

# **The Trauma-Informed Therapist: Self-Care and Personal Practice**

Those of us who work with trauma-impacted youth are not without our own stress. In fact, on top of the stressful nature of the work itself, we have our own stressful life events and traumas, and we must learn to manage them if we want to effectively serve trauma-impacted youth.

One youth worker told me about stopping home quickly before work only to find all of his clothes in a briefcase on the front porch. And I've worked with countless other professionals who've gone through divorces, have lost family members, or would at times get triggered by their own past trauma during their work with youth. Therefore, in this chapter I explore how our own self-care and response to trauma (both our own and our clients') is critical to being an effective, trauma-informed mindfulness teacher.

## **Our Own Response to Trauma**

In my case, while I was in graduate school I went through the tragic experience of losing my sister to suicide. I was in my first year of graduate school, in my early 20s, and lucky to have the support I did in school, from my colleagues, my therapist, my family, and my mindfulness practice. It took a substantial amount of mental and emotional effort to not let myself get derailed and spiral down a path that involved leaving school. I became

extremely short-fused and angry at times, a feeling I hadn't experienced since I was a young teen.

We as therapists have our own lives to live: our own tragedies, traumas, shortcomings, and bad days; and it's our responsibility to take care of ourselves so that we show up as our best, most-attuned selves when working with trauma-impacted youth.

For me, what ultimately led me to feeling emotionally balanced after my sister's death was the constant leaning in to my emotional pain through an assortment of practices, mainly mindfulness. The experience was still painful. But I was able to make meaning out of it and use my mindfulness practice to mitigate my strong emotions, cultivate compassion, and find purpose in my work with young people.

Self-care is one of the most critical ingredients of working with trauma-impacted youth. I see mental health professionals as healers. We encounter deep pain and hear of some of the worst experiences that humanity has to offer. We run the risk of developing secondary trauma symptoms, compassion fatigue, and burnout. And when we burn out we either quit—and then the youth doesn't benefit from our help—or we show up but phone it in: we're dispassionate, uncaring, and un-present, which can sometimes be worse for the youth.

When I think about the criteria for being a competent meditation teacher and the components of competent self-care, I realize they are the same. My formal meditation practice is a necessity that enables me to teach formal meditation. It's also a critical aspect of my self-care. My practice of living authentically, bringing mindfulness into as many moments as possible, and practicing personal growth helps me model healing, integrity, and walking the path of meditation—all necessary for teaching meditation, all necessary for working with trauma-impacted youth.

## **The Importance of a Personal Mindfulness Practice**

What I present below are my thoughts on the intermingling of how my formal mindfulness training influences my self-care practices, and vice versa. These experiences have been instrumental in my ability to deal not only

with tragic events like my sister's death, but also with toxic work environments, and with the immense amount of trauma I've heard over the years. My hope is that sharing these experiences will motivate you to contemplate how you take care of yourself and the areas for growth that may be helpful for you in working with trauma-impacted youth.

### ***Experience Retreat***

Like most in the mindfulness world, I echo that if you want to teach formal meditation it's best to have your own formal practice. Retreat time is one way to take a deep dive into the experience of the mind. I feel retreats are a critical aspect of formal meditation training given that they give you the opportunity to a wide range of subjective experiences that you may not get with shorter meditation practice. If you meditate each day for 5–10 minutes, that may be a great way to start your formal practice, and if that's where you're starting that's okay. But to really get the benefit of noticing and practicing nonreactivity to that bone from the lion-versus-dog metaphor, it's important to sit for longer periods of time so you can encounter a full spectrum of experiences. That often happens during retreat practice.

The first formal retreat I experienced was a 10-day silent retreat in the tradition of S. N. Goenka. It turned out to be extremely difficult. On Day 3, I had my whole escape route planned. I knew what I was going to say to the instructors about needing to get back home to my family, the significant amount of work and school stress I was under, and how I'd sign up for another retreat as soon as I was available.

