Helping Ourselves

Self-Care for Psychologists

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Introduction

Growing stressors on psychologists have been widely studied and reported, especially in response to the pandemic. A recent APA study showed that almost half of U.S. licensed psychologists (45%) reported feeling burned out in 2022, with similar levels reported in 2020 (41%) and 2021 (48%).

These issues aren't disappearing anytime soon. In recent surveys of APA members, burnout and work-life balance are consistently cited as among their top issues of concern.

This timely E-booklet offers a concentrated self-care resource for APA's collective membership—whether they are embedded in educational institutions, operating clinical practices, or conducting scientific research. It offers well-researched tools and strategies for having greater agency within a host of circumstantial and personal stressors.

With interviews and research from leading psychologists and other experts, it tackles common challenges psychologists face in creating and sustaining a healthy work-life balance, with tried-and-true tactics for getting back on course.

APA is with you every step

APA offers extensive resources on self-care—from articles to videos, podcasts, and webinars. Understand the benefits of self-care and how to apply it to your everyday life. Visit the APA Self-care Resource Hub: www.apa.org/research-practice/self-care

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A Community of Care

The Roots of Professional Belonging

By Summer Allen

Psychologists may understand the importance of belonging better than most, but that doesn't mean that they don't struggle with forming connections and feeling a sense of community in their professional lives. Whether they work in private practice, academia, or other settings, psychologists face unique barriers and opportunities when it comes to belonging.

Trainees and psychologists in new roles can struggle with imposter phenomenon and forming connections with mentors and peers. Psychologists from marginalized groups often face stigma and discrimination in the workplace. And a culture of overwork that often exists in mental health fields can make it hard to maintain relationships inside and outside of work.

Kelly-Ann Allen, PhD, associate professor and educational and developmental psychologist at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, has studied belonging since 2010. There are different definitions of belonging, says Allen, but they all boil down to a feeling of being accepted, valued, and comfortable within a particular setting. "I can see through my research that a sense of belonging can also relate to a sense of belonging to a culture, a sense of belonging to a place, or a sense of belonging to land," she says.

Allen says that prior to the pandemic there was a growing recognition of the importance of loneliness—often linked to belonging—but less focus on other components such as community connection, community participation, or social satisfaction. During the height of the pandemic, when people were not able to connect and engage in the social opportunities that traditionally fulfilled their need to belong, the many facets of belonging became much more salient.

"That absence," says Allen, "made people reflect more on belonging and prioritize it more."

Policymakers also have recognized the vital importance of belonging in self-care. In May, 2023, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released an advisory on Loneliness and Isolation that highlights just how dire the loneliness epidemic is and focuses on strategies to advance social connection nationwide.

Clinical psychologists: solo and together

The pandemic ushered in new challenges to self-care for clinical psychologists who were forced to switch to delivering teletherapy. For those who derived a sense of belonging from working with colleagues in person, the shift to working from home was a big change, leading some to return to in-person therapy as soon as they were able.

Others discovered that they preferred providing therapy remotely. One 2021 study found that 21% of psychologists surveyed planned not to offer any in-person services in the future.

The issue of belonging as an element of self-care has taken on highly practical overtones as clinicians evaluate whether they want to join group practices or go it alone.

Studies show belonging is linked to a host of positive outcomes:

- Better academic achievement, job success, mental and physical health.
- People with strong social networks may be less susceptible to colds, have stronger antibody responses to vaccines, and have their wounds heal quicker.
- One meta-analysis showed the risk of an early death was reduced by 50% in people who had strong relationships.

"There's been this mass exodus of people leaving clinics and practices that are in-person," says Lisa Lovelace, PsyD, founder of the online therapy group Synergy eTherapy, which has been offering teletherapy since 2016.

Allen has noticed a similar trend with graduating psychology students who used to start their careers in schools or hospitals with built-in supervision and colleagues: "I'm seeing more students go off into private practice, which private practitioners can tell you could be a really isolating experience," says Allen.

While many psychologists thrive in private practice—and benefit from autonomy and potentially greater income—Lovelace says there can be a steep learning curve to the logistics required to set up and run a business—from billing insurance to finding HIPAA-compliant software. "You don't know what you don't know," she says. And some new private practitioners in totally remote practices can struggle with doing it all alone.

This may be driving the second trend Lovelace has observed: people who first chose to move to solo remote practices and are now looking to join online group practices: "People have tried being on their own, and they realize that it's not for them," she says. "It's too isolating."

For clinical psychologists struggling with isolation, Lovelace stresses that self-reflection is key for figuring out what's their best option for increasing connection: "Even if you're solo and you want to be a part of some sort of community—whether group practice, a consultation group, or just finding colleagues to chum around with—you have to know yourself a little bit. There's not a one-size-fits-all.

"Do you want a structured consultation group? What and how much do you need? Do you want to pay for it, or do you want to try to find other clinicians who are like-minded and kind of co-work together? Or maybe you really like the idea of a group practice, where you're part of an organization."

Lovelace says she's a strong advocate of group practice for teletherapy providers, precisely because it offers many kinds of supports: "I'm obviously biased," she says. "But I think that it's kind of like a built-in friendship system, a built-in collegial system, a built-in supervision, consultation support system."

Lovelace suggests methods for enhancing camaraderie within an online group practice:

- Use technology for connection. Lovelace stays connected with the therapists in her group through group emails, an intranet site, and a private Facebook group for therapists to post life updates and personal photos. "Seeing their families and seeing their lives, helps bring people together," she says. She also uses the smartphone app Voxer, which allows a group to exchange voice messages asynchronously, to stay in touch with colleagues.
- Create opportunities for live virtual interactions. Her organization hosts virtual "grand rounds" where therapists take turns teaching each other about different topics. Lovelace also hosts monthly online consultation sessions.
- Get together in person. The Synergy eTherapy team recently held a summit in Minnesota where they did trainings and took a cruise on Lake Minnetonka. "We got to feel each other's energy, and we got to hug each other for the first time in years," she says. Lovelace now plans to hold a summit every year.
- Join an online consultation group. For remote therapists not wanting to join a group practice, Lovelace recommends belonging to an online consultation group.

Multicultural peer groups are gaining steam as a place where psychologists can increase connection and validation, especially when navigating complex dynamics related to culture, racism, and health inequities. According to recent research by Gabriela Nagy, PhD, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin, participation in a multicultural peer-consultation team increased psychologists' ability to provide treatment that "carefully and routinely considers the influence of culture and context on patients."

Breaking out of the academic silo

Many of the competing demands academic psychologists face are counter-productive to establishing or maintaining community connections both in work and in life.

Pursuing a career in academic psychology often involves multiple moves. Researchers of

Getting institutions on board

There are many steps institutions can take to enhance a culture of collaboration, and in turn, make researchers feel more widely supported. The University of Southern California, for example, issues explicit instructions for how departments and committees are to consider team science and interdisciplinary scholarship when making tenure and promotion decisions, including soliciting letters from collaborators. Allen suggests these other strategies for increasing a sense of professional belonging among academics and the institutions in which they serve:

- **Incentivize collaboration.** Administrators leading departments or involved in tenure and promotion procedures can create protocols that give scientists credit for engaging in collaborative work.
- **Change peer review.** Allen suggests changing the peer-review process so that it focuses more on a strengths-based approach that uses volunteer mentors who help authors shape their ideas into publishable papers.
- **Try cluster hiring.** Cluster hires, whether around a particular research subject or identity, can enhance a sense of institutional belonging among new faculty, particularly when they are part of interdisciplinary departments.
- **Embed inclusivity.** Incentivize departments to hire faculty from groups that have been underrepresented by developing a funding pool to recruit exceptional diverse scholars, and ensure that their research is embedded into the curriculum.
- **Improve funding.** Funding agencies can help foster collaboration by sponsoring collaborative grants and grants with multiple principal investigators.

color may struggle with limited diversity in their program, university, or town. A publish-or-perish mentality can threaten work-life balance, preventing researchers from pursuing hobbies and relationships outside of work. Constant rejections—from journals, book publishers, and grant-funding bodies—can feed into a sense of not belonging in their field.

