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.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHYSICAL SELF-CARE</th>
<th>PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF-CARE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eat regularly (e.g., breakfast and lunch)</td>
<td>Make time for self-reflection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eat healthfully</td>
<td>Go to see a psychotherapist or counselor for yourself</td>
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<td>Exercise</td>
<td>Write in a journal</td>
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<td>Lift weights</td>
<td>Read literature unrelated to work</td>
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<td>Practice martial arts</td>
<td>Do something at which you are a beginner</td>
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<td>Get regular medical care for prevention</td>
<td>Take a step to decrease stress in your life</td>
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<td>Get medical care when needed</td>
<td>Notice your inner experience—your dreams, thoughts, imagery, feelings</td>
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<td>Take time off when you’re sick</td>
<td>Let others know different aspects of you</td>
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<td>Get massages or other body work</td>
<td>Engage your intelligence in a new area—go</td>
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<td>Do physical activity that is fun for you</td>
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<td>Take time to be sexual</td>
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<td>Get enough sleep</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wear clothes you like</td>
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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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“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 suggestions:

- 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.
  - 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.
- 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.

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 ACTIVITY**

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.

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2 Id. at 12.
3 Id. at 13.