

# How do we keep going? Activist burnout and personal sustainability in social movements<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://laurencecox.wordpress.com/> for other free materials.

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"Trauma work is part of resistance."

(Activist Trauma Support, "Why we think this is important..."; n.d.(b))

Personal sustainability in social movements is a huge and complex topic, but one which is immediately important to many participants, both in terms of keeping going themselves and of supporting their fellow-activists and preventing burnout. It is also of importance to researchers attempting to understand how movements continue in the face of everything that is thrown at their participants. This paper represents some extended notes attempting to rethink, and restructure, a problematic whose contours are extremely slippery. It may, I hope, also be of some use to activists who are facing these problems but not (currently) overwhelmed by them; for those who are in a crisis situation or trying to help others in crisis, the Activist Trauma site (<http://www.activist-trauma.net>) is a good starting-point.

Firstly, some general considerations. What is *personal* sustainability in social movements? Here I am separating out two other aspects of movement sustainability – organisational sustainability on the one hand, and the sustainability of a whole movement on the other – from personal sustainability. In other words, given a continuing need or desire to engage in social movement, and the continuing viability of groups, networks or formal organisations through which to do this, personal sustainability has to do with the conditions which make it possible for individuals who do want to take part in a movement to actually participate in some of its specific organisational manifestations – avoiding, as one writer has put it, involuntary and individual demobilisation.

So far, this is a negative definition, excluding the strategic failure of movement organisations on the one hand and, on the other, the question of why people who arguably have good reason to engage in social movement do not consider it. Positively, it points to people who have a sense of themselves as wanting to engage in social movement at some level, who have somewhere to go practically, but who do not manage to do so.

Since, as Fillieule (2005) observes, drop-out or "defection" is a constant feature of social movements, we are talking about a fairly constant phenomenon, ranging from cases of conscious apostasy to "burn-out" to people "just drifting away". There is no obvious way to measure "pre-emptive drop-out", the case of people who (all else being equal) would like to engage in social movement but find it beyond them for some reason, but experience suggests that it does exist, and in some cases may be significant; not least, the widespread use of minimally demanding forms of participation (signing petitions, passive membership, large demonstrations) indicates this.

### **Different dimensions of personal sustainability**

So what does personal sustainability actually relate to in practice? Elsewhere (Cox 2009) I have suggested that its most important feature is variability, in terms of different people's situations, the ways in which different movements relate to daily life, and the historical and comparative "movement situation" within which people find themselves.

Thus, firstly, personal sustainability entails a range of issues that matter differentially to different people (see Hradil 1987 for more on this). These include general aspects of physical and economic survival as members of society (physical vulnerabilities and dependence; paid and unpaid work; family and personal networks); they include more specifically movement-relevant resources (pressures of money and time, access to communication and transport, skills and expectations around participation in public life); and lastly they include psychological and emotional dimensions (mental health, emotional management skills and culturally-based emotional resources).

Secondly, there are differences in how movements are articulated with daily life: as workplace-based movements, as community-based movements, as paid or at least full-time activism, and as "leisure" activism – each of which poses particular challenges to participants. Thus, depending on whether someone's movement participation is primarily a job, an identity, part of their everyday culture or a response to their working life, very different issues are going to arise in terms of sustaining it.

Thirdly, the broader cultural context of movement participation obviously makes a difference, as between long-standing movement cultures; broader classes or cultures which broadly support movement participation; moments of generational transformation; and newly-formed or culturally marginal movements.

So a reasonable way to approach the question would be to say that personal sustainability is a way of defining a problematic, not a list of necessary and sufficient conditions for sustained movement participation.

Downton and Wehr's *The persistent activist* (1991) attempts to develop precisely such a list of conditions, and does so with great conviction – except for the minor problem that the issues

involved in peace activism in a small-town American context during the 1980s are not universal ones. As with most other studies of the subject, Downton and Wehr is "positivist" in the sense of assuming a broad generalisability of its conclusions.

An adequate approach, then, ultimately needs in some way to be comparative, and ideally also historical. While I am attempting some of this in my broader research project, this paper tackles the much smaller area of burnout and (to some extent) post-traumatic stress reactions in social movement participants. It draws on some reading (around the subject, and on movements more generally) and personal experience, as well (indirectly) as pilot interviews, to reflect on three different areas.

Firstly, what are burnout and post-traumatic stress reactions in general? Secondly, what is specific to burnout and post-traumatic stress reactions in social movements? Thirdly, what strategies do movements and individuals use to tackle activist burnout and reactions to trauma?

Material on these topics is scattered over a range of different literatures: general psychology and self-help; social movement studies and social-psychological studies of activists; and different kinds of movement literature, usually produced either by specific support groups within movements or by therapists, workshop organisers etc.

In what follows I have tried as far as possible to read this literature critically, in terms of the different movement experiences reflected in particular approaches, and to note something of these differences. I welcome suggestions (to [laurence.cox@nuim.ie](mailto:laurence.cox@nuim.ie)) as to what I might be missing out, and how it can effectively be researched. The paper necessarily ranges far beyond my personal area of expertise, and I also welcome comments pointing out misreadings and misunderstandings.

# I. What is burnout?

One of the dubious joys of life in class society, and particularly in late capitalism, is the extent to which psychological overload has become a *routine* feature of ordinary lives. The relentless stress produced by the pressure to produce surplus value, the everyday trauma brought on by the routine use of violence to maintain relations of power, and the sense of being unable to continue speak volumes about the hidden costs of capitalism (James 2007, Sennett and Cobb 1972).

In this section I consider a series of related terms: stress, trauma, burnout and post-traumatic stress reactions. These are not all neatly-bounded terms: even within the psychological literature there are different definitions, and all are used by activists in different ways again.

We should also bear in mind a recurring, if minor, theme in activist writing on this subject, which is a healthy scepticism as to the constructed nature of these terms within psychiatry in particular, and the potential for pathologisation etc. (Ruthless n.d.) Jones (2007), despite working as a psychotherapist and using diagnostic categories such as PTSD, depression etc., cautions against uncritical appropriation of medicalising approaches, and suggests the need to develop our own terminology for activist purposes:

"Aftershock is my word for the reverberations of traumatic events endured by activists. Aftershock may include post-traumatic stress or depression as these are experienced by people who have undergone other kinds of trauma but in may also involve reactions related to the context of activism." (2007: 55).

The most useful distinction for the practical purposes of prevention and intervention seems to be that between a *situation* (of crisis, confrontation, violence etc.); people's possible *experiences* of that situation (as stressful or traumatic); and the possible long-term *outcomes* of those experiences (in burnout and post-traumatic stress in particular, though we could also discuss questions such as depression etc.)

It's important to say that when we talk about people's experience of a situation, this is not to say that this is a free choice or a psychological flaw, but in the first instance an acknowledgement of human diversity. Secondly, of course, it *may* mean in some cases that there are possibilities for change at an individual level as well as (not instead of) the structural one which is inherent in movement thinking; as we shall see, though, some of the most interesting issues arise at the organisational level.

## The stress process

McEwen argues that stress is a potentially confusing category, and that we should instead think of allostatic load. Allostasis – the body's capacity to shift gear for sleep, fight / flight, eating etc. – is just as normal as the homeostatic processes that e.g. keep blood at a constant temperature. The body here of course includes the CNS, action-related hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol, etc. Hence

"[n]ot all stress is unhealthy or unnatural. The fight-or-flight response is something quite natural that can protect us when we are faced with a life-threatening situation." (Koster 2007: 5 – 6).

Allostatic *load* is when constant exposure to situations where neither fight nor flight is possible lead to the heightened bodily reaction, but no solution or resolution. Thus the body, and its allostatic systems, is continually being placed in a crisis situation without a natural ending. The problem, then, is not crisis as such, but crisis in which we cannot take action that either removes the threat or removes us from its presence – such as ongoing confrontation, whether physical or social<sup>3</sup>.

McEwen identifies four scenarios for allostatic load: unremitting stress (e.g. the experience of privatised civil service employees under Thatcher), inability to adjust to new sources of stress, not realising when the stress-inducing situation has passed, and ineffective allostatic responses for various physical reasons.

In itself this is a relatively optimistic perspective, since it is possible to learn how to adjust to new sources of stress (though aging makes this harder), and to identify the end of stress-inducing situations. More generally, Koster observes that between the situation comes a combination of our physical excitement and our cognitive interpretation, leading both to an emotional reaction and to behaviour of whatever kind (2007: 8 – 9).

Unremitting stress, however, is outside our control as a situation, and is a frequent enough experience in capitalist societies for non-activists as well as for movement participants (it is of course often a trigger for mobilisation). Thus Koster identifies various sources of stress, notably those related to work, gendered expectations, workplace hierarchies, technological demands, and culture.

