

Nurturing the Self as We Nurture Others

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For psychologists, a driving professional goal is to benefit others, to promote the well-being of those in psychological need, to help those whose distress prevents them from living fully. Throughout our professional lives, we learn and practice techniques, theories, and interventions designed to mitigate others' emotional pain and enhance their functioning. Yet psychologists are not, by virtue of our training and expertise, immune from the very problems we treat in others. Like our clients, we experience daily stressors, developmental transitions, and even life crises that can affect—for good or for bad—our work as therapists. And because of the very nature of psychotherapy, which is increasingly recognized as a relationship of mutual influence rather than one of inured healer and impressionable client, the work itself may contribute to compassion fatigue, vicarious traumatization, problematic anxiety, and even depression.¹

Sustaining our own well-functioning is every bit as critical as helping others with their functioning. While each person's "wellness" is somewhat individually defined (i.e., you may not function well without a 20-mile bike ride each day, while your colleague relies more on spiritual connections and peer support), research points to several important factors that contribute to personal and professional well-being for psychologists. When considered together, they can become a sort of self-care checklist that can highlight both patterns of positive behavior and areas for improvement.

Relationships. It is not surprising that relationships are a pivotal wellness feature for professionals whose lifework is centered in interpersonal connections. Still, we may need occasionally to remind ourselves to put as much energy and intentionality into our extra-therapy relationships as we do into our therapeutic relationships. Secure and stable connections with partner, family, and/or friends sustain us through the ups and downs of work and nonwork aspects of life. As a recent article on self-care suggests, "something may be askew if you are habitually giving out more nurturance than you are receiving."² Our relationships with clients are intended to meet their needs, not ours; consequently, it is essential that we foster personal relationships that feed our souls, energize our hearts, and calm our minds. Among these might be relationships with other psychologists or mental health care providers, whose shared experiences and professional wisdom can be invaluable. Indeed, one study found peer support to be of highest priority for well-functioning psychologists.³

Balance and Boundaries. Psychotherapy and its related duties—including paperwork, phone calls with managed care, reimbursement efforts, etc.—can exact a toll of stress, burnout, disillusionment, and emotional exhaustion. Well-functioning psychologists are able to maintain a balanced life in which physical and recreational activities, spiritual pursuits, vacations, rest, and relaxation offset the potential stressors associated with work. To do this, psychologists must not only cultivate those nonwork activities, but must set boundaries to prevent work from spilling over into private life. It may be helpful, for example, to establish clear policies with clients about telephone contacts, late appointments, emergency needs, and the limitations of your practice.

Continuing Education/Peer Consultation. Among the greatest rewards of this profession are the opportunities to continue to be challenged by and grow from our experiences as psychologists. Still, given the isolation and routine inherent in the work of many psychologists, it is not hard to see how some professionals feel themselves stagnating and growing bored. Peer consultation groups and continuing education are two ways to avoid boredom, to spark interest, and to revitalize our thinking. In addition, these activities offer additional opportunities to forge connections with professional colleagues.

Personal Psychotherapy. Though most psychologists have no difficulty seeing the value of psychotherapy for our clients, many fail to appreciate its value for our own lives. Despite Freud's proposal that all therapists should pursue and then periodically reenter therapy to promote personal growth and education, and despite the APA's appeal for psychologists to "be aware of the possible effect of their own physical and mental health on their ability to help those with whom they work,"⁴ too few of us avail ourselves of our most recognizable forum for enhancing self-awareness. Psychotherapy can prevent us from becoming so attuned to the needs of others that we neglect our own. Within it, we can acknowledge our needs, values, wants, and fears—and catch early warning signs of distress.

Maintaining emotional fitness is vital to our work. Through deliberate and consistent self-care, we can minimize the risks of professional burnout and dissatisfaction, as well as the risks of harm to our clients. When there is a synergistic balance between the personal and the professional, not only is maintaining emotional fitness vital to our work, but our work can be vital to maintaining our emotional fitness.

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¹ Gilroy, P.J., Carroll, L., & Murra, J. (2002). Preliminary survey of counseling psychologists' personal experiences with depression and treatment. *Professional Psychology: Research & Practice, 33*, 402-407.

- ² Norcross, J.C., & James, D.G. (2005). Therapist self-care checklist. In G.P. Koocher, J.C. Norcross, & S.S. Hill III (Eds.) *Psychologists' desk reference* (pp. 677-682). New York: Oxford.
- ³ Coster, J.S., & Schwebel, M. (1997). Well-functioning in professional psychologists. *Professional Psychology: Research & Practice*, 28, 5-13.
- ⁴ American Psychological Association. (2002). Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. *American Psychologist*, 57, 1060-1073.