



Reflections from Early Career Professionals

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This fall, five mental health professionals working at three different university counseling centers paused in their busy schedules to reflect and share what it means to be an early career professional. Some responded to stimulus questions and others shared general thoughts and feelings. All endorsed feeling energized about their work with clients, acknowledging that this can also be challenging and stressful. Each shared ways they implement self care---whether viewing that as a "radical act" that must be a central aspect of one's life---or prioritizing sleep, exercise and/or "down time". Thoughts about career development, the importance of connection with colleagues and other personal connections, ongoing learning about oneself as well as financial and academic stresses were addressed as well.....so, without further ado, we salute these individuals for their accomplishments as well as their willingness to share the following reflections....

What is this?

Cathleen T. Connolly, Ph.D., Counselor

First year post-internship

University of Central Florida Counseling Center

1) As an early professional, what have you learned already?

I've learned that I need to be savvy in how I market myself to clients and employers. I've learned that I needed my graduate schooling as my foundation but need to be proactive and creative in thinking about what my career will look like.

2) What do you wish you'd known?

I wish I had had a better idea of the financial strain of completely finishing my degree and working towards licensure. When I entered my program, I think I had a vague notion of when I would finish but didn't completely understand the pre-doc internship process and the difficulty in finding work that qualified as post-doctoral supervision hours. I think in my naivety I had pictured that psychologists were easily employed and well-paid (from movies and TV shows!) and was surprised by how that isn't always the norm in the field.

3) What's the most satisfying and challenging thing about your career?

Most satisfying- helping someone find peace, acceptance, and growth in their life.

Challenging- I think I am still surprised on certain days by the amount of emotional energy clients can take from me and how I need to be diligent about replenishing it.

4) What "feeds" you?

I like thinking and talking to others about challenging and complex cases. The personality, dissociative, and somatization disorders fascinate me. I'm not sure about how effective I am in working with them, but they definitely fascinate me! I also get excited about working with performance enhancement issues with

athletes and performing artists.

5) How are you exercising self care?

I make sure to set limits on my time- the end of the work day is the end of the work day. I try not to bring home work or stay late at work. When I leave, I exercise by walking/running outside or playing volleyball with co-workers to relieve tension and stress. I also make sure to get the amount of sleep I need each night to function, which ends up being between 8-9hrs, so most nights I'm in bed by 10pm.

6) What would you have done differently so far?

I'm not sure because I used to say if I had known how stressful the final 2 years of graduate school/internship were going to be, I would have thought twice about getting my Ph.D. Now that I have it, I'm not so sure about that and realize that I learned some important personal lessons during my graduate school years. So, I guess I'm trying to be more proactive in gathering information about job and career choices and making more informed decisions about my future.

Pius Nyutu, Ph.D., Counselor

First year post-internship

The University of Texas Counseling and Mental Health Center

1) As an early professional, what have you learned already?

I have learned that even though I have completed the training part, there is still a lot to be done that causes stress such as job search, adjustment to a new job, preparing for licensure, and developing stability. I have learned to stay motivated, trust my intuitions, be conscientious, consult when in doubts, and stay connected.

2) What do you wish you'd known when you started out?

I wish I had a clear understanding of the time it takes to complete the training program, the efforts it takes at different levels, to meet requirements, and that the profession is all about the love for the work and not the money.

3) What is the most satisfying thing about your career? The most challenging?

It is very satisfying to work with students and to see them make positive and meaningful changes due to strategies they developed in counseling. Currently, it is very challenging to live separately from my family.

4) What "feeds" you in your work?

I am fed by self motivation, interest in the things I do, and a wish to make a difference. I am happy to work in a supportive environment and together with good colleagues.

5) How do you exercise self care?

I have not been able to do as much as I used to do when I was in training. Whenever possible I like to take a walk, do dance exercises, visit places of interest, and dine out. On evenings and weekends, I like to put my work aside and just stay in the house watching TV or talking on phone.

6) What would you have done differently so far?

It is hard to tell since I just started recently. Maybe stay close to my family and also join a gym.

Donald Domenici, M.A. Counselor

First year post internship

The University at Buffalo Counseling Services

Reflections on being a new professional:

The most satisfying aspect of my career thus far is being able to perform interesting and fulfilling work and connect with colleagues who share my passion for counseling and for helping others. Having caring and supportive colleagues allows me to maintain a fresh perspective and is essential to my self-care. I value being able to turn to my colleagues throughout the day for consultation, emotional support, or just to share a laugh. A cooperative work environment is essential for me to feel comfortable, regardless of the type of work I am doing. It is such a joy knowing that I can always count on my colleagues for

understanding and assistance when I am in need of it, and knowing this makes me want to do the same for them. Hobbies and social support (outside of work) have also been a significant part of my self-care. It has also been exciting to gradually integrate hobbies and other personal interests (e.g., music, poetry) into my work as a professional, and it helps to work in a setting where this is supported (or even encouraged, as at times I have been challenged by colleagues to do so even more!). If there is one thing I would have done differently so far, it probably would have been to find a way to finish my dissertation sooner. I had always heard that it was more difficult to finish while on internship or while working a full-time job, but I didn't fully understand how true this was until leaving graduate school. I sometimes feel that I would enjoy my job even more if I didn't have this task hanging over my head. At times, thinking about "not quite being done" gets in the way of feeling fully content and appreciative of where I am at.

