

Description

Why does self-care matter for midwives?

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I recently read a magazine article proclaiming that 'Self care is the new diet industry'. The article spoke about how marketers' prey on people with promises of a better life if they subscribe to this, or buy that. Perhaps marketing has caught on to Self-care as a concept which can lure customers in, but that doesn't mean that the concept of Self-care is not important. It seems to me that Self care may be almost trivialized as an indulgence. Mentioning taking time out can result in eye rolling or be met with a sarcastic response. People may feel it is a luxury they just can't afford, but these beliefs need to be challenged. Self care is essential for everyone. Whether you realise it or not, you probably practice Self care. The World Health Organisation recognizes that Self Care is essential for health care workers and have developed a handbook which is available with guidance for maintaining well-being.[1]

In nursing, in 1985 Orem developed the Self Care Theory defining Self Care as:

- "the practice and maintenance of activities that an individual initiates and performs for themselves to maintain life, health and well-being".[2]
- Self care is recognized as vital by the World Health Organisation (WHO) who use the following definition,
- "the ability of individuals, families and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and to cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a health-care provider".[3]

In other words, without Self care, individuals lose the capability of maintaining their own health and well-being. When

this happens, we face burnout.

What is burnout?



Burnout may happen gradually over a period of time. It may be a response to prolonged stress and maybe personal or work-related. An individual may notice they have difficulty sleeping, brain fog, irritability. Crucially, it affects the amygdala (fear centre) in the brain which can affect problem solving and decision-making. Therefore, burnout can not only affect midwives personal well-being but, it may impact the quality of midwifery care.

Since March 2020, midwives have faced unprecedented anxiety and stress related to working on the frontline during the pandemic. COVID 19 presented an uncertain situation, with little known about the virus and evolving information. Midwives continue to face work every day with a potential exposure to COVID and we now face the second wave. As highlighted in an editorial in May, solidarity and compassion are vital[4] and the well-being of midwives must be a priority.

> We know that health care professionals including midwives are at risk and some have sadly died from COVID 19. Although more is known now about COVID and PPE more readily available, anxiety around COVID is tangible and everyone is fatigued.

Evidence from midwives working in the UK this year highlights the pandemic concerns for personal safety and well-being, fears for midwives own family well-being, the possibility of PTSD after COVID, the possible long-term impact of COVID on midwives and midwives expressed moral distress since they could not provide the care they wanted to.[5]

Even before the pandemic, stress, anxiety, depression and burnout levels were high in midwives working in the UK. The Whelm Study was conducted in 2017 and out of almost 2,000 midwives who participated, one third of midwives scored moderate and above for stress, anxiety and depression and two thirds recorded moderate and above for work-related burnout. Crucially, 80% experienced personal burnout. Burnout was associated with being under the age of 40, having a disability or working in a hospital rotation midwife role.[6]

The RCM has developed guidance to support midwives emotional well-being in a pandemic in response to these findings. Three key elements encompass this. 1. Recognise increased vulnerability to COVID 19 in midwives, 2. Respond to staff concerns effectively, 3. Optimise well-being.

This guidance is available on the RCM website and there are some infographics which accompany the guidance which can be downloaded and shared.[7] The guidance highlights the need to keep compassion and care at the heart of the pandemic. Compassion applies to everyone involved in maternity care, for midwives, doctors, all maternity staff as well as mothers, partners and babies. Midwives are encouraged to remain calm and be the source of grounding for women, maintaining a calm environment. To do this, midwives must practice Self care – take adequate breaks, eat and hydrate.

> The possible long-term impact of COVID 19 on midwives must be considered and there may be additional supports required by staff and students returning to practice.[5]

Midwives did report some positive aspects of working during the pandemic-including an increased sense of pride in being a midwife, a sense of comradeship, creative freedom which led to innovations in care, more time to spend with women in postnatal wards and the fortitude to provide high quality midwifery care. They felt they rose to the challenge and there was a public acknowledgement of the value of their work.[5]

Still, if we take the results of the 2017 Whelm Study as a baseline prior to the pandemic, levels of stress, anxiety, depression and burnout urgently need attention in Midwifery. Thus, self care is to be endorsed and promoted for midwives well-being.

What is the evidence in relation to Self care?



