

A four-step guide to self-care: THE TOOLS YOU NEED FOR GREATER PEACE, HAPPINESS, AND RESILIENCE

RECLAIMING THE TERM “SELF-CARE”

The term “self-care” has turned sour for many in the past several years. Personally, when I hear the term, I think of the continuous marketing push I see in my social media feed to order *this* skincare product to make me look younger, *that* bath salt to melt away my stress, *another* miracle supplement that will cure my insomnia or *an activewear set that will inspire me to get outside*.

Of course, the reason we’re sucked into all this promotion is because it’s designed to make us feel like we’re failing: marketers create the illusion of what we *should* be like and then sell it to us. No matter that it’s all a sham and most of us have neither the time nor money to buy into it.

Self-care is a billion-dollar industry – but if you’re like me, the constant push of products, experiences, and workshops is overwhelming (and causes more stress than it solves). It’s a luxury to be able to take part in the self-care industry, but when did taking care of yourself turn into a commodity?

According to [ASD Market Week](#), between the years of 2019 and 2020, Google search trends showed a 250% increase in self-care searches. Additionally, this industry’s value has skyrocketed, from 10 billion in 2014 to a whopping 450 billion in 2020 ([Treating Yourself and the Commodification of Self-Care](#)). Much of what I’ve noticed in the marketing of self-care focuses on instant gratification – a dopamine hit to distract you from life’s challenges.

This won’t solve the problem of chronic stress and burnout – so the question is:

What can we do to meaningfully take care of ourselves in the long term without burning our pockets or filling our schedules?

To me, self-care involves supporting ourselves in ways that genuinely promote well-being and resilience.

Let's explore four essential self-care practices backed by science without the unnecessary stress of perfectionism or financial strain.

STEP ONE:

FOSTER A SENSE OF SELF-COMPASSION

Self-compassion involves extending the same care, understanding, and support to yourself that you would offer a friend when facing challenging situations, setbacks, painful feelings, or personal inadequacies.

Kristin Neff's research on self-compassion consists of three interacting components, each of which has a positive and negative pole:

- **Self-kindness vs. Self-judgment**
- **A sense of common humanity vs. Isolation**
- **Mindfulness vs. Over-identification**

SELF-KINDNESS

refers to being caring and understanding with oneself rather than harshly judgmental. Instead of attacking or berating oneself for personal shortcomings, the self is offered warmth and unconditional acceptance.

COMMON HUMANITY

involves recognizing that humans are imperfect and that all people fail, make mistakes, and have serious life challenges. By remembering that imperfection is part of life, we feel less isolated when we are in pain.

MINDFULNESS

in the context of self-compassion, involves being aware of one's painful experiences in a balanced way that neither ignores and avoids nor exaggerates painful thoughts and emotions.

Research suggests self-compassion is strongly related to psychological well-being, personal initiative, motivation, accountability, increased happiness, optimism, and connectedness, as well as decreased anxiety, depression, neurotic perfectionism, and rumination (**Reff, Nude, & Kirkpatrick 2007**).

Practicing self-compassion is an important aspect of self-care. Here are a few ways to incorporate self-compassion into your life:

GRANT YOURSELF KINDNESS

When you experience failure, painful situations, or other life challenges, treat yourself the way you would treat a friend. You may be used to self-criticism or beating yourself up when you fail. Instead, ask yourself, “How can I offer myself support in this moment?” or “What support would I offer a friend if they were going through this?”

TAKE A MOMENT TO BE PRESENT

Let yourself feel the painful situation for what it is. How does it feel in your body? What emotions are present? Here are a few examples of how you might name the feelings:

- This is anxiety
- This is stress.
- I feel tightness in my chest.
- This hurts.

Allow yourself to notice these feelings without judging them. Let them be just as they are.

REMIND YOURSELF THAT STRUGGLES, PAIN, AND SUFFERING ARE A PART OF LIFE

This is the practice of common humanity.

- Other people feel this way or have felt this way before.
- You are not alone.
- Suffering is a part of being human.



If you'd like to explore self-compassion further, here are couple other practices you can do:

• **Self-Compassion Break**
(#6 and is around 4 minutes long)

• **Self-compassion meditation**
(4 minutes long)

• **Self-Compassion Meditation**
(#5 and is around 20 minutes long)

• **Deepening self-compassion**
(14 minutes long)

STEP TWO:

PRACTICE REGULATING YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

Humans are prone to negativity bias, which means that the brain preferentially looks for negative information or threats over positive information.

Negativity bias is an evolutionary trait from early human history. Paying attention to threats (the bad, the negative, the dangerous) over the positive was a matter of life and death. Those who paid more attention to the dangers around them were more likely to survive, passing this trait down to future generations.

This bias was useful when we were vulnerable to the threats of nature on a consistent basis, but now even as we have evolved, we retain this ancient trait in our brain, which responds involuntarily to any threats that come our way.

At one time, this protected us, but now it interferes with our ability to function in the modern world, where the threats we experience are much more subtle (and generally less life-threatening).

The threat-defense system evolved so that when we perceive a threat, our amygdala (a region in the brain which deals with threat) gets activated, we release cortisol and adrenaline, and we get ready to fight, flee, or freeze. The system works well for protecting against threats to our physical bodies, but nowadays, most of the threats we face are challenges to our self-image or self-concept. Unlike being chased by a lion, our current stressors often don't resolve (with a lion, you either escape or you don't).

