



EUDAEMONIA **Self-Care, with Peta Sigley**

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Kim Forrester 0:00

Most of us know what's good for us and can list the habits and behaviours that can enhance our emotional, mental and spiritual well being. But how many of us prioritise these practices in our day? You're listening to the Eudaemonia podcast. I'm Kim Forrester, and today, it's time to highlight the significance of self care.

Intro 0:23

Welcome to Eudaemonia, the podcast that is all about flourishing. Plug in, relax and get ready for the goodness as we explore the traits and practices that can help you thrive in life ... with your host Kim Forrester.

Kim Forrester 0:43

Peta Sigley is co-founder and Chief Knowledge Officer at Springfox, previously known as The Resilience Institute in Australia, and she is the voice of the Resilience Real Time podcast. Peta's academic credentials include economics, psychology, and counselling and she's currently completing her doctorate in psychology at Melbourne University. It's my absolute delight to be connecting with Peta today to discuss how profound self care can help us build resilience and live happier, more fulfilling lives. Peta Sigley, it's just such a delight to have you here on the Eudaemonia podcast. How are things with you in Melbourne today?

Peta Sigley 1:20

Well, thank you. And I'm absolutely delighted to be asked to be part of this. Melbourne is a little bleak, we're still in lockdown, but moving forward. So life is good.

Kim Forrester 1:29

Well, I'm so pleased that you could be here with me today. Now researching for this particular interview, Peta, the first thing I noticed was how broad and ambiguous our collective definition of self care can be, and just how little we actually understand about what it is to truly care for ourselves. Your work is very much grounded in the concept of resilience. How do you define self care from your perspective?

Peta Sigley 1:55

That is a fantastic insight to recognise - that more often than not, when we're dealing with concepts, whether that be around self care or resilience, that we really aren't ever given a really clear, concise definition. There's lots of things that come into play here, and self care, very much like resilience, they're entwined. So recovery of self is crucial for this concept of resilience. And our global research around resilience - looking at some 21,000 people - really highlights this. So what we see when

people are reporting low levels of resilience, they really report poor elements around self care. So there's high levels of fatigue, worry, hyper-vigilance, insomnia, self doubt, and that ends up resulting in them being really self-critical. So simplistically, 'no recovery' equals 'no resilience'. And lack of self care is really reflected in the things that really bring us undone when we start to talk about the concepts of resilience. And that's supported by lots of other research. So we're seeing people really rely on coping behaviours that have become dysfunctional. And what ends up happening is their self care, their resilience, is compromised. So resilience is a multi dimensional construct of which self care is only one component. And for many people, when we talk about self care, you're really thinking diet, sleep, exercise - that trilogy. And that's certainly part of it. But that's only really one component of what we would call a performance supply chain. And self care also is very much present in our emotions, our thinking, and understanding our purpose.

Kim Forrester 3:33

So I think the year 2020 has been an exercise in resilience for most people around the world, Peta. And so what you're saying there is that these are the kinds of times that we should turn to self care - that we should amplify self care - in order to ensure that we are building and maintaining the kind of resilience that we need to, not just cope, but to actually bounce forward from these sorts of situations in our life. Is that right?

Peta Sigley 3:58

Absolutely. So, interestingly enough, a lot of the behaviours that we're seeing people engaging now are really around coping. Resilience comes with growth and adaptation. So the resilience we build from something like COVID, and a pandemic, is what will hold us in good stead for what we will use in the future. So the resilience skills that we're relying on and the self care that we would utilise for self, will go a long way to sustaining us around resilience and well-being as we go through something like COVID.

Kim Forrester 4:30

I love that idea. So it's not just a matter of coping and getting through these situations, but actually growing, and learning, and evolving, and coming out at the other end feeling stronger and more able to face the future.

Peta Sigley 4:41

Absolutely. So that resilience is all about adaptation and growth. And self care is a fundamental component of that.

Kim Forrester 4:47

Now, some of the integral daily practices that you encourage seem, to me, to be pretty self explanatory. Right? You encourage us to care for ourselves through gentle exercise and meditation. But you also note that monitoring our inner monologue is an important part of self care. Why do we engage in detrimental mental activity, Peta, and what can we do to be more caring of ourselves when it comes to what we choose to think about; to what we choose to dwell on?

