

# Watch yourself



How do we maintain our equilibrium as interpreters and ward off compassion fatigue and burnout? **Hannah Watson** explores a multi-faceted approach to self-care

## Hitting my milestone of five years'

Interpreting coincided with the beginning of my personal development journey. This prompted me to think about how we as interpreters resource ourselves, when we work mostly alone, outside of traditional line management structures. I presented at the ASLI Conference in 2016 on this subject and, having since completed the 360 Diploma in Supervision and marked ten years in the profession, I feel even more deeply that this topic is crucial for interpreters.

I originally looked to other practice professions (doctors, counsellors and palliative care professionals), to see what evidence-based practices helped them to maintain their equilibrium. As fellow 'people-based' professionals, we are exposed to similar stressors, including the 'social interactions that characterise human service work', which lead to emotional exhaustion (Maslach & Jackson, 1996, in Kearney et al, 2009:1158). This can lead to compassion fatigue, also known as 'vicarious trauma' which, if left unchecked, leads to burnout.

## Mirror neurons

Research shows that burnout can affect interpreters (Swartz, 2014). Our role places

us literally in the middle of often distressing situations, including harassment and discrimination, channelling the language and thought-worlds of all participants.

For me, understanding the concept of mirror neurons has really helped me understand why our work can have such an impact on us. Goleman (in Tirsch) describes how mirror neurons 'act as a neural Wi-Fi, attuning to the other person's internal state moment-to-moment and recreating that state in our own brain – their emotions, their movements, their intentions'. This occurs automatically, according to Gallese (in Winerman), meaning we feel the emotions of the person we are interpreting for.

Given the areas we work in, I was keen to see how other practice professions sought to

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safeguard themselves against being human sponges to their patient's/client's experiences. Palliative care professionals, dealing with dying patients day in, day out, found that having holistic self-awareness gave them a buffer against experiencing vicarious trauma (Sanso et al, 2015). Here, resilience came from holistic self-reflection.

## Metaphorical buckets

One model that describes resilience levels quite neatly is Brabban and Turkington's Bucket model (2002). Here, our capacity for coping is turned into the metaphor of a bucket. Each of us has different sized buckets (due to our upbringing, experiences and genetics), meaning that we can tolerate varying levels of stressors before our bucket overflows. For instance, you may be able to tolerate the rain, the traffic jam and your car having to be mended at the roadside before work, whereas I may 'overflow' when sitting in the traffic jam!

This image helps me to think about what else may be going on in my personal life, which may be filling my bucket, which I'm unaware of and could lead me to overflow as a result of something seemingly trivial at work. To release the water from the bucket, we need to put some holes in it (faulty analogy I know!). These are our positive coping strategies, which lead to stress relief (NHS Scotland, 2013). These are also self-care, by any other name.

## Physical self-care

Self-care can be split into four areas – physical, spiritual, support and psychological (Richards et al, 2010:248). Of these, the physical area of self-care seems more observed by interpreters, especially around the prevention and treatment of RSI (repetitive

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strain injury) (Swartz, 2014:1). Massage or physio treatment, while good physical care for aching muscles from interpreting, can also have a secondary function. Rothschild (2006:45-50) explains how empathy is felt somatically, in the body; physical treatments therefore can help to ease the unconsciously stored emotions of others.

Richards et al also highlight what may seem obvious elements to consider for our physical self-care – our rest, sleep, exercise and nutrition patterns. When was the last time you stopped and thought about your habits and patterns for each of these? Exercise is proven to improve recovery (Soojung-Kim Pang, 2016), so finding a form you can consistently enjoy will help you reap the benefits. Alongside exercise, fuelling your body with healthy nutrition (protein, healthy fats, slow-release carbs) helps you fuel your brain (Lewis & Webster, 2014:111-123). Eating a brain-healthy diet and avoiding sugar-laden foods helps us think more clearly which, given how much we rely on the processing power of our brains, seems a good idea.

Rest is the more difficult of these to capture as, to have positive benefits, activities need to be able to create a state of flow. Flow activities give your brain learning and development opportunities, but without the pressures of being your work. For example, Churchill

painted. This similar, but different, approach helps you detach from work and can evoke a sense of deep play, which gives your brain the active rest it needs. This unfortunately means that constant Netflix marathons don't actually help us fully rest (Soojung-Kim Pang, 2016).

