

Self-Care as the Bedrock of Ethical and Competent Service Delivery: The Practitioner's Journey

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ABSTRACT

Sport psychology practitioners (SPPs) face unique challenges associated with the nature of their profession, which can result in negative consequences to their well-being and to the quality of their service delivery. Therefore, SPPs must aim to promote their own well-being by engaging in self-care practices. Recent literature highlighted the importance of self-care for SPPs, however no clear recommendations as of how SPPs can identify, develop, and implement self-care practices exist. Based on our experience in delivering workshops on self-care to SPPs, grounded in the existing literature, we offered some guidance of how SPPs can develop their own self-care plan.

In recent years scholars have begun to explore self-care in psychology practitioners (Rupert & Dorociak, 2019) and sport psychology practitioners (SPPs) specifically (Quartiroli, Etzel, et al., 2019). However, within the sport psychology literature, this body of work is still mainly exploratory and descriptive, stressing the importance of engaging in self-care and clarifying the relevant terminology (Quartiroli, Hunter, & Martin, 2022). In the past few years, we have been invited to deliver workshops to SPPs focused on self-care in multiple countries, bringing to practice some of the theoretical knowledge in the literature. While grounded in the existing sport psychology self-care literature, our approach to the workshop has been heavily influenced by our reflections grounded in our experiences in applied practice, in leading the workshops, and in our interactions with workshop participants, clients, supervisees, and colleagues. The information shared in this manuscript is the result of these reflections. With this manuscript, we are hoping to share the process we have so far developed and implemented to support SPPs in their journey toward well-being by developing their self-care plan and engaging in effective self-care practices.

The theoretical background

SPPs dedicate their professional career to facilitating their clients' pursuit of performance and well-being (Poczwadowski, 2019). While a variety of factors positively characterize the work of SPPs (Quartiroli, Knight, et al., 2019), their work is also associated with both personal (e.g., emotional exhaustion) and professional (e.g., impairment) challenges (Stevanovic & Rupert, 2004). These challenges may negatively impact SPPs' personal and professional well-being if not managed effectively and consequently negatively

influence their professional effectiveness (Cropley et al., 2010a).

Due to a complex interplay of workplace conditions and stressors, SPPs experience various career-related challenges (Quartiroli, Etzel, et al., 2019). These challenges experienced by SPPs include the nontraditional working conditions (e.g., quick meetings during breaks, in hotel lobbies, and during air travel), the ambiguous ethical and professional boundaries (e.g., room sharing on extended trips), and the perceived lack of professional support (Quartiroli, Etzel, et al., 2019; Quartiroli, Wagstaff, & Thelwell, 2022).

Recently, Poczwardowski (2019) described how a SPP can be considered as an expert, a person, and a performer. As performers, SPPs play a critical role in successful service delivery, and to do so, they must articulate their knowledge, skills, and abilities and regulate themselves in their roles. Quartiroli, Wagstaff, and Thelwell (2022) highlighted how practitioners' self-regulatory functions (see Poczwardowski, 2019) can be supported by their engagement in self-care. Self-care is essential in promoting excellence in a SPP's service delivery efforts and can also potentially add to their personal growth (Quartiroli, Wagstaff, & Thelwell, 2022). In their journey toward pursuing excellence in their practice, SPPs must maintain the highest ethical standards of service delivery (Barnett et al., 2007) while also reaching their fullest potential and providing their clients with effective and ethical services (Aoyagi & Portenga, 2010). To flourish as individuals within their professions, SPPs, and psychology practitioners must aim to promote their own personal and professional well-being (Rupert & Dorociak, 2019) by engaging in self-care practices (Quartiroli, Fogaça, & Wagstaff, 2022). Therefore, it is possible to consider the deliberate engagement of SPP in self-care practices a moral and ethical responsibility (Smith & Moss, 2009; Wise et al., 2012).

Engaging in self-care may protect SPPs from negative outcomes while fostering personal flourishing and promoting good practice outcomes and experiences of greater well-being (Colman et al., 2016). SPPs who fail to prevent, manage, or cope with the challenges and demands of their profession whilst simultaneously not being able to care for their own well-being, may experience negative effects on their own well-being, and potentially engage in harmful and unethical practices (Norcross & VandenBos, 2018).

