

Self-Care: Performance, Punishment, & Commodity

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A few months ago I joined a workplace-affiliated self-care group for therapists and mental health workers to celebrate self-care habits. If you post a photo and short description of yourself doing self-care 20 times a month, you are eligible for a gift card each month with a value that is proportional to the number of people who participate. In order to qualify for the gift card, you have to document that you met the criteria. I made it easier to report my participation by keeping a simple self-care journal in the form of a spreadsheet where I could keep a numbered list of the days I posted about self-care along with a description of what I did. I imagined that a self-care journal would also allow me to look back over time and try to see if there are any broader patterns between my self-care choices and other circumstances of my life. Perhaps it would be an avenue for developing some type of insight into myself.

There are a lot of obvious potential benefits for a social media-based self-care group. A supportive community that encourages self-nurturance and demonstrates the many ways that people can do self-care each day could be especially significant for someone who is newly becoming accustomed to the idea that they are worthy of taking time for themselves and meeting their own needs in a way that feels meaningful, soothing, and energizing.

In this way, self-care is an anticapitalistic act in that it encourages us to let go of a focus on values like productivity, money-mindedness, and constant active doing, and instead gives us permission to slow down or stop entirely. Selfcare stands in opposition to a grind culture that pushes people to be constantly occupied by a laser focus on attaining external signs of success. Selfcare endorses smelling the roses and nothing more, sitting and breathing and nothing more, resting, watching the wind in the trees and the clouds lilt past; self-care encourages us to follow creative impulses to bake and paint, to sing for no reason, to dance with abandon. Selfcare also points us towards each other, and in this way, the value of attending to the self through mutuality can build communities that care for their members through systems outside of capitalism.

The political implications of self-care were once an inherent characteristic of the concept as described by Audre Lorde when she wrote in *A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer*. Before it was whitewashed and commodified, self-care was named by Lorde as a survival strategy for Black women that overtly included mutuality and community. Lorde's vision of self-care as she faces a metastatic cancer diagnosis does not describe an independent venture, but rather navigating walking the line between self-protectiveness and openness by "not [being] ashamed to let my friends know I need their collective spirit - not to make me live forever, but rather to help me move through the life I have"

(Lorde, p. 90). Throughout *A Burst of Light*, Lorde wrestles with her mortality in part through an impulse towards productivity, but as she reflects on the meaning and impact of her work as a poet and activist she consistently turns back to the people she met across the globe and their mutual work. It is in this context that Lorde famously wrote in the epilogue, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (p. 95).

From that perspective, perhaps a social media self-care group of mental health workers is in fact a way to include community as a core component of intentional self-care practice. A self-care group that encourages members to post for a specified number of days a week or month can be useful for those who benefit from external structures to help create routines. For people who benefit from a sense of supportive accountability, or who want very clear descriptions of expectations, these parameters can be very useful. Again, these factors can become especially relevant to someone who is newly adapting to the idea that they are worthy of caring for themselves. These clear expectations might help them imagine what it would look like were they to integrate self-care into their regular life over the long term.

My Introduction to Selfcare

I am almost 40 years old, and I have been a therapist for around a decade. I don’t consider myself new to the ideas and values of self-care, and so as I began this venture I also wondered what joining a group like this would offer me - apart from a potential financial award of unspecified value.

I was first granted a formative lesson in the value of self-care well before I became a therapist. Composer Phil Winsor, co-founder and director of the Center for Experimental Music and Intermedia at the University of North Texas, first interjected the necessity of self-care into my life.

Phil didn’t call it self-care, but he nonetheless taught me valuable lessons about self-care.

Phil Winsor was my composition professor. His office was in the dimly lit composition hall of the music building at the University of North Texas, and we met for an hour at a time ostensibly to discuss music composition but just as often to talk about travel, photography, and multimedia arts. Phil had used music and art to get through his own struggles in life, and I was doing the same, and it was that dynamic that set the stage for one of his candidly direct statements to significantly change how I thought about concepts like productivity, hard work, and leisure time.

