California Community Colleges



Sustaining Ourselves and Each Other: A Practical Guide to Self-Attuning, Boundaries, and Wellness

How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed to be used flexibly. You do not need to read it from start to finish.

Instead, choose one section or practice that feels most relevant to you right now. Many of the activities can be completed in 2–5 minutes and are designed to support awareness, regulation, and boundary-setting during the workday.

This resource is not a clinical intervention and is not intended to replace supervision, mental health care, or campus support services. Rather, it offers practical tools that support sustainable engagement in student support roles.



Introduction

Support staff at community colleges regularly navigate complex student needs, institutional demands, and our own lived experiences while striving to provide consistency and care. For many of us, working in community colleges means showing up for students, colleagues, and our communities, yet much of this work takes place within systems that were not designed with well-being or emotional sustainability in mind.

When we operate with limited personal capacity, it can affect every area of our work: physical health, relationships, classroom presence, leadership, and the quality of engagement we offer students.

As we support students facing academic pressure, financial challenges, trauma, mental health concerns, and systemic inequities, we are also managing our own responsibilities.

This guide was created in response to shared questions across the California Community Colleges system, including:

- How does the emotional and cognitive load of this work affect our practice and well-being?
- What happens to our campus ecosystem when we are consistently asked to give more than we can sustain?
- Where do we find the space to restore ourselves and support one another?

Additionally, this resource was created with the input and voices of California Community Colleges student support staff who engaged in reflective learning in fall 2025 on the ways staff self-attunement is intricately connected to student success. For example, we heard you share your visions for your well-being with reflections such as:

"Creating more space for my own self-care. I am currently not succeeding at taking the space I offer clients for myself."

"More self-care without guilt."

"Filling my cup first, so I can pour for others."

Our capacity to provide trauma-informed support is closely tied to our own well-being. Without the tools and space to process our experiences, we risk reacting from stress, missing important cues, or over-identifying with students' needs. Developing awareness of these dynamics is essential to effective, grounded practice.

This resource is an invitation to slow down, assess our personal capacity, and apply the same intentional care to ourselves that we so generously offer our students.

Part 1: Self-Attuning and Professional Regulation

Defining Activation and Self-Attunement

Activation refers to a psychological and/or physiological response to a perceived threat, whether conscious or subconscious. In professional contexts, activation may manifest as tension, defensiveness, racing thoughts, withdrawal, irritability, or abrupt shifts in energy or mood.

Self-attunement is the capacity to accurately notice, label, and respond to our emotional, cognitive, and physiological states. It involves intentionally monitoring our own emotions and experiences so that our responses are deliberate rather than reactive.

When we are attuned to our needs, triggers (what activates us), and limits, we are more likely to:

- Respond rather than react.
- Offer care without overextending ourselves.
- Model emotional honesty and healthy boundaries for students.
- Contribute to a culture of wellness across departments and teams.
- Make space for collective resilience, rather than relying solely on individual endurance.

Maintaining awareness and regulation allows us to support students navigating stress, trauma, and systemic barriers while preserving our own health and well-being in the process.

Unattended Activation Is a Barrier to Wellness

What might be some indicators of unattended activation?

Physiological Indicators

- Tight chest, elevated heart rate, and shallow breathing
- Chronic fatigue that is not alleviated by rest
- Headaches, gastrointestinal discomfort, and muscle tension
- Sleep disruption, including insomnia or excessive sleep

Emotional and Cognitive Indicators

- Increased irritability, impatience, or emotional reactivity
- Difficulty with concentration or memory
- Emotional numbing or disengagement
- Heightened experiences of sadness, anger, frustration, and anxiety

Unattended activation can trigger a threat-based mindset, including:

- Reducing cognitive flexibility and intentionality, leading us to operate from fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses
- Limiting our capacity for creative problem-solving
- Interfering with our ability to remain present
- Narrowing our perspective of strengths and progress while emphasizing deficits and challenges

Impact on Professional Identity and Self-Efficacy

- Difficulty maintaining an accurate sense of competence
- Over-identification of self-worth with productivity or output

Relational and Professional Consequences

- Withdrawal from colleagues or students
- Overcommitment despite limited capacity
- Reduced empathy or increased risk of compassion fatigue
- Feelings of resentment, lack of support, or isolation
- Rushing through interactions without presence or clarity

Cultural and Systemic Indicators

- Burnout becoming normalized as an expected aspect of the role
- Implicit pressure to ignore distress or "push through"
- Decreased curiosity, creativity, or connection to purpose
- Increased conflict or miscommunication within teams

Applied Practices for Developing Self-Attunement

▶ **Practice 1:** Conditioned Response Mapping

Identify recurring activation patterns and their contributing factors.

1. Identify a recent moment of stress or activation.
2. Document the following:
   - What occurred externally?
   - What internal responses were present?
   - What needs were present but unmet?
3. Identify any patterns, such as recurring situations, people, times of day, or topics. What patterns did you notice about when and how you become activated?
4. Pattern Mapping: What Is Emerging?

