

If you could be the healthiest you have ever been in body, mind and spirit, what would you be like? What would you do differently? How would you get through a crisis?

Self-neglect can breed unfair expectations of the world. We anticipate that others will do for us what is really ours to do for ourselves. When you don't take care of yourself, you may find that you want someone else to inappropriately do it for you. When you don't take special notice of your inner life, you may find that you will disproportionately want people to notice it. When you don't attend to your own needs, you may start unfairly expecting others to attend to them. And when "the others" don't come through, you get to hold a grudge and say,

"See? I was right. I AM invisible."

Asking for help is paramount to a life of sound self-care. But to a certain degree, validation of self is not anyone else's job but our own. When we take responsibility for some of our pain, it begins to go away. However, instead of always conducting ourselves in a healthy manner, sometimes we get foolhardy with our lives and our bodies. For some, our "drug of choice" is a single act of defiance; for others, it can be a co-occurrence of risky behaviors. Whatever the method, a lack of routine self-care can lead to contamination of the invisible kingdom.

I always expected everyone to fix everything because I didn't know how to do it myself. Everyone else seems to make the impossible look possible. I was so desperate to find someone who had figured it out that I never realized there was no genie coming to grant me my three wishes. There was and is only me, but I didn't know where or who "me" was and I never thought it would be okay for me to be clueless. All I did know was I had to find myself to heal myself. Not to find a way out but to find a way to actually feel I'm still okay. I realized that, in order to allow myself to begin living again, I have to set myself free from the deception, the lies and all the denial haunting my every move. I'm beginning to awaken from the darkness that has so long surrounded me, not always wishing for change but finding happiness somewhere in the destiny I've been handed. Today I am without

answers but less confused than before. In no way can I say I'm where I want or need to be but finally I have an idea of the direction I need to go.

– Kelly, age 20

Here is my list of instructions for a healthier life of self-care:

Action. Feel your feelings, then do something. Brush your teeth. Do your homework. Feed your goldfish. Answer your email. Pay your bills. Tie your shoes. Drink your milk. Eat your dinner. Call your mother. Attend to whatever is in front of you and stay responsible. Regardless of your pain, do something. Eventually, the seemingly tedious tasks will become gifts to get you through the day. Jonathan from Florida says, “The way I see it, there’s nothing bigger than the little things. Life is in the details.”

I will only live until tomorrow

Until tomorrow becomes today

I will only live until tomorrow

– Sam, age 15

Believe. Faith is itself the act of asking for faith. Cast your net far and wide and allow the universe to work for you. Believe that there is magic in you. Believe in something. Your dreams. The stars. Your screen name. One teenager’s screen name read ‘Butgodisnowhere.’ Upon first inspection, it reads “but God is nowhere.” But if you look closely, it can also read, “But God is Now Here.”

Every minute that you don't spend appreciating the good things you have is a minute you could be closer to losing those very things without the recognition they deserve. We must take advantage of every opportunity we have to express our love, to spend time together, to search for that piece of faith that is within all of us. It is up to all of us to live each moment together and never forget who and what means most. Things can be replaced; people cannot.

– Michael, age 20

Compassion. Always be kind and gentle. As you grow, there will be much that people will want to share with you and show you, but they will be afraid because vulnerability is a scary thing. Help them carry the burden of life’s lessons and assist them to find room for joy alongside

of pain. Your compassion and goodness will tell them that it's okay to be fragile. In that way, they can be made to feel safe again. Sam is a fifteen year-old from Washington DC with "out of the bottle" dyed green hair. "They say, 'It's not easy being green,'" he told me, "but I needed to find out for myself." One of the ways to break the cycle of inward aggression is to treat ourselves with the same compassion we would offer someone else that we love. Where is the compassion for yourself? Sometimes, there are no right or wrong answers or actions, only opportunities to do things differently. Ask yourself, is this working or is there a better way?

You know you are grown up when your heart feels deeper and you start to care more about people. More than I want to help the people that are hurting, I want to help the people that are making them hurt!
—Yvonne, age 17

Dream. When life gives you a multiple choice question, answer (D) all of above.

