



BEING YOUR BEST SELF

Protecting Your
Mental Wealth

YOUTH Lead: A Toolkit for Transformational
Leadership to Support Gender Equality

by CIWiL and ParlAmericas



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This module is part of the toolkit ***“YOUth Lead: A Toolkit for Transformational Leadership to Support Gender Equality.”***

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DISCLAIMER:

This resource, including its written, graphic, and audiovisual content as well as links to external sources, are provided for informational and educational purposes only and not intended to offer or substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Please consult your physician or other qualified healthcare provider you trust for personalised medical advice if you think you may be experiencing mental health challenges. Do not delay or dismiss seeking such professional advice for yourself, or encouraging others to do so, based on anything presented in this resource.



INTRODUCTION

Self-care and maintaining good mental health is critical for everyone. This can be especially true for leaders and advocates of gender equality and social justice, who often juggle numerous tasks and selflessly work long hours in the pursuit of fairness and equality, which can seem like an unending journey. Many tend to experience guilt over any time not expressly spent on social justice efforts, and they press on in the belief that their commitment will fuel them indefinitely. However, this pathway ultimately tends to lead to burnout and long-term stress which can have multiple negative mental, emotional and physical effects on persons. It is time for leaders to prioritise safeguarding their mental wealth.

Being able to sustain the work that you love and approaching it as your full self are core reasons why even the busiest and most dedicated leaders must centre their well-being. Your dedication should not be a justification for why your mental health should take a backseat. Further, leaders in the gender equality space can unfortunately be subjected to additional threats to their well-being in a number of ways, as their work challenges long-standing norms and disrupts existing power balances. Self-care then becomes an important strategy for building resilience and maintaining efforts in the face of such dangers.



We recognise that care has traditionally been in the hands of women, thus prioritising our own well-being is feminist and political.



According to the World Health Organisation, mental health is...



...the state of wellbeing in which every individual realises [their] own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to [their] community.



Read more on this in the introduction to the FRIDA Young Feminist Fund's Happiness Manifesto.



Truly grounding your leadership in a feminist approach requires a commitment to fostering all-around well-being for yourself, your teams, and your communities. Awareness raising and advocacy on mental health and well-being more broadly is also needed. Stigma and misunderstanding continue to surround the topic of mental illness at a societal level, which further exacerbates existing mental health challenges and barriers for accessing support.

This resource has been designed to encourage young women to focus on their own mental well-being – and that of their team members and larger communities – as an integral part of their leadership. This tool does not provide medical or psychological guidance; it presents information and resources that can be used by leaders to advocate for and bolster good mental health. Its content covers:

- Caring for your own mental well-being as a leader
- Supporting the well-being of your teams and communities
- Advocating on mental health

