

Runaway and Homeless Youth Training & Technical Assistance Center



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Creating a Self-Care Culture in Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs

What is Self-Care Culture?

Almost everyone is familiar with the flight safety rule that says: “In the event of trouble, put on your own oxygen mask before helping others.” This simple message has outsized meaning for runaway and homeless youth (RHY) workers, because by taking good care of ourselves, we can thus take good care of the young people we work to nurture and protect. RHY staff who are getting the “oxygen” that they need are able to be more empathetic, think more clearly, have more energy, and persist even when the going gets tough.¹

Though most providers know that they need to take an active role in protecting their own well-being and happiness, in particular during periods of stress², it’s easy to let it slide to the end of the to-do list. Organizations that intentionally promote a culture of self-care can improve the chances that RHY staff thrive and are able to offer young people in their programs reliable, high-quality services over time. This tip sheet includes simple steps for making sure that self-care plans become self-care practices.

What the Research Says

- In the United States, 40 percent of the workforce reports experiencing high levels of stress, and claim that they are considering or have left jobs due to high levels of stress.³
- Staff turnover rates in settings like RHY programs can be as high as 20-40 percent.⁴ Replacing a worker costs an average of one-fifth of that position’s annual salary.⁵
- Organizations that proactively address employee well-being and promote self-care can reduce levels of stress among staff and improve morale, retention, and the quality of service that they provide to clients.⁶

¹Sansbury, B.S., Graves, K., & Scott, W. (2015). Managing traumatic stress responses among clinicians: Individual and organizational tools for self-care. *Trauma*, v17(2), pp. 114-122.

²Rondina, Ellen. (2018). *Self-Care Revolution: 5 Pillars to Prevent Burnout and Build Sustainable Resilience for Helping Professionals*. Upland, CA: Ellen Rondina; and Shainna, A. (Jan. 22, 2019). “Is Self-Care Just a Trend?” [blog post]. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/modern-mentality/201901/is-self-care-just-trend>

³Business.com Media, Inc. [infographic]. (2016). *Stress and Productivity: What the Numbers Say*. Retrieved from <https://www.business.com/articles/stress-and-productivity-what-the-numbers-say>

⁴Casey Family Programs. (Dec. 29, 2017). How does turnover affect outcomes and what can be done to address retention. Retrieved from <https://www.casey.org/turnover-costs-and-retention-strategies>

⁵Boushey, H. & Glynn, S.J. (Nov. 16, 2012). *There Are Significant Business Costs to Replacing Employees*. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/16084443/CostofTurnover0815.pdf>

⁶Bell, H., Kulkarni, S., & Dalton, L. (2003). Organizational prevention of vicarious trauma. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 84(4), pp. 463-470. Retrieved from <https://www.ce-credit.com/articles/100716/PrevVicariousTrauma.pdf>

Tips for Creating Self-Care Culture

Express and Prepare for Stress

- Educate staff about secondary or vicarious trauma, and communicate the expectation that it's not a matter of "if" but "when" employees will be affected.⁷ Don't forget to include front office and other administrative staff.
- Consider sending out monthly self-care reminders and distributing information about healthy activities happening outside of work (for example, Tai Chi classes at the local rec center, or community cultural events).
- Develop written self-care plans as part of employee supervision. Encourage employees to identify what works for them, and ask staff members regularly whether they are acting on the plan. Understand that there's no "cookie cutter" approach to self-care; just like your clients, your staff are individuals.⁸
- Acknowledge events happening outside the organization that might impact the ways in which staff members work.

