

Mid-Life Wisdom: Cultivating Soulful Self-Care

Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation.

Audre Lorde, 20th Century American writer

The other day while talking with my twenty-year old daughter on the phone, she lamented, “I’m feeling run down and stressed out. Between my job, relationships and daily responsibilities, I don’t seem to have time for me anymore!” As I continued to listen, I could hear the frustration in her voice and recognized how much she sounded like the old me, the way I used to sound and feel from taking care of others rather than taking care of myself. “What are you doing for yourself?” I inquired. My daughter replied, “I feel too guilty putting myself first so it hardly ever happens.” I reminded her that it’s truly okay—in fact, *necessary*—for her to take care of herself. And, the more she practices honoring herself, the easier it will become and the less guilt-ridden she will feel.

No one will ever honor us more than we honor ourselves. I remember writing these same words in my first book, *Gifts of the Soul*, several years ago. And as much as I recognized the truth in those words, it has taken reaching my 40’s for me to actually put it into practice. Mid-life is such a powerful place for many. It’s often a time when our children are becoming independent; an age when we question our life’s purpose; an era of wanting to strengthen the connection with our soul; a period of looking inward and taking stock of life so we may release what is no longer valuable in exchange for what has deeper meaning. Such introspection requires taking time to become quiet; listening to our thoughts, feelings and heart-felt urges, and attaining balance within every area of our lives.

This is also a scary time for because it feels like we’re in a void, an unfamiliar empty space that needs to be filled up with something—*anything*. Many women try to fill the void with a new relationship, baby, or through over attaching to children (who yearn to be free and independent). In closer analysis, however, a woman’s fulfillment comes not from any of these “diversions,” but rather, from honoring her life experiences and inner gifts and sharing them with others.

My experience has been that women, especially, struggle with the importance of taking care of one’s self. Many women feel to do so is selfish or insensitive. We’ve been taught that our

value stems from nurturing the emotional and physical needs of others. Men, too, struggle with taking care of themselves, having been programmed to believe that their worth is derived from their performance, career success, and financial support.

Taking care of one's self, I'm discovering, is at the core of a meaningful life. Research has shown that when people don't know how to take care of their needs they tend to experience higher rates of depression, illness, isolation and self-destructive behaviors. Julia Cameron summed it up when she wrote, *"There is a connection between self-nurturing and self respect. If I allow myself to be bullied and cowed by other people's urges for me to be more normal or more nice, I sell myself out. They may like me better, feel more comfortable with my more conventional appearance or behavior, but I will hate myself. Hating myself, I may lash out at myself and others."* When we don't take care of ourselves, we tend to become irritable with others believing that *they're* the problem. Further, when we don't know how to meet our own needs we expect more from others than what is realistic. We become "energy leeches," sucking and draining the energy from those around us because we're not taking the time to nurture the love within ourselves.

Observe your life right now and notice what you are doing to take care of yourself. It's never too late to begin. Here are some tips for taking care of your self that I personally use and have taught my clients to implement into their daily lives:

- 1) Communicate with those around you. Tell them that you love them, yet in order to be a balanced and happy person you must do certain things just for you—then do them. Don't wait for others to give you permission to take care of yourself, it will never happen. Taking care of yourself will allow you to be an amazingly powerful role model for others.
- 2) Record your nightly dreams. The more you write them down the more you will recall, and the more you recall the more you will begin to understand the immense wisdom they hold for you.
- 3) Receive some form of bodywork on a regular basis. This might involve acupuncture, deep tissue massage, hot stone therapy or whatever form appeals to you. Daily exercise is also extremely important and a powerful way to take care of your physical and emotional wellbeing.
- 4) Work with a holistic counselor to learn how to set healthy boundaries. Boundaries

include physical, sexual, emotional and spiritual. Learn to protect your precious life force energy so you do not become drained. It's okay to say "No" without feeling guilty.

- 5) Spend time in nature—*alone*.
- 6) Pay attention to your body and what it is telling you. The body is a phenomenal instrument for reflecting your true thoughts and feelings. Notice reactions in your body and learn to trust them. The more you work with your body, the more you'll know what you need to do to take care of yourself.
- 7) Connect with like-minded people who are supportive of your emotional and spiritual growth and life's work. Be willing to release those individuals who are stuck and are not ready to move forward in an empowered and healing way.
- 8) Practice being in the present. Keep bringing your attention out of the past and future and into this very moment. Being in the present will energetically rejuvenate your body, mind and soul.

As the phone conversation with my daughter concluded, she said, "I know I need to take better care of myself but I still don't know what to do." At that point I questioned, "Do you really *want* to, or are you getting some hidden benefit from taking care of everybody else?" "Hmmm," I heard her say, "I'll have to think about *that* one and if it's true, I must have learned it from you, Mom!" Gulp...she was right. Healing works, each generation gets smarter and quicker than the one before. Isn't mid-life grand?