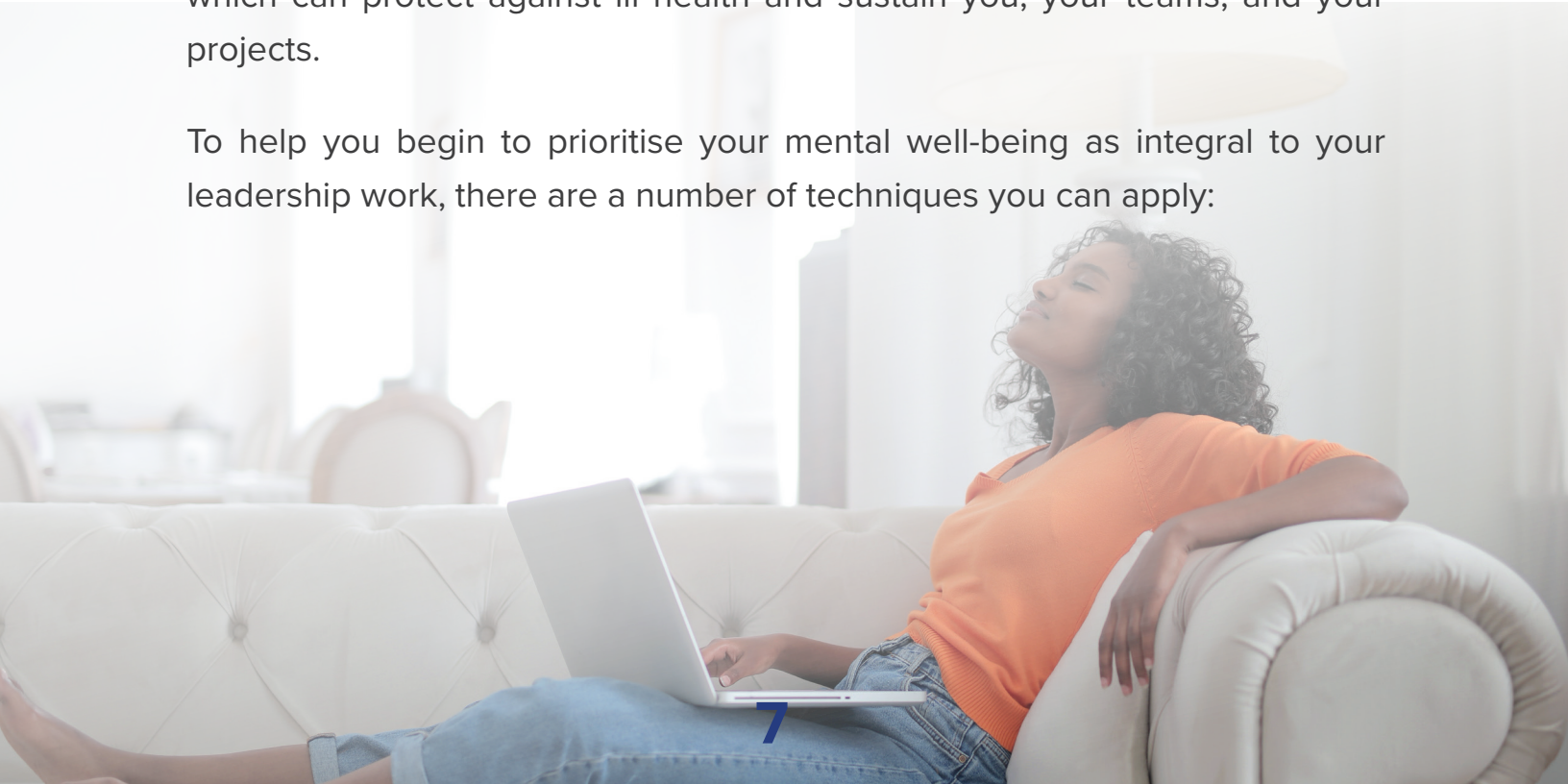
Safeguarding Your Mental Health As A Leader



The vibrancy and effectiveness of any initiative is dependent on the contributions of those involved. To give your best to your work as a leader, it is essential to strike a good work-life balance and prioritise your personal well-being so that you are able to show up as your whole self. It is important to note that rest and self-care are things that all humans should enjoy simply for the sake of rest and self-care, without needing to earn or have a reason for it. However, as this toolkit focuses on supporting young leaders' efforts to advance gender equality and social justice, it will emphasise the ways in which rest and self-care can positively impact your working life and activism.

Collectively and individually, we must acknowledge the flaws in some societal values which idealise overworking and self-sacrificing patterns. Shifting our perspectives on self-care and rest helps us see these as valuable and necessary components to our leadership: they are revitalising measures which can protect against ill health and sustain you, your teams, and your projects.

To help you begin to prioritise your mental well-being as integral to your leadership work, there are a number of techniques you can apply:



Set and maintain boundaries

Write out your values and goals

Think about the traits, actions, and principles that you hold in high esteem and want to hold yourself accountable for.

Record these for yourself and use this as a guide for your decision-making around options and opportunities that arise: Does this align with my values?

How good is your ‘yes’ if you never say ‘no’?

