

Healing Ourselves

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When I was in private practice, I passed a flower shop when driving between the courthouse and my office. Following a particularly difficult court experience, I would stop and buy flowers for my office or home. The experience of being in a place of nurture and beauty restored my sense of well-being. The simple act of purchasing flowers took me from the ugliness of particularly disturbing facts or behaviors to beauty. The shopkeepers seemed perfectly content to let me browse for whatever time I wanted. The act of viewing the various displays and connecting with the many varieties of flora nurtured my spirit. Occasionally I would stand in the cold storage area reserved for more delicate flowers because I could be perfectly alone in an environment of, beauty, non-violence and non-judgment. The cold would act as a natural timer that pushed me out to resume my work life.

Most of us have considered some remedies that take relatively little time yet help relieve stress. A trip to the gym or the nail salon, or a ten minute walk at lunchtime regardless of the weather, truly can be quick and effective ways to separate ourselves from our work. Any solution that you find that quickly will take your mind from heaviness to happiness is worthy of habitual practice. When I am teaching law students, the last fifteen minutes of each class is devoted to self-care.¹ Students devise quick and fun ways to take them out of the sadness of our cases to the joy of being human. I am always amazed at the creativity and the simplicity of the activities that they devise. For example, a lesson in rug hooking required that we focus on hand and color coordination, leaving no room for our minds wandering back to our work. A quick game of rock, paper, scissors did the same.

In 2005, Sarah Buel and I presented for the first time on self-care at the ABA Commission on Domestic Violence's Civil Law Institute held in Chicago. What struck me most during the presentation was the look of relief on the participant's faces. I realized that the discussion of taking care of oneself was generally not happening in either legal aid or other law offices across the country. For those who work daily with the vulnerable and victimized, meeting our own needs is fundamental to our ability to thrive. Also, we need regular reminders to engage in practices designed to minimize stress and sustain us in our work.

¹ This is a practice that I learned from my wonderful colleagues at the Domestic Violence Institute at Northeastern University School of Law.

The “quick fixes” are essential and are good to incorporate into our daily routines. Equally crucial, however, are regular practices that promote reflection. Examining our level of happiness and professional satisfaction takes time, but must be a regular practice if we want to assure long-term personal and professional satisfaction.

In that regard, “self-care” seems a limiting term. We really are talking about our ability and willingness to reach our true callings in a way that is compassionate and self-preserving. Spiritual teacher Dhyani Wahoo tells us that we have an obligation to be happy. When I heard her say this, I was initially struck by the seeming inconsistencies of “obligation” and “happiness”. I was forced to contemplate how my own level of un/happiness impacts my well-being and that of clients and co-workers. I understood that if I were not true to myself, I could not bring peace, happiness or inspiration to others. *Short term solutions are essential for getting through the day. The longer term tools and techniques are essential for getting us through life.*

Often we do not recognize our stress until we are well into it. Usually others will recognize changes in our behavior before we do. This is why we must develop regular practices that relieve stress. Much of what we experience as work-related stress or sadness can be relieved and prevented through regular attention to our own feelings and needs. Not respecting the boundaries of others and not enforcing our own often creates much of our stress. Domestic violence and other forms of abuse are all about failure to maintain appropriate boundaries. Isn't it ironic that often those of us who represent survivors are unwilling to draw boundaries with others or with ourselves? I can assure you, however, that once you start respecting your own boundaries and those of others, you will watch a more mature and satisfied adult emerge. This does not mean that your life will be pain-free. It means that your personal and professional relationships will attain a more appropriate balance.

Simple rituals can draw boundaries around your work. For example, saying good morning and good night to co-workers can define the beginning and end of your work day. Scheduling breaks or visits with colleagues into your work day can provide stress relief at regular intervals. Shutting your office door with a clear indication that you are not to be disturbed can provide a peaceful space for a quick meditation or relaxation exercise, as well as provide uninterrupted time to reflect on a case and accomplish your work. For managers, regularly scheduled staff meetings to discuss the emotional and psychological impact of the work can be critical to healthy productivity.