### Spiritual self-care

Spiritual self-care was found to have benefits for palliative care professionals (Sanzo et al, 2015:201); spiritual (or religious beliefs) were found to promote self-awareness for hospice workers and help them to contextualise difficult emotional experiences. As a result, they were more able to maintain and manage their emotional balance, and to deal with work-related stressors. For those of you who are thinking, 'but I'm not religious/spiritual!', Richards et al (2010:249) point to a broader definition; having a 'meaning-making framework', as a way of contextualising negative experiences, gave similar protective benefits, as did regular meditation.

Reflective writing was another method found to have a strong evidence base for workers gaining self-insight, helping them to work through emotionally difficult experiences and make more sense of them (Kearney et al, 2009:1160).

### Support networks in self-care

Support is the third area of self-care. Imagine you were to draw a spider diagram, with yourself at the centre and everyone in your life surrounding you (personally and professionally). Then draw arrows outwards from you, to all those whom you support, using increasingly thick lines, the more you support them. Now draw similar arrows back to yourself.

In almost all the diagrams I have seen like this, there is more support going outwards

## ..... 'Flow activities give your brain learning and development opportunities, but without the pressures of being your work'

than the person is receiving. Who might we receive useful support from? Sometimes it can temporarily feel good to offload to our nearest and dearest, but what other supportive relationships do you have? For interpreters, professional supervision offers an independent, trusting relationship, giving you a supportive space to explore your practice. A supervisor can act as a mirror, helping you to understand your work, your blind spots and your responses and to develop the skills to be a more resilient practitioner (Hetherington, 2012).

Professionally, our co-interpreters should be a supportive presence, yet 'toxic' co-interpreters can block those necessary stress-relieving holes in our bucket. Whatever makes them toxic to you means that what should be a stress-relieving relationship becomes a stressor in its own right. (Swartz, 2014:4)

### Psychological self-care

The largest area that I believe interpreters tend to focus less on is the psychological element of self-care. Schwenke et al (2014:226) agree, noting that the psychological and emotional impact of interpreting needs to be taught. Costa, in her paper on supervision (p62) states: 'Unconscious processes do not disappear if we ignore them or if we attempt to override them.' Traditionally, such self-awareness

among counsellors is gained as a by-product of their clinical supervision (Pieterese et al 2013:193), yet the field is now looking to make this a more explicit process.

While reflective practice is not a new phenomenon for interpreters (think dilemma discussions and miscue analysis), this is akin to Schon's model of reflection-on-action (1983, in Wong-Wylie, 2010:11), which focuses solely on practice situations. Like similar counselling reflective practice, this does not include the self of the practitioner. Wong-Wylie's work, however, takes this model of reflection a step further for counsellors, introducing the notion of 'self-on/in-action'. This is defined as looking at 'salient personal experiences that influence and shape the professional and her or his actions and decisions, rather than focusing only on practice situations' (Wong-Wylie, 2007:60).

This level of self-reflection was not something I was taught as part of my interpreter training, but has become to become a personal interest of mine. Wong divides self-on- and in-action into two parts. The first is reflection on the formed/forming self. This is all the parts that make up our self and how we view the world through a 'lens'. We all have a personal lens (Rosin, 2015:88-89), which is formed by our values, judgements and beliefs. The literature also separates out the cultural lens, which is formed by our internalised culture(s) and how these can influence our thoughts (Ho in Rosin 1995:89).

As interpreters, being unaware of how our lenses can influence us can lead to bias in making decisions and in our interpretations. Indeed, Dean and Pollard note how 'judgements about what is going on are deeply influenced by who you are, your values and your life experience' (2013:10).

For instance, an unconscious dislike of an old school teacher could sub-consciously lead us to inadvertently taint an interpretation of a speaker who sounds just like that teacher.

For counsellors, an unexamined cultural lens could lead to collusion with (or aversion to) their client, due to their unconscious beliefs. For us as interpreters, we not only have the racial lens, but also that of the client's Deaf culture, to be mindful of. The cultural lens was used to focus on the client's racial culture and how the practitioner may act in a biased manner when dealing with the client due to their unconscious beliefs.

### Self-on-action reflection

Counselling literature has several models that could be used as a comprehensive and step-by-step look at the formation of your cultural and personal lenses. Two of these are included in Wong-Wylie's spherical method for personal understanding (2010): a 'Russian doll', systemic look at your 'Self' and the influences on your development; and Roysircar's Cultural Self-Awareness Assessment (2004).