As we might expect, this experience is not a socially neutral one. It is unevenly distributed by race and gender (McEwen 2002: 180 – 183), and impacts particularly strongly on children and the elderly (176 – 180). More strongly, as Wineman (2003: 20) puts it,

*"Oppression is generically traumatizing.*

Racism, patriarchy, homophobia, and economic brutality all routinely violate people's integrity and repeatedly render people powerless in the face of overwhelming personal and institutional forces. The social experience of people of color, gay people, women, workers, poor people, children, and disabled people is saturated with abuse, humiliation, violence, and negation of personal worth."

"Systemic oppression is itself traumatizing. To be a member of a disenfranchised race or ethnic group or gender or class or sexual orientation, or to be a child confronted at every turn with an overwhelming system of adult power, is to be bombarded on a daily basis with messages that who you are as a person does not matter in the larger scheme of things... Those messages are conveyed through acts of violence and gross brutality, such as sexual violence and gay bashing; they are manifested in material conditions such as severe poverty; and they are also encoded in countless mundane events which are invisible to the dominant group. The totality of these messages can be chronically traumatizing to the extent that they repeatedly create experiences of violation and powerlessness among oppressed people." (Wineman 2003: 42)

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<sup>3</sup> In the rest of this paper, like McEwen, I return to the everyday use of "stress", but with this caution against seeing confrontation etc. as *per se* problematic. If we can escape from it, or win quickly and decisively, there is no stress problem.

At the upper end of the stress spectrum is the experience of psychological trauma – an overwhelming experience, or series of experiences. Such experiences can include violence and sexual abuse, as well as the threat or witnessing of these; catastrophic events; and long-term exposure to poverty, verbal abuse etc.

I have included trauma with stress here both because various literatures use these terms differently, and because what makes a situation "stressful" or "traumatic" is not simply an objective feature of the situation, but has much to do with an individual's interpretation of the situation, their past experiences etc.

Interpreting the impact on individuals is also difficult, as we shall see. Burnout, depression and PTSD can all have elements of demotivation and lack of energy. To find out whether another person is experiencing the alienation and cynicism involved in burnout, or the intense reliving of traumatic experience, requires a potentially intimate disclosure on their part, which is not always freely given either to researchers or to fellow-activists.

## **Burnout: process and results**

If the physical process of burnout can be traced as the continuation of a fight-or-flight reaction without any resolution, this is not always evident on the outside, and cannot necessarily be read off from the situation. As Shields (1991: 121) puts it,

"Humans are capable of sustained hard work under very difficult conditions without showing signs of burnout. .. They may suffer exhaustion, but not necessarily burnout. So what makes the difference?"

In one way of talking, burnout is constantly present as a possibility where there is this constant crisis:

"Stress progresses in three states: an initial alarm reaction of anxiety, an attempted coping ('resistance'), and a stage of exhaustion in which the depletion of energy leads to fatigue. These three stages repeat themselves throughout our life's activities and it is important to recognize when we are approaching the final stage (burnout) and to replenish our energies.

Unfortunately, the body itself complicates matters; during the initial stage, tension and excitement lead to an increase in the production of adrenalin, which may lead to a kind of euphoria or intoxication. This intoxication can be addictive and can lead to an attempt to be constantly active without allowing time for relaxation. The euphoria is sometimes followed by depression, because the body stops producing adrenalin at some point after the stressful feelings end." (Forman and Slap 1985: 64).

This is not, of course, to say that everyone who suffers burnout is addicted to adrenalin!

Freudenberger and North's processual model of burnout can be summarised under the following headings:

1. Compulsion to prove oneself; working harder; neglecting one's own needs
2. Displacement of conflicts (not realising the root cause of the distress) and denial of emerging problems (cynicism and aggression become apparent)
3. Revision of values (dismissing friends and hobbies), withdrawal (reducing social contacts to a minimum etc), behavioural changes become obvious to others

#### 4. Inner emptiness, depression, fullblown burnout.

Maslach and Gomes (2006) identify three key elements to burnout, following the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach and Jackson 1981; this seems to be widely if not entirely accepted in the psychological literature):

"Exhaustion – the individual stress component. You feel drained and used up, without any source of replenishment...

Cynicism – the interpersonal component. This is a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to various aspects of the work. It usually develops in response to the overload of exhaustion...

Inefficacy – the self-evaluation component. This is a feeling of a lack of achievement and resulting doubts about self-worth." (Maslach and Gomes 2006: 44<sup>4</sup>)

It has been suggested that people in more individualistic societies may be more vulnerable to burnout, and certainly the literature agrees that strong social ties are one of the main supports against stress and burnout:

"Westerners in particular often seem to experience a certain psychological, emotional, or social burden when together with other people. The self-centredness of Western culture may play an important part in this. Westerners grow up with the idea that they have to prove themselves to others... Dutch psychologist Carien Karsten states that experiencing other people as a burden is one of the symptoms of burnout" (Koster 2007: 14).

This, of course, is not much help to people who do live in such societies and have grown up in such ways, although it is an important corrective to arguments that universalise a sense of isolation as normal. It may be more constructive here to return to the widely shared observation that

"Burnout often affects people who are very skillful, trustworthy and hardworking... [we should] consider burnout not as a sign of weakness but rather of being out of balance" (Koster 2007: 168).

## Post-traumatic stress reactions

Post-traumatic stress reactions, like burnout, appear as long-term consequences of stress (Koster 2007). Both are marked by abnormal patterns of cortisol, one of the hormones involved in the fight-or-flight response (McEwen 2002: 26).

"In the moment of trauma, the victim's psychological task is to maintain some semblance of normalcy, coherence, integrity, meaning, control, value and equilibrium. This must be done in the face of an overpowering assault which threatens to annihilate the victim psychologically, and in

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<sup>4</sup> There have been, incidentally, suggestions that some 1970s work on burnout was linked to Israeli counter-insurgency work and fitted a "behavioural management" agenda vis-à-vis Palestinians. Activists on the Israeli left confirm that this is entirely plausible, and that there is a substantial literature along these lines in Hebrew, deriving from research carried out by the Israeli military. Certainly Pines' work shows that burnout is in no sense a radical concept: one article studies "gender differences in burnout among Israelis due to the Palestinian Intifada" (1997: 28), and another studies "work stressors experienced by Israeli border police during the 2001 Palestinian Intifadah" (Pines and Keinan 2006: apparently they have a hard life but don't suffer much burnout because they believe in what they do).



many cases physically as well... But these traumatic responses persist [past this point]." (Wineman 2003: 50)

"The long term pattern that emerges is what Judith Herman describes as an 'oscillating rhythm' between the intense re-experiencing of the traumatic moment and the dissociative responses of numbing, denial and constriction." (Wineman 2003: 55)

"The result can be symptoms of traumatic stress such as severely elevated states of arousal and vigilance, emotional numbing or dissociation, disruptions in memory of traumatic events, and psychological and emotional fragmentation..."

Powerlessness stands at the heart of traumatic experience... [O]ne of our key responses when we are powerless – when it is subjectively impossible to fight or to flee – is what both Judith Herman and Peter Levine describe as constriction and *freezing*." (Wineman 2003: 51)

As we have already seen, such experiences are far from uncommon in societies marked by exploitation, oppression and cultural hierarchies.

## Does action make a difference?

One question that I haven't found answered in any depth in the literature is whether the *subjective* experience of power is significant in terms of whether burnout or post-traumatic stress reactions are likely to develop. Wineman suggests that what characterises trauma is that "action is of no avail", much as we have seen that stress is the result of being unable either to fight or flee. But does the experience of being able to resist, in some less directly physical form, have value? Forman and Slap suggest that it does:

"Peace workers... are even more likely to suffer burnout because our work requires the maintenance of idealistic values in the face of constant awareness of the dangerous world situation; being aware of such danger naturally causes stress. Becoming politically active has the potential to reduce this stress, because activism helps us feel we are doing something to make the world more peaceful. The way we go about our activism, however, will determine whether it helps us successfully cope with the stress (1985: 63).

Certainly activist common sense would hold that mobilisation into movements is often a psychologically healthy response to stressful or traumatic situations; however, to the best of my knowledge there is relatively little work comparing movement participants to the apathetic or disempowered in this respect (but see Thalhammer et al 2007). In this respect, most literature (political as well as academic) seems to reproduce the split in everyday experience between the two.

