**Self-Care for Helping Professionals**

**Jeffrey Kottler**

**Distinction Between Various Professional Stress Reactions**

**Primary psychological trauma:** a direct personal experience with some major crisis, incident, injury, or disaster that results in an inability to cope effectively; characterized by severe anxiety, depression, and perceived threat to security.

**Secondary trauma:** Stress reactions that result from close proximity to someone experiencing major trauma, especially as a result of a close, intimate relationship that was high in emotional valence.

**Vicarious trauma:** contagious effects and emotional resonance as a result of listening to, or being a witness, to catastrophic trauma narrative.

**Compassion fatigue:** Acute and prolonged exposure to high levels of trauma and misfortune in professional role, resulting in blurred boundaries, internalized negative feelings, and unconscious absorption of someone’s fears, anxieties, and hopelessness.

**Burnout:** chronic stress on the job that results from interpersonal, administrative, workload, or political difficulties; results in reduced efficiency, physical and emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and loss of satisfaction.

**Symptoms of Burnout, Compassionate Fatigue, and Stress Difficulties**

* Emotional exhaustion
* Lack of physical energy
* Dispirited, pessimistic, negative attitudes
* Impaired concentration and focus
* Frequency of verbalized cynical, critical complaints
* Depersonalized view of others as objects
* Feelings of ineptitude and disillusionment
* Feelings of anger or frustration at being victimized or marginalized
* Lack of meaning and satisfaction in work
* Feeling unsafe to express oneself honestly and authentically
* Feeling unsupported and unappreciated by colleagues
* Feelings of isolation and disengagement
* Collateral damage that affects family and friends
* Lack of personal coping and self-care strategies
* Sleep disruption due to intrusive thoughts
* Self-medication with drugs, alcohol, food, or behavioral addictions
* Physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches, digestive problems, etc.)
* Feelings of helplessness and futility to change situation and make impact

**Conditions that Most Contribute to Poor Morale and Burnout**

* Perceived lack of control over job responsibilities
* Confusing, unclear, or fluctuating expectations from administration
* Supervisor(s) perceived as incompetent or uncaring
* Supervision focused only on micromanaging procedures, policies, and tasks
* Minimal training opportunities
* Limited experience to complete assigned tasks
* Peer debriefing discouraged or unavailable
* Repetitive nature of work with little variability
* Chaotic, inefficient operation of organization
* Few opportunities for advancement or new responsibilities
* Conflict between personal and organizational values and priorities
* Toxic organizational culture with interpersonal conflicts
* Abuse of power by those in control
* Time pressures and excessive workhours
* Norms that allow for backstabbing or undermining others
* Competitive atmosphere that leads to power inequities
* Perceived low compensation and minimal benefits
* Presence of a bully or abusive, insensitive staff member
* Incidences of racism, discrimination, microaggressions, or marginalization
* Unfair and inequitable rewards for productivity
* Lack of resources and appropriate funding
* High staff turnover
* Unreasonable workload and caseload
* Excessive paperwork, monitoring, and documentation
* Disinterest by administration to address staff morale
* Severely distressed, traumatized, chronic clients
* Personal disruptions (loss, health issues, transitions, finances)

**Distinctions Between Distress and Eustress (Positive Stress)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Distress** | **Eustress** |
| Experienced as frightening and disturbing | Experienced as exciting and stimulating |
| Perceived as obstacle, annoyance, inconvenience | Perceived as a challenge and opportunity |
| Pessimistic and discouraged mindset | Optimistic and hopeful mindset |
| Feelings of helplessness and passivity | Feelings of control and engagement |
| Limits effectiveness | Improves performance and productivity |
| Leads to anxiety, depression, and burnout | Leads to growth, learning, and resilience |
| Decreases life and work satisfaction | Increases sense of well-being and satisfaction |

**Why Self-Care Fails**

* Don’t “own” what they report is known and supposedly understood
* Enjoy benefits and pay-offs of complacency, distraction, and inaction
* Enjoy secondary gains (victim mentality, attention, distraction
* Externalized blame or disowned responsibility for difficulties
* Behaviors not habituated or reinforced
* Shoulds/oughts rather than internalized commitment
* Negative self-talk and sabotaging beliefs
* Unrealistic expectations and unattainable goals
* Discouraged by setbacks and relapses
* Strategies not culturally appropriate, contextualized, or individualized
* Take themselves, others, and the world, *way* too seriously
* Flooded and overwhelmed; failure to practice in real-life conditions
* Lifestyle and pace of life out of control
* Underlying organic problems
* Lack of support or external sabotage
* Failure to generalize or transfer learning

**Self-Care Requires Honest and Thorough Acknowledgement of Difficulties**

Just as we are sometimes not very accurate in our assessment of how well things are working in our helping relationships, we are inclined to shrug off annoying and unpleasant symptoms. We engage in wishful thinking that things will improve of their own accord if just given enough time.

