Your Self-Care Plan

By

Elizabeth Thomas
School of Social Welfare Careers Services
University at Albany
WHAT IS SELF-CARE?

Self-care is anything you do to take care of your mental, physical or emotional health. Every person’s self-care is unique because every person gains fulfillment in different ways.

WHY IS SELF-CARE SO IMPORTANT?

In order to drive a car, there has to be gas in the tank. The more gas you have, the further you can go. However, no matter how full your tank is at the beginning of the trip, at some point you’ll have to stop and refuel. If you drive for too long without refueling, you’ll run out of gas and be stuck.

Social workers are the same. You need to stop and refuel. If you don’t take time to fill your tank, you could run out of the energy and joy you need to help your clients. By practicing self-care, you prioritize taking time to do things you enjoy. Through that enjoyment, your tank fills. Making sure you lead a fulfilling life is an important step in being able to offer effective help.

Studies show that less-experienced social workers are more likely to face burnout because they have fewer and less-effective coping skills. In addition, they tend to have lower salaries and usually spend more time at their jobs than social workers who have been in the field longer.

Whether in graduate school or just heading out into the work-force, realizing the importance of self-care and taking the time to do it are integral to being successful. Happier more satisfied people make happier and more satisfied social workers who are in turn better able to help their clients.

Taking 10-15 minutes now to create a self-care plan can save you time and energy later.

STARTING WHERE THE SOCIAL WORKER IS:

How are you caring for yourself now? Are there ways you could improve? Answer these few questions to get a start on assessing your current self-care.

THINK ABOUT YOUR SELF-CARE IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS:

- Physical: Are you taking care of your physical body by sleeping well, eating healthy foods and at regular times/intervals, exercising and/or taking down-time?
- Psychological/Emotional: Are you decreasing stress in your life by doing what you like to do and being around people who make you happy? Are you seeing a counselor? Do you keep a journal?
• Inspirational: Are you making time for reflection? Spending time in nature? Meditating, praying or singing? Have you danced lately? Do you have enjoyable activities you engage in?
• Workplace/Professional: Are you advocating for breaks? Are you balancing your workload?

These questions were adapted from *Transforming the Pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization* by Karen Saakvitne and Laurie Anne Pearlman (1996 – TSI Staff). If you are interested in the complete assessment, please see this text.

**CREATE YOUR PLAN**

Now that you know how you’ve been doing self-care in the past, it’s time to think about new ways you might be able to bring a bit of self-care into your daily life. Are there new things you’d like to try? Take a moment and list out all the ways you’d like to take care of yourself. Now prioritize that list, choosing a few activities to focus on. Think about the 5 areas of self-care, including physical, psychological, emotional, inspirational, and workplace/professional.

Similar to how we recognize barriers to a client’s treatment, think about your own. Think about all the excuses you’ve made in the past for why you can’t take a walk, go to the gym, read a book, etc. Knowing what your barriers to self-care are before they show up will help you recognize them and successfully navigate around them.

Make sure you write your plan out. Perhaps utilize a calendar or “To Do” list, whatever you respond to the best. Post your plan somewhere you can see it. Having your plan visible to you every day will help remind you to take time for self-care.

Working on self-care with a partner or a group can help hold you accountable. If working with others is something you enjoy, consider reaching out to create a support network where you can share your self-care progress and get healthy feedback.

Set aside time at least once a week to do a self-care check-in to see how you’re doing. Also, set a time for 3 months from now when you can re-evaluate the strategies you’re using.
One Student's Self-Care Journey

I began my teaching career at a public school in the Mississippi Delta where I taught first through fifth grade general music classes. In addition, I had an afterschool drum line and helped a co-worker run a leadership group for young women. I worked from 7:30 to 3:00, had a half hour break for lunch and an hour long prep period during the day. I was the first of my roommates home every day. Needless to say, I loved my job.

Then, due to budget cuts, I transitioned to working at a charter school. My world shifted dramatically. I had to be at school by 7, I taught classes until 4 with only a half hour lunch/prep break and was expected to remain at school working with kids until at least 5:00. Gone were the carefree days of leaving work at work. To get by, I had to bring home my planning. I spent most nights working until bed time. I started a downward tailspin. I no longer was excited to teach. I took everything I had to make it through each day. I found myself yelling more in the classroom and feeling like I couldn’t get ahead. Every time I finished one thing, there were ten more on the backburner to complete. In order to get through it all, I started making short cuts in my lesson plans and the energy I gave to my students. I made it through to summer vacation, but was quickly thrust back into the swing of teaching after only a month-long summer break (remember, I was working at a charter school).

