

Self-Care (seriously. don't laugh.)

Today we're going to discuss something that is critically important and feels nearly impossible: self-care. As parents, every time someone tells us to take care of ourselves we feel like laughing (and we feel like crying). It's so easy to tell someone to practice self-care and so hard to actually do it. Today we are going to discuss reality-based self-care. We are not suggesting you spend an hour every morning exercising and meditating or that you go out with your friends every week and so forth. If you can do that, then go ahead and do it. But our hunch is that if you're able to do that already, you probably don't need this course!

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We need to stop for a second and talk about something that's really important. There's this thing in our culture that says you shouldn't take care of yourself. That you're a better person if you don't. You're a better parent if you take care of your kids and not yourself. You're a better worker if you work yourself to death and neglect your health and family.

And that's just not true. Taking care of yourself is not only important, it also benefits those around you. It's like how an athlete has to eat well, stay hydrated, and get enough sleep to be at their best

performance. You are an interpersonal athlete! You have to take care of yourself to be the best parent, worker, boss, sibling, neighbor, or community leader you can be.

Also, you're modeling what you want your children to do. If they see you not taking care of yourself, they are going to think that as adults and parents, they shouldn't either. If you want them to grow up to be healthy, happy adults with their own joys and interests, you need to model it for them.

We know you want the best for your family and friends. You want them to eat well, get sleep, take time to relax, and do things that make them happy. And we want that for YOU. And so does your family. Taking care of yourself is not selfish. The better you treat yourself, the more you have to give.

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There are several steps to self-care. The first is deciding what self-care means to you. Especially if you are highly sensitive or neurodivergent yourself, your self-care may be different from any of the lists you can find online. There is no judgment here. Sit down and make an honest list of the things that actually help you feel better (you can print the page at the end of the chapter to make your lists). This is not what someone else has told you to do, this is what *you* prefer to do. Later in this lesson we'll also recommend stretching yourself a little, but for now just think about what you're actually doing and what actually works for you. This list might include vegging out in front of a screen, overeating, stimming (ie repetitive movements or actions as self-stimulation), or hyper focusing on a hobby. This is your honest list of what currently helps you take care of yourself. You don't have to show it to anyone, but it can be helpful to discuss it with a caring therapist.

→ So, pause reading this chapter and make that list. We'll wait for you! :-)

Now we're going to make another list of the things you've been told you *should* do to take care of yourself. These may carry a lot of baggage for you, or be really annoying, or be things you don't want to do/can't do/wish you could do/feel guilty you're not doing, and so forth. This is just a brain dump of all the self-care baggage we carry around with us. You can organize this list by what kind of negativity you feel around each item, or do a mind map, or just dump it all on paper.

→ So again, pause and make the list.

Now look honestly at those two lists. They are probably very different from each other. That's okay!

Set those lists aside. We're going to talk about the point of self-care for a minute before we go back to them. We like to think of our mental energy/physical energy/emotional energy/life force, and

so forth as a bucket. Self-care is a way of filling your bucket! You are probably well aware of the drains on your bucket. These might be your spouse, your children, your job, the housework, mental health or medical issues you may have, or any other stressors in your life. You can print the journaling page at the end of the chapter if you prefer to use visuals with your words: it shows a bucket with areas to list the drains out of your bucket as well as what fills your bucket. This is a good time to jot down your drains!

If you're like most parents, there are a significant number of drains from your bucket. Sometimes filling your bucket means decreasing the drains. Talking it through honestly with a therapist or coach can help you determine if all the drains are necessary or if maybe some can be removed or changed to be less draining. It's beyond the scope of this course, but [let us know](#) if you're interested in hearing about how we've streamlined everything from meals to laundry in order to keep them as manageable as possible!

Some issues may be causing a greater drain than they seem like they should. In our family we call this Cumulative Points of Upset. For example, let's say your friend forgets about getting together with you. You're disappointed but they haven't done this before, so it's only worth 1 Point of Upset. Now let's say your friend forgets again. You're going to be more upset than you would be if it was the first time, so now maybe it's worth 2 Points of Upset. In general, each time something happens it tends to make us a little more upset than the previous time.

Additionally, multiple things happening one right after the other tends to make us more upset than if just one thing happens. Let's say you forgot your phone at home (worth 1 Point of Upset) and you get chewed out by your boss (worth 2 more Points of Upset) and *then* your friend forgets that you were getting together. It could still be worth just 1 Point of Upset, but with everything that already happened maybe it gets 2 or 3 Points of Upset. You might even completely lose it with your friend through no fault of their own, simply because you had so many other things happen.

