



SUSTAINABLE ACTIVISM

& SELF CARE

Level 2: Fundamental activist skills

Published February 2020

Amnesty International Australia - defending human rights

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Happy activist times © Amnesty International

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BEFORE WE BEGIN

If you haven't signed up to join our movement yet, head over to our [Get Active](#) page.

You can find other modules on fundamental activist skills [here](#). We recommend getting familiar with them all if you are new to activism.

If you have any questions please get in touch with us at communityorganising@amnesty.org.au.



Keep Hope Alive activists 2015. © Amnesty International

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our module on sustainable activism & self care. In this module we're going to take a look at how we can better take care of ourselves as activists. Our passion and commitment to human rights activism is what changes the world. That desire for justice and freedom is what drives us. We know that every contribution we make as activists gets us one step closer to it. It's because we care and can't stand by as injustices are happening.

As a movement, we understand that sustaining that passion and dedication can be tough. As activists we have to deal with a lot of emotions, trauma and engage with people that often do not share our views. We can take on too much without pacing ourselves. It can add up over time and we can start paying a toll for this work in our personal lives. If left unchecked it can lead to mental and physical health problems. Also straining of personal relationships and neglect in other areas.

Amnesty International recognises how vital wellbeing is to the long term sustainability of our movement and our ability to have impact. We can avoid this burnout, or at least counter the effects, by preparing ourselves and having a plan. This is what we are going to cover here. How you can recognise when your activism is starting to take a toll. What you can do to make sure your activism is sustainable for as long as you wish to do it. That you can be resilient and enjoy what you do for a long time to come.

It's important to note before we go any further that we are not medical professionals. The info here can point you in the right direction, but is not a substitute for expert medical advice. We can tell you what to look out for and how to prepare, but if you need medical help please talk to the professionals. You can also contact our free, external and confidential counselling service on 1300 361 008.



You don't have to wait for an emergency to give them a call.

The importance of sustainable activism

Activism involves exposure to things that over time can have a negative effect on us. Achieving social change takes a long time. On some issues we may spend our entire lives fighting for justice. Even if we are able to achieve that change we still have to fight to keep things from going backwards again.

Before we achieve that change we also witness the effects of injustices on others or ourselves. This can be traumatic.

We work against formidable opponents such as governments and corporations. They have more resources and it can often feel like they have a lot more power. Particularly if the general public is behind them. They have the power to enact change, but are usually also the cause of injustice in the first place. It is a huge effort to get them to admit they are wrong.

We spend a lot of time in opposition to public opinion. This exposes us to criticism, verbal or physical abuse and discrimination. Even when we shift public opinion in our favour on one issue, we are still in opposition on other issues. So it can feel like a never ending battle to win over the public sometimes.

There are also disagreements among those fighting for change. Differences in opinion on what the right approach should be. As activists we meet a lot of different personality types, which can lead to clashes. Just like any situation where we have to work with other people, we're not always going to agree with them or get along.

It's difficult to be an activist without conflict of some kind. The entire purpose of what we do is to oppose injustice. There's always going to be pushback. That's what makes activists courageous. To choose to open ourselves up to conflict because we know it's the right thing to do. Our knowledge that we are on the right side of the issue is generally enough to keep us going. But this does not come without stress or trauma. But too many activists ignore their own self care and then experience fatigue, burnout and have to walk away from their activism.

There are a lot of reasons why we ignore our own self care. We can get lost in the moment, our passion driving us to keep fighting until we win. That there will be time to rest when victory comes. Sometimes we worry more about the welfare of others than ourselves. That others experience a lot more suffering and we can't complain by comparison. Also that other people are relying on us to keep fighting and we can't let them down by stopping.

This kind of thinking is pretty prevalent in activism culture. So here are some things to keep in mind as an activist to shift that culture to something more positive. Keep in mind that is not just about taking better care of yourself. It's also about championing this change in culture so others can benefit as well. Because we all need to be looking out for each other. Movements need long term activists who can stay in the fight for a long time. To achieve that we need activists who are optimistic, resilient and prioritise self care. Here are our tips to achieve that.