Personal boundaries are “guidelines, rules or limits that a person creates to identify reasonable, safe and permissible ways for other people to behave towards them... Boundaries help us take care of ourselves by giving us permission to say NO to things, to not take everything on. Boundaries draw a clear line around what is ok for us and what is not.”¹

Boundaries can guard your time and capacity and can be applied to many aspects of life in ways that make sense for you. Some examples are provided below but it is important to remember that these are likely to differ for everyone based on their needs and situations:

- Work habit examples: I respond to emails between X and Y hours on weekdays/these days. I commit to x number of events per week/month. I will not answer any calls or messages when I have scheduled time on my calendar to dedicate to an urgent task.
- Personal examples: I prioritise certain types of family obligations when they arise during hours work hours. I regularly block X amount of time in my calendar for my hobbies, leisure activities and self-care.

[This article](#) by the FRIDA team shares further examples of boundaries and self-care practices they model.

Communicating your boundaries with those around you is also key. For others to assist you in maintaining your boundaries, they must know what those boundaries are.

1. [“Boundaries - Why Are They Important?”](#) Ida Soghomonian, *The Resilience Centre*, Sept 23, 2019

Pre-plan moments of self-care as part of your daily routines



Schedule some moments each day that are just for you to do things that make you happy or help you to care for yourself: journaling, meditating, grocery shopping, movement, going outside, reading, seeing a loved one, making health care appointments, etc. Include these in your calendar or to do list, and take them as seriously as meetings or commitments you make to others.

Note that this does not negate the need to listen to and trust yourself when you need rest or care outside of these scheduled activities.

Ask for help



Avoiding overwork and creating space for your mental health can also be aided by delegating or seeking support from trusted colleagues and friends. You do not have to do everything, nor do you have to do anything alone.

Cultivate relationships with a group of trusted advisors you can ask for advice when needed.

For any projects and initiatives, create a team of individuals with similar values to yours and skillsets that complement your own.



Thinking back to the WHO definition of mental health, each of the techniques above should help to give you more quality time for the things you enjoy or need to do just for you. This will help to ensure you are fulfilled and cared for, and will also translate back into meaningful and strategic work.

Reflection prompt:

How do I incorporate rest and self-care into my leadership?

In what areas can I ask for help or give myself grace?

TAKE ACTION

Draw on outside resources and templates to support you in centring your mental well-being.

Examples include:

[Happiness Manifestx \(FRIDA\)](#)

FRIDA's team developed this commitment to self-care at personal and collective levels as part of an organisation-wide reflection exercise on how to live their values as a feminist group. Consider developing your own happiness manifesto, or creating one with your team, as a way to define your boundaries and commit yourself to necessary daily care actions. As a bonus, looking through the artwork in this document can also be a great moment of personal time.

[Wellness Planning Template \(The Audre Lorde Project\)](#)

This template by The Audre Lorde Project can help you to anticipate personal and community needs at various moments and plan for possible supports to meet these. This can be done at a personal or team level and could be used for various events - whether activities you are helping to design and implement, or more personal moments.

[Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide \(WHO\)](#)

The exercises in this illustrated guide by the WHO can help you to ground yourself and cope when you are feeling overwhelmed, or as a preventative practice.

