



CENTER FOR APPLIED NONVIOLENT ACTIONS AND STRATEGIES



REST AS REBELLION

THE ACTIVISTS GUIDE TO SELF-CARE

Breza Race Maksimovic
Dr. Vanina Waizmann



**ACTIVISTS MUST “REFRAME
THE IDEA THAT YOU’RE WILLING
TO DIE FOR YOUR COMMUNITY”
AND INSTEAD CONSIDER “WHAT
IT MEANS TO LIVE FOR YOUR
COMMUNITIES**

Campaigning for social justice, human rights, or political reform is an inherently demanding and emotionally exhausting endeavor. When activism attracts attention, particularly negative targeting from governmental entities or powerful groups who utilize social media, mainstream media, and various forms of pressure, the burden becomes even heavier. Activists frequently experience anxiety, depression, isolation, or even trauma as a result. Activists fighting for causes like climate justice, human rights, political dissent, anti-corruption, free expression, and workers’ rights often face immense pressure. Many endure harassment, threats, or even legal persecution, all while grappling with the emotional toll of slow progress or constant crises. It’s no surprise that burnout is common – but it’s not inevitable. As scholar-activist David Stovall puts it, activists must “*reframe the idea that you’re willing to die for your community*” and instead consider “*what it means to live for your communities*”¹. In practice, this means embracing strategies for self-preservation and resilience.

It is no secret that activism is a demanding endeavor that takes its toll on one’s physical health, as well as one’s emotional and mental wellbeing.

Over decades of working with movements, we have repeatedly observed activists experiencing significant stress, burnout, survivor’s guilt, and even suicidal thoughts or attempted suicides. It became increasingly evident to us that neglecting mental health can hinder the effectiveness of activism and that one’s ability to drive sustainable change within communities directly depends on their emotional wellbeing.

Interestingly enough, as much as we know about what activists face from what they have shared with us over the years, there are very little resources available for activists and we could not find research or articles published on their well-being or mental health. Therefore, with the support of Dr. Vanina Waizmann, a PhD. in Psychology and a trauma-informed therapist working with activists all over the world, [CANVAS](#) conducted a survey to first look at what is really going on, so we can provide better and more accurate support.

Mental health and activism are closely intertwined, each profoundly influencing the other. Both require thoughtful and deliberate attention. Sustainable activism requires mental health support; without it, there are inherent limits to its effectiveness.

This article presents some results from that research and explores some key strategies on how to prevent burnout and promote resilience using contemporary case studies of activists who have successfully managed stress, protected their mental health, and overcome burnout in the face of intense challenges.



**WE CONDUCTED A
MULTILINGUAL SURVEY
AMONG 44 ACTIVISTS
HAILING FROM 14
DIFFERENT COUNTRIES AND
COMMUNITIES.**

THE STATE OF MENTAL HEALTH AND ACTIVISM: WHAT IS REALLY HAPPENING

Recognizing a knowledge gap when it comes to the mental and emotional challenges activists face, we conducted a multilingual survey among 44 activists hailing from 14 different countries and communities. Nearly half (45.5%) of the respondents reported activism as their full-time occupation, with over a third (36.4%) living in exile. The data underscore the urgent need for mental health interventions to support the sustainability of activism. We present some of the main results:



EXHAUSTION

86%



SADNESS

97%



MEMORY ISSUES

72%

ONE IN FOUR ACTIVISTS HAD
ATTEMPTED SUICIDE IN THE PAST



PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS:

Activists frequently experience chronic physical symptoms, reflecting the prolonged impact of stress and burnout. More than 86% reported experiencing exhaustion, while nearly 80% struggled with sleep disturbances. Over 60% suffered from panic attacks, heart palpitations, and difficulty breathing. Physical symptoms such as headaches, bowel issues, and dizziness were also prevalent.

EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FEELINGS:

On an emotional level, sadness was nearly universal, with 97% of respondents experiencing it sometimes, often, or always. More than 85% reported discouragement, while 70% frequently felt dissatisfaction. Anger, fear, and mood swings were common, accompanied by feelings of helplessness, guilt, and even fear of losing sanity or dying.

COGNITIVE AND BEHAVIORAL EFFECTS:

The psychological toll of activism extends beyond emotions; cognitive and behavioral effects were also significant. Over 84% reported difficulty concentrating, and nearly three-quarters experienced memory issues. Procrastination, rage attacks, and irregular eating habits were also widespread. Alarmingly, more than half of the activists reported having thought about suicide, and one in four had attempted suicide in the past.





PHYSICAL ABUSE

55%

EXPERIENCE OF ABUSE IN THEIR LIVES:

Personal trauma compounds the stress on activists. The study found that nearly half of the activists surveyed had experienced domestic abuse, and more than half had suffered physical abuse. Two-thirds reported emotional abuse, while 41% had been victims of sexual abuse. For 23%, the abuse took the form of sexual assault in childhood or adulthood. These further increases vulnerability to burnout.



ACTIVISM HAS AFFECTED THEIR LOVE LIFE

52%

ACTIVISM AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS:

The emotional burden extends beyond individual activists, impacting their relationships as well. More than half reported that their activism had negatively affected their love life, with issues such as emotional instability, low sex drive, and mood fluctuations straining relationships. Many activists also avoided romantic involvement for fear of exposing their partners to risk.



ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

45%

COPING MECHANISMS AND RESOURCES:

Coping mechanisms varied widely. Many activists turned to alcohol consumption (45%), tobacco use (36%), social media escapism (75%), and compulsive behaviors such as excessive spending, overeating, and self-harm. Healthier coping strategies were also common, with 80% of activists finding support in confiding in someone they trust, 73% seeking to get resourced in nature, and others relying on exercise, meditation, journaling, and therapy.



**THE IMPACT OF BURNOUT
EXTENDS BEYOND
ACTIVISM, AFFECTING
PERSONAL LIFE, WORK, AND
SOCIAL INTERACTIONS.**

ADDRESSING BURNOUT AND BUILDING RESILIENCE

Burnout is a state characterized by emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion from prolonged stress that can lead to feeling overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and losing motivation. As stress accumulates, it diminishes productivity, energy, and enthusiasm to continue the work towards positive change that once inspired a person's activism.

For activists, burnout can result from constant vigilance, fear, harassment, smear campaigns, threats, isolation, exhaustion, or an inability to disconnect from social media platforms. The added layer of being targeted deliberately by powerful entities compounds this stress significantly, making mental health support a critical necessity.

The impact of burnout extends beyond activism, affecting personal life, work, and social interactions. It can also lead to long-term health consequences and autoimmune issues, such as irritable bowel syndrome, chronic pain, and fibromyalgia. Early intervention is therefore critical.

1. RECOGNIZING SIGNS OF BURNOUT

Burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress and overwork. Recognizing the early signs is crucial for preventing long-term harm and taking corrective action. Without self-awareness, activists and individuals dedicated to their causes may continue pushing forward until they reach a critical point of exhaustion. Below are some key indicators of burnout and their deeper implications:



A. PHYSICAL EXHAUSTION

Burnout takes a toll on the body, leading to persistent fatigue that doesn't improve with rest. Common symptoms include:

- **Chronic fatigue** – Waking up tired even after a full night's sleep, struggling to complete daily tasks.
- **Disrupted sleep patterns** – Difficulty falling or staying asleep, waking up in the middle of the night with racing thoughts, or oversleeping to escape stress.
- **Frequent headaches and muscle tension** – Stress-induced physical symptoms, including migraines, back pain, and jaw clenching.
- **Increased susceptibility to illness** – A weakened immune system leading to frequent colds, infections, or slow healing.



B. EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

Burnout deeply affects emotions, often leading to instability and overwhelming negative feelings:

- **Helplessness and hopelessness** – Feeling like nothing you do makes a difference, leading to despair.
- **Increased anxiety and worry** – Constantly feeling on edge, irritable, or preoccupied with tasks, responsibilities, or outcomes.
- **Depression and sadness** – Persistent low mood, difficulty experiencing joy, or feeling numb to things that used to bring happiness.
- **Emotional numbness or detachment** – A sense of disconnect from emotions, loved ones, or the cause that once fueled passion.
- **Unexplained anger or frustration** – Reacting more aggressively than usual, feeling easily irritated by small inconveniences.



C. SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL

Burnout often leads to a loss of connection with others, making individuals feel isolated:

- **Avoiding social interactions** – Canceling plans, ignoring messages, or feeling drained by the idea of socializing.
- **Strained relationships** – Increased conflicts with family, friends, or colleagues due to irritability or emotional detachment.
- **A sense of loneliness** – Even in the presence of others, feeling misunderstood or emotionally distant.
- **Loss of community connection** – Activists may feel disconnected from their cause or disengaged from fellow organizers.



D. LOSS OF MOTIVATION

One of the most alarming signs of burnout is the loss of drive and enthusiasm for activities that once felt meaningful:

- **Apathy toward responsibilities** – Feeling indifferent or unmotivated to complete work, activism, or personal projects.
- **Diminished passion** – No longer feeling excitement or commitment to causes that once inspired deep dedication.
- **Difficulty finding purpose** – Questioning whether efforts make a difference, leading to a loss of direction.
- **Feeling overwhelmed by small tasks** – Struggling to start or complete simple activities due to lack of mental energy.



E. REDUCED PRODUCTIVITY AND COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT

Burnout affects cognitive function, making it harder to concentrate and perform efficiently:

- **Difficulty focusing** – Losing track of tasks, zoning out during conversations, or rereading the same sentence multiple times.
- **Procrastination and avoidance** – Delaying tasks that once felt manageable due to exhaustion or dread.
- **Indecisiveness** – Struggling to make even minor decisions due to mental overload.
- **Memory issues** – Forgetting appointments, commitments, or important details.

2. BUILDING EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE AND PRIORITIZING SELF-CARE: A KEY TO SUSTAINABLE ACTIVISM

We cannot emphasize enough the importance of actively scheduling time for self-care, which in turn helps regulate the nervous system and mitigate stress. Recognizing and addressing burnout early, while incorporating relaxation and self-care into daily routines, is essential for sustaining long-term activism, preventing and/or dealing with burnout.

MOVEMENT AND PHYSICAL WELL-BEING:

Engaging in regular physical activity is a scientifically proven way to reduce stress and regulate the nervous system. The body holds onto stress, and movement helps release it.

BREATHWORK:

Breathing techniques reduce anxiety and activate the parasympathetic nervous system, promoting relaxation.

DAILY MOVEMENT:

Activities such as stretching, walking, or yoga improve circulation, decrease muscle tension, and boost mood.

SPENDING TIME IN NATURE:

Studies show that exposure to green spaces lowers cortisol levels, enhances mood, and restores mental clarity.

SOMATIC TECHNIQUES:

Physical grounding exercises, such as self-hugging and tapping, can help soothe an overwhelmed nervous system.



MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION:

Regular practice creates inner calm, reduces negative thoughts, and improves emotional regulation. Over 6,000 scientific studies support meditation's effectiveness in reducing stress and anxiety.

CREATIVE OUTLETS:

Practices like painting, drawing, or sculpting provide a meditative and non-verbal way to process emotions. Singing or playing music reduce stress hormones and promotes a sense of joy. Writing & Poetry can help externalize emotions and organize thoughts. Dance and movement therapy can release pent-up energy and boosts endorphins.

JOURNALING AND EXPRESSIVE WRITING:

Documenting thoughts and feelings has been shown to help process stress and reduce emotional overwhelm.

