

Original Article

Mindfulness-based Self-care Practices of Counselors for Nurturing Wellbeing: An Auto/ethnographic Inquiry

Pragya Shrestha*

pragya_med1sc2024@kusoed.edu.np

Chet Nath Panta

chetnath@kusoed.edu.np

Abstract

This study explores mindfulness-based self-care practices of counsellors working in school setting and how it contributes to wellbeing. The study demonstrates that mindfulness improves self-care and wellbeing, reduces stress and burnout, balances mental and physical health, and compassion towards self and others. This study further unpacks how counselors notice signs of stress and burnout, their existing self-care practices, and how they practice mindfulness in their daily life to enhance their wellbeing. This study follows a Buddhist perspective and is centralized within Buddhist principles. The study was done within three months using the auto/ethnographic method. The narratives offer experiences of school counselors' challenges in school and how they deal with them, experiences of stress and burnout, existing self-care practices in their life areas, and reflection on need for changes in their self-care practices. Semi-structured interviews as well as arts-based work and photographs with three counselors working in school setting and journaling of Author 1 throughout the research period was documented. The first author reflects on her roles as counselor, Gestalt psychotherapist, mindfulness practitioner, and Buddhist student, in conversation with the second author role as mentor and educator with an Eastern perspective. Through an auto/ ethnographic inquiry, the study uses self-reflection of mindfulness practice and mindful inquiry with four counselors to gather, analyze and interpret self-reflective materials. This study contributes to knowledge that possibly enhances the development of the university curriculum in terms of the teaching, training, and supervision of self-care practices. It advocates the need for self-care for counselors in school.

Keywords: *self-care, wellbeing, mindfulness practice, auto/ ethnography, stress and burnout, school counselor*

*Corresponding Author.

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Journal Webpage:

<https://journals.ku.edu.np/index.php/jcepw>



Introduction

I (Author 1) am a counselor and supervisor for more than eighteen years working in mental health psychosocial area in Nepal. While I was working in one of the psychosocial mental health organizations, a couple of years back my supervisees shared about their loads of school going adolescents' cases with suicidal ideations every day. As suicidal cases are always high priority case, reporting each case in the team on the same day was expected from the team. So, I tried my best to assist my supervisees. Although they felt understood and supported, I was not able to support them as I resonated their stress and burnout. I self-criticized myself, doubted about my skills, became reactive or impatient, lacked curiosity, pushing self for success or outcomes causing sense of lack of freedom, and not able to accept me also have limitation. This made me frustrated, angry, and helpless. In team meetings with my colleagues, I got emotional and was unable to manage my emotions. I can see how taking care of self is necessary in this period as a helping professional since clients share their difficulties with counselors and counselors to their supervisors to what Searles (1955) say 'parallel process'.

The role of school counselors (ASCA, 1994) is not limited to only individual and group counseling with students, but consultation and coordination with teachers, parents, support personnel and community resources, case management, guidance curriculum, and program evaluation and development. School counselors during counseling have to listen empathetically to students' trauma, academic and career issues. With my eighteen years of experience as counselor, I have realized the significance of self-care. Ethical guidelines also mention about self-care (Smith, 2017) to maintain personal wellbeing. Without proper self-care, counselors possibly bring their own emotional issues during the session, experiencing feelings of incompetence, self-blame, and not being able to separate emotion of self and client. As a result, wellbeing of both counselor and client was impacted. Therefore, it is important for the counselors to prioritize their self-care so that they can support their clients.

As a researcher, this led me to explore self-care strategies of counselors, including myself, for wellbeing to deal with these emotional and behavioral responses. In this study, the term 'counselor' and 'supervisor' refer to all helping professionals – psychologist, psychosocial counselor, school counselor, and psychotherapist, like me, who support their clients and/ or supervisees. I explore existing self-care strategies of counselors and help them to self-reflect to identify sustainable self-care practices for their wellbeing.

This study is a follow-up of the unpublished mini research conducted as a part of my term paper in Kathmandu University (2024) on "*The self-reflection on self-care practices of counselors for their wellbeing*" with three counselors resulted the need of capacity building (e.g. training, conference) for professional growth, continuous travelling, physical exercise, spirituality, engaged in creative activities, mindfulness practice, and value self.

As a counselor balancing multiple personal and professional roles, I noticed how easily stress and burnout enter into our daily life without making noises. I have seen this in myself as well as in fellow counselors carrying emotional weight silently while continuing to help others. We speak of self-care with clients and others but rarely pause to ask what it means in our own lives. Mindfulness (*Sati*) originated from Buddhist roots as a path for wellbeing, but I wonder: how do we, as Nepali counselors actually practice mindfulness?

How do we notice stress and burnout in ourselves? What do our self-care practices look like? These questions are often limited in formal research, especially in our Nepali context. This study is my way of returning to these questions, hoping to unpack the deeper meaning of our lives as counselors. With mine and the stories of other counselors I seek to figure it out. If there is “parallel process” from client to counselor, then there is another way around by taking care of self can support self-care of client. The purpose of this study is to explore how Nepalese counselor notice signs of stress and burnout, engage in self-care practices, and integrate mindfulness in their daily lives for their wellbeing while balancing personal and professional roles. The following research questions helped to navigate this study:

How do counselors in Nepal notice stress and burnout and make sense of it?

What are the existing self-care practices of counselors?

In what ways does a counselor practice mindfulness to enhance their wellbeing?

Conceptualizing Self-care and Professional Wellbeing

Burnout is a psychological syndrome linked to prolonged response to chronic emotional as well as personal stressor faced in professional work (Doulougeri et al., 2016). The authors emphasized the importance of underlining six domains, namely workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. These domains can influence individual wellbeing. Similarly, in the study of professional quality life of Nepali helping professionals and mental health workers, the author found moderate level of risk for secondary trauma (Adhikari, 2017) as they have to listen the stories of their clients. In another study (Adhikari, 2018), the author claims that academic and training courses in counseling and psychology have not covered issues of compassion fatigue and addressed it for helping professionals. Likewise, Bali-Mahomed et al. (2022) on their study with 330 secondary school schools demonstrated there is a significant positive relationship between self-compassion, counselling self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, spiritual intelligence, and the school counsellor’s psychological well-being. Mayorga et al (2015) conducted a study with 109 Master counseling students found that lower levels of self-care increased levels of stress among these students. They further emphasized that it is important for counseling students and educators to practice self-care behaviors and to include information in their course work and curriculum that addresses self-care practices with focus on avoiding harmful stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue. So, school counselors need to equip themselves with self-care factor to deal with work stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue for their psychological well-being.

