

# How to Thrive in Professional Practice



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# Introduction: The reality of self-care

*Stephen, Lisa and Steph*

## LET US BEGIN...

We have all got a unique story because we are all unique. The three of us writing this book all have our own tales to tell, and you will have yours. Your life has brought you to this point, so well done for getting here. At various points during your life you will, I'm sure, have tried very hard to do things. Sometimes you will have succeeded at your endeavours and sometimes, like us, you will have failed. Occasionally spectacularly. Such is life.

Self-care is like life. We try, we fail and we try again. The self-care prescription you require is unique to you. You will need bits of everything we talk about in these pages but in a unique balance that is all yours. Experimentation is key.

This book comes with a guarantee. All of the ideas that are in here have been tried and tested by one or all of us. We come to you as people who have given things a go and have generally ended up a little better off as a consequence. Small steps lead to big changes. You might read that phrase a few times in the coming pages. You have been warned. Self-care is not about getting it right all of the time. It's about getting it right as much as you can, realising you have neglected to get it right for a while, and knowing where to go back to in order to reengage with it. For engage with it we must.

For years on and off, my path and the paths of Lisa and Steph have kept intersecting. Snippets of conversations in corridors. Years of not seeing each other as our paths developed. During these snatched conversations there were nuggets of information behind the 'How are you?' 'Fine' type conversations that might have hinted that at times things were not fine. Lisa and I knew each other as practitioners in older people's services. I stayed and she left to go off into children and families social work, but we still bumped into each other occasionally. I knew Steph because she hosted student placements for us and then ended up working at the same university. Over time, the conversations developed and through a chance Facebook exchange Lisa and I started talking about meditation. We met for a coffee and discovered that our unique journeys had, as it turns out, a lot of commonality. There were stories of long hours, stressful cases, too much wine and too much comfort eating. The other common thread was that we were both trying to mitigate against these things. Me, largely through exercise and Lisa, through holistic therapy.

What was clear was that there was more to what we were trying to do than mere chance. The stars had aligned (Lisa will like that line!) and we were up and running on a journey of discovery to find out just what lay behind our attempts to care for ourselves and what was hindering us. We hoped we might actually find out what would help us. What was the science behind sleep, what was the research about nutrition, and was there really something to mindfulness or was it just some hippy hangover from the sixties?

We started delivering self-care sessions to students and then to practitioners. What we discovered was that everyone, to one degree or another, was involved in the same struggle. Trying to cope with the emotional labour of social work or being a student. Trying to figure out how to explore feelings. Trying to figure out how to get things done and control the chaotic world. Trying to balance everything. Trying to fit everything in. Knowing that there must be a better way but not knowing what that better way might look like. *'If what you are doing isn't working then maybe it's time to do something different'*, someone once said to me.

We live in an 'information overload' society so we knew all the relevant information was out there. What wasn't there in people's heads was the underpinning theory and science that said *'do this because we know it works'*. So, people were often cynical. *'How can going for a walk help?!'* *'How can focusing on my breathing make the slightest bit of difference?!'* What was also missing was people feeling ok about giving themselves permission to look after themselves. People could easily trot out phrases like *'I know! If I don't look after myself how can I look after others'*, but they weren't heeding this advice, so stress and burnout were, and still are, rife. The research and people leaving the profession confirm this.

Hopefully this book is an adventure into the depths of what actually works in regard to self-care and why it works. The advice is not about running marathons, it's about the benefits of what is really only a small amount of regular exercise that gets you a little breathless. It's not about dieting so you are in a size 8 dress or have a 30-inch waist. It's about how what you eat influences your emotions and therefore your productivity. It's not about reaching the dizzy heights of a zen-like state when attempting meditation, but is about how small steps into mindfulness and meditation can influence how you emotionally respond to events around you. Mostly this book is about what we can do to help ourselves to have the best lives we can have, by being the best versions of ourselves we can be. Not perfect but rather living in a way that is productive and helpful to us and to those around us. Keeping ourselves in order so that we cope with the chaos out there.

We are not perfect and don't always get things right or even heed our own advice. We have all been on a journey to get to this point and there is more journey in front of us. We know what it's like to struggle so we thought it might be useful to share a little of our stories about what led us to contemplate self-care ideas before we get started.

## Lisa's Storm to Calm

Thank you, Stephen, and yes, I loved that line about the stars aligning because it's so true, the stars were aligned!

I think it is important for us to share our story because it will help others to know we really do understand what it's like to crash and burn and have to get back up only to crash and burn again. Let's see if any of these phrases are familiar: professional stress, end of my tether, life falling apart, hate work, overworked, undervalued, stood at a crossroads in life, stuck, need to change but don't know how, depressed and tired?

