



# Why You Struggle with Self-Care



DEC. 16, 2019

By Britt Mahrer

You may see self-care as a luxurious act of pampering yourself. You may have thought to yourself, *I should enact this ritual of personal dedication*, resolving to begin a self-care practice immediately. That is, right after those things on your to-do list. And after you help your friend move. And when you get your next paycheck, so you can afford candles. Maybe self-care starts next week? But that deadline next Friday...maybe you'll just add self-care to your to-do list. You'll get to it eventually.

Consistently practicing self-care can feel impossible. Here are a few reasons why.

## 1. You've Got The Wrong Definition

Once upon a time, self-care meant "care of self." It was the act of performing one's own low-risk medical treatments (insulin shots, exercise, etc.), freeing doctors for more advanced work. But today's image and hashtag-driven culture points us toward a new definition of self-care: prolonged pleasurable time resulting in peace, happiness and beauty.

In theory, it's lovely and filled with things we enjoy. But the problem is that this version of self-care takes a lot of energy. It is a massive undertaking. It mandates a very specific process with a very specific result: create a peaceful space, sink into presence and reflection and come out refreshed and filled with self-love (and perhaps with better hair).

The roots of self-care are still there, if you look hard enough. Engaging in practices that prevent the decline of our health and well-being is a powerful notion. Yet this hashtag version of self-care means we are only successful if our actions result in self-improvement. The result? We tell ourselves to create a #selfcare practice, but we don't. We simply don't have the energy.

**Conclusion:** The moment that self-care produces reluctance, it is no longer self-care. It is self-growth. And while there is a time and place for self-growth, it doesn't have to happen at the same time as self-care.

## 2. You Think Putting Yourself First Means Putting Others Last

We learn about opposites in grade school (happy and sad, awake and asleep, etc.). In many ways, this all-or-nothing thinking never leaves us. Thus, it's natural to think the opposite of selfless is selfish, that to care for others, we must sacrifice the care of ourselves.

In particular, new relationships (babies, romances, friendships) often result in a battle between time and to-do list, forcing us to choose something left undone. Prioritizing our new connection becomes a sign of love and dedication, an indication we are good people who care about the needs of others.

Yet anyone who's flown on an airplane knows the rule: if the oxygen masks come down, secure yours first. Why? Because you have to be okay before you can help others be okay.

This is why prioritizing self-care is important. You can't drive a car without fuel. Maintaining a self-care practice is not an act of selfishness — it is an act of improving our ability to care.

**Conclusion:** When self-care feels selfish, we aren't seeing the long game. Taking time for our physical and mental health makes us more capable for others.

## 3. You Think You Can't Afford It



The more expensive it is, the better it works. Right? At least, that's what we're told by advertisers. As self-care rises in popularity, so does the opportunity to profit. Suddenly, taking care of ourselves means buying the latest and greatest. Only the fanciest candles, softest sheets and most exclusive shampoos can make us feel good.

If these things bring a person joy, then more power to them. But the issue arises when we start to listen to the subconscious message: *if you can't afford this, you don't get self-care.*

The result of these messages is that what was originally a practice of self-empowerment is now inaccessible for lower economic classes. It leads people to think that either we can afford self-care or we must accept it's not for us.

There are thousands of practices that improve physical and mental well-being, many of which are free and quick. Yes, an expensive hour-long yoga class is self-care. But so is a five-minute yoga video on YouTube.

**Conclusion:** We do not need fancy things to practice self-care. We simply need to knowingly engage in practices for our own benefit. Sometimes they're big, sometimes small, but they are ours, and they work.

#### 4. You Don't Know When You Need It

Blame that old banner-waving motto: hard work pays off. Our push-through-it mentality saturates politics, economics and even gender expectations. It's practically hollered from the rooftops: Work hard. Be strong. Overcome weakness.

But at some point, on our quest for mental fortitude, we began to believe that listening to our feelings prevents the strength needed for success.

When we numb ourselves to feelings, we don't develop self-assessment skills. We never learn how to pause and ask, *what is happening within me right now? What do I need to do to address it?* This makes self-care a daunting concept. How do we take care of ourselves if we don't know what parts need taking care of?

Integrating self-care into our lives means redefining, and learning to respect, our relationship with our feelings. With time, feelings no longer feel like weaknesses. They become information, data telling us what part of us needs addressing.

**Conclusion:** Don't ignore how you feel. Rather, use how you feel to recognize when you need self-care. And if you just thought "other people might need self-care, but I don't," then you might be exactly the person who needs self-care.

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