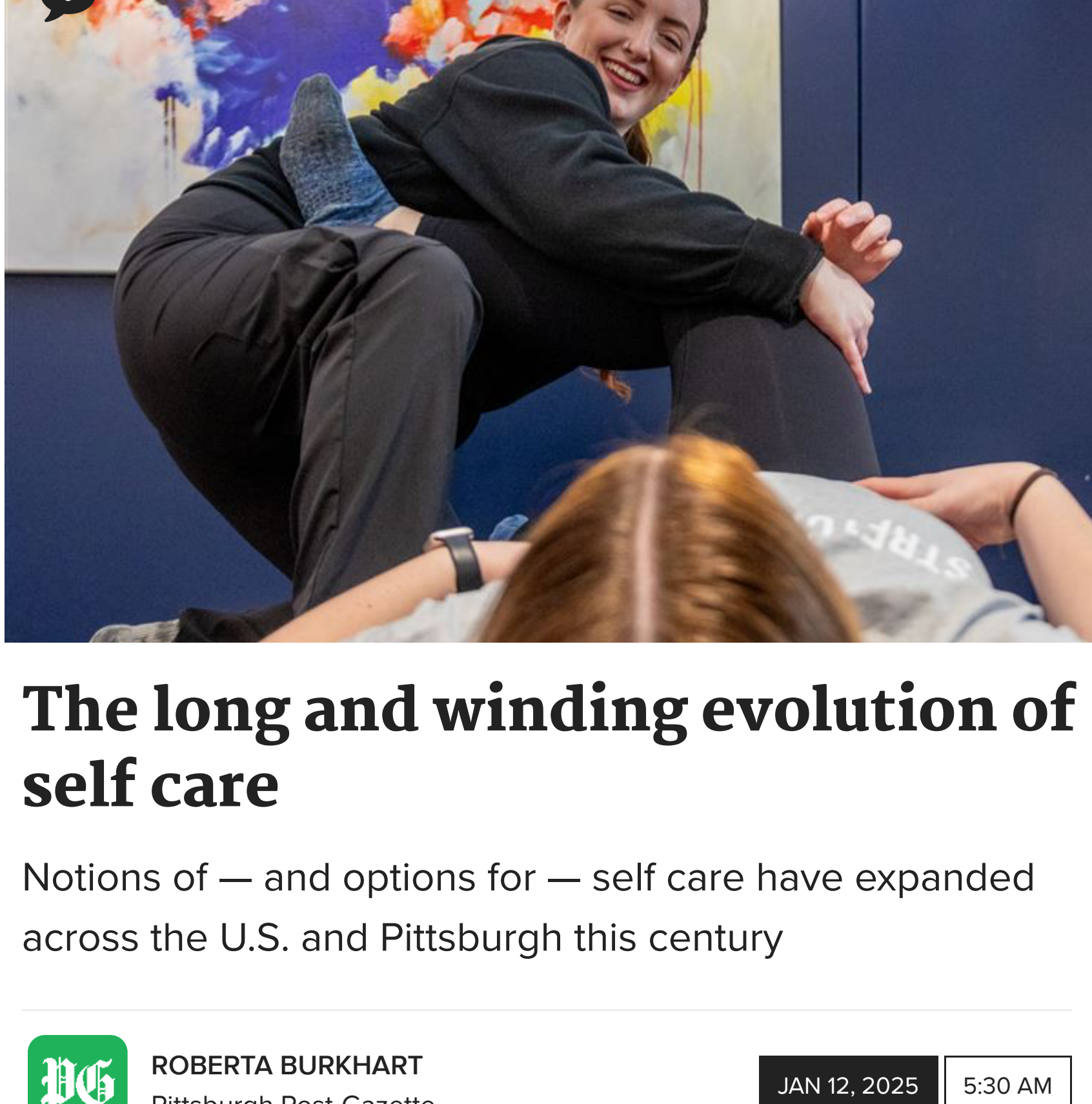


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# The long and winding evolution of self care

Notions of — and options for — self care have expanded across the U.S. and Pittsburgh this century

ROBERTA BURKHART Pittsburgh Post-Gazette JAN 12, 2025 5:30 AM

As we step into 2025, the concept of self care stands as both a buzzy term into a global industry worth trillions, influenced by shifting social attitudes, technological advancements and a growing recognition that mental health is just as important as physical well-being.

