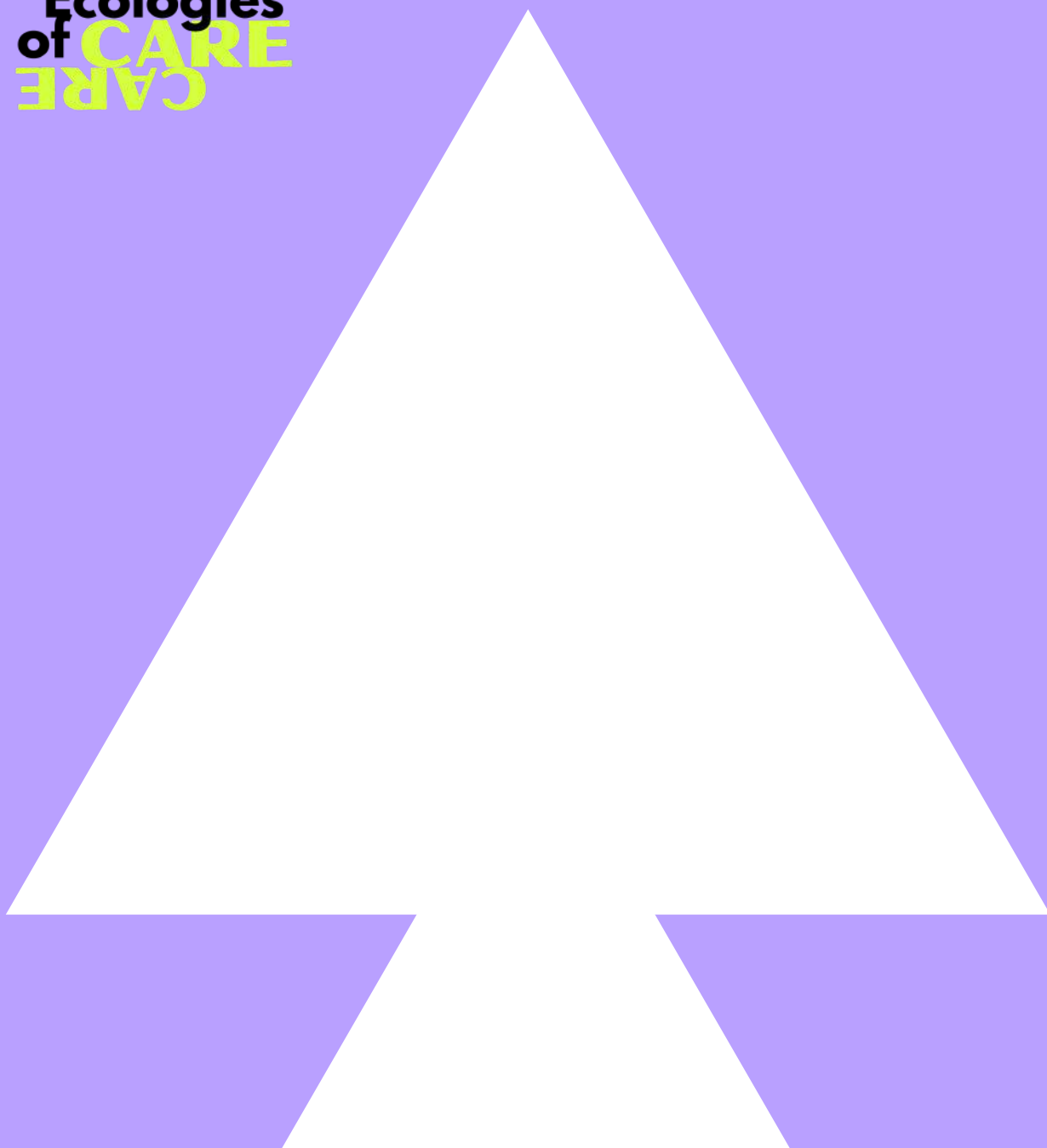


TOOLKIT

How to enhance self-care &
mental health

Ecologies
of CARE
CARE



Ecologies of care: toolkit for self - care

The aim of the project is to reorient care in a socio-ecological sense and redefine it as a practice of resistance. "Ecologies of Care" wants to challenge the dominant models, the lack of time, lack of resources, psycho-physical attrition and fatigue.

Which ecological and social relationships are worth regenerating, and which must be undone to transform the condition of life in the commons? How care can generate other worlds?



Co-funded by
the European Union

The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



This work subscribes to the concept of "fair use". Fair use is a jurisprudential criterion which allows a limited use of protected material without requiring the permission of the holder of such rights, for example, for academic or informational use.

Ecologies
of CARE
CARE

INDEX

Team

Project

Activities



Co-funded by
the European Union

The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



This work subscribes to the concept of "fair use". Fair use is a jurisprudential criterion which allows a limited use of protected material without requiring the permission of the holder of such rights, for example, for academic or informational use.

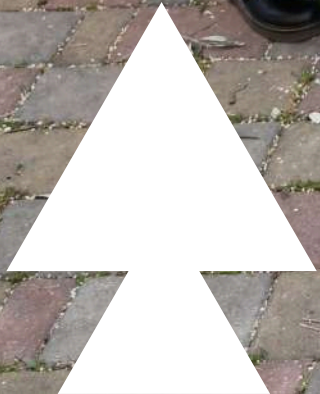


Agenzia Italiana
per la Gioventù



**Ecologies
of CARE
CARE**

Team



These are the people from the organizations who contributed:

Coordination: MOH ETS

Responsible for facilitating workshops, questions to trigger debate and partner review:

- MOH: Isabella Mileti, Francesca Cannone
- ELAN: Veronika Varhegyi, Fleuriane Amghar
- SMOUTH: Despoina Bounitsi, Lydia Pantziou, Garyfallenia Tsinopoulou, Dimitra Zacharouli
- INTOUCH: Vaida Šikšnytė, Dora Djamila Mester

Graphic design

Isabella Mileti MOH



Co-funded by
the European Union

The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



This work subscribes to the concept of "fair use". Fair use is a jurisprudential criterion which allows a limited use of protected material without requiring the permission of the holder of such rights, for example, for academic or informational use.



Agenzia Italiana
per la Gioventù



Ecologies
of CARE
CARE

Ecologies of care: toolkit for self - care

ISABELLA MILETI
Project manager, Youth
worker
MOH



she/her

FRANCESCA CANNONE
Project manager, Youth
worker
MOH



she/her

DORA DJAMILA MESTER
Project manager
In Touch



she/her

VAIDA ŠIKŠNYTĖ
Project manager
InTouch



she/her

DIMITRA ZACHAROULI
Project Manager, Trainer
Smouth



she/her

GARYFALLENIA TSINOPOULOU
Project Manager, Trainer
Smouth



she/her

LYDIA PANTZIOU
Trainer
Smouth



she/her

DESPOINA BOUNITSI
Artist, Trainer
Smouth



she/her

VERONIKA VARHEGYI
Project manager
Elàn Interculturel



she/her

PARTNER



élan interculturel





PROJECT

Ecologies of Care aims to reorient the meaning and practice of care in a socio-ecological sense, reclaiming it as a form of resistance against dominant models that prioritize productivity, speed, and extraction over well-being and sustainability. The project challenges the widespread conditions of lack of time, scarcity of resources, and the psycho-physical attrition that increasingly shape contemporary life, especially for young people. By questioning which social and ecological relationships are worth regenerating—and which must be unlearned or undone—Ecologies of Care opens a space to imagine alternative ways of living together in the commons. At its core, the project asks: what kinds of care practices can generate other worlds? How can care become a transformative force capable of reshaping our relationships with ourselves, others, and the environment?

The implementation of the project is rooted in a combination of research, collective reflection, and creative, educational practices. The first phase focuses on participatory research exploring how young people experience, understand, and narrate their relationships, self-care practices, and sense of community. This research is not extractive, but dialogical: it creates spaces where participants can recognize and reflect on the relationships they inhabit, including those that are nurturing, ambivalent, or harmful. Building on these insights, the project develops a series of activities and training sessions dedicated to emotional literacy and embodied awareness. These moments focus on recognizing emotions, listening to personal and collective wounds, respecting one's own limits, and understanding care not as self-sacrifice but as a relational and reciprocal process.

Alongside this, Ecologies of Care develops a practical toolkit that reframes community as a living network of relationships—human and more-than-human—rather than a fixed or idealized structure. The toolkit supports young people and youth workers in navigating interdependence, conflict, responsibility, and mutual support within groups and communities. Visual and audiovisual materials, including short videos and cards, further expand the project's reach by addressing our impact on the environment. These tools invite participants to recognize how everyday actions affect ecological systems and to explore concrete ways of limiting harm while fostering more respectful and regenerative relationships with the natural world.



Co-funded by
the European Union

The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



This work subscribes to the concept of "fair use". Fair use is a jurisprudential criterion which allows a limited use of protected material without requiring the permission of the holder of such rights, for example, for academic or informational use.



Agenzia Italiana
per la Gioventù



Ecologies
of CARE
CARE

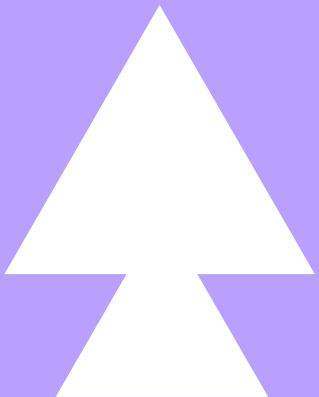


ACTIVITIES

As part of the project, we conducted research on the theme of care, exploring its social, ecological, and political dimensions. The study investigated how care can be redefined beyond individual practices of well-being, framing it instead as a collective and transformative act. By engaging with diverse perspectives and methodologies, the research highlights care as a strategy of resistance, resilience, and regeneration within communities.

