

Caring for Ourselves, So That We Can Care for Others

by Jamie Bonczyk

Take care of yourself. Your students need you to do this. Put on your oxygen mask first so your teaching can be a gift of yourself to your students. They need your mind, body, and soul to be nurtured. You can't give to them what you don't have.

Lauren Quinn, teacher and author, in the post "Dear Teachers, It's Time to Reset," from the blog Proceed Lightly

I agree! Having a self-care plan is critical for all early childhood professionals. Self-care helps us reduce stress and improves the quality of our lives. These plans help us tap into our inner resources to build resilience, to practice adaptability, and to create positive change. If we want to not only maintain but also grow our

stamina for this field, we must take care of ourselves.

Self-care is the practice of intentionally working to create or maintain a healthy and vibrant life. Creating a plan for self-care helps you develop habits or behaviors that keep you refreshed. Self-care plans also help

you restore areas of your life that may feel depleted at the end of the day, week, or month.

Personal care is important for everyone, especially for those working with vulnerable children and under-resourced families. Without attention and connection to your needs, you leave yourself susceptible to compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, and/or burnout.

When caregivers focus on others without practicing self-care, they can start to fall into self-destructive patterns of behavior.

To avoid such pitfalls and to create longevity I propose that you must:

- a) Know yourself. Why do you need what you need, and what are your needs now? This knowing will enable you to:
- b) create an action plan.

Know Yourself

To know yourself is to:

- Be aware of how you became the person you are now. Who or what experiences have influenced how you see the world?
- Observe how your personality influences your reactions and responses to what is happening around you.
- Recognize what strengths you bring to a situation.
- Pay attention to how you interact with others.
- Plan for personal and professional growth based on your current needs.

There are many tools available to help you connect with who you are and what you need. Strengths Finder 2.0 written by the Gallup Strengths Center (Rath, 2007) is a great tool to discover how to hone in on your natural instincts. In *The 5 Love Languages*, author Gary Chapman (2015) invites you to discover which of the following things make you feel most loved: words of affirmation, acts of service, receiving gifts, quality time, or physical touch.



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*I study myself more than any other subject. That is my physics.
That is my metaphysics.*

Michel de Montaigne

To get started, I suggest a self-check (see Table 1).

Anti-bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010) suggests that we reflect on our value system with regard to race, gender, abilities and disabilities, language, social class, sexual orientation, and access to resources to determine how we have been influenced by our family and peers, institutions we belong to, personal experiences, and society at large. Once we can

articulate successfully what contributes to our individual identity, we can understand how we interact with others: children, families, and the community. More than that, we can better understand ourselves:

- What issues do we advocate for?
- What do we want to know more about, and why?
- Which populations do we chose to work with and why?

- What resources are available to us?
- How do we use these resources for self-care so we can continue on our journey of self-improvement?

This self-knowledge allows us to make conscious choices instead of merely reacting to events or people. You will be able to identify and articulate your needs more effectively, recognize when they are not being met, and set a course of action.

Table 1 — Self-Check

| What is your... | Questions for Self-Reflection |
|--|--|
| Learning Style? How do you prefer to obtain new information? | Do you learn best when you see something? Hear something? Or are you hands-on? |
| Disposition? The tendency to act in a certain manner under given circumstances and a person’s prevailing tendency, mood, or inclination. | What is your general attitude towards life? How would you describe your general mood? |
| Level of self confidence? A feeling of trust in one’s abilities, qualities, and judgment. | How often do you doubt yourself? Do you believe you can do anything you put your mind to? |
| Need for visual stimulation? The level of input from the visual environment that we prefer to work and live calmly. | Do you require a neat and orderly environment? Can you tolerate some disorganization? Do you find inspiration in clutter? |
| Communication style? Do you consider yourself: • Passive? • Assertive? • Aggressive? | Do you voice your opinions or remain silent? Do you say yes to additional work even when your plate is full? Are you quick to judge or blame? Do people fear talking to you? |
| Temperament style? The combination of mental, physical, and emotional traits of a person; our natural predisposition. | What is your general energy level? How predictable are your daily body routines? How much stimulation can you handle? How much frustration can you tolerate? Do you like new things right away? How likely are you to stick with tasks? |

