

Understanding the Importance of Self-Care

Self-care is the practice of assessing our mental health needs and taking actions to protect and improve our wellness. These actions can vary to a large extent and they look different for each person. As mental health advocates, some of the work we do can be emotionally draining. Self-care helps us prioritize our own mental health and our needs so that we can manage stress more effectively and maintain wellness in a way that is sustainable for us.

Why is self-care important?

Imagine your energy levels (emotional/physical/relational, etc.) as a battery. Throughout the day, as we look after our basic needs, check things off our to-do lists, and interact with people in our lives, the level of 'charge' or energy in our battery will undoubtedly dwindle. The same thing is true about our mental health. Our physical and emotional energy can decrease as a result of these activities. Self-care allows us to recharge from these situations, so that we don't burn out, start struggling with our mental health, or worsen existing mental health struggles.

Why is self-care important during COVID-19?

In response to COVID-19, we have had to make major changes to our routines in order to keep ourselves safe and minimize risk for everyone in our communities, especially vulnerable groups. In many cases, COVID-19 and measures taken to address it have impacted our sense of safety and security and have shifted our sense of connection and belonging to our loved ones. These are major shifts in factors that strongly impact our mental health and many of us will be feeling increased levels of stress or anxiety as we navigate this new normal. Building or maintaining regular self-care practices can support all aspects of our health at this time.

Types of Wellness & Self-Care:

Self-care practices can protect and promote wellness in not only mental health, but also physical, social, emotional, and spiritual health. Within this integrated approach to wellness, your self-care practices may focus on certain forms of wellness based on your needs. All of these areas of wellness are correlated and can each impact our mental health. Since COVID-19 has impacted many aspects of our lives, an integrated approach to wellness and self-care can allow us to consider all of these factors on wellness in looking after our mental health.



Physical wellness

Our physical wellness is when our bodies are functioning well and we're taking care of them. Getting enough sleep, eating well, drinking enough water, being physically active, and managing any existing physical conditions with appropriate care can help ensure physical wellness. When we are stressed, we may fall behind on some of these practices and it's helpful to check in with ourselves and set small, incremental goals to get us back on track.



Social Wellness

Our social wellness is tied to our sense of belonging and community. Social wellness can be supported by maintaining a network of supportive and healthy relations. During challenging times, these social networks are the ones that we may lean on, as we vent to a friend or ask a family member for support. Even when we cannot physically meet with friends, we can continue to feel supported by our network by staying connected online or over the phone. Community care is an important aspect of social wellness which extends to each individual looking after their community and a community looking after each individual. We can practice community care simply by checking in and maintaining social connections with others in our community but it can also include connecting others with resources for physical wellness, learning together for spiritual wellness, and other forms of support.

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Mental Wellness



Taking care of our mental wellness is about creating a context where our mental state can flourish. An important aspect of self-care for mental wellness is maintaining manageable levels of stress, in both duration and intensity. Self-care for mental wellness is especially important in a time of crisis when many things feel out of our control. We may be feeling a lot of pressure to maintain our routines and productivity levels related to our education, career, and relationships despite changing conditions. To practice mental wellness, try and take some time out to take mental breaks and practice grounding exercises to alleviate the negative impacts of stress on your brain and body. These mental breaks can come in many forms, including meditation, taking a nap, spending time outdoors, or limiting our COVID-19 coverage intake.

Emotional Wellness



Being in tune with our emotions and feelings is what emotional wellness is all about. There is nothing wrong with being frustrated or sad or angry, but it is important to be aware of our emotions and be able to accept them. One aspect of self-care for emotional wellness is practicing self compassion. Are we speaking to ourselves with the same level of respect, kindness, and compassion we would show our loved ones? If the answer is no, practice transforming that critical voice into one that shows more respect, kindness, and compassion.

Spiritual Wellness



When we look at spiritual wellness, we are looking at an individual's search for meaning and purpose in life. This can be tied to religion, morals, or ideologies, but in the broadest sense, spiritual wellness is about striving for a state of harmony between our beliefs and our actions. Some self-care practices for our spiritual wellness are rooted in our advocacy work. Being champions for causes that are important to us help us feel aligned with our values. In these moments, we can strive to change what we can change and accept what we can't. After all, we can't predict the future and sometimes, the best we can do is "do the next right thing".

These five forms of wellness contribute to our overall health and our self-care practices can lean on each of these categories. Use the information above to set priorities and build yourself a self-care toolkit.

Building Your Self-Care Toolkit:

Use the checklist below to check-in with your current self-care practices. Select 1-2 priorities from each category that you would like to practice.

Physical Wellness:

- Get enough sleep
- Eating well to provide your body with nutrients
- Drinking enough water
- Being physically active
- Managing any existing physical conditions with appropriate care

Social Wellness:

- Connect with your family, your friends, classmates, or coworkers online or over the phone;
- Engage in an online social activity (e.g. "Netflix parties", group arts or fitness classes, and virtual tours of museums, art galleries, parks, zoos, etc.)
- Connect with a community support (e.g. Kids Help Phone volunteer, a therapist, a social worker, a faith-based leader, etc.)
- Practice community care: Build reciprocal relationships with your family, friends, and neighbours to check in with and help look after each other's needs;

Mental Wellness:

- Let go of things that are outside of your control (i.e. we don't know when the pandemic will end and reading more news articles isn't going to reveal that)
- Get a sense of your capacity and prioritize important tasks
- Do activities that help build your sense of control (e.g. tidy your work or study space, write down your routine, maintain an online calendar or an agenda, take a leadership role in a new project)

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- Take breaks and do grounding exercises (e.g. meditation, taking a nap, spending time outdoors)
- Ask for help (e.g. ask for support, extensions, deferrals, or alternatives if you are having trouble completing a task)

Emotional Wellness:

- Check in with your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (i.e. familiarize yourself with your daily ups and downs so you can recognize when you might need more support)
- Give yourself space to feel your emotions (e.g. if you're feeling a lot of sadness, watching a sad movie might let you get some of those feelings out)
- Practice speaking to yourself with kindness, respect, and self-compassion;
- Wrap your arms around you and give yourself a hug

Spiritual Wellness:

- Take time to connect with your faith-based or religious community;
- Find one thing to feel positive or grateful for each day;
- Prioritize activities and relationships that mean the most to you;
- Figure out a way to help others (e.g. support a neighbour with grocery shopping or make a donation to a cause you care about;)

Seek help when you need it

Self-care is a great practice as part of a regular routine to maintain your mental health. However, there will be times in your mental health journey when extra support through friends, family, a community support, or a service provider might be helpful. Exploring how comfortable we feel reaching out for support and making a list of supports we feel comfortable reaching out to can help us prepare for moments when we might be struggling with our mental health.

Since many of us may be dealing with higher levels of stress right now, it can be helpful to start conversations with friends or family by asking if they have the capacity to talk about mental health. This check-in can build a space of trust and allow both of you to prioritize your mental health.

COVID-19 has been a stressful time for all of us and has challenged our health in various ways. By practicing an integrated approach to self-care and by recognizing that it is okay to get help when you need it, we can look after ourselves and build a culture that prioritizes mental health.