

SELF EMPOWERMENT TIPS

A Resource prepared by Zainab Amadahy

Self-empowerment, in this document, is self-care that recognizes your inter-connectedness to the universe. It takes your relationships into consideration, including those with the past, future, physical environment, social environment, history, ancestors and the spirit realm. While self care is often seen as the process of maintaining optimum wellness, **self empowerment** is about spiritual growth and “wellness” is one of many benefits.

In mainstream society self care tends to be thought of as something you do for yourself, independent of others. It's your personal responsibility and not that of your family or community. With self care you are often expected to withdraw from your day to day life to engage in something pleasurable; something that stimulates the senses and makes you feel good for a while. Many times this pleasurable activity costs money and relies on a sensual delight that is outside of yourself; dependent on something else being available and accessible. Examples include a spa day, a getaway vacation or pampering yourself with a pedicure.

While there's nothing wrong with experiencing pleasure, and these activities serve a purpose, research increasingly shows they are not the most effective forms of self empowerment. Many wisdom traditions have known this for millennia. Rather, activities that help us feel connected, that allow us to experience the joy of giving and sharing with others or provide opportunities to nurture life have deeper, more lasting benefits. These benefits can today be measured in our biochemistry and brain activity. Examples include gardening, hosting a baby shower or singing in a choir. Volunteering at the local community centre can be far more empowering and stress-busting than pleasure-seeking activities.

In addition, it is more self empowering to develop your inner reserves rather than rely on something external to shift how you feel. For example, have you ever seen someone vacationing in a beautiful natural environment but still unhappy? Their thoughts remain stuck in their day-to-day dramas. Or maybe they complain about the bugs, heat or lack of convenience. Meanwhile others in the exact same environment joyfully experience the moment, their daily stresses forgotten. Clearly self empowerment in this case is an inside job.

Indeed nature is a powerful stress-countering medicine when you can shift your focus and allow yourself to fully appreciate the life that surrounds you. Even when not in nature you can train yourself to look for and savour the good on a regular basis and this will result in a shift in your relationship with yourself and your life so that you experience an underlying temperament of joy and peace with your world. You develop the reserves to manage the difficult moments and are able to bounce back to a place of optimism and happiness.

Of course, there are many things in life you cannot change and acceptance can play a role in countering the stress reaction. But recognizing what **can** be changed, by you alone or by working with others, can feel incredibly empowering. In fact, the feeling of being alone and

isolated in a stressful job or relationship can be countered by joining with others to change unjust, unhealthy circumstances that you cannot change on your own. In this way self empowerment is related to collective empowerment. Everyone's self empowerment is impacted by the environmental degradation, social injustice and inequality. Our collective empowerment is realized when we work together to co-create social structures and processes that honour the wellbeing of individuals, communities and other life forms in the world.

A reasonable and balanced approach to activism can make you feel incredibly empowered while changing oppressive structures and practices in the world. For many of us, what attracts us to activism is the promise of working cooperatively with others in community to create positive social change. The reality of being an activist sometimes betrays that promise as you become stressed by relationship and power dynamics within activist circles as much as by injustice in mainstream society.

There are no easy answers but there are simple practices you can incorporate into your life to ensure clarity of mind, optimal physical wellbeing and spiritual connectedness regardless of what life throws at you - personal or political.

This list of suggested practices is based on the premise that your body is self-healing, self-correcting and doesn't lie. Nevertheless, being a human being you will always experience the full range of emotions; you will encounter sickness and difficulties, you will age and you will die. The question is do you want to experience your life and relationships with a sense of empowerment and joy? Or do you want to feel victimized, resentful and disempowered?

Clearly this is not a comprehensive list of practices but they are simple actions that go a long way toward supporting physical, mental and emotional wellbeing as well as spiritual growth. If you already have practices that work for you, the suggestions below will compliment what you're already doing.

You can choose one, all or any combination of these practices. They are all powerful according to new science as well as many wisdom traditions.

