



guide to
summer
self-care
for families on the go



introduction

Hey there, I'm Jonas Ellison. I'm so happy that I could write this little summer guide to self-care in collaboration with my good friends at the SALT Project. The work they do and the joy they spread for the sake of the Gospel is astounding and I'm humbled to be partnering with them.



The only problem is, I don't think I'm qualified. I'm a rookie dad of only five years (okay, almost six). I've only been a husband for ten. And I'm so not great at self-care. But in recent years, the concept has crept its way to the forefront of my attention. Because I'm just enough of a seasoned family man to realize that if we don't take care of ourselves and each other, things go haywire real easily.

Summer, as fantastic and fun as it can seem, is ripe with emotional pitfalls. If you're fortunate enough, you'll be spending more of it with your family. And if not, it's easy to feel guilty or shameful that you can't. Summer can be a needed escape from the pulls of our day-to-day grind. But it can also disorient us. When we're pulled away from our routines, we can easily lose our way. Another trap that we can get caught up in is the obsession to make summer 'epic' – therefore stretching the budget and our nerves to the max.

This little guide was designed to give you some tools to pick and choose from to foster self-care in your family this summer. Peruse through it, use what speaks to you, and discard the rest. There's no certain order to this guide. So relax, feel free to jump around, and enjoy the read. I've selected from my own mental Rolodex of family self-care ideas as well as ones I've borrowed from the cultures of my Scandinavian ancestral siblings (because it's true – they are the masters of self-care).

I hope you enjoy this little guide. May you enjoy the blessed days of summer. May the sun bring you both the internal and external warmth that leads to new life and restorative health.

As Ever,
Jonas Ellison



simple ideas

relatively quick and easy;
little or no prep time necessary

schedule 'curiosity days'

Curiosity is one of the highest virtues (at least, according to me). But just like any muscle, curiosity can atrophy if not exercised. Have everyone in the family write down one thing they're curious about and book a day to go explore it together. Then, reflect on it afterward over pizza (or whatever fare your family best converse over).



help each other face challenges

As relaxing as summer is, it's also important to balance the chill times with times of enthusiasm, challenge, and excitement. Humans don't tend to do well with being too stagnant.

What's a challenge that you can help each other name and achieve? Make it fun and make it specific. And make it something that leaves room for a (safe) chance of failure. Write it down and when/if someone conquers their challenge – throw a little celebration (or a big one!).

be intentional about your music choice



"Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise..."
+ Martin Luther

The music we listen to has a profound effect on our overall well-being. Any kindergarten teacher knows that if kids are getting rowdy and frantic, playing classical music is like turning the chaos knob down at least a few notches.

At home, it's so easy to just throw on Top 40 or Kidz Bop (not to knock Kidz Bop – it has its place). But when the energy gets too raucous, consider switching the playlist up to something more soothing in nature.

(See our 'Recommended Playlists' at the end of this guide for suggestions.)

go on a social media check-in spree

This is a fun, quick one you can do... Grab the kid(s) and your computer or other digital device and head over to the social media accounts of friends and family (especially those of whom you haven't seen/heard from in a long time). Surprise them with quick, fun, and sincere hellos and updates from the family. Get goofy about it. Make them short and fun hellos rather than long diatribes.

Note: The best place for this might be via direct message unless you're okay with your check-ins being public.

plan some one-on-one time

Summer is a time often spent with the family doing things together as a unit. Break it up a bit. Create space and time for one-on-one time. Maybe just mom and son go canoeing together. Or dad and daughter go on a hike. And don't forget parent dates too:) It helps for family time to be balanced between group time and individual time.

the timeless power of gratitude



"Give thanks in all circumstances..."

