



SELF-CARE AND SELF-COMPASSION FOR INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

A chronic and/or acute mental illness brings many challenges into our lives. It is common to struggle with feelings of overwhelming fatigue, powerlessness, guilt, pain, and anxiety. When these feelings press upon us, self-care and self-compassion are crucial. They are the keys to rediscovering dignity and integrity in the midst of difficult experiences. They teach us to recognize our needs and to establish clearer boundaries so that we can engage in recovery as soon as possible. Practicing self-care and self-compassion is an appropriately kind way to respond to unwanted, undeserved mental health challenges.

However, this practice is difficult for many of us. We can easily find ourselves believing that we do not deserve happiness or that there is something inherently wrong with us. In fact, one of the primary emotions associated with mental health challenges is that of guilt. We feel guilty about all the things we can no longer do and all the people we have let down. Guilt causes our thoughts to run away from us, and we may have a hard time recognizing that our illness is not our fault. **Being in too much pain—emotionally and/or physically—is never our fault.**

Self-care is about taking responsibility for our health physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. When we practice self-care, we are engaging in an activity with the specific intention of caring for ourselves. This activity might be fairly normal and routine, such as going to the gym, or it might be unique, such as attending a weekend retreat. Either way, the focus of the experience is on actively loving and caring for ourselves.”¹

Here are some suggestions for how to practice self-care and self-compassion while living with a mental health challenge:

- Delegate responsibilities wherever possible. Let go of unnecessary obligations.
- Learn to say “no”: Setting boundaries is essential to avoid over-taxing our already compromised anatomy and psyche. For example, if you are asked to go out for the evening when you are exhausted, explain that you would love to join in, but you will have to take a rain cheque.
- Remember, saying “no” does not mean you do not care nor make you a bad person.²
- Learn to accept your illness. This will probably be a process. Be gentle and understanding with yourself as you work toward this goal.
- When you feel discouraged about what your body can’t do, spend a moment thinking about all the marvelous things your body is doing: start at the tip of your head – your brain – and work down to your toes. Be amazed!

1 Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries, *The Sanctuary Course*, Vancouver, Canada, 2018. p 70

2 For a helpful list of assertive statements, see Nickel, Sue. *Be Held*. Winnipeg, Word Alive Press, 2018. p. 219-220.

- Do not beat yourself up when you can't do the things you normally can. Put your hand on your heart and breathe love slowly and evenly into this area for 4 breaths.
- Spend less time with people who don't understand your illness and who aren't supportive. It's okay to do this: you can reconnect when you have more energy in the future.
- Walk for 30 minutes each day (or 10 minutes, 3 times every day).
- As you are able, engage in an additional exercise of your choice that is invigorating (not depleting).
- Rest appropriately during the day; this can mean one longer period, or several short ones.
- Get adequate sleep (requirements vary and are individual). Educate yourself on healthy sleep practices by asking your doctor or counsellor and checking online resources.
- Take medication as prescribed.
- Ask for assistance when needed (this may take some humility).
- Set realistic goals depending on energy levels (both mental and physical).
- Attend health care appointments.
- Participate in a support group and/or individual counselling sessions.
- Eat a balanced diet at regular intervals (3-4 times a day, small-medium portions); minimize sugar intake.
- Drink 8 cups of water each day. Staying adequately hydrated is required for optimal mood functioning.
- If you enjoy reading, choose books that are not mentally taxing or depleting.
- Do small acts of housekeeping--a little bit each day.
- *Make your bed daily.
- *Maintain appropriate daily hygiene.³
- Get dressed in clothing that makes you feel good, strong, and protected.
- Download relaxation techniques and use them. Progressive Relaxation Techniques and Guided Imagery are particularly beneficial. Preview guided imagery techniques before buying them as there is quite a range of options, and you may be more comfortable with some than others.
- Write and mail a card to someone who is lonely, sad, or ill. Focusing on another person for a moment can be a helpful distraction and a beautiful expression of kindness.
- Write a list of things for which you are thankful, no matter how small.

* These activities help to promote a sense of order in your life which, in turn, helps to dissipate the disorder you may be experiencing internally.

- Listen to your thoughts about you and your circumstances, and check their accuracy. Chances are good that they are not quite accurate. What is “feeling” and what is “fact” at this time?
- Try to talk to yourself as lovingly as you would to a close friend feeling as badly as you feel right now.
- Don’t tell everyone exactly how you are feeling; one or two significant people in your life are sufficient. Most people offer advice and, although they are very well-meaning, it may end up being confusing and overwhelming.
- If you are feeling anxious, try some compassionate gestures such as cupping your face in your hands or placing your right hand on your heart. Hold this position for 30 seconds while you breathe deeply and slowly. Just rest. These gestures actually have the added benefit of activating the parasympathetic nervous system to release neurotransmitters. The result is a more compassionate posture and mindspace!
- It is very important to become aware of your experience while at the same time being non-judgmental about it. Try to say kind words to yourself such as, “I’m really having a hard time today,” or “I’m not sure how to do this alone right now,” or “I sure feel powerless; I wish I saw things differently.” This helps you see your challenges as something you are experiencing rather than something you are.
- If it is difficult to say kind words to yourself, be curious and think about what you would say to a good friend who was feeling the same way you are. What would you want that friend to know?
- Watch your inner dialogue for words such as “always” and “never.” Not many things in life are “always” or “never!” Check in with your absolutes.
- Earlier in this list it was recommended that you share your experience with only a few trusted people, but the importance of finding those significant relationships cannot be over-emphasized because you are not alone. There are many people with mental health challenges; together, you can comfort and care for each other in a supportive community.
- And finally, hang in there. Sometimes you will need to take life one minute or one hour at a time — definitely one day at a time. But things will get better, and you will indeed feel better. Self-care and self-compassion are ongoing, important investments that require time, energy, commitment, and sometimes money. Gift yourself with them.

You are worth it! May you be held in the loving arms of our gracious God.