

My experience and use of key strategies to avoid burnout as a therapeutic practitioner for safe, compassionate and effective therapy.

Introduction: Self-care as a strategy – but what does this mean?

'For therapists, intentional self-care is a survival tool...if we don't take care of ourselves, we cannot do our work effectively.' (Bush, 2015)

Self-care – a word that is familiar within the therapeutic professions. What, though, does 'self-care' really mean? We see many things on social media and the internet about bubble baths, time to oneself and so on, and indeed these can be part of self-care, but self-care is much more than this. Self-care starts with self-awareness and self-observation. To know where we are being more harmful than helpful to ourselves as therapeutic practitioners (even in the name of helping clients or advancing in our career) can serve us in making any necessary changes and employing strategies for self-care that is specific to our individual need and areas of misalignment with ourselves and needs.

Saying no when I need to and honouring my vision

As a therapeutic practitioner, I have found over the years that I need to re-evaluate my self-care and strategies to avoid burnout on a regular basis. For me, I have had a career-long focus on boundaries, and setting healthy boundaries in my practices in more areas than the time of appointments and contracts. I have needed, and need, to assess my internal boundaries and need for time structure in my life outside the office and therapist role. Before becoming a therapist, my life and work was mainly in dance and theatre, before I began to train as a counsellor/therapist, and also dance therapist and begin a dual career. I was determined I would not lose the dancer part of me, that there would always be dance in my work, and I would not forsake my dance classes and practice whatever work I was doing. This meant making sure I scheduled my time to include my dance and exercise, and to put boundaries around different aspects of my life in order to honour this and honour myself. Sometimes this went well. Other times this went not so well. As someone who more often has said yes to people than no, sometimes I would find myself feeling resentful to people wanting more of my time, or if I rushed a class at the end of a day of seeing to others' needs. This was not only in relation to clients, but also some personal relationships. This meant work around the difficulty I have had at times in saying no to people, and increasing, even painful self-awareness around this matter. I realised in not saying no to others, I was sometimes saying no to things for myself that I needed to say yes to. Self-care, for me, meant being more proficient in saying no, including saying no to myself when I was taking on projects to prove my worth through achievement or as a defence against a fear of failure. It meant cost/benefits analysis of various work I did, as well as non-

work areas. It meant looking at my work-life balance. It meant assessing if how I was spending my time was in line with my long-term vision and goals.

Learning through Breast Cancer

In April 2019, at the age of 45, I was diagnosed with multicentric breast cancer. The experience of travelling through breast cancer, with consequent left breast mastectomy and reconstruction invited me to a whole new level of assessing my need for self-care. I was concerned that I was not going to be able to see my clients for a few months, and how they may cope. The majority of my current clients suffer from eating disorders, and I was concerned about my absence triggering relapses in their recovery, or a worsening of their eating disorders. However, I know, it would be impossible to work immediately after mastectomy and reconstruction, which took place in July 2019. I worked from diagnosis up until the week scheduled for the surgery, and created a self-care booklet to leave with my clients in their absence. As someone who believes in practicing what I preach, I used the booklet for myself too, applying the concepts regularly, setting myself out a daily programme of garden time with my coffee, taking my vitamin D, healthy exercise, emotion management and so on. I had already set myself daily routines to help me navigate breast cancer, and give myself the best chance of survival from the day I was diagnosed, and then added to these from my booklet.

One thing I needed to look at within myself was how I felt towards slowing down my achieving and plans for a period of time and making simply surviving and living daily a priority – eating well, resting when I needed to after the surgery, practicing daily gratitude and marking even small achievements like completing my arm physiotherapy each day to regain use of my arm on the side of the surgery. This meant having more self-compassion, and this could only make me a more compassionate therapist. Since then, I have made self-care a central part of the treatment with my clients, and some of them even have self-care boxes, where they store things and ideas for moments of self-care as a regular practice.

The challenge was going to come when I started to phase back to work. Going back to work, even on a phased return, was going to mean managing work and all that that brings as a therapist, as well as in other work roles I undertake. However, there was a new factor in the mix, as now I was working as a therapist dealing with breast cancer, was post - surgical, and also on adjuvant chemoprevention treatment, which inevitably produces some side effects, and brings changes to the body, and potential identity. I knew I needed to practice adequate self-care, which would mean even more stringent than in the past. It became even more necessary to have adequate sleep, good nutrition and a good work-life balance. For the adjuvant treatment to work at its best, and to help prevent breast cancer recurrence or a new cancer forming, good nutrition, adequate sleep and exercise and limiting stress all contribute to a better outcome.

