Importance of Self-Care and Resilience during these uncertain times.

(Modified from a Sam Himelstein blog)

There is a strong link between self-care and resilience. This is a guide to understand how we respond to threats and support people to think about what aspects of self-care would be useful for them to practice.

Resilience versus Self-Care

Resilience is our ability to overcome difficulty. If our difficulty is too extreme to overcome, our central nervous system has the capacity to send us into the fight, flight, freeze, and feigned death responses.

The way to mitigate that stress response is to make it manageable. That's where self-care strategies come into play.

Self-care is the set of strategies that we rely on to overcome difficult experiences. Self-care is oftentimes thought of as a reactive: "x happened, so now I'm going to do y," which is not untrue, but if we want to develop resilience the key is to have a strong self-care routine that's practiced proactively.

Self-care strategies are one way of mitigating our stress response in these uncertain times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One Layer Deeper: 3 Types of Self-Care

Disclaimer: I don't intend for this post to be exhaustive (I want to keep it short) but it does reflect a good amount of my current thinking about self-care.

Generally, I tend to think of self-care strategies within three major categories:

1. Regular Relaxation Response

This is the calming the central nervous system so that our parasympathetic "relaxation response" is activated. This is our "rest and digest" system and is necessary on some level to feel physically and emotionally safe. These strategies can include light exercise that produce endorphins, short meditations and relaxation-based training (e.g., deep breathing), music, hiking and nature, massage, and so on. What's important for this strategy is that the relaxation response is regularly cultivated. More on routines below.

2. Effortful Training

Paradoxically, this is on the other side of the spectrum than the regular cultivation of the relaxation response. This is where we stress our system to a degree, but with a payout. Exercising, eating healthy, sleep routines, prolonged meditation; these can easily be difficult things to do and may not feel "good" or "calming" in the moment, but they have a positive payout for our minds and bodies.

Also within this category (at least interpersonally) is saying "no." Having boundaries can be an important self-care strategy.

3. Creative Expression

This strategy has to do with the flow of your creative juices. These methods inspire innovation, reflection, inspiration, and its namesake, creativity. Writing, art, dance, singing, editing, and so on can foster creativity.

Examples of strategies from each of the above self-care buckets really are in the eye of the beholder. It's important to choose strategies that work for you and facilitate those respective experiences. It's also important to be honest about which strategies actually lead to health long term rather than simply being a crutch in the moment.

I support a lot of individuals in recovery in my therapy practice that would be quick to tell you that drinking alcohol definitely activates their relaxation response. Hence, not everything that makes you feel relaxed is the best thing for your health long term.

With the above in mind, here are three simple steps to help you build resilience through self-care strategies, especially in uncertain times. Remember, this isn't exhaustive. This post is meant to help you plant a seed that you can continue to nourish over time.

A Self-Care exercise to try at home

1. Identify at least 1 strategy from each self-care category from above and put them in your schedule

What helps your nervous system relax?

Try to identify at least 1-2 (preferably more) activities that can facilitate calmness.

Do the same for the other two categories and then (and this is most important) create a draft schedule where you do at least one thing, however short, per day.

The schedule should be achievable and realistic.

Creating the routine is as important as the strategies themselves. The routine creates predictability and over time, self-care strategies that are predictably practiced will result in resilience. More on routines below.

Here are a few of mine for the sake of example:

REGULAR RELAXATION RESPONSE	EFFORTFUL THINKING	CREATIVE EXPRESSION
Deep, diaphragm-based breathing	Mindfulness; both through formal mindfulness meditation and informal, daily mindfulness, for the development of equanimity.	Writing
Light hiking in nature*	Compassion; both for myself and others	Creating content in an area of interest
One on one connection with close friends and family*	Exercise; walks*	Brainstorming study or career ideas
Light stretching	Consistent sleep routine	Pretend play with my kids
		Play music

Anything with an asterisk (*) above means these practices have had to be modified in some way due to the stay at home guidance.

2. Stay apart physically, connected socially

Probably deserving a whole separate bucket for self-care above, is staying connected with people we love and care for. At this point many of us have heard countless calls for "social distancing" as a way to fight the spread of the coronavirus. This of course is extremely important however it isn't the "social" distancing that's important. It's the "physical" distancing that we need to follow.

Don't forget that you can reach out to your friends, family, and colleagues to check in, share gratitude, compassion, and so on through phone calls and video calls. Set up a free Zoom or Skype account to see and meet with your friends and family live (i.e., stay socially connected) but physically at a distance. Process your feelings, invoke your others on the path of practice self-care, and set-up accountability partners.

3. Develop a Home Routine

If you are stuck at home more than expected and feeling cooped up, it's important to create routine. Just like having an actual routine for self-care, having a general routine throughout the day can help you not get stuck in the dwelling of anxiety, depression, or other strong emotions.

It's easy to turn on the TV and constantly watch the news, take extra naps (that was me the first two days), and have a hard time cultivating motivation. If you work or study from home, develop your self-care routine within your overall work schedule and social time.

Again, the role of routines is that they create predictability. In uncertain times this is even more important because our reliance on regular predictability; going to work, kids at school, social activities on the weekends, isn't being awarded to us. So inner predictability can go a long way. Predictability over time, when practiced healthily (i.e., via your self-care strategies), leads to resilience.