

*'Ruby Usman is an inspiring individual with a hunger to live life to the fullest. Her intelligence, "realness" and wisdom are born of real-life experiences. Like an alchemist, she has turned life's garbage into gold. This gold she offers to others with enthusiasm and integrity!'*

MYRIAM BEJJANI

CHILD AND FAMILY PSYCHOLOGIST

*'I just heard Ruby do an amazing speech on self-care. Wow! What a dynamic speaker. Her energy was great and her smile lights up the room. She speaks with such confidence about her ideas. She has really made me want to deliver more self-care to myself. I loved her idea about self-care being something that's important in giving to others as well, instead of just thinking about yourself. She really opened my mind and made me think, "What more can I do?"'*

GRAND CALDER

CEO, CAREER DEVELOPMENT COACH, SPEAKER AT THE ROLL

WWW.THEROLL.COM

*'Ruby is one of my favourite speakers. She moves me every time she gets up there with the story of what she's made of her life and the impact that she is already making on the world. I have felt it, and I highly recommend that you get in touch with her so that you can feel it too. Her book about self-care for parents is such a strategically important topic, and she boils it down and*

*makes it so understandable. You just understand what you need to do and how you need to do it. It's amazing.'*

ELLIE BASSICK-TROVATO  
PARTNER AT SPARK YOUR SPIRIT  
WWW.SPARK-YOUR-SPIRIT.COM

*'Ruby has a deep compassion and empathy for people that guides all she does. She has a wide knowledge and experience with many methods of reflection, discovery and self-improvement. I am endlessly grateful that Ruby has helped me to become a far more self-aware person, and prompted me to dig deeper and to challenge my assumptions on countless occasions.'*

NARADA ELLIS  
SENIOR CONSULTANT, FENWICK SOFTWARE  
WWW.FENWICKSOFTWARE.COM.AU

*'Ruby has been a wonderful mentor for the past four years and has helped me realise my potential. She has helped me reflect on what I feel is important in my life and how I ought to achieve these. Her guidance and constant feedback has ensured that I stay focused on my beliefs and move forward aiming for a positive future. Thank you Ruby.'*

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**SELF-CARE**  
FOR *parents*

**RUBY USMAN**

**When you care for self,  
you care for others**

*To my mother, Aisha  
For leading your life courageously  
For teaching me how to take a stand for my beliefs  
For loving me endlessly  
And for giving me critical thought  
Thank you*

*To my father, Usman Muhammad Hashim  
For loving me the best way you could  
For providing me education so I could create a life for  
myself*

*And to my mentor, Joy Paul Tharakan  
For being a catalyst in my rebirth  
For supporting me in one of the darkest times of my life  
For giving me the courage to take my first steps into this  
world on my own*

Self-Care for Parents

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# INTRODUCTION

*'Making the decision to have a child is momentous.  
It is to decide forever to have your heart go  
walking around outside your body.'*

—ELIZABETH STONE

**I** GREW UP IN the slums of Pakistan, where there were no parenting books. Parents learnt from their own parents and passed their parenting down to their children.

Today I live in Melbourne, Australia, where there are millions of books, blogs, videos and experts offering different strategies to keep your children safe, healthy and well behaved.

Yet often this advice is contradictory. Parenting experts don't always agree on the best way to parent. There was a time when controlled crying was not only a

safe parenting method but also a recommended one. On the other hand, today we know that controlled crying affects children in unhealthy ways.

Parents try to do the 'right' thing based on what our peers, parenting experts and our own experiences dictate. Unfortunately, problems arise when we get trapped in these ideas and try to force our children to conform to them. We forget that children are not really concerned with these ideas.



**'You can't make your kids do anything. All you can do is make them wish they had. And then, they will make you wish you hadn't made them wish they had.'**

**—MARSHALL B. ROSENBERG**

They just do what they do.

Why do we feel so much pressure to get it 'right'? Because we love them. The love parents have for their children is an insane and unconditional love that drives them to put everything else aside. We want the best for our children, and we generally don't care how it affects our lives. Dr David J. Palmiter<sup>1</sup> in his book *Working Parents, Thriving Families*

suggests that parents feel so much love for their children that it makes them behave in a manner that's almost lunatic – he calls them parent-lunatics.

