

Fact Sheet 5:

# **Worker wellbeing and self-care**

This information is intended for specialist family violence practitioners working within the Victorian context to strengthen understanding, skills and confidence when responding to disclosures of sexual violence within the context of family violence.

# Worker wellbeing and self-care

Working with adults, young people and children who have experienced sexual violence can be demanding work. Hearing victim survivor's stories of violence and trauma may have an impact on our personal and professional lives (National Association of Services Against Sexual Violence, pg. 110). The nature and degree of the impacts experienced by workers may be influenced by several individual and workplace factors, such as:

## Individual factors

- **Adaptive coping strategies** (behaviour or cognitive strategies used to help manage stressful situations)
- **Current** life circumstances
- **Work** style
- **Social** support
- **Personal history** – past experience of similar trauma

## Workplace factors

- **Workload**
- **Perceived** organisational support and guidance
- **Competing** demands
- **Level** of responsibility
- **Challenging** work condition
- **Opportunities** to debrief between clients

*Crivatu, Horvath & Massey, 2023*

Engaging in effective self-care practices contributes to our personal and professional wellbeing. Self-care is not a luxury. It is a clinical and ethical imperative in our role as family violence practitioners, enabling us to perform well in our role and to offer safe and effective care to clients (Posluns & Gall, 2020; Crivatu et al, 2023).



In the context of the work that we do, self-care refers to:

“...the “ability to refill and refuel oneself in healthy ways”, including “engagement in behaviours that maintain and promote physical and emotional wellbeing” and that “lessen the amount of stress, anxiety, or emotional reaction experienced when working with clients” (Gentry, 2002, p.48; Myers et al, 2012, p. 56; Williams et al, pg 322, as cited in Posluns & Gall, 2020, p.4)

The National Centre of Excellence for Complex Trauma, the Blue Knot Foundation, notes that:

“[self-care is] Attentiveness to one's own needs, especially for rest and relaxation, and generally 'looking after' self. The ability for self-care is an indicator of healthy self-respect, and is very different from 'selfishness'. Self-care is a key component of professional and ethical...practice, both in fostering the...[worker's] wellbeing...and in modelling this ability for clients.” (Kezelman, C.A. & Stavropoulos, P.A. 2019, pg.)

There are many self-care strategies. What works for one person may not work for another. It is important that you identify self-care strategies that work best for you.

## Self-care practice domains

There is, however, evidence to support the following self-care practice domains:

- **having an awareness** of what it means to do the work we do, including an understanding of the potential risks for and symptoms of burnout and professional impairment, and of personal coping strategies
  - This awareness can be supported by engaging in strategies such as self-reflection, creative writing and mindfulness practices.
- **seeking to maintain balance** in lifestyle and workplace, using strategies such as varying work activities, investing time in non-work-related interests and relationships, maintaining personal and professional boundaries, and engaging in leisure activities
- **flexibility** in self-care approaches fostered by adopting an attitude of openness, having realistic expectations of oneself, developing effective coping strategies, setting goals and reappraising situations
- **physical health**, including sleep, exercise and diet
- **seeking professional and personal social support**, which may include accessing individual and group supervision, consulting with peers and mentors and undertaking personal therapy
- **the practice of spirituality**. This has been described as “encompass[ing] aspects of connection with self, others and the divine, as well as purpose and ultimate meaning” (Posluns & Gall, 2020, p.9). Mindfulness as a spiritual practice is defined as “a type of awareness that entails being fully conscious of present-moment experience and attending to thoughts, emotions, and sensations as they arise without judgement and with equanimity” (Christopher and Maris 2010, p. 115, as cited in Posluns & Gall, 2020). Mindfulness has been identified as a way to enhance clinician awareness, acceptance of limitations, and clarity about self in relation to others (Harrison & Westwood 2009, as cited in Posluns & Gall, 2020) (APS, 2022).

## Self-care practices

Below are some ideas for personal and workplace self-care practices.

### Personal

- Spend time in nature
- Practice mindfulness
- Engage in spiritual practices such as prayer
- Practice gratitude
- Do some creative writing or journaling
- Do physical exercise
- Monitor your sleeping habits and practice good sleep hygiene
- Engage in recreational activities
- Explore new hobbies
- Spend time with members of your social group

*Crivatu, Horvath & Massey, 2023*

### Workplace

- Go for a walk
- Build breaks into your day
- Schedule time off
- Seek peer support and supervision
- Maintain healthy boundaries between work and personal life
- Seek out and invest time in professional development opportunities
- Process difficult situations and client work with your supervisor or peers

As part of your self-care plan, it may be helpful to consider:

*What effective self-care practices can I apply on a daily, weekly, monthly, and annual basis that will contribute to my overall wellbeing?*

# Organisational practices that support wellbeing

Worker wellbeing is not just the responsibility of individual workers.

