

Autistic Self-Care Toolkit

What is Self-Care?

Self-care refers to intentional actions you take to support your physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being.

Practicing self-care is essential for preventing burnout, reducing stress, and promoting overall health. It is important to regularly take time for yourself to recharge and engage in activities that bring you joy and relaxation.



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Self-Care Myths

Self-care is often misunderstood. Let's break down some common myths and replace them with truths that support a more inclusive, realistic, and neurodivergent-affirming view.

Myth

Truth

Self-care is selfish

You're not being selfish by meeting your needs. Caring for yourself sets a foundation that lets you accomplish everything else in your life.

Self-care looks the same for everyone

Self-care is personal. Especially as an autistic person, your self-care will probably look a little bit different from other people's. Your care will match your needs.

Self-care is expensive or time-consuming

Self-care can be as big or as small as you need it to be. You can start with small options like drinking more water or spending time with a loved one. Some elements of self-care can be expensive, but that isn't a requirement.

Self-care is girly, frilly, or just for women

Popular portrayals of self-care can lean towards the feminine, but anything that supports your well-being is self-care. Self-care has no gender.

Self-care is just about relaxing

It can be restful, but it might also mean doing hard things—like advocating for yourself or finishing a tough task.

Self-care is only about mental health

It supports your whole self: physical, emotional, sensory, social, and more.

Anything that soothes you is self-care

Some things that self-soothe will cause you harm in the long run. Strong self-care includes things that are sustainable, not just things that feel good right now.

You have to earn self-care

All human beings deserve care. It is necessary for us to survive. You don't have to do anything extra to be worthy of care.

Self-care is something you do alone

Asking for help, connecting with trusted people, or being in community is self-care. Sometimes strong self-care is knowing when you need support from someone else.

Types of Self-Care

Self-care encompasses a lot of different things. It's not as simple as just things that help you relax. It's all the things that help you feel like your life is fulfilling and you are taken care of.

Here are a few types of self care:

Physical



What it is:

Supporting the health and comfort of your body. This includes rest, movement, sensory regulation, nutrition, and hygiene. For autistic people, it also often involves attending to sensory needs like pressure, temperature, or proprioceptive input.

Why it matters:

When your body feels regulated and supported, it's easier to think clearly, feel emotions more calmly, and navigate your day. Physical overwhelm can lead to shutdowns, meltdowns, or burnout.

Examples:

- Lying under a weighted blanket
- Using a body sock or compression vest
- Wearing soft clothes or noise-canceling headphones
- Eating foods that feel safe and manageable
- Gentle stretching, rocking, or jumping on a trampoline
- Staying hydrated
- Taking naps or resting in a dark, quiet space

Helpful Resources

- What Helps My Body Feel Okay?
- Body Emergency Plan

Emotional



What it is:

Tending to your feelings and supporting emotional regulation. It can include methods to adjust or soothe your emotions as well as space where you can freely feel emotions.

Why it matters:

Autistic people often experience strong emotions, alexithymia (difficulty identifying feelings), or emotional shutdowns. Emotional self-care can help prevent overwhelm and reduce the intensity of emotional cycles.

Examples:

- Stimming to express or soothe emotions
- Writing in a journal or using an emotion wheel
- Spending time with an emotional support animal
- Crying in a safe space
- Using a playlist that matches or shifts your mood
- Talking with a therapist or support person

Reflection Question

- What feelings do I find hard to notice or accept?

Tip: Consider creating an “emotional go-bag” with sensory items, visuals, or scripts that help during big emotions.

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Here are a few types of self care:

Mental



What it is:

Giving your mind the support it needs to stay focused and engaged. It's about creating clarity and protecting your cognitive energy.

Why it matters:

Many autistic people deal with executive dysfunction, brain fog, or hyperfocus. Mental self-care helps avoid burnout, decision fatigue, and mental spiraling.

Examples:

- Deep-diving into a special interest (for joy or rest)
- Accepting and using accommodations, like checklists or timers
- Taking breaks from news and social media
- Having meaningful conversations about topics that interest you
- Learning about executive function and finding strategies that support yours

Helpful Resource

- My Brain Feels Best When...

