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Managing Yourself

# "Serious" Leaders Need Self-Care, Too

by Palena Neale

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**Summary.** Despite the well-known benefits, many leaders remain resistant to the whole idea of self-care. This resistance often stems from a feeling that self-care is a sign of weakness, a feeling that they just don't have time, or just generally rolling their eyes at the entire concept. Based on her experience as a leadership coach, the author offers several suggestions to help leaders see the benefits of self-care, as well as some concrete strategies to incorporate self-care practices into your daily routine. **close**

The benefits of self-care are well known. Yet when I work with my leadership clients, I often get major pushback around the whole idea. Why are many leaders so resistant to taking a bit of time for themselves?

It usually boils down to misperceptions around what good leadership is, what self-care is, and how self-care actually works. Luckily, I've also found that with some thoughtful introspection, it's possible for even the most skeptical among us to overcome those misconceptions and learn to reap the benefits of self-care. Below, I consider the three most common excuses my clients give for their resistance to self-care, and offer some solutions to help leaders overcome that resistance.

**"Self-care is just a bunch of new-age, hippy-dippy nonsense"**

Some of my clients find the entire concept of self-care to be antithetical to their image of what a "serious" leader looks like. They roll their eyes at the whole idea of meditation, mindfulness, chants, "anything that involves candles," nature walks, and

"slowing down." Others trivialize taking time for yourself as an "indulgence" — maybe others enjoy it, but it's a luxury they feel they can't afford.

How can we start to challenge these limiting beliefs? To start, I work with my clients to reframe self-care as an investment that can increase their overall productivity and effectiveness as a leader. A data-driven approach is often the most convincing, and the research is clear that diet, exercise, sleep, and emotional regulation promote health and well-being.

Specifically, a healthy diet has been linked to better moods, higher energy levels, and lower levels of depression. Aerobic exercise increases blood flow, boosting both learning and memory. Getting good sleep has been linked to increased focus, improved cognitive function (including creativity and innovation), greater capacity for learning, and improved empathy.

To refocus on the tangible benefits of self-care, I'll often ask clients the following questions:

- If instead of focusing on "self-care," I invited you to focus on diet, sleep, exercise, and emotional regulation, how would you feel differently?

- What could you stop, start, or continue doing right now to improve your mental and physical health?

**"I don't have time!"**

More often than not, when I broach the topic of self-care or even taking a break, my clients respond with some version of, "Are you kidding me?!? I'm already way beyond capacity looking after my team and my family, trying to organize home schooling, emotionally supporting my friends, colleagues, family … I don't have time for that!"

This feeling of constant stress is sadly all too common among today's endlessly busy leaders. Unfortunately, when we're stressed, neuroscience tells us that our amygdala — the area of the brain responsible for our evolutionary fight-or-flight response — kicks in, diverting resources from the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for logical reasoning, problem solving, decision making, and willpower. In other words, it is precisely when we're feeling stressed and overwhelmed that we would most benefit from slowing down in order to think big, innovate, and solve the problems that are stressing us out.

This too is thoroughly backed by research. Studies show that taking breaks can help prevent decision fatigue, renew and strengthen motivation, increase productivity and creativity,

and consolidate memory and improve learning. Even short "micro-breaks" can improve focus and productivity.

As we think about the stress-induced "I don't have time" objection, it's useful to ask:

- What are the key priorities in your life? Can you achieve them without health and well being?

- How much time could you save by responding from a place of control rather than reacting from a place of stress?

- What is one thing you can choose to say no to today that will give you back at least five minutes? (Hint: You probably spend longer on social media than you want to!) How you could you use this time to improve your own well-being and performance?

**"Leaders need to be strong. If I'm a good leader, I shouldn't need self-care."**

Some of my clients come in to coaching thinking that as a leader, they must never show any vulnerability. Recently, I worked with a client who explained that she expected herself — and any "self-respecting" leader — to have all the answers. "Otherwise," she asked, "why would anyone follow me?!" The belief that practicing

self-care is a sign of weakness combines with the notion that showing weakness makes you a bad leader to create serious resistance to even exploring these practices.

To combat my client's limiting beliefs, we needed to explore her preconceptions about what it meant to be a leader, delving into the power of vulnerability and the opportunities we can create when we rely on others. As she began to acknowledge the importance of delegation and asking for help, she was able to see that self-care was actually the key to becoming a more effective leader.

If you're struggling to shift your notions of what "good" leadership looks like, try asking yourself these questions:

- If the strongest leader you knew was struggling with stress, what would you advise them to do?

- How has taking some time for yourself benefited you or your team in the past?

- If you didn't *need* help, but you just wanted to recharge your battery — how would you do that?

Once you begin to overcome your initial resistance, it's time to start thinking about how to integrate self-care into your daily routine. Here are a few strategies that have been effective for my

clients:

**Make peace with self-care (or whatever you want to call it).** Acknowledging your resistance is the first step to overcoming it. For example, one leader I worked with associated self-care with long meditations sitting cross-legged on the floor, complete with incense and chants, which he found completely repellant. Once we got past that misconception, we were able to arrive at a more meaningful understanding of self-care — for him, it consisted of a morning journaling exercise, a brief afternoon nature walk, and 15 minutes of kid-free jazz in the evening.

**Make it your own.** Understand that self-care is as individual as the person practicing it, so it can take many different forms. You may not be a spa person, but perhaps you get a boost from nature. Talking on the phone may be draining, but pulling out a sketch pad or a crossword puzzle might reenergize you (or vice versa!).

**Make it micro.** Short diversions can provide a powerful boost. One of my clients sets a daily alarm for a five-minute loving kindness meditation, which he finds centers him amidst his "many storms brewing." Try an online mindfulness meditation to improve emotional regulation, journaling to promote self-awareness, creative writing to increase well-being and creativity, reaching out to someone you haven't spoken with

in a while to increase your social connectedness,
a gratitude exercise or an act of kindness to promote positivity, or
a walk around the block to get your blood flowing.

**Make time in your agenda.** Once you've come up with a plan, put it in your calendar to make it official! If you're not sure what exactly you want to do, you can start by simply identifying two 10-minute blocks every day, setting your alarm, and then choosing a new self-care activity to try out during each time block.

**Experiment.** You'll never get it exactly perfect the first time. Once you've started, think about what's working for you, and what you might want to change or add to your routine. You can also look to your peers and colleagues for inspiration. There's no need to reinvent the wheel — if something they're doing sounds appealing to you, borrow it and make it your own.

**Once you've got it, share it.** As a leader, you set the tone for your people. So share what's worked for you, and make it clear through both words and actions that you know the importance of taking care of yourself. If you're open about your investments into self-care, your team and your entire organization will follow your lead.

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Self-care begins with you. It comes in many shapes and sizes, but done consciously and consistently, it gives you the tools you need to become a better leader and a happier, healthier person. If you want to become the best version of yourself — and inspire those around you to do the same — investing in your own well-being is worth making time for.

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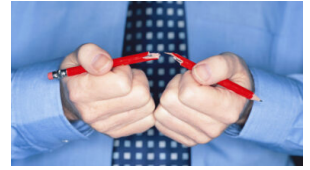


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