Then, those narratives that were contributing to me wanting to leave passed. I was able to fully experience the impermanence of the stories I created. I was able to truly see the bone from a dis-identified, but present, state of mind. That's the power of long meditation practice: the mind will shift from relaxed, to stressed, to feeling physical pain, to the creation of narratives for why you should leave a retreat, and so on. It's these departures from our anchors of awareness that are actually key to the practice. When we become aware of those bones we can train our mind to equanimity and realize its impermanent nature.

I was lucky to experience this retreat approximately 5 months before my

sister's death. The practices I learned helped keep me grounded through the immense amount of emotional pain. I was able to truly grieve. In the past, I might have turned to drugs and alcohol, but because of the retreat I was able to sit, feel the deep sadness, cry, and be tender with myself.

I was also able to become present to the short fuse that had seemingly reappeared from my past. This short fuse was one of the reasons I was in so much trouble as a young teenager and in and out of juvenile hall. When I was privileged to transform my life and the destructive path I was on (which came from both a lot of inner work and support from others), I did a lot of emotional work, practiced a lot of meditation, and I was able to get a pretty good handle on myself.

But all of that was ripped back open after my sister's death. I truly credit the deep practices from that first retreat with helping me stabilize during those times. I was able to experience my emotions fully; I didn't run away from them. I sat in the sadness that was underneath that short fuse. I became intimate with it. I felt it in my body. I learned its purpose. I fully grieved. This helped me regain control in my life and sparked a passion for my work with youth.

I started this section by stating I believe if you teach formal meditation you should spend time experiencing retreats. I don't think it's necessary for me to advise if you should do one, two, or three retreats per year. Or whether they should be 10-day, 7-day, or 5-day retreats. Or whether they should be retreats of a particular tradition, or self-retreats. But I will reemphasize that retreats offer a particular depth that can be extremely beneficial when working in the healing professions; the more practice we do on ourselves, the more insights we have about our life, the more growth we encounter, the more I believe we can help others walk down a similar path.

### ***Developing a Formal Sitting Practice***

Part of the reason that what I learned from my first retreat helped me so much during my sister's loss was because I maintained a strong daily sitting practice after it. Keeping a sustainable sitting practice will offer many of the same benefits of a retreat and help you deal with daily stress, strong

emotions, and tragedy. Formal practice also aids in building the necessary experience to teach meditation; the more you practice, the more you go through the meditation instructions, the better able you are to teach them.

Forming the habit to meditate is as much a part of the work as the actual meditation itself. If you don't have much experience with a meditation routine, I suggest starting with what's most sustainable. If that's only 3 minutes a day, start there. "Start," as in, don't finish there. Three minutes of meditation may offer some benefit but will probably not award you the full spectrum of experiences of distractions, narratives, physical sensations, and everything else that will inevitably take your mind on a roller coaster ride.

Forming habits can be difficult. Intention is great, but it's the action and momentum from that action that will help sustainability. For example, rather than telling yourself to meditate for 10 minutes each day, which can feel overwhelming if you struggle with sitting practice, tell yourself to simply assume the meditative posture once per day. This could be a sitting posture, standing posture, or whatever posture you get into for meditation. Getting into the posture takes seconds. Once you're there, you're much more likely to meditate for longer periods of time because you've already taken the steps to start your meditation practice.

Even if all you do is assume the posture, become mindful for that moment, and label your experience as "here," you've successfully practiced mindfulness. I've heard countless meditation teachers suggest this and have found it extremely helpful to sustain my daily practice, especially when feeling unmotivated.

My personal daily practice has been all over the map. I have gone through spells of meditating an hour a day for years (as I did after my first retreat), 20 minutes twice a day, not formally meditating at all and bringing my awareness to as many present moments as I can, and everything in between. My current practice is a morning and evening meditation practice for an indeterminate amount of time. I cannot express how this has impacted my ability to be fully present with my clients, my friends and colleagues, my wife, and my children. The list of benefits could fill an entire

book, but I think what is most relevant to working with trauma-impacted youth is the attunement, compassion, and presence I have with the youth with whom I work.

### ***Practice Mindfulness Beyond Meditation***

Practicing mindfulness beyond meditation is critical to being an effective mindfulness teacher and for practicing self-care. If you've had any experience in formal meditation circles, you've probably noticed that just because you're present and mindful while on the cushion doesn't mean it will translate into daily life.