Aiming to offer a shared language and to support SPPs in their journey to proactively focus and engage in self-care practices, Quartiroli, Wagstaff, and Thelwell (2022) recently offered a definition of Sport Psychology Self-Care (SPSC) as "the purposeful engagement in activities grounded in one's values. It involves prioritizing, developing, preserving, protecting, monitoring and restoring holistic (i.e., physical, psychological, social, spiritual, and emotional) health, well-being and satisfaction with work and life." (p. 8) Core to this definition is the idea that self-care is grounded in one's own values. Thus, SPPs are encouraged to engage in reflective and explorative efforts to develop their awareness of their own values, upon which they will also be able to start conceptualizing developing, implementing, and assessing their personal self-care plan.

How to conceptualize, develop, implement, and assess an individualized self-care plan

An individualized self-care plan is the result of the process of developing awareness about oneself and their values, what self-care is in one's life, what makes self-care relevant in one's journey, identifying the self-care practices that, as grounded in their personal values, would fit the individual SPP's journey, and the factors limiting their implementation. Finally, a self-care plan must also be assessed and revisited throughout one's journey in relationship to their personal and professional life events.

While SPPs can identify different models to develop a self-care plan, we believe that self-care is a purposeful engagement in activities grounded in one's values and, therefore an intimately personal journey. For this reason, offering a prescriptive approach to the development of a self-care plan is neither useful nor necessary, and instead, it may become potentially detrimental to the process of self-exploration needed by SPPs to develop the foundational awareness of themselves, their journey, their values, and their worldview on self-care. For this reason, here below we tried to bring together an approach to engage in this journey that we have developed throughout our scholarly and applied experience. Our approach is aimed to offer SPPs to begin the self-exploratory journey needed to develop their own self-care plan, without offering a finite list of practices that one should engage in.

Life story: A tool to develop self-awareness

We believe that the first step to engaging in this journey is grounded in the self-awareness of how one's journey has, and is still, unfolding; what are its most relevant aspects and moments, the values and motifs guiding it, and the way it is experienced. For this reason, the first of the steps to developing and implementing a self-care plan is for the SPPs to engage in a deliberate exploration of the self and their journey. Looking for an effective avenue to engage in this process, we recommend SPPs to engage in a modified, self-engaged, version of the McAdams' Life Story interview (McAdams & Guo, 2014).

Table 1. McAdams life story interview outline – modified.

Interview component	Description
Life Chapters	When I consider the story of my life, the main chapters are... (provide a title and a brief summary of the plot.) The end of one chapter and the beginning of the next is marked by...
Key Scenes High & low points Turning points Critical Moments	In an especially significant scene in my life... this scene stands out in my life story because...
Life Challenge	The most significant challenge I have faced in my life is... it came to be because...I have addressed / understood / coped with this by...
Future Script	When thinking about the next chapter in my life, I see... I am heading toward... My goals are...I plan to achieve them by...
Ideological Setting	When thinking about my beliefs about life and the world, my most important personal, spiritual, or ethical values are... I came to these values by...
Life theme	Thinking back, what is the main theme that runs through the story of my life?

Modified from McAdams & Guo, 2014.

One of the primary purposes of a life story is to enable the individual to make sense of their journey, reflecting on particular—important or salient—life scenes or events and how these events are informative about who they are (Alea, 2018). SPPs are asked to both describe the events characterizing their journey and simultaneously whether and how these events say anything about them, as a person, a professional, and about their life. Working through the development of their own life story, SPPs can engage in a self-exploration of their own authenticity, fundamental beliefs and values, and visions for the future, which may lead them to structure a solid foundation to understand which self-care practices may fit their life and the needs, values, and goals they have identified.

In Table 1 we offer a modified version of the McAdams Life Story Interview Outline (McAdams & Guo, 2014) that could offer SPPs a semi-defined structure to begin engaging in this process. However, we also recognize this is not the only approach to developing life stories and that the literature may offer additional guides (Atkinson, 2007) and some SPPs may find other structures for this reflection more in line with themselves.

Self-reflection as a foundation to self-care

Grounded in their enhanced awareness of their life story, SPPs can now engage in reflective exercises aimed to help SPPs to develop the foundations for their self-care plan. Specifically, SPPs have benefited from engaging in self-reflective exercises focused on developing some clarity about their values and how they currently approach self-care.

