PRACTICES FOR A GOOD LIFE

HOW TO HELP OTHERS WITHOUT FORGETTING TO TAKE CARE OF ONESELF IN THE PROCESS
PRACTICES FOR A GOOD LIFE

How to help others without forgetting to take care of oneself in the process

THE HEINRICH BOLL FOUNDATION RUSSIA
FREE HAPPY PEOPLE
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Practices for a Good Life explores the problem of occupational burnout that is often experienced by human rights activists, journalists, employees of NGOs and other nurturant professionals. Besides the theoretical part the book includes a comprehensive “how-to” section encompassing a great variety of body-oriented, reflexive, writing and creative practices that are meant to prevent job burnout and improve the quality of life of all those whose job it is to help others. We recommend this book to nonprofit employees, journalists and activists and anyone who would like to get engage in self-inquiry and introspection and take stock of the (mal)functioning of their daily routines thereby making their lives a bit better and happier.
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THE AUTHOR’S PREFACE

I was part of the very first group of activists that The Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Free Happy People organization brought to a retreat in Armenia. At the time, I felt perpetually exhausted, irritable, and struggled with serious sleep and motivation problems. Back then, I did not know very much about occupational burnout, but I did feel one thing: whatever it was that I was experiencing could hardly be explained by “simply being tired”. I did not know how to help myself because I could not figure out what was going on. And truth be told, I really did not have any energy to deal with any of it, no energy at all to do the actual figuring out.

At the retreat we learned to listen to ourselves and to understand ourselves better. We learned to take care of ourselves without feeling guilty about it. We learned to draw firm boundaries between our private
and professional lives, to separate home and work. We learnt to set ourselves goals that did not necessarily have to be overly ambitious and all-encompassing. We learnt to enjoy the routine, to recharge our batteries and, last but not least, to dream. After three days of mastering rather uncomplicated techniques and practices and talking to therapists, many of the retreat’s participants could finally unwind and do some soul searching, looking within themselves and acknowledging their feelings. Emerging after this three-day experience they were astonished to discover that their absences had not precipitated any major crisis at work and that the world, surprisingly, had not come to an end. My own takeaway from the retreat was not only a clear understanding of the need to reach a balance between my personal and professional selves and that it was perfectly normal to seek such a balance to begin with, but also a few useful practices that I have come to love and appreciate and that since then have grown into a habit. For one, I constantly practice the so-called “body scan” and keep wondering how I could have possibly failed to notice that my sandal straps hurt my feet or that I could spend 30 minutes sitting in a really uncomfortable position.

Initially, we intended this text to be a handbook about occupational burnout and retreats. However, while working on it we got another idea: why not add useful practices that anybody can perform on their own? The Free Happy People therapists shared their favorite all-purpose techniques that are fairly simple and straightforward. Now you can both learn more
about rehabilitation retreats and what they are (once you know more about them you will definitely want to participate in such a program), and help yourself here and now. You can also learn to focus your attention on the specific task at hand, to realize what needs to be changed right now, to figure out what it is that you really want, learn to put yourself in a better mood and even discover how to operate and be in control of your own body.

The project team certainly hopes that each reader will find useful self-care practices for a good life that will work for them and that are certain to bring about a small but tangible change for the better right here right now.

Evgenia Volynkova, social journalist
People working for nonprofits in Russia are used to helping others at the expense of their own health and wellbeing. Russian nonprofits receive little or no support from the government while trying to meet the ever-growing demand for their services, so their employees are forced to overextend themselves, oftentimes without proper remuneration or adequate amount of rest. Our society regards nonprofit employees as super-humans of sorts, uniquely equipped to work in high gear for months on end, infinitely resourceful and able to come up with a solution to any problem. It is commonly believed that it is ok to call a human rights advocate or a charity worker at any time of the day or night and to expect immediate assistance or help. And most of the time nonprofit employees do sacrifice their personal time to throw themselves into the all-consuming commitment that is their job.

Unfortunately, very few people ever pause to consider that nonprofit employees, too, are often in dire need of help. First and furthermore, they need help in helping themselves.

Back in 2015, The Heinrich Böll Foundation and the international network Free Happy People* launched their Sustainable Activism project with the explicit purpose of preventing burnout in human rights advocates, civic activists and social journalists. It is hardly an overstatement to say that The Heinrich Böll Foundation/Free Happy People team was the first to recognize the need to provide systematic help and support to those whose job it is to help others.
The **Sustainable activism** program offered rehabilitation retreats that equip their participants with invaluable skills of preserving motivation and inner resources to continue to give to others. The coaches that work with the activists employ unique techniques many of which can be turned into useful habits and used beyond the scope of this project.

In this small book the Sustainable Activism team offers you a comprehensive discussion of retreats: what they are, what they do and how they work. Our coaches (professional psychologists, psychotherapists and physical therapists) will share some helpful techniques for various purposes that you can practice on your own.

* Free Happy People is an international network of experts and coaches that seek to promote local communities and civil initiatives in Europe, the Caucasus and in Central Asia. Our experts pursue various projects in the field of peacemaking, post-conflict social development, post-trauma, reinforcement of grass-root activism, gender equality and women’s rights.
COACHES AND EXPERTS OF THE SUSTAINABLE ACTIVISM PROJECT

Irina Kosterina, program coordinator of The Heinrich Böll Foundation. As a coach and organizer, Irina works with movement techniques and practices to develop mindfulness and strategic creative planning for the future.

Dmitry Stebakov, clinical psychologist, member of European Brief Therapy Board, co-founder of SFTeam Russia.

Inna Airapetyan, rehabilitation trainer, supervisor, head of “Sintem”, the socio-psychological resource center based in Grozny, Chechnya. Airapetyan specializes in art therapy, body-oriented therapy and crisis counseling.

Olga Khokhlova, psychologist, solution-focused practitioner, psychodrama therapist, co-founder of SFTeam Russia.
RETREATS: WHAT ARE THEY AND WHAT DO WE NEED THEM FOR?

Back in 2014, as part of a sweeping crackdown to silence critical voices, Russia’s parliament amended the “foreign agents” law to authorize the Justice Ministry to register nonprofit groups as “foreign agents” without their consent. The move came as a heavy blow to the country’s nonprofit sector, as its fallout was both reputational and financial. The law was meant to seriously hinder NGO’s work as they were now constantly under the threat of another substantial fine for failing to label their “published or distributed” materials with a marker of their organization’s status. As per usual, the law was notoriously vague as to what exactly constituted a “material”, but the fines for failing to comply with the intentionally ambiguous rules were very high. In addition, every NGO designated as a “foreign agent” was required to undergo an expensive annual audit, which meant that a significant portion of their already small budget had now to be spent on fulfilling the requirements of this very law. Besides draining NGOs’ limited funding the new law also severely undercut the nonprofit employees’ motivation and energy. Many nonprofits were forced to discontinue their operation and to lay off their staff. The “survivors” continued to work but collectively found themselves at the end of their tether: completely worn out and exasperated.

It was then, amidst the turmoil caused by the renewed crackdown on
Russia’s civil society that The Heinrich Böll Foundation launched a special rehabilitation program meant to assist and support staff members of the country’s NGOs as well as journalists in these difficult times.

Irina Kosterina who initiated and spearheaded the project explains: “From the very onset, since its arrival in Russia, The Heinrich Böll Foundation has always supported the country’s NGOs, but mostly in the form of grants and financial assistance that it issued to help implement “green” projects. This is what we were busy with up until the moment the parliament passed the so-called “Foreign Agent” law and started using it as a weapon against the most-active and vocal NGOs. We soon noticed that our partners, the nonprofits we had been long collaborating with, were now demoralized, disheartened, frustrated and leaving the nonprofit sector en masse. The remaining ones were spreading themselves thin, suffering from massive burnout and were generally on their last legs. This triggered a major shift in our modus operandi: we started to push for and implement our own projects and events much more actively than before while still maintaining close contacts and collaborating with many of our partners.”

In 2015, Irina Kosterina came up with an idea of the first retreat for women-partners of The Heinrich Böll Foundation within the framework of the Foundation’s Gender Program. The retreat was designed to help these women to regain professional motivation and to replenish their energy so as to be able to continue their work.
The term “retreat” is used in Buddhism to denote one of the vital practices of the Buddhist tradition: a temporary withdrawal from everyday life in order to practice auto-reflexivity and soul-searching, to reevaluate one’s values and goals and to “reboot” your system. Today, the word “retreat” has gained a really wide currency and is employed in many different contexts, including corporate culture where it has come to denote employee getaways. The retreats designed by The Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Free Happy People team are essentially rehabilitation training sessions or workshops held in different far-away locations, but the word “retreat” has already firmly established itself in our project’s discourse so we intend on keeping it.