Peta Sigley 5:15

So we do arrive in the world pre-programmed; it is human nature to find fault and look for threat. And that is very much a survival mechanism. So it's really important to recognise, at this point, that negative thoughts aren't wrong, or that we are looking to remove all negative thoughts. That's not healthy either. Where it starts to come into play in terms of this inner monologue that you're talking about, is where we get caught up in the space of rumination. So this is where we're spending time with repetitive negative thoughts. And that's what really stops us moving forward - it really heightens that level of anxiety, that feeling of being out of control. The byproduct of that can be anger, and we're really struggling to operate within a positive space. So when we're talking about self care and mental activity, and moving forward away from the negative, we're really speaking about building agility around our thinking. So we're looking to work more often in a space of realistic optimism. And so that's the understanding that today is a challenge, it is difficult, there is uncertainty. But tomorrow will be better. And so the skills that we're looking to work on are really our ability to reframe, and reframe quickly. And I think it's really helpful - and what I find helpful when I work with people - is to give them little catch phrases to hang on to. So when it comes to thinking, we always talk about 'catch, check and change'. Can I catch that thought? Check it? Is it serving me well? Is it serving me poorly? And if I need to, can I change, reframe. Catch, check, change.

Kim Forrester 6:50

I love this whole concept of caring for ourself through caring about what we're thinking about. Our mind is an incredibly powerful ally when we use it wisely, isn't it, Peta? So in that case, is it helpful for us to set an intent when we engage in any act of self care? Is it best to consciously tell ourselves, "Right, I am draining stress from my body. I am letting go of unhelpful thoughts and emotions as I go for this walk in the forest"? Or does our intention have no impact on the outcome of our self care practices at all?

Peta Sigley 7:24

Okay, so our intentions are a reflection of our level of respect for self and how we value ourselves. So it's important to recognise that the neurons that fire together, wire together. And you often hear people use that very phrase; neurons that fire together, wire together. So what we think and feel will influence what we do, and directly impacts outcomes. So yes, it is really helpful to be setting an intention. It provides goal clarity, and it helps with maintaining motivation and agency - that sense that we have control that we can do something. So when we understand the 'why' of what we're doing, then we're more likely to follow through with action. And so some of those intentions can be very much around the positive. "I would like to do this, I would like to achieve that." But sometimes the intention's around stopping doing some of the things that we don't find are helping us. So when we start to look at the things we really want to let go of, I often talk to people about the philosophy of 'don't' versus the philosophy of 'can't'. When you say, "I don't do that", or "I don't eat high fat treats", the choice of 'don't' gives you agency control. You're not feeling as though it's being placed upon you; that it's so strict that you can't step outside that. It's about giving you ownership of the behaviours that you're looking to adapt and change. So with all that said, there's also a need to connect intent to action. So therefore, we need to start creating tiny little habits that really tie in to bigger practices around self care.

Kim Forrester 9:00

My concern there is that many of us, I think, might set an intention and then not actually follow through. Right? Or set an intention and fall short of what we would expect of ourselves. Is it self caring to set an intention, fall short, and then go into self recrimination or self criticism? That doesn't seem to be a particularly caring thing to do for self. What do we do in those moments?

Peta Sigley 9:22

No, I think that is helpful. And I would certainly shy away from that. And you know, if you have that perfectionist personality type where, you know, it's 100% or it's nothing, then really, you need to be very mindful of what those intentions are. So you're really looking at small, achievable milestones with a degree of flexibility and understanding that, you know, life isn't perfect, things do get in the way. It's about being able to come back and pick it up again. So often, when we talk about intent, I often ask people to think about giving different days of the week a different level of intent. So whether that's around self care for exercise, or sleep, or mindfulness, or meditation, or building positive emotions, so that each day you've got something new to focus on, and that you can recalibrate as you go through the week. And so you're less likely to lose motivation. And it doesn't mean that you stop once you haven't been able to achieve what you were looking to achieve. So having lots of little practices - the sum of those far greater than just having that one big purpose that you're looking for.

