

Promoting Clients' Self-Care Supports Relationships

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Three Premises

- Depleted partners don't bring their best to their relationship or therapy
- Insufficient self-care may be a sign of insufficient differentiation
- Working on improving selfcare can drive differentiation—and vice versa

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Case Study

- Hetero couple in their forties. Married ten years
- Toddler and a breastfeeding baby
- Workload imbalance
- Husband over-relies on wife to calm his anxieties, she grows impatient, so it often drags late into the night
- She can be resentful and critical and struggles with self-advocacy
- Interventions?

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Depleted Couples Don't Have It To Give

- Exhausted couples are too often running on fumes
 - Don't take care of themselves—or their partner
 - Zero sum tug of war as each resents other for not bailing them out
- Insufficient emotional resilience for life's inevitable bumps
 - Don't use emotional regulation skills (well)
- Seem motivated in session
 - But too often "didn't have time" for homework

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Sure, life's demanding, but you *really* can't do better?

I mean, it's not *that* demanding. . .
(Except for when it actually is)

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Life is Hard Sometimes

- Some couples legitimately don't have much slack
 - Young kids
 - Demanding jobs
 - Other obligations—eg, caring for parent(s), contentious ex-
 - Limited finances
- Is this a stage of life or situational issue that will improve with time?
 - What can we improve at least a little?

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Time Poverty

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Rush, rush, rush. . .

- **Time poverty:** chronic feeling of having too many things to do and not enough time to do them
 - FOMO (e.g., expectations) increases feelings of time poverty
- Time poverty is increasing
 - 2018 Gallup showed 80% of employed Americans reported that they "never had enough time"
- We're probably no better off than our clients

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Time Poverty is Unequally Distributed

- Financial poverty exacerbates time poverty
 - Probably less job flexibility/control
 - Less access to time savers
- Greater expectations for women to handle domestic caretaking and coordinating worsens their time poverty
 - How are responsibilities divided?
 - Can the couple discuss it productively?
 - Does gendered time poverty impact work towards stated goals?

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I Don't Have Time for That

- Feeling time-poor has all the obvious adverse impacts:
 - Subjective well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, positive affect)
 - Mental health
 - Pursuing healthcare
 - Work performance
 - Creativity
 - Relationship quality
- Self-care can be the first to get squeezed out

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Busy Couples Really Feel It

- They have less time together
 - To discuss family business
 - To enjoy each other
- Feeling depleted reduces emotional regulation and generosity
- Rewind the tape to before the point of inevitability
 - What earlier choices are they making that constrain/influence later options?

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How Are Time Decisions Made?

- Can the couple have a productive discussion about time commitments related to work/income?
 - Are they joint decisions?
 - Do decisions about expenses commit decisions about income?
- Or kids' activities, other family members, friends, house projects, hobbies. . .
- Is it a problem of planning, negotiation, or avoidance?

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Time is Money is Time

- Time can be converted into money
 - Work extra hours, do the task oneself instead of paying for it, etc.
- Money can be converted into time
 - Pay someone, take out meals, etc.
- Is the couple clear on why they allocate time and money?
 - What are their relative priorities?
 - And is it (still) the best option for them?

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Some Good Conversations

- Should we explore your division of labor?
- Let's clarify your goals and therefore the activities you take on
 - Do some activities deserve less time?
 - And others more?
- Would lower standards for some tasks actually serve you better?
 - No minute can be spent twice

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Some More Good Conversations

- Can we get creative and find a way to make things work?
 - E.g. exercise routine to do at home
 - What is the barrier to a seemingly plausible option?
- If it needs to be done anyway, is there a way to do it together?
 - Can this build good feelings?
 - Or at least reduce negative feelings?

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Self-Care Basics

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Self-Care as a Means & an End

- Sleep, diet, and exercise set the stage for how we feel and function
 - And react to our partner
- Working on clients' self-care will enable them to bring more of their best to challenging relationship situations
 - Especially important for clients who have less margin for error
- But maintaining good habits requires good differentiation
 - And working on those habits can drive differentiation

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Poor self-care is both diagnostic and a point of intervention

What's happening?
Why?
And what do we do about it?

