

10 Self-Care Tips for Maintaining Wellbeing

By Emma J Bell

I sat at her kitchen table on the silky sheepskin covering that softened the hardness of the wooden bench. Tears ran down my face as I listened to her tell me how the terrorists had stormed the restaurant at the Oberoi Hotel in Mumbai whilst she was dining there with her close friends Alan and his thirteen-year-old daughter Naomi. There were screams and cries as the bullets rained down. Helen had taken cover under the table with her friends, but by the time the gunfire had fallen silent, they were both dead.

She lifted her gaze from where it had been fixed on the corner of the table mat while she replayed these horrors, and saw my tears. She reached over and took my hand. "Have you been taking care of yourself?" She asked.

I started sobbing then. Full-on, heart-wrenching sobs. I thought about Alan and Naomi, and all the others who had died in the Mumbai terrorist attacks. This was the sixth interview I had conducted in seven days, flying hundreds of miles between each meeting. Each interviewee had shared their story of trauma and adversity. Of how they had overcome the death of a loved one, their child committing suicide, of sexual abuse by a parent and of imprisonment for a crime they didn't commit. I was on a journey that would ultimately take me over 35,000 miles around the world to interview 50 people who had faced 50 different kinds of trauma but each of whom were thriving. I wanted to know what had enabled people like Helen to thrive in the face of a violent terrorist attack, of death, abuse, loss and terminal illness. Ultimately, I found that there are 9 key resilience strategies that had allowed every single one of the 50 Thrivers to bounce forward and flourish in the face of adversity. Those same '9 Secrets to Thriving' can enable you and I to thrive in the face of everyday challenge too.

The 50 Thrivers consistently identified Self-Care as a key resilience strategy. You simply cannot thrive without deliberately taking care of your mental, physical and emotional wellbeing. Self-care is a mindset that says '*I matter*'. Not, '*I matter once everyone else is looked after*'. You matter now. When you care for yourself deliberately and mindfully, you have energy and vivacity and none of the resentment that arises from consistently putting others first. Self-care is not selfish. It's a necessity. Especially in times like these.

Helen talked to me about her analogy of the mobile 'phone. "*You wouldn't not charge it and expect it to work, would you?*" She asked rhetorically. "*So don't expect 'you' to work if you don't take care of yourself. You will drain all your energy and become emotionally and mentally exhausted.*" She was right, of course. Just as I was on an exceptional journey and had to take care of myself so that I was fit enough to see it through, we all have to apply self-care tips and strategies to ensure we come out of this Covid-19 marathon, stronger and wiser and better than before.

Here are 10 self-care tips I learned from the amazing 50 Thrivers that are as relevant during lockdown as they were in the face of the adversities each of them endured.

1. **Ask yourself “who do I want to be?”** Self-care begins with a clear and deliberate intention to thrive emotionally, mentally and physically. When faced with adversity, accept that a level of anxiety is a natural response, and that there will be a period of adjustment to your new reality. But it’s important to push through the fear and learn what makes you feel better, such as limiting intake of news, surrounding yourself with optimistic friends and family (even virtually) and aim to grow as a result of the experience. Growth is signified by focussing on others. How can you help someone in need? Is your colleague struggling? Can you offer practical help in your community? How can you use this time to build deeper and more loving connections with your family?
2. **Apply Empathetic Thinking.** It’s common to fall into ‘wishful thinking’ or ‘support seeking’ in tough times. Wishful thinking means you underestimate how difficult things are likely to be. Every time bad news comes, you’re thrown into shock and denial yet again. Support-seeking can have you leaning too heavily on others and sinking into a victim mentality of ‘why me?’ and ‘this isn’t fair’, focussing on the downsides and limitations of your situation. Empathetic thinking allows you to see how others may be suffering more than you. That then prompts you to do two things; to reach out and help, and to count your many blessings when you compare your own situation to theirs. Lockdown in a centrally-heated house with a fridge-full of food is, after all, so much better than what many others face right now.
3. **Have mechanisms to manage anxiety.** Being in lockdown, unable to physically connect with loved ones is hard. Some days, your stress and anxiety are likely to be worse than others. Anxiety is usually triggered by thinking about what might happen in the future. What you face here, in this moment, is rarely a cause for anxiety. It’s important to have a mechanism that keeps bringing you back to the present moment when anxiety flares. Take 7 or 8 deep breaths, in and out. Or notice what you can hear, taste, feel, see and smell. Or go outside, if you can, and be soothed by the gifts that nature provides to each of your senses, especially at this time of year.
4. **Eat well.** It’s critical to maintain a healthy immune system and minimise stress. Breakfast enables your cortisol levels to return to normal after the fast imposed by sleep. If you skip breakfast, cortisol (the stress hormone) continues to rise and you’re more likely to make food choices that will dampen your mood and lower your energy. A body fuelled by healthy, slow energy -releasing foods supports greater mental and emotional stability.
5. **Focus on a wellbeing priority.** Research shows that only 8% of New Year resolutions succeed. Generally, that’s because you aim to make too many changes simultaneously. By focussing on one area only, you set yourself up for success – and harness the virtuous effects of the Keystone Habit. A coaching client of mine bemoaned that the lockdown had sent her off the rails. She’d stopped running, was eating way too much chocolate and had fallen out of her regular sleep pattern. She wanted to lose weight, gain energy and get fit, all at once. By choosing running as

