

Self-Care Tools, Strategies and Assessment

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“In dealing with those who are undergoing great suffering, if you feel ‘burnout’ setting in, if you feel demoralized and exhausted, it is best, for the sake of everyone, to withdraw and restore yourself. The point is to have a long-term perspective.”—The Dalai Lama

Self-Care

While you cannot eliminate stress from your life, you can take care of yourself so that stress does not overwhelm you. Stress affects many aspects of our lives – physical, emotional, personal, and professional. It affects the relationships we form with others and the relationship we have with ourselves. Self-care should be a preventive measure, and not something one does when feeling completely overwhelmed. It is not always easy to take care of ourselves; demands from work, family, and friends can relegate self-care to the bottom of your “to-do” list. Self-care is particularly important for attorneys and advocates that work closely with traumatized clients that have difficult stories to tell.

Self-care is not a sign of weakness. It is a way of making our bodies and minds stronger, thus enabling us to continue living our lives. Even superheroes hang up their capes now and then, and so can you. We cannot take care of others unless we first take care of ourselves.

| SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL ¹ | |
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| Take some time to complete the checklist below. You need not share your answers with anyone – this is simply for self-reflection. Remember that no one strategy works for everyone. This activity just gives you a way to think about the possibility of self-care in many aspects of your life. | |
| How often do you do the following? (Rate, using the scale below): 5 = Frequently 4 = Sometimes 3 = Rarely 2 = Never 1 = It never even occurred to me | |
| PHYSICAL SELF-CARE <input type="checkbox"/> Eat regularly (e.g., breakfast and lunch) <input type="checkbox"/> Eat healthfully <input type="checkbox"/> Exercise <input type="checkbox"/> Lift weights <input type="checkbox"/> Practice martial arts <input type="checkbox"/> Get regular medical care for prevention <input type="checkbox"/> Get medical care when needed <input type="checkbox"/> Take time off when you're sick <input type="checkbox"/> Get massages or other body work <input type="checkbox"/> Do physical activity that is fun for you <input type="checkbox"/> Take time to be sexual <input type="checkbox"/> Get enough sleep <input type="checkbox"/> Wear clothes you like | PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF-CARE <input type="checkbox"/> Make time for self-reflection <input type="checkbox"/> Go to see a psychotherapist or counselor for yourself <input type="checkbox"/> Write in a journal <input type="checkbox"/> Read literature unrelated to work <input type="checkbox"/> Do something at which you are a beginner <input type="checkbox"/> Take a step to decrease stress in your life <input type="checkbox"/> Notice your inner experience—your dreams, thoughts, imagery, feelings <input type="checkbox"/> Let others know different aspects of you <input type="checkbox"/> Engage your intelligence in a new area—go |

¹ The tool, strategies and breathing activity discussed in this document were adapted from KATHERINE T. VOLK, KATHLEEN GUARINO, MEGAN EDSON GRANDIN, & ROSE CLERVIL, WHAT ABOUT YOU? A WORKBOOK FOR THOSE WHO WORK WITH OTHERS 10-11 (The National Center on Family Homelessness 2008), available at: <http://www.familyhomelessness.org/media/94.pdf>. There are more detailed exercises and information on self-care available in the workbook.

