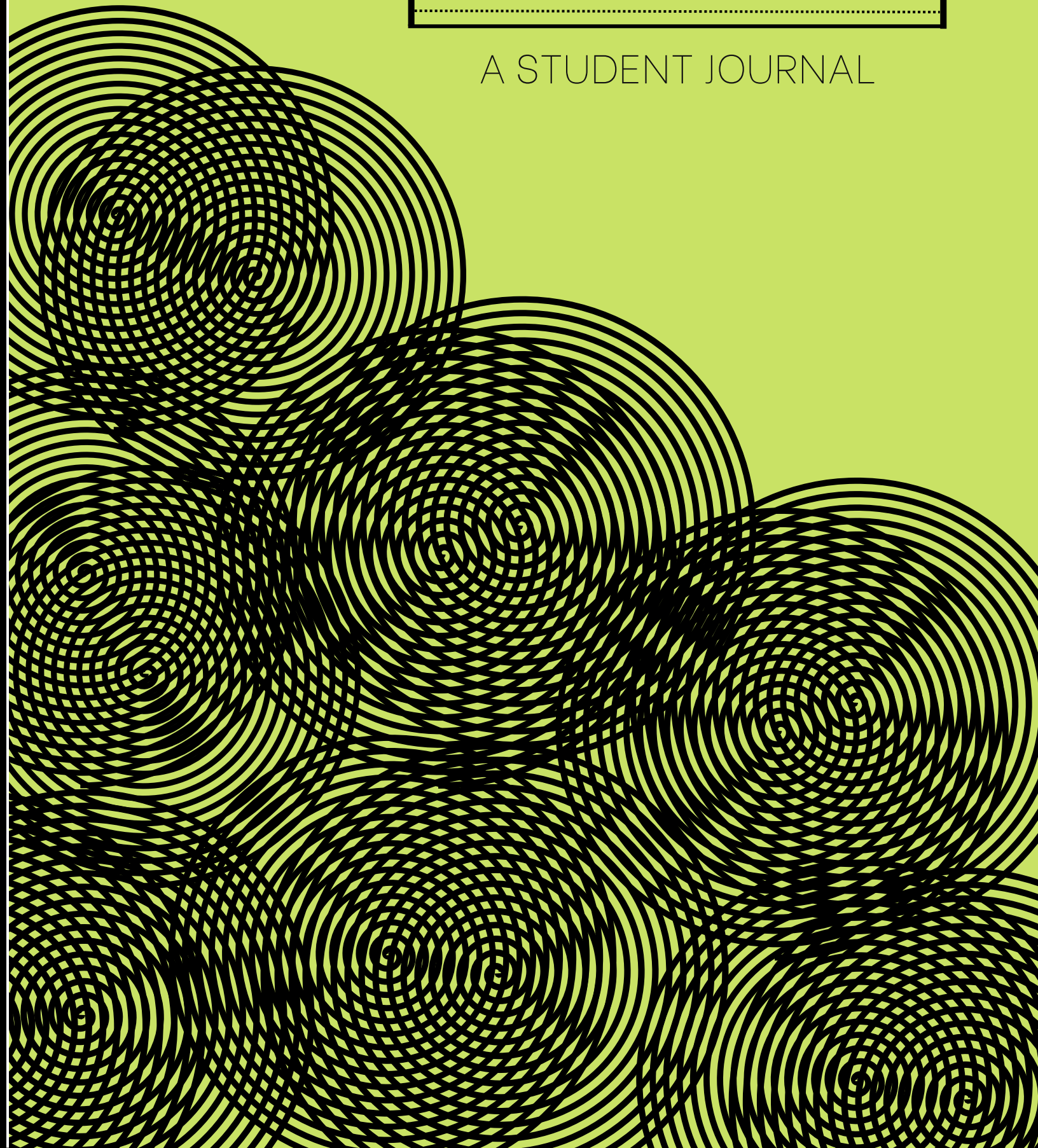


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MAY '22

THE DISRUPTOR

A STUDENT JOURNAL



The background of the page is decorated with several thin, black diagonal lines that run from the top-left towards the bottom-right, creating a sense of movement and disruption.

