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Self-Care



The term **self-care** describes the actions that an individual might take in order to reach optimal physical and mental health. Mental health professionals often use the term self-care to refer to one's ability to take care of the activities of daily living, or ADLs, such as feeding oneself, showering, brushing one's teeth, wearing clean clothes, and attending to medical concerns. Physical self-care, such as sleep and exercise, is also an ADL.

PRO

Self-care can also refer to activities that an individual engages in to relax or attain emotional well-being, such as [meditating](#), [journaling](#), or visiting a counselor. Because an extended failure to care for one's self can result in illness or hospitalization, individuals who find themselves unable to take care of their own needs may find it helpful to [speak to a therapist](#).

UNDERSTANDING SELF-CARE

ALS

Self-care can include activities such as getting a haircut or massage, taking a trip, or eating at one's favorite restaurant, as well as attending to one's basic daily needs. An individual may experience difficulty with self-care for several reasons:

ABO

- UT [Depression](#) can sometimes inspire a lack of care for one's condition: a loss of appetite or motivation, a lack of energy, or a sense of self-loathing. All of these can impair the ability to care for one's self.
- Survivors of [abuse](#) or [violence](#) may find it challenging to maintain good self-care habits.
- Cognitive declines associated with [dementia](#) can impair self-care skills.
- [Psychosis](#), a split from reality that may include [hallucinations](#) or [delusions](#), can often have an affect on one's ability to care for oneself.

People all have different requirements for self-care, but in general, the goals of self-care are to find a state of good mental and physical health, reduce [stress](#), meet emotional needs, maintain

one's [relationships](#), both romantic and platonic, and find a balance between one's personal and academic or [professional life](#).

Self-care, beyond that which refers to ADLs, is not a selfish act. Individuals who do not take care of their own emotional and physical needs before attempting to resolve those of others may begin to experience a decline in their own emotional or physical state. Those [individuals who care for others](#), either professionally or in personal life, may find themselves especially drained if they do not devote enough time to self-care. Once they have met their own needs, they may often find themselves better able to assist others in meeting their needs.

Taking care of the emotional self by managing anxiety, [anger](#), [sadness](#), and other feelings is also an important aspect of self-care. This type of self-care can often be accomplished by setting boundaries with people, especially those people who are not positive or supportive and may have a negative effect on one's mental state. Good, healthy relationships can help an individual maintain a positive frame of mind, but friends who only want to fulfill their own needs or family members who leave an individual feeling exhausted or depressed will likely not help an individual's mental or emotional state to improve. An individual who has trouble meeting emotional self-care needs may find it helpful to limit time with people who are neither supportive nor helpful.

WHY SELF-CARE IS IMPORTANT

Sometimes people attempt to meet the needs of family members, employers, children, friends, or society in general before meeting their own needs, and working to please and care for others often interferes with one's self-care routine and can take a toll on a person's well-being. People who have [dependent](#) personalities or experience depression, [codependency](#), or [anxiety](#) may also fail to meet their self-care needs. However, self-care is often considered to be an important aspect of resiliency: those who are able to adequately meet their needs are often able to better cope with everyday stressors.

Because people who are able to meet their own physical and emotional needs are typically better equipped to care for others, it may be especially important for parents of children with behavioral challenges or other special needs to maintain a self-care routine. Fatigue, stress, anxiety, and worry may have a significant effect on well-being, but attending to physical and emotional needs may help prevent or reduce the effects of these issues, foster [self-compassion](#), and leave parents more able to meet the needs of their child.

Self-care behaviors may also help mental health professionals and other health care providers avoid [compassion fatigue](#), which can often result from work in a high-stress or traumatic environment and may lead to [self-doubt](#), self-blame, and ethical or legal complications.

Individuals in a transition phase or those who are facing changing circumstances may neglect

self-care. College students, for example, may experience excitement when first leaving home, but as they adjust to life in a different environment with new behaviors and responsibilities, they may experience significant stress, anxiety, and other emotional turmoil. However, those students who engage in behaviors that promote health—exercising, sleeping and eating well, and keeping in touch with loved ones—have been shown to face less stress during their transition, and research shows they are less likely to develop anxiety or depression or drop out. These self-care skills may also lead to resiliency that continues to have a positive effect throughout life.

