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Health

Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time



Making Self-Care a Priority

Taking care of ourselves often takes a backseat to the everyday demands of work, family, and community. We can feel torn between a drive to fulfill obligations and expectations and knowing that we need to slow down. Over time, that contradiction starts to wear on us, and we may feel exhausted, heavily stressed, or even burnt out.

Prioritizing self-care is crucial for maintaining physical, mental, and emotional well-being. However, committing to it can be challenging in today's fast-paced world.

This article will explore how we can cultivate healthier habits that will help us lead a more fulfilling life. It is possible to shift conventional perspectives on the importance of self-care. Doing this allows us to take the necessary time to recharge and find gratification in creating consistency in moments and kindness. Let's take a look at seven ways you can start to make self-care a priority.

1. Understand the importance of self-care

Self-care is a vital aspect of maintaining overall well-being. It is certainly more than some of the clichés we see portrayed in popular culture – like bubble baths, face masks, and overindulging in shopping, food, or drink. It's much broader because it encompasses physical, social, mental, spiritual, and emotional aspects.¹ The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes that there are “many facets of a person's life [that] come into play,” including factors related to the environments we are living in and the economic means we have to support ourselves.² Ultimately, self-care can be thought of as the actions that we feel responsible for undertaking consistently as part of a driven practice we adopt to help us stay healthy every day and for the future to ensure we're functioning at our best. Self-care has been proven to “reduce or eliminate anxiety and depression, reduce stress, increase happiness... adapt to changes, build strong relationships and recover from setbacks.”³

2. Recognize signs of burnout

Burnout is a genuine concern and because in our world, it's become normalized to live with chronic stress, there's a tendency for it to sneak up on us. Common signs you need to slow down because you may be experiencing burnout include fatigue, disassociation, and decreased motivation. There are more subtle indications of burnout, though, such as feeling emotionally spent, experiencing a lack of joy in things you enjoyed, dealing with bouts of insomnia, having changes in appetite, and having difficulty concentrating.⁴ Be cautious not to quickly dismiss any increased frequency of gastrointestinal problems, unexplained weight gain, weakened immunity to illnesses like colds, and muscle tension, as these are all tied to chronic stress.

3. Set boundaries and learn to say "no"

When you set boundaries, you create a set of "healthy rules for navigating relationships" and protect your time and energy by defining what feels safe.⁵ It can be challenging to do. It requires self-reflection and being open to acknowledging how we can be influenced by the view we hold of our place in the world. It also requires understanding that you are entitled to establish "basic rights" that you choose to believe in – similar to a set of operating principles.⁶ With boundaries in place, you will know yourself better and your limits. Perhaps more critically, you've



successfully communicated non-negotiable "hard boundaries" to others, where you are unwilling to compromise, and "soft boundaries," where you are comfortable being more flexible.⁷ We often feel pressured and obligated to explain ourselves to others. It can be a breakthrough in self-care when "you learn to say no without an explanation... [and] without offering any excuse."⁸ Learning how to say no with confidence is a powerful act of self-care. It allows you to prioritize your needs, without feeling guilty.

4. Integrate self-care into your daily routines

Self-care doesn't have to be complicated or time-consuming. It's about finding small ways to nurture yourself every day. Whether that means taking time for a short walk outside, driving to listen to music, practicing breathing and mindfulness for a few minutes, or enjoying a favourite hobby, try to find activities that bring you joy and incorporate them into your daily routine. Just be sure you are doing something for yourself, not someone else's benefit. For example, taking time to make dinner for your family isn't a great example of something related to self-care, even if you really enjoy cooking, because it's a routine activity that isn't exclusively for your benefit. Instead, surprise yourself with the gift of taking 30 minutes to sit with a cup of tea while enjoying a treat or snack you enjoy. Self-care doesn't need to be extravagant.

5. Treat self-care as a commitment

Elevate self-care to the same level and dedication you give to other obligations in your life. Think of what you prioritize. What would you never miss, even if you were stressed and exhausted from caring for someone else? Self-care needs to be that level of commitment. Remember that caring for yourself is not selfish; it's necessary for your well-being.⁹

6. Practice self-compassion and work on your self-worth

Self-compassion focuses on how you treat yourself in times of difficulty. Self-worth is more about the fundamental belief in your value as a person. They are both essential components of self-care. Self-compassion can build your self-worth by demonstrating that you deserve kindness and offering the same care you would give to a friend experiencing a similar challenge.¹⁰ By embracing imperfections and letting go of harsh self-criticism, you begin to practice forgiveness and understand that you are worthy of love and kindness, precisely as you are, without worrying about societal expectations and relying on achievements or validation from others.

7. Overcome guilt and societal expectations

Making self-care a priority is not always easy. Not everyone will understand or support your efforts, and that's okay. Part of developing your commitment to self-care requires you to consider the many internalized beliefs shaped not only by cultural and societal influences but also by our life experiences, our families, and even where we grew up.¹¹ Many of those ingrained messages emphasize how important it is to make sacrifices and put other people's needs ahead of our own. However, it creates inner conflict because it can make us believe that taking time to focus on self-care is selfish and at odds with what is perceived to be obligatory to be a productive member of society. We can feel guilty and fear criticism or judgement from others for going against norms and expectations by carving out time and energy to devote to self-care. Feeling nervous, we may fall back into clichéd views of acceptable ways to care for ourselves, which lack depth and avoid the introspection that helps us grow. Prioritizing self-care and having the courage to navigate feelings of guilt while challenging societal expectations sets the stage for us to understand what we need to establish and maintain our physical, emotional, and mental well-being.



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