

Why self-care is a trade union issue



Dr Neil Thompson, independent writer, educator, adviser and a SWU Ambassador shares his views



'You can't pour from an empty vessel' is a comment often made to reinforce the importance of self-care. You can't be effective in looking after other people if you can't look after yourself is another point that crops up quite frequently in encouraging people to take self-care seriously. And these are, of course, points well

worth making. Anyone can lose sight of the need for self-care, but social workers, being so strongly focused on the needs of others, are particularly prone to the problems that arise from poor or non-existent self-care. That is especially the case in these troubled, over-pressurised times.

But, you may be wondering, how does all this fit within a trade union context? To answer that question, we need to think about the very word 'union' and what it means. Fundamentally, it means bringing people together for mutual benefit (which, of course, is why the word 'union' is also used to refer to marriage). So, while it is quite right to think of unions in terms of workers' rights and interests, working conditions and protection from ill-treatment, we should not forget that all these things have their roots in one thing, in solidarity, in always bearing mind that 'we are in this together'. Solidarity is very much about 'union' in the literal sense, bringing people together for mutual benefit.

So, while self-care is, as the name implies, a personal responsibility, it is also much wider than that. As trade unionists, we have a duty not only to maintain our own self-care, but also to support others in doing so (for example, when we become aware that a colleague or even whole team is engaging in dangerous practice - dangerous to themselves and others potentially) by neglecting self-care, we should be prepared to offer the necessary support and help them get back on track. The fact that we call it self-care does not mean that no one else can be involved in caring. Supporting one another is at the heart of trade unionism.

We also need to be aware that some cultures (far too many, in my experience) can discourage self-care by creating expectations that the work must be done, come what may and therefore at whatever cost to the individual worker. In our book, *How to Survive in Social Work*, John McGowan and I talk about how overworked individuals can easily

retreat into a sort of protective bubble by disconnecting themselves from colleagues. Unfortunately, some cultures seem to encourage this and therefore create obstacles to teamwork and its many benefits. As trade unionists we can not only support individual colleagues by encouraging self-care, but also work together to challenge harmful cultures that place team members' health and well-being at risk.

At one of the SWU annual conferences a new member came up to me and said that she had been considering giving up social work because she was finding it too stressful. But, after attending one of my training courses where I emphasised the importance of solidarity and, as a key part of that, trade unionism, she decided to join SWU. Having a sense that she was part of a community of fellow professionals wrestling with the same pressures and issues gave her greater confidence and sense of purpose that **enabled her to continue her career and to continue to make a positive difference, despite all the significant challenges and discouragements. She realised that she had not only been neglecting her own self-care, but had also not taken the opportunity to support others in doing so. Being a SWU member changed all that.**

As part of my commitment to supporting both social work and trade unionism I am able to offer SWU members a significant discount on an important self-care resource. The humansolutions *Health & Well-being Portal* offers over 1,000 videos, e-courses, activities, workouts and challenges designed to promote employee wellness. Along with the discounts I offer SWU members on my books and two new online learning programmes, I am pleased to be able to offer a reduced subscription cost for access to the Portal. The full price is £8.99 a month, but is just £4.99 a month for SWU members.

For more information about the Portal, go to <https://humansolutions.org.uk/the-health-well-being-portal/>. For information about all the discounts available to SWU members and how to access them, contact Joanne Marciano (joanne.marciano@basw.co.uk) at SWU. If you have any questions about any of this, please contact me directly at neil@avenueconsulting.co.uk

Dr Neil Thompson's website, with free learning resources can be found at www.NeilThompson.info