ANOTHER KEY TO RESILIENCE IS CELEBRATING SMALL WINS AND FINDING HOPE.



TAKING TIME TO ACKNOWLEDGE SUCCESSES CREATES POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT THAT FUELS CONTINUED ACTION.



Long-term campaigners note that recognizing progress – no matter how incremental – guards against despair. Taking time to acknowledge successes (a policy change, a freed political prisoner, a community saved) creates positive reinforcement that fuels continued action. It combats the feeling of endless uphill battle that often leads to burnout. By processing trauma, embracing support from professionals or spiritual practices, and actively cultivating optimism, activists strengthen their capacity to “bounce back” from setbacks and keep going with clarity and purpose. Resilience training and emotional intelligence can help activists handle the intense pressures they face:

PERSPECTIVE-TAKING:

Remind yourself of the importance of your mission, focusing on long-term goals rather than short-term setbacks.

CELEBRATE ACHIEVEMENTS:

Acknowledge small wins and victories to counter feelings of helplessness or defeat.

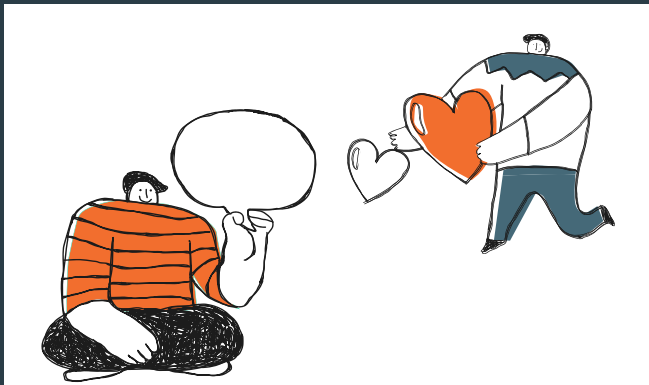
3. THE POWER OF SOCIAL CONNECTION: CULTIVATING A SUPPORT SYSTEM



SURROUNDING YOURSELF WITH UNDERSTANDING PEERS HELPS VALIDATE EXPERIENCES AND SHARE THE EMOTIONAL LOAD.

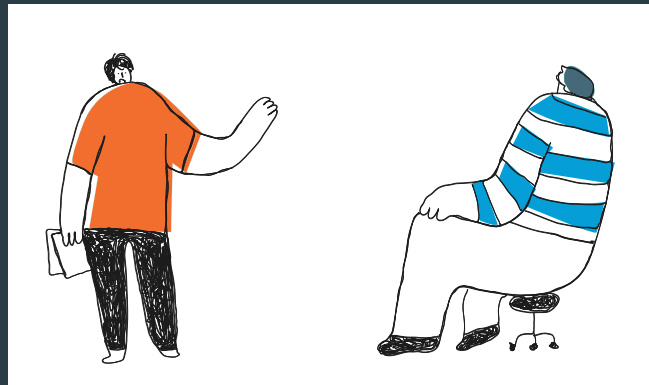
No one should have to hold the weight of a movement alone. A strong community and support network can buffer activists against stress and targeted attacks. Surrounding yourself with understanding peers helps validate experiences and share the emotional load. Activists worldwide echo this: a trusted “crew” of colleagues, friends, or mentors provides a safe space to vent, strategize, and uplift each other. It also means practical backup – from sharing tasks to checking in on wellness – so no one person carries the full burden all the time. In short, community is medicine for activist fatigue. Whether it’s informal friendships, peer support groups, or organized collectives, having people who “get it” can combat the loneliness and overwhelm that fuel burnout. These bonds remind activists that they are part of a greater “us,” and that together they can each afford to rest occasionally because others will pick up the slack. By leaning on each other, activists build collective resilience that keeps movements afloat even under fire.

