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The Self-Care Challenge

It is health that is real wealth, and not pieces of gold and silver.

—Mahatma Gandhi

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Long has our field been famous for talking the talk but not walking the walk. That dreaded term *self-care* has come to mean anything from embarking on an exercise program to leaving school by 4:30 instead of 6:30. We all know the importance of taking care of ourselves, yet many of us struggle with finding a way to actually do so.

Is it because we're so focused on helping others develop healthy habits that we ignore our own needs? As caregivers, we are attuned to our charges' struggles and can often identify a course of action that will help, so we advise them, train them, and support them in their efforts—all the while postponing our own goals for another day. How many times have you started a new initiative to lose weight, pick up a fulfilling hobby, or achieve a healthier work-life balance, only to revert

to old patterns and rhythms? Eventually, this cycle results in lower self-confidence, greater frustration, and an even more pressing need to take action before it's too late.

Women are especially challenged with this, as we feel pressure to live up to the ongoing, somewhat sexist expectation to “do it all”—work, kids, housekeeping, cooking, shopping, laundry... the list goes on and on. In addition, many of us believe that doing something for ourselves would be selfish. I cannot tell you the number of times I hear the women in my life say, “I want to take an exercise class, but I’m away from the kids too much as it is,” or “I would love to meet my friends for drinks, but I have too much to do at home.” Then I hear, “When the kids get older/when work settles down/when summer comes, that’s when I can finally see friends more/take that fun class/start an exercise regimen.” Does this sound familiar to you?

Comfort Isn't the Goal

It's time to take ourselves off the shelf. How can we expect the students and families we work with to be healthy if we can't commit to our own wellness? It's true that genuine, sustained self-care is an art. And, let's face it: change is hard. Do you feel like you live in a hamster wheel sometimes, spinning nonstop but never getting anywhere? When you're stuck in a rut, you can't keep doing the same thing and hoping for a different outcome. Setting a goal to grow or improve is admirable, but the way many of us go about achieving that goal is severely lacking. We need to find an effective way to get ourselves healthy—and that likely means giving up comfort as a goal.

Doing what's comfortable doesn't always equate to healthy habits. I was working with a mom whose upbringing had abounded with trauma and who had experienced unimaginable things in her young life. She had had babies young and was chronically at risk for Child Protective Services taking them away. She chose abusive men as her children's fathers, and she found herself repeating the same abusive

patterns that she herself had experienced as a child. In short, she did what she knew—what was comfortable to her. When she came to me for help, she was terrified. She wanted so desperately to stop the cycle of abuse and to be a good mother to her children, yet she had no clue *how* to do this.

We started small with the simple strategy of “If it feels comfortable, don’t do it. And if it feels foreign or weird, give it a try.” We began to identify what kind of family she wished she’d had in her own childhood, and we brainstormed what that could look like for her own children. She practiced reading children’s books to me to make sure she could read them correctly and capture the content ahead of time. We practiced exploring what eating at a table could look like and what a healthy conversation entailed. We identified triggers that were most apt to get her into her downstairs brain and problem-solved healthy options for managing them. Last, we focused on *her*—what she needed to be healthy, to see herself as strong and not as broken, and to build the confidence to believe in herself.

Eventually, she dumped the abusive boyfriend, got a job, and moved into her own place. Her kids learned to expect stories and a bedtime routine, and the first purchase she made with her new earnings was a table so that the family could eat together. She committed to “me time,” and her kids were eventually able to see that “when Mommy got her me time, she was way nicer!” She faced numerous challenges and had a few setbacks along the way, but she did it. She found and relied on her own resilience. And it all started with small, simple steps.

Avoiding Burnout

Our work in the caregiving fields is tremendously challenging and emotional. Our own self-care is imperative in helping us maintain our focus and avoid **burnout**—that point we reach when we’ve got nothing left to give, our tank is empty, and we have to exit the profession.

I know this all too well, because in 2003 I experienced a bad case of burnout. I was a clinical director of a nonprofit organization that specialized in serving victims of trauma. I had a phenomenal team, and I was extremely proud of them, yet I was working long hours in a broken and deficit-driven system. This left me weary, unhappy, helpless, hopeless, and defeated. My self-care took a backseat, and I was miserable. I’d hit the wall.

It was so bad that when I was recruited by a software company, I took the job. Now, anyone who knows me knows that technology and I don’t mix. I still use a paper calendar, I rely on my 2nd grade son to help me understand the latest apps, and there’s a running joke at work about how long it will take me to figure out any updates to the systems. So when I accepted the position, it surprised everyone, even me. Perhaps not surprisingly, it was far from the right job for me, and I lasted only nine months.

When I returned to the human services field, I vowed that I would do things differently. I realized the importance of balance, realistic expectations, and gratitude and grace. In my old job, I had been so lost in the deficit that I failed to see all the awesome that was happening around me.

I spent some time soul searching and seeking counsel from trusted advisors in my life. I took advantage of therapy, started intentionally focusing on the positives, and began taking risks with friends. I shared things that I had never shared, processed things that I had never allowed myself to process, and came to terms with some of my truths and experiences. It was rough, but man: the journey was worth it!

The Self-Care Challenge

As I evolved in my own self-care journey, I vowed to encourage others to do the same. I researched multiple methods, read voraciously, and learned as much as I could about this endeavor, eventually narrowing

the list of steps to what I believe are the top four components of self-care. These elements—health, love, competence, and gratitude—are what we need to accomplish with consistency and intentionality.

