

Radical Self-Care for Social Workers in the Global Climate Crisis

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Abstract:

Gradual environmental degradation, more extreme climate change events, and related environmental injustices affect individuals and communities every day. Social work entities around the world are increasingly highlighting professional responsibilities for addressing the global climate crisis. Often, social workers experience vicarious trauma from work with those immediately affected. Working within the context of the global climate crisis brings further risk. Social workers may be personally affected, or experiencing their own challenges, such as climate anxiety and eco-grief. Thus, radical self-care is a dire need as social workers promote sustainable communities and environments and seek ecological justice for all. This article discusses the health and mental health impacts of the compounding factors of the climate crisis, modern technology, and current political contexts. Activism for change and ecotherapeutic strategies are presented as radical self-care for social workers, in both academic and practice-based settings. These strategies are essential for recognizing, legitimizing, and addressing the need for radical self-care practices in the global climate crisis.

Keywords: climate crisis | ecotherapy | environmental justice | radical self-care

Article:

If we take a close look at Earth as an elaborate ecosystem in which we live, we realize its intricate beauty; it produces everything it needs to survive *and* naturally reuses and recycles all the organic waste it produces. Before we delve into the main topic of this article, radical self-care for social workers, we would like to offer our gratitude to the historical and current caretakers of our planet and to “Mother Earth” as our self-care is, in actuality, a re-acknowledging of connections to all the elements of care she provides us.

As humans we are part of the intricate and interconnected ecosystem of Earth. Some people continue to live each day intentionally mindful of these intimate and inextricable connections; however, many people have moved out of harmony with nature, considering humans as removed

from or somehow outside of nature. These mind-sets, or worldviews, have led to overconsumption and toxic, inorganic waste that the ecosystem is unable to accommodate, exceeding Earth's natural capacity to regenerate. Even the advances and use of sustainable technology cannot sufficiently alleviate the damage done from our consumption and waste patterns, and often such "sustainable" technology itself becomes part of our unsustainable waste stream.

We humans have exacerbated normal patterns of climate change, creating a climate crisis with increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters, environmental degradation, and related environmental injustices (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, n.d.). Environmental injustice occurs when some people (a) shoulder more of the burdens from, and risks of, environmental degradation and disasters (such as having to take jobs in toxic factories or having to live in high-risk areas for flooding or landslides) and (b) do not have the same enjoyment of or access to environmental benefits (such as green spaces for mental and physical health or access to clean water) (Bullard, 1994; Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], n.d.). Recent examples include Typhoon Mangkhut, which hit parts of the Philippines and China, and Hurricane Florence, which hit the east coast of the United States in September 2018. Both storms severely affected those individuals and communities already oppressed, marginalized, or in vulnerable living conditions. For instance, prior to such disasters many lived in housing that was insufficient to withstand significant storms and flooding and were less likely to be able to evacuate. After such events they were also less able to recover. These vulnerabilities are often the direct result of economic constraints and are being further neglected as others are prioritized, often due to environmental racism (Bullard, 1994). Communities such as these are additionally at risk as their social and ecological coping strategies are undermined. For example, people who previously found self-care through connections—both spiritual and nonspiritual—to community and nature may suffer additional health and mental health problems as their environment is devastated in the face of disasters and environmental degradation (Grise-Owens, Miller, & Owens, 2014; Rinkel & Powers, 2017).

We are currently in a climate crisis, with some cities and countries even declaring a state of climate emergency. Like a frog in a pot of boiling water, if things heat up gradually it may not notice, and in the end, it will die. It is becoming clear, however, that we can no longer ignore the global climate crisis that exists. Rather, we as social workers must take urgent action, alongside everyone on this planet. Taking such action is not only a necessary professional role in this era, it also follows in the footsteps of pioneers in social work as they addressed similar issues in various ways. For example, social work pioneers developed parks and recreation for the health and mental health of those moving to cities during the industrial revolution, helping labor unions to address safety issues in their built environments of factories, and working with waste management and sanitation programs (Powers, 2016).

