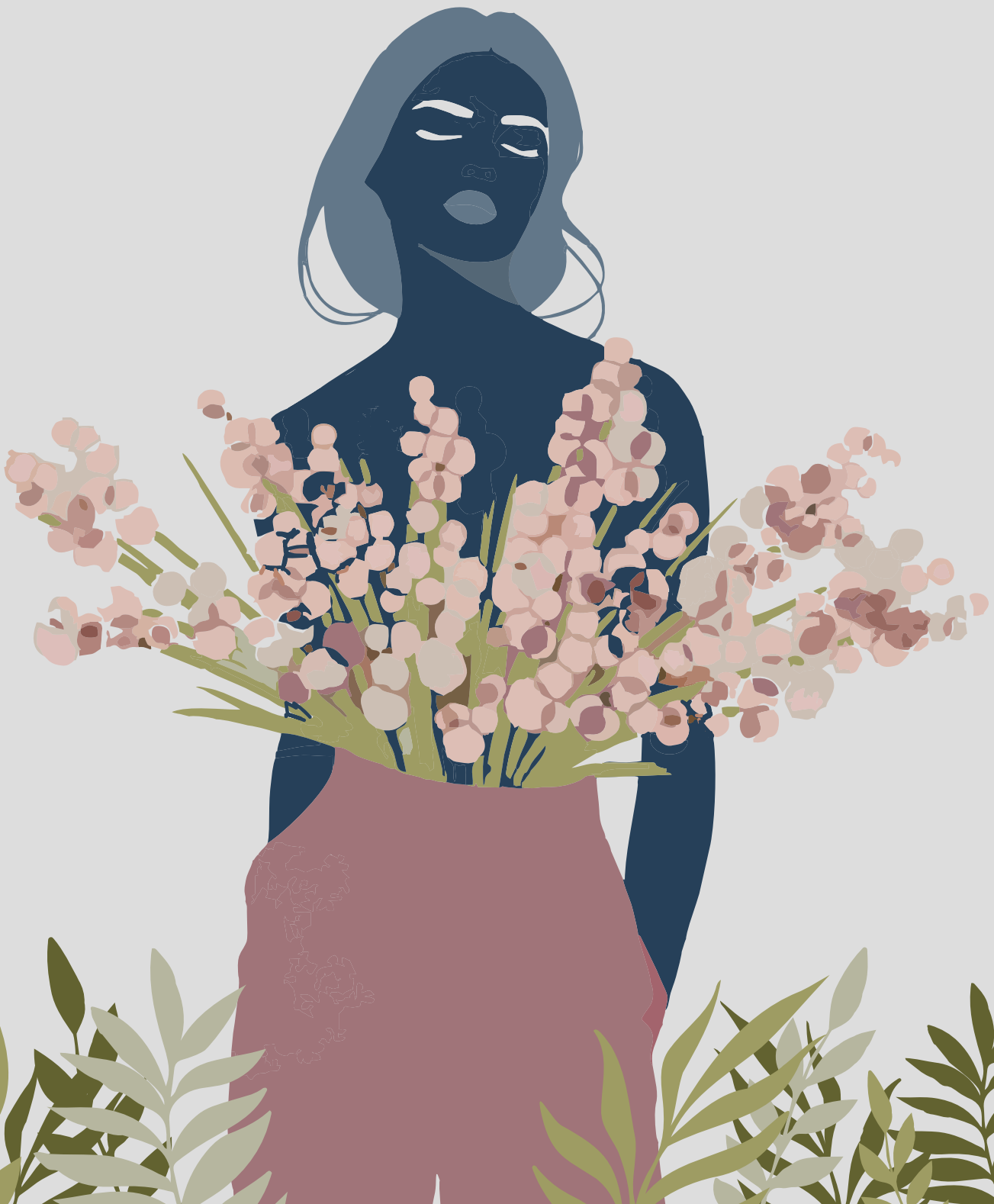


Making yourself a priority

Shamillah
WILSON
TRANSFORMATION • LEADERSHIP • WELLNESS



Making yourself a priority

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Thank you to the feminists, change agents and activists who make up my community. You have taught me the importance of prioritising self-care and paying attention to my own needs. *Making yourself a priority* is dedicated to you.

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Contents

Internal change requires prioritising oneself	5
Why make yourself a priority?	6
A systems lens to why it is so difficult	7
Building the muscles to make yourself a priority	9
Listening to our own needs	9
What we say vs what we do	10
Breaking the pattern	12
How to prioritise yourself	13
Going deeper with your individual work	13
#1 Assess your life context	13
#2 Develop a new narrative for a life where you are a priority	14
#3 Connect to the values underpinning this new way of being (you as priority)	16
# 4 Remember change happens in increments	17
Start prioritising your own needs	18
#1 Start claiming 10-15 minutes a day for yourself	18
#2 Affirm yourself	18
#3 Set yourself up for success	19
#4 Replenish and nourish	19
#5 Slow down, do less	19
#6 Tend to your emotions	19
Tips on how to cultivate rest within systems of oppression	20
#1 See rest as a political principle	20
#2 Set the intention to cultivate rest for yourself in small ways	20
#3 Seize the potential for rest	20
#4 Access spaces for collective rest	21
#5 Experiment with different forms of rest	21
#6 Reflect and learn	21
Moving between self and others: Reaffirming boundaries	22
#1 Get to know your boundaries	22
#2 Address boundary violations in early	22
#3 Don't see boundary violations as character flaws	22
#4 Boundaries related to power	22
#5 Lean into your support network	23
#6 Trust yourself as your authority	23
#7 Let go of perfection	23

Prioritising yourself while also acknowledging the needs of others

- #1: Show yourself compassion and kindness.
- #2: Build a support network (seek community)
- #3: Seek professional help where needed
- #4: Address systemic issues

24
24
24
24
24

Internal change requires prioritising oneself

If we want to lead change from within, we must learn to make ourselves a priority. We must start by recognising that “No one will save you”. When my coach told me this for the first time, I wanted to cry because I had subconsciously believed someone would come and tell me I needed to prioritise myself.

While making ourselves a priority seems obvious to some, most of us struggle to put ourselves first. Many activists, particularly women, gender non-conforming and Indigenous and black people, have been socialised to believe we should always put the needs of others before our own and that making ourselves a priority is self-centred. Thus we extend care to others much more than we should and hope that someone else will remind us that we, too, are worthy of care.

Even when we finally realise that things need to change, and express an intent to prioritise ourselves, we might find it challenging to follow through on this realisation.

For example, a client kept saying that the people she worked with in her organisation took her for granted and did not respect her boundaries when she expressed a need to prioritise herself. Yet, whenever we had a coaching session, she would find a reason to cancel it. I had to tell her, “But you are the one that’s not prioritising yourself. It’s not the people at work. Until you say yes to yourself, and act in alignment with what you say, they will keep doing the same thing you are doing.”