Review your notes to identify patterns related to:

- Recurring activating situations.
- Times of day or workload cycles.
- Specific types of comments, behaviors, or interactions.
- Recurring internal narratives.
- Frequent unmet needs.
- Contexts in which boundaries become difficult to maintain.

▶ **Practice 2:** Curiosity Over Judgment

Slow down and extend your curiosity toward your strong reactions and emotional responses.

What might this feeling want from me? By examining what our feelings may be here to teach us, we create space for insight, healing, and integration. This approach supports greater awareness and regulation without reinforcing judgment or avoidance.

▶ **Practice 3:** Cultivating Introspection Through Journaling

Suggested journal prompts:

- What emotions do you experience most frequently at work?
- What factors have shaped your relationship with these emotions?
- What did you learn about different emotions from your family of origin, culture, community, environments, and identities?
- What physiological signals are activated when you are operating from your conditioned responses? When are you emotionally overwhelmed?
- How can these signals be acknowledged and accommodated rather than overridden?



Part 2: Boundaries and Burnout

Boundaries are the emotional and physical space we need to be the most authentic version of ourselves.

Boundary systems operate within three domains: external, internal, and relational.

1. External boundaries are spatial and allow us to choose our distance from other people. They enable us to give or withhold permission.
2. Internal boundaries protect our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and support our emotional regulation.
3. Relational boundaries distinguish our unique identities from those of others.

All three domains help us notice activation before it contributes to burnout and support a relationship to care that does not require self-sacrifice.

"Boundaries are not walls—they are the distance to which I can love both you and I simultaneously."
— Prentice Hemphill

Boundaries are commonly expressed in three patterns: responsive, porous, and rigid.

Responsive	Porous	Rigid
Flexible, clear, and aligned with your capacity. Allows for connection and protection of well-being.	Too open; draining.	Overprotected; limited connection.
Examples: • "Let me check my capacity and get back to you." • Maintaining predictable work hours and communication limits. • Taking breaks without apology.	Examples: • Saying yes to avoid guilt. • Taking responsibility for others' emotions. • Feeling depleted after most interactions.	Examples: • Avoiding collaboration to avoid becoming overwhelmed. • Not asking for support. • Shutting down emotionally.

Burnout often emerges when we are unable to attune to our needs or consistently maintain responsive boundaries. Remember: Burnout is not an individual failure—it can be a sign that our capacity has been exceeded or that the support and boundaries we need are not in place.

Applied Practices for Boundary Development

▶ **Practice 1:** Quick Self-Attuning Scan (2 minutes)

- **Body:** What physical sensations are present (e.g., tension, fatigue)?
- **Emotions**: What emotional states are present?
- **Mind:** What thoughts or concerns are active?
- **Need:** Identify one small need that can be addressed today.

▶ **Practice 2:** Boundary Reflection | Formation and Patterns (Journal for 3–5 minutes)

- How have family, identity, culture, or survival shaped your relationship to boundaries?
- In what contexts did you learn to overextend or to retreat?
- Which adaptations were once protective but may now contribute to overwork or disconnection?

▶ **Practice 3:** Boundary Pattern Check

Identify your current patterns with students and colleagues.

- Where do your boundaries tend to be porous?
- Where do they tend to be rigid?
- Where do you feel appropriately balanced?

Choose one small boundary adjustment to practice this week.

▶ **Practice 4:** Stress-to-Need Mapping

After a challenging moment, ask yourself:

- What triggered my activation?
- What need was impacted (e.g., clarity, time, respect, support, rest)?
- What boundary or request could reduce strain next time?

▶ **Practice 5:** Brief Somatic Practice | Self-Holding (1–2 minutes)

A grounding practice for moments of overwhelm: Place one hand on the chest and one on the abdomen. Breathe slowly into both areas.

This practice can support regulation and restore focus during periods of acute stress.

▶ **Practice 6:** Mini Support Plan

Complete the following statements:

- Early warning signs: _____
- Non-negotiable needs: _____
- One boundary to prioritize this month: _____
- Support resources or individuals: _____

▶ **Practice 7:** Current Capacity and Load Assessment

Reflect briefly on the following:

- Where in your work do you feel most supported or effective (e.g., specific relationships, environments, times, or practices)?
- Where do you experience the most tension, strain, depletion, or disconnection (physically, emotionally, or relationally)?
- What feels easier to decline at this stage, and why?
- What remains difficult to decline, and what factors contribute to that difficulty?
- Is providing care easier than requesting it?

What Recent Physical or Emotional Signals Have Indicated Unmet Needs?

After completing this reflection, pause to notice any new insights, patterns, or areas for adjustment that have emerged.



Part 3: Reclaiming Holistic Wellness

Healing, wellness, and restoration are not individual tasks. They are community responsibilities and collective acts of imagination.

We cannot build transformative, equitable learning environments from a place of chronic overwhelm, fragmentation, or collective exhaustion.

