

# A Practical Tool for Mental Health Recovery

The experience of many people with mental health challenges shows that most such challenges are rooted in life experiences. Learning to prioritise and engage in healthy self-care can act as an accurate tool to support our recovery.

## What is Self-Care?

Self-care is any activity that we do deliberately in order to take care of our own physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health.

Sometimes we can think that taking time out for ourselves is selfish and that we must be selfless in order to be well thought of by others. However, self-care is not selfish as can be seen from the definitions below:

**Selfish** - the act of putting our own needs first to the exclusion of other people's needs

**Selfless** - the act of putting other people's needs first to the exclusion of our own needs

**Self-care** - the act of taking care of our own needs first so that we're better able to meet the needs of others

## Why is Self-Care important?

Research has illustrated that including self-care in our daily routine has many benefits including:

- improving our physical health & reducing our chance of physical illness,
- improving our mood/mental health & reducing our chance of stress/anxiety,
- helping to repair the damage caused from past trauma,
- increasing our self-worth
- inspiring feelings of happiness
- helping us to treat others with more care when we treat ourselves with care,
- increasing our productivity and promoting our work-life balance

## Why might we find it difficult to engage in Self-Care?

There are many reasons why people might find it difficult to self-care. They are listed below:

- **Lacking Role Models of Self-Care whilst growing up:** Self-care is something that has to be learned by children. We may not have had parents or other role models growing up who demonstrated self-care to us. We may have been taught to deal with our emotions by numbing and self-medicating behaviours e.g. using food, drugs, alcohol or technology to distract ourselves from difficult emotions. Self-care means learning to process our emotions, feelings and stress while providing care for ourselves based on our specific needs at the time. Without having had a role model of self-care, we now need to define self-care for ourselves. Indeed, the various acts of self-care we engage in are unique to us and our

needs at any given time.

- **Learning that our needs are not important:** Beyond the basic needs of each person i.e. water, shelter, food, and love, each of us has needs that are unique to whom we are. When those needs are negated or neglected, we learn that not only are our needs not important, but who we are isn't important either. This can affect our self-image, self-identity, self-worth and affect the way we believe the world sees us i.e. as very unimportant. Therefore, we learn that taking care of our needs doesn't matter.
- **Learning that the needs of others is more important than our own needs:** if we grew up in an environment where the only time we were shown love or felt safe was when we took care of the needs of others, we will grow up with the belief that in order to keep ourselves safe and/or receive love from others we need to put others needs before our own. This leads to co-dependency issues where we believe we are only okay when the people around us are okay. This addiction to people pleasing can be detrimental to our mental health and wellbeing and can make it difficult for us to focus on our own needs in order to engage in self-care.
- **Believing we are undeserving of love as a result of Adverse Childhood Experiences:** Research from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Study (Felitti, Anda et al, 2005) showed that the more adversities a child experiences whilst growing up (i.e. neglect, abandonment, abuse etc.), the more likely that child is to experience mental health challenges as an adult and as a result can feel very unsafe in the world and undeserving of love. If someone believes they are not deserving of love, they won't believe they deserve to take care of themselves and therefore will find it difficult to engage in self-care and may engage in self-destructive behaviours instead e.g. self-harm, addictions etc. However, giving ourselves now, as adults, the love, safety, compassion and delight that we should have had as children is a great tool for recovery from the trauma of our past and to support our ongoing mental health.
- **Symptoms of mental health challenges:** The symptoms of our mental health challenges may be such as to make it difficult for us to care for ourselves. For example, we may have disruptive sleep patterns leading to high levels of fatigue during the day, we may be socially anxious and so isolate ourselves from others etc. However, no matter the symptoms you are experiencing, it is possible by taking little steps, to create a daily self-care routine for yourself, as even the smallest of changes to our usual routine could benefit our mental health and wellbeing.

### **What is the first step to Self-Care?**

The first step to our Self-care is self-awareness i.e. being aware of the ways in which we care and/or don't care for ourselves at the moment. Have a look at the ways in which we care for ourselves at the moment – could that be improved? Are there ways we don't care for ourselves? If so, in what way do we not care for ourselves and how might various self-care activities meet this need for care.

Some tips for starting our self-care routine are:

- **Start small** – aim for small acts of self-care at the start
- **Go from inactive to active** – small ways to be a bit more active in our day
- **Feed your senses** – take the time to see, feel, hear, taste and touch e.g. getting outside, listening to music, getting a hug, eating a tasty meal etc.
- **Keep a routine** – create a routine that easily allows you to engage in self-care

### How can we recognise when we need more Self-Care?

If we notice any of the following in our lives, then it is time for us to consider engaging in more self-care:

- Physical symptoms i.e. tension headaches, disturbed sleep / oversleeping, fatigue, being run down, spots, illness
- Mental symptoms i.e. not being able to concentrate properly, forgetfulness, tension, depression, anxiety
- Emotional symptoms i.e. getting triggered easily, excessive crying, angry outbursts
- Social symptoms i.e. excessive isolation

### What are the different types of Self-Care?

The different types of self-care are:

1. **Physical Self-Care** is the act of taking care of our own physical health i.e. tending to the needs of our own physical body such as:

- Exercising i.e. yoga, walking, running, swimming, dancing
- Having a massage or facial
- Eating healthily and mindfully
- Having a hot drink i.e. herbal tea, cocoa etc.
- Getting a good night's sleep
- Reducing unhealthy self-soothing e.g. smoking, caffeine, alcohol
- Having a bath with your favourite scents
- Physical grooming; bathing, skincare, nail care, hair care, clothes you wear
- Creating a cosy space / home e.g. candles, throws, flowers, pictures

2. **Emotional Self-Care** is the act of taking care of our own emotional health.

