

DR POOJA LAKSHMIN



REAL

'Expect to turn down every other page' PANDORA SYKES

SELF

'A concrete set of principles to rely on' MARTHA BECK

CARE

**A Transformative Programme
for Redefining Wellness**

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Real Self-Care

‘A bracingly honest, galvanizing and necessarily provocative look at what “self-care” looks like – through a political and feminist lens. Expect to fold down every other page.’ Pandora Sykes

‘Invaluable. For anyone mothering, working, simply trying to be their “best self”, this book will offer clarity and a new way forward.’ Katherine Ormerod

‘This isn’t just another self-help book . . . *Real Self-Care* is a much-needed sanctuary for the minds and hearts of its readers.’ Martha Beck

‘*Real Self-Care* is a revelation. Pooja takes us through a journey of unlearning and rediscovery to tackle burnout, make ourselves whole again and step into our power in a world that is often stacked against us.’ Eve Rodsky

‘A gentle yet direct invitation for us to consider the things that will really help us to be well. This is a practical and helpful guide for anyone who has done all the things the listicles have outlined and is still feeling overrun and worn out. Pooja provides a real path forward paved with compassion and encouragement.’ Dr Joy Harden Bradford,
founder of Therapy for Black Girls
and author of *Sisterhood Heals*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Pooja Lakshmin, MD, is a board-certified psychiatrist, *New York Times* contributor and a leading voice at the intersection of mental health and gender, focused on helping women and people from marginalised communities escape the tyranny of self-care. In 2020, Lakshmin founded Gemma – a physician-led women’s mental health education platform. She maintains an active private practice, where she treats women struggling with a plethora of mental health-related issues. Having gone down the rabbit hole of extreme wellness herself, *Real Self-Care* is the author’s answer to a happier and healthier future, not only for ourselves, but for our society.

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Penguin Random House is committed to a
sustainable future for our business, our readers
and our planet. This book is made from Forest
Stewardship Council® certified paper.

This book was written for every woman who wonders if she's got it all wrong, if she'll ever measure up, if she's asking for too much.

I see you—I am you. Together, we will forge a better path,
for ourselves and for the next generation.

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“For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”

AUDRE LORDE

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Author's Note

You'll notice that I reference my patients in this book. Names and details have been changed in order to protect their privacy. In a couple instances, I have created composites out of an abundance of caution.

In this book you will find tools based on techniques that are commonly utilized in psychotherapy. *Real Self-Care* is meant to be a source of support and education. It is not a substitute for seeking professional help and treatment. At the end of the book, I have included resources for finding a mental health professional.

I've created a space for folks who are practicing *Real Self-Care* to come together. Join me and my colleagues at Gemma: the physician-led women's mental health community that centers equity and impact www.gemmawomen.com.

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Introduction

You may have noticed that lately it's nearly impossible to go even a couple of days without coming across the term *self-care*. A phrase that encompasses any number of lifestyle choices or products—from juice cleanses to yoga workshops to luxury bamboo sheets—“self-care” has exploded in our collective consciousness as a panacea for practically all women’s problems.

As a physician specializing in women’s mental health, I find this cultural embrace of self-care incomplete at best, and manipulative at worst. Wellness dogma says that a fix for your troubles is as simple as buying a new day planner or signing up for a meditation class. And according to this philosophy, when you don’t find time for these “solutions,” it’s your fault for not keeping up with one more task on your to-do list. In my clinical practice, where I take care of women suffering from burnout, demoralization, depression, and anxiety, I have seen countless patients come in and say some version of: “Dr. Lakshmin, I feel like crap. Everything feels like a chore, I’m constantly on edge—and I feel like it’s my fault because I’m not doing self-care!”

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INTRODUCTION

It's not their fault and it's not yours.

In reality, the game is rigged.

By focusing on *faux* self-care—what I call the products and solutions marketed to us as remedies—we've conceptualized self-care all wrong. Faux self-care is largely full of empty calories and devoid of substance. It keeps us looking outward—comparing ourselves with others or striving for a certain type of perfection—which means it's incapable of truly nourishing us in the long run.

