

A Practical Guide to Self-Care for Helping Professionals

Written by

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Introduction

Self-care for professionals is vital to the effectiveness of the services being provided. Helping professionals may not consider their own needs, or they may be preoccupied with their responsibilities. Helpers often mistakenly believe that they are invulnerable to fatigue, stress, frustration, and depression. Often, they see the needs of others and feel the responsibility to lift them up, and in the process forget about self-care. As helping professionals, we have learned that helpers need help, encouragement, and support, too. This article was written to affirm that, for helping professionals, proper self-care is both a responsibility and a necessity.

Being successful in the human services field requires a strong, committed individual. It is important to be able to respond to multiple needs, and often in a time of crisis for the individual or family. Every youth/family is different and providing a nurturing response requires a professional that is level-headed and capable. When helping professionals are not able to take care of themselves, the helping service results in negative outcomes including:

- rapid turnover of staff, which limits the overall relationships between youth/families and those who are helping;
- the services being offered are easier to provide but less effective; and

- youth/families sensing the stress of the staff and reacting by withdrawing from reciprocal relationships.

This article explores techniques of increasing professional self-care through supportive supervision, self-monitoring, and structuring the work environment to value and encourage strong self-care. The authors have a combined 40 years of experience in the helping field and have directly seen the power of strong self-care. This article includes the authors' anecdotal experiences, relevant lessons from the field, and stories and tips from actual professionals who were recognized as having great self-care skills.

The need for self-care during crises

Professionals may experience crises through the families they serve and may have crises or extreme stress in their own personal lives. The stress during times of crisis may lead to neglecting one's own needs. Different people experience crisis in different ways. Fear and anxiety evoked during crisis can be overwhelming and cause other strong emotions to arise in both adults and children. Learning to cope with stress will make you, the people you care about, and your community stronger.

Helping professionals report feeling stress, anxiety, grief, and worry, and frequently this stems from supporting families with complex needs who are dealing with crisis situations. These feelings may occur both during the crisis as well as after the disaster dissipates. Everyone responds to crisis in their own way, and over time, we learn to respond in new ways. Self-awareness dictates that you identify and accept how you feel. It is vital to be proactive in self-care and monitor emotional health during a crisis.

As part of being proactive in self-care, it is important to look for the signs of distress in our own lives. Below is a list of common signs of distress that is available on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website (2014):

- feelings of numbness, disbelief, anxiety, or fear
- changes in appetite, energy, and activity levels
- difficulty concentrating
- difficulty sleeping, nightmares, and upsetting thoughts and images
- physical reactions, such as headaches, body pains, stomach problems, and skin rashes
- worsening of chronic health problems
- anger or short temper
- ambivalence
- increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs

EXAMPLE OF A PROFESSIONAL PROMOTING SELF-CARE

Misty Kerrigan, M.S., is a director of a local children’s mental health effort in Southern California. She actively mentors the staff she supervises to develop their self-care in both their personal and professional lives. She has written and published a book on this topic titled *Echoes of Hope: 8 Things You Must Know Before Working with At-Risk Youth*, which is available on Amazon. Misty focuses her support on the phrase “Do for; do with; cheer on” and reports a stronger and more resilient staff.

Individual Activity: Signs of Distress

Time: About 5 minutes

Instructions: Look at the preceding list of common signs of distress. Evaluate your own behavior: Have you recently experienced any of these signs? If so, how did you handle the sign of distress?



IS SELF-CARE SELFISH?

According to a recent podcast (Pfitzer & Briggs, 2020) through Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, self-care is not selfish. It is actually the best way that we can take care of ourselves in order to be available for others. For professionals, self-care looks different for each individual. For some, self-care involves physical activity, while for others it may include reading or writing or other pursuits.

EXAMPLE OF SELF-CARE

Jennifer Crouch is a Family Support Partner in a wraparound effort in Western Colorado. When her work or life becomes too stressful or intense, one of her preferred self-care techniques involves sitting quietly with colored pencils and an adult coloring book. Jennifer reports that this soothes her and gives her joy (J. Crouch, personal interview, May 2020).

