

A close-up, profile view of a woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a light-colored, textured knit sweater. She is holding a brown ceramic mug with both hands and drinking from it. The background is a soft-focus indoor setting with a window and some greenery. The overall mood is calm and cozy.

SELF-CARE

simplified

BY DR. MELISSA SONNERS

ABOUT me

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"Never be afraid to fall apart. It presents an opportunity to rebuild yourself the way you wish you had been all along." - RAE SMITH

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I come to you as a mom of three vibrant and busy kids who, for a while, stopped taking good care of myself. I, as most moms do, put their needs and my husband's needs before my own. Well that only worked for so long before my world came crashing down. I had spent the last seven years pregnant, breastfeeding, running a chiropractic practice, taking care of our home, cooking clean-ish food for our family, and showing up for my patients, my friends and family. But I wasn't showing up for myself.

I happened to be on a boat with 4 kids (one was our son's friend) when I realized something was really wrong. I slowly felt each vertebrae of my spine tighten and lock up. It went all the way up to my neck and my head started feeling like I had the worst pain of my life. I began to sweat and could tell something wasn't right. I told my husband I needed to get out of there. He lovingly told me I probably had the keto flu. For those of you who don't know what keto flu is, it's aches and pains sometimes caused by lowering your carb count. I had experienced a bit of keto flu in the past, but that was *nothing* compared to this.

After days of progressively feeling worse and worse, I had my blood tested. I remember getting the phone call when the test came back. I had two kids fighting while dinner burned on the stove. I was trying to understand what they were telling me on

the phone but couldn't hear over the fighting boys. I left my daughter on the floor as I went to tell them to be quiet, marched back through their room into what I hoped would be a quieter area and slipped on her poop diaper. My heel hit it and I went flying as if I had stepped on a banana peel. It was disgusting, chaotic and one of those all too familiar moments of mom-hood when you think, this has all got to be a joke. There must be a camera on me and wow, Murphy's Law is really a thing.

The lab told me I had Lyme Disease. I later found out the Lyme decided to set up shop in my brain and nervous system giving me Encephalitis and Meningitis. I literally started to lose my mind. Thankfully, I have access to great therapies that helped get me through. Although it was what felt like a really long and very bumpy road, I am on the other side of it.

I now often say that contracting Lyme was one of the best things that happened for me, not to me because it forced me to make a decision: I could feel this way (or worse) for the rest of my life or I could take it upon myself to make some major and not-so-easy changes in my life that would affect my social life, my practice life, and much more.

I have created systems for myself that make it easier for me to remember to do this. In the pages of this book, I am happy to share them with you.

MY SELF-CARE systems



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"Self care is giving the world the best of you, instead of what's left of you."

- KATIE REED
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Make it Important: If we are to put ourselves at the top of our to-do list, we need to realize the importance of doing so. I do this by visualizing every single person I take care of and what would happen to them if I could no longer take care of them. This reminds me that taking care of myself is not an option. People need me. And in order to take care of them, I must take care of me.

We are reminded of this every time we get on an airplane. "In an emergency, place your own oxygen mask on before assisting others." We all know that if we don't help ourselves first, we may not have the chance or ability to help those around us. To some people, staying healthy takes too much time and

costs too much money. You know what else takes a lot of time and costs a lot of money? Getting sick. We either make time for our health or it will be made for us when we are forced to confront it. I promise, it costs less time and money on the proactive side of health than on the reactive side.

Think about the last time you were sick, really sick. Like, couldn't do anything all day, although as parents I know doing nothing isn't really an option for us. But you know what I mean. How much time did you waste? How stressful was it that you couldn't do what you needed to do and couldn't help the people you normally help?

Take the time to really visualize those who could potentially be hurt if we aren't available to take care of them. Imagine what our lives will be like if we continue on like this, not taking care of ourselves in the next year, five years, ten years.

Remembering all the things that happen to us if we don't take care of ourselves, helps ensure that we *do*.

