



The
Case Management
Community

Staying Well As A Case Manager

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The role of a case manager is a unique and complex role which can be deeply rewarding. However, if you are unable to first care for yourself, you will be vulnerable to mental and physical burnout.

Here are a few ideas to stay as well as possible...

1 Notice your inner psychological experiences

As clinicians we are used to assessing what is going on outside of us. When you meet a new client, you might notice mess or disrepair. You might notice inappropriate equipment or an unusual gait or even the style family members use to communicate with each other.

However, it is easy to miss the wealth of information that arises inside of you. What is this context triggering inside of you? What are you thinking and feeling? Do you feel instantly inadequate or in charge? Do you feel helpless or proud of your expertise? Is this person someone you could be friends with in another life or do you feel threatened, irritated or uneasy? This is such important information. It will drive your behaviour towards the client which in turn will change their behaviour towards you. It will impact your ability to tolerate risk as opposed to exerting too much control. It'll influence how well you can self-care as opposed to self-sacrifice.

Try this - Notice and name your thoughts and feelings with each contact. Discuss the patterns with your supervisor. Increased self-awareness is crucial for being a safe and well practitioner.

2 Set a capacity boundary and stick to it

With ever increasing clinical demand it is tempting to say 'Yes', when the answer needs to be 'I am sorry but I don't have capacity at the moment'.

Know what questions to ask referrers to find out if a case is complex or straightforward. If you become too busy, you'll most likely reduce leisure and social time, click into auto-pilot mode, stop exercising and eat badly. As a consequence, your mind health will quickly deteriorate and your loved ones will suffer. Additionally, your already vulnerable clients and their families will feel your mindless practise, lack of presence and unavailability which will increase their burden.

As people who want to succeed and please others, even the thought of saying 'No' produces a range of negative thoughts and feelings to sabotage our necessary willpower. Thoughts such as:

- I won't get other work.
- People will think I'm lazy.
- Referrals will stop.
- I have nothing other than work.

Try this - Discuss with your supervisor how many complex cases and how many easier ones you have capacity to do well. Agree a number, write it down and stick rigidly with it. Look at whether you can hand over a case or two to someone who has capacity to take the work. Only take a new case when you finish an old one. Below are tips about managing the unhelpful thoughts.

3 Manage your thoughts

Us flawed humans experience constant negative thoughts. When life is easy, negative thoughts have less impact. However, on the difficult days it is normal to have lots of negative thoughts like....

- I'm useless.
- It's all my fault.
- I should know better.
- My client does it on purpose.
- My client doesn't like me.
- I can't do this work.
- No one cares.

Thoughts are essentially just words in your head. However, if you don't notice your thoughts or you believe them as the truth, your mental health will suffer and you'll begin to feel sad, angry, helpless, anxious and depressed.

Managing your thoughts so they don't drive you mad or ruin your leisure time needs practice.

Try this - Here's an example technique you can try: NNQ – notice, name, question.

- Notice – What is the negative thought that has grabbed your attention?
- Name – Write it on paper or on your phone so you can take a more objective look.
- Question – Ask yourself two questions.
 - Is this thought helpful to me right now?
 - If I believe this thought as the absolute truth, will it help me to treat myself and others how I would want to?

We can't get rid of unhelpful thoughts so don't try. If it's an unhelpful thought or a thought that will make you harshly treat yourself or others, simply thank your mind for its suggestion and refocus on what's going on. The easiest way to refocus is to notice something you can see, hear, smell, touch or taste.

This is resistance training for the mind. At first it will feel strange but if you keep practising the technique, you'll be less prone to stress and poor relationships. We can't turn off those negative thoughts, but we can be less bullied by them.

4 Create routines to support a work life balance

Many case managers are self-employed. Flexibility, choice and control can deliver great blessings. However, if you don't intentionally set boundaries and manage your electronic devices and communication, you'll inevitably slip into overworking and consequently a permanent feeling of stress and restlessness.

Try this - Each day decide when you will be starting and finishing, stick to it. If necessary set an alarm or ask others to help. If possible, work only in one place within your home. Don't spread your paperwork, to do list and work bag in your domestic space or your mind will be constantly distracted by work demands. If possible, remove social media and email apps from your personal phone so you can frequently leave work behind. As much as possible leave electronic devices at home when you exercise or socialise so you can be fully present.

