

# Basics of Awareness

## *Knowing Yourself*

We open this chapter with a story from Mitch:

When I reached middle age (early, early, middle age), we got a treadmill to get some exercise. I was very anxious to get started, so I just turned the machine on, got the tread revolving, and started walking. On the model we bought, there are about twenty different built-in programs that simulate everything from a power walk to a climb up a hill at heart-pumping speed. There are hundreds of different settings, none of which I've used in ten years!

As you are reading this scenario you might be thinking, "Wow Mitch, what a waste. You are really missing out on some good exercise." And you are right! By Mitch not familiarizing himself with the basic machinery – not reading the instructions nor doing some systematic assessment – he's missing out on a high level of effectiveness even though he gets an adequate amount of exercise. Or you might be thinking, "No big deal Mitch; you're getting enough exercise. Listen, there's no need to bother with all the bells and whistles." You might be right on this view too. For a home treadmill, this may be a perfectly fine way to go. After all, it's Mitch's money; he can do with it as he pleases. He's not influencing anybody else.

But the scenario and our responses change when we're talking about a professional activity with potentially huge impacts – positive or negative – on other people. This is when positive ethics come into play. When we involve positive ethics, we are obligated to do more than the minimum. We need to move beyond the ethical floor (staying out of trouble) and shoot for the ethical ceiling (excellent and exemplary professional practice) (Handelsman, Knapp, & Gottlieb, 2002; Knapp & VandeCreek, 2006).

Think about your graduate school applications: Did you say you wanted to be adequate, to help people *a little*, to be only as good a therapist as you need to avoid being complained about? Similar to the treadmill scenario, merely doing some quick walking on the treadmill and not falling off is not reaping the benefits of a well equipped machine! To shoot for the ethical ceiling means more than just following rules and staying out of trouble. When you do good work and stay motivated, you do so in a personal and professional context that makes sense and resonates with both your head and heart. Corey, Corey, and Callanan (2007) state that a major piece of psychotherapy is the person part of the therapist which includes the psychotherapist's values, needs, and personal motivations.

We wholeheartedly agree. We want help you gain a solid working knowledge of your own ethical origins, a clear understanding of how positive ethics is possible, and an appreciation for the relationship between ethics and excellent therapeutic practice.

At this point you might be thinking, "OK, already, you've convinced me. Let's get on with it. Just show me the ethics! I'll follow the rules. Just let me get started!" To this we say, "Hold on!" We encourage you to explore who you are morally and ethically as well as to take some time to learn about the "treadmill" – learn about the psychotherapy culture. Here we dedicate some time to explore the pre-existing workout programs – explore your personal morals and values that you are bringing into your new profession. And then we can examine how you might modify your workout – assess the match or mismatch between the profession's culture and your personal ethics, values, and morals.

We want you to achieve the high goals you have for your work by using every bit of your professional knowledge and putting your virtuous character to work. That's why in this chapter we focus on you. We're not going to talk (yet) about rules to follow. Rather, we're going to ask you to look at your feelings, motivations, values, virtues, and moral courage. These elements contribute to your personal and professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary in order to do more than follow the rules. In other words, we want you to develop a comprehensive and coherent ethical identity as a professional.

For us, positive ethics includes codes and rules but moves beyond them to explore the moral dimensions of the profession. This exploration is accomplished through the lenses of values, virtues, self-care,

ethical decision-making, sensitivity, valuing the moral foundations of ethics codes, and encouraging positive behaviors (Kuther, 2003). The foundation of positive ethics begins with understanding yourself in the context of the profession. So let's get started on our exploration.



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## Food for Thought: *Feelings, Nothing More Than Feelings*

How are you feeling about becoming (being) a psychotherapist? Scared? Excited? Intimidated? Impatient? Fulfilled? Picture yourself in therapy sessions with a variety of different kinds of clients (e.g., tall, short, female, male, Native American, White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, heterosexual, homosexual, homeless, rich, able-bodied, wheelchair-bound, motivated, unmotivated, clean, dirty, attractive, unattractive, old, young, genteel, foul-mouthed, thin, obese, urban, rural, liberal, conservative, communist, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, orthodox, atheist, truck-driver, rock star, psychotherapist). Now picture the "perfect" client and list all the feelings you have, especially as you anticipate being in a session with this person. Next, picture your least favorite client and list all the feelings you might have as you anticipate seeing this person. Our emotions are a critical part of our experience with clients. They inform us about our prejudices, biases, preferences, and values.