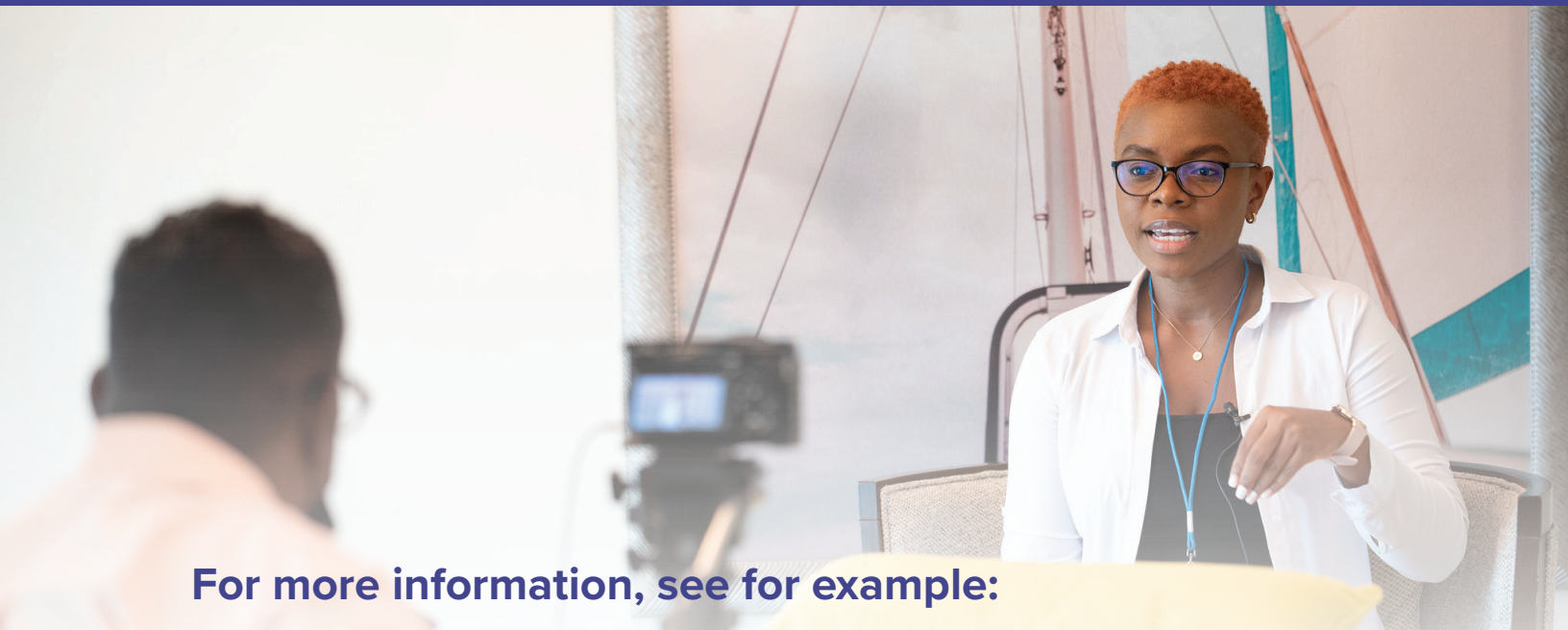
[Self-care Essentials: Resources for People doing People Work \(Tarshi\)](#)

This website shares information on mental health for activists and features a series of worksheets on topics like “warning signs of stress,” “why I do what I do,” and “exploring boundaries,” among many others.

[Self-Care and Self-Defense Manual for Feminist Activists \(CREA\)](#)

This resource contains prompts on pages 47-59 to encourage reflection on your own strengths, weaknesses, and challenges in various areas of self-care (including nourishment, rest, and movement).

Beyond the potential challenges to leaders' mental health that can arise from stress and overwork, it is also important to recognise that online trolling, reproof, and harassment can be distressing realities for many leaders within the gender equality space -- and particularly those who engage in public and social media advocacy. Such backlash is often the result of attempts to silence women leaders or those challenging unequal power relations. This can have a detrimental effect on mental health and also requires additional consideration beyond the resources and strategies listed in this publication to ensure leaders' safety and well-being.



For more information, see for example:

“Backlash: What Is It and How Do We Address It Safely?”

(Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), Feminist Pocketbook Tip Sheet 9, 2018)

“Wellness, Self-Care and Security – Why This Is Important to Feminism” (Katherine Ronderos, AWID, June 14, 2012)

“Women Human Rights Defenders”

A collection of AWID resources

“Right to Be”

Resources on Harassment



Other Resources:

Self-Care Starter Kit (*University at Buffalo School of Social Work*)

Originally designed for students of the program, this series of resources is publicly available and contains tools for understanding self-care and developing a plan to apply it in your own life.

Personal Well-being and Managing Stress for Managers and Leaders: Why Is Mental Health and Well-being Important? (*United Nations*)

This factsheet includes information on the importance of mental health, exercises to assess your mental well-being in relation to your work in particular, and related tips.

Personal Well-being and Managing Stress for Managers and Leaders: How Can You Improve Mental Health and Well-being? (*United Nations*)

In the same series as the above factsheet, this one provides a specific focus on improving your mental health and having a positive impact on that of others in your work life.

Protecting Your Mental Health While Speaking Out (*Assembly*)

This toolkit provides information and resources on self-care for youth activists, incorporating experiences, learning, and recommendations from other young leaders.

