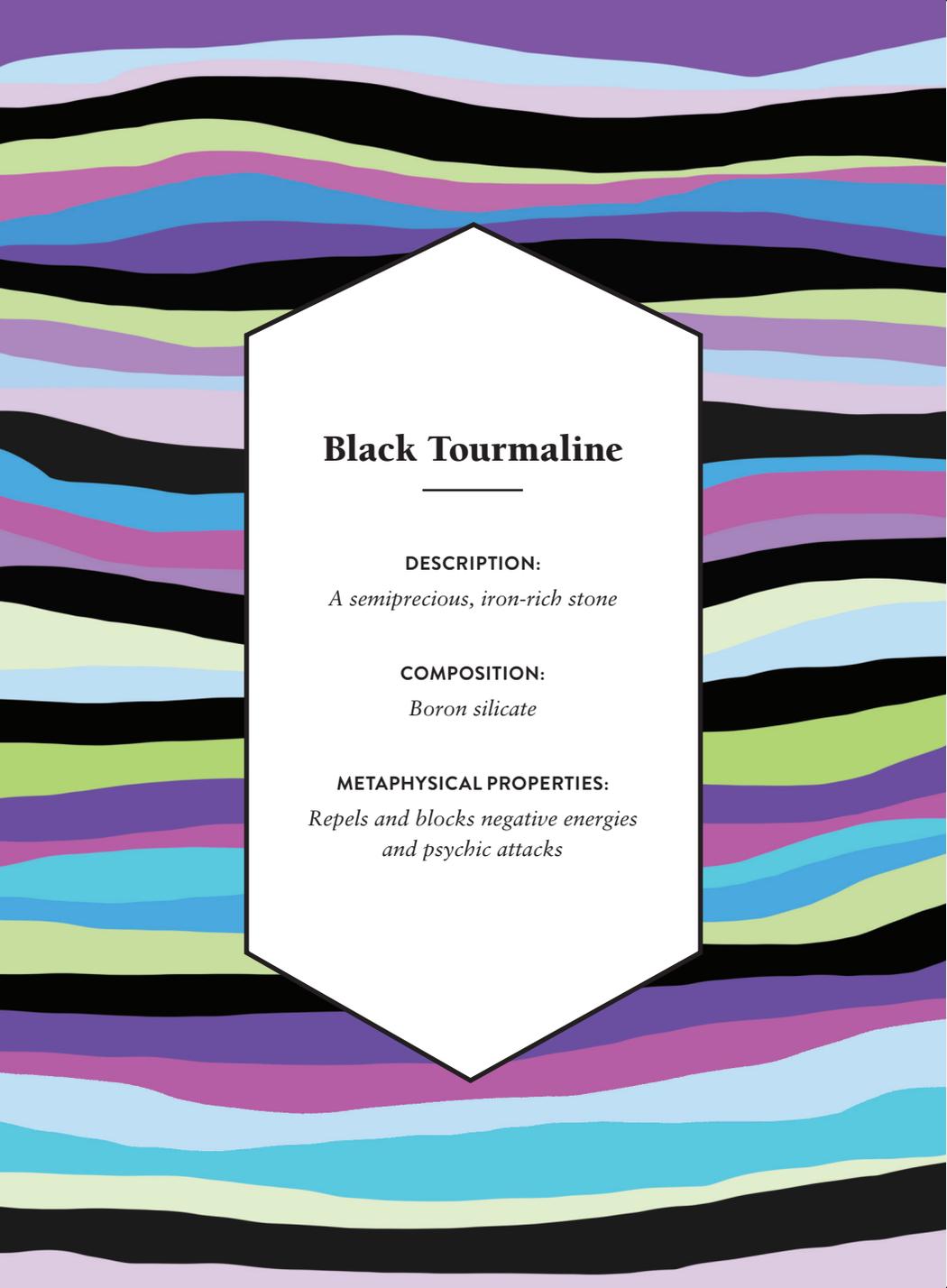


Black Tourmaline

AND
SETTING
BOUNDARIES



Black Tourmaline

DESCRIPTION:

A semiprecious, iron-rich stone

COMPOSITION:

Boron silicate

METAPHYSICAL PROPERTIES:

*Repels and blocks negative energies
and psychic attacks*

I bought my black tourmaline in a panic. I had been laid off recently, having spent as much time interviewing for the job as I had holding it, and it was the kind of layoff that shook my worldview and made me question every choice I had made. I thought I had done the right thing in seeking a well-paying full-time job and all the stability (and health care) it promised. And now here I was, back to freelancing, scrounging for paychecks and sending desperate follow-up emails to editors “just checking in.”

