Description

Self-Care Can’t Always be There (But it Needn’t be Far Away)

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Introduction

There aren’t many people who would disagree that caring for ourselves is crucial, particularly when working in an emotionally and physically challenging profession. However, there is an assumption that we all know how to do this.

Self-care isn’t lighting candles, going shopping or having a spa day – these might be part of your routine but it’s much more than this. Practising self-care is a skill and, without this being taught, it sets us up to fail when we find it difficult to put in place.

It begins with the relationship we have with ourselves. Like any relationship, this will have its ups, downs and complexities. Connecting with ourselves requires holding a part of us that is vulnerable while acknowledging and believing we are “deserving” of being cared for.

This can feel tricky for many of us for different reasons, like our upbringing, experiences or beliefs. Tuning into our bodies can feel threatening, overwhelming, and even daunting for some of us. However, learning to do this and nourish ourselves can have profoundly positive effects.

> No one is born knowing how to put boundaries in place, how to ask for what they need, or how to say ‘no’. The teaching of these self-care practices are mainly absent during most healthcare professionals’ training, including midwifery.

Practising self-care in isolation will have less of an impact on individual’s mental and physical health if the organisation doesn’t have systems to reinforce it. For example, scheduled breaks, adequate resources and emotional support staff can access are some ways that demonstrate to workers they are valued. Self-care isn’t prescriptive.

We all have complications at times in our lives, and building a routine to care for ourselves will look different for each person. If you are learning how to connect with yourself, go at your own pace and don't feel pressured by others to rush the relationship with you.

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When our anxiety, trauma or burnout symptoms increase, there is a tipping point when self-care activities have less potency. The things we need to put in place to recover from being burned out or traumatised is called aftercare; it's not self-care. Although we can continue to practice it, we need something more to directly address these conditions.

Many midwives are burned out, anxious about future maternity care and are leaving their profession. A two- pronged approach is needed to address this, top-down (from the organisation) and bottom-up (from the individual).

> Self-care behaviours like having a sleep routine, practising gratitude and being around others that make us laugh are all ways we can actively try to optimise our mental health and wellbeing.

The more we practice these activities, the more confident and productive we are. The ripple effect is that we are then more likely to experience joy and make better decisions.

Even when we are short on time, there are micro-moments we can create each day to connect with ourselves and consciously pause to smile: listen to music, have fresh air or watch something funny. All these actions tap into parts of our brain that can help us feel calmer and better resourced to manage challenges.

Self-care isn't the whole solution to the difficulties midwives are currently facing but it can help you feel that there are actions you can take to care for yourself when you need it the most. **TPM**

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