One promising suggestion is to approach what Barker (1999) has described, following Durkheim, as "collective effervescence" in these terms: as the moment not simply of cognitive liberation (McAdam 1982) but of emotional liberation when people come to name the sources of stress and trauma in their lives as injustices which can be tackled collectively. Such "burn-in", and "burn-out" in everyday life, can then be seen as two sides of the one coin, of the everyday experience of life in capitalism.

Since much of the rest of this paper discusses the negative effects of activism, it may be useful to restate the point made above, that stress and trauma are not inherent features of a situation, but are responses (albeit not chosen responses) to a situation or activity which others may

experience in different ways (thus giving rise to various degrees of incomprehension or movement machismo):

"For Italian far left activists, Diego Giachetti avers [in *Oltre il sessantotto*],

to engage in politics was by no means an alienating activity, an onerous obligation, experienced as a painful loss of precious time that had to be subtracted from one's regular social and emotional life. These activists submerged themselves in political work, investing all sorts of energies, participating in concrete and daily actions, experiencing a certain joy of living and concrete measures of personal growth resulting from such choices.

Or, in the words of the former Trotskyist, Gérard Filoche [...] "All those young people evolved, read, studied, campaigned, travelled, were engaged in exceptional activities; and the sum total of their efforts was spellbinding" [...]

The frequent get-togethers at party branch headquarters, the typing of leaflets, the distribution of newspapers at school or factory gates was experienced as a great communal effort and uplifting of spirits. The proliferation of associated cultural venues and products served as simultaneously stimulating and entertaining digressions. After leafleting the giant FIAT Mirafiori works for most of the day, to listen to a concert by Paolo Pietrangeli or to experience a life performance of Franca Rame and Dario Fo was an experience no one was likely to forget anytime soon. A dense network of far left publishing houses [...] and bookstores, newspapers and magazines, served to update and refine one's political horizons. Cooperative ventures, such as food co-ops, restaurants, or repair shops were widely available as communal living had become the norm. A long-time member of the extensive far left squatter community in Frankfurt [...] remembers:

"The sole thing which was expected was 'solidarity', i.e. the willingness to help out and a generalised altruism – to an extent which is today difficult even to imagine... Solidarity meant to help comrades and soulmates alike – with a move, when painting an apartment or room, when looking for a job, with term papers, or in emotional crisis situations."

Even the production and distribution of written documents, whether stencilled leaflets, posters, pamphlets, newspapers, or books [...] must be understood as a key element "in a process of democratization of debate", which Michel de Certeau aptly phrased as "the capture of speech" or "the capture of the word". In short, far left activism was first of all experienced as a fulfilling, pleasurable, and meaningful way of life." (Horn 2007: 161-2).

Horn makes this point in relation to the "hyper-activism" of the post-1969 far left precisely to underline that what from another standpoint might seem a recipe for burnout and demobilisation can – under the right circumstances, such as a massive movement wave, cognitive liberation and a sense of making real achievements – be empowering and life-affirming; and it is crucial to bear this in mind when discussing negative outcomes of such practices, both to understand where they came from and to make intelligent choices about what may need to be changed and how.

Having established, in this first part of the paper, some basic sense of the psychological territory of burn-out and stress reactions, I want to move on to discuss how it affects movement participants in particular, and how we can deal with it.

## II. Activist burnout

"Burnout is the act of *involuntarily* leaving activism, or reducing one's level of activism...

When an activist burns out, she typically derails her career and damages her self-esteem and relationships. She also deprives her organization and movement of her valuable experience and wisdom. The worst problem, however, may be that when an activist burns out she deprives younger activists of a mentor, thus making *them* more likely to burn out..." (Hilary Rettig, *The lifelong activist*; 2006: 16)

There seems to be general agreement that burnout varies by occupation, although views on exactly which occupations are most vulnerable has changed over time. Certainly social movement activists are vulnerable to burnout and post-traumatic stress reactions, whether or not they are uniquely so. There is a case to be made, in fact, that when people become activists this is a healthy reaction to experiences that have more damaging results on others:

"[W]e encounter trauma and the politics of powerlessness every day in our movement-building efforts, whether or not we recognize them or name them as such. One face of powerlessness presents itself as burnout, disaffection, apathy, and despair among potentially radical constituencies." (Wineman 2003: 47)

The discussion of "collective effervescence" at the end of the previous section suggests that there is a reverse to this "politics of powerlessness", at the peak of movement waves, in revolutionary situations and in sudden local mobilisations. Indeed, Davies and Flett (2009) have entered an important caveat as to the significance of long-term, self-identified "activists", as against the "brief activism" associated with this initial mobilisation. Brief activism need not necessarily lead to any longer-term participation but (numerically at least) is central to social change: "the activism was still useful when it took place" (2009: 2).

For the purposes of this paper (and this research project) I am by no means dismissing this view, or the argument raised in *Poor people's movements* (Piven and Cloward 1979) about the limitations of seeing organisation-building as the best way to go for mass movements. Indeed, many of the comments in this section point *away* from hierarchical organisation-building, as a strategy which has particularly high risks of burnout built into it.

Nevertheless, as the British Marxist historians' tradition has shown, the "flecks, frames and carriers" (Waite 1997) that link one movement to the next *are* important, and are often carried by individuals rather than by organisations. Davies and Flett highlight this in their discussion of EP Thompson's "warrening of capitalism" and their Monty Pythonesque "Nobody expects... the activist!" (2009: 5 – 6). They extrapolate a Thompsonian "theory of activism, which is centrally focussed on how activism often appears from surprising quarters and has surprising impacts" (2009: 5). In this context, we may be talking not about continuous but about intermittent activism; almost "sleeper" activists – as Waite suggests.

While I agree that individual activists, or organisations, *are* in the long run *less* significant than genuinely grassroots mobilisation on a large scale, and the "brief activism" often associated with it, this is not to say that they are *not* significant. Indeed, *particularly* where organisational continuity is less of a given (as in the contemporary anti-capitalist movement in the North),

*individual* continuity between movements over time, and in moving between movements, is crucial to many aspects of movement success, at whatever level: political analysis, organising skills, personal contacts and networking ability are among the key ingredients that long-term activists bring to such movements and mobilisations, and it is in this perspective that I am studying activist burnout.

Precisely because movement participation is uneven (and because, in the biggest picture, we live in unequal societies where popular participation in public life is constantly contested), more is "personalised" within individuals than we might wish, and these unequally distributed capacities are lost with burnout and trauma. As Jen Plyler puts it,

"Instead of figuring out ways to take care of ourselves and each other, social justice groups lose brilliant and committed activists to burnout, disillusionment and poor health. As a result, movements are plagued by fragmentation, lack of reflection and discussion, and 'wheel reinventing' that keeps them from moving their agendas forward" (2006: 123).

And, of course, when experienced activists do help to create suitable contexts, many of the "instant activists" will go on to become "long-term activists" in turn, particularly those who experience movement participation as liberating and as a good response to the stress or trauma of their own lives.

## **Activism and the big picture**

"Burnout is defined as long term involvement in situations that are emotionally demanding, and is caused by 'a combination of very high expectations and chronic situational stresses'. Bringing about the downfall of capitalism could be considered one such 'very high expectation'." (Slackers 2007: 13)

Maslach and Gomes observe

"Burnout has been a special concern among many caregiving occupations, where people often work very hard for few rewards but are strongly motivated by core values. Activism shares many of the characteristics of this kind of dedicated commitment and sacrifice, so it's not surprising that many activists, both paid and unpaid, report burnout at some time.

Activists also have other unique characteristics that can make them vulnerable to burnout. The very nature of activist work involves cultivating and maintaining awareness of large and overwhelming social problems, often carrying a burden of knowledge that society as a whole is unable or unwilling to face. This can lead to feelings of pressure and isolation that easily feed into burnout." (Maslach and Gomes 2006: 43)

Shields (2008) suggests that burnout-inducing problems with environmental movements include:

- "Prolonged attention on disturbing and negative information and future projections
- Crisis work with a short term focus
- Apparent lack of results – sometimes unrealistic expectations due to lack of understanding of the long-term nature of social movements
- Working against resistance
- Lack of resources"

These are, perhaps, particular issues for movements which valorise moral and (paradoxically) emotional reactions and dismiss or downgrade social theory, political analysis and organising strategy.

These are not enough, however, as one participant at *Alternative Futures 14* observed, "Not losing terribly is good for keeping active". Major defeats involve large-scale demobilisation, even when activists can draw on a broader picture. Not least, under such circumstances, which often follow major mobilisations, activists may have put large parts of the rest of their lives "on hold", and may not simply turn to those with a sense of relief, but have unfulfilled obligations which now need to be met.

