

Emotional Exhaustion: Fighting the Fatigue

Small Shifts

Sometimes life wears us out. Stress, challenges, responsibilities, unexpected curve balls...all can take a toll. We don't always recognize that this is happening, until we discover that we seem to have lost our essential energy and drive. Being able to reclaim a sense of vitality may take time. Small shifts in perspective, along with caring for ourselves in basic ways, can help us regroup and find our motivation again.

What's making you weary?

What experiences seem to drain your energy or wear on your spirit right now? List as many as you can think of.

Identifying the impact

The fatigue we feel in the face of prolonged stress is more than just tiredness. Along with physical weariness, we may notice a flatness in our emotions. You may see a loss of motivation and interest in work, a disconnect in relationships, and general sense of being out of gas, directionless, stuck or a little lost. The sample statements below may help you see aspects of common reactions in your general sense of weariness. *(Note: These examples are not diagnostic. Any concerns related to physical or mental health should be discussed with your health care providers.)*

Emotional exhaustion

- ☐ I feel flat, drained, worn out.
- ☐ I feel tired physically, mentally, emotionally.
- ☐ I'm sort of checked out, disengaged from others.

Burnout

- ☐ Every day feels like a bad day.
- ☐ Even small tasks seem overwhelming.
- ☐ More and more I feel like "why even try?"

Empathy fatigue

- ☐ I feel powerless to make a difference.
- ☐ My ability to care about others seems used up.
- ☐ Sometimes bad news just leaves me feeling numb.

Languishing

- ☐ Feels like I'm just going through the motions.
- ☐ I feel adrift, restless, yet unmotivated.
- ☐ Every day feels just like the last one.

Bring the pressure down: Focus on what’s within your control

Make a list of your top five concerns in the SEE section. These may come from the “What’s Making You Weary?” box or be something else. For each one, consider if it’s within your control to address it in some way. If the answer is no, list it under SET ASIDE. If yes, put it in the SOLVE square with one realistic step toward resolving the issue.

SEE

SET ASIDE

SOLVE

Issue:

First step:

Issue:

First step:

Issue:

First step:

Issue:

First step:

Process your emotions: Connect the dots

Notice:

What emotional pressure indicators are you experiencing? *(Examples in italics)*

Physical sensations *(tension, trouble sleeping, stomach issues, lethargy)*

Emotional reactions *(irritability, withdrawing, teary, feeling “flat”)*

Thought patterns *(negative self-talk, blaming, loss of focus, worry)*

Coping behaviors *(increased alcohol/tobacco use, overworking)*

Name:

Can you identify and name one or more emotions that these cues point to?

Recognize:

Can you see why you might feel this way, given what you’re experiencing?
What are those emotions telling you that you need? What would help address them?

- Common emotions

Fear

Anger

Grief

Anxiety

Sadness

Frustration

Resignation

Hopelessness
- Potential triggers

Loss

Vulnerability

Powerlessness

Uncertainty

Sense of threat

Isolation

Reset your perspective: Explore your explanatory style

It’s easy to get overwhelmed when life is challenging. We can feel as if the difficulty is our fault in some way and that it’s going to impact us broadly and for a long time to come. Conversely, when good things happen, it can feel random, not likely to reoccur and not something we can take credit for. Psychologists have found that this “explanatory style” can impact our stress levels and resilience. Tending toward a pessimistic interpretation can keep us stuck, draining down our spirit. However, they’ve also found that when we practice shifting our explanations toward a more optimistic viewpoint, we can grow more resilient. (Scott, 2023) The exercise below can help you practice reframing.

- Identify a negative event, a “bad” thing that has impacted you (it could be one of the items on your list). First, fill in thoughts you have about it that align with a pessimistic perspective – the three “P”s in box 1. Then think of and fill in thoughts that align with an optimistic view – the three “I”s in box 2.
- Repeat both aspects of the exercise with a positive event, a good thing that happened to you, in boxes 3 and 4.

