Foothold

Self-care: how do I start?

Do you sometimes feel tired and lethargic, no matter how much sleep you've had the night before? Or maybe you're getting overwhelmed by a never-ending list of errands?

Sure, we all go through busy times. An intense week at work, worrying about a health niggle, looking after a newborn - most of us would find these life changes challenging. But these can also be signs that in the busy race of everyday responsibilities, you may be overlooking your number 1 priority - your own well-being.

What is self-care?

Simply put - it's paying attention to and looking after your own mental and physical health.

For some it'll be setting aside time for a weekly yoga session or 5 minutes of meditation. Others will dedicate a few hours of Netflix or take an extra-long walk on a Sunday morning. Self-care means putting on your own oxygen mask in a plane, before helping anyone else. Because looking after others, same as working and socialising, needs inner resources because you can't pour from an empty cup.

Scientific research overwhelmingly supports self-care and its many benefits. Making a conscious effort to look after yourself will lead to reduced stress, better sleep, increased resilience, focus and productivity. So how do you start bringing self-care into everyday life? By getting your basics right.

Sleep

Sleep is as important to our health as eating, drinking and breathing. We all know the quality of our sleep affects our mental and physical well-being, and almost every aspect of our lives. Our bodies repair, process information and memories when we're asleep.

The key to sleeping well is creating a routine and sticking to it. Humans generally need between seven and nine hours of sleep every night to function well. Some people enjoy staying up a little later at night, while others prefer waking up early in the morning. So listen to your body when creating a sleep schedule. Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day so your body can find its natural rhythm and settle into a regular sleep-wake cycle.

If you have trouble falling asleep, a wind-down routine may help. Make sure you're relaxed, and avoid looking at your phone, computer or TV screen for at least an hour before bedtime. Another good tactic is writing in a journal or reading before bed. It'll help process any worries that may be getting in the way of you nodding off.

Eat

We've all heard of 'you are what you eat' from just about every possible source – doctors, TV programmes, parents.... But you don't need to meal-prep like a fitness influencer to nourish your body and eat foods that give you energy.

Cooking from scratch whenever possible and avoiding processed foods will get you most of the way to a good, wholesome diet. But food isn't just about sustaining our physical bodies so occasional treats shouldn't be labelled as 'bad foods'. They'll provide variety and feed your soul too.

Just like with sleeping, taking care of your basic dietary needs is about creating a daily pattern to follow, so try to stick to regular mealtimes.

If you go long periods of time without eating, your body can't function at its best. If you're not eating often enough, you'll find yourself unable to think clearly. This is because our brains use glucose as fuel. Skipping meals can also cause fatigue and headaches, and nobody's at their best when they feel unwell.

Eat mindfully and stop when you're full. Eating on the go (or at your desk!) isn't great for your digestion, stress levels or general enjoyment of your food. If you're at work, aim to sit down away from your workstation, use tableware and really taste the food you're having. And when you're at home, try focusing your attention on your meal, without watching TV or using your phone.

Taking your time and noticing what you're eating has many benefits like lower stress levels and even weight loss. So why not try it during your next meal?

Move

We all know exercise is good for us, but many of us underestimate the benefits. Exercise can help both physical and mental health, boosting your mood and reducing stress and anxiety.
Regular movement also supports your immune system and weight-loss efforts!

The mental health benefits of exercise are particularly impressive. Movement promotes positive changes in the brain. This includes neural growth, reduced inflammation, and new activity patterns. Thanks to a release of feel-good chemicals, you notice increased feelings of calm and well-being.

Of course, daily gym visits are unrealistic for many of us. So other exercises, such as walking or playing a sport could fit into your schedule more easily. Walking is the great unsung hero of fitness: it's simple, free, can be sociable and you can do it anywhere! An hour of walking has shown to reduce rates of major depressive disorder by 26%.

If you're thinking of starting to exercise (well done!) remember that a little bit is always better than none at all. To start with, aim for a brisk 10-minute walk each day, then gradually increase it to 30 minutes per day. You could fit this in on your way to or from work, getting your weekly shop or picking the kids up from school. The most important thing is to create a routine that works for you.

Start small

Remember that self-care doesn't have to be lengthy, complicated or cost money. The purpose of it is to help you recharge and relax so you can be fully present in your life.

A self-care routine isn't something that will happen right away and on its own. But look at it as something that will help you become a happier, more settled version of yourself. When you make time to look after yourself, you'll be better equipped to deal with any surprises life throws at you.

So start with one thing today! – maybe get off at an earlier bus stop on your way home or add a few veggies to your dinner plate tonight. Then keep doing it!