Kim Forrester 10:27

That sounds very wise. You were speaking there of the 'don't' principle versus the 'can't' principle. It's actually something that I have applied in my own life because, personally, I've been a bit of a people pleaser all of my life. And I do want to know, from your perspective, how important is it for us to practice the word 'no' and the word 'help' if we're committed to truly caring for ourselves?

Peta Sigley 10:51

So this is a really, really important concept. And we definitely see differences by gender here. We all should be able to be in a space where we feel safe to say 'no' or to ask for help. But much of this behaviour, and particularly around gender, is driven by strongly held societal norms. We know that. So men are reporting higher levels of decisiveness; they definitely feel confident to say no. They're seen as assertive, strong leadership qualities, acting with courage. Whereas for women, we often speak about getting over this disease to please, which often means that we end up doing things that we don't really want to, or don't challenge the comments and the opinions of others that we find disrespectful or not reflective of our opinion. And so we're really driven by this pressing need to be liked. And many may feel that if you say 'no', then you're not seen as a team player, or you're not viewed as assertive but aggressive. In other words, we over invest in the opinions of other people, which will often mean that we're left without our own voice. So that really speaks to the female aspect of gender differences and really around that ability to say 'no'. Interestingly enough, when we look at the effectiveness of things like positive education programmes in school - which is really designed to promote mental health, resilience, and well-being - one of those core competencies within those programmes is for students, adolescents in particular, to understand where and how to ask for help. And this is the flip side when we start to talk about gender because men tend to display poorer help-seeking behaviours. And this is something that society is really trying very hard to correct, particularly around mental and physical health. So you'll notice this particular focus around talking around mental health, particularly at a professional sports level. Things and initiatives like

Movember, the Man Cave, and that is all around opening up that space for men to say, "Look, I could do some assistance here." So our ability to do well here, whether we're male or female, will help stop us and prevent us from sliding down that downward spiral around resilience and well-being.

Kim Forrester 12:59

While we're on the subject of relationships and relating with others. Social connection is incredibly healthy for us. Right? It is shown to increase our health, our well being, our longevity, even. However, there are circumstances we're spending time with others can actually be really unhealthy, unhelpful, and stressful, Peta. What should we look for when connecting with others as an act of self care? So how do we balance a need for social connection and a sense of belonging, with our own needs for nurturing?

Peta Sigley 13:34

Yes. And this is something that most people really probably struggle with. As human beings, we're definitely pack animals and we're designed to be in tribes. And our relationships, as you quite rightly said, are critical for our well-being and mental health. And the state of COVID that we currently find ourselves in has resulted in an absence of those connections. And so what we see highlighted is that there's this distinct lack of awareness, or under-appreciation, of how important our social interactions are. Particularly the very simple work interactions. Yet, I totally agree with you, we do need to have our own space to reflect, consolidate, and recover. If we were to talk about how we socially invest with other people, most of us would say we want to be present for others such that we're operating in a place of compassion, with empathy. Which means we bring curiosity about others, and we're seeking to understand and appreciate different perspectives. We're resonating with how people feel. And we're connecting in a way that people know that we understand where they're coming from. If we don't allow ourselves to step away and recover, we're more likely to find that we're sitting in a space of indifference, or ignorance, contempt and, interestingly at times, over caring. So that definitely leads to burnout. So in terms of that balance, we're being mindful that emotions are contagious and we are also susceptible to the emotions and actions of others. So we're all likely to have worked in a team where one person has been really critical, negative, argumentative, or always sad or flat, and that has definitely had an impact on the rest of the team. And people can often walk away feeling very drained, feeling unfulfilled. So practically, this means getting better at providing space for you to recognise your own emotions, and having that ability to choose the emotions you want to move forward with. But being sure to be authentic around that. And one of the practical things I would say to people is, get really good at naming your own emotions. Because when you name emotions, you dissipate the strength of the emotion. But emotions are those data points that give us insight as to how we're travelling, and whether we are being rewarded for those interactions that we are having with others.

