

## CARING FOR YOURSELF

by Marie Wall

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Teaching is a very demanding career and quite often the last person considered is yourself. Children, schedules, and deadlines constantly make demands and it is easy to put yourself last. Yet, to make it for the long haul, you need a full personal tank. So, what is your personal tank? Yourself, body and mind. And is it filled with energy – a life force that is needed to maintain life? The Chinese call this energy Chi. How you fill your personal tank and how consistently you fill-up is important. You cannot drive a car if it does not have gas or maintenance; whether it is your car or your body, care is essential.

Self care is often considered selfish or egotistical, yet it is only when we are experiencing fullness in our lives that we can share and be emotionally available to others. Self care is a relatively new concept. Many of us grew up in families and communities that put more emphasis on taking care of others than on looking after ourselves. Some would say that looking out for oneself is selfish and it is impossible to change old habits. However, another perspective is that not looking after yourself is selfish because you will feel drained, leaving you little or nothing to share with others, your spouse, children or students. Stress and burnout have forced us to change our attitudes regarding self care. It is essential that we learn how to live differently and find balance in our lives.

Learning to care for oneself may take a multitude of forms; it may be physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and most likely some combination of these. Finding what fits for you is essential to learn how to live differently. So, what is self care and how do you incorporate it in your everyday life?



Self care is knowing what you need to restore your energy and how to attain that same energy. Your body is wise and it knows what you need. Listening for this wisdom is essential. Take a few minutes to notice what is happening in your body. What physical sensations do you notice? What is the predominant emotion you are experiencing? The first step in self care is observation. Body wisdom is listening to the message from your body.

The next step is: determining the meaning of this message for you. Are you reacting to recent events – good or bad? Is there something you need or want that you don't have? Is someone asking something of you? Stay with the message until you know what it means for you. Only then can you act on it.

When you have evaluated the message and what it means for you, it is time to consider how best you can care for yourself. At this time consider what will best help you to fulfill your needs. This is not what someone else can do for you, but something that only you can act upon. You could decide to talk to someone about the incident, sharing what you are pleased about or offended by. If in need of something, you may plan a way to attain it. If something is being asked of you, you may want to decide whether you can do it or not – then state clearly your intention. Learning to say "no", makes your "yes" much louder.

In assessing whether an activity is self care or selfish, you should consider whether that activity has left you with energy for others, your spouse, family or students. If it has restored you and allowed you to be

emotionally available for others then it can be very liberating. If, however, you do not have anything to give others, the activity may have been a selfish one that is not life- giving but self-indulging.

The activities may be small acts of kindness or an extensive activity you have been putting off or have never considered. The key to self care is that it is ongoing. It may be supported by family or co-workers. Or it may be something that you need to do on your own. Learn to listen to your "body wisdom" and you will know what to do.

This may sound very one-sided but it requires awareness and intentional action. In a school, self care may be considering what you can do to make work more nurturing and enjoyable. It could be a walk before school or after supper. It could be a plan to spend time with a friend. In a family setting this may happen by both partners planning quality time, together or separately. These are intentional acts. Self care is intended for building up your "self" and your "others".

How can this differ for a woman or a man? Research has indicated in the first half of life women are primarily focused on relationship building. This often includes career but it is secondary to friendships, romance, and parenting. In the second half of life this changes and the need for personal accomplishments is important. For men, the primary emphasis in the first half of life is establishing a career, home and family. Once structures are put in place, relationships take a more central role for men. This provides a renewed purpose in their second half of life. Therefore, depending on your gender and the focus in your life, finding balance will differ. Respecting these differences is necessary.

All of us need to have balance in our lives. If there is not enough time and energy for yourself you are out of balance. If you have no time or energy for your significant other, this too is out of balance. As the title says, caring for yourself enables caring for others. When you are emotionally fulfilled you are more likely to cope better with stressful situations, unexpected events, caring for others, sharing your life, or one of many other potentially draining situations. You can be more positive, have higher self-esteem and are better able to cope effectively with situations as they arise. Is it worth it to you to have a full, balanced life? If so, take stock and learn to do self care – it will look good on you. Learning to develop awareness of your personal needs can make your life more full. As stated earlier, physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual care are important. Future articles in The Bulletin will continue to explore these various aspects of our lives.

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