

How to Cope: Self-Care versus Self-Soothing

Now that we've acknowledged and given you permission to experience the different reactions you may be having, let's explore how to cope with those reactions by defining **self-care** versus **self-soothing**. The concept of self-care has become heavily commercialized and is often used as a punch line for pleasurable activities. For example, "I'm getting my nails done—self-care!" or "I'm taking myself shopping—self-care!" or even "I'm buying myself this new cell phone—self-care!" To be clear, none of these activities are inherently bad for you and likely will lead to a boost in your mood. However, these activities are not necessarily forms of self-care; they are forms of self-soothing (Schlessinger, 2019). **Self-soothing** activities help us feel better in some way and provide us with a distraction or increased comfort, but they do not lead to long-term healing.

Self-care, on the other hand, is geared toward healing. Self-care is what it sounds like: It is actually taking care of yourself and attending to your physical, emotional, relational, or financial needs. For example, take a situation where I felt stressed after one of my friends asked me to plan her baby shower. For me, self-soothing involved the decision to take a bubble bath while watching my favorite show. Engaging in this activity allowed me to feel a temporary sense of calm as I was able to distract myself from my anxiety and stress. Alternatively, self-care in this situation would involve initiating a conversation with my friend to let her know that I did not feel emotionally ready to plan her baby shower. Again, this is not to state that one method is better than the other. Indeed, we sometimes need to self-soothe before we can feel emotionally stable enough to engage in the work of self-care. For example, in my situation, I needed to engage in a self-soothing activity to help me feel more grounded and less distressed *before* I could have that difficult conversation with my friend.

The following table further clarifies the difference between self-care and self-soothing by providing some examples of each.

Self-Care Activities	Self-Soothing Activities
• Going to therapy • Meditating • Exercising • Accepting ownership of your finances • Saying yes or no when you really need to • Eating the right food for your body even if it isn't what you want • Eating regular meals even if you only want to snack • Going to sleep early when you're tired • Keeping boundaries • Seeking medical care for physical ailments • Confronting difficult conversations with thoughtfulness and maturity	• Taking a bubble bath • Going on a coffee date with yourself • Practicing aromatherapy • Keeping a gratitude journal • Binge watching your favorite show • Coloring • Putting on a face mask • Giving yourself a facial • Knitting • Reading • Making your favorite treat