With the background of Gestalt psychotherapy and applied Buddhism, I am much more inclined to awareness, and self-reflection for my self-care. The self-care and wellbeing as mentioned by Butler et al. (2019). Bringing mindful attention and intention to addressing the range of one’s self-care needs across all life domains is vital for helping professionals...Although there is no “one-size-fits-all” way to approach self-care, there is a common thread in all self-care efforts: they involve making and honoring a commitment to one’s own wellbeing...self-care also requires a commitment to none’s own wellbeing as *its own priority*. (2019, p.16).

In addition, The American Counseling Association (ACA) code of ethics states that for counseling practices and serving clients effectively and ethically, a counselor needs to “engage in self-care activities to maintain and promote their own emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing” (ACA, 2014, p.8). ASCA (2022) ethically guides school counselor to take responsibility of self to recognize the potential for stress and secondary trauma. It is important to practice wellness and self-care by monitoring mental, emotional and physical health, while seeking consultation from experienced school counseling practitioners and/ or others when needed. (2022, p.8). This suggests how important is self-care for helping professionals in professional and personal lives.

Elements of self-care: I reflect on my self-care strategies based on the eight different life areas as mentioned in the trauma healing cards (UMN, 2009): work, family and friends, learning, spirituality, diet, health, play and rest. Likewise, Butler et al. (2019) provide six domains of self-care that includes physical, professional, relational, emotional, psychological and spiritual. The physical domain includes sleep, nutrition, exercise, and health maintenance and adherence. Professional domain includes job stress and burnout, job engagement, secondary traumatic stress, vicarious traumatization, and retraumatization, preventing and combating occupational hazards of the helping professionals, and compassion satisfaction. Relational domain – social integration and social support, altruism, and virtual social networks. Emotional domain – identifying and replacing destructive ways of coping, reducing negative emotional experience, and increasing well-being and happiness. Psychological domain – intellectual pursuits and other enjoyable activities of the mind, self-awareness and mindful reflection on self. Spiritual domain – faith-based spirituality such as religious participation and prayer, secular or non-faith-based spirituality such as spiritual mediation, connecting with nature. So, I would choose simple eight life areas used by United Mission to Nepal (2009) for the reflection of self-care strategies.

Mindfulness and its Impact on Wellbeing

The research with helping professionals, here, counselors, revealed that mindfulness is a significant mediator between self-care and wellbeing (Richards et al. 2010). ‘*Sati*’ (Pali word), the Buddhist concept was translated as ‘Mindfulness’ by Thomas William Rhys Davids from the Buddhist text *Mahāsatipatthāna Sutta* (Xiao, Q., et al. 2017). *Sati* stands for awareness, attention and remembering (Siegel et al. 2009). Mindfulness focused on practice of watching how things ‘come to be’ and ‘pass away’ (Gethin 2013). Mindfulness is to be in the present moment or presence of mind. It helps to be aware of interconnectedness of mind and body.

Walse (1995) describes about the greater discourse on the foundations of mindfulness, among four foundations of mindfulness (body awareness, feeling awareness, cognition awareness, and mind-object awareness). It mentions about contemplation about mind-objects in respect of the four nobles: *dukkha* (suffering), origin of suffering, cessation of suffering, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering (Nanamoli Thera. & Bhikku Bodhi. 1998). In general, acknowledging sufferings through the awareness of body, emotion, cognition and phenomenology helps to reduce suffering.

Similarly, the Buddhist concept of the middle path in between the two extremes self-indulgence (*kāmasukkhallikānuyoga*) and self-mortification (*attakilamathānuyoga*) and

consists of the noble eightfold path (*ariyo atthangiko maggo*) that leads to freedom and happiness (Kalupahana, 1986). In my understanding, the Buddhist principle of the Middle Path provides a framework for balanced living by avoiding two poles sensual pleasure and self-denial. This Middle path includes: Right view (*sammā ditthi*), Right intention (*sammā sankappa*), Right speech (*sammā vācā*), Right Action (*sammā Kammanta*), Right Livelihood (*sammā ajiva*), Right effort (*sammā vāyāma*), Right Mindfulness (*sammā sati*), and Right Concentration (*sammā samādhi*) (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000). Together, these elements provide a life guide towards liberation and peace, and end of suffering. Snyder (2009) claims that Right view is about understanding the four noble truths, the truth of suffering and the cessation of suffering. Right thought refers to wholesome thoughts, the thought of love and non-violence. Right speech is about abstinence from lies, hatred speech, and gossip. Right action is done by not killing, not stealing, not sexual misconduct, and no intoxications. Right livelihood is living not harming others such as not trading weapons, not trading human beings, not trading intoxications, poisons, not killing animals. Right effort is done by preventing unwholesome states of mind from arising. Right mindfulness is by being aware of body, emotion, thoughts, and mind-objects. Right concentration, the practice of Samatha and Vipassana.

Benefits and drawbacks of meditation according to Anderson, T., et al. (2019) include emotional benefits (calm and positive emotions), cognitive benefits (attention, self-control and cognitive enhancement), growth (insight and personal growth, existential and spiritual growth), mental and physical health management, resilience (e.g stress management, emotional stability), mindfulness (e.g. non-judgmental, decentering and detachment from thoughts, present moment awareness), social and interpersonal benefits (kindness, compassion, empathy, connection and a sense of community), and other benefits (e.g. strength, hope). Drawbacks of meditations are time demands that could have spent elsewhere, learning curve (affective demands and task demands of meditation), negative emotional and psychological outcomes (e.g. troubling or scary thoughts and experiences, sadness, over awareness of sensation, emotions and thoughts), social and interpersonal drawbacks (e.g. stigma and disconnection), stressful personal change, negative health outcomes (e.g. pain or discomfort in the legs or back), and serious adverse events (e.g., suicidal thoughts, hallucinations or psychosis). To simply put, mindfulness meditation practice has both benefits and drawbacks. However, benefit outweighs drawbacks, and when drawbacks are handled in balance, and teachers support, helping professionals equip to manage stress, foster self-compassion, and enhance overall well-being.

Knowing how not taking care of self can lead to burnout, secondary trauma and compassion fatigue among school counselors. In the context of Nepal, narratives of counselors' own self-care practice are lacking. With the understanding of concept of self-care, its elements, and importance self-care, I am motivated to conduct this auto/ethnographic study with school counselors to address this contextual narrative gap, where I reflect upon my own and others' self-care practice belonging to the same community and see where to strengthen and where to improve, as there is gap on self-care strategies of school counselors in Nepal.

Methodology

We explored self-care practice within personal and professional contexts in eight different life areas. They are work, family and friends, health, diet, learning, spirituality, play, and rest

(UMN, 2009). We needed to understand self-care practices of my own before we explored other counselors'. Therefore, we chose auto/ethnography approach as this is an introspective to reflect upon, have easy access, and communicate with my personal experience.

