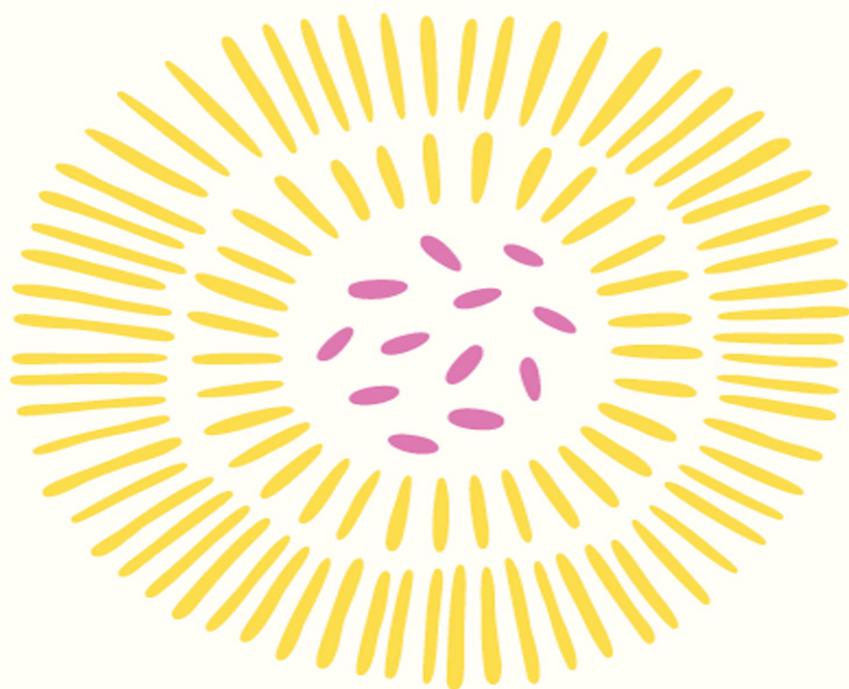


KANDICE COLE



The Joyful Woman's Guide to

Self-Care

*Refresh, Reset, Restore, and
Reclaim Your Life*

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Disclaimer: If you know or suspect you have a health problem, it is recommended you seek your medical or mental health professional's advice.

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MY STORY

I have been obsessed with checklists and planning since I was a young child. Maybe it is because I'm a Virgo. It might be because I am the oldest child or simply because I like being in control. Whatever the reason, I have always loved having a solid plan with all of the details organized meticulously. I remember picking out the colors for my wedding in high school, and I even created a timeline of when I would have children, too. My perfect life checklist went something like this:

- Get college degrees.
- Get a great job.
- Get married.
- Have kids.
- Travel.
- And live happily ever after.

Interesting how the happily ever after didn't happen until I had done so many things. After graduating high school, I started checking things off that list. I graduated from college, being the first person in my immediate family to graduate with Bachelor and Master's degrees. After a rigorous year-long teaching residency in Chicago, I moved to Sacramento and began my teaching career at a newly formed charter school. About three months into that teaching assignment, something did not feel right. I felt off balance, and just felt a general sense of apathy about many things.

Being a first year teacher in a startup school was particularly tough. I had to juggle between finding my balance as a new teacher, while taking on many responsibilities to help create a school culture that was being built from the ground up. It was an exciting challenge that had so many unknown elements. I was working non-stop, often bringing work home and staying up late into the night. When I finally did go to bed, I was absolutely exhausted. This reality was something that I heard other teacher friends experiencing, and I remained hopeful that it would get better. I was a new

teacher, in a new city, at a new school. That was a lot of transition and it would take time to find my footing. This was the real world of being an adult, and this beginning phase was just part of the course.

