

If you are traveling by plane and the air pressure in the cabin changes - the oxygen masks will drop down. If you are sitting next to someone requiring extra support. Whose mask should be put on first, you or the person next to you? Many respond to this question with the person needing additional support. This is our human instinct, to help others before caring for ourselves. The correct answer however, is that you should put your mask on first so you are capable of assisting others. If you can't breathe, you cannot help others breathe. The oxygen mask on a plane represents self-care for those of us in education and other helping profession.



Whether you are working in school administration, a counselor's office or in the classroom, it is important to maintain a healthy work/life balance through adequate self-care activities to prevent burnout. The work with students, families and colleagues is important but it can lead to significant levels of stress, which is often manifested in physical, mental, emotional, occupational and spiritual fatigue (Stebnicki, 2008). Self-care is not an indulgence, it is necessary to prevent distress, burnout, impairment and to maintain a level of psychological and physical wellness which is an ethical responsibility (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2011). Engaging in self-care practices will keep you healthy and on the top of your game.

The first step in developing healthy self-care habits is to recognize the signs and symptoms of burnout so you can take immediate action. Signs can include every day feeling like a bad day, feeling fatigued all of the time, daily tasks seem mind-numbingly dull or overwhelming, and feeling like nothing you do makes a difference or is appreciated by anyone. Developing and maintaining a plan for self-care is crucial for a person in any helping profession. When burnout occurs, the quality of service to students and families can be jeopardized. Five key areas to include in a solid self-care plan are:

1. Exercise – You don't have to run a marathon! Commit to 30 minutes a day 3x a week engaging in a physical activity you enjoy such as walking with a friend over lunch, catching an exercise class on your way home from work to transition from the stress of the day to relaxation mode so you can enjoy your family. Don't have 30 minutes? Do short bursts of activities between tasks/meetings at work. Physical movement can help relieve stress and re-energize you.

2. Sleep – Research recommends that adults get 8 - 10 hours of sleep. We tend to burn the candle at both ends so this seems next to impossible. While you may or may not require that much sleep, getting quality snooze time for 6 – 7 hours can sharpen your cognitive functioning.
3. Nutrition – Meal planning can go to the wayside on busy days but eating healthy food more often than not replenishes necessary nutrients to keep your body/mind functioning on all cylinders.
4. Hydration – Fatigue and hunger are often a result of dehydration. Set a goal to drink 6 – 8 glasses of water each day to avoid the mid-day drop.
5. Social Connections/Laughter – Take time to have fun! Spend time with friends and family. It is recommended to spend time with others outside of work so you don't dwell on work issues. The purpose is to laugh, to experience joy and recharge your battery.

Consider these five key areas and develop a simple achievable goal around one area to start a self-care plan. Choose one person in your life who will support you and hold you accountable to reach your goal and slowly add an area. Remember you may be the most important resource for your students and families so it is imperative you take time for you and your self-care!

Corey, G., Schneider Corey, M., & Callanan, P. (2011). *Issues and ethics in helping professions* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole. (Original work published 2007)

Stebnicki, M. A. (2008). *Empathy fatigue: Healing the mind, body, spirit of professional counselors*. New York: Springer.