

# Is self-care actually #selfindulgence?

It's the buzzword in the wellness world but  
we might have taken it to excess...

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**Y**ou only have to scroll through your social media feed to see how ubiquitous the term '#selfcare' has become. The new buzzed-about term in wellbeing, self-care has become a byword for treating yourself. Whether it's a co-worker seizing a duvet day or a friend treating herself to cupcakes for breakfast, the addition of #selfcare after a guilty Twitter confession can elevate it from a self-indulgent act to a noble feat of mindfulness.

And, while there's no doubt that we all have a duty to respond to our own needs,

especially when we are feeling stressed, anxious or overtired, it seems that somewhere along the line, 'self-care' has been adopted as a catch-all term to excuse selfishness.

"The true meaning of self-care is a very deliberate and conscious decision to step back and engage in kindness to oneself," says Dubai-based health psychologist Dr Melanie Schlatter. "The definition of self-care has clearly become very warped."

We are all for pushing the wellness agenda, but it's all about balance, explains Dr Annie Crookes, a psychologist from Heriot Watt University in Dubai. "The shift in society to measure and enhance wellbeing over purely

economic consumption is important and positive. However, with so much promotion and social media hype about self-care activities, the point about balance may have been lost. Self-care is ensuring there is time for yourself in amongst the time you give to others, your work and responsibilities. Self-care is not selfies, selfishness or avoiding responsibility to others."

Dr Crookes adds: "When we are faced with something effortful, challenging or scary, then our brains will always seek excuses or reasons to just stay where you are, conserve energy, don't change, don't push. So the self-care promotions are there





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to give us an easy way out. What self-care awareness should include are messages about developing self-awareness, about knowing the difference between care and indulgence, and about self-care being the Ying to the Yang...one does not work without the other!”

In reality, avoiding work or putting off unpleasant tasks by hiding under the comfort blanket of ‘self-care’ is just a band-aid solution to a bigger problem. Dr Schlatter explains: “When you engage in procrastination and avoidance, that’s hardly relaxing to the mind — there’s too much of a background awareness that something needs to be done, which you are ultimately putting off. Pure self-care is a conscious decision — it feels good and recharges you without any stress.”

Authentic self-care is all about the end result of an action. “If I have a monthly two-hour massage, it may feel indulgent, but the benefits would constitute self-care such as relaxation, time out, less muscle tension, a calmer mind and so forth. If I am eating a tub of ice cream, aside from instant gratification, there is little else to show for it that benefits me — that’s hardly caring for the self. Who could do that without guilt, which is stressful anyway, right?,” asks Dr Schlatter.

Dr Crookes adds, “It’s the difference between need and want — self-care activities are things you need in order to balance out the chores, stressors and responsibilities that are in your life. On the other hand, self-indulgent activities are things we simply want. Indulging in ourselves feels happy and fun in the short-term, but will not impact our longer-term wellbeing.” Eating an entire box of chocolates after a stressful day at work, for example, is an inauthentic form of self-care because it’s bad for your health in the long run. “Self-care is about overall wellbeing — not just feeling happy in the moment,” says Dr Crookes. “So an activity that is an indulgence like yummy fatty foods, or that extra glass of bubbles will add to our current mood state, but could be bringing down our overall wellbeing. Again, it’s about balance — food and drink treats, or putting off a task for a much-needed nap can all be fine in moderation. But becoming reliant on any of these external things to control your moods or to ‘band-aid’ your stress is not developing your self-awareness or ability to self-soothe, so then they become unhelpful and not self-care at all.”

As well as the usual guilt and stress associated with self-indulgence, modern self-care can bring a unique sense of guilt, as it’s often billed as another thing we have to achieve. When you’re juggling work and family, not setting aside time to follow the advice of a thousand Insta-memes and do a yoga session, meditate AND run yourself a bubble bath can leave you with an underlying sense of failure. “If the thought of needing to take time out and engage in self-care is stressful, then the very definition has been misconstrued,” says Dr Schlatter.

In fact, some of the most effective self-care takes away only a smidgen of time in your day, she adds. “Self-care could be taking a minute or two to do some deep breathing exercises; engage in a hobby; give yourself a hand massage; take time to sip a herbal tea; walk on the beach, or listen to music. The idea is that you are just taking a small moment to get present. You may take one minute because you are at work; you may take 20 minutes if it is the weekend. The best idea is to put a sticky note reminder where you do something habitually — a reminder to breathe by your toothbrush; a reminder to stretch by the shoe cupboard; a note to eat mindfully in your lunchbox. The most important thing is that it should never feel stressful. The ultimate outcome is to reconnect with what is going on around you and within you.”

Still unsure of the line between self-care and self-indulgence? A good litmus test for whether an activity is an authentic form of self-care is to question whether it is truly benefitting your physical, emotional or mental health, suggest Dr Crookes. “Self-care is about self-awareness — knowing when you need to build in something for yourself, and knowing what activities truly work for you.”

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