I was diligent about the amount of work I undertook per week in my phasing back. I decided

not to work mornings (as I do run some evening therapy and dance therapy/body confidence groups), and to keep mornings as a time set aside for myself, and also in case I had had a difficult night's sleep, as the adjuvant treatment has been documented to cause insomnia in some people. This way, I knew, if needed, I could have a couple of extra hours of

sleep in the morning without feeling anxious about needing to get up at an early hour. I would also be able to continue a morning ritual I had started during my time off, which was spending time in the garden with my coffee (weather permitting!), 'being' instead of 'doing', and taking in some vitamin D from the sun. I decided I was not going to let work impinge upon the things that were essential to my physical, mental and emotional well-being, and that in order to do my job, such things were actually a pre-requisite!

Having breast cancer also provided me with the opportunity to assess if I were going in the best direction for my life, what I wanted and didn't want, where I was achieving for the sake of impressing people, not for actual core value achievement, and how I wanted to spend the remainder of any life I have left ahead of me. Whilst my prognosis is good, I am aware cancer usually reduces the amount of years a person would have otherwise had in life, and also there is always the ongoing risk of recurrence even with preventative treatment and measures a person may take themselves. Self-care became the most central part of being an effective and competent therapist, who provides a service of safety, compassion, and good modelling to my clients. Reaching burnout was to be prevented at all costs, and balance and self-care were to be the essentials of this, even if at the expense of an accolade, an extra achievement or helping that extra person. If I am not at my best, I cannot offer my best to my clients, and like all humans, if tired, will be more irritable, less compassionate and less focused. Trying to achieve and offer more but skimping on self-care and ending up approaching or at the place of burn-out only leads ultimately to less competence and achievement.

Modelling to my clients

Many of the clients that come to see me, whether individually or in therapy and support groups struggle with adequate self-care. It is important that I practice what I preach on self-care, as well as model an attitude of self-care and self-worth. If I do not show it is important to care for myself or value myself enough, how can they be expected to think it is important to practice self-care and increase self-worth? Of course, this does not mean expectations of 'perfection' from me, but it does mean taking active measure to monitor myself, make self-care a priority and to work on making changes where I fall short. Clients can be particularly sensitive to the states of their therapists and helpers, and many easily recognise if the therapist is feeling taxed, irritable, and exhausted. In addition, exhaustion can sometimes mean slips in boundaries and being less diligent, and this would mean less safety for the client given that boundaries provide safety and a sense of a container. When we are tired and overworked, we are not as diligent in many ways, which we often see as human beings

in our personal lives. Although therapy is not our personal life, we are still human beings who can suffer from an overwrought nervous system and stress, and whilst we contain some things within ourselves when working with clients, an overwrought nervous system and tiredness does not just switch off because we are in the therapy room!

Conclusion

Allowing ourselves as therapeutic practitioners to get into a state of burnout does not make for effective therapy. In addition, it can lead to reduced capacity for compassion and empathy. When we are at the end of our rope, tired and run down, we can be more easily triggered, more irritated, more resentful of clients wanting something from us when we have little left to give. This indeed has been my own experience at times. In my desire to help, I would, at times, fall prey to over-helping, and then would be (albeit unwittingly) of less help when I made mistakes because I was too tired or struggled to deliver that I said I would give. This meant and means ongoing assessment of where I am up to, scheduling in self-care, assessing time management and boundaries at intervals. It means empowering myself and inviting my clients to empower themselves by self-responsibility and self-care. It means making sure I put on my oxygen mask before I go and help the other people struggling to breathe, and all the while making sure I silence my inner critic that may at times say 'you are being selfish or harsh'. It means not saying 'Yes' when I want to say 'No'. Breast cancer was and is a good teacher, who has taught me so much about putting in measures BEFORE I notice signs of any burnout. I believe the pre-requisite and most important thing to any therapy and helping is 'first do no harm', and this must include also to myself, which in turn will limit harm to my clients.

Bibliography

Bush, A.D. 2015. *Simple Self Care for Therapists: Restorative Practices to Weave Through Your Workday*. W.W.Norton, NY.