

# Exploring the Intersection of Leadership and Mental Health: Self-Care Practices in Academia

Henry Oh, PhD, MBA, DF, NPT-C, RRT, MLS, FAARC, FRSB, FGAFM  
Business Administration, Education, Neuro-Psychotherapy,  
Medical Laboratory Science and Respiratory Therapy

## Summary

The demands of leadership roles in academia can be tremendous, leading to damaging effects to mental health. Some of these acts are emotionally taxing and can lead to stress, burnout, and feelings of isolation. Self-care practices have emerged as one way of countering these effects. This literature review aims to examine the link between academic leadership and mental health and self-care practices with well-being toward resilience. Terms involved in the search strategy were: 'academic leadership stress', 'mental health in leadership', 'self-care practices in academia' and 'leadership and well-being'. This review further highlights some research gaps providing an opportunity for future research in this important area, given a much smaller number of studies conducted on self-care in academic leadership.

## Introduction

The pressures faced by academic leaders are well-illustrated. They often must balance between several roles that create a fair amount of pressure (Urick, Carpenter, Eckert, 2021). The unique challenges of academic leadership are long hours worked and under pressure from decision-making for various stakeholder relations. These job challenges can cause a considerable amount of mental distress, including stress, burnout, and anxiety (Gabriel, 2018).

Women of color face unique challenges within academic structures. They may experience composite stress due to their gender and racial identities, which can affect their mental health (Nicol and Yee, 2017). Grottis (2024) elaborates on this by examining how black women administrators sail their roles while prioritizing their subjective well-being and resistance through radical self-care practices.

This review seeks to integrate existing knowledge in the field of leadership, mental health, and self-care practices for a better understanding of their intersection and to put forth the most desirable avenues for future research.

## Methodology

The methodology included the following steps for this process:

### Search Strategy:

In order to identify relevant peer-reviewed articles, books, and reports, relevant databases were employed: PubMed, PsycINFO, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Search terms included:

'academic leadership stress,' 'mental health in leadership,' 'self-care practices in academia,' and 'leadership and well-being.'

#### Inclusion Criteria:

Except for one reference from Orem (1995), this study provides literature published in English from 2000 to 2024. Empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and reviews that relate to self-care practices and mental health in academic leadership were the most favored.

#### Exclusion Criteria:

Articles were excluded if they were related to corporate leadership or non-academic contexts or were unrelated to mental health topics.

#### Data Completion and Analysis:

key findings were extracted from the reviewed literature and placed under different themes including stressors in academic leadership, role of mental health in leadership, and common self-care practices. Such methodology provided insight into the intersectionality of leadership and mental health as applied in an academic context.

#### Stressors in Academic Leadership

The academic leadership system comprises several stress-producing factors: administrative overload, resource constraints, conflicts between the faculty demands and institutional goals (Knight and Trowle, 2001). The above pressures create a chronic state of stress, which in turn affects one's ability to make decisions and the effectiveness of leadership (Sverdik and Hall, 2020). Evidence shows that, in many cases, the mental well-being of the leader is sacrificed for the further demands of the institution, hence aggravating the mental health issues (Leiter & Maslach, 2016).

#### Mental Health in Leadership

Great importance is allocated to mental health in leadership since it evokes their effectiveness in decision-making, relationship-building, and fostering teamwork (Bowen et al., 2019). It has been suggested, and found to be on correlation with diminished production and morale, that mental illness may lead to lower organizational productivity (Colligan & Higgins, 2006). The failure of a leader to prioritize themselves gives birth to those leaders who, conversely, become resilient, high-performing, and demonstrate respect for team conformity (Luthans et al., 2007).

#### Self-Care Practices

One finds it common to tie self-care into effective leadership in the honorary realm of academia case studies and reports. In their paper, Driscoll, Leigh, and Zamin (2020) have mentioned how self-care enhances personal wellbeing while augmenting professional abilities; hence, leaders exercise self-care to augment their emotional intelligence, which would pay off in the culture of their institutions. This correlates with the findings of Lemon

(2021), who puts forth that vulnerability as a trait that should permeate into self-care can indeed help leaders form crucial connections with their peers and students.

