

12 SELF-CARE PRACTICES That Will Change Your Life

Science and experts reveal how prioritizing your mind, body, and soul can help you achieve your best self.

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When you think of self-care, do you conjure images of relaxing at a day spa? If so, you're not alone.

"Somewhere along the way, self-care may have gotten blurred with pampering," says Dr. Heather Paessler-Chesterton, a licensed mental health counselor and faculty member for Walden University's MS in Clinical Mental Health Counseling program. "Self-care is highly individual and consists of whatever it is we require for optimum health, not just physically, but emotionally, too."

Here are 12 self-care practices that could change your life for the better.

1 PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION.

Do you continuously berate yourself when times are tough or you fail at a task, particularly if you're a perfectionist? Be careful if you do. Research has linked ruminating on negative thoughts to depression and anxiety, and it might even impair your ability to problem-solve.

"Self-compassion means you are kind and understanding when confronted with personal failings," says author and mindfulness expert Julie Potiker. "After all, who ever said you were supposed to be perfect? Having compassion for yourself means you honor and accept your humanness."

Instead, treat yourself like you would your dearest friend. "When friends we love are going through a tough time or not feeling their best, we go out of our way to lift their spirits, encourage them, and let them know they are loved," Potiker says. "Commit to treating yourself like your very best friend. Shower yourself with compassion and understanding."

LEAD PHOTO: AUDRA COHEN



2 EAT FOR ENERGY.

Maybe you love to indulge in a juicy burger and crispy fries from time to time. Just make sure that when you're feeling down, that's not all you reach for. "When our vibrations are low, we often turn to 'comfort foods,' but the irony is that most of these so-called foods of comfort, while perhaps initially pleasant to the palate, can have a net-negative effect on our emotional healing," says Dr. Bradley Nelson, author of *The Emotion Code*. Just think how good you feel when you're getting lots of vegetables, fruits, and water, he adds. Nelson suggests eating for energy as a self-care practice. Shop for locally grown foods. Change your way of eating on a fundamental level (read: Don't diet). Avoid processed foods, MSG, and GMOs (genetically modified organisms). "When you adopt healthier eating and are mindful of what you put into your body, you often feel in harmony with your highest self," he says.

3

LOL EVERY DAY.

Research shows laughter can relax the body, trigger feel-good endorphins, alleviate stress, support heart health, and boost immunity. In one 2015 *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* study, researchers looked at levels of immunoglobulin (IgA, antibodies vital to immune function) in milk from postpartum mothers before and after laughter therapy. Participants who engaged in laughter therapy saw an increase IgA. Another study found that laughter therapy improved depression and negative moods in cancer patients.

Laughing can even burn a few extra calories. A study published in the *International Journal of Obesity* found that participants who watched funny film clips for 10 minutes burned 10 calories. Those who watched non-funny clips burned zero.



4 MEAL PREP.

Research published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* found people who had time to cook made healthier choices. Those with less time ate more meals dining out, often at fast-food joints. A possible solution? Meal prep. It's become so popular there's a social media hashtag devoted to it: #mealprepsunday.

"Meal prepping can seem daunting, but it is quite easy and efficient with a little guidance and planning," says Kim Walsh, a nutrition coach and CEO of Warrior Forward Wellness based in

Virginia Beach. "It absolutely saves time throughout the week, but it also supports whole-body wellness. By prepping your foods ahead of time, even breakfast if you so choose, you are able to portion-control your meals, which supports mindful eating and digestion and eliminates the possibility of over- or under-eating."

One way to meal prep like a pro is to fire up the grill. "It's easy to cook quantities of meat on the grill, there's little clean-up, and you free the oven for other food items," Walsh says. Another? Look for sheet-pan recipes that roast a ton of veggies and protein in one shot.

BURGER: MARAZZI/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM MEAL PREP: TIMOLINA/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

5

GO FOR A FLOAT.

Imagine being partially submerged in a dark, 10-inch pool of warm, Epsom-salt-infused water for one hour. Purported benefits of floating include reduced muscle soreness, lowered cortisol levels, improved circulation, reduced pain, and better sleep. A 2016 study published in *Performance Enhancement & Health* found that sensory deprivation

flotation therapy may be an effective tool for both physical and mental recovery post-training in elite athletes. Flotation benefits are cumulative so the more you float, the better. "Our sensory deprivation float pods help people unplug for an hour in a zero-gravity environment that allows the mind and body to completely let go, relax, and reset," said Jim Rowe, CEO of True REST Float Spa.



7 TAKE A BREAK FROM TECHNOLOGY.

Tech is ubiquitous: Smart phones and watches, gaming, streaming, email, and social media. While we think we've mastered multitasking thanks to tech, we might actually be harming our brains and increasing stress levels.

"Putting down the cell phone and engaging in real-life conversation, looking another person in the eyes and sharing a laugh together, is wonderful for the mind, body, and spirit," said Dr. Elena Villanueva, a functional holistic medicine expert based out of Denver and Houston. "No amount of technology can compare to real human interaction, and many of our relationships struggle because of our time spent on social media [and technology]."

