

Self-care

in the Family Violence, Women's Health and Domestic and Family Violence sectors amidst COVID-19

Working in the domestic and family violence sector exposes professionals to a whole range of stressors, potentially on a daily basis. Whether you are case-managing or providing therapeutic support, it is likely that you are always holding and managing a level of risk in relation to the safety of your clients and their family. Some front-line practitioners may be supporting clients directly after acute traumas like sexual and physical assault, and as a result may be repetitively exposed to detailed accounts of people's most horrific experiences, on a daily basis, placing them at high risk of vicarious trauma. One of the hardest things about working in domestic violence can be supporting and holding a space for someone who feels trapped, under threat, but not ready to leave the situation. Sitting with someone who is in danger but stuck, can leave us feeling stuck with them, a parallel feeling of being under threat and powerless to change it. If all of these front-line stressors weren't enough, domestic and family violence services are often confronted with a whole range of systemic stressors, including high case-loads, working with other service systems that don't understand DV, advocating for clients in the court system, tension between services (referral processes and gate-keeping), and limited resources particularly around places in refuges.

On top of all of this, the emergence of co-vid 19 has brought a whole range of new stressors for our clients and for us as practitioners. The potential health consequences of the virus and financial uncertainty, along with perpetrators attempts to exploit the pandemic as an opportunity to further isolate clients, has seen significant increases in referrals for many services. While the need for support has increased, the pandemic has greatly challenged our capacity to connect with our clients and monitor risk. Services have also been required to implement new changes and policies on the move, and adapt quickly to new technology and new ways of working, including from home. For some working from home has been a welcome change and a chance to slow down, avoiding previous commutes and writing emails in your pyjamas. For others this has brought zoom-meeting fatigue, a juggling of responsibilities, loss of work-life boundaries, constant distractions and a sense of disconnection from your team.

Cumulative exposure to crisis, risk, and trauma can start to impact on our mental health, slowly shifting us towards higher levels of physiological arousal. This is often experienced as an underlying feeling of restlessness, stress or anxiety, and we may be experienced by others as being short, more reactive or sensitive than usual. It reduces our capacity to manage other stressors (particularly personal/family pressures) and can make it difficult to participate in social situations we would normally enjoy as our nervous system becomes tuned up to handle threat not social engagement and positive relationships.

For many, the changes and new restrictions has created major obstacles for access to self-care, whether it be spinning around in your chair to have a quick impromptu debrief with a colleague, or getting a massage, or going to the gym. Many people working in the sector may not have had much in the way of healthy self-care strategies to start with, and under stress are more likely to be driven by the brain's instant pleasure dopamine reward system. Healthy self-care strategies or not, many people may have noticed an increased urge to eat sweet, salty and fatty (calorie-dense) foods. Some may notice their 'only on the weekend' drinking rule has begun to slip, or that they are spending a lot more time scrolling on their phone at times when they know they should be sleeping or actually connecting with people.

While we certainly appear to be approaching the other side of the pandemic, we need to remember that our nervous system may be slower to catch-up, and that either way, longevity in the domestic and family violence sector, demands that we invest in our long-term mental health. I think the greatest challenge with self-care, is continuing to investment in these strategies, even when we are time-poor or under increased stress. Here are some strategies that can help us to embed self-care into our lives –

Creating routines, rules or rituals – can help change habits. Here are five tips and advice for this time...

1. **Sleep** - The emerging neuroscience around sleep is showing us that this is a time that our brain engages not just in rest, but in brain-maintenance and memory consolidation. For healthy functioning, our brain needs to get 8 hours of solid sleep on a regular basis, as it is towards the end of our sleep cycle that we have the most REM sleep (responsible for memory consolidation and some important restorative functions). Creating rules around bed-time, such as no technology (phones/screen-time) in bed, can break habits that contribute to poor sleep (which otherwise can quickly exacerbate stress levels). Making rules around caffeine intake, such as not drinking coffee after 12 can also support this. Caffeine has a half-life of 5 hours (to metabolise), and even if you still find it easy to get to sleep, caffeine has been shown to impact on the quality of our sleep if consumed within 9 hours before going to sleep. Even building a routine around going to bed one night a week can go a long way in maintaining your mental health.
2. **Exercise** - Find exercise that you enjoy and plan it into your week. Ideally we want to be engaging in 30 minutes of vigorous exercise (intense enough that you sweat) to get optimum benefits for our brain. Research shows that exercising for this duration and intensity can completely burn off excess cortisol (stress hormone) from our body, that we would otherwise be carrying in our system for 2-3 days. It also releases calming hormones and neurotransmitters, improving mood and promoting positive emotions. If vigorous exercise is difficult for you or just not your thing, going for walk, particularly with a friend still has lots of health benefits and can be a great way to stay connected.
3. **Diet** – We all know about the benefits of a healthy diet for our body’s physical wellbeing, but we often don’t consider its impact on our mental health and mood. 95% of our Serotonin (feel good happiness chemical) is actually produced by the micro-flora in the lining of our gut. While there is so much information around foods that promote the well-being of our mental health, as a broad rule try to avoid eating too much processed foods, particularly foods high in sugar, sodium and fat. Eating fresh fruit and vegetables rich in vitamins, and foods with anti-inflammatory properties like turmeric, ginger and garlic, are associated with promoting brain health and positive mood.
4. **Mindfully monitoring** - Working in this sector can mean constant exposure to other people’s experiences of trauma, placing us at higher risk of compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma and emotional constriction. Some people may notice that they are holding the emotions of others in their body long after a call, and some may notice that they leave their feelings at the door when they step into a session or pick up the phone. While most of the time we may want to resonate with our clients experiences so they feel genuinely connected and not alone in those big feelings, there are also times where we need to step back to provide containment and hold a space for them and ourselves. This process of actively attempting to not feel, in many ways, goes against the connections of our brain and nervous system, and repetitive attempts to step away from what we are experiencing can start to lead us towards feeling increasingly numb. That is, we cannot selectively mute negative emotions, and overtime attempts to block out connecting with other people’s pain, sadness, or terror, can start to impact on our capacity to feel other emotions like joy, excitement or a sense of connection. So if you

are frequently having moments where you need to leave your feelings at the door, make sure you have strategies for picking them back up on the way out. Setting up daily prompts on your phone that cue you to pause, take a deep breath and notice what you are feeling, is a great way to ensure that you check-in with yourself and monitor whether you need to focus more on self-care at the moment. Most mindfulness apps allow you to program these prompts into your day and can then engage you in a calming and centring activity that reconnects you with your emotions.

5. **Transition rituals** - Planning transition rituals, that signal the end of your work-day and support you to leave it behind, can be really important to maintaining our self-care and relationships with others. This is particularly important if you are working with traumatic disclosures, or managing high levels of risk, and are even more important to have in place if you are working from home. This may involve taking some time on your commute home to reflect and process the day, and then playing a particular song to symbolise your decision to leave that stress until tomorrow. If working from home, it may be that you take your dog for a walk to decompress or have a shower and change your clothes to symbolise that transition.

Authored by Trent Savill, Complex Care (contextualised and learning emerging from WorkUP Queensland PD events held on 19 April and 11 May 2020)