“A training session or a workshop means that you have to train certain skills, and a retreat implies leaving your everyday life behind, going to some new unfamiliar place where things happen to you. ‘Leaving’ and ‘traveling’ are both key terms here as it is really important to leave your city or sometimes your country behind and to tear yourself away from the habitual environment and the everyday routine. Work is life’s main purpose and substance for many of those working for the NGOs, so it is often hard to imagine how you can even suggest to these people that they should not use their laptops and phones for some time. Going away allows people to forget about their work for a while, therefore it is really important to provide them with a healing, nourishing space or environment that will help them “disconnect” from the usual concerns and irritants, to stay in
a quite place, in silence, with a very different pace of life,” continues Irina Kosterina.

The first retreat took place five years ago in the Armenian spa town of Tsaghkadzor. The warm-hearted and affordable Armenia was an ideal choice of destination, ticking all the right boxes. The organizers were generally happy with how things went although this retreat was largely an experiment of sorts.

According to Irina Kosterina, it allowed the organizers to get a closer look at what was going on with the Foundation’s partners and what could be done to best help them in their distress.

“We analyzed the life-work balance of many of our participants and found out that many do not have much of a life to speak of besides their professional activities. Participants gave us important feedback about “rediscovering” or “finding” their bodies, and learning to be attuned with and attentive to what the body felt and needed. Back then, it did not occur to me that such retreats could become a regular, systemic thing, but we soon received a request for a retreat meant for human rights activists and advocates operating in the North Caucasus. Having invited participants from the same region we quickly realized our mistake: these people had already known each other and it made it difficult for them to open themselves up to each other and to openly discuss their problems and concerns. This experience has taught us the importance of following a basic principle: we should always invite a single participant from any given
nonprofit organization, making sure that all of them come from different regions and different fields: some are journalists, others are human rights advocated, still others work with the elderly or with animals”, Kosterina explains.

And so gradually, step by step, one retreat after another, a program took shape that was over time becoming more and more attractive, popular and sought-after among those employed in the nonprofit sphere. Through the grapevine people learnt about the retreats, and the organizers received applications from staff members of NGOs and journalists from all over Russia.

“This was when we decided to hold a series of retreats in collaboration with the international network Free Happy People. Over the last 18 months we have held 12 training sessions for about 200 participants. Besides, we are currently testing a new format of online retreats”, concludes Kosterina.
DIFFERENT DEGREES OF BURNOUT

Today the retreats offered by The Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Free Happy People mean three full workdays and a group format. The program’s coaches work with a group of 15-20 people, combining work with mini-groups of two to four people and face-to-face work with an individual participant.
Participants are selected based on their application forms, in which they are invited to tell us about their work and explain why they need to go to a rehabilitation retreat. Ultimately, we assemble a rather diverse group of participants that suffer various degrees of burnout and who have different needs and goals.

The application forms demonstrate in no uncertain terms that journalists and those working in the fields of human rights advocacy or activism and bound to feel at some point that their resources have been depleted and that they are not equipped to be able to replenish these resources on their own. This may prompt some people to discontinue their professional activity and may also irrevocably damage their personal and family wellbeing and health. Applicants talk about the constant feelings of anxiety, despondency or utter helplessness. Many claim that they can no longer find any energy or motivation within themselves not only to carry on working, but also to carry on living.

One such application form reads: “Our social and public commitment that we have taken upon ourselves often feels like such a burden on our mundane existence, that I feel like I am at the end of my rope. I feel like quitting halfway through.”

“Sometimes our psychotherapists realize that the person’s distress is too severe and refer them to a psychiatrist”, says Irina Kosterina. “We have had several participants who would arrive with acute depression or in a really bad pre-suicidal state of mind, but out coaches were able to
detect that early on and to refer them to mental health professionals for personalized care just in time.”

“Popular demand for this kind of retreats for journalists and those working for NGOs has been so huge from the outset that we decided to invite everybody in dire need of access to psychological care”, says the project’s coach Dmitry Stebakov. “It does not really matter whether the person suffers from emotional exhaustion or has difficulty conceiving of a vision of their future. What makes our program unique is the wide range of quests, enquiries, challenges and expectations that people bring to our rehabilitation retreat. Some talk of being emotionally worn-out, drained of energy and define their condition as burnout, others are going through a difficult situation that oftentimes has to do with violence or pressure that they are subjected to.

That is why our training is built around different practices that are not necessarily psychological in nature, but sometimes also creative. Our goal is to open as many doors and new venues to our participants as possible, so that everybody could take home with them some valuable skill, insight, technique or practice. We challenge our participants to experiment and try new things, and we also encourage them to have a say in how we conduct our training and to claim some agency and control over the activities that we offer them”.

“The program that our coaches offer during the retreats is both flexible and gentle, approaching our participants with great care and
sensitivity. It is designed on the basis of the application forms that we receive and the requests formulated therein. For instance, if applicants have difficulty making plans for the future or dealing with stress, we offer participants customized methods and techniques to address this exact issue."

“It is possible to say that participants become co-authors of our workshops and training sessions”, Irina Kosterina suggests. “Our therapists and coaches always follow the needs of the group and adjust their agenda every day depending on what is going on with each participant.”
PAIR WORK

There are different techniques and strategies of leading a workshop or a training session. The Sustainable Activism retreats usually involve two coaches working together. Pair work enables them to deal with 15-20 participants at once (this is a rather substantial audience size for such retreats). Sometimes one particular method cannot be applied to each and every participant or simply does not work for a certain individual, or there might emerge compatibility issues with specific part of the group that does not “click” with this or that coach’s idiosyncratic style, manner or the techniques they use. That is why pair work enables coaches to offer participants a wider range of different styles and practical approaches in order to equip them with the most suitable tools for dealing with their feelings and problems.

“A group might perceive the coaches’ efforts as an intrusion or an encroachment (sometimes even an aggressive one) into its own space”, explains Inna Airapetyan. “It is much easier to take one’s negative emotions out at one of the two coaches than it is dealing with a single coach. When coaches operate as a duo they divide roles between the two of them: for instance, I work through emotions and my colleague works through logic or vice versa. Such division of roles enables us to use a wide range of useful practices. For example, as I conduct drama- and symbol-based relaxation exercise I focus my attention on the
entire group, while my colleague keeps a close watch of the participants’ emotional state, which is crucial for this particular exercise. For another exercise we divide the audience into smaller groups and invite participants to choose one specific approach they would like to work through.

For instance, one mini-group might work with the methods of art therapy, and another one might chose to apply brief therapy methodology to achieve short-term goals’

According to Inna Airapetyan, the main advantage of pair work is the opportunity to receive immediate feedback from your partner. Participants write that this approach allows them to quickly tune in to the group dynamics, familiarize themselves with or explore the space. The coaches’ working in sync unleashes a stronger, more intense emotional response to whatever goes on in the group, helps people express their emotions freer and create an atmosphere of trust. To be sure, this model of pair work can only be effective when the two coaches have already built a relationship of trust, and instead of competing with each other seek to complement each other in the joined pursuit of the same goals. This is the model that our coaches bring to their practice.
HEALING ENVIRONMENT

The workshop’s main elements are networking, healing environment, psychological practices and exercises and post-retreat psychological support. It is important that people come to a place that makes them feel comfortable, so as to be able to shift their focus from struggling with everyday professional agendas to pursuing their own inner goals and solving personal issues.

“We organize dinners, karaoke-parties and outings to facilitate interpersonal communication among the participants. This is what I call ‘networking’”, says Dmitry Stebakov. “As a result a lot of problems get solved through exchange of resources or ideas and through mutual help and support. It is not infrequent for workshop participants to meet partners for future professional collaboration or simply like-minded people whose company they enjoy and with whom they build relationships that are likely to continue outside and beyond the time they spend together at the retreat.

Dmitry Stebakov believes that the main purpose of the training is to launch healing and constructive processes. For that end coaches use a wide range of practices and techniques, selecting the most suitable ones for every training session.

“I typically use around 20 practices”, says Stebakov. “Among them are practices of mindfulness, art therapy, body-oriented therapy,
SOLUTION-BASED THERAPEUTIC PRACTICES AND OTHER METHODS

Psychologist Olga Khokhlova employs a solution-based approach in her work. She talks with participants about their desired visions of the future, the goals and objectives they set for themselves, as well as their dreams, thereby creating a very special environment that enables participants to help each other move towards achieving their aspirations.

“Three days are hardly enough to make a large-scale change possible, but you can start shaping new habits that will bring about tangible improvements in your life”, argues Olga Khokhlova. A lot of what she does professionally is geared towards dealing with stress and the...
impact it has on our wellbeing, so the topic occupies a huge place in her practice. During our retreats she teaches participants how to recognize that you are stressed and how to alleviate or neutralize it altogether by forming specific habits.

Another method that Olga employs in her work is psychodrama.

* Psychodrama is an action method, often used as a psychotherapy, in which clients use spontaneous dramatization, role-playing, and dramatic self-presentation to investigate a given situation, an experience or a feeling from various standpoints and thus gain insight into their lives.
“I was trained as a family systems therapist and have a substantial experience of working with psychodrama. This integrationist approach enables me to “pack” these three days of retreat with a lot information, skills and tools that our participants will certainly find useful after the retreat is over and its many experiences sink in and burgeon”, says Olga Khokhlova. During the retreat participants and I hook up to the resources of different literary or film characters (sometimes we use real people), step in their roles and enact them. The purpose of this role-playing method is to empower people to implement and enact a new role model that they can then apply to their own lives to create change. It allows us to unleash people’s spontaneity and enables participants to reconsider a lot of things in their lives by looking at things from a different angle.

