Radical Self-Care for ADHD Women

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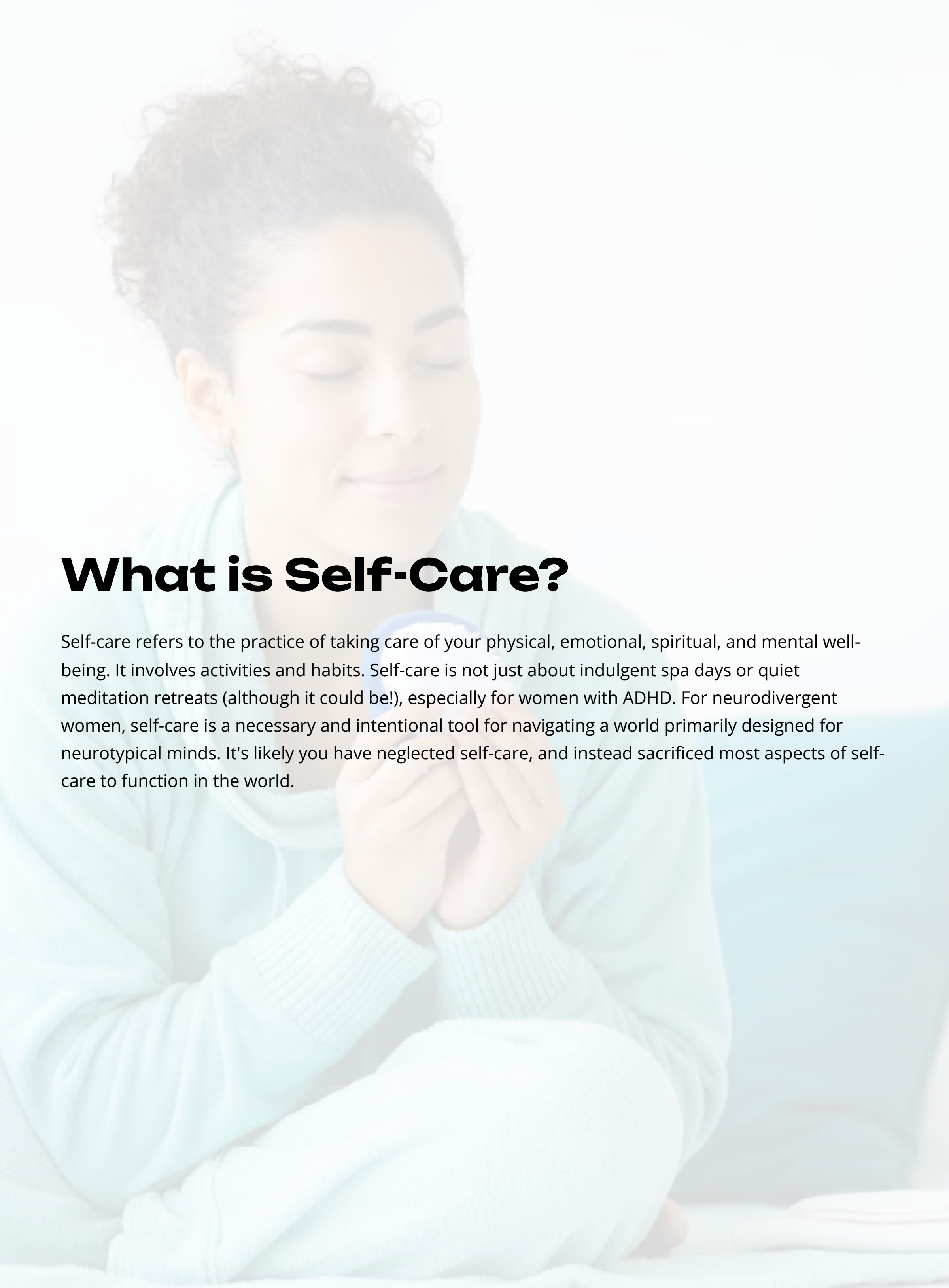
Your Self-Care Plan

- Setting Goals
- Refining and Supporting Your Goals

Empowering ADHD Women

- Managing Time and Sensory Needs
- Building a Supportive Environment
- Embracing Your ADHD Identity

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What is Self-Care?

Self-care refers to the practice of taking care of your physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being. It involves activities and habits. Self-care is not just about indulgent spa days or quiet meditation retreats (although it could be!), especially for women with ADHD. For neurodivergent women, self-care is a necessary and intentional tool for navigating a world primarily designed for neurotypical minds. It's likely you have neglected self-care, and instead sacrificed most aspects of self-care to function in the world.

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Why Self-Care Matters

Avoid Burnout

The ADHD nervous system can easily get stuck in chronic stress due to feeling unsupported. Human bodies were built to have short bursts of stress and then recover, not to be in stress all the time. When this happens, burnout can result. This is a state that is hard to return from.

