

the guide to self-care for survivors

A trauma-informed workbook



introduction

Contrary to prevalent misconceptions, self-care is a concept that transcends the realm of face masks and bubble baths. In fact, these conventional notions of self-care are far from what we'd advocate, especially when it comes to supporting survivors of trauma.

Understanding that the healing journey for trauma survivors is a complex and deeply personal process, our approach to self-care aims to provide genuine support and empowerment. We recognise that survivors often face unique challenges, triggers, and emotional landscapes that call for a more tailored and holistic form of self-care.

True self-care begins with self-awareness and self-compassion. We encourage survivors to engage in practices that foster a deeper connection with their emotions, triggers, and needs. By recognising their strengths and limitations, survivors can navigate their healing journey with resilience and intention.

With best wishes,

Meredith Graham

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the complexities trauma survivor's face with self-care

Self-care can be difficult for survivors of trauma, regardless of the type of trauma endured.

The challenges trauma survivors encounter when it comes to recognising and prioritising their own self-care needs are multifaceted and deeply rooted.

Here are some of the reasons why:

- **High Tolerance for Discomfort:** Surviving trauma often demanded an immense capacity to endure pain and discomfort. This heightened threshold was a survival mechanism that allowed them to navigate through traumatic experiences. Unfortunately, this endurance mindset can carry over into their perception of self-care. They may downplay their own needs and discomfort, believing it to be a normal part of life.
- **Self-Worth and Deservingness:** Trauma survivors frequently struggle with feelings of unworthiness and disbelief in deserving good things in life. Past experiences may have left them questioning their value and worthiness of care, kindness, and positive experiences. This internalised narrative can hinder their ability to prioritise self-care as an act of self-love.
- **Limited Perspective of Possibilities:** The trauma lens often narrows survivors' perspective on life's possibilities. They might perceive positive change as something reserved for others, never truly attainable for themselves. This limiting belief can stifle their motivation to seek out different ways of living or engaging in self-care.

get to know the basics

There are four key dimensions to self-care, these are: emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual.

Within the realm of mental health services, particularly in the context of mental health assessments, clinicians undertake the vital task of evaluating an individual's capacity to navigate the intricate landscape of self-care across four essential dimensions. It's important to note that these dimensions are not rigid templates but rather *adaptable* frameworks tailored to each individual's unique circumstances.

For instance, your identification as a spiritual person isn't a prerequisite for acknowledging the spiritual dimension of self-care. This dimension extends beyond traditional religiosity and encompasses a profound connection to something greater than oneself. It can involve finding meaning in life, connecting with nature, or nurturing a sense of purpose. Clinicians appreciate that this dimension may manifest differently for each person, and they assess how you engage with it in ways that resonate with your personal values and beliefs.

why is self-care important?



Self-care holds immense significance for survivors of trauma, particularly those who have experienced sexual violence. The aftermath of such experiences can have profound and lasting impacts on a survivor's physical, emotional, and mental well-being. Engaging in intentional and trauma-informed self-care can play a crucial role in supporting survivors on their journey towards healing and recovery. **Here's why self-care is so important for survivors of sexual violence:**

- **Restoring Empowerment:** Trauma can leave survivors feeling powerless and stripped of agency. Engaging in self-care activities allows survivors to reclaim a sense of control over their bodies, emotions, and choices, thus restoring their sense of empowerment.
- **Creating Safety:** Self-care practices can provide survivors with a safe haven, offering moments of respite from the distressing memories and emotions associated with their traumatic experiences. Establishing safety within oneself is an essential step towards healing.
- **Reconnecting with the Body:** Trauma can lead to disconnection from one's body. Engaging in self-care that involves physical sensations, such as gentle movement, mindfulness, or relaxation techniques, aids in reestablishing a positive relationship with the body.

01.

practice self-care for the mind

Self-care for the mind of a trauma survivor involves nurturing mental well-being, processing emotions, and fostering a sense of safety and control. Here are some examples of trauma-informed self-care practices for the mind:

- **Mindfulness Meditation:** Engage in mindfulness meditation to cultivate present-moment awareness, reduce anxiety, and manage intrusive thoughts. Focus on your breath or sensory experiences to ground yourself.
- **Breathing Exercises:** Practice deep breathing techniques to regulate your nervous system and promote relaxation. Breathing exercises can help manage feelings of panic and anxiety.
- **Journaling:** Write down your thoughts and feelings in a journal. This can provide an outlet for processing emotions, reflecting on your healing journey, and gaining insights into your progress.

