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Adding self-care to your workday

Always secure your own oxygen mask first.

By **Hannah Pitstick**
28 February 2019

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As work becomes more demanding and time more constrained, it's ever more important to take care of yourself throughout the day.

"I think of self-care as a form of connection to oneself, and understanding the emotional, physical, and structural conditions that help us to be our most effective selves," said Amy Jen Su, co-founder and managing partner of Paravis Partners, a boutique executive coaching and leadership development firm based in Washington, DC.

Some may assume that self-care is a luxury reserved for those with a surplus of time and energy, but, on the contrary, people with overwhelming schedules can often benefit the most from implementing a routine that prevents burnout.

"Self-care is treating yourself like you would a good friend," said Denise Chilton, an [executive coach](#) based in Liverpool. "I think we're conditioned to care for others rather than to care for ourselves."

Here are five tips from experts on weaving self-care into your workday:

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Respect your own time. One simple way to ensure you're making time for self-care is to schedule it into your calendar and honour it as you would a meeting or a doctor's appointment.

For example, Chilton reserves Monday evenings for yoga and works everything around that.

"That's 90 minutes just for me," she said. "I turn off my phone, and I don't turn it back on until Tuesday morning."

Another way to value your time is to set your top three intentions for the day and make sure you're focusing on what matters most. Instead of having everything be an automatic yes to other people, Su recommended taking a deep breath and pausing to consider whether the request really fits into your day. Chilton suggested asking a question before responding to a request. By inserting a pause before you say yes to someone, it gives you a bit more time to consider, rather than impulsively obliging.

Adjust your internal dialogue. Very often, people aren't aware of what they tell themselves, but negative internal chatter can have detrimental effects on emotional energy reserves.

"The brain is five times more likely to think of the negative; that's the way we're designed," Chilton said. "When we bring our internal dialogue into the conscious, we can realise what we're saying, and we can start to make a shift."

Chilton recommended being aware of the words "shouldn't" and "couldn't" in your lexicon, such as "I *couldn't* let someone pick up the kids for me."

"We often let guilt get in the way," she said. "If you have any 'shouldn'ts', let go of them." Instead, Chilton suggested focusing on what you do have, rather than what you don't.

"You don't need to be good at everything, but really own what you're good at," she said.

Su suggested taking a look back at the previous month or quarter, and naming or writing down what went well or what felt particularly satisfying, as a way to stay connected to passions, acknowledge your biggest contributions, and take note of actions that actually added value.

Pay attention to your energy throughout the day. As you begin to figure out your ideal routine, pay attention to your natural circadian rhythms. If you are a morning person, schedule tasks that require the most focus for the beginning of the day, and if you are a night owl, plan for the opposite. It's natural to have dips in energy throughout the day, especially after lunch, so schedule restoration breaks throughout the day.

Maybe you take lunch away from your desk, get up and go for a walk, or simply pause and take a couple of deep breaths.

"A restoration break doesn't have to mean going to the gym for the two hours that nobody has," Su said. "It means checking in with yourself to see if your battery is running low and finding small ways to give yourself a little bit of juice."

Modify your workspace. Your workspace environment can have a significant impact on both your physical and emotional wellbeing.

"I know a lot of times, for me, my desk can suddenly look like a hurricane hit, and it can lead to feeling overwhelmed," Su said. "Taking a few minutes to clean up your desk, number one, can be anxiety relieving, and then, once you have a cleared-up workspace, it's amazing how much better one can feel."

Your workspace doesn't have to be Marie Kondo-level orderly for you to be your best self — your ideal working environment will depend on you.

Chilton likes to be around people, but she lives and works on her own, so she uses a co-working space; other people may not like to speak to anyone, so they should seek out a secluded workspace. She also encourages adding small touches, such as bringing some of the outdoors in with plants, lighting a candle for ambience, and preparing some tea or coffee to boost energy.

Don't ruminate. Often, the most draining aspect of a workday can be tough interactions. For financial managers, it may be difficult conversations, collaborating with a colleague, or negotiating with a boss.

It's usually best to be professional, but direct, with others rather than letting your stress or frustration with somebody linger.

“Instead of having the conversation with a person in your head and ruminating, try having a direct conversation,” Su suggested.

— **Hannah Pitstick** is a freelance writer based in the US. To comment on this article or to suggest an idea for another article, contact Drew Adamek, an FM magazine senior editor, at Andrew.Adamek@aicpa-cima.com.

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