

# Self-Care Toolkit for University Students

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Welcome to the Self-Care Toolkit for University Students! This toolkit was created to help students like yourself explore and understand why self-care is important and how you can include it in your life. This toolkit is divided into three sections. The first section provides information on why self-care is important and the various benefits and barriers to self-care. The second section will help you identify your strengths and weaknesses in practicing self-care. The final section addresses how to make a plan for both maintenance and emergency self-care purposes.



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## **Step 1: Understanding Self-Care**

### **What is self-care?**

Self-care includes any intentional actions you take care for all aspects of your wellness. At the Wellness Education Centre, we like to think of wellness as encompassing at least seven different dimensions, including: academic, social/cultural, environmental, mental, physical, spiritual and financial. The Fort Garry Women's Resource Centre (2016) describes self-care as, "care provided 'for you, by you'. It's about identifying your own needs and taking steps towards meeting them" (p. 2). For example, you may find that going for a hike helps you stay physically and mentally well. Reaching out to a friend or family member could be an example of taking action to nurture your social wellness. While there are an infinite number of self-care strategies to help with each area of wellness, it's always personal and subjective. A strategy that works for one person may not have the same impact on another person.

In order to figure out the appropriate self-care plan for you, it's important to understand the barriers and benefits of self-care. By addressing these issues, you can begin to understand how you can incorporate self-care into your life. Proceed to the next page to learn more about why self-care is important as a university student.



### **Why is it important to practice self-care as a student?**

As a student, it's common to feel overwhelmed at times with school and other personal responsibilities. You'll quickly notice that the demands of university life can require more effort than high school because you are being asked to be more independent than ever before. This transition can be unsettling, which is why practicing self-care becomes crucial for adapting and thriving in university life. Self-care can help you to nourish your wellbeing and manage stress.

When you fly on a plane, the flight attendant always cautions you to put the oxygen mask first on yourself before you worry about others in case of an emergency. Self-care works the same way in student life. By participating in self-care, you allow yourself to breathe and engage with the world in a more meaningful and healthy way.

Taking steps toward developing a healthier lifestyle can help you to reduce stress and improve your physical health, both of which can improve your mental health as well. Self-care is unique for everyone and will take time to develop. Studies have shown that practicing self-care can increase the capacity for empathy, improve your immune function and lower levels of anxiety (Williams-Nickelson, 2006; Schure, Christopher & Christopher, 2008). There is evidence even suggesting that by practicing self-care, you can enhance your self-esteem (Faunce, 1990). As you can see, self-care is well worth it in the long run! But what's stopping you?



### What's stopping you from practicing self-care?

While it's easy to see the benefits and importance of self-care, some of us may be wondering, *why haven't we practiced self-care before?* What's been stopping us from practicing self-care consistently? There could be several reasons for this. Tamura et al. (2008) have listed some common barriers preventing people from practicing self-care. Use the scale below to determine which barriers are stopping you the most.



- 0 = Does not apply to me at all  
 1 = Sometimes or occasionally applies to me  
 2 = Frequently applies to me  
 3 = Almost always applies to me

- I must do all of the self-care practices in order to get ahead  
 Self-care is too self-serving and makes me feel guilty for doing so  
 I'm afraid that my faculty and peers will question my level of academic and professional dedication if I practice self-care  
 I'm not aware of my needs  
 I'm not sure how to practice self-care  
 I believe self-care focuses too much on disease and problems instead of prevention  
 I don't believe in my own ideas and theories enough to live a 'wellness' lifestyle  
 I believe I must work as hard as possible in order to succeed  
 It's too hard to maintain and incorporate self-care in my life  
 I just can't do self-care.

Take a look at each barrier you scored as 2 or 3. What surprised you about your scores?

Next, answer each of the following questions:

1. Why do you think the barrier exists in your life right now?
2. What have you tried to overcome this barrier in the past?
  - a. Why didn't it work?
3. What do you hope to learn in this toolkit to help you overcome that barrier?

This toolkit is designed to empower you to overcome these barriers by providing you with knowledge on ways to incorporate self-care into your life. The very choice to read through this toolkit is an act of self-care. You are choosing to find ways to improve your health and well-being. That's a great start! If you are unaware of your personal needs or how to practice self-care, proceed to the next section to learn more about yourself. The next section will help you to reflect on your personal lifestyle so that you can better understand your personal needs. You will receive insight into the areas in your life that you may already be doing well, and some areas in your life that you can take steps to improve.