Self-reflecting on existing self-care is meaningful as a researcher. Self-reflection enables one to critically analyze (*graphy*) their personal own lived experience (*auto*) to understand cultural experience (*ethno*) (Ellis et al., 2011), which is known as autoethnography. The same article mention that a researcher writes autoethnography by using characteristics of autobiography and ethnography. Similarly, Dahal et al. (2022) highlight the role of autoethnography within Nepali context position participants as co-constructs of meaning, thereby aligning methodology with the collaborative and reflective essence of autoethnography. Therefore, as a counselor, mother, daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, and practitioner balancing different personal and professional roles, I write within the field I am studying. My experience of stress and burnout, self-care practices and mindfulness are not just data, but living reflections that inform this inquiry. I am not outside the research, but I am in it. This research grows from my own need to understand how, I and others like me, enhance wellbeing in high demands navigates personal and professional boundaries. My positionality is both a lens and a source.

While writing, the researchers can use texts from interviews that is recorded, photographs and use journal to recall (Ellis et al., 2011). My reflections and experiences are recorded in a self-reflection journal and meditation and mindfulness journals. Therefore, this study is an auto/ethnographic exploration of self-care strategies of some counselors working in school setting, currently seeing school going children, and practicing mindfulness.

Justification for Auto/ethnography

I (Author 1) have been working in mental health and psychosocial area since 2007. I have provided training and supervision to mental health non-specialists such as community psychosocial workers, counselors, health workers and others who have not specialized in mental health (Shrestha, 2020; Pederson, 2023; Rose et al., 2023). I have contributed to adaptation and implementation of evidence-based interventions (Jordans et al., 2019, Sangraula et al., 2021, Ghimire & Shrestha, 2021) in Nepal. In past 6 years, I have worked with school going adolescents with depression in rural Nepal as a therapist and supervisor (Rose-Clarke et al., 2020, 2022). During this career trajectory I realized that I cannot grow alone. I grow together with others. So, with this growth mindset "together we grow," currently, in completing M. Ed in school counseling course at Kathmandu University, I wanted to choose the topic that supports myself and other counselors' personal and professional development.

Self-care of Counselors for Wellbeing

As a counselor and supervisor, I (Author 1) want to address self-care needs across all life domains as suggested by Butler et al. (2019). These life domains are work, family and friends, health, diet, learning, spirituality, play, and rest mentioned in UMN beginning card 9 (2009). Self-care needs commitment to one's own wellbeing. I have been influenced by awareness from Gestalt Psychotherapy and four foundations of Buddhist mindfulness, i.e. bodily awareness, emotional awareness, cognitive awareness, and phenomenology awareness, and how they use this awareness in relation with other, here, client. This transparency of self

(bodily, emotionally, cognitively, and phenomenologically) in eight life areas help to understand existing self-care and identify a gap for additional self-care strategies.

Individuals and sampling: I have selected three counselors, with three inclusion criteria; counselor working with adolescents, currently working in school setting, and at least work one year experience in school counseling.

Reflexivity: I am a Gestalt psychotherapist, practicing counseling in school setting and a student of Buddhist studies with some experience of Vipassana meditation practice. So, I might see mindfulness as secular perspective as I have experienced both western and eastern perspective of awareness. This may create bias towards different types of mindfulness. I have acknowledged this. Therefore, it was not possible to find the counselor who had both background of Gestalt therapy, Buddhist mindfulness practice and school counselors exclusively. With regards to the counselors' characteristics, it was important to keep aside two characteristics (Gestalt psychotherapy and Buddhist studies) aside and select counselors who are working in school setting.

Data Collection Strategies

I have used multiple information generation strategies such as self-reflection, interviews with three counselors, and art-based reflection. These methods will provide rich insights from self-care practices among school counselors. As an individual shares their lived experience, the researcher's personal reflections provide depth and context to the narrative, although the researcher's experience is not the central focus (Ellis, 2004). The in-depth interviews offer not just external viewpoints but also additional data that can validate, enhance or even challenges the insights gained through reflection.

Interviews with school counselors: I conducted semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B) with counselors who are currently working with children in a school setting. These interviews explored challenges faced in professional life, and how they have been dealing with them using self-care practices for their wellbeing. In some parts of the interview, I have adopted specific questions to open up area, while in some I have not explored questions as they have already shared without asking. These interviews were recorded and translated for thematic analysis. Prior to interviews, I explained the purpose of study, let them read and signed a consent form (see Annex A). I also self-interviewed myself the same questions.

Journaling: In addition to my own interview, I documented my own personal self-care strategies over period of three months through journaling that focus on eight key life areas. I have also written each day experience of 10 days Vipassana meditation a month before I started this research project. These reflections helped me to be aware of my bodily response, emotional fluctuation, thought process, and phenomenology awareness. I used some of these materials as reflexive data about my own self-care journey.

Art-based reflection: Counselors including myself were invited to engage in art-based self-reflection, visualizing different life areas and reflect upon where they want to change or improve. Photographs of artwork and snap shots were collected to give meanings of self-reflection on self-care practices including myself. The recorded interviews were protected in my laptop, and I only have access to it.

Meaning Making

Overall, the meaning-making of each narrative, interview findings, and art reflection provide a comprehensive exploration of self-care practices among school counselors. The process of autoethnographic data analysis and interpretation requires moving back and forth between personal and others' experiences (Bartlett, 2014). As Frank (1995) differentiates between two ways of analyzing narratives of stories; one is thinking *with* a story (narrative analysis) and the other is thinking *about* a story (analysis of narrative) (Bartlett, 2014). Bartlett added thinking *with* a story is to experience it as affecting our life, to find in that experience a truth about our life and analyze the different aspects of the narrative, for instance, the use of language. While thinking *about* a story, we see the story and try to identify common themes or patterns in it. In this study, I have combined both of these approaches to gain rich information.

Findings – Our Stories

Theme 1: Embodied Stress and Relational Spillover: Body-Emotion-Mind-Social Interconnection Burnout

When I am in stress, it impacts not just only me and but also other. Bodily, I feel physical discomfort, headache, burning sensation in piles, get tired or exhausted. In mind, I have lots of reoccurring thoughts and images. Emotionally, I get angry, irritated, frustrated, feel lonely. This impacts other as I do not want to look at work or give time to other. Stress and burnout are not just internal experience, but embodied and relational. The body gives signals of stress before mind by shaking, heaviness, pain or fatigue. This bodily sign cannot be separated with emotional responses. This internal stress spills into interpersonal relationship resulting conflict in relationships. For Sahashi, stress is expressed in a body and how stress impact relationship as she shared:

When I am stressed, my legs shake. I could not be able to stabilise it. I feel heavy. I feel something is choking in my throat as if it cannot be taken out. I do not want to talk with anyone..... Problem arises in my relationships.....and then, if I am doing something, there arises negative result although I tried my best to make things better... I feel I am beriyeko jasto (feel bound), confused, not able to handle myself.... For example, one of my friends went abroad. She expected my friend and I to see her off at airport. Because of my personal work and my sickness, I was not able to complete that expectation. As I did not go, my friend also did the same. I was also in a rush due to my office work as I was also not physically fit. I was trying to convince her. She did not understand it. She stills does not talk to me because of this issue. It has been 6-7 months that she is not talking to me. I thought of myself that I was not able to make her understand. If I had done something, I could have been able to meet her. That thing still makes me stress.

