

Autism Diaries: Tips For Self-care | CPD Blog

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Something I've struggled with as an Autistic person is consistent self-care and performing daily activities. Sensory challenges and burnout are my biggest struggles when it comes to doing these things – and this has become even truer as my chronic illnesses cause constant pain and fatigue with everything I do. Here's how my internal monologue goes for things like brushing my hair and teeth (my two most hated self-care activities): 'I mean, do I really have to do this every single day? I did it yesterday. And now I have to do it AGAIN?!' Followed by a dramatic sigh.

And as an adult, I don't have anyone telling me to do these things every day. Not that it would help. Nagging is just not a useful tool in my book. Brushing my hair is incredibly painful due to sensory issues and my fibromyalgia-tender scalp. I'd rather just have a fashionable rat's nest for several days. But of course that means even more pain down the road brushing it out later. I think if anyone ever saw me when I'm doing this, they'd think it was some sort of demon summoning ceremony. It gets that ugly. And then I loathe myself for it. So as I work on becoming a super adult who can brush my teeth twice a day and brush my hair more than I summon demons, I've been working to find ways to make these things easier for me.

The good news is I have learned a few tricks along the way that I want to pass on to fellow Autistics. The first tip is not only for Autistic people, but the people that love them.

There is NO shame in struggling to do these things or in needing them to be simpler or easier. Self-shaming, or even worse, shaming from loved ones for struggling with these things does the opposite of motivating oneself, in my humble experience. The guilt actually makes me avoid doing them more. Doing daily activities can require more patience and cause more pain for Autistic people than for neurotypical people. Of course you are going to not want to do them. All humans work to avoid pain and unpleasant tasks. I try to not talk down to myself if skip a day brushing my teeth. I've found it is more useful if tell myself, "I just couldn't hack it today, and tomorrow is a clean slate." The point of self-care isn't just to care about your physical well-being, but your mental one as well. When I'm taking care of myself, I feel better mentally – which brings me to the next thing. The tasks may never become any less unpleasant to do, but you can find more motivation to do them if you see self-care as a radical act of self-love. I realized recently that I usually think about self-care things as stuff on a checklist to get done. This is the most unhelpful thing for me. I love a good checklist of house cleaning, errands or work items. I do not love to see things like take meds or drink water on a list. I just loathe doing them even more, and I see it as a never-ending list of torture. It has taken me 32 long years to understand I need to do these things because I care about my own well-being – that I deserve the self-care my body requires. I still hate brushing my hair, but when I do it now, it is because I love myself enough to provide this service for myself. **Tools**

The physical limitations from illnesses, sensory processing issues and my aversion to routine means that I've had to find different ways to accomplish self-care. There is more than one way to do something. For example, I've always detested brushing my teeth – both the time it takes and the way it feels – like a carwash in my mouth I didn't ask for. Now, as an adult, my chronic illness causes my wrist to sublux when doing tasks like teeth brushing (sublux means to partially dislocate – this is as fun as it sounds) and I hate it even more. But this changed several years ago when my tech-savvy brother got me an electric spin toothbrush. This is literally the best gift I've ever received. I could actually tolerate brushing my teeth. My dental visits were perfect. All I needed was to adapt a task. My wrist doesn't sublux because the brush does most of the work. It takes less time, and I no longer feel individual bristles scraping along my teeth and gums. This was the catalyst for me to look for ways I could change other tasks to make them easier. Flossing was a chore, so I tried floss picks and had sweet success.

Routines, Order of Operation

I realized adapting an activity doesn't just have to apply to tools of self-care, but the way it is done and when it is done. For instance, my illnesses cause me to become sick from showering, and having the energy to brush my teeth afterwards is dicey at best. I found that brushing my teeth before I shower is the way to make sure it gets done. Another example is drinking water. I have always struggled to remember to hydrate. I don't know why my brain doesn't have the alert for 'your thirsty', but that feature was not included in my make and model. The solution for me has been to keep water bottles in every room. If I see it, I remember. Experiment with ways to change your routines and habits to better suit you – it might take a few tries, but it is worth the hassle to find success. Doing this will give you more time for the things that are most important. If a task doesn't affect your health or well-being, let it go. I think this is especially true for girls and women. We live in a society that tells us constantly we have to spend loads of time on intense beauty routines. If it brings you joy, great. If you do it because societal gender norms says you have to, and you don't like it, let it go. If someone tells you it is necessary, ask yourself if that's really true. Body positivity and acceptance is so empowering. For some women this means adopting no leg shaving – embrace your inner mammal! For others it is saying goodbye to using heat tools on your hair every day. Maybe it is letting go of current clothing trends that leave you unable to move, breathe and be you. The other great part of this is learning to embrace what makes you, you. Frida Khalo, the famed artist who was a disabled woman, has become an icon as of late. She proudly wore her unibrow – no time for tweezing when you're a brilliant artist. For me, one of the things I've let go is uncomfortable clothes and shoes. I've never looked back. A neurotypical world continually tells Autistic people they don't know themselves well enough to make decisions for themselves. While having family and friends to get advice from is important, at the end of the day, you know what works best for you. As a Millennial, I'm bombarded with social media 'influencers' my age who boast they know the best way you should take care of yourself. Instagram stars proclaim goat yoga in a hipster barn wearing LuluLemon is how I should exercise. The implicit message is that my way of exercise is outdated and antisocial. Facebook ads tell me the trendy charcoal is the toothpaste I should use. Mine isn't organic and therefore is invalid. I say hogwash. I know what works for me, and I know I'm taking care of myself the best way I can. Other people's adamant claims they know the best way you should take care of yourself, especially ones that include ways for someone to make a buck off of you, don't need to factor into your self-care decisions. Sure group spinning classes on over-priced bikes are cool, but if you hate biking or group exercise, it

isn't going to be an effective tool for you. If you love working out alone to your 1990 Richard Simmons VHS tape in your basement, then that is the right choice. My Autistic brain requires peace and focus I will never get in a group exercise format. And I'm ok with that.

Life on the spectrum can be a challenge when it comes to self-care and daily activities for a variety of reasons. Everyone, no matter the level of supports needed to be successful in self-care, deserves to have habits and routines that work for them. Changing self-care habits can be a powerful tool to find more peace and fulfillment in your daily life. It can be frustrating at first to struggle to find something that fits your needs, but taking the time to really find solutions is worth it because you are worth it. Happy teeth and hair brushing.