

Dear Social Work Educators, Teach and Model Self-Care

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Abstract: A social work educator, I joined with a student to examine the social work profession's challenges with burnout and self-care, to explore my lived experiences clinically practicing at an inpatient psychiatric hospital and emergency department during the beginning of the Global Pandemic, and to aggregate critical reflections on how to improve teaching strategies for social work students. This reflection focuses on two themes implemented during a fall 2020 social work direct practice course for undergraduates: 1) teaching and 2) modeling self-care strategies and work-life integration. There is no better time than now to promote wellness in the classroom so students have the skills and confidence to continue applying these strategies throughout their careers. If social work instructors are not emphasizing the importance of self-care, who is going to? Social work educators can—and *should*—utilize their roles to teach and model positive self-care behaviors and work-life integration approaches, exemplifying the imperative nature of upholding one's wellness.

Keywords: social work education, self-care, workforce, case study, social work profession

Now more than ever, amidst a global pandemic and a polarized election, situated within structural inequalities and inequities across the world, social work educators need to teach and model self-care strategies for their students. We acknowledge burnout syndrome has long existed among helping professions, specifically the social work profession (Kim et al., 2011; Lloyd et al., 2002; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; McFadden et al., 2015; Vîrgã et al., 2020; Wagaman et al., 2015; Williams, 2015). Burnout is a response to chronic work stress (Leiter et al., 2014) caused by various factors including but not limited to overworking, time management struggles, lack of job satisfaction and resources (Oliveira & Rossi, 2020), stressors, large caseloads, involvement in emotionally charged situations, lack of support (Vîrgã et al., 2020), and exhaustion (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1981); social workers often encounter a mixture of these components. Burnout symptoms include discomfort, fatigue, frustration, cynicism, inefficiency, and other negative feelings such as anxiety and depression (Oliveira & Rossi, 2020). More recently, due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, mental health professionals are suffering from stress, sleep disturbances, depression, and anxiety at elevated rates and are showing a profound interest in learning about wellness resources (Ornell et al., 2020). Research shows unmanaged stress can lead to negative health outcomes and wellbeing (Kim et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2017), including mental health conditions (Nieuwenhuijsen et al., 2010).

Social workers in helping roles must feel emotionally supported to best assist their clients. One study found healthcare professionals neglected their patients' psychological issues or avoided connecting due to their own high emotions, which went unaddressed and unresolved (Barello & Graffigna, 2020), exemplifying the correlation between one's wellness level and their engagement with clients. When social workers experience burnout symptoms, it interferes with the level of care they can provide to their clients, specifically around rapport and empathy (Lizano & Mor Barak, 2015). We know social workers who experience fewer burnout symptoms provide better care and are more productive in their workplace (Maslach & Goldberg, 1998). I

believe there is no better time than now to thoroughly address and integrate self-care awareness and strategies into social work curricula. A recent study found 80 percent of social work students reported the COVID-19 global pandemic has negatively impacted their mental health (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2020), exemplifying the imperative nature of promoting and encouraging self-care strategies during and after a global health crisis. Social work academics must adequately prepare social work students to take care of themselves so they can adequately perform in their classes to make it to the professional social work field.

The Social Work Profession

Today, there are more than 700,000 social workers in the United States, and this number is projected to grow 13 percent from 2019 to 2029, which is much faster than other occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). We know burnout among social workers is high (Kimes, 2016); and, more recently, there has been a steady increase in workloads, stress-related health issues, and turnover in human service organizations (Dollard et al., 2003; Geisler et al., 2019; Mor Barak et al., 2001), specifically among social workers (Astvik & Melin, 2012; Geisler et al., 2019; Giffords, 2009; Griffiths et al., 2017; Tham & Meagher, 2008). Self-care is a well-known, empirically supported approach (Colman et al., 2016; Santana & Fouad, 2017) to decrease negative outcomes and encourage one to thrive in various aspects of their life (Wise et al., 2012). One large review found fostering awareness, balance, flexibility, physical health, social support, and spirituality could prevent burnout related symptoms while also promoting wellness in various areas of life (Posluns & Gall, 2019). A paucity of research exists on the implementation of self-care practices among social workers (Miller et al., 2019). However, a national study with almost 3,000 social workers found this group engaged in only *moderate* self-care practices, insinuating a need for a systemic response to addressing and encouraging self-care strategies (Miller et al., 2019). Teaching and encouraging self-care strategies may alleviate burnout symptoms, promote better wellbeing, and foster improved care and treatment for the clients social workers serve. Those in social work educator roles must utilize their platforms to teach future social workers to appropriately take care of themselves, not only so they can better serve their clients, but so they can continue helping others.

