

Practicing What You're Preaching: Self-Care for Counselors

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Abstract

Counseling is a profession where people help create a safe place for people to tell their stories so they can heal. Counselors are naturally caring individuals who are willing to go the extra mile for their clients. If you were to ask any counselor why they chose this profession, they would more than likely tell you it is because they wanted to make a difference in the world. Well, all too often counselors are busy helping and healing others at the expense of not taking care of themselves. You may be surprised to learn that there are many counselors suffering from emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue and burn out. This article examines counselors' self-care and provides ways for them to take better care of themselves.

Keywords: *Counselors Self-Care; Burn Out; Compassion Fatigue; Emotional Exhaustion*

People in today's society are busy trying to balance multiple responsibilities, including work, which affords them opportunities to be able to spend more quality time with their family, friends, and doing whatever else they love doing. People desire to excel in their professions and are spending more time at work. Even when they are not at work physically, they are often thinking of job-related tasks they need to accomplish. They are also thinking of ways they can do their job in a more effective and efficient manner.

Counselors, by nature, have a strong desire to assist other people and are willing to go to great lengths to make this a reality. All too often, counselors have hefty caseloads whether they are in private practice or working for a public agency. More people are under stress in today's society and do not mind seeking professional help to cope with life's challenges. This is very good for mental health professionals; however, for counselors to keep up with the pace of working in the mental health profession, it is imperative that they practice what they preaching to their clients. Counselors teach their clients first and foremost that they must take good care of themselves. Counselors have the head knowledge when it comes to self-care but, being able to put that knowledge into practice is an entirely different story.

Self-care is when a person has the ability to provide the appropriate physical and mental health for themselves. Counselor self-care is the ability for counselors to take good physical and emotional care of themselves enabling them to provide their clients the maximum support warranted at the time they are providing services for them. Counselors provide their clients with a private, sterile environment in which they can discuss personal problems and release emotions in total confidence. In short, the clients are able to get a lot off of their chest, which in turn allows them to feel emotionally better. Oftentimes, the counselor is absorbing the emotional energies from their clients. Counselors are not able to release this information, as they are ethically bound not to disclose what take place inside of therapy. Counseling is a one-way conversation where the client is doing the majority of the talking. The counselor is there basically to listen and provide emotional guidance. Counselors spend hours listening to the emotionally wounded dispose of their emotional energies. Self-care

becomes extremely important simply because if counselors are not able to take care of themselves, they would not be very beneficial for their clients. A similar concept is applied during the airline travel, in which flight attendants instruct adult passengers to put oxygen masks over their own mouths before helping children. The passengers are to put the mask over their mouths first before proceeding to take care of the child sitting next to them. This concept is not only applicable in the air but also on the ground. People who are in the helping profession have to be extremely cautious that they do not spend all their time taking care of others that they neglect their own self-care, which can result in burn-out.

What is burn-out? Burn-out occurs when there is an imbalance of psychological resources but there is a higher demand of those resources from the individual. In short, when a person is giving out more than they are taking in, they will suffer from burn-out. Counselors suffering from burn-out is very common. Counselors deal with a lot of challenging clients who can require substantial amounts of empathy, attentive listening and patience. Needless to say, all of this leads to a counselor's crashing and burning because they do not have an active self-care maintenance plan in place.

Warning Signs of Counselor's Burn-Out:

- You begin to drag more at work than you previously have
- You start to repeat information to clients more than you normally would
- During your counseling sessions, you fantasize about being somewhere else, i.e. on the beach
- Start your sessions late and end them early
- Noticeable decline in your ability to empathize with your clients during the therapy session
- Becoming agitated with your clients for no apparent reason
- You resent having to go to work
- You lack the desire to volunteer for any additional tasks
- You are overly excited when your clients do not show up for their appointments
- Deeply saddened when your clients do make their appointments
- Oversleeping and eating
- You isolate yourself from family, friends, and colleagues
- You have a constant feeling of being overwhelmed, emotionally exhausted and drained
- Your work no longer brings you the joy it did in the past
- You are rude, short-tempered, and resentful to your clients, as well as other individuals in your social spaces.

Burn-out will vary depending on the individual. There are people who can see themselves headed down the path of becoming burned out and they immediately take the necessary precautions. These individuals are aware of the warning signs of therapist burn-out, so they avoid allowing themselves to have a full-blown meltdown. On the other hand, there are those individuals who are unaware of what to look for and they feel like they can take on the world without being personally impacted. Either way, counselors do suffer from burn-out. If they cannot adequately help themselves, then they definitely will not be in a position to support their clients, and could even unintentionally cause their client harm.