Participants are then able to eschew their usual role models and to start practicing the newly learned skills.

I offer my group many kinds of exercises and tasks that facilitate interpersonal communication by putting people into smaller groups of two, three, etc.

“I am happy when participants start looking at each other and seeing each other, when they begin to interact as it certainly helps to combat the feeling of isolation that is all too often experienced by human rights activists. Once people start talking to each other they find out that a lot of them have similar issues and questions and that they
are not alone in their predicament. This is a hugely empowering and encouraging discovery”, concludes Olga Khokhlova.

There is yet another characteristic feature of our retreats. Once they are over, coaches keep in touch with participants.

“We believe that prearranged, organized communication helps to sustain and test the changes and discoveries that happened during the training session”, says Dmitry Stebakov. “We usually set up a separate
chat for each group of participants that allows them to talk with each other, share their experiences and achievements. Besides, we also organize so-called commitment-groups: smaller groups that allow its members to remain in touch, to call and support each other long after the training session is over.

Certain formats of the practices used during the retreats imply written transcripts of everything that participants say and of the solutions they come up with. I assemble these recordings into a “manuscript”, which I then send to the members of the group. Sometimes we ask participants to share the music that inspires them at a given moment. The result is a soundtrack of associations that I collect and then send back to the participants after the training session is over.

Last but not least, we have a really special format: a composing session. Those willing to take part in this experiment form a music band of sorts and compose a song that we later record however non-professionally right then and there with the help of a smartphone and a laptop. Songs offer a really easy access to the memories and feelings associated with the training session.

This wide array of different formats and modalities enables us to be as flexible as possible in designing and conducting our retreats.”
FEEDBACK

After each retreat participants give feedback that is then thoroughly studied by the organizers. The majority of participants thank the organizers for giving them an opportunity to “make some time for themselves, to look at themselves from outside”, “to recharge their batteries”, “to reboot their system amidst all the tension/the tough daily grind”, “to unwind and relax”. They speak of the need to educate people about the tips, tools, and strategies to help them recover from burnout, about healthy psychological defense mechanisms and how to monitor your general mental state. We do not receive negative or neutral comments: everybody acknowledges the positive changes that the retreat has brought into their lives.

The recurrent theme that runs through the majority of messages that we receive is this: “The event has turned out to be an absolute life-saver to me!” Let us quote some of the feedback that we have received from our former participants to illustrate the effectiveness of our program:

- “The training session has helped me regain some mental equilibrium, brought me peace of mind”;
- “Retreats help save people with leadership qualities”;
- “The training session has reminded me that my life is not limited to the work I do, and that I also have to factor into the equation myself,"
my interests and my desires… This realization is certain to help me become more efficient in what I do professionally”;

• “I am in a really difficult place right now but even so the retreat helped me to tap into something within myself that can become a source of energy and support, something that I can hold on to”;

• “I would recommend this training session to everyone with any sort of connection to human rights activism or advocacy. At work we have to deal with a lot of routine, lots of human emotions, even suffering. These psychological practices meant to help us overcome the consequences of burnout that have been shared with us are absolutely invaluable”.

Participants remark on the coaches’ incredible professionalism and tactfulness, thank them for specific practices and exercises learnt that they have found to be effective in the everyday realities of nonprofit organizations. Importantly, from the many techniques and methods of rehabilitation shown to them participants can choose and apply those that will enable them to systemically combat burnout at work. “The most important thing that happened is that not only was I given a fish, but I was also given a fishing rod which will help me nourish myself in the future”, one of the participants wrote. All our respondents stress the importance of repeating such workshops and meetings “in the nearest future, before we bounced back to burning out at work”, “A single retreat is not enough, what’s needed is a long-term systemic
commitment”, “my biggest request is for making this training session longer, three days were not enough for a retreat”.

The usefulness and effectiveness of retreats are buttressed by participant's responses that claim that they have managed to find solutions to the problems that previously appeared unsolvable. They succeeded in regaining faith in themselves and in the importance of their jobs, to find a source of energy within: “We are many, we are strong, there is a higher purpose to what we do”.
UNSUPERVISED INDIVIDUAL WORK

Every coach has their own set of methods and practices ranging from body-oriented practices and mindfulness practices, to the practices focused on the past, present and future, on the search for resources, working through your goals and formulating useful habits for a better, happier life.

Some of these exercises, techniques and methods can be practices exclusively under close supervision of a therapist. Others, however, can be practiced on your own. Below you will find plenty of exercises devised by our project’ coaches that you will be able to use independently in your everyday life. Select practices based on your personal needs and follow the instructions offered by the therapists. We do hope that they will help you feel at least a little bit better and soon!

These little drawings will help you distinguish among different kinds of practices and figure out the time you need to perform them.

NB!

Body practices
Reflexive practice
Written practice
Creative practice
Time
DMITRY STEBAKOV’S PRACTICES

“People working for nonprofits and in human rights advocacy encounter various problems and difficulties, some of them have a lot to do with the specific aspects of their job and the emotional burnout that it often causes, while others might be rooted in other spheres of their private lives. I see my principle task in improving the quality of people’s lives, restoring their ability to work and having enough energy to do that. To achieve this goal I have to direct their attention towards the quest for solutions to these very different problems. The practices that I offer at the retreat are based on psychotherapeutic methods that have been proven to be effective. They are based on research that explores personal change and what enables these changes to happen. These practices are quite universal and can be applied to a wide range of problems and to the majority of individuals facing them regardless of their actual condition.”
THE PRACTICE OF SELF-INQUIRY
Use it when you need to figure out what works for you in your life (and what does not)

10–20 min

A number of studies have shown that the feeling of wellbeing has a lot to do with how well your everyday routine and your everyday habits are structured and organized. This practice invites you to take stock of your own routine and to be clear-eyed about what goes on in your life day in and day out.

HOW TO DO IT?

These are the key (bullet) points for you to consider when conducting self-inquiry:

• Do you have any compulsory rituals in your life and if so, what are they? (morning exercises, a prayer, morning coffee, an afternoon walk in the park, etc.)
• List your hobbies if you have any
• What is your support network: the people in your life that help you achieve your personal and professional goals
• Do you stick to any enjoyable everyday routine? Are there any things that you do everyday that make you feel better? (e.g. morning coffee, cooking your own breakfast, reading, etc.).
• List your habits that have to do with your body: something that you do regularly that helps you live a bit happier? (taking a shower, taking care of your body, etc.)
• List your habits that have to do with food and eating (cooking by yourself, eating at a particular time every day, having dinner with your family, etc.) What kind of habit do you have in your life?
• Do you pay enough attention to the interpersonal communication within your family or doing something on a regular basis with your family?
• Sites and sights: do you go to any beautiful places? Do you see anything that brings you joy and inspires you?
• The material side of your home: things and coziness. Is the space around you well organized?
• Pets (if you have any) and caring for them: do you manage to find or make time for that?
• A properly-functioning and supporting work routine: what helps you work better and what motivates you?
**Please, answer the following questions and write down your answers**

- Which of the habits and activities that you have or have not mentioned would you like to do more or more often?
- What can it possibly bring into your life?
- What can you do already today, even if this is the most insignificant thing?

The practice of self-inquiry gives you a clear and straightforward snapshot of your behaviors, habits and patterns that bring you particular joy and positively affect your life and wellbeing: if something works better, simply do more of it. It throws into sharp relief the spheres of your life that function well and others that require your attention in order to effect change.
THE PRACTICE OF SELF-HELP IN PROBLEM SOLVING
Use it when you need to see some changes in your life

20 min

This practice will help you choose a particularly challenging and problem-ridden aspect of your life or your relationships, something that you would like to change.
Insoo Kim Berg, a well-known psychotherapist and a pioneer of solution focused brief therapy, formulated several tenets of her pragmatically developed approach to change. Here are some of them:

• **If it is not broken, don’t fix it.** Is something works for you as is do not change it. A lot of the things we do in our everyday lives are there to support and help us and they already have an overall positive impact on our wellbeing.

• **Do more of what is working.** If you have noticed that certain things have a positive impact on your life, it makes sense to do them more often. The key is to notice this positive impact, however insignificant it might seem.

• **If something is not working, quit doing it and try something else.** A dog owner beats their dog if it keeps picking up bones in the street. The beating continues year after year after year. The dog, however, sticks to its nasty habit and keeps picking up bones when walking outside. It does not make sense to continue beating it because the result is bound to be the same, that is: no result whatsoever. Try something else! (for example, try hiring a dog trainer).

