Social Worker Self-Care as an Ethical Obligation: Surviving the Pandemic and Beyond

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About the Presenters

Graduated in 1990 with MSW from University of Hawaii at Manoa

Worked in:
- Outpatient Mental Health Agency
- Crisis Services for Children and Families
- Case Management Supervisor
- Private Practice
- University Of New England Field Faculty since 2003

Wanda Anderson, MSW, LCSW
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About the Presenters

Graduated in 2006 with MSW from Boston University School of Social Work

Worked in:
- Day Treatment Program for Teens
- Outpatient Mental Health Agency
- Hospital setting providing patient navigation for patients and families receiving cancer treatment
- Non-profit agency providing grief support to children, families, and communities
- University setting providing field support and instruction

Rebecca Diggins, MSW, LCSW
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Learning Objectives

- Define self-care, burnout, compassion fatigue and trauma stewardship and the role they play in social work practice
- Recognize self-care and trauma stewardship as an ethical responsibility and integral part of the profession
- Examine general self-care practices and strategies
- Learn how to assess and evaluate own self-care practices
- Learn how to develop personal and professional strategies to advance and prioritize self care
Agenda

Day One
Understanding Self-Care as an Ethical Obligation for Social Workers

- Define and explore burnout, compassion fatigue, self care, and trauma stewardship
- Explore how self-care is not only critical to our professional self but a requirement of our NASW Code of ethics.
- Discuss how to care for self while also caring for others during COVID and beyond

Day Two
Social Worker Self-Care: Practical Strategies and Ethical Obligation

- Review self-care as an ethical obligation for social workers.
- Review definitions and Trauma Stewardship
- Self-assess current well-being, identify areas of personal and professional stressors.
- Connect with others around self-care strategies.
- Explore concrete strategies for self-care. Learn how to create and evaluate individualized self-care plans for use now and in the future.

Housekeeping

- Ask questions at anytime
- Respect others opinions
- Stand or walk around
- Every question is important
- May use chat box for questions
- Will use small groups, whiteboard, polling
- Use Speaker View
Points to Ponder
Let's take a minute

- What brought you to do this work?
- What keeps you doing this work?
- Why do you keep showing up?
- What keeps your light lit?
- How do you feel each morning as you prepare for your day/work?
- Close your eyes and envision Monday morning, does this bring anxiety or calm?

Burnout Syndrome (BOS)

First described in the 1970s, BOS is a work-related constellation of symptoms that usually occurs in individuals without any prior history of psychological or psychiatric disorders. BOS is triggered by a discrepancy between the expectations and ideals of the employee and the actual requirements of their position. In the initial stages of BOS, individuals feel emotional stress and increasing job-related disillusionment.

American Thoracic Society, 2016
Burnout Cont’d

Health professionals caring for seriously ill/dying patients and their families are frequently exposed to distressing emotional situations and profound suffering. Lack of attention to health providers’ stress responses to this suffering can lead to burnout, which has consequences for the provider and his/her interpersonal relationships.

Burnout is characterised by 3 dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism / depersonalisation, and inefficiency.

- Exhaustion reflects the stress dimension of burnout.
- Depersonalisation is an attempt to distance oneself from the client by developing an indifference or cynical attitude when feeling exhausted and discouraged.
- Decreased effectiveness and work performance result from negative attitudes and behaviours.
- These factors combined interfere with one’s effectiveness or efficiency at work

Goldberg, 2017

Compassion Fatigue

Definitions

- The physical and mental exhaustion and emotional withdrawal experienced by those who care for sick or traumatized people over an extended period of time. Unlike burnout, which is caused by everyday work stresses (dealing with insurance companies, making treatment choices), compassion fatigue results from taking on the emotional burden of a patient’s agony.

- Apathy or indifference toward the suffering of others as the result of overexposure to tragic news stories and images and the subsequent appeals for assistance.

- Compassion fatigue is also synonymous with secondary traumatic stress disorder.

Merriam-Webster, 2021
Compassion Fatigue Cont’d

Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue: biological, psychological and/or social.

- Biological/Physical - Sympathetic and parasympathetic arousal (prolonged stress leads to immuno-suppression, and frequent illness).
- Psychological - Excessive self-concern, aloneness, powerlessness, despair, and stagnation.
- Social - Rejection, separation, lost control, giving up, destruction, emptiness, and disintegration.

(Friedman, 2002; Figley, 1995)

Self-Care

General: Self-Care describes the activities undertaken by individuals and the wider community in order to improve health, prevent disease and manage illness. It encompasses a broad spectrum of activities and decisions that people make for themselves to maintain a good level of physical and mental health.

