



HER LEAD

As the clock ran out on 2018, I found myself exhausted. I was exhausted not just physically, but mentally and emotionally. I *looked* tired, something that helpful colleagues commented on with regularity in the months of November and December. I felt like I was drowning in terms of workload and was unable to check things off my list despite my best efforts. My office door was closed more often than it was open, a metaphor for how I was feeling overall. By the time I got home in the evenings, there was no energy left to dedicate to anything else. In short, I was displaying many of the [common symptoms of burnout](#).

As someone who's worked on issues related to gender-based violence for nearly 12 years, I am all too familiar with burnout and its close companions [secondary trauma and compassion fatigue](#). Burnout is a term that was coined to describe feeling hopeless, fatigued and overwhelmed from excessive workloads or unsupportive work environments. Burnout is not a mental health condition, although there are some shared symptoms with trauma. Rather, burnout is a reaction to chronic occupational stress often driven by both individual and organizational factors. Having been there before, I've developed a few tools to cope. So I decided it was time to brush off the old self-care tool box and give myself a tune up!

Thankfully, I had some time off work and some space to reset and breathe - a momentary pause before sprinting headlong into 2019. I started first by taking stock. I wanted to give myself a chance to reflect on 2018 and everything that had gone well before turning to the challenges I was facing. I reflected on the personal achievements - purchasing my first home with my long-time partner - as well as the professional - leading the development of a new, yearlong fellowship program - to try to reframe the hamster-in-a-wheel feeling that had obscured my accomplishments. "Dang," I thought to myself, "I've done a lot this year." Maybe there was a reason that I was feeling so spent as the year drew to an end!

Then, it was time to turn my attention to 2019. I've been in the habit of casually creating annual goals, but I've never been great about writing them down or holding myself accountable to them. This year, I decided that I would do just that. I needed to set goals at the beginning of the year that prioritized my wellness and could serve as the foundation for a self-care plan for the whole year. It felt daunting, but creating this list of goals has already started to help me lay the foundation for sustained wellness in 2019. Here are a few helpful steps I took and resources that I used along the way.

FOR 4 HELPFUL STEPS. KEEP READING



1. ASSES YOUR NEEDS

Developing a self-care plan can feel like an overwhelming task if you're anything like me. Thankfully, there are a lot of good resources out there, and there is no need to reinvent the wheel. I'm personally a fan of the [Self-Care Starter Kit](#) that the Buffalo School of Social Work put together. It's a compilation of resources organized by topic in step-by-step fashion.

As is the case with most things, the best way to start this endeavor is to assess what your needs are. There are plenty of tools out there to help you. There are [quick assessments](#) to help you think through self-care strategies that you may already be engaged in as well as [checklists and measures](#) designed to help you explore whether you may already be experiencing the effects of burnout or secondary trauma.

2. DEVELOP A PLAN

Once you have a sense of where you're at and what your needs are, it's time to put pen to paper. I've got a dedicated wellness notebook and that's where I've chosen to map out all of my self-care goals. However, there are a lot of different ways to approach developing a plan. Some people prefer a calendar or [chart-like format](#) and others prefer a [worksheet template](#). No matter how you choose to record your plan, there are some key components that should be included in any wellness plan:

- Physical wellness
- Mental wellness
- Emotional wellness
- Spiritual wellness
- Relationship wellness
- Professional wellness

There are some overlaps in these categories, of course. However, most wellness assessments and self-care plans will cover these or similar categories. If you're integrating this into a broader set of goals like I did, you may choose to layer in other goals that are related. For example, financial health impacts my mental health and also affects what types of activities I can incorporate into my self-care plan.

I have found that I need to be strategic in my planning to reduce barriers for myself and increase the likelihood of following through. One successful strategy that I've employed is to embrace self-care activities that allow me to meet multiple goals. Some of the goals included in my self-care plan right now are to spend more time outside, be more physically active and to mediate more. By listening to a guided mindfulness meditation while walking to work in the morning, I hit on several areas that benefit my wellness (outside, physical activity while mediating – boom!). I can concentrate my energy for one 20-minute walk and it produces a multitude of benefits, including starting my day off on a positive note.

