



ACTIVIST BURNOUT: UNDERSTANDING, PREVENTING, HEALING

What is Activist Burnout?

'Activist Burnout' broadly encompasses all personally negative mental, emotional, physical, and behavioural changes caused by one's activism, that in result hinder the effectiveness of that activist. It is common for activists to suffer from varying degrees of activist burnout, with a variety of symptoms, throughout their lifetime. One of the most important things activists can learn is how to use personalized coping methods to deal with stresses. Thankfully it is possible to overcome and avoid activist burnout and ensure a well-balanced and successful life full of activism.

Why do Activists Experience Burnout?

'Activist Burnout' will have different causes depending on the individual and their environment. In general, activist burnout is due to the inability of an activist to effectively deal with the many stresses associated with their activist work. Activists should not feel at fault for their burnout. It is understandable why so many activists have difficulty dealing with their stresses when there is little and often no support for activists.

Reasons activists may be unable to effectively deal with stresses:

- Workload
- Poor habits (procrastination, inefficiencies, etc.)
- Inexperience
- No mentors
- No support network
- Internal activist policing & sense of competition
- Secondary traumatic stress disorder/ compassion fatigue
- Weltschmerz (pain for an unideal world)

What are the Symptoms of Activist Burnout?

The stresses activists have to deal with on a day to day basis will affect everyone differently. Mental/ emotional, physical, and behavioural symptoms are all interrelated and can exacerbate each other. This means that to resolve one symptom often means dealing with several. The following is a non-exhaustive list including many common symptoms of activist burnout:

Mental/Emotional Symptoms

- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Sense of hopelessness / helplessness
- Cynicism
- Intense or misplaced anger
- Lack of motivation
- Difficulty enjoying life / activities once enjoyed

There is a tendency for activists to remain silent about any painful emotions they may have. Activists will justify this for the reason that while they may be sad, angry and upset “it is nothing compared to the suffering of the ones they are trying to help”. While this reasoning is understandable, unwillingness to share and work through painful emotions will only worsen them.

Behavioral Symptoms

- Reclusive behavior / isolation from once positive relationships
- Disregard for social responsibilities
- Unwillingness to accept help
- Lack of effectiveness
- Inability / unwillingness to fulfill responsibilities
- Decreased self-care (personal appearance, hygiene, unhealthy eating, etc.)
- Inability to remain focused
- Difficulty making decisions

Behavioral changes are inevitable for activists experiencing burnout. These changes are most obvious to a third party, and often misunderstood as unpleasant character flaws. The negative changes in behaviour can isolate activists, and deter new people from joining the organization or movement.

Physical Symptoms

- Fatigue
- Trouble sleeping
- Weight loss / weight gain
- Decreased immunity
- Pain and achiness
- General lack of physical fitness
- Difficulty making decisions

While not always associated with activist burnout, the physical aspects are incredibly important to deal with because physical weakness/ailments only exacerbate the taxing mental effects caused by activist stresses. Maintaining physical fitness will help to improve quality of life and alleviate activist burnout.

What Can Activists do to Avoid and Overcome Burnout?

As activists, it is important to spot the warning signs that might indicate we or our fellow activists are becoming burnt out. Whether warning signs are apparent or not, it is important for all activists to take proactive measures to ensure they effectively deal with any stresses they might have. It is essential for all activists to have the ability to use stress management techniques in order to overcome and proactively avoid activist burnout. The following are a few of the many ways to effectively cope with activist stress:

- Learn to prioritize better and focus on priorities.
- De-stress through healthy activities (physical exercise, music, reading, etc.).
- Identify your triggers and what boundaries you need to have. Be honest with yourself.
- Maintain healthy eating, sleeping, and exercise habits. *this is crucial
- Develop better work habits.
- Try to focus on tasks you are good at and enjoy doing.
- Use a journal to vent about painful experiences or stress, to focus cultivate gratitude and positivity, and to help identify patterns in your moods and behaviors.
- Attain support groups you can rely on and talk with about your stresses.
- Maintain friendly relationships with fellow activists and non-activists.
- Find a mentor or mentor a less experienced activists.
- Understand that activist work is a lifelong process.
- Make your work more enjoyable and fun.
- Engage in moderate to intense physical exercises. *great fix for depression
- Reduce workload but improve quality of work being completed.
- Understand there are high and lows to every initiative/organization/movement.
- Maintain activities outside activism that fulfill you.
- Resolve negative thought patterns and never discount the worthwhile work you do.
- Reward yourself and others for the important work they do.
- Examine how your activist work affects your attitudes and behaviours.
- Understand “successes” and “failures” are not dichotomous. Every initiative has some degree of success. The real failure occurs when activists leave the movement.
- Understand change is possible (thinking otherwise is internalized repression).
- Remind yourself that feeling sad and angry about the world is normal and justified.

- Maintain a sense of humor.
- Therapy has a tremendous potential to help individuals struggling to effectively manage their stress. Short-term counselling is nearly always beneficial and becomes even more crucial when symptoms are severe.
- Recognize that self-care is not selfish and does not need to detract from your activism. Finding effective ways to manage stress and improve your efficacy will make you a better activist and will increase the longevity of your activism.

Burnout is difficult to address. It often requires a great deal of time, patience, honest reflection, and a willingness to adapt. Although challenging, **the benefits of avoiding burnout are immense**. We owe it to ourselves, other activists, and animals to take burnout seriously.