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## Professional Self-Care: Ten Tips for a Quality of Life Check

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Most of us are responsible for accruing a number of continuing education hours in ethics. One of the topics which "ethics" should cover is self-care. After all, when are we most likely to make serious errors in judgment? When we are suffering from compassion fatigue, vicarious traumatization, or when we are in denial that we are not functioning well.

Since I also work with my husband, Alan Taylor, I know that boundary-keeping between personal and professional lives is also a challenge. Each of us tries to monitor our balancing act by occasionally asking the other, "Quality of life check?" and listening carefully to the answer. We may do this in celebration, for example when we are savoring a nice meal on the patio: "Quality of life check?" "Excellent!" or when we are working on custody evaluations on a Sunday: "Quality of life check?" "Terrible! We need to take a break and get this workload under control!"

This column is dedicated to helping you monitor your own quality of life. You ARE your instrument of peace-making and you are constantly barraged with the emotional toxic waste of distressed clients, and maybe a little bureaucratic dysfunction too. Add to that a few rough patches in our personal lives and there we are: somewhere between frazzled and burnt out. So here are ten tips for a quality of life check:

### 1. Take an overall assessment of your life to establish a baseline of your strengths and deficits.

Set aside thirty minutes and go to [www.realage.com](http://www.realage.com) to take a broad inventory of what you are doing to help and to harm your health. An even broader range of questionnaires is available on [www.sharecare.com](http://www.sharecare.com).

**2. Start with a good understanding of your own temperament to find a baseline for your emotional health.** If you're not well-grounded in personality types, take the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator or a similar test. Although the Myers and Briggs Foundation website recommends going to a qualified professional, you can take a "quick-and-dirty" test online. Oftentimes professionals without mental health backgrounds don't understand just how differently introverts and extraverts process stress. This is also very important in managing our personal and professional relationships. Are you working "with the grain" or "against the grain" of your own personality?

**3. Exercise** demands conscientious effort in our sedentary world. Be honest with yourself about how much exercise you get. Is your exercise *regular*? Is it vigorous? There are plenty of good **smartphone apps** like MapMyWalk, NikePlus or Couchto5k to help you start walking or running and there are gadgets like Fitbit to monitor your progress. At the very least, **get up and stretch!** Your eyes and neck need a break from that computer or phone screen, and your neck and you need to get your circulation moving. Walk up and down a flight of stairs for extra points—without your phone!

**3a. But really—stretching won't cut it—you have to work out.** If that made you yawn, **get a coach or a trainer.** You can cut the hourly rate in half by sharing with a friend. I've worked out with my coach for five years because I'm inherently lazy and I consider this health insurance. Now I'm in better shape than your average fifty-year old—which is good, because I'm sixty.

**4. Be honest about your eating and drinking.** The surveys in #1 will help you determine how well you are nourishing your body. But I bet you already know what you could do better—beware if you know you are drinking to relieve stress. Search “Nutrition Tracker” in your smartphone app store and choose one of the many apps to help you monitor your food for a week. According to the Pennington Biomedical Center, tracking your food accurately is one of the best ways to ensure compliance with any food plan.

**5. Secure the perimeter.** Check how well you’re maintaining the boundaries between your work and personal lives. (You have a personal life, right? Ask your loved ones if you’re not sure.) Establish non-working hours and non-working zones. At work, train your clients: Use your phone’s alarms to set a nice chime to go off five minutes before the end of a client’s allotted time and tell your client about it at the beginning of the session. Explain politely that you value their time and want to be sure they have time to cover everything; the 5-minute alert is to cue them to be sure they get all the important issues covered. Then cut them off graciously when their time is up. They won’t run over a second time. Use another alarm to train yourself to only check your emails at designated times and another alarm to remind you to get up from your desk and stretch. Then turn the darn thing off at home.

**5a. Define a sanctuary and do not allow phones or other infernal tech devices into your sanctuary during designated periods.** Your sanctuary is whatever area you designate on any given day—but it should always include your bedroom—sleep and intimacy are too important. Put a message at the bottom of all outgoing texts and emails saying, “I will return all non-emergency messages during regular office hours” to remind people of what regular office hours are.

**6. Have a creative outlet.** You give all day, and what you receive is often the client’s anxiety or negative emotion. Have a creative outlet—gardening, cooking, painting—whatever lets you receive the good energy that comes from the creative part of your brain. When you stop a creative exercise, you feel *refreshed*. Bet you don’t say that after playing Candy Crush or posting pictures on Facebook for an hour.

**7. Take a financial inventory.** Money is a form of energy and sometimes we are not so great at saving, spending or sharing it in healthy proportions. Many young professionals are overwhelmed by their educational debt and many older ones aren’t great business managers. Money problems are marriage-killers and among the guiltiest of our secrets. Therapy clients will talk about their sex lives more easily than they will their finances. Please be honest with yourself about your financial competence and health.

**8. Nurture your social network.** Even the most introverted among us need social connections. Happiness, especially in later years, is very much tied to social stimulation. Make time for old friends. Make time for new friends. You don’t have to be a party animal; you just need to give and receive friendship and affection. Go where you are cherished.

**9. Laugh a lot.** Find at least one thing that’s guaranteed to make you belly laugh. It may be a video or a best friend. For me, it’s [www.damnyouautocorrect.com](http://www.damnyouautocorrect.com) (warning: language!), but even after the most difficult parenting coordination session, I can look at this and laugh until I cry. Much better than just the crying!

**10. Nurture your spiritual life** to metabolize that emotional toxic waste you pick up at work. This is essential in preventing compassion fatigue and burnout. Remember, you are not only a giver, but a receiver and a lot of what you receive is stress. Consider your spiritual hygiene as you would physical hygiene: make time for daily prayer or meditation, connection to kindred spirits, and retreat into reflective time. These are the things that break down that negative energy and help you process it to leave your body, mind and spirit.

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