

A Guide to Self-Care



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Introduction

This e-book has been created as my gift to you. I have worked as a Registered Psychologist in Alberta since 2009 and, along the way, I have heard a lot of different people talk about self-care and, sometimes more accurately, their lack of it. I have found that many people struggle with self-care and I wanted to offer a resource that may help in your journey of personal development and self-love.

In terms of the challenges I have heard along the way, some people do not know what self-care is, others do not know how to implement it, and some do not see the point. The common denominator is often a struggle in loving self. Why would we want to invest time and energy into taking care of ourselves if we do not really like ourselves? I hope this tool will support you in building awareness and/or action to support you wherever you are at right now and to, ultimately, be a building block in growing your relationship of respect and care for yourself. If you do not have your own back at the end of the day, who else is going to?

For myself, I have struggled throughout my life with high amounts of shame, self-doubt, and low self-worth. This has ebbed and flowed over time and seems to be on an upwards trajectory towards more consistent self-love, compassion, and care. I have found that taking regular time to move my body, nourish it well, cultivate friendships with people who unconditionally care about me, and checking in on my preferences around basic things has been healing. I hope that you can continue to reflect on what caring for yourself would mean and what benefit that may offer you.

A quick disclaimer: This e-book is intended to be used as a self-help and personal development tool in conjunction with other supports, including

professional therapy. If you have been experiencing mental health and/or addiction symptoms that are chronic, debilitating, and/or concerning to you, I would encourage you to consult with a healthcare provider for proper assessment, diagnosis and/or treatment. Self-help tools alone may not be enough to support you in your journey of wellness (and that's okay). Remember, books and strategies are not a substitute for professional support.

This e-book contains information as well as questions and exercises. You can complete these electronically if you wish, or by writing your responses down on paper. I encourage you to move into this exploration with curiosity, openness, and a desire to learn and grow. I hope you will try to remove expectations from yourself, especially to do it perfectly or figure it all out. Wherever you are at today is wonderful. Anything you can learn or do differently today will support you tomorrow. My professional slogan is, '*Do different. Be different.*' All it takes is small steps of change.

Alright, now that we have laid some groundwork, let us delve into an exploration of self-care.

Sincerely,

Paige Abbott



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1. What is Self-Care?

Webster's Dictionary defines self-care as... Nope, that is not where we are going to start on this one. Sure, we could look up a formal definition of self-care, as I'm sure many of you reading this have done already. That is not what we are hoping to accomplish here. What we are hoping to really accomplish is more personal. We want to understand and start to unearth; What does self-care mean to *you*?

Question 1: What is your current definition of self-care?

Question 2: How do you engage in self-care?

From my perspective, self-care is a combination of **Intention + Actions**. We will use this as our starting point in our guide to self-care.

Intention

What do I mean by intention? Let us take an example to explore this further. I can do an action like go for a walk or eat a healthy dinner, but if my motivation behind taking that action is to: a) Impress others; b) Stave off putting on weight; c) Get external approval; and/or d) Because I "should", then this is not an act of self-care. Sure, it is a helpful act for my body (my body will be fundamentally grateful for the movement or the nutrition), but the connection to self is limited to non-existent. Where am I in the equation? Therefore, intention is (almost) everything when it comes to self-care. The actions are important but what is driving those actions is essential.



**WE ARE NOT 'SELF-CARING' WHEN WE
ARE ATTENDING TO OTHERS' NEEDS
OR EXPECTATIONS OVER OUR OWN**

Question 3: When you engage in acts of 'self-care', what is driving you?

Question 4: How does your current self-care make you feel? (You can choose from the following list as well as come up with feelings of your own: Happy Fulfilled Disconnected Connected Shame Guilt Comfortable Fearful Uncomfortable Sad)

Actions

The motivation driving a behaviour is important to pay attention to and another essential aspect of self-care are the actions themselves. These, much like the intention, are personal and unique to the individual but follow a theme of rejuvenation. Actions that drain, frustrate, annoy, shame, discomfort, anger, sadden, and/or deplete you are not self-care. Taking care of self is about restoring your energy, balance, and grounding in the present.