I had pointed out to him that in order to do my best creative work, I had to do things that I perceived as “lazy” or “unproductive.” Phil corrected me without beating around the bush. If I needed to walk a mile in order to do my best work, then walking a mile was actually part of the work. If I needed to lay on the floor with my eyes closed doing absolutely nothing for 30 minutes in order to do high-quality work, then laying on the floor doing nothing was being productive. Those things I did to care for myself - even if they function outside of the capitalist drive for productivity - were in fact a necessary foundation for any serious “work.”

The manner in which Phil put this idea to me - so clear and direct and straightforward - led me to change the way I thought about how I spend my time, and I still think of his insight when I am feeling

conflicted about whether to do one thing or another. Over the years I grew a significant appreciation for the way “non-productivity” nurtures the quality of life and also, yes, quality of productivity. To an extent, it is true that you cannot work hard unless you also play hard. The upside of seeing self-care as an important antecedent for quality work is that this also helps engender a spirit of living each day to the fullest and not taking a day for granted - something that only becomes more viscerally important several years into a pandemic. Over the years as I tried to integrate Phil’s wisdom into my life, I saw improvements in my mental health. After years of intentionally registering the value of activities that ‘recharge your battery’, I had unintentionally integrated the idea that my needs were valid. Understanding my needs were valid made it easier to establish boundaries and say no. And all this, without using terminology of “self-care.” I simply understood this as what artists need to do in order to survive being an artist and to make good art.

My Experience in a Selfcare Group

As I participated in the group I noticed that due to the fact that participants didn’t necessarily know each other very well and the group was administrated through the workplace, this brought up many unwritten rules of appropriate ways to share one’s personal life outside work with co-workers and bosses. The group could even be understood as a manifestation of Foucault’s exploration of Bentham’s panopticon¹, in which managers surveil the personal lives of their employees in order to reward those who conform both in and out of the workplace.

More practically speaking it means participants must self-police what is posted. Many types of self-care can be very personal, intimate, and difficult to describe processes - self-care can be something that happens in your head and can’t be photographed. Self-care can be a very simple childlike response to an ugly adult context that is too heavy to share with colleagues and bosses. But this group asks participants to share documentation or proof of their act of self-care in the form of photos of themselves and/or their environment.

Many people post what they are eating, their route taking a walk, or a photo in their living room of hanging out watching a movie. People post about spending time with loved ones and doing hobbies.

You don’t see people posting “I told my mother no, that if she was going to talk to me in such a horrible way I would hang up and I will not answer the phone for an hour. And then I stuck to it, and I didn’t answer my phone.” You don’t see the messy side of self-care. You don’t see politics. You see people posting polite lives in work attire. In this way, it becomes a performance. Eating a healthy snack for self-care becomes a project in which you try to photograph your snack without revealing how messy your kitchen is. Having dinner with your brother turns into a request to take a photo together so you have something to post, whether you would normally photograph yourselves at dinner or not.

¹ Bentham’s panopticon is a building that enables social control by allowing one security guard to observe all the prisoners without the prisoners knowing if they were being watched at that moment. Bentham proposed that this would lead to the prisoners regulating their own behavior in compliance with prison rules. Foucault explored this concept in his text *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, expanding the idea into concepts of social control and power over the general populace.

Personally, I posted about my pets, gardening, watching hockey, reading books. In the springtime, I post pictures of flowers and butterflies, the sunlight streaming through the dappled leaves of an aglaonema², a cup of tea. I look forward to the growing season, when I know I can post photos of whatever vegetables I harvest for easy self-care posts. There are always times I am doing something for self-care that I'm not comfortable posting a photo of - like when I soak my feet in hot water for the sensory input: what would I do? Post a photo of my feet in the water? When so many people have capital-F Feelings about feet being gross or sexy? Not today, Satan!

