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Why Self-Care is Vital for Social Services Professionals

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Author Note

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Abstract

The Health Project Center (HPC) is a nonprofit organization serving the Central Coast of California. HPC helps the needs of older adults ages 65 and over, families, and communities by organizing and implementing high quality programs and planning. The Multipurpose Senior Services (MSSP), program provides Case Management to low-income, share of no cost, and medical eligibility seniors. Furthermore, MSSP helps older adults who are at risk for losing their independence, especially at home, by providing case management services to assist clients with daily living needs so that they may live healthy lives. The purpose of this capstone is to examine the impact of self-care, work setting stress, and burn out in case managers working at the HPC Monterey County office. According to Mayo Clinic (2019) “case managers have a high percentage of experiencing burn out due to not performing self-care (para. 1)”. Stress and ignoring self-care to one’s self can impact the way case managers help clients. It’s essential to take care of ourselves before helping others, no one else will, and eventually the person will suffer. A pre-survey of six questions was given to the employees of the HPC to help identify if they are experiencing high levels of burn out in the workplace. The results based on the data indicated that most of the workers realize they are experiencing stress to some degree and are taking care of this before it’s too late. Most of the employees do believe self-care is important and should be addressed in the world of case managing.

Keywords: Case Management, self-care, burn out, stress, workplace
Agency & Communities Served

Multipurpose Senior Services Program (MSSP), helps the elderly population receive proper health care, help maintain daily tasks, they would have trouble doing on their own at home. Of course, there is a specific income line that one must meet to qualify, but once the individual qualifies, there is no charge at all for the services given. To qualify for the program, the person must be 65 years or older and be eligible or are currently at the time of enrollment receiving medical benefits.

The agency’s mission is to, “Improve access to and the quality of Healthcare for adults 65 years and over who live In California” (MSSP, 2017). The purpose of it is it provides certain Individuals that are 65 years or older or are experiencing a disability of that age stay at home with the home or community services it offers as opposed to going into a nursing home. Overall, the MSSP is committed to provide quality care to the clients being served and ensure they stay safe at home. The services and programs MSSP currently offer are case management, personal care services, and respite care.

MSSP is dedicated to serving the 65 and older population communities. MSSP proudly serves 30 cities in California. In July 2018, there was a 13.2% population of 65 years and over in Monterey county (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Moreover, to be a part of the MSSP program, individuals must meet the criteria for skilled nursing facility care. According to the California Department of Aging (2018), MSSP operates under Medicaid (Medi-Cal in California) 1915(c) Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) waiver that has been approved by the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. In 2016-2016 the MSSP program served, Hispanic/Latino elder adults 4%, Black/African American 21%, Asian/ Pacific Islander 1% and non-minority 74%(CDOA, 2018). MSSP proudly serves 30 cities In California. According to
MSSP (2018), It is a community-based program that provides Case Management services to the frail and low-income seniors in Sacramento, Placer, and Yolo Counties. There are two separate offices, and they are Santa Cruz county office and the Salinas County office.

**Problem Description**

Self-care, stress, and burnout have been the main topics in the field of social work.

“Social Work is a field that has to do with helping people in need and those who are traumatized from a specific life event that occurred in their lives (SAMHSA, 2014).” Furthermore, these particular clients are scared and are in high-stress environments. This is affecting the social worker because the emotions are there, and people feel the pain the other individual is experiencing. Most turnover studies of social workers confirm the negative relationship between age and turnover (16, 22, 35, 50). Kermish and Kushin (22) note an annual turnover rate of 53.3% for social workers, age 25 years or younger, and less than half of that rate, 24.7%, for the next age group, 26-30 years. Moreover, this could be a reason why the percentage is so low: turnover in social workers is very common. Essentially, turnover is the rate at which employees leave and are replaced at a specific organization. According to Coyle (2019), “for one, it can negatively affect the services clients are offered, seek, and engage in (para. 3).” Meaning that the workers are not lasting long enough in a job because of triggers like stress and burnout. In addition, having fewer people in a job signifies poor services in a job and not the best place to get help in. In fact, about 48% of the total social work workforce in the United States experiences high levels of personal distress as a result of their work (Loewenberg, 1979, Para. 15). Essentially, this is a high percentage because it’s showing it is almost half of the people that think this is difficult.
Contributing Factors

