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You are listening to Supporting Supporters, a ChangetoChill podcast. This is a free mental well-being resource offered by Allina Health. My name is Tonya Freeman. I'm a licensed psychologist and regional lead psychologist with Allina Health.

These podcast episodes are aimed with the goal of providing quick, tangible resources and information from Allina Health mental health providers on a range of mental health topics relevant to day to day lives of the listener. We invite you to join us in any way you please, whether you sit back and kick your feet up, or as you engage in movement, your daily commute, or as you prepare for your day. However you choose to join us, we welcome you and we honor your time.

--- Episode ---

Hi and thanks for listening. My name is David Nathan and I'm a Licensed Psychologist with Allina Health. I work primary with boys and young men and their families on a lot of different issues they face. I feel very fortunate to be part of this project. Everyone is in my family is a teacher; my parents were both teachers in St. Paul Public Schools. My sister today is a teacher at Johnson High School in St. Paul. Teaching and working with students is a critical job in our society. We need to make sure they have the resources they need. The fact you are listening to a podcast like this demonstrates how much you care about your students and you work and want to improve your own skill set. Thank you for doing what you do. I hope this will be useful for you.

Today we're going to talk about Self-Care Fundamentals, how it works and why it is so vital for all of us.

To begin with, it is important to understand that all of us have a limited amount of mental energy. In this way, our minds are a lot like our muscles. We have a limited amount of muscle energy. If someone is doing push-ups one after another without stopping, at some point, their muscles are going to start getting sore. If they go to the point of exhaustion, they won't be able to do anymore; it isn't about not wanting to do any more pushups. The chemicals and biology of their body won't have the energy to do another. Thankfully we can recharge. If the person goes and take a break, let their muscles relax and recover for a little while, they will get some of that energy back. 10 minutes later, they will be able to do more pushups.

Our mind is like that too. Just like our muscles, they can run out of juice. Pretty much everything we do either takes some mental energy from us or restores some mental energy to us.

One way we can look at self-care is that it's the process of making sure we have mental energy left to do what we need to do. Its critical that we do. Here's why.

When our muscles, they stop functioning. If we are carrying some heavy furniture and our muscles give out, we are going to drop what we were carrying. With our minds, it isn't that easy. It's not like we are going to just fall asleep when we are out of mental energy. Instead, we are going to start having various symptoms. The lower our mental energy is, the more frequent and severe the symptoms are.

There are three main categories of symptoms people experience when they are low on mental energy. The first category of symptoms are what psychologists call "Internalizing symptoms." These are symptoms like anxiety, depression, obsessive thoughts, deep fears, etc. We call the internalizing because they take place inside of our mind. These symptoms impact how we interact with ourselves. The next category of symptoms are called "externalizing symptoms." These are things like being irritable, destroying property, or getting into fights with other people. These symptoms impact how we interact with the world around us. The last category of symptoms are called "somatic symptoms, or body symptoms." These are things like headaches or stomach aches or GI problems.

Everyone has one or more of these symptoms when they get low. Some people, when they are overwhelmed, will get one symptom from one category; they might get really bad headaches and that's it. Other people may get a combination of symptoms from one or more categories. These people may feel depressed and irritable, for example. It's hard to predict how any one person is going to respond, and the causes seem to be related to both the genetics a person was born with and the environment in which they grew up.

As a psychologist, when someone comes to me and tells me they are feeling depressed or are having difficulties with anger management or get really bad stomach aches and their doctor can't find a medical reason for it, the first thing I check on is stress in their life. I see symptoms like these as smoke and the question is, where is the fire?

Almost always, the fire is connected to a lack of balance between the demands of their life and their opportunities to recharge and relax. It is essential that we have time to relax and recharge in our lives. When I was in grad school, over and over, my professors would say 'if your patients don't have these three things in their life, exercise, food, or sleep, talk therapy isn't going to make any difference. They need those things. If someone isn't getting sleep, it doesn't matter how much they exercise or eat. They are still going to be tired. I would say that today, there is a fourth factor that is just as important as sleep, food and exercise. It's that down time. We need to have it. One of the ways I think about mental energy is like a battery. Sometimes it needs to be recharged. The way to recharge our battery is through doing things that bring us delight and joy. That means not just doing jobs and checking things off our to-do lists. And sometimes, there is some overlap. Someone may really like sweeping the floor. For them, doing that specific chore just makes them feel good. And that's great. But the key criteria is that the activities we do to recharge make us feel better about ourselves and our lives. We need to have time to do things that make us happy every day.

