

Ep #34: Self-Care



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

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Ep #34: Self-Care

Self-care is all the rage these days. I'm a huge proponent of you learning what self-care means for you and making a commitment to taking care of your perfect self each and every day. In this episode, we're looking at the stories that lead us to need self-care, and I propose a new framework for what self-care can mean to us.

If you struggle with self-care, as so many of us do, you're going to want to keep listening, my love. It's going to be a good one.

You're listening to Feminist Wellness, the only podcast that combines functional medicine, life coaching, and feminism to teach smart women how to reclaim their power and restore their health! Here's your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, Herbalist and Life Coach, Victoria Albina.

Hello, hello my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. As autumn starts to creep in here in the Northern hemisphere, my thoughts are turning to self-care and the concept of how we take care of ourselves in the world. My clients love to talk about self-care and the 47 things they're doing on the daily, but also the 473 things that they are not doing that they know they should be doing.

Which is usually said in this self-deprecating, self-flagellating way. A listing out of their failures to live up to some standard of care that someone else told them is vital for wellness. Self-care is a super-hot buzzword right now, and as such is being marketed to us in a thousand ways. To sell us sugary drinks, alcohol, vacations, new clothes, new shoes, new bags, new expensive gym membership.

Take a break. You deserve it. And while yes, you deserve self-care, every creature does, the commodification of it often leaves us with some confused messages and understanding, and a propensity to beat ourselves up for not doing all of the things.

[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Ep #34: Self-Care

Before I start talking about self-care in general, I want to talk about what self-care means to me and how I came to understand the concept in and for my own life and wellness. So if you've listened to the show before, you likely know that I was sick as a dog my whole life. I had wicked bad IBS, reflux, intermittent depression, anxiety, lots of chronic pain, and I grew up with a lot of codependent care-taking thinking.

All rolled up in indirect communication and a big old case of emotional childhood. It was in my late teens, early 20s as a student at Oberlin College - shout-out to my weirdos – that I started to hear about the many ways people would actively take care of themselves. And it's so funny to say this now but I was honestly surprised to hear about folks taking the time for witchy ritual.

For baths, for exercise, for their mental health. Not just to fit a beauty standard. And as I moved through my 20s, my awareness of these concepts grew but I didn't have a solid base in self-love to begin to implement anything on the regular. In my 30s in Boston and later San Francisco, I started spending time with folks who were actively dedicated to self-care as a thoughtful daily practice.

People who went running in the woods and the snow for the joy of it, who meditated, who did self-care-y things. And I started to realize the ways I was not taking care of myself and the ways that that lack of self-care was keeping me both out of spiritual alignment and embodying being an IBS and anxiety-riddled, hangry, tired, grumpy, stressed hot mess.

And as always, it was my thoughts that were keeping me feeling stressed, overwhelmed, et cetera. Not my symptoms or the circumstances of my life. And the actions I was taking or rather not taking to take care of myself kept all these cycles humming along in the background.

Ep #34: Self-Care

So before I talk about what self-care has come to look like in my life now, I want to talk about the two frameworks I hear and see folks using to talk about caring for ourselves. One, self-care is a one-off activity, an event, or action we take in the world. Two, self-care is a daily practice of series of small practices that we do for our own health, wellness, and healing.

Examples of the former, self-care as an event would be what we see all over social media, a la #selfcare. Taking a bath, going out with friends, or consciously not going out, doing a nice face mask, exercising, saying yes, saying no, buying something, having ice cream or wine. Events. Purchasing things. An occasion of active self-care, and the list goes on and on.

The thing that all these activities have in common is that they give us a wee hit of dopamine, which is a neurotransmitter that makes you feel good temporarily, which makes you want to do that thing again. And to be real, dopamine flooding our brains and bodies feels so good. Like, so amazingly good.

So I'm not out here saying that doing a thing for the dopamine hit is inherently bad or problematic. I'm just saying that if event or activity-based self-care is our only focus, we're missing out on a deeper form of wellness, which is a focus on consistency. Something I'm all about.

That is consistently doing the small daily things that build up an internal trust in yourself, that show you that you will show up for you on the daily. With a focus on long-term and short-term health in all the ways. Mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional.

These things often aren't as shiny, as sexy, as Instagrammable, and I'd say that these things are the things that bring me the most wellness. While the episodic things, the face mask, the night out are like icing on the proverbial gluten-free, sugar-free cake of my dedication to myself.

[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Ep #34: Self-Care

And I'll pause to point out that the social media sort of culture of self-care can be harmful in a few ways. One, it can make it seem that we need to have money and spend money to engage in self-care, and that is just BS. Two, these frameworks can be very centered in a patriarchal, sort of white straight ideal about what it means to care for yourself, which can often look like makeup, skincare, hair care, activities for the sake of thinness.

