

The Limits of Self-Care

Category: Healing

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I've been thinking lately about the perils of self-care. I'm an unlikely critic of anything that promotes wellness, especially among clinicians, who face daily affronts to our desire to care deeply and well for our patients. But hear me out.

We live in a consumerist society. Any notion with a glimmer of truth will be trumpeted, captioned, tweeted, and twisted into a sales pitch, whether by backyard YouTubers or major corporations. I do think self-care is important—of course I do!—but not the way most people understand it.

Because I dwell in the world of medicine more than that of commercialism (thank goodness!), I also live by the belief there is no “always” or “never.” We deal in gray areas. So almost every catch-phrase needs a footnote:

“You have to help yourself before you can help anyone else!” (Unless helping yourself hurts someone else. Then maybe it's not such a great idea).

“You have to take care of *you*.” (But if you have children, you have to take care of them, too. No, really, you do.)

“No one has the right to tell you what you should do.” (Except ... laws. Yeah, we have those for a reason.)

Self-care, if you believe the marketing, can get expensive: spa visits, massage chairs, gym memberships, luxury vacations, bingeing on ... well, anything. Plus, self-care sometimes sounds like one more thing for the to-do list. The price of not taking care of yourself, whatever that means to the marketer du jour, is guilt. *Feeling sad? You did this to yourself. When was the last time you put your needs above everyone else's?*

What we need more of is self-compassion.

Some people need time away. Some need to exercise. Others are recharged by a day at the gym. For me, time at home (maybe even with the people I love!) fills my cup more than anything else I can dream up or buy. While self-care can veer too easily into narcissism, self-compassion asks a question—What makes you feel good about yourself?—and makes room for us to figure out the answer. Not as flashy, but worth the effort.

Try it. It takes only a moment to take a deep breath and remind yourself that you're doing your best. Treat yourself like someone you care deeply about. Maybe that involves wine and a cruise ship—but I'll wager that a hug and a smile might go farther.

Caregivers offer compassion to others all day long. It's time we save a little for ourselves. We are worth it.

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