Tip: It's okay to say no to things that feel mentally overwhelming—even if they seem “small” to others.

Social



What it is:

Finding connection that feels nourishing and safe, and that fit your neurotype. Not everyone wants or needs the same amount or style of socialization, so find what feels right to you.

Why it matters:

Autistic people often experience social anxiety, masking fatigue, or sensory overload in social settings. Social self-care honors your version of connection, even if it's different from typical norms.

Examples:

- Parallel play (doing something next to someone without talking)
- Texting or voice notes instead of phone calls
- Being part of a group chat or online community
- Scheduling alone time after social events
- Having support scripts or communication cards
- Attending neurodivergent-affirming spaces

Helpful Resource

- What kinds of connection feel good to me?

Tip: You're allowed to prioritize yourself in social situations—even if others don't understand.

Boundaries and Delegating

An essential element of self-care is learning to set boundaries and delegate tasks when you need to. Boundaries help protect your energy, time, and well-being. When you're doing too much, self-care becomes much harder — and you risk burnout.

Check out the templates for worksheets to help you brainstorm your own opportunities to set boundaries and delegate.

What Are Boundaries?

Boundaries are limits you set for yourself about what you can and can't do — and how you want others to treat you.

Why Boundaries Matter:

- They protect your energy so you don't get overwhelmed.
- They help others understand what you need.
- They make it easier to care for yourself without guilt.

For autistic people, boundaries are especially important because sensory, social, and emotional overload can happen quickly — and saying no early can prevent shutdowns or burnout.

How to Set a Boundary

Setting a boundary might feel uncomfortable at first, but it's a skill you can practice. Here are the steps:

1. Determine what is happening that is not acceptable to you.
What behavior needs to stop and how does it make you feel?
Tell the person what they are doing and how it impacts you.
 - a. Example: When you call me unexpectedly it makes me anxious.
2. What would you like to happen instead?
 - a. Example: I would prefer it if you can text before you call.
3. What will happen if they don't respect this boundary?
 - a. Example: If you continue to call me unexpectedly, I will not answer.
4. Follow up if needed — It's okay to remind people of your limits.

Remember, you don't need to over explain or justify.

Use or adapt these phrases to say what you need:

- ✓ "I can't stay longer, but thanks for inviting me."
- ✓ "I'm not able to take that on right now."
- ✓ "I need some quiet time and will check in later."
- ✓ "I'm happy to help, but I can only do __ this week."
- ✓ "That doesn't work for me. Can we try something else?"

Delegation

Sometimes you can't (or don't need to) do everything yourself — and that's okay. Delegating is a way to share tasks with others so you can save your energy for what really matters or what only you can do.

How Do I Know What to Delegate?

Look for:

- Tasks that are not your responsibility.
- Tasks that someone else is equally good at or better at.
- Tasks that drain you but don't really need your specific input.
- Tasks you keep putting off because you're overwhelmed.

Examples:

- Asking a roommate to handle the dishes when you're burned out.
- Letting a coworker lead part of a project you can't finish right now.
- Asking a family member to make a phone call that's stressful for you.
- Hiring someone (if you're able) for errands or cleaning.

How Do I Find Someone to Delegate To?

- Start with people who already share the task (like family or teammates).
- If it's at work or school, ask your boss, teacher, or project group who can help.
- If it's personal, think about friends, support staff, or even paid help if possible.

If you're not sure who, ask: "Who would be the right person to help with this?" — it's okay to start by just asking that question.

How Do I Ask Them?

Be direct, specific, and kind — most people appreciate clear instructions!

- Be specific about what needs to happen and when.
- Explain why you're asking (optional — you don't have to over-explain).
- Thank them for helping.

Tips for Delegating:

- ★ Start small — even delegating one step can help.
- ★ People can always say no — and that's okay!
- ★ The clearer you are, the easier it is for them to say yes.

