

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM  
TO PREVENT VIOLENCE  
AGAINST WOMEN

## SELF-CARE ACTIVITY SERIES

VIOLENCE  
AGAINST  
WOMEN

# THE SILENT EPIDEMIC

IS YOUR VOICE BEING HEARD?

## INTRODUCTION:

### WHY SELF-CARE?

As people who work with issues of violence against women and girls, many of us spend so much time taking care of others we forget to take care of ourselves. Many others see self-care as disconnected from our work—that is isn't a priority considering everything else. It is hard to make time, it is hard to put ourselves first – but we all do need to take care of ourselves – because we deserve it, and because we can't actually work effectively if we are exhausted and spent. For the GBV Prevention Network, self-care is based on two beliefs:

1. We as caregivers and activists cannot give what we do not have, and
2. Self-care is political. The way we treat ourselves is part of the power dynamic in the world that can harm or liberate women and girls.

Let's explore both of these a little bit further.

**1. We as care givers and activists can't give what we don't have:** When we don't take care of ourselves well, and we continue to work with a trauma-based issue like violence, common effects are compassion fatigue and secondary post-traumatic stress. Compassion fatigue is sometimes described as feeling burned out. Sometimes we start to feel so tired, and start wondering if what we are doing is even making any difference. When we hear about someone's pain, we feel distant and like we have nothing to give. Often, this happens with people who naturally feel deeply for others, and marks a real shift. Secondary post-traumatic stress is actually starting to experience symptoms as though you yourself had been traumatized, after hearing someone else's experience or connecting deeply to VAW in your activism. It can include gaps in memory, feeling your heart pound when you start to work with someone you are supposed to care for, and even a feeling that you are living the traumatic experience someone explained to you. All of these are signs that you yourself need care. But we do not have to wait until our cup is empty and we are already suffering to remember that we need to fill up our cup! We can take care of ourselves now.

**2. Self-care is political. The way we treat ourselves is part of the power dynamic in the world that can harm or liberate women and girls.**

"Be the change you wish to see in the world." - Mahatma Gandhi

Often, the people who work on issues of women and girls have been taught growing up how to care for others, and even to sacrifice our own wellbeing for others. Often, though not always, we are women ourselves, and this pattern of caring for others more than ourselves is an extension of the same belief

system we are trying to work against, in which women suffer. Self-care is a way to embody the change we wish to see in the world. If we want to see a world in which strong women and men respect and encourage each other, self-care is a way to be respectful of ourselves and take care of our own, positive power within. Taking good care of ourselves, we build up the power we have within ourselves so that we can be in a strong place to join our power with others and create change.

As members of the GBV Prevention Network, we know the amazing results that can be achieved when activists combine their power to create change. This guide will help us to live our beliefs, and give us as activists some concrete ideas about how to make the personal political by taking care of ourselves.

## HOW TO USE THE SELF-CARE ACTIVITY SERIES

The Self-Care Activities are a series of 5 guides for practical reflections and actions, designed to help us as caregivers and activists build up awareness of our own wellbeing, as well as our support system around taking care of ourselves. The activities don't take much time (between 20-45 minutes), but can help us stay healthy and strong in our work and our lives.

It is possible to do these activities by yourself, so do not be discouraged if you cannot form a group. However, it is preferable if you can find at least one other person or a small group of trusted coworkers or friends to go through them together. Even though it is called self-care, it is important to have support for any changes you decide to make!

Here are a few examples of ways you can engage others in the activity series with you:

- One or more other coworkers agree to meet at lunch regularly
- Ask for 20-45 minutes in staff meetings once per month or when realistic to do this as a staff
- Ask a trusted friend in or outside of work to do the activities together
- Engage local health care workers, other organization staff, or community based activists in the activities
- Or . . . Think of another strategy that works for you!

If you have a group, try to plan about 45 minutes for each activity (some will take longer than others, but try to keep them to 45 minutes). Plan to meet regularly to go through them. You can decide to meet once a week, or every two weeks, or at a monthly staff meeting, and do one activity each time. You may also decide to do a brief self-care campaign and meet every other day for a week. There should be enough time between activities for participants to put the activity into practice before they start the next activity.