Every morning, I hoped that I would wake up feeling like my regular self. I longed to feel something different. I wanted life to have a flow to it and finally click into place. Instead, I felt like I was running on a treadmill that kept going faster and faster. Every day I woke up, I felt more exhausted. Now a new feeling, sadness, had joined the morning routine. I tried to shake this feeling and convince myself that this too would pass. I read personal development books and listened to uplifting music. I prayed and wrote out positive affirmations on notecards. I even joined the local chapter of my sorority to meet some new people in the city. This feeling of tired sadness lingered like a cloud that steadily hovered over me. The color of my world was getting duller and losing its vibrancy. This was not a part of my checklist and I had no plan for this. I didn't know how to make sense of what was happening to me. Instead of leaning in for support, from those close to me, I isolated myself because I was too embarrassed to share how I was really feeling.

The gap between how I wanted to feel and how I was actually feeling was growing wider day after day. Some days I could shrug it off long enough to focus and do work, but the exhaustion got increasingly worse, and the sadness would linger longer. It was becoming harder to focus and I felt very unmotivated to do anything. I was falling behind with grading papers and organizing my classroom. On the weekends, I only wanted to lay on the couch and watch TV, which didn't help me feel more rested or happy.

I assumed that the source of my unhappiness was this particular teaching job. I started obsessing about switching to a school that was more established and that would offer more support for a fledgling teacher like myself. I thought about moving back to Chicago where I had a strong personal and professional network. I connected these uncomfortable emotions with external situations and desperately wanted relief. Seven months after starting, I officially quit my first teaching job. I partially felt like a failure, but honestly I felt like I could take a breath. I made another plan: Regroup, get back to my regular self and find another teaching job.

I had thought about doing substitute teaching, but decided I needed a break from teaching at least for the rest of the school year. I still wanted to

work with kids, so I went back to my babysitting roots and found a job as a nanny for an infant with a really great family. Over the course of a few months, I started to feel like myself again. I was sleeping better. I was journaling every day. I was given a bike and rode to work a few days a week enjoying the scenery. I was also taking walks with the baby almost daily and that lifted my spirits. I started to feel less exhausted when I woke up. I could see and feel glimmers of happiness returning. It was as if a long winter was finally making way for springtime. I felt like myself again, meaning I felt more energized and happy. I checked regroup off of my list along with getting back to my regular self. Now I was ready to get back into teaching.

The following year, I moved back to Chicago excited to start teaching again. I was smarter and wiser this time around. I had a stronger support network in Chicago for navigating the new teacher phase. I found a job at a school where I had previously done student teaching, and was given the space to try new things in the classroom. I taught the entire school year and didn't quit. It had its challenges, but I genuinely enjoyed being in the classroom with my students.

As summer rolled around, I had so much to celebrate. I accepted a new teaching position at my dream school, a place where I had done the majority of my student teaching and where teacher development was a top priority. I dove into professional development opportunities and connected with my colleagues. I ended up teaching for two years at the school, but something started to change in that second year. I started feeling that exhaustion and sadness that I had felt during my first teaching job. It was not as intense, but it was there pulsing underneath it all. I found myself increasingly doing more work, and staying up later to complete it. We had a rigorous curriculum, and were a high performing school. I once again attributed it to the job and that it was crunch time with assessments. Teaching in a public school is not easy, and retention rates for teachers are pretty low across the country. Maybe I had just picked a profession that was inevitably going to exhaust me. With this realization in mind, I made the decision to leave teaching.

Over the next few years, I explored different routes including consulting, freelance work, and nonprofit management. The same pattern persisted as it related to my energy. I would go full steam ahead and things would be okay for a while. I would throw all of my attention and energy

into a project and feel fine. Then, I would sputter out, lose motivation, and feel unhappy. I could push through and get things done, but it was not what I wanted to be the norm. Looking back, I see that I was experiencing burnout, but in the early 2010s that term was not being used like it is today.

