



Self-care about more than self-indulgence

By Erin Kelly for the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

What comes to mind when you hear the term ‘self-care’?

A day of pampering at a spa? A facial or manicure?

While those are commonly associated with self-care in the media, they don't represent the full picture and only further fuel misconceptions. Because while a spa day may not seem to have much in common with farm safety, self-care certainly does.

“Most people have a preconceived notion of what self-care looks like because of what is on the internet, or what they see on TV or social media. People have this idea in their head of what self-care is supposed to look like,” explains Deborah Vanberkel, a registered psychotherapist and founder of Cultivate Counselling Services in Eastern Ontario's Lennox and Addington County, where she also works on her family's dairy farm. Her business is focused on providing services and supports to rural and agricultural communities.

So what exactly is self-care? That depends on the person.

As Vanberkel explains, self-care is any activity that helps someone emotionally, physically, or mentally. But what exactly that entails differs from person to person.

“If you type self-care into Google, there is going to be an infinite number of results that come up, and they are all going to be different. And while I'm sure a lot of the things that come up are great, it does not mean that they are going to work for you,” Vanberkel says.

“Self-care is self-defining. I think that is the piece that people overthink or forget about because they end up on Google looking up what self-care is. Rather than ask Google, ask yourself what self-care means and looks like. There is no right or wrong answer for self-care, so long as it benefits you physically, emotionally, or mentally.”





Cynthia Beck is a clinical psychology master’s student at the University of Regina whose graduate research involves examining the mental health needs of rural and agricultural populations. She echoes Vanberkel’s remarks, noting that self-care fundamentals are so basic that most people don’t realize it is self-care.

“We need to acknowledge that self-care is not indulgent. It’s a basic necessity. A huge part of self-care are those necessary, everyday things like making sure we’re eating regular meals or getting enough water,” explains Beck, who also farms with her husband on a mixed farming operation outside of Regina, SK.

“People need to customize their own self-care and look at what their own needs are. A 20-year-old working in agriculture will have very different needs than a 55-year-old person working in agriculture. That’s just reality.”

In fact, even tasks that may seem trivial, such as cleaning the house, should not be overlooked as being beneficial to self-care.

“With a lot of those mundane tasks, in our current society, we have pushed them to the wayside,” says Beck. “But they actually do contribute to our personal success factor, and that success means living a happy and healthy life.”

When it comes to farm safety, stress and mental health issues are known contributing factors. That’s also why it comes as no surprise that self-care – both prioritizing and neglecting it – has a significant influence on farm safety.

“The farm operator, our bodies and minds, are the most important part of machinery on any farm. That’s why it is so important that self-care be a priority. You can’t run a successful farm operation if you are not functioning at a healthy level,” Beck explains, adding that when self-care is neglected, people are more likely to make poor decisions or have poor judgement.

“Often, we treat the farm machinery much better than how we treat our bodies. We fill the tractor with fuel every day. We do regular maintenance on our machinery. But how often do we provide that care and attention to our own body?”





There's no question that farmers and farm families lead busy lives. But just because there is always something new taking priority on the farm, doesn't mean that self-care should be considered any less valuable and necessary. The most important thing to keep in mind is that self-care isn't selfish.

“Children, farm operations and such, everything else takes priority. So the question needs to be put back on [farmers] of when do you become the priority and what do you do to prioritize yourself?” says Vanberkel. “People will say that they don't have time [for self-care] because they are looking for something that will fit their schedule. But that's the kicker – we can make time for everything else but not for ourselves.

“It's like driving. If you keep on driving and never stop to gas up, you're going to run out of gas eventually.”

Canadian Agricultural Safety Week (CASW) is a public campaign held annually during the third week of March that focuses on the importance of safe agriculture. The 2021 campaign, Safe & Strong Farms: Lead an AgSafe Canada, takes place March 14-20. CASW is presented by Farm Credit Canada. For more information, visit agsafetyweek.ca.

