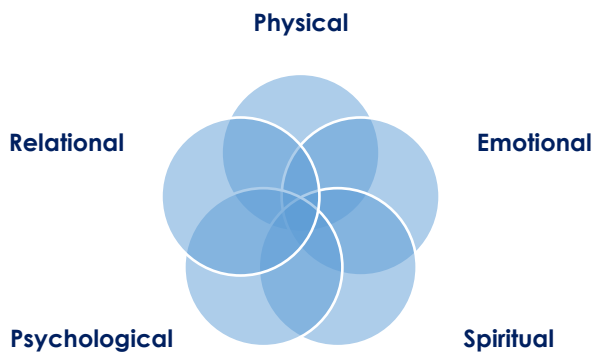




What is Self-Care?

- Self-care is the deliberate practice of any activity that we do in order to support our mental, physical and emotional health.
- These activities are most likely to be sustainable and more meaningful if they are in line with our values and interests.
- It is really important to try to plan ahead and prioritise these activities into our everyday routine in order to make them habitual.



There are several different interconnected aspects of self-care which are important to keep in mind.

Butler, L. D., Mercer, K. A., McClain-Meeder, K., Horne, D. M., & Dudley, M. (2019). Six domains of self-care: Attending to the whole person. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 29(1), 107-124.



Practical ideas for Self-Care

Psychological | Satisfying intellectual needs whilst understanding your own motivations

- Start a journal to note down your thoughts.
- Practice meditation or mindful exercises.
- Listen to a calming music playlist.

Emotional

- Treat yourself with kindness and compassion. Perhaps use some affirmations, such as "I am good enough."
- Practice gratitude.
- Identify less helpful coping strategies you practice.

Physical

- Take up a new sport.
- Try to establish good basic habits, such as getting enough sleep, having a healthy diet and staying hydrated.
- Create small opportunities to move your body more.

Relationships

- Schedule in time to meeting with friends and family, either in person or over the phone/virtually.
- Put up photos of friends and family around your house/room so you can see them regularly and be reminded of memories you share.
- Mix connecting with others with another aspect of self-care, such as going for a walk.

Spirituality

- Faith based spirituality can be supported by connecting with others in religious practises, or engaging in prayer.
- Connecting with nature and the natural world can provide times to reflect on what gives your life meaning. Take a walk, look at the stars or take a picnic to the beach.

Professional | Work-Life Balance

- Address stresses in a solution-focused way. Break problems into smaller, more manageable parts to improve your stress in small stages.
- Reflect on what makes you satisfied in your work. Take time at the start of each break to reflect on positives you have achieved to make you feel proud.

Time with Friends

- Spending time with friends who can provide a listening ear (and not rush to reassure you) is so important. This is further explained in the following video by Brené Brown; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw&t=1s>
- Although this may be more difficult during the Coronavirus pandemic, it is so important to maintain a sense of connection with our family and friends. For example, by arranging a phone or zoom call.

Time for fun

- Sometimes we need to give ourselves permission to relax or treat ourselves by doing something we enjoy doing.
- By doing something fun, we redirect our attention and focus away from stressors, helping us gain perspective.
- For example, try to find time for self-reflection, writing in a journal, enjoying a hobby or trying something new.



Importance of down time

- We are currently living in a 24-hour culture of news and responding, and so it is important to try and reduce this stress by not pressuring yourself to respond so quickly and also taking time away from screens where possible.
- **Importance of boundaries** – it is so important to be aware of and able to express our own boundaries. By this, we mean that we need to be respectful of our own needs as well as what is actually possible. When we do not look after ourselves in this way we can feel ourselves being more pressured by the hopes and needs of others. Check in with yourself and what is important to you first. It is okay to say 'no' or 'not this time'.



Try to look at the bigger picture

- What is there realistically time for?
- What will it mean in a week, a year, or five years' time? Will it still be as stressful or difficult? Will some elements of what you're finding stressful be resolved by then?



