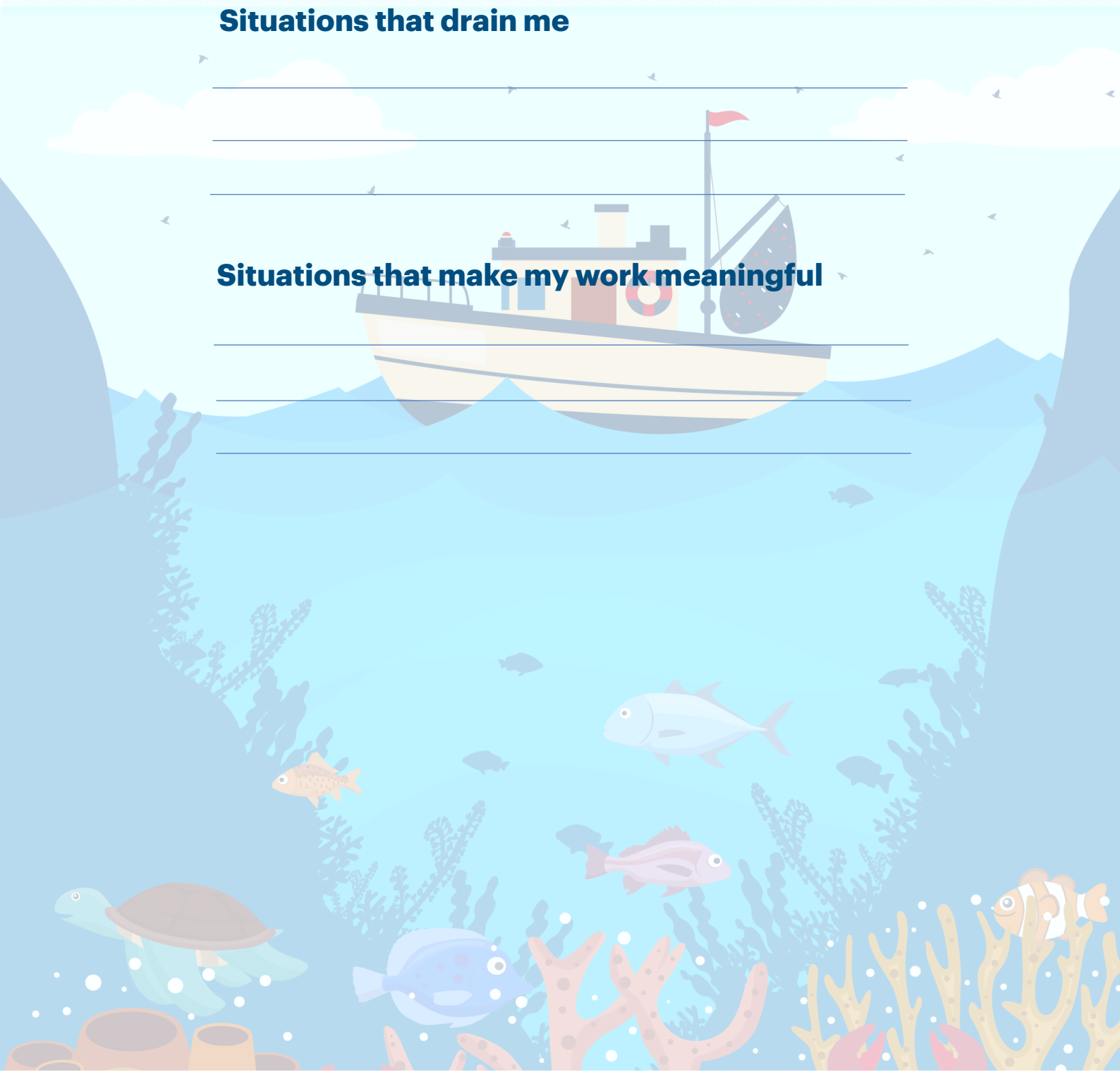
Part 4

Educational Workload map

Situations that trigger me

Situations that drain me

Situations that make my work meaningful



Part 5

Periodic review

(weekly or monthly)

5

Periodic review - recognizing overcompensation and boundaries that are being lost

Notebook question: *Where am I overcompensating using my own time or health? / Which borders am I defending? Which ones am I losing? / Where am I working beyond my role?*

Connection with the research/training. This exercise is the most direct bridge to the training area “ethical mission and professional boundaries”. The risk is not motivation itself, but the shift from availability to over-availability, especially when the system is understaffed.

