

Self-care in the Academy

Life as a counselor educator is much more involved than simply teaching courses to eager students, and successful navigation of the academic environment requires more than mastery of the subject matter, alone. We have already discussed several factors that will help you master the academic environment, but I want to return to self-care because this is the key factor that allows all the others to be effective.

I'm fairly certain that you understand why self-care is important, and I have no doubt that you could very easily explain the reasons to your clients. I'm not so sure, however, how well you might apply what you know about self-care to yourself. Accordingly, we are going to spend a little more time discussing this particular topic.

Remember that self-care is non-negotiable. It cannot be omitted from your plans for success and it cannot come last.

Signs that things are not going well include:

- Increased irritability
- Loss of energy and/or memory
- Problems at home
- Loss of sense of humor
- An increasingly negative view of the world and the people in it

These are not all of the signs that your self-care skills need to be adjusted, and these signs can certainly appear for other reasons, but they are typical among doctoral students in counselor education. I mention them here because **self-awareness** is the first and most important aspect of self-care. The second most important aspect is the set of observable and realistic goals that comprise the **self-care plan**.

Constructing the plan

Your self-care plan should be like your CV: you start it now and continue to update it as long as you are in the profession. All plans are not alike, but all have the same general goal, which is for you to maintain your physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual health. Your plan should address at least the following elements in a way that makes sense to you:

1. Identify your stressors and seek ways to eliminate or minimize them.
2. Maintain your assertiveness. Know when to say, "no" and mean it.
3. Set boundaries
 - Devise a means to separate work and other aspects of your life.
 - Plan (and keep) vacations and holidays.
 - Commit yourself to your self-care plan.

4. Keep up with your professional reading
5. Engage in continuing education activities
6. Spend time with family members and/or non-university friends.
7. Create and attend study groups.
8. Surround yourself with positive people
9. Make plans for the future that include realistic (achievable) goals
10. Identify the activities that make you feel best and do them routinely.
11. Reward yourself for accomplishments.
12. Maintain healthy routines.
13. Maintain healthy eating habits.
14. Find a way to include a dedicated physical activity at least three (3) times each week.
15. Find a way to get at least six (6) hours of sleep every night.
16. Find a way to maintain the activities that routinely promote your spiritual health.
17. Look for and acknowledge success in your life.
18. Remain optimistic.
19. Encourage others.
20. Exhibit positive non-verbal behaviors.
21. Keep connections with the goals and excitement that brought you to the profession.
22. Make plans for a smooth transition from the program into your new career including relocations.

As you read this list, you were probably rating how well you are attending to each item right now. If you were not, I would like for you to go back and write down how well you are doing these things right now. When you see areas that need adjustments, start to work on devising improvement strategies now. It isn't necessary to fix everything in one week, but your review will help you prioritize the elements in your plan. Remember, your plan has to be based upon behavioral goals and objectives. It must actually exist publicly in your home or office and you should have at least one ally to help you not stick to it.

Self-care is non-negotiable.