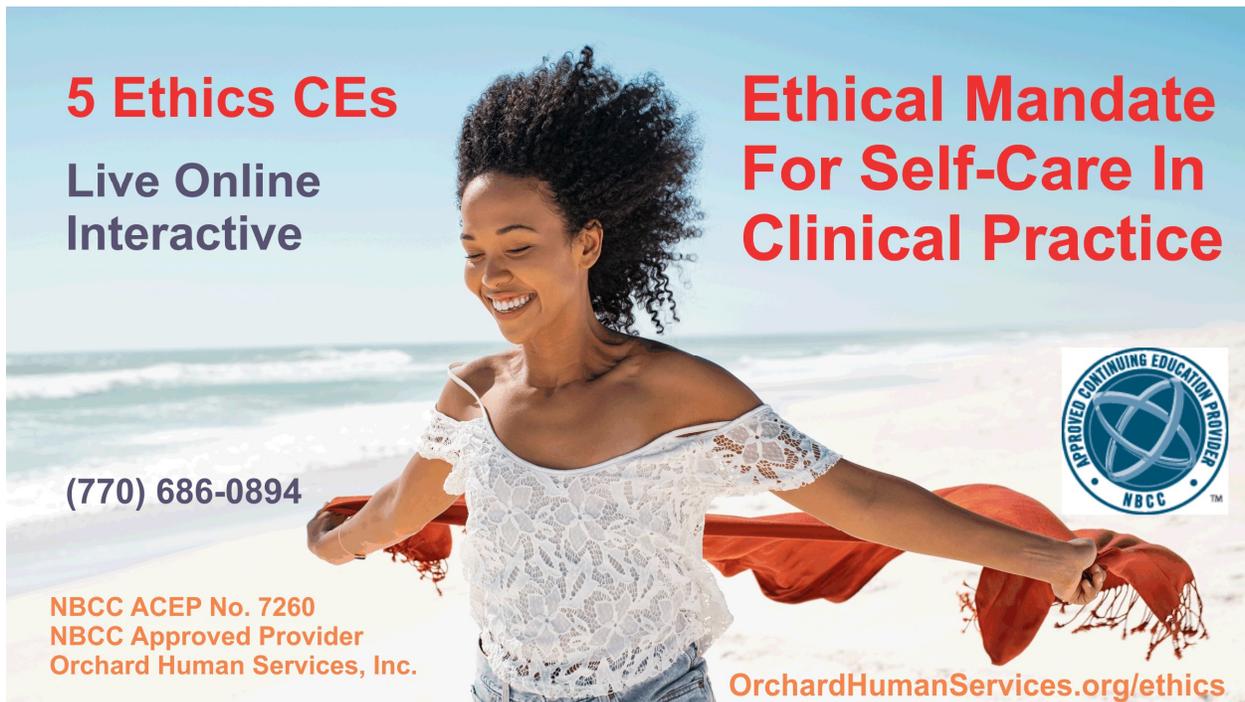


## Ethical Mandate for Self-Care in Clinical Practice

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### *A Brief Review of the Literature on Ethics & Self-Care*



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## **Review of Ethical Considerations for Self-Care by Clinical Providers**

The American Counseling Association, the American Psychological Association, The National Association of Social Workers, and the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists call for mental health professionals to practice self-care in order to be of sound mind and emotional state as an ethical mandate (Abramson, 2021; ACA, 2014; AAMFT, 2015; Murray, 2021). The United States is facing a series of overwhelming and catastrophic challenges ranging from pandemic to political unrest against a global backdrop of uncertainty due to issues related to war, environmental catastrophe, and widespread pandemic. The World Health Organization (2022) recognizes the Covid-19 Pandemic as a global catastrophe, with over 600,000,000 confirmed cases and in excess of 6,500,000 deaths globally. The Coronavirus epidemic is the largest and most significant pandemic facing humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (WHO, 2022). Negative social media and political messaging have additionally added a Sinophobic slant to many discussions of the pandemic, causing further confusion and distress (Schild et al., 2020).

