

Learning to love yourself for a healthier life

By Teddi Nicolaus

Who will you spend the most time with today? A family member? A friend? Your boss, teacher, co-worker, or significant other?

It may come as a bit of a surprise, but the person with whom you'll spend the most time today is yourself. Your relationship with the face in the mirror is pretty important, especially as it's the only relationship you can be sure you'll have for the rest of your life.

To understand what self-love is, it's important to first understand what it's not. Self-love is not about being self-indulgent, selfish or narcissistic. It's an appreciation for yourself that grows from actions that support your physical, psychological and spiritual growth, according to the Brain and Behavior Research Foundation.

"Self-love is important because for people to live a full and healthy life, they need to take care of themselves," says Jeffrey Borenstein, MD, president and CEO of the foundation.

Unfortunately, many people don't think of that person in the mirror as their first priority. But "to be able to help others, to be able to be successful professionally, you have to make sure that you yourself are functioning at the highest possible level, and that means taking care of yourself," Borenstein says.

Self-love starts with self-care. That means exercising regularly, getting sufficient sleep, maintaining social connections, getting regular checkups, seeking help from a health care provider if you aren't feeling physically or mentally well, and kicking bad habits like smoking.

From there, consider your unique needs. For example, you might gain satisfaction from volunteering, helping with children or older adults, or doing a hobby that you



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love. You can also add some of the following self-love strategies into your daily life.

Hey, you! You got this

Positive affirmations are statements you make to yourself that affirm something to be true. Over time, the desired outcome becomes a reality, helping you build confidence and achieve your goals. Are you starting a new job or facing a crisis? Choose phrases or words that resonate with you, such as "I am worthy," "This too shall pass" or "You got this!" Say them out loud in front of a mirror or jot them on sticky notes and plaster them where you're sure to see them. You can also repeat them in your head as you go about your day.

Be kind to yourself

"Everyone makes mistakes." Who hasn't heard that comment before? We've been taught the importance of forgiving others, but many of us find it difficult to forgive ourselves.

In fact, counselors and life coaches report that the hardest person to forgive is yourself. Guilt and regret can take a huge toll on your mental and physical health and cause you to neglect the people who love you and need you. Embrace mistakes, learn from them and move on. Be as patient, gentle and compassionate toward yourself as you are toward the people you care about.

Mindfulness matters

Yoga and meditation are mindfulness-based practices that allow you to experience life as it happens — the good and the bad — without judgment or preconceived notions. Mindfulness

is about letting go of the past and the future and being completely aware of what's happening in the present.

Research shows that mindfulness tools such as yoga and meditation can ease chronic pain and anxiety, improve your mood and increase your overall quality of life.

Happiness starts with you

You may have heard this one before: "You're responsible for your own happiness." Expecting someone else to fulfill your needs isn't fair to the other person and puts pressure on relationships. People will come and go from your life, and they will have their own

needs. So take control over your own happiness: Instead of expecting someone else to love you unconditionally or make you happy, look within yourself.

Once you define love for yourself and learn to treat yourself with dignity, kindness and respect, then you can set boundaries and expectations for how others treat and love you.



Taking the self-love journey

Self-love is not something you can expect to figure out overnight, says Keoshia Banks, MPH, CHES, founder and CEO of Self-Love, Self-Respect and Sisterhood Inc.

"Self-love is understanding your unique needs and then nourishing them," says Banks, who started the nonprofit in 2018 to provide a safe space for teen girls to build self-love.

"We are all unique," she says. "We are all individuals who have different needs. We need different boundaries. We need different interactions. We need different things from the people that we love, and from the world. Once we figure out what that is, then we have to nourish it."



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