"If we're feeling rejected, we might be questioning, 'Should I be an academic? Does my work belong in this space? Maybe this isn't for me,'" says Allen.

A related barrier is the "lone genius" myth deeply ingrained in the culture of science. "We have this image of scientists, this lone person … they're sitting in a room and they're thinking about something great," says clinical community psychologist Jacob Thebes, PhD, professor of psychology in the Child Study Center, Yale School of Medicine. While Thebes stresses that science has never actually operated that way, the myth has shaped many of the structures and rewards of academia.

Until recently, labs have mostly operated as research silos led by a single principal investigator who applied for their own grants and earned tenure based on their individual accomplishments. This emphasis on individual success can hamper collaborations that could lead to a greater sense of professional belonging and community for researchers.

"In order to do science, to do creative discoveries and inventions, we need to put people together," advocates Thebes. "A team of people that complement one another, maybe even overlap, because sometimes people see things differently when they're looking at the same thing."

Luckily, there are many ways psychologists—and the institutions that support them—can and are working to build a less isolating culture. The most obvious, says Thebes, is for psychology researchers to collaborate with other researchers, thus expanding their sphere of connection.

Connection through scientific collaboration

Thebes considers collaboration vital both for researchers and for science itself. He has published papers about the value of team science and of seeing science as an inherently relational process. And in one paper, Thebes and his co-authors highlight how research publications authored by teams are more frequently cited and have greater scientific impact than those authored by a single person.

"If you can get there and get the shared understanding of a problem, there's a sense of camaraderie, team spirit, belongingness that definitely happens," he says, adding: "And you get better science, for the most part. Maybe slower science, but better science. I think you get more fairness in the whole enterprise."

Thebes has some advice for researchers interested in engaging in more collaborations inside and outside academia:

- Create a way for collaborators to listen and share their experience. "You don't own it," says Thebes. "Everybody shares in owning it. Be a little humble about your perspective being the only way to do it."
- If you are a graduate student, postdoctoral fellow, or early career faculty, look for a mentor with experience in team science who has an equitable philosophy about collaboration and is willing to share credit.
- Try to engage local community members in your project, utilizing community-based participatory research methods. They don't have to be involved in every step for there to be mutual benefit.
- For long-distance collaborations, try to schedule time for organic conversations and get together in person when possible. "There are real benefits to face-to-face contact," he says. "We're all learning that now."

APA is with you every step

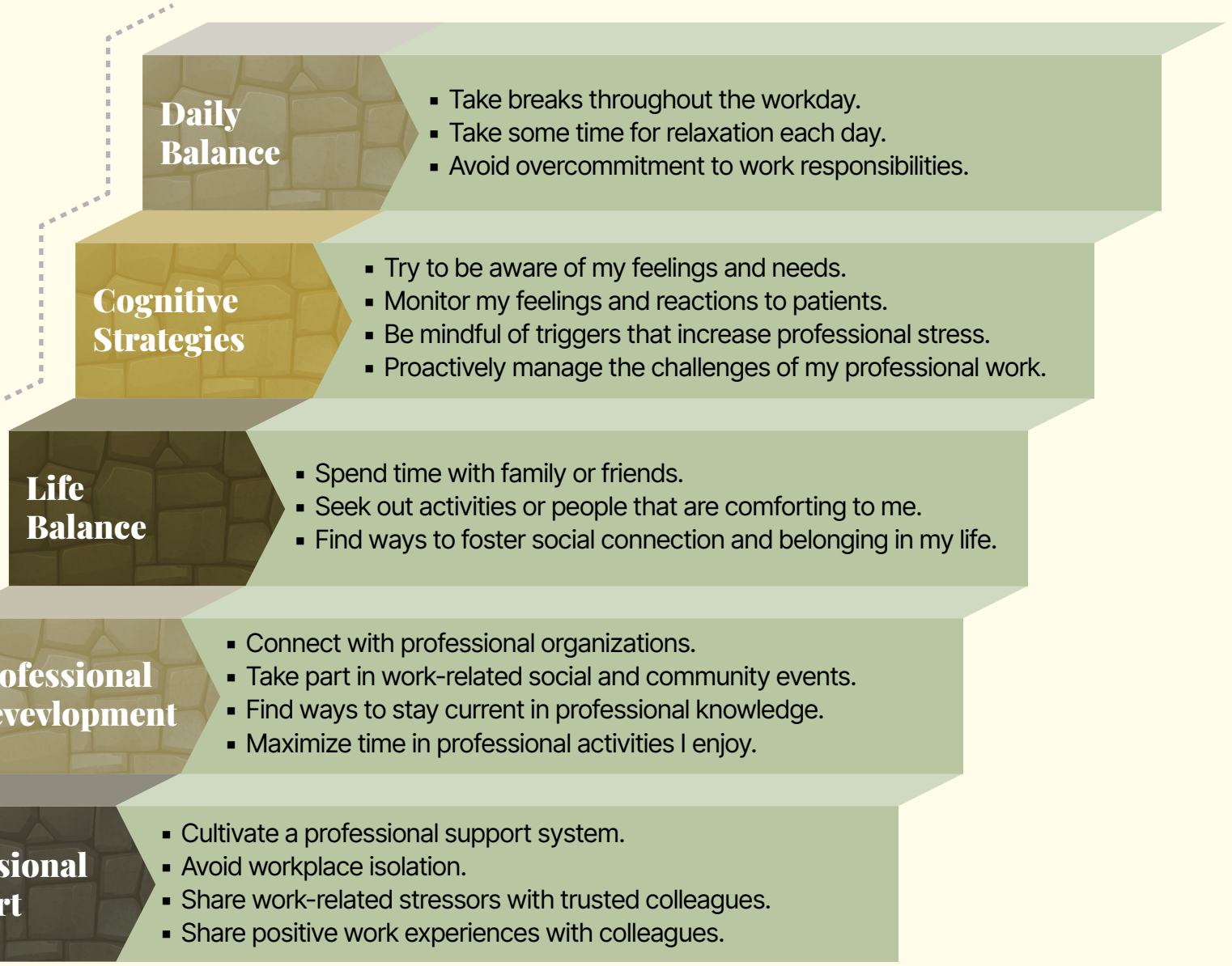
Interacting with APA is yet another way for psychologists to feel accepted and a part of the field.

A recent survey of APA members found that 56% of respondents felt that it was very important or extremely important that APA provides a sense of belonging.

Here are a few ways APA may help you feel like you belong:

- Meet colleagues and new friends at the annual convention
- Join an APA division
- Get advice on how to grow and manage your practice
- Call the Private Practice Helpline

Self-Care Stepping Stones for Psychologists



Adapted from Dorociak, K. E., Rupert, P. A., Bryant, F. B., & Zahniser, E. (2017). *Self-Care Assessment for Psychologists* (SCAP) [Database record]. APA PsycTests. https://doi.org/10.1037/t59491-000

Living Your Values:

Psychologists of Color Speak Out

By Tori DeAngelis

What does it mean to nurture yourself and your community in the face of ongoing discrimination—internal and societal messages that say you must work extra hard to prove your worth, and social structures that continue to favor people who have more resources, higher social status, or a particular skin color?

"For those of us who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color, we often face additional forces of racism and oppression that are exhausting to navigate," said Hector Y. Adames, PsyD, a professor at The Chicago School of Professional Psychology and director of its Immigration, Critical Race, and Cultural Equity Lab (IC-RACE Lab). "Because of that, it's vital that we think deeply about how to take care of ourselves and each other."

To illuminate what self-care might look like for people of color, Adames and other psychologists have amassed a rich set of ideas, pursuits, and messages related to this topic. Among them: Self-care should incorporate one's community, values, and culture, and it may mean challenging prevailing social and cultural norms.

"The light is not out there—it's inside of us and our community," as Adames put it. "We need to tap into that." I check in by Zoom every day with a group of colleagues who also do this work. We send each other inspiration, articles, music, and art. I get so much from that connection, and I encourage my students to do the same. I tell them, "We are nothing if we are alone, but we are everything if we are together."

He and other psychologists share thoughts about what self-care may look like for individuals and communities of color.

SHARING OUR STORIES

One of the traditional ways that Black people have healed is through testimony service, where people tell stories of challenging things they have made it through. Someone got laid off or faced racial harassment on their job. Someone experienced sexual assault, and now they're in a loving relationship. How did the people who came before us make it? We can utilize some of those strategies and build on them. There is wisdom that comes from learning about how people survived difficult times.

Thema S. Bryant, PhD, 2023 APA President

PASSING IT ON

I want to always pay homage to those narratives that helped us survive slavery, to survive Jim Crow, to help us survive today. But I'm also allowed to have rest, to have love, to have happiness, to experience joy. My job is to make sure that my children learn how to live lives of joy, too. We know what happens to our DNA and to our physical bodies with the accumulation of intergenerational and historical trauma. Part of my work is to heal those damaged pieces of myself and actively teach my children how to do that as well. By taking care of myself and living in joy, I'm passing on healing, I'm passing on reparative DNA, I'm passing on a mechanism for wellness.

NiCole Buchanan, PhD, Professor, Michigan State University

FURTHER READING

The self-care prescription: Powerful solutions to manage stress, reduce anxiety and increase well-being
Gobin, R.L.
Althea, 2019

Homecoming: Overcome fear and trauma to reclaim your whole, authentic self
Bryant, T.S.
TarcherPerigee, 2023

"We can create a better world for ourselves": Radical hope in communities of color
French, B.H., et al.
Journal of Counseling Psychology, 2023

Rest is resistance: A manifesto
Hersey, T.
Little, Brown Spark, 2022

Radical healing in psychotherapy: Addressing the wounds of racism-related stress and trauma
Adames, Hector Y., et al.
Psychotherapy, 2023

Your self-care is made of capitalism: A decolonial approach to self and community care.
Miller, A.E. & Tran, N.
Chapter from *Decolonial psychology: Toward anticolonial theories, research, training, and practice*, Comas-Díaz, et al. (Eds.),
APA, 2024

HONORING OUR ANCESTORS

One aspect of self-care is drawing on ancestral healing practices. These may include making different recipes from our cultures and sharing them with our communities—or singing, dancing, praying, or connecting with nature. All ancestral healing methods go back to the idea of knowing who you are, of honoring where you come from and the people who have poured themselves into you. For people of color, it's not that we don't know what we need; it's that sometimes we get disconnected from our inner knowing because of the day-to-day stressors and oppression that we face. We must be intentional about reconnecting with our innermost selves.

Robyn Gobin, PhD, Assistant Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

CREATING SAFE SPACES

A lot of people of color find themselves in spaces where they have to keep certain parts of themselves hidden to fit in or to be accepted. An essential form of self-care and healing is being in community with other individuals of color, where we don't have to hide or explain ourselves. An important consideration is how we can create more safe affinity spaces where we can show up as our full selves and feel seen, heard, connected, replenished, and strengthened for the journey ahead.

Robyn Gobin, PhD, Assistant Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

LIVING BY OUR VALUES

If you look through the lens of the dominant culture, it appears that the only road to success is through individualism and capitalism—doing more and making more. But we weren't born thinking, "I need to make a lot of money and have these great titles. I want people to cite me in journals." We need to question whether living by those values is the only means to a successful life. Ultimately, we need to ask, "What is a sustainable way of living? How do my own values inform the way I do self-care?"

Grace Chen, PhD, counseling psychologist, San Francisco Bay area

A FOCUS ON THRIVING

Black History Month isn't just about the history of racism in this country—it's also a celebration of the contributions of Black Americans. Self-care is the same: It's recognizing that we're trying to manage whatever stressors and trauma we experience, but also that we're honoring ourselves as whole beings with a lot to celebrate, that we're joyful in community, and in solidarity. It's important for us not just to survive but to thrive.

Grace Chen, PhD, counseling psychologist, San Francisco Bay area

Essentials of Consultation Groups

By Katherine Lee

Many of the casual interchanges that were a regular source of support among psychologists disappeared during and after the pandemic, leaving practitioners and clinicians to grapple in relative isolation with issues such as burgeoning caseloads, compassion fatigue, and burnout.

It quickly became apparent that regular meetings with fellow mental healthcare providers were a necessity, not a luxury, explains Adriana S. Miu, PhD, ABPP, clinical psychologist at the Atlanta VA Medical Center, who advocates and writes about the importance of peer consultation groups.

"Peer consultation encourages psychologists to slow down and reflect on complex cases or professional issues, challenges them to identify their unchecked biases, and counters burnout," according to Miu. "And by learning about what others have done to problem-solve or to address their in-clinical challenges, it can help sharpen your own clinical skills," she adds.

Getting this kind of input from experienced clinicians can be invaluable for psychology graduate students as well, says Gabriela Nagy, PhD, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin, in Milwaukee. It can provide a greater context for the training they receive from their clinical supervisor, and "allows for a wider sampling of different perspectives that they may not otherwise get," she says.

Seasoned pros who are experts in specific disciplines can also benefit from peer groups, adds Nagy. For example, a clinician with a different specialty or life experience may be able to suggest alternate assessments, different ways to present information, or other ideas for inter-

Characteristics of a healthy peer consultation group

- Group members have been there for a while; there isn't a lot of turnover.
- People attend meetings regularly.
- Group size, frequency and format — hybrid, online, in-person — work best for you.
- Members listen, offer constructive feedback, and refrain from personal criticism.
- There are clear agreements about group rules and commitments. "That might be making sure that we are only using that space to talk about productive, relevant things and not bashing our colleagues or trash-talking clients. And agreeing that whatever you say in the group will stay there," says Nagy.
- The focus of the group suits your needs — whether it's open-ended or has a particular focus (such as multicultural issues, mindfulness, depression treatment, or dialectical behavioral therapy).
- Group operates in an ethically responsible format, according to Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct.

vention. "Even though we might be experts, it can still be useful to hear other kinds of insights from our peers that maybe we haven't even thought about," she says.

"Even the process of preparing to meet with peers to get feedback can force us to think things through, such as whether to bill for a session that a patient missed or whether to continue working with a patient who develops a problem that may be outside your scope of expertise," says Jeff Zimmerman, PhD, ABPP, a clinical psychologist and co-founder of The Practice Institute, a private consulting firm supporting mental health practitioners.

Peer consultation groups also can benefit psychologists who are not clinicians, says Zimmerman. For instance, he notes, if you're editing a book, you may find it helpful to have input on issues such as how to communicate with authors or how to make granular or larger decisions about manuscripts. And if you're a researcher, your colleagues' input may help you fine tune ideas about your next study or suggest new ways to analyze data you've collected or conclusions you've drawn.

