

WELLBEING

THE SELF-CARE GUIDE FOR SELF-ISOLATION — AND FIVE EASY THINGS TO TRY

In an uncertain time can our resident self care sceptic overcome her resistance and find a healthier, happier way to live without joining the touchy feely crowd? Sarah Jossel meets fashion's favourite wellness gurus and discovers an unexpected path to enlightenment



Sisters Katia, left, and Nadia

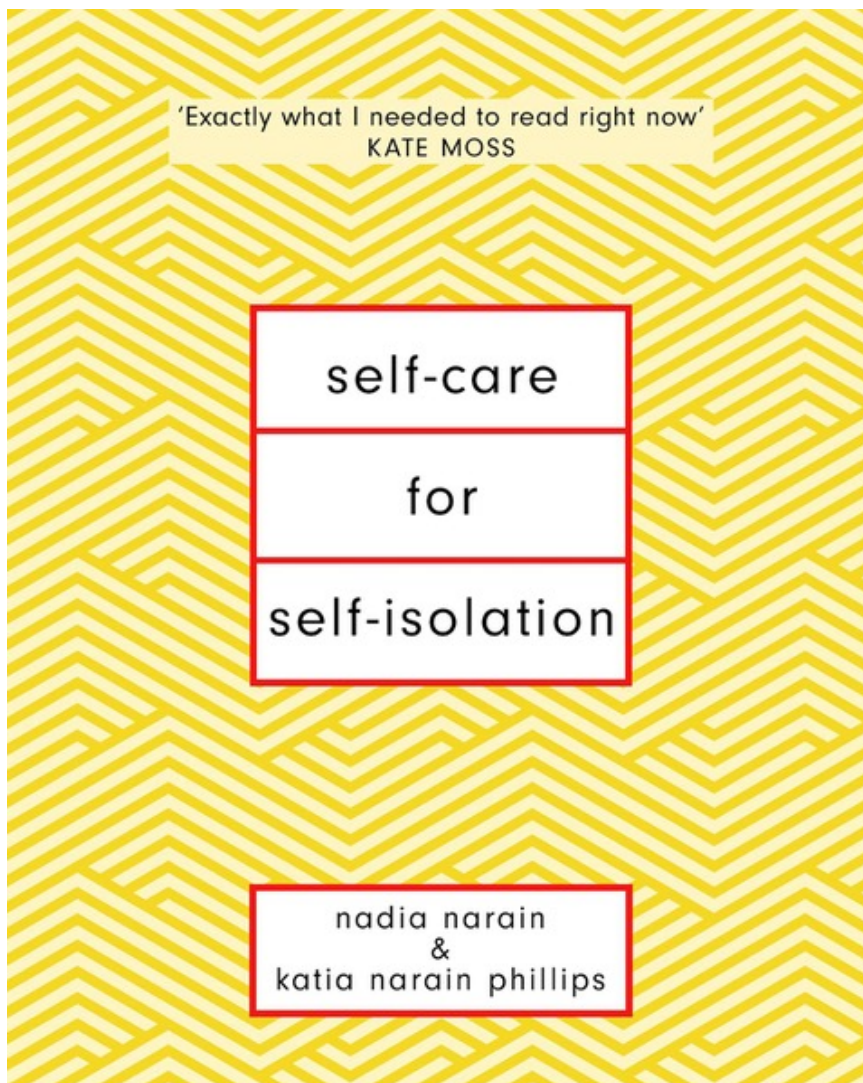
ISSY CROCKER

[Sarah Jossel](#)

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I can see a candle! I can see a window! I can see a facial steamer! I can see a kettle! I can see a martini glass! Oh wait — I've not gone completely loopy in isolation. I am practising something called Exercise for Overwhelm, whereby you focus on five things you can see, from the new ebook *Self-Care for Self-Isolation*, written by the wellness gurus and sisters Nadia Narain, 46, and Katia Narain Phillips, 44.