Her experience shows me how stress and burnout due to life demands, workloads, sickness and responsibility, not just affect body, emotion, and relationship, but also affect thoughts of self-blaming that we could have done more.

Rupa echoed this as physical languages and frustration that spills into relationship. She shared:

The body itself tells. My left hand gets tired. Then another thing is I cannot concentrate when I am burnout... Irritation is observed in my behavior. I displaced irritation in my family members. I get angry... When I do something after getting angry with my family members, I observe they feel hurt and reflect back on what I did wrong. Why am I doing this? I am the person who understands other, I must not do this. Then I came to know that I am in difficulty. I love my family a lot. Why am I shouting at my mom, the person I love most? Then I realize I am already burnout.

Prami captures this and says burnout is a phase. She shared:

Feeling of burnout like you [I] do not like to go to work, you [I] feel tired, do not want to talk to people, absenteeism. It's a phase. Everyone goes through this phase. There was a teacher, who left school many years back, he used to share. Burnout is a collection that you feel so bad...It's enough, feeling of frustration. But we have to survive, we have to earn. Sometimes, although there is burnout, we keep burnout and stress. Try to deal with it, of course, me as well, I take it as a part of life. There is no other way. Either one has to leave the job. There is no profession, where you do not feel burnout? You need rest and break... Doing counseling every day is also stressful.

I empathize her that how heavy counseling profession can be as we need to carry other's pain resulting burnout when not taken care in earlier phase.

The reflection on narratives validates me how physical, emotional, behavioral and thought indicators are sign and symptoms of stress and burnout that impact relationships and work. For instance, feeling low, irritability, not wanting to talk to people, unable to handle oneself are some emotional signs of stress and burnout. Likewise, feeling tired, legs shaking and feeling of chocking in throat were physical signs experienced. With regards to social connection, shouting at family members, displacing irritation with family members, not giving time to them, and not wanting to work or absenteeism, and missing work commitments, were shared impacting relationship and work.

Theme 2: School Setting as both Weakness and Strength

In the context of Nepal, where school counseling is just emerging, not trusting in counseling process is a big challenge; as Prami said,

School is not very negative towards counseling, and so much positive also I think...I think the main challenge is that school wants quick result. Incharge can ... give strict guidelines and children follow them. Maybe because of fear. But counseling does not work in that way. Sometimes, they assume that the way he did is faster result than instead of sending the child in counselor, which may not happen immediately. So, I think this is the main challenge. Even though after going to a counselor, there is no immediate change. They [Heads of school] want quick fixes. That is one thing...that makes them feel that there is no trust in counseling. No trust in the process...I think that is the biggest challenge.... They think that counselor is another version of DI (Discipline Incharge) ... Let's say kind of softer DI.

Despite these challenges, there are colleagues within school such as principal, teachers, and in-charge who understand and support her. She adds, *"The good thing is that the principal is*

very aware about the counseling.... Teachers also give me support. They give me feedback. That's very good. I think. Support system is In-charge as well. Support is colleagues whom you work with."

This shows although heads or founders of school seems to be neutral (neither positive nor negative) towards counseling process, it's important how the trust of the principal and teachers are a big support in school setting.

In Rupa's story, while coordinating with parents, when parents do not understand what their child is going through, although the counselor educates its importance leading counselor a source of stress. She shared

... many things are not in our hands... Problem was severe, and school principal asked me to see the child. I called his father and referred for further treatment [after two sessions he as referred to hospital/ psychiatrist] ...He said OKAY to me, but schoolteachers said that that child did not come [to school] afterwards.... They did not pick up the phone when called. At that time, it was raining. I went home taking scooter. I talk with them.... They have already taken for treatment a long time back, but the medicine made him sleepy, did not able work. Every time he felt sleepy.... They stopped medicine... The other thing is that he used to study in a Nepali school. Later, he was admitted at boarding school. He has difficulty in studies... his friends are younger than him and this made him feel ashamed...He was teased about being old.... Without understanding this, they said they would take him to traditional healers for 3-4 days.

This narrative left me with a sense of helplessness, accepting a fact that everything is not in a counselor's hand. It reminded me of having patience and limitation of counseling.

Weather, stigma, and distance are challenges to conduct counseling as shared by Sahashi:

Environmental issues like the winter season, they do not have to miss classes. They reach home late [the session is after school] and parents pressurize us and ask us not to do [counselling]. They know that it is important, but safety also needs to be taken care of. This is one challenge. And then there is another challenge. Although we are tried, stigmatization is from teachers. Children say 'No' to session. They do not want to come for the session. Although we convinced, they are influenced by other people [students]...and then... the distance of school and home is far, so this thing [not coming to session] arise. In public school, the bus system just came. There used to be no bus. Some students who did not go by bus, faced difficulty related to bus...when they stay late, parents call."



Her experience demonstrates the real-world challenges of school counseling, where environmental, social and logistical challenges block support. Despite understanding the value of counseling, parents and

Sensing stretched muscles Day 6 in Vinassana Center

teachers sometimes discourage children to participate, and peer stigmatize them for taking counseling session.

Theme 3: My Roles and my Mindful Self-care Strategies

Self-care Begins with Self (Pragya)

I have been conducting training about self-care for others, which conflicted with myself as I was lost in performing roles and responsibilities and not truly taking care of myself. So, now when I reflect it back, I began to take care of myself balancing my roles and self-care. I am a mother of two children, and have many other personal roles (wife, daughter-in-law, elder daughter, elder sister, and friend) and professional roles (counselor, trainer, supervisor, and colleagues). As a mother, I took responsibility of preparing breakfast, tiffin, dinner, helping in assignments, washing clothes, concern about physical and emotional health daily. As a wife, I share economic and other responsibilities with my husband. As a daughter-in-law, I cook, wash utensils and kitchenware, and spend time. As an elder daughter, I make sure my mother gets quality time and health concerns. As an elder sister, I try to connect with my sister who stays abroad regularly. As a friend, I hardly give time to them.

