

Look After Yourself

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Louisa rubbed her tired eyes. Glancing at the clock, it was 2am. She had to be at work at 8am, but still had another 1,000 words to write. And then there's the upcoming biology exam. Maybe it would be a slow morning at the office so that she could squeeze in a bit more studying. She should have come right back to her flat after class, but Shannon was upset and needed the support of a friend. "At least my friends can always count on me," Louisa thought. Still, her studies loomed over her – she couldn't allow herself to get behind. Fighting a rising sense of panic, she pressed on, trying to construct a coherent argument despite the exhaustion she felt.

University life can bring numerous challenges--adjustments to being away from home; trying to make and keep new friends; dating or exploring your sexual identity; essays to write and exams to study for; perhaps working full or part time on the side. How well do you look after yourself in the process?

Unfortunately, many of us are not very good at looking after ourselves. Like Louisa, you may be better at taking care of others than at taking care of yourself. Maybe it does not seem important. Perhaps it seems selfish to focus on yourself. Or maybe you just don't have the time. Or maybe you're not sure how to.

And yet, if we want to not only survive but truly thrive in university and beyond, looking after ourselves is critical. This chapter explores self-care – what it is, why it matters, and how you can integrate it into your life. The good news is that looking after yourself requires relatively little time and effort – simple actions can have big payoffs. By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Recognise the impact that ongoing stress can have on physical and mental health.

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2. Define self-care and understand why it matters.
3. Discover simple activities that can be incorporated into everyday life to help you feel and function well, represented by the acronym I-CARE.
4. Develop a weekly plan that places your key priorities first, helping you to feel and function well despite challenges that you might experience.

Digging into the Research

Thriving involves feeling good and functioning well across various areas of life (Huppert & So, 2013; McQuaid & Kern, 2017). Thriving does not mean that challenges and struggle are absent. In fact, many people report having a sense of thriving, despite experiencing numerous struggles (The Wellbeing Lab, 2020). This is important, because looking after ourselves can be experienced differently depending upon the amount of struggle that we are facing. When life is going well and we face little struggle, looking after ourselves involves proactively developing positive habits that support wellbeing. During challenging times, looking after ourselves involves drawing on a variety of coping strategies to effectively navigate the difficulties.

Stress and Coping

Regardless of our background and choices, life will be challenging at times. We regularly encounter various stressors – an upcoming exam, sitting in traffic, changing weather, etc. Sometimes those stressors are particularly intense, such as a major illness or injury, the death of a loved one, separation or divorce, getting married, starting a job, transitioning to adulthood, or a global pandemic. Large stressors can have a major impact on our health and wellbeing. Still, it is often the accumulation of small stressors that overwhelms us.

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Numerous models of stress exist. The classical model suggests that the *experience* of stress occurs when the stressors that we encounter exceed our ability to cope with those stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). That is, it is not the stressor itself that matters, but our *appraisal or perception of the stressor* that results in a physiological and emotional experience of stress. Using an economic metaphor, Hobfoll (1989, 1998) suggested that people have resources that they value (e.g., a house or car, a good job, certain personal qualities, money, power), which they try to conserve and hold on to; we experience stress when those resources are lost or threatened. Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) suggested that stress occurs when we anticipate or experience difficulties in achieving our goals.

Across these views, stress arises if we feel *threatened* (we expect there to be bad consequences), perceive *harm* (we believe bad outcomes have already occurred) or feel a sense of *loss* (something that we desire seems like it was taken away) (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). For instance, an upcoming exam might be threatening, as your sense of competence is at risk. A past exam might be harmful, as you ruminate on the consequences of failing the exam. You may feel the absence of family as you live away from home. All of these can cause feelings of stress.

Coping refers to the diverse ways in which we respond to threat, harm, and loss (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). The concept of coping is broad in nature, encompassing a rich history and diverse views on definitions, categories, and approaches (Compas et al., 2001; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). For instance, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) distinguished problem and emotion focused behaviours. *Problem-focused coping* directs energy toward the stressor, identifying ways to remove it, avoid it, or diminish its impact. *Emotion-focused coping* focuses on the distress caused by the stressor, including behaviours such as relaxing,

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seeking emotional support from others, crying, screaming, denying the problem, and avoiding the emotions.

Others have distinguished engaging versus disengaging behaviours (e.g., Moos & Schaefer, 1993; Roth & Cohen, 1986; Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003).

Engagement coping involves directly dealing with the stressor itself or the emotions associated with the stressor, whereas *disengagement coping* involves escaping from the stressor or the related distressing emotions (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). For instance, mindfulness, seeking support from others, and reconsidering how you think about the event reflect engagement approaches, whereas escaping through substance abuse, self-harm, fantasy, and other forms of denial reflect disengagement approaches. Engagement approaches tend to be more useful and productive. Whilst disengagement approaches can reduce the emotions caused by a stressor, they tend to be a short-term solution. They provide temporary relief but are ineffective and often harmful in the longer term.