A poll we conducted with over 50 helping professionals found that the most common positive self-care activities are as follows:

- exercise, including walking, biking, and swimming
- meditation and yoga, including deep breathing
- gardening and just being outdoors
- talking with friends and family (either on the phone or virtually)
- volunteering and practicing gratitude

Family culture and self-care

Culture can be described in many ways. Culture involves race and societal structures as well as individual family culture. Many helping professionals include a process of exploring the youth/family strengths and culture and ensuring that the resulting service is culturally competent to the family. It is important to spend time connecting with families around their culture and their experiences. This process of listening to people around their experience can be draining, which further speaks to the need of professional self-care.

Self-care involves many aspects of family culture. Every family has different methods of keeping strong and monitoring stress. For example, some families may have positive patterns of talking out problems when family life becomes stressful; going to older or more experienced family or contacts for help; increasing physical exercise and “fun” activities; or other positive self-care techniques.

EXAMPLE OF CULTURALLY COMPETENT SELF-CARE

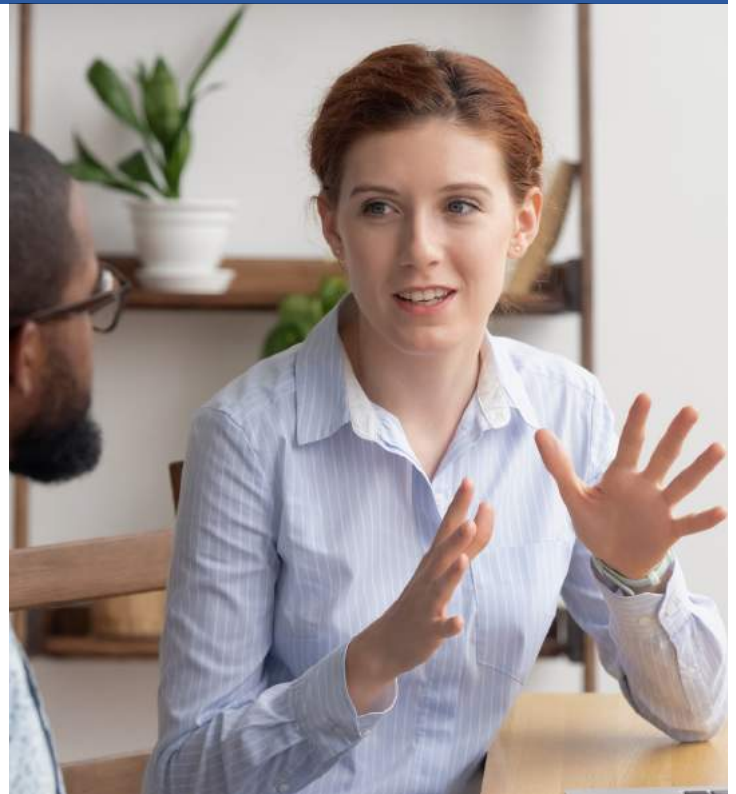
Trinidad Georges is a case manager from Haiti who lives in South Florida. Trinidad utilizes self-care techniques that come from her cultural background, including listening to Christian music, speaking with her sisters in Christ, and talking with her sister daily. Additionally, she prefers a structured routine during times of crisis because she grew up having a daily routine (T. Georges, personal interview, May 2020).

Some methods of adapting to stress can have negative outcomes. For example, some families may address stress through denial of the stressor or situation. Others may have unrealistic expectations of family members being able to “buck up” and “deal with it.” At times, family culture can treat self-care as selfish or as demonstrating a lack of humility, and members may apply peer pressure to other family members to avoid self-care. It is important to honor the culture and traditions of the individuals and families that we are serving.

Pairs Activity: Family Culture and Self-Care

Time: About 10 minutes

Instructions: Pair with another professional and spend a few minutes discussing your own family culture around self-care, either the family you grew up in or the family in which you now live. For example, a professional may have been raised in a family that emphasized practicing self-care through nutrition and exercise. Another family might view practicing self-care as silly or a sign of weakness, or even narcissistic. Each person should list at least three positive strategies for self-care that are from either the family you were raised in or the family you live with currently.



SELF-CARE STRATEGIES.

It is also important to identify self-care strategies. Whereas self-care activities focus on specific actions, self-care strategies involve a plan of action or a personal policy. Self-care strategies guide the amount of time that you will allocate towards specific activities. For example, a self-care strategy might be the goal of, “I will allocate one hour per day toward personal self-care. During the hour, I will read for 30 minutes and walk for 30 minutes.” Many of the professionals that we interviewed reported that an important self-care strategy was to create structure in their day. Read the example below about how structuring your day can be helpful.

EXAMPLE OF SELF-CARE

Christine Hillard is a peer counselor in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Christine utilizes several strategies to support her self-care. She sets necessary boundaries, including scheduling breaks in her day and taking an hour for lunch. Further, she has committed to having daily wellness checks with her supervisor. Not only does she check in with her supervisor, she also checks in with herself. Her philosophy is that if she is having a bad day, she can just pause, take a break, and start her day all over (C. Hillard, personal interview, June 15, 2020).

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014), some important self-care strategies include the following:

- set aside daily time to relax and reflect on the positives
- create a daily schedule or routine to create structure
- set boundaries to create work/life balance
- stay informed, but limit time listening to the news about a crisis
- strengthen your support networks
- exercise or move your body daily
- manage your sleep
- stay connected to your community (volunteer)

EXAMPLE OF USING SELF-CARE STRATEGIES

Candace Trujillo is a supervisor in a children’s mental health agency in Colorado Springs. She supervises eight professionals. She applies a variety of methods to promote self-care. She uses group staff meetings to facilitate active discussions on self-care. She supports staff by encouraging them to focus on their own personal lives, particularly to avoid overworking. (Candace feels that overworking to meet the needs of the families being served is the biggest contributor to burnout among professionals.) Candace also keeps her eye on the staff for indications of high stress levels, including looking extra tired, not participating in group sessions, or gradually withdrawing from the work. She reports feeling 100% comfortable pulling staff aside, checking in with their situations, and offering help as needed. She also tries to model good self-care, including building in regular breaks and getting outside in the fresh air on a regular basis.

Candace’s story is an excellent example of work-life balance. During challenging times, it is important to set necessary boundaries and to make sure that your needs are met in addition to the needs of the individuals or families you are serving. It is more difficult to manage this when working from home, especially when children are also home schooling. This often requires having a more structured day and setting necessary boundaries to ensure that you can separate work responsibilities from home responsibilities.

Pairs Activity: Matching Your Strengths to Your Self-Care

Time: About 20 minutes

Instructions: After dividing into pairs, each person will list three of their top strengths, interests, talents, or cultural characteristics that relate to their work. For example, a family support partner might identify a top strength as “I have been there, done that when I raised my own child with complex needs.”

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.



Next, participants take turns sharing a strength and together brainstorm ways of matching each strength to a self-care strategy. For the previous example of the family support partner, matching their strength to self-care might include such options as:

- Recognize that you are very experienced in observing when other people need self-care and begin doing that with yourself!
- Think about how you got through a specific crisis situation with your own child and what you did to get yourself through that crisis. Now, think about how to do more of that in self-care.
- When you share your story with new families, do you mention self-care and how you have practiced it? If so, what did you do? If not, what could you mention?

It is important to support resource development for the youth and families with whom the professionals are working. In a good case management process, families should be learning how to look for and access resources for themselves. This self-determination will help the family feel accomplished by learning to manage their own responses to crises as they occur. By sitting with families and reviewing the above resources, professionals can work together with families to find appropriate self-care activities and strategies.

Peer to peer support of self-care

Peer to peer support is one of most powerful forms of human learning (O'Donnell & King, 1999). Professionals routinely help each other prioritize and carry out self-care. It is easier as a professional to understand what a fellow professional is experiencing. This first-hand knowledge provides an opportunity to connection and support.

Large Group Activity: Peer to Peer

Time: About 20 minutes

Instructions: At a staff meeting, appoint a staff member to lead a discussion of peer to peer support of self-care. Share with each other situations when other staff provided help in ensuring self-care during stressful work situations. For example, in one office, staff would write self-care suggestions on post-it notes to put on the staff refrigerator, such as “When you see another staff person burning out, ask them how you can help!”



