

# ACORN EDUCATION AND CARE

## The Importance of Self-Care when Working with Traumatised Children

**Authors:** Heather Lawson and Chelsea Cade, Assistant Clinical Psychologists at Acorn Education and Care



### Introduction

Developmental Trauma is defined as a psychologically distressing event that occurs during a child's development and is outside the range of usual human experience, often involving a sense of intense fear and helplessness (Perry, 2011). These traumatic experiences can have profound impacts on the child's behaviour. In the context of trauma, these behaviours can be described as 'functional', as they enable the child to meet their basic human needs at the time of the traumatic experience.

### Secondary Trauma

Trauma can also ripple through the people and systems around the child. People exposed to traumatic material and/or empathically engaging with a child who has experienced trauma are at risk of secondary, or 'vicarious', traumatising. The signs that you may be being influenced by secondary trauma include:

- Experiencing lingering feelings of anger, rage and sadness about the child's experiences.
- Becoming overly involved emotionally with the child.

- Experiencing bystander guilt, shame, feelings of self-doubt.
- Being preoccupied with thoughts of children outside of work.
- Over-identification with the child.
- Loss of hope, pessimism, cynicism.
- Distancing, numbing, detachment, cutting off from children, staying busy.
- Avoiding listening to child's story of traumatic experiences
- Difficulty in maintaining professional boundaries with the child

For those reasons, it is important we understand our own needs and how to take care of ourselves.

### Understanding Our Own Needs

All of us at Hillcrest Children's Services, both adults and children, have basic human needs which need to be taken care of in order for us to survive and thrive. According to Maslow (1943; 2013) these needs fall within a hierarchy as shown in the diagram below:





**Physiological:** Basic physical requirements like food, water, sleep and warmth, which are critical for survival.

**Safety:** The need to have structure, control and order in our life to induce feelings of security.

**Love/Belonging:** Social needs: including being loved, belonging and feeling accepted, which comes from relationships with others.

**Esteem:** Feeling appreciated and respected, i.e. having efforts recognised and feeling valued. This includes self-esteem and personal worth, which can be achieved through things like personal hobbies or work activities.

**Self-Actualisation:** Self-actualisation is a higher state of psychological wellbeing and can only be achieved once the other needs in the hierarchy are met.

## Self-Care

Learning and living alongside children who are affected by developmental trauma can trigger uncomfortable and perhaps challenging feelings in ourselves. However addressing these feelings in ourselves is often not seen as a priority. Therefore, self-care is a vital component of working with traumatised children. Often within organisational contexts, self-care can be neglected. The myths surrounding self-care can often contribute to people not prioritising this, which can lead to an unhelpful cycle of blocked care and secondary trauma. Examples of these myths include:

"Putting yourself first is selfish..."

"Discussing the emotional impact of your work makes you weak..."

"Giving yourself time-out makes you bad at your job..."

Moving away from such myths and engaging in good self-care practice is vital to allowing you to process your own emotional responses (in relation to secondary trauma) which can in turn allow you to be more effective in your role whilst caring or interacting with traumatised children.

## Self-Awareness

Children who have experienced trauma are highly sensitised to the reactions of the adults around them. It is important that we are aware of our responses and are able to recognise when our internal experiences (as a result of work or home events) may be impacting the way in which we interact with the children. It is important to recognise our thoughts, body sensations and expressions and reflect on what may lead you to respond in a particular way. Of particular importance is recognising when we may be experiencing the signs of secondary trauma and ensuring that we are taking care of ourselves. Newell and MacNeil (2010) reported that workers need to be self-aware, but also have good self-care practices.

In addition, a big part of self-care is self-compassion. It can be easy to get into a negative cycle of self-judgement, however, it is essential to extend kindness and understanding to yourself rather than being self-critical. View your experiences as part of the larger human experience. One way to encourage this might be to take a 'helicopter' view, looking at things from the outside and taking a step back when you need to and be mindful, holding your thoughts and feelings in balance rather than over-identifying with them (Neff, 2003). Self-awareness enables us to be attuned with our emotional and physical wellbeing.

