

Coping with the stress and strain of taking a stand

Roberta Bacic with thanks to Clem McCartney

Protest occurs for many reasons, but often it is because people are confronted with a situation to which they feel they must respond and take a stand. The reality we face – whether it’s our own or that of others – pushes us to try and change what we are experiencing or witnessing. However, it is easy to forget to take into serious consideration the possible consequences of any such choice; while positive consequences are often empowering, we can be disempowered by negative experiences. We need to think about the personal consequences of protest in advance, so that we are prepared for the impact, and so that we are not surprised by them and end up suffering great stress.

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Activism in oppressive regimes: some lessons from South Africa

Case studies

Chile: Gandhi’s insights gave people courage to defy Chile’s dictatorship
West Papua: “We will be free”
Colombia: Peace community of San Jose de Apartadó

Training

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Risky situation

Consequences of taking a stand

When taking a stand, we might be putting ourselves into situations that will push us to our limits and put ourselves at risk. If this happens, negative experiences will be almost inevitable and fear will most likely surface as a response. In situations of insecurity and anguish, some of these feelings will emerge; fear of being arrested, fear of being denounced, fear of being tortured, fear of being caught in an illegal meeting, fear of being betrayed, fear of again not achieving our goal. Activists need to know what can be done to avoid those consequences, or cope with them when they arise.

Three main elements can help us to continue functioning in the face of fear: **confidence and solidarity with our fellow activists, good training, and emotional preparation and debriefing.**

Some of the consequences we need to be prepared for

Dealing with fear consequences

When we think of traumatic consequences, we immediately think of the physical consequences; being manhandled, arrested or beaten, or having our human rights violated, are all potential risks activists face. This is a greater risk in some societies than others, and people protesting in very militaristic and authoritarian states are particularly vulnerable. However, all of us will normally feel at least some anxiety and fear, and be aware of the risk of physical pain or discomfort. **These fears can immobilise us, and it is not good to ignore them.** If we are not prepared our natural reactions in a situation may actually lead to



NONVIOLENT ACTION IN SANTIAGO, CHILE

PHOTO: ARCHIVES OF ROBERTA BACIC

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greater hurt. For example, when we encounter riot police we may have an urge to run, but if we start running we lose our discipline and those opposing us may be tempted to attack at that moment. Being prepared – rationally, emotionally and practically – is important, and training in fear control is very helpful.

The strength of coming out in public

People involved in action for social change need to be aware that they are choosing to stand outside conventional opinion. It is not difficult to share our feelings in private with those who share our views (although we may worry about being betrayed), but coming out in public is more difficult. We are taking a stand not only against the state, but also against common social attitudes. The very reason that activists need to protest is to challenge those conventions, but knowing that does not make it easy; we are exposing ourselves. Consider 'Women in Black' in Israel, who simply stood still as a silent witness to what they could not accept in their society; that form of witness has been used in Serbia, Colombia and elsewhere. **Solidarity** is very important in such situations, as is creating space to air our feelings and deal with them. Even those who appear confident will have worries that they need to acknowledge and deal with.

Preparing ourselves to deal with distress

There are other risks and consequences that are comparatively subtle, but for that very reason can be more distressing. We may face disrespect and humiliation, be mocked and goaded by bystanders or the state forces. Again 'Women in Black' come to mind, who were spat at and abused by a hostile public, yet

remained silent, and did not react. Such actions can be emotionally distressing for the participants, but role playing the situation in advance at a training or meeting of the participants helps us to prepare ourselves emotionally, and to understand more fully the motivations (and fear) of our opponents (see 'nonviolence training', p18). Solidarity and confidence in our fellow protesters is important, and that is partly built up in rehearsal. Less emotionally distressing, because it is less immediate, is bad publicity. The press, who may libel movements with all kinds of inaccuracies, may challenge our good faith and motivations. Preparing ourselves for such humiliation makes it easier to cope with it when it comes.

Putting yourself in the position of the other

Activists may even seek out humiliation as part of the statement we are trying to make, as when protesters try to put themselves into the situation of people they are defending. For example, many groups have done street theatre, acting out the roles of prisoners and guards at Guantanamo Bay. In this scenario, unanticipated feelings rise to the surface which participants sometimes find difficult to control. The 'prisoners' may begin to feel violated, while the 'guards' find themselves entering into the experience too enthusiastically or – on the contrary – feel a sense of revulsion; either way the participants may feel defiled and polluted. To deal with such possibilities, participants need to be prepared for such reactions in themselves, and to be debriefed sensitively afterwards. Another example are the protests against factory farming, when volunteers used their own bodies to model slabs of meat. The reaction may be to feel really enthusiastic and liberated by taking a stand, or troubled at the situation they have put themselves into.

Dealing with disillusionment

Sometimes we have few problems before and during the protest, but it is a real blow if it seems we didn't have an impact. For example – the huge protests against the invasion of Iraq in February 2003 did not stop the war, and the movement's worst fears were realised. Unsurprisingly, many people felt disillusioned and disempowered, and asked whether it had been worth doing. Activists who have experienced this may not want to take part in any other actions on this or other issues, feeling it worthless. What can be done to address this disillusionment? We need opportunities to reflect together on what has happened and what we can learn from the experience (see 'action evaluation', p142), and we need to adjust our expectations. Protests are important to show strength, but protests alone will not stop a war.