Why is this important? Because drains on your ability to feel comfortable in your own skin aren't all worth the same number of points, and aren't all worth their inherent number of points. So in tackling the drains, it's important not just to think about it rationally. Really consider how much energy is being lost to that drain and if the drain is worth that energy. In trying to decrease each energy drain, it helps to consider why it has as many points as it does.

For example, Tim has a long history of being late. For a while, this meant that when he was late, I was significantly more upset than if someone else were late. I had accumulated a great many Points of Upset around the situation. Once I realized how much energy I was losing to this issue, addressing this out-of-proportion drain became a top priority. Since I can't control anyone else's behavior, I had to figure out ways to keep it from draining my energy. I came up with a variety of ideas including: not counting on him to be on time, leaving without him and enjoying myself alone or

with just the kids, and rewarding myself when he was late so that I actually had a prize to look forward to. I didn't quite get to the point where I was hoping he would be late, but it certainly helped take away some of the sting. I also changed my thoughts about him being late. I realized that I had a lot of overly-traumatic thoughts about it. For example, that he was late because he didn't care or didn't love me. Or that he would ruin all my fun. Or that other people were judging me based on his behavior. Once I got away from these thoughts, I discovered that I could have a really nice time regardless of his punctuality. I discovered that no one at church thought much of it if I reacted calmly. When they did ask me, "Where's Tim?" I could say, "I don't know. He said he'd be here soon." Because I didn't react, it didn't reflect on me one way or the other.

There's only so much you can do about the drains on your bucket. Drains happen. So the other important step is *filling* your bucket. This is where self-care comes in. Self-care is finding what fills your bucket so you are never running on empty. In general, self-care falls into one of several categories. At the end of the chapter is a handout showing categories of self-care. As we go through the following information, you can fill it out.

Self-care can be literally caring for your body. This can be showering, eating meals, getting enough sleep, putting on face lotion, or wearing clothes that make you feel good. Write down what body self-care is important for you, even if you haven't been doing it lately.

Self-care can also be social care. This can mean spending time alone or spending time with people who fill your bucket. This is different for everybody. Most people need a certain mix of time with other people and time spent alone. Everyone needs at least a little bit of each. Surprisingly, most people aren't very good at estimating how much time they need in each of these areas. You might have social anxiety and therefore think you don't need to be around people. Or you may not have found activities you enjoy alone, or may have negative thoughts when alone, and therefore think you do not need alone time.

Think about what influences how much social time versus alone time you can take or need. Now think about how much social time you would want if it were perfect social time, the kind of enjoyable, non-stressful social time that fills your bucket. Now think about how much alone time you would want if it were the perfect alone time, if you enjoyed yourself and weren't bored or anxious, if you were happy and content to focus on something you enjoy. Write this down as well.

Self-care can also be moving your body. Everyone needs to have at least a couple different ways they enjoy moving their body. Some people love team sports, some people love running. I am not one of those people. That's okay. We all have things we can enjoy. Whether that's bicycling, hula hooping, yoga, roller skating, going for a walk, dancing to music alone in the living room, parkour, martial arts, or whatever else it is that you enjoy. If you don't think you enjoy anything, it's important to start trying things. There is very good research that even a moderate amount of exercise

boosts mood and energy and makes everything else easier. If you haven't found your thing yet, it's just time to get creative. And if you don't feel that you have time, I hear you. This doesn't have to be every day and it doesn't have to take a certain form. I jump rope in my living room. I do walking videos from YouTube. I teach my kids to juggle. I teach my kids yoga. I work in the yard. I would love to have a long bike ride alone every morning, but that just isn't the reality of my life. But I can go on a bike ride with my kids! Any physical therapy you need to do counts as well.

On your worksheet, write out what ways of moving your body you currently enjoy, think you might enjoy, or would at least be willing to try. If you can't think of anything, try a Google search. I find it helpful to tell Google something about myself to get better results. So I might search "best exercises for busy moms" or "unusual individual sports." In searching for my family, I might look up "best sports for anxious kids." Or if I want a whole new list, "physical activity options you haven't thought of yet." Do a search and write down some ideas that sound fun to you!

Self-care can also be giving your brain a break. Everyone's brains need a break from day-to-day life. Some people do this by watching television or movies, reading novels, listening to podcasts, learning all the details about historic trains, playing board games, playing video games, writing fiction, or going on social media. Many of these methods have gotten a bad rap. People roll their eyes about cheap novels, too much screen time, and the hazards of social media. I personally do not go on Facebook because it increases my anxiety too much, but I have found Instagram to be a safe alternative. On my personal account I only follow knitters, weavers, spinners, dyers, sheep farms, potters, painters, and various Princess Kate fan accounts. None of these stresses me out. Real life is stressful enough, I don't need social media stressing me out, too! When choosing your brain break, it's important to question if the chosen method is actually helping you feel better or not. If you are feeling anxious, irritable, incompetent, or ashamed, if you can't set it aside and go back to your normal life, if you can't limit your intake, or if your screen time tracker is showing an excessive amount of use, these are signs that your chosen brain break method might not be healthy for you.

