Review

Natalia Pilarska[1]
Kazimierz Wielki University, Faculty of Psychology
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5545-1752

Lakshmin, P. (2024). *Real Self-Care (crystals, cleanses, and bubble baths not included).* Laurum, pp. 256

Pooja Lakshmin is a certified psychiatrist with a doctorate in medical sciences. She comes from a South Asian immigrant family, lives in the United States, and bases her concept of *self-care* on these socio-cultural circumstances. The author of the book for women *Real self-care (crystals, cleanses, and bubble baths not included)* shares her personal experiences with her readers (including her time in a cult, undergoing in vitro fertilisation, dilemmas related to marriage) that have influenced her current perception of reality, and her professional experiences (by recalling specific situations from her practice), which she uses to illustrate the content discussed. The author's education is relevant in the context of the book's subject matter. Self-care has recently become a very popular phenomenon (there are currently over 92 million posts with the hashtag *#selfcare* on Instagram!). The slogan is often used in advertising by places such as gyms, beauty salons, wellness centres, and vitamin and supplement shops, which shows how differently the definition of self-care can be understood. What is more, in the age of pop psychology, where facts and myths are mixed together and permanently permeate our everyday lives (Lilienfeld et al., 2010), it is very important to distinguish between what is scientific and what is pseudoscience. This is what the title of the book *Real self-care (crystals, cleanses, and bubble baths not included)* refers to, in which the author refers with indignation to the false image of self-care, revealing its function as the apparent protection of mental health. In her work, she cites numerous publications whose findings confirm the author's thoughts and recommendations, and even a tool for self-work. Although the title of the book refers to some extent to self-help guides, and the culture of self-care is becoming manipulative, this book is written with a common-sense approach and genuine concern for its readers.

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[1] Correspondence address: pilarska@ukw.edu.pl.

The book consists of an introduction, two main parts (eight chapters in total), a summary and appendices. In the first part, entitled *The tyranny of false self-care*, the reader learns about the ineffectiveness of all wellness activities that, in the long run, will not cure women of feelings of exhaustion, burnout, depression or anxiety. Referring to Greg McKeown's book *Simple: Make the important things matter* (2021), the author distinguishes between two approaches to self-care: self-care as a method (in the form of a noun – it can be applied in a specific situation, but it does not allow for understanding the causes of difficulties, is reactive in nature, and is the wrong method) and self-care as a principle (in the form of a verb – it can be used in a wide range of situations and repeatedly, allows for understanding the causes of difficulties, is proactive in nature, and is the right method). In addition, the reader learns about three categories of behaviour that indicate false self-care: self-care as an escape (expressed, for example, in the form of trips that are supposed to "temporarily" fix everyday life devoid of self-care), self-care as achievement (which involves enormous pressure to identify with the trend of self-care, often underpinned by shame) and self-care as optimisation (expressed in the form of achieving high performance, but devoid of self-compassion). None of these methods provide relief and leave those who practise them constantly searching for something.

In the second part of the book, *True self-care is inner work*, the author compares self-care to eudaimonic well-being (cf. Ryff, 1989). She defines it, following Ryan et al. (2001), as focusing on finding meaning and acting in accordance with one's own values. In other words, it is the pursuit of a sense that our lives have meaning, and in order to achieve eudaimonic well-being, we should follow the following four principles, based on a type of behavioural therapy called ACT (acceptance and commitment therapy):

1. Setting boundaries and letting go of guilt (involves assertiveness training, cognitive defusion and psychological flexibility).
2. Treating yourself with compassion (i.e. developing knowledge about self-care by replacing self-judgement with self-kindness, letting go of perfectionism, recognising community and taking an interest in yourself, which again is related to psychological flexibility).
3. Getting closer to yourself (the main goal here is to understand your values and resolve internal conflicts in this area, as well as practising gratitude).
4. Using power (by strengthening your complexity, finding autonomy within yourself, and cultivating care for the community).

The principles listed above are the titles of chapters in which the reader can find numerous exercises in true self-care, as well as a test to check oneself and assess one's assertiveness, and although this tool is not a standardised questionnaire, it is certainly able to highlight areas that require work on one's behaviour.

Each chapter begins with a carefully selected quote. A unique feature of the book is its friendly and humorous tone towards readers ("Yes, dear reader, you are right. I am asking you to do extra work – you caught me."). For better comprehension, the author has prepared summaries in the form of tables, in which she lists the most important content in a given chapter, indicates coping strategies,

highlights difficulties in implementing recommendations (in subsections entitled: "Sounds great, but…"), and describes other important information (e.g., she distinguishes between the effectiveness of self-care in healthy people and those struggling with mental illness, where specialist care and often pharmacotherapy are necessary). In addition, the book ends with appendices – these are materials for independent study (*The true self-care compass*), a guide to true self-care exercises, and tips on seeking professional help. Unfortunately, there are minor errors in the book (e.g., the table on page 65 contains the word "escape" instead of "optimisation"; there are also editorial errors), but overall, the book is prepared with great care and maturity. After reading it, one gets the impression that the recommendations the author tries to convey can largely be treated as universal, which means that they will be applicable in different cultures (however, it is worth noting that the author herself shares her concerns about their universality with her readers). For example, the author uses the term *martyr mode*, which also appears in Polish literature (De Barbaro, 2021) and culture. An additional great advantage of the book is that it addresses important social issues (i.e. racism, women's rights, gender stereotypes) that are the source of current difficulties not only for the author's patients, but also for many women. The book is interesting, valuable and has enormous preventive potential for women's mental health.

References

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