



Addressing Self-Care as Integral in Teaching Professional Ethics to Psychology Graduate Students

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The Ethical Imperative of Self-Care

The Canadian Psychological Association's *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists*,ⁱ refers to the ethical importance of self-care. In adhering to the Principle of Responsible Caring, under the subheading of competence and self-knowledge, the *Code* states that psychologists would "engage in self-care activities that help to avoid conditions (e.g., burnout, addictions) that could result in impaired judgment and interfere with their ability to benefit and not harm others" (II.12). Furthermore, it directs psychologists to "seek appropriate help and/or discontinue scientific or professional activity for an appropriate period of time, if a physical or psychological condition reduces their ability to benefit and not harm others" (II.11). Stated otherwise, it is essential for psychologists, including psychologists-in-training, to take appropriate steps to maintain individual well-being in order to be able to engage ethically in their activities with others.

Given their profession, one might assume that psychologists are more aware of the importance of self-care and exemplify good mental health. However, a review of the research suggests that psychologists are prone to burnout, and subsequent impairment in their roles.ⁱⁱ Although varying across studies, findings indicate that more than half of psychologists report emotional exhaustion and depressed mood, with upwards of 40% reporting suicidal thoughts, and a minority reporting substance abuse, at some time during their career.ⁱⁱ Furthermore, while 85% of psychologists in one survey believed it was unethical to work when they were overly distressed, 60% of them had done so.ⁱⁱⁱ A clear need for greater self-care is not restricted to clinicians. High rates of burnout are also reported amongst university faculty, with professors who supervise larger numbers of graduate students reporting greater emotional exhaustion than those who supervise smaller numbers.^{iv} Thus, psychology graduate students are likely to train with and learn from psychologists who may be struggling to engage in adequate self-care themselves. Indeed, psychology graduate students also struggle with high levels of stress that interfere with their professional functioning and personal well-being.^{v,vi,vii,viii} Commonly cited stressors include academic responsibilities, finances/debt, anxiety, and poor school-life balance.^{vi}

Opportunities for Fostering Self-Care

In their review of impairment amongst psychologists, Smith & Mossⁱⁱ highlight the importance of preventing burnout by addressing the issue during graduate training. Previous research suggests that the more knowledge psychologists have about



burnout prevention techniques, the stronger they report believing it is unethical to practice while impaired.^{ix} This supports the importance of fostering the development of appropriate self-care strategies within graduate psychology programs. However, the vast majority of psychology training programs reportedly offer only a single opportunity that focuses on fostering self-care (e.g., as part of one course).^x Very few programs integrate an ongoing emphasis on self-care throughout the graduate programming. Perhaps of greater concern is that more than half of psychology graduate students do not believe that their program encourages or promotes self-care.^{xi} So, what can be done?

Several strategies have been suggested for engendering a culture of self-care within the profession and graduate training programs. These include the development by graduate programs of peer support groups that foster a sense of community, open dialogue amongst faculty and students about the challenges of adequate self-care, and faculty members modeling good self-care.^{vii,xii} Such self-care includes exercise, adequate sleep, healthy eating, and leisure activities that do not have a connection to work or school, such as a regular vacation and engaging in activities unrelated to the profession.^{ii,viii} Research has shown that graduate students are more likely to engage in self-care activities when they believe that their mentors support their self-care strategy.^{xiii} It has also been suggested that programs integrate self-care opportunities into student schedules and maintain flexibility over how students meet academic and training requirements^{xiii}. Indeed, increased perceived control over one's work environment and activities appears particularly important for students and psychologists in preventing burnout.ⁱⁱ Benefit has also been shown from student participation in formal graduate course offerings such as mindfulness-based classes.^{xiv}

By including discussions of self-care from the moment of first orientation for new graduate students and throughout their courses and clinical training opportunities, students are more likely to receive the message that self-care is an essential ongoing part of the profession. Furthermore, self-care should not be seen as an extra or bonus activity that occurs only when or if there is time, and students should be helped to understand the importance of learning one's own early signs of burnout.



Case Discussion*

“You are a graduate student whose research supervisor has high expectations of the members of her lab. There seems to be an ‘unwritten rule’ that graduate students may not decline work (paid or unpaid) that is assigned by the supervisor. However, your physical and psychological health has been declining due to lack of sleep and what you believe is an unreasonable workload. You believe you cannot take the pressure much longer, but you need your supervisor to provide you with a reference letter, and if you complain you would be perceived as incompetent or lazy.” (*Case #22 reprinted from Pettifor, J.L., McCarron, M.C.E., Schoepp, G., Stark, C., & Stewart, D. (2010). *Resource guide for psychologists: Ethical supervision in teaching, research, practice, and administration*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Psychological Association.)