Many professional social work entities and organizations are calling on social workers to take action in addressing the climate crisis. For instance, *Global Agenda of Social Work and Social Development* highlights our professional role to actively engage with promoting sustainable communities and environments (International Association of Schools of Social Work, International Council on Social Welfare, & International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2010). Increasingly, social work scholars and practitioners are partnering with communities to

create best practices and curricular resources on these topics (for example, Rinkel & Powers, 2017). Social work education is also becoming more explicit about including these issues in educational standards. For example, since 2015 CSWE includes environmental justice as a core component in the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE, n.d.). These professional mandates to address the climate crisis create even more reason to promote self-care for social workers.

In this context of a global climate crisis, there is a dire need for radical self-care for social workers (Powers, 2017). In this article we begin by bringing awareness to the compounding stressors to social workers from the climate crisis, modern technology, and the global political climate. We then highlight radical self-care solutions that combine elements of traditional self-care, with which most social workers are familiar (for example, boundary setting, respite), and elements of activism for social and ecological change. We also present tools for radical self-care such as various ecotherapeutic strategies for creating links with the natural environment, and the sustainable, life-enhancing pace model, an innovative coping model for personal health and well-being (Daley, 2003; Powers, 2017). Finally, we conclude this article with implications for social work education and practice as we note how these tools and strategies can be used by social workers in their own lives and when working with students, colleagues, and service consumers (that is, clients and communities).

Dire Need for Radical Self-Care

IFSW conveys the importance of self-care by including it in the “Statement of Ethical Principles and Professional Integrity,” Section 3.3: “Social workers have a duty to take the necessary steps to care for themselves professionally and personally in the workplace, in their private lives and in society” (IFSW, n.d., p. 3). National social work organizations have echoed this mandate in their codes of ethics and statements on professionalism (for example, National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017; NASW, North Carolina Chapter, 2016; Self-Help UK, 2017). In light of these professional mandates, self-care is becoming more frequently discussed and formally taught for social work students and in professional development workshops (Carter & Barnett, 2015; Grise-Owens, Miller, & Eaves, 2016; Powers, 2017). However, when self-care is mentioned, it is not uncommon to hear it presented with this statement: “You can’t give from an empty well.” We argue that this is true, but if left there, it is a single-sided reason for taking care of oneself solely to care for others and does not consider the intrinsic value of the social worker as an individual. It is important that social workers understand that self-care is not merely about being better equipped for one’s professional roles and responsibilities, but that each social worker has their own intrinsic value and deserves to be cared for (by self and by others). In addition, although we promote well-being and self-care for our service consumers, we often neglect to apply these daily habits and tips to our own daily practices. This may be due to the fast-paced cultures in which we live and work, forcing us to always be producing and not “just being” (Epstein, 2001), meaning we forget that we are “human beings,” not “human doings.” This also may be due to the notion that our role as caregiver has become fused with our identity (Wu & Pooler, 2014). Indeed, we need to normalize help seeking, whether that is to take time for caring for oneself or reaching out to others for help. Self-care does not mean one need be entirely self-reliant.

Social work is among the highest risk professions for stress, burnout, and job turnover rates (Cox & Steiner, 2013; Miller, Lianekhammy, Pope, Lee, & Grise-Owens, 2017; Smullens, 2015; Travis, Lizano, & Mor Barak, 2016). Studies suggest that social workers experience high levels of stress, burnout, negative views on work and work-based relationships, anxiety, depression, work strain, and lack of job satisfaction, and that they engage in unhealthy coping mechanisms (Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2005; Tham, 2007; Tham & Meagher, 2009; Travis et al., 2016). In addition to the unhealthy impacts to social work practitioners, the impact of turnover on service consumers can be devastating because frontline workers play an important role in determining the quality of care in practice (S. Y. Chen & Scannapieco, 2010; Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007; Nissly et al., 2005; Weaver, Chang, Clark, & Rhee, 2007). Munro (2011) acknowledged that if the work environment does not help support social workers, then the potential for turnover increases, thus radical reform is needed to give weight to the importance of the emotional requirements of the work. All of these risks are further exacerbated by three global stressors, which we elaborate on in the following sections: the climate crisis, modern technology, and current political administrations.