Within the sessions, if you are alone, you can simply read along and follow the steps. If in a group, one person can agree to facilitate the session, reading the steps of the activity out loud, and reading discussion questions to facilitate the discussions and actions needed.

At the beginning of each activity, it is encouraged to reflect on accomplishments since the last activity. At the end of each activity, participants make commitments to self-care.

While there are only 5 activities in this series, they are designed to provide the basis for thinking and support for longer-term self-care for all participants.

Once your self-care group is formed, or if that is not possible, you have decided to follow the guides by yourself, you are ready to get started with Activity 1!

Supplies needed for the self-care activity series:

- 1 Copy of the activity for that day
- Notebook and pen for each participant
- Flip chart and markers, if desired to write down group brainstorm
- Copies of that activity's Commitment Statement for each participant, if desired (if not possible, participants can write commitments in own notebooks)

# SELF-CARE ACTIVITY #1: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF?

We can only give what we have. We all know that being activists and caring for others, especially those who are in crisis themselves, requires a lot of energy and skill. But it also requires us to be healthy!

## STEP 1: DISCUSS THE SELF-CARE ACTIVITY SERIES

1. Ask people to say what they think “self-care” means. What does it mean to take care of ourselves? Give specific examples (e.g. self-care is being kind to ourselves and nurturing ourselves, for example not working too late, remembering to eat lunch, etc.)
2. Read the introduction for all participants, or have a facilitator who has read the introduction answer any group questions about the activity series.
3. What are your expectations of going through this series of activities on self-care?(e.g. I will learn a few new ways of taking care of myself, I will make some real changes, I will learn more realistic ways to take care of myself, our group will learn to support each other in taking care of ourselves, etc.)
4. Reflect on/ discuss any adjustments to expectations we have for the series, based on the ideas in the introduction.
5. This series of activities cannot force anyone to take care of ourselves, but hopefully will help provide some strategies and reflections that can help us to develop positive patterns that can be sustained beyond the group.

## STEP 2: DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers to the following reflections; the right answers are the ones that come from you and the group you are with!

1. What happens when I don't take care of myself? (e.g. I get burned out, I get annoyed with my coworkers, I feel depressed, etc.)
2. Do I sometimes come across barriers that stop me from taking care of myself, or make excuses about why I can't take better care of myself? If so, what are they? (e.g. I don't have time to eat better. . . I'm strong, I'll be okay. . .I'll just do one more thing, it's not dark yet . . .I don't have money to take care of myself . . .)
3. In what ways am I good at taking care of myself? (e.g. I always take a lunch break, I spend a lot of time on weekends with my family, etc.)
4. What would help me take better care of myself?(e.g. I could get some exercise, learn to say 'no', etc.)

## STEP 3: MAKE A COMMITMENT

It's sometimes helpful to make a commitment in front of others or to yourself to change something for the better. In each of the activities in this series, at the end there are commitments so you can start to practice what you learned immediately after the activity. You can choose something small and realistic as a starting point, or just make a commitment to the general idea of self-care. Write up something yourself and hang it on your desk, or say it out loud to your discussion group.

You can create a statement that feels right to you, but here is a sample for Activity 1.

## ACTIVITY 1 COMMITMENT STATEMENT

I am committed to taking good care of myself. I believe I can only be an effective and healing presence in the world if I also feel healthy.

I will \_\_\_\_\_ to take good care of myself.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## SELF-CARE ACTIVITY #2: LISTENING TO MY BODY - KNOWING THE SIGNS OF STRESS AND BURNOUT

Learning to listen to your body, mood and behavior for messages that you are stressed one of the first steps to being able to take good care of yourself! When we listen well to the messages our body, mood and behavior are sending us about our own level of stress, we can catch the signs early, avoiding burnout and staying healthy! In this activity, we practice scanning ourselves for signals of stress, becoming aware of what those messages are telling us. In the coming activities, we will learn what to do with those messages.

### STEP 1: REFLECT ON SELF-CARE

Check in with everyone, or reflect yourself: how are you feeling about the idea of self-care? Ask each person to reflect out loud, or write to yourself, **one** thing you have learned about self-care since you have started these self-care activities.

