Self-care Strategies for Maximizing Human Potential

Bradley J. Cardinal
Jafrā D. Thomas

“I recommend you choose a new profession.” Those soul-crushing words, shared with a student of ours by a veteran physical educator with 28 years of experience at the close of an interview, shocked and devastated the student. It is unclear why the veteran teacher had such an attitude, when it formed, or why the teacher would choose to share such a discouraging view with the student. Perhaps it was a temporary state due to a recent run-in with an administrator, colleague, parent or student. Maybe something else was going on in the teacher’s personal life. Maybe the teacher genuinely thought the student was not well suited to be in the profession. Maybe teaching was not this particular teacher’s calling in life, but rather something he or she settled for. Might it have been a misguided attempt to use sarcasm as humor? Or perhaps burnout had set in. We will never know for sure. What we do know is that our student was haunted by those words, perhaps even more than the veteran teacher ever expected or will know.

In an attempt to turn this into a teachable moment, we convened a group of students to talk about the things they thought were demotivating and discouraging in their life as teaching professionals, as well as the things they thought were motivating and encouraging. A central tenet of the discussion was to have and maintain a caring attitude toward sustaining personal and professional passion, and sharing that passion with others. The idea of lifelong learning and continuous improvement came up almost immediately. We referred to this as constant and never-ending improvement.

Seeking constant and never-ending improvement was viewed as a life philosophy that helped inform and form people’s attitudes, which guided their thoughts and actions. These efforts were believed to be a necessary means of nurturing the best in oneself and others.

Nurturing Your Garden

Many health, physical education, recreation and dance professionals were drawn to the field because of an intrinsic desire to make a direct and positive difference in the lives of other people (Culp, 2011; Matanin & Collier, 2003). Because of their selflessness, they often put their own well-being on the back burner while being of service to others (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Cuevas, Lonsdale, 2014; Cardinal, 2013). If not carefully monitored and balanced, these sacrifices can take a toll, sometimes in unexpected ways, such as in the type of language that is used with students, how much attention is devoted to students, and how classroom behavior is managed (Harris, Jennings, Katz, Abenavoli, & Greenberg, 2015).

Self-care — intentional actions aimed at taking care of oneself physically, mentally and emotionally — allows the best of a person to be revealed to and shared with others (GoodTherapy.org, 2015). It is also paramount to staying true to what brought the person into the field in the first place, such as being committed to making a positive difference in the lives of others and supporting and teaching others to lead healthy, active lifestyles.

Of course, being at one’s best does not mean being perfect. Rather, it means remaining in a state that allows the person to effectively handle situations that arise and to maintain healthy relationships with others. For example, positive self-talk that directs the attention toward opportunities for improvement rather than focusing on problems not only is an important self-care strategy, but it also represents professional maturity and
enables a person to use energy constructively (Hertel, Rauschenbach, Thielgen, & Krumm, 2015). Signs that a professional is engaging in self-care include having a genuine sense that the work he or she does is energizing, joyful and meaningful (Schussler, Jennings, Sharp, & Frank, 2016). If a person notices his or her body becoming tense because of a situation that was observed or a conversation with someone, this could be an opportunity for self-care because it allows the person to intervene in a positive way by de-escalating negative sensations (e.g., excusing oneself or tabling the conversation).

Signs that a person is not engaging in self-care practices include becoming easily annoyed, disappointed, frustrated or irritated (Mearns & Cain, 2003). Over time such emotional reactions can result in decreased motivation for work and withdrawal from healthy relationships with others, which may include becoming less attuned to their needs (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011).

People who are more self-caring practice being self-compassionate and make efforts to develop realistic self-views, which includes accurately attributing success to their own abilities and identifying realistic personal-development plans (Petersen, 2014). Practicing appreciation, demonstrating kindness, and integrating multiple activities that are rejuvenating throughout the day — such as 5 to 10 minutes of meditation, physical activity or stretching — represent additional self-care actions.

Nurturing Collective Gardens

There are continual opportunities for self-improvement, but these opportunities can become obscure due to external forces and lack of recognition. The work environment and relationships with peers represent powerful influences.

