

# SECONDARY TRAUMA: THE SCIENCE AND ART OF SELF-CARE

Deena McMahon MSW, LICSW

McMahon Counseling and Consultation, LLC

[deena.mcmahon@gmail.com](mailto:deena.mcmahon@gmail.com)

# A SERIOUS PROBLEM

Job satisfaction worldwide is in a 'surprisingly fragile state'. Research suggests that mental health providers may be experiencing burnout in a range from 21-67%.

# WHAT IS BURNOUT?

- Fried, past your prime, etc..
- Compassion fatigue
- Vicarious traumatization, secondary traumatic stress
- Burnout?
- It is all the same thing.

# IT IS A BIG DEAL

- The world seems to be in the midst of a pandemic of burnout, spread across all age groups, genders, professions, and cultures.

Miller, S., Hubble, M. & Mathieu, F. (2015, May-June). Burnout Reconsidered: What Supershrinks Can Teach Us. *Psychotherapy Networker*, 18-23;42-43.

# IMPACT ON OUR LIVES

- Increased absenteeism
- Anxiety/depression/exhaustion
- Job turnover
- Physical illness
- Insomnia
- Hypertension/weight gain, muscle and bone disorder

# DRUG COURT CHALLENGES

- You serve the deep-end defendants who have been unreachable, unteachable, and rejected.
- They are highly mistrustful and often have misdiagnosed mental health problems.
- They are traumatized people who have been in and out of addiction programs which have not been trauma-informed.

# YOUR DEFENDANT

- Your defendant has lost hope of success, recovery, or life in the mainstream.
- They have often lost or deeply compromised most, if not all, of their important relationships.
- They have internalized a sense of not just failing but of ‘being’ failures.

# EXTREMELY HIGH STAKES

- Failure for your defendant will be very high.
- Jail, prison, or death is a higher stakes outcome than most professionals cope with on a daily basis.

# VULNERABILITY

- Your work creates an intimate interface with a defendant:
  - You build a relationship with them.
  - You invest in them.
  - You celebrate sobriety with them.
  - You grieve their losses, feel their trauma, and hurt when they hurt.
- You also sit at your desk a lot.

# THE PARADOX

- Our greatest strengths become our greatest weaknesses.
- The capacity to share, connect, empathize, problem-solve, and engage deeply is what makes us good at what we do. It also leaves us vulnerable.

# A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

- You become the strength they do not have.
- You become the substitute family.
- You offer a relationship that holds them accountable.
- You are there when they need you and often when they don't want you.

# ANECDOTE TO BURNOUT

1. Do more of this.
2. Do less of that.

# A NEW TWIST

- Involvement, caring, or connection is not the point; a good outcome is the point.
- Connection and involvement is a means to an end.
- “Super shrinks” (Psychotherapy Networker)

# MANAGING EMPATHY

- Over-empathizing with a client can lead to burnout. Compassion means remaining attuned but differentiated.
  - *‘What was it like for them to have that experience?’*  
rather than
  - *‘I could never have survived that.’*
- This separates their feelings from ours.

Ackerman, D. & Siegel, D. (2015, May-June) . Healing and Home in the Human Age. *Psychotherapy Networker*, 41, 48.

# DIFFERENTIATION

- Sometimes we forget about our victories because we are so haunted and hurt by the unsuccessful defendants.
  - That is part of our story, but we do not own it.
  - We were in the story, but we did not write it.

# YOU NEED CONTROL

- Circumventing stress is a matter of possessing the ability to act effectively in any given circumstance.
- The more control workers have, the less stress-related illness they experience.

# NEW DATA

- It is not how demanding your job is or the level of responsibility, but how much control you have in performing the work.

# LEARNING FROM SUCCESS

- The most successful professionals, including athletes, surgeons, and scientists, tell us we have to know when we CAN'T help, and learn from that process.

Miller, S., Hubble, M. & Mathieu, F. (2015, May-June). Burnout Reconsidered: What Supershrinks Can Teach Us. *Psychotherapy Networker*, 18-23;42-43.

# LEARNING FROM FAILURE

- Avoiding burnout and nurturing resiliency is knowing how to be helpful and knowing when you can't be.

# HOW WE GET HOOKED

- They need us to support them \$\$\$\$
- It our job to hang in there????
- They just need a little more time.....
- At least they are not getting worse@#\$^
- There are no other options for this guy.

# DO MORE

- More sleep
- More fun
- More exercise
- More time off
- More hobbies
- More mindfulness
- More team meetings

# MACRO SELF-CARE

- Take longer, more expensive vacations.
- Daily morning yoga with cross-fit weights 5 times a week. Eat a healthy lunch every day.
- When you get home, go to your gardening club, your book club, etc.
- Make a list every morning and sleep 8 hours every night.
- Count your blessings. Be sure to be positive.

I simply don't have time  
at the end of my day for  
my good intentions.

# LATER

- I will do that later.
- Later, I will have time to spend with my friends.
- Later, I will sleep in.
- Later, we can forget about what they need and just relax.
- Later may NEVER come.....

# THE NEW SMOKING?

- The lack of exercise and immobility of our work lives is creating an epidemic of physical and mental health problems that is as serious to our generation as chronic smoking.
- It is the new national health crisis.

# MICRO SELF-CARE

- Micro self-care is about making small changes with reliable frequency.
- Neuroplasticity (the brain's ability to reorganize itself with new neural networks) happens with brief, repetitive experiences.
- Small and frequent works better than big and seldom.