- 1. Make self-empowerment a priority.** You probably know a ton of self empowerment tips but they are useless to you if you don't practice them regularly. Obviously, self-empowerment needs to be among your highest priorities if you want to be empowered. Remember that the nature of empowerment requires you to assume it; it isn't something anyone else can give you. It doesn't come from outside of you. It's a choice you make.
- 2. Keep a Gratitude Journal:** many people who have tried this say it has changed their lives because it shifts their outlook on life. Focusing on gratitude for 5 minutes results in 5 hours of heightened immunity, accelerated healing & expanded mental capacities including problem solving, clarity and creativity. Studies show that intentionally cultivating gratitude correlates with a longer, healthier life.

- It's better if you can draw or doodle your gratitude entries. This gets you out of the left-brain and into the right.
- Don't just do a shopping list. Write/draw about why you're grateful to whom and for what.
- Stay in the mindset for a while, notice how gratitude feels in your body, notice that you're taking note and that this is healthy for you.

3. Commit to your own happiness

- Decide that you deserve to be happy.
- Acknowledge that everyone you connect to benefits from your joy in tangible and intangible ways.
- Understand what makes you happy (it's probably not material things) and grow it in your life.
- Understand that happiness isn't a permanent state of mind but it is an underlying temperament and approach to life.
- Give up the need to be right in favour of being happy.

4. Cultivate Mindfulness as a daily practice:

- People who have a mindfulness practice tend to be happier and healthier according to many indicators.
- Mindfulness is about observing yourself as if you were an outsider and then observing that you're observing.
- A mere 5 minutes a day can catalyze a dramatic shift in your mindset and wellbeing.
- Options:
 - a. Be still and focus on your body, scanning yourself from head to toe, exploring all sensations as they arise and fall away.
 - b. Breathe: Make your out-breath twice as long as in-breath (activates the vagal response)
 - Stimulating a vagal response slows the heart rate and generates feelings of inter-connectedness, bonding and basically puts one into a centred, focused, peaceful state that provides an ideal foundation from which to create, innovate and achieve.
- Mindfulness is particularly useful when you are triggered into a negative state. Mindfulness of your negative state, especially how your body reacts, is preferable to ignoring, denying or repressing emotions. You do not want to switch your focus to positivity to avoid negative feelings. Feel the feelings until you feel you sense a release of decrease in their intensity. Then you can switch your focus.
- Paying attention to your negative state of mind is less stressful than trying to refocus your attention to something positive. So if the negativity shows up it's better to explore it than turn away from it.
- **Do not** talk through your negative state. Do not explain, judge, criticize or analyze. This is an intellectual process that will impede your body's ability to heal the damage caused by stress. Stay out of your head. Simply observe.

- Mindfulness of negative states prevents them from getting stuck in the body and causing illness.

5. Offer Compassion:

- Pray for or send blessings/good wishes to another.
- Compassion enhances feelings of your connectedness to other living beings which ...
- Shifts your brain and your biochemistry toward physical health and improved mental capacity.
- Sending good wishes alleviates suffering (even over time and distance).
- Take ethical, honourable action to relieve another's suffering. (The compassion circuit includes a part of the brain responsible for planning action.) This doesn't have to be time consuming or expensive. The action can be small or large, do whatever is in your capacity.
- Be mindful of your capacity or you'll burn out. Stay open to the messages your body sends.
- Work with others to alleviate suffering and injustice in the world.

6. Self-Compassion

- Don't forget to be self-compassionate (treating yourself to the same kindness, understanding and forgiveness you offer others).
- Studies show that self-compassionate people are less likely to burn out or suffer from compassion fatigue.
- When upset with yourself notice how you feel, emphasize the temporary nature of the feeling, tell yourself everyone has experienced this from time to time and it's part of being human.
- Rather than seeing your situation as unique, think about how your situation helps you connect to others. Example: Feeling insecure about money allows me to empathize with others who have even less than I do.