Some reminders to all activists for healthier activism

- 1 The weight of the world should not be on our shoulders as individuals. We are part of a movement and share the struggle together. Ask for help when you need it. If help is not readily available, then focus on building that support before anything else.
- 2 If you don't take care of yourself first, it will be more difficult to have the energy and resilience to help others. Think of it like the airplane safety tips, fit your own oxygen mask before helping others.
- 3 Your wellbeing is as important as others. You don't have to be experiencing injustices personally to be worthy of concern. It is okay to take time to care for yourself.
- 4 It is okay to pace yourself and take time to rest. Trust that while you rest that others in the movement will keep fighting until you are ready again.
- 5 You are allowed to limit the amount of time that you spend as an activist. You can enjoy things outside of your activism. Take a break from your activism when you need to so that you can maintain your energy and enthusiasm in the long run.
- 6 It's fine to focus your energies on a few issues rather than everything that is wrong with the world. We have to be realistic about what we have the power to do. It is not your responsibility to fix all the issues. It's better to do one thing well than spread ourselves too thin.
- 7 There are some people we will not be able to convince to see our side of things. That's not a failure, it's just the way the world is. Focus on people you can convince.
- 8 You don't have to be an expert on anything to be a great activist. Commit to learning when you can, but don't feel like you're less of an activist because you know less about an issue than others. Passion and commitment are an activist's most important qualities.
- 9 We have to accept that positive change can take a very long time. There will be setbacks, disappointment and frustration along the way. Activism is not something with an endpoint, but is an ongoing process. But everything we do makes it easier for the next activist that comes along to take up the cause. We do win in the end and the world is a better place for our activism. We do make a difference.

A lot of activists have a tendency to put unrealistic expectations on themselves. That there is an idealised version of an activist that we have to be at all times. That we have to put everything before ourselves. That it is not right to enjoy life while injustices are going on. We set ourselves up for failure by trying to force ourselves to be something we struggle to live up to.

While there are principles we should always try to live by as activists, how we do our activism is our choice alone. We each get to determine how much of ourselves we want to give to our activism, others don't get to decide that for us. If we do less than others it doesn't make us less of an activist. It just means we are doing what we have capacity for. Coming up with our own realistic version of what an activist does is how we can make sure it is sustainable. Remember every contribution you make adds up and has impact.

The impact of unsustainable activism

When we don't practice self care it can lead to emotional and physical trauma. If we stop being an activist because of this we deprive the movement of our skills and knowledge. But it's more important to remember that we also deprive ourselves of a happy and healthy life. We're now going to look at some of the effects that can happen if we don't strive for sustainable activism.

Burnout

Burnout is what happens when we expose ourselves to prolonged stress. Over time it causes emotional, mental and physical exhaustion. Where we no longer have the energy to meet demands. It can lead to loss of interest and passion in the things we once cared a lot about. It can also result in us feeling cynical, resentful and hopeless. It's very difficult for us to keep it from affecting other areas of our lives too.



Compassion fatigue

Compassion is not an uncapped resource and from time to time it can run out. This can lead to a reduced capacity to feel compassion or empathy for others. It is usually caused by overexposure to the trauma of others. It's when we use compassion faster than we are able to generate it. It overwhelms our mind to the point where we no longer feel like we care.

Vicarious trauma

Vicarious trauma is when the trauma someone else experiences transfers to others. They don't need to have experienced the trauma firsthand for it to affect them. It comes from working with people suffering from trauma or dealing with confronting material. It tends to happen because of repeated exposure to other people's trauma. When we are too empathetic, to the point where we can put ourselves in their shoes.

These are a few conditions that can arise without practicing self care. They are not a matter of having them or not, they are on a scale of severity. They can happen at the same time to varying degrees. Trying to push through these without treatment can lead to prolonged damage. It can also lead to serious mental health conditions like depression and anxiety. There are also physical health issues that can occur. If they become serious it can be difficult to treat and can even lead to suicide.