Saying "No": Did we all somehow learn, somewhere along the line that saying no was wrong? Why is it so difficult to say no to things that don't serve us? Whether it's staying extra hours at work, going to yet another birthday party when you have had one every weekend, or signing up to volunteer for something that honestly just sounds exhausting and draining. It is OK to say no. A friend shared this amazing acronym with me years ago and it has helped me have an easier time saying no: "NO" stands for Nourish Oneself. Saying no to things that aren't good for me or things I don't want to do, allows me to say yes to the things I do want to do and that will be good for me.

Let me give you an example. Have you ever felt completely beat and just desperately needed that couch date with your Netflix? You realize you have nothing going on that evening and are so looking forward to some down time and refilling your tank. You get a phone call and someone needs you. Whether they are asking for girl time, help with something or just needing to talk your ear off, it's ok to say no to them and instead get what you really need for you at that moment.

Here is another example. Say you decide that Monday is going to be different. For some reason, most people change things on Mondays, not that we have to wait until then, we can always start now. But, let's say you decide that on Monday you're going to start eating healthier. No junk food during the week. You're going to pack your meals instead of eating out. You're going to skip dessert and maybe you're even going to pack your gym bag in your car and go for a walk or workout at the end of the day. All of a sudden Monday rolls around and you are doing great. Lunchtime arrives and you enjoy your perfectly packed lunch and then, out come the cupcakes. Apparently, it's Tracy's birthday and your friend brought cupcakes so you could all celebrate. You politely decline. "What?" Tracy says. "You aren't going to have a cupcake with me on my birthday?"

Remember that saying no is ok. That saying no allows you to nourish yourself and, more importantly, it allows you to say yes to the things that are more important to you. In this case, saying no to the cupcake allows you to say yes to feeling great the rest of the day, No sugar crash for you!

It is not the job of others to know or respect our boundaries. That is our job. Remember to imagine all those you take care of and remember you can only do that if you take time for yourself too. Whatever that looks like is your business and you never need to explain what you are doing. If you feel the need to add information you can always say you have a very important appointment that cannot be rescheduled. A little white lie when it comes to self-care so you can help others is totally fine in my book!

If it's not your focus, don't focus on it: This is a good one that can be applied to so many things! For simplicity, I'll use straightening up the house as an example. Say you're in the midst of cleaning the kitchen and maybe you see a book lying about that needs to go on the bookshelf. You walk the book over to the family room to put it on the bookshelf, and while you're there you notice your child's shirt on the couch. So you pick up the shirt, take it to their room and on their way back you notice a dust bunny on the floor. So you grab a dustpan and broom to sweep it up and dump it in the garbage can. Then you notice the can is full. So you tie up the bag, take it outside and notice a mess in the garage, so you start cleaning up the mess in the garage. You see where this is going? You were cleaning the kitchen! If you are cleaning the kitchen, stay in the kitchen and don't worry about the other rooms. We become so much more efficient when we focus on one thing. If it's not your focus, don't focus on it. Create tunnel vision for yourself as much as possible with whatever task you are working on.

I use this as much as possible when with my kids. I carve out time to be fully present with them and ignore my emails, phone calls, etc. It's not always easy since we live in a time where we are constantly bombarded with to-do's, phone calls, messages, jobs and more. Maintaining boundaries around these and focusing on the task at hand allows us to do a better job and most likely, stay calmer while doing it.

Power Hour: I began incorporating a power hour many years ago, before kids, and it has changed a bit since that time. For my power hour, I wake

up an hour earlier than I have to. I originally used that entire time for getting way ahead of the day by working through my goals, my emails, reading or writing. Now, I use the first 20 minutes of that time to slowly sip my coffee or tea while I look outside and/or meditate. Then, I use the rest of the time to work on whatever feels most fun or whatever I want off my plate before going into my day. Taking this time for myself has become one of the favorite parts of my day. Although I do thoroughly enjoy sleep, I really don't miss that extra hour. On the few occasions when I have slept through and skipped it, the day just isn't the same and I'm reminded of why I started doing a power hour in the first place. Put simply, it allows me to get ahead of the day before it gets ahead of me. Try it. Maybe start by waking up 20 minutes earlier and see what a difference that quiet alone time can do for you.

