Exercising as a Form of Self-Care

It is a well-researched fact that exercise promotes physical wellbeing, but current studies now indicate that consistent, moderate exercise throughout the week also aids in mental well-health. From stress reduction, improved focus, memory retention, and increased positive mood, exercise proves to be one of the best natural supplements for mental health and one of the best activities you can engage in for self-care.

**How is Exercise Self-Care?**

When some people imagine self-care activities, they think of things that are fun and relaxing that help the body and mind to unwind, such as a nice bubble bath or binge-watching their favorite show. Most don't imagine huffing and puffing through a challenging cardio workout as self-care, but in reality, it is. Self-care is any activity that helps to reduce stress and promotes mental health and cognitive functioning. By this definition, exercise is a perfect form of self-care. 

**How does Exercise Affect Mental Health?**

When you engage in a challenging workout it increases your heart rate, prompting the release of endorphins, which help you to feel calm and happy. In fact, consistent moderate exercise is as effective antidepressant medications at reducing symptoms of depression. Exercise also helps reduce the symptoms related to anxiety by relaxing muscles that have become knotted and tightened due to stress. Exercise helps the mind and body to become more balanced and work in tandem.

**How Much Should I Exercise for Optimal Mental Health and Self-Care?**

The goal is to improve and maintain physical and mental health when exercising. You don't want to start out too strong, especially if you have been sedentary for a while or are new to exercising. You should consult a physician before beginning any exercise regimen, but a general rule of thumb is to attempt to exercise at least 150 minutes per week if you are doing activities like walking or swimming and 75 minutes per week if you are engaging in more challenging activities such as running. 

**What Exercise is Best for Self-Care?**

The best exercise for self-care is the one that makes you the happiest. You are more likely to stick with an exercise regimen that you enjoy so find an activity that makes you happy and that you can work at a consistent pace. Love swimming? Find a local pool and do some laps or take an aqua aerobics class. Love running? Find a local runners club in your area to join. Engaging in physical activity doesn't have to be a solitary feat and the social interaction will help to keep you interested.  
  
Starting an exercise regimen can be difficult at first. Instead of viewing it as a "have to" find something that you enjoy and stick with it. The more you engage in and repeat the activity the more that it will become part of your self-care routine. Happy exercising!