It's not that long ago I was feeling most of these, but the thought of moving out of my comfort zone by making the desired changes was scary. It was this fear that kept me stuck on the treadmill of monotony, anxiety and boredom for longer than I should have been, resulting in my eventual total crash and burn that required a career break.

Truthfully, I just felt useless. Work made me constantly anxious, longing for the weekend but fearing not being at work. My overactive imagination would have me dealing with all kinds of crises come Monday morning. Friday would arrive like a long-lost relative, but I would be too tense to start to unwind. As a social worker, conditioned to reflect upon my practice, I thought this meant the need to constantly replay conversations in my head. Pondering what I could have done differently when that family member was screaming at me down the telephone and was making me shake with anxiety. Did feeling anxious make me come across as antagonistic rather than empathic? Over and over I'd replay the same scenario, thinking, thinking and thinking what I could have done differently.

On Saturday I'd spend all day thanking the heavens above I wasn't at work. On Sunday morning I would be hit with the realisation that *'tomorrow is Monday and I'm back to work'*. I would spend the rest of Sunday worrying about worst-case scenarios, imagining how every single one of my cases was bound to have 'kicked off' over the weekend and how goodness knows how many emails would be waiting for me as soon as I logged into the work PC. Monday morning was boooom!!! Rush hour traffic was usually navigated through a sea of tears and the much longed-for journey home was often undertaken in the same saltwater haze.

Yet, every Monday morning things were never as bad as my imagination would have had me believe. The really sad thing is, I had not had any relaxation all weekend due to unnecessary worry. I would arrive at work on a Monday morning already in a heightened state of stress, which would be exacerbated as the week progressed. I was stuck in this cycle of constantly being at work. When I was not physically at work, I was mentally and emotionally at work. Every second of every day, that's where I was. Something had to give, and I was given the opportunity to leave the profession I loved but had grown to despise. Social work and I had officially separated and filed for divorce.

So I set up my own holistic business, and trained in life coaching and mindfulness. While this took me down a road that ended up being a dead end, it offered me the opportunity of time and space to learn to reconnect with the person I am. What I came to realise is that social work, at that time, had stripped me of my identity, my sense of humour and who I was as an individual. This time and distance allowed to me to come to terms with the fact that social work is an extremely difficult and challenging profession. Yeah, I know, who knew eh? I'm back in practice again now.

I suppose I had always believed myself to be saving starfish. You know the story by Loren Eiseley (1979) where the little boy on a beach throws starfish back into the sea? He is

asked by an adult why he is doing that as there are too many starfish stranded on the beach to make a difference. He responds by telling the adult he had made a difference to the one starfish he had just thrown back into the sea. For all my good intentions and goodwill, I was never going to fix the world. I was never going to 'save' everyone because no one can.

I hope with all my heart you resonate with even the smallest amount of truth of what is within this book and that it may help you in your moment of Storm to reach a place of Calm.

## Steph's story

*Think in the morning. Act in the noon. Eat in the evening. Sleep in the night.*

(William Blake)

When I sit and reflect on how long I have worked in social work, I think about how in my work with young people I have encountered some very sad cases over the years. That has sometimes made me question why I do the work I do. I have always struggled with the idea of how little social justice and what unequal starting points some people have in life, particularly in some of the vulnerable groups we work with. Despite this, I somehow find the strength to carry on, as I know how much my work means to me and, if I am honest, some of the best, most rewarding experiences in my life have been work related.

Buddhism helps me to see the world around me in a more positive light, and did so especially when my only brother died suddenly and tragically in 2018. He was the same age I am now, and his passing brings home to me how we are all on a journey in relation to self-care and just how important this is for each of us.

During my early social work career, I developed the healthy habit of sticking to core working hours, went to the gym close to my office, ate well and ensured I took my lunch breaks when I could. Leadership is what makes the difference. I always rate managers who set good examples and know the value of lunch breaks! They develop cultures in which micromanagement is discouraged and innovation is welcome. I worked in the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) until 2002. The culture at the time was unique to the warm but small team. It involved mid-morning coffee breaks and afternoon tea, and a shared garden was developed by a green-fingered colleague which allowed a relaxed approach to us sharing concerns about families, brainstorming and generally being emotionally available to each other as a means of managing risk issues. We also learned about each other's families and personal interests, so we got to know each other really well and were able to tell when one of us was struggling. This was great care in action. This type of team helps you deal with the difficult aspects of the work we do, like the day a mother screamed at me about how much she hated my voice. I still remember consciously listening to my own voice as I spoke to see if she had a point!