There are many instances in our lives that can trigger the activation of our sympathetic nervous system, leading to the fight, flight or freeze response. Whether it's an overwhelming workload with little recognition, worries about money, relationships, or your career, holding the majority of the mental load at home, or the constant exposure to distressing news as you scroll through social media, it is crucial for us to have the tools to calm ourselves in the face of stress.

Prolonged stress can lead to burnout, which reduces the function of our parasympathetic nervous system (which helps calm us). This can affect our sleep, immune system, digestion, and other important bodily functions.



One way to regulate our body is to learn how to activate our vagus nerve, which represents the main component of our parasympathetic nervous system. The vagus nerve helps regulate most of the bodily functions necessary for our health and emotional well-being, and by stimulating this nerve, it sends a message to your body that it's time to relax and let go of stress.

Regular vagal nerve activation can lead to improvements in mood, well-being, and resilience. Stimulating the vagus nerve also helps us better manage anxiety and stress when they arise.

There are many simple ways to activate the parasympathetic nervous system to calm ourselves down.



A practice for accessing the healing power of the vagus nerve (from [Stanley Rosenberg](#))

Lie on your back

Interweave your fingers on both hands and place them behind your head

Without turning your head, look all the way to the right

Remain here until you spontaneously yawn or swallow

Return to the neutral state with head and eyes straight ahead

Repeat on the left side



Here are a handful of simple activities you can do at any time

- Take slow + deep breaths from the belly
- Unclench your jaw and release your shoulders
- Take a walk in nature
- Reach out to someone to feel connected
- Splash cold water on your face or take a cold shower
- Think about someone you love (this releases oxytocin)
- Listen to a relaxing sound or song
- Practice mindfulness meditation
- Laugh out loud
- Hum or sing
- Gargle water

One more practice I'll share with you is to try this experiential practice

Taking in the Good
by Dr. Rick Hanson



This practice, over time, helps you rewire the brain to notice positive experiences over negative ones.

These are helpful tools to have in your pocket when you notice stress overwhelms you.

STEP THREE:

CULTIVATE CURIOSITY

Think about what it feels like to be curious. This is usually a very fun feeling. That's because it speaks to your passion and the natural drive within us to explore and know our world.

Here are some prompts to help you:

- When was the last time you explored a topic because it piqued your interest?
- When you're out in nature, what does it feel like to look around and absorb the world around you?
- What does it feel like to close your eyes and listen to the sounds around you?

This type of curiosity is called “interest curiosity,” and it's the type of curiosity that feels open and explorative (different from “deprivation curiosity,” which is driven by a lack of information and feels like an itch to be scratched).

Next time a negative thought pops into your mind, try being curious about it.

- How does it feel in the body?
- How am I reacting to the thought?
- Can I acknowledge that it's just a thought?
- Can I also acknowledge that all humans have negative thoughts?

Here's a practice by Dr. Jud Brewer that will help you cultivate curiosity in your own life

Cultivate curiosity in your own life



STEP FOUR:

REMEMBER OUR SHARED HUMANITY

I believe collective care is also a form of self-care. It doesn't just feel good to care about others; it benefits all of humanity (including ourselves).

The idea of common humanity refers to seeing our struggles and failures as core components of what makes us human rather than as personal failings that separate and isolate us from other people. All humans wish for safety, comfort, connection, and relief from suffering.

Everyone knows what it's like to fail, say the wrong thing, and feel overwhelmed. When we experience difficult feelings, acknowledging our common humanity can take away our sense of isolation, reminding us that we are connected to all humans, even those very different than us.

When we're chronically stressed, we're more reactive, and we operate more from the primitive brain. This can initiate our fight, flight or freeze response. We see others more as objects than as people — objects who are meeting our needs or not. We are much more likely to dehumanize others and act impulsively in this state of mind, often not thinking about our actions as we're doing them. We respond more out of anger and fear, closing ourselves off in an effort to self-protect and self-preserve; in other words, our actions are self-oriented.

When we struggle with feelings of burnout, failure, and helplessness. It is important to remind ourselves that we are not alone in those feelings. These feelings are part of the shared human experience.



Seeing our commonalities helps us act responsively (instead of reactively).

When responsive, we have the ability to access our inner tools of compassion, empathy, mindfulness, curiosity, understanding, and perspective. We are less likely to view someone as "other than us" and are more likely to hear the needs beneath their perspective. Remembering our common humanity, even with people we do not agree with, can help us remain calm and act responsively.

Here are a couple of practices to establish the feeling of common humanity:

• Common Humanity Practice
(#8 and is around 17 minutes long)

• Shared Identity Practice
(around 2.5 minutes long)

The U.S. surgeon general has also raised the alarm about the current “epidemic of loneliness and isolation” and has stated that this lack of connection can increase the risk of premature death to levels comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. These practices invoke the feeling of connection, which I hope also inspires you to connect to those in your life you care about. When you’re aware that all humans experience suffering, you can use it as fuel to reach out and check in on those you love.



I hope seeing self-care through the lens of supporting your overall well-being feels supportive. Through slight shifts in the way we see ourselves and the world around us, we can lay a foundation for resilience and growth. With practice, you’ll be able to recognize what is nourishing to you and let go of the rest.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kristine Claghorn".

Kristine Claghorn
Global Compassion Coalition