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WAVE TOOLKIT ON

# FEMINIST SELF-CARE

FOR YOUNG ACTIVISTS & YOUNG PROFESSIONALS



## Imprint

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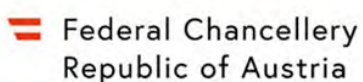
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	A Feminist Perspective on Well-being	3
2.	Mental Health Under Pressure: How Stress Affects Us	5
3.	The Ripple Effect: How Trauma Exposure Affects Your Well-being	10
4.	Systemic Obstacles for Youth Activists and Professionals: Age, Gender, and beyond	11
5.	Self-care Activities	17
	Quick Grounding Hack - Stress Relief Anywhere, Anytime!	22

## Foreword



*“You are not here to save everybody.  
You are here to plant the seeds which will bloom later  
and will help them to save themselves!”*

**Neci\* (age 32)**

Many young people engaged in social movements feel a profound sense of responsibility to make the world a better place. You may feel inspired, empowered, and hopeful as you stand alongside others who share your vision for justice and equality. From protesting on the streets and community organising, to advocating for policies to government bodies, or implementing these efforts in professional spaces and settings, youth activists and young professionals like you are undoubtedly a vital force in driving social change.

However, the very nature of this work often demands more from you than just knowledge and practical skills, involving physical and mental well-being. Activism refers to taking action to bring about change in areas such as social, political, economic, or environmental issues. It involves challenging existing norms and addressing injustices, with the goal of creating meaningful change, not just at the individual level, but at broader structural and systemic levels. Feminist activism is a specific form of activism focused on achieving gender equality and addressing the systemic inequalities caused by patriarchy, with the ultimate goal of dismantling it. The WAVE Network,<sup>1</sup> celebrating three decades of feminist activism, is deeply committed to bringing about change through solidarity, advocacy, and empowerment to ensure that violence against women is ultimately eradicated.

The WAVE Network recognises that in the field of women’s rights, gender equality and gender-based violence (GBV), regular exposure to injustice, trauma, and systemic barriers takes a toll. This is where self-care becomes essential, not as a luxury or an afterthought, but as a crucial practice to keep activism and professional activities sustainable. Over the past three years WAVE has prioritised feminist self-care through trainings for its members, which are women’s specialist services<sup>2</sup> working for the right of women and their children to live a life free from violence. These sessions focused on creating a safe, supportive space for sharing, learning, and mutual support, introducing the Stress- and Trauma-sensitive Approach (STA) to enhance resilience and well-being in challenging conditions. Key topics included self- and collective care, and trauma awareness, offering participants time for self-reflection, reconnection with personal needs and resources, and a network of support to mitigate burnout, compassion fatigue, and other mental health challenges.

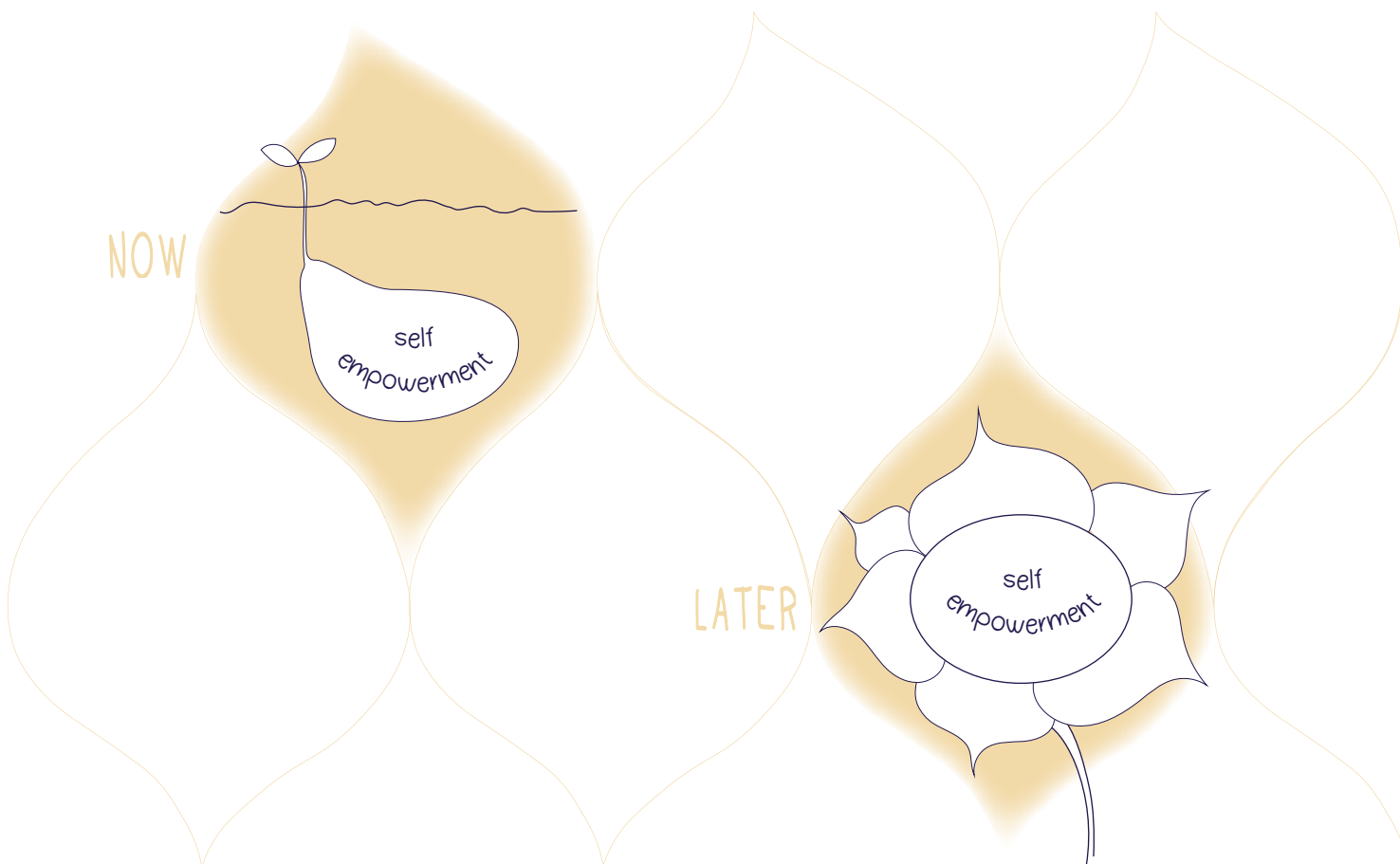
<sup>1</sup> WAVE is a network of over 180 women’s NGOs in 46 European countries, which are all working towards preventing and tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG). Our members are mainly women’s specialist services (WSS) such as shelters, centres and helplines, some are also national networks of these organisations. Since its inception in 1994, WAVE has been dedicated to promoting and strengthening the human rights of women and children, with a core mission to empower women and their children to live lives free from violence.

