



SELF-CARE for NWARTA Members and Friends

Joan Godbout

Thanks to the support of ARTA’s Wellness Committee, I have had the opportunity to take a few workshops: *Mental Health First Aid for Seniors*, *Psychological First Aid*, and *Together in Isolation* offered by the Peace Health Advisory Council and CORE (Collaborative Online Resources & Education). The information presented came from research-based sources including Alberta Health Services, Canadian Mental Health Commission, Canadian Mental Health Research. These resources are the basis for a series of three articles that will be coming to you by email and via the NWARTA website <https://artabranches.net/nwarta/>

The first article will examine *Self-Care*, the second will focus on the *Caring and Compassion* for others and the final will explore ways of *Engaging*.

These workshops have by no means made me an expert, but I will share ideas that have resonated with me. For this reason, you will notice the extensive use of the pronouns “we ... us” but it probably should have been “I ... me”.

Flight attendants tell us, “Put your oxygen mask on first before assisting others.” This is an excellent metaphor for *SELF-CARE*. In essence, we are encouraged to focus on keeping ourselves **emotionally, mentally, and physically healthy**, consequently remaining resilient and able to be of service to others. With the added “COVID stress”, it is crucial to reduce our anxieties, replenish energy, get sufficient rest, and maintain physical and cognitive effectiveness.

“me”). Perhaps as retired professionals in service of others, we have habitually neglected and sacrificed ourselves to attend to the needs of others. It is long past time to acknowledge that the best way to be available for others is to take better care of ourselves; being selfless is not necessarily the best way to support those who are important in our lives.

Self-Care Red Flags?

How do we know we need to take better care of ourselves?



During these times of COVID restrictions and isolation, there are even more behavioral cues -- *red flags* -- that should coax us to spend more time taking care of ourselves. Individuals may not experience the same *red flags*, but better self-care becomes essential when there is a cluster of these behavioral cues.

Some *red flags* include:

- changing eating habits or weight



(Source: Alberta Health Services, *Virtual Care in a Pandemic*, 2021)

There are many reasons (excuses) we neglect to do what we know is good for us (I write “we” but it’s most certainly

- decreased stamina (lethargic or tending to procrastinate)
- loss of interest
- increasingly irritable or short tempered
- feeling a lack of purpose; an increased sense of hopelessness
- changing sleep patterns
- increased escape behaviors (excessive absorption in watching television, social media ...)
- changes in internal processes (blood pressure, hormone levels, digestion, tightening muscles ...)
- greater difficulty with memory or focused attention
- increased use of mood enhancers

(Source: Alberta Health Services, *Virtual Care in a Pandemic*, 2021)

To maintain a quality of life, especially in retirement, emotional, mental, and physical health is crucial; identifying our own *red flags* is but the beginning.

Red Flags – Now What?

Experiencing a cluster of *red-flag* symptoms should prompt us towards greater self-care; this requires a degree of SELF-CHANGE. Yet creating new behavioral patterns requires consideration, commitment, and planned action. These changes will be unique to each of us and fit our personal lifestyle. But above all, changing behavioral patterns requires “a belief in [our] ability to change, which reinforces

[our] will.” (Source: Alberta Health Services, *Stages of Change: Transtheoretical Model*, June 2020)

Behavioral theorists tell us to make small changes.

To reiterate, change begins as an internal process of considering a miriad of options and ultimately consciously planning for action(s). Behavioral theorists tell us to make small changes. Attempting several changes at once only increases our internal struggles and reduces the likelihood of success.

If you want to read more about the psychology of behavioral change, you may want to check this AHS resource.

<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/amh/if-amh-ecc-stages-of-change.pdf>

Layering one small change upon another small change will help us move towards our personal goal(s).

Once we are comfortable with one small change and we experience a measure of success, we will certainly want to focus on another small change. Layering one small change upon another small change will help us move towards our personal goal(s) -- baby steps result in long-term changes.



Self-Care in Action

To make small changes, we will want to choose only one or two suggestions from the list that follows. (These suggestions come from a collection of sources including Alberta Health Services, *Virtual Care in a Pandemic*, 2021.)

Place a checkmark in front of the suggestions you already incorporate into your life. Later this will help you to zero in on the one or two suggestions that are manageable.

General suggestions for self-care that are especially beneficial to retirees; some of these are habits may have been lost when we retired.

- Create and maintain a routine.
- Maintain a calendar of activities, appointments, etc. -- the best strategy is to keep busy, but not overwhelmed.

- Create and maintain an evening routine to assist you in getting sufficient sleep.
- Treat yourself the way you would treat a small child -- be kind, tolerant, even indulgent.