Nevertheless, as Mick McKeown commented at *Alternative Futures 14*, "Winning is really important – but movements persist without it" – as of course they have to much of the time. Outside of the most major mobilisations (revolutionary situations, general strikes and so on) much of the challenge for movement participants lies precisely in how to keep going *without* the immediate returns of winning major victories, which of course are hard to come by in more ways than one.

Davies and Flett quite rightly quote Gramsci (1973: 79) at this point as discussing the need for communist militants (he was writing in 1920, the context of the defeat of the Turin factory councils) to combine "pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will" – a realistic analysis of current structural constraints with a will nevertheless to keep active<sup>5</sup>. This combination, of course, responds directly to one central problem of burnout: how to manage the experience of current defeat or blockage for one's own actions, and led to his analysis of the "trench systems of civil society" and the need to think in terms of a long "war of position" as well as the moments of "war of manoeuvre" and "underground war" (Gramsci 1971) which might be more immediately rewarding, or at least more directly energising. Or, as Davies and Flett put it, "things can be done but it won't be easy" (2009: 8).

## Repression and secondary traumatisation

Social movement activists are vulnerable to the actions of opponents. This includes not just direct repression, but also the stress or trauma of witnessing social violence and oppression, poverty, environmental destruction etc.: what some writers describe as secondary traumatisation<sup>6</sup>. Jones (2007) has thought a lot about this:

"I define *high-risk activists* as people whose work for peace and freedom for people, animals or ecosystems jeopardizes their physical, emotional, or spiritual balance. At particularly high risk are those who encounter injurious violence as well as those whose work involves repetitive or ongoing upsetting experiences" (Jones 2007: 44).

She notes that particularly difficult conditions include working outside the support of organizations, underground work, confrontation with the police, other armed forces or

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<sup>5</sup> He wrote that this "must be the slogan for every communist who is conscious of the efforts and the sacrifices required of those who have voluntarily taken up a militant role in the ranks of the working class".

<sup>6</sup> There is another (more medical) use of this term to mean the re-traumatisation of an individual suffering from PTSD by a subsequent event, an inappropriate psychological intervention, etc.

opponents, witnessing injuries done to others (including in solidarity work), having to make choices as to who to support, rescue etc. (44 – 45).

Similarly, Plyler notes that radical activism (which she defines as social justice work geared to the elimination of oppressive power) "inherently carries with it a certain level of risk of confrontation and repression, because it directly threatens the functioning of systems and groups who profit from exploitation and injustice" (2006: 125 – 6).

Activists face a range of threats in these circumstances, including physical attacks, threats and intimidation, economic reprisals, shaming, detention, police abuse, sexual assault and harassment, betrayal, criminalisation, and what activists witness (Jones 2007: 49 – 60). These threats are of course unevenly distributed, facing women, working-class, ethnic minority, disabled and gay / lesbian activists more than those who have higher social status and power.

Jones highlights the cumulative impact of doing emotionally difficult work over a period of years, stress brought on by identification with a group that is suffering, or with the type of suffering they are experiencing, social vulnerability (eg due to being a female, black, gay activist etc.), generational memory of violence done to past generations of activists, and individual reactions which cannot easily be shared (eg particular knowledge of a locality or an issue with its own peculiar forms of pain) (46 – 49).

Similarly, Shields highlights the importance of overexposure to horrors and emotional accumulation of distressing realities as common activist experiences (1991: 122 – 3). Fraser, Harris and Pantesco, among others, have proposed this in specific relation to environmental movements:

"Clinical diagnosis and treatment of Acute Stress Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, are seated within trauma dynamics that are sub-cortically encrypted and experienced. It is possible that environmentalists and conservationists working with profound awareness of how current human behavior is degrading the environment beyond recovery, may suffer from a subtype of acute stress disorder and post-traumatic sequelae...

This is ominous for both clinical and social psychologists because it may reveal depression, anxiety, and enervation in those arguably most needed in combating the degradation of the biosphere. This paper will present findings from exploring symptoms of acute stress disorder and PTSD in people working on the front lines of conservation action and a proposition that psychologists are urgently needed to help those who are becoming debilitated by their knowledge of the consequences of human impact on the planet at this time. It also proposes that psychologists may be needed now to develop a new language, context and treatment for this subtype condition."

What is not always present in these analyses, but is noted elsewhere in the literature, is that some of this can be overcome by emphasising practice-oriented analysis: not simply the disempowering and overwhelming awareness of horror, but a clear sense of existing social potentials for resistance and change, of a history of resistance as well as of oppression, and of plausible successes within reach:

"We need to remember that it is a long struggle. To change a culture requires the best of you... Who knows how long capitalism will last... Our fight will always be the unfinished fight. But in the meantime, we can get many things done that make a difference in people's lives." (Manuel Moreno, quoted in Plyler 2006: 133).

## The activist "workplace": overwork, urgency, conflicts

At a simple level, activists often just do too much, because (as EP Thompson once put it) there is so bloody much to be done:

"A feminist friend once commented that 'being in the women's movement' meant spending approximately 25% of her time engaging in group activities and 75% of her time developing herself ... [but] we tend to plunge ourselves head-first into organisational activities, neglecting personal development, until one day we find we do not know what we are doing and for whose benefit, and we hate ourselves as much as the movement." (Levine 1984: 18)

Barry and Dordevic, looking at women human rights activists globally, found that

"While activists are deeply concerned and stressed about the amount of work they have to do, they almost *universally accept this level of work as an inevitable fact of activism...*

[W]e needed to ask 'why do activists *consistently choose to take on so much work?*'"

They go on to point to a combination of the amount that needs to be done and the sense of personal responsibility (2007: 24 – 5). Shields (1991) similarly argues that our sense of identity can become bound up in our activism, so that we take failure personally or set ourselves impossible tasks.

Wells (2007: 135) notes that the activists she worked with often "found within themselves vestiges of the outmoded and destructive work ethic that measures the value of their efforts by the price they are willing to pay".

Urgency adds to the stress: "A constant 'We must do something NOW!' can impede the flow of creativity that helps to build dynamic, sustainable groups." (Slackers 2007: 13). Shields (1991: 125) suggests that activists' role models are often disempoweringly driven individuals with no life outside their activism, and so hard for many people to live up to. We might also want to add that high-profile activists often gain emotional rewards from their activism (such as praise and support, as well as engagements with the world outside their organisations) that are not available to others, enabling them to continue in ways that would otherwise be unsustainable, and are in fact unsustainable for other activists who do not receive these rewards.

Added to this are interpersonal aspects growing from internal conflict (Downton and Wehr 1999: 109; ATS n.d. (a); Plyler 2006: 128) and criticism (Shields 1991: 127). In one study of 1990s peace activists, 'relationships with other activists' emerged as *both* the most common reward and the most common stressor in their activist work (cited in Maslach and Gomes 2006).

Lester et al. (1996) note that "some psychologists identify social support and sense of accomplishment as the two most important buffers against stress." However, the activists they studied were often isolated from friends and family and sometimes from fellow activists, as well as lacking positive feedback for their work.

As Lichterman (1996) has observed, these situations vary hugely from movement to movement. The most psychologically sustainable movement organisations, unsurprisingly, are those which are located in broader movement cultures which are themselves well-rooted in a society.

## Movement culture

Movement organisations often exacerbate these "workplace" aspects of burnout. Studying a range of national-level movement organisations in the US, Lester et al. found that they had

shared "ups" around organisational successes but left individuals to deal with "downs" on their own:

"These organisations saw 'burnout' as an individual problem, not an organizational problem, so it was low or absent from organizational priorities."

They suggest that activists see these questions as administrative / organisational and hence less important than political ones:

"[Activists] expect to be overworked and underpaid; they consider stress and tension part of the job... sometimes they seemed to wear their own oppression as a banner... Social change staff also deny their own needs by comparing themselves to the people they serve... We wondered if, on some level, social change staff feel they don't deserve better."

Shields (1991: 80) similarly argued that "Activist groups often tend to put more value on the task dimension [of organisation], until the neglected relationship side forces its way onto the agenda or the group disintegrates".

A number of writers (such as Shields, Lester et al., Wineman and ATS) suggest that there may be features of movement culture that directly contribute to burnout. Some of these have to do with the importation of productivist and / or patriarchal attitudes to work into movement contexts (including, arguably, the understanding of movement participation as "work", which I try to use in a more critical sense in this paper to highlight undesirable affinities).

More acutely, some movements and groups seem dysfunctionally geared towards adrenalin "highs". These include both macho movement cultures which exalt confrontation and violence as such, and undermine expressions of fear, hurt and so on, as well as movement organisations which over-emphasise confronting participants and outsiders with emotionally overwhelming material, particularly representations of violence, destruction and sexual violation.