<sup>2</sup> Women’s Specialist Services is a collective term used to define feminist services that support women and their children experiencing violence against women and domestic violence. These services include but are not limited to women’s support centres, shelters, helplines, rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres, and prevention services.

Building on these efforts, we also wanted to extend this focus on self-care to our work with youth activists. Drawing from insights gained in these trainings, we created the “WAVE Toolkit on Feminist Self-Care for Young Activists and Young Professionals”, aimed at equipping young activists with practical self-care tools. This toolkit serves as an addition to our **2022 WAVE Campaigning and Advocacy Toolkit for Youth Activists**<sup>3</sup> and is designed to empower youth like you to engage in sustainable, resilient activism, supporting your well-being and long-term impact as you advocate for change.

To create this toolkit, from September to October 2024, the WAVE Team surveyed young feminist activists and professionals up to 35 years old, collecting over 40 answers. The insights gathered helped shape the toolkit's content and approach, and you will read stories from the participants who generously shared their experiences. For privacy reasons, some names have been altered and are noted with an asterisk (\*). One of the most powerful takeaways from the survey was the importance of learning to set boundaries and knowing when to say 'no', an essential practice for safeguarding your mental health and well-being.

This toolkit is designed specifically with you in mind and will guide you through practical strategies and personal reflections, all aimed at helping you sustain your work and activism with resilience and care. It acknowledges the unique challenges faced by young people and offers practical tools and strategies to help you recognise your needs, identify risks, and prioritise your well-being, all through a feminist lens.



<sup>3</sup> Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) (2022). *WAVE campaigning and advocacy toolkit for young activists*. [online] WAVE. Available at: [https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/wave\\_campaignadvocacy\\_toolkit\\_for\\_young-activists\\_2022.pdf](https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/wave_campaignadvocacy_toolkit_for_young-activists_2022.pdf)

# 1. A Feminist Perspective on Well-being

Before diving into the specifics of self-care, it's essential to understand the concept of well-being first. At its core, well-being is about much more than the mere absence of illness or stress. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), well-being is a **“resource for daily life”**<sup>4</sup> that enables both individuals and communities to contribute meaningfully to the world around them. It is multidimensional and shaped by social, economic, and environmental factors, and is closely tied to one's quality of life. At the broader societal level, collective well-being represents the resilience of societies, which is the ability to withstand, act and transcend challenges.

As young activists and professionals navigate the hard demands of activism and professional life, it becomes clear that maintaining well-being does not come automatically, and requires deliberate effort. This is where the practice of self-care becomes essential. Self-care is deeply personal: what works for one person may not work for you. However, regardless of the form it takes, self-care is about ensuring that we have the energy, focus, and strength to continue pursuing our goals without sacrificing our health in the process.

Feminist self-care takes the concept of self-care and frames it within a political and collective context. This feminist approach of self-care originates from Black feminism, defined as theories and practices challenging dominant racial and gender norms to affirm Black women as “knowing agents of social change”.<sup>5</sup> It is key to acknowledge that different marginalised groups, such as Black women, are particularly exposed to systems of oppression that may undermine their resilience and their ability to engage in feminist activism. Self-care can be a particularly empowering and revolutionary practice. Audre Lorde, a Black feminist, is the one who brought the concept of self-care into feminist theory, through her essay “A Burst of Light”, published in 1988.<sup>6</sup> She was the first to frame self-care as “an act of political warfare” rather than self-indulgence or a simple matter of personal well-being.<sup>7</sup> As feminists, our individual well-being is deeply connected to our collective well-being and our movement's ability to foster societal change. It fuels our resilience and our autonomy. It plays a vital role in feminist activism and it should not be optional.

Feminist self-care is an act of defiance and resistance to oppression. It acknowledges that marginalised groups, including women, LGBTQ+ individuals, people, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) and people with disabilities, are disproportionately affected by societal pressures and systemic inequalities such as sexism, racism, queerphobia and ableism. It is a way of reclaiming our bodies, minds, and time from systems that aim to exploit and exhaust us. A feminist approach to self-care understands that the challenges we face vary depending on our intersecting identities and experiences. Therefore, self-care strategies must be adaptable and responsive to these diverse needs.

4 WHO (2022). *Promoting well-being*. [online] World Health Organization. Available at: <https://www.who.int/activities/promoting-well-being>

5 p3, Emejulu, A. and Sobande, F. (2019). *To exist is to resist : black feminism in Europe*. London: Pluto Press.

6 Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM) (2024). *Nourishing Feminist Souls: A Joyful Self-Care*. [online] COFEM. Available at: [https://cofemsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/COFEM\\_Feminist-Joy-Toolkit.pdf](https://cofemsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/COFEM_Feminist-Joy-Toolkit.pdf).

7 Ibid.

Practising feminist self-care also requires changing our mindsets about rest and productivity in activism. The hustle culture, which consists of narratives glorifying overwork and “rise and grind” attitude as the only road to socio-economic success,<sup>8</sup> permeates our society and the feminist movement is no exception to this trend. The capitalistic urge to be constantly productive is strong and as an activist, you may end up thinking that your personal worth is proportionate to your work performance. In this capitalistic paradigm, rest is viewed as a form of failure, laziness and selfishness. You may think that resting and taking care of yourself is not an option as an activist because you would give up on the people who need your support on the ground. Such behaviour, rooted in guilt, is detrimental to our mental health and may culminate in burn-out. Tricia Hershey, a Black feminist who founded The Nap Ministry, was fully aware of this when she decided to champion the groundbreaking idea that rest is resistance.<sup>9</sup> Through her work, she stands against the glorification of overwork and promotes a paradigm-shift in the way we think about rest, underlining that it is active and political.<sup>10</sup> Feminist self-care goes hand in hand with the emancipation from capitalism.

To conclude, **feminist self-care is about reclaiming autonomy over your body, time, and choices.** It empowers you to make decisions that **prioritise your well-being** devoid of guilt or shame. In a world that often demands self-sacrifice, feminist self-care encourages us to assert our right to rest, heal, and thrive. It is a way of affirming our worth and reinforcing the idea that we are not simply tools for labour or change, but human beings deserving of care and dignity. Feminist self-care also fuels the resilience of the feminist movement as a whole, strengthening its ability to foster lasting change, resist backlash, and support one another in the face of ongoing challenges.



8 Carnegie, M. (2023). Hustle culture: Is this the end of rise-and-grind? [online] BBC. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20230417-hustle-culture-is-this-the-end-of-rise-and-grind>.

9 Hershey, T. (2022). The Nap Ministry – Rest is Resistance. [online] [thenapministry.com](https://thenapministry.com/). Available at: <https://thenapministry.com/>.