Example Phrases for Delegating:

- "Would you be able to take care of ___ for me today? I'm overwhelmed."
- "Could you help me by ___? I need a break from it."
- "I'm not able to ___ right now. Can you handle it this time?"
- "This isn't my area of strength — would you mind taking over?"

Adapting Over Time

Self-care isn't a one-time plan—it's an ongoing practice. What helps you today might feel different tomorrow, and that's okay. Life circumstances, energy levels, and even your understanding of yourself will shift over time. This page is here to help you check in with yourself regularly and adjust your self-care to meet your needs in real time.

Why Does Your Self Care Need to Adapt?

It's highly unlikely that you'll find the perfect self-care routine the first time you try. You'll find that some strategies don't work the way you expected, some need fine-tuning, or even that you have a hard time working some strategies into your life. Adaptation is about figuring out what self-care strategies you'll actually do and which ones are helpful for **you**. It takes experimentation: trial and error.

You'll also need to adapt over time. Your needs will change as you grow, face new challenges, or discover what works best for you. Your life will change, so your self-care plan needs to change with it.

- That doesn't mean you "failed" at self-care—it means you're paying attention and taking care of yourself in the moment.
- Self-care is flexible because you are allowed to change.

Check in Strategies

It can be helpful to set a regular schedule to pause and reflect on your self-care. This will help keep self-care at the top of your priority list, and let you see patterns as they develop. You could choose weekly, monthly, or any other time frame that works for you. Here are some suggestions for how to approach reflection.

- Keep a list of the strategies you're using so that you can make notes about each one.
 - You can always make small adjustments to a strategy you're trying instead of leaving it behind entirely. Write these down too!
 - Notice when strategies aren't fitting into your life.
 - Are there any you wanted to use but didn't? What stopped you? Are there adjustments that would make them work better for you?
- Check in on each of the types of self-care (physical, emotional, mental, and social). Notice which areas of your life feel like they could use more support.
- Think about what's happening in your life that could be adding additional stressors or challenges. This can help you decide if you need to prioritize your self-care in a bigger way.
- Try out these reflection questions:
 - What's working? What's not?
 - What do I want more of? Less of?
 - Have my sensory, emotional, mental, or social needs changed?
 - Do I feel like my self-care is doing enough to support me?
 - Who has been helpful during this time period?

Be kind to yourself if your answers surprise you—there's no wrong way to adjust.



Self-Care Templates

These pages are here to help you reflect, plan, and practice self-care in a way that works for you. You don't have to fill everything out all at once — start where you are, and adjust as your needs change. Use these templates as a starting point. You can print them, save them digitally, or copy them into a notebook or app.

Emotion Regulation Menu

When you feel a strong emotion, it can help to have some ready-to-go ideas for what might help. Use this page to map out your personal plan. The table has some ideas of emotions you may want to plan for, plus spaces to add your own.

When I feel...	I can try...
Overwhelmed	
Anxious	
Sad	
Angry	

Examples

Overwhelmed → Find quiet space & breathe deeply

Anxious → Fidget & listen to calming playlist

Sad → Text a friend or cuddle a pet

Self Care Planning Page

Use this page to brainstorm what self-care activities you're going to incorporate and how often/when you'll do them. You can do it multiple times as your plans change.

Plan date:

Brainstorm

Start by brainstorming some self-care activities you want to try in each of the four areas. Write those down here.

Physical



Emotional



Mental



Social



Self Care Planning Page

Organize

Now that you've come up with some ideas, pick 1-2 in each area. On this page, you'll decide when you want to use each strategy. One useful way to organize your planning is on a week by week basis. You can use the table below to add strategies to different days, and even print this table to remind yourself to use your strategies.

	Task	Task	Task
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			
Daily			
Monthly			

Another option is to write down each strategy you want to use, and then make a note of when you'll use it, like the table below.

Strategy				
When?				

For a larger template to plan your self care, check out [AuSM's Self Care Toolkit](#).

Self Care Check In Journal Page

Use this page to reflect on your self-care at regular intervals. You can use this space to notice patterns, celebrate what's working, and gently adjust what isn't.