The collective research on care redefines self-care as a political, relational, and transformative practice that resists neoliberal, individualistic, and capitalist framings of wellbeing. MOH **highlights care as a transfeminist strategy** of survival and social change, grounded in mutual support, artistic healing, and decolonial practices. SMouTh emphasizes radical self-care as **community-rooted and activist**, with grassroots initiatives in Greece showing care as **solidarity, healing, and justice**. Elan broadens the meaning of **care through language, psychology, and youth perspectives, presenting self-care as both personal and relational**, shaped by identity and social belonging. Intouch, through **dialogical exploration, situates care within embodied experiences, intergenerational ties, and systemic resistance**, portraying it as a practice that sustains resilience and collective connection. Together, these approaches demonstrate that care is not a luxury, but an essential act of resistance, survival, and world-making.





HOW



2. MOH | Research on self-care and mental health

Introduction

In today's context of systemic crises and increasing social fragmentation, self-care — from a transfeminist perspective — becomes a political and collective practice. Taking care of oneself is not a selfish act, but a form of resistance, a way of affirming one's existence and dignity, especially for those whose lives are devalued or marginalized.

In *Ecologies of Care*, Maddalena Fragnito and Miriam Tosi invite us to rethink care not as a private or individual responsibility, but as a shared political act. Care, in this sense, is not romanticized or naturalized, especially not as something inherently “feminine.” Instead, it's seen as a practice of conflict: against capitalism, against heteropatriarchy, and also within feminist movements themselves. In a world that turns living beings and the planet into disposable resources, care becomes a decolonial political struggle, a refusal to comply with unjust rules, to normalize inequality, to remain silent in the face of systemic violence. Similarly, mental health cannot be reduced to an individual or medical issue. As Gianpaolo Contestabile argues in *Psychology of Resistance*, psychological suffering must be understood in connection with social, political, and economic conditions. His work challenges clinical approaches that isolate mental illness from its structural causes, and highlights how collective resistance to oppression can be both healing and transformative. Mental health, in this view, is not just about individual recovery but about imagining and building a more just society.

This vision resonates with *The Care Manifesto*, where The Care Collective proposes an alternative to neoliberal neglect: a care-centered society built on interdependence, solidarity, and mutual responsibility. Against the cult of self-sufficiency and competition, the manifesto calls for care to become a shared political infrastructure — one that supports life in all its forms.

Care as a political act

Self-care is often portrayed as a neutral activity, a matter of wellness routines or personal productivity. But for those living under systemic oppression, caring for oneself is a deeply political act. As Audre Lorde, a black lesbian poet and activist, wrote, taking care of oneself is not a luxury, but “an act of survival.” In contexts marked by systemic oppression—racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, classism—taking care of one's body, emotions, and limits means refusing to be crushed by the world as it is.

From this perspective, self-care is resistance to a system that rewards overwork,

emotional numbness, and silent sacrifice. Transfeminist self-care rejects the neoliberal myth of individual resilience and instead asks: *who gets to rest? Who has access to care? Who remains invisible in mainstream wellness narratives?*

Recognizing how social structures shape personal well-being is essential. Self-care becomes a response to structural violence, a way of protecting oneself in systems that devalue life. It's not about adapting to oppressive conditions, but about resisting them by creating space for rest, emotional presence, and alternative forms of living. Rather than striving for "wellness" as defined by marketable standards, it's about cultivating practices that sustain us and open up possibilities for collective transformation.

Interdependence & Community

In Western societies, care is often treated as a private matter, as something that happens within families, or something outsourced to underpaid professionals. But transfeminist practices remind us of a simple and radical truth: *we don't survive alone.*

The concept of **interdependence** challenges the illusion of individual autonomy. As *The Care Manifesto* argues, society should not be organized around self-sufficiency — a narrative that often hides privilege — but around shared responsibility, mutual support, and collective vulnerability. We are all shaped by our relationships, by the people and communities who sustain us.

This doesn't mean denying the need for personal space. On the contrary, interdependence values individual needs within a web of connection. It asks us to learn how to offer and receive support, how to listen and be listened to and how to build trust without erasing differences.

Being part of a care network means practicing solidarity not only in emergencies, but in everyday life. It means creating cultures where people can show up as they are, where needs are not pathologized, and where support flows horizontally — not as charity, but as collective responsibility.

By shifting our understanding of care from an individual act to a relational one, we begin to build communities that are both more resilient and more just. Interdependence is not weakness — it is survival through connection.

Body, emotions and self-determination

The body, in contemporary Western society, is often an object to be modified, trained, displayed, fixed or controlled. For those whose bodies fall outside of normative standards — queer, trans, racialized, disabled — the body can become a site of surveillance, control,

or violence. But it can also be a place of resistance and care.

Transfeminist practices put at the center the right to feel, to inhabit one's body in its complexity, outside of normative models. Caring for the body means listening to it without judgment, noticing sensations, honoring fatigue, recognizing desire, and moving at one's own pace. These are not just wellness techniques: they're acts of self-determination.

As Sara Ahmed writes, discomfort is not a failure; it's a way of sensing the world. Learning to name emotions — including anger, shame, grief, or numbness — is part of reclaiming agency, especially for those who have been denied the space to feel or express themselves freely.

Care, in this sense, is not about emotional control or positivity. It's about creating conditions where emotions can exist without being managed or pathologized. It's about undoing internalized norms that tell us what bodies should look like, how they should move, what they should feel.

Self-determination means being able to relate to our own bodies on our own terms. And that process (slow, nonlinear, often painful) is a form of resistance to systems that medicalize, commodify, or erase us.

Individual Practices of self - care

Self-Writing and Political Journaling

Keeping a journal not just to “let off steam,” but to process emotions, draw boundaries, understand where anxiety, guilt, anger, etc. come from. Writing as a practice of self-awareness, linked to historical (70s) and queer feminist practices. As bell hooks says, “writing is an act of liberation.”

Learning to say no / Setting limits

It involves recognizing when you are tired, overloaded, and learning to refuse imposed care roles or performative expectations. Saying no is not selfishness, but taking care of one's boundaries to avoid reproducing toxic dynamics (emotional labor, burnout, silent sacrifice).

Rituals of connection with the body

Listening to the body through somatic, slow, gentle practices (breathing, stretching, free dance, queer meditation, self-guided massages). The body is not an aesthetic object to be corrected, but as a living subject, situated, crossed by memory, history, pleasure. Body care is a restitution of agency, especially for those who have suffered medicalization or violence.

Care for the space around you

Organizing your environment with intention, creating a “safe space” even in a small way (a room, a desk, a queer altar, etc.). The daily gesture of making the world more habitable for oneself also becomes an act of transformation, as Sara Ahmed suggests: “feminist life is made of small acts of disobedience and construction”.

Listening and empathizing

Working on oneself so as not to always react from a place of trauma or need, but to build relationships that are not symmetrically unbalanced. Self-care is also self-reflection, decolonization of one's automatisms, of the wounds that risk becoming involuntary weapons against others.

Learning to ask for help

Deconstructing the toxic idea of self-sufficiency, normalizing the fact of not always making it, seeking a safe space of support. Asking for help is an act against patriarchal pride, a vulnerable and therefore revolutionary gesture.

Collective practices of self - care

Safe spaces and mutualism

As the creation of self-managed spaces by trans, queer and non-binary people, where they can share experiences, offer legal, psychological or material support, cook together, take care of each other. Here the care is not welfare, but the creation of collective autonomy

Care as self-defense and support in emergencies

As the solidarity networks to accompany trans people to medical visits, during transition processes, or to provide support during episodes of domestic or institutional violence. These practices reject forced medicalization and demand the self-determination of bodies.

Relational ecologies and interspecies alliances

As community gardens and agricultural practices that combine care for the territory, relationship with the non-human, rejection of extractivism, and creation of new forms of subsistence. This is a form of care for the living (earth, plants, animals) as a political act.

Art and performance as collective healing

Dance, writing or performance workshops to explore the body, memory, trauma and desire, where the body is treated and affirmed not as an object to be medicalized, but as a poetic and political subject.

Practices of “deinstitutionalization of care”

Such as the rejection of imposed health and psychiatric logics, in favor of horizontal and community models of support (peer support, transfeminist counseling, speaking circles, etc.). This gives people back the possibility of defining and living their own health and care outside of normative models.

Workshop held in Puglia, MOH ETS



Diffractive writing

INTRODUCTION

Diffractive reading and writing are tools that foster a non-linear, multi-temporal approach to storytelling, challenging heroic-progressive narratives rooted in conquest and power. They enable the narration of multiple phenomena in a trans-relational way, generating heterogeneous material-semiotic consequences without relying on oppositional logic.

Type of method / disciplines involved	Diffractive writing
Keywords	storytelling – relationship – materialism – intra_action
Source / Author	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Karen Barad- <i>Meeting the Universe Halfway</i> (2007)• Donna Haraway- <i>Staying with the trouble: making kin in the chthulucene</i> (2016)• Ursula K. Le Guin- <i>The carrier bag of fiction</i> (1989)

Ecologies of care: toolkit for self - care

Number of participants	The number of participants can be from a minimum of 2
When to use it	The methodology can be adapted to different contexts: non-formal rather than academic spaces. This depends on the theoretical knowledge of the authors of reference and the philosophical context of cyberfeminism.
Objectives / expected learning outcomes / Improved skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquiring new perspectives on one's own history; • Active and participatory listening; • Storytelling skills; • Acquiring the principles of materialistic relationships; • Criticism of the linearity of time and heroic narratives.
Time / duration	10 minutes for each story. Total time for the activity: 40 minutes.
Space & Equipment requirements / materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • paper; • pens.
Description of the activity	Following the theoretical introduction on which diffractive writing is based, participants will be divided into pairs. Each person in the pair will have 10 minutes to recount moments in their life when they recognised an act of self-care. The story does not have to be linear. Participants are also free not to share a story. At the end of the sharing session, each participant will have 10 minutes to write down the story they have just heard (i.e. the story of the person they are paired with). At the end of the writing session, the results will be shared in a plenary session by those who feel comfortable doing so.
Debriefing / Assessment / Evaluation	Sharing in plenary will serve to 'depersonalise' the stories, turning them into shareable care tools and practices that can be adopted by each participant.
Remarks / Pay attention to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not dramatise the stories; • Emphasise theoretically how each person's subjectivity is always related to others; • Highlight how writing will make the story effective (i.e. it will not depend on how much of one's personal story is shared); • Provide a thorough theoretical introduction.

