



Straight Talk About Self-care

for Human Service Workers

by John Ashfield PhD



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The purpose of this book is to provide human service workers and professionals with simple and practical principles and strategies for self-care. Despite being amongst the most self-giving and compassionate people in our community, those who occupy human service roles are often little considerate of themselves and their own wellbeing. It is intended that this book will be a resource that human service organisations and agencies will obtain and distribute to their employees and contractors.

In this brief volume, topics have been chosen for their immediate practical importance. Though tapping into many technical sources of 'tried and tested' ideas and data, they are presented purposely in straightforward language and with simple accompanying self-care and self-help strategies. The thought being that, busy people don't need the added stress of having to 'mine' for useful ideas in a laboured or academic style of content.

The book commences by highlighting that self-care and care for others are inseparably part of a single moral imperative of human service. It concludes with a theme that is rapidly becoming a key consideration in psychological practice, health promotion, and preventative mental health: the use of principles of meditation for self-care, general health, and wellbeing.

Why You Must Matter

Ever dressed in a hurry and in buttoning up a shirt or blouse you didn't pay enough attention and started doing up the buttons in the wrong sequence, thus, every subsequent button was done up wrongly and you had to undo them all and start again at the top?

The 'top button' of this book is to first establish *why you must matter* as a human service worker, and why valuing yourself is inseparable from the whole enterprise of effectively caring about and helping others. Actually, the two rise or fall together and must both be given due attention. If you don't grasp the fact that *you must matter*, then not much else that follows this chapter will have value for you. This, of all the chapters is the one to take your time over and read reflectively.

Most of us are drawn into human service work out of what has been termed 'altruism' - concern for others, and the endeavour in some way to help them and improve their experience; which on the face of it, seems like a virtuous and moral thing to be doing. But is it really that simple? Rarely is human service work without mixed motives, and though our heart may well be in the right place (as they say), with how much awareness do we factor ourselves into this picture? To explore *why you must matter*, we'll borrow some musings from Carl Jung, a famous Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst (the two sources used are listed in the reference list).

It is widely recognised that human service work should be characterised by a deep respect for people, for the facts of their situation, and their experience of it. Jung called this a 'moral achievement'. It follows then, that if we wish to help others we need to be able to accept them as they are. But can we do this without first we have noticed and accepted ourselves? Sounds simple enough, and you've probably heard this said before. However, simple things are often the most difficult to comprehend properly.

There is virtue in caring for and helping others, but what if I stand in need of compassion, acceptance, being affirmed and

valued? What if I fail to notice and show respect for myself? How can I simply reverse the moral principle of my human service work and refuse to admit that this 'poor' person has ever crossed my path? Surely such 'selective compassion' where I choose nonchalantly to remain in ignorance about myself while being busy with other people and their troubles, is rather fraudulent? I may feel virtuous but have I deceived myself and others around me?

There is virtue in caring for and helping others, but what if I stand in need of compassion, acceptance, being affirmed and valued? What if I fail to notice and show respect for myself?

Most of us struggle with the idea of self-acceptance and though we may in many ways do things for ourselves, even to the extent of selfishness, we fail to reflectively acknowledge our own hurts, insecurities, fears, and struggles; we do not choose to truly notice and value ourselves.

Jung suggests that we quite naturally don't want to be ourselves, instead imagining who we ought to be or would prefer to be, and making every effort not to be ourselves. This creates the idea that it is not good to be ourselves or to think of ourselves. In response to this tendency, Jung quotes from a scripture passage of Christian origin: '...love your neighbour as yourself', pointing out that we are unhesitatingly responsive to the ideal of loving our neighbour, but ignore the imperative of the same moral precept: 'as yourself'. So, we may be agreeable with the idea of loving our neighbour, but what if the neighbour that is ignored, that begs acceptance, needs nurture and kindness, happens to be ourselves?

As already stated, these two imperatives rise or fall together, because both are inseparably part of the one moral principle. Some ethicists argue that to act in a way that is truly in our best interests (selfishness is not) is at the same time in the best interests of others, and that these are intertwined in a profound yet not always immediately evident way; an idea well worth pondering.

It may be a more satisfactory rendition of *altruism*, especially if altruism is to be effective and avoid fraudulence, for it to necessarily include a genuine attempt at self-acceptance and self-compassion, as well as a genuine attempt to accept and show compassion to others. Granted, there are rare occasions in some extraordinary human lives that call



People who work in human service roles and organisations never have been the best at taking care of themselves. This book argues, that needs to change because the idea that we can care for others while neglecting ourselves is highly questionable; the two stand or fall together.

Whether your role is in health, mental health, police, welfare, emergency services, aged or disability care, pastoral care, or some other domain of human service, you'll find this book an invaluable resource to support and sustain you in your important work.



Dr John Ashfield is a bestselling author, educator and psychotherapist, known all over Australia for his efforts at providing people with simple yet effective self-help strategies for taking care of their mental health. His books have received wide acclaim and endorsement and with nearly one and a half million copies in print, he is the most read author of mental health promotion literature in Australia.

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