





Self-care and internship in Psychology: building a healthy professional practice

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Professional practice in psychology involves significant emotional and ethical demands, particularly in the early stages of a psychological career. Despite the growing discussion surrounding self-care, the integration of this topic into academic psychology training remains overlooked, and there is still a lack of research in this area.

Objectives: This study aimed to assess the perceptions of final-year psychology students undertaking curricular or professional internships regarding the relevance of self-care to professional practice. It also sought to identify the strategies used by these interns and to understand the role of such strategies in developing good professional practice.

Methodology: A qualitative methodology was adopted, involving eight semi-structured interviews with psychology interns. Data analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke.

Results: The participants demonstrated a clear understanding of the concept of self-care, identifying various strategies such as physical activity, meditation, hobbies, psychotherapy, a balanced diet, adequate sleep, and social support. They recognized self-care as inseparable from professional practice, viewing it as both an ethical commitment and a health-promoting strategy. However, they pointed out the lack of content on the topic within academic training as well as the scarcity of institutional support resources for psychology interns.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the urgent need to integrate the theme of self-care into psychology training programs. Promoting self-care practices from the academic stage may foster more self-aware, empathetic, and resilient professionals, helping to prevent early burnout and enhance the quality of clinical interventions.

Key-Words: self-care, strategies, psychology interns, training and training

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RESUMO

Introdução: A prática profissional em Psicologia envolve exigências emocionais e éticas significativas, particularmente nas fases iniciais de uma carreira psicológica. Apesar da crescente discussão em torno do autocuidado, a integração deste tema na formação académica em psicologia permanece negligenciada, e ainda há falta de pesquisas nessa área.

Objetivos: Este estudo teve como objetivo avaliar as percepções de estudantes finalistas de Psicologia que realizam estágios curriculares ou profissionais sobre a relevância do autocuidado para a prática profissional. Procurou-se, ainda, identificar as estratégias utilizadas por esses estagiários e compreender o papel dessas estratégias no desenvolvimento de boas práticas profissionais.

Metodologia: Adotou-se uma metodologia qualitativa, envolvendo oito entrevistas semiestruturadas com estagiários de Psicologia. A análise dos dados seguiu os princípios da análise temática propostos por Braun e Clarke.

Resultados: Os participantes demonstraram uma clara compreensão do conceito de autocuidado, identificando várias estratégias como atividade física, meditação, hobbies, psicoterapia, dieta equilibrada, sono adequado e apoio social. Reconheceram o autocuidado como indissociável da prática profissional, vendo-o tanto como um compromisso ético quanto como uma estratégia de promoção da saúde. No entanto, apontaram a falta de conteúdo sobre o tema na formação académica, bem como a escassez de recursos de apoio institucional para os estagiários de psicologia.

Conclusão: Os resultados evidenciam a necessidade urgente de integrar o tema do autocuidado nos programas de formação em Psicologia. Promover práticas de autocuidado desde o estágio académico pode fomentar profissionais mais autoconscientes, empáticos e resilientes, ajudando a prevenir o burnout precoce e melhorar a qualidade das intervenções clínicas.

Palavras-Chave: autocuidado, estratégias, estagiários de psicologia, treino e formação.

Introduction

Professional practice in psychology, from its embryonic stage during academic training to the consolidation of clinical work, involves continuous exposure to the suffering of others. As the psychotherapist is primarily their own tool, their well-being is a central element in the quality of the intervention they provide; when this well-being is compromised - as a result of emotional involvement often masked by technical competence - consequences may arise that go beyond the professional domain. In this context, self-care emerges as a crucial dimension of psychological practice, not only as an individual strategy for stress and burnout prevention but also as a professional competency that ensures the sustainability of clinical work.¹

Despite its theoretical and practical importance, research on self-care remains limited within the specific field of psychology, in contrast to the extensive body of studies conducted in other health-related areas, such as nursing. This scarcity becomes even more evident when reviewing the literature on self-care within the context of training new psychologists, especially during the internship phase—whether curricular or professional.²

The latest guidelines from the World Health Organization (WHO)² define self-care as the individual's ability to promote and maintain their own health, with or without professional support, in a context where the mental health of professionals themselves is often deprioritized.

