

Give Yourself a Break: Self-Care in the Time of Pandemic

In this time of pandemic, we are intensely caring for our families, our clients, our company, and our careers—and in some cases even schooling our children at home, or caring for loved ones and neighbors. We are giving 110% to everything at once. Many of us have become adept at this, working virtually, leading meetings remotely, hurtling forward day-after-day.

But too often we are not caring for *ourselves*. Though we are strong, leading the way daily, our minds and bodies need breaks too.

ALULA has worked as a virtual company for years, so we've learned a lot about staying healthy in "the virtual life"—physically, mentally, and emotionally. Here's some advice, especially for those who may not be accustomed to working from home.

How much is too much?
You can't work 18/7 (for long).
Yet, some of us do, compelled by our workload, our passion, our commitment. But it's not healthy for your body, mind, or relationships. Yes, some will take advantage of you "always being there," and not respect your time, but the bigger risk is that <i>you</i> will take advantage of you! You're an expert on management, so manage yourself! It is essential to set boundaries—and maintain them.
But I have so much to do!
Yes, you do, but you can't do it all, or all at once. Seize control of your calendar and your time. Set limits and realistic goals about what you can accomplish in a day, and stick to them. By doing this, your workplace reputation evolves from "the person who is always late and busy" to "the consistent leader who manages time effectively and follows through on commitments." Communicate what you are doing, and your colleagues will respect it, because they are up against the same time challenges.
Assess your values and priorities.
This is tough, because you value it all: work, family, friends, community, company, and career. But life needs priorities. What are yours? If this is hard to answer, or you find it impossible to prioritize your list, that's a red flag. Take the time to reflect on this question more by observing your own behavior. Does your "say and do" match your priorities?

Specific things you can do toward self-care.
Set boundaries.
Working from home, with the added responsibilities the pandemic brings, can make boundaries quickly blur. It is critical that you define your boundaries and give yourself the freedom to focus on one thing whenever possible. How can you arrange your day to help live your boundaries?
Control what you can.
Of course, some things are beyond your control. But it's up to you to control what you can, and let everyone know that. "Keep your own lawn cut, and don't worry about the neighbor's," as the old saying goes.
Don't eat + work.
Pause to eat, and get away from your screen or documents. Leave your office or desk if you can. Lunch with someone and talk about anything but work. You'll return to work much fresher—and you'll work better.
Don't take your laptop and phone to bed.
Your mind and body need to rest. Leave the electronics in another room. Tomorrow is another day; things can wait until then.
Lights out, go to sleep.
This one's tough with so much speeding through your mind. But "each hour you sleep before midnight is worth two hours after midnight," and it's true, according to the old adage. Ben Franklin famously said it best: "Early to bed and early to rise makes one healthy, wealthy, and wise."
Eat healthy, including snacks.
We're all tired of hearing this, but it's true, and you know it. This one takes discipline and planning, to have the right foods available at the right time. But the payoff is long-term health, weight control, and longevity.
Hydrate.
Our bodies are about 50–60% water. We expel many cups of water daily, and these must be replaced to keep your mind and body humming efficiently. So, put simply, drink plenty of plain water.
Take breaks often.
We're all good at losing ourselves in work, and the hours slip by. But the body and mind need breaks, and we work better post-break. Get a coffee, take a walk, spend a few minutes with a child, whatever—it may be helpful to use a break-timer app to remind you take much-needed breaks.
Exercise.
We're tired of hearing this one too, but body and mind simply run better when you exercise—walk, bike, stationary machine, anything can work. Schedule yourself for a minimum of 20–30 minutes daily. It will make a big difference.
Control social media.
This is a double-edged sword. The good side is obviously social connection. On the other hand, it can consume serious amounts of time you may not have. Know what "control" means to you, and stick to it. Define what is time well spent and what is wasteful—because we all know that time is precious.
Treat yourself.
This is obvious, but too many of us postpone self-rewards. Come evening, plan an hour for something you love to do besides work—read, play guitar, shoot pool, crochet, cook, whatever you enjoy. The important thing here is that it is reinforcing to <i>you!</i>
Make time for your family.
"Family comes first" we all say, but time with our families often gets sacrificed when work is demanding. Dinnertime is great for "family-firsting." All of you dine together, phones and TV off, and share your day. This is true quality time. Also, plan occasional evenings together for games, movies, cookouts, etc.
Make time for your partner.
You may have a forgiving partner who tolerates your excessive work. But never take them for granted. Plan to spend precious time with them—and don't change it at the last minute because of some work demand. The work can wait.
Check your intent vs. your impact.
Whether it is a virtual meeting or taking a well-earned break, when we try to do it all at once, our <i>intent</i> and <i>impact</i> may not be aligned. You may <i>intend</i> to spend quality time with your family, but if you don't because "duty calls," your <i>true impact</i> is negative: loved ones being bumped by your job. An example to help align your intent and impact: if your household is busy and hungry around noon, don't schedule lunchtime work calls or meetings. Schedule them earlier or later, when you can be fully present for your work colleagues. No matter how good your intentions, pause to check your real impact on those around you.

What can leaders do to promote self-care?
Leaders offer good advice on working remotely, and many companies provide the technology. But in this pandemic, with people forced to stay home, how can leaders help?
Communicate expectations about self-care and personal time, and then live it. Tell people it is normal and acceptable to care for themselves and their families first, and that you support it. This doesn't mean that leaders should prescribe work/life balance. Just communicate that it's normal and healthy to set boundaries so you can be effective, both at work and home. If people struggle, offer suggestions from the list above.
Help your isolated, at-home employees stay fit physically, mentally, and emotionally. Institute regular check-ins, town halls, and small-group meetings to keep everyone in touch. Incorporate virtual team-building activities that are fun. (We do yoga, virtual happy hours, virtual campfires with storytelling, etc.)
Create cross-team "buddy groups" to hold regular 30-minute virtual coffee breaks to share views on company business or troubleshoot barriers that are getting in the way.
Schedule regular check-in calls with each of your team members. Even just 2 minutes on the phone can make a big difference. Listen to what they tell you. Listen for stress, concerns, signs of overwork—and discuss things they can do to make life better.
Catch your team members doing it right! It is critical to deliver positive feedback even when working virtually. During times of change or difficulty, positive feedback is even more critical, so take the time to provide genuine feedback on specific performance that is helping move the company forward.
Lead by example! What you as a leader do speaks louder than what you say. Be a role model for self-care during these stressful times.

We're all in this crisis together. We all face the same challenges, just to different degrees and with different details. Above all, we must take care of ourselves, so we are up for the battle. Good health to everyone!

About ALULA®

ALULA® is a management consultancy founded in 1993 as Continuous Learning Group, Inc. (CLG) to assist Fortune 500 companies with improving strategy execution. Today, ALULA exists to inspire and accelerate the extraordinary growth of individuals and exceptional performance of business. ALULA employs proven principles of behavioral science to help organizations more efficiently and effectively implement change, enhance leadership capability, and improve performance.