This unconditional love drives parents to be over protective, over giving and over analysing. These rules

become a way to keep children safe and happy. And, often, they're at the expense of their own happiness.

Unsurprisingly, I have yet to meet a parent, or a parent to be, who is not somewhat challenged by the experience or expectation of parenting. And what happens if you believe something is hard?

- You may hear yourself saying things like 'It's hard work', 'I have no time' and 'I'm so tired'.
- Your conversations with your friends may become a way for you to let it all out, yet you still don't feel better about it.
- Your energy starts to fade as life feels like nothing more than hard work.
- Ultimately, you might start to feel resignation, resentment and anger, which then negatively affect others.

I bet that a lot of the time you feel like a headless chook running around to make sure that everyone else's needs are met. It doesn't matter how tired you are – if your child needs you, you get up and do whatever is needed to keep the family going.

The sense that you are solely responsible for shaping another life may sometimes be overwhelming. It is very tempting to say that your life and your emotions come second and your child comes first. This is what most parents do.

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Yet how does that affect your own life and your own relationships?

Imagine this common scenario: you and your partner have been really busy, and even though you have been wanting to spend some time with each other, it just hasn't happened.

Then one of you snaps. 'You never spend time with me!'

Or imagine if you are the only one getting the kids ready in the morning with no help from your partner. You feel resentful and then you lose it by saying something like, 'You can see I'm working my a\$# off but you don't care. It doesn't occur to you to help me at all.' You might even say something like, 'I feel like they are only my kids and not yours.'

When we're emotional, we can easily make cutting accusations aimed at our partners, friends, family, and even our children. Unfortunately, we don't realise the cost of these outbursts – what I call 'emotional leakages'.

How likely is it that your partner will spend time with you after you accuse them of not doing so?

How likely is it that they will help get the kids ready in the morning after you accuse them of not caring?

You probably already know the answer.

So why do we act this way even when we know that these accusations are not going to give us what we want? This is because it is much easier to get angry – instead of confronting these deeper emotions – at yourself and

at the world. It is so much easier to blame the circumstances that cause anger rather than really acknowledge the deeper emotions and needs.

For a long time, I did the same. I thought that crying was a sign of weakness and asking for help meant that I was somehow inadequate. But the quality of my relationships suffered and so did the quality of my life. When we don't know how to cope with our emotions and feelings, we become angry and it is much easier to blame others and take it out on them.



**It is hard to say:  
'I am sad and  
I need support  
or love'.  
It is much easier  
to get angry  
and lash out.**



### Try this at home



*For one day, observe how many times you express your disappointment with other people, whether it is directly to them or indirectly by talking about them with someone else.*

*At the end of the day, while reflecting on these observations, ask yourself the following questions:*

- *Do people disappoint me all the time?*
- *What reality am I creating and is it serving me?*
- *What do I believe about myself; how is that manifesting in my life?*
- *Do I have expectations of others that they do not know about?*

## SELF-CARE FOR PARENTS



Our capacity to hold on to our emotions is like a bowl full of water. It can only hold a certain amount of water. If you try to pour more, it will just overflow. In the same way, when parents start to feel the challenges of parenthood and their other responsibilities, their natural reaction is to toughen up and take care of everything else, paying little attention to their own wellbeing. This causes them to lock away their emotions so they can continue to navigate their lives.

Unfortunately, these emotions don't stay locked for long. When you reach your capacity, these emotions leak out – you feel a lack of energy, you feel snappy and you feel overwhelmed. Before long, you start to take this out on those around you.

When consistently present, emotional leakages can negatively affect the quality of your life and your relationships (if you keep on snapping at someone, it is likely that they will reciprocate sooner or later). If life already feels hard, it will become harder as you



continue to chip away at the important people and important aspects of your life with destructive emotions.

Instead, don't you want to remember yourself a little while you are still a parent? Wouldn't it be nice to create some balance in your life?

What if meeting your own needs wasn't only essential for your health and happiness, but for that of your children as well?



