

# Sister act



Meet the siblings whose straight-talking advice promises to transform our lives for the better. Nadia Narain and Katia Narain Phillips explain how embracing imperfection might just be the key to fulfilment

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Scan the shelves of your local bookshop or browse Amazon's bestsellers list and it soon becomes clear that we're living in the era of 'me'. From every direction, there's conflicting advice on being a better version of who we are – how to find more joy, be stronger, less sensitive, more vulnerable, more Parisian, more Italian, more elegant, how to say no, how to say yes, the art of not giving a fuck. Essentially, how to be 'other'. Trying to deconstruct our negative traits and emerge as shinier, upgraded versions of ourselves can be enough to induce an existential crisis.

Sisters Nadia Narain and Katia Narain Phillips have been watching this phenomenon unfurl while practising in the wellness field for more than two decades, in yoga teaching, and food and massage respectively. They've seen the term 'self-care' garner more than 20 million hashtags on Instagram, but they also know that social media can be part of the problem. 'Real self-care is not about leggings, smoothies and spas,' says Katia, who runs Nectar Café in north London's Triyoga centre. 'It simply means taking care of yourself so that you have more to give to others.'

This straightforward message is the reason why their bestselling book *Self-Care For The Real World* has attracted a starry following, including Reese Witherspoon, Sienna Miller, Jools Oliver and Kate Moss. 'We didn't want it to be overly complicated or patronising,' adds Nadia. 'The idea was to write a book that could help people navigate the difficulties we all face, from grief, heartbreak and loss to our own negative inner voices. Often that means taking a walk, eating well, going to bed early, limiting screen time and staying hydrated.' Simple remedies, yet so readily pushed aside by life's complications. Fortunately, perfection is not the aim of the game, not least because the sisters consider themselves a constant work in progress. When I ask Nadia about the times she has struggled with her own self-care, her voice cracks. 'I'm struggling now,' she admits, due to witnessing the illness of a loved one. 'Paying attention to what I need to do to take care of myself is a daily commitment. But the joy of writing the book is that it made us embrace our own advice.'

Born in Hong Kong to a South African mother and an Indian father, the siblings were raised in a household that they didn't regard as nurturing. 'We grew up in a volatile environment,' says Nadia. 'So, the concept of self-care was like learning a new language.' The sisters flew the nest early and both acknowledge that their twenties contained some of their darkest times. But there was always a sense of self-preservation underpinning their experimentation. 'A party trip to Hawaii was a turning point for me,' says Katia. 'I realised I couldn't do it anymore. After that I returned to London and opened a raw-food cafe.'

Nadia became immersed in reiki and yoga from a young age. 'Yoga was medicine for a long time, but I became very rigid with it and, of course, then it becomes counter-productive.'

The death of their father 13 years ago helped the pair hone their own version of self-care. 'We were with him at a hospital in India during his illness, and being far away from home we only had each other,' says Nadia. 'It was a very intense situation.' On their return to London, where both had settled for good, the dynamics of the sisters' relationship had changed for the better.

It was while hosting a retreat more than a decade later that they were approached about putting their ideas into a book. 'I think our publisher understood that our way of presenting simple but effective theories could strike a chord,' says Katia. The book went on to become a bestseller, as did its sequel, *Rituals For Every Day*, which focuses on how to put self-care into practice by creating natural, emotionally nourishing pauses in life. Perhaps the reason for its cult following is that it acknowledges that we all face challenges, regardless of celebrity status or our social media following. 'Everyone needs the tools of kindness to teach us to respond well, rather than react badly,' reflects Nadia.

Their own small, daily doses of self-care include early nights, good food, taking time out, being in nature, and spending time with friends and family. Their books also explore bigger life issues, such as setting healthy boundaries, addressing low self-esteem and fixing poor sleep patterns. 'Most of us tune out by distracting ourselves with screens, Netflix and social media, but too much can be addictive,' Nadia says. 'Self-care isn't about countering that with a day at a spa, but perhaps taking five minutes in the morning to quietly set your compass for the day.'

As for the idea that self-care equates to a kind of selfishness, both sisters are adamant that the opposite is true. 'If you are well-resourced, you're more able to help others,' they explain. 'It means you'll have the energy to help the woman on the tube who's struggling with a pram, rather than looking away. Or you're better able to connect with your kids at pick-up, because you've taken the time to eat a proper lunch.'

In such politically charged times, the concept of 'self' is a hotly debated topic. Are we too individualistic? Are we neglecting the needs of others in our rush to thrust ourselves under the spotlight? 'News reaches us faster than ever before, forcing us to be engaged 24/7,' says Nadia. 'I feel there's a collective tension right now. The positive side is that we've developed a need to take responsibility for our own wellbeing.' And during turbulent times, the little things start to matter. 'It's all about the small wins, whether that's making your bed daily or taking the time for a family supper on a Friday,' says Katia. 'We call it "letting the good things grow".'

Perhaps that means we can finally tune out of the cacophony of competing voices vying to shake out our kinks and, instead, place our faith in just one mantra: it's enough simply to appreciate who we are and to nurture our own unique qualities in the process. ♦

## KATIA AND NADIA'S TOP TIPS FOR SELF-KINDNESS

**WORK** on having a caring internal dialogue that shows the same kind of love you might direct towards a friend or a child.

**INTRODUCE** a daily 'body scan' into your routine – that can be as simple as sitting down for five minutes with both feet on the floor, closing your eyes and tuning in to how your body feels, noting any aches and pains.

**MAKE** time for pauses in life – whether that's having a bath when you get home from work, listening to your child tell you about their day or sitting down to eat with family or friends once a week.

**LEARN** to enjoy nature, away from screens. Many of us think we don't have time, but if you add up the minutes you spend just scrolling through social media or browsing the web, you can claim back those moments for something more nurturing.

**TRY** to make decisions from a place of security, rather than reaction. Consider the impact of your words and actions. We've both benefited from a life coach and a therapist at various times, which helped us understand the importance of how we communicate with one another and the world at large.

*Self-Care For The Real World* (£16.99) and *Rituals For Every Day* (£14.99), both published by Hutchinson