Be Your Best Self for Others

When your self is cared for, you are happier and more regulated. This allows you to be a better friend, partner, worker, or dreamer.

Resilience against Life Stress

Think of self-care as protection. It helps you bounce back faster and handle life's stress.

Stay Emotionally Balanced and Regulated

Self-care helps you stay balanced, making it less likely for RSD and emotional dysregulation to set in and create stress cycles.

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The Reality of Self-Care for Women with ADHD

As a woman with ADHD, you may face a higher risk of mental and health problems due to the pressure to function in ways and in environments that may not be friendly to you. You may feel like you have to conceal who you are to fit into a world that doesn't understand or support you. To reduce these risks, it's important to take good care of yourself with radical self-care.

> As a woman, you may have been taught to prioritize caring for others over your own needs. However, it's crucial to break this pattern and belief that self-care is selfish or wrong.

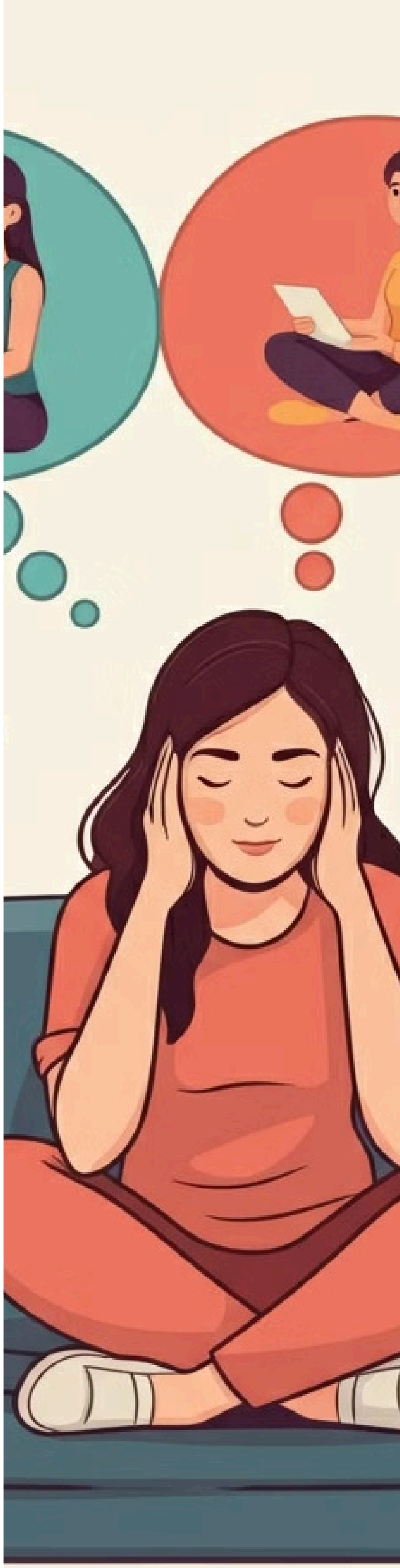
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Reflections on Self-Care

Self-Care for ADHD Women: Navigating Complex Realities

The Invisible Struggle

In the intricacies of daily life, the person we often forget first is ourselves.



Reflect:

- How many meals do you miss?

  _____

  _____

  _____

  _____

- How often do you forget to hydrate yourself?
- _____

  _____

  _____

  _____

- How often are you sleeping well?

  _____

  _____

  _____

  _____

- Are you resting enough after periods when you push yourself at work or at home?

  _____

  _____

  _____

  _____

- Are you feeling a constant drive to achieve and/or keep up?

  _____

  _____

  _____

  _____

- How many moments do you bypassed your body's needs?

  _____

  _____

  _____

  _____

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Realities that make ADHD Women's Self Care Hard

1

Executive Functioning Challenges

As we know, ADHD can lead to difficulties in planning, remembering, and organizing. Drinking, eating, and resting are not going to rise to the level of your attention until they present a crisis. Self-care is preventative, so it may not get attended to.

2

The Pressure to Perform

Especially for women with ADHD, there's an unspoken expectation to always achieve, mask differences, and keep up. This relentless drive often pushes self-care to the back burner.

3

Intersectional Issues

For those with multiple marginalized identities, societal pressures and systemic biases intensify. Given these compounded stresses, the concept of self-care, which is essential for well-being, might feel more distant or even unattainable for them.

4

Social Conditioning

Women, and particularly ADHD women, have often been conditioned to prioritize others' needs above their own. This self-sacrifice is sometimes seen as a virtue, but it can come at the cost of our health and well-being.

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Reflection on Self-Care Practices

Despite the odds that are stacked against you, you still have a part of you that knows you need to practice self-care.

This group, for example, is an act of self-care.

> *Can you think of anything else you do that is an act of self-care?*

Reclaiming Self-Care

In our group and workbook on self-care, we will explore what self-care might mean to you and see what small steps you can take to practice more self-care.