Over the past 25 years, self care has evolved from a niche movement into a global industry worth trillions, influenced by shifting social attitudes, technological advancements and a growing recognition that mental health is just as important as physical well-being.

“We are increasingly understanding that the mind and body are connected. The brain runs the show, so everything is related to what’s going on in your head,” with more and more people “understanding the gut/brain axis, the heart/brain axis,” said Blake Gibson, assistant professor of adult, child and adolescent psychiatry in the department of behavioral medicine and psychiatry at West Virginia University’s Rockefeller Neuroscience Institute.

This transformation is evident in Pittsburgh via the rise of wellness businesses, from holistic health centers in East Liberty to yoga studios in the Strip District.

When Schoolhouse Yoga founder Leta Koontz opened her studio in the Strip in 2002, there were only two other yoga schools in the city, she said. “When I first opened my studio, there was a lot of trepidation: ‘Is this a cult? Is this a religious practice? Will I have to chant names of gods from different religions?’”

Her first clients were mostly college-aged; now Schoolhouse Yoga, which also has a Ross Township location, offers classes for prenatal through senior citizens.

Data from Yoga Alliance, a nonprofit that maintains a voluntary credentialing registry of teachers, indicates that there are currently 373 registered yoga instructors in the Pittsburgh area, a number that didn’t surprise Koontz. She said she expects yoga to remain popular here as people continue to embrace the practice as a gentle and restorative way to achieve better overall health.

The trajectory of self care from 2000 to today is entangled with pivotal social and cultural moments — such as the rise of social media, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased awareness of mental health — that have redefined what it means to care for oneself in Pittsburgh and beyond.

“One of the things, I think, that has changed or developed over the past 25 years is an awareness that looking after mental health is for everybody. You know, you don’t need to have a mental health problem to be looking after your mental health anymore,” said Elizabeth Fein, associate professor and chair of Duquesne University’s psychology department. “There’s much more awareness that looking after yourself involves looking after your whole self.”

## Big business

It’s no secret that mindful meditation, juice cleanses and even goat yoga are big business.

In April, the Global Wellness Institute revealed that the U.S. wellness economy is valued at a staggering \$1.8 trillion, twice that of the second-largest market, China. Globally, the wellness economy is estimated to be worth an impressive \$5.6 trillion.

