Self-Care: A Model of Prevention & Sustainability in Social Work Practice

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Self-Care: A Model of Prevention & Sustainability in Social Work Practice

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Abstract

This banded dissertation focuses on self-care as an imperative in social work practice. In the context of this banded dissertation self-care is defined as “the balancing activities in which social workers can engage to preserve personal longevity and happiness, their relationships, and their careers.” (Smullens, 2015, p. 6). According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Delegate Assembly passed a policy statement placing self-care in the forefront of social work practice (2008). The NASW noted that self-care required deeper examination in the social work profession. This banded dissertation research centers on self-care as a model of prevention & sustainability in social work practice.

The first product, a book chapter, advances the understanding of self-care in social work practice. Specific self-care strategies (infusing nature into the workplace by walking, creating a garden, using plants) for the workplace are highlighted. Implications for social work practitioners offered.

The second product presents research conducted within a graduate social work program with 30 students, in which a self-care discussion board was analyzed to identify themes. Social work educators can help social work students develop effective strategies that may be employed during professional social work practice.

The third product, a conceptual paper, advances disciplinary approaches to self-care in social work practice by applying Paulo Friere’s transformative learning theory. Implications for social work organizations offered.
Acknowledgements

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Self-Care: A Model of Prevention & Sustainability in Social Work Practice

Introduction

Self-care is an imperative for sustainable social work practice. The NASW policy statement noted that self-care must be included in the professional development of social workers. As asserted by keynote speaker, Jackson at the 2015 Council of Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting opening plenary speaking to the social work collective, “there are some spaces you have to walk in, that others are running from… It’s going to take a level of persistence to this job,” (Jackson, 2016). The speaker was referring to the charge of social workers to solve real-world problems despite challenges.

Some of the challenges are serious conditions such as burnout, stress, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma (Grise-Owens, Miller, Eaves, 2016; Lisansky, 2016; Ledesma, 2014; Newell & McNeil, 2010). Diaconescu refers to these conditions collectively as “burnout syndrome” (2015, p.57). Burnout syndrome is a serious condition experienced by social workers as result of unsupportive work environments, helping suffering clients, stress, etc. (Newell & McNeil, 2010). The phenomenon has serious implications such as professional depletion, declination of social work practitioner wellness, and turnover (Grise-Owens, Miller, Eaves, 2016; Lisansky, 2015). “Too often, they are accepted as just part of the terrain for social work practitioners,” (Grise-Owens, Miller & Eaves, 2016, p.12). These conditions are an increasing inevitability for social workers. In the last ten years, self-care was introduced in social work literature. Based on research, self-care can work as a model of prevention.

Prevention and reduction of stress, burnout and vicarious trauma are an imperative to ensure sustainability and wellness for social work practitioners. Social work practitioners use resilience as a model to help client’s overcome challenges (Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990;
Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Masten, 2001; Grise-Owens, Miller & Eaves, 2016). As a form of parallel process, social work practitioners can demonstrate resilience and wellness by engaging in self-care that helps sustain their practice and reduce negative outcomes. Myriad self-care strategies aid a social worker in bouncing back and sustaining in the profession. Self-Care strategies may be categorized in four areas - social, professional, psychological and physical which include utilizing mentorship, taking vacations, attending peer group, etc. (Grise-Owens, Miller & Eaves, 2016; Smullens, 2015).

**Summary of Banded Dissertation Products**

This dissertation examines self-care strategies and self-care in social work education and practice. The three sections of this banded dissertation are 1) a solo-authored chapter about specific self-care strategies, 2) a conceptual paper that explores organizational wellness and self-care, 3) a thematic analysis of a self-care discussion board amongst students.

**Conceptual Framework**

Transformative learning theory introduced Paulo Friere explains that people interacting together in the learning environment stimulates reflection on their reality; and through action and critical reflection the environment is transformed (Friere Institute, n.d.). Transformative learning theory is comprised of concepts such as dialogue, praxis, and conscientization (Friere, 1967, 1974). Dialogue is a conversation amongst equal participants that fosters mutual respect and that change existing thoughts into new knowledge. Praxis is the process of acting together upon the environment to “critically reflect on their reality and to transform it through further action and critical reflection (Freire Institute, n.d.; Dirkx, 1998). Conscientization is referred to as consciousness-raising (Dirkx, 1998, p. 2). Critical consciousness refers to a process in which
learners develop the ability to analyze, pose questions, and take action on the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts that influence and shape their lives (Dirkx, 1998, p. 3).

Because this perspective is commonly associated with adult education, it is important to note that transformative learning theory can be applied to social work practice. Transformative learning theory has since been expanded by Mezirow (Dirkx, 1998) and employed in social work more extensively in the United Kingdom (Hegar, 2012).

Discussion

The research of this banded dissertation add to the body of work in the area of self-care and organizational wellness. Graduate students reported high levels of stress related to their field practicum. The graduate students viewed the implementation of self-care as a preventative tool. Graduate students found the process of developing self-care plans, discussing, and writing about self-care to be a process of mutual aid. Implementing, discussing, and practicing self-care should be implemented into social work education curriculum to prepare social work students for practice.

Implementation of self-care initiatives is also an imperative for organizations. The graduate students in this research discussed the dynamics of the field practicum organizations and the organization’s impact on their overall wellbeing. This finding expands the body of knowledge about self-care and shifts the discussion of self-care from a micro to a mezzo and macro focus. Self-care is typically viewed as an individual social worker’s responsibility to an organizational responsibility. Organizations must approach the issues of professional depletion from the perspective of wellness by implementing training, policies, support mechanism, and practices that support social worker wellbeing.
Implementation of self-care practices, training, policies, etc. is an imperative for sustainability in practice. Social work educators and licensure boards should implement and require courses and trainings that educate social work students and practitioners on the conditions of professional depletion and self-care. Social work administrators and supervisors should consider the role their respective agencies address the conditions of professional depletion and self-care. Undoubtedly, social work organizations play a crucial role in the overall health of their organizations and the people employed within them. Implementation of policies that support self-care practices, identifying and eliminating policies that contribute to the conditions of professional depletion is necessary to improve organizational wellness.

Implications for Social Work Education

Many social work students enter the profession without completing a career assessment to determine if social work is the best career fit. Social work students become disillusioned and burnout as early as graduate school due to a lack of understanding social work and the practice terrain. This researcher found that the majority of the social work students experienced social work practice related stress. Students should begin early in the social work program discussing the potential for vicarious trauma, stress, and burnout as opposed to after practicing for several years. Social work educators should include self-care as an integral part of the social work curriculum. Specifically, in field and practice courses, students may learn to implement and practice self-care. This researcher found that graduate students viewed the process of developing self-care plans and discussing self-care to be a process of mutual aid.