Last month, I took the dog on a walk with my spouse. I took a picture of the dog on a leash in front of us and told James, "I'm going to post this in my self-care group: going on a walk with the dog for self-care." A woman's scream cut through our banter. It wasn't a playful scream or a surprised scream, and it didn't stop. She was screaming for help, and so I left the concrete path and hurried up the hill towards the sounds coming over the tennis court. I knew there could be a woman being assaulted on the tennis courts and I wouldn't be able to see them until I climbed higher. I tried to make a plan for what I would do if someone was being physically attacked. I noticed my fight or flight response was kicking in. The screams continued.

I made it to the tennis courts: nobody was there. It was a relief that the images in my head were not in front of me but the screaming continued. Slowing down now, I looked around to try to find the source of conflict, finally coming upon a row of houses with a couple standing in the driveway in front of a door. Now I was close enough to understand what was being said, and what I heard made me start shaking. It was clearly a custody dispute over access to a child who was in the house. This only terrified me more, because in a state like Texas with rampant firearm ownership such a conflict can quickly become deadly - and I was still standing in a public park not 100 feet from a playground where children played. I took out my phone to call the police, only to look up and see another woman was already speaking to dispatch and describing the situation. I relayed what I had heard to the good samaritan, and we waited together for an officer to arrive, standing across the street while the woman shouted and wept for her child.

When I police arrived, I began walking home, still shaken. I logged on to the group and posted the photo, acknowledging how empty it was because this particular act of self-care had actually made me feel far, far more stressed out and how I would have to go do additional self-care to calm down from having just done self-care.

On another occasion, I posted a photo of me and my little brother hanging out while he was in town for work. I posted it rather later at night, and the next day I had undeniable symptoms of covid and I took the day off sick. While coughing my way through this decision to stay home even without a positive test, I struggled with feeling guilty for taking a day off, feeling as if I were lazy or using being sick as an excuse, and other perverse capitalistic self condemnations. The thought wandered through my head that my boss might think I was taking the day off to goof off. At some point, I had to examine these fears and label them for what they were: contrary to the idea of self-care and stemming entirely from a capitalist frame of reference that puts profit and money as the most important issue - even when it comes to how we see ourselves. Even when we have symptoms of a viral infection in the midst of a surging viral pandemic.

² Houseplant commonly called Chinese evergreen

And so my radical act of self-care that day was to take the day off - not only from work but also from posting about “productive” self-care in the group. I worried that I would post something that wouldn’t be seen as appropriate given I had taken the day off. I worried about performing self-care in a way that my employer would find appropriate. At the same time, I was aware these worries were entirely unproductive, and resting while symptomatic is in fact the best way to prepare for future productivity. This stressed me out so much that I felt a sense of relief when I finally tested positive for covid (again) after five days of symptoms - because I now had proof that my symptoms were valid and I had made the right choice to stay home. In a capitalist world where we are encouraged to work while sick, even if it means putting others at risk, I now had permission to stay home and recover.

I was learning how, ironically, documenting your self-care habits for others to see can risk promoting feelings like guilt, shame, inadequacy, or fear of being judged or rejected. It can lead to employees worrying about what a supervisor thinks about posts that reveal the employee’s personal life. I considered how this type of access into people’s personal lives can be a more precarious experience for people whose identities are marginalized in some way or another. Thankfully, this particular group is inclusive and welcomes same-sex relationships and so members can post acknowledging their relationships openly - but one can imagine being LGBTQ+ in a discriminatory environment in which you have to juggle between revealing aspects of your personal life in a self-care group and staying closeted - something that could totally contradict the purpose of self-care.

In practice, it becomes just one more thing to do on a list of things to do, because not only must you do the act of self-care but you must also take a photo and document that on social media. I have personally found that not having the Facebook app on my phone is self-care, but this means I have to get on my laptop to get on Facebook and post self-care content. Sometimes, I make a plan to do some type of self-care like reading a book, so I take a photo and get on Facebook to post it, and immediately get distracted by a bunch of random social media things that I didn’t intend to get involved in. Before you know it, the time I had available has run out and instead of reading, I got on social media to post about reading and then got distracted.