To make the purpose of the question clear

One sentence from the interviews captures the mechanism well: “The more is asked of me, the more I give.” The research links this attitude to self-neglect and overextension. The purpose of the review is not to do less on principle, but to make visible when one’s own time or health is compensating for structural gaps.

Example text ready to insert into the notebook (EN)

Example: I am answering non-urgent messages after 8 p.m. and using lunch breaks to finish reports. Boundary I am defending: I no longer accept unscheduled weekend calls. Boundary I am losing: I keep taking on tasks when a colleague is absent. Beyond my role: coordinating a case without formal decision-making authority. What would help realistically: one weekly priority-setting meeting and explicit redistribution of urgent tasks.

Source: Interviews report, pp. 2 and 4; A research on Burnout in Youth Work, p. 21

Part 6

Resources backpack

(To be updated along professional lifetime)

6

Resources backpack - making resources concrete rather than leaving them generic

Notebook question: *Educational skills I have / People I can let my guard down around / Safe spaces for dialogue and reflection / Activities that truly recharge me*

Connection with the research/training. The training proposal focuses on relational and collective resilience, support networks and supervision. The interviews describe the team not only as an operational tool, but also as a space for emotional relief, peer learning and validation.

To make the purpose of the question clear

In the interview report, teamwork is explicitly described as “a protective factor against burnout”. At the same time, the report warns that informal support cannot replace structured forms of supervision and organizational support.

Example

Example: Skills I have: de-escalation, facilitation, asking open questions. People I can let my guard down around: Marta, my co-worker; my external supervisor. Safe spaces: monthly supervision; Friday team debrief. Activities that recharge me: walking without my phone, swimming, cooking with friends, twenty quiet minutes after work before going home.

Source: Interviews report, pp. 4 and 7; A research on Burnout in Youth Work, p. 20.

Part 6

Resources backpack

(To be updated along professional lifetime)

Educational skills I have

People I can let my guard down around

Safe spaces for dialogue and reflection

Activities that truly recharge me

Part 7

Micro-coping actions

(Can be repeated how many times is needed)

7

Micro-coping actions - turning “take care of yourself” into a small, feasible action

Notebook question: *Signal perceived / Little and concrete action / Time needed / Impact on my resilience*

Connection with the research/training. The questionnaire data show that the most frequently mentioned spontaneous strategies are brief and practical: taking a break, disconnecting, breathing, walking, spending time in nature, talking to someone, writing and practising mindfulness. The value of the exercise lies in linking a specific signal to a realistic and repeatable response.

To make the purpose of the question clear

Prevention becomes more concrete when it does not require “big solutions” at the moment of greatest fatigue. A micro-coping action does not solve an organizational problem, but it can interrupt the automatic pattern of overload and create the minimum space needed to choose the next step.

Example

Example 1: Signal perceived: tight jaw and racing thoughts after two difficult interviews. Little and concrete action: drink water, take 10 slow breaths, write three points to bring to debrief. Time needed: 5 minutes. Impact on my resilience: I feel less flooded and more able to continue.

Example 2: Signal perceived: I am replaying work conversations on my way home. Action: 10-minute walk without messages, then one sentence in my notebook about what can wait until tomorrow. Time: 12 minutes.

Source: *Final Report questionnaires, p. 21; A research on Burnout in Youth Work, p. 20.*

Part 7

Micro-coping actions

(Can be repeated how many times is needed)

Signal perceived: _____

Little and concrete action: _____

Time needed: _____

Impact on my resilience: _____

Signal perceived: _____

Little and concrete action: _____

Time needed: _____

Impact on my resilience: _____



Part 8

Free space *for* Emotional debriefing

(Use these pages without filters, order, review)

8

Free space for Emotional debriefing - giving space and legitimacy to what stays with us

Notebook question: *Use these pages without filters, order, review*

Connection with the research/training. The free-writing page is consistent with one of the strongest research findings: workers need spaces in which to process complex emotions. Almost all participants identify supervision as an important space; when such spaces are absent or irregular, workers risk having to manage difficult emotions in isolation.

To make the purpose of the question clear

Here, the example should not turn the page into a rigid form. It is better to show that debriefing can be messy, brief and personal: its purpose is to “set down” the experience before eventually giving it more structure in supervision or in discussion with the team.

Example

Example: I keep replaying the moment when he said I had failed him. I know the situation is bigger than this one meeting, but I still feel guilty. I was tense all afternoon and I noticed I became impatient with the next group. I do not need to solve this now. I want to bring it to supervision and ask the team what they saw that I may have missed.

