



Sustainability as Prevention

Anti-violence work can be emotionally, physically, and intellectually taxing - which makes all of us at risk for burnout, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue. In this resource we offer a brief look at these concepts, and explore how we can plan to prevent and respond to them so we can sustain ourselves and our movements.

Sustainability is a fundamental violence and abuse prevention strategy that we can engage in within our efforts. When we are sustained and a part of sustainable communities, environments, and movements we are enabling change and working towards a healthier and safer world for all people. This is prevention - and we all play a role in preventing violence and abuse.

FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS

SATF's view of sustainability is grounded in the belief that all of us working in violence prevention and response (and activism and trauma work in general) can be impacted by our work. We also believe that there are ways we can work to prevent the worst effects of these impacts and respond when we start to experience them, which this sustainability plan is designed to help you do.

> VICARIOUS TRAUMA

is the profound shift in worldview that occurs in helping professionals when they work with individuals who have experienced trauma: helpers notice that their fundamental beliefs about the world are altered and possibly damaged by being repeatedly exposed to traumatic material (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995).

> BURNOUT

is the physical and emotional exhaustion that workers can experience when they have low job satisfaction and feel powerless and overwhelmed at work.

> COMPASSION FATIGUE

is the "cost of caring" for others in emotional pain; the profound emotional and physical erosion that takes place when helpers are unable to refuel and regenerate (Figley, 1980).

> MORAL INJURY

is the damage done to one's conscience or moral compass when that person perpetrates, witnesses, or fails to prevent acts that transgress one's own moral beliefs, values, or ethical codes of conduct.

> ACTIVIST BURNOUT

is "a chronic condition in which activism-related stress becomes so overwhelming it debilitates activists' abilities to perform their activism effectively or to remain engaged in activism" (Gorski, 2019).

These don't exist in isolation from one another. There are additional and situational factors that impact all of these as well. Beginning in 2020, the anti-violence sector observed unprecedented flux and fatigue due to pandemic burnout and the ongoing effects of global collective trauma, for example.

WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT IT?



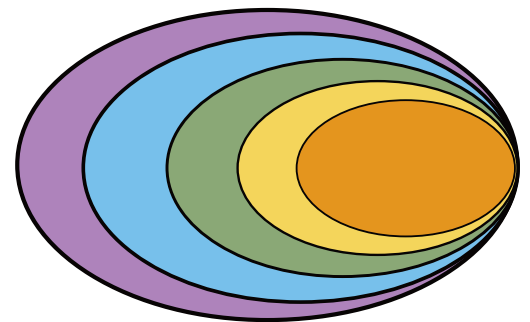
The truth is, we'll all most likely experience burnout, vicarious trauma, and/or compassion fatigue at some point in our lives. The solution? We have to plan for it, and take action to sustain ourselves. We need a sustainability plan! Promoting our individual and collective sustainability is also a meaningful violence and abuse prevention strategy. So while you're making and implementing your plan, you're also contributing to norms and cultures that protect against violence.

TAKE NOTE...

You may have noticed that we keep using the phrase "sustainability" instead of "self-care." This plan recognizes that most of us cannot survive and sustain ourselves through only individual "self-care" actions; our society needs to acknowledge the role of our relationships, communities, and systems/structures in health and wellbeing. The concept of community care has been brought forward by POC and disability activists (among others) as a response to issues of privilege, accessibility, and bootstrap-ism in the modern conception of self-care*. Community care acknowledges that most of us need to care for and connect with each other to sustain ourselves, and that is incumbent on our communities to care for us—and for us to care for our communities. We use ideas and strategies of both self-care and community care in this plan.

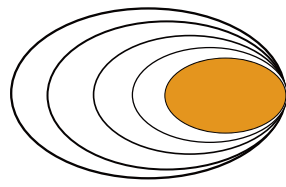
SO LET'S MAKE A PLAN

In this plan we utilize the social-ecological model as a framework for sustainability. Experiences of compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and burnout are influenced not just by our own actions, but also (and often primarily) by other factors including the place we work (the institution), our communities, and society. This plan acknowledges and takes advantages of multiple levels of influence—while also acknowledging that there are many things you alone cannot control.