I used my first \$25 gift card to buy a black guayabera³ - so I can wear it to work for a different job that requires an all-black uniform. On the surface, it seems to contradict the spirit of the group - investing back into work instead of ‘feeding my soul’ with a scented candle or some such thing. But after all, if self-care is ultimately about survival, and working-class people must work to survive, then spending my self-care money on a work uniform is perfectly valid - even if somewhat ironic. I justified making the work-related purchase by pointing out to myself that buying a traditional Cuban garment made by a Latina-owned shop is a valid way to wear my Cubanidad⁴.

Participating in the selfcare group made me start looking out for opportunities each day of something I could do that is photographable and postable content - I began thinking like a self-care content creator. I also started thinking about and working on a draft for this essay. I could post this self-care essay on Patreon, I think. I could include it in a self-published book of essays, I think. I read about self-care in online articles that explored the topic through the lens of neoliberalization. I joked with my

³ Traditional Cuban shirt made of lightweight fabric and buttons up the front, with four pockets and a collar

⁴ “Cubanness”

spouse - "I'm eating these pickles for self-care!" Self-care became an easy punchline for any given choice.

I laughed derisively at White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki's suggestion that people disenfranchised by the failure to pass a voting rights act should "go to a kickboxing class, have a margarita, do whatever you need to do this weekend."⁵ "The complete and utter dissolution of democracy - for self-care!"

And simultaneously I was internally grieving when I saw self-care used as chastisement or a punishment against some who is not doing well. "Go home and do some self-care." "You need to do self-care." "It's because you're not doing your self-care." Said in that irritated, accusatory, disapproving tone of voice that is most unhelpful. Self-care becomes a weirdly miraculous, individualist cure as if one could just self-care themselves into wellness. If a therapist doesn't have anything useful to offer, just blame your client for doing their self-care wrong.

Five months passed and I felt like I was gaining some clarity.

Selfcare is all of these things: Selfcare is a radical political act. Selfcare is also a neoliberal commodity.

Selfcare is a performance of wellness and mental health, and it is also a way to shift the blame onto individuals.

Selfcare is a performance of the authentic self put on for the benefit of your therapist, and it is also a state of being in symbiosis and interdependence with a community of others.

In that regard, my challenge is then to engage in this workplace selfcare group in a radical manner that rejects neoliberalism compliance to a commodity-oriented, individualist way of life, and seeks out instead authentic interdependence with my community in a way that promotes health. It's made all the more challenging because things that make perfectly lovely sentences in an essay can be annoyingly condescending when trying to fit it into daily life, between cleaning the litterbox and making lunch for the next day's work.

"Should my company institute a program like that?" A business owner asked.

I don't know. On one hand, recreating a panopticon in your workplace might not be the best thing for your employees. On the other hand, I can strongly affirm that it's a far more healthy option than some of the other health and wellness programs businesses can institute. One person told me their workplace has "The Biggest Loser" challenges for employees, even though this focus on weight loss as a proxy for health is so extremely problematic and unhealthy. Another person's workplace has a contest for who can walk the most steps each month - it's always the same person who blows everyone else out of the water by a huge margin, and the company quickly dropped the idea of offering special prizes and incentives.

⁵ See video: <https://twitter.com/therecount/status/1484568330967134213>

I haven't decided yet what I will post for today's self-care. I just started a new book recently and I haven't posted it yet, and I haven't posted about reading recently, and the cover and content are professional so it meets the unwritten criteria about how to appropriately perform self-care for the group. Or maybe I will take a photo of the view outside my window, and post that I paused to watch the wind move the trees. Soon I will fill out the survey where I verify that I posted 20 times a month, and pick out where I want my giftcard from. Will I choose a visa or an amazon gift card? Or something from a local shop that sells tiny wicker hammers and spaghetti-scented candles?

Read more:

Lorde, A. (2017). *A Burst of Light: and Other Essays*. Ixia Press.