Table 2 — SMART Template

| | |
|----------|---|
| S | Specific: What am I going to do? What do I want to accomplish? Why is it so important at this time? How am I going to do it? |
| M | Measurable: How will I know I have reached my goal? |
| A | Attainable: Can I see myself achieving this goal? Can I break it down into smaller, more manageable pieces? |
| R | Realistic: Is this goal too difficult to reach? Is it too easy? |
| T | Timely: What is my target date for reaching this goal? |

There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ self-care plan. However, there is a common thread to all self-care plans: making a commitment to attend to all domains of your life. This includes your physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. It may also include workplace, or professional, self-care.

Creating an Action Plan

To take care of yourself, you are going to need a plan:

Step 1: Set a SMART goal for yourself.

Step 2: Schedule time to work on and track your goal.

Step 3: Get support.

Step 1: Set a SMART goal for yourself.

Choose one goal at a time to focus on from your list of identified needs. Break that goal down into manageable parts using the SMART template (See Table 2).

Step 2: Schedule time to work on and track your goal.

Carve out the time necessary to make strides toward achieving your goal. In *Better than Before*, author Gretchen Rubin (2015) states,

“It’s tempting to pretend that I can do everything if only I get the ‘balance’ right, but scheduling requires choices. Scheduling makes that time unavailable for anything else. Which is good — especially for people who have a hard time saying no.”

We must make a commitment to ourselves. By reserving time for self-care on our calendar, we are holding ourselves accountable to realizing the goals we set for ourselves.

Step 3: Get support.

We all need assistance from time to time. Ask for help in achieving your self-care goals from:

■ family members.

■ friends.

■ professionals in mental health, health and wellness, recreation/sports.

■ tribe (church, neighborhood, or other like-minded groups).

As early childhood teaching artist Jennifer Viets puts it,

“I have come to realize telling others is not enough. Find people who will support you whether with free child care, bartering, or any other creative way of providing yourself the opportunity.”

In other words, find the people in your life who will help you put on your oxygen mask first!

On a Personal Note

Writing this article helped me to reevaluate my own self-care plan, giving me an opportunity to practice what I preach. My newest action plan was to drink more tea and less coffee. I purchased tea bags that have affirmations on the tag to provide me some daily inspiration with my hydration. When I told my colleague about my goal, I learned that she is an avid tea drinker. She brought an electric teakettle to our office area with a basket full of green tea.

The positive unintended consequences of my new goal are that I now check in with myself during tea time. I feel more focused and less stressed than before. The tea itself is now a daily reminder to take care of myself. My daughter, my husband, and my agency need me to keep my mind, body, and soul nurtured. I can’t give them what I don’t have.

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Self-Care Checklist

To identify areas to focus on, use the scale below. If you find yourself marking a 3, 2, or 1 this may be an indication that this area is for personal improvement through an action plan.

1 = It never occurred to me 2 = Never 3 = Rarely 4 = Occasionally 5 = Frequently

Physical Care

- ☐ Eat healthy
- ☐ Exercise
- ☐ Get regular medical care for prevention
- ☐ Take time off when needed
- ☐ Get enough sleep

Emotional Self-Care

- ☐ Give yourself affirmations; praise yourself
- ☐ Identify comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places and seek them out
- ☐ Allow yourself to cry
- ☐ Find things that make you laugh
- ☐ Express your outrage in social action, letters, marches, and protests

Spiritual Care

- ☐ Make time for reflection
- ☐ Spend time in nature
- ☐ Find a spiritual connection or community
- ☐ Contribute to causes that mean something to you
- ☐ Read inspirational literature

Workplace or Professional

- ☐ Take a break during the workday (e.g. lunch)
- ☐ Identify projects or tasks that are exciting and rewarding
- ☐ Set limits with your clients and colleagues
- ☐ Get regular supervision or consultation
- ☐ Have a peer support group

Adapted from: Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996. For a more comprehensive assessment, go to:
www.ecu.edu/cs-dhs/rehb/upload/Wellness_Assessment.pdf.