THE DISRUPTOR

A Little Bit of Everything

*2021-2022 Staff
Farewell Issue*

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WELCOME BACK TO THE DISRUPTOR

Welcome back and thank you for keeping up with The Disruptor this year!

This is the final issue from the 2021-2022 staff. Here you will find our thoughts on self care and support for individuals with autism in the workplace. You will also find a fantastic career highlight on Financial Social Work! As always, we are excited to share this with you and hear your thoughts on these topics.

It has been an *extreme* pleasure to share our thoughts with you all this year. We are grateful for your support and hope you will continue to support The Disruptor as it continues to grow and start conversations about important topics in the field of Social Work.

Happy Reading!





Autism in the Workplace

Steven Isaacson

For far too long, autistic people have been shut out of the workplace. People with disabilities have low rates of employment, and for autistic people it is upwards of 80%, among the lowest employment rates of all disability groups (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Employment has been identified as one of the key facilitators of positive mental health outcomes and a high quality of life, but Autistic adults say the work environment, including attitudes about autism, contribute to negative work experiences (Kapp, 2008; Hayward, McVilly & Stokes, 2019). There is interest at the federal level to rectify this problem by developing pilot hiring programs based on already existing private sector frameworks. With autism prevalence on the rise, it is important to get a hold on this issue now, so that future autistic adults have a path forward for work (Shepherd, 2021). By instituting pilot hiring programs, companies create promising best practices for the future workforce. By investing in the current generation of autistic adults, companies also benefit from retaining loyal, reliable employees.

Social Problem

The history of autism at work is as diverse as the spectrum itself. There have been anecdotal accounts that the world's most famous geniuses including Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, and others, were autistic (Falck-Ytter & Loden, 2021).

Notes made about them describe their brilliant intellect coupled with odd social behaviors. For autistic people with less support needs, the workplace is a place to show off technical skills. But the minefield of unwritten social rules and small talk can still prove disastrous without the proper training.

Historically, sheltered workshops used the labor of disabled individuals while shutting them away from the rest of the population. These settings do not provide community integration and historically have been used to justify sub-minimum wages for disabled workers (Selyukh, 2020). Now, the workplace must welcome this section of the population, a phenomenon which artificially creates a new area of the social problem that was arguably already there all along. While Autistic people do enjoy increased representation in the media, most of the spectrum is depicted exclusively either as 'savants' or 'slow', which is unrepresentative of most people on the spectrum with lived experience (Bradley, 2017).

In the entertainment industry, autistic people can excel in animation careers. An animation and film design firm called Exceptional Minds in California provides training for autistic adults interested in careers in the entertainment industry. Companies like this also help the families and caregivers of autistic adults who would otherwise not be fulfilled and stay at home being unproductive. By providing more outlets for apprenticeships and careers based in people's interests, the autistic adults feel productive, and the companies receive honest, hard-working labor.

Policy Implementation

The recent landmark policy adopted by the Biden administration, Executive Order (EO) 14035, seeks to "strengthen the Federal workforce by promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility [DEIA]..." The Order defines accessibility as "the design, construction, development, and maintenance of facilities, information and communication technology, programs, and services so that all people, including people with disabilities, can fully and independently use them (White House, 2021)." This definition also includes the provision of accommodations in the workplace and ensures they are accessible to increase the

probability that the organizations will retain valued employees and improve productivity at the same time (Loy, 2016).

By adopting EO 14035, the federal government signals its intention to remove barriers to inclusion for historically disadvantaged groups, including people with disabilities, and acts as a catalyst for the private sector to do the same (Gurchiek, 2021). EO 14035 advances not only diversity and inclusion, but accessibility as well, adding to its uniqueness (Ogrysko, 2021). The Obama White House in 2011 released EO 13583 which called on the federal government to diversify its workforce and commit to equal opportunity for all (White House, 2011). It did not specify “accessibility” in particular, which is evidence of a material shift that President Biden has chosen to wage in the social justice arena.