You are what you eat. A healthy diet sustains our energy levels, and leads to better moods. There is evidence to suggest that following a Mediterranean diet (based on the diets of people in Crete, Greece and South of Italy) including oily fish, whole grains, vegetables and fruits can be a stress buster.[8] There is now over-whelming evidence to support the fact that gut microbes have a major impact on central neurochemistry and behaviour, especially stress related disorders such as depression. Recent studies indicate that patients with depression have gut dysbiosis but it is unclear why. It is possible that dietary patterns in Europe and elsewhere have undergone major changes over the last few decades, with increased intakes of red meat, high fat foods, and refined sugars. Individuals who consume a Mediterranean diet have lower rates of depression and a recent study suggests that a Mediterranean diet may have antidepressant properties.

A group of researchers called The MyNewGut consortium recommend that patients with depression or vulnerability to depression should be encouraged to enhance a plant-based diet with a high content of grains/fibres and fish. This Irish team of researchers examine the relationship between our gut health and our mood and have had positive findings with fermented foods and prebiotic supplements.[9,10] In addition, polyphenols in dark chocolate can be beneficial by having an antioxidant effect.

Avoid alcohol. Alcohol may temporarily relieve stress, but it is associated with anxiety and depression and may lead to a cycle of drinking to ‘self-medicate’.

Increasing hydration is important. Even mild dehydration can cause irritability, headaches and moodiness.

When we get stressed, we must slow down. This is usually the opposite of our intuition, which tells us to keep going to get a task done. In order to be able to think clearly and be innovative we must take time out. Even a short break can reduce stress, fatigue and improve focus.



Meditation builds the grey matter in our cerebral cortex. With more practice, the more neural connections are formed, a process referred to as neuroplasticity. Rather than degenerating, the neurons form dense branches and connections. Yoga and meditation reduce cortisol levels which rise when stressed. Activity in the amygdala may be reduced resulting in an improved memory. There is ample evidence that aerobic exercise may also reduce depression symptoms,[11] boost the memory and enhance well-being.[12]

Good sleep is an essential component of Self care. Proper sleep can improve cognitive function, capacity for learning and, importantly, improve empathy.

Research in the field of positive psychology has demonstrated that hope, optimism, gratitude, social connection and kindness are all crucial for our well-being.[13]

Finally, a sense of humour helps us to cope. Evidence suggests that laughter and humour improves anxiety and depression, relationship satisfaction, stress and pain.[14] When a lot of us felt paralysed with anxiety in 2020, we reacted by watching and sharing funny video and memes with friends and family. Although as health care professionals, we should be cautious about sharing misinformation and fake news!

What can we do?

We need to re-frame the perception of Self care from a luxury or something we do when we have time, to be a priority for our health and well-being. Self care needs to be part of our daily routine. Check in with yourself and assess your mood regularly.

> Start by asking yourself, what can I do today to improve my mental and physical health?

If you search for Self care in Google, the results will include, treating yourself, getting spa treatments, and facials. All of these things are nice, but self care doesn't have to be expensive. Simple things can help improve our well-being.

Key things we can do are: have a daily routine, maintain our personal hygiene-shower/fresh bedsheets, improve our diet and hydration, cut down caffeine and sugar, increase water intake, practice daily gratitude, exercise, make time for friends and family, spend time in nature, try to improve sleep, listen to our body and when we need rest, take it. It is really important to look forward to the future and hold hope.

Some things I have found helpful have been journaling or self-reflection.[15] My students in Bahrain joined in and some blogs were published.[16] It helped us to feel like part of the global community of health care professionals and to make sense of the situation. Getting active, spending time in nature, listening to music, singing, yoga, baking, and staying in contact with my friends and family although socially distant helped. It is really important to connect with systems of social support- family video calls have become a normal part of life. Plenty of laughter, love and support. If I am feeling stressed, it may be work related and it can be helpful to get organized and get things done or make a plan to get things done. I love lists and find great satisfaction in crossing things off as I get them done and experience a sense of relief. Self care is not just taking time out, it is ensuring that you maintain your emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual health.

Conclusion

Self care is an essential part of life, not a luxury you cant afford. We need to schedule self care in to our daily lives. This

doesn't have to be an expensive spa treatment or treat, but rather simply self compassion by taking good care of yourself, allowing yourself to rest, to laugh and enjoy yourself, and spend time with friends and family. This is an unprecedented time which calls for unprecedented kindness, I know it is cliché but it is so important in these times to be kind and not just to others, but to yourself. This is especially important for midwives, since compassion is crucial for the provision of respectful maternity care. In the words of Pema Chodron, 'Compassion for others begins with compassion for ourselves'.

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