There is so much more out there. I can feel it. I can taste it. It haunts my dreams. I want it all.
—Haley, age 19

Exercise. Get into an on-going, consistent routine that you employ every day of your life. Exercise helps channel your energy in positive and healthy ways, relieves stress and anxiety and gives you a chance to take care of your body at the same time. We all internalize our issues in different ways and learn to handle our emotions through many different methods. The most important thing is to figure out what works best for you. Some people like to deal with problems and stresses by playing sports, walking their dog or going for a run. Whatever you do, as long as it helps to relieve your anxiety and focuses your attention on the betterment of your mind, body and spirit, will be true self-help and care.

I use exercise and physical fitness as my method of self-help. I go to the gym everyday; I have a trainer; I take exercise classes; I do yoga and I like to go on walks, hike, swim and dance. For me, expending extra energy and built-up tension through movement and action works the best. When I go to the gym, I leave my cell phone in the car, take my headphones and favorite

CD's and only allow myself to bring fun reading material. In this way, I always associate fun and freedom with exercise and fitness. Exercise helps me prepare for my day by allowing me time in the morning to sort my thoughts and figure out my plans. It helps me sit still in class by giving me a means to expel the extra energy I would normally not know what to do with during the day. It gets my blood flowing and sends those much needed endorphins rushing through my body. It clears my head and relieves pent-up stress and anxiety. And of course, it keeps me in shape and helps me stay healthy. I have come to depend on this hour and a half everyday. No one can bother me and nothing can upset me. Even if you can't get to a gym or don't have a free hour-and-a-half everyday, take some time to go on a walk, to take a run or to do some stretching and breathing exercises. Over time and with consistency, you will feel better – mentally, emotionally and of course, physically.

– Amy, age 20

Fear. Be willing to be afraid. Chris is a teen in a Juvenile Detention Center who writes, “I am scared, but I don't say that to people because I don't want to sound like a little kid.” Fear is just adrenalin, another color with which to paint onto the canvas of your world. Learn to live with it. Fear is the thing that helps you finish crossing the street. It is not who you are; it is just what's visiting you, sometimes emboldening you. Honor it because it makes you accessible. As eighteen year-old Marc says, “I live my life in fear. That's why I live my life.” What's the point of fear if it doesn't help you grow stronger?

The undeniable truth remains that I am scared that I won't fit in. I am scared that my parents will ground me next weekend. I am scared that I won't receive honor roll on my next report card. But it's okay to be scared and it's okay to make mistakes. I don't need to test my problem-free blessings. I feel that by trusting these facts I can truly value my life as well as the lives of others.

– Krista, age 16

Gratitude. Alfonso is a teenager who said, “I have been thinking about all the things that I have been blessed with in this life. Gratitude brings with it a strange peace that I forget was always there. I now see how

much we would win if we only learned to be grateful for all the things we have in life.”

I was walking home from the gym one morning feeling very dizzy and uncomfortable, trudging through the gross, slushy streets where mud was gathering on my shoes. I was about to say, “Uch, this is such an awful day,” when all of a sudden I realized that I am able to feel the slushy rain on my feet and able to walk to and from the gym. I am here right now. It was as if the ground began to sparkle making it seem like jewels were coming up from the mud. I was able to take a bad day and turn it into a beautiful experience.

– Gretchen, age 16

Heart. Love, as a verb. As an action. As a daily task. Especially love those who are hardest to love, for they need it the most. Sometimes love hurts. It gives you ground only to take it out from under you, making you chase after it. Keep chasing it. Joe is a cab driver in Illinois who once said, “I’m nothing special. You can cross me out, you can beat me up but you cannot kill my love. I’m someone who is able to tell people that I love them.” Sandy is a wise friend who keeps reminding me to “love the averageness in all people.” And finally, Doug is a teenager with unbounded instinct who says, “Love makes you not an asshole.”

I’m still waiting for that answer to how learning “integration rules” in my calculus class will leave me infinitely more prepared to make some profound contribution to the betterment of society and my own personal life. Since when does calculus matter at 3:30 in the morning when you’re lying awake, wrapped tight in the arms of a person whom you love so much that you can hardly bear it, listening to the sound of the inhalations and exhalations as they sleep peacefully beside you? Last time I checked, THOSE were the moments and people and events that actually matter in this world. The moments and loves and realizations that teach us and remind us why we’re here.

– Michelle, age 20

Individuality. Try being single for a while.

