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Vergie Charlery's Self Care e-book #6

Mental Self-Care



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Mental Self-Care

When was the last time you did something to help increase or maintain your mental well-being? If you can't come up with a satisfactory answer right away, you're not alone. We don't always think of our mental well-being as a priority, and taking care of our mental health can seem arduous when our careers, education, family, and social lives demand our attention. Yet, to be really present at our jobs, classes, and family or social gatherings means more than showing up physically. If we don't care for our mental well-being, we may encounter difficulties in all settings and start experiencing mental distress.

Mental or psychological well-being involves healthy patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

It affects how we extract information, make decisions, express ourselves, and relate to others. Maintaining our mental wellness is vital to our quality of life, which is why taking care of our mental health is an essential dimension of self-care.

We all have different mental wellness needs. Therefore, caring for our mental well-being looks different for everyone. Some mental self-care activities involve decluttering our minds. Others focus on

reducing stress. Yet, some other activities are designed to keep our minds sharp. By investing a relatively short amount of time each day to care for your mental health, you can benefit for years to come.



Mindfulness

Have you ever gone to a restaurant or another public space and observed other people? Chances are that many people were looking at their phones even as they were eating their meals or conversing with their friends. Wouldn't it be better if they

actually paid attention to their food's taste or were entirely engaged in their conversations? In other words, wouldn't they enjoy their meal or interaction even more if only they were more mindful?

One of the most popular topics in psychology is mindfulness. As a result, we hear about it in various contexts such as mindful eating, mindful parenting, mindful exercising, and mindfulness meditation. But what is mindfulness, and how does it work?

We can define mindfulness as being fully present in the current moment without any judgments. When we are mindful, we pay attention to our experiences, emotions, thoughts, and everything and everyone else in our surroundings.

We all can be mindful and notice what is going on at that specific moment. Yet, most of us don't practice mindfulness much, if at all. When you first start paying attention to what's going on, you might feel awkward or uncomfortable. This is normal. Mindfulness involves becoming aware of all kinds of experiences, thoughts, and emotions, which you then acknowledge and accept without judging. And sometimes, what you become aware of is unpleasant or bitter. Yet, the more you practice being mindful, the better you understand these thoughts and emotions. In the end, you get better at being in the present moment. One of the best ways to hone our mindfulness skills is by practicing mindfulness meditation. Here is an exercise to help you get started.





Exercise: Mindfulness Meditation

Whereas mindfulness is being present in the current moment without any judgment, mindfulness meditation is the activity we can use to train our attention to cultivate or improve our ability to be mindful. This brief mindfulness meditation example is designed to provide you with the basics of this technique. Pick a time that you can stick with every day. For instance, you might want to meditate in the morning while you are waiting for your coffee to be ready.

- 1. Find a suitable place to meditate.** Ideally, your meditation spot would be free of distractions and provide a surface where you can sit comfortably.
- 2. Close your eyes and bring your awareness to the sound of your breath.** Feel the cool air entering your body through your nostrils and the warm air leaving your body. Feel the surface under your body and how your body feels against it.
- 3. Now bring your attention to the sounds in the room.** Maybe you hear the coffee machine burbling or your cat purring. For the next few minutes, listen to these sounds without judging.





4. **Next, bring your attention to the sounds in the distance.** These may be birds chirping, dogs barking, or vehicles passing by. They can also be leaves rustling or rain droplets hitting your window. Again, listen to these sounds without making any judgments.
5. **Open your eyes and observe what you see in your surroundings.** Notice any movements, such as the fan blades rotating or your cat's belly rising and falling with each breath.
6. **Keeping your eyes open,** bring your attention to the surface under you, the air entering and exiting your nostrils, and every sensation your body feels. Slowly stretch any muscles that may feel tight as you finish your practice.

Take home:

In this short meditation, you incrementally increase your awareness by focusing on what's happening closest to you and then bringing your attention to what is happening in your surroundings. Practicing mindfulness meditation (as in this example or numerous examples available online or at meditation centers) can increase your ability to be present in the moment.

Take a Break From Electronics

Suppose you and your partner are sitting next to each other. Your partner is scrolling down their social media feed, and you are reading the news on your phone. Your partner longingly looks at the happy pictures of other couples on their feed and wonders why the two of you seem to be losing that joyous connection you once had. Meanwhile, you click on an article about ways to figure out whether your relationship is destined to fail. If you could change one thing in this scenario, what would it be?

Undoubtedly, the emergence of smartphones and other portable electronic gadgets has made our lives easier. Imagine carrying a road atlas, a

compass, a calculator, an agenda book, a camera, a record player, a computer, and many other stand-alone items separately. Luckily, our phones allow us to fit all those functions into one palm-sized device. But as the saying goes, everything is good in moderation.

