

Practicing Self-Care While at Work

Self-care has become synonymous with bubble baths, hot tea, and facials. And maybe those are part of your routine. But sometimes these associations scare off people who think of self-care as “pampering” – that sounds like a luxury rather than a necessity.

The truth is, “self-care” is absolutely essential in being a healthier person and a better worker.

There’s no “one way” to practice self-care: it’s doing what decreases stress in your life for the sake of yours and other’s health. And if work is the greatest source of stress for most people, then work is where you should be tackling self-care practices.

What is Self-Care?

Self-care means taking care of yourself: it’s an essential space in your schedule for making you more productive, less stressed, and healthier. It’s any activity that relieves anxiety or increases happiness. Sometimes this means hot tea. Sometimes this means meditation. Sometimes this means setting boundaries for toxic relationships.

If you have to force yourself to do something – if it’s somehow increasing your anxiety or stress – then it isn’t self-care. That’s why self-care is so subjective: it can be any activity (or attitude) that makes you feel *better*, which can mean just about anything for each person.

Self-care is the treatment for *stress*, the killer of joy and productivity in the workplace.

Impacts of Stress

There’s a difference between pressure and stress. Sure, there’s overlap. But pressure can lead to good results; some procrastinators need pressure to produce their best work. Chronic stress mainly leads to unhappiness and unhealthiness.

Stress takes a major toll on workers, especially in the United States. According to the American Psychological Association, [one-third of U.S. workers have chronic stress](#) related to work; 79% don’t get enough sleep; and 69% blame the lack of sleep on stress about work. Stress and sleeplessness result in shoddy work or low productivity.

According to the [National Institute of Health](#), stress and lack of sleep increase chances for heart disease, diabetes, and obesity. They [exacerbate skin problems, throw hormones off balance, and trigger depression](#).

The [Society for Human Resource Management](#) describes “Presenteeism” as a direct result of stress: when people are “working” but unproductive because of chronic stress (it’s a portmanteau of “present” + “absentee”). This wastes resources and time. It can also trigger depression and feelings of “spinning wheels”.

Stress in the workplace is unavoidable. Even positive moments can create stress. So the best thing to do is manage the response to stress. If it’s left alone, it can cause health problems. If it’s handled through self-care practices, there are significant improvements to health and work quality.

And bottom line: everyone deserves to be well.

Rock Beats Scissors; Self-care Beats Stress

In the work space, self-care is essential to increased productivity. It promotes healthy development and relationships.

And there are stacking benefits: the more you practice self-care, the more resilient you may be to future stress. The World Health Organization even states that [self-care treats preventative diseases](#).

Stress is a reaction to internal or external danger. Self-care is creating healthy habits that nurture or calm you. They're antitheses.

It's important to remember that self-care isn't a cure or a magic pill. But it is an effective treatment.

Self-Care While Working

So you want to be healthier, happier, and more productive. You want increased work quality without losing sleep or getting sick. And maybe going home isn't relaxing for you, either.

For those benefits, you need to practice self-care during your work day. Taking time to "calm yourself" during a busy work schedule may seem unrealistic – even selfish – but consider that 10 minutes of self-care can mean hours of high-quality productivity.

Maybe half of your lunch breaks is devoted to self-care practices (maybe the whole thing). Maybe 15 minutes that would have been a bathroom break. There are practices for however much time you can spare. Keep in mind that the improvements to your mental, emotional, and physical health are worth some space in your day.

15 Tips for Self-Care during the Work Day

1. Admit that you need it.

For many people, the first barrier to practicing self-care is the idea that doing it shows you're weak, lazy, or spoiled. The U.S. work culture is particularly harmful because it emphasizes that if you're not constantly producing tangible results, you're a failure. So taking time to slow down and focus on yourself feels like the opposite of "producing tangible results"; hence making people feel like failures. But self-care is the key to success!