Aligning with values

Making yourself a priority is a way of aligning your life and values. When you align your priorities with your values, you are in sync with yourself. And yet, making choices that are in sync with your heart can be challenging amid the clamour of competing demands and responsibilities.

Often, there is a gap between espoused values and lived values. For instance, you may value relationships but have little or no time to nurture them. This gap does not mean you (or someone else) are hypocrites. It just means there’s a gap between how you live and how you wish to live. Similarly, you may assess your values and see that one of your values is a belief in inherent human worth or care for all. But when you don’t prioritise your worth or take care of your needs it signals a misalignment between your values and actions.

Only once our values are aligned will they reinforce our intentions of living well and being true to ourselves.

In addition, a common set of values may translate into different behaviours for different people. How would you know if someone valued creativity? What range of behaviours would you expect? Answering these questions is important so that each of us can clarify our unique take on values and behaviours and hold ourselves accountable for making important changes.

What are the steps to prioritise ourselves?

We start by figuring out how to do what we say we will do. We connect to our values and assess our choices. If our choices and actions do not reflect what we claim is important, we are in misalignment, and thus, we must figure out how to honour our agreements with ourselves.

Why make yourself a priority?

For many activists, prioritising the collective means putting the group's goals, bonds and support before our own. In this instance, we will emphasise harmony, interdependence and shared responsibilities. The approach is relational and always oriented towards the group context.

Self-care sustains us while we do the hard work of activism and leading change. Audre Lorde's quote affirms this view, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare". In the context of our change work, we regularly experience challenges. Our stress magnifies during the process because we start advocating for change in settings where sometimes, because of our identities, we feel invisible and unheard. Activists must acknowledge this unjust reality and participate in self-care to have the energy and tenacity to face oppressive systems.

Moreover, due to the emotional nature of change work and the magnitude of the issues we are fighting for, burnout — or the loss of motivation and capacity to continue working — is common in activist groups. Prioritising yourself is vital to preserving your health and capacity to work for positive change. It includes

doing what you can, within your capacity, to prioritise your physical and emotional health in a balanced and thoughtful way. This is incredibly important, especially for activists.

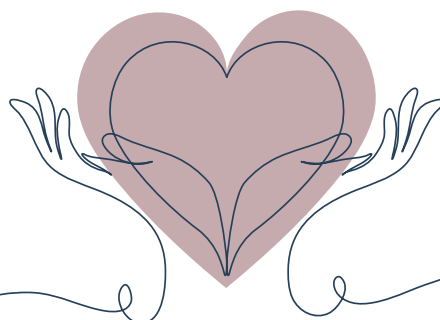
Taking on too much without pacing ourselves can add up over time. This can take a toll on our personal lives. If left unchecked, it can lead to mental and physical health problems as well as straining personal relationships and leading to neglect in other areas.

There are many reasons why we ignore our own needs.

We may feel an incessant need to respond to the demand for care within our collectives, communities and families and thus put our needs last. However, it is unsustainable to only respond to the needs of others, particularly in the context of unabating needs.

"We can get lost in the moment, with our passion driving us to keep fighting until we win. That there will be time to rest when victory comes. Sometimes, we worry more about the welfare of others than ourselves. Others experience much more suffering, and we can't complain by comparison. Also, other people rely on us to keep fighting, and we can't disappoint them by stopping."

Amnesty International, Sustainable Activism and Self-Care



It might also seem simple to say, “Taking care of oneself — setting boundaries and preserving one’s mental, emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing — is one of our core responsibilities.” However, following through requires self-love; and self-love is much deeper than self-care. Self-love is about valuing your worth and recognising that you are worthy of love and respect in all areas of life. This is deep, long-term work.

At the same time, we must also recognise that many of us have signed up to change the world and that taking better care of and loving ourselves includes caring for the work we intentionally put out.

So, rather than focusing on binaries — care of others OR care of self — our challenge is to develop the muscle that integrates our wellbeing into the roles we play in our collectives. This work is ongoing. What is needed is increased self-compassion and an appreciation for our very real efforts to respond to care crises.

If we do all we can on both fronts, we increase our ability to take care of ourselves and use our available resources to care for others. It’s not about either our activism or our wellbeing. It’s about balancing both because our movements and causes need us to be optimistic, resilient and well.

A systems lens to why it is difficult

In our current paradigm, we may view the inability to prioritise ourselves as a failure on the part of individuals. However, we must understand that self-care challenges run much deeper and are systemic. We must, therefore, build a more nuanced understanding of the challenges we encounter as we navigate our wellbeing journeys.

For example, toxic productivity, also known as “hustle culture,” over-emphasises productivity and relentless work and glorifies busyness. In hustle culture, individuals often feel pressured to work excessively long hours and sacrifice personal time and wellbeing. This constant pressure to hustle can lead to chronic stress, fatigue and, ultimately, burnout. Toxic productivity often leads to neglecting self-care activities, such as proper nutrition, exercise, relaxation and spending quality time with loved ones. Personal relationships may suffer as work takes precedence over maintaining healthy connections.

In recent years, we have also had prolonged exposure to stress — some of us more than others — due to, for example, our identities, geographic location or class position (among others). This has left a great number of us with varying levels of psychological distress and symptoms of depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress. At the same time, those doing care work at the social level or in social justice settings often carry an unequal burden of care due to inadequate social care support systems that mostly invest resources and capacities where profit can be made. However, the very

real need to keep going with our political resistance has meant we have also had to develop strategies to remain functional (rather than well) despite the impacts on our underlying mental health. This dynamic often results in symptoms going unnoticed or undiagnosed. It is, therefore, important to note that a need to keep going and be productive no matter the cost to ourselves is rooted in capitalist beliefs that place production and output above human value, psychological health and wellbeing. Because these beliefs are so deeply woven into the fabric of our societies, we keep acting them out even as we profess explicit beliefs about what is good for us. Hence, it is not surprising that we continue with ‘functional’ behaviour, working even harder to cover up our underlying ‘dysfunction’.