Places of pleasure

INTRODUCTION

The Places of pleasure workshop proposed a critical deconstruction of desire as imposed by dominant social norms, in order to reframe it as a practice of resistance, freedom, and self-care, in dialogue with transfeminist thought.

Type of method / disciplines involved	Artistic mediation: collage
Keywords	Pleasure- collage- resistance- self_care- transfeminism
Source / Author	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Paul B. Preciado – <i>Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era</i>• Paul B. Preciado – <i>Countersexual Manifesto</i> Columbia University Press• bell hooks – <i>Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics</i>. Routledge• Audre Lorde – <i>Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power</i> (an essay included in <i>Sister Outsider</i>) – explicitly addresses the erotic and desire as forms of political power.
Number of participants	The number of participants can be from a minimum of 6
When to use it	The workshop can be adapted to different contexts: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schools;• Non-formal contexts;• Academies.
Objectives / expected learning outcomes / Improved skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To critically deconstruct socially imposed notions of desire.• To explore desire as a practice of resistance, freedom, and self-care.• To foster body awareness and individual/collective reflection on pleasure.• Increased awareness of personal and collective perceptions of desire.• Empowerment through reclaiming desire outside normative frameworks.

Time / duration	1h
Space & Equipment requirements / materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• paper;• pens;• newspapers;• glue;• scissors;• posters• colors.
Description of the activity	<p>Following a theoretical introduction on how transfeminism has reinterpreted pleasure, participants are divided evenly into groups of at least two people. They will be asked to draw the silhouette of a body on a poster (this can also be a non-anthropomorphic body; in this regard, the interspecies relationship could be emphasised). Newspaper clippings are freely applied to the body, which can represent, through the selected images, the reinterpretation of a desire focused on self-care.</p>
Debriefing / Assessment / Evaluation	<p>Each group will present the product in plenary session; this will help to find common ground or rediscover areas of interest that were previously unknown.</p>
Remarks / Pay attention to	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emphasise the non-sexual nature of desire;• Highlight the need for joint work within the group;• Prepare newspapers with a wide variety of images.

ELAN



Research into self-care – elan’s perspective

We have approached the intersection of “care” and “self” through 3 different angles, hoping that they will offer three different windows through which we can have a better view on what this really means in our current context:

1. A linguistic approach: how to translate “taking care” to French?
2. What is the “self” social psychology or narratology
3. Personal practices of self-care of young people

Step 1 and 3 have been executed through a number of interviews and discussions with young people. For the collection of the “practices” besides direct questions and interviews we also invited young people to create pictograms / make body sculptures of practices that they do and then invite them to guess / share what practices these are.

1. A linguistic approach: how to translate “taking care” to French?

When we sat down with Iris for the first interview about “self-care” practices we instantly realized the first challenge. The English word “care” grabs in an apparent ease and evidence a plurality of meanings that seem to fit so well in one word: “to take care of”, “to care about”, “care for”, “care to” would all have different translations for French. So we got curious, where does this word come from? And to our surprise, this word that seems to be so profoundly positive, started with a rather negative meaning:

“Originating from Old English and Proto-Germanic roots meaning "sorrow" and "lament," the word's meaning encompasses grief, anxiety, care, and concern. »

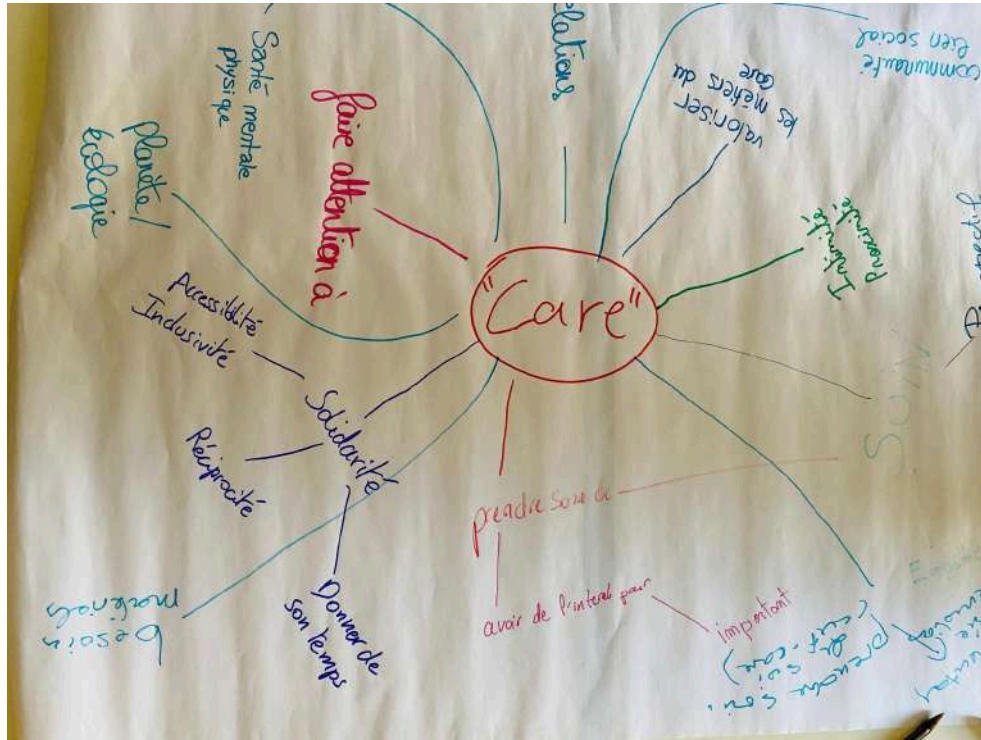
To care “Old English carian, cearian "be anxious or solicitous; grieve; feel concern or interest," from Proto-Germanic *karo- "lament," hence "grief, care" (source also of Old Saxon karon "to lament, to care, to sorrow, complain," Old High German charon "complain, lament," Gothic karon "be anxious"), said to be from PIE root *gar- "cry out, call, scream" (source also of Irish gairm "shout, cry, call;" see [garrulous](#)).

If so, the prehistoric sense development is from "cry" to "lamentation" to "grief." A different sense evolution is represented in related Dutch karig "scanty, frugal," German karg "stingy, scanty." It is not considered to be related to Latin cura. Positive senses, such as "have an inclination" (1550s); "have fondness for" (1520s) seem to have developed later as mirrors to the earlier negative ones.

<https://www.etymonline.com/word/care>

This discovery led to the idea of approaching “what do you care for” also from a negative prompt: “what makes you angry”. We’ll see that later.

In any case, to have our French translation we started with the drawing up of a concept map. Trying to cover with French words all the possible meanings of “care”. This obviously is a game we could only play with relatively good English speakers, but at least it gave a starting kit of parent and sister concepts.



>> Prendre soin de, porter intérêt pour, sentir solidarité avec, être avec, donner du temps, se donner soi, valoriser, intimité, proximité, faire attention à, être vigilant

In consecutive steps, we have used these words / concepts to describe what we're after.

1. What is the “self” social psychology or narratology

We did not play the same game of collaborative definition for the word “self”, mainly because this concept lately has its own literature of its own that could fill a thousand libraries. There seem to be an unprecedented interest for all “self”-related issues since the 2nd part of the 20th century. Not that the concept wasn't known before, but possibly not considered the center of it all. What is interesting however, is that even in one of its earliest definitions, by one of the godfathers of the discipline of psychology, the Self was defined in a quite open, multiple way, far from the idea of a solid, unique, homogeneous core. More recent research depicts the self as even less solid, even less unique and constant.

William James, the Principles of Psychology (1890)

“In its widest possible sense, however, a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down”

James' formulation is telling>> Self is the sum total of all that man can call his. These elements do not constitute an objective collection amounting to the self, they constitute the self only to the extent the person will account for them, or include them in their self-narrative.

Self as narrative

The idea of the narrative self comes from the notion that people understand and constitute their identities through stories. Rather than seeing the self as a fixed essence, narrative theories propose that identity is constructed by the way individuals organize their experiences into coherent accounts over time. Building in Ricoeur (1984, *Time and Narrative*; 1992, *Oneself as Another*) Charles Taylor (1989, *Sources of the Self*) and Jerome Bruner (1990, *Acts of Meaning*) it is Dan McAdams who in the late 1980s and early 1990s, introduces the life story model of identity (McAdams, 1993, *The Stories We Live By*). McAdams argued that, beyond traits and motives, the self is fundamentally expressed through the personal myths we construct—life stories that integrate past, present, and future into a sense of unity and purpose. His work provided empirical methods to study narrative identity, examining themes like redemption, contamination, and agency within people's autobiographical accounts.

Brian Little: *Self as "personal projects"* (2011)

For Brian Little, amongst all the stories we tell ourselves, the "personal projects" are of particular importance. Studies have found that people with a greater sense of purpose, and more likely to agree with statements such as, 'Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them,' actually lived longer than others, even when factors such as age and well-being were controlled for. These goals that we purposefully pursue have been the subject of many decades of research by the psychologist Professor Brian Little. He calls them 'personal projects' and has examined tens of thousands of them in thousands of participants. He's discovered that people are typically engaged in around fifteen at any one time. Whether they be mundane, such as teaching the dog to sit, or meaningful 'core projects' such as trying to rid the world of racism, he believes they're so essential to our sense of self that they actually are our self. 'In many respects we are our personal projects,' he told me. 'We are the things we're doing.' Little has found that in order to bring us happiness, a project should not only be meaningful, we also must have some sense of control over it. Traditionally, heroes in fictional stories are ultimately successful in their struggles to get what they want, and that's how we should feel too – that, no matter how tough things get, we're making some kind of progress. When I asked Little if the idea of the core project speaks to an existence close to that of literary heroes battling to make their lives better through the archetypal three-act narrative structure of crisis-struggle-resolution, he replied, 'Yes. A thousand times yes.' (cited from Will Storr)

See "tool" of "personal project analysis"

https://www.brianrlittle.com/Topics/research/personal-projects-analysis/?doing_wp_cron=1756490387.2568678855895996093750

Self as a society of mind - multiplicity of voices and positions

Hubert Hermans' concept of the dialogical self opens the apparent unicity of being into a dynamic multiplicity of "I-positions", that came to life through the process of socialization, from dialogues with real people, groups and also fictive partners (Star Wars heroes etc). These self-positions that interact like voices in a dialogue. Instead of one unified self, people have shifting positions (e.g., "I as a friend," "I as a student," "I as ambitious") that can agree, conflict, or negotiate with each other.

