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# INTRODUCTION

It was 2006, and I had just begun my clinical psychology internship at Boston Children's Hospital/Harvard Medical School. Despite my feeling like an imposter and a virtual infant in the evolution of my professional training, our directors kindly insisted that we were the "cream of the crop" and that we could do anything we put our minds to. Skeptical but encouraged, I launched into the vast sea of psychotherapeutic training in one of the largest children's hospitals in the world.

Fortunately, I was embarking on this journey with six other compatriots with whom I would become incredibly close and entrust with my life. We ventured in and out of different rotations, some more brutal than others but all amazing learning experiences. Nothing, however, could have prepared me for what I was about to experience.

On April 3, 2007, my life dropped out from under me and would change forever. After several months of unidentified and unrelenting pain, several forms of unsuccessful therapies, and two grueling biopsies, I was diagnosed with an extremely rare form of cancer with which only 75 other Americans each year are afflicted. What ensued was a harrowingly surreal 8 months of intensive cell-killing treatments followed by two back-to-back 10-hour

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*The Thriving Therapist: Sustainable Self-Care to Prevent Burnout and Enhance Well-Being*,  
by M. A. Hersh

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surgeries and postsurgical radiation. My recovery, as one could imagine, was even longer than the course of treatment, and it's still ongoing in many ways.

It would be an understatement to say that I was suddenly thrust into what I would now consider a cosmically peculiar and intense experiment on self-care. Self-care became *self-caring*, a constant here-and-now endeavor rather than something planned for the future or done in reaction to my life getting too stressful. I tried to practice gratitude for the small victories, and I unknowingly signed up for crash courses in equanimity, radical acceptance, abiding presence, and unadulterated courage. Perhaps most importantly, I was supported in countless ways by loved ones, classmates, friends, and supervisors, all of whom figuratively and literally had my back.

From and through all my trials and tribulations that year, I learned the invaluable lesson of common humanity—that each and every one of us suffers and struggles. It became incredibly clear to me that because we're essentially no different from our clients or patients, we can harness that reality to empower ourselves for better preventive self-care and well-being enhancement over the rollercoaster journey of our professional and personal lives.

Although most psychotherapists, thankfully, will not be diagnosed with such a rare cancer, the vast majority of us have and will experience our fair share of everything else: illness, financial struggles, family conflict, loved ones lost, workplace inequities, addiction problems, depression, bigotry and racism, anxiety, insecurity, and relationship struggles and dissolution. Some of us will feel intense crises of identity and soul that sometimes spark feelings of hopelessness so profound that suicide becomes a viable alternative to living with such suffering. The bottom line is that psychotherapists are still human and need to treat ourselves as such.

## **PSYCHOTHERAPIST SELF-CARE: OUR RIGHT AND OUR MANDATE**

Self-care is not just for the privileged. It's not just for psychotherapists who subscribe to any particular theoretical orientation. Nor is it just for "those" psychotherapists who "really" need it. Rather, self-care, like health care, is a universal right and need, and psychotherapists are invited to join the movement.

Allied helping professionals are also invited along on this journey. Although this book is written from the perspective of a clinical psychologist and is predominantly for fellow psychotherapists, many others share our way of helping, manage similar occupational stresses and strains, and are in need of the same self-care support and encouragement. Thus, I encourage helpers such as

nurses and psychiatric nurse practitioners, physicians, addictions counselors, massage therapists, acupuncturists, hospice workers, child welfare workers, and wellness coaches (and many more) to walk this self-caring path as well. It's incumbent upon us all to be our own best advocates as well as to support and strengthen each other along the way.

