The Seven Pillars of Self Care

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Introduction

For the past 15 years I have responded to many disasters, trying to help individuals, families and communities to recover and heal. It is very gratifying work but sometimes very stressful and puts me at risk of “Compassion Fatigue” or “Vicarious Trauma.” This essay shares what I have found to be helpful in protecting myself from the consequences of holding the pain of others. Self-care is a core task for many first responders – fire fighters, police officers, paramedics – as well as clinicians. One of the beauties of a self-care approach is that 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.

My model 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 but not this particular overall package. Many people whom I have mentored have reported to me how important self-care has been to their professional growth and ability to withstand stress and even thrive. I know that many of my colleagues have their own strategies for self-care that may differ with or overlap with this model; I share this as one approach which I hope will be reworked and reconfigured by individual practitioners.

The Three Legged Stool – A Foundation
While there are many aspects to self-care, three form the foundation. With them, we can withstand most work situations and they are the underpinning for the other four pillars of self-care. The three – exercise, mindfulness and social connections – can be done in many in many different ways, take varying amounts of time and are portable – they can occur wherever a person is located.

**Exercise**

Engaging in social work can be exhausting but it is 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, such as the amygdala, that generate feelings of anxiety, hyper-alertness and fear (Famer, 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.

It is important to not be formulaic about how to exercise – what kind, how often, how hard – this can lead to people feeling that they are 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 view it as being in the same league as eating, bathing, and other elementary aspects of self-care. It is something that we can all build
into our schedules in some way. And it is important to try and do this early in one’s career – so that healthy routines coexist with one’s work life - although it is never too late.

**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 – encouraging me to see this as a strategy that can cut across cultures, if adapted and modified by different people to be consistent with their life styles and cultural practices.

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 learn to be present, they are better able to be engaged with others and often find meaning in what they are doing. Inevitably, we are exposed through our work to stressful, if not toxic situations with clients and as empathic people with mirror neurons, will vicariously experience some of this. 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. And when we are working with clients or teaching students, it is common for us to be invested in certain outcomes, some of which we have some influence over but others that we cannot control. Mindfulness can help us to sort out when we can try harder on behalf of
ourselves or others, and when acceptance will help to let go of depleting and demoralizing concerns that are the subject matter of rumination; mindfulness can help us to situate our 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. This can be informed by a range of traditions – spiritual or secular. Other ways of employing a mindful approach include 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, be less emotionally reactive and accepting of oneself without severe self-criticism or judgment, all of which can be goals as we approach our work and do not necessitate daily meditation. 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 a 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). 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, et al, 2006). This leads to the next self-care pillar – 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 (Hobfall, 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).

Like exercise and mindfulness, we are all different in our personalities, social styles, access to social resources, needs and what social support will actually look like in our life. But we can strive to not be too isolated and to find sources of social support at work and away from work. The important thing is that this is a topic of conversation in a mentoring relationship.

Four Other Pillars of Self-Care
The first three pillars of self-care are the foundation for four other kinds of self-care that sometimes can take more work to achieve but can elevate how robust and resilient a person is in their professional work. They include altruism, meaning and spirituality, fun and pleasure, and deepening self-awareness.

**Altruism**

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; helping others generates positive emotions (Otake, et al, 2006) and forges closer social connections with others. 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. We can try to transform “compassion fatigue” to “compassion satisfaction” (Radey & Figley, 2007).

The risks of focusing on altruism include feeling that we have to try and work harder, increasing our fatigue and stress. We need to feel o.k. about redirecting our energy and uncoupling from our work while at the same time reviewing the pleasure and meaning that altruism brings to one’s life.

**Meaning**

Meaning is implicit in what we do in our work and yet it is sometimes lost in the avalanche of cases, or course 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.

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. It can help to review our goals and sources of meaning and to remind ourselves of why we entered this line of work, what is getting in the way of achieving a sense of meaning and engagement and what would help us to reconstruct, re-establish and resurrect a sense of meaning. This is a collaborative enterprise and there is no playbook that can tell us how to accomplish meaning, but if we talk to colleagues, supervisors and teachers and make this a specific area of focus and attention, it can create a process where meaning is generated through a shared, co-constructed process.

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. Whether spirituality is tied to particular religious practices, is animistic, collectively shared or uniquely personal, for some people having a sense of spiritual purpose in one’s work can lead to a sense of transcendent value in what one does and why one is doing it. I would include a deeply held belief in the importance and need for social justice as a form of spirituality in that it embodies a vision of a more just, equitable and compassionate society, which to me is a spiritual (as well as social) vision. When we explore our principles, sense of purpose and transcendent beliefs, this contributes to self-care by connecting the quotidian activities of one’s work to a larger purpose and value system.

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. We need to be able to give ourselves encouragement, if not permission, to cultivate ways of enjoying ourselves and finding satisfaction, gratification and contentment. Pleasurable activities certainly generate positive emotions and positive emotions in turn make people more stress resistant (Fredrickson; 2009, Seligman, 2012).

**Deepening Self-Awareness**

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, including but not limited to engaging in therapy to deepen the experience of social work education. Often, our narratives connect to deeper, even life-long patterns and stories, some of which may not feel appropriate to discuss in a supervisory, teaching or mentoring relationship. Other ways of deepening self-awareness include mutual aid or self-help groups, reading, and journaling. What is critical is to view self-awareness as a form of self-care – it can give us greater insight about our reactions, which in turn can offer more self-control and autonomy, which can result in a greater sense of efficacy and ability to be effective in our relationships and work with others.

**Conclusion**

I have shared some ideas about what may provide scaffolding for a self-care foundation. This essay, although citing some empirical and evidenced-based data, has shared an admittedly personal and idiosyncratic approach to incorporating self-care in one’s professional life, striving
to achieve balance, foster resilience and an overall sense of well-being. 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 students and practitioners 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.

References


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