2. Limits

Introduction

As much as we don’t always want to admit it, we all have limits. There are 24 hours in a day and seven days in a week. Even though we don’t always believe it, we have limits on our physical and emotional energy. Many of us cannot accept that we can do some things and not do others.

One issue here is our commitment to our clients. Many of us see what we are doing not as a job for which we are paid but as moral obligations.

Yet, when we exceed our limits, we burn out. That means that we cannot function for our clients nor can we function in our personal lives.

Thus, it is imperative that we become aware of our limits and respect them.

Time

Fortunately or unfortunately, there are 24 hours in a day and seven days in a week, no more.

Therefore, it is crucial that we create priorities as to how we will spend our time.

At least some of our time must be spent on ourselves, our families, and our friends. Human beings function in that way. It also is very good to spend some time in quiet and in reflection. That makes us more functional, that is, more useful to our clients, ourselves, and everyone around us.

Even within our work, we must allocate time. Actually, we function better if we take time to reflect on a client and what we have experienced in the contact before and after seeing the client. We generally allow about 10-15 minutes before seeing a client and about 20 minutes to a half hour afterwards to reflect on what the client has told us and how we feel about it. It helps to write up our notes about the client during that period. Also, in our private journals, we have the habit of writing about how we feel personally about the client. We show this to no one. Yet it, helps us to clarify our feelings and get them out. We take somewhat longer – about 45 minutes – after each group. Again, this works for us but also makes us much more aware of what is happening with the clients and with our feelings about them.

Activities

What are your priorities for your time allocation?

How do you allocate your time with clients?

How do you allocate your time during the day?

How much time do you allocate your time during the week?

How do you feel when you take more time with clients and groups?

How do you feel when you take more time *between* clients and groups?

How do you feel when you take more time in your private life?

Are there situations in which you should not take time, either in your professional life or in your private life?

Physical and Emotional Energy

Working with highly traumatized people takes a great deal of emotional energy. As we have described in the previous section of this course, we identify with them, and have to do so to make the caregiver-client relationship work. Yet, that can exhaust us.

The same is true of many situations in our private lives. As much as we love and care about people around us, dealing with the difficult situations that we all have at various moments takes the emotional and physical energy out of us.

Again, we need to make priorities and allocate time and activities for ourselves that *we* enjoy doing, that renew us and give us pleasure and satisfaction. Also, as we will see later in this section, writing and finding ways of getting the frustrations out are very important.

Activities

Describe the situations that take up your emotional and physical energy.

Describe how you renew yourself.

What are the priorities for your use of your physical and emotional energy?

How can you change the use of your physical and emotional energy?

Acceptance of What We Can and Cannot Do

As much as we would like to, we cannot change everything that we would want to. As we have repeated a number of times, we cannot change clients’ lives. Only they can do that.

Also, there are things within the organizations in which we work and in the societies in which we live and work that we cannot change.

Very frequently, there are things in our private lives that we also cannot change.

Thus, we need to come to an acceptance of what we can and cannot do, as difficult as that is. We acknowledge that it *is* difficult for many of us. We see no other way.

Activities

Describe a situation that you could not change. How did you deal with it?

In the future, are there things that you can do to assist you in accepting things that you cannot change?

Final Remarks

Accepting the limits of time and emotional and physical energy that we all have is difficult for many people, particularly those of us in caring work. Yet, setting priorities and learning to take measures to accept and deal with what we can and cannot do in our professional and private lives is essential if we are to survive. The most experienced professionals have difficulties with this. Thus, we urge you to take the time and make the effort to work through your own situation.