The Personal and Collective Need for Self-Care

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As a discipline, psychological concepts and interventions have rightly been positioned in the amelioration of adverse impacts and reactions to complex traumatic events. However, on the most fundamental level, psychologists are both impacted by and impact the world in which we live and work. The grief and stress in California due to local disasters and immigration practices, unrest in our nation and abroad is showing up either directly or indirectly in the populations we serve and our own professional and personal lives. It can be posited that out of chaos can come clarity and opportunities for fostering and sustaining resilience, cultivating post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). We propose that collective and individual self-care is the pathway through this challenging time.

Research has indicated that burnout, compassion fatigue and unrecognized secondary traumatization can decrease effectiveness and yield poor ethical judgment (Figley, 2002; Rothschild & Rand, 2006). The APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2017, Principal A) requires that we remain aware of the effect of our physical and mental health on our clinical work. Attention to self-care is increasingly accepted as part of being an ethical psychologist.

We suggest that collective self-care take its place alongside individual self-care. Collective self-care involves nurturing our community and ourselves-in-community through understanding, support and sometimes, respectful challenge. Understanding that we may look, act or think very differently from each other. Supporting inclusion, making space for those who feel marginalized to have a voice, applies to both our clients and students, and our collective community of peer professionals. Ferdman (2017) states that inclusion can be a process and practice that involves working with diversity as a resource.

Yet, embracing the challenge of inclusion, questioning our beliefs, actions, expanding our individual lens and honoring legitimate differences that make up community can be difficult, frightening if not based in genuinely developed trust, safety, mutual learning, and consciousness. Microcosms of the collective, including treatment teams, consultation groups, or conference committees can yield growth, resilience, a sense of belonging, and restorative experiences for each involved member. They can also offer added stress, unsafe spaces, unconscious transference-based enactments and reinforced biases. The collective affects the individual, even as the individual affects the collective.

Expanding self-care to include community requires conscious intention, effective communication, respectful relational engagement, and ever-evolving awareness of self-within-the-collective and the collective-beyond-self. Whether considering personal, clinical, environmental, or political traumas, we each have our own emotional responses, transference activations, and meaning-making of these experiences (Crim, 2017). Nurturing community to allow it to become a genuine source of safety and care for self and other may require individual psychotherapy, consultation, and intentional, vulnerable participation in small groups and larger conference spaces.

Venturing into self-care via community requires courage and practice (Berlin & Caulstrom, 2014). Yet the self-care benefits and resources available through increased collective community consciousness can be profound, numerous. Individual loads can lighten; resources can multiply; opportunities for support and belonging, feeling seen, understood, and safely challenged can markedly reduce stress for individuals and communities (Crim, 2013). As new relational dances are discovered, primal and communal injuries, including marginalization or privilege, can heal. In these times of environmental, political, and personal challenge, we encourage psychologists to seek spaces for practicing conscious self-care individually and collectively.

Complete references for this article can be found at www.cpapsych.org – select The California Psychologist from the Professional Resources menu.