25 Science-Backed Ways to Change Your Life by Taking Better Care of Yourself

For anyone who's been looking for a good reason to #treatyoself, consider this: You probably don't do it often enough, and putting "me time" on the back burner is a big part of why we can all feel run-down, frenzied, and overwhelmed. Self-care, to the rescue!

What's the Deal?

Often-ignored but totally necessary, self-care is any action or behavior that helps us avoid triggering health problems (like increasing our risk for heart problems due to excess stress, for example) and benefits us by improving our mental and physical health through better self-esteem, less stress, and overall wellbeing. These behaviors help provide balance in an increasingly over-stimulating world. Self-care makes up an essential part of a healthy lifestyle that keeps us healthy, happy, and more in-tune with our minds and bodies.

The problem is, we probably aren't doing enough of it.

Experts suggest we neglect self-care because it can be tough to make healthy changes and manage stress in better ways. Self-care is also sometimes associated with selfishness and lazy, over-indulgent behavior. This mentality might make us

feel guilty for thinking we need to take a break from our lives to do something that, simply put, makes us feel better. But ignoring our needs has some dangerous side effects: It makes us more likely to get sick and can make existing conditions worse—not to mention the emotional toll of never taking a break.

That's why taking the time to check in with your mind and body *isn't* a bad thing. In fact, researchers believe the pursuit of health and happiness is far from selfish. When we take good care of ourselves, we're likely to see an improvement in many aspects of our lives, including our physical health, relationships, and even our income. Plus, by making the choice to practice self-care, we have a tendency to care more for others—proving its importance for not just ourselves, but the world around us.

Your Action Plan

Since self-care is a very individual thing, there's no set prescription for how or when to do it. That said, mental health professionals recommend taking at least 20 minutes a day to do something for ourselves, which seems pretty darn reasonable to us. Lost for ideas? Don't fret. We've rounded up some sweet strategies that'll help slash stress, boost happiness, and improve total health. Practice any of these self-care behaviors (or any others that occur to you!) daily, weekly, or even hourly—whatever feels best to *you*.

1. Get outside.
Ditching the comfort of your home is a great way to improve mental and physical health. Similar to meditation, spending time out of doors benefits the brain ▜ . Other research suggests that being outside in nature also makes us feel more alive. Even living in an area with more green space (i.e. parks and gardens) is associated with greater life satisfaction and less mental distress.

2. Try an outdoor workout.
Consider taking your sweat session into nature, too. Research shows that working out in the Great Outdoors boosts mental health, and may decrease tension,

anger, and depression ⚑⚑ .

3. Pay it forward.

By helping others, we actually help ourselves, too. Lending a hand not only boosts mental health, but may also lead to a longer life ⚑ . Volunteering also positively affects self-confidence, self-esteem, and general wellbeing.

4. Breathe the right scents.

We know that breathing techniques can help us relax. But *what* we breathe might be just as important as *how* we breathe. While the benefits of aromatherapy are debated, research suggests that citrus scents—orange essential oil in particular— can help slash stress and anxiety, and getting a whiff of rosemary may boost memory ⚑⚑ .

5. Stress less.

By now, we all know that stress is really bad for our health. Research suggests that stress may be contagious, and the more stressed we *think* we are, the worse it might be for our heart health ⚑ . But between work, relationships, family, and whatever else life throws at us, it's difficult not to succumb to it. Use these strategies, which range from drinking tea to practicing progressive relaxation, to keep the stress monster at bay.

6. Be mindful.

Focusing on the present—without judging how we feel and what we think—can be both a liberating and healthy practice. Studies show that getting in-tune with ourselves through mindfulness slashes stress and depression, helps us see ourselves in a truer light, and may even help keep our minds from wandering ⚑ .

7. Be happy!

We all know that happiness feels good, but it's also great for our health. Research suggests that feeling happy may even prevent disease, including heart disease ⚑ Fredrickson, B.L., Grewen, K.M., Coffey, K.A., et al. University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA. Proceedings of the National Academy

of Sciences, 2013 August 13; 110(33): 13684–13689 ⚑ . But being happy is easier said than done, right? Turns out there's actually a simple way to feel more upbeat: Just crack a smile!

8. Meditate.

Meditation is proof that it doesn't take a ton of time to do a mind and body good. Just a few minutes of quieting your mind can help relieve stress ⚑⚑⚑ . Other benefits include a boost in compassion and emotional stability, and some research suggests that meditating could even keep winter illness at bay ⚑ . The best part? Its benefits continue even when we're not meditating—consider it the gift (to yourself) that keeps on giving. Sneak some meditation into day-to-day life with these 10 awesome techniques.

9. Dance around.

Shaking your booty doesn't *just* make for a fit physique. It may also improve both mood and body image, lead to a better outlook, is associated with a lower risk for dementia, and even help you make friends ⚑ . Consider this your cue for a silly impromptu dance party.