I try and enjoy a short walk during my lunch break, like Stephen, as I know this helps me return to my afternoon work feeling refreshed and focused. It was invaluable during my days of trying to juggle social work with an interest in performing arts when I ended up as an extra in a film. It was a very interesting time, juggling filming during the day with

nocturnal report writing. Not the best in terms of self-care. Sadly, due to my dedication to social work and knowing I could not miss presenting a case in court, I had to forgo the chance to drive a Ferrari booked for the day when Patsy Kensit (who was the real star) was ill.

Over the years, despite my best of intentions, I'm afraid my healthy habits have slipped. I have a real sweet tooth so I'm always after my sugar boost. It doesn't help that I simply love baking cakes or scones for the team. But taking care of others, often to the detriment of myself, can take its toll. I push myself to be there for others, even when I know I am feeling tired. The body tells us when it needs to rest, if only we'd listen! I need to listen more! I've learned so much on the journey to help write this book and hope you take away some the points that really resonate with you and hopefully help 'you' to take care of 'you'!

## **Stephen's story – the self-medication cycle**

I've been quite lucky that over the years I have done many things by chance rather than design that have contributed to being in general good health and well-being. As you'll find out later in the book, I wasn't a fan of exercise at school, but as a young adult I found a great passion for running, weight training and squash, all of which helped mitigate against my other passion, food. I do like to eat. Although again, by chance, I do enjoy for the most part quite healthy food. I just enjoy a lot of it!

I was brought up going to church so was conscious of the benefits of quiet contemplation and as a child and teenager, in a pre-computer game era, hanging out with friends was largely an outdoor pursuit. I carried this love of the outdoors with me throughout my adult life and, as we know, being outside is good for you. I have translated my faith as a younger person into adult enquiry about mindfulness and meditation as there are many parallels between those pursuits and the prayer that people of faith engage in.

I hadn't really had much cause to consider self-care as I was engaging in self-care activities without really realising I was. But then as a social worker things took a bit of a turn. I found myself struggling with difficult cases and found it difficult to keep myself organised. I got into the habit of leaving things until the last minute. I hit that dangerous place most of us get to where we think we know what we're doing. In reality, especially in a profession like social work, you never completely know what you are doing and always need to be learning and developing. I lost focus and felt as though I was always trying to keep up. I did keep up, nothing went wrong, everything got done, but it was all done in quite a chaotic way. This was exacerbated when I became a manager. There's an assumption that because you are good at one thing, you will be good at another, and while I think I did a fine job as a manager, it came at a cost. I relate to what Lisa was saying above when she talked about thinking about work all the time.

My solution was to drink wine. Every night. This was the only way I could get to sleep. This inevitably led to a hangover the next day, which meant that I drank copious amounts of coffee. I was an expert in the caffeine crash. Drinking so much wine and coffee made me feel dreadful, but all was well as I found a solution. Over-the-counter medication in the form of codeine took away the dreadful stomach pains and headaches I was feeling in the

early afternoon and gave me a relaxed feeling. Codeine is an opiate so is very addictive. It also makes you constipated, and coffee, as you may know, agitates the bowel and can help you go to the toilet. Can you imagine! Internal uproar, which led to feeling even more lousy which meant the cycle of alcohol, caffeine and codeine to try and feel better started again. A conversation with a friend who is a doctor alerted me to the harm codeine was doing to me when taken regularly and I stopped immediately.

I look back on that period of time now, probably a period of around about six months, and reflect on how dreadful I felt day in, day out. That cycle was driven by stress and by not knowing how to manage the stress I was feeling in a positive way. I chose a negative route. Ultimately, choosing a negative route makes you feel worse in the long run. The difficulty is that negative routes are often easier. It takes commitment to look after yourself properly and do the right thing for your body and mind. It's all about developing healthy habits.

## THRIVING IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Enough about us. Let's get started. We have found out so much on our various journeys that we want to share with you. Small steps really do make a big difference. I'd suggest you grab yourself a pen and a notebook because I think you'll find it really useful to make notes as you go and jot down your responses to some of the questions we will pose for you. Writing things down helps to consolidate ideas and makes action more likely. Books are tools so I give you permission to write in the margins and underline things and put big asterisks against the bits you want to find again. And if you want to break the spine of the book so you can lay it flat, go on, do it.

Let's go.

## REFERENCE

Eiseley, Loren (1979) *The Star Thrower*. New York: Harvest.