

Take Care of Yourself

Overcoming barriers to self-care can be difficult, especially for women. But making time and space for ourselves - and getting over any residual emotional guilt - is critical to our well-being and happiness. In the long run, it's better for those around us, too.



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For most of us, the concept of self-care is lost amid clamoring cell phones, hungry kids, impatient bosses and a 24/7 news cycle that's continuously bombarding us with big things to worry about. We rank just about everything — work, kids, friends, aging parents, ever-looming crises — above our own fundamental need for things like rest, quiet, exercise and pleasure. Something always seems more important.

Women are especially accustomed to pushing their self-care further and further down the to-do list. We've been socialized to care for others and taught that self-sacrifice is inextricably linked with motherhood and wifedom. We fear being labeled "selfish" for insisting on monthly massages or "lazy" for taking a midday nap.

"For me, the hardest thing is to say no to my kids, and to claim time and space for myself when they want me," says Heather Hewett, PhD, a women's studies professor at the State University of New York at New Paltz and mother of two small children. "I have to tell myself, consciously, that they will be OK. Where does all this guilt come from?"

Pamela Peeke, MD, MPH, and author of *Fit to Live* (Rodale, 2007), thinks it's biological: "Women are hardwired to care about anything that comes within 100 feet of them, but they have to realize that the best caregiver is a healthy caregiver."

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Ignoring our own needs while constantly meeting the needs of others can have serious physical, emotional and even spiritual ramifications. For example, scientific studies regularly confirm that stress — the condition self-care can help alleviate — heightens a person's risks of cardiovascular disease and some cancers. Christiane Northrup, MD, author of *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom: Creating Physical and Emotional Health and Healing* (Bantam, 2006), attests that cellular inflammation — a byproduct of stress, among other things — is the origin of all chronic disease. The hormone cortisol also builds up in the stressed system and gradually erodes it — causing our organs to malfunction, our muscles to lose suppleness, our immune systems to break down, and both our bodies and our brains to age faster.

Those who don't take the time to exercise regularly or eat healthy, balanced meals further increase their chances of incurring chronic health problems, including diabetes. And women more often suffer from immune illnesses like chronic fatigue syndrome and thyroid disorders, ailments that experts believe are often caused — at least in part — by a frenzied and health-compromising lifestyle.

Emotionally, a lack of self-care can leave us anxious, depressed and less productive (the ultimate irony, of course, since we often avoid self-care in pursuit of accomplishing more).

Though we often postpone self-care to better serve those we love — taking that bath can seem petty when your kids need help with their homework — forgoing our own needs actually damages those relationships in the long run. It can lead to bitterness, exhaustion, and even resentment. Women too harried to take care of themselves often have a harder time being receptive and compassionate with their partners, too. Studies confirm that those who have consistent self-care routines are markedly happier in their marriages.

Beyond the damages that we suffer personally when we neglect our own needs, there are some troubling sociological ramifications associated with all this "toughing it out." We superwomen are raising a generation of supergirls.

Though few mothers explicitly tell their daughters to sacrifice their own needs and instead focus on the needs of others and "achieve, achieve, achieve," the models they set with their own busy lives speak volumes.

How often, by contrast, do we model the subtle art of putting our own essential needs and self-care first?

"Many of us saw our moms slip into second place, so we easily fall into the same pattern," explains Wendy Shanker, author of *The Fat Girl's Guide to Life* (Bloomsbury, 2004). "We take a sort of pride in our martyrdom: *I couldn't exercise because I had to stay late at work. I couldn't meet up with my friends because my kids would freak out if I left the house. Shockingly, you discover that you don't get rewarded for your selflessness, so you get resentful. You get used to the resentment. Then you gotta make someone pay for all that sacrifice, and it's often your daughter. The cycle continues.*"

Our lack of self-care is a dangerous legacy likely to be passed on to the next generation of female leaders. Results of an October 2006 report published by Girls Inc., *The Supergirl Dilemma: Girls Grapple With the Mounting Pressure of Expectation*, revealed that 74 percent of girls in grades 9 through 12 reported feeling stressed. The next generation may have access to more opportunities than their mothers or grandmothers, but they aren't likely to know much more about protecting their own physical and mental health while pursuing their dreams.

There are also profound spiritual losses when we submerge our own needs and desires and let everyone else's expectations float to the surface. Anna Quindlen describes it well in her book *Being Perfect* (Random House, 2005): "Someday, sometime, you will be sitting somewhere.... And something bad will have happened: You will have lost someone you loved, or failed at something at which you badly wanted to succeed. And sitting there, you will fall into the center of yourself. You will look for some core to sustain you. And if you have been perfect all your life and have managed to meet all the expectations of your family, your friends, your community, your society, chances are excellent that there will be a black hole where that core ought to be."

Simply put, self-care is about feeding the very center of yourself. It's about valuing the needs and desires that emerge from your body's wisdom. It's about believing that you can't do the work you need to do in the world — including taking care of others — without first doing the hard work of taking care of yourself.

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But what does all this mean in practical terms? How do you limit your caretaking of others and start prioritizing at least some of your own needs? Here are a few simple steps for putting yourself first.