In this next part we'll look at how you can identify whether you are suffering from some of these conditions. Here are some of the symptoms you can keep an eye out for:

- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Isolation
- Irritability
- Anger
- Sadness
- Pessimism
- Disappointment
- Numbness
- Fatigue / Insomnia
- Lack of motivation
- Physical pain / Sickness

It is fortunate though that we are able to identify these conditions early. We can tell that we have them before they become serious and take the necessary steps for treatment. Learning how to identify these conditions are vital skills for an activist. We have to plan for them and have our own individualised way of dealing with them.

BURNOUT TEST



Activity: Here is a resource you can use to tell if you are at risk of burnout. It's shouldn't be used as an alternative to professional medical advice. But it can give you a bit of an idea of your current state. Be very honest with yourself.

Rank your experience of the following symptoms over the past three months.
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 with a short fuse?
7. Have you been more susceptible to illness lately, eg: colds, flu, allergies, hay fever?
8. Do you feel like isolating yourself from your 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?

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 some changes now.

36-50 - You need to take action immediately - your health and well-being are at serious risk.

How to practice sustainable activism and self care

We're now going to look at a few skills that you can learn to practice sustainable activism. Each of these take time to become a habit and you may not notice any changes at first. But stick with them and in time you will see the difference.

Resilience

Resilience is about how well a person can adapt to problems in their lives. It's the ability to bounce back faster from stress and trauma. Everybody has resilience. It's a question of how much you have and how well you use it. Resilience doesn't mean the person doesn't feel the effects of these problems. Instead, it means that they've found a way of dealing with it faster than others.

The longer you do any activity, like activism, the more you will learn to be resilient. It takes time and experience. It doesn't mean you will never experience setbacks. But, the problems you encounter will seem less severe because you know how to handle them. What may have overwhelmed you earlier in your life will be something you can handle better in the future. But you won't get there unless you put it into practice and commit to learning how to do it.

There are some proactive ways you can increase your resilience.

1. Treat every problem as a learning opportunity. What could you do different next time? What worked well? What didn't? What would you say the cause of the problem was? How could you try to avoid it in the future?
2. Make sure you have a realistic workload. Do you have the capacity to achieve everything you've set for yourself? Have you agreed to take on too many tasks from others? What do you need to be able to achieve your goals? If you're unable to get what you need do you have the ability to reduce your goals?
3. Have a strong support network. Do you have people you can talk to about problems in your life? People that can help you work through possible solutions. People that can reassure, encourage and inspire you.



Activity: Think about a problem you experienced recently, it doesn't have to have been a big one. What did you learn from the situation? Has it changed how you approach things now? How did you solve it?

Positive self talk

Whenever we have a setback in our lives there is always an internal voice in our head reacting to it. That voice has direct impact on how we process that situation and others. If the voice is negative then it will lead to negative feelings. If we always respond in a negative way then we will always feel negative.

But if we can make sure the voice in our head is positive then it will have a massive impact on how good we are feeling. Positive self talk is about changing the way we view our actions and the actions of others. So that we can see the bright side where possible. It's not about pretending there are no negatives, it's about reframing them.

Here are some examples of negative self talk and ways you can reframe it.

Negative frame	Positive frame
That was a complete failure. What a waste of time.	That didn't go as planned, but I can see ways to learn from it. Next time it will be better.
I am terrible at this. I can't do anything right.	I should be proud of myself for giving it a try. I know I can learn how to do it better.
I'm not going to work with that person anymore. They are completely unreliable.	What are the reasons that person is finding it difficult to complete these tasks? If I can find that out I can help them work out how to do it.

This is all about building up a positive version of yourself in your mind. A person that knows their strengths and what they are capable of. A person that has the ability to achieve goals and be successful. It's not about deluding yourself, but having an honest and accurate of yourself.