Self-care and Prevention of Burn Out Among Activists – Tools for Everyday Life (*Frontline AIDS*)

This resource offers easy-to-use, practical tools and tips to help activists maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Preventing Compassion Fatigue: Honouring Thyself (NRCDV) This webinar recording discusses burnout and compassion fatigue, as well as strategies and techniques to build resilience. The presentation and checklist associated with the webinar can also be accessed through the links provided.

SELF's Guide to Caring for Your Mental Health (*SELF Magazine*)

This compilation of resources on mental health covers a variety of related themes in accessible articles.

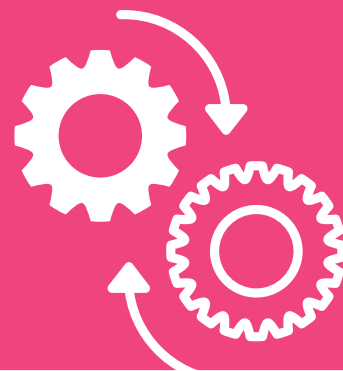
There are also times when the actions discussed thus far are insufficient. It is important to recognise when you are experiencing mental ill-health or caught in patterns of unhealthy thoughts and behaviours. In these instances, it is critical to draw on all the support you can access.

The [database available at this link](#) shares specialised resources – beyond standard national emergency numbers – for each country in the Caribbean to connect with if you or someone you know is in need of professional assistance related to mental ill-health or a mental health emergency.

Disclaimer:

The list available in the spreadsheet is not exhaustive; other services and emergency lines may exist and no programs are being endorsed by being shared in these materials.

Incorporating Mental Health Into Your Leadership



As has been raised by activists in many feminist spaces,² it is insufficient for our commitment to care to be limited solely to ourselves. We must be committed to the collective care of our teams and communities - and encourage this in others - in order to truly transform the systems and practices that perpetuate overwork and exhaustion. There is an intrinsic and reciprocal relationship between the pursuit of self-care and community care. Grounding leadership in these principles will help to achieve broader positive change in society.

Such an approach aligns directly with the goals and purpose that likely motivate those who advance human rights and social justice work. However, promoting proactive efforts to foster good mental health within the teams, organisations, and spaces in which we work can be sidelined. Greater awareness and attention to mental health in our teams and movements promotes well-being for all, invites others to form active support systems for one another, and helps to reduce the stigma around asking for support when in need.

Leaders have a responsibility to create healthy environments that support their team's success and well-being. One of the most important ways leaders can promote a shift in views on care is by modelling the healthy practices in their work and their relationships that they want to see others emulate. This will go even further than advocating for good mental health, as it will reinforce for team members the value of such actions and quell concerns that rest or taking time for other self-care may be viewed as lazy or a lack of commitment. Your dedication to protecting your mental well-being and caring for the well-being of others will encourage your teams to do the same. This in turn can have positive implications for the communities, individuals, and causes you serve.

2. See for example "[From Cultural Change Strategies to Building Communities of Collective Care](#)" (Chitra Nagarajan, AWID, October 17, 2016) and "[Protection, Self-care And The Safety Of Human Rights Defenders: A Perspective of Feminists and Black Women](#)" (Simone Cruz and Jelena Dordevic, International Journal of Human Rights, August 2020)



Below are some additional, concrete strategies you can adopt as leaders to deliberately foster a team culture that prioritises individual and collective care:

Be deliberate and vocal about the importance of mental well-being to help to tackle stigma around this topic ▼

Openly affirm your commitment to care and mental health and ensure this is reflected in any team/organizational/workplace policies, guidelines and manuals that you have a say in.

Offer praise to team members who practice self-care and community care and have compassionate, private conversations about workloads and possible mitigation strategies when you note other team members are in periods of overwork.

Initiate self-reflection exercises at individual and team levels on a regular basis as a way to collectively survey how the group is doing in its efforts to prioritise well-being. Establish priorities and strategies for moving forward in the face of any identified challenges.

Continue your learning on good individual, organisational/team, and community practices to foster collective well-being. Be proactive in sharing resources and available supports with team members through your group chats and in shared spaces.