10 Meraji, S.M. (2022). *How to think about rest as a form of resistance*. [online] NPR. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2022/12/27/1145716272/how-to-think-about-rest-as-a-form-of-resistance>

## 2. Mental Health Under Pressure: How Stress Affects Us

### Why Do We Feel Stressed?

Stress is our mind and body's **natural reaction** to the pressures around us, helping us deal with what's happening in the moment. It's an automatic response that kicks in when we feel threatened or we cannot handle a situation.

**Have you heard of the amygdala?** That's a part of our brain that quickly detects threats and triggers the "fight-or-flight" response, telling our body to release stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. This helps us stay alert and be ready to protect ourselves, even in everyday situations that make us feel vulnerable. The stress response can kick in to protect us not just from physical harm, but also from uncomfortable emotions like shame or failure.

While **stress can sometimes be helpful** in overcoming challenges, it has its downsides too. When the amygdala detects a threat, it may interfere with our ability to think clearly, resulting in impulsive, poor responses. Moreover, stress that lasts for weeks or months can negatively affect our mental and physical health as well as overall wellbeing.<sup>11</sup>

Here are some common stress responses:



#### Fight

Not necessarily physically; this can mean standing our ground or resisting in small ways.



#### Flight

If we feel we can't change the situation or find it too threatening, we may choose to withdraw.



#### Freeze

Sometimes, feeling stuck or unsure of what to do, we end up doing nothing, hoping the situation will pass.



#### Fawn

We might try to please others or go along with things to avoid stress.<sup>12</sup>

If your brain perceives that you are facing danger, your body might enter one of these survival modes, and non-essential functions like digestion and tissue repair will pause to conserve energy. It might take up to **30 minutes to go back to your normal emotional state**.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Field, J. (2015). *The Science Behind Stress* | Dr Jena Field. [online] Themonkeytherapist.com. Available at: <https://themonkeytherapist.com/science-behind-stress/> [Accessed 18 Nov. 2024].

<sup>12</sup> Cleveland Clinic (2019). *What Happens During Fight or Flight Response*. [online] Cleveland Clinic. Available at: <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/what-happens-to-your-body-during-the-fight-or-flight-response> [Accessed 17 Nov. 2024].

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



## How to recognise signs of stress in day-to-day life?

Stress might be impacting your health in ways you don't even realise. We tend to blame headaches, poor sleeping and brain fog on other health conditions or lifestyle factors - but stress could actually be the root cause. Stress can have a wide range of effects on your body, mood, and behaviour, often without you noticing the connection right away.



**Physically**, stress can bring on headaches, muscle tension, chest pain, fatigue, sleeping issues, and even a reduced immune system, which makes it easier to get sick. It might also lead to changes in your appetite, stomach issues, and shifts in your sex drive.



**Emotionally**, stress can stir up anxiety, restlessness, sadness, or even depression, making it hard to feel joy, motivation, or even hope in daily life. These mood changes may come with memory trouble or a general feeling of grumpiness, irritability, and overwhelm.



**Behaviorally**, stress can lead to unhealthy coping strategies, such as overeating or undereating, using alcohol, tobacco, or drugs, or avoiding friends and tending to stay at home. You may find yourself lashing out in anger more often or cutting back on things like exercise, which can make stress feel even harder to handle.<sup>14</sup>

If daily stress is constantly putting your body into stress responses, there are strategies that can help you feel more in control. The first step would be to recognise events or situations that cause a stress response in the body; your personal stressors.

- 1 **Specify the stressor:** Be precise - what exact part of your activism, future, or job is stressful?
- 2 **Acknowledge your reactions:** Notice how you think, feel, and act under stress. Are there habits in place, like procrastination or unhealthy coping mechanisms, that keep the stress going?
- 3 **Determine what you can change:** Identify what's within your control, what's difficult but possible, and what's out of your hands.
- 4 **Act on what's doable:** Pick one manageable thing to focus on first.<sup>15</sup>

14 Mayo Clinic Staff (2023). *Stress symptoms: Effects on your body and behavior*. [online] Mayo Clinic. Available at: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-symptoms/art-20050987> [Accessed 17 Nov. 2024].

15 Cleveland Clinic (2019). *What Happens During Fight or Flight Response*. [online] Cleveland Clinic. Available at: <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/what-happens-to-your-body-during-the-fight-or-flight-response> [Accessed 17 Nov. 2024].



*“My work has had a detrimental impact on my mental health when I was focusing my days only on the topic of [gender-based violence] (GBV). As I felt responsible for filling a resource and attention gap on key matters linked to GBV, I worked long hours and experienced burnout. Despite my motivation and passion for the subject, the topic of GBV is even trickier for me to tackle since I was a victim of this and can identify with stories and victims. Emotional support at this point helped me recover, but professional mental health support would have been necessary, to help me manage my emotions and my workload, to be more efficient in the long run.”*

Arie\* (age 25)

## Stress Overload: Understanding Burnout, Anxiety, and Depression

If stress becomes so overwhelming that it starts to interfere with your daily life for a prolonged period, it may lead to more serious conditions like burnout, anxiety, and depression.

### Burnout



*“What is challenging for me is deciding to what extent I must look at all the atrocities perpetrated all around the world. To what extent is it okay to look away and not know all the details? [...]”*

Camille\* (age 21)



*“When I first started working in the field, my contract was a part-time contract for 4 months (not the most secure type of contract - again lack of financial resources) and the workload was such that I almost finished [burning] out after merely 4 months. I had time afterward to recover, friends and family and psychological support (all of this outside of work). Once back on my feet and having grown from the experience and having learnt to set limits, I am better able to manage and be careful about not burning myself out. But it is a constant attention to have.”*

Tere (age 32)

A strong desire to make a difference in the world often calls for a deep knowledge and awareness of social issues, like suffering and oppression, which can sometimes feel all-consuming.<sup>16</sup>

Burnout happens when ongoing **stress is unaddressed** and starts to weigh you down. It shows up in different ways, and symptoms are similar to those shown due to stress; however, stress and burnout are not the same. Stress and burnout can go hand in hand, with one often leading to or worsening the other. While stress is tied to a specific goal or task, burnout is prolonged stress that makes you feel completely drained and unable to recharge, even when taking a vacation.<sup>17</sup> In 1974, Freudenberger defined it as “the extinction of motivation or incentive, especially where one’s devotion to a cause or relationship fails to produce the desired results”.<sup>18</sup>

There are **three main dimensions** of burnout that may help you recognise it:<sup>19</sup>

### 1. Feeling totally drained

even with the activities you used to enjoy. It is a feeling of emotional exhaustion, and you might find yourself overpowered just by the thought of attending a meeting or answering messages.

### 2. Becoming detached

or cynical about what you’re doing, questioning the point of your work. It may look like becoming distant from your fellow activist(s) or being resentful towards people you are meant to help.