I have no doubt that each of you can brainstorm on the best way to manage your daily stressors. In the long run, we have to develop healthy boundaries and practices that de-clutter our minds as well as our spirits. Simple techniques can sustain us in our practices for whatever period of time we choose to work with survivors of violence. The following are some suggestions that I have found helpful in my own life:

1. *Respect the Boundaries of Your Competency and Your Professional Role.*

As advocates, we work within the confines of our profession and our skills. While we would like to resolve all of the problems that our clients bring to our offices, we cannot. Nor do healthy clients want us interfering with their lives beyond what they ask us to do. They come to us with specific requests, whether to help stop the violence, find safe housing or help them retain custody of their children. Identify what skills and training you have that can assist the client. If you are a domestic violence advocate, you most likely can assist with shelter. If you are a lawyer, you can advise as to custody and manage any litigation. We can make referrals to other agencies or individuals who have the expertise to help meet our clients' other needs. When you work beyond your areas of expertise, you run the risk of exhausting yourself and failing your client. You could create dependencies that will deprive the client of finding more appropriate resources. Most of all, you will disappoint. You will disappoint yourself, your clients, your co-workers, your friends and your families. You would not have done your best work and because of it you will be tired and distracted. You need to gauge what is the best use of your time and energy. For example, sometimes a ten minute telephone call from a lawyer to benefit provider can resolve a matter quickly. In other cases, the additional work might be more involved. In those cases, you might decide that taking on the additional work would be too difficult for you, emotionally or otherwise.

- Define early in your case what you can or cannot do within the bounds of your professional role.
- Clearly articulate to the client what you see as your role
- Accept your limitations and appreciate the good work that you can do for the client rather than dwell on what you cannot

2. *Respect Your Own Boundaries.*

Consider your own boundaries. Do you know what they are? Are you comfortable keeping the personal out of the professional relationship? Can you separate out your own needs from those of the client? Are you accepting when your client rejects your advice? Do you have the need for constant validation from others? Are you able to say "no" to clients, family members, friends and colleagues? If any of these questions have not been the subject of sincere self-reflection, you might want to set aside time now to begin exploring your answers. If you have a mentor, you might discuss the issues with him or her. Professional or spiritual reading can contribute quite a bit toward the development of healthy boundaries. Mental health consultations can be remarkably helpful. The combination of self-reflection and objective advice is a life-long practice that will serve you through many personal and professional ups and downs. The excuse of not enough time for self-reflection is not acceptable.

- Spend time sorting out your own professional and personal boundaries

- When you do not keep to your boundaries, whether professional or personal, reflect on why you are not doing so
- Seek out professional suggestions on how you can change your behavior to enforce your own boundaries and respect those of others.

3. “No” Means “No”.

We quickly raise this mantra in sexual assault trainings, yet readily ignore it in other aspects of our lives. For managers, when an employee says that s/he cannot take on another case for fear of risking malpractice, we must respect the boundary. For front line workers, when you cannot hear one more story of violence, you must be able to tell your superiors and your co-workers of your distress. It also may require you to be available to assist colleagues through days when they are unable to continue their work in the usual manner.

Saying “no” in our personal lives is just as important. A friend of mine once told me “If it is not a “yes”, it is a “no”. Very often if we have to consider an answer to a simple question, the answer is “no”. Do you want to go to a movie? Do you want to be friends? Do you want to go out after work? Can you help me? If you need to consider the response, perhaps your answer is “no”. Life becomes much simpler when we have the ability to say “no”. If others are unwilling to accept your decisions, you will need to learn ways to strategize around their disappointment. Honesty is helpful. Try saying “I am really trying to understand and respect my own needs because I know that it is the best way for me to stay refreshed in my work.” “I appreciate the fact that you are disappointed that I cannot go out tonight, but this is something that I need to do for myself.” Therapists can make helpful suggestions in how to communicate clearly to others your needs and decisions. If others continuously refuse to accept your decisions, consider whether or not those relationships are healthy for you.

- Think about how others have enforced their boundaries in ways that are helpful and not offensive.
- Practice out loud what you will say to maintain your boundaries in the face of persistence.
- Observe whether or not you can accept the boundaries set by others.

4. Ask for Help.

Very often we don’t need a long break from our work. A few hours off, a change in assignment for a few days or closing intake can be sufficient to sustain us in our work. If you have made a sincere examination of what you need and you are meeting resistance from others, consider your alternatives. Consider what changes are essential in your workplace in order for you to continue your work with that employer. If you are in management, consider what creates a healthy environment so that your best

employees will thrive. Once we have a commitment to work together toward a healthy environment, expect momentary setbacks. Commit to working together to recognize unhealthy practices and to change the culture that has developed unhealthy conditions or practices. For non-work situations, make the same analysis whether or not the relationship or other situation is continuing to meet your needs.

- Clearly articulate your needs to those who are in a position to help.
- If those who are in a position to create positive change refuse to do so, consider whether or not you can continue in that relationship.
- Expect lapses into old habits as you and others try to create a positive environment. Patience and humor will help create change.

