Developing a Better Understanding

Ohio OACBHA
Association of County Behavioral Health Authorities

Four in ten adults in the United States reported feeling symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, four times the pre-pandemic rate. There have also been notable increases in alcohol consumption and substance use.

Self-care is defined as "the ability of individuals, families, and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a healthcare provider."

Self-care is a critical component of building resilience, as it requires intentional effort to manage stress and maintain or enhance well-being and overall functioning.

Self-care is not a cure for mental illness. But, understanding what causes or triggers mild symptoms and what coping mechanisms work best for each individual can help manage mental health.

Seek help for severe symptoms lasting more than two weeks.

Practicing Self-Care to Foster Resilience

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaped more than a year of our lives, upending our daily routines and lifestyles. It disrupted the economy, livelihoods, and the physical and mental well-being of countless people worldwide. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, a staggering 4 in 10 adults in the U.S. reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, quadrupling the pre-pandemic rate. There have also been notable increases in alcohol consumption and substance use. History has shown that the mental health impact of disasters largely outlasts the physical impact, suggesting that the psychological distress that many have endured may persist even as we transition to the next stage. It is therefore imperative to practice self-care, as we are more resilient and able to handle stress when we are feeling our best both physically and emotionally.

The World Health Organization defines self-care as "the ability of individuals, families, and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and to cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a healthcare provider." In sum, self-care means taking the time to do things that help you live well and improve both your physical and mental health. Self-care looks different for everyone, as we each have a unique set of health needs, and each person's "healthiest self" looks different (National Institutes of Health).

The Role of Self-Care in Building Resilience

Dating back to the earliest of times, humans have endured the psychological impact of a wide range of crises, including famines, natural disasters, wars, and outbreaks of potentially fatal infectious diseases. Today is no exception, as we try to navigate how to cope with the grief, stress, and anxiety caused by the biggest health challenge of our time, COVID-19. After over a year of living with the pandemic, many individuals are feeling overwhelmed and exhausted— perhaps drained, anxious, or both. And understandably so, as nearly every aspect of life has required added work during COVID-19, from parenting and working, to shopping for necessities and getting routine medical care.

Resilience, "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress," plays an integral role in not only an individual's ability to bounce back from difficult experiences, but to emerge even stronger than before. Developing resiliency is a key mental health strategy for responding to the coronavirus and many other stressors facing our communities, nation, and the world. While some individuals are naturally more resilient than others, anyone can learn and develop the thoughts, behaviors, and actions that foster resilience (American Psychological Association). Self-care is a critical component of building resilience, as it requires an intentional effort to manage stress and to maintain or enhance well-being and overall functioning. Just as you would tend to a physical injury by seeking support, relieving symptoms of pain, and taking steps to ensure recovery, the same is true for an emotional or psychological challenge or obstacle.

With intention and practice, there are many ways in which anyone can become more resilient. Maintaining your physical, emotional, and mental wellness are important ways to build resilience.

Self-Care Strategies

Self-care is an important way to protect your physical, mental, and emotional health so you can better adapt to changes, build strong relationships, and recover from setbacks. You can also better support those around you who might be in need. When it comes to your mental health, self-care can help you manage stress, lower your risk of illness, and increase your energy. Even small acts of self-care in your daily life can have a big impact.

Below are some tips from the National Institute of Mental Health to help you get started with self-care:

- **Get regular exercise.** Just 30 minutes of walking every day can help boost your mood and improve your health. Small amounts of exercise add up, so don't be discouraged if you can't do 30 minutes at one time.

- **Eat healthy, regular meals and stay hydrated.** A balanced diet and plenty of water can improve your energy and focus throughout the day. Also, limit caffeinated beverages such as soft drinks or coffee.

- **Make sleep a priority.** Stick to a schedule, and make sure you're getting enough sleep. Blue light from devices and screens can make it harder to fall asleep, so reduce blue light exposure from your phone or computer before bedtime.

- **Try a relaxing activity.** Explore relaxation or wellness programs or apps, which may incorporate meditation, muscle relaxation, or breathing exercises. Schedule regular times for these and other healthy activities you enjoy, such as journaling.

- **Set goals and priorities.** Decide what must get done now and what can wait. Learn to say "no" to new tasks if you start to feel like you're taking on too much. Try to be mindful of what you have accomplished at the end of the day, not what you have been unable to do.

- **Practice gratitude.** Remind yourself daily of things you are grateful for. Be specific. Write them down at night, or replay them in your mind.

- **Focus on positivity.** Identify and challenge your negative and unhelpful thoughts.

- **Stay connected.** Reach out to your friends or family members who can provide emotional support and practical help.

Self-care looks different for everyone, and it is important to find what you need and enjoy. In addition, although self-care is not a cure for mental illnesses, understanding what causes or triggers your mild symptoms and what coping techniques work for you can help manage your mental health.

When to Seek Help

While self-care can you help you maintain your mental health and well-being, it is important to seek help if you are experiencing severe symptoms that have lasted two weeks or more, such as: difficulty sleeping; appetite changes that result in unwanted weight changes; struggling to get out of bed in the morning because of mood; difficulty concentrating; loss of interest in things you usually find enjoyable; inability to perform usual daily functions and responsibilities. It is important to understand that it is okay to not be okay, and that help is available.

Help is Available

- Connect with Crisis Text Line by texting 4Hope to 741741.
- Contact your local Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health (ADAMH) Board. Find contact information for your county at www.oacbha.org.
- Reach the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services CareLine at 1-800-720-9616.
- If you are feeling overwhelmed with emotions such as sadness, depression, anxiety, or feel like you want to harm yourself or others, call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifelife at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).

Sources

American Psychological Association	National Institutes of Health
Kaiser Family Foundation	World Health Organization
National Institute of Mental Health	