Check In Date:

Prompts

What felt good this week?

What was hard?

What strategies did I want to use this week, but didn't? Can I adjust them?

How do I feel in each area of self care?

Physical:

Mental:

Emotional:

Social:

What's one small thing I want to try next?

Tip:

If you feel stuck, look back at your earlier self-care templates for ideas, or try one small, new thing instead of changing everything at once.

Boundaries and Limits

When Should I Use This Page?

If you're feeling:

- Overbooked or overcommitted
- Like you "should" say yes but don't want to
- Overwhelmed in a situation but unsure how to leave
- Resentful because others keep asking more of you

...then use this page to plan and practice your boundaries.

Prompts

Answer these questions to help determine what boundaries you need and where you need to delegate.



What tasks can I delegate to someone else?

(Examples: asking a roommate to do the dishes, hiring help for a project, letting a family member make a phone call.)



What tasks can I adjust to make easier?

(Examples: splitting a chore into smaller steps, doing it at a quieter time, asking for extra time to finish.)



What can I say no to?

(Examples: extra work shifts, an event that feels too crowded, another volunteer commitment.)



What's one boundary I want to practice this week?

My Brain Feels Best When...

Your mind has its own rhythms, preferences, and limits — and that's okay. This worksheet helps you notice when your brain feels clearest, calmest, and most focused, and what supports or drains it. When you understand how your brain works, it's easier to plan your day, ask for accommodations, and be kind to yourself when things feel hard. Reflect on the questions below to help determine the times you may need more support.

What time of day is my thinking the clearest? (ex: "Late at night when it's quiet" or "Mornings after breakfast")

What helps my brain feel calm vs. scattered? (ex: "Calm → having a written plan, quiet space" / "Scattered → too much noise, interruptions")

What tasks or activities recharge me? What drains me?
(ex: "Recharge → reading about my special interest" / "Drain → too many meetings in a row")

What tools, supports, or accommodations help me focus? (ex: "Noise-canceling headphones, to-do lists")

What Kind of Connection Feels Best to Me

Connection can look very different from person to person — and that's okay. You don't have to connect the way others expect you to. This worksheet helps you figure out what kinds of social interactions feel safe, comfortable, and supportive for you. Use the prompts below to reflect on who you feel good around, how you like to communicate, what boundaries help protect your energy, and what kind of support you need in social situations. Knowing your preferences can make it easier to advocate for yourself and create relationships that feel nourishing instead of draining.

Who do I feel safest with? (ex: "Friends who let me be quiet, my sibling, my online support group")

What boundaries help me protect my energy in social settings? (ex: "Leaving early, saying no to more than one plan a day")

What kind of support do I need in social settings? (ex: "Someone to help me leave when I'm overwhelmed, knowing where the quiet room is, bringing sensory tools with me")

How do I like to communicate? How do I not like to communicate? (ex: "Like → texting, voice notes, or parallel play" / "Not like → phone calls or crowded parties")

Accommodations

Everyone deserves support. Accommodations and supports are changes to your environment, tasks, or expectations that help you participate, succeed, and feel safe — without having to push yourself beyond what's sustainable. You don't need to "earn" accommodations or prove you deserve them. This page helps you identify what supports work for you in different situations, and think about how you can ask for them when you need them.

What Are Accommodations?

- Accommodations can include:
- Adjusting the environment (like quiet spaces, lighting, seating)
- Changing how a task is done (like written instead of verbal instructions)
- Giving yourself more time or fewer steps
- Asking others to help with something
- Using tools or devices that make things easier

These can happen at work, at school, at home, or in social settings — anywhere you need them. Check out the [Job Accommodation Network](#) for more ideas.

Reflection Prompts

In Work or School Settings

What helps me do my best at work/school?

(ex: written instructions, flexible deadlines, quiet workspace, noise-canceling headphones)

What gets in the way when I'm trying to complete tasks?

What does the environment look like when I am most productive? What times of day am I most productive?

At Home

What helps me feel safe and comfortable at home?

