

## The Importance of Self-Care: A Paradigm Shift

By Karen Cheman

An all too familiar scene: An advocate tries to go back to sleep in the middle of the night after answering a call on the crisis line. Sleep evades her as the conversation is replayed over and over again in her mind while hindsight reminds her of all the things she should have said. A vague feeling of distress lingers as reported images hover on the edges of her consciousness. Realizing sleep is far away, she gets up to make some tea for those chocolate chip cookies in the cupboard. She turns the TV on to catch some late night sci-fi distraction. Munching on cookies and sipping tea in front of the tube, she realizes she hasn't heard a word of the program. It's back to bed for another shot at sleep.

Morning comes and our advocate oversleeps the alarm clock. It's too late for that jog she had hoped for and not enough time to make some lunch while getting the kids off to school before leaving for work. She finds herself snapping at her children as they ignore her requests to clean up the dishes or get into the car. While driving to work she slams on the horn, wondering why most people drive like fools. By now, she realizes she's feeling somewhat anxious. She wonders if she should call the crisis line supervisor to debrief but thinks it's not really that important and besides, she just doesn't have time for it. There are more immediate things demanding her attention.

As the scenario implies, self-care is often a neglected issue among advocates. We tell ourselves we can handle the stress of our work, it's not a big deal, it won't bother us—we'll deal with it later. This attitude may translate into insomnia when we can't fall asleep, or as intrusive thoughts when emotions, images, or energy lingers long after our intervention is over, interfering in our daily lives. We may find ourselves irritable with our families or coworkers, anxious or fearful about walking out to the car at night, angry toward our communities, or numb to our clients. Our stress could progress to loss of trust in ourselves or in the goodness of others, intimacy avoidance, or control issues.

For the sake of our health and that of our clients, it's time for a new approach. The first step requires moving self-care up on our personal priority list. As advocates, we willingly take action to assist others. To be truly available and effective for them, we need to initially take care of ourselves. Self-care, then, becomes an investment first in ourselves and secondly in our line of work. Not only are we personally worth the effort of empowering our health; it's essential in order to continue our work to avoid burnout and vicarious trauma. As advocates, we need to view ourselves as assets deserving of routine maintenance care, downtime, and incentives in order to function compassionately, capably, and efficiently.

It is common knowledge among advocates that working with trauma survivors is demanding work; therefore, it is to an advocate's advantage to take a proactive approach in dealing with potential stress. We need to make a conceptual paradigm shift. Instead of using coping skills or strategies after the fact, we must begin with a proactive, self-care routine before the fact. In other words, we should create structures that will support us as we work, rather than react with coping strategies after our work is done. Self-care is then viewed as a health promoting behavior, designed to mitigate potential negative effects before they arise.

In order to develop a self-care system for ourselves, we need to understand how self-care routines differ from coping strategies. While comprising many of the same behaviors, self-care involves a planned, comprehensive approach rather than a post hoc set of coping mechanisms. Both styles may

involve behaviors such as exercise, spiritual practices, special foods, leisure activities, socializing, or private time. While coping strategies would employ these behaviors sporadically or after stress has accumulated, self-care incorporates these behaviors on a regular basis before the onset of symptoms.

Examples include:

- A fitness class in contrast to an occasional walk
- A weekly meditation group instead of an infrequent prayer
- A healthy nutritious diet as opposed to one high in sugar, fat, and processed foods
- Salsa dancing every other week versus a solitary impromptu occasion
- A bi-monthly night out with the girls instead of once every three or four months
- An early morning hour for yourself instead of a few minutes caught in between appointments

Over time our short-term, stop-gap, coping strategies are not likely to work. There won't be enough cookies, tea, or TV programs to alleviate our stress. Only an upstream solution rather than a downstream response can prevent the dam from bursting. As opposed to losing ourselves through stress, self-care is an opportunity for us to define ourselves. With self-care, we establish our boundaries, determine our values, act upon our choices, hone our skills, and identify our strengths. Self-care can prevent stress from controlling or diminishing the quality of our lives, leaving us free to assist others. Our roles as advocates depend on that.