

# Actualizing Equity by Resisting Systems that Deplete Us

To achieve our collective visions for justice and liberation in our communities we must center the voices and experiences of those most impacted — but we cannot lose sight of our own wellbeing. Across sectors but especially in nonprofits, burnout has become an epidemic, draining our bodies and hollowing out our movements as leaders struggle to sustain themselves in the crush of processes that dehumanize and divide us. How are organizations pushing back on entrenched systems insistent on incremental change? How are we metabolizing the daily trauma and exploitation we face working to advance policy change in spaces designed to undermine us? What tangible steps are we taking to redirect our energies and protect our spirits against burnout? At our April 2024 Actualizing Equity event, we discussed these critical questions with Ebony Aya from the Aya Collective of Minnesota; Sunny Chanthanouvong from the Lao Center of Minnesota; and Liz Loeb from Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light.

## Addressing Burnout Requires Context



Ebony Aya

“Under enslavement, Black womanhood was constructed along the premise of force and control: forced labor, physical and sexual violence, enforced reproduction, and wet nursing.

Black women were basically seen as objects. So in that context, the concept of rest and burnout is an oxymoron, because our bodies are being forced to do things that we don’t want to do.

Even as the institution of slavery, as it was initially conceptualized, has been dismantled, other forms have taken its place. That construction of Black womanhood remains the same, as our country and its institutions depend on Black women’s labor and exploitation in order to survive. No, we are no longer on physical plantations, but the impact of the spirit murder and the daily cumulative impacts of racism on our bodies lead to the mental physical impacts that show up as diabetes, hypertension, addiction, poor maternal outcomes and cancer, just to name a few.

It’s not that Black women aren’t capable. It’s not that we can’t do things. We do many amazing things every single day, but our own individual acts of agency and self care are no competition to these systems that continue to destroy and malign and harm us.”



Liz Loeb

“I’m white. I carry whiteness. That means the system of white supremacy is constantly trying to use my positionality in the world as an instrument of violence. I can’t

pretend that’s not true. So what does that mean for me as a white person committed to interdependence, committed to collective liberation? If I mean those words, how do I need to act in the world? That means we have to talk about power when we talk about burnout.

Collectively, there’s been a pandemic and an uprising. Those events impacted us so differently across lines of geography, race identity, experience. And yet in many of our organizations and collective endeavors, we are being asked to function as if somehow we should all be okay in the same way. That’s just not true. And when we act like it is true, we hurt each other in systemic and structural ways. So, for me, by the time we ask the question about burnout, the harm has already been done. We have the opportunity to engage in repair but I want a world where that harm isn’t happening. And that means I have a responsibility.”

## Burnout Culture



Sunny  
Chanthanouvong

**Isolation of leadership:** For many in leadership, there are few—if any—people to candidly shares challenges and discuss problems in confidence. Often, executive directors or those who manage others can't talk to other staff or expose internal struggles to community members. They don't want to burden their family and friends with workplace problems. And that can breed a deep sense of isolation.

**Unrelenting work:** For most, the work of organizing and advocacy has material consequences for members of the community. While many recognize the need to take time and space to rest and reset, the issues impacting our communities don't take a vacation. Crises and opportunities are constant, making it nearly impossible to plan or take a break without leaving unresolved work or unforeseen challenges for other people.

**Endless race for resources:** Especially in the United States, the government expects nonprofits and cultural service providers to carry many critical social programs, but does not fund organizations at nearly the level necessary to create adequate staff and organizational capacity to maintain those programs in a sustainable way. That leaves organizations in a constant state of seeking additional funding and capacity.

## Strategies for Sustainability

**Holding multiple truths:** Yes, we live in deeply entrenched systems of oppression in the Unites States. *And also*, we can hold gratitude for the basic necessities many of us do have: some degree of confidence that our homes and families will be there when we get home, which is not a given in places experiencing war or violent conflict.

**Taking space:** It doesn't have to cost money to carve out space for pause, reflection and attention to our basic human needs. It can look like setting aside the first 30 minutes of the work day to drink tea and listen to music. It can look like NOT answering emails after 5 p.m. It can look like a writing practice or something else that brings us joy or grounding.

**Rejecting martyrdom:** We live in a culture where being consummately busy, over-scheduled and overwhelmed are validated as marks of a committed organizer or leader doing the most. Challenging that notion by maintaining boundaries and modeling life-work balance without shame creates radical space for others to do the same.

**Relying on community:** American capitalism teaches us that we are inherently individuals, scrambling for finite resources to meet our own needs or maintain our own status. We chip away at that false assumption when we act in ways that recognize our interconnectedness and our role as part of a wider community—not a individual who has to carry it all.

**Forgoing unnecessary urgency:** While there are undoubtedly moments of urgency, crisis and unique opportunity that require increased intensity, we must be intentional about how that intensity is distributed based on our complex identities and how to let that urge to hustle release when the moment does not call for it.

**Taking action where we have power:** There is no law that says we have to work 40 hours per week or receive inadequate benefits from our organizations. If you have the institutional power, ask your staff what they need—and then meet those needs to the best of the organization's ability.

**Leaving systems causing harm:** There is a narrative that harmful institutions can not be reformed without more Black and brown bodies sacrificing their wellbeing within those same institutions. Sometimes the most powerful form of resistance is leaving.