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From reading your other textbooks, or from what you have heard from your colleagues, classmates, and professors, you might be feeling overwhelmed. You might have said something like this to yourself: "There's too much; I don't know how to handle it. I hear people talking about confidentiality, reporting child abuse, boundaries, multiple relationships – how do I keep all this straight!" If this is the case, we draw upon the treadmill analogy and say, "It seems intimidating now because you haven't even read the instructions yet!" When you see the

flashing lights on the treadmill that read, “Choose your program,” you feel helpless only because you haven’t prepared yourself with information to make a choice.

The opposite reaction is to be *underwhelmed* as you anticipate being a psychotherapist or meeting with your current clients. You might be asking yourself, “Why are ethics such a big deal? It seems like there are so many rules – Don’t do this and don’t do that! What’s wrong with ‘If it feels good, do it’? I am a nice person and I care about clients – isn’t that enough?” You may be reacting like Mitch did when he first stepped on the treadmill: “Just show me how to make that thing move, and I’ll take it from there. I don’t need to bother with the preliminaries and the extras.” You might be a bit impatient and want to move on a little more quickly than is wise.

Here’s our suggestion: Relax a little, no matter what you are thinking and feeling about your professional journey. We want you to take one step at a time and make an investment in the material of this chapter. It will pay off, both for you and your clients.

## **Motivations**

As a part of your ethical identity, your motivations for being a psychotherapist are analogous to the fuel or energy that propels the new treadmill. Unlike simple machines, however, the sources of energy – your motivations – are many and varied. When we review the statements of interest written by prospective students, we always come across a number of noble motivations: “I want to help people as a way to change the world by relieving the suffering of individuals.” Often, these noble motivations seem to match up well with personal characteristics and stated experiences of students: “I was always the one whom my friends confided in. I guess that means I’m a good listener,” or, “My friends typically look to me for guidance. If they have a problem, I’m the one they contact,” or, “I like to help people and seem to be pretty good at it. My friends tell me I am a natural. I think this makes me a good match for being a therapist.”

Such noble motivations and basic skills are important, but they are merely the tip of the iceberg. There are thousands of other motivations which can and typically do run the gamut from the highest motives to change the world to very personal and individual ones. Sometimes we

are aware of other motives, although we refrain from listing them on graduate school applications because they don't seem relevant or because we're a little ashamed of them. For example, most of us want and need to earn money to make a living. We also want to be in a profession that enjoys some prestige. Other times our motives are hidden, even from us. We might be motivated by power, personal prestige, or other personal drives. Uncovering the personal needs that drive our motivations for becoming a psychotherapist is important (Bashe, Anderson, Handelsman, & Klevansky, 2007). Here's an example of why it's important to understand the personal needs. This is from Sharon:

I realized during my internship year that one of my motivations to become a psychotherapist grew out of a subconscious drive to make sense of my own family dynamics. This realization came to light while working with an estranged couple. I saw the husband as not caring and aloof and the wife as emotionally neglected and fragile. I felt good about my work with this couple until my supervisor viewed a session on tape. At one point she stopped the tape and pointed out how I had really aligned myself with the wife and joined her in verbally mistreating her husband. My first response was shock. My next response was "Ouch!" My professional ego had been pinched! My subconscious need to "fix" a family-of-origin relationship compromised my ability to connect with the husband of this couple. I wasn't listening well and I was not being helpful to my clients. In this case, my purely personal motivation inhibited my professional motivation. (We'll mention this story again in chapter 8 on supervision.)

Some personal motives, however, are appropriate – in the right amount – to merge with professional ones. Think of nitroglycerine: In small doses, it can keep people alive. In larger doses, it can blow people up. Small doses of some personal motivations, balanced with professional motivations and sensitivity, will work well together. For example, a little psychological voyeurism (wanting to hear about other people's private lives) might be a good thing when combined with compassion, respect, helping, and objectivity. The voyeurism might keep you interested! Another example is your financial and power motives. These two motives, used appropriately, allow you to do what you do and to achieve your larger goals of helping and service.

