Self-care and resilience for psychologists in times of crisis

In this time of crisis after the horrific terrorist attacks on the Muslim community on Friday the 15th March 2019, we will all be feeling a host of strong emotions which will shift and change as time goes by. We must support our Muslim community who have been most affected as it is their experience that needs our primary acknowledgement and understanding, their pain that must be heard, and their needs put at the forefront of our hearts and minds. We need now, more than ever to reach out compassionately to our Muslim friends and family, clients and colleagues, to offer kindness and compassion. Feeling loved and supported are among the most important features of being resilient.

Beyond this, depending upon how we personally have been affected by this trauma, it is important to reflect on how we are taking care of our loved ones and ourselves. We may be doing extra hours and dealing with others’ distress alongside our own anger, pain and trauma. The saying ‘we need to put our gas masks on first’ applies aptly to psychologists and other health professionals who are often working with people at their most vulnerable. However, in crisis times, this does not always seem possible, we tend to look after others first when we perceive their needs are greater than ours. Ideally, self-care needs to be present as we make decisions throughout our day, as it will affect the quality of care we give and the wellbeing we experience during these times.

With that in mind, the self-care strategies below are intended as a checklist to look through, alone or with a peer, as to what you (and the people around you) are doing to cope and manage feelings such as sadness, shock, helplessness, anger and lack of safety that may prevail at times like these. Self-care includes many strategies that many of us, whilst aware of in everyday life may de-prioritise in times of stress. Be self-compassionate towards yourself, don’t engage in guilt or chastisement about what you may not be able to do right now. The strategies here are just a prompt, not a list of must-do’s! Neither are they an exhaustive list, you’ll have your own original ones. Self-care is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’, we need to select broad strategies that appeal to us individually and most easily fit into our cultural practices, lifestyle and resources. Self care can look and feel different cross culturally. For example, in individualistic (western) cultures the concept of self-care may be more accepted and in collectivist cultures self-care may take a different form such as through cultural or religious practices.

These are a mix of self-care strategies from the more traditional and resilience arena. The latter aim to build strengths and grow from adversity rather than just offset the stress or fatigue. Both are relevant right now. We suggest you use this list to consider and celebrate and strengthen what you are already doing and pick one or two areas that you could tweak.
Remember to keep your wellbeing a priority when you can.

- **Positive Relationships** – it is important to have quality connections with people who understand our feelings and the work we do. As we know, happiness and psychological health are inextricably linked with close, meaningful, and intimate relationships. The more we are connected to others, the more the opportunity to process our own reactions, and gain nurturance and support, experience positive emotions and so on. This is so important to do when we are in crisis mode, seeking out connection after a difficult session, a challenging day and so forth. This includes those both inside the office - clinical colleagues, peer support/supervision groups, clinical teams, supervisors and mentors, competence constellations and clients – as well as those outside the office – i.e. one’s spouse/partner, family members, friends, spiritual guides, or a personal therapist. If you have been closely linked to someone affected by trauma or have been re-triggered as a result of past trauma, taking this to supervision or re-engaging with a therapist yourself would be ideal at this time. Furthermore, if you are having to advocate for others or challenge islamophobia or racism in your workplaces, find supportive others with whom to connect for support in these actions.

- **Practicing reflection** – one of our core competencies, this is a building block of self-care. The first step is developing our self-awareness when feeling overwhelmed, followed by reflection upon what might be going on within you, and the people around you. The understanding gained can guide our self-care choices. Without taking the time to reflect, we run the risk of overlooking our essential needs. Again, many of us do this best within the context of a relationship, be it a colleague, mentor, supervisor, therapist, friend or family member or all of the above. Someone who can help us see what we might be too immersed in to see ourselves, provide a bit of objectivity.

- This may involve expressing vulnerability, and it is vital that we support each other to be open and share our feelings safely. Even psychologists report fear expressing vulnerability to colleagues or loved ones in case we are seen as weak, or causing others distress. These barriers to emotional expression need to be actively challenged in our work cultures so that we can obtain the support we need to cope well. The empathy and care we receive helps us to feel contained, resolve feelings and move on.

- Alongside processing our sadness or trauma, we can try to cultivate more positive emotions to boost the ratio of positive to negative. We can add into our day positive experiences, big or small, which can balance out and ‘undo’ the impact of negative emotions like sadness, grief, anger. We can play, hug, laugh, love, be compassionate, notice beauty in nature, appreciate the privilege of being taken into a client’s confidence, be thankful (noting 3 things we are grateful for each day for a week), embrace the awe inspired by others actions, feel pride in our own, or take the time to enjoy some daily routine that we usually hurry through such as savouring a meal. Simply noticing positives that are already part of our experience and savouring them enhances our mood.

- Boosting optimism – cultivate a positive outlook to enable us to maintain hope for ourselves and our clients. We can practice this by noting ‘what went well’ at the end of each day, at the start of each meeting, at the beginning of supervision or by practicing random acts of kindness within the workplace, a very fitting strategy for a stressed team. Engaging in our spiritual practices and with our communities often boosts hope and optimism.