(ex: predictable routines, labeled storage, help with chores, sensory-friendly spaces)

What do I need extra help with?

During Stress or Overload

What helps me recover when I'm overwhelmed or shut down?

(ex: time alone, weighted blanket, no questions for 30 minutes, clear checklists)

Asking for Accommodations

How Can I Ask for These Supports?

Using the brainstorm from the previous page, write down each accommodation you might want. Next to each one, write the name of who you would ask to provide that accommodation. Some of them you may simply be able to provide yourself (for example having a fidget to stay calm). You can also brainstorm what you'll say so that you feel prepared. Remember: you don't have to disclose a diagnosis to ask for an accommodation. You can describe the challenge you're having, then propose the accommodation as a way to solve the problem.

In some cases you may want to disclose (for example if you need formal accommodations in work or school).

Accommodation

Who Can I Ask?

Script

What might I say?

Here are some example scripts you can adapt:

- ✓ "I work better when I can take a 5-minute break every hour. Can we plan for that?"
- ✓ "I'd like to wear my headphones during meetings to focus. Is that okay?"
- ✓ "I need written instructions because I have trouble remembering spoken directions."

What Helps My Body Feel Ok?

Your body has its own ways of telling you what it needs — but sometimes it can be hard to notice or name those needs. This worksheet helps you explore what makes your body feel safe, comfortable, and regulated throughout the day.

For autistic people, this often includes paying attention to sensory needs like light, sound, movement, and touch. You deserve to feel okay in your body — this page can help you figure out what helps.

How to Use This Page

Write down specific actions, tools, or changes that make your body feel better at different times of day or in different situations. If you're not sure yet, that's okay — you can start by noticing what feels good and adding to this page over time.

Morning

What helps me wake up and feel ready for the day? (ex: sunlight, stretching, eating a familiar breakfast, quiet time)

Midday

What helps me stay grounded and calm while I'm active or working? (ex: wearing soft clothes, taking a movement break, drinking water, fidgeting)

Evening

What helps me wind down and rest at the end of the day? (ex: weighted blanket, dim lights, bath or shower, relaxing music)

Other Situations

What helps when I feel...

Overwhelmed? (ex: leaving a noisy room, deep pressure, lying down)

Anxious? (ex: rocking, breathing exercises, holding a comfort object)

Shutdown? (ex: quiet and dark space, no questions, gentle movement)

Body Emergency Plan

Sometimes your body and brain get overwhelmed, and it feels hard to think clearly in the moment. That's why it helps to make a plan ahead of time — so you know exactly what to do, what helps, and who to ask for support when you're having a hard time.

Use this worksheet to write down what you need during a “body emergency” — like a meltdown, shutdown, sensory overload, or panic.

How to Use This Page

Fill this out when you're feeling calm. Keep it somewhere easy to find — on your phone, printed in your bag, or posted in your room — so you can use it or show it to someone when you need help.

How I Know I'm Having a Body Emergency:

Signs my body gives me: (ex: heart racing, can't speak, crying, hands shaking)

What I feel (ex: overwhelmed, panicked, frozen)

What I Need Right Away: (ex: leave the room, sit down, deep pressure, silence, water)

Where I Can Go: (ex: my room, the car, a quiet corner, outside)

Tools or Comfort Items That Help: (ex: noise-canceling headphones, weighted blanket, fidget, calming playlist)

Who Can Help Me: (ex: friend, sibling, teacher, coworker)

What They Can Do To Help: (ex: sit quietly with me, remind me to breathe, stop asking questions, help me leave)

Other Resources

Check out these resources for more self-care ideas

AuSM Resources

- [Your Self-Care Toolkit](#)
- [Sensory Strategies for Emotion Regulation](#)
- [Things That Help With Burnout](#)
- [Sensory Schedule](#)
- [Glossary](#)

Other Resources

- [Sensory Preference Checklist](#)
- [Sensory Strategies for Teens and Adults](#)
- [Emotional Regulation Activities](#)
- [45 Regulation Activities to Boost Well-Being](#)
- [Self-Care Checklist](#)

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