

The background of the entire page is a light blue color. It is decorated with several stylized, minimalist line art faces in various colors (orange, blue, green, and brown). These faces are drawn with simple, flowing lines and are positioned around the central white text box, some partially overlapping its edges. The faces have different expressions and orientations, some looking up, some down, and some in profile.

Self Care

for **Nurses**

Small Doses for **Wellness**

Natalie B. May
she/her

Tim Cunningham
he/him

Dorrie K. Fontaine
she/her

The term *resilience* often gets a bad rap, but the ability to take care of yourself during stressors remains key to creating a work environment where you can thrive.

Grounded in research and rich in expertise gleaned from fellow nurses and other practitioners across the healthcare spectrum, *Self Care for Nurses* offers proven self-care strategies in small doses that can positively transform your relationship with work. The authors filled this book with practical exercises that will fit easily into your lifestyle and might just keep you from the brink of burnout.

Contents include:

- Over 30 science-based wellness practices that tend to your mind and body
- Bite-sized exercises that apply the latest in self-care research
- Relatable stories and helpful guidance from nurses and wellness experts that offer inspiration, camaraderie, and support for your challenging-yet-rewarding work as a nurse

Authentic self-care practice is best for you, for your patients, and for your colleagues. Integrating these purposefully simple and easy-to-adopt strategies into your life can help you flourish in good times and grow in difficult ones.

NATALIE B. MAY, PhD, is a self-care and resilience researcher and Associate Professor at the University of Virginia School of Nursing.

TIM CUNNINGHAM, DrPH, MSN, RN, FAAN, is the Co-Chief Well-Being Officer for the Woodruff Health Sciences Center at Emory University.

DORRIE K. FONTAINE, PhD, RN, FAAN, is the Dean Emerita at the University of Virginia School of Nursing and founder of UVA's Compassionate Care Initiative.



SigmaMarketplace.org/Books



Self Care for Nurses

Small Doses for Wellness

Natalie B. May
she/her

Tim Cunningham
he/him

Dorrie K. Fontaine
she/her



Copyright © 2023 by Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing

All rights reserved. This book is protected by copyright. No part of it may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission from the publisher. Any trademarks, service marks, design rights, or similar rights that are mentioned, used, or cited in this book are the property of their respective owners. Their use here does not imply that you may use them for a similar or any other purpose.

This book is not intended to be a substitute for the medical advice of a licensed medical professional. The author and publisher have made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the information contained within at the time of its publication and shall have no liability or responsibility to any person or entity regarding any loss or damage incurred, or alleged to have incurred, directly or indirectly, by the information contained in this book. The author and publisher make no warranties, express or implied, with respect to its content, and no warranties may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The author and publisher have no responsibility for the consistency or accuracy of URLs and content of third-party websites referenced in this book.

Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing (Sigma) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is developing nurse leaders anywhere to improve healthcare everywhere. Founded in 1922, Sigma has more than 135,000 active members in over 100 countries and territories. Members include practicing nurses, instructors, researchers, policymakers, entrepreneurs, and others. Sigma's more than 540 chapters are located at more than 700 institutions of higher education throughout Armenia, Australia, Botswana, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Croatia, England, Eswatini, Ghana, Hong Kong, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Malawi, Mexico, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Scotland, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Taiwan, Tanzania, Thailand, the United States, and Wales. Learn more at www.sigmanursing.org.

Sigma Theta Tau International
550 West North Street
Indianapolis, IN, USA 46202

To request a review copy for course adoption, order additional books, buy in bulk, or purchase for corporate use, contact Sigma Marketplace at 888.654.4968 (US/Canada toll-free), +1.317.687.2256 (International), or solutions@sigmamarketplace.org.

To request author information, or for speaker or other media requests, contact Sigma Marketing at 888.634.7575 (US/Canada tollfree) or +1.317.634.8171 (International).