• **No problem is forever, even the toughest one sometimes gives you a break.** A well-proven fact: the majority of very tough problems have little glimpses of hope and moments of respite to them: the events or actions that do not fit into the framework of this problem. You can be suffering from a relentless depression but be able to smile
once in a month. Your kid might be giving you a headache, act out and be generally quite insufferable, but all of a sudden the day before yesterday he decided to brush his teeth before going to bed without you even having to nag him about it for an hour first. The ability to discern these tiny events, these glimpses of normalcy and hope when the problem suddenly dissolves if only for a minute is the super-power that you can coach yourself to use in order to enact positive changes.

How to do it?

In line with Insoo Kim Berg’s principles, please, answer the following questions and then observe the problem for a week or two.

• Choose a name for your problem (it can by any name at all).
• Which of your everyday activities and routines work well and do you good? Which of your everyday behaviors support you and serve you well?
• Which solutions to your problem that have you already tried have had any kind of positive effect (even the most insignificant one)? Resort to them more often.
• Which of the things that you do to solve the problem have had no result whatever? Perhaps, you should quit doing them and pause to think: what is going to happen once you discontinue these behaviors?
• Try to find at least one moment of respite, one glimpse of normalcy
in the midst of your problem, something that went slightly better than usually (even if it was only a one-off thing).

• Try to imagine what your day and your life would look and feel like if your problem was to suddenly disappear once and for all? Discuss it with somebody.

**Observation and Experimentation**

• Whatever it is that has a positive impact on your life, however small, try doing it a bit more often.
• Try abstaining from (at least from time to time) those behaviors that do not yield any positive result.
• Ask yourself every day: “What has become a bit better today?” If you can think of nothing, try another one: “What has enabled me to remain in the same place that I was in yesterday?” If things have become worse, ask yourself: “What helps me withstand the difficulties and not lose heart?” If you have indeed become despondent, ask again: “Which of my personal qualities, behaviors and resources enable me to continue to exist in such an impossibly difficult situation?”
THE PRACTICE OF TUNNEL VISION
Use it when you need to focus on a single task and boost your productivity

10–40 min daily

If you ever decide to count the number of times that you get distracted from the single task at hand, if only for a split second, the
result might be frustrating. The practice of single-tasking and a deeply focused kind of work is a challenging skill to acquire, but it is the one that will allow you to boost your productivity, sometimes rather dramatically.

Some people who begin to practice this deep focus while going about both their everyday chores and creative tasks, report having accomplished more in the 30-40 min of focused work than previously over the course of two hours. But what is this practice of deep focus? It is a tunnel vision geared towards the implementation of a single task that puts all available resources of your nervous system at the service of this task. Deep focusing implies instant detection of every distraction, however minor, that might undermine your attention span, and immediate return to the cognitive task. This ability can be trained and it implies two equally important skills: the ability to detect the smallest distraction and the ability to redirect your attention back to the task at hand.

Here are several short exercises to help you develop deep focus.

**How to do it?**

In order to do these exercises you will need:

- a small notepad;
- a pen;
• any kind of professional or creative task;
• a timer.

In order to train your mind to be able to achieve deep focus you have to minimize the range of potential distractions. Turn off the sound of your mobile phone, close social media pages on your computer. Set the timer for 15 minutes and start working on your task. Every time you notice being distracted (even for a short moment), make a note in your notepad. This is what it might look like:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JUNE 21</th>
<th>A 15 MIN-SESSION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Got distracted by thoughts of the upcoming vacation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The door creaked and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hence, the first stage in the training process is learning to notice the distractions. This stage might usually take anywhere between two and three weeks given that you practice every day.

Later on, you will have to gradually increase the duration of the “deep focus” sessions while diversifying the cognitive tasks you choose and keeping to the rules described above.

The optimal duration of a “deep focus” session is 40 minutes. Normally you will be able to perform highly-effective “deep focus” sessions after a month of daily practice.

**Training Program**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>15-min focused sessions, the simplest tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week 2</strong></td>
<td>20-min focused sessions, different types of tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week 3.</strong></td>
<td>20-min focused sessions, different types of tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week 4.</strong></td>
<td>30-min focused sessions, different types of tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Beginning from the Week 4</strong></td>
<td>40-min focused sessions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

THE ‘FAMILY HISTORY’ PRACTICE
Use it when you need to explore your family history to find your answers

30–60 min

Different psychological traditions devote significant attention to the study of family history. Depending on the purpose of such exploration you can tap into resources linked to pleasant memories, bolster and affirm certain narratives that have to do with your ancestral history
(for one, you can explore the inter-generational transmission of certain values and skills) and get a better sense of the evolution of personal relationships across the many generations of your family.

Not infrequently, reflecting on your family history might prove useful in trying to solve an actual problem or remedy a situation. We encourage you to spend some time thinking about certain topics and questions that have to do with the history of your family.

**How to do it?**

For starters, ask yourself a question: “In case my reflection about the history of my family proves useful for my purposes, how exactly am I to understand that, what has to change for me to understand that?”

**Stage one: on your own**

Draw a basic family tree of your family dating two-three generations back, but really as many as you can. The structure, style or the symbols your choose for this drawing do not matter at this point but do leave extra space so as to be able to expand this scheme in case you discover additional information.

Make short biographical notes next to the significant people in your life.
• Mark all the people who are important to you, think about their roles in your life: what have they taught you? What have they bequeathed to you? Why are they important? Are there any remarkable or interesting biographical facts that you can recall?
• Mark all the resourceful people in your family: those who had to triumph over difficult circumstances or hardship, those with stories of success, defiance and endurance, in short: of strength.
• Consider how life has become better and the differences between the younger generations of your family and the older ones. What skills, resources, abilities, qualities, values and life comforts do the younger generations possess?
• Think of your values that are similar to the values of other members of your family.
• Think of your values, skills, knowledge and experience that you would want to pass on to your children (if you already have or plan on having any).
• Who are the resourceful members of your partner’s family (if he or she has one).
• Think of the values, skills and strengths of various members of your partner’s family that resonate with your values, skills and strengths.
• What do you know about the stories of coping, of the problem-solving experiences of the previous generations? What efficient, working problem-solving strategies can you discover in the history of your family? Can these strategies be useful to you today?
• How did your ancestors and relatives across many generations use to deal with life’s hardships? Which strategies have proved to be the most effective ones?
• How do the different generations of your family experience trauma (loss of the loved ones, natural disasters, wars, violence, etc.)? What has been changing from generation to generation? What effective coping strategies do you know and could use?
• Has there ever been anyone in your family who was different, who stood out from his or her environment, someone who chose to do things his or her own way, although others did not necessarily understand or approve of this independent manner? How did this person become so independent? What good intentions were hidden behind such behavior (even if it was mostly condemned by others)?
• In what way does your own behavior differ from the conventions of your family? What are the intentions and what kind of experience underlie this?
• How can your family help you directly right now in solving your current problem? Which family member can offer help/support, and what kind of help and support this is?
• What has changed or shifted a bit while you were considering these questions? What do you feel like remembering and applying to your life?
Stage two: with family members

Think of a family member or members with whom you would feel safe and interested enough to talk about your family history. Offer this person to talk with you.

Show this person your scheme and tell him or her of your findings and your answers. Ask him or her questions.
A lot of people have no long-term plans. Oftentimes our participants would tell us that they are so overwhelmed by their current workload, by what is on their plate at the moment, that they never pause to consider how they would like to be living in five or ten years time, what they see themselves doing in the future. Many may even find it difficult to imagine their own life a year from now! Strategic planning for the future is not only about your job, but also about your heart: what does your heart desire? What does it need? Where does it want to be? I speak with the participants about their mission on this earth, about the unique and important gifts that they have to give to this world. For a lot of people retreat becomes the first ever occasion in their lifetime to pause and consider these important questions.

* Embodiment is an umbrella term for a great variety of body-oriented practices and techniques.

IRINA KOSTERINA’S PRACTICES

“I usually pursue three main lines of effort during the retreats: creative strategic planning for the future, attention and mindfulness techniques, and offer participants body-oriented exercises or embodiment”, Kosterina says.

NB!

* Embodiment is an umbrella term for a great variety of body-oriented practices and techniques.
ART PRACTICE ‘MY DREAM DAY’
Try it if the daily grind wears you all the day down and it is all just one endless Groundhog Day, when you lose your vision of the future and whatever source of inspiration you might have had before

40–60 min

This very inspirational practice allows participants to dream, to think about the important things in life, and to consider how they would like
to improve or even change it. You will need an A3 sheet of paper (or any big sheet of paper for that matter), a whiteboard or a corkboard, old magazines or photographs and pictures (people, travel, cars, home interiors, nature, etc.), scissors, glue, colored pencils, sharpies – anything that will help you make a collage.

**How to do it?**

Sit down if you feel like it, put on some inspirational light music and fantasize: imagine your perfect day in minute detail. It is important for that day to be an ordinary weekday, followed by similar workdays, not a day off or a holiday. How and where does it start?

The morning (or day) comes and you open your eyes. Which country, city or village did you wake up in? What time did you get up? What do you have for breakfast? Where did this food come from, who cooked it – you or other family members? Perhaps, you have hired a cook who comes to your place to prepare food for you or you go to have breakfast at your favorite little street corner café? Or, perhaps, it is a little French village and you have the freshest local produce delivered right to your porch: fresh cream or milk, freshly baked bread and delicious fromage.

