
Here's Your Nonprofit Leader's Self-Care Handbook

A handbook to care for yourself. Is that really necessary?

Apparently so.

Knowing the *importance* of self-care does not seem to be the problem. *Definition* does. Exactly what is self-care? And the corollary question: what counts as self-care?

Today's article, the last in my series, comes after a career's worth of anecdotal conversations with hundreds of nonprofit leaders. To prepare for the installments of this series, I've employed formal surveys and interviewed dozens of nonprofit leaders to learn how they go about handling the pressures of a tough job. Lack of defining what is personally helpful self-care was one of the top two problems identified in my year-long exploration of this important topic.

The other top problem clearly and emphatically identified? Accountability.

In my interviews, not a single nonprofit leader said anything like, "Oh, I didn't realize that a healthy self-care practice could change my life and have lasting positive ramifications for my organization." This seems to be known quite well. However, the act of *incorporating* self-care into daily life seems to be the sticking point.

That's where the handbook comes in. (I share it further down in this article.)

Early in my career, I was a director-level fundraising executive with a spouse, work, travel, volunteer commitments, family, house, and, of course, a ninety-five-pound golden retriever puppy. The "I have to be all things to all people" syndrome was deeply embedded in my mind and my life. I had zero tools and a million reasons (read: excuses) to not tend to my self-care.

I want to acknowledge here that past generations did not have self-care as a value. They worked, worked, worked to support their family and their jobs. It was just the way it was (you will still hear this from anyone who is seventy+ years old). Anything else was a luxury for anyone other than the wealthiest people. Self-care was seen as being or doing "lazy" things. When you are tilling fields or building a business from scratch, taking time to *just breathe* was at best a luxury or at worst a waste.

Can you see the picture? I know, because, in some ways, it still applies to you, doesn't it? Be honest with yourself. Do you not prioritize to the bottom of your list your gym time, massage, walk, meditation, social connection (yes, this is a form of self-care), and other things that come to your mind to do for yourself? So, how far have we come?

It feels like we have come a long way! Meditation in place of detention in school, specialty gyms and kickboxing studios on every street corner, Facebook groups on breathing, a proliferating health & wellness coaching industry, Instagram videos on how to make a healthy snack in an instant. It's all right at your fingertips or just around the corner, isn't it?

But...

(There's always a "but.")

In my decades working in the nonprofit sector as a practitioner, consultant, and coach to colleagues and executives, I've learned that the type of person who becomes the impassioned (and overworked) nonprofit leader prioritizes others over themselves. It's just that simple. It's not a horrible thing. In fact, it's the thing that makes this profession so precious and often leads to prolific programming that serves ever-growing needs.

And, let's not beat around the bush here. The *need* is ever-growing. I want to state that for the record, but I know you already know that. You are the one who carries on your shoulders the growing number of people-in-need, growing environmental concerns, shrinking resources, expensive education, and the arts/culture and humanities that create the moral fiber of our society. What on earth are you supposed to do? Go somewhere and *meditate* while a child goes hungry or a woman's life is in danger? Go out and take a walk when a young person's education is in jeopardy or soul needs soothing?

In a word, yes.

We know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you will be more effective in your work (and life) when you are in a high well-being state of mind. Your well-being depends on you, NOT on whether or not you raise the most money, run the perfect program, or hit it out of the park every time. In a poor well-being state, the losses take a toll and run you down. In a high well-being state, losses become challenges that you commit to *rising to* or overcoming next time around. Did you know there is an entire [Well-Being Concepts page](#) on the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) website? I'm pretty sure it would not have a long, updated

resource page on the subject if it was not in its line of sight for the impact it wants to make.

And how do you get into a high well-being state of mind? With self-care that is effective for you (remember the top problem I reported? Defining what self-care is), that is a habit in your life (remember the second top problem? Accountability).

Getting Real about Your Self-Care

What's a busy nonprofit executive to do?

In four words, keep this handbook handy.

Before I share the Self-Care Tools (below) for your improved well-being, I want to share something deeply personal. I hired my adult daughter to help me while preparing for this last article in the CharityChannel six-part series. I asked her to read the prior five articles and pull out all of the tips and tools that were shared throughout and create a single document of them. When she finished the project, she emailed it to me with this note: "Mom, this is so great. It would have been great if you had these tools when we were younger."

