

The Afterschool  
Professional's Guide to  
**Self-Care**

Created by the  
National Afterschool  
Association



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ASSOCIATION

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**S** “Self-care is not about self-indulgence,  
it’s about self-preservation.”  
-Audre Lorde

Each of us feels the weight of stress and fatigue in daily life. Stress can reach every aspect of life, whether professional, personal, or social. As an afterschool professional, you likely also feel the stresses of youth in your care, compounding your own stress. You serve as a caring, stable adult to youth and are vital to their participation in afterschool. To ensure you provide youth with the best care possible and are responsive to their needs, it’s essential to place importance on your own well-being and self-care. *The Afterschool Professional’s Guide to Self-Care* provides information on the basics of self-care, in addition to practical self-care actions and strategies for managing your mindset to cope with stress.



## Signs of Fatigue

**Caring for and helping youth cope with their stress and trauma can be physically, emotionally, and mentally draining. These overwhelming feelings are known as compassion fatigue.**

The first step in addressing compassion fatigue is identifying it. A direct result of caring for the well-being of others, compassion fatigue does not indicate weakness or incompetence (NCTSN, 2008). Compassion fatigue is normal and common for those working with youth, especially those who have experienced trauma.

There may be warning signs that indicate you are experiencing compassion fatigue. Be mindful of and recognize the following compassion fatigue warning signs (NCTSN, 2008) (Lander, 2018):

- Feeling irritable, impatient, or angry
- Disengaging from family and friends
- Difficulty concentrating or focusing
- Placing blame on others
- Difficulty sleeping
- Change in eating habits, either eating too much or not enough
- Feeling hopeless or isolated
- Denying youth are impacted by trauma or feeling numb or detached
- Feeling guilty that not enough has been done for youth
- Intense feelings and intrusive thoughts about a youth's trauma that does not lessen with time
- Worrying pervasively about youth's trauma experiences after program hours and during sleep
- Struggling to plan program activities

# What is Self-Care?

**Most of us have heard the term “self-care” repeatedly over the past few years. What exactly is self-care and why should we practice it?**

Time and attention need to be devoted to oneself and the feelings of fatigue experienced when working with youth. Self-care is about taking the time to focus on your own well-being in order to manage this stress and fatigue. It allows you to find balance professionally, emotionally,

physically, spiritually and socially. It not only helps improve physical health, but also brain function and memory. It can result in improved mood, happiness, stress levels and overall quality of life. Practicing self-care is an expression of your value of self and your importance to others. This can affect your relationship with the youth you work with and enhance your ability to care for them.

Self-care is a personal practice and is different for each person. Each individual needs to find self-care strategies that are enjoyable and help them manage their own stressors and signs of fatigue. Because stress and fatigue can be constant and persistent, self-care is not a one-time practice; it should be a daily and long-term practice.



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*Practicing self-care is an expression of your value of self and your importance to others.*

# Six Elements of Self-Care and Practice Strategies

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), there are six elements of self-care. It's important to address each of the six elements to reach a balance in well-being.

Create and document a self-care plan that includes an activity for each of the six elements daily. Place the plan in a visible location and schedule time for your plan in realistic increments so it can be regularly implemented.

Following are descriptions of each of the

six elements of self-care, as well as ideas for practice strategies for each element. These are just a few ideas to get you started and help you generate your own ideas. Choose practices that resonate with you and help manage your stress. (Childcare Education Institute, Reachout.com, and McCarthy, 2020)

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## *Six elements of self-care:*

1. *Physical*
2. *Psychological*
3. *Emotional*
4. *Spiritual*
5. *Social*
6. *Professional*



## Physical Self-Care

Activities that involve staying healthy and fit, such as exercise, nutrition, sleep and rest.

- Exercise regularly with an activity you enjoy.
- Walk the dog, whether you have one or not.
- Have a dance party.
- Take a walk during work breaks.
- Make sure to take a lunch break.
- Set a goal to improve your healthy diet.
- Establish a consistent sleep routine that allows for adequate sleep.
- Try a sleep or exercise app.

## Psychological Self-Care

Activities that involve applying consequential thinking, engaging intrinsic motivation, practicing mindfulness and creativity, or allow you to clear your head to intellectually face life challenges.

