

5 Ways I Help Myself When My Job is to Help Others



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I'm a helper. Over the years, I've supported those living with serious and persistent mental illness, people with substance use disorders and survivors of rape and other traumas. Each day, people come to me with their biggest worries and their biggest wins. They look to me for insight, guidance and condolence.

My clients are not alone. One in five U.S. adults experience mental illness. And ever since I can remember, I've displayed my own signs of mental illness. I was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) in my freshman year of college. Later, as a result of being attacked and raped in graduate school, I developed posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

While my daily work is to help others, I've learned—through lots of therapy and hard work—that I must take care of myself before I can help those I serve. Prioritizing my recovery and myself has allowed me to be a better friend, a better partner and a better person; it's also allowed me to be more successful. I'm much better at helping my clients knowing that I have learned how to help myself.

Here are five ways I help myself, so I can better help those I serve.

Adopt A Self-Care Mindset

Self-care. Self-care. Self-care. I preach these words to client after client. As such, I also try to model self-care activities, like exercise, mindful eating and work/life blend.

I've come to learn that it's less about intentional acts of self-care and more about having a constant self-care mindset. In other words, I've learned that I don't always need to set aside a specific time *just* for self-care. Rather, I find self-care in my regular activities—showering, eating, walking—and that alone improves my mood.

Know When To Take A Step Back

As a helper, I deal with the most challenging parts of people's lives, and I want to be with them through it all. However, I've come to recognize that some topics can be triggering for *my* mental health, and I need to take a step back (metaphorically, of course).

If a client brings up a topic that is particularly challenging for me, I take a few extra moments to reflect before I respond. I also acknowledge this with my client and unpack this topic during *my* next therapy session, if necessary.

Invest In Professional Mental Health Care

One of the highlights of my week is writing a check to my therapist—seriously! Since my first diagnosis of anxiety more than five years ago, the single most beneficial part of my recovery has been therapy. Therapy has allowed me to explore and build upon my biggest strengths as well as develop my “weaknesses.”

While I'm often tempted to talk through issues my clients are having during therapy, I ensure the focus of my sessions are me, my mental health and my recovery.

Take Time Away From Work

One of the greatest forms of self-care is time away from work. Yes, as a helper, I derive energy and joy from supporting others, but it's still important I take time away from work and clients. Wrapped up in the hustle and bustle of helping others, I easily forget myself.

While work schedules look different for each of us, I've found that I work best when I have fixed working hours; do not email outside of work hours (except for emergencies, of course); and find happiness in sources outside of work, such as family, friends, Netflix and the occasional hike. Even these nightly “vacations” from work help me unplug.

Be Patient

I'm great at practicing patience with my clients. I allow them to make mistakes, recognizing that change takes time. But when it comes to myself, I'm often less forgiving, and I tend to set unrealistic expectations.

I'm working on my patience as I continue to care for myself, recognizing that it's a lot of work to be serving so many people at one time. When I'm late to an appointment or I forget to complete a task, I ask myself, “Am I treating myself with the same patience and respect I treat my clients?” If the answer is no, I reflect and course-correct.

When your daily work is helping others, it can be difficult to carve out time to help yourself. Self-care and time away from work can feel self-serving. But if you view helping *yourself* as helping others, it gets easier.

Kyle Elliott, MPA, CHES runs CaffeinatedKyle.com. His goal is simple—to help people find jobs they LOVE (or at least tolerate). Kyle loves coffee (if you couldn't tell), writing and eating the same thing at different restaurants.



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