For example, as I presented in Chapter 3 of this book and in both of my previous books (Himelstein, 2013; Himelstein & Saul, 2015), relationship-based mindfulness is a practice I heavily emphasize. The genesis of this came from my clinical work, but I also practice relational mindfulness in all of my relationships. That takes explicit intention in pausing and practicing mindfulness in the moment when in an argument with my wife, or learning how to be present and nonreactive with the high stress of a hospital-based job.

Almost anything can be turned into a daily mindfulness practice: walking, washing the dishes, talking with friends, talking with family, eating, and so on. For me, how I show up in daily interactions with others is one of the primary reasons I maintain a practice of formal meditation. I strive to be calm, compassionate, and balanced during conflict, and passionate, energetic, and present when doing something I love. I'm tender with myself when I make mistakes, but also put explicit intention into striving to improve myself into those areas. It's the daily moments where I'm best able to become aware of and manage my emotions, and it's there where I'm truly able to appreciate life.

Formal meditation is powerful, but daily mindfulness is meditation in action. I suggest you develop a daily mindfulness practice that will help you become more present, manage stress, and help you meet whatever your goals may be. For me, I've experienced a bidirectional relationship between daily mindfulness and formal sitting meditation. The more I practice one, the more benefit I reap when practicing the other. But

again, it's the daily mindfulness where I've learned to apply much of what I've learned in formal meditation and retreat practice in order to live a fuller, more authentic life.

### ***The Pillar of the Work: Ego Transcendence***

By the title of this section I don't mean mind states of ego transcendence where one feels unity consciousness, at one with the universe, or a deep spiritual connection. If you've had the experience, that's wonderful. What I'm talking about though is what I like to call "rubber to the road" ego transcendence. This is the type of work that happens in the trenches of everyday life: when we're upset at our partners, when a client offends us, when a work colleague "does that thing again."

Our ego is comprised of our "self" and "personality," a congruence of conditioned defense or resistance or protective mechanisms that we've learned over time via our family of origin, environment, trauma, and positive life experiences. The ego is what contributes to how we respond to life: positive experiences, social interactions, conflicts, and so on. With or without awareness, it influences who we are, the nature of our relationships, and the work we do with trauma-impacted youth.

"Rubber to the road" ego transcendence holds insights that can influence how you respond to disrespect, disruptiveness, and violence in your work with youth. It can help unlock awareness of implicit biases about age, race, sex, gender, class, and how to actually embody equity in our relationships with youth. With training we can become aware of what motivates us, what we may fear, what we desire, and how we can show up in our relationships as authentic human beings. These are all helpful attributes in teaching mindfulness and significant insights when it comes to self-care.

Working on my ego has helped me to be less reactive, more compassionate, and more aware of my triggers. Because of this, I can shift and respond to youth in the moment more skillfully, oftentimes getting a better outcome because of it (e.g., as when I engage the pyramid of responding to protective mechanisms from Chapter 9). But even when I don't get the wanted outcome with youth, at the very least my awareness of my ego and attempt to

shift beyond it awards me less stress and suffering and ultimately acts as an ongoing self-care practice.

You've undoubtedly heard the self-care metaphor that relates the oxygen mask that comes down from the airplane ceiling: "Put that mask on yourself before your child," as in, self-care first and then care for others. This is true, if you can do it. But sometimes you're in the belly of the beast: a tough group with a lot of disrespect, a youth in an individual session who has a psychotic break and needs to be hospitalized, a heated argument with your partner, the constant toxicity of a traumatized coworker.

In those situations I believe it's necessary to learn to practice self-care in motion and that's what rubber-to-the-road ego transcendence is. I offer another metaphor, coined by my close friend and colleague, Mica Gonzalez, who specializes in working with children ages 0–6 years and their families. Picture a mother exercising by going for a run while her infant is in a stroller. She is caring for herself while also caring for her infant. She cannot simply care for herself first. Her infant is completely dependent. I view self-care in motion the same way. It's how we learn to step outside of our egos in times of conflict and tension to where we can respond with clinical skillfulness and offer care toward our clients but also exercise our own self-care.

