

research
in practice



Supporting practitioner wellbeing

About this guide

This guide aims to support you, as a social care practitioner, to repair, maintain, grow and sustain your mental health and wellbeing. This will allow you to flourish and continue to support others effectively in your professional practice.

The guide draws upon the extensive research and practice experience of the author, Professor Gail Kinman, and includes approaches and guidance she has developed as well as providing detailed evidence from varied research and practice sources.

The guide includes the following sections:

- > Introduction and background
- > Self-care: the cornerstone of resilience and wellbeing
- > Self-care: repair, maintenance and growth
- > Avoiding burnout
- > Self-compassion
- > Lifestyle and self-care
- > Mindfulness
- > Building your support network
- > Keeping a healthy work-life balance
- > Assembling your own toolbox

There is a **useful resources and websites** section at the end which includes all the resources highlighted in the guide.

Introduction

Although taking care of ourselves seems logical, it is often sacrificed when we are fatigued or feel overwhelmed by the challenges we face. Nonetheless, self-care is essential for continued health and wellbeing, especially for social care practitioners whose work is complex and emotionally demanding. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ pathway to self-care: the skills and strategies that are most effective depend on your circumstances and preferences. This guide provides practical, evidence-informed guidance on self-care to support your mental health and emotional wellbeing. It forms part of Research in Practice’s multi-level, holistic approach to supporting wellbeing in social care and will not only be useful for individual practitioners but can also complement the Social Work Organisational Resilience Diagnostic ([SWORD](#)) framework that provides leaders and managers with evidence-informed tools to support policies and practices to promote wellbeing more widely. Drawing on up-to-date research and resources, including learning gained from the COVID-19 pandemic, this guide will help you develop a self-care action plan and assemble a personalised ‘tool-box’ of strategies that will support your physical, mental and social wellbeing.

Background

Research shows that social care practitioners find their work meaningful and satisfying (McFadden et al., 2018). Nonetheless, working in social care can be challenging and emotionally demanding, with a higher risk of stress and burnout than most other professions (Health and Safety Executive [HSE], 2021; Peinado & Anderson, 2020). The stress experienced by practitioners arises from a combination of occupational factors (e.g. high caseloads and emotional demands) and organisational constraints on their effectiveness (e.g. dealing with bureaucracy and coping with change) (Grant & Kinman, 2014; Ravalier et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these hazards (Baginsky & Manthorpe, 2021) and, although social care workers have shown considerable dedication and resilience, there is evidence that the quality of their working life and mental health have deteriorated (Atfield et al., 2021; McFadden et al., 2021).

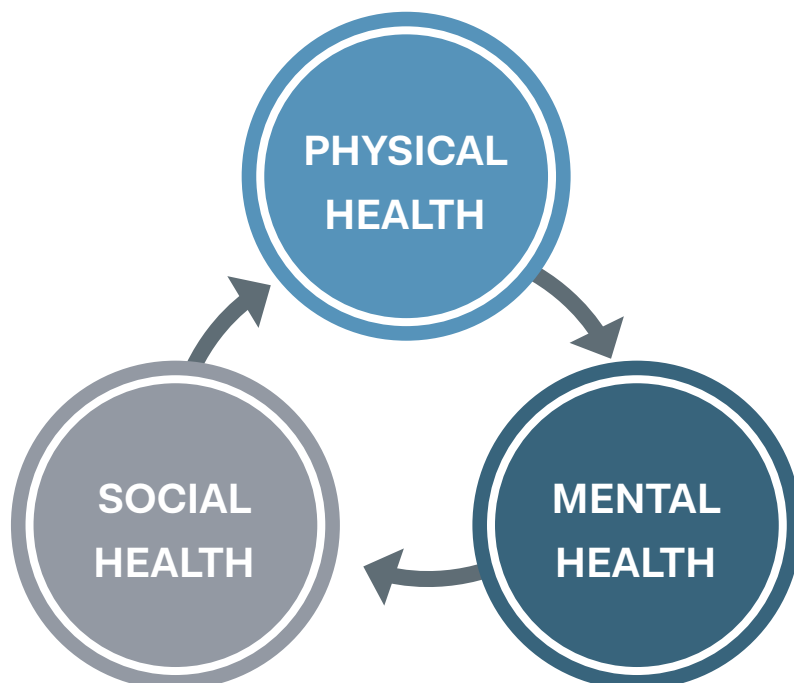
Work-related stress can threaten physical and mental health, personal relationships and job performance (Grant & Kinman, 2014; 2021). Evidence-informed, systemic interventions are therefore essential to help practitioners cope with the demands of the job and remain healthy, satisfied and motivated. Employers have a legal and moral duty of care to protect employees’ wellbeing, so stress must be managed effectively at the organisational level (HSE, 2021). Nonetheless, practitioners are also responsible for developing the resilience required to meet the challenges of a highly pressured working environment and protecting their wellbeing.

Self-care – the cornerstone of resilience and wellbeing

Self-care benefits practitioners' wellbeing in two ways: **directly** by protecting their health and promoting wellbeing and **indirectly** by helping them manage the emotional demands of their job and avoid burning out (Lee & Miller, 2013). Social care practitioners often struggle to prioritise their own wellbeing over meeting the needs of others (Kinman & Grant, 2020). They typically prioritise practices that enhance the wellbeing of their professional self (i.e. to enable them to support others) over those that promote personal self-care (Miller et al., 2019). Nonetheless, maintaining good health via appropriate personal self-care strategies is an essential survival skill, not only to sustain oneself but also to provide the best possible support to people with care and support needs. Reflecting the biopsychosocial model of health (Sarafino & Smith, 2021), the strategies outlined in this guide are designed to help you support the three 'pillars' of health: physical, mental and social. It should be emphasised, however, that the guide aims to help manage stress, prevent burnout and support wellbeing at an early stage of intervention. Practitioners who are experiencing trauma or mental health difficulties should seek professional support from occupational health, an employee assistance programme or their general practitioner. Guidance on managing stress is also available from the NHS and organisations such as Mind. (See the **useful resources and websites** section for links to these organisations as well as further resources.)

