

Seven Self-Care Strategies

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Abstract: This narrative describes the importance of centralizing self-care as part of being a social worker. Seven different self-care strategies are described and a self-audit tool is offered to help practitioners to generate a self-care plan.

Keywords: self-care, mindfulness, social work, self-audit, relational connections, vicarious trauma, traumatic growth, social distance, positive psychology

Introduction

Like many social work academics, my teaching, writing and direct practice overlap. My practice involves helping individuals, families and communities to recover from major disasters and armed conflict, as well as antiracism activism in the US, and I teach courses in both of these areas. I once published an article in *Reflections* called “Violet’s Seeds” (Miller, 1996) which described a violent tragedy experienced by one of my first clients, when I was 25, and the impact that this had on me, which included what we would now call “vicarious trauma.”

One of the ways that this was manifested was that I had a compulsive need to be available to the survivors of the tragedy and also to work with all of my clients to prevent future catastrophes. I would find myself in my office, a department of social services in London, late at night after everyone else had gone home, eating Chinese or Indian take-out while writing my reports. My workaholic habits isolated me from other people and meant that I had little time for my own self-care. In some ways this period, early in my career, established a pattern of intense investment in work that has characterized my career. While there have been some rewards and benefits to this intensity, it has also been a challenge to sustain this level of energy and it at times has meant that my life is out of balance. Thus, developing self-care strategies has been an important counter-weight to my fervent commitment to my work.

As with many tragic and traumatic situations, over time I experienced traumatic growth. It was this experience that directly influenced my desire to respond to acute, overwhelming emergencies, as well as stimulating my interest in helping professionals who are triggered and adversely

affected by their work. What I have found from my work responding to disasters is that self-care strategies are important for both clients and workers; they help all of us to manage the toxicity generated by disasters as well as helping inoculate by stimulating our sources of strength and resiliency. One of the beauties of a self-care approach is that it is not only empowering, but cuts down on the social distance between the helper and the helped – we all need and benefit from engaging in it. In this article, I will describe seven self-care strategies that I have found valuable for myself, my students, and the people to whom I am responding.

My practice of self-care draws on positive psychology (Fredrickson, 2008; 2009; Seligman, 2012; Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006), resilience theory (Bonanno, 2004 ; Miller, 2012; Southwick and Charney, 2012) mindfulness (Begley, 2007; Chodron, 2001; 2002; Miller; Wallace, 2007) and neurobiology (Farmer, 2009), as well as my own experiences. Individual aspects of the model have been empirically validated although not this particular overall package. However, clients and students have reported to me successful ways that they have incorporated, metabolized and used these strategies.

Self-Care Strategies

In this section I will cover exercise, mindfulness, relational connections, altruism, meaning, pleasure and enjoyment, and deepening self-awareness. As can be seen from the list, self-care is multi-directional; it can involve an inward journey but also involves focusing outside of ourselves, such as on other people and our environment.

Exercise

Social work is exhausting and mostly a sedentary way of working. Not only that, but the work itself is

stressful and can release many hormones that keep us on alert, such as adrenalin and cortisol, and activate parts of the brain that generate feelings of anxiety, hyper alertness and fear, such as the amygdala (Farmer, 2009). Even when we cognitively know that this is happening to us, it still is occurring physiologically. And, of course, this can interfere with sleep, healthy eating, and intimacy with others, and becomes part of a cycle of tension and depletion, with negative physical, emotional, psychological, social and spiritual consequences.

Exercise flushes out toxins, releases good hormones, such as endorphins, stimulates sleep, has many physiological benefits and also grows brain cells, so we can think and perform more effectively (Southwick & Charney, 2012). It also improves our mood and often leads to higher levels of self-esteem.

The benefits of exercise are well documented but I know many people who find it difficult to develop a routine or to be able to maintain their exercise practice when deployed in the field or during very busy periods at work; the times when we most need it! So how can it be initiated and maintained?

