

A self-care journey as a Hmong American Woman

By Maivoncais Her

Growing up in the United States of America as the eldest child, I often heard my parents' voices in my head telling me, "You need to try hard and do your best, so that you can pave the road for your siblings. They are looking up to you." Because they couldn't speak English and had little formal education, they asked me to take care of my siblings in ways parents often do. "We will do what we can by providing a roof over your heads and food to eat," they said.

Even though I was faced with many challenges in college, such as navigating a new academic world and balancing my multiple jobs, volunteer activities, internships, student leadership positions and concern for my siblings, I did not want to burden my parents with my own stress. It wasn't until graduate school that I learned about the importance of caring for myself.

An immigrant family's story

My immigrant family has overcome many obstacles to be where we are today. Both of my parents are orphans who lost their parents and survived a war that gave them a new chance at life, while at the same time tearing them apart from their families. My father immigrated to the United States from Laos in 1981 after the Vietnam War ended in 1975. Leaving behind his father, brothers and sisters, he traveled to an unknown land that had promises of opportunities, freedom and prosperity.

My mother, also of Hmong heritage, came to the United States in 1989 with her relatives. My parents met at the Fresno Hmong New Year soon after she immigrated and got married.

They struggled financially on my father's wage of \$4.25 an hour. In 1994, with a hope of greater opportunities, they moved from California to Minnesota, where they worked 12-hour shifts to create a home where their children could flourish.

As the eldest child, I had to become independent quickly, as I had the responsibility of caring for my siblings while both of my parents were at work. I did not want to burden my parents and knew that they were both exhausted from their jobs.

This became a motivation for me to try harder and do better. I had to figure things out on my own or ask my teachers for help.

During my first year in high school, I vividly remember my father being laid off from his job of 10 years and my mother picking up three jobs for a year and a half just to make ends meet. Although it was a very stressful time for my parents, they tried to make sure we got what we needed and tried to shield us from the stress.

Constantly seeing my parents working hard, putting their needs behind their children's needs, keeping silent

about their stress and exhaustion while hoping that there would be a brighter future for their children—these were all characteristics that I ingrained into myself. This sense of extreme responsibility and self-sacrifice has been reinforced within my academic life and my life overall.

Thinking about the needs of others first

I struggled to keep up with all of my obligations, but I worked hard. There was no time to think about myself, since I had to focus on doing what I needed to do to achieve success so that my family could have a better life.

Even if I was physically and emotionally exhausted, I would remind myself that what I was experiencing was nothing compared to my parents' experiences. So, I learned to keep my fears and struggles deep inside me, and pushed forward to become "successful," in order to support my family.

By the end of my first year of graduate school, I was burned out. I had lost my motivation. I had gone into a crisis of not knowing who I was anymore.

However, I did not want to talk to my parents about what I was going through because, as the eldest child, the expectation was that I would be strong. I was hoping that eventually I would bounce back up and find my energy and passion again, without my family ever realizing the difficulties I was facing.

It was an impossible hope to have. Although my family never truly knew the extent of my breakdown, I was emotionally and mentally stuck in a rut and was not able to move forward.

Find a way out through self-care

In my field of study, social work, there has always been a focus on self-care. But I did not truly understand what self-care meant.

I tried various methods mentioned (breath work, meditations, journaling, yoga, YouTube breaks, listening to music), and I found that none of the methods were right for me. I felt that none of these took into consideration my cultural background and heritage. Although it was frustrating, I decided to continue to seek out different self-care methods.

As I was pondering what made me feel happy and confident, I realized those moments were when I was busy accomplishing tasks and being surrounded by people working toward an issue. I decided to become more involved in my community group, Community Action Against Racism, taking on more tasks and responsibilities.

Although I did regain my confidence and a good sense of self, and felt happy when I completed a workshop or event, I was still physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted.

Last summer, I finally realized that it was okay to slow down and take some time to focus on myself. My field supervisor reframed the perception of self-care for me. She told me that in doing self-care, I have to note the difference in doing things that feed the soul and ego (such as being

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busy and actively involved in things that I'm passionate about) and doing things that help me relax physically, mentally and emotionally.