My personal life was also undergoing drastic change. My relationship was moving into a new phase—a good thing, but one that required a lot of talking and emotional energy. My family was reeling from a recent death and a slew of medical emergencies. It seemed like every friend was having a crisis at the same time

and was asking me to witness and help. The country was on fire. Nothing else could happen to me, I decided. I couldn't handle it.

A few months earlier a friend had gifted me a selenite wand after being told by her tarot reader that no altar was complete without one. Selenite is a crystal known for its healing and soothing energy—a stone of purity, one that bathes everything in warm, clean light and welcomes in the good. But I felt weak when I held the wand and wished for a moment's peace. I needed something stronger. I didn't need to bring the good in; I needed to keep the bad out.

Black tourmaline is a shield, a bodyguard stone that protects against and eliminates negative energy. It's supposed to cleanse you of stress and bad thought patterns, the spiraling negativity and fear that leave you breathless and incapable of action, by keeping them from touching you in the first place. But more than that, it supposedly provides protection against negative people: those “moaners, whiners, complaining neighbors, or emotional vampires who burden you with their problems but do nothing to improve their situations.” This is the stone that helps you set boundaries.

I've always thought of my role as the helper, something my partner has described as “assigning myself homework on behalf of other people.” Being there for friends, thinking through their problems, and

offering solutions, or even just being a shoulder to cry on, is how I tell myself I thrive. But lately I'd been flinching at every text message and Gchat, first from friends who wanted to unload their issues and ask for advice, and then from everyone. I assumed my problem was that I was too giving; I had dropped everything to answer everyone's calls so often, no matter how petty, that I had become a repository for their issues. Focusing on my needs by sealing myself off seemed necessary, and far easier than being honest about the support I could reasonably give or, God forbid, asking my friends for help. It was all very self-pitying: woe is me, the put-upon woman with too many friends!

But as I fingered the selection of half-inch black tourmaline chunks in the back of the crystal store, I told myself the right one would empower me to not respond the second my friends texted, to not plan out two weeks of dinners and parties, to not spend my days trying to help everyone else instead of fixing my own problems, which I was sure I could do all by myself. In reality, my relationships weren't so one-sided. Of course my friends asked me how I was doing, too. But what was I supposed to say other than “fine”? If I wasn't the helper, I was the emotional vampire. If I wasn't giving, I was taking.



Tourmaline comes in all colors of the rainbow, sometimes even a few at once. Because of this, it's often mistaken for other stones. According to the Gem Institute of America, when Spanish colonizers found green and blue gems in Brazil, they sent them home as sapphires and emeralds. Dutch colonizers in Sri Lanka did the same, saying they were zircon. Black tourmaline in particular is also known as *schorl*. The German village Zschorlau, nestled in the Saxony Ore mountains, used to be known by this name since the region contained tin mines in which black tourmaline was a common by-product. *Schorl* is also an old mining expression meaning “false ore”; it looks useful, but it's not the thing you actually need. It wasn't until the 1880s that tourmaline

(which comes from the Sinhalese for “mixed gems”), in all its color variations, was identified as its own mineral structure. Black tourmaline was found to be a part of the family.

Black tourmaline is slightly different from its more colorful cousins in that the iron and manganese in its structure make it magnetic, which is probably why words like *grounding* and *shielding* show up so often in descriptions of its metaphysical properties. It can hold a light charge, attract and repel, draw out impurities, and electrocute you if you get near it on a bad day. The color comes from the mineral’s ability to absorb what’s around it. “Schorls are interesting, because tourmalines form in a few stages as they take up whatever is available in the fluid around them,” says mineral researcher Keiji Hammond. “A lot of these tourmalines will just take up so many things until the light doesn’t really pass through them and you’ve got this black coral color.” Let’s face it: if you’re choosing a talisman to protect you against the unwanted, black is a more fitting color than white or pink.

Black tourmaline is thought to be strong, but that’s a lie. Black tourmaline is hard but brittle and prone to breaking, leaving a rough, uneven surface. Though the stone has traditionally been used in mourning jewelry, it’s not easy to work with. It’s too rigid, too unstable to withstand much pressure, and sometimes can even crumble in your hands. If black tourmaline is the stone of boundaries and protection, it’s one whose brittle boundaries are too opaque to see through.