7. Switch Your Action Orientation

- If working to right injustice in the world leaves you feeling burdened or stressed out switch your focus and work to bring more joy, beauty and right relationship into the world. This might require mere a mental tweak or a comprehensive reorientation of what you do. Nevertheless, a simple shift in understanding yourself as being "anti" something to being "pro" something makes a huge difference to your happiness and wellbeing. So instead of describing yourself as an anti-oppression activist, call yourself an equity or justice activist. Define your work around the positive vision rather than what you don't want in the world.
 - Example 1: Instead of working to decolonize yourself and your world reframe what you do to "reviving Indigenous values and lifeways". This reframing centres the optimistic vision rather than colonization.
 - Example 2: Instead of setting a goal to lose 20 pounds, decide to adopt one wellness practice a week (sleep more, make dietary changes, meditate, move

more, etc.). The reframing here is to switch your mindset away from losing or giving up something to enriching your life in some way. You may or may not lose the weight but you'll feel better and possibly get to a point where it doesn't matter.

- Positive framing of your goals and vision looks different in your brain and facilitates your ability to achieve what you're working for **and** feel better about the journey.

8. Spend time in nature or surround yourself with nature

- Even fake nature (photos, art objects, sounds) or imagining/fantasizing about nature can reverse stress and promote wellbeing.
- Studies don't tell even half the story but nature promotes wellbeing at the material, energetic and spiritual levels. Ever heard of nature deficit disorder?

9. Define and describe yourself in empowering ways.

- While genuine humility is helpful it isn't helpful to criticize and judge yourself, publically or privately. **You are your story so make it a great one.**
- Use empowering words to describe yourself and your choices, even when talking to yourself.
 - Examples: How often do you say "can't" instead of "won't"? How often do you say, "I should" instead of "I will"? "I want to be"... instead of "I am"?
 - How many times have you talked about your choices as events that have happened to you? "I have to help my mother..." instead of "I choose to help my mother..."? "I had to buy it" instead of "I chose to buy it." "We have to blockade this highway" versus "we've chosen to block this highway in order to ..."
- Belief can follow the talk. Fake it till you make it.

10. Keep a Self Compliments Journal: give yourself 3 compliments a day.

- Stay away from physical attributes.
- Don't repeat your compliments. Make them different every day.
- This can apply to groups. A grounding exercise to start off meetings might be that everyone answers a question like: "What do you most like about working in this group?" or "Why I'm grateful this group exists".
- Give others sincere compliments. Then compliment yourself for doing it. 😊

11. Smile. Even if you're not feeling it (although it's better if you do). Smiling:

- Counters the stress reaction
- Calms the heart
- Boosts immunity
- Lowers blood pressure
- Oxygenates the blood
- Improves memory, learning, alertness, creativity
- Increases endorphin, serotonin and dopamine levels
- Lifts the spirits of those who receive your smile.

12. Do something that will make you (and others) laugh:

- A laughing brain looks a lot like the meditative brain.
- It's good for your abdominals.
- You get all the benefits of smiling.
- Promotes brain integration, which enhances physical health and expands mindset.
- Laughing together with others creates a collective magnetic field that literally sends good vibes into the world.
- When you laugh your body produces pheromones that lift the spirits of others and create a sense of connection.
- Your magnetic field will always sync to the highest vibration in the room. So the good feelings can spiral upward to infinity.
- Fake it till you make it.

13. Distinguish between sensual pleasure and internal fulfillment.

It's common to confuse what's pleasurable in the moment with what sustains long-term joy. Pleasure tends to be about engaging the senses in something that feels good. Your pleasure in this case is 1) dependent on the presence of something external to you and 2) short-lived. The causes of a joyful temperament are more likely to be based in your approach to life and relationships, including your relationship with yourself.

14. Move your body or think about moving your body

- Stimulates endorphins, dopamine, serotonin & other biochemicals that enhance physical wellness and good feelings
- Your body isn't able to tell the difference between your thoughts about moving and actually moving.

