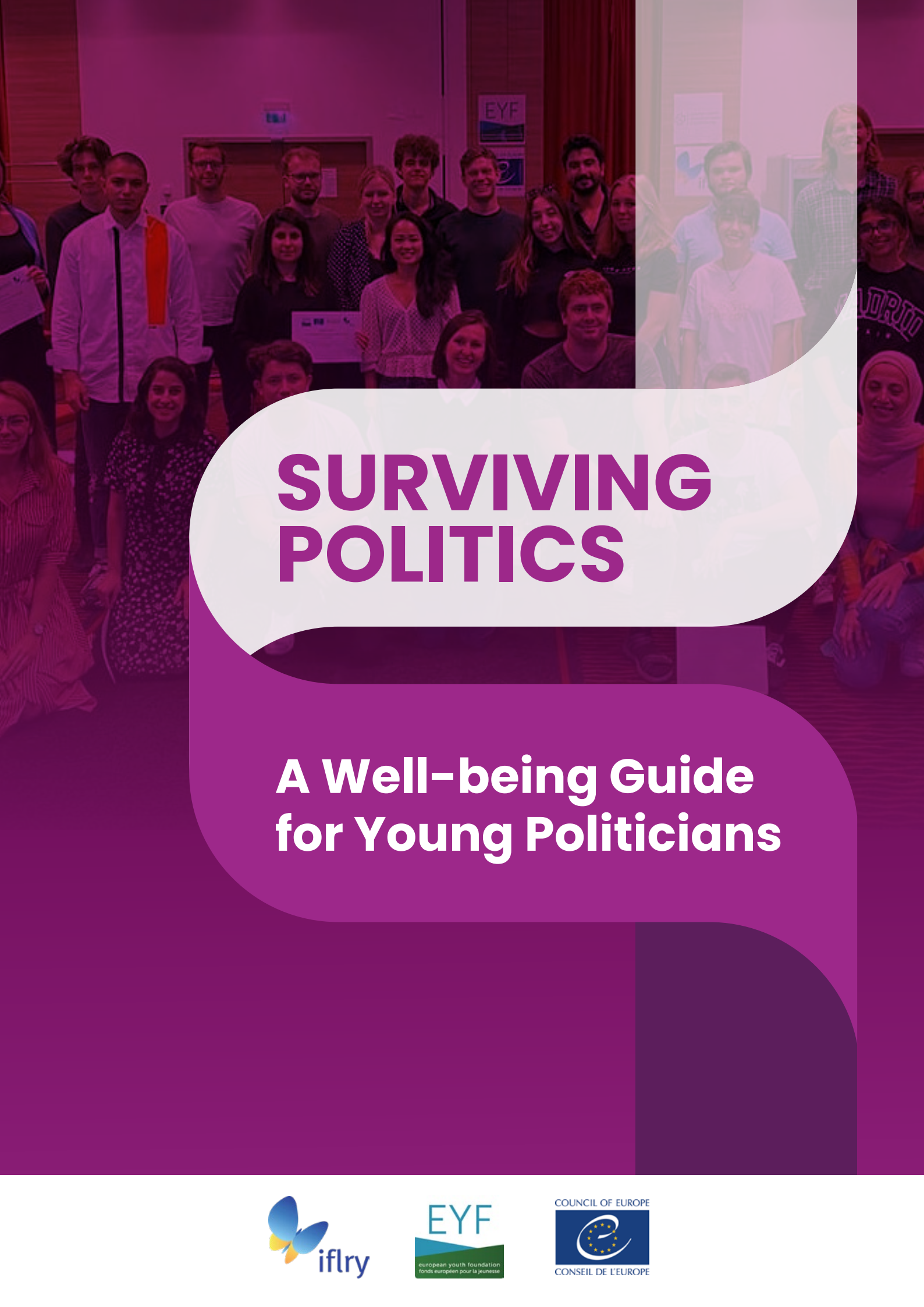




SURVIVING POLITICS

A Well-being Guide for Young Politicians

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Surviving Politics: A well-being guide for Young Politicians

This booklet was created by the International Federation of Liberal Youth (IFLRY) with the support of the Council of Europe (CoE) and the European Youth Foundation (EYF).