Individual-level strategies are those you can do by and for yourself (or with a little help—like asking a friend or family member to watch the kids). **Relationship-level strategies** will ask you to think about how you give and receive care and support, and how we can use our relationships to help us sustain our work. **Institution-level strategies** in this sustainability plan, will focus on the policies, norms, resources, and challenges at your specific workplace. **Community-level strategies** look at community resources that help sustain us in our work—and brainstorm ways to stay safe in communities that are more challenging than supportive. And in **society-level strategies**, we'll look at ways you can take action to promote societal-level change while also taking care of yourself within systems and norms.

*For more information on critiques of self-care and visions of community care, check out: Abeni Jones on Autostraddle, "Beyond Self-Care Bubble Baths: A Vision for Community Care," <https://www.autostraddle.com/on-being-a-burden-whats-missing-from-the-conversation-around-self-care-385525/> or Laurie Penny in The Baffler, "Life-Hacks of the Poor and Aimless," <https://thebaffler.com/latest/laurie-penny-self-care> or Heather Dockray in Mashable, "Self Care Isn't Enough. We Need Community Care to Thrive," <https://mashable.com/article/community-care-versus-self-care/>



INDIVIDUAL LEVEL STRATEGIES

Individual-level strategies encompass much of what we traditionally think of as self-care. Under each topic we suggest a few strategies, but this list is not exhaustive; your own individual strategies may look very different! Write in your own as needed. For each column, try this:

Put a check mark by strategies you already do well that help sustain you

~~✓~~ ~~Cross out strategies~~ you know aren't/won't be helpful for you, or aren't accessible for you

Circle strategies you would like to try or improve (try not to pick TOO many —start with a few!)

PHYSICAL

- Eat regularly
- Eat food that makes my body feel good
- Enjoy a beverage, treat, or dessert I love
- Drink enough water
- Seek regular medical/dental/etc. care
- Take time off when I am sick
- Move my body in a way that feels good regularly (dance, walk, stretch, play outside, etc)
- Wear clothing I like
- Cut/style my hair in ways I like
- Get regular/enough sleep
- Honor my sexual needs with myself/my partner(s)
- Allow myself "breaks" from my physical demands on myself (exercise, eating patterns, etc)

SPIRITUAL/PURPOSE

- Spend time in nature
- Spend time with my spiritual community
- Be open to inspiration, and reflect on what inspires me
- Be aware of the non-material aspects of life
- Practice gratitude for what I have
- Identify my values/what gives me meaning, and practice centering these things
- Meditate or pray
- Sing or enjoy music
- Contribute to causes I believe in (with my time, money, or energy, etc)
- Read inspirational literature or listen to inspirational talks, music, etc
- Allow myself to take breaks from spiritual practice

PSYCHOLOGICAL/EMOTIONAL

- Make time away from screens, phones, etc
- Write in a journal
- Set aside time to sit with my thoughts and reflect
- Talk to a therapist/counselor
- Read things unrelated to activism/the work
- Engage with media (movies, books, social media, etc) that values and validates me and my identities
- Meditate or practice grounding activities
- Say "no" to activities/extra responsibilities sometimes
- Do an activity I am not an expert in or in charge of
- Give myself affirmations and gratitude
- Set aside and protect time for important relationships
- Spend time with a companion animal
- Allow myself to cry
- Ask for help when I need it

WORKPLACE/PROFESSIONAL

- Make time for breaks during my workday
- Take time to chat with colleagues
- Set and protect quiet time to complete needed tasks
- Identify projects/tasks that are exciting or rewarding
- Seek mentorship inside/outside my workplace, and regularly meet/talk with mentors
- Set limits with students/colleagues
- Set limits on when/where I will work, and hold myself accountable (weekends, evenings, at home, etc)
- Arrange my workspace so it's comfortable/pleasant
- Use the benefits provided by my workplace (healthcare, HRA, EAP, etc)
- Use my vacation time/sick time/PTO (vacation, wellness days, seeking medical care, caring for children, etc)

FINANCIAL

Track my spending to learn more about my expenses

Create a budget

Talk to my partner(s)/family about our financial goals and expenses

Talk to a financial planner to get advice about reaching my financial goals/getting out of debt/etc

Ask for a raise, or talk to my supervisor about how I can seek a promotion/increase wages in the future

Put aside money each month for savings, a trip, educational goals, etc

Allow myself joys by spending occasionally on things that make me happy or that will make life easier

Remind myself that many external forces impact my finances; I will not shame myself for my financial limits, debt, crises, etc.

