



Building a Support Network

Resources for activist health and wellbeing

Support Networks Increase Capacity for Action!

I was recently talking with a friend about ways to increase the sustainability of her activism. I noticed she was getting cagey and when I asked about it, she said 'You're just going to tell me to do less, aren't you?!'

Well, that's often a good idea, but the truth is many of us have really big, audacious goals, which challenge us and take a lot of work. The answer isn't necessarily to do less, but to increase the support and resources for that work.

To use an analogy: elite long distance runners have support teams, to help keep them mentally motivated, to massage aching muscles, to ensure they eat the right balance of foods. Their ability to run marathons owes a lot to the support of others. In order to achieve the goals they've set for themselves, they get help.

Many activists act as though getting help, or investing in their own self-care, is a distraction from the main game, and a waste of time. Being kind to yourself is a good in and of itself – but it may be a useful perspective to adopt, that being 'self-indulgent' is actually about increasing capacity for effective action.

Research shows the more individuals from whom we draw intimate support, the more stress we can handle well (Psychologist Stephanie Simonton referenced in [Grassroots and Nonprofit Leadership](#)). So if you have committed to big challenges, make sure you set up big support.

Audit Your Support Network

Take some time to notice:

- Whose support currently enables you in your activism? Who do you support?
- Where do you get emotional support? (Such as listening, affirmation, a shoulder to cry on)
- Where do you get practical support? (Like financial support, meals, childcare)

- Where do you get guidance and development? (Feedback on your performance, insights, mentoring)
- Where could you use more of a hand – and where could you access that?

Plan for Stressful Times

If you are heading into a high intensity campaign think about the people in your life – how can they support you at this time? Whether it's listening to you at the end of a hard day, making dinner for you, baby-sitting, or volunteering on the campaign, it can make a big difference to have folks on your side. Let people know why you've made the decision to commit to the campaign, what it means for you over a particular period of time, and what it would mean to you to have their help.

You don't need to guilt people, just ask! If you're usually someone who spends a lot of time caring for others, or is very self-reliant, your friends and family may not be used to being able to help. This may be a great opportunity for them to get closer to you, by letting yourself lean on them a little. It also makes sense to be clear with people about how available you will be during busy times, and that you may not be able to offer them certain kinds of support for a while.

Appreciate and Reciprocate

Don't forget to appreciate your support network and give back! If it's a one-way relationship for a prolonged period of time there's a risk of exploiting their kind hearts and wearing them out. This can be particularly true in partner relationships – don't expect your partner to carry the burden of your emotional health. Take responsibility for your own needs and share the load.

It can be helpful to negotiate supportive relationships with people who are prepared to provide one-way attention – such as paid professionals or people with lots of capacity who see it as a social change contribution. Another option is negotiating a fair exchange of support, such as swapping equal amounts of listening time, or bartering goods and services.



How to Support Activists

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A really great support network requires willing and savvy people being actively supportive. How do you actually go about backing someone who's on a social change mission?

Everyone is different so every supportive relationship will have its own characteristics. With that qualification, here are some hunches I have about backing activists, based on my experiences of receiving and giving support. These are relevant for non-activists supporting activists, for activist colleagues supporting each other, or even for individual activists considering how they can better look after themselves.

Respect. Activists experience so much invalidation and so many attacks it's important to counter that with respect for their intelligence, autonomy, choices and commitment.

Show care. Be sweet and show that you like them. You may meet with resistance. There's a definite tendency among some activists to dismiss 'warm fuzzies' but that doesn't mean it's not a good idea. That culture will only shift by people modeling a different way and melting some frosty hearts.

Listen. Full, warm, relaxed, attentive listening is one of the best gifts you can give anyone. When we are listened to well we are able to process challenges, release emotional burdens, and think more clearly. Practice active listening or go further and try reciprocal peer listening (like Re-evaluation Counseling).

Bring lightness and laughter. A lot of activism is really heavy. A light touch can shift perspective to what is hopeful and sustaining. Laughter is a healthy way to release fear and tension and it's fun.

Keep calm. Sure, this sounds like the beginning of that annoying meme but it's important. When all around is chaos and struggle, calm people hold the space for rest and recovery. Staying grounded and not getting

caught up in the drama could make you the safe port in a storm.

Appreciate. A lot of the time activists are so busy rushing on to the next battle that they don't get to celebrate success. Acknowledging and appreciating people for their hard work and achievements can help someone really take on board success, which can be a bulwark against burnout.

Value the person, not just the work. Capitalism treats all people like their worth depends on what they produce. Many activist cultures do similar but with an extra moral weighting (the virtue of the mission and personal sacrifice). It can be a radical departure from this script just to be interested in how someone is feeling and what's going on in their larger life.

Share skills and resources. If you know something or have something that could make a difference to the effectiveness of other's social change efforts, don't keep it to yourself. Connect people with similar concerns or complementary skills. Value education and development and encourage others too as well. You can start with sharing the resources of Plan to Win and Plan to Thrive.

Offer practical support. Sometimes the most useful thing you can do when someone is in the middle of a hectic campaign is help them cover the basics. Cook food, run errands, lend resources and equipment (like cars), donate to the campaign or directly to them. If it makes sense get involved in the group or campaign and volunteer your time.

Ask. "Is there anything I can do to support you? What kind of support would make a difference to you at this time?"

Look after yourself. To help others you need to be in good shape yourself – helping others at your own expense defeats the purpose. Have boundaries around what you're prepared to offer and build reciprocity in your relationships. Apply this list to yourself – respect yourself, care for yourself, listen to yourself.