I have found from my own experience and from talking with others that it is important to not be formulaic about how to exercise – what kind, how often, how hard – this can lead to feeling unable to live up to someone else’s expectations or create pressure to do something that is not pleasurable. Exercise should strike a balance between pushing oneself and enjoying oneself. I made a commitment to myself that exercise is as essential as eating, bathing, and sleeping, which means that I have to do it every day. And this is where the need for flexibility comes in-sometimes it will be for two hours, at others for 15 minutes. When I responded to Hurricane Katrina with the Red Cross, I managed to run early in the morning or late at night. When working in Uganda during the rainy season, there are times I have settled for doing yoga underneath a mosquito net. Psychologically, it helps me to know that no matter what I do and for however long, that I am caring for my body and that elevates my sense of efficacy and self-esteem. I have now incorporated this into my expectations for students planning to do crisis intervention or disaster response work; building in exercise and other ways of self-care is part of their preparation to become an effective

social worker.

Mindfulness

In my recent book on responding to disasters (Miller, 2012), I end each chapter with a mindfulness exercise. I also start and end each class in my disaster course with a brief mindfulness exercise. For the past few years I have been teaching a similar course at a Chinese University and have found students very receptive to this. I have also used mindfulness techniques in working with disaster survivors in Haiti, Uganda and Sri Lanka. The form that it takes varies and mindfulness practices need to be adapted and modified by indigenous people so as to be consistent with their life styles and cultural practices. But in most cultures, value is placed on being able to calm oneself, or exercise self-control, or on achieving elevated states of consciousness and awareness.

Mindfulness as a self-care strategy means to me that a person intentionally tries to build an awareness of themselves, often, though not necessarily, through some form of practice, where there is a greater ability to be present in the moment and to not be aversive or clinging towards particular thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations. When people are present, they are better able to be engaged with others and often find meaning in what they are doing, even under oppressive conditions and corrosive environments. Social workers engaging with clients, and students engaging with case studies and clinical material, are empathic people with mirror neurons, and often will vicariously experience pain and suffering.

Mindfulness allows a person to not fear these reactions or to try and avoid them nor to see them as some kind of inevitable vortex that will pull one into a downward cycle. The emphasis is on noticing such reactions and then letting them go – knowing that they will come and go but do not define who we are. It is common when doing social work to feel invested in certain outcomes, some of which we have influence over but others that we cannot control. Mindfulness can help sort out when to try harder on behalf of ourselves or others, and when acceptance will help us to let go of depleting and demoralizing concerns that are the subject matter of rumination; mindfulness helps people to situate their concerns in a bigger context and picture.

As with exercise, there is no one way to do this – it is an approach to things rather than a rigid set of practices. Some people, including me, meditate every day, even if it is only for five minutes. One of the things that I value about mindfulness as a self-care strategy is that it is portable; I can carry my practice with me wherever I am.

There are a wide range of mindfulness practices informed by a range of traditions – spiritual or secular. Employing a mindful approach includes doing regular body scans (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) or intentionally uncoupling from work concerns and focusing on nature (Coleman, 2006), or beauty or music. Journaling is another mindfulness strategy. When engaged with mindfulness, a person strives to be in the moment, aware of oneself, engaged with others and the larger world and to be less emotionally reactive; accepting of oneself without severe self-criticism or judgment. When there is no succeeding or failing attached to how a person engages in mindfulness, rather just an intention to be mindful, then it is less likely that person will evaluate themselves negatively, or feel discouraged and give up on this approach.

There is increasing awareness of the benefits of mindfulness. Research by Richard Davidson and others has shown, through brain imaging techniques, that mediators practicing mindfulness activate certain regions of the brain that lead to a greater sense of calmness and well-being (Begley, 2006; Wallace, 2007). Anxious neural territory (e.g. the amygdala) is often less active, while the more rational, pre-frontal cortex is more active (Begley, 2006). Some forms of mindfulness involve focusing on a single source – such as one’s breathing – while others engage practitioners in guided imagery or intentionally breathing in other people’s suffering while breathing out healing energy (Chodron, 2001; 2002). There are lots of web-based pages that offer suggestions about how to meditate or practice mindfulness – including one offered by Shambhala Sun, a Buddhist journal (<http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=26&Itemid=161>).

One benefit of a mindfulness practice is that it can lead to greater sense of oneness with others (Otake, Shimai, Tanka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson 2006). This leads to the next self-care strategy –

connection with others.

Relational Connections

Social work is a relationally based profession and relies on the use of empathic relationships, whatever the type of work, level of intervention, or approach being used. It is also a profession that values teamwork, supervision, consultation and mentoring – so there is a framework that encourages us to work with others.