Reclaiming holistic wellness involves:

- Slowing down sufficiently to recognize activation and unmet needs
- Treating emotional experiences as valid and instructive sources of information
- Interrupting grind culture that disconnects us from our bodies, values, and relationships
- Creating structured opportunities to process cumulative emotional and professional demands
- Cultivating conditions that support integration, stability, and professional sustainability

Our wellness shapes campus wellness and our regulation can shape our students' sense of safety. Our boundaries shape what becomes possible for everyone.

"I am thinking about how much work it is to get to a point where I can be compassionate toward myself, especially as someone who does not fit into any typical identities. It has been so hard to convince myself that I am WORTHY of the work."

— CCC Student Support Staff

Shifting Toward Holistic and Collective Wellness

Moving from fragmented, task-based self-care toward holistic wellness invites broader inquiry, including:

- How can emotional experiences be acknowledged with compassion rather than urgency?
- What does wellness look like when practiced collectively rather than individually?
- How might intentional slowing support clarity, decision-making, and long-term capacity?
- What support is needed at the personal, relational, and institutional levels to sustain well-being?
- What emotional, physical, or cognitive experiences require acknowledgment rather than suppression?
- Where can greater spaciousness be created within daily or weekly routines?
- How is wellness defined beyond short-term coping?
- What characteristics define a just, humane, and sustainable workplace?
- What boundary adjustments could support rest, clarity, or renewed engagement?

These questions support a reframing of wellness as a shared institutional value—one that is integrated into daily practice rather than addressed only in response to crisis.

"The journey begins beneath our feet—not in the first step but in the stillness that precedes it, in the place where we stand before we move, in the very ground of our being."

— Cheryl Strauss Einhorn

Additional Resources

This section includes optional resources for those who want to further explore self-attunement, boundaries, trauma-informed practice, and collective wellness in ways that support sustainable care in helping roles.

During a fall 2025 professional learning session on self-attunement, California Community Colleges student support staff shared written reflections in response to a guided prompt about recognizing signs of overload and responding to personal needs. A selection of these reflections is available as an optional companion resource.

Collective Staff Reflections on Self-Attunement
California Community Colleges Student Support Staff – Collective Journal
Optional reflections shared during professional learning on recognizing overload and responding to personal needs.

Attunement and Self-Regulation
RAIN: The Practice of Radical Compassion - Tara Brach
A brief, structured practice for responding to stress with awareness and compassion.

The Power of Attunement and Why It Is Important in Your Life - Diversity for Social Impact
An overview of why attunement matters for emotional regulation and relationships.

The Art of Attunement - Turning Point Therapy
An introduction to attunement as a therapeutic and relational skill.

What Is Attunement? - Momentous Institute
A plain-language explanation of attunement and why it supports well-being.

Why Is It Important to Be Emotionally Attuned to Yourself? - Creative Minds Psychotherapy
A short explanation of self-attunement for emotional awareness and care.

Understanding Our Activation as Opportunity for Recovery and Renewal - Oriana Ides
A guided reflection connecting activation to regulation and recovery.

Trauma, Stress, and Nervous System Support
Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma - Peter A. Levine
A foundational text on trauma and nervous system regulation.

Peace from Anxiety: Get Grounded, Build Resilience, and Stay Connected Amidst the Chaos - Mashal Khouri
Practical strategies for grounding and managing anxiety.

The Age of Overwhelm - Trauma Stewardship Institute
Resources on secondary trauma, stress, and sustainable care.

Naming a Thing: A Case for Feeling - Noor Jones-Bey
Explores creative expression as a way to process grief and emotion.

Boundaries, Role Clarity, and Sustainable Care
Set Boundaries, Find Peace: A Guide to Reclaiming Yourself - Nedra Glover Tawwab
Practical guidance for setting and maintaining healthy boundaries.

Boundaries with Difficult People - Sonya Brewer
Strategies for navigating boundaries in challenging relationships.

Role-Clarity and Boundaries for Trauma-Informed Teachers - Alex Shevrin Venet
Explores boundaries and role clarity in trauma-informed educational settings.

Boundaries for Joy: Centering Renewal in Times of Unrest - Oriana Ides and Shirley Johnson
Reflections on boundaries as a practice for renewal and sustainability.

Community Care, Equity, and Collective Wellness
Healing and Accountability Wheel; Community Care Map; Self-Care Support Plans - Black Emotional and Mental Health Collective (BEAM)
Tools for community care, accountability, and collective well-being.

Wellness Tools - Black Emotional and Mental Health Collective (BEAM)
A collection of practices supporting emotional and community wellness.

Honoring the Four Sacred Directions Within Us - Jesus Solorio
Connects cultural teachings to reflection and lived experience.

Tools and Resources for Helping Professionals
Relationship, Responsibility, and Regulation: Trauma-Invested Practices for Fostering Resilient Learners - Kristin Souers and Pete Hall
Guidance for supporting learners through trauma-informed practices.