

Self-Care For The Long Winter Ahead

by Merilynne Rush

Editor's Note: Merilynne Rush is an end-of-life doula trainer, home funeral and green burial educator, and Respecting Choices® First Steps Advance Care Planning Facilitator trainer through The Dying Year Consulting. She co-founded and was first President of the National End-of-life Doula Alliance, is on the NHPCO End-of-life Doula Advisory Council, and served on the boards of the National Home Funeral Alliance and the Green Burial Council. Merilynne started her professional career as a home birth midwife in 1980, worked as a hospice nurse, and served as a volunteer nurse in Nicaragua and India. She earned her MS in Hospice and Palliative Studies in 2018 at the age of 59. To learn more about Merilynne and *The Dying Year*, and to participate in weekly EOL doula discussions, visit <https://www.thedyingyear.org>.



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Looking ahead at the winter to come, I am concerned about self-care. Under normal circumstances it is difficult for me to remember to take time to care for myself—I'm so busy taking care of other people! But these are not normal circumstances, so I am putting plans in place now to be more disciplined about it. That means making lists, planning schedules, getting help, setting the timer, and trying to be very mindful. It is simply not going to work to neglect this very important aspect of my life.

So, here's my list. I hope you find something new and helpful in it. If you can buddy up with someone to check in with periodically about how you are doing with self-care, all the better.

1. **Practice self-compassion.** My favorite resource for going deep with this is Kristin Neff, PhD, and her many resources about mindfulness and self-compassion found on her website, www.self-compassion.org. From books and articles, to videos, workshops and trainings, she offers the best research and practical guidelines about why we might not be so good at this, and how we can improve, as a basis for everything else we do. Learning to stop and breathe in self-compassion has changed my life.

2. **Grace and forgiveness.** See self-compassion. When we can be kind to ourselves, we can more easily be kind and forgiving to others. Especial-

ly important in our world and in our work.

3. **Meditation**—Nidra Yoga is my favorite right now. It helps me feel into my body, not just be in my head—something I find so helpful while spending a lot of time sitting at the computer. It is not just relaxing, but actually rejuvenating and healing, and it improves my physical health. It is also involves the spiritual practice of stating intentions.

4. **MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction)** is my second favorite form of meditation. Learn all about it and take a free, self-guided class at <https://palousemindfulness.com>. By the way, all the healthy people I know do some form of regular meditation/prayer. And even mainstream medicine is now fully on board with MBSR and recommending (prescribing) it for a range of conditions and ailments. It's always best to take an intro class in person if you can (even if it's online in person).

5. **Anything that produces the hormone oxytocin.** I first learned about oxytocin when studying to become a birth midwife. It is the love hormone. Not only is it released during sex, it helps get labor going and helps nursing moms sit still. You'll recognize these additional ways to release oxytocin and feel good:

- a. Petting the dog.
- b. Music—listening, singing, dancing.

- c. Warm conversation with friends.
- d. Getting outside, taking walks.
- e. Cooking a nice meal.
- f. Meditation.
- g. Yoga.
- h. Hugging (wrap your arms around yourself, hum, sway).
- i. EFT Tapping or Havening—so easy, so effective, so nurturing. It's all about neuroplasticity and mind-body connection. We can change old habits and patterns.
- j. Of course, everything elsewhere on this list can also help release Oxytocin.

6. **Okay, here's a different angle**—I must schedule time to be social. I am a very social person. It is not good for me to sit at my desk all day long, taking breaks only to go to the bathroom, eat, or get the mail. During this time of social distancing, I am not getting out in the world and seeing people regularly, and I am not teaching, learning and working in the same room with other people. The effect of this creeps up on me. I notice it when at the end of the day I am pacing my house asking, "What is wrong with me?" Or when I realize that the only outing I've had is a solitary walk to the park or grocery shopping. So, I resolve to accept any and all invitations to get together with friends, neighbors, acquaintances, and groups, whether it's online or outside. I need to talk to other people. If I don't

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schedule this, it won't happen. And then I end up being inappropriately emotional during a business meeting! At the beginning of the virus pandemic, a neighbor used the Nextdoor app to get us together each evening for a walk. We invited those who couldn't walk to come outside and wave from the porch as we passed. Great for building a sense of community (and releasing oxytocin).

7. **Exercise**—we all know we need it and you can't have a list of self-care suggestions without including it. Zumba videos, walks in all weather (with or without the fancy gear), yoga, dancing, even housecleaning. ☺ It releases oxytocin, too! The best resource for healthy and restorative movement books and videos is Katy Bowman, *Nutritious Movement*.

8. **Indulging in special visceral experiences**—castor oil compresses, hot bubble baths, fancy body butter—it's my newest favorite thing, smells good and helps with dry skin in the winter. What's your favorite? Go ahead, splurge!

9. **Finally, nurture your spiritual practice, whatever it is.** As the Dalai Lama says, "Pick a path and follow it" (or something like that). Spend time each day contemplating the big picture, something larger than yourself, and acknowledge your small part in the universe. Pray, create rituals, commune with nature, practice detachment, meditate. I do not see how we can do the work we do as caregivers and death workers without being connected to something outside of ourself or being on a path of discovery and humility. The work is too profound. For me, this is the most important aspect of self-care. It is the grand pause, the perspective, the connection, the hope, and the relief.