

Maintaining motivation as a counselor

Is a passion for helping others enough to carry counselors through an entire career, or is it sometimes necessary to find other sources of inspiration?

Compiled by Jonathan Rollins

As a whole, professional counselors are known to be driven by their desire (many might even deem it a calling) to help others. But as is the case in any job or profession, that internal sense of motivation to show up day after day and perform to the best of one's abilities can sometimes wax and wane.

And let's face it. Counseling is not just any profession. Yes, the intrinsic rewards can be great, but there are some inherent challenges to being a "helper" for a living.

Counseling Today recently contacted a handful of American Counseling Association members to ask them how they maintain their motivation levels in a profession that can be demanding, draining and exceedingly rewarding — all at the same time.

Note: Some responses have been edited slightly for purposes of space or clarity.



What originally motivated you to enter the counseling profession?

Aaron Norton: To echo the most common answer I get on this question from graduate students in clinical mental health counseling, I was very driven to a profession that enabled me to help people. On deeper

reflection over the years though, I do not think I could consider this answer thorough and honest if I didn't add that I wanted to continue learning more about mental health to better understand my own mental health and wellness.

I first saw a counselor at 19 years of age, and I've seen a few others over the years. They were instrumental in helping me to heal from experiences in my personal life, and those experiences were so invaluable to me that I very much wanted the opportunity to pay it forward.

Anita B. Wright: My transition from teacher to school counselor was a natural progression. It was clear that the needs of the students I served required more from me. My instructional role toward academic proficiency could not be achieved without having first attended to the social/emotional realities [of the students].

Summer R. Collins: What originally motivated me was to help alleviate the intensity of people's emotional pain. I experienced emotional distress in a capacity I never had before during my first year postgrad when my mother and then my grandfather were both diagnosed with cancer. I was also grieving the loss of my career as a competitive collegiate swimmer while facing these family members' cancer

diagnoses, and it all felt like too much. The relief and peace I felt in seeking help through my own counseling motivated me to become that same safe place for others experiencing pain.

Mary Barros-Bailey: Serving people with disabilities, particularly Portuguese and Spanish speakers.

Kathryn L. Bright: As an angsty yet dauntless teen, I longed to help those less fortunate than me, in particular my first boyfriend. He had left home, quit school, and ended up in a juvenile facility. At 18, he was convicted of marijuana possession and given the choice to go to jail or join the Army. He chose the Army. After a year in Vietnam as a foot soldier, he returned to the U.S. with severe posttraumatic stress disorder, depression and anger issues.

My parents scorned my choice of boyfriend, but I saw so much good in him beyond his troubled façade. One day, while imploring my mother to let me see my forbidden Romeo so I could help him, she curtly retorted, "You're not qualified to help him." From then on, the seed was planted in me to become qualified — through education and experience — to help people deal with traumas and life's dramas.

I'm also gifted with being a highly sensitive, empathic, intelligent woman



who grew up in a dysfunctional Southern family in the '50s and '60s. Good counselors were hard to come by then. The ones who were available greatly benefited me, making a huge difference in my own struggles and motivating me to share that benefit with others.

Aaron J. Preece: I spent 12 years in a deep depression, the last 1.5 years with daily suicidal ideation and related challenges. I then began working as a staff member in a wilderness therapy program and, while helping the clients, found many tools that I too could use and benefit from.

We're all aware that counseling can be a challenging profession and that counselors sometimes face the risk of burnout. What has helped you maintain your motivation level as a counselor long term?

Mary Barros-Bailey: I always understood that I could grow professionally in a variety of directions. Initially, I started as a master's-level vocational rehabilitation counselor with a private practice in California. Within a couple of years, I landed in Idaho, started a single-person private practice that I still run today, and entered a doctoral program. My love for rehabilitation counseling led me to

Meet the counselors

The following members of the American Counseling Association agreed to share their personal insights regarding maintaining motivation as a counselor:

❖ **Mary Barros-Bailey** is a bilingual certified rehabilitation counselor, a national certified counselor, a diplomate of the American Board of Vocational Experts, and a certified life care planner in Boise, Idaho.

