

# SELF-CARE FOR LEADERS: MAKE RESTORATION A PART OF THE JOB

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For the last two decades, I've been an executive coach working with leaders in a variety of industries and roles. While my clients work for companies at different stages of growth, one commonality among them all is the feeling of walking a tight rope and the tension of wanting to make a difference and achieve big goals while managing the stress and accountabilities of today's leadership demands.

Most concerning is what appears to be an escalation of conditions that have made this tension more pronounced. We're living in a time of rapid change, when a frenetic pace and an overfull plate are the norm. Explicitly or implicitly, we're encouraged to work harder and faster—all while technology and industry disruption are evolving more quickly than ever. Much of how business is conducted today has created a greater risk for highly engaged leaders to fall into periods of disillusionment or ineffectiveness. As Jen Fisher, Deloitte's national managing director for well-being shares in her 2018 *Harvard Business Review* article, "How Managers Can Prevent Their Teams from Burning Out," a Deloitte survey of 1,000 full-time U.S. employees found that 77% had experienced burnout, even though 87% reported having "passion for their job." Among this latter group of highly engaged workers, 64% reported feeling frequently stressed.

So, if you are an engaged and high performing leader, how do you avoid the slippery slope of falling into career stall-out or burnout? How do you bring more restoration—periodic times for rest, recharging, and self-care—into a role and context characterized by high velocity and ferocity? These are questions that I explore in my forthcoming book, *The Leader You Want to Be: Five Essential Principles for Bringing out Your Best Self – Every Day* (Harvard Business Review Press, October 2019). As you consider your long-term sustainability on the job, here are a few areas to which you can bring more intentional focus:

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## *Reframe restoration as part of the job.*

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- Understand your natural energy cycle and align to it,
- Create a set of recharge rituals and weave them into your workflow, and
- Build an internal barometer for knowing “what’s enough.”

### Reframe Restoration as Part of the Job

Highly ambitious and successful professionals tend to be more self-critical, place greater demands on themselves, and generally feel an outsized pressure to succeed. Many leaders bear the weight of performance pressure and accountability more heavily than others. These are forces borne from within—our inner drives, natural inclinations, and motivating factors—and they’re often deep-rooted. As a result, many of us don’t feel we can give ourselves permission to ease up even a little bit. When I speak to leaders about self-care or restoration, they often share that somehow it feels selfish or too risky to change.

However, as your role or span of control grows, periodic down time becomes even more critical. One chief executive officer (CEO) I worked with put it beautifully: “Self-care is hardly some selfish thing—it’s actually part of the job.” I couldn’t agree more. Effective leadership requires an understanding of the conditions that cultivate our highest and best contributions and our deepest and most inspiring passions. In short, proper self-care and restoration means that you’re aware of and understand what

you need to be your most constructive, effective, and authentic self.

Further, the reality is that as a leader, having a good day versus a bad day impacts not only yourself but all the people you work and interact with as well. Team spirit, performance, and collaboration suffer as you telegraph stress or impatience onto teammates and loved ones. Self-care is not something we can squeeze in at the end of a long day or put off until we can get around to it. On the contrary, it’s an urgent *daily* responsibility whose importance can no longer be overlooked or underestimated.

### Understand Your Natural Energy Cycle and Align to It

Sustained performance requires a high level of focus and energy. Like a battery, it’s important to protect and restore that energy to remain your best self. Pending the level and duration of your engagement and focus, you want to be sure to create cycles for when you can also unplug and recharge.

Scientific evidence supports the value of this cyclical form of operating for mental and physical well-being as well as for our productivity. In Shawn Achor and Michelle Gielan’s 2016 *Harvard Business Review* article, “Resilience Is About How You Recharge, Not How You Endure,” the authors suggest that rather than trying to “tough it out” and power through the workday when we’re physically or mentally depleted, it’s better to stop, fully recover, and try again. Why does this approach work better than trying to “grin and bear it”? Because of the fundamental biological concept called homeostasis, our bodies’ ability to continuously restore and sustain well-being. Neuroscientist Brent Furl coined the term “homeostatic value” to describe the value that certain practices and actions have for creating and maintaining our equilibrium and well-being. “When the body is out of alignment from overworking,” explain Achor and Gielan, “we waste a vast amount of mental and physical energy trying to return to balance before we can move forward.” It’s therefore far better to give ourselves time to recover, and then, refreshed, return to our work with the battery recharged.