+ 1 Thessalonians 5:18



We've been bombarded with gratitude lately. We have gratitude apps, journals, t-shirts, beads, etc. But that's because it works! Gratitude really is a powerful thing. Get together as often as possible and talk about what you're grateful for. Counting your blessings is something that will never get old.

chore-crushing wind sprints

Are things getting a little messy around the house? All that lounging you've been doing (right?!) has that effect. When things get untidy, it frays our nerves. As author and Netflix phenom Marie Kondo so eloquently states, tidying up is a spiritual practice. Huddle up and have everyone do a single tiny household chore that stands out – empty one drawer, give away one bag of clothes, or clean one shelf of your fridge. Take everyone out to ice cream as a reward for completing it.

schedule in catnaps



"And on the seventh day God finished the work that God had done, and rested on the seventh day..."

+ Genesis 2:2

This is hard for us Western families. Napping means giving up, right? Not only that, it seems that napping has been replaced with zoning out over YouTube or Netflix.

Break the cycle of busyness and digital slavery. Plan family catnaps. Lay around the living room and sleep (or even just rest your eyes) for however long you want. 30-40 minutes is a good average.



comb the calendar and cut mercilessly

Go through your calendar and cut out everything that isn't essential. Things that carry an obligatory heaviness should be scrutinized. Maybe that thing has become a toxic habit that you've just been doing for so long that it just becomes an obligatory 'thing.' Cut the nonessentials from your calendar and reevaluate after summer comes to a close.



don't just do it, savor it



"This is the day that God has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

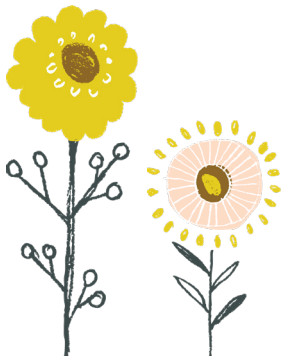
+ Psalm 118:24

Choose something that you're going to savor today – taking a shower, riding the train, walking, chopping wood, reading a celebrity magazine, etc. 'Savor' it instead of just 'doing' it.

what's in your backyard?

We take our local communities for granted. My wife and I were just stressing about places to travel during our child's upcoming break when we realized – wait a second... We live in Chicago. Why don't we save ourselves the stress (and money) and just plan things that are in our own backyard?

Even if you don't live in a big city, go somewhere local that you've never been before – a new forest preserve, a new park, a new beach, a different library, a conservatory, etc.



the rule of three

It's easy to get stuck in a rut. No need to stress about it, but it's nice to be excited about things on the horizon. Try following the 'rule of three': always be consciously aware of 3 things that you're looking forward to. When one gets checked off the list, add another one. Again, these don't have to be epic. Simple is often enough, if not preferred.



medium sized ideas

good stuff to chew on;
some modest planning involved

fill up each other's buckets

There are two types of behaviors we can choose to exhibit: bucket-filling or bucket-dipping. Kindness (bucket-filling) is often contagious. If someone does a kind act for you, then you are more likely to pay it forward to someone else.

Have the kids create actual buckets at home for the family. Then, make slips of paper available. When someone does an act of kindness for someone else, write it down and put it in their bucket. See how close you can get to having your bucket filled by the end of summer. Make a family tradition every weekend or two where everyone gets to read from their buckets and feel the love spread.

picnic blanket talk: is this inside or outside of my control?



"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow..."

+ *Matthew 6:28*

So much of what we worry about is outside of our control. And so much of what's inside of our control goes unattended to.

The next time you gather around a meal, have an open discussion about what's bringing stress and worry to each of your lives. Grab some paper and a pen and start a 'worry list' for each person. Beside each thing, decide whether it's inside or outside of your/their control. If it's outside your/their control, cross it off the worry list and give each other permission to let it go.

was that a power choice?



"Bear one another's burdens..."

+ *Galatians 6:2*

Your family can be seen as a micro-community (though perhaps your family isn't so micro – kudos to you!). Many of the choices we make throughout our day make no real impact on the familial community. But others do. Of these choices, some neglect the community while others support/protect it. The latter is a 'power choice.'



For example, if Susie cancels her Starbucks hangout with a friend to pick her little brother up from school because dad can't, that's a power choice. So often these things go unnoticed and taken for granted.