Healthcare workers are facing an unprecedented level of psychological stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, and require elevated, innovative, and preemptory support to reduce the negative impact of serving the pandemic-affected public (Tsamakis, et al., 2020). Compassion fatigue of mental health professionals is understandable in this current national and global climate. Criterion for compassion fatigue incorporates a state of burnout along with secondary traumatic stress (Clark et al., 2021). Mental health professionals are also facing the phenomenon of Imposter Syndrome as they are faced with challenges of clients that may feel overwhelming and uncertain for the clinician (Clark et al, 2021).

Harrichand, Litam, and Ausloos (2021) discussed the importance of counseling educators incorporating self-care into the curriculum. Carroll et al. (2008) discussed the moral imperative

for female therapists to practice self-care in order to protect the wellbeing of clients and promote positive client outcomes. Bradley et al. (2013) explored the spectrum of demands on professional counselors, discussing the exigence for counselor self-care to promote therapist quality of life and clinical efficacy. Because counselor efficacy is such a critical factor in promoting positive patient outcomes, the authors suggested that counselors take a strength-based approach to utilizing creative self-care strategies (2013).

Counselor efficacy is, in part, linked to the professional's awareness of emotions and emotional state. In 2017, the American Psychological Association set forth a *Clinical Impact Statement* as follows: "Mental health professionals practice more effectively when they accurately understand their skill level, biases, emotions, and values" (Knapp et al., 2017, p. 163). Based upon a consideration of this statement of impact, the American Psychological Association (as cited in Knapp et al., 2017) suggested a series of questions to self to promote mental health professionals' self-awareness and self-efficacy:

Specifically, psychotherapists can ask themselves the extent to which they (a) are aware of their immediate reactions to patients, (b) can evaluate their competencies accurately, (c) effectively monitor potential biases, (d) consider that they may use heuristics inappropriately in their decision-making, and (e) think about how personal values may influence their professional decisions. (p. 163).

Self-awareness has long been considered an important part of mental health professional self-care to maintain personal wellbeing as well as promote clinical efficacy (Knapp et al., 2017). Investigation of self-awareness of mental health professionals revealed some inconsistent results regarding self-awareness. Self-awareness of the psychotherapist has not been proven to produce consistent positive outcomes for therapist or client; in some cases, psychotherapist self-awareness results in increased anxiety and compromised performance (Williams, 2008).

## **Self-Care Strategies for Clinical Providers, Staff, Colleagues, and the Public**

The human capacity for heart-centered connection is a source of soothing, nurturance, compassion, and healing for adults, youth, infants, and children in stress and distress. Heart Rate Variability [HRV] is a recently new metric that helps explain how individuals can regulate their own mental and emotional state to increase overall health and wellbeing. Considerations of the neurobiology of love and how to purposefully leverage unique human responses to heart-centered engagement can further elucidate area of exploration for mental health professional self-care as well as strategies to promote self-care and wellbeing of the public. Heart-centered human capacities can help calm the stressed brain of a child and restore calm, focus, trust, mental ease, and wellness in infants and children who have been negatively impacted by the recent traumatic events in human history.

Spirituality is another lens through which researchers have explored mental health and human experiential phenomenology. Kotchoubey (2018) perceives consciousness as an animalistic behavior that is expressed through play, communication, and application or use of tools. “Consciousness plays an important role in intention, attention, thoughts, feelings, emotions, behavior and health” (Dana, 2022, Abstract). Dussault et al. (2022) discussed the Buddhist Four Noble Truths as a perspective for understanding the suffering of survivors of childhood interpersonal trauma. Meanwhile, Iyer (2022) explored psychological wellbeing and self-care through the lens of the four Buddhist aspects of mindfulness:

- Related to the body and breathing,
- Related to the feelings aroused by perceptions from the various senses,
- Related to the mind,
- Related to the objects of the mind. (Hanh, 2018 as cited in Iyer, 2022)

Van Dam et al. (2018) discussed the recent popularity of mindfulness and meditation for promoting positive mental health outcomes, but caution that poorly defined research methods may lead to over promises for these interventions that may cause harm or disappoint the patient. The authors suggest that new methods of evaluating efficacy of mindfulness-based practices must be developed in order to elucidate the mechanism of efficacy and clearly define the extent to which such practices may benefit patients. More recently, Costello and Walters (2021) investigated integration of mindfulness intervention to promote resilience into mental health counseling for the purpose of reducing stress and activation of anxiety and PTSD of individuals who suffered psychological trauma. Miller et al. (2021) evaluated a four-week mindfulness intervention with university students, and discovered that the intervention reduced student report of stress.