Various authors have emphasized the importance of promoting self-care practices that encompass multiple domains, including awareness, balance, flexibility, physical health, social support, and spirituality—thus preventing the spiral of stress and exhaustion experienced by many mental health professionals.³ This comprehensive view of self-care is particularly relevant during internships, a critical phase in which professional identity is still being formed. Interns, frequently exposed to intense emotional demands, face the challenge of maintaining their commitment to others and their suffering, often at the expense of their own well-being; moreover, the training they receive tends to prioritize technical and objective knowledge, neglecting the strengthening of the subjective, relational, and emotional dimensions that underpin clinical practice.⁴

As Melo and Raupp⁴ point out, the practice of psychology is marked by frustrations and failures inherent to the therapeutic setting, which - if not properly managed - may compromise both the professional's performance and well-being. The existing literature also indicates an increased risk of stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout among early-career psychologists, especially during major transitional phases such as internships.⁵ Among more experienced therapists, self-care is a priority in their professional practice, often promoted through preventive actions aimed at preserving and protecting their primary therapeutic tool—theirself.⁶ Consequently, experienced psychotherapists report significantly lower levels of stress compared

to early-career professionals, with the former group regularly engaging in self-care practices.^{7,8}

There is a clear gap in how academic institutions address the topic of self-care, particularly regarding its inclusion in psychology training curricula. As a result, self-care is often treated as an individual, isolated responsibility, disconnected from the educational context, when it should instead be recognized as a transversal competency essential to professional activity in psychology.⁷

This study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on the role and impact of self-care in the development of professional identity among psychologists in training, addressing a research gap focusing on the experience of self-care among interns.

The main objective of this research is to analyze the perceptions of final-year psychology students—whether undertaking academic or professional internships—regarding the importance of self-care strategies. On a more specific level, the study aims to assess: the perception of psychology interns concerning the relevance of self-care strategies for their professional practice; which self-care strategies are used by final-year students/interns in psychology; and the role these strategies may play in maintaining good professional practice.

Methodology

The choice of a qualitative approach reflects the intention to gain a deeper understanding of the meanings attributed to self-care by Psychology students, as well as how (and whether) such practices are integrated into the daily lives of interns.

Participants

The eight participants in this study were selected based on previously defined inclusion criteria. These criteria were: being male or female students in the second cycle of psychology studies currently undertaking a curricular internship; or undertaking a professional internship required for admission to the Portuguese Psychologists Association (*Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses*); and being fluent in Portuguese. All individuals who did not meet these criteria were excluded.

Of the total participants, seven were female and one was male. The participants' ages ranged from 23 to 27 years: four were 23 years old, two were 24, one was 25, and one was 27. Six participants were completing a curricular internship as part of a Master's program in psychology, and two were undertaking a professional internship for admission to the Portuguese Psychologists Association.

Participation in this study was conducted entirely remotely via the Zoom platform, ensuring the comfort, privacy, and autonomy of the participants. This format was

chosen not only due to logistical and accessibility considerations for interns but also in response to the preferences expressed by the interns themselves, who showed greater receptivity to non-presential interviews.

Instruments

Data collection was carried out using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide was divided into four thematic sections:

The first section involved the presentation of the project and the researcher, clarifying the objectives of the study, the confidentiality of the data, and the voluntary nature of participation, aiming to establish a transparent relationship with the participants.

The second section focused on collecting sociodemographic data (age, gender, educational background, and type of internship).

The third section aimed to assess participants' understanding of self-care, their perceptions of the place self-care occupied within academic training, and their views on the availability of self-care resources provided to interns—both during curricular and professional internships—also evaluating how easily students can access such resources.

