

A woman's face in profile, looking down, with a blurred face of another person in the foreground. The background is a solid light green color.

Taking Care of Yourself

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Taking care of yourself is important. But busy lives often leave little time for self-care. If you'd like to still be practicing 10 years from now, it's time for a little reflection. Massage therapists not only have the stresses that accompany the day-to-day reality of being human, but also the physical demands of the profession. The result? Burnout. Take heart, though. Following you'll find a plethora of methods we can use to keep ourselves physically strong and mentally vibrant.



FIRED UP OR FLAMED OUT?

Caregiver burnout means that all your fuel is burned up—a condition of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion. The demands on your body and mind can easily seem overwhelming, leading to anxiety, depression, fatigue, hopelessness, and stress. Your attitude, many times, is affected and slips from being positive and caring to being negative and unconcerned.

Don't think you are immune. Clients can burn you out, and so can your children, your checkbook, your household chores, and your aging parents. When caregivers don't ask or seek help when needed, and we think we can do it all, we can be so wrapped up in the care we provide that we forget to tend to our own health. Many caregivers feel guilty if they spend time on themselves rather than on their other responsibilities.¹

Burnout isn't like a cold. Much like posttraumatic stress syndrome, the symptoms of burnout can sneak up on you. It's critical to do a realistic self-assessment of how you are feeling about your work and your life and make any needed changes before a crisis hits. Being able to cope with the strains and stresses of being a therapist is part of the art of caregiving. In order to remain healthy so that we can continue to practice, we must be able to recognize our own limitations and learn to care for ourselves as well as others.²

What are your expectations of yourself as a caregiver? You can't expect that you can have a positive effect on the health and happiness of every client. That's not realistic, helpful, or even possible. Do you assume the full role of sole caregiver? You can't be all things to your clients. Professional boundaries are critical. Are you making over-the-top demands on yourself? Sometimes we think it's our ultimate responsibility to heal every part of clients' lives.

Maybe most important: are you caregiving or caretaking? Caregiving (what healthy bodyworkers do) is the giving of treatment and aid to a client with no obligation to produce certain results. Caretaking (or taking over care of a person who cannot provide for himself or herself) often derives from the practitioner's need to be needed and is the quickest road to burnout.

Look for these signs of impending slow-motion collapse:

- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns.
- Decreasing interest in work and productivity.
- Feelings of depression.
- Feelings of helplessness.
- Increased use of stimulants and alcohol.
- Increased fear of death.
- Ongoing and persistent fatigue.
- Withdrawal from social contacts.

All of this leads to persistent stress. If you develop anxiety, back pain, digestive changes, headaches, high blood pressure, shortness of breath, or problems with intimate relationships, sound the stress alarm. Take action to get your life back.

LOOK TO THE LONG HAUL

Taking care of yourself sounds good, and it's easy to do—tomorrow. Still, tomorrow comes all too soon. You've got to take the long view. Set realistic goals at home and work. How much can you handle per day, per week, per year?

There's no right answer to these questions, but set a pace you can sustain for many years, and make sure your financial needs are in accord with your productivity and health. With very few exceptions, therapists who perform more than about 25 hours of hands-on work per week are abusing their bodies and setting themselves up for exhaustion and a degraded quality of touch for their clients.

It is critically important to find meaning in what you do and to follow your bliss. A fresh perspective and a break go a long way toward cooling down burnout. According to the journal *Business & Health*, men who missed out on their yearly vacation were more apt to die from coronary heart disease than were couch potatoes or smokers who did take time for an annual getaway.³

Go ahead and take that vacation. Your table will still be there when you get back. Take continuing education classes to keep fresh. Look into techniques other than your own. Dive into your spiritual practice, which is just a way to learn to connect with your own soul, in whatever way moves you. Finding and holding meaning in your life keeps you centered, effective, and optimistic about being who you are.

LET YOUR SESSIONS HEAL YOU, TOO

It's possible to quell the flame of burnout and feel healed by your own sessions. Feel your own heart as you work, and welcome yourself in. Invite your client in, too, fully and warmly.

The call to do our work refreshes the call to merge energies with others. And therapists are right to ask about managing strong feelings. Touch intensifies the connections between us. Our emotions can bounce all over while we work. But as the operations manager of your inner life, learn to create the energy infrastructure to dissolve into the feelings that pass through you, the feelings of personal cultivation of mindfulness and universal compassion.

