



## WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Jim Knight

Three simple things can help us to have better self-care: purpose, healthy habits, and compassion.

## TAKE TIME FOR SELF-CARE

We are experiencing at least five major disruptions simultaneously: a global pandemic, fears about the economy, a national reckoning about racism, divisive rhetoric from Washington, and, if we work in schools, a deep uncertainty about what it is that we actually do as professionals and how, as schools navigate between remote, hybrid, and face-to-face instruction.

All of these changes, whether they have potential for good or not, involve the stress inherent to change. That is why now, more than at any time in our lives, educators must do something that doesn't come naturally to us: We must take the time needed to take care of ourselves. Three simple things can help us to have better self-care: purpose, healthy habits, and compassion (for others and, perhaps more importantly, ourselves).

### PURPOSE

Sometimes, the most important thing we can do in challenging times is just to remind ourselves of the purpose that brought us to school in the first place. Remembering that purpose can help us persevere when the situation is stressful like it is now.

Richard Leider, a life coach and author, has interviewed hundreds of people over the age of 65, asking them to look back and identify what they wish they had done differently in their lives. During those interviews, Leider heard so much about purpose that he wrote a book about the topic, *The Power of Purpose* (1997).

What Leider learned is that, "without purpose, we eventually lose our way. We live without the true joy in life and work. Until we make peace with our purpose, we will never discover fulfillment in our work or contentment with what we have" (p.4).

One way we can reflect on our purpose is to consider the four questions at the heart of the Japanese concept of "ikigai," which can be understood as "the reason we get up in the morning" (García & Miralles, 2016, p. 9): What do I love to do? What does the world need? What can I get paid for? What am I good at? I have found it to be very worthwhile to take time

to reflect on these questions and journal my answers until I get clearer and clearer on my purpose.

In education, aligning our work with our purpose is often less about discovering and more about remembering. The day-to-day rush of urgent tasks that must be done can keep us so busy that we forget why education matters and what difference we make.

Purpose is particularly important right now when educators face challenges they've never experienced before, like learning a host of new technological tools and instructional approaches and navigating health concerns. Purpose can get us through.

### HEALTHY HABITS

We have all thought about healthy habits. We make resolutions and take initial steps, but eventually fall back into our old patterns of behavior. We blame ourselves for not changing and then feel even worse. Research shows that we fail to change not because of a lack of discipline,



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but because we lack a structure for our behavior change. Willpower by itself does not get the job done. What we need is a habit.

What distinguishes our habits is that, once they are established, we pretty much do them without thinking. Each of us has habits, good and bad. We brush our teeth, get ready in the morning, and drink our morning coffee, all without thinking. Some habits are good, like working out after school, and some are bad, like drinking a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc every night while reading the news on Twitter.

To take care of ourselves, we need to harness the structure of habits to entrench the behaviors that lead to healthier lives. We need to develop a simple routine that we can easily repeat, ideally doing the exact same actions every day at the same time.

We should alter our context as best as we can to ensure it supports our new habit. If we stick with our habit long enough, perhaps 90 days or more, we can develop something that sticks (Wood, 2019), especially if those behaviors are small and simple (Fogg, 2020).

One good place to start is getting enough sleep. Lack of sleep makes us less intelligent, grumpier, less productive, and more likely to gain weight (Stevenson, 2016). Unfortunately, when you are worried about your family's health, or your economic well-being, or whether structural racism puts your child at risk, or the upcoming election, sleep doesn't always come easily.

Luckily, there are a few simple hacks anyone can do to improve the quality of sleep, including keeping your smart phone outside your bedroom,

spending time in the sunshine every day, avoiding caffeine in the afternoon, exercising, and going to bed at the same time every night. Better sleep leads to a better life and a better capacity for taking on the specific unique challenges of this time.

## COMPASSION

The challenges, opportunities, and uncertainties of this particular time in history zap our personal resilience, and this means many of us are not at our best. People are upset because their partner has just lost his or her job, or worried about their mother's health, or angered by the latest offensive political tweet. These exceptional times will lead to exceptional, and not always positive, behavior.

To support others, we need to be compassionate, understanding the emotions and needs of others, moving through our own mental barriers so we can demonstrate empathy, and acting on our understanding of others. That includes understanding that when people lash out because of frustration or fear, it's often not personal.

Of course, you are likely already extending a lot of compassion to others. But you might not be treating yourself with compassion. Self-criticism can lead us to say horrible things about ourselves (often silently to ourselves) that we would never say to someone else (Neff, 2011). If we are committed to effectively taking care of others, we need to start by taking care of ourselves.

To overcome self-criticism, we first need to recognize it, and then start to extend to ourselves the compassion we extend to others. This may involve letting go of the need to compete with others, being kind to

ourselves, being mindful, and setting reasonable expectations for what we can accomplish right now.

I don't want to suggest that taking care of yourself is just a matter of adopting a happy frame of mind. Many people are suffering today because they cannot pay for the health care they need or because they are experiencing racist or gender-based systems designed to hold them back. Part of self-care involves working to create systems that are safer, healthier, and more humane. That should be a challenge we all take on.

Today, as we face all of these challenges, I am comforted by the knowledge that people are resilient. We will get through this together. But three simple things can make our getting through easier — reminding ourselves of our purpose, developing healthy habits, and being compassionate toward others and ourselves.

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