### 3. Struggling with

**feelings** of failure or low accomplishment. You may think that your work is meaningless, unvalued or you can feel incompetent and start comparing yourself with others in your team.<sup>20</sup>

In many human rights organisations, addressing activist burnout can be challenging. This is sometimes upheld by a “**culture of selflessness**”, which discourages activists from acknowledging burnout or practising self-care, as expressing such needs may be dismissed or even belittled. This unsupportive work environment can pressure activists to sacrifice their own well-being for the cause, ultimately increasing burnout risk.

In addition, other stressors within organisations can contribute to burnout, such as high workloads and time pressure. Conflicts often arise between members with differing views and, such tensions, particularly in organisations filled with people who are emotionally invested in their work, can remain unresolved and strain relationships within the team.<sup>21</sup>

Ignoring the symptoms of burnout can lead youth activists and young professionals to step back from their activism, or sometimes to leave it for good, meaning that its impact can be felt in the whole movement.<sup>22</sup>

16 Chen, C.W. and Gorski, P.C. (2015). Burnout in Social Justice and Human Rights Activists: Symptoms, Causes and Implications. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 7(3), pp.366–390. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huv011>

17 Psychology Today (2024). *Burnout*. [online] Psychology Today. Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/burnout?msockid=2a6e1105373a673006ba058536e36615> [Accessed 18 Nov. 2024].

18 Nassar, A.K., Waheed, A. and Tuma, F. (2019). Academic Clinicians’ Workload Challenges and Burnout Analysis. *Cureus*, 11(11). doi: <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.6108>

19 Maslach, C. and Leiter, M.P. (2016). Understanding the burnout experience: Recent research and its implications for psychiatry. *World Psychiatry*, [online] 15(2), pp.103–111. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20311>

20 Boutros, N. (n.d.). *Burnout: Definition, Symptoms, & Recovery Tips*. [online] The Berkeley Well-Being Institute. Available at: <https://www.berkeleywellbeing.com/burnout.html> [Accessed 17 Nov. 2024].

21 Chen, C.W. and Gorski, P.C. (2015). Burnout in Social Justice and Human Rights Activists: Symptoms, Causes and Implications. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 7(3), pp.366–390. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huv011>

22 Ibid.



*“[...] The point of these measures is that you don’t reach the point where you are in crisis and desperately need to use them, it’s about mitigating those [stressors], those factors that can lead up to burnout. And we have to be very clear with ourselves that, no matter how strong and good we are at coping, working in [the field of] violence against women affects us directly. [...]”*

Dara\* (age 35)

## Anxiety

Fear is triggered by immediate threats, while anxiety focuses on potential future risks. Unlike stress, which is a response to current events or situations that we feel we need to handle, anxiety is tied to **worrying about what might happen in the future**. As our brain cannot easily differentiate between a real and imagined threat, it often responds to both with similar physical and chemical reactions.

Anxiety turns into a disorder when worry becomes constant, unrealistic, and ignores logic. It can disrupt daily life - like concentrating on a task or doing normal activities. If intense worry persists most days for six months or more, it may be a sign of an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety may manifest in different ways. Reactions in the body prepare it for danger (even if the danger is an imagined one), which might lead to **shallow breathing, dizziness, sweating, restlessness, an upset stomach and nausea, dry mouth, frequent trips to the bathroom or an irregular heartbeat**. Mentally, anxiety often brings a sense of constant unease, a feeling that the worst scenario will happen, worries about how others view us, and a desire for reassurance. It can even create a sense of detachment, where one feels separated from one’s body or reality—a phenomenon known as dissociation.<sup>23</sup>

## Depression

Depression is more than just feeling low - it’s a lasting state that can impact every part of life, from your connections with friends and family to how you perform at school or work or your involvement in the community. Symptoms include an overwhelming feeling of **sadness and guilt, low mood, loss of energy and focus, lack of interest in things that once mattered, feeling worthless, and trouble sleeping or eating**. In severe cases, depression can lead to suicidal thoughts.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Open Briefing (2023). *Helping human rights defenders and activists cope with anxiety*. [online] Open Briefing. Available at: <https://www.openbriefing.org/blog/helping-hrds-cope-with-anxiety/> [Accessed 18 Nov. 2024].

<sup>24</sup> WHO (2023) *Depressive disorder (depression)*. [online] World Health Organization. Available at: [Depressive disorder \(depression\)](#) [Accessed 17 Nov. 2024].

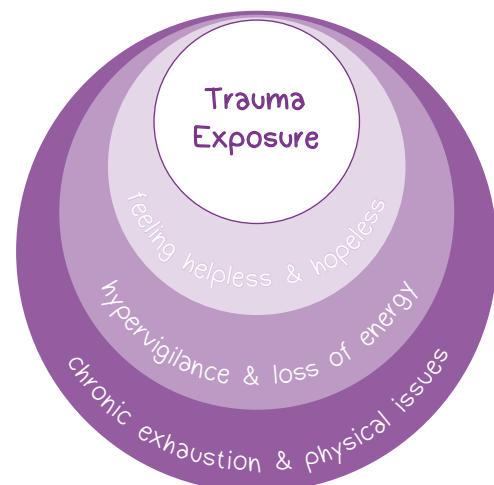


If you're finding it hard to manage stress or think you might be facing burnout or a mental health condition like depression, consider seeking support from a mental health professional. This toolkit offers helpful tools but it is not a replacement for professional care. A trained mental health professional can work with you to develop adequate strategies to navigate challenges and support your well-being.

### 3. The Ripple Effect: How Trauma Exposure Affects Your Well-being

Youth activists and young professionals are at particularly high risk of experiencing trauma<sup>25</sup> due to their **frequent exposure to violence, systemic oppression, and distressing stories**.<sup>26</sup> Regular exposure to the traumatic realities faced by others can lead to vicarious trauma, also referred to as trauma exposure response or secondary trauma. Vicarious trauma happens when you take on the pain and suffering of others who have experienced/are experiencing trauma, to the point where it starts to impact your own health. Just listening, witnessing, or helping someone with their struggles can sometimes cause you to feel similar symptoms, even though it was not your direct experience. Those who have experienced trauma in the past are at a higher risk, so it's important to be aware of this and to take care of yourself.<sup>27</sup>

An important step in coping with vicarious trauma is to increase self-observation, as there are **16 common signs of a trauma exposure response**. These include feeling helpless or hopeless about the impact of your work, sensing that no matter what you do, it's never enough to alleviate suffering, hypervigilance (constantly thinking about risks), and a decline in creativity as you lack energy for it. You may also struggle to embrace complex ideas, find yourself minimising and not responding to the pain of others, or experience chronic exhaustion and physical issues. Other signs include avoiding communication, having dissociative moments, feeling persecuted and controlled by others, or feeling guilty for taking time off, experiencing but ignoring heightened fear, anger, or cynicism, and feeling numb or unable to empathise. Some may develop addictions or a sense of grandiosity, where they connect their value with the work they are doing. However, it's important to recognise that there's no right or wrong way of how you may feel after trauma exposure, and all those emotions are valid responses.<sup>28</sup>



25 Trauma is an emotional response that is caused by a distressing event or series of events, that overwhelms the capacity to emotionally digest it.

