

## 50 ways to take care of yourself in the arts

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Feeling burned out? Here are practical tips and advice from community arts workers, artists, practitioners and managers on how to manage self-care in the arts.



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As a sector, the arts is on the [verge of burnout](http://performing.artshub.com.au/news-article/career-advice/performing-arts/madeleine-dore/why-we-are-burning-out-in-the-arts-249582) (<http://performing.artshub.com.au/news-article/career-advice/performing-arts/madeleine-dore/why-we-are-burning-out-in-the-arts-249582>) if not already teetering far beyond its edge. Lack of support, the precarious nature of freelance and contract work, the emotional and physical toll of creative and community arts work, frequent requests to [work for free](http://design.artshub.com.au/news-article/features/design/madeleine-) (<http://design.artshub.com.au/news-article/features/design/madeleine->

[dore/essential-guide-to-working-for-free-249029](#)), and the undervaluing of work in Australia is confounding. Yet there is a silver lining in that these issues are finally being broached.

At the [Making Time: Arts and Self-Care \(http://footscrayarts.com/event/making-time-arts-and-self-care/\)](http://footscrayarts.com/event/making-time-arts-and-self-care/) conference held by Footscray Community Arts Centre (FCAC) last week, the discussion was stripped bare of the appearances we are often greeted with at exhibition openings, or daily dealings with colleagues and friends. Delegates shared candid accounts of dealings with trauma, mental health difficulties and illuminated the dark corners of community arts work.

Community arts workers in particular are often exposed to difficult or traumatic situations through working with those that have experienced hardship. As empathic individuals, it can be difficult to distance yourself or avoid taking on external stress. Often when we do take a step back, we begin to feel we are not doing enough, or spiral into feelings of anxiety or worthlessness.

Remaining fully engaged yet detached enough to preserve your own self-care is a difficult balance, yet essential to ensuring you can continue to help others through the work you do.

So how can we incorporate simple steps towards self-care into our days without feeling pangs of guilt?

At Making Time, arts workers, practitioners, performers, artists, producers and managers brainstormed how as individuals we can strive for better self-care before, during and after a potential period of stress.

Here's a collection of 50 practical ideas to help you avoid burnout while enabling you to engage with communities, look after others, advocate for the sector, or focus on the creation of your work.

## **50 ways to take care of yourself in the arts**

### **1. Get out of your head**

Our thoughts can often be biased and get stuck in harmful feedback loops about not being good enough, not doing enough, not helping enough, not knowing enough. This damages creative relationships and our capacity to do good work. Step out of that loop through mindfulness or physical activity.

### **2. Be playful**

Whether it's playing a sport, going for a jog, stealing flowers from other people's gardens or swinging on the playground, playfulness is often an underrated tool to help manage stress.

### **3. Share with others**

One delegate was asked in a job interview, 'What do you need help with?' This is something to continually ask yourself throughout projects or your art practice, and a way to reach out to others.

#### 4. Nurture an attitude of gratitude

Being grateful for something as small like having milk in the fridge can help give you perspective.

#### 5. Get your life admin in order

Change your sheets, make sure you have food in the fridge, do your laundry, clear your desk. Sorting out your life admin before a big project means that you don't need to worry about it for a while.

#### 6. Basic nutrition

Make sure you eat food that makes you feel recharged. If you are travelling away or have an upcoming residency, plan meals and eat well in the lead up.

#### 7. Have the treat now

Don't wait for something 'good' to happen in order to give yourself a treat. Enjoy something now, even just a cup of tea, and reward yourself for your hard work.

#### 8. Check in with yourself

Self-care is continuous. Checking in with yourself along the way, not just at the end of a project means that you can avoid feeling like you've been hit by an unexpected bout of exhaustion.

#### 9. Put an end to your work day

A common cause of burnout is the undefined nature of work in the arts. What is professional time and what is personal time? Even arbitrary structures such as 'I will break for lunch' or 'I will stop work at 6pm' can keep the constantly-working-around-the-clock feelings in check.

#### 10. Limit screen time

Enforce a rule where you don't look at your phone during your morning commute, or switch off your phone each night to avoid reading emails or checking social media in bed.

#### 11. Stop for food

Don't eat at the computer: make it a rule to stop for three meals each day.

#### 12. Be present

Don't let what could happen in the future taint what is happening now. Likewise, dwelling on the past can prevent you from doing your best work in the present. Take time to be by yourself to focus and be conscious of what is around you.

#### 13. What stories are you telling yourself?

Recognise the stories you are telling yourself that are not serving you well. Integrate them and ground your thoughts in facts. Know that feelings aren't facts.

