

## LESSON 5: SELF CARE

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According to Kelsey Patel, a Los Angeles–based wellness expert and the author of the forthcoming book *Burning Bright: Rituals, Reiki, and Self-Care to Heal Burnout, Anxiety, and Stress*. Self-care is part of the answer to how we can all better cope with daily stressors. Work stress is the stress of trying to keep up with the pace of daily life, which technology has hastened more than ever (just think how many emails come flooding into your inbox each day). “People are feeling lonelier and less able to unwind and slow down, which makes them feel more anxious and overwhelmed by even the simplest tasks. Self-care includes everything related to staying physically healthy — including hygiene, nutrition, and seeking medical care when needed. It’s all the steps an individual can take to manage stressors in his or her life and take care of his or her own health and well-being.

A 2010 study published in *JBI Library of Systematic Reviews* defined self-care as “the set of activities in which one engages throughout life on a daily basis,” focusing on promoting health, preventing illness, and managing issues that come up.

A study published in *BMC Palliative Care* in April 2018 took self-care to mean “the self-initiated behavior that people choose to incorporate to promote good health and general well-being.” The study authors added that it’s about being healthy but also about incorporating coping strategies to deal with work stressors.

In 2019 researchers published a self-care framework in *The BMJ* to specifically point out that in addition to self-care being the activities individuals do on their own to promote physical and emotional health, it also includes the ways that individuals interact with clinicians and healthcare systems to tend to physical and emotional health. That means self-care includes things like getting a vaccine, scheduling cancer screenings, or taking prescription medications on schedule but healthcare providers and organizations play a role, too, in how well individuals engage in these self-care practices. In other words: There are a lot of people and factors that bear on any one individual’s ability to engage in self-care.

“When self-care is regularly practiced, the benefits are broad and have even been linked to positive health outcomes such as reduced stress, improved immune system, increased productivity, and higher self-esteem,” says Brigid Courtney, of Boston, a client leader at the wellness technology company Wellable and a faculty member at the Wellness Council of America (WELCOA). Engaging in self-care regularly could help you put your best foot forward. “When we are due to maintain positive well-being.”

Marni Amsellem, PhD, a licensed psychologist based in Trumbull, Connecticut says; Self-care has become more mainstream, the definitions have started to become more applicable to the general public and tend to focus on tuning in to one’s needs and meeting those needs. “Self-care is anything that you do for yourself that feels nourishing. “That can be something that’s relaxing or calming, or it can be something that is intellectual or spiritual or physical or practical or something you need to get

done.” Self-care requires checking in with yourself and asking yourself how you’re doing and what your body’s asking for. Some people use it to deal with difficult news stories, others just to maintain their happiness day to day. Self-care does not mean the same thing for everyone. Different people will adopt different self-care practices, and even your own definition might change over time. “What is self-care for one person will likely differ from someone else, and what’s self-care for you one day might not feel like self-care another day. Engaging in self-care regularly could help you put your best foot forward. “When we are regularly taking care of ourselves, we are better able to react to the things that go on in our lives.”

The International Self-Care Foundation also includes health literacy as a pillar of self-care, meaning that any steps you take toward better understanding health information you need to make appropriate decisions about your health and well-being counts as self-care, too. This is why at Everyday Health, self-care is all the steps you take to tend to your physical and emotional health in the ways you are best able to do so. Engaging in self-care regularly could help you put your best foot forward. “When we are due to maintain positive well-being.”

### I. Types of Self-Care

“It could be anything that floats your boat — anything that puts a smile on your face,” Dr. Gill Lopez says. “Anything that makes you feel cared for, even if it's you caring for yourself.”

There are a few different categories of self-care:

- **Emotional self-care**, such as self-talk, weekly bubble baths, saying “no” to things that cause unnecessary stress, giving yourself permission to take a pause, or setting up a weekly coffee date with a friend
- **Physical self-care**, such as prioritizing sleep, adopting an exercise routine you can stick with, choosing healthy and nourishing foods over highly processed ones
- **Spiritual self-care**, such as attending a religious service, spending time in nature, meditating, incorporating regular acts of kindness into your day, or keeping a gratitude journal

Additionally, Gill Lopez puts self-care into two further categories: **temporary and enduring**.