5 Learn to focus on what's happening outside of you

When you're having a hard time at work it is normal to become preoccupied by what is going on inside of yourself. Psychologists call these internal psychological experiences which might include regretting, analysing what's happened, worrying, judging yourself and others or solving problems outside of your control. Focusing on what's going on inside of you will make you feel stressed and restless. You'll be distracted at work and unable to enjoy your time off.

Try this - Research shows the antidote is to focus on what's happening outside instead of inside. This simply means learning to notice what's going on instead of being on automatic pilot. Take a moment to focus on what is happening in the here and now. What can you hear, smell or see? What can you taste or feel? Practise this every time you wash your hands and you'll then find it easier to do it when life is hard.

6 Managing distress

It is normal for our clients to be frequently upset, angry, sad or even suicidal. The client might even accuse you of things you haven't said or done or expect you to have all the answers. As a case manager they may dump their distress on you, as might family or team members. As a result, you might be left feeling burdened, overwhelmed and inadequate.

Try this -

For others - Everyone needs to feel their distress is heard, often what they are saying is nothing to do with what has really upset or triggered them. If you can, help the person name their feelings by saying "I can see you are furious", or "it sounds like this is making you very sad". Then wait, listen but resist the temptation to solve, reassure or cheer up.

For you - After a difficult day, write out exactly what has upset you as if it was recorded on a camera. Include what has been said and done. Write down your thoughts about what happened and how it made you feel at the time and afterwards. Taking the time to process what has happened prevents long term

health problems. If the incident is still on your mind twenty-four hours later, call someone and ask for a debrief.

7 It's not personal

When your client or a family member is upset, it is common for them to blame you. We can all be guilty of that at times. They may even accuse you of doing or saying things you haven't. This can feel very painful especially as you're trying to do a good job. If you believe it's personal, you will start to feel victimised and helpless and you'll be at risk of reacting in a negative way to your client and making life worse for all.

Try this - Remind yourself that what is happening is not personal even though it feels personal. You can say to yourself "I am having the thought that this is personal or I'm feeling like this is personal". This will remind you it's a thought or a feeling and not the absolute truth. Tell someone you trust how you are feeling.

8 Choosing your values

Research shows that people who know why they have chosen certain roles and how they want to behave, enjoy life more and cope better with difficult times.

Try this - write a few sentences about what attracted you to case management work. Choose the personal qualities/values you would like to show at work. E.g. kindness, patience, gratitude, acceptance, assertiveness, self-care, compassion. Notice when you are showing these qualities. If you stay aware of your values, you can walk away from a difficult day knowing you did your best even if others are angry, sad or critical.

9 Notice the positives

When life is tough it's easy to lose sight of the good things. Research shows that practice strengthens your brain's ability to focus on positive things.

Try this - At the end of each day, write down five things that have gone well or for which you are grateful.

10 Treat yourself with compassion

When the day doesn't go as planned, it is easy to be harsh or critical with yourself. You might have thoughts like "I am a rubbish case manager" or "I've let my client down" or "it's all my fault". You might then be tempted by negative coping strategies like a large glass of wine, a binge on sugar or isolating yourself.

Try this - Think about how you would respond to a friend if they were suffering or had made a mistake. Treat yourself like that. Recognise you are doing the best you can. Be aware of how you speak to yourself. Don't call yourself names like useless or stupid. Treat yourself with kindness, in your words and actions. If you are able to be kinder to yourself, you will be more patient with those around you. After a bad day, take rest, see friends and have fun. People who can show themselves kindness feel mentally better.

11 Think about food and exercise

There is good evidence that a diet containing high sugar, processed fat and too much alcohol makes people more vulnerable to feelings of anxiety and low mood. A little regular exercise can be better than anti-depressant medication for lots of people. Often people set themselves up to fail by setting unrealistic goals around food and exercise.

Try this - Try making small, achievable changes that are more likely to succeed. For instance, give up butter on a Tuesday. Swap one latte or wine each week with a glass of water. Park the car slightly further from your destination and walk. Take the stairs rather than the lift once in a while. If you can make tiny changes and keep them up, you will soon notice mind and body benefits.

12 Finally...

If you want to do a good job, there is no escape from negative thoughts and painful feelings. This shows you care. If you've tried the tips in this handout but feel consistently low or anxious most of the time, have trouble sleeping and have little or no interest in life, speak to your supervisor or GP.

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