



Play therapists spend an inordinate amount of time pouring into the lives of the children and families that we serve. Becoming more intentional about self-care can mitigate vicarious traumatization, compassion fatigue and burnout, allowing us to continue our work in excellence and finish well when the time comes. This author identifies helpful ways to assess your current functioning as well as providing ways to take self-care to the next level. *Clinical Editor Paris Goodyear-Brown, LCSW, RPT-S*

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Self-Care for Play Therapists

By Terry Kottman, PhD, LMHC, NCC, RPT-S

Why is self-care important for play therapists? Because when play therapists are “unwell (stressed, distressed, or impaired) they will not be able to offer the highest level of counseling services to their clients” (Lawson, 2007, p. 20). Because of what we witness in our clients’ lives, we are often at risk for compassion fatigue, vicarious traumatization, and burnout, which can result in impaired professional functioning (Cummins, Massey, & Jones, 2007; Lee, Cho, Kissinger, & Ogle, 2010; O’Halloran & Linton, 2000). Impairment can occur when play therapists “have persistently focused on the plight of clients while ignoring, dismissing, or minimizing their own needs for balance and self-care” (Lawson, Venart, Hazler, & Kottler, 2007, p. 5). In other words, if we don’t take good care of ourselves, we can’t do a good job taking care of our clients.

So... what can you do to take better care of yourself? One of the first things you can do is assess your functioning on the Wheel of Wellness (Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000), a model of wellness composed of twelve subtasks: (a) sense of worth, (b) sense of control, (c) realistic beliefs, (d) emotional awareness and coping, (e) problem solving and creativity, (f) sense of humor, (g) nutrition, (h) exercise, (i) self-care, (j) stress management, (k) gender identity, and (l) cultural identity. You can also consider how you are doing in the dimensions of wellness: social, emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual, psychological, occupational, and environmental (Roscoe, 2007). When you have a clear picture of the areas of your life in which you need to work toward wellness, you will need to develop a plan for better self-care (Venart, Vassos, & Pitcher-Heft, 2007).

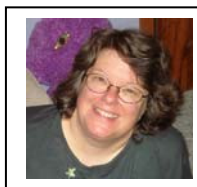
There are several approaches you can use to make sure you are doing a better job of cultivating wellness. One approach is to use coping strategies that are most often endorsed as “career-sustaining behaviors” by counselors: (a) maintain sense of humor, (b) spend time with partner/family, (c) maintain

balance between professional and personal lives, (d) maintain self-awareness, and (e) maintain sense of control over work responsibilities (Lawson, 2007). Another strategy requires that you be intentional about your choices. When you say yes to something, you are always saying no to something else. "It's about choosing: choosing to say yes to things that make us more alive and saying no to things that suck the life from us" (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 2007, p. 138). For optimal self-care, remember to say yes to yourself more often.

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