

Self-Care and Healthy Living While Going Through Adversity

by Jamie Balderas for Your Life Helper



Purpose

Self-care and healthy living are great goals any time, and this course is applicable for everyone. Taking care of yourself and making healthy choices can be challenging even when life is sailing smoothly. It can be more difficult when going through adversity. Here are some things to keep in mind about self-care and healthy living while going through adversity:

- 1) Adversity can make you more tired, less motivated, and more stressed. It can lead to decreased kindness and patience with yourself. Emotions can affect how you feel mentally and physically, and you may not have the capacity you usually have.
- 2) Baby steps are substantial. You don't have to run a marathon or follow the perfect diet. Every little thing you do to take care of yourself counts.
- 3) Keep a healthy perspective. Remind yourself that self-care is extra hard right now, and celebrate the smallest of victories along your journey.
- 4) Find what inspires and motivates you. This can be so helpful when you just don't have the drive. It can help you focus and improve your mentality.

Making self-care and healthy living a priority will help you get more out of life and create a solid foundation on which to cope with adversity.

Modules

Module 1: You

Module 2: Food

Module 3: Hydration

Module 4: Sleep

Module 5: Exercise

Module 6: Connection

Module 7: Spirituality

Module 8: Enjoyment

Module 9: Success



Your Life Helper
a compassionate space to grow

Module 1: You



There are several components that make you, you, and each one is important. Your body, mind, and spirit are synergistic. Balance is best achieved when all elements of you are nurtured. Self-care is always important. It is even more crucial through adversity. Taking care of you will encourage processing, healing, and growth. This does not mean you have to rush things or that it is going to be easy. The journey and timeframe for everyone is different. Listen to and trust yourself. On the days you just cannot find the drive to nurture every element of you, choose one and rotate.

Body

Your body has several systems that help you function. Just like the body, mind, and spirit, the systems within your body are synergistic. Think of a car - if one system is not working, it can prevent the car from running. Your body is amazing. Many of your body's systems work unconsciously. There are some, however, that need your attention. For example, if you don't eat, you're going to run out of fuel. If you eat unhealthy foods, your body function is going to suffer. If you do not get enough rest or sleep, your body will eventually slow and shut down. You may not notice any immediate effects if you don't exercise or move your body; however, over time, your muscles, ligaments, joints, digestive system, and respiratory system will let you know they have noticed.

Mind

“Watch your thoughts, they become your words; watch your words, they become your actions; watch your actions, they become your habits; watch your habits, they become your character; watch your character, it becomes your destiny.” (Lao Tzu)

Everything starts in the mind, so it is important to pay attention to it.

The Mental Health Foundation (UK) recommends these 10 tips for improving mental health:

1. Talk about your feelings
2. Keep active
3. Eat well
4. Drink sensibly
5. Keep in touch
6. Ask for help
7. Take a break
8. Do something you're good at
9. Accept who you are
10. Care for others

Spirit

This is the part of you that connects with something bigger than you - meditation, religion, or nature - and understands and feels peace. Just like the body and mind, there are scientific benefits to nurturing your spiritual side. For example, a comprehensive study by Koenig (2012) found that there is a strong correlation between religion and spirituality and well-being. Specifically, those who practice spirituality or religion have improved mental health and handle health challenges better.

Module 1 Reflection

Why are you taking this course? Share your story and what has led you here. This will make your learning experience more meaningful. What are your overall goals?

[illegible]

Module 1 Application

This course is designed to complete one module per week. You may lengthen the time to fit your needs. Record how often you will complete a module and how much time you will spend reading and reflecting. Choose one of the 10 tips for improving mental health to practice before your next module.

[illegible]

Module 1 Journal: Record Your Experience

Record your application experiences from Module 1.

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Date _____

Module 2: Food



Many of us have heard the term, “you are what you eat.” As you know, this doesn’t mean if you eat a lot of chocolate, you’re going to turn into a Snickers®. Or if you eat a lot of apples, you’re going to turn into a Honeycrisp. However, the foods you eat contain nutrients and minerals that help your body function. If you eat a lot of foods that lack nutrients and minerals, your body is going to lack essential elements that help it thrive. Some people are really in tune with their bodies and recognize when eating certain foods makes them feel sluggish, tired, less energetic, or the opposite. This takes practice. If you have not noticed this before, **keep a food diary**, and pay attention to how you feel a couple hours later and the next day.