Do one thing every day just for you: Imagine a number scale from 1-100 with 1 representing death and 100 being the healthiest and happiest you have ever been. Rate yourself on that scale today. Then define where you want to be. What are you going to do today to get yourself closer to that number? Every day, identify and commit to one thing you can do to get you closer to where you want to be. Add it to the top of your to do list or set it as your intention for the day.

There are many things we can do for our self-care that require a good chunk of time, sometimes childcare, and often money. There are many others that don't require much of those at all. Ironically, many of these are also the most effective. In this next section, I'll share some of my favorites.



MY simplest SELF-CARE tools

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"The most important relationship is the one you have with yourself."

- DIANE VON FURSTENBERG

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These self-care tools require no extra time or money. I add at least one of these in a day, usually many more.

Presence: An extremely effective self-care tool that doesn't take any extra time or cost any extra money is making the decision to be present. Even if it's just for a few minutes a day, focus just on the present; it's when we focus on the future or the past that we become stressed, anxious, depressed or overwhelmed. You really cannot feel these negative emotions when you are focused on present time. Here's how I do this. At any point during the day when I start to feel overwhelmed, I give myself

permission to take a few minutes "break" from what is going on. This often isn't even really a physical break, but it certainly becomes a mental one. I make the decision to just completely focus on whatever one thing I choose that is going on around me. Sometimes this is more challenging than others. At home, if everyone needs me, if there is a meltdown, and it's dinner time and I'm trying to answer text messages and thinking about my day tomorrow, I literally stop, quiet my mind and choose one thing to focus on. In the situation I just described, I may choose to just *listen* and not to react. Just listen and *respond*.

To be truly present, I usually need to put my phone away. Again, I know, so obvious. Many times, as parents we need to have our phones close by *just in case*. I will say this though, we can all put them away for even a few minutes. It doesn't take long and yields incredible results as far as allowing us to focus on *one thing*.

Kids have this amazing way of always being in the present moment. Give yourself permission to join them. Follow their lead for a few minutes. Get rid of your agenda, for yourself and for them, and let them take you on a present time journey. Again, even a few minutes is super refreshing. When I take the time to do that, they remind me of how beautiful the little things are. Have you ever watched ants? Seriously, they are pretty amazing. The way they all gather for a collective mission when they find a crumb. It's as if they somehow all know how to work together to get this crumb back to their little ant village. Other things I never truly appreciated before kids: dandelions, worms, bubbles, sidewalk chalk, all the little details that are around us all the time. The things I have seen through the eyes of my kids when I give myself permission to just be are pretty amazing. And as an added bonus, that playful time resets my mind and body, and is one of my favorite self-care tips.

Breathing: We breathe anywhere from 60-100 times per minute every minute. Adding a little attention and intention to it turns breathing into a major self-care tool. One of my favorite breathing exercises is 8-4-7 breathing. I'll explain it first, and then we'll try it together. You're going to breathe in for a count of eight. Then we're going to hold it for four. And then we're going to breathe out for a count of seven. So let's all do it together. Ready? Breathe in. Hold it for four. Breathe out for seven.

Breathe in. Hold it for four. Breathe out for seven. One more. Breathe in. Hold it for four. Breathe out for seven. Good. Do you feel that?

You can literally fit this in at any point during the day. Stop signs, red lights, while cooking, while listening to someone talk who is a bit tense and stressed, when you are feeling overwhelmed, literally any time. I probably do this 20 times a day. It is by far one of my favorite tools.

