



How Self-Care Improves Your Physical and Mental Health

Juggling the pressures of family, work and other responsibilities can make for a hectic life. Self-care provides the key to keeping things in balance, yet many Canadians overlook this important need.



In this eBook you will learn about the importance of self-care, how it can help you maintain good health, and tips to create a self-care plan that can help you stay healthy and thrive in life.

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The importance of self-care



Self-care can strengthen our ability to cope with life's demands by refreshing and rejuvenating us, both physically and mentally. *Obesity Canada* notes that "if you do not create time for self-care you will likely end up taking unplanned sick leave" ³. In fact, each year Canadian workers average almost two weeks in casual absences related to mental health.

At the same time, according to a 2018 survey for the *Canadian Mental Health Association*, 53% of adults feel that anxiety and depression are becoming an "epidemic" in Canada ⁴.

When self-care is missing, you don't feel your best. Work seems more difficult, it's hard to concentrate and you may become impatient with people around you. You may experience a host of physical symptoms or have trouble sleeping. Healthy choices like nutritious meals, getting to the gym or time with friends, fall by the wayside. The good news is that self-care can make a difference over time. Daily moments of self care, like putting more zzzz hours in your day, can help reduce risk of diabetes and depression ⁵.



What self-care involves



The *Self-Care Foundation* recommends the following key areas⁶ for attention:

- Make healthy lifestyle choices – nutrition, exercise, sleep – and avoid unhealthy ones – smoking, excess alcohol.
- Be responsible in use of prescription drugs and non-prescription medications.
- Pay attention to how you feel each day, and whether there's a change. Be an active partner with your healthcare professional in understanding and managing your health.
- If you're living with a chronic condition, learn to recognize your symptoms of illness and what to do about them – on your own and along with your healthcare provider or others with the same condition.

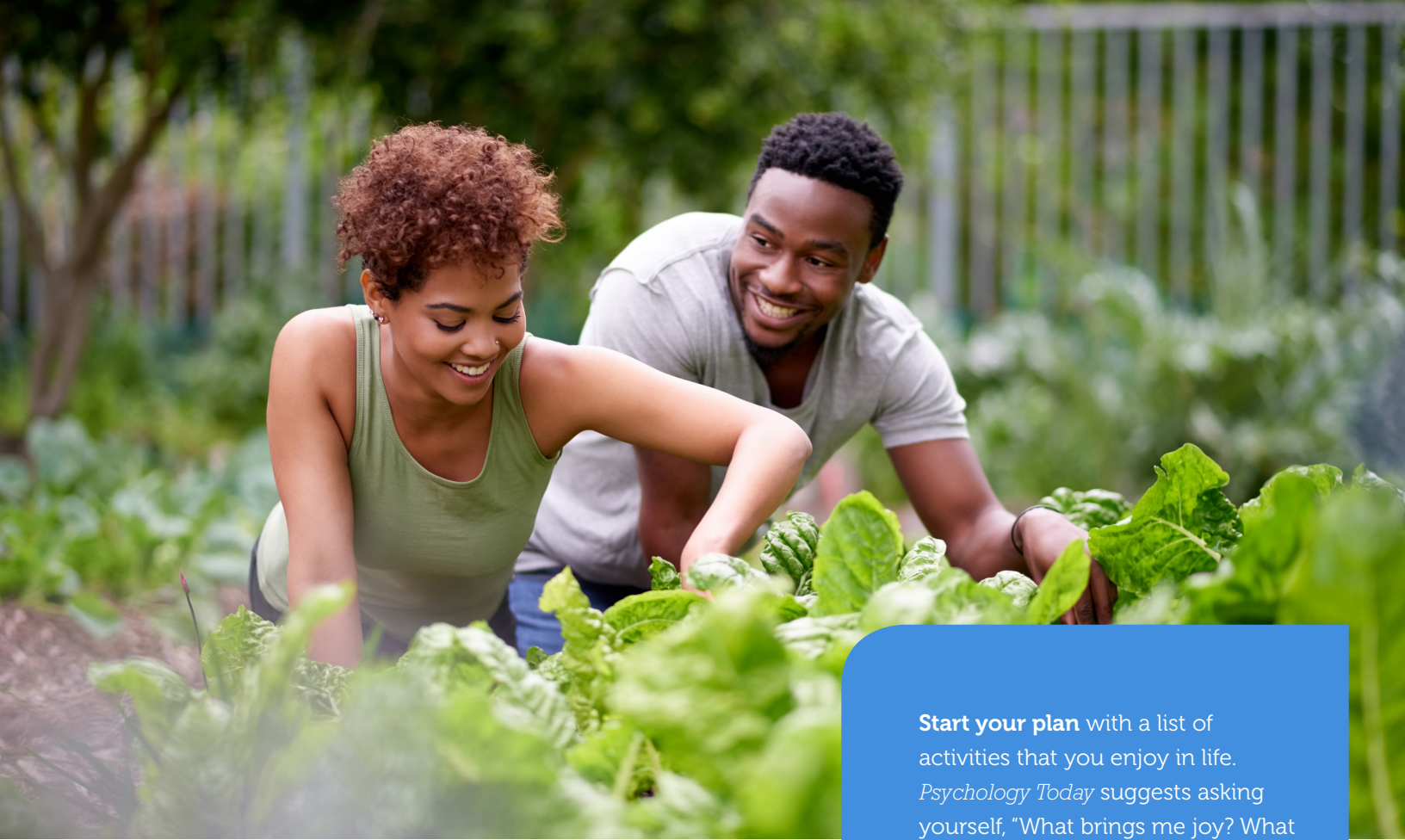
Making self-care part of your daily life