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Our thanks also go to all participants and speakers who joined us throughout this journey. In 2025, we held two seminars, in Germany and Poland, bringing together youth in politics to explore the topic of wellbeing, share insights, and shape this booklet with their thoughts and reflections.

This resource is the result of your collective wisdom, passion, and commitment.



WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

Increased participation of young people in democratic political life has from the beginning the key priority of the youth sector of the Council of Europe. Back in 1972, against the backdrop of the Baby Boom after 1945 in Europe the Council of Europe created its own youth policy as a living standard for member States to take inspiration from. The policy hinges on co-management of the instruments of the Europe Youth Centre and European Youth Foundation. Both create opportunities and spaces for young people to engage directly through activities led by them and their peers in political work at European level. International non-governmental youth organisations, such as the International Federation of Liberal Youth (IFLRY), have from the start been key partners of the Council of Europe in this work.

The Council of Europe is defending youth participation as a core value of democracy. Young people are agents of change in societies and contributors to democratic development. At the same time, when spaces for participation – as observed in politics – are not youth-friendly, frustration, marginalisation and discouragement risk settling in. When political life does not allow young emerging politicians to bring their contributions to decision-making, society risks falling into stagnation.

The Summit of the Council of Europe in Reykjavik in May 2023 called upon the Organisation to broaden youth participation and integrating youth perspectives across all parts of its work. This entails potentially a broader political consideration to better reflect perspectives of young people in all political deliberations. The best way to generate youth perspectives is to place young people at the centre of politics – to be physically present – through meaningful youth participation. However, it is not the only way, because first, young people do not necessarily know, and carry on, the perspectives of others. That is a challenge of representativity which youth organisations such as IFLRY play an important role to address. As international organisations are also crucial for reflecting youth perspectives at continental or multi-annual scale.

This guide for young politicians created by the International Federation of Liberal Youth will help to create a positive dynamic. The guide is the result of a year-long project supported by the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe. IFLRY is addressing the topic of mental health of young politicians, as the well-being of individuals in democracy contributes to positive outcomes. Mental health of politicians is not just their private issue, it is an issue that potentially affects more than themselves, given the role politicians exercise in representative democracy.

This guide has the potential to lead to a cultural change in politics and we hope will start new debates and awareness, which are essential to be had in dynamic democratic societies. This guide is also an example of youth perspectives on an all too often ignored problem. We are grateful for IFLRY's initiative to propose the project to the European Youth Foundation and wish the guide many readers, users, and real impact for everyone's benefit.

Tobias Flessenkemper
Head of the Youth Department
Council of Europe

INTRODUCTION

To my fellow young politicians,

Politics is demanding in ways that are rarely acknowledged. It tests your time, your energy, and your emotional resilience. Often, we hide our struggles, afraid that admitting doubt or fear will make us appear weak. We second-guess our decisions, question the intentions of others, and sometimes feel unable to trust the support around us. It can be isolating.

We are expected to perform flawlessly at every meeting, debate, and event. At the same time, we are asked to stay informed on global developments, maintain our studies, exercise, eat well, and nurture relationships with family and friends. The weight of these expectations is immense, and it is easy to feel overwhelmed.

I see you. I feel you. Politics is not made for us; it is made to challenge us. Yet, we adapt, because we care about change and about the people we represent. I have struggled to ask for help, believing that I needed to carry everything alone. But I have learned that asking for support is not weakness, it is human. We are human. We are allowed to struggle, to breathe, and to seek guidance while remaining committed to our political purpose.

This booklet is made by us, for us. It is not a typical mental health guide. During the two seminars, I met young activists and politicians from around the world, different languages, different countries, but the message was the same: we share the same fears, the same pressures, the same moments of doubt. We worry about being unseen, overlooked, or left behind.

You are not weak for struggling. You are human for surviving. Thank you for choosing this path, for showing up despite the challenges. We are together on this journey.

