

Activist Burnout

Strategies for Prevention



What is activist burnout?

How can you tell if you're burning out?

What do other activists do to prevent burnout – or recover from it?

Read on to find out! This zine was written by Helen Cox, featuring responses from the 2014 Plan to Thrive 'Activist Health and Wellbeing Survey'.



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Why are activists always talking about burnout?

In early 2013, Plan to Thrive surveyed a diverse range of community organisers, changemakers and campaigners (I'm going to call them 'activists' here) from around the world who are currently, or have previously been, engaged in social movements and action from environmental justice to workers rights and animal rights. Lots of activists told us that their engagement with social movements and community campaigns have had a positive effect on their wellbeing, for example a respondent told us about '*A sense of purpose helps me to keep going, the community and close friends it has given me have been my greatest support over the last few years*'. Overwhelmingly, survey responses imparted a sense of obligation and passion. It should be no surprise to anyone that activists are people who care, and care deeply.

Sometimes this level of passion for and engagement in struggle can leave activists, much like health and social work professionals might experience 'compassion fatigue' or burnout, very vulnerable to exhaustion. Respondents also indicated they were working an average of 13 hours non-paid activist work on top of paid work and non-paid caring work such as looking after children and elderly relatives. This is a lot of work! One respondent told us '*I get less sleep, less rest and see my family less. It's all pretty overwhelming sometimes. I get stressed and worry I'm not doing enough*'. Sound familiar?

Of our respondents, of which around 50% had been involved with activism and campaigning for over 10 years, a massive 73% of respondents indicated they had experienced 'activist burnout' at some stage.

What is activist burnout?

Burnout is a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in situations that are emotionally demanding. Burnout makes you a less effective activist, and it can adversely affect those around you and the organizations we work within.

While burning out is part of a process of growth and involvement and is often accepted as a byproduct of activism, we can work to support ourselves and others so we are more effective and healthy.

Burnout is the way your body and heart communicate your limits to you, and it is important to listen to and respect that. We can use burnout as an opportunity to reevaluate, prioritize and to develop more sustainable and healthy working styles— burnout doesn't have to be a break down; it can be a break through!

- from activist-trauma.net

How is activist burnout different to trauma?

Activists can also experience acute or prolonged circumstances that are traumatic (trauma means 'to rupture'). Trauma is frequently experienced by activists, particularly if they are involved with direct action or experience police, government and/or corporate stand-over tactics and violence directly affects their everyday life and living conditions.

There may be a lot of cross-over between what we might describe as 'burnout' and 'trauma', and it is entirely possible that an individual may be affected by both, however the usefulness of the distinction may come into play when we come to discuss strategies and treatments for healing burnout and trauma.

For more information about trauma we recommend the work of patrice jones (particularly her book *Aftershock, 2007*), U.K based site activist-trauma.net and U.S. based site mindfuloccupation.org for trauma first aid. If you suspect you or a friend is being affected by trauma (also known as post-traumatic stress disorder, or aftershock) we strongly recommend you research and locate appropriate and supportive professional help.

What does activist burnout look like?

A quick glance at the literature around activist burnout reveals a number of ways we might recognise this in ourselves or in others, such as prolonged fatigue, irritability and feelings of hopelessness and despair. Generally, burnout might look very similar to exhaustion or mood disorders like depression and/or anxiety. They have a lot in common, and if we look at what health professionals would name as 'symptoms' we can empathise with why these symptoms might have come about. It is worthwhile re-framing and normalising burnout and its associated psychology as the expected response to the life and work conditions experienced by activists and campaigners.

Remember, experiences of burnout are NOT a reflection of abnormality or weakness.

Burnout rating scale

Long-term activist and writer Katrina Shields has prepared a great questionnaire for assessing levels of burnout, why don't you fill this out and see where you are at?

Think over the past 3 months and score the following questions according to how often you have experienced these symptoms.

0 =Never 1 =Very rarely 2 =Rarely 3 =Sometimes 4 =Often 5 =Very often

1. Do you feel fatigued in a way that rest or sleep does not relieve?
2. Do you feel more cynical, pessimistic or disillusioned about things you used to feel positive about?
3. Do you feel a sadness or emptiness inside?

4. Do you have physical symptoms of stress, eg insomnia, stomach pains, headaches, migraines?
5. Is your memory unreliable?
6. Are you irritable or emotional with a short fuse?
7. Have you been more susceptible to illness lately, eg colds, 'flu, food allergies, hay fever?
8. Do you feel like isolating yourself from colleagues, friends or family?
9. Is it hard to enjoy yourself, have fun, relax and experience joy in your life?
10. Do you feel that you are accomplishing less in your work?

