

Rethinking Self-Care: Everyday Micro Practices

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As I sat with a group of colleagues, having just finished our monthly consultation group, I blurted out the question, “How do you feel about self-care?” At the time, I was researching and writing a book about self-care for therapists, so this question was very much on my mind.

I fielded a range of responses from, “I know it’s important but I don’t have the time,” to “I’m in this field to take care of others not myself!” Over the next few months, as I polled my colleagues, I heard these themes of conflict and time constraints repeated many times.

However, it’s important to recognize that as therapists, we are subject to a host of occupational hazards. Burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue threaten to swallow us up on a daily basis. In reality, taking care of ourselves *is* taking care of our clients (and our family and friends.) Each one of us is the instrument of healing, as it’s our presence and our personal resonance that create the relational environment for healing. If we don’t take care of ourselves in mind, body, and spirit, we can’t take care of our clients.

I began to realize and assert with increasing vigor that it’s time to rethink our approach to self-care! Not only do we have to address the practical roadblocks to self-care but also the ethical quandry that allows self-sacrifice to undermine good therapy.

So given that self-care is not only vital but an ethical imperative, how do we realistically fit it into our busy, overworked schedules? It’s not like we can drop everything and book a monthly vacation or even a weekly massage. How can we

practically engage in self-care and give it the priority it deserves in our lives and in our careers – not just occasionally but daily?

One answer is to microtize self-care. What does that mean? It means to engage in small nurturing habits in our daily lives that have a big impact on our wellbeing. Advances in neuroplasticity underscore this successful strategy: small repetitive practices matter, both in creating new neural networks in our brains and in creating sustainable self-care.

Practically, it can be as simple as looking into your arsenal of self-care strategies, 'shrinking them down' to their most powerful essences, and then sprinkling them throughout the workday. For example, you might not be able to get to a yoga class today, but you can benefit from the stretch and relaxation of one power-pose between clients. You might not be able to schedule a full body massage today, but you can realize the benefits of myofascial release by massaging your feet with a tennis ball before you go home.

The idea is to create a personal toolbox of micro-habits – self-care activities that you can do in a few minutes or less which can then be threaded through the day. With this new approach, you can take care of yourself before clients, between clients, and after clients.

Here are 5 sample practices to weave through your workday:

1. Circle of Care

When: First thing after you've settled into your office and before you begin your workday activities.

What: Take a circular object and hold it in your hand. I have a small rose quartz circle that I keep in my desk drawer. Hold the object in your hand and say, "I'm part of a vast

circle of helpers around the globe.” As you say this, close your eyes and imagine helpers and healers of all persuasions in your town, state, country, and in countries around the world. Know that you’re a part of this web of helpers.

Why: Whether we work in private practice, in a clinic, or some other setting, at some point we close our doors and are alone with our clients. This can feel isolating, as if we’re alone in our endeavors. If there’s one thing all schools of psychology agree about, it’s that relationships are crucial to our well-being. This brief technique reminds us that we’re part of a tribe.

2. Hark How the Bells

When: At the start of a session.

What: Ring a Tibetan singing bowl (or other chime) three times with your client. Listen to the sound as it dissipates into the air around you and then begin the session.

Why: This mindfulness-based ritual helps you and your client transition to your time together. Daniel Siegel, in his book *The Mindful Therapist*, reminds us that mindful awareness not only offers us resilience in the face of uncertainty and challenge, but is a crucial determinant in our ability to help others.

3. Imagine That

When: After Lunch, during a midday break

What: Close your eyes and imagine yourself in a favorite place, happy and peaceful. It could be a real place that you remember or a fantasy place of calm and bliss. Summon as many aspects of the place as possible, including sounds, smells, temperature, tastes, and visual details. Let these sensory cues come alive in your imagination and then bask in the glow of warm, happy sensations. Enjoy this image for a minute or two.

Why: When you summon a happy place in your mind, your brain and body begin to respond as if you’re actually there. You feel instantly at peace. In EMDR -- Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing, safe-place imagery is taught to clients as a way to deescalate when they notice being triggered by their emotions.

4. Progressive Dinner

When: After a session

What: Progressively tense four major muscle groups for 5 seconds and then relax for 10 seconds. As you relax, say a cue word or phrase such as *relax* or *I release* or *it's okay*, and notice feelings of relaxation enter your muscles. Repeat the cycle of tense and release twice before you move on to the next muscle group. Start with your lower limbs and feet, move to your chest and abdomen, then to your shoulders and arms, and end with your neck and face.

Why: Progressive muscle relaxation has been shown to stimulate the body's relaxation response. It's become a standard intervention for stress and pain relief in many clinical settings. For the therapist, its benefits are threefold: it relaxes the body, focuses the mind, and renews awareness of feelings and inner sensations.

5. Wring It Out

When: At the end of the workday, before you go home.

What: Sit upright in a chair. Slowly and gently twist your body to the right from your hips to your head. Turn around as far to the right as you can. (You might wish to grab the chair handle to help you turn further.) Hold for 10 seconds or longer, allowing your muscles to relax and stretch. Add an extra stretch with a deep inhale, letting your chest expand. Then exhale as you come back to the front. Then repeat this process to the left. As you wring yourself and exhale, imagine that you're a sponge that's absorbed your clients' energies. You want to squeeze out this sponge, freeing yourself from their concerns. Take a moment to notice how your body feels after you twist. Once you're done, shake your arms in front of you as you release the day's work.

Why: The essence of this micro self-care practice is in the stretch. As we sit in our therapy offices, conference rooms, lunch tables, and in our cars, the muscles of the back, chest, and shoulders tighten and clench to keep our posture. Gentle and slow twisting relaxes them, signaling to our bodies and minds that it's time to leave work at the office and lighten our load for our homecoming.

When you rethink self-care using this new template of micro practices (weaving small well being habits into your day), you'll find that you have the time, the ability, and the means to take care of yourself every day. As a result you'll feel better and find that you do better clinical work. Let self-care become a win-win experience in your life today.

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