Source: *A research on Burnout in Youth Work*, p. 19; *Interviews report*, pp. 4 and 7

A colorful illustration of a sailboat on a blue sea under a light blue sky with clouds and birds. The boat has a yellow hull, a grey deck, and a red and white striped sail. A lifebuoy is visible on the side. The background features stylized waves and a few small fish.

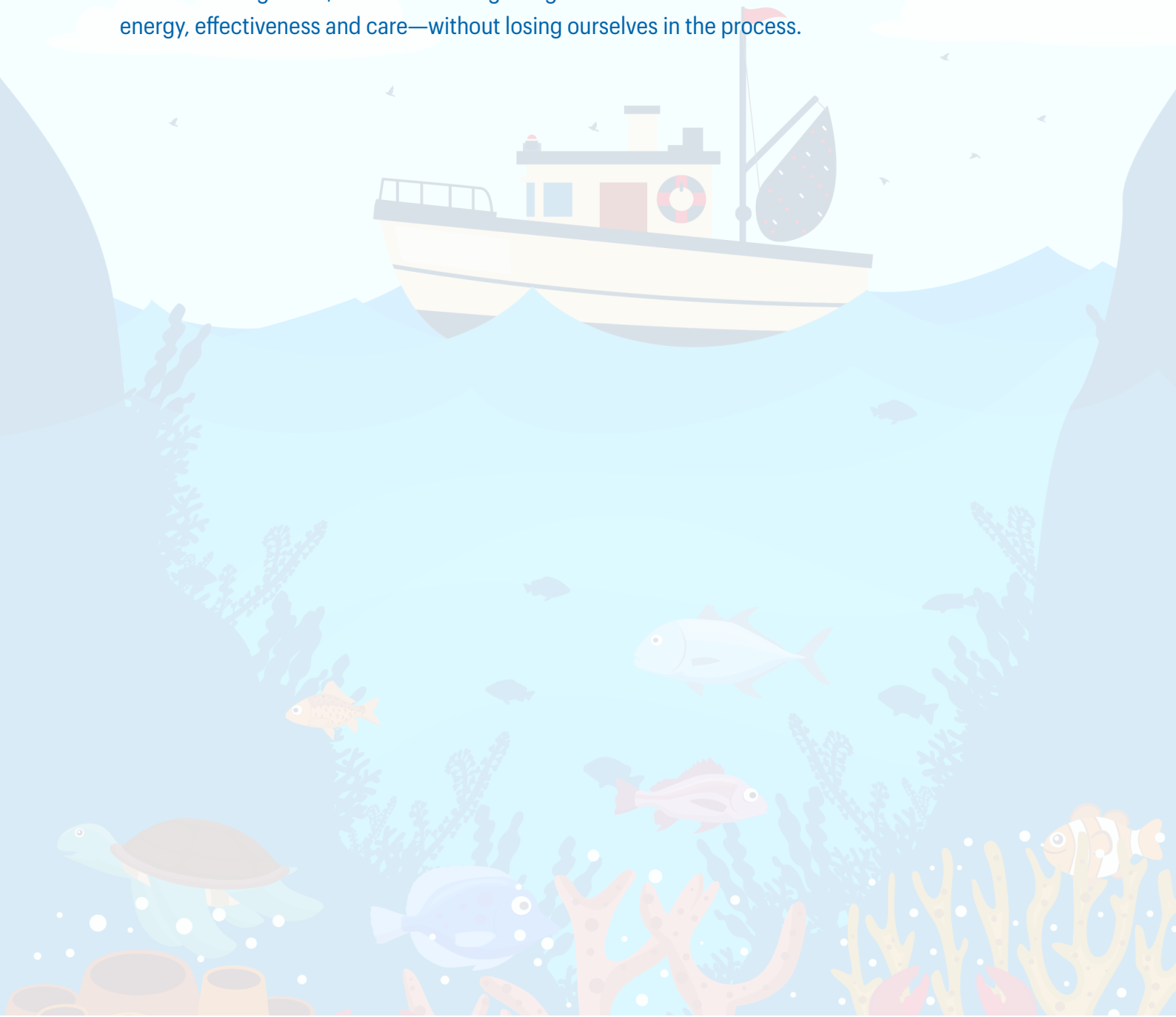
APPENDIX

How to Use This Additional Material

The following pages are designed as a practical extension of the Resilience Notebook. They bring together three complementary dimensions of self-care: making a personal commitment to sustainable well-being, recognizing when everyday coping strategies are no longer enough, and using simple tools to regain balance in particularly demanding moments.

They are not intended to add further responsibilities or tasks to an already busy working life. Rather, they invite youth workers to pause, listen to themselves, and develop a more conscious relationship with their own energy, boundaries and emotional resources.

