What Do I Do, When, and How?

The Multiple and Varied Tasks of Directing an Internship Program

Resources and Strategies for New Training Directors

36th ACCTA Conference, September 19 – September 24, 2013

New Orleans, Louisiana

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**Therapist Self-Care**

**Avoiding Burnout**

**Burnout Creation vs. Burnout Prevention**

work overload vs. sustainable workload

lack of control vs. feelings of choice and control

insufficient reward vs. recognition and reward

breakdown of community vs. a sense of community

unfairness vs. fairness, respect, and justice

significant value conflicts vs. meaningful, valued work

**Sustaining the Professional Self**

Eighty percent of therapists surveyed in 2000 (Radeke, J.T. & Mahoney, M.J., in Professional Psychology: Research and Practice) agreed that one of the hazards of “high touch” work was emotional depletion. Practitioners may work 30-40 years. Thinking long-term and building professional and personal self-care into this endeavor can change one’s perspective and approach. The common factor in high touch fields is the caring cycle of empathic attachment → active involvement → felt separation.

* Many practitioners are social people by nature and seek others out. **Finding support from other professionals** (e.g., professional support or consultation group) can be highly valuable. Venting can be cathartic. Being able to openly share with other professionals can greatly reduce the stress and dissatisfaction experienced by some therapists. Professional association involvement is a way of connecting with the larger community of psychologists.
* It is important to also **receive care from mentors, supervisors or bosses**. Likewise, the act of mentoring, supervising and managing can be very positive in one’s own self-care and professional development. There are many myths within the training and practice of psychotherapy that we’re supposed to be self-reliant to an extent that other people aren’t expected to be.
* It is important to learn to be both professional and playful at work – **have fun, tell jokes and laugh**. Maintaining a sense of humor was the number one career sustaining behavior in a study of psychotherapists, endorsed by 82% of the sample. You do not have to be “productive” at all times.
* Practitioners are often afraid of underperformance and want to perform at the 100% level, 100% of the time. It would be helpful to develop an acceptance of being the **“good enough practitioner”.** One can’t sustain this level of performance all the time because it is too exhausting. Care does not have to be perfect; it just has to be good enough.
* **Learn to set boundaries, create limits and say no to unreasonable helping requests**. Veteran practitioners learn to pace themselves, always being ready at critical moments but pulling back some at non-critical moments. The process of setting limits involves learning to tolerate the risk of disappointing other people. The process of increasing our sense of meaning and purpose in life involves defining “success” and making hard choices in light of the very real limits of time and energy.
* **Set priorities**. There will always be too much to do. The world has become increasingly complex both personally and professionally, and most of us experience information overload. Accessibility by cell phone and e-mail has eroded the boundaries between work time and non-work time for many professionals (e.g., after hours, in the car, on vacation, etc.) and has created the expectation of instant responsiveness. The pace of contemporary life is rushed. Many people have contact with more people in one day than people in the 1800s had in a lifetime. Our brains aren’t wired to multitask the way computers are and many people report symptoms of over stimulation. The fast pace and information overload may contribute to emotional irritability, concentration difficulties, sleep disorders, indigestion, heart problems and immune dysfunction. It is up to us to make our own boundaries around our work and personal lives so that we don’t become overly fragmented.
* **Self-organization, structuring and planning**. For many, getting organized is self-comforting and self-calming and can promote more effective rational and emotional functioning. Tending to what is controllable and manageable in life allows us more energy and time to address what is less within our control.

**Sustaining the Personal Self**

Learning to pay attention to and be respectful of one’s needs and to meet them responsibly is a lifelong task for therapists. This is a serious obligation because the work, giving of the self, cannot be successful without it. Many therapists struggle with feelings of selfishness when they think of trying to meet their own needs. As therapists, we use our training to help clients become more self-aware and self-tending, but for many reasons, are reluctant to offer ourselves that same kind of understanding and care. In reality, self-care may ultimately be the most important thing we do for ourselves and our clients.

* Pay attention to **nutrition, exercise and sleep**. Just as these are important in combating depression, they may also be an antidote for the emotional toxins in the practitioner’s work life.
* Hobbies and recreation can be great for self-care because they have elements of both renewal and control. We control the involvement and outcome, the domain is manageable, and the task is fun, interesting and absorbing. The value of a hobby with concrete results, clear beginnings and finished products is important for the helping professional (Skovholt, 2001).
* **Relaxation/Stress Reduction** – reducing the stress response of overarousal can be of great value in both one’s personal and professional lives. Solitude can be an antidote to “people intensity” and we need to achieve the best balance between the time we spend alone and the time we spend with others. Self-time allows us to just be, rather than to do or to be in relations with others. Quiet, uninterrupted time is necessary to incubate, to think through matters of concern.
* **Connections/Relationships** – both personal and professional are immensely important. The quality, more than quantity, is key. We need to be aware of the professional hazards that may affect the relationship and discuss them openly with our partner/family/friends. After a day of listening on the job, a decrease in the desire to listen empathically reduces the ability of the therapist to connect with his/her partner in an intimate, genuine manner. We may also displace work-related tension onto our partner. We also run the risk of misdirecting or misusing our professional skills in the relationship with a significant other. Therapists have the language to pathologize their partners and analyze or interpret their feelings away, or conversely, become a compulsive caretaker. Friendships are priceless. They are a source of support and sharing and help keep us grounded in reality.