Many of us pull out our smartphones any time we feel bored or are uninterested in what we are doing at that moment. But our phones aren't the only electronics we use to soothe our boredom and lack of interest; we binge-watch TV shows or search for new cat videos on our computers to keep ourselves entertained.



Breaking up with electronics isn't a viable option for most people. Nevertheless, we can all benefit from taking regular breaks from electronics. There are numerous benefits of these breaks. For example, you can declutter your mind and pay more attention to what's happening around you or the task you are working on. That way, you can increase your task performance by finishing it (potentially) faster and without making careless mistakes. Even if you aren't working on a task, spending hours on your social media accounts or online stores may make you feel unproductive. You can change that by taking a break from your electronics and finding something else to do with that free time, which might be a simple chore such as tidying up your room, a brief meditation, or your favourite relaxing activity.



Visualization

Have you ever daydreamed or imagined yourself elsewhere doing something completely different? If you have, then you have the basic skills to incorporate visualization into your mental self-care routine.

Simply, visualization allows you to discover the depths of your mind via imagining yourself in a situation and exploring a scene, image, or journey, as well as your feelings, emotions, and reactions to them. Moreover, visualization has been shown to increase athletic performance (Ranganathan et al., 2004), promote relaxation (Yu et al., 2014), and reduce stress while increasing sleep quality (Amini, Shirvani & Bazgir, 2022).

There are different visualization practices for different goals, such as stress relief, mood improvement, relaxation of muscle tension, promoting sleep, increasing confidence to achieve goals, or feeling at peace. Here is an exercise to help you feel peaceful.





Exercise: Guided Imagery

Guided Imagery is a visualization technique often used to evoke positive scenes to help you unwind and feel at ease. In this example, you'll find your "happy place" that you can imagine at times of stress or whenever you feel the need.

You might want to read the following instructions before beginning and do what you can remember. It's okay if you can't remember specific details. Alternatively, you may record yourself reading these instructions at a slow pace and with long pauses between steps or ask a friend to read them to you.

1. **Find a quiet place and get in a comfortable sitting position.** Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths as you quiet your mind.
2. **Once you achieve a quiet mind, start visualizing a place** that makes you feel safe, calm, and content. This could be a place you have been to or a place you created in your mind.





3. **Now start noticing as many details as possible.** Notice all the objects and living creatures around you, if there are any. Notice all the colours, sounds, and textures. Is your happy place sunny, or are you seeing bright stars above you? Do you feel a light breeze on your skin, or are you in a wooden cabin, sitting next to a fireplace with crackling flames?
4. **Continue breathing slowly with your eyes closed,** fully experiencing your happy place for the next few minutes. Imagine feeling a little bit more content with each inhalation.
5. **When you feel completely at ease,** you can leave your happy place by slowly opening your eyes.

Take home:

When you finish this visualization exercise, you may feel happier and more relaxed. You can visit your happy place any time you feel the need to release some tension or ease your mind.

Positive Self Talk

Positive self-talk is what the supportive voice in our minds does. Instead of hearing your inner voice put you down and criticize you mercilessly, positive self-talk allows you to empower yourself. In other words, positive self-talk is like having an inner cheerleader. It makes us feel encouraged, valued, and supported. When we use positive self-talk, we feel more ready to deal with stressful events in constructive ways.

Evidence has shown that supportive self-talk can promote success. In one study, children trained to give themselves positive self-talk performed better in a subsequent math assessment (Thomas et al., 2020). Furthermore, another study conducted with adult athletes has found that positive self-talk increased performance, reduced anxiety, and enhanced the subjects' self-confidence (Hatzigeorgiadis, 2009).

So how do we develop positive self-talk? As you might have guessed, positive affirmations can help you develop a supportive inner voice. Positive affirmations are supportive statements about yourself that you repeat to shift your mindset towards positivity. Repetition is key to

the success of affirmations; the more you restate positive statements about yourself, the more likely your mind will start thinking about them automatically (Paulhus, 1993).





Here are some affirmations that may help you get started.

- I appreciate my qualities, talents, and abilities.
- I don't have to be good at everything to feel good.
- My life is full of potential.
- I define what success means for me.
- I am comfortable in my skin.
- I am capable of learning from my mistakes.
- I am in charge of my life and my decisions.
- I am worthy of respect, kindness, and love.
- I am proud of my progress.
- I deserve peace and joy.
- I have the power to change.
- I am kind and compassionate towards myself and the people in my life.



Exercise: Personalized Affirmations

The positive affirmations listed above are general statements. Yet, you may benefit from creating your own set of affirmations that reflect your qualities and goals. You can do this by writing personalized positive affirmations using the instructions below.

