Support and encouragement

In these exercises we're going to look at how to anticipate trouble, how to support yourself when you recognise that you are escalated, and how to build sustainable, realistic practices to buffer you against life's adversities.

'Self-care' can feel like one more onerous task on a busy to-do list - but having detailed memories of pleasurable experiences buffers us against adverse experiences, and is instrumental in resilience, recovery and post-traumatic growth.

The ***gesture*** of caring for ourselves, treating ourselves sometimes, letting ourselves rest, is more important than what exactly we do, or how long we spend doing it.

The ***habit*** of noticing our emotional and physical states, and giving ourselves little nudges in the right direction, is more important than having a sustained and consistent practice of anything in particular.

Exercise 1: anticipate your pitfalls

1. What are the habits you easily slip into? (Another way to think of this might be, which parts of you are most prone to taking over?)

2. What are the situations that are most likely to trigger these habits?

3. What unrealistic expectations are likely to feel like seductive challenges to you?

4. Where in your life do you find yourself grappling with your lagging skills the most?

5. What factors - physical health, hormonal activity, tiredness, hunger, dehydration, etc - tend to make things more difficult?

6. What situations / people is it possible for you to **avoid** when your resources are low?

Exercise 2: name what's happening

1. Name the patterns you recognise. You might use the name of the part of you that is taking over, or how you refer to a particular internal conflict. If names don't work for you, see if a visual image comes up, or a metaphor (e.g. 'in the doghouse').

2. Establish a **safe word or phrase**. When you notice you are escalated, you might use this safe word as a prompt to pull back, take a breather, and see if you can get a wider perspective. You don't need to tell anyone else what it is - it only has to have meaning for you.

Exercise 3: menu of helpful activities

Think of all the activities that you know you enjoy / help you feel calm / nourish you.

Let go of any expectations about what these 'should' be.

Everything is allowed, as long as it works for you. Screen time, junk food, lie-ins, social media, daydreaming, etc.

If you are, or might be, neurodivergent, remember that stimming is one of the best tools you have for nervous system regulation.

(examples of stimming: looking at running water or flickering lights; chewing gum; twirling hair; rocking; pacing; walking barefoot; sitting on a wobble board; spinning around in a chair)

Challenge yourself - how many activities can you come up with in each of the following categories:

1. Activities that can be done wherever you are

2. Activities that can be done in 30 mins or less

3. Activities that can be done in under 5 mins

4. Activities that can be done (safely!) *while* you do something else

5. Activities that give you the feeling of *getting away with something* (helpful when you have some frustration / anger to discharge, or could do with feeling more autonomous)

6. Activities that give you energy

7. Activities that help you feel calm

8. Activities that help you feel ***connected*** (this doesn't need to involve deep conversations - could be reading fiction / spiritual practice / role playing games / doing your shopping in physical shops /chatting on internet forums - whatever works for you.)

Exercise 4: Menu of things you can let yourself cancel / quit

1. What social events can you bail on if needs be?

2. What volunteering commitments might you hand over?

3. What family commitments can you cut back on?

4. What other extra-curriculars might you allow yourself to let go of if they stress you out?

Exercise 5: Menu of expectations you can easily drop when resources are low

5. What can you let go of in your home environment?

6. What can you let go of in your emotional life?

7. What can you let go of in your close relationships?

8. What can you let go of in your expectations of your body/health/fitness?

9. What can you let go of in your work life?

Exercise 6: List of things to look forward to

1. In the next month

2. In the next 6 months

3. In the next year

If you can't think of any, plan some.

Exercise 7: The 'ta-da list'
(a to-do list in hindsight)

List anything in your work or personal life that you are proud of / that was hard to do / that you finally completed / that you are pleased to have finally *stopped* doing / that you are proud of yourself for persisting with

1. In the last week

2. In the last month

3. In the last 6 months

4. In the last year

Reflect for a bit on the qualities, skills, and character traits that you relied on to help you do these things.

Free Resources!

Insight timer - free guided meditations, talks, etc. Search by topic, presenter, etc. Huge variety, though takes a bit of a commitment to find the things that work for you.

The One You Feed is a great podcast of interviews with a huge variety of therapists, psychologists, mindfulness coaches, people involved in personal development, etc. I like it because it's not espousing any particular approach - the host simply talks to people about their own contributions to understanding and navigating the human condition.

The Academic Imperfectionist is a podcast by philosopher and academic career coach Rebecca Roache. She addresses all sorts of common difficulties of academic life.

CBT Self-Help & Psychoeducation by the Centre for Clinical Interventions - including workbooks & worksheets on anxiety, perfectionism, etc. CBT works for some people better than others, but there are some helpful re-framings and ways of thinking of things here.