Of course, boundaries and balance are a huge part of this, too, and warrant an entirely separate article. But I've found that by setting and prioritizing goals for myself, it's easier for me to enforce boundaries overall. For example, I've made a personal (and financial) commitment to dance class on Tuesdays, so I have to leave the office by a set time – no lingering at my desk until 7 p.m.



I have also fully embraced technology as a tool to promote my wellness, including options that are low and no-cost. Here are a few of the tools that I use regularly.

- iPhone Health app – This is a standard feature for all iPhones, though few people who I know use it. Many Android phones also come with a standard health app. If you don't have the cash to buy a Fitbit (or simply don't like the aesthetic of wearable wellness technology) you can use this app to track your steps and integrate other free apps to help track nutrition, mindfulness and sleep all in one place. I always have my phone on me, so I use this to track my steps each day.
- MyFitnessPal – I downloaded this app for free last year to help me track my nutritional intake and help me work toward my physical health goals. Through the app you can track food intake and physical activity. You can also set goals, check out healthy recipes and explore the myriad of wellness articles offered through the app. The progress tracker was a huge motivator for me and allowed me to visualize the tangible outcome of my efforts!
- Calm – I initially downloaded the free version of this app, though I ultimately sprang for the paid version (about \$60/year) because I enjoyed the app so much. Calm includes guided meditations, sleep stories, calming music and more to help you achieve self-determined goals that you develop when you create your account. You can focus on things like improving sleep, reducing anxiety and increasing happiness among others. If you download it, try out the “Love Letter to Africa” sleep story.

- Yoga with Adriene (YWA) – [YWA](#) is hosted by Adriene Mishler, a certified yoga teacher from Austin, TX. About 90 percent of the content offered through her website is free, including a seemingly endless number of YouTube videos to help guide your at-home yoga practice! I stumbled across this after struggling to find a yoga studio home in Washington DC, partly because it was cost-prohibitive. Adrienne's videos provide the appropriate level of guidance for me while allowing me to choose my own yoga adventure. She's also leading a free 30-day yoga challenge to kick off 2019, which made my 2019 self-care goal list (it's not too late to join!). In addition to the website and YouTube channel, there is also a free, complementary app that you can download to take part in the broader global community of YWA loyalists. I've found that the sense of community through the app helps to fill the void of the yoga studio community that's missing from my at-home yoga practice.

Beyond the tools listed here, there are tons of free and low-cost products out there that can help to support your own wellness plan!

3. INTEGRATE ACCOUNTABILITY

The same day that I wrote my 2019 self-care goals, I shared them with my partner. Since then, I've shared many of my goals with my friends, family and co-workers. Part of holding myself accountable is letting other people know what I'm doing to create a little external pressure to maintain my wellness. However, accountability can come in many forms – including systems of self-reward, visual aids to reflect your progress or joining a group of people working toward similar goals (like a running group or the online yoga community I mentioned above). Reflect on what's worked well for you in the past, and consider what checks and balances will be most effective for you.

4. CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF

I have a tendency to overcommit myself, even when it comes to self-care. That means that I have to get real with myself sometimes about balancing all the goals I set out. It's not self-care if the list of wellness tasks is so overwhelming that it becomes another stressor. So instead of holding myself accountable to completing a 30-day yoga challenge and starting a new dance class and walking to and from work every day and going to the gym, I've reorganized. I've already started my 12-week dance class and the 30-day yoga challenge (almost halfway there!). So while I finish the 30-day yoga challenge, I'll cut myself some slack on some of the other activities. I'll do my best to get my 10,000 steps in every day, but it's okay if I don't go to the gym or walk to work every day. Once my yoga challenge is over, I'll give myself permission to reassess and shift some of the other items back to the top of the wellness priority list.

As you begin your self-care journey, don't forget to be kind to yourself along the way! At the end of the day - as cliché as it sounds - self-care and wellness are not a destination, but a lifelong journey, so there's always a chance to try again tomorrow.

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