

HEALING HANDS



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Renewal & Resiliency in Our Work

Congratulations. You survived 9/11, bioterrorism, the onset of an economic recession, and a return to guns, not butter. Perhaps you even overcame a fear of flying. Most of all, you kept on keeping on — caring for your friends and loved ones, for your clients and colleagues, and for persons who suffered more than you did during the past four months. This issue of Healing Hands is written for the person who is too often last on the list of those who are recipients of your TLC — YOU! Two experienced Health Care for the Homeless clinicians based in Seattle, Washington, share their wisdom and collective experience in helping professional caregivers learn how to do unto themselves as they do unto others. Enjoy!

“In the event that oxygen masks may be needed, place the mask over your own face before assisting others.”

by Ken Kraybill, MSW

Health Care for the Homeless clinicians work under demanding circumstances, bearing witness to tremendous human suffering and wrestling with a multitude of agonizing and thorny issues on a daily basis. At the same time, we have the privilege of becoming partners in extraordinary relationships, marveling at the resiliency of the human spirit, and laying claim to small but significant victories. Such is the nature of this work that it can drain and inspire us all at once.

Despite the rewards inherent in the work, it inevitably exacts a personal toll. By listening to others' stories and providing a sense of deep caring, we walk a difficult path. Yet we do so willingly, knowing that first we must “enter into” another's suffering before we can offer hope and healing. It is interesting to note that the word *care* finds its roots in the Gothic word *kara*, which means “lament, mourning, to express sorrow.”

Caring can become burdensome, causing us to experience signs and symptoms of what the literature variously calls compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, or vicarious traumatization.

This impact is compounded by the frustrations of trying to provide help in the face of multiple barriers to care, including inadequate

resources and structural supports for homeless people such as housing, health care, and incomes. To feel weighed down by these circumstances is not unusual or pathological. It is in fact a quite normal response.

The “treatment of choice” for diminishing the negative impact of this stress is by seeking resiliency and renewal through the practice of healthy self-care. Self-care is most effective when approached with forethought, not as afterthought. In the same manner that we provide care to others, we care for ourselves by first acknowledging/assessing the realities of our condition, then creating a realistic plan of care, and acting upon it. Though many HCH clinicians practice self-care in creative and effective ways, we sometimes lose our sense of balance, and fail to provide the necessary care for ourselves with the same resoluteness that we offer care to others.

To better understand what self-care is, here are three things it is **not**:

THIS WORK...

exhilarating
and exhausting

drives me up a wall
and opens doors I never imagined

lays bare a wide range of emotions
yet leaves me feeling numb beyond belief

provides tremendous satisfaction
and leaves me feeling profoundly helpless

evokes genuine empathy
and provokes a fearsome intolerance within me

puts me in touch with deep suffering
and points me toward greater wholeness

brings me face to face with many poverties
and enriches me encounter by encounter

renews my hope
and leaves me grasping for faith

enables me to envision a future
but with no ability to control it

breaks me apart emotionally
and breaks me open spiritually

leaves me wounded
and heals me

Ken Kraybill, MSW

1. Self-care is not an “emergency response plan” to be activated when stress becomes overwhelming. Instead, healthy self-care is an intentional way of living by which our values, attitudes, and actions are integrated into our day-to-day routines. The need for “emergency care” should be an exception to usual practice.

2. Self-care is not about acting selfishly (“It’s all about me!”) Instead, healthy self-care is about being a worthy steward of the self — body, mind and spirit — with which we’ve been entrusted. It is foolhardy to think we can be providers of care to others without being the recipients of proper nurture and sustenance ourselves.

3. Self-care is not about doing more, or adding more tasks to an already overflowing “to do” list. Instead, healthy self-care is as much about “letting go” as it is about taking action. It has to do with taking time to be a human *being* as well as a human *doing*. It is about letting go of frenzied schedules and meaningless pursuits. It is also about letting go of detrimental attitudes and behaviors. Self-care has been conceptualized in three related domains — awareness, balance, and connection — the “ABC’s” of self-care.⁶ It may be useful to reflect on the status of your own self-care in these realms.

THINGS TO DO TODAY...