It's understandable that we turn to faux self-care and wellness to solve our problems—after all, it's everywhere we look! And as you'll see in the introduction here, I've done it too. When we're feeling exhausted and in despair and we see an ad for the latest juice cleanse promising extraordinary results, *of course* our ears perk up. So please, let me be clear, I don't mean to shame anyone who takes solace in wellness as a respite from their hectic lives—that's not the point of this book. Instead, I'm here to share that not only is the helplessness that we feel when it comes to taking care of ourselves *not our fault*, there is also a better way to do it, from the inside out, and that's precisely what I am going to teach you.

In this book you'll learn how to carve out a meaningful path forward. Real self-care, as you'll see, is not a one-stop shop like a fancy spa retreat or a journaling app; it's an internal process that involves making difficult decisions that will pay off tenfold in the long run as a life built around the relationships and activities that matter most to you. My goal is to teach you the difference between the two not only by lifting the veil on commodified

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faux self-care but also by transforming your understanding of what a real practice of caring for yourself could look like and showing you that it's possible. I'll share practical tools and tangible strategies for how you can make wellness your own—making positive changes in your own life and then expanding that knowledge outward, to impact the people and systems around you. As I'll teach you in this book, real self-care not only impacts us as individuals—it also has a cascade effect in our relationships, communities and workplaces, and society at large. It is what we need not only to buffer ourselves but also to change the systems that are not serving us as women.

In short, there is a better way.

WHY LISTEN TO ME?

I've spent the better part of the past decade working as a psychiatrist specializing in women's mental health, in addition to twelve years of education to become a physician and a psychiatrist. In my clinical work I've spent thousands of hours taking care of women struggling with burnout, despair, depression, and anxiety. In addition to treating patients and my academic endeavors, I've poured myself into gender and social justice advocacy.

But perhaps more important than my professional accolades is for you to know that I've been there—*right where you are*. I've believed that if I followed the recipe of fancy schools, a prestigious career, and marriage, my feelings would catch up and I'd

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INTRODUCTION

feel content and fulfilled. I've suffered from burnout, hopelessness, and even clinical depression and anxiety. I've taken medication and been in psychotherapy. I've been through loss, hardship, and trauma. And I've made a number of mistakes on my journey (some of which are detailed in this book).

A decade ago, while in my late twenties, after spending much of my life up until that point in school to become a physician, I made a drastic decision. To the shock and horror of my family and friends, in the course of a year I blew up my marriage, moved into a wellness commune in San Francisco, and dropped out of my highly competitive psychiatry residency training program. And not just any commune, but one that practiced and taught orgasmic meditation.

Convinced I had found the Answer to life's problems, I spent nearly two years with this group—living in their intentional community, working for their wellness start-up, and spreading their message with fervor. The group itself was organized like a matriarchy, in which women held and wielded the power. To say this appealed to me was putting it lightly; I was a former women's studies major but had grown up in a patriarchal South Asian culture and had just gone through a male-dominated academic medical system.

In the introductory class for the group, co-led by an ob-gyn, the group's leader explained that the reason women felt unsatisfied was because Western culture had indoctrinated us to disconnect from our bodies, and because of that, we never learned to fully live in our power. They offered up orgasmic med-

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itation as a female-focused practice that was akin to sensate focus therapy—it allowed you to drop away from all the noise and chatter in your brain and connect with your body, and in turn, with yourself. Within a week of that first class, I dove in. It was the first time in my life that I saw women openly asking for what they wanted and getting it. It felt like the one wellness practice—the one feminist utopia—that could fix all of my problems. I spent nearly two years deeply immersed in this group’s world of spiritual practice and Eastern wellness modalities.