Isolation often amplifies stress and connection strengthens resilience. It can have different forms:



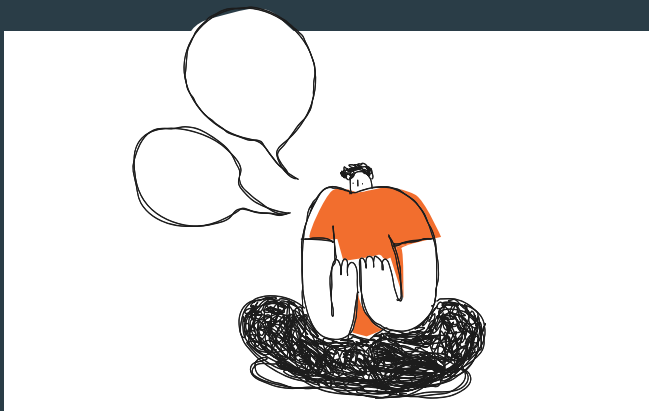
TRUSTED COMMUNITY:

Building networks of trusted friends, family, activists, or professionals who understand your struggles.



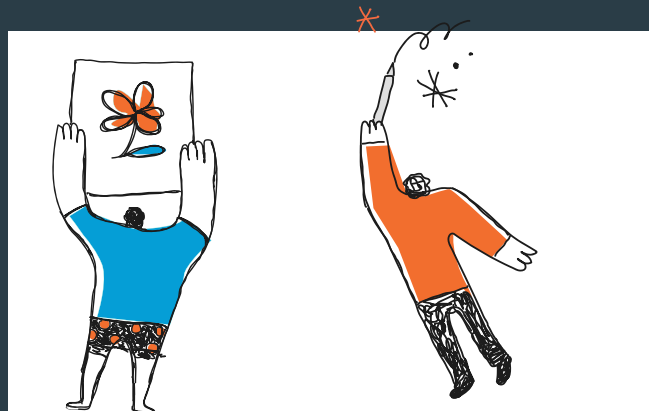
SETTING BOUNDARIES IN RELATIONSHIPS:

Protecting personal energy and avoiding emotional exhaustion from toxic interactions is essential.



PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT:

Seeking psychological counseling or professional mental health support when needed. Therapy can offer coping strategies specifically tailored to dealing with stress, anxiety, trauma, or burnout. While self-care strategies are powerful, sometimes professional intervention is necessary.



ENGAGING IN JOYFUL SOCIAL ACTIVITIES:

Spending time with loved ones in non-activism settings helps maintain balance.

Social connection plays a critical role in resilience, as activists who prioritize community engagement and peer support report better mental health outcomes. Burnout often leads to isolation, but social support is one of the strongest protective factors against stress. Activists who prioritize community engagement and peer support report better mental health outcomes.

4. DIGITAL WELL-BEING AND SAFETY



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FOUND THAT 3 IN 5 YOUNG ACTIVISTS GLOBALLY HAVE ENDURED ONLINE ABUSE FOR THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS POSTS, LEADING MANY TO CENSOR THEMSELVES OR QUIT POSTING

² amnesty.org

³ amnesty.org

Modern activism often unfolds online – which can be a double-edged sword. Social media helps mobilize support, but it also exposes activists to hate, misinformation, and nonstop stimulation that can erode mental health. Activists need to learn to guard their digital well-being and safety as part of self-care. *This can mean unplugging regularly, curating online spaces, and using digital security practices to mitigate harassment.*

Digital safety measures are also key, especially for those facing coordinated online attacks or surveillance. Activists increasingly leverage privacy tools and community guidelines: from using secure messaging apps and pseudonyms, to moderating comments and blocking abusers. By controlling their digital environment, they reduce exposure to toxic content and threats. Amnesty International found that 3 in 5 young activists globally have endured online abuse for their human rights posts, leading many to censor themselves or quit posting.² In response, support organizations offer trainings on cyber-hygiene and emotional coping. Simply “documenting and reporting” harassment, seeking solidarity from others who have survived it, or taking breaks when needed can blunt the psychological harm of digital vitriol. Ultimately, **knowing when to log off is as important as logging on for activists.** By consciously managing their digital exposure and prioritizing online safety, avoid burnout and stay focused on their mission rather than on every notification. As one guide bluntly notes: “*The internet can be a very scary place*” for activists³ - so stepping back to recharge is not defeat, but a strategy to keep fighting another day.

