



Self Care and Positive Coping

What is self care?

Self care is taking the time to care for you. Pretty simple, right? Even though it sounds simple, self care can be one of the most difficult things to ask someone to do.

To engage in self care,

1. You have to think that it would be beneficial for you to do
2. You have to prepare to spend time on yourself
3. You have to think that it's okay for you to spend time on yourself
4. You have to think that you're worth spending time on

And tackling those statements are just a few of the reasons that people struggle with practicing self care on a regular basis. Self care is all about helping you to feel better physically and mentally so you will feel more empowered to be able to cope with difficult situations that happen in your life.

Why is self care so important for trauma therapy?

When someone experiences a traumatic event, such as sexual assault, they respond in one of three ways:

- Fight – You may try to fight off the attacker or defend yourself in some way
- Flight – You may try to run away or hide as a way to protect yourself
- Freeze – You may feel unable to move, respond, fight back, or get away; like your body is paralyzed

The logical, thinking part of your brain is not working when the traumatic event is occurring; the emotional part of your brain takes over. Since the thinking part of your brain is not working and the emotional part of your brain takes over during the traumatic event, when you have something that reminds you of the trauma, your body responds in a similar way and you react based on those emotions you feel.

And why does your body respond in those ways?

Those situations that you find yourself in that remind you of the trauma are called “triggers”. Triggers can be anything: people, places, smells, seasons, feelings, situations, vehicles, bodily sensations, and so on. You might know what your trauma triggers are or you might not. When something happens and your trauma trigger reminds you of the past trauma, you may act differently. You may cry, you may become angry, you may keep to yourself and not be around the people you care about, or you may try to keep yourself busy so you don't think about those things. Just like triggers can be anything, your response to those triggers can be anything.

When you are reacting to these triggers, you are reacting from that emotional part of your brain. Since your logical, thinking part of your brain isn't working right, you may feel out of control and helpless to do anything different. This is why you need tools to help you manage those thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that happen when something reminds you of a traumatic experience.

What types of self care and positive coping can you do?

1. Deep breathing:

Deep breathing has been shown to be one of the single most effective tools a person can have to help them calm down and manage their stress response system. It's easy to engage in deep breathing and it's a tool one can use literally anywhere, like in meeting, in the car, in stores, or at home. Really, how many people are going to look at you strangely if you are breathing?

- To engage in deep breathing:

Take in a deep, belly breath through your nose, hold for one second, then exhale slowly through your mouth, thinking of a word or phrase to help you relax (such as calm, relax, breathe, or peace). Take 5 to 10 of these deep breaths, checking in with your body to make sure that you are not feeling dizzy. If you are new at practicing this technique, changing to breathing in this way can make you feel dizzy or light-headed. If you notice this, just stop and return your breathing to a normal rhythm for you.

2. Imagery:

For imagery, you want to create a safe, peaceful scene you can recall at times of stress and discomfort that helps you feel calm and stable.

- To engage in imagery:

Find a quiet, comfortable place and close your eyes, letting your whole body rest. Think of an image of a relaxing place. This can be somewhere you've been where you felt relaxed or an imaginary place. As you picture this image, go through your senses. What do you see? What do you smell? What do you hear? What do you taste? Do you feel anything against your skin? Make this visual imagery as animated and detailed as you would like. Remember to engage in deep breathing as you create your visual image. If your mind wanders away from your image, just bring it back and begin creating the image in your head again. When you feel you are ready and more relaxed, open your eyes and continue with your daily activities. Once you have created your visual image, you can bring yourself to this image throughout the day and remember the feeling of relaxation and calmness you felt when this image was created.

3. Progress Muscle Relaxation:

Progress Muscle Relaxation (PMR) is a technique where one tenses and relaxes different muscle groups as a way to learn the difference between the feelings of a tense muscle and a relaxed muscle. This technique requires you to pay close attention to your body and the sensations that arise. While a helpful technique to promote a sense of relaxation and getting in touch with how your body feels in states of tension and relaxation, this technique can be triggering or uncomfortable if you are not used to paying attention to your body. Remember, like with any other practices suggested here, do what is comfortable for you. If you are uncomfortable engaging in this activity, stop and try one that you have found that works for you.