Try to reframe "self-care" as "taking care of yourself". Why wouldn't you take care of yourself? Why wouldn't you do something that relaxes you *and* makes you a better worker? You don't have to feel guilty. You're not selfish. You're not less productive or lazy. In fact, you'll be more productive if you take the time to reset. You deserve wellness.

2. Toot your own horn

Take time to say, "Hey, I accomplished something". Rather than immediately moving on, slow down to celebrate victories, big and small. Endless work without reward leads to burnout. Take notes of

everything you accomplish during the week (“Landed a client”; “restocked the fridge”; “answered all emails”; “spoke up during the meeting”); review that list to remind yourself that no matter how stressed you are, you’re making progress.

3. Set reasonable boundaries and stick to them

Boundaries are important to ensure peace of mind. They set the limits for acceptable behavior from others or from yourself. “Boundaries” come up a lot when talking about relationships and determine mutual respect. But there are professional boundaries as well, which lead to self-care.

You don’t have to take on every project. You’re not mean for saying “no” if you can’t do something. Do your own work well, and if you’re up to it, you can consider helping out more. Boundaries also mean knowing when you need to stop working and when you can push a little more.

If you hit your limit, then stop. Walk away. You can choose to take a break, or wait until tomorrow. Sure, still get your work done, but don’t feel guilty for having a limit. A burnout is not worth 15 more minutes of productivity.

4. Make a checklist every morning

Have you ever noticed how *good* it feels to cross something off a list? When you put a big line through it, or delete it, or put a check mark? Mmm, good stuff.

Every time you cross something off a checklist, you get a [dopamine](#) rush to your brain, the chemical responsible for pleasure, learning, and motivation. In fact, [each time you look at the crossed off item](#), you get a new little dopamine release. [Your brain craves dopamine](#). It both motivates and relaxes. Making a tactile checklist is an easy way to self-care at work because of the dopamine releases.

Add even small things (walk the dog; deposit check). Anything you need to accomplish. Make the checklist reasonable (don’t go overboard with what you can do in just 8 hours) but make it so when you look at it at the end of the day, you can say “I was productive/I moved forward/I’m satisfied with my accomplishments”. Remember that big accomplishments are made up of little steps. Don’t put “Solve world hunger”; what are the everyday, actionable steps that lead to bigger results? Those go on the checklist.

5. Meditate/breathing exercises

The [health benefits of meditation](#) are pretty backed up, especially when it’s connected to deep breathing. Meditation and breathing are simple ways to reduce stress and make you more productive. [They even help you focus](#) (talking to my fellow procrastinators)! But these words often get connected to images of chanting, incense-filled rooms, and spirituality. If that’s how you practice meditation, great! But those images can scare off workers who feel like they don’t have time for that in their work schedule.

Meditating at work can take 5 or 10 minutes. Breathing exercises can take 30 seconds (you decide how short or long you need). Both can be done at your desk, on a bench, in the hallway. Maybe not in the bathroom.

Here are [three easy breathing exercises at your desk](#). You could sign up for a “workspace meditation” app, like [Headspace](#), that guides you through 10-minute breathing and mindfulness exercises. And here’s a [free 10-minute guided meditation to be done at your office desk](#).

6. Stretch

Have you seen those coworkers with standing desks? Or who bounce on yoga balls instead of sitting in chairs? Maybe you rolled your eyes at first, but the truth is, they’re onto something important.

If you sit for [more than 7 hours per day](#), you are increasing the risk for serious health risks, like [heart disease, dementia, and diabetes](#). Don’t worry: exercising for 1 hour per day counters those effects. If exercise sounds like the worst, then stretching is key! Even stretching for 5 to 10 minutes a few times per day (including standing up) can counteract a lot of the sitting risks.

In terms of self-care, [stretching boosts your mood, fights stress, and makes you more productive](#)! Here are some [tips to stretch at your desk](#) or in your office.

7. Bring in some plants

There’s [no conclusive evidence that plants purify air](#), but [adding green to a space has proven benefits](#) for your mood and productivity! (Plants can even make you more social! [Science!](#)) They’re also a lovely way to [add color to your workspace, which can also improve mood](#) and lower stress.