It is not unusual to be less hungry, hungrier, engage in mindless eating, or not feel like eating at all when dealing with adversity. **Listen to your body**, rather than emotions or stress, to determine if you should, what to, and how much to eat. Practicing body awareness through a food journal should help with this.

Eat natural foods. Processed foods are higher in sugar, salt, simple carbohydrates, and artificial ingredients, leaving you feeling unsatisfied and sluggish. Natural foods contain more nutrients and minerals, are more satisfying, and give you more energy.

Eat more fruits and vegetables. One cup of fruit and two cups of vegetables every day will decrease your risk of disease. Additionally, a study published in the American Journal of Public Health concluded that eating more fruits and veggies increases “happiness, life satisfaction, and well-being.”

Participate in meal planning. You can do this once a week, once a month, or whatever works best for you. Meal planning contributes to healthier eating habits and decreased stress. The thought of meal planning can be overwhelming when experiencing adversity. If this is the case, use an online or app meal planner. Many of these meal planners allow you to select dietary needs, restrictions, number of meals, ingredients, and number of people. They will create a menu and shopping list for you.

Pay attention to emotional connections to your eating patterns. The goal is to satisfy physical hunger, not emotional hunger. Here are some tips to help with emotional eating by Smith, et al. (2021):

- 1) Depressed or lonely - connect with someone you enjoy being around, connect with your pet, visit an animal shelter
- 2) Anxious - go for a walk or jog, turn on some music and dance, workout to a video
- 3) Exhausted - make yourself a warm drink, soak in a warm bath, take a nap/go to sleep
- 4) Bored - get out in nature, do something that requires handwork, learn something new, partake in an activity you enjoy

Module 2 Reflection

What are your tendencies with eating when you are going through adversity? Consider if you eat less or more or healthier or less nutritious foods? Do you go without eating? What emotional connections, if any, do you notice? Being aware of tendencies is the first step to setting productive goals.

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Module 2 Application

Choose one of the **bolded** items (listed below) in Module 2 to implement and practice before your next module.

- Keep a food diary
- Listen to your body
- Eat natural foods
- Eat more fruits and vegetables
- Participate in meal planning
- Pay attention to emotional connections to your eating patterns

[illegible]

Module 2 Journal: Record Your Experience

Record your application experiences from Module 2.

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Module 3: Hydration



Water is essential to the function of our bodies. In fact, Science in the News (Harvard University), asserts that a person can only live without water for three days. Our bodies consist of 55% to 75% water depending on our age and body composition. Cells contain 70% water, and our bodies are made up of trillions of cells that replace themselves naturally.

Water flushes toxins. Toxins cause disease, illness, and inflammation. Consider a fishbowl that hasn't been cleaned in months. The water becomes cloudy, and bacteria builds up on the sides. If the water isn't replaced, the fish will eventually die. If we don't drink water, our bodies don't work right. The benefits of flushing toxins from our bodies include a strengthened immune system, decreased inflammation and pain, increased energy, and weight loss and control.

Water maintains cell shape and function. According to the USGS, proper cell shape enables connections that are necessary in muscle contraction, communication, and digestion. Imagine a plump, juicy grape that pops when you bite into it and squirts juice everywhere. This is how hydrated your cells should be. When you don't drink enough water, your cells shrink and shrivel like raisins. Dehydrated, misshapen cells are unable to make the connections necessary for healthy body functioning. Proper cell shape and function improve movement and communication.

Water is the main component of our organs, tissues, and body fluids. Our brains are 70% water, blood is 83% water, and skin is 64% water (USGS, 2020). The brain is responsible for sending messages to all parts of our bodies allowing us to blink, think, drink, eat, move, talk, etc. Blood carries oxygen throughout our bodies, allowing us to breathe. Skin provides protection against elements to keep us safe. The benefits of keeping our organs, tissues, and body fluids properly hydrated are clearer thinking, improved breathing, and faster healing.

Here are five ways you can increase and maintain your water intake:

- 1) Change your perspective. Drink to live. Instead of drinking for enjoyment, drink because your life literally depends on it.
- 2) Change your habits. Drink eight ounces of water when you wake up, before every meal, before every snack, and in between.
- 3) Mark a gallon container with hydration times. For example, if you wake up at 6:00am, write 6:00am near the top of the gallon. Below that, mark 8:00am. Continue marking the jug until you reach the bottom and have times for every two hours. Drink the amount of water at the designated times.



