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RADICAL SELF-CARE

MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

Ma'kai Bryant, Cornelius Frederick, Sean Monterossa...as youth justice advocates, our bodies and brains house the injustices inflicted on youth everyday. Listening to others' experiences can result in vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue, conditions common for those working in helping professions and constantly exposed to others' distress. Vicarious trauma may trigger feelings of being tense or "on guard", potentially damaging physical and mental health. Add to this that company cultures are commonly rooted in capitalist ideologies that prioritize work outputs over employee well-being, and advocates are fast-tracked for burnout. For activists of color, these stressors are amplified and compounded by the toll of racism and racial injustices that pervade everyday life and undergird legal systems.

The National Juvenile Justice Network (NJJN) is committed to fostering a culture of wellbeing, which requires unpacking internalized capitalism and white supremacy to build organizations rooted in healing. While much of the conversation around self-care centers on personal practices and coping skills, NJJN is focused on steps organizations can take to create cultures that support their employees as they seek to transform systems. A key aspect of making this shift is learning how white supremacy culture directly undermines self-care and assessing organizational self-care practices within the Network to ensure advocates are supported in caring for their health and wellbeing.

REVOLUTIONARY SELF-CARE

White supremacy pervades our everyday lives: personal and professional. It is impossible to talk about work cultures without examining how colonization and capitalism have shaped our notions of professionalism and success. Nonprofits are not exempt. As a result, NJJN made a commitment to become an anti-racist organization, reorienting our work to not only deconstruct racist structures, but pursue policies that further equity. Part of this work is transforming organizational cultures that are rooted in and perpetuate white supremacy. The 1619 Project's in depth look at the history of America's work culture underscores how white supremacy and capitalism are inextricably tied, rooted in the history of the slave trade.

As such, it is no surprise that the concept of "self-care" has always been "radical" and revolutionary. What originated as strategies to empower people who were institutionalized to "cultivate their self-worth" became a movement led by Black and Brown communities. Black Panther leaders promoted mindfulness techniques and other self-care practices as ways to maintain mental health and wellness while facing incarceration, inequality, and racism.

While self-care has traditionally been thought of as something that individuals are responsible for; deconstructing white supremacist and capitalist structures in our companies requires us to not only assess organizational culture, but to act by implementing structural “self-care” practices.

ORGANIZATIONAL SELF-CARE

When employees are asked about what led to their burn out, they often describe environmental factors such as feeling as though they were placed under unreasonable time pressures, lacked good communication with their managers, were unclear of their role in the organization, and/or they had unmanageable workloads. For professionals of color, these factors may be exacerbated by being tokenized, silenced, or otherwise limited in power.

A critical first step for organizations is to engage employees in an evaluation of your office’s self-care practices. To begin, NJJN recommends The National Center on Family Homelessness’ Organizational Self-Care Assessment (activity 3.3) on page 36 and 37 in the [What About You? A Workbook for Those that Work with Others](#). For further exploration, organizations can also explore The National Council for Behavioral Health’s Organizational [Self-Care Training Activity Worksheet](#), which is trauma-informed and resilience-oriented.

Yet, the best assessments fail if employees do not feel protected enough to speak freely about the organizational culture and what they need. While not exhaustive, [Everyday Feminist](#) shares three strategies that can shift cultures and empower employees: creating a culture of abundance, collective decision making, and community accountability. These strategies can help counteract power imbalances and lay a framework for [anti-racist company cultures](#).

PERSONAL SELF-CARE

While NJJN is focused on transforming work cultures, we support nurturing personal self-care practices too. We know that each person’s ideal self-care routine will be unique. Check out some of the following resources to create your own self-care practice:

- [ART REACH](#) - Caring for Yourself is a Radical Act: Self-Care Guide for Youth Working in Community is a self-care workbook that provides education and guided opportunities for reflection with four weeks of self-care practices to explore.
- Augsburg University has a list of resources pertaining to [Self-Care for Activists](#). This tool includes short toolkits to podcasts, some of which aim to reach activists of color.
- XO NeCole, shared an article titled, [Three Black Women Activists Get Real about Self-Care, Self-Preservation, and Social Change: For Colored Girls Who Need Self-Care when Fighting the Power is a Whole Job](#) where activists share their thoughts on self-care.

WAYS TO ENGAGE WITH NJJN IN SUPPORT OF MENTAL HEALTH

NJJN is committed to creating a healthy community where members, youth, and advocates can thrive. To do that, we must prioritize personal and organizational care practices. Join us over the coming months as we host wellness check-ins with our membership. Conversations will focus on topics ranging from personal self-care strategies to building healthy organizations. At the same time, we recognize that youth in the justice system face many mental health barriers. As we work to create systems where youth can succeed, NJJN is developing a collective platform on mental health in the youth justice system.