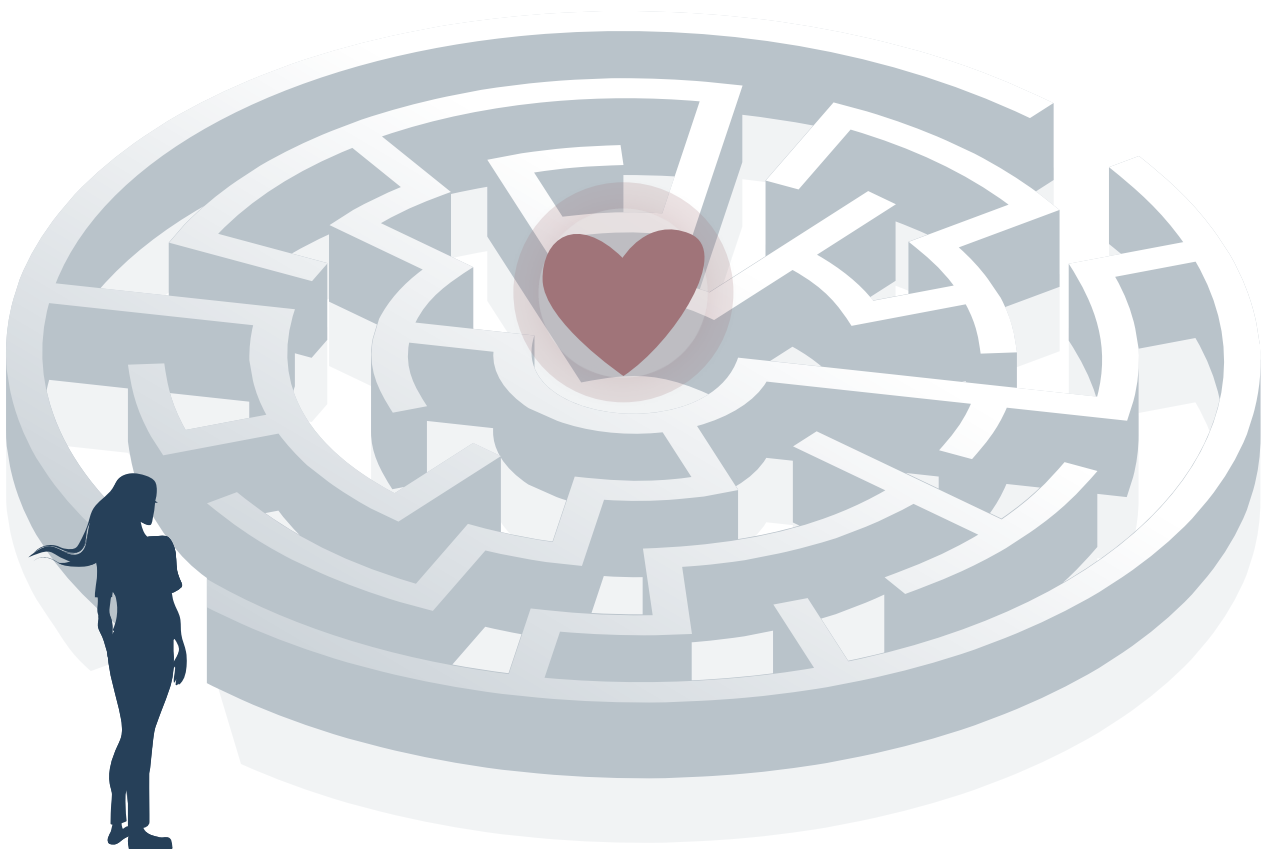
Another systemic challenge is that many of us do caretaking and support work that is often invisible because of contextual realities influenced by patriarchal and white supremacy values. For example, one of the reasons behind the invisibility of care work is that, historically and politically, most care systems (formal and informal) were created with the expectation that most of us care for a few without

complaint and with little or no compensation. Most debates on care have focussed on this reality. However, what is less discussed is that activists are there to take care of the global majority (rather than the privileged minority) and also of each other and how the increasing need to do so impacts those of us providing these forms of care. This is especially true when it is not acknowledged that those providing care feel increasingly vulnerable, unsupported or on the brink of collapse. These signs of crisis can only be worked with creatively when we make this important form of care for others (as opposed to self-care) visible and acknowledge the key role it plays in the collective wellbeing of communities. It is not enough to keep taking on more care. We must speak up for and preserve the energy to create more equal care systems.

Understanding that self-care challenges are much more profound and systemic quickly reveals that simply putting pressure on individuals to prioritise themselves is disingenuous. Indeed, there are elements of self-responsibility. However, for many, the questions remain, "How can we rest, be at ease or focus on ourselves when so much is happening right now? How can we

set boundaries and do more for ourselves? We are in a constant state of inner dialogue, guilt, and of feeling overwhelmed." However, these patterns are also destructive (and unsustainable). Connecting to the teachings of feminist ancestor Audre Lorde — who referred to caring for ourselves as an act of defiance in a society designed around systems that were never meant to care for the collective, systems that are designed to keep us overwhelmed and exhausted — is a way I keep reminding myself that when we are burnt out, we cannot create the change we wish to see in the world. It also reminds me that self-care should extend to greater systemic transformation and that systemic transformation should include ways to take care of ourselves.

The truth is that without caring for ourselves, we cannot feel at ease, reflect or have the ongoing capacity and energy to direct at the injustices in the world. Thus, the work is about acknowledging the complexity of the challenge and the push-pull effect of our internalised commitments to do more about contextual needs while acknowledging the very real limits of our capacities to keep going without care for ourselves.



Building the muscles to make yourself a priority

Listening to our own needs

Paying attention to ourselves and our needs is certainly an important skill, but it can take a little time to master - particularly if we are disconnected from our bodies, very stressed, tired or used to distracting ourselves constantly with busyness, social media or other habits.

Amelia Freer

Although the politics of care drives caregiving in activist spaces, there is an increasing awareness that it can be one-sided. As we have seen, those of us who actively respond to a need for care might honour the needs of another beyond our capacity. If we look up the basic definition of honour, it talks about regarding others with great respect. Yet, in reality, many activists who step up in informal or formal care roles struggle to balance honouring the needs of others with our own. Thus, the complexity of honouring the self must be viewed from within our contexts, particular histories and narratives.

For example, we might ask how white supremacy culture informs narratives that challenge our ability to trust inner processes of listening to and sensing our needs.

White supremacy culture promotes the idea that there's only one right way to do things. School grading systems, for example, are often organised around producing the right answer, and in many work environments, we could lose status, support or income when we make the 'wrong' choices. As a result, we learn to work hard to get things 'right,' and soon, we bring this lens to everything we do, including our activism and care.

For example, rather than feeling grounded in listening and being present to what's happening within us, we might feel the need to be more critical of ourselves and lose sight of our needs. However, it becomes difficult to trust ourselves when we constantly look through a lens of right and wrong. This is especially true when we live in countries that have been

colonised or if we come from generations of people who were constantly forced to doubt themselves and wonder if they were doing the right thing.

The truth is that there is no right or wrong way of being. There are simply ways of being that produce unwanted results when they don't resonate with the dominant culture of a particular environment. We could instead ask ourselves, "How would our relationship with ourselves change if we could reframe 'right and wrong' in another way?"

