SELF-CARE: Clinical Recommendation and Biblical Mandate

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Hollywood has put the drama of counseling at center stage with the success of the sitcom “Frazier,” the emergence of Tyler Perry’s stage play, “The Marriage Counselor,” and HBO’s “In Treatment” series. We find divorce, infidelity, inappropriate sexual innuendos, physical, substance and mental abuse…and this is among the clinicians!

Granted, this is the genre of creative minds and these are fictional characters, but unfortunately, “art is imitating life.” In a world of brokeness, we find that our “helping professionals” are also broken.

Consider the data on psychologists according to Jeffery Barnett, et al., as reported from other studies (cited in the 2007 Professional Psychology: Research & Practice, 38(6), pp. 603-612):

- 70% of female psychologists have been either sexually or physically abused as children
- 33% of male psychologists report the same
- 33% of psychologists report being abused as adults
- They feel the effects of these difficulties (and other family crises) just as non-counselors
- They may be less likely to get help due to knowledge and professional identity
- 60% acknowledged being significantly depressed during some point of their careers
- 29% reported being suicidal at some point
- 4% have made suicide attempts

We are broken, indeed…different fractures, but still broken. As counselors, we are called on to bear the secrets of our counselees, to come alongside of them in their struggles. Yet counselors can become adversely affected by vicarious trauma, stress and burnout…irrespective of personal issues. Bearing one another's burdens can take a costly toll if not properly managed. Don't neglect self-care.

As experts in behavior, we are trained in areas of self-care, but do we practice what we preach? Jesus mandates that we “love our neighbor as thyself”—the presumption is that we love ourselves…but do we?

Do we show love to ourselves when we neglect our health? Do we love ourselves when we are unforgiving of our own shortcomings, yet cognitively challenge the "intrusive thoughts" of those who we counsel? Is it love when our appointment books are overscheduled, yet we have failed to make an appointment with God? Therapists may find that their overall self-care, or the lack thereof, is a key element in the effectiveness of how we care for others.

Self Care Recommendations

Conduct a self-audit of three vital components of your life:

1.) Physical – When is the last time you had a full physical? If you haven't had one within the last year, schedule one, with a complete battery of tests. If you do not already have an exercise regimen, consider developing one. Institute some structured fitness routine for weight control, cardio and stress relief (check with your doctor first). How you feel may be directly attributed to your diet. Monitor the types of food you consume and the portions.

2.) Emotional – Do you still have joy? If not, what has stolen it away? Are you decompressing after a day of therapy? If so, what is your methodology? If it is not effective, consider a new mode of debriefing so that you are not bringing work home with you or ruminating over your sessions. Ask yourself: the type of questions you would ask your clients and then listen! Are there losses you have yet to grieve, apologies you have yet to offer, or forgiveness you have yet to give? Be kind, but honest, with yourself and others.

3.) Spiritual – This is the most essential component of the assessment and you may want to start with this one. Take an inventory of your spirit life. Is God first? Are you growing in the Word of God? Are you seeking the Lord for your life purpose? Do you have a corporate place of worship? What monopolizes your time and energy the most? What idols need to be torn down in your life that you may see Jesus?

The Pharisees asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment of the law. "Jesus replied, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39, NIV).

In the words of author Paul Tripp, when referring to counselors we are "handling the fine china of people's lives." We do well to inspect the cups and saucers on our own table for broken pieces in desperate need of repair.

Why Should We Care?…continued