## **Step 2: Identifying Your Strengths and Weaknesses**

Becoming aware of our needs is necessary in order to develop solutions and the appropriate self-care plan. Ask yourself the following questions to identify what's helping you, and what is holding you back.

What makes you feel nourished and reenergized?

What stresses you out?

When do you feel drained? After doing what?

What makes you anxious?

What are you comfortable with?

What is something that YOU enjoy?

The next few pages include information on identifying your strengths and weaknesses when it comes to self-care. If you are looking for information on how well you've been practicing self-care in all areas of wellness, take a look at the **Self-Care Assessment**. If you are looking for information to help you identify negative and positive responses to challenges in your life, the **Lifestyle Behavior Questionnaire** will help you. Use the pages as a guide to help you explore what works and doesn't work for you!

## Self-Care Assessment

The following worksheet, adapted from Saakvitne & Pearlman (1996), for assessing self-care is not exhaustive, merely suggestive. Saakvitne & Pearlman (1996) write, “Feel free to add areas of self-care that are relevant for you and rate yourself on how often and how well you are taking care of yourself these days. Try to be as honest as possible. When you are finished, look for patterns in your responses. Are you more active in some areas of self-care but ignore others? Are there items on the list that make you think, ‘I would never do that’? Listen to your inner responses, your internal dialogue about self-care and making yourself a priority” (p. 1).

Use this assessment to better understand which wellness behaviours you do often, and which new behaviours you’d like to incorporate into your everyday life. Choose 2-3 behaviours from each type of wellness to start with. The results of this assessment will be used to determine your current and new wellness practices for step three of this toolkit. If you give a wellness behavior a rating of 2 or 3, they would be considered current practices of self-care. If you give a wellness behavior a rating of 1, 0, or “?” then those could be considered new practices you wish to include more in your life.

Rate the following areas according to how well you think you are doing:

- 3 = I do this well (e.g., frequently)
- 2 = I do this OK (e.g., occasionally)
- 1 = I barely or rarely do this
- 0 = I never do this
- ? = This never occurred to me

### Spiritual Wellness

- Make time for reflection
- Spend time with nature
- Find a spiritual connection or community
- Be open to inspiration
- Be aware of non-material aspects of life
- Try at times not to be the expert or in charge
- Be open to not knowing
- Identify what is meaningful to me
- Meditate/pray
- Sing
- Have experience of awe
- Contribute to causes in which I believe
- Read or listen to inspirational literature
- Listen to spiritual/calming music



### Academic/Career Wellness

- Take breaks during the day
- Take time to chat with colleagues/ other students
- Make quiet time to complete tasks
- Set limits with colleagues and friends
- Arrange a comfortable work space/ find a study environment
- Get regular feedback from mentors, supervisors, etc.
- Negotiate my needs e.g. schoolwork, extension, deadlines, etc.
- Have a peer support group
- Prioritize tasks/assignments
- Do a little bit of work every day
- Network with others
- Hand in assignments/projects on time
- Study well in advance for exams/tests
- Regularly review notes/read textbook



### Financial Wellness

- Pay my bills on time
- Save a portion of my income every month
- Apply for bursaries
- Track my expenses
- When buying items, ask myself: "DO I NEED or WANT this?"
- Examine my checking account statements every month
- Use my debit card or cash rather than a credit card for making purchases
- Make responsible choices when I shop
- Manage a monthly budget
- Eat nutritiously on a budget by taking lunch, snacks and drinks to school
- Take advantage of student discounts \*\*e.g., by carrying your student identification cards



## Mental Wellness



- Spend time in the company of those I enjoy
- Stay in touch with important people in my life
- Give myself affirmations or praise
- Revisit favourite books, movies
- Seek out comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places
- Allow myself to cry
- Find things that make me laugh
- Make time for self-reflection
- Have my own mental health support network
- Write in a journal
- Read literature unrelated to school/work
- Try something I am not an expert in or in charge of
- Notice my inner thoughts, judgements, beliefs, attitudes, feelings
- Let others know different aspects of myself
- Engage my intelligence in a new area
- Practice receiving from others
- Be curious
- Say no to extra responsibilities when I need to

