

Burn out

Dealing With or Preventing Burnout in Activist Work

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Unpublished Paper

The below hints focus on actions or mental attitudes you can cultivate to prevent or deal with burnout (whose symptoms include irritability, feelings of hopelessness/helplessness/cynicism, non-enjoyment of activities enjoyed in the past, difficulty in making decisions, inability to stay focussed, and fatigue or other physical effects). There are, of course, various societal and organizational factors that will impact strongly on whether burnout will develop, be it particular world crises or a workplace culture that discourages taking days off after high stress periods. Though you may be far removed, physically, from a world crisis, you can potentially help create a work environment more conducive to positive mental health.

Depending on the situation and your personal makeup, various measures can help limit burnout or prevent it; see which ideas fit you best:

- * maintaining healthy, friendly, and meaningful relationships with fellow activists and having a support group (activists and nonactivists) to which you can talk and release your feelings
- * living one day at a time, but realizing that working for peace/justice is a lifetime job
- * being more of a specialist and utilizing your specific personal talents, while trying to emphasize those work activities that on their own are enjoyable and accomplishable and that you feel you are doing a good job at; doing work that is transformed into creative play
- * reducing certain commitments and doing less activities/projects, but doing them better--one can never do all the projects one would like to do, anyway; assigning priorities to your activities and doing the important ones first, when possible
- * being aware that it is not possible to control everything in one's work and life environment--while viewing some stressful situations as challenges to be overcome
- * realizing there are actually ebbs and flows in political work and responding appropriately
- * finding successes in life outside the political arena; taking time to do those things that rejuvenate the self
- * knowing that the fact you are working on such social concerns is one sign of a healthy, mature individual; realizing that what you are doing is right --no matter the outcome- and celebrating the victories that do come, while rewarding yourself for the work you are doing
- * becoming more aware of and tuned into the effects of activist work (finding a balance between the often undue optimism of the political right and pessimism of the political left):
 - o focussing more on where we have come from in certain movements rather than just on where we would like to be; Bill Moyer's Movement Action Plan outlines the progress in social movements that is not always recognized over the course of social change

- o realizing how much worse things would be without our efforts--thus we do have "influence" if not always "success"
- o being aware that there have been many successes at the local level and some at the national level regarding issues such as labor/women/gay/African American rights, environmental problems, and certain anti-military concerns; this is sometimes amazing given the resources and media that often are in opposition
- o understanding that certain successes result in "non-events" that are more difficult to recognize--such as the non-invasion of Nicaragua in the 1980's
- o finding out years later about our influence--such as the effects of anti-war efforts on President Nixon during the Viet Nam war
- o in one sense taking heart from the successes of the grassroots religious right--if they can organize and influence so dramatically then the political left can too, and
- o realizing that changes can and do occur over time--in various directions--and that that is the constant; new injustices will evolve and battles won at one point may have to be fought again, and losses now may be reversed in the future (thus it is good for one to take an historical perspective)
- * realizing that feelings of sadness or despair about the world situation are legitimate and should be experienced; but maintaining hope by actively recalling successes your group or the movement has had, while visualizing positive scenes or inspiring political "heroes" such as Martin Luther King
- * recognizing negative thoughts about yourself and your work that may not be legitimate
- * cultivating a sense of humor
- * taking care of yourself physically and working off stress by exercising; doing relaxation or meditation exercises
- * even though helpful at any time, understanding that more advanced cases of burnout or potential burnout may require participation in therapy, or in a relevant burnout or "despair and empowerment" workshop.