

## **A WELLNESS STORY**

**By Steven P. Welch LCSW, CASAC**

As I laid on my Physical Therapist's table while listening to soothing music, my therapist prepared to work on my lower back. I felt rested, taken care of and I knew my body was healing.

But how did I get here?

It started with debilitating neck and shoulder spasms which morphed into lower back pain. My body was telling me for a while "you are not taking care of yourself so pay attention!!"

It has been my experience that mental health professionals are notorious for not taking care of themselves.

Lying there I thought about ways to invest or reinvest in my wellness. I'm here for my clients but how am I showing up for me? Not prioritizing ourselves is an old but familiar story. Words like burnout, vicarious trauma and depression come to mind as symptoms of inconsistent self-care. I identified 5 investment strategies that may help you yield wellness dividends. Your clients will also benefit by having a balanced and motivated mental health provider.

### **INVEST IN MEDICAL FOLLOW UP**

I've struggled with this in the past. Men in general tend to struggle in this area. As a person of color, doctors historically have used minorities for experiments and provided substandard levels of care. Do your research and find a doctor with the training and credentials you need. As a mental health provider, YOU are the tool of your craft. Putting off medical and/or dental appointments, for example, can dull your ability to bring your best self to the communities in which we serve. Health conditions, such as high blood pressure, headaches and poor posture from sitting for hours are common. Increase in alcohol and substance use, as a way of coping with stress, can significantly compromise health conditions and medications. It can contribute to poor work performance, attendance and productivity. A simple blood and urine test can reveal conditions we need to focus on to support our wellness. Many health conditions can be detected by our dental care.

### **INVEST IN MOVING YOUR BODY**

Though Physical Therapy seems to be a passive experience, it reignited my muscle memory. My body was telling me to MOVE!! My schedule and motivation lulled me into inaction over time. I was no longer the gym rat I used to be. I knew this would change once my body released me from my muscle spasms. However as of writing this article, I have not attended the gym. I did call about the fees though. It was a baby step towards self-care.

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## **INVEST IN HOLISTIC APPROACHES**

I attended a week long retreat at the Ann Wigmore Natural Health Institute in Puerto Rico. As my body was healing, the sun, surf and sand were my welcomed companions. I learned about and experienced the “Living Foods Lifestyle”. The study guide stated “The classes and foods offered here will be the basis for your journey into wellness. Your dedication and commitment will help to determine your degree of rejuvenation”. I learned about the benefits of plant-based food choices, meditation, yoga, various types of massage and how common food products and preparation contribute to various forms of poor physical and mental health. The friend who attended the retreat with me stated “The restorative detoxing allows me to sustain the demanding schedule at home”. The experience was new, demanding and educational for me.

## **INVEST IN SOCIAL ACTIVITIES**

As a psychotherapist in private practice, it can become a very isolating experience. After a couple of years, I noticed my mood changed. I was consumed by the administrative aspects of the practice and needed mind numbing YouTube videos to help me sleep. I was anxious about seeing enough clients to pay the office rent at times. I had to consistently schedule quality time with my friend’s vs the seduction of isolation and binge-watching Netflix. I experience a lot of love and support from my “family”. My support system includes clinicians from various parts of the world. As a clinician of color, I am affirmed by how the dynamics of race, ethnicity, gender politics and male privilege impacts our professional environments. This can also contribute to workplace stress.

## **INVEST IN YOUR OWN THERAPY**

My mother passed away on Christmas Eve 2017. She had Alzheimer's disease. It was so helpful to be in therapy at that time. It put the emotional impact of her loss in perspective. As mental health professionals, therapy is an important part of maintaining wellness. It allows us to see aspects of ourselves that are human, flawed and resilient. We encourage our clients to navigate their lives from a strengths-based perspective. We need to do the same. Going to Puerto Rico after my mother's death was restorative. The experience complemented my therapy. I truly felt I was investing in my wellness both financially and professionally.

Life, workplace stressors and burnout related symptoms are inevitable in our lives as clinicians. It is my position that prioritizing investments in your personal wellbeing will produce major dividends. The results of those investments will allow us to bring our best selves to our clients.