And as always, I have no beef with these activities per say, not at all. I'm just saying they're selling you a story about what self-care looks like and it's often a manicure, an expensive hair treatment, a fancy expensive gym class. And obviously, lots of humans of all genders, all races, all sexualities have gorgeous hair, skin, and nails.

Beauty matters in all ways, and you get to decide what that means for you. That's not the problem or even what I'm speaking to here. You do you, my darling. It's this way this #selfcare culture label these things as the pathway to being a put together human who takes care of themselves that I find problematic.

The outward external focus that can sometimes accompany these activities. Perhaps doing so so someone else will hopefully think something of you is the thing that I'll invite you to get curious about. Are you doing these things because they bring you joy? Independently of anyone else?

If so, proceed. I may or may not have a really nice homemade hair mask in place right now because I'm a Leo and I'm obsessed with my hair, and I enjoy it when it looks really nice. But if you're doing these things, these self-care activities that are focused on outward appearances in the hopes of influencing what someone else may think of you, then I'll simply invite you to consider pausing and contemplating what activities are truly in line with your wellness, your time, your money, your energy, and all the rest.

Ep #34: Self-Care

Three, a focus solely on self-care activities versus self-care as a state of being, which I shall dive into in just a wee little minute, takes the focus away from living your life as an active daily self-care. When we can use that massage or spa day or whatever as a way to buffer against the feelings that come up about not taking care of ourselves, the way we'd like to Monday to Friday.

And if you don't know what I mean by buffering, please go back and listen to episode 14 and then come on back here because understanding that concept really helps with what is to come. Fourth and finally, occasional acts of self-care can also serve as a buffer against our feelings of guilt or shame around doing things that we judge ourselves for, or that society finds worthy of judging.

Like eating off plan, though if you're eating intuitively, there is no plan. Or binge-watching Netflix, or whatever, as a way to escape our own minds. You knew I'd get right on back to mind management sooner or later, right? So many of us are using self-care activities as a way to attempt to release the stress and exhaustion that comes from not managing our minds.

It's a form of self-soothing, like a little kiddo sucking their thumb or rubbing their ear while holding their blankey. And again, never judging because soothing ourselves is super important. It's actually really vital for grounding ourselves, particularly if we have a tendency to get dysregulated.

I'm just saying, another way is possible. You don't need to seek the temporary pleasure of buffering against your feelings and calling it self-care. Instead, you can learn to hold space for your feelings, to truly and deeply feel them, which is the gift of breathwork.

And then once you've felt into it, have experienced how it feels in your body, then you can do the thought work to shift your thinking so you don't feel stressed. To change your story so you don't feel overwhelmed.

[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Ep #34: Self-Care

You don't need to order some fancy special meal or go to a Grecian island to feel less stressed. You feel stressed because of your thoughts and your somatic bodily reaction to those thoughts. And that, my love, is where you have control.

Thought work is the ultimate self-care and your breath is the greatest tool that I know of for accessing our thoughts and feeling deeply, somatically, within our bodies, so that you can make peace with them and then shift what doesn't serve you.

But looking at your own thoughts and feelings is scary at first, for sure. And it's a skill that takes a lot of practice and guidance of a trained coach such as moi, and so we continue to buffer and call it self-care. I'll be talking a lot more about thoughts, feelings, and the think-feel-act cycle upon which the thought work that I do is predicated.

So make sure you're subscribed, make sure you tune in, those episodes are coming your way very soon. So I want to talk about self-care the way I think about medicine, which is through the lens of functional medicine, which is all about root cause care, which is what I teach in this podcast.

Getting to the root cause of our health concerns by learning to love ourselves and manage our minds. When I was practicing functional medicine, I was always digging for the root of the imbalance, the illness. A patient would say to me, I have irritable bowel syndrome, IBS, and I would ask, why? Why? Why? Like a four-year-old.

And I would dig until I found the root. The parasite, the imbalance of stomach acid, the bacteria hanging out where it shouldn't be, the food sensitivity, the thyroid or ovaries or adrenals that weren't getting the right signaling.

Ep #34: Self-Care

And after 20 years in health and wellness, I have come to really see how the root cause behind all of it, each and every physical imbalance is so often stress. And an inability to manage your mind, leading to more stress, more suffering, more anguish, more buffering, and thus, this shift in my career to the deepest root cause work. Life coaching, breathwork, and mind management, as the most true and vital functional medicine. A way to truly heal ourselves.

And this is my life's work because it works. When you manage your mind, you don't need to buffer or to call your symptoms a problem. You live in acceptance, in your truth, aligned with your own capacity to choose your thoughts and feelings so stories like I'm so stressed about whatever it may be, work, home life, dating, kids, et cetera, can shift.