As international collaborations in scientific research increase, extended networks of peers are becoming more the norm. Zimmerman notes that videoconferencing capabilities have made this information-sharing and support much easier. And he is noticing an uptick in interchange at international conferences: "I recently attended a Society for Psychotherapy Research meeting … and saw how much networking was being done," he said. "People were meeting during and outside of the sessions in small, diverse multinational groups." ●

APA is with you every step

For individual consultation for those in private practice, contact the APA's Private Practice Helpline. These free, 20-minute sessions offer provider advice on issues such as practice setup, administrative structure, business decisions, fees, and ethics concerns. While these aren't long-term group meetings, they can connect you with other psychologists with dozens of years in practice.

FURTHER READING

Not Going It Alone, https://www.apaservices.org/practice/ce/self-care/peer-consult

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Making Healthy Habits Life-Proof

By Emily P.G. Erickson

Many people intend to take care of themselves—beefing up exercise, taking time for meditating, joining groups. The routines work for a few days, maybe weeks. But then life happens, and well-being goals often go out the window.

This is the problem with relying on force of will. "Making thoughtful, conscious decisions takes effort and a lot of planning and focus. Most of us have lives where we're dealing with multiple challenges, and we have many things going on," says social psychologist and habit expert Wendy Wood, PhD, an emerita professor at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. "A constant focus on our weight or on our finances or on productivity is just not possible."

Luckily, consistent self-care doesn't require continual focus. It just requires habit.

"Habits are how we persist," says Wood. In the face of pressures that deplete self-control, Wood's research suggests that habits tend to take over, which can either work for or against your goals.

Fortunately, habits themselves are malleable—with the right methods. A huge body of research on habits, much of it conducted by social and health psychologists, reveals practical tactics for designing self-care habits that stick.

More than mindset

The first thing to know? Evidence shows that the intentions and goals that supercharge one-off achievements aren't the right fuel to power daily habits.

"We think if we want to go to the gym, that it depends on how committed we are. We figure if we have a strong intention, we'll be able to continue with that," says Wood. "But research shows that our intentions shift over time. It's easy to get derailed."

Most people don't really believe this, adds Wood. "We all like to think we're in charge."

The latest reasearch is that habitual behaviors and goal-directed behaviors are actually two different processes that can interact with and influence each other, but which are not necessarily interdependent. Unlike goal-directed behaviors, which often involve some deliberation, with habits, you automatically repeat a practiced behavior as a result of environmental triggers, says Wood. Related findings in behavioral neuroscience suggest the pair even have distinct brain activation patterns.

"Goals might get you started with habits, but it's the link between the situation and the behavior that keeps you going, and leads to habit formation," explains health psychologist Martin Hagger, PhD, a distinguished professor at the University of California, Merced. For people who want to change their habits, it's important to focus on the link between the two.

So, changing habits involves shifting awareness from the values that may have originally prompted the habit, to a focused understanding of its mechanics: Do you have a clear behavior in mind? What happens right before the behavior starts? What makes it easier or gets in the way? Is it rewarding? How often does it happen? "It does take a level of awareness and planning to rail against automatic processes," says Hagger.

Think simple, and start at the top

Not all behaviors are equally good candidates for becoming a habit. "Our recent meta-analysis demonstrated that the more complex the behavior, the less likely it is to be formed as a habit," said Hagger, a fellow of APA Division 38, Society for Health Psychology. The results suggest that simpler

habits, like snacking on healthy foods, are easier to start than more complex ones—such as prioritizing supportive interpersonal relationships.

Of course, many desirable behaviors are not as straightforward as noshing, yet people still manage to do them habitually. The trick may lie in making them bite-sized.

"One of the interesting developments in the area of habits is a recognition that most behaviors are actually behavioral categories that require discrete actions, which, put together, make up the behavior," says Hagger.

> **"The more complex the behavior, the less likely it is to be formed as a habit.**
>
> Martin Hagger, PhD

For instance, the action of going for a run isn't just one behavior. It's a category that includes gathering equipment, selecting a route, picking a time, and more. Each of those component behaviors could be habitual or not, Hagger explains.

An action that can be done without much thought, such as putting on running clothes after waking, might be habitual. However, choosing where to run is an action that requires explicitly evaluating factors like road conditions and training goals.

"You've got to break down the complex behaviors needed to achieve that goal into discrete packages, which you could then potentially automate some or all of," he says.

Focusing on initial behaviors may be especially fruitful, Hagger says, pointing to 2022 research on habitual instigation that suggests that beginning actions are critical for both simple and complex habit formation. "The idea is that what becomes automated is that link between the cue or the triggering situation and the behavior," he says. "That kind of gets things started and sets in train a series of behaviors or behavioral patterns that become associated with that initial behavior."

Environmental cues and habit stacking

"I think it's really important to understand the importance of the environment in determining the habits we form, and how easy they are to keep," says Wood. "Habits develop in certain ways depending upon the environment that we're in. And it's something that people often overlook."

"As psychologists, I think we are particularly prone to believe that our decisions and goals drive us. After all, that's what we study. We study individuals and their capacity for change—not recognizing that contexts have strong effects that often stand in for motivation," Wood adds.

Embedded in particular contexts or environments are cues, which can set in motion a habitual behavior. The more consistent the cues, the more consistent the habits. Interestingly, research shows that cues are equally effective whether they are routine- or time-based. In the study, a sample of 192 adults who got help forming a nutrition plan were able to stick to it equally well whether the new health habit was cued by something regular in their routine (like breakfast) or a time of day (like 9 a.m.).

The best cues are often the ones already on lock, per a paper Wood co-authored. Habit "stacking," or "piggybacking," is an evidence-based approach where new habits are tied into an existing routine by adding it after an already-set behavior.

"Habit stacking takes advantage of the automaticity in an established habit to build a new one," explains Wood, a fellow of APA Division 8, Society for Personality and Social Psychology. "It's something that people do naturally," she adds. "When you have to take medication, you probably find that you're most successful if it's right next to your toothbrush, where you can tie it to an existing routine."

Friction is your friend

The role of friction—how fast, easy, and convenient a habit is—tends to fly under the radar when people discuss the building blocks of habit formation. "Friction in our daily environment matters much more than most of us realize," says Wood. "The two keys to building healthy habits are reducing friction on healthy activities and increasing it on unhealthy ones."

This is something social media companies know well. "A lot of designers and social media apps try to reduce friction as much as possible, making it easier and more rewarding to use their apps," says Ian Anderson, MS, MA, a PhD candidate in social psychology at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Manipulating friction helps drive habit development—and points toward potential solutions.

"If you are unhappy with the way that you're currently using social media, maybe you're scrolling too often, then you have to intentionally disrupt your own habit," says Anderson, who co-authored a paper on building and breaking

social media habits. "You have to figure out precisely what your cues are and intervene there."

Bedtime scrollers should consider keeping phones out of the bedroom or at least plugging them in across the room, Anderson advises. Electronic notifications can be silenced if work is spilling too much into the private sphere. It may even be necessary to make friction physical by leaving devices at the office, placing them in lockboxes, or otherwise not letting them be in the spaces where the habit takes place.

"Make the friction so high that it's disruptive to your routine," Anderson suggests.

Embed enjoyment

One of the biggest misconceptions about healthy habit formation, say researchers, is that they require a certain amount of suffering to stick.

