



Taking Care of Yourself Helps You Take Care of Children

Self-care is an important mechanism for taking care of others. To be able to help children year after year and have the greatest impact, we need to take care of our most essential resource – ourselves. The more adults take care of themselves – self regulate, stay calm, self-nurture, get support for themselves – the better they’re able to help children do the same.

Adults, as well as the children we work with or care for, need to build resiliency and find ways to heal from traumatic experiences.

EXAMPLE: When flying, you’ve probably heard flight attendants say, *“Put on your oxygen mask first before helping your child.”* Why? The reason is your brain needs oxygen so you can help a child put on their mask. In the same way, we must care for ourselves before caring for those who have experienced trauma.

Five Considerations For Taking Care Of Yourself:

1. Emotional Health
2. Physical Health
3. Workplace Health
4. Physical Environment
5. Personal Well-Being and Outlook

1) Emotional Health

Caregivers need to consider their own emotional health. Like children, they may have also experienced traumatic stress and violence and may be deeply impacted. Consider, have you been affected by Personal Traumatic Experiences or Secondary Traumatic Stress?

- **Personal Traumatic Experiences** are those who’ve experienced or witnessed firsthand violence, abuse, natural disaster, racism, homophobia or transphobia, or intergenerational or historical trauma.
- **Secondary Traumatic Stress** results when you hear about the firsthand trauma experiences of another.

Caregivers are not alone if they feel shame, anger, or fear when they are triggered. Adults, like children, need tools to heal themselves. These same 4 strategies that work for children can also help caregivers and providers reduce stress, improve focus, and feel better.

I. **Mindful Self-Regulation:**

- Read your own cues. Think about how you are feeling. Listen to yourself. Are you centered, calm and clear? Is your heart racing? Are you upset, confused, or frustrated?
- Using self-regulation techniques including breathing and self-soothing as part of an everyday practice can help reduce your stress, improve focus, and help you feel better about helping others.

- Think about your feelings in your body, thoughts, and behavior when you are calm and regulated? What about when you are not calm and regulated? By identifying your feelings when you are deregulated, you can take steps to calm yourself down.
 - II. **Breathing:** Breathing is the fastest way to get blood to your head to help you calm down. When you're not feeling centered, pretend you are blowing up a big balloon. Take a deep breath, hold it for a count of three, blow it out, and repeat 3-4 times. Just the process of breathing will help you feel clearer and calmer. Practice breathing in front of or with children to show them how breathing can help them too.
 - III. **Tactile Grounding:** To move from a triggered and disassociated state back into the moment, into your body, and in more control try: 1) placing your back against the wall, 2) running your hands under cold water, 3) rolling something nubby (a pencil or a nubby ball) between your hands, or 4) rolling your shoulders.
 - IV. **Seeking Help:** Seeking counseling or mental health services for yourself will strengthen your ability to better help children you work with or care for. Having a non-judgmental person to talk to can help you be more present and happy with others.
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2) Physical Health

Taking care of our physical selves can make a difference in how we feel about ourselves and ultimately show up for children. Remember to:

- I. **Get Exercise:** Exercise is just as important for us as it is for children. Find ways to get exercise even when your schedules seems too busy. Walking with a co-worker twice a week. Stand, instead of sitting for a debrief with your boss. Walk your dog a little bit longer every night. Or try a new sport with a friend. Talk to the children you work with and help them see the value of exercise and how it can help everyone feel better, sleep better, and be more calm.
 - II. **Eat Right and Drink Enough Water Each Day:** Eating right really makes a difference for adults too. When stressed we can easily justify eating the things we crave — carbs and sugar. Being mindful extends to your body. Ask yourself why you're craving certain foods. And don't forget to drink water.
 - III. **Get Rest:** Getting enough sleep is essential to being our best selves. Adults just like children need adequate rest every night to restore our bodies and spirits. Getting more rest can improve your brain function, ability to focus, and ability to remain patient and calm around the everyday chaos.
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3) Workplace Health

Part of taking care of ourselves is understanding which aspects of our life nurture or deplete us - including our workplace dynamics, policies, and physical environment. Is your work environment healthy and functional? Trauma informed? Do you feel supported and appreciated on a daily basis? If not consider these recommendations.

- I. **Celebrate Wins:** When a child has an emotional or behavioral breakthrough, it's a party. Don't forget to celebrate your own accomplishments!
 - Write down 3 good things you do every week with the kids you work with. Keeping a list will help you push through the hard times and remember the good.
 - Write down 2 things you are grateful for every day. Appreciate both the little and big things that add up to more satisfaction in life.
 - Compliment colleagues or fellow parents personally or professionally every week.
 - Recognize the small changes you've made by celebrating external and internal benchmarks.
- II. **Seek Support:** Who do you turn to for support? Who are your allies? Create a community of colleagues, fellow parents, or other caregivers around you to vent or share successes, lessons learned, and tough days.
 - Set up regular and formal sessions with colleagues or supervisors to process the hard cases or situations.

- Schedule brown bag lunches. Remember to talk about the good things! Part of being trauma informed is learning about the spaces where you can really relax and catch your breath.
 - Talk to your colleagues or friends about prioritizing self-care. Share how it helps you be your best self and better serve the children you work with or care for.
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4) Physical Environment

Space matters. How you feel in your environment affects your overall outlook. Think about what makes you happy in your space. New posters? A new comfy chair? Plants? Transform your space into one that's more inviting, kid friendly, more like home, and a reflection of your personality.

5) Personal Well-Being and Outlook

Our children look to us for hope, safety, and stability. To be able to make a difference and be our best selves every day— we need to explore and seek out **what inspires us, what our purpose is in life, and what our beliefs are.**

- I. **Find Your Purpose:** Why did you get into this or became a parent in the first place? Remembering the “why” can be a source of inspiration during the hard times. With colleagues or fellow parents, share why you chose to do this work. Write your purpose down as a piece of art, poem, or quote for your wall as inspiration when you are feeling burnt out.
 - II. **Be Curious:** Explore professional goals or personal learning you've been putting off. Would you like to run a 5K? Plant a garden? Help in a pet shelter? Discover arts or cooking? Make a list of 10 things and celebrate when you check one off the list.
 - III. **Have Role Models:** Surround yourself with role models and people who inspire you.
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In Summary

To create healthy and thriving children, practice self-care to develop and share your most innovative and creative self and to be able to remain in this work for the long haul.

Make a bigger impact in the world around you by first taking care of yourself.

More Resources

1. The Trauma Stewardship – An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others
<http://traumastewardship.com/the-book/inside-the-book/>
2. Move to End Violence – 21-Day Self-Care Challenge Packet
<http://www.movetoendviolence.org/resources/21-day-self-care-challenge-packet/>
3. Secondary Traumatic Stress
<http://www.nctsn.org/resources/topics/secondary-traumatic-stress>
4. The Sanctuary Model
<http://sanctuaryweb.com/TheSanctuaryModel>