

Self Care NOW!: Sustaining Ourselves, Sustaining Each Other

Who hasn't experienced organizing burn-out? In political organizing, art projects, event planning, collective house projects... it's always a struggle to put our time and energy into these amazing projects and to keep our heads above water; to do this work WHILE we are taking good care of our bodies, our moods and our hearts. Finding a balance of time, commitments, hard work, lots of sleep and fun are key ingredients for building a group that will LAST. This is true of any political/art project, but it cannot be emphasized enough in work around sexual assault and abuse. These matters pull at our heart strings, can be triggering, and often make us feel as though every meeting or e-mail is a crisis. Philly Stands Up Collective prioritizes individual self care and group self care. Without these, we'd never be around today with more energy than when we started.

STRUCTURALLY

*Be Strategic. You can gain clarity about who you are and what you do by starting with a strategic and long-term vision. As an organization ask yourself key questions: What is the need we are trying to fulfill? Who do we serve? What do we want to be doing in 6 months? In 2 years? Check out the Philly Stands Up's "Starting a Group? Start Here!" document for a fuller list of questions to ask your group at the beginning.

* Be Clear. As an organization, be concise about what your role and your project is; If you only work on situations locally, it's ok to say "no" to someone from out of town. If your group only gives workshops, don't agree to facilitate a mediation session. The more firm and articulate you are about your mission, skills and capacity, the less energy you will have to put in to rethinking who you are and inventing new resources to offer. You will be less effective if you are constantly trying to change and bend who your group is and what you do, and you will be stressed! It's ok to offer exactly what you can.

*Non Crisis Framework. While responding to instances of sexual assault and violence are community crises, having a more whole framework for your organization will ensure that you have other fundamental projects, goals and successes to anchor you. This could be education, publications, fundraising, or events. If crisis intervention is your sole purpose, your collective/organization will be controlled by specific urgent trauma, while ideally, your organization is grounded and prepared to solidly guide community through crisis instead of getting stuck in it.

ORGANIZATIONALLY

*Have specific meeting times with time limits! It can feel stressful to go to a meeting that may end up lasting for 4 hours. Come up with regular meeting schedules and meeting lengths that you stick to, this way you know exactly what to expect and can better commit to following through.

*Rotate responsibilities. Trade off on who facilitates meetings, who keeps and sends out notes and who hosts or provides snacks. This will give everyone the chance to try and feel comfortable in each role, and will prevent folks from getting bored or weighed down by extra obligations they aren't interested in. This is also a great way to mix up traditionally and oppressive gender roles.

*Record Keeping! The more closely you document your work (meeting notes, workshop outlines, email trails, journal type accounts of decision making and why decisions had to be made, etc.) the less reinventing the wheel you will have to do! It pays to know why a group made large structural decisions, or how the group got out of small logistical binds. It feels really good and empowering to know that you have a lot of the answers to key questions that may come up as your group grows and progresses.

*Prepared for Turnover. It's almost a guarantee that at some point, the membership of your group will change (especially if you are around for a long time!!). Have a system for what happens when old members leave and new members join. Record keeping will help that a lot. When an individual leaves you don't want their knowledge, skills or experiences to leave as well. Have structure in place to move forward with membership changes smoothly so that the work can continue. We like a dinner party with old and new members, where old members can share lots of anecdotes, pitfalls and lessons learned. This is also a great way to honor old members and welcome new members so everyone feels as valuable as they are!

*Internal anti-oppression work. Anti-oppression work is at the crux of all our organizing. Think about how this fits in to your own group. Race. Class. Gender. Ethnicity. Sexuality. Size. Age. Disability. Closely working with a small group of people will bring this up (I mean, hey, everything brings (anti)Oppression up, right?). Have conversations about your overlapping and diverging identities and experiences. Educate yourselves internally so that you can name oppressive dynamics when they come up, deal with them, learn, transform and then move through to continue doing this work.

*Semi closed group. This may not be the answer for every organization in every community, but we find that having a closed group (only active members come to meetings) means that we can build trust much more easily, and it allows our meeting space to feel safe and intimate. It also means you don't have to be constantly negotiating shifting group dynamics. Feeling comfortable and relaxed in meeting space goes a long way to cutting down on stress and remaining present at meetings.

*Check-Ins/ Check-Outs. Start every meeting with a check-in. This lets everyone be real about their energy level. Work was awful? You've got a little bit of a headache? You're waiting for your date to text you back and you can't stop checking your phone? Naming your mood and your capacity in that moment is really helpful for the whole group. Checking-out offers the same thing. How are you feeling? More energized than when you started? Dreading a specific task you said you'd take on? Way more relaxed now that your date finally texted you back? It is also really good practice to take a minute and really think about how you are feeling. Staying in touch with your mood and body is important in sexual assault/violence work.

INDIVIDUALLY

*Making time for Personal Needs. The more whole people we are, the better activists and organizers we will be. Support each other in doing the other wonderful things in your lives. You have a mahjong game on Tuesday night? Got it, we'll send you the notes from that meeting. Kick some ass! It's your housemates' top-surgery benefit party? Holler! We'll come up with a different deadline that works.

*Accommodate different levels of involvement. Make space for members to have capacity for different things. Maybe someone can commit to being at most meetings, but can't do any work outside of meetings. Maybe someone can be present in email conversations, but can't make it to meetings. Things are super busy at work? It's finals at school? Your hot Punk-Bluegrass-Electro-Metal Fusion band is going on tour for 2 months? Cool. We'll be here when you get back. just bring us some t-shirts. The more flexible the group can be for differing levels of

involvement, the more steady your organization will be, the less resentful you'll feel of each other, and the better you'll be caring for yourselves. It feels awesome to be in a group where commitments don't come from a place of guilt or obligation.

*Basic self care. You GOTTA take care. Eat right. Get enough sleep. If you are feeling terrible and stressed, SKIP the meeting and take a bath. If a specific situation of sexual assault is triggering or getting in the way of your own healing process, let your collective members know and help you figure out exactly what you need. There is nothing more important than your own health and stability.

*Fun-Times. Know each other. Like each other. Love each other. This is hard hard work. Don't forget to have a blast with one another. Go get a drink after a meeting sometimes. Get ready for some epic fun on road trip on the way to a workshop/conference. We love a retreat! A weekend away where we can do some big structural building work on our collective and also CHILL. Laugh, play cards, weird parlor games, cook with each other, gossip with each other, serenade each other. You aren't going to get far if you forget to have some honest fun.