The other breathing technique is called alternate nostril breathing and is an extremely effective technique for balancing our brain and quieting our minds. You breathe in your left nostril and out your right. Then in your right and out your left. That is one cycle of breath. You will need to block the nostril you are not breathing from each time you use the other nostril. Repeat for three to five cycles.

If you have a **hyperbaric oxygen chamber**, do your breathing in the chamber. Hands down, this is my most powerful self-care tool. If you're putting your kids in the chamber, get in with them. I would not be standing here if I didn't use the chamber. I use my chamber as a self-care tool, to get through Lyme, to have more energy, to think more clearly and OK, if I'm being honest, as a healthy place to get away from everything else.






Delegate: Are there things you are doing that someone else can do? In the days of everything being automated and easy to deliver, it has become easier and easiest to delegate. That weekly grocery trip? Have it delivered. If you can gain back one hour of your time each week, take it. Is it an option for you to pay someone to come even once a month to help clean the house? Do it! Giving up some of the things we don't *have* to do, allows us to do the things we want to do and also frees up more time to do the things we need to do.

One of my friends told me that one of the best things she did as far as delegating was having someone help clean her house so that when she got home from work she got to do the things with her kids that she *wanted* to do. She was able to give them a bath and read to them at bedtime instead of spending an hour cleaning up the mess that was made while she was at work.

We can also delegate other aspects of our lives. How about paying that tween-age responsible neighbor a bit of money to help you by doing your dishes and picking up your house, or walking your dog, or doing your laundry? We can all find ways. They don't have to cost a lot of money if you get creative. Dislike or don't have time for cooking but wanting to eat healthier on a budget? What if you and a friend decide to take turns, one week you prep a bit of extra food for her family and the next week she does the same for yours?

Similar to saying "no," delegating frees up more of our time and allows us to say "yes" to the things that are truly important to us, including self-care.



CLOSING thoughts

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"You have been assigned this mountain so you can show others it can be moved."

- MEL ROBINS

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I said it earlier and I will say it again. Lyme was one of the best things that happened in my life because it forced me to make a choice. Option A: Do nothing and continue to feel awful, fall apart, not have the energy or clarity to take care of others and continue down this spiral. Or Option B: Figure out a way to make time for myself, self-care and the life I know I deserve to have.

I chose Option B. I chose to take advantage of the 86,400 seconds that I am given each and every day. I chose happiness, I chose energy, I chose clarity, I chose my relationship, I chose me.

And I choose it again each and every day when I say no to certain things so I can say yes to so many others.

There are times when my kids watch screens or get dragged to the gym with me, there are times when I question myself and what I am doing. Am I enough, am I doing this all right, will my kids grow up and know that they got the best of me and that I have always had their best interests at heart? Like any mom, at times I feel guilty when I am away from them and then there are many times when I am with them that I find myself zoning out and daydreaming of the other things I could and should be doing.

But what I do know to be true, time and time again, is that I am the best mom to my kids, the best partner to my husband, the best doctor to my patients, the

best friend and the best version of me I can be when I take the time to take care of myself.

I truly believe that we can feel better with each passing year. That age is a number and that we don't have to assume we are going to feel worse and worse every year. In my almost forty years on this planet I definitely do see that things change. I don't look as good as I used to when I pop out of bed, moisturizers and serums have become some of my best friends. But I also know that water and clean food does wonders for our skin. I know that workouts are non-negotiable if I want to continue to feel youthful and full of energy. I have learned that if I want to feel better than I have always felt I've got to do more than what I have always done. That is my motto for each and every year as I age. Remember, many of these things I do, these self-care tools take no extra time and require no extra money.

We can no longer use the excuse of not having the *time*, not having the resources. We make time for the things we value. Because the reality is, you are either going to *make* time for it now or be *forced* to create time for it later.

Self-care is important and self-care can be easy. With the right system in place it becomes part of our daily routine and yields incredible results.

What self-care system will you be adding to your life?