Self-Care and Resilience During Challenging Times

Jeffrey E. Barnett, PsyD, ABPP; Professor of Psychology

 We definitely are living in very difficult, challenging, scary, and stressful times. It is easy

to feel isolated, overwhelmed, frustrated, and stressed out. And that’s just by Tuesday! The rest of the week can easily go downhill from there. In this age of COVID-19, homeschooling, work from home, social isolation, physical distancing, hotspots and second and third waves, financial insecurity, societal unrest, and unpredictability, it is easy to feel demoralized, pessimistic, hopeless, stressed, and even anxious or depressed. For these reasons and many others, it is vital that we each integrate the ongoing practice of self-care into our daily lives and work to promote our resilience so that we may better cope with these stressors and better support those we care about.

**Stress, Distress, Burnout, Survival, and Flourishing**

 The natural emotional response to the many stressors, demands, and challenges in our lives is called distress. Distress is unavoidable and we have all experienced it. It is not a sign of weakness or a flaw. Rather, it is a signal for the need to take some corrective action. Failure to do so can allow distress to build up to the point where burnout develops. Each of the three components of burnout fall on a continuum. We all have experienced these three components of burnout to some extent at various times. The hope is that we will notice their growing presence and take corrective action. These three components of burnout are:

* Feelings of emotional exhaustion and energy depletion
* Loss of caring; feelings of negativity or cynicism related to one’s job
* Reduced professional efficacy and feelings of accomplishment

Take a burnout assessment here:

<https://www.onelegacy.org/docs/BurnoutQuestionnaire_PublicWelfare1981_Modified2013.pdf>

 Some signs of burnout may be temporary after an especially difficult and frustrating day or week, and may then resolve on their own, or they may continually grow over time in response to longstanding challenges in your life, requiring an active response to combat them and prevent them from harming you. The positive actions we take to promote our wellness in general, and to combat the symptoms of burnout in particular are called self-care. Self-care can be thought of your regularly scheduled maintenance to keep you in good working order. Just as is seen with your vehicle, a failure to engage in regularly scheduled maintenance can have significantly negative consequences like a total breakdown.

 While self-care is intended to reduce feelings of distress and to prevent or minimize the consequences of burnout, it also has positive goals. Beyond just surviving, the ultimate goal of self-care is flourishing. Even during stressful and difficult times we can feel more in control, more optimistic, and more at ease. While it is unlikely you will feel this all the time, with the ongoing practice of self-care positive change is possible.

**What Self-Care Is and Isn’t**

 Self-care can comprise a wide range of activities that promote your ongoing wellness. There is no one list of correct or accepted self-care behaviors; they are individualized and can vary by person. But there are some general rules that are helpful to follow. You should select activities that promote your emotional, physical, relationship, and spiritual wellness. Each are important. Self-care activities should be either enjoyable, relaxing, or rejuvenating. Basic self-care strategies include ensuring you get enough rest, have a healthy diet, and that you exercise regularly. Additional activities might include relaxation (meditation, yoga, massage, deep breathing exercises), taking regularly scheduled breaks, journaling, listening to or performing music, artistic endeavors, time in nature, time with your pets, time with family and friends (some of which will need to be virtually or physically distanced these days), any hobbies you enjoy, pleasure reading and writing (not reports or projects for work!) and countless other activities that may be enjoyable, relaxing, or rejuvenating.

 Of course, finding the time to engage in these activities may be a challenge. It is important to keep in mind that self-care is not an all-or-nothing activity. Any self-care is better than no self-care. Whatever amount you decide upon it is important to be flexible and to set reasonable and realistic goals for yourself. Effective time management and setting limits or boundaries are also crucial. These are especially important if you are working from home. It can easily feel like there is no separation between the professional and the personal; that your life is out of balance. You may feel like you are always ‘on’ and never get a break. Self-care doesn’t tend to happen automatically and must be deliberate. You should schedule it into your day. Even just a few minutes of self-care here and there can make a big difference.

 We must be on guard against negative or maladaptive coping strategies. When faced with numerous work challenges it can be tempting to just keep working harder and harder. It is easy to think “After I get this project completed, I will take some time for me.” If you keep thinking this way, you may never get to taking care of yourself. Since the work never ends, we each must set realistic goals for ourselves and set limits on work time. We also need to avoid self-medication with substances and other potentially harmful coping strategies. While of course one alcoholic beverage at the end of a tough day can be relaxing, we must keep in mind that too much of a good thing is still too much.