Even though there are many contributing factors that social workers potentially face in a working environment, one of the main ones is that case managers have excessive workloads. Having all these caseloads of people and having all this paperwork to complete adds all this extra time. Care Excellence Case Management Education (n.d.) notes, “Still, care coordinators have an average caseload of 100 cases. Registered nurse care managers and social work care managers have an average caseload of 25-35 cases. And care managers who function in a supervisory role of other care managers or care coordinators can be responsible for supervising upwards of 150 cases”. Also, that is the recommended number of cases to have in a place where a social worker won’t experience stress. Furthermore, at the MSSP program, they have a caseload of 56 clients each worker. According to CESME (n.d), “research findings in a recent needs assessment by the funders supporting the Care Excellence initiative, concerted efforts are made to keep caseloads manageable. Additionally, experts agreed that caseloads over 35 were too high”. Therefore, the number at MSSP is too high since the average amount of clients is 35 and less. This can be triggering too much work for only three case managers, and there is not enough time.

Work-related stress and emotional exhaustion can be dangerous to social workers if no measures are being taken to fix the problem. According to Jackson (2014), “when social workers experience burnout or compassion fatigue, their clients suffer as well (para.9).” Nevertheless, to say it is essential that social workers take care of themselves first before we can meet the other client’s needs. On average, 46% of gerontological social workers have caseloads of 50 or more clients (NASW, 2006). Overall, this can conclude that case managers have a big load of work to complete, and this can raise high levels of stress, especially if they have to take unfinished work
from the office to complete at home. A National Study of Licensed Social Workers stated that changes in their workplace in the past two years that have resulted in increased demands, but fewer supports in providing services to clients (NASW, 2006). Furthermore, three-fifths of these social workers reported increases in paperwork, caseload size, the severity of client problems, and the waiting list for services (NASW, 2006).

Another contributing factor to social workers not getting enough self-care in the workplace could be there is not enough knowledge of what self-care is. The majority of social workers go right in the field and go straight to work and want to be focused in their work that they tend to forget how vital self-care is; thus, they forget to find ways to distress themselves and refuse to acknowledge what self-care really is. There are many resources out there about self-care, social workers fail to implement needed self-awareness strategies. There are numerous reasons as to why this is occurring. “However, a few main reasons are procrastination, poor time management, and/or fear of change (Zastrow and Hessenauer, 2019)”. Workers fail to achieve their self-care objective, they have a lot of responsibilities, from paperwork to working with clients to managing their own personal lives, and they don’t want to change up the routine of work.

Consequences

For the reason that social workers work long and exhausting hours, it is easily detected that the employees “burn out” in the workplace. As Kiser (2016) mentions, burnout is defined as: a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that results from constant or repeated emotional pressure associated with an intense, long-term involvement with people (p. 274).
Due to the endless hours of work, it puts the workers at a higher risk for physical and emotional stress burnout and having a poor quality of life all in all this is compared to other professions out there. The primary mission of the profession calls social workers to enhance the well-being of all people with attention to basic needs and biopsychosocial functioning of marginalized populations (NASW, 2012). Thus, a significant amount of time is focused on the client and the community needs. Furthermore, this exposes the social workers overall well-being and the trauma they face compared to other health and human services professions. In addition, physical and mental exhaustion often leads to depression and anxiety in social workers. As a result, most social workers need to seek medical advice. After the doctor will most likely prescribes anti-depression medication and the side effects cannot always have good results. Due to the lack of knowledge about self-care in the workplace for Case Managers, a lot of employees are at a more prevalent risk for experiencing Turnovers. In the Multipurpose senior services program, there is a total of 480 clients per year (444 clients per year+8% turnover=480 clients. This emphasis, the total percentage of client turnover with an 8% turnover in employees.