Figure 1

The three pillars of health



Self-care: repair, maintenance and growth

As well as strategies designed to protect your physical, mental and social health, your self-care plan should reflect the need to **repair, maintain and grow** your wellbeing. The following exercise will help you do this.

Repair: the remedial actions we take when we notice signs of stress. There are some common symptoms, but people react differently – some respond emotionally (e.g. become irritable, feel overwhelmed or lose confidence), behaviourally (e.g. become indecisive, isolate themselves from others or turn to alcohol or other substances, or physically (e.g. experience headaches, insomnia or food cravings). Key questions to develop your repair strategies are:

- > Think about a time when you took some action because you noticed symptoms of stress or signs of burnout.
- > What signs did you notice and what did you do?
- > How effective were your actions?
- > What could you do to spot these signs sooner and take pre-emptive action?

Maintenance: keeping ourselves ‘ticking over’ and operating at full capacity. Key questions to develop your maintenance strategies are:

- > What do you do to maintain your wellbeing?
- > How successful are these strategies?
- > Do you pay enough attention to your physical, mental and social wellbeing?
- > What else could you do to maintain your wellbeing across these three areas?

Growth: building the capacity for resilience, to feel and perform at our best. Key questions to develop your growth strategies are:

- > What do you do to build your mental and physical resources and invest in your future wellbeing?
- > What type of things might destabilise your actions and what could you do to overcome them?

This guide will help you build your toolbox with self-care strategies for repair, maintenance and growth. A key function of self-care is to avoid burnout, which is discussed next.

Avoiding burnout

Social care practitioners are at particular risk of burnout, which is a state of mental and / or physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. Burnout is defined by Maslach (2011) as a syndrome that occurs among professionals who work with other people in challenging situations with three components:

- > **Emotional exhaustion:** feeling over-extended and drained of emotional and physical energy – ‘I just can’t do this job any longer’
- > **Depersonalisation/cynicism:** active disengagement from one’s job and negative attitudes towards colleagues or people accessing services – ‘I feel that I treat some people I work with impersonally’
- > **Decreased sense of accomplishment:** poor sense of achievement and loss of purpose – ‘Maybe I am not cut out for this type of work. I’m just not good enough’.

Studies conducted over several decades show that burnout can seriously impair physical, mental and social wellbeing and can compromise the quality of care or service provided (Maslach, 2011). Research shows that social care practitioners are at particular risk of burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion (McFadden et al., 2015). The box below describes the early warning signs and common causes of burnout (See Maslach [2011] for more information on the burnout syndrome and Grant & Kinman [2014] for a more in-depth discussion of burnout in social workers).

How can you tell if you are burning out?

The early warning signs

- > Cognitive changes: difficulty making decisions; lack of concentration; increased cynicism, criticism and suspicion of others; doubts about one’s own competence.
- > Emotional changes: anger and frustration; anxiety and fear; feelings of meaningless and being under-valued; loss of enjoyment of work and sense of doing a good job.
- > Physical changes: insomnia and fatigue; unexplained symptoms such as headaches; increased vulnerability to illness.
- > Social changes: feeling alienated from other people; feeling isolated.
- > Behavioural changes: lack of empathy; loss of sense of humour; depersonalising people; self-medication with food, alcohol or drugs.

Common causes

- > Chronically high workload; fast pace of work; long working hours.
- > Lack of resources and support from managers and colleagues.
- > Unclear job expectations.
- > Stretching yourself too thinly.
- > Poor work-life balance; no opportunities to recover from work demands.
- > Weak boundaries; over-involvement in work.
- > Perfectionism; idealism; a rescuing tendency.

Remember that self-care is not a temporary crisis intervention, but a long-term investment in your wellbeing. Trying to repair damage that has already occurred, particularly in the case of burnout, will be more challenging and less effective than employing regular maintenance and growth self-care strategies. You will therefore need all three types of self-care strategy in your toolbox to help you remain well physically, mentally and socially. Fundamental changes to your life are not necessarily required, as small and purposeful efforts can reap many benefits.

First we focus on self-compassion - the foundation of self-care.

Self-compassion

The key to improving self-care is to acknowledge the need to treat ourselves kindly and support ourselves when we are struggling. Identifying ways to soothe ourselves when we are experiencing difficulties can be effective and even small actions can show benefits (see below).

Learn the art of self-soothing

An effective first step in helping us become more self-compassionate is to find out what soothes us. Doing kind things for ourselves, particularly when we are struggling, is comforting and helps repair and maintain our wellbeing. Particularly effective are self-soothing actions that appeal to the five senses: touch, taste, smell, sight and sound. People find different things soothing; some might go for a walk in the countryside or phone a friend for a chat, while others might play music or have a long, relaxing bath. Include the activities that work for you in your self-care plan.

Neff (2016) identifies three elements of self-compassion:

- > **Self-kindness vs self-judgment:** being warm, patient and understanding towards ourselves when we suffer or feel inadequate rather than self-critical and hostile: 'When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need'
- > **Common humanity vs isolation:** recognising that personal suffering and feelings of failure are part of being human, and not something that differentiates us from others: 'When things are going badly for me, I see my difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through'
- > **Mindfulness vs over-identification:** taking a balanced and accepting approach to negative emotions, so our feelings are neither avoided nor exaggerated: 'When something upsets me, I try to keep my emotions in balance'

Figure 2

The three elements of self-compassion as described by Neff (2016)



Neff's tool is available online for you to test how self-compassionate you are overall and across the three different elements (see Neff, 2022).

Self-compassion has many benefits for wellbeing. It protects us from stress and burnout and is a powerful source of resilience, helping us flourish (Kinman & Grant, 2020). Self-compassion can also benefit job performance by enabling us to build better relationships and feel and act more compassionately towards others (Miller et al., 2019). People who are more self-compassionate are also better at implementing lifestyle changes, such as healthy eating, exercise and sleep behaviours (Sirois et al., 2015). Ways to enhance lifestyle self-care are considered later.