This policy could help increase research to learn how autistic people interact with the workplace and what types of work situations are best suited to neurodiverse workers. Research stemming from this policy could potentially help identify strategies for facilitating seamless communication between individuals in the workplace. Additionally, the productivity and mental health effects of remote work could be studied. Coincidentally, the disability community has been advocating for remote work long before the pandemic occurred.

COVID-19 forced companies to generalize remote work for most tasks, and since the adoption of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the 1990s, accommodations for people with disabilities have usually ended up benefiting society.

Within the federal government, agencies are required to send in plans on how they will meet EO 14035. Furthermore, federal workers could receive education and training on their rights and responsibilities related to requesting and maintaining accommodations, as well as a lesson on neurodiversity more broadly. An important barrier to full implementation of autism at work programs is the federal-state dichotomy. Just because the federal government adopts a policy, does not mean it will be implemented in all states. However, autism related issues have mostly enjoyed bipartisan support, meaning members of both major political parties agree on the need to improve disability life outcomes in this area. This is evident in the recent bipartisan reauthorization of the Autism Collaboration, Accountability, Research, Education and Support (CARES) Act of 2019 which included an additional \$369.7 million to be used for government activities related to autism research and services through the lifespan (IACC, 2019).

Autism-at-Work Programs

Autism hiring pilot programs have begun to emerge as agencies seek to reveal hidden talent hidden beneath the rough.

These programs have begun to emerge as global firms seek to boost productivity and bring in new ways of problem-solving. The inclusion of neurodiversity on team projects not only makes the workplace more diverse, but it also strengthens the production of ideas and decreases margin for error. Indeed, industry pioneer JPMorgan Chase reports that recruits to its autism hiring initiative are 90% to 140% more productive than their neurotypical counterparts (Waldmeir, 2020).

Many employers see the benefit of hiring autistic workers, who can become independent employees with little or no extra cost (Scott et al, 2017). Autistic people tend to have diverse perspectives and skillsets such as pattern recognition, adherence to rules, and dedication to detail, which benefit companies everyday whether managers know they have neurodiverse staff or not. Furthermore, the four major autism at work hiring programs that started in the past ten years, from SAP, JPMorgan Chase, Microsoft, to EY have all boasted a better than average industry retention rate of 90% or more (Scheiner, 2020).

Existing pilot programs have found various unintended consequences that have taught valuable lessons. First, non-autistic employees might feel new autistic hires are getting special treatment, so extra care and education must be taken when introducing accommodations and performing onboarding duties (Sporr, Bury & Hedley, 2021).

As well, employee cohesion and social integration might require extra attention because autistic people can be slow to adapt to new environments and could have differing communication patterns than their neurotypical peers (Scott et al, 2017). Overall, disability-related employment programs provide highly useful information about the already existing gaps present in the workplace.

Disclosure of disability in the workplace is a sensitive topic, but behaviors such as hand-flapping, rocking, or using repetitive phrases are visible signs that someone might be autistic. However, EY, for example, found they could revamp the interview process by preventing applicants with these behaviors, which have no negative impact on job performance, from being automatically excluded from consideration (Hofman, 2020).

Overall, the inclusion of neurodiversity on team projects not only makes the workplace more diverse, but it also strengthens the production of ideas and decreases margin for error (Waldmeir, 2020). The lessons of established programs show that finding community partners to carry out the federal policy on accessibility in hiring is crucial (Annabi, Crooks, Barnett, Guadagno, Mahoney, Michelle, Pacilio, Shukla & Velasco, 2019).

Not only will they be able to provide expert advice on autism-related issues, but they also have connections within the community to raise awareness programs, which can help with sourcing talent.

Conclusion

With the right supports, autistic people in the workplace can thrive. By making workplaces accessible to people with disabilities, they also potentially improve the work culture for all workers.

Autism at Work programs in the private sector have already shown that they can successfully integrate autistic workers into the work schedule.