1. Show up
2. Pay attention
3. Tell the truth
4. Let go of the results

AWARENESS Self-care begins in stillness. By quieting our busy lives and entering into a space of solitude, we can develop an awareness of our own true needs, and then act accordingly. This is the contemplative way of the

desert, rather than the constant activity of the city. Thomas Merton suggests that the busyness of our lives can be a form of “violence” that robs us of inner wisdom. Too often we act first without true understanding and then wonder why we feel more burdened, and not relieved. Parker Palmer in *Let Your Life Speak* suggests reflection on the following question: “Is the life I am living the same as the life that wants to live in me?”

“Hope is not about believing that we can change things.
Hope is believing that what we do makes a difference.”

Vaclav Havel

BALANCE Self-care is a balancing act. It includes balancing action and mindfulness. Balance guides decisions about embracing or relinquishing certain activities, behaviors, or attitudes. It also informs the degree to which we give attention to the physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and social aspects of our being or, in other words, how much time we spend working, playing, and resting. Recently I heard it suggested that a helpful prescription for balanced daily living includes eight hours of work, eight hours of play, and eight hours of rest!

“To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation in violence.

The frenzy of the activist neutralizes one’s work for peace.
It destroys the fruitfulness of one’s work, because it kills the root
of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful.”

Thomas Merton

CONNECTION Healthy self-care cannot take place solely within oneself. It involves being connected in meaningful ways with others and to something larger. We are decidedly interdependent and social beings. We grow and thrive through our connections that occur in friendships, family, social groups, nature, recreational activities, spiritual practices, therapy, and myriad other ways. Often times, our most renewing connections can be found right in our midst in the workplace, with co-workers and with the individuals to whom we provide care.

There is no formula, of course, for self-care. Each of our “self-care plans” will be unique and change over time. We must listen well to our own bodies, hearts and minds, as well as to the counsel of trusted friends, as we seek resiliency and renewal in our lives and work. ■

“Fasten your seatbelts and enjoy the flight!”

Ken Kraybill is a social worker who worked for fifteen years with HCH, providing care to homeless, mentally ill individuals in downtown Seattle. During the past year, he has conducted outreach training for homeless service providers nationwide as a staff member with the National Health Care for the Homeless Council.

“Let us not underestimate how hard it is to listen and to be compassionate. Compassion is hard because it requires the inner disposition to go with others to the place where they are weak, vulnerable, lonely and broken.
But... our spontaneous response... is to do away with suffering by fleeing from it or finding a quick cure for it.
As busy, active, relevant people we want to [make] a real contribution. This means...doing something to show that our presence makes a difference.
And so we ignore our greatest gift... our ability to be there, to listen and to enter into solidarity with those who suffer.”

Henri Nouwen

Dealing with Secondary Trauma

by Lisa Cunningham Roberts, MA, NCC

Several years ago, our Mental Health team found itself reexamining what we knew about people who were homeless. It seemed as though our clients were more and more complex, confusing and wounded. Their personal histories and current circumstances seemed filled with tragedy and self-destruction.

A colleague recommended that we read *Trauma and Recovery*,⁵ a book by psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman, as a way of expanding our knowledge of what happens when people experience trauma and abuse. We invited a few other clinicians to join us and met each month to talk about our experiences and the book. It was a tough but very readable book, best contemplated in the company of others. Two concepts proved most valuable to me:

First, Herman's description of the **steps involved in healing from trauma**:

1. Establish safety and stability.
2. Remember and mourn.
3. Reconnect with society as more than a victim.
4. Carry the message of healing.

Second, Herman's (then) provocative identification or naming of "**complex**" **posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**. This is the idea that people who suffer abuse as children grow up seeing themselves and the world differently; their PTSD is consequently more confusing and complex than the affective disorder that someone might develop after a single episode of violence or trauma.

As I read the book, I saw the lives of many of my clients in a new light; and I had a deeper appreciation for the necessity of their "survival skills." I now had words and concepts that cleared some of my confusion about what was going on with the people with whom I

worked, and why I often felt inadequate, overwhelmed by the magnitude of their needs, and frustrated by the long process toward health.