An example of **temporary self-care** is going to dinner with a friend. You’ll benefit from the social connection, but it won’t last for very long after you part ways. **Enduring self-care**, on the other hand, has more permanent effects. An example of this is practicing mindfulness regularly, because it leads to brain changes. According to a study (one of many on this topic) published in *Psychiatry Research*, eight weeks of mindfulness training led to changes in gray matter concentrations in the brain areas involved with learning and memory processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective taking. “You reap the benefits of mindfulness whether you're [actively] doing it or not,” Gill Lopez says.

## II. The Effects: How Self-Care Benefits Your Health and Well-Being

Many common self-care practices have been linked to longevity and other positive health outcomes, says Ellen K. Baker, PhD, a psychologist based in Washington, DC. There's a lot of research, for example, showing that things like exercise, yoga, and mindfulness are supportive of mental and physical health, she says.

An article published in January 2020 in JAMA noted that longevity in the 21st century depends on abiding by healthy practices — such as exercising, not smoking, and following a healthy diet and also embracing a positive lifestyle all around.

Paying attention to your well-being involves asking yourself big questions (such as "What brings me satisfaction?"), and then finding ways to get there, according to that report.

The following self-care practices have been well-researched and linked to a longer life:

- **Exercise:** People who exercised between two and eight hours per week throughout their lives reduced their risk of dying by 29 to 36 percent, according to a March 2019 study published in JAMA Network Open.
- **Finding Purpose:** According to the researchers behind a May 2019 study published in JAMA Network Open, having a strong life purpose was associated with decreased mortality rates.
- **Diet:** Eating a diet filled with five servings of fruits and vegetables per day was associated with a lower risk of mortality, especially from heart-related issues, according to a July 2014 study published in The BMJ.
- **Sleep:** A study published in September 2017 in the Journal of the American Heart Association found too-little sleep (less than seven hours per night) was linked with higher mortality rates, though too-much sleep wasn't healthy either.
- **Getting Outside:** According to a 2019 study published in Lancet Planet Health, spending time in green space is associated with a lower mortality rate.

The clinical evidence documenting the long-term health benefits of specifically taking a self-care approach to health (over other approaches) is less robust, but it is building.

For instance, research shows that people with chronic conditions who were more likely to follow medication regimens, to be knowledgeable about how to take care of their health, and to have the skills to take care of their health (characteristics that are considered part of self-care), indeed, were more likely to score higher when it came to measures of mental and physical functioning.

## III. How to Start a Self-Care Routine

To get started with a self-care routine, the experts we spoke with suggest:

- Determine which activities bring you joy, replenish your energy, and restore your balance.

- Start small by choosing one behavior you'd like to incorporate into your routine in the next week.
- Build up to practicing that behavior every day for one week.
- Reflect on how you feel.
- Add in additional practices when ready.
- Get support through sharing practices from loved ones, a coach, a licensed professional (like a therapist or dietitian), or through your healthcare plan, community, or workplace.

Practicing self-care doesn't need to be a heavy lift right out of the gate. Here are a few ideas to ease you into your self-care journey:

- Journal.
- Start each day by paying attention to your breath for five minutes and setting intentions for the day.
- Eat breakfast.
- Reflect on what you're grateful for each night.
- Put your phone on airplane mode for a half hour each night and release yourself from the flurry of notifications.
- Call a friend just to say hello.
- Take up a relaxing hobby.
- Pick a bedtime and stick to it.

Note, if you read this and feel a sense of demoralization or sadness from challenges mounting or establishing a self-care practice, its best to get help and support. There may be barriers to caring for yourself from past trauma, mental health issues, or family situations that may be making it more challenging to get started. Seek support from trusted counsellors and behavioural health providers (like therapists), a trusted primary care doctor, or a close friend.

Self-care can have a positive effect on your health and outlook, but it requires a commitment or intention to invest in your well-being. "Self-care is a choice that each individual can make to proactively take care of their well-being, and it tends to be well worth the time and any money you spend. "We need to remove the stigma that being kind to and taking care of ourselves is self-indulgent or selfish.

REFERENCE(S):

<https://www.everydayhealth.com/self-care/>