Though Autistic people have a wealth of talent in critical areas, they are largely an untapped source of labor. As the political winds move in the direction of neurodiversity, it is time to embrace the change in hiring practices. Organizations can benefit from the added value autistic people bring. Though there will be an initial learning curve for everyone, once they find their spot in the firm, new autistic hires will thrive, and the organizational culture will be better for it. The private sector will eventually find the inclusion of neurodiverse workers to be a mainstreamed best practice.

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Social Work

Field

Highlight

Finance as A Social Determinant of Health

By: Jane Makori

Have you ever wondered how the topic of finance and social work could ever collide? If you have, you are not alone! Members of The Disruptor, your student-led journal, also wondered the same thing. This led us on a discovery to determine just what exactly is out there for us social work practitioners. While digging deeper on this topic, I had the pleasure of meeting the wonderful pioneers of the Financial Social Work Initiative (FSWI). Furthermore, I had the opportunity of speaking and engaging with practitioners who are implementing finance into social work practice.

This first led me to the FSWI that was established in 2008 at UMB. I had the pleasure of speaking with the Chair of FSWI, Dr. Jodi Frey and Co-Founders, Meg Woodside and Robin McKinney who serve as phenomenal leaders within our profession. It was riveting to hear each of the journeys that led them to where they are today, and quite encouraging to know these wonderful advocates are accessible to students intrigued by FSWI.

The commonality that presented with them all is the consideration of finance as a Social Determinant of Health. When I first heard of the idea, it rang true like an alarm and connected like a magnet. It had appeared to me that this should've been common sense before but at the same time it still felt like such a trailblazing and innovative idea! Though this idea is still making headway within our profession, there's great work that is happening at our university.

The idea of FSWI incorporates the need for intervention in direct practice with individuals and families, addresses unjust financial practices within communities, fights for their right to cost-effective and suitable services and benefits that meet their needs, and advocates on the policy level to counteract systemic economic injustice. In addition, the program offers educational resources for current students at the university and practicing social workers.

In collaboration with the university, the FSWI offers a course for all students concentrating in Macro and/or Clinical Social Work.

This course is known as Financial Stability for Individuals, Families, and Communities (SWOA 738/SWCL 738). As you can infer, the focus of this course allows social work students to become knowledgeable in the roadblocks to financial sustainability and growth for individuals, families, and communities. Furthermore, it also exposes students to the resources that are available to help them create better and more sustainable opportunities for financial wealth. Lastly, the course provides a comprehensive overview of programs, services, and policies that work towards helping these communities to grow towards acquiring and building their own assets.

Furthermore, the FSWI provides Continuing Professional Education Offerings related to Financial Social Work and Stability. A sample of these courses is as follows:

1. How to Recognize and Deter Financial Exploitation of the Aging Population
2. Understanding Financial Behavioral Health: Considerations for Clinical Practitioners
3. The Intersection of Problem Gambling and Financial Capability: What Can Clinicians Learn from the Research

The FSWI takes it further by putting practice into policy and partnering with various coalitions and agencies that impact the financial outcomes of Marylanders. This includes the CASH Campaign of Maryland, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the Maryland Alliance for the Poor, and the Maryland Consumer Rights Coalition.

The FSWI has a place for all aspiring social work practitioners whether on the micro, mezzo, and/or macro level of practice.

What I find most influential about the program is that they are continuously advocating and working on each level of practice. This provides a space and opportunity for Social Work students with every kind of interest to find their niche within this sector. In addition, each of the Co-Founders of FSWI are profoundly connected to the university and serve in a manner that can be beneficial to interested parties. I can personally attest to their great stewardship and their willingness to educate and partner with students.

The program provides a great network for students to connect with likeminded practitioners who are looking to make similar differences within their respective communities. This spring, I attended both Networking Webinars held by FSWI and learned of an organization called Money Talks Baltimore that provides financial counseling. This organization was just one of a few of the great nonprofits that were present in the dialogue.

Lastly, the initiative provides references for which field placements clinical and/or macro students can apply should they be interested in putting FSWI into practice! Whether you're looking to network among this niche of Social Work and/or collaborate with FSWI, there a plethora of opportunities to get engaged! Get ready to dive in and join the road to becoming another great co-conspirator of FSWI!