"We're really much simpler organisms than that," observes Wood. "You won't do things if you don't enjoy them. It sounds like a truism, but it's not what people think of when they try to establish healthy habits. They think of all the long-term reasons why they should do something and the benefits that they're going to get. But most of the time, we're driven by what is immediately rewarding."

Rewards that support habit development can come in many flavors. Sometimes they're built in, other times creativity is required to embed pleasure into habit. For Wood, running felt like freedom, but when age-related changes forced her to shift to an elliptical machine, that intrinsic reward went poof. Now she uses her workout time to watch shows while she's exercising. "I'm not really loving the elliptical still, but I love what I'm doing while I'm working out," Wood says.

Wood's approach to making an otherwise ho-hum health habit more satisfying is called "temptation bundling," a strategy of pairing a pleasurable indulgence with a behavior that provides delayed rewards. In one study of physical exercise frequency, researchers found that by educating people about temptation bundling and offering them a free audiobook, the likelihood of their weekly gym visit increased by 14% over multiple weeks.

Repeat to lock it in

Before habits become automatic, they must be repeated. Deliberately. But how many times before they stick?

There's no absolute formula for how long to expect, but one factor is the complexity of the habit. Habits with many sequences take longer to establish, notes Wood. "The greater the numbers of steps in a habit, the harder it is to establish and the more vulnerable it becomes to disruption at any point along the way," she says.

Researchers are now putting AI to the task of measuring how long it takes to form habits. In one recent study, machine learning techniques analyzed large data sets—one of gym attendance, the other of hospital handwashing—to predict habitual behavior. Contrary to the popular belief in a "magic number" of days to develop a habit, the study found that it typically takes months to form the habit of going to the gym, but only weeks to develop the habit of handwashing. Furthermore, just like our bad habits, good habits stick.

"Some habits are going to take more time to form just because it's harder to figure out how to make the behavior rewarding for you," says Wood.

> **"Most of the time, we're driven by what is immediately rewarding.**
>
> Wendy Wood, PhD

The challenge for psychologists

Thanks to their training, understanding the science of habit may be easier for psychologists than for most. But applying it can be another story. "I know a lot of psychologists who are brilliant at working out the health of other people and providing advice," says Hagger. "But they don't necessarily apply it to themselves."

"I think psychologists are much better at predicting, explaining, intervening, managing, and helping others change their behaviors rather than their own," says Hagger. Sometimes, doing this for yourself can just feel too much like work, he notes.

Understanding the science of habit—including how to optimize behaviors, cues, friction, rewards, and repetition—can provide psychologists with a workable blueprint for setting up sustainable self-care practices of their own.

While insight is a useful starting point, Hagger warns that it's not sufficient when it comes to implementing behavior change. Knowledge isn't a panacea, he notes. There's just no substitute for the messy work of mucking about in the habit laboratory that is real life. ●

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Q&A with Ellen Ernst Kossek, PhD

Juggling Work-Life Balance

Psychologists have long reported that one of their biggest stressors is striking a happy work-life balance. The pandemic only upped the pressure: According to APA's 2022 COVID-19 Practitioner Impact Survey, 45% of psychologists reported feeling burned out, and only 63% said they were able to maintain a positive balance.

Ellen Ernst Kossek, PhD, Basil S. Turner Distinguished Professor of Management at Purdue University Mitchell E. Daniels School of Business in West Lafayette Indiana, is a leading researcher and writer on technology and work-life flexibility. Here, she discusses why it's important for psychologists to holistically assess how they blend life roles, manage boundaries between them, and devise a personal plan that sustains their efforts and well-being.

You have identified specific preferences in the ways people juggle their life roles. Why is it important to look at all the factors that come into play?

Many psychological studies on antecedents of work-life boundary styles focus on single measures at a time, such as whether individuals prefer to integrate or separate roles. This approach is called a "variable centered approach," where researchers examine a single variable at a time as a predictor of outcomes. Since how we manage styles is often clustered together with other measures, it's more effective to take a person-centered approach. This involves examining how several measures cluster together to form a typology—such as looking at patterns of relationships between work-life identities, how we synthesize roles to integrate and separate them, and how much control we have over how we carry out roles. This helps us to understand how we manage the permeability of work-life boundaries, rather than looking at a single variable.

Some people prioritize family roles; others prioritize work roles as central to their identity. For example, a family-centric person with a young child or an adult to care for may need the ability to interrupt work for a family task, and to be able to restructure work to disperse hours later or earlier in the day. And many people today are dual-centric—placing an equally high value on work and family roles. Personal preferences matter, too. Some hate even the concept of boundaries. Others, interrupt them and you've spoiled their day. These values and identities may change according to life circumstances, and we should regularly reassess our approach.

Ellen Ernst Kossek, PhD

What is the single biggest shift in work-life issues since the pandemic hit? How has that impacted psychologists?

Boundaries became a hot topic when we were all forced to telework. Some people needed to have a physical space away from home to be able to focus, especially if they lived in a shared, small space. There is also an increased need for focused attention on gender roles: If one is multi-tasking childcare and work, this may be a recipe for role overload and stress. Psychologists are grappling with increased telehealth appointments and virtual classes, issues that will likely remain.

How might psychologists know if they need to change things up?

They can reflect on their overall well-being. Are they enjoying life? Are they performing effectively in their life roles? There are 168 hours in a week. I ask clients to make a life pie on how they want to spend that time — sleeping, eating, working, TV. Is there time for friends and exercise and other interests? They may also get feedback from family and colleagues if their boundary management style is causing conflict.

Which preferences seem to be faring best in the new work paradigm?

People who are the most unhappy are those who have the least control over their boundaries or have too much work-life task switching. If you're on Facebook during work hours, for example, you'll have cognitive task-switching loss and will waste time getting back on track with work. Do that too often, and you may face job-creep by having to catch up on off-hours. If you're trying to get high-value work done, it's important to mentally self-regulate and maintain your attention.

How much does the external environment factor in?

People find a lack of perceived control over their boundaries to be very stressful. I hope that organizations will try to support peoples' preferences, but they may violate boundaries or set unrealistic expectations. Pushing back may be difficult for psychologists, who typically identify strongly with their work. I think some organizations might take advantage of that: You're there to serve. These things are up for negotiation, however. You have to train family and friends to respect your choices, too. ●

Contributed by Stacy Lu

Tips for Avoiding TILT!

By Stacy Lu

There are warning signs when work and/or life are becoming precariously lopsided—such as feeling overwhelmed or ineffective—but solutions may be hard to spot in the moment. That's because stress and burnout can impair execution function, so it may be harder to make good choices and to schedule and plan effectively. Instead, we may take on too much work or underperform across life domains, deepening our frustration.

"It takes mental energy to be intentional about your schedule. It's harder to make those higher-order cognitive functions when you are feeling stressed," says Chelsea LeNoble, PhD, assistant professor of industrial/organizational psychology at the University of Central Florida.

Consider these strategies to help protect against "role creep" when life is topsy-turvy:

Set physical barriers at home and at work to help you avoid distractions, as mental task-switching further depletes cognitive energy. Barriers might include a dedicated home office with a door to prevent mind-wandering and interruptions. If possible, keep separate phones and laptops for home and work, logging off at appropriate times. Turn off unnecessary alerts, and avoid looking at news or social media except during designated breaks.

Enlist allies. Enlist family and colleagues in supporting your focus. Communicate goals clearly, often, and in writing, such as giving notice that work emails will go unanswered on weekends. Coordinate with others to be on call for caregiving during specified time periods to help ensure uninterrupted work time.