Grant time as a family to recognize these power choices. By giving them more weight, they perpetuate (hey, that even rhymes – gotta love it when that happens).



teach each other something

It's empowering to showcase, celebrate, and pass on our gifts. Plus, it increases our connection to each other. Everyone in the family grows when we do this.

Make a short list of your top gifts that you may be able to teach to the rest of the family. Then, schedule in afternoon workshops that the family can attend together hosted by the 'expert.'

As with anything of this nature, feel free to expand the workshop into an impromptu BBQ.

if you need an excuse to eat more cake



"The word is added to the element, and there results the Sacrament, as if itself also a kind of visible word."

+ St. Augustine of Hippo

Fika is the Swedish ritual of afternoon coffee/tea and cake. In my home, we don't do it enough, but when we do, it's a holy ritual. For Swedes, it borders on dogma in that many of them do it every day (how they stay so svelte is a mystery to me).

Get some nice coffee (tea, milk, or juice for the kiddos is fine) and bake a cake (from scratch is even better, but not required). Schedule it in and make it a ritual – slow and intentional.

No one should be running around when you're making, preparing, and serving it. Give it a blessing and make the coffee and cake sacramental (okay, it's not bread and wine, but it can still be sacred). And it must be done together – Fika in solitude is merely a coffee break.

know that kids don't need 'epic'

Perfectionism is real, even (particularly) in parenting. It's easy to get stuck and think that there's 'nothing to do' just because you don't have something epic planned, like a trip or even a playdate with a friend.

Most kids (especially those under the age of 10) are fine with a mere stroll around the block to chase fireflies or pick up rocks and sticks. If you live near a wooded area or a stream, you have a built-in wonderland that's easy to take for granted because we adults can get bored so easily.

In fact, from what I've found, the simpler the better. My daughter would much rather hang out in her little workshop area and make things out of cardboard and tape than go to a 'nice' restaurant or even an expensive show.

Enjoy the simple desires of your young ones while you can. They might actually prefer it that way.

parents: you can have friends too



"Then God said, "It is not good that the human being should be alone..."

+ Genesis 2:18

If you're fortunate enough to be able to spend a lot of time with your family this summer, know it's a great thing – a blessing, in fact! But just like anything, too much of anyone can be – well – too much!

As parents, it's easy to voluntarily become tethered to your family unit. I get it. But parents need contact with people outside of the nuclear family as well. It's healthy to vent to an outside entity (venting is different than gossiping or over-complaining). It's also good to have someone to talk with about other stuff besides family stuff..

I'm not saying to duck out on your family and go hang out with the guys/gals at the pub every night. Be intentional about it. Plan dates with your friends and acquaintances (if you don't have any real close friends, hit up that nice person you've been wanting to get to know better from church or the gym). Break away and enjoy yourself every now and then. Your family will thank you.



grandma had a point: go for 8 hours of sleep



"It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved."

+ Psalm 127

It's real. People are sleeping less and less. There's a sense of franticness sweeping through our modern culture. This isn't a place to go into the 'why,' so I'll leave it at this...

We need sleep. Like, NEED it. During sleep, our health is restored and our minds are reset.

It's so easy to think that life is controlled by our individual ego. We must have faith so that we can surrender to the divine forces that are constantly at work. Trust this and rest.

leave room for blueness



"...a time to weep, and a time to laugh..."

+ Ecclesiastes 3:4



We're human. Sometimes we get down in the dumps. We get blue – sometimes for a reason, but often for no reason at all.

We place such high expectations on summer. We want so badly for it to be a constantly cheery, happy, and exhilarating time full of smiles, laughs, BBQ's, water balloon fights, and time on the water.

But we're cyclical beings. We go through stuff. We have to allow each other space to be blue. Yes, care for each other. Keep an eye on your loved ones. But incessantly expecting perpetual cheeriness is a burden no soul can bear (this includes you, mom or dad).