Inside these pages, you will find reflections, tools, and strategies drawn from our shared experiences. Participant voices, trainer insights, and expert guidance combine to help you navigate politics without losing yourself. This booklet is a companion for surviving politics, for finding balance, and for remembering that resilience is not perfection, it is the courage to be human in the hardest spaces.

Hania knio
President
International Federation
of Liberal Youth

WHY MENTAL WELL-BEING IN POLITICS MATTERS

In politics, mental well-being is not a personal luxury, it is a democratic necessity. The state of mind of those in public office shapes every decision, every negotiation, and ultimately the trust citizens place in their leaders. When politicians neglect their mental well-being, the consequences ripple far beyond their own lives. Decisions may be rushed or poorly weighed. Dialogue becomes defensive rather than constructive. The energy to listen, empathise, and truly represent citizens fades away.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines well-being as

“a state in which an individual realizes their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their community.”

The OECD frames mental well-being more specifically as

“the ability to handle emotions, respond to challenges, and maintain positive relationships while pursuing life goals.”

Mental health, according to WHO, refers to a *“state of mental functioning”* and includes conditions such as anxiety or depression. This booklet focuses on mental well-being, which is broader than clinical diagnoses.

When mental well-being deteriorates, political performance suffers in visible and invisible ways:

POORER DECISIONS: fatigue and stress narrow thinking, leading to impulsive or overly cautious policy choices (*Research by Lucey et al., Journal of Political Psychology, 2020*).

REDUCED EMPATHY: leaders lose the capacity to “step into someone else’s shoes,” which is essential for representing diverse constituencies.

LOWER NEGOTIATION CAPACITY: without emotional balance, it becomes harder to handle conflict, compromise, and complex multilateral talks (*OECD Policy Paper, 2018*).

GREATER IRRITABILITY AND REACTIVITY: public debates risk turning combative, damaging political discourse.

The costs are not abstract; they are visible in real events.

Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand, stepped down in 2023, saying she *“no longer had enough in the tank”* to lead an open acknowledgment of the emotional toll of leadership.

Carinne Erhel, a French MP, tragically collapsed and died while giving a speech in 2017, after years of high-intensity political work.

In Japan, Yasuo Yamamoto, a city assembly member, resigned citing *“severe exhaustion”* from the demands of public office.

In these moments, it becomes clear: political leadership is not just about strategy and policy, it is about sustaining the human capacity to serve. Chronic stress can erode a leader’s sense of self-worth, leading to self-criticism, feelings of failure, and the belief that they must give *“more and more”* at the cost of their own lives. Over time, this disconnects leaders from their communities, their families, and even from themselves.

Healthy democracies require healthy politicians. When leaders sustain their mental well-being, they make better decisions, build stronger alliances, and maintain the trust of those they represent. This is not about *“soft”* skills, it is about the foundation of effective governance.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A YOUNG POLITICIAN

From the outside, political life is often reduced to election nights, speeches, and photo opportunities. But the reality is far more complex and far more relentless.

Beyond campaigns, a politician's daily work includes negotiating with stakeholders, participating in debates, designing and reviewing policy strategies, communicating with media, and engaging with citizens on a constant basis. The phone does not stop ringing. Messages arrive late at night. Every meeting has political weight. And unlike most professions, the role never truly ends when the office closes. You are never *"off duty"*, every public interaction can be interpreted as political action, every silence as a statement.

For young politicians, the demands come with an extra layer of pressure. They are often seen as inexperienced, scrutinized more harshly, or invited to the table primarily as a symbol of *"youth inclusion"*, what some participants in our seminar called tokenism. This can mean being photographed for diversity campaigns while excluded from real decision-making. In debates, younger leaders may have to work twice as hard to prove their expertise, while carrying the same (or greater) workload as older colleagues.

As one participant shared during the sticky notes exercise on *"What people think I do vs. what I actually do"*:

"People think I spend my days giving speeches and attending glamorous events. In reality, I'm spending long nights drafting position papers, answering endless constituency emails, and fighting to be heard in rooms where my age is seen as a weakness."

These invisible burdens can be exhausting. The constant expectation to perform flawlessly, to always be *"on message"*, and to respond immediately to crises all while navigating the judgments and doubts of others takes an emotional toll. There is little space for mistakes, and even less for vulnerability.

