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Self-Care Is Not An Indulgence. It's A Discipline.

-Tami Forman, *Forbes* Contributor

Self-care requires the discipline to do the hard and boring things that are good for us.

The way self-care is portrayed today is completely and utterly backward. First, self-care as a concept is almost exclusively aimed at women (generally wealthy white women who can afford the goods and services that get marketed to them as self-care). The not-so-subtle suggestion is that women need to be reminded to care for themselves because, after all, they are so busy taking care of everyone else. And the even less-subtle suggestion is that while we should be taking care of ourselves, that doesn't absolve us from taking care of everyone else.

Which brings me to the second way that the current portrayal of self-care is backward -- it's characterized as an indulgence. This means both that the practice of self-care is something we are occasionally allowed to indulge in and that self-care should feel like an indulgence. Think expensive bath products, luxurious chocolates, spa appointments. When we spend more time talking about the self-care power of high thread count sheets than we do about getting enough sleep we've wandered pretty far from anything that can be remotely considered healthy for either mind or body.

Self-care is not an indulgence. Self-care is a discipline. It requires tough-mindedness, a deep and personal understanding of your priorities, and a respect for both yourself and the people you choose to spend your life with.

For example, self-care is:

1. Turning off the TV instead of watching another episode of "The Crown" because the alarm is going off at 5am so you can get to the gym.
2. Declining the second drink at the office holiday party. It might even be declining the first drink.
3. Saying "no" to the thing you don't want to do even if someone is going to be angry at you.
4. Maintaining financial independence.
5. Doing work that matters.
6. Letting other people take care of themselves.

If we are being honest, self-care is actually kind of boring. Which is why self-care is a discipline. It takes discipline to do the things that are good for us instead of what feels good in the moment. It takes even more discipline to refuse to take responsibility for other people's emotional well-being. And it takes discipline to take full and complete responsibility for our own well-being.

Self-care is also a discipline because it's not something you do once in awhile when the world gets crazy. It's what you do every day, every week, month in and month out. It's taking care of yourself in a way that doesn't require you to "indulge" in order to restore balance. It's making the commitment to stay healthy and balanced as a regular practice.

Ironically when you truly care for yourself, exercising all the discipline that requires, you are actually in a much stronger place to give of yourself to those around you. You will be a happier parent, a more grateful spouse, a fully engaged colleague. Those who take care of themselves have the energy to take care of others joyfully because that caregiving doesn't come at their own expense. And those who take care of themselves also have the energy to work with meaning and purpose toward a worthy goal. Which means they are also the people most likely to make the world a better place for all of us.