

Self-Care Toolkit

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 to be effective and 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?

You can think of it being good to yourself in ways that help you feel stronger, healthier, more grounded, balanced, and productive.

What does it look like?

Self-care can focus on basic functions, such as eating, sleeping, and being active, to feel more energized and well. But self-care is more than that. It's 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.

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.

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 its grip 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 run 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 world and our own potential.

Self-care ideas and resources

Though we're each unique in what will feel like self-care, the examples and resources below may be a fit or spark ideas of your own. Taking small steps to build these supportive and enriching moves into regular habits can help turn them into healthy norms for you.

Emotional stabilizers

- ☐ Keep a journal
- ☐ Explore mindfulness practices
- ☐ Start and/or end the day with a calming routine
- ☐ Experiment with asking for help if it's hard for you
- ☐ Experiment with saying "no" if it's hard for you
- ☐ Commit to making realistic to-do lists
- ☐ Create a ritual of setting worries aside before bed
- ☐ View stressors through a "can/can't control" lens
- ☐ Talk to yourself the way you'd talk to a friend
- ☐ Put firm boundaries around a daily "me moment"
- ☐ Take 5 minutes daily to breathe deeply and daydream
- ☐ Use a positive self-talk mantra (e.g., I can do this!)
- ☐ Your ideas:

Fulfillment drivers

- ☐ Explore the idea of a mentor
- ☐ Do informational interviews for roles of interest
- ☐ Get training in a career development area
- ☐ Put boundaries around your workday
- ☐ Make sure to use all your PTO or vacation time
- ☐ Make a vision board
- ☐ Work to get better at something you love to do
- ☐ Learn about or to do something new for you
- ☐ Plan an adventure (big or small)
- ☐ Try a creative project
- ☐ Do something spontaneous
- ☐ Be part of something bigger than you
- ☐ Your ideas:

Resource: UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center www.uclahealth.org/programs/marc/free-guided-meditations/getting-started

Resource: Psychology Today www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/emotional-fitness/201005/ten-simple-steps-happiness-fulfillment

Physical non-negotiables

- ☐ Set and stick to a regular bedtime
- ☐ Stop looking at devices 30+ minutes before bed
- ☐ Try earplugs or sound machine for quiet sleep
- ☐ Keep a water bottle at your workstation
- ☐ Stock up on healthy snacks that you really like
- ☐ Put weights next to your desk or the TV
- ☐ Set a timer to take regular movement breaks
- ☐ Experiment to find enjoyable forms of exercise
- ☐ Learn a progressive relaxation technique
- ☐ Take five slow, deep belly breaths when tense
- ☐ Your ideas:

Social energizers

- ☐ Smile at people you pass
- ☐ Try volunteering
- ☐ Call a friend and reminisce
- ☐ Start a "game night" with friends/family
- ☐ Join a club, meet-up group, or take a class
- ☐ Each month, meet a different friend you rarely see
- ☐ Ask a coworker to join you for lunch or coffee
- ☐ Tell someone what they mean to you
- ☐ Speak up if another's negativity is bothering you
- ☐ Plan a "solo" day doing things you love
- ☐ Your ideas:

Resource: Physical Self-Care Spotlight www.schoolpsychologyselfcare.com/physical-self-care

Resource: Mental Health America www.mhanational.org/connect-others

“Stealth” factors

Self-care can also be valuable in areas that we may overlook, ignore or deny when it comes to our well-being. Challenge yourself to: See the effect, start with one small self-care move, and build in structure to make it sustainable.

Finances

- ☐ Open bills right away
- ☐ Create a plan for paying down debt
- ☐ Get guidance on loan repayment options
- ☐ Create a spending/savings plan (aka budget)
- ☐ Your ideas:

Resource: American Psychological Association

www.apa.org/topics/money

Social media

- ☐ Unfollow or mute people who bring you down
- ☐ Follow accounts that enrich you or make you smile
- ☐ Avoid “doom scrolling” – view news just once
- ☐ Take regular timeouts, put phone in airplane mode
- ☐ Your ideas:

Resource: HelpGuide

www.helpguide.org/articles/mental-health/social-media-and-mental-health.htm

Environment

- ☐ Set a 10-minute timer for a weekly home declutter
- ☐ Try a family PIWIG challenge: Put it where it goes!
- ☐ Organize your desktop (real/virtual) at day's end
- ☐ Carve out quiet time (use headphones if needed)
- ☐ Create playlist of songs that soothe and uplift you
- ☐ Get out in natural sunlight and fresh air daily
- ☐ Bring the outdoors in – get a hardy houseplant
- ☐ Your ideas:

Resource: University of Minnesota

www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/how-does-your-personal-environment-impact-your-wellbeing

Remember

To find the self-care tools that work best for you:

Be open to trying new approaches. Give them some time and notice the impact on your wellbeing. If it ends up being more “pain than gain,” it’s okay to try something different.

Take small steps. Self-care shouldn’t be an added pressure. It should make you feel better than before you did it. Do what is doable and build up slowly.

Commit to and protect your efforts. Self-care is not selfish or a waste of time, it’s how we stay strong and resilient, and are able to be our best. This benefits us, but also everyone around us.

Use your resources. Friends, family, coworkers – all the people who want us to succeed in life – are potential partners in this effort. Other resources, such as your EAP, can also help you identify and commit to healthy moves.

Be kind to yourself. We are all a work in progress!

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