Coping is often seen as reactive in nature, responding to existing stressors. But coping can also aim to prevent threatening and harmful things from occurring in the first place (Aspinwal & Taylor, 1997). *Proactive coping* tends to be problem focused, identifying potential challenges and actively developing strategies to mitigate or reduce the impact of those stressors. For instance, as you begin the semester, you might recognise that you'll have a particularly challenging seventh week with several exams and assignments due. You develop a plan to complete the assignments before that week, so that during the seventh week you can focus your attention on studying for and performing well on the exams.

These different forms of coping come together into a distinctive *coping style* – the unique ways that a person copes with different types of stressors (Carver & Connor-Smith,

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2010). Coping styles develop from an early age and continue to change and develop across the life span. Just as the internal and external stressors that we encounter in everyday life are varied and diverse, there is not a single right way to cope with challenges – it depends upon the situation and the person (Frydenberg, 2017). Still, some approaches are healthier, more productive, and more adaptive than others. For instance, occasionally playing an online game can provide a useful break from cognitively challenging tasks, but at other times the game represents unhelpful procrastination, resulting in short term pleasure but longer-term consequences.

Self-Care

Self-care refers to activities that a person purposefully does to care for their physical, mental, and social health and wellbeing. These are things like regularly engaging in health-promoting behaviours, taking time to reflect and rest, and doing activities that make you feel good. It is a *proactive* coping approach, which generally focuses on building positive mental and physical health, rather than treating symptoms of dysfunction. Care is actively done by the self, with the focus on the self (Bressi & Vaden, 2017).

Numerous studies have focused specifically on the intersection of self-care and stress. Within our bodies, the autonomic nervous system (ANS) acts a control system, functioning largely unconsciously to regulate many of our bodily functions, including our heart rate, digestion, and breathing. The ANS has two major divisions: the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. Stress triggers the sympathetic system, releasing cortisol, priming various bodily functions, and preparing us to fight or flee (Cannon, 1932). This response is adaptive response for short-term stressors, such as avoiding an oncoming vehicle or running away from an angry crocodile. The body also wisely self-corrects. As the stressor passes, the

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parasympathetic system kicks in, dampening the activated response and restoring a normal level of functioning. The body naturally tries to maintain *allostasis* – through which it tries to balance the barrage of internal and external stressors with processes to help us restore stability as we experience change (McEwen, 1993; Sterling & Eyer, 1988). Our bodies are incredibly resilient, with reserves of energy for times of additional stress. However, if stress continues for too long, allostasis becomes harder to maintain; energy reserves are depleted and exhaustion follows. With chronic stress, the sympathetic system is triggered – and remains triggered. Resting heart rate increases, placing pressure on other physiological systems. The body and mind become increasingly susceptible to break down, chronic illness, and even risk of early mortality (Friedman & Kern, 2012; Graham, Christian, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2006; Kemeny, 2007; Segerstrom & Miller, 2004). When chronic stress goes on for too long, it can lead to burnout. Burnout is a form of breakdown, characterised by an overwhelming sense of exhaustion, cynicism and growing detachment from one's work, and increased feelings of ineffective performance and lack of accomplishment (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Importantly, numerous studies emphasise the role that self-care plays in preventing and recovering from burnout. Self-care activities activate the parasympathetic system, calming and restoring us so we are ready for the next stressor. By regularly engaging in simple self-care activities, it becomes a circuit breaker to the many stressors we encounter. Think about your computer. When you are running a lot of programs at once, it becomes slower and slower until it freezes. How do you fix it? You restart, which clears out the memory and allows it to reset. Computers work more effectively when they are regularly

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restarted. Likewise, our bodies need to reset, and things like good sleep, moving regularly, engaging in meditative practice, eating well, etc. help us reset and continue to function well.

Admittedly, self-care is easier when we are feeling and functioning well than in times of difficulty. Think about times when you feel stressed from exams and essays. What happens to your sleep, exercise, and diet? For many people, good habits are placed on hold. But these nutrients are vital for restoration and performance. Importantly, we can learn effective coping strategies and establish regular self-care habits that will help us proactively build our wellbeing as well as successfully navigate stresses and difficulties that we encounter.

Summary

Bringing the research together, we know several things that can help us look after ourselves:

- The experience of stress occurs when we perceive threat, harm, or loss. Stressors do not necessarily result in the experience of stress; we experience distress when we perceive that stressors exceed our ability and capacity to deal with those stressors.
- Coping refers to diverse strategies that we use to respond to stress. We covered five different types of coping:
 - i. Problem-focused coping aims to find ways to remove, avoid, or diminish the impact of stressors,
 - ii. Emotion-focused coping focuses on addressing the emotions that we experience from the stressor.
 - iii. Engagement coping directly deals with the stressors and emotions
 - iv. Disengagement coping tries to escape the stressor and related emotions.

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- v. Proactive coping focuses on preventing the harm from happening, mitigating or reducing the impact of potential stressors.
- There is no single right way to cope with challenges, as it depends on the person and the situation, but some approaches are better for us than others. Importantly, we can learn effective coping strategies and develop a healthy coping style that will help us navigate stress and challenge well.
 - Self-care refers to activities that we do to look after our health and wellbeing. It is proactive in nature, helps to restore our physiological and mental processes, and reduces risk of exhaustion and burnout.
 - Self-care is often sacrificed in times of stress, and yet is probably even more important at those times. Self-care is not selfish; rather, it is a way to help us keep functioning at our best.

Putting it Into Action through I-CARE

How can you make looking after yourself a priority and incorporate it into your busy university life? Using the **I-CARE framework can help.**

I: we are **Intelligent agents** of our wellbeing through self-care practices.

C: we show **Compassion** for self and others

A: we are **Authentic** in how we choose to put self-care into action

R: We are motivated and supported by **Relationships** with other people

E: we make it **Easy** by using simple strategies that we can incorporate into busy lives.

Let's unpack these elements, giving some simple things you can do to look after yourself well.

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Importantly, I-CARE requires *caring about yourself*. For some, that will be easy; you believe you have a sense of value and worth, and you want to do what you can to support yourself. However, for others, you may struggle to accept yourself, have low self-esteem, and question your worth. If you are struggling, reach out for additional support – trusted friends or relatives, counselling services, your doctor, or others – people who can deeply listen to your story, help you make sense of experiences you might have had, and help you along with your journey. You have much to offer this world, and that begins with recognising your own value.

Intelligent Agents

I-CARE begins with us as **Intelligent Agents** of our wellbeing. Looking after ourselves is not about blindly following whatever self-help advice we might come across. Rather, it means, critically engaging with the research to identify evidenced-based approaches that work *for you*. This book provides numerous tools and resources. As you start to practice evidence-based approaches, you'll find what works for you and what does not – empowering you to be an intelligent, active steward of your wellbeing (McQuaid & Kern, 2017).

Self-care needs to be a priority. We often feel like there's just not enough time in the day for things. But as intelligent agents of wellbeing, we need to schedule self-care into our everyday life. And this means making it a priority. A simple activity can help us think about our priorities. You can do this as a thought experiment by imagining it in your mind; even better if you can find the materials and try it out yourself.

ACTIVITY: Jar of Rocks

Materials needed: a large jar, some large rocks, pebbles, and sand.

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Fill the jar part way with sand. The sand represents all of the little things that take our attention – time suckers that are not particularly meaningful. Then add the pebbles – these are more important things, but still not what matters most to us. Then add the largest rocks – these represent what we really value and care about. What happens? Often, there's not enough room for all of the large rocks.

Now imagine another jar. This time, place the large rocks in first. With nothing else inside the jar, they fit easily. Then add the pebbles, which fall around the rocks. Then add the sand, which fills in the empty space between the pebbles and rocks.

Take a few minutes and write down your big rocks. These are the things that are really important to you. You probably won't have many 'big rocks' - perhaps 2-5 – and one of them needs to be self-care. Next think about your pebbles. These are the things that are a priority, but not as important as your big rocks. Now finally identify your sand. This is the day-to-day tasks of life that need to get done and the things that waste time without delivering much benefit.

Each week take a few minutes to map out your time. Start with the big rocks (include self-care activities) and then schedule other things – your pebbles and sand - around those rocks. Then, at the end of the week, review your week. Did you keep your big rocks, or did you allow sand and pebbles to take over? How can you prioritise your big rocks next week? Over time, by prioritising your big rocks, you'll find that you accomplish more and have more time than you thought possible.

Compassion

Compassion for ourselves and others means that we are aware of the pain of others, feel their suffering, and desire to alleviate suffering (Wispé, 1991). We refrain from

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judgement, simply seeing people as fallible human beings (Neff, 2003). While compassion is often thought of as focused on others, compassion can also be directed toward the self. Self-compassion involves being open to our own suffering, desiring to alleviate our own pain, and accepting ourselves as human, despite our failures and inadequacies (Neff, 2003). Importantly, through self-compassion, we are better able to be compassionate towards others.

ACTIVITY: Permission to be human

Have you ever mucked things up? Despite our best efforts, things do not always work out. We live in a society that is averse to failure. We are encouraged to put our best face forward and hide our inadequacies. Yet we wonder, am I the only one who messes things up? Why does everyone else seem to have it all together? Despite all of the images that we can create, we are imperfect and fallible. Self-compassion involves seeing our failings as part of the larger human experience (Neff, 2003).

