

CITIES AND MENTAL HEALTH



Toolkit for urbanist working on
challenges beyond design

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a toolkit for urbanist working
on challenges beyond design

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INTRODUCTION

As May is Mental Health Awareness Month, it is crucial to acknowledge that urbanists face unique challenges in their demanding and fast-paced work environment, which can take a toll on their mental health. With rapid urbanization, displacement due to conflict or climate change, and other social issues, the role of the built environment has expanded beyond land use and urban design to include the demand for safe, inclusive, and healing spaces. Compassion fatigue, burnout, and stress are common challenges encountered by those working in this field. Prioritizing self-care and mental well-being is essential for maintaining a healthy work-life balance and achieving long-term success.

Research has demonstrated that taking care of one's mental health can have positive impacts on job performance and overall job satisfaction. Despite the increasing demand for mental health awareness in the professional world, these topics are not fully integrated into the education of architects or urban planners. In this handout, we will explore the significance of mental health in the workplace for urbanists and discuss how incorporating self-care practices and creating a supportive work environment can lead to a more fulfilling and productive career.

TIP #1: CLEARLY DEFINE YOUR ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Even if your official role may be clearly titled as architect, project manager, or field researcher, it can be easy for us to slip into different roles, even if we do not realize we are doing it. In the mental health professions, we are taught that our role is to meet with patients to provide counseling. This role includes certain tasks, such as diagnosing and treating mental disorders, creating individualized treatment plans according to patient's needs, and ongoing assessment of patient's progress. It is not our job to "fix" or "save" a patient, to take responsibility for their actions or circumstances, or to effect change for them. This is something that is taught in our curriculum, but also something that we must continue to learn and practice throughout our careers, and I believe it can be applied across industries and functions.

So what is your role as architect, urban planner, and placemaker? These roles can change and shift depending on the project and depending on the specific relationship (peer to peer or project manager to stakeholder). While you may not be able to fully separate the person from the professional, just as you can't separate the community from the place, having clarity in your role, strengths and boundaries support the understanding of where your responsibility lays

Try It!

Whenever you start a new project, take a moment to define your role and responsibilities using the following prompts:

- My role in the project is...
- My responsibilities include...
- My responsibilities do not include...



TIP #2: SET BOUNDARIES

Once you have defined your role and responsibilities, it is important to set clear boundaries that will help you honor your role and let go of the things that are not yours to do.

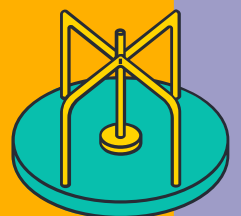
There are 3 types of interpersonal boundaries that we'll be focusing on: Psychological, Emotional, and Physical.

- Psychological boundaries focus on your own thoughts, beliefs, and opinions and whether or not you share that information with others. It can also be about what types of conversations you do or do not participate in.
- Emotional boundaries refer to whether (or how much) you allow others to affect you emotionally. This includes being aware of your feelings toward an individual or group of people as a professional (countertransference).
- Physical boundaries refer to all activities that involve your body and the physical space or environment. This includes your physical needs to function well, as well as your limits in terms of physical contact with others.

Whenever our boundaries are crossed or we fail to set healthy boundaries, one or more of our biopsychosocial needs are not met. Sometimes this happens without our knowing it, but we notice something is off because we feel irritable, resentful, overly responsible, or burned out.

Try It!

- Identify the situation and boundary type.
- Negotiate and set boundaries using the worksheet.
- Communicate boundaries clearly.
- Monitor and adjust as needed.



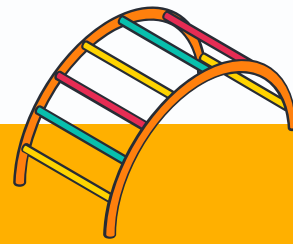
Check out a more detailed resource & download the worksheet [here](#).

