



Finding a Self-Care Ritual That Works for You

By: Whitney Casares, MD, MPH, FAAP

My friend Jenny is a go-getter. She likes lists and agendas. She thrives on structure.

"When I have a day to myself (which I hardly ever have), I find myself overplanning it, making an itinerary for myself even if I don't have to," she told me. "By 5:00 pm I'm exhausted. I'm realizing that I'm just as type A about my self-care as I am about my job."

Jenny, like many moms, has a tendency to make self-care (/English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/Importance-of-Self-Care.aspx) yet another chore instead of a much-deserved reset. Self-care is about finding ways to make sure, as we're working, and parenting, and doing all the "stuff" of life, that we fit in opportunities to actually live it. It's about allowing time to do things that make us truly joyful, not just at the end of our working mom journeys but also along the way there.



Over the years I've learned to be more flexible and aware that I'm ultimately a tiny ant on a big, huge, spinning planet—one I'm not spinning. But even if we're not in complete control of the world or of our lives, we are absolutely, 100% (please listen because I am going to say this with italics so it will stand out to you) *in control of the way we respond to the world around us, the way we show up for ourselves and our families. We're in control of the way we choose to spend our efforts and time.*

That means that we're in control of choosing to take moments—and sometimes hours—specifically for ourselves.

Decide you're worth 5 minutes a day

When you wake up in the morning, you are starting fresh on your journey toward social-emotional health for you and your family. You have a chance to renew your commitment to your dreams and your priorities. Take it. Decide you're worth 5 minutes a day thinking about the things you're grateful for, visualizing who you want to be, and remembering what your priorities are.

If you're inching toward a dream, use that time to think about the goal you're working on to get there. As you move through your day, all kinds of distractions and barriers are going to come up, so find 5 minutes early on to get intentional about what really matters to you.

You could use your 5 minutes alone in the shower to do this, or take 5 minutes in the car on the way to work to move through this process. When I have early morning meetings, I use the microphone feature on my phone to record my 5-minute sessions. The point is to take the time to remember why you do what you do.

Find a self-care plan that fits your life

As you develop a self-care plan, you'll have to decide how much time you're willing or able to commit to on a weekly basis. What is something you can do about every other day, almost every single week? If you can commit to 3 times a week most weeks, it will be often enough that you stick with it, and it will become a routine. If you can get to your activity more often, awesome, but 3 times a week is a great start.

Start with exercise

If there was going to be one single activity that is worth time by yourself and for yourself, physical fitness (/English/healthy-living/fitness/Pages/Making-Fitness-a-Way-of-Life.aspx) (if you choose the right activity—anything that triggers an endorphin release) or meditation takes the cake. Physical fitness can give you the chance to deepen your

social connections, be mindful, work on your own physical fitness, and set goals for yourself. Meditation also checks many of those same boxes, but there is something valuable in moving our bodies as a way to clear the mental and physical cobwebs away. [Back to Top](#)

Make it a multitasker

It makes sense to bundle your benefits so that you get the most bang for your buck from the activity you choose. Look back at your priority list—is there something you can do that accomplishes multiple goals for you? Here are some examples.

- **Group exercise class**—stress relief, physical fitness, mindfulness, camaraderie, alone time to and from the activity
- **A walk around the neighborhood**—fresh air, visual change of pace, physical fitness, mindfulness, maybe an errand or two
- **Virtual hangout with a friend**—building community and support, stress relief, good food

Avoid stressful extras or add-ons

When my first daughter was born, I really could not wait to get out of the house. She was colicky and exhausting, and, in turn, I was a hot mess. It was obvious that I needed a bit of time away from her, but I felt guilty about it, so instead of using minutes and hours away from her to actually spend time on self-care, I spent time doing chores. It helped me feel like I was accomplishing something, like there was a reason beyond self-preservation for getting out and away.

Unfortunately, my plan of cramming a bunch of tasks into each free hour I had quickly backfired. Instead of feeling relaxed and ready to parent when I returned home, I felt like the family servant. I did all the work when I was at home with her, when I was at work, and when I was away from her in my "spare time."

I'm not alone in filling up hours away from my kids with to-dos, obligations, and tasks. I see moms every day in my office weighed down by the items on their lists, by the checkboxes that have yet to be checked for the day. Instead, pick some times for you that are only about taking care of yourself so you can come home refreshed.

Filter out the to-dos

Moms who focus solely on getting things done miss out on *life*, plain and simple. Instead, think about how to lessen your load. If you have a partner, figure out a plan for dividing responsibilities along strength lines. No matter what your family construct, stop doing everything for everyone else. Get other people on your team, including your kids. Coaching kids to help with household tasks in an age-appropriate way builds your family community, teaches responsibility, and helps kids develop resilience.

Be OK with the stage of parenthood you're in now & what that means for your self-care

If you're reading this while holding your newborn and feeling like, "I can barely take a quick shower, let alone plan out a priority list for myself," remember—there is a season. Even though it's tempting to wish you could hurry ahead to more balance, you may just need to be still for now. Your priorities and your bandwidth may change as your kids grow and your work demands change. What seemed impossible to me as a new mom is a daily part of my life now that my kids are a little older. It's just a fact that our self-care options may change depending on the stage of motherhood we're in, and that's perfectly OK.

My wish for you, as you think about ways to incorporate self-care into your own life, is that you'll see self-care as a reflection of motherhood in general: perfect would be nice but that less than perfect can be pretty amazing too.

More information

- Importance of Self-Care: Why Parents Need Time Out to Recharge ([/English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/Importance-of-Self-Care.aspx](#))
- Mood-Boosting Tips For Families During the COVID-19 Pandemic ([/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Mood-Boosting-Tips-for-Families-COVID-19.aspx](#))
- Depression During & After Pregnancy: You are Not Alone ([/English/ages-stages/prenatal/delivery-beyond/Pages/understanding-motherhood-and-mood-baby-blues-and-beyond.aspx](#))
- Tips for Coping with a New Baby During the Pandemic ([/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Tips-for-Coping-with-a-New-Baby-During-COVID-19.aspx](#)) ([/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Tips-for-Coping-with-a-New-Baby-During-COVID-19.aspx](#))

About Dr. Casares

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