Here I follow Wineman (2003) in suggesting that these latter may represent unacknowledged and unhealthy ways of "acting out" personal experiences of trauma, or the importation of traumatogenic features of the wider society. Obviously this is not to say either that confrontation or outrage are inappropriate in movements, but rather that the sustainable use of either depends on making confrontation (and indeed violence) *non*-traumatic for participants, and on using information in ways that encourages action rather than feelings of being overwhelmed, disempowered and despairing.

Conversely, Tova Benski commented at *Alternative Futures* 14, that sometimes activists in the Israeli women's peace movement wanted *more* direct confrontation with the forces they were challenging, rather than less, and selected organisations on this basis. Conversely, at least some such "high-energy activists", in groups such as "Anarchists Against the Wall", met with high repression and did manifest burnout and high turnover. Such activists, however, according to Anne de Jong, typically moved to other organisations rather than abandoning activism altogether.

One *Alternative Futures* participant asked "What if the whole organisation is burnt out?" Barring major defeats, these situations are likely to represent toxic *organisations*: under most circumstances, burnout manifests as an individual experience, or at most that of a particular group (eg a leadership faction, or taken-for-granted support workers). Where a whole



organisation is burnt out, something has gone badly wrong at the organising level, whatever the specifics of this.

## Lack of visible results and acknowledgement

Some part of the stress or otherwise of action lies straightforwardly in its outcomes:

"Many people find that a direct action campaign can be one of the most important, life-changing and empowering things in their lives. But some, especially if a campaign is lost and what they were seeking to protect is destroyed, say that it was the worst experience ever, and that they couldn't go through that pain again." (ATS n.d.(a): 2)

More generally,

"Activist work involves large, long-term goals that often seem unreachable. Progress in social change is often nonlinear, leaving activists vulnerable to feeling discouraged. If you come to feel you have nothing to show for all your hard work or you've made a mistake in choosing your life path, then you're at risk for low self-esteem and depression, and you're more likely to leave activism." (Maslach and Gomes 2006: 45)

In particular,

"Social change work, by its nature, is a collective activity, very long-term, and difficult to evaluate. It is usually impossible to determine any one person's contribution." (Lester et al. 1996)

These, of course, are arguments for the importance of analysis, of a strong collective "we"-sense, and of celebrating successes. There are, however, narrower ways of reading the question of individual acknowledgement or reward, such as the economic analysis proposed by FFII (Foundation for a Free Information Infrastructure):

"In a pro-bono context we're expected to work without economic incentive. That is, we sacrifice family life, professional advancement, free time, and health in order to accomplish some goal we have decided to invest in.

In any project, we need some kind of reward to make it worth continuing each day. In most pro-bono projects the rewards are emotional, not economical. Mostly, we do things because people say "hey, great!" This is a powerful motivator.

However, we are economic beings and sooner or later, if a project costs us a great deal and does not bring economic rewards of some kind (money, fame, a new job...) we start to suffer...

Diagnosis is simple. Has someone worked a lot on a project that was not paying back in any way. Did he [NB] make exceptional sacrifices? Did he lose or abandon his job or studies to do the project? If you're answering 'yes', it's burnout." (2008: 1)

This is contradicted by a wide range of studies showing that material incentives are typically *not* the most powerful ones in social movement organising. What it points to, I think, is the need for a clearer sense of context; these statements may perhaps be true for the highly-trained computer specialists involved in FFII, or more so than for other activists. It also, of course, points to questions of the type of organisation involved:

"[T]he extent to which stress results in loss of motivation (burnout) also depends on the amount of social support activists experience to receive from their unions. Being an activist *is* on many an occasion a taxing experience. Seeing that your movement organization appreciates your hardship

and is prepared to support you in your efforts to cope with it, apparently makes a real difference." (Klandermans 1997: 104 – 5).

## Isolation, incorporation and sectarianism

In an interesting approach to the question of isolation, Davies and Flett (2009) initially pose a contrast between incorporation and burnout, drawing on Sidney Tarrow's arguments along these lines in *Democracy and disorder* (1989), before going on to observe that this "reflects the pressures on those who try to change things and the dull compulsion of economic reality" (2009: 1). They quote Tarrow's analysis of Italy in 1968-9, where he saw a cycle of protest ending with the "isolation, sectarianism and violence" of those who were not willing to settle for reform, and the institutionalisation of those who were (2009: 3).

One possible reading of such situations is that for an "activist minority" to be continually set against the broader culture (and presumably many of one's own family and colleagues, if not one's chosen networks) is itself a source of burnout, and that incorporation and respectability may meet important psychological needs (as well, of course, as reducing the risk of repression and increasing the potential for rewards, material and otherwise).

Davies and Flett identify two alternative ways of thinking this problem. One (following Sedgwick) is that of an "activist majority", where certain *kinds* of activism (e.g. demonstrations) are normal, non-stressful and broadly acceptable, activities that most people might consider doing themselves. They hold that this is currently the case in the UK, for example (2009: 1 – 2, 6 – 7).

The other, which they develop in relation to Stan Shipley's account of the "Soho O'Brienites" after the end of Chartism as a mass movement, is sectarianism as a means of sustaining engagement. This group of working-class activists remained active from the 1840s through to the First International in the 1870s and the SDF in the 1880s, but (Davies and Flett argue) were shielded from the slings and arrows of burnout by sectarianism: they were "so caught up in their own shibboleths and views of the world that they were both inoculated against the bad times and passed by the upwards swings in struggle" (2009: 6). In this respect they highlight the significance of the lower possibility of *actual* mass activism, stressful situations and burnout for such groups or organisations; restricted influence can be a positive thing from the point of view of continuity.

We could also suggest that the sectarian in-group meets many of the needs for acceptability and normality, at least for long-standing members. In support of this, those who left or were expelled from *small* Communist Parties, such as the British or West German, often experienced this as very difficult precisely because of the number of breaks with "significant others" involved in doing so. Here we could also refer to EP Thompson's comment, in *Poverty of Theory*, that an activist may have to "be all elbows" in order to keep going.

## Lack of self-care

For persistent activists, according to Rettig, "their activist work doesn't drain them, it sustains them" – it is part of who they are, their self-identity. Conversely, "burnout is caused by living a life in conflict with your values and needs":

"The vast majority of burned-out activists are not lazy. They are not uncommitted. They are not undisciplined. They are, in contrast, some of the most energetic, committed and disciplined people around. They are, however, blocked from using their energy and talents in the service of their movement; and the block is invariably caused by trying to live a conflicted life where one's actions do not derive from one's values and needs." (Rettig 2006: 17, 20).

One obvious way in which this mismatch between needs and action manifests is in failing to take proper breaks:

"Quite simply, rest seems selfish.

It's the context. How could anyone take a break, take time for themselves, when all around them others are suffering? When there is so much work to be done? When everyone around you *expects* you to work without stopping..." (Barry and Dordevic 2007: 26)

Similarly, Jones (2007: 94) sees this process continuing even once activists are suffering from burnout or post-traumatic stress:

"Often, the suffering that activists have witnessed or are working to end is considerably greater than their own. This, in combination with the altruism that motivates much activism, may lead after-shocked activists to feel that they ought to set aside personal suffering in the service of others."

Thus, activists' breaks are often used to care for others (gender, age and paid occupation play a large role here, as with caring responsibilities generally) and are often filled with work or worry about work. In any case, there are few opportunities for activist retreat / sabbaticals:

"Activists are making choices every day about well-being. Their own ... and everyone else's. With so much to be done, and so many wrongs in the world to right, they almost always choose to serve others first.

Because they don't feel that they have a right to rest." (2007: 28).

Activist Trauma Support (n.d. (a): 3) tie this to movement culture:

"What kind of a culture do such common personal attitudes end up creating? As a movement do we accept periods of low motivation, while respecting people for admitting that they need a break to recharge their batteries? Do we respect activists who own up to the fact that they don't have the time or energy to complete tasks they have taken on? Or rather, are respect and kudos within our community earned through a kind of devotion to the cause which requires endless personal sacrifice?" (ATS n.d.(a): 3)

Wells (2007: 109 – 110) has a different take on this:

"When [long-term community organisers] had committed themselves to social justice work, they had given up much more than high salaries and regular vacations. The majority gradually had relinquished a significant number of outside activities, interests, and relationships. They also had developed a companion practice of overriding any physical, emotional, or mental distress signals that might get in the way of achieving their goals on schedule.

By eliminating so many of these non-work elements from their lives, residents cut themselves off from nourishing activities that could act as a counterweight to the wear and tear of the job. By ignoring crucial inner warnings, they failed to recognize the limits of their own endurance. We began to understand what made so many susceptible to wearing themselves out. They were stuck in a chronic imbalance of overwork and suffering a steady decline of resources that grew more and more difficult to reverse."

