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Time to Truly Take Care

As the pandemic stretches out into months of managing the threat of the virus, we all continue to live with the day-to-day realities of reducing spread while maintaining our regular duties. The World Health Organization has indicated that the drawn-out and ongoing nature of dealing with the pandemic may be leading to “response fatigue”. The virus has not changed, but we, as humans, are shifting our behaviour and calculating our risk. We may be feeling emotionally and physically tired of processing and responding to the risks in our environment. We may feel over-stimulated and overwhelmed by all the changes and uncertainty. As this continues over time, our body and mind can’t maintain such a high level of response, and it can ultimately lead to fatigue.

We each have to take care of ourselves to be healthy, especially amid physical, mental and emotional fatigue. We need to take active care of ourselves by engaging in regular self-care practices. Often when we think of self-care, we picture grand gestures or luxury moments. However, caring for ourselves is ultimately about the little things and laying the groundwork for considering our own needs.

Check-In:

As we go about our life, meeting demands, changing and adapting to situations, we are busy managing what goes on around us. We forget to check in with ourselves, how we are doing and what we need. An essential part of a self-care plan is making time to notice ourselves.

Create times throughout the day to check in with yourself. To do this, all you need to do is ask yourself some quick questions such as: “How is my body feeling?” “What emotions are coming up for me?” “What do I need right now?” Then give yourself a moment to consider the answers. We need to tend to ourselves consistently in small moments throughout the day, rather than putting all our attention on what is happening outside us.

Deep Breaths:

Yes, we all breathe automatically, and it seems like such a simple suggestion that we often don’t believe that it will have a real impact. However, significant research has been done studying the various positive outcomes of practicing deep breaths. It activates our relaxation response as opposed to the stress response. Science has found that engaging in deep breaths can reduce stress and anxiety, can support pain management, reduce body tension, can benefit diabetes, reduce gastro reflux, increase energy, reduce inflammation in the body, as well as many other research outcomes. Even without all the research, when we practice taking a few deep breaths, we are usually met with immediate positive feedback from our bodies. There are many exercises and formalized practices for engaging our breaths, but at the core, deep breaths are so effective because it’s so simple to practice, and it’s always available to us.

The first step is to create a regular habit of deep breathing. Don't just try it when you're excessively stressed or overwhelmed, it's like showing up for the gold medal game without practicing, you have to practice, so it's available for the crunch times. Find times you can create prompts to remind yourself to activate your deep breaths. For example, instead of singing a song when washing your hands, try deep breathing instead. You could also try every time you get in the vehicle as a reminder to do deep breathing, it's often a time when we feel rushed as we are leaving one place and headed to another, plus you can breathe and drive. Some set an alarm or smart device to prompt them to take deep breaths throughout the day. However you choose to prompt deep breathing, it's about integrating it so it becomes easily and frequently practiced.

You can also search online for videos and instructions on how to breathe deeply. You can get started right now. Simply breathe in through your nose and slowly fill your lungs with air, then exhale. That's ultimately all there is to it, just slow it down and fill it up and repeat. Aim for several breaths several times a day and when you notice yourself struggling during the day, try some deep breaths first.

Take Care:

As we gain more awareness of our internal experience through checking in and breathing deeply, we can then begin to treat ourselves differently. Often we meet our struggles, such as fatigue, with criticism and self-judgment. Taking care of ourselves means offering ourselves self-compassion. When we make a mistake, let someone down, have an accident, etc. we have to let go of the urge to put ourselves down, and instead offer ourselves the compassion we would offer someone else who made a mistake. We would take care of others by offering kindness and understanding, while we might deny ourselves the same privilege.

The times ahead will be uncertain, and as human beings, we will inevitably make mistakes, yet we can also practice self-compassion. This means resetting our inner dialogue to give ourselves messages like, "It's ok I made that mistake, I'm still a capable person", "Even though I didn't do things ideally, I'm still worthy of love and care", or "Failure is a part of my evolving." Offer ourselves something to counteract and soothe the critic that usually shows up in the front row of our difficult times.

These aren't quick strategies to self-care, rather a deeper shift in perception about how we think of and treat ourselves. To take active care of ourselves, we must ultimately value ourselves and believe ourselves worthy of our care. When we are stuck in people-pleasing or unable to tolerate the emotional discomfort of others, we stay other-focused rather than self-focused. To practice self-care, it is necessary to cultivate the belief system that tending to ourselves is a genuine priority. Otherwise, doing things to look after ourselves will be about ticking a box rather than an authentic way to engage wellbeing.

If you need some support to shift to a self-care mindset, find people who are already practicing healthy self-care and positive beliefs. Learn from these role models and find what works for you. If you would like to reach out to the Employee Assistance Program to help you along the path to integrating self-care, reach out for a session.

Author: Stacey Hutchinson-Maund, M.S.W., R.S.W.

Additional Resource:

Simple Tips for Self Care – The Holistic Psychologist

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0X0vMYJ_zg

A Beginner's Guide to Breathwork – The Holistic Psychologist

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEW0TRQorLM>

Contact Information:

Employee Assistance Program

40B Burns Avenue

Charlottetown, PE C1E 1H7

Telephone: [\(902\) 368-5738](tel:9023685738) Toll Free: [1-800-239-3826](tel:18002393826)

Fax: [\(902\) 368-5737](tel:9023685737)

Website: <https://psc.gpei.ca/employee-assistance-program>

Email: eap@gov.pe.ca