Social care workers often struggle with perfectionism, which is another type of negative self-judgment. A recent study found that 'self-oriented' perfectionism (having excessively high standards for ourselves) and 'socially-oriented' perfectionism (feeling that society has high expectations for us) can increase the risk of burnout for practitioners (Kinman & Grant, 2022). Perfectionism can also destabilise self-care by breeding unhealthy self-criticism and encouraging us to work longer and harder. A key function of your self-care toolbox, therefore, is to be self-compassionate and avoid perfectionism. Another way to develop self-compassion is to observe the differences between your inner monologue (or your 'self-talk') and compare this with how you would treat a friend (see below).

Be your own best friend

1. Firstly, imagine that a close friend is having difficulties, or suffering in some way. How would you respond to them? Write down what you would typically do and say, paying particular attention to the tone in which you usually talk to your friends.
2. Secondly, think about times when you have had difficulties, or are suffering in some way. How do you respond to yourself in these situations? Write down what you typically do and say, noting the tone in which you tend to talk to yourself.
3. Can you notice a difference between the two approaches? If so, why? What makes you treat yourself so differently from how you treat others?
4. Consider how things might change if you responded to yourself in the same way as you do to a close friend when you are suffering or experiencing difficulties in your life.

Adapted from <https://self-compassion.org/exercise-1-treat-friend>. Other exercises for enhancing self-compassion can be found on Dr Kristin Neff's website (<https://self-compassion.org>).

Compassion-focused expressive writing

Another tool, compassion-focused expressive writing, can foster the self-reflection that underpins self-compassion.

Try writing a letter to yourself from the perspective of an imaginary friend who is aware of your imperfections but is unconditionally accepting, kind and compassionate towards you. Re-read the letter during difficult times or when your self-compassion needs a boost.

Writing about negative feelings and life experiences more generally can improve our mental and physical health and enhance life satisfaction (Pennebaker, 2017). Research with social care practitioners has also found that expressive writing can boost resilience-building capacities such as emotional literacy, bounded empathy¹ and flexibility (Grant et al., 2014; Tonarelli et al., 2018). Write daily for maximum benefits, but there is evidence that spending only two minutes a day writing about your emotions can benefit health (Burton & King, 2008). There are no rules, but the tips provided below may be helpful.

Tips for emotional writing

- > Find a time and place where you will not be disturbed: e.g. after you finish work for the day.
- > Write continuously. Do not stop to read over what you have written or make any changes.
- > Write about your emotional responses to specific situations, not how you feel generally.
- > Express your positive as well as your negative feelings.
- > Writing in the third person can encourage self-kindness, understanding and compassion.
- > Noting what you were doing and who you were with can help you identify patterns in your emotional reactions to people and situations.
- > If writing about upsetting events, try to focus on the meaning rather than reliving them.
- > When you have finished writing, save it, burn it, erase it, or tear it up.

More information on journaling for stress and mental health can be found [here](#) (Ackerman, 2018).

¹ The ability to take the perspective of others and show emotional understanding and concern, while maintaining professional boundaries to support self-care.

Becoming more mindful (see later section on page 12) can also encourage us to be more self-compassionate. For social care practitioners, reflective supervision can help build the capacities underpinning self-compassion, such as self-kindness and recognition of shared experiences and human fallibility (Coaston, 2019). The benefits of reflective supervision for wellbeing are revisited later in this guide.

The next sections provide strategies that aim to help you promote the three pillars of wellbeing. Included are lifestyle change for your physical wellbeing, mindfulness for your mental wellbeing and support from others for your social wellbeing. Nonetheless, as these aspects of wellbeing are interlinked (Sarafino & Smith, 2021), these strategies will have broader benefits. For example, increasing social support will not only improve social health, but protect mental and physical wellbeing and practising mindfulness is likely to enhance interpersonal relationships and health in general.

Lifestyle and self-care

We all need to treat ourselves occasionally, but self-indulgence offers no sustainable benefits for wellbeing and over-indulgence on a regular basis (for example, with food, alcohol, rest) can make things worse. Becoming aware of what genuinely supports our wellbeing over the longer term will help us balance genuine self-care with self-indulgence. Although it depends on individual circumstances and preferences, some of the lifestyle practices that can underpin sustainable wellbeing are:

- > Health literacy: accessing information to avoid unhealthy lifestyles and promote health.
- > Regular physical activity.
- > Eating healthy and nutritious food and ensuring good hydration.
- > Limiting caffeine.
- > Drinking in moderation and not smoking or getting support to quit.
- > Getting between seven and nine hours of sleep each day.
- > Spending time out of doors each day.
- > Engaging in preventative healthcare such as having regular screening, health ‘MOTs’ and dental check-ups.
- > Getting some ‘me-time’ every week.
- > Avoiding working long hours.
- > Having regular breaks from work and taking sick leave when required.
- > Setting boundaries for technology and social media use.
- > Maintaining hobbies and personal interests.
- > Scheduling time to reflect and to plan and set goals.
- > Developing and drawing upon support networks in personal and professional life.

Following these self-care lifestyle guidelines should improve your energy as well as your health. Managing energy effectively is another key component of your self-care toolbox. Some questions to help you identify what helps you do this and target areas for change are shown below.

I feel better when

I have seven to eight hours of sleep.

I get enough exercise.

I take regular breaks to recoup my energy.

I am able to concentrate on the task in hand rather than be distracted by other things.

I attend to longer-term issues rather than react to crises and demands.

I take time for reflection and creative thinking.

I frequently express my appreciation to others and enjoy my own achievements.

I am able to allocate my time and energy to things that are important to me.

When trying to implement healthy behaviour change, we need to set goals that are stretching but manageable and avoid trying to change too many things at once. As habits require less willpower (Tapper, 2021), try to incorporate the new behaviour into your current routine. For example, exercise in the morning (the new habit) before your breakfast (the existing habit). Remember that healthy habits are inter-connected, so a new goal (e.g. reducing alcohol consumption) is likely to have 'knock-on' effects by improving your sleep, which will increase your energy and, in turn, feeling more energised will encourage you to be more physically active. Successfully adopting a new habit also strengthens feelings of self-efficacy that help us set and meet further goals (Tapper, 2021).