Give yourself a good cry, eat too much ice cream, and share your raw truth to a trusted friend or a blank journal page. Just make sure you commit to coming out the other side restored.



your family will thank you.

check yourself (and your family) on busyness and being needed

We complain about how busy we are, but if we're not conscious of it, we can easily wear our busyness as a badge of honor or use it as a distraction from more important things (quietude being one of those 'more important' things).

Our ego loves to be needed. To play the savior. Some of us have this propensity more than others. At a certain level, it can be healthy, but it can easily creep into toxicity when it pulls us off center more often than not.

Before you go darting off and being pulled in different directions, ask yourself, "Is this really useful and/or serving myself/others, or am I just doing it to distract myself and/or be needed?"

Encourage your family members to ask themselves the same if you see them falling into the trap of busyness and being needed.

activities this summer





bigger ideas

deeper waters to swim in,
with your whole summer in mind



hygge: the danish phenomenon of sincere and comfortable self-care

Maybe you've heard of the cultural Danish phenomenon of hygge. Though hygge is usually promoted in the US during the winter months, it can be practiced year around just like the Danish.

I've been a practitioner of hygge for the last few years since hearing about it and I love how it's a form of self-care that feels sincere instead of obligatory or forced (plus, it's fun to say).

Meik Wiking, the author of *The Little Book of Hygge: Danish Secrets To Happy Living*, and CEO of the Happiness Research Institute in Copenhagen, says that hygge has been called everything from "the art of creating intimacy," to "coziness of the soul," and even, "cocoa by candlelight."

As Wiking explains, hygge is something we know when we feel it. It's hard (plus it defeats the purpose) if we make it too prescriptive, but some of the key ingredients of hygge are togetherness, relaxation, indulgence, presence, and comfort. "The true essence of hygge is the pursuit of everyday happiness and it's basically like a hug, just without the physical touch," he says.

In the 2016 World Happiness Report, Denmark ranked as the world's happiest country. Wiking and other hygge enthusiasts believe that hygge is the reason why. "The Danes are exceptionally good at decoupling wealth and well-being," he says. "We focus on the small things that really matter, including spending more quality time with friends and family and enjoying the good things in life."

but seriously, how do you say it?

Hygge is pronounced HOO-gah. Hygge can be a noun, a verb, and an adjective. Hygge practitioners say things like, "What a hyggelig (hygge-like) home you have!" Or, "We had such a hyggelig time last night." If you get really into this, you can be a hyggespreder (someone who spreads the hygge). Friday night can be reserved for familiehygge.

No matter how you say it, hygge gives us fantastic customs for genuine self-care. I respect Marie Kondo and her joy of tidying up, but I have a hard time thanking my underwear before folding them immaculately and putting them in the drawer. In the same vein, I like minimalism, but I want to keep my books.

Hygge requires only a small effort, it doesn't ask me to talk to my undergarments, and it costs little – if any – money. As Wiking says, "There is nothing fancy, expensive, or luxurious about a pair of ugly woolen hygge socks – and that is a vital feature of hygge. It's about appreciating the simple pleasures in life and can be achieved on a shoestring budget."

here are a few ways to start making your life as hyggelig as possible...

board games, not video games

Old school, baby. Let's face it, we need more analog in our lives. The human/paper connection is primal.

flickering light

Flickering light set the hygge mood like nothing else. In summer, you don't want the fireplace going, so candles will have to do the trick. Don't blow a lot of money on \$20 organic soy candles (unless you want to). Cheap white unscented votive candles are fine. If even just after the kids go down (and even if you're not getting romantic, though, ya know...). Another plus is having a darker room increases natural melatonin levels and makes for better sleep.

select your hyggebusker

Time to pick out your hygge uniform. We'll start with the bottoms (hyggebusker). This would be a pair of pants or shorts you might not ever wear in public but are secretly a favorite. When you're in for the evening, put them on like a uniform. This is serious, intentional lounging.