Mindfulness

“Mindfulness is **awareness** that arises through **paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally**” - Kabat-Zinn

The benefits of mindfulness and supported by large volumes of research. (Seigel, 2010)

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Benefits of Mindfulness

Increases self-awareness

Improves mood

Lowers stress

Improves emotional regulation

Improves physical health



Practical ideas to practice mindfulness



Everyday Mindfulness

• Take time to purposefully notice sensations as you do everyday activities, such as brushing your teeth or washing up.



Mindful Meditation

• Spending time quietly noticing thoughts, feelings and sensations (apps or guided meditation videos can help).



Mindful Breathing

• Bringing awareness to your breathing (apps or videos of guided practice can be helpful).



Mindful Exercise

• As you engage in exercise like walking or yoga, pay attention to your thoughts, breathing and any physical sensations.



Make it regular

• Mindfulness is like a muscle - it will help most if it is practised regularly and consistently.



Mindful Breathing Exercise Examples

Exercise 1: Mindful Breathing Using a Mantra

Close your eyes, and as you breathe in, say "inhale calm" (3 syllables) to yourself. Try not to force this.

As you breathe out, say "exhale relax" (4 syllables), and continue this for several minutes. Try to relax your body and sink your weight into your seat on each exhale.

This breathing practice is based on the fact that inhalation is related to your sympathetic nervous system and the fight/flight response. Exhalation is related to your parasympathetic nervous system (rest and digest response). By extending your exhalation, you move away from the flight response, which in turn helps to calm your nervous system.

Exercise 2: Belly Breathing

1. As you inhale, try to soften and allow your belly and pelvic floor to expand with the breath.

2. As you exhale, your pelvic floor and abdominal muscles will gently recoil together in order to release the air.

Try to add Rib Expansion

Once you are comfortable practicing Belly Breathing, imagine a balloon gently and evenly inflating in your rib cage with every inhalation. Then, imagine the balloon softly deflating as you exhale.

Breathe in through your nose, and when you exhale, pretend you are breathing out of a straw. This will help to slow down and even out your exhalation, which may help you get a better sense of the contraction of the pelvic floor and belly.

The following is a link to a Guided Meditation on Loving Kindness on YouTube, which may be a helpful way to start introducing mindful meditation into your routine: <https://youtu.be/zhiHCU2CpB0> (Tara Brach, 2017)



Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is when we direct kindness and warmth towards ourselves, especially when faced with challenges. It is about offering ourselves the same love and kindness that we would give to those we care about.

Kirsten Neff has defined self-compassion in terms of 3 key elements; self-kindness, common humanity (remembering that everyone goes through difficult times) and mindfulness. "Unlike self-criticism which asks if you are good enough, self-compassion asks what's good for you?" (Kirsten Neff, 2011)

The following link is to a video outlining how our emotion systems were impacted by COVID-19, but this is relevant during any time of significant stress. It uses Paul Gilbert's Three Circles concept from Compassion Focussed Therapy (a system of psychotherapy that encourages people to practice compassion towards themselves and others.): <https://youtu.be/rLrAfDKvsOM> (Theresa Dahm, 2020)

"We often wait for kindness ... but being kind to yourself can start now."

– Charlie Mackesy, *The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and The Horse*, 2019

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D.O.S.E is an acronym for the four major chemicals in the brain that influence happiness – the following diagram outlines these chemicals, including what happens when we become deficient in them and how to increase their levels in our brain.