Kim Forrester 15:45

Peta, I think very few people realise how self loving it is to get a good night's rest. If we've had a rough day and we have the choice between a glass of wine and a Netflix movie, and going to bed early, why should we choose bedtime?

Peta Sigley 16:01

So, if it's a choice between a glass of wine, Netflix, and sleep, the choice is always sleep. Why? Because the quality and the duration of our sleep definitely determines our daytime effectiveness. So it gives us time to recover, regenerate, and we tend to function better. So, better emotional stability and cognitive performance. And when we're not sleeping well, we know that our whole immune system tends to suffer. So quality and sleep duration impact your choices around diet and exercise, which is important for self care. And so, if I talk directly to alcohol and Netflix, then maybe people get a bit of an idea of why this is so important. So alcohol, firstly, is a sedative. And people often confuse this and say that, when they drink, they tend to relax and it actually helps them sleep better. In actual fact, that's both untrue. In actual fact, it's not what we would really call sleeping, but a light amnesia. And so alcohol cheapens our sleep. It's certainly more likely to make us snore and so, therefore again, cheapening our quality of sleep. It impacts on our willpower. And we start to find that we gain weight - there's certain hormones that kick on and off when we have poor quality sleep. So alcohol - definitely not a great idea in terms of self care and impacting sleep. And in terms of the Netflix - also impacts our sleep. What it's doing is really telling our brain 'it's time to engage' which is the opposite of what we're trying to do. We really want to be trying to cool down and process ourselves into bed. And when we do finally get to bed, we tend to find that we struggle to get to sleep and we don't have that great level of sleep that we're looking for. So sleep is your choice every time.

Kim Forrester 17:47

Every time? Is there an activity or a practice that you would advise people stay up that extra 30 minutes or 60 minutes to partake in? "Is there something that is actually more beneficial to us than sleep?" is my question.

Peta Sigley 18:01

So there's certain things that can improve your quality of sleep. So meditation. Journaling is very good; those feelings of gratitude and reflecting on the day. Sex is very good; it's great for relationships, but also sleep quality. And just reading a book. That stillness; that ability to just unwind from the day. So I wouldn't ever compromise the length and the quality of sleep, but there's certain things that you can do in terms of processing yourself into bed, that will go a long way to improving the benefits that you get from sleep,

Kim Forrester 18:36

Some lovely alternatives to Netflix and wine you've given us. Peta, when it comes to your integral daily practices, as you call them, there's a lot of emphasis on the body - like rest and exercise - and on the mind - like nurturing a more positive attitude or those emotional concepts that you were discussing. In your experience, how helpful can it be to also engage in more, shall we say 'soulful' practices, like pursuing meaningful activities, or finding awe, or seeking inspiration in life? Do you believe that there's also a positive effect that comes from engaging in those sorts of practices on our resilience and on our well-being?

Peta Sigley 19:15

The simple answer to this is absolutely, yes. The question, or this question in particular, talks to the very top of our resilience model, and that is 'spirit in action'. So feeling on purpose, say in a work

situation, is a really a key contributor to us having positive emotional well-being. So that ability to define and understand our purpose, results in us living longer, healthier lives, reporting higher levels of happiness, greater life satisfaction. And that's across all domains of life. So the need to be clear on why you're doing something is really important if you're wanting to have sustainable changes in behaviour. So I suppose the simple way of summing that up is 'no why, no motivation, no sense of purpose'. Yeah.

Kim Forrester 20:03

Now most of us, Peta, are pulled in a million different directions, okay. And we have many, many factors that demand our time, our energy, and our attention. And this, for all of us, is an obvious cause of stress. What difference would it make in our lives, do you think, if we chose to simplify our lives? And I think the pandemic has actually brought this to the fore for many people around the world. What would it be like if we became more discerning around what and who deserves our attention? Would that be a form of self care if we were to simplify in that way?

