Episode 4: Self-Care Re-Rooted

Feminista Jones: “Uhhh social work buzz word, that people have exploited, Self-care should mean that you take care of yourself, first and foremost. You put your oxygen mask on first. Um and I think that some folks have turned it into something marketable and something that can be profited from. But self-care means honoring your pain, honoring your exhaustion, honoring your struggles, and doing work to make sure that you are taking care of yourself, healing yourself, and prioritizing yourself.”


Crystal Moten: I'm Dr. Crystal Moten, and my pronouns are she/her

Krystal Klingenberg: And my name is Dr. Krystal Klingenberg, and my pronouns are also she/her.

Crystal Moten: On this pilot season of Collected, we are re-rooting Black feminism and placing it in its original historical context. This episode, we’re talking about self-care.

Fath Davis Ruffins: “I had to examine in my dreams as well as in my immune function test the devastating effects of overextension. Overextending myself is not stretching myself. I had to accept how difficult it is to monitor the difference, necessary for me as cutting down on sugar, crucial physically, psychically. Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”

Crystal Moten: At the time, Audre Lorde was living with cancer. She was a poet, writer, lesbian, feminist, and a part of the Combahee River Collective. She’s saying that to take care of oneself is not an indulgence. It's how you keep going, literally.

Krystal Klingenberg: I think Lorde's point about over-extension here is really important, right? As professional women who work as hard as we can, we're passionate about our work. It's very easy to find yourself over-extended. And you know, you stretch and you stretch and you stretch yourself, but sooner or later, you end up feeling a little underwater, and I think this is where the true meaning of self-care comes in, regardless of whether or not you're dealing with some of the really deep and existential issues that Lorde is dealing with at this point that she's writing.

Crystal Moten: I resonated with that point as well, especially because working for freedom, working for justice in whatever kind of avenue or venue you find yourself doing that, it can be easy to say, "Oh, let me just do one more thing. Let me just do one more thing, one more thing." But you have to be able to know when too much is too much. I think that next thing she says, "I had to accept how difficult it is to monitor the difference," right, it's really hard to understand or see when you're crossing that line between over-extension and stretching, and knowing that you have to monitor that is really important to note.

Krystal Klingenberg: And you know especially so when we talk about our families and how hard we may work and care for our families, when we talk about other loved ones, friends, and when we talk about political situations that we find really important to our livelihood, right?
So this sense of overextension: where is the line? Can truly be hard to find when you are so deeply into a project, so deeply into a problem, so deeply working for change. And so her call to monitor herself for over-extension is really important.

Crystal Moten: Yeah. And I think the other part of her statement that's really important is this part where she says that self-care or caring for herself is not self-indulgence, it's self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare. And connecting those points is really important to think about her identities, right, and how they were intersecting. Her identity as a Black queer woman in an environment where literally she had to think about what does it mean to keep myself physically on this earth, right, and in an environment where Black queer women are among the least valued, this becomes a political act. Caring for yourself becomes a political act.

Krystal Klingenberg: We uplift this portion of Lorde's text partially because this sense of self-indulgence is a little bit where the idea of self-care has kind of ended up in the mainstream, right? There's, from our favorite TV show, Parks and Recreation, Treat Yo Self. We all deserve a treat, right?

Crystal Moten: Yes. Right.

Krystal Klingenberg: Treating yourself is not a part of this. This is not about self-indulgence. This is how we're going to make it through. This is how we're going to try to survive, and I say try because in the case of her being ill, the political warfare piece is very powerful because we have to take care of ourselves in order to keep the movement going forward.

Krystal Klingenberg: We spoke to Paris Hatcher of Black Feminist Futures about how self-care isn't necessarily glamorous.

Paris Hatcher: “The reality is that a lot of the self-care doesn't feel good. I mean, it's got to be honest. Therapy is not always going to be your... "I'm going to get, yeah..." If you're in therapy, your therapist should be telling you some things you got to work on. Or, if you're like, "I have a physical practice." Your physical practice should really be like, it stretches you, right?
I think that oftentimes the parts of self-care that we, that get lifted up are the tropes that really feel nice. So, yes, a spa day feels really nice, but having some of these harder, painful conversations or the conversations around... "I have been avoiding going to the doctor for the last three years, um but I actually need to go," right? That's the type of self-care... And I understand, the medical-industrial complex is a mess, and we got to know where we... We can find some better providers for you so you can do that care to make sure this machine is, like you humming."