Professionally, as a counselor, I take sessions with clients. As a trainer and supervisor, I provide trainings and supervisions. As a colleague, I work in a team. These were/are my regular roles. I was working 9 am – 5 pm in the office and my travel time from Duwakot to Baluwatar is 1.30 to 2 hours. I did not give myself as I was completely engaged in these roles for others until I decided that I quit 9-5 job to further study for myself. I quit job in June 2024. After quitting job, the first self-care I did was joining a course of yoga teacher training for a month. I learned different postures and play with breaths. I enjoyed connecting my mind and body with this formal training. Then, I joined M.Ed school counseling course from August 2024 to learn about counseling in school setting, which is different from community and clinical setting that I had experienced. I went to Vipassana for 10 days in-between. I experienced unnoticed inside tiny parts of my body, witnessed different emotions and thoughts. This almost one year has been a joyful self-care journey for me as I explored different parts of me.

Starting with Me-time Followed by Household Chores (Prami)

A mother of 20 years old son. Almost two decades of experience in teaching before becoming a counselor. She works in school for 3 days from 10 am to 3:30 pm. Her roles include counseling with the referred students from teachers, orientation/ education to students from grade 4 and above, focusing on developmental stage. For her, self-care practice includes me-time, connecting with nature and daily household chores *“I start with a cup of tea 10 to 15 mins alone at terrace, where the cool wind moves. Then, I feed the birds at that time. Whenever I go up, birds come. They know that they will be fed now. Then after 10-20 minutes, I do puja. I like to cook and try new dishes. I enjoy that actually.”* She remembered when she was asked by a trainer about self-care, she replied, *“My*



Pink wings of butterfly representing work at home. Addina blue winas for

answer was different. Washing clothes and when they are clean. I do not know what is that but after cleaning when you [I] see clothes are clean. You [I] feel so much happy...I organize clothes...I am not OCD [obsessive compulsive disorder] person, but I try to maintain it. Like kitchen countertop, burner, everything has to be visually presentable...I mean the clean space." She remembered one picture of butterfly in the kitchen of her home, when she was asked about her home. She added few bigger wings sketching with blue color symbolizing professional work at the end of the interview, when she was asked if she wanted to add or change in different life areas.

Accepting Dark Side and Bright Side (Rupa)

She divides her roles at school in 3 days, apart from other community work with adults. One day for individual counseling and two days group counseling and orientation to teachers once a month. She sees her roles both as challenges and opportunities in work. She uses a metaphor of the dumbbell which clearly signifies both challenges (darker side) and opportunities (brighter side). On the darker side, parents who listen but do not act, teachers who interrupt sessions and give sarcastic remarks. I empathize her fatigue. On the brighter side, she shared:

"...They [Parents] acknowledge the effort and try to understand [me].... But they did not do what has been said, this represents the dark side [of dumb bell]. Teachers also do not understand. While conducting session with children, they come near to me. This session was supposed to be for only children. They came near and interrupt me in between session. In some activities, there is turn-by-turn speaking. They become judgmental and bias. They say, "Ye yesto po (Is it this?)" I had to send teachers out of the room. I told them that this is boundary. They said, "Hamro balbalika lai k k na garna aayeki (Here comes she, who wants to do big things for our children in a satirical way)" When I see it, I feel fatigue which is this part [dark side of dumb-bell]. However, when I saw progress after sessions [individual or group], I go to this side [brighter part]. I realized that these both parts are important.

She relates dumbbell in her person life as well.

When I could not give time [for family members], that represents this part [darker side]. They become happy with my progress; it is this part [brighter side]. ..My mother says, "This [daughter] is doing work like a son working from distant." I usually take photo when I go to any program [training/ workshop]. They see these photos. Other people tell [mother], "Your daughter does lots of work. She goes to many places." My mother gets happy. This is this part [brighter side] Both sides are important." After drawing this and expressing she shares, "I feel like Oho [laughing with charm]. I did not realize that the product would be this. This came out and it is supporting me. Not only drawing, but expressing it makes me feel clear. Justifying myself...

Sense of Responsibility, and Purpose (Sahashi)

She sees her roles in work into three things – school, office and home. At school, she finds a sense of purpose, of transformation, of deep connection with student who changes after her sessions. Saving other's life is a proud moment that I can also resonate. She says "... The first

thing is about school. I feel proud of myself when I think of it. This is me and this is student [showing picture]. She is feeling sad and when she meets me, she changes and transforms, and she becomes happy. At the end of [counseling] session, they shared that they were very happy. I feel proud that I am able to do something. I share this to my Mom that students tell things about me. Mommy also become happy because of my work. I feel proud that I am saving someone's life." She was smiling while she shared it.

However, at home I can sense the responsibility as being an elder daughter. She draws she is being a center of her family, carrying a burden. She said,

...The other thing is about home. [showing the picture]. This is me, that's Mom and that's my brother. I have also drawn my daddy. He lives far at a distance. I have a burden on my shoulder [Showing black circle on the picture]. I have a burden of responsibilities. I have responsibilities of housework. Sometimes due to this burden, I feel difficult....and then my dad is also far. Because of this I feel difficult. Whatever I have been doing, I am making my Mom and brother happy...

With these narratives, I recognize my work and home responsibilities, accepting personal and professional life blend into one another. As a counselor, a mother of two children, an elder daughter of my single mother, and a daughter-in-law in my home, where I need to be aware of my self-care while balancing both personal and professional sides.

Theme 4: Opportunities to explore various self-care elements of life

Another me

Unlike my mother, I am the person who tolerate pain. It is now physical pain, but if I have to reflect back it can be emotional pain as well. She told me not to tolerate pain. This reminds me of one of the counselors who told that she could not tolerate pain. When I reflect myself that I mostly tolerate pain, that thought made me emotional. Am I taking care of myself? What is self-care for me then? Why I am tolerating pain? People tell me I am kind. Shall I now change my image? Am I ready to change another part of me? Am I suppressing another me? How would another me looks like? If I have to imagine another me – I am bold, rude, no fear to talk, loud voice, carefree, childish, do whatever I want, do things for me than think of other at first. I want to experiment another me.

However, another realization (with an incident when my mother shared her pain) not tolerating pain is good to hear, but if it affects others (whether other can tolerate to listen others' pain). Is it good? This made me cover another me as I do not want other to be bothered because of me. I am enjoying searching about me and I do not have to search outworld to enjoy.

