Self-care: what every manager needs to know

In this paper, we will look at some of the strategies that managers and team leaders can use to support themselves as they grapple with the effects of the demands being placed on them in the post-pandemic health or social care workplace. In the next paper in this series, we will consider how managers can support their teams and promote a sense of wellbeing

KEY WORDS
- Stress
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- Culture
- Self-care
- Burnout

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We know that all areas of health and social care are under enormous pressure as we come out of the COVID-19 pandemic and start to gear up for the pressures of the winter and the inevitable flu season. This only compounds the problems affecting the wider health and social care sector arising from chronic underfunding and some of the highest vacancy rates ever seen, requiring many health and social care professionals to work harder with fewer resources.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we received a lot of support from society at large, with people recognising the valuable role that health and social care professionals play in keeping people safe and working on the front lines of managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Now that support is not so obvious and those same "COVID heroes" are now somewhat forgotten, the health and social care sector is dealing with a growing epidemic of stress and depression among the workforce, not all of which can be attributed to COVID-19 (Health and Safety Executive, 2021).

The impact of stress

We saw in some previous papers in this series how stress affects people both physically and mentally (Ellis, 2017) with some of the impacts on the manager including issues like:
- Managing a high staff turnover
- Managing increasing levels of sickness among staff
- Managing low levels of motivation among staff
- Managing petty squabbles and poor behaviours among staff.

All of this means that managers are drawn away from the tasks they have to attend to in order to undertake recruitment drives, arrange sickness cover, support staff, act as arbitrators and negotiators as well as physically working on the floor to cover absences.

This has an impact on the manager's wellbeing as they must find the time, usually their own, to undertake the management tasks that their job role demands of them. This means that some tasks are missed, others are side-lined, and still, others are not done to the best of the manager's ability. All of this adds to the stress experienced by nurses and other health and social care managers as a result of high workloads, diminishing resources, and increased financial responsibility (Labrague et al, 2018) and creates a vicious cycle of despair.

Why self-care?

Tierney (2021) makes the very simple but important observation that many nurses and managers believe that time spent away from caring and doing things for oneself is less valuable than time spent providing for the health and wellbeing of patients. He also goes on to make the pertinent observation that 'self-care is critical for us to function at our best and ensures that we are operating at the top of our abilities' (Tierney, 2021). The point being made here, a bit like how you should secure your own oxygen mask before helping others talk on aeroplanes, is that unless the manager is fit, well and, on the ball, they will not bring their best abilities to work, and this is detrimental to those under their leadership.

Furthermore, the wellbeing of the manager can also have a significant impact on the wellbeing of the entire team and hence on patient care. As

Schreuder et al. (2011) observe, the stress related behaviours of managers can have an impact on absenteeism and the physical health of the people who report to them. This creates a number of good reasons why managers need to practice self-care both for their own good as well as that of their teams and the people they care for.

Strategies for self-care

Broadly speaking, there are three areas that managers in health and social care need to address in order to exercise the sort of self-care, which will have a positive impact on their personal and professional physical and mental health and wellbeing. These three areas are:
» Personal behaviours and habits
» Relationships with reports
» Relationships with other managers.

Failing to address any of these areas may mean the manager fails to address the causes of their stress and fails to undertake the sort of self-care that enables them to develop and sustain the sort of self-resilience necessary to lead effectively and avoid burnout. To be clear self-care is not only about physical things like eating properly and staying hydrated, which are important, but it is also about other social and psychological issues such as relationships (both in and outside of work), support mechanisms and adequate rest.

Personal behaviours

People who are under pressure at work often forget that the thing they have the most control over is what they do with their own time, and how they treat themselves and their bodies. One study of nurse managers in the US, for example, identified that more than 50% were overweight or obese and almost 50% did not eat at least five portions of fruit or vegetables each day, while more than 80% were almost entirely sedentary (Ross et al, 2018). This suggests that this group was failing to meet their own physical health needs, which is concerning given the growing evidence for a link between physical health and mental wellbeing.

Williams et al (2022) identify that among the personal behaviours that nurses and nurse leaders can adopt as part of their self-help behaviours, are habits relating to regular exercise and expressing their emotions. Similarly, in their systematic review of the literature, as it applies to all grades of nurses and nursing students, Guillaume et al (2017) identify how training and interventions for nurses based on mindfulness techniques served to improve their mental wellbeing 'significantly'.

Such straightforward habits, physical and psychological self-care, are among the habits of successful leaders who through pursuing these elements of self-care are able to achieve their personal and professional goals (Butler et al, 2019).

Relationships with the team

As a manager in a health or social care environment, the people with whom you will most frequently interact are those on your immediate team. It is important therefore for managers to develop and maintain a healthy relationship with team members, as the team can be a source of ongoing support and help or a source of stress.

There are many research studies which show that among healthcare teams where the manager practices and promotes mindfulness (Monroe et al, 2020), foster resilience in team members (Wei et al, 2019), and promote self-care for staff members (Hofmeyer and Taylor, 2021) the teams they lead are more stable, have higher levels of satisfaction, in turn this create less emotional work for the manager. We will explore how the manager can promote these practices in the next paper in this series.

Relationships with managers

As well as thinking about the team the manager leads, they must also consider their relationships with the people who in turn manage them as well as their peers (Udod and Care, 2012). Peers can be a great source of support for managers, when they are prepared to discuss their challenges and share ideas about coping strategies and solutions to problems that are common to others at their level (Lamonica et al, 2016). Often the very act of hearing that other people face similar challenges is often enough to validate a manager's feelings about themselves and their work, and is a form of self-care in and of itself.

One of the biggest issues in terms of stress at work is the management of one's personal workload. Managers and leaders who learn to say

no, when faced with requests to take on additional work when they are already at capacity, coupled with the significant role senior managers should play in preparing middle managers for their roles, asking for and accepting support from senior managers goes a long way towards helping middle management in coping with the day-to-day challenge of care (Udod and Care, 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

While management and leadership roles in health and social care may be demanding and stressful, people in these roles need to learn strategies for self-care to support themselves not only during difficult times, such as the ones they are experiencing now but also during the normal course of their work. While employers have a role to play in supporting the wellbeing of their managers and leaders, these same individuals need to learn some strategies for self-care or they risk burnout.

Self-care is about being honest about what one is feeling and being open to discussing these issues with peers and line managers. Self-care is also about establishing good habits both inside and outside of the workplace to ensure that managers take care of their physical as well as emotional and mental health needs.

In the next paper in this series, we will unpack a little more about how managers in health and social care can promote a sense of wellbeing among their teams which, as we shall see, can have a positive impact on the manager as well.

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