5. *Be Demanding of Yourself and Others.*

Expect yourself and others to live in honesty, integrity and with compassion. If any element is missing in your professional or personal life, consider the source of any inability to maintain these standards. Correct your own behavior and trust that all will work for the better of everyone once you do.

- Be honest with yourself and others when you could have done something better.
- Be honest and truthful in all of your dealings. You will find instant relief in honesty. The weight of living without integrity is destructive and retards our growth.
- Help others address their weaknesses without imposing judgment or shame.

6. *Treat Depression.*

I have always appreciated when friends and colleagues expressed their concern that I appeared depressed or was behaving negatively. I hope that you are blessed with people who care sufficiently to tell you when your behavior troubles them. It would be impossible to work with victims of violence and not slip into negativity at one time or another. If you feel negative or “depressed” for more than two weeks, seek professional help. We make all sorts of excuses for not treating depression. “I am just being realistic, not negative.” “I can’t afford to change jobs.” “I am too set in my ways to change.” Sound familiar? I’ll bet you have a few creative excuses of your own. If we have not recognized or dealt with our needs in the past, the cumulative lack of self-awareness or boundary setting can result in depression. Therapy can help us identify the sources of our negativity. Depression can be the precursor to amazing growth. Reflection combined with behavioral changes can lead to exciting spiritual, professional and personal paths. Just remember—Friends are for support, professionals are for therapy.

- Be aware of your level of engagement in your work and personal lives.

- Gauge your ability to feel joy as well as pain.
- Seek guidance from others, both personal and professional.

7. *Maintain a Healthy Sense of Humor.*

If you go through a twenty-four hour period without seeing humor in at least one situation or event, you may be in immediate need of self-nurturing. Stop everything that you are doing and take time for yourself. Watch your favorite comedy, share a laugh with a colleague or client. Find funny pet photos on the internet. Emergency care is needed!

- We all have favorite movie clips that make us laugh. Keep that movie or comedy routine handy. Watch it often, even when you are not feeling “down”.
- Seek out fun.
- If you have sustained lack of enjoyment in your life, seek professional help.

8. *Believe That You Will Be Taken Care Of If You Take Care of Yourself.*

If you are unhappy in your work, think about change. Sometimes change can be simple. Blocking out one hour a day where we do not take phone calls may be enough to refresh. Spending engaged time with children or pets might be just what you need at the end of the day. Listening how children express their needs can teach us to improve our own styles of expression. Engage in an activity where you will interact with others who have no connection to your work. Leave work early every now and then—and not because you have a dentist appointment! Take a walk for fifteen minutes during the workday. Roll out the mat for a fifteen minute power nap.

- Engage in simple activities that are designed to refresh you.
- Watch how your life becomes easier once you focus on creating simple pleasures.
- Trust that taking care of you is the best preparation for taking care of others.

9. *Find Ways to Be Un-Impaired.*

Sometimes when I am driving I think about how many impaired drivers are on the road. This includes me when I have not had enough sleep. We often think of those who are addicted to substances as being the impaired ones among us. Try expanding your definition of impairment to include any condition that prevents us from fully engaging in our work and other activities. What can you do to help yourself sleep better and longer? Can you identify when your negativity impairs your judgment? Has your willingness to

take “shortcuts” in your work not only impacted quality but undermined your self-esteem? All negative patterns impair our judgment and general well-being.

- Be aware of how much time you engage in passive activities, such as watching television.
- Be aware of whether or not you are engaging in passive activities out of choice or habit.
- Be mindful of any habits or activities that leave you mentally or emotionally exhausted or otherwise impair your judgment.

10. Remember That We Are Service Providers.

David Hall, former Dean of Northeastern Law School, said that when he meets someone he asks two questions: “Why has this person crossed my path? What can I do to serve him?” Sometimes the answers are not obvious ones. Our immediate response might be to assume that we will take the individual on as our client. What if the service is to say “no” to the individual? What if we are not the best provider for him or her? What if we are too exhausted to make that decision? What if the person has come into our life to teach us compassion and we were too busy to learn the lesson? When we remove our ego from the transaction, amazing lessons are learned. Being straightforward about our abilities and our needs, and making an honest assessment of the client’s abilities and needs will create true partnerships with those whom we meet. Our clients have wonderful lessons to teach us through rich experiences that will sustain and nurture us.

