Ethics and Self-Care for Psychologists

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General Session (morning)

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1. Explain how maintaining personal well-being is an ethical responsibility that is directly related to competence in a complex multicultural society, and how care for one’s colleagues can be considered as part of our professional and ethical responsibilities.

2. Identify at least two vulnerabilities to occupational stress common to psychologists and two that are unique to you as an individual psychologist based on a self-assessment exercise.

3. Identify common warning signs of occupational stress for professional psychologists in general and describe two which are most relevant to your professional practice.

4. Develop a plan for implementing two self-care strategies.
“... Psychologists strive to be aware of the possible effect of their own physical and mental health on their ability to help those with whom they work.”

APA Ethics Code 2010; Principle A
“We teach best what we most need to learn...”
2.01 Boundaries of Competence

(a) Psychologists provide services, teach, and conduct research with populations and in areas only within the boundaries of their competence, based on their education, training, supervised experience, consultation, study, or professional experience. (emphasis added)
Ethical Standards and Competence

2.03 Maintaining Competence
Psychologists undertake ongoing efforts to develop and maintain their competence
2.06 Personal Problems and Conflicts

(a) Psychologists refrain from initiating an activity when they know or should know that there is a substantial likelihood that their personal problems will prevent them from performing their work-related activities in a competent manner.
2.06 Personal Problems and Conflicts

(b) When psychologists become aware of personal problems that may interfere with their performing their work-related duties adequately, they take appropriate measures, such as obtaining professional consultation or assistance, and determine whether they should limit, suspend, or terminate their work-related duties.
Impact of vicarious trauma...

- The **cumulative** effect of contact with survivors of violence or disaster or people who are struggling.
- What happens to each of us over time as we witness cruelty and loss and hear distressing stories, day after day, and year after year.
“If you ask a fish to tell you about her environment, the last thing she’ll mention is water.”
Brief and commonplace
Daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities
May be intentional or unintentional
Communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color
Perpetrators are often unaware of their behavior or its impact

~Derald Wing Sue, et al. 2007
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An implicit bias is a positive or negative mental attitude towards a person, thing, or group that a person holds at an unconscious level. In contrast, an explicit bias is an attitude that somebody is consciously aware of having.

Research has found that our implicit and explicit biases often diverge. For example, a person may consciously express a neutral or positive opinion about a social group that they unconsciously hold a negative opinion about.
Is Caring for Ourselves an Ethical Imperative?

- Care for self is a private matter
- Maintaining competence is an ethical obligation
Redefining Competence

- Traditional definition of the term *competent*:
  - Being capable or legally qualified to perform a task
  - Commonly defined as static attainment of credentials
Competent is the present participle of the term compete.
In Latin, the term *competere* is derived from
*com* = *with* and *petere* = *to seek or to strive*

**COMPETENT** means *to seek or strive together!*
1.04 Informal Resolution of Ethical Violations

When psychologists believe that there may have been an ethical violation by another psychologist, they attempt to resolve the issue by bringing it to the attention of that individual, if an informal resolution appears appropriate and the intervention does not violate any confidentiality rights that may be involved.
1.05 Reporting Ethical Violations
If an apparent ethical violation has substantially harmed or is likely to substantially harm a person or organization and is not appropriate for informal resolution under Standard 1.04. . . psychologists take further action appropriate to the situation. Such action might include referral to...This standard does not apply when an intervention would violate confidentiality...
(excerpt)
The majority of psychologists admitted to instances of working when too distressed to be effective despite the fact that most acknowledged that doing so is unethical. Most psychologists were quite confused about whether it was inherently unethical to file an ethics complaint about a colleague or to encourage a colleague to do so.

Pope, Tabachnick, & Keith-Spiegel, 1987
When concerned about colleague substance abuse only 19% acted...

**Why not?**

- 53% stated they “knew of subtle changes but lacked the tangible evidence of negative impact,”
- 42% “did not see it detrimental to job performance,”
- 39% “thought it would do no good,”
- 30% “thought it was none of my business,”
- 23% stated that “it was too risky for me,”
- 19% stated that “the problem was temporary,”
- 7% reported feeling that it was “too risky for him or her [the impaired colleague]”

Good, Thoreson, & Shaughnessy, 1995
Colleague concerns may be especially challenging...

- Limitations in current Ethics Code:
  - Over-focus on individual responsibility
  - Colleague concerns focus on confronting or reporting ethical violations
  - Difficult to enact and not helpful when the concerns don’t clearly rise to a high level
  - Cultural focus on individualism

- Recent calls for a more “communitarian” focus
Is Caring for Our Colleagues an Ethical Imperative?