## Physical Wellness

- Eat regularly
- Eat healthfully
- Exercise
- Get regular medical check ups
- Get medical care when needed
- Take time off when sick
- Get massages/ body treatments
- Dance, swim, walk, run, play, etc
- Take time to be sexual
- Get a restful sleep
- Wear clothes I like
- Take vacations/mini-vacations
- Make time away from phones, computers



## Social & Cultural Wellness



- Plan time to be with my family and friends
- Enjoy the time I spend with others
- Experience my relationships with others as positive and rewarding
- Make time to check up on how my friends are doing?
- Explore diversity by interacting with people of other cultures, backgrounds, and beliefs?
- Do I treat myself and others with respect
- Seek out opportunities and am willing to meet new people and do new things (i.e., join a club or organization, play a team sport, learn a new hobby, volunteer, or attend community events).
- Look at situations from multiple perspectives and resolve conflicts through compromise
- At social events, am conscious of how much alcohol I am drinking
- I have a safe way of getting home when there is alcohol available?

## Environmental Wellness

- Use a reusable mug/water bottle
- Open blinds to let in natural light
- Take short showers (e.g., under 7 minutes)
- Wash clothes using cold water
- Hang clothes on a clothesline to dry
- Turn off lights when not in use
- Turn off water when brushing teeth
- Not let water run while washing dishes
- Run the dishwasher or washing machine only when there is a full load
- Take public transportation or walk/ride my bike
- Print documents as little as possible
- Recycle bottles, cans, newspapers, etc.
- Donate items I no longer need or use
- Reuse items such as bags and containers
- Make meals using leftovers to reduce food waste
- Freeze foods before they go bad



## Lifestyle Behavior Questionnaire

The following worksheet, adapted from Lisa Butler's Lifestyle Behavior Questionnaire, was created to help you assess lifestyle behaviors that you already use to manage your stress.

### Is your lifestyle causing you stress?

Lisa Butler writes, "The way you live your life can have a big impact on your health, well-being, and your ability to handle stress. Below are lifestyle behaviors that affect stress levels. Please check the boxes that apply to you. Doing an honest assessment of how you take care of yourself can help you manage your stress in the future" (p. 1)

You'll learn about what is considered to be a healthy strategy for managing stress and what is considered to be an unhealthy strategy. This knowledge can help you to make healthier lifestyle choices when feeling overwhelmed or stressed. Reflect on what positive lifestyle behaviors you think you could include more in your life and what negative lifestyle behaviors you could do with less. This will be important for when you proceed to step 3 which involves creating the self-care plan.

| <b>Negative Lifestyle Behaviors</b>  |                          |                          |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| When you are under stress, do you:   | Yes                      | No                       |
| Smoke/use tobacco  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Drink a lot of caffeine or caffeinated drinks (more than 2-3 cups per day)                           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Drink alcohol (more than recommended levels of 1-2 per day)  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Overuse over-the-counter medications   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Overeat or under eat   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Spend too much money (e.g., do you have a lot of credit card debt and have trouble making payments?) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Abuse/overuse tranquilizers or other over-the-counter medications                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