15. Commit to Your Own Spiritual Development

- Strive to be a better person – whatever that means to you.
- Cultivate self-awareness and personal growth. Suggestions:
 - Mindfulness practices are powerful (See #4).
 - Some find journaling helpful. If you enjoy journaling here are some questions you can contemplate:
 - What do I love about my life?
 - What great things have I accomplished this week/month/year?
 - What really matters to me in this moment?
 - How was I useful today and how can I be useful tomorrow?
 - Why am I proud of myself?
 - What does my ideal world look and feel like?
- Your relationships can help you become more self aware. What do your feelings and reactions to others teach you about yourself?
- Choose to be around people who inspire you to become better.
- Role model what you consider to be honourable behavior.

16. Know and Live Your Values

- Living in a way that doesn't align with what you value is stressful.
- If you value honesty, be honest. If you value kindness, be kind. If you value peace, be peaceful.

17. Minimize Your Exposure to Negativity

- Yes, you need to know what's going on in the world and be there for people who are in distress but you don't have to immerse yourself in despair 24/7.
- Ask yourself if there is a good reason to listen to the same negative story over and over. If there is no new information coming in, cut yourself off. (Turn off the TV, close Facebook, walk away from the conversation, change the subject, etc.)
- When you hear a story that triggers or upsets you, accept and feel your feelings, explore them in the body, etc. (See #4) After that think about reframing that story into something that is more empowering. Does it inspire you to action? Does it reassure you that the work you're doing is useful? Does it spark ideas or insights? Is it good that this story is out in the world? Can you retell the story in a more empowering way and encourage others to do the same?
- If the story comes from an individual, think about how you can help that person shift their story so it's more empowering for them to tell it. What makes you feel more empowered when you are sharing a sad, traumatizing or painful story? Feeling heard? Answering clarifying questions? Being referred to resources? Hearing statements of empathy and compassion? Do that for others.
- Reframe stories out there so they are more empowering, inspire and offer hope.
- Notice if you are caught up in the energy of a negative story and do something about it.
- Immerse yourself in positive, optimistic stories - real or fictional.

18. Cultivate Optimism and Hope

- If you can't envision it you can't achieve it.
- Optimism and hope feel better, promote wellbeing and inspire others.
- Focus on the **feelings** of accomplishing your vision.
- Keep a vision board to stimulate your imagination and stir up excitement.
- Draw and doodle aspects of your vision to get out of the intellect.
- Having **realistic** goals and taking time to envision them, fantasize about them and imagine yourself working toward them increases your chances of achieving the goal.
- This is equally true for groups: groups that take time to vision together, revisit the vision, adjust the vision and communicate the vision to others are more likely to achieve their goals.
- Vision about the big picture rather than material, parochial matters.

19. Gift and Share

- Do it with a light and loving heart without any sense of obligation or expectation.

- Increases levels of oxytocin, nitrous oxide, DHEA and other health promoting biochemicals.
- Reverses the stress reaction.
- Positive benefits are heightened and prolonged when you gift or share anything.

20. Learn how to receive graciously

- Giving and receiving need to be in balance. It is a cycle that needs to stay in process.
- Over giving leads to resentment and exhaustion.
- Receiving enables another to benefit from the experience of giving.
- Receiving gives you the opportunity to practice feeling that you are deserving and loveable.

21. Cooperate and volunteer

- Heightens immunity, accelerates healing & expands mental capacities including problem solving, clarity and creativity.
- Studies show people who volunteer and are predisposed to cooperation live longer, healthier lives.
- Even witnessing kindness brings measurable physical benefits.
- Many studies indicate that cooperation makes goal achievement more likely - even in the business world.
- One study suggests 2 hours a week is the optimum amount of volunteering.
 - The number is different for everyone and varies with the situation however the point suggests two things: 1) Volunteering your time without expectation of receiving anything in return is healthy and makes you happy and 2) Volunteering beyond your capacity causes stress and jeopardizes the value of what you're offering.