1. Pessimistic: When bad things happen, they are... • Personal (<i>your fault</i>) • Permanent (<i>will be an issue for a long time or forever</i>) • Pervasive (<i>touch many parts of your life</i>)	2. Optimistic: When bad things happen, they are... • Impersonal (<i>not your fault or within your control</i>) • Impermanent (<i>likely to change and improve</i>) • Incident-specific (<i>confined, not widespread impact</i>)
3. Pessimistic: When good things happen, they are... • Impersonal (<i>not created by you</i>) • Impermanent (<i>won’t last or reoccur</i>) • Incident-specific (<i>doesn’t impact other parts of life</i>)	4. Optimistic: When good things happen, they are... • Personal (<i>to your credit, you contributed</i>) • Permanent (<i>positive impact will continue</i>) • Pervasive (<i>will positively touch other parts of life</i>)

Embrace compassion: Try out guided exercises

Self-compassion.org – Dr. Kristin Neff

Assorted guided self-compassion practices including Compassion with Equanimity and Loving-Kindness Meditations.

self-compassion.org/category/exercises/#guided-meditations

Greater Good Science Center: Discover New Practices

A wide range of practices to build empathy, compassion, optimism, mindfulness, happiness, and more.

ggia.berkeley.edu/

In-the-moment loving kindness

For many of us, being self-critical has become a norm. To change this, we have to actually practice being kind to ourselves. When you feel stressed and self-critical, try a short, three-breath loving kindness message directed to yourself. Take a deep breath in as you picture yourself in front of you. As you exhale, send yourself a kind message that is meaningful in this moment. Repeat three times.

Reference

Scott, E. (2023, August 14). *How does your explanatory style affect your stress levels?* VeryWell Mind. <https://www.verywellmind.com/about-explanatory-styles-3145110>

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Self-Care: Why Does It Matter?

Managing day-to-day life, and the many stressors it brings, can be a challenge. It makes sense that we need to take care of our own wellbeing in order to deal with them most effectively and be at our best. Yet, it's often the case that the more stressed we are, the less able we are to prioritize our own needs. Understanding the wide-ranging value of self-care may help you approach it differently.

What IS self-care?

Generally, you can think of it being good to yourself in ways that help you feel stronger, healthier, more grounded, and balanced. Life and ongoing stress can deplete our emotional, physical, and spiritual resources – the strengths, abilities and mindsets that help us stay well, productive, and happy. Self-care is a way to build and maintain those resources.

What does it look like?

Core self-care moves address basic life functions – eating, sleeping and being active in ways that help you feel strong and healthy. But self-care is more than that. It is also about supporting our emotional well-being, being compassionate with ourselves, managing our stress, and being engaged in life – growing, learning, and connected in meaningful relationships. It can involve managing our financial well-being, investing in career development, or pursuing a sense of purpose and spiritual connection.

The power of self-care

Life pressures trigger our built-in stress response. This can be helpful in the short-term, but when it stays “on” indefinitely, it creates tension and co-opts our energy, focus, and mood. The physical impact can lead to pain, obesity, reduced immune function, and damaging inflammation that can increase the risk for chronic diseases. Emotions can be “tense” too. It can be hard to concentrate, sleep, make decisions, and be creative. The impact can be felt in our mental well-being, our work, and our relationships. Self-care is a way of helping us undo these negative effects and proactively promote positivity, strength and resilience.

How does it work?

All aspects of our being – mind, body, spirit – are connected and influence one another. Stress and unhealthy ways of coping, such as drinking or overeating, strain this system, making it harder to be strong and well. Self-care can reduce the impact of stress and prime us to be more resilient and better able to manage challenges going forward. It can:

- **Release tension:** We can be held hostage by our hard-wired, tense stress response. Physical tension can increase emotional tension and vice versa. Self-care can help release the grip of tension to free up our resources and disrupt this pattern.
- **Renew health:** The calming actions of self-care dial down the stress response and shift us into a restful rejuvenating state. This can strengthen the immune system, reduce inflammation and support mental health.
- **Restore calm:** Thoughts and worries can be a sneaky way for stress to grow. Self-care allows us to develop a different relationship with external and internal stressors by helping us feel more in control and able to tap thoughtful, measured responses.
- **Replenish energy:** Like the gas in our cars, our energy, focus and motivation run down. Overloaded lives can lead to exhaustion and burnout. Healthy self-care is a way to “plug in” and refuel.
- **Recharge spirit:** Life challenges can spark negativity and gradually erode our spirit. When we treat ourselves with care, it reinforces the sense that we have value and worth, boosting self-esteem. This can help us be more engaged in our relationships, the world, and our own potential.