In other words, activists' own *coping skills* may be part of the problem; and this is of course particularly exacerbated where their defence mechanisms against early childhood trauma have become part of their personality structure, so that keeping going is identified with psychological survival.

## Responsibility and burnout

At *Alternative Futures* 14, John Krinsky observed rightly that under certain circumstances the more experienced or responsible activists may suffer burnout, while others in the movement do not, as a result of particular pressures such as isolation, high-pressure engagements with opponents and the media, a greater awareness of risks such as repression, a broader sense of the needs of a particular project, etc. I have certainly experienced this myself at times, and it is one reason frequently advanced for a more democratic sharing of decision-making, roles and skills (though this is often easier said than done!)

Two illustrations may suffice. In the heat of 1968, a large proportion of the (West German) SDS women's wing presented the (male) leadership with a document highlighting the leaders' burnout and inability to keep going under the extreme pressures of that year, and recommending them to step down. They were ignored.

Colin Barker similarly noted that during the Gdansk uprising, while most workers were experiencing a true sense of "collective effervescence" in what was for many their first movement participation, some of the longer-standing organisers were cracking under the strain and turning to drink or winding up (legitimately) in psychiatric care as a result of the pressure.

This is not to suggest that "only elites burn out", a proposition which has been widely disproved in research on stress in the workplace generally. Rather, it is to highlight that overly hierarchical movement organisations create the likelihood of specific *kinds* of pressure for their leadership (and face particular risks when that leadership succumbs, since so much is centralised in their persons). Conversely, non-hierarchical organisations face the challenge of how to share the skills and knowledge of more experienced activists, not simply roles and decisions.

## Particular manifestations of burnout in activists

What does burnout look like in a movement setting?

"In its most extreme form, it is a condition where an activist has expended all of his or her physical and emotional resources. This produces a sudden collapse of effort, since there is no further personal energy to invest in movement activities. The ambition, hope, and commitment that existed just a day or two earlier suddenly disappear. This condition most often arises after a prolonged period of intense activity." (Downton and Wehr 1997: 107)

Good Grief (2008) mention a series of observed symptoms of burnout in an Irish social centre:

- "A creeping feeling that activism is taking over your life.
- Difficulty in making decisions.
- Inability to stay focused.

- Insomnia, difficulty in sleeping, or in getting enough sleep.
- A growing tendency to think negatively.
- Pervasive feelings of hopelessness.
- A loss of sense of purpose and energy.
- Feeling physically tense, 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." (1 – 2)

This has broader implications for movement work:

"Here's what happens when we repress (don't feel) or suppress (push down) our feelings:

- Instead of motivating purposeful action, emotional energy is wasted on the hard work of keeping the feelings away.
- Because they are not enlivened by emotional energy, the words in our speeches and writing become dull and sluggish.
- Instead of inspiring creative problem solving, the rejected feelings interfere with clear thinking." (2007: 7)

Finally, Maslach and Gomes (2006: 44) note that "[E]xcessive detachment can mean a loss of the idealism, passion, and enthusiasm that initially fueled your commitment to activism... This anger can even evolve into self-righteous bitterness toward an unresponsive public". At times, particularly within individual organisations, this "self-righteous bitterness" easily becomes a defining characteristic of an organisation, particularly if it offers a particular media niche, as producers or objects.

## **Burnout and movement exit**

The overall level of burnout is hard to establish; as we have seen, it means different things to different people and is not always something that people will admit to themselves or comrades, let alone researchers. Klandermans suggests that levels of burnout range from 10% (using the strictest measure) to 50% (in a loose sense of demotivation) among the activists he studied (2005: 104).

Similarly, its significance in terms of activist turnover is disputed. McAdam (2005: 67) treats burnout as one of four "ways out" of movement participation, alongside competing affiliations, a growth in repression and hence in the perceived costs of participation, and collective demobilisation.

Klandermans, however, discussing Dutch trade unionists, sees burnout as particularly significant in terms of avoidable turnover. While most ex-activists had changed jobs, retired, become unemployed etc., and only a small proportion left for political reasons, he hypothesises that burnout produced by role conflict etc. is particularly significant (2005: 103). On this, he notes the demands in terms of time, stress and role conflict on union activists in producing burnout, particularly when colleagues and family are unsupportive.

Downton & Wehr are ambiguous on burnout as a reason for movement exit: they say that while it does not explicitly appear as an explanation for the ex-activists they interviewed, nevertheless it may be there as a background factor, whether this is down to "physical exhaustion, emotional collapse, or disappointment about something that has occurred within their peace communities" (1997: 113 – 114).

Finally, in Fillieule's (2008) study of defectors from Act Up France, burnout

"is mentioned by 12% of respondents. Finally, 7% of the motivations refer to fatigue, demotivation, and sometimes a feeling of not being useful, reasons expressed in an ambiguous manner and about which we cannot say at this stage whether they are related to *burnout*, organizational and political disagreements or a new perception of the epidemic due to the appearance on the market of new treatments" (2008: 21).

This class of explanations came third after difficulties with the organisation (massively predominant) or changes in biographical availability (22% of respondents).

Perhaps the most important finding is that burnout is not in any way evenly spread among different activists within a movement, as we shall see.

## Who burns out?

It is unclear why some activists are more susceptible to burnout than others; Klandermans suggests that it is particularly high when motivation is idealistic and expectations are unrealistic, as well as when there is little support from political comrades and friends and family are opposed (2005: 103). The level of support from the union plays a role in determining whether stress becomes burnout: emotional support more than material or technical support (2005: 104).

Elsewhere, he argued (1997) "that it is high costs or high levels of psychological tension *in combination* with high levels of commitment that produce burnout. It is the inability to be flexible about their work as an activist and to take time to relax that seems to do the damage" (104).

"Activists are by definition the more committed members of a movement who feel a moral obligation to actively support the movement. In a way this makes them more vulnerable to burnout than other supporters. If on the top of that they are part of a movement culture which conveys the message that no periods of low motivation can be permitted, the already existing susceptibility to burnout is easily carried through" (Klandermans 1997: 104)

Fillieule and Broqua (2005: 189) highlight the particular nature of burnout in the context of AIDS activism, due to the scale of the epidemic and the involvement of sufferers. They also note that those activists affected by burnout and "psychological fatigue" are among the longest-standing and oldest activists; chronologically, this group (disproportionately seronegative, straight and female, hence less affected personally) seem to have dropped out at the point when new treatments started to come onto the market (2005: 210). If so, there are perhaps choices being made on some level about *when* one lets burnout take over, or recognises it – or when adrenalin and the sense of urgency dissipate?

## Activist burnout: some thoughts

There does seem to be widespread agreement that burnout is particularly associated with high commitment, whether in the sense of unrelenting dedication and activity, of a lack of other engagements and social links, a strong self-identity as an activist and altruistic motivation rather than instrumental rewards (*pace* FFII!).

If so, one of the most interesting findings is how *rarely* burnout actually leads to drop-out; following Downton and Wehr in particular, it seems more plausible that activists who have suffered burnout and are unable to continue with their previous activities tend to change organisation, or in some cases movement, but remain "activists" – and in this case, despite my more general reservations about the term, "activist" is probably a useful way of describing the role.

Similarly, John Charlton, at *Alternative Futures* 14, observed that in his research on historical members of CND in Newcastle, even the "burnt-out" activists retained the same basic personality orientation: in one case, remaining intensely political in their perspective, even though they did nothing more active than read the paper; in another, moving into what he describes as "non-active active strategies", such as lively engagement in politically-tinged folk music associations etc.

Within this "at-risk" group, what makes the difference (to return to Shields' question) between burning out or not? Some of the elements which seem clearest include social support (whether supportive family, friends and colleagues or support within the movement and organisation); a general acceptance of the need to rest, to manage work and to deal with the sense of urgency; solidarity in the face of repression; an effective way of identifying and recognising the results of one's own, or the group's, work; and a way of analysing the "bad news" that often forms the primary material of social movements and turning it into the raw material for sustainable action.

These can be tackled in different ways – individually, organisationally, or within a movement culture. The next section explores the various strategies that movement organisations and researchers recommend or have implemented in the hope of tackling burnout and aftershock.

What should be clear, though, is that burnout and post-traumatic shock reactions can to some extent be seen as features of particular movement situations, movement cultures and movement organisations; and movements can take action to make a difference in this respect. I do not want to suggest that particular movements are *inherently* unhealthy in this respect, for two reasons.