“If you want to try to stop anxiety getting to the stage of a panic attack, you need to take yourself out of your imagination and into the physical space where you are right now,” they say during our three-way Zoom call. Nadia is by herself in a top-floor flat in Primrose Hill, while Katia is in Hampstead Garden Suburb, also in London, where she's doing lockdown with her husband, two sons and a dog.



This is the sisters' third self-care book, and it came into being when they realised how much support people need right now. They put their heads together (virtually) and wrote it in 3½ weeks after both were hit hard with Covid-19 symptoms. The crux of the book is simple: "Self-care isn't optional in a crisis, it's essential." They agree with me that the term doesn't have the best reputation. "It sounds like manicures and bubble baths, but it's so much deeper than that at the moment."

I have always been conflicted when it comes to the idea of self-care. Count me in for the facials and fake tan, but the crystal healing malarkey and forced relaxation? I'm out the door at the first tinge of that triangle. However, things feel different now, and as I adjust to the slower pace, I have found myself reflecting on my perpetual need for speed. Saying that, my living room should really have a "Sarah's Salon" sign as I have set it up to do weekly at-home beauty tutorials. As the queries come flooding in about essential oils and face masks, it's clearer to me that we are looking for ways to feel our best right now.

The book, which Kate Moss describes as "exactly what I needed to read right now", is a mix of the touchy-feely holistic and straight-talking practical advice. On one page you will find gratitude journal writing tips, on the next there is helpful content on posture, prolonging fresh food and how to create the perfect workspace that even I, a yogi's worst nightmare — I can't sit still for a minute or touch my toes, and I count caffeine and red wine as daily essentials — have found really useful.

The younger sister, Katia, a health food chef to the stars and trained massage therapist, joins the 1pm call with wet hair from an earlier hair mask. She got up at 7am to do a Jane Fonda-style dance class. Nadia, a renowned yoga teacher and holistic mentor who has the likes of Sienna Miller and Reese Witherspoon following her every yoga move, tells me she put on perfume and lip gloss for our chat: "Even if it's just me looking at me, it has made me feel good."

Nadia hasn't been sleeping well. "When the crisis began, I went from being the busiest yoga teacher to not having a job or identity overnight. I've had to hustle. Last night I was up at 3am for an hour and a half trying to breathe myself back to sleep." She starts her day at 6am with hot water and lemon. (Caffeine is a no-no for both sisters as it makes them jittery.) After our call she will be teaching online yoga to a class of about 150 people. Any A-list names joining? She would never tell and, anyway, some clients "would rather do one-to-one sessions".

The Narain sisters are the antithesis of the matcha-drinking, Lycra-wearing, millennial wellness warriors that are hashtag-blessed every minute of every day on social media. In fact neither of them has much love for Instagram. "I don't feel like exploring others at the moment," Katia says. "It opens up feelings of comparison." They also don't believe it's normal to put a positive gloss on everything. "Of course we feel depressed and useless some days," she continues. "It's OK to feel rubbish. But the more you learn these coping techniques, the less time you spend in unhelpful places."

Alcohol is off the table too. "We come from alcoholic backgrounds. We've done it all and it's not our gig. It gives us hangziety! A hangover and not being able to escape is not for me," Nadia laughs. I ask them what they make of my new regular — OK, daily — glass-of-wine ritual. "Sarah, if you feel great the next day and you don't have negative thoughts, then that's what works for you. We're not here to tell you what's right or wrong," Nadia says. "Our message is: we've tried this and we want to pass it on to you," Katia adds. Bingo. That's what I like about this book, it's advice rather than rules. It never tells me what to do, so I never feel like I'm failing. I've been to retreats across the globe for my job, and my friends and I have committed to fads and failed at the first hurdle, because the rituals become chores, leaving me with the sinking feeling that I've not done my homework.