The word *no* has never felt smooth in my mouth. Experiments with it always went awry; someone would start crying, their feelings would be hurt, my parents would make phone calls to the other person’s parents to fix things and get us both to apologize, regardless of how measured that *no* might have been. I figured the whole thing wasn’t worth it. Instead of learning how and when to say *no*, I’d find excuses, ways to wrap the *no* in silk so it could slide out of me obscured. Or I wouldn’t bother to say anything at all. I never seemed to learn how to do it right, but also, I’m not sure there ever was a way to do it without earning shock or disappointment from someone. If I didn’t know how to say *no*, it’s also true that no one else around me learned how to hear it.

Even if I figured out how to say it, I never had any *nos* that were big enough to fight for—no violations of body or privacy or self that a *no* could have provided a barrier against. All of my unsaid or diluted refusals were over small things, like plans I didn’t want to keep but knew my friend was looking forward to, or saying yes to takeout burritos when I was craving sushi. It’s not just that my *nos* were silent; it’s that the stakes always felt too low. There was value, I knew, in going with the flow, or at least in not being the person who repeatedly derailed group plans by insisting everything go her way. I rarely felt a hard opinion calcifying inside of me, and in that way it’s been easy to be chill and ignore the bigger questions.

I never felt much like I was denying some part of myself in order to stay calm. But my chillness was rewarded, every sign pointing in the direction saying yes, continue going with the flow, there is nothing to even speak up about. I was the “cool girl” who didn’t complain, the friend who never caused drama, even if in some fleeting second I wanted to. Letting things happen to me felt so easy, to the point that I never learned the difference between when my needs were being ignored and when I just needed to relax.

For other women, it seems, the temptation to give in to every *no*, to be a bitch, is strong, since we’re so rarely encouraged to do so. In the film *You’ve Got Mail*, Meg Ryan’s character complains that she is

never able to say the exact bit of biting, mean truth the moment she wants to say it, and instead is forever victimized by *l'esprit de l'escalier*. Once she meets Tom Hanks's character, Joe (who is secretly her on-line paramour), she finds the words come to her immediately, inspired by just what a prick he's being over the crudité. She also finds herself crushed by what she's done. "I was able, for the first time in my life, to say the exact thing I wanted to say at the exact moment I wanted to say it," she writes to Joe, still not knowing he was the one she'd said it to. "And, of course, afterwards, I felt terrible, just as you said I would. I was cruel, and I'm never cruel."

She wasn't cruel. What she said to him—the man who owned the corporate bookstore threatening to put her out of business, who had spent all of their in-person interactions thus far negging her—was that no one would ever remember him, because he is "nothing but a suit." She had no obligation to him, no reason to be polite or go along with him. She didn't know he was her budding soulmate, and he had certainly never treated her as anything but an annoyance. And yet she felt nothing but guilt.

When I watch that movie now, I think about how I still don't know when and where that obligation exists, as the only options seem to be that we're obligated to everyone equally or to no one at all. I think about how when "no" is forbidden, righteousness can feel like cruelty. I can't decide if it would have become cruel if she knew him better—it certainly would have remained accurate. And I don't know which to trust: the voice that tells me my opinions are valid and should never be tamed for someone else's comfort, or the voice that says, were I to start saying how I really felt, my meanness and indifference would only drive everyone I care about away.



I saw someone tweet about how it felt "empowering" to cancel on a birthday party to stay home and watch a movie. It may have been

tongue-in-cheek, but it says something about the modern self-care movement that I found it difficult to tell whether it was a joke or whether they earnestly thought flaking on a friend was akin to reclaiming some long-lost right. Self-care, boundaries, toxic behavior—it's all easily sloganized and tweetable, and easily used to justify not doing anything you don't feel like doing. Oh, the emotional labor of it all! Doesn't everyone know it's not my job to explain things to them? Don't they know "no" is a complete sentence?

By now, most people understand that when black womanist Audre Lorde said "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare," she was talking about how radical it was to care for her black body and self in a society that doesn't care about black women, and about the need to preserve your strength and health for an ongoing, collaborative fight against injustice. She was not talking about buying a \$30 scented candle and taking a bath because your boss was particularly tedious that day and your boyfriend refuses to vacuum. But when I reach for my black tourmaline, I see all the ways I warp her words to endorse what I think constitutes self-preservation in that moment, when it feels like the world is asking too much of me.

