



Planes, Trains, and Other Interruptions: Such Is Life!

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ Nurse leaders can spend a significant part of their careers traveling.
- ▶ Self-care and personal mindfulness need not suffer when we are away from home and our normal routine.
- ▶ Personal health plans can be adapted in practical ways to travel with you.
- ▶ So pack your bags with whatever feeds your self-nurturing needs, grab some kale chips and comfortable shoes, and let's get going!



Kim Richards

TRAVEL IS A NECESSITY of work for many of us but boy, can it mess up a self-care routine! From meals planned by others, time spent sitting in meetings, and jam-packed agendas, a healthy routine can be sabotaged quickly.

Recently, at a nurse leaders conference, I asked the attendees how they prepared for (or not) the continuum of their personal self-

care while traveling. What routines, practices, or habits would they be able to maintain? Would other activities in a different environment suffice? What does time permit and how can they best nourish their body, mind, and soul?

Here are some of the comments and observations:

- I plan on attending an outdoor yoga class, even though I do not do yoga at home.
- I plan on drinking much more water by having it with me all the time.
- I am going for a walk early every morning and enjoying the beautiful area.
- I am going to skip a night with my colleagues, order room service, watch a movie, and get extra sleep.
- I brought my iPod® and am hitting the hotel gym.
- I plan to split entrees with a colleague so I don't eat so much.
- I will not stay up late responding to unimportant emails.
- I plan to choose healthier food at breakfast and skip the pastries.

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- I am turning my phone off during the opening session so I can really listen to my colleagues and develop connections.
- I plan on sleeping in an extra hour and am ok with missing a session.
- I am scheduling a massage and pedicure.
- I am reading a book that I got lost in.
- I brought my sneakers and workout clothes to run.
- I brought my Bluetooth® speakers with me and listen to favorite music in my room.
- I plan on writing a few sentences in my journal each day about my observations.
- I plan on sitting on my patio and meditating for 10 minutes in the morning.
- I am opening my patio door and listening to the birds.
- I am tracking my food intake and steps on my Fitbit®.
- I plan on saying “no” to any commitments that add more workload.
- I packed some Weight Watcher's® protein bars in case I want a snack.
- I am limiting my alcohol intake and staying away from sugar-laden drinks.
- I plan on talking less about myself and asking more about my colleagues.
- I brought my protein powder and a shaker to mix my own breakfast.
- I plan on Skyping with my kids each night to ask about their day.
- I plan on not attending any session that I am not interested in or that is not mandatory.
- I brought probiotics to help my digestion.
- I plan on just being me, without the title.
- I travel with a booklet of sticky note positive affirmations and post them on the bathroom mirror each morning.

Interesting, huh? What a variation of self-care perspectives! The diverse affirmations reflected each attendee's definition of self-care; doing whatever it is that nurtures the body, mind, or spirit.

Travel Obstacles to Self-Care

What are the commonalities between all of these comments? They are proactive, planned, and purposeful choices. They allow flexibility, adaptation, and personalization. They help prevent self-sabotage and guilt. They also show a strong commitment to self: knowing what “tools” work for you, planning ahead, taking what's needed and recognizing vulnerability, especially away from home.

Those who travel often have experienced the exhaustion and the feeling of never catching up on work, sleep, healthy habits, and relaxation. Personally, I have had to institute a much tighter plan for self-care when I travel because I found myself (yes, I know I am supposed to be the expert!) slacking a bit on the road. I was traveling around the country doing presentations and workshops on this very issue, yet found myself off course of my routine. I was gaining weight, lacking my usual energy, and uncharacteristically leaving my workout gear at home for short travels. It was not a good feeling and I had spent way too much money on clothes that I could not wear!

I had to finally admit that my midlife metabolism had slowed significantly (yes, I knew the current research on that!), my hormones were depleted (yes, I knew that too!), and those airport salads are often packed with as many calories as a cheeseburger, even with dressing on the side. (Yes, I even knew that too!)

Here's the point: As a nurse coach and fitness instructor, I clearly understand, advocate, and preach about healthy lifestyle, wellness, and self-care. But in the spirit of full disclosure, I ridiculously thought I was somehow "grandfathered in" when it came to all of that aging stuff. For some reason, I had defaulted to giving to others more than myself, a common thread that weaves throughout the nursing profession.

The experience jolted me into developing a new plan with new baselines, including getting my hormones tested. I was *sure* it was hypothyroidism. Nope, my thyroid was normal. But, the absence of several important hormones, such as estrogen and testosterone, made me feel a bit relieved, as I had something clinical to point the finger. (Did you know that the normal range for testosterone in a 55-year-old woman is 80-100? Mine was barely detectable at 3!) After discussion of the pros and cons with my awesome nurse practitioner, I chose bio-identical hormone replacement pellets that last about 3 months. (It's a personal choice and I am not advising either way, just sharing what worked for me.) I could feel the difference in 48 hours. Aahhh...why didn't I get tested earlier? (Hum, could it be self-diagnosis and avoidance?)