6

TRY TALK THERAPY.

In a 2017 study published in *Translational Psychiatry*, talk therapy, more specifically Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), was shown to help participants suffering from schizophrenia make structural changes in their brains and improve symptoms. Talk therapy helps with decision-making, implementing healthy behaviors, coping, managing stress, and improving interpersonal relationships, according to Dr.

Stephanie Ford, a faculty member at Walden University who has worked in clinical counseling for 24 years. You don't have to wait for a crisis to start talk therapy either. In fact, some experts suggest you consider it a regular self-care practice. "Individuals who utilize counseling for self-care engage in a preventive practice for optimal wellness," Ford says. "Counseling as a self-care practice provides people with an opportunity to gain insights before a problem arises."

WOMEN WITH YOGA MATS: ALDRIA OREN

One third of mini-vacationers enjoyed less stress at work, 53 percent reported improved well-being, and 47 percent strengthened bonds with family or friends.



8 WRITE IT DOWN.

Every day write, by hand, three things you're thankful for, three things you love/like about yourself, and three things you're good at, suggests Scott Shmaren, a licensed hypnotherapist and author. "This exercise ... uses repetition done consistently over time to change the course, direction, and perspective of our subconscious minds," he said. Nearly 90 percent of everything we do starts at a subconscious level, according to neuroscientists. While the subconscious mind may be

harder to change, it can be done through repetition over time. Shmaren's client, Kendra Alcock, 54, of Colorado, used this exercise to overcome anxiety. "My pursuit of perfection in relationships and appearance, and of course falling short, were based on the fact that I had nothing good to say about myself, to myself," she says. "This exercise focused me on the successes, big and small, that I've had, the people and things in my life that I'm truly blessed with, and most importantly, the talents and gifts I possess that my anxiety crushed."

9 TAKE A MINI VACAY.

According to the US Travel Association, in 2018, Americans left 768 million vacation days on the table, up 9 percent from 2017. Forgoing vacation can potentially increase heart disease in both men and women. If you're worried you don't have time or funds to take a week or two off work, try a mini vacay (2-3 nights). In fact, it's becoming the preferred way to get away.

According to a Hotwire Quickie Survey conducted by Wakefield Research, 90 percent of Americans, millennials in particular, prefer short getaways of three nights or less versus longer vacations. One third of mini-vacationers enjoyed less stress at work, 53 percent reported improved well-being, and 47 percent strengthened bonds with family or friends, according to the survey.



PEN: VASTRAVSHUTTERSTOCK.COM; WOMAN SURFING: SERGEY CAUSELOVESHUTTERSTOCK.COM

According to research published in the April 2019 issue of *Frontiers in Psychology*, setting aside 20 minutes each day to walk or sit in nature can significantly lower stress hormone levels.

10 GIVE CBD A TRY.

CBD (short for cannabidiol) products have exploded onto the market with tinctures, balms, gummies, salves, vape pens, and more. CBD is non-psychoactive, meaning it won't get you high, unlike cannabinoid tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). A group of scientists at the National Institute of Health filed for a US patent on CBD 20 years ago, stating that CBD exhibited neuroprotectant and antioxidant properties that can "limit neurological damage" and health complications

related to oxidation. CBD has since been known to help ease pain/inflammation, reduce stress, and support restful sleep.

"There are a lot of health hazards that come with lack of sleep. Waking up fresh instead of groggy, that's going to be a game changer," says Bryanna Fissori, a spokesperson for Receptra Naturals, which produces CBD products under three main categories: Relax, Relief, and Rest. "Having CBD is going to help alleviate sleep issues without having to go to any extreme measures. For the average person, CBD is a great natural option to try."

11 DEAL WITH THAT INJURY.

That nagging shoulder or knee pain you've been trying to ignore for the last year? It's not going to heal itself. Especially if you're hell-bent on continuing your regular workouts and daily activities. The sooner you deal with it, the easier the recovery process will be.

"If you don't deal with it, it is going to get worse ... and could eventually become irreparable," says Dr. Alejandro Badia, a hand and upper-limb surgeon and founder of Badia Hand to Shoulder Center in Florida. Badia said it's imperative to see an orthopedic surgeon and an MRI will probably be necessary. Know and weigh all your options. Don't delay and, don't "suck it up," he says. "Get a diagnosis."



12 GIVE BACK. Surely you've heard the adage, "It is better to give than to receive," but did you know that giving actually creates a dopamine response in the brain? The emotional, social, psychological, and financial benefits of giving can even outweigh the satisfaction of splurging on yourself or your family. Here are a few other ways giving (whether it's financially or volunteering your time) is a great way of practicing self-care:

Increases Joy – In a University of Missouri study, researchers found that people who gave to others scored higher on feelings of joy and contentment.

Reduces Stress – A recent study at Johns Hopkins University found that charitable givers experience reduced stress and lower blood pressure.

Improves Life Satisfaction – A study conducted in Germany found that those who give their time and resources to others are more satisfied with their life. Also, volunteering is connected to better quality of life, according to a meta-analysis of 37 studies of older adults.



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