

# Self-Care is More Than a To-Do List

I think I was born to be a helper. From the time I was a little girl, I have been described as an empathetic person, a good listener, and a dependable caregiver—so naturally, it made sense to become a social worker. I got my first job in a shelter in downtown Ottawa. In the first few years, I saw things, heard things, and did things that no university class could have prepared me for. In those years, I became so profoundly aware of the suffering of others that my heart sometimes could not take it.

I carried that burden for a long time. The slow accumulation of trauma stories—of people’s hardships and losses—left a painful imprint on my heart and eventually changed my view of the world. I later learned that this is called vicarious traumatization. At the time, it just felt like I was losing faith in humanity.

In moments when I was brave enough to reveal my vulnerability, I would admit to people in my life that I thought my work was hurting me. To that admission, I was given advice on the importance of practising self-care to prevent burnout. I was also told about making sure I had firm boundaries so that I didn’t become enmeshed emotionally.

This counsel was so puzzling to me. My job was to foster a safe space for my clients to bare their raw emotions. To do that, I needed to use empathy to build a deep therapeutic connection with them. I wondered how many more vacations and bubble baths it would take to help me recover from the trauma I was exposed to in that process.

Still, I tried to honour that advice. I made more and more self-care goals for myself out of the desperate hope that eventually I would have done enough. I picked up swimming, art classes, and yoga. I accumulated a pile of self-help books. When I wasn’t working, I was “self-caring.”

Given this, you can imagine my surprise when I ended up in the doctor’s office in excruciating pain—only to hear him say I had a case of stress-induced shingles. His prescription: a month of bedrest.

It felt like a punishment to me—the doer, the helper, the giver—to be still and focus on my own well-being. Yet now I look back with gratitude for this painful period in my life. It was the start of the journey of finding myself again.

**Self-care is about cultivating, nurturing, and protecting the resources within us to grow a sustainable garden of hope, faith, and compassion. By tending to this garden, we can share our harvest with the world.**

In my spiritual awakening, I learned that I had been so concentrated on showing up for others who were suffering that I had unknowingly isolated myself from spiritual connection and community—my driving force from the beginning.

I learned that self-care needs to involve self-awareness and self-compassion. It is not a checkbox on the to-do list. We must discover and reconnect with our needs, desires, and feelings in order to cultivate wellness. Understanding these needs is the first step to self-compassion.

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Self-compassion also means showing up for ourselves in a kind way like a good friend would. Friends are not only there for us in times of suffering, but they are also there for us to share and create joy with. Self-care is an ongoing investment of time and energy into building a friendship with yourself. It takes commitment, deep listening and an effort to understand.

With a nurturing and accepting approach, we can hold ourselves accountable and value what makes us feel whole and well. Self-care is about cultivating, nurturing, and protecting

the resources within us to grow a sustainable garden of hope, faith, and compassion. By tending to this garden, we can share our harvest with the world.

When I first set out to write this article, I considered putting together a list of all the creative ways to practise self-care. But some of you may have taken that list and turned it into a mission like I did. My list isn’t your list anyway. Instead, I’d like to suggest this: close your eyes, get quiet, and listen to your heart. Whatever you discern you need to do, be gentle and caring to yourself in doing it.