The bottom line: Psychotherapy is a profession, which means you don't just get to do what you want to do. Your *primary* motivations need to be professional and moral (Rest, 1983, 1994; Kitchener, 2000), even though your personal motivations play a role.



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### Journal Entry: *Motivations*

In this activity we'll be asking you to dig deep and share some of the most personal and private elements of your professional identity. Therefore, we suggest that you complete at least the first two parts of this entry in a very private place where you can be honest with yourself.

*Part 1* Answer the following questions as truthfully as you can: Why do (or did) you want to be a psychotherapist? When you think back (or forward) to completing your application for graduate school, what were your top three reasons for applying? What personal needs are getting met by being or becoming a psychotherapist?

Be inclusive in your list of motivations. Certainly include the noble motivations, the ones you discussed on your applications (e.g., helping people live better lives). But also include the base motivations, the more "human" and personal ones (e.g., a sense of power, having an office rather than a cubicle, comfortable chairs, prestige, the enjoyment of being needed, hearing stories of others, or wanting to save others from the kind of family you had). Go beyond what you know and speculate about some motivations that you *might* have even if you are not in touch with them at the moment. Remember Sharon's story? If she had done this exercise during her training before internship, she might have uncovered the hidden need to understand family dynamics and been less likely to align herself with only one part of the couple.

*Part 2* After you have generated as complete a list of motivations as you can, think about how central each motivation is or might be. Rate each motivation on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being "just a little

important,” and 5 being “absolutely critical to my being a therapist.” One way to make these judgments is to ask yourself how you would feel about being a therapist if a particular motivation were not satisfied. For example, if “having a big office with nice furniture” is one of your motivations, what would it do to your desire to be a therapist if we told you (just for the sake of argument) that that motivation would definitely not be satisfied during your career?

*Part 3* Think about your *second choice* of a career. What would you be doing or going to school for if not for becoming a psychotherapist? This second-choice career could be something totally apart from the mental health fields or it could be something related, like psychology research. Once you have picked a second-choice career, list the motivations that you have or would have for that career. Repeat the ratings that you did in Part 2 for this new list of motivations. What are the similarities and differences between the motivations and their importance for the two careers?



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### Food for Thought: *Professional Motivation*

Think about a professional you’ve seen – a therapist, accountant, nurse, etc. As you picture yourself listening to and taking their advice, think about *their* motives. What might their central and peripheral motivations be? Which are acceptable to you, which are not? Which ones might get in the way of their providing useful services to you? Which might be unacceptable and irrelevant to you at the same time?

Think about a time when you’ve worked with a professional whose motives you questioned, if only to yourself. What made you wonder about them? Words? Behaviors? Subtle cues?



## Values

Another element of your professional identity is your values. What's important to you? What would the world look like if things were perfect? Values overlap with motivations to a substantial degree; we are often driven to actualize our values. However, sometimes our motives conflict with our values, or our values conflict with each other. For example, you think having a fuel-efficient (and expensive) automobile is desirable but your motivation to help people without access to mental health care keeps you working at the local mental health center for a low salary.

Like your motivations, some of your values are purely personal, some purely professional, and some a combination. Some of your personal values might be: "I believe it's important to make money. I believe it's important to provide for my family. Personal growth is important." We can talk about professional values in regard to what you think is important for your profession – and for you as a professional – to be, do, or accomplish. One of your professional values might be "I think it's important to help other people grow." Some of the personal and professional values will be moral values which have to do with your relationships to other people: helping them, respecting them, and fulfilling duties. The intersection of your moral and professional values is where your sense of professional ethics comes from. We hope you can actualize most of your professional and personal values at least over the course of a career, if not every hour of every day.

Also like motives, values can range from noble to base. Some of your values probably revolve around the human condition and the desire to see people thrive and grow. Obviously, these values match well with many of the goals of psychotherapy and overlap with your desire to be a therapist. Some of your values, however, may revolve around financial, social, and personal success and stability. Being a successful psychotherapist is clearly a way to actualize these values. Of course, our values are complex and the likelihood of dealing with conflicting values is very high.



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## Journal Entry: *Values, Nothing More than Values*

Similar to the list of motivations you created for being a therapist, generate a list of your values. Each value on your list can start this way: "I think it's important ...". After you've done that, make them into a hierarchy. Which ones are most important? Which ones are least important? Which ones would you consider central to your role as a psychotherapist? Which ones would be especially important in terms of your professional ethics?



