

6 Ways to Weave Self-Care Into Your Workday

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I've spent the past few years working closely with leaders on incorporating self-care into their work lives — as a key component of their overall performance — so that an expansion in their role or responsibilities doesn't come at the expense of their health and well-being. One CEO I worked with summed it up best when he said: "Self-care is no longer a luxury; it's part of the job."

So, what exactly *is* self-care, and how do we do it?

Define Self-Care More Broadly

At the heart of self-care is your relationship and connection to self. As part of your job, it means that you're attuned to and understand what you need to be your most constructive, effective, and authentic self. Therefore, rather than narrowly defining self-care as just physical health (which is an important piece of the equation), we need to pay attention to a wider set of criteria, including care of the mind, emotions, relationships, environment, time, and resources.

Take Out the Word "Should"

Self-care can feel daunting or unattainable. But the intention is not to add more to your already full plate, or create a reason to beat yourself up. For example, you might find yourself annoyed when someone suggests that you need to take better care of yourself, especially when it seems they don't understand how much you've already got on your plate. Self-care doesn't originate from judgment and isn't reactive to judgment (both are forms of self-sabotage, as I describe later). Instead, self-care flows from an intention to stay connected to oneself and one's overall mission: *Who and what can support and be in service of the positive contribution I hope to make?*

Operationalize Self-Care in Your Day-to-Day Work

Rather than having self-care be something "outside" of work, it's important to weave it naturally into the course of your workday. Below are six ways I've seen clients take purposeful action. Self-care is highly personal, though, so rather than being an exhaustive list, these ideas are meant to get your gears turning:

Cut yourself a break. We can often be our own harshest critic. When the weight of accountability or perfectionism kicks in, ask yourself: "What would I say to a colleague or friend in the same situation?" Research from HBS professor Amy Edmondson has shown that we optimize performance and learning in groups when both accountability and psychological safety are present. These principles can also help you as an individual. By keeping your internal critic at bay, you can create the right psychological conditions to accelerate through periods of rumination or self-doubt more quickly.

Value time, money, and resources. Throughout a given workday, others frequently ask for our time or resources, distracting us from more important priorities. That's why it's important to set aside 15 minutes first thing each morning to jot down the three things you hope to accomplish that day. Then, as requests come in, consider the impact on your priorities before offering a knee-jerk automatic yes. For those who are self-employed, the same goes when you are asked about your fees and services. Self-care means honoring the value, impact, and contribution you bring.

Take a victory lap. What did you do last week? Most of us can't remember because once we've completed a deliverable or gotten through a tough crunch, we've already moved on to the next thing. Instead, hit the pause button with yourself and your team to take a look back at the previous month or quarter, and name or write down what went well or what felt particularly satisfying. This kind of debrief can help you and your team stay connected to passions, highest contributions, and actions that actually add value.

Surround yourself with good people. Healthy and supportive relationships are a critical part of self-care. Consider whether your team is providing ample leverage and support to meet priorities. Take notice of who feeds your energy and who drains it. Set more boundaries with the drainers. Invest in those who inspire and support you and who understand what it means to have a healthy give and take. The same goes for your relationships outside of work. Don't let work cause you to neglect the most important people in your life. Use breaks during the day, or perhaps your commute time, to call friends and loved ones, and carve out plenty of time outside of work to nurture relationships.

Update your workspace. Our environment and workspace can have a significant impact on productivity. Gain more mental clarity by cleaning up your desk. Put up pictures, artwork, or images that inspire you or remind you of the people and things that matter. Your workspace should feel like a reflection of your best self.

Recharge and reboot. Stay attuned to your energy levels. For most busy professionals, getting eight hours of sleep every night is (sadly) not realistic. But it's important to at least try to refill your gas tank during the week, so designate a Wednesday or Thursday night to get in some extra sleep. And it's equally important to build restoration breaks into your workday. For example, try scheduling more walking meetings, or make a point of having lunch away from your desk with a colleague or friend. If you're traveling for work and find yourself with an extra 30 minutes before boarding a flight, stop by one of the airport massage stands to relax and recharge before your trip.

Notice When You've Slipped Out of Self-Care Mode

In times of stress, self-care can get especially off-balance. Be aware, with self-compassion, of when you've lost touch with your authentic self in one of the following ways:

Self-neglect. With demanding workloads and overly full plates, self-neglect can become a familiar pattern for many of us. It feels like we're always running on a hamster wheel. As feelings of anxiety and being overwhelmed increase, it becomes harder to maintain composure and say no to the daily fire drills, interruptions, and demands of others. We end our workdays feeling completely burned out.

Self-management. Maintaining a professional and competent persona is an important leadership skill, but in some cases, we can take it too far. When you overly manage yourself, you suppress or deny emotion, working hard to uphold a professional game face. You end up feeling exhausted from keeping up the act, and risk being perceived as inauthentic.

Self-sabotage. Sometimes, we don't achieve our mission or highest priorities because we have gotten in our own way. Notice when you have slipped into unproductive habits of procrastination, rumination, or distraction to avoid the anxiety or fear of completing your most important tasks.

Self-preservation. In a competitive world, it's easy to succumb to a scarcity mindset. When we're overly focused on a lack of resources, we can lose touch with what's best for the business. Being overly competitive can cause others to perceive you as protecting your own turf and being in it for yourself.

In each of these cases, we are no longer in the driver's seat. Instead, anxiety, control, disdain of vulnerability, or fear is running the show. Notice, without judgment, when you've slipped into one of these places, and then gently reach for a self-care action to come back to yourself more fully.

As our work lives only get busier, self-care will become an ever more important part of being authentic and having a positive impact without sacrificing our health or relationships. By incorporating self-care in our day-to-day work lives — and coming back to it in times of stress — we can all become our most constructive, effective, and authentic selves.

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