Retreat practice, formal sitting practice, and daily mindfulness have all aided greatly in my continuous awareness of my ego. I also gravitate to personality typing systems like the Enneagram. *The Wisdom of the Enneagram* by Don Richard Riso and Russ Hudson (1999) is a great overview of personality: our qualities, protective mechanisms, and so on, and how we can become aware of our personality, understand it, and step outside its bounds when it gets in our way. For me, I can be frank, stubborn, and controlling. I can also be deeply caring, compassionate, and a very strong leader. I'm an Enneagram Type 8. It's when I pause to assess whether my frankness might hurt someone, whether my stubbornness is a way to influence an outcome I want, or whether feeling defensive and angry really has a root of feeling a loss of control that I'm aware of my ego in action. And it's the choice I make in the moment to deactivate those mechanisms that help me, for a moment, transcend my ego.



This is usually not an easy or fun process. As I alluded to above, I'm not in a unity consciousness or at one with the universe when this happens. The feeling I get is as if I'm traveling one direction in a car, and when I become aware of it and choose to sidestep the ego, I'm not just hitting the brakes but reversing my direction altogether. It takes substantial effort to get the car moving in the reverse direction (hence, "rubber to the road" ego transcendence).

## **Commit to Professional Development**

I believe another aspect of self-care is lifelong learning. That is, as therapists it's important to get together with other therapists in structured ways to learn new ways to serve clients, polish skills, and receive support. Sitting with other therapists in consultation groups, supervisory settings, workshops, and other training formats will help relieve some of the psychic load of working with trauma-impacted youth.

For me it was difficult to find consultation groups and training on the intersection between mindfulness, building relationships, and trauma-informed care with juvenile justice, substance abuse, foster care, and other marginalized youth. That's why I created the Center for Adolescent Studies, a training institute that offers online courses and in-person seminars on the above topics. While I'm still most passionate about the direct clinical work with youth, training fellow youth workers comes in as a close second. I get to talk to other clinicians about the work that I love to do. It feeds my soul.

I remember one training I facilitated with clinicians who worked solely with incarcerated youth (a population I've worked with for most of my career and am very passionate about). At one point in the training, a clinician discussed how hard it was when she'd lost one of her clients to community violence. Another clinician stood up and shared the same thing. Next thing I know everyone in the room, myself included, were all crying about the tragedy of our clients getting killed. After, the room lightened and filled with compassion. We all left feeling more connected with each other as

the simple act of shared experience had brought on a sense of camaraderie among everyone in the room. This contributed to self-care, because it aided in feeling less alone and more supported.

I urge you to find a supportive community where you can continuously polish your therapy skills and have an opportunity to focus on your own self-care. That may be the Center for Adolescent Studies, or it may be another resource. Whatever you decide, I hope you commit to your own professional development. You will become a better clinician, be more balanced in self-care, and ultimately serve the young people you work with to a higher degree.

## **Final Thoughts**

This work is my purpose. I am passionate about working with trauma-impacted youth because I have seen firsthand the success of some of the young people with whom I've worked. My goal in this book was to share what I've found to be most useful in:

1. Teaching mindfulness to traumatized youth without further triggering them and
2. Helping them to regain control over their symptoms, heal from their traumas, and ultimately lead successful lives.

Building authentic, trusting, and safe relationships is the bedrock for any clinical work with trauma-impacted youth. And it helps even more to get youth receptive to mindfulness, a skill that if practiced consistently can aid in regulating some of the very chaotic inner experiences that go along with trauma.

It is important to consider the particular mindfulness exercises that will be most beneficial to the youth you work with, but even more important than that is your own commitment to professional development and self-care. As therapists, we are the tools that we use in our trade. Through self-care practices and professional development training, we learn skills to become more attuned and compassionate and get better

at emotional management, skills that support us in both our professional and personal lives.

My hope is that you have been able to gain some value from this book. I hope you can integrate the concepts, practices, and exercises from this book into your work with trauma-impacted youth. I am confident they will evolve, through both my own work and other clinicians' expertise. I am filled with gratitude knowing there are others doing this at times challenging, but very rewarding work. Our young people deserve it.