



10 self-care strategies

for professional caregivers

by **Dr. Carla Cheatham**, MA, MDiv, PhD, TRT



We know self-care is extremely important, but lack of time, energy, and money can make it feel impossible. When we face challenges and stressors, the two greatest predictors of how we weather them are if we feel we're able to take action on our own behalf and if we feel we have support from others. The list below includes practices that can help us do both and only require a little effort and a shift of focus and perception.

1. Do what you can and let go of the rest.

It feels far easier, and even more fun in the short term, to spend my energy complaining about things I cannot control. But doing this gives my power away and leaves my wellbeing in the hands of others. When I focus on the actions I can take, I keep a far better perspective on most things in my life and work.

2. Access support.

Strong social connections can help with anxiety and depression, healthier heart rates, and a more balanced perspective on all of life's events. Those connections can be made during a phone call with a loved one on our way to work, by sharing funny memes with friends, using a video-call app to visit with a family member while cooking dinner, or talking with a colleague on a 15-minute break from work.

3. Have self-compassion.

The way we speak to ourselves is often far more harsh and critical than we would ever dream of speaking to others. Instead of judging or shutting down our emotions, we should listen and respond to them as we would to a friend in need. This, in turn, can allow us to have even more patience and gentleness with others, which makes all our relationships better. For more on techniques to build self-compassion, check out the work of Dr. Kristin Neff [here](#).

4. Mind your stories.

Our brains are hardwired to see the negative as a way of keeping us on guard to fight off a saber-toothed tiger or other threat. This is adaptive and protective, until it's not! The stories we tell ourselves may or may not be true, and reacting based on inaccurate assumptions can cause unnecessary stress and conflict. Getting curious and asking questions before getting upset saves us a lot of unnecessary struggles. For more on this, see [The Work](#) of Byron Katie or the book [Crucial Conversations](#) by Patterson, Grenny, et. Al.



5. Set boundaries.

We often feel guilty for setting boundaries, but there is nothing selfish about taking care of yourself so you can show up well for others. “No,” is a complete sentence, and I can allow others the dignity of dealing with their own feelings about what I am and am not able to do. If I push further than I really want or need to, I do not get to be resentful of others since my boundaries are mine to set and hold. When I find I have given too much, it is a chance for me to learn more about my limits and to own and honor them, so I am less likely to put myself in that situation again. For more on the importance of boundaries, [watch this video](#) of Brené Brown discussing the topic.

6. Finish the circle.

Because it can be far easier to recall the negative in my life, my mentor regularly reminds me to “Finish the circle” by also naming the good around me. This does not negate the things that feel or seem bad — that would be false positivity — but it also does not deny the good around me. If I feel so stressed that I cannot think of such things, I go through the alphabet and name something I’m grateful for that begins with each letter. By the time I get to X, Y, and Z, I am more relaxed and have a more balanced perspective about whatever I am facing.

7. HALT.

When we are poorly resourced, we are less likely to be able to handle stressors in constructive ways. Think of trying to take a cookie from a two-year old who needs a nap! When I check in and find that I am Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired, I HALT and tend to those needs before trying to move on. From this more resourced space, I can be more efficient, productive, and present for myself and others.

8. Practice the badge technique.

Mindfulness techniques are simple practices we can perform that allow us to be more present rather than on autopilot. When I put on my badge each day, I commit to being available for others. When I take it off, I commit to myself and my loved ones to really, REALLY be off duty and focused on my life outside of work. By avoiding email, having my work phone on Do Not Disturb, and trusting the on-call team to handle things, I can wind down and relax until I put my badge back on for my next shift. When I do, I return more refreshed and effective for whatever I may face.

9. Imagine waterfall doorways (real and virtual).

Another mindful technique I practice is to imagine that any doorway I walk through (whether it's into meetings or patient rooms) is a waterfall. As I walk through it, I allow any stressful energy I've collected from the day to be washed off so I can walk into that next interaction clean and clear and present in the moment. When I leave, I allow the waterfall to wash the energy of that interaction off me so I can walk into the next task clean. This can also be done before pressing the button on the computer to enter a virtual meeting, as I pause and allow myself a moment of peace and calm before moving on. Doing this throughout the day means I am far less likely to gather my stress and carry it with me, so it takes less time to offload it at the end of the day before being with my loved ones, or just with myself.

10. Breathe.

The best way I have found to soothe myself, keep myself from going to emotional extremes, pause to get more information, and simply keep my neurochemistry out of the stratosphere is *to breathe*. Breathing in while counting to four, holding for seven, then blowing out for eight (4-7-8 breathing) is one of the quickest ways to calm the sympathetic arousal that can lead us to fight, flee, or freeze. I can practice this while doing paperwork, sitting at a stoplight or in a meeting (just be sure not to look like you are heaving an aggrieved sigh!), cooking supper, or going to the restroom. When I am breathing, it helps me let go and accept things as they are — not in a resigned and helpless way — but with calm poise and empowered assurance (which brings us back to number 1!). For more on the impact of slow and controlled breathing techniques, [read this article](#).



Dr. Carla Cheatham,
MA, MDiv, PhD, TRT

Dr. Carla Cheatham is the Principal and Lead Trainer for Carla Cheatham Consulting

Group, LLC. She began her career in social services with an MA in Psychology, certification in trauma counseling, PhD in Health & Kinesiology, and M.Div. She is a national keynote speaker, consultant, and coach focusing on emotional competencies for performance excellence for leaders, medical professionals and mental health counselors, health organizations, and family caregivers.



Agencies using WellSky[®] solutions have **reduced staff turnover by 16.7%.**

You can too!

[Learn more today!](#)