26 Our Mental Health (2024). *4 Types of Trauma That Can Occur in Activism*. [online] Our Mental Health. Available at: <https://www.ourmental.health/trauma/4-types-of-trauma-that-can-occur-in-activism> [Accessed 18 Nov. 2024].

27 Marschall, A. (2023). *Vicarious Trauma: The Cost of Care and Compassion*. [online] Verywell Mind. Available at: <https://www.verywellmind.com/vicarious-trauma-the-cost-of-care-and-compassion-7377234> [Accessed 18 Nov. 2024].

28 Lipsky, L. van D. (2009). *Trauma stewardship: an everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others*. [online] Internet Archive. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/traumastewardshi0000lips> [Accessed 18 Nov. 2024].



*“[...] Before I seriously committed to activism, I took a training course that made me ask myself preventive questions: Are you doing this for the right reasons? What is your own story and experience? (Because it’s not the same as the people you’re going to help, so keep some distance.) Where will you find help if you need it? How many hours do you want to reasonably spend on activism?”*

*Afterward, I talked a lot with other activists and colleagues when a situation has shocked me. I allow myself to rest for several weeks if needed (very important). I also read a lot on the subject to understand the situation and why I was shocked.*

*Sometimes, talking to a psychologist helps a lot to understand what was difficult, so you can move on when a situation feels overwhelming.”*

Raphaëlle (age 26)

## 4. Systemic Obstacles for Youth Activists and Professionals: Age, Gender, and beyond

### Navigating Youth-Adult Partnerships

Youth are often encouraged to **“be the change”**, but more often than not without adequate resources or guidance to support them in making lasting change. With minimal mentorship and a lack of tools, you may feel overwhelmed, facing not only adultism biases but also unrealistic expectations that can silence your enthusiasm and hinder your growth, sometimes leading to early burnout.<sup>29</sup> Collaboration among different generations can bring unique challenges for youth activists and young professionals.



<sup>29</sup> Lund, D. and Van Beers, R.A. (2020). Unintentional Consequences: Facing the Risks of Being a Youth Activist. *In education*, 26(1), pp.3–17. doi: <https://doi.org/10.37119/ojs2020.v26i1.479> .



## Ageism

Ageism happens when people are judged or treated unfairly because of their age, and that can harm connections and create barriers between generations. This can involve age-based **stereotypes** (how we think), **prejudice** (how we feel), and **discrimination** (how we act). It can be manifested in institutions, in personal interactions, and even within our own thinking. Once ageism intersects with other “-isms” (such as racism and sexism), it creates even more challenges and harm. Studies in Europe suggest that young people experience more age-based discrimination than any other age group. For instance, **55% of young people aged 15-24 faced unfair treatment due to their age.**<sup>30</sup>



## Adulthood

Adulthood is the belief and behaviour that adults are inherently more capable than young people, giving them the right to make decisions for youth without their input. This bias is often upheld through societal norms, institutions, laws, and cultural expectations.<sup>31</sup> Adulthood, a part of ageism, often rewards young people for being obedient while labelling their critiques of social issues as mere rebellion.<sup>32</sup>



## Youth tokenism

If you ever got involved in a certain event or process yet your ideas and experiences were (continuously) dismissed, leaving you feeling used or not valued, it is likely that you experienced tokenism.

Although young people are invited to provide their input and develop proposals on important matters, those proposals often remain restricted to youth-only spaces. Data reveals that **81% of young people view international event participation as mostly symbolic, with minimal power to shape policies or decisions.**<sup>33</sup>

30 World Health Organization (2021). *Global report on ageism*. World Health Organization. Available at: <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/340208> [Accessed 18 Nov. 2024].

31 Bell, J. (2003). *Further Resources Resources on Adulthood - How to be an Ally with Students in School*. [online] Available at: [https://www.nuac.org/articles/pdf/understanding\\_adulthood.pdf](https://www.nuac.org/articles/pdf/understanding_adulthood.pdf) [Accessed 18 Nov. 2024].

32 Serriere, S.C. and Riley, T. (2024). *Heavy on the Solidarity, Light on the Adulthood: Adult Supports for Youth Activism*. [online] Democracy and Education. Available at: <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol32/iss1/3/> [Accessed 18 Nov. 2024].

33 UNICEF Innocenti - Global Office of Research and Foresight (2024). *Voices for Impact: Meaningful youth engagement in the multilateral system*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/reports/meaningful-youth-engagement-multilateral-system>

Tokenism in youth involvement is when it looks like you are being included but without any real impact on the work that matters. Outcomes of the tokenistic involvement are:

#### For adults...

...it makes them feel good to include youth, but without real effort to collect and implement the input, there is no long-term improvement in anyone's work.

#### For youth...

...it is frustrating and limiting. When youth is only included on the surface, it does not help them grow as leaders and can demotivate their further involvement.

#### For organisations...

...it weakens inter-generational teamwork, and the transfer of knowledge and resources to those who are meant to carry the work forward. It also limits opportunities to amplify the work among their peers.<sup>34</sup>



*“In my previous role, many teams were resistant to change and innovation in the field of Youth Engagement. When trying to include young activists directly in the work we do, a lot of my colleagues reacted as if I was throwing a huge roadblock in their day-to-day work. [...] Being a young woman leading projects and proposing new ideas I felt like I was consistently criticized, looked down [upon] and second-guessed. It even happened once that one of my colleagues went directly to my manager sending a very long email in which they were basically stating that they don't trust that I know how to do my work properly and that I'm causing stress to the team by insisting on youth participation and engagement standards to be upheld. Finding out about this email really impacted my ability to continue working on this project, shook my mental health and made me doubt my own capacity and expertise. I was lucky enough to have a manager [who] was truly supportive and understanding [and] who helped ease the load of the project and reestablish my confidence as a Project Lead.”*

Alex\* (age 28)