**'It's a terrible myth to believe that once we have children, our journey ends and theirs begins.'**

**—BRENÉ BROWN**

## **RECOGNISING YOUR NEEDS**

In 1943, Abraham Maslow proposed a theory on the hierarchy of our needs. According to him, we have five basic needs in the following order of importance

1. **Physiological:** These are our physical needs, which need to be met for survival, such as breathing, food, clothing and so on.
2. **Safety/security:** These relate to personal safety, financial safety and security, health and well-being and so on.
3. **Love/belonging:** These relate to being wanted, finding your own place in the world and having an intimate circle of friends and family.

## SELF-CARE FOR PARENTS

4. Esteem: These refer to our basic need to be respected and valued.
5. Self-actualisation: These needs refer to a person realising their full potential and only become important when the other four needs are sufficiently met.

I think it would be fair to say that there are many times where some or all of these needs aren't met, and this is compounded for parents. Parenting pressures often cause you to put your needs last. However, your mind and body don't understand that – they keep asking for what they really need.

If your needs aren't met, it will soon affect your happiness, your wellbeing and your energy levels. Who would want to wake up in the morning if the day was only going to be another hard one?

This can be very dangerous for parents. First, when you aren't healthy or happy and when you have no energy, you can't parent effectively. Second, the example you set for your children is one they will emulate as they get older, which could lead to another generation of adults who put themselves last. Finally, if you keep neglecting yourself, you may even start to resent your children.

A friend of mine once said that, as a parent, he had learnt that the more he has to change his life for his children, the more resentment he feels. On the other

hand, the more he involves his children in his lifestyle, the happier he is.

While his parenting experience was challenging, he took pleasure in life by doing the things he loved and by having his children accompany him.

In a similar example, when I spent time with my ex's children – a ten-year-old boy and a six-year-old girl – my main focus was just being myself. I shared my life principles with them; I shared the importance of trying new things and explorations into self-awareness; I shared the joys of various adventures I'd had; and I also discussed my work assignments with them and got their opinions. We hung out together and debated many topics. One time, we all went to the Gold Coast and his daughter and I went on a rollercoaster ride. Even though she was scared, instead of getting off the ride she said, 'Oh what the heck, let's do it!' This was a moment of jubilation: I didn't have to teach her or force her to do anything; she chose to experience life so she could learn more.

Wouldn't it be nice to focus on your needs for a change, and to encourage your children, partner and friends to support you in this? This is possible, and doing so helps everyone you interact with.

## **WHY SHOULD YOU LISTEN TO ME?**

I grew up in the slums of Karachi, Pakistan. Life didn't come easily in these slums. Most of my extended family members struggled to meet their basic survival needs.

## SELF-CARE FOR PARENTS

Education wasn't a primary focus because male children needed to help their fathers earn more money. Women either stayed home or became housemaids doing cleaning and other chores to earn money.

These problems were compounded by the cultural norms and religious rituals: women were expected to sacrifice themselves to serve their husbands and husbands' families while men made it their primary duty to be the sole breadwinners for their families. These families not only included their children, but also their parents and sometimes their siblings.

The pressures of this life were intense and the word 'self' got buried in the mountain of societal roles, responsibilities and expectations. It was an epidemic of unmet needs, which resulted in another epidemic of anger, resentment, violence and child abuse. It was okay to take your frustrations out on others. In my case, I experienced this through being sexually abused from a very young age by adults who didn't know how to handle their own lives.

I am not sure how, but I was born into a household that didn't subscribe to these extreme behaviours. My father, in his early days, used to work during the day to support his family of seven siblings and parents, and would study at night under the streetlight until he completed his Bachelor of Commerce. Once he received his qualification, he and my mother were married via an

arranged marriage. They then had three children – me being the youngest.

We were poor just like all the other people around us. My father only had one shirt, which my mother would wash and dry each night for him to wear again the next day. My Siblings and I didn't have a separate bedroom, a separate wardrobe, a dining table or even sanitary pads (we used rags, washed them and reused them. Yes, I know it sounds disgusting, but life doesn't care about that, does it?).

Luckily for us, my father had the opportunity to work in Saudi Arabia, where he stayed for many years. This was an unusual experience for us, as my mother became the leader in the home when the societal norm was for women to be subjugated and dominated.