So what about mental health? And self-care?

The three different theorisations of "self" could all have their entry point to consider "mental health"

Mental health & narrative self

From the perspective of the narrative self, mental health is closely tied to the quality and coherence of the stories people tell about their lives. Since identity is constructed as an evolving life story, wellbeing depends on whether these stories provide continuity, meaning, and a sense of agency. When narratives become fragmented, rigid, or dominated by negative themes, psychological distress often follows.

A healthy narrative self typically shows several features:

- **Coherence:** The story makes sense across time, linking past, present, and anticipated future. Even painful experiences are integrated rather than erased or left chaotic.
- **Continuity:** The person recognizes themselves across life stages, despite change. This creates stability and protects against feelings of alienation.
- **Agency:** The story portrays the self as an active participant, able to make choices, rather than as a passive victim of circumstances.
- **Communion:** Narratives include themes of connection, belonging, and relationships, which support social wellbeing.
- **Meaning-making:** Challenges and traumas are not denied but interpreted in ways that allow growth or redemption. McAdams's research, for example, shows that people who frame adversity as part of a redemptive arc often report higher life satisfaction.
- **Openness and flexibility:** A healthy narrative self allows revision. New experiences can be incorporated without breaking the sense of self, preventing rigid or brittle identity structures.

Little's personal projects framework

- **Authenticity:** Mental health is supported when personal projects and stories align with what Little calls our core projects—those that express our deeply held values and identity. Pursuing projects that feel imposed or inauthentic (e.g., living out someone else's script) often leads to stress, burnout, and reduced wellbeing.
- **Coherence and meaning:** Like the narrative self tradition, Little argues that personal stories help us integrate diverse projects into a coherent sense of "who I am." A fractured or conflicting project system (for example, trying to succeed academically while also pursuing incompatible social or family expectations) can create distress if stories fail to reconcile these tensions.

- **Flexibility:** Healthy personal stories allow projects to evolve. People who can reframe or adapt their stories when projects fail (e.g., turning a setback into a learning experience) are more resilient. Rigidity—clinging to obsolete projects or unchangeable stories—can harm mental health.
- **Stress and coping:** Little distinguishes between self-concordant projects (energizing, identity-affirming) and self-discordant projects (draining, imposed). Mental health suffers when people are locked into discordant projects without the narrative tools to disengage or reframe them. Stress arises not only from the demands of projects but also from the stories we tell about why we must persist in them.
- **Wellbeing as project ecology:** Little uses the idea of a “project ecology”—the fit between personal projects, the environment, and one’s personal resources. Narratives help interpret this ecology. If someone can frame obstacles as challenges rather than threats, their story supports wellbeing. If obstacles are narrated as evidence of failure or inadequacy, distress increases.

Dialogical self:

Mental health depends on the flexibility and balance of these inner dialogues. A healthy dialogical self integrates diverse voices into a meaningful, adaptable whole.

The dialogical self model can guide self-care by encouraging people to listen to and engage with the multiple “voices” or I-positions within themselves. Each position reflects a perspective shaped by personal experience, relationships, and culture. Mental health benefits when these voices are acknowledged and allowed to enter into constructive dialogue. Self-care practices might include journaling or expressive writing where different I-positions are given space to speak, such as “I as the caregiver” responding to “I as exhausted.” Mindfulness can also help by creating room to observe these voices without judgment. Creative methods—role play, letter writing, or even internal dialogues in therapy—allow individuals to negotiate between conflicting positions and foster integration. By strengthening dialogue, the self becomes more flexible, less rigid, and better able to adapt to challenges. This practice nurtures resilience, enhances self-understanding, and supports a balanced, compassionate relationship with oneself.

- Personal practices of self-care of young people

Before directly pinning down self-care in the realm of mental health we were interested in what were the domains in which young people saw the place of self-care.

From the interviews:

Q: “do you know someone who’s really good at taking care of themselves?”

R: “Yes, my boyfriend. Gets up every day at the same hour, brushes teeth, has a big breakfast with vitamins showers, puts cream on. He has a routine that he never skips. Even iron clothes every day and clean his shoes.

Q: "What do you think of when you hear «self-care» ? Does this mean anything to you?"

R1: "Protect yourself from possible damage: external sun, not positive things that want to hurt"

"Find less chaotic in environments to handle stress"

"Manage yourself efficiently"

R2: "take care not to fall ill, cover up, eat well, pay attention to nutrition..."

Q: "How would you like to take care of yourself?"

R1: "Have a structured routine to make me feel safe and not overthink things"

Q: "Is structure important?"

R1: "Yes, I have ADHD and I have to pay attention, make an effort to keep structure otherwise I drift or disappoint people"

R2: "remain connected to one's culture" "pay attention to special moments" "give time to one's spirituality"

"In what domains of life is self-care important?" responses from the concept map activity:

- Our relationships
- Our material needs of survival
- Social connections, not being marginalized, not leaving others marginalized
- Our inner life

Through the pictograms:

- Staying connected to others
- Connect others
- Take care of smaller ones, make sure the bad things that happened to us don't happen to them
- Our social identities, especially if they are threatened or discriminated
- Mental health, especially in moments of crisis
- How we present ourselves, physically
- Peace of mind
- Understanding of the world.

Workshop held in France, Elàn Concept map

INTRODUCTION

Some words are easily transposable from one language to another, and some much less. It appeared that “care” was rather difficult to translate to French. The English word “care” grabs in an apparent ease and evidence a plurality of meanings that seem to fit so well in one word: “to take care of”, “to care about”, “care for”, “care to” would all have different translations for French. There is a seemingly evident translation to “soin” but “soin” evokes the medical field, with synonyms such as “treatment”. This led to the invention of the “concept map” activity to try to cover with French words all the possible meanings of “care”. In this specific context the participants needed to have an understanding of the English word “care” to play the game. However, for languages that do have a relatively good translation of “care” it is also possible to play this game without invoking English. In this case the prompt could be: what if the word “care” did not exist? What would be all the synonyms and sister concepts needed to cover all the different meanings of “care”? Yet another option for multilingual groups is to invite all to put the words existing in their languages that cover the different meanings of “care”.

Type of method / disciplines involved	Concept map
Keywords	Language - synonyms
Number of participants	The number of participants can be from a minimum of 4. If there are more than 7 participants, it may be better to create small groups of 4-5 each with their own flipchart.
When to use it	The activity has a focus on language, so needs participants to have a common language or to have translators who can help moving between languages.
Objectives / expected learning outcomes / Improved skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquiring new perspectives on one's own history; • Active and participatory listening; • Storytelling skills; • Acquiring the principles of materialistic relationships; • Criticism of the linearity of time and heroic narratives.
Time / duration	30-40 minutes, depending on the engagement of the participants

Space & Equipment requirements / materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flipchart paper;• Marker of a different colour for each participant.
Description of the activity	<p>The instructions slightly vary depending on the context, as the activity has at least three different versions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• mono-language context where “care” does not have an easy translation but everyone has an understanding of the English concept• mono-language context where there is a good translation of the concept of “care”• multi-lingual context <p>In our French context, we invited participants to think of the concept of “care” in English, that we wrote in the middle of a flipchart paper. We asked everyone to think of how they would translate it in French. When “soin” came up, we asked whether it covers all the possible meanings. Noting that it did not, we invited participants to think of the different meanings of this word and propose French translation for each meaning. In the first round the collection happened through writing and the second round each person presented what they added.</p>
Debriefing / Assessment / Evaluation	<p>For a debriefing have a look at the multiplicity of meanings and concepts collected. You can ask participants if they discovered meanings that they were not conscious about before.</p> <p>Assessment / evaluation should not focus on the quality of contributions of participants rather their engagement.</p>
Remarks / Pay attention to	<p>Depending on the profile of the group and the setting (mono- or plurilingual group) make sure the instructions are clear for everyone at the beginning and make sure no one, no contribution is lost in translation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emphasise the non-sexual nature of desire;• Highlight the need for joint work within the group;• Prepare newspapers with a wide variety of images.

Pictograms of self-care

INTRODUCTION

The Places of pleasure workshop proposed a critical deconstruction of desire as imposed by dominant social norms, in order to reframe it as a practice of resistance, freedom, and self-care, in dialogue with transfeminist thought.

Type of method / disciplines involved	Pictograms
Keywords	Pictogram - emotions - caring
Source / Author	The idea of using pictograms comes from Migrantas who use pictograms with migrant women groups as a “visual language of migration and living together”. Their prompts however are different from ours. http://www.migrantas.org/web_migrantas_english.html
Number of participants	The number of participants can be from a minimum of 4
When to use it	Pictograms are an easily adaptable format to different contexts, using different prompts. The prompts we used make sense if they are preceded by a discussion on what is “taking care”. It follows with fluidity a “concept map” activity.
Objectives / expected learning outcomes / Improved skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stimulate awareness of the need to take care of oneself.• Valorise different strategies that different participants have to take care of themselves• Share different strategies and practices, adapt practices from others.
Time / duration	1h, though depends on the number of participants
Space & Equipment requirements / materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A5 or A6 size cards of different colors for each participant• Markers for each participant

Description of the activity

We invite each participant to think of something they do to take care of themselves. This should be interpreted in the largest sense: anything that makes them feel connected, anchored, at peace, calm etc. We can already ask some examples in plenary or share what we do to take care of ourselves so that the examples facilitate new associations. We invite participants to do a pictogram representing the activity on one side, and the description of what they do on the flipside.