Finally, the fourth section focused on the participants' concrete experiences with self-care strategies. Participants were asked about the practices they adopted in their daily lives, how frequently, in which contexts, and with what perceived effects. Topics such as the need for professional support during the internship (academic or professional) and the ease or difficulty of accessing such support were also discussed.

Procedure

Data Collection

This research project was reviewed and approved by an ethics committee (FCHS/PSC – 431/23), and complete anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed to all participants. Only the data essential to fulfilling the study's objectives were collected.

To consolidate the study's ethical foundations and participants' agreement, students received the informed consent form prior to any data collection. Alongside the form, they were reminded of the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any time during the interview. Individual data collection was conducted using the interview guide and an audio recorder, for the sole purpose of transcription and thematic analysis.

To recruit participants for this study, a dissemination process was implemented using the snowball method through the researchers' academic and professional contacts.

In the initial phase, all potential participants were informed about the content of the study. The information

provided included the research objectives, inclusion criteria, expected duration of the interview, continuous confidentiality safeguards (emphasizing that any collected data would be destroyed upon the study's completion), and the option to participate either in person or remotely via Zoom.

The interviews had an average duration of 45 minutes and were recorded in mp3 audio format after participants had signed the informed consent form. These recordings were later transcribed for the purpose of thematic analysis. The entire data collection process was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the informed consent provided to participants.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis process was guided by the structure of thematic analysis, following the model proposed by Braun and Clarke.¹ This model involves six distinct phases:

1. full transcription of interview content and familiarization with the data through careful reading of the transcripts;
2. generation of initial codes by identifying meaningful elements in participants' narratives;
3. active search for themes by organizing the initial codes into coherent groups;
4. review of themes to ensure consistency and relevance in relation to the overall dataset and categories;
5. naming of themes, which involved a continuous and nonlinear process of recoding data, resulting in the construction of a representative table of this process: the Hierarchical Category System; and
6. presentation of the results obtained through the thematic analysis, linking them with the research objectives and encouraging reflective interpretation.

This process was carried out manually using different color markings on printed transcripts of participants' interviews.

The hierarchical category system resulting from this process is described in detail in the results section. The coding was performed by the main researcher and was cross-checked by two researchers. The audio recordings used solely for transcription purposes were destroyed upon completion of the project. The interview transcripts were also destroyed.

Results

Thematic analysis was characterized by a non-linear progression, requiring us to move back and forth through the different stages of data analysis,¹ ultimately resulting in a variety of domains and themes. The process of coding the various categories within overarching themes took into account the relevant references to the topic under study found in the discourse of the eight participants. This process was also guided by the objectives of the present study.

From the thematic analysis, five main themes emerged, which organize and synthesize the content of the eight interviews (see Table 1):

- (1) Conceptualization of Self-Care;
- (2) Self-Care Strategies;
- (3) Importance of Self-Care;
- (4) Self-Care in the Context of Academic Training; and
- (5) Benefits of Self-Care.

Table 1. Hierarchical category system.

Categories	Sources	References		
1. Conceptualization of Self-Care	8	27		
Taking care of oneself	8	12		
Balance between personal life and professional life	5	9		
Personal well-being	4	6		
2. Self-Care Strategies	8	36		
Physical activity	8	11		
Meditation	5	5		
Hobbies	7	10		
Psychotherapy	4	8		
Social support	6	8		
Healthy eating,	6	8		
Adequate sleep	4	4		
3. Importance of Self-Care	8	17		
Inseparable from the profession	4	5		
Ethical imperative	2	5		
Health-promotion focus	3	7		
4. Self-Care in the Context of Academic Training	8	42		
Lack of investment	8	22		
Absence of information and support materials	6	20		
5. Benefits of Self-Care	8	41		
	5.1. Internship context	5.2. Professional context		
	Sources	References	Sources	References
Improved listening	2	3	2	4
Increased empathy	3	3	2	2
Facilitated communication	4	4	4	7
Reinforcement of ethical conduct	2	3	2	3
Improved problem-solving	3	5	4	7

Although presented separately, these themes are interrelated, forming a comprehensive and integrated framework of the relationship that these interns establish with self-care in their daily lives.