Global Stressors

Climate Crisis

The climate crisis creates additional dangers to our health and well-being and has made it imperative for social workers to join in the global, interdisciplinary responses. Grise-Owens et al. (2014) linked this to the growing need for a meta practice to be incorporated into social work practice as we begin to think about the “interdependent global considerations” when working at a local level. This is of particular concern to social workers as environmental issues disproportionately affect vulnerable and marginalized populations. Many environmental injustices create not only dangerous or toxic environments, but also political unrest and violence as people vie for resources such as land, clean water, or food. These issues are producing and exacerbating environmental injustices for vulnerable populations, including forced migration (Powers, Schmitz, Nsonwu, & Mathew, 2018).

In addition, the climate crisis may create ramifications for social workers such as vicarious trauma, personal eco-grief, and climate anxiety (Canty, 2017; Cunsolo & Landman, 2017, Rinkel & Powers, 2017), which occur when we experience the negative impacts the climate crisis is having on our planet and the people and places we care about so deeply. These stressors are often compounded by the availability of information about how climate change is affecting communities around the world. For example, one social worker from Puerto Rico, who is a member of the Green/Ecosocial Work Collaborative Network, said she was experiencing her own personal loss as a member of the community and vicarious trauma as she worked on disaster recovery after Hurricane Maria. She indicated that people did not even want to come out of their homes as they are traumatized and suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. Her service consumers anguished, “all the green is gone,” referring to the loss of the lush vegetation once prominent in their tropical island home.

Modern Technology

Modern technology, the second compounding global stressor, often heightens and intensifies knowledge of and urgency felt to address injustices. The availability of technology has increased “working” hours due to constant interaction and connection. For example, even when a social worker is “off duty” from work, they may engage with technology in the form of e-mails, social media, and news outlets. This could potentially result in feeling the need to turn on their social worker professional roles and act on the issues they are confronted with during their intended times for rest, refueling, and socializing with loved ones. This could lead to compassion fatigue, stress, and potentially burnout (McFadden, Campbell, & Taylor, 2015).

Current Political Administrations

Finally, many current political administrations around the world negatively affect service consumers, not to mention our own livelihoods. This intensifies the need for services at all levels of practice as resources, including social work jobs, are diminishing. In some countries, national and international policies are going in directions that are contrary to social work ethics and values. This has created an increasingly urgent need for social justice work that addresses unethical policies. However, under these political administrations, social workers run additional risks of becoming vulnerable to activist burnout, a condition that affects individuals’ well-being and social movements’ ability to be sustained (C. W. Chen & Gorski, 2015). In addition, with political administrations moving slowly in deciding how they will work to combat climate change, it is becoming clear how stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, PTSD, and feelings of hopelessness or inefficacy are becoming more prevalent within the social work community. For example, when President Bolsonaro recently came into political power in Brazil, one social worker who is a member of the Green/Ecosocial Work Collaborative Network lamented, “I’m having trouble coming to terms with the fact this is actually happening. He will have absolute power to destroy the environment and indigenous people when he comes to power.” Another member expressed similar sentiments and showed signs of PTSD as she discussed how the Trump administration affected her as she endured the stress of having to fight not only the global climate crisis, but also the daily barrage of fake news, incompetent leaders put in charge of environmental programs, and the consequences of unjust policy decisions—enacted or terminated—that exacerbate the climate crisis.

