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Macro Matters

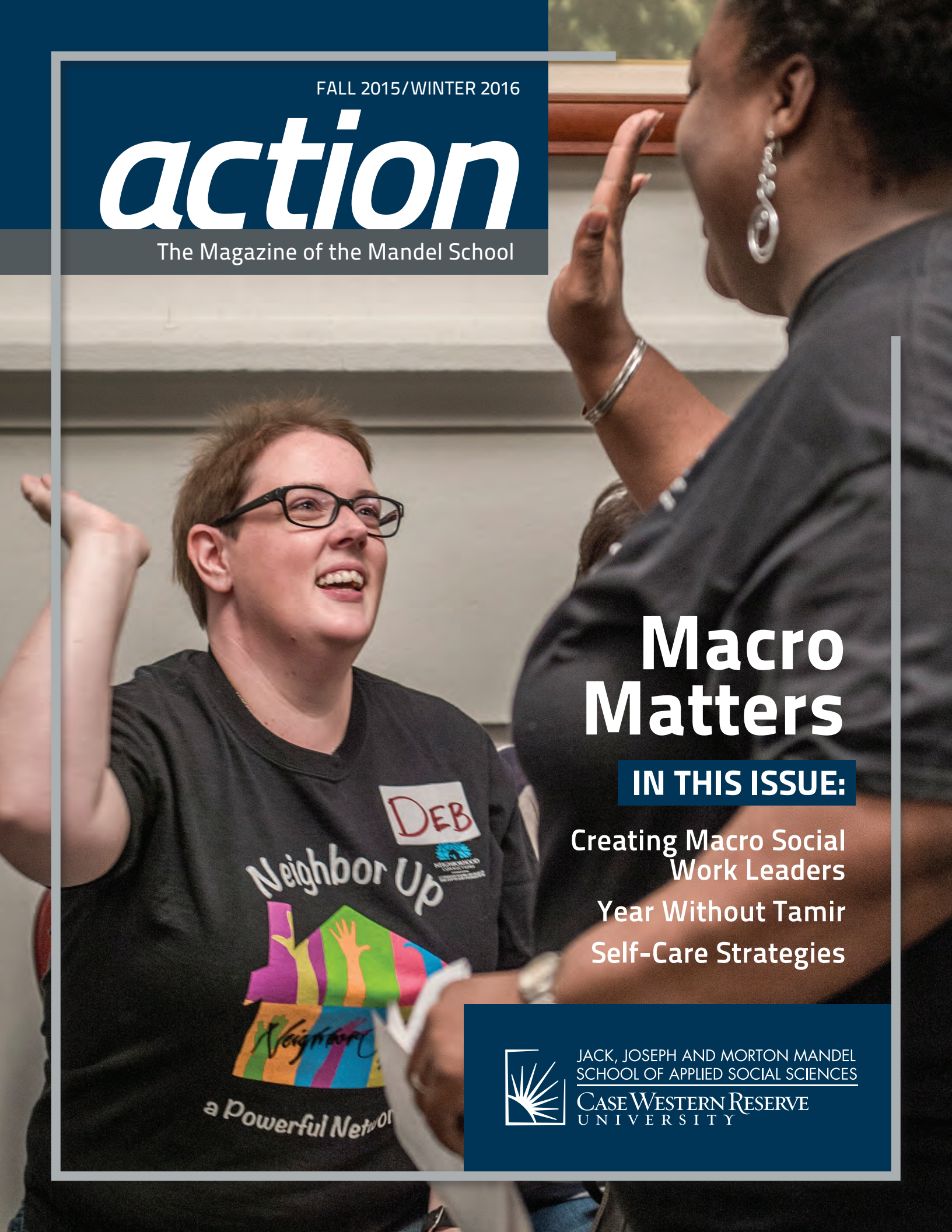
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JACK, JOSEPH AND MORTON MANDEL
SCHOOL OF APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCES

CASE WESTERN RESERVE
UNIVERSITY



Care for Thyself

Preventing Burnout and Compassion Fatigue Starts with Self-Care



This is an excerpt from our new "Social Work and Self-Care" infographic. To see (and share!) the complete infographic, go to bit.ly/SocialWorkAndSelfCare

Looking for regular self-care tips and ideas?
Follow the Mandel School on Facebook and
Twitter for #SelfCareSunday

It's an important and oft-repeated instruction you hear each time you board an airplane. In an emergency, put on your own oxygen mask before you help another passenger with their mask.

In other words: you have to take care of yourself before you can take care of someone else.

There is mounting evidence those who work in care fields—including social workers—can also benefit from a similar friendly reminder.