Let's keep in mind that part of practicing self-care requires you:

- [ ] Challenge societal and internal pressures that demand continuous performance.
- [ ] Question the deep-seated conditioning that urges women to serve others at the expense of themselves.
- [ ] Do a little work to put in place systems to scaffold your executive functioning.

SELF-CARE is a journey of reprioritization.

> "The true work of 'self-care' is recognizing you are the only one who can give yourself permission to take back your time and energy." - Dr. Pooia Lakshmin, M.D. Currently writing The Tyranny of Self-Care

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Four Foundations of Self-Care

1 Nourishing Yourself

Feeding yourself and hydrating yourself.

2 Resting Yourself

Building in periods of rest. Which might mean engaging in periods of solitude, creativity, connecting with friends, or engaging in your special interest.

3 Sleep

Getting enough sleep which is essential for your mood and executive functions.

4 Moving Your Body

Moving your body in some way.

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Nourishing Yourself with Food

Eating Disorders, Hyperfocus, and Alexithymia

ADHD women are at a greater risk for co-occurring eating disorders . This relationship is complex, as emotional dysregulation, anxiety, and depression can contribute to a further complicated relationship with food. Additionally, issues with alexithymia (difficulty identifying and expressing emotions) and hyperfocus can further complicate matters. It can be challenging to remember to eat when hyperfocused on a task or when not aware of hunger cues. In these cases, external scaffolding, such as timers or strategically placed notes, may be helpful reminders to eat.

Blood Sugar

Fluctuations in blood sugar levels can cause difficulty concentrating, irritability, and mood swings and exacerbate difficulties you might already have.

So, what's the best advice for an ADHD woman when it comes to diet?

Most articles and research suggest that maintaining stable blood sugar levels by eating regular meals, focusing on complex carbohydrates, and limiting excessive sugar is a good idea.

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Nourishing Yourself: Bottom Line

A good general goal is to learn to eat regularly and keep yourself nourished. Try to eat some vegetables and fruits.

Tips to help you towards this self-care goal if it's a challenge for you:

- Keeping food handy and accessible is a good step towards nourishing yourself.
- I once saw a video that recommended keeping a platter of convenient, pre-prepared food in your fridge.
- Choose foods that are appealing to you, and you know you will want to eat. Examples include peanut butter and crackers, olives and a block of cheese, apples or apple slices, and dark chocolate.
- Whatever you choose for the platter, it should be easy for you to feed yourself and appealing.
- You can pull that platter out whenever you need a quick meal, and it serves as a visual reminder to nourish yourself! This way, you are more likely to feed yourself regularly.



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Nourishing Yourself: Practical Strategies

Set Up Eating Reminders

Set reminders at intervals to remind yourself to eat so you don't get hungry.

Have food placed around strategically to cue yourself.

Keep notes and signs around to trigger your memory.

Release Food-Related Guilt

Don't get caught up in shame about food patterns.

You can eat in any way that works for you or your family, as long as you are nourishing yourself.

Believing you need to cook meals or keep up with the housewives next door is harmful and impractical.

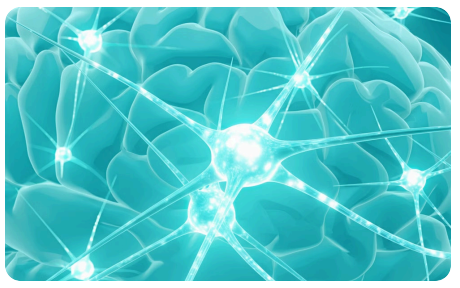
Choose Convenience

Make it as convenient as possible and accommodate your ADHD brain in any way you need to.

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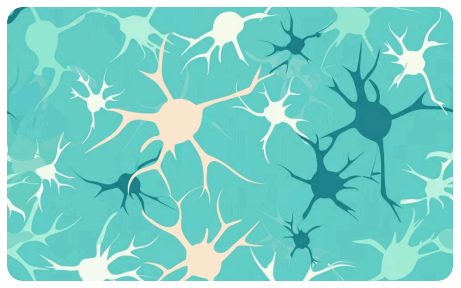
Watering Yourself: The Importance of Hydration

Drinking water is essential for everyone, regardless of whether they have ADHD. However, for individuals with ADHD, it's more important for several reasons:



Cognitive Functioning

Dehydration can impair attention, memory, and cognitive functioning.



Brain Health

Even mild dehydration can impact neurotransmitter production and function. We believe ADHD is partially due to issues with neurotransmitters so let's not mess with that.



