

Self-Care as a Social Justice Issue

SOWK 697.03 Diversity, Oppression and Social Justice

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Learning Objective #1

Develop a greater awareness of your own identities and of personal experiences, socialization, values, attitudes, and patterned responses to human diversity;

Connections to Self-Care:

We propose that reflecting and learning about Self-Care helps develop a greater awareness of our personal experiences as social work practitioners, identify our needs and establish practices to improve our well-being and capacity to work towards social justice with others.

Learning Objective #3

Gain advanced knowledge of various forms of oppression and of the impact of oppression in the context of social justice work;

Connection to Self-Care:

We propose that learning about Self-Care as a Social Justice Issue helps us gain advanced knowledge of the multiplicity of causes and effects of compassion fatigue or burn-out, to engage in critical reflection on the dominant discourses about burn-out, and to have an understanding of the oppressive nature of individualized conceptualizations of self-care.

Learning Objective #4

Develop an understanding of the strategies and concepts related to anti-oppressive practice in social work;

Connection to Self-Care:

We propose that developing a multiplicity of Self-Care skills, at the micro, mezzo, and macro level, is a crucial strategy in maintaining our individual and collective capacity to work with awareness, compassion, and an ethic of empowerment. Anti-oppressive social work practice must be grounded in principles that include authentic valuing of ourselves, our fellow social workers, and community.

Social Work As Compassionate Justice

- “I know I will never be able to forget this moment of physically turning my back on him. **Nothing in my professional training has prepared me for the waves of shame, betrayal and dishonour that go through me.**” (Reynolds, 2011, p. 28).
- “The very act of being compassionate and empathic extracts a cost under most circumstances. In our effort to view the world from the perspective of the suffering we suffer. **The meaning of compassion is to bear suffering.** Compassion fatigue, like any other kind of fatigue, reduces our capacity or our interest in bearing the suffering of others.” (Figley, 2002, p. 1434)

Compassion Fatigue

- “hearing about and assisting others managing the impact of their traumatic experiences of war, abuse, mental health, loss, grief, or death, can be stressful and eventually contribute to vicarious trauma for social workers.” (McGarrigle et al., 2011, p. 213)
- “A professional experiencing vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue has limited ability to express empathy, has overwhelming feelings of despair and is unable to be sufficiently emotionally available to his/her clients.” (McGarrigle et al., 2011, p. 213)

Definition, Meanings and Importance of Self-Care

Self-care can be described as an individual's ability to balance personal, professional, emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual components in order to live in a balanced, energized manner that assists one in coping with day-to-day stressors (Collins, 2005).

...neglecting self-care and healthy coping strategies typically results in **sleep deprivation, emotional exhaustion, reduced morale, feelings of despair, high levels of staff turnover among social workers** (Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2005; Pooler, 2008), **and may result in ineffective treatment and care for their clients** (Ben-Zur & Michael, 2007; Pooler, 2008).

(McGarrigle & Walsh, 2011, p. 214)

Breaking the silence

“The first is to speak openly about our own struggles with compassion stress and compassion fatigue. **The conspiracy of silence among the profession about this compassion fatigue is no different than the silence about family violence, racism, and sexual harassment in the past**” (Figley, 2002, p. 1440)

Discussion: Discouragement

- Moments of realization that we were **the unwilling and unwitting contributors and perpetrators of oppression and injustice**
- Moments of feeling **exhausted, overwhelmed and unable to envision hope** for an individual, a family, a community, an organization, ourselves as social work professionals, our society as a whole, the Planet

Self Care

Self-care, broadly conceived, consists of an approach, strategies, and practices aimed at caring for oneself by oneself. Situation and culture specific, self-care concerns the purposeful use of practices to enhance personal well-being and healthy functioning.

(Profitt, 2011, p.279)

Personal

The personal usually refers to our unique individual biographies, personalities, internal states, and experiences. In critical SW, the notion of the personal also encompasses an understanding of our multiple social identities and our place in relations of power in SW practice.

