



Take care of yourself!

A practical, wholistic spirituality

When I was a young adult, one of my mentors gave me this advice, "You have to take care of yourself because no one else can."

"Sure, sure," I told myself, "but I'm too busy to worry about that now. I'll deal with it later." Years went by, and I immersed myself in family and ministry. Self-care became "rewards," a meal out after a long week or a short vacation after a big event was finished. I became overworked, overweight, and spiritually empty, and I accepted this state as the price to pay for doing ministry.

Eventually I realized that something had to change. I came to more fully appreciate my mentor's advice from decades earlier. I noticed that when I don't make caring for myself as important as caring for others, my ability to give of myself suffers. The center from which I serve others isn't enthusiastic and joyful but grudging and disheartened. In the Great Commandment, Jesus tells us to love God and to love others as we love ourselves. He makes it pretty clear that caring for others and caring for self is not an either-or commitment; it must be a both-and commitment.

I now appreciate that my spirituality must address both self-care and care for others. The challenge for many of us in church ministry is that we're pretty good at caring for others but not so good at caring for ourselves. And I suspect that even when we do make attempts at self-care, our theological foundation is often not the strongest. That is, we don't care for ourselves in a wholistic way. Rather, we think about it dualistically, distinguishing care for our bodies from care for our souls. Spoiler alert, they are not two distinct things!



Self-care spirituality: A wholistic approach

This is what I've discovered: My self-care (or love of self) works best when I think about caring for my body, mind, and spirit as one integrated project. Although this is not a terribly new insight, it is one I rarely see well implemented. Many popular secular self-care programs address our physical dimension, treating diet and encouraging regular exercise. But these programs entirely ignore or minimally address our spiritual dimension. Many religious programs address the spiritual dimension, encouraging prayer and meditation practices, but they ignore or minimally address the physical dimension. Could this be why we so often struggle with maintaining both dimensions in our busy lives?

Here's why I believe this is a problem. Our faith teaches us to view ourselves wholistically. The Catechism tells us that God created us as "a being at once corporeal and spiritual" (check out nos. 362-365). Body and spirit cannot be separated in this life or the next. What directly affects our body will have an impact on our mind and spirit and vice versa. So, for example, prayer and meditation can and should positively impact our mental and physical health. A great deal of evidence, both scientific and faith-based, supports these connections.

What if our personal self-care takes this reality seriously? What if we make regular physical exercise just as important as regular prayer? What if we make an annual retreat just as important as a healthy diet? What if we make reading a stimulating book just as important as reading the Bible? Did you cringe at any of these suggestions? At one time I would have, either out of guilt or because I had them arranged in a hierarchy of importance in my head.

Or why even treat them as distinct activities? What if you used your spin class or daily walk as an opportunity for prayer and meditation? Or used part of your evening examen (prayerful reflection on your day) to reflect on how well you've treated your body during the day? Or listened to an audiobook while preparing and enjoying a healthy meal?

A practical method

How might this work? No one needs a new, complicated, and demanding spirituality program. I needed something that was simple and practical. And a straightforward approach popped into my head (I believe it was a Spirit-inspired moment). I could create a list of the core spiritual, mental, and physical self-care practices that I know make a difference for me and use them as a daily spirituality checklist.

Doing this has made a huge difference in my life. I have five practices on my list. None of them are novel or extraordinary. They are all things I've striven for in the past, but never in an integrated, intentional way. Together, these practices create a synergy that is powerful and spiritually energizing for me. Here are the practices, with brief explanations.



- 1. Exercise:** As little as 20 minutes of daily exercise can make a huge difference in our physical and spiritual health. It counteracts depression, helps us sleep better, enables us to lose or maintain weight, and just makes us feel good! Everyone needs to set a realistic goal for themselves; my goal is an hour six days a week, mixing strength training and aerobic activities. I often do this with friends, contributing to the next practice.
- 2. Personal Connection:** We are made for intimacy, but we live in a time when loneliness is dramatically on the rise, and not just for the young. Even spouses let days go by without really sharing what is in their hearts and minds with each other. My goal is at least one significant conversation with another person each day about something that's really on my heart and mind. And Facebook and texting don't count!
- 3. Prayer:** Yes, of course, prayer. But it must be a type of prayer that works for you. For me it is a combination of reading a daily reflection, silent meditation, gratitude awareness, and journaling. It is also meditating and praying while I'm running or lifting weights. It is surrendering myself to the will of God before I sleep and the first thing when I wake up. It is the connective tissue that integrates all my spiritual practices.
- 4. Healthy Eating:** Jesus said, "It is not what enters one's mouth that defiles that person" (Mt 15:11). But I wonder if he would have said that today—he didn't have the overabundance of highly processed and junk foods we face every day! There is so much information on the importance of a healthy diet that this may be the most obvious spiritual practice on my checklist. It is also one of the most difficult for many of us.
- 5. Adequate Sleep:** Some people seem to talk about lack of sleep like it is a badge of honor or a sign of commitment to their work. How silly! Health studies consistently tell us how important getting seven or eight hours of sleep each night is for our mental and physical health. Getting enough sleep is a spiritual necessity; if I don't get enough sleep, all these other practices become so much more difficult.

Here's what I've discovered. On days when I get in only one or two of these self-care practices, it typically isn't a great day. I'm just getting by without much energy or enthusiasm. When I achieve at least four in a day, I usually have a good day. And when I achieve all five, I have a great day. And by great, I don't just mean that I feel good about myself, I mean physically and spiritually I have energy, focus, and enthusiasm in my care for others.

I've also found that these practices reinforce one another. Exercising makes me want to make better eating choices. Making a personal connection almost always leads to prayer. And getting enough sleep makes achieving all of them easier. It is quite awesome to discover just how closely connected our body, mind, and spirit really are.



Getting started and keeping going

I've found that the COVID-19 pandemic has made wholistic self-care more challenging and all the more important. While some people have found that sheltering in place has allowed more time for self-care, many others have found that working from home (especially with children at home!) and having few if any social outlets have made them more isolated and, in some cases, more sedentary. This contributes to greater depression and even a sense of victimhood. Then throw into the mix the stresses on teachers and administrators—unknown schedules, new styles of teaching, more demands on our time—it is all too much! How can we cope and stay healthy?

The words of my mentor still ring true, "You have to take care of yourself because no one else can." As challenging as it might be, make a commitment to caring for yourself and doing it in a wholistic way. Identify the daily and weekly self-care practices you know will contribute to your spiritual health. Try making a simple checklist of those practices, and review it at the beginning and end of each day. Doing this the last few years has made a world of difference for me. And be gentle with yourself! Strive for progress and not perfection. I truly believe that God wants us to be the healthiest we can be, so let's all be supportive of one another in working toward that goal.

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My wholistic spirituality checklist

This checklist is one way to hold yourself accountable for tracking the practices that contribute to a healthy spirituality (see article, "Take Care of Yourself!").

For each core practice listed in the left-hand column, fill in the specific goals that work for you. For example, in the personal connection box you might put down, "A 10-minute conversation with a friend about something besides work or politics." Make each practice something you can achieve in a typical day.

You can also add other practices that are important to you, but do not go overboard. At the end of each day (or beginning of the next day), check off each practice you achieved that day. The point is not to beat yourself up, but to give yourself realistic goals to work on.

	sun	mon	tues	wed	thurs	fri	sat
exercise goal							
personal connection goal							
prayer goal							
healthy eating goal							
sleep goal							
