



UIC Counseling Center

April 16, 2020

The Case for Self-Care

In this issue, we tackle self-care: that pesky concept that we all seem to know is good for us, yet it can be so hard to do (or to feel like we have permission from others to do). Self-care is essential even under the most ordinary circumstances, so we want to talk with you this week about how to be sure you are caring for yourself as you navigate your own unique circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What is self-care?

Self-care is more than just bubble baths and Netflix binges –self-care is any activity we engage in to nurture and restore our bodies and our minds amid the demands of daily life. Naturally, what qualifies as self-care and how much of it is needed will vary from person to person. For example, an introverted person may not find talking with a large group of people to be a restorative self-care activity, though that same activity may be just the type of self-care a more extroverted person needs. Self-care can also look different depending on one's cultural identities and value systems.

Why is self-care important?

Self-care is the key to a balanced lifestyle; not only does it feel good, it helps move us forward in the areas of our lives that matter most. For example, students tend to perform better on exams if they take breaks while studying than those who study without taking breaks. (Especially if you use the break to exercise, meditate, or sleep – sorry Facebook, social media can actually cause more stress!) We are better versions of ourselves when we take care of bodies and minds, which matters not only for ourselves but for the people around us. So do the selfless thing and take care of yourself!

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What makes self-care so hard to do?

I don't have time! We know that many UIC students juggle multiple demands; self-care activities don't often make the cut during a busy semester. But when we wait until we "have time," it may be too late for self-care to serve a preventative purpose. Self-care is best practiced when you *make* time for it: write reminders for yourself and ask others to hold you accountable. Try to be specific about what you plan to do, and try to anticipate where self-care is needed in your schedule (e.g., after a stressful online lab). Consider cutting certain things from your schedule, where possible, and protecting self-care time from other obligations.

Others might judge me! Whether it's a parent who expects hard work, an overbearing supervisor, or a judgmental roommate, others often impose their values and expectations on us, making it difficult to justify self-care. With these individuals, it can sometimes be helpful to talk about realistic expectations and practice setting boundaries. If these strategies are not effective, it may make sense to accept that our actions may disappoint others at times.

We don't do that where I'm from! It may be difficult to make time for self-care if your cultural norms or values inform you to put others or their evaluation of you before yourself. We in the mental health field can certainly relate to prioritizing others' needs, but we must frame our own self-care as an ethical obligation that enables us to give our best care to those who rely on us. We support your value of caring for others *and* also encourage you to be mindful of what you must do for *yourself* in order to fully engage with that value. It is also common in many cultural or social groups to resist asking for help – but asking someone else to care for you represents self-care too!

I don't deserve self-care! The right to self-care is not earned; it is something we all can do to feel better and perform our duties more competently, which becomes an upward and ongoing cycle. If you are struggling to believe this, you may benefit from [self-compassion resources](#) and/or a consultation with a counselor.

Now more than ever, self-care is NOT a luxury – it isn't a selfish indulgence, a sign of laziness, or something to do "if you have time." We are all worthy of self-care, and we at the Counseling Center hope this week's newsletter helps each of you to espouse the self-care you need and deserve during this uncertain time. ♦

Self-Care With You in Mind

For those who can't stay home

To our first responders, medical professionals, grocery clerks, restaurant staff, postal workers, sanitation workers, and other personnel putting in work in our community – a heartfelt “thank you” for the work you’re doing to help your community during this trying time. We recognize that for some of you it may not be a choice to not come to work, and even while you provide essential and key support services, you may feel deeply impacted by the stress of living and working in a pandemic, not to mention fear of contracting or spreading illness. To the extent possible, we encourage you to keep in mind some basic tips to manage demands at this time:

- Physically: Try to prioritize sleep, as it supports the immune system and lowers cortisol levels. Have accessible snacks and plenty of water as you provide your essential service. Aim for at least 15 min of sunlight per day to regulate circadian rhythm and boost mood.
- Mentally: Reconnect with yourself and how you’re doing – this may be done by setting an intention for the day, plugging in a mindfulness app for a few minutes after work, or taking a few deep breaths. The pull to remain on the go can be strong, but unless you find moments to take care of yourself, you are at risk for experiencing burnout or other emotional complications.
- Relationally: Consider building in daily (5 min) debriefings with your team, participate in group texts or hop on a video call during a day off.
- Spiritually: Amid the stress you are surely enduring, try to stay connected to your values and to the meaning of your contributions.