Firstly, what is unhealthy is primarily the social situation that movements are responding to, and the most obvious differences in terms of "movements on the edge" have to do with the levels of poverty and oppression in their social environment, and with the level of state and other repression. Secondly, in my experience at least the "same" movement (in terms of theme) can contain within it both "healthy" and "unhealthy" groups and tendencies – either simultaneously, or in different places or different times. Movements have choices in this respect, not necessarily free choices, but choices none the less, and this is what I now turn to.

### III. Strategies for tackling activist burnout

"[O]nce the visible wounds are healing, many of our friends are left alone with their fears, their sense of defeat, their suicidal despair, or the resulting addiction to pain pills... We are not surprised. We are shocked. We are traumatized. Nor is trauma something we choose to indulge. It is the typical human response to violence and injustice. In fact, in a community of activists who actively confront the capitalist system, trauma is inevitable..."

If we want to prevent burnout, and keep our activists from recoiling in fear of the next confrontation with reality, we all must learn to recognize trauma, develop a better understanding of the emotional impact it has on ourselves and on the community at large, and take the recovery of the individual out of isolation."

(Dr Ruthless, "Surviving the side effects of the class struggle"; n.d.: 1)

Responses to burnout and "aftershock" can include primary prevention, attempting to prevent burnout occurring, and secondary / tertiary prevention – either preventing stress turning into burnout, or recovery and avoiding a relapse. In most *movement* contexts, attempts to prevent burnout are more likely to come from organisations or the wider movement culture, while attempts to manage existing stress or burnout tend to come from the individual affected and perhaps their close friends and comrades.

Within the wider culture (which primarily means capitalist firms and public organisations adopting capitalist management strategies), individual-centred strategies tend to be better developed. These include tackling the causes of stress, altering interpretations of what is and is not stressful, and social support of various kinds. Mainstream organisational responses to burnout also tend to be focussed on the individual (as employee assistance programmes, stress management training and stress interventions) rather than attempting to change workplace culture or (even less likely) the amount of work demanded of individuals.

Since more is known, and more work has been done, at this individual level, its effectiveness is clearer than in relation to broader, "political" solutions aimed at transforming the workplace or working culture. Obviously enough, specifically activist strategies are particularly understudied, and there is considerable diversity in what is suggested:

"Ultimately ... there is no one size fits all solution. The process of healing that is involved in avoiding or coping with burnout is as singular as each one of us is. We have to follow our passions..." (ATS n.d.(a): 4)

Most of the literature drawn on in this paper (academic as well as movement-led) comes from movements which have reached a moderate degree of institutionalisation, not necessarily in the sense of formal organisations with paid staff, but certainly in the sense of movement longevity, reflexivity and (crucially) specialisation, so that authors on this subject (other than pure researchers) tend to be involved in interventions of various kinds.

Interestingly, there seems to be relatively little literature on the topic from really long-lived social movements (Marxism and socialism, feminism, black and anti-colonial movements). I suspect that to some extent this represents those movements' having arrived at relatively fixed



approaches to these subjects, whatever their effectiveness: arguably their organising traditions represent "encoded" ways of framing and tackling such issues.

Hence more is known about these issues within a certain "range" of movements, and about western Europe, North America and Latin America, and this needs to be taken into account.

## **Naming the problem: individual and collective awareness**

Unsurprisingly, most writers on the subject seem to feel that simply raising the issue can be useful in itself, whether at individual or collective levels. Thus Forman and Slap (1985: 64) write of the individual:

"One strategy to avoid these consequences [of addiction to adrenalin-producing stress] is to become more aware of our progress through these stages, to regulate our stress levels by monitoring what activities produce stress, and to limit stressful activities."

In terms of more specifically activist practice, a Climate Camp organiser writes:

"I have survived my own instincts and drives to work too much, so pushing myself past boundaries.

This is not to say that I did not reach those boundaries, but the toll of doing that did not cost so much...

The biggest lesson was to get rid of those tasks I physically could not do. This required me accepting a large amount of stuff on trust." (ATS 2007: 6)

At a collective level, the same author writes that the presence of ATS and the Wellbeing Space at the 2005 G8 and the Climate Camp undermined "ego and macho-ness" and enabled people to take action on each other's behalf, as well as being more aware of it in themselves (ATS 2007: 7).

FFII (2008: 1) similarly write "When we explain to people what burnout is, they recognise it faster and can take action before it happens. Action means telling people 'I need help and / or financial support'." Similarly, Forman and Slap (1985) recommend organising burnout workshops; and of course a fair amount of the literature (esp. the work of Shields, Wollman and ATS) comes from such initiatives.

## **Personal strategy**

"I want to be an activist for the rest of my life, not to be another bright burst of energy followed by hollowness... [W]e need to prepare ourselves for the long haul, physically and mentally." (ATS 2007: 8)

Importantly, what research exists indicates that recovery is possible, even common; "positive health" (McEwen 2002: 184) is a reasonable goal. McEwen gives the example the example of a subgroup of "resilient" women who recovered well from depression, in many cases despite difficult early life experiences. The key difference in this case seems to have been good personal relationships as well as education and career satisfaction.

This goes for burnout as much as for depression, as Downton and Wehr's "persisters" highlight:

"Persisters inevitably reversed this decline in energy and commitment. They got a 'second wind', sometimes when a new opportunity presented itself... For a renewal of commitment of this kind, the new challenge had to be met with a sense of inner motivation." (Downton and Wehr 1997: 108)

Similarly, Maslach and Gomes found that long-term activism is typically rooted in a broad perception of one's activism as life-enhancing, rather than highlighting its challenging aspects: "[f]ocusing on their passion can be of central importance." (2006: 47)

Given the right conditions, then, it is possible to effectively respond to burnout at an individual level, which is surely good news given the pressures facing movement organisations and the limited resources burned-out activists have for convincing their groups to work on these issues collectively.

This is also true in relation to at least some trauma:

"Politicizing the ongoing process of healing from violence means that I can see that piece of my identity as an asset rather than a barrier to my organizing. I feel that this increased what I have to offer as a community worker working primarily with women who are street-involved and engage in sex-work as a means of survival. I also feel that I'm in a better position to help bridge the gap between activists and organizations working against gender-based violence, on the one hand, and other anti-capitalist and anti-racist groups on the other." (Plyler 2006: 133 – 4).

### *Reflection and persistence*

As Downton and Wehr (1997: 113) put it,

"At the core of these strategies for dealing with burnout was a conscious effort on the part of persisters to create a way of being, thinking, and feeling that would sustain their peace commitments. This was the life design effort they undertook to preserve their movement commitments while maintaining personal equilibrium..."

In this context, their model of "persister burnout strategies" (1997: 115) starts with balancing (work and play, action and reflection, and responsibilities):

"Persisters ... balanced action with reflection, diversified their activities, used creative outlets to relieve tension, withdrew into solitude or nature to regain their energy, found kindred spirits for mutual support, and developed long-term views of change in order to maintain their motivation.

Consciously developed and implemented, a burnout prevention plan can reduce the chances of a commitment collapse. The lives of our persisters revealed that balance is a key element in avoiding burnout. They refrained from working to the point of exhaustion, cared for personal needs as well as movement demands, and took time to play and create. Such efforts balanced the stresses and disappointments of peace work with spirit-renewing activities." (Downton and Wehr 1997: 149).

Similarly, Rettig (2006 :25) recommends an "activist project history" which brings out things like needs, activist strengths and weaknesses, how important activism is in your life, perception of achievement, etc. In more general terms, Forman and Slap (1985) recommend journaling around movement activities, while Minieri and Getsos stress the importance of "reading, writing and reflecting" (2007), as do Barry and Dordevic (2007). All of this fits within a broad sense of reflective activism, however this is developed.

What strategies emerge from this reflection?

In very general terms, physical health, social networks, creative activities, effective emotional self-management and a conscious approach to one's activist work appear as the most frequently mentioned elements of a sustainable practice of activism, or as an effective response to burnout. If physical health and social networks are uncontroversial proposals, there are certainly differences in which other elements are emphasised, depending on the kinds of movements in question and the authors' relationship to social movements.

Thus references to creativity and self-nurturing beyond the physical and social are highlighted particularly in relation to the peace movement (Downton and Wehr) and by the explicitly religious Koster. A focus on workplace strategies is particularly strong in "how-to" texts (Forman and Slap, Shields, Rettig, Maslach and Gomes). Having said that, none of these authors dismiss other areas, and there are no explicit disagreements in relation to individual strategies.

### *Physical health*

McEwen (2002) highlights basic steps to reduce allostatic load: walking, running, healthy eating, sleep. Maslach and Gomes (2006) recommend that activists "build resilience by improving physical health and strength". Virtually all writers, unsurprisingly, recommend getting enough rest in a more general sense, taking breaks, and learning how to relax (Shields 1991, Klandermans 2005, Maslach and Gomes 2006, Minieri and Getsos 2007, Good Grief 2008, Mind Tools 2009a).