her well-being priority, and not focussing on any other change, she was able to harness the positive power of the Keystone Habit. She scheduled a run for four times per week, at a time of day when she would most enjoy it and could easily commit the time. She roped in her mother as her accountability partner, because she knew she'd get a hard time if she missed just one run. She downloaded music on her 'phone to motivate her and understood she'd have to consciously focus on the beneficial feelings for at least ten minutes when stretching after her run. The brain fails to remember the good aspects of exercising as effectively as it can recall the discomfort and effort. To store the positive memories takes focus and application.

6. **Routines and rituals are critical.** When work and home life merge, it's vital to use structure to create demarcation lines. Routines anchor you and provide a sense of being in control. We respond well to predictability, but when we are working from home, we have to create that for ourselves. Starting and finishing work at fixed times is vital. Having a work space that can be shut or cleared away at the end of the working day allows you to relax fully. You no longer have the interruptions that plagued your day when working at the office, so it's critical to build in rest-breaks too.
7. **Create ways to trigger your relaxation response.** It's not easy to have fun right now. It takes a bit of planning – but it's worth it. Whether you 'self-soothe' by lighting a candle, savouring the taste of decent coffee or stroking your dog, these activities bring much-needed joy at this time. Plan in activities with the family. Break up the weekend into episodes and plan something for each. Divide each day into portions and allocate at least two to doing things simply because they are enjoyable.
8. **Take time out when U-HALT.** When you feel Unloved (which also means Undervalued, Unworthy and Unhappy), Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired – take time out to rest and repair before making any important decisions, trying to be creative or having a difficult conversation with your teenage daughter! When you are in any of these impaired states, your instinct will likely be to push on. Please don't. Instead, take care of yourself by retreating and prioritising your own needs.
9. **Train your Inner Critic.** The voice in your head is invariably negative – unless you have whipped it into shape. It's a bit like a puppy that pee's in the corner of the room. It takes persistence and patience to house-train your pet, just as it takes effort and focus to silence the voice in your head, or better yet, to replace it with a compassionate coach who inspires you to learn from failure and embrace progress over perfection.
10. **Set boundaries and ask for what you need.** It is not your job to make other people happy – but it is your job to make yourself happy. Please drop the habits of expecting others to know what you want by osmosis, of allowing your boundaries to be transgressed while seething inside and of taking the emotional outbursts of relatives personally. When you take responsibility for articulating your needs clearly,

you act as a role model to others. It's possible to tell others that you cannot give them what they want in a way that is loving and respectful of you both. This is an especially useful self-care tip when you are confined for weeks on end with close family.

Who knows how long this lockdown will last? As well as the many limitations, this time offers a golden opportunity to develop self-care habits that will allow us to flourish and thrive in the new world.

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