### STEP 2: LEARN THE SIGNS OF STRESS - READ THIS STEP OUT LOUD OR TO YOURSELF

According to experts, stress is mental or emotional strain or tension, often arising in response demanding circumstances. Stress shows itself in our bodies, our behaviors, and in our ways of thinking. Constant stress over a long period of time is related to a lot of health problems, but there are smaller signs that we can learn about that can help us know we need to do something to de-stress. What messages do our own bodies, moods, and behaviors send us when we are stressed? All of the following are common signs of stress:

**Messages in our bodies:** Headache, other frequent aches and pains, pain or tightness in your chest, upset stomach, sleep problems. In a moment of stress, some people feel their stomach or muscles clench up, their breathing become shallow, or the feeling of intense fatigue rush over them.

**Messages in our mood or thinking:** Anxious or racing thoughts, lack of motivation, irritability, sadness or depression, memory problems, inability to concentrate, seeing only the negative, constant worrying.

**Messages in our behavior:** Over-eating or under-eating, angry outbursts, nervous habits like nail biting or pacing, isolating yourself from others, procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities, drug or alcohol abuse.

Citations: [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org) and [www.helpguide.org](http://www.helpguide.org)

### STEP 3: PRACTICE LISTENING TO YOUR BODY

In this step, we are going to practice scanning our bodies and minds for stress messages, and learn a technique for doing a similar scan when we are busy.

A. Take a deep breath, relax, and reflect on the following questions. (Note: If in a group, participants other than the facilitator can close their eyes while the facilitator reads.) Pause after reading each question, to do a scan of your own stress, right now. What of the symptoms we just read apply to my body right now? *(10 second pause)* Do I have aches and pains, are my muscles clenched up? Is my stomach upset? My *(10 second pause)* How is my mood and my thoughts? Am I anxious, irritable, worried? *(10 second pause)* Does my behavior show signs of high stress? Do I have eating problems, angry outbursts, nervous habits, or addictions? Do I isolate myself from others? *(10 second pause)*

B. Share with your self-care group or write in a journal a few things of what you noticed in your body, mood and behavior right now.

C. Everyone responds to stress a little bit differently. Discuss with the group what signs you each think are most common for you to experience when you have stress - the things you list may or may not be on the list above.

### ACTIVITY 2 COMMITMENT STATEMENT:

In the last activity, we made a commitment to self-care. In this activity, try to make another commitment to scanning your body at least once a day for stress. In future activities, we'll learn what to do when we notice stress, but the first step is learning to listen, regularly, to the messages you are sending yourself!

Below is a sample commitment. Remember to be realistic in your commitment, and share your commitment with others, so you can support and remind each other.

I am committed to taking good care of myself. I believe I can only be an effective and healing presence in the world if I also feel healthy.

I will learn to listen to my body, mood, and behavior regularly to take good care of myself. This week, I will take a deep breath and do a scan for stress related messages at least \_\_\_\_\_ times a day.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## SELF-CARE ACTIVITY #3: QUICK STRATEGIES FOR SELF-CARE WHILE AT WORK

People who are activists and care for others are busy people! Sometimes our ability to care for ourselves slips because we are so busy taking care of others. In Activity #2 in this series, we learned to listen to the messages our bodies, moods and our own behavior send to us about our levels of stress. It is important to keep up that practice! But what do we do when we listen to those messages and learn we are stressed? In this activity, we will practice 3 quick strategies we can use while at work in order to decrease our stress level.

### STEP 1: REFLECT ON SELF-CARE SUCCESSES

Check in with everyone, or reflect yourself: how are you doing with your new commitment to self-care? Ask each person to reflect out loud, or write to yourself, **one** success in self-care since you have started these self-care activities. It's okay if the success is something small--it is a beginning, and celebrating your accomplishments and learning to congratulate yourself and each other for small victories is one essential component of self-care!

### STEP 2: PRACTICE 3 TECHNIQUES TO QUICK STRESS RELIEF

Remember, don't just read about these techniques, try them with your self-care activity group or on your own!

#### A. The 1 minute stress reducer: breathing and centering.

Deep breathing and centering is one of the simplest, fastest ways to decrease your level of stress. Deep breathing actually activates a part of your brain that impacts many areas of your body and helps you relax, and feel balanced. It can be done anywhere, because it all happens within you. Breathing deeply means inhaling as far as you can, so your stomach and chest puff up, full of air. When you can't breathe in any further, hold the air in for a second or two, then let all the air rush out of you like a balloon deflating. You can even make noise when you exhale. Ensure all the air has left your lungs, and then breathe in again, as deep as you can. Listen to your body, and slowly, over the next minute, make the deep breathing more natural, and think of images that bring you joy and peace--being with someone you love, a beautiful place in nature, an image that reminds you of your religious or spiritual beliefs, or something else you see that helps you relax and center. Keep breathing deeply.

#### B. De-stressing the body in 5 minutes with stretching or walking

A 5-minute break can be enough to decrease stress in both your body and mind by working on your body. Try stretching, or walking around outside or in a non-stressful area near your work for even 5 minutes, and see what a difference it can make. Since our muscles tend to clench up in times of stress, this can get the blood flowing in a healthier way and set up your mood

*Stretching:* Try reaching your fingers up toward the sky and standing on your tip toes, then reaching down as far as you can toward the ground, touching your toes if you can. Do this a few times, slowly, breathing deeply all the while. In your group, stand in a circle and teach each other a few stretches you each know. Remember to breathe deeply, and to stretch gently so you do not hurt your body.

*Walking:* Identify a couple of places that would be good to walk to, within 5 minutes of your work, for a change of scenery and to get the blood flowing during a short break during work hours. As a group, at the end of the activity, take a walk there together!

#### C. Setting up and returning to a positive space

In most work spaces, there is some opportunity to add decoration or personal objects to the area where you work. It may be as simple as photos of people you love around a desk, or a picture of a beautiful waterfall on the wall in view of where you work. Brainstorm 3 ideas of things that make you happy that can help you set up a positive space in your work environment that are right for you! In

Step 3, we'll make a commitment to actually bringing in those things and setting up a positive space at the office. This space can be a place you physically or mentally "return to" in times of stress. It may be as simple as looking up, taking a deep breath, and letting the image help you into a positive, non-stressful mindset. In cases where it isn't possible to bring in objects to work and put them up, you can actually carry around a picture with you, either in your purse or wallet, find something in your surroundings that is beautiful (the sky, a bird, a tree, or anything that brings you joy). If none of these are possible, you can even focus on a picture you form in your mind. Try visualizing your positive place right now!

### **STEP 3: BRAINSTORM OTHER TECHNIQUES**

We have just practiced 3 simple techniques that take 5 minutes or less that can be easily done to help de-stress when we notice we are stressed. There are many others! Brainstorm other techniques, and make a list.

### **ACTIVITY 3 COMMITMENT STATEMENT:**

I will learn continue to listen to my body, mood, and behavior regularly to take good care of myself, and I'll try a few techniques that can be done in the moment when I notice I'm stressed. This week, I will try the \_\_\_\_\_ technique to help reduce my stress and take good care of myself while at work! To do this, I will:

1.

2.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## SELF-CARE ACTIVITY #4: STRATEGIES FOR SELF-CARE WHILE OFF WORK

In Self-Care Activity #2, we learned to scan our bodies for signs of stress, and in Activity #3, we learned a few quick techniques for reducing stress while at work. In this activity, we will look more deeply into strategies that go a little deeper into healthy patterns you can develop while off work that help you reduce stress in your life overall.

### STEP 1: REFLECT ON SELF-CARE SUCCESSSES

Check in with everyone, or reflect yourself: how are you doing with your new commitment to self-care? Ask each person to reflect out loud, or write to yourself, **one** success in self-care since you have started these self-care activities. It's okay if the success is something small--it is a beginning, and celebrating your accomplishments and learning to congratulate yourself and each other for small victories is one essential component of self-care!

### STEP 2: DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS

1. What are the biggest stressors in my life?
2. What stops me from changing these things?
3. Of these stressors, which of them can I do something to change?

