

After the Assault: Self-Care for Recovery

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I still remember that concrete jail cell, the coldness of the ground, the bareness of the walls. I remember thinking, “This isn’t supposed to be a part of my story. How did I end up here?”

In 2009, at the age of 20, I was brutally raped and beaten by a stranger who offered to help me change my flat tire. By 2011, I had completely unraveled. Although I survived my assault, I allowed myself to become a victim of the turmoil that consumed me in its wake. For the two years following my attack, I desperately tried to suppress my pain, never acknowledging its existence until it festered and reappeared like catastrophic bombs in my life, obliterating everything I cherished.

Shame, guilt, anger, insecurity, sadness, fear, self-hatred; I battled with depression and anxiety attacks. These emotions took over my life and became so heavy to carry that I started to numb myself through heavy alcohol consumption. In addition, out of that self-hatred and shame, I punished my body by neglecting it and starving it. I was on the path to total self-destruction.

Looking back now, it’s plain to see how I ended up in that jail cell. After a night of heavy drinking, the person who was driving me home was arrested for driving under the influence. When the police officers attempted to forcefully remove me from the car to drive me home, I was immediately taken back to the night of my assault. I snapped. What transpired resulted in me being charged with two counts of Battery On An Officer With Injury, one count of Resisting Arrest, and another count of Intimidation.

I vividly remember going before the judge, who knew who I was in relation to my assault case. Her words have stuck with me to this day: “You need to handle your trauma better than this.” And with that, she withdrew the charges. In that moment I realized I couldn’t neglect my experience any longer. I was responsible for nurturing myself to a place of healing. I also needed to allow this chapter in my story to make me more empathetic and appreciative of the beauty all around me. By fostering a #MeFIRST mentality and committing to a routine of self-care and self-love, I literally saved my own life.

Now today, as a Women’s Studies Scholar, International Photojournalist for women’s organizations in conflict countries, Sexual Assault Speaker, and Wellness Workshop Coach for women’s groups on college campuses, I have found that my greatest purposes have been rooted in my deepest sufferings.

So how can survivors equip themselves with the tools and practices of self-care and self-love that are detrimental during recovery? Although everyone's self-care routine is personal and unique to them, here are some examples of the ways that I practiced and continue to practice self-care today:

1. **Welcome Your Brokenness:** This means acknowledging your wounds and letting yourself feel all that you need to in order to process and recover. Seek counseling, join group therapy for survivors, journal, confide in friends, meditate, or seek prayer.

2. **Self-care for the Heart:** Set *boundaries* around your heart, these are personal property lines to your healing.
 - People: when we experience those giant falls in life, we often rely on the people around us for support. Are those close to you keeping you down or picking you up? Rely on wholesome friendships, the people who make you whole and don't deplete you.
 - Unplug: What aspects of the outside world are speaking into your life? Turn off technology when you can. Shut off the world's voice so you can hear *your* voice more clearly.

3. **Self-care for the Body:** Our bodies are often the first thing we punish and neglect when dealing with trauma. We numb it, abuse it, starve it, and speak poorly to it. But we have to remember it's our most faithful companion.
 - Honor your body: Similar to any relationship you have, you should tell that person you appreciate them, they're beautiful and strong, and they're safe. Do the same with your body. Write loving messages on your mirror. Even write yourself a love letter.
 - Exercise: Our bodies carry our emotions and exercising (and stretching) releases that tension. Exercise also produces serotonin (our feel-good hormone) and it's a way to show appreciation for our body's strengths, abilities, and healing power.
 - Stress-reducing foods: Your gut produces 90% of your body's serotonin. Researchers refer to your gut as the second brain, as its health greatly affects your thoughts, mood, clarity, and perception of the world. Psychiatrists are finding that proper dietary changes are sometimes more effective in treating depression and anxiety than medications. Ultimately, the healthier you eat, the happier you are.

4. Self-care for the Mind: What nurturing thoughts are you feeding your mind?

- **Meditation:** Meditation means state of rest. What are you doing when you're resting? For instance, are you listening to sad music or scrolling through social media which brings you down? Instead, listen to encouraging and therapeutic things.
- **Mindfulness:** You have nearly 70,000 thoughts a day, with 80% being negative. Whether you're experiencing shame, depression or guilt from your past, or anxiety and stress about the future — setting your mind on the present has been a proven way to quiet and calm your thoughts and emotions. Additionally, you can learn to not only quiet your thoughts, but also control them so that they support you in a positive way. Some practices to incorporate in your self-care routine are:
 - Journal for five minutes each morning or night and answer: "Today I am grateful for..." "What can I release from today that no longer serves me?" "What made me feel calm today?"
 - Make a short list of affirming "I am..." declarations. Some examples: "I am resilient. I am beautiful. I am loved. I am fearless." Loving thoughts create loving actions. Declare love into your life.
 - Set daily, weekly, monthly or seasonal intentions to keep you motivated and moving forward with purpose. Plan a day, occasion or trip that's just for you.
 - Practice breathing exercises that will bring you into a more reflective state where you can quiet that inner, distracting dialogue. Concentrate on this pattern of breathing: inhale through your nose for four seconds, pause for one second, exhale/release the breath through your mouth for five seconds, and repeat. Do this until your mind is clear and relaxed.

Even if you are not a survivor of trauma, self-care is important to your overall health. And, hopefully one or more of these self-care practices can help you in your daily routine.