SELF-CARE: WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Managing day-to-day life, and the many stressors it brings, can be a challenge. It makes sense that we need to take care of our own well-being in order to deal with them most effectively and be at our best. Yet, it's often the case that the more stressed we are, the less able we are to prioritize our own needs. Understanding the wide-ranging value of self-care may help you approach it differently.

What IS self-care?

Generally, you can think of it being good to yourself in ways that help you feel stronger, healthier, more grounded, and balanced. Life and ongoing stress can deplete our emotional, physical, and spiritual resources – the strengths, abilities and mindsets that help us stay well, productive, and happy. Self-care is a way to build and maintain those resources.

What does it look like?

Core self-care moves address basic life functions – eating, sleeping and being active in ways that help you feel strong and healthy. But self-care is more than that. It is also about supporting our emotional well-being, being compassionate with ourselves, managing our stress, and being engaged in life – growing, learning, and connected in meaningful relationships. It can involve managing our financial well-being, investing in career development, or pursuing a sense of purpose and spiritual connection.

The power of self-care

Life pressures trigger our built-in stress response. This can be helpful in the short-term, but when it stays "on" indefinitely, it creates tension and co-opts our energy, focus, and mood. The physical impact can lead to pain, obesity, reduced immune function, and damaging inflammation that can increase the risk for chronic diseases. Emotions can be "tense" too. It can be hard to concentrate, sleep, make decisions, and be creative. The impact can be felt in our mental well-being, our work, and our relationships. Self-care is a way of helping us undo these negative effects and proactively promote positivity, strength and resilience.

How does it work?

All aspects of our being – mind, body, spirit – are connected and influence one another. Stress and unhealthy ways of coping, such as drinking or overeating, strain this system, making it harder to be strong and well. Self-care can reduce the impact of stress and prime us to be more resilient and better able to manage challenges going forward. It can:

› **Release tension:** We can be held hostage by our hard-wired, tense stress response. Physical tension can increase emotional tension and vice versa. Self-care can help release the grip of tension to free up our resources and disrupt this pattern.

› **Renew health:** The calming actions of self-care dial down the stress response and shift us into a restful rejuvenating state. This can strengthen the immune system, reduce inflammation and support mental health.

› **Restore calm:** Thoughts and worries can be a sneaky way for stress to grow. Self-care allows us to develop a different relationship with external and internal stressors by helping us feel more in control and able to tap thoughtful, measured responses.

› **Replenish energy:** Like the gas in our cars, our energy, focus and motivation runs down. Overloaded lives can lead to exhaustion and burnout. Healthy self-care is a way to "plug in" and refuel.

› **Recharge spirit:** Life challenges can spark negativity and gradually erode our spirit. When we treat ourselves with care, it reinforces the sense that we have value and worth, boosting self-esteem. This can help us be more engaged in our relationships, the world, and our own potential.

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Self-care basics

Self-care, in all its forms, can be used as an antidote to rising stress. It can also be developed into habits that can help proactively reduce the impact of stress and help us be at our best. While it can be hard to incorporate all of these strategies every day, even small moves can help you feel stronger and more balanced.
Core examples include:

- ☐ **Don't let sleep be optional.** You should get enough rest each night to awake feeling well-rested and energized. Seek help if you struggle with sleep.

- ☐ **Make time to eat well and stay hydrated.** Regular, well-balanced meals give you the high-grade fuel you need to stay strong and focused.

- ☐ **Fit exercise in.** It lowers stress and can help with sleep. Even 15-minutes can make a difference. Find something you enjoy and make it a regular routine.

- ☐ **Find one or more ways to relax mind and body.** Try out different methods, such as deep breathing or mindfulness, then make them a norm in your day.

- ☐ **Work on responding with self-compassion** rather than self-criticism. Use positive self-talk to remind yourself of your strengths and abilities.

- ☐ **Invest in meaningful relationships** and be open to leaning on them. Look for listeners, givers of honest feedback, and nurturers to build you up.

- ☐ **Build financial wellness.** Be proactive by having goals, a budget and savings plan. Address debt.

- ☐ **Embrace your life and potential.** Make room in each day for you. Allot time for fun and enjoyment along with your "must dos." Open yourself to the refreshment of being outdoors in nature. Explore new things that help you grow and pursuits that nourish your spirit.

The science

Sleep, especially the deepest stages, is a time to repair damage and renew resources. Stress hormones reset, mood-lifting brain chemicals are refreshed, creativity, and problem-solving abilities get a boost. (Healthline, 2020)

Nutrition: A healthy, balanced diet can actually fight stress. For example, complex carbs help us produce the calming neurotransmitter serotonin. Omega-3 fatty acids, found in fish, prevent surges of stress hormones. (WebMD, 2019)

Physical Activity: Research shows that regular activity not only reduces the levels of stress hormone in the body, it actually teaches our body systems how to better manage stress. (APA, 2020)

Relaxation strategies can dissipate tension and help us to feel more calm and in control. Practices, such as mindfulness, use body/mind connection to quiet worry and train a more measured response to stress. (Aldina, 2019)

Self-compassion has been found to be a stronger motivator than the self-criticism that's often our default. (Chen, 2018) Try treating yourself with the kindness you'd show a friend when you notice self-talk growing negative.

Meaningful relationships have been shown, in long-term studies, to be a key factor in sustaining health and happiness in our lives. (Harvard Health, 2017) Building and maintaining social connections is, in fact, self-care.

Finances are commonly cited as one of the most pressing stressors. Studies show those in poor financial health tend to have poor physical health and are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety. (Hill, 2018)

Embrace your life and potential. While life pressures can push our needs to the end of the list, allowing them to be a priority means we can replenish our personal resources, which means we have more to give to others.

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