burnout is a political and emotional phenomenon that occurs when people are emotionally exhausted and unable to continue 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 the world at large.

To a great extent burnout is a spiritual problem. 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. These are all practices that nurture our sense of our own intrinsic worth and beauty and the intrinsic worth and beauty of all life on Earth.

Another important aspect of energy management is one’s style of thinking and problem solving. Emotions are important. “When you eat, your body is thinking, your emotions are thinking for you. When you eat food that is bad for you, your emotions are thinking for you that you are doing something wrong.” (Starhawk)

To sustain an activist movement in situations that are emotionally demanding, it is important to drop our community’s expectations and assumptions about our own behavior and motivations. “I think the movement is driven by a lot of assumptions about our own behavior and motivations. I think the movement is driven by a lot of assumptions about our own behavior and motivations.” (Starhawk)

What’s important is that we drop our community’s expectations and assumptions about our own behavior and motivations. We need to be honest about our own behavior and motivations. “I think the movement is driven by a lot of assumptions about our own behavior and motivations. I think the movement is driven by a lot of assumptions about our own behavior and motivations.” (Starhawk)
emotions. You can experience extraordinary things very quickly. Many people find that a direct action campaign can be one of the most extreme experiences that they will ever have. 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.

Direct action can stir up the most extreme emotions. This is not to say that everything that goes on in activist situations is explosive and out of control. The desire to take direct action comes from a clear and grounded sense of concern for a cause. It comes from a commitment to a political idea or ideology. Activists may fight and argue with each other and attend meetings and training sessions. There is sometimes a desire to express one’s emotions. This can happen when we demand too much of ourselves. When we make demands on our friends and family. When we don’t value ourselves, when we fail to look after our own most basic needs. Activist culture is not about burning out. Activists need to look at their own needs and work on changing those things that grind them down. Activism needs to be fun and enjoyable. It needs to be a source of joy for all involved.

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

• Difficulty in making decisions.
• Inability to stay focused.
• Insomnia, difficulty in sleeping, or getting enough rest.
• A creeping feeling that activism is taking over your life.
• 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.
• A growing tendency to think negatively.
• Pervasive feelings of hopelessness.
• A loss of sense of purpose and energy.

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. Don’t feel you have to go it alone. There is nothing wrong with delegating.

Activist culture:

If we wish to see in society at large, then surely it is time we accepted that relentlessly driving ourselves and those around us do not lead to the kind of world we wish to see. We need to remember that changing the world is a marathon, not a sprint. We need to pace ourselves. We need to combine 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. We are neither inexhaustible machines nor robots - demanding that we constantly work on every action - if it doesn’t feel right don’t do it.

What to look out for

What are the situations that grind you down the most? Can you create ways of dealing with them? 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 live up to. The downside of the activist culture of devotion to the cause is 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.

Actions that were once exciting and interesting - a general sense of running on empty.

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 do not lead to the kind of world we wish to see. We need to remember that changing the world is a marathon, not a sprint. We need to pace ourselves. We need to combine 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.

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