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Why create these lists of motivations and values? First, you need to be aware of as many of your motivations as possible because not all of them will be satisfied at any given time. For example, some psychotherapy clients change very little or not at all. The value you attach to helping may not be fully actualized when you don't see a client improving. At times like these, you need to be aware of *all* your motives for being a psychotherapist.

Second, as we mentioned before, some values will often conflict with each other. Indeed, one way to assess and better understand our values is to explore the choices we make when values and motives conflict (Abeles, 1980).

Third, it's important to know the difference between values and the expression or implementation of values. Sometimes it will appear that the values you hold will conflict with those of the psychotherapy profession when the problem is really one of expression. We may value compassion, but we can't show our compassion with clients in the same way we do with friends (hugging, lending money, sharing our problems, etc.).

Fourth, sometimes your values and the values of psychotherapy will actually be in conflict. We'll be getting to that in chapter 3.



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## **Food for Thought: *Exploring Personal Motivations and Values***

You see a client who is a little anxious about his local acting job. The client tells you wonderful, funny stories about his life and his family. You are fascinated, at times spellbound, by the client's dramatic way of speaking. He is a pleasure to work with because he is professionally rewarding – he's making progress in therapy – and personally engaging. Several months later, the client appears on a local news program telling those same stories as part of his one-man show. Within a few months your former client is a "hit" on Broadway. You see him now on national talk shows; he even mentions his "shrink" in some of his interviews. You feel the urge to brag to your friends that *you're* the "shrink" and that you helped him get where he is today.

Explore your motivations: Why do you want to tell others? To feel powerful or important? To impress your friends? To become, perhaps, a bit of a celebrity yourself? Under what values are you operating? See if the motivations and values you list here are similar to what you listed in your last two journal entries.



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## **Virtues and Moral Courage**

You may feel like you've done all you need to do to meet the ethical requirements of psychotherapy and we could stop here, with motivations and values. But we've only gone through part of the instruction manual of our ethics treadmill. Ethics is not just about accepting and then conforming your behavior to the rules. An effective and rewarding professional identity includes developing moral habits that are so ingrained they become personality characteristics.

In addition to considering what you should do and not do, excellent ethical practice requires that we spend some quality time considering *whom you should be* as a professional. In other words, let's talk about *virtues* (Jordan & Meara, 1990; Meara, Schmidt, & Day, 1996; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Peterson and Seligman (2004) have outlined six basic virtues along with associated character strengths, outlined below:

- I Wisdom and knowledge
  - Creativity
  - Curiosity
  - Open-mindedness
  - Love of learning
  - Perspective
- II Courage
  - Bravery
  - Persistence
  - Integrity
  - Vitality
- III Humanity
  - Love
  - Kindness
  - Social intelligence
- IV Justice
  - Citizenship
  - Fairness
  - Leadership
- V Temperance
  - Forgiveness
  - Humility
  - Prudence
  - Self-regulation
- VI Transcendence
  - Appreciation of beauty and excellence
  - Gratitude
  - Hope
  - Humor
  - Spirituality

For our purposes, we can consider all of them virtues. Some of the virtues that good psychotherapists might cultivate include integrity, prudence, humility, compassion, respectfulness, and truthfulness.

It could be argued that it is unnecessary to think in terms of virtues. You might be tempted to think: "If I follow the rule to tell the truth, that's good enough! Isn't it?" In most cases, the answer is probably yes. But which of the following phrases fits better with your conception of whom you'd like to be as a psychotherapist?

- I told the truth because it was a rule I needed to follow and I didn't want to get into trouble.
- I told the truth because I am a truthful professional and to not tell the truth would have resulted in internal discord.

Cultivating virtues, in addition to following the rules, gives us a chance to feel more connected to our profession and to create a coherent identity.

Too much or too little of a virtue can be problematic. For example, too little compassion leads to indifference and too much compassion may lead to problems like taking too much responsibility for clients or enabling their self-defeating behaviors. Here's another example: Too little humility leads to arrogance and too much humility can lead to self-debasement and timidity.