Make Your Workplace "Trauma-informed"

- Provide clinical case supervision so that RHY staff have a safe, confidential place in which to talk about stressful situations with clients. Keep clinical supervision separate from the employee evaluation system; RHY staff may fear opening up about struggles if this disclosure will be tied to job performance reviews.⁹
- Ensure that the workplace offers physical safety. This might require adding security staff, renovating existing spaces, or setting up the expectation that staff use a buddy system when on the grounds or out in the community.
- Encourage staff to display personally meaningful artwork, photos, and other items in their office space, and to hang similarly inspiring and beautiful pieces in common areas.
- Apply trauma-informed care principles to the workplace by asking employees what specific changes would improve their sense of safety, empowerment, collaboration, choice and trust.¹⁰ Survey staff about ways that the organization can promote self-care.
- Conduct self-care check-ins as part of weekly supervision or staff meetings. Talk openly about self-care and the risks for vicarious trauma.
- Facilitate staff's access to mental health care, if they need it, by including coverage in benefit packages or setting up formal agreements with local providers. Staff who have experienced past personal trauma are at greater risk for vicarious trauma, so individual needs will vary.

⁷Bell, H., Kulkarni, S., & Dalton, L. (2003). Organizational prevention of vicarious trauma. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 84(4), pp. 463-470. Retrieved from <https://www.ce-credit.com/articles/100716/PrevVicariousTrauma.pdf>

⁸Caringi, J.C. & Lawson, H.A. (2012). In CW360°: *Secondary Trauma and the Child Welfare Workforce*. Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare at University of Minnesota, p. 24. https://vt.ova.gov/ojpasset/Documents/OS_STS_Child_Welfare_Article_Review.pdf

⁹Bell, H., Kulkarni, S., & Dalton, L. (2003). Organizational prevention of vicarious trauma. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 84(4), pp. 463-470. Retrieved from <https://www.ce-credit.com/articles/100716/PrevVicariousTrauma.pdf>

¹⁰Sansbury, B.S., Graves, K., & Scott, W. (2015). Managing traumatic stress responses among clinicians: Individual and organizational tools for self-care. *Trauma*, v17(2), pp. 114-122.

Tips for Building Career Pathways

Develop Structural Supports for Staff

- Ensure that RHY staff have balanced caseloads; each person should be assigned some cases that are easier, and some that are more challenging.¹¹
- Allow staff the freedom to vary work activities throughout the day, interspersing high-stress tasks with more mundane ones. Remember that different individuals find different things stressful—while one person might find relief in a quiet hour doing paperwork, another might relax by running a recreational group with a coworker.
- Structure work so that employees take regular breaks throughout the day, even or especially in the midst of crisis. Don't interrupt staff with work while they are on break. Also, provide a separate, private space for employees to take breaks where they can get away from clients and outside distractions.
- Proactively link clients with other community providers. Case collaboration provides material support to RHY staff in terms of meeting clients' needs, and also reduces a sense that they're working in isolation, or the idea that "it's all on me."¹²
- Facilitate staff's ability to take time off. Do not allow employees to take work home, and insist that they use their accrued vacation time each year. Let staff know that it's okay to take a paid personal leave day. (See the sidebar for on-call staff.)

Promote Workplace Social Bonding

- Encourage workplace friendships. Making friends with coworkers has been shown to improve people's ability to handle workplace stress.
- Simple things like providing a comfortable space for breaks, allowing staff to take lunch together, assigning people "team projects," and encouraging brief periods for socializing at the start of staff meetings can go a long way.
- Avoid questioning or penalizing staff for spending short spans of time with a coworker, chatting, or venting, or for occasionally sharing photos or jokes in lighthearted emails. Realize that blowing off steam is a natural and adaptive reaction to workplace stress.

Self-Care for On-Call Staff

"On-call" can take many different forms. Maybe workers are staffing a 24-hour crisis line and have to respond, day or night, to whatever comes their way. Or maybe staff have a day off, but must still be available to come in if needed. Either way, on-call work can take a toll. To make it easier:

Make sure that on-call duties are rotated among a team; no single individual should be on call all of the time.

Consider allowing a late start in the morning or an extended lunch break to compensate for a busy on-call night.

Require supervisors to take over on-call duties for one-to-two hours per work day in order to allow the on-call staff time for an uninterrupted meal, to work out, or just take a break.

Remind on-call staff to get enough sleep, eat well, drink enough water, and exercise to keep up their stamina and prevent "crashes."

Consider having healthy snack kits or care packages that on-call staff can grab on the go.

Ask staff what other plans they have during their on-call weekend—connecting with friends and loved ones can protect people from negative stress.

