I am facilitating an EMDR consultation group and starting with a check-in. I ask one of the consultees how they are and what they need from the group. They respond, “I am out of f*%$’s to give. Can you help me with that?” Everyone in the group giggles validates and resonates.

I am an EMDR trainer and consultant, and many of my consultations these days focus on the burdens of burnout. Clinicians are weary, tired, a bit cynical, and overwhelmed. I am sure you can resonate on some level with this sentiment.

As someone who spends a lot of time with clinicians, I have observed this growing theme since the pandemic’s beginning. Over the past few years, therapists have been navigating a pandemic, climate catastrophes, civil unrest, countless acts of gun violence, overdue racial reckonings, a constitutional crisis, and threats to democracy. It is a lot to process as a human and a lot to hold space for as a helper.

We work in a field prone to burnout during a time of heightened burnout risk. And, as EMDR therapists who identify as trauma experts and specialists, we are at even greater risk for burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma. A 2020 Gallup poll found America’s mental health to be the worst in two decades (Brenan, 2020). The events of the last few years have increased addiction, depression, and anxiety. The influx of clients has created a shortage of available therapists, leaving clinicians overwhelmed with full caseloads, long waitlists, and no reprieve in sight. It has been exhausting, and burnout and compassion fatigue have hit us all. A study by Summers et al. (2020) identified that 78 percent of counselors surveyed reported high levels of burnout. Three-quarters of our profession is sizzling on the frying pan. We seek ways to get centered and grounded, only to find ourselves topsy turvy again, whisked away by another wave of trauma and a new existential threat. It feels like a never-ending parade of absurdity. We are living in a trauma cycle.

I am not here to sugarcoat anything, tell you to create a gratitude journal, get a massage, or take a vacation. Those things alone just do not cut it.
What I find helpful personally and professionally has a different tone than what you’re probably used to hearing. Let’s get real for a moment and be honest about some things.

**THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS BALANCE**

Life is not a grounding, balancing, or centering experience. So let’s get rid of the notion that being off-kilter is bad. While it does not feel good to be imbalanced, it is part of the human experience. Part of living is experiencing adversity and stress. If that were not part of the deal, we would not have a nervous system wired to respond to stress. Fight, flight, freeze, and collapse would not be physiological functions of our biology if we were meant to live in the window of tolerance 100 percent of the time. Holding yourself to the expectation that you should be centered and balanced is like expecting to swim through water without getting wet. It’s impossible.

Mindfulness and meditation are well-known methods for cultivating balance and battling burnout. But remember, they are practices. Why? Because balance is fleeting and impermanent. These practices require consistent application and practice because life is stressful and dysregulating. Period. Paying attention to the state of the world while navigating your life and holding compassionate space for others is hard work. It is normal to be affected. Just like a rollercoaster can make you feel disoriented, this work and world can make you dizzy. Getting centered is more of a practice than an outcome.

Radical acceptance of these truths allows you to avoid holding unrealistic expectations while also embracing the reality that life is uncentering. While practicing balance is essential and necessary, recognize that moments of groundedness are temporary. The imbalance is a sign you’re living.

Do not believe your stress-filtered narratives.

**THE BURNOUT NARRATIVE**

As EMDR therapists, we know that our physiology changes in response to extreme stress and adversity. Hard-wired responses for survival take over when our nervous system perceives a threat. Fight or flight responses mobilize us with racing thoughts, hypervigilance, anxiety, restlessness, sleep troubles, reduced appetite, increased heart rate, and tension. Collapse responses immobilize us with disengagement, fatigue, depression, dissociation, slowed metabolism, increased appetite, and numbness. Burnout and compassion fatigue all fit within these physiological stress responses.

Our physiology and psychology change in response to stress and internal narratives. The stories we hold about ourselves, others, and the world are products of our experiences and physiological state. Consider your narrative about yourself, others, and the world when you’re free of threats and anchored in your window of tolerance. This is where I feel confident, I am trusting of others, and I can find good in the world.

How does that narrative change when you are in a hyperaroused, fight-or-flight stress response? Do you become critical of yourself and others? Does the world become unsafe and dangerous? Is the future one of fire and brimstone?

And how about when you move into hypoarousal and collapse? What happens to your narrative about yourself, others, and the world? Is it hopeless? Do you feel helpless or shameful here? Do you lose the capacity to empathize? Is everything futile, and there is no way out?

If your narrative changes in response to physiology, it is not necessarily accurate when you’re in a stress response. Truth is truth and does not ebb and flow depending on
Self-care is a billion-dollar industry that evokes images of privilege and elitism. But let’s reframe self-care as intentional self-regulation time. If every person on the planet practiced a little more self-regulation, what a difference that would make!

the day’s circumstances. No matter how you feel, $2 + 2 = 4$, and north is north because those are truths and facts. When you experience others as terrible, the world and humanity to be hopeless, and you cannot stand yourself, recognize those thoughts and beliefs are filtered by your physiological stress response. They are not necessarily accurate appraisals.

When I find myself thinking things like “People are terrible,” “It’s hopeless,” “This is the worst it’s been,” or “I’m not enough,” I pause for a moment and ask, “Is this a narrative from my window of tolerance?” If it is not, I remind myself that while those thoughts and beliefs may feel true in the moment, they are the products of my stressed-out physiology.

Do not believe your stress-filtered narratives.

**PERSPECTIVE**

A fallacy of the human condition is our tendency to be near-sighted. Our nervous systems are terrible at staying tethered to the big picture and remaining objective when we get stressed and scared. When we get overwhelmed, our survival instincts hone in on the threat, which can have a blinder effect and skew our perspective.