- 4) Explore and determine your preferred temperature. Some people prefer their water at room temperature, and others prefer cold water. If you don't know your preference, try drinking water at different temperatures and determine which one you drink more often. If you prefer cold water, prepare ahead of time by putting it in the refrigerator, or making sure the ice tray is full the night before.

Drink more water when you're exercising, are not feeling well, or are experiencing hotter weather.

Module 3 Reflection

What are your usual hydration habits? Do you drink enough water on a regular basis? Do you notice when your body is hydrated or dehydrated? If so, what happens? Do you drink less or more water when you are experiencing adversity?

[illegible]

Module 3 Application

Choose one of the four ways to increase water intake in Module 3 (listed below) to implement and practice before your next scheduled module.

- Drink to live (choose water instead of other beverages)
- Change a habit (drink water first thing in the morning, 30 minutes before meals, etc.)
- Mark your water bottle or container with times to drink water
- Find your preferred water temperature and prepare ahead

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Date _____

Module 3 Journal: Record Your Experience

Record your application experiences from Module 3.

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Module 4: Sleep



Experience speaks for itself when it comes to sleep and rest. You can probably make an accurate and lengthy list of benefits associated with sufficient sleep and rest, and you have most likely felt the results of the opposite. Make your list here:

Benefits of sufficient sleep and rest:

Consequences of lack of sleep and rest:

According to John Hopkins Medicine, sleep improves brain function, and lack of sleep can cause migraines, depression, and memory issues. Sleep aids in handling stress and healing, and when insufficient, can weaken the immune system, cut years from a longer life, and increase exposure to diabetes, obesity, and heart issues (Cleveland Clinic, 2020).

Look at the lists you made. How many items you listed fell under the categories listed above?

Adversity and lack of sleep can contribute to depression, stress, migraines, and a compromised immune system. While you can't always control experiences through adversity, you can learn how to improve sleep quality and adjust, as needed, to lessen the impact. Following are a few tips for getting enough sleep (some ideas incorporated from Cleveland Clinic, 2020):

- Decrease stimulants (alcohol, caffeine, etc.)
- Climate control (not too hot or cold)
- Turn screens off early so your body can prepare for sleep
- If you need a nap, take a short one earlier in the day
- Keep paper and a pen by your bed to write recurring thoughts down
- Develop a consistent and relaxing bedtime routine - take a warm shower, drink a cup of tea, read a calming book, or listen to soothing music
- Participate in daily physical activity earlier in the day
- Invest in a comfortable sleeping area and blackout curtains
- Avoid drinking large amounts too close to bedtime

Module 4 Reflection

What are your sleeping habits? Think about your activities an hour before you went to bed over the last week. Are they preparing you for a restful sleep? Is there a difference in your quality of sleep when going through tough times? What do you notice?

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Module 4 Application

Choose one of the tips for getting enough sleep in Module 4 (listed below) and implement and practice it before your next scheduled module.

- Decrease stimulants
- Make your climate comfortable
- Turn screens off early
- Take short naps earlier in the day
- Keep a notebook by your bed for thoughts
- Create a consistent and relaxing bedtime routine
- Exercise and do it earlier in the day
- Form a comfortable sleeping space
- Keep liquids to a minimum before bedtime

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Module 4 Journal: Record Your Experience

Record your application experiences from Module 4.

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Module 5: Exercise



The benefits of exercise and movement are numerous. Studies of the relationship between physical exercise and mental health found a strong correlation between the two and noted that physical exercise increases energy, reduces stress, calms the mind and body, and triggers endorphins - the chemical that makes people happy (Chaoulloff, 1989). Have you ever watched people go into a health club and come out after their workout? If not, try it. You will usually find their frown turned upside down and an extra pep in their step. Other noted advantages of exercise and movement are a healthy heart, healthy lungs, increased flexibility, improved muscle strength, sense of accomplishment, and improved overall health.

This is all great news; however, when dealing with adversity, there are days when just getting out of bed is a challenge. If that is all you can do, celebrate your victory. On the other days, you may need a kickboxing class to release big emotions. There are a wide range of activities that can offer relief during different stages, feelings, and processes of grief and adversity. Several of these are listed in the next column.

