

An Action Plan for Self-Care

Consider how guidance for patients may apply to you



As professionals working with people in distress, practicing psychologists themselves tend to face undue stress. Some practitioners functioning in the role of helper are far more concerned with their clients' well-being than with their own.

Yet a proactive approach to self-care is crucial for effectively managing occupational and personal stressors and for maintaining optimal wellness. Good self-care is sound prevention – guarding you against severe or chronic distress or even professional impairment.

The global economic downturn may intensify the challenges facing practitioners. For example, stress levels may spike for psychologists experiencing financial concerns or hardship while they work with clients in similar or worse situations. In a December 2008 survey of American Psychological

Association (APA) members, up to one-third reported that the economy had a negative impact on the number of clients seen, income and employment security.

In good economic times and bad, practicing psychologists have an abiding ethical imperative to engage in self-care. The APA *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (2002, Principal A) states that: “Psychologists strive to be aware of the possible effect of their own physical and mental health on their ability to help those with whom they work.”

The same self-care guidance that psychologists offer to clients is useful for the caregivers themselves. Consider the following self-care pointers:

- ▶ Make personal and professional self-care a priority.
- ▶ Honestly assess your psychological and physical health. Focus on prevention rather than simply on remedying problems such as inactivity, over commitment or poor nutrition.
- ▶ Find time for activities that are personally restorative such as brisk walking or other forms of exercise, yoga, pleasure reading, journaling, meditation and massage.



EIGHT BENEFITS OF SELF-CARE

- ▶ Reduces occupational hazards such as burnout and compassion fatigue
- ▶ Helps build resilience
- ▶ Models healthy behavior for clients
- ▶ Promotes quality of caring
- ▶ Increases the capacity for empathy
- ▶ Fortifies relationships with clients and others
- ▶ Enhances self-esteem and confidence
- ▶ Contributes to realistic goal setting

- ▶ Avoid isolation. Identify sources of social support and use them. In addition to close family members and friends, sources of social support might include local civic groups or spiritual organizations, for example.
- ▶ Establish and maintain professional connections that offer an opportunity to discuss the specific nature and stressors of your work. Consider when it may be helpful or necessary to tap into peer support groups or consultation, make connections with colleagues through professional associations or engage in personal psychotherapy. Pay attention to possible warning signs such as feelings of helplessness, emotional swings, tendency to ruminate, loss of empathy or disconnecting from family and friends.
- ▶ Take occupational risks seriously, and be aware of the particular risks facing practicing psychologists. If necessary, educate yourself more fully about topics such as professional burnout, vicarious traumatization, compassion fatigue and colleague assistance. Incorporate this learning into your professional training and continuing education.
- ▶ Develop realistic and reasonable expectations about work and your capabilities at any given time. Make appropriate accommodations or adjustments – such as limiting your caseload or consulting with peers – in light of professional stressors and risks that you are experiencing.
- ▶ Pay attention to the need for balance in work, rest and play. If your schedule is packed, be prepared to say “no” to additional demands on your time. Take vacations or other appropriate breaks from work. Monitor carefully the substances and/or processes you use for relaxation or entertainment.
- ▶ Pursue opportunities for intellectual stimulation, including some outside the profession. Nurture interests apart from psychology.
- ▶ Take steps to enhance your career satisfaction. Many psychologists find it satisfying to diversify their professional activities, perhaps incorporating a niche practice area when the market opportunity arises. Some find it stimulating to combine clinical and non-clinical work.

PROBLEMS MOST LIKELY TO AFFECT PSYCHOLOGIST FUNCTIONING

Problem	Percentage*
Traumatic events (such as being affected by war or natural disaster)	100
Licensing board complaints	86
Stress/burnout	54
Vicarious trauma/compassion fatigue	48
Anxiety	25

MOST FREQUENT RESPONSES TO PROBLEMS


Response	Percentage**
Talk to a colleague	34
Exercise	27
Seek family or social support	24
Consultation/supervision	23
Psychotherapy/counseling	18
Reduce clinical load	16
Participate in hobbies	16

Source: APA Board of Professional Affairs Advisory Committee on Colleague Assistance (ACCA), 2007 pilot survey of licensed APA members

* Percentage of respondents (n = 169) reporting that this problem was likely to affect functioning.

** Percentage of respondents utilizing this response.

- ▶ Adopt a long-range perspective, recognizing that you likely will have different needs at various stages of your career. Beginning to engage in self-care practices as an early career professional can help them become a habit.

Self-care activities should be tailored to your individual circumstances and needs. The pointers above are intended as healthy food for thought to help you develop a personal action plan that works for you. 

This material was developed in collaboration with the APA Board of Professional Affairs' Advisory Committee on Colleague Assistance (ACCA).