#### 14. Know it's okay to step back

Don't feel guilty about taking time out before a big show, launch, or intensive work period. So often we work right up to the eleventh hour, buzzing on our phones and computers. Taking time to leave the space and focus, or sitting in a

neutral space, can be more beneficial in the long run.

#### 15. Assess your to-do list

Often we can fool ourselves into thinking that because something is on our to-do list, we have to do it. Reassess, clear the clutter, and target what you really need to be doing.

#### 16. Use to-do lists

That said, if you are feeling overrun, a to-do list can help give you focus and control. One delegate suggested turning your to-do lists into adventure maps with illustrations to make tasks seem less daunting.

#### 17. Clarify your purpose or intent

When you start feeling stressed about things that you should be doing, or overwhelmed by the amount of work you have taken on, try and come back to your original intent for the project or the purpose of your work. What really matters? What tasks, thoughts, and burdens can you get rid of?

#### 18. Have faith in your colleagues and collaborators

Sometimes we can presume it is all on us, but remember that usually you have colleagues and support around you. Get better at delegating.

#### 19. Trust the process

Understand where you are at, where you need to go, know that you've pulled this off before and trust that you'll pull it off again.

#### 20. Be okay with doing nothing

Pressure to be productive all the time is nonsense. Let yourself have a bath, read a book, switch off from social media or just lay in bed and do nothing. It's okay to do nothing.

#### 21. Build in congratulations along the way

We don't need to wait until it is all over to celebrate. Take time to congratulate yourself and your team for achieving smaller milestones.

#### 22. Make self-care part of the acquittal

Self-care needs to become part of the vernacular and a respected and valued part of any project or workplace.

#### 23. Don't do the debrief at the end of the project

Allow time, Skype if you have to, you need space away from the project.

#### 24. Put recovery time into the budget

When applying for a grant or putting together a budget, factor in self-care and recovery time.

#### 25. Acknowledge and reflect on the project

Often it's best to reflect on the project a few weeks after its conclusion.

Acknowledge the work you have done, the personal and organisational learnings, and how they can be applied to future projects.

#### 26. Manage the post-show high

You may feel a rush of adrenaline after the completion of a show or project, but if you blow out by going to a big party and end up in bed for a week to recover it's not the best use of your energy. Think ahead to your sustainability.

#### 27. Have a celebration

That said, if having a party works for you, let your hair down. Find your way and know what your treat is and what is good for you.

#### 28. Don't let FOMO fool you

It's okay to retire to bed. We can feel this pressure to go to every opening, exhibition, see every project, keep 'networking' least we be left behind, but acknowledging what you really would prefer to do instead of being ruled by what you *should* be doing can diminish the feelings of fear of missing out.

#### 29. Look at how you are using drugs and alcohol

A lot of people around you may be using drugs and alcohol as a way to celebrate or cope with stress and trauma. Make informed choices and seek help where necessary. You are in charge of your well-being.

#### 30. Identify when you are being pulled into a negativity vortex

Don't let negative feedback or naysayers discourage you. As one delegate said, 'I had to remind myself I did the work. I wrote a book, so fuck everybody.' You did it, and other people shouldn't get in the way of you feeling good about that.

#### 31. Reconnect with friends

When our collective mantra is 'I'm so busy, busy, busy' we can neglect people around us. Reconnect and reach out to your friends and family and let them know if you are feeling burnout.

#### 32. Be with nature

Spending time in nature can quite grounding and reflective – it can often help you pinpoint what it is that is making you stressed so you can reassess.

#### 33. Animal companionship

Take your dog for a walk or spend time with a pet to de-stress.

#### 34. Relish solitude

Sometimes it can feel as if there is a pressure to be with people, but for some, hanging out by yourself is more nourishing. It's okay to connect with just one person, not 20. Hibernate, you can even order your groceries online if you want to. It's about finding what recharges you.

#### 35. Say no

There is an art to saying no, and it's essential to preserve self-care. We can't eliminate everything we don't want to do in life, but saying no to relationships

that aren't working well, projects that you don't have time for or interest in, or the commitments that don't enrich you in some way, is extremely beneficial.

#### 36. Do something totally different

When you finish a project, going overseas or switching practices can be reinvigorating. Change really is as good as a holiday.

#### 37. Build boundaries

Working in the arts can often mean no structure when it comes to personal and professional time, and sometimes relationships with colleagues, clients and communities can eat into our private lives. Build boundaries, which can be as simple as switching off email notifications on your smartphone.

#### 38. Where you are and what is the end goal

When feeling stressed or overwhelmed, knowing where you are at and what your goals are for a project or even your career can help bring focus and clarity.

#### 39. Don't let your creativity be shoved to the side

Even just ten minutes of your own writing or creative focus can be healing. Unlike going from job to job to job, art is a lifelong practice.

