



Northeast and Caribbean (HHS Region 2)

MHTTC

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Flourishing at Work: A Plan for Helping Professionals

Podcast Series

Transcript – Making Yourself a Priority

Michelle: Hi there! My name is Michelle Zechner. I'm faculty at Rutgers University School of Health Professions, Department of Psych Rehab and Counseling Professions, and I am honored to be with Dr Tony Zipple, a psychologist who spent most of his career as an executive and manager in behavioral health organizations that build teams and create cultures to address serious mental illness, and now working as a consultant around the world, using positive psychology to build stronger behavioral health organizations and more effective interventions. We are hosts for Flourishing At Work - A Plan For Helping Professionals, a podcast series. Hey Tony!

Tony: Hi Michelle! Great to be here.

Michelle: I'm so glad you could join us today. This is our first official podcast and today's topic is making myself a priority which I have to admit I am really pretty bad at doing for myself. I'm wondering if you would be willing to talk a little bit about that.

Tony: Sure. I think, that in behavioral health, the field is populated with people who are often challenged by taking good care of themselves. They enter the field with a strong sense of mission and wanting to be helpful to other people and always wanting to give. But, when it comes time to taking care of themselves, it can be harder for them to prioritize self-care, the importance that it plays and being able to do great work on behalf of the people they're serving.

Michelle: That's a really great point. I know for myself having done some clinical work, it is really hard. You feel like your job is to take care of other people. And then, WHAT? Now I also have to take care of myself! Oh my goodness, that's seems like a lot of burden. I don't know, do you have any thoughts about how we might be able to frame that so that it doesn't feel like it is more hard work for ourselves?

Tony: Well I think we need to prioritize it. You know there's only 168 hours in the week, and no matter what we do, there's only 168 hours. The question is how we use them, and how we set priorities. I think finding time to take good care of ourselves and making that a priority is an important step in doing so.

There's been a lot of research around who is most effective in the long run, and who's able to deliver more good stuff to other people. We sometimes think that it is the people who are selfless, who just

give all the time. But what we've discovered is that it is the people who pay attention to taking good care of themselves at the same time. They maintain concern for themselves, as well as others. So, they genuinely care about helping people, but they want to achieve their own ambitions and they want to take care of their own interests at the same time. They don't see those as in conflict with each other.

Sometimes I think we get confused. We think if we're taking good care of ourselves, it means we're in conflict with taking good care of others. And it is possible to do both of those at the same time. In fact, doing good self-care, helps us to do better work for other people.

Michelle: That is a really helpful way to frame it. I really appreciate that Tony, because it really becomes, sort of, how we act in the world rather than something special that we're doing or an extra task that we have. I'm reminded of that term that you talked to me once about. Would you mind going over "other-ish giving" and some of the details about that because I think it fits really nicely with what you've just talked about.

Tony: Yeah. The research looked into dividing people into three groups.

- There were people who only took care of their own stuff. You know, kind of selfish people.
- There are people who gave all the time and were completely selfless.
- And there were other people who were kind of balancers. You know, well "I'll give as much as I get back".

They were trying to figure out which of those three groups was most effective. What they discovered was that there was a fourth group! That forth group was people who balance selflessness and selfishness. You know, they took good care of themselves and took care of other people as well but they had balance in that. And they talked about those people as "other-ish givers". Those are the people who are most effective because they were in it for the long run. They were going to be strong and effective and they were able to do good things because they were not burned out after doing this for a few months or a few years.

Michelle: Thank you. Well I think that concept is really helpful. I think that's something. I don't know what you think about this, but, as someone who has helped people for most of my career, when I hear the word "be selfish", I think, oh my goodness. I almost get a reaction! I can't possibly do that! Yet, the way you're describing "other-ish giving" is really that. You know, maybe not selfish but acts focused on yourself but also being able to focus on others. When you have that foundation of focusing on yourself and making sure that you're good at having what YOU need, then it's sort of logical that you would be better able to help others.

Tony: Sure, I mean in in folk wisdom, there's a lot of reference to this, the concept of "sharpening the saw" so we have the tools we need in order to do good work. Abraham Lincoln was once quoted, and whether this is really true or not, who knows, but people have said he said, "If I had eight hours to cut down a tree, I would spend the first six hours sharpening my axe". Because if we use more effective, efficient and stronger tools we can do better work. And I think that's true for ourselves. We've got to take good care of ourselves because in the end, that's the tool in behavioral health that we have. In mental health organizations, in the end, the only thing that will help organizations really produce are hours of skilled time and we need to make sure that skilled time is really sharp.

Michelle: That's, a great analogy. A way to think about it is that our product is ourselves, our helping profession and connecting with other people. We are not making widgets, we're not making paper airplanes, actually, the product is our time. I kind of think what we're talking about are the attitudes and beliefs that we need in order to make ourselves a priority. I'm kind of curious, what other kinds of attitudes and beliefs do you think are needed to make ourselves feel like we're a priority?

