**Ethics and Self-Care for Psychologists and Graduate Students**

Principal A in the aspirational portion of the APA Ethics Code reminds us that “Psychologists strive to be aware of the possible effect of their own physical and mental health on their ability to help those with whom they work”. This statement highlights the critical link between our professional competence and our health. In the enforceable section of the code, Standard 2.06 (*Personal Problems and Conflicts*) is explicitly focused on the potential for our personal problems to negatively impact those with whom we work. Why do professional psychologists and graduate students need to be concerned about personal wellness and functioning? Many of us are drawn to professional psychology because of our fascination with psychological processes and our deep commitment to helping others. However, psychologists commonly bring personal vulnerabilities to their choice of career. Themes such as cultural marginalization, psychological mindedness and the experience of childhood pain tend to emerge in the personal histories of psychologists who choose to become psychotherapists (e.g., Farber, Manevich, Metzger, and Saypol, 2005). Such factors can be a source of great strength and compassion, but also of vulnerability. Stress and distress are common among psychologists (Smith & Moss, 2009), and a recent large sample survey of psychology graduate students revealed that over 70% reported experiencing at least one stressor that interfered with optimal functioning (El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh, & Bufka, 2012).

In its Introduction and Applicability section, the APA Ethics Code (2002) informs us that the professional activities to which the code applies “…shall be distinguished from the *purely private* *conduct* of psychologists, which is not within the purview of the Ethics Code.” (p.1061, italics added). This raises an interesting question: Is self-care purely personal? When we recognize that psychologists share common personal vulnerabilities, that there are hazards endemic to our profession and that we are prone to experiencing stress and distress, we are more likely to acknowledge that self-care is indeed a critical issue for us. In fact, self-care and self-reflective practice are now recognized by APA as foundational competencies to be integrated into graduate training. The importance of effective self-care and coping during times of major stressors may be evident to all. Less obvious is the importance of developing positive and preventative self-care *habits* to maintain personal wellness and optimal professional functioning (e.g., Wise, Hersh & Gibson, 2012). As a profession, we clearly possess the knowledge to create a “culture of self-care” (Barnett & Cooper, 2009), even though this has ironically not been a common element of our graduate training for many of us.

What follows are a few self-assessment questions that we would encourage you to consider:

* What drew me to the practice or study of psychology? How are these factors a source of both strength and vulnerability for me?
* What do I find most fulfilling and most stressful in my daily work or training as a psychologist or as a graduate student?
* What are some healthy (positive) and less healthy (negative) coping strategies that I currently use?
* How do I prioritize self-care activities compared to other demands, and how do these choices affect my well-being *and* long term professional functioning? What are the personal and professional costs of putting off my self-care?

Based on your responses to these questions, there are many resources for psychologists and graduate students who wish to explore healthy and adaptive coping. One place to start is with the wisdom of our own profession--in addition to seeking personal psychotherapy during times of significant stress or loss, the interventions that we use with clients can work for us too. In particular, mindfulness, positive behavioral activation and challenging critical and perfectionist self-talk can be helpful to busy psychologists who are engaged in clinical work. Training programs are beginning to be aware of their responsibility to integrate self-care into an already intense and demanding course of study. A few suggestions for training programs are to integrate self-care into academic course work, clinical training and supervision wherever possible and for faculty to model a balanced and compassionate approach to their own lives. It is not a simple task, but we can do better as a field to mentor graduate students to reach for excellence in a manner that incorporates sustainable self-care into their lives at a time when habits for an entire career are being formed.

Those of us who are already in practice and those of us who are still in training can benefit from a compassionate reminder that self-care is an ethical duty and should be an integral part of our lives at any stage of our careers. Rather than being “another demand on the list”, small, thoughtful changes can be a step in the right direction.

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