At the end of this academic year, Dr. Christine Callahan will be taking Dr. Jodi Frey's place as Chair. Dr. Callahan is has been an essential advocate working within FSWI and has led phenomenal research, programs, and committees on behalf of the organization!

To learn more, please see the Financial Social Work Initiative's website.

<https://www.ssw.umaryland.edu/fsw/about-fsw/?&>



To connect with Dr. Jodi Frey, Dr. Christine Callahan, Meg Woodside, and/or Robin McKinney, please see their full bios below:

Dr. Jodi Frey:

<https://www.ssw.umaryland.edu/academics/faculty/jodi-frey/>

Dr. Christine Callahan:

<https://www.ssw.umaryland.edu/academics/faculty/christine-callahan/>

Meg Woodside: <https://www.ssw.umaryland.edu/fsw/contact-us/meg-woodside/>

Robin McKinney: <https://cashmd.org/staff/>

An Argument For Prioritizing Self-Care

By: Jessica Libowitz

Being in a caring profession, our focus is rightly on understanding and helping others: what problem is an individual client presenting with; where has the communication for this family broken down; how can we empower this community; what policies could we create to bring about systemic change? We don't often factor our own needs into this equation. We are taught to be wary of countertransference or personal triggers, but where do the roots of these responses come from? It is our own mental wellbeing and history of painful events- and even trauma- that feed into these issues and can lead to burnout. These issues are what necessitate conversations about self-care.

I was able to speak with Professor April Latson, who will be teaching the course Mindfulness, Stress Reduction and Self-Care next semester, on the subject of self-care, and she defined it as the following: "Self-care is the act of prioritizing your self-preservation over all other things. It's recognizing that without taking care of you, there is no room to care for others nor to thrive." Though it can be hard to put yourself first in practice, it is a vital skill for surviving as a social worker. Just as on every flight we are reminded to put on our own oxygen mask before assisting others, if social workers cannot function healthily, then we won't be able to help others to do so.

Practicing self-care helps us to be better social workers for our clients, and it helps to protect us from the ongoing strain of doing social work. Professor Latson went on to say that "self-care is extremely important to social workers and all helping professionals. We use our whole self in the work we do. It requires our mental, emotional, physical, and even spiritual selves. We pour into others daily, chronically use compassion and empathy and offer support in ways most other professions do not. If we do not take care of ourselves, we will not have the tools we need to do the work we do." When we are not taking care of ourselves but continue to pour ourselves into our work with others each day, we can experience burnout, which is characterized as both a physical and mental exhaustion, as well as a negative shift in our worldview. Your work, your clients, even your worldview becomes a taxing source of negativity that drains you of what willpower you have at the start of your day.

You don't go straight from being fine to being burned out, however. Burnout is a final destination in a process that often makes stops at compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress first. A former colleague of mine once compared it to making toast. You start off as a slice of bread and as heat builds with daily stressors and consistent lack of self-care you get crispier. Eventually so many negative events and stressors build up that, if you don't intervene to take a break and care for yourself, you'll find yourself to be a completely burnt piece of toast.

There are many places along this process when you can intervene and many crispy days you still feel functional, but if you don't stop the process to care for yourself, then you will inevitably burn out. As a social worker, this will hurt you and the clients you serve. Professor Latson explained this concern further: "When social workers are burnt out, experiencing compassion fatigue or even secondary traumatic stress, there is no way in which that translates to "good" care for clients on any level," and so we must acknowledge that "prioritizing self-care can eliminate some of the issues that disrupt services provided to client as well as dysfunctional systems and structures" through both individual and agency level practices. This can be compounded if we are working in a highly emotional environment, especially if that workplace is toxic itself.

At a former position in a local intimate partner violence (IPV) prevention agency, I found that the day-to-day work of supporting individuals victimized by IPV left me feeling crispy, but it was the toxic environment cultivated by agency leadership that truly left me burned out. I was not practicing self-care and I felt isolated and lost on how to make things better. In our conversation, Professor Latson emphasized that a "lack of self-care can lead to depression, anxiety, burnout, compassion fatigue and more".