The topic of professional self-care and occupational hazards awareness has been receiving a lot more academic and clinical attention in recent years. The American Psychological Association, Psychotherapy Networker, and National Register for Health Service Providers, to name a few, host powerful blogs, publish articles, and publicize resources for self-care and professional risk awareness and prevention. Over the last several years, major social media platforms have begun to attract highly specialized groups of mental health practitioners searching for community, support, and sharing of self-care resources to build their resilience and reduce occupational stress. Therapists now can benefit from podcasts and both online and live programs designed specifically for prevention of practitioners' burnout, management of stress, and cultivation of well-being (e.g., Greater Good Institute for Health Professionals, The Thriving Therapist's Self-Care for the Stressed Health Care Practitioner, Simple Practice, Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project, Fire Within Consulting).

There is good reason for such increased attention to psychotherapist self-care. Psychotherapy is not just about the faceless delivery of an intervention. We are the instruments through which our psychotherapeutic services flow. Every instrument needs calibration, tuning, and maintenance. We've all been there in our daily lives—with our cars, smartphones, and the beds and pillows on which we sleep. We tend not to tolerate (nor is it safe) driving a car that's depleted of brake fluid, using a phone that's run out of storage, or sleeping on a squeaky and unstable bed. We top off the fluid, clear out some storage space, and tighten up the beams on our beds. As our own instruments of psychotherapeutic change, empowerment, and healing, we deserve no less (and a lot more) than the inanimate tools we rely on in our everyday lives.

Thus, we can rest assured that there is quite the pragmatic rationale for bringing sustainable self-care into our lives as therapists. When we sleep better, we feel better and are less irritable and more tolerant of ourselves and our clients. When we eat well and stay adequately hydrated, we can sustain more mindful presence with clients' struggles and can feel more energized throughout long days. When we respect our own boundaries, we can feel less resentful when clients seem to demand our time and energy. Ultimately, we can feel more at ease taking care of ourselves without internal conflict or sense of self-judgment, and we propel ourselves forward with greater resilience and equanimity.

## WHAT THIS BOOK CAN UNIQUELY OFFER

In stark contrast to well over 10,000 books published on various approaches to psychotherapy as well as on the ethics of psychotherapeutic practice, well under 50 books exist on self-care cultivation and occupational risk reduction for mental health professionals and trainees. That's about 0.5% of our psychotherapy training that's focused on taking care of ourselves. Some of the existing books focus on highly pragmatic daily self-care practices (e.g., *Simple Self-Care for Therapists*; Bush, 2015), whereas others like *Leaving It at the Office* (Norcross & VandenBos, 2018) are more principles based while offering integrative practices for optimal well-being and prevention of professional fatigue. These books and others like them have indeed provided an incredibly solid foundation on which I could create this book.

My aspiration in writing this book was to create a self-care framework that is at once integrative, holistic, and practical. My aim is to invite you, the reader, to be self-caring across your lifespan and career development rather than to "do self-care." Doing self-care is too often a reactive and piecemeal endeavor, whereas being self-caring is a proactive lifestyle for more sustainable well-being inside and out of the therapy room.

As human beings, we tend to begin with what appears most obvious. Larger societal messages convey that if *X* is good for you, then just do *X*. But starting a self-caring journey in this way might be like launching a business while feeling unworthy of making good money, jumping in without a business plan, or having very little internal motivational support to sustain oneself through the challenges of the process. Just as we treat our clients as highly unique individuals and consider their personal histories, learning styles, and conditioning to be of utmost importance for how we relate to them and what recommendations we offer, we too can become more deeply aware of the unique and idiosyncratic reasons and practices for taking the best care of ourselves over time. This book is an exploration of a self-evolutionary model of self-care in which growth in self-understanding begets a more fine-tuned sense of how to sustainably take care of ourselves professionally and personally and to the mutual benefit of our work and personal lives.

This book is dialectically oriented, with a focus on knowing ourselves more deeply and embodying and practicing self-care in alignment with that deeper knowing. We'll invite acceptance of who we already are (e.g., our strengths, challenges, blind spots) and move toward making the necessary changes within ourselves and in our environments for optimal health and healthy prevention. We'll welcome the notion of self-caring as an individualized

developmental journey rather than a one-size-fits-all set of activities at any given time.