1. Conceptualization of Self-Care

All participants demonstrated familiarity with the concept of self-care. They described self-care as an individual's orientation toward 1) taking care of oneself, associating this construct with 2) a balance between personal life and professional life, and viewing it as a tool for achieving 3) personal well-being.

Self-care was understood by participants not only as a personal practice for maintaining one's health but also as an attitude of internal listening, awareness of one's own needs, and recognition of personal limits.

These ideas align with the conceptualization of self-care found in the reviewed literature, which emphasizes self-

care as a strategy for promoting healthy behaviors, allowing individuals to become managers of their own well-being⁸. Other perspectives, consistent with those of the interns, describe self-care as a behavior directed toward oneself or the environment that helps regulate factors affecting personal functioning.⁹

2. Self-Care Strategies

The second theme identified in the analysis relates to the self-care strategies used by the participants. All strategies mentioned by the interns were considered and, through the thematic analysis process, were coded into relevant categories. Although these strategies were linked to each individual's personal and subjective experience, they allowed for uniform coding due to their recurrence across most participants.

The seven categories grouped under this domain are:

1. physical activity,
2. meditation,
3. hobbies,
4. psychotherapy,
5. social support,
6. healthy eating, and
7. adequate sleep.

These strategies, as mentioned by the participants, are consistent with those identified in other qualitative studies, such as that of Mota,¹⁰ and in models found in the previously reviewed literature.^{11,12}

3. Importance of Self-Care

The categories that gave rise to this theme emerged not during the more structured parts of the interview, but rather in the less structured, more spontaneous moments—moments sparked by the participants' reflection prompted by the interview questions.

Participants repeatedly described self-care as 1) inseparable from the profession, 2) an ethical imperative, and 3) a health-promotion focus. These associations regarding the importance of self-care reflect a perspective that aligns with the reviewed literature, which highlights that promoting the well-being of the caregiver is a cornerstone of health care provision; a professional who is not well cannot effectively care for others.¹³ Other authors also emphasize the need for psychologists to be more aware of the importance of investing in self-care strategies, both personally and professionally.⁴

4. Self-Care in the Context of Academic Training

This section aimed to assess the current role that self-care occupies in psychology curricula, specifically: what debates are being encouraged, what support materials are made

available to students throughout their education, and how much weight is given to this topic in achieving learning objectives in psychology.

These aims were met through testimonies that allowed for the creation of two categories:

1. lack of investment and
2. absence of information and support materials.

These two codes are ultimately linked to the insufficient focus on self-care during academic training, highlighting informational gaps that affect the interns interviewed.

The reviewed literature also emphasizes this lack of investment in the promotion of self-care, calling for academic institutions to raise awareness and take action⁴. There is a clear need for greater inclusion of self-care content in both the materials provided and the curriculum itself,^{14,15} which aligns with participants' perceptions regarding the absence of information and resources on self-care.

5. Benefits of Self-Care

Participants emphasized that self-care enhanced their listening skills, empathy, communication, ethical practice, and problem-solving abilities. These benefits, due to their broad and cross-cutting nature, gave rise to five categories:

1. improved listening,
2. increased empathy,
3. facilitated communication,
4. reinforcement of ethical conduct, and
5. improved problem-solving.

Regarding the benefits of self-care mentioned by students, it is worth noting that they did not primarily focus on stress reduction itself as a benefit, but rather on how that stress reduction positively impacted their professional activity—fostering the improvements listed above.