The previous strategies do not encompass all the aspects of your life you may need to attend to in order to sustain yourself. Here you can brainstorm what other strategies you might need for your own sustainability:

MAKING A PLAN

When identifying new strategies to help sustain yourself, it's helpful to make a plan. How will you make time? What does success look like? Identify one strategy you want to work on, and make a plan for how you can integrate it into your life.

Q How will you know you've met your goal? What will success look like? How many times a week/month will you engage in this strategy?

A Your Answer:

Q How will you track your progress? Who can you ask to help hold you accountable, and how?

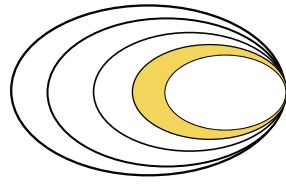
A Your Answer:

Q How will you celebrate your successes? What milestones along the way can you celebrate?

A Your Answer:

REMEMBER:

It's ok to revisit and revise your goals along the way! You don't have to stick with a strategy that's not working for you. Give yourself permission to struggle and learn along the way.



RELATIONSHIP LEVEL STRATEGIES

Relationship-level strategies acknowledge that we may need others to help sustain us, and that we owe it to those in our lives to help sustain them. Sustaining relationships can include partners, family members, friends or chosen family, colleagues, co-activists, and more.

ASSESSING MY NEEDS

First we need to think about what our needs are in relationships: what does a supportive relationship look like for you? What qualities do you look for in supportive relationships? How do you show care to others? It might be useful to think about your needs in ways like introvert versus extrovert (i.e., how do you recharge best, with others or alone?), or love languages (i.e. ways that you give and receive love, enumerated in this case as words of affirmation, acts of service, physical touch, quality time, and gifts). For others, these aren't useful concepts! Use the guided prompts below to brainstorm what the most sustaining relationships look like for you.

WAYS I NEED CARE/SUPPORT

How do you prefer to be shown love, care, or support in your relationships? This could be qualities or characteristics you need in others (listens if I need to cry), activities (goes with me to my medical appointments), or something else.

WAYS I SHOW CARE/SUPPORT

How do you show love, care, or support for those in your life? This could be qualities or characteristics you demonstrate (I like to cheer people up by making them laugh if they're sad), activities (I love to bake for my friends), or something else.

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Consider not just how you need or show care, but also when. Do you plan for time alone as well as time with others? How do you communicate your boundaries when it comes to the times you are able to give or receive support/care?

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For each way you listed above that you prefer to be shown care/support, who fulfills that need for you?

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Who are the primary relationships in your life with? How do you show your primary relationships care and support?

Just like our strategies for individual care (or self-care), our relationships need care too—and we need others to help us prevent and respond to vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout. Some strategies are suggested below, or you can write in your own ideas.

- Invite someone to participate in an activity I enjoy with me (cooking, exercising, crafting, watching tv, etc)
- Ask someone to go with me to medical or other appointments
- Spend time with a friend (or call someone) while I do needed errands or chores (go to the store, garden, watch movies while we pay bills)
- Schedule a regular (monthly, weekly) “date” with a friend, family member, or partner
- Celebrate the accomplishments and milestones of those I care about
- Ask for help with a task or to learn something new
- Send an unprompted card, text, etc telling someone that I’m thinking about them
- Volunteer for a cause/event someone I love is helping to organize
- Share a fear, hope, or secret with someone I trust