Recognise those you work with as whole humans, not solely as colleagues or members of communities reached through your work, and leave space to connect on this level³

Ask about and listen actively to what colleagues are willing to share about their lives outside of the primary settings/roles through which you normally interact. Be sure to also respect their privacy and any boundaries they establish surrounding personal information.

Understand that all individuals have different life experiences and situations, which is likely to result in unique and differing needs for all members of your team and in communities you work with. Seek to understand these needs, again by listening actively, so that these are appropriately considered across your work and relationships.

Incorporate the promotion of mental well-being into any projects and activities you are planning

Make use of the “wellness planning” template mentioned previously to facilitate preemptive thinking on the needs of various actors who will be involved in the initiative being planned.

Include agenda items on mental health, feature speakers or facilitators who are mental health advocates, and/or approach themes in a way that emphasises a connection to care for or service to others.

Design activities in a way that demonstrates care for those taking part. Consider individual care responsibilities, set reasonable start and end times and incorporate breaks, serve healthy snacks and meals if this is part of the program, and designate rest spaces where participants can recharge.

3. In the article [Sliding into my DMs. On Checking in and Community Care within Black Feminism](https://alp.org/breaking-isolation-self-care-and-community-care-tools-our-people) (AWID, August 2016), Kagure Mugo emphasises care as a personal act in addition to a political one and explains the importance of this approach. <https://alp.org/breaking-isolation-self-care-and-community-care-tools-our-people>

Reflection prompts

For you:

What kind of leader do I want to be? How do I want myself and others to feel when we work on projects together? How can I make this a reality?

For your team:

What does care mean to us at individual and collective levels? How do we ensure that our work practices and activities reflect these goals? How do we hold ourselves accountable for maintaining these practices?

TAKE ACTION

Consider taking a Psychological First Aid (PFA) training if one is accessible to you. [PAHO](#) noted during the COVID-19 pandemic that “trusted and respected community leaders may already be working as frontline providers of psychosocial support to their communities.”⁴



This type of program may be useful if you have found yourself supporting the mental health of others as a result of your work, or as a means to build your skills in case such a need should arise.

4. *“Seminars for Community Leaders and Hotline Workers on MHPSS in Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean Countries,” PAHO/WHO, Aug 2, 2020.*



Self-care not only ensures the sustainability of the social movements, but is also a politically ethical stance that involves the analysis of working practices and of relationships at the personal and collective levels.



- According to Ana María Hernández Cárdenas and Nallely Guadalupe Tello Méndez, cited in Protection, Self-care and the Safety of Human Rights Defenders: A Perspective of Feminists and Black Women, Simone Cruz and Jelena Dordevic, International Journal of Human Rights, August 2020



The only control we as activists have is the kind of spaces and organisations that we create... As activists, we need [to] start from a place where we assume burnout will happen unless prevented and think of what this means for ourselves, our communities and our organisations.



- From Cultural Change Strategies to Building Communities of Collective Care, Chitra Nagarajan, AWID, October 2016



Other Resources:

Self and Collective Care Zine (Just Associates and Raising Voices)

This resource makes the case for the importance of self and collective care and provides examples of actions we can take – and learn from others – to advance these goals.

Supporting a Colleague: Recognising When Someone May be Developing a Mental Health Condition and How to Support That Person (United Nations)

This resource provides guidance for having conversations with colleagues about their well-being, with scenarios in which they approach you or you approach them.

ActionAid's Ten Principles of Feminist Leadership (ActionAid)

This webpage outlines the principles that guide ActionAid's commitment to feminist leadership. Similar commitments could be used to guide your team's actions and hold each other to account.

Keep Your Cup Full: Self-Care is Essential to Trauma Informed Advocacy (National Resource Centre on Domestic Violence - NRC DV)

This webinar recording builds understanding of vicarious trauma, how this can impact advocates (in particular those working on themes of violence), and self-care and organisational care strategies to respond to related stress.

Hear perspectives on the importance of self-care and how to incorporate this into organisations from **Angela Davis** and **Alicia Garza** (Afropunk), and read related quotes from other prominent activists (Women's Foundation California Resource).