Question 5: What actions, environments, people, and/or situations do you find draining?

Question 6: How do you know when you are drained? What does this feel like for you?

Many people may narrowly define self-care as a vacation or taking a trip to the spa. That is not to say these are not self-care actions, they can be for many, but there are many other things in life that can bring about a similar feeling of wellness. If you do find vacations, leaving your home city, or going to a spa relaxing, this is a helpful template to look at what those actions offer you and how they feel. As you explore other actions, you can use those feelings as a guide to see how rejuvenating these new activities are.

For instance, travelling often provides people the opportunity to be mindful and present without distraction. This might be easier to achieve when you are on vacation, but what if it were possible in your life every day at any time? You can take the fundamental principle of mindfulness and start incorporating that into your day in small moments at a time. Smelling a flower, looking outside, watching a pet or child consciously and purposefully. Sure, it might not feel exactly the same as travel but notice how it impacts you. You will likely feel slightly more relaxed and in tune to your surroundings and self then you were before you did the mindful action.

Question 7: What situations, activities, places, things do you find restorative?

Question 8: What do you think it is about these that restores you?

Question 9: Brainstorm how you could bring some of these principles into your daily life. When would you do that? What would it look like?

Now that we have explored some of the fundamentals of self-care, let us look at some of the common (and personal) stumbling blocks that people encounter along the way.



SELF-CARE IS A COMBINATION OF
INTENTION + ACTIONS

2. Common Stumbling Blocks

I hear often from clients that they do not know what self-care is and cannot identify what they do to take care of themselves. There are a number of common barriers that come up in the path to taking care of self.

No Training

How you observed your primary caregivers looking after themselves is part of what can make or break our journey to self-care. If your role models did not engage in self-care for whatever reasons then it would have been difficult for you to learn what this looks like. Sometimes role models are so busy just getting by or have their own mental health or addiction issues that get in the way of slowing down and taking care of themselves. For me, even though my caregivers had untreated mental health issues that impacted our lives, I still saw modelling of healthy behaviours like exercise, healthy eating, regular eating, and relaxation outside of work. There were other things I did not see modelled, particularly emotional self-care, but I felt confident to explore and seek out resources for myself. My first journal was started when I was six years old! No idea where that came from as I did not see anyone in my life writing down their thoughts and feelings, but I'm glad I found that tool at such a young age as it was, and continues to be, a very helpful outlet for me. Basically, if it is not modelled then people do not know how to do it. The good part about that is that self-care is a tool (well, really multiple tools) that can be learned at anytime.

Question 10: What did you see modelled by your caregivers in terms of self-care?

Question 11: What were your caregivers' barriers to self-care?

Shame

If people do not feel very good about themselves then the idea of self-care is not only foreign, it can seem repulsive. It is a complete paradox to the internal feelings, which send the message to distract and get away from self rather than spend time focusing on self.

Taking time to invest in nurturing self can help to lessen the amount of shame people are carrying. The act of taking time for self sends the message to our brain that "I am worthy" which is what we are trying to counterprogram the shame-based messages of "I am unworthy" with.

The tricky part is that the shame can prevent people from being able to take care of themselves. To get around this conundrum, I recommend slow, bite sized steps of action that are realistic and doable, though they may still be uncomfortable.

Question 12: How does your brain talk to you about you? Write down examples of statements, phrases, words that you hear about yourself from your own brain.

Question 13: How do you feel about yourself when you hear these messages?

Question 14: What would be more helpful and kind messages to hear about yourself? Write down examples of statements, phrases, words that you would like to hear your brain say about you.

*Although we are jumping ahead a bit since this is not the action chapter, I would recommend that you challenge yourself to pick one of the statements, phrases, or words you wrote down in Question 14 and said it to yourself multiple times throughout the day. If you do this with a different phrase every day for three weeks, observe how that starts to shift your feelings about yourself.