Value-based self-reflective exercises

In line with the definition of self-care offered by Quartiroli, Wagstaff, and Thelwell (2022), a clear understanding of one's values represents a primary bedrock for the development, implementation, and maintenance of self-care. SPPs deliberately engaging in these self-reflective exercises may be able to develop an in-depth understanding of their values leading their life and the relevance that these values play in their life. These self-reflective exercises may also enable SPPs to develop greater awareness of their adherence to these values day-to-day and explore the potential gaps that may exist between how they aspire to embrace them and how they experience them. In Table 2 we offered some suggestions in terms of reflective questions that we have used in our own practice and work that may facilitate SPPs to engage in this reflective experience.

While engaging in this process it may be important for SPPs to also keep in consideration the existence of universal (Schwartz, 1994) and basic (Gouveia, 2003) values as well as the influence that our cultural environments (Bardi & Goodwin, 2011) and life events (Rohan, 2000) may have on our values as well as their development. For this reason, we encourage SPPs to engage in this reflective exercise periodically to assess their values, their ability to live congruently with these values, and how functional these values are in their personal and professional lives in relation to the cultural space within which they exist.

While this process of exploration of their values has been so far described as a unique and individual exploration for each SPPs, we would also encourage SPPs to consider their involvement in reflective communities of practice as an effective avenue to stimulate and enhance their value-focused reflections (cf. Wagstaff et al., In press).

Table 2. Value-based self-reflective exercises – a few Questions.

These questions are a few examples of reflective questions that SPPs can ask themselves and can use to explore their values within their own personal and professional journey.
What are my most important life values? What makes them important in my life? how congruent to my value am i living? how do these values unfold in my professional journey? When/how did i develop these values? how did this value evolve throughout my life? My professional career? how does my cultural environment impact my values? how does my cultural environment impact my ability to live congruent to my values? are my values functional to effective personal and professional living?

Note. These examples are not meant to be a complete list of questions or the only way to engage in this exploration. With these questions, we only want to offer the reader some initial reflective exercises that will enable them to begin engaging in this work and we encourage them to consider other sources focused on value-based work, such as the work of.

Table 3. Self-reflective exercises focused on self-care.

These questions are a few examples of reflective questions that SPPs can ask themselves and can use to explore their understanding of and attitude toward self-care, and engagement in self-care practices.

What does self-care mean to me?
What makes self-care relevant in my journey?
What do I strive to obtain by engaging in self-care? how does self-care fit my life?
What role does self-care play in my professional life? how do my current self-care practices fit my life?
When/how did I develop these practices?
What impact do these practices seem to have in my life?
What nourishes and/or constrains my engagement in self-care?

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Modified from Anderson et al., 2004.

Note. These examples are not meant to be a complete list of questions or the only way to engage in this exploration. With these questions, we only want to offer the reader some initial reflective exercises that will enable them to begin engaging in this work.

Self-reflective exercises focused on self-care

Along with their newly developed in-depth understanding and awareness of themselves, their journey, and their values, SPPs are encouraged to engage in further reflective exercises focused on their approach to self-care, such as those in Table 3. These reflective experiences will enable SPPs to develop a greater awareness of their self-care practices, how they developed, how impactful they are, and what factors nourish or constrain their engagement in them.

Bringing it all together

To develop a self-care plan grounded in one's values and to be able to bring together a series of practices that can be assimilated within each other and in the individual's life, SPPs must consider how the outcomes of these reflections may be integrated. To begin the process of integration, SPPs could try to engage with a series of reflective exercise through which exploring their current and developing engagement in self-care practices, in relation to their life story, values, and worldviews. Through these exercises, SPPs may also explore possible practices, factors and individuals in their lives that they may want to consider integrating in their self-care plan. We share here a few examples of possible reflective questions, that consider the SPPs' life stories and values in Table 4.

These questions are aimed to offer a foundation for SPPs to begin engaging in the process of developing and implementing self-care practices. The goal is to identify practices that a SPP can integrate in their personal and professional lives and in which they can deliberately engage, while remaining true to themselves and the professional they want to be. Given the many possibilities and combinations of self-care practices, it is important that SPPs explore how they select these practices, assess how these practices are relevant to their personal and professional needs, and how they implement these practices in a coherent, holistic, and effective manner (Martin et al., 2022).

Table 4. Integrative questions.