Also, within our conversation, we both acknowledged that my family was intricately intertwined with my self-identity, which added to my stress.

With this knowledge of the enormous impact and influence my family has on me, we both decided to focus on having me figure out a way to slowly differentiate between my own self and my perceived responsibility of not burdening my family. It was an eye-opening conversation.

Let the process begin

I began to recognize the importance of embracing things where they are and emphasizing the importance of taking time to care for myself so that I can become successful.

I had to learn how to slowly extract myself from my family and just focus on me. For example, one method that worked really well for me was giving myself 20 minutes of "worry time." I usually do this right before my bedtime, or twice a day if I'm having a very stressful week.

The 20 minutes are meant for me think about any anxiety, stress, worries or negative feelings that I may have toward myself and my activities for the next day. After the 20 minutes are up, I restart fresh with a positive affirmation and move on with my day.

Another method that worked for me was having a support group with my best friend. We decided to plan a monthly, positive, stress-free activity (i.e., having a spa day or going rock climbing).

A method that I am still relentlessly working on is to learn how to gauge my own capacity and how to say no to things. It was hard to do, especially since it did not fit perfectly into my collective culture of putting others as a priority before oneself. But I was at a crossroad and knew I needed to follow the axiom of "taking care of myself helps everyone."

Although some methods have helped me, I want to emphasize that as a person's needs change, the self-care method that may have been working may not necessarily fit with the new change, and that it's a natural process to adjust and rework.

It is also important to acknowledge that family may have an immense influence on how one creates and finds a self-care method.

Journey, not destination

My self-care journey has also been a rediscovery of my self-identity and worth. I am still figuring out what slowing down and self-care mean and learning how to accept things as they are, as well as learning how to find a balance between my family and myself.

I know that there are probably many women out there from many different cultures who are exhausted from working hard to become successful—I hope that sharing my experience with self-care will help you in your journey toward success, health and happiness. ■

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fields (engineering, computer science, etc.) as viable career paths. We want girls to embrace the opportunities ahead of them and understand that there are no limits to what they can do and be.

How do you think the principles you use for these inspiring and also tremendously fun toys can translate to tools teachers can use in middle school, high school and even college?

All of our product and design decisions are made with young girls in mind, and our team is dedicated to making toys that are both functional and appealing. At our core, we want to inspire the next generation of female engineers, so we make sure to focus on creating fun, positive experiences that leave a lasting impression.

It's important to understand your audience and engage with them. Sometimes that requires a bit of experimentation, but you can't be afraid to fail. Some of our best insights have come from lessons learned.

How do you think those girls raised today on GoldieBlox will help transform STEM culture when they're college age?

When we started out, we really wanted to ignite a national conversation about breaking gender stereotypes that would help shape a better future for our girls, and we think it's starting to work!

We've seen the mindset shift in so many girls and their parents who write in to tell us what a difference GoldieBlox has made in their lives. We know that we're helping these girls take a step in the right direction, and it's incredibly fulfilling.

These girls are going to be our future physicists, mathematicians and engineers, and we are so proud to know that we've played a part in inspiring their journeys.

Can you envision gender-neutral GoldieBlox toys that help smash gender boundaries?

Boys love GoldieBlox too—pink ribbon and all. In fact, Goldie's best friend is a male character named Li Gravity.

Everyone is encouraged to discover engineering with Goldie and her friends, and our toys teach a variety of engineering and problem-solving skills that are relevant for all kids. Our goal is to be a bridge between this hyper-gendered world of toys and a world in which the blue and pink aisles are obsolete.

How can higher education absorb some of your attitude in order to drive more young women into STEM and also foster a more positive environment?

Teachers can play a huge role in driving more women into STEM. I didn't even know what engineering was until my high school teacher suggested I pursue it as a college major. Sometimes, all we need is a little push in the right direction.

What I believe is so important in this space are role models—women who are cool, interesting, smart and relatable. We hope that Goldie and her friends are positive examples for girls and boys alike, but it's also so inspiring to see real-world examples of strong, intelligent women and communities supporting each other. ■

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