- Be aware of any negative feelings that you have toward a particular client. Feelings of hopelessness impair our ability to function.
- Consider whether or not your response to a client or inability to decline work is part of “burnout” or “compassion fatigue”.
- Leave your job if you routinely have sustained negative feelings toward your work or your clients. It is not your concern who will replace you.

11. Develop Compassion.

If our definition of professionalism has blocked out ability to feel sadness or pain, then we need to examine whether we have lost part of our humanity. Developing compassion is a necessary part of our work. Without it we cannot understand behaviors that might be judged as “wrong”. From a legal perspective, it is impossible to effectively defend clients or explain their behaviors if we do not understand their intention. The same applies in the rest of our lives. If we cannot develop an appreciation of different perspectives, we are destined to be unhappy. Developing compassion is not the same as sanctioning inappropriate behavior. Living with

compassion is self-protective. Adding a different perspective will help remove us from negative behaviors that undermine our ability to appreciate the richness and difficulties of our lives and the lives of others.

- Develop compassion for yourself as well as others
- Appreciate that most of us respond to situations based upon our prior experiences
- Develop practices that guard you from taking personally the responses of others.

If you are unable to maintain compassion for yourself or others, consider removing yourself from the situation that is creating the distress.

12. Believe in Abundance.

Money cannot be the excuse to keep us in work that makes us unhappy. I am embarrassed when I hear lawyers say that they cannot afford to change their work. We have been blessed with education and the ability to earn a living. We have choices. This is true for other professionals, as well. Usually when we stay in a position long after we are unhappy or dissatisfied, we need to face our fear of change. Embrace change. Whether it is change in work, our habits, our relationships or our attitude, change never disappoints. Change is growth—for us and for those around us.

- What would you be doing for work if you were guaranteed sufficient money to meet your needs and those of anyone dependent upon you?
- Go do it. You will be taken care of.
- My favorite saying is *“LEAP AND THE NET WILL APPEAR”*.

13. Know That You Are Good.

We all have behaved in ways that caused unnecessary distress to others. Acknowledge your behavior. Learn how to avoid the behavior and move on. I believe that most people want to be well-behaved. They want to love and be loved. Some days we are just not at our best. Maybe certain experiences trigger survival responses that are no longer needed or appropriate. Maybe we have been abused or neglected and have yet to identify the triggers. Listen to the suggestions of others. Decide for yourself if your behavior was inappropriate. Consider how others might perceive us. Develop techniques for adjusting our behavior and accept that we are human. We are unlikely to eliminate inappropriate behavior from our lives. We learn to recognize it earlier, acknowledge the behavior and accept our humanity and that of others with humor.

- Acknowledge when you have behaved inappropriately. These are learning moments. Ask others whether or not you could have handled something better.

- Rejoice in the fact that you are human.
- Expect your best, not perfection.

14. Work with people as they are, not the way that you want them to be.

You can only suggest change. Plant the seed of how someone might view life differently. Eliminating the word “should” from our vocabularies helps us to eliminate judgment in our relationships with others and ourselves. You may no longer be in the person’s life to see positive change. Know that your words are remembered and do effect change for better or worse. This is why we want to speak carefully. If another adult’s behavior is so concerning that you or others will be harmed through an ongoing relationship, do what you must to protect yourself while minimizing the harm to others. Knowing when to take appropriate action can be achieved through self-reflection and the guidance of those whom we trust.

- Enforce your standards and boundaries as needed to secure as safe and healthy work and personal atmosphere. Be clear and compassionate in the enforcement.
- Do so because it is necessary for your well-being and without expectation that others will change.
- Examine whether or not your insistence that others behave in a certain way is rooted in your own sense of safety and respect or in your inability to accept behavior that does not follow your vision of how others “should” behave.

15. Feed Your Spirit.

Whether it is music, meditation, play, writing or drawing, there is a practice that nurtures your spirit. Paying attention to our short and long term spiritual needs is really how self-care is best accomplished. Whether you define spirit as soul, personality, happiness or otherwise, you already know that the feeding and caring of our spirit is what sustains us through difficulties large and small. Decision making becomes not only easier, but simple, when we nurture the spirit.

- We are meant to be joyful.
- Taking time for joyful activities that do not harm others is a form of self-love.
- Love yourself and all else will happen in the right order.

By choosing to serve survivors of violence, you have chosen a path that requires courage. You have been blessed with an opportunity to make a difference in many lives. You have also been blessed with an extraordinary opportunity to learn about yourself. Our clients are often our best teachers if only we listen. Whether it is your

path to work in the field for a few months, years or a lifetime, keep your heart open and take care.