- To engage in PMR:

Find a comfortable sitting position with your feet touching the floor. A chair with a back that allows you to rest your head is best. Scan your body for any areas of tension or discomfort. Begin by focusing on your feet. Tense and relax the muscles of your feet, holding the tension for about 5 seconds and allowing the release of the muscles to occur for about 10 seconds. Repeat this 3 to 4 times with each body part you move through to ensure you have allowed yourself to identify the feelings of tension and relaxation within the muscles. Move from your feet through the muscles of your body, ensuring you focus on the lower legs, thighs, stomach, shoulders, lower arms/hands, upper arms, neck, and face. Make sure to use the deep breathing as you move through the muscle relaxation activities to increase your awareness to your body. If your mind wanders

through the PMR activity, just bring your awareness back to your body when you notice this has occurred. PMR is good to do at night before you go to sleep, as it helps to relax the muscles and prepare you for a restful night's sleep. You may find that you fall asleep during the PMR exercises in the beginning.

4. Meditation:

Meditation is a wonderful tool to cultivate that will help one begin to reconnect to their bodies and learn to quiet their minds. Meditation has been used for centuries in all parts of the world and, while called by different names, is seen in many religious practices as a way for one to become more centered and connected to a higher power. Meditation as a self care tool is a useful tool to cultivate because it promotes a sense of relaxation and calm while allowing you to feel more in control of your thoughts and feelings. Extensive research has shown the benefits of using meditation practices and how these practices have been shown to change the activity of the brain. For you, this means that you can use meditation to actually change your brain and how it responds to trauma triggers.

- To engage in meditation:

Find a comfortable sitting position on the floor with your legs crossed. Use the deep breathing techniques to help bring your awareness to your breath. Focus on your breath as it flows into your lungs and out of your nose. Notice how your body responds to the in-breath and the out-breath. See if you can focus your attention on your body so that you notice the feeling of the air flowing into and out of your nose. Don't judge any sensations that come up, just acknowledge that is there. If your mind wanders away from your breath, just gently return your focus to your breath without judgment. Spend as much time as you feel comfortable in this meditative state. It is recommended to start by seeing if you can sit for 5 minutes in meditation. As you practice, you will become more comfortable with this process and may be able to sit for longer periods of time. In the beginning, you may notice that your attention often wanders away from your breath. Just refocus your attention and keep practicing. You will notice that with continued practice, it will be easier to keep your attention on your breath, the time you can sit in meditation will increase, and you will more easily feel the calming effects of focusing on the present moment.

5. Mindfulness:

Mindfulness practices can be seen in all the self care activities already presented. When one is mindful, you are "paying attention to your intention." By practicing mindfulness, you will become more skilled at paying attention to your bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings that arise without getting caught up in those feelings. It's easy to fall victim to the intense emotions or the negative thought patterns that emerge in all of us, so to practice responding mindfully to things, you begin to regain some control over your reactions to those thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness doesn't prevent you from feeling a certain way or thinking a certain thing; it just allows you the space to notice that this is how you feel or what you are thinking, and possibly choose a different response than what you have done before.

- To engage in mindfulness practices:

Mindfulness can be practiced in formal meditation or in everyday life. Most people live in the past (always replaying things that have already happened) or in the future (imagining events that have not occurred). Practicing mindfulness in everyday life helps one to stay focused on what one is doing without turning on the "autopilot." Just as you become more comfortable focusing on the body through deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and meditation, you will become more comfortable focusing on the present through the practice of mindfulness. This can be practiced anywhere and at anytime. All you have to do is just notice what you are doing. Pay careful attention to the movements you make, the

things you experience with your senses, and allow any thoughts that come up to just be. A good way to practice mindfulness is through mindful eating. We often are so busy with our days that we multitask and don't spend time actually focusing on what we are putting into our bodies. Work to practice mindfulness as you eat your lunch at work. To become familiar with the practice of mindfulness with eating, try using a raisin. To begin, take the raisin in your fingers and look at it, evaluate its texture and shape. As you place the raisin in your mouth, do not begin chewing immediately. First, evaluate the way it feels in your mouth. As you chew, notice the different textures and tastes of the raisin. Notice how it feels in your mouth as the texture changes. Notice what muscles are used when you swallow the raisin. Practicing mindfulness in this way will help you to become more conscious of your eating in everyday life and will help you to learn to bring your awareness to the present moment at all times.

