

# Self-Care: What Do Those Buzz Words Really Mean?

Is self-care Caribbean vacays and exotic detox diets? Maybe, but probably not.

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It was late Thursday afternoon, the final session of the fourth and last day of a national conference on child neglect and child physical and sexual abuse. Sixty-two participants dutifully filed in and took their seats. Some looked exhausted, some exhilarated. As a presenter, I weighed my options. Do I discuss the findings of a study I conducted on vicarious resilience and self-care, and risk folks glazing over and mentally, if not physically, checking out? Do I talk about dimensions of vicarious resilience? Nope. I elected instead to say the following: "Glad to see you all here. Sometimes folks ask me, 'Are your findings and recommendations empirically based? Grounded in science?' Yes, they are published in journals, and empirically based. But you didn't come here for that. You came to reflect on the work you do, and to leave here today with the tools and resources you can use to sustain you as you continue to do the work that you love but also demands much from you. That's what we're going to talk about. Okay?" Audience members nodded, looking more than a little relieved.

About 20 minutes in, I began discussing self-awareness and self-care and went off-script about things bloggers gesture to when they refer to self-care. Spa days, ski getaways, Caribbean vacays, exotic detox macrobiotic diets, coffee enemas, you name it. The way they talk about it sounds more like advertisements, and these activities come with a hefty price tag. I pointed out that this seems rather insensitive to many helping professionals do not have the discretionary income or endless vacation days to afford such extravagant solutions. Besides, that's not what self-care is, or should be about.

An audience member raised her hand and asked, "Dr. Killian, why aren't you a fan of self-care?" I was flabbergasted, since the focus of much of my writing and many of the trainings I conduct is that very subject. I replied, "I'm all for it." But how we *define* it can help make it accessible, doable, and something we more easily incorporate into our lives. Something we actually do on a regular basis. Aware that my critique of expensive versions of self-care had given a

few folks the wrong impression, I began talking about what it does look like. Here are two examples:

1) Tuning in to yourself and enhancing your emotional self-awareness. Why? Research (Killian, 2008; Killian et al., 2017) suggests that [emotional intelligence](#), or self-awareness, protects one from [burnout](#), probably as an early warning system as symptoms begin to appear. How do you go about tuning into yourself? One 5-minute, 1-minute and 30-second [meditation](#) at a time. Meditation is about grounding, becoming centered, by intentional, attentive breathing, giving oneself a break and an opportunity to listen in to what you're feeling in the midst of a hectic, crazy-making schedule. I say 1 minute or 30 seconds at a time because there's an app for that. There are actually many, highly rated, easy to use, and [free apps](#) to facilitate meditative practice. Scientists say that even a 1-minute meditation, say, between clinical sessions, or before you depart work for home, can lower your pulse and blood pressure, clear your mind, and reduce the feeling of being stressed. These apps can help folks who want a little help focusing, or are especially anxious that they "might not be doing it right", a common issue with beginning meditators.

2) Training attendees often can point to specific activities or hobbies that they know help them cope with work stress: Taking a walk, gardening, going to a gym, playing an instrument. But identification of these favorite things does not translate to utilization. If you're not doing these things, they aren't doing you any good. For example, I play a Les Paul Gibson electric guitar nowadays. For the longest time, it sat in its case, neglected, and I was a guitarist who never played. Then I started leaving it out, next to my desk in my home office, plugged into a crate amplifier. Now I can flip a switch and grasp my guitar without getting up from my chair, and voila! I am a guitar player again. Only twice a week, on average, but I'm making a joyful noise and it is a great stress reliever. I had to do something different, and allow time in my schedule, to make that happen. What would you have to change to make your favorite things a part of your life with some regularity?

At the talk's conclusion, two members of law enforcement spoke with me about workplace wellness, and the fact that after a critical incident, say, a deadly shooting, no officer would tell a psychologist on follow-up anything other than "they are fine." Another approached me at airport security and said that she appreciated what I had said *and* that they would never request assistance or training at the workplace—*trainers and helping professionals must come to them*. Stigma around therapy meditation, and self-care has

lessened in the past 15 years but persists in some professions. How do we reach our prospective audiences about self-care and reducing workplace stress? It's like my talk, and the concept of self-care in general—keep it simple, doable, and accessible. If you're a trainer, reach out to your local and regional first responders and law enforcement. Let them know you are available to give a talk. Then see what happens.

## References

Killian, K.D., Hernandez, P., Engstrom, D., & Gangsei, D. (2017). Development of the Vicarious Resilience Scale (VRS): A measure of positive effects of working with trauma survivors. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 9(1), 23-31.

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