



Why Black Women Organizers Need to Care for Themselves and Each Other — and How They Can Do It

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#BlackLivesMatter, an international chapter-based, member-led organization fighting systemic racism and violence towards all Black people, took root on social media in 2013 in response to police killings of Black people in the United States. Alyxe, a Black woman in her early fifties, is the executive director of a Black-led nonprofit that focuses on community building and, in 2016, functioned as a chapter of Black Lives Matter. This chapter rarely organized direct actions like the shutdowns of airports or freeways that garnered widespread attention elsewhere. Instead, Alyxe used her twenty years of experience to lead her chapter's efforts to help formerly incarcerated Black men heal. In this work, Alyxe told me about the ways she and her fellow woman organizers had to confront the anti-Black, anti-woman sentiments so pervasive in U.S. society. In response, Alyxe and her fellow organizers sometimes leveraged their own traumas with sexual and physical assaults to ensure the men they worked with would listen to them.

Even as their own experiences are regularly dismissed, Black women also face high levels of stress, relatively high exposure to medical malpractice, high infant mortality rates, and fear for their lives. As they work on behalf of marginalized groups and for themselves, Black women organizers often have to deal with interpersonal conflicts and shortfalls in essential material resources. To cope with routine problems and extra stressors, the Black women organizers I interviewed used ingenious forms of self-care and collective-care. Lessons from their efforts can inform the efforts of other organizers dealing with similar challenges.

Personal Ways to Address Trauma

Self-care, as I came to understand it through my interviews with these women, involves prioritizing one's own physical, spiritual, and emotional needs as a way to heal from trauma. The self-care strategies I identified in my interviews fall into two categories: "band aids," and "practices." A self-care band aid, such as alcohol consumption, serves as a temporary solution to stress. Yet alcohol is a potentially self-destructive band aid that may numb current stress while failing to heal the initial cause of the trauma. A self-care practice, on the other hand, involves an action like expressing one's thoughts through journaling which can, if repeated over time, help address the various moving pieces in an organizer's life and serve as a preventative measure. Broadly, self-care practices include self-reflection and mindfulness, creation, distraction, or emotional release. But without a proper support network of friends and loved ones, self-care efforts tend to be insufficient over the long run.

Creating a regular practice of self-care is a learned process that requires a great deal of self-reflection and, ideally, social support. Alyxe was a member of the first Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity cohort, which focuses on the aspects of the self that make for more sustainable, resilient, and effective Black leaders. This experience taught Alyxe how to think about activities that had previously brought her happiness, rather

than simply reacting to stress with temporary self-care band aids. For example, Alyxe has loved coloring and singing with her family for “all of her life,” and found that incorporating singing and coloring into her daily routine can be restorative. Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity gave Alyxe the tools to begin a stable and financially accessible self-care practice by encouraging her to return to what she already knew about herself.

The Necessity of Mutual Collective-Care

Little empirical research exists on either self- or collective-care, and when popular media outlets discuss these practices they focus solely on self-care. Yet self-care without collective-care is not enough. Collective-care serves the same function, but instead encompasses activities that are neither solitary nor done in isolation. Collective-care includes exchanging stories, venting, writing for a public audience instead of just for oneself, and spending time with people who share similar experiences. Community-centered actions and dialogues need leadership from Black women organizers. So, too, do these organizers need shared, mutually reinforcing healing routines.

Some of the women I talked to described the act of community organizing as a form of self-care, while others told me that organizing created the bulk of the stress they feel. Those who see organizing as a form of self-care stated that healing through this work can only occur when organizers’ needs take priority rather than expectations to engage in self-sacrificing behavior. The pervasive belief that organizers must dedicate all of their time, energy, and material resources to community organizing can make it difficult for highly stressed organizers to create boundaries that others respect. When this happens, effective collective-care practices can include conversations about how the needs of individuals and community are interconnected.

Supporting Self and Collective-Care for Black Women Leaders

To establish effective routines to relieve organizers’ stress, four issues must be addressed:

- **Avoid guilt.** Those served by community organizers must stop expecting Black women to save them. Black women, too, must find ways to avoid feeling they are “letting down the movement” when they take time for themselves.
- **Value wellbeing.** Organizers have to first cultivate self-love in order to feel worthy of taking guilt-free time to care for themselves and each other.
- **Manage time.** Employers should be flexible with time off and organizers should remind each other that a break is sometimes necessary to invest in their own wellbeing.
- **Strengthen social networks.** Friends and loved ones must reach out to their organizer friends and organizers must reach out to each other to ask for support in meeting their emotional, material, and physical needs.

In order to move forward, everyone must avoid the assumption that self-care is only available to organizers with their own material resources. Self- and collective- care do not necessarily require spending money. Instead these practices require that time to breathe that so many of us lack. So if people believe in the work that organizers do, they must be willing to assist with monthly bills and ensure they have a place to sleep and food to eat. Once basic needs are met, organizers and the communities they serve can finally establish regular

practices of self-care and collective-care to release emotional trauma and sustain organizing work over the long-term.