HOW THERAPY CAN HELP WITH SELF-CARE

Therapy can often uncover the root of a failure to care for one's self. If depression is the cause, therapy can typically help relieve symptoms of depression and improve one's mood, which will generally lead to one becoming able to meet self-care needs once again.

In the case of dementia, therapy can often help in the early stages by teaching new coping and communication skills. Therapy might also be useful in helping families learn how to cope with a loved one's dementia: In therapy, the family can learn ways to help their loved one maintain some level of self-care skills. Medication and a high level of care, such as daily activities at a hospital or community mental health center, might also help one's self-care skills improve.

The failure to care for oneself due to wanting to please or care for others, which might be seen of an individual in a codependent relationship or in the case of overly demanding family members, can indicate some difficulty with self-image and/or with setting boundaries. Therapy can help an individual develop a stronger self-image and become better able to say no to those who ask for too much.

SELF-CARE ACTIVITIES TO BOOST WELL-BEING

Meeting one's own needs tends to make a person more able to help and support others and, generally speaking, to obtain more [happiness](#) and fulfillment from life. In order to facilitate your own healthy routine to make sure your needs are met, it can be helpful to develop a [self-care plan centered on three key components](#): physical, mental, and spiritual self-care.

Eating well and exercising regularly are both aspects of physical self-care that have been shown to improve an individual's state of mind. Many reputable sources recommend about 75 to 150 minutes of physical activity each week. You do not have to run a marathon or pump iron; a simple 30-minute walk at least a few times a week will suffice. Prioritizing sleep is another physical self-care tactic. Try committing to 7-9 hours of sleep each night for a week and see how you feel when properly rested.

Regularly engaging your brain with puzzles and creative activities is a great way to make sure you are practicing mental self-care, as is simply taking a little time to be alone. Even people

who thrive in the company of others generally need some time on their own to rest and process experiences.

Many assume the spiritual component of self-care means spending time in a church, mosque, temple, or other religious building. Religion, however, is only one expression of spirituality. You can practice spiritual self-care in many different ways such as volunteering to help others in need, spending time in the great outdoors connecting with nature, or reading about religious practices and values that intrigue you.

To help you determine if your life could benefit from more time and energy spent on self-care, please consider taking our [self-care quiz](#).

CASE EXAMPLES

- **Self-care to cope with grief:** Jennifer, 32, comes to therapy wearing the same clothes several sessions in a row. She originally came to therapy seeking help for issues with her [marriage](#). However, her marriage has ended, and since then, she has been very depressed. Her lack of self-care is a sign that the depression is worsening. She reports, in answer to the therapist's questions, that she has no energy and sees no need to care for herself because "he's gone." Her therapist encourages her to care for herself even when she does not feel like it. She demurs. The therapist asks about [suicidal](#) thoughts, noting how severely Jennifer's mood has worsened. Jennifer admits to some passing suicidal thoughts. The therapist recommends hospitalization, and Jennifer accepts this intervention passively. In the hospital she is given medication and attends [therapy groups](#). With this treatment, her mood slowly begins to improve. Returning home and restarting therapy, she is able to begin working through her [grief](#) and caring for herself, though she still experiences some difficulty with the process.
- **Caring for one's self before others:** Chong, 26, is a nurse, and he also cares for his disabled father and younger sister, doing housework and preparing meals for the three of them. Between his job and the needs of his family, Chong has no time to relax, enjoy leisure activities, or even sit down and eat with his family. He begins to lose weight and finds himself exhausted and irritable at work. When he realizes his mood has an effect on his performance and his patients, he enters therapy. The therapist helps Chong realize he is doing too much for others, and maintaining a state of emotional well-being requires him to have time to meet his own needs. Together, they discuss ways Chong might find time for himself. He decides to ask his cousin to help out on the weekend. He tells the therapist he did not want his sister, who is in high school, to have to worry about caring for their father



Exercise for physical self-care doesn't have to be tough. Click to enlarge.

or doing household chores. However, the therapist helps him see he needs his sister's help, so Chong begins to rely on her to run some errands and encourages her to prepare meals a few times a week. Very soon, Chong is able to spend some time on his own, and his mood begins to improve rapidly.

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Last Update: 05-15-2019



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