What options are open to the student? What can the supervisor do to encourage adequate self-care by the student? What can be done at a program level to support the student’s well-being?

Invitation: Please feel free to send your comments about this article or any ideas you have regarding topics for future Ethics Corner articles to ethicscttee@cpa.ca.

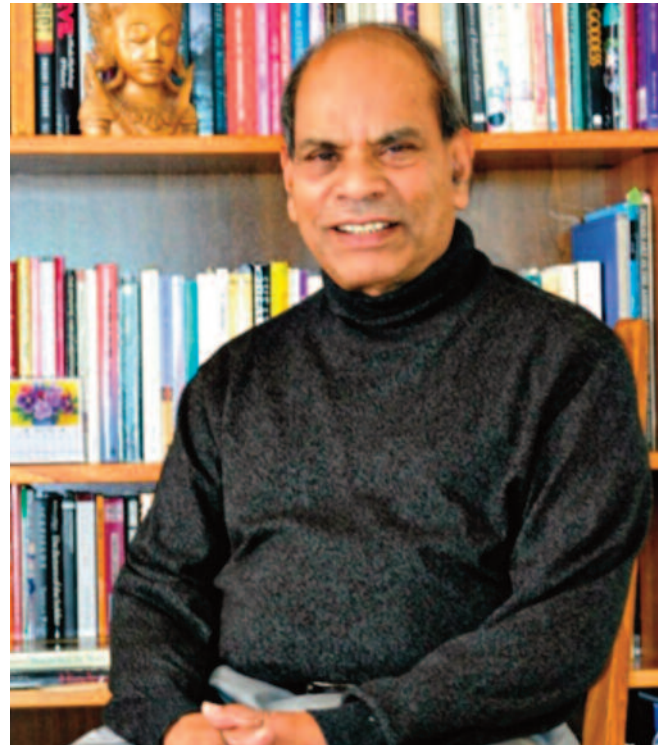
For a complete list of references, please go to www.cpa.ca/psynopsis

CPA Welcomes Dr. Stewart Madon as the new Registrar of Accreditation and Ethics Officer!

Dr. Stewart Madon is a clinical psychologist who completed his Ph.D. at Lakehead University and his undergraduate degree at Laurentian University. Though his graduate training was in clinical psychology, his doctoral research was in the visual neurosciences and psychophysics; specifically, the impact of photosensitive retinal ganglion cells on conscious visual processing. He completed his predoctoral internship and post-doctoral supervised practice with the Mental Health and Addictions programs at Health Sciences North in Sudbury, Ontario, where he also served as the psychology professional practice leader. During that time, he had the opportunity to guide the practice of psychology, work on the promotion of psychology within the hospital, as well as liaise with practice leaders from other disciplines. On a personal note, Dr. Madon is married with 2 wonderful children, and enjoys stereotypical hobbies such as golf, swimming and bad handwriting.

As the new registrar of accreditation, it is Dr. Madon’s goal to facilitate the promotion and elevation of psychological training and practice in Canada.

Reshaping Our Intelligence J.P Das named to the Order of Canada for his work in intelligence & cognitive psychology



What does it mean to be intelligent? Jagannath Prasad (J.P.) Das has been asking this question since he was a child. Even at a young age, Das recognized that intelligence went beyond a person’s schooling and basic knowledge of facts. Determined to understand intelligence outside the conventions of an IQ test, Das has dedicated his career to explaining the roots of intelligence in neuropsychology and cognition since 1975. Throughout his studies, Das found that intelligence is a comprehensive facet of thinking and knowing, which embodies the processes of planning, attention, simultaneous comprehension and sequencing. Together with his colleague Jack Naglieri, Das developed an intelligence assessment system that reduces cultural and educational biases. Today, psychologists use the theory and the Das-Naglieri Cognitive assessment system as an educational intervention in several parts of the world. In recognition of his contributions to psychology, J.P Das was appointed to the Order of Canada on July 1.

Learn More about Dr. Das and The JPDas Centre on Developmental & Learning Disabilities at the University of Alberta:

<http://dascentre.educ.ualberta.ca>
www.childlearningprogram.com