When I notice I have blinders on because all I can focus on is the news, the problem, the overwhelm, or the threat, I seek out ways to expand my perspective with intentionality. I like to do this through a process I call **Zooming Out**. Here is how I do this:

- Get quiet for a moment and turn inside.
- See yourself from above. Observe yourself and your space from above.
- Zoom out and notice the building you are in.
- Zoom out and notice the city you are in.
- Zoom out and notice the country, continent, and planet.
- Zoom out again and notice the universe.
- Pause and take in this perspective. What wisdom or new truths are available to you as you take in this perspective? What do you notice?

When I **Zoom Out** I am reminded that I am just a tiny spec, on a tiny blue dot, in a vast universe. I am reminded that the universe is chaotic with stars collapsing, gases colliding, and black holes engulfing. It created all life on earth, and we are inseparable from its ways. Its tendencies are paralleled in our societies and clinical offices. We also experience violence, collision, and destruction in our world. The sometimes traumatic collision of
opposing forces and beliefs are all fractals of our existence. It is all a parallel process of the larger picture within which we exist.

Suffering is part of life. Many spiritual and religious practices teach this. It is easy for us to get lost in the day-to-day crises and fires and think it’s the worst it is ever been and that our suffering is unique. But that’s a near-sighted perspective. From plagues to famine, to slavery, to wars and genocide, to the Great Depression and the Holocaust, there has been no shortage of suffering in human existence. The flavor of suffering right now may be unique, but it is not necessarily the worst it has ever been. With social media at our fingertips, and people flocking

endured, but we also lose sight of the wins and triumphs.

**INTENTIONAL SELF-REGULATION**

A simple truth is that if you do not take care of your nervous system, you will feel pretty terrible and burn out in this field. Your nervous system is your greatest resiliency and most important means of clinical intervention. As EMDR therapists, we focus on the adaptive information processing model, a mechanism of the nervous system, and the storage of memory. The nervous system is the focus of our assessment, intervention, and outcome. But it’s not only our clients’ nervous systems we focus on. The health and wellness of our nervous systems and we thrive in connection. Relationships are medicinal, which is one of the reasons therapy works. But relationships need to feel safe to be therapeutic, which requires a regulated therapist.

When clients come to counseling, we lend them our nervous system. Our regulated nervous system provides a life raft, offering co-regulating opportunities to connect clients to their window of tolerance. Coregulation paves the way to self-regulation (Dana, 2018). Therefore, the therapist’s physiology becomes the intervention pathway. So, we must care for our minds and bodies to be effective helpers.

Recall a time you were taking a trip and searching for lodging. As you scrolled through hotel options, you probably weren’t drawn to places that looked dirty, cluttered, or run down. You were likely drawn to clean, organized, and cared-for places. After all, you don’t want to pay good money for an uninhabitable space. This metaphor applies to your nervous system and the counseling process. You do not want to loan your dysregulated nervous system to your clients. It just isn’t therapeutic.

Self-care is a billion-dollar industry that evokes images of privilege and elitism. But let’s reframe self-care as intentional self-regulation time. If every person on the planet practiced a little more self-regulation, what a difference that would make! As therapists, we have a duty to take care of our nervous systems because it is the vehicle through which we provide clinical interventions. It is your professional instrument. Consider self-care to be an ethical responsibility of the job. Getting a massage and taking a vacation are certain forms of self-care. But not all self-care is equivalent to pampering. Self-care needs to

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be dosed daily, and not all self-care
is fun. Eating something nutritious
when you want fried food, getting
to bed at a reasonable hour when
you want to scroll social media, and
hitting the gym when you’d rather
hit up happy hour are all forms of
self-care. We must create time for
self-regulation to keep our clinical
instrument, aka our nervous system,
in good health.

Using skills and making time for
self-regulation is important. But
as EMDR therapists, we also know
the importance of integrating
experiences that hijack our nervous
systems. Sometimes it’s about skills,
and sometimes it’s about diving
back into our personal counseling.
Our clients’ stories can get stuck in
our system, leading to symptoms of
vicarious trauma. We may over work
to avoid our trauma or the state of
the world. We may push ourselves in
attempts to counter a negative belief
we hold such as “I’m stupid” or “I’m
not good enough.” We likely have
our own trauma histories and may
find ourselves in an acute phase of
healing after directly experiencing a
recent traumatic event. Just because
you’re an EMDR therapist and a
trauma expert doesn’t mean you’re
immune to the laws of neurobiology.
You deserve to be happy and healthy,
and you have a right to heal. And
lucky you, you know about this
amazing therapy called EMDR that
could probably help.

Getting to your own counseling
is a necessary ingredient to remain
a helpful therapist. It is an ethical
imperative and a required component
of embodiment. Because we can’t
just talk the talk. We have to walk
the walk.

WE CAN DO THIS
You are a renewable energy source.
But you must take time to renew.
You are not your fridge that can stay
on 24/7. Like your clients, you are
resilient. You can heal, overcome,
and find ways forward. But it takes
practice, and it takes commitment.
Resiliency is not a passive process. It’s
an active one.

You, dear healer, make a difference.
Every day you show up, whether
big or small, you help make the
world better. Do not lose sight of
that and the good happening, easily
overlooked in the shadow of threat.
Do not get swept away in the stormy
waves of this impermanent moment.
You are a valuable resource in this
challenging world, and people need
you. Though these times are uncer-
tain and tumultuous, progress still
happens, people heal, the sun rises,
and the birds sing.

When the ocean of life gets choppy,
do not abandon the ship. Build a
bigger boat.

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