When I read those words, my heart skipped a beat and my old demon revisited with an almost physical shove. You see, before my breakdown in my late thirties, I was a "yelling mom." And, for certain, "resenting wife." I lived with anxiety, stress, and a bit of depression. I felt out of control on the inside all the time while on the outside I appeared to have a perfectly lovely life. To be clear, I DID have a perfectly lovely life.

But if you suffer from anxiety and depression, it doesn't matter what your life looks like on the outside. Or, even if you just suffer from stress, your truth is how you feel on the inside. *Self-care* to me was a complete non-starter. The only thing it did start were fights between my husband and me anytime he would use the word "relax" with me, or tell me that I should go to the gym or take a class. That was a sheer impossibility for me, in my mind. Then, I just resented more.

After my, *ahem*, breakdown that had me in bed for ten days with no peripheral vision, I pulled myself out of a dark place and started on a path to recovery from that life. Sparing you the boring details, suffice to say I committed to the journey and it all resulted in the tools I share today and the work I do as a coach. I freely share my personal experience to help others know that I really do understand.

I know what it feels like to feel guilty all the time at home, to be busy and feel stressed. Thus, this handbook will be very simple. I will offer just three steps for you to rise higher on your well-being scale. For if there is one seminal thing I learned, it's that progress results step by step and well-being grows from appreciating each step you take. You simply cannot leapfrog straight to the top of the well-being scale (ask me how I know). You can leap up a couple of steps if you commit, but most mortals just grow step by step. If you are in awareness of how you feel along the way and recognize your progress, your well-being grows. And, one day you say, *I feel better*.

Three-Step Self-Care Handbook

Step One: Well-Being Mindset

It is true that everything starts in your mind. You don't have to believe it, as long as you're willing to try it. Try developing and then practicing a new mindset about feeling better. Moving higher on the well-being scale will serve your overall self-care plan.

This is the step where you identify what helpful self-care is to you. Remember that top problem I identified? If you don't know what self-care is to you, how can you do it? And, how can you raise your well-being state? When clients tell me they just want to feel happy, I ask them what happy feels like and nearly every time they are not able to describe it. How can you feel happy if you don't know what happy feels like? Likewise, how can you have a good self-care practice if you don't know what good self-care is for you?

Finally, think about well-being as an adjective, as in "a well-being day." Ask yourself, "What kind of well-being day am I having today?" Try to create a habit of asking yourself this question three times daily. You can also focus on a certain area as in, "What kind of spiritual (or physical, or mental) well-being day am I having today?" If you answer that you are having a mediocre or bad spiritual well-being day, then ask yourself, "What can I do *right now* to raise my spiritual well-being?"

Make a good decision for yourself. Understand the importance of well-being and realize that good self-care leads to better well-being. Create a new mindset around this and practice, practice, practice (think about it, journal about it, talk about it, whatever it takes to bring it to mind several times a day).

Step Two: Well-Being Focus

When it comes to self-care, what do you focus on? Do you focus on all of the things you do not do (go to the gym, play, pray, or be with loved ones)? Try focusing on the vision that you have for yourself to be a healthy and well person. Remember the old-time camera lens? The kind that you turned back and forth until it came into focus? That is step two: focus on what you want. Tweak it, tighten it up, refine, and refocus (repeat).

Be honest with yourself about what you're focusing on when you come to awareness about this. "See" what it is that your mind is seeing when you are in the chaotic distraction that is your life. To help you get into focus, try taking some deep breaths and feel your body still; then breathe again and get even stiller. When you feel quiet inside, ask yourself what you want, then listen to what your soul responds. If your soul indicates that "I just want to feel better," then move to Step Three for a few simple tools. If you can't get quiet at all, work on your mindset transformation and try re-focusing again (repeat). Your soul is in there and is waiting to be felt. This step will help get you re-connected.