Radical Self-Care Solutions for Social Workers

Considering the three global stressors we discussed, social workers are moving toward professional roles to address the climate crisis through activities such as increasing their use of technology for campaigns for social and environmental justice, taking political action, and even running for political offices themselves (Bent-Goodley & Hopps, 2017). These activities are examples of what we mean by “radical self-care.” Activities such as political warfare, activism, and working for the collective good are empowering and strongly related to overall well-being (Gilster, 2012). When social workers participate in creating positive community change, both globally and locally, they become part of the solution in reducing the stressors that created their need for self-care in the first place. For example, we, the authors, see our teaching as an activity that is a big part of our own radical self-care as we know we are helping to equip future social workers to address a variety of social and ecological problems facing the planet they will inherit. Therefore, we argue that radical self-care combines elements of traditional self-care (for

example, boundary setting, respite) with elements of activism for change. We explore strategies for these elements in the following sections.

Activism as Radical Self-Care

Social work is committed to, and in many cases founded on, political activism and challenging social injustice. Therefore, we are also affected by and committed to being involved in macro and meta practice (Grise-Owens et al., 2014; McBeath, 2016). Radical self-care through activism has the potential to address some of the stressors social workers face in their daily jobs, especially as related to the global climate crisis. Advances in modern technology (including social media) for sharing information and engaging in various levels of political activism have increased and intensified. There are both strengths and concerns related to this, and its impact on health and well-being for social workers and others (Pyles, 2018). Technology and, for some, social media, are such a prevalent component to everyday personal and professional lives that it is important to reflect on how to stay engaged in technology without it contributing to burnout. In fact, activists who use modern technology as part of their own radical self-care are also beginning to caution others to the potential stressors of online activism (for example, the blog, “Rest for Resistance”). The self-care that is needed to combat overstimulation by technology will likely have to include more intentional boundary making and ensuring there are social media “safe spaces.” Such safe spaces are places where there is a sense of solidarity with other activists through a sense of community, empowerment, and support, not a combative space.

Organizational Membership as Radical Self-Care

There are personal and professional benefits from increased involvement with professional social work organizations and advocacy networks (McBeath, 2016). Being a member of IFSW, for example, not only allows us to connect with others to learn about best practices around the world and for professional solidarity building, but also provides us with staff and leaders who advocate on our behalf to elevate the profession so we have better recognition and professional rights, and to lobby political administrations on behalf of and with our service consumers.

In addition to formal organizations, informal networks are also beneficial. One such advocacy network was recently formed within the social work profession to promote the roles and responsibilities in addressing the climate crisis, the Green/Ecosocial Work Collaborative Network. This network connects social workers around the world on Facebook, Google Groups, and Twitter, and is coadministered by the authors as part of our own radical self-care. This network is a tool for radical self-care as it provides members with solidarity through a shared commitment and allows for sharing resources and networking for advocacy purposes. For example, one network member recently shared,

Thank you for the encouraging words. I, too, became discouraged (and still am in some respects) given the recent climate reports and the timeline of just 12 years to reverse the complete eradication of coral reefs and our ice caps. We have to remain resistant to these changes (whatever that looks like to our communities), and collectively, we can make change. I know it’s hard, but solidarity is what binds us in struggle—we all rise together, and no one is left behind. We can’t give up. (Joel Izlar)

Traditional Self-Care and Radical Self-Care

Most social workers are at least familiar with, if not always great at, implementing traditional strategies for self-care such as boundary setting with service consumers and work responsibilities and making sure to take respite to avoid illnesses or to heal. Intentionally and consistently creating opportunities for rest; engaging in activities that offer distraction and personal growth; and developing and maintaining sustainable intimate, family, and interpersonal relationships are ethical imperatives for those in helping professions, such as social work (Pearlman & Caringi, 2009). As renowned environmental and political activist Audre Lorde decried, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (origin unknown). One such traditional self-care activity in the context of the global climate crisis includes reading books that help one grow their knowledge of environmental issues, which in turn helps to normalize and address the feelings one may be experiencing—for example, *Mourning Nature* (Cunsolo & Landman, 2017), *Ecological and Social Healing: Multicultural Women’s Voices* (Canty, 2017), and *Coming Back to Life* (Macy & Young Brown, 2014). Other activities within traditional self-care practices are also considered part of radical self-care as we slow down to grow organic produce; shop at local markets; prepare and enjoy healthier, home-cooked meals; and get to know neighbors; these are all aspects of the environmental activism movement known as “the degrowth approach” (see <https://degrowth.org/>). Indeed, many self-care benefits come from slowing our lives to match the pace of nature, as renowned philosopher Lao Tzu noted, “Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished” (origin unknown). This is just one example of an ecologically conscious, radical self-care strategy.

