MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING SERIES

Self-Care for Health Challenges

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Self-care is a broad term describing attitudes, knowledge, and skills used to promote health or to prevent, reduce, or recover from undesired health conditions. Self-care is more than a reward at the end of a long week and involves taking care of our mind and body. Engaging in self-care can help address conditions like muscle or joint pain, infections, heart disease, mental health challenges, or chronic stress. The process of using self-care is essential to maintaining homeostasis, which is a state of regulation and stability in our body's function. When our body responds to injury, illness, or stress, it turns on its survival system. Once the survival system is working, our body focuses on surviving. Turning on the survival system for a short time is generally harmless. However, if the survival system stays on too long, it affects our ability to stay healthy. By using self-care, we can take care of ourselves while helping others do the same.

Types of self-care

Attitude and knowledge

Often, we think of self-care as a set of things to do. However, self-care is also about attitudes and knowledge. We should consider both our attitudes toward and our knowledge of ourselves, others, and our surroundings. An attitude of positive self-worth and self-talk reduce stress and help us keep a positive outlook on life. A negative attitude can bring on feelings of stress, worthlessness, sadness,

or worry about ourselves and others. In contrast, a positive attitude can help turn off our survival system and increase feelings of self-worth and self-care behaviors. Increasing knowledge about self-care helps improve our attitudes and self-care activities.

Knowledge about self-care is important because it can allow us to try new concepts or different self-care activities such as using relaxation techniques. We also need to learn about ourselves to help our attitudes. Learning about ourselves is not hard and involves acknowledging our own needs, desires, thoughts, and emotions. For example, taking an inventory of daily stressors can make us more aware of which events cause stress. Other examples include knowing which activities restore us versus those that

harm our health and well-being. An example might include socializing with a group of friends. A small group of close friends helps restore us but spending time in a larger group might induce stress. When thinking of self-care, it is important to take note of those things that contribute to or take from our sense of health and self-worth.

Physical self-care

Physical self-care involves activities used to stay healthy or recover from unhealthy conditions. Frequently, we think of physical self-care as walking or grabbing our favorite food on Friday night. However, physical self-care is more than that. It should include drinking plenty of water and eating a healthy diet of fruits, grains, legumes (beans and lentils), and protein (meat and nuts). Other examples of physical self-care can include getting sunlight each day, keeping a regular sleep schedule, and attending to daily hygiene (showering or bathing, clean clothes, and brushing teeth). We can also engage in other physical self-care activities

like taking walks or exercising. Physical self-care activities might also include things like camping, playing sports, gardening, or woodworking. The important thing to remember is that physical self-care will help promote health and prevent, reduce, or recover from undesired health conditions. It is also important to talk to your medical provider if you have a physical condition that might limit your physical activity.

Mental self-care

Mental self-care can help us stay healthy too. However, we don't need to do as much physical activity for mental self-care. These activities are important because they use different parts of the brain, and we can complete them even if we have a physical disability or health condition that limits physical activity. We can also perform mental self-care regardless of the weather, which makes them helpful during certain seasons. Some common examples of mental self-care include practicing mindfulness, using breathing techniques, or

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thinking about and making a gratitude list. Other mental self-care activities may involve sewing, knitting, coloring, or painting. Others also like listening to music or reading a book to help relax. Spending time with friends and family can also serve as a form of mental self-care, by enjoying activities such as playing board games or watching a movie together. Some people may choose to engage in spiritual activities to care for themselves such as praying, meditating, reading a religious book, or going to religious events. As with physical self-care, it is important to explore those mental self-care activities that promote our well-being.

Social support

We often overlook social support as a form of self-care, but it is extremely important. In fact, research on social support in heart disease patients showed that patients who received social support experienced shorter recovery periods and had better long-term outcomes. This means the patients lived longer and were able to enjoy a better quality of life.

Seeking social support can include a variety of activities mentioned under physical and mental self-care. Most people think social support is asking for and receiving support from someone they love and trust. However, social support is much more. Social support can include psychological or tangible resources that show an individual is cared for. Generally, social support occurs through a broad network of people in the community. The types of social support we can receive could be information, emotional or physical help from friends, family, or other social groups, or self-help peer support. Other types of social support can come through more structured groups like a recovery group such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or Celebrate Recovery (CR). The important thing to consider is that we are

hardwired to connect, and social support is a critical part of self-care.

Lastly, it is important to remember that anyone can promote their health or prevent, reduce, or recover from a health condition. However, there are times when we need more help. If you or someone you know has a condition that is worsening, reach out to your health-care provider. **If you believe you are in crisis, call or text 988 to speak with a crisis counselor.**

988
SUICIDE
& CRISIS
LIFELINE
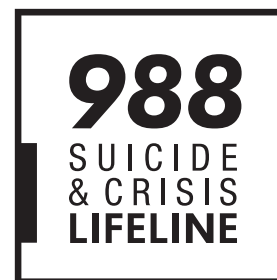
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