Why Now?

I (Kelly) started my first semester as an assistant professor in a school of social work at a large public university during fall 2020, transitioning into not only a new role, but also a new state, new community/home, and multiple new contexts. These numerous changes were challenging but, because of my commitment to self-care and work-life integration, I believe I have been able to persevere. Having worked in numerous high security and stressful social work settings (i.e., juvenile detention center, inpatient psychiatric hospital, and medical emergency department), I have learned that self-care strategies are imperative to prospering as a professional, while also helping to meet and exceed my clients' needs.

My most recent social work clinical experiences took place during the beginning of the COVID-19 global pandemic (i.e., January through August 2020). During this time, I served as an intake assessment and mobile crisis specialist at an inpatient psychiatric hospital and medical

emergency department, some weeks clocking in more than 60 hours. Those days were spent with constant walk-in patients, referrals, phones constantly ringing, elevated crises, and high emotions among staff. These circumstances were particularly difficult during the COVID-19 global pandemic because there were fewer beds to house clients/patients, social distancing guidelines had to be upheld, and personal protective equipment (PPE) had to be worn to protect ourselves and our clients. This required extra time for important protocols and attention to details. Further, there were more emails and meetings to learn about the agency's updated procedures; altered daily activities; extra cleaning of supplies/materials (i.e., pens, clipboards, chairs, tables); and increased stress about following the appropriate protocols to ensure health and safety among our clients, staff, and for ourselves. Some of the strong emotions were caused by uneasiness with working directly with clients who were in contact with someone who had COVID-19, strict guidelines for maintaining social distancing that created a barrier when attempting to build rapport with new clients, and the anxiety of possibly bringing the disease home to our loved ones.

During these months, I witnessed many colleagues reach—and some surpass—their breaking points, needing to take multiple days off to take care of themselves and reset. I saw others no longer wanting to serve in their roles because of extra responsibilities and expectations from administration, and some losing joy, interest, and passion for the work they were trained to do and clients they were helping. Unfortunately, this led to many of those social workers feeling overburdened, exhausted, and frustrated. Some colleagues decided to quit their positions, further adding to the increased workloads and high emotions of employees, exemplifying inflated turnover rates in the social service profession (Dollard et al., 2003; Geisler et al., 2019; Mor Barak et al., 2001). For most of those who stayed, it seemed their self-care and work-life integration plans were solidified. They maintained boundaries at work; responded to their mental, emotional, and physical health needs; and came to work refreshed and ready to take on their responsibilities each day. I quickly learned to set boundaries by choosing to not work on weekends, setting aside an hour each day to exercise, and only responding to work emails while on the clock. I focused on getting enough sleep each night, preparing a nutritious lunch, and maintaining positive relationships with my family and friends.

Because of my experiences being situated in a year unlike any other, I decided I must do my best to prepare my future social work students for these types of environments, unexpected circumstances, public health crises—and even a global pandemic. I do not want my students to struggle like some of my colleagues did. I want to do my due diligence as a social work educator to best prepare my students to take care of themselves throughout their educational journeys and into the professional field. Because of this, as I started creating my syllabus for fall 2020, I critically thought about my practice experiences and knew I had to weave work-life integration and self-care into the entire semester—knowing the numerous stressors (e.g., global pandemic, election year, hybrid teaching model) would persist. I taught and modeled various self-care strategies in my social work direct practice class for undergraduates. Because of the positive feedback from my students, I will continue promoting self-care and work-life integration in my future social work courses.

