Here’s What Therapists Want You To Know About Being Politically Active: You can do anything, but not everything.

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With everything going on in the United States, chances are you’ve been working to stay informed, and maybe even help out in some ways — both of which can take a lot of mental energy.3/16/17 7:23 PM

That might mean going to protests, rallies, and marches, getting involved in local efforts, spending a lot of time on the phone with your representatives, or even just staying up on the constant onslaught of news developments. With SO MUCH going on, it’s easy to get burnt out.

The truth is, though, you’re at your most helpful and effective when you know your limits. So, to help you maintain your mental health while being politically active, BuzzFeed Health talked to the following experts:

• Kameelah Rashad, Philadelphia-based mental health professional and founder of Muslim Wellness Foundation

• Monnica Williams, PhD, clinical psychologist and director of the Laboratory for Culture and Mental Health Disparities

• Andrea Bonior, PhD, clinical psychologist and author of Psychology: Essential Thinkers, Classic Theories, and How They Inform Your World

Here’s what they want you to keep in mind.

1. First, your main goal is to find the balance between taking action and taking enough care of yourself that you’re actually able to work effectively.

You can make a difference, yes, but one person can’t do everything at once. So plan to pace yourself and be in it for the long run. “It’s not as if, if you don’t do something today and every day, you’ll lose the window of opportunity,” says Rashad. “People really get swept up in the momentum, and wanting to do something immediately to counter the feeling of hopelessness and powerlessness. However, it’s not sustainable. It’s like if you’re a runner and enjoy the runner’s high — eventually you’re going to have to rest and sit out a day so your muscles can recover.”

So, start learning the answers to these questions: How can you recuperate? What safeguards can you put in place to make this work sustainable in the long run? How can remind yourself of why this is important?

2. On that note, recognize that self-care doesn’t have to be indulgent and superfluous. Think of it as securing your own oxygen mask before you assist others.

If you can’t get on board with doing it for your sake, Bonior says to think about it this way: “Who would you rather have fighting a battle for you: someone who’s completely demoralized, under-slept, fatigued, not eating well, and stressed to the max [or] someone who is energized and clear-eyed? So if you can’t do it for yourself, do it for the fact that you will absolutely be a better fighter if you take care of yourself.”

Self-care looks different for everyone and is never about one specific action — think about it as an ongoing commitment to looking after yourself and making time for things that rejuvenate you. That said, it for sure involves getting enough sleep, eating healthfully, and making sure you have a strong support system around you. But it also might mean carving out time by yourself to decompress with Netflix, play with dogs, go outside for fresh air, or do anything else that makes your heart feel a little lighter.

3. If you get overwhelmed thinking about what to prioritize, consider where you can actually be most helpful.
If you try to decide what’s most important to you or what cause is most urgent, you’ll probably wind up running in circles — because, well, a LOT of things are urgent and important. You likely also care about multiple causes, and it’s not easy to rank them against one another.

So, instead, be honest with yourself about what skills you have and the opportunities that there are to help in your area. Are you most comfortable making calls? Are you good at creative efforts to raise awareness? Are you in a place to donate? It might even come down to something as simple as choosing a place to volunteer that’s closest to your apartment, so it’s easier to go more often.

“It’s knowing where you feel like you’ll have the greater impact within your own small circle of influence,” says Rashad.

4. **Make specific to-do lists so you can concentrate your energy in productive bursts rather than always worrying about what needs to get done.**

As with any goal, you need to pick specific, reasonable, and actionable steps, otherwise you won’t get anything done. “It’s much more effective, especially for self-care and often for the movement, to be able to say, ‘OK, I’m going to spend 15 minutes a day acting on this in this way’ than to think and worry about it all day with little action,” says Bonior.

If you’re not actively involved in a group to help guide your to-do list, you can check out places like 5 Calls, which send out daily digests of actions you can take.

5. **Set boundaries about how and when you keep up with the news.**

Pretty much the easiest way to stress yourself out right now is keeping up-to-date on everything that’s happening in the news. Obviously, being informed is important and unplugging for even a few hours at a time can feel like burying your head in the sand, but setting up some rules so you’re not constantly exposed to bad, stressful, and even potentially traumatic news is crucial, says Bonior.

What works and is actually realistic will be different for everyone, but Bonior says there are a few ways to think about it:

- **Setting a time boundary.** Limit yourself to certain times throughout the day (like a half hour in the morning and half of your lunch break, for example) so you don’t fall down a vortex of endless scrolling.

- **Making certain places off-limits to news.** Places like your bed or your workplace — just to create safe spaces to unplug.

- **Reading only headlines until a pre-approved time.** Skim news throughout the day so you don’t feel completely disconnected, but save details for later.

- **Catching up on the news via digests at the end of the day.** Newsletters like “What The Fuck Just Happened Today?” or the BuzzFeed News newsletter (shameless plug) put everything in a convenient place so you don’t have to waste time surfing around.

