



# Self-Care & Relaxation Starter Pack

Prepared by Liam Modlin and Christina Muller  
Brought to you by Supporting Wounded Veterans

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## Introduction

What does “practicing self-care” look like for you? Is it healthy meals? A hot bath? A bit of yoga? If you find the question hard to answer, you’re not alone. The phrase has become so common – we see it everywhere, from Instagram to advertising - that we rarely notice it anymore, let alone stop and think about what it really means. Even more rarely do we actually take the advice and look after ourselves.

Such resistance is easy to understand, considering the many myths and misconceptions about self-care that persist in today’s culture. Here are some common examples:

- “Self-care is selfish/self-indulgent”
- “Self-care takes too long – I haven’t got time”
- “Self-care is a luxury I can’t afford”
- “Self-care is for weak/lazy people”
- “Self-care can’t help, my problems are too big”
- “Self-care is complicated, I don’t have the energy”
- “Self-care is boring, I’d rather have fun”

In reality, self-care has scientifically proven benefits, for both physical and emotional health. It can boost confidence, improve your sleep, and enable you to respond better in difficult situations. Self-care can take many different forms – what’s important is finding the approach that works for you. We hope the information in this booklet will give you a new perspective on self-care and inspire you with simple ideas about how to look after yourself. Even just a few minutes a day will pay off in every area of your life.

*--Liam Modlin and Christina Muller*

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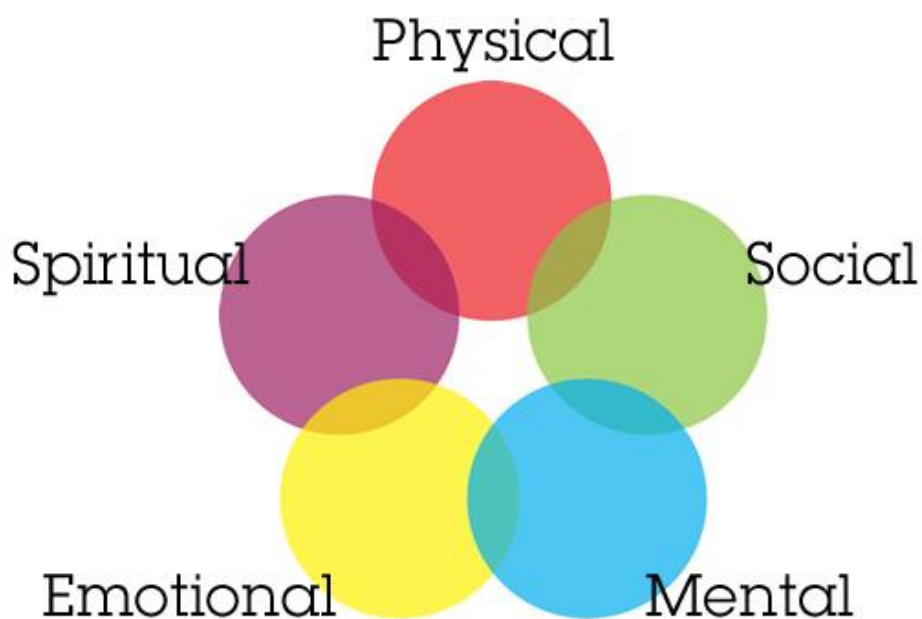
### What Is Self-Care? Definition, Tips & Ideas for a Healthy Life

**Mary McCoy, Author and Social Worker**

Self-care is a very active and powerful choice to engage in the activities that are required to gain or maintain an optimal level of overall health. And in this case, overall health includes not just the physical, but the psychological, emotional, social and spiritual components of an individual’s well-being.



Most people understand that stress is more manageable when they're feeling happy, healthy, loved, and at peace. However, understanding what is good for you does not necessarily translate into actual behaviours. There are a number of recommendations on the following pages for each component of an individual's health; be aware, however, that self-care is a highly personal endeavour, so each suggestion may not necessarily resonate with you.