As I began my second year of teaching, I knew something had to give. My friend talked me into attending a yoga class with her. My excuses of “I don’t have time,” “I can’t fit it in,” and “I’m too tired” had run their course and I reluctantly went. I enjoyed the class, but didn’t feel a great shift in the tides. I decided the next week to make it a goal and priority to return. Remarkably, I kept going back. I cherished the time I took for myself and realized the great impact it made not just on my well-being, but on my interactions with my students and how I was able to perform my job. I was more focused in my teaching and planning. I was kinder to the students and had a lot more patience. I also began to enjoy teaching again. I evaluated the time I spent working. Although I still had the same amount of work to get done, I realized that I could do it more efficiently and effectively if I took care of myself by doing yoga, playing my guitar and spending quality time with friends.

I also had a shift in my personality in that I no longer worked toward perfection. The kids didn’t care whether the lesson was perfect in every aspect. Instead, they cared if I was present and invested in them and the material. Something similar can be said about social work practice. Your clients will benefit most if you are present and there to help them through their problems.
TESTIMONIALS FROM SOCIAL WORKERS

We asked Social Workers about their personal self-care plans. Here are their responses.

HEATHER LARKIN (Associate Professor)

“Self-care is important to promote our own resilience, which helps prevent vicarious trauma and burnout. When we are able to bounce back from stress, this supports our ability to live up to ethical principles and carry out the effective practices that we learn about. Cognitive understanding isn’t enough since we need to embody our NASW Code of Ethics, and effective practice involves our use of self. Since it is challenging for me to exercise regularly, I’ve signed up for a personal trainer for a half hour 3 mornings a week. I used to meditate more regularly to increase awareness and ability to experience multiple perspectives on challenging situations – now I’m benefitting more by experiencing awakened transmission in mutuality groups (http://www.wakingdown.org/). My self-care also involves work-life balance, which I’m currently addressing by working mostly from a distance this semester.”

DAVID PETTIE (Assistant Coordinator of Field Education)

“Boundaries and balance are keys to my self-care. I’m best off when my boundaries are permeable and I can remain both connected and protected in my interpersonal relationships and those I keep with organizations. Experience is always my best teacher for this kind of awareness. If I’m already spread thin, I’ve learned not to spread myself even thinner though it may be tempting. If I said yes to everything that was truly appealing I’d have to clone myself 10X to pull it off. This required that I develop a muscle for saying no and the willingness to use it. Another key factor is balance. In addition to being social I need spaciousness for solitude: making art, being in nature, exercise and meditation are some current ingredients.”

CANDI GRIFFIN-JENKINS (Assistant Dean, Student Services and Graduate Admissions)

“I truly enjoy reading and journaling. When the weather permits, I go to Zumba classes which I truly enjoy. I would say my biggest avenue for self-care is taking time to relax with my family, watching movies and laughing. I realize when I am not in balance, this causes me to get sick, emotional and overwhelmed. So I do what I can to always take a break during the day. To engage in conversation just because and to take a few minutes every morning just to sit in silence and breath. When I am conscious of it I set an intention for the day daily. This often helps me to remain focused.”
PUT YOUR PLAN INTO ACTION

Now that you have your plan and ways to make sure you stick to it, start doing it!

IF YOU NEED HELP, ASK!

Above all else, you are not in this alone. There are resources around you who can help.

Reach out to friends, family, co-workers, supervisors, professors or anyone else who is or could offer assistance.

Consult with your parents about your health insurance benefits. Maybe your gym membership can be paid for through your health insurance. Or perhaps your insurance can help find a counselor or therapist.

Contact the Counseling Center at UAlbany to set up a session with a counselor. Visit their website at:

http://www.albany.edu/counseling_center/ or call 518-442-5800.

If you are feeling overwhelmed about the MSW program, you can contact Dawn Knight-Thomas, Assistant Dean of Student Academic Affairs. She is the point person for your concerns about the program and can help you navigate towards a successful completion of your MSW degree.

You’ve taken a few giant leaps toward self-care. You know what it is, you know how to do it and you have a plan. Now comes the hard part, doing it. However, with a support system in place, your chances of successfully implementing your plan are high. Embrace your self-care plan and enjoy your life.