Fortunately, my mother was a woman ahead of her time. Her attitude towards our religion, Islam, was very moderate and she often challenged the norms and rejected rules that seemed illogical to her.

One such rule was in relation to study. With my father's new income, we were given the gift of education, and study became non-negotiable in our house. When a Muslim scholar of the time suggested that women shouldn't study so they could focus on learning domestic chores, my mother cursed the scholar immediately. If women didn't get educated, how could they prepare their children to face the world?

My siblings and I lived simultaneously in contradictory

## SELF-CARE FOR PARENTS

environments. At home we were treated with respect, love and equality. In the outside world there was violence and aggression and women were second-class citizens.

I once remember asking a neighbour if she wanted to go for a walk with me. She said that she had to ask her mother. Her mother didn't have the liberty to make such decisions, so she asked my girlfriend's younger brother for permission (he was the only male in the house at the time). She didn't get the permission. When I went back to my home and asked my mother if I could go out, she said yes and that was that.

Despite my mother's strong mind, I absorbed a lot from the outside world and felt that I was a nobody when I grew up. I was more impacted by the violence I saw on the streets and in my extended family than by the love and respect I saw in my own family. I was more impacted by the society that said I had no right to take care of my own needs, I had no right to be happy and my only true contribution was self-sacrifice.

Without them realising it, this theme of self-sacrifice was mirrored within my family. Although my parents had a lot of love for my siblings and I, they weren't happy with each other. The only reason they stayed together was so that we would not be deprived of our time with each of them. Yet, even though their intentions were good, as a child I absorbed all my parents' pain.

The same went for the parents of other children around me, who also suffered but had taken it upon

themselves to devote their lives to their children, regardless of the personal consequences.

I felt these subtle frustrations woven into the fabric of life and they shaped who I became. I learnt that it was important to be strong and be responsible so that I could fulfil my responsibilities towards others. This meant it was not okay to voice my own needs, because those needs were not about serving others. Those needs would make me selfish.

Ultimately, I kept everything in and didn't voice my own needs. For me, it was more important to make sure my family was okay than to make sure I was okay. The result was that I became two people. My first self was my true self, who was locked away within me – she wasn't allowed to breathe, she was insignificant, her voice didn't matter and the best way for her to live was to hide. My second self was a bubbly girl, full of fun and passion and always ready to help others. She was strong and supportive and people came to her with their problems. She didn't need love because she was self-sufficient.

Believing that I wasn't worthy and that my needs didn't matter led me to a troubled marriage. It was my first relationship and I was expected to serve my partner and his family and forget about myself. Yet my partner didn't believe in communication, which left me to guess his needs and then fulfil them without asking him. It was a tough gig and I tried to fulfil that role but failed miserably. The relationship became one of

indifference from him and detachment from me. Sex was simply an act of abuse.

My unhappiness escalated to physical symptoms, and the list of illnesses I had during that time was huge. I was constantly on medication for one thing or another. You would think that I would share my pains with my friends, but not me! Sharing my pain was a sign of weakness that I didn't want. So I kept it all in and kept living.

After five and a half years I freed myself from that relationship in 2002, as I was lucky to be in Singapore at that time. If I had stayed in Pakistan, it wouldn't have been appropriate for me, a woman, to ask for a divorce.

The period following my divorce was my rebirth. I had the opportunity to relive my life and learn things from scratch. I made it my mission to integrate the part of myself that I had been hiding for so long.

As I pursued my journey of self-discovery and self-compassion, I realised that, just as I didn't feel my emotions and my needs had any place in my society, other people felt the same. In the worst cases, these people grew so frustrated with their lives that the only way their emotions could break free was in the form of anger, aggression and violence towards others.

Don't get me wrong – I am not condoning what people have done to me or what they do to others who can't defend themselves. But I now understand that the human mind and body will do whatever it takes to meet their needs. If these needs are not met in a



healthy way, people will go to any lengths – sometimes subconsciously – to meet these needs.

After my rebirth in 2002, it took me years to find my true self; it took me years to realise how I was damaging myself and damaging my relationships and it took me years to undo the brainwashing I was exposed to during my childhood.

