

STRESS MANAGEMENT AND SELF CARE

Though a service year is a valuable, life-changing experience, that doesn't mean it's always easy. Everyone has ups and downs while they're serving and encounters situations that are difficult to deal with. Learning to take care of yourself while you work through tough issues will let you thrive in your service year and prepare you for future success. Managing stress is a skill that will let you thrive in any workplace - and your life outside, of course! - so learning self-care strategies during your service year that work for you will translate directly to your career and well-being beyond.

WHAT EXACTLY IS STRESS?

Stress is part of our "fight-or-flight" survival mechanism. A threatening situation will trigger a stress response in our body, which releases hormones that prepare us to fight or flee a possible danger. Unfortunately though, the stress response is also triggered by tense situations where physical action is not an option, such as an unreasonable boss, heavy traffic, or financial problems. When these problems are ongoing, known as chronic stress, the continuous build up of fight-or-flight hormones in our bodies can lead to some serious physical and mental issues.

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE ABOUT STRESS:

- [Understanding the stress response](#)
- [From burning bright to simply burned out](#)
- [Ted Talk: How to make stress your friend](#)

WHAT IS SELF CARE AND WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?

Self care is identifying your needs and taking steps to meet them, especially when you are feeling stressed out. It helps you manage all aspects of your life that affect your overall health – the physical, psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual components of an individual's well being. Check out this [self care wheel](#) to see examples in each category, or look at this [Self Care Assessment](#) designed to give you a snapshot of where you are currently giving your attention, and to help you to think about other ways you can contribute to your wellbeing.

There is a ton of information out there about self care, but it's important to remember a few things when you begin to evaluate what self care looks like for you and others in your life:

Self care requires a lens of intersectionality. You may hear "self care" and think that it's only for Instagram-perfect white ladies doing yoga, but that isn't the case. Self care is for everyone – including men, people of color, people with lower incomes – but it won't and shouldn't look the same for everyone. As written by Rex Leonowicz in this great article about [intersectionality and self care](#), "We have to transform the way we understand self care because it doesn't exist in a wormhole, where the effects of oppressions and privilege have no bearing on how we are able to care for ourselves."

Self care isn't an excuse to ignore your responsibilities. Getting take-out when you've had a busy day could be self care. Getting take-out every night because you don't want to cook, go grocery shopping, or *gasp* do dishes is not probably not self-care – it's likely avoiding a basic responsibility of

adulthood. Be honest with yourself about when you need time to decompress and feel refreshed so that you are able to get things done later, and when you are just avoiding doing the things you need to. If you find you are having trouble maintaining some responsibilities, it might be time to seek out help (see below for more info).

Self care is about actually taking care of yourself. Everyone once in a while, a “[treat yo self](#)” shopathon might be just what you need, but more often than not, it’s about making time for activities and routines that help you truly take care of your mental, physical, and emotional health – and won’t require a big spending spree. Doctors appointments, eating balanced meals, and making time for your valued relationships are all part of self care.

Self care is about you! Only you can judge for yourself what are the right activities for you and when you need to carve out special time for self care. Along the same lines, it’s not your role to evaluate what is or isn’t self-care for someone else. Friends and family may help with your self-care - and you may help them - but ultimately it’s for every person to find what works for them.

EXAMPLES OF SELF CARE & STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Below are some proven ways that people manage their stress and take care of themselves in all aspects of their lives. Find the strategies that work best for you!

KEEP A JOURNAL

A journal is an easy and cheap way to start evoking mindfulness in your daily life. You can work out past frustrations, current hurdles, and record your dreams in a safe space meant just for you. Journaling has been shown to help with [achieving goals](#), [boosting memory](#), [improving communications skills](#), and [healing](#). It’s a great first step in self discovery and learning more about how you react to stress. Bonus – just by journaling, you’re taking time for yourself!

EXERCISE

There are plenty of studies that confirm that exercising in almost any form can act as a stress reliever. [It boosts your feel-good endorphins and distracts you from your daily worries](#). Take a walk (with or without a friend), go on a jog, do a few laps at the local pool, or throw your favorite workout on the TV. Maybe even try something new like boxing or spinning, or train for a marathon – whatever gets you going, keep moving for your physical and mental well being!

DO YOGA

Find a yoga studio in your area that allows you to take classes for a decent price, or try yoga at home for free! There are countless [benefits to incorporating yoga](#) into your daily life, and it’s a great place to start with [self care](#). Check out YouTube channels like [Yoga With Adriene - Yoga for Beginners](#) series for some of the basic moves, and then you can move up into more [advanced practices](#). Test out some different classes with different instructors and see what’s right for you!

MEDITATE

Learning to mediate can be a simple but effective way to reduce stress, boost your mood, and improve focus. It can feel difficult to figure out where to start, so looking into some meditation apps is a great

place to start. [Headspace](#) and [Calm](#) are two popular meditation apps that offer both guided and self-guided meditations that can be customized for what's happening in your life. [Starting with guided meditations](#) can be a valuable way to learn how to meditate to limit frustration that may come up early on by not knowing what to do.

SPEND TIME WITH FRIENDS AND LOVED ONES

Make time for the relationships that are important to you. Call your mom or have a movie night with your buddies. [Having friends present in our lives](#) lowers the stress hormones in our bodies. If a big gathering sounds like a fun way to de-stress, go for it! If you recharge by being alone, that's fine too, but make time for meaning connections with your loved ones – [even introverts need people!](#)

GET OUTSIDE

[Being outdoors has some pretty amazing stress-relieving benefits.](#) You don't have to be super outdoorsy – just a little time outside each day in the [sun has important health benefits!](#) If you don't get as much outdoor time as you'd like during the winter, or if you live or work somewhere without good natural lighting, you might want to [invest in a sun lamp](#) to help naturally elevate your mood.

FIND A NEW HOBBY OR ACTIVITY, ESPECIALLY A CREATIVE OUTLET!

Sick of zoning out in front of Netflix? Try finding a creative hobby! You don't have to be an expert artist to get a fun coloring book or a five-star chef to try a new recipe. Finding a new hobby, [especially one that has meditative, repetitive actions](#) like crafting or coloring, is great for your brain. And news flash: [knitting isn't just for grandmas anymore!](#)

OTHER IDEAS FOR SELF CARE AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- [50 self care ideas](#)
- [45 Simple Self-Care Practices for a Healthy Mind, Body, and Soul](#)
- These activities to practice [Stoicism](#)

TURN OFF

It's important to take time each day to get away from social media and any electronics (I know, I know, waaay easier said than done). You may think that TV or scrolling through Instagram are helping you unwind, but in reality the blue light is keeping your brain from fully relaxing. Not to mention that social media can sometimes adversely affect your mental health. Use the tips above to help you find an activity that gets you off your screen, and try to turn everything off at least an hour before you'd like to fall asleep.

SEEK HELP

Always remember that seeking help from a licensed facilitator or professional is always an option and never a failure. You shouldn't feel ashamed for seeking therapy to work out issues that you're unsure of how to handle or need help with. At any point, anyone can decide that it's time to set up an appointment with a therapist, but some common signs that you should consider professional help include feeling like you can't control your emotions, relying on a substance to cope, and not enjoying activities that used to be important to you. Read more suggestions here about when it might be time to step up and seek help. If you need immediate help or are worried about your safety or that of a friend, you can call anytime, toll-free, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or visit <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/> to chat and find help.