It took me a long time to see that a particular job or industry was not the sole cause of my unhappiness and sadness. I had a habit of diving into new jobs and endeavors, without ever coming up for air. I would eagerly put so many things on my plate and then feel the effects later. By the time I noticed how I was feeling, I was so exhausted that I ended up getting sick or missing important deadlines. I didn't understand this pattern until many years later when I started journaling and working with a therapist. Turns out, I was not actually taking care of myself as well as I had imagined. I continued to experience this as I checked things off of that ideal life checklist. I got married. I did some traveling. After being married for six years, we welcomed our first child into the world.

After having my daughter, I was consumed with newborn life and the learning curve of being a first time parent. My husband and I were going through a tough time financially, which meant he was working longer hours to make ends meet. I was completely overwhelmed with motherhood and struggling through postpartum depression. Some days it felt difficult to even get out of bed and take a shower. I felt irritable and sad most of the time.

This felt familiar, but even more intense than before and I wanted to do something different. I knew that I had to disrupt this burnout pattern that had been happening for the past decade. I didn't know what to do quite yet, but I knew that I wanted to be a happy mother, wife, and person in general. Of all the things I had put on my checklist, being happy was not specified. I had assumed that doing certain things would guarantee happiness, but that was not the case. Happiness was about what was going on inside of me, and I needed to focus on that. I didn't know how I was going to do that, but I was ready for a change.

As I became ready, resources started to find me. Kind of like when the student is ready to learn, the teacher appears. Over the course of many years, I would come to understand the importance of a consistent, and varied self-care routine. It took a lot of things for me to understand the entire process of taking care of myself. There is a lot that happened between

where I am now and where I was. And it is a lot of space between where I am currently, and where I want to be in my wellness journey.

This book is about how messy and joyfully worthwhile it is to develop a self-care practice. While it would be nice for everything to work out perfectly when it comes to taking care of yourself, the journey is not linear. It is more like putting together a puzzle. You add a piece here and see if it fits, then you do that over and over again until you create something that is whole. So much of our self-care, or lack thereof, is a result of beliefs, experiences, and societal narratives that we carry with us. It takes a tremendous amount of patience and acceptance to stay committed to self-care.

If you feel resistant as you read this book, know that it is okay. If you feel so exhausted that you can't even imagine being any other way, know you are not alone. I used to have days when I didn't want to get out of bed and wanted to hide under the blankets. I couldn't imagine a day when I would want to get out of bed and actually feel joy and peace constantly. Yet, this morning, I got out of bed and felt good. It took a bunch of small steps (and missteps) to find my way back to myself, but it was a journey worth taking.

Showing up is what matters. You might show up excited or scared, but you still show up. You might show up sad and tired. You might be at one hundred percent or at one percent. You keep showing up because you are that important. And you know what? There is not a finite arrival point on your self-care journey, it's more like milestones and checkpoints that show how you are evolving. You will learn lessons, grow, evolve, and repeat the process over and over as your life changes. Your self-care journey is an ongoing act that requires something different at certain stages of your life. I think making peace with that has been the saving grace for me. I am not the same person I was a few months ago. You are not the same person you were a few months ago. It is up to you to honor who you are becoming instead of trying to force yourself to be something that no longer fits. As I write this book during the pandemic, I know many of you have had to completely rethink your life. You have had to really grapple with what taking care of yourselves really means.

This book is not a cookie cutter step by step process. It is more of a reflective guide to help you move through your own unique way of understanding your self-care journey. That being said, it does not have to

be read in order. You can pick whatever chapter seems right for you at the moment. Give yourself what you need, and always trust that you know exactly what you need.

You are a brilliant person who is doing a lot. You have put yourself on the back burner for far too long. You may have started prioritizing your self-care, but there is more terrain to cover and more to deepen into, too. Coming back to yourself is a journey worth taking. On the other side of the exhaustion is something beautiful. On the other side of the transition is something exquisite. Who you are when you prioritize rest is the truth of who you really are.

I will not make any grand promises about what this book will do for you. My hope is that this book will encourage you to stand in your power, and create a life that is a source of constant nourishment and love.

Find a comfortable spot, get your favorite drink, and get ready to practice self-care all the time.

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