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SELF-CARE: HOT RIGHT NOW

TROPICAL DISHES YOU HAVE TO TRY

HOT FLASHES? NO SWEAT



Feature





SECRETS OF SELF-CARE

Hot trend or pillar of health?

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JANIS ISAMAN WAS LIVING THE high-gloss dream: an apartment in New York and a job at *Harper's BAZAAR*. Then she decided to have a baby—and to do it as a single mother. She moved to Calgary for a fresh start and founded My Body Couture, a business offering personalized fitness and nutrition plans. She designed her boutique studio to look more like a fashion haven than a box gym: exposed brick walls and stacks of couture-centric books paired with state-of-the-art fitness equipment. The image? Perfection. The reality? Dangerously taxing. ➤

From client demands to parenting decisions to maintaining her home and everything in between, it was all on her—every single obligation, both personal and professional. It didn't take long before she started burning out.

Isaman was constantly overwhelmed, with a feeling she describes as “brain fog” that never went away. While she may have seemed successful on the outside, with a thriving business and a happy child, her lifestyle was taking a toll on her health—mentally, emotionally and physically.

A cascade of one sickness after another was what finally convinced her to make some much-needed changes in her life.

“Here I was, running a health business,” she remembers, “and I was so sick I couldn't walk to the end of the block. I felt like a fraud at my own job.”

Struggling with pain, insomnia and chronic illness, she was told by a doctor that it would take upwards of six months to recover fully. A key part of that recovery would be self-care.

SELF-CARE: MORE THAN A HASHTAG

With more than two million uses of self-care-related hashtags on Instagram alone (hi, #selfcaresunday), and the term thrown about liberally to describe everything from getting a pedicure to chugging cold-pressed juice, it's safe to say that self-care is not only trending, but has gone mainstream—good news for the many health care professionals who consider self-care to be a serious and vital part of maintaining health and well-being.

But what is self-care, exactly? The concept has often been sold as a form of consumer indulgence, inviting you to “treat yourself” to small extravagances, guilt free, under the guise of caring for yourself. And if you're looking for an exact meaning for the term, the jury's still out.

A 2011 research paper looked into 139 uses of the phrase and found that in the 1970s, it was often used simply to refer to individuals taking initiative to manage their own health or illness. By the 2000s, the definition had evolved to be more expansive: self-care was viewed as a daily activity, and one that included social and emotional needs in addition to physical ones.

So while there's no single clinical definition for the term “self-care,” there's a generally accepted understanding of what self-care means: the activities you can engage in to help maintain or improve your health. Put simply, it's the act of taking care of yourself.

And it doesn't have to be complicated or expensive. Cheryl Bradshaw, a registered psychotherapist and counsellor at the University of Guelph, sees students (and clients at her private practice) who are drained and running on empty. As a simple first step, she often advises them to get back to basics with proper sleep, nutrition and exercise to restore the body to its normal working order.

Almost everyone knows how important these self-care fundamentals are, and the difference they can make to overall health. So why is it so hard for so many of us to actually commit to them?

THE DEMANDS ON YOUR ‘BANK ACCOUNT’

Chantale Denis, a clinical social worker and sociologist based in Niagara Falls, cites modern society, with its changing and overlapping roles (particularly for women), as a reason why self-care is so crucial, and yet difficult to put into practice. A single person can be a caregiver, colleague, student, spouse, parent and possibly more, all at the same time. Often, each of these roles demands a large investment of effort and attention outward, leaving little time for reflection or introspection.

Many of the women Denis sees in her practice fail to invest time in nurturing themselves, resulting in poor life satisfaction, low self-confidence and a skewed sense of self-awareness.

“With proper self-care,” says Denis, “women find themselves happier, healthier and more hopeful for the future.”

Although finding opportunities to take care of yourself may feel selfish or indulgent, it's definitely neither—in fact, it's necessary in order for you to take care of others. Bradshaw explains self-care to her clients using a points system, similar to the idea of an emotional bank. Taxing or stressful situations deduct points, while positive and enriching actions help restore points. ➤



The idea is to keep your points from running low by participating in activities that inspire and uplift. Even little things, like a short walk or a cuddle with a pet, can make a huge difference. Making self-care habits instead of one-offs can help, too. For one person, a meditation and mindfulness practice may do wonders, while another may find regularly spending quality time with others to be more restorative.