What's important is making self-care part of your regular routine. Surprisingly, some counselling psychologists suggest starting with a "no" list: saying "no" to things you don't like or that you want to change. These might include get-togethers you just don't enjoy or checking your phone too often or during meals. Saying no means deciding to focus on what it is important to you and getting other people to lend a hand when you need it.

Your "yes" list would include well-established basics like a nutritious diet, regular exercise and enough sleep (7-8 hours for adults) and attending medical appointments as scheduled. Your list should also include activities that bring pleasure and relaxation, such as time with friends and family or enjoyable activities like a walk outdoors, going to the cinema, or cooking. A good piece of advice is to do at least one pleasurable activity every day and look for opportunities to laugh. Studies show that laughter brings a good dose of benefits ranging from stimulating many organs, activating and relieving your stress response, to soothing tension.⁷

Sometimes taking a vacation day for your mental health is the right thing to do. It can help de-stress, reset your perspective, rest and relax⁸. If possible, get permission in advance from your boss. Take a walk in nature, explore a museum, attend a yoga class, go for a swim, or just lose yourself in a good book. The key is relaxing with an enjoyable activity away from your regular routine.





Your personal self-care plan

Consider crafting a personal self-care plan for yourself. When you're juggling priorities or under pressure, your plan will keep you on track and guide you to good choices. It helps you make sure you're meeting your goals.



Start your plan with a list of activities that you enjoy in life. *Psychology Today* suggests asking yourself, "What brings me joy? What doesn't? What do I want to change? Where can I fit self-care into my schedule?"⁹. Some activities may take only 10 or 15 minutes, while others need an hour or more. Be realistic. It can help to start with shorter, simple activities.

Identify potential obstacles and how you might avoid or move them. Can you ask someone else to swap shifts, pick up the kids or look after Mom? Try to include at least one enjoyable activity every day and treat your self-care activities like important appointments – which they are! Ask for support from others by sharing your plan with a friend or family member.

A couple is walking on a grassy dune at sunset. The woman in the foreground is wearing a grey beanie, a black vest over a light-colored long-sleeved shirt, and dark pants. She is smiling and looking towards the right. The man behind her is wearing a dark jacket and a dark beanie. They are walking through tall, dry grass. The background shows a sandy dune and a clear sky with a warm, golden light from the setting sun.

20

ideas to inspire you

The options are personal and plentiful, many of them free or low-cost. Suggestions¹⁰ from Psych Central include:

- Go for a walk in nature
- Listen to upbeat or relaxing music
- Sit down and put your feet up for 5 minutes
- Turn your phone off for 30 minutes
- Watch a comedy on TV
- Stand in the shower with the hot water pouring over your back
- Ask your spouse or partner for a foot rub or back massage
- Listen to a meditation ("Insight Timer" is a free app for meditations)
- Take an Epsom salt bath
- Schedule a date night with your spouse, partner, or friends
- Enjoy a hot cup of tea
- Spend 5 minutes taking deep breaths
- Get a manicure or pedicure, or give yourself one
- Attend a yoga class
- Make a gratitude list
- Write in a journal for five minutes
- Read a book for 20 minutes
- Go to bed 15 minutes early
- Unfollow someone on social media who is negative or makes you feel bad
- Schedule a get-together with friends.

Even with all its ups and downs, life is a gift. Whether it's a moment spent with a good friend, learning to meditate, or celebrating a milestone event, taking time for self-care helps to smooth the journey.

If you are in distress or need emotional support, call Crisis Services Canada toll-free at 1 833 456 4566 or text 45645. Open 24/7 year-round. If it is an emergency, please call 911.