Scoring:

0 - 15 You are doing well.

16 - 25 Some attention needed, you may be a candidate.

26 - 35 You are on the road to burnout. Make changes now.

36 - 50 Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

(From 'In the Tigers Mouth', 1991)

Oh my! I'm an Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! What do I do?

This is a time to rest, reevaluate and reevaluate.

The most important thing to remember is that you are not the first person to experience burnout, as stated earlier almost 3/4 of our survey respondents have been at the 'Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!' stage and in most cases they have been able to work through it and rejoin the action, albeit with a more sustainable approach.

Its understandable that people at the Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh! stage are going to be experiencing a significant level of distress and struggling to function in the ways they might normally. For this reason it is really important to tell someone you trust that you are experiencing burnout. Perhaps you have friend, family member or an established support network (like an 'affinity group') you know you can rely on to help you negotiate the path to wellness.

Seeking advice and treatment from a health professional may be very important to your recovery from burnout, for example a counsellor, psychotherapist or psychologist (or holistic practitioners like naturopaths, herbalists or wellness coaches). Sometimes there is no easy way to find a practitioner that you 'click' with and who can appropriately validate your experiences as an activist, so be aware it may take a bit of investigation, a few phone calls and a few sessions to find someone who is appropriate as well as being a good practitioner.

I'm not an Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! but I do think I am vulnerable to activist burnout, what can I do?

Prevention, prevention, prevention. Also planning.

Individual Strategies

Here are some sound words of advice from people who took part in our survey (we actually had almost 200 worthy pieces of advice - here is a random, yet fairly representative, sample):

"Having a healthy routine - exercise, breakfast, mindfulness. Getting enough sleep. Saying 'no' I'm not going to be on call or do email when I've put aside time to rest."

"When I get sick I actually stay in bed and cancel everything. Reading before I sleep. Checking in with myself before I step in to take on new tasks and projects. Looking at the diary to suss the time ahead and see where I can get some wiggle room, what I can keep out of and when I can get some life admin/house keeping/chill out time. Bike riding! Sensing when something makes me feel nervous and looking at that feeling to figure out how to deal with the source of it."

"GET OFF THE INTERNET"

"1. Sleeping less does not make me more productive. Drinking less (alcohol) does, though! :)"

2. Taking time to prepare and eat good food is worth it.

3. Exercise is critical to my well-being and balance. I need at least 30 minutes a day. If I am honest with myself, I can almost always find those 30 minutes though sometimes I have to be a bit creative about it.

4. Timeblock planning time, vacation, and self-care (exercise). Get it in the calendar.

5. Work should have cycles including recovery weeks (just like when you work out intensely).

6. Make sure you take time to do things you love. For me, one night of live music goes a long way....

7. We all need good friends, coaches, and mentors. Make sure you schedule these meaningful conversations.

8. Remember the 80/20 rule (there are many 80/20 rules). The one I'm thinking of is that 80% of our "product" tends to come from 20% of our activities. Make sure you do the high-value, high-leverage activities. Each week (and each day) ask "What is the one thing I can do that, once done, will make everything else easier or even irrelevant." Make sure you schedule time daily to work on that One Thing."

"PAUSE! stocktake! what is going on, write it all down, map it out, timeline, due dates, etc delegate, prioritise, schedule in rest time sand breaks, and health needs, social needs, ect"

"Take a long mindful walk in the woods or along a beach and pay attention to the miraculous there, talk to an ecotherapist"

Coaching and mentoring

Having access to a regular coach or mentor can be a good strategy for activists and campaigners who might need a 'sounding board' or strategic advice regarding how to proceed with particular campaigns and actions. Any good coach or mentor will have an idea of how self-care and wellbeing factor in to good strategy.

Support groups and peer counselling

Belonging to a tight-knit group, like an 'affinity' group that attends actions together or a group of mates who are on the same page can be really important for maintaining a dedicated space where you can regularly debrief, whinge, cry and laugh.

One survey respondent reckoned having '*a designated "spotter" who can recognise when activists are burning out*' was useful for prevention. Another told us it was important to have '*good supportive loving friends to pull me up when I'm overdoing it*'. One way we can help 'spotters' and supportive friends is to communicate early on to what burnout and stress looks like for us on a personal level. This might be a group exercise or one-to-one conversation worth scheduling before embarking on a big campaign or action if this is something you'd like reflected back to you when early warning signs arise- it can be easy to go into denial if we're on our own.

