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Health

We Need a Revolution

A call for revolutionary self-care
for the young, Black activist

By Stacey Coles

#BlackLivesMatter,

prison reform, environmentalism, women's rights — the list could go on and on. There's a load of issues in the world and plenty of reasons you may feel the urge to join the fight for change. And while it's no cap that activism can be rewarding, it can also have a negative impact on the mental health of some of its strongest warriors. And there are receipts to prove it.

In his book, *Democracy In Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul*, Princeton University professor Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. writes about how Ashley Yates, a cofounder of Millennial Activists United struggled to want to live. According to Glaude, Ashley said there was a time when she was "counting down the hours until I'm going to shoot myself ... Now, it's like ... you can't kill yourself today because ... you've got this meeting, you've got this protest at seven o'clock." In 2016, *The Washington Post* reported that 23-year-old #BlackLivesMatter activist MarShawn McCarrel killed himself on the statehouse steps in Columbus, Ohio. And this past October, the journal *Pediatrics* dropped the results from a study called, "Trends of Suicidal Behaviors Among High School Students in the United States: 1991-2017," noting Black teens were the only ethnic group to have an increase in suicide attempts over those years.

All this is to say that while you're fighting for the world, don't forget to fight for yourself, too. Here's what you can do to protect your energy and mental health while being involved in the movement.

PEEP THE SIGNS

Think of poor mental health as the flu. First, you notice the sniffles, and then the body aches and chills. Now, imagine if you ignored those symptoms and left them untreated. They would inevitably become worse. Aaliyah Nurideen, a psychiatric social worker who specializes in group therapy with teen girls, wants to remind young activists to keep an eye out for the symptoms of vicarious trauma. This "emotional residue" can occur after being constantly exposed to other people's stress; it can also be dubbed "compassion fatigue."

"What you want to be able to look for in terms of the signs that you're having some difficulties personally would be disrupted sleep, exhaustion and fatigue, low energy, lack of motivation, some irritability," Nurideen says. "And really, importantly, a decreased feeling, a decreased connection, and lack of intimate connection with those around you, with some loved ones, with your partner, with your friends."

Also, be aware that a decline in your mental health can screw up your physical health. Physical symptoms can include headaches, appetite loss, and even



heart attacks. Once you know the signs, you'll be in a better position to prevent and/or treat them.

BUILD A FORT

As for prevention, one of the most important things you can do is surround yourself with supportive and positive people. When you're up against a challenge or feeling low, don't

downplay the power of having someone there to encourage you and build you up. "I believe it's important for young Black girls to have other Black women around them to support them through their work of activism," says Marline Francois-Madden, licensed clinical social worker, teen therapist, and CEO of Hearts Empowerment Counseling Center in New Jersey. "It's important for them to have not just Black women,



but Black men, too, that are right there fighting with them for the work that they're doing."

In the field for about 16 years, Francois-Madden warns those fighting the power that keeping their feelings bottled inside can do more harm than good. Don't be afraid to let your loved ones know how you're feeling and what they can do to help you through your struggles. Surrounding

yourself with love and support just may be the best defense against negative energy.

And don't trip if your fort is small, quality surpasses quantity.

Once you've secured your fort, zone in on what you can do for you. Grab your planner, set your alarm, and block out some time for yourself.

Nurideen suggests your self-care practices be the opposite of your activism pursuits. "If you're doing activist work when you get home from school at 3 o'clock until 9 o'clock every, single night, you want to make sure, at least on the weekends, you're doing something fun, something enjoyable," she says. "If you're in isolation most of the time, you want to develop a self-care routine that puts you outside of your house, that puts you in more of a social

environment [and] if you notice that for yourself, you're spending a lot of time outside and a lot of times engulfed in other people's energy and outside stimulation, develop a self-care routine where you're able to spend some alone time and have that one-on-one in solitude with yourself."

Don't get caught in the hype that self-care is just manicures and facials, either. Self-care also includes things, such as exercising, going to the doctor, taking a break from social media, picking up a new hobby, or simply getting some sleep. Do things that benefit you and make you happy.

USE YOUR VOICE

Is it really a self-care "routine" if you don't do it regularly? Uh, no. So, once you develop your plan, stick to it. Speak up and say you need a break. Find a therapist who can help you process the distressing things you witness, stories you hear, and bullying you may receive. Knowing when to take a step back is an important part of being self-aware (AKA peeping the signs) and taking care of yourself.

"Self-care could be you just saying no to people, so you can say yes to you," Francois-Madden says. "I find that when you're burnt out, you're really not thinking about yourself in that moment; or, you feel like thinking about [yourself] and doing self-care, it would look selfish."

But the truth is, you're no good to anyone when you're unhappy, exhausted, or even worse, no longer on this earth.