Krystal Klingenberg: What Hatcher says there about going to doctors, yeah, especially when it can be hard to find somebody... Especially in the pandemic and post-pandemic period, if you're seeking a therapist, all the therapists are fully booked. How do you find somebody to talk to? These are all things that can be a real pain to manage, but you have to do it to take care of yourself, and especially so when we see the rates of maternal health for Black women is poor, the ways in which Black women as a whole don't always get the care that they deserve and they need, whether it be the system working on them or you're taking care of everybody else sometimes and you put yourself at the bottom of the list.

Crystal Moten: But, also, you know, thinking about our lives and ourselves as bodies that need maintenance, right, that we can't just go day after day after day without tending to our physical maintenance, our spiritual maintenance, our mental health maintenance, these are things that really become important when you think about self-care that are not always as easily seen.

Krystal Klingenberg: And also, to come back to the moment that we're in, we've been in this pandemic for several years now. It's been a very up and down journey for all of us. It's been full of grief, but it's also... There've been a few bright spots but mostly not bright spots, right, and so then how do you take care of your mental health under those circumstances? Maybe it's making sure that you drink water during the day. If you have access to good food, it's making sure you're eating good food. There's some things that are very mundane here that are important to, as you said a moment ago, just keeping your body going and keeping your spirit going. Are you getting sleep at night?

Krystal Klingenberg: That's critical.
Crystal Moten: You know, our conversation reminds me of the discussion we had with Charlene Carruthers, organizer, author, and former executive director of BYP100.

Charlene Carruthers: “Self care is about self work. It’s about tending to one's body, mind, and spirit, and understanding that as connected to people, even outside of one's body, one's immediate mind and one's spirit. And the cultivation of that is an ongoing and a lifelong process. And it looks different. It can look different from person to person. And it is something that we all deserve as people.”

Krystal Klingenberg: Charlene's point about self-care being a lifelong practice is really critical here. It's not like one day, you've suddenly self-cared yourself to a point where you no longer have to take care of yourself. That's just not how it works. We use this word practice a lot. Some of that comes from the fact that we are practice-oriented individuals and we're academic types. But when we say practice here, it's like doing these things over and over again.

Crystal Moten: And over. Yes.

Krystal Klingenberg: Getting into a specific habit of doing these things for your benefit.

Crystal Moten: Right. Right.

Krystal Klingenberg: And to Charlene's point, it's a lifelong process. We grow, we change, our needs can change, and the way that we care for ourselves can change. But it's essential that we do care for ourselves such that we can keep going.

Crystal Moten: Yeah. And everyone deserves to be in a position where they can care for themselves. The reality is that not everyone is in a position where they can actually care for themselves. But as Charlene says we all deserve that we all deserve to have that ability.
Krystal Klingenberg: And to your point, Crystal, not everybody is able to care for themselves the way that they would like, and some people's position as being on the margins plays a role here, and Black women are on the margins, but Black trans women are even further on the margins in that way. We spoke to Raquel Willis, journalist and activist, and she had a lot to say about this.

Raquel Willis: “Self-care is prioritizing your own health and wellness and ability to sustain momentum in your life, and in a world that constantly tells, particularly folks on the margins and black women, black queer women, black trans women, that we shouldn't exist.”

Krystal Klingenberg: But it's important to recognize levels of privilege, even among folks who are on the margins, who are the furthest away from power. So as I sit here as a Black cis woman, there's plenty that I go through but as a Black trans woman, there's an experience even further on the margins that Raquel articulated for us and is particularly worthy of self-care because of that place on the margins.

Crystal Moten: Yeah. And to just put it quite frankly,

Crystal Moten: Black trans women are murdered. Literally taken from this earth, right? Self-care becomes a matter of life and death. In an environment where violence is meted out upon you because of who you are, you have to prioritize how you're going to survive that. Many times, that doesn't just come in self-care. It comes in how you're connected to the communities around you. It requires connection to and development of community, because being alone and on an island all to yourself is not going to preserve you and Dr. Brittney Cooper reminds us that there are limitations to a concern for just the self.

Brittney Cooper: “I also think, like to be honest with you, that I'm a little bit tired of the self-care conversation because I'm like, well, what happens when the world is super heavy and you can't care for yourself, and you need somebody to come cook you a meal, or you need to call a friend and say like, can I borrow 20 dollars? Or you need just someone to get on the phone with you and talk it out or cry it out.”
Krystal Klingenberg: Dr. Cooper brings up a really great point here about how far we can take the self-care concept. What happens when you can't take care of yourself?

Krystal Klingenberg: That's where the idea of community care comes in. So what do we mean by community care?

Crystal Moten: Especially when I think again about this moment that we're living in, in the midst of a global pandemic, where mutual aid. We began to see more examples of mutual aid networks developing in neighborhoods around the country.

I know in the neighborhood that I lived in DC, there was a Sixth Ward Mutual Aid Network where people came together, provided groceries, shopped for people who couldn't necessarily get to the grocery store, gave books to people, coloring sheets to kids, dog walks to people who had dogs and couldn't get them out. So there's this way of thinking about, "Okay, what are the needs of the people who are around me, and how can a group of folks together help meet those needs?

Krystal Klingenberg: Some people find this kind of aid in fellowship through religious worship. Other people don't. And so when you're considering, what are the communities that you are a part of and what those communities need, what are the mechanisms inside those communities that help care for members who need that care, and this is how mutual aid comes as a long time example of one way of caring for members of the community. And frankly, I think it's only going to continue, and these mutual aid networks will continue to grow and develop.

Crystal Moten: Yeah, I agree. I think it's also worth mentioning. Especially in this technologically-oriented world that we live in now, there are digital and virtual ways of thinking about community care, and even in this pandemic, when we are when so much of our social lives are now virtual. I think about virtual book clubs, and I think about all of these ways of being online that allow us to connect with each other even when we can't be in-person.

Krystal Klingenberg: One joyful example would be D-Nice's Quarantine Club.
Crystal Moten: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Krystal Klingenberg: Right? At that particular point in the pandemic, our spirits were low, and he brought musical aid.

Crystal Moten: Yes. Yes.

Krystal Klingenberg: He was spinning for hours and hours. He's an incredible DJ, and I think folks came to know that during the pandemic.

Krystal Klingenberg: But that gave us joy that we needed at the time, and we were able to feel in community, even though we were not physically together. So, to your point, even in the ways in which technology can isolate us, there's still the possibility for community and care through those technical means.

Crystal Moten: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Oh, that's a great example. Love that.

Crystal Moten: We've a lot about what self-care can be, but how can it show up in people's lives? Paris Hatcher says it can be going to therapy, doing intergenerational work. Self-care can also be joy. Krystal, when you need restoration, how do you take care of yourself?

Krystal Klingenberg: I take care of myself in lots of ways. and music really does it for me. Music takes me through joy, pain, restoration, fulfillment, upliftment, especially when you have the music in your body and you can dance and kind lift yourself and lift your spirits out of the moment that you're dealing with, provide a balm to your soul, right?

Krystal Klingenberg: And it helps me like discharge my worries and fortify myself for whatever challenges life is going to throw at me. I'm a vocalist. I've been singing since I was a kid, and there's this experience. I can only call it flow. There's a flow state that I reach when I'm singing where I'm neither here nor there, but I'm also not in the in-between. I'm just myself. I can ascend to some kind of higher plain, to get a little bit woo-woo about it.

Krystal Klingenberg: But it's so important to how I care for myself. I need to be doing more singing. Unfortunately, singing is one of those things that's really
taken a hit during the pandemic. But it's so important to my sense of self, to my sense of expression and how I gather myself up. It doesn't matter how well you sing. Sometimes, when you just hit your Mariah Carey in the shower or you hit your Whitney Houston in the car on full blast, those simple pleasures-

Crystal Moten: Or you hit your Barry White.

Krystal Klingenberg: Or your Barry White, if you need to... Maybe you got a little cold. Maybe your voice dropped a couple octaves. I'm a contralto, okay? That can lift you out for a second. That can help you shake off what you're dealing with, and that can remind you how much joy life really does have for you.

Crystal Moten: Yeah. I agree.

Krystal Klingenberg: That feeling of joy and hope is something I access all the time through music.

Crystal Moten: I was just going to say you're not the only one. I mean, you're not the only one to incorporate music into your care practices. One of the guests we interviewed, Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, she uses music as part of her regular practice of getting ready for the day.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs “There's so much of that...I have a daily practice of listening to Black women artists and looking at myself in the mirror.... There is something vibrational that happens with the sound work that especially that black women are doing. I know that it's a technology that's also available to all that really moves me. And it makes certain forms of movement possible in such a beautiful way.

And it makes it physical and embodied in a way that I think is so valuable. I listen so voraciously and it's a very important part of my practice. So not a day goes by without me very specifically inviting myself to be transformed by a piece of music written, composed or vocalized, or all three by a black woman artist.”
Krystal Klingenberg: You know Gumbs uses music as part of her ritual to get in the right mindset for the creative and activist work she seeks to do, right. So sometimes it's about the right artist at the right time who's giving you the kind of messaging you need. Sometimes, it's about music that really speaks to your circumstances, right?

Krystal Klingenberg: So we asked Barbara Smith how the members of the Combahee River Collective took care of themselves, and musical joy played a role there as well.

Barbara Smith: There was a bar and there were a number of bars in Boston that were gay bars. There was only one bar that was really a lesbian bar that I recollect. And there may had been one other that was lesbian friendly. But the lesbian bar in Boston at that time was called The Saints and, it was known as the political bar too.

Barbara Smith: And the only thing that I can remember about that is Diana Ross's If There's A Cure For This, I Don't Want It. Because we thought-

Krystal Klingenberg: Love Hangover.

Barbara Smith: Yeah. We thought that was our anthem. Because if you listen to the words, it sounds like it could be a woman talking about being a lesbian saying, "Hey, I am completely happy with who I am, how I am. If there's a cure for this, I don't want it." And given that Anita Bryant and the rest of the people, Phyllis Schlafly and all those people were coming out strong during that time repressive, this is only a few years after Stonewall. Everything I'm describing to you happened less than a decade after Stonewall. Combahee organized less than a decade after Stonewall.

Barbara Smith: We were marginalized and stigmatized by the Black community and in the Black community. So to be dancing on a spring or summer night at The Saints to a song that said, "If there's a cure for this, I don't want it." Heaven. That was heaven.
Krystal: The members of Combahee found care and community on the dance floor. "If there's a cure for this, I don't want it." The embodied joy of music and dance are really powerful and restorative. You can hear it in Barbara's story.

Crystal Moten: You know you mentioned that you are a vocalist. I am also a singer. I've also been singing since I was young, and I've sang mostly in choirs. So, for me, the act of singing has always been a community act, a community effort. Also an alto. I love singing because the alto part usually is the one that's the supportive part, right? Without-

Krystal Klingenberg: The hardest part.

Crystal Moten: It is the hardest part, yes. But without the alto part, kind of the harmony is missing, and so singing. But also, I have recently fallen in love with indoor cycling, and so I cycle a lot. There's the joke that indoor cycling, you're on a bike that goes nowhere, but while you're on that bike that goes nowhere, you can reflect on whatever you want to reflect on, right and it also allows you an opportunity to kind of use your imagination, to actually get yourself away from whatever that is perhaps stressing you out at the moment and then get those endorphins from exercise.

Krystal Klingenberg: And the gym isn't always the most friendly place to Black women, to people of color, to fat people, to people with any kind of physical challenges. It's a tricky landscape, and when we spoke with Courtney Marshall, English professor and Zumba instructor she agreed.

Courtney Marshall: “I had a friend, we were talking about CrossFit, and he was like, "Oh, you should come back to CrossFit." I don't want to come back to CrossFit because I don't want to be the only black woman there. I just don't want to do it anymore. And so if the fitness industry or fitness wellness movement, which all gets kind of squished together, right, if we're still trying to figure out what is the proper way to talk to folks about movement in a way that's not shaming them, that's not blaming them for what they're eating, or you don't go walking, but how can you walk because you don't have a safe place to walk, so all these questions remain. And I feel like we've come some ways. Right?, But those questions still remain and we've come and I really think that Black feminist thought really has important things to say about this industry."
Crystal Moten: Dr. Marshall started a Zumba class and a hiking group to intentionally create space where black women and femmes can care for their bodies. So it becomes really important that these spaces, that they're our space.

