



## Resources for Sustaining Activism

*Staying Healthy and Happy While Working Towards a Better World*

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### Recommended Reading

- Plan to Thrive – Activist Health and Wellbeing <http://plantothrive.net.au>
- Plan to Win – Social Movement Learning <http://plantowin.net.au/>
- ‘Pacing Yourself For The Journey: How To Avoid Burnout And Thrive While Working To Change The World’, Chapter 15 of *Grassroots And Nonprofit Leadership* (1995) Berit Lakey; George Lakey, Rod Napier, and Janice Robinson, New Society Publishers (available on Plan to Thrive – Resources)
- ‘Survival Tactics (How to Spark Without Incineration)’, Chapter 11 of *In The Tiger’s Mouth: An Empowerment Guide For Social Action*, Katrina Shields, 1991, Millenium Books NSW.
- Activist Trauma Support website [www.activist-trauma.net](http://www.activist-trauma.net)
- The Training Resources – Personal Development and Life Skills page on the Change Agency website ([www.thechangeagency.org](http://www.thechangeagency.org))
- Self-Care for Activists - summary of discussion and resources on New Tactics in Human Rights <http://www.newtactics.org/conversation/self-care-activists-sustaining-your-most-valuable-resource>

### Food for Thought

‘Human rights work is a powerful and fulfilling vocation. And it is equally hugely challenging for human rights practitioners. These practitioners are often exposed to distressing situations directly and indirectly. From those working directly with survivors of human rights abuses to those working indirectly on human rights abuse issues, the need for taking care of one’s self is extremely important. We all know that the work is precious and valuable, and yes, we need to be strong, healthy and balanced to do it well -- but we take care of ourselves first and foremost because **we** are valuable.’

– New Tactics in Human Rights

‘Burnout is an occupational hazard for high achievers with high ideals’

– Patricia Vigderman

‘Burnout is the index of the dislocation between what people are and what they have to do. It represents an erosion in values, dignity, spirit and will – an erosion of the human soul’

– Christina Maslach, *Burnout – The Cost of Caring*, 1982

‘We just assume that the mission (or work) is more important than our personal needs. This is where a fundamental contradiction sets in. Those of us who are burnout-prone are also sensitive people who have feelings, want to be liked and recognized, and wish to do worthwhile things for other people. We want to do well and look good in the eyes of our peers, but unfortunately our peers are usually in the same dilemma. They also play down personal needs.’

– William Bryan, *Preventing Burnout in the Public Interest Community*, 1980

‘The most effective people tend to have dreams, plans, and visions of the future. Some idea of where they are going promotes a sense of hope and well-being in their lives and provides something to shoot for beyond the here and now. Having such a vision or dream helps maintain a clear and balanced perspective on the present’

– Lakey et al, 1995

# Active Listening

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Active listening is about really hearing people. Listening well to someone can make them feel worthy, appreciated, interesting, and respected. Ordinary conversations emerge on a deeper level, as do our relationships. When we listen, we foster the skill in others by acting as a model for positive and effective communication. Listening helps us learn more about others and helps to prevent misunderstandings.

Often when people talk to each other, they don't listen attentively. They can be distracted, only half listening or thinking about something else.

To use good active listening skills in either a group or one to one situation the person listening should focus on what the speaker is saying—looking at them, maintaining eye contact and facing them to show they are interested in and open to what is being said. The listener can then repeat back to the speaker in their own words what they have understood from both what has been said and the feelings involved to ensure understanding.