Recognizing these realities is not about discouraging young people from entering politics. It is about naming the conditions they face, so that the political environment can be reshaped into one where young leaders can not only survive, but thrive.



THE PRESSURE POINTS

INSIDE THE MIND

The grind of politics hits us internally in ways others don't see:

- 👉 **Imposter syndrome** creeps in when you wonder whether you're "qualified enough" to sit at the table even though you clearly belong there.
- 👉 Some of us breathe through **overachievement**, piling on committee work, policy drafts, and evening calls all in the name of proving that we're serious.
- 👉 And the **fear of failure**? Every misstep risks going viral, making bold choices feel like potential personal undoing.

OUTSIDE FORCES THAT BREAK YOU DOWN

Being a young politician invites pressures from every direction:

- 👉 **Hate speech**, especially online, is blunt, relentless, and often attacks your identity, not your politics.
- 👉 **Media scrutiny**, intensified by social media, reduces you to sound bites. A misunderstood quote or photo can dominate the headlines in minutes.
- 👉 **Party politics?** That's often a quieter burden. You're forced to choose between loyalty and your values or being sidelined when you speak up.

These pressures aren't abstract. In 2024, Better Politics Foundation found **41% of politicians** rated their mental well-being as lower than first responders citing indefinite workload, lack of job clarity, and non-stop scrutiny.

WHAT MAKES THE GRIND BEARABLE

Emerging from our Skills Lab and fishbowl conversations, young politicians shared real survival tools:

- 👉 **Journaling**: not for publication, but to give yourself a space to digest before responding.
- 👉 **Peer calls**: late-night check-ins with someone who gets the context.
- 👉 **Mentorship**: veterans who model a path forward without self-destruction. Setting **"off hours"** even one night a week, reclaim your mind.
- 👉 **Mindset reframing**, so "I must respond to everything" becomes "I choose what deserves my energy."

TIP BOX

HOW I KNEW I WAS BURNING OUT

"I noticed I was poring over every notification, long after the workday ended because I felt guilty stepping away."

"I started missing the people I used to care about... my friends texted that I didn't show up, even when I was free."

"The passion slipped. Working for change became just 'work' and that's when I knew it was time to pause."

CONTEXT FROM EUROPEAN LEADERS & POLICY

Politics is increasingly recognized at the EU level as a stress multiplier. In November 2023, the Council of the EU adopted conclusions demanding mental health be addressed across sectors including employment, education, digitalization, anti-discrimination measures, and hate speech.

At the local level, the European Committee of the Regions highlighted that 84 million Europeans suffer from mental health disorders at a €600 billion cost and called for "mental health in all policies" to reduce stigma and fund prevention.

Meanwhile, the **Council of Europe** insists on a human-rights approach to mental health emphasizing autonomy, dignity, and voluntary care and continues developing legal frameworks and awareness programs to protect mental well-being across Member States.

WHY DOES IT MATTERS?

If **leaders** can't pause, reflect, or even recharge, **democracy loses coherence**.

Decision-making narrows, empathy dulls, and communities feel that disconnection. Recognizing these pressures and knowing how to navigate them is not a weakness, it's part of being a capable, sustainable leader.

WHEN POLITICS ISN'T DESIGNED FOR YOU

Impact on Diverse and Underrepresented Groups

Being a politician is challenging for everyone. But for underrepresented groups, the pressures are often amplified, complicated, and deeply personal.

WHO COUNTS AS UNDERREPRESENTED?

This includes anyone whose identity puts them outside the majority in political spaces: women, LGBTQ+ individuals, racial or ethnic minorities, migrants, people with disabilities, and others. Being underrepresented doesn't just mean you are fewer in number, it means your experience is often invisible, your voice scrutinized more intensely, and your every move evaluated against stereotypes.

