

What Makes Your Engine Run? It May Be Time To Convert Your Engine To A New Self-Care Fuel Source

June 20 2022 9:12 AM



(CENTERSTONE) - “It was as if I had been trying to run on gasoline and I actually had a diesel engine.”

That was a client’s description of how difficult it was to function effectively when he wasn’t making self-care a priority. But once he incorporated a method of maintaining good health that worked for him – found the right fuel for his engine -- it was truly transformative.

Most of us know that self-care is essential, so why do so many of us find it so difficult to incorporate it into our daily lives? One reason is that our brains are hardwired to react more easily and quickly to negative stimuli – threats and fear – than positive ones, like the knowledge of the benefits of self-care.

According to psychologist Alicia H. Clark, this “negativity bias” is the main reason why so many people spend so little time doing what we know would benefit our physical, mental, and emotional health. This bias, which helped keep our ancestors alive, also hinders us from promoting a better quality of life.

As mental healthcare practitioners, we’re well aware of ways we can help clients rewire negative tendencies. Can’t we do the same thing with our approach to self-care?

If our negativity bias is the gasoline that makes our internal engines run, is there a way to convert to an “electric” engine and use a whole new fuel source? Absolutely! Our belief in everyone’s potential, in every person’s ability to change and grow, is the cornerstone of our work at Centerstone, so you better believe it’s possible!

As with negative thoughts, a cognitive behavioral therapy approach can be useful in reprogramming our negativity bias while working to change our thinking and behavioral patterns. The first step is in redefining self-care.

Therapist Kala Lacy points out that self-care as an action is not sustainable — a warm bubble bath can only last so long. She believes that “true self-care is a way of being” and promotes a “compassionate way of being” to “open new possibilities” and encourage “a gentle and consistent practice of empathy and care” for others and ourselves.

Before we react in any given moment, seek out compassion in the situation. If none is present, then choose a more compassionate reaction. This shift in thought will lead to a more compassionate emotional response, which will help us choose more compassionate actions. When this new cycle of thought becomes internalized, we will have embraced a compassionate way of being. We will have changed our internal engine and found an alternative fuel source.

Lacy adds that this commitment to self-love will empower us to become even better caregivers and help us model the self-care we encourage our clients to embrace.

In other words—compassionate thoughts lead to feeling more compassion which helps us act more compassionately. From there, the cycle repeats, informing how we treat ourselves and others.

While acts of self-care may not be self-sustaining, they can be a recharging station for our newly converted “electric” engines, if we choose actions that are specifically designed to refuel who we are and if we enter into those actions with compassionate self-awareness.

Reading a book in bed to the sound of rainfall may recharge me, but my colleague may prefer working with clay or reorganizing a bookshelf by color. Actions of self-care should be selected according to what energizes us mentally, physically, and spiritually. Finding that trifecta may not be so easy and it may not even be something we’ve ever tried before, so be adventurous, try new things, and take your commitment to self-care seriously.

One of the main reasons many clinicians don’t routinely practice self-care is because we’re overbooked, overburdened, and overthinking every day of our lives, like many of you. However, when you are infusing action with compassion, you have more time to practice self-care in your thoughts, feelings, and actions. And if you are making time each day to practice mindfulness, self-awareness, and recharging activities, you’ll have more energy, resilience, and compassion to do all of the things you’re called to do that day.

Just like elementary schools are discovering that working “brain breaks” into the day -- for yoga, meditation, mindfulness, or even a little silliness -- improves the academic performance and emotional well-being of students, self-care breaks can make all the difference in the daily lives of mental healthcare workers.

We can work a few self-care recharging sessions into our busy schedules — even if it’s just taking a quick five minutes to enjoy a snack, stretch, or some deep breathing -- to allow ourselves to exercise a little self-compassion.

Are you ready to make self-care a way of being in your life?

If your answer is yes, then consider recruiting a partner in the endeavor. (Everyone knows road trips are better with a friend, right?) Studies have shown that when you have someone to whom you are accountable, you are more likely to make those transformative lifestyle changes.

So, while society looks for more ways to go green and be more compassionate to the earth by doing things like converting from gas-powered cars to electric cars, mental healthcare workers can make a similar lifestyle conversion. We can convert from an energy-guzzling approach to life that has us taking care of everyone but ourselves, to a more compassionate way of being that incorporates daily self-care.

Take care now!

Alexandria LaFaye is an intern with Centerstone's outpatient services. In the generalist phase of her internship, she's seeking out opportunities to learn as much as she can in as many areas of social work as possible because the more she learns, the more tools she will have to help clients lead their best possible lives. She's also very dedicated to helping her fellow mental health practitioners do the same and self-care is a key piece of helping each individual live fully in a career that can easily drain you. Alexandria is working towards her MSW degree through the University of Central Florida. That is when she's not a full-time professor of English at Greenville University or with her multi-generational family in Glen Carbon, IL. With such a full life, she's gratefully implementing all she's learning about self-care. She hopes readers of this column will do the same.

About Centerstone

Centerstone is a not-for-profit health system providing mental health and substance use disorder treatments. Services are available nationally through the operation of outpatient clinics, residential programs, the use of telehealth, and an inpatient hospital. Centerstone also features specialized programs for the military community, therapeutic foster care, children's services, and employee assistance programs. Centerstone's Research Institute provides guidance through research and technology, leveraging the best practices for use in all our communities. Centerstone's Foundation secures philanthropic resources to support the work and mission of delivering care that changes people's lives.