#### 40. Restructure your work week

While not all arts workers work in an organisation or have the ability to work relatively set hours, if you can, consider how you [distribute your working hours](http://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/career-advice/professional-development/madeleine-dore/personal-time-promotes-organisational-creativity-248205) (<http://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/career-advice/professional-development/madeleine-dore/personal-time-promotes-organisational-creativity-248205>) through the week. Working 8am-6pm Monday to Thursday and having Friday off may work better in order to give you time for your creative projects.

#### 41. Ask for money

You might get asked to work for free for a good cause or 'great exposure', but it not up to somebody else to determine what is a good cause or the value of exposure for you. Keep in mind they wouldn't ask the caterers to walk for free, so why should the most valuable contributions to the project be neglected?

#### 42. Know the warnings signs

Often we can be so excited to get work that we ignore potential stresses. Are they walking the talk? Trust your gut and know when you are being 'chronically bullshitted', said a delegate.

#### 43. Do your reference check

Talk to peers about other organisations and people to make sure you will be working in an environment that is supportive.

#### 44. Systematic issues and what is acceptable

Working long hours for low pay is entrenched in the sector but would be [unacceptable in the corporate sector](http://performing.artshub.com.au/news-article/career-advice/performing-arts/madeleine-dore/why-we-are-burning-out) ([http://performing.artshub.com.au/news-article/career-advice/performing-arts/madeleine-dore/why-we-are-burning-out-](http://performing.artshub.com.au/news-article/career-advice/performing-arts/madeleine-dore/why-we-are-burning-out)

[in-the-arts-249582](#)). We need to do our bit to try and break this down by saying no to working for free, taking breaks, and factoring in self-care into budgets and grant applications.

#### 45. It's okay to walk away

Whether it be during or at the completion of a project, sometimes our health and wellbeing may require us to walk away. One delegate said that when she finishes a project, she tells her boss she needs a break. It may be five days, it may be three weeks, but 'she will be back.'

#### 46. Really listen

You don't have to have the answers, but letting someone speak and really be heard can be helpful. Platitudes such as, 'How's your depression?' are not really listening, but offering a genuine conversation helps build empathy. Your offer may be rebuffed, but it's still a step towards us all getting better at listening.

#### 47. Stop telling ourselves and others to 'toughen up'

Telling ourselves to toughen up when we are feeling burnout creates a harmful feedback loop: we feel exhausted, then guilty for feeling exhausted, so we 'toughen up', and wind up feeling even more exhausted. If we acknowledge and take our own well-being seriously, we set a good example for others to nurture their own. Small steps at an individual level could see a change in the 'toughen up' culture of the sector.

#### 48. Be comfortable with uncertainty

Stress can manifest when we worry about the future. At Making Time, delegates were advised to look at what you are fearful of and what you are avoiding. Is it failure? Is it letting people down? Trying to bring your focus back to the current project can minimise stress and worry surrounding an imagined future.

#### 49. Are you biting off more than you can chew?

Assess your commitments. Is there anything that you are doing that does not align with your goals? What is the biggest stress? Could you reduce your workload in one area? Time and attention are two of our most precious resources and what we do with them can either aggravate or defend against burnout.

#### 50. Recognise the warning signs of depression and anxiety in yourself

Mental illness can present differently in people, but some signs that you may be experiencing depression can include social isolation, loss of interest in work or other activities, poor hygiene, and emotional instability. Know that some days you might feel okay, but other times may not. It is important to seek help. Reach out to a friend, colleague or talk to someone about your mental health at [beyondblue](https://www.beyondblue.org.au/) (<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>) on 1300 22 4636.

If you are at immediate risk of harm to yourself or others, please contact [Emergency Services](http://www.australia.gov.au/information-and-) (<http://www.australia.gov.au/information-and->

[services/public-safety-and-law/emergency-services](#)) on 000. If you are feeling suicidal or concerned about someone who is, please call: [Suicide Call Back Service \(https://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au/\)](#) on 1300 659 467.

**How do you manage stress and burnout? Share with us any tips, however small, in the comment section below.**

**Further reading:**

**[Why we are burning out in the arts \(http://performing.artshub.com.au/news-article/career-advice/performing-arts/madeleine-dore/why-we-are-burning-out-in-the-arts-249582\)](http://performing.artshub.com.au/news-article/career-advice/performing-arts/madeleine-dore/why-we-are-burning-out-in-the-arts-249582)**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Madeleine Dore is ArtsHub's Deputy Editor and is fascinated by the intersection of art and entrepreneurship, and is dedicated to communities that encourage creative and artistic careers.

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