Social Work: Self-care refers to activities and practices that we can engage in on a regular basis to reduce stress and maintain and enhance our short- and longer-term health and well-being. Self-care is necessary for your effectiveness and success in honoring your professional and personal commitments. [School of Social Work, University at Buffalo]

Definitions

- The practice of taking action to preserve or improve one's own health.
- The practice of taking an active role in protecting one's own well-being and happiness, in particular during periods of stress.
Self-Care - Your Ideas

- What does self-care mean to you?
- What isn't self-care?
- What does self-care mean in your organization?
- Is just a buzz word?

Ethical Considerations of Self-Care

Prior to the 2021 revisions, the NASW Code of Ethics made no explicit references to self-care.

To address the lack of guidance on proactive self-care in the Code of Ethics, new language was added to the purpose and principles sections of the Code effective June 2021. No new standards were added, and no new revisions were made to existing standards.

The first change in the purpose section is indicated by the bolded language below:

5. The Code socializes practitioners new to the field to social work’s mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards, and encourages all social workers to engage in self-care, ongoing education, and other activities to ensure their commitment to those same core features of the profession.
The following paragraph is a completely new addition to the purpose section of the Code:

*Professional self-care is paramount for competent and ethical social work practice. Professional demands, challenging workplace climates, and exposure to trauma warrant that social workers maintain personal and professional health, safety, and integrity. Social work organizations, agencies, and educational institutions are encouraged to promote organizational policies, practices, and materials to support social workers’ self-care.*


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**4. Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities as Professionals**

**4.01 Competence**

(b) Social workers should strive to become and remain proficient in professional practice and the performance of professional functions. Social workers should critically examine and keep current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work. Social workers should routinely review the professional literature and participate in continuing education relevant to social work practice and social work ethics.

**4.03 Private Conduct**

Social workers should not permit their private conduct to interfere with their ability to fulfill their professional responsibilities.
Ethical Considerations of Self-Care Cont’d

4.05 Impairment

(a) Social workers should not allow their own personal problems, psychosocial distress, legal problems, substance abuse, or mental health difficulties to interfere with their professional judgment and performance or to jeopardize the best interests of people for whom they have a professional responsibility.

(b) Social workers whose personal problems, psychosocial distress, legal problems, substance abuse, or mental health difficulties interfere with their professional judgment and performance should immediately seek consultation and take appropriate remedial action by seeking professional help, making adjustments in workload, terminating practice, or taking any other steps necessary to protect clients and others.

NASW Code of Ethics, https://www.socialworkers.org/

Break Out Groups

- Name the top reasons you show up each day to your job
- Name the top reasons you feel stressed in your work role
- How has COVID changed your work role?
Break Out Group Debrief

Report back to larger group

Share themes that emerged in discussions

From Compassion Fatigue/Burnout to Trauma Stewardship

Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others
by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky & Connie Burk

After bearing witness to others’ suffering, you can become fundamentally changed. It can become part of you - can change the way you view life and react to situations.
Keeping Your Light Lit

In order to do the work you do and share your light, you need a spark, a passion to do the work. We therefore need fuel to keep our light lit. We need to stay in touch with “the heart that was breaking;” to learn to care for our breaking heart; to help it heal. Otherwise, our light will burn out or we will build up walls. (Lipsky & Burk, 2009)

Trauma Stewardship = GOAL

➔ Engage oppression and trauma by caring for, tending to, and responsibly guiding other beings who are struggling 

WHILE NOT

internalizing others’ struggles or assuming them as our own.
How to Achieve Trauma Stewardship

1. Acknowledge the effects of the trauma exposure
   - Personal – Know your history, your story, your triggers!
   - Organizational – the agencies in which and with which you work
   - Societal – views, stigma, bigger systems (judicial, healthcare, housing)

As you begin to observe yourself, be fascinated, intrigued, and in no way critical. No conclusions, no judgment, no defensiveness – just curiosity.

“If I am exposed to suffering in a single moment or over the arc of time, is there the possibility that I will be affected by such exposure?”

How to Achieve Trauma Stewardship Cont’d

2. Develop a deep sense of awareness needed to care for yourself while caring for others
   - Learn to make room for your own internal process and allow for healing

3. Continue to Live Fully
The Reality

Lacking resources and means to help others reach goals can increase your clients' distress and create increased hardship.

