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Put Yourself First
Reach Other Goals by Starting With Yourself

You're a parent, school volunteer, Little League coach, and trusted assistant to your boss. You've been up since 6 a.m., made breakfast, packed lunches, cleaned the house, chauffeured the neighborhood kids, helped with homework, read bedtime stories, and finished extra work from the office .It's 11:30.You're exhausted .And, in about six-and-a-half hours you'll begin the whole 24-hour cycle... again.

If you find yourself saying 'Stop the merry-go-round, I want to get off!' you're not alone. Most of us—especially women, but men too (hey, there are reasons that men die younger than women)—have at some time found ourselves at the bottom of the heap when it comes to taking care of our needs.

The problem with that is that if we don't take care of ourselves, sooner or later we won't be of much use to anyone else—or to ourselves. Just as the airline attendant tells you to put on your own oxygen mask in an emergency before helping a child with theirs, you must take care of your own basic needs before you can attend to the needs of others. What's more, being *busy* is not necessarily the same as being productive with *meaningful* activity. (Do the workaholics you know really accomplish that much more in proportion to the time they invest?)

If "putting yourself first" (a common admonition) sounds too selfish or too hard, try something simpler: **put yourself on an equal footing with those you love and tend to**. Do you insist that they get enough sleep? Start making that a priority for yourself too. Do you give them time for fun and socializing with friends? Then you do the same! Remember Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: human beings must meet their basic needs before they can move on to higher-level goals. Since most of us already *know* that we should take care of ourselves—but often have trouble figuring out how to *do* it, here are some guidelines for getting there:

Preserve your physical health with adequate sleep, exercise, and nutrition.

Value your emotional health as much as the physical, with a support system of friends and a willingness to laugh—especially at yourself.

Schedule fun activities on a regular basis—it's just as important to plan pleasure as it is to plan work.

Identify "busy behaviors" (or people) that drain your time and energy but aren't really important, then dump 'em, or at least minimize their hold on you.

Kill two birds with one stone, combining family time with exercise, for example, which benefits everyone involved.

Try to look at the problems in your life with new eyes to find solutions. If you're a new mom, for instance, see if you can trade childcare with another new mom to get some time for yourself.

Learn to say “No!” Your “yes” is valuable and should not be automatic. Instead, reserve it for the things that are most important to you.

Don’t try to change every problem area in your life all at once. Start with one or two items, then expand as you get things under control.

Your life should be like a checking account, balancing out on a regular basis so that you always have assets to draw upon. By making even small deposits—taking care of yourself with a 10-minute walk or a nutritious meal—you’ll be amazed at the interest you’ll reap.

By Rebecca Pratt, Staff Writer www.sparkpeople.com