



The Two Sides of Self-Care

by Denise J. Hughes

Self-care has become a major trend. On Instagram alone, the hashtag #selfcare has over twenty million posts. It's become a movement. Among Christian women, though, the topic of self-care has been polarizing. Some are huge advocates of it while others are vocal opponents of it.

What are we to think of the growing popularity of self-care?

On the one hand, self-care makes sense. Our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit, so it's only right and good that we take proper care of ourselves physically (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). We need rest, nutrition, exercise, hygiene, and access to healthcare so we can be good stewards of the physical houses in which we live, move, and have our being. The Apostle Paul recognized this human fact when he said:

“For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body” (Ephesians 5:29-30).

It's natural to care for our human bodies, and we can't fully live out our calling to love and serve others if we fail to do so. To this end, basic self-care practices are good and helpful.

On the other hand, self-care is widely praised and promoted in our culture, leading some to see the term as being saturated with worldly implications. Thus, some Christian women reject the culture's notion of self-care. In its place, they advocate soul-care instead of self-care, urging women to invest more in praying and reading the Bible.

So, what's a woman to do?

Self-care? Soul-care? Both? Or neither?

As Courtney Reissig aptly states in her article at The Gospel Coalition, “[W]e are both body and soul. To thrive, both need to be nourished and cared for.”* This makes sense. We need to care for both our physical bodies and our inner souls.

Basic self-care practices, like rest and nutrition, are wise.

And soul-care practices, like praying and reading the Bible, are also wise.

I get all this. I really do. And yet, the term “self-care” still makes me cringe.

So, I’ve had to ask myself why I wrestle with our society’s ubiquitous push for self-care. And I’ve realized that it’s not basic self-care I have a problem with. The real problem doesn’t lie with self-care or soul-care; the real problem lies within the subtle messages lurking beneath the larger self-care *movement*.

When I refer to the self-care *movement*, I am referring to the widespread cultural ideas about it that have become a ten-billion-dollar industry. From expensive makeup products to extravagant spa treatments, self-care is now a booming business, and it is marketed to women as a “must have.” What’s more, it is offered as *the* necessary balm to an overworked and overspent generation of women.

Four Underlying Messages Within the Self-Care Movement

Steeped within the self-care movement are four underlying messages that pose a genuine concern.

First, the self-care movement sends the message that you are the source of replenishment and restoration. And if self-care practices lead us to see ourselves as the source for replenishment and restoration, then we’re displacing God as the sole giver of life and strength, joy and peace.

Second, the self-care movement tends to conflate necessity with indulgence — such as “you should eat chocolate and not feel guilty about it” or “you should travel because a trip away could recharge your mental state.” These things can be a treat for sure, but they’re hardly a necessity and not everyone can afford such luxuries.

Third, the self-care movement focuses on your own personal happiness and well-being, not for the sakes of others, but for the sake of a happier self. Yet, this is contrary to Scripture, where we’re told to “look not only to [your] own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4). Again, happiness and well-being

are not counter to God's commands in Scripture, but they're not our reason for existing either.

Our greatest joy is never found in serving ourselves, but in serving others, which brings us to the final concern.

Fourth, the self-care movement does not promote Christ-like self-denial or service to others. If we look to Scripture as the ultimate authority in our lives, then we will see plenty of examples where Jesus took time to be alone and pray. He took time to enjoy meals with his closest friends. In fact, Jesus spent 30 years in complete obscurity, all in preparation for his three-year ministry. So, yes, there is a time for taking care of certain needs before entering into service for others, but the way of Christ led to the cross.

The center of all of Christianity rests in the fact that Jesus gave his life so I could live (2 Corinthians 5:15). Jesus summed it up best when he said, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). As followers of Christ, we are called to take up our cross and follow him (Matthew 16:24).

This is contrary to everything the world tells us to do, and it's the opposite message the self-care movement tries to sell. But self-denial for the sake of serving others is the heart of every Christ follower. Not that we need to live a strict ascetic life without joy or pleasure of any kind, but that serving others brings a deep satisfaction that can't be found any other way.