I used to hang onto ‘the last guy’ until the next guy came around. It may not be the most comforting thought but I have learned that it is okay to not have someone to call to say ‘goodnight’ every evening or someone around

when I wake up in the morning. It is okay to be alone. It is okay to be single. It is more than okay to give 100% of myself to myself. Now I can let go of the 'last guy' simply by being happy in and of myself. It's scary and it's a challenge, but it should be really good for me.

– Andrea, age 18

Joy. Make a list of the things that bring you special joy.

The red stains on my fingers after eating too many pistachio nuts

“My So Called Life” marathons

When people compliment me on looking good

The smell of rain

Having no classes during “General Hospital”

Numbers 6 through 10

The sound of ice cubes in a glass of iced tea

A good game of Scrabble

A wool blanket placed over me in the middle of a nap

Milk Duds in the movies

Outdoor showers

The extra second stare someone takes when you know they like you

Realizing your life is pretty good after all

–Traci, age 21

Kindness. As you proceed on into the future, let kindness be the legacy you leave behind. At my twentieth high school reunion, an old friend approached me with thanks for being so kind to her in sixth grade. “Those were the days when Ritalin was scarce,” she laughed. “You were the one person who never made fun of my tantrums. I’ve always remembered you for that.”

There is this one kid in my grade who my group of friends torment because he different. I was always really nice to him, but he always gave me the cold shoulder and I never knew why. Then I remembered all the times I stood by and watched while he got hurt and never did anything to stop it. I didn't do anything but notice. I never said a word. I realize that sometimes standing by not doing anything at all can be worse than doing the crime itself. I was so ashamed to be part of a group of people that made someone feel that way. Were there more kids that felt the same? What really bothered me is that he probably could be one of the most interesting people I would ever get to

know in high school but I blew whatever chance I had to become his friend. So I wrote him a letter and slipped it to him at the end of class. In it I wrote everything because I figured honesty might be the best solution. He wrote back with two simple words, "Thank you." I can't tell you how good that felt. I learned that it doesn't matter who your friends are and what the consequences will be if you do something differently from them. If you know something is right, stand up for your beliefs and don't worry what people say about you. As long as you know that you did the right thing, you won't have any regrets.

– Maggie, age 16

Loneliness. Lonely people are not always found in lonely places. You may breathe the same air, walk on the same side of the street and eat the same cafeteria food as everyone else, yet they may also harbor their very own secrets, sorrows and insecurities.

Having ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) can sometimes make me feel like an outsider; everything is a hundred times harder for me. I study three hours for a quiz so I can pass when my friends study for only one hour and get 90s. I feel inferior and inadequate to everyone else. I wonder, does the guy sitting across from me in math who is real smart when he talks but is always looking out the window, does he have the same feelings? Does the girl in my gym class with no coordination in volleyball and is always alone all the time, does she feel the same way? Do my friends? Are they as lonely as me?

– Judy, age 15

As you lament the unspent hours with unmet companions, know that you are enough. Bless you for your unspoken pain. For your hidden autobiography. For trying to make sense of this thing they call "growing up." In the game of love and loneliness, you only win if you realize the two go hand in hand. One earns the other and in the end you are a better person for it, the kind of person that a special someone deserves.

Mistakes. Value your mistakes; there is merit in stumbling. Appraise the alternatives. Sara is a teen figure skater released from the hospital after treatment for anorexia who said, "I figure if I have to be 95 pounds to do a triple axle turn, then I'll learn to play ice hockey."

No one ever told me that it was okay to fail before. In fact, failure was the one thing that I was scared of more than anything, (with the possible exception of spiders). But somewhere, amidst the feelings of loneliness, confusion and failure, there is a glimmer of hope that things will get better.
– Yanina, age 18

The four “Nevers” in relationships:

Never trust anyone who says, “You can trust me.” Trust must be earned, not taken.

Never say to anyone, “I’ll never leave you.” That’s a promise you may not be able to keep.

Never use modern technology to do your dirty work. Don’t break-up with someone over the phone, in an email or text message. Have the decency to do it in person.

Never tell someone, “I don’t love you anymore.” If you are able to say that, then you never did at all.

Get to know me. Allow me to be unique. Give me the chance to show you who I am. Respect my boundaries. When I say “No,” it’s not a game to get me to say “Yes.” I’m not a trophy or a toy.
– Anonymous

Obey. Simply put, when you are driving, slow down.

