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## **SUPERVISION AS CARE FOR (PHYSICAL AND) MENTAL HEALTH**

Self-care and care of one's own mental health can be understood in the framework of important topics for health promotion. Self-care can be seen as a personal willingness to be responsible for acquiring the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to improve or maintain good health (Simmons, 1990). There are different factors which can influence the decisions, behaviour, and results of a lifestyle which stimulates good health, and how a person approaches this issue of self-care is an important indicator of how effective he/she will be in various situations (Greaves & Campbell, 2007).

People often experience self-care as an aspirational goal, i.e. as a long-term orientation. Norcross and Barnett (2008; see also Barnett, 2016) describe self-care as an *ethical imperative* for psychologists. Rarely do codes of ethics explicitly address self-care, but they do implicitly anticipate it through the principles of integrity and responsibility. To psychologists, self-care means paying enough attention to their physical and psychological well-being in order to be capable of effective implementation of professional standards (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001).

A competent psychologist is thus aware that his/her work can be hindered due to personal problems. That is why he/she must not take part in activities where personal problems could prevent competently performed work. In such situations he/she must take proper measures, that is, seek professional support or consultation, and identify how and what tasks he/she can perform (Norcross & Barnett, 2008).

## Paradox of Self-care in “Non-Vulnerable” Psychologists

Psychologists’ work often involves painful aspects of human experience, and this can cause feelings of stress, burnout, secondary traumatization, a reduction in professional competency, or other unfavourable consequences. The majority of psychologists experience stressful situations, and one third of them have experienced the impact of stressful situations on the quality of their work (Guy, Poelstra, & Stark, 1989; Pope, Tabachnick, & Keith-Spiegel, 1897). However, the percentage of those who seek help is much lower than this. Although on a declarative level psychologists tend to agree with the importance of self-care, when it comes to their personal lives many adopt a defensive stance, finding it very hard to admit that they experience distress. This problem relates to the myth of psychologists’ non-vulnerability (Norcross & Barnett, 2008). From this perspective, awareness and changing of habitual patterns of professional conduct is important. This is supported by studies which show that professionals are more willing to offer help to those in distress if they themselves feel psychologically well (Sisask et al., 2014).

## Supervision as a Method for Introducing Self-care in Early Career Psychologists

Supervisory relationships offer opportunities for increasing awareness of the importance of self-care. The supervisee imitates and follows the lead of the supervisor, and by observational learning takes on skills and behavioural patterns related to professional work habits and attitudes. By observing the supervisor, the supervisee learns how to recognize stressful situations and his/her responses, starts reflecting on how best to deal with his/her workload and establishes a regular self-care routine. However, for effective transfer of such practices from the supervisor to the supervisee it is necessary that the former exhibit virtues such as personal integrity, as well as the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed for the implementation of his/her own self-care.

Supervision also offers opportunities for the supervisor to recognize the supervisee’s distress, and thus to support the supervisee’s constructive resolution of difficulties and encourage (long-term) self-care. This indicates that the supervisor has to recognize the signs and patterns of stressful situations, both in the workplace and personal life. The supervisor thus pays attention to changes in emotional, behavioural, and physical reactions, which can appear as changes in mood, social withdrawal, reduction in effectiveness, and/or compensation for all these by being excessively engaged in the workplace. The supervisor thus acts as gatekeeper in order to prevent the supervisee from engaging in the activities where his/her difficulties could hinder competent performance.

Even if the supervisor does not have professional experience in solving a particular problem, he/she can apply knowledge and experience to direct the supervisee towards more effective coping with distress, and bring a wider perspective to the

situation. The skills of decision making and recognition of automatic non-functional behavioural patterns may be of assistance in this.

## Self-Care Strategy

Several programmes aiming to promote self-care have shown to be successful (Norcross & Barnett, 2008). In this context, it is essential that psychologists are aware of their motivation for choosing this profession. Altruistic reasons, such as a desire to help others, are usually the most frequent, but are not necessarily sufficient to maintain good mental health. A psychologist has to reflect on a complex combination of things which satisfy and make him/her happy, and because of which he/she works in this profession. Such reflection will cause a greater awareness of self-care, and recognition of the dynamics which led him/her to choose this line of work.