Being A Leader In The Mental Health Space



Beyond incorporating practices of self and community care into your direct sphere as a leader, advocacy on mental health at a societal level is also an important area where young leaders can and do have a critical impact. The topic has received increased attention at the national and global levels in recent years, but mental disorders like anxiety and depression remain prevalent and undertreated:

- The OECD estimates that 15% of the working-age population in the Caribbean and Latin America is affected by mental illness at any given time, and around 56% of people with depression do not receive appropriate treatment.⁵
- Mental disorders are now recognised as the fifth major non-communicable disease and a serious threat to health and economic development.⁶
- The negative impacts of mental ill-health and mental illness are further compounded by stigma and discrimination and insufficient access to treatment, care, and services⁷ which can impact both willingness and ability to seek out support when it is most needed.

Compassionate leadership is important to bring these issues to the forefront, to alter perceptions of mental illness and those who experience it, and to enhance the availability and quality of supports for the many people who want and need to take steps to improve their mental health. Effective advocacy must be grounded in the commitment to collective care discussed earlier, as well as based on an understanding that individuals will have diverse mental health needs and benefit from different forms of assistance.

5. *Health at a Glance: Latin America and the Caribbean 2020*, OECD, June 2020

6. "Investing in Mental Health," Kendol Morgan, CARPHA, CARICOM Today, Oct 14, 2020

7. *Ibid.*

TAKE ACTION

Learn more about the current state of mental health policies and programs, infrastructure, and support services in your country, as well as the initiatives and organisations that are working at community levels to complement national initiatives.

A 2011 WHO-AIMS Report on Mental Health Systems in the Caribbean Region (WHO, PAHO, CIDA) examined the following at a national level across the region:

- Whether countries have mental health policies/plans in place;
- The percentage of the health budget dedicated to mental health and where mental health funding goes;
- The structure of mental health care/systems and how these are governed;
- Whether social insurance covers treatment for mental health disorders;
- The existence of public education and awareness on mental health from government or community levels;
- Related legislative provisions and protections; and
- Available training on mental health for healthcare and other professionals.

TAKE ACTION CONT'D

If you are interested in understanding and improving mental health systems in your country, each of the areas listed above could be potential focuses of your research and advocacy. The WHO has also published a guide on [mental health advocacy](#), which provides information on relevant key concepts (pages 9-16), an overview of important actors (pages 17-21), and solutions for overcoming barriers (page 44) that could provide useful guidance for beginning advocacy work in this area.



Reflection prompt:

Imagine a community that has made a full investment in the mental health of its people. What would this look like? What services and programs would exist to meet the different needs of the population? How would people and the community benefit?

*This prompt was inspired by "[4 Ways to Keep the Momentum Rolling on Mental Health](#)," World Economic Forum, May 27, 2019

Mental health is increasingly a priority at the global level. Governments are reaching consensus on how integral this is to overall health, evidenced by joint commitments like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Such international frameworks can be valuable tools for furthering advocacy.



SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Target 3.4: By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being

WHO's comprehensive mental health action plan 2013-2030

- This action plan was adopted by the 66th World Health Assembly, comprising Ministers of Health of 194 United Nations Member States, in May 2013. Originally adopted to cover the period 2013-2020, the plan was extended until 2030 following the decision of the 72nd World Health Assembly to ensure alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- Four major objectives are set forth:
 - more effective leadership and governance for mental health;
 - the provision of comprehensive, integrated mental health and social care services in community-based settings;
 - implementation of strategies for promotion and prevention; and
 - strengthened information systems, evidence and research.

Regional and international bodies can also be important sources of information on mental health themes. The following are some of the organisations that can be consulted:

- PAHO
- Healthy Caribbean Coalition
- Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA)
- WHO (in addition to the action plan linked above, the organisation has a repository of other resources on mental well-being)

This tool, “Being Your Best Self: Protecting your Mental Wealth” was one module of the toolkit, “YOUth Lead: A Toolkit for Transformational Leadership to Support Gender Equality.”

Find the other modules here:

- [Gender Equality 101: Unpacking Key Concepts and Issues](#)
- [Learning to Lead: Laying the Foundations for Transformational Leadership](#)
- [Leading by Doing: Taking up Space and Driving Change](#)