In Isaman's case, once she knew she had to start taking care of herself again, she started by getting back into her favourite activities. That meant long baths and good books.

Bradshaw has a particular interest in taking advantage of the outdoors, believing that a natural setting can enhance the benefits of self-care even further. She co-founded Back to Your Roots: Soul Camp, a weekend retreat inviting participants to turn off their phones, connect with nature and form friendships with fellow campers.

She might be on to something. **Study after study shows improvements in areas like concentration, memory and creativity after simply being outdoors, making it perhaps one of the easiest ways to practise self-care.**

Summer is a perfect time to start an outdoor self-care practice. Find a green space, spread out a blanket and take some time for you.

SELF-CARE STARTERS

Denis says each person has six dimensions that need to be cared for: emotional, spiritual, physical, psychological, sexual (which includes points like personal hygiene and femininity) and intellectual. She encourages her clients to find a way to nurture each of these dimensions—a good jumping off point for those interested in self-care but unsure of where to start.

Need an example? **You can satisfy your curiosity (and intellectual needs) by signing up for that class you've always wanted to take.** Or meet your emotional needs by setting boundaries and not being afraid to say no when you need to.

For instance, as a small business owner, Isaman is no stranger to long to-do lists. To make her list more manageable, she chose to schedule time twice a week to respond to her many emails, rather than intermittently on a daily basis. She advises her clients to call or text her for urgent matters.

Everyone finds different activities refresh and replenish them depending on their level of health and ability, their preferences and their time constraints. See the checklist on the following page for a few fun ideas to explore, but remember: you know best what fills your tank.

SUPPLEMENTS FOR SELF-CARE

While eating well is a key part of self-care, sometimes it's not easy to fit nutritional perfection into every day. More than 40 percent of Canadians use vitamin and mineral supplements to help fill the gaps in their diet—but those are just one type of supplement that can help you feel your best.

Although you should always check with your doctor or health care practitioner first—contraindications with pre-existing conditions or certain types of medication are possible, even with natural or herbal products—studies do show that certain supplements may make a big difference in your well-being. Omega-3 fatty acids have been shown to improve mental health, and **herbs like ginseng and rhodiola may help with stress management.**

When you're really on the go, meal replacement bars or drinks can help ensure you get the right balance of nutrients. They can be useful for weight management, but only as part of an energy-reduced diet. Proteins like soy and casein feature strongly in meal replacements; both have been shown to be effective. Remember, though: self-care means proper meals the majority of the time. Taking care of the grocery list is a way to take care of you.

WHEN IT'S *NOT* SELF-CARE—OR NOT ENOUGH

Even though proper self-care is essential to living well, it's definitely not a cure-all. Bradshaw notes that her clients can sometimes be tempted to use “self-care” as an excuse to put off challenging tasks or dodge responsibilities, like when her students binge-watch Netflix to avoid the stress of studying for a difficult test. “These are simply distractions,” says Bradshaw.

“True self-care is not about avoidance, even if it feels good at the time.”



Another therapist, BC-based Esther Kane, puts it this way: "Self-care is a wonderful tool to have in helping to maintain our well-being, but sometimes these techniques on their own are not enough." **For people struggling with serious mental health issues, unhealthy relationships or other traumas, it's vital to find professional resources** to help build a comprehensive treatment plan, rather than trying to cope on their own.

Even after Isaman started making time for her favourite activities, she realized more drastic measures were needed. With the help of a health coach, she slowly began to get her life back in order, which went hand-in-hand with improving her sleep and physical condition.

Today, she enjoys a well-balanced life, with time to connect with friends, volunteer and spend with her child. Just as importantly, she also regularly takes time for herself. She does yoga, reads and reflects on her experiences, and she has trusted people to turn to when she feels stuck in difficult situations.

"Self-care literally changed my mindset, my outlook and my health," she says.

It could do the same for you. 🍀

A SUMMER AFTERNOON OF SELF-CARE

- ☐ Wear something you love
 - ☐ Pack snacks and drinks that nourish you
 - ☐ Bike or walk to your favourite park, or somewhere you've never been
 - ☐ Draw, colour or paint
 - ☐ Read a book on a topic you'd never normally explore
 - ☐ Stand up, stretch and move
 - ☐ Journal and reflect
 - ☐ Listen to a whole album
 - ☐ Notice what you see, hear, feel and smell now that you're outside
 - ☐ List what you're grateful for
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