What if we asked if there are things that might work for us and things that might not work for us within a certain context or if there are things that will either produce the result we want or the result we don't want without causing harm to another?

When we can navigate this quagmire in our endeavours to take care of our own needs, we increase our inner resources — and thus, we can share more of ourselves with the world and others.



What we say vs what we do

If we constantly break agreements with ourselves, we suffer in the form of "disintegrated self-trust."

David Allen

It's not enough to say the 'right' things. We must demonstrate behaviours that align with our values. Authenticity comes from aligning what we say with what we do. We've all experienced those instances with ourselves and others when what is said and done just doesn't align. And when it happens, it is damaging. It damages credibility and erodes trust in ourselves and others. So, what can you do to remedy the situation? Unfortunately, it's not as easy as saying, "Do what I say, not what I do." The actions that we take have to be honest and driven by what we say we value.

When assessing how we treat ourselves, we can start by looking at how many times we

break agreements and promises with ourselves. We could all start by looking at ourselves in the mirror and compassionately telling ourselves the truth about how we treat ourselves. When I did so, I saw that I repeatedly failed to keep agreements with myself. While I went to great pains to ensure that everyone I encountered honoured agreements with me, in contrast, I had an appalling record of keeping my promises to myself. I lost count of the number of times I would tell myself that I would change my behaviour 'tomorrow'. For some reason, I permitted myself to duck out on these personal promises. This pattern of behaviour demonstrated my inability to make myself a priority.

The kind of promises I tended to make, and then break, included:

- "I promise to take better care of myself — I'll get back into exercising tomorrow."
- "I promise to spend more time with my loved ones."
- "I promise to have a better balance and stop working so much."
- "I promise to start being smarter with my money next month."
- "I promise I will do something about my dreams next week."



So, repeatedly, I kept on putting myself on the back burner. Yet the bigger impact of my habits was invisible to me. If anyone in my life (friend, partner, family) constantly made promises and let me down, I would feel disrespected and unimportant. I would eventually get to the point where I would express my dissatisfaction with their treatment of our relationship, and I would request myself to move on. In other words, I would not tolerate this behaviour.

It was hard to acknowledge that I treated myself worse than others. Not only that, but I was also sending a powerful message to my subconscious that it was okay to disrespect myself. It was one thing to say that I would kick anyone to the curb that would continuously disrespect me, but I could hardly tell myself to hit the road.

Scientists assess that, at best, only 10% of our mind lies within ordinary waking consciousness. About 90% lies beneath the surface in the subconscious mind, where issues and problems reside. The totality of our consciousness creates our reality. So, in looking at myself, the 90% that creates my reality is the part I am not conscious of and this is what ultimately attracts stuff into my life that I don't want.

We tell ourselves that we are unnecessary when we continuously break our promises.

In my example, by continuing to put myself on the back burner and disregarding my level of integrity, I was creating a ripple effect to the extent that I had broken the trust and belief in myself. Secondly, I stopped believing in my ability to care for myself. The cycle then continued with me fulfilling these beliefs and living up to these harmful standards for myself, and this resulted in an ultimate disconnection from myself, leading to feelings of fear, guilt and shame. Yet I kept on being too busy or finding reasons (always plausible) not to be a priority in my own life, thus feeding these negative emotions and continuing the cycle of disconnection.

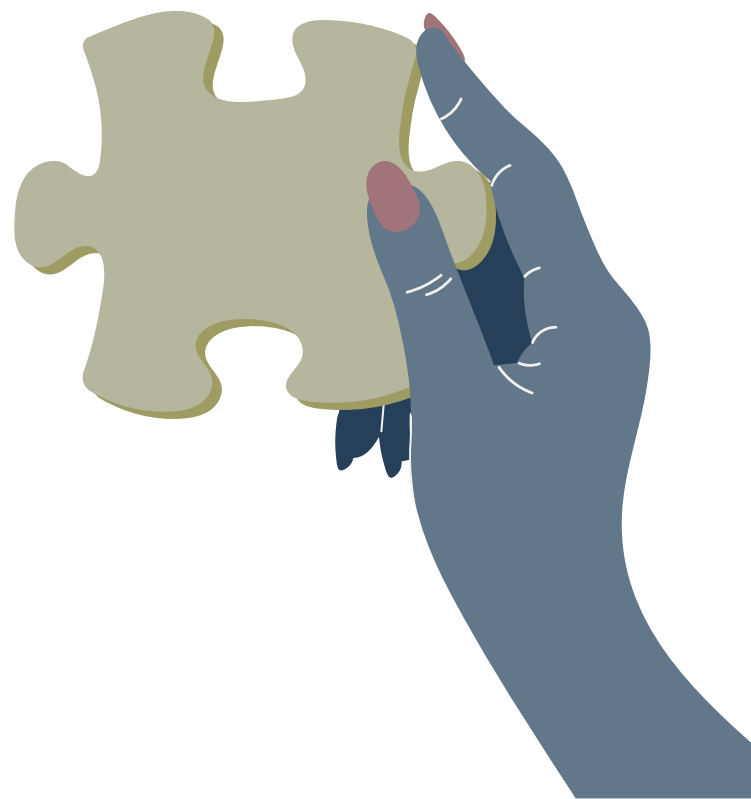
The belief that "I am not important" and my disconnection affected my health and fitness goals. It also affected my eating. I found myself eating emotionally because I was not

getting the care that I needed in other areas of my life. Putting myself at the bottom of my priority list also affected how I showed up in my relationships. I struggled with the (incorrect) belief that making myself a priority was "selfish," not realising that when I prioritise my well-being, I set a powerful example to others regarding how they treat themselves and me. It is, therefore, no surprise that I struggled to build deep and lasting connections with others as I was disconnected from myself.

I knew that I had my work cut out to break through this pattern—so that I could, in the first instance, build a more loving connection and relationship with myself. I knew this was my first port of call even before I could consider connections to a partner, family, colleagues and friends.

At the same time, when we observe how our actions align with our intentions and our words, it's important not to strive to change everything at once. It's more helpful to make one change — often, it just needs to be a small change — to get the ball rolling. For example, research shows that keeping a food journal for just one day a week creates healthier eating patterns..

Isolate the one thing that needs to happen to move you one step closer to your desired outcome and focus on changing that one behaviour.



Breaking the pattern

"Recognizing that you are not where you want to be is a starting point to begin changing your life."

Deborah Day

Noticing the pattern is not enough to change a way of being. We have to take deliberate action to break the pattern. It starts with a decision to prioritise YOURSELF. It is not an indulgence but a necessity, similar to regular oil changes for your car. Prioritising self-care allows you to run smoothly and direct your best self towards your other priorities and challenges. Below are some steps to take to break the pattern.