ISBN: 9781646481019
HARDCOVER ISBN: 9781646481996
EPUB ISBN: 9781646481026
PDF ISBN: 9781646481033
MOBI ISBN: 9781646481040

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023003551

First Printing, 2023

Publisher: Dustin Sullivan

Acquisitions Editor: Emily Hatch

Development Editor: Alexandra Andrzejewski

Project Editor: Alexandra Andrzejewski

Interior Design/Page Layout: Rebecca Batchelor

Managing Editor: Carla Hall

Publications Specialist: Todd Lothery

Cover Designer: Rebecca Batchelor

Copy Editor: Todd Lothery


Proofreader: Todd Lothery

**To all nurses:
May you care for
yourselves and each
other with the same
fierceness that you
care for your patients
and their families.**

Table of Contents



Small Doses for Your Happiness and Health.....	6
It's Not What You Think	15
Burnout: Sound Familiar?.....	23
Rewire Your Brain for Resilience	33
What's Your Mindset?	39
Be a Flashlight.....	45
Pay Attention.....	49
Cultivate Your Appreciative Practices....	59
Tend Your Emotional Garden.....	71
Choose Joy and Positivity	79
Reframe	85
Exercise Gratitude	91
Change Your Question, Change Your Mind	97
Use Your Vision to Change Your Fate....	105
Go to Your Safe and Happy Place	113



Cultivate Your Wisdom	119
Rest.....	127
Nourish Your Body and Hydrate	133
Evaluate Your Alcohol Consumption	139
Breathe Deeply	143
Move Your Body.....	147
Integrate a Life That Works With a Life That Counts	155
Make It a Good Place to Work	163
Take Care of Each Other	167
The Pause: When a Patient Dies	171
Mattering Matters.....	175
Put an End to Bullying and Incivility.....	185
Advocate for Yourself and Others	191
Lead From Where You Are	200

The background of the page is a solid light blue. It is decorated with several stylized line art drawings of faces. In the top left, there is a light blue face. In the top right, there is a red face. On the left side, there are two red faces. On the right side, there is a large light blue face. At the bottom left, there are two light blue faces. At the bottom right, there is a red face. The faces are drawn with simple, flowing lines, giving them a soft, ethereal appearance.

*I have met myself and I am going
to care for her fiercely.*

—Glennon Doyle

Small Doses for Your Happiness and Health

The terms resilience and self care may carry some baggage for nurses. Did we just see an eye roll? But we firmly believe the ability to take care of yourself in the midst of stressors is the core of creating a work environment where you can be well. We're not here though to suggest you must adopt the contemplation practices of a monk and exhibit the compassion of Mother Teresa, all while eating organic foods and taking a daily bubble bath. The version of self care we present in this book—one backed by research—is something you can fit seamlessly into your life at doses appropriate to your circumstances. (And sure, maybe that results in a new meditative practice!) When you're empowered to take deliberate steps toward your own well-being and that of others, everyone flourishes. If your workplace isn't prioritizing your well-being, that's all the more reason for you to ferociously guard your health and to advocate for the change you and your patients deserve.

Since publishing our previous book, *Self-Care for New and Student Nurses* (2021), we've heard a lot from nurses. Some of it has been delightful to hear:

"This book is great."

"I keep it on my desk as a resource."

"I wish I could give this book to every nurse."

But from some nurses who are facing increasing challenges in their work, their comments have been hard to hear:

"Don't talk to me about self care when I can't even get time off for a doctor's appointment."

"If one more person tells me to breathe, I'm going to scream."

"Self care is basically just telling the drowning person to save themself."

"I hate it that anyone has to be resilient."

So what are three passionate teachers, researchers, nurses, and writers who care deeply about the well-being of our colleagues to do? One path is to keep listening, teaching, and writing. Another is to delve even deeper into advocacy for our nurses and every one of us who works in healthcare. A third approach is to shout from the rooftops that self care still does matter! We choose to do all three. If approached with openness, self-compassion, and a little science, self care can bring us joy and foster better connections with those around us. In fact, it may be our most powerful tool in delivering fiercely compassionate care and creating meaningful change. And frankly, if we don't care for ourselves, who will?