- **Use the present tense.** Your affirmations should be about you at this moment. So, start your sentences with “I am...” or “I can...”
- **Add a personal touch.** Incorporating your goals or wishes can strengthen your affirmations and make them more personal.
- **Be precise.** Try to be specific in your phrasing so that your affirmations fit your goals or situation. Avoid vague statements like “I am okay.”
- **Keep it short.** You are more likely to remember and repeat concise statements.

Take home:

Repeating your positive affirmations regularly can help you change your narrative over time and develop a positive inner voice. Moreover, feel free to revise your list of personalized affirmations whenever you need to incorporate new goals or address current circumstances.

Undoing Rumination

Way back people needed record players to listen to the music of their choice. Yet, record players didn't always create an optimal listening experience. For instance, if a record was damaged, it would repeat the same short audio sequence over and over. If you think about it, that repetition is not dissimilar to rumination, replaying the same negative thoughts in your mind repeatedly. In other words, when you ruminate, your mind turns into a record player stuck like a broken record.

There are many reasons why we ruminate. We might be upset about a stressful situation or have experienced a traumatic event. Hence, we may replay these events in our minds. We may also keep repeating any negative thought patterns evoked by these events. For instance, a person may ruminate about having lost their job and keep repeating that they are untalented or unworthy. Another reason we may ruminate is

perfectionism, such as when we have high standards and fail to meet our expectations. Yet, we may also ruminate about something in the future, such as an upcoming exam or a dentist appointment next week. Whatever the reason, repeating the same negative thoughts as a broken record can diminish our self-esteem. It can even lead to anxiety and depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2000).

So how can we stop playing the same negative thoughts as a broken record? We can start by silencing our inner critics. After all, there is a negative voice in our heads doing all that talking. When you catch yourself ruminating, you might want to stop that voice immediately and give your mind's platform to the cheerful voice you developed earlier. You can summon your positive voice by repeating your affirmations or by simply letting them oppose the negative statement of your inner critic.



Mental Sharpening

Mental sharpness isn't something we think about much. Especially when we are still relatively young, we tend to take our brain health for granted. But just like we need to do physical exercises to keep our muscles strong and bodies healthy, we need to care for our minds, too. Certain brain exercises can help boost your memory and focus, allowing you to keep your brain sharper as you age. Let's discuss how you can keep your brain sharp.

1. Avoid smoking and alcohol.

Smoking and alcohol consumption is harmful to your brain. How? Smoking can increase the risk of stroke and dementia (Rusanen et al., 2011). A study conducted with men and women across different race groups found that the heavier a person smokes, the higher their risk of developing dementia (Rusanen et al., 2011). Similarly, studies suggest that heavy alcohol use depletes thiamine (vitamin B1) in brain cells, alters their metabolism, and increases the risk of dementia (Rehm et al., 2019).

2. Learn a new language.

Research has shown that bilingualism may strengthen your cognitive abilities and protect your brain against cognitive decline and dementia, even if you learn your second language later in life (Bak et al., 2014).



3. Learn a complex skill.

Taking a class to learn a new skill can also help you keep your brain sharp. A study with older adults compared the cognitive effects of learning a complex skill such as digital photography or quilting to simpler mental activities like solving crossword puzzles. When the subjects were tested three months later, the participants in the complex skill learning group showed a significant improvement in memory tasks (Park et al., 2014).

4. Read for leisure.

If you are a bookworm, we have good news for you. If you aren't into books yet, here is a reason to consider reading as your new hobby. Reading can sharpen your brain. That's right. In a 14-year longitudinal study with nearly 2,000 older adults, scientists tested whether reading affected their

cognitive performance. After adjusting for variables, they found that frequent readers had a reduced risk of cognitive decline compared to other adults (Chang, Wu & Hsiung, 2021).

What about cognitive training apps and games? Although many of these apps claim to sharpen your mind and increase your cognitive abilities, evidence suggests that their effect is quite limited (Butler et al., 2018). This limitation is due to the narrow set of cognitive skills trained with these methods. Therefore, the only improvement users get is the few skills engaged in such training activities. In other words, using these cognitive training apps is like strengthening only your biceps by doing biceps curls and expecting your entire body to get in great shape. Therefore, you might be better off choosing a more wholesome brain-sharpening method, such as a new hobby that requires you to learn complex skills.



In Sum

No matter how busy we are, taking care of our mental needs is vital for our well-being. Mental or psychological well-being reflects how well our minds function and can affect how we extract information, make decisions, express ourselves, and relate to others. Therefore, maintaining our mental wellness is essential to our quality of life.

Activities that declutter our minds, reduce stress, and keep our minds sharp can keep our brains healthy. By taking care of your mental and cognitive health, you are likely to enjoy the benefits of your mental well-being for years to come.