- Care for others can be a delicate and complex matter
- Maintaining competence is an ethical obligation for psychology
Suggested edits to the Ethics Code *(italics)*

**Standard 2.03, Maintaining Competence:**

Psychologists undertake ongoing efforts to develop and maintain their competence. *Psychologists maintain regular engagement with colleagues, consultation groups, and professional organizations and routinely solicit feedback from these sources regarding their competence for work in specific roles and with specific populations.*

**Standard 2.06, Personal Problems and Conflicts:**

(c) *When psychologists become aware that a psychologist colleague is experiencing problems that may lead to interference with professional competence, they offer care and support, and collaborate with that colleague in assessing competence and determining the need to limit, suspend, or terminate their work-related duties.*

Johnson, Barnett, Elman, et al., 2013

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Why is self and colleague care important?
Common Vulnerabilities

- Professional isolation
- Not enough leisure or non-work activities
- Unrealistic self-expectations, rigidity
- Tendency to focus on others’ needs while neglecting our own
- Stage of life stressors
Surveys of psychologists:

- 40% report episodes of *emotional exhaustion* during the previous year (Mahoney, 1997).

- *Psychosocial isolation* and *disrupted personal relationships* are commonly reported (e.g., Shapiro, 2007)

- Compared to research psychologists, practicing psychologists report *higher levels of distress*...but also more *positive influence* from their work (Radeke & Mahoney, 2000).
Warning Signs

- Loss of pleasure in work
- Depression or anxiety
- Inability to focus or concentrate
- Substance abuse or other compulsive behaviors
- Loss of interest in new learning
- Regularly feeling overwhelmed (e.g., can’t say “no”)
Skating on Thin Ice!
Stress-Distress Continuum
(APA Advisory Committee on Colleague Assistance)

- Stress
  - Distress
    - Impairment
      - Improper behavior
Self-care Assessment

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Stress ↓ Distress ↓ Impairment ↓ Improper behavior

Revisiting the Stress-Distress Continuum
(APA Advisory Committee on Colleague Assistance)
Influence of positive psychology...
Re-envisioning the Stress-Distress Continuum

Flourishing

Competence

Wellness

Self-Care
Dimensions of Wellness
~SAMHSA and others

- Spiritual
- Relational
- Intellectual
- Emotional
- Vocational
- Physical
“Engaging in an experience that produces ‘flow’ is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, rather than for what they will get out of it. The activity is its own reward. Flow is experienced when one’s skills are sufficient for a challenging activity, in the pursuit of a clear goal, with immediate feedback on progress toward the goal. In such an activity, concentration is fully engaged in the moment, self-awareness disappears, and sense of time is distorted.”

~Csikszentmihalyi, 1990
Gratitude

- Better physical health
- Optimism
- Progress towards goals
- Well being
- Help others
- Ask...what am I grateful for?

Emmons & Crumpler, 2000
“Wealth is only weakly related to happiness both within and across nations, particularly when income is above the poverty level.”

~Diener & Diener, 1996
Mindfulness

“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: On purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”

~Jon Kabat-Zinn
Leaves on a stream...
Mindfulness training for therapists?

Initial randomized control trials suggest:
- Increases in therapist satisfaction (Shapiro, 2007)
- Improved client outcomes (Grepmair, et al., 2007)
The Serenity Prayer

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.
“Sometimes your joy can be the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy.”

~Thich Nhat Hahn

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Self-Care Principles and Practices
Self-Care Strategies
(Norcross & Guy, 2007)

- Value yourself
- Refocus on the rewards
- Recognize the hazards
- Minding the body
- Nurturing Relationships
- Healthy escapes and play
- Create a flourishing environment
- Cultivate spirituality and mission
- Foster creativity and growth (diversify)
Therapeutic Lifestyle Changes (TLCs) (Walsh, 2011)

Evidence-based systematic review:
- Exercise
- Nutrition
- Mindfulness
- Relationships
- Recreation and play
- Spirituality
- Be in nature – avoid over-exposure to hyper-reality and media
- Contribution and service
- Doing less and other challenging decisions
Ethical Dilemmas are Stressful

- Competing pulls or mandates
- Potential risk of harm
- Emotional intensity
- Often no perfect solution
Stay grounded and follow the curves...
Vignettes
4 Bins (plus one)

- Clinical
- Legal
- Ethical
- Risk Management

1. Distressing Review

EXCELLENT □
GOOD □
AVERAGE □
POOR □
the worst □

□ ★★★★★
□ ★★★★
□ ★★★
□ ★★
□ ★
2. Early Career Psychologist
3. Overwhelmed at work
4. Disgruntled Colleague
Self-care Strategies

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Thank you!