Here are some examples of emotional self-care:

- Allowing ourselves to feel our emotions as they are without judgement or the need to push them away
- Identifying our feelings and emotional needs and meeting those needs with loving kindness.
- Saying positive affirmations that we find helpful for us, for example,
  - ✓ "I am good"
  - ✓ "I am loving and loveable"
  - ✓ "I am safe"

- ✓ “I am capable”
- ✓ “I am strong”
- ✓ “I can have my life the way I want it”

- Treating ourselves as we would a small child i.e. with kindness, gentleness, compassion, love, warmth, delight and patience.
- Allowing ourselves to make mistakes - we are only human.
- Gifting our inner child - think of our favourite things to eat, drink or do when we were a child and gift it to ourselves e.g. eating marshmallows etc.
- Finding things that make us laugh
- Complimenting ourselves when we look in the mirror
- Accepting compliments from others by saying “Thank you”
- Connecting with our loved ones
- Silencing our Inner Critic by finding compassion for ourselves

3. **Psychological Self-Care** is the act of taking care of our psychological health i.e. observing & managing our thoughts and engaging in activities that exercise, stimulate, distract and/or calm our minds.

Some examples are:

- Developing our self-awareness: paying attention to our thoughts, feelings and attitudes
- Saying “No” to extra responsibilities in our lives so as to decrease our stress
- Mindfulness: learning to practice mindfulness i.e. recognising that we are in the present – ‘The past is history, the future a mystery, whilst the present is a gift’ – this phrase can help us not to dwell on the past or worry about the future and focus on the present moment.
- Meditation: quietening our minds with meditation/guided meditation e.g. using the Headspace app or free meditations available on YouTube
- Gratitude: practicing self-reflection and writing down or saying aloud the things that we are grateful for in our lives
- Reminding ourselves of our strengths and talents. Writing them down give us the opportunity to look back on them in times of self- doubt or worry.
- Arts & crafts
- Reading a good book
- Doing a crossword
- Doing a course that interests us
- Keeping track of our accomplishments
- Unplugging from the digital world i.e. social media, phones, laptops etc.
- Expanding our knowledge or skills in other areas – being curious

4. **Relational Self-Care** is the act of taking care of the relationships we have with others in our lives so that we can satisfy two of our most basic needs as human beings i.e. **1)** to know that we matter, **2)** to feel that we belong.

Also, only we can do the work of our own recovery – but we can’t do it alone. Learning to trust that there are other people who can be relied on not to hurt/criticize us and can reflect back to us the real, strong, capable, loveable human being we are, is very helpful in

the way we feel about the world, the people in it and our own recovery and reminds us that we are not alone.

Some examples of relational self-care are:

- Building and experiencing emotional intimacy with others
- Spending time with positive, non-judgemental friends
- Attending a support group
- Connecting with people who can help us on our recovery journey
- Removing ourselves from unhealthy relationships and/or minimising our time with people who have an unhealthy effect on us
- Talking out our worries and/or issues with a peer and/or a therapist

5. **Spiritual Self-Care** is the act of taking care of our own spiritual health. It is finding and nurturing our inner human spirit, connecting to what matters most to us at our core so that we can find a sense of meaning and purpose for our lives that honours the values of our inner spirit.

Some examples of spiritual self-care are:

- Spending time with ourselves in silence
- Walking in nature
- Building and/or nurturing a connection to a Higher Power
- Creating something i.e. baking, cooking, drawing, painting, writing etc.
- Contributing to causes we care about
- Listening to music and/or playing a musical instrument
- Meditating
- Engaging in inspirational videos/literature on spirituality
- Writing in a journal

6. **Professional Self-Care** is the act of ensuring we have a healthy work-life balance.

Some examples are:

- Ensuring our work isn't taking up an unhealthy amount of time in our lives
- Managing our workload in a way that ensures we have tiny breaks as needed
- Prioritizing our time
- Decorating our workspace to our liking
- Creating a quiet area to get our work done
- Doing work that we're passionate about

## Creating Your Own Self-Care Kit

Fill a basket/ box with some of the things that soothe you when you need an extra dose of self-love. Here are some ideas of things that you could include:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Treasured photos of people who love you and/or you love</li><li>• Photos or pictures of a favourite time in your life</li><li>• Positive notes or affirmations you've written to yourself</li><li>• Teddy bear</li><li>• Fidget toys / grounding objects</li><li>• Fluffy socks</li><li>• Calming jar (fill jar with pinto beans – the sound can be soothing)</li><li>• Colouring book</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bubbles</li><li>• Journal &amp; pens e.g. write a gratitude list</li><li>• Favourite dvds</li><li>• Essential oils</li><li>• Weighted blanket</li><li>• Nail care items</li><li>• Sweets</li><li>• Lotions</li><li>• Worry box: write down all of your worries &amp; put them in your worry box, asking God/The Universe to take care of them for you so you can let them go</li></ul> |
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We are all unique individuals and different approaches to self-care will work for different people. We may need to try out different self-care activities until we find the ones that work best for each of us.

The time we spend doing this is likely to be a valuable investment in our recovery.