Energy flows differently within each person, and it's important to come to understand how to best care for yourself. Some of us operate at our best when we're paced in a smooth and steady way. Think of a light. "Steady as she goes" types prefer to hold the light at a continuous level of brightness—not too bright, not too dim at any given time. If this is you, then it's important that you have processes that ensure your best chance of having roughly the same workload and work flow each day. Further, because we'll all have occasional crunch times, your processes should build in adequate time for a recharge after a period of sprinting. Ideally, you'll want some down time *before* a period of intense work as well. Without processes that protect your energy flow, the steady as she goes leader runs the risk of fueling the burst of energy required for a sprint with anxiety and adrenaline, and then feeling exhausted and burned out once the task is done.

At the other end of the continuum are those professionals who are natural burst taskers. They derive energy and satisfaction from the hard drives required to push a deliverable over the finish line. They prefer to go all in, with all they've got. And when they are on, they are *on*—the light is at 110% brightness. They excel in a pinch and thrive in any situation that requires quick deliverables, fast results, or even a steep learning curve that would leave others dismayed. Then likewise when they're off, they're fully off. Burst taskers love the thrill of the deal, and once they've sealed the deal, they need to fully restore and recharge.

## Create a Set of Recharge Rituals and Weave Them Into Your Workflow

Understanding if you are a "steady as she goes" or "burst tasking" leader drives how often and when you might need recharge, but recovery can come in many forms. I encourage you to take more of a portfolio approach toward having a variety of ways to restore. Below are some of my favorites rituals that can be weaved into your current workflow.

## Breathing

In any given moment, we have an opportunity to create a natural cycle with our breath. One technique is a type of yogic breathing I learned when I trained for my yoga teacher certification. This practice is called 4-7-8 breathing, and it's especially great for those who are short on time—it takes exactly 1.5 minutes per day. One of the best demonstrations of this practice comes from Dr. Andrew Weil, a Harvard-trained physician and pioneer in the field of integrative medicine. Here's how it works:

- Inhale quietly through your nose for four seconds,
- Hold the breath for seven seconds,
- Exhale through the mouth for eight seconds, and
- Repeat for four breath cycles.

I've had clients report that 4-7-8 breathing helps them with insomnia, prepresentation jitters, general anxiety, and getting centered and present quickly.

## The Midweek Gas Tank Fill-Up

Like breathing, another natural cycle to look at is our sleep. No matter how much we have on our plate, we still need some level of sleep to function the next day. While 7–8 hours a night is recommended, I've seen friends and clients spend way too much time stressing about not getting as much sleep as they think they should.

Instead of trying to force yourself to get a solid eight every single night, develop a sleep ritual that is more realistic. For example, in my work with an executive in a demanding role, we came up with the "Mid-Week Gas Tank Fill-Up" ritual. Sometime midweek, he would get one or two nights of great sleep—8+ hours, which was significantly more than the 5–6 hours he normally got. He was excited to find that these one or two nights made a tremendous difference to his mental clarity and physical sense of well-being. A naturally hard charger, this executive had never valued sleep or naps as much as he did a cardio workout. However, as he began to reap the benefits of greater sleep, he began to give himself more permission on the weekends for

an occasional afternoon nap as another way to recharge his battery for the week to come.

## Productive on the Flight Out, Restorative on the Flight In

For those leaders who frequently travel, being on the road can also bring opportunity to cycle between high engagement and restoration. Two rules of thumb can be very helpful. On the way out to your destination, use the flight to be productive, such as reviewing important documents, engaging in strategic reflection, or moving the needle on a top-priority item. Then, on return flights, which often occur after a long day of meetings, give yourself permission to relax. Use this time to restore by listening to music, napping, or reading a book. If you're crunched for time, tighten up this ritual and do it for takeoff and landing when you can't have access to your computer.