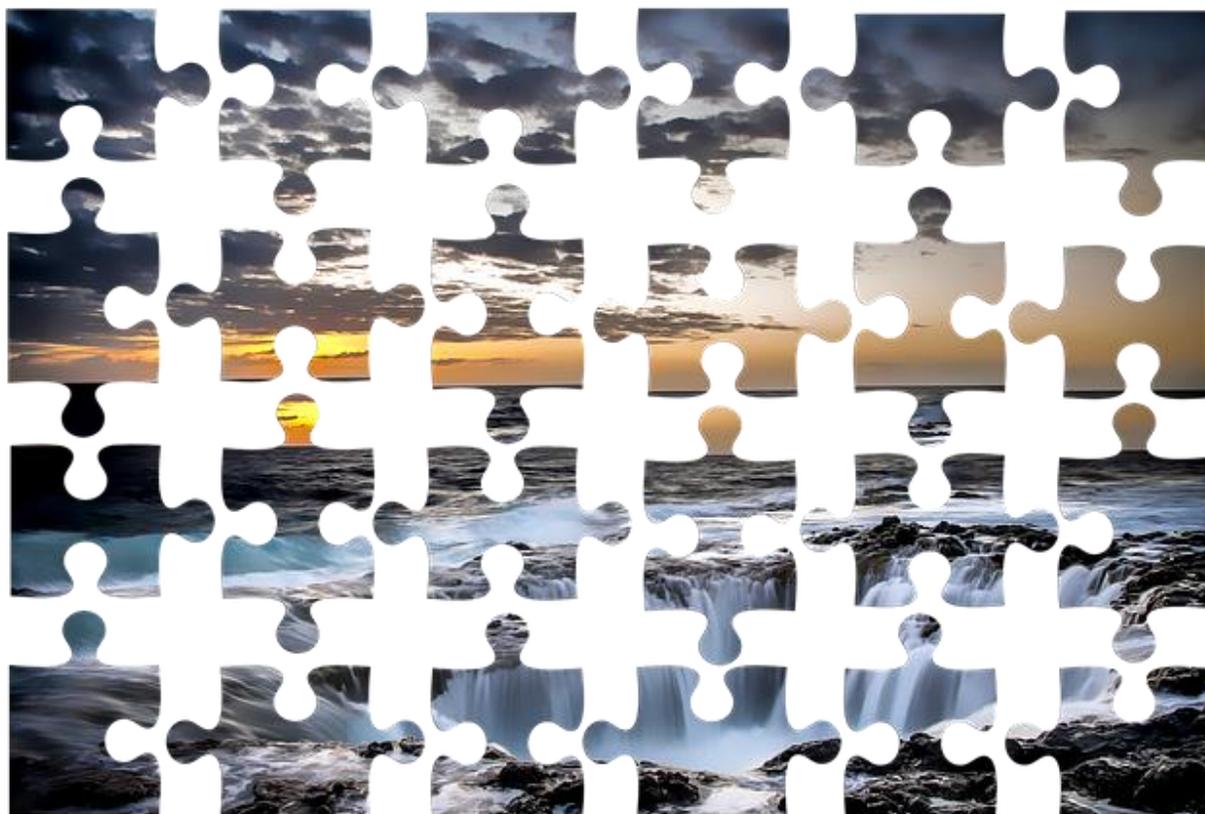
|   |                          |                          |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Watch too much television (more than 3-4 hours per day)   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Have angry outbursts  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Take illegal drugs  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Withdraw from people  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Ignore or deny stress symptoms  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Engage in self-destructive relationships  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <p><b>While these behaviours may reduce stress in the moment, they ultimately lead to increased stress later and irreversible damage. These lifestyle behaviours reduce our overall wellness by negatively affecting some or all areas of our wellness.</b></p> |                          |                          |

| Positive Lifestyle Behaviors  |                          |                          |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| When you are under stress, do you:  | Yes                      | No                       |
| Engage in physical activity at least three times a week for 30 minutes each day | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Get six to eight hours of sleep every night                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Maintain good eating habits   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Make time to relax  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Maintain a sense of humor   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

|  |                          |                          |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
|  |                          |                          |
| Play   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Maintain healthy rituals and routines  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Be optimistic. Engage in positive thinking   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Spend time with family   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Spend time with friends  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Make plans for the future  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Figure out ways to manage stress   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Reward yourself for your accomplishments   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>These lifestyle behaviors help to reduce stress and increase our overall wellness by improving some or all aspects of our wellness.</b> |                          |                          |

## Step 3: Making Your Self-Care Plan

You made it to the final section of our Self-Care Toolkit for University Students! Well done! In this section, we want you to use the knowledge you gained from step 1 and 2 to create your very own self-care plan. In step 1, we learned what self-care was, what barriers are stopping us from practicing self-care and the benefits of self-care. In step 2, we identified our strengths and weaknesses at practicing self-care by completing a self-care assessment and lifestyle behavior questionnaire. In this final step, we will learn how to create a maintenance and emergency self-care plan. The **Maintenance Self-Care Plan** will help you to figure out which lifestyle behaviors you want and feel you can include on a weekly basis to improve your overall wellness. The **Emergency Self-Care Plan** will help you to devise a healthy strategy for coping with those times when it seems the world is crashing down around you.



