

The Care and Keeping of a Leader

In order to care for others, leaders must first take care of themselves

By Dennis Pierce

It took two trips to the hospital emergency room for Jim Henningsen to realize it was time to change his behavior.

The first time, he had a headache so bad he couldn't even stand. The second time, his blood pressure spiked. He was only in his early 40s. The doctors told him he was suffering from too much stress.

"A fire alarm was going off inside my body, warning me that I had to adjust what I was doing," says Henningsen, who was vice president of student affairs for Seminole State College at the time and is now president of the College of Central Florida.

He adds: "The house didn't burn down, thankfully. I didn't die." But the incidents served as a wake-up call for Henningsen to pay more attention to his own well-being.

Community college leaders have very demanding jobs. They're pulled in many directions, both professionally and personally—and they're responsible for the welfare of hundreds or even thousands of students, faculty and staff.

But, as the safety instructions on an airplane imply, those in positions of authority have to take care of themselves before they can effectively tend to the needs of others.



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Health scares motivated College of Central Florida President Jim Henningsen to take care of himself, physically and mentally.

College administrators who have embraced a healthier, more balanced approach to life and work have found that it not only makes them happier individuals—it makes them better leaders.

MIND, BODY, SPIRIT

Leading a community college can be stressful. Stress triggers the body's natural "fight or flight" response, which releases adrenaline and cortisol into the body to aid in survival.

But these chemicals aren't meant to be in our bodies all the time—and too much of them can disrupt the body's natural processes, leading to sleep and digestive problems, anxiety, weight gain, hypertension, high blood pressure and heart disease.

Not only is this bad for one's health, but it can hinder effective decision-making.

"When you're in that fight-or-flight response, your mind goes into a reptilian state, where you can't process basic information well," Henningsen explains. "You're all about survival at that moment." This is the same phenomenon that leads to test anxiety among students.

Using relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or meditation can reduce stress dramatically, and these techniques can also help sharpen focus and improve other job-related functions (see sidebar).

After his second trip to the ER in as many years, Henningsen began using these strategies as part

of a three-pronged approach to better health that targets the mind, body, and spirit.

Tending to the mind might involve quiet meditation, reflection, or simply being present in the moment. Nourishing the spirit includes finding joy in life or believing in a higher power. Keeping the body healthy means eating right, getting enough sleep, and exercising regularly.

"This doesn't mean you have to become a gym rat," Henningsen observes, "but some sort of exercise is important."

SUCCESS, NOT STRESS

Henningsen has followed a low-carb ketogenic diet for a few years now, and he's seen dramatic improvements in his health and stamina. He compares eating well to fueling a precision race car: "If you try to run a race car with low-grade 87 octane fuel and you expect high performance on that Daytona 500 track, you're not going to get it."

By focusing on the mind, body, and spirit, Henningsen has changed his entire outlook and his approach to work.

"I no longer see situations as stressful," he says. "Yes, they're challenging, but it's how you deal with those challenges that determines whether you feel stress or not. Stress is just a consequence of not handling a challenge appropriately."

Even amid all the uncertainty and rapid changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, Henningsen and his staff were able to maintain an even keel.

“The semester was going fine, and then all of a sudden we were in the midst of a pandemic crisis,” he says. “We were told to turn on a dime and shift everything online, including our services. Normally, trying to get all that done in a year would be a huge task. We had to do it in two weeks.”

The college’s leadership team met throughout spring break to plan this unprecedented transition.

“Did I have concerns? Yes, of course I did,” Henningsen says. “But I also knew we were focused on the task at hand, and we had a great team with a great culture. So I wasn’t stressed through that period.”

IMPROVING RELATIONSHIPS

A healthy leader is a more effective leader, as Compton College President Keith Curry can attest.

Losing nearly 100 pounds has helped Curry sleep better at night. He finds he has a lot more energy now and is more productive at his job.

In fall 2017, Curry weighed 370 pounds. “I knew I had to take control of my weight,” he says. He embarked on a fitness journey that included eating better and exercising regularly. Today, he weighs about 280 pounds—and earlier this year he completed his first marathon.

Aside from having more focus and energy, Curry says his weight loss has improved his relationships with students, staff and colleagues.

AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders

Time management and planning: Continue to find balance in your life, ensuring that your priorities shift as needed. Carve out adequate time to plan for the rollout of major initiatives. *(CEOs, Personal Traits & Abilities)*

BETTER HEALTH IN 5 MINUTES A DAY

Setting aside just five minutes a day to meditate or clear your mind can make a big difference in your health and your job performance, research suggests.

Meditation slows down the nervous system so the mind and body feel more relaxed. Research shows that consistent meditation changes the structure and function of the brain regions responsible for attention, emotion, and awareness, leading to less stress and a greater ability to focus over time.

In fact, just one week of brief daily meditation has been found to produce significant improvements in attention, energy, and stress reduction (Tang et al., 2007). And in high-stress work environments, those who were trained in meditation techniques were able to stay on task longer (Levy et al., 2012).