Tony: Well, I think, you're right that attitudes and beliefs are an important part of this, but I think we need to figure out how to change our behavior. You know, I'm an old cognitive behavioral therapy guy and a strong believer that change in behavior precedes change in emotion and attitude and belief. So how do we change our behavior so that we act like we believe this. And, if we act like we believe it, over time, we discover that it really works and we are believers. So, I think that it's important to work on attitudes and beliefs. The way you get there, I think, is by building a plan that helps you to take better care of yourself. And you know, the underlying parts of it, aren't really rocket science. How do we find a way to make sure that we get enough sleep, that we get a little exercise in our life, that we eat reasonably well, that we maintain social connections, all those things that our parents told us were really important to do, so we can, in small ways, begin to make changes that take better care of ourselves. And, those sorts of ways change our behavior. Build a plan that gets us there!

Michelle: Yes. Change is hard. You know I've spent some time looking at health behavior change, and those things, little things, such as eating well and making sure we get enough movement in our day are habits. It's so hard to change. You have to do something like 200 times in order to make it a habit, everyday. You're kind of suggesting, I think, that we kind of build that muscle and strengthen it. We act like we believe we are a priority, do the steps we need and then that will happen. It will come.

Tony: Well that's right. If we act as though we really care about this and do the things that demonstrate that we care about ourselves, over time, that increases self-care, and our belief in the importance of this. One of the hard things about it is what you're talking about. There are all kinds of things that get in the way of doing self-care. We face all sorts of obstacles and, you know, certainly during COVID, over the last couple of years, there had been all sorts of new obstacles that have cropped up. So, I think that an important part of a plan is to recognize that when we try to do good self-care, such as getting at least seven hours or seven and a half hours of sleep a night, there are obstacles to that. So, can we be honest and identify those obstacles and make some specific plans to counter those obstacles. I think, that's the hard work, being honest with ourselves about what's gets in the way, and then taking steps to get beyond that.

Michelle: Right. So, you're talking about developing a plan. Sometimes they talk about the idea that you state your intention or your goal. And then you identify the things that might get in the way. And then you think about how you might overcome them. So, we were just talking about sleep. I have a quick example. I have three obstacles and they're my cats, and they really love to sleep on top of my head. And so, if I want to ensure that I get a good night's sleep, sometimes, I just have to kick them out of the room so I have my pillow all to myself.

Tony: I think that's a great example and you know if you want to dive deep into this there's a structure for this called "woop". Woop stands for "wish, outcome, obstacles and plan".

What is your wish? Get a sharp picture of your wish. Get a clear understanding of what you think the outcome would be if you achieve that wish. What the benefit of it? What are one or two or three of the

obstacles that keep you from achieving that wish. And then what's your plan for not letting that get in the way. And, if you look online there's lots of resources around woop, And, it's a really quick and easy way to do habit formation in our own lives and to teach our clients about making changes in their lives as well.

Michelle: Yes, woop, and it's really fun to say, woop, it's w-o-o-p. And, it's a really great acronym for wish, outcome, obstacle, plan, right?

Tony: That's right. There is a website of all of this called woopmylife.com.

<https://woopmylife.org/en/home>

Michelle: I need more wooping in my life Tony. I need to floss my teeth, I need to get sleep, I need to remind myself every day to make me a priority and we hope that other people will be thinking about that too.

So, I'm going to try to summarize what we've talked about a little bit.

- We've talked about some of the stressors that we've been experiencing and some of the challenges to making myself a priority or ourselves a priority.
- We talked about this idea of "other-ish giving", where you're sort of giving, but you're also receiving things from other people.
- And we've talked a little bit about the kinds of things that we need to move forward. Your're suggesting a plan which is really wonderful, the use of woop and building habits in order to make yourself a priority.

Any final thoughts you want to leave us with Tony?

Tony: I think that's a really good summary and that's a lot for a short podcast like this. I hope that those are really good tools people can use and think about. I think the important part of this is to take the first step with it.

You know you're none of us can change our lives in massive ways on a dime. You know, it's not like you wake up and say, everything's going to be different today.

We take small steps, and we keep taking them and as we take those small steps the next step gets easier.

Michelle: Yeah, small steps, start with small steps. That's really good advice, Tony. So Tony and I talked about leaving everyone with some hard questions or challenging questions, and maybe one of those challenging questions might be

What's one small step you can take to make yourself a priority? And, I mean, maybe you even want to spend a little bit thinking about why making yourself a priority is important for yourself if it feels really challenging.

Yes. So I think we're going to leave it there.

Next time we're going to tackle the topic of remembering your purpose and why the heck are you, I mean, why are you doing the work that you do?!? Thanks so much for listening, I'm Michelle Zechner and I'm with Dr Tony Zipple. We are grateful for the important work you're doing.

Remember to take some time for self-care today. You matter!

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