

From: Teaching Toolbox - Center For Faculty Innovation <TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU> **On Behalf Of** Center for Faculty Innovation
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To: TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU
Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Forget the Oxygen Mask: Building a Culture of Proactive Care

Forget the Oxygen Mask: Building a Culture of Proactive Care

by Daisy L. Breneman

(Note: We are sending this Toolbox a little early this week, so that it will not arrive during Fall Break, for those able to take a break this week; breaks are so important!

I've never really loved the [oxygen mask metaphor](#)—you know, put on your own oxygen mask if there's an emergency, so that you can take care of others. Why should we wait until a crisis hits? [Forget the oxygen mask](#)—let's take care of ourselves well before we hit rough skies!

We've all navigated our share of personal and collective crises over the past few years. As a result, we do seem to be having [more conversations about care](#). But it shouldn't take a crisis for us to attend to care, for ourselves and others. Let's devote [proactive](#) attention to the things we and others need.

Let's also get some of the self-care *baggage* (so to speak) out of the way: It's [NOT selfish](#) to prioritize our needs. It is possible to balance what we need with the demands on us; to do that, we have to [learn to say no](#)—or, perhaps, instead [learn to say yes](#), but only to the things that matter most.

It's a false promise, after all, when we deliver a task by working extra hours, putting off other tasks, or neglecting self-care. When we artificially prop up systems by taking on extra work, we just perpetuate inequities and gaps in resources. When we care about our work, it needs to be sustainable. Asking for more time, resources, support, or assistance is one way for us to get things done, without [exhausting ourselves](#). Especially in this age of [burnout](#), we need to create [cultures of care](#) that support [wellness and wellbeing](#). Care is the responsibility of the [community](#), not just the individual.

Care is also not an add on, [luxury](#), or fluff. What individuals need can really vary, and it's not all about bubble baths or massages. Not to say those aren't awesome if they work for you, but care is [different for every individual](#). And [real self care](#) can be truly transformative, making space for what we all need to thrive. We can't, and shouldn't, make do with less.

And these are lessons we can share with our students. We can model self care by, for instance, [setting clear boundaries](#) around communication. Put on your syllabus, Canvas site, or email signature the times of the day/week that you do—and don't—check email. Give reasonable timelines for when students can expect to receive feedback on their work from you. Have boundaries about how, when, and in what format you will give that feedback. For example, consider using class time for workshops or one-on-one conferences, instead of reading drafts students email the night before a paper is due (okay, who I am kidding, the night they are due).

That can also help students structure their time. I'm also very transparent with students about deadlines and why I set the times that I do. I have even shared articles about ["Cinderella deadlines"](#) (that is, the midnight deadline) directly with students, to let them know why I avoid them if possible; that said, it's also often helpful to discuss what deadlines work best for them and their schedules.

Keep [open lines of communication](#), and do regular [check-ins](#)—with students and [yourself](#). Remind students to [fill their cups](#). Remind yourself, and your colleagues, too. Consider building in [mindfulness](#) or wellness time or activities in class. Include links to [care resources](#) on your syllabus and Canvas site and refer to them frequently. Talk about the resources that *you* use to support your work, and your wellness.

Throughout the semester, build in [reflection](#) days, days off to work on projects, or [TBA/placeholder days](#) so that students know that they can invest their time in their work, while also having time for things that fill their cups. That also builds in opportunities to slow down pacing as needed or respond to emergent events or situations—or times when we, as faculty, [may need to pause](#). And, [being transparent](#) and intentional about how we're using that time can support students in managing their own time, and [making time for self-care](#).

Given the [role of place in our emotional lives](#), building [connection to place](#) can also support student and faculty self-care. When possible, help them explore opportunities to connect with campus and community places that are meaningful to them, including [the Calming Spaces](#) offered on campus. (Faculty can use many of them, too!)

If you're not already, explore integrating service-learning or other civic engagement projects. While students might think it's counterintuitive for a "work" assignment to be part of care and wellness activities, talk to them about how [engagement can be a form of self-care](#). Encourage students to pick service activities that both challenge and nourish them. Build in ample reflection time so that they can build community around the work they are doing, and build in support, such as through JMU's [Community Engagement and Volunteer Center](#).

And, remember, [learning doesn't have to \(and shouldn't\) be all work](#). Allow time in class for social conversations to build nourishing community and connection, between your students and between you and your students. Harness [the power of play](#), and consider [using games](#) or other fun activities, or [finding the humor](#) in the work you are doing. Consider ways to help students regain joy and fun in learning. For example, markers and stickers can offer creative outlets for student reflection and applied learning. [Laughter](#), fun, and joy are important (some would say [non-negotiable](#)) parts of self-care!

Care is not zero sum, nor is it a competition. We don't have to take care of ourselves OR our students. [Our students will thrive better](#) in classrooms that support wellness, theirs and our own. We can be [models for our students](#) when we set healthy boundaries. We're all there for the same reason, after all—because we care about learning. Extending care to ourselves and our students creates more positive learning, and living, environments for all.

Let's keep the conversation going and find ways to breathe before we need the oxygen mask. After all, it shouldn't take a crisis to affirm our value and worth.

About the author: Daisy L. Breneman serves as the Justice Studies Advising Coordinator, and the co-coordinator of the Disability Studies Minor. She is also the Faculty Coordinator for Wellness and Wellbeing Initiatives in the Center for Faculty Innovation. She can be reached at brenemdl@jmu.edu.