

# Self-Care Starter Kit

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# What is Self-care? And why is it so Important?



Self-care is the actions we undertake to look after ourselves, physically, emotionally and mentally.

It incorporates the essential acts of care that we all need to focus on – like eating well, keeping ourselves clean and getting enough sleep.

On top of that though, self-care is what nourishes us personally: the things we do that comfort us, calm us, and make us feel good. These will vary from person to person – you might be drawn to creative activities, physical pursuits, mindfulness techniques, a combination of all three or something different altogether.

## **WHY IS SELF-CARE SO IMPORTANT?**

### **1. It's good for our health**

Some self-care activities have physical benefits that can help our mental health. Exercise, for example, instantly triggers endorphins, and taken regularly can offer a whole host of mood-boosting benefits.

### **2. It's good for our hearts**

Self-care can also positively impact on our emotional wellness. Some self-care activities can directly impact on the stuff that brings us down. For example, decluttering our surroundings can leave us feeling lighter. Practising self-compassion can boost our self-esteem.

It sounds basic, but doing things that make us feel good, makes us feel good. Even if we can only do the tiniest thing, and even if that tiniest thing only opens the teeniest-tiniest chink of light within the black fug of our depression, we've still made progress.



### 3. It reminds us we are worthy

Our thoughts can be cruel: they sometimes tell us we don't matter, even though we really, really do. By prioritising self-care – taking time out to do something just for us – we counter those negative thoughts. We're showing them that actually, WE ARE worthy of attention and care. By prioritising self-care, we remind ourselves that we are worthy. And though initially we may feel some resistance to this (sadly, self-worth sadly can't be magicked out of the air), the more we practice self-care, the more we'll believe in our worth too.

### 4. It empowers us

Although medical and therapeutic assistance are vitally important in treating illnesses like depression, self-care is extremely helpful too. And whereas we're not always in control of the outside help we get – we rely on our doctors to make the correct choices about medication, we may need referrals or be on waiting lists for treatment – we can take control of our own self-care.

Making positive choices around our self-care is empowering. We show our depression, and ourselves, that we are still in charge.

### 5. You can start now

Self-care is accessible to everyone, and even the smallest acts make a big difference.

In fact, downloading this Self-Care Starter Kit counts as an act of self-care.

*You've started.*

Nourishing yourself in a way that helps you blossom in the direction you want to go is attainable, and you are worth the effort.

**Deborah Day**



# 5 Instant Self-care Things Which Can be Done From Your Bed

## **IDEA 1: BE KIND TO YOU**

Do you find yourself apologising for everything? Beating yourself up for past mistakes? Being much kinder to others than you are to yourself?

It's not an easy feat, but please try and be kind to you - be as patient, understanding and accepting of yourself as you are of others. It's not easy to change a habit, for some a habit of a lifetime, but we really do need to try and take care of the way we treat ourselves. That's the very essence of self-care, being mindful of how our words and actions can harm or heal.

## **IDEA 2: HAVE A DIGITAL DETOX**

Are there updates which appear in your Facebook feed which make your heart sink a little? Perhaps you follow so many people on Twitter that you can't keep up with it. Do you have an overflowing inbox, full of emails? Do the alerts on your phone interrupt your day or make you feel anxious?

- 1) Go through the list of people you follow on Twitter and only follow those who really interest you.
- 2) Use Facebook's 'unfollow' feature to remove updates from your feed which make you do anything other than smile/learn/feel good. You know the ones – those which make you feel below par, less of a person. The ones which kick-start comparison and the 'coulda, shoulda, woulda' thoughts. This feature allows you to remain friends with people but stops their updates popping up in your feed.
- 3) We can often find ourselves subscribed to dozens of newsletters. We don't know about you but we really notice this over any Christmas period when our normal email traffic is slower as people are off work. Every day, we had dozens of emails (most of which we don't remember signing up to receive) and so we spent some time unsubscribing or setting up email filters so that they no longer clog up our inbox. There's a really good programme to make this easier to do --> <https://unroll.me/>
- 4) Apps can be fantastic, they allow us to do so much from our smartphones and keep us connected. However, the notifications can be disruptive and cause anxiety. Consider changing the alerts in your phone settings. We've turned off notifications for all apps, including our personal social media networks. This means we have to mindfully check in to the sites rather than feeling demanded to do so because of a flashing light/alert. It means we can also focus more on whatever it is we're doing (work, spending time with family, sleep) and gives us some much needed headspace.

### ***IDEA 3: DEVELOP A BEDTIME ROUTINE***

Sleep plays such a pivotal role in our wellbeing. It's when our body gets the chance to repair and our brain gets the chance to file away the events of the day. So many of us struggle with getting a good night's sleep. As babies, our parents and carers are actively encouraged to develop sleep routines for us, developing cues so that we would know it was time bed.

How can you develop a routine for yourself? Can you go to bed the same time every night? Perhaps a warm milk before bed? A vow to turn your phone off an hour before you want to go to sleep? Soothing music might help too. Part of your routine might include proper rest breaks throughout the day to allow your brain to digest things as the day progresses, rather than when your head hits the pillow and you experience that 'wired' feeling.

We interviewed neurologist Dr Kirstie Anderson about the role sleep plays in our mental health. You can listen [here](#).

### ***IDEA 4: WRITE YOURSELF A LETTER AND POST IT***

Be a friend to you. Write a letter to you with the same words of kindness and general loveliness that you would write to another person. It's not easy to do and it might be that you instead, find a really lovely quote instead. If you're anything like us, you'll forget you've done this and it will be a lovely surprise.

Another thing you could try if your email provider supports it, is to email yourself some positive affirmations/words of encouragement and schedule them to arrive at ad-hoc dates. We use a Gmail add-on called Gmail Boomerang. Boomerang allows you to schedule when you'll receive those emails. They'll be a welcome surprise in your inbox.

### ***IDEA 5: PRACTISE SAYING 'NO' TO THE THINGS YOU REALLY WANT TO SAY 'NO' TO.***

This is a tricky one. Depression can make us really dislike ourselves. Some may start looking to others for approval and then find themselves saying 'yes' to every demand on their time, bending over backwards to be as helpful and accommodating to others as possible. It can be exhausting. We may also find we're agreeing to do things for others that we really can't be bothered to do, but we feel we ought to do. Other people's expectations of us can weigh heavy, we don't want to let people down, we don't want people to dislike us and we want to feel useful.

Doing something for someone else is a gift of your time, energy and commitment. It's a gift from you, to them. First and foremost, you are important. Your needs are a priority. Make sure that when you are agreeing to do something, you're not saying 'no' to you.

Take a look at your boundaries and how you can assert them. Take time to consider how things 'feel' too. If you feel taken advantage of, resentful, frustrated and angry, then those are cues that your boundaries may have gone a little wonky.

# Self-care Alphabet

- A**llow yourself to dream
- B**e honest about what you need
- C**reate/craft something
- D**rink a mug of soothing tea
- E**at foods which nourish you
- F**orgive yourself
- G**o on a walk in nature
- H**ave a long soak in a bubbly bath
- I**nvest in yourself
- J**oin a [support group](#)
- K**ite, fly one
- L**earn to say no to the things you want to say 'no' to
- M**ake a blanket fort
- N**ap
- O**wn who you are, embrace your you'ness
- P**lay, it's not just for kids
- Q**uestion your icky boundaries, work on them
- R**ead books, not just self-help/improvement ones
- S**top making New Year's Resolutions, choose a feeling or a key word instead
- T**ake time out for you
- U**ppgrade a tatty item
- V**ocalise your needs
- W**rite a journal or a letter to someone
- X**enial – be as kind to yourself as you would be to others
- Y**ou matter, you are important and worthy
- Z**zz, 7-9 hours per night

# Self-Care on a Budget



While spa days and shopping sprees are undoubtedly expensive, there are many other acts of self-care that cost very little or are in fact free.

## 1. DRINK UP

Being even the tiniest bit dehydrated can have a negative impact on our mood, so ensuring we drink enough water is one of the simplest ways we can look after ourselves. Normal tap water is fine.

If you're not fussed about water, herbal teas (the non-caffeinated kind) also count, and you can pick up boxes relatively inexpensively – especially if you choose own-brand over premium labels. As an added bonus, some herbs (such as chamomile) can soothe symptoms of depression and anxiety. As a few herbs can impact on the efficacy of drugs, do check the information sheet/talk to your doctor if you are on medication.

## 2. EAT WELL

We've talked about the benefits of healthy eating before, and contrary to popular belief, eating well doesn't have to be expensive. Yes goji berries and superfood salads are good for us, but so are baked beans and tinned fish! [Our podcast on food and mental health](#) shares several low-cost nutrition ideas, and there are plenty of blogs out there where you can find inspiration: for example [Cooking on a Bootstrap](#).

## 3. SLEEP

Getting a good night's sleep is one of the kindest things we can do for ourselves, and better still it's completely free. However, as depression often comes hand-in-hand with

sleep problems, we know that can be easier said than done.

You can improve your chances of getting a good night's kip by limiting caffeine after 2pm and implementing a 'bedtime routine' – a series of calming activities you do every night to tell your body and your brain it's time for bed. Limiting screen time in the evenings can also be really helpful, as the light given off by your devices can be disruptive. [Our podcast on sleep explains more.](#)

## **4. MOVE IT**

Although it's often the last thing we feel like doing – especially when we're depressed – getting moving is a great way to show ourselves self-care. Exercise has innumerable health benefits, and even a short burst of movement triggers endorphins and gives us that feel good glow.

You don't need a pricey gym membership to exercise either. You can dance to in your bedroom to your favourite tunes, follow along with free fitness videos on YouTube, or you can simply pop some trainers on and head out for a walk or run. Exercising outside has additional benefits too.

## **5. GET OUT**

We love our blanket forts and duvet days (sometimes they are much needed), but we also know how important it is to get outside. Sunlight and fresh air are instant mood-boosters – and are available to us all, completely free. Research suggests that exposure to natural surroundings is beneficial to physical and psychological wellbeing, so if you can get out into green space (even if it's just your local park) all the better.

## **6. GET CREATIVE**

Engaging in creative activities is a fantastic – and fun – way to integrate self-care into your day, and it needn't be expensive. We are all innately creative (even those of us who may think otherwise!) and there are so many different ways we can express our creativity. Writing, knitting, sewing, singing, cooking, painting, sculpting, gardening, restoring furniture, playing with make-up, writing computer code... activities like these are beneficial for our wellbeing: they bring us into the present moment, boost feel-good chemicals in our brain, and give us a sense of achievement.

## **7. CLEAN UP**

There is a bit of a trend for decluttering at the moment, and with good reason. The environment in which we live can have a real impact on our mood. If our surroundings stress us out, take up headspace, or make day-to-day living harder than it needs to be, we can definitely benefit from clearing up. (And if we sell any of the stuff that we declutter, our wallets can benefit too!)

As well as decluttering physical items (the contents of our wardrobe, the random drawer of junk in the kitchen, the piles of paper lying about), we can also declutter digitally: think unwanted software that slows the computer down, unread emails or even Facebook friends.



## 8. TREAT YOURSELF

While clearing up can be undoubtedly helpful, there *is* something lovely about having new things (that's why we created the [BuddyBox!](#)). Of course when we're on a budget, it's not wise to buy stuff willy nilly, but there are ways to get new things on the cheap.

Libraries are a good starting point: if you can't concentrate on books (we struggle to read when we're unwell), there are audio books and DVDs. Plus some local libraries reduce fees for those with disabilities – worth looking into if that applies to you. Then there are charity shops: you'll be surprised by some of the awesome things you can find, and you can treat yourself while helping others. There are also bargains and freebies to be found online: look at sites like [Freecycle](#) or community Facebook groups.

## 9. BUILD BOUNDARIES

Those of us who struggle with depression often have issues with low self-esteem, and look externally for approval and validation. If you find yourself regularly putting other people's needs before your own -saying 'yes' when you want to say 'no', exhausting yourself to fulfil other's expectations – you may benefit from working on your boundaries.

You are most important person in your life (yes, really!), so you need to learn to make your needs a priority. Addressing wonky boundaries can feel like a scary task but you'll feel the benefits almost immediately. And of course looking after yourself in this way doesn't cost financially.

## 10. REST UP

Many of us have high expectations of ourselves, and feel like we should always be productive: always giving, always doing. Continually putting stress on ourselves in this way is a sure fire road to burnout.

As hard as it might feel sometimes, one of the best things you can do for yourself is STOP. Really. Allow yourself to just be. Run yourself a lovely bath, lie on the floor and stare at the ceiling, watch some nonsense on TV. Letting yourself rest is a fantastic act of self-care, and it doesn't cost a penny.



# Self-care from the Inside Out



The foods we eat play a vital role in both our physical and our psychological health. Making positive nutritional choices can make a real difference to our overall wellbeing.

## HEALTHY EATING

There are a lot of conflicting messages out there about what is meant by healthy eating: traditionally, the focus was on limiting calories, then came the low-carb high-protein trend, and now there are innumerable health gurus out there singing the praises of spirulina and kale smoothies.

In our podcast on [The Role Food Plays in our Mental Health](#), award-winning dietician Lucy Jones warns us against getting too caught up in such “food fashions”. Eating healthily needn’t be complicated, overwhelming or costly. Instead we should focus on regularly consuming a variety of nutrient-rich, wholesome foods from the groups we list below. As a rule, the less processed our food, the better.

Improving our diet won’t reap instant results, but consistently eating good quality foods WILL lead to an improvement in mental function, mood and energy levels – which, in turn, can lessen the impact of depression.

## FOODS THAT HELP

The Association of British Dietitians recommends that to help boost mood and energy, our diets should principally be made up of the following types of food:

### 1. FATS

Yes you read that right: fat is our friend! Our brains are made of around 40% fat, and we need an adequate supply of it to maintain good health. However, before we crack open the cream cakes we should note it is unsaturated fat – found



in foods like olive or rapeseed oil, nuts, seeds and avocados – that we need to be eating. Trans fats – the fats found in processed foods like sausages, ready meals, or pre-packed cakes and biscuits – may in fact harm brain structure and function.

In addition, Essential Fatty Acids – the “Omega 3 oils” – have been shown in several studies to help improve mood and reduce depressive symptoms. The best sources of essential fatty acids are oily fish like salmon, mackerel, herring, sardines, pilchards and trout (fresh, tinned or frozen) – we should aim to eat a couple of portions a week.

If you don't like fish, or are vegetarian, essentially fatty acids can also be found in flaxseed and walnuts, as well as omega 3 fortified foods (look out for fortified eggs and fishfingers). Alternatively you may wish to consider taking a supplement.

## **2. WHOLEGRAINS, FRUIT & VEG**

The best food is whole food – food in its most natural state. Wholegrain cereals, beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, fruits and vegetables are enormously good for us. They're full of fibre, and provide the vitamins and minerals our bodies need to function well.

Complex carbohydrates (found in oats, grains, brown rice and veg like squash) release serotonin in the brain, while B vitamins (including folate) and zinc have been found to be particularly useful in managing depression. You can get these vitamins via a range of wholefoods (as the NHS outlines), or by eating food like marmite and fortified breakfast cereals.

We should be aiming to eat at least five different fruits and vegetables daily to get all the vitamins and minerals we need. If this feels overwhelming – or the idea of chopping up loads of vegetables when you can barely get out of bed feels a bit much – remember this is a target we can work towards, and that there are ‘convenient’ options out there, like fruit smoothies, pre-prepared salads and frozen veg.

## **3. PROTEIN**

Protein is required for our bodies' growth, maintenance and repair; a lack of protein in our diets can lead to irritability, fatigue, lack of concentration. Moreover, some studies have shown that tryptophan – one of the building blocks of protein – can improve the mood of people with depression.



Most people correctly associate animal-derived food – meat, fish, shellfish, eggs and dairy products – as rich in protein; however plant-based foods like lentils, beans, nuts and seeds, as well as some vegetables (such soy beans, peas and broccoli) are also good sources of protein.

Iron deficiency – or anaemia – can also affect your mood and energy levels, so it's important to eat foods that contain iron. Red meat is the most effective source of iron, but you can also get it by eating plant proteins like beans and lentils, as well as dried apricots, dark chocolate (yum!) and fortified breakfast cereals.

#### **4. WATER**

Although not technically a food, water plays a huge role in our brain function. The European Food Safety Authority recommends we drink around 2 litres of water a day (you can find out the precise amount you need using the Hydration 4 Health calculator). Not drinking enough water affects our concentration, our memory and learning ability; even the slightest case of dehydration can have a negative impact on our mood.