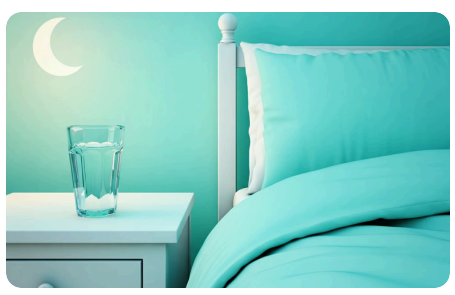
Medication Side Effects

Staying hydrated helps regulate your body temperature and the side effects that ADHD medication may cause you.



Mood Regulation

Dehydration can negatively affect mood and exacerbate feelings of anxiety or depression.



Sleep

Proper hydration supports optimal melatonin production, which is crucial for sleep.

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The Impact of Water on ADHD

1

Executive Functioning

When you're dehydrated, your brain's executive functioning abilities become impaired, making ADHD symptoms more challenging to manage

2

Neurotransmitter Production

Proper hydration is essential for your brain to produce and regulate neurotransmitters effectively, which are already affected by ADHD

3

Medication Effects

Regular water intake helps your body better manage ADHD medication side effects by regulating temperature and maintaining balance

4

Mood and Mental Health

Staying hydrated helps prevent the negative effects of dehydration on mood, anxiety, and depression symptoms

5

Sleep Quality

Your body needs proper hydration to produce melatonin effectively, supporting better sleep patterns

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Movement and Exercise: Benefits for ADHD



1

Physical Foundation: Neurotransmitter Boost

Exercise stimulates the release of dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin, neurotransmitters that play a significant role in attention, motivation, and mood regulation.

2

Enhanced Cognitive Function

Regular physical activity enhances cognitive functions such as working memory, attention, and executive function, which are areas often impacted in individuals with ADHD.

3

Improved Sleep Patterns

Women with ADHD often experience sleep disturbances or irregularities. Regular exercise can help regulate the sleep-wake cycle, promoting better sleep quality and duration.

4

Natural Stress Management

Physical activity serves as a natural stress-reliever, helping to manage daily tensions.

5

Better Emotional Balance

Regular movement can play a role in mood stabilization, helping to reduce the emotional dysregulation that some ADHD individuals experience.

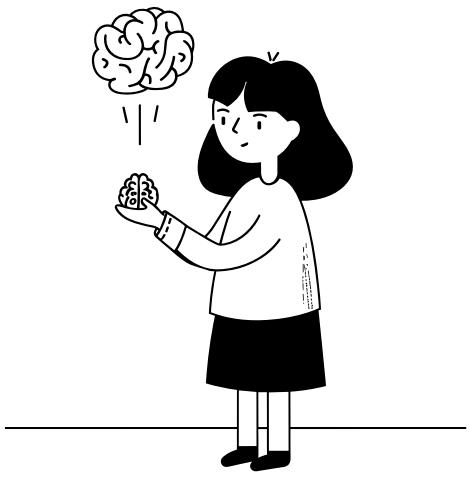
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More Benefits of Movement and Exercise for ADHD

Brain Growth and Efficiency

Exercise promotes brain growth, improves brain efficiency, and strengthens learning abilities.

The changes in the brain associated with exercise are most dramatic in areas related to ADHD: executive functioning, attention, and working memory.



Stress Reduction

Sustained exercise may significantly decrease the negative epigenetic effects of stress or trauma.



What about Food?

Studies suggest that exercise has a greater impact on supporting adhd than food, a more commonly promoted treatment strategy.



Extraordinary Effects

While the body of research on exercise is still small compared to that on medication or therapy, the effect on some people with ADHD can be extraordinary.



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Tips to Help You Drink More Water

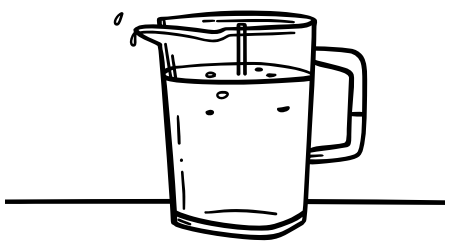
Stylish Water Bottle



Get yourself one of those beautiful water bottles that motivate you.

Refrigerated Water

Keep a pitcher of



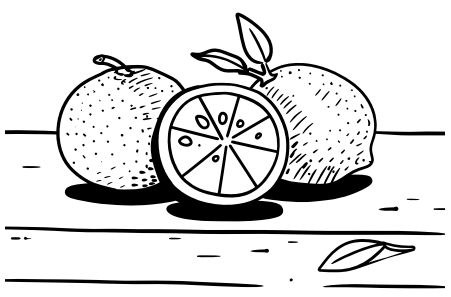
ice water in the fridge.

Use a Straw



Get yourself a straw!

Flavor Your Water



Drink flavored water.

Make It a Game

Make it a competition with a friend

Link to Other Activities

Hook it onto another activity. For example:

- Each time I check my email I will drink a glass of water.
- Each time I let the dogs out I will have glass of water.

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BDNF: Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor

BDNF, or Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor, is a protein found in the brain and central nervous system.