- Plan time for relaxation or personal time.
- Maintain a reflective journal.
- Participate in a hobby or find a new one like cooking, gardening, or playing an instrument.
- Connect with family and friends who have a positive attitude.
- Engage in calming activities such as meditation, completing puzzles, or game play.
- Find an experienced colleague to consult on a regular basis.
- Refrain from checking your work email and phone after work hours.
- Participate in learning opportunities through podcasts, playlists, instructional videos, or articles.
- Take a break; either small breaks during the day or a personal day to recharge.

## Emotional Self-Care

Activities that allow you to safely experience and navigate your emotions and involve development of compassion and empathy, effective management of stress, and enhancement of emotional literacy.

- Make a daily list of three achievements.
- Do something you enjoy.
- Have a good laugh.
- Play music and sing a song.
- Cultivate supportive friendships.
- Play a group sport and meet up afterward.
- Meet up with your professional or social groups.
- Connect with a friend to discuss how you are coping with life challenges.

## Spiritual Self-Care

Activities that involve the beliefs and values guiding your daily life, a sense of perspective apart from daily living, and practices that strengthen your spiritual awareness.

- Meditate.
- Visit a place of worship.
- Do yoga.
- Reflect with a supportive person.
- Read for enjoyment or inspiration.

## Social Self-Care

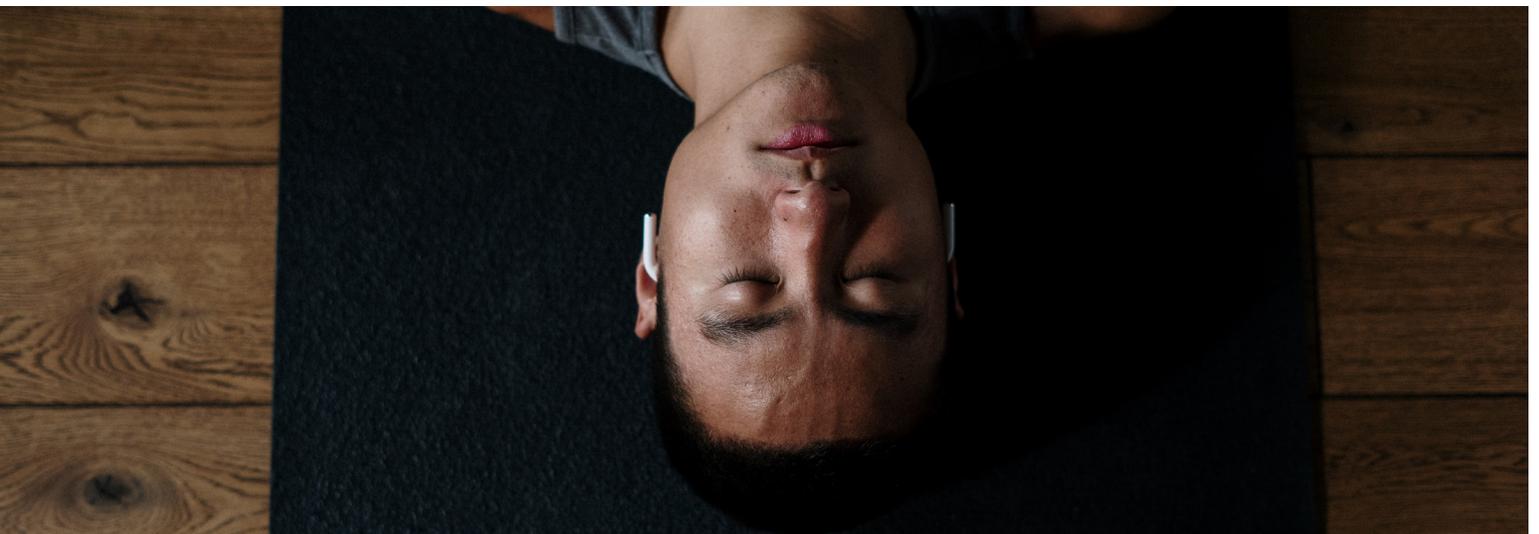
Activities that allow you to enhance a sense of belonging and connectedness by building healthy relationships with a network of diverse, supportive and caring individuals—both in your personal and professional life—who you trust and can rely on.