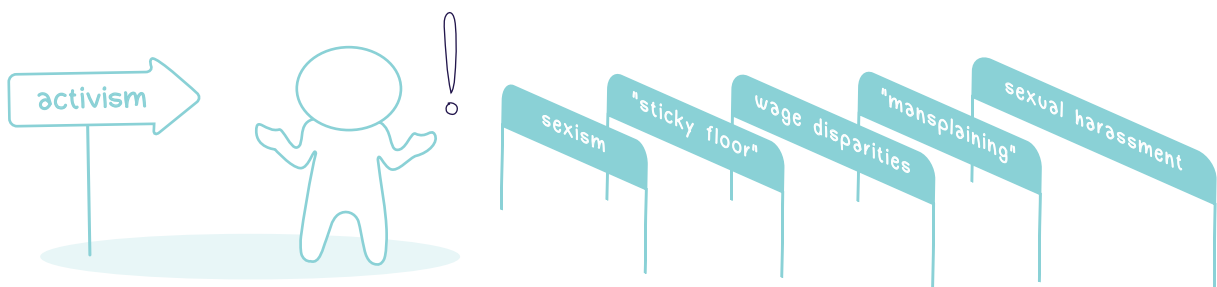


## Gender-specific barriers for young professionals and activists

As you step into the workplace or activist environments, you may encounter a range of unique challenges rooted in systemic gender bias. The effects of sexism remain pervasive, with gender stereotypes and biases influencing roles and opportunities. These biases can undermine the performance of women as employees and activists,<sup>35</sup> or indirectly affect men, who may avoid female-dominated occupations due to social stigma.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, such a phenomenon leads to **unequal treatment and lack of respect**, even in spaces where you would not expect it to happen. A significant obstacle you might encounter is the **“glass ceiling”**, an invisible barrier that restricts many women’s advancement to senior positions, regardless of qualifications, dedication, or performance. Alongside the glass ceiling, you may also encounter the **“sticky floor”**, a set of circumstances and systemic barriers that **keep women in lower-level positions**, making it challenging to gain the traction needed to advance, even at the outset of their careers.<sup>37</sup>

**Wage disparities** also persist, and you may find yourself being paid less than your male counterparts for similar roles. Additionally, you might be confronted with **“mansplaining”**, where male colleagues or superiors may treat you in an arrogant, patronising or infantilised manner or automatically assume you’re less competent,<sup>38</sup> which can indeed have an impact on your confidence and ability to fully engage in your work.

Even when you are included in decision-making spaces, there might be an undercurrent of gender-based tokenism, a phenomenon in which women and gender minorities are being brought in for pink-washing purposes rather than having their voices and ideas genuinely valued. As much as in the case of mansplaining, tokenism can make it feel as though your presence isn’t fully respected, leading to frustration and disillusionment which can indeed impact your work or activism performances but most of all your mental health. It is not uncommon to see **ideas dismissed or overlooked** only because the person proposing them is not a male, and only gaining recognition when presented or rephrased by male colleagues. All these intersecting barriers can lead to feeling compelled to overperform and continually prove your competence in ways that male counterparts may only partially experience. Unfortunately, **sexual harassment and microaggressions** may also persist, creating an uncomfortable environment where unwanted comments, behaviour, or subtle discriminatory remarks can reinforce gender biases.



35 Dardenne, B., Dumont, M. and Bollier, T. (2007a). Insidious dangers of benevolent sexism: Consequences for women’s performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, [online] 93(5), pp.764–779. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.93.5.764>

36 Margherita Torre (2019). *The flip side of segregation: men in typically female jobs*. [online] LSE Business Review. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2019/01/29/the-flip-side-of-segregation-men-in-typically-female-jobs> [Accessed 17 Nov. 2024].

37 Ahmed, S. (2023). *‘Glass ceilings’ and ‘sticky floors’– why women are overworked and undervalued*. [online] Shape Talent. Available at: <https://shapetalent.com/glass-ceilings-and-sticky-floors-why-women-are-overworked-and-undervalued> [Accessed 17 Nov. 2024].

38 Smith, C.J., Schweitzer, L., Lauch, K. and Bird, A. (2022). ‘Well, actually’: investigating mansplaining in the modern workplace. *Journal of Management & Organization*, [online] pp.1–19. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2022.81>.

These gender-specific challenges are particularly difficult on their own, but they are often intensified when combined with the broader issues that youth face in the workplace or in activist environments. When various aspects of identity intersect with age and gender (such as race, disability, sexual orientation, or physical appearance) the resulting **barriers become even more complex** and difficult to address.

**An intersectional viewpoint helps** us recognise that these identities do not exist in isolation. Instead, they overlap, creating unique and deep experiences of bias and discrimination. While varying for each individual, these experiences are perpetuated and upheld by systems of inequality and power imbalance.



*“The opposing party in the case threatened me and physically assaulted me; people who randomly walk in [...] to get legal advice give up when they see I’m female; colleagues in the chamber say with humour that the legal profession is not for women, etc.*

Danijela (age 33)

## Imposter syndrome

The term “imposter syndrome” describes the inner experience of **feeling like a “fraud” or doubting one’s abilities, despite evident accomplishments**.<sup>39</sup> Individuals who experience this tend to attribute their success to pure luck and fail to take credit for their hard work.<sup>40</sup> For instance, landing your dream job but constantly fearing exposure as unqualified or undeserving may indicate imposter feelings you might need to address.

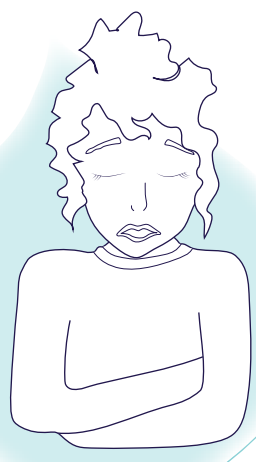
Imposter syndrome can hit **harder for women, youth and minorities**, especially those facing **intersectional oppressions**. These groups constantly feel pressure to “show their worth” in environments where they already feel like they’re on the sidelines. When the concept of imposter syndrome was first developed, it didn’t consider the impact of systemic racism, classism, xenophobia, or other forms of -isms and -phobias. Even today, imposter syndrome is often framed as an individual problem rather than recognising the broader historical and cultural forces that influence it and systems that uphold it. For women, youth and minorities, especially in corporate settings, self-doubt is a result of systemic disadvantages and unrealistic standards that they’re expected to meet – often without the same resources or support that others receive. This creates intense pressure to overachieve, making the reality of experiencing imposter syndrome even more challenging.<sup>41</sup>

39 Clance, P.R. and Imes, S.A. (1978). The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving women: Dynamics and Therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 15(3), pp.241–247. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0086006>

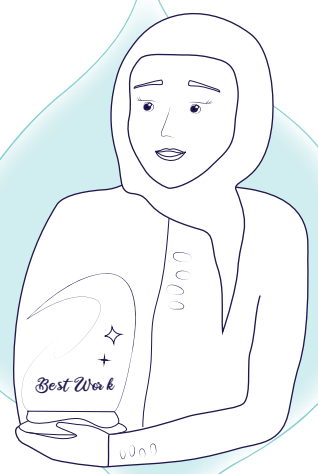
40 Mak, K.K.L., Kleitman, S. and Abbott, M.J. (2019). Impostor Phenomenon Measurement Scales: A Systematic Review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10(671). doi: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00671>

41 McFee, A. (2023). *Letting Go of Imposter Syndrome’s Grap on Women & Minorities*. [online] [hospitalityinsights.ehl.edu](https://hospitalityinsights.ehl.edu). Available at: <https://hospitalityinsights.ehl.edu/imposter-syndrome-women-minorities> [Accessed 18 Nov. 2024].