**The Poor Self-Care Deadly Dozen –** Skovholt (2001, p. 210)

1. Toxic supervisor and colleague support
2. Little fun (playfulness, humor, laughing) in life or work
3. Only a fuzzy and unarticulated understanding of one’s own needs
4. No professional development process that turns experience into more competence and less anxiety
5. No energy-giving personal life
6. An inability to say no to unreasonable requests
7. Vicarious traumatization that takes an accumulated toll
8. Personal relationships that are predominantly one-way caring relationships with self as giver
9. Constant perfectionism in work tasks
10. Continual unresolved ambiguous professional losses
11. A strong need to be needed
12. Professional success defined solely by client, student, or patient positive change or appreciation.

**Top 10 Helpful Activities –** Skovholt (2001, p. 211)

1. Taking vacation
2. Social activities
3. Emotional support from colleagues
4. Pleasure reading
5. Seeking consultation on difficult cases
6. Reading relevant professional literature
7. Taking breaks during workday
8. Emotional support from friends or family
9. Spending time with children
10. Listening to music

Overall, we recommend that therapists do for themselves the self-nurturing, self-building things they would have their clients do. Increasing our awareness of our needs and remaining connected with our bodies, our feelings, and other people will strengthen us as individuals and allow us to choose to continue to do this important work (Pearlman, 1995, p. 62).

When trying to set self-care goals it might be helpful to consider some of the following:

In what type of setting will you be most able to nurture yourself?

How can you put your own unique stamp on your work so that it truly reflects you?

What kind of atmosphere do you need so that it most feels like “home”?

In what areas of your life is the energy high? Low?

What are your strongest/weakest self-care areas?

Will you give yourself permission to balance other-care with self-care? Who/what drains your energy?

What is **one thing** you can commit to now to make a positive change for yourself?

How will you measure your success?

What are some subsequent steps you can take to continue on the path of self-care?

**Visualize your dream environment and make it a reality!**

Summarized from:

Skovholt, T.M. (2001). *The resilient practitioner: Burnout prevention and self-care strategies for*

*counselors, therapists, teachers, and health professionals.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Weiss, L. (2004). *Therapist’s guide to self-care.* New York: Brunner-Routledge.

Wise, E., Hersh, M., & Marks Gibson, C. (2011). Ethics and Self-Care: A developmental lifespan perspective. *The National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology. The Register Report.*  Fall, 2011. 20-29. [www.nationalregister.org/trr\_fall11\_wise.html](http://www.nationalregister.org/trr_fall11_wise.html).

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| **Self-Care Principles** | **Examples, strategies and applications** |
| ***1. Valuing the Person of the Psychotherapist*** | ***Apply the skills that we use for clients to ourselves.*** |
| ***2. Refocusing on the Rewards*** | ***Remember to focus on the benefits and privileges of our work; practice gratitude.*** |
| ***3. Recognizing the Hazards*** | ***Acknowledge and accept the occupational challenges that are endemic to our field.*** |
| ***4. Minding the Body*** | ***Remember to practice the essentials of healthy living; sleep, eat and exercise well.*** |
| ***5. Nurturing Relationships*** | ***Cultivate support among colleagues, family members, friends and mentors. Ask the question, “Who has my back?”.*** |
| ***6. Setting Boundaries*** | ***Establish and maintain boundaries between yourself and others; between your personal life and your professional life.*** |
| ***7. Restructuring Cognitions*** | ***Notice perfectionistic and self-critical thoughts; manage them with compassion.*** |
| ***8. Sustaining Healthy Escapes*** | ***Seek restorative activities that keep you vital and engaged.*** |
| ***9. Creating a Flourishing Environment*** | ***Intentionally create a positive environment for yourself in terms of setting, colleagues and comfort.*** |
| ***10. Undergoing Personal Therapy*** | ***Engage in personal psychotherapy on a periodic basis as a form of positive self-development. Consider alternative approaches such as taking a yoga or meditation class.*** |
| ***11. Cultivating Spirituality and Mission*** | ***Connect to sources of meaning and values in your life.*** |
| ***12. Fostering Creativity and Growth*** | ***Diversify your professional activities; seek growth, development, change and renewal in your work.*** |

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Wise (personal communication 8/20/12) asked that credit also be given to Norcross, J.C. & Barnett, J.E. (2008). Self-Care as Ethical Imperative. Continuing Education Programs. Washington, D.C.: National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology. Retrieved August 20, 2012 from the National Register web site: http://www.e-psychologist.org/index.iml?mdl=exam/show\_article.mdl&Material\_ID=80