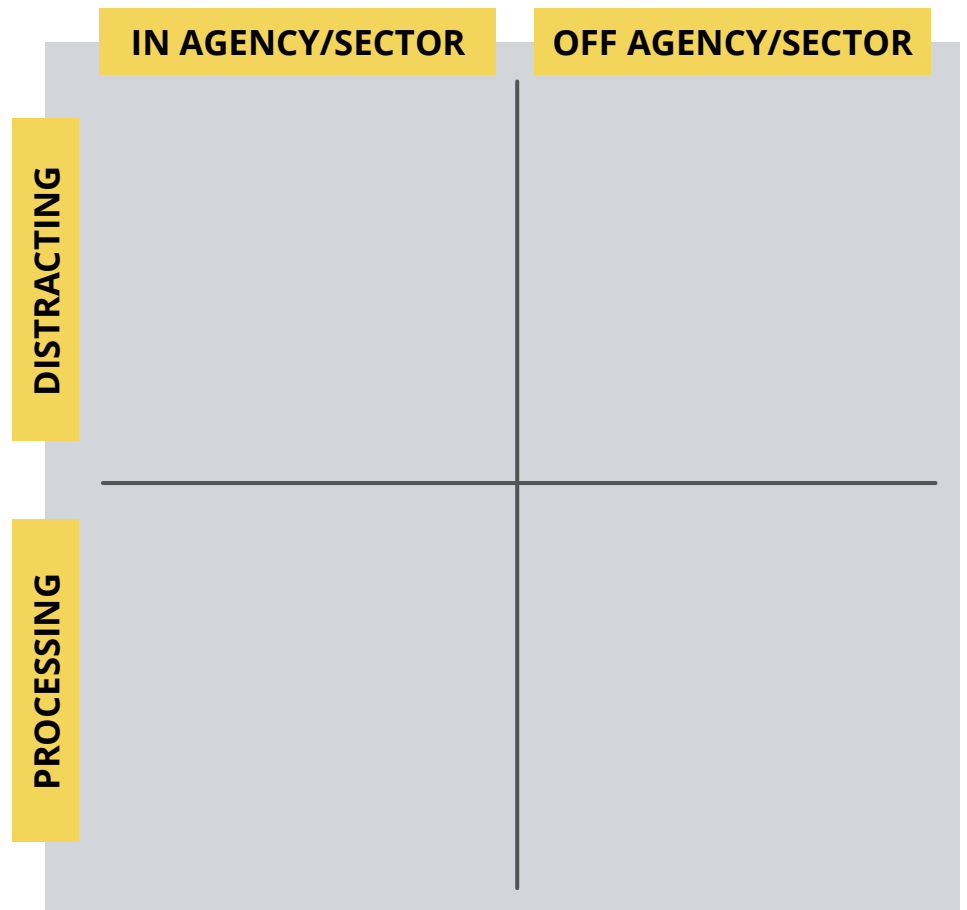
- Reach out to someone I haven’t talked to in a long time
- Ask a friend/family member/partner for a hug
- Cook a meal with or for someone I love
- Step out of my comfort zone and do something someone I love cares about that is new to me
- Set boundaries with someone I care about so that I can get the space/support/care that I need
- Set aside time to email/video chat/call important people who live far away

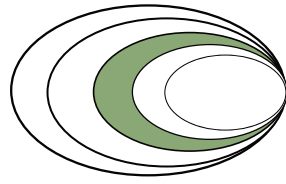
PREVENTING VT, CF, & BURNOUT: ALLIES

When our work/activism is overwhelming, stressful, or traumatic, we may want to process what happened, or we may just want to distract ourselves and not think about it for a bit. Most of us need both processing and distracting at some point, though when each person needs it can look different.

Think about who your allies are when you need both of these. Processing allies are those who you can talk to about work situations; you usually feel a little bit better, or at least less alone, after you talk to them. Distracting allies help take your mind off the situation—maybe they tell funny stories that make you laugh, you can play a sport together, or you’re both obsessed with the same tv show.

Brainstorm who your processing and distracting allies are. Be sure to list allies both within and outside of your agency/organization (or: folks in the field/movement as well as outside of it).





INSTITUTION LEVEL STRATEGIES

Institution-level strategies focus on sustainability within your organization or agency. Our workplaces—the department, the structure and policies of the agency, the people who make up the workplace community—can significantly impact whether we experience or are able to prevent vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout.

MY CURRENT ROLE

We all have parts of our jobs and work environments that we like, and parts that we dislike. What about your role empowers you? What do you feel drained by? What about aspects of your departmental and institutional culture? Take some time to brainstorm those aspects here.

	JOB DUTIES/ROLES	DEPARTMENTAL POLICIES/ PROCEDURES/NORMS	INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES/ PROCEDURES/NORMS
I feel enriched or empowered by these aspects...			
I feel drained or disempowered by these aspects...			

?