I got an opportunity to translate (English to Nepali) and train others in trauma healing cards from United Mission to Nepal In 2009, while I was working in Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Nepal. It has three big volume of cards. 1. Beginning cards - For the beginners, who heal self from trauma. 2. Middle cards – For other who heal self from the beginning cards. 3. Final Cards – For the rest community. While translating Beginning card no. 9, I came to know about eight life areas under self-care - Work, friends and family, health, diet, spirituality, learning, play and rest. I practice myself and I started to

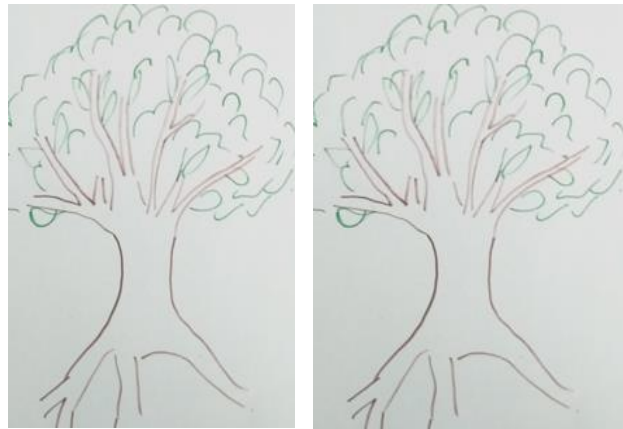
give training to others about it. People loved it, got emotional, connected with self and transformed. I reflect on these areas time and again, and it keeps on changing with new learnings.

Work: Joy from Home Activities

As a part of my role and self-care practice (mentioned above) at work, all counselors (female) including me find joy in doing different home activities (e.g., decluttering, organizing clothes, cooking and trying new dishes, washing clothes, shopping for useful home items) apart from work at school.

Family and Friends: Relationships as a Source of Strength

My relationship with my family members (sister and brother-in-law, son, daughter, husband, mom, sister and her husband) are my strengths and support for my both personal and professional growth. My colleagues are my support for my professional growth. My supervisors and teachers support my professional growth. I connect with them via phone, WhatsApp, messenger, and email who are far.



Relationships depend on connection, like trees from root, trunk, branches to leaves. While going through the narratives of Prami, I see her drawing clearly represents her relationship with families and friends. She shared, *I think there is a strong foundation with branches and many members...Each one helping me in a different way.... When I say foundation, there is tree. There are many branches. Some are big, some are small...Lots of leaves... Foundation is my parents. My mother has passed away. [a long breathe] Foundation and trunk. I think branches are my sisters, brothers, may be friends. May be leaves are activities that we have done, the bond that we have.* Her image of trees stays with me, and it reminds me how relationships are not fixed – they grow, they fall, they renew.

Tree as family and friends

When I listen to Rupa's story, I hear less about closeness and more about clarity. Her connection with family seems to be distant when there is no effort from both sides. I have similar feelings with some of my relatives. However, professional and personal friendship filled that gap. She shares, *"The relationship with my family is so-so. May be because of distance. That [Effort] should not only be from my side. They also should make it [effort]. We do not feel each other except [talk] over the phone. Instead of them, my professional relationship is with my colleagues because of my skills. My personal relationship is good with them...I can understand friends and maintaining the relationship. I know who I am. I know how to make boundaries and how much to make. These boundaries help harmony between both sides...."*

Sahashi reminds me of the power of connection at the time of stress. She shared:

I believe sharing can release stress. When I am in confusion, they motivate me by saying you have potential.... Currently, everything is very fine. I have one friend... She knows each and everything about me, and I know about her. We talk with each other daily. What happened today, what is going on. This plays an important role in my life. Obviously, there is family. Because of them, we laugh, enjoy, sometimes cry, shout. Relation is good with everyone.

These narratives reflect how relationships with family, friends, and colleagues are source of strength, emotional balance and nurture wellbeing.

Health: No regular check-up until serious problem

The common thing that I found with all of us including me except Prami that we do not go for regular health check-up unless there is problem. As Sahashi said, *"I am not satisfied with my health. Not able to maintain chubby. Thyroid problem, body weight, no regular check-up."* She wanted to work on it when reflected back in the interview.

Likewise, Rupa also does not go for regular checkup until she has serious problem. She says, *"I do not do regular checkup. If there is any problem, I take it seriously. Until it solves, I am conscious about food, rest, work, and maintain it. If I have cough, I do not take spicy or sour food. I can do it. I cannot stay in pain. If I have to go hospital, I already know that I can quickly recover. I do not have to do anything for a long time. I maintain food. Even if I am seriously sick, I wake up and prepare food for myself. Eat plain food. I do not stay hungry. I do not depend on other. I do not do regular checkup before becoming seriously ill."*



Prami goes for health check-up regularly. She says, *"According to my health issues, two things [thyroid and blood pressure] that I said earlier. I need to go to doctor every three months. They also refer some other tests like lipid profile, sugar test. And another is ...I go for mammogram once in six months or year."* While reflecting these narratives, a common pattern among us is that we tend to seek medical help unless there is serious health issues.

Wants to learn to cook Susi

Diet: We all prefer home cooked food "Dal, Bhat and Tarkari"

A glass of water early in the morning followed up by oats and fruits. Dal, bhat and tarkari at daytime. For a long time, I have not eaten noodles, and I am happy about that. I used to be noodle lover. I feel good that I am eating fruits these days.

For them, one who enjoys cooking most of time wants to try making new dishes like Prami,

...The fact that I enjoy cooking. My son loves my cooking...normal Nepali food...Dal, bhat, tarkari. It is cooked in the morning and the evening. Other [food] I experiment, and I have learnt few different techniques...an image [Susi] is coming, which I want to learn...

Despite being vegetarian, one can have constipation issues due to their diet as Rupa shared:

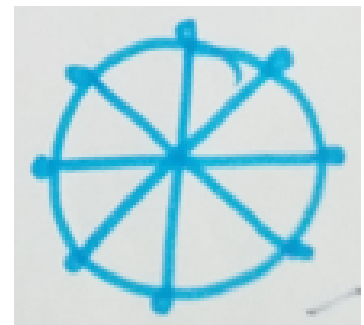
For healthy food, I do not have food schedule. If I want to have food, make food with joy. If not [hungry], I do not even care... When I became vegetarian, I thought what to eat. I take fruits a lot, especially during fasting time. My unhealthy diet is tea. Every time I take tea. If I have to work till 11 or 12 nights, and if there is milk, I make tea... I know this is unhealthy... I do not have proper management for diet. I have a constipation problem because of not being aware of healthy food... I am not managing it. And I have to do it...

Sahashi also does not like junk food. She says, “No junk food, no packed food, maximum homemade food, nutritious...”

Spirituality: Powerful connection with personal and professional self-care

Spirituality does not mean we may or may not have to be religious. Spirituality includes what we believe about the visible and invisible worlds around us. It may include daily practice of gratitude, prayer or worship, or connecting with nature or self (UMN, 2009).