I personally have had to work very hard to find healthy brain breaks. Video games stress me out, social media stresses me out, shows and movies stress me out. I'm just very sensitive to the emotional content of whatever media I am using. So I have learned to stick to safe topics and safe people who don't have significant emotional content. Other people enjoy emotional stimulation but I find it exhausting. Tim greatly enjoys politics, especially in comedy form. For him, this is a great brain break from family life and work. Everyone in our family but me enjoys Minecraft. I don't think I'd find Minecraft stressful, I just prefer knitting. Other people would find knitting pretty boring, but for me it has just enough drama.

Make a list of your preferred brain breaks and notate those that you need to monitor to see if they're actually helpful or not.

Self-care can also be creation. Humans are creative beings. We all need to make something. This could be something where we follow rules written by someone else like a recipe or instruction manual, something where we create our own methods of achieving an end product, or it could be about the process and not the product. Every person needs some hobbies in which they create, make, experience, process, or produce something. Many of us had hobbies in our childhood or teens but haven't for years. Our current culture discourages hobbies so much that I also know many people who have never had one. Simply collecting something doesn't count. You need to have a skill or outlet of some sort. There are literally hundreds of options so make a list of how you enjoy creating. Or do a quick Google search for hobbies, creative outlets, things to make and do, crafts, or whatever else seems like a good search. In our house we have so much going on, from gardening to painting to writing to cooking to baking to knitting to sewing to electronics to modeling to home improvement projects to home decorating to bike repair to drafting and design.

Now that you have a list of ideas for self-care, the real question is how you will fit this in. Some people are able to simply schedule a time, but there are other options.

Tim listens to political comedy with one earbud in while doing housework. I knit while supervising the kids. I read while brushing my teeth. This has increased both my reading and my tooth brushing!

I listen to a podcast with one earbud in while helping my kids settle into bed. I always spend some time focusing on them, but we invariably seem to have one kid with insomnia. While I'm rubbing a back or stroking a head, I can be listening to a podcast.

I do my knee exercises while lying in bed for two extra minutes. It's a way I can give myself the luxury of lying in bed a little bit longer while also taking care of the exercises that prevent my bum knee from acting up.

I do my neck and shoulder exercises at stop lights while driving. I'm sitting there anyway, and it's a way of making sure I'm taking care of my body.

Look back through your list of self-care and see which items you can slip in funny places and times. Gretchen Rubin calls this Habit Linking in her incredible book, [Better Than Before](#). This could be while you're brushing your teeth, getting dressed, taking the kids somewhere, supervising the kids, doing chores, lying in bed, and so forth.

Now look back through your list of self-care and see if there are any items that you can actually schedule into your week. For example, on the weekend when everyone else is playing Minecraft for a little while, I don't use that time to get work done. Instead, I go on a bike ride all alone. It's

heavenly! Even though it's once a week, it still counts as time alone. I like to schedule things based on what others are doing or what else is happening rather than what time it is. So you'll notice I read while I brush my teeth, I listen to a podcast while I cook, I go on a bike ride during family Minecraft time, I stretch at stop lights. This is because it is much easier to link a new habit to a current habit than to initiate something out of the blue based on the clock. If you don't have any habits at all yet, don't worry. There are things you *have* to do and that you *are* doing that you can just add something to. While one of my kids sits on the toilet I play meditations to help them tackle an issue we're currently working on. They can't help but go to the bathroom, so I use that time wisely.

The final step is to take your list to another person who can help you think creatively and also keep you accountable. A therapist, counselor, or coach is a great person for this, but a spouse or partner, family member, or friend can also help.



Current Self Care

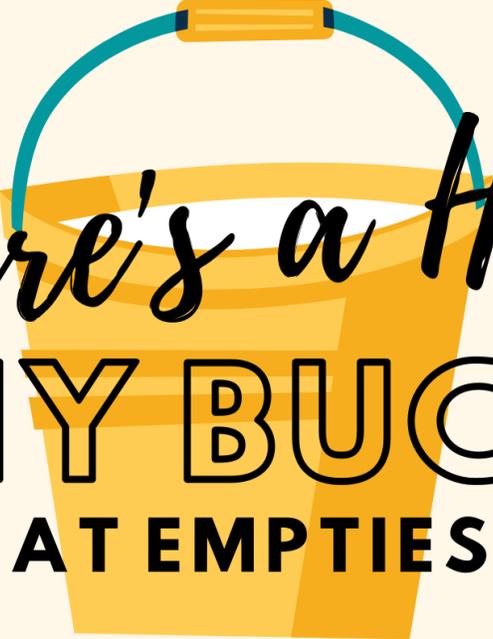
Blank space for writing current self-care practices.