I believe that we can stop this cycle. I believe that we owe this world to be connected with our needs and create a life that works for us. I believe that we can create compassionate and mutually beneficial relationships when we know who we are and are able to communicate effectively with others.

This is my reason for writing this book. If you don't consciously meet your needs, your mind and body will find ways to meet them, and some of these methods may not be healthy for you or your loved ones.

Instead, the strategies described in this book will help you reconnect with yourself, rediscover your needs and learn how to relate to your life, your loved ones and your community. You will learn the skills you need to create balanced happiness in your life. You can become the parent you want to be. And you can raise happy, healthy, well-adjusted children who are confident when it comes to asking for what they want and having their needs met.

This is what this book is about.

## **THE 5 STEPS TO FINDING HAPPINESS & BALANCE**

Parents who do a good job of managing their lives, and who get along well with others, tend to have children who are also good at managing their lives and getting along with others. Parents who have problems managing their lives, their homes, or their personal relationships tend to have children who also have problems.<sup>2</sup>

So how can you do it? How can you manage your life effectively, experience happiness and fulfilment, and teach your children to do the same?

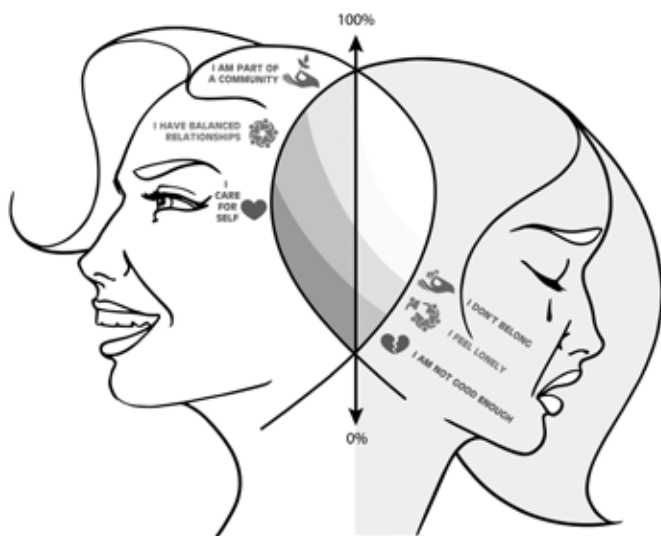
In the next section, I will share my five-step methodology to fill your personal wellbeing reserve so you can live a balanced and fulfilled life. Based on my experiences and those of my parents and other parents, I will share strategies that will help you recognise your needs and create a life that meets those needs.

What's this methodology?

Let's start with the idea that each of us has a reserve of personal wellbeing. Within that reserve are the needs we have in each area of our lives. If these needs are met, the reserve gets filled and we have more available to us that we can draw on when living our lives. These needs include your personal needs, your family and relationship needs and your needs within the wider community.

Imagine waking up each day with a smile; imagine knowing that you are not alone and your family, your friends and your partner are here for you; imagine being able to communicate effectively with your children and

having them respect your needs; imagine having fun and laughter; imagine feeling that life is balanced with a solid foundation of bliss that will stay with you no matter where you go.



Your Personal Wellbeing Reserve

You can then choose to enjoy your life the way it is or you can choose to explore new horizons and create amazing wonders for you and your family. The world will open up to you once you take responsibility for your own wellbeing and create better connections.

Feeling excited yet?

To fill this personal wellbeing reserve, you need to follow five simple steps, or the five 'Cs'.

### **1. Clean your slate**

All that we experience in life touches us in some way. In our bodies we carry emotions, beliefs and our past experiences. Some of these help us succeed in our lives, but many don't work for us. Regardless, these stored emotions influence the way we behave today and how we interact with those around us. Often, this causes a negative spiral where we put ourselves in negative situations, we associate with people who let us down and we disappoint ourselves. This then makes it difficult to create the lives we want and fill our wellbeing reserves, so the first C focuses on clearing away this baggage so you can move forward freely.

### **2. Commit to the life you want**

When you get out of your house to go to work or to meet a friend, you have to set the intention first. Unless you set your destination, you won't know which path to take.