Despite these four underlying messages within the self-care movement, the whole notion of self-care has taken root in our culture, so it's clearly striking a chord with women and meeting a certain felt need. I suspect it's because we live in a world that has accepted overwork and overcommitment as normal.

What Overextension Really Means

Between the constant need to be "on" and the breakneck pace of everyday life, most people are overextended in just about every area of their lives. And our culture offers self-care as the remedy we need.

After four-and-a-half decades of living, I have learned this to be true: If I am desperate for some basic self-care practices, the reason is probably that I have neglected my human limits for too long. I have pushed myself beyond reason. I have stayed up too late for too many nights in a row. I have taken on too much, saying yes to more than I should. I have run myself ragged, until I'm barely holding it together.

When I'm spending myself in these unhealthy ways, there's usually an idol lurking in my heart.

It could be the idol of productivity, in which my sense of purpose is tied to my work. Or it could be the idol of being needed, in which my sense of worth is tied to my relationships. Or it could be the idol of being admired, in which my sense of self is tied to my reputation. Or it could be something else.

Nowadays, when I recognize that I'm pushing myself too hard, I see it as a refusal to acknowledge my God-designed limits as a human.

As fallen, sinful creatures, we continuously test our limits. Spend a few moments observing a toddler with a generous array of toys at his disposal, and what does the child prefer to investigate? Not the toys, but the limits. Inevitably, the toddler seeks to do what is beyond the bounds of his world. He tries to touch what he's been told not to touch. He tries to eat what he's been told not to eat.

We might smile at the cuteness of such toddler-like attempts, but we're not that much different; we just have more sophisticated ways of pushing our limits. We spend a little more on that outfit than we should. We add a little more to our plate than we need. We take in a little more caffeine to work even longer.

I know I've been guilty of all of the above, but when we try to do more than what is humanly possible — which is another way of trying to be like God — we need to repent and acknowledge that we are not like God (Isaiah 30:15). We have limits, and we accept them.

God alone is limitless. In his omnipotence, he is all-powerful, requiring no sleep. In his omniscience, he is all-knowing, requiring no striving. He is infinite, immeasurable, and indescribable. He is God and I am not. This means I need to honor my human limits by embracing my need for rest, my need for balanced nutrition, my need for healthy relationships, and ultimately, my need for God.

I know what it's like to feel overextended, and I know what I need to do to take better care of myself. I need to take vitamins and eat more leafy greens. I need to follow-up with my medical appointments. I need to stick to a consistent bedtime as much as possible. I need to reduce, maybe even eliminate, my intake of caffeine. I need quiet respites periodically throughout the week, and daily when possible.

But I don't see these things as self-care as much as I see them as humble stewardship, recognizing my limits and embracing them.

When we are poor stewards of our health, we will eventually burn out and have little left to give. And our reason for being here is to love and serve and give our lives away, but we can't do that if we're constantly trying to do everything in our own power, trying to fill up with our own finite means of restoration.

Where We Go from Here

Most self-care advice can be reduced to simple practices, such as lighting a candle, sipping hot cocoa, taking a bath, reading a book, seeing a friend, taking an exercise class, hiring a babysitter, getting a massage, going out to eat, buying flowers, taking a walk, getting a haircut, or taking a nap.

There's nothing wrong, of course, with any of these things. I enjoy soaking in a hot bath as much as the next girl, and I always look forward to a few quiet moments with a steaming cup of chamomile tea. But I see these things as gifts to be enjoyed more than practices to be followed.

What are your thoughts? Self-care? Soul-care? Humble stewardship?

NOTES:

*Reissig, Courtney. "Self-Care or Soul-Care? Yes." The Gospel Coalition. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/self-care-soul-care/>

**This article is an excerpt from a chapter in *Sensitive and Strong: A Guide for Highly Sensitive Persons and Those Who Love Them*, pp.95-104.