Mindfulness is an evidence-based strategy to improve mood and overall self-efficacy and sense of wellbeing for counselors (Dye, Burke, & Wolf, 2019). Deguma et al. (2022) took a more practical view of meditation as a self-care strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors determined that individuals experience better mental health when focusing on enjoying being alone while meditating as opposed to being unhappy suffering through isolation (2022).

Riggs (2022) discussed a collaborative art project as a healing and restorative practice for disenfranchised clients who were negatively impacted by a hasty restructuring of a services program for sexual assault survivors. The art project healed the divide between clients and providers while promoting a sense of belonging to the individual artists (Riggs, 2022).

Human-animal interactions are another holistic strategy investigated by Monfort Montolio and Sancho-Pelluz (2020). The investigators demonstrated the efficacy of animal-

assisted therapy in improving therapeutic outcomes for patients with dual diagnosis in a residential program.

Bussing et al. (2012) analyzed existing research to determine efficacy of yoga on healing and recovery from physical and mental health conditions. The authors' analysis revealed some well-designed studies that demonstrate the efficacy of yoga for improving mental health and reducing physical pain (2012). Raj and Sharma (2021) conducted a more recent meta-analysis of research on the therapeutic effects on yoga for physical and mental health disorder; while the analysis pointed to the efficacy of yoga for improving mental health outcomes. Bennetts (2022) also concluded that a number of reliable studies pointed to mental and physical health benefits of yoga, but pointed out that the studies failed to distinguish the mechanism by which yoga affects positive change, and recommended a transdiagnostic process to support further investigation.

O'Shea et al. (2022) explored the impact of stand-alone CBT as compared to CBT combined with yoga, with the combined treatment providing greater relief from anxiety and depression with longer lasting relief from depressive symptoms. Vajpeyee et al. (2021) investigated the impact of combined yoga and music therapy on healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors concluded that this low to no cost non-pharmacological intervention is an effective approach to reducing anxiety, stress, and depression of healthcare workers during challenging times.

Adams et al. (2022) explored the use of yoga for clinicians in treating patients for physical and mental conditions; while the use of the modality differed across the clinical settings, practitioners reported using yoga with confidence in promoting positive outcomes with patients.

Review of Self-Care

Compassion is an emerging field within neuropsychology, offering the promise of human empowerment, self-healing, and self-efficacy that approximates a Human Super Power. The current body of evidence in support of how and why compassion can soothe so many human hurts is broad and inconsistent, and does not yet point to a definitive understanding of how to use compassion for self and others as a curative for human woes. Exploration of current research does point to some practical considerations and strategies for using compassion for self and others to relieve human suffering while promoting positive capacities like psychological and physiological flexibility, resilience, and emotional regulation. Compassion training, therapy, and intervention offer hope to educators for self-care as well as additions to the curriculum to promote the learning and wellbeing of children within educational settings and potentially serve as a bona-fide Human Super Power.

One study revealed that Finnish children who received in-home care at 3 years of age and out-of-home care at 6 years are age were statistically more likely to have the greatest incidence of trait compassion as compared to children who received care at other settings at the critical ages of 3 and 6 (Gluschkoff et al., 2018). Beyond being a possible testament to the positive impact of early childcare on human development, this research study does not inform best practice within a clinical or educational setting.