Societal Messaging

We have our personal role models, who are often our primary caregivers as well as people we spend a lot of time with, but a big teacher for our brains is society, whose messages come to us through many sources. What is the primary message from society about self-care? I would say it is that “Self-care is selfish.” Well, me and every other healthcare practitioner out there would take a stand against that and boldly declare that: **Self-care is not selfish.** Self-care allows us to maintain strength which fuels our purpose and contributions to the world. Therefore, if society wants us to be an active participant in it, then it needs to reinforce the message of having people take time to recharge their batteries in order to be able to do this. Without a full battery, our ability to work, parent, fundraise, support, and contribute diminishes. As our battery dwindles, we become incapacitated and even disabled and then society ends up needing to support with sick time, disability pay and leave, and hospitalizations. Much of this could have

been prevented with time, space, and encouragement to allow people opportunity for rest and rejuvenation.

Of course, we cannot change society but we can change ourselves. Rather than prioritizing work or other commitments, try bringing yourself into the mix.

SELF-CARE IS NOT SELFISH



Question 15: What messages have you taken on about self-care from society? Write down as many as you can.

Question 15a: Now, look at your list of messages and review them. Which do you actually believe and find truth in? Which ones do you not agree with?

We must know who we are and what we believe in. Only then can we create customized and personalized goals that will match our needs as well as our value system. Picking goals that are impersonal is not going to get you very far.

Planning

With self-care, it is easy for life to get in the way. Other commitments or obligations come before any intended plan for self. If you did something for

yourself before somebody else, that means you are selfish and rude, right? Please see the previous section for a discussion on this.

I hear often from people that there is just no time for self-care. Everything else comes first and feels more important. Even with the intention to go to the gym or cook a meal, the reality looks different when stress, fatigue, or other commitments take over. This is the reason that action steps need to be realistic or else they are not going to happen and you will be left feeling frustrated and dejected.

Question 16: What excuses, commitments, or other things get in the way of your self-care goals? List them here.

Question 17: What are some intentions you have had for awhile but seem to struggle to do at all or consistently?

These initial chapters were designed to start creating awareness about your beliefs about self-care and the barriers that get in your way. In the following sections, we start to look at the action that can be taken to create change.

3. Tools for Looking After Yourself

Let us now dive into the meat of self-care. At this point we need to explore what are the options available to you for looking after yourself? I have tried to be as comprehensive as possible, taking into consideration things I find meaningful as well as what I have heard others find value in over the years. I have left some blank spaces at the bottom of the chart for you to include other actions (however small they may seem) that you find personal value in.

What we are fundamentally trying to identify are the actions that you can take that fill you up. They may not be big actions and they may not come with big reward, but during or after doing them, you feel even just a bit more settled, peaceful, and rejuvenated to carry on with life. Even though your brain may resist these actions, you know in your core that they are helpful.

If you find the steps that you are taking exhausting, draining, and extremely painful, then chances are you have not found the action steps that are of best fit for you. You may be putting undue pressure on yourself that you “should” find value in something but, in reality, you don’t. It is important that you be honest with yourself about what you enjoy and know holds value for you.

Question 18: The question for this section is to carefully read through the list below and make a separate list of the activities you are doing, would like to do, and/or have found value in before. This becomes the start of your self-care action plan.

The Self-care Chart

Fresh air	Quiet time	Journaling	Going to the doctor
Massage	Petting an animal	Learning something new	Listening to music
Walking	Sitting outside	Calling a friend	Watching a show
Laughing	Crying	Hugging yourself	Eating something nourishing
Singing	Physiotherapy	Acupuncture	Drinking water
Playing a sport	Watching rain	Being mindful	Going to the dentist
Playing an instrument	Playing a game	Using a meditation app	Doing a fun activity
Crafting	Writing	Art	Cooking
Going to a spa	Buying yourself something new	Reading a book	Going to an event
Grooming	Saying no	Tinkering	Cleaning your home
Using your hands	Saying yes to something enjoyable	Leaving an event	Tidying up
Leaving a toxic situation	Ending a bad relationship	Starting a new friendship	Helping someone
Therapy	Support group	Volunteering	Talking
Checking in on feelings	Taking a class	Working	Retiring
Exploring	Travelling	Staying home	Smiling
Lighting candles	Knitting	Enjoying a cozy day at home	Enjoying vigorous activity
Learning something new	Donating to charity	Coloring with your non-dominant hand	Sauna
Being a comfortable temperature	Snuggling	Hugging	Kissing
Connected sex or intimacy	Going somewhere new in your own city	Home decorating	Smiling

Question 19: Take time to revisit the bigger list every month or so to re-evaluate what you are doing. Is there anything that you would like to remove? Add? Alter in any way? This list will shift for you over time as you and your needs change and that is okay and natural. It is part of the process!