Ecologically Conscious Strategies for Radical Self-Care

Ecologically conscious strategies for radical self-care are centered on the belief that humans have an innate connection to the natural world that needs to be nurtured to promote not only the well-being of the humans, but also the well-being of the natural world (Jordan & Hinds, 2016; Macy & Young Brown, 2014; Wilson, 1993). Thus, radical self-care includes being mindful and becoming conscious of these perspectives. It is the reacknowledging of the connections to all the elements of Mother Earth as we remember that we are in an intimate, reciprocal relationship with nature; indeed, we *are* nature. Ecologically conscious self-care includes a variety of strategies social workers can use in supporting positive physical and mental health and well-being to address problems resulting from the global stressors of the climate crisis, political context, and modern technology (McGeeney, 2016; Williams, 2017).

Ecotherapy. Ecotherapy is seen as an umbrella term for physical and psychological interventions that have an ecological or nature-based consciousness or intent. It acknowledges the important role of nature and addresses the human-nature relationship (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Doherty, 2016) and can encompass a wide variety of activities, methods, or interventions (Engstrom, 2018). For instance, using outdoor spaces in therapy sessions can relax a person and invite them to reclaim a more natural pace in life (McGeeney, 2016; Powers, 2017). Sometimes people who have experienced trauma in, or regarding, natural outdoor spaces can use ecotherapeutic practices to reclaim their connection to nature and heal, such as an indigenous

women's group walking the Trail of Tears (Schultz, Walters, Beltran, Stroud, & Johnson-Jennings, 2016). Ecotherapy can positively affect a service consumer and the social worker when engaging with nature alongside a service consumer or on their own (McGeeney, 2016). Even the seemingly simple gesture of moving a helping session outdoors could have an impact on not only the service consumer, but also the quality of the service consumer and helper's relationship, as both reap benefits of time spent in nature (Jordan & Hinds, 2016).

Hart (2013) described a form of ecotherapy known as ecological drama therapy. Ecological drama therapists can support ecological activism as they integrate drama therapy methods to promote an understanding of our responsibility to all peoples and forms of life. Horticultural therapy and wilderness work are two other ecotherapeutic interventions that help people reconnect with nature (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Powers, 2016). Within these settings, people are not only working to improve their environments, but also beginning to reconnect with each other and with nature as a way to embrace better health for themselves and their community. Spending time in nature has been found to include a wide variety of potential benefits, including relieving some symptoms of anxiety and depression (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Jordan & Hinds, 2016; McGeeney, 2016).

Ecotherapeutic self-care can be tailored to each individual's interests and comfort levels. For example, it does not always have to mean that one books a wilderness retreat or goes camping for a weekend. It can include moving your fitness routine outside, starting a gardening practice, or volunteering with animals. Practices could also include taking a walk in a forest or an urban park, sitting near a lake, watching wildlife from a bench, or visiting a beach or river. Ecotherapeutic practices can be indoors or outdoors; both spaces can help someone recognize the critical connection of humans with the natural environment. For instance, if indoors, one could change a room to incorporate more natural lighting, spend quiet time near windows, practice mindfulness meditation while holding an item from nature, enjoy time with a loving pet, or incorporate more plants or nature items in decor. Finally, ecotherapy not only incorporates the natural environment into the therapeutic relationship, but also asks ecologically conscious questions such as: What is my place in the world? What particular gifts do I bring? What does a healthy ecosystem require from humans? Carefully reflecting on such questions may create a shift in worldview or mind-set (Rinkel & Powers, 2017).