Implications for Future Research

Implementation of self-care initiatives is also an imperative for organizations. More research is necessary to examine self-care at the organizational level. This researcher found that
graduate students’ wellbeing was impacted by the dynamics at their respective field practicum organizations. To exemplify this point, a graduate student wrote, “I like the necessity for interventions on self-care at a macro level. If agencies placed more importance on self-care it would be tremendously helpful for the work.” This research shifts the discussion of self-care that is typical viewed as an individual responsibility to an organizational responsibility. Organizations must approach the issues of professional depletion from the perspective of wellness by implementing trainings, policies, supportive mechanism, and practices that support social worker wellbeing. More research is needed to examine self-care and wellness at the organizational level.
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Nature: A Path to Wellness at Work

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Abstract

The National Association Social Workers asserted that self-care must be addressed in social work practice. Self-care may be included in social work education curriculum which provides students with an opportunity to learn self-care strategies prior to entering the field of practice (NASW, 2008). This author solo-authored a chapter, Nature and co-edited The A to Z Self – Care Handbook for Social Workers and Other Helping Professions that was published by the New Social Worker Press (Grise-Owens, Miller & Eaves, 2016). The book provides practical self-care strategies identified by social work practitioners and students (Grise-Owens, Miller & Eaves, 2016). The book targets social work practitioners and other helping professionals to promote self-care as a core competency of sustainable social work practice. The chapter addresses the use of nature as a self-care strategy to improve overall sustainability in the workplace.

Introduction

Finn (2016) noted that celebration is an integral part of social work practice. According to Finn (2016) celebration is congruent with our work as social workers. Yet, scant article exist that make mere mention of celebration in social work literature. As an educator and administrator with fifteen years of practice, I intentionally provide opportunities to celebrate the work that inspires happiness and love for doing the work. Celebration is a self-care strategy that may transform workplaces. Kanter & Sherman (2017) suggested developing a self-care plan to create a happy, healthy workplace.

My self-care strategies have most certainly strengthened my practice and not only, helped me sustain but also, stay in love with the work. bell hooks wrote "When teachers teach with love, combining care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust, we are often
able to enter the classroom and go straight to the heart of the matter, which is knowing what to do on any given day to create the best climate for learning," (2003, p. 134). Similarly, in social work practice, staying in love with work allows me to be my best self which I find extremely important as a social work administrator who embodies the power to help transform the culture of workplaces. In this first product, I share one of my strategies, nature, to exemplify how anyone may infuse self-care into their daily practice.

**Nature: A Path to Wellness at Work**

“To sit in the shade on a fine day and look upon the verdant green hills

is the most perfect refreshment.” *Jane Austin* (n.d.)

Nature is like a cool cleansing rain, washing away the troubles laid before me. As a helping professional, I delve deeply into other’s problems, empathize with their feelings, and discuss problem-solving strategies. Incorporating nature into my self-care plan was essential to ward off the hazards of being a helping professional, such as vicarious trauma, nihilism, and burnout.

Like Jane Austin, Aristotle, a philosopher; Ansel Adams, an artist; and George Washington Carver, a botanist, expressed their appreciation of nature. They—and so many others—remind us that nature is restorative. Ansel Adams (1961) believed that the world, being nature, was “incomprehensively beautiful” with infinite possibilities. While Aristotle (n.d.) proclaimed, “…in all things of nature, there is something marvelous”. Lastly, George Washington Carver (n.d.) remarked on nature’s tranquility saying, “Nothing is more beautiful than the loveliness of the woods before sunrise.”
“Bogged Down?”: Create a Bog Garden

In nature, I find rejuvenation, peace and balance. Working in my bog garden is quiet and peaceful. It serves as a gentle reminder of how nature, like people, is resilient. Regardless of the harsh environment, nature always finds a way to replenish.

Some years ago, an area of my home landscape was overly shady, very wet, and seemingly hopeless for any growth. At the same time, I was experiencing tremendous workplace stress, and desperately needed new ways to effectively manage stress. Like my home landscape, I felt stymied in my professional growth.

I read that taking a walk outside was a great way to “bust a bad mood” (Bust A Bad, 2011). I began taking walks around my office building. While walking under trees and around yard benches, the pathways were natural and minimally disturbed the environment. The walks cleared my mind, boosted energy and sparked ideas. Research shows that a connection to nature reduces stress and cultivates a sense of meaning and purpose (Ulrich, Simons, Losito, Fiorito, Miles & Zelson, 1991).

Eventually, I began taking “nature walks” with my family at home, and we fell in love with nature. This feeling of connection to nature helped me experience the restorative power of nature and sparked an idea to appreciate the environment, even what seemed beyond repair. This walk evolved to creating a bog garden at home. Boggy soil is soft, watery and typically referred to as a trouble spot where very few plants, trees, etc. can grow, and the entire eastern side of my home was comprised of boggy soil. I transformed this “hopeless” area of my home into a serene, rejuvenating place that provides me peace by simply creating a bog garden. A bog garden is a collection of perennials, shrubs and trees that thrive under consistently moist and shady conditions.
conditions, and often has a water feature such as a pond or fountain. I walk through my garden several times per week, and reserve heavy-duty work such as digging and lifting in the garden for days when I experience increased work stress. The heavy-duty work serves as a therapeutic output of energy and a healthy way to relieve stress (Wolf, Krueger, & Rozance, 2014).

Like the bog garden, I stumbled into the Louisville Loop when exploring ways to expand my self-care options. The city has several green spaces connected by scenic pathways, referred to as the Louisville Loop. The pathway stretches around the cityscape through hilly parks and along the river. In spring, aromatic honeysuckle shrubs scent and burgundy Japanese maples accent the pathway—serving as a natural meditative space. Japanese culture researched the healing power of nature. Shinrin-yoku, “forest bathing”, a concept that encourages walking through the woods to experience nature’s restorative power (Hutchinson, 2013). Minimal noise pollution, clean air, immune boosting mist from plants are benefits of forest bathing.

At work, my day is filled with meetings and tasks with minimal down time and even less for processing. The nature pathway provides a space with little distractions and quiet time, leaving me alone with only my thoughts. Likewise, in my bog garden, I become immersed in the solitude and peace of nature. Nature is quiet and simple. I share bell hooks (2000) sentiment that the key is to live life simply. In these quiet times in the bog garden and on the nature path, I find clear thoughts and creative ideas. Ansel Adams believed nature provided endless prospects of “magic and wonder.”

**Bring Nature into Your Workday**

Ansel Adams is known for his photography of natural landscapes. I incorporated similar photos of nature and live plants into my office decor to provide a relaxing atmosphere. Infusing nature into my workspace has a rejuvenating effect. It allows me time to re-center before

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meeting with the next client or going to that long meeting. Researchers found that people who had nature contact experienced “significantly lower stress levels and health complaints than those with less natural elements in their workspace” (Largo-Wight, 2013). Nature scenes as a screensaver, desk fountains, zen gardens, plants or pictures capturing nature are ways to bring nature into the workspace.

As a "natural" de-stressor, nature helps maintain a healthy balance for helping professionals. Dedicating time in nature whether working in a garden, traveling through scenic pathways or infusing nature into your work surroundings is a step toward developing a well-rounded self-care plan.

**Reflection & Discussion**

1. Think about your work surroundings and nature. What are some ways to infuse nature into your workspace?

2. Think about the location of your office. Is there a park, waterway, or other natural setting you can visit during breaks?

3. A bog garden was just what I needed when I was feeling “bogged down” in my professional life. Where is a natural setting or activity that can help you feel rejuvenated and replenished?
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Graduate Students Self-Care Strategies & Barriers: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

Social work practitioners experience high levels of burnout, stress and vicarious traumatization resulting in professional depletion that lead to a decline of the social work practitioner’s wellbeing or an untimely exit from the profession of social work. In 2008, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Delegate Assembly passed a policy statement acknowledging the need for a more-in-depth examination of self-care. Literature related to self-care, in general, is scarce (Dorociak, Rupert, Bryant, & Zahniser, 2017; Miller, Lianekhammy, Pope, Lee, & Grise-Owens, 2017).

This qualitative exploratory study utilized a thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008, p. 54) to find themes in discussion board posts from a practice course comprised of thirty graduate students. Through exploration of common themes in self-care strategies utilized by students and challenges experienced by students, educators can help social work students develop effective strategies that may be employed during professional social work practice. Social workers and supervisors can utilize findings toward implementing self-care strategies that may prevent burnout, stress, and vicarious traumatization.

Keywords: self-care, burnout, stress, vicarious traumatization, thematic analysis
Burnout, stress, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma are challenges facing social workers today (Grise-Owens, Miller, Eaves, 2016; Lisansky, 2016; Newell & McNeil, 2010, Smullens, 2015). Under such pressures, large numbers of social workers leave the profession resulting in pervasive, high turnover percentages (Nissly, Mor Barak & Levin, 2005). In the last ten years, self-care was introduced in the social work literature. Exploring effective self-care strategies employed by social workers is timely. Self-care is a preventative tool to help social workers improve overall wellness and increase sustainability in the profession thereby reducing professional depletion.

The following theory shaped my perspective and guided this research study. Resiliency theory, a concept that explores how good outcomes result in spite of severe threats to the adaptation of development (Gitterman & Germain, 2008; Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990; Masten, 2001) and one’s ability to bounce back despite adversity (Werner & Smith, 1992). Resilience, often used to inform client engagement, also applies to social work practice, and like our clients, social workers can bounce back and sustain professionally.

**Purpose Statement**

The NASW (2008) asserted the need for more research in the area of self-care in social work practice. By including self-care in the curriculum, graduate students learn self-care strategies while in their field practicum settings. This exploratory qualitative study explored self-care from the perspective of graduate students by examining a self-care discussion board from an integrative practice course comprised of thirty graduate students. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research technique used to systematically evaluate written documents (Riessman, 2008, p. 54). This study examined (a) self-care strategies utilized by graduate students and
examined (b) challenges and successes with implementing the self-care strategies using thematic analysis.

**Literature Review**

This literature review will address the following areas: social work practice conditions, self-care in social work education curriculum, and self-care strategies as identified by social worker students.

**Practice Conditions**

There has been a growing body of research over the past decade focusing on the experiences of social workers and the adverse conditions experienced by social workers, compassion fatigue, stress, burnout, and vicarious trauma, as a residual of working with trauma clients (Bride & Figley, 2007; Harrington, 2007; Newell & MacNeil, 2010; Partab, 2010; Wilson, 2016). As a result of such negative conditions, social workers make an early exit from the profession. (Brewer & Shapard 2004; Chiller & Crsip, 2012; Halbesleben, 2008; Nissly, Mor Barak & Levin, 2005). Additionally, social workers experience a decline in overall wellness that presents as increased mental and physical health concerns, reduced morale, and diminished professional competence (Nissly, Mor Barak & Levin, 2005). High levels of stress increase the possibility of fatal health failure (Ferraro & Nurridin, 2006). Collectively, these terms referred to as conditions of professional depletion (Greville, 2008). These negative consequences are considered normative and part of the terrain in social work practice (Grise-Owens, Miller & Eaves, 2016, p.12). The NASW (2008) noted the need for inclusion of self-care in social work education and training to educate students and practitioners.

There is scant research in general regarding self-care that is specific to social work practice. The research comprised of empirical studies focused on self-care strategies amongst

Self-Care and Practitioners

In a quantitative study conducted by Bloomquist, et al, (2015) the authors found that practicing self-care positively contributed to the practitioner’s quality of life, but many practitioners do not use self-strategies. Additionally, Pack (2014) conducted a qualitative study to explore useful self-care tools to prevent vicarious trauma. Though limited in terms of generalizability, the study concluded that self-care improved the supervisor and supervisee relationship (Pack, 2014). Implications of the research were that additional training and education was necessary to prepare social workers adequately. The implementation of self-care strategies in social work practice improves morale. Self-care begins in the social work education process. As a model of prevention, social work students benefit from understanding adverse conditions of social work practice and implementing self-care in the learning process.

Self-Care and Graduate Students

Shapiro, Brown, and Biegel (2007) found that students enrolled in a course offering mindfulness-based stress reduction interventions, an approach to self-care, experienced a significant decrease in perceived stress, negative affect, state and trait anxiety and rumination with increased positive affect and self-compassion. Thereby, showing the effectiveness of including self-care in social work pedagogy. Several authors reported on student benefits of mindful-based stress reduction components in graduate courses (Bonifas & Napoli, 2011; Gockel & Deng, 2016; Napoli & Bonifas, 2014; Raheim & Lu, 2014; Schure, Christopher, &
Christopher, 2008). Implementing self-care into social work education ensures that students understand adverse conditions of social work practice and assist students proactively include self-care into their professional repertoire.

There is need to address self-care in social work education as students experiencing field practice for the first time may experience disillusionment and panic due to the gap between theory and practice (Smith, 2015). Smith (2015) found that most students practiced self-care in the area of physical, psychological, spiritual, workplace/professional, emotional, and balance. However, the students showed signs of burnout concluding that students should be exposed to self-care and self-care theory early in social work education. Saakvitne and Pearlman (1996) in a study exploring self-care strategies utilized by students identified five areas of self-care. The self-care areas identified as a result of the survey were psychological, spiritual, emotional, physical and professional (Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996). Moore, Bledsoe, Perry & Robinson (2011) noted limited research on actual self-care strategies utilized by social work students. The researchers in the exploratory study found students engaged in journaling about self-care as an assignment in master’s level course. The four areas of self-care identified are social care, physical care, emotional care and spiritual care. Shannon, Simmelink-McCleary, Im, Becher and Crook-Lyon (2014) in a qualitative exploratory study researched the development of self-care practices amongst 17 graduate students in a trauma treatment course. The graduate students wrote in journals four times throughout the semester. Though students struggled with developing effective self-care practices, they demonstrated an ability to establish professional self-care practices. Both studies found that additional research on self-care and self-care strategies included in the social work curriculum is crucial.
Summary

As demonstrated throughout this literature review, social workers are experiencing high levels of stress, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma and burnout. These conditions collectively referred to as professional depletion has caused many high levels of turnover and shortage of social workers. The National Association of Social Workers identified the state of professional depletion as a serious concern for the social work profession requiring more-in-depth of ways to address the matter in education, practice and research. As noted by the NASW and several researchers, self-care is a component of professional practice that should be included in social work pedagogy. Furthermore, self-care, is also, a strategy to prevent the conditions of professional depletion. Through exploration of self-care strategies utilized by students, can help social work students develop effective strategies to utilize during professional social work practice.

Methods

This is a qualitative exploratory study that explores self-care from the perspective of graduate students. Exploratory research is research conducted for a problem that requires deeper examination. Exploratory research gives new insight into phenomena and helps develop clear understanding of any problem (Babbi, 2013). Qualitative exploratory studies are typically used for secondary data research (Schutt, 2001). This study examines a micro practice course discussion board on the self-care strategies utilized by graduate students. An exploratory design gives more insight into graduate self-care strategies.

