

Self-care as a Therapist. Dr Isha Mckenzie-Mavinga 30.5.29

"If you're gasping for air, you can't help other people," says Rankin, who is also earning her doctorate in health psychology from Walden University. "Counselors who neglect their own mental, physical and spiritual self-care eventually run out of 'oxygen' and cannot effectively help their clients because all of their energy is going out to the clients and nothing is coming back in to replenish the counselors' energy." (Rankin. S 2011)

As therapists we have an ethical responsibility to be present for our clients and work with compassion, congruence, and empathy. The enduring nature of vicarious trauma, grief and relational challenges can wear us down if we are not taking care of our own wellbeing and the impact of these phenomenological concerns. I therefore consider my own selfcare a priority. I have learned that exercising clear boundaries and self-nurturing have helped to keep my mind body and spirit balanced when with clients and supervisees and also when I am not working.

Preparing the space

Preparing my space for working with clients is a form of self-care and care for the clients and supervisees that I work with. I carry out cleansing rituals that clear negative elements and bring joy, protection and balance to the therapeutic space. This preparation helps define the working space from living and social space, especially when seeing clients at home. This has been essential for my wellbeing and for the client's wellbeing. What the client senses as they enter a therapeutic space is essential to their sense of safety and being cared for. It follows that if I am feeling nurtured, my clients will also feel nurtured. In my own consulting room. Flowers and cultural objects from my background give a sense of home rather than blank clinical grey spaces. This also makes me feel nurtured.

Winding down after sessions

When my client work has finished, I make sure I have eaten and take a walk. It is essential to move my body after sitting for long periods. I take a warm cleansing bath with essential oils. Sometimes I light candles to create a relaxing atmosphere and play some relaxation music to nurture and calm my spirit.

Taking breaks and holidays

I must admit it has taken years for me to take structured holidays from client work. In the past I would rearrange appointments and take breaks only during my clients scheduled holidays. This meant that breaks were staggered and I was available throughout school holidays and national holidays for clients who were not taking breaks, giving the appearance that I was always available.

The Wounded Healer myth resonates; 'a force for good but if not understood, leads to a deepening of the wound, the practitioner becoming 'sacrificed' for the benefit of the client (McLeod, 1998,P9).

I am a work in progress. I have learned that negotiating structured breaks rather than being conditioned by the client's holiday periods is a form of self-care. I am now fully aware that we can both survive these breaks. This required me to develop my self-reflection and

process my past hurts about abandonment, separation and endings. Also learning to shed cultural patterns like working harder to be accepted because of stereotypes about lazy black people perpetuated by racism. This lifelong re-evaluation helped me create stronger more realistic boundaries in my personal life and therefore be more courageous in working with client's experiences of abandonment.

Way back in my early years as a therapist, a friend said to me "you are always available". At the time I was flattered as it felt like a personal quality was being validated. Later in life, when I gave some reflection to my enduring disappointment about being let down by others, I realised that it is not necessary to place others needs before my own, our need for self-care can be mutual.

Parallel Process

Many female clients I have worked with had similar lifelong patterns of placing themselves second best and becoming drained by other's needs. We that self-care is different to selfishness.

One of my biggest learning curves is understanding and processing the balance between what I call 'compulsive independence patterns' and patterns of co-dependence. This has brought a stark realisation that as a therapist my own personal growth and development is paramount to assisting others to grow and change unhealthy relational patterns. This requires us to love every part of ourselves, even the shame and anger as we go through this process and emerge into larger more visible humans with better self-care and improved self-esteem.

As a one to one client, I became aware of my therapists' demeanour and whether they were fully emotionally available to endure our meetings. My own clients have assisted me to be aware of my selfcare as I know they can see me. I have received comments like, 'you look tired, or you look vibrant, and some of them ask me how I am, a dual process checking whether I am prepared for them. This sharpens the relevance of my selfcare and readiness for the sessions

Counselling takes emotional energy, so to wind down and debrief, I take brief notes. This process helps me to offload thoughts and feelings from sessions and in most cases let it go until the next meeting. If I find it difficult to shake off material from a session. I usually call my supervisor for a brief chat and support. The action of asking for help when I need it rather than storing up feelings has been a steep learning curve for me as I am generally an independent person. This has taught me to trust myself and others with my vulnerability.

Unconditional love for myself is important so that I don't store up guilt about not being available to absorb everyone's problems outside of work. Observing these boundaries is an example to clients who find that they get drawn into other's problems and this can be burdensome.

