

Taking better care of
yourself doesn't always
mean a major life overhaul.

Small steps can make
a big difference
over time.

Small Steps, **Giant Gains** in Self-Care

BY DEBBIE MANDEL

We bring to our work certain assumptions. If we've been doing it for a long time, we don't expect to have the initial enthusiasm. We periodically feel disenchanting, depleted, and undervalued. We often return home after a day of professional caregiving to be a caregiver. We are often out of balance because we have set aside little time for self-care.

Daily Stressors

Frieda Tawil, MSW, director of young adults and special events at a New York community center, tries to do her best wearing many hats at work and at home with four children and a husband. "I work with a demanding community who wants all its needs to be met—now. I'm an internal person, so I sort things out privately in the car (no radio) or I visit the supermarket before I go home, walk down the aisles, and figure things out. Then I go home to my family and smile," she says.

Paula Van Doren, LCSW, feels that the most stressful part of her California-based practice involves interpreting state law about reporting domestic violence and the "duty to warn," in addition to the ethical considerations. Her colleague recently left her job because she couldn't handle similar responsibilities. "Sometimes my caseload accompanies me home. When that happens, I don't give my children, husband, or friends the best of me because I don't want to talk and I don't have a great way to get over it," she says. During a work break, Van Doren takes a walk to get out into the sun and world, and "that does me a world of good," she says. Van Doren also tries to take spinning classes and resets her mood with her favorite workout—swinging dancing.

As caregivers, we often find it difficult to give up control and just flow, especially when we are so good at giving advice—do we take our own? We feel stressed, sick, and tired because we have lost our core identity. No matter how accomplished we are, if we feel negative and fatigued, it is a sure sign that we are out of balance with our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. Perhaps we have become addicted to stress or performance.

Physical Pain Can Symbolize Emotional Stress

John Sarno, MD (professor of rehabilitation medicine at New York University Medical Center), and Christiane Northrup, MD (obstetrician/gynecologist and founder of The Center for Women's Empowerment), suggest that our body emits signals to help us decode our uneasiness. According to Sarno and Northrup, when we become aware of symptoms of stress such as a backache, stomachache, or headache, we can interpret the pain or discomfort based on which body part is afflicted—where our anxiety has lodged. We can understand the emotional problem and correct it. For example:

- Upper back pain suggests that we shoulder too many responsibilities.
- A pain in the mid-back suggests a lack of support.
- A stomachache may mean that our egos are on the line.
- Joint pains imply the fear of moving forward.
- Skin eruptions point to anger.
- A headache suggests overanalyzing.

Our bodies remind us to withhold a part of our intuitive empathy for ourselves. Consider this image of a screen door to manage stress levels: A screen door keeps the flies out and lets the fresh air in. We don't have to open the door to everyone.

Exercise Control

Exercise helps us restore focus and decompress, to return to ourselves and find balance in an unstable medium. Simply put, activity often alleviates anxiety. In fact, calibrating exercise intensity with our stress levels resets balance. So, if we are inundated with administrative duties or feel like we let a patient down, working up a good sweat will take the edge off as opposed to a short walk that may not counterbalance the day's tensions.

In particular, strength training the body helps us mind each working muscle and feel our bodies. Tapping into our muscles enables us to infuse them with our spirit. We probably don't realize how profound an impact it is to move our muscles purposely. If we are not concentrating because we are speaking on a cell phone, or lost in our thoughts executing a movement sloppily, then this loose mind will carry over into our daily lives. However, if we are focused, making each movement count, we will see this level of concentration transfer to our relationships and careers. We will truly listen to other people, instead of waiting to speak.

At the very least, strength training will help empower and distract us from our worries and bring us into our core. When we fortify our core, we are centered and stable. Everything emanates from a strong core—our arms and legs are as strong as our core like the branches of a tree are as strong as the trunk to which they are attached. In training as in life, stability first, then mobility. If we know what we bring to the table, we do not need applause or recognition.

For example, consider how many lower body muscles we recruit when we execute a basic squat: ankles, calves, quadriceps, hamstrings, glutes, hips, and abdominals—our whole lower body. In this compound movement, we are building bone mass and strengthening our legs. Consider the basic push-up, a total upper body move: Abdominals, biceps, triceps, and pectorals working to help us push off the ground and open our hearts. You could do chair squats and wall push-ups in your office in only five minutes and feel refreshed.

Food Affects Our Mood

Another benefit of focused exercise is that it helps us organize our day around good health. When we work out, we are less likely to eat impulsively, angrily, or emptily. Instead, we balance our meals with complex carbohydrates, protein, fiber, and nutrient-dense fruits and vegetables. Judith Wurtman, PhD, a research scientist at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and director of Harvard University's TRIAD Weight Management Center, discovered that the order in which we eat our food affects our temperament and mind. Eating complex carbohydrates first raises our serotonin levels. Eating proteins first helps with intellectually demanding tasks. We know stimulants, such as caffeine, sugar, alcohol, etc., will keep us awake at night. Less obvious foods that keep us tossing and turning are eggplant, tomatoes, spinach, ham, and cheese (tyramines). Yogurt, turkey, bananas, figs, dates, tuna, and whole grain crackers contain tryptophans to induce sleep. What we eat affects us day and night.