Sample

The researcher utilized secondary data and convenience sample for the qualitative study. A convenience sampling is a specific type of non-probability sampling method that relies on data
collection from population members who are conveniently available to participate in the study (De-Cuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2016). A convenient sample was utilized which consisted of 30 social work master’s level students. The students were entering the final year of a two-year social work graduate program in 2014. Additionally, all the students had social work practicum placements and enrolled in the Micro Practice. The demographics of the sample are as follows: 8 males, 22 females with an age range from 22 to 59 years of age.

**Human Subjects Protection**

The subjects in this qualitative study all participated voluntarily. Each participant received an informed consent application specifying the purpose of the study as well as the risks and benefits of participating in the study. No identifying information or names were included in the findings to ensure the confidentiality of each participant. An IRB form was submitted and approved in December 2016 by the Institutional Review Board at St. Catherine University. All data collected from the study is stored on a password protected cloud server.

**Data Analysis**

For this qualitative exploratory study, this researcher conducted a thematic analysis to determine emergent themes as they are presented throughout the participant discussion board posts. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research technique used to systematically evaluate written documents (Riessman, 2008, p.14). Themes were identified and clarified. A separate researcher conducted a second review of the discussion board posts to ensure inter-rater reliability. This second review provides consistency and discussion of differences in themes (Marks & Yardley, 2004, p.63).

**Procedures**
Participants engaged in a discussion board focused on the topic of self-care. The participants received a consent form via email. Participants acknowledged consent verbally. Consent allowed the use of de-identified data from the participant’s self-care discussion board posts from 2014 when they were graduate students in Micro Practice. For one semester, the participants engaged in a self-care discussion board. Bi-weekly, the participants posted self-care resources or strategies, self-care challenges and/or successes. Additionally, each participant responded to at least two other discussion board posts to create dialogue focused on incorporating self-care into their social practice. The data includes the self-care strategies, challenges and successes.

Findings

This researcher used a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach to this exploratory qualitative research. The grounded theory begins with a question or collection of qualitative data. This researcher reviewed the discussion board posts, and the repeated ideas from the posts were identified as codes and extracted from the data. Through re-reviewing the data, the codes were grouped into concepts. The researcher combined the concepts into categories, a broad group of related concepts that are used to generate a theory which is a basis for the theory.

Stress

The American Psychological Association (2017) defines stress as a state of physical, mental or emotional strain, or tension resulting from the adverse or very demanding circumstances. The thematic analysis revealed that all the students utilized self-care to address social work practice related stress. The students reported high stress levels specifically related to their work as social work interns and/or practitioners. For example, one student reflected on stress
and the need to practice self-care as an imperative: “Knowing that I have a plan in place practice self-care really helps me deal with stress on the job.” “When we experience stressful situations, we tend to ignore ourselves, neglecting sleep and skipping meals. During stressful times, it is imperative that we continue to maintain self-care.”

These extracts describe the student’s experience with stress and the implementation of self-care to address the negative ramifications of stress. Additionally, some students discussed the importance of using self-care as a preventative measure to proactively address stress as opposed to utilizing self-care as a reactive measure: “There is not a permanent cure for burnout, but by utilizing self-care regularly can prevent experiencing the negative affect the profession of social work puts on our bodies.”

“Some good discussing on whether burnout is an endpoint or process. If we consider burnout a process then we have some control. … [do] not to wait until we reach burnout, meaning self-care has to be in place and best if proactive.”

As students discussed their struggles with stress and shared various helpful self-care strategies, the analysis revealed a theme of appreciation for the discussion amongst fellow social work students. The process of discussing self-care strategies and potential latent negative consequences of practice helped students proactively develop self-care strategies that may serve as a preventative tool and mutual aid.

**Mutual Aid**

Mutual aid can be described as people with similar experiences helping each other to overcome obstacles and build support (Gitterman & Germain, 2004). This support provided by students may be considered mutual aid, the hallmark of social work with groups. Students experienced support and accountability to practicing self-care through participation in the self-
care discussion board with fellow social work students: “I have found support within the cohort and with a few special people. The support I have received and continue to receive will help me stay committed to my self-care plan.” “I feel comforted that self-care is a struggle for most of us (not just me!) and that we are all actively and mindfully making lifestyle changes for both our own benefit and for the benefit of the clients we serve.” “The self-care check-ins is really helping me. Writing down my accomplishments and struggles helps keep me accountable.”

Organizational Wellness

The analysis revealed that organizational wellness was one of the factors impacting the student’s self-care. Several students discussed that their individual organizations and practicum agencies should address self-care throughout the organization. For example, one student employed as a leader at the social work organization experienced stress and decided to implement self-care strategies to model healthy, social work practice: “I think that me talking some about self-care in the office had led to a little bit of improvement in the office mood as I share some of the things that we are sharing here during my staff meetings.” “I like the necessity for interventions on self-care at a macro level. If agencies placed more importance on self-care it would be tremendously helpful for the worker.”

These extracts indicate that students understand the importance of self-care on a micro-level and identify incongruence between micro and macro-level practice. Self-care strategies for individual social workers are necessary and implementation on the mezzo and macro levels of practice are necessary. Correspondingly, the analysis revealed that self-care as an organization was addressed through supervision. Through supervision, students engaged in discourse about the practice which helped their practice: “Supervision can help reduce our stress by bringing in another person to help us think through our decision making process. I have found in my own

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work that the more I am able to staff issues with my supervisor, the less stress I experience.”

“Though this study analyzed self-care strategies and experiences amongst students. There are implications for social work organizations in that there is a theme specific to organizational wellness that requires deeper examination.”

Discussion

In the United States, many social workers are at risk of burnout, stress, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma (Bride & Figley, 2007; Harrington, 2007; Newell & MacNeil, 2010; Partab, 2010; Wilson, 2016). For mental health social workers, 21-67% experience high levels of burnout (Morse, Salyers, & Pfahler, 2012). For child welfare social workers, they experience extremely high levels of burnout and stress (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984). High levels of burnout, stress, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma professionally deplete social workers (Greville, 2008). As a result of professional depletion (Greville, 2008), social workers experience a decline of overall wellbeing and/or untimely exit the social work profession and (Brewer & Shapard 2004; Chiller & Crsip, 2012; Ferraro & Nurridin, 2006; Halbesleben, 2008; Nissly, Mor Barak & Levin, 2005). Self-care is a preventative tool to help social workers improve overall wellness and increase sustainability in the profession thereby reducing professional depletion. The purpose of this study was to examine (a) self-care strategies utilized by graduate students and examine (b) challenges and successes with implementing the self-care strategies.

The social work graduate students utilized the discussion board in the practice course as a form of mutual aid (Gitterman & Germain, 2004). Several students reported that the sharing of experiences with implementing self-care was supportive and reinforced accountability. For example, in one case, a student wrote that fellow students provided comfort and external validation. Previous research implemented self-care into the social work curriculum (Moore,
This research found that graduate students found the process of developing self-care plans, discussing, and writing about self-care to be a process of mutual aid. The concept of mutual aid as a self-care strategy through the process of students implementing self-care plans while in the social work program expands the current body of knowledge regarding self-care in the profession and social work education. Furthermore, one student connected the exemplification of self-care practices by the social worker to mutual aid and modeling a healthy lifestyle for clients.