Many things can jeopardise our good intentions – other people, our mood and the situations we are in. Formulating 'if-then' plans can help us eliminate obstacles and maintain behaviour change by reducing the choices available. An if-then plan is simply: 'If X happens, then I will do Y' (where X is the cue and Y is the action). Some examples of plans for lifestyle changes are:

- > If I am working late, then I will have healthy food available that needs little preparation.
- > If I have difficulty sleeping, then I will use a mindfulness app to relax.

If-then plans can promote good self-care practices more generally, for example:

- > **If** Tom criticises my work, **then** I will take a deep breath and tell myself it is just his opinion.
- > **If** I have not finished writing the report before lunch, **then** I will still go on time but make it my priority when I return from my break.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness refers to paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). The wide-ranging benefits of mindfulness for wellbeing make it a particularly effective self-care tool (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence [NICE], 2020). As highlighted above, mindfulness is a key tool for promoting self-compassion. Research has also found it can support the development of key social care skills and values (such as enhanced listening skills, rapport-building and bounded empathy), help build resilience and improve mental health (Kinman et al., 2019; Maddock et al., 2021; McCusker, 2020). Several mindfulness exercises are provided below that cover a range of personal preferences and needs.

Brief mindfulness exercises

Mindful eating. Paying attention to the taste, sight and textures of what you eat. For example, when drinking a cup of tea or coffee you could watch the steam that it gives off or focus on how hot and liquid it feels on your tongue.

Being outdoors mindfully. If possible, find a quiet space outside. Notice the feeling of the air against your skin, the ground below, and the different sights smells and sounds around you.

Body scan. This involves moving your attention slowly through different parts of your body. Start at the top of your head and gradually move down to your toes. You could focus on feelings of warmth or relaxation in different parts of your body.

Awareness of breathing. Sit quietly and focus on your breathing, your thoughts, your bodily sensations and what you can hear around you. You could do a body scan (see above) or explore bodily sensations randomly as they occur. If your mind wanders, simply notice this is happening and gently focus yourself back to the present.

Focus on a single task. Place your attention on one experience or activity at a time. As with mindful breathing, if your mind wanders return to the task in hand. You are likely to accomplish more than you would trying to multi-task and make fewer errors.

Additional mindfulness exercises can be found [here](#) (Ackerman, 2017). Several mindfulness apps are available with a range of strategies for different situations, such as Calm and Headspace. More information on how mindfulness can be used by social workers can be found in Grant and Kinman (2014).

Building your support network

Social support is one of the most important health promoting resources. Social care practitioners who feel better supported tend to be more resilient and mentally and physically healthy (Grant & Kinman, 2014; Sánchez-Moreno et al., 2014). For many, working at home during the COVID-19 pandemic challenged existing support structures and the functioning of the team as a secure base, restricting opportunities to share experiences and feel understood by others (Cook et al., 2020). Emotional support from colleagues and peer support groups are crucial in helping practitioners maintain a sense of wellbeing and purpose, particularly during these demanding and uncertain times. Supervision is also an important mechanism to discuss wellbeing and any additional support that may be needed. A strong network of supportive relationships (both inside and outside work) is therefore a key aspect of self-care.

One way to expand your support network is to create your own A-Team. This is an informal group of individuals that can support you when you are struggling and when you are thriving and provide useful advice, encouragement and feedback. Diversity of backgrounds, experience and perspectives and mutual trust are key criteria for your A-Team, but members might be, for example, current or former colleagues, friends or family, or people in your community. You will probably need to include people with the following qualities (listed in the box below), but the specific roles required will depend on your preferences and circumstances. To benefit most from these supportive relationships, it is important to maintain contact with your A-Team members by having regular 'catch ups' when things are going well, as well as when you are experiencing challenges in your life. As support is a two-way process, try to reciprocate by joining other people's A-Team.

This has been adapted from the tool 'My Personal Board of Directors' on page 84 of the [SWORD Workbook](#).

My personal A Team

Someone who you can accept criticism from.

Someone who knows you better than you know yourself.

Someone with relevant skills and expertise.

Someone who is a role model for you.

Someone who helps you be creative.

Someone who has practical solutions.

Someone who can challenge your assumptions and offer a new perspective.

Someone who can see the 'bigger picture' on a situation or issue.

Someone who supports you emotionally.

Someone who has accumulated wisdom.

Someone who is one of your greatest 'cheerleaders'.

Someone from another generation (older or younger).

The next section provides tips on improving your work-life balance – a key aspect of self-care and essential for maintaining physical, mental and social wellbeing.

Keeping a healthy work-life balance

Social care practitioners often struggle to maintain a healthy balance across their work and personal life. A range of personal factors, such as caring responsibilities, family issues, financial worries and the challenges faced by people in minority groups or with disabilities, can impair work-life balance. Research with social workers has also shown that characteristics of the job, such as the emotionally demanding and complex nature of the work, short staffing, lack of support, poor interpersonal relationships, meeting the expectations of others and a strong sense of duty, can also lead to work-life conflict (Grant & Kinman, 2014; Kalliath et al., 2012). Research has found that work can interfere with personal life in several ways, but time-based and strain-based conflict are particularly relevant to social care workers (Grant & Kinman, 2014; Kalliath & Kalliath, 2015):

- > Time-based conflict: when the time spent in one role (e.g. the work role) limits that available for other activities. For example, a heavy caseload will mean long working hours and less time available to spend with family or on social activities and self-care.
- > Strain-based conflict arises when negative psychological reactions to work situations ‘spill over’ into personal life. The emotional demands of social care work can make practitioners feel anxious, distracted, or irritable outside work. Concerns about the progress and wellbeing of people with care and support needs can also encourage unhealthy rumination that will threaten recovery processes.