How did a type A, perfectionistic physician find herself in a group focusing on female orgasm? In hindsight, I realize I had been simultaneously searching desperately to find myself in new and exciting places while also attempting to lose myself. I was disillusioned with mainstream medicine and psychiatry, which, at the time, I viewed as irredeemably flawed and betraying the people it proposed to help. As a trainee, I experienced the death of a patient, which crushed me. I started to question what was being taught—I didn’t get much guidance in medical school or residency on what to do when your patient can’t pay for health insurance or when she has lost childcare for the third time in two months and is being fired from her job. Instead, I was taught to prescribe medications or provide psychotherapy for issues that were clearly systemic. While there is certainly a great need for both of these medical interventions, the lack of attention to the inhumanity of our social policies left me feeling powerless—just like my patients. Personally, I was burned out and teetering on depression, and I felt like my own attempts to get professional

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help were lacking (despite being a physician myself!). It was in this state—angry and feeling betrayed by our medical system—that I left to find answers in the most unlikely of places.

To me, the group I joined was changing the world—breaking stigmas and taboos about women’s sexual well-being and fighting loudly for the empowerment of people who are often dismissed by the medical establishment. I met the neuroscientists at the Rutgers fMRI orgasm lab, one of only two labs in the world that studied female orgasm through brain imaging technology. I studied what happens in the brain during female orgasm. It was a period of both personal and academic exploration.

During this time, I became aware of many critics of the group, yet I didn’t have tolerance for them. From my perspective, I was there fully of my own volition, and I looked with pity upon those who couldn’t see how singular this group and its mission were. At the time, I believed in their particular brand of wellness dogma and spirituality—a combination of new age teaching and Silicon Valley—espoused libertarianism. Coincidentally, the dogma fit perfectly with my Hindu upbringing, which leaned heavily on magical thinking, mythology, and gurus.

Unfortunately, what I didn’t realize, and what those who cared about me did, was that as a physician, I offered something invaluable: legitimacy. During the time I was with the group, from 2012 to 2013, I was treated with kid gloves, kept at arm’s length from the inner workings of the higher-ups. At the time, I thought that distance was in place because I was not spiritually actualized enough to be in the inner circle. It was many years later, in

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2018 after the news broke about an FBI investigation into this group, that I found out how dark the story had become and I put together the pieces of why I was always shooed away.

I left the group after a little less than two years. As they were reaching new levels of success and opening wellness centers all over the world, I began to notice inconsistencies in their dogma. I wanted to finish my residency training, and I was starting to understand that one wellness practice could not fix all of my problems.

It wasn't until I left and started doing my own healing that I recognized how much my time in the group had warped my thinking. I struggled to make sense of what had happened. I fell into a deep depression and wondered if I could keep living. I no longer had the group, and in the process of joining it I had torched my old life.

I had to rebuild my life, and myself, largely from scratch.

My parents let me crash at their place, rent-free. I turned thirty in my old childhood bedroom, wrung out and bingeing reruns of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, texting with the few close friends who stuck with me. I was fortunate to have mental health professionals to turn to who helped me work through my experiences and make meaning of them. Others who left the group didn't have that luxury and suffered much more than I did. And I had to grapple with the knowledge that I helped legitimize this group—a cult—as a physician and a professional who spoke publicly on their behalf while I was deeply entrenched in their philosophy.

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It was understandable—like many of you, I dove into a wellness practice because the thought had not occurred to me that the solutions needed to come from inside myself. While the practice of orgasmic meditation had helped me personally, I had been seduced by the fantasy that an external solution—this shiny wellness practice—could fix all of the problems in my life.

Instead, I learned the hard way that self-care is an inside job.

Going on to face the real world by returning to my medical training was both the hardest thing I've done *and* the thing that's given me the most strength. In many ways, it was leaving the cult, not joining it, that has made me the person I am now. I learned to set boundaries, came to understand my values, and ultimately found my voice and started speaking up for myself—separate from my family, the medical system, and the cult. In short, I learned how to practice *real* self-care.

