

A Time to Protest and a Time to Rest: Activist Mental Health and Wellness Strategies

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Convener, Mental Health and Congregational Care Affinity Group

July 2016



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To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to gain, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

~Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

[a time to protest and a time to rest]



The recent back-to-back deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile by police officers seem to have struck a different cord within the activist community. Within minutes of the breaking news, I began receiving countless calls from family and friends expressing pain, horror, anger, and disgust. Yet, as I spoke to my activist friends and clergy who have been involved in the Black Lives Matter movement, and other justice movements for some time now, I noticed an eerie truth that might have been lying under the surface—we are tired.

As the nation is being confronted yet another time with the ugly reality of inequality and racism, many of us are ignited with righteous indignation and feeling compelled to find out how we can help put an end to the senseless killings. However, others of us are disheartened with discouragement, numbed by pain, and paralyzed by pure exhaustion—this blog is for you.

As activists, we all too often seem to put ourselves last when it comes to caring about the safety and wellbeing of others. This fearless, servant-leader selflessness is not only Christ-like, but I would argue it's the core of activist effectiveness—it's what makes the movement move. However, when we deliberately expose ourselves to physical danger and social isolation without proper self-care techniques or considering the potential long-term psychological effects, we run the risk of experiencing debilitating burnout, numbing compassion fatigue, and other common psychological defenses created to serve as warning signs for emotional, psychological, and spiritual imbalance. Below are four potential psychological risks of activism you should be aware of, followed by a list of ways to respond and maintain balance, wellness, and healthy mental health.

Post-Traumatic Stress and Re-Traumatization

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) occurs when one has been exposed to an extreme stressor that the psyche cannot fully process in the moment. Most people recover naturally from trauma within a few weeks; however, depending on the traumatic event experienced, some may experience PTSD when symptoms continue longer than about a month.

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It is important to note that one person's trauma is not necessarily another's. Trauma is subjective and completely based on the individual's past experience, coping skills, and ability to process the stressor. For example, one might witness a friend being assaulted during an action event, yet after weeks of talking about the incident, processing what happened, and expressing the appropriate emotion, their trauma symptoms may cease. Another friend witnessing the same thing—having never seen a human body assaulted by another human—could struggle to process the incident. While a third friend could be “re-traumatized” or triggered after witnessing the assault, having been raised in a home of domestic violence where physical assault was normal and psychologically damaging.

After an action, you might experience some of the following if you've witnessed very disturbing events:

- Re-experiencing the events (dreams/nightmares, obsessions, intrusive memories, flashbacks, etc.)
- Avoidance (amnesia, substance abuse, self-isolation, etc.)
- Increased arousal (insomnia, irritability/outbursts, difficulty concentrating, etc.)
- To learn more about PTSD symptoms, click here:
<http://www.adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/symptoms>

Re-Traumatization

Re-Traumatization is the re-hashing of past emotional and psychological wounds that have yet to be fully processed due to another similar event's occurrence. Due to a “compiling effect,” or a sense of endless misfortune rather than an isolated incident, the second traumatic event can feel worse than the original. Those experiencing re-traumatization will describe it as an old trauma, combined with a new trauma, plus a loss of psychological safety rebuilt after the first trauma. Re-traumatization can occur when a similar injustice occurs and we are exposed again to content of the situation (i.e.: watching videos, news commentary, or even listening to the account through conversations with friends if past traumas related to activism have not been processed). It is important to be mindful of your process from past action traumas before engaging new incidents or justice issues.

Vicarious Trauma and Compassion Fatigue

Vicarious Trauma is the emotional strain or residue that accumulates after exposure to trauma-related content or stories when helping those suffering. After witnessing the pain, fear, and terror of others surviving trauma, those serving in the helping capacity (i.e.: advocates, pastors, mentors, therapist, etc.) may have their own worldview, emotional, and psychological needs, belief system, and thinking patterns juristically altered or impacted negatively. Essentially, vicarious trauma is the “cost of caring” for others in emotional pain and distress.

Compassion Fatigue is another term or form of vicarious trauma and occurs due to the tension between having deep sympathy for those suffering and the demands of one's own needs in everyday life. In addition to feeling some of the symptoms of vicarious trauma listed below, activists suffering compassion fatigue may feel numb or insensitive to repeat or new justice issues, apathetic to the needs of others, and generally more hopeless and cynical.

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Those with vicarious trauma might experience the following:

- Overall sickness, changes in sleeping and appetite
- Increased compulsive behaviors
- Feelings of anxiousness in the body
- Cynicism, negativity, and apathy
- Increased sensitivity to violence
- Generalized despair, hopelessness, grief
- Intolerance of emotion
- Inability to be empathetic
- Anger and irritability
- Uncontrollable crying or flatness/numbness
- Crisis of faith or feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness
- Questioning your worldview regarding self-protective beliefs about safety, control, predictability, and protection
- Unwillingness to trust others
- Withdrawal from formerly enjoyable activities and friends
- Difficulties with intimacy and/or intimate relationships
- Feelings of isolation and the sense that “you have to do it all yourself”

Burnout

Burnout is the cumulative process marked by emotional exhaustion and withdrawal associated with increased workload and institutional stress, NOT trauma-related. Though burnout could happen in various ways, this could look like exhaustion from the actual work put into organizing and performing an action, trouble managing life’s demands in addition to activist work, and/or the emotional and psychological toll it takes to consistently put others before oneself. It’s important to note that burnout emerges over time, while compassion fatigue has a more rapid onset. Similarly, compassion fatigue has a faster recovery (less severe, if recognized and managed early) than burnout.