Both types of conflict can jeopardise practitioners’ physical, mental and social health as well as their professional effectiveness. An inability to recover from work demands is likely to result in sleeping difficulties, fatigue and more serious complaints such as burnout over time (Grant & Kinman, 2014). Learning how to switch off and to avoid ruminating excessively about work-related problems is therefore an essential self-care strategy and will help reduce strain-based conflict. This Research in Practice [webinar – ‘Recovery, work-life balance, wellbeing: how to switch off’](#) highlights the importance of detachment from work worries and concerns, and highlights some strategies to help people develop healthy boundaries between their work and personal life. The exercises provided in this guide that aim to reduce perfectionism and self-criticism, and enhance self-compassion will help you avoid rumination, but more information is provided below. As highlighted above, however, it is important to remember that your employer has a legal responsibility to support your wellbeing and should take steps to ensure you are not overloaded.

Switching off – breaking the rumination cycle

Learn your triggers: recognise when you are ruminating and what you ruminate about.

Spot patterns: identify where and when you are most likely to ruminate and what you are doing.

Gain perspective: when we ruminate, we often filter out the positive and become trapped in a spiral of negative thinking. Take time out or discuss the situation with someone else.

Seek distraction: a mundane or practical task can stop rumination by taking your mind off the problem.

Realise that rumination is not helpful: recognise the differences between constructive reflection, planning and problem-solving and damaging rumination.

Recalibrate your standards: getting a task done is often more important than ensuring it is done perfectly. Recognise when something is good enough by getting feedback from others.

Think positively: when ruminating about a future situation or task that makes you feel anxious, remember when you have been successful in doing something similar.

Monitor your progress: try different strategies to find the approach that works best for you.

More information on avoiding rumination and effective strategies for switching off can be found in Cropley (2015). Cognitive-behavioural strategies and mindfulness-based interventions are particularly effective in reducing rumination and worry (Querstret & Cropley, 2013). As rumination is a vulnerability factor for depression and anxiety (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008), you might wish to contact your general practitioner if you experience recurrent negative thinking.

To switch off effectively, we need strategies that help us transition between our work and personal life (Kinman et al., 2020). The COVID-19 crisis required many social care workers to work at home for an extended period. Employers are increasingly adopting a 'hybrid' approach that blends on-site and remote working. Although homeworking can increase flexibility and boost productivity, practitioners can struggle to get the support they need (see above) and find maintaining boundaries between 'work' and 'home' more challenging. Whether you work in or outside your home, strategies are needed to help you switch between your professional and personal roles to support your work-life balance. Some guidance is provided on the following page.

How to improve your work-life balance

- > Have regular breaks away from your desk: this will get you into the habit of switching off.
- > Get up and move around throughout the day: this will improve your focus and avoid musculoskeletal problems.
- > Get outside in the daylight: if possible, adjust your working hours so you can take a daily walk.
- > Have an unwinding ritual: for the last 30 minutes, only start jobs that you can complete easily; spend the time on digital housekeeping, or clearing your desk.
- > Write a daily 'exit' list: jotting down your tasks for the next day will help clear your mind and provide a sense of resolution. Reviewing the list the next day will mentally prepare you for the tasks ahead.
- > Find a 'corridor' between work and home: people who do emotionally demanding work need to 'decompress' physically and mentally before moving into their personal life. Consider how you can transition between work and home: change your clothes, have a shower, cook a meal, or go for a run. Mindful walking can be a good way to switch off (see above).
- > Be mindful: when you are at work, focus on work, but when you are at home and with family and friends, be fully present mentally as well as physically.
- > Find a restorative place: spend 15 to 20 minutes somewhere you feel happy and relaxed. This could be a favourite chair or a place in the garden. Alternatively, try guided imagery, which is a type of focused relaxation or meditation where you concentrate on a specific scene, event, or object using your five senses (see Scott, 2020) or progressive muscle relaxation, a technique that involves tensing and relaxing each muscle group in turn in order to release tension (Cuncic, 2020).
- > Disconnect from technology: this will help you switch off and recoup your energy.
- > Use your diary to schedule activities that you enjoy: planning your leisure time well in advance will ensure you have opportunities to switch off.

Some questions to help you enhance your work-life balance are provided below. See Grant and Kinman (2014) for further guidance on work-life balance in social work and how it can be enhanced.

When developing a self-care plan to improve work-life balance, ask the following questions:

- > How satisfied are you with your work-life balance? Do you feel you need to make changes?
- > What changes would you like to make? What strategies are likely to work for you?
- > What goals can you set to improve your work-life balance?
- > What factors are likely to destabilise your goals? How will you tackle them? Try the 'If-then' technique shown on page 11.
- > How can you monitor your progress?