Sustainable, Life-Enhancing Pace Model. Another ecologically conscious, radical self-care practice is the sustainable, life-enhancing pace model (Daley, 2003; Powers, 2017). This practice is situated within the degrowth approach (see <https://degrowth.org/>) and is presented here as an example of an innovative and holistic model of radical self-care. This model not only is about traditional self-care practices, but also includes issues of intentional and mindful use of resources, time, material possessions, and choices to create healthy priorities, resulting in a plan for implementing a sustainable, life-enhancing pace (Daley, 2003; Powers, 2017). It is possible to have a life pace that is sustainable, but not really life enhancing; and it is possible to have a life pace that is life-enhancing, but not at all sustainable. Thus, it takes much intentionality to create a life pace that is both sustainable and life enhancing. One needs to spend time and mindfully examine many interrelated facets of life to create an individualized plan. For example, one may contemplate on remembering that we are human beings, not human doings, practicing an attitude of gratitude, practicing daily time for mindfulness or spiritual centering, focusing on

the things we are becoming, practicing preventive care, instead of dealing with emergencies that arise from neglect, reconnecting with nature daily, saying “no” to things or people that drain us and “yes” to those that reinvigorate us (Engstrom, 2018; Powers, 2017).

Implications for Social Work Practice and Education

As social workers, it is crucial that we are avid about our own well-being and develop a plan for our own radical self-care (Macy & Young Brown, 2014; Powers, 2017). The strategies presented in this article could be used as part of explicit training for social workers in practice-based and academic settings. Social workers should be able to recognize and legitimize the need for radical self-care practices for themselves, their students or colleagues, and service consumers. Specifically, we must acknowledge our grief over the loss of nature and the related climate injustices to people and planet, ensuring that we legitimate the grief and allow for the time to appropriately mourn (Cunsolo & Landman, 2017). Educators should not only teach strategies, but also become models of self-care and create a culture where self-care is normalized and legitimized. The radical self-care strategies presented in this article can be offered to service consumers and used in our personal lives to enhance our well-being and to better equip us for our professional roles.

Some social workers are already utilizing the strategies presented in this article. For example, ecotherapy is being incorporated into a current, community-engaged research project spearheaded by one of the authors, Powers. The project connects governmental parks and recreation services with local community members and volunteer groups to enhance community parks in underserved areas with marginalized populations. This project is focused on older adults. During participatory research with the community, it was discovered that community members wanted improvements to outdoor walking trails to make them more accessible to older adults with mobility issues, outdoor spaces to socialize, trees for shade, and flowers for beautification. They also indicated interest in having raised beds for gardening that are accessible to people with limited mobility or those in wheelchairs. All these enhancements would promote ecotherapeutic health benefits through the reconnection with nature in the park. In addition, the project team is consulting with local gardening groups to learn about native plants and trees for use in landscaping and creating a plan that benefits not only the community, but the physical environment itself (for example, planting pollinator gardens, making permeable walkways to allow for rainwater to be absorbed by the local vegetation and not run off into storm drains). A wide variety of similar practice examples can be found in the workbook series by Rinkel and Powers (2017) and on the Web site for the IFSW Climate Justice Program (<https://www.ifsw.org/social-work-action/climate-justice-program/>).

Conclusion

In the context of the global climate crisis with the related ecological injustices, the volatile political climate, and the negative impact of modern technology, we urgently need radical self-care tools that can better equip us to live healthy and well as we respond. In addition, we need partnerships, intentional and committed community engagement, and creative ways to empower individuals and communities to strengthen their assets, including their own radical self-care strategies.

The array of radical self-care practices presented in this article may be useful tools not only for social workers' own benefit, but also for others. As social workers experience their own eco-grief and climate anxieties, in addition to the normal stressors of working with vulnerable and oppressed service consumers, they may find that prioritizing and implementing radical self-care strategies will help them thrive, both professionally and personally. Through radical self-care we can become people who embrace healing and peace within ourselves—and then we can offer it to others and to our beautiful Mother Earth.

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