In the decade since then, I've come to understand that real self-care is not only a more authentic and sustainable solution—it's also self-determined. It involves the internal process of setting boundaries, learning to treat yourself with compassion, making choices that bring you closer to yourself, and living a life aligned with your values. It's hard work, but not only can it be achieved, it can be maintained internally, unlike an off-the-shelf product or the lessons of a self-help guru. And, as you'll come to understand in this book, it has the potential to shift our relationships, our workplace culture, and even our social systems, thus impacting the collective injustices that are the root of women's problems.

I ultimately graduated psychiatry residency and joined the

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faculty at George Washington University School of Medicine, then went on to start my own private practice focused on women's mental health. You won't be surprised to learn that when my patients began coming in talking about self-care and wellness solutions like vaginal jade eggs and turmeric face masks, I was worried. On one hand, I understood that my patients, who were at their wit's end from demanding family lives and nonstop careers, were understandably looking to these solutions for a bit of solace. Yet I had tried extreme wellness and I knew the dangers of getting caught up in the self-care industrial complex. Now I not only had the credentials and the professional expertise to set the record straight, I also had this profound personal experience of what happens when wellness goes very wrong. And even more than that, I knew there was an alternative that was self-driven and sourced from the inside.

So, I did what any reasonable geriatric millennial would do—I started a blog and an Instagram account. Soon after, in 2018, I published an essay for *Doximity*—"We Don't Need Self-Care; We Need Boundaries." Aimed at an audience of women physicians, the piece was an attempt to shed light on the problematic nature of self-care as a solution for health-care worker burnout. Like in many industries, hospitals and medical groups were offering up "resilience training" as a solution to the burnout epidemic in clinicians. But despite these perks, there was no mention of paid time off, childcare subsidies, or real policy changes to support workers. In the weeks after the publication of my essay, I received message after message from women across the country

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telling me they felt like I was describing their exact plight. Subsequently, in 2019, *The New York Times* asked me to adapt the essay to speak more broadly to a nonmedical audience, and I went on to become a regular contributor, writing about gender justice, women's mental health, and the societal structures that prevent women from being able to build emotional well-being.

From all these seeds grew the book you hold in your hands.

Before we go any further, I want to be clear with you. For a long time, I hesitated in writing about this topic and joining the self-help field. I am not writing as your guru. If it's someone else's answer, it can never be your solution. Whether it's a full-fledged cult, a diet, or the latest fitness program, the answer to your problems is never going to be someone else telling you what to do, myself included. As you'll understand as you dive into this book, the answers can only come from inside you. As you read along, you will notice that I don't prescribe a lot of rules to follow, but rather encourage you to ask tough questions and make hard decisions. This is deliberate—from what I know, personally and professionally, real self-care has to come from within you. What I'm providing is a guide to hold space for your own self-reflection, and productive questions to ask yourself, so that ultimately, you can create your own path for meaningful and long-term real self-care.

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN HERE

In this book, I'm going to teach you why self-care as we've conceptualized it is all wrong, and arm you with the crucial tools you

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need to do the radical work of taking real care of yourself. This work isn't about fixing yourself—in fact, it's high time we stop telling women they need to be fixed. Instead, I will teach you how to care for yourself from the inside and, in turn, create a cascade effect that influences your family, your relationships, and even your workplace. Real self-care is revolutionary precisely because it has the power to change the root cause of our problems—the systems.

Some of this work will be challenging for you—as women we are taught that caring for ourselves is a selfish act. We learn early in life that we should be putting our energy into caring for others (as daughters, partners, mothers, etc.). I am giving you permission to hold space for yourself as you read this book. Do not shy away from taking this time to learn how to look after your own well-being. What you learn here may go against what you've been taught, but it is not self-indulgent—it's *necessary*.

That being said, this book is predicated on the notion of dispelling the myth and the *burden* that you can have it all, so don't worry—I'm not going to give you another set of ideals or practices to fail at. Instead, I will invite you to take a close look at how you spend your time and how you talk to yourself, so you can make clear decisions about aligning your behaviors with what matters most to you.