Work-life balance wheel

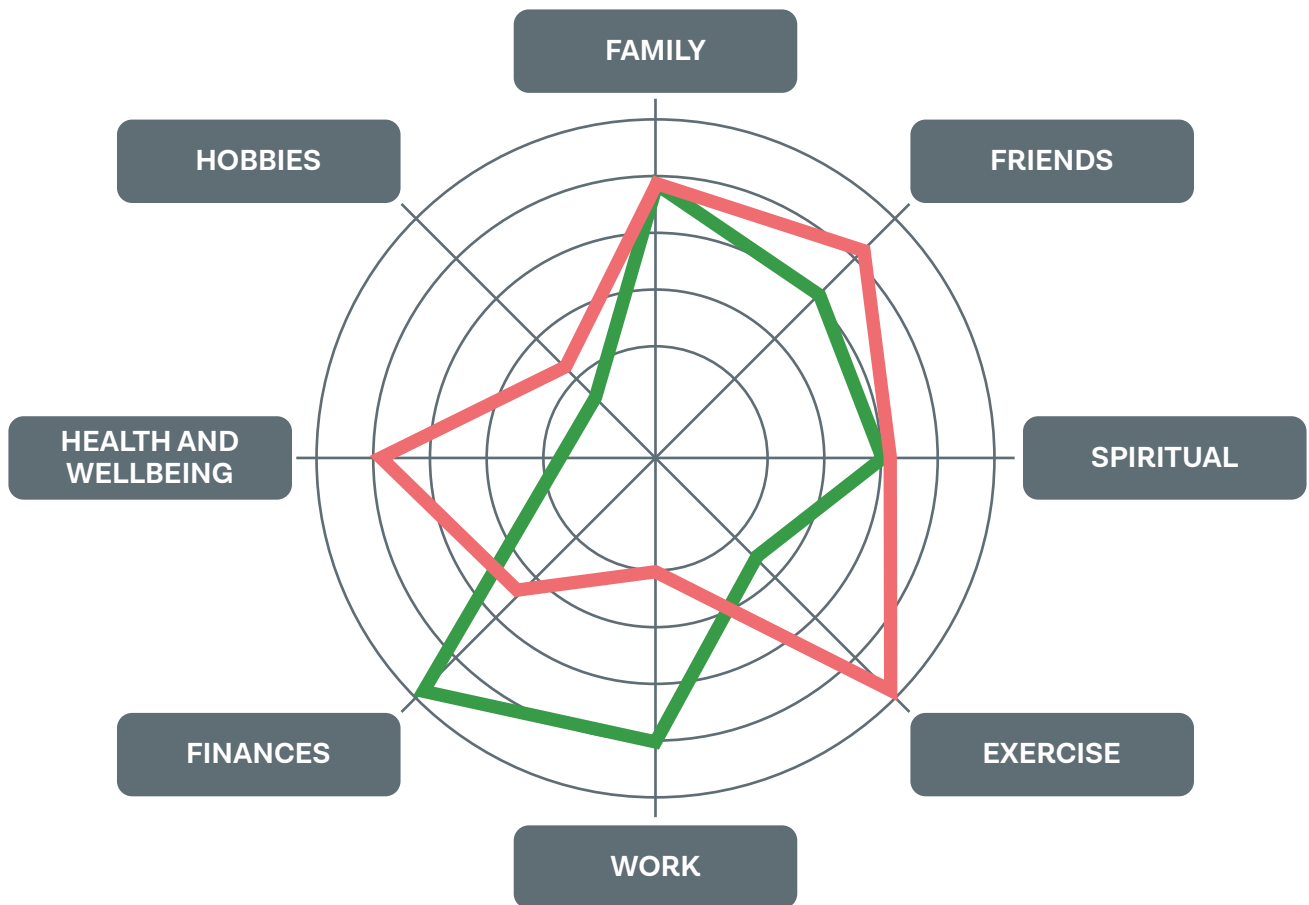
To enhance balance, we should consider the amount of time and energy we spend on different aspects of our life and how closely this is aligned to our personal values. The work-life balance wheel is a useful, self-reflective tool to help us accomplish this (see Grant & Kinman, 2014). Make a list of the most significant work and non-work elements in your life – they may include the following:

- > career, education, training and personal development
- > relationships with partner, children, other family members and friends
- > health, exercise and nutrition
- > fun and recreation
- > hobbies, interests and creative pursuits
- > community activities
- > emotional wellbeing and personal growth
- > spirituality or religious commitments.

Next, plot each element on a wheel representing the amount of attention you currently give to each aspect, allocating scores of 1 to 5 (see below), where the inner circles represent low scores and the outer circles for higher scores. A low score (1 or 2) suggests that you are not giving this aspect much consideration, whereas a score of 5 shows that you give it a great deal. Indicative scores are shown by the green line in the example below. The next step is to consider the level of attention you would like to give to each aspect of your life. Provide a second set of scores for each dimension on the same wheel: as above, a low score (1 or 2) means that this aspect is not very important to you, whereas a high score (4 or 5) indicates that it is very important. The example below (Figure 3) shows these scores as a red line. Finally, compare any discrepancies between the two sets of scores and identify where the biggest differences lie. In the example you can see that the individual who has drawn up their wheel is spending considerable time and energy at work, and financial concerns are also a key focus. Health, wellbeing and exercise and time with friends are getting much less attention than desired. Is this sustainable and what could they do to change this?

Figure 3

Example of a work-life wheel



Guidance for managers on supporting work-life balance for social care practitioners with particular focus on home workers is available in this Research in Practice briefing: [Supporting Wellbeing Remotely](#) and in the [SWORD](#) workbook.

Finally, here are some key tips for self-care and wellbeing based on a synthesis of research and practice:

Ten Top Tips for self-care and wellbeing

- > Check in on yourself each day: Do you feel OK? If not, identify the problem and the support you need.
- > Block off time for self-care: regularly schedule time in your diary like you would for any other important task.
- > Learn to say 'no': decline tasks that would add more stress to your life. Communicate your message clearly, concisely and unapologetically. See [here for further guidance on how and when to say 'no'](#).
- > Support your mental health via a personalised Wellness Action Plan: this identifies your triggers, the signs you may be struggling and the type of support you need. Different Wellness Action Plan templates are available for people who are working in an office, working remotely or hybrid working – [see here](#).
- > Schedule time to address your worries: make a note of your concerns during the day and set a specific time to work through these thoughts.
- > Avoid multi-tasking: regularly switching between tasks can extend your working day by up to two hours.
- > Write an 'I-did' list; unlike a 'To do' list, this will highlight what you have accomplished throughout the day and foster a more positive outlook and a sense of self efficacy.
- > Switch off email notifications: they can be distracting and can cause stress and anxiety.
- > Notice your strengths and celebrate success: keep a folder of positive feedback and achievements and read it when you need a boost.

Conclusion: Assembling your personal self-care toolbox

Self-care is essential for continued health and wellbeing and for optimum functioning at work. This guide will help you build your personal toolbox with self-care strategies to support your physical, mental and social health. The exercises are designed to aid you in repairing, maintaining and growing your wellbeing, helping you to not only avoid burnout but to flourish. The importance of self-compassion – the foundation of self-care – has been emphasised, with a range of strategies included to help you become kinder and more understanding towards yourself. The key lifestyle practices that underpin sustainable wellbeing have been considered and ways to set and implement healthy behaviour change goals identified. Strategies to help you become more mindful, reduce perfectionism and rumination, and build your support network are likely to be particularly helpful tools in your box. Finally, the importance of maintaining a healthy work-life balance for wellbeing and professional effectiveness has been emphasised with strategies to help you accomplish this. The 'My Self-Care' list in Annex 1 will help prepare an action plan for change and monitor your progress towards your goals. Remember to periodically review the effectiveness of the strategies you use and consider whether you need to supplement them to accommodate new circumstances and challenges.