Taking responsibility for your actions

The first step in breaking a pattern is accepting responsibility for your role and your lack of self-care and nurturing. Taking responsibility is not about blaming or shaming yourself (although I'll admit I did much of that). Taking responsibility simply means recognising your role in what transpired, owning it, and then doing what you can to restore your integrity. As is the case with the breaking of any agreement, the first step is to own up to one's role in it.

Committing to change

The harder part is making a new commitment to yourself. There are several ways to do so. For example, one of my clients shared that she held a 'commitment' ceremony with herself and used a ring to symbolise that commitment. Looking at that ring each day was a reminder of her commitment to herself. But before you even commit you need to figure out what you want (as an outcome). In my case, I realised that my commitment would be, "I choose to be a priority in my own life. This means that I treat myself with respect and kindness and honour the agreements I make with myself".

Develop the practice of keeping promises

The greatest lesson in this is an increased awareness of how you treat yourself. This means taking responsibility when you break an agreement with yourself. It is very different from simply continuing as if nothing happened. From my example, I recognise how disrespect for myself went unacknowledged; hence my levels of self-love and respect were always relatively low. This new approach shifted my relationship with myself. It also changed my relationship with others as I felt more authentic when demanding integrity from others — as I could do so knowing that I was doing the same personally.



How to prioritise yourself

Going deeper with your individual work

#1 Assess your life context

Like any new project, we begin prioritising ourselves by exploring our current reality. What is going on, both within us and around us? This analysis is an opportunity to understand our reality non-judgmentally and compassionately. As we do this, things as yet unsaid may come into focus, insights may be gained, awareness may arise and the issue may be seen with greater clarity. In this way, we pinpoint what is happening in our inner and outer worlds and recognise where change is most needed, where we feel most empowered to change, and what changes will affect our greater context.

A life context analysis often helps you admit, “Well, this is what is currently happening in my life. I am exhausted, I feel disconnected and don’t know where things are heading with my life.” At the same time, you also recognise what is needed to shift things and the resources you already possess to do this.

EXERCISE

Questions to help develop a personal context analysis

- What is currently going on in your life? List the good, the bad and the not-so-pretty. (if it helps break it up into different areas: health, relationships, work, activism, etc.)
- What environmental factors (context) impact your lived reality?
- What impact does a difficult or existing situation have on you and others?
- What are you putting up with in your life right now?
- What are your major sources of concern or worry?
- What has previously stopped you from doing things differently?
- What do you need to do differently to achieve sustainable activism?
- What steps have you already taken to achieve boundaries for yourself?
- What has contributed towards you moving closer to (or further away from) your wellbeing and/or healthy boundaries?
- What skills/resources/knowledge do you have that can contribute towards you achieving your personal wellbeing goals?

Once we better understand our context, we begin to see recurring themes. These themes are often the ones that we need to address by bringing our mission and values to our strategies, which, in turn, are divided into short-term action plans to achieve within predetermined time frames.

Assessing your life context helps you see your reality with greater clarity, in a new way and from a different perspective. In turn, this opening allows your perspective to stretch so that different ways of seeing emerge when you enter the strategic phase.

#2 Develop a new narrative for a life where you are a priority

The next question asks, "What must change?". Now that you know what is happening, you can zoom into an area you want to change. What is your life's activist project vision? What will look different in a future where your work fills you with a sense of wellbeing?

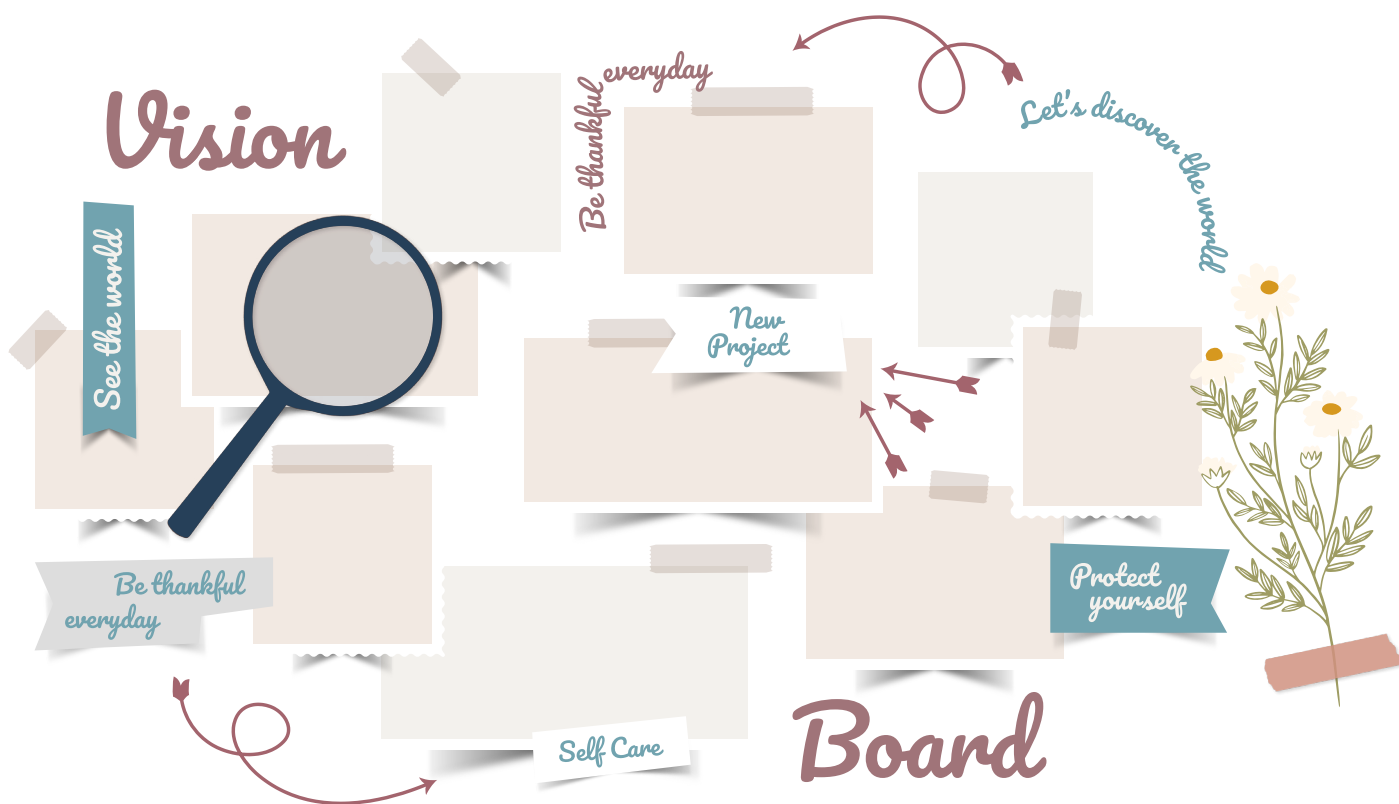
Before we get to the details, it is essential to dream a little and envision your life if YOU were a priority.