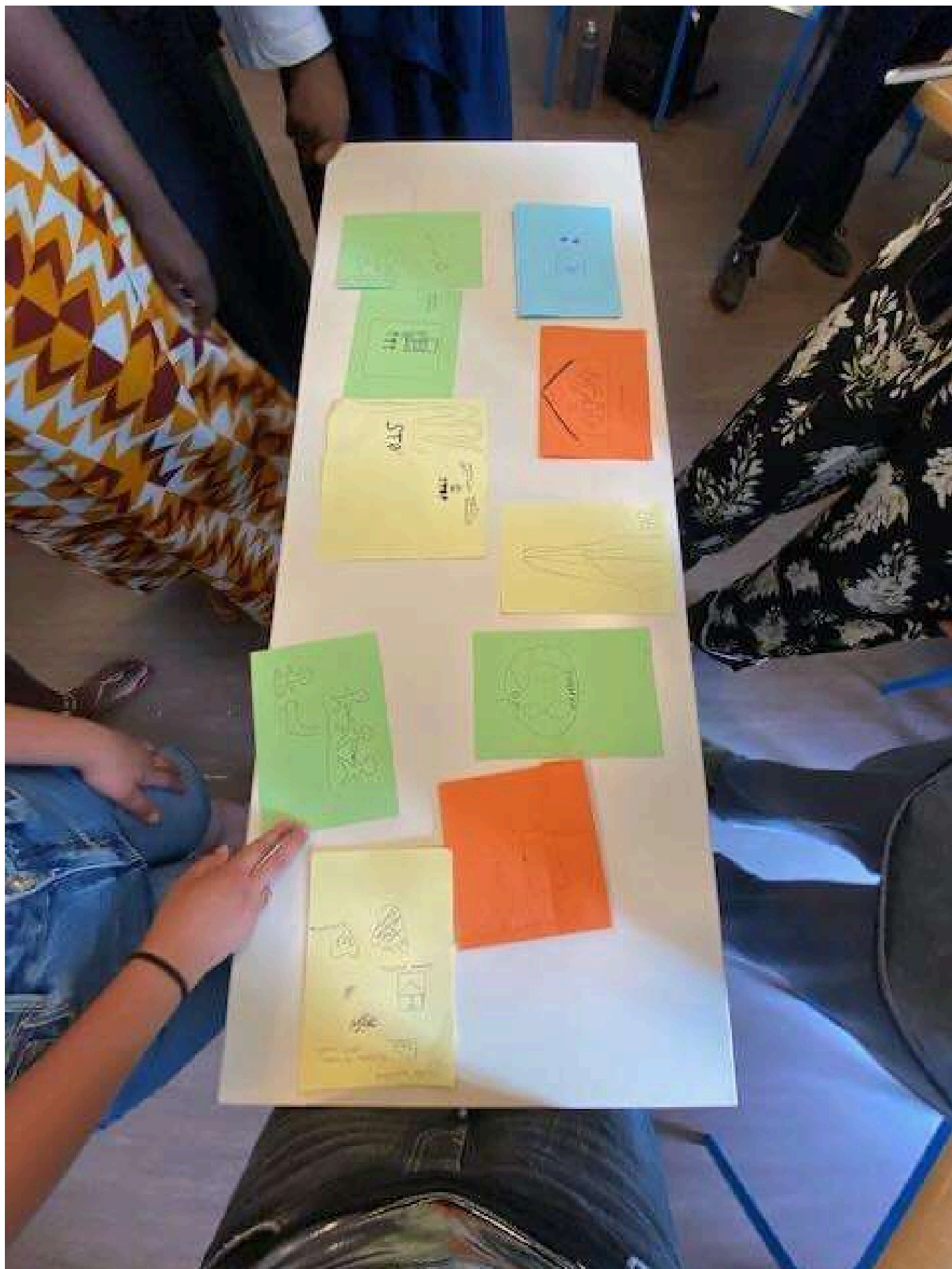
Debriefing / Assessment / Evaluation

Different strategies have been tested for sharing the pictograms: with smaller groups we exposed them on a table and invited everyone to have a look around, try to guess from the pictograms what the practice is about and then ask authors to share. With a larger group (14) we sat in a circle, one person started the sharing and then we asked whether anyone else could connect to what was said and invited the new person to share their pictogram and practice. We also invited everyone to take a picture of the pictogram / practice that resonated with them.

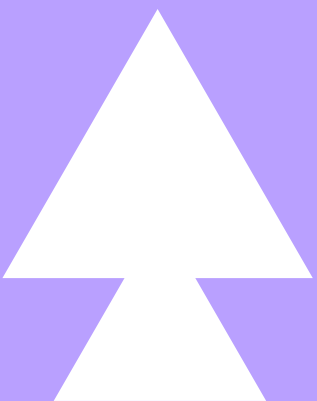
Assessment and evaluation should not focus on the artistic quality of the pictograms or the practices presented, rather the engagement of the participants in the activity.

Remarks / Pay attention to

In the sequence above we used a positive prompt, but it is also possible to start from a more negative sounding prompt. In one session we proposed to make pictograms on "What makes you angry" and in a consecutive step, after the sharing participants could choose which pictogram they would like to address offering some practice that is possible to do in small scale to overcome the anger-triggering phenomenon. This should not suggest that the solution of systemic problems such as poverty or racism is up to the individuals, but rather that even as individuals, we may want to take action, simply because that's what makes us align with our values.



INTOUCH



Self and Care: InTouch research

In this section you are invited to read a conversation/dialogue between two researchers sharing their personal insights and experiences related to the concept of 'self-care'. Rooted in their individual backgrounds - V,- as a queer migrant woman engaged in queer politics and marginalized communities, and D,- as a community builder and activist and a gardener based in various European countries - the conversation delves into the multifaceted nature of self-care beyond conventional definitions.

Through their stories, they reflect on how self-care functions as a return to the basics, a way to remain connected in this world, and a vital act of resistance in a highly demanding world shaped by capitalism, social upheaval, and inequalities. By opening up about their personal stories, they emphasize that self-care is a deeply rooted multi-layered process that sustains both individual resilience and collective strength, illustrating how it is both an individual necessity and a political act.

Photos made by the authors.

Aspects and ingredients of Self-Care:
(REFLECTION)

- SELF VS COMMUNITY
- BODY
- GENDER
- SPACE
- TIME
- CULTURAL CONTEXT/BACKGROUND
- INTERGENERATIONALITY

What is the first thing that comes to your mind if I say this: "self-care"?

V -

A crucial ingredient in our everyday lives, a source of life and energy to continue our missions, whether that is motherhood, or activism - personal or political. In our fast paced societies that are so deeply embedded in capitalist values, we are often reduced to social security and tax numbers, solely defined by our productivity, thus self care - becomes an act of resistance. A conscious choice to find the balance, in order to live fulfilling lives. Without it, our energy and communal commitments are limited. As someone who experienced anxiety, depression and finally a burn out - I cannot emphasise enough the importance of it. Nevertheless, there is not one correct way of 'doing' self-care, often it is a process of searching between ourselves, people around us and broader communities.

Ecologies of care: toolkit for self - care

D -

The cat is cleaning her ass peacefully with full confidence that life is whole.
Just a moment for yourself with some emptiness...

But if I translate the word “care” to my mother tongue, well, then everything is getting a bit more complicated. In the first place “self-care” as a word doesn’t exist. Second, care in Hungarian is - *gondoskodás* or *törődés*. “Gond” in the first word means trouble. I am full of trouble if I care. There is a verb built on trouble. The second one has to do with “being broken”, “getting injured”.... If I do care, or I am busy with caring I will be hurt, broken, injured. So it seems that everything I mentioned, like the cat or me being in myself must have developed much later in my late adulthood. I had to “learn myself” “into self-care”. I have to admit (to myself) I am not coming from a happy family where people’s well-being is something taken for granted... having a good meal together, enjoying laughter, dancing, making music, singing under the shower...whatever where people just feel good...

V -

Yes, less words and more truth - nature and animals - they do know it better - cat grooming herself - undeniably an act of ‘self care’, the very basics of it. For me that’s where it begins - at the very basics: your body, your space, your outer spaces, communities, and the circles continue. Without the very inner ones we cannot expand.

D -

A touch, a smile, a word, a hug, laughing together, a piece of attention, beauty...



Can you tell me a few words about yourself?

V -

I am a lesbian migrant woman, researcher, and someone who's deeply involved in queer politics, community, and the way of life for marginalised communities. I am also a neurodivergent person, someone who suffers from the weight of this world on my own, and our communal shoulders. In the world where inequality, wars and genocides are being committed on a daily basis, the word 'self/care' have a significant meaning - a necessary ingredient for us to continue our commitment to the community and to ourselves, thus, for us not burn out like a candle, and collapse in this demanding, capitalist societies that we are forced to survive.

D -

I am a gardener, community builder, educator, activist. I live and work in Amsterdam and am involved in social engagement projects in Hungary and Italy. I am a mother of a 17 year old boy. I work a lot with all generations of people. Care is somehow the base, the core of my work - this means attention, creating and maintaining spaces, places, gardens, systems where people find peace, safety, joy, inspiration, beauty, belongingness, love and care. I have always to be aware of how to find and maintain the balance between self-care and taking care of others.

Can you share a few moments in your life that are somehow related to this word "self-care"?

V -

In my personal life self care is many things - skincare, make-up, hours spent getting ready, time spent outside with people I love, working with marginalized communities. Even doing research alone at night, writing papers - it is self-care to me, as I need to have the answers to the crucial questions in my own personal and political lives. Being connected with the world, in a way that allows me to understand and process what I consider inequalities, wars, genocides and pain. Anything that is the opposite of self-care - being frozen in the suffering of this world, not knowing how to move through space and time, isolated and alone in my own mind.



Ecologies of care: toolkit for self - care

D -

Self-care moments when I am in nature. I guess, "time" and "space" are the gifts that I can take for myself. When I can breathe deeply in and out. Nature gives back some sanity which in this world is taken away from us. Some deep wisdom, knowledge, feeling grounded and connected. Swimming, diving under water, getting in the repetition of the movement and fully covered by the element, the silence of water, disappearing, where the "self" is not important any more. Funnily, these moments can happen with someone... also somehow "self-care" back in time, my experience in the Hammam in Morocco, when this old big woman was washing me off like a child, I was also disappearing in the process. But also similar working in the garden, getting lost in the hand, body driven monotonous physical work. When the "self" is not important any more, when "I" becomes my work.

V - I remember grief. When my grandmother passed away there was no 'self' to care for. It was not there, the body and mind, both mine - were not there. But I too, remember the process, 'becoming' my work. I dissolved and fully disappeared into it. The repetitive acts of spinning human hair into a yarn.

