

Reclaiming and Redefining Self Care Culture

By Brittany Sievers

As professional helpers in training, we are all very familiar with self-care and the culture surrounding it. We often hear that we should engage in self-care as a means of avoiding burnout, protecting our health, and to avoid providing harmful or ineffective care to our clients. Throughout various points of my educational career, self-care has, at times, felt like an impossible expectation. I have experienced environments where I was told to make time for myself when I had just been assigned another paper, given an extracurricular task to complete, or been expected to work tireless hours because, “that is just the way graduate school is.” I often felt juxtapositioned between self-care and finishing my homework or my thesis. Many say, “self-care can happen in small moments! You can always make time to relax, even if it is only five minutes!” While this is true, and this is what many of my peers and myself would do, those small moments of self-care often weren’t sufficient. It was not solely due to our own failings or ability to manage our time, but largely due to graduate school environments in which you are constantly expected to perform many varied tasks at a high level. Faculty and graduate students alike often find themselves in this rat race and, although we try to find time for ourselves, scheduling self-care is a challenge in and of itself.

Uncoincidentally, work culture in the United States (U.S.) mirrors a similar dynamic to graduate schools. U.S. culture continues to encourage longer work days under the guise of self-improvement, despite the deleterious impacts on our well-being. We are often told to continue working hard to achieve our goals, which makes it difficult to stop to recognize that the pace ebbs and flows rather than merely rests at a steady, manageable pace. We often place a large emphasis on individuals to perform, without recognizing the constraints the environment poses for many of us. Yet, we continue at this pace. We even use our past successes or our past experiences of labor-intensive effort to justify this rapid pace to those that cope after us, encouraging them to persist in sometimes tireless endeavors.

Like many future clinicians, I can appreciate the ethical reasons for engaging in self-care. It is important to mirror self-care to our clients and to maintain a balance in our lives so that we can be helpful to those we work with. With that being said, I have developed somewhat of a love-hate relationship with the meaning that is embedded into current self-care culture. So often it seems like self-care is used to provide a cautionary tale related to burnout or a lesson in morality of the “shoulds” of ethical care. In fact, self-care has appeared as a category on my practicum evaluation forms, placing us in positions where deficiencies in self-care could lead to punishment, despite us having little control over our workload. However, I feel as if the main purpose of self-care often gets lost in the culture; we neglect to encourage ourselves and others to engage in care for the purpose of being kind to ourselves, not just so we can continue to work long hours.

As I am nearing the end of my graduate career I have found myself wondering several questions: Why is it that, so often, self-care is only expected to come in isolated moments or to be separate from our working lives? Why is it that individuals are held accountable for their own

self-care, but our environments and society are not held responsible for creating an environment where we can care for ourselves and others? Why is it that, to be a dedicated professional, conventional definitions of “work” must be placed at the center of our lives, while self-care falls into an extracurricular aspect of living? Perhaps, most importantly, where can we find the compassion in self-care, rather than continue to demand it so that we can continue at our current, arguably unhealthy paces? As I progress further in my career, and likely into roles with increasing amounts of power, I am challenging myself and those around me to reclaim the culture of self-care and to seek to redefine it. Self-care does not only have to be 6 a.m. yoga, hiking, or watching a movie on a weekend prior to working on a manuscript. Self-care can be integrated into our working lives by being kind in our constructive critiques of one another, by finding leniency in “hard” deadlines, by understanding when we all need time to unwind rather than taking on another project, and by using our power to create environments where others’ boundaries are encouraged and respected.

As we gain power in workplaces we can aim to hold ourselves and others accountable for keeping hours where we can disconnect without the risk of losing financial, social, or professional resources or gain. I believe that taking care of oneself is extremely important because, after all, we matter. Just like those we work with, we deserve love, care, and appreciation, and so often we already are doing enough just by *being*. Although I hope to continue to finesse my own self-care practices, I also hope that as we move forward we began to recreate a culture in which we can place the value of compassion at the forefront of our lives, including our work, so that self-care does not only have to come in small moments in between working, but that work and self-care can be integrated to create a balanced life.

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