How can you care for yourself as much as you care for others?

With the challenges of day-to-day work and life, tending to yourself can seem trivial, even self-indulgent.

After all, you’re busy. You have families to serve, bills to pay and a business to manage. You feel guilty for missing family events and can’t imagine adding one more item to your full schedule. You feel grateful for the opportunity to serve families at their most vulnerable time but wonder why you’re so exhausted.

It’s extremely easy as a funeral director to overlook yourself, especially when you’re accustomed to prioritizing the needs of others over your own.

“No matter how much you enjoy and value your work life, your life is multi-faceted. Your family, your friends, your interests and your spirituality also deserve your time and attention,” explained Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., grief educator and director for the Center of Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado.

The first step to self-care is to recognize the importance of tending to yourself when you have imbalances in your life. Being a steward for your own care allows you to serve your clients better, be more present for your family, and most importantly, bring happiness to yourself.

“Without self-care, you may have higher burnout, health issues, and less fulfillment. You’re susceptible to more mistakes and increases in poor judgement,” says New Hampshire therapist and grief counselor Ashley Davis Bush.

Clients can tell when you are not physically, emotionally and spiritually available. “People are sensitive to your capacity to be with them. If drained, you will not be present at a time when they need and deserve your full attention,” Wolfelt said.

“When you’re able to show up, be present, listen, open your heart and connect soul to soul, it’s a win-win,” Bush said.

But how do you make self-care a priority?

You must set the intention to care for yourself. To stay balanced in a busy world takes discernment, compassion toward yourself and the ability to choose peace-inducing rather than stress-inducing activities.

Bush advocates micro self-care practices, which are simple daily tasks to nurture, protect, and heal yourself. They are small but effective — especially when you have limited time and energy. These practices can improve your mood, decrease your emotional reactivity and increase your mind-body awareness.

Start small and use strategies that work for your situation. Below are effective self-care tools to get you started:

Use micro self-care practices. Plan for your day by caring for yourself upon waking, starting your work, supporting clients, and ending your day. Bush suggests following a template to weave restorative self-care into your routine:

1) Begin your morning with a mantra, such as “I am enough” or “I go with the flow.”
2) When you arrive at the office, reaffirm your purpose for your work. Complete this statement: “I do this work because…”
3) As you start working with a family, ground yourself by becoming fully present and aware of your body and surroundings.
4) During the day, reset and relax your mind. Use a 4-7-8 breath. Inhale through your nose to the count of four. Hold your breath to the count of seven. Exhale for the count of eight.
At the end of the day, reflect upon three things you're grateful for about your employment, whether your supportive colleagues, understanding boss, peaceful facility or ability to serve your higher purpose.

In addition to daily practices, ongoing self-care is essential due to the intensity of your job. Facing loss each day, especially the aftermath of traumatic, sudden deaths, can leave you at risk for loss overload. Compassion fatigue, which is empathy erosion for clients, or vicarious trauma, which is a shift in your worldview after working with people who have experienced trauma, can occur.

Even if your employer does not emphasize self-care at your work, view it as your responsibility to seek it out and build it into your day and life. Acknowledge and take care of your own need to grieve and heal. You can use the practical self-care tools below to outwardly express your job-related stress, emotions, and sorrow in order to enhance well-being.

Use a support person regularly. Whether a spouse, partner, friend or colleague you need to debrief, share your grief, and discuss how work impacts you. “Some client funerals will hit closer to home based on the story surrounding the death, your past experiences, or history,” Bush explained.

Start a journal. Use a journal to release thoughts and emotions. Be honest, vulnerable, and authentic in your entries. Anyone who serves mourners can feel anxiety, irritability, or sadness. By shutting out those feelings, you may risk sinking into emotional numbness. “Journaling clarifies what you are thinking and feeling, creates a safe place to express yourself, examines any stress you are feeling, and transforms it into something survivable,” Wolfelt said.

Use a daily ritual. Use the power of ritual to restore yourself. “Rituals can make you feel more in control when you are experiencing anxiety or being out of control. For example, a meditation ritual can foster more restful sleep, lower your blood pressure, improve your immune system, increase your ability to concentrate, calm your mind and stimulate your overall feeling of well-being,” Wolfelt noted.

Give yourself space. Use a quiet place to retreat each day for about 10 to 15 minutes. Here, you can continue to process feelings, release grief and be alone with your thoughts. You do not need to edit or judge your feelings – just be wherever you are. When you let your guard down and allow emotions to surface, you invite feelings to flow through you, including the painful aspects you normally want to avoid.

“You can love what you do, enjoy serving a greater purpose and also take care of yourself at the same time. Do not allow your work life as a funeral director to totally define you,” Wolfelt stressed.

“It’s never too late to care for yourself and honor yourself as a precious instrument for your work,” Bush added.

Focus on the benefits, set the intention, accept the responsibility and take action to care for yourself. You are deserving of the same love and attention you give to others.

RECOMMENDED READING


“Companioning You! A Soulful Guide to Caring for Yourself While You Care for the Dying and the Bereaved,” Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., Companion Press.


Caregiver Blessing

May you be moved by passion and enthusiasm for your work.
May you deeply believe you deserve self-care.
May you replenish yourself daily.
May inspiration be a guiding compass to your days.
May you know you are a bright light in a world that needs your presence.
May you be an instrument of help and healing.
And may your cup overflow so that there is plenty to share.

– Ashley Davis Bush