One possible explanation for the soothing impact of compassion-based therapy and intervention could be a positive shift in the way the brain responds to trauma. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD] is a poorly understood process that involves changes in the communication between the Amygdala and the Dorsal Periaqueductal Grey structures within the human brain (Brandao, & Lovick, 2019). Investigation of the neurophysiology of compassion has revealed that processing does not occur in some expected areas (Gao et al, 2021; Kim et al.,

2020). Recent fMRI investigation has revealed that compassion can be processed in the Periacqueductal Grey region (Kim et al., 2020).

Heart Rate Variability [HRV] is a critical new metric that is associated with broad aspects of physiological wellbeing and psychological wellness (Lou et al., 2018). Compassion is linked to higher HRV, potentially supporting more flexibility of the individual to maintain psychological and physiological wellbeing (Lou et al., 2018). DiBello et al., (2020) discovered a positive association between compassion of the individual and vagally-mediated HRV.

Beyond stress, trauma and PTSD, self-compassion may also reduce alcohol use related to coping with depression and anxiety as well as coping-related marijuana use (Wisener & Khoury, 2020). Self-compassion may be a potential curative force in Body Dysmorphic Syndrome [BDS]; a recent study found a negative association between self-compassion and BDS (Allen et al., 2020). Meanwhile, self-compassion is documented to be a mitigating factor for perfectionism and eating-disordered cognition in Women of Color (Gwira et al, 2021).

Self-compassion is documented to have a potentially beneficial impact on individuals with Irritable Bowel Syndrome [IBS], and is correlated with reduced level of depressive symptoms, stress, and anxiety (Trindade & Sirois, 2021). Transition to college is a life event associated with increased risk of psychopathology and related depression and anxiety; self-compassion is associated an increased incidence of transition success, pointing to a possible protective mechanism inherent in the human capacity of self-compassion (Kroshus, Mawrilenko, & Browning, 2021).

While compassion is generally accepted as one part in effective treatment of trauma and PTSD, some individuals who are survivors of maltreatment during childhood may be resistant to practicing self-compassion (Boykina et al., 2018). According to the authors, these survivors of

childhood maltreatment are more likely to exhibit signs of psychological inflexibility, which in turn may limit willingness to engage in warmth and kindness toward the self. As a result of this information, effective treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms in female survivors of moderate to severe types of child maltreatment should address potential psychological inflexibility and fear of compassion for self.

A preponderance of the preliminary findings on the benefits of compassion-based training, treatment, and intervention is compelling, and puts into question how to utilize compassion in therapeutic and educational settings. One study revealed an increase in resilience and emotional wellbeing of pediatric nurses after one day of self-compassion training (Franco & Christi, 2021). Research indicates that compassion training and intervention can produce efficient neuroplastic responses of the brain centers responsible for emotional regulation and positive emotions (Forster & Kanske, 2021). Mindfulness training has produced positive changes in amygdala volume in some individuals with a history of child maltreatment; increase in volume of the right amygdala is associated with an increase in self-compassion (Joss et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Hilppö et al. (2019) discussed how early childhood educators can promote a culture of compassion among peers.

### **Pragmatic Self-Care Strategies for Clinical Providers**

Pragmatic self-care strategies may also promote the mental and emotional wellbeing of mental health professionals while also offering support for the public. Quality sleep of sufficient duration is one practical aspect of good self-care. Losso et al. (2018) reported that consumption of tart cherry juice at bedtime increased bioavailability of tryptophan, extended overall sleep time by 84 minutes per night, and reduced inflammation.

Establishing a healthy circadian rhythm, reducing exposure to light before bedtime, and eliminating all blue light, intense light, or overhead lighting for at least an hour before bedtime may contribute to production of Melatonin, which promotes sleep. Morning exposure to early sunlight directly on the face and skin further establishes the circadian rhythm and can promote regulation of Serotonin production. Regulation of circadian rhythm and production of Melatonin and Serotonin can also promote better overall mood and sense of wellbeing. Optimizing light exposure for night and morning can promote deeper sleep, and potentially expand the REM cycle during which Human Growth Hormone is produced. Human Growth Hormone helps with cellular repair during sleep, and promotes overall health and wellbeing of the individual.

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