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Take vacations <input type="checkbox"/> Take day trips, or mini-vacations <input type="checkbox"/> Get away from stressful technology such as pagers, faxes, telephones, e-mail <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | to an art museum, performance, sports event, exhibit, or other cultural event <input type="checkbox"/> Practice receiving from others PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF-CARE (CONTINUED) <input type="checkbox"/> Be curious <input type="checkbox"/> Say no to extra responsibilities sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Spend time outdoors <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| EMOTIONAL SELF-CARE <input type="checkbox"/> Spend time with others whose company you enjoy <input type="checkbox"/> Stay in contact with important people in your life <input type="checkbox"/> Treat yourself kindly (supportive inner dialogue or self-talk) <input type="checkbox"/> Feel proud of yourself <input type="checkbox"/> Reread favorite books, review favorite movies <input type="checkbox"/> Identify and seek out comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places <input type="checkbox"/> Allow yourself to cry <input type="checkbox"/> Find things that make you laugh <input type="checkbox"/> Express your outrage in a constructive way <input type="checkbox"/> Play with children <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ WORKPLACE/PROFESSIONAL SELF CARE <input type="checkbox"/> Take time to eat lunch <input type="checkbox"/> Take time to chat with co-workers <input type="checkbox"/> Make time to complete tasks <input type="checkbox"/> Identify projects or tasks that are exciting, growth-promoting, and rewarding for you <input type="checkbox"/> Set limits with clients and colleagues <input type="checkbox"/> Balance your caseload so no one day is "too much!" <input type="checkbox"/> Arrange your workspace so it is comfortable and comforting <input type="checkbox"/> Get regular supervision or consultation <input type="checkbox"/> Negotiate for your needs <input type="checkbox"/> Have a peer support group <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | SPIRITUAL SELF CARE <input type="checkbox"/> Make time for prayer, meditation, reflection <input type="checkbox"/> Spend time in nature <input type="checkbox"/> Participate in a spiritual gathering, community or group <input type="checkbox"/> Be open to inspiration <input type="checkbox"/> Cherish your optimism and hope <input type="checkbox"/> Be aware of nontangible (nonmaterial) aspects of life <input type="checkbox"/> Be open to mystery, to not knowing <input type="checkbox"/> Identify what is meaningful to you and notice its place in your life <input type="checkbox"/> Sing <input type="checkbox"/> Express gratitude <input type="checkbox"/> Celebrate milestones with rituals that are meaningful to you <input type="checkbox"/> Remember and memorialize loved ones who have died <input type="checkbox"/> Nurture others <input type="checkbox"/> Have awe-filled experiences <input type="checkbox"/> Contribute to or participate in causes you believe in <input type="checkbox"/> Read inspirational literature <input type="checkbox"/> Listen to inspiring music <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ <i>Source: Adapted from Saakvitne, Pearlman, and Traumatic Stress Institute Staff, Transforming the Pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization, 1996</i> |

“Don’t worry about the world coming to an end today. It’s already tomorrow in Australia”
—Charles Schultz

Self-Care Strategies

There are ways to incorporate self-care into our daily routines. Clearing space in your life for self-care often means shifting priorities or tasks to make that space. Many commitments and responsibilities cannot be erased from your daily life, but there may be some things that can be changed to accommodate a healthier lifestyle. It is important to try various self-care activities so that you find the ones that work best for you. Taking time for yourself should be enjoyable – if it feels like a chore, try something else.

Here are some practical suggestions²:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ Take one thing at a time.❖ Solve little problems.❖ Be realistic.❖ Be flexible.❖ Adopt a positive attitude.❖ Avoid over-scheduling.❖ Learn to relax.❖ Treat your body well. Adopt a healthy lifestyle.<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Eat healthy food.○ Exercise.○ See your doctors regularly.○ Get enough sleep as often as you can.○ Take time off when you are sick.❖ Watch what you are thinking. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ Share your feelings.❖ Talk about stress with friends and family.❖ Talking to doctor, spiritual advisor, or other professional might also help.❖ Learn to ask for help.❖ Be aware of your limitations.❖ Personalize your work and home environment.❖ Take time for self-reflection.❖ Say "no."❖ Limit your exposure to media (e.g., news stories, movies) that deals with sad, violent, or tragic themes. |
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Building Awareness

Self-care begins with awareness. Knowing your warning signs and understanding what works for you are essential to building and maintaining a sustainable self-care plan. Over the long term, this means building self-care routines and rituals into everyday life. Over the short term, we can create moments of awareness simply by pausing to take a breath.

BREATHING ACTIVITY³

One of the simplest things we can do to combat stress is to breathe. Deep breathing doesn't take long, doesn't require any special equipment, and can be done almost anywhere.

Follow this guide:

- ✓ Sit up straight
- ✓ Take a long, slow deep breath through your nose
- ✓ Stand up
- ✓ Take a deep breath, feeling the air go into your lungs
- ✓ Put your hand on your abdomen, feeling it expand and contract with each breath
- ✓ Put your hand on your chest, feeling it expand and contract with each breath
- ✓ Make yourself aware of the path that the air is taking as it enters and leaves your body
- ✓ Focus on your breathing for at least two minutes, noticing how your body responds
- ✓ Try deep breathing at your desk, when stuck in traffic, or anywhere you need to refocus.

² *Id.* at 12.

³ *Id.* at 13.