Knitting the blanket.

Laying under it.

Covering myself in and under grief.

How she used to cover me - tuck me in bed and care for me.

By losing myself - I processed my grief.

If it's not self-care - I do not know what is.



How "self-care" is related to the body - in your experience? Can you recall memories?

V -

Yes, I can recall - everyday. Bringing my body to the sea and letting it float... Weightless, still, surrounded only by movement of waves and the sounds of wind. It's nearly a ritualistic meditation for the body and mind. However, just as much, going out into this world - with my very physical being - working together, whether that's taking care of my dog, a loved one, community or a garden. It does not differentiate, the act of care for something or someone, often equals self-care. It is embodied and a very physical experience.

Nevertheless, body and mind cannot be separated, just as ourselves - we cannot be separated from other people around us, as well as nature.



D -

Body and mind, same and different, as Zen Buddhism says. When I can get enough silence, peace, space, a rest from the overwhelmingness, stress, pressure of the world, I feel it in my body as well. Sometimes I need to use my muscles to arrive into that mindfulness. Walking barefeet, working with my hands, cleaning, swimming, hiking, climbing...



Ecologies of care: toolkit for self - care

D -

I remember back in time, as a young girl, I was introduced to the world of “beautisians”, where women can come for waxing, facial treatment, massage... These female places were social, intimate places for “self-care”. Hairsaloons were never the same. Maybe because of this intimacy was missing... I don't know. In the beauty saloon there was this special atmosphere of “being together”, sharing but still was always about “me, being taken care of”. As a young woman I often tried to make the same “self-treatments” at home but they somehow never really succeeded; I lived with men...; I was walking with my facial masks at home and they were laughing at me. I guess, this female supportive space made the difference. It had also something to do with time.. In these saloons there is no time, these are somehow timeless, blessed spaces in the universe. I still see young girls, women giving the same type of care to each other - social and very private at the same time. In the changing rooms of swimming pools I always feel fascinated by the private self care rituals of women, it creates a very special atmosphere.

- **Can you mention a few things with regards "self-care" and culture, "self-care" and gender from the countries, places where you have lived or visited?**

D -

I am coming from an Eastern European country where poverty and suffering have always been pretty much the main things shaping all aspects of life. “Self-care”, beauty, health - such as - was considered as a luxury. For all the generations of women in my family self-care was a very practical, fast thing, never really something important. Women had this “martyrdom” aspect, sacrificing their lives for the men, family, children and for society. In my family I was always somehow surrounded mostly by men. All the few women around me managed to do their self-care rituals quite fast in privacy. When the socialist system changed and all these Western “second hand shops” began to appear - buying clothes was a sort of “self-recognition” moment for us, young women. Back in university times, after finishing the exams we went to buy some nice lingeries for ourselves, that was for sure a “self-care” ritual.

D -

I don't remember either if men had their rituals for themselves which had been really for the moment of “taking care”. I remember when my grandfather was washing his hands after he finished with his work in the garage - it was a long, careful process with soap, washing off the motor oil... I still see his hands in this movement of washing. Later as the economy started to change more and more young men had the opportunity to take some time for body rituals. I remember when the first after-shaves products appeared. If I ask young men what is self care they would answer, shaving... Now I can see in the community garden that young men “hanging” together, rolling the cigarettes in these semi-public spaces - are also the moments of self-care, a sort of man-rituals.

D -

There is something with self-care which has a lot to do with resistance or freedom. Raising

Ecologies of care: toolkit for self - care

up in hierarchical, oppressive systems simply trying to find ways to my personal freedom, resistance itself was always a form of self care. Paying attention to my own needs, preferences. Saying “no”. Sometimes I needed to, so I had to learn how to lie. Just one small example, as a child, I had to wear warm, itchy underwear in school, so I got rid of them and hid them in the cellar. Saying yes was as difficult.

D -

Cooking and eating...”Feeding” us children was always a “form of care” in our Eastern European hemisphere but unfortunately this often turned into an often abusing form of control. You have to eat what is served to you otherwise you don't show respect. Or saying “no” was simply not an option. Refusing food or certain eating / cooking habits and later finding my own ways of diet became a part of a self care process. Awareness about my possibilities and rights is what I give to my body to eat. This was leading to enjoying food and cooking again on my own terms.



D -

I think the oppressive school- and worksystems which are responsible for a “crazy” culture of body related self-care: the “culture of sickness”. Social sciences refer to these phenomena as perversive incentives where an incentive, meant to encourage a certain behavior, instead produces an unintended and often negative outcome. In Hungary, where I grew up, being sick was mostly followed by social judgement; it meant two things; I am “weak” and “not able” but I also deserve some extra care and attention. I have an excuse not to go to work, to school, and have the possibility to get extra treatment for my well-being. Only these days. To get this care, love and attention was hardly possible in any normal days, as a healthy child, teenager, or young woman. I see it still as a cultural trait, in Hungary for sure,

Ecologies of care: toolkit for self - care

the whole society is very medicalized, cities are full with pharmacies, we go to doctors not only for being treated when ill, but as a regular ritual of personal care and attention. "Being sick and being treated" is the "language of care". Although it has an "unhealthy" cultural message: I deserve care only if I am sick. In welfare countries huge systems are providing services for people's well-being, a whole industry is built on medicalizing care in many ways.

V -

I guess, I have forgotten when I was a young child, I grew up with my grandmother and she too, barely ever had time for herself, nothing to even mention about 'self-care'. She was a grandmother in Post-Soviet Lithuania, a small town, somewhere close to nature. She cared for me and that has consumed her life. I only remember she had one perfume, this very small bottle of cologne, I do not even know if she liked the smell. There weren't any options. I never understood until now, when I think of it, how little 'our' women had for themselves, it was always directed at taking care of others.

In contrast, when I moved to The Netherlands, as a young woman, I have found myself in capitalist consumption, 'self-care' that tells you - you need five different toners, serums, creams, spf's, masks, and hair care too: conditioner - leave in and rinse out, shampoo - regular and clarifying one, oils, hair bonding treatments, the list just never ever ends... You need it all, to be beautiful, to validate yourself, to signal your social status. All of it. To be seen and accepted, being a migrant woman contributes to this too.

I had to relearn outside of my 'location' and within, how and what self-care was for me. The two extremes have never worked in anyone's favour, especially women. Either we were the ones who took care of something or someone, or the ones who suffered from the pressure to 'over take care' of ourselves, to scrub and moisturise ourselves into a 'spiritual' death.

- **Can you mention a few things from your life experiences which are connected to "self-care" and generations?**

D -

I think I bring this from my culture and through the generations that "cleaning the house" is something very important. As a child back in time I felt it was a punishment, a curse - why do we need to do this forced cleaning every day, every week. As a young person I felt ashamed by this forced habit, I couldn't change, I just needed to be tidy wherever I lived. As I grew older I realized that cleaning the house, washing and hanging the clothes are my self-care rituals. It gives me calmness, peace, the feeling of control, satisfaction - the most simple human activity, cleaning the environment around me. It is more or at least as important of a self-care process for me than treating my own body.

D -

I do believe that generations can learn from each other but also that there is not really a big difference in how we find joy in social activities regardless of our age. I see these social moments as rebooting, intensive positive moments also of self-care.

D -

Motherhood opened a whole universe of self-care to me. It is a paradox. I entered a world of constant care. Where the self is overwritten, there is no more just you. You are a mother of another human being; responsible for his existence, his well-being. Through breast feeding I felt the very first time that care cannot be just a one-way process. It works well if it's mutual. The self disappears and we become one source, his energy is feeding mine and vice versa. I also learned that as a parent I am responsible for my own well being otherwise I cannot be a "good" mother. My tasks are to give, to support, to be there - I need to be able to give a sufficient, happy energy source for my child.

Care is attention.

So I have to cultivate my own garden with loving attention and care so he feels home any time with me. I became much more aware of my body; my needs, my strengths, weaknesses, my rhythms, how my body works. I started to listen. And listening to my child was listening to myself and listening to myself was listening to the people around me ... I started to appreciate all the very basic and simple ingredients of life; time, energy, attention, the quality of the food, the temperature of the sun, the water, the space, the sounds, noises, the smells, the lights, the colors. A whole universe opened up for me and started to teach me what we as living beings need to feel healthy and good in life. Also I have learned how much we are interconnected, how the well-being of the self is not possible without the well being of its environment and vice versa. My relation to nature, plants, and animals, my cat, my garden teaches the same. How essential is self care which is not separable from care for everything around us - and how different it is from what we learn in the culture of consumerism.

D -

I do care = it does matter = I can make a difference. I gave birth in a country which has a long history of abuse. All kinds of systemic abuse. It doesn't really matter what happens with you, we do not matter. I think this should be the base when we start to discuss what is care. I do care. My existence does care. My voice does care. It does matter what the effects, impact of my actions are. I am responsible.

Motherhood was what gave voice to my critical thinking on how to tackle the political aspects of "care". I started my work while being pregnant as a sex educator and activist in an Eastern European country through building solidarity networks among mothers, women, couples and families questioning traditional gender roles within and beyond the realm of the family, inequalities in the division of labor, the importance of shadow work (care), power hierarchies and the underestimated value in general in societies of all the efforts, work, attention, time and energy that goes to active care for someone or something or the environment around us.

Ecologies of care: toolkit for self - care

(self) Care is attention... and the world needs too much attention...and.. I have my limitations... self-care often is just keeping it small, keeping it slow...it still costs a lot of energy just to hold sometimes the space for myself and the ones I care for...

- What do you think about how much social or private "self-care" can be?

V -

I'm not sure whether 'self care' can exist outside of the social realm just as much as private. There are different rituals that we engage in and both are equally important.

We all live in social circles, whether that's our neighbors, family, friends or other extended communities. We cannot escape it, nor should we. In my personal life self-isolation is the opposite of self-care, only when engaging with others I feel parts of myself being healed and cared for.

However, the private is inseparable from the 'social' for the whole circle to come around. Time we spend alone, with ourselves grooming, taking care of home is in part a meditative experience in my life - the quiet moments when I can finally recharge and be ready to face the 'social' again.