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Your self-care is your responsibility.

And also good partners support each other's goals and good habits.

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Good Self-Care Begins with Self-Differentiation

- Do they know what they need to function well?
- Are they clear on their goals?
 - Do these goals feel imposed by others?
 - Or do they project internal pressure onto partner?
- Can they hold themselves accountable to doing what it takes?
- Can they handle (appropriate) encouragement from their partner?
 - And own up to the negative impact of poor self-care?

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Good Self-Care Includes Other-Differentiation

- Do they know what their partner needs to function well?
 - Can they support that without adding their own agenda?
- Can they negotiate and collaborate with their partner?
 - When they want some specific or general support?
 - When there are differences of opinion about what to do?
 - When their methods conflict?
 - When they need to divvy up finite time?

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General Sleep Interventions

(Keeping in mind that every intervention is diagnostic.)

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Research Findings

- Reduced sleep leads to:
 - Worse mood generally
 - More negative and less positive affect during arguments
 - Reduced empathic accuracy and interpretation of social cues
 - Less effective expression of emotions
- Good news! One rested partner can neutralize those impacts
 - And reduce the mutual reinforcement of poor sleep and marital conflict

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If You See Something, Say Something

- Ask clients about sleep and self-care
 - In general, check in on this
 - Listen between the lines for situations where poor sleep contributed
- Compare good sleep days vs bad
 - Efficiency and effectiveness of task completion
 - Mood in general, emotional reactivity, and connection with others
- Is this something to address in sessions?

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The Obvious Lifestyle Recommendations

- Get into and out of bed around the same times
- Limit caffeine after noon and alcohol
- Avoid sticky and stimulating activities before bed
- Avoid > 30 minute naps, especially after 4:00
- Exercise helps modulate sleep
- Take melatonin 9 hours before midpoint of sleep but probably not regularly
- Adopt four-year-olds and get a fish

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Sleep Strategies

- Make a commitment to value sleep
 - Identify the benefits
- Create (and honor!) a bedtime
- Avoid sleep cycle shifts (weekends)
- Address inefficiencies earlier in the day
- Get into bed together
- Relaxation/mindfulness audio

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Tastes Terrible, Less Filling

- We steal time from sleep so we can have it both ways
 - We dodge hard decisions or actions without supposedly paying the price
- What are your favorite lies?
 - I'll catch up on the weekend
 - I'll just watch one more episode
 - It's not a big deal if we don't get into bed together

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Less Pills, More Skills

- Sleeping pills are not very effective
 - And disrupt sleep architecture so it's less restorative
 - Can cause daytime sleepiness—and increased caffeine intake
- CBTi (CBT for Insomnia) is the recommended first-line treatment for insomnia
 - Large psychoeducation component
 - Structured sleep habits
 - CBT for problematic beliefs

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Deeper Sleep Interventions

People are complicated

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Clarify the Priorities

- Priorities are what we do, not what we say
 - Do the client's words and actions line up?
- If greater self-care is a priority, then what would it take to get there?
 - What other things need to happen/not happen?
 - What exactly are the first dominoes? What's happening in those choice point moments?

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Clarify the Conflicts

- Clients will often struggle to make the necessary hard choices
 - Just state the observation
 - Ask how it affects them
 - Call it as you see it
 - Use two chair technique to really explore
- Don't let client paint it as your agenda
 - Especially with passive aggressive or oppositional clients

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Is There An Unspoken Agenda?

- What's the real reason for getting into bed too late?
 - Avoid sexual dysfunctions or disagreements
 - Only time to drink (or whatever) without partner's knowledge
 - Avoid anxiety-driven ruminations or nightmares
 - Avoid one-on-one intimacy without acceptable distractions
- Need to identify and possibly address the unspoken
 - Does something not seem to add up?

