

BEING CLEAR, STAYING WELL

“THE SELF-CARE PIECE IS ESSENTIAL FOR THERAPISTS,” SAYS MARIE-JOSÉ DHAESE. AND YOU OWE IT TO YOURSELF TO FIND AN APPROACH TO SELF-CARE THAT WORKS FOR YOU.

BY CAROLYN CAMILLERI

“The essence of our work comes from our capacity to attune to ourselves first and then to others, and then how we hold the space for them — it’s bound to call upon our boundaries,” says Dhaese, founder of the Centre for Expressive Therapy in Parksville and a pioneer in expressive play therapy and animal-assisted therapy. She has been teaching for more than 30 of her 43 years in practice and offers “Therapy for Therapists” by phone, in person, and at healing retreats.

No matter what emotions and issues your clients bring with them to session, you need to maintain a level of clarity and stamina to hold that space, and then know how to “clean it up” afterwards. “It’s very difficult to keep finding ways of cleaning yourself up each day — and after each session — and reconnecting to yourself, re-grounding yourself, and getting ready for the next client,” says Dhaese. “It takes a lot of practice.”

Another problem is information overload. “People are becoming disconnected from what they really know, from their natural instinct, and it’s very hard to attune to yourself when your head is full of things you’re supposed to do.”

Self-care helps you maintain your stamina, clear toxicity, process new information, and restore your own energy to prevent health problems and to allow yourself to grow as a counsellor. Finding a self-care approach that works well for you means thinking about what you like to do.

“I always look for what gives this person pleasure and what’s easy for them — things they need in their lives at different times for different parts of themselves,” says Dhaese.

She believes there has to be an aspect of self-care that is physical. “I’m 70 years old, and I walk an hour and a half each day at the end of my day. That’s what’s kept me going.”

Rhythmic, physical release allows you to “flow and flush,” she says. “It’s like natural EMDR, where there is bilateral movement, and you let it



One of Dhaese’s favourite ways to “flow and flush” is making snow angels. “There’s nothing like it, to let yourself fall into the snow and look up at the sky.”

reconnect you to your body, especially when you spend a whole day sitting in a chair — or on the floor, as we do as play therapists.”

If Dhaese finds walking isn’t enough, she listens to inspiring podcasts until her mind gets quieter. She also suggests colouring, which provides that EMDR-like, back-and-forth effect. “With some people, a cup of tea while knitting and listening to music might be what they do.”

You may want to explore music, art, or sand therapy and make it part of your self-care regime. And sometimes you need to take self-care to the next level. For example, if you are dealing with an issue of transference or counter-transference or if you’ve been activated in your own issues.

“I can’t imagine having been a therapist for 43 years and not having had somebody I could go to regularly if something stirred me up, because no amount of walking is going to take care of that.”

Supervision or consultation is also important so you have someone to debrief cases with and to discuss new information with.

“I would say to any therapist, it’s really important that you come back to how you view human beings, what it is that you know, and digest it really well before you start using it in therapy with your clients. It’s like a compassionate understanding that allows you to have boundaries — that neutrality and clarity are really what makes a therapist.”

The hardest lesson, she says, is to value and cherish yourself. “And really remember that if you don’t have your health — your physical and emotional health — you cannot keep swimming in toxicity and not be affected,” she says. “It has a side effect to be a therapist. I have seen so many people come and go in this field over the years. You have to make self-care a priority.”

SELF-DATING

Do something special for someone you love — yourself. There is nothing selfish about treating yourself to some extra attention to boost your spirits and help you better appreciate your own company.

- ▶ Make a reservation for dinner somewhere nice, then dress up and go. If you are nervous about dining alone, bring a book.
- ▶ Go to a concert and sing, dance, and get lost in the music.
- ▶ Pack a gourmet picnic lunch, go to a park, and enjoy nature.
- ▶ Light candles, play some soothing music, turn off your cell phone ringer, and relax in a warm, fragrant bath.
- ▶ Sign up for a class in painting, pottery, poetry, cooking, gardening — whatever creative endeavour takes your fancy.
- ▶ Tour a vineyard or a farm and stay for lunch to enjoy the setting.
- ▶ Imagine someone is visiting you from out of town. Plan a tour to show them the sights and then take yourself.