"Professionally, we always knew self-care was important," said **Kathi Overmier Gant, MSSA 1990**, Mandel School Field Faculty Advisor and Student Success Coach. "But now we know it's essential to prevent burnout and compassion fatigue."

As a success coach, Gant organized a series of activities during the fall semester to help students explore self-care techniques that worked for them, including yoga, meditation, cookie decorating and coloring. Gant said coloring has become a popular self-care tool because the focus needed stops the mind from racing and it provides the comfort of a childhood activity.

"The administration recognizes the stresses on students as they transition into field assignments and cope with class demands, and wants to help them start on the path toward good self-care," she said.

Recently, the topic of self-care has been incorporated into social work curriculum as well. Three years ago, Assistant Professor and Director of Educational Outcome Assessment **Zoe Breen Wood, PhD 2013**, designed an advanced practice course titled "Trauma-

Informed Social Work Practice with Families and Children” that is required for all students in the Children Youth and Families direct practice specialization. The course focuses heavily on self-care techniques.

“Working with individuals who have trauma experiences can lead to secondary or vicarious trauma,” Dr. Wood said. “Their stories can impact your whole life.”

At the end of class each week, Dr. Wood leads students through a self-care exercise, such as a yoga move, doing the Hokey Pokey or coloring. Dr. Wood also assigns each student to keep a gratitude journal and create a self-care plan that can take many different forms, such as a scrapbook or a deck of cards. Each page or card might detail a different self-care action, for example, mindfully making and drinking a cup of tea.

“It is by far my favorite assignment to grade because I love seeing what students do for themselves,” Dr. Wood said.

The self-care jar **Megan Johnson, MSSA 2015**, created for Dr. Wood’s class has helped her prioritize her own emotional health in her new role as foster care and adoption assessor at OhioGuidestone. Before taking Dr. Wood’s class, Johnson didn’t take self-care seriously, she said.

“When I was feeling stressed with homework, I would feel guilty if I took breaks or did something that I did not find to be productive,” she said.

Johnson’s self-care jar includes Popsicle sticks marked with ideas for activities she enjoys and can do when she’s stressed. When feeling overwhelmed, she can simply choose an activity from the jar for some relaxation.

“They are activities that have allowed me to focus on myself and calm down in the moment,” she said. “And that helps me keep a successful work/life balance.”

Although including a specific self-care component may be a relatively new addition to social work curricula, instructors at the Mandel School have long been aware of the importance of self-care.

Heidi Weiker, MSSA 1992, a Stress Resilience Specialist and Instructor at University Hospitals Connor Integrative Health Network and Co-Owner of Spherica, LLC, a health, wellness and fitness company, recalls a Mandel School professor asking students to keep journals about their experiences and, in return, responding with notes about how to take better care of themselves.

Weiker is also an instructor for the SMART program, which offers Case Western Reserve University employees stress-management courses through the university’s wellness program. She recently introduced SMART 2.0 for SMART graduates looking to delve more deeply into concepts of purpose and happiness, and will be introducing SMART 3.0 in the spring.

“There has been exponential growth in self-care, partly because there has been exponential growth in our knowledge of what stress does to our physical and emotional health,” Weiker said. “Even the United Nations has declared that stress is a global epidemic.”

Weiker wants social workers to know it’s possible to make time for self-care—and a little bit can go a long way.

“It can be as simple as standing in a nice breeze for 20 seconds or mindfully taking that first sip of coffee in the morning,” she said. “The research shows these things can help boost your immune system, lower blood pressure, ease muscle tension, and literally change body and brain chemistry.”

Weiker also encourages people to adopt a new mindset about work and accomplishment, and to be nicer to themselves in general.

“As soon as we get one thing done, there are 50 more behind it,” she said. “We must honor who we are: human *beings*, not human *doings*. To be is to exist. There are 100 definitions of ‘to do’ and we are filling all our time with busyness, and losing touch with the fun, the play and the gratefulness.”

Go-To Self-Care Strategies



Heidi Weiker

I dance—in my car, in my bathroom, while I watch TV, just constantly moving to a rhythm. I also take hot baths with essential oils and Epsom salt. The water is a cocoon of living energy and the world is gone, even if it’s just for 30 seconds.

Megan Johnson

At OhioGuidestone, a daily wellness walk is an activity that includes our entire office. At 2 p.m., we stop what we are doing and take a walk around the college campus across the street. The only rule is that we cannot talk about work.

Kathi Overmier Gant

Being outside, riding my Harley motorcycle with my husband. I also process and talk with colleagues and friends, to keep things from roiling beneath the surface.



Zoe Breen Wood

I’m a yoga nut. I also think about gratitude every morning. That helps me when I’m feeling overwhelmed or negative, to think of all the good things that are in my life.