- Plan special events with friends or family.
- Make close relationships a priority.
- Connect with family and friends via video conference if you can't be in person.
- Share meals online, or in person when possible, with family and friends.
- Join a book club or discussion group.

## Professional Self-Care

Activities that help you maintain your expected professional level of performance, allow you to establish professional boundaries and share your strengths and contributions.

- Develop a mentor relationship with an experienced colleague.
- Create a support group of your professional peers.
- Establish and adhere to clear work boundaries with your time and work habits, and make sure to communicate them.
- Read professional articles and literature.
- Participate in professional development opportunities.



# Managing Your Mindset

**Self-care coping strategies are an important daily practice to alleviate stress and fatigue and improve well-being. Another essential part of maintaining well-being is establishing a mindset that allows you to be positive and supportive of your own self to prevent stress and fatigue from becoming overwhelming.**

Use the following points to guide you in forming a healthy, positive mindset to better manage your stress and fatigue. (NCTSN, 2008, Thompson, 2019, Lademann, 2019, National Education Association, 2020)

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**Realize what you can control:** Remember that you can only control the things you can control. You are not responsible for all things and should ask for help from those around you.

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**Be honest with yourself:** Recognize when you are stressed or fatigued. Acknowledge it and accept that it is difficult to deal with.

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**Assess work habits:** Evaluate if your current work habits are escalating your fatigue. Make adjustments to the practices that tend toward these feelings.

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**Have self-compassion:** Be kind to yourself, recognize when you are too hard on yourself, and treat yourself as you would a friend.

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**Regulate your media diet:** Limit your media exposure to a level that feels safe to you, keep perspective of what you are exposed to, and don't use media to enhance anxiety and fear.

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**Manage worry time:** Worrying can be exhausting and most things you worry about do not come to fruition. Establish a time during the day as a “worry-free” time to provide relief from these feelings.

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**Set realistic expectations:** Make reasonable and achievable expectations for yourself.

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**Differentiate probable vs. possible risks:** Keep in mind there is a difference between possible and probable risks and just because an adverse event is possible does not mean it is probable.

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**Strive for quality instead of perfection:** Maintain your ideas for quality work but allow yourself to make mistakes and flex your expectations during stressful times.

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**Establish a sensible pace:** Persistent high levels of stress and productivity are not sustainable, and you will need to take time to recharge and rejuvenate.

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*Establish a mindset that allows you to be positive and supportive of your own self to prevent stress and fatigue from becoming overwhelming.*

**Be optimistic:** Practice and model a positive, hopeful attitude.

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**Laugh:** Laughter can be restorative and healing. Look for opportunities to engage your sense of humor.

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**Reduce your clutter:** Remove unwanted or stress-inducing things that create clutter in your life, whether it be physical items, hurtful relationships, feelings of guilt or grudges, to-dos that never get done, or unachievable tasks.

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**Forgive yourself and others:** Try to see other points of view in order to forgive mistakes for those not functioning at their best. Strengthen your tolerance in order to overlook the irritating and frustrating behaviors of others.

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**Handle one day at a time:** Focus on the challenges and accomplishments of each day as it occurs.

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**Acknowledge your strengths, achievements and confidence to handle future challenges.**

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**Be reflective:** Look inward and reflect on your own identity and worldview in order to understand your beliefs and biases.

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**Seek support from colleagues:** Be careful of isolating yourself and seek out trusted colleagues to help you process your feelings and grow.

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**Seek professional help:** Seek help if you are experiencing overwhelming signs of fatigue or if any unresolved trauma experiences are impacting your daily life.

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**Reassess:** Continue to check your state of well-being to assess for signs of fatigue and to ensure you are incorporating helpful self-care practices.



# Additional Resources from the National AfterSchool Association



[Tips for Managing Stress During the Pandemic](#)



[Managing Stress Proven to be a Key to Success](#)



[Self-Care Tips to Avoid Burnout](#)



[Does Work Life Balance Exist?](#)



[Survival Tips for Youth Development Professionals](#)



[Self-Care to Avoid Burnout - TurnKeyPD](#)

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