

Self Care for Educators: A Review

Freytag, C.E. & Shotsberger, P. (Eds.). (2022). *Self Care for Educators: Soul-Nourishing Practices to Promote Wellbeing*. Freedom's Hill Press. 191 pages.

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INTRODUCTION

Drawing from their experiences as educators and administrators and a deep conviction that many teachers and educational leaders need self and soul care, editors Cathy Freytag and Paul Shotsberger offer a volume of essays that share the unique insights of over a dozen contributors. There are many books and papers on self-care, however, few are directed to educators and fewer yet to Christian educators. This book is unique in the breadth of topics covered including all stages of teaching from novice to mid-career to retiree. Whether new to the topic of self-care, or well-read, this book has much to say to the Christian educator. It is full of strategies for those looking to increase the balance of self-care in their professions. *Self Care for Educators* is a 191-page book with ten chapters written by sixteen authors. Many authors shared their first-hand experiences as educators and how they balance caring for others and caring for themselves. The main theme of the book is that responsible self-care starts with God. Coming to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ is the most important self-care step we can make.

SELF-CARE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS

The first chapter, “Extravagant or Essential: Self Care for Endurance in Education,” defines compassion fatigue as being depleted, taxed, and having a diminished capacity to help others. It is an antecedent to sleeplessness, frustration, withdrawal from others, and engaging in self-destructive behaviors. Responses fall into five self-care domains including the physical (e.g., nutrition and exercise), emotional (e.g., focusing more on me this year), social (e.g., a focus on relationships), cognitive (e.g., thinking and reflection) and spiritual (e.g., prayer, meditation, and worship). These methods are explained via a vignette of an individual dealing with compassion fatigue.

The second chapter, “Embodying and Modeling Healthy Self Care in Teacher Education,” tells the reader that responsible self-care starts with God. The purpose of self-care is to enable us to care for others more effectively. Self-care is also about setting boundaries, partly to have time for God in our lives. This time includes keeping the Sabbath, prayer, reading Scripture and meditation.

The next chapter, “How Leaders and Organizations Can Support Educator Self Care Practices,” looks beyond the teacher, disagreeing that self-care is strictly the teacher’s responsibility, and defines a supportive organizational structure to encourage and support self-care. The author presents a well-researched section on ways organizations can create a culture that supports a caring environment where caregivers and care receivers flourish.

Chapter 4, “Self Care for Leaders,” deals with the leader’s unique needs such as a lack of significant others who understand their positions and with whom they can share pressures, conflicts, and issues (e.g., academic politics, union stances). A leader manages and cares for those they lead and must also care for themselves.

In “Self Care for Higher Education Faculty,” survey data used by the author indicate that the population studied (non-Christian colleges/universities) did not appear to give priority to spiritual self-care, preferring other practices such as participation in physical activity and/or escapism in television and/or games. However, this survey provided some insight into preferred self-care methods used by such faculty and included exercise, human interaction, spiritual practices, and escape. The spiritual practices mentioned included mindfulness, church attendance, participation in Celebrate Recovery, meditation, scripture reading, and praying with children at home. Interestingly, the author found many of the non-spiritual activities, such as exercise, were not restorative.

“Caring for Self and Others in the Online Community” is based on a literature review. Interviews with online faculty at two private higher education institutions are included,

and the focus was on specific stressors of online teaching. The authors believe faculty may unknowingly contribute to their stress in how they design the courses they are teaching online. For example, a healthy recommended practice is not having course assignment due dates all fall on the same day of the week.

In the next chapter, “Self Care for Novice Teachers,” the authors look at the unique situation of new teachers (first five years), the ways they are stressed, and the high rates of attrition experienced. Stressors include long hours without adequate compensation, working in low performing schools, frustration with student results, and the lack of preparatory education for the realities of a teaching career. The authors cited research showing teachers with high coping skills were associated with lower behavioral problems among their students and higher academic performance.

In Chapter 8, “Creating Space for Self Care for K–12 Educators,” the authors focus on K-12 educators and their communities, drawing on surveys to present evidence of teacher stress. Stressors include changes associated with distance learning, hybrid classes, curriculum changes, and new software. Strategies for dealing with the stressors include making time for self-care practices, setting boundaries on when one’s workday begins/ends, shutting down the computer, avoiding emails, and giving oneself grace for what they can accomplish.

In “The Liturgy of the Lesson Plan: Life and Work as Spiritual Discipline,” the author defines self-care as God feeding our souls in the workplace allowing us to work and grow spiritually, pointing us toward Him. While some chapters in this book have viewed self-care as an “outside the workplace” activity in which to engage, this chapter looks at self-care IN the workplace. Here spiritual self-care is reified during the activities of the workday including the classroom. God is present during (and is part of) all activities of the day. The author provides examples of how one can practice the presence of God in the workplace.