Exercise and BDNF

Exercise appears to help create BDNF.

Importance for Neuroplasticity

BDNF is crucial for neuroplasticity, which is the brain's ability to reorganize and adapt.

Cognitive Benefits

Proper levels of BDNF can support improved **learning**, **memory,** and overall **cognitive function,** which can be particularly beneficial for ADHD people.

Factors Affecting BDNF

Stress and sleep deprivation are two factors that can decrease BDNF levels.

Impact of Stress and Sleep

Chronic stress and elevated cortisol levels can reduce BDNF expression, while lack of adequate sleep can lead to decreased BDNF levels. Therefore, it is essential to manage stress and prioritize good sleep hygiene to maintain optimal levels of BDNF.

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Sleep and ADHD

People with ADHD often have trouble sleeping. They may take longer to fall asleep, wake up more often during the night, and not sleep as well overall.

Common Sleep Issues Associated with ADHD:

Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome (DSPS)

A circadian rhythm sleep disorder where a person's sleep-wake cycle is delayed by two or more hours beyond the socially acceptable or conventional bedtime. This delay in falling asleep causes difficulty in waking up at a desired time.

Treatment Approaches for DSPS:

- Good Sleep Hygiene: Maintain a regular sleep schedule, create a relaxing bedtime routine, avoid caffeine and electronic devices before bedtime, and ensure a comfortable sleep environment.
- Chronotherapy: Gradually delay the bedtime by 1-2 hours each day until the desired bedtime is reached. However, this method can be quite challenging to maintain and is not suitable for everyone.
- Light Therapy: Exposure to bright light in the morning can help reset the circadian rhythm. It is usually recommended to get exposure to bright light for about 30 minutes to 2 hours upon waking up.
- Melatonin Supplements: Melatonin is a hormone that regulates sleep-wake cycles. Taking melatonin supplements in the evening can help shift the circadian rhythm to an earlier time. However, the timing and dosage of melatonin should be carefully adjusted under the guidance of a healthcare professional.
- Medications: In some cases, prescription medications like sedatives or sleep aids may be prescribed by a healthcare professional.

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Sleep and ADHD: Additional Considerations

> Note: Adapting to societal sleep-wake times is often necessary, but it's advised to align your life with your natural rhythm and consult a professional for a personalized plan.

Other Common Sleep Issues in ADHD:

Restless Leg Syndrome (RLS)

Irresistible urge to move legs, often with uncomfortable sensations. Treatment for Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS) typically involves a combination of lifestyle changes, iron supplementation if necessary, and medications. Estimates at over 30 percent of ADHD people have RLS.

Sleep Apnea

Repeated breathing interruptions during sleep, causing fragmented sleep and daytime sleepiness. The most common treatments include machine which uses a hose connected to a mask or nosepiece to deliver constant and steady air pressure to help keep the airways open during sleep. Estimated over 30 percent of ADHD people have sleep apnea.

Insomnia

Trouble falling/staying asleep or waking too early. CBT medication are the treatments used.

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Revenge Bedtime Procrastination

Revenge bedtime procrastination (RBP) is when one delays bedtime to reclaim personal time, especially after feeling overwhelmed during the day.

Understanding the Phenomenon:

- You might get engrossed in a hyperfocus activity and do not want to sleep until late.
- Women, especially, often feel overwhelmed during the day, lacking personal or leisure time. Hence, the night becomes their 'me-time', usually involving tech activities that might not be very fulfilling.

Strategies to Improve Sleep with RBP:

- In the event of revenge bedtime procrastination try giving yourself some free time to enjoy yourself during the week.
- Control the environment so you don't get tempted at night.

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A Few Tips About Sleep

Stimulants

Contrary to popular belief, sometimes ADHD medications can help with sleep if taken appropriately.

Routine

Establish a consistent bedtime routine to reinforce the body's circadian rhythm.

Sunlight

Exposure to natural sunlight can help regulate sleep patterns.

Exercise

Comparable to sleep pills, it affects the circadian clock and can help reinforce a sleep routine.

Limit Tech

Avoid screens an hour before sleep. Use candles instead of bright lights at night.

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More Tips About Sleep

Avoid Naps?

The buildup of adenosine, a sleep-regulating chemical, makes us sleepy. Napping disrupts this. It might help not to nap.

Bedtime Prep

Complete bedtime preparations early in the evening to minimize resistance.

Find Joy in Sleep

Link positive emotions with sleep. Embrace challenges, novelty, and fun to make bedtime more appealing.

Understanding one's triggers and creating a personalized system can foster positive emotions, making it easier to adhere to a better sleep schedule.

Celebrating small successes, like getting to bed on time, can boost dopamine and promote better habits.

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REST: Why It's Crucial for ADHD Women



Stress Response (Sympathetic System)

ADHD women often experience heightened stress from inadequate support and self-criticism, activating the Fight-Flight-Freeze response. This constant state of alertness can lead to illness and exhaustion, as our bodies aren't designed for continuous stress.

