

Balance and Self-Care

The modern world can leave people feeling overwhelmed and out of balance. Experiencing balance in life **IS** attainable, but it can't be forced. Gustavo Razzetti writes in his blog, *The Adaptive Mind*¹, that balance is the realization that life is not stable but in constant motion, and is not something that you can get, but something you continually do. Life does not fit into a perfect little box, it is always changing and things are being thrown at us from all different angles. In order to maintain our own sense of balance in an imbalanced world we need to be able to adapt. Stop pitting the "want to" against the "have to", they can co-exist! Growing up we are given schedules that include creativity, outdoor fun, exercise, and extracurricular activities; these things are part of our educational requirements! Living in the modern adult world does of course look much different, but the idea of allowing ourselves to be more flexible and open to creating moments of "me-time" can help us attain more balance.

If you take a moment and let your mind wander back to a time in your life where you truly felt balanced; at your best physically, emotionally, mentally; when was that?

- What was different then than now?
- What did you allow yourself to prioritize in the past that you no longer believe you have space for?
- What activities and hobbies did you forego when you became an adult?

Many adults believe the key to their success lies in solely focusing on their work, not letting things "distract" them from their goals. What they fail to realize is that they likely never operated within a "work only" mentality, and that much of what led to their success prior to adulthood is balance. Their minds and bodies were given space to breathe and focus on things that brought them joy, peace and purpose.

Self-care can easily get misconstrued as manicures and long baths. Self-care is more than that, and can also be much humbler than people realize. It is about allowing yourself to have moments in your day to provide for the parts of you that make you whole. We all operate at our best when we nourish these important aspects of ourselves, and each of these parts carry their own weight and are integral to creating a whole, balanced picture of who we are.

When considering self-care it is important to recognize there are areas of our lives that greatly impact our sense of balance and overall well-being. Nurturing the social, psychological, physical, spiritual and purposeful areas of your life will encourage a more balanced and happy existence. When practicing self-care it helps to envision a pie chart in perfect balance, each aspect of your

¹Razzetti, G. (2018, September 26th). The Best Way to Find Balance in Your Life. *The Adaptive Mind*.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/the-adaptive-mind/201809/the-best-way-find-balance-in-your-life>

well-being in harmony. If we ignore any of these areas too much we can feel out of balance. Each of these areas affects the other, so by overlooking one part we are in-turn placing more strain on the other areas of our well-being. Let's explore each of these areas in more depth and highlight strategies you can use to enhance your self-care.

Social connection provides comfort, fun and support. The people in our inner circle can bring joy to life and lighten the load we carry. Forgas and Baumeister found that high-quality social relationships contribute substantially to an individual's overall well-being². Some people derive energy from being social, while others prefer to keep their circles small and can feel drained by large social gatherings, so choosing what works for you is important. Make sure the people you spend your time with are adding, not detracting from your life. Remember that balance is about accepting the natural movement of life. Taking the time to be with your loved ones is not a reason to feel guilty. This socialization can help you feel better and more energized so that when you get back to work you can be more focused and productive. It's more beneficial to go for a coffee with your friend than stare at a wall for 30 minutes pretending to work! If you are having difficulty creating a social circle, consider joining a [club](#) or [volunteering](#).

Psychological well being affects all areas of our life. Paying attention to your thoughts and feelings helps create more awareness and connection to your body and mind. Emotions are messengers from the body asking you to pay attention to something, listen and give yourself space to explore these emotions (feel them, [journal](#), try counselling). Our thoughts can greatly impact how we feel and our overall mood. Taking time to be more aware of our thoughts can allow us to challenge or let go of [negative](#) or [anxious](#) thoughts so they don't take over. Be gentle with yourself and practice [self-compassion](#).