## Time Zones and Home Zones

Given today's 24 × 7 nature of work, it's further critical to establish some clear boundaries around both your time and physical space.

- First, create “time zones” whereby you define the blocks of productive work time when you are at home. This way your personal time doesn't leak into work, and work doesn't leak into family time. Time zones can further help you communicate your availability to others both at work and on the home front or set their expectations about your level of presence and engagement.
- “Home zones” are equally important. These are physical spaces in your house you will go to—such as your home office or den—to get a little extra work done or crank through those emails. If you leave your electronics only in your designated home zones, you physically have to walk a distance to get to them. This is important given the psychological pull these devices have on us. By leaving electronics in a home zone, you are less likely to be tempted by them, and you're far more likely to be fully engaged in whatever you're doing at the moment. If you do succumb to temptation,

you at least slow down your reaction time, and with enough practice, you can break the habit of reflexively reaching for a device.

## Build an Internal Barometer for Knowing “What's Enough”

Even with a reframed mind-set and rituals in place, the reality is that restoration can still be difficult because there is always more to do than we have the hours in the day to do it. Sometimes we just can't help ourselves and lose vital track of how our work and choices are connected to passion, contributions, meaning, or progress. Instead, we find ourselves on a hamster wheel and despite our strenuous efforts, we don't get the results we hope for and we don't have a sense of internal satisfaction in what we're getting done.

Unfortunately, the benefits of doing more are usually short-lived. It may feel good temporarily to be needed by others, demonstrate that you have a high tolerance for stress, or relish the excitement of taking on something new. In a world of countless choice and everyone telling you that more is better, it's critical to set an internal barometer for what is enough. This is a completely subjective question with no single, concrete answer, but I think it's something that every leader must consider. It requires a fair amount of inner self-confidence and humility to know that what you are doing is enough and that you already are enough.

The key is to notice when you have hit a point of diminishing return. Observe, without judgment, all the places in your work and home life where you can identify a tipping point of going beyond “what's enough.” Here are some examples:

- Organizational or functional scorecards: What are the top three priorities?
- Last deliverable or work product: What was the right stopping point?
- Last networking event: What was enough?
- Family schedule: What are the most meaningful activities?

What's enough is different at different stages of life, and even from day to day. Only you know where that line is for yourself. But the practice of asking yourself what is enough is critical, as it is far too easy to allow our comparing minds to find external barometers for that answer. This requires that we stay fully present to ourselves, calibrating what is enough with self-compassion, and living with as much balance as we can. When life seems to be coming at us from all sides and we feel we've reached our maximum capacity, it can be a lifesaver to remember that what's truly enough is simply the one thing you need to do next.

## Conclusion

The truth is, we all will struggle from time to time and we all have days in which we regret how we responded to or handled something. Finite “clock” time will never go away, the work ahead will likely become more complex, difficulties and conflicts with other people are bound to crop up, and naturally, our organizations will continue to have their ups and downs. With these conditions in place, every professional I know—and certainly I include myself here—fluctuates between being their best self on a good day and being a more reactive, stressed version of themselves on other days.

The real danger is that if we are not aware, we can end up letting stress become our operating norm, becoming less effective and impacting our teams and organizations negatively. However, we have a better chance of sustaining and caring for our best selves by more consciously looking at reframing restoration as part of our jobs as leaders, honoring our natural energy cycles, aligning and creating rituals to weave into our natural work flow, and learning to set an internal barometer to know “what's enough.” Leadership will certainly bring its fair share of challenges, but it also presents at every moment an unparalleled possibility to learn, innovate, grow, mentor, and make a significant difference in the world. It presents the opportunity to care for your highest and best self so that you can create a greater lasting impact and make the difference you intend.

This article is adapted from the book *The Leader You Want to Be: Five Essential Principles for Bringing Out Your Best Self – Every Day* by Amy Jen Su (Harvard Business Review Press, October 2019).



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