THE RISKS ARE REAL

- 📌 **Tokenism:** Being asked to represent "your group" can feel like your political worth is reduced to your identity, rather than your ideas or expertise.
- 📌 **Extra emotional labor:** Explaining yourself repeatedly, defending your perspective, or educating others about your lived experience is exhausting.
- 📌 **Greater scrutiny:** Mistakes, micro-expressions, and disagreements are noticed, amplified, and sometimes weaponized against you.

REPRESENTATION ≠ SUPPORT

Just because someone is present at the table doesn't mean they are supported. Inclusion without structural safeguards can feel performative, leaving underrepresented politicians isolated or hesitant to speak.

REAL STORIES FROM THE FIELD

During our seminars, participants shared experiences that illustrate these challenges:

- 📌 A queer politician described the tension of raising LGBTQ+ issues in committees where allies are few and hostility is subtle but constant.
- 📌 A female migrant leader explained how taking the floor often meant navigating microaggressions, unsolicited advice, or being interrupted repeatedly, simply for being "different."
- 📌 A young woman politician shared how even small victories are scrutinized: praised publicly for "balancing family and politics," but criticized privately for being "too ambitious."

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM EXPERTS AND PARTICIPANTS

- 📌 Create **safer spaces** for underrepresented politicians to discuss challenges, share strategies, and decompress.
- 📌 **Mentoring** programs that pair newcomers with experienced leaders who understand identity-specific pressures.
- 📌 Clear codes of **conduct** within parties and institutions to protect against harassment, tokenism, and discrimination.
- 📌 Structural recognition that supporting **diverse leaders** is not optional, it's necessary for healthy, inclusive governance.

Ultimately, acknowledging these realities is the first step. By recognizing the extra burdens, providing targeted support, and fostering environments where difference is respected and valued, we allow all politicians, not just those from dominant groups to thrive, contribute, and lead effectively.

RESILIENCE, BUT MAKE IT REAL

Being a politician is demanding. Stress, scrutiny, and constant responsibility can quickly overwhelm. Resilience isn't about pushing harder, it's about strategically protecting your energy, your mind, and your values, so you can stay effective without burning out.

1. PERSONAL HABITS THAT STICK

- 📌 **Rest:** Even short breaks can reset your focus. Take deliberate downtime, walks, a coffee away from screens, or a nap if your schedule allows.
- 📌 **Saying "no":** Every "yes" has a cost. Learn to prioritize tasks that align with your goals and values.
- 📌 **Journaling:** Writing down feelings and decisions creates clarity and reduces mental clutter.
- 📌 **Movement:** Simple walks, stretches, or exercise help regulate stress and boost cognitive performance.

2. BOUNDARIES

- 📌 Take a break from social media. Don't let instant reactions drive your mood.
- 📌 Create work-life separation. Even in politics, evenings and weekends can be reclaimed for friends, family, or self-care.

3. PEER SUPPORT

- 📌 WhatsApp check-ins or buddy systems with fellow politicians or colleagues can provide emotional grounding.
- 📌 Discuss challenges openly; having someone who "gets it" reduces isolation and normalizes struggle.

4. MINDSET SHIFT

- 📌 Failing does not make you unworthy. Mistakes are part of growth and learning.
- 📌 Recognize the difference between constructive reflection and self-criticism that paralyzes.

5. RESILIENCE MAPPING

Map protective factors across three layers:

- 📌 **Inner (Personal Resources):** Humor, belief in justice, self-compassion, flexibility.
- 📌 **Middle (Supportive People):** Family, Friends, mentors, community, peer networks.
- 📌 **Outer (Systemic Influences):** Political culture, media narratives, institutional support or obstacles.

This helps identify where you are strong, and where you might need reinforcement.

6. ENERGY AUDIT

- 📌 Track what gives energy versus what drains it.

Examples:

Negotiating a policy you care about may energize you, while endless bureaucratic meetings drain you.

Adjust tasks and routines to balance energy intake and output.

7. WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

Keep your emotional and cognitive state regulated under pressure:

- 📌 **Red:** Numb, paralyzed, or shut down. Stop and reset.
- 📌 **Yellow:** Overwhelmed, racing, reactive. Use grounding tools.
- 📌 **Green:** Focused, connected, clear. Maintain this zone for decision-making.