Research shows ADHD correlates with higher stress levels, immune dysregulation, and increased illness risk.



Rest Response (Parasympathetic System)

The Rest and Digest mode allows our body to relax and recover, creating essential balance. For ADHD women, who often push beyond comfort levels, finding this calm, neutral state is crucial.

Self-care, especially rest, helps escape the continuous cycle of productivity that society demands. Remember our previous work on rest challenges and overwhelm - these exercises remain valuable tools.

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REST: Incorporating It Into Your Life

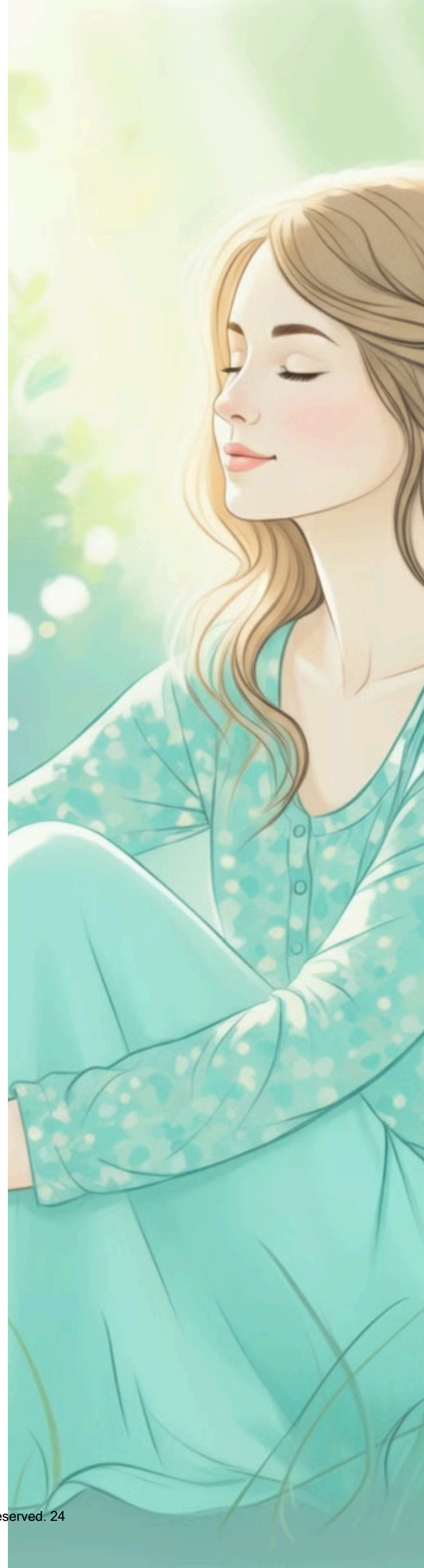
Types of Rest We Need

- Physical rest for body recovery
- Mental rest from cognitive load
- Emotional rest from feeling management
- Spiritual rest for deeper connection
- Creative rest to restore inspiration
- Social rest from interpersonal demands
- Sensory rest from overstimulation

Embracing Your Reality

Practicing self-care when you are neurodivergent can sometimes involve grief. Letting go of the idea that you will somehow magically keep up with the demands of neurotypical society is, in fact, practicing self-care.

It's important to recognize that the "gold standard woman" who meets all expectations is a creation, not reality. Releasing the pressure to achieve unrealistic demands isn't giving up - it's choosing yourself.



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Self Care Plan Worksheet

Instructions.

Steps

Step 1: Choose an Area of Focus

Select one area to work on:

- [ ] Rest
- [ ] Sleep
- [ ] Nourishment
- [ ] Hydration
- [ ] Movement

Step 2: Choose a Goal

Next pick one goal from your chosen area of focus on the following sheets or write your own. After selecting your goal, proceed to Steps 3, 4, and 5.