EXERCISE: VISION-BOARDING

Find at least two hours for this process.

Materials needed:

- Gather together an A2 sheet (preferably cardboard).
- Grab some magazines, Pritt (or paper glue), scissors, music (relaxing with no vocals preferably) and a glass of wine (optional).
- Light a candle and set your intention as you tap into more profound wisdom to find your direction for the next part of your journey.



Turn on the music and close your eyes. Relax your body and mind. Assure yourself that everything that has happened in your life until now has been as it should be because it prepared you for the next part of your journey. Relax and start imagining yourself happy, excited and inspired. Stay with that feeling for a few minutes.

Open your eyes. Now for the fun part. Without thinking too much, open up the magazines and randomly choose pictures or words that grab your attention. Do not analyse your choices. Just follow your intuition.

Do this for about 20 minutes and then paste what you have gathered on the A2 sheet, relating them to one another in a positive way.

Once you have completed this process, you will have created a visual representation of what you are called to create in your life.

When looking at your vision board, identify the keywords that define the essence of what you want for your life, such as freedom, connectedness and health.

Your vision board presents a narrative of what you want to create for yourself. It gives you back the power of choice.

Connect to the dream and what living in this reality could feel like.

NOTE: We are not concerned with the blockages that could prevent you from achieving your goals. If you are aware of some already, note them down, then put them away to refer to later. For example, list emotions linked to a lack of resources or negative assumptions and beliefs, such as fear, anxiety, procrastination, overreacting, dramatising, complaining, using excuses, avoiding responsibility or being overly independent. Identifying the hurdles is a helpful part of the process as is acknowledging that going for what you want is not always smooth sailing. Yet, this approach sometimes prevents us from allowing us to touch our deepest desires to their fullest potential.



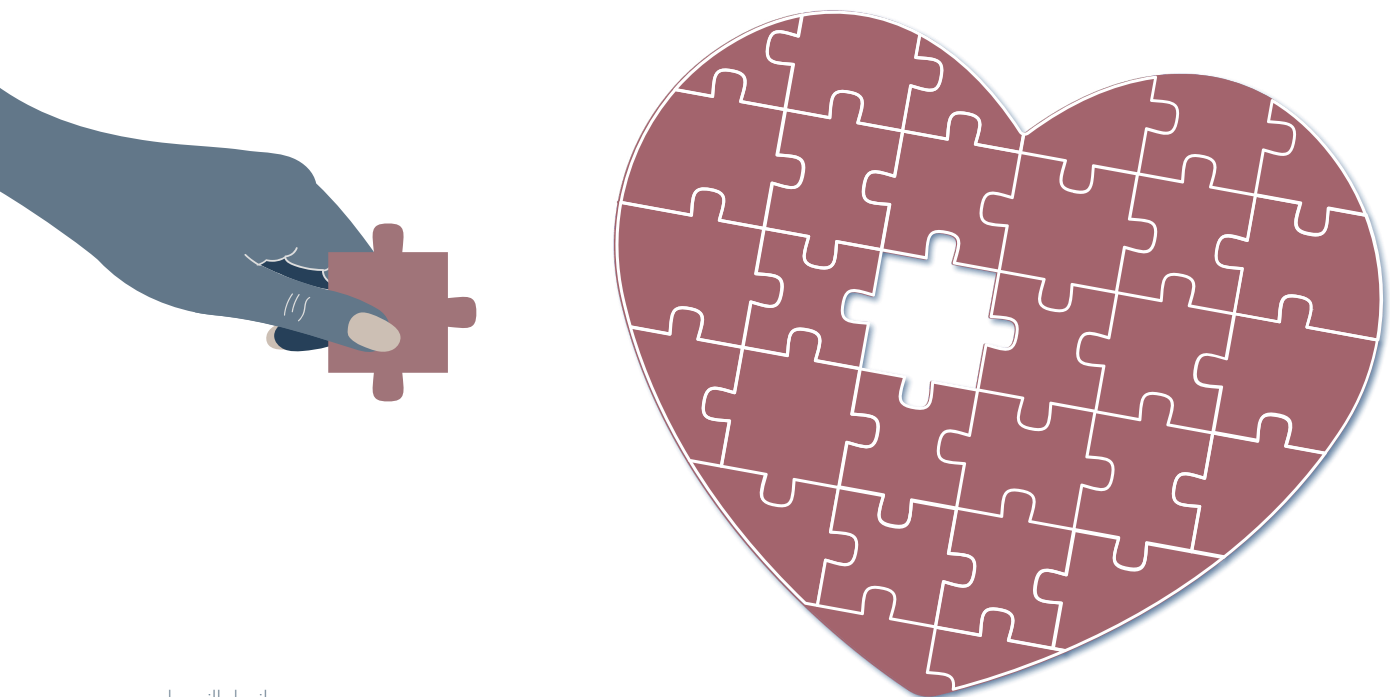
#3 Connect to the values underpinning this new way of being (you as priority)

As activists, our values express our politics and beliefs.

For example, an activist group may value collaboration, inclusion and accountability. Therefore, it would need to reflect on how its behaviours and processes model those values.

Similarly, our values are the most powerful way to “come home” to ourselves. It allows us to effortlessly connect to what matters to us most. Our values are deeply held desires that guide us to create a fulfilling life. When we honour our values, our hearts sing. However, when our values are confused with value judgments (including ethical or moral judgments and thoughts of right/wrong or good/bad), we lose our ability to connect with our shared humanity. This reduces our capacity to contribute to making the world a better place as we come from a divisive, rather than inclusive, space. Moreover, because values are deeply personal, clarity can reveal a lot about our deeper motivations and, therefore, help us make decisions and take action easier.

When we feel dissonance, it is often because our current needs or long-term values are not honoured. It is important to note that although needs and values are intricately linked, needs are more immediate, whereas values guide us in the long term. When needs are urgent, it is often important to be clear about our feelings and beliefs so we can meet them in a way that is more congruent with our values. In addition, when our priorities and life goals are not our own and our behaviour is not aligned with our stated values and beliefs, we cannot stand up for ourselves and our causes and are often not fully present to those we relate with. On the other hand, knowing and articulating our values allows us to know what we stand for and to speak up for our needs and the needs of others. Therefore, finding a compelling language that describes the key driving forces in our lives is important as it clarifies our deepest needs and longings.



When values are fully honoured, we align, feel energised and can build relationships that sustain us and our activist projects. We also navigate the complexity of meeting our own needs while more gracefully taking care of others, our projects and our causes.

