

Self-Care and Mindfulness

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In 1986, author Melody Beattie wrote a revolutionary self-help book, titled *Codependent No More: How to Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself*. The book was not so revolutionary in its identification that so many of us are “codependent” or overly dependent on another to meet our emotional psychological needs. Beattie’s book, in fact, brought renewed attention to the very core of our needs—taking care of ourselves. It might be surprising to know that over 30 years later, we still have a difficult time justifying self-care. It simply sounds self-*ish*. So, through Beattie’s book, the revolutionary seed was planted that, ultimately, it is up to each individual to take good care of themselves, otherwise we are of no good to anyone else.

When you board an airplane and take your assigned seat, what follows is a rather monotonous explanation of safety protocol in case of an emergency. The flight attendant explains to the passengers that if something should go wrong, oxygen masks will drop down from the console above and then specifically emphasizes that if you are travelling with young children, it is important that you secure your oxygen mask before trying to help others. The lesson here is a simple one; if we don’t care for ourselves, we won’t have the necessary emotional, physical or mental energy to be of assistance to others. Unfortunately, this concept makes us feel guilty, and we often find ourselves sacrificing time and energy that we don’t have in order to appear less selfish. But, self-care is not at all selfish; it is just a reminder of healthy priorities.

Self-care is not a new concept, but it is easy to forget about and/or neglect. We are so busy! We have so many balls juggling in the air that thinking of ourselves is often last on the list. Nevertheless, self-care is important. Self-care is not taking your car into the garage when the engine has seized. Self-care is checking the fluids, getting a tune-up and not

giving all of your oil-change coupons away to your best friend because her oil is blacker than yours. Good self-care basically means preventing and repairing damage to yourself before things get out of hand. Oftentimes good self-care is about choices. Instead of packing your schedule with required curriculum courses, choose to take a yoga or ceramics course. Instead of devoting your day to rigorous studying, take the time to go for a walk or prepare a healthy meal. Instead of texting your family at home, pick up the phone and call. The choices we make about self-care keep us well but also keep us balanced.

The act of balancing our individual self-care can be compared to the “four-hand carry” technique. The four-hand carrying technique is often used in First Aid manuals and looks like the image to the right.

Whether the carriers grasp at the wrist or elbow, the concept is the same—there are four joints that create a temporary stool or sling for the injured individual to sit upon so that he/she might be carried to safety. (See Figure 1.) Self-care is much like this four-hand stool

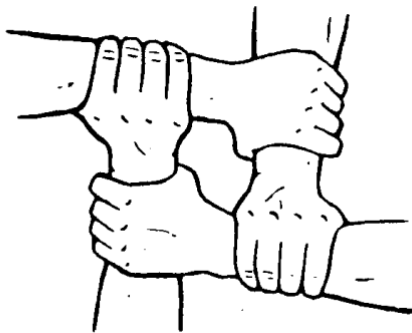


Figure 1: Hand Carrier

or sling. There are four domains of self-care necessary for an individual to be “carried.” When one of the domains is weak, the other bonds become strained and possibly break. The sling becomes useless and the individual falls. Let’s take a look at “Finals Week.” This is the week dreaded by all college students and it usually looks something like this: study, power nap, eat

junk to stay awake while studying, repeat. You can guess what this does to the student’s immune system and you can also *tell* what it does by how many coughs and sneezes you hear coming from classrooms all over campus. As one domain in self-care demands more attention, the others suffer and become weakened. The key is to keep a healthy balance so that our self-care stool doesn’t fall. Each bond of

the four-hand self-care model can be represented by four self-care domains: physical, social/emotional, mental, and spiritual self-care.

Physical Self-Care

Think about a few things you take for granted, perhaps every-day-life conveniences. Imagine life without those things. How much more difficult would it be to take your groceries to your car without electronic doors? How would you eat if you didn't have access to a fork or knife? And how different would the experience of a shower be each morning if there was no hot water heaters? Similarly, your physical health, while it might seem quite optimal right now, is not a thing to take for granted. People who take good care of themselves physically seem to understand that health is not an end goal, but a journey of self-improvement and maintenance. Here are some good physical self-care suggestions:

1. Maintaining personal hygiene, including cleanliness and personal grooming
2. Doing your laundry often and keeping your dorm space tidy
3. Scheduling regular medical and dental check-ups
4. Taking multi-vitamins, including vitamin C and D to help improve your immune system
5. Challenging yourself to eat at least five fruits or vegetables a day
6. Avoiding foods or beverages with empty calories (too much simple sugar)
7. Scheduling time for physical activity—don't forget to play!
8. Averaging eight hours of sleep per night
9. Learning how to positively manage stress
10. Staying home from class or work if you are sick
11. Respecting your body and avoiding unnecessary risks