D -

I do believe that generations can learn from each other but also that there is not really a big difference in how we find joy in social activities regardless of our age. I see these social moments as rebooting, intensive positive moments also of self-care.

D -

Laughter, joy, playing, forgetting about time, about "serious" things, letting the child be, being very social and very embodied...

D -

If you ask me how self-care is connected to society I would say that they shape each other. In my adult life, both work related and private I try to build and maintain social relations based on shared responsibility, trust and care. This, I believe, creates a safe environment and reliable structure for the individual (enough space for self-care) and care for each other. Somehow energetically more sustainable from the culture of care where I am coming from. The culture of mistrust. Back in time when I was a teenager and later as a young woman I felt too much insecurity, power imbalance, systemic abuse in the care institutions - whatever smaller ones, like the family, or bigger ones, such as school or health care.

Unreliable systems taught me to become more independent, alert, resilient, I have a lot of practical skills - "I do it myself"- these survival toolkits now I see also as a sort of "self-care" toolkit. I can always survive and solve anything but it costs a lot of energy. It's not about real joy, pleasure, care for health - this goes mostly for survival.

As a mother I learned from my child that the most important care-skill he needs from me is

Ecologies of care: toolkit for self - care

that I am reliable, trustworthy, I keep my word and I am available to be there for him. I remember that the most important adults in my environment back in time were those mostly women, my grandmother, my aunt, my math teacher - who were always available if I was in trouble or I needed a peaceful and safe space to sleep, to get a warm soup, a good advice, or just silence. Also, I have learned that self-care or care for others can mean very simple, practical things.

D -

It might not be a coincidence that I am creating similar spaces where people find the same sort of “spatial care”, where within the environment they can give good care for themselves...And such as... here we arrive back to where we were beginning; what is self-care? Maybe like if we talk about love... if it's a mutual act, presence, effort then the self dissolves in the process. It can be with someone or alone with something or with an activity. Beauty for me is also an important ingredient. As I have learned from my math teacher; it doesn't matter if I get to a good conclusion, it's more important how I am working on the equation. Mathematics is about beauty. I have kept her words since then; and believe whatever I do in life, if I focus on the beauty of my presence and the beauty around me, that will be the most rewarding self-care whatever I do, whatever I need.

(self) Care is control

This way of working - whether it means physical work, mental or emotional work - helps me to get to the sense of control in a “good”, not in a heavy way. Caring, being responsible is always heavy, it's not a coincidence that in all languages care has something to do with worry. Things we care for are important. Such as our existence in the universe. For ourselves. But I feel if I can find my presence and beauty in all my activities, then I can develop an intimate relationship with my actions, therefore the sense of “connected control”, control within instead of the endless effort for control over. I am part of all kinds of ecosystems. Me, the self is not really separate from every other thing, living beings, objects, things around me. This kind of connectedness gives a lot of relief.



Workshop held in Netherland, InTouch Growth of the Self

INTRODUCTION

"Growth of the Self" is a hands-on activity that encourages participants to take care of small plants in personalized bags, highlighting how nurturing others—plants in this case—can also support our own well-being. By tending to their garden, participants learn how caring for something outside themselves can help develop patience, responsibility, and a sense of achievement, all of which contribute to better self-care and emotional health.

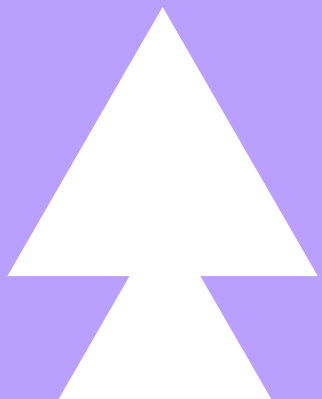
Regardless economic, social status, against capitalism

Non-privileged care, inner outer care, even though the quantity is small - food- as much as needed. symbolically emphasising the importance of taking care only as much as you need. awareness raising. sensitising awareness raising.

Empowerment - against capitalistic powerless sense of self.

Type of method / disciplines involved	Concept map
Keywords	Language - synonyms
Number of participants	The number of participants can be from a minimum of 4. If there are more than 7 participants, it may be better to create small groups of 4-5 each with their own flipchart.
When to use it	The activity has a focus on language, so needs participants to have a common language or to have translators who can help moving between languages.
Objectives / expected learning outcomes / Improved skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acquiring new perspectives on one's own history;• Active and participatory listening;• Storytelling skills;• Acquiring the principles of materialistic relationships;• Criticism of the linearity of time and heroic narratives.
Time / duration	30-40 minutes, depending on the engagement of the participants

Space & Equipment requirements / materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flipchart paper;• Marker of a different colour for each participant.
Description of the activity	<p>The instructions slightly vary depending on the context, as the activity has at least three different versions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• mono-language context where “care” does not have an easy translation but everyone has an understanding of the English concept• mono-language context where there is a good translation of the concept of “care”• multi-lingual context <p>In our French context, we invited participants to think of the concept of “care” in English, that we wrote in the middle of a flipchart paper. We asked everyone to think of how they would translate it in French. When “soin” came up, we asked whether it covers all the possible meanings. Noting that it did not, we invited participants to think of the different meanings of this word and propose French translation for each meaning. In the first round the collection happened through writing and the second round each person presented what they added.</p>
Debriefing / Assessment / Evaluation	<p>For a debriefing have a look at the multiplicity of meanings and concepts collected. You can ask participants if they discovered meanings that they were not conscious about before.</p> <p>Assessment / evaluation should not focus on the quality of contributions of participants rather their engagement.</p>
Remarks / Pay attention to	<p>Depending on the profile of the group and the setting (mono- or plurilingual group) make sure the instructions are clear for everyone at the beginning and make sure no one, no contribution is lost in translation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emphasise the non-sexual nature of desire;• Highlight the need for joint work within the group;• Prepare newspapers with a wide variety of images.



SMOOTH



Radical Self-Care in Greece: Self-Care as a Community and Political Act, Beyond Neoliberal Wellness: SMOUTH

Practices of Care, Resistance, and Collective Wellbeing

At a time when self-care is widely marketed through consumerist frameworks—luxury retreats, wellness apps, beauty routines, productivity hacks—grassroots movements in Greece are reclaiming care as a collective, political and embodied practice. This shift signals a refusal to internalize systemic failures and offers new imaginaries of wellbeing rooted in solidarity, resistance, and justice. Philosopher *Judith Butler*, in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), challenges the notion of the fully autonomous subject by highlighting the inherent opacity of the self—our identities are shaped relationally, and we never have full access to who we are. Yet, despite this partial self-understanding, we remain ethically obligated to others. For Butler, this vulnerability and dependency are not weaknesses but the very foundation of ethical life. Recognizing our interdependence, she argues, opens up a politics of care and justice that moves beyond individualism and toward shared responsibility and collective wellbeing. Similarly, Feminist theorists such as Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher define care not as a personal feeling, but as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world” (Fischer & Tronto, 1990). Under this light, care involves political engagement, redistribution of resources, mutual responsibility, and ecological awareness.

Philosopher Byung-Chul Han, in *The Burnout Society* (2015), describes modern capitalist society as a “performance society” in which individuals are no longer merely exploited by others, but self-exploit in pursuit of optimization and achievement. The neoliberal subject becomes both master and slave, trapped in cycles of hyperproductivity, self-monitoring, and burnout. Even rest becomes instrumentalized: “How can I rest in the most efficient way to return stronger?” (Han, 20215). Similarly, Ronald Purser, in *McMindfulness* (2019), critiques how mindfulness has been stripped of its radical roots and turned into a tool for individual adjustment rather than collective liberation. He argues that instead of resisting toxic systems, mindfulness has been co-opted to numb individuals into accepting them, placing the burden of transformation on the self and privatizing structural suffering (Purser, 2019). Scholar Audre Lorde reminds us, however, that “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (Lorde,1988). This perspective positions care—especially for marginalized bodies—not as luxury but necessity. It is a refusal to be discarded by extractive systems, and a reorientation toward community, healing, and survival. Physician and trauma expert Gabor Maté offers a vital perspective by framing self-care as an act of trauma-informed healing rather than self-optimization. In his work, he argues that true wellbeing arises from emotional authenticity and the recognition of how stress and disconnection manifest in the body (*When the Body Says No*, 2003). Rather than isolating care within individual responsibility, Maté emphasizes the importance of connection—to self, others, and the body—as a path to recovery. He also highlights music as a therapeutic medium, capable of accessing deep emotional states, regulating the nervous system, and facilitating reconnection with

suppressed feelings, making it a powerful tool in holistic self-care practices. Care theorist Maria Puig de la Bellacasa also emphasizes care as a vital, affective, and ethical practice that cannot be disentangled from politics, materiality, and power structures. She writes about “matters of care” as deeply entangled with science, technology, and more-than-human worlds (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

In this context, various Greek initiatives, networks, and communities challenge dominant wellness paradigms by foregrounding intersectionality, inclusivity, non-commercial care, and decentralized participation. What follows is a map of free and community-rooted practices that redefine what it means to care.

B. Mental Health & Peer Support

- Self-Help Promotion Program: Community groups promoting self-help and mutual support, especially for people with addictions or mental health challenges.
- EPAPSY: Offers peer support programs for youth mental health and psychosocial rehabilitation.
- Life Workshop (Larissa): A prevention and health promotion center focused on addiction recovery and emotional education.
- Adult Play Group (Gestalt-based): A group promoting play as a means of emotional expression and interpersonal connection.
- SupportCare Workbook: A resource for informal caregivers of people with dementia, focusing on self-care and resilience.
- Reconnecting with Nature (ROOTED, Erasmus+): A program promoting mental wellbeing for older adults through structured outdoor and nature-based activities.
- Rebirth Festival: A grassroots birth autonomy festival promoting trauma-free, inclusive and informed approaches to maternity care.
- The innovative program “Collective Well-being”: It aims to raise awareness and access to factual information on mental health issues, as well as to develop skills that enhance mental well-being and quality of life (Museum of Cycladic Art in collaboration with the Research University Institute of Mental Health, Neurosciences and Precision Medicine “Kostas Stefanis”)

Mapping Radical Self-Care Initiatives in Greece - Indicative examples

A. Gender, Feminism & LGBTQIA+ Empowerment

- Diotima: An NGO focusing on gender equality and the prevention of gender-based violence, providing psychosocial and legal support to survivors.
- Womentors: A mentoring and empowerment program for young women that addresses systemic barriers and promotes personal and professional development.
- Kýklos: An ecofeminist initiative that bridges environmental activism with gender justice, creating spaces for healing, ecological awareness, and collective learning.
- Red Umbrella Athens: A support center for sex workers in Athens, offering psychological support, legal aid, and health services.
- Transcending Youth: A community initiative focused on supporting trans youth through peer support, workshops, and advocacy.
- Proud Parents Greece: A support network for parents of LGBTQ+ children that promotes acceptance and educates against stigma

- **Orlando LGBT+ Mental Health:** A mental health network that trains professionals in LGBTQ+ affirmative practices and raises awareness on the intersections of gender, identity, and wellbeing.
- **Map of Actions for Roma Women:** A digital mapping and documentation project that showcases grassroots feminist actions and empowerment among Roma communities in Greece.