Don't get me wrong. It's not all for me — I'll leave the cold-shower stints and the awkward "legs up the wall" poses to the next reader — but in less than a week I

am getting good at my anti-desk stretches, I am making a conscious effort to pack up my workspace to signal the end of the working day, and I am now doing daily “rescue breathing” outside my apartment — which is when I breathe strongly in and out and make odd sounds 30 times over. My neighbours have asked if I am extra committed to the clapping for carers.

Everything in the book is based on simple steps. “Begin small, otherwise you’re not going to keep it up every day,” Katia says. “It’s staying on top of the little chores like making the bed in the morning and emptying cups at the end of the day. These things sound insignificant, but they are little signals that we are taking care of ourselves the way we would take care of a guest who was coming to stay.”

Some exercises are more, um, out there than others. “Give your anxiety a name — like Gus!” they say. I go back and forth as if I’m choosing a baby name. George! No, I can’t do the future king. My anxiety has to be male, though. Maybe he’s more of a Theodore? But I also like Oscar. I panic. I decide to rhyme with Gus and go with Russ — Russell when I’m annoyed. “So instead of feeling fear, you can think, ‘Oh hey, Gus has come to visit. Sometimes he stays longer, but he’s here so let him in.’” The whole concept of chatting to your anxious thoughts feels silly — although it does feel quite powerful telling Russ to go back where he came from — but the point they make “is this doesn’t work overnight. It takes discipline and practice to pay attention to your feelings so that you know how to respond to the anxious moment rather than react.”

The book teaches you how to reframe words. For example, swap “isolation” for “retreat”. Instead of moaning that I’m stuck in isolation with my boyfriend, I would say I am currently retreating with my boyfriend. Or he is retreating in the bedroom while I am washing up. If you are doing lockdown by yourself, like Nadia, then “being alone doesn’t mean being lonely”, she says. “I call it oneliness.” In the book they say they want us to “stay soft”. “This period is not

about staying strong, it's about being vulnerable, letting go of the ego and coming together.”

The good news from the recipe section is that you won't be bombarded with lacklustre mung bean-quinoa ideas. There is a scrumptious veggie katsu curry and a fuss-free sweet potato and lentil shepherd's pie I've lined up for next week. Oh, and then there is the array of facts you'll pick up, such as turmeric tonic ingredients for coughs and the fact that “if you leave raw mushrooms out in sunlight before cooking you will increase their vitamin D content”. Who knew!

I wonder to myself how much of this approach I will use when normal life resumes. Will I have time for the deep breathing and stretching — and talking to Russ — when I'm back in the fast lane? I hope so. One of the exercises is to write a letter to your future self to remind you of what was important when the whole world stopped. I've also written out their famous mantra — “Remember to put yourself at the top of your to-do list” — because when was the last time any of us had a chance to do that?

[@sarahjossel](#)

5 easy self-care tips for self-isolation

By Nadia and Katia

The 20-20-20 rule

After 20 minutes of screen time, you should spend 20 seconds looking at something 20ft away to rest your eyes.

Shaking

“Picture a dog shaking the water off itself.” Shaking is good for helping with anxiety as you get out of bed or if you've been sitting at a computer for a long time.

Stamp it out

To quickly get out of your spiralling thoughts and back into your body, stomp your feet on the ground and make large sounds such as “haaaaah” or “aaaaagh”.

The Pomodoro technique

If you spend long hours at a computer, work in 25-minute bursts, interspersed with five-minute breaks. You could use that time to stretch, make a cup of tea or just check in with yourself and how you are feeling.

The Instagram accounts that keep us sane

- [@dnice](#) for DJ sets
- [@ryan.heffington](#) for live dance classes
- [@upwards.gold](#) for self-love
- [@icemanhof](#) for breathing sessions

Self-Care for Self-Isolation by Nadia Narain and Katia Narain Phillips is out now in ebook form (Orion Spring £6.99) and is available as an audio download from Thursday (£3.99)

Nadia and Katia are offering their four-week online course called A Gentle Revolution free to all NHS staff nadiaandkatia.com