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Cracking the code of self-care: translating eye-roll-inducing buzzwords into genuine well-being

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Abstract

Many of us actively seek opportunities to offer care, compassion, love and pleasure to others, but are much less comfortable receiving the same things. We are quite happy if an activity can be filed under the heading of self-preservation, but less so if it seems as if there is any possibility that it might be deemed self-indulgent. Some individuals also feel that the world of self-care and well-being has been hijacked by consumerism, but burnout is a genuine concern in healthcare. More than one-third of healthcare professionals report feeling exhausted, and 50% of physiotherapy students show high levels of perfectionism, a trait that is highly correlated with burnout. This paper discusses various strategies to address these issues.

Keywords: burnout, self-care, well-being.

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Introduction

Care. Compassion. Love. Pleasure.

How do you feel about these words? Do you experience any reaction? Anything physical, emotional, positive or negative?

Now insert the prefix “self”.

Self-care. Self-compassion. Self-love. Self-pleasure.

Did that addition of just four simple letters cause you any trouble?

Isn't it interesting how many of us will actively seek opportunities to direct care, compassion, love and pleasure to others, but are much less comfortable receiving the same things?

There seems to be an unspoken code of acceptability. We're quite happy if an activity can be filed under the heading of self-preservation (e.g. getting enough sleep, not working at weekends and going to the toilet before it becomes critical), but less so if there is any possibility that the activity might be deemed to be self-indulgent.

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Self-care and burnout

Self-preservation is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “the protection of oneself from harm or death, especially regarded as a basic instinct in human beings and animals” (OUP 2024).

Is this the best that we can achieve for ourselves? It strikes me that we want much more for our clients.

To those of us brought up with and educated in a scientific paradigm, the language of self-care can be off-putting. My particular nemesis is the term “holding space”, which seems to me unnecessarily vague and hints at secret knowledge. There is also an argument that directing employees towards self-care is a form of gaslighting, i.e. placing blame on the victims of a poor working environment, particularly in fields such as healthcare, where high workloads and poor resourcing are common.

In a *Washington Post* article entitled “Have we been doing self-care all wrong?”, Angelica Puzio (2021) argued that, “As our psyches endure more distress, often due to broader social ills, we burden ourselves with the responsibility