Question 20: How are you feeling about the list you have created?

Question 21: How are you feeling about taking action with the list?

This is what we will explore further in the next chapter: Action.

4. Action Plan

All the hope and planning in the world is useless if we do not follow it up with the essential step of ACTION. We need to do things in order for things to change. One of my favourite quotes is “Nothing changes if nothing changes.” We can sit and hope for change all we want, but until we are willing to do something about it, we will be in the same situation. I feel like a bit of a balloon popper as I tell people this because it deflates the fantasy and the false hope that things will just change and shift. No, they will not. You are the one living your life and you need to be the one to take steps to make it what you want. Nobody is going to do that for you.

Now that you have your list from chapter 3, we will start planning what to do with this. Here are some action steps that you can take to get you going in your journey:

- 1. Pick 1 or 2 items to start.** Taking on too much too fast is the #1 killer of hope and goals. Be realistic and start small. If you have already been taking action, then you will now *add* 1 or 2 more items and do this repeatedly until you have built up action that is realistic, fulfilling and sustainable for you.
- 2. Build a specific plan for each item.** When in the day are you going to do them? How are you going to execute them? It is important that you are incredibly specific with this. Taking a walk at 4:00pm is going to be more likely to happen than the intention of taking a walk ‘sometime.’
- 3. Build accountability and reminders.** Calendars and planners are great for this. Put your intended actions into a visual reminder where you will see it and/or be reminded (most virtual calendars have audible reminders which are helpful here). You can ask for support from a friend or family member, but do not be exclusively reliant on this. Remember, this is your

life and goals so you will need to take ownership of the steps you are taking.

- 4. Execute for minimum of 3 weeks.** This is the time it takes to help solidify new patterns into our brains.
- 5. Pay attention to barriers along the way.** This will help you identify what roadblocks are coming up. Is it your thinking? Time? Is the goal too big and unrealistic? Is it not personal or meaningful enough? Are you enjoying it? Are shame or guilt rearing their ugly heads? Stopping to re-evaluate frequently will help you to pivot as needed.
- 6. Redirect as needed.** This does not necessarily mean abandon ship completely on the action item. It might mean changing the time you're doing it or for how long. Sometimes it may mean picking something different off your list because you discover this particular action item is too much right now, not personal, or not what you thought it would be.
- 7. Aim for consistency. Be patient and kind to yourself.** Not doing the action item every time you intended means you are a human being. This helps you learn where you are vulnerable and about your triggers. It does not indicate that now is the time to stop. In fact, quite the opposite. It means you are onto something here and will likely find great value in keeping going.
- 8. Be encouraging of yourself.** Think about how you would reinforce progress in someone else. Say these kind words to yourself. Often.
- 9. Check in on your feelings regularly along the way.** Are you frustrated? Scared? Guilty? Shameful? Calm? Happy? Hopeful? Dejected? Pessimistic? Optimistic? Sad? These feelings give you information about where you are at and are a valuable part of the process. Taking time to reflect and even write them out on a daily or every few days basis is

helpful when it comes to change and goals. Taking care of yourself is not easy and is a process.

10. After there has been consistency with your action items, you can add 1 or 2 more. Go back to step 1 and repeat as needed. This is a great recipe for change. It can apply to self-care as well as other goals that you might have for yourself.

Question 22: What are you learning about yourself as you go through this process?

Question 23: What step(s) were the easiest for you? What step(s) were the hardest for you? Any thoughts on how come they were easy and difficult?

Question 24: What is your current level of motivation to keep engaging in self-care?

