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Women of Witness

TIPS TO BETTER YOURSELF

The Insanity of ‘Self-Care’

By Marshall Segal

The self-care movement strives to address the stresses of everyday life with simple, practical habits.

Clinically, “self-care” has to do with anything someone might do for the sake of their own physical or mental health, including, for instance, eating well, exercising, or sleeping eight hours a night. Functionally today, the articles seem to focus more on stress management, and often target women in the workplace (often with major responsibilities at home and at work). Self-care strategies attempt to apply structure and discipline to “me-time,” re-centering our world around ourselves (wouldn’t Ptolemy be proud?), and looking for hope, healing, and stability from some hidden place deep within ourselves.

The list of strategies will vary from website to website, but they will often be some combination of the following steps (in this case, developed by the faculty at the University at Buffalo):

1. Start eating healthier.
2. Work out regularly.
3. Reduce stress.
4. Prioritize and schedule your time better.
5. Relax.
6. Practice “mindfulness.”
7. Be good to yourself.
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Okay, but how do you “reduce stress” — for instance, stress about a struggling marriage, or about consistent interpersonal conflict at work, or about years of chronic pain or disease, or about habitual, demoralizing personal sin or weaknesses? Here are a few suggestions from one PhD in philosophy:

- “Blow bubbles.”
- “Plant a flower.”
- “Hum a tune.”
- “Feed birds and squirrels.”
- “Walk a labyrinth.”
- “Listen to a cat purring.”
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It’s all diversion. Every item on the list of 75+ activities is simply meant to get your mind off of the stressor. It’s the licensed healthcare equivalent of turning up Taylor Swift so loud you couldn’t possibly think about anything else. Just shake it off. It’s medication by distraction, not redemption. Practicing forgetfulness, rather than pursuing forgiveness.

These tactics do not even pretend to address your needs or to offer a cure. If you think that a tune, a labyrinth, or a squirrel are going to heal the things that haunt you, you are more helpless than you even realize. A tune covers the silence you fear, but it will never cover the sin you carry. A squirrel might find a nut, but he never finds freedom from guilt and shame. A lonely walk in a corn maze never leads to reconciliation between estranged friends or family members.

The Maddening Idea of Mindfulness. And what is “mindfulness”? Dr. Cindy Sanderson says, “Awareness without judgment of what is, via direct and immediate experience.” What does that mean?

- “You eat dessert and notice every flavor you are tasting . . . You’re not thinking about ‘is it good or bad to have dessert?’ You’re just really having dessert.”
- “Dance to music and experience every note, instead of wondering if you look graceful or foolish.”
- “You walk through a park; you actually walk through the park. What does that mean? It means you let yourself ‘show up’ in the park. You walk through the park aware of your feelings about the park, or your thoughts about the park, or how the park looks, or the sensation of each foot striking the pavement.”

Mindfulness sounds an awful lot like mindlessness. Do whatever you want, but whatever you do, don’t think about your problems. Want to deal with stress? Fixate yourself on chocolate or Netflix or the park near your house. Pretty soon, you’ll realize you haven’t been thinking *at all* about your looming financial debt, or your failures as a father, or your mom’s cancer. For a whole five minutes, you’ve been thinking about Reese’s, *The Office*, and golden retrievers. Isn’t that the freedom you’ve been dying for?

The Self-Care Search for Big. The closest the self-care movement can get to truly good news is to tell you to stare at something big:

- “Watch a sunrise.”
- “Hike in the woods.”
- “Go to the beach.”
- “Take a country drive.”
- “Watch a sunset.”

Each of these is an effort to put you in front of something bigger than yourself long enough that you forget yourself. The strategies hint at the Christian gospel because the sensations we feel gazing at bigness begin to uncover the God-sized cavity beneath our guilt, stress, and anxiety.

The Care You Really Need. The care you really need is not buried somewhere deep inside of you, waiting to be unlocked by some dessert or diversion. No, you need the healing, forgiving, restoring, and transforming grace of a God who loves you. Only Someone stronger than your greatest weaknesses, bigger than your worst failures, and brighter than your deepest darknesses could address the things you fear or regret.

If you’re drawing on the ocean of God’s grace to you through Jesus Christ, then your habits might make all the difference. Our habits of grace — our daily and weekly rhythms of seeking God, of surrendering our dreams and anxieties to him, of spreading his fame in all we do — are the means by which we

experience real, genuine happiness, and they are the highway along which we will begin to experience freedom from sin and all its awful consequences in our lives.

David Mathis writes, “Grace is too strong to leave us passive, too potent to let us wallow in the mire of our sins and weaknesses. “My grace is sufficient for you,” Jesus says, “for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). It is the grace of God that gives us his “means of grace” for our ongoing perseverance and growth and joy this side of the coming new creation. And the grace of God inspires and empowers the various habits and practices by which we avail ourselves of God’s means (*Habits of Grace*, 23–24).

Where does the weary soul find rest and relief from its stress? Jesus says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28–30)

Where does the anxious soul find peace for all its fears? Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6–7)

Where do we find the strength to keep battling our sins, overcoming our weaknesses, and running hard through this difficult life into eternity? Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, *for it is God who works in you*, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12–13)

The Massive God in Your Small Habits. Practice a different kind of mindfulness. Go ahead and listen to music, or watch a sunset, or play with your pet, but go Godward — be mindful *of God* and his great love for you. It really can be helpful to practice gratitude, or to enjoy a particular moment or activity, or to focus on something bigger than yourself, but not if it ends there, and certainly not if it only ends with you. Any habit or activity can be a means of joy, peace, and healing, but only if it brings you to God — our only Lord, Savior, and greatest Treasure.

- “Blow bubbles,” and remember that your sins have been forgiven. (1 John 1:9)
- “Plant a flower,” and pray for God to satisfy you, again. (Psalm 90:14)
- “Hum a tune,” and memorize another stunning promise in the Bible. (Isaiah 41:10)
- “Feed birds and squirrels,” and know how much your heavenly Father cares and provides for you. (Matthew 6:25–34)
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The power of effective habits is not in the seclusion, or the silence, or the journal, but in whom you find in the habit. If you only find yourself, then your weaknesses, failures, and stresses can only be amplified and perpetuated. But if you find more of *God*, you have found resources far beyond yourself to address your deepest, most desperate needs.

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-insanity-of-self-care>