Supervision and self-care

Individualized, culturally competent, and strengths-based supervision is a key element of increasing positive self-care for professionals. Supervisors need to not only monitor staff stressors but reinforce expectations that self-care is a valued, desired, and important skill set for their staff. Further, supervisors can support their staff in developing positive self-care plans by following up with them to see if they are completing the tasks on the plan. Individuals are more likely to follow through on their plans when they have someone supporting them by checking in and holding them accountable. One successful self-care strategy that was often mentioned relates to using meditation or practicing mindfulness. See the example below about how a supervisor incorporates mindfulness into her supervision practice. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Taking Care of Your Emotional Health, September 2019.

EXAMPLE OF A SUPERVISOR SUPPORTING SELF-CARE

Concepcion Perez Ebrahimi from Palm City, Florida, is a supervisor in a children’s mental health agency. Connie spends time teaching her staff about mindfulness. Her view is that they are on a journey together, and she teaches them as well as learns from them daily. She also believes that whatever skills she teaches her staff they will in turn share with the individuals and families that they are working with (C. Perez Ebrahimi, personal interview, May 2020).

Individual Activity: Supervision and Self-Care

Time: About 5 minutes

Instructions: List three examples of when supervisors have helped staff recognize the need for self-care and have helped promote self-care as a staff skill. Cite actual instances. For example, a supervisor started each weekly staff meeting by asking staff to share positive things they did to take good care of themselves during the previous week.



Conclusion

As implementers who focus on carrying out a service in the helping profession, we cannot neglect our own self-care. We need to remember that crisis does not have to be an inhibitor of innovation but can be an invitation for innovation. Personal crisis can be followed by a creative resurgence of our essential helping qualities, including focusing on our own increased self-care. Being able to work with others is an incredible privilege; we each deserve to be the best we can be, and that involves self-care. All over the U.S., human services practitioners are making extra efforts to prevent burnout through implementing effective self-care. We encourage readers to commit to making time to learn new self-care strategies and to incorporate those strategies into their daily routines.

This paper was published originally in June 2020 as a Wraparound guide and is an adapted version for team-based planning process.

Resources for Self-Care

TOOLS FOR ASSESSING NEED FOR SELF-CARE.

There are reliable and valid tools that can be used to assess the current self-care status of professionals in the helping field. One such tool is the Professional Quality of Life Scale (PROQOL). This tool measures compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue. You can use this scale with your staff or team as a conversation starter about how they are personally managing the current crisis. Another useful tool is the Work Life Balance Quiz available through the Canadian Mental Health Association that can be found at <http://cmha.ca/work-life-balance-quiz>.

SELF-CARE LESSONS FROM POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY.

According to Mike Buchanan, the founder of Positively Leading at the University of Pennsylvania, while it is difficult to stay positive during challenging times, a positive attitude creates hope for a better future. Positive psychology is the science that teaches us how to harness the power of shifting our perspective to increase the potential for happiness in everyday behaviors. For example, one of the biggest challenges of experiencing a crisis is the loss of a sense of control. Although it is true that there are many things that are beyond our control during a crisis, leading experts tout the benefit of focusing on what we do have control over and making those positive experiences.

The field of positive psychology has documented that we have more ability to control our own happiness than most people believe. Further, our happiness is significantly impacted through our actions and behaviors. It is not what has happened to us, but rather our response to what has happened, that dictates how we feel. In fact, some results of research studies on positive psychology report that:

- Spending money on experiences provides a bigger boost to happiness than spending money on material possessions (Howell & Hill, 2009).
- Gratitude is a big contributor to happiness in life, suggesting that the more we cultivate gratitude, the happier we will be (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).
- Those who intentionally cultivate a positive mood to match the outward emotion they need to display (i.e., in emotional labor) benefit by more genuinely experiencing the positive mood. In other words, “putting on a happy face” won’t necessarily make you feel happier, but putting in a little bit of effort likely will (Scott & Barnes, 2011).
- Happiness is contagious; those with happy friends and significant others are more likely to be happy in the future (Fowler & Christakis, 2008).
- People who perform acts of kindness towards others not only get a boost in well-being, they are also more accepted by their peers (Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012).
- Volunteering time to a cause you believe in improves your well-being and life satisfaction and may even reduce symptoms of depression (Jenkinson et al., 2013).