Peta Sigley 20:41

It is absolutely a form of self care. It is also a key contributor to performance. Multitasking, by concept, is a fallacy. So trying to meet many different needs of others, often means that we're less effective, and we tend not to be productive, and mistakes are far more likely. In terms of a time continuum, when we're multitasking, it's far more likely that we're sitting in the future. And this is where fear sits, and it definitely feeds the space of stress. And that's that constant, 'what if, what if, what next, don't forget, have you done' and the list goes on. So this doesn't mean that you can't shift your focus and your attention to others and tasks quickly - your ability to do that is really fundamental in terms of the sheer volume of things that we've got to get done. But it does mean that you're fully present. So when you're staying in that moment, you give yourself the greatest degree of control and choice. And I'm going to say to you, it is a prerequisite for our relationships. So when we are physically in the present and our brain is in the future, we can often be perceived by others as uncaring, disinterested, bored, or absent. So that self care is not only for what we can achieve cognitively, how we're feeling emotionally, but self care also for our relationships is really important here, as well. So I would say to people, a good practice here is to start each day with four clear agenda items or things that you'd like to cover off. And that doesn't mean you can't change the order, or you can't swap something in or out. It's about recognising some of the things that you can get done. And some really simple things are just as important. What we're really wanting to do is to give our brain a win each and every day and by saying that sole focus - or simplifying as you quite rightly said - is a really good way of achieving that.

Kim Forrester 22:33

Peta, is self care something that we can actually practice to excess? You are very, very careful in your work to admit that stress - or some stress - is actually good for us. Do you think it's actually possible for us to over-focus on self care to the point where we eliminate just about all the stress in our life? And what is that going to do to us? Is it detrimental to us if we over-focus on caring for self?

Peta Sigley 23:01

I think it's probably nearly an impossibility to remove all stress, but people do become quite preoccupied with it. Interestingly, overwhelmingly, when I speak to people about stress, they tend to

think only of negative stress or what we've termed 'distress'. So when I ask them to define stress, I tend to get lots of one word responses such as fatigue, anger, insomnia, can't sleep, overload, overwhelmed, indecision, loneliness, frustration. What I very rarely get are any words around positive stress, or what's termed use stress, such as passion, enthusiasm, motivation, and arousal. So instead of trying to focus on removing all stress, I would say that's actually the last thing we want to do. What we really want to be able to do is to build skill around being able to master our stress. What I talk about here is really, moving out of that negative or distress space of stress into the area of positive stress. When we're in that space, then we're able to align for flow; we're able to sit longer in a space of high sustainable performance, and we're able to reach peak performance more often. So, not so much remove stress, but work with stress and think about mastering stress. The other thing I would say here is often people confuse stress with pressure. So there's nothing wrong with pressure; we need pressure to perform. And stress is really our perception of our ability to cope. And that's when we internalise that pressure into a reflection on where we're sitting. So often, stopping and asking the question, "Am I stressed or am I under pressure?" will go a long way to providing clarity around where you're actually sitting in relation to a particular event or person.

Kim Forrester 24:44

Peta, it seems to me that self care is something that we ought to adjust - right - according to our life circumstances. The 'when' of self care, and the amount of self care that we need - does that change according to what's happening in our life circumstance? Would you agree that we need to engage more fully and more frequently in self care when we are actually in stressful situations? And if so, what are the signs that we look for that say, "Hey, time for some more self care"?

Peta Sigley 25:15

I think it is important to recognise that, when you are stressed, that you are going to be probably compromising your own well-being; you tend to focus less on self. And so I think that focusing on those self care practices are critical if we want to really avoid the space of burnout. And you're hearing people talk about burnout more and more. So what are we looking for to recognise that maybe I need to be doing more around self care? If you're getting easily distracted, and you're unable to focus on a task as you would normally do, then that's starting to hit that place of confusion; that entry into that downward spiral. You have increased feelings of feeling overload or confusion, and some of the things that you're saying to yourself - that internal chitchat that goes on - you're literally thinking and saying to yourself, "I can't cope, I'm just getting by." Typically, we'll see increased fatigue - and I'm talking not just about the physical, but also the emotional and the mental. So getting to the end of the day and feeling tired, that's really normal. But if you're there and you're totally spent - absolutely whacked - then that's an indication that things are getting on top of you, so to speak. Finding it harder to switch off between work and home, and that days are blurring into each other - a pretty good indicator. Trouble with sleep, withdrawing from others, and relying on coping behaviours like food, alcohol, medication that aren't helping, but you're using them to fill a void. They're pretty clear indicators that you need to be having a pinpoint focus around self care.