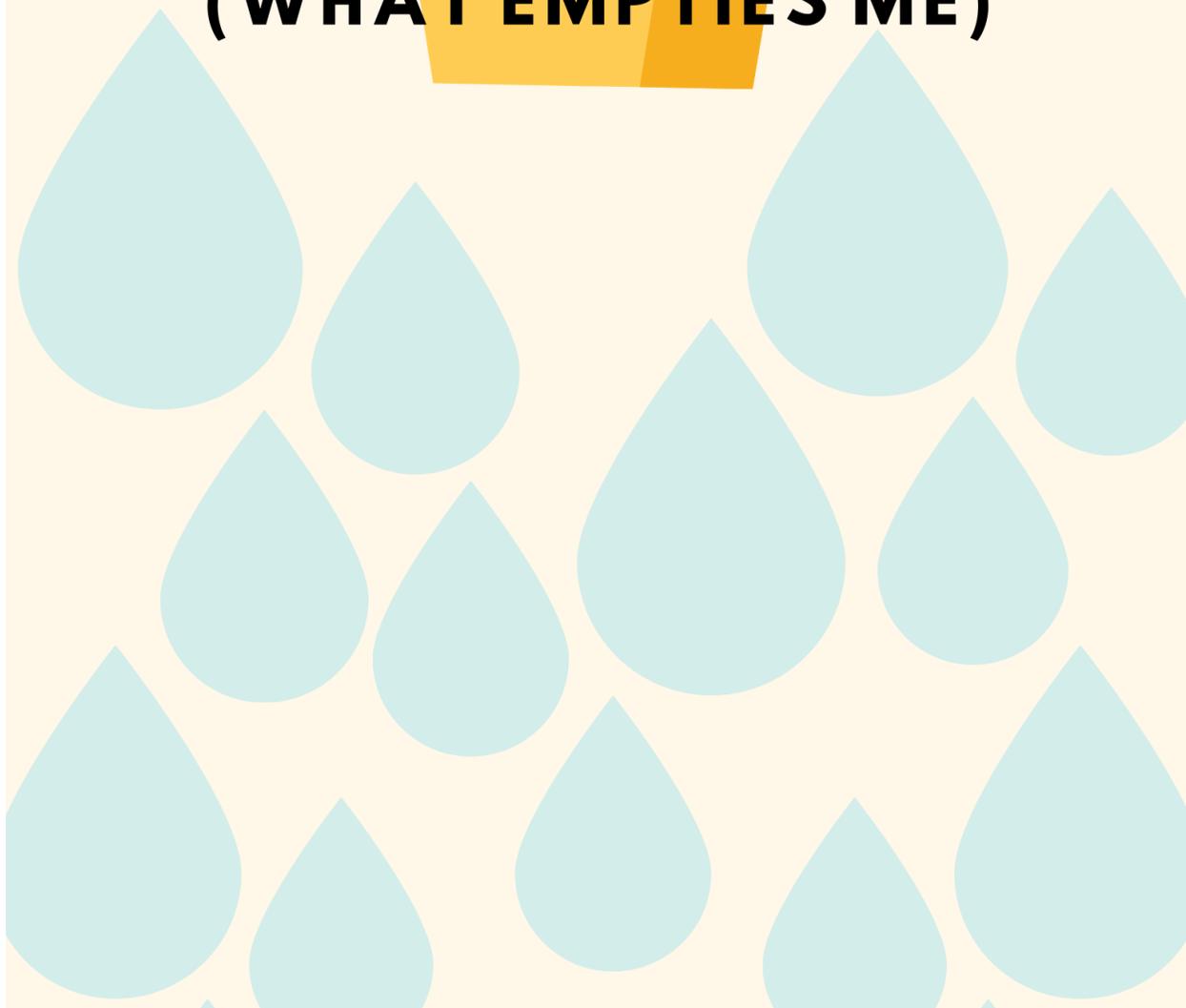
"Should" Self Care

Blank space for writing ideal self-care practices.

AspieFamily.com



There's a Hole
IN MY BUCKET
(WHAT EMPTIES ME)



What Fills MY BUCKET

Body Care

Social Care

Movement

Brain Break

Creativity