In her research, Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky (2008; also view her TED Talk on YouTube) documents that we can control our happiness through some of the following techniques:

- do more activities that you find engaging
- savor life's joys
- learn to forgive
- practice acts of kindness
- nurture relationships
- cultivate optimism
- avoid overthinking and social comparison
- take care of your body
- count your blessings
- strengthen your spiritual connections
- commit to your goals
- develop strategies to cope

Additional resources for self-care. Here are some valuable online resources:

- Self-care guide: <https://www.healingtrust.org/2019/02/25/plan-a-day-of-self-care-with-these-free-resources/>
- Happiness activities: www.actionforhappiness.org
- Meditation: www.stopthinkbreathe.com
- Guided meditation: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=ZizK2yBnncM>
- Happiness resources: www.worldhappiness.com
- Online happiness magazine: www.livehappy.com
- Free public domain e-books: <https://www.gutenberg.org/>
- Free public domain audiobooks: <https://librivox.org/>
- Mindfulness meditation: <https://www.headspace.com/covid-19>
- Information on healthy sleep habits: https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/sleep-and-mental-health
- Online book clubs (www.goodreads.com has many others!): <https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/58421-2020-reading-challenge>
- Online YMCA classes: <https://ymca360.org/>
- 10-minute audio-guided yoga: <http://lararomeo.com/yoga-lala-on-alexa/>
- Charity Miles app: <https://charitymiles.org/>; PMHW team
- Corepower Yoga on-demand videos, free during pandemic: https://www.corepoweryogaondemand.com/keep-up-your-practice?fbclid=IwAR06C9bv dKTKSVI4yuf9nTwj-G4xJv6iSoR6w6yODgNytNzRDvi_AU9fI0A

- Self-care guide: <https://www.healingtrust.org/2019/02/25/plan-a-day-of-self-care-with-these-free-resources/>
- Happiness activities: www.actionforhappiness.org
- Meditation: www.stopthinkbreathe.com
- Happiness resources: www.worldhappiness.com

AUTHORS

Julie Radlauer-Doerfler, L.M.H.C., has extensive experience in the field of human services and organizational development. She has been working in the nonprofit arena for over 25 years. In 2003, Julie became the co-founder of the Ronik-Radlauer Group and has been involved in the development of individuals, the strengthening of organizations, and the sustaining of communities. The Ronik-Radlauer Group provides extensive training around organizational development at the direct service level, the supervisory level, as well as the leadership level. Much of Julie's work involves providing training, coaching, and technical assistance in the wraparound model. In this capacity she has worked nationally and at the state level to implement and scale wraparound. Additionally, as a licensed mental health counselor, Julie has utilized her clinical experience to educate professionals in self-care. This article blends these two interests of working with wraparound practitioners and supporting them in their self-care. Julie can be reached via e-mail at jradlauer@comcast.net. Her website is www.ronikradlauer.com.

John VanDenBerg, Ph.D., is one of the founders of the wraparound process. He led the team who served the first system of care-focused wraparound for youth in 1986 as part of the Alaska Youth Initiative. Later, he wrote the first article on the process and led the first research effort. In 1987, he presented the first outcome data from the Alaskan effort to a national audience through the National Institute of Mental Health, which began a process with many other wraparound implementers to support expansion of the model to every U.S. state. In 1990, he began full-time wraparound consulting and training in every U.S. state and all Canadian provinces except Nova Scotia, as well as in Europe and Asia. He was privileged to be invited to train with over 200 indigenous and native communities in North America and other countries. He retired from traveling and formal wraparound training in 2015 and currently enjoys writing and volunteering time to local and key national wraparound efforts. His 2017 TEDx talk "Children Should Live with Families" (go to YOUTUBE, insert in search John VanDenBerg and word TED) has been widely viewed. He is also a volunteer and consultant to The Open Table, a national anti-poverty effort similar to wraparound. He has led their effort to become an evidence-based practice. John can be reached via e-mail at jevdb1@gmail.com.

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