

Turn Down the Pressure

A firefighter-turned-principal on the importance of self-care

By Joe Mazza

Twenty years ago I was a college student and volunteer firefighter interested in community service. I wanted to learn how all the apparatus on each rig worked, and I was intrigued by how firefighters used innovation to not only prevent fires, but help firefighters stay safe so they could save people, pets, and property.

Probationary firefighters (those in their first year, and by Pennsylvania certification law) are

not allowed to walk into a burning structure. Some departments use blue helmets to make sure everyone on the ground knows where the “probi” is at all times.

I was once a probi, and at the end of a long night on scene, we didn’t simply go back to the station, get in our cars, and head home, but stayed another hour or two to “reset the house.” We hydrated, ate something, folded hoses, restocked supplies,

gassed up the trucks, napped in the bunkroom, refilled oxygen tanks, and put them back on the rescue truck.

There was a lot of playful banter across generations of firefighter families, and being a member of the Alpha Fire Co. (State College, Pennsylvania) was a brotherhood. That culture of “I have your back,” and the importance of “systematic proactivity” has never been lost on me as I reflect back 20 years later.

The lessons I learned in the fire service have helped me not only stay calm in the face of the inevitable day-to-day crises, but also helped me treat my “probi” teachers and veteran staff with respect. I learned that I need to give them what they need to build the stamina required to return to the classroom again and again. I also learned from my fire chief: He took “necessary naps,” worked out, and read the latest fire service research. His example taught me that to succeed as an instructional leader, I’d have to start taking care of myself.

Self-Care Isn’t Selfish

As principals, we often get up at the crack of dawn and race around our homes. Eat, shower, and throw whatever work we brought home yesterday into a bag so we can finish it at our desk. Take the dog out, clean up, and provide food and fresh water.

This was my day-to-day schedule when I was a brand-new principal, *without* young kids at home. Today,

I have multiple kids, and things are even more hectic. Given this reality—shared by so many principals—it’s important to ask, *How are we recharging our own batteries so we can help the people next to us (at home and at school)?*

A former colleague once said, “The principalship is like drinking water from a fire hose.” I laughed out loud and then realized that my past as a firefighter has prepared me for life as a principal. And I wondered, *What if you could adjust the water pressure on the hydrant so the water didn’t completely knock you off your feet?*

Stress Less

You can dial down the pressure by listening to your inner self and taking positive steps toward self-care.

I reached out to my network to learn more about strategies they use to prioritize well-being. Here’s what they had to say:


“I work out w/praise music nearly every morning no matter what time I have to get up and do it. Sweat is extra sparkle for my soul. ...”
— Julie Adams (@adamsteaching)

“I tightly control my calendar in order to protect time for wife and kids. We eat dinner together every night at the table w no devices.”
— Ronnie Mosher (@ronniemosher)

“I try to exercise for at least 45 min. I swapped out social media before bed for reading for fun + devotional first thing when I wake up.”
— Kayla Delzer (@TopDogTeaching)

“On some days, it’s as simple as using my commute to gear up/unwind between home-school-home. Drink my coffee, listen to a podcast, breathe.”
— Mary Kate Jackson (@msjacksonatraf)

“Know I can’t do it all myself. We call it sharing the love. Ts step up and take on tasks. We use texts to ask for help. Trust one another.”
— Janalyn Taylor (@JanalynTaylor)

In order to serve students, families, and community in an equitable way, we principals have to get our minds and bodies together for the day ahead. 

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