



Self-Care is Not Achieved with a Shot Glass, Beer Bottle or Wine Glass

by Elizabeth Sindelar-Loy
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Over the last two years, the term self-care has become mainstream due to our increased awareness that demanding lifestyles chocked-full of multiple commitments leads us to function daily in a constant state of stress (fight or flight). Self-care is the term used to express the importance of looking after ourselves in order to recharge and boost our emotional resources to withstand the daily chaos. Within the self-care movement, alcohol has been de-stigmatized and mislabeled as a “proper” wellness tool.

If you are stressed, anxious and in desperate need of "me" time, it may be more convenient to reach for a glass of alcohol as opposed to choosing another form of self-care. Honestly, I understand the marketing as to why alcohol could be used for self-care: it's physiologically relaxing, the taste is usually enjoyable and it is often paired with other things we find pleasurable.

Unfortunately, using alcohol as a self-care tool is an extremely risky practice. Consuming alcohol stimulates the dopamine response in the brain - the pleasure center. Due to this chemical response in the body, alcohol is almost too effective at helping us unwind. It's easy to stop at one bubble bath or limit time for exercise or reading but, stopping after one drink can be extremely difficult after this response in the brain has been activated.

The definition of self-care is the practice of taking action towards preserving or improving one's health, well-being and happiness. A comprehensive global study was done in 2018 by the University of Washington's School of Medicine and it was concluded that there is no “safe” level of alcohol consumption. Therefore, once and for all, despite what society, media, t-shirts, marketing and all the Facebook memes tell us – drinking alcohol can NOT be self-care. Even with beer, hard liquor, spiked seltzer or wine labeled sometimes as organic or includes "natural" ingredients, alcohol in any form is still a mind-altering, addictive chemical that can lead to potentially deadly health problems. Therefore by definition, alcohol is disqualified from being self-care.

In this “Alcohol as Self-Care” movement, women have become targets of aggressive marketing. The influx of low-calorie spiked seltzers now join the shelves with all the liqueur labeled with feminine-sounding names such as Skinnygirl, Little Black Dress and Sofia. These convoluted messages are becoming internalized (just as it has been to males) to trick us into believing that alcohol is an essential part of surviving a women's life. Without its usage, we become a social pariah, unable to handle the stress piled on top of our overflowing plates.

Here is the thing ladies, we further enable this message perpetuated in our society by liking and sharing social media memes that claim women need wine to survive - labeling it "Mommy's Little Helper" or sharing hacks on how to avoid detection in public. What has been perceived as whimsical or harmless, is actually subliminally encouraging excessive drinking and alcohol usage as a self-medicating, coping mechanism all while reinforcing that this dependence is normal.

Continuing this pattern of behavior is a slippery slope that keeps us from questioning our relationship with alcohol. Plus, it monetizes women's invisible labor by using the knowledge that women are overworked, underpaid and looking for a way to deal with stress by selling us a temporary solution in wine or alcoholic products. Scores of businesses, social media influencers and bloggers are using this concept to profit off of our stress by combining safe self-care practices such as yoga, Pilates or manicure/spa days with alcohol. Which makes achieving health or wellness with those ideas completely contradictory.

If the previous paragraphs have yet to convince you how dangerous this trend is, just this past December, research from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism found that alcohol-related deaths in the United States more than doubled between 1999 and 2017. The study found that the largest annual increase in death was among non-Hispanic white women and concluded that women are at greater risk than men at comparable levels of alcohol exposure for alcohol-related cardiovascular diseases, certain cancers, alcohol-related liver disease and acute liver failure due to excessive drinking. Due to the way women's bodies process alcohol, they reach higher blood alcohol levels faster than men of the same weight. This leads to tissues in the body being exposed more to acetaldehyde, a toxic metabolite of alcohol, after each drink.

Being able to make choices regarding our personal well-being is powerful and can impact the quality of our life greatly through improved wellness - mentally, physically and emotionally. Alcohol impacts our lives also, but with far greater negative consequences that decline overall health and wellness. Instead of turning to alcohol, you can keep a gratitude journal, exercise, practice mindfulness, read, take up a hobby, socialize with a supportive group of friends, and practice re-training the brain to be happier or go for long walks in nature. With varied levels of stress impacting us daily, healthier self-care choices can give us a sense of control and mastery over our lives - which will you choose?

Elizabeth Sindelar-Loy is the Wellness Coach for Main Street Chiropractic in Edwardsville. She has worked in traditional and holistic health care for over 8 years. Ms. Loy is a motivational wellness speaker and participates in multiple Madison County Coalitions. As a single mom to an ambitious little girl, she understands the importance of practicing self-care to achieve balance in personal and professional growth.

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