Herman recommends that clinicians notice their own reactions while working with trauma survivors. She articulates the very natural

Talking with peers about the personal impact of doing this kind of work was extremely validating and inspiring. Ken Kraybill invited me to join him in giving a workshop at the 2000 National HCH Conference in Denver on "self care." We've since had several opportunities to offer half-day local workshops through a city-based program that provides free training to staff who work at agencies serving homeless people.

In the workshops we include a variety of topics and activities designed to create an environment that is validating, respectful and confidential. Some of the materials offered in the workshop are included in this newsletter. We try to set a tone that is emotionally safe, offer different ways to "tell one's story," and ask people to join with one another in exploring creative ways to care for themselves at work and at home.

Their responses have been enthusiastic: "I really appreciate the relaxed atmosphere of the workshop, everything from my agency's encouraging me to go, to the gentle pace of the workshop itself." "I liked having time to talk with others in the field and to share our experiences." "I'm glad to have tangible tools to take back with me to my agency."

Although we originally intended to enhance our ability to provide better care for our clients, this process evolved into learning how to take better care of ourselves. It is no surprise that the very steps

Judith Herman suggests as necessary for helping clients heal work well for us too. ■

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CARING FOR YOURSELF, YOURSOUL, YOURSANITY

Self Care (Mind)

- To be self "centered" (mindfulness)
- Being in charge of your choices, attitudes and successes.
- Awareness of the process; strive for progress, not perfection
- Self-care is a life skill.
- Interpretation of events is individual and changeable.

Healthy Lifestyle (Body)

- Sleep, rest and downtime help us restore and refresh ourselves.
- Food is fuel, a way to express our creativity and nurturance.
- Exercise to move, to feel powerful, to connect with self/others.
- Body work, breath work, meditation (silence)

Spiritual Care (Spirit)

- Imagine slowing down enough to hear your heart speak!
- Match your values to your actions.
- Celebrate and savor good moments.
- Cultivate healthy relationships, find/be a mentor.
- Let yourself play creatively every day.
- Practice financial intelligence.

Stress and Work (Warning Signs!)

- Irritability, negative attitude, gossip, small acts of sabotage
- Avoidance, procrastination, "sick" days, fatigue
- Anger, anxiety, depression, self-criticism, hypersensitivity
- Health problems, sleep difficulties
- Drinking, smoking, eating more than you know you should

Strategies for Self Care at Work

- Take a break.
- Practice mindfulness everywhere.
- Talk it out, be direct and assertive.
- See a professional. (crisis = dangerous "opportunity" for growth)
- Remember your choices and your values.

Lisa Cunningham Roberts, MA, NCC

process that caregivers undergo as they come face-to-face with the reality of how deeply people can hurt one another, how interpersonal violence is often denied or minimized, and how sometimes the victim, not the perpetrator, is held responsible for the trauma s/he has suffered.

MINDFULNESS AND SELF-CARE FOR HCH CLINICIANS

- When you awaken, express gratitude for having a home... your health... your work...
- Say, "thank you" and "you're welcome" often.
- When caught up in a stressful situation, ask yourself: "What is the most important thing right now?"
- Practice "seeing" from more than one point of view.
- Be willing to say, "I don't know."
- Ask for help or support when you need it.
- Try substituting water or fruit juice for carbonated beverages. Monitor your intake of alcohol, caffeine, salt, and sugar.
- Take mini-stretch breaks several times a day - feeling what you are doing while you are doing it.
- Create a *personal* mission statement related to your work.
- Identify ways in which your work serves you in various dimensions of personal growth.
- Take a deep renewing breath before picking up the phone, responding to an email, opening a letter.
- Place photographs/postcards of the faces of people who inspire you in your workspace.
- Take a daily five-minute walk outside of your work setting.
- Keep a "wit and wisdom" file.
- Do one thing at a time.
- Be silent... even if only for a few moments.
- Forgive.
- Do something unrelated to work every week that feels nurturing, just for you. Be creative. Try something new.
- Create a rhythm of action *and* contemplation in your workday.
- Rejuvenate with more sleep when needed.

SUGGESTED READING

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4. Hanh, Thich Nhat. *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991.
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7. Santorelli, Saki. *Heal Thyself: Lessons on Mindfulness and Medicine*. New York: Bell Tower, 1999. ■

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