Dealing with success in our actions

As well as worrying that a situation may turn out worse than we anticipated, paradoxically we might also find it hard to cope with what might on the surface seem positive; for instance, if the security forces act more humanely than anticipated, or the authorities engage and seem more willing to consider our

Burnout

Joanne Sheehan

Burnout is when we become emotionally, mentally and physically exhausted from our activism. We feel 'burned', our ability to deal with things well is gone. We may have a hard time staying focused, we can become irritable, we may become resentful of others for 'not working as hard'. We may lose hope that change can happen.

We can suffer burnout when we overwork and do not take care of ourselves. We push ourselves and others with long hours of work, long meetings without breaks, expectations that we and others should do things we do not have the ability to do.

Avoiding burnout

Being an activist does not mean we need to sacrifice ourselves "for the cause." We need to take care of ourselves and each other. We cannot grow healthy movements if those of us involved are unhealthy. Who will want to get involved?

We need to take care of ourselves – eat right, exercise, make time for practices such as yoga, meditation, tai chi. Be a gardener. Get a massage. Take time to be with friends and relax.

Exercise

Here is a simple way to be mindful of balance in our lives. You can do this on your own or include it in a workshop where people can share their reflections after. Write down, one under the other:

work
community
ourselves

Next to each, write what that includes for you. In addition to your job, what is your work? How do you spend time with community and friends? How do you nurture yourself?

To show how much time you spend on each of these three areas of your life, draw a line in relationship to the others. You will probably end up with three lines of varying lengths. Can you join them together in a triangle, or is your life so out of balance that your work is a long line, and the others shorter and not able to connect?

Thanks to Ouyporn Khuankaew of International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice for this exercise.

Resource

Sustainable Activism & Avoiding Burnout:
http://www.activist-trauma.net/assets/files/burnout_flyer_rightway.pdf

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demands than expected. This can have an unsettling effect if we have steeled ourselves for confrontation; what happens to all the adrenaline that has been built up in our bodies? what do these developments do to our analysis? are we wrong in our analysis of the situation? should we trust the system more? or are we being duped by sweet words? Our movement may achieve more solidarity when faced with harsh opposition, and may fracture when that does not materialise. We need to be ready to know what responses might be most effective, and test out what is possible. That way, we are more able to collectively assess the situation and act appropriately.

When levels of aggression rise

Many of us have been shocked at the aggression which sometimes arises during a nonviolent protest – and not only from our adversaries! For example, waves of aggression can rise up when we are manhandled by authorities – even if we do not react, then that feeling can make us very uncomfortable and doubtful. Or other protesters may start to riot and we have to be able to find an appropriate response; do we join in, leave, or hold our ground continuing the protest nonviolently as planned? There is little time to think in such situations, so options need to have been thought through in advance, and we need to have our alternatives clear so that quick decisions can be made.

Different contexts

We might be protesting in the Global North in states and cultures which claim to be liberal and democratic, or we might be living under an authoritarian

Roberta Bacic

If we prepare for the mixture of emotions and reactions which may result from our protest, build solidarity with our colleagues and analyse and debrief ourselves on the consequences of our actions, then we are better placed to continue the struggle for a better society, even though we may know that that will not be achieved in our lifetime, if at all.

However, if we do not prepare well and deal well with the consequences, then we may end up not helping anyone, not even ourselves. We may get discouraged and decide to give up, or take up other types of strategies that may be counterproductive, like mainstream politics or the use of force. Alternatively, we may get into a pattern of just protesting for its own sake, without any strategic sense. We may appear, on a superficial level, to still be engaged in movements for change, and others may admire our persistence, but we will have lost a purpose for all the energy we expend; our ineffectiveness and purposefulness may even discourage others. If – as I believe – we have a duty to protest, then we also have a duty to prepare ourselves well, by identifying the risks to our physical and emotional well being, taking steps to ensure that we can overcome these risks, and continuing to work for change in a positive and effective manner, keeping true to our ideals.

regime. We should not assume that protest is easier in liberal democracies; some 'democratic' states can be very harsh in their reaction to protest.

There are other factors that determine what the potential of protest and its limits are; for example, the society may be closed or open. In a closed society the risks are greater because dissidents can disappear and there is little possibility of any accountability. It may have a functioning judicial system, independent of the government, which can act as a check on human rights abuses. The culture of a society is also a significant factor, especially if it values conformity and respect for authority. A society can also feel weak and vulnerable to the pressures of modernity, or of the influence of other states, and this can mean that any form of protest is seen as disloyal and destructive.

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Activism in oppressive regimes: some lessons from South Africa

Janet Cherry

The brief reflection below draws on my experience as an activist in the South African liberation movement in the 1980s, and subsequently as a trainer in strategic non-violence in other struggles over the past decade. While most of the examples given are from experience of activism against the apartheid regime, it is written in the hope that it will be useful to activists in other contexts.

The nature of authoritarian regimes

Our experience as activists in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa was of building a mass movement in the context of a repressive and authoritarian regime. The apartheid state was brutal but also to some extent restrained: it was a racially exclusive democracy, operating with the rule of law. The laws were changed from time to time, of course, to contain the rising resistance through security legislation and States of Emergency; and the courts did not prevent torture and deaths in custody. The cost of resistance was sometimes very high. And yet, there was also some space in which to operate, to build grassroots organisations, which evolved into a mass nonviolent movement; to develop strategies and test out a variety of tactics, and ultimately to create a counter-hegemony to the apartheid state. We called this "peoples' power" in South Africa. But it is not very different to many of the

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