This goes without saying, but we'll say it anyway: We need all the gifts you bring to the nursing profession. Your patients need you. Your colleagues need you, and especially new nurses need you as they enter the profession. There are a lot of people at stake in your becoming the best nurse you can possibly be. Nursing affords you routine interactions that change the lives of your patients, strengthens the resolve of your colleagues, and ripples beyond your immediate circle to surprising places. Your gifts are beyond measure.

We know there is more to your life than nursing. You also have commitments to family, friends, and others and passions outside of your work that are worthy of your most joyful and best self. This isn't a book about self care "just" to make you a better or more resilient nurse. We approach self care in a holistic way to foster your well-being in all aspects of your life. If you can bring awareness and mindful responses to a difficult patient encounter, then you can use those same skills to create greater connection to your family and friends.

What do we mean by self care?

A standard definition of self care is elusive in part because of the breadth of the topic and the individual nature of self-care practices. As you'll learn in this book, one size definitely doesn't fit all. If you're lucky, you may have learned some self-care practices in nursing school. Or maybe you've learned some from the school of life, books, or podcasts. There are so many terrific resources out there today. Nursing researchers Pam Ashcraft and

Susan Gatto¹ offer that self care is “deliberate decisions made and actions taken by individuals to address their own health and well-being.” We appreciate their emphasis on deliberate decisions and the recognition that we’re all empowered to manage our behaviors and resulting health and well-being. We think this is an excellent starting point.

Here are some more truths about self care:

Self care generates the energy and wisdom that you will draw upon when the going gets rough.

Self care is a collection of personally and culturally appropriate practices that provide you with skills to be with their stress, to experience growth during difficult times, and to provide compassionate care always.

Self care takes time, effort, and reflection.


Self care is a conscious decision to be aware of your thoughts and feelings and to be curious about them.

Self care is gentle and self-compassionate. It follows then that self care isn’t judgmental or harsh. It’s not a failed diet or New Year’s resolution—you should never feel guilt or shame for struggling periodically or even frequently.

We’ve found that the diversity of self-care definitions mirrors the diversity of the nursing workforce—there are countless meaningful self-care practices. We’d be remiss to say there is only one definition that is “right,” that there is only one correct way to do self care. Use this book and every resource at your disposal to find the practices

that resonate with you, that make your heart leap a bit and cause you to think, *Yes, that sounds like a good fit for me!* Your self-care practice should complement, even enhance, who you are and what you're already doing. Your self-care practice will evolve as you grow and as your life circumstances change. We hope you'll find what fits for you now and that you will store away ideas for future use. Exploration and practice are the guiding principles of this text.

Self care is not a magical elixir. It alone will not fix the problems that create stress in your life as a new or veteran nurse; however, a self-care practice can help you to develop the necessary tools to find creative solutions to problems, to enjoy and rely on the camaraderie of your team, and ultimately to flourish in a meaningful and exciting career.



***For if the brain is
the cause of suffering,
it can also be its cure.***

—Rick Hanson

The background of the page is a light blue color. It features several stylized, line-art faces in various shades of blue and orange. These faces are composed of simple, flowing lines that suggest facial features like eyes, noses, and mouths. They are scattered across the page, some partially obscured by the central text box.

Rewire Your Brain for Resilience

Your self-care activities—going for a run, getting a massage, spending time with friends—have benefit beyond the moment when you’re doing them. Sure, these are pleasurable experiences, but more importantly, they benefit your future self in powerful ways. They change your brain and lead to resilience.

It's all about changing your brain

Your brain literally rewires based on your experiences. It's called the science of *neuroplasticity*, your nervous system's ability to form new neural pathways. Those self-care activities you're doing change your neural pathways, and the result is resilience. Maybe you've learned that traumatic events can change victims' brains in negative ways. Similarly, *positive neuroplasticity* explains why fostering your own well-being today has a powerful influence on your well-being months or even years from now when you face adversity.

