

SELF-CARE IN TIMES OF STRESS

Working toward balance.



What is self-care, really? Self-care is simply practicing behaviors and activities that help you to feel good and be mentally and physically healthy. That seems pretty straightforward, right? Unfortunately, self-care has become a whole industry that overwhelms us with messages that tell us what we should do to take care of ourselves and imply that there is only one right way to do it. There is so much information on self-care, that we don't even know where to begin. If you are finding the thought of adding self-care routines and practices into your life overwhelming and anxiety-inducing, you are not alone and it is ok to feel this way.

Life has always been stressful but now we are encountering a whole new pile of stressors on top of those that life has always thrown at us. Stress comes in all sorts of different shapes and sizes- some stressors hang around so long and nag at us so much that we kind of get used to them lurking in the background. Other stressors come in swiftly, hit hard, and take a great deal of time and work to even begin to recover from.

When we are feeling high levels of stress, self-care can become one more thing on the stress-pile and can easily feel like one more thing on your "to-do" list that you probably won't get done. Let's face it, when things get tough we are more likely to take care of others first. We take care of the most pressing and immediate needs, but that usually doesn't include taking care of ourselves. Taking time for ourselves when there is so much to do can make us feel guilty or selfish, though it is the best thing we can do to ensure that we can help others. It is important to take care of ourselves always. It is also important to recognize that self-care in times of great stress will look different than times when stress is low. Self-care at these difficult times is all about doing things to feel better and help manage your stress. You are doing a great job with all you are having to deal with- you should be proud!



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What is stress?

So, what is stress, anyway? Author Dan Mager defines stress as, “An imbalance between your current coping abilities and the demands placed on you, including demands that you place on yourself- both real and perceived.” Simply stated, we are in balance when we can cope with the stressors in our lives. We are out of balance when our stressors are too much for us to handle. It should be easy enough to manage stress, right? All we have to do is balance our stress with our coping abilities. Unfortunately, it is not that easy.

This definition is great because it acknowledges the complexity of dealing with stress. We have external and internal stressors and our ability to cope will fluctuate. We can easily identify external stresses and pressures that are put on us by outside forces such as, other people, our jobs, or difficult circumstances, but recognizing the ways in which we put stress on ourselves can be more difficult to see.

Internal stress most frequently comes from our personal perceptions and expectations of what we should or shouldn't be doing.

Dealing with stress becomes even more complex when we look at how many factors influence our ability to cope including, physical health, hormones, past or current trauma, the presence or absence of effective support systems, the weather, and so much more.

Signs and Symptoms of Stress Imbalance

There are times when we know that we are experiencing excessive stress, but there are times when stress levels can gradually increase until we suddenly feel overwhelmed. By becoming more conscious of the ways that stress affects us personally, we can be more aware of times when our stressors are beginning to become too much for us. Every person experiences stress differently. Some common signs that warn us that our stress levels are excessive include:

- forgetfulness
- persistently negative attitude
- low threshold for frustration
- anxiety
- depression
- headaches
- muscle pain or tightness
- changes in appetite
- changes in sleep patterns
- Increased occurrences of interpersonal conflict



Working Toward Balance in Times of Stress

First, I want you to know that you are doing a great job of handling all of the things on your plate. There is so much coming at you from all different directions and you are still going. You are accomplishing so much each day! It is okay if you never find the perfect balance, but it is possible to feel less stress. It is okay to not be perfect at stress management but you are worthy of care. It is important to remember that self-care isn't about doing what is right, it is about doing what is right for you right now. It is about taking care of yourself in the best way that you can given your current circumstances. It is doing whatever you need to feel calmer, happier, and more regulated. Self-care practice is not about being perfect or feeling perfect. It is about feeling better. In the Iowa Family Counseling article titled, “Self-Care for Parents,” we highlight many different self-care ideas. If you are feeling overwhelmed by imbalanced stress, that article may contain more ideas than you feel like you can process right now, so here I have whittled those ideas into four things that you can focus on to help move you toward a more healthy stress balance.

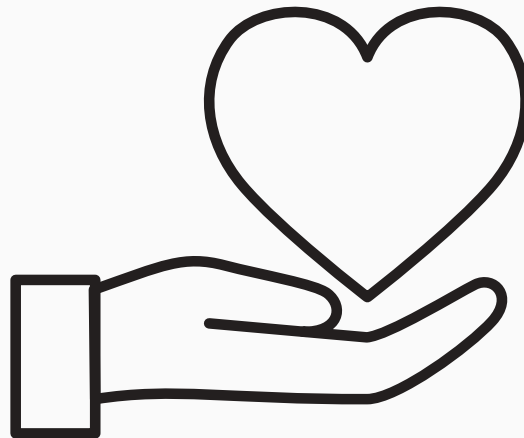
What We Can Prioritize to Help Balance Stress

- Speak to yourself encouragingly, with kindness and empathy
- Take things off of your to-do list
- Rest your body and your brain
- Ask for help



Speak to Yourself Encouragingly, with Kindness and Empathy

Speaking to ourselves kindly is the most important priority that we can have when dealing with large amounts of stress. It is easy to beat ourselves up over all sorts of things during times of stress. Stress causes symptoms such as negative attitude, low threshold for frustration, and depression that can easily be turned inward on ourselves. When our closest friends and family are going through difficult times, we want to be there to support them and offer encouraging words. We should afford ourselves the same empathy and compassion that we show others. It is important to remember that you are a good person that is doing the best that you can. When you catch yourself in a negative thought pattern, practice flipping your inner-dialogue.