Together, these resources underline a central principle of burnout prevention: resilience is not about enduring more, but about recognizing what we need in order to continue our work with energy, effectiveness and care—without losing ourselves in the process.



Beyond the Notebook: Red Flags & Support

Connection with research/training: Burnout prevention tools are designed for daily self-regulation, but acute stress requires direct structural and professional interventions. Recognizing severe distress without stigma is a crucial protective factor for mental health.

Example: *"I have been experiencing persistent insomnia and anxiety for three weeks. Micro-coping is not resolving it. I will schedule a meeting with my supervisor today and contact a healthcare professional."*

When the Notebook is not enough

This notebook is designed for daily reflection, emotional regulation and prevention. However, micro-coping actions cannot fix systemic overload or advanced burnout so if you notice any of the following red flags it means your stress response has surpassed what self-management can address:

Red Flags to Watch For:

- **Physical & Mental Exhaustion:** Persistent insomnia, severe chronic fatigue, or frequent physical symptoms (migraines, muscle tension).
- **Emotional Overload:** Constant anxiety, panic attacks, feeling numb, or persistent cynical detachment from work and young people.
- **Loss of Functioning:** Inability to concentrate, feeling completely paralyzed by daily tasks, or feeling hopeless about your role.

What to do when you recognize these signs:

1. **Pause & Acknowledge:** Admitting you are struggling is a sign of professional awareness not personal weakness.
2. **Talk to your Organization:** Request an urgent meeting with your coordinator, manager, or team to redistribute workload and adjust responsibilities.
3. **Use Professional Supervision:** Bring the situation directly to formal supervision sessions.
4. **Seek Psychological Support:** Reach out to a psychologist, therapist, or mental health professional.

Remember: You cannot support others if your own vessel is taking on water. Taking a step back to heal is essential for your long-term well-being.

A Little Extra for Your Journey

Managing stress and preventing burnout isn't a one-size-fits-all process—it's a broad, deeply personal journey that changes from day to day. Since no single routine works for every situation, we wanted to leave you with these three practical tools as an extra resource to keep in your back pocket.

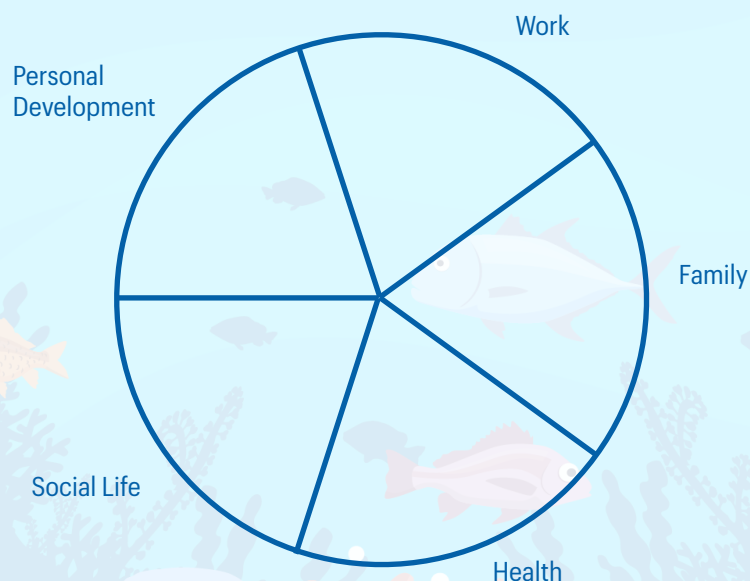
Think of them as a quick, flexible toolkit for those particularly heavy days. Instead of adding more tasks to your to-do list, they offer simple ways to navigate three key areas: **checking in with your self-awareness(1)**, **protecting your time and energy(2)**, and **physically releasing tension(3)**. Use them whenever you need a quick reset to find your balance again.

1. The Stress Map

Take a quick pause to check in with yourself. Color or shade each section of the wheel based on how heavy it feels right now—the more filled in the slice, the higher the pressure. Use this to instantly spot where your energy is being drained today.

Stress mapping circle

(Shade areas based on stress level)



2. The Priority Matrix

When everything feels urgent nothing is! Take a breath and use this space to filter out the noise so you can protect your energy for what actually matters today.

- **The absolute priorities:** Pick just 1 or 2 things that truly cannot wait.

- _____
- _____
- _____

- **Things to park for later:** Write down tasks that are important but don't need to happen today.

- _____
- _____
- _____

- **What to push back on:** Saying "no" to protect your bandwidth

- _____
- _____
- _____

- *Boundary phrase (example) : "I can't take this on right now without sacrificing the quality of my core work."*

3. End-of-Shift - Decompression: Body Tapping

Leave work at work. Before you transition back to your personal life take just 60 seconds to signal to your nervous system that the shift is over and it is safe to unwind.