It is important that counselors have an active self-care maintenance plan. Here are few suggestions for self-care:

- Take time to relax
- Schedule at least three fun things to do each week

- Maintain a healthy eating life style
- Exercise at least three-times a week
- Participate in meditation or yoga
- Ensure that what you are doing for your community service is separate from what you do at work
- Avoid taking work home
- Join groups that bring you joy, i.e. swimming, running, painting, singing or speaking
- Spend quality time with family and friends
- Get involved with spiritual activities
- Do pleasure reading
- Learn to set healthy limits on your life
- Learn to say "No" politely
- Eliminate negative things and people out of your life
- Surround yourself with positive people. People who will lift you up and not bring you down
- Create some quiet time during your day
- Have a "Me Day" at least once a week
- Go see a good movie that will make you laugh out loud
- Have breakfast, lunch, or dinner with people you care about the most
- Write yourself a love letter
- Send yourself some flowers
- Keep thank you notes to remind yourself what an amazing person you are
- Call your best friend and vow not to talk about work
- Take at least one mental health day every two weeks
- Go on vacation
- Unplug
- Learn to smile more and say thank you
- Maintain work life harmony
- Maintain a sense of humor
- Seek therapy for yourself
- If all else fails, know that it is okay to quit your current job and find something that will bring you passion.

Being a therapist can be an extremely rewarding experience. You are in the position to touch others' lives and make an impact on the world. Just as counseling can be super gratifying, it can also be emotionally draining. Since you are working with the walking wounded, assisting people with deep gushing wounds that they may have been wrestling with for a while only exacerbates the risk of falling into the trap of becoming burned out. Counselors are more valuable than they think. Also, counselors view themselves as people who can apply

therapy within their own lives so they try and conduct counseling on themselves. Counselors would love to be a role model for the information they provide to their clients. Make no mistake, no one is immune from having a meltdown or a full-blown break down. Keeping this in mind, it is imperative therapists are aware of warning signs of burn out and maintain an active self-care plan. A therapist is not any good to their clients or themselves if they are burned out.

Suggested Reading List

- Ten Commandments to Work-Life Harmony by Linda J. M. Holloway
- I Ain't Much Baby, But I'm All I've Got by Jess Lair
- Circle of Stones: Woman's Journey to Herself by Judith Duerk
- Don't Sweat the Small Stuff...And It's All Small Stuff: Simple Ways to Keep the Little Things from Taking Over Your Life by Richard Carlson
- The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon by David Elkind
- The Woman Who Thought Too Much by Joann Limburg
- Get Out of Your Mind and into Your Life by Steven C. Hayes, and Spencer Smith
- The Steps of Essence: How to Live Well and Authentically by Hanns-Oskar Porr
- Mindfulness and The Art of Choice: Transform Your Life by Karen Sherman
- Just Enough: Tools for Creating Success in Your Work and life by Laura Nash and How Stevenson
- Peaks and Valleys: Making Good and Bad Times Work for You-At Work In Life by Spencer Johnson
- Who Moved my Cheese by Spencer Johnson
- The Road Less Traveled by M. Scott Peck
- The Power of Now by Echart Tolle
- Don't Bring It to Work: Breaking the Family Patterns that Limit Success by Sylvia Lafair
- Your Erroneous Zones by Wayne Dyer
- Embracing Your Potential by Terry Orlick
- Man's Search for Meaning by Victor Frankl
- Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of "A Course in Miracles" by Marianne Williamson
- The Dance of Intimacy by Harriet Lerner
- How to Win Friends and Influence People by Dale Carnegie
- Change Your Brain Change Your Life by Daniel Amen
- Loving What Is: Four Questions That Can Change Your Life by Byron Katie
- The Language of Letting Go by Melody Beattie
- 7 Things He'll never tell you.... But You Need to Know by Kevin Leman
- The Five Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts by Gary Chapman
- The Prophet by Kahlil Gibran
- Act Like a Success Think Like a Success by Steve Harvey

- Jump by Steve Harvey
- No Matter What! 9 Steps to Living the Life You Love by Lisa Nichols
- Abundance Now by Lisa Nichols.

Conflict of Interest

It does not constitute a conflict of interest for the authors.

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