# MICRO

- **Relaxation** dials down burnout.
- **Energizing** our sense of purpose overcomes compassion fatigue.
- **Grounding** ourselves keeps us safe from secondary trauma.

# THE PLAN

- One-minute meditation by Martin Boroson (**relax**)
- Tense major muscles, breathe, and relax for 5 seconds. Repeat 3 times. (**energize**)
- Sit still, look at a loved photo or object, and repeat your mantra about connectedness to others. (**grounding**)

# FIND A MANTRA

- This work is very important.
- I make a difference.
- I contribute to the greater good.
- Everyone deserves another chance.

# BE WHERE YOU ARE

- This is mindfulness.
- Take a seat, take a breath, and simply commit to being aware of the present moment.

# MICRO MOMENTS

- “Micro-moments” of connection (e.g. sharing a smile or expressing concern):
  - Improve emotional resilience
  - Boost immune system
  - Reduce susceptibility to depression and anxiety

Barbara Frederickson, as cited by E. Millard (“The Power of Kindness”; ExperienceLife.com)

# ATTITUDE IS A CHOICE

- Attitude does not come to us at birth: It is developed over time and continues to change throughout our entire life. Thank goodness!
- Attitude is what we say when we talk to ourselves.

Urban, H. (2003). *Life's greatest lessons: 20 things that matter* (4th ed., 1st Fireside ed.). New York: Simon & Schuster.

# WHAT WE SAY TO THE MIRROR

- We are typically very hard on ourselves.
- Listen to women as they talk about themselves when they look in the mirror.

# HAVE A SUPPORT SYSTEM

- You need as much support as you need.
- Having someone to share your ups and downs with on a regular basis, even for short periods of time, can make the difference between depletion and sustenance.

# COMPARTMENTALIZE

- When we get too focused on the long list in front of us, we can be demoralized and overwhelmed.
- On meeting at a time, one day at a time, one challenge at a time.
- If we teach it, we need to reach it.

# ACCEPT YOUR LIMITATIONS

- I accept that there are many aspects of this beyond my influence.
- I am doing what I can.
- I work within the system.
- I focus on the good I have achieved.
- I recognize and accept my limitations.

# LEARN TO SAY NO

- Learn to MEAN IT when you say it.
- Learn not to feel guilty about saying it.
- Learn to let others take over.
- Be a 2-year-old again, they say “NO” a lot.
- Review Step #1.

# UNPLUG

- We have fewer “real” boundaries or limits around our personal time.
- We use email/voicemail/laptops/iPhones as a convenience but have trained people to think we are always accessible.
- How many portals of entry into your life do you tolerate or want?

# SLEEP MORE

- We need eight hours, on average. If not,
  - We are more accident prone.
  - We are less productive.
  - Short-term memory is impaired.
  - Pain tolerance diminishes.
  - Problem-solving decreases.

# SLEEP AND LEARNING

- Sleep helps build long-term memories and fully incorporating the day's lessons requires a full night's sleep.
- “If you don't sleep the night after training, then even if you sleep the next night or the next night, you never learn.”
  - Charles Czeisler, director of sleep medicine at Harvard Medical School and consultant to NASA, the Secret Service, and the NBA

# LACK OF SLEEP

‘Getting too little sleep can have serious health consequences, including depression, weight gain, heart disease and probably mortality.’

-Steven Feinsilver, director of the Center for Sleep Medicine at Mount Sinai School of Medicine

McDonald, J. (2015). Sleep Like a Pro. *TIME: The Science of Sleep*, 56-65.

# YOUR SPIRITUAL SELF

- Have a sense of what you are passionate about and why it matters in the big picture.
- Spending time by yourself and learning to live with silence is how we come to listen to our inner voice. This is a lesson the elders taught.

# KNOW YOUR VULNERABILITIES

- Every one of us has a weak point. The body compensates, but only when it has to.
- Our organ systems are all interrelated. Some are more susceptible to stress than others.
- What hurts first? The early warning signs...
- **This is true on a larger agency scale as well.**

# GOOD MENTAL HEALTH

- We need to pay attention to the symptoms we develop, our family history, and our level of distress/impairment.
- We need to trust that getting help is good.
- Identify our barriers (shame, guilt, fear).

# BREAK THE RULES

Play before work—the work is never done.

Have dessert before the veggies—your stomach can't hold all the food.

Sleep as late as your teenager—make it a contest.

**You are never too  
old to have a happy  
childhood.**

# IT IS ALL CONNECTED

- The greatest predictor of positive outcomes for the clients we work with is the manner in which we interact with each other.
- Positive relationships and care in the work environment directly impact our ability to extend this to our client system.

# HOPE AND CONNECTION

- One of the greatest things we do to improve the lives of our defendants is to offer hope.
- Every opportunity we have to form a connection, however brief, is an opportunity to make a difference.

# Practice Play

# Embrace Learning

# Seek Laughter

# BELIEVE

Believe that you make a difference  
every day.

Believe in the power of the human  
spirit.

Believe in yourself and what you bring  
to the process.

# PUT YOUR HAND ON YOUR HEART

- Our physiology is hardwired to recognize this as a self-soothing gesture.

E. Millard (“The Power of Kindness”; ExperienceLife.com)

# THE GIFT OF YOU

- If you could not feel their pain, you would not feel their joy.
- If you did not grieve their relapse, you could not celebrate their sobriety.
- If you could not understand their losses, you would not strive to help them make gains.