Social support is a critical ingredient that has been found to help individuals to recover from trauma and disaster (Hobfoll, et al., 2007; Miller, 2012). It is what emerged as a pivotal ingredient in helping prisoners of war to withstand torture and degradation (Southwick & Charney, 2012). And it is one of the most important factors in stoking resilience (Miller, 2012; Walsh, 2003; 2007). Social networks can lead to better health, greater emotional well-being, and higher levels of self-esteem and a sense of meaning (Christakis and Fowler, 2009). When I went through my period of Vicarious Trauma, I lacked social support and once I was able to establish this, my symptoms diminished.

Social support has sustained me over the years and in many challenging situations. I find that it generates a desire to give back to others, which leads to the next self-care strategy.

Altruism and Social Action

It is in the nature of social work that we are altruistic – our goal is to help others reduce their suffering, gain more control over their lives, and to find more pleasure and meaning in what they do. Social justice is an important part of this mix. One reason that we help others is that it also makes us feel better about ourselves. I think one reason that I do this kind of work, is that helping others and engaging in altruism, generates positive emotions (Otake, et al, 2006) and forges closer social connections with others. Instead of feeling helpless, I feel as if I am contributing to healing or recovery, which also nurtures me. It is part of the beauty of social work that engagement with others, which can be the cause of much stress, is also an activity that fosters such pleasure, significance and inspiration. Helping others can transform “compassion fatigue” to “compassion satisfaction” (Radey & Figley, 2007).

But it is a delicate balance between experiencing the benefits of helping others and overdoing it to the point of depletion. The risks of focusing on altruism as a self-care strategy include feeling that we need to try and work harder, increasing fatigue and stress. If mindfulness and social support are also being used as a self-care strategy, then we will (hopefully) be aware of this risk and be able to monitor which side of the scale we find ourselves. I usually know when I meditate at the end of the day how fast my heart is racing, how heavy my eyelids feel, how preoccupied and obsessed my brain is with someone else's suffering, and how distracted I am. Or my friends and family let me know that I am too preoccupied with work, so social support helps to give me a reality check.

It is also liberating to engage in social action, to actively try to change policies, laws, or the culture of the agency where we work. Engagement with others in a struggle for justice is empowering. It can involve working to transform a toxic work environment to one of respect and collegiality. Or it could involve advocating on behalf of targeted or marginalized clients. As one of my mentors, Richard Cloward, once explained to me, there are seams in history when social change can happen and then the seams close up again, sometimes for decades. So it is important to take the long view, to keep the pilot light lit even when there is not enough fuel for a full flame of social justice, because at some point there will be. The act of resisting and standing for something gives us a sense of purpose and meaning, which is the next self-care strategy.

Meaning

Meaning is implicit in what we do in our work and yet it is sometimes lost in the avalanche of cases, or teaching requirements, or bureaucratic tasks or in the repetitive and mundane aspects of our work. When I was the director of a large state child welfare agency, I found that many workers were stressed and demoralized and had lost a sense of meaning and purpose in their work. This contributed to a demoralized group culture.

The search for meaning is one of the most important tasks of being a human being (Frankl, 1946) and yet it is all too easy to lose sight of this in our work lives. How can we intentionally build meaning into

our lives? One way is to set goals and priorities for what we want to engage with and accomplish. When we have established goals and priorities, it is easier to see what is blocking them and we can develop strategies to re-set our goals or alter our plan for achieving them

Approaching meaning as part of a larger quest for spiritual growth may be appropriate for some but not others. Spiritual growth is one way of framing the search for meaning and purpose. Another is to view one's work and efforts as part of a larger political or professional agenda. Why are we engaging in the specific acts of our lives and to what purpose? Connecting the quotidian with a bigger picture helps to generate greater coherence and direction. It is easy to lose sight of this and to be in touch with the burdens of our daily activities but not their purpose and the value that this holds for us.

