



Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #07:

SELF-CARE: TIME AND ATTENTION FOR YOU



With evolving demands, challenges faced in our everyday lives, and with recent global disruptions, including isolation and quarantine measures, self-care has received increased profile and attention. Most people realize that it's a big part of living well. But have you ever thought about what good self-care looks like? If you look beyond rewarding and treating yourself, you can explore a more profound purpose that could be life-changing.

Developing a healthy self-care practice means that you are willing to do some work to discover what makes you feel fulfilled. You're also willing to try and achieve a better balance between your physical and mental health. There are a lot of aspects that help you form a sense of self that you may not have explored. How they interact and support your beliefs about the concept you have about yourself is a big part of understanding why self-care is so important.

Most often, these are components you use to determine how you operate in the world and whether or not you feel whole:

- Self-acceptance – This is how much you “embrace all facets of yourself– not just the positive, more “esteem-able” parts.”¹
- Self-compassion – This is about how you act towards yourself when you are feeling challenged, having a tough time, or being critical of something you don't like about yourself.²
- Self-confidence – This is a feeling of how much you trust yourself to do things.
- Self-esteem – This is how much value you attribute to yourself after you act on or experience something. It's influenced by other people's reactions to you and by how you compare yourself to others.
- Self-love – This is how much kindness, caring, and respect you exhibit for yourself.

- Self-understanding – This is how well you know yourself, your feelings, your likes and dislikes, your abilities and capabilities.
- Self-worth – This is your steady-state opinion of yourself. It's derived from self-understanding, self-love and self-acceptance. When it's high, you feel worthy and deserving of great things. High self-worth can protect you from outside influences that try to bring you down.³

Self-care is intentional, and taps into self-realization

Having a good self-care regimen means that you perform deliberate actions to help you feel your best. It means that you are in tune with the physical, emotional, social, personal, spiritual, security, financial and work aspects of your life. It also means that you attempt to find balance in each of those areas because you recognize it as part of your responsibility in life.

If you're not used to doing this, it can be difficult to start. You might even be self-conscious or shy to do so because there may be a touch of stigma associated with self-care. Fundamentally, self-care is an essential part of being human and living your best life. But other people may think that the actions associated with self-care are selfish. This may be an indication that they are lacking in their self-care practices and could benefit from developing a practice of their own.

Sometimes, society can influence our thinking too much and change how we view self-care practices. With predetermined ideas of socially acceptable self-care, this presents its own set of challenges. People can be stuck on the notion that many self-care activities are gender-stereotyped. For example, does it make a difference if someone wants to recharge with a bubble-bath, manicure/ pedicure, or by racing an all-terrain vehicle through a muddy bog? The truth is that self-care activities, no matter what they are, can help promote a better sense of self and overall wellness, and therefore apply to everyone.

Unfortunately, self-care is also a lucrative industry

Interestingly enough, some self-care activities continue to be affected by a noticeable difference in pricing, often referred to as the "Pink Tax." It means that the cost of the same activity can be higher for people who identify as female. It's something so ingrained in our culture, we don't often recognize it. Since self-care is also tied to body sensations such as stress and anxiety, we often feel more vulnerable and our decision making can be easily influenced.

It's important to see beyond the promotional and commercial aspects within the \$10 billion a year self-care/ wellness industry. Falling into that trap can have harmful effects and counteract the intentions to pursue something personally restorative. For someone with untreated alcohol addiction, for example, one glass of wine may not just help them unwind. That glass could become more damaging to their psyche and be a catalyst to them unravelling. Similarly, influencer and celebrity culture can make people begin to think that self-care is out of reach because it is "exclusive, elusive, and also expensive."⁴

Unfortunately, social media provides a very effective forum for people to express visceral comments related to self-care activities, regardless of who is sharing. If you review the comments on many posts, you'll see evidence of shaming and punishing people. Still, others feel compelled to share "proof" of their participation in self-care activities through social media. This can be an incredibly harmful reason to publicly share something that, in essence, is a very private exercise. Don't feel that you have to agree to things you wouldn't usually agree to or being nice to everyone. If you aren't entirely comfortable, you may want to call into question your motivation to be so public about your self-care activities.

Consider that your fear of missing out (FOMO) and need to share luxurious indulgences may actually be influenced by insecurities around social interactions and socializing. Listen carefully and critically to messages from the diet and cosmetics industries. They've capitalized on mass marketing self-care products through words that promise things that seem too good to be true. Recognize these as inauthentic and do your homework before spending your hard earned money.

You may also want to think for a moment about how, culturally, we have normalized alcohol and drug consumption and masked it as self-care. What we know to be addictive behaviour can sometimes be overlooked when shopping for retail goods, viewing beloved television shows and characters, and attending gatherings or events. Those tea towels with the humorous saying about why it's okay to pour yourself another glass of wine or to chuckle at a story about how a character accidentally ate a particular batch of brownies feel harmless. However, we need to consider that this has the potential to overlook how dangerous this can be for someone who struggles with addiction as part of their daily life. In these circumstances, purported self-care activities can be self-destructive.

Creating a plan for regular and long-term self-care

It's important to recognize warning signs or indications that you need to take time for self-care. Feeling distracted, burnt-out and having difficulty concentrating, experiencing brain fog, or being unusually emotional are all indicators.

Thankfully, developing a good self-care practice in its purest form consists of four things that won't cost you a lot of money, nor a lot of time:

- Getting enough sleep – Aim for between 7-8 hours at night, and if you can manage it, plan for a mid-afternoon nap of 20 minutes. Rest is essential to reset our brains after the events of each day. Going to sleep is like a deep cleaning. Physiologically and mentally, it can work wonders.
- Eat well, be inspired by proper nutrition – Get inspired to add more healthy foods to your diet and reduce consumption of things that are not nourishing. Having a special favourite meal or food is excellent, in moderation.
- Make time to lead an active lifestyle – The least expensive way to exercise is to go for a walk. You don't need any costly equipment or memberships. You can head out the door and explore the world or take the dog around the block. Plan for at least 30 minutes of exercise each day as part of a good self-care practice.
- Enjoy the silence – We're often convinced that if we aren't doing something, we're wasting time. In fact, being present in the moment with stillness and silence is something we all need. Plan for at least 15 minutes a day to meditate, bird watch, or even just sit and listen to your breath. Our fear of boredom is over-exaggerated. It's an essential part of human nature and allowing yourself to feel bored sometimes stimulates, "contemplation, daydreaming [and] it can spur creativity."⁵



Do things that work for you

Ultimately, determining what motivates you to care and change your behaviour is crucial, and developing the commitment to regular self-care practices is, in fact, essential.

Yes, if spa days, bubble baths, star gazing, cooking, listening to or playing music, massage therapy, painting, knitting, reading, and watching your favourite tv show are your thing, that's wonderful! You're practicing self-care, as long as they are cognitive choices that you are making that will help you recharge your sense of self. It's the key to motivation. If you're doing any of these for the wrong reasons, you aren't going to derive the full benefits.

But don't be afraid to try new things or recognize little things that you've perhaps always done as self-care measures that benefit your physical and mental health. Grounding yourself through focused breathing has been proven to have significant effects by reducing stress hormones, inducing calmness and easing hypertension. Singing can be a natural anti-depressant, improve your memory and give your lungs a

workout. If you're shy, sing in the car or the shower. Finally, laughter is good medicine and is linked to vascular health and good hormone and neurotransmitter levels.

In the end, you should aim to reduce worry and manage stress. Practicing instinctive self-care (without even knowing you are doing so) can lead to a healthier, more balanced and fulfilling approach to life.

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