The strategies used here differ with regard to their effectiveness, and the best decision is simply to choose the most suitable strategy for each situation. Overall, however, more active methods for problem solving have proven to be better. In prevention programmes it is more effective to apply *broad* principles or strategies, as opposed to more specific techniques. Being knowledgeable of several techniques is better than mastering one, and less experienced psychologists are thus offered a palette of different options among which they can choose when they are in distress (Norcross & Barnett, 2008).

It has to be emphasized that self-care is influenced by both personal characteristics and the features of the environment. This means that strategies can focus either on empowering an individual or changing the home and work environment. Strategies which address the work system should not be neglected (Norcross & Barnett, 2008), and these include supervision.

Programmes on mental health should thus point to the fact that self-care is performed in- and outside of work environment, in private life (Norcross & Barnett, 2008).

## The SUPER PSIHOLOG Project and Self-care

Module 3 within the framework of the SUPER PSIHOLOG project was the third part of the training of supervisors/mentors with regard to supervised practice. Its main aim was to inform the participants about different topics in relation to mental health (promotion, strengthening of mental health, and mental health of professionals), and to develop the skills needed to recognize difficulties in the area of mental health and then adopt appropriate measures and interventions.

Overall, the goals of Module 3 were in compliance with the guidelines for the promotion of public mental health (Roškar et al., 2016), which assert that it is necessary to implement educational programmes in mental health for professionals with various backgrounds who come into contact with at-risk populations, with updated

educational programmes for those who have previously attended them. Additionally, the related measures should encompass the implementation of programmes for strengthening professionals' mental health and increasing their sensitivity to mental health issues among their colleagues and the experts they come into contact with. These guidelines thus call for the establishment of supervisory groups for professionals, in particular those at the early stages of their careers, and this was also one of the goals of the SUPER PSIHOLOG project.

Key topics within the framework of Module 3 and self-care were as follows:

1. Burnout: Recognition and prevention.
2. Self-reflection and seeking help.
3. Addiction: Risky and harmful use of alcohol.
4. Ethics and data protection in psychologists' work.
5. Suicidality: Recognition and interventions in cases of suicidal behaviour.
6. Motivational interviews.
7. Psychological first aid after traumatic events.
8. Crisis counselling.
9. Coping strategies: Increasing the power of problem solving.
10. Mindfulness: Mindfulness as a psychological intervention for everyday life.

The Module 3 workshops were not intended only for the supervisors, but were offered to various psychologists as short training sessions within the framework of continuing professional development.

Module 3 introduced the importance of self-care into the training of supervisors. On the one hand it encouraged the supervisors to pay more attention to their own well-being; on the other it encouraged the supervisees to do the same. Module 3 strengthened the participants' trust in their own sense of competency when dealing with professional dilemmas, personal distress and difficult life situations. While psychologists are not immune to distress, their expertise can help them in managing personal health issues.

The Module 3 curriculum is described in the following text.

### **Module 3 of the Training of Supervisors: Self-care<sup>11</sup>**

The goal of Module 3 is to empower professionals to work in the area of mental health. As such, it encompasses three scopes which are interlinked and evidence-based.

1. Knowledge of important topics in relation to mental health – Studies have shown that if professionals are knowledgeable and competent in a particular area, they will be better at recognizing people's difficulties and will more actively participate in their prevention (Sisask et al., 2014);

11 The program was outlined by Urša Mars Bitenc, Vesna Mlinarič, Črt Bitenc, Vlasta Zabukovec and Anja Podlesek. The program was prepared by Vita Poštuvan. The program leaders in the SUPER PSIHOLOG project were: Vita Poštuvan, Mateja Štirn, Sara Tement, Saška Roškar, Maja Zorko, Alenka Tančič Grum, Urban Brulc and Darja Boben Bardutzky.

2. Development of professional skills – If professionals are taught how to apply skills, they can help themselves in different situations, and their sense of competency is thus increased. The skills can be used in different situations, including those where the professionals work with their clients (Blue & Brooks, 1997; Ernaut, 2003);
3. Self-care – Studies on social psychology have shown that the more satisfied and worry-free people are, the more pro-socially they behave (Darley & Batson, 1973). Not only is self-care important for a professional’s mental health, but it indirectly influences the quality of the work performed (Sisask et al., 2014).