Last night I got a speeding ticket on the way home doing 77 mph in a 55 mph zone and almost put the car in a ditch pulling off the road. It’s not the ticket that bothers me most, but the fact that I didn’t realize I was going so fast and hadn’t paid attention to the limits and my surroundings. I learned many important things last night: not to think about distracting topics while driving; when the highway is two-lane the speed limit is slower than four-lane; and cops can come out of nowhere. The ticket is \$175.10 and I lost 6 points on my license. But more than that, I lost credibility in the eyes of the people I love. I learned the hard and expensive way, but I learned. Now I have to deal with it: my fault, my consequences.
– Shannon, age 17

Prioritize. In this instant, everything is fine. Right now is all that matters. Right here is everything you need - this moment, this opening, this enough-ness. Whenever you feel fear and worry, take a look inside and realize that your mind is probably running away with the present tense and chasing scenes that do not yet exist. All you have is this moment. What can you learn from it? How much can you squeeze out of it before it turns into the future? Celebrate this instant. Swim in the immediacy of the present. Be in the now for now.

“When I’m with you, I am constantly building a wall preparing for the moment when you decide I am not the one for you,” he announced plainly, much as if he had asked me to pass the butter at dinner. As he turned to leave I whispered, “I do love you. The problem is that I feel you are living for an uncertain time in the future and I am living in today.” In building one great world for our future, he was building many little walls in the present.

– Morgan, age 23

Qualify. Try not to compare yourself to others; praise them instead. If you can witness it, you can be it. See your competitors as teachers and guides, the mirror to your potential. Allow others their success and you will be allowing yourself your own.

Success is reaching the top of a mountain with someone on your shoulders.

– Brandon, age 16

Responsibility. Learn how to put your needs above everyone else’s once in awhile. Concentrate on the things that pertain to your daily survival. Sometimes saying ‘no’ will help you to regain balance and keep you safe regardless of what others may say or think. Ask yourself, “What’s my part in this?”

Last night I was in the back of an Explorer with six guys, (one was my boyfriend and the other five I didn’t know since they don’t go to my school). We were going to the basketball game when they decided they needed some pot. It was extremely foggy and we couldn’t see five feet in front of us. Everyone, including me, was high and the guys decided to race. We were going 100 mph down country roads and no one was wearing a seat belt.

I started getting really scared. Then I asked myself a lot of questions like, “Do I deserve to be in a situation like this? Do I hate myself so much to risk my life doing stupid things? Am I worth more than this?” I knew then that if I stayed on that track I would eventually end up killing myself. I got dropped off immediately, ran to my room and laid on the bed crying. I don’t know how my life is going to go from here, but I do know that I’m not going to be in a situation like that ever again.

– Marquita, age 17

Support. In the early days of my HIV infection, I became a support group junkie going to an AIDS meeting or support session every day of the week - individual therapy, group therapy, couple’s counseling, inspirational lectures, weekend workshops and/or retreats. Groups of people sitting around a room and sharing their daily struggles by talking and listening to each other can really help. Talk about your fears. Talk about your fantasies and foibles. Talk about anything and everything. The world needs to hear your truth so keep talking. My friend Billy says, “You don’t get extra points for going through this life alone.”

In the last few years, my little sister was diagnosed with ocular melanoma, a rare cancer that starts in the eye, which then spread to her liver and then into a tumor on her lung. It wasn’t her being in the hospital that was the worst part. It was having nowhere to go without people in school bringing it up. It was like her cancer had become my whole identity. The sympathetic glances in school were more than I could take. Was the word “weak” or “victim” written all over my face? Tired of feeling helpless and being seen as helpless, I got ready to ask for support. I started with my Social Actions club at school. I got up in front of the whole club and just started talking. I told them everything. I think I fell into some kind of a trance because I was not too aware of what I’d said. I just remember looking up when I finished and seeing the entire room in tears and then hearing them say, “How can we help?”

– Joanne, age 17

Tears. Give voice to your emotions. As my friend Susan says, “I’m crying out loud, for crying out loud.” Tears have a bad rap in our society. Notice how sometimes a parent will comfort a crying baby with the words, “Sshh...don’t cry.” Yet, it is a part of our humanness. The problem

is not that we cry, it's that we don't cry enough. Bless you for your tears.