**Expect Instant Relief**

Get a massage. Drink a green smoothie. Go for a walk. Schedule a manicure. There has been an overemphasis on specific techniques and strategies, not to mention self-care products, that are alleged to make all the difference. And of course they don’t—for very long—especially when we return to the same conditions and forces that continue outside of our control.

**Emphasize Simplistic Techniques**

As in every other aspect of life, it’s rare that any quick-fix, tool, or technique will make much of a significant difference, at least one that has enduring impact. The evidence is also pretty compelling that broad, personally designed and contextualized strategies are far more likely to work.

**Self-Care Implies Something is Broken**

Let’s face it: something probably *is* broken in the sense that the current situation isn’t working. But we are supposed to be experts, high functioning muses, who represent the ideal of personal effectiveness. Understandably we may be reluctant to admit to others, much less ourselves, that things feel out of control.

**Time Crunch**

If there’s not enough time in the day to take care of business without feeling overwhelmed, adding self-care tasks can feel like just another responsibility.

**Changes Don’t Last**

If the average number of times that someone makes the same exact New Year’s resolution is 10, it is pretty evident that all of us have trouble sticking with our promises. Habits require an average of 65 repetitions to stick.

**Deeper Issues**

There are often underlying issues at work that lead to, or exacerbate, stress reactions. Self-care strategies may get at the most obvious, annoying symptoms but do not address the chronic, entrenched patterns that are operating to make things so much more difficult. These could be unacknowledged problems from the past (trauma, abuse, neglect), chronic health difficulties, family problems, interpersonal conflicts, personality features, addictions or substance abuse, or more nebulous existential questions in which there is loss of personal meaning in work and life.

**Limits of Self-Help**

There’s only so much we can do for ourselves without assistance, support, and guidance from others, especially professionals. We might not have any compunction of taking our car for service, calling a plumber when the toilet needs repair, but there is reluctance and resistance at times to get the help we need when we can’t do it ourselves.

**Systemic and Contextual Issues**

More than anything else, it is the work environment that is both the source and anecdote to stress reactions. Conflicts, backbiting, lack of resources and support, feeling undervalued, all make things so much worse.

**Reminders of the “Gifts” of Helping Others**

Greater sense of well-being and happiness

Greater appreciation for life situation

Broadened worldview of self and others

Improved feelings of affiliation and belongingness

Sense of meaning to life’s mission

Increased lifespan and immunity to disease

Reduced chronic pain

Helper’s high: elevated oxytocin and vasopressin

Status, trust, respect, privilege

Spiritual transcendence

Renewed faith

Redemption and use of own pain or loss

Leaving a legacy

Opportunity to reinvent self

Acts of love, caring and compassion

**Self-Care Strategies**

**Reframing stress.** Positive benefits for enhancing performance.

**Facing the source.** What is the stress saying to you? Secondary gains.

**Identify the problems.** Locate triggers and context.

**Fears of failure.** Value of feedback. Learning from mistakes.

**Deep breathing.** Meditation. Chanting. Focusing. Yoga.

**Relaxation training.** Muscle relaxation.

**Use visual imagery.** Rehearsal.

**Being assertive.** Stand up for yourself *appropriately*, set and enforce limits.

**Support from friends.** Reaching out. Taking constructive risks.

**Self-talk.** What are you saying to yourself? What can you say instead?

**Stress journal**. What happened? When? Where? With whom?

**Manage time.** Procrastination. Prioritize. Disconnect from technology.

**Constructive escape.**  Movies. Books. Solitude. All in moderation.

**Physical changes.** Diet. Sleep. Exercise.

**Slowing down**. Flow states.

**Making a commitment.** What will you do differently? When? Where? How often?

**Get help.** Counseling. Consultation. Education.

**Make changes last.** Plan for relapses.

**Now What?**

1. Remember that the knowledge, inspiration, support will soon fade away.
2. The same dysfunctional, toxic influences and forces in your life are still there.
3. Stop complaining and DO something differently. Accept what you can’t change and do what you can.
4. Insulate yourself from discouraging, negative influences
5. Identify just a few things you KNOW you can stick with, no matter what.
6. Make public commitments so you are held accountable. Recruit support.
7. Remember that consistent repetition (60 +) is required to make changes stick.
8. A month from now all of your new promises, commitments, and declarations will likely be just a dream.
9. Plan for relapses and rehearse how you will recover and continue efforts.
10. If all else fails it’s time to consider other options for yourself and your future. You aren’t stuck; it just feels that way.