



**“YOU”
CARE**

5 Pillars of Self-Care

Taking care of yourself during overwhelmingly high-stress times may not be easy, but it is critically important for you and the families you are serving.

BY ALAN D. WOLFELT, PH.D.



I've been privileged to work with funeral directors for more than 40 years. I know and respect many of you as colleagues and count some of you among my closest friends. Funeral directors are good people. You're "people" people. You're good at helping others, and your empathy skills tend to be well above average.

But as is typical of caregivers, many of you aren't so good at taking care of yourselves, which puts you at risk of burnout and mental and physical health issues during normal times.

Now that we're in abnormal times, your risks are even greater. This pandemic is imperiling our communities and our world in unprecedented ways. Even if your funeral home isn't located in one of North America's hot spots (and especially so if it is), you are likely busier than ever. At the same time, infectious disease protocols may be making it much more difficult to do your job, stay safe and support grieving families. Much is being asked of you.

Amidst the chaos, this article is a reminder that it is even more essential that you prioritize good basic self-care. Whenever stress rises, self-care tends to fall. I suspect that this imbalance is getting severe for some of you right now, and I'm concerned about your emotional and physical health in the coming weeks.

But you can choose to safeguard your health as much as possible during an exceptionally stressful time by caring for your basic needs. You deserve it, the families you serve deserve it and the grieving in your care deserve it.

Here are what I consider the five essential pillars of self-care when everything else goes to hell in a handbasket. (Please note that I am not addressing the use of PPE, hygiene and other protocols to prevent infection in this article because these measures are non-negotiable, and you are already doing everything you can to follow them scrupulously to protect all involved.)

1 GET REST WHENEVER POSSIBLE

I understand that for funeral directors, who must sometimes be available 24/7, getting good rest and sleep is challenging enough in the best of times. During this crisis, it may seem completely out of reach. Yet, when stress goes up, your body and mind's need for restorative rest goes up as well.

As much as you can and whenever possible, make rest a priority. If you don't, your mental and physical health will worsen and your immune system will falter, putting you at even greater risk of getting sick. If you're battling insomnia during those rare stretches

in which you could be sleeping, please make an appointment – in person or via telehealth – with your primary care provider.

Now may seem like a time when sleep sacrifices have to be made, and of course, that may be true. Also remember, though, that now, more than ever, you need as much rest and sleep as you can get.

2 EAT DECENT FOOD AND DRINK ENOUGH WATER

It can be hard to eat well when you're busy and stressed, but I encourage you to cling to a few eating plan rules you know you'll be able to adhere to. For instance, you might commit to eating at least two servings of fresh fruit and vegetables each day. No matter what else you eat, this alone will help to ensure you get enough fiber and vitamins to protect your health. Don't forget to drink enough water to stay well hydrated, as dehydration can cause all kinds of unpleasant side effects, including fatigue and headaches.

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3 CONNECT WITH LOVED ONES

No matter how busy you are right now, you need and deserve quality time with loved ones. So make those video or phone calls to friends and family, send those texts and use any downtime you might have to relax alongside the people with whom you're sheltering in place. Mutual love and support will see you through.

4 EXPRESS YOURSELF

The more stressful your work life gets, the more critical it is to talk aloud about all the stresses. Sharing your internal thoughts and feelings outside yourself will help you navigate traumatic times. Keeping everything inside, on the other hand, will likely pull you under. Open up regularly to the good listeners in your life, including other funeral directors.

When something particularly challenging happens, find time to debrief about it as soon afterward as you can. If your funeral home is being inundated by deaths or you're feeling particularly stressed, I

also encourage you to begin seeing a counselor – on-line or by phone – right away. Even one counseling session a week can provide you with the lifeline of affirmation and support you need to be able to cope.

Later on, after the crisis has abated somewhat, you and your team may also need additional traumatic grief counseling due to the unprecedentedly difficult situations to which you may have been exposed.

5

TURN TO GRATITUDE AND GRACE

Especially on days when you're feeling the most overwhelmed and in despair, turn to gratitude and grace. Remember everything you have to be grateful for. Intentionally place your awareness on good people and happenings around you. Notice all the kindnesses and support. Have compassion for mistakes or failings. Whenever you stop to take a moment to breathe and recenter yourself and focus on gratitude, you invoke a self-fulfilling prophecy – that for which you are grateful multiplies. In the future, you'll be able to look back at this period as a time of hardship, yes, but also as an unparalleled season of empathy, heroism and grace.

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In addition to these five basic pillars, which are essential each and every day without fail, I encourage you to make room in your daily schedule whenever possible for something that gives you pleasure. Give yourself permission to spend at least a few minutes on something that brings you enjoyment and helps you to decompress and relax.

You are a front-line worker of utmost importance. Thank you so much for all the above-and-beyond work you have and are doing right now to care for the precious bodies of those who have died, as well as the families brought to grief during such exceptionally difficult circumstances. They need you, the world needs you. Please, for their sake as well as yours, make it a priority to care for your basic health as well as you are able during the pandemic. And when we meet again, I look forward to speaking with you and hearing your pandemic stories of love and loss. ☰

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is an author, educator and grief counselor. Recipient of the Association of Death Education and Counseling's Death Educator Award, he presents workshops to bereaved families, funeral home staffs and other caregivers, and teaches courses for bereavement caregivers at Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado, where he serves as director (centerforloss.com). Contact Wolfelt at drwolfelt@centerforloss.com or 970-217-7069.

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