

The conversation:

# Self-care: It's not up to you alone

We'd like to have an ongoing conversation about the challenges unique to working in the family violence sector and ask workers how they think about and practice self-care. This regular feature is an opportunity to bring those different points of view to life, and share them across the sector.

In this issue we discussed the concept of self-care with DVRCV's own Belinda Bannerman, senior trainer in practice and response. Belinda has over 17 years' direct experience working with victim/survivors of family violence and now designs and delivers family violence training, including training on self-care.

Belinda continues our conversation by interrogating some of the assumptions surrounding self-care and re-framing the entire concept.

## How do you question the concept of self-care?

Self-care in the workplace has become overly focused on the individual: the notion that you are responsible for your self-care implies that if you're not managing, then you must be doing something wrong. But a feminist view of self-care includes the crucial consideration of *context*.

Caring for yourself as a professional is a joint act shared by you and your workplace. You do have to take responsibility for yourself, but you also need support. We should be moving towards understanding this concept as 'worker sustainability and wellbeing', which shifts the focus to a dual responsibility, and allows a broader understanding of the context in which the work is carried out.

## What is the importance of valuing yourself and your work?

I think people are doing amazingly well but I think they need help. The first step is to change the old thinking that self-care is about individual workers who can either hack the job or can't.

And we have to think about it from a political standpoint. Where does the idea come from that you put yourself last? It comes from that idea of what a mother is, what a good woman is and a woman who works to help



other women does. There's this underlying idea of, "But you just help people don't you? Surely it doesn't matter what you get paid?" Or it could even be the undervaluing of the complex set of skills that are needed just to work in this sector.

The other crucial thing I'd recommend is self-awareness. Whenever I do training in self-care, I ask, "What are three things that nourish you, that nurture you, that puts the fuel back in your tank?"

The other part of knowing yourself is knowing what kind of role makes it feel like you're making a difference. What sort of work makes it possible for you to get some traction?

For example, some people are more suited to crisis intervention, some are better at long-term case management, some are good at strategy and some people are good at supporting staff. Finding the right role is challenging and it may change depending on where you are in your life, but the right role for your strengths will go a long way in producing that feeling of 'Something is changing because I do this'.

## How is systemic change relevant to self care?

It's about understanding how your work fits into a larger movement of change. Doing this work can feel overwhelming at times which is an appropriate response to an overwhelming system. So when you break it down to what you can achieve in your role, what's within your role and what's outside of it, this assists managing the frustrations of a system with many limitations.

A worker could do a thorough risk assessment, but then come up against a system that says, "Sorry, she doesn't meet our criteria, she can't go into refuge".

What can you do when facing something as enormous as systemic change?

Talk to your manager so they can advocate at their level and find colleagues who share your concerns. Learn how to do *systemic* advocacy alongside *individual* advocacy, or support others who are already doing that.

Understanding your role in the broader system helps to alleviate the sense of being powerless and reminds you that you are part of a broader movement; you're not alone. It's essential to remember that. ■

**NEW TRAINING:  
WELLBEING, SELF-CARE  
& SUSTAINABILITY**

In response to our training survey, DVRCV created training dedicated to self-care and wellbeing for people working in the family violence sector. Visit our website for dates and locations [www.dvrcv.org.au](http://www.dvrcv.org.au)