❖ **Aaron Norton** is a licensed mental health counselor, licensed marriage and family therapist, certified clinical mental health counselor and certified rehabilitation counselor working at Integrity Counseling Inc. in Largo, Florida.

❖ **Kathryn L. Bright** is a licensed professional counselor, parental responsibilities evaluator (known in other states as a child custody

evaluator), and parenting coordinator/decision-maker in Boulder, Colorado.

❖ **Anita B. Wright** is a licensed professional counselor and national certified counselor. A retired principal, she opened her counseling private practice, Anita B. Wright, Counseling, Tea and Therapy PLLC, in Winterville, North Carolina, on a part-time basis in 2018. She is also the dean of middle school and special education/English language learners at Winterville Charter Academy.

❖ **Aaron J. Preece** is a licensed professional counselor who works at High Country Behavioral Health in Pinedale, Wyoming.

❖ **Summer R. Collins** is a licensed professional counselor intern currently practicing under supervision at Sparrow House Counseling, a group private practice in Dallas.

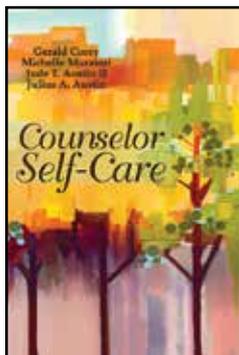
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become professionally involved at the local, national and international levels; to serve on accreditation and credentialing boards; to chair federal government panels; to teach [as an] adjunct for four universities; to research, publish and present in areas of my interest; and to develop a forensic practice where I have had cases north to Canada and Alaska, from California to Maryland, and as far south as Brazil, thus stoking my other love — travel.

I have learned that it's OK to say "no." Every few years, I take a self-imposed sabbatical from attending or presenting at conferences, joining any committees or teaching a class. I keep up with technology that has made me very efficient and allowed me to practice in ways I never dreamed possible when I started as a counselor. I'm still very excited about the challenges posed by counseling and where I'm going professionally, particularly in forensic practice.

Kathryn L. Bright: Self-care is the biggest help. That includes healthy lifestyle choices such as regular exercise, sunshine and fresh air, along with meditation, social interaction, consultation with colleagues, and continuing education.

Aaron J. Preece: Balance. I do *not* take my work home with me if at all possible. I also involve myself in social, religious and community programs not related to counseling. Also, nurturing and maintaining relationships with family and friends on a weekly basis.

Anita B. Wright: Absolutely the work. The intrinsic stories. Having the privilege to join the journey.

Summer R. Collins: What has helped me maintain motivation as a counselor long term is to view my career as an endurance race. I know there will be parts of the race that will feel more daunting and challenging, and I can expect that. But I can also expect ... the "runner's high" of different victories that I know I'll experience in the field when I get to witness clients making lasting changes with improved emotion-regulation skills and cognitive flexibility.

Aaron Norton: I keep a collection of artifacts — letters, cards, drawings, emails, etc. — from clients who have expressed their gratitude for my help over the years. I can look at them anytime that I want a reminder of why I do what I do.

Additionally, I try to practice healthy self-care. When I was a student in my clinical mental health counseling program, I took a class on the art and science of

personal change. We were required to create and implement a personal change project using the knowledge we acquired during the class. My goal was to exercise regularly — a goal that I had not ever been able to consistently practice prior to that class. I implemented my change plan, and I have continued it without any lapses for the past 13 years. In my humble opinion, all counselors should exercise regularly, although that regimen may look very different from person to person.

I also regularly spend time with family members, friends, my partner and colleagues doing things that have nothing to do with my job, and I start every day off with my daily Stoic meditation. I try to practice healthy eating, do not hesitate to take vacations and time off, spend time in nature and with pets, participate in weekly peer consultation, stay very connected to my colleagues through professional associations, implement time-saving organizational measures, and enforce boundaries with my clients.

What is the biggest threat to your sense of motivation as a counselor?