 We also must look out for negative and self-defeating thought patterns. It can be easy to talk ourselves into pessimism, passivity, and avoidance, none of which is helpful in responding to ongoing stressors in our lives. Monitor your thinking and catch thoughts like “That will never work,” “This is impossible,” “I’ll never be able to do this,” “I should be doing better at this,” and the like. Statements with “always,” “never,” “should,” and “must” in them invariably are incorrect. Challenging such negative predictions about the future and replacing them with more realistic thoughts and following them up with positive actions to help you to achieve your goals tends to work best.

**Resilience**

 While we often do not have control over what happens in the world around us, we can control how we respond to these events. Resilience speaks to how we respond to challenges, stressors, and demands. If you are a battery, resilience is your charge. As we respond to the many challenges and demands in our lives our charge or inner resources are depleted. Unless we respond with efforts to replenish these inner resources (plug in and recharge) we will suffer from the symptoms of burnout.

 We must have reasonable and realistic expectations for ourselves. Efforts to be perfect or to control what cannot be controlled will result in frustration. The goals we set must involve the positive actions we can take, not about others and how they will act or respond. It is also important not to compare ourselves to others. These are artificial comparisons that can only make us feel worse about ourselves. We tend to have very limited information about others (e.g., what they share on Facebook), yet we know everything about ourselves. In essence, we are comparing our insides to their outsides. These are very unfair comparisons and do the opposite of promoting our resilience. We should see ourselves as a work in progress, making comparisons to ourself over time based on the goals we set and the positive actions we take.

 To build resilience it is also important to push ourselves outside our comfort zone from time to time. It is vital that we not stagnate. But it can feel risky to try new things. It is vital not to assess our efforts in terms of success or failure but rather in terms of learning. The more new experiences we expose ourselves to, the more we can learn, and as a result, the more we are building resilience. Every time we try something new we are presented with an opportunity to learn and to grow. Plan for and accept the setbacks that may occur during this process and do not be daunted by them. These are additional opportunities to develop resilience. Every time we respond positively to a setback (and don’t give in or quit) we are building resilience. Remember that you don’t need to go it alone. Ask for help, nurture the relationships in your life, and give yourself credit for the positive actions you are taking and the progress you are making.

**Self-Care as a Team Activity**

 While some self-care activities are done by oneself, overall the process of self-care is not an independent activity. We must not isolate. We need each other and should look out for each other, offering caring and support. We should create caring communities in our personal and work lives; small groups that regularly talk, share openly, provide honest feedback, and support and encourage each other. Support can include encouragement, advice, information, and physical assistance, but most importantly it reduces feelings of isolation. Together we can help each other through these difficult times. By sharing openly and honestly, we can let others know that they are not the only ones experiencing feelings such as frustration, anger, fear, anxiety, depression, and so on. These caring communities can also work collaboratively to come up with innovative and creative solutions to problems (another outcome of resilience), and to promote a culture of self-care in the organization.

 It can be tempting to isolate, to think that you are the only one feeling what you feel, that it will be embarrassing to share openly about how you are struggling, or that others will look down on you. But, if you choose your caring community wisely, and you each commit to mutual trust, respect, and support, you may be pleasantly surprised at the positive power of the group and how much you each benefit from it and contribute to it.

**Concluding Thoughts**

* Self-care is not optional. Self-care is not selfish. It is an essential activity for everyone.
* Failure to practice ongoing self-care can result in the development of burnout and can negatively impact your ability to care for others and to effectively carry out your duties and responsibilities.
* We each are impacted by the challenges and stresses of the times in which we live. It is impossible to be perfect; we each will experience the negative effects of these challenges. How we respond it up to us.
* Develop a personal self-care plan that includes effective time management, setting realistic boundaries and limits, and realistic self-care goals. Watch out for negative or maladaptive coping strategies such as self-medication.
* Support others and seek their support. Create oases of self-care and support in your organization. Be open and honest in your sharing; be supportive and respectful in your responses.
* Work to build your resilience. See this as an intentional activity that you work on by pushing yourself outside your comfort zone and in how you respond to setbacks.
* Don’t wait for others to take the lead. You can lead by example (and doing so will promote your resilience!).
* Set limits when needed such as limiting exposure to social media and the news. Know your limits and when to say ‘no.’
* Strive for balance in your life but be flexible and have realistic goals for yourself. As one on parent recently wrote in the *New York Times*:

“Balancing is not a thing when you are parenting, teaching and working simultaneously. It’s simply not possible to do it all or do any of it well” (Learning, October 18, 2020, p. 7).