The workers take care of themselves before taking care of the clients because this can trigger the way we serve the clients by being in a moody state of mind. Not being rested and having a clear mind can affect the way we treat our clients by not communicating with them and making the conversation with the client brief. According to Alle-Corliss (2006), “Beyond the personal level, entire agencies can be affected by burnout as workers performance, and effectiveness are adversely affected, thus harming the quality of services to clients” (as cited by Kiser, 2016). As mentioned, no matter what is the level of expertise one has in a working field, burnout can happen to anyone, and that jeopardizes our quality work.

Capstone Project
The capstone project will address the case managers working at the Multipurpose senior services program that it’s essential to practice self-care while being active at work. Mostly, I worked with my supervisor, Claudia, and the employed staff to discover and find out why they are not getting enough self-care in the office. First and foremost, I will develop an email that advises the team members the process of how the survey’s will be distributed, and when they are expected to be returned. The questions will point out about their physical well-being status, what they are currently doing for self-care, and if they engage in stress-reducing activities. After I gather all the survey’s, I will then analyze the answers and initiate data on excel based on the questions they answered. Lastly, I will hopefully have collected results and presented the data and formulated a PowerPoint to inform the staff regarding my findings.

**Problem Model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contributing Factors</th>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excessive Workload</td>
<td>Case Managers are not getting enough Self</td>
<td>Burn out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Care In the workplace.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough knowledge of what self-care is.</td>
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</table>
Capstone Project Description and Justification

Project Purpose and Justification

The project intends to make sure that case managers maintain a healthy relationship with themselves and practice how to take care of themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally. It produces positive feelings, which will boost confidence and self-esteem in the workplace. Nevertheless, piles of cases can be draining and exhausting and can take effect in our bodies and make us ill to the point where it could be overwhelming. At this point, case managers can encourage each other to do specific things together in the office so they can feel self-motivated and to focus on ways to work better and work. According to Zawaski and Mann (2016), “Encouragement comes in many forms- a few words, a handwritten note, or an e-mail that makes someone smile. Helping with priorities and boundaries, one-on-one coaching from supervisors, and demonstrate encouragement can make a difference (pg. 259).” Furthermore, this interprets that by helping each other, there can be a plan made regarding self-care, but everyone in the office has to be involved in the planning. This could mean take longer walks and use dumbbells at the same time or even take little five-minute breaks and listen to music or get a stress coloring book. Moreover, this project will be useful in the sense that case managers will have a chance to see data regarding the stress-related to the job or what is provoking the stress and will give them an opportunity to actually have a moment and relax and take it easy. Furthermore, In the world of Social Work, case managers are at high risk of experiencing this stress due to the reason being that the tasks of case managers are plenty to worry about. According to Prudent Practice, “A Guide for Managing Malpractice Risk, social workers who suspect they might be undergoing a process of burnout are advised to undertake preventive measures—measures to safeguard themselves and their clients, among them: Take needed “mental health days” and use stress-reduction techniques” (as cited in NASW, 2004). Overall, this indicates that taking some time
off is essential to get in touch with ourselves so that we avoid having tension at work and explore options regarding stress mechanisms that can benefit our health in general.

**Implementation Plan**

The chosen project was to determine that Case Managers are not getting enough time off to practice self-care in the workplace. Practicing methods of personal care is not as crucial to Case Managers because they are doing other important work in the job rather than paying attention to themselves and what their bodies are telling them when they are overworking. Moreover, the participants chosen for this project are Claudia Mendez (CM supervisor), Monce (Case Manager), Luis (CM), and Laura (CM) hopefully they will all be involved. First and foremost, an email will be sent to the workers explaining what will happen. The email will explain in detail that a survey will be conducted on a particular day and just let the workers know ahead of time so therefore, they won’t be surprised if they get the survey without a valid explanation. Secondly, the workers will get an email with the questions. The survey will consist of an estimate of six questions that will let me comprehend their emotional state level they are in and will give me the chance to see if they have a good understanding of what self-care essentially is about, and if they practice it as often as they should be to avoid burnout while there presence at the office. After the questions are emailed out, I’m going to give them about a week to answer the survey, and after they are completed by the workers, I will get them in return and start collecting data regarding the stress at work and inputting the information of the questions gathered in a spreadsheet in excel. Furthermore, based on the results that were gathered from the questionnaire with the five employees of emotional well, being a PowerPoint will be formulated. Thirdly, the PowerPoint will specifically read about the final results from the survey presented to
them and give them extra information regarding how to take care of themselves so that the Social Workers can prevent this burn out at their job. The point of this presentation is so that they can bring serious this issue since a lot of presenting problems follow if they are not taking care of themselves and taking the time to relieve their stress in the job. Some personal materials I will use are at the end of the project when I hand out gift sets that include items that lower the levels of stress these may include, customized stress balls with inspiring quotes that motivate the workers to incorporate fun ways of relieving stress, adult coloring books for stress, fidget spinners, and healthy food snacks. Moreover, these items can stay on their desktop and remind them to use them every now and then when they are experiencing a sudden high level of stress. A detailed implementation plan and timeline can be seen in the Scope of Work in Appendix A.