According to the reviewed literature, self-care can enhance the competencies of mental health professionals, both during the early stage of curricular internships and later throughout their professional careers. Some authors examine the benefits of self-care through the lens of ethics, particularly in how it influences communication and intervention, and emphasize its impact on decision-making processes.¹⁵

Discussion

The analysis of the interns' testimonies reveals a consistent perception among participants regarding the importance of self-care in psychological practice. All participants in this study demonstrated an understanding of the concept, associating it not only with the preservation of personal well-being but also with the quality of professional intervention itself. Self-care is understood by the interns as a continuous process involving, among other things, emotional self-

regulation strategies, time management, seeking professional support, and developing healthy habits - thus emerging as a foundation for building a professional practice guided by the ethical principles upheld by the Portuguese Psychologists' Association. Also, professional interns have access to psychoeducational materials prepared for Portuguese Psychologists Association (and for those already practising professionally) that they can be familiar with. These perceptions align with studies such as that of Posluns and Gall,³ which emphasize the relevance of self-care strategies in preventing stress and burnout among mental health professionals.

Engagement in pleasurable and leisure activities appears as a factor that enhances the therapist's tools, reinforcing their listening abilities and the maintenance of a reflective stance in the professional setting. The literature indicates that more experienced therapists incorporate self-care routines more systematically into their daily lives,⁶ which is one of the differentiating factors in preventing emotional exhaustion, as demonstrated by Dorociak.⁷

This study reveals a concerning gap: despite the interns' awareness of the importance of self-care, this topic remains absent - or nearly nonexistent - in academic programs. Participants pointed out the lack of curricular content dedicated to self-care, as well as the absence of support materials that would foster the development of these competencies, particularly during academic internships. These educational and preparatory gaps stand in stark contrast to the emotional demands experienced during curricular or professional internships, which are particularly sensitive stages in the training path of a psychologist. This indicates that academic programs and training structures give too much emphasis on technical skills, and not enough faculty training in emotional health. Entry into host institutions for internships exposes students to intense and sometimes disruptive therapeutic environments, requiring not only technical knowledge but also emotional stability and self-awareness—particularly the recognition of one's own limits.

In this regard, it becomes imperative to rethink training models in order to include self-care as a structuring element of professional identity, alongside supervision, ethics, and technical knowledge. Despite the lack of content in academic curricula, participants demonstrated initiative and actively sought out self-care strategies with a direct impact on their well-being. This proactivity, often materialized through self-directed research, while commendable, also highlights that interns frequently lack the tools acquired through formal education and may not know what strategies to use during moments of high emotional exposure.

The findings of this study underscore the need to revise Psychology training programs, integrating self-care as a professional competency to be addressed and developed among Psychology students and interns.

Conclusion

The results of this study highlight the relevance of self-care in ensuring good professional practice among trainee psychologists, underlining its importance in maintaining the mental health of interns. Self-care strategies have a direct impact on the quality of the therapeutic alliance, enhancing active listening and supporting sound decision-making in professional contexts.

The testimonies collected reveal an awareness among the surveyed students of the need to care for themselves throughout an academic and professional journey marked by numerous demands. All participants demonstrated not only familiarity with the concept of self-care but also a commitment to implementing it through strategies aimed at preserving their own well-being. However, this individual awareness contrasts with a lack of academic recognition of the topic. The absence of curricular content, reflective spaces, and guiding materials available to students and interns points to a significant gap in psychology education.

Given these findings - indicating a lack of investment and a shortage of support resources, which participants viewed as detrimental to student well-being - it is recommended that a coordinated effort be made between educational institutions and internship host organizations to raise awareness among interns regarding the importance of self-care.

It is hoped that this study will have a positive impact both in consolidating relevant content on self-care and in presenting findings that underscore the need to promote broader integration of self-care into academic settings, for instance integrating reflective supervision focused on self-care; promoting workshops or self-care modules; training mentors and supervisors to model and support self-care.

This study has some limitations, namely the sample size-gender bias (7 women, 1 man), and possible which compromises the generalisation of the results, so we recommend continued research into how self-care strategies may impact the delivery of healthcare, particularly in the field of mental health, so that mental health professionals are better equipped and prepared to perform their roles effectively, also incorporating the digital self-care importance as proposed by recent work focusing on post-pandemic shifts in training and pedagogy.¹⁶

Integrating self-care into educational models represents an ethical commitment to future professionals—and, ultimately, to all those who will benefit from their clinical work.

Data availability statement: The data supporting the results can be provided on request.

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