Step Three: Well-Being Tools

Here are three of the simplest self-care tools. They will help you to get you onto the path of better well-being:

- A. Awake — Waking Hour
- B. Breathe — The Breathing Stop
- C. Cues — Visual Reminders

Awake: The power of the waking hour is seriously underrated. When you come awake, try to formulate the thought of how you want to feel that day. Not about how the day will go, but about how you want to *feel*. Give yourself permission to advance. Think this through if you struggle with *feeling words* (again, ask me how I know). How would you like to feel?

The A in the A-B-Cs of self-care tools, Awakening, can propel you into a better well-being day if you lie there at the outset of the day and choose it. Decide to commit to feeling calm/comfortable/happy/content/productive/satisfied...or even just "okay" today. Feel free to say a prayer or think up multiple gratitudes — anything that helps put you in a high well-being state of mind in your waking hour. Mostly, our waking hour results in feelings of fatigue,

stress, guilt, or fear coming up about anything that is dominating our mind. When you take back your waking hour, your well-being scale will rise. It's a fab self-care tool!

Breathe: The benefit of your breath is one of the greatest secrets that you will learn. Foundational to Eastern healing, it is only more recently mainstreamed in Western culture. Yogis have known about it forever, but the rest of us mere mortals, not.

Once I learned about the value of becoming conscious of my breath and breathing, I've integrated it into my self-care practice, and I use this technique in all of my speaking and coaching.

Here's some simple steps I created that I hope will serve you. Once you do it just a few times, it can become organic and I encourage you to program into your phone reminders to take a breathing stop periodically (and encourage your team to do the same!). Here's how:

Sit up straight, shoulders down and back.

Take a deep breath in through your nose, hold for three seconds.

Blow out through your mouth for four seconds.

Roll your shoulders, stretch your arms out and back.

Gently look to the right, then to the left, to stretch your neck. Now gently tilt your head to the right, then to the left, with your eyes forward. Finally, bring your head back to center.

Look up at the ceiling (visualize the sky), then gently look down to the floor (visualize the earth).

Take a deep breath in through your nose, hold for three seconds.

Blow out through your mouth for four seconds and bring your shoulders down while you breathe out.

Cues: The visual reminder has been another game-changer for me. So what if I need it? Why not do *everything I can* to support my good self-care and rise higher on the well-being scale? Give thought to what visual cues you can create in all of your surroundings as a great self-care

boost or reminder. Perhaps at home you put up pictures of a great vacation or family time where it all floods back into your mind when you look at that picture. Perhaps at your office you put up plaques with motivational sayings that can support you (and your team) at a glance, a quick inspiration by the copier or in the lunchroom.

Believe it or not, I have found the best place for inspiration is — wait for it — the bathroom. Yes, I will not go into the toilet-psychology of sitting there with nothing to do, in full attention, etc.! I believe with my whole heart that my younger daughter benefited from a motivational picture I hung in the bathroom that just sat there for her to stare at multiple times a day every day of the week (get the drift?).

I could go on and on about cues, but I will ask you please give it a try. Use whatever cues you need to give yourself a self-care pick-me-up and a well-being boost.

Accountability

What is it going to take for you to hold yourself accountable to your best-life/self-caring/well-being? Maybe this handbook is it? That would be wonderful. But, on the chance that it may not be enough, please give thought to your accountability plan. Who can be your accountability partner? If you feel that you want to create a solid start to this new practice, consider hiring a coach — someone you pay and therefore feel accountable to for showing up when you are supposed to. If you have a friend who is interested in growing their well-being and committing to this lifestyle change and will “show up” for you (and you for that person), then that’s perfect.

If it would be helpful for you to have an email reminder to support your accountability, I have created a daily email reminder to come directly to your inbox. It says the same thing every day and will act as one of your cues. You can find a link to the daily accountability email on my [Confident Fundraising](#) website.

To end this Self-Care Handbook, I’ll leave you with a final tool that I recommend to all my clients: mapping. If you don’t know what self-care is to you, and you don’t know how to get there, how can you possibly arrive? I encourage you to sit down with commitment to your best health/best life and map in self-care stops that will support you. Use the calendar, use your activity, use upcoming events, whatever works for you to map out a specific and intentional plan for your improved well-being. Do whatever it takes. *Not doing it* has dire consequences.

Take back your power, today.