Ofentimes people tell themselves that it's not okay to be unhappy. But sadness plays a major role in a person's 'life advances,' growing up in this globe of craziness; essentially, this sadness makes us who we are today. "I feel, therefore, I know I am alive," a quote I kind of live by. Boys do cry, and so do girls. Also men and women and animals, too. Maybe even God sometimes. Just know this: it's okay to be sad. It's okay to feel. And it is definitely okay to cry. Keep pushing through the tunnel of broken hearts, for once you get through angels will heal. 'venni vetti vecci' – I came, I saw, I conquered.
– Jordan, age 15

Understanding. Forgive someone. In fact, forgive everyone; it will add years to your life. Whether or not you think they deserve it, you do. When you hold grudges against people, you lock them inside a prison in your heart. Consequently, there needs to be an emotional warden to watch over them so they don't escape. It is too much work and takes too much good energy from you. Set them free and set yourself free.

I've had conversations with myself for years about asking my family why they separated us from our uncle. I don't know what hurts more, their keeping his HIV/AIDS status a secret from me or the fact that I didn't get to go to his funeral. I'm not sure if I can forgive them now but maybe someday in the future I can. And I'm not exactly sure what forgiveness is going to feel like. I know I'm not going to get a card in the mail that says, "Congratulations, you have just forgiven your family!" I wonder how I'm going to know to recognize it. I hope that I will somehow feel it inside my heart, a power from within that is immeasurable, boundless and without limits.
– Aliza, age 17

Remember as well, forgiveness takes time. My friend John Fletcher Harris used to say, "Forgiveness comes, when it comes, if it comes. Just as you can't force Mother Nature, forgiveness comes in its own time." For now, at least be willing to forgive. And while you are working on forgiveness of others, forgive yourself, for it is just another word for mercy. Go gently upon your journey through life. In the words of Jared, a college student in Pennsylvania, "This love of life is what alone ensures my victory."

One evening I was walking down the street and saw myself reflected in a store window and something looked...different. I mean, I looked the same as I always did, but it was like somehow I could tell that I had become someone I had never wanted to be. I spent the next few days just peeling back layer after layer and trying to see if I could find myself. And I did, but forgiving myself for the way I had behaved (by disrespecting myself and those around me) was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I've started to feel a little better about myself. I am reconnecting with who I want to be and I can start to work on living that life again.

– Abe, age 18

Volunteer. On an envelope from a student named Samantha were written the words, “Everyone you meet is fighting a harder battle.” Find something to do for someone else and give your all to it. When you volunteer your time and energy you will meet people who have it harder than you. It will take you out of your head and teach you about the incredible strength of others, and if you can see strength in others, it must be somewhere inside of you as well. Meet someone who has it harder than you and see how he or she survives. They might just say, “You should meet some of my friends who’ve got it harder than me and see how they survive.” And so on and so on.

On a beautiful Sunday morning a little over a week ago, my friends and I stood outside a supermarket collecting items for AIDS patients. I asked everyone going in to pick up an extra item on our list and to donate it on their way out. Last year, we got about two shopping carts filled with items. Last week, in the four hours that we were there, we collected over five shopping carts of items to be donated! We then brought them back to our dorm room and sorted them. Later in the week we drove to the health center in the next city and gave them everything. They were so thrilled with all that we had collected. We essentially restocked their shelves for them. All day, while I handed out flyers and spoke to people, I was thinking of others who need our help. I just wanted to let you know that there are a lot of great people out here that are on their side, helping to fight their battles.

– Elisa, age 19

Withdraw. Don't take it all too personally. Remember that compliments and insults are two sides of the same coin. If you measure your worth by people's praise, you will have to invariably measure it against their criticism of you as well. Stay in your center; it's never really about you, anyway.

If a guy can't handle my twenty extra pounds, then how's he gonna put up with my mood swings?

– Anne, age 17

XYZ. Living a life of self-care can help us to see our part in the larger picture, that we are infinitely linked to others seeking a similar tenderness. It is in our connectedness to one another, in our knowing that our lives are of consequence to others, that we can be healed. When we hurt ourselves, we hurt others who love us. When we take care of ourselves, we are also taking care of those around us.

In allowing ourselves to become strong and comfortable with all that is new and unfamiliar, we can be made to feel safe again.

You belong to this place, this life. You have a right to hurt and a right to heal. Find your own special ground for growing. Seek out ways of loving yourself through the difficult times. And have faith in the future

because you are a part of it.

