

HEALING THE HEALERS

Promoting the mental health of helping professionals

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How can helping professionals offer their very best to others without draining themselves? The issue of burnout or compassion fatigue has been discussed for years and yet we are still looking for ways to prevent it among helping professionals and caregivers. The reason for being concern about the mental health and wellbeing of caregivers is simple: when people who take care of others are not doing well, the whole community suffers.

Numerous articles have been written on approaches focussing on the working environment or “ways of doing things” to prevent burnout and better support the mental health of helping professionals, without very conclusive results. As a helping professional myself, I suggest we focus more on how we can care for ourselves on the inside by paying more attention to the “ways we think about ourselves and others” and letting go of our hurtful and wearying thoughts and beliefs².

Why others’ suffering hurts us so much?

It is not because we don’t know how to protect ourselves that others’ suffering hurts us within. It is because the suffering is already inside of us. The pain of others affected us because it mirrors our own pain, the one we carry in our thoughts.

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² Beliefs are broadly defined here as thoughts and theories we have about ourselves, others and the world.

The first responsibility of helping professionals and caregivers is to heal themselves in order to care for others. We cannot offer others what we deny for ourselves. In other words, we cannot support and care for others if we don't learn how to care for ourselves.

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Better caring for ourselves requires that we become aware of the thoughts and beliefs we have about ourselves and others. Although they can vary ad infinitum, our thoughts and beliefs are either based on love, trust and unity or on fear, judgment and separation. The former are conducive to peace, joy and health. The latter are producing conflict, suffering and disease.

Since the very beginning of our lives, we have assimilated thoughts and beliefs passed on by our family, sociocultural milieu and the world. We have built our understanding of self (self-concept), others and the world with these thoughts and beliefs, which also determine our understanding and experience of day-to-day life.

The thoughts and beliefs we entertain about ourselves are the cause of all our life experiences because they are the glasses through which we look at or see others and the world. In other words, we always experience what we think of ourselves! For example, if we have mainly thoughts of trust and satisfaction about oneself (cause), we will remain calm and confident even if the external situations are difficult (effect). On the other hand, if we entertain lots of doubts about our self-worth (cause), chances are we will feel judged, undermined and rejected by others even if it's not the case (effect).

The good news is: since we are the ones having the negative and hurtful thought about ourselves, we can also decide to let them go. But first, we obviously have to become aware of them.

Healing the way we think about ourselves

We live in a world where thoughts of separation or opposition to others, judgments (i.e. guilt, blame, attack, accusation), and fears are pervasive. No wonder there is so much anger, hate and suffering.

Although we give these thoughts “prime time” and much importance, we are not compelled to live with them. We can decide to withdraw the

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attention or importance we are given them. In doing so, we free up space for thoughts of unity, love and wellbeing that are already inside us.

It is not easy to let go of judgments in a world that feeds on them. Nevertheless, it is the only way to heal how we think about ourselves and to become a source of support and healing for others. Letting go of our judgments doesn't mean denying or ignoring them. To the contrary, it is a deliberate process where we decide to release them so as to foster healing and health.

It is especially important for helping professionals and caregivers to learn how this process works and its beneficial impact on their own mental health and professional practice.

Healing the way we think about ourselves implies that we fully recognize our responsibility vis-à-vis the thoughts and beliefs we entertain about ourselves, others and the world given that we are the only one who can change or release them.

As children, we have identified with others and the world thoughts and beliefs – the positive and negative ones – without being aware of it. However, as adults we have the maturity and the resources to take on that responsibility. We can consciously decide to let go of the negative and hurtful thoughts and beliefs about ourselves and others we no longer want.

It is because we are the cause and not the effect of these thoughts that we can decide to let them go. We cannot have painful thoughts and beliefs against our will. However, we can be unaware of the process by which we acquire and entertain them.

Thoughts and beliefs are nothing by themselves. They are void of substance. They do not define who we are and have no meaning, truth or power over us except the one we give them. That is why we can decide to release our negative thoughts and judgments, heal ourselves and be mentally healthy and at peace.

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Healing the way we think about others

Healing the way we think about others is also important since our judgments about them are desperate attempts to free ourselves from our own self-

judgments and are therefore just as much hurtful. Recognizing that we are constantly projecting our self-judgments on others is an important step to cease this painful cycle and heal ourselves and others.