TIP #3: CREATE SPACE TO DECOMPRESS AND RECHARGE

When we have a challenging day at work, it's important to take time to decompress to avoid negative consequences like burnout and anxiety. It can be tough to compartmentalize our emotions and shift our focus to other aspects of life. While setting boundaries and defining our role can help, it's natural to feel intense emotions during emotional experiences.

Cal Newport, the author of Deep Work, recommends a "shutdown ritual" that has helped him reduce stressful work-related thoughts during personal time. This ritual can help create a tangible disconnect between work and ourselves, allowing us to fully relax and recharge. For instance, a doctor taking off their white coat at the beginning and end of the day clearly marks when they're performing as a medical professional and when they're performing in other roles like a friend, mother, or partner.

Try It!



To create your own shutdown ritual, Newport suggests considering the following:

- A quick series of steps to get back on track with events in your student or work life; something you can do in 5 minutes at the end of each day. This can be preparing your to-do list for the next day, or making a ta-dah list of all the things you did that day.
- A phrase you say when you complete the ritual. Newport's is "schedule shutdown, complete." You can say anything - bonus points if you can bring some levity or humor to it.
- Make an agreement with yourself that once you've completed your sentence, you will set aside or release any work-related thoughts that may arise

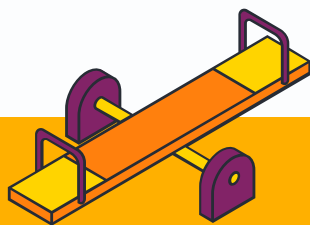
TIP #4: ASK FOR SUPPORT AT WORK

It's important to recognize that you don't have to face work-related stressors alone. By openly talking about mental well-being with your colleagues and leadership, you can create a supportive work environment that prioritizes the well-being of everyone on the team.

If you're feeling overwhelmed or struggling to cope with work-related stress, don't be afraid to speak up. Talk to your colleagues or supervisor about how you're feeling and what you need to manage your workload and maintain your well-being. This might mean asking for additional resources, such as a mental health day or flexible work arrangements, or simply asking for emotional support and understanding.

It's also important to create a culture of openness and support in your workplace. Encourage your colleagues and leadership to prioritize mental well-being and make it a part of regular conversations and check-ins. This can help to reduce stigma and make it easier for everyone to ask for the support they need.

By creating a supportive work environment and asking for the support you need, you can help to ensure that you and your colleagues are able to thrive both personally and professionally.



Try It!

Initiate or co-create a Team Emotional Wellness Check-in. This can be done weekly with a little, if you have a stand up meeting, a quick daily check in.

TIP #5: FIND ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

Finally, seek out professional help if you need it. There are a variety of ways you can engage with professional mental health support and it can look different depending on your needs.

One option to consider is therapy or counseling. These services can provide a safe and confidential space to process and manage the emotional toll of your career. You can work with a therapist to develop coping strategies and address any underlying mental health concerns that may be impacting your work and personal life.

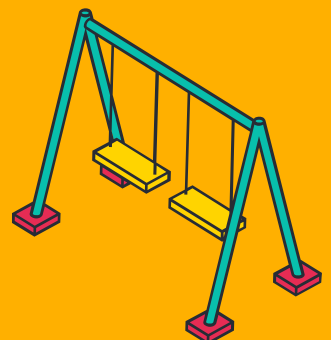
Other types of professional support may also be helpful. For example, career coaching can help you navigate the challenges of your field and identify strategies for achieving your professional goals. Additionally, mindfulness practices like meditation or yoga can help you manage stress and stay grounded in the present moment.

Remember, seeking support is a sign of strength, not weakness. It takes courage to recognize when you need help and take steps to prioritize your well-being. By including mental health support in your self-care kit, you're investing in your long-term success and happiness.

Try It!

Professional support may look different for everyone. Here are some types of support you may consider and explore:

- Individual Therapy
- Group Therapy or Professional Co-development
- Life Coaching
- Yoga or Meditation





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