Check in with yourself throughout the day; awareness is the first step to regulation.

8. VALUES SHIELD

Anchor your decisions and actions in your core values:

Practical Tool – Values + Boundaries Card

- 1 Pick 3 personal values (e.g., honesty, justice, empathy).
- 2 For each value, write:

Why it matters

A boundary it creates (e.g., *“Because I value honesty, I won’t fake support for policies I don’t believe in.”*)

- 3 Keep this card visible in your workspace or journal to stay grounded in moments of pressure.

9. MICRO-ACTION PLANNING

When overwhelmed, take small, concrete steps to regain control:

- 🍷 Short breathing exercises.
- 🍷 Write down the next actionable step, not the entire workload.
- 🍷 Celebrate small wins, these accumulate into meaningful progress.



ADVOCATING FOR A CULTURE OF CARE IN POLITICS

Mental well-being in politics is not a private issue, it is a movement. As young politicians, we have the opportunity to lead cultural change, shaping political systems that value people, not just policies.

1. CAMPAIGNING FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Advocacy starts with action. Here is what you can do:

- 📌 Petitions and open letters: Mobilize peers to call for institutional support for mental health. Make your demands clear, concise, and evidence-based. Youth MPs in Canada successfully pushed for a parliamentary committee on burnout by collecting signatures and presenting real stories.
- 📌 Youth-led manifestos: Create a party or community manifesto highlighting mental health priorities. In the UK Youth Parliament, mental health has been a core advocacy point, influencing party platforms and youth policies.
- 📌 Workshops and community dialogues: Run public discussions to educate citizens and policymakers about the link between politicians' well-being and effective governance. Use real-life examples from your own political experiences.

2. MEDIA ADVOCACY: SHAPING THE NARRATIVE

How we talk about mental well-being matters. Advocacy does not have to sound "soft" it can be strategic and persuasive:

- 📌 Social media campaigns: Use TikTok, Instagram, or X platforms to share concise, relatable stories about political stress and resilience. Kenyan youth advocate Judah Njoroge shared his lived experience at the UN, bringing global attention to youth mental health.
- 📌 Highlight data and stories: Pair statistics with human stories. This builds credibility and empathy simultaneously. Sharing research on burnout among MPs alongside personal narratives creates urgency for institutional change.
- 📌 Collaborate with influencers and media outlets: Leverage journalists, public figures, or youth networks to amplify your message. Transparency builds trust, even when addressing controversial truths.

3. LOBBYING AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Directly engaging decision-makers ensures lasting impact:

- 📌 Research first: Know the policies, gaps, and opportunities in your system before approaching leaders. Use evidence, surveys, and case studies.
- 📌 Present clear, actionable proposals: Small steps can create big change. For example, mandatory mental health check-ins, mentorship programs for young MPs, or internal party policies protecting personal time.
- 📌 Build relationships: Keep open channels with supportive politicians, party staff, and allies. Regular communication makes your advocacy sustainable.

4. WHAT WE WISH OUR PARTIES KNEW

From youth politicians across seminars and real-life examples, here is what matters most:

- 📌 Mental health is political. Unwell politicians make poor decisions; healthy leaders make better policies.
- 📌 Support systems are not optional. Mentoring, peer networks, and safe spaces improve both well-being and performance.
- 📌 Acknowledging stress is strength. Speaking openly about struggles does not weaken leadership; it humanizes it.
- 📌 Institutional policies save careers. Formal mechanisms, flexible schedules, burnout prevention programs, and mental health guidelines protect both individuals and the democratic process.

5. KEY TIPS FOR YOUNG ADVOCATES

- 📌 Do not fear addressing stigma, burnout, or systemic inequities. These are part of the political reality.
- 📌 Use both personal stories and data to persuade.
- 📌 Focus on small, tangible wins: one policy change, one manifesto point, one workshop. These accumulate into lasting impact.
- 📌 Build alliances with peers, NGOs, and international youth networks for collective power.

WHAT INSTITUTIONS CAN ACTUALLY DO

Purpose:
Push for policy and cultural change.

1. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Mental Health Leave

POLICY	RATIONALE
Implement paid mental health leave for political staff and elected officials. This policy should allow individuals to take time off for mental health reasons without fear of stigma or reprisal.	Mental health is as crucial as physical health. Providing dedicated leave ensures that individuals can seek necessary care without compromising their professional responsibilities.

Onboarding Sessions

POLICY	RATIONALE
Introduce comprehensive onboarding sessions for new political staff and elected officials that include training on mental health awareness, stress management, and available support resources.	Early education on mental health can reduce stigma, promote well-being, and equip individuals with tools to manage stress effectively.

Confidential Peer Support

POLICY	RATIONALE
Establish confidential peer support programs within political institutions, allowing individuals to seek guidance and share experiences in a safe and private environment.	Peer support fosters a sense of community and understanding, reducing isolation and promoting mental well-being.

2. SMALL PRACTICES

Well-being Check-ins Before Meetings

PRACTICE	RATIONALE
Implement brief well-being check-ins at the beginning of meetings to allow individuals to express their current emotional state and any support they might need.	Starting meetings with a focus on well-being can create a supportive environment, reduce stress, and enhance productivity.

3. EMPHASIZING GOOD GOVERNANCE

ARGUMENT	CALL TO ACTION
Mental health support is not just a moral imperative but also a cornerstone of effective governance. Leaders who are mentally well-equipped are better decision-makers, communicators, and advocates for their constituents.	Political institutions must recognize the integral role of mental well-being in governance and take proactive steps to support the mental health of their members and staff.

APPENDICES AND TOOLS

Purpose:

Equip young politicians with practical tools to advocate for mental well-being in politics.

1. MENTAL WELL-BEING WEEKLY CHECKLIST

A reflective tool to assess and enhance personal well-being:

- 📌 **Emotional Check-in:** How am I feeling today? (e.g., anxious, calm, overwhelmed)
- 📌 **Physical Well-being:** Did I get enough rest and nutrition?
- 📌 **Social Connections:** Have I engaged in meaningful conversations this week?
- 📌 **Workload Balance:** Is my workload manageable?
- 📌 **Support Systems:** Do I have access to peer support or mentorship?
- 📌 **Self-Care Practices:** Have I dedicated time to activities that recharge me?

TIP

Use this checklist at the end of each week to identify patterns and areas for improvement.

2. SAMPLE POLICY BRIEF TEMPLATE

A one-page template to advocate for mental health policies:

Title: *[Insert Policy Title]*

Problem: *[Describe the mental health issue affecting political staff or elected officials.]*

Recommendation: *[Propose actionable solutions, such as implementing mental health leave, onboarding sessions, or confidential peer support.]*

Example:



Title:

"Implementing Mental Health Leave for Political Staff"

Problem:

"Political staff often face high stress without adequate mental health support."

Recommendation:

"Introduce paid mental health leave to ensure staff can take necessary time off without stigma."

3. RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Mental Health Organizations:

- 📌 **MIND:** Provides advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem. It campaigns to improve services, raise awareness, and promote understanding of mental health. [Source: Better Politics Foundation](https://www.betterpolitics.foundation/lists-1)
- 📌 **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):** Offers mental health support, education, and advocacy. [Source: NAMI](https://www.nami.org/)
- 📌 **The Mental Elf:** Provides up-to-date, reliable mental health research, policy, and guidance. [Source: The Mental Elf](https://www.nationalelfservice.net/mental-health/)

Crisis Support:

- 📌 **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (USA):** Confidential, free, 24/7/365 help is available. Call or text 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org.
- 📌 **SAMHSA Helpline (USA):** Provides 24/7, free, and confidential assistance for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders. Call 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or visit [SAMHSA](https://www.samhsa.gov/).

AND FINALLY, REMEMBER THIS:

You are doing enough.

Your choice to step into politics is an act of courage and service in itself. The challenges are many, the pace is relentless, and yet you continue to show up for your community and your values.

Take a breath.

Allow yourself to acknowledge the difference you are making, both seen and unseen.

Thank you for choosing this path, for lending your voice, and for leading with dedication. **You are doing good.**



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