These questions are a few examples of reflective questions that can enable SPPs to engage in the process of integrating their reflection on their own values and those on their self-care understanding and engagement, within the nuances of their life-stories.

How does my understanding of self-care align with my past, present, and future journey?
How do my current self-care practices contribute to prioritizing my well-being?
How do my current self-care practices align with the life values i live by?
How do my current self-care practices support my professional values?
How can I engage in self-care practices that align with who i am and my values?
How do my current self-care practices support my professional philosophy and practice?
How can I develop and engage in self-care practices that will support my professional philosophy and practice?
What self-care practices enable me to prioritize my well-being and stay true to my values?

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Note. these examples are not meant to be a complete list of questions or the only way to engage in this integrative process. With these questions, we only want to offer the reader some initial examples upon which they can build their own process of exploration focused on developing and implementing value-grounded self-care practices in which they can deliberately engage.

We want to emphasize that SPPs must engage in this process with the understanding that this is a lifelong commitment to oneself and their care. This is a process characterized by the interactive and cyclical relationship between one's reflection about their value and their awareness of how their life and self-care practices align with these values; their awareness of how their behaviors, thoughts, and feelings related (and not) to self-care reflect their values, and their reflections of what lead them to live and engage in self-care congruently (or not) with these values. For this reason, to be effective in their process of developmental adaptation of the self-care plan, SPPs need to regularly, flexibly, and cyclically engage in the above-mentioned reflective processes. Thus, SPPs may be able to explore how their own needs may have changed, how their values may have evolved, how their self-care practices may fit (or not) their current developmental tasks, and how their self-care plan may need to be modified and adapted to their new circumstances.

Self-care engagement throughout the career lifespan

It is also important to recognize that self-care needs, practices, and challenges evolve and change across the career span (Quartiroli, Wagstaff, & Thelwell, 2022). Fogaca et al. (2022) highlighted how SPPs in later stages of their career are more engaged with their own self-care, as a results of their appreciation of the importance of the role that they play as part of the relationships with their clients. On the other end, early career practitioners experience more emotional exhaustion, greater perceived stress, less personal accomplishment and satisfaction with the current position than late-career practitioners (Dorociak et al., 2017; Quartiroli, Etzel, et al., 2019). Grounded in their clearer and more solidified professional identity (cf. Quartiroli, Wagstaff, Hunter & Martin, 2022), experienced SPPs have a clearer understanding of their needs and a greater ability to prioritize them and address them (Quartiroli, Etzel, et al., 2019). Due to these different experiences, while SPPs across the career lifespan value self-care similarly, they experience and engage with self-care differently (Martin et al., 2022).

Therefore, SPPs must develop a self-care plan that adapts to their own specific developmental stage

and that they can be modified and adapted to different developmental, contextual, and situational factors. An effective self-care plan is one that aligns with one's values and sense of self, encompassing practices that are free to evolve and can be maintained across one's professional development. The adaptability of a self-care plan will also depend on a SPP's consideration of how personal values may evolve throughout one's lifespan (Gouveia et al., 2015). SPPs who understand the importance for this flexibility in developing, implementing, and adjusting the plan are far more likely to experience more positive outcomes for their personal and professional well-being (Martin et al., 2022).

Self-care plan's challenges

Engaging in this process, SPPs may experience challenges that hinder their ability to develop and implement effective self-care practices as well as effective self-care plans (Quartioli, Wagstaff, & Thelwell, 2022). These challenges can be classified as external and internal. The former being primarily associated with the uniqueness of the sport psychology profession, such as the uncommon work settings and conditions, the precarity and scarcity of professional opportunities, the competitiveness of the job market, the isolation characterizing the professional roles, and the demands of their professional environments, (see Quartioli, Wagstaff, & Thelwell, 2022; Stapleton et al., 2010; Wren et al., 2022). The internal challenges, instead, are associated with the individual SPPs. Specifically, SPPs reported their tendencies to professionally over-commit—especially in the early stages of their careers—their inability to set reasonable personal and professional boundaries, to managing multiple roles (Martin et al., 2022; Quartioli, Wagstaff, & Thelwell, 2022). They also listed as factors hindering their ability to engage in self-care practices their lack of self-compassion and awareness of their own self-care needs, the life events characterizing their own lives, and their inability to foster and maintain personal relationships (Quartioli, Wagstaff, & Thelwell, 2022). Interestingly, some of the challenges reported by SPPs as hindering their ability to effectively engage in self-care practices overlap with the challenges that in different body of work they also report in relation to the quality of their professional experience (Quartioli, Knight, et al., 2019), their professional identity (Quartioli, Wagstaff, Hunter & Martin, 2022), and professional practice (Stapleton et al., 2010).

