



Caregiver Self-Care

Why Self-Care is Important for Caregivers

When you are raising a child or children, self-care often gets pushed to the bottom of the priority list. After all, you have kids that need your help with homework, getting dressed, basic daily living skills, etc. However, when caregivers don't make time for themselves and engage in self-care activities, they are more likely to be stressed, tired, anxious, depressed and have low frustration tolerance. Taking care of yourself isn't a luxury, it's a necessity. If you aren't decompressing and engaging in activities that you enjoy and recharge you, then you aren't going to be able to sustain momentum, especially when raising a child with challenging behaviors.

If you, as the caregiver, begin to experience low energy, frustration, anxiety, depression or other related symptoms, you will not be able to keep your children from experiencing the same. Kids are very in tune with their caregivers' emotional state. If you are feeling anxious or agitated, they will then become uncomfortable and mirror those emotions. This in turn will cause more stress, frustration, and faster burnout.

Being "on" and at the ready for your children at all times can cause burnout and turn everyday enjoyments into laborious tasks. For example, just playing with your kids could begin to feel overwhelming or frustrating. However, if you are recharged from regular self-care, you will be able to enjoy those moments more often. Self-care is not a selfish act but rather it allows you to be the best caregiver you can be.

What Caregiver Self-Care Looks Like

Self-care is anything that you do that is **enjoyable** and **recharges** you. But, ultimately, it's making time for yourself on many different levels. Below is what that might look like in different domains:

Emotionally

- Be creative: painting, drawing, creating something can all allow you to express your emotions (even baking and cooking have been shown to use the creative parts of your brain and boost mood)
- See a therapist: talking to someone about the stressors of parenting/work and learning effective coping strategies may be helpful
- Cry: allow yourself to cry it out
- Write: journaling can be therapeutic and allows you to get your emotions out of your head
- Find things that make you laugh (e.g., movies, books, TV shows)
- Say "no" to extra responsibilities: saying no is crucial, especially if you already have too much on your plate

Physically

- Exercise: preferably on your own so you are getting "you" time, but this could also be with friends or as a family if that would be restorative for you



- Sleep: this one can be hard with younger kids, but it's still important to try to make happen. This could look like asking a relative, friend, or even a babysitter to watch your kids while you take a nap
- Eat healthy: be sure to get enough fruits and vegetables as well as take vitamins to help with any gaps in your nutrition
- Be affectionate: either with your partner or even with your kids or pets. Being affectionate is proven to lower stress levels.
- Take a hot shower or bath: hot water raises your internal temperature which allows your body to relax more effectively. You can also add certain essential oils like lavender to make it a more relaxing experience.
- Go for long walks: preferably without kids
- Have a cup of calming tea
- Stretch: stretching is a great way to relax and can be done anywhere
- Engage in a sport

Socially

- Spend time with friends: go out to eat or get drinks, go see a movie, have a game night
- Schedule time to talk to another adult each day
- FaceTime or use other video chat platforms to connect virtually with those you cannot see in person
- Join parenting social group: look online to find parenting groups that meet regularly
- Join a community sports league

Intellectually

- Read: take time to read books you have been meaning to read. Read for fun or for educational purposes.
- Play games or do puzzles
- Listen to podcasts or radio shows
- Write stories, poems, songs
- Watch documentaries
- Engage in old or new hobbies
- Find a project that you would like to complete and would be rewarding

Spiritually

- Attend a religious service (in person or virtually)
- Meditate or pray every morning or evening
- Do volunteer work or help out others in your community
- Contribute to causes you believe in
- Engage in social activities that are uplifting
- Spend time outdoors and enjoying nature



How to Set Boundaries with Others, Even your Kids

It is important to set boundaries with others so that you can regularly engage in your self-care activities. Setting boundaries can be hard at first and you may even feel guilty. But it is important to remember that you cannot be or do your best if you are not recharged and able to decompress. Below are ways to set boundaries with others, even your kids.

1. Define your boundaries: let others, including your children, know that you are engaging in activities away from them in order to recharge and be ready to play with them later.
2. Make your expectations known: let others know what you expect from them while you are engaging in self-care activities (i.e., do not call/text, do not come in the room, etc.) and what they can expect from you (i.e., what time you'll be home, where you will be, how to contact in an emergency, who they can reach out to instead of you for non-emergencies, etc.)
3. Validate others' feelings regarding your absence but do not give in: others, including your kids may try to make you feel guilty for taking time for yourself. But explain to them the importance of you being gone AND how you understand that they are sad or upset about it. Validating feelings does not mean you agree with them but rather that you understand why they may feel that way.
4. Stick to your boundaries: consistency is always key. If you are not sticking to your boundaries, others will not stick to them either.

Tips for Finding Time for Self-Care

Knowing and doing are two separate things. You may know that you need to make time for self-care, but how do you do it? Below are different ways to make that happen.

- Enlist family, friends, neighbors, or even a sitter to watch your kids while you take a walk, go out with friends, or recharge alone.
- Tag-team with your partner: ask your partner to watch the kids while you go do something and then switch.
- If you are not able to leave the house, try to just take a shower or bath alone.
- If possible, take some time off from work to engage in a self-care activity.
- You and your partner can take a day off while the kids are at school and do something together.
- If you have a child at home during the day who still takes naps, do something for yourself while they are napping
- Schedule self-care time like any other appointment. This will make it more likely that you will keep it.
- Take time when you can. Be flexible when opportunities arise and you find yourself with time on your hands. Even if it is only a half hour.

Lastly, sometimes you are in a situation where you can't take time for yourself. Below are activities you can do that promote self-care with your kids. Plus, it will help them de-stress and re-energize.



- Practice taking deep breaths: there are lots of YouTube videos online to help with doing this correctly.
- Have a dance party
- Go for a walk
- Watch a funny video or show
- Read each other jokes
- Read a book together
- Draw or color together
- Listen to music together
- Do each other's hair
- Dress up together
- Make a comic or a short story
- Play games
- Make a fort
- Plan your favorite vacation or your perfect day
- Look up recipes to cook now or later

Self-care is vital for everyone but especially caregivers. Do not put yourself last. It is similar to the guidelines when using an oxygen mask in flight; you need to put your own oxygen mask on before you can help anyone else with theirs, even your kids.