Once you visualize the first images you can unleash your creativity: look for appropriate pictures or photographs that reflect your dreams or start drawing on the sheet of paper.
Imagine the material world around you in the greatest detail possible. What kind of house do you have: what if it is a hotel suite, or a yacht? What happens after breakfast? Perhaps, you pet your favorite dog and get ready to go to the office that is located on the embankment, with a beautiful park nearby, or in some hip and sleek office building? What does the office look like? What is it that you do there, what is your job and position? What does your own workplace look like?

Or maybe you are a freelancer working from home when it is convenient to you, so you are at liberty to go for a walk, to work out or chat with your spouse, with your parents or kids before embarking on your work?

Describe your entire day right until the moment you fall asleep (details are important: at what time do you go to bed, what do you do before falling asleep, what do you feel and think about before falling asleep?).
Once you have fantasized your entire day, and drawn and glued the pictures onto the vision board, take another look at that day: do you really like it? Do you fancy the life that you have imagined, in such a setting, surrounded by certain people that you have visualized?

If you do like your vision board, think of the first, however tiny step you could make in reality toward achieving this perfect day of your dreams, a tiny, but real step that you are prepared to make tomorrow, even today.

If someone tells me they would love to move into a new apartment, I suggest they do research into real estate prices in the area that interests you or check with the banks to see what your mortgage options are. If someone tells me that they would like to get a pet, the first step is to google different breeds of dogs and their characteristics or to get in touch with the dog-owners among your friends and ask them about their experience. If you feel like acquiring a new qualification or profession or making more money you have to compile a list of professions and jobs that appeal to you the most and paste it somewhere where you can always see it. You could also google new courses and university programs. Our participants often crave more support and companionship, so you could also make a list of people that you enjoy talking to and would love to see again. Your next step is to pick one person, pick up the phone and arrange to have a coffee together in the nearest future.

This is how your goal is shaped day after day: you get a better sense
of what it is that you mean to achieve in a year or in three years' time.

On the last day of the retreat the coach works with you to put the final touches on that dreamy vision and to crystalize it. Sometimes they formulate the first step that needs to be taken and that becomes the nearest goal for the participant to strive for. Participants plan their immediate actions for the nearest couple of months in order to come closer to realizing their bigger vision and achieving their larger goal.

The format of commitment group works really well for this practice: participants are assigned to smaller groups and have to check on each other once a week, arrange to meet regularly and exchange news of their progress. However, you can also do it on your own: take a minute to contemplate your larger goal and to check it against your innermost thoughts and feelings. Is it still alluring and appealing? Sometimes you might feel like altering it ever so slightly, reformulating it or abandoning it altogether, because it no longer draws you like a magnet. That is how you know that you need to look for another venue to pursue and another goal to visualize.
THE ‘BODY SCAN’ PRACTICE
Use it when you need to recharge your batteries, to take good care of your body and to find resources within it

5–10 min

Body-oriented practices or embodiment play a huge role in the rehabilitation process. A lot of activists and journalist are so used to living in their heads, the sole focus of their lives, that after a hard day filled to the brim with talks, negotiations, articles, interviews and reports, they can almost hear their brain buzzing from overload. It is not easy to regulate this condition and to disconnect from the constant inflow of information. Many people are faced with constant stress and the need to practice multitasking, which is also quite demanding cognitively and intellectually.
To make matters worse, most of us tend to spend our working day in the sitting position: at the desk, in a car, at a meeting, on public commute. Therefore, it is particularly important to remember the other vital part of our being: our body. It is through the active engagement with the body, the acquired habits of body-oriented practices and mindfulness we can switch over, achieve the state of resourcefulness and find strength and support in our own body. The “Body Scan” practice is a basic exercise that works to enhance your mindfulness of your own bodily sensations, such as physical discomfort, for example. It helps you detect early on the signals that your body might send you when it needs help, attention and good care.

**How to do it?**

The scanning can be performed while sitting, lying down or standing, although the basic position is standing with your legs spread shoulder width apart, placing your feet parallel to each other. First you have to feel your feet press against the surface of the floor while your weight is divided between the two legs (you might feel more weight pressing against your left toe or your right heel). Then the lens of your scanning attention starts moving from the bottom to the top examining each part of your body. Listen carefully to your bodily sensations, perhaps, you feel some tension, discomfort, there is some tugging or straining or twitching, you might feel cold, sore, or tight, etc. Feel you ankles, your calves and knees (pause here a little longer to move your knees a bit, to lower and lift your
bent knees just a few inches quickly), then move to your thighs, buttocks and on to the other side of your upper body (stomach, solar plexus, heart and chest). Pause again and feel how breathing impacts your body, how it lifts the chest and widens the stomach.

Now focus your attention on your back (the small of the back, the space between your shoulder blades, your shoulders and neck). Now comes the turn to scan your upper limbs (your hands and fingers, wrists, elbows, arms and shoulders). Your face comes next: the lower jaw, the mouth, the upper jaw, the cheeks and the cheekbones, the left and the right side of your nose, your eyes and the forehead. And finally – the top of your head. The entire journey from the feet to the top of your head will take anywhere between three and five minutes. Afterwards, reverse the bottom-up trajectory of your scanning and move slightly faster backwards, from the top of your head to the lower parts of your body, marking the areas that did not receive sufficient attention last time.

Provided you practice this technique regularly the body scan allows you to quickly check your physical and even emotional state, as well as their impact on your wellbeing and take measures. This acquired skill helps you detect the slightest discomfort and to feel through your body what needs to be changed: check your posture, straighten your back, uncross your legs, ease your tight jaw, loosen the belt which is too tight, let your hair loose, rub your tired eyes, drink a glass of water or eat an apple. Besides, by closely monitoring our body we can return to ourselves every time we get swept into the whirlpool of our thoughts.
THE ‘MINDFUL WALKING’ PRACTICE
Do it when you need to turn a bad mood around and get a better understanding of your body

10 min

Like the body scan, that we have discussed earlier, this practice helps you be more attuned to your own immediate needs. It also exposes certain moods and attitudes that are sealed in your body. Put simply, the practice allows you to manage your body for your own benefit.

You can try doing it at home in the largest room, if the size permits you to take at least eight steps back and forth. You can also do it on the way to work or while walking in a park. Moreover, you can turn the entire process into a fun game, invite others to participate, or rather, to observe your exercising and share their comments later on.

How to do it?

As you begin, walk at your natural pace and try paying particular attention to some physiological peculiarities of your manner of walking: the lifting and falling of your foot, the movement of your arms (which one moves more?), the shifting of the body from side to side, what happens to your head and shoulders as you walk.
If it is hard to observe all that and if you do not have any witnesses eager to help you with their feedback when you practice, you may want to record yourself and watch the video afterwards.

Next, continue walking now focusing on your thoughts and how they affect your gait. Walk the way you would walk when going on a date, and then try walking like you would when coming back from work late at night, utterly exhausted.

Our thoughts influence our body, which, in turn, influences our thoughts as well. If we throw back our shoulders, exhale, lift our head up, smile, relax our shoulders and eyes, then our body will send a message of happiness and wellbeing through our neural networks: our brain “detects” that we are doing fine. This is how we can “cheat” on the neural networks and re-program them. Our mood and mental state follow suit and magically enough we feel way better.

If you feel like you need to leave the anxiety behind, shrugging off all unpleasant feelings or stop the avalanche of disturbing thoughts, you could try doing sports or simply put on some cheerful music and dance a bit.
STALKING YOUR HABITS AND EMOTIONS
Do it when you need to figure out what it is that throws you off balance

_round the clock!

This practice enables you to detect and grasp the reasons behind your different emotional states, their frequency, the context in which they emerge and their triggers. As a result you can weaken their influence on your wellbeing or neutralize it altogether.
How to do it?

I ask participants to keep track of their states or emotions that do not really bother or disturb them a lot but that reappear regularly. Being a stalker means keeping a close watch on your habits. You can monitor your indecisiveness, your fears and procrastination. This habit helps you understand yourself much better. For instance, you now realize why your mood has suddenly turned sour, what has drained your energy and where your inspiration has vanished.

For instance, try to make a mental note during the day each time irritation kicks in. This is my favorite example because I am a highly flammable person, prone to overreacting to small irritants. It took me long and consistent practice to understand these patterns better and to be able to track what causes these knee-jerk reactions before actually lashing out. I get annoyed when people walk down the escalator in front of me really slowly. I get annoyed when people stop in the middle of the road and stare at their phones oblivious to the fact that they are blocking the way. I fume when I do not get a timely reply to an important letter I wrote, setting the task and the deadline by which this task had to be completed. It drives me crazy when my mum sends me three messages in a row each one demanding that I reply straight away, etc. These are rather big and evident triggers, but it takes time to detect them all. However, if you continue practicing
the “stalking” exercise and draw a mental inventory of your triggers and irritants, a week later you have every chance of becoming a real stalking pro fully aware of what pushes your buttons.