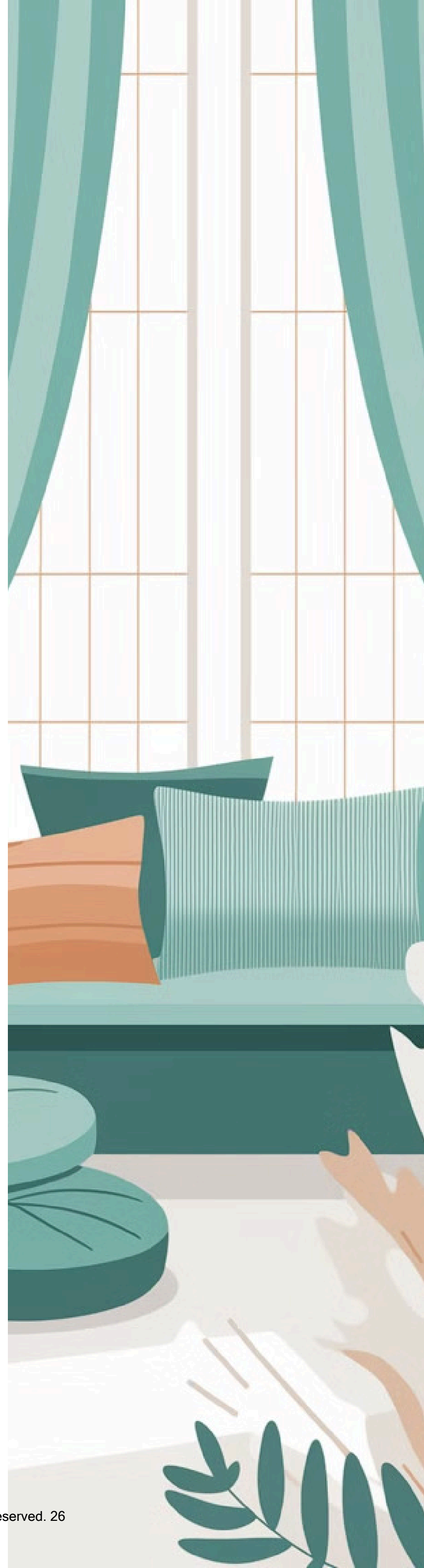
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Rest Goals

- [ ] Read for 10 minutes twice this week.
- [ ] Spend an hour with a friend.
- [ ] Engage in a special interest for 15 minutes twice this week.
- [ ] Sit outside in nature for 10 minutes once this week.
- [ ] Listen to calming music for 10 minutes daily.
- [ ] Practice deep breathing or meditation for 5 minutes daily.
- [ ] Take a short break from screens every hour.
- [ ] Sketch, color, or journal for 10 minutes twice this week.
- [ ] Engage in a hobby or craft for 15 minutes once this week.
- [ ] Listen to a podcast or audiobook for 10 minutes once this week.
- [ ] Do a quick relaxation or visualization exercise for 5 minutes daily.

- **Your own:**_____

_____



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Sleep Goals

- [ ] Go to bed 10 minutes earlier twice this week.
- [ ] Remove the phone from your room 30 minutes before bed one day this week.
- [ ] Sleep in for an extra 10 minutes once this week.
- [ ] Purchase a sleep mask to block out light.
- [ ] Experience sunlight as soon as you wake up.
- [ ] Keep the bedroom cool for better sleep quality.
- [ ] Avoid caffeine six hours before bedtime.
- [ ] Create a bedtime ritual (e.g., reading or stretching).
- [ ] Make the bedroom a screen-free zone once this week.
- [ ] Set an alarm to remind yourself it's bedtime every night.
- **Your own:**_____

_____



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Nourishment Goals

- [ ] Remind yourself to eat one meal daily.
- [ ] Eat one vegetable daily.
- [ ] Eat one fruit daily.
- [ ] Prepare a snack platter for the fridge once this week.
- [ ] Try a new healthy recipe once this week.
- [ ] Eat a healthy snack one day this week.
- [ ] Increase protein intake in one meal daily.
- [ ] Drink a smoothie or health drink daily.
- [ ] Avoid skipping breakfast.
- [ ] Set a timer to remind yourself to eat one day this week.
- **Your own:**



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Hydration Goals

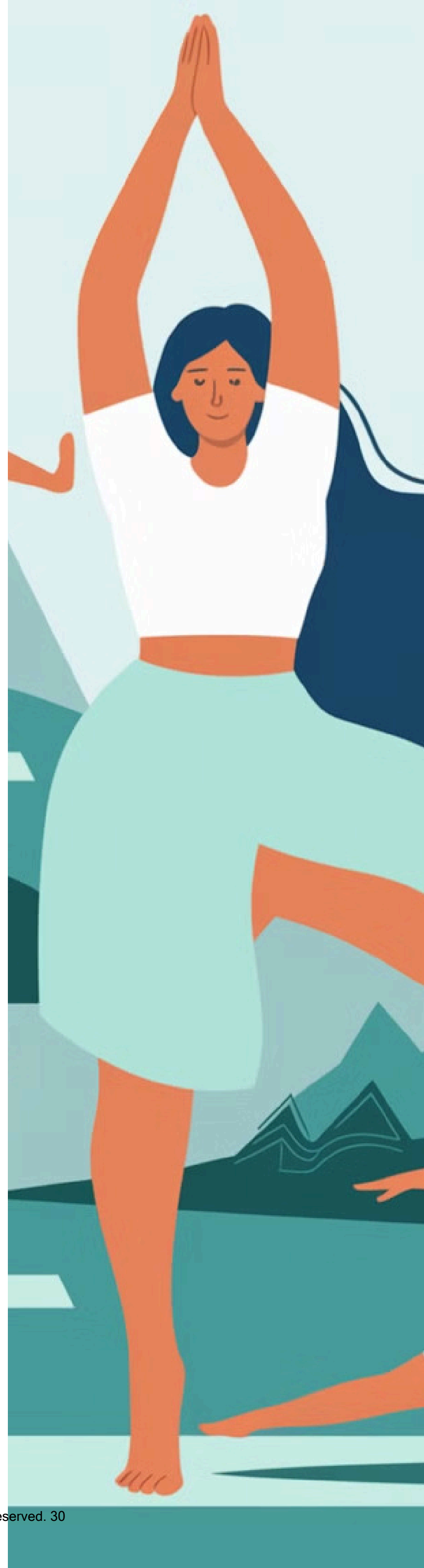
- [ ] Drink an extra glass of water daily.
- [ ] Carry a water bottle for one day this week.
- [ ] Limit caffeine or soda one day this week.
- [ ] Try a piece of fruit you've never had before.
- [ ] Set hourly reminders to sip water.
- [ ] Drink a glass of water before each meal.
- [ ] Track your daily water intake.
- [ ] Flavor water with natural fruits for variety.
- [ ] Skip alcohol one night this week.
- [ ] Drink a glass of water as soon as you wake up.
- **Your own:**