Ideas for exercise and movement:

- Stretch
- Yoga
- Go for a walk - it doesn't have to be long or far
- Jog
- Cycle
- Hike
- Jump rope
- Toning exercises
- Calisthenics (jumping jacks, sit-ups, push-ups)
- Weightlift
- Canoe or kayak
- Paddle board
- Ski or snowshoe
- Skate
- Play a sport
- Rock-climb (natural or gym)
- Dance - turn on your favorite music and dance anywhere, take lessons, or take a dance exercise class
- Play frisbee
- Take a group exercise class
- Tai chi
- YouTube workout video
- Take the stairs instead of the elevator or escalator
- Yard work
- Clean
- Jump on a trampoline
- Horseback ride
- Take a water aerobics class
- Swim
- Participate in a mud run or challenge course
- Do a resistance band workout
- Navigate a ropes course
- Play hopscotch
- Go on a walking scavenger hunt
- Participate in a volksmarch

Module 5 Reflection

Think about the physical activities you participate in each day. Are they a part of your regular routine, or do you plan time for exercise and movement? Do you get enough exercise with your job or other duties? What do you notice about your physical, mental, and emotional state when you exercise and/or move your body?

[illegible]

Module 5 Application

Choose one way to incorporate exercise into your routine, and decide how often you will do it. Adapt this to your current physical capacities. Practice following the routine before your next scheduled module.

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Date _____

Module 5 Journal: Record Your Experience

Record your application experiences from Module 5.

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Date _____

Module 6: Connection



After physiological needs and safety, love and belonging are the third level on Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. Social connection is linked to several benefits including improved mentality, better health choices, lower rates of heart disease, diabetes, and cancer, decreased mental illness, and longer life. (Martino, et. al., 2015). The study suggests "prescribing" social connection because it is as important as medicine that can heal.



Dr. Levin suggests several ways to meet the need for social connection:

- Friendships
- Romantic attachments
- Family
- Social groups
- Community groups
- Churches and religious organizations

Consider each of these areas and which are most meaningful for you or bring you most joy. Seek more of these connections. Also consider which areas can use more attention and how to make that happen. Keep in mind that time and circumstances generate changes in our connections. It is important to recognize this, evaluate our current connections, and adjust as needed.

Following are suggestions for improving social connection:

- Connect in person
- Decrease screen time
- Get involved with any of the social connections listed by Dr. Levin
- Maintain balance
- Volunteer
- Spend time with a pet

It may also be helpful to reduce or limit contact with certain people, or time spent on relationships, that add to stress and adversity.

"Animals may be an especially important source of emotional support during conditions involving social isolation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic when contact with other people is limited, or during experiential conditions such as the loneliness so common in bereavement" (Cacciatore, et al., 2021).

There is simply no pill that can replace human connection. There is no pharmacy that can fill the need for compassionate interaction with others. There is no panacea. The answer to human suffering is both within us and between us.

Dr. Joanne Cacciatore

Module 6 Reflection

Think about the social connections you have had in the past, you have now, and you would like to have in the future. Are you happy with the connections you currently have? Consider some of the fulfilling social connections you have had or have now. How have they made, or how do they make, you feel?

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Module 6 Application

Choose one way to improve social connection from Module 6 (listed below) and implement and practice it before your next scheduled module.

- Connect in person
- Decrease screen time
- Get involved with any of the social connections listed by Dr. Levin
- Maintain balance
- Volunteer
- Spend time with a pet

[illegible]

Module 6 Journal: Record Your Experience

Record your application experiences from Module 6.

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Date _____

Module 7: Spirituality



According to Mental Health America, spirituality provides the following benefits (n.d.):

- Reassuring belief in a greater force
- Sense of purpose and meaning
- A focus on individual universal wisdom
- Understanding of suffering
- Connection with others
- Reminder of the good in the world

You may already be in touch with the spiritual side of you and have felt some of the benefits MHA mentions. When going through adversity, it is not unusual to withdraw from and lose touch with your spiritual resources.

For some, spirituality may be a completely new concept.

The following ideas can be helpful for anyone desiring to increase spirituality.

MHA suggests three spiritual paths that will help you with spiritual connection and correlated health: organized religion, meditation, and connection with your deepest self (n.d.).

