



A Psychologist's  
Guide to....

# SELF-CARE

AS A PARENT

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# Why Self-Care?

The term “self-care” can feel ambiguous. We know it is important, but what does it really look like? How do we find time to do it when we are busy caring for other people?



As a parent and human, you likely wear many hats – caregiver, partner, employee, friend, daughter, sibling, uncle, etc. With all of these roles comes the weight of the mental load, meaning all of the physical and mental work that is required to keep your home, family, and life running. One study described it as the responsibility of “anticipating needs, identifying options for filling them, making decisions, and monitoring progress” (Daminger, 2019).

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**Naturally, having to manage all of this is exhausting. Your health, hobbies, and rest are likely last on the priority list.**



Decreased rest or self-care is linked to increased fatigue, stress, irritability, disturbed sleep, decreased quality of life and social functioning, and increased substance use or mental health diagnoses.

When significant, it is also associated with poor health outcomes for children.

APA (2023), Law et al (2019), Rodriguez et al (2017)

# SELF-CARE IS IMPORTANT. BUT WHAT REALLY IS IT?

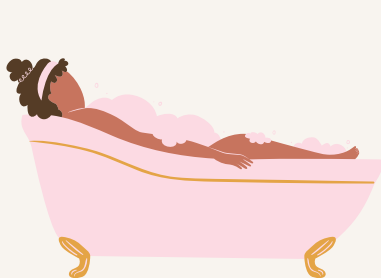
## It has been defined as...

*"the practice of taking an active role in protecting one's own well-being and happiness, in particular during periods of stress"*

- New Oxford American Dictionary

*"...taking the time to do things that help you live well and improve both your physical health and mental health"*

- NIH, 2023



# THINK OF IT AS

## ***REST & RESTORATION***

**Rest** - how can I relax, refresh, recover by stopping my activity

**Restoration** - how can I return to myself, to feel renewed

Self-care involves two parts - **resting and restoring**. In our hustle culture, **rest** is not something that is prioritized. However, rest is vital not only for our physical health, but for our cognitive health as well. When we allow our brains to rest, it allows our brain to retrieve memories, increase creativity and sharpness, and become more self-aware. It also allows us a way to “recharge our batteries,” which allows us more ability to cope with tomorrow’s challenges.

Equally as important is **restoration**. What is it that makes *you* feel like *you*? As a parent, it is easy to let go of your own hobbies, interests, or social connections. However, these things make up who you are. Many new parents say, “I just don’t feel like myself anymore.” While your world may always look different now that you have children, you can still access the parts of you that allow you to feel “normal,” or like you again.

(Beaty et al., 2014; Sestieri et al., 2011)

# THINK OF IT AS

## *REST & RESTORATION*

### Examples of rest

- +Sleep
- +Reading
- +Watching a movie
- +Meditating/mindfulness
- +Hot bath or shower
- +Journaling
- +Slowing down in your day
- +Prayer
- +Getting up before your kids

### Examples of restoration

- +Eating good foods (and indulging too!)
- +Cooking
- +Seeing friends
- +Exercise
- +Engaging in favorite hobbies
- +Date night
- +Going to mass
- +Treating yourself
- +Setting boundaries
- +Seeking help when needed

# CONSIDER THE “WHEN”



**Self-care should be both:**

## **Preventative**

“How do I make sure my cup is full?”



Think of what practices, activities, or hobbies you give yourself on a day-to-day basis. What activities fill your cup or help to charge your batteries? The more our emotional batteries are charged, the more we can positively cope and manage stressful days.

## and **Reactive**

“What do I do when my cup has been emptied?”



When you’ve had a long, hard day or when you feel that you are burnt out, how do you give yourself rest or restoration. Preventative self-care helps to charge batteries, reactive self-care helps to *recharge* your batteries. This can look like asking for help or delegating tasks, leaving the laundry until tomorrow, or stepping away from a tantrum for a moment to breathe.

# WHERE TO START

## START WITH YOUR BODY

Based on Marsha Linehan's DBT activity "ABC PLEASE"  
(Linehan, 2015)

	<p><b>Physical Health</b> When our body is not at our best, our mind or ability to cope isn't either. Are you treating any physical illnesses you might have? Are you making sure to refill any prescriptions? Is there anything about your health that you've been ignoring?</p>
	<p><b>Eating</b> As parents, eating full meals is hard to come by. However, providing fuel for your body to get you through the day is important. Are you eating consistent meals? How can you rearrange your time to make sure you are eating foods that make you feel good?</p>
	<p><b>Balance with Mood Altering Substances</b> Excessive use of substances (think caffeine, alcohol, marijuana) can make it harder to manage negative emotions. Consider reducing use if you observe a pattern of increased anxiety or depressed mood.</p>
	<p><b>Sleep</b> The importance of sleep cannot be understated. Although you may only have limited control based on your kids' sleep habits, prioritize the amount of sleep that works for you.</p>
	<p><b>Movement</b> Moving your body increases endorphins. If you don't exercise regularly, start small. Go for a walk with your kids. Dance in the kitchen. Stretch before bed.</p>

# SET YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS

## CONSIDER YOUR NEEDS & CURRENT PHASE

Self-care is only going to work if it fits with your life and needs.

### Your current phase

What phase of life are you in? Are you currently postpartum? Do you have multiple young children? Do your weekends consist of car rides from sports activity to sports activity? Think about what is realistic for your life. Waking up early before your kids is likely not going to happen if you are waking up with your baby three times a night. Frequent date nights out of the house might be hard if childcare is limited. **That's okay.** Remember that life consists of phases. What is realistic for your life now?

### Your needs

The self-care activity that might work for your friend, your sister, or your husband may or may not work for you. Do you tend to gain energy from being with others, being by yourself, or both? Consider what has historically worked best for you.

Ask yourself these questions -

1. When do I feel most at peace?
2. When do I feel most connected with the people in my life?
3. What has made me felt fulfilled in the past?
4. What has been a stress reliever for me before?
5. What is it that brings me joy or warmth?



# TAKE ACTION

## BEGIN TO IMPLEMENT SELF-CARE IN YOUR LIFE

Start with small steps.

**01** Choose one self-care activity to begin with. Start small. Start with trying it one day a week.

**02** Find a time that you can realistically implement this into your daily schedule.

**03** Remind yourself that prioritizing yourself is vital for you and your family's wellbeing. Practice being okay with being inconvenient.

**04** When challenges arise (as they will!), reassess how best to fit self-care into your life. Don't give up!

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