- **Positive Affirmations:** Create and repeat positive affirmations that challenge negative self-beliefs and reinforce self-worth. Choose affirmations that resonate with you and your experiences.
- **Art Therapy:** Express yourself creatively through art, such as drawing, painting, or crafting. This can be a nonverbal way to process emotions and channel your feelings into a tangible form.
- **Guided Imagery:** Use guided imagery exercises to create soothing mental landscapes that help you feel safe and relaxed. Visualise places or scenarios that evoke positive feelings.
- **Mindful Colouring:** Engage in colouring books or pages designed for mindfulness. Focusing on the colours and patterns can be calming and meditative.
- **Limit Screen Time:** Take breaks from screens to reduce exposure to potential triggers. Spend time engaging in offline activities that nurture your mental well-being.
- **Establish a Safe Space:** Create a physical or mental space where you can retreat to when you need to feel safe. Fill this space with comforting items, images, or scents.
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Practice progressive muscle relaxation to release physical tension and promote a sense of relaxation in your body. This can help alleviate physical symptoms of stress.
- **Gratitude Journaling:** Write down things you're grateful for each day. Focusing on the positive aspects of life can shift your perspective and improve your overall mood.
- **Cognitive Behavioural Techniques:** Learn and apply cognitive behavioural techniques to challenge negative thought patterns and reframe your perceptions in a healthier way.
- **Set Boundaries:** Establish clear boundaries with people and situations that might trigger distress. Communicate your limits and prioritise your emotional well-being.
- **Sensory Grounding:** Engage your senses to stay present and connected to the moment. Describe the sensations you're experiencing using each of your five senses.
- **Seek Professional Support:** Connect with a trauma-informed therapist or counsellor who specialises in trauma recovery. Professional guidance can provide personalised strategies and tools.

02.

practice self-care for the body

Self-care for the body of a trauma survivor is essential for promoting physical well-being, reconnecting with the body, and fostering a sense of safety. Here are some trauma-informed self-care practices for the body:

- **Gentle Movement:** Engage in gentle forms of exercise, such as yoga, tai chi, or walking. These activities can help release tension, improve flexibility, and promote a positive connection with your body.
- **Massage or Body Work:** Treat yourself to a soothing massage or explore other body-focused therapies that promote relaxation and physical comfort.
- **Breathing Exercises:** Practice deep, mindful breathing to calm the nervous system and reduce physical tension. Focus on your breath as you inhale and exhale slowly.
- **Healthy Nutrition:** Nourish your body with balanced and nutritious meals. Focus on whole foods that provide energy and support overall well-being.

- **Hydration:** Drink plenty of water throughout the day to stay hydrated and maintain physical wellness. Proper hydration can also contribute to better mental and emotional states.
- **Restorative Sleep:** Prioritise quality sleep by establishing a calming bedtime routine and creating a comfortable sleep environment.
- **Sensory Engagement:** Engage your senses to ground yourself in the present moment. Listen to soothing music, enjoy a warm bath, or savour a comforting cup of tea.
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Practice progressive muscle relaxation to release physical tension and promote relaxation throughout the body.
- **Self-Massage:** Use gentle self-massage techniques to soothe areas of tension or discomfort. This practice can promote body awareness and self-compassion.
- **Hot/Cold Therapy:** Use heat packs or cold compresses to relieve muscle tension or discomfort, depending on what feels most soothing to you.
- **Nurturing Routines:** Establish routines that prioritise self-care, such as taking regular breaks, stretching, or engaging in activities that bring you joy.
- **Physical Comfort:** Wear comfortable clothing that helps you feel at ease in your body. Prioritise physical comfort in your daily choices.
- **Nature Connection:** Spend time outdoors in natural settings to connect with the environment and experience the grounding effects of nature.
- **Warmth and Comfort:** Use soft blankets, cosy clothing, or warm baths to create a sense of physical comfort and safety.
- **Limit Exposure to Triggers:** Be mindful of potential triggers in your environment and take steps to minimise exposure to them.