



Remember Your Oxygen Mask

Before take-off on any flight, an air steward will explain to passengers what to do if oxygen masks should drop down from above. Adults are asked to put on their own masks first, before tending to children travelling with them. We understand this is not self-centred; it is in the children's best interests, because the adults need to be in a fit condition to help them.

However, this logic somehow escapes us in everyday life. Instead of making self-care a priority, we are tempted to push on, regardless of the warning signs. It's not surprising that overworked people in the not-for-profit world often 'crash and burn'. This is a disaster, not just for them, but also for those depending on their work. Effectively the not-for-profit martyr takes others down with them.

What is self-care?

Self-care is anything you do intentionally to care for your physical, emotional, spiritual and mental health. It is those things which make us feel most alive, energised and buoyant. But because we are such individual creatures, what feeds my soul will be different to what feeds yours. Also, different self-care strategies will be required at different times of our lives.

Good self-care requires both self-awareness and planning. Louise Presley-Turner, a UK life coach and motivational speaker, suggests some questions to help people think about what form their self-care should take :

- Where do I feel deprived?
- Who or what is causing me to feel resentful and why?
- What do I need more of right now?
- Who are the people in my life that nourish me?
- Which places or locations nourish me?
- What activities nourish me?

Be as specific as you can with your answers. When you have finished you will have the information you need to create a list of the self-care options that will work best for you.

The next step is figuring out how you are going to achieve them!

Planning it out

We all know that without a plan the results of any project will range between less than satisfactory and utter chaos. Your self-care is no different. You need to honour the process and actually schedule your self-care practices into your calendar, and then commit to them.

You are responsible for your self-care but if you doubt you will stick to the plan come crunch time, ask someone to be your accountability partner. Give them a copy of your self-care schedule and tell them they have your permission to check in with you, to discuss your progress.

Look for mentors and role models - people who lead happy, productive and well-balanced lives and who, formally or informally, will inspire or motivate you. Ask them about the self-care strategies they have put into place in their own lives.

Be intentional – don't just go through the motions so you can tick something off your list. For example, if one of the things that revitalises you is looking at beautiful artwork, then make a conscious decision not just to look, but to appreciate its beauty. All the time, be aware that what you are doing is for your self-care because you are worth it.

And finally remember that the goals of a self-care plan are health, balance and contentment. So fulfilling your plan should not become an additional, stressful burden in an already stretched calendar and to-do list. Sometimes the best self-care options may be taking things off your existing schedule, not adding to it. Delegate to others the things that don't energise you. Have the courage to say 'no' to requests to attend meetings or do tasks that would distract you from your core mission. Take the phone off the hook.

Creating a self-care culture

In an article on AlterNet, Dr Michael Bader, an American clinical psychologist, says the following about self-care within organisations:

In order to make mindful self-care a core feature of our organisations and movement, it has to become a priority at

all levels, outside and inside, reflected in the norms of the organisation, reiterated as a value and virtue by that organisation's leaders, and supported and reinforced by coaching and a culture that values health and self-reflection. All of these efforts have to be grounded in a deep understanding of the causes of burnout and the difficulties treating it.

Although Bader was writing within the context of political activism, his comments are equally valid for other mission-driven organisations. The following are suggested steps an organisation can take to develop a self-care culture, adapted from his article:

1. Examine what organisational practices hinder your people from paying attention to their own needs.
2. Recruit and develop talented and trustworthy staff who can help shoulder the burdens, so leaders do not need to micro-manage.
3. Provide space for individual coaching, which may pinpoint personal causes for burnout.
4. Schedule regular reflective time for staff, to re-engage with the 'big picture'.
5. Make staff education about health and stress a priority.
6. Don't glorify the workaholic. Honour their dedication and their achievements, by all means. However don't imply that the organisation values them more because they work longer hours than anyone else. By the same token, do not belittle anyone who regularly leaves work on time or who takes their allotted holidays without being forced to do so.

Recognise the warning signs

Self-care is meant to be proactive, not reactive. But if you have slipped up with your self-care plan and you are sliding towards stress, recognise the warning signs.

These will be different for each person. Some may be physical, like a racing heart, thumping headaches, or upset stomach. Some may be emotional, like bursting into tears at inappropriate moments, or losing your cool over insignificant matters.

Maybe you are just not sleeping at nights, and then struggling to stay awake at work. Or it is affecting your behaviour, like uncharacteristically withdrawing from those close to you.

Whatever the signs; pay heed to them. You will not have an airline employee at your elbow to tell you what to do. So unbuckle your seatbelt of procrastination, and march on up to the cockpit. You might need to ask for the help of others to land your plane safely, and that's OK because we are designed for interdependence. But it is you who needs to be in the pilot's seat of your self-care. Take control and fly!



Holidays? What holidays?

Having a break from work can sometimes be just what the doctor ordered. But it is not unusual to find people in the non-profit sector who have racked up many months of leave, and who have to be ordered to take time off.

If asked what prevents us from taking holidays, most people would answer: 'There's just too much to do.' However if we dig down deeper, maybe the real reasons fall into one or more of five sometimes overlapping categories:

- **Guilt** – we feel an overwhelming sense of duty. This sounds admirable but often stems from insecurity, as in: 'What will people think if I take leave now when we are so busy?' Or it could be because we have been raised to abhor anything that smacks of selfishness. However this is a wrong understanding of the principle behind self-care. The truth is you must first take care of yourself if you are to function well and be in a position to help others.

- **Fear** – we worry that the organisation will fall over if we take any time away or conversely, that other people will be found to be more than competent in covering for us. Both of these stem out of mistrust.
- **Pride** – we are focused on making our mark in our field, and feel we need to prove ourselves. Therefore we won't do anything we think will place obstacles on our career path, including taking time off.
- **Need** – we crave the feeling of being needed, important or lauded for our efforts.
- **Avoidance** – we use busyness at work as an excuse to avoid family commitments or relationships.

Ouch! A bit harsh? Well, maybe. But next time you shelve your holiday plans ask yourself what is the real reason.



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