Quick! First responder mode & troubleshooting: tips & tools to pause & reset

Sometimes we just need to pause before we can move forward. In that case, start here! Here’s a shortcut to a few quick tools that can help us pause, reset, and prepare for the next step.

Feeling Overwhelmed?
Remember “RAIN”

Four steps to stop being so hard on ourselves.

R | A | I | N
---|---|---|---
Recognize what’s going on | Allow the experience to be there, just as it is | Investigate with kindness | Natural awareness, which comes from not identifying with the experience

The Stop Strategy

Stop
Notice when you begin to feel the signs of stress (chest tightening, face becoming warm, forehead creasing). Then, stop and take a pause. Taking cues from your body will help you to disrupt a potentially negative mindset.

Take a Breath
Just take a slow breath. Only focus on that breath. Your brain needs an opportunity to distance itself from the stress. You need a chance to gain clarity. Focus on the air going in and out of your lungs. The 2-3 minutes it takes to breathe and reset your thoughts will allow you the best opportunity to make positive choices.

Observe
Once you have allowed your brain an opportunity to become calm, acknowledge what is happening, be it good or bad, inside or outside of you. Just note it. Don’t act, yet. Just acknowledge for yourself what you are feeling, seeing, hearing or thinking. Emotions are information. Take a moment to process the information.

Proceed
Having briefly checked in with yourself, and allowing yourself a moment to pause, go forward with a more aware and neutral mindset.
A few other shortcuts to practice:

- **Connect with your senses: 5-1.**
  - **SIGHT:** Find 5 things of different colors around you.
  - **SOUNDS:** Distinguish 4 sounds you can hear.
  - **TOUCH:** Slowly touch 3 different textures near you.
  - **TASTE:** Remember 2 things you’ve tasted at your last meal.
  - **SMELL:** Notice the most prominent smell near you.

- **Go for a short walk outside.** This can be 5 minutes to walk around the block or 30 minutes to enjoy the mid-day sun. While you’re walking, notice the feeling of your feet making contact with the earth. Pay attention to your breathing. Notice the sights and smells around you.

- **Feel your feet.** (*This is useful while in a safe space.*) This is one quick way to short-circuit a flight-fight-freeze response in the brain, by mindfully returning our attention to the body. Remembering and tuning into our body can (in most cases) ground us in the contained and safe space that is our body. If you have more time, turn your practice into a body scan: starting with your feet, move your attention upwards, noticing each body part as you do. Breathe into any pain or discomfort and notice where you hold tension, choosing softness and release as it is available.

**What other practices ground you in your body and remind you of your wholeness?**

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How to use this guide

A living & learning document

Wellness is a life-long, intergenerational healing process: we're in this for the long-haul. This means we're learning along the way, both in our own personal journeys as well as in the various groups of people we find ourselves in. As we practice, we also learn and notice how the practice is slightly different every time we do it—even if we do it multiple times a day!

Therefore, we expect this document to grow along with our practices and learning. Please update and include new ideas, tools, tips, etc as you find them useful.

For internal & external use

For internal use, we suggest a living document with comments, questions, and learnings-in-process (a.k.a. experiments). However, a more polished version may be more appropriate for sharing with a wider community. We suggest a regular (once or twice a year) clean-up and publishing of a version for this external use.
Part 1

Culture shift:

Moving from burnout to wellness
Where we are & How we got here

We’re amidst toxicity of various forms: burnout culture, literal environmental toxins, and ways we have incorporated toxic ways of being in our bodies, our relationships, and our work.

This isn’t our fault, but it can be our responsibility.

We can take on the responsibility to bioremediate ourselves, like oyster mushrooms do. They take toxins and with their magical bodies, break them down into bioavailable nutrients that are then shared with plants and animals. Similarly, we can take the toxins that have been given to us, break them down, and choose other ways of being.

Let’s be mushrooms together.

Why wellness?

Wellness is another direction and a conscious decision. We can repeatedly and consistently choose wellness over toxicity in all areas of our lives. This looks like not only practices and one-off activities, but also creating cultures that center wholeness, wellness, and healing.