For example, I was asked to serve as the Associate Dean at my School at a time when I was engaged with some very meaningful practice and scholarship projects. I was also in my 60s. I agreed to do this as a form of service to the School but soon was feeling resentful about the many administrative responsibilities that constituted the job. I needed to remind myself of my commitment to my school, to educating future practitioners and to the profession to place the job responsibilities in the context of my commitments and priorities. I also had to work out a plan that led me back to being a professor rather than an administrator. Once I had a roadmap and timetable for this, I felt more comfortable with fulfilling my administrative responsibilities and could see how they fit with my larger career arc and trajectory.

Pleasure and Enjoyment

This is a simple one while it also can be stubbornly hard to achieve. When constantly immersed in the suffering of others, it can almost feel as if we are not entitled to feel good or have fun. Of course, balance in one's life is essential to being able to withstand the strains and rigors of social work and social work teaching. One of our hardest tasks can be giving ourselves encouragement, if not permission, to cultivate ways of enjoying ourselves without feeling guilty. Pleasurable activities certainly generate positive emotions and positive emotions in turn make people more stress resistant (Fredrickson; 2009,

Seligman, 2012). The motto work hard, play hard is apt. It is also particularly important to build this into a self-care strategy early in one's career. In my experience, workers who are working too hard and playing too little when they are young often carry these habits through most, if not all, of their career.

Deepening Self-Awareness and Self-Acceptance

While mindfulness activities can help with noticing thoughts, or even patterns, it can be helpful to go even further and develop greater self-awareness through self-exploration. There are many ways to do this. Therapy is an obvious one but it is not for everyone. Activities with others or journaling or artistic pursuits are others. What I have found for myself, and for many of my fellow social workers, is that self-acceptance and relaxing internalized harsh judgments are life-long tasks but can be mitigated with self-awareness. The ability to notice unproductive patterns, critical thoughts, self-defeating tendencies goes a long way –it doesn't make these issues disappear but they can be worked with and lead us astray less often.

Implementing a Self-Care Strategy

In my book on *Psychosocial Capacity Building in Response to Disasters* (Miller, 2012) I tried to help practitioners develop a means for self-auditing their self-care strategies, which I will summarize here:

1. Investment: Identifying one's goals and professional and personal commitments is a helpful starting place. Why are you doing this work? Writing down a few of these and even posting them in your office or on your computer can remind you of what this is all about.

2. Monitoring your investment in clients and outcomes: Try to notice when you really want a client to act or behave in a certain way, or to accomplish a particular goal. Notice when you are very preoccupied with particular clients or absorbing so much of their pain and anguish that you are suffering. Use self-care strategies to redirect your thoughts and feelings.

3. Supervision and support at work: If it is there use it, if not try to generate it. If it is not possible to adequately get this formally, then

seek it from peers or outside consultants.

4. Exercise: Try to set some modest goals and a plan for what you hope to do and when you might do it. If you find that it is not working, don't hesitate to modify it or scale it back – but also assess what is getting in the way and what can be done to reduce the obstacles. For some people it helps to do this with others.

5. Recreational activities: Once a month reflect on what you were able to do and if you are not doing much, what is getting in the way and what it will take to balance out your life.

6. Mindfulness and meaning: Try to identify at least one strategy for achieving this – meditation, journaling, performing, hiking, yoga, etc.

7. Connection with others: Try to be mindful if you are withdrawing from social contact or working so much that you find it hard to hang out with people. Even a small encounter with a friend, like a cup of coffee together, can go a long way.

8. Help when wounded: There is nothing to be gained by toughing it out if you are experiencing the symptoms of compassion fatigue, depression or vicarious trauma. Ruminating about clients, breaking into tears about work issues uncontrollably, excessive anxiety, drinking or smoking too much, loss of libido or energy, too many sleepless nights – you know what the indicators are! Get help sooner than later. Do for yourself what you would wish for your clients.

Conclusion

I have encouraged readers to view self-care as an essential aspect of your practice. This essay has shared an admittedly personal and idiosyncratic approach to incorporating self-care, but also cited some empirical and evidence-based data supporting their value in fostering balance, resilience and an overall sense of well-being.

I hope some readers will share their self-care strategies with Reflections – we can all learn from and support one another. Social work is a noble profession not only because of its aspirations and values, but because practitioners are willing to deeply engage with the

suffering of others. It is for this reason that I encourage myself and others to develop our own unique blend and flavor of self-care, so that we are able to shoulder the weight and responsibilities that come with this line of work while finding pleasure and meaning in the process.

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