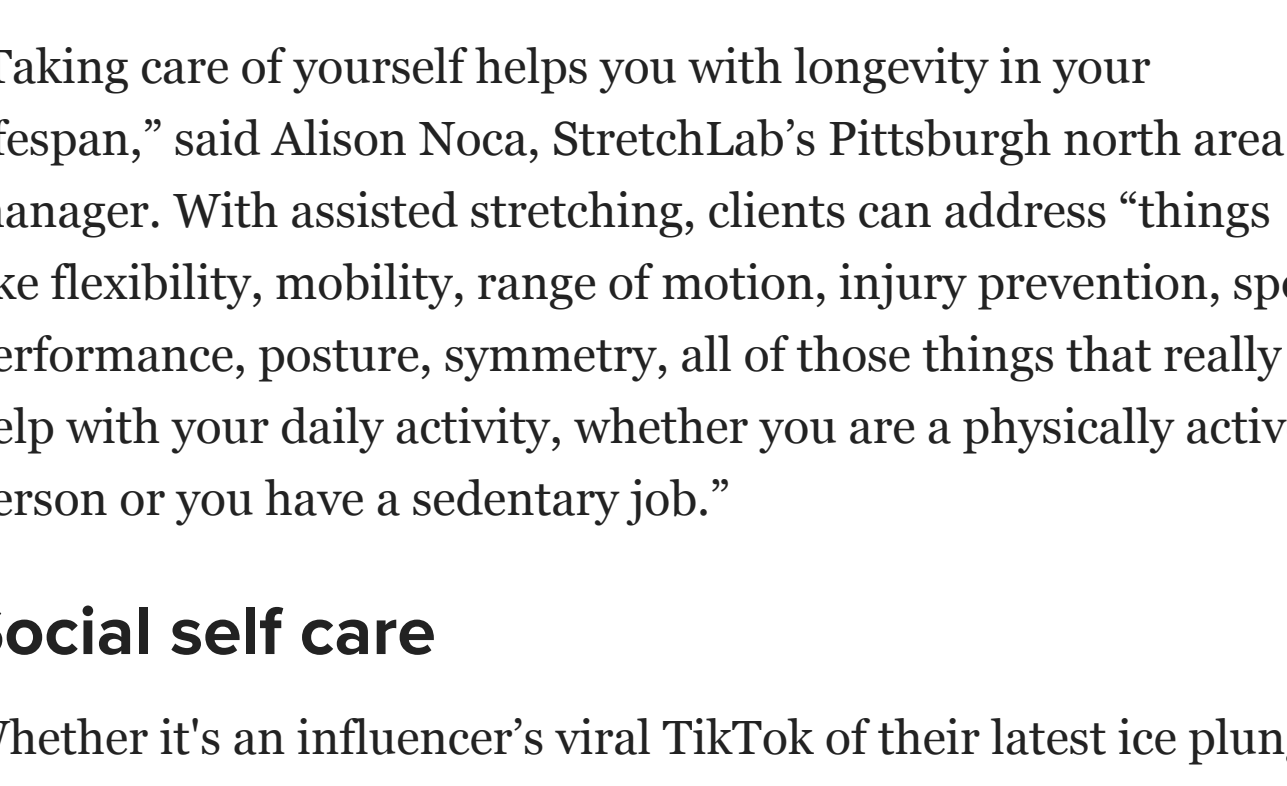
And this wellness boom is evident in 2025 Pittsburgh and its suburbs. Yoga studios abound. Organic fruits, vegetables and more line the shelves not only of numerous health food and niche grocery stores but in Giant Eagle and Shop ‘N Save too. Words like “pilates,” “barre” and “HIT” are commonplace not just at exclusive health clubs but at your neighborhood YMCA. A quick internet search for “mindful meditation in Pittsburgh” turns up plenty of offerings at local libraries and community centers in addition to those at health care giants UPMC and Allegheny Health Network.

One glimpse into the rise of Steel City self care shows us that Pittsburgh has a higher concentration of massage therapists, manicurists and pedicurists than the national average, according to a July report from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In May 2023, there were about 93,000 massage therapists in the United States. The areas with the highest concentrations were Kahului-Wailuku-Lahaina, Hawaii, and Napa, California, with nearly eight and five times more, respectively, than the national average. While not quite as plentiful, the number of Pittsburgh-area massage therapists registered slightly more than the national average.

The preponderance for manicurists and pedicurists was higher, with Pittsburgh nail salons and spas employing more than 1.5 times the national average.

If you really want to veer off the beaten wellness path in the region, options include forest bathing at Allegheny National Forest (you can find information on the Allegheny County Parks website), sound healing at the Awareness & Wellness Center in Shadyside, aromatherapy at numerous spas, cryotherapy at the four locations of Restore Hyper Wellness, Ayurvedic counseling at Village Center for Holistic Therapy (West End or Shaler) and silent retreats atop Mount Washington at The St. Mary of the Mount Retreat Center.



Dave Sites of New Kensington, right, holds a pose with Stephanie Wijkstrom with the Counseling & Wellness Center of Pittsburgh during Yoga in the Park, in Allegheny Commons West Park on the North Side, Saturday, June 22, 2024. (Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette)

“The wellness industry has boomed over the last quarter of a century. We have gathered tomes of research on how much wellness works,” said psychotherapist Stephanie Wijkstrom, who founded the Counseling and Wellness Center of Pittsburgh in 2015. “Wellness is so much more than bubble baths and massages, it’s the way we eat our food, the way our mind thinks, and what specific things an individual needs to be their healthiest self. Generation Z and millennials have adopted wellness-informed practices as a part of their lifestyle. This will be even bigger in the future.”

