A Self-care audit, and baseline for creating a personal self-care plan

1) To sustain ourselves over time and be 're-stored' we need to balance the energy we 'spend' on work. And on life's other demands. What do you do to restore your energy?

   On an average week how much time do you spend on this/these activities?

2) Do you know what your own symptoms of stress are?

3) Can you identify the kind of things that create a feeling of stress in you?

4) If you do feel stressed, what do you do to make yourself feel better?

These are all questions to help you draw out awareness of your patterns. Not many people can answer these off the top of their head, so the idea is (as with the Qs below) to keep them in mind and build a picture over time. When you realise you're feeling stressed, stop and look at what the trigger was - something that happened? Something you thought? Knowing your situational triggers allows you to plan for them by increasing self-care around this time. Have you felt run down or stressed but didn't do anything about it? That's interesting, what's going on here? What's the barrier to taking action?

5) Are you supported by your family/partner when you are under pressure in your personal or work life?

   If so, how do they show this support?

6) Can you talk openly about personal/work problems with someone close to you?
   How often do you actually do this?

These two Qs are about the social support/isolation you may have, which really makes a difference in our resilience, and it might get you thinking about barriers you may put up to (other's) support – this is one of the areas that can throw up some pretty interesting underlying (unhelpful) beliefs, like 'I don't want to burden them', or fears of being seen to struggle or not cope. etc..

7) How often you get sick in an average year?

   What kinds of illnesses have you had?

Do you notice that you get sick when you are 'run down', or when you go on holiday?

Things to look for here are patterns, of being repeatedly run down and depleted for instance, and maybe of this happening at the same points in the year. Of relying on occasional holidays to keep going rather than ongoing self-care too, perhaps.

8) When was your last full medical check-up?

Did this check-up raise specific issues of concern?
If so, what is being done about these?

9) Is there a history of particular illness in your family?

If so, are you doing anything specific to avoid that illness?

Some specific prompts for self-knowledge. But also what's the pattern of *acting* on this knowledge?

10) Is your diet is a balance of food types in terms of the healthy "food pyramid"?

Yeah, boring, but if we want to perform we need some reasonable level of performance fuel. Crap food plays havoc with our metabolism and energy levels, which makes comfort eating when we're under pressure so counter-productive. If we know all this, does action flow from that? And remember that our brains are really dependent on being supplied with an adequate water supply, so watch the liquids intake.

11) Do you skip meals?   If so, how often?

A basic pressure/self-care level indicator. Is there a pattern here?

12) Do you do physical exercise?
If so, what, and how often?

Exercise is really, really important for keeping the mind and body healthy. We need to find something we enjoy (or at least feel ok about), which may be more about the company in or the place of your exercise being at least as important as the activity itself. The dark side of exercise is it can be one of those things to watch if it's a 'self-care' tool that you're using to sustain a high level of ongoing stress.

13) How much recreational screen time/TV/devices do you average per week?

14) Do you drink alcohol, or use drugs (prescription medication or recreational drugs) to relax and deal with the symptoms of stress?
If so, what, how much, and how often?

15) How much coffee/tea do you drink?
Do you use this to energise you for your day?

16)   Can you go without these substances for several days?
        If so, how do you feel?

        These are popular coping strategies, but iffy. Again, look for a pattern because they can be ok occasionally or over the short term, but they're pretty limited as sustaining 'food', and importantly they can gobble up the time and energy which need to be put into real self care and 'feeding.' Look out for screen time/TV/devices (more on this later) as these tend to be a version of a basic default strategy humans rely on; distraction (the other is denial), and that usually means things getting worse while we look the other way.

17)   How much sleep do you get over an normal 24 hour period?   How would you describe the quality of your sleep?

Sleep is a key indicator of stress and depletion, and a necessity for resilience. Again, look for patterns. There's lots on the net about sleep hygiene (a big topic) and the thing to avoid is letting pressure set up a cycle of not sleeping, with this resulting in a drop in your ability to perform, this creating more stress, more sleep problems, etc

18)   To what extent is your work meaningful and important to you?

19)   How do you think your personality is suited to the work you do? Are there aspects of your work involving values that conflict with your values?

Two Qs here about how much of our sense of worth as people is tied up in our work role and our work performance.   That's potentially a lot of eggs to have clustered in one basket, and means we're only as good as our last project/report/meeting. In terms of work, are there structured-in conflicts here, lots of components of the role that don't fit your strengths or personality? Think about the basic human need for a degree of mastery too. That sense of control or capability seems important for humans so if it's elusive in your work (because it's abstract, or there are no clear points of completion or 'success') you may need to find this elsewhere, like in a hobby or sport.

20)   How many hours do you work in an average week?

21)   Are you often multitasking in your work and home life?

Basic pressure/self-care indicators, maybe part of a pattern that leads to depletion? Is there a pattern here?

