



# *Self care for social workers*

*This is a checklist, designed to be read through every now and again. It's not a list of shoulds, but rather like a little brainstorming process that may occasionally spark some kind of helpful reminder.*

**awaken your senses:** Be near the ocean, dance to a great song, build something, take photographs, do yoga, cook from a recipe, or just get outside to breathe deeply and enjoy the sky. Connect with hobbies, interests and sensory activities. Apart from the great importance of having fun and making time for life outside of work; activities which stimulate mindful sensory awareness are fantastic for your medial prefrontal cortex - the part of the brain that enables us to "hover calmly and objectively over our thoughts, feelings and emotions"(van der Kolk: 2014).

**write like no one is watching you:** You are choosing a career that throws you right into the richness, complexity and rawness of the human experience - the thoughts and feelings that are stirred in you at times will be powerful, confronting and unexpected. Writing freely, to yourself and for your eyes alone, helps with emotional processing and self reflection - and is supportive of your mental and physical health.

**be honest:** With yourself, with your supervisor, with trusted colleagues. The best learning and most ethical practice springs from your capacity to think honestly about your reactions and responses. We are human, we will have negative judgements and mistakes, we will at times feel overwhelmed and uncomfortable. Of course, we won't say these aloud to clients, but in the right context, the more honest are our reflective processes, the more thoughtful and accountable our actions are likely to be.

**connect and collaborate:** Stay in touch with one another, make friends at work, bring a cake in to the office, collaborate on joint projects, co-work client cases, seek out mentors among your colleagues, join the AASW. Contributing to these connections and being supported by others will be enormously significant for your longevity, creativity and well being.

**exercise:** I know everyone says this, but it's true! If you're not the team sport or gym type, find something fun that doesn't feel like a chore, or build exercise in to your day by walking part of the way to work a few times a week. Apart from your physical health, some of what social workers soak up from clients, families or communities are the types of communications that do not have words. These more visceral communications are often best released through movement - a physical or energetic processing. Try to be aware of your body at work; think about your posture, stretch, breathe, run cold water over your hands and wrists, whatever helps you not to finish work carrying the emotions of the day in your body.

**laugh:** With your friends and families, with your colleagues and with clients. "This is the art of courage: to see things as they are and still believe that the victory lies not with those who avoid the bad, but those who taste, in living awareness, every drop of the good". - Victoria Lincoln.

**talk about it...:** Don't let things painfully buzz round in your head for too long; talk to your colleagues, make a time with your supervisor or manager, see a counsellor (you'll find most experienced social workers have done this from time to time), arrange external supervision if your employer's provisions are not meeting your needs at that time.

**...and know when to stop talking about work:** If you find yourself still talking about the same client or issue come 10pm at night, or when out with friends, it's a hint that you need to seek out some supervision sooner rather than later, or do some writing.

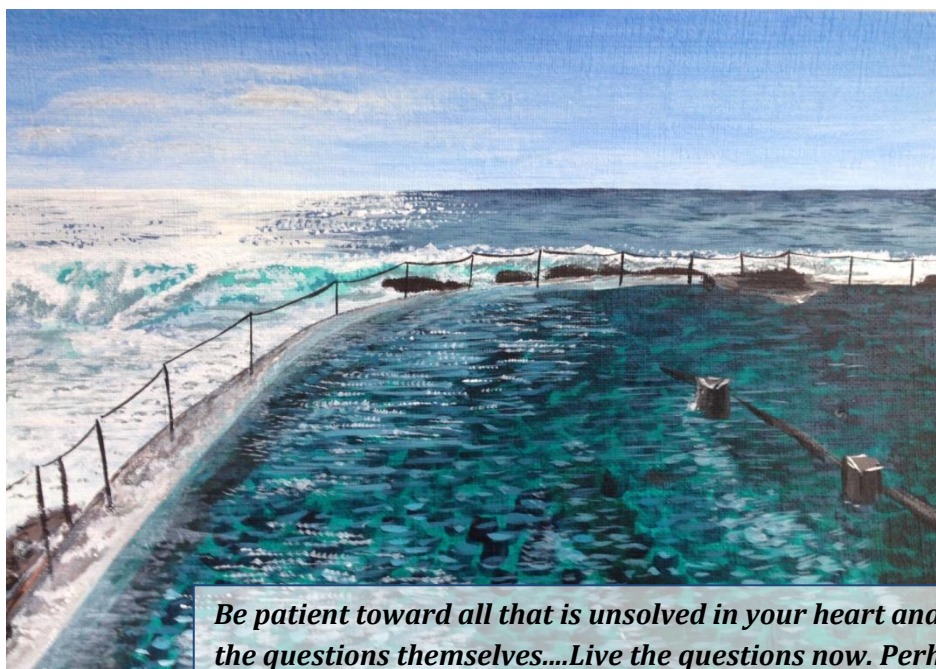
**we are not islands:** At times we are all invited to feel incredibly **responsible**. While our contribution is often significant, it's also crucial to remember that we are part of a system/or systems. Recognising and strengthening the support system around yourself, a client, a family, a community or project will bring sustenance, survival and growth.

**bear witness, contain, transform:** Social work is about change. If you come away from a counselling session weighted by hopelessness; use this feeling like a resource to reflect upon your client's possible experience. If you are angered by disempowerment or injustice; take action, advocate or join a social action group. If there is lots of toxic gossip running round your office, be part of the solution at your next team meeting.

**believe in repair:** just as resilience can be built through adversity - so too, robust growth in our relationships forms through the processes of repair that follow ruptures, conflicts or disagreements.

**keep learning:** in all forms!! You are not expected to know it all in your first year....but we are also not expected to know it all in our 10th or 20th year either!! Certainly we all have practice experience, theoretical frameworks and skills, but equally as important is learning to manage uncertainty, staying curious and supporting your clients to be the ones to 'know'. That said, there is learning to be done and time to do this tends not to appear without planning. Set aside time to read articles, keep an eye out for training, subscribe to a journal or join a peer supervision group. You will learn so much about yourself if you stay open - both a challenge and a gift.

**number one super-marvelloso most magically important tip of all: Treat yourself with as much humility, respect and compassion as you do those around you.**



***Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves....Live the questions now. Perhaps you will gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. - Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet.***