

SELF-CARE: THE BASICS

Since humans don't come with an instruction manual, it's sometimes forgotten that routine attention is required for our bodies to function properly. If we tried to fuel a car with whatever liquid is at hand or didn't drive it for a year, we wouldn't be surprised if a break-down occurred; why should our body be any different?

Even for those of us who typically do take good care of our bodies, when under stress, self-care is often the first time expenditure to get cut--exactly when we need it the most. As the saying goes, 'put your own oxygen mask on first.'

So what are the fundamentals of self-care?

1. **Eat healthfully.**

What goes in our mouths, both builds and fuels our bodies. Every bite we take is an opportunity to feel better in the (possibly very near) future. If you want a simple rule of thumb on what to eat, Michael Pollan, popular food author, summed it up nicely when he said, "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants," ie, avoid processed and packaged items with long lists of ingredients. For more comprehensive thoughts on **what** to eat, my current favorite nutrition guru is Michael Greger, MD, author of How Not To Die, <http://www.nutritionfacts.org>.

As for **how** to eat, the best guide for when to eat is hunger. Personal schedules vary but most bodies need to eat every four hours. Registered Dietitians, Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch, have a book (and a program), Intuitive Eating, that is helpful if you have lost faith in your body's signals.

2. Exercise.

The data is clear that regular movement helps us to feel our best and prevent illnesses of body and mind. Movement not only strengthens our various organs, it also detoxifies the body by stimulating drainage through our otherwise static lymphatic system.

Find a movement that they enjoy doing and to keep experimenting until you find it. There are no studies on this as far as I know, but it's common sense to think that you are more likely to stick with an exercise that you enjoy. Different bodies seem to like different forms of movement.

As with building any habit, the hardest part is getting started; it's simple physics--a body in motion stays in motion, a body at rest stays at rest. Eventually, missing a workout will actually feel like a hardship. . . honest.

The CDC's website, www.cdc.gov, has the latest recommendations on exercise based on an individual's age. And a tip for those who can't seem to make the time for exercise: Schedule workouts in your calendar.

3. Sleep.

The amount of rest a body needs varies from person to person, depending on our age and genetics, but a consistent bedtime and wake time are an essential part of a healthy daily rhythm. In fact, a chronic sleep deficit increases the stress hormone cortisol and causes the body and mind to exist in a more stressed state regardless of other factors.

One can think of sleep as restorative to the body on two levels. First, it's the time in our day when we combat the effects of gravity by shifting our body from vertical to horizontal. This allow the vascular system to do its work differently; for about eight hours, our organs get the benefit of being in the same plane as our heart and lungs. And, second, the brain shifts into different rhythms, in the

four phases of sleep, as it processes the stimuli of the day. There is no new input during sleep, just digestion of what has been taken in during the waking hours. When well-rested, we are better problem solvers and thinkers; our brains have had adequate time to get organized.

The NIH publishes a free PDF, entitled Your Guide To Healthy Sleep, <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/resources/sleep/healthy-sleep>, that has more information on getting a good night's rest.

4. Minimize (or avoid) mood-altering substances.

Even for the non-addict, substances (including alcohol) are often used to avoid or anesthetize difficult feelings. In many societies, it is common to use alcohol to treat social anxiety and facilitate connection.

It's important to understand that substances do not treat difficult emotions; they simply delay the normal processing of emotions. Any feelings, avoided in the moment, will simply have to be experienced later. Taken to the extreme, addicts are involved in a vicious cycle of substance abuse caused by avoidance of the ever-worsening backlog of feelings.

Regardless of whether someone has a substance abuse problem or not, substances impair judgment and destabilize emotions. Caution should always be employed.

5. Know when to ask for help.

If you are in physical or emotional pain or your mind or body is acting unusually, see your primary care doctor. And, if you don't have a primary care physician, now is the perfect time to establish care with one.

Some people will be unable to implement any of the self-care principles listed above due to physical or emotional issues; this is a

reason to seek professional help. Others may find that even after applying the basic self-care principles, they continue to suffer from difficult emotions--another reason to find a mental health professional.

Asking for help is not weakness, it takes courage, and, if anyone says otherwise, talk to someone else.

These are the basics of self-care, the necessary foundation upon which a fulfilling life is built. Once the fundamentals are established, more is possible--loving relationships, meaningful work, creative and restorative play--each with their own self-care tenets. . . . And the complexity grows.