

8 Tips for Restorative Self-Care Planning Before a High-Stress Period

Stephen Thompson, MA, CCWS, CHRS
Sr. Specialist, Global Staff Care & Well-being

High-stress work periods can be intense, whether you're gearing up for a humanitarian mission, preparing for a critical audit, or facing a demanding project deadline. While much of your focus may be on the work ahead, planning restorative self-care before these periods is crucial to help you navigate stress more effectively and avoid burnout.

By being proactive and intentional, you can build a buffer of resilience that will support you throughout the upcoming high-stress period. Here are eight practical, creative tips for planning self-care ahead of time, so you can stay grounded, focused, and energized even when the pressure is on.

1. Establish Pre-Stress Rituals

Creating calming routines before a high-stress period helps you mentally and emotionally prepare for the demands ahead. Whether it's a daily meditation, a calming cup of tea, or a brief walk in nature, these rituals serve as anchors that help set a positive tone for the day.

Tip: Choose a simple activity to commit to each day leading up to the high-stress period. This might be journaling for five minutes in the morning or practicing deep breathing exercises at the end of each day to cultivate a sense of calm.

2. Plan for Micro-Breaks During Stress

One of the most effective ways to prevent burnout during intense work periods is to schedule micro-breaks in advance. These short, intentional pauses give your brain a chance to recharge, even when time feels tight.

Tip: Block off 5-10 minute breaks on your calendar during the high-stress period. Use these breaks to stretch, breathe deeply, or listen to calming music. Planning these breaks ensures they happen and helps prevent you from getting overwhelmed.

3. Stock Up on Nourishing Foods

Eating well can often fall by the wayside during stressful work periods, leading to energy crashes and irritability. Preparing nourishing snacks and meals ahead of time can ensure that you're fueling your body properly, even when you're busy.

Tip: Prep healthy snacks like nuts, fruits, or granola bars, and plan quick, nutritious meals that are easy to make. Having these on hand will help you maintain steady energy and mental clarity throughout the high-stress period.

4. Set Clear Boundaries

One of the most challenging aspects of high-stress work periods is the potential for them to spill over into other areas of your life. Establishing clear boundaries before the stress begins can help protect your personal time and well-being.

Tip: Communicate your boundaries to colleagues, family, and friends ahead of time. For example, you might set specific work hours or commit to no work-related emails after a certain time in the evening. Being clear about these boundaries helps you manage expectations and protect your downtime.

5. Plan a Post-Stress Reward

Having something to look forward to can provide extra motivation and serve as a reminder that the high-stress period won't last forever. Planning a reward or relaxing activity for when the work is complete can give you a sense of closure and something to enjoy afterward.

Tip: Plan a treat for yourself after the intense work period, whether it's a small getaway, a spa day, or simply a quiet day at home. Knowing there's a reward waiting at the end can boost your morale and give you something positive to anticipate.

6. Create a Soothing Space

Your physical environment can have a big impact on your mental state. Creating a calm, organized workspace before the high-stress period begins can reduce distractions and bring a sense of order to your day.

Tip: Declutter your workspace and add calming elements, such as a plant, soothing scents, or a comfortable chair. Having a space that feels peaceful and organized will help you stay focused and reduce stress during the busy period.

7. Make a Self-Care "Toolbox"

Having a go-to set of self-care practices can help you stay resilient throughout the high-stress period. In the same way, you prepare work tools for a project and a "toolbox" of self-care activities that you can use when you start feeling stressed or overwhelmed.

Tip: Create a list of quick self-care practices that work for you—like a 10-minute meditation, a short walk, or a favorite playlist. Keep this list easily accessible so you can refer to it during the high-stress period when you need a moment of relief.

8. Check in with Yourself Regularly

It's easy to get so wrapped up in work that you forget to check in with how you're feeling. Scheduling regular self-reflection before the high-stress period begins can help you monitor your well-being and adjust as needed.

Tip: Set aside time at the end of each day or week to reflect on how you're feeling mentally and physically. Ask yourself questions like: "Am I feeling overwhelmed?" "Do I need to take more breaks?" This practice helps you stay attuned to your well-being and take proactive steps to care for yourself.

Why Proactive Self-Care Planning Matters

Planning your self-care before a high-stress period is one of the best ways to protect your mental and physical health. By establishing calming routines, setting

boundaries, and preparing for the demands ahead, you can reduce the risk of burnout, compassion fatigue, and stress-related exhaustion. This proactive approach helps you perform better during intense work periods and supports your long-term well-being and career sustainability.

With these tips, you'll be better equipped to face the upcoming challenges with resilience, energy, and a clear sense of purpose. Take time now to prepare, and you'll thank yourself later.