22. Give up arguing

- Understand the difference between arguing and discussing.
- Possible alternatives to arguing:
 - Ask questions designed to help people work things out for themselves, consider different ideas and come to their own conclusions.
 - Try to understand why others feel strongly. What is the fear or emotion behind her/his position? Name that emotion and assure her/him it's reasonable to feel that way.
 - Share your own fear or concerns about the implications of her/his beliefs or opinions. This can help her/him consider something s/he hadn't previously.
 - Decide if anything you say is likely to shift the person's mindset. If not, walk away and save yourself the grief. There are others who will be open to a discussion.
 - For your own peace of heart, wish that person happiness. You don't have to agree with her/him but acknowledge their humanity and that s/he has as much right to happiness as anyone.

- Stay open to the possibility that you might be mistaken.

23. Make Music or Art

- If you enjoy art and create with a (self) compassionate spirit you will enjoy heightened immunity, accelerated healing & expanded mental capacities including problem solving, clarity and creativity.
- The more you exercise your creative capacities the stronger they become.

24. Pets:

- If you can afford and enjoy a pet, get one.
- Studies: people with pets are healthier & live longer.
- Pets lower your blood pressure, lessen your anxiety and boost your immunity.
- Assuming you're not afraid, merely petting a cat or dog slows the heart rate, counters the stress reaction, and elevates dopamine and serotonin levels (mood stabilizers) while lowering triglyceride and cholesterol ("bad" fat) levels.
- Pet owners are less likely to suffer from depression and are more likely to recover from or live longer after serious events like stroke and heart attack.
- People who own pets make less frequent doctor and hospital visits and enjoy better overall health.
- Contrary to previous beliefs, children raised in homes where there are pets are at less risk of allergies, asthma and eczema.
- Pets offer you opportunities to give and share every day.
- Pets give you many opportunities to laugh throughout the day.

25. Deliberately recall positive memories, imagine or fantasize: The body doesn't distinguish between what's really going on from what you focus your attention on. Allocate time in your day or journal around positive, fulfilling and uplifting ideas.

26. Slow Down and Focus

- Fight your instinct to speed up and multitask when under pressure.
- Take frequent breaks. Cut back. Doing things slowly and mindfully not only increases your enjoyment but improves productivity while minimizing mistakes.
- Multitasking looks like stress in the brain and decreases your enjoyment of what you're doing. It also impedes your wellbeing.
- Prioritize, decide what you can and can't do and make tradeoffs.
- Strategize on how you can avoid being in a position where you must hurry or multitask.

27. Remember the 5:1 ratio.

- For every minute you spend in a negative brain state you need 5 minutes to reverse the physical stress impact.

28. Take risks

- They don't have to be big or life threatening. Take small steps in the direction you feel drawn.
- Risk taking builds confidence even when mistakes are made.
- Note and celebrate when you have taken a risk, whatever the outcome.

29. Tell yourself the truth.

- If you don't know your truth, test it in your body. Truth always feels better in your body than a lie.
- If what you're doing or who you're doing it with doesn't energize you it's time for a change.

30. Ask yourself seed questions.

- Seed questions are questions that you plant in the universe and then wait to see what grows.
- Examples:
 - How can things get better?
 - What are the opportunities in this moment?
 - What would it take to change this?
 - What else is possible?
 - How can I contribute?
 - What am I missing?
- Do not answer them. Stay out of your head. Practice being still to allow the Universe to answer them for you.
- As you don't expect a planted seed to germinate overnight, your questions may take time to germinate answers.
- Staying open to possibilities helps you see them when they show up.
- Answers may come in the form of serendipity, coincidence or random occurrences. If you're mindful you'll see them when they appear.

In sum, the most effective and lasting self empowerment practices are those that:

- 1. Strengthen your inner reserves.**
- 2. Cultivate your connectedness to other life forms.**
- 3. Contribute to honourable social change.**

Hope this resource was useful. Best wishes on your self empowerment journey.

For a more in depth exploration of these ideas visit Zainab Amadahy's website at www.swallowsongs.com where you will find information on her workshops and publications.