

“If you want to lead others, you have to lead yourself first”

ANGÉLIQUE PITERNELLA was too busy caring for others, and forgot about herself. Now she has learned to “put on her own oxygen mask” before helping others.



“For years, I was a world-class people pleaser. I ignored my own emotions and spent all my time taking care of other people. It started when my brother died suddenly. He was 17; I was 18. The grief of my parents was so upsetting to me that, without being asked, I started to take care of them, ignoring my own grief. When my parents divorced, my father told me to ‘take good care’ of my mother, so I did—even after she adopted another three children and even when she was in the hospital. In my secretarial job, I was also helpful to my co-workers in an over-the-top way. By the age of 23, I was running the whole family.

Later, the people-pleasing continued in my marriage. I was losing sight of my own needs and wishes, and I stopped doing anything fun for myself anymore.

My divorce, ten years ago, was a first step toward standing up for myself, but I still clung to the role of caregiver to my sick parents, my own children and even my co-workers. It left me drained.

One day—under severe pressure, and despite the pain in my chest—I decided I would ‘just’ set up a swimming pool for the kids, because I’d promised I would, but the next day I was in the hospital with angina because my blood pressure had shot through the roof. As I lay there, hooked up to all sorts of tubes and machinery, I saw my life flash before my eyes and I thought, ‘Shit! I haven’t done any of the things I want to do.’

After that dire warning, I decided to focus on doing only the things that I wanted to do. I got more rest and took a leadership

training course, because that was really just for me. That course made me do some deep work on myself, because if you want to lead others, you have to lead yourself first. That was fantastic. I learned how to open up and experience my own feelings, and I decided to redesign my life. That wasn’t easy in practice, because I was still working at the same job, where I noticed that I was feeling unhappier by the day. Then, as I was on the road to a better life, the burnout hit me. I sat in my office every day crying. My body felt heavy and listless, and my head was buzzing with thoughts.

That’s when I decided to go for a walk every morning. I wanted to feel the cold air on my face and to be outside where I could hear the birds singing. That helped, because it emptied my mind and made my body feel lighter and more energetic. I also started listening to peaceful music: fado and meditation music. I would take the time to sit and listen every day after getting home, lighting a lily-of-the-valley candle. That ritual brought me inner peace. I still do it every day now, six years later, even if I get home after midnight. It’s truly a moment just for me.

While struggling with burnout, I quit my job and started my own business. I gave quite a few workshops on the ‘secretary of the future’ and decided to go further in that direction. What a great choice that was! Working for yourself is wonderful. When I feel like I have too much on my mind, I stop right away and take a walk or listen to music. That freedom is so delightful, and so important. Someone

once told me, ‘You should treat yourself like a million dollar racehorse.’ That’s so true. If you take good care of yourself, burnout won’t stand a chance. Now I know I have to be loyal to myself. And I have to renew that commitment every day, by taking good care of myself and asking for help when I need it. That’s why I farm out a lot of tasks and work in inspiring places such as the Dominican Republic. It’s just like in an airplane; you have to put on your own oxygen mask first. Only after that can you help others. I’ve become a much freer human being, and that makes me better able to care for my children and co-workers. 🌸