These are only a few suggestions, but you get the idea.

6. **On the flip side, avoid news, media, and people who are genuinely hurtful to your well-being.**

DON’T HATE-READ. It can be so tempting to read comments from trolls, to scroll through that one guy from high school’s Facebook because you can’t believe he’s so bigoted, or to click the link from a radical news site that your friend sent over in disbelief. But 99.9% of the time, it’s not productive and it’s not worth the cost of your mental health.

“It’s important to recognize that a lot of media and news out there can be hurtful and might not necessarily add to your understanding of an issue,” says Williams. This is especially true for marginalized or stigmatized groups right now.

“As a person of color, for example, there are a lot of things being said that we would call microaggressions. I know that I can only deal with so many microaggressions in one day, so I have to pace myself if I’m going to be productive and sane and have a good sense of well-being.”
7. Remind yourself that it’s OK if your strong emotions die down — in fact, you need to let them.

When bad things happen around you, you might find yourself feeling guilty for the moments you feel good — almost like you’re normalizing negative events when you’re not actively sitting in your anger and disgust. But that’s not the case.

“No one can stay in a state of emotional and physiological arousal indefinitely without burning out,” says Williams. “Your body is eventually going to come back down and you may feel complacent at times and that’s OK. If these things are really cherished values, they’re not just going to go away while you think about other things.”

8. Keep your expectations realistic and don’t rely on immediate results to feel like your work is worthwhile.

There might be times when you see that an action you took led to a change — like when Uber CEO Travis Kalanick left President Trump’s economic advisory council after #DeleteUber went viral with customer backlash — but these instances are rare, says Rashad.

“For the most part, activism doesn’t offer immediate gratification,” she says. “And if things aren’t moving at a speed with which you feel content with, it’s very easy to feel impatient and frustrated.”

Without that instant gratification to keep you going, it’s really important to always be having conversations about self-care, mental well-being, and the impact of the work you’re doing. Otherwise, you might become cynical, apathetic, and resentful toward the work and the people you’re doing it with, says Rashad.

9. If this is your first time getting involved in politics in a big way, ease in and focus on educating yourself.

For a lot of people — particularly those who were unaware or unaffected by these particular issues — this is going to be the first time they’ve felt compelled to participate in activism. If that’s the case for you, be aware that you’re not going to know everything, and that it’s OK.

“See yourself as a baby,” says Rashad. “Would you expect that baby to run a marathon? No. You start with crawling, then taking your first few steps. So be mindful of taking a stance of humility, be patient with yourself, and expect to make mistakes.”

That’s not to say you can’t get involved — you should! Look to the people who have been doing this longer for advice on where and how you can be most helpful. Ask questions! That way you won’t burn yourself out going to every protest and rally that comes through your Facebook invitations.

10. Know the signs of burnout — and step back if you’re experiencing them.

Sometimes you just need a break. Look out for changes in your physical health (are you getting sick more often?), your sleeping and eating patterns, your relationships (have you stopped hanging out with friends or found yourself more irritable around them?), and so on. Also, keep an eye out for any depression and anxiety symptoms in general (you can learn more about those here and here).

Another good indicator of burnout is if you’re just feeling, well, defeated. “If you’re putting in the work and are starting to ask yourself, ‘Well, what’s the point?’ that, to me, is a sign you need to sit out, refresh, and remember why you’re doing this,” says Rashad.

If any of that applies to you, don’t feel guilty about concentrating on yourself for a bit. “If you need to step away for awhile, don’t interpret that to mean that you don’t care,” says Williams.

11. If you’re considering seeing a therapist, put in the effort to find one who gets it.

Therapy is never a bad idea, and if you’re someone dedicating a lot of mental energy to political activism, a therapist can be a great sounding board for putting things into perspective and a resource for strategies to help you cope with your emotions day to day, says Williams.

That said, not all therapists are equipped to deal with this kind of work (like the issues of marginalized and stigmatized groups) so shop around to find someone you connect well with. Some of that will be trial and error, but always feel free to ask prospective therapists lots of questions — not only about their backgrounds and approach to therapy, but also straight-up whether they feel equipped and open to talking about politics, activism, and issues that pertain to your ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexuality, etc.
12. Learn to see positivity and playfulness as an act of resistance.

Hold on to the good things in your life and don’t put them on the back burner just because everything else might be demanding more attention.

“We give the opposition more power when we don’t play, when we don’t have fun, when we don’t find the joy and the happiness in life,” says Rashad. “Because then, they’ve taken everything from us. Not only are maybe your rights and life threatened, but your very ability to smile and laugh are also threatened. So don’t give them that power. In the midst of all of this say, ‘I am still committed to playing and to lighter moments and to laughing and smiling and loving.’”