What to be aware of as an active listener:

- be aware of any preconceived ideas or opinions you may have on the subject
- ensure you allow the speaker to finish their point—don't interrupt
- ensure you listen fully to the speaker—rather than hearing the first part of their idea and then formulating your response in your head prior to them finishing
- even if you don't agree with the speaker's opinion or suggestion, allow them to express their ideas
- use body language and facial expressions to encourage the speaker, for instance face the speaker and maintain (comfortable and culturally appropriate) eye contact
- avoid distractions during discussions by going to a quiet or private location, for instance eliminate background noise, other people interrupting and mobile phone ringing
- minimize internal distractions, if your mind wanders let those thoughts go and keep bringing your focus back to the person you are listening to
- don't sidetrack the conversation with how you have handled similar situations, or what it reminds you of, or your particular opinions on the topic
- once you have heard what the speaker has to say—summarise what you have heard and feed this back to them to ensure you have understood. This gives the speaker a chance to clarify anything that was unclear
- once clarified, the listener can then respond with any queries, questions, reflections on their own experience or ideas to the original speaker
- reflection of the information from the speaker can also be expressed in terms of feelings, for instance "It seems you feel angry when...". This shows you have understood more than just the content of the words.

The speaker and the listener continue to alternate in this process of active listening until full understanding is reached.

## Sources:

Collated from sources including Study Guides & Strategies 2007; International Online Training Programme on Intractable Conflict 1998; Australian Government Job Access guides to job requirements; and Susie Michelle Cortright.

## Tips for Healthy Organisations

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1. Create a group culture or ethos that supports self-care, balance and sustainable work loads and patterns.
2. Take a long-term perspective of planning and working for the long haul, to keep experienced and skilled group members for as long as possible.
3. Balance task focus with process and relationship / maintenance focus - in meetings, in daily work, in planning, and in evaluation.
4. Provide or access workshops and training in stress management and burnout prevention - can be as part of conferences, gatherings or ongoing training and orientation.
5. Use regular planning and evaluation as a tool to reduce stress.
6. Build stress level checks into reviews and evaluations - how stressed do people feel? What is contributing? What do we need to do about these?
7. Put stress prevention strategies on the agenda for meetings.
8. Allow people to express feelings of distress, grief and loss and frustration - regard them as normal and healthy responses to unhealthy situations and state of the world.
9. Provide individual or group debriefing after critical incidents or high stress campaigns. Keep an eye open for vulnerable individuals and see intervention as valid.
10. Create support structures, eg supervision, mentoring, support and affinity groups, larger group workshops.
11. Put value on socialising, fun, humour, relaxation time as a group.

**Source:** Katrina Shields, from the **Essential Skills for Environmental Activism** training manual, National Environment Movement Training Support Group, November 1997

## Creating a Culture of Self-Care

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Promoting self-care in the activist community is not up to the individual alone. Successful self-care is promoted both by changes in practitioners' approach to their work, as well as through intentional efforts on the side of the organization. The way an organization operates influences the way activists conceive of the goal of their work and their own well-being.

### **What can an individual do?**

- Think long-term
- Take care of your body
- Follow a sustainable lifestyle, develop personal coping strategies

### **What can an organization do to support self-care?**

- Build trust and confidence within the organization
- Focus on prevention
- Organize group meetings
- Create a vision, do not focus on listing problems
- Hold the organization accountable for their staff's health and wellbeing

**Source:** New Tactics in Human Rights Online Dialogue: Self-Care, Sustaining Your Most Valuable Resource, 2010. See <http://www.newtactics.org/conversation/self-care-activists-sustaining-your-most-valuable-resource>

# Burnout Rating Scale

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Think over the past 3 months and answer 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  |

Adding up your total score will give you some indication whether you are likely to burn out or not.

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 an 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?

My score \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Scoring

0 – 15 You are doing well

16 – 25 Some attention needed, you are a candidate.

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

36 – 50 You need to take action immediately – your health and well-being are threatened.

**Reference:** In The Tiger's Mouth: An Empowerment Guide For Social Action,  
Katrina Shields, 1991, Millenium Books NSW, pg 130.

Other 'indicators' of being over-stressed or approaching burn-out for me are...

Something I will decide to do from now on to take care of myself and manage stress...

## Personal 'Traps' that Contribute to Activist Burn-out

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Here are some 'traps' I've noticed activists can fall into - many of which I'm familiar with from my own experience! These attitudes or practices can contribute to activist burn-out. They can reduce our enjoyment of life and the effectiveness of our actions. Happily, these traps can be challenged or avoided.