Build in microbreaks. Even 10 minutes of walking, stretching, or talking to a friend can reduce fatigue, keep the mind clear, and smooth task transitions. Set alarms to signal when it's time to finish a task, ending meetings a few minutes early to give ample space for breaks.

Develop rites of role transition, such as reading or listening to music while you commute. If you're working from home, even small shifts, such as firing down a computer or changing into loungewear, can signal your brain that it's time to relax and go off-duty.

Leave it at the door. Downtime is vital for recovering from the stress of work. Relaxing and enjoyable activities can improve sleep quality and make all the difference the following day. If you need help logging off, sign up for an after-work class or schedule an activity with friends or family.

Know Your Boundary Management Style

As part of her seminal work researching and writing about work-life issues, Purdue University Distinguished Professor Ellen Ernst Kossek, PhD, identified several modes for demarking and sustaining differing life roles. These boundary management styles factor in particular sets of psychological, physical, and emotional circumstances, such as fragmentation, boundarylessness, and autonomy.

Use this chart to help identify your boundary-management profile and determine where you can map out improvements.

	Integrators	Separators	Cyclers	Role Firsters
	Blend home and work, often allowing spillover and interruptions. Some enjoy this blend, while others simply have little boundary control due to conflicting responsibilities.	Have strict boundary controls throughout their days, with defined blocks of time for each role.	Alternate between periods of high work-life integration followed by periods of more rigid separation, prioritizing different life domains as needed.	Tend to have a dominant life role, be it worker, family member, leader, or other life priority, that spills over into their other roles.
Pros	A can-do attitude and high degree of flexibility. Available when needed.	Reliable, focused, professional. Some research shows that being fully focused on one domain for periods of time can enhance concentration and reduce work-family conflict.	Engaged and highly flexible. Better able to fully engage in life roles during separation from work.	Strong ability to focus and less susceptible to work-life conflict.
Cons	Task switching can lead to mental overload and exhaustion. Raises the risk of overwork and poor work-life balance.	Can be rigid and unadaptable. More likely to feel stressed by interruptions or a change of plans.	Peaks and valleys may affect recovery and lead to burnout, exhaustion and "ball dropping" in other life roles during peaks.	May find it hard to clock off. Risk sacrificing career or personal life to satisfy demands of the dominant role.
Career-family identity	Often dual-centric, valuing both work and non-work equally but unsure how to prioritize.	Tend to place equal importance on work and non-work roles; strive for focused mindfulness for each.	Tends to value one role over another at different times of the year or month.	One identity is clearly dominant; cross-role interruption behaviors often reflect crossover "creep" to support main identity.

Adapted from: Managing work-life boundaries in the digital age, *Organizational Dynamics*, Kossek, E. E. (2016); and Flex Styles Assessment, Purdue University.

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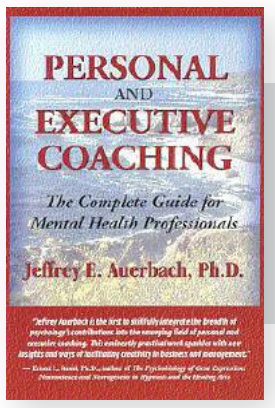

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Planting the seeds of financial health

By Tori DeAngelis

Money is a big source of angst for most people: APA's 2022 "Stress in America" survey finds that 83% of Americans cite inflation as a significant source of worry—the largest of any major stress category. Psychologists face money stresses of their own.

A recent survey found that more than half of psychologists working in academic health centers pegged salary as a source of stress, while other data show that psychology faculty make less than any other type of faculty, including those in other social sciences. Meanwhile, most practice students leave school with large debt loads, and private practitioners regularly confront difficult financial decisions such as whether to use insurance, join managed-care plans, or raise their rates.

Getting a handle on these stressors isn't easy, and part of the reason is psychological, say experts in financial psychology, an emerging field of study and practice that examines the social, emotional, cognitive, and cultural factors that influence how people make financial choices. There are various approaches and terminology used in the field, including: behavioral finance, which looks at cognitive and emotional biases and their impact on financial behaviors; financial psychology, which uses psychological principles to study, design and implement client-centered interventions; and financial therapy, which integrates cognitive, emotional, behavioral, relational, and financial aspects of well-being to promote patients' quality of life.

"You can know all the right things to do, you can increase your financial literacy, you can read all the 'how-tos of financial health,'" said Ashley Quamme, a marriage and family therapist and certified financial therapist in Evans, Georgia. "But if you have a psychological blockage or issue that is impeding your ability to take action, it will dominate the way you deal with money."

> **A lot of us are drawn to the field primarily because we want to help people, not because we want to be financially well off.**
>
> Brad Klontz, PsyD

That may be true, especially for psychologists and other helping professionals, noted Creighton University psychologist Brad Klontz, PsyD, who along with his father, Creighton University psychologist Ted Klontz, PhD, and colleagues, conducted foundational research on the topic in 2008. Since then, the field has grown to include several arms that straddle cognitive theory, individual therapy, and financial planning. It also includes budding research devoted to clinical, experimental, and survey studies, and the peer-reviewed Journal of Financial Therapy.

"A lot of us are drawn to the field primarily because we want to help people, not primarily because we want to be financially well off," Brad Klontz said. "But I think it's important to challenge that notion."

Improving one's financial self-care requires thoughtful self-analysis—and sometimes outside help—to examine, challenge, and ultimately change aspects of your money script that do not serve you. Here are some tools to help you navigate this important self-care arena:

Learn your money patterns

The psychology of money is complicated, based on family and intergenerational history, personal experiences and personality traits, and how you subconsciously integrate these factors into your actions (or inactions) around money.

Brad Klontz identifies four basic money scripts that can influence peoples' approaches to finances:

- **Money vigilance,** or keeping a keen eye on your financial situation and regularly adjusting it to save more than you spend;
- **Money status,** or conflating self-esteem with income and possessions;
- **Money worship,** the belief that money is the key to happiness;
- **Money avoidance,** the belief that money is bad and wealthy people are greedy or corrupt.

Interestingly, recent research suggests that many psychologists are money avoiders—people who wish that money issues would evaporate so they can focus on their primary purpose of helping people. While psychologists in the study came from a range of backgrounds, those who held these views tended to share certain commonalities: They often grew up in poorer families where money was shared, or in families that saw money as inherently corrupting. They then "self-selected" into fields that held similar views.

Financial therapy practitioners say the first step in financial self-care is to take an honest look at one's financial beliefs and where they might have come from. It shouldn't be a huge stretch to do this work because psychologists are already taught to think in this way, Klontz noted.

"We're trained to become aware of how our biases, culture, family, and experiences impact our beliefs about the world and about relationships," he said. "We just need to do the same thing with money."

There are a variety of tools that can help. Here are a few: the 32-item Klontz Money Scripts Inventory-Revised, which can help determine one's general approach to money. The Money Attitudes Test, provided by the private company IDR Labs as part of their personality assessment tools. And the money genogram, provided by the investment firm Hartford Funds and others, which helps people trace their money beliefs through their family tree and history.

Finally, the Financial Therapy Association offers resources, such as webinars and workshops on relationships and money, that can aid one's journey toward financial health.

Question your beliefs

Once people have a handle on their personal money beliefs and how they differ from other potential approaches to money, they can begin to challenge them, Ted Klontz said.

He and Brad also draw on the transtheoretical psychology model "stages of change" to help clients gradually change their stances toward money. The framework recognizes that change doesn't happen overnight, and that people must often undergo a series of psychological steps in order to create new attitudes and actions, in this case around money. This work is interwoven with individualized guidance on good money management—basics like balancing a budget and understanding cash flow.