## Everyday Self-Care

Engaging in every-day self-care can be a good starting point, even though most of us know about the importance of eating healthy and engaging in physical activity, these things can easily slip. A way to remember these skills is to remember the term '**PLEASE MASTER**':

1. Treat '**P**hysical **I**llness': Take care of your body. See a doctor when necessary.
2. Balanced '**E**ating': Try to eat a balanced diet and avoid eating foods that will give you rush of sugar as this often leads to a 'sugar low' which can leave you feeling lethargic and low in mood. Begin your day with slow release foods that will keep your energy and metabolism stable throughout the day. Food should nourish your body!
3. Avoid '**M**ood **A**ltering Drugs': Avoid the use of non-prescribed drugs and minimise alcohol intake as these substances can affect our mood.
4. Balanced '**S**leep': Try to get the amount of sleep that helps you feel good. Most adults will need between 6-8 hours. Keep to a sleep routine by going to bed at a similar time and waking up at similar time.
5. Get '**P**hysical **E**xercise': Try to incorporate some kind of movement into your day whether it be in the form of exercise or just taking a walk. It can burn off excess adrenaline, release mood-enhancing endorphins and help you sleep better at night.
6. Achieve Mastery: Try to do one thing a day to make yourself feel competent and in control.

## Pro-Active Self-Care

You can also be more proactive in your self-care both at work and at home. At home practices such as regular yoga or meditation can help to reduce the stress responses in your body. Mindful breathing can also help return your body to a state of calm and be a time to allow you to reflect upon your day. Maintaining general self-care may also involve the use of positive forms of self-expression, such as drawing, painting, sculpting, cooking, or outdoor activities (Hesse, 2002).

Self-care strategies can also be implemented within the work place. Supporting children can seem like a 24hr job however it is not your responsibility to be available 24 hours a day; that is a responsibility you share with the rest of your team. The following is a list of steps to take better self-care at work. Think of this as a starter list which can be adapted as you become aware of your own self-care needs.

1. Set and maintain professional boundaries – separate work and home and avoid taking work home with you.
2. Balance your work schedule and life demands so no one day or one week is too much.
3. Make time throughout the work day for intermittent self-care breaks (i.e. lunch or afternoon walk; social time with co-workers; listen to relaxing music).
4. Create a healthy work space for yourself (e.g. tidy desk, tidy mind).
5. Develop a short list (2-3 items) of top priorities each day which you can realistically achieve.
6. Minimize procrastination and maximize a sense of control.
7. Before committing to something, consider your needs and available resources, and whether it will lead to overextending yourself.

These are all strategies that you can take responsibility for yourself but can also be implemented across your staff team. Please find a link to the self-care checklist resource below. This is available for you to print to think about your own self-care activities and incorporating more into your weekly routine.

## Conclusion

Caring for traumatised children is both a challenging and rewarding job but it is important to recognise that you cannot 'pour from an empty cup'. To be able to be the best carer or educator for these children, you need to be taking care of yourself. This will naturally lead to you being emotionally and physically available for the children and better able to withstand the challenges that come with your role. In addition, it is also important to recognise that we act as role models for our children. It is important to demonstrate to them

that we are all human and we cannot 'run on fumes,' we all need to be replenished and take care of ourselves.



## References

- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological review*, 50(4), 370.
- Maslow, A. H. (2013). A theory of human motivation. Simon and Schuster.
- Newell, J. M., & MacNeil, G. A. (2010). Professional burnout, vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue. *Best Practices in Mental Health*, 6(2), 57-68.
- Hesse, A. R. (2002). Secondary trauma: How working with trauma survivors affects therapists. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 30(3), 293-309.
- Perry, B. D. (1999). Stress, trauma, and posttraumatic stress disorders in children. *Child Trauma Academy Materials*, 2(5). *Child Trauma Academy Interdisciplinary Education Series*.
- Self Care Quiz - <https://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/just-for-fun/quiz-new-year-resolution/>
- Self-Care for Children - <https://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/classroom-resources/self-care-for-teachers/>
- Self-Care Checklist - <https://www.hillcrestchildrensservices.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Self-Care-Checklist.pdf>

## Spread the word...

If you found this help sheet useful please feel free to share it with anyone who you feel may benefit.

To see the full series, please take a look here:  
[www.acorneducationandcare.co.uk](http://www.acorneducationandcare.co.uk)