Smith (2015) found that many social work students enter the profession without completing a career assessment to determine if social work is the best career fit. Additionally, Smith (2015) found that many social work students become disillusioned and burnout as early as graduate school due to a lack of understanding social work and the practice terrain. This research found similar results in that all the social work students experienced social work practice related stress. Smith (2015) also suggested that students should begin early in the social work program discussing the potential for vicarious trauma, stress, and burnout as opposed to after practicing for several years. This study found that students viewed the implementation of self-care as a preventative tool. For example, some students wrote, “There is not a permanent cure for burnout, but by utilizing self-care regularly can prevent experiencing the negative affect the profession of social work puts on our bodies.” “Some good discussing on whether burnout is an endpoint or process. If we consider burnout a process then we have some control. … [do] not to wait until we reach burnout, meaning self-care has to be in place and best if proactive.”

Implementing, discussing and practicing self-care as a component of the social work program is
a preventative tool.

Implementation of self-care initiatives is also an imperative for organizations. The social work students in this study discussed the dynamics of the field practicum organizations and the organization’s impact on their overall wellbeing. This finding expands the body of knowledge about self-care and shifts the discussion of self-care that is typically addressed by the individual social worker’s responsibility to an organizational responsibility. For example, one student wrote, “I like the necessity for interventions on self-care at a macro level. If agencies placed more importance on self-care it would be tremendously helpful for the work.” Organizations must approach the issues of professional depletion from the perspective of wellness by implementing trainings, policies, supportive mechanism, and practices that support social worker wellbeing.

**Strengths and Limitations**

One of the strengths of this study includes an increased understanding of self-care from the perspective of graduate social work students, the factors that impacted self-care and how the findings contribute to the social work body of knowledge. Finally, the graduate students’ experiences showed the importance of self-care as a prevention tool. Though this study has strengths, there were several limitations in the study, mainly pertaining to researcher bias. The researcher’s previous knowledge about self-care limited her objectivity. The researcher was familiar with the graduate program focus on self-care in the curriculum. This might have limited her ability to understand the successes and challenges of graduate students as they established self-care plans.

Additionally, the nature of the qualitative exploratory study and the convenient sample limits the generalizability of the findings to larger populations. The experiences of the graduate
as they implemented self-care into their practice were likely similar to other graduate students implementing self-care strategies; further evidence is needed about self-care, challenges, successes.

**Implications for Social Work Practice**

Findings have implications for social work educators who want to prepare social work students for practice. Social workers should learn about the negative, latent ramifications of social work practice. Additionally, social work students must engage in dialogue about the self-care strategies, challenges and successes. This dialogue improves understanding of self-care, improves student relationships through the form of mutual aid. Social work programs should add components of self-care to their curriculum through readings, activities and program materials. The field, policy and practice courses should address the potential latent consequences of practice in conjunction with self-care activities to help students understand and learn preventative tools. The faculty liaisons should include discussions about self-care in the organization with field supervisors to support student learning and wellbeing. An intentional focus of practicing self-care as a program implicitly models for students.

Social work supervisors and administration should consider the impact organizational wellness on the practitioner’s self-care. Social work administrators may influence policy at their respective institutions to promote overall improved wellness at the mezzo level of practice. Social work administrators have the power and influence to change the overall culture of their workplace by intentionally engaging in dialogue with social workers about professional depletion. Collaboratively, administrators and social workers can modify and create initiatives, practices and policies that support social workers, a process of which enhances understanding and appreciation of all social workers within the organization.

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Social work supervisors may utilize this research to understand better the challenges experienced by social workers and to enhance the working relationship between social workers and supervisors. Social work supervisors and administration should develop training and create support mechanisms to address burnout, vicarious trauma, and stress. Training should provide social workers with tools to identify and prevent the conditions of professional depletion. Supportive mechanisms may involve periodically rotating frontline workers to other roles to minimize the consequences of consistently working with the suffering.

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Using Friere’s Transformative Learning Approach to Inform Self-Care and Organizational Wellness

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Abstract

Social workers are increasingly at risk of professional depletion and untimely exit from organizations, or even the profession. Organizations play a crucial role in addressing these risks. Self-care is one remedy to address professional depletion, but it is often explored only through individual self-care strategies. This paper proposes that a collective response by social workers may transform their respective organizations. Lastly, this paper addresses macro implications such as implementation of a self-care component into the social work education curriculum and workplace supervision.

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Self-care is an imperative for sustainable, effective social work practice. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Delegate Assembly (2008) noted that self-care required deeper examination in the social work profession and must be included in professional development. Self-care is defined as the intentionality of placing care of oneself as a priority (Taylor & Renpenning, 2011).

The NASW mandate was in response to serious conditions facing social workers such as burnout, stress, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma, (Lisansky, 2015; Mathieu, 2012; Papia, 2014, Skovholt & Trotter Mathison, 2011; Smullens, 2012; Smullens, 2015; Van Dernoot Lipsky, 2009). Diaconescu refers to these conditions collectively as “burnout syndrome” (2015, p.57). Burnout syndrome is a serious condition experienced by social workers, in part, as impacted by unsupportive work environments, helping clients who are experiencing or have experienced severe trauma and suffering, and so forth. The implications of such conditions are professional depletion, decline in social worker wellness, and untimely exits from the social work profession (Lisanky, 2016). Self-care is a preventative tool to reduce burnout syndrome and ensure sustainability. Learning about and practicing self-care at an individual level is imperative. So too, is the importance of self-care at the organizational level, often referred to as organizational wellness.

Less attention has been given, however, to the overall organizational wellness of the institutions in which social workers are employed. The literature regarding self-care in the profession is greatly focused on teaching self-care and individual strategies for self-care. This conceptual paper explores the concept of self-care and the potential impact practicing self-care may have on the overall organizational wellness. Social workers individually practicing self-care can play a significant role in transforming the organizational wellness of their respective organizations.
institutions. The paper applies Friere’s transformative learning theory as a framework for promoting self-care in human services organizational context.

Theoretical Framework: Transformative Learning

Transformative learning theory introduced Paulo Friere explains that people interacting together in the learning environment stimulates reflection on their reality through action and critical reflection the environment is transformed (Friere Institute, n.d.). Transformative learning theory is comprised of concepts such as dialogue, praxis, and conscientization (Friere, 1968). Dialogue is a conversation amongst equal participants that fosters mutual respect and that change existing thoughts into new knowledge. Praxis is the process of acting together upon the environment to “critically reflect on their reality and to transform it through further action and critical reflection (Freire Institute, n.d.; Dirkx, 1998). Conscientization is referred to as a form of consciousness-raising (Dirkx, 1998, p. 2). Critical consciousness refers to a process in which learners develop the ability to analyze, pose questions, and take action on the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts that influence and shape their lives (Dirkx, 1998, p. 3).

Transformative learning theory has since been expanded by Mezirow (Dirkx, 1998) and employed in social work more extensively in the United Kingdom (Hegar, 2012). This perspective is commonly associated with adult education; however, it is important to note that transformative learning theory can be applied to social work practice. Friere worked closely with social workers Friere asserted that progressive social workers may transform society through collective awareness and action (Friere, 1968).

There are three concepts that are part of the transformative learning theory: the first being dialogue, followed by praxis and conscientization. Transformative learning theory provides a lens to understand how individual social workers (dialogue) may collectively work together

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(praxis) and transform (conscientization) the social work organization.

Individual social workers that engaged in self-care had a contagious effect in that fellow social workers also began to engage in self-care practices. This collective action this collective action can be identified as the praxis concept of the transformative learning theory. As a result of the collective action of social workers practicing self-care as a group, teams were thereby transformed, a process refer to as conscientization, by adopting strategies, practices, and policies that supported individual self-care.

