

The lost art of self-care

KEY WORDS

- » Mental health
- » Pressures
- » Stress
- » Self-care

In my last article, I focused on the relationship that we create with our patients and an argument for the biopsychosocial model. This model speaks of taking into account, not only the biological presentation of our patients, but also the psychological and social factors which may include a whole host of influences and needs, primarily for patients, but also ourselves. In this article, I would like to turn my attention to a potentially more uncomfortable and often overlooked relationship that is also of vital importance — our relationship with self.

In my experience, firstly, as a student and now as a practicing Therapist and Tutor, one of the most common messages that was heavily preached, and less so practiced, was the endeavour of self-care. I can sometimes catch myself falling into the traps that I have experienced frequently around me in other professionals, and vowed “I will ensure that I don’t end up in the same position!”. And yet, here I am, often feeling as though there is not enough space, inclination, or time to ensure the essential focus on self-care and nourishment so that I can offer the most to both those around me and myself. As well as being able to model this, for both students and clients.

As with so many of those things that make their way on to our to-do list, and yet, seem to find themselves being trumped by every other task, commitment and “I’ll just get that done first” activity, self-care can find itself being overshadowed and shunned, for the very reasons that we need to ensure that this is at the top of our list — a busy life filled with responsibilities and commitments. In this article, I would firstly like to look at why we may tend to lose sight of this very important commitment, and then look at some ways in which we can ensure that we try and stay on top of our relationship with self.

Swimming against the tide

As mentioned previously, the absence of self-care and prioritising of our own needs, can be a phenomenon that I imagine we may all be able to relate to in some way, whether that be seeing the professionals around us or by looking directly in the mirror! For some reason, self-care does seem to be an area of life that we so often lose sight of or

have towards the bottom of our list of priorities for many different reasons.

I feel that one aspect of this could very well be the culture that we find ourselves in. Linking to the last article, which argued for the acknowledgement of the social and psychological factors at play in our patients, I believe this area will also give us some answers about why our relationship with self-care exists in the way that it does, and often with much room for improvement. I believe that living in a capitalist world, with a tendency to praise hard work and an ongoing social game of top trumps in relation to the hours of work we have done each week, it can be a very hard tide to swim against and ensure that we are giving greater attention to our own needs, rather than the conditions that society has set up for us.

As well as the pressures mentioned, that can certainly encourage us to be overworked and overcommitted to our responsibilities, work and busy-ness can also be a badge of honour, an avoidance tactic, an addiction, and a way to both mask and displace our own self-esteem. I feel that there are many pressures and conditions, which we may need to resist to make space for our own needs and restoration.

Going against the grain is never an easy task, but when we are in a world when grabbing a quick lunch at our desk (we might even be lucky to be sat down!), seeing many colleagues around us being overstretched, and the ever growing demand and expectation on us as professionals. I believe that making a commitment to self-care and our own needs, as well as standing our ground in the face of all the above, is no small task.

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In summary, what I am trying to portray here, is the idea that committing to self-care and carving out space to see to this commitment, can often take concerted effort and be hard to maintain in the face of many pressures and conditions that surround us, which will likely explicitly, or implicitly, demand the alternative from us. So, without further ado, let's have a look at some of the ways in which we may achieve this...

Self-care agenda

As I have mentioned, our commitment and action of self-care will often take conscious effort and sometimes planning. Self-care is one of those things, that unless it is explicitly made time for and engendered, can easily slip by the wayside. For that reason, we may need to plan or even actively block out time in our diary to ensure that we see to this commitment.

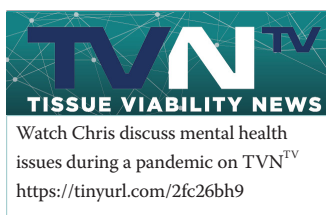
This is something I have done for myself in the past. Realising how easy it was to book another client or commitment into my diary, I was curious why I couldn't do this for myself. Don't get me wrong, it did feel odd and unnatural at first, but I also think it helped me to realise and explore why there was such a discrepancy in being able to do this for other people and not myself. Julia Cameron, in her book, 'The Artist's Way', writes about the concept of having an 'artist's date' with yourself. The reason that this is proposed is because it helps us move into the mindset of thinking about how we would treat ourselves to a date, just like we might plan for someone else. These can be a variety of activities and will depend on each individuals' preferences and needs, but it may be something like taking yourself out for dinner or a coffee, seeing an attraction, visiting a gallery or simply going for a nice walk. I think this concept helps us not only carve out this time as discussed above, but also look at our relationship with self in the frame of someone we would like to treat to a date!

Continuing in this vein, and The Artist's Way, we may also think about doing activities that take us away from our everyday lives and mode of operating. Working as a helping professional can often be quite a logical and responsible task. Therefore, a good antidote to the pressures we may feel as a result of this, is to use a part of our

brain and personality that is quite counter to this. For example, how would it be to have some play time?! This idea can often be met with dismissal and/or discomfort — "don't be silly, I'm not a child!" But I believe that adult play and creativity are just as important (maybe even more so, as a counter action) in our later years. We don't have to go to the extreme from the off, but how would it be to have some time colouring, just making some marks on a page or getting those watercolours out at the back of the cupboard?

Carving out specific time and planning our self-care also makes me think of the importance of boundaries. Not only in the boundaries and commitments we set for ourselves, but also how we may need to be boundaryed against other commitments and requests. This is not only when they may risk getting in the way of our designated time for self-care or other activities, but also in saying no to other requests that we may not feel able or want to do. We may often feel a responsibility or pressure to say yes to people's requests, either if we feel obliged or have no good reason not to. However, I believe that needing space for self, lacking capacity, or simply preferring not to, are all valid reasons we may have for being able to say no to other's requests. We can often feel like we need a "valid" reason that means we really aren't able to commit to their offer but how would it be to simply use preferring not to as a reason?

The final area I would like to look at is that I believe the effort to make this time may initially mean a lot more than the task itself. We can often be overwhelmed by the feeling of not having time or space to even think about creating any time for these activities mentioned. Furthermore, I believe one of the most important things, is that we are making the effort to engage in self-care, however short a time this may be. This means that we may just start with five minutes to sit down and really enjoy our coffee mindfully or read just one article in a magazine. What matters is that we are engaging and making conscious effort to see to our own needs. I have often experienced this for myself with meditation. It can feel such a big task to sit down for just ten to twenty minutes a day and I couldn't possibly have the time for that! However, even to just commit to one minute of focus on my breath, that is consciously approached



and planned, can set my intention (and I usually end up wanting more than a minute anyway!). So these things can start in small baby steps and set our intention, and then may progress into more of this practice and conscious effort. What matters is starting with that first intentional step, however small or time limited it may be.

CONCLUSION

I have hoped to spend some time in this article exploring the lost art of self-care. Firstly, looking

at our relationship with this and why that might be, before moving on to look at some ways that we can set our intention to make designated time and effort to see to our own needs, no matter how small. As mentioned, this can often take conscious effort and boundaries, especially in the world we live in today. However, I think we can start small and set the intention, with immediate effects and foundations being laid, no matter how modest they may seem. Okay, I best leave this here because it's time for me to go for my walk... WUK

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