



WHEN SELF-CARE TURNS INTO SELF-SABOTAGE

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It's safe to say that self-care is having a moment. More and more, it seems like everyone is espousing the importance of sleep, saying no, and "treating yo'self" as much as possible.

As a social worker and coach, I talk all the time about the importance of self-care. Many people scoff, roll their eyes, and tell me they don't have time to meditate for 20 minutes or extra money to spend on yoga and massages. Fair enough. I, too, used to think that self-care was all about taking a day off and getting a pedicure. It's understandable, since we've been fed a very narrow view of what self-care actually is — the pursuit of "me time" — by companies eager to sell us on wellness retreats, bath bombs, and expensive gym memberships.

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Self-care can include these luxuries, but it's better defined as self-management activities designed to enhance your well-being. Self-care is any habit, practice, or action that is under your control, deliberate, and self-initiated. In the 1980s, the World Health Organization first described self-care as "the activities individuals, families, and communities undertake with the intention of enhancing health, preventing disease, limiting illness, and restoring health."

Since then, self-care has become a national obsession—one that has rightfully caught on as a way to cope with the ever-growing demands of modern life. But self-care can go awry when it becomes work in and of itself. It becomes problematic when we use immediate gratification as a balm for stressors instead of addressing their root causes.

The Fine Line Between Self-Care and Self-Sabotage

Just because something feels good doesn't mean it's helping. Very often, self-sabotage masquerades as self-care. We misuse strategies to numb ourselves. Instead of restoring our well-being, we turn to travel, fitness, food, and shopping as ways to escape the exhaustion of daily life. We try to run from a bad relationship, an uninspiring job, disappointment over unmet goals — anything that doesn't make us feel good.

We make justifications like "I deserve it" to reason having one, two, or three glasses of wine after a rough day. Or we swear off parties to stay home instead. As a card-carrying introvert and highly sensitive person, I'm the first to celebrate the glory of downtime. But skipping social gatherings can slip into isolation and seclusion if you're not careful.

I see it all the time with my clients, and even in myself—we turn to indulgences or we turn inward as a way to self-soothe and achieve some semblance of respite in a world that often feels overwhelming. It becomes a cycle: The constant busyness of life gives us purpose, but when it becomes too much to bear, we go back to escaping through Netflix, or sleep, or snacks.

One pattern I've observed in myself is taking the afternoon off "for my mental health." Nine times out of 10, I'm actually facing a creative roadblock and the decision to step away leaves me feeling more anxious than before. I've learned that discomfort is something to be embraced, not kiboshed. Pushing past the fear is what truly builds my confidence and, time after time, proves to be the more productive choice.

Let me be clear: Self-care is essential. But don't confuse it with self-soothing. Whenever you find caring for yourself turning into distraction or avoidance, it's time to pause. Self-care is so much more than simply relaxing or destressing. Fundamentally, it's about finding rewarding habits that sustain (instead of drain) you.

Excuses, Excuses

It's human nature to seek what author and habits expert Gretchen Rubin calls "loopholes," or opportunities to excuse ourselves from good behavior. Catching ourselves in the act of loophole seeking is the first step to stopping self-care from becoming self-sabotage. In her book *Better Than Before*, Rubin outlines several common loopholes:

- **The moral licensing loophole:** We often give ourselves permission to do something "bad" after we've been "good." (For example, "I've earned this cupcake," or "I deserve a day off.")
- **The tomorrow loophole:** We tend to discount bad behavior now, because the future offers a fresh start. ("I'll buckle down first thing Monday," or the infamous "Diet starts tomorrow.")
- **The lack of control loophole:** When we feel powerless, we are more likely to engage in self-defeating behavior. Psychologists call this learned helplessness. ("With the news today, how could I not want to get wasted?" or "Facebook is just too addictive.")
- **The "this doesn't count" loophole:** "I'm tired." "I'm exercising today." "I went out last weekend." We come up with creative reasons why this time "doesn't count."
- **The fake self-actualization loophole:** Digital detoxes are a great example of "tuning out the world," sometimes at the expense of social connection.

Occasionally taking your mind off something is fine, but constantly relying on loopholes is another story. It usually suggests that you're covering up emotions you'd rather not feel or ignoring a decision you'd rather not make. Over the long term, this can suck the energy out of you.

What Real Self-Care Looks Like

Real self-care is all about digging into the roots of your insecurities or stressors and facing them instead of running from them.

Each time I find myself turning to unhelpful coping mechanisms to self-soothe, I remind myself of the words of Seth Godin, who says, "Instead of wondering when our next vacation is, we should set up a life we don't need to escape from."



So, what does real self-care look like? The truth is it's often unsexy and invisible — not all bubble baths and pedicures. Real self-care is all about digging into the roots of your insecurities or stressors and facing them instead of running from them. It's also about learning what makes you feel deeply happy and rewarded.

Psychologists generally outline six multidimensional facets of self-care. True to the concept's original definition, each is designed to restore health and address the root causes of distress, not simply cover it up:

1. **Physical self-care:** Beyond exercise and eating well, physical self-care can look like making an informed decision to take medication or discovering what gives you sexual pleasure.
2. **Emotional self-care:** Identifying, accepting, and expressing your feelings is essential to feeling balanced.
3. **Spiritual self-care:** This can mean religion, but it doesn't have to. Spiritual self-care is all about finding what gives you deeper meaning and purpose, however you choose to define it (nature, the universe, a vocational calling, etc.).
4. **Intellectual self-care:** Critical thinking, pursuing interesting ideas, and creativity fall into this category. It can look like choosing a documentary over reality TV. Intellectual self-care also includes continually learning and advancing yourself. Recently, one of my clients (a woman) said to me that self-promotion at work is an act of self-care. I had to agree.
5. **Social self-care:** Cultivating friendships and keeping your family relationships strong are the building blocks for a happy life. This can look like grabbing a coffee with co-workers instead powering away at your desk. Social self-care can look like date night, connecting with a community on social media, or sending your mom a card just because. It's about honoring your social needs and surrounding yourself with people who respect you.
6. **Safety and security self-care:** Taking care of your finances and planning ahead fall under this category.

The next time you feel stressed out or overwhelmed, do a little self-assessing. Are you well balanced between each category? Keep in mind that self-care is also fluid. It can look different depending on the day, your mood, and circumstances. Sometimes it *does* look like taking a few hours off to let your brain rest. On other days, it's pushing through a slump to prove to yourself what you're capable of.

Ultimately, self-care is any number of habits and actions that leave you feeling restored and nourished. It shouldn't elicit shame or guilt. It's a little less about treating yourself and much more about reparenting yourself. This sounds easy in theory, but in reality, the hardest work you'll ever do is learn to discover (and preserve) who you really are.

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It is a practice of enhancing health, preventing disease, limiting illness, and restoring health.