This exercise gives you a better sense of what it is exactly that usually throws you off balance, while bringing self-awareness into your life and helping you to keep racing thoughts in check.

It is not that the feeling of irritation subsides completely, but it becomes less acute, which is to say, it affects us less. We start taking certain things (that previously used to annoy the hell out of us!) more lightly and humorously, or learn to react to them in a more constructive way.
INNA AIRAPETYAN’S PRACTICES

- “I often hear from our participants: “my heart sinks”, “a chill lives inside my spine”, “my knees seem wobbly, I cannot stand”. The job done by journalists and human rights activists is filled with stress, pressure and, not infrequently, also with risk. These translate into the fears and anxieties that “inhabit” our bodies. I use diagnostic art-practices to help participants recognize the emotions that inhabit their bodies and to find their bodily locus.

Once people realize what is going on with their body, what emotions are “stuck” in it, in what parts and what events have precipitated these emotions, I offer participants to try different practices from the body-oriented therapy cycle, breathing exercises, relaxation techniques and art-practices.

I am a big fan of art-practices for the incredible diagnostic and therapeutic potential that they have. For one, they are almost painless, and they also provide important resource to those suffering from emotional exhaustion. In my work I often use relaxation techniques and meditations on mandalas. Such meditations help you to unwind, calm down and tap into your own energy resources. This, in turn, restores your creativity and the healing phrase “I can do it!” becomes your motto, which is just great.
At retreats I often set myself the task of teaching people how to activate their capabilities and skills that will later on help them to remain emotionally stable after returning home.

It is important to be able to determine what specific event has put you through this emotional wringer, so that the person could seek professional help after the retreat or work with this event on their own.
A BIBLIOThERAPY PRACTICE ‘A LETTER OF CHOICE’
Do it when you need to find an answer

Bibliotherapy is a creative arts therapies modality that offers rather straightforward and effective tools of helping oneself when you are stuck looking for the right solution. Words have the power to boost your self-esteem, to form an adequate concept of the self, to help you learn to plan your own life. It involves storytelling or the reading of specific
texts, books or paintings with the purpose of healing, but I prefer to use independent writing more than reading.

When a person articulates their problem, shares their worries, problems, anxieties and fears, it alleviates the pain and makes things bearable. Very often in my therapeutic practice I get a chance to see incredibly talented writing produced by those who have never tried creative writing before. I see the incredible healing power that their texts have that takes the sting out of suffering and improves the author’s overall mental state. There are different ways of using creative writing for therapeutic purposes but I prefer the epistolary genre.

**How to do it?**

Try writing a letter addressed to (you have a choice):

- your friend;
- your enemy;
- sickness;
- your boss;
- your girlfriend;
- your colleague;
- your parents;
- your sibling;
- yourself going through a hard period in your life;
• your present self from the nearest future, for example, five years from now;
• your childhood self experiencing a particular situation.

You may not only express your negative feelings and emotions in these letters, but also thank somebody (yes, it can be a thank-you letter, too). You can give yourself some advice based on the experience you have already accumulated, offer guidance, express regrets, make plans, describe dreams, offer help and propose specific actions towards solving the problem or dealing with a situation, and you can certainly refer the addressee to someone who can help. There is only one condition for getting it right: your desire to write such a letter and to analyze it once it is ready. Experience your renewed state of being, acknowledge your new feelings and emotions. You can either choose to give this letter to the addressee, destroy it or keep it and continue writing such letters in the future so that they can later be compiled into a diary of sorts.
WORKING WITH A MANDALA
Do it when you need to calm down and activate your resources

90 min

My work notepads have pages upon pages of doodles between rows of text. Usually these are abstract drawings: squares, circles, coils, spirals and other geometric shapes help me regain focus once my attention is diffused. But why do I feel such an urge to start doodling at a moment like this? I do because drawing allows us to get in touch with the inner self and our feelings, both negative and positive. Creative process unleashes different possibilities and neutralizes tension: we calm down and recollect ourselves, our emotional state improves.

In my work I tend to use a lot of drawing techniques that I have borrowed from art therapy, so let me tell you how I use mandalas.

A mandala is Sanskrit for “circle”. There are ready-made mandalas (see fig. on p. 71), but I prefer to ask the person I work with to create their own designs and circular geometric configuration of symbols and to choose the range of shades to color the drawing.

The process of drawing a mandala can be a highly meditative, enriching personal experience that helps increase our self-awareness. We look inside ourselves, become more attuned with our spiritual being and can better decipher the messages we receive from our inner world.
I use mandalas while working with people who suffer from constant stress and tension, and struggle to concentrate. It also helps those who experience problems with their self-esteem, feel off-balance, constantly afraid of losing control. Mandala can help you manage pent-up annoyance and anger, it is invaluable during crises, when you need to concentrate and focus your attention, activate your state of resourcefulness, find the way out of the impossible impasses that life throws your way and solve psychosomatic problems.
How to do it?

To prepare for working with a mandala you have to find a quite place, where nobody can disturb you for an hour or an hour and a half while you are drawing. The organization of space is crucial for the effective outcome of this practice since a quite, comfortable place devoid of distractions will enable you to get in touch with your feelings. Background music can become a useful aspect of your practice. My personal favorites are Frédéric Chopin’s April or Tenderness Moonlight; it is best to turn on quiet and calm music without any lyrics.

You will need colored pencils, crayons, pastel, watercolors – whatever you prefer, but I would recommend starting with colored pencils (of at least 12 shades). Make sure that your pencils are sharpened. You will also need an A4-size (or even better, an A3-size) white sheet of paper, a graphite pencil and a plate (25-27 cm diameter). Put the plate on the sheet of paper and draw its contours around it with the graphite pencil. Put a dot into the center of the circle. You have now completed the preparatory stage and can embark on your exercise.
THE ‘WHERE AM I? WHO AM I?’ PRACTICE
Do it when you need to calm down and activate your resources

90 min

This exercise helps you reevaluate a situation. Creative process restores one’s balance and serenity by channeling energy into the person’s mental world so that they begin to feel whole, complete like a mandala.

Close your eyes, feel your breath, inhale and exhale slowly several times. Now open your eyes.

Take the piece of paper with a circle and start drawing your mandala. Try not to pay too much deliberate attention to the meaning of the colors you choose. Do not think of the final drawing, work through your current state of mind, through your actual feelings at this very moment. Remember, there are no “good” or “bad” mandalas, each and every one of them is unique and saturated with meaning. No two mandalas look completely the same since they always convey your state of mind, your mental and emotional state at a particular juncture in time so your tomorrow’s mandala might not look anything like the one you are drawing right now.

While drawing, ask yourself questions and ponder possible answers: “Who am I? Where am I? Where am I from? Where am I headed?”

You can start your drawing from any place in the circle depending on your feelings. You have to draw what you feel like. Perhaps, you might encounter some color that you do not really like while drawing, you might
even feel annoyed by it. Such feelings are perfectly normal, simply try to avoid overthinking it too much and let the colors make their own way into your design: trust your feelings and let your hand do whatever it wants.

Once your drawing is complete, look at your mandala and try answering your questions: “Who am I? Where am I? Where am I from? Where am I headed?” You can add a caption to your design, name it or simply put a date on the piece of paper. Important: if you feel like you are not enjoying your drawing, have difficulty answering the questions or are bothered by some fragments of the design, you have to continue working. It is important to create the kind of mandala that once completed is sure to elicit positive emotions and answers at least one question. If you feel that you want to draw beyond the confines of the circle, by all means go ahead: this is your circle and its outside boundaries should not be in any way limiting or restricting to you.

Once you behold your mandala and feel deep satisfaction, your work is done.

NB!

Attention! When working with mandala on your own, it is best to abstain from diagnosing yourself or interpreting your own designs. “Reading” mandalas is a complicated process and requires special qualifications and experience. Should you feel the need for a deeper engagement with your questions through the same or similar technique, please, consult a certified art-therapist.
PRACTICES FOR RELIEVING EMOTIONAL OR PHYSICAL TENSION

The busy lives most of us live today are so high-paced and intense that it is exhausting. We are constantly stressed trying to strike a healthy balance between work and family, studies and other responsibilities. To make matters worse, a wide range of irritants and distractions, such as the news media, advertisements, social media, and the like, vie for our attention 24/7. As a result, many of us perceive stress, tension and fatigue to be integral and inalienable parts of our ordinary everyday existence.

Stress triggers a variety of physiological symptoms: anxiety, sleeping difficulty, loss of sex drive, digestive disorders, nausea, migraines, irritability and nervousness, palpitations, higher blood pressure and tensed muscles.

There are three stages to your body’s reactions to stress and tension. The first one is the stage of anxiety that enhances the body’s sensitivity. It detects the threatening factor and thus tension sets in. This is when your nervous system releases adrenaline and noradrenaline. The second stage is called the stage of confrontation or tension and it engenders noticeable growth of your resources. Your system tries to deal with the menacing factor by releasing stress hormones cortisol and aldosterone produced by the zona glomerulosa of the adrenal cortex in the adrenal gland.
At this stage your system is capable of achieving much higher results than before. The next stage is that of exhaustion. When the person is no longer capable of managing his or her emotional state and tension becomes chronic, it is natural to feel exhausted. Their system experiences a deficit of adaptive energy and intensively draws upon its deposits of vitamins and minerals. As a result your body wears out and falters like any mechanism would. That is why is it important to “fix” the glitches in time.