## ***FOODS THAT HINDER***

At Blurt, we don't believe in denial (we have enough difficulties in our lives without adding to them!), but there are some foods we should seek to limit due to their low nutritional content and the affects they have on our system.

Caffeine and Alcohol are both dehydrating – especially when drunk in large quantities – and can disrupt our sleep patterns. Caffeine withdrawal symptoms can make us feel anxious, irritable and low, and drinking too much can deplete our iron and calcium levels. Drinking too much alcohol comes with its own host of problems, including the depletion of B vitamins, which again leads to low mood. Sugar is another food we should avoid consuming in large quantities. Eating lots of sugar spikes our blood sugar levels, which leads to feelings of fatigue and irritability when our glucose drops (ever heard the phrase “sugar coma”?). Again, too much sugar has also been linked to depression as the body uses up essential B Vitamins to process the sugar into energy.

Although undoubtedly convenient, most processed foods (foods that come pre-prepared in packages, like ready meals or biscuits) have limited nutritional value. Eat as many fresh foods as possible to supply your brain with the micronutrients it needs to function properly. We are not suggesting you cut these foods out of your diet completely (we like a cup of tea and a french fancy as much as the next person!), but they should be consumed in moderation, alongside more brain-boosting treats.

## ***WELLBEING BOOSTERS***

As well as eating a wide range of healthy foods, there are a few other things we can do to maximise our wellbeing.

#### **EAT REGULARLY**

Although what we eat is important, when we eat is even more crucial for our wellbeing. Eating little and often is the name of the game. As Lucy Jones explains in our [food podcast](#):

*"The first thing to think about, rather than the specific foods that we should be eating, is the way we should be eating. Eating a regular meal pattern can play a big role in improving energy levels, brain function, concentration and ability to remember things. Actually getting up and getting into a regular meal pattern through the day gives your brain a constant supply of energy from the food that you eat. We know that long periods of fasting can actually negatively affect our mood and our energy levels leaving people sort of distracted and less productive through the day".*

### **CONSIDER SUPPLEMENTS**

Although a varied diet can supply our bodies with all the goodness it needs, in some cases a nutritional supplement may be helpful. As the BDA outlines:

If you have not been eating well recently, or rely on ready meals and packaged foods regularly, you may be lacking certain vitamins and minerals. If you smoke or drink too much alcohol you may also need extra nutrients.

If so, you may want to take a one-a-day complete multivitamin and mineral supplement. These contain a full range of all the essential nutrients. Choose one that contains 100% of recommended daily intakes. Very high dose supplements (more than 100%) are not more effective than these and just cost extra money. They may even cause an increased risk of ill health. Vitamin A and E supplements in particular are not recommended for smokers.

Recent research has also shown that folate (one of the B vitamins) supplements may increase the effectiveness of antidepressant medication. If you are thinking about taking any additional nutrient supplements ask your doctor for advice.

### **BE GOOD TO YOURSELF**

While eating healthily can help calm depressive symptoms, making radical lifestyle changes can be daunting, especially when we're in the depths of depression.

If reading this section has inspired you to improve your diet, remember you don't need to overhaul everything all at once. You can start small: maybe by ensuring you eat one piece of fruit a day, and then – when that becomes a habit – introducing another.

Celebrate your successes – however small – but don't berate yourself for 'slip-ups'. Remember the motivation behind eating healthily is feeling good. If being mindful of your diet leaves you feeling 'bad' or dispirited or guilty, shift your focus elsewhere: depression gives us a hard enough time as it is. Your wellbeing is what is most important.



# Self-care Worksheet

Not sure where to start? Need a personal self-care plan? We've put together a worksheet to help you figure out what could contribute to your daily self-care practice. Answer these questions and refer back to them when you need some inspiration.

I'd like to feel...

The things that comfort me are:

The top three people I enjoy spending time with:

The three people who make me feel icky:

Things I'd like to try (food, crafts, adventures):

Dreams which still play on my mind:

The teeniest of steps I could take towards one of those dreams is:

Three items I'm putting up with/could do with an upgrade:

My favourite smell is:

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If you've loved this starter kit, you might be interested to know we've only gone and written a book! Introducing *The Self-Care Project*.