

The Faulty Messages We Tell Ourselves about Self-Care – And What to DO About Them

Adoptive, foster, and kinship parents frequently say they “can’t” schedule self-care into their family calendar. We get it – you are busy with work, family time, therapy, family visits, homework help and so much more! However, we would like you to consider that one of the reasons you “can’t” put self-care on the calendar is because of the messages you tell yourself. You’ve internalized these messages as true, consciously, or unconsciously.

These internalized messages don’t just keep you busy, they keep you from taking care of yourself.

What Are the Faulty Messages You Are Believing?

I’m a Care Giver, not a Care Receiver. It’s uncomfortable to be on the receiving end of nurture and care when you are accustomed to being the caregiver. When our identity is wrapped up in giving care, it’s hard to see that we deserve nurture.

I Asked for This Life. We understand that you chose this path and that you might have received the message – or spoken the message to yourself – that you don’t have room to complain about the weight of it because you asked for this. Wherever you might have picked up this message, it hangs out in your brain when you feel tempted to reach out for help or support and shouts you down.

I Don’t Have it So Bad. It’s easy to look around and compare your hectic, busy life to others’ circumstances. When you have a naturally caregiving bent, it’s easier to decide that you can make it through. Even when you are barely muddling through, it’s okay because your life is not nearly as hard as Jane’s.

I Don’t Even Know What I Need. We also get the lack of clarity you might feel about what it is that you need. When you are overwhelmed, sleep-deprived, and depleted mentally and emotionally, it’s a challenge to think through what will help you the most. Scheduling a routine appointment for your own rest seems out of reach.

What Can You DO About the Faulty Messages?

These messages might feel insurmountable – unless you get some help and guidance to get you over or through them. We are offering these practical tips to help you identify and re-write the messages you tell yourself about why you don’t need self-care.

Provided by Creating a Family, the national adoption and foster care education and support nonprofit.

Give Yourself Permission. Start by telling yourself that you are worthy of care and that it is okay – even good! – to engage in self-care. If you must, say it out loud, a few times a day, until you believe it. These scripts help you change the messaging in your head.

- I am worth taking care of.
- I will take better care of my family if I learn how to take care of myself.
- I cannot give to my family what I have not learned to give myself.
- Self-care will make me a better (mom, dad, grandparent, aunt, uncle).

Say “No” More Often. It might be intimidating to say “no” to more events on your calendar or, “asks” from friends and family. However, it’s a vital step in setting healthy boundaries for yourself. Replace the thing you said “no” to with an activity that fuels you.

Establish a Routine. If you don’t already have a predictable, manageable routine for your household, set one up. It’s its own form of self-care, and it sets you up for scheduling other self-care as well. Then schedule your self-care into that routine. Some parents might prefer to schedule dates and alone time on a shared online calendar to keep each other accountable to stick to the plan. Build on that routine once you get it started.

Pick One Thing. Within your newly established routine, be sure there is one thing you can look forward to daily. You’ll be surprised how the thought of something special built into each day can fuel you.

It’s GOOD to Start Small! If you are not in the habit of regular self-care, build your muscle for it in small ways. Here are a few small ways to start the habit of self-care:

- Saturday morning coffee with your partner while the kids chill with cartoons.
- Go for a walk alone in the park. Bring along your favorite podcast or new music.
- Watch one movie a week starring your favorite actor until you’ve exhausted their whole body of work.
- Soak in a hot bubble bath while older kids clean the kitchen (and lower your standards on what constitutes “clean”).
- Take one hour every other day to learn a new hobby or pick up a hobby you’ve neglected.

Ask for the Help You Need. Whether it’s laundry, a grocery run, or two hours every week of childcare, be specific about the help you need. Some parents find it helpful to brainstorm this together. Others can immediately list the tasks of life they are willing to outsource to create time for self-care. Remember, asking for help IS self-care. It helps you carve out time for that which nourishes rather than depletes you.

Teach Yourself to ACCEPT the Help. Many adoptive, foster, and kinship parents have loving, supportive people in their network who frequently say, “If you need anything, please let me know.” Train yourself to respond to that offer with a concrete task that will help you. Those who offer you their help might not know what you need, but when you provide ideas for specific support, then take the help when it comes!

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