## Health in the time of COVID

Another defining turning point in the past quarter century, the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly reshaped the concept of self care and wellness, shifting it from a personal indulgence to a vital necessity as people sought ways to manage stress, boost immunity and navigate the uncertainty of a global health crisis.

“What happened with COVID was that everybody had to think about their health in a new way. There was an immediacy to health risks,” said Fein. That, in part, she explained, led many of us to consider, “in a more immediate way,” how to care for ourselves as individuals in addition to “as members of groups. And I think it also gave us time to reflect. We had a lot of downtime there for a bit.”

A self-care plan doesn’t have to cost a fortune or take up all your free time: It can be as simple and accessible as incorporating small, intentional practices into your daily routine. This simplicity reminds us that self care is ultimately about consistency and balance, not extravagance.

A common self-care misconception is “that it is frivolous and for the wealthy-indulgent,” Wijkstrom said. “We now know that if we don’t care for our well-being, we will burn out and our bodies and minds will suffer.”

Preventive and recovery self care often mix and mingle at StretchLab, a global business providing customized stretching sessions. While it was founded in 2015, the company experienced a post-pandemic expansion that saw it hit more than 500 locations in 2022. Its first Pittsburgh location landed in the Strip in August 2022; five more outposts have since opened in the area.

“Taking care of yourself helps you with longevity in your lifespan,” said Alison Noca, StretchLab’s Pittsburgh north area manager. With assisted stretching, clients can address “things like flexibility, mobility, range of motion, injury prevention, sport performance, posture, symmetry, all of those things that really help with your daily activity, whether you are a physically active person or you have a sedentary job.”

## Social self care

Whether it’s an influencer’s viral TikTok of their latest ice plunge, a fitness guru’s review of infrared sauna therapy, a pop-up ad for sensory-deprivation float therapy or even your cousin’s Facebook post about forest bathing (a Japanese practice involving mindful immersion in nature), no one can deny the influence of social media on the wellness arena.

Every expert interviewed for this article shared the same caution: Don’t believe everything you see or read online. Conducting thorough research is essential to avoid wasting your time and money, or even risking your health, on advice that lacks solid evidence and is rooted in superficial opinions.

“I treat a lot of children, and the social media effect in kids is largely negative. It can be mixed in adults,” said Gibson, who studied at the University of Arizona Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine, long known for its pioneering approach to holistic health and wellness. “And I think there’s a really big irony in watching a TikTok reel that tells you to go touch the grass. The more you use social media, the less you talk, the less deep personal relationships you have.”

While social media platforms have pluses, including information access, Gibson cautioned about the way “explaining and evidence gets truncated in social media. Some concepts can’t be boiled down to a 20-second reel.”

And, often enough, those behind Instagram and TikTok messages aren’t necessarily getting their information from the best experts.

“Social media can be great. I think it can inspire people to make changes into their wellness and lifestyle habits,” said Brian Larouere, associate professor and program director of exercise science at Seton Hill University in Greensburg. “But sometimes with social media, those influencers might lack information.”

He suggested going to trusted websites like the American College of Sports Medicine (acsm.org) or Evidence in Motion — commonly called EIM — (evidencemotion.com) to research products, treatments and trends.

Also in the tech realm, wearable technology like the Apple Watch, Fitbit and Oura Ring unquestionably have carved out a self-care niche. “It is hard to argue with data, when you can see that you sleep and recover better when you practice self care, it motivates more good behavior,” Wijkstrom said. “I love biometrics and encourage everyone to use one.”

Larouere cautioned that technology has pitfalls that consumers must consider. In one of his classes at Seton Hill, he instructed his students to feed health data into an artificial intelligence platform to create an exercise and nutrition plan. The class then examined the plans and found many instances of bad — and even sometimes dangerous — advice.

“Who knows? Maybe 15 years from now it might be great. I’m leery on the AI aspect of creating,” he said.

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