As people work through their ambivalence about money, they come to see the possible "pro" sides of a more proactive approach, Ted Klontz noted. And gaining stronger financial health can help practitioners be more present with patients and provide them with good financial role-modeling, allowing them to pursue important life goals that they couldn't achieve otherwise.

Get help

While people can do some of this financial self-analysis themselves, it also helps to work with professionals, noted University of Georgia Professor Kristy Archuleta, PhD, an international expert in financial therapy. That's because most people, including psychologists, lack financial knowledge except what they've learned in their families—and often, that's not a lot.

Working with financial professionals can help people fill these gaps and clarify their financial life both psychologically and practically, she said. She recommends working with one or more of these professionals, who have the highest level of training in their respective areas for these purposes:

Certified financial planners, who look holistically at people's money situations, including taxes, investments, insurance, estate planning, cash flow, and more.

Accredited financial counselors, who help individuals meet short-term, concrete goals like creating spending plans and managing debt.

Certified financial behavior specialists, who use the theory and tools of financial psychology to help people achieve financial well-being. This certification is offered through the Financial Psychology Institute and requires candidates to meet specific educational and continuing education requirements in behavioral finance and financial behavior.

Certified financial therapists, who help individuals address behaviors, thoughts, cultural factors, and feelings around money. (People can earn this certification through a self-study program offered through the Financial Therapy Association.)

These professionals can help you stop burying your head in the sand and become more like those who are "money vigilant"—who understand their cash flow and save for their future, Brad Klontz added. In fact, he'd like to see all psychologists—including those just out of grad school—create a "financial freedom fund" where they regularly and automatically put at least 10% of their earnings into a retirement fund.

And while it may go against some deep-seated beliefs, financial self-care doesn't mean you'll become calloused or jaded in your work—quite the opposite, Klontz added.

"We can actually help people and take care of ourselves financially without hurting anyone," he said. "As a matter of fact, the better our financial health, the better we'll serve our clients." ●

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Busting Grant Writing Procrastination

By Katherine Lee

One of the biggest universal stressors on researchers and academics in fields whose work is powered by funding is the onerous process of writing grant proposals.

"Writing a grant is overwhelming—federal grants especially," says Allan Goldstein, MD, professor of surgery at Harvard Medical School and chief of pediatric surgery at Massachusetts General Hospital. According to Goldstein, who co-authored an article on strategies for grant-writing success, larger federal grants such as the National Institute of Health (NIH)'s R01 grant can take as much as 100 hours of writing and require extensive ancillary documents. "It's just endless—it takes a lot of time to put all of that together," he says.

And after all that work, success isn't guaranteed. According to the NIH, the success rate for R01 grants in 2022 was just 21 percent. Success rates were even lower after the pandemic, when the number of grant submissions surged, likely because researchers had more time to stay at home and work on grants, says Mark Pepin, MD, PhD, resident physician at Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts. "The pandemic led to a lot more grants being submitted at a very specific window of time, which meant that the rate of funding dropped precipitously," notes Pepin.

It's understandable, then, that procrastination is often part and parcel of grant writing, says Goldstein. "How do you even begin a process that's that long, especially when there's no guarantee that it will yield anything, and you have competing obligations?" he notes.

Other demands on time often include family, student loans, other aspects of your work such as benchwork or teaching, and, if you're a clinician, patient care. "Writing a grant doesn't get you anything if at the end of the day it's unsuccessful," notes Goldstein. "Meanwhile, seeing patients generates revenue, and especially for young people who need to pay their loans and start their careers, it's very challenging to take time away from clinical activity and commit it to grant writing."

> **"Grants aren't just about money. They're also about being able to do work you know is important, being able to better serve communities you care about, or addressing problems and challenges in our world.**
>
> Betty Lai, PhD, author of the 2023 book, The Grant Writing Guide: A Road Map for Scholars

Stressors notwithstanding, grant writing is a necessary, and potentially rewarding, part of doing research. The bottom line, says Pepin: "It's tough but worth it; getting grants is essential for this career and it allows us to do what we love."

Pepin and Goldstein suggest trying several proven strategies to overcome procrastination in grant writing:

- **Give yourself ample time to write and revise.** "If you start early, you can finish early, and that allows you to have a finished product that you can then run by colleagues and get feedback," says Goldstein.

- **Assemble a good team of collaborators.** It's difficult to write a grant alone, so it's helpful to collaborate with others, such as a biostatistics expert, computational biologist, or epidemiologist assigned to do various parts of the grant. "Collaborators can also refine what you write based on their own expertise in that area," says Goldstein.

- **Seek advice from a good advisor or mentoring team.** Seasoned advisors can help you understand what has already been investigated and what experiments have failed so that you don't repeat those mistakes. They also can advise you on writing a compelling research question that will appeal to a reviewer and a grant-funding agency and that is appropriate within the scope of the funding timeline. (This can be particularly helpful for early-career researchers who often lack training on how to write successful grants, which can lead to procrastination, says Pepin.)

- **Apply a lot.** The more you apply, the easier grant writing will become, and the more likely your grant is to be funded, says Goldstein. "Fear of failure is a factor in grant writing," he explains. "The more you do something, the more comfortable you get with it." Plus, he notes, there's the practical benefit garnered from submitting, say, 5 to 10 grants a year: Once you receive feedback on a grant that was not successful, you can take the feedback from the reviewers and use it for the next grant.

- **Reframe rejected grants as progress.** View unsuccessful grants not as failures, but as a stepping stones for the next success, advises Goldstein. "You have to almost expect a grant not to be funded the first time around, and hope that there will be useful comments that will make it a better grant the next time you submit it," he suggests.

- **Keep your self-worth out of it.** Remind yourself of who you are as a whole person, rather than just as a scientist, researcher, or academic, says Pepin: "I think part of growing as a scientist is figuring out how to separate my identity as a person from my performance on a grant review; it's a reminder for me to focus on the things that bring value on an individual level, like spending time with my family."

- **Talk to colleagues.** "Applying for a grant is one of the most common things we do in academia," says Pepin. "Talking about my frustrations and anxieties with my colleagues is one of the most helpful things for my well-being—just learning that I'm not the only one that's feeling this way."

Calming the Mind, Energizing the Body, Connecting with Spirit

By Stacy Lu

When Matt Hersh, PhD, needs to regain equilibrium amid a hectic day, he pauses to take a breath, using powerful diaphragmatic breathing which he describes as "low, slow and through the nose."

A mindfulness meditation teacher and a therapist with a practice in Waltham, Massachusetts, Hersh says the technique is "a nervous system reset. A lovely cascade of mind-body effects starts happening within three to five breaths. Breathing is the gateway toward better health in so many ways."

Hersh began practicing multi-faceted self-care, including breathwork and meditation, after a grueling bout with cancer. The benefits of such a holistic approach to wellness are well documented. Research shows, for example, that mental stress is a major factor in many bodily diseases, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes and chronic pain. Numerous studies show that exercising the body is a pivotal component of human health. Clinical studies even extend to the state of our spirituality, documenting its association with positive mental health and resiliency.

> **"I see mindfulness and other reset practices as an emotional disinfectant between clients.**
>
> Christopher Willard, PsyD

Psychologists may have a particular need for holistic interventions, Hersh says. In fact, he recently published a book, *The Thriving Therapist: Sustainable Self-Care to Prevent Burnout and Enhance Well-Being*, to fill what he saw as a critical need among those whose focus is on helping others.

