

Caring for yourself to care for others

A burnout and vicarious
trauma toolkit

bit.ly/vicarioustraumatoolkit

About this toolkit

This is a toolkit about burnout and vicarious trauma. It was created on June 6, 2020, with the intention of providing resources for self-care and healing amid the very necessary work of organizing specifically against anti-Black racism and police brutality, though these principles apply to any kind of movement work, and these movements are intersectional. This is a toolkit for organizers, students, parents, allies, and anyone for whom its message resonates.

Why do I feel so bad?

A trauma exposure response may be defined as the transformation that takes place within us as a result of exposure to the suffering of other living beings or the planet. (Definition from *Trauma Stewardship*, by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk.)

Trauma affects us. It affects us directly, and it affects us as witnesses, too. Examples of trauma we witness include videos of violent instances of police brutality, which are frequently shared on social media. Even if we haven't experienced violence personally, being exposed to this violence can be traumatizing in its own right.

A range of trauma responses are listed on the next page, drawn from *Trauma Stewardship*.

Some of these responses might seem familiar to you. Knowing what we are feeling and being able to name it is a step on the path to taking care of ourselves and healing.

Trauma exposure responses

- Feeling helpless and hopeless
- A sense that one can never do enough
- Hypervigilance
- Diminished creativity
- Inability to embrace complexity
- Minimizing
- Chronic exhaustion/Physical ailments
- Inability to listen/Deliberate avoidance
- Dissociative moments
- Sense of persecution
- Guilt
- Fear
- Anger and cynicism
- Inability to empathize/Numbing
- Addictions
- Grandiosity: an inflated sense of importance related to one's work

What's burnout?

Burnout refers to the sense of exhaustion or being overwhelmed when we feel that our efforts and energy have not “done enough.” It can happen when we’re advocating and organizing in times of high stress. Burnout is a state of emotional and physical exhaustion that can feel a lot like major depression.

What's vicarious trauma?

Vicarious trauma occurs cumulatively over time, and can lead to more lasting changes in our belief systems. Due to vicarious trauma, we might feel hopeless, jaded, or like our beliefs about the world have changed. Many of the responses on the chart on the previous spread, and which are listed to the right, are symptoms of vicarious trauma.

What's compassion fatigue?

Compassion fatigue is when we can't feel emotion for or empathize with people who are suffering. Compassion fatigue happens over time and with prolonged exposure, especially in people who work directly with others, such as nurses or social workers.

Trauma looks different

A trauma exposure response might manifest differently for different people. In this moment, Black people are directly experiencing trauma, combined with the vicarious trauma and burnout that comes with putting energy into organizing and advocacy.

It's important to recognize that part of being a good ally as a non-Black person means understanding that trauma exposure and trauma activation will look different for Black people, and that a non-Black person, who does not directly experience that trauma, won't experience or react in the same way. Checking in on friends and listening to Black organizers and leaders are ways toward understanding how to be supportive.

How does trauma manifest in our bodies?

If you are someone who has experienced trauma directly, that trauma affects you on many levels. You might feel shock, grief, isolation or sadness. You might have trouble eating or sleeping, or feel more anxious. As time passes, you might wonder why things aren't going back to normal, or why you still have nightmares or mental flashbacks to traumatic events.

When you experience a traumatic event, adrenaline rushes through your body and the memory is imprinted into your amygdala, part of your limbic system, at the center of your brain. As a result, your body literally remembers the emotional significance and intensity of the traumatic event.

What does it mean for trauma to be embodied?

Trauma lives in our limbic system, the parts of the brain that deal with emotions and memory. It lives in the deeper parts of our brain, not just the prefrontal cortex, the part that's "turned on" when we're thinking rationally. As a result, we're not always rational when we respond to our own trauma. Our body is remembering what our minds don't have words to express.

Experiencing trauma rewires our nervous systems, to the point that when we're traumatized, even if the threat has passed, we continue to organize our lives as though the trauma is still going on. In times of stress, or when triggered, that fight-or-flight instinct activates again, overpowering our conscious minds.

This means that to address trauma, it's important to remember that it is embodied, deeply. Addressing it with your conscious mind is important, but you also need to address it holistically. Healing trauma requires engaging your body, mind, and brain.

Why should self-care be important to me right now?

It might feel selfish to think about our own well-being in a time of activation or crisis. It seems like there's so much work that needs to be done, and it's true that there is.

The work is important, but in order to do the work—to organize, to uplift, to write letters or lock arms at a protest or make phone calls or put together packages or raise funds or check in on our community members and in all of it to push, push, push for a better future—in order to do any of this, we must be well, and balanced, and aware of our own needs.

It's important to value ourselves simply because we are valuable. This understanding can guide us as we join in solidarity against anti-Black racism, capitalism, ableism, transphobia, and all the many intersecting modes of structural oppression that affect each and every one of us on this earth.

What's the relationship of self-care to community care?

Self-care is what we engage in as individuals to heal, improve our mental health, and recover. However, self-care can be difficult to manage in the systems that we currently live in, which is where community care comes in.

Community care is all the things we need to do to support each other within systems that don't inherently support care. Community care looks like providing childcare, skill sharing and mutual aid, worker-owned coops, and community-based healthcare organizations, among many other things.

We always need community care alongside self-care. Self-care isn't possible without community care, especially for people with trauma.

What are some ways that you can help others do self-care by providing care to your community right now?

In a community where we look out for each other, take care of each other, and uplift each other, we don't need police, because we can protect each other. We don't need jails, because we can work together to mediate conflict and move towards transformative justice. What kind of future would that look like?