Work-Life Integration and Self-Care

The phrase “work-life integration” seems to slowly be replacing “work-life balance,” something I fully support. I believe this new phrase insinuating integration of the two aspects is practical and achievable. Work-life balance assumes there is equilibrium between work and personal endeavors; however, this is rarely, if ever attainable. Work-life balance also separates work from personal endeavors, suggesting you must not overlap these two areas in life—another thing I believe is impossible. I encourage my students to view the framework of work-life integration rather than work-life balance when discussing their self-care strategies. Work-life integration encompasses a mindset of taking care of yourself to fulfill your duties in *all* aspects of life.

What is self-care? I believe it is more than a go-to buzzword when someone mentions they are doing less than okay. If you search this phrase on the Internet, you will find millions of videos, books, strategies, articles, and “how-to’s” on self-care. It is great there are so many resources, but it can be overwhelming to some. While the Internet can offer great suggestions and serve as a starting point, I propose self-care strategies must be more personalized than a simple Internet search.

To me, self-care is engaging in activities that “fill up my cup.” The umbrella term of self-care includes a variety of activities that fulfill me mentally, physically, spiritually, emotionally, and socially. These activities range in type and duration depending on how I am feeling and what my body needs. Self-care, for me, includes things such as consuming enough water throughout the day, putting aside time each day to engage in exercise, taking a lunch break away from my desk, walking in nature, breathing in fresh air, and turning off my phone when I am watching a movie/show. I constantly share with my students that we cannot fill another’s cup (i.e., a client’s) if we have an empty cup ourselves. This means we, social workers, must feel energized, fulfilled, and nourished before we can assist our clients.

Social workers in training (i.e., social work students) should have the resources and support throughout their social work education to create, modify, and implement their work-life integration plans incorporating self-care strategies. Students should observe their instructors, mentors, and supervisors modeling work-life integration practices. Teaching self-care from the beginning to the end of one’s educational journey can encourage the use of positive strategies throughout one’s professional career. Speaking about and modeling practices can inspire students to take care of themselves, so they can provide the best assistance to the clients, families, and communities they will serve.

Teach Self-Care

I believe self-care should be a topic embedded across the social work curricula. I believe assigning one course, or class period, to address this topic is doing a disservice to our social work students. If students view this topic as unworthy to be discussed throughout their social work education, the message they are taking away is they do not *need* to prioritize this approach in their career. Social work educators should work towards integrating self-care throughout all courses. I share two overarching themes I applied in my fall 2020 social work course (see Table

1).

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| Teach: | 1. Devote class time to teaching & dispersing self-care |
| Teach: Disperse Throughout | a. Create a discussion forum with self-care ideas |
| | b. Check-in with individual students via assignments |
| | c. Facilitate class check-ins on moods & stressors |
| | d. Identify professional development topics |
| | 2. Emphasize self-awareness and self-reflection practices |
| Model: | 1. Set your tone & boundaries from the beginning |
| | 2. Discuss work-life integration & self-care strategies |
| | 3. Advocate for the Social Work Reinvestment Act |

Table 1. *Themes and examples to teach and model self-care.*

Devote Time to Teaching and Dispersing Self-Care

Teaching self-care can be convoluted. However, I believe there are various opportunities to educate social work students, no matter the course content we teach. In my class, I set aside time at the beginning of the semester for students to create a self-care plan. This worksheet was a tangible and modifiable document that allowed students to recognize their stressors, as well as activities they could engage with to maintain wellness. I emphasized self-care is not one thing, like a bubble bath, that will magically make you feel brand new or make your stress levels disappear. Rather, it is a conglomeration of diverse things you do related to wellbeing (i.e., physical, spiritual, emotional, mental, social). Throughout the semester, I asked students to refer to their plans and consider if they needed to modify or change any of their strategies. This opportunity emphasized the importance of self-care, but also illuminated how strategies can—and do—change over time.

I have devoted time to dispersing and encouraging the conversation on self-care in innovative ways; this included creating a discussion forum where students could post pictures and descriptions of them engaging in self-care activities. I asked students to share a picture of themselves or provide a summary of self-care things they did during the week leading up to class. Students enjoyed learning about—and even adopting—their peers’ strategies. Stemming from this activity, students asked me if I could create a central location where they could share activities in our geographic area, such as places to eat, hike, and socialize. I created a Google Jam Board where students could post pictures, ideas, and places to go to, which is readily accessible and modifiable, even after the semester ends.

I also utilized individual check-in assignments throughout the semester. During week four and week thirteen, I asked students to create and upload an audio or video recording sharing how they were doing, challenges they saw arising, and things I, their instructor, could do to support them. I then responded back via a video. Students explained they never had an assignment like this and appreciated the opportunity to personally check in with their professor. I saw this as an “informal” way to communicate with my students since we do not have a multitude of in-person face-to-face opportunities due to the hybrid teaching model.

I also periodically asked students to share their moods or feelings during check-ins at the start and end of class. I believe this acknowledges how students’ moods fluctuate, and it reminds me to be understanding, patient, and flexible depending on my students’ standing. One of these check-ins was an icebreaker asking students to share an emoji which best represented their current mood at the beginning of class. I also randomly grouped students in pairs to create a Google Jam Board with images illustrating things they did for their wellness the past week and things they would do the upcoming week. Students were then asked to share their plans with the class. I saw this as an opportunity to practice oral communication with some level of self-care accountability from their peers.

Lastly, I incorporated various professional development topics into each class, spending 10 to 15 minutes on each topic. Subjects included “Learn What You Love to Do and Not Love to Do,” “Considering Long Term Social Work Goals,” “Time Management Skills,” and “Conflict.” These presentations captured important areas often unaddressed in formal social work curricula. I believe bringing awareness to these topics allowed for students to recognize professional aspects of work, which would not only better prepare them for the workforce, but also alleviate transitional stressors and encourage a holistic work-life integration approach. My students shared they have greatly appreciated this learning opportunity and that they now feel more confident in how they professionally present themselves.

Emphasize Self-Awareness and Critical Reflection

To prepare culturally competent social workers, social work educators must teach self-awareness and self-reflection strategies (Colvin-Burque et al., 2007; Messinger, 2004; Negi et al., 2010). CSWE’s (2015) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) require social workers

to “apply self-awareness and self-regulation to manage the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse clients and constituencies” (p. 7) when engaging diversity and difference in practice (Competency 2). While demonstrating ethical and professional behavior (Competency 1), social workers must “use reflection and self-regulation to manage personal values and maintain professionalism in practice situations” (CSWE, 2015, p. 7). Self-awareness, self-regulation, and reflections are core strategies and behaviors social work students are taught so they can serve their clients while upholding professional social work values.

I propose these strategies are necessary not only when serving in the social work field, but also for one’s own self-care and work-life integration plan. Students must be self-aware of their feelings, mental health state, and personal issues they need to address to uphold wellness. I believe social work educators can easily address this in their curriculums since it is a skill already conveyed. Self-awareness strategies are necessary to create and alter self-care plans and work-life integration boundaries. Social work educators can integrate these teachings into courses by having conversations with students about how and why burnout, compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and high turnover rates persist. Educators should emphasize the importance of self-monitoring and critical reflection around work environments/contexts, colleagues, and supervision. Social workers should have the knowledge and skills to critically assess their situations so they can make informed decisions regarding their self-care and work-life experiences.

Model Self-Care

It is no surprise that, as social work educators, our students often look up to us for knowledge, wisdom, and mentorship. Because of this, social work instructors must be mindful of the way we behave and implement policies in our classrooms. Social work educators should model positive work-life integration and self-care strategies throughout our professional roles. We offer three ways I modeled self-care, which other professionals might consider adapting (see Table 1).

