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The Importance of Self-Care for Direct Support Professionals

By: Judi Hoskins

I have often thought that one of the biggest challenges in a human services career can be looking after ourselves. Self-care was generally not top of mind when we chose our paths. Most of us got into this work because we want to help others; our goal is to improve the lives and positions of others. This goal can be at odds with our own needs at times and certainly can take up more space in our heads. However, I believe it is more important than ever to consider our needs as well.

Research shows that, to be effective caregivers, we must also look after ourselves. This is vital to avoid burnout and maintain the energy needed to care for others. In 2020, the Azrieli Adult Neurodevelopmental Centre at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) surveyed the mental health of direct support professionals (DSPs) throughout Ontario, Canada and found that 69% reported feeling increased stress at work, while 25% reported moderate to severe distress resulting from work demands (CAMH, 2020). By 2022, a follow-up study identified that 35% of DSPs were experiencing moderate to severe distress (CAMH, 2022). Both studies identified self-care among their recommendations to reverse the trend. I would like to offer my thoughts on self-care for DSPs as caregivers. Some of the ideas presented here are based on research and are evidence based, while others come to mind based on my personal experiences.

Editors: Angie Nethercott, M.A., RP
Chanelle Salonia, M.A., BCBA



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First, make time for physical activity. Whether your job role is active or leaves you seated for long periods of time, an important part of looking after yourself is making time for exercise. As they say, twenty minutes, three to four times a week should be sufficient to see the benefits for overall health and to improve sleep. This can be easier said than done when our schedules are busy, and the daylight is scarce, but it can make all the difference. I am not a terribly active person but definitely feel the benefits when I take time to walk the dog, shovel some snow, and go up and down the stairs while completing chores. Try to include some physical activity in your self-care routine for the naturally calming effect of muscle movement.

Take a break when you need it. There's a popular meme circulating right now that says, "everything, including you, works better when it's been unplugged briefly." This resonates with me. The demands of our work can be emotionally and mentally taxing, particularly when solutions don't come easily. Make sure to

disconnect when you need to, if only for a moment. Particularly in programs that run 24/7, it's easy to feel like you are needed right away, at all hours. This kind of commitment is admirable but not always sustainable and can lead to negative outcomes for you as the caregiver. Know your hours of work and, as much as possible, stick to them.

Be mindful. While teaching mindfulness practice, I have learned to appreciate its benefits for my work. I can manage stress when I'm able to focus on the task at hand, letting go of my thoughts and feelings related to challenges faced earlier in the day or week. There are many free online resources available to help get started. As an example, "mindful walking" combines the calming benefits of physical activity with the mentally calming effect of being in the moment. While walking, keep your thoughts in the moment by noticing the details of your surroundings with all five of your senses. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you feel with your skin, face, feet, etc.? In Ontario, there is a provincial initiative to support DSP mental health called the "Cultivating Community Wellness" website (<https://provincialnetwork.ca/ccwellness/about-2/>), which provides a variety of resources and podcasts, including 'Mindfulness for all: Accessible Mindfulness video series.'

Avoid sacrificing your own routines. Probably the most powerful professional development I ever participated in was an exercise where we were asked to describe our morning routines in minute detail. Most of us were quite rigid in our routines and attached to the minutia. We were then asked to describe the impact of someone messing with that routine. I can assure you there was very animated discussion, as we all recognized the emotional impact of changes to our preferred routine. The familiarity that starts our workdays can be crucial to setting us up for success. Self-care is often built into the activities that we choose to start and end our day. If your work is getting in the way of the routines and structures that support you emotionally, it will be difficult to perform at your best, particularly for the long term.

Share your thoughts openly and respectfully. In the consultative role that I currently have, I always appreciate DSPs and supported individuals who will challenge my ideas openly. I much prefer a chance to defend or abandon my position (based on the discussion) rather than leave thinking it was helpful and find that the idea is criticized privately and/or abandoned. When introducing environmental changes to a staff group, the team member who is able to voice their concerns openly always gives the opportunity for me to further explain the rationale and improve everyone's comfort level with change. Each program has a unique culture that is fed by daily interactions and, as a DSP, you are an essential part of maintaining that culture. I have found that workplaces where colleagues are comfortable to speak openly experience less negativity and stress. Self-care includes open communication and disengaging from the emotional venting of others whenever possible.

Be part of the solution. This point perhaps explains itself and naturally follows sharing your thoughts. As DSPs, you probably know the program and the individuals that it supports the best. When something isn't working, you may have insight that can be vital to improving the situation. Openness creates a more honest conversation and can reduce the feelings of isolation and negativity that can result from feeling like you know what would help, but no one else sees it. I still remember many years ago when we planned a milestone birthday celebration, put a great deal of time and energy into it, without recognizing that the individual who was celebrating was terrified of balloons. Needless to say, some very quick adjustments were needed to save the occasion. Contribute to Individualized Support Plans and other support documents, and keep them alive in your workplace.

Respond in moderation to change. I've learned that it's best to take a measured approach to new initiatives and directives, as change that happens too quickly can be very difficult for everyone. Changes in structure and direction can come around frequently, and change in our

sector is often cyclical. Particularly when supporting older adults, a measured approach to changing routines usually has better outcomes. This is true for all the reasons discussed earlier related to the comfort of routines and is magnified as we get older. Be sure to hang onto the support style that makes you unique and so valuable to your workplace. I've learned to listen to the person and to the direct support professional, as both are acutely aware of the consequences of change for change's sake.

Notice your strengths that represent resilience and work on developing them as needed. “Resilience is the ability to bounce back, the capacity to thrive and fulfill our potential in spite of our circumstances” (CAMH, 2013). The Family Guide to Dual Diagnosis by CAMH identifies the characteristics of resilient people and encourages caregivers to consider which strengths they already have, and which they might develop. I believe that these characteristics can be applied to the DSP role also and have listed them below for your consideration:

- a sense of closeness and connectedness to others
- strong, dependable support from at least one significant other
- attention to personal health and well-being
- high self-esteem
- a strong sense of personal identity
- a realistic and balanced awareness of strengths and limitations
- the ability to be assertive and emotionally tough when necessary
- a playful, lighthearted approach to life
- a sense of direction and purpose in life
- the ability to turn difficult experiences into valuable learning opportunities
- the capacity to pick self up, shake self off, and keep moving forward
- the ability to adapt to live comfortably with uncertainty and unpredictability
- the ability to laugh at self. Resilient people do not “sweat the small stuff.”

Noting your areas of strength and attention to areas for development can help to direct your self-care.

In conclusion, I hope I have piqued your interest in expanding self-care opportunities. The DSP role is essential to our support systems, and I believe requires the most creativity and stamina. Parenting, aging parents, and other responsibilities can add to the challenges for achieving work-life balance and make self-care even more important. To develop self-care habits, it can be helpful to start modestly and celebrate small steps forward, as well as drawing on the experiences of colleagues. Focus on activities that interest you, and you'll be more motivated to continue. I recall that the helping role of a DSP can be very rewarding when it is balanced with also making your emotional and physical health a priority.

About the author

Judi Hoskins is a Developmental Service Practitioner at Hands TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca and has worked in the adult services field throughout her career. Judi worked at summer camps for adults living in large institutions while completing her BA in Psychology and DSW diploma. Later, she worked as a Direct Support Professional in day and residential programs before moving into her current role. Over the years, this role has changed from behaviour therapist to focus more specifically on emotional and social skill development, supporting the registered social worker role in our agency.

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