1. **Health.** We must exercise for 40 minutes at least three times a week. Extensive research supports the biological science of this idea (see John Medina’s superb *Brain Rules*). The benefits go beyond supporting physical health: regular vigorous exercise helps us to regulate our bodies and our stress levels, thus nurturing our mental health. So get out there, find a form of exercise that works for you, and make it your new habit. Swim, run, climb rock walls, ride a bike, play racquetball, move your arms while watching your favorite show, dance—whatever it is that gets you moving. Just keep moving.

2. **Love.** That old adage rings true: “Before you can love someone else, you’ve got to learn to love yourself.” In that vein, we’ve got to give ourselves a cookie at least once a week. You read about this strategy in Chapter 15, and now it’s time to make this a regular part of your life. Do whatever you need to make sure you feel happy and rewarded for being the special person you are. Take a bath, read a book, invite a special friend to get coffee, opt to spend time with family instead of cramming a work project. So much of our work involves giving to others and being present in the moment for them, which can be draining. Refill your cup, replenish your spirit, and refresh yourself.

3. **Competence.** If we want to continuously grow and learn, we must make it a priority to challenge ourselves. We all have our comfort zones; learning happens just outside those zones. So take a risk and do something uncomfortable. This might mean confronting someone who hasn’t treated you well, saying “No,” trying a new recipe, varying your routine, overcoming a fear, or going someplace you’ve never been before. It can be as simple or as complicated as you’d like it to be. For example, I went to a high-ropes challenge course for my nephew’s birthday, which was way out of my comfort zone. Frankly, I was terrified. But I knew I had to demonstrate my willingness to grow for my

nephew and for myself, and when I had completed several of the challenges, I felt an energy I never knew existed. Ultimately, the experience increased my confidence and overall sense of competence. So go for it!

4. **Gratitude.** The thankful heart is the open heart, and since we’re in a giving, loving field, we must open our hearts. Every day, write down something you’re grateful for, and within 24 hours, demonstrate your gratitude in some way. If you’re thankful for a person, a friendship, or a relationship, past or present, you might write a thank-you note or make a phone call. If it’s something inanimate, like an experience or a memory, just writing it might suffice. This gratitude could be generated by something that happened that day, such as a teller being kind to you at the bank, or an element of your life, such as your kids’ health. The more we acknowledge gratitude and find the silver linings in life, the happier we tend to feel. The two most powerful words in the world are *thank you*.

These four elements became my mantra, and I began to call on professionals I trained and students I taught to take on this challenge. The results were astounding. I’ve received numerous thank-you notes and e-mails from people detailing how this self-care challenge has helped them feel better about themselves, gain more energy, and feel an overall sense of hope for themselves and others.

PETE’S PRACTICE

You’ve got to take care of number 1 if you’re going to be of any value to numbers 2, 3, and 617. I’ve seen it firsthand: the teachers who work around the clock to prep lessons, tutor students, restructure their rooms, grade papers, and create elaborate materials are burning the proverbial candle at both ends. Heck, I’ve been that person, both as a teacher and as an administrator.

When I felt myself heading toward burnout in my second principalship, I heeded Kristin's advice and sought what I needed. My outlet turned out to be physical activity. I discovered triathlons. You'll notice I didn't say I became a triathlete; that's in my future tense. In the meantime, I find solace and time to process the events of my life in the lake, on the trails, or spinning the pedals. When I dedicated a certain amount of time every week to exercise, I found my energy soaring, my patience returning, and my priorities balancing.

In all areas of my life—executive coaching, leadership training, parenting, mentoring, and teaching—I endorse this practice. It's at the heart of the ASCD Whole Child Initiative's first tenet: ensuring that each student enters school *healthy* and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle. When we grow up, the lessons we learned influence our health, happiness, and success as adults.

Your Self-Care Challenge Planning and Recording Zone

And now, I encourage you to take on this self-care challenge. Set yourself up for success by starting small. If incorporating a self-care strategy every day seems to be too much, then commit to once a week at first. I promise that it really does work!

Consider each of the four focus areas of the self-care challenge—health, love, competence, and gratitude—and spend some time reflecting on how you might incorporate them into your life. For the next four weeks, make your ideas a reality. Use the forms in Figure 16.1 to help you organize your thoughts, create your plans, and keep track of your successes. If you'd like to extend this challenge beyond four weeks, go for it. Your future self will thank you for the investment in your happiness, job fulfillment, health, and relationships.

Finally, I'd like to thank you for the amazing work that you do and for your dedication to helping others. Our world is a better place because of you, and our children are blessed to have you. Stay strong!



FIGURE 16.1
The Self-Care Challenge

Health: Select at least three days this week to exercise for 40 minutes. Check the box after the exercise is complete.	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.
Love: Give yourself a "cookie" this week. In this space or in a separate journal, describe what you did to take care of yourself. What did you do <i>just for you</i> ?							
Competence: Try something new this week. In this space or in a separate journal, describe how you stepped out of your comfort zone. Record your emotions before, during, and after the experience.							
Gratitude: Journal your gratitude about something or someone each day. In this space or in a separate journal, describe what you're grateful for and how you demonstrated that thankfulness.	Mon.						
	Tue.						
	Wed.						
	Thu.						
	Fri.						
	Sat.						
	Sun.						

Reflective Questions

1. Take the self-care challenge for 28 days. Record your thoughts, feelings, and baseline energy level. Keep track of the activities you engage in and how they make you feel.

2. At the conclusion of the 28 days, record your responses to these questions: how consistently did you engage in the four focus areas of the self-care challenge? How do you feel? Are these activities worth continuing? If so, make a 70-day, 365-day, and 10,000-day commitment to continuing. Let me know how it goes!

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