**Literature Review**

**The Problem of “Professional Depletion”**

“It is, therefore, up to all of us to elevate these issues to a greater level of awareness in the helping professions,” (Figley, 2002, p. 1440).

A growing body of research over the past decade focuses on the experiences of social workers and the adverse conditions experienced by social workers, i.e., compassion fatigue, stress, burnout, and vicarious trauma, as a residual of working with trauma clients (Bride & Figley, 2007; Harrington, 2007; Newell & MacNeil, 2010; Partab, 2010; Wilson, 2016). Additionally, social workers experience a decline of overall wellness that presents as increased mental and physical health concerns, reduced morale, and diminished professional competence (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2005). High levels of stress increase the possibility of mortal health failure (Ferraro & Nurridin, 2006).

Collectively, these terms are referred to as conditions of professional depletion (Greville, 2008), and defined by the NASW as "the common characteristic is that they represent the negative, unwanted psychological effects of the experience of helping and therefore, uniquely affect the helping professional.” As a result of such negative conditions, social workers make an
untimely exit from the profession of social work (Brewer & Shapard 2004; Chiller & Crsip, 2012; Halbesleben, 2008; Mor Bak, Nissly, & Levin, 2005).

Every arena of social work faces the challenge of “professional depletion.” Miller, Donohue-Dioh, Niu & Shalash (2017) noted that social service agencies increasingly recognize self-care as a strategy to address employee outcomes. “The bad news is that employees often leave not because of personal and work-family balance reasons but because they are not satisfied with their jobs, feel excessive stress and burnout, and do not feel supported by their supervisors and the organization,” (National Council of Crime and Delinquency, p. 10, 2006).

Child welfare social workers charged with the responsibility to protect children face significant challenges by working with the neediest children and adults of population (National Council of Crime and Delinquency, 2006). This particular area of social work practice undergoes significant turnover annually with 20 to 40 percentage of the child welfare social workers leaving the profession (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Reagh, 1994). The social workers that remain in child welfare do not fare well (National Council of Crime and Delinquency, 2006).

Mental health social workers, in the practice area of mental health, are committed to working with vulnerable, clients who experienced significant trauma and lived through difficult histories (Bride, 2007). As a result of servicing these clients, mental health social workers experience higher levels of stress, vicarious trauma, and burnout. Similar to child welfare social workers, mental health social workers, as a result, experience high rates of turnover (Grady & Cantor, 2012) that are the residual of adverse conditions.

Therapists tend to overlook their individual needs such as self-care while dedicating their focus to the needs of their clients (Figley, 2002). Over time, the therapist’s neglect of individual

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needs leads to chronic lack of self-care, according to Figley (2002). This chronic lack of self-care is marked by compassion fatigue and countertransference. Compassion fatigue is defined as “a sense of helplessness and confusion” with a “greater sense of isolation from supporters,” (Figley, 2002, p. 1436). Countertransference is “chronic attachment associated with the family of origin relationships and has much less to do with empathy toward the client that causes trauma,” (Figley, 2002, p. 1436). Figley suggested that therapists speak candidly with colleagues about their struggles with stress and compassion fatigue and expand their support system.

Similarly, Barnett, Baker, Elman, and Schoener also found that psychologists in mental health fail to attend to the “emotionally taxing” practice of psychology (2007). The authors also identified burnout as a prevalent problem resulting in professional impairment. However, Barnett et al. explicitly concluded that self-care was an ethical imperative and a preventative tool for burnout.

Organizational wellness directly contribute to professional depletion and untimely departure of social workers (Brewer & Shapard 2004; Chiller & Crsip, 2012; Halbesleben, 2008; Mor Bak, Nissly, & Levin, 2005). The reasons provided by social workers to separate from the profession, work related stress problems, poor supervision, work-related health reasons, are factors related to organizational wellness (Kanter & Sherman, 2017; National Council of Crime and Delinquency, 2006).

Organizational Wellness as a Response

“[A]s an administrator and now director of training for my agency, I know that individual self-care (person) and organizational wellness (place) intersect.”

(Grise-Owens et. al, p. 89, 2016)
Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky (2006) describe organizational well-being as the presence of effective, reflective, and affective environments. Organizations affect workers in myriad ways that may enhance or diminish the well-being of employees (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006). As a response to professional depletion, organizations may intentionally implement strategies to address well-being.

Kanter & Sherman (2017) suggest that harmony in the workplace may be achieved through individual practice of self-care and a healthy organizational culture. Individual well-being should be an organizational response which is referred to as “We-care” (Kanter & Sherman, 2017). The responsibility for addressing professional depletion is addressed with an organizational and leadership lens that involves changing the workflow to create a happy, healthy workplace (Kanter & Sherman, 2017; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006).

In studying the quality of life for social workers, Van Hook and Rothenberg (2009) found that organizations must assist social workers deal with stress with organizational changes to support social workers. Kulkarni, Bell, Hartman, and Herman-Smith concluded, after assessing the relationship of organizational support with coping strategies, that organizations must create a culture that encourages self-care (2013). In the A to Z Self-Care Handbook for Social Workers and other Helping Professionals, the editors, Grise-Owens, Miller and Eaves purported that organizational dynamics and conditions correlate with individual self-care in that organizations “create unhealthy and unsupportable environments,” (p. 14, 2016).

**A Critical Exploration of Literature**

The thesis of this paper is that self-care, often thought of in the context of social workers engaging in strategies to improve their individual well-being, may transform the overall wellness of organization. For example, several social workers in a team atmosphere engaged in self-care
practices on a social work team may influence the overall wellness of the social work team.

To explore the relationship between self-care and organizational wellness, I reviewed a sample of published articles about self-care practices of social workers and organizational wellness. I explored the nature of that relationship and identified themes in the literature that speak to ways in which self-care has positively shaped or changed a work environment or the environment beyond oneself. In this section, I delineate key themes from that literature exploration. Then, in the following section, I use Friere’s transformative learning approach as a framework for assessing the relationship between self-care and organizational wellness.

A social work concept is that individuals have the power to change the environment. Paulo Friere in espousing the transformative learning approach contended that individuals have the ability to act and transform circumstances, conscientization (Friere, 1968). The conditions of professional depletion in the social work profession can be understood as a form of oppression to be oppressive.

**Burnout is not Inevitable**

Often times when social workers tell someone else that they practice social work as a profession, the response refers to the impossibility of the work. The reason for this response is due to the current state of social work practice. The conditions of professional depletion are often causal when social workers choose to exit.

The unfortunate state of social work practice is that the conditions of professional depletion have been accepted as normative (Grise-Owens, Miller, & Eaves, 2016). The imminent risk of professional depletion is real, and, sometimes, contributes to an untimely exit or professional impairment for social workers that remain in the profession. As opposed to
acceptance of conditions of professional depletion as normative, latent consequences of working with the most vulnerable people, a micro, mezzo and macro practice response is necessary.

Paulo Freire in the transformative learning theory suggests that students coming together and engaging in dialogue results in consciousness-raising (Friere, 1968). As a result of consciousness raising, students are able to understand their environment and see it through a different lens. As a result of this consciousness-raising process, students gain understanding of oppression in their environment and transform the environment through collective action. In applying this theory to social work organizations, social workers who engage each other in critical dialogue in support of one another will develop a greater understanding of the dynamics of professional depletion and how their environment, social work organizations, play a significant role in perpetuating the dynamics that contribute to professional depletion of social workers. Through collective action social workers transform social work organization, thereby creating a culture of wellness.