To illustrate, if our vision is to feel more joy, the first step would be prioritising ourselves — and the values of caring, kindness and respect could help us do so. Caring for ourselves means making sure that whatever choices we make about our activism work are not only about caring for others but also for ourselves.

As a result, when we commit to being a priority in our own lives, we always treat ourselves with respect and kindness while we engage with, and honour, the agreements and activist goals we set for ourselves. Moreover, we respect our boundaries and expect others to do the same.

EXERCISE: VALUES CLARIFICATION

Clarifying values is one primary way to awaken the inherent resourcefulness and wisdom needed to activate deep levels of creativity.

When we pay attention to the still small voice within, the experiences that have shaped us and what we love about our values come alive. We can bring awareness to the experiences that shaped us by:

- Asking clarifying questions.
- Looking at snapshots of times when life was really sweet — times when we fully honoured what is most important to us. What made it sweet?
- Recalling the challenging times in our lives. What were the lessons learned?
- Looking at times when we were particularly upset or angry. What was missing?
- When was our life or work particularly meaningful or fulfilling?
- What was a time when we felt fully energised about our lives?

From answering the above, see if you can identify your five (5) core values.

Now, see if you can list what you would have to do to make those core values a reality.

4 Remember change happens in increments

Learning to prioritise yourself will always remain a challenge. It's easy for healthy eating, exercise and self-care activities to slide off the to-do list. You've probably been there. You get worn out and lose motivation or can't figure out how to fit everything into your already busy schedule. When life gets busy, personal priorities, self-care or "me time" may start to feel expendable and drift off your radar. Many smart, busy people fall into the mindset trap of believing that self-care

At the same time, as activists feeling more joy is only possible in a world that feels just and equal, and we, therefore, find ways to extend our joy into our activism and care. We might also notice that being kind to ourselves and honouring our boundaries make us feel more resourced, making it easier to take the time for kindness and to respect the boundaries of others.

Although our values don't change much over time, our awareness of them often shifts. So it is important to distinguish between things that need to happen right now and values that can be built more slowly. For example, when over time a goal isn't met, it's often because the goal is not linked to a core value. However, when we are aligned with our values, our vision, mission and purpose become clearer and easier to define. In this way, we can persevere with our goals because a deeper place of meaning drives them.

is selfish or a luxury — something you can get to later. This is not true.

Nature wired us each to be imperfect so that as the world changes, we can adapt and evolve as needed. While bumping up against our limitations can feel frustrating, and falling short of our ideals can be disappointing, it's important to understand that these uncomfortable and often stressful feelings are simply nature's invitation to learning and growth.

The good news is that we are also wired with curiosity, creativity and the ability to connect with others to navigate these challenges. For example, everything we've ever learned to master in our life — from walking to speaking a language to building good relationships with others — we did by taking three simple steps:

- **Acting:** We've drawn on our curiosity, creativity and maybe even the wisdom of others to playfully experiment with different ways to accomplish the behaviours that have mattered most to us.
- **Assessing:** We've used our curiosity to reflect on what's working and what's not and how we can use what we're learning to continue improving the behaviours we've chosen to master.
- **Adjusting:** We've used our learning to change our behaviour until we consistently achieve the desired outcomes.

We've repeatedly travelled this simple Learning Loop — often without even being conscious of the steps we were taking — until we've reached mastery in a behaviour.

Unfortunately, often we misread bumping up against our limitations, falling short of our ideals or wrestling with obstacles and setbacks as signs that we are "failures" instead of perfectly imperfect human beings who are still learning and growing. While travelling the Learning Loop doesn't always guarantee our desired outcomes it provides us with the opportunities and support to keep working on developing different actions and adjusting until we achieve our desired outcomes. Far from being soft, studies suggest that self-compassion improves our resilience, confidence and performance.

Start prioritising your own needs

#1 Start claiming 10-15 minutes a day for yourself

It won't take away from your productivity but will increase it.

Really. Use this time to connect with yourself and pay attention to your feelings and needs. Journal, walk, meditate or soak in the tub. Try not to save these for the end of the day when you are too tired to move and your brain has stopped working. Pay attention to yourself first or, if necessary, take a break during your day.

#2 Affirm yourself

Adopt the following mantras: "I'm doing my best" and "I can't do it all." They are true. Put them where you can see them and remind yourself of them frequently.



#3 Set yourself up for success

Create effectiveness in doable steps. Each evening, identify your top three personal action items for the next day and decide when you will accomplish them.

Think do-able. If these daily goals seem overwhelming, make them smaller. A fifteen-minute walk is better than the 45-minute one you couldn't fit in. If possible, knock out your priorities early in the day.

#4 Replenish and nourish

Plan for food that fuels you, especially when time is tight. Don't skip breakfast, have a plan for lunch and don't starve yourself before dinner. Make sure you have the groceries that you need. Choose appealing foods, no starvation diets.

#5 Slow down, do less

Cut the multitasking. It stresses us out and makes us less effective. Practice focusing on doing one thing at a time. It may not be perfect, but that's okay, remember step number two.

#6 Tend to your emotions

Take emotional distractions seriously. They often signal that life is out of balance and your priorities need more attention. Emotional eating, for example, happens when our spirit or life isn't fed the non-food things we need or crave. Huge changes are possible when we pay attention and develop other ways of caring for ourselves instead of turning to food, alcohol, social media or Netflix. This can be complicated, but it doesn't have to be overwhelming. If you feel stuck, consider an emotional eating programme, checking in with a friend or seeing a coach or therapist. There is so much more to life than this vicious cycle.

Learning to prioritise your needs is a process. You don't have to be perfect at it, to see big, far-reaching benefits.



Tips on how to cultivate rest within systems of oppression

#1 See rest as a political principle

Rest is reparation, an act of freedom and a wilful resistance. The Nap Ministry is an organisation dedicated to reclaiming rest as the norm. They argue that rest is an act of rebellion against a culture that teaches us we must hustle for our worth. We have accepted exhaustion as normal, but that is not our natural state. Rest is resistance that allows us to deprogramme ourselves from seeing exhaustion as the norm to embracing rest as normal.

#2 Set the intention to cultivate rest for yourself in small ways

We can also acknowledge that in our society the ability to choose rest, to have time to rest and to access restful spaces is unequally affected by our relationship to privilege and power. Yet, we all deserve refuge - to lay down our burdens, reconnect with ourselves and renew our sense of agency and purpose. So, the answer is to start accessing rest in small, accessible ways based on our circumstances.