The COVID-19 pandemic further derailed the significance of self-care in academic leadership. The crisis presented unprecedented challenges that required rapid modifications, which often, but not only, caused increased anxiety and mental anguish among leaders (Urick et al., 2021). As a response to these tensions, many leaders found solace in self-care strategies that allowed them to refresh and lead in a more effective manner. Riccitelli (2024) comments on how crucial self-care acts as a tool of resistance in a neoliberal academic context, emphasizing that self-care practices will counterbalance the adverse effects of those in high-stress roles.

Self-care is the method of maintaining the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of oneself (WHO, 2019). Within the context of leadership positions, self-care refers to managing cortisol levels (stress management), emotional regulation, and finding work-life balance. Among the numerous theories developed, Orem's Self-Care Deficit Nursing Theory defines self-care as an effort against burnout (Orem 1995). In academia, self-care practices are positively correlated with job satisfaction and inversely proportional to burnout among women in universities (Turner & Edwards, 2021).

Besides addressing the instantaneous well-being of leaders, self-care has a powerful pull on institutional landscapes. Randa (2023) proposes that institutional self-care actions could contribute constructively towards making the working environment more supportive for every scholar and academician. Accordingly, self-care practices should be publicized by leadership, which would show that mental health takes precedence to the resilience of an organization. Besides these, Lemon (2022) points out that creative expression done as a way of self-care can aid in providing a space for academics to breathe, collaborating and committing to a healthy community.

### Self-Care Strategies

Academic leaders are encouraged to use varied self-care practices to improve their resilience. For example, physical activities such as running can double as mental breaks (Tarabochia, Brugar and Ward, 2022). In addition, a culture of support tutoring can offer additional self-care layers that promote well-being (Balderrama-Trudell, 2023). Johnson-Arnold's work (2020) indicates that students who graduated in educational leadership greatly benefit from understanding of self-care as part of their holistic health.

Common techniques include mindfulness practices, physical activity, and social support, all of which are utilized by academic leaders to cope with stress (Shanafelt & Noseworthy, 2017). Mindfulness-based intervention has been found to significantly enhance their emotional regulation and reduce stress levels across the board among leaders (Good et al., 2016). Besides, such institutional support in self-care practices, including flexible scheduling and the availability of mental health resources, are critically significant to make those possible (Geller et al., 2021).

There is an increasing awareness that institutions must actively support self-care practices. Lemon (2024) underlines the necessity of universities putting their weight on ensuring well-being and remaking their cultures so that self-care is no longer a solo undertaking. By establishing environments that promote mental well-being, institutions may therefore break the silence on mental health issues facing academic leaders.

Despite the importance of self-care, the challenges remain. Prisloe (2022) warns about toxic rhetoric that surrounds discussions about self-care, which can create pressure instead of relief for academic leaders. Leaders must find a balance in how they approach self-care to ensure that they do not become another task in their daily life.

### Gaps in Literature

Mental health and self-care participation of academic CEOs and leaders remain with few materials being procured. Much of the existing research primarily addresses governance in general or corporate contexts, which has consequently limited its application and relevance within the academic field (Gabriel et al., 2018). Mixed-methods research combining quantitative and qualitative data is also sorely missing to paint a bigger picture about self-care participation and its effect on mental health and leadership successes.

### Implications for Future Research

Future studies should consider practices with self-care employed in academic leaders and associated studies linking their success to varied institutional settings. Mixed-method approaches could offer richer insights into the ways in which self-care influences mental health and leadership performance. In addition, longitudinal studies could measure lasting impacts on well-being and organizational outcomes from self-care interventions.

### Conclusion

Many individuals consider academic leadership roles to be among the most stressful careers. Therefore, every academic leader should develop their mental health and self-care practices to ensure optimal personal and professional functioning. Affirmatively, the literature impacts future targeted research aimed at self-care in the administrative arena as a basis for developing evidence-based interventions directed towards academic leaders. By putting self-care and mental health as top priorities, institutions can develop resilient leaders to withstand the test of time in dealing with various challenges facing higher education.

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