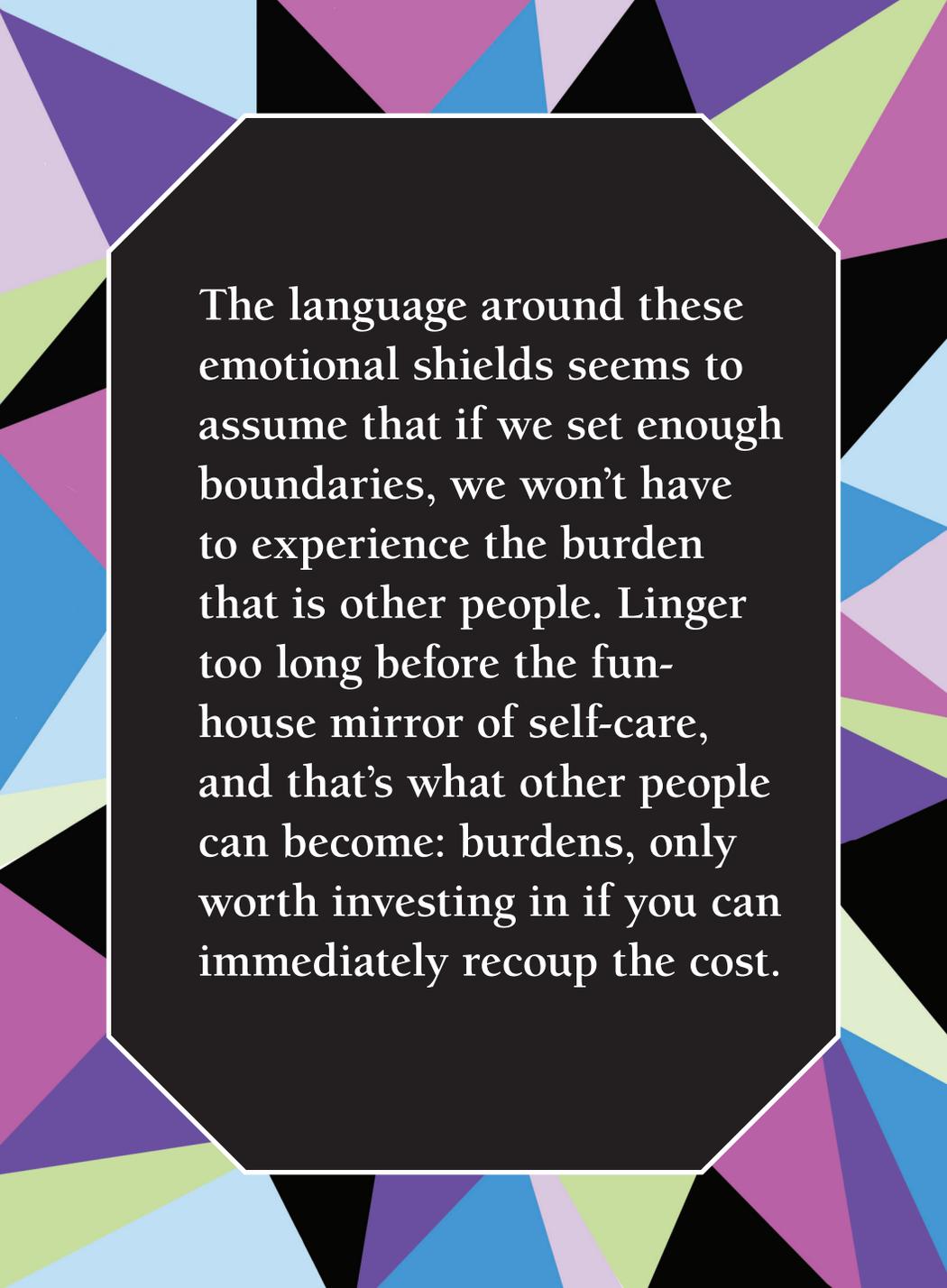
It has been easy for me to find support for saying *no*, for thinking about my needs instead of the needs of others. Boundaries are in. I'm told by blog posts and thought leaders and anyone with an opinion on "emotional labor" that it is self-care to say *no* and cut people out of your life, and that you should never be made to justify these actions to anyone. Perhaps it's neoliberalism (whatever that means) seeping into our relationships—friends are assets, interactions should be optimized. Once you've cut out the big problems, start cutting out the little ones until your life is perfect and glistening and impenetrable—just like black tourmaline.

