Self-Care Checklist

Checklist · 75 items · 8 sections

Self-care is maintenance, not reward. This checklist pulls from WHO, CDC, NIMH, APA, and the academic literature (Neff's self-compassion, Dunbar's networks, Holt-Lunstad's longevity research) rather than wellness-influencer takes. Daily, weekly, monthly items across physical, mental, emotional, social, and practical baselines, plus the warning signs that should send you to a clinician.

Open the editable version online:
https://genechecklist.com/checklist/self-care-checklist

DAILY PHYSICAL SELF-CARE

- [ ] Sleep 7-9 hours per night (NIH adult range); consistency of bed/wake time matters more than total in isolation
  HIGH
- [ ] Drink water across the day (the '8 cups' is a floor for sedentary adults; scale with body weight, heat, exercise, caffeine)
  HIGH
- [ ] Move at least 30 minutes; walking counts. CDC target: 150 min moderate or 75 min vigorous per week + 2 strength sessions
  HIGH
- [ ] Eat at regular intervals (skipping meals 'for discipline' worsens mood regulation and binge risk)
  HIGH
- [ ] Build plates around whole foods: vegetables, fruit, legumes, whole grains, lean protein, dairy or fortified alternatives
  HIGH
- [ ] Limit ultra-processed foods (NOVA-4 intake correlates with depression risk in longitudinal cohorts)
- [ ] Take prescribed medication on schedule; adherence below 80% is the threshold most chronic-disease guidelines flag as poor
  HIGH
- [ ] Apply broad-spectrum SPF 30+ to exposed skin if outdoors more than 15 minutes
- [ ] Brush teeth twice and floss once (periodontal disease links to cardiovascular and inflammatory markers)
  HIGH
- [ ] Get outside in daylight within an hour of waking (morning light exposure stabilizes circadian rhythm)

- [ ] Stop caffeine 8-10 hours before bed (half-life ~5 hours)
- [ ] Sit less; break up sitting every 30-60 minutes

WEEKLY AND MONTHLY PHYSICAL MAINTENANCE

- [ ] Hit 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity across the week
  HIGH
- [ ] Complete 2 strength training sessions covering major muscle groups
  HIGH
- [ ] Add balance and flexibility work twice weekly, especially over age 40
- [ ] Restock groceries with a written list (decision fatigue at the store drives ultra-processed purchases)
- [ ] Book an annual physical with your primary care provider
  HIGH
- [ ] Book dental cleaning every 6 months
  HIGH
- [ ] Book an eye exam every 1-2 years (annually if you wear corrective lenses or have diabetes)
- [ ] Keep age-appropriate cancer screenings current: cervical, breast, colorectal, prostate, skin (USPSTF timing)
  HIGH
- [ ] Track menstrual cycle, blood pressure, or other chronic-condition markers if relevant
- [ ] Refill prescriptions before you run out (lapses in psychiatric meds are a leading cause of relapse)
  HIGH
- [ ] Replace toothbrush every 3 months

DAILY MENTAL SELF-CARE

- [ ] Practice 5-10 minutes of meditation or focused breathing
  Mindfulness-based interventions have meta-analytic support for anxiety and depression.
- [ ] Read non-screen material for at least 15 minutes (improves comprehension and reduces evening arousal)
- [ ] Practice a skill or hobby for 20 minutes (sustained engagement supports the competence pillar in self-determination theory)
- [ ] Cap recreational social media at 30 minutes
  Doses above this correlate with elevated depressive symptoms (Hunt et al., 2018).
- [ ] Keep your phone out of the bedroom
- [ ] Journal for 5 minutes (Pennebaker's expressive-writing paradigm shows benefits with short daily entries)

- [ ] Use a structured mood tracker if you have a diagnosed condition or suspect one (NAMI recommends symptom logging between appointments)
- [ ] If in therapy, do the between-session work (homework completion is one of the strongest predictors of CBT outcomes)

  HIGH
- [ ] Consider an app-based option if in-person therapy is inaccessible (BetterHelp, Talkspace, Woebot, Wysa)

  App-based care is supplementary, not equivalent, for moderate-to-severe conditions.