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**“Know Thyself”** – This ancient Greek aphorism is inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. Writing out (and periodically revising) a personal philosophy or mission statement can help with self-understanding. Knowing yourself and your purpose in life gives you direction. Why do you do what you do? What impact do you hope to have on the world and those you encounter? Knowing the answer to such questions can help keep you grounded and focused on the big picture. It also helps you understand how to prioritize and manage your time.

**Physiological** – To give the best of yourself, you have to take care of your own health and wellness needs (e.g., consuming adequate amounts of water, eating a wide variety of high-quality foods, getting sufficient sleep and rest, getting an appropriate amount of physical activity).

**Safety** – This involves ensuring your own personal safety and the safety of those you love and care for. It includes a range of basic needs, such as job security, and ensuring you have taken care of other important security needs (e.g., insuring assets and property, living within your means, saving for the future).

**Belonging and Love** – Fostering and maintaining healthy relationships with others (e.g., family, friends, mentors, coworkers, colleagues) can include professional affiliation, organizational involvement, and community engagement. Experiences create memories and memories bond people together.

**Esteem** – Developing new levels of competence and mastery by striving to be the best that you can be results in achievement and independence. These qualities may be recognized and appreciated by others, resulting in reputational status. Reputational status may result in opportunities to “give back” by mentoring others or assuming leadership positions.

**Cognitive** – To keep your mind active and fresh, seek out opportunities to obtain new knowledge and understanding (e.g., learn a new activity, skill, or sport; attend professional conferences; take classes; read books; write an op-ed or a newspaper, magazine or journal article).

**Aesthetic** – Attend to the natural beauty in the world around you, whether in nature or human made. Interacting with and caring for the natural and built environment around you allows you to see and experience nature’s splendor and the grandeur of human accomplishment. Moreover, human movement can be beautiful and physical performances can be miraculous. Allow yourself to be awe-inspired and share your enthusiasm and observations with your students and others in your life.

**Self-actualization** – Striving to realize your own human potential is self-fulfilling. Engaging in personal-growth activities and peak experiences gives value to your life. Set goals that are consistent with your personal philosophy or mission statement and strive to achieve them.

**Transcendence** – This is actually a centerpiece of being a true educator. It is the selfless act of helping others achieve their own self-actualization, including all of the necessary preliminary steps leading up to it. Be positive, optimistic and grateful for each and every opportunity that you are given, including the opportunity to share your life experiences and knowledge with others.

As such, they can be a positive source of professional affirmation and growth (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011). As professionals seek to nurture themselves, they have the opportunity to positively affect their work environment and the lives of others, too. Projecting and modeling positive attitudes and constructive behaviors are fundamental methods for being a positive role model in the lives of others (e.g., family, friends, colleagues, students). Joint projects and peer support can also serve as important forms of self-care, as they provide opportunities for self-directed and collaborative learning (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011).

### Conclusion

Underlying the constant and never-ending improvement philosophy is a sense of caring, which includes self-care. The 26th president of the United States was onto something when he said, “Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care” (Roosevelt, n.d.). It is important to attend to self-care, as self-care will allow a person to give the best of themselves to those in their charge and in the profession. This is important for all helping professions, especially those who teach others. Ginott’s (n.d.) words serve as a powerful reminder of this:

> I’ve come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It’s my personal approach that creates the climate. It’s my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized.

For each individual to see how well he or she is prioritizing self-care in their own life, we encourage the reader to complete an online assessment such as (a) http://healyourbest.com/wp-content/uploads/HYB-self-care-quiz.pdf, or (b) http://www.encouragingcoach.com/projects-selfcare-quiz.htm. Practical strategies that can help professionals be the best they can be, which will also help them help others live up to their maximum human potential, are highlighted in Table 1. Trying to implement everything in Table 1 all at once, even though it is not an exhaustive list, would be overwhelming and not a good self-care strategy. Rather, we encourage the reader to read Table 1 and try to identify an area where there is room for improvement to work on first. In time, additional areas can be worked on, all in the spirit of constant and never-ending improvement and self-care directed toward maximizing each individual’s human potential and being a positive influence in the lives of others.

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**References**


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**Bradley J. Cardinal (Brad.Cardinal@oregonstate.edu) is a professor in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences at Oregon State University in Corvallis, OR, and co-chair of the JOPERD Editorial Board. Iafra D. Thomas is a graduate teaching assistant and doctoral degree student in Kinesiology at Oregon State University in Corvallis, OR.**

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