

New Kids on the Block: A Column for Early Career Psychologists

Promoting Self-Wellness During the COVID 19 Pandemic: Key Strategies for Practitioners

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Abstract: This article aims to shed light on the importance of self-wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic for practitioners. Key strategies will also be provided for practitioners to consider as they navigate the uncertainties and disruptions caused by the pandemic, to enable them to adapt and thrive in the culture of a new normal.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the mental health and wellness of many practitioners, including early career psychologists (ECPs). According to a recent COVID-19 Practitioner Survey conducted by the American Psychological Association ([AMA], 2021), ECPs, women, and racial minority psychologists in the United States reported an increase in stress levels and burnout. Similarly, many practitioners in Canada are experiencing growing mental health concerns and occupational risk factors related to chronic stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, and Zoom fatigue during the pandemic, with increased client workloads (Connolly, 2021; Sim et al., 2016). Given these growing issues, greater emphasis needs to be placed on self-wellness for practitioners in order to maintain functional health and wellbeing, and for longevity in the profession. In this article, *self-wellness* defines “the active pursuit of activities, choices, and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health” (Global Wellness Institute, n.d., para 2), in that it is more than just physical health, and incorporates various dimensions that should work synchronously (i.e., familial, professional, mental, emotional, spiritual, social, and environmental). It also involves an active process associated with making choices and having awareness as one works to achieve the optimal state of wellbeing. Though wellness is impacted by the environments where one lives, as practitioners we have the responsibility to be proactive in our choices and actions.

Further, self-wellness requires a paradigm shift from being self-focused to more holistic and collective in nature. This position supports Profit’s (2011) argument for the need to change our perspective within the psychological field from the current individualized concept of self-care to a more holistic form of self wellness that considers “both the life-giving and wearing effects of practice, as well as the multiple and diverse processes of “conscientization, growth, and struggle that practitioners” experience in their daily functioning (p. 281). Since practitioners may occupy the same space as some of their clients, conscientization may lead to a better understanding of how much they are also impacted by the same systems and structures that impact on the wellbeing of these individuals in counselling contexts. This also means that the burden to sustain one’s self wellness is not solely placed on the individual, but rather it is a more collective and collaborative effort involving various entities and forces including but not limited to managers, directors, colleagues, peers, policymakers, allies, supervisors, consultants, mentors, social change agents, and community leaders. With the inclusive efforts of all parties, practitioners will have the appropriate support systems in place to become more empowered

to advocate for their own self-wellness both individually and professionally. It is also crucial for practitioners to become more action oriented as they try to make meaning of the ebbs and flows of this pandemic.

Drawing from Profitt's (2011) work, I will provide several actionable steps that practitioners can take to work towards a collective concept of self-wellness. These steps are situation- and culture-specific with concerns given to the purposeful use of practices to enrich personal well-being and development. First, there is a need for practitioners to question the assumption that they can serve others without being impacted by the systemic injustices they observe. Second, practitioners are called upon to challenge beliefs on an administrative level that simply focusing on self-wellness can mitigate distress and negates the reality that the need for self-wellness is often due to psychological suffering resulting from familial, social, political, and economic factors. Third, practitioners should increase their awareness around the discourse that denies the institutional factors impacting the field of psychology and the onus placed solely on them to develop effective coping strategies to prevent pressing mental health struggles like burn out. Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that self-wellness is both a structural and ethical issue. As such, it is necessary to preserve integrity and provide quality service in counselling practices. Practitioners are gently encouraged to reflect on these key strategies and find ways to incorporate them into their professional and personal lives as they take charge of their career trajectory; by so doing, they will be better able to maintain boundaries and create a more sustainable and meaningful work-life balance.

Essentially, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected many practitioners' sense of safety and connection with others. Based on this reality, they are challenged to become more intentional and proactive about their self-wellness in these unprecedented times. Embracing an attitude of self-wellness means that practitioners have the capability to promote preventive wellness interventions that encourage intentional lifestyle changes around nutrition, exercise, social interaction, and stress management (Posluns & Gall, 2019; Shallcross, 2011). More so, with the understanding that working within the helping profession can be emotionally draining, it is paramount for practitioners to engage in self-wellness practices that can help them recharge holistically. This holistic process should place emphasis on practitioners' interpersonal needs through improving emotional connections with others, self-compassion, mindfulness practices, sexual health, family and social supports, and spirituality (Dixon, 2020; Neff, 2016; Newell, 2018; Pyles et al., 2021). All of these identified factors are fundamental components of emotional/holistic health. With greater attention given to a holistic approach to self wellness, practitioners will be better able to cultivate increased self-awareness to change their habits, which in turn will enhance their lives.

To conclude, as practitioners push to recover from the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic on their emotional and mental wellness, including resultant health distress, it is critical to remember that self-wellness should be viewed within the context of collective care and community wellbeing. In so doing, practitioners will not only strive to look after themselves holistically but also support others to create transformative healing and build their resilience during and beyond the pandemic.

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