



Youth Worker Practice Network Members Session “An Introduction to Self Care”

Overview of why we need ‘self care’

Will Mollinson (Executive Officer, Families ACT)

- Youth work is an altruistic profession. Because our work involves caring about and for other people, it can have an effect on our emotions and personal life (outside of work).
- One of the challenges is that we are constantly faced with decisions about priorities – how do we determine the most important need when they are all important? What do you do when there are things outside your control, but you are still expected to fix them?
- Stress can lead to feelings of guilt – guilt that you can’t answer the phone, meet every need, or fix every problem. However, this guilt is irrational – there will always be more work to do, and in order to do it well, you need to look after yourself.
- Supervision is important. Having someone to debrief with after an incident or dealing with a difficult issue, and to check in with about how things are going in general, is important. If your workplace doesn’t have supervision and/or a support program in place, talk to your manager about how you might be able to access it.
- It is also useful to learn to recognise different types of body tension and symptoms of stress, including depressed immune system/illness.
- Monitor what is causing you stress. Remember that even though you might be on top of your self care in one context, changes to work situations (new job, new team, etc), as well as changes in personal situations, may require you to make changes to your self care plan as well.

The basics of ‘self-care’

Emma Robertson (Youth Coalition) & Jamie Gray (headspace Canberra)

Group Discussion: Why do we need to look after ourselves?

- We can do more damage to a young person if we aren’t looking after ourselves. Particularly if we are getting frustrated with the young people we work with, have a low tolerance to challenging behavior, or are getting cranky with other services.
- Youth work is a profession – it’s something that you want to do for a long time (career). Studying for a year or more and then burning out after two or three years isn’t a good idea! You need to look after yourself right from the beginning, so you can have as long a career in the sector as you want.

- You learn youth work through practice, it isn't just about learning theory in your course, and then knowing everything. If you aren't continually checking in on how you're going, you end up not being able to learn and grow as a worker.
- There are times when you have to acknowledge that you can't help or that a situation can't be fixed, and it can be deflating. It's important to make sure those times don't negatively impact your view on the work that you do.
- Every interaction with a young person is an opportunity to model behaviours and attitudes. It is important that we model to young people how to look after themselves and why it is important.

Group Discussion: What are the signs and symptoms of not looking after yourself?

- Care factor = Zero
- Attitude/actions/words directed at young people say 'I don't have time for you'
- Continually needing to debrief when you get home
- Ultra-sensitive – taking comments personally or the wrong way
- Nervousness when hearing the phone call – anxious about who or what it might be about
- Your own relationships (outside of work) are affected
- Reacting to 'the system' and getting frustrated with how it works (or doesn't work)
- Sickness, especially getting sick when you go on leave
- Altered sleep patterns – unable to fall asleep, waking in the middle of the night and/or waking up too early

Group Discussion: What is self care? (how would you explain it to a young person?)

- Taking responsibility for respecting yourself, and actively doing so
- What you do to look after yourself
- Work Life Balance
- Looking after yourself, putting yourself first, balancing responsibility between work life and home life
- The concept is simple, but there is a range of complex ideas. Ask yourself: What is something nice you can do for yourself tonight? And in the next week?

Group Discussion: What are the specific stressors that can affect youth workers?

- Overload of work – the job never ends. Finding one solution means a new problem takes its place on our 'to do' list. The work is unrelenting.
- Working with people can be unpredictable.
- Expectations from funders, employers, organisations – what you are expected to deliver can exceed what you have the time/resources to do.
- Youth workers wear many different 'hats'. There can be so many different issues affecting a young person, you don't always know where to start and what to address first. This happening repeatedly can get overwhelming.
- Complexity of clients needs – there is rarely a quick fix.

- Unsatisfactory systems – wanting them to operate differently to the way they do, but being unable to change them.
- Needing to do admin – it takes more time than we think it should.
- Emotional impact of taking the work home.
- Pressure from other agencies.
- Building a relationship takes time, and when you get them to the point of being able to access the right help, it isn't available (arbitrary rules in particular can be stressful).
- Internal and external stressors.
- Internal relationships within your organisation.
- Professional relationships with external organisations.
- Our own internal and professional needs. For example, wanting to have significance in the community, knowing our contribution helps others, needing job security.

Group Discussion: What are the barriers to self care?

- TV – while this can be a tool for relaxation, if you just pass out in front of it every night and don't debrief/process what's going on, it can be a barrier.
- Too much time at work, too much to do at home – no time to stop and think about what you need to do to look after yourself.
- Lack of resources/money
- Family (although they can also be helpful for yourself care!)
- Laziness
- Responsibility to others doesn't end at work
- Competing priorities
- Martyrdom/Superhero complex
- Getting stuck in a downward spiral and need something to snap you out
- Not prioritising our own wellbeing
- Not taking time to reflect
- Not having supervision
- Complacency – “I'll start next week, there's too much going on right now”
- People are always demanding more from us
- Feeling of shame about needing to seek help about your own issues
- Stigma around seeking help, plus Canberra is a small place. These two things can mean that we don't seek out help to meet our own needs.
- We aren't always aware of it happening as it does. Particularly if we don't take time to reflect, we can find ourselves burning out before we realise it.
- Turning to negative coping mechanisms/bad habits. Getting stuck in dysfunctional habits.
- Not all work places are open to you asking for help
- Not being aware of the supports that are in place that we can access through our workplace.

Group Discussion: Who/What are your allies in self care?

- There is strength in numbers – what other youth workers can you connect with, internal and external to your workplace? (Tip – join the Youth Worker Practice Network! 😊)
- Having professional boundaries AND connections within your work team
- Having personal boundaries AND connections within your work team
- Colleagues (peers, management)
- Team meetings, case reviews, pushing for action as a team
- Non-sector friends (hang out with people who aren't focused on saving the world all the time)
- Family
- Active distraction (tv, pets, exercise, music, hobbies)
- Black humour – it's ok to laugh about the odd/tough situations we often find ourselves in as youth workers

Self care tips:

- Take time out from work to deal with personal issues. When your job is to reach out to people who are hurting and pull them up, you can't be down in the muck yourself. You need to look after yourself so you don't get drawn into it.
- Persistence, consistency, flexibility – we offer that in caring for our clients. Try doing that in your own self care.
- Take some time to reflect on where you are at, and what changes you need to make to do self care well. (Check out the resources below if you need some help with this).

Follow up

Join up to the Youth Worker Practice Network - go to members.youthcoalition.net/ywprn

ReachOut for Professionals has some great resources around self care, particularly for professionals who support young people, including a Self Care Assessment. This is a survey, which gives you a snapshot of the areas of self care that you are currently doing well in, where you could pay a bit more attention, and helps you think about how you can contribute to your own wellbeing. It should take you 5-10 minutes to complete. The survey, and a range of follow up resources are available at <http://au.professionals.reachout.com/self-care-for-professionals>

Have a look at the article, 'Youth Workers and Stress', by Vaughan Bowie, which was mentioned during the session. Try and set aside a bit of time to have a read and a think about it, and then discuss it with your colleagues.

Remember – look after yourself! You do amazing work, and good self care practice will help you to keep doing it well!