¹¹Sansbury, B.S., Graves, K., & Scott, W. (2015). Managing traumatic stress responses among clinicians: Individual and organizational tools for self-care. *Trauma*, v17(2), pp. 114-122.

¹²Bell, H., Kulkarni, S., & Dalton, L. (2003). Organizational prevention of vicarious trauma. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 84(4), pp. 463-470. Retrieved from <https://www.ce-credit.com/articles/100716/PrevVicariousTrauma.pdf>

Simple Exercises and Practices

Provide opportunities for all staff to engage in self-care practices at work. The activities that follow are easy to fit into weekly staff meetings, supervision time, or training and retreats.

Three Things to Try

- Reframe stress. Stress tends to be viewed as negative and harmful, though it can actually be beneficial. Furthermore, research indicates that your attitude about stress has a direct effect on whether stress hurts or helps you.¹³ So, to the extent possible, change your mind about stress. The next time that you feel overwhelmed, try to shift your attention to how your body is responding to the stress. Identify what is at stake in the stressful moment, and why it matters to you. Next, think of one thing you can do right away that reflects and affirms “why it matters,” and then do it. This could be as simple as speaking up about what’s at stake, or it might mean physically moving to another part of the room, or even respectfully ending a meeting. Take a few moments to notice how what you did changed the way you felt and thought.
- Practice gratitude. Keeping a “gratitude board” in the office can help staff to train their brains to notice “positives” just as often as “negatives.” Research shows that gratitude helps affirm a sense of purpose, motivation, and common humanity.¹⁴ Try to add something to the list at least five times per day. Be specific, focusing on people rather than things. Noticing unexpected events that brightened your day can make your feelings of gratitude even stronger. This practice won’t eliminate stressful experiences, but it will balance your perception of “what work is like” and how work affects you.
- Express appreciation. Spend 10 minutes thinking about two to three people who you have interacted with in your work life (coworkers, supervisors, young people and families, police, judges, etc.). Write down something specific about that person that you value or appreciate. Describe how their actions or attributes affected you. Bring your attention inward, and notice your sensations, thoughts, and feelings. Now, tell that person about how they affected you—send a note or a text, write an email, or better yet, share your appreciation face-to-face. You have just increased the likelihood this person will “pass it on” and share their appreciation with someone else! Reflecting on the ways that other people have enriched your life (ideally, a few times each week) can shift your attention positively over time and strengthen your relationships, both of which are factors that build resilience.

¹³McGonigal, K. (2015). *The Upside of Stress: Why Stress is Good for You, and How to Get Good at It*. New York, NY: Penguin Random House; and Abiola, K. et al. (2012). Does the perception that stress affects health matter? The association with health and mortality. *Health Psychology*, 31(5), pp. 677-684.

¹⁴Simon-Thomas, E. & Keltner, D. (2018). *The Foundations of Happiness at Work* [course]. Greater Good Science Center, University of California Berkeley. https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/what_we_do/event/the_foundations_of_happiness_at_work

Additional Resources

CW360°: Secondary Trauma and the Child Welfare Workforce (2012). Annual publication from the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare at University of Minnesota featuring articles on secondary traumatic stress in the child welfare field, as well as a range of organizational responses. https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/ojpasset/Documents/OS_STS_Child_Welfare_Article_Review.pdf

Greater Good in Action [website]. Online hub for scientific studies and research-based approaches to improving social and emotional well-being that includes articles, online courses, podcasts, and more. A collaboration between UC Berkley's Greater Good Science Center and HopeLab. <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/>

The Age of Overwhelm: Strategies for the Long Haul (2018). Book by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, founder of the Trauma Stewardship Institute, offering strategies for coping with overwhelming experiences in ways that maintain a healthy perspective and sustain people's ability to act with intention. <https://traumastewardship.com/>

RHY Staff Retention Tip Sheet Series (2019). This set of five tip sheets from the Family and Youth Services Bureau describes strategies for retaining quality staff in RHY programs by focusing on self-care, organizational culture, hiring, compensation, and career pathways. www.rhyttac.net

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