

# Help Others By Taking Care of Yourself First

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*Should the oxygen mask fall from the compartment above your head, put your own oxygen mask on first, and then help the others around you.* Such are the pre-flight instructions that flight attendants recite to commercial airline passengers before take-off. Most of us are not listening; we are preoccupied with getting comfortable, meeting the passenger seated next to us, or browsing the in-flight shopping brochure. Yet, those words are critically important. What nobody explicitly tells us is that if the cabin pressure should suddenly fail and there is a loss of cabin oxygen, the very best of us has precious seconds (less than 30 seconds, depending on altitude; only 9 seconds at 50,000 feet) without oxygen before we lose consciousness and then we are of no help to anyone. Not only should we be listening to the instructions, but we should be mentally rehearsing putting on the oxygen mask.

*Put your own mask on first.* There is great wisdom in those few words. We must first help ourselves if we want to help anyone else. Most of us are too pre-occupied with our routine chores, our social circles, and our jobs, to take the necessary time to take care of ourselves first. Then, in a crisis, we are unprepared and unable to help ourselves or anyone else. How easy to forget that a good team works together and team members watch out for each other; but, in order to be on that winning team, we have to be prepared, and ready to each contribute towards the success of the team.

Being mentally and physically prepared is not the same as being self-centered. Being prepared is also not the same as worrying or stressing about potential problems. Being prepared is about being educated, healthy, and emotionally centered. Perhaps it is time that we each learn to nurture ourselves; in doing so we will, in turn, be better able to help those around us. The Boy Scout motto "be prepared" means being in a state of readiness in mind, body, and spirit, in order to do that which needs to be done, the duty at hand. How much better off we, as a society, would be if each of us was prepared. Never before in the history of mankind have individuals had so much information at their fingertips. The availability of publications and the internet allows each of us to do health and lifestyle research. We all have access to the information that was once available only to physicians. Educated consumers make smarter choices. Healthy people make a healthy society, and a healthy society accomplishes more. Health is one aspect of our nation's infrastructure – just like education, roads, railways, and communications. The foundation for a great society stems from healthy individuals. Make healthy choices. *Put your own mask on first.*

Those around us are influenced and affected by the way we react. Emotions, such as energy and optimism are contagious. Emotions in turn influence the way that we act. The reverse is also true: being so caught up in problems of others, problems in the world that we can't solve, leads to burnout. Burnout is manifested by anger, isolation, and resentment. Burnout is also a cause of depression, leading to poor lifestyle decisions such as inactivity, bad dietary decisions, and a vicious cycle of nonproductive stress. Each of us, at one time or another, requires the emotional energy of those around us. There are many times when we must be ready to assume the role of one who nurtures. The closer we are to inner balance and harmony, the less effortlessly and the more we nurture those in need. Both positive and negative energy are contagious but only positive energy contributes to a better world.

*Put your own mask on first* also means being a leader. Leaders have a sense of balance, inspiring those around them to overcome challenges and create successes. Learning not to panic in the event of an emergency represents that sense of balance. Self-controlled individuals react more appropriately in adverse circumstances. In any emergency, there are those who panic, those who are dazed, and those who spring into action and help both themselves and those around them. Those who panic and those who are dazed have far less chances of surviving. Panic is a sign of an unprepared mind and panic never helps anyone in any situation. I see examples of this in the hospital every day when patients with stroke or heart attacks arrive for emergency treatment. In the worst of cases, people panicked and precious time was lost. In the best of cases, someone took charge, recognized the warning signs of a stroke or heart attack, and called for help,

administered CPR, or pulled a stranger from harm's way. What better gratification than being able to successfully help another in need.

Thus, there are two kinds of medical citizenship: inward citizenship whereby we develop inner strength and balance to better prepare ourselves, and the outward citizenship whereby we are prepared to help others around us. Medical citizenship means understanding our own health and taking steps to stay healthy or get healthier; and medical citizenship also means being prepared and ready to help others. Many challenges face us in today's world: for example, the woman next to us with symptoms of a stroke, the child injured in a car accident, the survivors of fires, floods, and hurricanes. Remember to stay healthy and to *put your own mask first* but then don't forget to help those around who are in need.

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