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Movement Goals

- Walk for 5 minutes daily.
- Do yoga for 5 minutes daily.
- Dance to your favorite song once daily.
- Stretch for 10 minutes in the morning.
- Try a new physical activity this week.
- Stand or walk during phone calls.
- Use the stairs instead of the elevator daily.
- Watch others move (e.g., in a park) for inspiration.
- Engage in a physical hobby (e.g., gardening, dancing) for 15 minutes.
- Set a timer to remind yourself to move or stretch every hour.
- **Your own:**



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Refining Your Goal

Step 3: Adjust Your Goal

- Is your goal overwhelming? _____
- If so, make it smaller or adjust the frequency._____
- Practice self-accommodation to ensure your goal feels achievable.

Step 4: Set a Start Time

- Decide when you'll start. Be specific (e.g., "Monday morning").____

Supporting Your Goal

Step 5: Develop a Strategy

How will you support yourself in reaching your goal? (Select or write your strategy):

- ☐ Leave visual reminders.
- ☐ Use self-talk.
- ☐ Set a timer.
- ☐ Have an accountability buddy.
- ☐ Announce your goal on social media.
- ☐ Pair with a group member.
- ☐ **Other:**_____

Staying Encouraged

Step 6: Motivation After Setbacks

If you miss your goal, how can you stay motivated? (Select or write your encouragement strategy):

- ☐ Understand that setbacks happen, and it's okay.
- ☐ Re-evaluate whether the goal was too ambitious and adjust.
- ☐ Speak kind and encouraging words to yourself.
- ☐ Seek support from an accountability buddy or group.
- ☐ Remember why you set this goal in the first place.
- **Your own:**_____

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Expanding on Self-Care for ADHD Women

Self-care for women with ADHD goes beyond typical relaxation techniques. It involves creating systems and environments that support your unique needs. Here are some additional considerations:

Time Management

Implement strategies like time-blocking or the Pomodoro Technique to manage your time more effectively and reduce overwhelm.

Sensory Needs

Recognize and accommodate your sensory sensitivities. This might involve creating a quiet workspace or using noise-cancelling headphones.

Medication Management

If you take medication, develop a system to ensure you take it consistently. This could be part of your morning routine or linked to another daily habit.

Celebrating Small Wins

Acknowledge and celebrate your accomplishments, no matter how small. This can boost your motivation and self-esteem.

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Building a Supportive Environment

Creating an environment that supports your ADHD needs is a crucial aspect of self-care. Consider the following:

Decluttering

Regularly declutter your living and working spaces to reduce visual distractions and mental overwhelm.

Visual Cues

Use visual reminders like sticky notes, whiteboards, or digital apps to keep important tasks and information visible.

Routine Building

Develop consistent routines for daily tasks to reduce decision fatigue and improve executive functioning.

Support Network

Cultivate relationships with people who understand and support your ADHD needs, including friends, family, or support groups.

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Embracing Your ADHD Identity

An often overlooked aspect of self-care for women with ADHD is embracing and celebrating your neurodivergent identity. This can involve:

Self-Acceptance

Recognize that your ADHD brain is different, not deficient. Embrace your unique strengths and challenges.

Education

Learn more about ADHD and how it specifically affects women. Knowledge can be empowering and help you advocate for yourself.

Community

Connect with other ADHD women through support groups or online communities. Sharing experiences can be validating and provide valuable insights.

Advocacy

Speak up about your needs and educate others about ADHD when appropriate. This can help create a more understanding and accommodating environment.

Remember, self-care is a journey, not a destination. Be patient with yourself as you explore what works best for you and your ADHD brain.

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