The 16 Warning Signs of Trauma Exposure

- Feeling Helpless and Hopeless – what’s the point?
- A Sense That One Can Never Do Enough – if I don’t do it, it’s not going to get done
- Hypervigilance – being so focused on our job, we can’t be fully present for anything else – always waiting for a crisis/emergency
- Diminished creativity – boredom with what you are doing, can’t remember a time when you felt energized/creative in your work
- Inability to Embrace Complexity – see things as good/bad, black/white
- Minimizing – well, I didn’t get shot, so it could be worse!
- Chronic Exhaustion, Physical Ailments – feeling fatigued in every cell of your body
- Inability to Listen/Deliberate Avoidance – leaving your voicemail box full. Knock softly on the door when doing a home visit in hopes they won’t hear and answer the door.
The 16 Warning Signs of Trauma Exposure

- **Dissociative Moments** – being engaged in your work when, for whatever reason, something suddenly unhinges you. You realize you haven’t heard the last 5 sentences someone has said.

- **Sense of Persecution** – feel a lack of ability to control one’s destiny – feel others are responsible for our satisfaction.

- **Guilt** – how can I spend money on a new purse when I know that person can’t afford their light bill.

- **Fear** – of intense feelings, personal vulnerability, potential victimization - begins to occupy the space inside us.

- **Anger and Cynicism** – “when you see the suffering and experience it yourself, it’s hard not to want revenge” – pro-democracy activist in Burma. Healthy humor is ok. When Cynical humor is used to avoid dealing with anger, that’s when it’s a problem.

- **Inability to Empathize/Numbing** – feeling emotionally asleep – often as a result of being overwhelmed over a period of time.

- **Addictions** – alcohol, food, sex, video games, facebook, television.

- **Grandiosity** – feeling like only you can solve someone’s problems, becoming a powerful figure in another’s life, getting attached to the feeling of being needed.

What You Can Do

✓ Understand the system(s) you are in
✓ Recognize your role within the system
✓ Build in Self-Care to your system
Day 1 Take Aways

Self-Care and Trauma Stewardship

It won’t come quickly or easily, but the great news is, you already possess all of the tools you need. More than anything else, we need a knowledge of our own lives – what we feel, value, and experience and what we need to do to take care of ourselves.

— Laura van Dernoot Lipsky

Day 1 Take Aways

The more deeply we connect with ourselves, the brighter our light can shine and the more joyfully you can do your work.
End of Day One

Let’s take a minute and think of one activity you can do this evening to care for yourself.

• What might interfere for you?
• How do you make your time a priority?
• Who do you need to reach out to so your self-care time can happen?

Remember to be kind to yourself
DAY TWO

Day Two Agenda

Social Worker Self-Care: Practical Strategies and Ethical Obligation

- Review self-care as an ethical obligation for social workers.
- Review definitions (burnout, compassion fatigue, self-care, trauma stewardship)
- Self-assess current well-being, identify areas of personal and professional stressors.
- Connect with others around self-care strategies.
- Explore concrete strategies for self-care. Learn how to create and evaluate individualized self-care plans for use now and in the future.
Reflection on last night’s self-care
How’d it go, what got in the way?

Ethical Considerations of Self-Care - Review

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Burnout & Compassion Fatigue - Review

Burnout: Health professionals caring for seriously ill/dying patients and their families are frequently exposed to distressing emotional situations and profound suffering. Lack of attention to health providers’ stress responses to this suffering can lead to burnout, which has consequences for the provider and his/her interpersonal relationships. (STRUCTURAL/SYSTEMIC)

Compassion Fatigue: The physical and mental exhaustion and emotional withdrawal experienced by those who care for sick or traumatized people over an extended period of time. Unlike burnout, which is caused by everyday work stresses (dealing with insurance companies, making treatment choices), compassion fatigue results from taking on the emotional burden of a patient’s agony.

Merriam-Webster, 2021
Self-Care and Trauma Stewardship - Review

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Trauma Stewardship: The ability to engage oppression and trauma by caring for, tending to, and responsibly guiding other beings who are struggling while not internalizing others’ struggles or assuming them as our own. (Lipsky & Burk, 2009)
Strategies for Self-Care

• Awareness/Presence
• Grounding
• Gratitude
• Routine, Structure, and Boundaries
• Humor
• Growth

1. For one day, commit to paying attention to the running commentary in your mind. Is your mind seeing the glass half empty or half-full. Are you able to reframe things?
2. When your day begins, close your eyes, take several deep breaths, and ask yourself, “What is my intention today?”
3. At the end of the day, before sleep overtakes you, ask yourself “What can I put down? What am I ready to be done with? What don’t I need to carry with me for another day.

Lipsky & Burk, 2009
Strategies for Self-Care

Grounding

1. Before starting your workday, take a moment to literally stop in your tracks and ask yourself, “Why am I doing what I am doing?” After you hear your answer, gently remind yourself that you are making a choice to do this work. Take a deep breath; breathe in both the responsibility and the freedom in this acknowledgement.

