

# Self-Care as a Professional Responsibility: Small Daily Actions that Sustain Nursing

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Nursing is a profession grounded in compassion, presence, and service. We enter this work to support others through healing, education, and advocacy—yet too often we do so at the expense of our own wellbeing. Across the profession, exhaustion, moral distress, and emotional depletion have become normalized, quietly accepted as “part of the job.” This normalization reflects not personal failure, but the conditions under which nurses are expected to practice.

For many years, self-care was framed as optional—something to fit in after patients, families, and work responsibilities were met. What both lived experience and emerging literature now make clear is that self-care is not indulgent, nor is it discretionary. According to Provision 5.1 of the *Code of Ethics for Nurses*, nurses have a duty to care for their own health and safety and are not ethically obligated

to sacrifice their wellbeing for the benefit of others (American Nurses Association, 2025). The wellbeing of nurses and the safety of patients are inseparable.

As a nurse for nearly three decades and in my current role supporting nurse wellbeing, I frequently hear colleagues say, “I’m bad at self-care,” or “I don’t have time.” My response is always gentle: *I suspect you already practice self-care—and may not even recognize it.* Through conversation and reflection, nurses begin to see that self-care does not require elaborate routines or financial investment. It often exists quietly within daily life.

Self-care takes many forms—physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social. Physical self-care may be as simple as a five-minute walk to restore circulation and clarity. Emotional self-care may involve setting boundaries or sharing laughter with a colleague. Intellectual

self-care includes creativity, journaling, or limiting screen time. Spiritual self-care may be found in prayer, meditation, or time in nature. Social self-care emerges through meaningful connection and community. When practiced intentionally, even brief moments can restore balance and resilience.

Small daily doses of self-care are particularly powerful. A few minutes of mindful breathing, setting a positive intention before a shift, or reflecting on gratitude at the end of the day can significantly reduce stress and enhance emotional wellbeing. These micro-practices support nervous system regulation, renew energy, and create space for clarity amid demanding work environments. When repeated consistently, they become habits that sustain us.

Importantly, individual self-care does not absolve organizations of responsibility. Burnout and moral distress are driven by systemic factors such as workload, staffing shortages, and cultural norms—not by a lack of resilience. Self-care must be paired with supportive leadership, healthy work environments, and systemic change. Nurses themselves also play an important role in shaping these systems—whether by participating in professional nursing associations, engaging in policy and advocacy efforts, speaking up when policies hinder safe and meaningful practice, or actively serving on shared governance councils within their organizations. These avenues offer nurses an opportunity to influence the conditions of their work, strengthening both professional fulfillment and overall wellbeing. Practices such as nurse coaching offer one pathway to strengthen

nurses—not by fixing them, but by reconnecting them to purpose, boundaries, and voice.

Self-care is not selfish. It is ethical. When nurses are supported to care for themselves, they preserve the empathy, judgment, and presence that patient care depends upon. By honoring our own wellbeing through small, intentional acts, we protect not only ourselves, but the future of nursing itself. ■

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