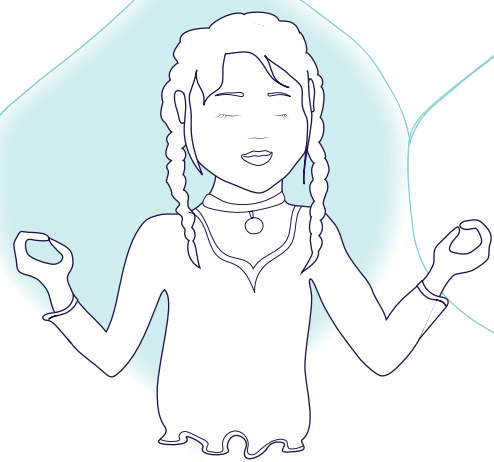
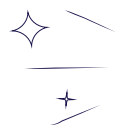
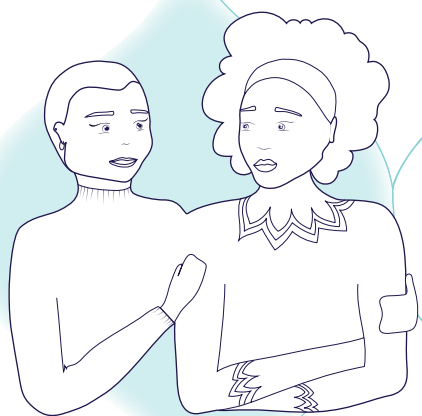
“Am I good enough?”



“That was only luck.”



“You got this!”



“Everything will be fine.”

## 5. Self-care Activities

### Tailoring of Self-Care Practices through Intersectional Lenses

Self-care in a common way is seen as a list of things we do to feel healthier and happier – like **sleeping well, exercising regularly, eating healthy and doing things we enjoy**. It may also mean **setting boundaries, taking regular breaks and nurturing relationships**. However, limiting self-care to these actions or specific behaviour can take us to consumer-driven ideas like “treat yourself”. Instead, by broadening our understanding of the multiple layers of self-care, we can break down stereotyped narratives about who needs, deserves, or has access to it. Self-care practice is affected by a mix of internal and external factors, which can either reinforce self-care behaviour or lead to neglecting one’s needs.<sup>42</sup>



*“Activism within marginalised communities can be even more challenging due to systemic barriers, discrimination, and limited access to resources. For some, prioritising self-care or mental health may feel like a privilege that’s not always accessible. It’s essential to acknowledge that the ability to take breaks, set boundaries, or seek mental health support is not equally available to everyone. As we talk about self-care, we need to remain mindful of these inequalities and find ways to support activists who face additional burdens.”*

Lou\* (age 28)

To expand the idea of self-care from a checklist of actions to a complex, layered process inclusive for specific groups, Miller et. al. have developed a framework based on **five layers** that build on each other: **self-care support, orientation, motivation, skills, and as a final layer, behaviours**.<sup>43</sup> Applying this framework allows us to differentiate between the care that should be provided for youth activists and young professionals from marginalised groups and the care they can provide for themselves.



**Self-care support** is needed for many young people who may not understand how to practise self-care or do not have the tools and access to resources. A system that truly supports self-care also acknowledges how oppression and intersectional identities affect youth’s lived experiences and their ability to care for themselves. Organisations can be key in offering youth self-care programmes that take these factors into account.

42 Wyatt, J.P. and Ampadu, G.G. (2021). Reclaiming self-care: Self-care as a social justice tool for black wellness. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 58(2). doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-021-00884-9>

43 Miller, A.E., Green, T.D. and Lambros, K.M. (2019). Foster parent self-care: A conceptual model. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 99, pp.107–114. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.01.014>



**Self-care orientation** is about how we view self-care and it implies that youth may also need to be encouraged to prioritise self-care by seeing it as a necessity, and not as a selfish act.



**Self-care motivation** highlights that even after finding self-care activities that work, young activists and young professionals might need the motivation to persist in engaging in them.



**Self-care skills** refer to self-awareness that helps youth know when and how to engage in self-care activities based on their needs. This further allows the creation of personalised self-care plans that effectively support their well-being. It also involves knowing when they lack the capacity to care for themselves and practising mindfulness to better navigate these moments.



**Self-care behaviours**, as a final layer of this framework, align with what most people think of when we say self-care. These behaviours are shaped by things like support, culture, motivation, skills, and even the resources you have access to. This means that self-care is influenced by the systems we live in, which can make it easier or harder to practice.

## Delving into self-care activities

Before diving into concrete self-care actions that you can carry out, it's important to recognise that **we are all made up of multiple, intersecting identities**. Our experiences, challenges and needs are shaped by these identities, therefore, you should not accept a one-size-fits-all approach to self-care. Instead, you should choose and customise self-care practices to support the well-being of each unique aspect of who you are. By acknowledging this complexity, you can create a more meaningful and effective self-care routine that truly addresses the diverse needs of your whole self.

### 1. Social Connection & Community Building

Taking time to foster connections with others, whether with your colleagues or with people from your private life, such as relatives, friends and partners, can be a powerful antidote to stress and isolation, especially in challenging work environments.

- Planning and making some time for meaningful connections, particularly after a tough day. Put it in your calendar if you're afraid that you won't find this time for yourself otherwise.
- Planning fun activities with friends.
- Doing fun and light-hearted activities with your activist group or colleagues.
- Peer support through peer-to-peer supervision and mentorship programmes, feminist solidarity and/or positive sharing with colleagues.

## 2. Physical & Outdoor Activities

Physical and outdoor activities allow us to reset and recharge, bringing fresh energy and perspective.

- Working out or engaging in sports.
- Spending time in nature.



## 3. Mental & Emotional Health Support

Prioritising mental and emotional well-being can help us navigate the demands of our work with better clarity and resilience. Finding spaces to process emotions and gain support strengthens our capacity to cope with difficult experiences.

- Attending therapy, ideally with a young psychologist familiar with activist work.
- Discussing feelings with friends, partners, or relatives.
- Engaging in mindfulness practices like meditation, breathing exercises, and body-focused stress relief techniques.



## 4. Creative Expression & Personal Reflection

Creativity and well-being are intrinsically linked. Whatever the type of creative expression, it undoubtedly brings innumerable benefits.

- Engaging in creative activities such as drawing, singing, dancing, playing an instrument, or creative writing.
- Journaling as a way to process thoughts and emotions.

## 5. Media & Leisure for Relaxation

Engaging with media for relaxation - or consciously taking breaks from it - can be a helpful way to unwind. Intentional media use helps manage energy and avoid burnout in our tech-driven lives.

- Using media: reading, listening to podcasts, or watching videos, series, and movies.
- Avoiding media: limiting screen time to avoid digital burnout.