There's a line between too much and too little confidence that we should aim for. We have the ability to be our own worst critics as much as having a massive ego. We want to be in a healthy space between the two. You can achieve this through affirmations. Reminding yourself about your qualities before any challenge e.g. "I can do this."

It's important to remember that everyone makes mistakes or encounters setbacks. It's how we react to them that matters. To get better at positive self talk we have to be good at monitoring our thoughts. Pay attention for times when you're thinking in a negative frame. Then stop and try to reframe it from a positive perspective.



Activity: Keep a thought journal for a few weeks. Write down anytime you have a negative thought. Think about how you could reframe it in a positive way. Read back your journal at the end of the day to see how many times you had negative thoughts or feelings. Get into the habit of challenging those thoughts as they happen.

Mindfulness

When we encounter problems they have a way of taking over our minds. We can spend all our time preoccupied with them becoming overwhelmed and stressed. This is not helpful state of mind to work out ways of fixing the situation. It also distracts us from other important things happening in our lives.

Mindfulness is about being able to press pause on those thoughts, so we can clear our minds and focus on the present. It's about engaging in what you are currently doing free from distraction. We do it so we can stop obsessing over our thoughts when we need to focus on other things. So we're not distracted from engaging with other people or tasks that also

need our attention. It's not about ignoring those problems, but to give us a moment of clarity so we can better tackle them later.

There are different ways you can practice mindfulness. It depends on what works for you and how much time you have. It's about figuring out what that is and turning it into a habit when you face stress.

Focused breathing is one method you can use. You can do this while standing, sitting or even lying in a comfortable position. Your eyes may be open or closed, but you may find it easier to maintain your focus if you close your eyes. Breathe in for five seconds and hold it for five seconds. Breathe out for five seconds and hold it for five seconds. Then repeat for five minutes or until you feel relaxed. It can help to set aside a designated time for this. Experts believe regular practice can make it easier to do it in difficult situations.

Other methods include things like meditation and exercise. It's about healthy ways of clearing your mind for a short amount of time. Different people need different methods.



This might not be relaxing to you at all, so find what suits you.



Activity: Try some different methods of practicing mindfulness. Find the method that works for you and set aside some time to do it. If you are able to do it during stressful moments then it's likely to have become a habit.

Developing a self care plan

Now we can bring all this information together to make a self care plan. Creating a self care plan is all about finding balance in your life. It's looking at what you need in all aspects of your life and then working out how to achieve that. Making sure that you're not neglecting some areas for others.

We've developed a template here that you can use. Fill in each section and then have a look at the whole picture. Is your plan realistic, do you have the capacity to do everything? Are you spending too much time focusing on some areas more than others? What you want to end up with is a plan where you spread yourself across all areas. Also that you can actually achieve what you have set for yourself. If you haven't read our guide on strategic thinking, that will help you with this as well.

MY SELF CARE PLAN (How are you currently going in each of these areas? How would you improve them?)	
Physical (diet, sleep, exercise etc.)	Psychological / Spiritual (relaxation, hobbies, personal development, community etc.)
Relationships (partners, family, friends etc.)	Work (employment, activism, volunteering etc.)
Other areas	
Potential barriers to my plan	How can I resolve these?
Negative coping strategies and habits I want to avoid	How can I make that happen?

That concludes our module on sustainable activism and self care. We've covered why sustainable activism is important. How it can lead to a variety of mental and physical health conditions if we neglect it. We've also looked at some skills you can learn to make sure your activism is sustainable. Finally we have shown you how to make a self care plan so that you can live a balanced and healthy life.

This is an introduction to these topics, but it should be enough to get you started. It's worthwhile to dedicate more time to learning about self care. Also we want to remind you of our free counseling service you can contact if you need. The number is 1300 361 008. If you or someone you know needs help, please reach out to someone. Also make sure to have a look at our other modules on [fundamental activist skills](#) too.

If you have any questions please get in touch with us at communityorganising@amnesty.org.au. Thank you for your time!



Visit the Skill Up page for more activist development resources.

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