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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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A Banded Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment

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

Keywords: self-care, organizational wellness, transformative learning, prevention, burnout, practice

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.

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As this journey ends to create vast opportunities in the future, I reflect on the amazing, unyielding support from my family and close friends. Thank you to my children, Marley and Cody for your understanding and sticking with me throughout the process. All this work is for us and serves as an example of what dedication and tenacity can do for you. Thanks to my mother, Veronica, for always having words of encouragement and endless support. Thanks to my dear friend and mentor Erlene for helping me in myriad ways. To my partner, D'Angelo, thank you for being my rock.

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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, 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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