Question 25: What have you noticed has changed in you and your life as you started taking care of yourself? Try and pay attention to the good, the bad, and the ugly parts.

Question 26: What would you say to a friend who is struggling? Can you say this to yourself in tough moments?

Question 27: Remember what brought you here in the first place. How come you wanted to take care of yourself? Remember this when the going gets tough.

It is amazing how much pushback we can get from our brains when we are doing something different, even if it is something helpful and healthy. I know it can take the wind out of the sails to encounter this resistance from internally and from others (remember people do not fundamentally like change and do not like it thrust on them), but this does not mean these changes are not worth making.

Some final thoughts on the action phase from me are:

Take it slow.

Be patient.

Remember, it's a process.

You've got this.

5. Further Resources

I cringe when people ask me for resource recommendations. For one, I do not do much learning from books myself, I'm more an on the ground, learn it as you go type of person. Second, resources are so personal that what is groundbreaking for one person may hold no interest to someone else. I have curated a few suggestions below to get you going, but I would also recommend doing an online search for 'self-care' and browsing the resources available to find ones that personally connect for you. There are many resources from activity books to psychoeducation to practical planners to support you in your journey. Here are some others for your consideration:

The Art of Extreme Self-Care by Cheryl Richardson.

The More or Less Definitive Guide to Self-care by Anna Borges.

*Unfu*ck Yourself: Get out of your head and into your life* by Gary John Bishop.

The Power of Now by Eckhart Tolle.

Author and researcher Brene Brown. She writes about shame, resilience, and vulnerability

Codependent No More and *The Language of Letting Go* by Melody Beattie. Great resources for those who recognize their compulsion to take care of others is detracting from their relationship with themselves.

Self-care journals and planners, available online and at local bookstores.

6. Conclusion

You have learned a lot about yourself and what that ongoing relationship will look like by doing the work in this ebook. While this is by no means a comprehensive guide to self-development and self-care, I hope you have found it a useful tool to get you going in the process, or to reinforce and remind you of what you already know. As a healthcare provider, I know from bitter experience that if I am not mentally fit then I am of no use to others. (I once tried to go to work after I was thrust out of my home due to a fire. I had no time for days to look after myself and as soon as I had space and time before a client session, all I could do was cry. I rebooked my appointments, took some additional time off, and looked after myself as best I could although it was in strange circumstances. This allowed me to return and actually function at work). This is no different for those who are not healthcare providers.

How can we adequately teach, parent, coach, nurture, learn, or work when we are not functioning at full capacity? Self-care helps us to function at our fullest capacity and bring our best self forward. I hope you will prioritize yourself in order to prioritize life. It is worth it.

7. About the Author

Paige Abbott is a Registered Psychologist in the province of Alberta since 2009. She works with individuals and couples primarily (and families from time to time) helping them improve their mental health and wellbeing. Paige has specialized in Addiction Psychology since 2011. From her perspective, this means exploring where the brain has become obsessive and compulsive in its unhealthy pursuit of dopamine. This may be with substances, like drugs or alcohol, but also commonly happens with other behaviours, including food, relationships, sex, gambling, shopping/spending, work, and more. Paige helps people to understand themselves and what their brain is doing so they can learn to work with this, rather than fighting against it.

Paige began her private practice, Sana Psychological, in 2019 after it being a career long dream and hopes to bring her expertise to those interested in exploring their mental wellness.

Paige is interested in supporting as many people as possible in their self-development journey and wrote this complimentary e-book in the hopes it might offer some clarity and inspiration to you.

In her personal life, Paige is married to her long-term partner and has one daughter. She has enjoyed journaling since she was 6 years old and also loves physical activity, one-on-one time with friends, laughter, meditation, and quiet time for herself. She is a Myers-Briggs INFJ and identifies as a Highly Sensitive Person or HSP (you can look these up to learn more if you are curious).

If you are interested in connecting with Paige for professional development or therapeutic purposes and you are located in the province of Alberta, she would invite you to contact her at sanapsyc@gmail.com.

Thank you for taking the time to read through this resource and invest in yourself. All the best to you in your journey of wellness!