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Is the Problem Setting Limits?

- Does the client struggle with setting limits on:
 - Kids' bedtimes or need for soothing
 - Work obligations
 - Partner's requests for sex or discussion
 - Housework/need for order
 - Own desires for fun or me-time
- To improve sleep, address the root cause
 - And possibly partner's collusion

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Claiming Tiredness as an Avoidance

- Claiming tiredness can be a dodge for more difficult relationship dynamics
 - Fully engaging in quality time together
 - Breathing room—buys some time when partner doesn't want to address an issue yet (chase dynamic?)
 - Red herring—it's safer than acknowledging deeper and harder enduring issues
 - Excuse for not having done expected tasks (passive aggressive)

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Never Go to Bed Angry—What, Who's Angry?

- Conflict avoidant couples may really feel the tension when it's just the two of them in bed
 - Nowhere to hide—except in their phones!
 - Or does it all suddenly come pouring out?
- What did each partner do to avoid addressing this earlier?
 - Perhaps use this suffering as a motivator to address conflicts earlier
 - How can the couple carve out and protect earlier/better time?
 - How can the couple tolerate a lack of resolution until a better time to address it?

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Someone Has to Worry About It

- Anxiety/stress are common sleep disruptors
 - But is it an individual problem or couple problem?
- Is one partner carrying an undue proportion of the household's mental and emotional burden?
 - How can the two partners create a better balance?
- Is one partner anxious in their own right?
 - How can the other partner provide appropriate comfort?

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Does Sex Get Squeezed Out?

- Are both partners prioritizing time for sex?
 - Getting into bed too late creates a forced choice
- Are both partners making an effort to have and create good will for sex?
 - Or is getting into bed late a convenient dodge?
- Is fatigue interfering with desire?
 - Sleep deprivation from last night?
 - Timing—was interested earlier but now it's too late?

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Small Improvements Make a Big Difference

- Sometimes getting into bed just a bit earlier really helps quality of time together
 - When does each partner start to fade?
 - How much time do they want together?
 - What would it take to make it happen?
 - Partner with a later preferred bed time can then get up after
- Focus on connection—use other time for shop talk or difficult topics

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Promoting Regular Exercise

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Benefits of Exercise

- Exercise benefits cognition, mood, and physical health
 - Mental benefits are bigger and sooner than physical
 - Also helps regulate sleep
- Anything is better than nothing (sort of)
 - But real benefits require real effort and consistency
- Cardio and weights are both important
 - Weightlifting is better for fat loss

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Barriers to Exercise

- Don't use time efficiently so run out of time
- Difficulty setting limits with work/family—don't deserve it?
- Sleep deprived so don't have enough willpower
- Too many other alternatives are more fun/less boring

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Barriers to Exercise, 2

- No plan—ambiguity, over-complicating
- Too inconvenient, annoying or time consuming
- *Sometimes you need to go past the first answer to find the real driver*

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Gyms Are Intimidating

- A (perceived) audience can feel scary
 - OK: No one is paying attention to you
 - Better: Even if they are, do you need to care?
- This can amplify feelings of uncertainty and incompetence
 - Do you need to figure out what to do?
 - Can you ask for help?
 - Who's your comparison group anyway?

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Definitely Make It Fun

- What will keep it interesting? Do they know?
 - Social or private?
 - Play or structured?
 - Self-directed or guided?
 - Silence, music, podcasts, videos?
 - Mixing it up?
- Make it something you actually want to do
 - Willpower will fail you

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Add Some Structure

- Make it a regular habit so it's automatic
- Plan when to do it—make it an easy transition
- Plan what you will do
- Add some accountability—friend, trainer, race, tracker app
- Make a fun bet
- Really notice the productivity/mood difference after

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Are There Body Image Issues?

- Do they feel hopeless about getting into better shape?
- Do they have unrealistic expectations for progress/goal?
- Do they not want additional attention from being more fit?
- Does it feel too much like someone else's goal so they don't know their own?