Figure 5 shows how the topics connect with regard to Module 3’s starting points, while Table 7 presents the key contents of each topic, and competences it develops.



Figure 5. Module 3 topics in relation to starting points.

Table 7. Module 3 topics, key contents and competences

Topic	Key contents	Competences
<b>Burnout: Recognition and prevention</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definition of burnout (clinical and organizational perspectives)</li> <li>• Factors of burnout (e.g. characteristics of workplaces, personal traits) and consequences</li> <li>• Symptoms of burnout and its course</li> <li>• Prevention of burnout</li> <li>• Interventions for burnout prevention</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation (e.g. evaluation of individuals) for difficulties of burnout</li> <li>• Intervention (e.g. person-oriented intervention) for preventing burnout or taking measures for recovery</li> <li>• Continuing professional development</li> <li>• Self-exploration and self-testing on own patterns for burnout</li> </ul>

Topic	Key contents	Competences
<b>Self-reflection and help seeking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definition of self-reflection</li> <li>• Goals of self-reflection and its benefits</li> <li>• Understanding the course of the process, recommendations for practicing self-reflection and reflection on own practices</li> <li>• Specification of help seeking</li> <li>• Recognition of factors influencing help seeking</li> <li>• Knowledge of methods for strengthening of protective factors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness of the advantages of self-reflection</li> <li>• Stimulation of own self-reflection practices and evaluation of own patterns</li> <li>• Development and strengthening of protective factors for seeking help in distress</li> <li>• Skills of intervention</li> <li>• Strengthening resources for own practice of self-reflection and help seeking</li> </ul>
<b>Addiction: Risky and harmful use of alcohol</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key data and trends regarding alcohol consumption in the relevant country</li> <li>• Terminology used in the area of alcohol-related problems</li> <li>• Low-risk levels of alcohol consumption</li> <li>• Diagnostic criteria for addiction and key psychological aspects of addiction</li> <li>• Basic characteristics of promotion, primary, secondary and tertiary prevention, and programmes on alcohol related harm reduction</li> <li>• Knowledge of helpful resources and fundamental prevention-promotion programmes implemented in the relevant country with the aim of reducing risky and harmful alcohol consumption</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge or use of proper terminology in the area of alcohol related problems</li> <li>• Analysis of alcohol related issues in the location where a psychologist is employed, and knowledge of key measures for improvement,</li> <li>• Ability to use different tests/psycho-diagnostic instruments or engage in conversation for detection of risky and harmful alcohol consumption by individuals.</li> <li>• Knowledge of help provision and treatment possibilities in the relevant country in cases of alcohol related issues, and adequate referral</li> <li>• Knowledge (and, if possible, collaboration in implementation) of prevention-promotion programmes implemented with the aim of reducing risky and harmful alcohol consumption; taking into consideration research findings on which programmes are effective</li> <li>• Connecting with (other) actors working in the area of alcohol-related difficulties</li> <li>• Understanding the role of psychologist in resolving alcohol-related issues, and encouraging a more critical attitude towards alcohol</li> </ul>

Topic	Key contents	Competences
<b>Ethics and data protection in psychologists' work</b>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of ethical principles, standards, guidelines and theoretical concepts for the comprehension of ethics, ethical conduct, and awareness</li> <li>• Principles of the Code of Ethics of Psychologists, and European MetaCode of Ethics</li> <li>• Legislative framework regulating the performance of psychologists</li> <li>• Knowledge of ethical awareness concepts</li> <li>• Knowledge of the process of resolving ethical dilemmas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of ethical dilemmas</li> <li>• Responding to ethically questionable procedures</li> <li>• Awareness of own responsibilities and ways of reacting</li> <li>• Ability to reflect on own ethical conduct and personal attitudes influencing the process of resolving ethical dilemmas</li> </ul>
<b>Suicidality: Recognition and interventions in case of suicidal behaviour</b>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Characteristics of suicidal behaviour in the relevant country</li> <li>• Knowledge of risk factors and protective factors for the development of suicidal behaviour</li> <li>• Knowledge of the development of suicidal behaviours (minor and major)</li> <li>• Warning signs of suicidal behaviour</li> <li>• Taking measures for different types of suicidal behaviour</li> <li>• Knowledge about depression as the most important risk factor</li> <li>• Specification of preventive activities and their application in practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of methods of promoting mental health</li> <li>• Recognition and evaluation of suicidal behaviour signs and risk factors</li> <li>• Knowledge of effective preventive measures for suicide prevention</li> <li>• Skills for intervention when individuals feel acute suicidal distress</li> <li>• Skills of offering support in cases when a close family member has committed suicide</li> <li>• Knowledge of the related treatment possibilities and adequate referral</li> </ul>
<b>Motivational interview</b>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theory of motivation</li> <li>• Basics of motivational interviewing</li> <li>• Application of motivational interviewing for different areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of inner motives for changes</li> <li>• Awareness of own motivation</li> <li>• Reflection on and understanding of barriers to communication</li> </ul>