and a hyggesokke

The hyggesokke is the same thing, but it's your shirt (or your sweater during cooler months or those cool summer nights if they actually happen in your area).

eat heartily and enjoy the process

The hygge 'diet' (if you can call it that) allows for a high level of meat, cakes, and coffee consumption. From a culinary perspective, hygge is about giving yourself a break from the demands of healthy living, but taking time to bake, savor, and enjoy the process of it. Bust out the slow cooker – not only does it make incredibly tender food, it acts as a natural aromatherapeutic mechanism. Eat via candlelight and take your time. Even if you're BBQing, you can still do it with a hyggelig vibe.



make popcorn.
over the stove.

There's just something about sharing popcorn in a bowl (plus, who doesn't like the smell of popcorn, right?). Sure, you can throw in the microwaveable stuff, but here's how to do it hygge-style on the stovetop...

- Heat the oil in a 3-quart thick-bottomed saucepan on medium-high heat
- Put 3 or 4 popcorn kernels into the oil
- When the kernels pop, add the rest of the 1/3 cup of popcorn kernels in an even layer
- Cover the pot, remove from heat and count 30 seconds
- Return the pan to the heat

go ahead and netflix & chill

There's something human about relaxing in front of good entertainment. Hygge totally allows for this. Just be conscious of it and keep yourself in check. If it's intentional and it isn't getting in the way of the key of hygge – togetherness – you're likely fine.

carve out a hygge-krog

A hygge-krog is a nook. The Danish like nooks. These are little spaces (could be inside or outside) that you carve out for comfort. Maybe it's a hammock in the corner of your yard. Or adorn an empty patch of floor by a sunlit window with cushions and plants. Make it somewhat private and – of course – comfortable.



budget accordingly

It's hard to hygge (is it a verb now? – we're going with it) when you're stressed about cash. Hygge is all about focusing on and savoring the simple things. The American mind wants to always 'go big or go home.' Well, maybe if 'going home' was more hygge, we'd actually be more excited about that and spend far less money while we're at it.

how will you hygge?

Source: <https://www.self.com/story/practicing-hygge-danish-lifestyle>



know your zones

My daughter is in Kindergarten and she's hands-down light years more emotionally intelligent than I was at her age (heck, she's way ahead of where I am now!). A large part of this is because her teachers have taught her class to be able to recognize and name their emotions using a really handy cognitive behavior tool that I'll share with you below.

During the summer months, chances are that we'll be around each other a lot more often. As great as this is, it also means the possibility of more emotional conflicts and flare-ups. The Zones of Regulation is a way to categorize all the different ways we feel and states of alertness we experience into four concrete colored zones. This is especially helpful for kiddos as it's extremely simple to understand (and – well – kids love colors).

the four zones

the **red zone** is used to describe extremely heightened states of alertness and intense emotions. A person may be elated or experiencing anger, rage, explosive behavior, devastation, or terror when in the Red Zone.

the **yellow zone** is also used to describe a heightened state of alertness and elevated emotions, however one has more control when they are in the Yellow Zone. A person may be experiencing stress, frustration, anxiety, excitement, silliness, the wiggles, or nervousness when in the Yellow Zone.

the **green zone** is used to describe a calm state of alertness. A person may be described as happy, focused, content, or ready to learn when in the Green Zone. This is the zone where optimal learning occurs.


the **blue zone** is used to describe low states of alertness and down feelings such as when one feels sad, tired, sick, or bored.



As you can probably see, saying you're in the 'red zone' is a low-impact way of saying that you just need space to cool off. Or saying you're in the 'blue zone' is a great way to communicate that you're just a little... well, blue. Saying someone is in the 'green zone' is another way of saying they're on a roll (or, 'in the zone' as they say in the sports world).

By creating a simple and consistent way to communicate these complex feelings, you relieve the pressure of having to eloquently say what you might be going through in the heat of the moment.