**Expected Outcomes**

The expected outcome from conducting surveys, research, and outreach regards case managers at the Multi-Purpose Senior Services program to inform each Individual that self-care is important and should be taken into consideration every day. It’s essential to take minor breaks in between workloads so that the person doesn't get worn off and burnt out so fast. If they do this, they can have a clear mind and work on the next case and feel more relaxed. If case managers want to take care of other clients, they must pay attention to themselves first. By presenting evidence to the staff regarding why self-care is so important, they will hopefully take the time to listen to their bodies. The way I will know the project is successful is by collecting the answers to the questions I ask the workers and comparing them to what each person noted down as an answer.

**Assessment Plan**
Towards the end, by gathering the data survey regarding the self-care they practice at work and the stress levels they might be experiencing at the time of the survey, I will finalize by showing the staff on board the PowerPoint and teaching the different ways to lower the stress or burnout they might be experiencing in the office.

**Project Activities**

In this project, I implemented surveys to find out if current employees at the Health Project Center are taking self-care more seriously and paying more attention to their own needs before they can better serve the clients. Failing to maintain proper self-care can trigger the capacity to achieve the job’s tasks correctly and sustain healthy relationships. This tool was given to the case managers to help better them and take action on a consistent basis to address one’s health and well-being. By them answering the conducted surveys, it will help me analyze each question given and transferring it to a spreadsheet on Excel. From there, gathering data will be done.

**Project Outcomes**

The project outcomes that I think the responders might have an idea of what self-care is and how important it is in the world of case managing but perhaps, are not as motivated as I think they are to trying new techniques at work to relive stress. Maybe, they are not as open to trying these recommendations regarding self-care because they don’t like trying new things that gets them out of their comfort zone. Nevertheless, the questionnaire asked eight questions in total, and six of the eight questions were analyzed carefully. Overall, These questions that had to do with if the employees are taking time off and practicing self-care at least once a week and my mentor concluded that the case managers are most likely practicing techniques of self-care more than once a week. Another question was if the workers recognize the symptoms of burn
out, and probably most do they don’t pay much attention to it. The third question was if case managers take at least a mini-break when they feel they have a load of work and need to vent out on the frustration, and here, most likely, they do reason being is they might feel anxious and angry and need to step out for a while. I think most of the workers will have mixed feelings about trying to find methods to cope with stress.

Findings/Results

A maximum total of five case managers were presented to a survey regarding if they recognize how important taking care of their inner mind and body when they are handling a caseload of cases in the job. Next is the data found and observations from the surveys that were given to the staff to answer. The first question that was answered was trying to find if the workers are taking good care of themselves during the week and practicing self-care.

Figure 1: Self-care once a week

As a result from the data presented above everyone (100%) of the people do practice self-care. Furthermore, this was not expected from my outcome predictions.
The second question asked the participants if they recognized the symptoms of burn out.

A total of (40%) of the respondents answered that they agree they are aware of the symptoms of burnout and a total of (40%) answered that they strongly agree that they recognize what exactly is burn out. On the other hand, (20%) of the employees don’t have enough knowledge on what the signs of burnout seem to be.
The third question was referring to the case managers and it was directly about if they take a break when they are at work.

