

# Are you really being Your Best Self?

by Jason Nitsch

Over the past many months, we have all gone to extraordinary measures to continue to create the kinds of experiences we want for our students and ourselves. With another school year underway, it's imperative that we revisit and reevaluate, and that work begins internally, with ourselves.

Teachers are among the most selfless workers in our society. How many times have we talked ourselves out of bed to go to school when we didn't feel well—because that's what teachers do? I've done it, and I'm sure you have also. We often believe it is more work to be absent than it is to just go to work sick. These are self-inflicted wounds we create every day, and it doesn't have to be that way.

I hope you'll consider some of the following departure points and conclude that there are opportunities for better self-care that you can adopt for a better you.

## Get More Sleep

My self-care journey started with examining my sleeping habits. While this might sound like a softball suggestion to lead with, it's important to note that a CDC study on morbidity and mortality reported that more than a third of Americans don't get a full night's sleep. With those numbers, it's clear this is an area in which many of us can improve, so consider the following ideas:

- Make sleep as important as other critical tasks, such as taking medicine.
- Maintain a constant waking time. Build a desire to sleep through consistent wakefulness.
- Relax before bed, without electronics, for at least one hour.

- If you wake in the middle of the night, don't look at the time. Doing so will make you more alert as you calculate the time remaining until you are supposed to get up, the time elapsed since you went to sleep, or what you must do the next day. All this will result in a higher state of alertness that will prevent an easy return to sleep.

## Set Boundaries

Today's technology enables us to connect with each other in multiple ways without interruption. This always-on technology has created a false sense of constant availability to each other simply because the capability exists. Previously, I seemed to have an almost *physiological need* to answer texts and emails immediately. I feared that if I didn't, I would miss out on something. I had an irrational concern that by letting messages remain unread for some time, I was allowing my work to pile up or I was creating more work for myself. As a result, I spent incredible amounts of time, day and night, returning messages and often interrupting dinner, movies, family time, sleep—*everything*.

After I realized I needed to make changes for my own wellbeing, I established some boundaries:

- I established days and times for returning emails. It was difficult at first, but my students and parents got used to it.
- I don't stay at school if I don't absolutely have to. When there are no afterschool rehearsals, I pack up and head out.
- I created multiple pathways for students and parents to get information. When information is easily available, parents email me less often.

Take this opportunity to find other avenues through which you can create a better experience for you and for your students. Find those opportunities in your own situation and be a part of creating new solutions, new practices, and new traditions.

- I ensured these boundaries extend to and include all staff members. They know I'm always there if they need me, but we agree to respect each other's time.

### Start. Change. Stop.

I wish I could remember who first shared this idea, but it's one I implement with my band occasionally, and it's a great launching point for anyone wanting to make adjustments to improve their life. I do this with myself several times a year.

I also believe in the power of the written word. We give our thoughts and ideas fidelity by writing them down and giving

them a physical life in the world. Once written, you can see them and you can remember writing them and what you thought and felt that motivated you to write them.

Right now, take a moment and write down three things about your life: *one to start, one to change, and one to stop.*

What you want to start can be as simple as wanting to read more books. It's just a starting point. It's one thing you can focus on that you want to start doing.

Next write down one thing that you want to change. You aren't stopping or starting something new, but you're going to deliberately alter the way you are cur-


rently doing something. It can be as simple as changing the way you schedule afterschool rehearsals. It can be *anything*.

Lastly, write down one thing that you are going to stop. Perhaps you're going to stop staying at school after 5 p.m. Find something that bothers you or that is currently inhibiting you from living your best life, and choose to cut it out. This is often the most difficult of the three, because we often believe there isn't anything that we're doing that we can't live without. You can—and you need to.

### Reevaluate Everything


I would offer this advice any year, not just one in which a global pandemic has interrupted everything. Our experience over this last year gave many of us an unusual opportunity to rethink many things. Ask any marching band director if they had to reimagine any part of their fall season in 2020 and see what answer you get. While we were forced into this mode of reevaluation, I contend that it's a very healthy process that we should be regularly engaging in—voluntarily.

How many of us do things for our




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programs because it's what our band director did, it's what our supervising teacher did when we started teaching, or it's the way we've always done it?

Ask yourself whether each method, strategy, or style is truly working. If you've been doing something the same for years, is it still relevant? Our learners are changing, the way they take in information is different, and the way they value their experiences is changing. Have we kept up with those changes? Are we isolating ourselves, all while making our lives difficult for nothing more than tradition, and not even our tradition, but someone else's in most cases?

Take this opportunity to find other avenues through which you can create a better experience for you and for your students. Find those opportunities in your own situation and be a part of creating new solutions, new practices, and new traditions. This is something I engage in regularly, and I take pride in the fact that the experience that my students have today is not the same as the one that a student of mine would have had 10 years ago. Allow yourself to adapt and stay fresh and

relevant, personally and professionally.


### Your Solutions Are for You!

Someone sent me a meme last summer while a lot of discussions were ongoing about what school would be like in the fall, whether we were going to have football games, marching band, and indoor concerts. The meme offered: "Your job will be posted before your obituary is posted." Perhaps it's harsh, but if you work yourself so hard that something happens to you that prevents you from working, or worse, someone will be in your classroom. Someone will be sitting at your desk. Your life needs to work *for you*.

When my children were born, I had a difficult time figuring out how to be Dad *and* Band Director. Friends, colleagues, and even mentors would plainly say things like, "You'll have to decide if your career is important, or if your family is important." Or, "Someone else can take them to soccer, no one else can teach your sectional." Or even, "It's going to be impossible for you to ever be a head band director in Texas if you really intend to see your kids grow up."

The disturbing thing is that these comments weren't warnings. *They were advice.* They were outright rationalizations for why I should constantly choose my job instead of my family.

So, I did some things differently. For example, on days when I had to stay late at school for a booster meeting or full orchestra rehearsal, I stacked all sectional rehearsals on that day. I might work an 18-hour day, but it also meant that I had one or two days that week with no after-school rehearsals. When school let out, I left. I picked up my kids from daycare. I made dinner. I exercised. Yes—I got some interesting looks as I exited the building, but it worked for me. And, the band was still amazing.

I hope as this year progresses, you will take the time to find things to start, change, and stop because your life needs to work *for you*. 



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