22)   Over the last two years, how often have you been on holiday?
        How long were these holidays?
        How did you feel about returning to work when at the end of a holiday - especially after a long break away?
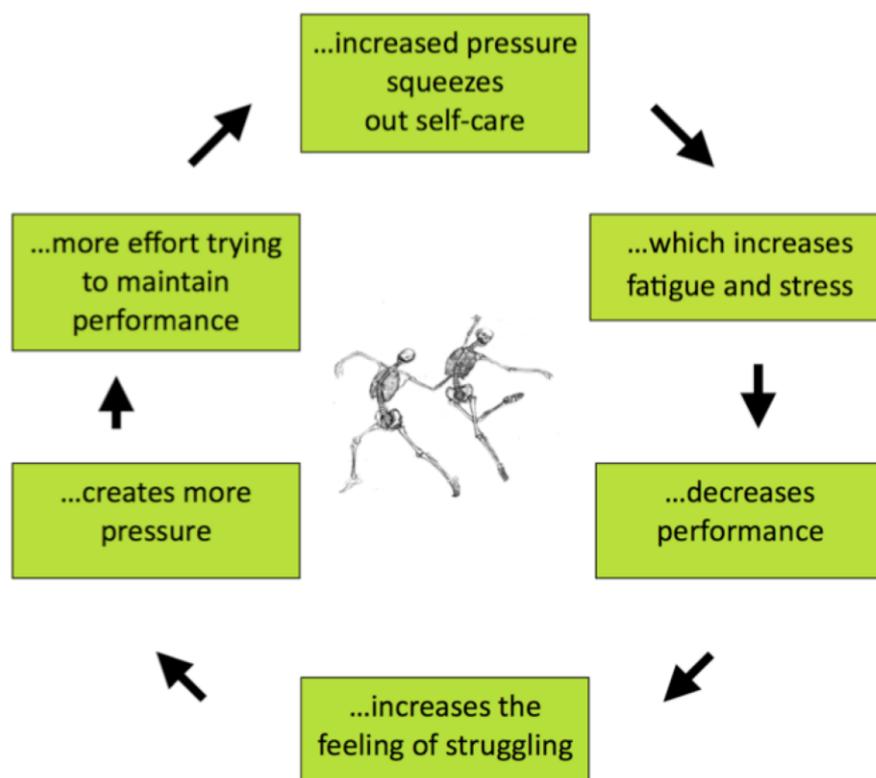
        Do you ever do work while you are on holiday?

Any indicators of a habit of 'running down to empty' and relying on holidays to 'catch' you at the point of depletion? That tells you you're not structuring in preventative self-care.

What's your Questionnaire telling you? Keep this in mind over the next few weeks - if you're starting to look for your patterns you'll be surprised what you find.

What knowing ourselves and our triggers helps prevent is being overwhelmed by both a sudden, single demand on us, and the slow, insidious build-up of pressure that we can get used to until suddenly it's all too much. We really need to avoid is this cycle (below), which can begin very subtly and slowly but become becomes a downward spiral and lead to total depletion – burnout.

The dance of depletion

...increased pressure squeezes out self-care

...which increases fatigue and stress

...decreases performance

...increases the feeling of struggling

...creates more pressure

...more effort trying to maintain performance

The attention economy

The attention economy idea is, as one writer has phrased it, that "attention is a resource—a person has only so much of it." The economic bit in that equation is that as attention is a limited resource there's a lot of competition for how we 'spend' it. In essence, we pay for free-to-air TV by having our attention sold to advertisers, for instance.

Some claims on our attention are pretty inescapable; attention when driving for instance is necessary if we want to stay alive. And other claims are pretty compelling, like the attention expected by employers or partners; they have a way of imposing some 'costs' if we withdraw our attention.

There are lots of other claims or competitors for our (limited) attentional resources, some of which are here…
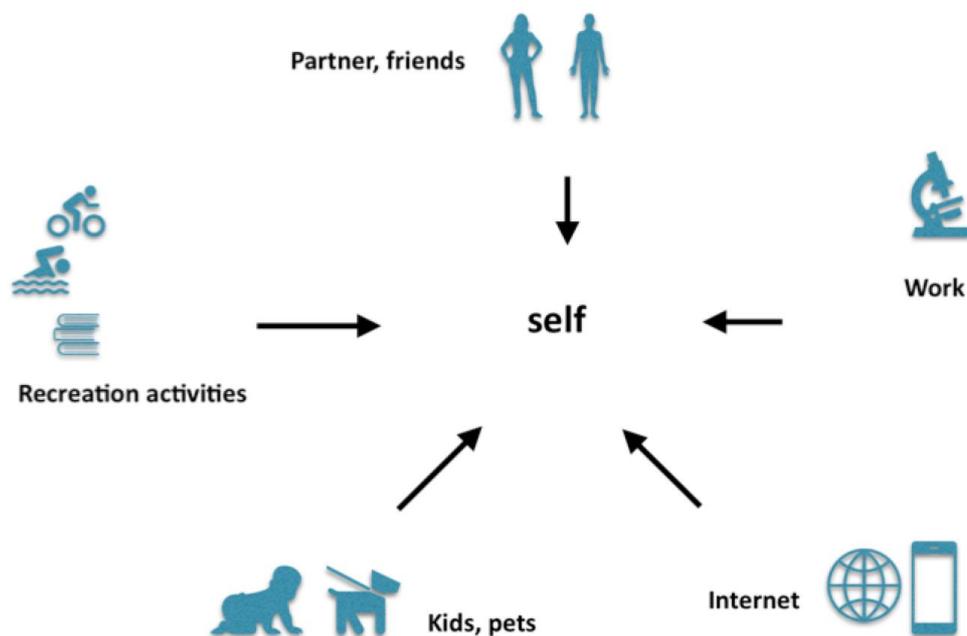
In self-care terms, the interesting bit is in the middle; in the battle for our attention, does the self (and its needs) lose out? Knowing ourselves, our needs and our patterns helps to ensure that we use our limited resource of attention wisely, and sustainably.