

## Practitioner Perspective

## | Unpacking Self-Care

By Mia Christina Döring



*‘Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation.’*

*Audre Lorde (1988)*

**Introduction**

This article discusses a model of self-care as designed by the author. The model consists of four facets of self-care, as hypothesised by the author. These areas are: curious self-awareness, self-compassion, boundaries and resourcing. The article explores and unpacks these facets as they relate to the individual, bringing to light or reminding us of forgotten

perspectives, or maybe giving us ideas or reflections on client work.

At the time of writing I am sick with a common cold. It is the third time I have been sick in the preceding five weeks, and as more and more of my life gets postponed, cancelled, delayed, a question keeps tapping away at me. *In what ways am I not looking after myself as I should be?* Clearly, getting sick so often in such rapid succession

is telling me something. I don't know what it is just yet. But I will listen to myself and hear what comes.

It is well known that those who operate in the caring, helping or therapeutic sectors can struggle with self-care, though we are likely adept at helping or advising others to become better self-carers. We know the value of self-care, deeply, yet can fail to make the time to allow ourselves reap the benefits.

The term 'self-care' is used a lot these days and this prevalence of use has also diluted the meaning of it to some extent. Anecdotally, in the wider community, 'self-care' can mean a shopping trip because you feel you deserve it, or a bar of chocolate, or some other superficiality lacking in responsibility; it can be seen as indulgence, rather than a considered act of self-nourishment designed to sustain and maintain our mental and physical wellbeing. This isn't to say that shopping and chocolate can never be meaningful acts of self-care, of course. For some they can be, for others they can be a source of anxiety. What constitutes self-care one day may not constitute it the next – it is about in the moment awareness of the specific needs and availability of choices for that particular individual.

Because of this over-prevalence of use, I've moved to calling self-care 'refueling' or 'self-resourcing', or, as Audre Lorde (1988) says, 'self-preservation', as a more succinct descriptor. In a recent self care workshop, the atmosphere in the room shifted and became more focused as I introduced words like 'survival', 'preservation', 'crucial' and 'vital'. Self-care is not an indulgence; it is not giving into self-pitying behaviour, it is not shirking responsibility and it is not being 'selfish'. Self-care is so much more and so much more meaningful than

'doing something nice for yourself'.

Over the last few years of various courses, learning, therapy and listening to myself and others, I've unpacked 'self-care' into four sections – curious self-awareness, self-compassion, healthy boundaries, and resourcing – and this is the model I use when I facilitate self-care workshops.

### Curious self-awareness

The first step is *curious self-awareness & connection*. Mindful self-awareness raises our ability to recognise when some self-care is needed, and how it is needed. Many people don't realise they are in need of some self-care intervention until it is too late and burn-out has hit. But this is still valuable information – by listening to our bodies, thoughts, behaviour and feelings when experiencing burnout, we now have a collection of 'red flags' to resource around for the future. A question to ask is *what tells me I need a break* using the Choice Theory Total Behaviour paradigm (Davenport, 2017). How are our thoughts, feelings, behaviours and physiology when we are nearing or at burnout? The reason for curiosity being a vital component of this exploration is exactly because it is an exploration. Without curiosity about our own inner process, we are unlikely to explore it. In addition, as long as curiosity is present, judgement cannot be, and self-judgement has no place in self-care. As long as we have an attitude that is along the lines of *I just want to fix the problem*, it is unlikely any significant or beneficial change or growth will occur. However, with curiosity and mindfulness we can connect with ourselves, and therefore others.

### Self-compassion

*Self compassion* is a vital component in any self-care

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behaviour. If we are doing something because we feel we have to, or because we will berate ourselves if we don't, or because we have added 'self-care' to a list of tasks we must complete, this may not be a self-compassionate attitude. Again looking at our Total Behaviour when we are nearing burn out (or anytime), we can ask ourselves: how can I introduce self-compassion to the four areas of my behaviour? Can I think self-compassionate thoughts, can I act self-compassionately, can I talk to myself compassionately, can I nurture my body self-compassionately? Without self-compassion there is no self-care.

### Boundaries

A huge part of self-care is being aware of and respecting our boundaries, and looking upon them with compassion and no judgement. As we know, some people have incredibly rigid boundaries and some have porous ones and some people have more flexible boundaries. Awareness and flexibility is key. For example when a client comes into the room for the first time I ask them about how the chairs are set up, giving her an opportunity to make adjustments. This allows the client to become aware of her own boundaries and own them in the therapeutic space.