6. Yoga:

Yoga is another form of self care that relies on mindfulness. In yoga, one is syncing the breath with the body to learn to pay attention to the sensations that arise in the body. Through yoga, you are learning to "befriend your body," which can often be seen as an enemy when you have a history of interpersonal trauma, where the body has been the source your pain and suffering. Yoga can be considered a relaxation activity and a coping skill. Yoga helps to cultivate deep breathing, muscle relaxation, meditation, and mindfulness. It also works to stretch the muscles through exercise, which is a positive stress management activity. Remember to go at a pace that is comfortable for you. Listen to what your body is telling you about how comfortable you are in a particular pose. Yoga is about increasing awareness of one's body and focusing attention on the present moment.

Since yoga is a form of exercise, it harnesses the positives of physical exercise to decrease stress. Evidence shows that physical exercise can help to alleviate symptoms of depression and increase positive views of oneself. Yoga accomplishes this while incorporating other relaxation strategies.

7. Journaling:

Journaling can be considered a positive self care skill to engage in because it allows one the change to explore and express what is going on inside of themselves. There is no right or wrong way to journal. It's all about having a place to express yourself and reflect on what is going on in your life.

- To engage in journaling:

All you really need to do is write down what is going on in your life. Journaling allows one to let out things that are occurring when they may have no one they feel comfortable talking to. There is no censor on journaling, so you can write down all of the positives and negatives that you think and don't have to worry about what others think. When you have a stressful job and you don't have people you feel comfortable with or who are comfortable themselves talking about it, journaling allows you an outlet for these feelings. If you find it difficult to write, you can use magazine clippings of pictures, words, or quotes to express feelings you have. This type of collage journaling can be a good way to begin journaling. Again, there is no right or wrong way to collage journal. Just flip through a magazine and pull out things that are appealing to you, both positively and negatively. Use different textured and colored paper to represent your feeling. Markers and stamps can help to express things that you may not be able to find through the magazines. You can leave your journaling experience at the level of creating the collage or you can choose to write about thoughts or feelings that emerged in creating or viewing the collage.

8. Expressive Techniques:

Many people are afraid to use expressive techniques to explore feelings they have. Using expressive techniques is often a good way to begin exploring your thoughts and feelings about a stressful situation or event, as it allows some distance between yourself and the event.

Painting, drawing, coloring, using clay, collage, dance, poetry, song writing and many more things are great outlets to explore for difficult feelings. Find a medium that you feel comfortable with and use it as you would journaling or just use it to de-stress. Often, spending 20 minutes coloring a picture in a coloring book can be as relaxing as yoga, meditation, or progressive muscle relaxation.

9. Finding Relaxation in Everyday Activities:

Everyone has things in their life that they find comforting and relaxing. If you have something that you do now, definitely work it into your list of coping skills that work for you. Here are some ideas of everyday things that people do that they find comfort and relaxation from:

- a. Cooking
- b. Sewing
- c. Gardening
- d. Prayer
- e. Playing with pets
- f. Driving
- g. Home improvements
- h. Reading
- i. Taking a bath

There are a number of things that one can do that requires no money and minimal interruptions in daily routines that can foster relaxation and bring a sense of peace to one's life. I encourage you to find those outlets in your life to use.

10. Positive Self Talk:

One thing that can be difficult for people is changing the way you talk to yourself. It's a natural thing for people to focus on the negative in situations, as this is something that has developed through evolution as a protective factor. Think about it like this: If you didn't pay attention to the "bad" in prehistoric times, you might have not survived. We orient toward the negative to help protect ourselves from those negative.

So try taking the glass-is-half-full approach and find the positive in situations. It may be difficult in the beginning, especially if you are accustomed to seeing problems everywhere, but with practice, it will begin to come naturally. If what you are doing is stressful, find meaning in that stress. Ask yourself questions related to why you are doing what you are doing, what good will come from it, what difference will you be making for someone, or other questions that will help you to adapt a positive mindset in your life. As you read earlier, it can be a difficult mindset for some to realize and accept that they deserve to spend time caring for themselves. Reminding yourself that you are a priority and putting value in your self-care will help you to foster this positive self talk.

- To engage in positive self talk:

Try looking in the mirror and complimenting yourself. This can be a physical attribute you are proud of or a personality characteristic you admire in yourself. You may feel silly telling yourself these things as you look in the mirror, but this feeling will diminish and it will get easier as you practice. Also, try finding ways to praise yourself and "pat yourself on the back" throughout the day. Take a compliment that someone else gives you and simply say "Thank you" without trying to downplay what you are being praised for. Everyone does

things they deserve praise for and the more you work to find ways to praise yourself, the easier it will be to accept that praise from others.