Being of service is a compassionate way to be with clients and their concerns. Being of service, and not attempting to fix others, is a way of working with clients that allows them their pain and allows healing to come to them as appropriate for them at the time. This means learning to feel, staying present, and letting go of reacting out of the pain of the past or the fear of the future.

To do this, your first priority is to build and maintain your own reservoir of healthy inner resources. You become aware of what nurtures and feeds you, and you become more constant and grounded. You honor your client's internal place, and pace, of healing. Your energetic connection becomes palpable, and you increase your effectiveness dramatically.

Before the session, cultivate the conviction that you deserve to take care of yourself and remind yourself that you are not your client's only resource. Then, during the session, hold a space of compassion and acceptance and preserve a vision of your client as whole, healthy, and free of pain. When you are done, acknowledge your client's commitment to heal and help him or her stay aware of the bigger picture. Consecrate each session with an attitude of gratitude.

EAT TO SERVE

One of the most profound things a bodywork professional can do is to eat a healthy diet. Scientific reports proliferate about the importance of what you put in your body.

Choose food that says, "I will support you in your work today." Eat that diet mindfully with thanks and the sense that it gives you life itself. Let good food choices ease out poor ones. And rely on good food, not caffeine or sugar, for energy.

Eat fruits and veggies. Your heart will thank you for it. At least, that's the indication of a study published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. Women who ate between four and 10 servings of fruits and vegetables per day reduced their risk of cardiovascular disease by 20–30 percent.⁴ Women without any cardiovascular risk factors, such as diabetes or hypertension, fared even better.

The researchers maintain that in addition to the antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, and plant hormones found in food plants, other enzymes and hormones, which both protect the plant from fungus or help to pollinate it, may help prevent disease in humans.

WHEN FOOD MAY NOT BE ENOUGH

Despite our best gustatory efforts, we may do better if we add nutritional supplements to our daily routine. A 2007 study, published in *The Nutrition Journal*, found that avid dietary supplement users who, on average, take 17 different supplements daily, were judged to be far healthier than adults who take only a single supplement, such as a common multivitamin, or who don't take dietary supplements at all. The researchers found suboptimal levels of nutrients were far less common among the multi-supplement users.⁵



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Risk for disease was far lower among the multi-supplement users compared to non-users. Risk for diabetes was 73 percent less, coronary heart disease 52 percent less, and self-determined health status (report health status was rated as “good or excellent”) 74 percent more often, compared to non-supplement users. Multi-supplement users had significantly higher HDL “good” cholesterol; lower triglycerides and C-reactive protein; and lower blood pressure—markers of cardiovascular health—than non-users and multivitamin users.

Many experts think vitamin D is the most common nutrient deficiency in America. In 2007, *The New England Journal of Medicine* reported that 85 percent of all Americans are vitamin D deficient.⁶ Lack of this critical nutrient has been associated with Alzheimer’s disease, arthritis, cancer, cold and flu, diabetes, fibromyalgia, heart disease, and premenstrual syndrome.

One recent study found that this critical substance increases life span by decreasing the morbidity of chronic disease. Americans who supplement with vitamin D lived 7 percent longer than those who did not. Another study, in *Circulation*, based on the Framingham Heart Study, says that deficient levels of vitamin D are associated with double the risk of experiencing a cardiovascular event,

including heart attack, heart failure, or stroke, within a five year period.⁷

HEAL YOUR JOINTS

Keeping your joints strong is the ultimate challenge for a bodyworker. Many massage therapists leave the profession because they develop repetitive strain injuries like carpal tunnel syndrome. One cause of many therapists’ injuries is that they overwork to “fix” clients and overextend their physical limitations, thus taxing their body and emotions.

That’s where the herb turmeric comes in. Long a favorite of yoga practitioners in India, turmeric curbs inflammation. One of the active ingredients, curcumin, the pigment that gives turmeric its distinctive yellow color, has anti-inflammatory effects comparable to cortisone and phenylbutazone, the standard in drugs for inflammation.⁸ Curcumin is nonsteroidal, so it has none of the ravaging side effects of steroid anti-inflammatories.⁹ These anti-inflammatory qualities make turmeric suitable for the treatment of conditions as diverse as arthritis and bodyworker’s elbow.

In fact, turmeric is a good general treatment for all connective tissue. Being a polyphenol, curcumin has the property of stabilizing collagen. It is used to enhance healing after surgery, reducing adhesions and scarring.

The complete article is available in printed form in *Massage & Bodywork* magazine. To subscribe visit www.massageandbodywork.com or call 800-458-2267.