In Part I, I'm going to show you the systemic problematic nature of what I call *faux* self-care. You'll understand why faux self-care is an empty promise that skips the critical self-driven process of developing boundaries and identifying what truly

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nourishes us. We will examine the way our patriarchal society has saddled women with the mental load, leaving us burned out, disconnected, and primed to practice faux self-care as an individual solution to a societal problem. We'll also dive into the three main ways women are understandably seduced into faux self-care as a coping mechanism: escape, achievement, and optimization. Finally, you will get a bird's-eye view of how the individual practice of real self-care has the power to impact the people and systems in your life. I'll describe cases from my clinical practice, explain the latest scientific research on well-being, and share personal stories from my own life experiences as a woman who has grappled, often in messy and unproductive ways, with how to implement real self-care.

In Part II of the book, we will roll up our sleeves and get to work. I'll teach you about eudaimonic well-being and why real self-care is grounded in this psychological concept. Then I'll share with you my framework—the Four Principles of Real Self-Care:

1. Set boundaries with others.
2. Change how you talk to yourself.
3. Bring in what matters most *to you*.
4. This is power—use it for good.

In these chapters you will also find actionable tools and exercises to help you start putting these principles into practice right away. I recommend reading the chapters in the order I've laid them out, so you have a full understanding of how they

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build on each other. Then, as you're implementing your real self-care practice in your life, feel free shift back and forth. The end of this book contains an appendix of exercises so you can easily reference these tools in the future.

LET'S GET STARTED

This book is my letter to every woman out there who has flirted with hopping in the car and running away from it all. To the women who are so bogged down in the mess of things that they don't even stop to imagine running away from it all. I want this to be a powerful resource for you and the scores of women, like you and me, who feel let down by the gratitude lists, the meditation apps, and the essential oils. It's not just that the status quo is broken; it's that the extent of the brokenness demands massive and radical change—and *that change starts inside all of us.*

You'll come away from *Real Self-Care* armed with clarity on how to develop practices that are truly nourishing—and transforming. In the end, you'll understand that real self-care is not a noun—it's a *verb*. And while it won't be as easy as buying that crystal-infused water bottle, it sure works a lot better.

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A Word on Identity, Privilege, and Systems of Oppression

I'm writing this book from the perspective of a cis-hetero second-generation South Asian American woman. I was raised in southeast Pennsylvania by my immigrant parents—a physician father and a homemaker mother. Growing up, I spent a good deal of time in Bangalore, India, where my parents and my extended family are originally from, which has greatly informed my view of the world.

You'll notice I use the word *women* throughout the book. The definition I am using is borrowed from Silvia Federici,¹ who, when asked to define the term *women*, has said: "To me it has always been mostly in terms of a political category." I use the word *women* inclusively to mean all people who suffer under the oppressive conditions that have typically been associated with the female sex, which includes queer folks, trans and nonbinary people, and intersex and agender people.

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My clinical practice is focused on people who identify as women, many of whom have children but not all. In a country without mandatory paid family leave and with astronomical childcare costs, parenthood can be an existential tipping point for women. But it is important to note that it's not just mothers who suffer from this overburdening—it's anyone who has been conditioned to put the needs and preferences of others ahead of themselves.

It's also important to note that systems of power affect individuals differently—those who have privileges like financial resources, family support, or lighter skin will have an easier time enacting change in their lives, while those who are the most marginalized may have to work harder to achieve the same outward results. Black and Indigenous women, trans and queer women, women living in poverty, and those who hold multiple vulnerable identities are more often than not the ones who are the most encumbered. This is precisely why we must shift away from a commodified version of wellness, which continues to uphold and perpetuate inequitable systems of power. As you'll learn throughout this book, real self-care is a radical and necessary practice for people of marginalized identities—it's a strategy for taking power away from predatory systems, bringing it back into yourself, and ultimately enacting change. Self-help traditionally does not acknowledge the systemic barriers that women and people from marginalized groups face. I wanted to change that: throughout the book, you'll see that I reference systems of oppression—racism, toxic capitalism, sexism, and able-

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