She shared the acronym "H.A.L.T. Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired" as a quick way to measure for burnout, explaining that "if we are experiencing dysfunction in any or all of these areas, they are often an indicator that something is wrong and needs to be addressed." This is the moment when you should feel most empowered to seek help and to focus on caring for yourself, because your work shouldn't make you sick. Practice personal self-care, speak with your supervisor, schedule a session with a therapist, find a new job, or do whatever you need to do to ensure your physical and mental health are taken care of immediately.

Self-care can take many forms; it's not a one-size-fits-all solution. Professor Latson described how in her course she encourages her students to "commit to a minimum of two hours per week of self-care" and to be "deliberate and intentional, consistent and prioritizing" when practicing this self-care. She elaborated, explaining that "The goal for self-care and mindfulness in particular is to reduce or eliminate stress, or rather distress" as best as we can and that "there are several kinds of stress, some good some not, but balance is key in all things."

Self-care is about finding that healthy balance for yourself, and that looks different for each person. For me, self-care now looks like a box I keep at my desk with easy and quick self-care tools, such as a DIY stress ball and fuzzy socks along with a list of self-care activities that I can do in 30 seconds, a minute, 5 minutes, etc. at my office. It looks like time to watch a short breathing video on YouTube or go for a 5-minute walk outside to get fresh air. My self-care also looks like time I schedule for breaks in my day and doing fun activities, both alone and with loved ones, in my evenings and on weekends. It looks like forgiving myself for mistakes I made and accepting the limits of my body. It looks like striving for a positive attitude each day and forgiving myself for days that go completely off the rails.



We live in a culture that emphasizes ideas like “push through the pain” and “quitters never prosper.” We are told that work should be hard, and we are made to feel that advocating for ourselves means we are ungrateful and complaining. This is why self-care is radical love, it is rejecting these toxic societal norms and saying it is ok to value and help yourself. Self-care is a social justice issue, because, as Professor Laston explains, we live in a capitalist society where “money is prioritized over health, work over rest, independence over collectivism,” which causes “extreme stress for our society.” This is all framed as part of the “American Dream” and finding success as an adult in this country. According to Professor Latson “statistically, the U.S. has higher rates of stress than most other countries in the world” and this may in part be due to “an element of shame associated with asking for help, even amongst those who are helping professionals.”

This shame is compounded by layers of oppression that signal to marginalized people that it is somehow a sign of inadequacy that they need help. Self-care is especially important to those of us whose bodies are regularly judged in this way and determined to be lesser. Bodies deemed less worthy to be cared for because they are bodies of color, differently abled, queer, or otherwise dictated as not the norm by society. Our bodies are othered, deemed unworthy of self-care, and then we are told to blame our peers instead of joining together to fight this oppressive lens.

This is of course a tool for dividing people into blaming others who are struggling for the limited resources around them, so they don't ask why those who have plenty of resources aren't helping. Self-care is about helping ourselves so we can help others, because, in the words of Maya Angelou, "Nobody, but nobody can make it out here alone." (Angelou, 2014.)

For this reason, as social workers, self-care must be a priority in our practice. Professor Latson put it best, stating, "You cannot be effective as a social worker if you do not attend to your own needs first. We not only support clients, but we model behaviors for them as well. Setting healthy boundaries, clear and effective communication, prioritizing rest, and health are all measures of self-care. When we show our clients the importance of these things it helps them establish a new baseline of addressing their own needs." We have to model the behaviors we are promoting; they are just as vital for us as they are for the people we serve. Even if you can only add five minutes of self-care in each day, which is a start to building a habit of caring for yourself.

So go outside and take a walk, curl up on a couch and with your favorite book or movie, hang out with a friend eating delicious food, or just close your eyes and take ten deep breaths. However you practice self-care is valid; just take time to actually do something for yourself. As Professor Latson reminded me, "Always remember: Rest is a Requirement, not a Reward."



Self-care
IS EMPOWERMENT



Want to join The Disruptor for the 2022-2023 Year?

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