Connecting with myself is spirituality for me by doing meditation either by sitting or by lying on the bed. Connecting body, mind and emotion make myself free. I observe my thoughts, my emotions, by body parts. I listen to sound of river, birds, rain either in real or in mobile. I like practicing *Metta Bhawana* (loving kindness meditation practice, a pray of happiness and cessation of suffering for self and others) in this day while doing meditation.



Cycle of Dharma as spirituality

Prami shares, “I am not a religious person. But I think there is some connection about counseling and Buddhism, somewhere... I go to the meditation center.... Besides that, I do bead as a part of religion that I follow.” She drew a picture that reminds me of a Dharmachakraprabartana (Cycle of Dharma) as I, being a student of Buddhist studies.

Rupa said,

“...Talking about spirituality that I am doing regularly and make me relax is fasting every Tuesday for Ganesh. I have faith... The sounds of bell, the smell of incense makes me relaxed. Now also fasting every Tuesday, worship, make me fresh, light, body energetic, connect with myself. The most effective thing about it is I have developed memory.... Apart from this, I go for hiking. I enjoy with nature... Another thing is I go to places where I want to go and sit on my scooter to be mindful. Alone, take tea and relax. That is why I am connected with nature and it continues...”

Sahashi said:

I have a pet. When I enjoy walking the dog out, I Feel fresh. I am not a religious person, but I connect with nature, greenery. There is one place, where there is no noise, no phone. I stay together with a dog. I recite Gyatri mantra before sleep...engage in natural things such as gardening, taking care of flowers.

Upon reflecting their personal practices together, these narratives illustrate how counselors create meaning through personalized spiritual practices. Whether rooted in traditions, Buddhist influence, or connecting with nature, there's a powerful connection with personal and professional self-care.

Learning for Personal and Professional Growth

Learning is not only for acquiring formal education but also for identity, memory, and healing. The narratives of myself, Prami, Rupa and Sahashi are rich information of meanings, and motivation.

Prami shared personal memory how she wants to learn beyond professional aspiration:

At present, I am okay. But I want to learn a lot.... May be some new skills, how to deal with students. I think in professional life that is it... Apart from professional area, another is I want to learn crochet... That's very weird combination. I do a little bit. It's something that my mom taught me...I want to do something in that area...So, this is a crochet, and this is needle. Here is a heap. This is also one of the things, that I do when I am stressed. I do not do it with two needles. I only do it with one needle.



Wanted to learn crochet apart from professional growth.

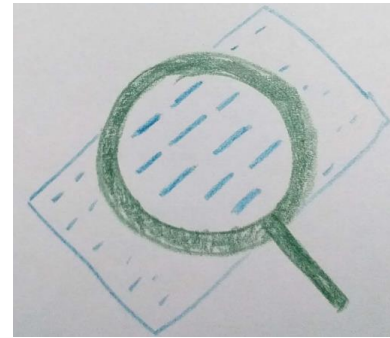
Her drawing is a metaphor for the personal and professional threads intertwined between sometimes tangles and sometimes purposeful.

Rupa has a clear academic goal by leaving her job, just like me. She shared:

Currently, I have been giving enough time for learning, and doing Master's degree, which was done after leaving my job... I cannot work and study...I go to college. Discuss with friends in ground. Go to bookstore... See books...get connected with books. My study habits were stopped before. I became lazy to see books. I am progressing reducing my laziness by reading books. It was very difficult to read. It would not have happened if I had not entered college. I would not know my gap...I have to make a presentation, many reports... I used to say I cannot do. Now, I say I will try because I give time for learning.

Her mindset *I cannot to, I will try*, is a significant sign towards professional growth that inspires me.

Sahashi points out learning from four areas: 1. Time management – personal, family, study and work management, give time to others, 2. group engagement – engage in group, leadership, learn from others, and share with others, 3. acceptance – *Thulo manche le vaneko improvement ko lagi* [senior gives feedback for improvement], and she lets them know she has improved, and 4. supervision – take supervision from supervisor. Learning is not linear. As I listen to them, I echo my journey. I search to learn not just from book, e-book, pdf, google scholar, teacher, but also from trainees, students, and my children. I talk with friends and colleagues, and I learn from them. While doing counseling, I learn from my clients. Academically, I engaged in universities. To learn about practical life, I learn from other. I am learning from my past experience. My curious nature is supporting me to learn.



Eyeglass metaphor as learning from academic, and practical life.

We Love to Play with Children

We all love to play with children. Rupa enjoys playing games, in training and with niece. She shares:

...I enjoy more than participants. I like to play. When I am alone, I play game in mobile... I do not have habit of playing for a long time. I play for some time and leave... When I go home, I play with my niece. I teach and play... Play goti [A game of small stones], making things from mud, play bhandakuti.

This reminds me of myself playing in training and with my two children. Prami plays cards, UNO, ludo, badminton with her son and she enjoys. Sahashi plays with 5 years old child.

Rest and Relax

Sahashi sleeps within 11 pm. She has no problem in sleeps. She says, “*...I get sleep within 5 minutes...6 hours is enough for me.*” Prami needs 6-7 hours of sleep to feel very fresh. When I was interviewing, she did not have enough sleep. So, she said,

...when sleep is not enough, I do feel a bit heavy. Like headache. Exactly what I am feeling right now. If possible, I try to compensate at daytime or when there is holidays. But normally I do not sleep at daytime. Sometimes, when I do not have enough sleep, waking up early in the morning 6 am moves to 7 am late also. There is flexibility” ...At home...I enjoying watching videos. I saved a lot. That time I feel relaxed... I have planted 25 to 30 dragon fruits. Flowing points. Spreading medicine when they get infected. Watering is done by my husband. He takes care of that. I bought some pots and do plantation. That’s what I enjoy.

Rupa shares, “*I try to sleep on time...Friday it takes long time to wake up...so that Saturday...relax ..not sleeping at day time...complete circle of sleep...*”.

Unlike Sahashi, Prami, and Rupa, I do not feel relaxed if I have to wake up with the thoughts of preparation plan for the day listed. Sleep time is enough, when I have nothing in my mind. It has been a month that I did not sit quietly. But true relaxation comes when I

watch by thoughts and breath. With everyone's narration, it reveals inner calm relies on when there is time for self-care.

Discussions

This section includes discussions of the themes highlighted in the findings. The themes are categorized into: '*Dukkha* (suffering) and the nature of stress', '*sati* (mindfulness) and the path to liberation', and 'the middle way and balance in life'

***Dukkha* (Suffering) and Nature of Stress**

In Buddhist philosophy, *Dukkha* (translated loosely as suffering, or dissatisfactory) is the interwoven nature of mind, body, and relational suffering (Rahula, 2007). Four counselors including me understand how stress and burnout are embodied through bodily sensations such as headache, body parts ache, recurring thoughts. It impacts relationships and work.