(Profitt, 2011, p. 280)

Social Divine - Vikki Reynolds (2011)

“As an activist I have been enlivened by participating in the spontaneous co-creation of spaces of justice-doing and embodied connections with unknown others who embrace me with spirited solidarity in direct action struggles against oppression.” (Reynolds, 2011, p. 41)

“More than a resistance to burnout, momentary experiences of the social divine feed our hungry hopes for just societies and global justice.” (Reynolds, 2011, p. 41)

Redefining Self-Care

- “How have you thought about self-care in social work practice?”
- How do you understand the relationship between self-care of social workers and the socio-political, cultural, and economic context in which we work.
- What do you see as the possible potentials of and barriers to a critical, collective approach to self-care?” (Proffit, p. 278)
- How does lack of self-care affect our ability to be successful as social workers?
- How do we live self-care in our daily lives?

Critical, Collective Notion of Self-Care

Critical, collective signals the need to think about self-care in ways that go beyond the individual to recognize both the larger social and political contexts of existing inequalities and the intertwined nature of self and others. (Profitt, 2011, p. 279)

Common conceptualizations of self-care rarely integrate the context of our work as social workers, but instead use frameworks of private feelings, psychology, or individual trauma. (Profitt, 2011, p. 279)

ACSW/ CASW Competencies

“Self-care activities or programs are counted as Category C credits. ***This may include, but is not limited to, nutrition, diet, exercise and spiritual self-care activities.***”

(ACSW, 2005, retrieved from http://www.acsw.ab.ca/site/faq_main?nav=sidebar)

“Should our ability to provide competent and adequate service to clients be hampered by psychological distress, mental health or personal problems, then ***we must seek appropriate remedies to care for ourselves.***” (CASW, 2005)

Critique of ACSW/CASW on Self-Care/Solidarity

- “Pedicures and Bubble Baths”? Why is no connection to compassion fatigue, PTSD, vicarious trauma being made, and our wellness not supported with more substantial suggestions?
- Linkages to sources of collective disempowerment?
- Acknowledgement of the ethical considerations of not attending to self-care?
- Connection to mezzo and macro levels?
- Invitation to shaping organizational culture that will encourage self-care/solidarity?

Doing Collective Self-Care

...We can create intentional collective spaces, in or outside the workplace, that nourish self-care and growth, clear the mind and emotions, and recharge energies. (Profitt, 2011, p. 286)

Structuring our understanding of sustainability as a collective task invites us to move in towards other workers, to sustain and support them, to be in solidarity with them, and to lend them our hope for a just society. (Reynolds, 2011, p. 32)

Justice and Collective Sustainability

Vikki Reynolds (27:49)

Engaging with justice-doing constructs our collective desire as more than resisting the harms that are part of our work. **As community workers and therapists we want to be fully alive, open to transformation and of use to people across our lifespan in all our paid and unpaid work.** (Reynolds, 2011, p. 28)

Solidarity as Self-Care

“I don’t think as therapists and community workers we’re burning out. **The problem of burnout is out is not in our heads or in our hearts, but in the real world where there is a lack of justice.** The people I work alongside don’t burn me out and they don’t hurt me, they transform me, challenge me and inspire me.” (Reynolds, 2011, p. 28)

“We promote sustainability in relationships with each other, not as a series of isolated; individual projects. **I am interested in our collective care, and our collective sustainability, which is reciprocal, communal, and inextricably link with spirited practices of solidarity**” (Reynolds, p. 32).

Designing Self-care in Social Work Practice

Reflection questions for our journals:

- **Micro:** What can I do individually? for self and other
- **Mezzo:** What can I do with and for my fellow social workers? How do we support each other in our organizations? Institutions? Together with clients?
- **Macro:** What can we do as a profession? Advocate for more attention at the ACSW? Why is this not a part of Social Work Education?

Self-Care as “Authentic Valuing”

Personal concept of self-care/solidarity as “Authentic Valuing”:

on-going practices of attentive and compassionate awareness of my needs, limitations, pressures, as well as dreams, hopes and passions, AND on-going practice of attentive and compassionate inquiry about the needs, limitations, pressures, as well as dreams, hopes and passions of others. (Agnieszka)

Music: Let Love by Agnieszka Helena Wolska

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