"As psychologists, we may have had aspirations from an early age to be the helper in the world, but we are as human as the next person. If we are not taking care of ourselves in appropriate ways, we tend to be more at risk for compassion fatigue, empathy absorption, and burnout," Hersh says. "We may focus more exclusively on a cognitive approach to mental health—think differently and things will get better. But we feel, we move, we are connected to others. Mind, body, and spirit cannot be separated," he says.

Though psychologists may share similar challenges, many also are experts on how to achieve self-care in these vitally important and interrelated domains. Following, several psychologists offer their strategies to help their peers approach holistic well-being.

Nurture a peaceful mind

Many aspects of modern life may be taxing our brains to the point where we must consciously work to maintain cognitive health, let alone serenity. "We're in a more stressful world than ever, constantly task-switching and balancing multiple demands. It's quite exhausting for the part of the brain that handles stress responses, the prefrontal cortex," says Christopher Willard, PsyD, a therapist in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

One natural counterbalance to these pressures is the practice of mindfulness or other attention exercises, says Willard, an author who teaches mindfulness to medical students at Harvard Medical School.

Mindfulness can be described as the awareness that arises from purposefully paying attention to the present moment and accepting what is happening without judgment. Mindfulness techniques have proven to have many positive psychological effects, and many clinicians now incorporate some aspect of this work into their practices. In fact, in one 2020 survey, 82% of therapists reported using mindfulness practices at least sometimes with their patients.

The science is there. The neurobiology of mindfulness is the subject of multiple studies, many of which explore how it influences stress pathways in the brain, potentially promoting well-being and reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression. MRI scans have shown that mindfulness meditation can reduce the size of the amygdala, the seat of the "fight or flight" stress response in the brain, and increase the thickness of the prefrontal cortex, a brain region associated with concentration and awareness. Studies on mindfulness also report an increase in grey matter density in brain regions involved in learning, memory, and emotion regulation.

Willard describes mindfulness as a vital tool for psychologists to adopt into their own daily lives as well: "I see mindfulness and other reset practices as an emotional disinfectant between clients," he says. "At the end of the day, we can also leave that emotion residue behind by taking a few breaths on the stoop or in the car before we walk in the door."

Hersh also employs what he calls a "zoom-in/zoom-out" mindfulness practice to calm and clear his mind between patients. He says he gently observes a nearby object in its entirety, like a tree outside the window. He then zooms in to inspect a leaf or branch and zooms out to perceive the whole again. "There is something very calming about observing both the whole and a nuanced detail of something. And the ability to zoom in and zoom out at will is an amazing mindfulness and attention regulation skill," he says.

Engage in joyful movement

The benefits of physical exercise on mental health are well-known, but experts now think it may be even easier to reap its good effects.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, optimal levels of exercise could be as little as 150 minutes of moderate-level aerobic activity per week, such as walking, gardening, or vigorous house work. The guidelines also call for some kind of muscle strengthening activity a couple of days a week, such as lifting light weights or doing push-ups and crunches. Yet per the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only about a third of Americans met these guidelines in 2020.

Having a more open mindset about a variety of activities can help, says Michelle Segar, PhD, behavioral scientist at the University of Michigan and author of *The Joy Choice: How to Finally Achieve Lasting Changes in Eating and Exercise*. Knowing that many daily activities count as "exercise" can make fitness feel achievable and boost consistency. Having a rigid workout schedule can even be counterproductive and a turnoff, she says.

Competing external demands often derail best-laid fitness, which can lead to stress and self-blame—and worse health behaviors in other areas, such as eating habits. Perfectionists or driven high-achievers who lean towards all-or-nothing thinking may be particularly prone to exercise guilt. That might include psychologists, suggests Segar, adding: "People who go for terminal degrees and top-level positions tend to be very achievement oriented, so that means that the criteria for success are even more tipped in the favor of achievement."

"We have been socialized to think about self-care behaviors in very prescriptive ways because that's how the research is done. There are so many things we're supposed to be doing: eating that, doing that. It's hard to change your belief system, even when there's a new recommendation out," Segar says.

Instead, research suggests that being flexible and tapping a range of options leads to more sustainable behaviors. To promote that open-ended thinking, Segar has developed a cognitive shortcut she calls POP:

Pause—Recognize what's pressing on you from your external environment that might impede your fitness plans;

Options—Consider many ways to make progress, no matter how incremental;

Pick a joy choice—Move your body in a way that feels good and is doable in that moment.

If a grant deadline prohibits you from getting to bootcamp, for example, perhaps a walk around the neighborhood will do. "You're reaffirming success, not rigidity," says Segar, adding: "Self-care becomes a personal necessity instead of something on a to-do list."

Lean into your faith

The role of spirituality in health and well-being has been a topic of growing interest in psychological research and practice. While it's difficult to quantify the effects of spirituality on mental health in absolute terms, it is widely acknowledged as being an important source of connection and life satisfaction. It also can be a source of strength for psychologists, who, in a 2015 survey in Counseling and Psychotherapy Research, identified it as a key part of their self-care, supporting their resiliency, work efficacy and sense of identity.

"We can lean into whatever our faith may be. That may be connecting with others in your belief system, whether it's a cultural practice or a community ritual or going on a pilgrimage. These all bring meaning and balance to our lives," Christopher Willard says.

Nature, in particular, can be a source of spiritual inspiration. Writers, philosophers and researchers have long linked time spent in the outdoors with self-transcendence, conjuring a positive connection to the vast world beyond our personal boundaries.

"You can go out and look at the stars, for example, and feel like you are being taken care of in such moments, helped by God, nature, or a universal energy," Hersh says.

In a profession that can often be solitary, it's important to take time to connect with others, adds Mindy Shoss, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of Central Florida: "I enjoy talking to working moms with shared struggles. We can validate each other's experiences and be supportive of each other."

Breathing into stillness

A practice rooted in ancient movement traditions, including yoga and tai chi, controlled breathing can quickly usher a person from a state of anxiety to relaxation. One technique to try is diaphragmatic breathing, the "low and slow" breathing Hersh describes.

Breathing from the lower belly engages the diaphragm, which optimizes oxygen exchange. Some researchers theorize that this type of breathing stimulates the vagus nerve, a main component of the body's parasympathetic nervous system, which regulates mood, heart rate, immunity and digestion.

Breaths should be steady and relaxed at a rate of about four per minute, for five to 10 minutes. Breathing through the nose helps to regulate breath rhythm, as well as to moisturize and regulate the temperature of the air intake.

Steady diaphragmatic breathing is a great tool for dealing with acute stress, anger or fear, as it signals your body that you are in a safe space, promoting the opposite of the "fight-or-flight" response. Instead, it eases you into a relaxation response, a physical state of deep rest. Over time, diaphragmatic breathing can reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and is being used widely as a non-pharmacological treatment for everything from depression to insomnia to PTSD.

Contemplative practices such as daily meditation can also inspire a sense of transcendence and connectedness. Of particular interest to psychologists are practices centered around loving-kindness meditation, an ancient practice with Buddhist roots that focuses on compassion and gratitude. Multiple studies suggest that it can increase positive emotions, purpose in life, and connection to others.

In this practice, the meditator conjures up thoughts of another person and silently repeats mantras invoking well-being for that person, such as, 'May you be happy. May you be peaceful. May you be healthy.' The meditator then expands these thoughts to include themselves, the community, and the world at large.

As Hersh says, "It's a way of thinking that promotes being in touch with our own and others' humanity, and the world beyond what we can see empirically. It can fuel our sense of spirituality and connection. We are all in the same boat. Let's be aware of each other. Let's take care of each other."

For an example, see this guided loving-kindness meditation by University of California, Berkeley Greater Good Science Center.

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