Think about a situation that went wrong. Take out a piece of paper, answer the following questions, simply free writing:

1. What happened? Describe the details of the situation.
2. What did you do? What were your actions? Do not judge, simply write your actions.
3. What were the outcomes or costs of your actions? Simply reflect on what resulted from your actions.
4. What did you learn from the situation, and what would you do differently in the future? There are always things that we can learn, insights that are apparent in

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hindsight. Take a moment to reflect on the lessons that are apparent in your experience, and what you can learn from the experience.

5. How does this reflect your humanity? Consider similar reactions that you have seen in others, recognising that you are human, just like everyone else.

Authenticity

Authenticity is about being true to ourselves. It begins with awareness – knowing who we are (our character, values, strengths, and weaknesses, not simply the superficial image that we might portray), what we are feeling and thinking, and how we are behaving. Then, authenticity involves living and acting in ways that honour who we are – not creating an image of what others expect us to be or being the person that others assume us to be, but aligning ourselves to our values and embracing both our flaws and strengths.

ACTIVITY: Identifying and embracing strengths

We are often better at identifying everything wrong with us, rather than all that we have to offer the world. We all have strengths – some of which are visible and easily accessible, others that are waiting to be discovered. By recognising and drawing on our strengths, our daily activities can become engaging, meaningful, and nourishing, rather than boring, meaningless, and depleting. Numerous tools are available that can help you start to tune into your strengths. For instance, the Values in Action (VIA) Character Institute offers a free survey, which can help you explore your strengths and use your strengths in everyday life (www.viacharacter.org). Complete the survey, and then start drawing on your strengths each day to bring out the best in you and others.

Relational

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Humans have a deep need to connect with and feel a sense of belonging or relatedness with others (Allen et al., 2018; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000). We are also interconnected with others – our actions impact others, and others impact us (Kern et al., 2019). People in our life provide a reason to look after ourselves, and only by being well ourselves can we help others to be well. Our relationships also provide support. While looking after ourselves is self-initiated, that does not mean that we do everything on our own. Looking after ourselves well means knowing when and reaching out for help when we need it.

ACTIVITY: Helping hand

How good are you at asking for help? Top performers and successful people do not reach success on their own – they have numerous people around them who gave encouragement and support, provided advice, or filled instrumental needs at the times that they stumbled, doubted themselves, and wanted to quit. And yet we often try to do things on our own.

Take a sheet of paper and trace your hand in the middle of the page. On each finger, list five people that you can seek help from when needed. Outside of the hand, note what each person can help with (e.g., listening to you, cheering you up, providing transportation, sharing information), and why that person is helpful. Then, turn the page over and trace your hand again. This time, list five people or organisations beyond your friends that you can go to for help. On the outside of the hand, again note what sort of help they can provide, and why they might be helpful. Hang the hand on your wall, and when you find yourself struggling, consider reaching out to the helping hands around you – and provide a hand to others as they need it.

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Easy

There is lots of evidence to suggest that for change to start and stick it needs to be made **Easy** through simple actions that can easily be incorporated into everyday life. Let's face it. Life is busy. There are many demands on your time and energy. It is easy for self-care to be placed on the back burner, despite good intentions. Indeed, each new year, people make numerous resolutions – how many of those resolutions last beyond the first few weeks? We rely on motivation and willpower – which quickly fade. Instead, we need simple ways to embed I-CARE into everyday life, such that it becomes automatic and effortless.

ACTIVITY: Tiny habits

Consider tiny habits – small actions that seem insignificant, but can easily be done, build a sense of confidence, and build motivation over time (Fogg, 2020). Tiny habits can be done quickly – even in less than 30 seconds. The action is paired with another behaviour, which becomes a cue to engage in the tiny habit, followed immediately by a reward, which pairs positive emotions with the behaviour. For instance, imagine that you want to start practicing meditation. Rather than trying to do a 30-minute meditation, begin with a few deep breaths, tied to starting class. Arrive to a class a few minutes early. Sit down, close your eyes, and take a few deep breaths. Then congratulate yourself for completing your tiny habit – use positive self-talk or do a little victory dance. Over time, expand the time or practice in different places. Be flexible and experiment, exploring what works for you, what activities the tiny habit should be tied to, and ways to celebrate.

Conclusion

Looking after ourselves does not need to be complex, difficult, or time consuming, and yet it has big payoffs. Importantly, university is a great time to create regular habits that

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will support you both in university and beyond. As stress increases, self-care becomes even more important, for both yourself and others. This chapter has identified why looking after ourselves is important, offering I-CARE as a simple approach to put self-care into action. Thriving does not happen overnight; rather, it is through the little things that we do that brings out the best in ourselves and others, despite the stresses and difficulties that we might encounter along the way. I wish you the very best with your journey.

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