Digital tools can be weaponized against activists, making online self-protection critical:



MANAGE ONLINE EXPOSURE:

Limit time spent on platforms that negatively impact your mental health or set strict privacy settings to minimize harassment.

CYBER-SECURITY AWARENESS:

Use secure digital practices to prevent surveillance, hacking, and doxxing. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that women are increasingly subjected to online harassment and technology-enabled gender-based violence (GBV). This pervasive issue not only threatens their safety but also takes a significant toll on mental resilience. Addressing these challenges requires both systemic action and individual strategies to foster psychological well-being. Digital literacy and awareness training can reduce anxiety related to online threats.

5. RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE: TURNING ATTACKS INTO MOMENTUM

Activists often face smear campaigns, demonization, or public misrepresentation—tactics designed to weaken their credibility and their cause. But the most effective activists don't just withstand these attacks; they redirect them. The key isn't merely countering falsehoods but strategically shaping the conversation to reaffirm their message and values.

This approach functions like political jiu-jitsu—using the energy of an attack to strengthen the movement. When civil rights leaders were labeled “troublemakers,” they embraced the idea that challenging injustice is necessary for progress, shifting the focus to unity and fairness. When authoritarian regimes brand free speech advocates as “enemies,” activists don't

just deny the label—they amplify the values of truth, transparency, and human dignity, reframing the accusation as proof of their mission's importance.

SUCCESSFUL COUNTER-MESSAGING ISN'T JUST ABOUT DISPROVING LIES; IT'S ABOUT MAKING THE TRUTH MORE COMPELLING.

Successful counter-messaging isn't just about disproving lies; it's about making the truth more compelling. Humor, moral clarity, and personal storytelling can be powerful tools for reframing narratives. Instead of absorbing toxicity, activ-

ists can shift the public's emotional response—winning empathy and support by telling the real human stories behind their work. By staying anchored in their own values, they turn hostility into a rallying force for solidarity.

Being targeted by media campaigns can also take a serious toll on mental well-being. Experiencing public attacks, whether in the media or online, can be deeply painful, disorienting, and emotionally exhausting. It's not just a challenge to one's message, but to one's identity and sense of security. The confusion, frustration, and distress these attacks create are real and valid, and acknowledging this complexity is an important part of resilience.

Activists can safeguard their resilience by:



FACT-CHECKING AND TRANSPARENCY

Proactively countering misinformation through open, evidence-based communication about their intentions and values.



CONSTRUCTIVE MESSAGING

Strengthening their own narrative rather than simply reacting to attacks, ensuring their message remains clear, empowering, and forward-looking.

IN A BATTLE OF STORIES, POSITIVITY AND INTEGRITY CAN OUTLAST CYNICISM. ACTIVISTS WHO MASTER THIS ART DON'T JUST SURVIVE NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNS—THEY USE THEM TO FUEL AWARENESS, EXPAND THEIR REACH, AND REINFORCE THEIR CAUSE.

6. LEGAL AND ADVOCACY SUPPORT



Facing legal harassment or violent repression is a severe stressor for many activists – but **having legal and advocacy support can be life-saving** for both their cause and their mental health. Knowing that expert lawyers, organizations, or international allies have your back reduces the fear of going up against powerful adversaries. Many activists have survived persecution by leaning on legal defense funds, NGOs, and solidarity campaigns. Legal support isn't only for high-profile figures. Grassroots activists benefit from connections to human rights lawyers and organizations that offer pro bono representation. For instance, in authoritarian contexts where political dissidents are jailed, networks like Amnesty International's urgent action groups or local civil liberties unions rally to defend them. These mechanisms not only improve activists' chances of legal success; they also reassure activists that they are not forgotten. Knowing that advocacy groups are amplifying their case can alleviate the mental strain of isolation. Families of political prisoners often cite that international campaigns for their loved ones give them hope and prevent despair from setting in.