It is useful to think about cultivating an optimal amount of each of our virtues. Additionally, virtues do not exist in isolation; they should exist in an optimal combination. Consider the virtue of truthfulness. Sometimes we don't tell a client the entire truth. For instance, we may not tell one client in the marriage what the other has said about them in a private therapy session. Our virtue of truthfulness needs to be tempered by considerations based on virtues such as respectfulness (the spouse shared impressions in private and expects his or her privacy to be respected) and prudence (sharing the information at this time in therapy may cause more harm than good).

The virtues of *integrity* and *prudence* may be central virtues. You can think of integrity as the state of having all the other virtues in proper proportions and balance, and prudence as the practical wisdom to decide how to express those virtues in the widest possible variety of situations.

Virtues, like motives and values, can be separated into personal and professional, with a subset of moral virtues. Once again, we'd like you

to consider the moral virtues that you wish to cultivate in your professional activities.



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## Food for Thought: *Virtues*

*Part 1* In your journal, create a list of three virtues that you express, at least some of the time, in your life. For each of these virtues, answer this question: When you are not being perfectly virtuous, what end do you flip to? For example, if you consider yourself a compassionate person, when you are not perfectly compassionate, do you feel too much (get in a person's way by making a decision for them) or too little (neglect to give a person the basic support and guidance needed)?

*Part 2* Think about several kinds of situations you face in your life and see if there are variations in your expression of virtues. For example, if you thought of truthfulness, how does the amount of truthfulness change depending upon whom you are dealing with, the type of situation, the kinds of behavior called for, and other considerations? Think, for example, about somebody you are very close to, somebody with whom you have a professional relationship, and somebody who is merely an acquaintance. Think about a work situation, a personal situation, and/or a family situation.

### *Part 3*

- What would your friends consider your greatest virtue? Your weakest?
- What do you hope your clients will or do say about you?
- What do you hope your colleagues will or do say about you?
- What new virtue will you most want to develop in your role as a psychotherapist?
- What is your plan for how you might develop this virtue?



One potential danger in thinking about your own virtues is believing that, because you have desirable personality traits, you are immune

from unethical behavior. Most psychotherapists, and those training to become psychotherapists, know right from wrong. It is a myth that most psychotherapists who engage in unethical or unprofessional behavior are sociopaths with no consciences and no virtues. In reality, every professional is capable of unethical conduct.

So, why do good psychotherapists who know what is right sometimes choose to do what's wrong? This question is complex – in a sense, this entire book is an attempt to explore the answers to this question. Let's look at one possible reason that relates to moral motivation and moral follow-through: Sometimes we know what the right thing to do is, but we also know that some of the outcomes of the right action will result in difficulties or hardships for us. Consider these examples:

- A client of yours has been doing pretty well in therapy. One day he tells you that he has abused his child. You know that you are required to report the abuse to the local Social Service agency and you could lose your license to practice if you don't report. You also know or assume that if you do report your client he will stop treatment and the possibility of further improvement (as well as future payment) is taken away.
- A friend of yours, a fellow psychotherapy student, is pressed for time and so writes up an assessment report on a client without doing all the necessary tests. In fact, he makes up some of the scores for an intelligence test. When you confront him about his behavior, he tells you that he knows the client well enough to estimate the scores and no harm will be done. He goes on to tell you that if he doesn't turn in his report he could get fired from the clinic and maybe kicked out of the training program. He's been your loyal friend since the first day of grad school and has done you some favors during stressful times. You know he has the potential to be a fine therapist. He asks you to do him this one teensy little favor and not turn him in for his dishonesty.
- You notice that the mental health center at which you are working has overbilled a state agency for the treatment of several indigent patients. You inform your supervisor, expecting her immediately to thank you for telling her so that she can let her superiors know that they need to reimburse the state. Instead, she tells you that many patients (who are not part of the state program) do not pay their bills and without the money from the state the center might

have to go out of business. “If we didn’t get that money some other center would, and we need it more.” She makes it clear that good employees of the center would not make such a fuss and that employees who do don’t remain employees for long.

In each of these situations, you face the possibility of unpleasant consequences for doing the right thing. The ability to do the right thing in these types of situations is called *moral courage*. When we face an ethical problem and need to implement a difficult decision, it is our moral courage – also called “moral character” (Rest, 1983, 1994) or “resoluteness” (Betan & Stanton, 1999) – that carries us through to complete our ethical course of action. In short, we can define moral courage as the demonstration of any of our moral virtues or values in the face of personal distress or discomfort.

## Ethics Autobiography – Part 1

Now that you’ve identified the motivations, values, and virtues that may drive much of your professional behavior, how do you put these together to make decisions about right and wrong, ethical and unethical? How do you actualize your vision of what it means to be an ethical professional? How have you learned, so far in your life, about right and wrong professional behavior? We are not asking these as prescriptive questions – we’re not asking how you *should* make those decisions. We are asking the questions about how you think *right now* about such issues, and how you may have developed your intuitive notions of professional ethics.

Earlier, Sharon shared her story of working with a couple, at least in part, in such a way so as to “fix” some of her own unconscious family dynamics. Clearly, this is wrong, because we are not there to help solve our personal problems. But how do we know when an action or behavior is unethical? How do we make those decisions? In this section, we want you to explore where you are (and have been) morally, how you know when professional behaviors are right or wrong.

The personal/professional *ethics autobiography* is described in a previous work by us with two of our colleagues (Bashe et al., 2007). We have used this activity over the years as we teach undergraduate and graduate ethics courses. The main purpose of our version of an ethics

autobiography is to encourage self-reflection about your personal ethics of origin. This is your existing instruction manual, wiring diagram, and troubleshooting guide for your built-in moral machinery. The more you know about it, the more you can use it to help develop your professional ethical muscles!

We'll introduce the second part of the ethics autobiography later when we've introduced the basics of the culture of psychotherapy. For now, let's get a sense of who you are, morally.



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### **Journal Entry: *Ethics Autobiography, Part 1***

Put the following on the top of a new page in your journal: name, date, context (meaning graduate school, employment, or wherever you are in your professional journey) and anything else that will help make a connection for you about the time and place for this journal entry.

Next, address the following questions:

1. What motivations, values, and virtues are most important to you, as a person, in your relationships with other people? You might want to refer to some of your previous journal entries.
2. What are the origins of these motivations, values, and virtues? Be inclusive. Don't just write, "I was born with them." Take some time to really think about where you might have learned your values. For example, from family members? Religious figures? What you learned in school? Teachers or professors? Coaches? Bosses?
3. How similar are your motivations, values, and virtues to those of other members of the cultures to which you belong? By culture, we mean any group of people who share some values, traditions, or ideals. Your nationality, religion, gender, geographic area, and sexual orientation are all cultures. You can even think more broadly. Mitch, for example, belongs to the cultures of trumpet players, contact lens wearers, and full professors.
4. What experiences have you had with members of cultures to which you do not belong and their notions of right and wrong?

What feelings did you have about those experiences and about the members of those other cultures?

5. At this stage in your professional journey, what would you consider as examples of right and wrong *professional* behavior?
6. Where does your idea of right and wrong professional behavior come from?
7. How might your motivations, values, and virtues that you wrote about in questions 1–3 influence your decisions about right and wrong professional behavior?
8. As you've answered the preceding questions, what thoughts and feelings are stirred in you? How do your journal entries about motivations and values sound now as you reread them?

What you've written is the *beginning* of a *rough draft* of your autobiography. Your autobiography, like your growth and development as a professional, *will never be finished* because your experiences, thoughts, and perspectives will change over time. So keep this portion of your journal accessible, as you will have occasion to refer back to it, reconceptualize it, and revise it many times.



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## Basics of Self-care

Earlier in this chapter we made the point that some of your personal motivations and needs – motivations and needs that contribute to your being human – cannot be actualized or acted upon as a therapist. These needs will have to be met elsewhere. Even some of the professional motivations will not be entirely met in the therapy room. To avoid inappropriate needs spilling over into the therapeutic relationship, you need to develop the skills, knowledge, and awareness necessary to get your nontherapeutic needs met so they do not contaminate the therapeutic relationship. We are talking about self-care.

Self-care begins with awareness on two levels. The first level is self-awareness. In the journal entry “Motivations,” we asked you, “What personal needs are getting met by being or becoming a psychotherapist?” Take a look back at what you wrote: If you didn’t answer this question earlier, take some time to answer it now. If you did answer it, see if anything else occurs to you. Be tenaciously truthful with yourself.