B. Mental Health & Peer Support

- **Self-Help Promotion Program:** Community groups promoting self-help and mutual support, especially for people with addictions or mental health challenges.
- **EPAPSY:** Offers peer support programs for youth mental health and psychosocial rehabilitation.
- **Life Workshop (Larissa):** A prevention and health promotion center focused on addiction recovery and emotional education.
- **Adult Play Group (Gestalt-based):** A group promoting play as a means of emotional expression and interpersonal connection.
- **SupportCare Workbook:** A resource for informal caregivers of people with dementia, focusing on self-care and resilience.
- **Reconnecting with Nature (ROOTED, Erasmus+):** A program promoting mental wellbeing for older adults through structured outdoor and nature-based activities.
- **Rebirth Festival:** A grassroots birth autonomy festival promoting trauma-free, inclusive and informed approaches to maternity care.
- **The innovative program “Collective Well-being”:** It aims to raise awareness and access to factual information on mental health issues, as well as to develop skills that enhance mental well-being and quality of life (Museum of Cycladic Art in collaboration with the Research University Institute of Mental Health, Neurosciences and Precision Medicine “Kostas Stefanis”).

C. Arts, Creativity & Self-Expression

- **μoment Creative:** A creative wellness platform offering tools for emotional resilience through artistic expression, particularly for creative professionals.
- **Among the Ants:** A collective project exploring the therapeutic and political potential of art in public space through workshops and installations.
- **Urban Play:** Interventions in public space using artistic play to encourage connection, expression, and emotional restoration.

D. Urban and Environmental Community Care

- **URBANA:** A platform for inclusive urban design practices that center community wellbeing and accessibility.
- **Kýklos:** (as above) integrates ecofeminism with environmental sustainability and communal care practices.
- **Nesson Ecovillage:** A living community that experiments with sustainable, cooperative life as a form of everyday care.
- **ROOTED:** (as above) utilizes outdoor activities to promote wellbeing for older adults and intergenerational dialogue.

E. Parenting, Youth & Intergenerational Support

- River West Seminars: Free seminars on parenting and mental wellbeing organized by a shopping center in Athens.
- Municipality of Acharnes: Offers free community workshops on self-awareness, parenting, and emotional intelligence.
- It's Up to Youth (EPAPSY): Programs that empower young people to address psychosocial challenges and build resilience.
- Checkpoint: A free HIV testing and health awareness service accessible to all, promoting bodily autonomy and self-respect.

F. Research & Advocacy Projects

- COV-CARE: A participatory research project mapping emotional and care experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece.
- SCoRe Collective: A research and action group developing gender-aware models of community care and mutual aid.
- Resilience of Nurses (COVID-era): A study exploring self-care practices and emotional resilience among healthcare workers.

G. Island-Based Radical Care Practices

While many radical self-care initiatives in Greece are centered in urban areas like Athens and Thessaloniki, islands also host important yet often overlooked practices of community care, ecological healing, and queer resilience. These initiatives respond to the specific challenges of insularity—limited access to services, seasonal population shifts, and ecological vulnerability—by fostering intimate networks of support and sustainability.

Feminist and LGBTQIA+ Networks

- Queer Ranch Festival: Based on the island of Lesbos, this grassroots initiative organizes the annual Queer Ranch Festival, creating a transnational space for queer expression, healing, and resistance at the intersection of refugee solidarity and LGBTQIA+ rights.
- Informal queer networks have emerged on islands such as Syros and Crete, where small-scale events, workshops, and retreats promote community safety, embodiment, and political dialogue.

Ecological and Communal Living Initiatives

- Ikaria Project: This experimental community rethinks time, health, and social rhythm through a culture of slowness, conviviality, and interdependence. It draws from local traditions while critiquing neoliberal time regimes.
- Eco-villages and permaculture groups have formed in parts of Crete, Skyros, and Evia, often integrating regenerative farming with collective governance and somatic care practices.

Indicative reading list on Radical Self-Care and Collective Wellbeing

1. Ronald Purser – *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*
2. Eva Illouz – *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*
3. Jonathan Crary – *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*
4. Joan Tronto – *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*

- Maria Puig de la Bellacasa – *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More-than-Human Worlds*
- Silvia Federici – *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*
- Gabor Maté – *When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress*
- Jenny Odell – *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*
- *Dreamtopia: A Book for Mental Empowerment in Difficult Times** (Greek title: Ονειροτοπία)
- Paul Watzlawick - *The Situation Is Hopeless, But Not Serious: The Pursuit of Unhappiness*
- Galit Atlas - *Emotional Inheritance: A Therapist, Her Patients, and the Legacy of Trauma*

Conclusion: Radical Care as Infrastructure, Not Escape

The initiatives described above invite us to reimagine self-care not as a retreat from the world but as infrastructure for staying in it, together. In these examples from Greece, care is not sold—it is shared, crafted collectively, rooted in histories of struggle, and committed to justice.

Rather than individual escape or optimization, self-care here becomes a practice of radical interdependence, where rest, joy, and healing are not privileges but rights. The tension between care and capitalism is not resolved, but actively confronted. Each collective suggests that wellbeing cannot be achieved without rethinking labor, gender, space, and ecology.

This opens new questions: - What does it mean to design care systems that are not extractive, but regenerative? - How can we center rest and repair in movements without romanticizing burnout?

These acts of community self-care are not merely about survival; they are quiet, persistent, revolutionary blueprints for a different kind of future.

References

- Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an account of oneself*. Fordham University Press.
- Fisher, B., & Tronto, J. (1990). Toward a feminist theory of caring. In E. K. Abel & M. K. Nelson (Eds.), *Circles of care: Work and identity in women's lives* (pp. 35–62). SUNY Press.
- Han, B.-C. (2015). *The Burnout Society*. Stanford University Press.
- Lorde, A. (1988). *A Burst of Light: Essays*. Firebrand Books.
- Maté, G. (2003). *When the body says no: The cost of hidden stress*. Alfred A. Knopf Canada.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*. University of Minnesota Press.

Purser, R. (2019). *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*. Repeater.

Workshop held in Greece, SMouTh Automatic Writing



Type of method / disciplines involved	Creative writing, group reflection
Keywords	free writing, collective reflection, care, self-awareness
Number of participants	Any group size
When to use it	When aiming to surface hidden thoughts and emotions, or to initiate group reflection on care.
Objectives / expected learning outcomes / Improved skills	Encourage spontaneous expression, reduce rational filtering, enhance awareness of care needs, and build group connection.
Time / duration	30 minutes
Space & Equipment requirements / materials	Paper, pens or pencils
Description of the activity	Step 1 – Free Writing (10’): Each participant writes continuously for 10 minutes without stopping, editing, or judging. Even if nothing comes, they should write “nothing is coming.”

	<p>Step 2 – Highlighting Words of Care (5’): Participants review their writing and underline words/phrases connected to care.</p> <p>Step 3 – Group Discussion (15’): Participants share their highlighted words and discuss why they were linked to care, whether expected or surprising, and if they reflect personal or collective needs.</p> <p>Extra: Reflective question – Would your response differ if you were directly asked what you need to feel cared for, instead of discovering it through writing?</p>
Debriefing / Assessment / Evaluation	Reflect on how indirect approaches may reveal deeper needs than direct questioning.
Remarks / Pay attention to	Encourage participants to suspend judgment during writing. Assure them that sharing is voluntary.
References	Adapted from creative writing and reflective practices on care.



Workshop held in Greece, Smouth A Recipe for Self-Care

Type of method / disciplines involved	A guided method using memory and sensory imagination to co-create poetic “care recipes,” blending sensory elements with reflective sharing. Guided visualization, creative writing, group sharing, self care
Keywords	free writing, collective reflection, care, self-awareness
Number of participants	Any group size
When to use it	When aiming to access personal memories and translate them into imaginative, supportive care practices.
Objectives / expected learning outcomes / Improved skills	Develop sensory awareness, transform memory into creative expression, and foster group bonding through shared narratives.
Time / duration	45 minutes
Space & Equipment requirements / materials	Paper, pens or pencils
Description of the activity	<p>Step 1 – Guided Memory Journey (10’): Participants close their eyes while the facilitator leads them through recalling a beautiful, peaceful memory. The facilitator prompts participants to recall: Where they are? What the surroundings look like? Whether they are alone or with someone? What sounds are present? What sensations, emotions, and thoughts are emerging?</p> <p>Step 2 – Sensory Selection (5’): Participants choose a color, a scent, a taste, and a texture from their memory that feel nourishing and supportive.</p> <p>Step 3 – Recipe Creation (10’): Participants write a poetic recipe with their four chosen elements, including ingredients and preparation steps.</p> <p>Step 4 – Sharing (20’): Each person shares their recipe, fostering relational reflection on care, memory, and creativity.</p>

Ecologies of care: toolkit for self - care

**Debriefing / Assessment /
Evaluation**

Discuss how sensory memories can inspire care practices. Invite reflections on how individual recipes relate to collective needs.

**Remarks /
Pay attention to**

Facilitator should create a safe, calm environment. Allow flexibility in sharing.

**Ecologies
of CARE
CARE**

