

What Have You Done for Yourself Lately?

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Do you have the role or the personality type of the “caregiver”? Are you always there to help a friend or family member? Do you anticipate their needs?

Can you easily list the first ten things you would do to try to help a friend in need? Caregivers are essential to everyone; none of us can thrive all alone for long. Many of us devote a lot of energy to helping other people, both at work and at home, and we are very good at it.

Our Jewish tradition teaches us the importance of self-care as well. One of the most fundamental passages of the Torah is *ve'ahavta lera'achka kama-cha*, loving another as you love yourself. As a child, I was not able to grasp the magnitude of this verse. I thought of it purely as loving another in the way that I wished to be loved. As I grew, I began to realize the amazing gifts of this passage, including the insight that treating others in the right way began with treating

myself in the right way.

I remember, as a bride, I was especially touched by the blessing of “an overflowing cup.” We can’t toast from an empty glass; we must have something in our glass in order to give to others. And how much better if our glass is overflowing?

We can all remember the first time we got an expensive piece of equipment or a prized outfit. We checked the care label, read all the instructions, and committed them to memory. We made sure to use the product in the optimum way to get the best out of it.

Human beings do not come with care labels. We live in a constant state of stress. Current news reports of global uncertainty increase the stress. Yet there is no universal care label that keeps us well in typical times and restores us to good health during times of stress. However, we can optimize our lifestyle and our recovery plan to get the most out of our lives. It involves taking time out for yourself and taking

care of yourself.

Self-care is often misunderstood as binge-watching Netflix or a day at the spa. But self-care is the opposite of “checking out.” It is a mindful, repeated ritual. We need to practice self-care deliberately to reduce our stress and take care of our physical and mental health. Just as our cell phones need daily charging, a robust self-care plan should be practiced daily. Self-care is part of loving ourselves. I am sure there are many important self-care items that you already do in order to thrive each and every day.

One of the challenges of self-care is that you have to initiate it for yourself. To care for yourself, you have to know what you need. How aware are we of our needs? One characteristic of robust mental health is the ability to identify, understand, and regulate emotions. Being aware of our feelings, understanding what inner and outer circumstances generate them, and knowing how to influence and adjust our feelings all have a positive influence on our overall well-being.

Typically, when one encounters a situation that could make any sort of difference in one’s life, emotions immediately leap forward. The emotions are real, but they don’t always tell us directly what we need. Automatic responses assist us in instantly navigating perceived threats to our well-being. The mind’s immense range of strong feelings are meant to prompt us quickly into the safest action our primitive brain stems know. That’s how our bodies and minds are supposed to work.

Negative coping mechanisms are the fastest and simplest way to achieve momentary satisfaction or relief. So we might automatically feel the need to have a cookie, but when we eat it (or . . . them), cookies don’t really meet our needs. The relief is as fleeting as the fix. This is not true of a solution that came from toil and work. *Ethics of the Fathers* tells us “*Lefturn tsaara agru*,” “The greater

the toil, the greater the reward.”

To care for ourselves, we can first accept that we sometimes have unpleasant feelings. We can live with the fact that we have such feelings in the moment, and not run from it. When emotions are pushed aside, they get stronger. The more we try to negate our feelings, the greater their hold on us. When we accept that our feelings are what they are, we can look deeper and ask why they are that way.

We can ask ourselves, “What function does this feeling serve?” For example, we might notice that being down-in-the-dumps about how impossible a situation is convinces us that it’s not worth taking the risks that would be necessary to try to make things better.

As we gain skill in identifying our needs, we must also learn to advocate for ourselves to successfully meet those needs. If we tell our kids that they are always in our hair and they should leave us alone for a while, they’re unlikely to play happily while we read a book. When we can explain our needs and set our boundaries in a sincere and respectful way, we are better advocates for ourselves, and are more likely to have others’ help and cooperation in meeting our needs.

When faced with challenges or turbulent times, the need to thoughtfully increase our self-care is very important. The need to love ourselves more is imperative. During the current COVID-19 crisis, news sources are rife with mental illness statistics, mostly reporting adverse reactions and negative trends. Less commonly known information is what contributes to robust mental health. Is well-rounded mental health even attainable? As Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, “You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.” Taking one step toward improving mental health is important, especially during this time of uncertainty.

Grieving the many losses that COVID-19 has brought can have a negative impact on our overall mental health.

While we are staying home, some of our typical coping mechanisms are unavailable. For adolescents, socialization with peer groups and independence are such important parts of development, and for now adolescents have to socialize virtually, as well as spend all day under the parental eye. We are all forced to find new ways of adapting to our circumstances, our surroundings, and our family members.

Unusual surges of emotion are typical reactions to atypical situations. It is okay to have many feelings when faced with uncertainty. By giving ourselves permission to feel the full range of our emotions, we gift ourselves with compassion.

Self-compassion, self-care, and self-love are great tools for everyone. While the exact form of self-care will vary from person to person, you could say that the ritual of self-care is about as close as we come to having a universal care label for humans. Self-care is meant to make you feel good. You owe it to yourself to learn and practice self-care.

You also owe it to the others with whom you share your journey. In the early 1990s, Giacomo Rizzolatti, an Italian neurophysiologist, discovered what he termed mirror neurons. Mirror neurons are unique in that they fire from simply watching somebody do something or somebody feel something. So when you practice self-care, you send the message that you deserve it, and that you matter. And from mirroring this, your loved ones will understand that they deserve it, and they matter, too.

What are some of the things that you do for self-care? Here are some self-care suggestions. These suggestions are components of my self-care plan that I attend to daily to avoid burnout, and to calm and quiet my mind. Gratitude journaling, getting out in nature, reading a good book, listening to a podcast, turning the music a little louder, dancing, going for a walk, making yourself a healthy meal, drinking a warm beverage. What would you add to this list that fuels your growth? ■