**Maintenance Self-Care Plan (or *What I Have Learned So Far*)**

The following chart allows you to write a summary of what you have learned during Step 1 and Step 2. Use this as your 'cheat sheet' summary that describes your maintenance self-care plan.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>1. The barriers I uncovered to maintaining my self-care strategies are:</b>        | <b>2. I will address these barriers and remind myself to practice self-care by:</b> |
| <b>3. The unhealthy coping strategies I would like to use less or not at all are:</b> | <b>4. Instead, I will:</b>  |

## Emergency Self-Care Plan

The following worksheet, adapted from Elaine Rinfrette's Emergency Self-Care Worksheet, was created to help you devise a self-care plan that you can rely on personally when you are feeling stressed or overwhelmed.

Why is this important? When we are feeling overwhelmed with university life, it's very hard to choose and act on a healthy self-care behavior. We can easily find ourselves resorting to easy and accessible self-care behaviors that end up being unhelpful. By creating your emergency self-care plan now, you will be better prepared with a variety of healthy strategies to get you through the difficult time. The beauty of it all is that this plan is completely personal and designed by you! Answer the following questions with your wellness and self-importance at the forefront of your mind. Trust your instincts. Feel free to use steps one and two to help you decide what'll help you the best.

### 1. Make a list of what you can do when you are upset that will be good for you.

a. What will help me relax?

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For example,

- Breathing, Muscle relaxation, Music
- Reading for fun, watching a movie
- Exercising, Taking a walk

b. What do I like to do when I'm in a good mood?

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- List all the things you like to do so you remember what they are when you need to think of something to do.

c. What can I do that will help me throughout the day?

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For example,

- Avoid too much caffeine if feeling anxious
- Remember to breathe
- Watch my thoughts
- Stay in the moment

d. Other: What else do YOU need to do that is specific to YOU?

**2. Make a list of people you can contact if you need support or distraction.**

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For example, your best friend, other friends, sibling, parent, grandparent, other relative, therapist, priest/minister/rabbi/imam, etc.

a. Divide the list of people into categories by asking yourself the following questions:

- Who can I call if I am feeling sad or anxious?
- Who can I call if I am lonely?
- Who will come over to be with me if I need company?
- Who will listen?
- Who will encourage me to get out of the house and do something fun?
- Who will remind me to follow my self-care plan?
- Other:

**3. Next, make a list of positive things to say to yourself when you are giving yourself a hard time.**

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Examples of negative self-talk:

- “I got a B- on the paper; that proves that I shouldn’t be in graduate school.” CHANGE to: “That is a good grade. I will work on getting a better one.”
- “I do not understand research methods, I am so dumb.” CHANGE to: “A lot of students are having a problem with this course. Maybe we should start a study group to help each other.”
- “I can’t get all this work done. I should just drop out.” CHANGE to: “I will develop a schedule so that I can get this all done.” “I can check with other students for ideas.” “I can get some feedback from the professors that might help me do the assignments.”

Think about what you would say to a friend with the same struggles and apply it to yourself.

**4. Next, make a list of who and what to avoid when you are having a hard time.**

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Examples of people to avoid:

- My partner broke up with me. I will not call my sister as she always hated my partner.
- I didn't get my assignment in on time and I'm worried about my grade. I will not call my dad. He is a stickler for doing things in advance so that they are never late. He'll just give me a hard time.
- I am discouraged about my grades. I won't call my best friend because she'll just tell me not to worry about it and to quit school if it's such a hassle.

The principle to remember here is that not everyone can be supportive or helpful with every situation. Go to the ones who can be supportive about the specific issue you are dealing with.

Examples of things to avoid:

- I should not stay in the house all day.
- I should not stay in bed all day.
- I should open the shades and let the light in.
- I should not listen to sad music.
- I should not drink too much alcohol.
- Other:

Again, you get it.

**5. Write this plan on a cue card. Keep it in your purse/wallet (and on your phone if you can). Look at it often. Add any good ideas to it whenever you can. USE IT!**

A blank cue card template. It features a red horizontal line at the top, serving as a header. Below this line are ten horizontal blue lines for writing. The card is otherwise empty, with no text or markings.

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