Daily D.O.S.E of Happiness

Deficiency Impact	Deficiency Impact	Deficiency Impact	Deficiency Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weight loss or weight gain • Trouble sleeping or disturbed sleep • Low energy • An inability to focus • Feeling fatigued • Feeling demotivated • Mood swings • Feeling hopeless • Having low self-esteem • Feeling anxious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling lonely • Feeling stressed • Lack of motivation/enthusiasm • Low energy/fatigue • Reduced empathy towards others • A feeling of disconnection from relationships • Feeling anxious • Insomnia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling anxious • Low mood • Aggression • Insomnia and fatigue • Irritability • Poor appetite • Poor memory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Depression • Mood swings • Aches and pains • Insomnia • Impulsive behaviour
Dopamine	Oxytocin	Serotonin	Endorphins
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encourages us to repeat behaviours that will release more dopamine, creating a cycle. - Encourages motivation, learning, concentration and pleasure. 	Released during contact with others: volunteering, doing something good, contact with loved ones.	Regulates mood, and affects our sleep cycle, appetite and digestion, among other physical processes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Releases a brief euphoria that masks physical pain. - Is a response to pain and stress which helps alleviate anxiety and depression.
How to Increase	How to Increase	How to Increase	How to Increase
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lifestyle and Diet • Adequate sleep • Engaging in hobbies • Eating food high in L-tyrosine (e.g. almond, banana and beans) • Sunlight • Exercise regularly • Meditation and mindfulness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect with loved ones • Giving gratitude • Laughter • Healthy diet • Play music • Exercise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cold shower • Exercise • Sunlight • Balanced diet (e.g. enough fibre) • Massage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laughter • Exercise • Dance • Enjoying favourite food/s • Massage • Eat spicy food • Eat dark chocolate



Re-training our minds to learn to relax

- **Return to the breath** – by relaxing your body, you can relax your mind.
- **Breaths per minute** – work towards reducing the number of breaths per minute to improve health, release chemicals that promote a sense of wellbeing. Try mindful breathing exercises (as outlined above).



Heart Rate Variability (HRV)

What does HRV mean?

- Fluctuations in the intervals between heart beats.
- It is how our heart gets ready to respond to different stressors.

What is it important for?

- HRV is related to mood, emotional regulations, physical health.

High HRV

- Shows body is ready to respond.
- Linked to better physical and mental health.

Low HRV

- Associated with being in fight/flight
- Lowers ability to cope with stressors.



What can help improve HRV?

Healthy Lifestyle



Exercises



Breathing Exercises



Relaxation



Proactive Stress Management



- The following is a link to a helpful summary video explaining Heart Rate Variability:
https://youtu.be/B6ld6Jl7_HU
- For further information, the following is a link to a webinar by Dr. Bessel van der Kolk on 'Engaging the Natural Healing System of the Brain for Self-Regulation: Trauma, Heart Rate Variability and Beyond', which you may find helpful to understand this topic further:
<https://www.heartmath.com/webinar/engaging-the-natural-healing-systems-of-the-brain-for-self-regulation-trauma-heart-rate-variability-and-beyond-with-dr-bessel-van-der-kolk/>



Having an emergency Self-Care Plan

It is important to have an emergency self-care plan in place in order to help you cope with particularly difficult times. It would be helpful to develop this plan in advance when you have the time and are in a positive headspace to do it. An emergency self-care plan will include activities that have worked for you previously, making this plan a collection of supportive coping techniques specific to you which can be accessed any time you feel that you need them. The following are some tips for creating this plan:

1. The activities should include things that are helpful and supportive to you, and so will enhance your mood and relax you.
2. The plan should also include things to avoid doing which may make you feel worse.
3. It may be helpful to include some positive affirmations in your plan in order to help you combat negative self-talk.



Further Websites and Resources

Headspace

- Meditation and Sleep App
- <https://www.headspace.com/>

CALM

- Meditation and Sleep App
- <https://www.calm.com/>

Samaritans

- A charity that offers listening and support to people and communities in times of need.
- <https://www.samaritans.org/wales/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/>
- 116 123

SHOUT

- A free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope.
- If you are struggling to cope, text SHOUT to 85258.

Mind

- A charity that provides advice and support to help empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem.
- Mind: <https://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/>
- <https://youngminds.org.uk/>