A non-judgemental attitude, which is central to well-trained caregivers, is not only highly recommended in the way we think about others but should be equally adopted and applied in the way we think about ourselves. Healing the way we think about others is learning to look at them not as separated or opposed to us but rather as sharing the same inner challenges, torn between love and fear, and life purpose to be at peace with oneself and others. The differences we see among ourselves are mainly external and superficial. They are uncountable expressions of the same humanity.

It is in the best interest of us all to heal the way we think about ourselves and others because it is only together that we will free ourselves from the thoughts and beliefs that separate and dis-ease one another.

Others are essential to our mental health and wellbeing. And we all are “the other” for someone. Without the others, we would not be capable to see the self-judgments we constantly make on ourselves, which become more

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visible through our projections on others. We owe them our awareness and our greatest transformations.

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True empathy

Helping professionals need to develop empathy towards themselves as much as for others. True empathy is not about connecting ourselves to others' suffering but learning to see ourselves and others as we truly are beyond suffering. Beyond suffering we are beings of reason, decision and transformation capable of healing and wellbeing.

We also need to remind ourselves that true empathy does not exclude anyone. Judgments and attacks, even the most terrible ones, always result from fear, self-doubts, feeling vulnerable and threaten. This is not to say that attacks are justified or that we should accept the unacceptable. This is simply to realize that judging or condemning ourselves for the terrible things we do result in reinforcing and perpetuating separation and conflict between us. Separation can only produce more separation, fear, judgment and suffering.

True empathy reminds us that when we don't see or hear others' distress and call for help behind their reprehensible words or behaviors, it's because we have judge ourselves harshly and need to heal the way we think about ourselves. There is no greater empathy for a helping professional to model for others that they can also see themselves differently by releasing their judgments about themselves and others. The goal is not to be without any judgment but rather to reduce them and benefit from the resulting relief and wellbeing that allows us to continue on this path.

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Letting go of our judgments requires time, determination but also gentleness and indulgence towards us. We are so used to look for or to see the cause of our problems and suffering outside of us, in others or in the world, it's no easy task to recognize -without feeling guilty or judging ourselves - that we are the only ones that have control over the thoughts we have about ourselves and project on others. This is actually where our only real power lies. We can decide anytime to free ourselves from our judgments about ourselves and others and be at peace.

True empathy allows us to recognize and take responsibility for our own thoughts which are under our control, while allowing others to do and experience the same. Again, we are all the same in this. Each one of us has to decide and experience for oneself. We are not helping or supporting others' mental health by overprotecting them or trying to do things for them. To the contrary, it's denying their free will. It's by recognizing and supporting their capacity to think, choose and behave differently that we help them recover, no matter how long they take before getting there. We all have our own pace. Most of us make the same errors repeatedly before being ready to consider other options. One thing is certain: our improvements benefit us all.

Conclusion

To flourish personally and professionally and offer the best of themselves, helping professionals have to know that there is nothing more painful and exhausting than moving in circle in thoughts of fear and judgments as well as trying to control what is not in their control but others. It distorts the way we look at ourselves and others and reinforce the feeling of helplessness.

We have to remember that most of our suffering does not result directly from the external situations we experience with others or in the world but from our interpretations of those situations, which reflect the way we look at ourselves. Therefore, it is by bringing the attention back on the thoughts and beliefs we entertain about ourselves and letting go of the ones that hurt us and others that we can heal and recover our sanity and peace of mind.

As helping professionals, we don't have the obligation to be entirely healed from all thoughts of fear and self-judgments. However, we have the responsibility to care for ourselves and transform the way we look at

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ourselves and others so as to convey health and wellbeing in our caring for others. We are always offering our very best to others when we are doing it from an inner state of indulgence and peace towards ourselves.

Nobody has the power to change others. However, we all have the power to change and heal ourselves. Real changes always happen inside, where decisions are taken. It is also where lies the hope of transforming our

relationships with self and others so as they experience more love, peace and wellbeing.

Better than anyone, helping professionals are well positioned to understand what hope is, model its strength and offer it to others.

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