Useful resources and websites

Tools to support staff wellbeing

- > Supporting wellbeing remotely:
www.researchinpractice.org.uk/all/publications/2021/october/supporting-wellbeing-remotely-leaders-briefing-2021/
- > Recovery, work-life balance, wellbeing: how to switch off:
www.researchinpractice.org.uk/all/content-pages/videos/recovery-work-life-balance-wellbeing-how-to-switch-off/
- > Social Work Organisational Resilience Diagnostic (SWORD):
<https://sword.researchinpractice.org.uk/>
- > SWORD workbook:
<https://sword.researchinpractice.org.uk/media/5989/sword-tool-workbook-2nd-edition-2021.pdf>
- > Wellness Action Plans from Mind:
www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-your-staff/employer-resources/wellness-action-plan-download/
- > Self-compassion test from Dr Kristin Neff:
<https://self-compassion.org/self-compassion-test/>
- > Self-compassion exercise from Dr Kristin Neff:
<https://self-compassion.org/exercise-1-treat-friend/>
- > Benefits of journaling from Positive Psychology:
<https://positivepsychology.com/benefits-of-journaling/>
- > Mindfulness exercises from Positive Psychology:
<https://positivepsychology.com/mindfulness-exercises-techniques-activities/>
- > Calm mindfulness app:
www.calm.com/
- > Headspace mindfulness app:
www.headspace.com/

Information to support people experiencing stress.

- > NHS

www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/stress/

- > Mind

www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/stress/managing-stress-and-building-resilience/

Example of support programmes within organisations

- > Example of Employee Assistance Programme in a Local Authority. Southwark Council.

[www.southwark.gov.uk/southwark-stands-together-workforce-workstream/help-and-support#:~:text=Employee%20Assistance%20Programme%20\(EAP\)&text=You%20have%20access%20to%20a,debt%20and%20health%20and%20wellbeing](http://www.southwark.gov.uk/southwark-stands-together-workforce-workstream/help-and-support#:~:text=Employee%20Assistance%20Programme%20(EAP)&text=You%20have%20access%20to%20a,debt%20and%20health%20and%20wellbeing)

References

- Ackerman, C. E. (2017, 18 January). *22 Mindfulness Exercises and Activities For Adults*. Positive Psychology.
<https://positivepsychology.com/mindfulness-exercises-techniques-activities/>
- Ackerman, C. E. (2018, 14 May). *83 Benefits of Journaling for Depression, Anxiety, and Stress*. Positive Psychology.
<https://positivepsychology.com/benefits-of-journaling/>
- Atfield, G., Baldauf, B., & Kispeter, E. (2021). *Mitigating the impacts of COVID-19. Rapid evidence review – Education, childcare and social work and related social care workforce*. University of Warwick.
<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/research/mitigatingimpactsofcovid19>
- Baginsky, M., & Manthorpe, J. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on Children’s Social Care in England. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 116.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104739>
- Burton, C. M., & King, L. A. (2008). Effects of (very) brief writing on health: The two-minute miracle. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 13(1), 9–14.
<https://doi.org/10.1348/135910707X250910>
- Coaston, S. C. (2019). Cultivating self-compassion within the supervision relationship. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 38(1), 79–96.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07325223.2018.1525596>
- Cook, L. L., Zschomler, D., Biggart, L., & Carder, S. (2020). The team as a secure base revisited: Remote working and resilience among child and family social workers during COVID-19. *Journal of Children’s Services*, 15(4), 259–166.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-07-2020-0031>
- Cropley, M. (2015). *The Off Switch: Leave Work on Time, Relax Your Mind But Still Get More Done*. Random House.
- Cuncic, A. (2020, 3 August). *How to Practice Progressive Muscle Relaxation: A Step-by-Step Plan to Relax Your Body*. Very Well Mind.
<https://www.verywellmind.com/how-do-i-practice-progressive-muscle-relaxation-3024400>
- Grant, L., & Kinman, G. (2021). *The Social Work Organisational Resilience Diagnostic Workbook*. Research in Practice.
<https://sword.researchinpractice.org.uk/about/>
- Grant, L., & Kinman, G. (2014). *Developing Resilience for Social Work Practice*. Macmillan.
- Grant, L., Kinman, G., & Alexander, K. (2014). What’s all this talk about emotion? *Social Work Education*. 33(7), 874–889.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2014.891012>
- Health and Safety Executive (2021). *Work-related Stress, Anxiety or Depression in Great Britain 2021*. Health and Safety Executive.
<https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress.pdf>.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2005). *Coming To Our Senses: Healing Ourselves And The World Through Mindfulness*. Hachette UK.

Kalliath, P., Hughes, M., & Newcombe, P. (2012). When work and family are in conflict: Impact on psychological strain experienced by social workers in Australia. *Australian Social Work*, 65(3), 355–371.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2011.625035>

Kalliath, P., & Kalliath, T. (2015). Work-family conflict and its impact on job satisfaction of social workers. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 45(1), 241–259. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct125>

Kinman, G., Grant, C., Fraser, N., Bell, N., Breslin, G., Colville, T., Kwiatowski, R., Steele, C., Tehrani, N., Thomson, L., Waites, B., Whittaker, L., & MacKey, G. (2020). *Working from home: healthy sustainable working during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond*. The British Psychological Society.

<https://cms.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Working%20from%20home.pdf>

Kinman, G., & Grant, L. (2022). Being ‘good enough’: Perfectionism and well-being in social workers. *The British Journal of Social Work*.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac010>

Kinman, G., & Grant, L. (2020). Emotional demands, compassion and mental health in social workers. *Occupational Medicine*, 20(2), 89–94.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqz144>

Kinman, G., Grant, L., & Kelly, S. (2019). ‘It’s my secret space’: The benefits of mindfulness for social workers. *The British Journal of Social Work*.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcz073>

Lee, J. J., & Miller, S. E. (2013). A self-care framework for social workers: Building a strong foundation for practice. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 94(2), 96–103.

<https://doi.org/10.1606%2F1044-3894.4289>

McCusker, P. (2020). *Mindfulness in Social Work Education and Practice*. Insight 56. IRISS <https://www.iriss.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-07/insights-56.pdf>

McFadden, P., Neill, R.D., Mallett, J., Manthorpe, J., Gillen, P., Moriarty, J., Currie, D., Schroder, H., Ravalier, J., Nicholl, P., & Ross, J. (2021). Mental well-being and quality of working life in UK social workers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: A propensity score matching study. *British Journal of Social Work*.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab198>

McFadden, P., Manthorpe, G., & Mallett, J. (2018). Commonalities and differences in social work with learning disability and child protection: Findings from a UK ‘Burnout’ national survey. *British Journal of Social Work*, 48(5), 1199–1219.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx070>

McFadden, P., Campbell, A., & Taylor, B. (2015). Resilience and burnout in child protection social work: Individual and organisational themes from a systematic literature review. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 45(5), 1546–1563.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct210>

Maddock, A., McCusker, P., Blair, C., & Roulston, A. (2021). The Mindfulness-Based Social Work and Self-Care Programme: A Mixed Methods Evaluation Study. *British Journal of Social Work*.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab203>

Maslach, C. (2011). *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*. Malor Books.

Miller, J., Lee, J., Niu, C., Grise-Owens, E., & Bode, M. (2019). Self-compassion as a predictor of self-care: A study of social work clinicians. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 47(4), 321-331.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-019-00710-6>

Neff, K. D. (2016). The self-compassion scale is a valid and theoretically coherent measure of self-compassion. *Mindfulness*, 7(1), 264-274.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-015-0479-3>

Neff, K.D. (2022). *The self-compassion test*.

<https://self-compassion.org/self-compassion-test/>

NICE. (2020). *Using mindfulness to support mental wellbeing at work for children's social care front line practitioners*. NICE shared learning database.

<https://www.nice.org.uk/sharedlearning/using-mindfulness-to-support-mental-wellbeing-at-work-for-children-s-social-care-front-line-practitioners>

Nolen-Hoeksema, S., Wisco, B. E., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). Rethinking rumination. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3(5), 400-424.

Peinado, M., & Anderson, K. N. (2020). Reducing social worker burnout during COVID-19. *International Social Work*, 63(6), 757-760.

<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0020872820962196>

Pennebaker, J. W. (2017). Expressive writing in psychological science. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 13(2), 226-229.

<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1745691617707315>

Querstret, D., & Cropley, M. (2013). Assessing treatments used to reduce rumination and/or worry: A systematic review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 33(8), 996-1009.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2013.08.004>

Ravalier, J. M., McFadden, P., Boichat, C., Clabburn, O., & Moriarty, J. (2021). Social worker well-being: A large mixed-methods study. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 51(1), 297-317.

Sánchez-Moreno, E., de La Fuente Roldán, I.N., Gallardo-Peralta, L.P. & Barrón López de Roda, A. (2014). Burnout, informal social support and psychological distress among social workers. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 45(8), 2368-2386.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcu084>

Sarafino, E., & Smith, T. (2021). *Health Psychology: Biopsychosocial Interactions* (10th ed.). Wiley.

Scott, E. (2020). *Use guided imagery for relaxation*. Very Well Mind.

<https://www.verywellmind.com/use-guided-imagery-for-relaxation-3144606>

Sirois, F. M., Kitner, R., & Hirsch, J. K. (2015). Self-compassion, affect, and health-promoting behaviours. *Health Psychology*, 34(6), 661-669.

<https://doi.apa.org/doi/10.1037/hea0000158>

Tapper, K. (2021). *Health Psychology and Behaviour Change: From Science to Practice*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Tonarelli, A., Cosentino, C., Tomasoni, C., Nelli, L., Damiani, I., Goisis, S., Sarli, L., & Artioli, G. (2018). Expressive writing: A tool to help health workers of palliative care. *Acta Biomed*, 89(6-S), 35-42.

<https://doi.org/10.23750/abm.v89i6-S.7452>

MY SELF-CARE LIST

What steps can I take to improve my self-care? Identify five steps for each of the four domains below. They can include things you want to do (such as be more active), stop doing (such as working during the weekend) and those you wish to reduce (such as limiting the time you spend on social media). You can also include things that you feel would be beneficial but may not easily fit into the four domains: e.g., new activities (e.g. learning a new language) and activities you used to enjoy but have neglected (e.g. playing the piano).

Physical

Psychological/emotional

Social

Workplace

Personal development

MY SELF-CARE PLAN

Pick a few options from your self-care list. Remember that your holistic self-care plan should address all four elements of your life and include areas for personal development in general.

Physical self-care

Psychological/emotional self-care

Social self-care

Workplace self-care

Personal development

1. Set **SMART** goals for an action in each of the domains (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Anchored within a time frame) – remember not to overwhelm yourself by being too ambitious.
2. Identify “If-then” strategies for each goal (see page 11)

Evaluate progress and revise goals (upwards or downwards)

Author: Gail Kinman

©Research in Practice October 2022

Research in Practice
The Granary, Dartington Hall
Totnes, Devon, TQ9 6EE
tel: 01803 867 692
email: ask@researchinpractice.org.uk

Research in Practice is a programme of The Dartington Hall Trust which is registered in England as a company limited by guarantee and a charity. Company No. 1485560 Charity No. 279756 VAT No. 402196875 Registered Office: The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall, Totnes TQ9 6EL

ISBN 978-1-915669-10-0

www.researchinpractice.org.uk