How can I learn to be aware of my needs?

This list is also adapted from *Trauma Stewardship*. It's important to find time to process the feelings related to burnout or vicarious trauma. Once there, we can begin to reflect on how to take care of ourselves. What feels right? What feels helpful? What are some directions we haven't faced before?

Creating space for inquiry

- Why am I doing what I'm doing?
- Is this working for me?

Finding balance

- Engaging with our lives outside of work
- Moving energy through
- Gratitude

Building compassion and community

- Creating a microculture
- Practicing compassion for myself and others
- What can I do for large-scale systemic change?

Choosing our focus

- Where am I putting my focus?
- What is my plan B?

Body movement and co-regulation

Regulating our nervous system is a means of self-care. Because trauma is embodied, we can use our bodies to heal from and work through it. By developing a relationship to our bodies, whether that's through yoga, dance, or anything else that comes naturally, we can get back into our bodies and help calm the limbic system, in the deeper regions of the brain.

You can ask yourself: Do I need to move my body? Do I need to dance? Do I need a massage? Do I need to find a physical way to channel my energy, rage, joy, despair?

Co-regulating, or dynamically processing and conversing between two people, is another main way to deal with trauma. By connecting with others, you can connect with and return to yourself. It's important to remember the “co” part—in processing with each other, we have to be aware of our own emotional capacity and needs.

You can ask yourself: Have I talked to my people—my pod, my chosen family, my support system? Have I talked to my loved ones? Have I allowed my loved ones to support me?

What are some other important aspects of self-care?

Here are some questions you can ask yourself. If anything sounds really good, or feels like it's missing, give yourself the loving opportunity to enjoy that thing.

Am I eating well? Am I eating healthfully and consciously?

Am I sleeping well, or sleeping at all? Am I removing distractions and devices that interfere with my sleeping?

Have I seen something beautiful? Have I been in nature? Have I spent time with animals? Have I interacted with plants?

What am I grateful for? Have I taken a moment to reflect on my gratitude or express my gratitude?

What are some ways I can ground myself?

Body scan

Take a comfortable seat with your feet on the ground and your hands on your knees. Closing your eyes, draw your focus to the very tips of your toes, and slowly move up through each part of your body. Note with compassion how your body feels; note what each part of your body needs. Feel your energy move up through your body, up until you've reached the very top of your head. Take a moment to sit and be present with yourself. Then, stretch out and activate your body in the ways that feel best to you.

Breathing exercise

Begin by becoming aware of your breathing. Inhaling from your chest or your belly, breathe in for 4 seconds. Hold for 7 seconds, and exhale for 8. If holding the inhale doesn't feel good, try counting for 2–4 seconds on the inhale, and 4–6 seconds on your exhale. Try to give yourself at least 10 deep breaths.

Grounding exercise

One simple grounding exercise is the 5–4–3–2–1 method. When you're feeling anxious or overwhelmed and want to calm down, try to name:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste.

You can always change these senses depending on your needs. What's key is using these details of your surroundings in order to bring yourself to the present moment.

For people with trauma, mindfulness practices that focus on the breath or body can be triggering. Focusing on the environment or visualization exercises can be more accessible.

I've read this whole toolkit, but I still feel like I can't make time for self-care. The work is too urgent and important.

No one of us is so important, so crucial to the project of social justice that we must be at work 24/7. Yes, every one of us is integral to this project of bettering the world, and each one of us has a place in this movement. But the beauty of coming together in solidarity is that the movement keeps moving even when you need time to take care of yourself.

Dealing with our trauma helps us show up better for each other. It helps us work through shame and guilt in productive ways, in order to actually be in community with each other. And when you're feeling well, you can take the initiative to provide care in your community, in the way that our communities take care of us.

I feel differently than the previous page—I feel overwhelmed and guilty and not sure what to do.

Some of us have been organizing for decades; some of us are getting involved in movement work for the first time. That's great! Don't let your fear of messing up stop you from taking action in the ways that you can. If you mess up, it's okay. Take it as an opportunity to learn something and do better next time.

It can feel overwhelming to consider our privilege in these times. Guilt is a powerful motivator, but it doesn't have to be where our emotions end. What if you turned your understanding of your privileges and your guilt into a desire to end inequity in the world?

Again, it will be uncomfortable. It will not always be easy to unlearn the systems of oppression that may have been taught to us as children. But this work is work that is worth doing, and no matter who you are, you have a role to play in it.

Further reading and resources

Trauma Stewardship, by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky
with Connie Burk

The Body Keeps The Score, by Bessel van der Kolk
“The Unspoken Complexity of Self-Care”
by Deanna Zandt

<https://blog.usejournal.com/the-unspoken-complexity-of-self-care-8c9f30233467>

Burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondhand
trauma Twitter thread from @pickledmint

<https://twitter.com/pickledmint/status/1266920230502010881>

“Learning From Errors” by Janet Metcalfe

<https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev-psych-010416-044022>

You feel like shit: An interactive self care guide.

philome.la/jace_harr/you-feel-like-shit-an-interactive-self-care-guide/play/index.html

A little more about this toolkit

This toolkit was written and compiled by Larissa Pham. This toolkit would not exist without the many valuable resources that have long been helpful to the social work and activist communities. Thank you and solidarity to the Black organizers who are leading the current movement that has inspired the need for this toolkit. Thank you to conversations with TG, AA, and CM for guiding this writing. Thank you to CR for layout and design.

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