Compassion Related Stress and Self-Care: Tips and Tools (and wisdom) from Yoga and Mindfulness

Pamela Szczygiel, DSW, LCSW, CYT-500, CHHC
Presented at the NASW-NC Fall Conference
November 17, 2017

Mindfulness Exercise: Checking In

The Many Signs of Compassion-Related Stress: Group Exercise
- Physical
- Emotional-Mental
- Behavioral
Compassion-Related Stress

The main questions:

- Is there a way that we, as practitioners, can simultaneously attend to our clients’ needs as well as our own well-being, so that we are not left starving for our own self care at the end of each work day?
- What role does yoga and mindfulness practice/philosophy have in this process?

Compassion Stress: Why does it matter?

- 21-67% of mental health workers experience high levels of burnout (symptoms inc. depersonalization, reduced efficacy and emotional exhaustion) (as cited in Morse et al, 2012)
- Some evidence that there is a higher burnout rate among social workers vs. psychiatrists and nurses in mental health field (as cited in Morse et al, 2012)
- Close to half of all helping professionals suffer negative physical, emotional, and psychological consequences, as a result of their work (Gerson & Evans, 1998).
- Many MSW programs do not offer separate coursework in compassion related stress and self care.
- Yet, self care is such an integral part of our job.
The Many Terms of Compassion Related Stress

- CF: sustained stress and exhaustion from constant caring, over time (Berzoff & Kita, 2010)
- STS: the direct outcome of working with trauma survivors (Figley, 2002)
- Burnout: increased burden/stress due to onerous work conditions (i.e. Poor pay, too much paperwork, etc...) (Ray et al., 2013)
- Negative Countertransference: difficult emotions/experiences resulting from exchanges between client and clinician

But, at the end of the day, however we label it, the experiences are difficult, real, and we need help as a profession...

Tips, Tools, (and values) of Yoga and Mindfulness

- Systematic review revealed that Mindfulness is useful to address a wide array of mental and physical health concerns (deVibe et al., 2012)
- Mindfulness meditation contributes to alterations in brain and immune function (Gendron et al., 2003)
- A study on women with PTSD found that yoga + supportive therapy significantly reduced PTSD symptoms over supportive therapy alone (van der Kolk et al., 2014)
- Awareness of the body is central to affect/emotional regulation and somatic therapies like yoga are particularly useful (Demacio, 2003)
- Changing breathing patterns can positively impact nervous system function, heart rate function (as cited in van der Kolk, 2014)

Why look to yoga and mindfulness?
Values and Wisdom of Yoga and Mindfulness

Mindfulness
- 4 Noble truths
- Everyone suffers
- Embrace suffering rather than fighting it
- “Right mindfulness” part of eightfold path to alleviate suffering
- Mindfulness=“remember” to come back to the present
- Compassion (for all)

Mindfulness=
- Compassion (for all) (Hanh, 1998)
- Nonjudgment, acceptance, beginner’s mind, trust, non-striving, letting go (Kabat-Zinn, 1990)
- Compassion for all living things (inc. ourselves)
- Contentment=acceptance of “what is”
- Self study (awareness)

Yoga
- Yoga=“yoke” (mind-body union)
- 8 Fold Path
- Practices focus on calming the mind for a meditative/mindfulness state
- Compassion for all living things (inc. ourselves)
- Contentment=acceptance of “what is”
- Self study (awareness)

Values and Wisdom Continued: What is compassion?
- In the West, we often distinguish between “self-compassion” and compassion toward others
- In Buddhism, compassion is a result of the notion that all things are connected (interdependency),...
- By simply having the awareness of connectedness, we are naturally driven toward compassion
- Compassion-Awareness
- As helping professionals, many of us “vow to save all minus one” (Magid, 2013)
- How compassionate are you, with your own needs?

Values and Wisdom Continued: Ahimsa
- Ahimsa=nonviolence (one of the five “yamas,” ethical/moral guidelines)
- This includes how we treat ourselves and the world around us
- Encourages self-awareness and examination:
  - Our mental processes: Are you overly critical of yourself? Punish yourself when you make mistakes?
  - Physical: “How are you treating your body? Do you deny your body what it needs to be healthy?”
  - Emotional/mental: “When do you respond with shame/guilt/embarrassment? Is this necessary? Is this coming from?”
- Think back to a time when you made an error/mistake, how loud was your “inner critic?”
Tips and Tools: Breathing, Movement, Mindfulness, Deep Relaxation

Breathing

- Overall Benefits:
  - Slowing down and deepening the breath will calm the body’s stress response
  - May activate the parasympathetic nervous system (rest and digest system)
  - Stimulates the vagus nerve, which has a calming effect
  - Since we can control respiration, it gives us a method for regulating our stress responses/hyperarousal

- 3 Part Breath (dirga pranayama)
  - Calming
  - Grounding

- Alternate Nostril Breathing (nadi shodan pranayama)
  - Calming/centering
  - Purify and balance the “nadis”/energy channels
  - Helps maintain body temperature
  - Harmonize/balance the right and left hemisphere of the brain

Breathing Continued...

- Lion’s breath (simhasana pranayama):
  - Relieves tension/stress in facial muscles and jaw
  - Releases heat “blow off steam”
  - Reminds us not to be too serious
Movement (asana)

- Assist in quieting the mind and preparing for a meditative state
- Focus around moving the spine: lengthening, twisting, forward fold, backbend, balancing
- Lengthening: Extended mountain pose (tadasana)
  - Improves posture
  - Strengthens legs, abdomen
  - Increases awareness
  - "standing your ground"

Movement continued...

- Twisting: Simple seated twist (chair)
  - Stretch back, neck, shoulders
  - Stimulate digestion
  - "wringing out stress"
- Forward Fold: Seated forward bend (chair)
  - Relieve stress/tension/anxiety
  - Relieves tension in the spine
  - "letting go"

Deep Relaxation

- Corpse Pose (savasana)
  - Yoga nidra "yoga sleep"
  - Engaging parasympathetic nervous system "rest and digest" system
  - Nerves originate in middle of spinal column
  - Stimulates digestion
  - Slows heart rate/respiration
  - Conserves energy and recover from stress
  - Get similar benefits from:
    - massage, laying on the beach, bubble baths, being in nature, spending time with animal companions, etc...
Discussion: What are we willing to do differently to better care for ourselves?

References


References Continued...