In a January 2019 piece for *BuzzFeed News* titled "How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation," Anne Helen Petersen makes an argument for how the concept of self-care has become so easy to bastardize.

She wrote of the paralysis she has faced when doing “high-effort, low-reward tasks,” like getting shoes resoled or scheduling a dermatologist appointment, and ascribed the rise of this feeling to a generation that has internalized that their sole value lies in their productivity. “When it came to the mundane, the medium priority, the stuff that wouldn’t make my job easier or my work better, I avoided it,” she writes. Any problem that arises is something that takes away from work and should be solved so you can get back to work, or takes away from the precious free time you have to relax from work, which you need to not tip fully over into burnout and return to work. After all, you want to be a giver, not a taker, right?

Petersen is a white, cis woman raised middle class; there are plenty of people from more marginalized backgrounds who have been facing this burnout for generations, or who can’t afford to give in to exhaustion and unpack what would make their lives feel truly fulfilling. But for the privileged, self-care has risen as both a cure for and a perpetuator of a culture that values so-called efficiency over all else. Meditation, yoga, diets, or anything else Goop has to offer is all sold with the implicit goal of having you in top shape so you can perform your best. It’s not drastically different from what Lorde spoke of—on its surface the goal is still taking care of yourself so you can be in this for the long haul—only that the work to get back to is typically nothing so crucial as civil rights, and that complicated, messy people are more likely to get thrown out under the guise that they are “too much work.”

When I hold up a black tourmaline shield against a tedious task or a toxic person, I have to ask, why are they toxic? Because they need me at a time that could be better spent working? Because I need to hoard my resources, emotional and otherwise? The language around these emotional shields seems to assume that if we set enough boundaries, we won’t have to experience the burden that is other people. Linger too long before the fun-house mirror of self-care, and that’s what other people can become: burdens, only worth investing in if you can immediately recoup the cost.



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Black tourmaline appears in another popular stone: tourmalated quartz. *Quartz* is an umbrella term for a mineral composed of silicon and oxygen; amethyst, agate, onyx, and tiger’s-eye all share microstructures—they just differ in color and transparency. But pure, “clear” quartz, on its own, is metaphysically the crystal to end all crystals. It’s the conduit through which the spiritual plane supposedly converses, used to elevate consciousness and promote clarity and lift the user out of the funk of everyday life. But black tourmaline punctures through some quartz like needles stuck in ice, scratching through the purity of the clear stone, obscuring its message. This combination can be a good thing, like a healthy dose of skepticism for the perpetually optimistic. Tourmalated quartz is often used to stay grounded even as you reach for the newer and better. But it’s too reminiscent of the way paranoia seeps into honest thought. We may know, somewhere, what self-care looks like, but it’s clouded by self-indulgence.

It’s easier to cut everyone out than to learn to differentiate between the chronically demanding and the occasionally needy. It’s war, we convince ourselves; there is no middle ground when people come for your precious energy, which is already spread so thin. It’s kill or be killed.



When I was sixteen, an elder threatened to cut me out of their life. I had lied to them. I was angry over something they had done but didn’t know how to say so to someone who had power over me. So I broke something of theirs in a fit of frustration and passed it off as an accident. They told me they had no place for liars in their life, and that if I was lying I could get out. They made it seem so easy. It hadn’t taken a history of abuse for them to cut me off, or at least threaten to. One teenage lie, stemming from one moment of justifiable anger, was enough. I don’t know if this is the root of my paranoia (I’ve always been a people-pleaser), but I’ve found myself unable to figure out what’s self-care and what isn’t. The threat of hurting or losing others by setting boundaries is always there.

Another lifetime later, I canceled on a friend’s birthday party and cried myself to sleep. I was feeling sick, likely because of some questionable cheese sauce served with a warm pretzel the night before. Before that, fantasies of canceling had skipped through my mind—the party was over an hour away on a crumbling subway, on a night that looked like rain, at the end of a week of feeling uncomfortable in my body for this reason or that. My partner looked at me with pity as I pawed through my sweaters, every few seconds gasping and grimacing with gas pain. “You’re sick! We can stay home, it’s fine,” they begged as my eyes started to water and I threw myself onto the bed.