Self-care basics

Self-care, in all its forms, can be used as an antidote to rising stress. It can also be developed into habits that can help proactively reduce the impact of stress and help us be at our best. While it can be hard to incorporate all of these strategies every day, even small moves can help you feel stronger and more balanced. Core examples include:

- ❑ **Don't let sleep be optional.** You should get enough rest each night to awake feeling well-rested and energized. Seek help if you struggle with sleep.
- ❑ **Make time to eat well and stay hydrated.** Regular, well-balanced meals give you the high-grade fuel you need to stay strong and focused.
- ❑ **Fit exercise in.** It lowers stress and can help with sleep. Even 15 minutes can make a difference. Find something you enjoy and make it a regular routine.
- ❑ **Find one or more ways to relax mind and body.** Try out different methods, such as deep breathing or mindfulness, then make them a norm in your day.
- ❑ **Work on responding with self-compassion** rather than self-criticism. Use positive self-talk to remind yourself of your strengths and abilities.
- ❑ **Invest in meaningful relationships** and be open to leaning on them. Look for listeners, givers of honest feedback, and nurturers to build you up.
- ❑ **Build financial wellness.** Be proactive by having goals, a budget and savings plan. Address debt.
- ❑ **Embrace your life and potential.** Make room in each day for you. Allot time for fun and enjoyment along with your "must dos." Open yourself to the refreshment of being outdoors in nature. Explore new things that help you grow and pursuits that nourish your spirit.

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The science

Sleep, especially the deepest stages, is a time to repair damage and renew resources. Stress hormones reset, mood-lifting brain chemicals are refreshed, creativity and problem-solving abilities get a boost. (Healthline, 2024)

Nutrition: A healthy, balanced diet can actually fight stress. For example, complex carbs help us produce the calming neurotransmitter serotonin. Omega-3 fatty acids, found in fish, prevent surges of stress hormones. (WebMD, 2025)

Physical activity: Research shows that regular activity not only reduces the levels of stress hormone in the body, it actually teaches our body systems how to better manage stress. (APA, 2020)

Relaxation strategies can release tension and help us to feel more calm and in control. Practices such as mindfulness use body/mind connection to quiet worry and train a more measured response to stress. (Mindfulness.com, n.d.)

Self-compassion has been found to be a stronger motivator than the self-criticism that's often our default. (Neff, 2023) Try treating yourself with the kindness you'd show a friend when you notice self-talk growing negative.

Meaningful relationships have been shown, in long-term studies, to be a key factor in sustaining health and happiness in our lives. (World Economic Forum, 2023) Building and maintaining social connections is, in fact, self-care.

Financial problems can take more of a toll than we realize. They've been linked to poor physical health, depression, anxiety, and relationship issues. (HelpGuide, 2024) Reaching out for support and resources can help get you on a path to greater stability.

Embrace your life and potential. While life pressures can push our needs to the end of the list, allowing them to be a priority means we can replenish our personal resources, which means we have more to give to others.

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Something New

Trying something new can spark energy and momentum. While you may want to actually *start* small, *thinking* big can jumpstart the sense of possibility that comes when we explore new things. For example:

- Go fly a kite
- Be in a parade
- Try out for a community theater production
- Plan a solo trip – anything from a short drive to overseas cruise; start by practicing eating out on your own
- Host a neighborhood block party
- Have a garage sale
- Find a way to play a sport you enjoyed as a child (neighborhood league, company team, etc.)
- Explore new approaches to learning a language: immersion camp, online/in-person talk sessions, travel
- Sign up to participate in an activist group that supports something you believe in
- Add to your computer skills; learn software programs with an online tutor or local classes
- Join a barter network
- Take dance lessons that appeal to you: ballroom, salsa, belly dancing, swing, tap, ethnic, square dancing
- Build GPS skills while having fun – try geocaching, letterboxing, or orienteering
- Build something – a bench, treasure box, treehouse, go-kart – use your creativity or find plans online
- Audit a class at an area university or college, or try a free MOOC (Massive Open Online Course)
- Try out for an amateur talent contest
- Get a completely different haircut or color; grow a beard or mustache
- Seek out a long-lost childhood friend
- Volunteer to lead a presentation at work, your place of worship, or a community organization
- Plant something and nurture it
- Learn a new game that you can play with others: bridge, cribbage, mah-jongg, backgammon, chess
- Take a crafting class: knitting, mosaic, weaving, glass-blowing, woodworking, scrapbooking, etc.
- Create a website for yourself or for your family; include a blog for your thoughts
- Take a different kind of vacation – a volunteer vacation ; if you have kids, make it a family affair
- Work your way through your family tree using genealogy research tools to learn family stories
- Go to free concerts in the park
- Join a flash mob