What do we mean by the word *resilience*? Clinical psychologist Rick Hanson translates the complex neuroscience of resilience into effective, simple behaviors that anyone can practice:

Mental resources like determination, self-worth, and kindness are what make us *resilient*: able to cope with adversity and push through challenges in pursuit of opportunities. While resilience helps us recover from loss and trauma, it offers much more than that. True resilience fosters well-being, an underlying sense of happiness, love, and peace. Remarkably, as you internalize experiences of well-being, that builds inner strengths which in turn make you more resilient. Well-being and resilience promote each other in an upward spiral.²⁵

By watching a funny movie or snuggling with your canine or feline companion, you're on your way to building new positive pathways in your brain, turning "passing experiences into lasting inner resources built into your brain."²⁶

Savor the good things

How can you make sure your self care has lasting change? The most important method of fostering resilience is to internalize experiences of well-being. Be present and pay attention to those experiences that fill you with positive emotions. It's not enough simply to focus on it; you must truly sit with an experience or feeling long enough (and often enough) to enable that experience to rewire your neural pathways. You must be intentional about creating positive change.

In other words, for neuroplasticity to take hold, you must *savor* experiences. You can practice savoring all day long:

- How do you feel in your cozy bed in the morning? What sounds do you hear?
- Truly taste that first cup of coffee or tea.
- What do you see on your way to work? Don't travel in a trance. Absorb the sights, sounds, and smells around you.
- When a patient or family member says, "Thank you. You made such a difference," do you rush off to the next task, or do you take a moment to appreciate the connection that exists between you?

This is simply the beginning of an infinite list of moments to savor throughout any given day. Every moment of your day presents an opportunity to create lasting changes in your brain. For example, do you have a beloved pet? When that fur ball curls up in your lap, don't always be texting or watching Netflix. For just a few moments, notice the cat purring and how happy that makes you feel. Notice how much the dog's snoring makes you smile, and feel grateful that you have a pet.

Next time you sit down to a meal, savor the sights, sounds, flavors, and feelings the meal evokes. Is the food delicious? Does it remind you of your childhood? Does it stir gratitude because someone cooked it for you?

If you love music, don't allow the music to fade into the background. Take time to not only listen intently but pay attention to how it makes you feel. Does the song make you feel powerful and energized? Does the symphony send you on a whole range of emotions or bring you to tears? Live concerts are the greatest opportunities to absorb the sights, sounds, and energy of music.

These experiences and so many others are fuel for positive neuroplasticity. Your goal is to strengthen the circuits in your brain, specifically the circuits you *want* to strengthen, such as those that foster positive emotions.

Seek these positive emotions, and when they present, really double down on appreciating them. This takes practice. Your 3-pound brain has 1.1 trillion cells and 100 billion neurons, and each neuron fires 5 to 50 times each second.²⁷ This presents nearly an infinite number of opportunities to strengthen your resilience and fortify your well-being.

This practice can sound like a lot to do, and to pay attention to, especially if you feel like you live a very busy life. But what about considering doing these practices—all about paying attention—in short spurts? Even if your day is totally booked, you still can take a minute to enjoy your furry friend or a few seconds to gaze up at the clouds. Take a few breaths, smell your tea or coffee, and then get back into the mix of things. Some people consider this micro-dosing well-being, and so do we. It's the little stuff, done regularly over time, that helps us positively change our brains. Imagine that your brain is a forest full of many paths. When you savor things that bring you joy, envision that you are forging new paths while letting the old paths that don't serve you grow over with brush and grass.

REFLECT

Savor the Day

For one day, be intentional about savoring the sights, smells, and sounds around you. Savor moments of peace, awe, or gratitude. Really taste your lunch or piece of fruit. Pay attention to sounds of laughter or the voices of colleagues. Give your brain something new to focus on—drive a new route to work or walk a different way to the cafeteria.