### **Scale**

Always focusing on the enormity of the problem wears us down! It's very valuable to be able to focus attention on big problems (more people would be activists if they could) but we need techniques to handle despair and avoid being overwhelmed. Some approaches that may be helpful are: noticing what is going well, getting support with our feelings, breaking our campaigns/projects into smaller scale measurable steps, and celebrating the steps along the way.

### **Lack of Boundaries**

Being open to taking on everything is the fast road to burn-out. We can set realistic boundaries – around the amount of time we devote to activism, when and where we work, and what kinds of work we do. We can prioritise. Doing this means we are more likely to be able to perform well and not spread ourselves too thin. We can practice saying 'No' and face the feelings that come up.

### **Monopolies**

If we take on heavy workloads alone we can trap ourselves into believing we're indispensable – 'no-one else can do it'. Sharing information, workloads, networks and decision making may mean we feel less special and crucial, but it's far healthier and sustainable. To stop monopolising work means trusting others, delegating, and investing time in other people's development. It can also mean being prepared to let things not happen.

### **Isolation**

Activism can be isolating. Building closeness in our lives can seem like a lower priority than the activist tasks we've set ourselves. But working for change shouldn't be a lonely project. Investing in building relationships, letting people in, and asking for help can make a big difference to our activist experience – and our whole lives.

### **Responsibility and Guilt**

Activists take responsibility for addressing social and ecological problems. The decision to stand up against oppression or take action for change is incredibly valuable. However some activists can over-personalise this responsibility so that if they're not doing their utmost they can feel like the problem is their fault. We need to keep it in context. For example, we did not start the oppression, we are not actually cutting down trees or constructing coal-fired powerstations! Feeling guilty doesn't help anyone.

### **Perfectionism**

This is another scale issue – it's difficult to feel pleased with anything you do if you are focused on every tiny mistake. Changing the world involves making mistakes, being experimental, being bold. Perfectionism holds us back. If mistakes are made we need to learn from them, do what we can to clean them up, apologise if necessary, then move on. Reflection is helpful – excessive self-criticism isn't!

### **Motivations**

Some activists and community workers are motivated to do good deeds by needing to feel better about ourselves. Our self-worth can become tied up with overwork. This traps us because when we need to stop or take a holiday we can hit feelings of being bad and worthless. With stronger self-esteem we can change our emotional relationship with our activism, and work from more sustainable motivations.

### **Skills Gaps**

Very few activists have access to the training they need to tackle the tasks they take on. Being continually stretched outside our capabilities can be exhausting and demoralising, and we can feel like there is something wrong with us. It is also pretty amazing how much we figure out on the fly! Having access to training and mentoring is an investment in preventing burn-out, and will increase effectiveness. Planning to work a mix of competence and challenge can help us keep our heads above water.

### **Lack of systemic analysis**

If we don't have a big picture of the situation we can be devastated by every little set back. Understanding the power relationships in society, and what stage our movement is at, helps us keep perspective. It also means we channel our efforts more effectively, for example we don't try to build a mass rally when we still need to do awareness raising about a problem.

### **On the other hand...Self-care is a Political Project**

- Having a good life and being happy challenges oppression and contributes to a better future.
- It makes activism more attractive to others.
- It enables you to be active for a long time and enjoy it!

**Source:** Holly Hammond, Plan to Thrive

<http://plantothrive.net.au/2014/09/activist-burnout-traps/>

#### **Activist's Commitment**

I have chosen to change society, but I also choose to be intelligent in the way I go about it.

The future needs me well-rested, well-nourished, and well-exercised.

The past is useful as a source of information, but never as a substitute for my own fresh thinking.

If I am not enjoying what I am doing, then there is something wrong with how I am doing it

... and I will correct it.

- Re-evaluation Counselling

'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence,  
it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.'

- Audre Lorde

'We must be the change we wish to see in the world'

- Mohandas Ghandi