Opinion

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'Self-care': how a radical feminist idea was stripped of politics for the mass market

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Audre Lorde proposed a series of calming activities as a way to survive adversity. Now it's just another form of 'me time'

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What do professional golfers, radical queer feminists and Instagram lifestyle influences have in common? They are all devotees of "self-care". While the earlier self-help movement focused on improving yourself, the relatively new self-care movement focuses on preserving yourself. It's lifestyle advice for an age of diminished expectations, where most people have given up on getting to the top and the best they can hope for is to get through the day. Self-care is self-help for a time when about a third of the population will suffer from some kind of anxiety disorder during their lives.

Self-care is a remarkably flexible term. It includes nearly any activity people use to calm, heal and preserve themselves in the face of adversity. Some common forms of self-care include getting enough sleep, eating well, physical exercise, meditating and doing things you like such as watching an 80s teen film. Other suggestions for self-care include tracking your menstrual cycle, having date nights with yourself, doing craft activities such as crochet, learning the art of saying no, and "consciously unfollowing" people on social media.

> **The central insights may well get lost. This could mean self-care becomes just another brand of self-help**

A whole self-care industry has popped up in recent years peddling products such as temporary tattoos featuring slogans like "I am enough". The hashtag #selfcare has been used more than 18 million times on Instagram alone. Type it in and thousands of images of glossy-haired women lounging in health spas will pop up. Although it is still largely targeted at women, self-care has starting to appeal to men too. For instance, the pro-golfer Bryson DeChambeau recently described his self-care ritual during the PGA tour: eating well, listening to his body and playing Fortnite.

Although self-care seems to be everywhere today, it hasn't always been this way. The roots of the current ideas about self-care are to be found in a book by the intellectual historian, Michel Foucault. In the third volume of The History of Sexuality, he examined how ancient Greeks pursued ideas about the "care of the self". This idea took on a new vitality in A Burst of Light, a book by Audre Lorde. Written after she had been diagnosed with cancer for a second time, Lorde talks about self-care as a radical political act. "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence," she wrote. "It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." Lorde's ideas about self-care were picked up by many in queer, feminist and activist circles. Caring for yourself became a way of preserving yourself in a world that was hostile to your identity, your community and your way of life.

But the idea of self-care has overflowed the relatively small circles of people who might be familiar with Lorde. The self-care of Instagrammers, professional golfers and overworked executives is probably not intended as "an act of political warfare" as Lorde had hoped. But why, a quarter century after her death, has a radical queer theorist become a go-to lifestyle guru? Maybe others are finally

radical queer theorist become a go-to lifestyle guru? Maybe others are finally starting to recognise the power of some of Lorde's ideas. Perhaps it is because the widespread existence of anxiety disorders means that many of us share some of Lorde's experience of facing up to fear and trying to survive in a world that seems so hostile. It could be that continued political shocks mean even relatively privileged people have started to feel that the world is against them and the best they can hope for is to endure. It is worth remembering that Google searches for "self-care" peaked between 13 and 19 November 2016, the week after Donald Trump was elected US president.

Self-care might have a wide appeal, but does it work? There are many testimonial accounts of the powerful impact self-care has had on people's lives. For instance, Angie Jaime describes for Vice how communal self-care helped her to deal with a jarring move between cities and the heightened presence of everyday discrimination and racism she faced. These kind of personal stories are backed up by a growing body of scientific evidence suggesting that self-care practices are good for people's physical and mental health. This is particularly true for people with chronic diseases – a group that makes up about 45% of the US population.

But while self-care may work for individuals, it doesn't come without dangers. This once radical idea is being stripped of its politics to make it more palatable to a mass market. As this happens, the central insights associated with self-care may well get lost. This could mean self-care becomes just another brand of self-help. Self-care could also be seen as cheap replacement for social care. Already many governments around the world are starting to focus their resources on promoting self-care in the medical world. This is fine if it is a complement to professional care. But when it becomes a substitute, we probably should be worried. Sometimes we need other people with skills and experience to care for us.

What was supposed to be an invitation to collective survival becomes yet another form of individualism. This happens when self-care becomes nothing more than another word for "me time". When this occurs, self-care can quite easily transform into self-coddling. Self-care can become an excuse to get out of almost any commitment. This can be a problem not just for the people we let down but also for ourselves. Self-care can become an excuse to avoid pushing ourselves even slightly outside of comfort zones. As a consequence, we miss out on opportunities to learn and to have experiences we can't directly control.

If we spend all our time caring for ourselves, it is likely we will have no time and energy to challenge ourselves. This could easily leave us feeling safe and cared for but also stunted, while doing little to reduce the anxiety about the world around us.

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