

Guard Your Soul Carefully – Prioritizing Caring for Yourself



Guard yourself and guard your soul very carefully (Deuteronomy 4:9)

The body is the soul's house. Therefore, shouldn't we take care of our house so that it doesn't fall into ruin? - Philo of Alexandria

What is self-care?

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) defines self-care as “taking the time to do things that help you live well and improve both your physical and mental health.” How we do this looks different for everyone.

What is reactive vs. proactive self-care?

As you think about caring for yourself, consider how you might support yourself in these different scenarios:

- What do you do after a stressful experience or in a time of crisis?
 - This is reactive self-care — what we do in the moment to help ourselves feel grounded, reregulate our bodies and continue on with the tasks ahead.
- What are you doing long term, on a daily, weekly or monthly basis?
 - This is proactive self-care — the habits we are building to care for ourselves, so we have the bandwidth to navigate the daily challenges of life and the more stressful moments.

Guard Your Soul Carefully – Prioritizing Caring for Yourself

Rabbi Hillel used to say: If I am not for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, then when? (Pirkei Avot 1:14)

Boundaries as self-care

Boundaries are limits we identify for ourselves and apply through our actions or communication. Setting boundaries allows us to feel secure and healthy in our relationships at work, home and school. They can look different, depending on the circumstance.

When navigating challenging situations, consider how you can respect your own and others' boundaries.

- What are your rigid boundaries? How do you know when you need to take a break and stop the conversation?
- What are your flexible boundaries? How do you actively listen and engage during some conversations to show your boundaries might be more flexible?
- How do your boundaries differ when you're engaging in conversation with different people?
- How do you know when you've pushed someone else's boundaries, and they are no longer comfortable? What can you do?
- What can you do when a conversation comes up at an inappropriate or inopportune time?

How to start?

Even a little self-care is better than none at all. Starting small will create momentum that results in progress. It may mean taking just 10 minutes a day to begin creating your self-care practice. It can be hard to find the time; life is busy, and individuals are pulled in a hundred ways. The key here is to make the time, and change your mindset to include self-care in your daily (or weekly) routine. When you use time and intention in your self-care practice, you'll find your mind will be clearer, and you'll feel more relaxed and re-energized.



Guard Your Soul Carefully – Prioritizing Caring for Yourself

Self-care ideas



Go off grid

- *“Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you.” – Anne Lamott*
- Find a few moments of digital peace. Turn off alerts and notifications, tune out social media, and tune into the present moment. Disconnecting from devices – even for 15 minutes – has been shown to decrease stress and anxiety.



Pick up a pencil

- *“We’re all in a cloud of remembrance and anxiety,” cartoonist Chris Ware believes.* He suggests that drawing is simply another way of seeing, and connecting pencil to paper can help us see through the fog. Remind yourself of the pride children have for every scribble they create, and consider passing your drawing on to someone else. Making gifts connects us to our own gifts.



Movement is like poetry

- The connection between mind and body is well-documented. Moving in any way you are able brings you back to yourself and helps to focus thoughts, increase energy and decrease anxiety. Walking is a peaceful kind of movement: regular and rhythmic. Walking outside has added value: different sounds, (sometimes silence!) or a chance encounter. The artist Austin Kleon thinks “walking is a way to find possibilities in your life.” He reminds us that “demons hate fresh air.” Borrow a dog if you must.



It’s OK to say NO!

- While there’s so much to explore, setting limits on your time is a gift to yourself. Being up for anything doesn’t have to mean running yourself down accepting every invitation. Healthy time boundaries build self-esteem and clarify your values. This is one of Shabbat’s primary functions; it serves as a fixed time to take a break from the world to focus and nurture the self. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “Six days a week we seek to dominate the world; on the seventh day, we try to dominate the self.”