The concluding chapter, “Care in the Transition Decade” defines the transition decade as the last years of teaching and the first years of retirement. The author’s literature review found educators who flourished in their late career had adopted four postures early on, including an institutional orientation (i.e., being part of something larger than themselves), a community orientation (i.e., being part of a congregation), vocational orientation (i.e., being called to teach) and spiritual orientation (i.e., following a pattern of prayer, worship, and reflection).

DISCUSSION

As an educator at a Christian university, I found this book fascinating and revealing. Christian business faculty face many of the same issues as other educators. Trying to find a biblical book on self-care which focuses on educator issues, in a seemingly endless ocean of self-care titles is challenging. I was impressed with the research the authors cited for their chapters. Support for their chapters came from numerous peer-reviewed journals and contained 278 citations. While there is abundant research on self-care as an intervention for compassion fatigue and burnout, there is little from the Christian/Biblical worldview.

This book stands out by including spiritual, in addition to the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive self-care solutions. The Christian perspective is supported by 25 scripture references, which I found to be insightful and uplifting. For example, the first chapter draws on 1 Peter 5:7 (New International Version) “cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you,” and includes spending time with spiritual mentors, being active in one’s faith community, small group meetings, embracing gratitude and walking in nature. Another example comes from Matthew 22:37-39, “He said to him, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.” Here a failure to care for self as one cares for their neighbor is seen as a failure to fully obey. It is this unique perspective that makes the book an uplifting read for Christian Business professors.

Overall, I found the scriptures and reference sections for each chapter a valuable resource for learning more about the ideas presented. While several citations were not peer-reviewed research papers, many were, each with its own reference section. Additionally, I like how the authors ended their chapters with a short “discussion section,” encouraging the reader to apply the concepts talked about in the chapter and to facilitate discussion in book clubs.

The book ends with Chapter 10; however, I think a general conclusion of the entire ten chapters would be an interesting and needed addendum. Many of the authors apply specific definitions of self-care to the areas on which they focused. Readers may find it difficult to see a common definition because of this specific focus. The definition concerns could be addressed in the introduction or a conclusion, including providing a general definition.

Life is demanding, and it is too easy to spend one’s life pursuing career goals, all the while ignoring God, family, and friendships. Further, in pursuing urgent issues in life, devo-

tional times become negotiable, worship time is replaced with online options, and it is occasionally skipped altogether. For many of us, Sunday has devolved into a day for getting additional work done or has become crammed with projects and activities. The advice found in this book is needed as we all know people who have ignored their own health to their detriment through sedentary lifestyles, poor diets, and ignoring their doctor's advice.

One would expect repetition in a book compiled from the writings/submissions of the number of authors who contributed. Many chapters include the common self-care domains of the spiritual, emotional, physical, and relational; however, what is different is how they are applied, with certain domains receiving primacy and in-depth coverage. These applications of the self-care domains include interactions with self-care agency and gender. Some of the authors point out alternative and mal-adaptive ways of coping with compassion fatigue, stress, and burnout. These ways include the negative coping strategies such as the use of alcohol/drugs, gluttony, overspending, pornography, and promiscuity. The authors highly disapprove of such behaviors as they lead to separation from the Lord. Self-care's ultimate purpose is to be good stewards of our souls, to love others, and give glory to God. Jesus is the true source of our spiritual, emotional, physical, and relational health.

This book reflects a Christian worldview from the reader's initial perspective. The subject areas of secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout may lead individuals to realize the limitations of secular methods and the philosophies they are relying upon. For those interested in the spiritual strategies, the book lacks a direct call to a relationship with Christ. As a Christian, I ask whether an unchurched individual could come to faith in Jesus by reading the book. I believe seeking God's presence, repentance and coming to faith in Jesus is the most important form of self-care one can take. Taking our self-care responses/actions to Jesus in prayer honors Him.

As part of the education sphere, I enjoy serving others. I realize a significant number of my peers in academia feel overwhelmed with balancing their teaching loads, scholarship expectations, advising, and service for institutions and communities. Educators can experience compassion fatigue when they are passionate about serving others and need to take time to recharge and continue serving with their best selves. Since the pandemic started, many of us isolated ourselves for months, and we have longed for meaningful connections with others and balance for our inner strengths. Organizations like the Christian Business Faculty Association provide these opportunities. For many, spiritual practice alone and with others helps handle this chronic stress. We

experienced a global economic downturn, political and supply chain challenges, weather changes, society becoming more online and asynchronous, and so forth, on top of the COVID pandemic. In times such as these, it is more important than ever to proactively focus on self-care and spiritual practice so we can continue to fulfill our mission to serve.

CONCLUSION

Self Care for Educators was a truly nourishing read. Spiritual interventions were the strongest solutions presented in the chapters. As an educator facing a busy semester, this text helped me to think differently about self-care and its importance in my life. I not only have a different view of what self-care means, but I walked away with practical strategies about how to make space for things that fill me physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I would recommend this book to my stressed-out colleagues.

REFERENCES

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