In order to repair your system inside and out you need to learn to manage stress. If you do not have time to take a day’s trip to the countryside, change the environment or your daily sphere of activity, take on a creative pursuit or afford professional therapy, you can always try simple yet effective exercises. They will allow you to reduce the impact of stress on your everyday life and teach you to manage it. Every person knows very well which ones of his or her physical functions are the most vulnerable and fragile ones and which are usually the first to play up when emotional overload takes hold. That means that you can select the most suitable type of exercise accordingly, taking into consideration your individual peculiarities.

Below we offer you a list of practices to choose from: you are free to select those that make you feel safe and comfortable. Some exercises include alternating moments of high muscle tension and relaxation. Please, note that these are not suited for those suffering from musculoskeletal conditions.
THE ‘COACHMAN’S POSTURE’ PRACTICE

15 min

The so-called coachman’s posture is a relaxation technique. It is used more often than others since it is very easy to perform: the only prop you need is an ordinary chair, a stool or even a box, given it has the right height. Please, make sure that the seat is parallel to the floor and so are your thighs.

The coachman’s position will allow to achieve maximum relaxation and to even fall fast asleep, without fearing that your body goes limp and you flop on the person sitting next to you, as it often happens when you fall asleep on your commute, for example. Dormant coachmen used to take this characteristic pose in anticipation of a rider. The secret of its steadiness is that the weight of the upper part of the person’s body is supported by the relaxed thoracolumbar region.

How to do it

To settle in this position correctly, you need to:
- sit on the edge of your seat, making sure it is directly below the folds of your buttocks;
- your legs are freely spaced;
• calves are perpendicular to the floor, if you still feel some tension in your calf muscle, move your feet 3-4 cm forward until the tension disappears;
• the head is lowered to your chest so that it hangs out on ligaments; your back is hunched;
• swing back and forth making sure that the position is stable due to the equilibrium between the bent head and the hunched back;
• the hands are on your knees, not touching each other, your arms rest on your thighs but do not press on them;
• close your eyes.

Please, pay attention to some likely mistakes:

• if you sit on the entire seat and not on the edge your legs might go numb;
• it is important to place your legs wide apart;
• you have to make sure that your back is sufficiently hunched and your head is fully lowered to the chest;
• do not bend forward too much as it might cause beck pain;
• do not press or base your elbows on your hips.

Settling into the coachman’s posture correctly takes time and practice.
While sitting in this pose, close your eyes, breath deeply through your diaphragm (or your stomach) and feel the relaxation of the muscles along the spine. A feeling of lightness should engulf your entire body. You can amplify that sensation if you imagine that your tongue has gone limp and your head is hanging without any tension. You might feel drowsiness. If you are bothered by extraneous thoughts, remain in the same position and start monitoring your breath, shift your attention to it. You can focus on the breathing and then use your will power to
transport yourself to some pleasant moments in your past, visualizing nice things in your imagination and then shifting the focus of your attention back to the way you are breathing. Remain half-dozing as long as you are enjoying this state. Before terminating the session say a few nice things to yourself that you will have to repeat several times. For example: “I know how to concentrate and stay calm”, or “Tomorrow is a better day than today”, “I can relax”, “I love my body”, etc.

Languor improves the functioning of nerve centers as it communicates the feeling of being well rested. Such technique allows you singlehandedly, without soliciting anybody’s help to get rid of fatigue, ease tension and master the techniques of visualization and self-suggestion. Your system kick starts mechanisms of self-regulation and restoration of distorted functions.

**THE ‘FLY’ PRACTICE**

![Avatar] 10 min

This exercise will help you relieve the tension in your facial muscles.

**How to do it?**

Sit comfortably with your hands resting on your knees.
Drop your shoulders and head down and close your eyes. Imagine a fly trying to land on your face. It is really annoying and tries to sit on your forehead, your eyelids, your nose and mouth. Your task is to get rid of the pesky insect without opening your eyes or changing your position by simply twitching the mimic muscles of your face. If the “fly” lands on your eyebrow, tense and move your eyebrow to shoo it away. Repeat the exercise with other parts of your face.

The exercise should take you five minutes to perform. When the time is up, open your eyes, lift your head and shoulders and feel the relaxed muscles of your face. Repeat the practice one more time if the tension is still there.
RESPIRATORY EXERCISES

10–15 min

Under which circumstances and in which mental conditions do you experience hyperventilation or palpitations? That’s right: when you find yourself in a situation that makes you excessively nervous. By slowing down your breathing you can reverse the process and steady your nervous system.

HOW TO DO IT?

Sit comfortably, you may close your eyes if you want. Feel your breath, breathe normally for two minutes. Inhale through your nose and hold your breath on the count of 1 to 10. Now exhale through your mouth, counting backwards from 10 to 1. Feel your breath, try breathing normally for two minutes. Repeat the inhaling and exhaling techniques, but not more than twice. The flow of oxygen to your brain might cause slight dizziness that will soon give way to steady regular breathing and a feeling of tranquility.
THE ‘ICICLE’ PRACTICE

10–15 min

This exercise will help you better manage the states of muscle tension and relaxation. It is better to perform it while lying down, but you can also do it while standing or sitting down.

How to do it?

I will describe the way to perform this exercise while standing, because you will most typically feel the urge to do it during the day when it is impossible to lie down.

Stand up with your hands raised above your head. Stand in this position for a minute. Now imagine that you are an icicle. Tense every single muscle of your body, remember the sensation and freeze
in this position for a minute or two.

Then imagine that sunrays are making you melt little by little. Slowly and gradually relax your hands, biceps, face muscles, the muscles in your neck, core and legs. Remember this sensation when you are relaxed.

Repeat the exercise several times until you reach the optimal emotional state.
OLGA KHOKHLOVA’S PRACTICES

- People experiencing emotional burnout or its harbingers often need urgent help so that relief comes as soon as possible and so does hope in the feasible and tangible change. The practices that I offer are geared towards triggering the smallest but much wanted changes and do not require much effort to perform them. These practices focus on finding resources and support rather than identifying the problem and its root causes. Yet at the same time it is important to remember that diving deeper into your feelings and experiences brings about important insights and a new perspective on things, so oftentimes it might be useful to discuss the outcomes of your self-reflection with a certified psychologist afterwards.

I tried to select practices that can work for people with very diverse needs and preferences: some people have a highly logical mind, others feel comfortable using images in order to look at the situation from a new angle, still others enjoy body-oriented practices or written practices. Some people prefer to do a quick exercise on the fly, yet others like it when they have plenty of time so that they can enjoy a lengthier process of introspection.
THE PRACTICE FOR REDOUBLING ATTENTION
Use it when you need to find your points of support

This is a very simple and straightforward technique that can be easily integrated into anyone’s daily routine. It is particularly helpful to those who do not have energy to invest in more difficult and energy-intensive practices.
It can become a starting point when you need to shift the focus of your attention, take a broader look at your everyday life, discover smaller points of support and reconnect with your emotional-sensual experience.

This practice activates every modality (sight, hearing, sense of touch, sense of smell) and teaches you to pay more attention to small things, to take notice of them, to listen to yourself and to the emotional response that these smaller things provoke in you. For instance, you can put an object of your favorite color on your desk so that it brings joy and energy to you day in and day out.

**How to do it?**

Focus your attention during the day and observe the things you see, hear, small, taste and touch. Which ones of these many things bring you pleasure and put a smile on your face, at least for a fleeting second? It can be a tasty meal, a balmy breeze, the softness of your favorite tee, some sounds that induce pleasant associations and memories or a pleasant orange shade of your sharpie. Write down a list of these things by the end of the day or simply run that list in front of your mental eye when thinking back to that day. Which of these things should you focus on more often? What can you tweak a bit in your routine so as to be able to enjoy these pleasant experiences more often?
THE ‘METAPHORIC BRIDGE’ PRACTICE
Do it when you need to find a solution

15–30 min

You will need a bit of imagination and pictures (downloaded from the Internet, postcards, cards from the “Dixit” or “Imaginarium” board games, metaphoric associative or projective cards, you name it). Alternatively, you can also use pencils, sharpies or watercolors to create your own pictures.

This practice is meant to assist you in the search for resources by engaging our visual or picture thinking.
Pictures carry their own symbolic meaning for every person who sees them. By working with these visual props we can change the angle from which we perceive a given situation and look for alternative solutions through our intuitive perception of things. This practice is particularly well suited for those prone to and apt at logical reasoning.