Heather Davies, LMSW, Social Worker

Third year post degree

The University of Texas at Austin Counseling and Mental Health Center

As someone who works predominantly with survivors of interpersonal violence, I wrestled a lot in my first couple of years out of grad school with feeling like I couldn't handle this field. It often felt like everyone else was doing just fine managing the emotional and physical toll of this work and that something must be wrong with me that I couldn't "hack it." What I eventually came to recognize for myself was that I CAN do this work and do it well if, and only if, I shift the lens through which I view self-care. I found that, for me, self-care can not be an after-thought, a reactive response to save a sinking ship, nor a mere activity scheduled into my day here and there to appease my emotional self. Self-care, instead, must be a guiding philosophy, a flame that begins and ends each day, a compass that guides even the smallest daily decisions, and an embracing love of the self that is ever-focused on nourishment and nurturance. As I have settled into this lense over time, I have come to view self-care as a radical act – an act that empowers the individual from within over the tug and pull of the systems without.

The systems within which we often work and the field of mental health as a whole, is replete with the Martyr and Rescuer archetypes which I carry strong versions of myself. In working with so much of the suffering and pain of others (not to mention my own), I have struggled with the seductiveness of these energies, finding it hard to give myself permission to contain them, set limits, and thrive. When I choose self-care over the tentacles of the unintegrated or shadow martyr and rescuer, I am saying "YES!" to a greater flow of my own energy, vitality, and passion and "NO!" to depletion, burnout, and secondary trauma. I have learned that my identities as social worker, therapist, advocate, and trainer are only a few in a vast sea of other identities that I carry. When I privilege these four over the others, I quickly fall out of balance and into a state of overexertion, exhaustion, and soul-drain. Self-care has become the banner that I wave with clients, colleagues, and friends. It is a banner that has moved me from a place of just surviving my life to one of vibrant, empowered, thriving!

Euna Oh, Ph.D., Staff Psychologist

Second year, post-internship

The University at Buffalo Counseling Services

1) As an early professional, what have you learned already?

I think I've learned so much about my vulnerability as a person and as an early professional while working as a full time clinician in the past year. Identifying my own vulnerability really helps me work with students in a clinical setting because it makes me easier to empathize with students' vulnerability. In addition, I have learned that I am different from others. I was trained in a doctoral program where there were so much diversity in terms of nationality, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. In that program, I believe that my difference was not as visible as it is now. Currently, I am working at a clinical setting where there are some diversity in terms of race, gender, and sexual orientation. However, I am the only one with a different nationality. This past year while I was working at this current clinical setting, I actually learned that I think differently, I act differently, and I feel differently than most of my colleagues. This learning experience was exciting, while some other aspect of this learning experience was draining and challenging.

2) What's the most satisfying and challenging thing about your career?

The most satisfying thing about my career is to be able to receive instant reward from my work and use my career as a primary resource to grow as a person. Specifically, it is extremely valuable to be able to witness the growth of my students each week. Sometimes, it is very challenging to see the pain in my students, but having the moment of sharing and witnessing the pain in others seems still very therapeutic and powerful for me. I also realized that providing therapy for others can be very therapeutic for myself. I am learning a lot about myself by observing other's strengths and vulnerability and I am still excited about exploring more about who I am.

The most challenging part of my career is that I feel limited sense of accomplishment primarily because of limited sense of responsibility and autonomy as a beginning clinician. I understand it's too early in my career to feel a sense of accomplishment. But, I am unsure what it would mean to feel accomplished as a clinician. Becoming a well known psychologist? Or Writing a book? Having many clients? I don't have an answer to this, but I'd like to find out answers eventually.

3) How are you exercising self care?

I maintain a healthy and close relationship with my significant others including family and my partner. They are my greatest social support and they help me feel taken care of by others. Also, recently, I made an effort to reconnect to my close colleagues and friends from schools. It felt so good to initiate contacts and to feel reconnected to my good old friends. This was my gesture to show my gratitude toward people who have played a big role in my growth throughout my academic career. This was my gesture to take a good care of myself when feeling lonely and isolated.

Editor's Concluding Comments: As I was reading these early professionals' reflections, the thought hit me that these voices are *already* molding the future of mental health at university counseling centers. I was struck by their honesty, wisdom and insight.... their growing pains, struggles and growth edges brought back familiar memories. My hope is that their vibrant passion for their work will remind us all why we're doing what we're doing. May we "listen hard" to them, learn from them, mentor them and promote their sustainability. They are our future!