8. Consider counseling

There are numerous online programs you can use to talk to a counselor for free; numbers to call; you can talk to someone every day, even for 10 minutes, if you like. If you’re dealing with chronic stress, anxiety, burnout, or depression, talking to a trained professional is key. If your leg was hurt, you’d go to a doctor; if your mind or emotions are hurt, you should do the same. Sometimes the best way to take care of yourself (“self-care”) is to discuss coping mechanisms with a pro.

9. Declutter your work area

“Decluttering” is a self-care practice that means removing unnecessary items from a messy workspace; or organizing your items so that you are more productive. Clutter can make you feel like you’re “suffocating”; it [increases anxiety and stress, and binarily decreases production](#).

When deciding what to remove from your desk, ask yourself: is the item useful? Does it bring you joy or relax you? Is it part of an aesthetic that improves your mood? If not, then stow it. Even the process of removing items gives a feeling of control, and releases dopamine because of the sense of accomplishment.

10. Good smells

Have you heard of “aromatherapy”? It’s using certain scents to practice self-care. The theory is that engaging the olfactory senses with “calming smells” triggers the limbic system, the part of the brain that deals with emotion and motivation. Like plants, there’s no conclusive evidence that this works, but there are millions of people who swear by aromatherapy. Essential oils, soy/coconut wax candles, or diffusers are easy ways to bring in [smells meant to reduce anxiety](#) and stress. [Candles in particular reduce stress](#) (humans love fire). Just be considerate of potential coworkers. (Careful: [your pet may be allergic to essential oils](#).)

11. Brain food

Make sure you're eating a healthy, energizing lunch. Junk food snacks make you feel sluggish and lethargic. Sugar gives you a temporary rush but a much longer crash. Sluggishness or crashing make you less productive, which can increase stress. For self-care, watch what you're putting into your body. Choose [foods that increase energy](#).

There's also mounting evidence that [sugar triggers depression](#) and [caffeine increases anxiety](#). If you're prone to those, then swap out bagel and coffee for things like almonds or lemon water.

12. Actually stop working during breaks

Don't keep checking emails. Don't touch up one more thing. Actually step away and let your mind unplug. Self-care requires rest. It's difficult to rest if you're not actually resting.

13. Social Support

Most people know that having a support network [decreases stress and improves your health](#). But you need that even at work. Having friends, [mentors](#), or support in the workplace is essential to self-care.

14. Good tunes

Have you seen those images titled "your brain on music" yet? If not, look them up after you finish this article; it's incredible how much more productive, relaxed, and energized you are when you're listening to music. (Here's some [science](#) to back that up.) Rather than being a distraction, music is a key component of taking care of your wellbeing. If music be the soul of self-care, play on.

15. Positive self-talk

Everyone makes mistakes. But a problem is when someone makes a mistake and then puts themselves down for it for way too long. Internal dialogue has a significant impact on the quality of work, willingness and energy, and even physical health. "Self-talk" is another term for that internal dialogue: how we talk to ourselves in our own mind. The more negative it is, the sicker we become. The more positive the self-talk, though, the more [proven benefits to productivity and mental health](#). It can take practice; some people seem wired to criticize themselves. But try to repeat positive, forgiving things to yourself, like: "It's okay, this will pass"; "This isn't forever"; "I'm good at my job"; "I'm smart, I know what I'm doing"; "I got this".

When to Practice Self-care

Gauge your anxiety level every hour. Is it a normal, work-related level? Is it spiking? Is it leading to presenteeism (working without being productive)? Do you feel ill? Log these check ins and see if they relate to specific activities.

Notice signs of self-neglect, as well. Things like dehydration, poor hygiene, unmanageable stress, poor eating habits, continual anxiety or depression are all signs that you need to step back and practice self-care.

Remember, self-care doesn't have to be a large chunk of your work day, and it doesn't have to be elaborate. It can be as small as deep breathing, lighting a candle, and being saying nice things to yourself. You deserve to be well. And your work quality will increase, too.