

Secure Your Mask First: Self-Care Isn't Selfish

In October of 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health, citing the serious toll of the COVID-19 pandemic on top of existing challenges. The US Surgeon General echoed these concerns in December by issuing a public health advisory to provide recommendations for how to address the mental health challenges confronting children and adolescents. At the same time, national surveys have highlighted a major increase in the number of U.S. adults who report symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia and burnout. How do we support kids' mental health when the adults that provide care and support are struggling too?

Mental health is more than the absence of a mental illness, it is essential to our overall health and quality of life. Self-care plays a large role in maintaining mental health. When life becomes overwhelming, self-care may be ignored. Now, more than ever, parents, caregivers, educators and other youth-serving advocates need to be given the space to invest in their own wellness. Unfortunately, for many, just the idea of "self-care" can feel stressful. In a world where many feel like they are burning the candle at both ends, lack of time and energy are two of the most common reasons individuals cite for not making self-care a priority. Experts recommend reframing the context of self-care. Rather than thinking of self-care as an indulgence, consider it a necessity (like air, food and water). Self-care is more than just pampering yourself; it's about protecting your mental health and fostering sustainability. Self-care techniques and general lifestyle changes can improve general wellbeing, help to reduce stress and can help manage symptoms of mental health problems. Additionally, self-care can help build resilience towards stressors that cannot be eliminated.



Self-care looks different for everyone, and it is important to find what you need. Because self-care is about being in tune with what your body and mind need to function optimally, it requires increased self-awareness. It may take trial and error to find what works best for you. Keep in mind that self-care doesn't have to follow the mantra of "go big or go home". Even small steps can go a long way. For example, 10 minutes of daily meditation or mindfulness can bring benefits. When it comes to self-care, something is better than nothing.

Not sure how to get started? Consider the following 5 key elements to self-care for a few ideas:

Physical:

- Protect your sleep- one of the most important interventions in mental upkeep
- Eat wisely- eating habits play a large role in mood regulation throughout the day
- Get outside- sunshine helps brighten mood
- Exercise- our bodies release dopamine and endorphins when we exercise that can help boost mood

Emotional:

- Stress management
- Coping skills
- Practice kindness- helping others can make us feel good

- Go for gratitude- research shows that regularly expressing gratitude helps boost overall happiness, leading to lower rates of stress and depression
- Practice forgiveness- people who forgive have better mental health and report being more satisfied with their life.

Psychological:

- Monitor your inner dialogue- explore how to better manage negative self-talk/thoughts
- Self-Reflection
- Engage in a digital detox
- Practice mindful news consumption
- Listen to a thought-provoking podcast
- Fuel your mind by learning a new skill, reading a book or doing a puzzle (anything that helps you learn, think and grow).

Social:

- Nurture support systems- spend time interacting with friends and others; maintain communication
- Give thought to which relationships are no longer serving in your life- relationships should uplift and fulfill you, not deflate and drain you
- Get involved in your community
- Set boundaries- it is okay to say no
- Talk it out- find someone you trust to talk to if you are having a hard time
- Ask for help

Spiritual:

- Embrace some alone time (even if for just a short time)
- Practice mindfulness or meditation- there's an app for that, do a quick google search to discover meditation and mindful apps that can help get you started
- Journal
- Volunteer for a cause you care about
- Create a vision board or do something that lights you up and inspires you

On a final note, remember that just because a behavior is “good for you”, doesn’t make it self-care. To get the full benefit of self-care practices, you need to get some enjoyment or gratification out of the activity. Search for self-care practices that leave you feeling energized and fulfilled to help boost overall wellbeing.

References: American Psychological Association; Childmind Institute; Everyday Health Group; National Education Association; National Institute of Mental Health