What is important in any stress-management/health program is to treat the total self. Consider the symbol of living in a four-room house and visiting each room—the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual rooms—every day. Visiting the physical room involves awareness of energy drains and boosters such as sleep,



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food, water, exercise, and environmental toxins. In the emotional room, we evaluate boundaries and dreams, asking ourselves, "How does it feel?" "Do we love our work enough?" An overall feeling of love for our work keeps us there and overrides the burden of routine tasks. In the intellectual room, we learn from others every day and we are not always right. In the spiritual room, we realize that a smile can generate positive energy or a good joke.

The Kaizen Method: Small Changes for the Better

How do we break our addiction to stress, performance, and the need to be busy? I am fascinated by the success of many Japanese companies and teach their principles in my stress-management groups. The secret—they use the Kaizen management concept for gradual, continuous improvement. Literally, *kai* means change; *zen* means to become good. Kaizen is built on the willingness to change, using small steps to improve every aspect of life constantly. It is process-oriented—in contrast to Western business concepts

of radical innovation and fast results.

Deborah Lewis, LCSW, assistant director of social work, works in a suburban hospital where the clients—chronically and terminally ill and older adults—show little or no improvement. "We are discharge planners, trained to look at length of stay and push an effective and efficient plan in place for life after the hospital, a bit impersonal—hard for a social worker." Lewis focuses on the smallest positive changes she and her staff make—getting her patients services when they leave the hospital. "Although we can't see that, the effect is endless." Lewis happens to be a champion martial artist. Her exercise, like her work, is process oriented. Her hospital, South Nassau Communities Hospital in New York, won a statewide Certificate of Merit for a psychologically healthy workplace.

If we apply Kaizen to manage our personal lives, we can transform our failures and regrets into successes. Success comes at different moments in life and is rarely spread evenly during a lifetime. Often, we are so intimidated by failure that we never try to become all we want to be. We are afraid to

make fools of ourselves. However, when we risk nothing, we gain nothing. The secret of success is the dogged determination to succeed—not the determination to avoid failure. Using Kaizen thinking, rather than worrying about quick and dramatic results, we move slowly with discipline and awareness. Eventually, change becomes part of our mindset.

Kaizen in Action

Linda Katz, MSW, LCSW, a New York City school-related service provider, felt frustrated with "...history repeating itself in the projects. Kids are not given a fair chance, yet I feel guilty about removing a child from a home with an unavailable mother. Sometimes I try to make it better, but I fear that I have made it worse. I want to take all the children home with me to at least give them a good foundation." Attending a number of my Kaizen workshops, Linda eases up on herself and sets smaller goals and more realistic expectations. On her schedule at the end of the day is some form of exercise, whether it is a body pump class at the gym or a jog, to sweat out her day. She calls friends for support, mostly her

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school secretary, who dispenses pearls of practical wisdom. "Basically, I love my work and now accept that any little thing I do during a home visit makes a small change—the point is the child feels the connection. I make a difference down the road. And even if I can no longer visit the family, I can keep in touch through other professionals like the physical therapist who will let me know about the child. It's not just about what I can do; there's a team member who can pick up the ball."

Kaizen stresses teamwork and that to succeed we must ask for help. This includes suggestions for improvements. When we hear criticism or things don't work out, we change what we are doing, cut our losses. Kaizen is nonjudgmental, leading us to determine what is wrong, not who is wrong. Criticism polishes our mirrors. Substitute the word *critique* for criticism. Critique is more gentle and soft.

Because there is no judgment, we can work better with others without worrying about our performance being rated. Kaizen is actually a form of good housekeeping that includes organization, efficiency, and team-

work. Everyone strives to communicate better when speaking and listening. The key is mutual recognition of kindness, fairness, sensitivity, and loyalty.

Ultimately, the Kaizen process leads to higher quality. This does not necessarily mean the applause we get, but the personal pride we take in what we do whether it is cleaning the house, writing a report, or beautifully finishing the back of a furniture piece to be placed against the wall. It's about caring when no one is looking.

Simple Solutions

When we make the conscious effort to take small, patient steps, we open ourselves up to others striving for quality and integrity; we shed our skin to reveal a fresh vitality. Try to apply Kaizen principles making healthy dietary and physical fitness changes. Don't diet or exercise like a weekend warrior. Change one unhealthy eating habit every few weeks or incorporate daily five minutes of exercise for awhile, then increasing two minutes more — all stress-free and sustainable. It takes roughly 21 days to change a habit.

Suggestions to improve your daily life with Kaizen include the following:

- When you feel overwhelmed by stress or criticism, ask yourself, "So what?"
- Always express your appreciation to others.
- When there is too much to do at work and you feel like you are not doing enough for your clients, remember that little things can matter greatly.
- Maintain your work/life balance. If your life is chaotic at home, it will reflect itself at work and vice versa. If something shakes you up, think about why and begin to change by slowly evaluating each step of the way.
- Let go of past mistakes. Sometimes we hold on to them because they define us and make us feel secure in some strange way. Be willing to move forward slowly because past mistakes make you inefficient and waste your talent.

— Debbie Mandel is the author of *Changing Habits: The Caregivers' Total Workout* and runs a stress-management Web site: www.turnonyourinnerlight.com.