Acknowledge your own humanity: you have the right to pleasure and a right to relaxation.

Accept and show our vulnerability. We are not machines, when we deny the vulnerable aspects of our nature, they can easily resurface in more problematic ways.

Lead as healthy a lifestyle as you can:

- Get adequate sleep and rest to maintain your energy levels.
- Eat a healthy balanced diet, lots of fresh fruit and veg, cut out junk food and don't skip meals.
- Get regular aerobic exercise - eg. swimming, cycling.
- Be aware of your intake of stimulant and recreational drugs, and whether it's helping or hindering your work.

Another technique is Core Energy Management (CEM). A set of simple mind/body techniques to manage your physical/emotional energy. CEM uses visualisation to stimulate endorphin production and energy work adapted from Taoism. It's useful to help prevent burnout, reduce stress (ideal before and during an action), and generally keep people energised and positive. See: /www.adrianharris.org/cem.htm

Learn some simple breathing exercises - in the west we have a tendency to breathe very shallowly - however it is physiologically impossible to be stressed and anxious if you are breathing deeply

Take up Tai Chi, Chi Gong, meditation, or yoga (all good for getting the habit of breathing deeply) Get a massage, learn how to give massages. Massage is a great way to relax and find comfort.

Play and be with children - rediscover your spontaneity - notice how effortlessly in the moment young children are - join them by engaging fully in their games.

Celebrate individual and group achievements. Create positive spaces, events and alternatives (like Climate Camp!).

Starhawk has said that in her experience activists who stay completely away from a spiritual practice of some kind, sooner or later reach a burnout point, whereas those who do have practices they return to consistently know how to reinvigorate themselves and keep the fire burning.

A spiritual practice could be anything from meditation to walks in the countryside, from permaculture and gardening to being entranced by oil rainbows on wet tarmac. Basically anything that nurtures our sense of our own intrinsic worth and beauty and the intrinsic worth and beauty of all life on Earth.

Explore your creativity - it's often said what a creative group of people activists are. How about experimenting with your creativity in areas that don't involve outwitting the police, or foiling corporate shenanigans?

Ultimately, at the end of the day, there is no one size fits all solution. The process of healing that is involved in avoiding or coping with burnout will be as unique and singular as each one of us is. We have to follow our passions, there is no point taking up an activity just because you read about it in a handout, for such a healing process to be truly effective you need to make use of a combination of activities and practices that really grab you and your passions.

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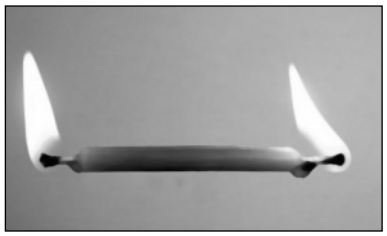
...TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER...

For more info: Activist Trauma Support Tel: 07962 406940
Email: activist_trauma@riseup.net www.activist-trauma.net

SUSTAINABLE ACTIVISM & AVOIDING BURNOUT

Burnout is a political and movement issue. Every year committed activists suffer and drop out of our community because they have burnt out.

To a great extent burnout is simply accepted as a by-product of being involved in activism. However as we work in groups, if a person is suffering from burnout, it will tend to have a negative affect on the group as a whole.



The way we behave to both ourselves and the people around us has profound impacts. An enjoyable and effective action or process can easily be turned into a negative one. This is in no way meant to blame or attack people suffering from burnout, it is more to emphasise the fact that we need to support each other more effectively. We don't have to accept burnout as a fact of activist life. We don't have to continue to lose valuable members of our community.

This workshop/handout begins from the premise that the most effective way of transforming our society and so halting it's destruction of the Earth, is through transforming ourselves, and the way we interact with both each other and the Earth herself.

This, in part, is what our movement is about, doing things in different, more effective, and most importantly, less destructive ways. Re-evaluating our approach to our own mental, emotional and physical health can play a large part in enabling our activism to become more sustainable, and thereby help us to avoid burning out, and so continue our resistance.

What is burnout?

"Burnout is defined, and subjectively experienced, as a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long term involvement in situations that are emotionally demanding. The emotional demands are often caused by a combination of very high expectations and chronic situational stresses. Burnout is accompanied by an array of symptoms including physical depletion, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, disillusionment and the development of negative self-concept and negative attitudes towards work, people and life itself. In its extreme form, burnout represents a breaking point beyond which the ability to cope with the environment is severely hampered."

from Career Burnout - Causes and Cures,
Ayala Pines and Elliott Aronson,
The Free Press 1998

Basically life goes sour, you lose your spark you stop having fun and you stop being fun to be with.

However we can also look at burnout as a warning sign - in this sense it is an opportunity to re-evaluate and re-prioritise, to develop more sustainable and healthy working methods. To paraphrase R.D. Laing the infamous 1960s Psychiatrist - 'It doesn't have to be all breakdown, it can also be breakthrough.'

Burnout often results from working too hard, from experiencing too much stress or too many stressful situations.

This can happen when we demand too much of ourselves, when we set ourselves idealistic or unrealistic standards, when we don't feel able to take time out and are unable to delegate. In other words, when we don't value ourselves, when we fail to look after our own most basic needs.

