

No time for Self-Care? Think: “I AM Worth It!”

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This Quick Bytes is contributed by: Dr. Quah Saw Han, Clinical Psychologist

Every year, I tell myself that I need to slow down, and that I will spend more time on resting and self-care. The truth is that every year, those who are close to me will smirk or roll their eyes. You see, I am one of those recalcitrant “New Year Resolution Breakers”. Thus, in this article, I am not going to tell you what self-care is, and there will be no perfect strategies for self-care. Instead, I will be sharing with you what I think is important to consider in our respective planning for self-care.



For those of us in the helping profession, this is a familiar story. We entered the profession with the sagely advice from our wise teachers and experienced colleagues that we need to remember to self-care before we help others. Yet, as we go through the seasons at work: “Busy” and “Crazy Busy”, we find ourselves saying things like, “Let me finish this one last report before going to bed”, “I can eat my lunch later, I need to catch this client of mine before he disappears”, etc. Gradually, we find ourselves sleeping less and less, and meals become irregular.

When stress from meeting work deadlines and from having to deal with challenging “people-work” become high, we are at risk of developing burnout – widely recognized to be coined by clinical psychologist, Herbert Freudenberger (1974, 1975), to refer to the unrealistic and excessive demands that were placed on individuals, either by themselves or others, that led to both physical and emotional exhaustion. Some of us would have experienced the exhaustion: being physically ill, feeling tired in the morning and not wanting to go to work, being more irritable, etc.

Abraham Maslow (1943) stated in his Hierarchy of Needs that the most basic and important needs are our physiological needs. Science has since proven his wisdom. Sleep deprivation, for example, has been shown to be associated with impaired cognitive and motor performance, impaired immune responses, cardiovascular and metabolic diseases, and mood disturbances (e.g., Luyster, Strollo, Zee, & Walsh, 2012).

Thus, for us to continue to help the vulnerable, and even when we say that we have “no time for self-care”, it will be good if we can take care of our other physiological needs, such as getting enough sleep, well enough so that we can have the mental alertness and physical energy to roll with the challenges that we encounter at work. I have learnt that it is helpful to slow down a little, and remind myself that “I AM Worth it” (adapted from (Williams & Williams, 1997).



<p>Important</p>	<p>In order for me to continue to help the vulnerable with compassion and passion, it is Important for me to take care of my own physiological needs (sleep included), safety needs and love/belonging needs (my family's needs are important here too). I am human, and according to Maslow (1943), individuals need to take care of their deficiency needs (physiological, safety, love/belonging), before they can meet their growth needs (esteem and self-actualization).</p>	
<p>Appropriate</p>	<p>Is what I am feeling and/or thinking Appropriate to the facts of the situation?</p> <p>As clinical practitioner, I find it useful to ask myself: “Whose anxiety is it? Do I really need to act now? Is what I am thinking or feeling about the situation ‘appropriate’?” Along the way, I learn that it is useful to look out for safety and risk factors – when they are present, then acting immediately is appropriate. If there are no safety and risk factors, then I will consider the next two sets of questions.</p>	
<p>Modifiable</p>	<p>Is this situation Modifiable in a positive way?</p> <p>Will the time and effort that I put in help to change the situation in any positive way? What are the behaviours or environmental factors that are modifiable? These questions help me to “work smarter” and be more efficient, as well as effective. When I spend less time to do more work, I get more time to self-care.</p>	
<p>Worth It?</p>	<p>When I balance the needs of myself and others, is taking action Worth it?</p> <p>Ultimately, it is a balancing act. Trauma work is not easy and many of our clients will benefit from the “extra miles” that we put in. Yet, if we are physically and emotionally exhausted, we will not only be unable to go the extra mile for our clients, but we will also not be walking our talk to them on self-care and self-compassion.</p>	

Chances are that you, like me, would have felt physically and emotionally tired from the crises you have in supporting clients’ trauma recovery. Chances are that you, the reader of this article, will have your own ways of self-care.

As we all know, there is no magic bullet when it comes to tuning in to our needs and taking care of ourselves. I sincerely hope that some of the ideas shared in this article can help us to remember to slow down and take good enough care of ourselves, so that we can continue our respective journeys as we continue to support children and teens who experience trauma-related and mental health concerns in our community.

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The Trauma Network for Children (TNC) programme is a joint collaboration between KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) and Temasek Foundation. It aims to enhance the capability of the Singapore community in providing psychosocial support to children, youth and their families after crises or traumatic events.