Set Your Tone and Boundaries from the Beginning

Setting your tone from the beginning of the semester is important. Students should understand and respect your expectations, but should also recognize you are flexible, adaptable, and understanding—characteristics social workers must often illustrate in their own careers. I do this on the first day of class by telling my students I recognize and understand my class is not the only thing they have going on in their lives, similar to my life (e.g., grants, publications, meetings, committees, family, friends, dogs, social events—you get it). Related to this, I allow my students to request written assignment extensions; however, they must do so at least 24 hours in advance. I view this as a balance; my students benefit, but on the other hand I expect them to respect the time and effort put into creating and grading assignments. I also view this as a conglomeration of numerous professional skills at play. First, students must be self-aware of their current standing and stressors; they then must think critically about their time management and, if they determine they do not have the capacity to complete an assignment before its due

date, they then must create a professional email requesting extra time to complete their assignment. All of these tasks must be completed in a timely, professional matter. My students seemed to really appreciate this flexibility. One student responded to an approved extension with, “I’m literally in tears with relief! Thank you so much!” (personal communication, October 2020) and later shared:

Thanks to you, these are things I did because I didn’t have to beat myself up mentally, trying to finish my assignment within 24 hours: 1. Showered (seriously, I did that as soon as I got your email telling me I had extra time to finish my work without penalty.) 2. Prepared six nutritious meals to warm up and feed myself this week. 3. Caught up on sleep Saturday morning. 4. Divided my work time so I could go on a hike Sunday afternoon before it got nasty outside today. 5. Enjoyed reading up on topics related to the first case study so I would have a better understanding of the subject. (personal communication, November 2020)

Reminders like this assure me the procedures and flexibility in place are helping my students academically, professionally, and mentally, exemplifying my commitment to *students’ self-care*. My hope is students will be more cognizant of my classroom procedures and further incorporate or replicate them into their professional social work careers.

On a related note, I have a statement regarding religious and cultural observances that coincide with the class schedule. I encourage students to honor their cultural and religious holidays because I acknowledge not all holidays are recognized as federal or University days off. I ask students to inform me of their holiday observance ahead of time so I can excuse their absence. I view this as being mindful not only of my students’ diverse identities, but also encouraging participation in personal endeavors—illustrating work-life integration.

When I think of professional boundaries, I reflect on work-life integration. I strive towards making sure I am meeting my job expectations, but also enjoying my non-job tasks. For me, this includes a variety of things. First, I put aside one day a week where I will not respond to any emails, grade any papers, work on manuscripts, presentations—*anything*. This allows me to reset my mind and promote motivation for the following days. Second, I share with my students I will respond to emails within 24 hours during the weekdays, and 48 hours on the weekends. This decreases my stress and anxiety around providing immediate responses to students. It also illustrates my commitment to work-life integration by creating realistic boundaries. Third, I am learning how and when to say “no” to tasks and requests that do not align with my academic mission and vision. Learning to say “no” is challenging but helps me stay on track to meet my review criteria. I have done this by not saying “yes” on the spot, mapping out my short and long-term goals to assess if requests align with my mission and focus areas, and asking for support from experienced mentors. Doing these things helps me stay on track to accomplish my goals, while not feeling exhausted or overwhelmed. When I am enthusiastic, have energy, and am motivated, I believe my students feed off the energy and view me in a more positive light. This allows me to provide the best instruction and feedback to my students.

Discuss Your Self-Care Strategies

It is okay to talk about things we do as academics that do not involve academics. We must normalize/universalize talking about non-work-related tasks with our colleagues and students. Having informal conversations about activities and events we engaged in (e.g., movies, exercising, shopping, traveling) outside of job responsibilities is important. These types of conversations should be natural. For example, I bring up fun extracurricular activities I did over the weekend to promote conversations around *not* working seven days a week. Educators can encourage students to attend school sporting events to socialize and have fun; this not only suggests the students support their university/college, but also exemplifies engagement in non-academic work. Another thing I do is share when my self-care strategies change. For example, I was walking my dogs every morning for 30 minutes, but I found this to be burdensome. I found quick ten-minute walks scattered throughout the day help me clear my mind, refocus, and get some fresh air. Sharing this example with my students models how self-care strategies can (and will) change depending on one's needs and schedule.