Personal development

I attend supervision regularly and make sure this space attends to separating my own projections and issues from the client's situation. I have also attended and participated in

conferences and workshops to enhance my personal development and connect to others in the field.

My own counselling is key to maintaining my self-esteem at a level where I remain confident, congruent and compassionate with myself and clients. This helps me forgive myself for mistakes and forgetting that I am sometimes vulnerable. Sometimes there are parallels between my client's stories and my own and I am reminded that I have defence patterns that need to be taken care off, so making space to reflect on my own well-being is important. I have learned and continue to learn about my ability to ask for help and share my vulnerability with my counsellors, family and close associates.

I use re-evaluation co-counselling as a method of therapeutic support. This approach encourages me to work on myself development in groups and be a member of a community of counsellors who address oppressions and sociocultural concerns both for themselves and others. I continue to work on my own oppressions and internalised oppression, so that I can be aware of my own prejudices and ways that oppressions feature in the lives of clients.

Reclaiming links to my heritage as a black woman of African Caribbean and Jewish Heritage has given me confidence as an adult. Transparency about this process via my published writing has attracted clients who also wanted encouragement to explore, reclaim and be proud of their ethnic backgrounds. I feel this has been an incredible journey that has added to my self-confidence and confidence as a therapist. Therefore, my clients have benefitted from my openness to address their cultural development and experiences of cultural oppression. I am proud to have been witness to these life journeys.

Exercise

Psychotherapy requires a lot of sitting, so I get up and stretch between clients. I take walks in nature and swim to clear my mind and rebalance my physical and emotional energy. Eating healthy goes alongside this. I try to give myself the attention and love that I give others and notice that connection is just as important as solitude.

I have practised yoga for many years and keep physically active on a daily basis, by stretching and exercising my body. This thread reminds me to check with clients whether they are balancing their own wellbeing and personal growth with physical activity.

As I mature person, I am learning more about the true meaning of rest and allowing myself time off to idle and do nothing. These periods bring elucidation and creativity in my life and I am improving self-permission to draw, paint and write. This gives me opportunity to express my inner self and allow spirit to guide me.

Spirituality

I cleanse the space that I live and work in using incense, candles, meditation and prayers. I practice Reiki and meditation and this really helps to keep me calm. Prayers for myself and the work I do with clients help me remember that I am not alone in my work. My therapeutic work is guided by a higher power and my ancestors and therefore I believe that the courage and wisdom needed to support others is universal. I am

in gratitude for my life and the privilege of others sharing their personal journeys with me and moving through life's challenges, heartaches and celebrations.

Reading

Literature that supports my work and the cultural elements of human development nourishes and affirms my cultural and political approach to working with clients and helps the development of anti-oppressive practice. I also read self-help books, novels and autobiography.

Creativity

Writing has been a useful outlet for sharing ideas, expressing thoughts and emotions and relaxing my mind. As a medium for sharing ideas and venting I write papers and have contributed to several anthologies and published academic books. Writing poetry exercises my brain and supports self-expression and storytelling. Through this medium I am enabled to be the real me and share thoughts and emotions. These activities mirror and expand my inner self. I have recently taken up drawing and painting and this helps me loose myself express my ideas in solitude. Theatre, dancing, movies and the fun side of life nourish the soul and create a balance of mood.

Time with family and friends

In the past I found it difficult to take off my counselling hat when with friends and family. It was enlightening to have it pointed out to me that, my social talk was as though I was being counsellor. My children helped me to see my real self and the need to de-role at home. The issues that clients raise also help me see areas of my own life that need attention. It is a blessing to experience a gaze that supports personal development.

I am becoming more being transparent, humble and flexible in my life and work. Alongside this learning curve is the practice of asking for help rather than suffering in silence and always appearing strong and unshockable. This is still a work in progress.

Retirement and the next stage

After 33 years as a therapist and teacher I am working towards my retirement as for my own mental wellbeing and selfcare I believe that working in mental health should not be a lifetime job. Although I am still receiving referrals, I believe that I have earned a rest and that this is the ultimate in self-care. I am looking forward to a period with no professional appointments and plenty of disposable time to indulge in my creativity.

Writing this essay has helped me to reflect on an essential element of my career as a psychotherapist.

McLeod in Dryden, W. (1995). *The Stresses in Counselling in Action*. London: Sage.
McLeod. (1998) P.9 BACP *Good Practice in Action* **088** Fact Sheet. Self-care for the counselling professions Sandra Rankin American Counseling Association, in '*Taking care of yourself as a counsellor*' By Lynne Shallcross January Counselling Today 17, 2011