For those who have lost their employment

To our community members who are navigating this strange and scary time and recently lost their job – we recognize the unique financial and psychological constraints this places on you and your families. The weight of uncertainty is amplified when you’re unsure how you may afford groceries or pay rent. Thankfully, there are [campus](#), (also see [here](#) for more UIC resources) [local](#), [state](#), and [national](#) resources available to help offset the impact somewhat. You may also be contending with an utter loss of routine, meaning and professional identity, which is a unique grief to hold at this time. Here are a few tips for your consideration:

- You may be having impulses for how to cope with your distress. Self-care isn’t always about following the emotional impulse (I just want to watch the first season of Ozark!) but rather, to intentionally ask yourself – how am I feeling and what do I need to do to address that feeling? Sometimes the answer is to treat yourself with comfort food or escape with sleep, but sometimes it’s to have a hard conversation, finish that essay, or prep tomorrow’s healthy lunch.

- Be present: This is a time of crisis, and your feelings (anger, fear, sadness, disillusionment, hope, loneliness, etc.) are valid and *normal* during these atypical times. We encourage you to be open to and accept that you may feel these emotions strongly at certain moments. When these strong emotional waves pass, refocus your intention – what’s a meaningful act that you can do to that would help you feel engaged in something worthwhile? The goal here is not to achieve previous levels of productivity but more to help you feel like you have options to exercise meaningful acts that align with your values.

- Stay connected: Many of us are grappling with a profound sense of loneliness, and those who have maintained connection to others through their jobs may especially be feeling it. Make efforts to check-in with others to maintain that sense of connection.

For those working/studying from home

We realize that while all of our students are adjusting to completing their academic work from home, some are also doing jobs from home, and even managing child care/education. Some are getting used to being home with family, coping with roommate stress, or navigating isolation. Students consolidating so many parts of life to one place are in definite need of self-care! Try to:

- Be patient: When so many roles and demands are converging at once, it may seem like all are a top priority that must be done NOW. Give yourself permission to do one thing at a time
- Integrate self-care: Many of us adapted to life at home on the fly. As you adjust to your new routine, ask “what’s missing?” If someone who cared about you created your schedule, what would it look like? Remember that self-care is sometimes hard - it may not always look like rest/relaxation but can also look like productivity and work. The key is balance. Try to know when the self-care you need is a movie night and when it looks like work you know you need to do that is ultimately good for you.
- Check out these [tips for staying mentally well while working from home!](#)

When home is not safe

For some of our students, the shelter-in-place order means forced contact with abusers or toxic environments. Even if it isn’t ongoing, living in places so closely linked to traumatic memories can make it difficult to function. Self-care is at its most fundamental under these circumstances and looks like safety. If you are living with ongoing abuse, avoid engaging with your abuser and fly under the radar. If you are coping with traumatic memories, treat yourself with the gentleness and understanding you need, not with the internalized voice of your abuser. Know that you do not deserve your abuse and that you do deserve happiness, peace, and healthy relationships. Practice self-care by asking for help at [UIC's Campus Advocacy Network](#) or the [UIC Counseling Center](#).

OVERALL KEYS TO SELF-CARE

Mindfulness. Check in with yourself – how are you doing physically? Emotionally? With your relationships? Spiritually? In order to know what you need, you have to pay attention to how you feel. If you know that talking to a friend helps when you are feeling anxious, you have to be willing to acknowledge that you are feeling anxious. Try some of our [Koru Mindfulness](#) meditations to get started.

Integration. Self-care is great when applied as-needed, but it works even better when it is integrated into your routine. As you continue to develop and adapt to stay-at-home life, [evaluate](#) whether you need to integrate more self-care activities, like exercise, eating fruits and vegetables, talking with friends or family, or getting enough sleep. Ask yourself, “what’s missing in my routine?”

Balance and flexibility. While they may seem at odds with routine, balance and flexibility are also important for self-care: the ability to establish healthy habits *and* to be mindful enough to know when we need to deviate from them can be foundational for good mental health. For balance: try experimenting with your optimal balance of self-care, both in terms of time and type of activity; for example, consider whether you need self-care in the way of rest or in the way of productivity. For flexibility: when you’re feeling exhausted or upset, or even have a decision to make, ask yourself, “If I cared about myself, what would I do? Would ___ be good for me?”

Remember, you are worthy of self-care!

Self-Care Guide During COVID-19

If you need to care for your body:

[Exercise! Stretch! Dance!](#)

Eat three meals per day, including healthy snacks, whole grains, fruits, and vegetables; avoid sugar and drink a lot of water

Take a nap/get enough sleep

Avoid alcohol and other drugs

Practice safe sex (that respects the shelter-in-place order!)

If you need to go inward:

Write in a journal or try an [expressive writing exercise](#)

Pray/meditate/develop a spiritual practice

Reflect on your most joyful memories/ count your blessings

Think about what you value most in life

Imagine yourself succeeding

Identify realistic goals for the year/semester/week

If you need to connect:

Talk to friends, family, or a counselor

[Help a friend or seek remote volunteer opportunities](#)

Express appreciation, on the phone or in a letter

Focus on listening

Spend time with pets

If you need to relax:

Practice [diaphragmatic breathing](#)

Imagine a relaxing scene or [watch a guided meditation video](#)

Try [progressive muscle relaxation](#)

Take a long bath or shower

Enjoy a cool glass of water or a warm cup of tea/decaf coffee

Try aromatherapy

UPCOMING WORKSHOPS/EVENTS

FEELIN' GOOD FRIDAYS WORKSHOP SERIES

FRIDAYS FROM 11:00AM-NOON, STARTING APRIL 3RD

Join us online for upcoming weekly workshops on test anxiety and self-compassion! Registration is required through emailing Johanna Stroffoff (jstroff@uic.edu) and Yun Lu (YunLu@uic.edu). Students are welcome to register for one to all workshops. [Click here](#) for more information!

MANAGING YOUR MOOD DURING A PANDEMIC WORKSHOP SERIES

TUESDAYS FROM 4-5:30PM, STARTING APRIL 14TH

Join us online for a 3-week structured dialectical behavioral therapy skills workshop! [Click here](#) for more information and to register.

DEALING WITH BOREDOM DURING COVID-19

MONDAY, APRIL 20TH FROM 11AM-NOON

Common experiences during this time include social isolation, disruption of routine, sadness, irritability, disinterest, and uncertainty. Join us to discover creative ways to find enjoyment and purpose, and gain a deeper understanding about what can bring you contentment during this difficult time. Click [here](#) for more information and to register.

NAVIGATING LIFE DURING THE PANDEMIC – HOSTED BY ARAB AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTER

TUESDAY, APRIL 21ST FROM 11AM-NOON

Join us for an online workshop discussing the challenges discussing the challenges of living with family, studying, and working while social distancing. Click [here](#) for more information!

UNITED PEER SUPPORT NETWORK GROUPS

MEETING WEEKLY AT THREE DIFFERENT TIMES!

Looking to feel more connected during this time of isolation? Our peer-led support groups are now meeting online and are open to any student! [Click here](#) for more information and to register.

If you need to get away:

Watch the sunrise or sunset

Limit news or screen time

Take a walk or a jog, in person or [virtually!](#)

Read a book or magazine

Attend an online/remote event – some ideas at UIC [here](#)

If you need to get creative:

Play [music](#), sing, hum, or whistle

Take photos or make a home video

Create a collage or online mood board that represents you

Learn a new [artistic skill](#) or hobby

Play like you did when you were a child

Write a poem expressing your feelings

If you need to work with your hands:

Avoid checking your phone while you complete a task

Go through your belongings and decide what you can donate

Simplify your environment and make it feel like home

Draw, paint, or sculpt; cook or bake; garden or plant something

Build something with blocks, origami, or Legos

Fix something that is broken or clean something that is dirty