**A Holistic Approach to Self-Care**

How we look after ourselves often depends on our current circumstance, our priorities and individual health needs.

Ask a working parent and they’ll likely reply ‘what self-care? I wish I had time’. Ask the hard-working young professional, and they may tell you how 3-4 days a week they are up at 6am to go to yoga and enjoy a monthly massage, in between social events.

Ultimately, we all tend to be busy! We live in a society that is filled with stimulation and abundance which often contributes to higher stress levels and subsequent poor diet or lifestyle choices.

Having more time at home in 2020 has been frustrating, stressful, and overwhelming at times but it has also given many of us more time without the daily commute, kids activities and lack of social engagements.

Therefore, it has been a good opportunity to focus on simple healthcare practices that can go a long way to keeping us more balanced, healthy and happy. These are my top recommendations for day-to-day self-care:

**Eat Real Food** – and don’t follow ‘diets’! That’s right, if you’re generally healthy and want to stay that way you’ll benefit long term by avoiding processed foods and drinks. Eat whole foods such as quality meat, fish and eggs, generous amounts of vegetables, small amounts of fruits, whole grains, fermented dairy, nuts and seeds. These should be the staple foods in our diet.

Of course, we all need a bit of convenience at times but it’s not difficult to snack on a handful of nuts and piece of fruit or a couple of dates. And eating out is an important part of our social lives but you can make healthier choices by avoiding fast foods.

**Eat Just Enough** – this is much easier if you are avoiding the processed foods. Foods high in sugar and salt are addictive so your brain tells you to have more. Fighting these cravings is also easier if your diet has good levels of protein and healthy fats, plenty of vegetables and small amounts of carbohydrates from grains. Fat and protein trigger your satiety hormones so tell your brain you can stop eating. With a high carbohydrate diet you will feel hungry more often.

Avoid snacking unless you are actually hungry and won’t eat for another few hours. We don’t need to feel full all the time! It gives the digestive tract a break, allowing it to work more efficiently and avoids further blood sugar spikes which can limit fat burning between meals.

**Drink Enough Water** – this is roughly 2 litres per day for a 60kg, moderately active, person. Try to drink mostly in between meals so you don’t dilute your digestive juices during eating.

Herbal teas also count toward your water intake but if you drink caffeinated drinks you should increase your water intake as caffeinated coffee and tea increase water losses through the urine.

**Get Enough Sleep** – 7 to 8 hours a night. I frequently have clients complaining of being tired and they are only sleeping for up to 6 hours a night, then they make poor diet choices: craving sugar for energy, caffeine to stay awake in the afternoon and alcohol to help relax in the evening. Not surprisingly until the sleep is improved changing all those other habits is not going to be easy!

If you are not tired by around 10pm then look at your sleep hygiene practices - turn off your phone or devices, create your own relaxation ritual before bed with dim lighting, a warm shower or bath, and diffuse some essential oils that calm the mind such as chamomile, lavender and sweet orange.

**Keep Caffeine and Alcohol in Moderation** – yes, there are numerous studies that show moderate intake of both can be beneficial to health but also plenty that identify the negative effects such as hormone imbalance, sleep disruption and impact on mood. Try to be aware of any negative side effects and have periods of avoidance to help the body reset.

If your social events revolve around alcohol try meeting friends for a walk in the park or breakfast catch ups instead of dinner.

**Exercise** – walk, run, cycle or stretch. Do whatever you can each day to move your body. Incorporate it into your daily routine: walk to work (or even part-way), take the stairs instead of the elevator, walk to the shops and stretch in the morning or before bed. If exercise is just another thing on your daily to do list, or done in excessive amounts, it can add more stress physically and mentally and become counterproductive.

Try to get into nature to exercise as much as possible, this will aid relaxation and hopefully make it more enjoyable.

**Think About Your Environment** – try to create a space at home and work that is uncluttered and restful. Taking the time to tidy and unclutter helps to keep your mind remain calmer and ultimately make you more productive in your day.

Adding plants to your home helps to keep the air healthy and you connected to nature whilst indoors.

Avoid using synthetic fragrances and chemicals in the home for cleaning or as air fresheners. Essential oils such as eucalyptus, tea tree, thyme, lavender and clove all have anti-microbial properties which can be added un-fragranced base products to make your own surface cleaners.

Diffusers are a great way to fragrance your home and support your mood. If you need help focusing or a bit of a lift in your day try a blend of peppermint, lemon and rosemary essential oils in your diffuser.

**Take Care of Your Relationships** – make sure you allocate time to spend with family and friends, nurture those relationships. Manage discontent or frustration with loved ones by communicating and seeking outside support if needed. We all need help navigating rough patches.

Be kind to yourself and others; it won’t go unnoticed and it’s contagious!

Beware of social media creating unrealistic ideals. Online communities can be helpful in reducing feelings of isolation (especially during a pandemic), but nothing beats real life interaction – even if its socially distanced!

2020 was no doubt a challenging year, however we can choose to embrace the positives. Such as the extra time to focus on health and developing better lifestyle habits. And remember anything new requires a commitment to change, re-wiring your brain takes time and effort so taking it step by step is key to making sustainable lifestyle adjustments.

By continuing to see the value of doing a little less and being kinder to ourselves, we will be better prepared to get through 2021 feeling healthier and happier.