

5 Tips For Being Sweet To Yourself While Yer Smashing The State



Photo by [Michael Steinberg](#)

We talk about “dismantling” oppressive systems, which makes it sound like a mechanical job to be tackled with wrenches, saws and screwdrivers. But these impersonal systems inflict great personal harm, leaving psychological bruises: anxiety, withdrawal, depression... wounds which can only be addressed with tender care. It’s nearly impossible to hold the two postures simultaneously, we need some kind of balance: sometimes fierce & unyielding, sometimes gentle & squishy.

My basic understanding of psychotherapy is that unresolved trauma from the past will keep fucking up your future, until you deal with it. So if we're all traumatised by the coercive power hierarchies of capitalism, patriarchy & colonialism, how do we undo our personal traumas while we also undo the unjust structures that inflicted them in the first place?

I guess that is one of the central questions of the [Emotional Anarchism blog](#). For a credible, informed perspective on trauma and activism, I point you to my fellow contributor [Megan Clapp](#), an honest-to-goodness psychologist with direct experience in radical politics. For what it's worth, I add my voice to the chorus as an interested amateur. In this essay I'll share a list of tactics I've used to shore up my mental health, and unpick the knots of my own traumas.

In the past couple weeks I've been having a lovely slow conversation with a friend, exploring the balance between "inner" and "outer" work: how do we look after ourselves "in here", while also organising "out there"? They admitted spending roughly one week per month in a state of collapse, taking it for granted that this is a normal price to pay when you dedicate your life to tackling racism and sexism head-on. Their comment reminded me: that used to be normal for me too. So I was motivated to write this list, at least as a reference guide for myself – these are the things I do to stay mentally well. I'd love to hear responses from readers, if you feel moved to share your own strategies too.

Autonomy, meaningful work, talking about yer feelings

All through my teens and early twenties, I had very erratic energy levels, cycling through periods of manic creativity and hopeless depression. In 2012 we set up [Loomio](#) – that was the first time I had a project and a team I really cared a lot

about. For the first time I had something that was worthwhile enough that I felt motivated to try to look after myself. Meaningful work is a hell of a drug.

We were extremely lucky to have the freedom to do things our own way (thanks to the welfare state for paying my rent, and to [Enspiral](#) for introducing me to a kind of entrepreneurialism that doesn't suck). With Loomio we established a working environment that rejected 'professionalism' as a mask you wear to hide your feelings, embracing people's vulnerabilities and bad days. We started every single meeting with a check-in circle, asking everyone 'how are you feeling?'

Just getting into the habit of regularly naming my feelings out loud massively increased my self-awareness, and hence my ability to regulate my energy. I learned my ups and downs are pretty regular, and if I'm careful with the Up, I can have a much less dramatic Down. Basic stuff like noticing I'm hyperactive this week, and then interrupting that tendency by *not* working all night, getting a good sleep, eating proper meals, enforcing relaxation even though my instinct said Woo Yay It's Time To Be Hyper!

Affection & tenderness

Hooray for affection! The first time I entered the Enspiral co-working space, I was greeted with an enormous hug (even though I was stinky from living in an Occupy camp). I need tonnes of physical affection to feel okay in my skin.

For most of 2012-2016 while I was renegotiating my mental health habits, I didn't have a close intimate partner. I had some lovers for fun, but no one up really close. So the affection and tenderness I received mostly came from my social sphere rather than from a close partner. A lot of people around Enspiral are very huggy, that helps a lot (they're also the kind of people that ask first, which is cool).

Enspiral people also introduced me to the peculiar social form of the “cuddle puddle”. It’s a lot like getting a nice hug from a friend, but with a potentially unlimited number of people, all sprawled out together on the floor in an expression of “nonsexual group physical intimacy” as Wikipedia so precisely puts it.

Psychotherapy

For the past couple years, whenever I’m stationary in my home city, I’ve been seeing a psychotherapist regularly. I am still on the fence about how much talk-therapy helps someone with my constitution, but still it seems better than nothing. Mostly it’s the place where I can examine how my old traumas keep showing up in the present. Sometimes I think it would be nice if I we would introduce ourselves to potential collaborators or new friends by naming our short list of pivotal traumas: *these are some things to keep in mind when you’re interacting with me*. Ok I’ll start:

From a psychological perspective, there are two themes from my past that are really relevant to my present. Firstly, I was raised in a fundamentalist Christian sect which literally put the fear of God into me. It’s very hard to convey to someone who hasn’t had that experience, but it’s a profound kind of metaphysical coercion, a demand for total ideological and behavioural conformity, backed up by the threat of infinite suffering for all time, reinforced by nearly every single person in my social sphere throughout my formative years. So that’s why I’m ultra sensitive to coercive power now, which is good because it informs my politics and my orgdev work, but it is also why I am way over reactive against harmless kinds of conformity like boardgames and smalltalk (which sounds funny but fucks up a lot of social interactions).

The second relevant factor was that I was raised a boy, so yay, privilege and freedom and opportunities etc, but also, boo relentless psychological assault to deny any parts of myself that are tender, incomplete, weak, sensitive, affectionate, etc, i.e. traits that identify me as feminine. Somehow, even though intellectually I obviously “know” that being feminine is not a bad thing, down at the subconscious level I still carry a bunch of shame that tends to discourage me from opening up and showing any vulnerability. It takes a lot of conscious awareness to counteract that tendency. In retrospect, a lot of my “inner” work has been about me directing tenderness to myself. Noticing how I disown the parts of myself that are not up to some ideal, and practicing self-forgiveness, self-acceptance, patting myself on the head and saying it’s ok, yer ok sweetie, it’s gunna be ok.

I’m not sharing this seeking some great expression of sympathy, as if my traumas even remotely compare to the intensity that most people have to deal with. My point is to illustrate that our hardware is pretty dysfunctional: I got mocked by ignorant bullies as a kid – now the bullies are long gone but my brain keeps doing their job for them. That is a dumb system but it’s common to most of us humans, so we need to be really gentle with each other pls!!

(Sidenote: if you want to look further into this process of internalised shame, I hugely recommended Nanette, an excruciatingly painful and profound show by queer comedian Hannah Gadsby. It’s on Netflix.)

Loving relationships

I had a friend tell me once, “Rich I don’t only want to be your friend when you are happy.” Maybe that is obvious, but it was a breakthrough for me. It’s dumb to be friends with someone who never shares when they are down. I’m learning what a gift it is to be able to support someone when they are feeling low. Slowly but sure-

ly, I'm learning to return the favour, reaching out to my buds when that sense of defeat and hopeless creeps in the backdoor.

And of course I can't overstate the degree of support I've received from my partner Nati in the past couple years. She is the most extraordinarily loving, caring, and compassionate human creature I've ever met. I only have some idea of what "acceptance" feels like because she has shown it to me relentlessly.

Other bits and pieces

Definitely **meditation** has played a big role in my wellness and self-acceptance. For me specifically that's Vipassana mediation, but only because that's the method I know. Probably many different mindfulness practices are extremely helpful. Vipassana gave me an experiential understanding that all the good times and all the bad times are always always always transient, so I don't need to freak out when I'm down, and there's no point getting too attached when I'm up. Mindfulness is like a parking bay on the side of the road that I can always pull into when my engine feels like it's overheating.

Another a very big piece of the puzzle is **circle work**. Sitting in circles with people I trust. Talking about my hopes and fears, being heard. Listening to others. To tell my story and to be heard and accepted... oh that is the good shit. Thanks Enspiral! Thanks people who are not scared about appearing to be "too hippy"! There's so much joy on the other side of the [cringe](#).

What else? I'm spending more and more time on **holiday**, or something like it. Resting, dreaming, practicing a bit of de-commodified time outside of confrontational or productive or hierarchical or outcome-oriented dynamics and just being a human animal enjoying nature and not taking responsibility for fixing the world's

problems 100% of the time. Oh and also, occasionally taking a psychedelic trip to clear out the gutters.

...all this and still I am pretty fucking flakey and incompetent at most aspects of life (though I admit I can talk a good game).

What about you?

I know this list is spelling out my privilege in big block letters, but I hope there's still one or two ideas in there that help. And I would love to hear from y'all: what are you doing to nurture that lovely self of yours?

p.s. Check out the [Emotional Anarchism](#) blog for more stories like this

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