What's one thing you wish were different about your role or your work environment?

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What steps are within your control to take to make this change? Set a timeline; when will you take a first step towards making change?

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Who are your allies in making this change? Who can you seek support from?

INSTITUTIONAL ALLIES AND RESOURCES

Who are your mentors in anti-violence work?

What professional organizations do you find community in?

Who are your allies in other departments or other parts of your organization?

Does your organization offer an EAP, or other crisis support? What is that contact info?

>> FOR SUPERVISORS <<

If you supervise other staff or volunteers, you can play a critical role in their sustainability. Think of your supervision style as a vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout prevention strategy!

Research shows that talking the talk of self-care and sustainability is helpful, but that it's more important to model it yourself. If you tell folks you supervise that you don't expect them to work on weekends, for example, but you send weekend emails yourself, they might feel pressure to do the same.

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Think about it: what do you set as expectations about work boundaries, self-care, and sustainable practices to those you supervise? How do you support your supervisees in setting work boundaries that fit their personal needs? How do you convey those expectations — verbally? In emails? In policy? If you don't do this already, how do you plan to?

If you supervise staff who engage in anti-violence work, activism, or trauma-response, you can also support them by providing them opportunities to process their experiences, or time and ideas to help them distract themselves. Circle some of the ideas below to try, or brainstorm your own!

PROCESSING

Set aside/schedule in processing time as a team; set aside a different time than used for staff meetings, case reviews, trainings, or other regular events.

Discuss compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and burnout as a staff, and brainstorm ways you can support each other.

Incorporate different kinds of processing options with staff, such as writing, painting, etc.

Allow for processing in one-on-one meetings.

Review EAP/resources at your next staff meeting; set and clarify procedures for staff/volunteers who want to seek counseling/therapy and may need work time off to do so.

DISTRACTING

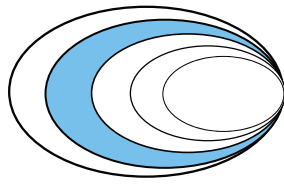
Encourage staff to use vacation and sick time, and use your own.

Engage in fun, creative projects as a team—there is research to support that creativity is helpful in preventing vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue!

If giving staff appreciation/birthday/end-of-year gifts, give gifts that encourage sustainability and self-care practices (like gift cards for places or experiences).

Offer to take a walk or go get coffee with staff who are experiencing stress or a heavy workload.

Share your (appropriate) distraction strategies with your staff, and model using them as needed.



COMMUNITY LEVEL STRATEGIES

What is a community? Community means different things to different people. One definition could be that communities are groups that share something in common, like a location (such as a neighborhood or school) or experience (such athletic team fans or people in recovery) or identity (like an LGBT/queer group or a family), and whose members are tied to the wellbeing of the community in some way.

Most of us belong to a number of different communities, including communities within communities (like a campus within a town, for example). List out some of the communities you belong to here:

Some of the communities you belong to may be sources of joy and safety; others may be stressful or even unsafe at times. Of the communities you listed above, circle a few that you feel the safest in.

STAYING SAFE

Sometimes for reasons beyond our control, or because we've made strategic and informed choices, we have to continue to engage in communities that are stressful or even harmful. Consider ways you can keep yourself safe and set boundaries in those kinds of communities. If by choice or by circumstance you are currently living in, working with, or otherwise engaged with a harmful community, you may consider the tools of safety planning to support your work.

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If possible, list a few safe people or spaces within any stressful or harmful communities you belong to.

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Who can you ask for emotional support when one of your communities is taking a toll on you?

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Who can you call if you are feeling unsafe and need help (such as a ride home, someone to accompany you to a doctor's appointment, etc)?

?

What boundaries would you like to set regarding how you engage with harmful/stressful communities?

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

What resources available in your community can help you sustain yourself in this work? In this section it might be helpful to think about physical communities you belong to (such as a town) as well as the larger communities you belong to that offer specific resources (such as support available from a national network or organization).

Local/national hotlines (crisis, violence, suicide, etc):

Where are your safe spaces in your physical community:

Community or identity-based resource centers in your community that you could access:

Free or cheap community locations/assets you can access for distracting sustainability (i.e. fun, intellectual engagement, etc):

GIVING BACK

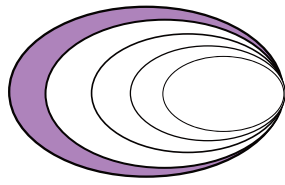
Being a part of a community means that you both give to and receive from that community. Giving back in ways that keep your communities alive and thriving helps with your sustainability—you'll feel good knowing you're contributing, and you'll receive love from the community in turn.

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What skills or resources do you bring to the community? This could be something like: being a good listener, having the skills/tools to do home repairs, love kids and are willing to babysit, are familiar with legal resources to help connect folks to legal advice. Brainstorm here some things you are good at or enjoy—i.e., skills and resources you can contribute!

?

Write down at least one way you already do (or plan to) offer these skills/resources to one of your communities. How can you use these tools to support and help sustain others?



SOCIETAL LEVEL STRATEGIES

Societal-level strategies help you think about the systems of structures we live in, and ways that you can live and protect yourself within those structures. This section will also have you think about ways you can advocate for societal change, and how to create a balance in your activism that fuels rather than drains you.

PRIVILEGE & OPPRESSION

Societal systems of privilege and oppression affect us every day. As people in anti-violence movements, our work is grounded in this reality, and we work to dismantle these systems—because these are the systems that allow interpersonal violence to flourish. Because our work is inextricably linked with privilege and oppression, we are making an assumption that you have a basic understanding of privilege and oppression when filling out this plan, and that you've already begun to do some internal work around this. If you need a refresher, check back to some of the resources earlier in this toolkit!

? What are aspects of my identity or areas of my life that I have privilege? How does my privilege intersect with my prevention work?

? How can I use my privilege to help change the norms, traditions, laws, and policies that uphold violence and oppression?

? What are aspects of my identity or areas of my life where I experience oppression or marginalization? How does this intersect with my prevention work?

? When I experience oppression or discrimination in the context of prevention work, how do I take care of myself afterwards? Who can I ask for support?

? What boundaries (if any) have I drawn, or would I like to draw, around my prevention work so that I reduce my experiences of discrimination or oppression? For example, are there specific communities I need to put boundaries on contact with?

SUSTAINABLE ACTIVISM

Sometimes societal and structural forces can feel overwhelming; it's hard to think about how we'll be able to change these massive systems. Engaging in activism can be an empowering way to make change and think about how your voice makes a difference. Different forms of activism are more or less life-enriching for different people.

Attend a community or organizational meeting for an organization I care about

Sign a petition for a cause important to me

Give a one-time donation to a cause I care about

Set up a monthly small (~\$5) donation to an organization I care about

Bring or cook food for an organizational event I care about

Volunteer my time to an organization I care about

Ask a friend to tell me about a cause that's important to them

Learn about legislative efforts in my state

Write a letter to a state or national legislator in support of/opposition to a bill

Attend a rally, protest, or demonstration

Research which local markets or shops are owned by people of color, women, or other marginalized groups and support them when possible

Sign up to canvass or block-walk for a candidate or a cause

Research current information and movements for a social cause I don't know much about yet

Use social media to raise awareness about a cause I care about

Make a donation on behalf of a friend/family member for their birthday or a holiday

Read a book about a historical movement for change

Get coffee or go on a walk with an activist friend I care about and tell them how much they mean to me

MAKING A PLAN

Engaging in activism can be enriching, but it can also be challenging or draining at times. How often can you sustainably engage? How will you make time? What clues will tell you that you need to change the type of activism you're engaging in, or the frequency?

Q How many times a week/month/year would like to engage in activism? How will you know you've met your goal?

A Your Answer:

Q How will you track your progress? Who can you ask to help hold you accountable, and how?

A Your Answer:

REMEMBER:

It's ok to revisit and revise your goals along the way! Give yourself permission to try a different type of activism if you want or need. If you become stressed or overwhelmed trying to meet your goal, change it!

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

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When I'm at my best and most balanced in both my professional and personal life, what do I notice? What does "being at my best" look and feel like?

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When I'm starting to experience some burnout, compassion fatigue, or vicarious trauma, these are things I might notice about myself:

?

Ways that I already take care of myself or sustain myself that are working well:

?

People and resources that help me take care of and sustain myself:

SOURCES AND RESOURCES

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