The second level of awareness is to be honest with ourselves about the nature of our professional activities. Clearly there are immense rewards for being a therapist and many find it a truly noble way to make a living. At the same time, psychotherapy is taxing and emotionally draining; authors have used phrases like “significantly stressful” (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2007, p. 123), and “inherently stressful” (Welfel, 2006, p. 58). The scenario looks something like this: We work with clients who are unhappy, ineffective, dissatisfied, angry, anxious, and/or lonely, and who sometimes really want to stay unhappy, ineffective, dissatisfied, angry, anxious, and lonely. Under these conditions, they challenge us to be that person in their lives who brings hope, a point of connection, stability, and caring confrontation. The increments of change we may see during the therapy process are often very small. In addition to this, we may rarely know of the positive endings for clients, which may happen long after termination. Thus, we often do not fully collect on the promise of good feelings after a job well done.

These conditions, plus other factors that may be out of our control (e.g., reimbursement from insurance carriers), constitute a recipe for emotional exhaustion. We need strategies to prevent the harmful effects of these stresses and to help ourselves when we start to feel detached, overwhelmed, and burned out (Jevne & Williams, 1998). We need to be on guard for the telltale signs of such stress, like fleeting hopes that our clients call to cancel their appointments, impatience with our clients, and musing between sessions about going back to school to study geology. You need to be your own best friend and make a strong commitment to take care of yourself. Those who need your help – your clients – won’t be asking you if you are getting good rest at night, taking periodic vacations, exercising regularly, or are involved in healthy personal relationships. You need to be checking in on yourself and seeking assistance from colleagues. For now, let’s look at stress and how you recharge your batteries.



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### **Food for Thought: *Stress***

1. What is or has been your most stressful work experience?
2. What do (did) you do about that stress?

3. What do (did) you see other people doing?
4. What do (did) you do about stress at school?
5. What could you do to cope better?
6. Choose one coping activity and start doing it now!




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Researchers Jane Myers, Thomas Sweeney, and J. Melvin Witmer (2000) describe the concept of *wellness* as “a way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being in which body, mind and spirit are integrated by the individual to live more fully within the human and natural community” (p. 252). Personal wellness is critical for our own well-being and our professional excellence. Spending time and effort on ourselves is part of our ethical obligation, in addition to the time and effort we spend on behalf of our clients. As Thomas Skovholt, a noted counseling psychologist at the University of Minnesota, states, “Maintaining oneself personally is necessary to function effectively in a professional role. By itself, this idea can help those in the caring fields feel less selfish when meeting the needs of the self” (2001, p. 146). In an important sense, wellness is to stress reduction as positive ethics is to ethics – it allows us to go beyond the minimum and reach a higher level.




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### Food for Thought: *Specific Wellness Strategies*

As a way to evaluate your self-care, consider the following list of categories. For each category, give yourself a rating of 0–5, with 0 meaning “no self-care” and 5 meaning “good self-care” in the category.

- \_\_\_\_\_ I encourage myself to feel.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I have my finances in good-to-great shape.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I have a laugh at least once during each day.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I give other people, as well as myself, a compliment most every day.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I have a healthy diet when it comes to food.

- \_\_\_\_\_ I walk and/or get exercise sometime during my day.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I have hobbies or activities that I do only for fun.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I keep my life's priorities front and center and don't let the tyranny of the urgent draw me off course.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I stop and just breathe when my day starts to feel stressful.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I give myself permission to be alone when I need solitary time.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I take time to foster my spiritual or religious self.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I have at least one healthy relationship in my life.

Now go back over your list and see if there are any scores you wish to change. If yes, write an action plan for one of those items. Keep this list handy so that you can retrieve it on a regular basis. We would suggest that you do this activity at least twice a year.



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In spite of the inherent stress of psychotherapy, there are ways to stay vibrant in the profession. Skovholt (2001) encourages professionals to seek out those experiences in their personal lives that promote happiness, fervor, energy, and tranquility. Of course, the list you develop to experience these will likely look different from those of your colleagues or classmates. That's fine. The key is to make the list and then implement your list on a regular basis. It is also important to remember that your list will change over the years as you develop as a person and a professional.



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### Journal Entry: *Staying Vibrant*

Make a list of the experiences, activities, behaviors, and thoughts that provide you with a sense of happiness, fervor, energy, and/or tranquility. *Do not list anything that has to do with your professional activities!* Your list should be a personal one, not a professional one. Once again, we encourage you to be inclusive and to put on your list, even things that provide only a little happiness.

