



BLOG

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SELF-CARE: WHAT WOULD YOU DO FOR YOU?



by Carolyn Spring

Twice at the weekend on training days I was asked how I 'self-care'. It comes up a lot, which shows what a big issue it is for people.

I could come up with a list of 'self-care activities', things that work for me, but I think we need to take a step back and just acknowledge first how hard self-care is.

And of course it is. It is entirely counter-intuitive. When we were abused, we made sense of the malevolent actions of others towards us by assuming that we're getting just what we deserve. I am bad – that is why I am being treated badly. The child's mind can't see outside itself to consider an alternative.

To me as an abused child it is obvious that I am bad. I am being hurt because I am bad. And I am bad because I hurt. It's a never-ending cycle of self-evident obviousness.

Then in adulthood, there's that moment – singular and dramatic for some, a series of steps down a moving elevator for others – where we decide we want to be free of this badness. We may have tried drowning it out with food or drugs or booze or sex or work or stuff or people, but it's refused to budge. And light dawns on us, and we grasp it for the first time that we need some major healing work to take place, not just sign up for another diet or course or church or job or hobby or relationship or child. There's something on the inside of us that needs fixing.

I reached that moment and eventually found help in the form of therapy. For the first time I began to see my unseen beliefs like crystals forming around me. It had never occurred to me before that I believed that I was bad; I just was. Was there even an alternative? It had never occurred to me before that I believed



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that I was unloveable; I just was. I didn't know that it was a *belief*. I thought it was just *true*. It hadn't occurred to me that I might believe things that weren't true. I assumed truth was what I believed it to be.

So here then are my beliefs, made conscious and given substance and form around me, and I wonder for the first time: *am I really bad?* Or is it possible that I'm not?

And so went the merry-go-round for a good few years. I can't *not* be bad, because I've always been bad, and that's why I was abused. Oh, hang on, maybe I'm *not* bad, and maybe it was wrong that I was abused – but wait a minute, what would that mean? Who abused me? And does that make *them* bad? No, no, stop right there, they can't be bad, because everyone has always said that they're good (including them), and they've always said that I'm bad, so I must be bad ...

It's a painful place to be stuck in this kind of thinking, where you desperately want to change what you think but you just keep resetting to default.

And for a long time, I argued against self-care because it was wrong, counter-intuitive, *weird*. Why would you care for something that is *bad*?! No, no, it's not right. Self-care is out. I can make myself good by caring for others. Self-care just shows I'm selfish, right?

And so I'd go around the merry-go-round on that one too.

Until ... Have you ever heard that Einstein quote? The one that says, 'If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got'? Some people think it was Henry Ford that said it, or Mark Twain, or Big Bird. Whoever said it, they were right. I kept on getting the same results from my lack of self-care, which reinforced my badness, which justified my lack of self-care.

I eventually realised that the only people winning from that equation were the people who abused me.

And by this point I couldn't take the pain any more – the pain of having been abused. You surface that stuff, and you don't remember it one event at a time, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. You relive how it felt. And it hurt. Badly. So badly that most of the time, during that phase of therapy and life, I wanted to kill myself.

So if you always do what you've always done ... I had been waiting for something magical to happen. I'd been waiting for something outside of myself to force some different kind of truth into my head, to take the pain of abuse – including self-abuse – away. And this 'something else' (whoever or whatever it was) was failing to play ball.



Dammit.

I can't remember when it was that I decided to change. No doubt I went through various rotations of the merry-go-round, trying *one more time* to see if self-hate would make me feel any better. But eventually I just started doing the 'different thing' to get the different result. I started to self-care.

It wasn't hot baths and candles and foot massages and nail salons ... Not really me, those things. It was just a small step forwards into something that had been a resource during childhood. It was something that most people wouldn't even think of as 'self-care'.

But it had been a resource for me as a child. Because whatever was happening, however awful the abuse, however intolerable it was to be alive and aware and to think and to feel, there was always an escape. I was 5, 6, 7, 8 years old. And off I'd go onto the moor at the back of our houses, with my best mates the twins, and two jumpers for a goal and away we went. Playing for hours. Sometimes just the three of us, sometimes with others. We could be anyone. I was Bryan Robson, Captain Marvel, who always came back from injury and adversity, always gave his all, always wore his heart on his sleeve. It was magical. Football was my escape and my salvation.

I had to stop playing when I was 21, at University, when I suffered a back injury,

but I still loved watching. And yet, through those breakdown years, with little or no money, Sky Sports didn't make it anywhere near our list of household priorities.

Until eventually I was asked the question about self-care in a way that I could understand it: 'What would you do for you, if you could do anything?' And out it came in a flash, all this pent-up longing: 'I'd have Sky Sports so I could watch Man United.'

It sounds daft. It doesn't sound like a momentous step forwards in my healing. But, looking back, it was, because for the first time I was able to articulate what I really wanted, what I wanted for *me* - not for anyone else. And it was something that had always been a resource for me, but just a neglected one.

I still had to get over the doubts: 'I'm being selfish', 'I don't deserve this', 'It costs too much', 'I don't have the time'. But it was the first step towards recognising the 'I' that exists at the core of me, who that person is, what that person wants and needs, and how to resource her.

Who'd have thought that watching football would be the start of a great journey of recovery? Who'd have thought that self-care could be so simple, so obvious?

What does self-care mean to you? And what would you do for you, if you could do anything? •