Krystal Klingenberg: Absolutely. That fitness is not about looking a particular way, but it's about feeling a particular way.

Krystal Klingenberg: In some major metropolitan cities all over the country, there have become these people of color yoga classes and some real intentionality. I think Dr. Marshall is on the vanguard of a wave of really creating spaces where people can feel comfortable. Because if we're meant to be exercising our bodies, if we want to care about our health, we need the right spaces to do it, and Dr. Marshall is really trying to provide that in her work and, gratefully, so are others.

Krystal Klingenberg: Crystal, this takes us to this question of how do you care for yourself in these spaces where you're not welcome or you don't feel welcome? I know we've all been the one, especially the one Black person at work or the one Black person in the classroom, or you may not be the only, but you may find yourself in circumstances that really try and test your spirit. So how do you take care of yourself under those circumstances?

Crystal Moten: Yeah. I think that really brings us full circle and back to this idea that self-care without community care really can't happen, right, because when you are in an environment where you are the only person, then it really becomes even more important that you are a part of other communities where your sense of self can be validated, where what you need to survive can be provided for in ways that you can't do alone. So this idea or this connection between self-care and community care really becomes one that needs to be emphasized, I think.

Krystal Klingenberg: Absolutely.

Krystal Klingenberg: So, Crystal, let's check in. How are you feeling after this episode?
Crystal Moten: Well, you know one of the things that I've been reflecting on, even as we are talking, is that self-care for me also brings together or brings up lots of emotion and lots of feeling because it's this way of caring for myself that recognizes where I am and what I need at the specific moment that I am in. So there's this necessary...you're present in the moment, right, and so whatever emotions that you're feeling or you're going through, you're wanting to unpack those a little bit. So even as we've been talking about self-care, I've been thinking about my own mental and emotional and spiritual and physical state and how I'm doing with that. So I think self care is this opportunity to reflect on how you are doing inside and outside. But I think our guests are challenging us to think about, "Well, you can't stop there," right? That can't be the end of your self-care.

Krystal Klingenberg: Absolutely. One thing that our conversation today is reminding me of is just sometimes it's important to be intentional about the way that you care for yourself because if you are not intentional about it, your care will slip further and further down the list, and you won't see it slipping. And you know, something I take very seriously in terms of my relationship with others, how can I model good self care, even when it's a little bit of a fake it till I make it situation, for some of the people in my circle who don't take such good care themselves? So part of the reason I asked you how you're feeling is because that's me checking in with you. That's community care.

Krystal Klingenberg: That's us making sure that we're taking care of each other- as we take care for ourselves, and that's really the name of the game.

Crystal Moten: Yeah. I just have one follow-up in terms of thinking about community care and understanding that community care is seeing when a member of your community is slipping in their self-care, right? It's noticing that, "Hey, this person who I am in relationship with needs something," right? And so self-care can't be so individually or internally focused that you fail to notice, "Hey, what's going on with Krystal over there," right? "How can I support and help her in caring for herself?" That's why the connection between self and community care becomes so, so, so very important to me.

Krystal Klingenberg: Join us next episode as we talk about intersectionality as a lens for better seeing the challenges faced by black women in society.
Raquel Willis “Intersectionality is rooted in understanding that there are, at any given moment, multiple systems of oppression that are impacting how an individual navigates the world. So it's not just stacking identities like Jenga, which I think a lot of folks like to do, But for me, intersectionality is really rooted in looking at the systems of oppression on a collective level.”

Krystal: Crystal and I would like to thank our guests, Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Feminista Jones, Dr. Courtney Marshall, Paris Hatcher, Charlene Carruthers, Dr. Brittney Cooper, and Raquel Willis for their time. Check out Collected's website for more information and resources related to the history and practice of Black feminism. Our podcast team Jenna Hanchard, Taylor Polydore, and Ann Conanan. Special thanks to Modupe Labode, Tony Perry, and Alana Gomez. Collected is funded by the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative and the National Museum of American History.