It should not have been such a dramatic decision to make, but I couldn’t stop. For nearly three hours, after we had agreed not to go and after I changed into sweatpants and after we turned on a movie, tears streamed down my face. I texted my friends I was sorry, and they wished me well and said everything was fine, and I wailed like someone had died. My partner became increasingly stunned; this was not a logical reaction, but logic was no help. They reminded me our friends were not mad at me, but I didn’t believe it. They asked me if I’d be mad if the tables were turned, but they didn’t understand. In my anxiety and paranoia, I had decided that this was it—the moment that everyone learned I was a selfish flake and decided once and for all that I wasn’t worth it anymore.

If you’re taught that self-care or saying no is inherently selfish, it becomes harder to tell what’s actually selfish. But whereas the black tourmaline may give you the strength to block out toxic people and experiences, it doesn’t give you the wisdom to know what to block, and when, nor does it let you see

your needs clearly. When I turn off Gchat and Slack and don't answer my text messages, I might think I'm justified, but a voice reminds me that other people might not be there waiting when I return. My boundaries, even if I need them in the moment, might result in other walls being thrown up against me. And that threat makes every inconvenience seem like the end.

We all know emotional leeches. They are the people who never ask about anyone but themselves, who demand your time and attention, and who guilt you when you can't give them and yet never offer theirs. But sometimes, we all need to leech. We've all needed a friend in the middle of the night, or for longer stretches of time than we'd like. We've all been so enveloped in our own grief or pain or depression that we forget to check in on those we care about. We've all asked those we love to schlep in bad weather to our birthday parties. It's not even leeching. We all ask things of each other.

I probably could use a shield. I could stand to say no more often, to not feel the need to justify why I'm not interested in a certain trip or activity or even conversation. I could stand to not be undone by admitting I'm too sick to go to a birthday party, because the people I'd say that to are not emotional leeches, nor do they think of me as such. These are people who love me, who have dropped everything to help me before, who have demonstrated time and again that they are there for me. And yet, even with them, I am held back from total honesty by the learned fear of being a bitch. What if that one *no* is all it takes for all my support structures to come crashing down—for everyone else to believe I'm the leech they no longer have time for?

This mentality is toxic, as is the assumption that everything is happening to me, on purpose—that it's me against the world and not me within it. The only way forward is to accept my missteps, to honor

them, so that I can extend that same grace to others.

When I think of self-care, I think of it as a way to recoup my energy so I can keep giving it to others. I don't want my relationships to be transactional. I still don't know where *no* fits into that. I haven't yet gained the wisdom to know when self-care looks like setting boundaries and when it looks like going with the flow, even if I would have done things differently. Until I figure it out, I'll use my black tourmaline with caution, and often with a positive, light-bringing stone like selenite or quartz. There's no use in keeping the bad out if you can't be vulnerable enough to let the good in.





Amethyst,
FOR WHEN YOU
SEEK BALANCE
AT ALL COSTS



Amethyst

DESCRIPTION:

Purple quartz, which attains its color through the presence of iron and other trace elements

COMPOSITION:

Silicon dioxide (SiO₂)

METAPHYSICAL PROPERTIES:

*Encourages balance and moderation in one's behavior.
A stone of peace and calm.*

Freelancing takes you to weird places. When I was a freelancer (and I write this as someone who currently isn't but will, in all likelihood, find myself doing it again) I was often asked what my "beat" was, and my joking answer was "whatever I'm paid for." I say joking because delivering the line with a smile diffused the tension with people who had salaries or built careers step-by-step. But for most, freelancing is about staying afloat. If I was gaining new skills or making new connections, it was usually an afterthought. I'd write for most publications about most subjects, as long as you paid me. This is how I agreed, on assignment, to go to a senior center in Queens, New York, to interview its patrons about their superhero fantasies while they had their portraits taken. I started the day doing the same thing at



Amber,
DEATH,
AND THE
PRESERVATION
OF LIFE



Amethyst

DESCRIPTION:

Fossilized tree resin, usually clear yellow to orange in color, and sometimes with animal or plant inclusions

COMPOSITION:

Carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen (C10 H16 O)

METAPHYSICAL PROPERTIES:

Thought to possess life energy. Good for healing, and for connecting to past lives.

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