

beyond the bubble bath:

A Harm Reduction Guide to Self Care

I first heard the phrase “self care” while working as a sexual assault advocate in 1998. It was my first professional job, and I had absolutely no idea what I was getting into. While we often mentioned self care at my agency, it was rare to see solid modeling of it. What did self care really look like? I knew it had to be more than just a bubble bath at the end of the day. And I was often confused that it was my total responsibility to implement self care practices, when, in fact, the policies and work culture seemed to be setting me up for burnout regardless of my individual decisions. Fourteen months after starting, I was suffering from some significant symptoms of trauma exposure. I’ve been thinking about, reading about and discussing the concept and practice of self care since that first experience with burnout.

Many people warn we can’t take care of others if we don’t take care of ourselves. In some ways, this is totally accurate because we will eventually reach a crisis point or stray far from our intended goals for helping others. However, many people manage to take care of others without taking good care of themselves. Sometimes the impacts are obvious and other times quite hidden to outside observers. The reality is that it can be hard to take care of ourselves. We’d rather spend the energy on other people. Many things get in the way of taking care of ourselves and being able to care for others. We don’t have the time. We don’t have the resources. We feel selfish. We are overwhelmed at how to begin. Adding to the complexity is the sense that at times, our people in our community need care regardless of our ability to give.

In modern society, there exists a baseline amount of anxiety and stress and a lingering sense of being

overwhelmed. Work, school, errands, chores and simple maintenance of life take a certain level of energy and time. Add to that the additional demands of children, creative projects, single parenting, second jobs, care of other ill family members and a desire to care for our communities, the animals and the environment...talk about overwhelming! If you also have an experience of chronic pain, chronic illness, are living with a disability or have mental health difficulties as part of your experience, then self care becomes an additional necessity (and challenge) rather than a “when-I-have-time-for-it” luxury.

Further complicating our relationship to self care is that we can judge ourselves very harshly for not tending to our own needs. When we aren't feeling so well others often ask us if we are taking care of ourselves. There can be some veiled judgment (or perhaps our own projections) that we are to blame for our current state because we didn't do it right. Our own ebbs and flows of emotional struggle or physical pain can also make it difficult to engage with and maintain self care. The heartache of tending to yourself when you feel broken, unfixable and in pain is challenging. A flare up can really challenge your commitment to yourself.

It helps me to view self-care as somewhat aspirational—I know the ideal way I'd take care of myself, my family and my community if I had endless time and abundant resources to do so. I often say that I could make it my full time job (and perhaps it should be)! Over the years, I've learned that my constitution along with the kind of work I do require that I take care of myself. If I'm not intentional about the amount of time I devote to self care, my body will hurt, anxiety will flare up and I will become resentful of the very activities I choose to spend my time on. I will be crabby with those I love the most. I will start complaining endlessly. I'm not so fun when I don't take care of myself. If I don't take the time to do essential chores that create calmness in my space, schedule important appointments or hang outs and ensure my schedule is reasonable, it becomes overwhelming to balance everything.

My reflections on the topic of self care along with my observations of my own patterns have led me to utilize harm reduction theory as a basis for formulating a self care plan. **Meeting myself where I am** (the essential core of harm reduction theory) seems a more reasonable way to contextualize self care. I know I'm not going to be able to take care of myself perfectly all the time and I will fall off the self care wagon. So why not give myself some room to do the best I can at any given time instead of trying to live up to some rigid expectation of taking perfect care of myself? Perhaps this will allow us more room to support others as well.

As I hear more and more people in my community talk of being extremely busy and overextended, I hope we will all take the time out to consider what actually works best for us. What kinds of activities make us feel the most restored, inspired and creative? What kind of schedule allows us to be present for both others and ourselves? What kind of nurturing do we truly need to be able to do the kind of work we want to do? How do we create awareness in our communities regarding the need to tend to each other? What follows are some possible suggestions on utilizing a harm reduction framework to activate your self care. I've also included three visual examples of self care plans. Please take what is useful to you and leave the rest behind. I'm keenly aware of the inherent paradox of focusing on self care. Others have suggested we move away from self care to communities of care. I agree. And let's start where we are and build an increasing level of awareness and skill regarding giving and receiving care. The challenge to move away from self care is best put by Yashna Maya Padamsee "Self-care, as it is framed now, leaves us in danger of being isolated in our struggle and our healing. Isolation of yet another person, another injustice, is a notch in the belt of Oppression. A liberatory care practice is one in which we move beyond self-care into caring for each other."

ACTIVATING & MAINTAINING SELF CARE

1. You will not be consistent. Don't stress it!

Our best-laid plans are always interrupted. We have a bad day (or week). We go on vacation. Friends come into town. Our family visits. We have too much work to do and taking care of ourselves seems like more work. We have a flare up and we have to put our plan on hold. Don't let this stop you from re-starting whenever the time feels right. Let go of how you didn't go to the gym for two weeks or you avoided doing your exercises while your friends were visiting. Let go of the idea that your plan will someday be perfectly adhered to, no matter what.

2. Start today/Do One Thing.

Don't think of *all* the things you'd like to care for yourself, just focus on one thing. Meet yourself where you are. Yes, you might not be living up to your ideal plans, but you can start making better choices at any point. Ate a bad breakfast? What choices can you make about your lunch? Skipped physical therapy this week? Set up your next appointment. Don't let one decision or one bad day sabotage you from doing the next best thing for yourself.

3. Punishment doesn't work.

You cannot control, dominate or judge yourself into good self care. We are human and we rebel when control is the dominant paradigm. It's more common for us to beat ourselves up for what we are not doing rather than celebrate the small victories. Try to drum up some compassion or kindness for yourself as the basis for taking care of yourself. Watch that nasty voice in your head that tells you, "I should be...." "I can't believe I didn't..." "Wow, another day without...." Be mindful of the running narrative. Flip the script. Be gentle.

4. Plant flowers instead of pulling weeds.

I find it much easier to add good stuff rather than working to remove all the not so good stuff I'm doing. I might not be willing to eliminate bad television from my life but I can

add a walk after dinner. Too much coffee? Add some water to the regimen. Put your focus on something you want to expand. Slowly, the flowers take over!

5. Self care is multi-faceted, complex and even paradoxical.

At times it means not going to yoga because you'd be more nourished by hanging out with a friend. It can mean that you need alone time, social time or medical care. At times, you might need time to self-reflect, at others, to be distracted. Be flexible with yourself and embrace the irony that anti-self care is self care sometimes.

6. Have a plan.

It is very difficult to take care of yourself if you don't know what you need. Everyone is different, and I find that I need different things at different times in my life. I try to check in with myself often because my needs change, sometimes on a daily basis. I wake up feeling like I need to go to acupuncture, but later, I find joy and wellness in sitting at the coffee shop writing letters to friends. Take some time to make a plan and occasionally put a self care plan review on your agenda.

7. Consider how to support your self-care plan.

Consider whom in your family or circle of friends you would like to have support your self care plan. What, if any, specific prompts, questions or words of encouragement would you appreciate from loved ones? How can you remind yourself (without guilt) that your self-care plan is available and ready? Is it something you'd like to tell people about? Hang up in your room? Would this be helpful to discuss with a professional counselor, social worker or other healer?

8. Ask for Help/Ask to Help.

We are very fearful of burdening others to the point that we suffer in isolation. It is very difficult to ask for help and that difficulty increases if you are in a vulnerable place. In my experience, when I do ask for help from trusted friends

and family, I'm often met with kindness and generosity. I want to live in community where I can ask for what I need without guilt and shame and trust that people will be honest about their ability to support me. I want to create those communities of care. I want someone to bring me a casserole when I am having a hard time. I want to do those things for others, too.

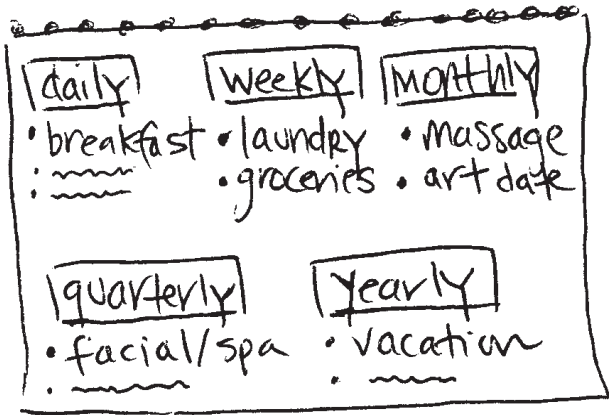
BRAINSTORMING CATEGORIES FOR YOUR SELF CARE PLAN:

- Chores/Errands
- To Do Lists/Goal Setting
- Sleep/Rest/Relaxation
- Exercise/Movement
- Activities that support your work/Career
- Journaling
- Creativity/Art/Crafts/Writing
- Hobbies
- Spiritual/Religious Practices
- Alone time
- Adventures
- Vacations
- Supportive people/Hang Outs with Loved Ones
- Attitudes/Philosophies/Words/Quotes/Intentions
- Dates/Sex
- Food/M meal Planning
- Supplements/Medication
- Healing/Medical Appointments
- Communication with Loved Ones
- Financial Needs/Goals

EXAMPLES OF SELF CARE PLANS:

These are just a starting place! Get creative! Make your plans as simple or elaborate as you want. Include others in the creation of your plan. Copy it for those in your support system. Make it work for you.

figure 1: "the planner"



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figure 2: 'the collage'

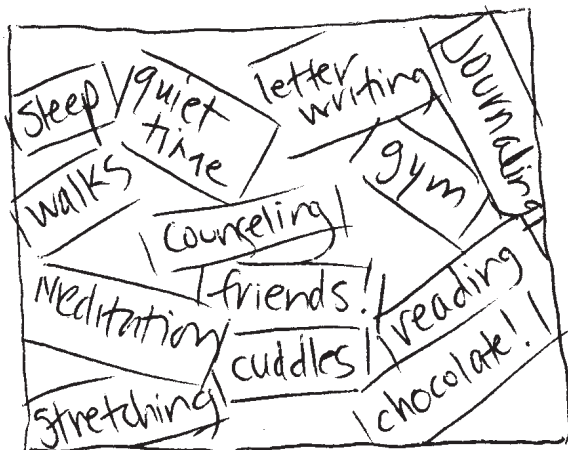
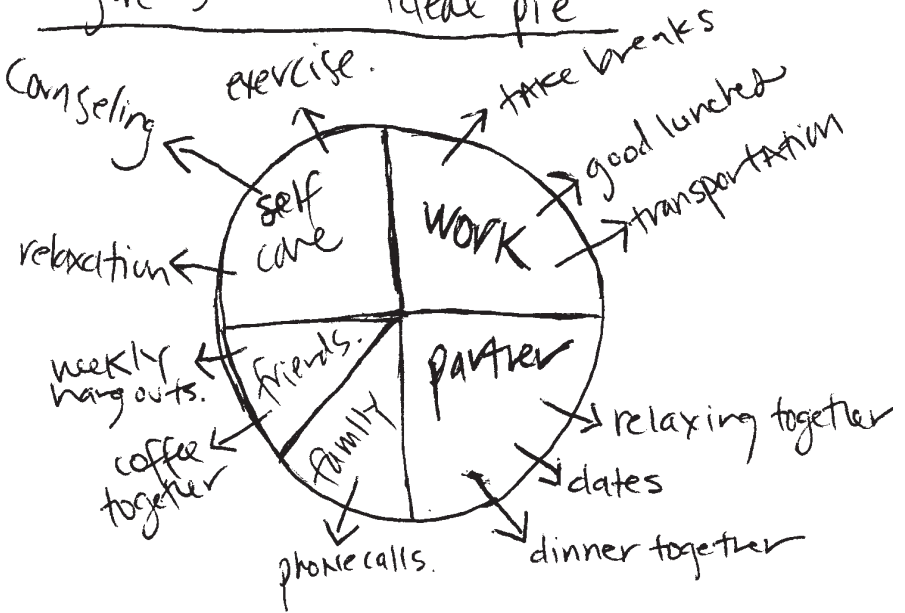




Figure 3: "ideal pie"



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### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

Communities of Care, Organizations for Liberation  
<http://nayamaya.wordpress.com/>

Creative Stress: A Path for Evolving Souls Living through Personal and Planetary Upheaval  
by James O'Dea

Aftershock: Confronting Trauma in a Violent World: A Guide for Activists and Their Allies  
by Patrice Jones



Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self  
While Caring for Others

by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk

Help for the Helper: The Psychophysiology of Compassion  
Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma

by Babette Rothschild

Acceptance And Commitment Therapy For Chronic Pain

by Joanne Dahl, Kelly G. Wilson, Carmen Luciano,  
Steven C. Hayes

**CONTACT:**

Questions? Comments? Feedback? I'd love to hear from  
you!

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