And you can drop the rock of that overwhelm story, that story that you are so stressed out and you can find another way to interact with the world, starting with your own mind. So when we're talking about self-care, I think that our motivation and intention really matter.

And the root cause driver of the actions we take are our thoughts. That is if you're going to yoga because you don't want to stay home and have a challenging conversation with your partner, or you watch an entire season of a show, calling it self-care, to avoid thinking about work or dating or whatever, or you go to the gym because you hate your body, the root cause isn't being attended to.

The avoiding the fear, the sadness, the self-loathing, those are symptoms of an unmanaged mind. It's like taking a chemical antacid instead of asking why you have heartburn in the first place, and really addressing your food sensitivities, acid imbalance in your stomach, possible SIBO, or bacterial overgrowth that underlies it all.

Ep #34: Self-Care

It's Band-Aid medicine, that chemical antacid, and so often we use self-care as a Band-Aid on our feelings. A temporary reprieve versus true deep healing. Truly caring for your mind, body, and spirit, versus just doing a thing to get the dopamine and endorphin hit so you feel good for a minute. And then you have to do another thing and another thing and another thing to get that same hit because you haven't dealt with your thoughts, which are the root cause issue.

We can wear the fancy yoga pants and eat the perfect salad and do all the things while never really getting the healing we need. Let it sink in. Breathe into it and ask yourself with love and gentleness and kindness please, am I using self-care to cover up feelings? As a buffer? As a way to not look at my thoughts and feelings about myself and the world?

If you're hearing your mind or body say yes, take another deep breath. All is well. There is nothing to feel guilt or shame about. You just have more information now, and that is a beautiful thing, my love.

So does all this mean you shouldn't do these acts of self-care? Of course not. I'm a huge proponent of doing the things and doing them with the intention of showing yourself more love versus doing a cover up job on your feelings. Because the cover up doesn't serve you. Not in a deep root cause, sustainable healing way, which is what I want most for myself, for you, and for each of my coaching clients.

Sustained, sustainable, lasting healing. And part of that is about doing the daily things that keep you feeling healthy and well in all the ways. Yes, breathwork, yes, thought work, and yes, to daily actionable self-care.

In the coming episodes, I'll be talking about the think-feel-act cycle in detail because it's the cornerstone, it's the basis for the thought work that I do and that has transformed my life and that of hundreds of people I've worked with.

[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Ep #34: Self-Care

Soon, I'll be talking more about this concept of making small and big promises to yourself and the power of building trust in yourself. Until then, I want to invite you to ask yourself if you're doing these acts of self-care because you enjoy them, because they bring pleasure and peace and calm and love into your life, or because you don't know how else to cope with the anxiety, stress, and turmoil of an unmanaged mind in a world that can feel pretty bonkers lately.

Ask yourself if you're doing these things for the dopamine or because they're a vital part of your healing, your health, your short and long-term wellness. If you're doing them to forget for a moment, to distract yourself, or because these activities bring you joy and joy is your birthright. I think I inadvertently just went all Marie Kondo on the issue of self-care and actually, I'm not mad about it.

If it doesn't spark true joy, then it's likely a cover up, which doesn't mean that we don't do hard things like learn to run or do breathwork or face our wee internal gremlins. Because all of that's hard. It's super challenging to hold space for change. Your brain will fight you every step of the way because that's its job.

And my love, you can do hard things. And they become easier when the action is aligned with your thoughts, when you are truly managing your mind. Only you know the real reason behind the choices you make so ask yourself with an open heart, and open mind, and remembering to leave the shame, guilt, and judgment out of it.

They have no place here. They don't serve you. And they certainly don't spark joy. True self-care is root cause medicine. Learning to manage your mind so you can come to your life without the baggage of buffering against your feelings but rather from a place of empowerment and dedication to your most profound wellness.

Ep #34: Self-Care

Thanks for listening, my love. Have a beautiful week and remember to subscribe to the show so you don't miss a thing. If you want to be the first to know about my weekly breathwork classes here in New York City, my upcoming day-long breathwork workshops, and the *Feminist Wellness* retreats I'm planning along with my magnificent online at home virtual breathwork groups, head on over to victoriaalbina.com/34, which is the link for this episode, to sign up for my email list so you get all of the goods right to your inbox each week.

My emails are great self-care. No, but seriously, they're good and they're short and they're not that frequent. So sign on up. Alright my darlings, feeling your feels is the first and most vital step in true daily aligned self-care. What are you waiting for, my darling?

Be well my love, and remember, you are safe, you are held, you are loved, and when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Take care, my beauty and I'll talk to you soon.

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you like what you've heard, head to VictoriaAlbina.com to learn more.