

month two

The Transformative Power of Self-Care

You can explore the universe looking for somebody who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and you will not find that person anywhere.
—Anonymous

Growing up as the oldest of seven children (five boys and two girls), I remember breakfast at our house being extremely hectic.

My harried mom was scrambling to make lunches, my dad was running around looking for tennis shoes and invariably one of the seven of us was in the kitchen cooking peanut butter oatmeal, rice flour pineapple muffins or some other strange concoction (in our family we were heartily encouraged to become masterful at “life skills”—this philosophy encouraged lots of cooking experiments but invariably led to mayhem in the kitchen!).

One morning my nine-year-old brother, Kert (now a macrobiotic chef), decided to whip up some pecan waffles. As I reached over to the waffle maker to help myself to breakfast, I bumped the edge of the hot grill and burned my elbow. I must have been ten years old at the time.

I don't remember if I mentioned the accident to my parents, but hours later I was sitting in my classroom at school, trying to ignore the pain from a small, brown, bubbly-looking burn on my elbow.

Rather than go and get a teacher for help or a bandage, I simply suffered, thinking silently, *it's not really important enough to bother anyone.*

This is my earliest recollection of realizing that self-care was not something that was promoted or taught in my family (even though my parents were medical professionals!). It was definitely something I had to learn.

Maybe when you think of self-care, you have visions of pedicures and facials. Indeed, physical self-care is a big part of the overall picture. But eliminating critical thinking, not over-scheduling, releasing the need to be perfect, hiring a babysitter for dates with your partner or yourself, saying no, refusing to do things out of guilt and giving yourself much-needed rest and downtime to refuel are also integral to total self-care.

Self-care is about nurturing yourself on all levels—physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually—so you can live, love and parent optimally.

Visiting with my friend Megan, mom to Mateo, three, and Alea, one, I listened as she shared how frustrated she was feeling. Exhausted from staying up until two a.m. the night before to do laundry, she had skipped breakfast and lunch, was surviving on nothing but coffee and had been beating herself up all day about not getting a homemade meal over to her neighbor, who had recently lost her father. My heart ached for Megan. Most of us would never imagine denying our children of sleep or nourishment, being judgmental of them or allowing them to ignore their emotional needs.

Yet, as mothers, we do this to ourselves on a daily basis.

The same love, gentle care and compassion we offer so generously to our little ones should be extended to ourselves as well. We teach our children about self-worth and honoring one's value through our actions, not our words. Modeling self-love and self-acceptance is the most effective way to have a powerful impact on a child's self-esteem and how they view themselves.

Below are several examples of how you can begin nurturing yourself and start making self-renewal part of your everyday life.

Physical Care

- Be kind and loving to your body—appreciate your body.
- Nourish your body by eating healthy and energizing foods that make you feel great.
- Get enough sleep and drink plenty of water to stay hydrated.
- Exercise to replenish your energy and manage stress.

- Take time to enjoy, nurture and appreciate your physical appearance.

Emotional Care

- Have a heart-to-heart with a close friend or mentor.
- Have kind, loving thoughts about yourself (try no criticism for one week!).
- Seek out support from a therapist, coach, social worker or counselor.
- Journal—write down your feelings and thoughts.
- Go on a fun date alone or with your partner or organize a monthly girls' night out.

Spiritual Care

- Take time to be by yourself to think or write.
- Take a walk in a park or out in nature.
- Meditate, pray or just reflect on what you're grateful for.
- Do something creative: paint/draw/write/dance/sing.
- Volunteer for a cause you're passionate about.

Mental Care

- Read a good book or see an intellectually stimulating movie.
- Learn a new hobby or skill.
- Sign up for a class, group or workshop on a topic that is interesting to you.
- Challenge yourself within your community or at work to learn something new.

Almost any mother will share with you how pervasive ideals like *good mothers always put their families first, motherhood is pure bliss, you just have to let your body go when you become a mom* or *good mothers are completely selfless* abound in our society.

These beliefs run deep—even if they're not on a conscious level and you don't buy into them—and can have a profound impact on how we view our roles as mothers and women. Realize this and be aware that the concept of self-care may feel foreign and difficult to embrace at first (to say the least)

Why Self-Care?

What are some reasons that self-care is important and how do we benefit by making time for self-renewal?

- By filling our cups first, we tend to feel more generous and can avoid building resentments toward others who demand our energy and time.
- Nurturing ourselves makes us naturally feel more loving, which makes us better friends, partners, parents and more fun to be around!
- Making our self-care a priority is one of the best ways to validate and honor our own worth, which naturally enhances true confidence and self-esteem.
- Taking care of ourselves on all levels (physically/mentally/emotionally/spiritually) helps us feel alive and whole, able to function at our best and do all the things we want to do.
- By taking time to care for ourselves, we renew and restore our energy supply and create energy reserves so we're able to weather unforeseen challenges more easily.
- Practicing self-care and being loving and gentle toward ourselves helps us to be more present and calm, so we can respond wisely, intuitively and effectively to a variety of circumstances.
- Honoring and nurturing our essence provides us with opportunities to experience profound spiritual and personal growth.

- Owning our personal power (realizing our potential) is our birthright. Self-care, self-love and self-acceptance are wonderful avenues for reaching this goal.
- When you feel good on the inside, you look good on the outside. Nurturing your essence—inside and out—promotes overall well-being and a sense of vitality.