Something to reflect on is what the word boundary brings up for you. If you were to imagine a boundary, what might it look like? What is it made out of? What is

it's texture like? Is it moveable or stuck fast? Is it rigid or can it bend? Is it thin, thick, and so on? Is it strong, easily pushed through or somewhere in between? This visualisation can tell us a lot of information about the quality of our boundaries. There is no wrong or right way to be boundaryed. There is just the boundary, and then the awareness of whether it is helpful or less helpful in any given situation. With this awareness we can make adjustments. What can we change about this particular boundary in this particular moment that might be more helpful for us?

Another reflection we can do is to take a look at what happens for us when a boundary gets tested. What happens in our *Total Behaviour* of thinking, feeling, doing and in our bodies? What helpful choices do we have when a boundary is tested? Can we press the pause button and create space for reflection? Can we resist blaming the other person or circumstance which is impinging on our boundary and take ownership of it and our subsequent choices in an attitude of self-compassion? Sometimes we feel we have no choice in the moment but to allow our boundary to be pressed. Sometimes people or situations can overwhelm our capacity to hold our boundaries. We may not have the tools we need in that moment. Creating a bit of space later to reflect self-compassionately on what happened for us can help us fill that toolbox. If you could go back to the moment what could you have done differently? This is not judging or blaming yourself. This is creating tools. Ask these questions with gentle self-love. If you feel too raw about the situation, wait until you feel ready to explore it.

The same is true for when we have overly rigid boundaries and are doing ourselves a disservice – maybe keeping people at arm's

length out of fear that if they get too close they will hurt us in some way. Again the key is compassionate awareness and asking ourselves if this particular boundary with this particular person/situation is helping or hindering? How can we do things differently? How could this boundary be more helpful and conducive to our happiness? In an ideal world, if we had a magic wand, what would this boundary look like?

### Resourcing

When we feel burnt out, raw, sad, victimised, hurt, and all the other less pleasant emotional responses to life, resourcing ourselves is a key part in our self-care routine. We have internal, external and somatic resources at our disposal in any given moment. An example of an *internal resource* might be how we speak to ourselves around the issue at hand, what we tell ourselves about it, or what it says about us. We might remind ourselves of all we have to be grateful for in our lives, we might focus on the love of a close friend, or a happy memory, we might tap into or remind ourselves of our strength, compassion, patience, and so on, all of our traits which helped us survive previous challenges.

An *external resource* might be texting or calling a friend. When I have bad days I do this a lot – not necessarily to fill them in on what is happening for me, but often I send something silly or frivolous, knowing that they will likely connect back in kind. This gives me two things – connection with an other (which is anything but frivolous, no matter what frivolity is going on), and the opportunity to experience lightness – essential when we are burdened. If connecting with another person doesn't sit right, another external resource might be taking the dog out for a walk, taking yourself out for a coffee, reading a chapter of a

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novel, getting immersed in voluntary work, watching an entire series on Netflix, planning a weekend away - the list is endless and individual to each person.

Somatic resourcing relates to the body. It could be doing yoga, going for a walk or run or swim. If that is too active there is restorative yoga, or curling up on the couch under a blanket. You could hold your arms around yourself in a hug for a few moments, close your eyes and allow yourself to feel the support of the chair underneath you. You could try listening to a mindfulness body scan. You could lift weights. You could go to the seaside and feel the sun on your face and ice-cream in your mouth and salt on your skin, you could hold your baby niece, you could stand at a windy spot and spread your arms and feel the cleansing wind rush your entire body, you could relax by the warmth of a fire, you could cuddle your dog. Again the list is endless and individual to each person.

Bringing awareness to our resources can also cultivate another aspect of self care – gratitude for everything we have to hand, probably a lot more than we thought we had. Without gratitude we may take the people and circumstances of our life for granted, not appreciate them, and therefore may not feel their value in our lives. Tapping into gratitude,

especially when we feel we are wanting is vital in order to build our resilience and emotional strength. And showing others appreciation can often deepen ties and inspire them to show their appreciation of us – a beautiful side effect.

Self care/preservation/refueling is not just a behaviour – it is a way of being. It is a way of thinking, feeling and doing. It is a life philosophy, and it is vital self-preservation. ☺

### References

- Davenport, B. 2017. An Introduction to Choice Theory. Retrieved from <http://www.bruceadavenport.com/total-behavior.html>
- Lorde, A. (1988). *A Burst of Light*. New York: Firebrand Books.

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