### 1. Physical Self-care

Taking care of your body is what self-care concepts are based upon. Self-care for the body includes those activities that doctors usually recommend to patients, such as sticking to guidelines for caloric intake, drinking enough water, getting enough sleep, and exercising regularly. **This also includes managing our stress.**

### 2. Psychological Self-care

Taking care of the mind is just as important as taking care of the body, even if the recommended activities for psychological self-care vary between individuals. It may require learning how to combat negative self-talk and addressing the emotions and psychological triggers that lead to feelings of defeat in relationships or the workplace. It can also include developing healthy habits around time management, organising ourselves, and keeping our minds active and stimulated.

### **3. Emotional Self-care**

Emotional self-care is highly related to psychological self-care because there is overlap between the psyche and the emotions. For people who are experiencing a great deal of stress or grief and bereavement, emotional self-care may involve taking the time to properly grieve the loss of a relationship or loved one. It may mean journaling about anger or talking about paralyzing feelings with a friend or counsellor.

### **4. Social Self-care**

If all a person ever does is work, it's difficult to practice social self-care. Social self-care involves just having fun with the people you love. It may mean going out to coffee with a best friend or planning a fabulous date night with your spouse. It means talking effectively through conflict, and addressing the emotional needs of the people you love.

### **5. Spiritual Self-care**

Even if you don't practice a faith, it's possible to practice spiritual self-care. Spirituality is about both faith and meaning in life. Providing spiritual self-care may mean spending time in prayer or meditation, or going on a long walk to contemplate purpose and meaning. It may involve making time for communal worship in a religious setting. Regardless of how you find meaning and purpose in life, spirituality can build social support and ease psychological and emotional distress.



## What Are the Benefits of Self-care?

The benefits of proactive self-care are numerous, measurable, and significant. Self-care truly does impact every aspect of well-being.

### **Physical Health**

If you follow some of the basics of self-care, such as exercising, eating right, and reducing or eliminating alcohol or tobacco products, you can accomplish the following:

- Likely enjoy a longer and higher-quality life
- Reduce your risk of certain diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and coronary artery disease
- Boost your overall energy
- Enjoy better sleep
- Ease pain and stiffness in your body

### **Psychological Health**

Stress can be useful for short periods of time to help individuals achieve important goals. Over a longer period of time, however, some of the feelings that accompany stress – such as fear, powerlessness, nightmares, anger, headaches, and back pain – can become a problem. Self-care, both physical and emotional, can reduce the risk of mental health problems over time.

me looking at myself after I actually  
take the time to practice self care



### **Emotional Health**

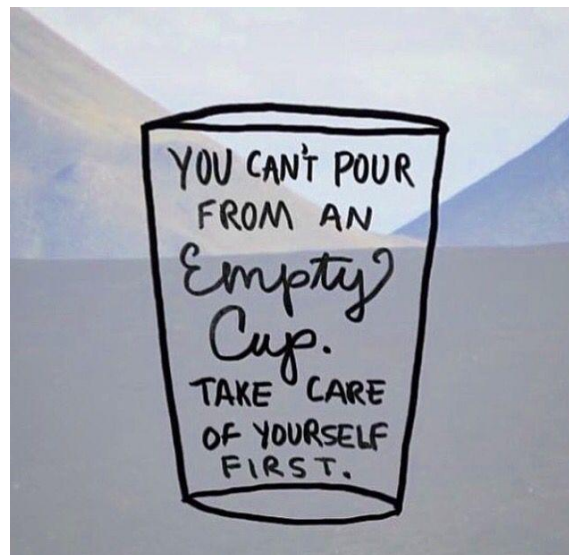
Psychological and emotional health do overlap, but emotional health is about more than just the absence of a mental health problem. The term encompasses the feelings experienced by people who are well-rounded and content. Such people are able to laugh easily, bounce back from adversity, retain a sense of meaning and purpose, adapt to the challenges they face, and maintain healthy self-esteem. Self-care and self-awareness can lead to more emotional resilience.

### **Interpersonal or Social Health**

Many studies show that individuals with solid social ties have far lower mortality rates than those with lower-quality relationships. The measure of social health isn't determined by the quantity of friendships, but by the quality of social ties. Unfortunately, people with poor social ties are more likely to experience on-going stress, which can further reduce the quality of their relationships. Self-care that values relationships and stress management, can improve overall health outcomes by building social support.

