



Staying Well As A Support Worker

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Being a support worker is a unique and complex job which can be deeply rewarding but at times really stressful. So, it's essential you look after yourself to avoid mental and physical burnout.

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

1 Manage your thoughts

Everyone has negative thoughts, it's part of being human. When things are going well, negative thoughts have less impact but on the difficult days it is easy to start thinking "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".

These are just words in your head but if you let the negative thoughts take over, your mental health will suffer and you'll begin to feel sad, angry, helpless, anxious and depressed. It takes practice to manage your thoughts so they don't drive you mad or ruin your leisure time and there are techniques you can use to help you.

Try this...

NNQ – notice, name, question.

- Notice – What is the negative thought you are experiencing?
- Name – Write it down 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 to be true, is it having a negative impact on how I'm treating myself or the people around me?

If the answer is 'no' to the first question and 'yes' to the second, it's an unhelpful thought.

When you're having a hard time at work it is normal to become preoccupied by what is going on inside yourself. Psychologists call these 'internal psychological experiences' which might include regretting, analysing what's happened, worrying, judging yourself and others or trying to solve problems you can't control. Looking inward can make you feel stressed and restless, distracted at work and unable to enjoy your time off.

You can't just make unhelpful thoughts disappear, so don't bother. Instead, thank your mind for being able to recognise what you're feeling and refocus on something outside of you. The easiest way to do this 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 practise this every time you wash your hands, for example, and you'll then find it easier to do in more challenging moments.

Remember: we can't turn off those negative thoughts, but we can learn to be less bullied by them.

2 Managing distress

It is normal for our clients to be frequently upset, angry, sad or even suicidal. As their closest supporter they may dump a lot of their distress on you. The client might even accuse you of things you haven't said or done or expect you to have all the answers. This may leave you feeling over-burdened or inadequate.

Try this...

To help the client:

They need 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 them name their feelings by saying "I can see you are furious" or "it sounds like this is making you very sad". Then you need to listen but resist the temptation to solve, reassure or cheer them up.

To help you:

After a difficult day with a client, write down exactly what has happened in as much detail as you can, as if it's a scene from a film. 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 your manager and ask for a debrief.

3 It's not personal

When your client is upset, it is common for them to blame whoever is closest. We can all be guilty of that. Your client may even accuse you of doing or saying things you haven't. This can feel very painful especially as you're trying really hard 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 everyone.

Try this...

Remind yourself that what is happening is not personal even if it feels like it is. 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.

4 Consider your values

Research shows that people who know why they have chosen to be a support worker and how they want to behave at work, enjoy life more and cope better with difficult times.

Try this...

Write a few sentences about what attracted you to support work. Identify the personal qualities you have that you would like to show at work. e.g. kindness, patience, gratitude, acceptance, assertiveness, self-care, compassion. We call these values. Notice when you are showing these qualities with your client. If you stay aware of your values, you can walk away from a difficult day knowing you did your best even if your client was angry, sad or critical.

5 Notice the positives

When life is tough it's easy to lose sight of the good things. Research shows that practice – in this case, recognising when things have gone the way you have wanted them to - strengthens the 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.

6 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 support worker" 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'. Be kind and respectful to yourself in your words and actions. This will enable you to be more patient with those around you. After a bad day, rest, see friends and have fun. People who can show themselves kindness feel mentally better.

7 Think about food and exercise

There is strong 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. However, often people set themselves up to fail by setting unrealistic goals around food and exercise.

Try this...

Make small, achievable goals. 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 notice mind and body benefits.

8 Set boundaries early

In most jobs, the dividing line between home and work is obvious. As a support worker, you'll spend a lot of time with your client, often in their family home. To do a good job, you need to develop a trusting relationship. This will involve asking questions and being open about some aspects of your own life, your preferences and concerns. However, you're not a friend or relative and understanding where to draw the line between a personal and professional relationship can be confusing as the relationship gets stronger.

Try this...

Speak to your manager about how to set boundaries about things like start and finish times, out of work contact and how to be assertive when your client or family members resist your boundaries. Don't have contact with your client on social media or socially. Make your boundaries clear to the client and family from the start and stick to them.

9 And finally...

If you want to do a good job as a support worker, you can't really avoid negative thoughts and painful feelings. This shows you care. If you try the tips in this handout but still feel consistently low or anxious a lot, have trouble sleeping or little or no interest in life, speak to your manager or GP.

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