Discover Your Own Self-Care Style

The first step involves defining what self-care means to you. For Betsy Henning, cofounder of Alling Henning Associates (a.k.a. AHA!), a Vancouver, Wash.-based creative business-writing agency, it's about solitude and silence. "I probably 'do' self-care, although I would never think of it that way, by getting up early," she says. "The mornings became 'my time.' I enjoy the quiet— I never turn on music or the TV. I read. I sit on the deck. I talk to the dogs. I write letters and emails. I find my camera and take weird, spontaneous photos. I love my family, but I have a visceral response to hearing the first of the three doors open and a bathroom door shut. Those are the sounds that let me know 'my time' is up."

For Hewett, it's less about being alone and more about being in touch with her own body. "I keep an exercise journal, which makes me focus on my body," she says. "Also, I love yoga, which teaches one to be self-aware and mindful of one's physical and emotional state. I have found this invaluable."

Self-care also means abandoning the idea that there is an authority that knows more about what your body needs than you. "The lack of self-care all comes from the belief that you don't know what's best for you," says Northrup. "So, in our culture, self-care becomes going to the doctor. How can we continue to believe that some expert outside of ourselves knows how to take better care of ourselves than we do?"

Make Some Changes

Once you know your self-care style, how do you get over the sometimes-debilitating logistical hump of actually following through?

Peeke believes that big changes only come through baby steps. "If you never have breakfast, then today is the day," she says. "You can learn about quality and quantity later, but the first step is to have the darn thing."

Sometimes getting what you need means just taking a few minutes during your hectic day to be quiet, says Karol Ward, LCSW, a psychotherapist and executive presentation coach in New York City. "I once coached a woman in a corporate environment — getting her to where she could finally shut her office door for 20 minutes a day," she says. "This version of self-care helped her realize that not shutting her door was leading to some self-destructive behavior, such as drinking way too much coffee and always being available to everyone else at the cost of her own need to get things done. Shutting her door allowed her to catch up on her own work, call her children and/or husband, or simply look out the window for peace of mind."

Some experts recommend taking mini-retreats, such as one day a month when you get to take care of yourself, and eventually working yourself up to longer retreats at a spa or exotic locale where you can immerse yourself in peace and quiet.

These and other self-care activities may need to become a fundamental part of your planning strategy each week. As you pencil in the soccer games on the family calendar or the networking lunches in your own planner, take a nonerasable pen and carve out some nonnegotiable time preordained as "self-care." If that means asking a partner for help, ask. If it means setting limits on how much you can do for others, set limits.

See the Bigger Picture

One important way to overcome the guilt that comes with prioritizing self-care is to understand how it will contribute to the greater good. As Northrup explains, "You cannot give real nurturance to another from an empty cup."

Another key, says Shanker, is to free yourself from the expectations of perfection. That will allow more time for self-care and the enjoyment of the accomplishment you have already created. "Your house doesn't have to be spotless. Your body doesn't have to be fat-free. Your desk doesn't have to be organized. Make room for mistakes. Give in to a certain amount of chaos. If you stop setting yourself up for failure, you give yourself a gift: success."

Perfectionism can be a coping mechanism, a way for women to feel safe and in control of their environment, explains Ward. But by paying more attention to their own self-care, women can often release that need for control.

"When women start practicing modes of self-care, they are able to relax more and tap into a 'good enough' mentality," she says. "Being in charge of one's life becomes more a 'feeling' state of mind rather than a 'doing' state of mind."

Listen to Your Emotions

Feelings aren't just the stuff of sentimental songs; they're the lifeblood of our physiological existence. It takes acute self-awareness to know what your body, in particular, needs and when it needs it.

"Self-awareness — the ability to recognize, understand and label one's own feelings, along with the ability to accurately self-assess — is a foundational skill for a life of well-being," explains psychotherapist Robin Stern, PhD, an expert on emotional intelligence and author of *The Gaslight Effect: How to Spot and Survive the Hidden Manipulation Others Use to Control Your Life* (Broadway Books, 2007). "But so many of us are racing through our lives without taking the time to stop and take a breath and just be."

Stern recommends scheduling regular time for reflective activity, like journaling and meditating, and setting aside brief moments of silence throughout the day to simply check in with yourself: What am I feeling right now? How strong is that feeling? Where do I feel it? What do I understand or know about that feeling?

She suggests "turning down the volume" of your daily life — by spending time alone, by escaping from the dull roar of media and conversations and other requests for attention — so that you can listen more acutely to your authentic inner voice. "That, in itself, is a loving act of self-care," she explains.

Learn the Magic Word

Acquiring and trusting this deeper sense of self-awareness can help you learn to say that most-difficult of words: no.

Not in your vocabulary, you say? You're not alone. "It's often hard for women who aren't used to saying no to jump right in and say it," Ward notes. "Instead, try phrases such as, 'I need to look at my schedule and get back to you,' or, 'That sounds like a worthwhile idea or project; I'm just not certain whether it's something I can commit to right now.'"

Before offering a firm response, sit down and check in with your body. How does your body feel when you imagine doing what you've been asked to do? Do you feel tense and weighted down, or excited and energized?

You may find it helpful to express your genuine feelings about your decision to say no, says Ward. She recommends phrases like, "It's hard for me to say no, but I have to at this time," or, "I know it's a worthwhile cause, but I am overextended right now." Or simply: "Unfortunately, that doesn't work for me."

Whatever your strategy for improving the way you care for your body, mind and spirit, try to take some small steps in that direction every day. How you go about improving the quality and quantity of care you give yourself is, as Northrup explains, completely up to you.

"Ultimately, self-care is about understanding that your body is the one place on the planet that you have dominion over," she says. "You are nature. Your body is what you're given as your little piece of the earth to take care of. No one else can do it for you."

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