The majority of the participants answered (60%) they agree when they are stressed out they go and take a break. At this point, they are feeling overwhelmed with some of the work and that’s when they go out and clear their minds. (20%) said they strongly agree they take breaks when they are full of work and need to vent out. Another (20%) said they disagree and they don’t take walks when they are stressed out they use another way to alleviate this feeling.

The next question was asked if they feel full of energy when self care is addressed.
In this question (80%) of the workers said they strongly believe when they practice self-care they feel full of energy. There was a (20%) on how the case managers believe that taking some time off and listening to the body gives them maybe self-confidence, energy, and joy.

The fifth questions asked if they feel worn out when they are putting everyone first and the do not self-care themselves.

A total of (60%) said they feel tired or drained when they help other first and don’t listen to what their body, soul, and mind is asking them to practice and take some time off because with no rest consequences can arise. Next (40%) did say they strongly agree with feeling exhausted and worn out when they don’t self-care and help the clients.
The sixth question asked the employees if they take walks at work to relieve the stress. A total of (80%) of the respondents answered that they are taking walks to relieve the stress they feel from the work that has been given to them and (20%) said they disagree with taking walks at work helps them relieve stress. On the survey that one person answered that they don’t take talks to relieve the stress.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

This project has provided an opportunity for the Case Managers at MSSP to continue the practice of self-care in the office and during work hours. Not much has been occurring in the office to address physical health. Listening and paying attention to a broader set of criteria, including care of the mind, emotions, relationships, environment, time, and resources. One recommendation that I would implement to the staff members would specifically be to create a personal toolbox of micro-habits and self-care activities that could be done in about ten minutes or less, which can be woven through the workday. With this new approach, case managers can take care of themselves throughout the workday, before clients, between clients, and even while in session. MSSP employees already started to use these recommendations when they are working and in between breaks. They are now taking break walks and using dumbbells to exercise at the same time they walk.
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Appendix A

Scope of Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Deliverables</th>
<th>Timeline/Deadlines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brainstorm on the type of questions I will be asking the MSSP staff</td>
<td>For the survey</td>
<td>April 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Met with mentor to discuss the capstone project</td>
<td>Survey purpose</td>
<td>April 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let the staff know regarding the survey.</td>
<td>Awareness of what is going on</td>
<td>August 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email a consent form to active staff members who are participating.</td>
<td>Get permission to Initiate the survey</td>
<td>September 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct survey questions</td>
<td>A total of 6 formulated questions</td>
<td>September 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revise the questions with mentor.</td>
<td>Approved questions by mentor</td>
<td>September 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send the questionnaire to the staff.</td>
<td>Start on the questions</td>
<td>September 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gather survey data</td>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>October 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present results to staff members through power point</td>
<td>Results of the questions presented</td>
<td>November 2019</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Self-Care Questionnaire/ Survey**

What is self-care?

Every mind (2019) defines self-care as referring to activities undertaken with the intention of enhancing energy, restoring health, and reducing stress. (para.1)

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<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I practice self-care once a week</td>
<td>A. Strongly Agree</td>
<td>B. Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>When I take walks at work it helps me relieve stress</td>
<td>A. Strongly Agree</td>
<td>B. Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>I am able to recognize the symptoms of burn out</td>
<td>A. Strongly Agree</td>
<td>B. Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>When I am feeling stressed out at work, I take a break</td>
<td>A. Strongly Agree</td>
<td>B. Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>I sleep 7 hours a night</td>
<td>A. Strongly Agree</td>
<td>B. Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>I feel amazing and full of energy when I do self-care</td>
<td>A. Strongly Agree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
B. Agree
C. Strongly Disagree
D. Disagree

7. I feel drained and worn out when I put everyone else first and do not self-care
   A. Strongly Agree
   B. Agree
   C. Strongly Disagree
   D. Disagree

8. Putting myself/ self-care has a big impact on my ability to function at my best
   A. Strongly Agree
   B. Agree
   C. Strongly Disagree
   D. Disagree