#3 Seize the potential for rest

Rest brings a needed perspective that the sun might shine from the sky even when it's dark inside. Rest fosters reflection and opportunities to pause and reflect, reconnecting us with our power. Resting grounds us. It reminds us of who we truly are and centres us in the wisdom that lives inside us. Without it, we forget our inherent worth and buy into the idea that overworking makes us more valuable. Create a routine or moments that allow for greater rest in your practice. As with everything, begin with baby steps. What is one small thing you can do to move towards embracing rest? Resting is a practice. You must keep reminding yourself it's okay to rest and then choose it as your new normal.



#4 Access spaces for collective rest

Collective rest and reflection help us notice that we are not alone in the work; and that the struggle for freedom is not an individual pursuit but one born out of collective consciousness and action. Finding spaces that are restful and filled with ease when we make time to communicate with each other is another restorative and radical practice of rest.

#5 Experiment with different forms of rest

We do not have to spend hours meditating, go on a week-long retreat or hike into far-off mountains to rest. Restorative rest can take on many simple forms, such as:

- Stopping to pat an animal or smell a flower.
- Making the time to remember someone or something that makes us smile.
- Pausing for a minute when we notice a beautiful sky, garden or view.
- Closing your eyes for two minutes.
- Meditating for five minutes.
- Taking a 15-minute nap.
- Praying.
- Taking regular breaks from social media.
- Knitting, crocheting or other creative expressions.
- Gathering a small group of friends in a restful setting and discussing what makes us grateful.

#6 Reflect and learn

Get curious about your resistance to rest. Is it linked to old habits and belief systems? Are you avoiding feelings or sensations? Are you working in environments that exploit you? Once you recognise your resistance, how can you (or others) support any changes you want to make? Some people may term this practice as self-indulgent. They are entitled to their opinion, AND what they think about you is not your concern. Your concern is to unapologetically give your body what it needs so you can thrive, not simply survive.



Moving between self and others: Reaffirming boundaries

Your boundaries refer to verbal and sometimes non-verbal communication with the world and its people. It indicates where we end and where we begin. Boundaries determine how we are treated and protect us from the overwhelming link to daily stress and power dynamics. In short, boundaries are our limits.

#1 Get to know your boundaries

Sometimes, we only learn about our boundaries when someone steps on them or they become blurred. We therefore need to take the time and space to create realistic boundaries around how much time we allocate to people and projects, when and where we relate, with whom and what kinds of interactions we are open to, rather than just reacting to breached boundaries. This approach ensures that you speak your expectations, hear the expectations of others, and respond to the actual capacity of all parties involved rather than an imagined capacity. Boundaries allow you to prioritise, perform well, and not spread yourself too thin.

When we acknowledge our boundaries, we can communicate effectively and compassionately with others. This helps us carve out our own space without alienating or offending the people in our lives. We can practice saying 'No' and face the feelings that come up. Being familiar with our own emotions and knowing our emotional capacity allows us to create a space of safety for ourselves and others.

#2 Address boundary violations early

The longer we ignore boundary violations, the greater their impact and acceptability. Once boundary violations become habitual, there is far more resistance to changing them. In addition, stating our boundaries and expectations early makes them part of how people see us. Remember that people will not know your boundaries until you explain them. It is not fair to expect them to read your mind or suddenly change the rules of your interactions with no prior warning.

#3 Don't see boundary violations as character flaws

Setting our boundaries should address someone's behaviour rather than point out their personality flaws. Instead of calling someone inconsiderate and disrespectful because of their actions and expressing how their behaviour affects you, you can express how you would like them to do things differently.

#4 Boundaries related to power

Our experiences of unequal power and oppression continue to exist. They have mutated and evolved. They express themselves through microaggressions and acts of appeasement in our daily interactions. Unequal power dynamics mean that everyday personal moments are, therefore, political. This approach offers a doorway into creating a daily practice of resisting forces of oppression (inner and outer). I often find that addressing these types of boundary violations requires solidarity and support networks. Find out where such mechanisms exist and how you can access them.

#5 Lean into your support network

Setting boundaries is tough as it often goes against many social conventions, disrupts power dynamics and brings up uncomfortable feelings. Checking in with people who know us, value us and have addressed similar challenges can help us feel less alone and “unreasonable.” In addition, knowing we have the backup and understanding of those who hold some power in a situation can go a long way toward standing our ground.

#6 Trust yourself as your authority

Trust that your feelings are true and alert you when something is not right. Go with your gut. Does something feel wrong no matter how much you and others try to convince you otherwise? If something feels wrong, there is a reason for it, and ignoring your discomfort will not make it go away. If you approach your feelings, thoughts and intuitions carefully, and authentically communicate with others, you will have more clarity about what is right for you.

#7 Let go of perfection

Our relationships often unfold in systems of high stress, unequal power, unresolved histories and fragmented understandings. Setting and maintaining boundaries in these conditions can be challenging, especially as only a few of us are exposed to examples of respectful, clear boundary setting. Be willing to get it wrong and see it as a practice rather than something you should be able to do.



Prioritising yourself while also acknowledging the needs of others

#1: Show yourself compassion and kindness

Being kind to yourself builds the foundation of self-care. Self-compassion means giving yourself credit for doing the tough, complex work of caregiving, stepping away from a self-critical, harsh inner voice, and allowing yourself time — even if it's just a few minutes a day — to take care of yourself. This includes taking care of your body through what you eat and exercise.

Your intentions to support others are good and can be rewarding. Yet, take time to regularly check in with yourself to ensure that your needs are also met. Writing down a list of your needs is a good way to organise your thoughts and check off what's important to you.

Remind yourself that self-care allows the caregiver to remain more balanced, focused and effective, which is better for everyone involved.

#2: Build a support network (seek community)

While it is difficult to stay connected to others, particularly when we feel overwhelmed, it is important to tap into our community for support. Realising that you're not alone and talking about what you and others are going through allows everyone to experience nurturing and support and to feel less isolated, thus preventing burnout. When using this strategy, it is helpful to establish the practices of first checking in with each other's capacities to connect, to allow for rotational sharing of the caregiving role and to explore alternative ways of support through collective information sharing.

#3: Seek professional help where needed

If needed, we can also seek professional help to assist with offloading. This could be emotional care or working with someone to clear our energy. Alternatively, you could work with someone to separate individual challenges from systemic ones or develop new strategies of self and collective care.

#4: Address systemic issues

Document and make visible to others the types of care you need and why and the cost for all when the systemic 'why' is not addressed. This reminds us that change is not up to us as individuals and allows us to strategically address systemic issues that make it hard to care for ourselves and others.

In addressing the systemic, we must remember to keep alive conversations that illuminate the inequalities that exist within current systems of care. Through these conversations, we can explore ways to start challenging or advocating for change. The work at the systemic level is collective. It requires all of us to come together and figure out ways to change the status quo. If we do not do the systemic work, we will continue to suffer the impacts of our current system and leave more vulnerable individuals to bear the brunt.