## 6. Power of Boundaries

Learning to say 'no' and set boundaries in your activist/professional setting is essential for protecting your well-being.



*“I remember one instance when we were discussing sexualized violence in a group with service providers. The conversation was quite triggering, but I was too afraid to walk out of the room because I thought, “What if people think I’m not fit for this job?”, I kept telling myself, “After all these years in the field, I should already be hardened to these topics”. So, instead of taking a moment for myself, I endured the session. Afterwards, I was exhausted but played along and waited for the day to end. I only called my mom afterwards and let it all out then. I eventually also spoke about it in therapy, which helped me process my feelings better.”*

Noa\* (age 28)

REMINDER

### How to recognise that you may need to strengthen your boundaries?

- You’re constantly feeling resentful because others ask too much of you.
- You would rather agree to do things that you don’t want and commit to too much than to disappoint others.
- You are resentful because you feel that you are giving more to others than what you receive, while neglecting yourself and feeling unappreciated for your efforts.
- You feel that letting people close will be emotionally overwhelming.

When you have to set boundaries and make a decision in specific situations, the **following questions may help you** get clarity:

- If there were no consequences, would you answer yes or no?
- When you compare the benefits and costs, is saying yes really worth it for you?
- Would you feel fine asking the same favour of someone else?
- Where would you set a limit that meets your needs?
- Do you know someone who you admire for their healthy boundaries?  
If yes, how would they respond to this request?<sup>44</sup>

Practising self-care starts with recognising that it’s a commitment to yourself - it only works if you make a conscious choice to put it into practice. Rather than being seen as yet another task, you should aim to incorporate it into your daily routine. Taking care of yourself is not just about you; it’s also a foundation for collective care, for supporting those around you, like those in need, your colleagues, fellow youth activists, and your community.<sup>45</sup>

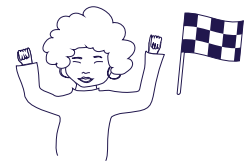
44 Scott, E. (2023). *Setting Boundaries in Relationships Is More Important Than You Think*. [online] Verywell Mind. Available at: <https://www.verywellmind.com/setting-boundaries-for-stress-management-3144985> [Accessed 17 Nov. 2024].

45 Ranganathan, D. (2016). *Practising individual and collective self-care at FRIDA*. [online] FRIDA | Young Feminist Fund. Available at: <https://youngfeministfund.org/practising-individual-and-collective-self-care-at-frida/> [Accessed 17 Nov. 2024].



*“Supervision helps a lot, and having those regular discussions with my manager about workload. When I started in the sector I thought I had to spend every living second reading about violence against women and feminism. Now I put more boundaries. I use my free time to do things that bring me joy, to focus on the things that bring me peace of mind [and] to remind myself that, despite the amount of violence out there, there are also good things worth living for.”*

Charlie\* (age 35)



## 7. Small Wins

Youth activism and fighting for human rights is a long-term journey. To make sure it's a sustainable one, we need to recognise that change is slow too, but even the smallest step is still a progress! Therefore, **take time to celebrate small wins** - this will **keep you motivated** and remind you why your work is important.



*“I balance my time between feminist and GBV-related activities and other interests to avoid over focusing on any aspect of my work and it helps me maintain perspective and prevents burnout.*

*I also make sure I stay engaged in diverse activities during my free time to keep myself refreshed and distracted from work-related stress. Additionally, I try to regularly discuss my feelings with others, like my therapist, partner, or friends. This makes me process my emotions without keeping everything to myself, while maintaining professionalism and not disclosing personal information. These practices help me stay mentally healthy and resilient in my work.”*

Andrea\* (age 24)



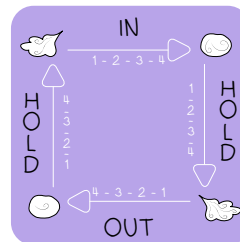
# Quick Grounding Hack - Stress Relief Anywhere, Anytime!

Grounding is a technique that may help you snap out of stressful or anxious moments by focusing on your environment and the present moment. You can observe the feel of your body or pay attention to the things around you – like the sound of the wind or the feeling of your feet on the ground. Grounding exercises are a quick way to calm down and get back to the present when your mind starts racing!

EXERCISES

## Box Breathing

1. Inhale deeply for a slow count of 4, focus on the feeling of air filling your lungs.
2. Hold your breath for 4 seconds.
3. Exhale gently for a slow count of 4.
4. Hold your breath again for 4 seconds, staying relaxed.



Repeat this cycle until you start feeling more balanced and present.

## Butterfly tapping

1. Cross your arms over your chest, placing opposite hands on your shoulders.
2. While keeping opposite hands on your shoulders, start tapping each shoulder, one at a time, gently.
3. If this position feels uncomfortable or painful, you can tap your legs or knees instead.
4. As you tap, you can repeat a calming phrase to yourself like, "I'm okay," "I've got this," or "I am safe."

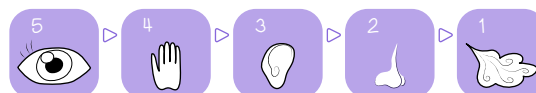


Keep going until you feel more grounded and at ease.

## 5-4-3-2-1 Technique

Start by saying to yourself (aloud or in your head):

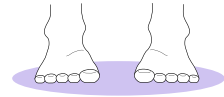
- Five things you can see around you.
- Four things you can touch.
- Three things you can hear.
- Two things you can smell or taste.



Finish by taking **one** deep breath in and out.

Repeat the steps for 1-3 rounds until you feel more present and calm.<sup>46</sup>

If you feel too restless to be able to sit still, you can also do **grounding through movement**:



1. Stand tall with your feet shoulder-width apart, feeling grounded.
2. Imagine your feet are like tree roots, deeply rooted in the earth, keeping you stable and strong.
3. You can try gentle stretches or yoga poses, like the mountain pose or a forward fold, and focus on how your body feels with each movement.
4. Breathe deeply and let any tension melt away as you stretch.

You don't need a lot of space - just simple movements or even walking while paying attention to your feet connecting with the ground can help you stay grounded.

### Mindful Observation



It is practised by tuning in closely to your surroundings, noticing the little details you might usually miss. Maybe it's the shades of colour in a room, the sounds outside, or the way the light falls around you. By focusing on these details, you anchor yourself right here in the present.<sup>47</sup>



*"Knowing your capacities and acting accordingly is crucial. It's easy to fall into the mindset that you have to say 'yes' to everything to prove your dedication, but in reality, setting boundaries allows you to maintain your well-being and sustain your activism. Be mindful of your limits and don't hesitate to take a step back when necessary - this is an act of strength, not weakness. Taking breaks when you need them ensures that you can give your best when you're ready to engage again. Remember, your well-being is just as important as the cause you are fighting for."*

Val\* (age 28)



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