### **Spiritual Health**

Spirituality is not necessarily the practice of a religious faith; it can be defined as any avenue through which a person finds meaning, hope, comfort, and inner peace. Research indicates that spiritual vitality also positively impacts health outcomes: It can reduce stress that leads to heart and vascular disease, diabetes, and gastrointestinal.



## What Role Does STRESS Play?

Your emotional and physical reactions to stress are partly determined by the sensitivity of your sympathetic nervous system. This system produces the fight or flight reaction in response to stress and excitement, speeding up and heightening the pulse rate, respiration, muscle tension, glandular function, and blood circulation.

If you have anxiety symptoms, either major or minor lifestyle and emotional upsets may cause an overreaction of your sympathetic system. If you have an especially stressful life, your sympathetic nervous system may always be poised to react to a crisis, putting you in a state of constant tension. In this mode, you tend to react to small stresses the same way you would react to real emergencies.



The energy that accumulates in the body to meet this "emergency" must be discharged in order to bring your body back into balance. Repeated episodes of the fight or flight reaction can deplete your energy reserves and, if they continue, cause a downward spiral that can lead to emotional burnout, health problems and eventually complete exhaustion. Being able to recognise common stress symptoms can give you a jump on managing them.

### **Common effects of stress on your body:**

- Headache
- Muscle tension or pain
- Chest pain
- Fatigue
- Change in sex drive
- Stomach upset
- Sleep problems

### **Common effects of stress on your mood:**

- Anxiety
- Restlessness

- Lack of motivation or focus
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Irritability or anger
- Sadness or depression

#### **Common effects of stress on your behaviour:**

- Overeating or under-eating
- Angry outbursts
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Tobacco use
- Social withdrawal
- Exercising less often



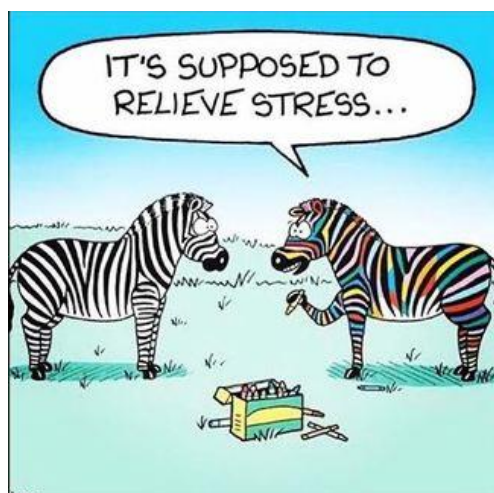
You can break this spiral by learning to manage stress in a way that protects and even increases your energy level.

The purpose of self-care is not to eliminate entirely the natural physical and emotional responses to stress but to provide you with a greater understanding of their origins, when and why they happen and how to alleviate them.

### **How to Get Started with Self-care**

The way we respond to stress is very much a personal experience and therefore different techniques will work in different ways for different people - part of self-care is learning what our own triggers are and the ways to cope and manage our stress.



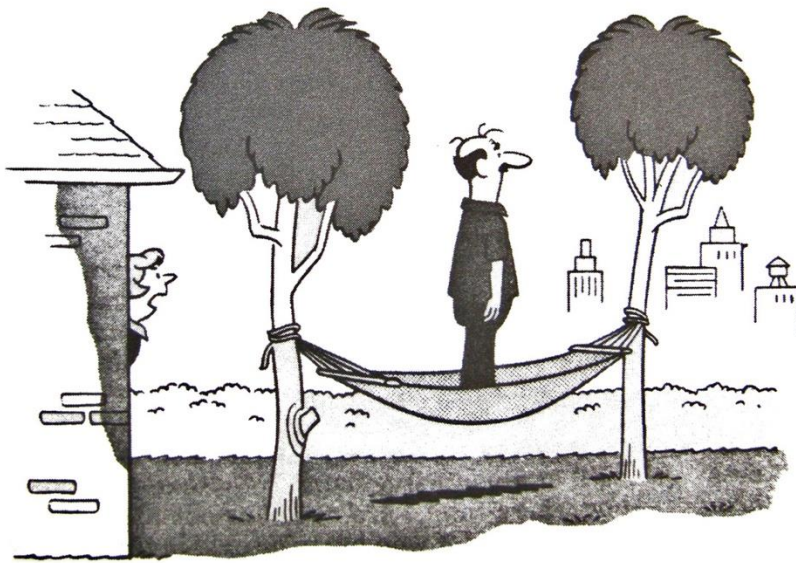


Ask yourself the following questions to begin identifying the self-care practices that can make a difference in your life:

- What do I most enjoy doing with my time? (Your answer shouldn't include work or chores.)
- What activities make my heart feel at rest and at peace?
- When do I feel full of life and well-being?
- When do I feel the tension release from my neck, shoulders, and jaw? What am I doing when this tension goes away?
- Which people provide me with energy, strength and hope, and how much time do I spend with them compared to the people who drain my sense of well-being with negativity and guilt?
- When do I feel my life is full of purpose and meaning?

If you don't know how to answer these questions, that's okay. It's not uncommon for adults to actually have no idea what they enjoy and when they feel best. Many people become so involved in their work and family lives that they forget to pause and consider who they really are and what they actually enjoy doing.

If you get stuck, think back to the kinds of activities you enjoyed when you were young. Or ask a trusted family member or friend to provide you with insight into the things you most enjoy. And if that doesn't work, consider seeing a counsellor or social worker for a few sessions to address these questions. Once you can identify the behaviours that enhance your life and happiness, you'll be able to set goals that actually lead to engaging in these behaviours.

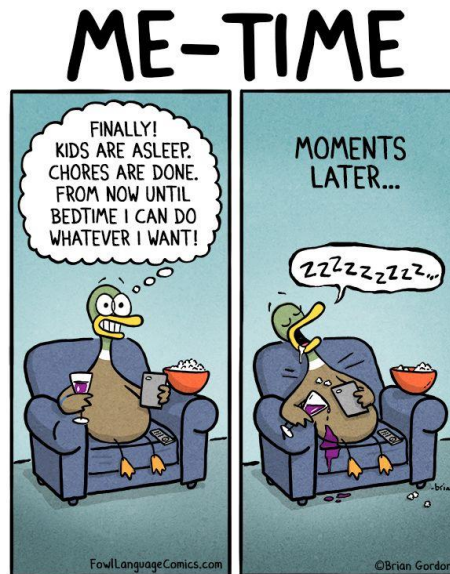


"Fred, you must learn to relax."

## How Can I Make Time for Self-Care?

Self-care isn't something that you can just put off until you have more time. It's an active choice to prioritise activities that are known to increase your overall well-being. Try these tips:

**Schedule it:** If you're busy with work and/or family or just find it difficult to prioritise yourself, put at least one thing you enjoy on your calendar every week. You're much more likely to actually participate in self-care if you write it down as something that needs to happen.



**Buddy up:** Enlist a partner/friend/colleague to join you. Commit to a self-care activity each week, and then share your experiences.

**Take mini self-care breaks:** If you're really squeezed for time, a little self-care is better than none. Try five minutes of deep breathing in your car, reading a book during your lunch break or taking a short walk outside.

Building new habits takes time, so be persistent. Once you begin to make self-care a part of your daily life, you'll most likely start feeling better in both body and mind.

## The Healing Power of Relaxation

Decreasing stress is one part of the self-care equation. An equally important part is increasing relaxation -- that is, spending time every day helping your body to physically release tension so it can rest and recuperate. If stress has become chronic, your system may need help remembering how to “let go”. If you can barely remember what it feels like to *not* be stressed, try any of the following exercises to get back in the habit of relaxing.

Purposefully relaxing in this way may feel unnatural at first, so be patient, and don't push yourself to do too much. Start with five minutes (or even less if that feels overwhelming). Aim to gradually increase the length of time you spend in relaxation, but remember that a little done every day is better than a lot done rarely.



### **Exercise 1: Abdominal Breathing**

Abdominal breathing is also known as diaphragmatic breathing. The diaphragm is a large muscle located between the chest and the abdomen. When it contracts it is forced downward causing the abdomen to expand and pushing air into the lungs. Abdominal breathing is an excellent tool to stimulate the relaxation response that results in less tension and an overall sense of wellbeing.