DAILY EMOTIONAL SELF-CARE

- [ ] Name what you feel ('affect labeling' reduces amygdala activation; specificity matters: 'disappointed' beats 'bad')
- [ ] Process emotions through one of three channels: writing, talking to a trusted person, or physical movement

  Suppression predicts worse outcomes than expression.
- [ ] Practice self-compassion using Neff's three components: self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness

  Self-criticism is not a motivator; it predicts depression.
- [ ] Set one boundary per day (boundaries are statements about your own behavior, not demands on others)
- [ ] Limit news consumption to one defined window; avoid news in the hour before sleep
- [ ] Cry without managing it (suppressed crying is associated with higher cortisol response)
- [ ] Avoid alcohol as an emotional regulator (worsens sleep architecture and rebounds anxiety within 24 hours)

  HIGH
- [ ] Notice rumination; set a 10-minute timer, then shift to a behavioral task if still cycling

SOCIAL SELF-CARE

- [ ] Maintain 3-5 close relationships (Dunbar's inner-layer estimate: ~5 people you contact weekly)

  HIGH
- [ ] Schedule recurring contact (spontaneous connection erodes by mid-30s; calendared standing plans hold)

  HIGH
- [ ] Reach out to one person you have not spoken with in over a month
- [ ] Say no to events and people that consistently leave you depleted; track this for a month if unsure
- [ ] Join one in-person community: faith group, sports league, volunteer org, hobby club, mutual-aid group

  HIGH

Social integration is the strongest single predictor of longevity in Holt-Lunstad meta-analyses.

- [ ] Limit time with relationships you have identified as harmful (low-contact is a valid intermediate step)
- [ ] Ask for help when you need it (most people overestimate how burdensome their requests feel; Zhao & Epley, 2022)
- [ ] Touch base with neighbors or weak ties (weak ties contribute disproportionately to daily wellbeing; Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014)

PRACTICAL SELF-CARE

- [ ] Build an emergency fund toward 3-6 months of essential expenses (financial strain is a top predictor of psychological distress)

  HIGH
- [ ] Review bills monthly; catch subscription creep, billing errors, rate increases
- [ ] Use your paid time off (unused PTO does not reflect dedication; it reflects dysfunction or avoidance)

  HIGH
- [ ] Take breaks during the workday (5 min/work hour beats working straight through on accuracy and fatigue)
- [ ] Block time on your calendar for focused work and for nothing (margin prevents the day from collapsing into reaction)
- [ ] Declutter one surface, drawer, or shelf per week (visual clutter measurably degrades working memory)
- [ ] Open a window daily (indoor CO2 above 1,000 ppm impairs cognition)
- [ ] Clean bedding weekly (sleep environment affects sleep quality independent of behavior)
- [ ] Define your work-off hours; disable notifications during them

  HIGH
- [ ] Say no to non-essential commitments by default; add, do not subtract
- [ ] Self-care does not require spending; most items on this list cost nothing

SELF-CARE DOES NOT MEAN INDULGENCE

- [ ] Self-care is not a spa day, shopping spree, or bottle of wine (those are leisure or coping, not maintenance)
- [ ] Self-care is not selfish (WHO frames it as a population-level health behavior, not a personal luxury)
- [ ] Self-care is not productivity (treating rest as a tool to extract more output is the burnout cycle)
- [ ] Self-care is not a substitute for professional treatment (bubble baths do not treat clinical depression)

  HIGH
- [ ] Self-care is not always pleasant (it often includes hard conversations, medical appointments, and saying no)

- [ ] Self-care is not the responsibility of the depleted (structural conditions shape access; individual checklists do not fix systemic problems)

WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

- [ ] Persistent low mood, anhedonia, or anxiety lasting more than 2 weeks (DSM-5 threshold for MDD duration)

  HIGH

- [ ] Any thoughts of self-harm or suicide

  HIGH

  US: call or text 988 (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline). UK: Samaritans 116 123. Elsewhere: search '[country] crisis line'.

- [ ] Inability to perform daily functions: work, hygiene, eating, parenting

  HIGH

- [ ] Using alcohol, cannabis, or other substances to manage mood, sleep, or anxiety

  HIGH

- [ ] Sleep disturbance lasting more than 2 weeks: insomnia, hypersomnia, early-morning waking

  HIGH

- [ ] Withdrawal from previously enjoyed activities and relationships

  HIGH

- [ ] Panic attacks, intrusive thoughts, or compulsions that interfere with daily life

  HIGH

- [ ] Significant unexplained weight change, appetite loss, or appetite increase

  HIGH

- [ ] A trusted person has expressed concern about your behavior or mental state

  HIGH

- [ ] If you are unsure whether your symptoms qualify, that uncertainty itself is reason to book an appointment (primary care is a valid starting point)

  HIGH