- Alongside optimism is building our sense of self-efficacy, by noticing what we have been capable of under stress, remembering how we’ve coped in difficult times in the past, reflecting on strengths we’ve shown and recognizing what we are therefore capable of going forward.

- **Self-Compassion** – How do we show ourselves the kindness we show others, understand our own inadequacies, and recognise the common humanity in any suffering? How do we develop an attitude of self-compassion - applying the
compassion we would show others to ourselves and accepting the universality of suffering, so vital at this time? Small things like allowing yourself breaks, not setting high expectations for what you can achieve, creating do-able goals, taking breaks to refuel, congratulating yourself on simply getting through a day.

- Part of this is practising **mindfulness**, which helps us to be non-judgmental and receptive to our thoughts and feelings without trying to suppress or deny them. This assists us not be “over-identified” with them, and be less caught up and swept away in reactivity. It’s an important skill when feelings run high and we need to manage them when we are working with others who are in distress as well. **Meditation** is one of the most highly rated self-care practices to enhance these skills and deal with stress. Engaging in one’s own practice of meditation or activities which bring about a meditative like state such as prayer. Meditation practice that combines self-compassion is that of Kirsten Nef who offers some self-compassion meditations on her website for example: [https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/#guided-meditations](https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/#guided-meditations)

- Also central to resilience and post-traumatic growth is taking the time to **find meaning** in our experiences, reflecting on your purpose or role. Our spiritual, philosophical, cultural or religious beliefs can help gain solace and perspective at this time. Make time to engage in your chosen spiritual practices. Connect with the values that underpin your career choice. Visit **culturally meaningful places** and engage in **events and activities** to recharge spiritually.

- **Valuing our work** - This may be happening in the wider community and nationally but how can we reflect upon this within our work sphere? How does the team show that you are deeply valued for the work you do? How do you show that you value yourself in the work you do? At this time of crisis it is important to recognise that our work is of immense value, from sitting with others in distress to the wider tasks of organising service delivery above and beyond the usual, everyone will be doing their bit in this very human tragedy and contributing to building a compassionate, caring community and country.

More traditional and most frequently recommended strategies also include these below:

- On the one hand, eat a balanced, healthy **diet**, moderating our alcohol and substance use.

- On the other hand, food can be nurturing, so cook some **favourite food** for yourself or a loved one:-)

- Regular **physical activity** (exercise, sport) watch the amount of sedentary time.

- Physical **relaxation** – whatever method gets you there.

- Build in **massage** – especially when you notice bodily tension on the rise, you may be containing a lot of emotions, your own and others.

- **Rest**, including passive rest (not doing anything), particularly if overly busy. Build rest breaks into your day, especially between clients or other tasks.

- Take a break from the incessant distraction of **digital media**, limit your exposure to small amounts and chose your time to connect carefully when not alone or just before bed.

- Getting a good night’s sleep - where problematic, optimising habits and routines to facilitate sleep (sleep hygiene)

- **Breathing** – practice deep breathing for a few minutes throughout the day at every pit stop, break or meal.

- **‘Vitamin N’** – spending time or ‘tuning in’ to **nature** in small or large doses, it provides perspective and good feelings which soothe and can be done in small doses during an quick office break, a drive home, an evening walk, a weekend outing, and few days away, a longer planned holiday. Make sure you have planned your next holiday now.

- **Time management** – tackling difficult tasks at optimum times of the day. Scheduling alternating challenging sessions with rewarding activities/fun/good people where
possible.

- **Leisurably diversions** – participating in hobbies, creative outlets, listening to or creating music for example.

- **Cognitive therapy** – watching our thoughts, for example managing unhelpful beliefs about what’s achievable under stressful circumstances (by yourselves or your clients) and being able to adapt our expectations flexibly as required at times like these. Make sure you don’t overly attribute lack of success to your failings.

- Be mindful of feelings of **compassion fatigue**, common feelings which may creep in when we do a lot of work involving empathy and we do it well. This is particularly important to pay attention to if we have other carer roles in our personal lives as well as our working lives (e.g. have young children, or sick or elderly relatives)

- Keep an eye on our potential to develop **secondary traumatic stress** if we are doing a lot of trauma work. Monitoring any overall shift in our beliefs, expectations and assumptions, e.g. heightened sense of vulnerability, suspicion, victim blaming or in relationship dynamics of heightened sensitivity to power issues or abusive dynamics in personal or professional relationships. If you find you’re feeling very reactive, this is understandable, talk with someone such as a mentor or spiritual guide or take to supervision or therapy. Together consider if you need time out from work for a while.

In the big picture, practicing self-care is a process with its own challenges and barriers. It takes work and constant refinement and adjustment to find what works and indeed to build new habits as new needs present themselves. This takes time and patience. Ideally, our approach to self-care should fit with who we are culturally, spiritually and emotionally. The better the ‘fit’ with our values, preferences and lifestyle, the more likely we are to enhance our wellbeing and resilience. When we practice this well, we are modelling a powerful message to our colleagues and young people about personal and professional wellbeing and the importance of vulnerability, self-compassion, connectedness and limit setting for a healthy work culture. Some references below might prove helpful to support your efforts as does doing this with a peer or supervisor. We welcome further useful ideas and feedback! Go well and take care!

**Useful references:**