Guard Your Soul Carefully – Prioritizing Caring for Yourself



Name it to tame it

- Rashi, the most famous Torah commentator, reminds us our words have the power to bring comfort. Listening to friends or acknowledging and giving voice to our own feelings all help keep moments of anxiety at bay. This phrase works literally as well: [Can you name the supportive people in your life who you could reach out to? Keep that list close.](#)



Hitbodidut: A Conversation with the Divine

- This Jewish meditation practice, translated as ‘to be by one’s self’ is an opportunity to be in conversation with the Divine, however you define it. [“Even if you start by saying ‘this is silly, I don’t know why I’m doing this,’”](#) says Alison Laichter, [“Keep talking. See who’s talking and who’s listening. Try sitting in quiet conversation—with the Divine or with your own thoughts. The poet and mystic Rūmī also encourages us to find moments of quiet to examine our own inner life, believing ‘the entire universe is inside you.’”](#)

Find the Light Anywhere You Can

- Light is around us, and we have to remind ourselves to seek it out. Henry David Thoreau advised us to find comfort in the cycles of the natural world, paying special attention to the light of both sun and stars. [“Observe the seasons in nature. Take up casual astronomy. Watch the sun rise and set each day.”](#) He understood what Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi did: [“A bit of light dispels a lot of darkness.”](#)



Shift Your Perception of Time

- Different cultures have different ways of orienting time, talking about how it behaves and flows, and visualizing the past and future. [Yet we all have time machines. Some take us back; they’re called memories. Some take us forward; they’re called visions and ambitions.](#) Sometimes when we feel the days racing away, it’s worth thinking differently about time: less concretely, more metaphorically.

Guard Your Soul Carefully – Prioritizing Caring for Yourself

Sleep is the Best Meditation



- According to Philo of Alexandria, that is. Every waking moment is precious, but sleep is a gift we were given to serve as the foundation of our immune system, focus, mood, energy and ability to communicate and handle stress. It's hard to make good decisions when you're exhausted. (On the Special Laws, Book One, Chapter 54) Sleep is about both the body and the soul. According to the Kabbalah, the soul's essential powers are strengthened and more apparent while one is asleep. Hasidic tradition teaches us that sleep is a time for rejuvenation of the soul.

Take a Beat



- Meditation can be as simple as mindful breathing. Pay attention to a full breath, feel it enter your body, fill your center and return again. Feel or imagine what it feels like to “be breathed,” just as the first earthling, Adam, was breathed into being. When your mind inevitably wanders, because minds generally do, gently return to your intention and begin again. Practice teshuvah (returning) to yourself, your best self, to holiness, to your source. We credit Jewish meditation master Alison Laichter for this teaching and for the reminder there's no failure here, just learning and growing and returning.

We Don't Care if You Call it a Diary or a Journal



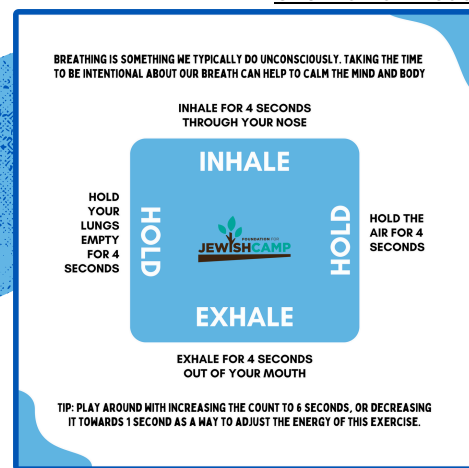
- The Torah constantly tasks the Jewish people with writing down our histories, gratitudes and tasks. A written record of your thoughts, feelings and memories can be therapeutic—or at least cathartic. A regular writing practice has been proven to stimulate your imagination and boost creativity. A journal can be a place to reflect on your emotions or actions, leading to greater self-awareness. As is true of all long treks, the starting point is less important than the journey itself.

Guard Your Soul Carefully – Prioritizing Caring for Yourself

Take a breath

- Being aware of and changing our breathing is the primary strategy we have to control anxiety and other emotional responses to stress. When we are anxious, the body's natural stress response is to breathe shallowly and take in less oxygen. By breathing more slowly and deeply, we can reverse this process and calm our agitation.

[Click to Download](#)



Ground yourself

- Certain strategies can help contain our emotional reactions, stop unproductive cycles of thinking and bring us into the present moment, where we have more control over our mind and body, and where we feel safer. Examples include: breathing, utilizing our five senses, e.g., comforting touch or smell, and identifying unhelpful and untrue patterns of thinking.

[Click to Download](#)