Sahashi has physical suffering in her legs, throat, and emotional sufferings as misunderstanding from friend. Likewise, Rupa's realization of shouting at her mother as burnout. She embodied sign of tiredness in her left hand, and lack of concentration. Prami normalizes this pain by naming phases of burnout that all have to face. Her Buddhist practice align with this concept of accepting *Dukkha* as truth.

With this reflection, I recognize that suffering is not isolated, but embedded in body, emotion, thought and relationships. So, observing this suffering clearly, with compassion and awareness than denying (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). These narratives validate how physical, emotional, behavioral and thought indicators are signs and symptoms of stress and burnout that impact relationships and work.

In Buddhist thought, *Dukkha* arises not only from bodily pain or emotional ups and downs, but also from dissatisfaction of systems, and expectations. My experience also echoes with Prami, Rupa and Sahashi's stories about day-to-day work stress. As Prami shares, the school administrators want a quick fix, leading them not to trust counseling process. This reminds me of Bhikkhu Bodhi (2000) mentions liberation cannot be forced as it is a gradual awareness and right effort. Prami's sharing underlines how the counselor is viewed as an alternative tool for control (softer Discipline Incharge), than viewed as a helper. However, in the same system, teachers and principal understand and collaborate with her.

Rupa's narrative adds another suffering of helplessness. She provided psychoeducation to parents by referring him to hospital for further treatment, but the parents follow traditional healing. Although her effort of riding a scooter in the rain was acknowledge by parents, they reject going to the psychiatric care.

Another logistical and environmental *dukkha* shared by Sahashi about weather, stigma, transportation, and peer pressure from students. These difficulties made me image water in a *doko*, watching it spill. Understanding the suffering but was not able to offer help. Following the Buddhist principle, the first step is to understand *Dukkha*. We as counselor witness or watch *Dukkha*, and support students compassionately.

***Sati* (mindfulness) in Different Roles**

Lost in roles of personal and professional life, while reflection I realize I had drifted from *Sati* – the present moment awareness. Although I facilitated self-care trainings for others, I was sometimes disconnected from my own body and needs. It was until I left 9-5 job that I began to connect with myself by doing yoga, academic study and meditation. Balancing my duties by being steady presence of *Sati* (Nyanaponika Thera, 1962). As I see narrative of Prami, I saw her mindfulness in work and at home – sipping tea on the terrace, experiencing *Sati*, the Buddhist mindfulness to be in the present moment. Her self-care not just focuses on self but is followed by home activities with full attention. The metaphor of Rupa's dumbbell represents challenge and opportunity – *Sati*, the Buddhist non-judgmental awareness toward different life poles. I saw myself in Sahashi's story – the blurred boundaries of work and home. She is being aware of her responsibilities towards family members and duties – acknowledging joy and heaviness. Liberation does not arise from changing our conditions, but from watching and being present with them (Nyanapaponika Thera, 1962).

The Middle Way and Balance in Life

While exploring 'another me', I struggled the stress between my enduring pain and expressing it – between kindness and self-abandonment. Rahula (1974) mentions that inner dialogue represents the Buddhist principle of the Middle Way. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (the philosophy of Middle way) indicates balance rather than extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgence (Kalupahana, 1986). Our life journey reminds me of balancing pain and pleasure (the middle way) at work and home while taking care of others as well as self. I reflected both physical and emotional pain, whether to self-care meant to be bold and prioritize only self or it means to listen to self. With the self-care practice on eight life areas from the trauma healing cards, I realized self-care journey is about not avoiding parts of me but to harmonize them. Knowing similarities and difference of life areas of Prami, Rupa and Sahashi, I better understand my self-care and make changes on some parts of my self-care specially continuing yoga, and fasting for myself but representing Sun. Likewise, Prami's needs to make changes on practice mindfulness, trying Susi and professional work by adding wings on the butterfly. Rupa's reflection on adding changes on diet, giving grains to birds, and giving more time to college for learning. Similarly, Sahashi's needs to make clear boundary by saying 'No' and every time not available at the office, and avoiding rice, starting exercise, and regular checkup for health.

Conclusions and Implications

High demand of school counselors' work leads to burnout. To this end, addressing one's own wellbeing appears paramount. For this, self-care plays a crucial role in school counseling. The reflection on mindful self-care practice of counselor working in school setting has been rewarding for me. It has been a deeper exploration of self and others – the same culture and context as of counseling we live in. This inquiry has exposed our vulnerabilities, abilities to take risks, commitments, patience, courage, and opened our unknown. As a school counselor, this autoethnographic journey has enhanced my capacity to be more supportive towards my supervisees and clients. This process has encouraged me to give balanced effort and commitment towards my self-care and towards others. Self-care practices includes both personal and professional growth that include eight life areas: work, family and friends, health, diet, spirituality, learning, play, and rest. It is essential to practice mindfulness in relation with spirituality and improve further in other life areas. Self-care practices nurture personal and professional growth that include eight life areas. These life areas lead to the

development of comprehensive wellbeing model for a school counselor. The insights of the study help to develop research proposal, make detailed implementation timeline, plan wellbeing model development, address ethical approval, take practitioners/researchers feedback, and pilot testing. This study advocates for the need of self-care for the holistic wellbeing of school counselors. It is essential to incorporate the contents of wellbeing in school and university curriculum.

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Authors' Bio

Pragya Shrestha is a PhD scholar and counselor, therapist, and researcher with over a decade experience of dedicated work in mental health and psychosocial services. Specializing in Gestalt psychotherapy, Ms. Shrestha serves as a trainer, supervisor, and group facilitator. Her work emphasizes mindfulness and competency-based approaches, with a strong focus on self-care practices. She has delivered national and international training programs, culturally adapted evidence-based psychosocial interventions, and supervised numerous counselors and psychologists. She is trained in a wide range of therapeutic modalities, including group problem management plus, behavior activation, trauma healing, interpersonal psychotherapy, and art therapy.

Dr. Chet Nath Panta completed his PhD in Educational Leadership. The PhD research focused on compassionate leadership embracing the lens of contemplative inquiry. He serves as a visiting faculty at School Counselling and Psychological Wellbeing Unit, School of Education, KU. He is avidly engaged in teacher professional development and leadership capacity-building workshops, wellbeing seminars, and publications. His areas of research interest include critical pedagogy, contemplative inquiry, dimensions of educational/ school leadership, wellbeing, Nonviolent Communication (NV), and Appreciative Inquiry (AI).

To cite this article: Shrestha, P., & Panta, C. N. (2025). Mindfulness-based self-care practices of counselors for nurturing wellbeing: An auto/ethnographic inquiry. *Journal of Contemplative Education and Psychological Wellbeing*, 1(1), 65-88. <https://doi.org/10.51474/jcepw.v1i1.623>