When I discuss this with my patients, one or two of the following questions often comes up. The first is, when am I suppose to do this in my busy day? And the second is “what can I do that makes me feel good? I can’t think of anything that works. Let me take the second question first.

The things that make us feel good will be unique to each person. Some people enjoy listening to music. Some people like to sew. Some people like to spend time with friends. Other people like curling up with a good book. Maybe there is a movie that you can watch that always makes you feel good. It might be hard or even impossible for some people who are really overwhelmed to identify several things that make them feel delight on the spot, and that’s ok. It might take time. The point is, its really important to have several, I would say 8-12, things that you know that helps you relax. And I say 8-12 because I want there to be backups and alternatives. Sometimes my buddies are busy and I can’t hang out with them. Sometimes its to rainy to go for a walk. Sometimes Netflix won’t load on my tv and I can’t watch Community.

The more activities that bring you happiness that you are aware of, the better prepared you are. And in terms of mental health, I consider the boundaries wide open. As long as what you are doing is sustainable and you can manage any costs or consequences associated with it, go for it. Sorry, running over people walking to slow in the cross walk isn’t a good method for self-care.

But otherwise, as long as it makes you feel good, go for it. Sometimes people feel limited by what their friends or family want to do. And sometimes we do things with other people that’s fun for them. But if something isn’t fun for us, if it doesn’t leave us feeling better than we did when we started, it isn’t self-care. Its just another task. Watching someone else eat doesn’t make us less hungry. And yeah, there are a bunch of companies out there who want to sell us stuff and tell us its self care. Is it? Well, it depends. I love burger king. A burger king chicken sandwich with fries and a coke is one of my favorite meals, it part because its delicious and in part, my grandmother would take me to burger kind when I was a kid and we would both get chicken sandwiches and going to burger king brings back some really great memories for me. So yeah, spending money can be a form of self-care. The question is, does it make you feel better? It might take a few days or even a few weeks for some people to come up with answers for that question. But that time thinking about it is well spent. Its also worth recognizing that over time, what brings us joy may change. Our lists need to be updated from time to time.

Now for the question of when. When do I have time to do these things? I think this one is harder. I think we need to make the time. And I know that sounds like a fantasy, but look at it this way: we take time to eat and sleep and move around every day. We should have some time to recharge too.

We need to take care of ourselves. Sure, it would be nice if someone came to us and said, wow, you really crushed teaching this week. Those kids were hard and you nailed

it. Have this school district credit card. Take your friends out this weekend. Get something to eat. Paint the town red. You deserve it. That isn't happening. We live in a world where there are countless demands on our time and energy. We need to make sure we are taking care of ourselves, because requests for us are going to keep coming. Other people are not necessarily going to swoop in when we need it and give us a break. We need to make sure we are able to do what we need to do.

So this might mean that some jobs don't get done. We may need to back out of obligations we have had. Just like we have a financial budget, we have a time budget. We need to be just as thoughtful about how we spend our time as we are about how we spend our money. Just as we can think about how much we spend on different areas of our life: groceries, entertainment, child care, travel, we should think about what we are spending our time on; chores, employment, family, friends, and other obligations. We need to make sure there is me time in there. Otherwise we are going to burn out.

And that might mean we ask someone to watch our kids or that we hire someone to clean or that we aren't as active in our community. That's ok. We go through different seasons in our lives and there is time to do lots of different things. If we really want to do some of these things, we can come back to it when we have an opening. But can't do everything. Just like we can't buy anything. That can mean making some tough decisions, but these are important decisions to make. You deserve you have enough energy to do everything you want and need to do. You deserve to not be burned out, anxious, irritated, or physically uncomfortable.

I'm going to talk a little more about helpful and unhelpful methods to engage in self-care in the next episode. But the topics covered here today are a good place to start. Remember: we all have a limited amount of energy to do the things we need to do. If we don't have enough, we start to have problems with. Self-care is the act of managing how and when we spend and recharge our mental capacity. Thanks so much for listening today.

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On behalf of Allina Health and Change to Chill, we thank you for taking the time to listen to our podcast. We do hope you enjoyed this episode and we hope that you join us in other episodes covering even more interesting topics with mental health providers. As always, you can find the show notes and any accompanying research and tools at the change to chill website at www.changetochill.org. In health and wellness, take care and see you next time!