Topic	Key contents	Competences
<b>Psychological first aid after traumatic events</b>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definition of psychological first aid</li> <li>• Aims of psychological first aid</li> <li>• Procedure of implementing psychological first aid</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goal specification in post-traumatic application of psychological first aid</li> <li>• Assessment of the post-traumatic application of psychological first aid</li> <li>• Intervention and skills in post-traumatic application of psychological first aid</li> </ul>
<b>Crisis counselling</b>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definition and characteristics of crises and traumatic events</li> <li>• Regularities in coping with crises and traumatic events</li> <li>• Possible consequences of crises and traumatic events</li> <li>• Definitions and aims of psychosocial support and assistance</li> <li>• Implementation of psychosocial support and assistance</li> <li>• Other types of psychological and psychotherapeutic assistance</li> <li>• Readiness for crisis events</li> <li>• Definition of and personal building blocks of psychological flexibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of regularities in response to crises and traumatic events and their possible consequences, knowledge of the process of psychosocial support and assistance</li> <li>• Adequate awareness of crisis readiness</li> <li>• Knowledge and skills of assessing and intervening in cases when psychosocial support and assistance are needed in the post-crisis period in one's own workplace</li> <li>• Reflection on own patterns which can be helpful for personal psychological flexibility in crisis situations</li> </ul>
<b>Coping strategies: Increasing the power of problem solving</b>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theories of problem solving</li> <li>• Definition and theoretical basis of character strengths theory</li> <li>• Skills of recognizing problems and problem solving</li> <li>• Skills of reflective practice and strengthening of one's character strengths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of skills, techniques and methods for helping in problematic situations</li> <li>• Evaluation of one's own character strengths</li> <li>• Analysis of problem-solving methods</li> <li>• Reflective practice and problem solving in the context of character strengths</li> <li>• Transfer of experiential learning techniques to psychological service users</li> </ul>



Topic	Key contents	Competences
<b>Mindfulness: Mindfulness as a psychological intervention in everyday life situations</b>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theoretical foundations of mindfulness</li> <li>• Mindfulness based psychological interventions – recognition, understanding, and action</li> <li>• Comprehension of the importance of the skills of directing attention (focusing) and loving kindness</li> <li>• Knowledge of the importance of recognition of automatic patterns by means of reflection</li> <li>• Method of evaluating suitability and efficacy of mindfulness programmes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge and analysis of the theoretical foundations and importance of the personification of mindfulness philosophy for self-care</li> <li>• Skills for evaluating the suitability of the application of mindfulness techniques for self-care and for clients</li> <li>• Experiencing kindness and accepting situations without judgment or avoidance</li> <li>• Adopting a distanced perspective and observing one’s own thoughts and emotions as temporal objective mind events</li> <li>• Ability of self-regulation and constructive redirecting of attention</li> </ul>

### The duration of Module 3

Ten eight-hour workshops, with each workshop devoted to a specific topic.

### Teaching methods

Short lectures, demonstrations by video recordings, reflection on films, reflective activities (individually, in groups, plenary), completion of worksheets, discussions in small groups, skill training in small groups, role playing, and so on.

### Recommended literature for the supervisors

Baker, E. K. (2003). *Caring for ourselves: A therapist’s guide to personal and professional well-being*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.