Additionally, training in legal rights is a form of support that empowers activists on the ground. Many movements now educate members on how to handle arrests, document abuses, or secure legal counsel quickly. This preparedness reduces panic and trauma when crackdowns occur. In some protests, volunteer legal observers and rapid response lawyers are present – meaning an arrested activist will immediately have someone to call who can advise them. Such structures remove a huge weight from individual activists, who might otherwise fear that one lawsuit or encounter with police could ruin their life's work.

In summary, *robust legal and advocacy support serves as a safety*

net for activists being targeted by authorities or corporations. It turns a lonely fight into a community effort, distributing the stress and shielding the individual. Maria Ressa's case, where a global coalition's backing helped overturn her unjust charges, shows the impact of this strategy. With lawyers fighting in court and allies fighting in the court of public opinion, activists can continue their campaigns with far less fear. This external support not only improves outcomes but also frees activists to focus on advocacy instead of constantly looking over their shoulder.

Being targeted by government institutions can be intimidating and stressful:



LEGAL SUPPORT NETWORKS: Develop relationships with human rights lawyers and advocacy groups who provide legal support and advocacy training.



AWARENESS OF RIGHTS: Stay informed about your legal rights, including freedom of speech, assembly, and protection from harassment.

7. FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR ACCESSING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT



84%

ACTIVISTS EXPRESSED A DESIRE FOR PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSISTANCE BUT MANY COULD NOT AFFORD IT,

Financial barriers remain a significant obstacle to accessing mental health support. While 84% of activists expressed a desire for professional psychological assistance, many could not afford it, emphasizing the urgent need for accessible mental health resources within activist communities.

When faced with financial hardship, individuals often prioritize basic needs like food and shelter over mental health care. This means that even when activists recognize the need for support, they may be forced to forgo it. Many activist organizations and movements lack the resources to provide mental health support to their members. Even well-intentioned organizations may struggle to secure funding for these services.



STAYING HOPEFUL: ACTIVISM AS A MARATHON, NOT A SPRINT



Activism is a long and often challenging journey, especially when powerful forces seek to intimidate or silence those advocating for change. To sustain their efforts without compromising their well-being, activists must approach their work as a long-term commitment—one that prioritizes self-care, resilience, and balance. Protecting mental health is not a luxury; it is an essential act of resistance.

By embedding self-care into daily routines, fostering strong support systems, and recognizing the signs of burnout early, activists can maintain their momentum while safeguarding their well-being.

Sustainable activism requires endurance, and endurance is built through intentional rest, renewal, and community care.

Every activist's path is unique, but certain strategies have proven universally effective across movements and regions—self-care, community support, setting digital boundaries, cultivating emotional resilience, using positive messaging, and securing legal protections. Whether a Ugandan climate activist, an American immigration advocate, or a Middle Eastern women's rights defender, the common thread remains: sustainable activism begins with caring for oneself.

The well-being of activists is not just a personal matter—it is a collective responsibility. True, lasting change cannot be achieved if those driving it are exhausted, burned out, or forced to abandon their work due to overwhelming emotional and physical strain. Preventing burnout requires both individual self-care practices and broader systemic solutions, such as access to professional support, organizational policies that promote well-being, and cultural shifts that normalize rest and emotional resilience.

SELF-CARE IS A REVOLUTIONARY ACT

Taking care of oneself is not an act of selfishness—it is a necessity for sustaining long-term activism. A burned-out activist cannot effectively create change. By prioritizing self-care, setting boundaries, and engaging in restorative practices, activists cultivate the resilience they need to continue their work while protecting their mental health.