Both models are quite lengthy, whereas a shorter self-history appraisal can be found in Rothschild's *Help for the Helper*. Whichever guide you decide to use, a deeper understanding of your Self stands you in a better stead for being able to reflect more holistically. Dean and Pollard (2013:128) concur, stating that 'self-awareness is the first step to self-regulation' with regard to intrapersonal demands.

From a self-on-action perspective, knowing our influences and values can help us understand the moral dilemmas we experience as interpreters and identify when our values run counter to the scenario we encounter. Here, professional/clinical

supervision can act as a resource for interpreters around these discussions (Hetherington, 2011:18).

While counsellors are required to have personal counselling 'to help them look after themselves so they remain fit and available for the patient' (Costa), this must be separate from their supervision, as the two relationships have very different focuses. Professional supervision will help you to explore your inner world, but with the focus on how your Self interacts with your work environment (self-on-action). For this reason, if your professional supervisor notices a recurring theme from your sessions, that is beyond this scope of

the supervisory remit, then they should direct you to personal counselling for these issues.

### Self-in-action reflection

Developing self-in-action reflection helps us to develop the skills to monitor our inner world, indeed our buckets, when interpreting. Knowing ourselves gives us one part of the toolkit, and the 'development of dual-awareness' gives us the rest. Dual-awareness is defined as 'a stance that permits the clinician to simultaneously attend to and monitor the needs of the patient, the work environment and his or her own subjective experience' (Kearney et al, 2009:1160).

## ..... 'It is the development of moment-to-moment (dual) awareness, through mindfulness meditation, that develops the meta-cognitive skills'

The need for this type of self-in-action reflection for interpreters is highlighted by Dean and Pollard when they state that 'perhaps the most crucial professional development goal pertaining to demands is to

increase one's recognition of intrapersonal demands and appreciation for their power to interfere with effective practice' (2013:128). My experience is that interpreters tend not to focus on their own needs and their internal worlds within the moment of active interpretation. It is the development of moment-to-moment (dual) awareness, through mindfulness meditation, that develops the meta-cognitive skills needed to be able to keep tabs on our buckets.

Formal mindfulness meditation practices also give the added benefit of being a physical self-care opportunity (Kearney, 2009:1162), while developing the skills to

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register what is occurring in the moment. These formal practices then translate into dual-awareness, being able to tap into our inner world and, at the same time, be present with the client and our interpreting process.

Since we use first-person narration for the vast majority of our voiceovers, we are constantly filtering all of the person's emotions (Hetherington, 2011:3). An ability to touch base with our inner world can help us to separate ourselves from our clients (Harvey, 2003:210) and therefore empty our buckets of stressors from elsewhere.

Some mental stressors can originate from us. These can include the way we think about and talk to ourselves, or about work. Interpreters were found to have tendencies towards maladaptive perfectionism, whereby we hold ourselves to extremely high standards and then feel intense shame when we are unable to achieve them. The ability to be with yourself in the moment means you are more able to catch your shame gremlins and self-critical thoughts and then flip the script. Changing these mental patterns means you are able to beat yourself up less and, in time, lower your perfectionist standards (Qin et al, 2008, in Schwenke et al, 2014:210 & 225).

That said, the process of raising your self-awareness is not easy. Our human desire to avoid discomfort has us acting more like ostriches when it comes to shining a light on parts of ourselves we dislike (or even like!). Here, working with someone impartial, such as a professional supervisor, who can be your mirror for your head-in-sand moments, can help you to approach these elements with

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support and in safety. Wong-Wylie (2007:64) also found that cognitive complexity and a lack of both support and targeted teaching on the subject were all barriers to developing self-on-action and self-in-action.

Developing formal practices which then feed into your self-in-action dual-awareness will begin to give you the brain space to have this cyclical process of (self-) improvement. I hope this article has given you some food for thought about your development, your Self and your self-care. In thinking about any self-care habits you already have, can you reinforce them further by building in mindfulness? Consider why you are doing that activity and bear in mind the benefits, as you do it. This level of self-awareness brings added benefits to your self-care.

Habit formation of new self-care strategies that could help resource you as a working interpreter can itself prove a stumbling block. I would recommend baby steps. Make your first step in your new self-care habit a small one, such as only one minute of mindfulness meditation, and your self-care habit will have a better chance of forming.

I hope you find ways to resource yourself and prevent burnout. In considering your bucket, the four elements of self-care and our personal/cultural lenses, we can have more stable foundations from which to operate from – building on rocks, not sand. 