**How to do it?**

If you have a set of pictures or a deck of metaphoric associative or projective cards, lay them out in front of you and pick the one that appeals to you the most. If you do not have pictures, close your eyes and imagine a visual representation of your pain, problem or the crisis that you are currently going through. Do not think for too long, let your imagination evoke an appropriate image for you, however illogical it might seem. If you want you could draw the picture you have just visualized or google an appropriate one. What do you feel when you look at it? What do you think of the situation based on the image that you have selected?

Now imagine the second picture that metaphorically embodies your best dreams and highest hopes, your expectations, aspirations and whatever your life would have looked like without this problem. Draw or choose the right picture without dwelling too long on whether it fits your purpose or has anything to do with reality.

What do you feel when you look at the metaphor of your dream? What is the most appealing aspect of this picture that attracts you the most?
Lay out the two pictures so that you can see both of them at once: one on your left and the other one on your right (if you use images sourced from the Internet you can arrange them this way on the screen). Look at both pictures simultaneously and answer the question: what do you feel now that you see both images at the same time?

Now it is time to build a “bridge” between the problem and the preferred state. This bridge will be the means of moving from the problem to its solution. Please, do not think logically, unleash the process of free association and allow your imagination to do its job. What is the first thing that you see when you think of the method that will enable you to achieve your preferred state? Try to get a sense of this image or find it on the Internet, draw it or select from the ready-made cards that you already have. Place that image between the “problem” and the “solution”. What do you feel when you look at these images now?

What actions and small steps appear to be within your reach to enable you to materialize the image your have found in reality?

If you cannot immediately come up with any answers, do not get upset. Save all of the three pictures and revisit them from time to time. Let your unconscious do its job and to actualize your inner resources. You can also install any of the images or all the three of them as a background picture on your phone. Wrapping up this practice try to get a better sense of whether your emotional state or your mood have changed right now.
THE ‘NEW HABITS’ WRITING PRACTICE
Do it when you need motivation to effect change

15–30 min

This writing practice is meant to boost your motivation to effect change and to increase the likelihood of introducing these changes into your life. It creates the necessary conditions for transforming your lifestyle one step at a time, activates hope for change and is designed to structure your ideas about the desired future.

How to do it?

First, think of the habits that you have already integrated into your life and have since seen positive changes as a result.

Now think what kind of habit could prove particularly useful in this period of your life. Think of certain regular activities that could engender positive emotions, bring about positive changes and improve the quality of your life right here and now. Select one particular activity: it can be anything, for example, an evening ritual of writing down every single nice thing that has happened during the day; a 5-minute long meditation in the morning; a practice of taking a different route each day to get to work; a habit of remembering the
sounds and scents that bring you joy, etc. It can be a rule that you follow of terminating all your activities by 11 pm and going to bed.

Think of how you could reward yourself for the job well done; how you could try sharing your feelings with someone whenever you feel deep in the dumps.

**Now write down the answers to the following questions for introspection and self-scrutiny**

- What would you do differently if you had already formed this habit in your everyday life? What else would be different about your life, perhaps, in the areas not directly related to the habit? For instance, if you were in the habit of designating some time for rest in your schedule, how would it affect your regular day, what about it would be different? What would happen in the morning, in the afternoon?

- Who would notice these changes? What would a very good friend of yours say if he or she were to see these changes?

- What would you think of yourself if that habit were to become part of your everyday routine? Write this little message down and repeat it every time you do something related to this habit.

- What can be done today and tomorrow to move one step closer to this habit? For instance, you could google massage parlors in your neighborhood or think of some activity you would like to take up in
your spare time. You could also share your ideas about this habit with somebody and talk this through.

- Mark specific moment in your schedule by which you will have to make this little step towards integrating the preferred habit into your life. If this habit involves certain objects or a particular setting, make sure to take care of that well in advance.

For example, spread your yoga mat out on the floor so that you could simply lie down on it first thing in the morning. Set your alarm clock for the time that you will need to close your notebook and finish work. Hang some reminder on the steering wheel of your car or install a screensaver or a background picture on your smartphone, etc.
THE ‘THREE QUESTIONS FOR A GOOD LIFE’ PRACTICE

Do it when you need to reduce anxiety (and to calm down)

5–10 min

This practice helps shift the focus of your perception from the problem at hand to some positive aspects of the broader context. It actualizes your resources, forms healthy habits and does not take a lot of effort to perform. It is perfect for stabilizing agitation, anxiety and depression.
It is recommended that you perform this practice everyday for at least two weeks.

**How to do it?**

Answer the following questions and write down your replies.

- Which of the things that I have done today make me happy with myself? You can list several bullet points here.
- What are some of the things that somebody else has done today that make me grateful to him or her? What are the things that elicited such a reaction on my part that the person will certainly have to do these things again?
- What are the things that I have seen, heard or sensed today that made me feel gratitude or joy?

You can turn these questions and answers into a kind of evening ritual to be practiced with your partner or children. For instance, you can light a candle on your bedside table (the candle itself will be a reminder of this ritual). You can then ponder and discuss these questions in a candlelit bedroom. Provided you stick to this practice, in due time it will become a soothing, familiar ritual that will help you get in touch with your feelings, raise self-awareness and make your daily experiences more meaningful.
THE ‘FLIP SIDE’ PRACTICE
Do it to feel better about yourself and to raise your self-esteem

10 min

It is a fun and game-like practice that works well for those who are prone to self-criticism and tend to underestimate themselves. It serves to examine your personal qualities and strengths. You can also use it as a game to play with your friends.

HOW TO DO IT?

Use post-it notes to write five qualities that you do not like about yourself and that you often berate yourself for. Write the positive aspect of these same qualities on the flip side of the paper.

Every quality has a flip side to it and the ability to discern it is a very useful skill. For example, “I am a control-freak and cannot relax and let go” is a negative quality. The flip side of it is being responsible and conscientious, the ability to get your act together and manage others. The flip side of “stinginess” is “frugality”, etc. If you cannot reformulate your weakness as a positive quality, ask your friends or loved ones for help.
THE ‘CENTERING’ PRACTICE
Do it when you need to find balance and relieve anxiety

This practice is about working with your body and self-awareness or mindfulness. “Centering” is the technique that helps you press the “reset” button and find balance in order to be able to make balanced decisions and act on them. It also helps to alleviate stress.

HOW TO DO IT?

This practice implies that you successively pay attention to different parts of your body. Stand up and feel your feet pressing against the floor. Notice the
sensations in your feet: which feet can you feel better? Are your feet warm or cold?

Now shift your attention to the stomach area. You have to “loosen” your stomach, relaxing the muscles as much as you can. Next, focus on your cheekbones and your lower jaw. Relax the muscles around the mouth. Now, imagine being a Christmas bauble hung on a tree: the cap and hook are on the top of your hand and you literally are hanging by a thread. Your back is straight, your shoulders are relaxed and the entire skeleton seems to be hanging on the spine. The position of being propped up against your own backbone gives you a feeling of security. Pay attention to how you are breathing, watch yourself inhale and exhale without changing anything about it. Then you have to feel your feet, your stomach, your cheekbones, your straight spine and your own breathing pattern all at the same time. When you try this practice for the first time you might find it tricky, but once you give yourself time to practice it more you will discover that it has become much easier.

The last stage of this practice is focused on your gaze. Try to take a broader look at the room around you, to take it all in in it is entirety. Now think of the places where you feel most at ease and the happiest, or about the people you love. You can practice “centering” before important public performances, functions or meetings, or whenever you feel like the stress has gotten the best of you. It helps alleviate anxiety, to balance and ground you when you need it the most.
Please, note that this exercise will not work unless you practice doing it. First try centering while being absolutely calm, with no stress on the horizon. Later on, once your brain gets used to this sequence of actions, you can try doing it in a stressful situation when you need to press the “reboot” button.
The retreats and workshops discussed above are conducted within the framework of the Sustainable Activism project that since April 2020 has been actively developing online.

We regularly publish on topics related to burnout, stress and fatigue that are commonly experienced by human rights activists, all those working for NGOs and journalists, recommending practices and strategies for avoiding and combating professional burnout.

You can follow our **Sustainable Activism project** on Instagram, Telegram and Facebook and on our eponymous YouTube channel:

- www.instagram.com/sustainable.activism.now/
- teleg.run/sustainableactivismnow
- www.facebook.com/sustainable.activism.now/
PRACTICES FOR A GOOD LIFE

How to help others without forgetting to take care of oneself in the process

Contributing authors:
Inna Airapetyan
Irina Kosterina
Dmitry Stebakov
Olga Khokhlova

Editors:
Evgeniya Volunkova
Irina Kosterina

Illustrations:
Yulia Sirotina

Composition services and design:
Klim Grechka
Practices for a Good Life explores the problem of occupational burnout that is often experienced by human rights activists, journalists, employees of NGOs and other nurturant professionals. Besides the theoretical part the book includes a comprehensive “how-to” section encompassing a great variety of body-oriented, reflexive, writing and creative practices that are meant to prevent job burnout and improve the quality of life of all those whose job it is to help others. We recommend this book to nonprofit employees, journalists and activists and anyone who would like to get engage in self-inquiry and introspection and take stock of the (mal)functioning of their daily routines thereby making their lives a bit better and happier.