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How do therapists protect their own mental health? 3 Hong Kong experts share tips

Hong Kong therapists share how planning things that ‘spark joy’, physical exercise and undergoing their own therapy helps them do their jobs

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With more Hongkongers experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety, the pressure on therapists is intensifying. Three therapists share their self-care tips to manage the emotional toll of their work. Photo: Shutterstock

More Hongkongers are experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety, recent studies suggest.

Up to one-third have moderate to severe symptoms, according to a recent joint study by the Chinese University of Hong Kong and The Mental Health Association of Hong Kong. This is driving demand for support through local counselling services.

For the professionals taking care of others, the pressure intensifies. We asked [three Hong Kong therapists](#) about their demanding careers and how they protect their own psychological well-being.

Dr Kim Carder is a clinical psychologist dedicated to promoting [positive mental health](#) in every member of the family through every stage of growing up.

She has always loved working with children. She began by supporting children with special needs as a Saturday job while in high school. The experience taught her that, to support children, you must also take care of their parents. Now a mother herself, she has learned that no parent can support their child’s mental and emotional health if their own is poor, or they do not understand their child’s struggles.

Like all psychologists, Carder witnesses a lot of distress. “The pressure got to me [at first],” she remembers. “People sharing stuff they don’t share with others, that can be scary – but that’s where training is so important.”



Dr Kim Carder is a clinical psychologist dedicated to promoting positive mental health in every member of the family. Photo: Laurel Chor

That training helps doctors like Carder keep a distance without losing empathy. “I remind myself that people are here to get better, and that’s quite positive.”

Building community

While she never feels fear with a client, “I often feel sad for people, about the loads some of them carry. I am always humbled by that and often impressed at how they manage to deal with challenges.”

Carder allows herself to be “emotionally touched”, but to stay strong to deal with whatever trauma or challenge comes into the room.

That is why she looks forward to doing fun things in her spare time, “something I can look forward to, something that creates ways to spark joy”. Her husband is supportive, and they like to party together, she says.

She also recognises the importance of a healthy mind-body connection. She exercises regularly and religiously – “when I exercise, I go quite hard; I need the intensive outlet” – and is a brown belt in [Brazilian jiu-jitsu](#), which she also coaches to women.

“My women’s class is visible and I can build a community out in the open.”

Community is key for a therapist who must keep all work confidential and cannot share thoughts about a case, especially if, like Carder, they work for themselves on their own.

Winnie Chiu is a counselling psychologist and psychotherapist. She has more than two decades of experience in supporting adults, children and teenagers who face battles with anxiety, depression, relationship issues, [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) and complicated grief.



Winnie Chiu is a counselling psychologist and psychotherapist. Photo: Winnie Chiu

Chiu worked in IT before she became a therapist. She made the switch when she found the IT work did not bring satisfaction, and realised she had to quit when she struggled with insomnia.

She was curious about what made people tick, so she took up life coaching. Realising she wanted to go deeper – “I still felt I was missing something” – she chose to study psychology, earning a master’s degree and then closely following a mentor for seven years.

Chiu credits her significant training with understanding how to draw boundaries in her clinic, so that a client’s distress does not distress her. She also underwent therapy herself, “so I would know how to hold a client’s emotions without letting them fuse with my own”.

Regulating emotions, balancing emotional energy

It is important to be aware of our emotions, Chiu says, but also to be able to regulate them. Discipline, exercise and social support are all crucial to that.

“Talking to other psychologists in the same field can help,” she says, but she relies on complete breaks to support her own emotional and mental health – a good holiday is great, but a good book is useful, too.

Chiu has a good rest each week to recharge without feeling depleted.

Michael Beckham is a Hong Kong-based, US-trained psychotherapist with 20 years of experience in anxiety, couples counselling, intimacy – he is a certified sexologist – and relationship issues of many kinds.

His therapy journey was “far from traditional”. He came to the profession late, after working as a cook, and in marketing and finance. When he had saved up enough money in the corporate world, he was able to pursue his true passion and earned a

graduate degree in psychology. His internships included three years at a rape crisis centre and five in a university counselling centre.



Michael Beckham is a Hong Kong-based, US-trained psychotherapist. Photo: Michael Beckham

Beckham credits his ability to manage boundaries in clinical work with the fact that he graduated when he was more mature and had experience in the corporate world. That has taught him how to focus on what is within his control.

In the beginning, he worried that he might have missed things that a client was too afraid to tell him. But years of experience have changed that.

“My philosophy for balancing my emotional energy as a therapist became, ‘I have 50 minutes a week with each client. I’m going to be present, calm, focused, as if there is nothing else happening in the world, just that client and I talking, and then trust the process that the client and I will work together to meet the client’s needs,’” he says.

“Once I had this new philosophy, I didn’t carry many feelings of burden.”

Because Beckham has struggled with anxiety and [attention deficit disorder](#) since he was young, he has had cause to use the coping skills he advocates in professional practice.

“When I feel myself beginning to get upset or irritated, or my anxiety flares up, I step back and ask myself what is in my control in this situation. This helps me focus and keeps me out of my head,” he says.

He also exercises four to five times a week, which lessens his anxiety levels and boosts his overall mood.

Being a bit older, he says, the “crazy” years are behind him. He does not drink alcohol or coffee, saying that “caffeine is an immediate anxiety trigger”. To stay focused in the present moment, he meditates and does breathwork exercises.

The key is for everyone “to find what works for them”.

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