

People often struggle with self-care. The concerns include: where will I find the time, I don't like to meditate, I don't have money or access to go to a place like a spa, and on and on. But that is not what self-care is about – **self-care is about elevating your consciousness in an effort to better attune to your needs and then responding to those needs with love.** Self-care is not selfish; it actually helps you to be the best you can be when you help others.

1. Commit to self-love. A useful self-care practice requires that you aim for unconditional self-acceptance and self-love. If this is a big ask, build upon it over time choosing the lessons below that speak to you. The truth is, when you embrace yourself where you are, in the moment with all of your imperfections, challenges, and vulnerabilities, self-care becomes a gift you give yourself rather than something else on your to-do list. Example: take two minutes tomorrow morning to verbalize 10 of your best qualities out loud (i.e., “I am a loving partner, I am compassionate, etc.”).

2. Increase your self-awareness. Pay close attention to your physical, mental, and emotional needs – thoughts such as I really need to take a break or I better not add one more thing to my to-do list this week, even if that means I will disappoint someone, are actually important messages. If you don't listen, you may find your body responding in ways you might not like. For instance, if what you need is rest but you insist on powering through, your immune system might weaken and you will find yourself forced into bed for the day with a bad cold; or if you have been so distracted and busy that you have not eaten in a while, you might find yourself demolishing an entire package of cookies without even realizing you are doing so. Be mindful about what your mind, body, heart and soul are telling you and respond in a timely manner; in this way you can make sure your needs and longings are met in ways that feel good and are purposeful and healthy.

3. Manage your heart. Do you try to over-control your emotions or keep them locked in an imaginary box? Do your emotions sometimes overflow like a clogged storm drain? Nature intended for us to be freely emotional in real time, but as we have evolved, there has been a shift in how we experience and display our emotions. Too often we tell: boys not to cry; children that anger is bad; and women they won't succeed if they are “overly” emotional. In our society stoicism is often coveted and strength is valued over vulnerability. Slow it down and notice without judgment whatever feelings go along with your experience. Express your feelings, both positive and negative...slowly, fully, with acceptance, and also with appropriateness. For instance, anger can be discussed and negotiated with the person you are struggling with; if that is not possible pour your feelings into your journal, or take a walk. These options are healthier than converting anger to physical aggression or storing it in your neck and shoulders, which will surely cause pain and discomfort.

4. Make this effort a journey not a destination. Self-care is a slow progression with no particular end. Starting and stopping, committing and wavering are natural and normal for most of us. But self-care builds on itself; the more frequently you care for you, the better the quality of your health and overall well-being.

5. Identify what fulfills you. You must figure out what nourishes and keeps you full, especially when you begin to get that empty feeling. It may be that you need to exercise, meditate, socialize, sleep, learn something new or pray. It doesn't matter what fulfills you, what matters is that you never let your "tank" run dry; as with a car with an empty tank, you will stall, get stuck and need a tow.

6. Think fewer negative thoughts. Your brain can be very gullible. When you tell yourself negative thoughts ("I will fail, "I am not good enough," or when you predict negative outcomes in your future), your brain experiences your thoughts as fact. Self-care means catching yourself being self-critical, stopping the thought before it is complete, and replacing it with a positive counter thought. For instance, when you catch yourself saying: "I am a terrible partner" STOP, and replace that thought with "I can begin to work on being a loving partner today."

7. Rest. "How" you ask? "There is no time," you say. It might seem impossible; but it is not. You need to make time. It doesn't have to be a lot of time and you don't have to stop all of your busy behavior if that is your style. You don't need to meditate or sleep; you can just purposefully take a time out. Are you willing to commit to just 15 minutes of a time-out each day to start?

8. Eat mindfully. This is a challenge for most of us. Mindful eating includes: slowing down and noticing so that you eat when you are hungry, not because you are emotional; learning to stop eating when your body tells you it is full; focused eating with friends or alone. This is not all or nothing. You can choose to eat a piece of fruit mindfully, and allow yourself to experience the pleasure of a simple food – facilitating pleasure and joy are very important aspects of self-care.

9. Find support and connection. You probably know when you support and connection. For most of us it appears as an ache needing attention, or a void needing filling. Start asking for support when you need it. Ask your friends, family and/or those in your faith community. Please don't let being alone keep you connecting and finding support. Reach out and connect to develop relationships.

10. Practice gratitude. There is science backing up the notion that practicing gratitude is self-care. It increases physical health, psychological well-being, and improves the quality of our relationships with others. There are many ways to practice gratitude, some of which take no extra time at all, such as saying thank you out loud for some of the mundane parts of your life, or mindfully appreciating something you see in nature on your way to work.

Self-care is yours to manage. The tips above will help you decide ways in which you are able to commit to sustaining your own well-being as you care for and support others, and while you work hard to make the world a safer, more inclusive and loving place. Not all of these tips will speak to who you are, and what resources are available to you. Take what you like and leave the rest. Remember that you are worthy and deserve to have your needs met.