Therapist self-care is also inherently bidirectional and reciprocal, meaning that we're not doing self-care only at or for the office. Rather, how we relate to and comport ourselves in our personal lives influences our professional selves (e.g., competence, patience, mindful awareness, resilience, creativity), and how we think, feel, act, and react in our professional roles affect our personal lives. It would be unfair to our wholeness to completely separate these parts of our lives. And, of course, we can also assume that our professional and personal lives can remain distinct and be treated as such. From whatever angle we take, we can harness our professional and personal lives for mutual positive and preventive empowerment.

Before moving on, it's important to note something about the concept of self-care. Although this book is ostensibly about caring for the self, I don't intend for that "work" to be done completely on your own. That's too much to ask of any one psychotherapist. So much vital growth is done from within, but we still have to be buttressed, reminded, and validated from outside of ourselves. Thus, tones of a communitarian and stewardship ethos throughout this book encourage us to look out for one another and be each other's keepers.

## **HOW TO USE THIS BOOK**

The book focuses primarily on two ways to approach self-care, risk prevention, and growth: (a) to ponder, pique curiosity, reflect, explore, discuss, invite, and give permission and (b) to experiment, practice, try out, try on, enact, decide, activate, and execute. With this dialectical framework, we can think, feel, and act our way into sustainable self-caring. I encourage you to take some time to explore each of the Self-Care Reflection Breaks with exercises, activities, or questions upon which to reflect and experiment. The appendices contain exercises and resources, and my accompanying website ([TheThrivingTherapist.org](http://TheThrivingTherapist.org)) will house additional exercises that allow you to devote more concentrated time and energy.

The practices and reflection exercises throughout this book are designed to help you get curious, explore, and go deeper into the nuanced world of professional self-care. To be inspired, sometimes it's enough to read the words on the page. To make active change, sometimes we need to reflect intentionally on and radically invite in the tension or blind spots that might currently exist (or have existed) in our lives. Welcoming the confusion, internal conflict, feelings of burnout, or cognitive dissonance as well as our

synthesizing our existing and recently learned knowledge to launch ourselves into a sustainable resilience and longevity of self-caring attitude and action. This section is about readiness and willingness to participate in self-caring, how to form long-term habits over the seasons and across development, and to integrate these habits in seamless and embodied ways on a daily basis. Finally, the book ends with a call for a communitarian ethos toward psychotherapist self-care. This is an invitation to look upon our roles as psychotherapists within a larger network of being one another's stewards and paying our gifts forward to the benefit of all.

To breathe life into the vital topic of self-care, you'll encounter my personal experiences as well as numerous anecdotes about therapists' real-life joys and struggles within the profession. Admittedly, it's quite a challenge to write about my own experiences through any other lens than my own—that of a White, male clinical psychologist in private practice in the Boston area who came of professional age in the early 2000s. Whenever possible, however, I've tried to include research and anecdotes that give voice to the diversity within the profession.

When I reference fellow therapists' experiences, some stories are about actual colleagues of mine. To honor and respect their experiences, I received their permission for their stories and names to be made public in this book. These colleagues are identified by first and last name. When I do not explicitly note that I'm discussing a real person, I've created a composite based on my experiences with different individuals over the course of my training and professional life. I have created (only first) names and backgrounds for such amalgamations that aren't necessarily associated with any given colleague I know.

Protection of confidentiality is of course paramount when discussing any clinical experiences with clients. Whenever I relay an anecdote about rewarding or challenging experiences that involved a client, I have sufficiently deidentified them by changing their name and facets of their identifying characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, diagnoses, presenting difficulties, and clinical experiences relevant to the client and my work with them.

I now invite you on this journey of affirming your place in the honorable world of being a psychotherapist. If the pitfalls to sustainable self-care for psychotherapists have innocently been created in your past, are accidentally maintained in your present, and will be unwittingly proliferated into your future, let's accept what has been and change what we can. I wish you much peace, success, and thriving in this noblest of endeavors.