Social/Emotional Self-Care

It seems strange that, currently, we hear so much emphasis in the media and social world on the word “mindfulness.” Mindfulness is the basic ability to be present in the moment, to be aware of where we are and what we’re doing, and not overwhelmed by what’s going on around us. The idea of mindfulness is not at all strange, but the fact that we have to be reminded to be “present” seems unnecessary. Why wouldn’t we be present? Great things are happening all around us... hold on I’m getting a text... holy cow look at this! It’s a cat playing the piano! Anyway, what was I saying? Oh yeah, mindfulness. I think you get my point. We are distracted. Our attention is being pulled in many directions, and it can be very difficult to slow down, breathe, take a moment to reflect, or to even take the time to feel. Good emotional self-care is more than allowing yourself a good cry. Social and emotional wellness incorporates the feeling and experiencing of emotions but also includes being connected with yourself and your environment in a positive and healthy way. Emotional self-care is about feeling and coping, but it is also about relationships and social health. Did you know that there are actual health benefits that come from being social like living longer, getting sick less often and experiencing less depression? So, here’s what good emotional and social self-care might look like:

1. Taking a walk when you are feeling overwhelmed
2. Appreciating the little things in life with a grateful heart
3. Eliminating toxic/negative people from your social media groups
4. Admitting that not everyone will like you
5. Valuing genuine intimacy
6. Craving solitude and peace
7. Sitting quietly with uncomfortable emotions
8. Avoiding procrastination
9. Laughing at yourself and your mistakes
10. Striving to become “unfiltered” in your social media posts

11. Developing creative outlets outside of your coursework
12. Confronting your past, including hurts and trauma
12. Confronting your past, including hurts and trauma
13. Letting go of negativity—try meditation or prayer
14. Avoiding emotional eating
15. Researching mindfulness techniques and benefits

Mental Self-Care

Do you believe that if you don't "use" your brain you will "lose" it? Well, science has proven that our brain wants to be used, but if we don't use it constantly and varyingly, it will efficiently "prune" what is not required. "Pruning" is the process of eliminating unused synaptic connections and axonal branches in the brain to help the brain function more efficiently. However, pruning can also inevitably occur when our brains are not used or exercised. Mental exercise is just as critical as physical exercise in keeping your brain fit and healthy. Mental exercises may improve your brain's functioning and even promote new brain cell growth. Like your muscles, you have to use your brain or you lose it. We are allowed only so much mental energy, so we must be cautious and efficient with our brains and how we use our "brain time." The good news is you're in college! You're already practicing great mental self-care by challenging yourself with increased learning. In addition to your academic schedule, here are more tips to help you practice good mental self-care:

1. Managing your time wisely and efficiently
2. Applying creative and imaginative thinking to your coursework
3. Becoming more observant of people and your surrounding environment
4. Not being distracted with time wasters
5. Being able to make rational arguments for the things you believe and think
6. Taking courses outside of your area of focus
7. Listening more than talking

8. Adding a news or history app to your phone
9. Opening your mind to new ideas and ways of thinking
10. Learning about an obscure religion or philosophy
11. Starting a collection of influential books

Spiritual Self-Care

An essential part of mindfulness is learning to be still. We live in a fast-paced world where quiet moments are rare. A college student's life is exceptionally chaotic--balancing coursework, relationships, money, and time. We focus on doing and forget to focus on being. Moments of quiet contemplation might be rare but are crucial in recharging and renewing our spirits. Spirituality is the final, but not the least of, our four self-care domains. Our search for spiritual connections seems to be an individual and often private experience. Some of us seek religiosity as a venue for our spiritual refinement, and others seek nature or a more universal approach. Regardless, the need to be connected to something more meaningful and larger than our own existence is real and can be nurtured through spiritual self-care. Good spiritual self-care might include, but is not limited to:

1. Coming to terms with your own mortality, but living in a way that includes a perspective beyond this life
2. Engaging in practices and activities that connect you with the earth and its beauties
3. Looking for ways to connect with others on a more universal level
4. Setting a goal for deeper prayer, meditation, or reflection
5. Acting in a way that deepens your sense of morality and integrity
6. Accepting that many circumstances and events are beyond your control
7. Serving others without expectation or reciprocity
8. Beginning a gratitude journal tracking your blessings and gifts
9. Sharing your talents and unique abilities to enrich the lives of others

10. Having a sense of something larger than yourself, whether it is God, community, or universal purpose

Conclusion

College students are at a crucial time in their lives for developing new habits. Developing new habits should not be limited to studying techniques, exploring new social experiences, or improving time management skills. In fact, if you are developing these techniques, you *are* practicing self-care. Self-care isn't necessarily about self-indulgence. Self-care often looks more like respect and responsibility. Self-care is paying your bills on time so that you don't get dinged with late fees or accrued interest. Self-care is paying attention to your hygiene, not out of vanity but because it protects you from disease and improves your social interactions. Self-care is praying or meditating out of a basic need to be still and feel the presence of something greater than yourself. Self-care is planning, organizing, maintaining, and slowing down. Self-care is constant. Self-care is a response to your self-worth, knowing your strengths, weaknesses, likes, dislikes, and coming to terms with all of it. Self-care is taking care of you!

Bibliography

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