### STEP 3: IDENTIFY WHEN AND WITH WHOM YOU FEEL BEST

It is important not only to identify what is stressing us out overall, but also to identify in what conditions we feel best, so while we're minimizing one we can also maximize the conditions that bring ourselves joy and peace. Remember we cannot give what we do not have!

1. Make a list in a notebook of when in your life you feel best - be specific about what conditions are present and what things you are doing
2. Make a list of a few people around whom you feel best

Discuss with your group how you each can maximize time doing the things you love doing with the people you feel best around.

### ACTIVITY 4 COMMITMENT STATEMENT

This is one of the hardest commitments to make--so you are going to need the support of your self-care group, or others in your life like your friends, families, supervisor, and other coworkers. But it is possible! We'll work more on getting support for your self-care goals in the final activity of this series. In this commitment, you are committing to some major changes - if there are stressors in your life that you identified you can do something to change, your commitment here is to change them. If you identified conditions and people that help you be joyful and peaceful, your commitment here is to spending more time in those conditions. This commitment is about changing patterns to allow for self-care! You can do it!

Below is a sample commitment:

In order to reduce stress, I will:

In order to do more of the things and with more of the people that help me to be my best, I will:

This week, I will do the following toward these goals:

1.

2.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## SELF-CARE ACTIVITY #5: SUPPORTING EACH OTHER'S SELF-CARE

In order to keep up positive patterns of self-care, it is important to have support of others in your life. If you have been doing these self-care activities with 1 or more other people, those group members are a great place to start in finding the support to maintain healthy changes! In this activity, we will practice ways to support each other in keeping up our self-care commitments, and brainstorm ways to integrate other important people in our lives into the changes we are making.

### STEP 1: REFLECT ON SELF-CARE SUCCESSES

Check in with everyone, or reflect yourself: how are you doing with your new commitment to self-care? Ask each person to reflect out loud, or write to yourself, **one** success in self-care since you have started these self-care activities. It's okay if the success is something small--it is a beginning, and celebrating your accomplishments and learning to congratulate yourself and each other for small victories is one essential component of self-care!

### STEP 2: REFLECT ON THE QUESTIONS BELOW ABOUT THE SUPPORT YOU NEED

Think about the Strategies for Self-care while at work, and while away from work that you came up with. Think about what challenges may come up to prevent you from keeping up with those strategies. Write in a notebook two lists, that answer the following questions:

1. What types of support do I need from others to make sure I can get past the challenges and keep taking good care of myself? (Note: be as specific as possible - for example: I need someone to remind me to take a lunch break if they see me working through lunchtime.)
2. Whose support do I need to help me take good care of myself?

### STEP 3: PRACTICE REACHING OUT FOR SUPPORT

Looking back at your action plan, how will you reach out to the people on your list for the support you need?

Do mini-role plays within your group, or practice in a mirror if you are by yourself, how you will explain to your support person or people your need for self-care, and ask them to help you in taking good care of yourself.

### STEP 4: BRAINSTORM WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T IN SUPPORTING OTHERS IN THEIR SELF-CARE

Brainstorm the following questions:

1. What are some ways to support others in their self-care?
2. What are some things we shouldn't do when trying to support others to take care of themselves?

## FINAL STEP: MAKE A SELF-CARE SUPPORT ACTION PLAN

Looking at each person's 2 lists from Step 1, help each person create an action plan for how to get support for their new patterns around self-care. Be sure the plans are specific enough. You can use some of the language you used in your commitments in Activities #2, #3 and #4 to help you fill in this action plan.

*Self-Care Support action plan:*

Actions:	People who can support me in doing these things
In order to reduce stress at work, I will: 1.  2.	Support people for point #1: _____  Support people for point #2: _____
In order to reduce stress overall in my life, I will: 3.  4.	Support people for point #3: _____  Support people for point #4: _____
In order to do more of the things and with more of the people that help me to be my best, I will: 5.  6.	Support people for point #5: _____  Support people for point #6: _____

Congratulations! You have completed the Self-Care Activity Series, and in doing so we hope you have taken important steps in taking care of yourself! We hope the patterns and bonds you developed in this activity series can help you on your path to great self-care! This is just the beginning!