

How To Start a Self-Care Plan

I am thrilled to welcome my friend Peter White to the blog as we continue to discuss self-care and the Christian life. Peter is an Ordained Deacon in the United Methodist Church and a trained Spiritual Director. He writes at [The Sabbath Life](#).

When my wife and I got married nearly 10 years ago, we received a really nice gas grill as a wedding gift. I loved that thing. Used it all the time. Neighborhood parties. College ministry events. Dinners for just the two of us. It's gotten more than it's fair share of use.

I say I loved it, but there's one problem. I never took the time to take care of it. Now it sits in my garage. It doesn't work. Didn't take it out even once this past season. Haven't tried to figure out what's wrong with it or how to fix it. It's just taking up space. I'm sure if I simply Googled "how to clean gas grill" I could become an expert in about 10 minutes. But I haven't.

Our bodies and souls are a little bit like my gas grill. They need regular maintenance. If we don't take care of them, they deteriorate, fall apart, and eventually stop working all together. But God has made us to be alive, and not just alive, but abundantly alive.

So how do we keep our souls from falling apart? We need to be mindful in tending to the needs of our bodies, minds, and souls. It's tempting to compartmentalize them, but they're all interconnected. I've learned that in seasons of life when I have a disciplined exercise routine, I'm more faithful in my

prayer life.

A self-care plan can take on many forms. Here are six ways for investing in your long-term health.

Sabbath

This is much bigger than taking a day off. Sabbath is more than a recharge or rejuvenation for going back out there again. It's not a retreat from work, but rather it's a celebration of the work that's been done. Anticipate it weekly.

Take one day a week to set aside the to-do list, don't set the alarm, turn off the phone, step away from social media, and connect with God and your family and friends. Sabbath is for doing things differently. One day in every seven unplug and be present in the world differently.

Sabbath is a way of resisting and rebelling against the culture of busy-ness and efficiency that surrounds us. Have the courage to go toe-to-toe with the busy-ness and say "no" to it one day a week.

Spiritual direction

Life demands companions. A spiritual director listens to you as you listen to God. Regular meetings with a spiritual director provide an outlet for all the crazy hunches and scary questions that lurk in the back of your mind.

How much is "burnout insurance" worth to you? A spiritual director gives you their full attention and can piece together your various experiences with God, and respond with utmost

sincerity, “Yep, you’re normal.”

There’s a scene in Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring* where Bilbo confides to Gandalf that he “feels like butter scraped over too much bread.” If you’re someone involved in ministry, either paid or volunteer, meeting with a spiritual director is like having “another set of eyes” on your life and examining your values and your behaviors. Spiritual direction reminds you that you’re not alone.

Eat well, move well

The doctrine of the Incarnation—that God put on a human body in the person of Jesus—teaches us that our bodies matter. We know this to be true when we’re sick. It’s not easy to pray or serve when we’re laid up with a headache or have no energy.

The biggest threat to your daily survival just so happens to be your Western diet and sedentary lifestyle. That’s amazing to think about. So, sign up for a 5k. Join a gym and use it. At the very least, take a walk around the block. Get eight hours of sleep a night. Give yourself a bedtime and stick to it. Keep a food journal. In the words of journalist and author Michael Pollan, “Eat [real] food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” Pay attention to the needs of your body.

Read a book

Any book will do. Pick up something you’ll love. It could be theology or a Christian classic. It can be a biography or a novel. Learn something new. Engage your mind and imagination. Expose yourself to new ideas. See what the world looks through someone else’s eyes. Just whatever you do, read for fun.

Invite someone to your table

One of the most significant spiritual experiences of my life happened around a dinner table. I was in my twenties, newly divorced. A family with three young kids invited me to join them for dinner on a weekly basis. They had no agenda for me. They just sensed their table wasn't complete without me. And it changed my world.

Luke's gospel portrays so many scenes of Jesus eating with others. I've seen one commentator mention that Jesus would have been fat had he not had to walk everywhere. I believe we can experience something profound about the kingdom of God by making space at our dinner tables for others. So invite someone to dinner. It could be a neighbor, a new person that sits near you at church, or the barista from Starbucks. The ancient Benedictine monks believed that every stranger that came to their door carried the presence of Jesus. We are wired deep down to welcome others. Be generous with your meal time.

A daily practice

Your details of this may vary according to your personality. You need some daily ritual of prayer and Scripture and gratitude. Those are your essential ingredients, and you can mix them up any way that works for you in your season of life. Maybe it's a couple hours first thing in the morning. Maybe it's five minutes over your lunch break. Maybe it looks like reading from a prayer book. Maybe it looks like having a Bible reading plan. Maybe it looks like writing down 10 things every day that you're thankful for. Take 5-30 minutes every day to be quiet by yourself and mindfully connect with God in prayer, Scripture, and gratitude. The point is not "to get something out of it" but rather to simply be present with God.

These are just a few ways that you can start to craft a plan for self-care. You might write down what your plan might be. Start small. Take care of yourself and surround yourself with people that take care of you, too. Be alive. Be fully alive.