But, the truth was, I needed to take a dose of the advice I dispense to others.

Not Just Diet and Exercise

Self-care is not just about diet and exercise, so I took a hard look at where I was within a 360-degree life assessment. I had gained weight. I missed the close connection with my family (including my Golden Retrievers) and friends due to travel and work and was feeling a bit lonely even though I'm passionate about meeting new people and talking with them about their goals of self-care. I felt a consistent underlying anxiety that was unexplained. I felt distant from my faith and missed the peace I experienced from spiritual ritual.

Since 2011, I had experienced 2 very difficult years that included a divorce and withdraw of life support for my father. While extremely painful, I persevered, as nurses do. The speaking engagements I had following those events gave me great comfort and a respite from grief. In fact, my grief transformed my delivery into a platform of inspirational strength. Yet, as a person who typically thrives on independence, change, and challenge, I found myself longing for safety, consistency, and a blanket. The assault to my core had been like an unhealed wound, and I had not fully appreciated the latent effects on my health – mind, body, and spirit.

Fast forward to today: I'm about 2 weeks from fitting comfortably into my skinny jeans and being able to sit down. I have one pair of jeans I use as my gauge, and they hang in a special place in my closet so I see them every time I walk in.

I feel energized, connected, and peaceful...yes, *peaceful*. I am grateful for unearthed feelings of joy and new possibility. I feel like an improved version of a wiser me!

On-the-Road Tips

These are just a few of the practical ways I found helpful in turbocharging my personal health plan, metabolism, and proactively healing myself. (If you are interested in hearing the full plan, just contact me!)

- While I still travel for work, I *always* take my workout gear and I *always* find something to do. Even if it's putting a towel on the hotel floor and jumping rope, doing push-ups, and sit-ups. I also pack protein drink packets and my own shaker to start the morning with nutrient-dense nutrition. This ritual is helpful as it reminds me of my commitment to me.
- I track every morsel I eat, maybe not forever, but for a while. My diet was already very good, but I needed to bring even more attention to it. I added more veggies and never eat after 7 p.m. I plan and shop on Sundays and always have a healthy soup in the freezer as my "fast food."
- I drink more water, about 100 ounces per day, starting with 12 oz. first thing in the morning. It makes me feel full, reduces swelling from air travel, eliminates toxins, and keeps everything moving smoothly. In fact, just this one practice makes a huge difference!
- I am back to teaching fitness classes 3 days a week as I had given them up due to my travel schedule. I now have a great, reliable substitute who is happy to teach when I am gone. I really missed the connections I made with participants and my competitiveness makes me work harder than when I exercise alone. The camaraderie is inspiring to me. (There's also something to knowing you will be jumping up and down in Spandex in front of lots of people to keep you motivated!)

- The days I am home and not teaching, I go to a challenging spin class and use my heart monitor to track calories burned. I aim for 600 each class. I am loving the pure cardio and am making new friends. (There is a 78-year-old rock star in my class who calls me “kid.” Love it!)
- I meditate twice a day instead of once, to keep cortisol in balance and re-center.
- I get an extra hour of sleep. Not every night, but most.
- Alcohol? Almost none (for a while at least). I have never been a soda or sugary beverage drinker, but I do enjoy a glass of full-bodied red wine. Empty calories. I hate that.
- I am planning my travel more efficiently (usually). I will plan an extra day in a nice place to have some down time. I work extremely hard, I deserve it, and I need it.
- And lastly, I decided to do what I do for clients who feel guilty about where they are, how they got there, and fret over what to do about it. I simply gave myself a big break and let go of the shame. It happens. It’s life. I’m human too and because of that I can choose to admit that what once worked, needs adjusting and get on with it!

Wake-Up Call

I’ve learned to release what no longer serves me, and create each new day. As Colin Hay sings in *Waiting For My Real Life to Begin*, “Just be here now, forget about the past, your mask is wearing thin.”

This *is* our real life. I was inspired by the other nurse leaders’ practices for self-care on the road. During further discussion, we all admitted travel was a challenge, yet cannot be an excuse for lack of self-care. It’s part of the leadership role we worked very hard to achieve, and now have a responsibility to do well and affect change. Yet, our honor to ourselves cannot be denied in our efforts to influence others.

Does my story sound familiar to you? Have you had a similar wake-up call that causes a pause in the way you care for yourself? As nurses, we often are so driven to help others and get the job done near perfectly, that even though we *know* the right information, we sacrifice our own needs in the process. Take it from an expert: none of us are “grandfathered in” when it comes to care for self, travel or no travel.

Take off the mask, pack your bags with whatever feeds your self-nurturing needs, grab some kale chips and comfortable shoes, and let’s get going, my friends! We’re all in this health care transformation together and we have monumental work to do...starting with ourselves. \$

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

— Mary Oliver (1990), *The Summer Day*