Physical self-care includes sleep, diet, exercise and relaxation. It means caring for the body we have in the best way we can. According the Sharman, Madaan and Petty, moving our bodies every day helps reduce stress hormones, increases energy, lessens anxiety and improves cognitive function³. This dedication to be active does not mean you have to live at the gym, just try to sweat for 30 mins/day, 3-4 days per week. That can mean dancing in your living room, going for a bike ride, or playing a sport with your friends! A healthy diet is equally important to provide the energy you need to perform your best. Drink plenty of water. Choose healthy options as much as possible to give your body the best quality fuel you can. We also require adequate [sleep](#). Try and aim for 7-8hrs of sleep per night and stick to a sleep schedule as much as possible. Part of recharging the body and mind is also making time for relaxation. Make a list of activities you find relaxing. This can be anything from going for a walk, reading, organizing a cupboard, or yoga. List relaxing activities that you have never regretted making time for.

Spiritual self-care means connecting to your community in a way that means something to you. Connection can be through prayer or [meditation](#), attending religious services, or by taking time to [detach from material things](#). It can be as simple as being mindful in nature: listening to the birds sing, feeling the wind and sun on your face, or just choosing to go for a walk without your phone. It can also mean connecting and giving back to your community through [volunteering](#).

²Forgas, J. P., & Baumeister, R. F. (2018) The social psychology of living well.

³Sharma, A., Madaan, V., & Petty, F. D. (2006). Exercise for mental health. Primary care companion to the Journal of clinical psychiatry, 8(2), 106. <https://doi.org/10.4088/pcc.v08n0208a>

Purpose in life is so important and can take various forms, and it doesn't have to be complicated. Each day can hold a different sense of purpose. Seeking meaning and purpose in day to day life can be through your work, studies, activities or hobbies you are passionate about, activism and social engagement, or through caring for those you love.

Take a moment to [assess](#) these areas of self-care to see where you're having success and areas you may want to improve.

After identifying areas you want to work on it's easy to do too much too fast and become overwhelmed with expectation and give up. The reality is that you don't have endless amounts of time, and trying to force self-care is just enticing the battle between "want to" and "have to", and detracts from the whole intention of balance. Instead of fighting against our current lives and commitments we need to be gentle with ourselves and create realistic expectations. If you are trying to force change with unreasonable expectations, you will feel more frustrated. Polivy and Herman found through researching various areas of self-improvement, people's unrealistic expectations about how much and how quickly they can change undermine their efforts towards behavior change⁴. The reality is that you may not be able to attend a 2 hour yoga class 3 times per week, but you may be able to do a 20 minute [online](#) video some mornings and have space for a 2 hour class on the weekends.

Every person has their own priorities, and that includes the priorities they have for their self-care. For some people exercise is very beneficial for their mood and energy, so making time for physical activity will be a main priority. For others, quiet time to unwind and read a good book reduces their stress, so they will still exercise, but 30 minutes 3 days a week is all they need. Some people find purpose and support in making time to connect to people, so they might join a team with their friends and go for walks with their family in the evenings. Taking time to really consider your priorities will help you weave self-care into your life in a meaningful way.

Finding balance doesn't mean becoming a different person, it can simply mean listening to the needs of your whole self and responding with kindness. Try and tune in to what the body and mind are asking for. Does your body need to move? Is your brain asking for a break? Are you craving social connection? Do you need to be outside and feel the sun on your face? Are you feeling inspired to be creative in some way? Has it been a while since you had a snack? In her article, found [here](#), author Meg Selig summarizes recent research on the value of taking breaks, and finds that breaks can bring you fun, relaxation, conversation, and entertainment, and greater work productivity⁵. Balance means understanding that in the middle of class you aren't going to get up and leave because you feel like going outside, but it might mean between classes you may take time to really be present during your walk. You can allow yourself a few moments to feel the sunshine, hear the people around you talking and laughing and see the grass peak out of the snow. There may not be large amounts of time, but these meaningful self-care moments throughout your day give your whole self what it needs so you can function at your best. Just remember to be gentle and allow yourself flexibility each day to provide for your well-being within the constant motion of day to day life, as Albert Einstein said, "Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving."

⁴ Polivy, J. & Herman, C.P. [2002]. If at first you don't succeed; false hopes of change. *American Psychologist*, 57, 677-689.

⁵ Selig, M. [2017, April 18th]. How Do Work Breaks Help Your Brain? 5 Surprising Answers for productivity and creativity, take one of these 10 relaxing breaks. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/changepower/201704/how-do-work-breaks-help-your-brain-5-surprising-answers>

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