- Run in a marathon or try a triathlon
- Plan a progressive dinner party with friends or neighbors
- Sign up for lessons to learn a new sport: golf, tennis, ice-skating, skiing, windsurfing, archery, sailing
- Go on a camping trip – pack a tent, cook over a fire, bring a star map, play flashlight tag
- Learn and try out alternatives to your regular commute
- Look through your community education offerings and pick one class to try
- Attend a book reading, book club, or discussion group at a local library or bookstore
- Join a speech-making group with the goal of getting comfortable speaking in front of an audience
- Explore a holistic health practice, such as yoga, tai chi, meditation or acupuncture
- Try something adventurous for you: skydive, scuba dive, snowboard, surf, take a hot air balloon ride
- Run for a political office
- Begin reading the classics or try out nonfiction if you usually like fiction or vice versa
- Host a foreign exchange student
- Enroll in mini-medical school offered at many universities – no tests, no degree, but lots of fascinating information
- Try a type of food, cuisine, or dish you have never had before
- Take a digital vacation. Turn off social media apps/sites, stop surfing the internet; see what takes their place
- Indulge in a full-service salon visit – massage, facial, pedicure – the works
- Sign up to work with a personal fitness trainer
- Make plans to attend a major event that interests you, such as the Olympics, Sundance Film Festival, SXSW music festival, the Kentucky Derby, Daytona 500, the Superbowl – think big!
- Begin writing or recording your memoir
- Challenge a fear of heights; try zip-lining, hang gliding, bungee jumping or cliff diving
- Learn to drive a motorcycle or motor scooter
- Self-publish a book
- Join a fantasy football league
- Travel to see a geographical sight you never have seen – the ocean, mountains, desert
- Try out a new approach for a week; Go TV-less, be a vegetarian, use public transport instead of a car
- Attend an event that you would normally avoid – a rap or classical concert, an opera, foreign film series, ballet, dirt bike race – keep an open mind and try to find something about it that you can appreciate
- Go to a city council meeting; speak up about issues that affect you
- Approach someone you admire and invite them out for coffee
- Find a storytellers group – sit in for the stories or learn to tell them
- Learn how to perform a magic trick
- Take a DIY (Do-It-Yourself) approach to a project you would normally hire out (start small!)
- Once a week, try saying “yes” to something you would usually say “no” to

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What Matters?

When we're struggling and feeling weary, we can lose sight of what's positive and valuable in our lives. These exercises can remind you of what matters to you – things you already have and things that you wish to have in the future. This can then be a “roadmap” for how to move forward.

My best times

Exercise: What were you doing when you remember being...

- Happiest?
- Energized?
- Content?
- Playful?
- Motivated?
- Proud?
- Strong?
- Joyous?
- Grateful?
- Supported?
- Fulfilled?
- Most alive?

My purpose and passions

Exercise: Use these questions to remind yourself of what gives your life meaning, energy, and direction.

- What gives me purpose in life is ...
- I love to...
- I'm willing to work hard for...
- I lose track of time when I'm...
- When I was young, I really cared about...
- If I had the money/time I would...
- Before I die I would like to...
- If I try, I know I can...

My valuables

Exercise: List the first three things you would grab if there were a fire in your home. (It's ok to group things.)

1. What does this represent to you?
2. What does this represent to you?
3. What does this represent to you?

My perfect not-so-perfect day:

One small step that brings me closer to that ideal: