

The Health of a Trainer

By Celia Kutz, celia@trainingforchange.org

Lately there's been a buzz on the internet from many U.S. activists about the way self-care is thought about in movement circles. I wrote this article inspired in part by my recent study of the Global Somatics Process, a method that uses movement, energy and bodywork to elicit and shift information stored in our bodies. I offer this as a continuation on the topic. Add your thoughts and follow others at [Community Care: A Conversation](#).

Self-care is a buzz word in many activist circles used to describe any number of ways to take care of yourself so that you can stay committed to 'the movement'. Often it's something you go somewhere else to do - on vacations, sabbaticals or retreats. However, taking care of ourselves can happen any time of the day - and it needs to. In a recent workshop I was leading I found myself getting flustered and overwhelmed. I was headed in to the third day and the group was doing fine but I kept leaving preparations to the last minute and forgetting small tasks. I was getting distracted by the inner dialogue and my body was tired of sitting. While participations were practicing in small groups I took the opportunity to think about some of the behaviors and beliefs I had felt during the training so far and why overwhelmed was showing up. After some crying and confusion I was able to see why I was acting the way I was and change my behavior for the rest of the training. Noticing and changing my own behavior during the training was a very empowering experience. After years of practicing noticing my own personal well-being (in my mind, my body and in my relationships) outside the training room, I was able to give myself the self-care necessary during the training so I didn't miss a beat. There are many strategies to self-care that can help any trainer maximize their capacity. I've outlined a few below that I've found accessible and helpful.

Know your Emotional Landscape

There are a lot of ways to do this and I won't mention them all here, but the key is recognizing when emotions show up for you. Are you trying to reach out to a community you've never met before? What happens when you start to get distracted during a meeting? Are you irritated because the same person is still talking? If you've been in a TFC training then you know the next question . . . how did that feel? Try to notice your emotional response to certain conversations or behaviors. Ask yourself what you're feeling in this moment and stay curious. You're investigating and want to figure out where this feeling is coming from. It takes practice and sometimes it might help to write it out but you will find it becomes easier after a while. Being able to recognizing the emotion you are having and acknowledge it will loosen its rigidity (that frozen feeling you might experience). When you name it within yourself other choices of emotions you could have will surface. You'll find yourself having different options in response to the same experience that use to really annoy you. Sometimes the same behavior happens multiple times before you even notice the emotion you're feeling and sometimes the emotion that comes up is sadness, lonely or grief. It can feel like a lot but practicing knowing your emotional landscape will help when you need to be on task during a packed meeting or stay in the room with a talkative person. Being

able to navigate those moments of discomfort are crucial for building a more diverse, inclusive environment for social change.

Stay Physical

It's been well documented that physical activity supports mental health; your body *is* connected to your mind! However, the impacts of movement extend even further. Frequent and spontaneous movement makes you more creative, innovative and visionary. Not only are hormones like serotonin and endorphins released which supports positive thought and increases energy but frequently moving your body helps stimulate new nerve pathways. Your nervous system is where the mind creates perceptions and interpretations of its outside world - it's where your behaviors and beliefs are created. When you're stuck on a how to ask a sustaining member for an increased donation this year you're probably holding a specific belief about what they'll say. Something as simple as bending down and touching your toes will actually help you discover new beliefs and ways of having the conversation. This happens because moving your body, and specifically your vertebrae, stimulates your nervous system making it possible for new pathways to be found to your brain. Accessing different parts of your brain impacts your capacity to create new solutions. Of course fireworks might not burst in the air with the best idea ever, but you are likely to have new thinking on the issue. As you integrate this practice in to your daily work day it will also creep in to your trainings. When things are heating up or you're feeling lost in the conversation doing even a small movement (stretching your neck or standing on your tip toes) will help you find a new way to approach the situation or respond to a participant. Explore how to utilize the kinesthetic learning channel for yourself by frequently bringing movement in to your daily routine and your role as a trainer.

Find a Mentor

Being committed to social change and movement building is like being in a long-term relationship. You might want an outside perspective at some points during the journey. When you're fighting the voter ID amendment, a proposal in certain U.S. states that would require specific ID's in order to vote, you need people who can see what you can't. There may be patterns of the campaign that are being repeated and reducing effectiveness or past relationships that were built and broken that's keeping some people from the table. Mentors may be able to notice these things or help you identify how to shift tactics in order to move forward. Maybe you are trying to stop the Keystone XL Pipeline, a project that would extract petroleum products from Alberta, Canada and distribute them through the center of the U.S.? While the recent re-election of President Obama might bring hope to winning this campaign there will still be moments of discouragement, despair and hopelessness. Having a mentor can help - someone who inspires you, has enough time and attention to listen to your thoughts and is willing to ask you questions and give feedback.

Asking for mentorship can be hard because it contradicts some of the most commonly held beliefs amongst activists - that you're alone and it's never been done before. But ask anyway. Those limiting beliefs make it difficult to learn from the past and benefit from the way campaigns, struggles and movement issues consistently overlap. Mentors are older or younger than you, nearby or half way

across the world. They can help you celebrate your personal victories or really experience joy or happiness, feelings often marginalized in activists' communities. In the beginning set up clear roles and boundaries with your mentor. Be clear about what you want and why you are asking them. How often do you want to communicate and in what way? What do you hope to gain from being mentored? Mentorship is different than friendship. In mentorship you have specific goals and there is a distinct direction of leadership. If you find you or your mentor want to have a different kind of relationship (friends, lovers, co-workers, etc.) then communicate about that and be clear about when you are being mentored and when you are in that different relationship. Being able to prioritize your own learning by asking for help is all about taking care of yourself.

Conclusion

We can't leave the work of self-care to exercise classes or long weekends. It has to happen in our daily lives; in the trainings or workshops we lead, the protest or press conference we organize and in our personal relationships and immediate families. Practicing every moment self-care helps us stay in the moment and, as a trainer, be ready for what might arise in a group process. When I lead a group I am paying attention for ways to bring out teachable moments however, I get distracted; by my inner dialogue assessing the situation, my body when it becomes uncomfortable or if I can't find the right story I want to tell. All of a sudden I've missed an opportunity or even misinterpreted what's going on. Learning and prioritizing how to take care of myself before, during and after the training helps me notice when I am distracted from training room and when I can change my behavior.

The work it takes to know and love your-self is on-going and there's many ways to do so. Your way will integrate your culture, gender, class background and ability. The challenge however isn't always in thinking of ways to take care of ourselves, it's in prioritizing and making it actually happen. Now is the time more than ever. Integrating small practices in to the way you can know your mind, your body and the wise people in your world will make a big impact on the work you do. If you're in it for the long haul then think creatively about how to use all your resources in order to carry that load.