Contrary to popular opinion, “you don’t have to be sitting in a lotus position and holding your hands together like a Buddhist statue in order to meditate,” says Jim Henningsen, president of the College of Central Florida. “It’s about getting comfortable and clearing your thoughts.”

“Regular mindfulness practice improves the mood and leads to better decision making,” says Tara Huber, co-founder of Take Five Meditation in Washington, D.C. “It helps one stay focused and calmly aware. And it doesn’t have to take a lot of time. Just five minutes a day of meditation can make a difference in health and well-being. What’s important is consistency.”

Huber works with high-powered clients to help them practice mindfulness. She says many people have the idea that meditation has to be a formal, lengthy process, and that’s just not true. You can meditate anytime and anywhere, even while commuting or before joining an important meeting.

“Start small,” she advises. “Just take a few minutes to take five deep breaths. Take a moment to stand under a tree in full bloom and notice the beauty around you. Take a break from your electronics and emails and take a short walk and mindfully notice bird activity. Notice how you feel after doing any of these activities. The act of noticing itself is meditation. These small, mindful acts over time help you to deepen your practice.”

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Tyjaun Lee, president of the Penn Valley and Maple Woods campuses of Metropolitan Community College, worked out with the college's softball team.



"As an African-American male, I felt people were intimidated by me because of my size," he says. "Now, that's less of a problem."

Learning how to be more mindful has helped Kay Eggleston, president of Richland College in Texas, forge stronger relationships within her own campus community.

Two of Richland's core values are wholeness and mindfulness. Wholeness refers to nurturing the mind, body, and spirit, while mindfulness is about being aware of the present and actively noticing things.

Eggleston takes daily breaks from the hustle and bustle of her job to stroll around the lake in the middle of Richland's campus and take in the beauty of nature. These moments of quiet, deliberate reflection have helped her become more fully present and a better listener when communicating with others.

"Ellen Langer's research on mindfulness has been instructive to us," she observes. "Langer says that everyone working within the same context and fully present can lead to more attentiveness and better performance."

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

For Tyjaun Lee, president of the Penn Valley and Maple Woods campuses of Metropolitan Community College in Missouri, taking care of her own health sets the right tone for her leadership team.

"How I show up to work each day is how my team shows up," she notes. "If I'm tired or hum-drum, that's the energy they feed off of."

Lee wakes up at 4 a.m., meditates, then heads to the gym for a workout before arriving at the college at 8 a.m. She also meditates for 10 to 15 minutes in the evening to prepare herself for a restful sleep, and she's in bed before nine.



Compton College President Keith Curry's fitness journey has given him more focus and energy.



Mindfulness has helped Richland College President Kay Eggleston forge stronger relationships with the campus community.

“I want to show up motivated, inspired and energized,” she explains. “Four o’clock in the morning comes pretty fast.”

At Richland, wholeness and mindfulness were core values before Eggleston became president, but Eggleston—whose background is in health care—has worked hard to institutionalize them. For instance, she begins every meeting with a discussion of how participants have applied these core values recently, and she doesn’t send emails to her leadership team at night or on weekends unless there’s an emergency.

“You have to model your expectations,” she explains. “I want them to have a life outside of work.”

At the College of Central Florida, even students are learning to be more mindful. Students are exposed to mindfulness strategies along with other habits for success in a required first-year seminar.

“We encourage students to practice different techniques for clearing and focusing their mind,” Henningsen says. “One of those techniques is doing a daily 10-minute meditation. It can be guided or not. There are free apps available that take students through guided meditations.” In its learning commons, the college has a mindfulness room dedicated to yoga, meditation or quiet reflection.

The college is collecting data to see if these techniques are helping students learn more effectively, he says. However, anecdotal evidence suggests they’re more focused and less anxious about schoolwork and life challenges.

FINDING TIME

With all the responsibilities a college president faces, finding the time to take care of oneself can be difficult.

Lee likes to multitask as she exercises. While she’s on the elliptical machine at the gym, she’ll catch up on email. “I’ll have my water bottle and my two phones with me—a work phone and a personal phone,” she says. “People must think I’m crazy.”



Last year, she attended the softball team’s workouts and exercised alongside the players. This allowed her to get in some physical activity while also interacting with students.

“While I was working out with them, I got a chance to hear about their experience on campus,” she recalls. These insights helped inform the college’s remodeling of its student center.

Henningsen saves the precious minutes that traveling to a gym would require by keeping an exercise bike and a weight bench with some dumbbells next to his office. “I’ve learned to use the little gaps in my time to work out,” he says.

Leaders have to find opportunities that work within their own routines, he says, adding: “We tell our students in class that it takes discipline and focus to complete their studies and pass their courses. This is no different. There are never enough hours in the day—but if it’s important to you, you’ll make the time for it. And it should be important to you.”

Being healthier is about making deliberate choices, Eggleston says. “Take care of yourself by getting more sleep, eating more greens, leaving the empty caloric soft drinks and snacks, getting up from your desk and walking briskly, doing something fun each day, laughing heartily and learning something new,” she recommends.

She concludes: “I believe we have to fill our own cups regularly if we want to serve and bring excellence to our students and our communities.” ■

Dennis Pierce is an education writer based in Boston.