2. Commit to walking, running, biking, or some other form of exercise for 5 minutes every hour or two that you are working. During this 5 minutes, focus on breathing in deeply and breathing out slowly. Notice anything beautiful around you and breathe that in as well. (Lipsky & Burk, 2009)

3. Survival Kit – reminders of what’s important to you.

Strategies for Self-Care

Gratitude

1. At both the beginning and end of your workday, take a distinct moment to think of one thing you are grateful for. Maybe log in a journal.

2. Every single day, think of one person you are grateful to and tell that person.

3. Advocate for your workplace to create some way where you and your colleagues can express gratitude towards one another.

Lipsky & Burk, 2009
Strategies for Self-Care
Routine, Structure, and Boundaries

1. Have a manageable work load
2. Have regularly scheduled supervision with supervisor and peers
3. Get and give feedback with supervisor and peers
4. Make people aware of your boundaries or your triggers before you snap or react
5. Stay organized
6. Take a “mental health day” when needed

Strategies for Self-Care
Humor

1. Laugh, joke, find time to unwind
2. Laughter Yoga
3. Have a “funny buddy” who will watch funny movies with you, funny YouTube videos
4. Listen to babies laughing (YouTube):
5. Remember a funny thing that you did or that happened to you and share it with a friend or write it down in a journal.
Strategies for Self-Care

Growth

1. Identify one thing that you would love to incorporate into your workday but are certain you could not. Now try everything in your power to make that a reality – even for just one day. (Lipsky & Burk, 2009)

2. Read materials, articles, self-help books, related to an area that you would like to grow in

3. Be assertive with your feelings


5. Meet with a therapist on a regular basis

6. Listen to your inner dialogue and give yourself what you need

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Break Out Groups

Reflect on your current self care strategies - what is going well, areas for improvement?

Share with what you do with others in the realms of:

- Mind
- Body
- Emotions
- Spirit
- Work
- Relationships
- Other

If you had more free time, money, support, resources, etc., what kind of self-care activities would you engage in?
Evaluating the Efficacy of our Self-Care

How do we know our self-care strategies are working?
• Just as each of your self-care plans will be different, so will how you know whether your plan and self-care strategies are effective and are working

Rebecca's Example - being in self vs. being dysregulated

Wanda's Example - being calm vs. agitated

How I know Self-Care is Working (Rebecca)

I am in Self
• Productive
• Inspired
• Effective
• Efficient
• Connected w/colleagues
• Social
• Open
• Seeking
• Excited
• Energetic
• Clothing reflects positive space

I am Dysregulated
• Overwhelmed
• Racing against the clock
• Pressured energy
• Constantly checking email
• Sleep interference
• Doubting abilities
• Feel underappreciated
• Disillusioned
• Exhausted
• Questioning career choice
• Withdrawing
• Seeking exit strategy
• Negative
• Don’t care about appearance/clothing
How I know Self-Care is Working (Wanda)

**I am calm**
- Feeling content
- Able to sit still
- Feel gratuite
- Speaking calm and normal
- Relaxed
- Focused
- Engaged
- Confident

**I am agitated**
- Can’t sit still
- Racing thoughts
- Can not focus
- Talk is pressured
- Jumping from one topic to another
- Can not finish anything
- Many grand ideas
- Feel unproductive
- Jittery
- Defensive

Self-Care Plan Template

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_rWT0iMl0v2_06HsDtDKJo17ea0vCU0i d9BbzjzGH0w/edit?ts=607d917d](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_rWT0iMl0v2_06HsDtDKJo17ea0vCU0i d9BbzjzGH0w/edit?ts=607d917d)
Day 2 Take Away

Be Patient and Keep Trying!

“Take the first step in faith. You don’t have to see the whole staircase. Just take the first step.” - Martin Luther King, Jr.

Self-Care Assessment Tool and Tips

For more information and resources on Self-Care, Assessing Self-Care and Creating Personalized Self-Care check out:

University at Buffalo School of Social Work’s Self-Care Starter Kit:
http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/resources/self-care-starter-kit.html

Socialworkmanager.org’s Self-Care Toolkit:

Reachout.com’s Developing a Self-Care Plan:

The New Social Worker’s article - Mindfulness: 10 Lessons in Self-Care for Social Workers
Self-Care Assessment Tool and Tips

University of Southern California Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work's article - How Social Workers Can Prioritize Self-Care in High-Stress Working Environments:

Northwoods 10 Tips on Self-Care for Social Workers:

Verywellmind's 5 Self-Care Practices for Every Area of Your Life:

NASW's Self-Care for Social Workers:
https://www.socialworkers.org/Practice/Infectious-Diseases/Coronavirus/Self-Care-During-the-Coronavirus-Pandemic

Share with us 1 thing you are taking with you from this training
Thank you for sharing your time and experience with us!

Wanda & Rebecca

References