For more tips on how to go about setting up support groups check out:

<http://plantothrive.net.au/2013/08/how-to-support-activists/>

Organisational Strategies

When we asked the question '*what have you noticed are the major contributors to burnout, either for yourself or others?*' many of the responses we received focused on organisational culture as being productive of stressful situations like dysfunctional group dynamics and overloading individuals with work. Contemporary campaigns have also inherited many of the defeats faced by the Left over the past few decades and continue to experience losses:

Feeling like I don't have a support network or that I am isolated; when there has been difficult movement politics or conflict between groups and individuals that's become quite toxic I have personally struggled...I think doing internal conflict well and respectfully is one of the most important skills we can cultivate.

I think there's a culture of overwork in activist circles, which is totally understandable but really detrimental. Lots of people start campaigning and drop out after a couple of years. It's not a good way to build a movement, and it means that the knowledge and skills people have built up are lost. We need to stop seeing ourselves as expendable. I might be projecting, but a lot of my self esteem used to be based on being a good organiser, and being "on it" and always busy, and I think in some ways this way of thinking is encouraged in our movements. I think despair is

also a factor. Losing a campaign can seriously affect you. I think we need to be able to have the space to talk about feelings of despair in our affinity groups, in a way that doesn't publicly advocate giving up. I feel despair a lot, but I don't want to give up.

It is worth noting that for a lot of the time, activists and campaigners are working under conditions where they receive very little positive reinforcement- campaigns may run for many years before they record a win or they may never win at all. For all self-identified activists and freedom fighters, I dare say, the struggle never ends even if the goal is always in sight.

Doing a bit of myth-busting and naming the difficulties faced by organisers and campaigners, particularly under neo-liberalism, can be a healthy strategy for managing expectations and identifying the places where people 'leak' out of campaigns, groups and movements. Here are a few more strategies you might like to implement at an organisational level to prevent burnout:

Check-ins and debriefing

Making space for emotional disclosure can be really important to group dynamics and processes. This can be as simple as starting every meeting with a 'how is everyone doing', or whatever you feel is a relevant question to ask the group at that particular time. Likewise, debriefing is about dedicating group space to how people feel an action or campaign affected them on a *personal* level. Debriefing is particularly important for direct-action activists and in their case should be done as soon as possible after completing an action to mitigate the effects of potential trauma. Ideally this is done in small groups where overall trust is high, such as affinity groups.

Facilitation and conflict resolution

Facilitation is the practice of helping groups realise their purpose. When groups are first forming or struggling with group dynamics at any particular time it might be helpful to have a designated facilitator (internal or external) to help groups and the individuals within these work through issues and address barriers that are holding them back from participating in activist and campaigning work more productively and with less stress. Facilitators (and other people trained in conflict resolution or mediation) can be useful for resolving personal or group wide conflict, particularly when this is holding the group back from reaching its full potential.

Anti-oppression training

Cultivating cultures of safety (such as physical, emotional and cultural safety) and democracy are crucial to maintaining diversity in organisations, groups and broader social movements. Why not test for support in your organisation or group for engaging in activities and discussions around anti-oppressive organising? Check out some resources from Organizing for Power: <http://organizingforpower.org/anti-oppression-resources-exercises/>

An example of anti-oppression training in Australia check out RISE's (Refugees, Survivors and Ex-Detainees) anti-racism workshops.

Strategic planning and campaign strategy

Why place group energies into tactics and strategies that are unlikely to yield success? Having access to experienced advisors and good information, as well as building group consensus around particular activist and campaign strategies keeps organising focused and determined.

Celebrate the wins, grieve the losses

Sometimes campaigns lose and activists who have been involved may feel a big sense of personal failure or a loss of personal agency. This is the time to ask for external assistance (like a facilitator or group therapist) to help people heal the loss and make meaning of the situation. Check out activist educator Daniel Hunter's work on what to do when campaigns lose: <http://www.wagingnonviolence.org/feature/lose/>

The alternative, winning, is no less deserving of attention. Celebrating wins can sustain activists and groups through their next set of challenges as well as highlight where campaigns gained ground and why. Check out Holly Hammond's work on celebration and hope: <http://plantothrive.net.au/2013/07/hope-and-activist-burnout/> and <http://plantowin.net.au/2013/06/celebration/>

Thanks for reading!

Please show care towards other activists by sharing this resource widely.

Many thanks to our wonderful survey respondents and the folk around the world doing fantastic work on the issue of activist burnout.

We'd love to hear your feedback on this zine and where and how you've distributed it. Better still, write an article for the blog! We welcome all sorts of stories and perspectives relating to activist health and wellbeing.



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