SPPs who are considering exploring their self-care practices and are considering embarking in this process aimed to develop a self-care plan, may need to prepare themselves for the possibility of failing in the process. SPPs are encouraged not to consider this failure as a complete defeat of their attempts to foster their own well-being by proactively engaging in self-care. Instead, SPPs may view this as an opportunity from which to explore if failure, on this occasion, is associated with a misalignment between their self-care practices and values and personal story and/or if it is associated with the lack of prioritization of their well-being within their personal and professional lives (Quartioli, Wagstaff, & Thelwell, 2022). Once SPPs completed their reflections on the importance of their well-being and their desire to proactively engage in practices supporting it, they can explore the potential unique challenges

that may hinder this process and possibly adapt their practices (Quartiroli, Hunter, & Martin, 2022).

Nowhere to start from. How can I begin?

So far, in this manuscript, we have stressed the importance for SPPs to engage in an individual journey of reflection as the bedrock of their self-care. However, we recognize that the process of self-reflection may be new to some SPPs and trainees and that it may take some time to learn how to engage in this work effectively. For this reason, we encourage SPPs to explore the existing literature focused on how to effectively engage in self-reflection as a part of their professional development (cf. Cropley et al., 2010b).

Moreover, we also recognize that the self-reflective work we are proposing in this manuscript may require some time before leading SPPs to identify specific, personal, value-grounded self-care practices to implement in their journey. Martin et al. (2022) described how trainees may appreciate some initial recommendations about how to start engaging in their self-care efforts. Similarly, experienced and expert SPPs described how early on in their career they utilized what they had learnt from supervisors and advanced SPPs and throughout their careers, they identified practices and strategies that better suited their lives (Quartiroli, Etzel, et al., 2019). For this reason, we would like to point the reader to some of the recent literature focused on self-care that highlight some of the commonly reported self-care practices and strategies, aiming to offer some recommendations to SPPs on where to start with the process of self-care. Recently a panel of 21 globally situated SPPs experts in areas related to self-care and well-being, co-constructed a list of the most effective self-care strategies and practices that SPPs may engage in to counteract the most commonly faced barriers to their self-care (Quartiroli, Wagstaff, & Thelwell, 2022). Among these practices and strategies, panelists listed: (a) active living, (b) resting and sleeping, (c) managing one's time, (d) self-reflecting, (e) personal reading, (f) contributing to the culture of self-care of their professional context, and (g) pursuing personal counseling. While not a finite or prescriptive list of activities, leaving SPPs to integrate their own, SPPs may use this list to begin their deliberate and active engagement in their self-care, while embarking in the self-reflective journey previously described.

Conclusion

SPPs should consider engaging in self-care as it is beneficial from various perspectives, and failing to engage in self-care may lead them to experience negative outcomes. Therefore, SPPs must acknowledge their responsibility to develop and maintain their holistic well-being by actively—and not just retroactively—engaging in self-care in both their personal and professional journeys. Failing to take care of oneself may result in engaging in practices that are not only harmful to clients but also to themselves, and the profession.

SPPs are strongly encouraged to engage in various self-exploratory activities—whether individually or collectively—that may enable them to develop the required self-awareness of themselves and their core

values, critical to the development of effective and individualized self-care practices. This awareness may support SPPs to identify self-care practices that will, in alignment with their selves and their values, positively and effectively contribute to the maintenance of their holistic well-being and indirectly to their engagement in ethical and effective sport psychology practices (Quartiroli, Etzel, et al., 2019). It is paramount that this process is not experienced by SPPs as a 'one and done' experience, rather, that it continues across the development of their career. For example, while SPPs trainees may focus on developing a self-care plan, experienced and expert SPPs may focus on revisiting, reevaluating, sense-checking their established practices. Finally, we acknowledge that the literature upon which this manuscript is built is heavily influenced by westernized Euro-centric worldviews of self-care, sport psychology, and life and may not be directly transferable to other cultural contexts and backgrounds.

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