

Therapist Self-Care

Coping

Advice

n/a

Coach

No

Helping professions can be demanding, challenging, and emotionally taxing, and as a consequence, psychologists and other helping professionals are prone to experiencing distress, burnout, vicarious traumatization, and eventually impaired professional competence.

Psychologists and other helping professionals may be more vulnerable to challenges for impairment than most as a result of inherent qualities of compassion, empathy, and caring. Further to this, existing evidence suggests that many psychologists may not take the necessary steps to prevent and resolve impairment that results from distress and burnout (Floyd, Myszka & Orr, 1998; Barnett, Baker, Elman, & Schoeneret, 2007).

Engaging in self-care can help to prevent burnout and maintain one's own psychological wellness. For psychologists, the pursuit of psychological wellness through self care is thought to be "an ethical imperative" (Barnett et al. 2007, p. 604).

Psychologists should first learn to recognize personal risk factors and warning signs, such as working with certain types of clients, personal stressors outside of working life, health problems, increased feelings of frustration, impatience, or anger towards clients, hoping certain clients will cancel, a lack of focus and increased boredom, a lack of motivation, and decreased satisfaction and enjoyment from one's work (Barnett et al., 2007). There also may be some degree of depressed mood, or a sense of hopelessness. Additionally, one may be disillusioned with the profession or even with him or herself. Physical signs may include tiredness, feeling rundown, and evidence of psychomotor retardation.

Self-care is engaging in activities to promote emotional, physical, interpersonal, and spiritual wellness. While this may sound simple enough, self-care is often difficult to execute. This tool offers a list (that is by no means exhaustive) of 20 self-care strategies for psychologists and other helping professionals.

Author

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Goal

The goal of this tool is to provide therapists and coaches with advice on burnout and a list of self-care strategies to build resilience and prevent and/or manage burnout.

Advice

- While this tool is targeted at therapists and coaches, it may be used with clients who are

experiencing burnout or similar in their own working lives. The self-care strategies listed here are not specific to those in helping professions.

- Take a close look at your calendar and carve out time for self-care, considering when and where suits you best. Put your plan in writing, and stick to it. This may take extra preparation, but it's necessary and worth it.
- Self-care is individual, so identify which activities help *you* feel your best.



Suggested Readings

Barnett, J. E., Baker, E. K., Elman, N. S., & Schoener, G. R. (2007). In pursuit of wellness: The self-care imperative. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 38(6), 603-612.

Floyd, M. Y., Myszka, M. T., & Orr, P. (1998). Licensed psychologists' knowledge and utilization of a state association colleague assistance committee. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 29, 594-598.

Sadler-Gerhardt, C. J., & Stevenson, D. L. (2012). *When it all hits the fan: Helping counselors build resilience and avoid burnout*. VIST AS Online (1), ACA.

Tool Description

Instructions

- 1. Ensure your physical needs are met.** Maintaining a healthy diet, drinking enough water, engaging in regular exercise, and getting enough sleep are vital to maintaining physical balance and emotional wellbeing. Additionally, socialising with non-psychologists, engaging in hobbies, learning new things, and being involved in meaningful activities and relationships are important strategies.
- 2. Cultivate sacred moments.** Sacred moments are precious, cherished, peaceful moments in time that are imbued with sacred qualities. Examples include sitting on a beach, watching children at play, visiting a family member or friend, or seeing a sunset. A sacred moment can take a person to a state of transcendence beyond herself or himself and provide a connection with others. It can promote purpose and meaning in life.
- 3. Practice gratitude.** A sense of gratitude can actually replace feelings of resentment or frustration towards one's clients or profession. Make a habit of noting at least 3 things that you are grateful for each day.
- 4. Create a professional greenhouse at work.** A greenhouse is an environment with optimal factors for growth, i.e., temperature, soil, and water. Create an environment at work that promotes positive work friendships, mentor and peer support, a balance of self- and other-care, and having fun.
- 5. Create an actual greenhouse at work.** Research shows that the presence of plants and greenery at work is calming and restorative, and has a positive impact on health and wellbeing.
- 6. Laugh and play.** Maintain a sense of humour, look for the comical in life, and laugh. Engaging in big belly laughing can reduce tension and increase energy.
- 7. 'Me' time.** In a people-focussed profession such as psychology, it is important to give yourself permission to engage in some time of solitude, away from family, friends, and other demands. Time alone can be refreshing and rejuvenating, and can help to clear the mind and restore a sense of balance.
- 8. Take a hot bath.** Engaging in relaxation activities such as taking a hot bath promotes healthy functioning. A hot bath can be particularly soothing, relaxing, and restorative.
- 9. Meditation.** Take the time to turn inward and allow yourself to be in the present moment. You might choose to pay attention to your breathing, or your body, or your sensory experience--that is, what you can see, hear, smell, taste, or feel. Research shows that mindfulness interventions can reduce stress, depression and anxiety, increase positive emotion, and make beneficial changes in the brain.
- 10. Seek supervision and peer support.** Regular, good quality supervision is an essential self-care strategy for psychologists and other helping professionals. Supervision encourages one to reflect on his or her practice and wellbeing, from which warning signs for burnout may be identified, and management strategies may be put in place.
- 11. Take up a hobby.** Either start something new or re-engage in something that you have enjoyed in the past. From photography to cooking to horseback riding, come up with something that you enjoy doing that doesn't relate to your day job. Research shows that hobbies, no matter the type, have both mental and physical benefits, such as reduced stress, reduced cortisol levels, improved mood, and lower blood pressure. Having a hobby also wards off depression, relieves stress, and helps you stay in the present.
- 12. Take regular scheduled breaks.** Create opportunities throughout the day as well as throughout the year for down time, to rest and recover, and to have fun.
- 13. Personal journaling.** Personal journaling such as expressive writing (expressing your thoughts and feelings about an emotionally impactful experience) or reflective practice (expressing your thoughts or reactions about a session that affected you in some way) allows one to process distressing emotions associated with burnout.
- 14. Go for a walk or run.** In addition to its benefits for physical health, exercise appears to be good for our emotional wellbeing as well. Research shows that exercise reduces anxiety, lowers the risk of depression, and improves

cognitive skills.

- 15. Gardening.** Spend time outside tending to your garden, and enrich your experience by engaging your five senses, noticing all of the different things that you can see, hear, smell, feel, and perhaps taste.
- 16. Yoga.** Yoga encompasses physical postures and breathing techniques to facilitate mindfulness and promote psychological and physical wellbeing. Give yourself permission to engage in an hour of yoga a few times a week.
- 17. Practice self-compassion.** There is growing evidence to suggest that self-compassion is an important source of wellbeing. To be self-compassionate is to treat yourself with kindness, to be non-judgmentally mindful and present, and also to feel connected to common humanity and be accepting of flaws as part of the human condition.
- 18. Join a book club.** Reading can be both relaxing and stimulating, and joining a book club not only encourages one to read but creates an opportunity for social interaction and interpersonal development.
- 19. Spend time with friends.** As social animals, interacting with others is vital for the health and wellbeing of humans. All too often, we withdraw ourselves from others when things aren't going well in our lives. Thus, it is imperative that we make (and keep) plans to catch up with friends.
- 20. Mindfully enjoy a cup of tea.** Slow down and fully engage in the experience of drinking your tea by noticing it's colour, the moving pattern of tea leaves, the feel of the hot cup against your fingers, the fragrance, and of course the taste