

Collective Ethics as a Path to Resisting Burnout

By Vicki Reynolds, M.A., RCC, Contributing Writer



"Engaging with a spirit of solidarity and collective ethics invites us to witness and connect with the important work of others..."

The counselling teams I work with in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver are being asked by society to work alongside people whose human rights are ignored and abused. The cost of our unjust society has fallen on impoverished and marginalized people, and counsellors who work alongside them bear witness to the suffering that most citizens have the privilege of choosing not to see. As a supervisor it is my ethical obligation to bring hope to these counsellors, and in these voids of dignity and justice this continues to be a great challenge.

I am hesitant to offer a model for supervision because, as Ani DiFranco says, "any tool is a weapon if you hold it right" (1993). What I am suggesting is a particular ethical stance rather than a prescribed set of tools and techniques. My ethical positioning for supervision attempts to bridge the worlds of counselling and activism, and is informed by the principles of social justice, practices of solidarity, and an ethic of resistance (Reynolds, 2002, 2008).

I am drawn to the question of what sustains us collectively as counsellors. For me, sustainability refers to an on-going aliveness, a genuine connectedness with people, and a presence of spirit. I am inspired by questions not so much of resisting "burnout", but of how we can act in solidarity to keep the spirit of our collective ethics alive in our work and lives: How can we be connected with this aliveness? How do we hold onto our collective ethics more fully?

In contrast to the ethics we hold collectively, "burnout" is an idea that is very individually structured, as if there is something about us personally that makes us measure up to this work or not. When I began to work with refugees and survivors of torture, many caring and well-intentioned folks echoed a powerful story that I would "burnout", as survivors of torture were at the top of some hierarchy of pain. This prescription that I would "burnout" was pervasive, presented as common wisdom, and scarce on hope. I found this collective fear of working alongside the

Nelson Mandelas of this world curious-yet I also gravely respected it. But I wondered where this fear was when I was doing what gets benignly referred to as "family work"- much of which consisted of working with youth who had been raped by family members who loved them (Coates & Wade, 2007).

Counselling in all contexts is often a frontline response to violence, abuses of power, and other acts of oppression. I believe that the level of what is being called "burnout" says a lot more about our society collectively than it says about us as counsellors individually. The problem is not in our heads or in ourselves, but in the real world where there is a lack of justice. The people I work alongside don't burn me out and they don't hurt me: they transform me, challenge me and inspire me. We're not "burning out", we're resisting being blown up! What is threatening to blow me up is an inability to work in line with my ethics, and my frustrating failure to personally change social contexts of injustice that clients wrestle with and live in.

Self-care on the part of counsellors is not enough to offset these contexts of poverty, violence, and indignity that clients struggle with, and puts the burden of this difficult work onto the backs of individual counsellors. Work alongside people with more money, resources and status is less likely to result in what gets called "burnout". This can make some counsellors look more professional, when in fact all people's pain is real. Pitting counsellors against each other does not serve clients. The problem of staying alive and healthy in the work currently gets constructed as a very individual project. Yet the issues are social and require collective actions and collective accountability.

Theory and practice are central to the work of counselling, but they exist in relationships with ethics. When counsellors are able to work in accord with their ethical stance, sustainability becomes possible. But social structures and limited resources, which force counsellors to work in ways

that go against their ethics, result in spiritual pain. This spiritual pain I'm talking about is the discrepancy between what feels respectful, humane, generative, and contexts which call on us to violate the very beliefs and ethics that brought us to counselling work. Accommodating people to privatized lives of hell is nothing any of us wants to do, but I think it is a possibility given the helping field's problematic connections to ideas of neutrality and objectivity (Waldegrave & Tamasese, 1993; Cushman, 1995). Fostering sustainability in the face of this spiritual pain is difficult when the unjust conditions of people's lives do not improve, and counsellors experience their work as shoveling water. We know we're working hard, and working harder isn't working. The smell of a particularly individual incompetence begins to creep in.

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This is the dirty work of isolation. But what of our collective resistance to spiritual pain and despair? Despite the fact that our work is not innocent, and need outweighs resources, here we are, "amazingly alive against long odds" (Osborne, 1999).

How do we do this work in ways that are in accord with our shared ethics and how can we experience sustainability and transformation collectively across time (Martin-Baro, 1994)? Teachings from solidarity inform me that a group is more useful than even powerful individuals: more people, more better. My understandings of solidarity are derived from time-honoured activist traditions of envisioning collective ethics, looking for connective practices of resisting oppression (Wade, 1996), and promoting social justice. Solidarity speaks to an understanding that just ways of being are interconnected. We are meant to do this work together. This spirit of solidarity has been beautifully articulated by Lily Walker, an aboriginal elder, addressing non-aboriginal people at a land rights action: "If you are here to save me, you can leave now, but if your liberation is tied to mine, you're welcome at my fire." (As cited in Sinclair). Our work is profoundly collaborative: We do this work on the shoulders of others and we shoulder others up.

Working in contexts which lack social justice can seduce us into thinking that we must do everything, and this is where solidarity and collective ethics can be a great resource to us. Sustainability requires that we balance responsibility with power. We cannot be responsible for the abundance of need, but only for that work which is within our power

to accomplish. Engaging with a spirit of solidarity and collective ethics invites us to witness and connect with the important work of others, helping us to envision our collective work as both doable and sustainable.

In terms of fostering sustainability it is important that we have a knowing in the bones that our work as counsellors matters. Often it is left to us to witness each other. In this difficult work we can be connected with each other across differences despite being on separate paths. We can go on somehow, fortified by knowing that others are moving in similar directions with shared hopes. Activism has taught me that ongoing commitments and engagement with collective ethics can sustain us across a lifespan of doing justice in our paid and unpaid work. 🌱

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Editors Note:

The Insights team would love to hear from you about your thoughts on this article, suggestions for a more collective approach to our often solitary work and what kinds of practices you engage in or efforts you have made in your own communities to reduce your own sense of burnout.
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