When we say and focus on wellness, it isn’t about pretending there is no harm or suffering in the world, but rather, we choose to focus on and direct our path toward something else. Throughout this guide there are tools, practices, and mindsets that support wellness of various kinds.
In the midst of collapse, choose visionary leadership

We’re in a prolonged collapse of oppressive systems. Surely we can offer parts of ourselves to that break-down as well: please break down any patterns of oppression I have internalized as part of my up-bringing in these systems.

But we can also look towards something else. Rather than focusing on apocalyptic narratives of death, destruction, and chaos, we can ground in radical imagination. We can choose the healing powers of love rather than the divisiveness of hate. We can choose to create supportive communities around us instead of succumbing to individualism.

For inspiration here, check out adrienne maree brown’s work, starting with Octavia’s Brood where she and co-editor Walidah Imansha share:

“Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds - so what better venue for organizers to explore their work than science fiction stories?”

Believing in other worlds and working to bring them about is critical to real leadership, most importantly amongst the series of collapses we are experiencing.
After our session on March 8, Ari compiled the thoughts, feelings, and images that were shared into this poem:

**glimmers from the future**

wellness has a smell, taste, feeling. a look.
what does it taste like to you?
is it ripe tomatoes, warmed on the vine,
or a slow sip of crisp, cool wine?

    wellness is a practice we can model with others,
    learning and sharing as we heal together.

    humans are capable of simplifying the complex:
    we build a nest for multiple truths.

this all begs a different pace: one that is slow.
    can you hear the rhythm of wellness in your heart?

maybe right now all we have are hopeful glimmers,
but woven together we can start to see new worlds
where wellness is default,
    abundance is palpable,
    and healing is inevitable.
Practice What is your vision?

1. What vision are you moving toward? For this practice, take some time to reflect.

2. If you are artistic, bring in that part of yourself:
   make a collage, write a poem, compose or sing a song.

3. Perhaps you can create a regular reminder to reflect on this vision: set up a calendar event to reflect for one hour every first Monday of the month.

4. Find and include symbols of your vision in your work and living spaces to remind you.

This practice can be done individually, alone together, or in community. If done with others, reflect on shared themes. Differences in visions are important too as they call out our special capacities and contributions.

Sharing & modeling

CEER already models practices of organizational wellness.
Part 2

What is “care”?

From self-care to community care
Care looks different for each person and how it looks for one person changes over time. The basic idea is that care helps us be healthy, whole, and connected. Maybe care looks like “emotional labor,” or treating symptoms so we can get to more spaciousness, or looks like preventative support. We'll discuss all of these in the next few sections.

Often we’re offered a capitalistic model of self-care: take care of yourself (usually by buying something) so you can be a productive member of society. It’s a model based on maintaining some level of harm, too, so it’s never really about “healing,” but rather keeping ourselves in a cycle between burnout and self-care. Like: “I go to the spa after a hard day at work.” There’s nothing wrong with this, but it doesn’t seek to shift the underlying conditions that cause you to get here, so it'll likely keep happening. Maybe after going to the spa, we could get together as a team and see how we can make those situations less likely to occur in the future.

How can we use these difficult points as opportunities for transformation?

We’d like to focus on kinds of care that acknowledge that we’re doing this work from our hearts, for the long-term, and against further exploitation.

Mainstream ideas around self-care also tend to be very individualistic. (Read this psychologist talking about the mental health connections between the personal and the political.) Even those that are relationally based: pour from a full cup (so you can offer others' your best), are still based on you getting what you need. We could broaden the idea of self-care to see it contained within a model of community care: we all get what we need, including you and me. Looking at it at a personal level we could think about feelings of disconnection, isolation, loneliness. (This article starts unpacking how to do that within an organizational context.)
How does this perspective change our approach to care?

I do not think that self-care and community care have to be in opposition or tension: I think we can choose both. However, given our current contexts of capitalistic, heteropatriarchal, white supremacist (etc.) cultures, when we engage in these efforts with more intention, it might feel like swimming upstream. For example, if we can only understand care as a reaction or prevention to getting burnt out, we will definitely miss other ways we can care for ourselves and each other. If we step back and see care more broadly (not just in a reactive way and not just self-care), other possibilities come into view.

**Types of care**

We can also consider types of care that might be unseen or hidden by mainstream/dominating perspectives. These are not just caring for the physical body or abilities to think in a certain way that supports your work, but also emotional, spiritual, ancestral.

What are the expansive ways you understand care?

What are the ways you care for yourself, people in your life, ancestors and descendents that might not be seen?

Maybe this is an altar you’ve created to honor your ancestors.

Maybe it’s going to therapy, seeing a coach, and/or working with other healers.
It could be preparing, eating, and/or sharing foods from your cultural heritage that makes your soul light up.

I just don’t want us to be corralled into narrow ways of seeing our care work. For more expansive, disability justice and POC-led ideas, check out the book Care Work and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s work.

Care work is work, too. It is something we can be intentional about offering ourselves and others. (See section on “what gets in the way,” later, for more.)

Check out Zoe Todd’s Tenderness Manifesto for a poetic visioning of an ethic of care and tenderness, here’s an excerpt:

Tender is a paradox. It is a vulnerability that can cut cloth and hide and fibre and stone in many ways. It can be a way of gathering us closer, of reminding us of the meditative, reciprocal work between us and our friends and family and more-than-human kin. Tending-to, tenderness. These are conditions of existence in a world built up through ever-shifting, ever-breathing, ever-going relations. Care, kindness. Love in its many refractions and dispersions.

Trauma and healing

We’re all living in a socio-cultural soup that includes trauma: climate change is trauma, racism is trauma, sexism and anti-trans oppression are all forms of trauma. Additionally, we may have also experienced individual traumatic events throughout our lives.

These traumas get in the way of being our full selves, keeping us stuck and rigid.
This is because trauma is held in the body in ways that keep us smaller than we would be otherwise. We seek to avoid repeating what happened in the past. But many of us have become good at living in these smaller spaces available to us, we've become experts at navigating our traumas.

In this way, healing from trauma can feel different than healing from more acute kinds of hurt or harm; it's not necessarily directly connected to responding to the present moment. Healing from trauma is grounded in a more holistic desire to return to our full selves and our communities. The main point here is that trauma is in the body so healing is embodied, but there is much work happening to understand trauma both in our bodies and socioculturally.

There are so many great books available now on trauma: The Body Keeps the Score and My Grandmother’s Hands are two of the most popular. Another, called Writing Ourselves Whole is an example of healing from trauma (particularly sexual) through writing. Trauma Stewardship and Active Hope approach trauma socially and with a lens of climate justice (respectively).

One place to start is by considering the practices in this co-created document:

Hosting Trauma-Informed Zoom Calls

Approaching Self-care: starting with the body

Because we know that trauma is embodied, we can start to approach self-care by grounding, coming back into your body. A simple centering practice can help as a starting point, or on its own.
To what end? How do I know if I’ve done “enough” self-care?

In very broad strokes, let’s think about the metaphors that underpin Eastern and Western medicine. (Obviously the fields of medicine are more complex than a false binary, and there are many “non-Western” practitioners in “the West.” But for simplicity’s sake...) Eastern medicine (like acupuncture for example) relies on the idea of prevention: we take care in order to not get sick. So we regularly engage in practices that keep us well and support our health while we’re healthy. This might seem curious given an upbringing under a Western medical paradigm, which suggests that you should see a doctor only after there’s already a problem – why would you go if you’re fine? Many times Western medicine can diagnose a problem and offer a quick fix to symptoms: it’s more about reacting to how things are currently presenting and offering solutions, whereas Eastern medicine supports systems before they get to a point of being out of balance. Both of these methods offer insight into wellness.

We do not have to wait until we’re sick to support our health. We can consider questions like: how do I prevent injury and illness in the future? This might look like exercise, dietary shifts, or other things that might not be the first things we think of around self-care. Here we’re cultivating a solid base of health and wellness to live into.

We can also respond to any illness as it emerges, too. Taking care of symptoms is important if it helps us get to the root cause of the problem. Addressing symptoms gives us more space to understand how we got here and think about preventing it from happening again. We can strategize on our own, in teams, and community when appropriate.
Practice: Energy Raising/Lowering Activities List

Make a list of the practices and activities that raise your energy and lower it. To do this, we first have to become aware of our energy levels, when they get depleted (and how), and when they get added to (and how). As we build awareness here, we can make a list, to remind ourselves when we might need help.

It could look like this:

**Energy Raising**
- Yoga
- Meditation
- Watch a TED talk
- Make an Acupuncture appointment
- Talk to good friends
- Qi gong
- Go for a walk outside
- Taking a shower or bath
- ...

**Energy Lowering**
- Spending too much time on a screen
- Scrolling Instagram for more than 10 minutes
- Being with someone who only talks and doesn't listen
- Feeling like I'm forcing myself to do things
- Not taking breaks when I need to (to use the bathroom, to rest my eyes, to lay down)
- Not eating when I'm hungry/eating when not hungry
- ...

Instead of looking at energy “outputs,” like work deliverables, schedules, and tasks, we can start to understand our energy in terms of inputs, too. We can proactively do the things that give us energy, whether or not we're feeling burnt out.
Practice: Rest

Add a section here

https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/work/2022/08/16/transform-work-rest

What gets in the way of giving and receiving care?

If we’ve accepted and internalized ideas of productivity and extraction, we might have some barriers to engaging in care. If the most important thing is to get the job done, it can seem like a distraction to focus on anything else. We may have been shamed for doing so in the past.

So care - both receiving it and giving it - might require first giving yourself permission to do so.

“I give myself permission to receive care.”

“I give myself permission to offer care.”

What feelings come up when you read those statements?

We can be intentional about these statements and behaviors, too. Along many lines of oppression (for example: gender and race), people are often tasked to do more care work or emotional labor and we lose our ability to choose: it is non-consensual. (For example, a woman or femme in a relationship may have to do more emotional labor than her/their male or masculine counterpart because of
social conditioning. And think of all the times that BIPOC have been tasked with explaining racism to white people.) Moving back into our power, we can set boundaries around who we offer care to or what circumstances we are available to do that work. (See more on accountability, below.)

Sometimes shame comes up around needing care. We think we shouldn't need it, so we don't take care of ourselves or we don't ask for the help we need - from those around us, from our co-workers, from our communities. We've been told that this is a sign of weakness. And there are certain kinds of needs that are more shameful than others: needing to work through grief in dominant U.S. society, for example, might bring up shame. Or needing a sick day or two during menstruation might bring up shame in a society that pretends that those days don't affect people.

Practicing boundaries and saying “no” can support us. Prentiss Hemphill says that “boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously.” And “boundaries give us the space to do the work of loving ourselves. They might be, actually, the first and fundamental expression of self-love.”

**Practice: Supportive, non-punitive accountability**

Many of the ways I've seen accountability play out in social justice spaces have strong elements of punishment attached to it. Accountability has unfortunately become boiled down into “if you mess up, there will be consequences.”
What could more supportive accountability look and feel like?

How could we be sure of our relationships - knowing they can contain strong emotions like anger, hurt, grief - and trusting that the relationships can heal us?

When have you felt held accountable in a way that supported your growth? Thinking about these times can help us create healthy accountability. We can bring these kinds of accountability into our relationships - both with other people and more generally in how we interact with our communities. This practice is connected to how we create and maintain our boundaries and helps us have relationships that are healthy.

Moving into Collective & Community Care

“Community care has been around for a very long time but was never really “mainstream.” I believe it has to do with this innate conditioning that many Americans uphold, which is independence over interdependence.” – Minaa B. from this article

Community care, like self-care, are ongoing practices, holding these questions out for reflection:
How do we invite others into caring for each other?

How do we model these ways of caring so we can practice and learn together?

How do we practice care for the non-human communities we belong to?

We actively listen for wants, needs, and unmet aspirations of the people around us. And we don’t have to be solely responsible for meeting those -- we can create systems and structures in our communities to support us all. This might look like: potluck meals, community picnics, dance nights, art and poetry exhibitions. It can look like exchanging books in a public park.

I particularly love the idea that community care means: “People committed to leveraging their privilege to be there for one another in various ways.” (Nikita Valerio)