

Emotional Self-Care for Well-Being

Principles adapted from the work of psychologist Lindsay C. Gibson

1. Notice Your Emotional Signals, Develop an “Observer Mind”

Emotions are information from the brain and nervous system. Don't ignore them. Pause and pay attention. Especially when emotions run high, mentally step back and observe the situation.

Ask:

- What am I feeling right now?
- What might this feeling be telling me?
- What is actually happening right now?
- Am I reacting to the present moment or to past experiences?

Noticing emotions early can reduce the buildup of stress. This shift to “observer” can help the brain move from emotional reactivity toward more thoughtful decision-making.

2. Radically Accept Reality as It Is

Stress often increases when we expect people to behave differently than they realistically can. A helpful approach:

- Notice what someone **can realistically offer**
- Adjust expectations rather than repeatedly trying to change people or the world around us

This can reduce frustration and emotional exhaustion.

3. Support Your Nervous System with Healthy Practices

Emotional well-being is closely connected to brain and nervous system regulation. Helpful daily practices may include:

- Consistent sleep and regular routines
- Being intentional with the foods and beverages you consume
- Physical movement or exercise
- Time in nature
- Creative activities (art, music, writing)
- Quiet reflection, mindfulness, or prayer

Small daily practices often help more than occasional large changes.

4. Use Journaling to Interrupt Rumination

Writing can help break cycles of worry and repetitive thinking. Possible approaches:

- Write down worries or stressful thoughts to “get them out of your head”
- Describe what happened and how you felt
- Ask yourself: *What is within my control? What is not?*
- Write possible next steps or simply close the page and return to it later

Externalizing thoughts on paper can help the brain shift from repetitive rumination toward problem-solving or emotional processing.

5. Train Attention with Mindfulness

Mindfulness practices help strengthen the ability to notice thoughts and emotions without immediately reacting to them.

One structured program some people use is the [Waking Up](#) app, which provides guided meditation and mindfulness training.

Even a few minutes of daily practice may help improve emotional regulation and attention.

6. Choose Supportive Connections and Set Healthy Boundaries

Healthy relationships usually include mutual respect, emotional safety, and the ability to discuss disagreements calmly. Boundaries help protect emotional energy and reduce chronic stress activation in the nervous system.

Examples:

- Limit conversations that become hurtful or draining
- Take breaks when interactions feel overwhelming
- Say “no” when demands exceed your capacity

Boundaries are not punishment; they are a form of self-respect. If interactions consistently leave you feeling drained, consider reducing exposure when possible.

7. Connection, Meaning, and Perspective

Many people find emotional resilience through sources of meaning such as:

- Family and supportive friends
- Community involvement
- Religious or spiritual practice
- Reflection on personal values and purpose

These connections can help provide grounding and perspective during stressful times.

8. Distress Tolerance: Skills for Intense Emotions

Sometimes emotions become very strong and difficult to manage in the moment. Distress-tolerance skills focus on **helping the nervous system calm down quickly** so the brain can think more clearly.

These tools are meant for short-term emotional regulation during periods of high stress.

Breathing to Calm the Nervous System

Slow breathing can activate the body’s relaxation response.

Try this:

- Inhale slowly through the nose for ~4 seconds
- Exhale slowly for ~6 seconds
- Continue for 1–3 minutes

Longer exhalations often help signal the nervous system to settle.

Grounding Skills

Grounding techniques bring attention back to the present moment.

Examples:

- Name **5 things you see, 4 things you feel, 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell, 1 thing you taste**
- Put your feet firmly on the floor and notice physical sensations
- Hold something cold or splash cool water on your face

These techniques can interrupt cycles of panic, rumination, or emotional overwhelm.

TIPP Skills (Rapid Nervous System Regulation)

A set of skills commonly used in distress tolerance training:

T — Temperature change

Splash cold water on your face or hold a cool pack to your cheeks.

I — Intense exercise

Do brief bursts of physical movement (e.g., brisk walking, jumping jacks) for 30–60 seconds.

P — Paced breathing

Slow, controlled breathing with longer exhalations.

P — Progressive muscle relaxation

Tense and release muscle groups to reduce physical tension.

These methods can help the body shift out of a high-stress state so you can respond more thoughtfully rather than react impulsively.

9. Self-Care for Caregivers

Caring for others—such as young children, a spouse with health concerns, or other family members—can be deeply meaningful but also physically and emotionally demanding. When you are responsible for others, **taking care of yourself becomes even more important**, not less.

Helpful practices include:

- **Take regular breaks** when possible, even short ones
- **Ask for help** from family, friends, or community members
- **Consider practical supports** when needed (childcare, daycare, hired help, respite care)
- **Protect small amounts of personal time**

Even **10–15 minutes per day** spent on your own interests—reading, exercising, gardening, music, prayer, art, or another hobby—can help restore energy and perspective.

Caring for yourself is not selfish; it helps maintain the emotional and physical capacity needed to care for others.

Simple Daily Check-In

At the end of the day, ask yourself:

1. What emotions did I notice today?
2. Did I respect my limits?
3. What helped me feel calmer or more grounded?
4. What small step could I take tomorrow to care for myself?

If you would like additional guidance learning or practicing these skills, support can be found through a trusted therapist via [Psychology Today](#) therapist listings, a [Dialectical Behavior Therapy \(DBT\) skills workbook](#), educational videos on [YouTube](#), or the podcast [Therapists in the Wild](#).