- Lie down on your back and place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. When you take a deep breath in, imagining you're inflating your belly like a balloon. The hand on the abdomen should rise higher than the one on the chest.
- After exhaling through the mouth, take a slow deep breath in through your nose imagining that you are sucking in all the air in the room and hold it for a count of 7 (or as long as you are able, not exceeding 7).
- Slowly exhale through your mouth for a count of 8. As the air is released, gently squeeze your abdominal muscles like you're squeezing out any remaining air from the lungs. You need to exhale completely in order to be able to take a deeper inhale.
- Repeat the cycle for a total of 5 deep breaths.



### **Exercise 2: Increasing Awareness**

You can practice this while standing, sitting, lying down, or even walking.

- Start by observing your breathing.
- Don't try to change anything about your breathing, just notice the sensations of breathing air into and out of your body.
- Try to focus all of your attention on your breathing.
- As you become increasingly aware of your breathing, begin to notice other sensations in your body.
- Become mindful of the posture of your body.
- Notice how parts of your body feel as you sit, stand, or lie down.
- Notice where your body makes contact with something.....with the floor, with a chair, with a desk, or with something else.
- Notice how your clothes feel against your skin.
- Observe the sensations in your muscles...on your skin...in your stomach...in your lungs as you breathe.
- Continue to observe all of the sensations of your body, becoming increasingly aware of your physical body.
- If thoughts come into your mind, gently refocus your attention on your body.

### **Exercise 3: Drifting Thoughts**

- Start by observing your breathing.
- Don't try to change anything about your breathing, just notice the sensations of breathing air into and out of your body.
- Try to focus all of your attention on your breathing.
- As you breathe, close your eyes and imagine that you are sitting beside a stream, with water gently flowing over rocks and rippling past you.
- Let your mind become as clear as the water in the stream.
- If any thoughts drift into your mind, imagine yourself breathing them out so that each thought flows downstream, like leaves on the current.
- Allow your thoughts to drift away from you, like leaves floating downstream, until your mind becomes empty again – only filled by the image of crystal-clear water.

### **Exercise 4: Sweet Dreams**

Try this technique before bed to promote better sleep.

- Make sure your bedroom is quiet. Get into bed and turn off the lights. Ensure that your curtains and shades are pulled closed to keep out any lights from the street. If there is noise or other disturbances, observe and notice them without judgement or without wishing to make them disappear.
- Stretch out of your bed and get comfortable. Tense up your body as much as you can and then relax. Repeat 4 times.
- Slowly breathe into your lower abdomen twenty times repeating silently to yourself “With this breath, I am calming my whole body”.
- Now with each in-breath, breathe in peace and with each out-breath, breathe out the worries of your day. Release your worries and welcome pleasant dreams. Ask that your dreams be helpful. Go deeper and deeper into relaxation. Feel and see yourself drifting into a deep, rejuvenating and peaceful sleep.



### **Exercise 5: Letting Go of Tension**

This full-body relaxation can help when you feel physically tense, tired or in pain.

- Start out by taking a few relaxing breaths. (Use the abdominal breathing from Exercise 1.) As you exhale, imagine the tension in your body beginning to ebb away.
- Move your attention to your forehead. As you inhale lift your eyebrows and wrinkle your forehead. Hold for up to 5 seconds and then release. As you release, feel the muscles of the forehead letting go of tension.
- Move your attention to the muscles in your face. Furrow your eyebrows and purse your lips. Try to pull all of your facial muscles towards your nose. Hold for up to 5 seconds and then release. As you release, feel the muscles in your face letting go of tension.
- Bring your attention to your jaw. Clench your jaw tightly, feeling the tension in the surrounding muscles. Hold for up to 5 seconds and then relax the muscles and allow the tension to disappear. You may feel your mouth begin to open a little.
- Now bring your attention to your shoulders. Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears. Hold for up to 5 seconds and release. Feel the tension in the shoulder muscles ebb away.
- Continue working your way down the body, focusing your attention on one part at a time, clenching the muscles and then releasing them. Notice the feeling of tension ebbing away each time. Include your chest, upper and lower back, arms and hands, stomach, hips and buttocks, upper and lower legs, and finally your feet and toes.
- When you've done your whole body, take a few more deep breaths. Feel a wave of relaxation, from the top of your head to the tip of your toes. When you're ready, slowly open your eyes.

