

Health

There's No “Right” Way to Do Self-Care

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Summary. Finding time to take care of your mind and body can feel impossible. But the answer isn't a better workout routine or sleep app. It's changing your mindset. By challenging your assumptions about self-care, you can find an approach that works for you. Self-care can... [more](#)

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There's been no shortage of advice touting the importance of self-care during this pandemic. We're being told to meditate, take long baths, and purchase new and expensive products. Though this advice is well intentioned, it rarely gets to the heart of why so many of us struggle to nurture our mental and physical health.

As a researcher, teacher, and career coach, I've been studying this issue for nearly two decades. On a daily basis, I hear from people who *want* to take better care of themselves but can't seem to find the time. It always falls to the bottom of their to-do lists ... after they fulfill their responsibilities to their bosses, colleagues, families, and friends.

Finding time for self-care can be especially difficult for students and young professionals. The pressing urge to prioritize school, work, and jobs applications is overwhelming. Not surprisingly, by the end of the day, many people are left drained and have little motivation to focus on themselves.

The irony here is that making the time for self-care is essential to performing well in all the other areas of our lives. Ample research has shown that nurturing our brains, bodies, and spirits can help us be more effective at whatever we put our minds to. So, how do we reconcile this apparent paradox — our mental and physical health is important for our educations and careers, but our educations and careers impede the time and energy we have for our mental and physical health?

The solution isn't a better study or workout routine, or the right sleep or meditation app. In order to change what we do, we have to change how we think.

In my research with organizational psychologist, Stew Friedman, we've found that most people operate with a trade-off mentality (i.e., "If I want to perform better at work, I need to take time away from something else"). This mindset is ingrained in the way we're taught to

view the different parts of life from a young age — even the notion of work-life “balance” is frequently represented as a scale with work on one side and the rest of life on the other. And while it’s true that there are limits to our time, it is this exact mindset that often stops us from making positive changes.

To create this positive change, we need to reframe how we view the interconnections between the different parts of our lives. By challenging your assumptions about self-care, you can find an approach that works for you.

Here are three tools that can help.

Define self-care on your own terms.

Given the abundance of advice about self-care, most of us are operating with a set of assumptions about what wellness *should* look like. But only you can determine what your mind, body, and spirit need to thrive.

Maybe that’s an episode of reality television to unwind at the end of the day. Maybe it’s finding a therapist or psychiatrist to support you. Or maybe you’re someone who needs to mute a text chain or Twitter thread that is causing you angst.

To figure out what you need, start by simply noticing when you feel invigorated and when you feel drained. Look for patterns. What makes you feel good? What makes you feel overwhelmed and anxious? Now begin creating your own understanding of what self-care looks like to you.

Check for all-or-nothing thinking.

Notice how you think about making time for yourself. Do you assume that you need to completely overhaul your lifestyle? You might be surprised at the number of people I work with who think that they need to go from sleep-deprived and burned out to a health and fitness guru overnight. The idea of doing anything less than a total life

transformation is unacceptable, so they avoid making any changes at all. This isn't surprising given all of the marketing that promises a "new you," but it definitely isn't helpful.

Noticing whether you're engaging in all-or-nothing thinking is the first step to creating a more realistic mentality. From there, you can start to explore small, doable changes that work in the context of your whole life. As you learn what works and what doesn't, curiosity and self-compassion are great alternatives to all-or-nothing thinking and tend to yield longer-lasting change.

Seek opportunities to integrate.

Another mindset shift is challenging the assumption that prioritizing wellness is something that we must do separate from the other parts of our lives. My research has shown that the most sustainable self-care solutions frequently come from bringing the different parts of our lives together.

For example, consider how self-care time could also be used to enrich your career (a walking meeting with a colleague or mentor instead of a Zoom call), support your community (picking up trash around the neighborhood), or strengthen other relationships in your life (setting a recurring time to stream yoga videos with a long-distance friend or family member).

By changing the way you think about self-care, you can make incremental and meaningful shifts that bring you greater peace, energy, and joy. In doing so, you can experience for yourself what research has clearly shown – that investments in your well-being can actually enhance your professional success. It is possible to create harmony among the different parts of your life, but you might have to challenge some of your assumptions to do so.

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