Focus on maintaining mobility.

Movement, we're told, "prevents persistent decline in function and mental processes". (Source: School of Rehabilitation and Physical Activity at McMaster University, *The Canadian 24-Hour Guidelines*, 2021)

- Do at least one thing every day from under the "*physical umbrella*"; this includes not only exercise, but also all forms of movement -- walking, leisure, recreational, and sports activities. Even chores are under the *physical umbrella*, but you may want to leave cleaning the bathroom to someone else in the household. (Source: HabitsforWellbeing.com. *Ready to Reconnect with Movement*, 2021. <https://www.habitsforwellbeing.com/ready-to-reconnect-to-the-joy-of-movement/>)
- Do one thing every day to elevate your heart rate, always staying within your physical capabilities.
- Stretch and strengthen your body in a variety of ways.
- Dress every day for changing weather conditions to enjoy nature and fresh.
- Limit your sedentary time – every hour, take a break from the screen or periods of sitting.

Practices to improve your mood and outlook, rejuvenating activities.

- Get at least one g😊😊d laugh every day -- watch funny pet videos, read funny stories ...
- Do something relaxing everyday -- meditate, pray, read inspirational or affirming messages ...
- Smile for no reason (even if you're alone).
- Do one thing every day "just because" -- buy yourself a small gift or a rare treat.
- Calm yourself with a fresh cup of tea, coffee, or ...
- Focus on regenerative feelings -- recall joyful experiences, flip through photo albums, sift through memorabilia.

Negate depleting feelings such as anger or frustration by re-focusing on feelings that provide positive life energy.

- Practice heart-focused breathing to reduce anxiety and improve wellbeing; it's especially helpful before bed. Use the following link to learn heart-focused breathing.
<https://www.heartmath.org/articles-of-the-heart/the-math-of-heartmath/heart-focused-breathing/>
- Listen to the sounds of happiness – music from your favorite playlist, children playing, pleasant sounds of nature...
- Frequently focus on visual and/or sensory elements -- light a candle,

add a pleasant colour to your environment, include blooms or twinkle lights. Also, recall that pleasant fragrances are powerful stimuli.

- Enjoy a variety of flavours -- frequently make special meals, try new recipes, and create a relaxing environment to enjoy your specialty.

Do something for yourself.

- Once a week, plan for and do one thing you'll be glad you did, perhaps it's something you've been putting off -- finish a project, complete your taxes early, clean out a closet ...
- Engage in activities that interest you -- a craft, hobby, writing, games ...



- Enjoy drinking more water, eating your veggies and fruit ...
- Every day take special care of your body; you may even be indulgent -- take a long steam shower or a fragrant bath, make an appointment for a massage ...

Focus on the positives. A study “evaluated the link between optimism and overall health in 2,300 older adults. Over two years, people who had a positive outlook were much more likely to stay healthy and enjoy independent living than their less cheerful peers.”

(Source: Harvard Medical School, *Optimism and Your Health*, May 2008.

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/heart-health/optimism-and-your-health>)

- Start a gratitude journal; write a few entries each day.
- Journalize at the end of the day; reflect on what has made it a “good” day and perhaps include events you’re anticipating.

Do something for brain health; continuing to be cognitively engaged allows us to maintain and improve learning skills and memory. Being informed enables us to be independent thinkers with the ability to critically consider current political or social issues.

- Keep your mind stimulated -- everyday view or read to remain informed, pursue interesting topics, take time to discuss your ideas with others.
- Search out opportunities to gain greater confidence with technology.

Focus on others; connecting with interesting and positive people is a powerful self-help strategy.

- Do or make something special for someone.

- During COVID restrictions, invite a friend to have patio coffee/tea or a driveway visit. Make it a masked and physically distanced gathering.
- During COVID restrictions, make extensive use of FaceTime, Zoom, or other visual communications apps.
- Find occasions to create a sense of togetherness -- watch a movie or program with someone (don’t forget the popcorn), play a game ...
- Tend to something that is growing or living -- play with children, enjoy the company of a furry buddy (it can certainly be someone else’s furry buddy), care for plants/flowers ...

In Closing

Of the 30+ strategies, how many boxes were you able to check off?

For some of us it may be that we practice

some of these self-care behaviors, but we fail to do so consistently. I should clarify, “It is I who fails to do so consistently.” My small change, therefore, may be consistency on one of these suggestions.

Neglecting to care for ourselves is not a selfless act; it is not a reflection of a “me first” attitude or of being self-involved. It is maintaining a quality of life to enjoy those who are special to us and to positively contribute to their lives.