Organisations have a responsibility to create a safe and healthy work environment and ensure that workers are supported and have access to self-care and wellbeing strategies (Network of Alcohol and other Drugs Agencies, 2022).

There are a range of organisational strategies to support worker wellbeing. These may include access to:

- regular reflective supervision
- training and professional development opportunities
- an employee assistance program (Network of Alcohol and other Drugs Agencies, 2022).

## Supervision

The Family Violence Workforce Health, Safety and Wellbeing Guide, developed by Family Safety Victoria notes:

"In the context of family violence and sexual assault services, it has been recognised that best practice organisational health, safety and wellbeing approaches include access to regular supervision".

Supervision has been found to have a positive impact on workers ability to cope with the impact and demands of work (Crivatu et al, 2023) Clinical supervision in particular, can be a resource for increasing awareness of the potential risks of the work we do and the impact on our wellbeing. Supervision can help to identify gaps in training, provide checks on work-life balance, direct career development, encourage self-care, and serve as a support when supervisees face professional hazards (Posluns & Gall, 2020).



### **ABCs of self-care for workers**

- Build **A**wareness of how we react to stress and monitor for signs that work is taking its toll so that we can seek help early.
- Strive for **B**alance in our work and other areas of our life. Assess our current self-care practices and identify any areas that may need more attention.
- Develop a **C**onnection to self and to others. Intentionally engage in practices that reconnect us to our beliefs, values and ethics – this is an important part of cultivating meaning and feeling sustained in our work.

Because of the gendered nature of the family violence and sexual assault workforces and the prevalence of violence against women and children, many practitioners in these sectors may have their own lived experience of violence.

These experiences may raise unique wellbeing issues for professionals in the course of their work and may require tailored support. Organisations will need to consider this in the context of their organisational policies and support services [Family violence workforce health, safety and wellbeing | vic.gov.au \(www.vic.gov.au\)](http://www.vic.gov.au)

### **Question to consider to help you safeguard your wellbeing**

- **How** do you currently care for yourself in the work that you do?
- **Do** you have a 'wellbeing' or 'self-care' plan to which you refer regularly?
- **Are there** dimensions of self-care that remain in need of addressing?
- **To what extent** do you track your own (as well as client) responses? (does consultation with colleagues help you with aspects of this?)
- **Are** your attitudes and assumptions to your work and life protective of your own health? (if not, how can you begin to address this?)
- **From where** do you derive your sense of meaning? (which is important to your own wellbeing and to effective practice)

Source: Blue Knot Foundation – Appendix 2: Self Care for Therapists who Work with Complex Trauma (pg 235)

## General wellbeing and self-care tips

- Develop self-awareness by checking in with yourself regularly. For example, ask yourself, 'how am I feeling?' 'Where do I notice this in my body?' e.g. tension in the shoulders or jaw.
- Monitor your sleep.
- Pay attention to your thoughts – are you having difficulty switching off? Are you feeling more reactive than usual and/or engaging in unhealthy behaviours?
- Prioritise your wellbeing. Give yourself permission – it isn't a luxury, it's a necessity.
- Make time to care for yourself emotionally, physically and spiritually.
- Try to keep balance (whatever this means for you) between work time and non-work time.
- Monitor the hours you are working and leave spaces in your schedule if possible.
- Arrange and seek support for yourself, including the opportunity to debrief after difficult sessions.
- Don't expect that you will always know what to do. Trauma manifests in different ways. Consult with colleagues and use secondary consultations when needed.
- Reconnect with your values and ethics to help you cultivate meaning and feel sustained in your work.
- Make use of clinical supervision and engage in reflective practice.
- Seek additional support when needed through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or speak with your GP.

## Resources

- [Family violence workforce health, safety and wellbeing guide](#): An online guide that aims to support the health, safety and wellbeing of the family violence, sexual assault and prevention workforce.
- [PERMAH Wellbeing Survey](#): A free and confidential tool that can be used by individuals, teams and organisations in the specialist family violence and sexual assault sector to measure health, safety and wellbeing.
- Black Dog Institute Self-care planning template for healthcare workers: [Black Dog Institute Importance of self-care planning and template](#)
- [Australian Psychological Society \(APS\) self-care checklist](#)