With this in mind, I recommend social work students and educators find a self-care plan that works for them. I encourage the social work community to engage in a deep self-reflection and become aware of their own needs—physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, and social. This is important because we must be attuned to our own needs and desires to “keep our cup full.” We should not try to copy others, but rather recognize that self-care strategies that work for one of our colleagues or peers may not work for us. Further, we must be patient with ourselves, and acknowledge that sometimes we need to adjust accordingly depending on our feelings, environments, contests, and current events. In this narrative, I offered what I have done for myself and my students in hopes to encourage this discussion to continue. However, I would be doing a disservice to the social work community by recommending certain activities that fulfill self-care. It is up to each individual to determine the activities which “fill their cup” and nourish them physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and socially.

Advocate for Policy Change (Reinvestment Act)

Social workers engage in social and political change that create positive effects on individuals, communities, and systems. Social workers are expected to “advocate for human rights at the individual and systems level” and “apply critical thinking to analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice” (CSWE, 2015, p. 8), as stated in EPAS Competencies 3 and 5 (CSWE, 2015). Social work educators can encourage their colleagues and students to advocate for their profession, specifically by supporting the enactment of the Reinvestment Act. First, we must teach our students about this act; then, we must model self-advocacy practices, which we can encourage fellow social workers as well as students to join us in.

It is well established that social workers have high rates of injuries and illnesses, excessive caseloads, lack of support and resources, significant educational debt, and insufficient salaries

(Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Due to these challenges, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) set in motion the Social Work Reinvestment Act to ensure quality improvement within the profession. This act works towards addressing professional concerns by enhancing recruitment, retention, and research by reinvesting in the profession of social work (NASW, 2019). The Social Work Reinvestment Act directs the Secretary of Health and Human Services to establish a Social Work Commission to provide independent counsel to Congress (Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act, 2019). The Social Work Commission would then study and address social workers' issues such as fair market compensation, high education debt, workforce trends, safety, workplace concerns, and state level licensure policies (Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act, 2019). In addition, it would provide resources to translating social work research to practice, as well as work towards creating a reciprocity agreement for providing services across state lines (Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act, 2019). Social work educators can maintain the core competencies of social work by shedding light on this act and encouraging advocacy practices around issues that matter to the profession.

Conclusion

Now, more than ever, social workers must feel prepared to appropriately tackle a variety of stressors while still upholding their job responsibilities and non-job engagements. Unfortunately, some research suggests those in health professional roles, specifically social workers, are not taking care of themselves as best as they could and *should* be. This not only has lingering negative repercussions on their health and mental health standing/state but is known to negatively interfere with the helping relationship with clients (Lizano & Mor Barak, 2015). Future research should seek to understand which self-care strategies have been valuable for social workers at different stages in their career (i.e., educational courses, field internship, and pre/post licensure), their focus area (e.g., substance use, mental health, schools, criminal justice, etc.), and agency setting (e.g., research funded, non-profit, private sector, etc.). Additional research can uncover how social work instructors/educators are teaching social work students and interns about burnout and self-care. This evidence can assist with a more thorough integration of teaching self-care strategies within the social work curriculum, professional development, and continuing education trainings.

As social work educators, we propose utilizing our platforms to encourage and motivate students to integrate tailored self-care strategies at the beginning through the end of their social work curricula. We can, and *should*, utilize our roles to teach and model positive self-care behaviors and work-life integration approaches, exemplifying the imperative nature of upholding one's wellness. Social work students often look up to their professors; let's be sure our behaviors, policies, and content model what we preach throughout our profession: *Self-care is a vital core competency*.

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