

Beyond bubble baths: Rediscovering real self-care

By Anne MacFarlane for Talk Now

5th November 2024

Years ago, in therapy, my therapist suggested I practice self-care.

"What is that?" I wondered. It felt like being asked to solve a complex physics equation without any prior knowledge. Caring for others came naturally, but caring for myself felt alien and intimidating. I left that session feeling ashamed for not knowing something that seemed so basic to everyone else.

Over time, I realised that this confusion around self-care is something many of us share.

Social media doesn't help—it can seem like everyone else knows exactly how to do self-care. They're posting happy photos at spas, on vacation, or with new purchases, as if self-care were a display. When I ask people what self-care means to them, I hear things like "I took a bath" or "I bought myself something nice." And while these things can bring temporary comfort, they don't reach deeper needs. Real self-care isn't about outward displays; it's internal. And it can be hard to embrace when we haven't been shown how, especially if we grew up learning our needs were unimportant.



What Does Real Self-Care Mean?

Real self-care goes beyond bubble baths and treats. While those things can be nice, they often don't meet our core needs. True self-care means knowing we deserve kindness, time, and love—just like anyone else. Imagine what it would feel like to offer yourself even a fraction of the compassion you give others. What if you treated yourself as someone truly deserving of care? Because you are.

Real self-care is about giving ourselves the caring, attentive energy we might offer a close friend and, slowly, learning to be that friend to ourselves.

Why Self-Care Can Feel So Challenging

For those of us who weren't shown love or care in the ways we needed as children, being kind to ourselves now may feel uncomfortable or even scary. Many of us keep busy, moving from one task to the next, perhaps unconsciously afraid of slowing down. That stillness can bring up feelings we've long avoided, and sometimes there's even a small voice saying, "I don't deserve this." But maybe that voice isn't telling the full truth.

What ifwe do deserve kindness and care?

What if caring for ourselves felt as natural as caring for others? Self-care doesn't have to be big. It can be as simple as taking a breath, choosing to pause, or just saying to yourself, "I am enough." These small actions are powerful.

The Loss of Self and Trauma

Gabor Maté, a renowned physician and author, said, **"The loss of self is the essence of trauma."**

When we go through difficult experiences, especially in childhood, it can feel as though pieces of ourselves went missing. We may have survived by focusing on others' needs, ignoring our own, and, in the process, lost touch with who we truly are and what we need. But those parts of us are still within reach, ready to be rediscovered. And you've come through so much already. The same strength you used to get through hard times can be used now to begin this journey of self-care.

Time to reconnect

When trauma happens, especially early in life, we often disconnect from our needs and wants. It can help to think of our inner child—that younger part of us who still needs validation, kindness, and care. This inner child part of us might be scared, lonely, or unsure. If you find it hard to picture your own younger self, try thinking of a child you know—a niece, nephew, or perhaps your own child. Then, ask yourself:

• Would I say unkind things to this child?

Most likely, you'd speak gently, offering reassurance.

- **Would I deny them rest, time to relax, or play?**

No, you'd likely encourage them to take breaks, to play, and to feel free.

- **Would I surround them with unkind, critical people?**

Of course not. You'd protect them from judgment and ensure they're supported and valued.

Our inner child deserves the same kindness. Treating ourselves this way is not indulgent or selfish; it's necessary. By extending this care inward, we can begin to rebuild a sense of self that trauma may have damaged.

Time for Me ?

Time is one of the most precious gifts we can offer. But making time for ourselves can feel challenging, especially if we're used to always being on the go or were made to feel that our needs didn't matter. Spending time with ourselves tells us we have worth, even if it's just a few minutes each day.

Imagine setting aside a few moments each day to just be with yourself. Call it a check-in. This "time in" can be as simple as sitting quietly, reflecting, taking a walk, or doing something small that brings comfort. At first, it might feel uncomfortable or even stir up difficult feelings, but over time, this practice helps us reconnect. Sometimes, just being with ourselves—without needing to accomplish anything—can be a gentle act of self-care.

Learning to Say No to Others and Yes to Ourselves

An important part of self-care is setting boundaries. We may have spent years saying yes to others, maybe to avoid conflict or disappointment, even when it drained us. But sometimes, saying no to others is saying yes to ourselves.

Setting boundaries isn't selfish; it's a way of acknowledging that our needs are important too. It's okay to turn down requests or say no to things that overwhelm us. Boundaries help us conserve our energy and make room for the things that nurture us.

Reclaiming Joy and Curiosity

Self-care doesn't always mean deep reflection; sometimes, it's about small joys and playful curiosity. When we've spent years focused on others, rediscovering what brings us joy may feel unfamiliar. However it can really help us connect with our child parts and help our body heal. Try small steps with a little curiosity.

Music Is Magic

Music can be a comforting companion. Try listening to different genres or revisit favorite songs from your past. Create a playlist just for you. Sing out loud if it feels good—even if you think you're off-key. Music has a way of connecting us to emotions we may not even realize we're feeling.

Moving in Your Own Way

You don't need to hold a perfect yoga pose or lift heavy weights to care for yourself. Move your body in ways that feel right. Dance in your living room, stretch, or take a slow walk. It's not about getting it perfect; it's about letting your body feel alive and free.

Giving Yourself Permission to Play

Play is a beautiful form of self-care, and it's something our inner child often longs for. Think back to simple joys from childhood—drawing, playing games, or even crafting something with your hands. Do something playful without a goal or purpose other than to enjoy yourself.

Find your inner Tiger

Dr. Kristin Neff speaks about "fierce compassion"—caring for ourselves with strength and kindness. I like to think of this as having an inner Tiger, a part of us that stands up for our needs and won't take any nonsense. We often find this energy when defending loved ones; now it's time to apply it to ourselves.

By caring for our inner child, giving ourselves time, setting boundaries, and rediscovering what brings us joy, we begin to embody fierce compassion. Self-care is an act of courage.

Choosing to care for yourself, even when it feels uncomfortable, is an act of defiance against the belief that your needs don't matter. You are becoming both the protector and nurturer of your own well-being.

The Journey to Self-Care and Self-Worth

Changing how we feel about ourselves doesn't happen overnight, and that's okay. This is a gradual journey of small, powerful steps. Each act of self-care, each boundary we set, and each moment we spend with ourselves is a connection to our resilience and true self .

We Are Worth It

We are valuable just as we are. Real self-care is embracing that truth and reconnecting with the child within us who deserves kindness, validation, and joy.

Today, take one small action just for you. It could be a deep breath, a gentle word, or a moment of quiet. This is your journey. You are worth every single step.

Written by Anne MacFarlane

Dip.Counselling Adults & children . Emdr therapist. BACP

Based in Glasgow, UK, I've been a counsellor since 2005 and worked at Talk Now since 2018 . I'm dedicated to supporting individuals on their journey to healing and authenticity. Passionate about self-discovery, I constantly delve into the latest research on trauma, therapies and body...

