

Self-Care

Taking Care of Ourselves So We Can Take Care of Others

Outreach programs support health centers to provide quality and responsive services to underserved communities by connecting to individuals where they live, work, and spend time. Outreach workers play many roles—from advocate, educator, and coordinator to service provider—which can be challenging and overwhelming. In HOP’s 2015 National Needs Assessment, health centers across the country reported staff burnout and frequent turnover as key challenges in their outreach programs. HOP supports practicing self-care as an effective way for individuals and health centers to foster a healthy work-life balance. With input solicited from outreach workers across the country, HOP developed this resource to share self-care practices, its benefits, and strategies to build a culture of self-care so that health centers can recruit, motivate, support, and retain staff.

What is self-care?

Self-care is any activity done voluntarily to help maintain physical, mental or emotional health. Practicing self-care can be simple and over time have significant impact on one’s overall health and wellbeing.

Benefits of Self-Care

- * Increases energy
- * Improves concentration
- * Enhances quality of life
- * Maintains motivation
- * Builds self-knowledge
- * Increases compassion and empathy
- * Increases productivity
- * Improves mental and physical health

“We cannot develop and implement visionary strategies for change in the long term if we are exhausted and burned out in the short term.”

- Move to End Violence Initiative

Why outreach workers need a self-care practice?

The many roles that outreach workers take on can be stressful, consist of long work hours, and encourage prioritizing community needs over their own, resulting in a high risk of “burnout” and “compassion fatigue.” There are three ways that burnout and compassion fatigue can negatively affect one’s work³:

- * *Exhaustion* shows in distancing from work-related tasks and results in poor service delivery.
- * *Cynicism* can diminish a person’s ability for compassion and empathy.
- * *Inefficacy* results in lower productivity and feelings of incompetence.

What is burnout and compassion fatigue?

Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress.¹

Compassion fatigue is a condition characterized by the gradual lessening of compassion over time due to the ongoing stress of care and giving from work performed on a regular basis.²

Having a self-care practice can help to ground and reinvigorate outreach workers and others in the health workforce to take care of themselves, so that they can be motivated and ready to serve their communities.

What is organizational self-care?

Organizational self-care, or collective self-care, is a broad organizational approach to foster a healthy and supportive work culture and environment for all employees that aims to:

1. Reduce burnout and compassion fatigue;
2. Improve job satisfaction and decrease staff turnover; and
3. Encourage the growth of staff and the organization.

Self-care is a collective responsibility that needs both teamwork and organizational buy-in and support to be effective. Aligning self-care principles with a health center’s attitudes, practices, and policies can help to create an organizational culture of quality performance, job satisfaction, and team collaboration.

Benefits of Organizational Self-Care

- * Create a culture of quality performance & team collaboration
- * Improve employees’ productivity
- * Retain staff and decrease turnover
- * Prevent or ameliorate work stresses
- * Reduce burnout and compassion fatigue
- * Promote job satisfaction and work-life balance

¹ Burnout Prevention and Recovery. Retrieved from <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/preventing-burnout.htm>

² Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project. What is Compassion Fatigue? Retrieved from <http://www.compassionfatigue.org/pages/compassionfatigue.html>

³ Maltzman, Sara. (2011). An Organizational Self-Care Model: Practical Suggestions for Development and Implementation. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 39(2) 303–319. Accessed online on 02/05/17. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0011000010381790>

How can individuals develop a self-care practice?

Self-care does not have to be a chore, or take time away from other priorities. The main thing is to find the right activities or approaches that work for you, and then try to develop a self-care habit. See below for some ideas from outreach workers:

Take a break: *“I take breaks periodically from the computer and I walk around the center making sure my co-workers are alright. I greet our patients with my best smile because I know everyone has a battle to fight.”*

Get enough sleep: *“Allowing myself the permission to go to bed early or take a nap helps me feel refreshed and ready to tackle the next thing to come my way.”*

Other Strategies Used by Outreach Workers

- * Read a good book
- * Exercise
- * Meditate or pray
- * Play with your pets
- * Learn breathing techniques
- * Talk to and visit family and friends
- * Play games
- * Go hiking
- * Take a social media break
- * Grow a garden
- * Keep up with annual health exams
- * Build something
- * Take a 10-minute walk
- * Drink water
- * Turn off computer and cell phone
- * Be creative, i.e., crafts, coloring
- * Eat fruits & vegetables



How can an organization start to build a culture of self-care?

Building an organizational culture of self-care is a process that takes time and effort. To start, consider taking the following three steps:

- 1. Conduct an inventory of the organization's existing cultural practices.**¹ Determine whether these practices may or may not support self-care. Ask questions; for example,
 - * *What are office norms around after hours work emails?*
 - * *What personnel policies are in place that alleviate heavy workloads, such as flex-time, or time off?*
 - * *Is there a common staff area for lunch or does everyone eat at their desks?*
- 2. Gather input from staff on what self-care means for them and what is needed to create a supportive work environment.** Ask questions: *How do you define self-care? How do you practice self-care during the workday? What support do you need to create and sustain self-care at the workplace?*
- 3. Develop a collective vision and definition of self-care for your organization,** based on staff input.

Organizational Self-Care Practices

- * Post the health center's self-care statement in visible areas and provide a copy to each employee
- * Integrate questions about self-care as part of regular meetings, such as doing a check-in at the start of meetings
- * Model self-care, especially by leadership, to set norms and encourage healthy practices (i.e., not sending or responding to email after work hours, initiating breaks)
- * Brainstorm ideas collectively as a staff on how to integrate self-care practices throughout the work day, such as group wellness breaks
- * Create staff self-care pledges to keep as reminders
- * Avoid or minimize setting back-to-back meetings
- * Provide trainings for management and supervisors on assessing and addressing burnout and stress for their employees
- * Establish collective self-care targets
- * Support health practices by seeking organizational discounts for gyms, wellness centers

¹ Tirona, Marisa. (2014). Organizational Self-Care: Why It Matters and What It Could Look Like In Your Organization. Compass Point. April 15, 2014. Accessed online on 02/03/17. <https://www.compasspoint.org/blog/organizational-self-care-why-it-matters-and-what-it-could-look-your-organization>.

Self-Care Resources

For Outreach Workers:

Taking Care of You: Self-care for Community Health Workers

A newsletter released by the Rutgers School of Nursing, it provides 7 strategies to help community health workers practice self-care.

Activism & Self-Care:

The Critical Role of Self-care in Social Movements

A blog post from by The California Endowment that discusses the toll that advocacy work can take on the body and the critical need to adopt self-care practices among advocate workers.

For Organizations:

Organizational Self-Care: Why It Matters And What It Could Look Like In Your Organization

This blog post from Compass Point makes the case for collective self-care practices to support sustainability and impact.

Self-Care for Sustainability and Impact

The Movement to End Violence shares how self-care is a core practice of their efforts around sustainability and impact.

12 Resources For Your Self-Care Starter Kit

A self-care starter kit from Compass Point to help embed self-care into our work, including resources on self-care and your organization, learning mindfulness, and rethinking sabbaticals.

Tools:

Self-care Starter Kit

A self-care starter kit put together by the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. It provides an introduction to self-care, example exercises, and activities to help begin your own self-care plan.

Everything is Awful and I'm Not Okay: Questions to Ask Before Giving Up

A pdf document containing a list of 16 questions to ask yourself as a personal form of crisis management.

This publication was supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under grant number U30CS09743, a National Training & Technical Assistance Cooperative Agreement, in the amount of \$770,259. This information or content and conclusions are those of the author and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.

Copyright © 2017 by Health Outreach Partners. All rights reserved. Copies of this and other documents are available from Health Outreach Partners.