Life works in the same way. Unless you know what you want and commit to it, you will struggle to create it. In this step, you will discover what you want in life, your needs, what makes you happy and what makes you unhappy. You will also discover how you can commit to creating the life you want.

### **3. Care for self**

At the heart of filling your personal wellbeing reserve, lies your basic needs. Just as a candle can't light a room or create warmth if it isn't first protected from the wind and the rain, you can't create the life you want or be the parent you want to be if you don't take care of yourself. In this step, you will learn how.

### **4. Create supportive relationships**

Once you have built the foundations of caring for you, next comes creating supportive relationships with your partner, family and friends. This network will help you raise healthy, happy children by sharing knowledge, helping with logistical responsibilities and more. This network will also help you care for yourself by providing the emotional and physical support you and your family need.

### **5. Connect with the community**

This aspect of self-care may seem a bit strange, but imagine if the only people who lived on the planet were you, some of your close friends and your family. Do you think life would feel a bit unadventurous?

Communities give us a sense of belonging. But more than that, communities allow us to contribute to life as a whole; they give us a platform to influence change and become open to new ways of being.

## SELF-CARE FOR PARENTS

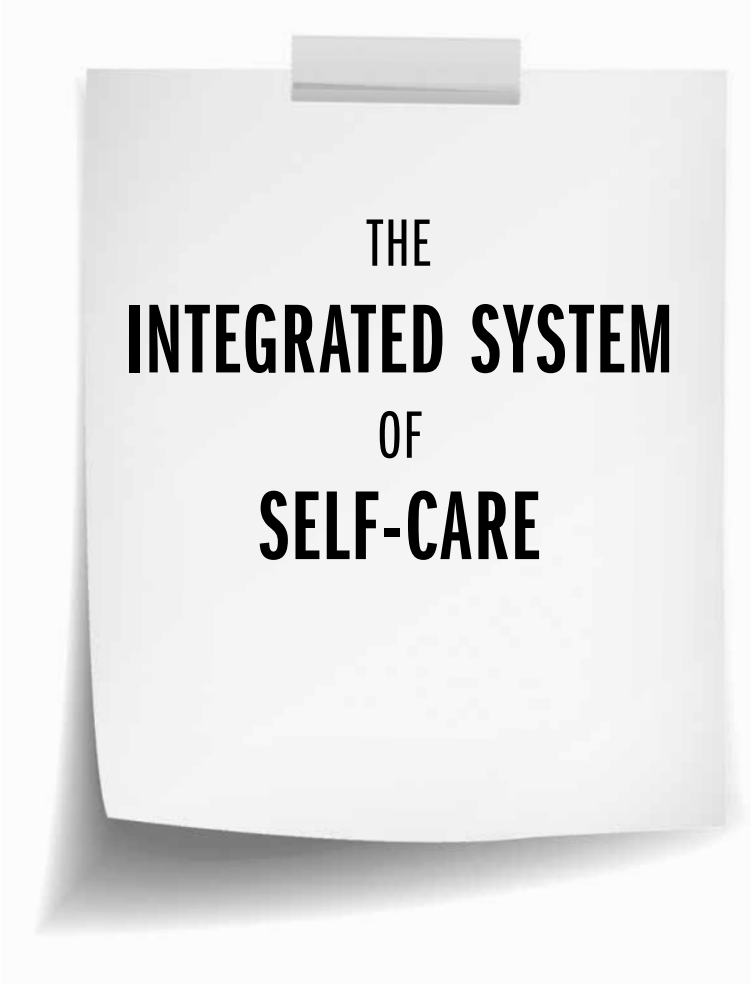
When we are part of a community, we feel happier because we feel we belong and our circle of life is larger.

Once you have learnt these strategies and have created a system of self-care that works for you, you will have transformed your life. Your challenges may transform themselves as well because your external world will have to play catch up with your new internal world.

Your life will be built on a foundation of bliss. Your relationships will help you reach even higher states of health and happiness, while those that don't will dissolve. Your home will run on a system within your house that meets everyone's needs and, at the same time, allows everyone to meet the responsibilities of life together.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could smile, not because there is a reason but just because you can? Imagine how contagious the effects would be...

And it all starts with you.



**THE  
INTEGRATED SYSTEM  
OF  
SELF-CARE**