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Promoting Healthier Eating

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Unhealthy Eating is Really Easy

- Healthy eating takes planning ahead and good time management in multiple moments
 - And maybe good limit setting and boundaries
- Waiting too long to eat leads to unhealthy food choices—what and how much
- Are they too depleted from their stressful day?
 - Identify earlier points of intervention—collaboration?

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Make Healthy Eating Easier

- A healthy diet follows the basics
 - Avoid complications with marginal benefits or quick fixes
- Stay far away from unhealthy temptation
 - Leave it at the store
- Recruit family members to help
 - Or at least not hurt—and if they still do, let's discuss that
 - Can this be a shared positive activity?

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Wait, Whose Problem Is This?

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You Should. . .

- One partner may have goals for the other's self-care
 - But what if that partner isn't interested in working on this?
 - Or this dynamic occurs across too many topics?
 - Or it's become so contentious that they've dug in?
 - Or they don't even know what they want on this topic?
- How much standing does the concerned partner have?
 - Especially if it involves a future and/or uncertain outcome?

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No One Likes to Be Bossed Around

- Why is this so important to the concerned partner?
 - Is this about managing anxiety through control?
 - Or difficulty seeing another's perspective/struggles?
 - Or retaining the high ground in the relationship?
 - Or an attempt to manage their own temptations?
 - Or entitlement?
- Unfortunately, pushing too hard tends to evoke pushing back
 - Or other undesirable consequences, especially when self-serving

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Is There a Collusion or Entitlement?

- Is the concerned partner willing to do their part to facilitate the necessary behavioral changes?
 - And realistic about what it would take (logistically and emotionally)?
- Is the uninterested partner interested in the direct or indirect benefits but not the work?
 - Does the concerned partner kind of have a point?
 - Is the uninterested partner giving away their responsibility or internal work?

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What's Their Motivation?

- Why isn't the uninterested partner more interested?
 - Do they have anything to gain here?
 - What's holding them back from considering this more deeply?
 - Is the relationship dynamic interfering with examining their own feelings?
- Is it just about self-determination?
 - Do they feel like they are being pushed to help the concerned partner manage their own discomfort?

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What Can You Control?

- Need to balance concerned partner's powerless resentment with uninterested partner's resentful compliance
 - Work on acceptance that partner won't change, at least right now
- "I'm not telling you what to do. I'm telling you what I'm going to do."
 - E.g. set limits on complaints about what the uninterested partner isn't working on
 - E.g. not make up the difference or accept lower performance
 - E.g. may hold back in other ways

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Foster a Better Discussion

- The concerned partner may have some good points—but a terrible delivery
 - Soften the (implied) judgment and control
 - Focus on how this impacts them and how they feel
- Reduce uninterested partner's defensiveness
 - Consider the request, separate from concerned partner's desires
 - Advocate more effectively for their position
 - Maybe possibly perhaps do it as a generous gesture

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Go Deeper

- Couples who are really stuck will need more help
 - Get out of the old script by listening to understand—lots of questions, few statements
 - Really explore how each feels, not just about the topic but also about the dynamic (initiator/inquirer?)
- Use this topic as an opportunity to drive differentiation and positive problem solving
 - Perhaps more than the final decision, it's important to feel good about your partner at the end

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In Conclusion

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Keep At It

- Self-care is an ongoing process
 - So let's all be patient about the pace of change
 - And therefore clients will likely need ongoing check-ins
- Regardless of what happened yesterday, do the better thing today
- Keep the bigger picture in mind—whatever that is
- Where does improving self-care benefit other therapy goals?

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Partial progress is still progress!

Make today a good day regardless of what happened yesterday.

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How does insufficient self-care affect your couples?

How does it affect you—personally and professionally?

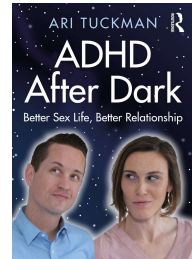
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