

# Why Self-Care Isn't Selfish

**By Tara Parker-Pope**  
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What's the most important lesson of pandemic life? I would argue that it's this: Self-care isn't selfish.

During Covid-19, we've learned that we are all connected, and that taking care of ourselves — staying safe and staying well — is a way to care for our community. Taking precautions is a way to keep ourselves, our loved ones and our neighbors from getting sick and avoid overwhelming our health care system.

One of the challenges of 2021 will be to continue making self-care a priority once the pandemic has passed.

If you're someone who has always said you don't have time for self-care, or that self-care seems selfish and self-indulgent, you're not alone. "One of the things that you come across all the time is the idea that 'I can't invest in things that are good for me, because it's taking away from my ability to be a good parent or do what I need to do at work,'" said Kelly McGonigal, a health psychologist and lecturer at Stanford University. "Wouldn't it be great if we learn to lean in to our interdependence, and that we can actually take some kind of joy in knowing that when I take care of myself, I often am also taking care of others?"

Start 2021 by redefining what self-care is. Self-care is not just making time to recharge your batteries with a nap, meditation or by taking a break from your family — although all those things count.

Self-care ultimately is about setting priorities, setting boundaries and finding purpose.

"Everybody understands that relaxation and rest is important," said Dr. McGonigal, whose latest book is "[The Joy of Movement](#)."<sup>1</sup> "So there are aspects of self-care related to sleep — everyone should take a bath, light candles. There's this idea that we need to calm down. But what can you experience today that is going to fill you with the positive emotions you need to do the most important things in your life? It's about refueling yourself in order to engage with life."

Jack Groppe, an executive coach and professor of exercise and sport science at Judson University in Elgin, Ill., said it's always difficult to convince people that they can make time for exercise and other forms of self-care.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/564895/the-joy-of-movement-by-kelly-mcgonigal/>

“Self care is a lot of things,” said Dr. Groppe, co-author of [“The Corporate Athlete: How to Achieve Maximal Performance in Business and Life.”](#)<sup>2</sup> “It can be exercise, creating boundaries. It’s keeping yourself safe emotionally. Maybe it’s not arguing with that uncle about politics right now. It can be spiritual. But you are in control of it.”

Self-care is different for everyone. Here are five self-care exercises to help you make yourself a top priority in 2021. Choose one or try them all.

**Give the best hours of your day to yourself:** Dr. Groppe often advises clients to map out a typical day, from dawn until bedtime. You probably spend about eight hours sleeping — but how do you spend the other 16 hours? Write down the time you spend preparing meals, doing your job, shopping, watching television, doing laundry, helping children with homework, caring for an aging parent, catching up on emails

Next, Dr. Groppe asks: What one- or two-hour period in each day do you feel your best? Your most energetic? Your most productive? Now look at your list, he says. Who gets those hours? Try giving that time to yourself instead.

Giving yourself the best part of your day doesn’t mean taking a two-hour break from life. It means focusing on your priorities, rather than someone else’s. You can use that hour or two for anything you want — it might be for a hobby, a work project that you feel passionate about, time with your children or even to volunteer and help others. Giving yourself time every day to focus on your personal goals and values is the ultimate form of self-care.

**Pick a word of the year:** Choose a single word that describes the goals, values or mood you want to set for 2021. Last year, Dr. McGonigal chose the word “vitality.” “I had no idea how relevant it was going to be,” she said. This year she’s thinking about choosing the word dance, “because of all the meanings that dance has for me personally, in terms of celebration and community and courage.” Your word can be anything that matters to you: community, family, exercise, love, health, energy. Use your word as a mini mantra throughout the year to remind yourself to make self-care a priority.

**Create a respite plan:** If you are a caregiver to an aging parent, ill spouse or disabled child, self-care probably feels impossible. Finding time for exercise, spiritual support or just having some fun is more easily said than done. If you leave it to chance, self-care won’t happen. That’s why it’s important to design a family respite plan that identifies your needs and wishes, as well as the types of help other people can provide. Call a family meeting or call your friends. Tell everyone what you need — don’t expect them to

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/The+Corporate+Athlete%3A+How+to+Achieve+Maximal+Performance+in+Business+and+Life-p-9780471353690>

automatically know how to help. The advocacy group AARP has a guide for designing [a respite care plan](#).<sup>3</sup>

**Help someone else:** Our bodies and minds benefit in a variety of ways when we help others. Studies show that having a strong sense of purpose protects us from stress in the short term and predicts long-term better health. If the traditional forms of self-care feel too self-focused to you, think about how helping others can be good for you. “It’s also the sense of having a responsibility to make a difference if you can,” said Dr. McGonigal. “Did I stand up for something this year in a way that might have made a difference? Did I allow myself to participate in that bigger-than-self process?”

**Imagine the end of 2021:** One of Dr. McGonigal’s favorite exercises is to ask someone to imagine life one year into the future. Imagine you’ve made some important change in your life that you would feel grateful for. Imagining your future self can help you focus on positive acts of self-care you can commit to now. “Really let your imagination run free,” she said. “Is there a change you could commit to? Is there a part of yourself that you want to really learn and grow? Can you imagine being grateful to your future self for making that commitment?”

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/life-balance/info-2017/respice-care-plan.html?CMP=KNC-DSO-Adobe-Google-Caregiving-RespiteCare-Caregiver&gclid=CjwKCAjw\\_sn8BRBrEiwAnUGJDtzqVpHU2HOc1bDcq2bVBEfy5g8gLBCj9ywOsAtnLrWlkwkawWoPVxoChQcQAvD\\_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds](https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/life-balance/info-2017/respice-care-plan.html?CMP=KNC-DSO-Adobe-Google-Caregiving-RespiteCare-Caregiver&gclid=CjwKCAjw_sn8BRBrEiwAnUGJDtzqVpHU2HOc1bDcq2bVBEfy5g8gLBCj9ywOsAtnLrWlkwkawWoPVxoChQcQAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds)