

Self-Care

Self-Care is a practice that is fast becoming central in mental health approaches to stress reduction and wellbeing, and it has always been a fundamental part of the Sanctuary Model. Self-Care is not about indulgence, rather it is about practicing caring for ourselves. Self-care is the intentional commitment to daily practices that build and maintain our psychological and physiological resources, so we can deal with uncertainty, stress, adversity, loss and even trauma.

Sadly in 2020 and 2021, with the impact of the Bush Fires and the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, additional stressors, uncertainty and unpredictability has burgeoned in our daily lives. The human brain is always trying to make sense of the world and find meaning, and so to cope with these rapid and unrelenting changes, many of us have been pushed into a kind of overload and exhaustion as a result. This is why self-care is imperative.

We need to make a daily commitment to doing the things that we know rejuvenate us, support us to keep balance and to maintain a healthy and optimistic outlook. Self-care is much less about enjoying ourselves and 'chilling out' or switching off after work, it is about valuing and investing in yourself, with the things you know keep you healthy, centered and happy. In the Sanctuary Model, a Self-Care Plan is part of the toolkit – it means creating a written contract with yourself, which encompasses an intentional commitment to daily rituals, practices and routines that support your holistic wellbeing. Key areas to include in a Self-Care Plan are:

1. **Sleep** – without adequate and quality sleep (at least 7-8 hours) our thinking is compromised, our mood is negatively impacted (because we don't replete neurochemicals like serotonin), and our bodily systems and functions don't have the opportunity to heal and properly regenerate, which can lead to increased illness
2. **Good Nutrition** – poor nutrition impacts on our immunity and our state of mind, for example too much fat or sugar in one's diet is associated with negative changes in our mood and even in our neurochemistry
3. **Exercise and movement** – exercise and movement are not just supportive of good physical health, they also work to manage stress and even reduce anxiety and depression
4. **Healthy relationship connections** – having healthy and positive relationships with others is associated with better physical and mental health (and even living longer). Supportive relationship connections have been shown to 'turn-off' our fight-flight (stress response) systems
5. **Mindfulness practices** - activities that promote present moment awareness e.g. breathing, creative art, gardening, meditation, prayer, fishing, dancing, and yoga - to name a few - have been demonstrated to have a positive impact on our stress response systems, and result in improved executive functioning

6. **Increasing our coping skills** - gratitude practices, journaling, affirmation, negative thought stopping, re-scripting and other practices like these, support us to ‘train our minds’ for greater resilience. They support us to embrace and process change, to look for what we can change and control, and to maintain an optimistic ‘growth’ mindset.
7. **Spiritual Self-Care** – include practices in your plan that promote self-reflection, connection with ‘something greater’, and the creation of meaning – these are tried and true ways human beings have learned over centuries, to not just cope with adversity, but to transform their experiences of it. This may mean regular rituals, ceremonies, prayer, mantra or other religious practices, but it extends also to advocacy, volunteering and community work, being in nature, for First Nations people it means connection with kinship networks, culture, Elders and country, and as Julia Baird says practicing ‘awe and wonder’
8. **Play** – don’t forget to play – fun, laughter, joy, celebration – these are all critical to our wellbeing – laughter releases ‘feel good’ chemicals in our brains like dopamine, and practices like these when done regularly, build ‘positive’ neurochemistry

Remember resilience is like a muscle, the more we use positive ways of dealing with challenges, adversity, stress and trauma – the better we get at it. This is what they mean by states become traits – the more we practice being calm, optimistic, or joyful, the more this becomes our new ‘equilibrium’. It is the small regular practices that count – these create habits and ‘re-wire’ our brains for optimal health and wellbeing. You can’t go to the gym for a full week and expect your body to change markedly- however, if you work out at the gym for an hour every day for six months you will see the results. Resilience building is the same.

It is important to recognize that Self-Care will be different for each person and also look different in different parts of your life. How we look after ourselves will evolve and change, the key is maintaining the commitment to care for ourselves.