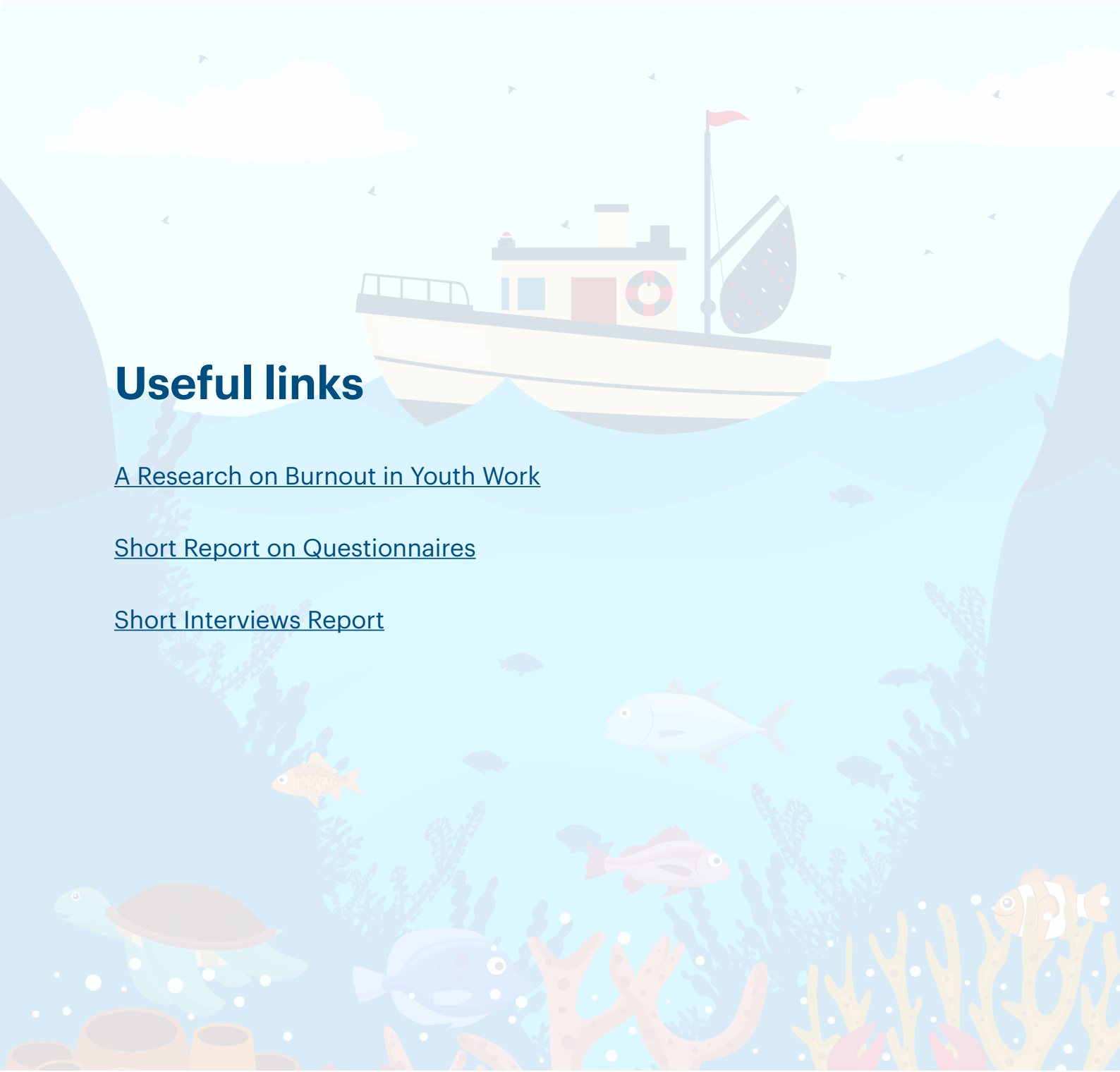
- *Body Tapping: Lightly tap your chest, arms, and legs with your fingertips while taking slow, deep breaths to physically release whatever tension accumulated today.*
- *Closing Thought Gently repeat something like this to yourself before walking out:
“My work for today is done. I am switching off and giving my time back to myself.”*

Useful links

[A Research on Burnout in Youth Work](#)

[Short Report on Questionnaires](#)

[Short Interviews Report](#)





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Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

This Notebook is not meant for doing more.
It's meant for lasting.