Kim Forrester 26:47

I'm sort of chuckling quietly to myself. I'm going "Well, that was me through lockdown!". Yeah.

Peta Sigley 26:53

And for most people. And the research really supports that. Our own COVID surveys supported that in terms of some of the behaviours people were experiencing, but also supported by other areas of research. So McKinsey did a report and they found that one in four of us were binge drinking at least once a week, that people were using prescribed medication for non prescribed purposes - that was at a ratio of one to five. And one in seven of us are now using illicit drugs to actually get through the pandemic. So those coping behaviours. And some of us do some of that. Hopefully, we're not doing all of that. But when it hits excess, then we're really in trouble.

Kim Forrester 27:30

Yeah, well, my current practice of self care is walking off the 'COVID curves' that I put on during quarantine, from the food I was consuming. Peta, my final question is one that I ask every guest on the Eudaemonia podcast. I normally asked for a practice, a mantra, an affirmation, but in your case, I think it's best if you can perhaps suggest a fundamental daily practice that my listeners can use to engage in profound self care.

Peta Sigley 27:57

Okay, so my mantra, and the one I've been trying to live by for a couple of years now, really is a reflection of our topic today. And this is something I say to myself almost daily, and it's something that I offer to others to think about. And that is "Go gently, go well." And that is about bringing mindfulness to what I do, and having awareness of the impact on myself and on others around what I bring to each and every situation. So that's really bringing my performance supply chain into alignment. And again, that's that alignment of body, heart, mind and spirit. So that's my mantra, "Go gently go well." The one practice I would really recommend is around a micro-moment to check in. And you really want to be giving people something that they have lots of opportunity to practice and that is easy to incorporate into the everyday. And so that is around checking in on how you're going. And how I do this is, I stop every 90 minutes to focus on just one breath. And there is a great Chrome extension called Breathe that you can set up the timing for this. And what that does is, it allows me to come back into the moment and to ask myself, "Well, what are my emotions? What am I thinking? What's my motivation?" And that allows me then to move forward with awareness and choice. So that would be the practice that I would ask people to consider.

Kim Forrester 29:20

It always strikes me how simple the most profound practices are. For us to thrive and flourish and feel better about ourselves and our lives, it often takes such a simple practice, to bring us to that space. I love what you shared there. Thank you so much.

Peta Sigley 29:37

My pleasure.

Kim Forrester 29:37

Peta Sigley, if people want to find out more about the work that you do - self care, resilience - where can they find out more?

Peta Sigley 29:44

Okay, so there's a number of different spaces. Our website, www.springfox.com. Great place to start. I'm also doing a podcast, and that is really taking and unpicking really key concepts that people that I've worked with keep asking, "Can you give us more detail on...?" or "How can I share this with my family and friends?", and that's called Resilience Real Time with Peta Sigley. And you can get that on any of the platforms that people normally get their podcasts. We have a number of books available, from tips around daily practices to resilience, to really understanding the science behind resilience. So there are a number of different avenues that people can tap into.

Kim Forrester 30:26

Peta Sigley, thank you so much for choosing to come along and be a part of the Eudaemonia podcast. I am very familiar with the work there at Springfox and I do encourage my listeners to go onto your website, springfox.com, and have a look at the work you do around resilience. Thank you for being here today.

Peta Sigley 30:41

My absolute pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Kim Forrester 30:43

As American author and activist Parker Palmer once said, "Self care is never a selfish act. It is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have; the gift I was put on earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give the care it requires, we do it not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch." You have been listening to the Eudaemonia podcast. If you'd like to learn more about how to live a truly flourishing life, please subscribe and check out www.eudaemoniapod.com for more inspiring episodes. I'm Kim Forrester. Until next time, be well, be kind to yourself and gift yourself some daily self care.