Summer R. Collins: The biggest threat to my sense of motivation ... is that our work as counselors cannot be measured and graded. I can question whether or not I've made an impact and if my work has meaning when I've had a particularly difficult week.

Kathryn L. Bright: Self-doubt creeps in from time to time, making me second-guess myself and lose confidence in my considerable abilities, thus slowing me w-a-a-y down.

Aaron J. Preece: Supervisors who expect unrealistic goals or results. Lack of variety in my job.

Aaron Norton: At the present time, I am finishing a doctoral program in counselor education and supervision. This is simultaneously a joy and a burden. Sometimes, when I am busy at work on my dissertation, or when I'm feeling particularly stressed or overwhelmed, I feel less psychologically available to my clients. I view this, however, as a very temporary problem.

Anita B. Wright: The weight of the therapeutic process as the [person's] pain and vulnerability are being tempered via me.

Mary Barros-Bailey: Apathy. I like variety — clinical and forensic practice, teaching, research, writing and innovation.

How do you maintain your motivation as a professional counselor? Send your thoughts to ct@counseling.org, and we may share them in a future issue of *Counseling Today*.

What one to two things currently energize you about your work as a counselor?

Aaron J. Preece: Our community began a prevention coalition in which I am deeply involved in substance abuse and suicide prevention work. I also enjoy learning new tools or techniques for approaching clients.

Anita B. Wright: Earning the sweet spot of trust as the therapeutic relationship develops.

Aaron Norton: My colleagues energize me. I have met such wonderful friends in our field. The clinical mental health counseling specialty is, to me, a tribe of sorts, and I enjoy having a place in this tribe. I belong.

Second, those moments when clients seem to “get it” have always been a consistent source of energy for me.

Mary Barros-Bailey: Innovation in assistive and instructional technologies and with counseling techniques, such as new methods in integrated behavioral health.

Kathryn L. Bright: When clients accept, practice and benefit from what I offer. When I see that “aha!” lightbulb shining brightly behind eyes filled with insight and gratitude. When colleagues show confidence in my work through their referrals.

Summer R. Collins: One thing currently energizing me is learning new treatment skills for working with clients with posttraumatic stress disorder and witnessing firsthand the effectiveness of this treatment and the healing I've seen my clients experience.

Are there any particular techniques, tricks or strategies that you use to stay motivated?

Aaron Norton: I start every day off with a daily meditation from Stoic philosophy, the ancient philosophy that

essentially informs cognitive behavioral theory. I also like to read about or listen to people in our field whom I very much look up to. I attend a great deal of workshops, retreats and training programs in our profession, and I always leave feeling energized and ready to get back to work.

Kathryn L. Bright: A daily practice of the techniques of self-knowledge helps me focus my attention within to experience peace and fulfillment. Taking time each day to enjoy that experience puts me in touch with my innate strength, clarity and wisdom. That helps me, more than anything else, to maintain my motivation as a counselor and an optimistic outlook on life. A sense of humor helps too.

Summer R. Collins: One trick I use to stay motivated is to continue staying connected with my colleagues in this field. I recognize my need to connect with others who understand the difficulties that come with being a counselor. Relating with them and being able to share hits and misses is a very helpful and important thing for me. It gives me grace for myself as I continue to seek to become an effective and helpful counselor to my clients.

Anita B. Wright: Continuous learning of clinical language and effective therapeutic approaches.

Aaron J. Preece: Exercise is my Prozac. I make a diligent effort to exercise at least three times a week — more if possible. I also work in the yard; keep involved in community music programs, Scouts, religious attendance, and youth programs on a volunteer basis; eat healthy; read; and make sure to get adequate sleep. Generally, it is about stress. I manage my low-level stress every day so big stresses don't immediately overwhelm me.

Mary Barros-Bailey: The personal strategic plan format I cobbled together with a variety of resources over the years has become my go-to when I'm in a motivation hole and need to shovel myself out and reenvision. ♦

Jonathan Rollins is the editor-in-chief of *Counseling Today*. Contact him at jrollins@counseling.org