

Self Care

Last week at a peer conference called Peerpocalypse, a speaker asked an audience of peer support workers if we were donating to the non-profits we are working for. I know therapists and social workers who work overtime with no pay to finish their documentation. The National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics says "Social workers are encouraged to volunteer some portion of their professional skills with no expectation of significant financial return (pro bono service)." Where does the career end and my personal life begin? That's where self care comes in, right?

Ten years ago I was standing on the balcony of a 30 story building trying to will myself to jump off, because while people kept saying suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem, my "temporary" problem was starting to look more permanent. I felt ashamed when I returned home from that trip having failed at death after 15 years of failing at life. But it gave me the permission I needed to make drastic changes to myself. Slowly, over the course of the next ten years, I learned how to take care of myself in a way that doesn't mean I'm thinking about killing myself every day for hours at a time. The war was hard fought, and now I've chosen a career path where I am in a position to give others the help that I never had when I was at my lowest.

But though the battles are fewer and farther in between, I still fight them. Every day I make hard choices to wash dishes, brush my teeth, do laundry, go to bed on time, work through the guilt I feel, talk to people even though I feel anxious, meditate, exercise, do self therapy, and so much more. Every day. It's exhausting. I struggle at work, too. Am I showing my emotions in the best way for my clients? Did I say anything sub-optimally? Should I apologize, or would that make it worse? And also—is my lack of self care affecting my job performance?

If I don't do my self care, then I don't do my job as well. People don't get optimal care, and worst of all, my company suffers. I owe it to the company I work for to care for myself so I can be a better worker, right? But if my company needs me to practice self care, why do I have to do it on my own time, and then when they're paying me, I can only do the kind of work they can bill for? My company hired me as a peer, which means they know that I have lived experience of mental health issues. I am in recovery from depression and trauma. Sometimes, I'm okay. Other times, I'm not, but I feel like I have to act like I am okay. And even though I feel like I'm alone when I don't feel okay, I know that I'm not. I'm human, and so are my coworkers. Everyone experiences bad times. But we have to pretend like we're always okay at work, because we're professionals. We are supposed to leave our personal lives at home. Except, that's not quite true, is it? That contradicts what I said earlier, that my company needs me to do self-care so that I am a better worker. So they want me to bring the good parts of my personal life from home, and leave out the bad stuff. That doesn't seem fair.

I enjoy being both a peer and a future social worker. Lately, I've leaned more into the social work side than the peer side. But that has led to me feeling increasingly guilty that I'm not always bringing my best self to work. I'm glad that I went to Peerpocalypse, not because I learned much from the workshops, but because I spent time around other peers, and was reminded that I got into

this career not because I have recovered, but because I am recovering, and will always be recovering, and I want to help others to start and continue to recover alongside me. And that necessarily means I have to give myself a lot of slack when I'm not a perfect person. In fact, trying to be a perfect person usually makes my mental health worse, not better. I have to be kind to myself when I skip exercising, or let my meditation practice fall off for a couple weeks, or years.

Self care is doing work for myself, and it is also resting. It is making the decision of when I need to slack off, and when I need to make an effort. Self care is not something I do for my company. It is something I do in spite of my company's needs. And—I'm actually not very good at it. I'm so scared of losing my job, or even just of making someone annoyed at me, that I tend to throw all my energy into pretending like I'm the perfect worker. I'm hopeful that I can get better at this balance as I expand my career. I also hope that we as mental health workers can collectively tell our bosses that we need more self care at work. We need to be able to set lower standards for ourselves and say "I can't take on another client right now" or "I need extra time in between my clients." We need to set the expectation for our companies that we won't come into work having perfectly cared for ourselves, but that caring for ourselves doesn't stop whether we are at work or at home. We have to be brave, and they'll just have to deal with it.

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