"If you feel like your compassion fatigue is really heavy, that's when you want to be able to create a balance where you aren't completely available and completely emotionally drained," Nurideen says. Setting boundaries will protect your energy and help create a safe space.

KNOW WHEN YOU NEED HELP

If you're actively feeling suicidal, or know someone who is, seek help immediately. Do not try to face things alone. Visit a nearby emergency room, and once there, you will be checked into a psychiatric unit where you will receive further assistance. Society's problems can wait — your life, however, cannot.

For those experiencing thoughts of suicide, Nurideen recommends hitting pause on your activism for a little while and working with a counselor to develop a more balanced lifestyle.

"We can't do life alone," Francois-Madden says. "Activism is very heavy work ... [and] in the midst of [that] work, [you] still need to play ... [you] still need to just be without having to constantly fight."

**The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24/7 at 1-800-273-8255.*

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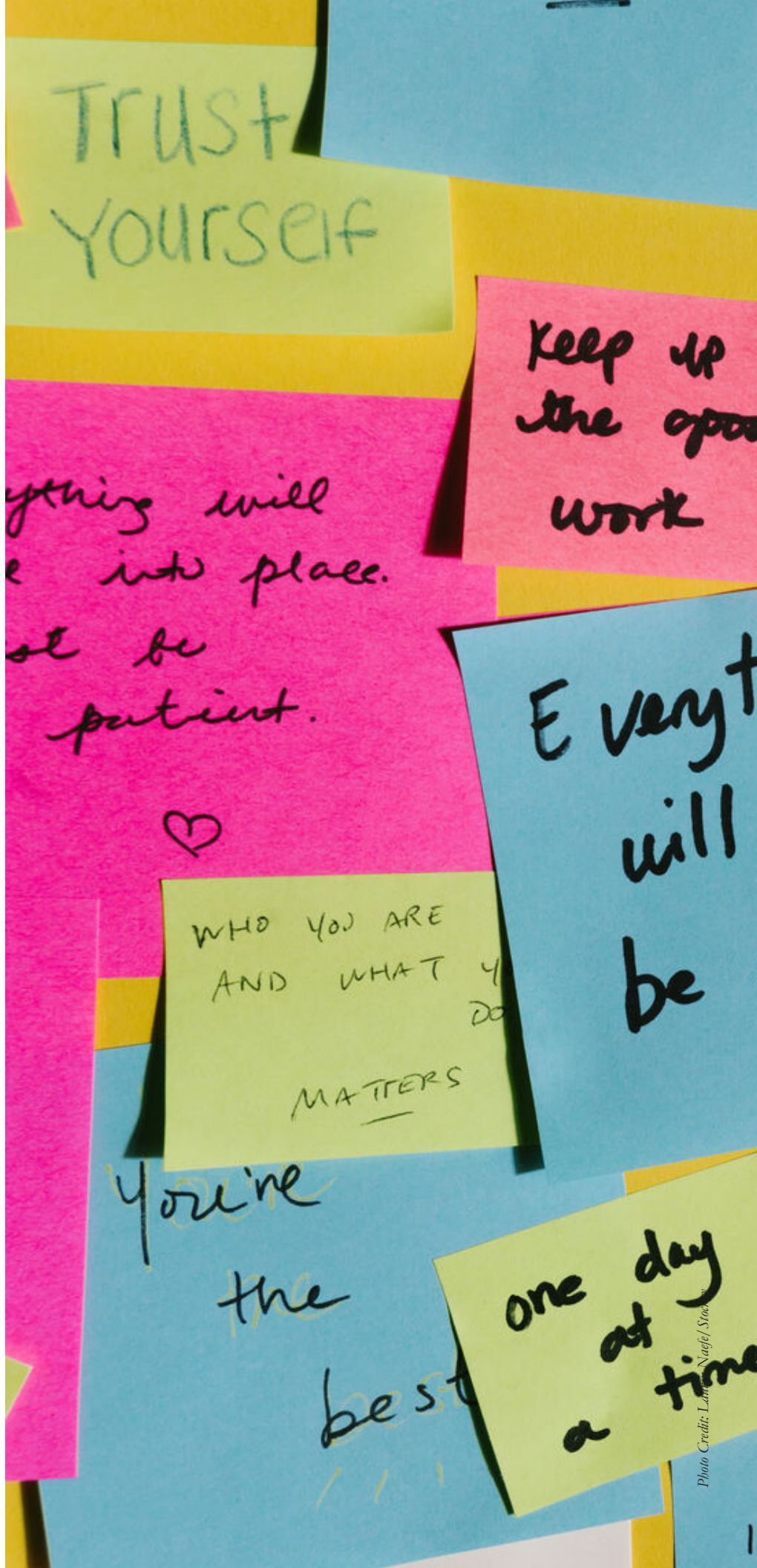


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