



You cannot pour from an empty cup...

Local mentor and mum, Helen Neary, talks to Families Solent East about the importance of taking time for yourself.

Working with many parents as a coach, I've become more aware of the vital role that selfcare plays in being an effective parent. However, as parents we are not always very good at leaving time or energy for ourselves! If you want to shout less, find more joy in the small everyday parenting stuff or just feel better about yourself as a parent then read on....

The term selfcare has become mainstream in the last few years yet the definition is often misunderstood; many of us aren't sure how to incorporate effective selfcare into our lives. At a recent parenting workshop, I posed the question "what do you do for you?" I'm used to this question evoking a stunned silence. but two members were willing to respond. One had a weekly music lesson and the other went to the cinema once a week. While both activities are excellent forms of selfcare it struck me that selfcare is perceived as being a specific event, performed for themselves, that is very separate from their parent identity. Working one to one with another parent they responded to the same question with "I don't know what I like to do anymore and anyway I'm too busy with the children". This is a classic thought and one many of us can relate to.

Selfcare is anything that has a positive effect (no matter how small) on you. That's it!! If an experience improves your wellbeing then it's a form of selfcare. It's not really about structured activities away from the children and it certainly can be 100% free. However, what is a core feature of selfcare is that you recognise it as something that boosts you (physically, emotionally and/or spiritually). Beyond that there are no rules. It may be that you create the moment yourself with a focus on it being for you or you acknowledge it afterwards.

Here are a few ideas to nudge you to look after yourself a little more on an everyday basis (for free too):

Become your own cheerleader

Listen carefully to your inner voice. What has it been saying to you while you've been reading this article? Identify the following: negative/critical talk, anxious/worried talk, emotional talk, encouraging talk, kind and compassionate talk. The chances are your self talk is negative more than it is positive and it (your inner voice) will not be part of your selfcare habits. Now you've become more aware of your self talk, start to change it. This will be a slow process so be kind to yourself. We all have automatic negative thoughts so when you hear yourself say one. Use your inner voice to say the opposite of that thought or "Stop. That's an unhelpful / wrong thought." Then replace it with a more positive thought and listen to the positivity. Over time you will hear less negativity and you will start to be kinder and more compassionate to yourself. This really is the greatest form of selfcare you can give yourself. Your very own cheerleader who is there for you every day.

Breathing

We all have to breathe and we do it all day long so paying attention to your breathing takes no time out of your busy day. It

is well recognised in the world of biology that slow deep breathing lowers the body's stress response. Now start to think about breathing in for 7 counts and out for 11 as this enables our bodies to unwind. This breath length is a challenge so work up to it and be pleased whenever you lengthen your breath by a count.

Move your body

We are designed to move so move as best you can within your physical abilities. Celebrate the body you have been given! Move it simply because you can. Take the stairs instead of lifts, walk outdoors, move in the park with your children. Walk around rather than sitting on a park bench. Even better play with your children!

Smile

Think about your mouth right and now and turn it into a gentle warm smile. Be aware of doing this in your day when your washing up, cooking, tidying up at the end of the day. The experience of smiling lifts our mood and you never know your little one may ask you why you are smiling and you can delight them with the simple answer "because I can".

The power of nature

Take a couple of seconds to look properly at something outside like a tree, flower, bird or spider's web. Taking that moment to pause and focus on a small act of nature has amazing benefits for your mind and body.

JOMO

The joy of missing out can be a very helpful way of looking after yourself. Sometimes its good to say no to some of the invitations especially when you're already feeling like you are doing too much. Then enjoy the time you've saved for you just by being in your own space at your own pace.

Selfcare is not indulgent nor selfish; it really is necessary. You need to care for yourself so that have the capacity to give to those who need you to care for them - emotionally as well as physical. Otherwise you will be trying to "pour from that empty cup" and are likely to get overwhelmed and exhausted. By feeling good in ourselves we are less inclined to run out of patience or tolerance so we shout less and we smile more. We start to find joy in the small stuff, and are able to "pour from our cups" as we have something to give to the people we love and care for.



You may be thinking "why bother, this all takes effort. I'm getting by just fine as I am". I would say to you two things; do you really want to be just fine? Or would you prefer to be good? I think you deserve to feel good every day. Secondly, do you want your children to be just fine or do you want them to feel good? I think you want the best for your children. You taking care of yourself is excellent role modelling for your children. They need to have self love, acceptance and respect and who is their biggest role model? You! If only for the love of your children, look after yourself. They love you and they want you to be well and feel good. They know (even if you don't) that you deserve the best you that you can possibly be!

Helen Neary is a Psychology lecturer, professional coach and an academic mentor. She delivers a range of tailored workshops on many psychological themes with a growing focus on parenting, mental wellbeing & resilience. She is a parent to two young boys and since having her children she has developed a love of peaceful moments in amongst the business of family life!

Contact helen.thriving@gmail.com or see her Facebook page at Helen Neary - parent coach and academic success mentor