Flipping Negative Thoughts into Encouraging Words

I am so behind, I can't get anything done! → Look at what I have accomplished.

I can't do this! → I am working at it.

I can't do anything right → I am doing pretty good given the circumstances

I can't handle this! → It is okay to ask for help

This is too much for me! → It is okay to take a break

Take Things Off of Your To-Do List

While procrastinating can be a sneaky source of stress, evaluating and prioritizing tasks can help to pare down your to-do list in order to make time to relax and recharge.

We often find ourselves putting things on our to-do lists because we feel like it is something that should be done. When we look at some of these things differently, we can see that it is not necessary or doesn't need to be prioritized. Some household chores are necessary to keep the house running smoothly, but others can wait for a bit. The same is true for work tasks. It would be great if we had time to accomplish everything we would like to do, but some things can wait. Examining our to-do lists to see what we can take off or push to a later time is a great way to clear some mental space and evaluate your priorities. We can ask ourselves questions like, *Does this need to be done right now? Is this an internal expectation or a real need?*



It is important to have goals to help us continue to move forward, but we can also put more stress on ourselves than is necessary. We often give ourselves unrealistic or ambitious goals and timeframes. It is okay if some things take longer than others. When deciding whether or not something should stay on our to-do list, you can ask ourselves, *Why does this need to be done? Who is telling me this needs to be done?*

Delegation is another tool that can be used to evaluate and remove tasks from our to-do lists. It is okay to ask for help from spouses, partners, friends, family, and colleagues. Life is a team effort and we are here to help one another. We can talk with the people in our lives to make tasks more manageable. Lots of things on our lists can be accomplished through delegation and teamwork. When looking at your to-do list you can ask, *Is there someone that can help me with this?*

Some questions that we can ask ourselves when evaluating our to-do list include:

Is this really important?

- Does this need to be done now?
- Why does this need to be done?
- Who is telling me this needs to be done?
- Is this an internal expectation or a real need?
- Is there someone that can help me with this?

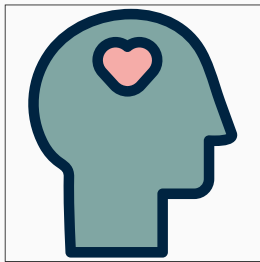
Rest Your Body and Your Brain

Stress is not only mentally exhausting, it can also be physically exhausting. When the physical symptoms of stress like headaches, fatigue, and tight muscles set in, our bodies are trying to tell us to slow down and take a break.

Taking a nap, going to bed early, or sleeping in can be one of the best gifts that we can give to ourselves. It is very common to have trouble sleeping when we are under high levels of stress. Rest will actually help us get things done.

It might seem like there is no time for sleep, but when we are rested we are able to be more present and productive.

Taking a break from some of our responsibilities can also help us to manage stress. If you are able to, take some time off from work, get take-out, use paper plates, give the kids extra screen time, let the laundry pile up. When we are overloaded with stress, we need to do whatever we can to free up some mental space for rest and recuperation.



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Ask for Help

There will be times in our lives that we need to ask for help and that is okay. We can lean on friends, family, and colleagues for help with many things. People are willing to help if we just ask. Just as we are willing to help others, others are willing to help us; we just need to let them know that we need help.

It is also okay to ask for help beyond our loved ones. If stress is persistent and overwhelming seeking help from counselors, spiritual leaders, or therapists can help. People outside of our personal network can help us to gain a new perspective and provide additional tools and strategies for difficult times. Mental health care providers have extensive professional education, training, and skills to identify and implement strategies for our individual needs.

If you feel that your sense of overwhelm has become despair and you are having thoughts of suicide or violence, please call 911 or go to your nearest emergency room. It is always good to ask for help. You are doing the right thing.

Self-Care Won't be Perfect

You are doing great. There is a whole self-care movement and industry that exists to tell us how to care for ourselves, but we need to remember that we know ourselves best. We should listen to ourselves always, but it is crucial that we pay attention to our needs in times of great stress. Stress is a very real and a very large part of our lives- we will always have stress. The work that we put into keeping our stress and ability to cope in balance is self-care.

Self-care is listening to yourself and doing what is best for you at the time. You cannot do it wrong.

There is no magic self-care practice that will fix everything, you are enough. Speak to yourself with compassion, work to give yourself the space you need for rest, and never be afraid to ask for help. You have a lot on your plate and you are amazing.

