

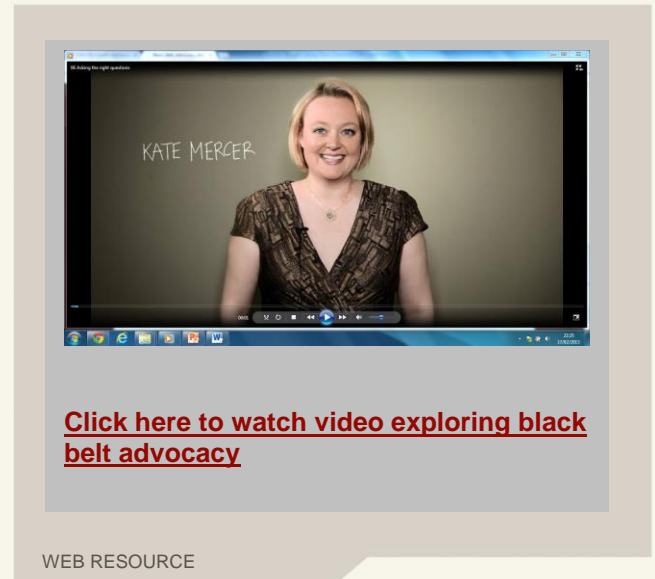
Are you good at looking after yourself or is this something which is overlooked and forgotten about? Whether it is a skill you have mastered or an opportunity to develop, the need for advocates to look after themselves is critical because advocates are often the unpopular underdog.

NO-ONE LIKES A TROUBLEMAKER

Being an advocate requires you to be different and sit outside of statutory services – we call this being independent and the lynchpin of providing advocacy. The problem with it, is that it is an unnatural state for people to be in. On the whole we look for consensus and to fit in. In other words, people generally liked to be liked: it's in our interest to get on with others.

Our culture values compliance – we are expected to fit in and do as we're told. Not being compliant and challenging the status quo means you face rejection on a daily basis. Advocates run the risk of being labelled, not being liked and generally viewed as trouble makers. At best you will face disagreement and opposition, at worst you are attacked.

You also face the risk of being rejected for making challenges: advocacy services may be threatened with losing contracts for pursuing complaints, gain a negative reputation or lose the support of professionals who refer people to its service.



GIVING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK IS HARD

Another area which leaves the advocate vulnerable, relates to a core activity – that of raising concerns.

Whilst some people may be very skilled at criticising others, it can be very hard to raise concerns in a way which preserves the dignity and integrity of all parties involved so that a positive outcome is reached.

Consider how you feedback to a nurse who is talking badly or disrespectedly to a service user; simply criticising this behaviour is unlikely to yield a positive change. In fact, it is likely to make the nurse feel worse and entrench the behaviour.

When you do decide to challenge behaviour (or culture), professionals can feel you are judging them and in turn become defensive (and who in all honesty can say we welcome feedback that is negative or points out weaknesses or things we have done wrong).

So advocates need to know that their feedback may at best be unwelcomed and at worst met with defensiveness.

DEALING WITH PAINFUL EXPERIENCES

Another reason advocates need to look after themselves is that they can spend a significant amount of time supporting people who are in pain or dealing with difficult experiences.

Advocates support people at moments when things have gone wrong or when people are at their most vulnerable. Supporting a parent whose child(ren) have been removed, working with people who self harm, listening to experiences of abuse or seeing discrimination firsthand can be traumatic and bring up internal issues and painful feelings for the advocate.

This requires the advocate to develop resilience so they can offer support and compassion to the advocacy service user whilst also looking after themselves.

“In dealing with those who are undergoing great suffering, if you feel "burnout" setting in, if you feel demoralized and exhausted, it is best, for the sake of everyone, to withdraw and restore yourself. The point is to have a long-term perspective.”

Dalai Lama

Which of these feelings do you regularly experience? What impact do you think this has on you?

FRUSTRATION

ANNOYANCE

CRITICISM

ANGER

SHOCK

UPSET

EXASPERATION

REJECTION



How to look after yourself

There are a number of things you can do to make sure you do not run on empty and are kept emotionally strong. Consider the following techniques:

1. **Practice compassion.** Try to avoid making judgements about professionals, especially when they have got things wrong.

Advocates can maintain their support of a client and understand a person's experiences without passing judgement.

2. **Celebrate when things have gone well.** Make sure your colleagues and manager know when you have achieved outcomes or completed a good piece of work.

3. **Avoid taking things personally** – this starts with you making sure that feedback you give (especially when it points out failures or wrongdoings) avoids being personal at all costs.

4. **Practice feedback not failure as a mantra.**

When someone complains about you or your service, or criticises what you do, frame this as feedback. They might be right they might be wrong – but whatever the truth is you need to listen to their experience. There will be times when you don't get things right but that doesn't mean you suddenly change everything you are doing

5. **Use supervision as a tool for reflection.**

Advocates must receive 1:1 supervision by trained supervisors who understand your role and the challenges you face. If you haven't got a supervisor or need a better one, make sure you discuss this with your service. Supervision is the space for you to take your concerns, worries and anxieties and discuss incidents which have had an impact.

6. **Replace criticism with a focus on outcomes.** This can also be phrased as looking forward not backward. Criticism is weakness – it's just another way of pointing at the problem and saying 'that's rubbish'. Criticising very rarely results in positive change.

When you want to give criticism: be clear about what the problem is and what you or your client wants to happen. Focusing on outcomes helps you and others give positive solutions to problems.

When faced with criticism from others, respond by asking 'what would you like me to do', 'how do we change this'.

QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

When was the last time you acknowledged a great piece of work you had completed?

What was it?

How often does your team or manager say well done, thank you?

How often do you tell your team or manager well done, thank you?

What has to happen for you to feel looked after?

How good are you at:

Identifying stress?

Maintaining work/life balance?

Seeking out support?

Self praise?

Join our black belt advocacy group for more free resources.

Simply email
kate.mercer@katemercer-training.com