For me, having grown up with a mother who suffered from depression and struggled constantly with issues around self-worth and self-esteem, I am motivated to make self-care an important part of my life so I can model this behavior for my son. I want him to see the value of total self-care and how it can positively impact how he feels about himself and others.

Self-care is not about pampering. It's about owning your personal power. It's about self-worth and honoring the person you are.

After you taste the benefits of focusing on your self-care, you will begin to schedule time for self-nurturing just like you schedule doctor or dentist appointments. You'll discover that it is integral to your emotional survival and that you are wiser and more effective in all areas of your life when you take time to fill your cup first!

“The other night at dinner my husband commented on how much more relaxed and joyful I seemed since I had started exercising and taking ‘journaling dates,’” shares Ella. “And since I started taking time for me, I also felt more generous and playful with my kids.”

The changes she made in her life inspired her husband to focus on his self-care, and now he takes guitar classes every Wednesday night. Ella uses the free evening to connect with other moms/kids whose partners also claim Wednesday night for their solo dates. The women have dubbed these regular dinners out as the “Wednesday Night Widows Club,” and all involved look forward to and relish these weekly community gatherings.

The journey to making your self-care a priority (and understanding how life-altering it can be) doesn't happen overnight. Remember, many women who initially equate self-care with selfishness may require a shift in thinking to make this an everyday practice. Be gentle, compassionate and understanding with yourself and know that you are doing the best you can wherever you are on your journey.

What do *you* need to live, love and parent optimally?

GUIDED JOURNALING EXERCISE

Making Your Self-Care a Priority

Set aside twenty minutes for some quiet reflection. Get comfortable, put on your coziest clothes or make some hot or iced herbal tea for yourself. Have your journal nearby in case you want to elaborate on the exercise below. If the concept of self-care is new to you, take it slowly and ease into this.

What do **you** need (physically, emotionally, spiritually and mentally) to be the best person, mom and partner you can be? Remember, each person's response will be vastly different.

What steps can you begin to take this month to make your self-care a priority?

(1)

(2)

(3)

What changes are you willing to implement today to start making self-care integral to your week?

What would motivate you to make your self-renewal a priority?

Look at the *Why Self-Care* list and list your top three reasons for practicing self-care.

(1)

(2)

(3)

TAKE ACTION

Jump-Start Your Self-Care Routine

Call and set up a dinner or coffee date with a friend, either from your PRG or another trusted advocate. If the friend is not in your PRG and you think they'd enjoy it, share the chapter exercise with them before your date. When you meet, take turns reading your answers to the questions above. Be specific when answering the question, "What steps can you begin to take this month to make your self-care a priority?"

Over the course of the month, notice when and if you think about self-care. If it does cross your radar, notice when this occurs.

Check in with your friend thirty days after your date to see how your self-care practice is going (or once a week via email or phone if you can). Be easy on yourself. And remember, baby steps.

SELF-RENEWAL TIP FOR THE MONTH

Your Morning Check-Up

For the next thirty days, every morning before you step out of bed, take two minutes to gently scan your body and check how you're feeling. Ask yourself, *What do I need to feel nurtured and to function at my best TODAY?*

Remember the four areas of self-care: emotional, physical, mental and spiritual. Make it a priority to address whatever comes up for you, even if it means saying "no" to something or altering your schedule for the day. Maybe you need a massage or to go for a walk. Perhaps you need to eliminate caffeine or sugar, get more sleep, start taking weekly solo dates or find a therapist or a coach for support on relationship or career

issues. Maybe you need to go to dinner with a girlfriend you haven't seen in a while and reconnect. Just taking a minute to do a self-care checkup sends a message to yourself that you're committed to your well-being. Your life will begin to radically change once you start to feel loved, nurtured and truly in tune with your own needs. And your child(ren) and family will benefit immeasurably!

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

The Women's Comfort Book, by Jennifer Loudon (www.comfortqueen.com)

Energy Addict: 101 Physical, Mental, and Spiritual Ways to Energize Your Life, by Jon Gordon (www.jongordon.com)

Life Makeovers: 52 Practical & Inspiring Ways to Improve Your Life One Week at a Time, by Cheryl Richardson (www.cherylrichardson.com)

Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom and *Mother-Daughter Wisdom*, by Christiane Northrup (www.drnorthrup.com)

Eight Weeks to Optimum Health, by Andrew Weil (www.drweil.com)

REFLECTIONS ON SELF-CARE

Use this space to expand on your thoughts and feelings around this topic. See "Tips on Journaling" at the end of the *Guide* for support if you're new to journaling.

THE POWER OF SELF-CARE

After the birth of two children, I was carrying around some extra weight. To say I was not an athletic person would be putting it mildly. I used to joke that the only time I would run would be so I could stand first in line for the buffet. My physical well-being had definitely taken a backseat to the care and nurturing of my kids. After focusing for quite a while on the self-care message, I decided to take a big step, and when a woman in my Personal

Renewal Group (PRG) said she needed a walking partner, I raised my hand. That next week we set off with my kids in tow. As we walked each week, the weight began to drop off, and my friendship with my walking partner grew. The confidence I found inspired me to train for and participate in my first Danskin Triathlon. My walking partner was there with me all the way, as were the other PRG moms, providing encouragement and support. I felt such pride following the race. It took a lot of training and a few sacrifices along the way, but the experience taught me so much about my internal power and myself. I now understand that acknowledging and addressing my needs (physical, emotional and spiritual) is not a weakness, it is a priority.

—Kelli, mom to Jackson, six, and Lauren, three