Some social work organizations ignore these dynamics or frame the issue, solely, as an individual problem which is common in oppressive environments. In such environments, the people suffering are blamed for the host of their problems while little to no attention is given to the structures and systems that impact those people. Certainly, social workers, individually, play a role in addressing the conditions of professional depletion in that they may utilize individual self-care strategies preventatively.

**Individual Responses**

As noted in the literature review, researchers explored individual responses by social workers to the conditions of professional depletion. As noted by the authors of the A-Z Self-Care Handbook for Social Workers and other Helping Professionals, there are certain categories
of self-care practices those areas are physical, psychological, social, and professional, and self-care strategies (Grise-Owens, Miller, & Eaves, 2016). Examples of each are:

Physical - exercise, walking, making healthy food choices

Psychological - mindfulness, meditation, deep breathing exercises

Social care - spending time with friends and family, attending social events, or anything that builds social connection

Professional/Academic - participating in professional development, creating a writing schedule, engaging a mentor

**Use of Supervision, Peer Supports, and Teams**

On some mental health social work teams, supervisors have started to include self-care into supervision. Social workers on the clinical team utilized self-care practices individually, and through this action, social work supervisors gained awareness of self-care (Anonymous, personal communication, November 11, 2014). Shulman (1993) found, in supervision, social work supervisors that discussed the social workers’ wellness and strategies reported positive results for the team. Munson (2002) similarly noted, supervision which specifically addressed self-care and coping strategies improved the overall wellness of social workers. In applying clinical theory, Dombo & Gray (2013) noted that mental health social workers may “take on” the client’s experiences as opposed to “taking in” which involves the ability to contain one’s own affect while helping the client to contain their experience. The authors focused on one area of self-care, spirituality. Dombo & Gray (2013) noted that participation in peer support groups provided professional spiritual support and helped clinical social workers address vicarious trauma.

Acknowledging, addressing and practicing self-care appears to have a contagious effect that inspires other social workers and builds connection. For example, this researcher as a
member of child welfare team started to gain awareness of self-care after observing other team members. Eventually, the team started to practice self-care strategies collectively. The team would take lunches together; walk together; staff difficult cases to gather; and discussed personal struggles. This collective practicing of self-care as a child welfare team, produced positive results. For example, the child welfare team was able to effectively employ a flex schedule which allowed for each social worker to take off one day every other week. While other teams had the ability to take a flex day as well, often, despite being off, social workers would receive calls regarding their caseload. Thereby, this practice prevented the social worker from disconnecting from the work which is absolutely necessary to sustain a healthy balance (Figley, 2002; Raheim & Lu, 2014). The child welfare team understood the importance of the additional day that allowed for restoration of the individual social worker. Therefore, collectively, we decided to staff each other’s cases, so if an emergency or question arose, the team would manage the issue allowing for the flexing team member to be off without disruption. This exemplifies how individual social workers collectively focusing on self-care transformed the dynamics of the team.

Broader Organizational Responses

Educational settings as organizations.

Social work students are, unfortunately, reporting high levels of stress and burnout prior to initiating their social work careers (Smith, 2015). In terms of organizational responses, social work education implemented changes to address the conditions of professional depletion. The NASW supports the implementation of self-care into social work education (NASW, 2015). Individual educators have begun to include self-care strategies into their individual courses. Social work educators researched the various forms of self-care strategies utilized by their social
work graduate students to help students identify effective strategies (Clements & Minnick, 2012). Other educators have included practices such as mindfulness into social work practice courses as a means of teaching self-care within the curriculum (Schure, Christopher, & Christopher, 2008; Gockel, Burton, Bryer, 2013; Shapiro, Brown, Biegel, & Rodolfa, 2007).

Grise-Owens (2018) provided a diagram that exemplifies how self-care on an individual basis permeates to macro changes in culture thereby transforming teams, organizations and the social context as shown in Table 1.1. A veteran social work educator described this process stating that a social work graduate student who learns about practice risks and self-care, in the future, will utilize such practices in the profession as a supervisor (Erline Grise-Owens, personal communication, October 11, 2017).

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<td>Self-Care &amp; Organizational Wellness</td>
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Role of the Workplace.

The workplace plays a significant role in the overall organizational wellness which includes micro issues experienced by social workers within the organization. There is an interdependence and interconnection of micro issues and macro issues (Raheim & Lu, 2014). Therefore, a model of self-care must be comprehensive and be aimed at multiple levels to be effective (Brady, Guy, Poelstra, & Brokaw, 1999; Trippany, Kress, & Wilcoxon, 2004).
The importance of practitioner well-being is specifically noted by the National Association of Social Workers (2015), “Professional self-care is an essential underpinning to best practice in the profession of social work. The practice of self-care is critical to the survival and growth of the profession,” (p. 245). The policy statement goes on to address the establishment and implementation of policies at the organizational level that address coping styles, culture, environments, work load, essential supervision, and encouraging self-care practices (NASW, 2015).

The workplace can respond by implementing various practices and policies that specifically focus on prevention and awareness of stress, vicarious traumatization, secondary traumatization, burnout and compassion fatigue. Aspects that foster wellness at the workplace are employee involvement, life balance, employee growth and development, health and safety, and employee recognition (Grise-Owens et al., 2016). Through educating social workers as an organization, employers would be endorsing and teaching self-care (Bloomquist et. al, 2016) within the organization about the conditions of professional depletion, organizations would thereby be support to social workers. Additional steps that maybe taken by organizations would be implementation of targeted wellness programs, self-care planning, and coping strategies training, workload reduction and interactional supervision (Shulman, 1993). Lee & Miller noted six primary structures that support what the authors refer to as professional self-care:

1 - workload and time management
2 - attention to professional role
3 - attention to reactions to work
4 - professional social support and self-advocacy
5 - professional development

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6 - revitalization and generation of energy

For example, in a multi-state social work agency, significant benefits were reported as a result of implementing an organizational wellness initiative. The agency utilized concept mapping which involved the social workers to implement a wellness program (Miller, Grise-Owens, Addison, Marshall, Trabue, & Escobar-Ratliff, 2016). Other helping professionals such as nursing have begun to address self-care on an organizational level (Rushton, 2016; Taylor & Renpenning, 2011). Social work agencies could utilize such models to initiate organizational wellness programs at their respective institutions.

Conclusion

“Self-care is a vehicle for change in the professional culture of social work.”

(Lee & Miller, 2013, p. 98)

The purpose of this paper was to explore the concept of self-care and the potential impact practicing self-care may have on the overall organizational wellness in social work institutions. The social work profession is charged with working with people in society who have experienced trauma and other significant life challenges which requires empathy and taking in the experiences of clients. As a result, severe conditions such as professional depletion, vicarious trauma, etc. are the potential latent consequences of performing the work (Bride & Figley, 2007; Grise-Owens et al., 2016; Harrington, 2007; NASW, 2008; Newell & MacNeil, 2010; Partab, 2010; Wilson, 2016).

The findings suggest that self-care is one potential remedy for these serious conditions. Self-care may be applied at micro, mezzo and macro levels of practice. On a micro level, individual social workers practicing self-care seems to permeate and influence other social workers to practice self-care individually and collectively. The collective expression of self-care
practices among a collection of individual employees may positively impacted the overall organizational wellness in social work organizations.