10. Turn up the tunes.

If you've ever noticed that certain songs bring a smile to your face, you're not alone. As it turns out, science has taken note, too. Research shows that listening to music makes already positive emotions even more intense, and upbeat music in particular can do great things for your mood. Plus, jamming out can also improve heart health ⚑ .

11. Eat more fruits and veggies.

Adding more fruits and veggies to our plate is a great way to practice self-care all throughout the day. Research shows that eating berries boosts brain health while noshing on peppers prevents Parkinson's ⚑ . And in case we needed *another* reason to load up on nature's goodness, filling up on seven portions of fruits and veggies per day might make us happier.

12. Swear it off.

Though a potty mouth isn't appropriate in a lot of scenarios (work… church… on a date… you get the picture), dropping an F-bomb might be an easy way to blow off some steam. Research also shows swearing can reduce physical pain, and may even boost confidence and self-esteem ⚑ . But, as they say, timing is everything —so be sure to filter your expletives to avoid adding embarrassment to stress.

13. Indulge in some retail therapy.

Shopaholics, rejoice! Hitting the mall can help ease mild depression and make us more confident, according to some researchers. Another study suggests that purchasing new clothes can lift a person's mood. Science aside, treating yourself to something shiny, special, and new (it doesn't have to be expensive!) is a pretty surefire way to put a smile on your face.

14. Get it on.

There are *tons* of awesome things about sex, even apart from the way it makes us feel. Getting busy can boost the immune system ⚑ :839-44)). Help to reduce stress, and may even relieve migraine pain—and that's just to name a few of its health benefits ⚑⚑ .

15. Become a bookworm.

Contrary to what some middle school bullies believe, reading is cool. Plus, it's actually really good for our health. Research suggests that reading on a regular basis keeps the mind sharp as it ages, and reading fiction in particular makes for more creativity and a more open mind. Cracking open a book may also improve sleep and make us more empathic ⚑ .

16. Laugh out loud.

There's a reason people say laughter is "the best medicine": Chuckling and giggling benefit our mental and physical health, especially when combined with exercise ⚑ . Giving into a case of the funnies can improve our overall quality of life, while getting goofy with other people can help us connect with the people we laugh with and foster our relationships. Your plan of action: Watch a funny

movie or a comedy on television—those reruns of *How I Met Your Mother* may actually be good for your heart ⚑ .

17. Look at something cute.

Instant mood booster: looking at pictures of baby animals. Thanks to Pinterest, that's incredibly easy (Just take a look at this board—it's chock-full of super cute furry friends.). Plus, browsing through these photos may even help you when you're on the job. Research suggests it may boost your productivity at work ⚑ . Just, uh, don't let the boss catch you.

18. Get enough Zzz's.

There tons of things that can sabotage our sleep, whether it's a late night at the office, a wild night with friends, or just catching up on *Scandal*. The problem is, skimping on shut-eye can hurt job productivity, make us choose to eat larger portions, and may lead to diseases like heart disease and diabetes. Prioritize snooze time for a healthier, happier you—even if it's just a quick cat nap during your lunch break.

19. Declutter.

Some researchers believe that clutter can stress us out and bring us down. On the flip side, sorting through and purging unorganized papers, clothes, knickknacks, or whatever else is crowding our lives may help us be more productive, cheerful, and calmer.

20. Pound the pavement.

Not only does it torch calories, but running is a mood-booster that can help reduce anxiety ⚑ . Long-distance running in particular may even provide pain relief. Exercise in general is linked to decreasing symptoms of depression, so lace up your sneakers the next time you need a mood lift ⚑ .

21. Indulge in a massage.

Set aside some time to experience the complete and total bliss of a massage. It soothes both the mind and muscles, improves sleep quality, and reduces stress ⚑

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22. Cuddle.

Whether you're the big spoon or little spoon, cuddling is good for you. Studies show that physical contact <u>reduces stress</u> and <u>releases a hormone called oxtocin</u> that boosts happiness.

23. Get your Om on.

It comes as no surprise that yoga is a healthy practice. It helps <u>relieve anxiety</u>, stress, and depression, all while boosting energy levels and improving our overall sense of well-being. Don't think you have to commit to a full-length yoga class to reap its health benefits. Just 20 minutes on the mat <u>improves focus</u> and <u>boosts the brain</u> 🔖🔖 . Try these <u>restorative yoga poses</u> to erase any built-up tension.

24. Unplug.

These days, it feels like everyone's glued to a phone, laptop, or both at the same time. Deliberately <u>taking a break</u> from social media, e-mail, blogging, and so on can help us recharge and gives our brain the downtime it needs to <u>work at an optimal level</u>.

25. Get out of town.

When it comes to taking vacation, <u>most Americans</u> don't do a lot of it. But skipping out on time away from the 9-to-5 does more harm than good: Studies show that skipping the family vacay is associated with a <u>higher risk of heart disease</u> in both men and women 🔖 . Whether booking a trip to an exotic location or going somewhere nearby, time away from work can help <u>refresh our focus</u>, and being exposed to a new location or experience may <u>boost creativity</u>. Plus, *everyone* deserves a break!