

The Self-Care Pillars

What Is Holding You Up Right Now?

Self-care is often reduced to treats, baths or taking time out. Those things can be enjoyable, but meaningful self-care is much broader. It is the collection of ordinary supports that help your body, mind and life remain sustainable: sleep, nourishment, movement, emotional care, connection, boundaries, an environment you can tolerate, purpose, enjoyment and access to support.

Imagine these areas as pillars holding up a structure. They do not all need to be perfect. Some may be strong while another is under pressure. The useful question is not 'Am I doing self-care properly?' but **'What is holding me up right now, and which part needs a little more support?'**

Self-care is not another performance

When people are already overwhelmed, a long list of wellbeing tasks can become one more demand. Self-care should reduce pressure, not create another standard to fail. Sometimes the most caring choice is doing less, asking for help, eating the easiest nourishing option available, cancelling something non-essential or going to bed.

Self-care is not about becoming a perfect version of yourself. It is about noticing needs early enough to respond to them.

Pillar 1 - Rest and sleep

Rest is a biological need, not a reward for productivity. Sleep supports attention, emotional regulation, memory and physical recovery. Rest also includes waking periods when demands reduce: quiet, stillness, low-stimulation time, breaks between tasks and moments when nobody needs anything from you.

- Is your sleep reasonably regular for you?
- Do you have any true downtime, or only time filled with different tasks?
- Are you pushing through tiredness because stopping feels guilty?
- What could make tonight or tomorrow slightly more restorative?

Pillar 2 - Nourishment and hydration

Self-care includes giving the body enough fuel and fluid to function. Nourishment does not need to look idealised. Illness, sensory needs, food intolerances, eating difficulties, finances, medication and executive-function challenges can all affect eating. The goal is appropriate, realistic nourishment rather than judgement.

Notice whether stress makes you skip meals, forget drinks, rely on quick energy or lose awareness of hunger and thirst. Practical supports - visible drinks, easy foods, reminders, prepared options or eating alongside somebody - can be legitimate self-care.

Pillar 3 - Movement and physical care

Movement can support mood, sleep and physical health, but self-care is not punishment through exercise. The right amount depends on your health, energy and circumstances. A walk, stretching, gentle mobility, dancing, gardening or structured exercise can all count.

Physical care also means attending appointments, taking prescribed medication correctly, responding to pain or new symptoms and allowing recovery when you are unwell.

Pillar 4 - Emotional wellbeing

Emotional self-care means making space to notice what you feel instead of only pushing through it. You may need to name an emotion, write, cry, talk, regulate, use therapy, practise grounding or simply acknowledge: 'This has been difficult.'

Not every uncomfortable feeling needs fixing. Sometimes emotions need witnessing. The aim is not to stay calm all the time; it is to build ways of responding that do not require you to abandon yourself.

Emotional check-in

What am I feeling beneath 'fine'? _____

What has been taking up emotional space? _____

What do I need: comfort, action, clarity, rest, expression or support? _____

Pillar 5 - Connection

Humans need different amounts and types of connection. Healthy connection may mean a close conversation, being around people without talking much, belonging to a group, spending time with family, sharing an interest or having one person with whom you do not need to pretend.

Connection is not measured by the number of people around you. You can feel lonely in a crowded room and supported by one safe relationship. Ask whether your current relationships leave room for honesty, reciprocity and respect.

Pillar 6 - Boundaries

Boundaries protect capacity. They help define what you can offer, what you cannot sustain, how you expect to be treated and when you need space. A boundary may be practical - finishing work at a certain time - or relational - refusing to continue a conversation where you are being shouted at.

People-pleasing can make boundaries feel selfish. Yet continually saying yes while becoming depleted often leads to resentment, exhaustion or withdrawal. A sustainable yes sometimes requires a clear no elsewhere.

- 'I cannot do that today.'
- 'I can help for 20 minutes.'
- 'I need more notice before making plans.'
- 'I am going to think about it before I answer.'
- 'I need some quiet before we continue this conversation.'

Pillar 7 - Your environment and sensory needs

The environment around you can either use capacity or support it. Noise, lighting, clutter, temperature, crowds, interruptions, smells and unpredictability can all affect wellbeing. This can be particularly important for people with sensory sensitivities or neurodivergent needs.

Environmental self-care might mean headphones, softer lighting, a predictable workspace, comfortable clothing, fewer notifications, a quieter route, reducing clutter one small area at a time, or creating somewhere you can decompress.

Pillar 8 - Purpose, meaning and enjoyment

Wellbeing is not only the absence of stress. People also need experiences that feel meaningful, interesting or enjoyable. Purpose can come from work, relationships, creativity, learning, caring, spirituality, volunteering, nature or personal values.

Joy does not have to be productive. An activity is allowed to matter because you enjoy it. When life becomes dominated by obligation, small moments of interest and pleasure can disappear first.

What still feels like me?

Something I enjoy without needing to be good at it: _____

Something that gives me meaning: _____

Something I have stopped doing that I miss: _____

Pillar 9 - Practical support

Sometimes the problem is not a lack of coping skills. There is simply too much to do. Practical self-care means reducing the actual load: sharing household tasks, asking for childcare, using workplace adjustments, automating bills, simplifying meals, arranging transport, asking someone to attend an appointment or breaking administration into supported steps.

It is easy to interpret needing help as dependence. In reality, humans routinely rely on systems and other people. Support can free capacity for the things only you can do.

Pillar 10 - Professional support

Self-care is not a substitute for healthcare or therapy when these are needed. Professional support may include a GP, therapist, counsellor, psychologist, psychiatrist, dietitian, occupational therapist, physiotherapist or another appropriate practitioner.

Seeking support early can be preventative. You do not have to wait until your wellbeing has deteriorated to crisis point.

Which pillar is wobbling?

When everything feels wrong, it can help to stop treating wellbeing as one enormous problem. Look at each pillar separately. One weak area can affect several others: poor sleep can reduce patience; isolation can intensify low mood; lack of boundaries can reduce rest; sensory overload can make social contact harder.

My pillar audit - score each 0 to 5

Rest & sleep ____ Nourishment ____ Movement/physical care ____
Emotional wellbeing ____ Connection ____ Boundaries ____
Environment/sensory needs ____ Purpose & joy ____
Practical support ____ Professional support ____

Do not automatically choose the lowest score as the place to begin. Ask which small change would create the biggest amount of breathing space. Sometimes strengthening one pillar helps several others.

A personal reflection

"I used to think self-care meant finding extra time for something relaxing, which felt impossible because I was already stretched. What changed was realising that self-care could be cancelling one thing, eating something easy, asking for help, turning my phone off, saying no without writing an essay to explain why, or admitting I was lonely. I stopped asking what a perfectly balanced person would do and started asking what would hold me up today." - illustrative personal reflection

Self-care when you are already exhausted

When capacity is low, reduce the size of the task. Instead of 'sort out my sleep', choose 'get into bed 20 minutes earlier'. Instead of 'eat better', choose 'put an easy food where I can reach it'. Instead of 'exercise', choose 'stretch for two minutes'. Instead of 'be more social', send one honest message.

Tiny actions are not meaningless. They can be bridges back to capacity.

- Drink something.
- Eat something manageable.
- Open a window or step outside briefly.
- Take prescribed medication as directed.
- Reduce one unnecessary demand.
- Move to a quieter or more comfortable space.
- Tell one safe person how you are doing.
- Book the appointment you have been postponing.

- Choose an earlier stopping point for today.

When self-care becomes avoidance

Self-care should support your life, not indefinitely shrink it. Sometimes an activity labelled self-care can become avoidance - repeatedly cancelling because anxiety is never challenged, spending beyond your means to feel temporarily better, using alcohol or substances to switch off, or withdrawing from every difficult conversation.

A useful question is: **Does this choice help me recover and return to my life, or does it repeatedly help me escape from something that needs attention?** There is no shame in noticing avoidance. It simply tells you that a different kind of support may be needed.

The minimum viable self-care day

On very difficult days, self-care may need to become extremely simple. Choose the minimum that protects safety and basic functioning.

My minimum viable day

Something I can eat: _____

Something I can drink: _____

Medication/health need: _____

One hygiene/basic-care task: _____

One person or service I can contact: _____

One thing I give myself permission not to do: _____

A weekly self-care review

- What depleted me most this week?
- What restored me more than I expected?
- Which pillar received almost no attention?
- Where did I say yes when I wanted to say no?
- Did I have enough connection - or too much social demand?
- Did my environment support me or overwhelm me?
- What practical help would reduce next week's load?
- What is one realistic adjustment rather than a complete overhaul?

For the person who feels guilty

Guilt often appears when you begin doing something differently. If you are accustomed to being available, saying no may feel wrong. If you are used to earning rest, stopping before exhaustion may feel undeserved. If you are the person everyone relies on, asking for help can feel uncomfortable.

Feeling guilty does not automatically mean you are doing something harmful. It may mean you are changing a familiar pattern. Healthy self-care includes considering other people's needs, but it does not require consistently abandoning your own.

Supporting someone else's pillars

When someone is struggling, asking 'What do you need?' can sometimes be too broad. Their decision-making capacity may already be depleted. Specific offers can be easier.

- 'Would it help if I brought you something to eat?'
- 'Do you want company or quiet?'
- 'Can I take one practical job off your list?'
- 'Would you like me to sit with you while you make the call?'

- 'Do you want me to listen, or would problem-solving be useful?'

Support should not remove autonomy. Offer, listen and respect the person's choices unless there is an immediate safety concern.

When more than self-care is needed

Self-care cannot solve every problem. Persistent low mood, severe anxiety, trauma symptoms, eating difficulties, significant sleep problems, substance misuse, inability to manage daily living, concerning physical symptoms or thoughts of self-harm deserve appropriate professional assessment.

If you are unable to keep yourself safe or there is an immediate life-threatening emergency, call 999 or go to A&E.; In England, NHS 111 can direct people to urgent mental health support. Samaritans offers emotional support on 116 123.

Books and further reflection

- *Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?* - Dr Julie Smith: accessible psychological tools for everyday emotional difficulties.
- *Burnout* - Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski: explores stress cycles, exhaustion and recovery.
- *Rest Is Resistance* - Tricia Hersey: a broader cultural reflection on rest, productivity and worth.
- *The Compassionate Mind* - Paul Gilbert: an introduction to compassion-focused approaches and relating differently to self-criticism.

Clinical and source notes

This resource draws on general public-health principles reflected in NHS guidance on mental wellbeing, sleep, physical activity, healthy eating, stress and accessing mental health support; NHS Every Mind Matters self-care material; and Mind information on wellbeing, stress and seeking help. The 'pillars' framework here is an educational organising tool rather than a validated diagnostic scale.

Individual needs vary. Advice around food, movement, sleep or physical symptoms may need adaptation for medical conditions, disability, pregnancy, eating disorders, neurodivergence, medication and other circumstances. Seek appropriate professional guidance when needed.

What is holding you up right now?

You do not need every pillar to be strong before life can feel better. Start by noticing what is already supporting you. Then notice what is wobbling. Choose one realistic action that makes your structure a little steadier.

Self-care is not about doing everything. Sometimes it is recognising the one thing you need most and allowing that to matter.

Space to Breathe Therapy - A place to reflect, understand your needs and create more room to breathe.