Through the framework of transformative learning theory, coined by Paulo Friere, this paper explored self-care and organizational wellness. Social workers are increasingly at risk of professional depletion - burnout, vicarious trauma, stress and an untimely departure from the social work profession. These latent consequences of being a helping professional should not be accepted as normative. Attention to individual self-care and collective action focused on self-care and wellness, organizations may be transformed into a healthier workplace that supports efforts that ensure wellness and sustainability of social workers.

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Nature: A Path to Wellness at Work

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Abstract

The National Association Social Workers asserted that self-care must be addressed in social work practice. Self-care may be included in social work education curriculum which provides students with an opportunity to learn self-care strategies prior to entering the field of practice (NASW, 2008). This author solo-authored a chapter, Nature and co-edited The A to Z Self – Care Handbook for Social Workers and Other Helping Professions that was published by the New Social Worker Press (Grise-Owens, Miller & Eaves, 2016). The book provides practical self-care strategies identified by social work practitioners and students (Grise-Owens, Miller & Eaves, 2016). The book targets social work practitioners and other helping professionals to promote self-care as a core competency of sustainable social work practice. The chapter addresses the use of nature as a self-care strategy to improve overall sustainability in the workplace.

Introduction

Finn (2016) noted that celebration is an integral part of social work practice. According to Finn (2016) celebration is congruent with our work as social workers. Yet, scant article exist that make mere mention of celebration in social work literature. As an educator and administrator with fifteen years of practice, I intentionally provide opportunities to celebrate the work that inspires happiness and love for doing the work. Celebration is a self-care strategy that may transform workplaces. Kanter & Sherman (2017) suggested developing a self-care plan to create a happy, healthy workplace.

My self-care strategies have most certainly strengthened my practice and not only, helped me sustain but also, stay in love with the work. bell hooks wrote "When teachers teach with love, combining care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust, we are often

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able to enter the classroom and go straight to the heart of the matter, which is knowing what to do on any given day to create the best climate for learning,” (2003, p. 134). Similarly, in social work practice, staying in love with work allows me to be my best self which I find extremely important as a social work administrator who embodies the power to help transform the culture of workplaces. In this first product, I share one of my strategies, nature, to exemplify how anyone may infuse self-care into their daily practice.

**Nature: A Path to Wellness at Work**

“To sit in the shade on a fine day and look upon the verdant green hills is the most perfect refreshment.” *Jane Austin* (n.d.)

Nature is like a cool cleansing rain, washing away the troubles laid before me. As a helping professional, I delve deeply into other’s problems, empathize with their feelings, and discuss problem-solving strategies. Incorporating nature into my self-care plan was essential to ward off the hazards of being a helping professional, such as vicarious trauma, nihilism, and burnout.

Like Jane Austin, Aristotle, a philosopher; Ansel Adams, an artist; and George Washington Carver, a botanist, expressed their appreciation of nature. They—and so many others—remind us that nature is restorative. Ansel Adams (1961) believed that the world, being nature, was “incomprehensively beautiful” with infinite possibilities. While Aristotle (n.d.) proclaimed, “…in all things of nature, there is something marvelous”. Lastly, George Washington Carver (n.d.) remarked on nature’s tranquility saying, “Nothing is more beautiful than the loveliness of the woods before sunrise.”

**“Bogged Down?”: Create a Bog Garden**

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In nature, I find rejuvenation, peace and balance. Working in my bog garden is quiet and peaceful. It serves as a gentle reminder of how nature, like people, is resilient. Regardless of the harsh environment, nature always finds a way to replenish.

Some years ago, an area of my home landscape was overly shady, very wet, and seemingly hopeless for any growth. At the same time, I was experiencing tremendous workplace stress, and desperately needed new ways to effectively manage stress. Like my home landscape, I felt stymied in my professional growth.

I read that taking a walk outside was a great way to “bust a bad mood” (Bust A Bad, 2011). I began taking walks around my office building. While walking under trees and around yard benches, the pathways were natural and minimally disturbed the environment. The walks cleared my mind, boosted energy and sparked ideas. Research shows that a connection to nature reduces stress and cultivates a sense of meaning and purpose (Ulrich, Simons, Losito, Fiorito, Miles & Zelson, 1991).

Eventually, I began taking “nature walks” with my family at home, and we fell in love with nature. This feeling of connection to nature helped me experience the restorative power of nature and sparked an idea to appreciate the environment, even what seemed beyond repair. This walk evolved to creating a bog garden at home. Boggy soil is soft, watery and typically referred to as a trouble spot where very few plants, trees, etc. can grow, and the entire eastern side of my home was comprised of boggy soil. I transformed this “hopeless” area of my home into a serene, rejuvenating place that provides me peace by simply creating a bog garden. A bog garden is a collection of perennials, shrubs and trees that thrive under consistently moist and shady conditions, and often has water feature such as a pond or fountain. I walk through my garden several times per week, and reserve heavy-duty work such as digging and lifting in the garden.
for days when I experience increased work stress. The heavy-duty work serves as a therapeutic output of energy and a healthy way to relieve stress (Wolf, Krueger, & Rozance, 2014).

Like the bog garden, I stumbled into the Louisville Loop when exploring ways to expand my self-care options. The city has several green spaces connected by scenic pathways, referred to as the Louisville Loop. The pathway stretches around the cityscape through hilly parks and along the river. In spring, aromatic honeysuckle shrubs scent and burgundy Japanese maples accent the pathway—serving as a natural meditative space. Japanese culture researched the healing power of nature. Shinrin-yoku, “forest bathing”, a concept that encourages walking through the woods to experience nature’s restorative power (Hutchinson, 2013). Minimal noise pollution, clean air, immune boosting mist from plants are benefits of forest bathing.

At work, my day is filled with meetings and tasks with minimal down time and even less for processing. The nature pathway provides a space with little distractions and quiet time, leaving me alone with only my thoughts. Likewise, in my bog garden, I become immersed in the solitude and peace of nature. Nature is quiet and simple. I share bell hooks (2000) sentiment that the key is to live life simply. In these quiet times in the bog garden and on the nature path, I find clear thoughts and creative ideas. Ansel Adams believed nature provided endless prospects of “magic and wonder.”

**Bring Nature into Your Workday**

Ansel Adams is known for his photography of natural landscapes. I incorporated similar photos of nature and live plants into my office decor to provide a relaxing atmosphere. Infusing nature into my workspace has a rejuvenating effect. It allows me time to re-center before meeting with the next client or going to that long meeting. Researchers found that people who had nature contact experienced “significantly lower stress levels and health complaints than
those with less natural elements in their workspace” (Largo-Wight, 2013). Nature scenes as a screensaver, desk fountains, zen gardens, plants or pictures capturing nature are ways to bring nature into the workspace.

As a "natural" de-stressor, nature helps maintain a healthy balance for helping professionals. Dedicating time in nature whether working in a garden, traveling through scenic pathways or infusing nature into your work surroundings is a step toward developing a well-rounded self care plan.

Reflection & Discussion

1 - Think about your work surroundings and nature. What are some ways to infuse nature into your workspace?

2- Think about the location of your office. Is there a park, waterway, or other natural setting you can visit during breaks?

3. A bog garden was just what I needed when I was feeling “bogged down” in my professional life. Where is a natural setting or activity that can help you feel rejuvenated and replenished?
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