Within these paths, MHA provides specific activities you can participate in:

Organized religion

- Join a religious institution
- Pray or focus on your notion of God
- Read religious texts
- Talk with others
- Volunteer

Meditation

- Deep breathing
- Mindfulness meditation
- Visualization
- Repeating a mantra

Connecting with your deepest self

- Focus on your goals, values, and beliefs
- Keep a journal
- Read inspiring stories or essays
- Be open to new experiences
- Look at what's good in yourself and others

**You are never alone
or helpless. The force
that guides the stars
guides you too.**

Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar

Module 7 Reflection

In what ways have you connected with the spiritual part of you? How does this impact your life? If you have not connected with the spiritual part of you, consider possible reasons why and if you are willing to explore this area.

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Module 7 Application

Choose one of the three paths suggested by Mental Health America (listed below) to explore before your next scheduled module.

- Organized religion
- Meditation
- Connecting with your deepest self

[illegible]

Date _____

Module 7 Journal: Record Your Experience

Record your application experiences from Module 7.

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Date _____

Module 8: Enjoyment



When going through grief and adversity, it can be challenging to do things you previously enjoyed.

Here are a few ideas you can try to start doing the things you enjoy again:

- Make a list of things you have enjoyed doing previously
- Make a list of things you have wanted to try
- Choose one thing from your lists to do on a regular basis - every day, every week, or whatever feels achievable

It's okay to not feel like laughing, and it's also okay to laugh. When you feel like laughing, let it flow freely. Laughing produces a multitude of emotional benefits.

Laughter puts things in perspective, makes challenges seem more surmountable, increases problem solving, allows one to take themselves less seriously, triggers creativity, engenders a sense of control or mastery over circumstances that initially seemed distressing threatening and all consuming (Haley, 2020).

In Psychology Today, Mendoza (2016) reports the following:

Humor is also important during the time of grieving. When we are in the depths of despair over the loss of our loved one, it is hard to think that we will ever smile again let alone laugh. One of the tasks of grieving is to learn to laugh again. A study from the University of Berkeley found that widows and widowers who could smile and laugh when remembering a loved one experienced less anxiety and depression at six, 12, and 24 months. Many successful bereavement groups incorporate laughter where members are encouraged to share humorous experiences associated with their loved one.

“Enjoy the little things,
for one day you may look
back and realize they
were the big things.”

Robert Brault

What are some things I have enjoyed in the past? What are some things I currently enjoy? What are some things I would enjoy in the future? What obstacles keep me from enjoyment? What are some things that bring me laughter?

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- 1) Choose one activity you enjoy participating in, and make a plan to do it, before your next scheduled module.
- 2) Participate in something that brings you laughter before your next scheduled module.

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Module 8 Journal: Record Your Experience

Record your application experiences from Module 8.

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Date _____

Module 9: Success



This Course

Success means different things to different people. Success may look one way today and another way tomorrow. You will have good days and not-so-good days. The goal is not to be perfect. The goal is to improve over time. You can always start over, pick up where you left off, and ask for help and support. Remember to acknowledge your efforts and celebrate each step on your journey.

Try some of these helpful tips inspired by Kendra Cherry (Very Well Mind, 2021) to stay focused:

- 1) Reward yourself with something that is motivating enough to get you started
- 2) Present a plan as a challenge
- 3) Visualize all the steps to achieve your plan, including the challenges and how you will overcome them
- 4) Take control of your plan - you can accept input and help from others; however, you will be more successful if you make the decisions
- 5) Focus on the journey, not the outcome - embrace all the steps along the path - the efforts, growth, and learning

Life

“Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved.”

Helen Keller

“Your hardest times often lead to the greatest moments of your life. Keep going.”

Roy Bennett

“In the middle of every difficulty lies opportunity.”

Albert Einstein



Module 9 Reflection

What does success mean to you? List or write about some things you feel successful at or have felt successful at in the past. Feel free to ask someone close to you for help with this list. (Remember to celebrate all the big and small victories along the way.)

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Module 9 Application

What have you learned from this course? What have you improved at? What would you still like to work on? How will you continue to grow as you move forward?

[illegible]

Date _____

Module 9 Journal: Record Your Experience

Record your application experiences from Module 9.

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Date _____

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