What to look out for

Burnout happens slowly, over a long period of time. It is expressed physically and/or mentally. Symptoms of burnout can include:

- A creeping feeling that activism is taking over your life.
- Difficulty in making decisions.
- Inability to stay focused.
- Insomnia, difficulty in sleeping, or getting enough sleep.
- A growing tendency to think negatively.
- Pervasive feelings of hopelessness.
- A loss of sense of purpose and energy.
- Physical indications of burnout include muscle tension, restriction of blood flow to the tissues and increased adrenalin buildup. These physiological signs can lead to headache, backache and exhaustion
- A loss of pleasure in food, friends or other activities that were once exciting and interesting - a general sense of running on empty.
- Other warning signs of burnout include temper tantrums over trivial matters, not wanting to get out of bed in the morning or becoming accident prone.

What causes and contributes to burnout?

Direct action can stir up the most extreme emotions. You can experience extraordinary things very quickly. Many people find that a direct action campaign can be one of the most important, life-changing and empowering things in their lives. But some, especially if a campaign is lost and what they were seeking to protect is destroyed, say that it was the worst experience ever, and that they couldn't go through that pain again.

In short, direct action can at times be very traumatic for most people. The best way to cope with all the stresses is to help and support one another. Stress reaction begins with the release of adrenaline, which gives temporary bursts of energy. By continually pushing ourselves harder we can stay on a high, but this cannot last. This should be followed by relaxing, curling up in a corner and recuperating. If we don't recuperate, ignoring messages that something is wrong, then our bodies and minds will resort to something painful or dramatic to get our attention. This is burnout.

We are neither inexhaustible machines nor soldiers who can consistently take loads of abuse. It is positively healthy to get upset about it all - it would be worrying if we were not affected. It is important that people talk, giving one another time to listen to worries and stresses. We need to make sure that we look after each other. And further that we don't forget the 'strong' people who may pretend to be fine all the time. Don't be afraid to let each other know what you are feeling.

Burnout can be difficult to deal with, as the person concerned may claim that they are fine. If you notice people around you going close to the edge, try to ease their pressure without challenging them. If you suspect you are burning out, don't be afraid to ask for help.

Infighting:

One of the big causes of burnout is when groups/people fall out, and exhaust their energies in infighting. Infighting often comes from people under stress who are looking for someone to blame and scapegoat. It can manifest itself as mistrust, bullying, intimidation, abuse and gossip. Pay attention to the group dynamics. Be aware if people are spreading malicious rumours and bad feeling; they are either hyper-stressed or dodgy - this is a common tactic used by infiltrators to destabilise groups. Before getting suspicious, try talking to this person to see if there is any substance to their accusations. Paranoid witch hunts help no-one. Above all be kind to each other, and to yourself. Value each other.

Activist culture:

Research has highlighted that activist burnout often appears to be caused by people setting themselves unrealistically high standards, which they are never quite able to meet, no matter how hard they drive themselves. Taking the weight of the world on your shoulders and not allowing yourself to rest until the problems of the world have been solved is a sure way to burn yourself out. See www.parkc.org/activist.htm

What kind of a culture do such common personal attitudes end up creating? As a movement do we accept periods of low motivation, while respecting people for admitting that they need a break to recharge their batteries? Do we respect activists who own up to the fact that they don't have the time or energy to complete tasks they have taken on? Or rather, are respect and kudos within our community earned through a kind of devotion to the cause which requires endless personal sacrifice?

Is there a danger that the often pressing and urgent nature of activist work fosters a work ethic which in itself can be highly damaging? While perhaps understandable, can a culture that respects personal sacrifice ultimately be either sustainable or effective?

The downsides of the activist culture of devotion to the cause are that our community continually loses some of its most committed participants, while there is also the tendency for new participants to be discouraged from becoming involved.

If we want to become the transformations that we wish to see in society at large, then surely it is time we accepted that relentlessly driving ourselves and those around us is neither sustainable nor desirable. We need to remember that changing the world is a marathon, not a sprint. We need to pace ourselves.

Strategies for avoiding burnout - making our activism more sustainable

Our commitments need regular review and pruning to prevent overload. If you have taken on something but can't do it say so publicly, rather than people thinking you are doing it when you are not.

Ensure that you take regular breaks while also combining a variety of different activities - plan some time off, before, during and after big actions or work sessions - aiming for a balance that is right for you and your needs.

What are the situations that grind you down the most? Can you create ways of dealing with them?

Don't feel you have to go on every action - if it doesn't feel right don't do it.

It helps to know your own motives. Sometimes people come to activism as a way of expressing anger and pain that actually arises out of more personal sources - an abusive childhood, or difficult life experiences. This is not to say that you can't have both, or that family violence does not have political aspects. However, in terms of sustainability, it is helpful to know what is coming from where.

Long term involvement in emotionally demanding situations is easier to cope with when you have a way of releasing the emotions that the situations create, regular emotional release through support networks, co-counselling, sport, sex, being in nature, basically things that take your mind off work, they can help you bring out the best in yourself and others around you.

Learn and practise the art of letting go - face up to, accept and work through your pain, your stress, your fears, while being compassionate with yourself, until you come to the point where you can let go and move on from them.