Source: <http://www.zonesofregulation.com/learn-more-about-the-zones.html>



be still and know: simple and prayerful meditation practices for the family

When you find yourself with a short stint of downtime, take advantage of guiding a short group meditation. I'm not suggesting to launch into a Vajrayana practice or anything extreme (though, if that's your thing, go for it).

Here are a couple of short meditation practices that might do the trick:

returning to the breath

Start by having everyone close their eyes, breathe deeply, and focus on their breath. Guide their intention through saying this mantra three times before a 5-minute period of silent deep breathing, "All sounds return to the breath, all thoughts return to the breath, all distractions return to the breath."

be still and know that i am god

In this meditation, sit around in a circle and have everyone recite Psalm 46 as a group mantra: "Be still and know that I am God." But each time you recite the mantra, peel off one part. So it'll go like this:

Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am.
Be still and know.
Be still.
Be.

Repeat this together as much as you'd like. Soon, you'll notice an incredible cadence that you're entering into together.





make a regular family plan



"Where there is no vision, the people perish..."
+ Proverbs 29:18

Another good way to check in on each other and keep things moving in a positive direction is to sit down together and create a 'family plan.'

1. What makes your family special? Write two or three sentences that describe how your family is different from any other family in the world.

2. What is your family's highest priority goal – right now? Write down the ONE goal you are going to work on and the time period in which you expect to accomplish it.

3. What are the action steps needed to work towards this goal? List four to five action steps that will make this goal a reality for your family.

4. How will your family check-in on your progress towards this goal? Write down your plan for holding family meetings (when/where/how often).

See this as an exciting venture, not a punitive thing. Every couple of weeks or so, check in on the plan and track your progress. Update regularly. This is a living plan, not a static one.

playlists

To find these playlists, just search Spotify under the playlist name – and enjoy!

focus flow

This playlist is a paradox... Both upbeat and chill. Both relaxing and invigorating. It's a playlist that both the cool kids and their ex-cool parents can bob their heads to (without getting too hardcore for we uppity parents, of course). Bring flow to your summer afternoon with this blend of uptempo instrumental hip-hop beats.

chill hits

Picture this... It's an afternoon in July. It's hot, but there's a refreshing breeze wafting around outside. You open the windows to let the fresh air in. The kids are coding, doing crafts, and whatever they do. You want to keep it relaxed, but you don't just want instrumentals. You want upbeat songwriting with a chill vibe. This is your playlist.

spotify orchestra: cello

In my opinion, there is no better solo classical instrument than the cello. Yo Yo Ma is coming to Chicago this summer and I'm already counting the days. If you're a cello freak like me, this playlist will bring you to your special place. Great for creative moments and soothing background music for relaxing dinners, etc.

yoga - playlist of the month

Now we're getting a little new-agey, but that's okay. These yoga beats are great for – well, yoga – but also for when your family tag-teams the house cleaning duties or for a festive gathering when you're bored of the same old classic rock and contemporary hits. Get your

family and friends in that yoga flow and bliss out, my friend. All is well.

peaceful choral music by living composers

One of the most wonderful things about humans, in my opinion, is our ability to sing together and create something far bigger than the sum of our parts. Choral music is a representation of the divine, as far as I'm concerned. This playlist is one of the best collections of choral music I've found. Hallelujah!

this is taizé

The Taizé Community is an ecumenical Christian monastic fraternity in Taizé, Saône-et-Loire, Burgundy, France composed of members from both Catholic and Protestant traditions who originate from across the world. If you've ever been to a Taizé service, you know how transcendent the music can be. To set the tone on a beautiful sun-washed morning or to cool things off in the evening as you wind down, this playlist is ideal for setting a sacred mood.

under the stars

This playlist was designed for campfires (as the title suggests) under the stars. I recommend it for the cooler nights of late summer. So grab those s'mores ingredients and a few blankets, stoke the fire, and make this acoustic, folk-driven, bluegrassy, instrumental playlist a part of the night as you tell stories, ask questions, pray, and commune under God's stars.