Importance of a Safe Place

Anytime the relaxation exercises are done, it is best if it is done in a quiet, peaceful environment. The deep breathing and mindfulness can be incorporated and is encouraged to be used at all times in one's life. Other techniques may require you to prioritize yourself care and make time away from work, home, kids, and / or partner to focus on these activities. If you have space in your home or office, creating a place of relaxation is a good idea. You can do this by using certain colors on the wall or in the furniture, adding candles and other scents you enjoy, and making the lighting soft and comfortable. If you don't have as much space at home or freedom to incorporate some of these elements at work, bring in small things that remind you that your self care is important. A plaque or piece of art that reminds you to breathe, hope, relax, or any other inspirational message is nice. Bringing in a small candle to work will help create a calming environment through smell. Encourage others in your environment to make their own self care a priority to create a positive experience at work or home.

As with all expressions of one's feelings, make sure you have a safe place to store the things you work on. If you write in a journal, make sure that you have the confidence that your writings will not be intruded on by someone else. Also, if you do collages or other pieces of artwork, create a box to store them in where others cannot see them if you choose not to share the pieces. Any expression of feelings is personal and a violation of your ability to express yourself can be hurtful. Encourage those in your home to respect your space and offer the same respect if they choose to express themselves through art.

Diet, Exercise, and Sleep

Wellness is the quality or state of being healthy in body and mind, especially as the result of deliberate effort. Part of good self care is taking care of yourself physically as well as mentally. Your mental health is directly related to your physical health, so if you feel bad physically, you are more likely to suffer negative effects on your mental and emotional health. Diet, exercise, and sleep are three main components to creating a self care plan that can often be overlooked by people. These three things are essential and critical in you feeling like you have the energy to tackle creating a self care plan.

Here are a few key points to think about when you are taking care of yourself physically:

- Exercise: Without regular exercise, you miss an opportunity to release stress and gain energy. When you choose an activity you love, you invigorate your soul as well.
Ask yourself: Do I have a workout routine? How often do I really follow it? When was the last time I did something physical that brought me a sense of joy?
Take action by making exercise a habit; schedule your activity for the same time every day. Your body will come to expect and look forward to it. And research has shown that physical activity helps to improve the mood and alleviate feelings of depression.
- Diet: Food is something that enters our body so, naturally, food affects our body. Everyone's heard the phrase "You are what you eat." If you practice having a healthy diet, you will likely feel the benefits of this by feeling better physically, having increased energy, and possibly boosts in your immune system. Good health and wellness is a result of mindful eating, including what we eat, when we eat, thoughts and feelings about eating, and attitude towards eating.
Ask yourself: What is my relationship with food? When I am tired does this relationship change? Do I look for a quick energy such as sugar, caffeine or chips?
Take action by keeping a food journal for one week. Choose foods that help sustain energy.

- Sleep: Sleep is an essential component to anyone's life. Think about the last time you had a good night's sleep. Or how about the last time you had a restless night's sleep. Your quality of sleep affects your mood and mental clarity. When one doesn't get good, quality sleep, it's difficult to function at your optimal level. Not getting enough sleep can also impair our ability to manage stress and regulate our emotions.

Ask yourself: How many hours of sleep do I get a night? Do I feel rested with this much sleep? Do I wake up several times a night? Do I suffer from bad dreams or nightmares that keep me awake?

Try keeping a sleep log including what time you go to sleep, how many times you wake up at night, and how you feel the next day. See if you can find any links between your sleep pattern and your mood.

Also, try creating a sleep routine. Set up your environment to promote good sleep by not having a television on, giving yourself time to wind down before bed, and creating a relaxing and positive environment to sleep in. Also, try to monitor what you eat and your caffeine intake close to bed to make sure your diet isn't affecting your sleep.

Practice, Practice, Practice

So, you've gotten a lot of information on what self care is, why self care is an essential component to being able to manage your feelings, and why people struggle with implementing self care strategies. The thing to do now is practice, practice, practice. There are so many ways that one can take care of themselves in a positive manner. The task for you is to find those things that work for you and use them! The reason practicing self care skills is so important is because the only way something becomes routine is to practice it. Think about riding a bike for the first time. Most people don't just hop on and start riding like a pro. It takes several repetitions before you become comfortable. It takes several more repetitions before you become a pro at something. It's been suggested that it takes thousands of hours of practice to become an "expert" at something. If you're going to become an expert at self care and positive coping, you better get started!