Those with burnout might experience the following:

- Irritability
- Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and cynicism
- Non-enjoyment of activities enjoyed in the past
- Difficulty making decisions
- Inability to stay focused, fatigue or other physical effects

Allowing for Time and Space

Ecclesiastes encourages us to allow ourselves space to discern what is needed in the moment. Though our own expectations, passions, enthusiasm, or even fears can cause us to proceed forward without pause, it’s important as activists that we allow ourselves time to rest, rejuvenate, heal, and reflect. It is in Ecclesiastes that we find permission to be human through it all. Because there is a time for everything under the sun—even a time to protest, and a time to rest.

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Tips for Maintaining Mental Health and Wellness during Activism

Meaning Making

1. Think differently about experiencing mental health symptoms. If you are experiencing trauma symptoms, or other symptoms, this does not mean you are weak, soft, not “woke,” or not true to the cause. It means you are human. It means your psyche—and I would argue the Spirit—is suggesting that you are in need of balance and/or more time to process experiences you’ve had.
2. Accept the fact that working for peace and justice is a lifetime job, and let that truth sustain a healthy pace and involvement level in your present work.
3. Make meaning of your efforts, regardless of the outcome.
4. Understand that certain successes result in “non-events” that are more difficult to recognize, such as cultural impact or political disasters your activism prevented.
5. Realizing systemic change happens bit by bit, over time, and unfolds in various directions as society evolves. So, try to find flexible expectations and hope in battles won that may have to be fought for again, and losses now might be reversed in the future.
6. Understanding that personal physical care is good activism (i.e.: tending to healthy eating, exercise, sleeping, hygiene, maintaining medical and other personal appointments, etc.)

Healthy Habits

1. Make sure to find successes in life outside the political arena.
2. Take periodic sabbaticals from involvement, especially during the natural breaks that come with the ebb and flow of the political world.
3. Take times to celebrate the small victories, and focus on where we come from instead of only where you want to be.
4. Allow yourself to cultivate a sense of humor.
5. Be open to therapy, pastoral counseling, and or spiritual direction as you engage in activism.
6. Maintain healthy, friendly, and meaningful relationships with fellow activists, and have a support group (activists and non-activists) to which you can talk and release your feelings.
7. Try focusing your talents and specializing your efforts in one particular area in order to manage your energy and time more effectively.
8. Lean toward tasks that come easy to you, are tied to your professional work, are naturally enjoyable, or feed your overall enthusiasm and energy. Agreeing to tasks that don’t spark your interest, or are out of your skill-set, can result in unnecessary draining and burnout
9. Quality not quantity: prioritize your involvement by doing less, but doing less more effectively and more thoroughly.
10. After crisis and/or long-term political action, be sure to recharge with indulgent self-care, tending to personal relationships, and nurturing other parts of your identity.
11. Make space to feel. It’s important, especially after losses, to express whatever emotions come up for you. Allow yourself to mourn, to cry, to be confused or disappointed. Allow yourself to be happy, proud, content, and excited about a victory. Not only is the insight and growth that comes with emotional expression invaluable for the movement, giving yourself a moment to pause, and feel, helps maintain mental health and wellness.

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Responding to Post-Traumatic Stress

These symptoms are not signs of insanity, and you are not alone in experiencing them. Post-Traumatic Stress is a common reaction to threatening experiences.

- Spend time in a safe space.
- Be surrounded by people who you feel comfortable with.
- Process the experience, by telling the story AND expressing the emotions surrounding the event. The emotional expression is key to healing.
- Take your time, be gentle to yourself, and accept support.
- If symptoms persist after four to six weeks, seek professional help.

Questions for Dialogue

- Are there points of trauma or burnout that you've ignored because it wasn't socially acceptable to admit their impact on your life?
- Are there points of trauma or burnout that you've naturally recovered from but feel the need to cling to and identify with to be accepted?
- Think about what you have witnessed since you've engaged in activism. How have you processed all that you've seen, felt, heard, and experienced?
- Is it time for self care, a sabbatical, or therapy? If so, what's stopping you from doing so, and who or what can help you find balance and wholeness?



Angela Whitenhill, M.Div., LCSW, is the convener of the Mental Health and Congregational Care Affinity Group. This group is a shared effort with Disciples Home Missions (DHM) and in response to the passing of GA-1523 "Becoming a People of Welcome and Support to People with Mental Illness and/or Mental Health Issues" by the 2015 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). For more information, please visit www.nbaca.org/mental-health.

NBA Response to Crisis and Trauma: *The recent violence and tragedies of last week have us, at the National Benevolent Association, in deep sorrow and prayer. Our mission statement reminds us that we as a ministry are to follow God's call to advocate for the well-being of all humanity and to accompany one another in the creation of communities of compassion and care. In the coming days, the NBA will continue to share some of the intentional conversations and resources that we have as healthcare providers and direct service ministries related to healing, peace, and justice. Read our full response and find ongoing resources at: <https://www.nbaca.org/care-resources/nba-response-to-crisis-and-trauma>.*