### *Social health*

Effective social support networks are widely recommended across different movements and cultures, consistent with the psychologists' emphasis on their effectiveness in combatting burnout and post-traumatic stress reactions.

Thus Barry and Dordevic (2007), researching women human rights activists internationally, talk about the importance of time with friends, crying, giving comfort and laughter. Downton and Wehr, reflecting on US peace activists, highlight the importance of spending social time with the community (1997: 115), while in a similar context Forman and Slap (1985) discuss their "'Hedonists for Social Responsibility" group in the context of "fun as a healing agent". In an Irish social centre, Good Grief (2008: 2) recommend "take care of each other ... do something for yourself. Talk to someone."

Slightly differently, Minieri and Getsos (2007) recommend building a network of friends and activities outside of organising, particularly for people whose main activity is internal to the organisation rather than about engaging with outsiders, while Mind Tools (2009a) recommend developing *better* personal and political relationships.

Plyler (2006: 127) notes the importance of extended family for her Aboriginal and Latin American interviewees, and of non-traditional (alternative, chosen) family for her white Canadian interviewee. Similarly, research on the Catholic Workers has highlighted the importance of their "chosen families" in very practical as well as emotional ways in enabling their continual, high-risk activism.

At a very basic level, FFII write "People need day jobs... Getting money from somewhere else makes it much easier to sustain a sacrificial project." (2008: 1). McEwen, finally, warns against overuse of alcohol to fill social gaps: the sustainable activist is not Sam Spade or Rebus.

### *Creativity and self-nurturing*

Downton and Wehr (1997: 115) highlight this area in particular as characterising their (often religiously-motivated) peace movement persisters. They stress a diversity of experiences, creativity (art and music, writing, crafting), maintaining contact with nature and children, cultivating patience, and silence and solitude.

Similar themes are mentioned by a range of authors, including Shields (1991) and Minieri and Getsos (2007); Koster (2007) recommends meditation in particular as a counter to burnout, while Audrey Huntley stresses the importance of her Aboriginal spirituality to her politics (in Plyler 2006: 127). She goes on to note:

"An elder once told me that every person should spend at least some time alone every day. It's essential for your sanity and for your life balance" (quoted in Plyler 2006: 132~).

### *Emotional self-management*

The key role of perception in the stress process has already been mentioned (McEwen 2002: 148). It follows that how we are with ourselves as activists can make a real difference to burnout.

Maslach and Gomes write that "[s]uccessful activists ... recognize the cyclic ups and downs of their work over time, and are flexible about how they deal with them" and recommend "converting the major end goal, which may only occur in the distant future, into a series of more specific milestones that can be realistically achieved in the short term." (Maslach and Gomes 2006: 48). In a related vein, Klandermans (2005: 104) cites Gomes and Maslach and Struik as implying that burnout can be countered by flexibility, tension release, and taking some distance from one's activist work. More broadly, Downton and Wehr identify as part of persister strategies

"Cultivating self-knowledge, understanding one's essential needs and balancing them, even becoming aware of those same needs in others; adjusting one's expectations to the difficulty of realizing a life vision; responding in a healthy way to the disappointments of rewards hoped for but not received; learning how to get away, rest, say not without guilt, pace oneself so play is interspersed with work, and to be gentle with others and oneself." (Downton and Wehr 1997: 113).

Shields (2008), rather exhaustingly, draws a distinction between active stress managers and passive victims of stress, and encourages us to assess ourselves on this basis...

### *Strategies for sustainable activist work*

Under this heading I have included items which deal with the individual activist's relationship to her activist work, rather than those which are mostly to do with group organisation or movement culture.

Many of these have to do with managing the amount of work an individual takes on. Forman and Slap (1985) place this in the context of treating movement commitment as lifelong, and using this to legitimate conserving one's own resources and setting priorities.

Psychologically, this fits as a rethinking of the potentially overwhelming scale of the problems and the difficulties in identifying results for one's own work, and as a practical implementation of a workable strategy for emotional self-management.

There is fairly broad agreement on how to do this: Most immediately, "saying no" to some external demands as well as self-generated ones is recommended by Forman and Slap (1985) and Maslach and Gomes (2006), and saying no to working at weekends by Barry and Dordevic (2007).

Forman and Slap go on to recommend attending fewer meetings and going with the natural ebb and flow of work demands, or as Minieri and Getsos (2007) put it, "work when you have to, not when you don't". FFII write in a related vein "Set limits. Don't do a tough project for more than a year or two years. Find someone else to take over before it's too late for you" (2008: 1).

Maslach and Gomes (2006: 46) also recommend "creat[ing] uninterrupted time, some protected freedom from demands and a chance to get rested and more clearly focused on an achievable goal".

Shields recommends effective personal planning and time management, awareness of your own work style, looking for feedback, and letting go of excessive attachment to results (1991: 124 – 9). In this she parallels standard workplace advice such as Mind Tools (2009a), whose strategies for preventing burnout include analysing sources of stress and effective time / work management.

Rettig, more specifically, recommends focussing on a single movement and single type of activism to about 80%, and focussing on achievable tasks within those (Forman and Slap agree with specialisation as a strategy). She argues, inter alia:

- (1) "Transitions are wasteful...
- (2) Working in too many movements, or on too many types of projects, means that you will probably have to manage unwieldy amounts of information and people...
- (3) Focussing will lower your stress level..." (Rettig 2006: 25)

Mind Tools (2009a) similarly highlight protecting the parts of your work that provide meaning and satisfaction. Minieri and Getsos conclude:

- "Enjoy your work and have fun..."
- "Celebrate your work and accomplishments and mourn your losses collectively." (Minieri and Getsos 2007: 269 – 71)

My main reservation in relation to this is that it suggests a greater "manageability" of activist work than is the case in many organisations, particularly where movement organisations are

simultaneously personal and social support networks for vulnerable people. As Jones (2007) notes, it is in itself traumatising to have to close the door or say "no" to a request for personal help, knowing that that person may have nowhere else to turn.

## **Organisational strategies**

A Knowledge Lab discussion including people from CIRCA and ATS brought out some political tensions around burnout, organisations and movements, with one participant arguing for a need to "move towards an activism where burnout simply didn't happen" rather than taking it as given and focussing on palliative measures (Harris 2008).

Certainly there are broad political issues about how far burnout is an issue for organisational strategy – or for the wider movement culture – or for the individual, as well of course as the ever-present question of how a movement or organisation prioritises time, energy and discussion, and how burnt-out or traumatised individuals can effectively argue the importance of what may be seen as their personal issues, particularly within movement or organisational cultures that privilege either macho emotional behaviour or a taken-for-granted attitude towards emotions.

The main issues identified as organisational counters to burnout and trauma are good interpersonal relationships, slowing the pace of work, well-organised autonomy and equality within movements, recognition of results, personal development as an organisational strategy and direct interventions.

### *Good relationships*

At the broadest level, interpersonal relationships within groups make a huge difference in this respect. As Maslach and Gomes (2006) note, in one study of 1990s peace activists 'relationships with other activists' emerged as *both* the most common reward and the most common stressor in their activist work. Shields (1991: 146 – 7) highlights working atmosphere and effective conflict resolution as important organisational elements in reducing the risk of burnout. Minieri and Getsos write:

Having social time, such as sharing dinner before or after a volunteer shift, is another way to build solidarity and a sense of mutual support (2007: 71).

More specifically, support groups, formal or informal, are widely recommended (Forman and Slap 1985, Shields 1991, Minieri and Getsos 2007).

### *Slowing the pace*

As we have seen, a movement which sees problems as overwhelming and urgent can be a burnout-inducing context. Lester et al. (1996) conclude that activist organisations should pay more attention to personal well-being, including setting priorities and challenging unhealthy organisational expectations. Shields (1991: 146 – 7) suggests aiming for "appropriate pace, tension and urgency", while ATS (2007: 7) speaks of the importance of discouraging feelings of panic, "impending doom and urgency" while encouraging each other to relax.

Minieri and Getsos (2007) also urge organisations to develop family-friendly policies and work environment, as well as leave policies etc. Material resources obviously play a role both in an organisation's capacity to do this (in this case we are already talking about organisations relying on paid staff) as well, more broadly, as raising or lowering the pressure of work on individuals.

### *Well-organised autonomy and prefigurative politics*

How activism is organised is another key area. McEwen (2002) stresses the importance of control over one's own work as a major stress-inducing dimension (151 – 2), and this participatory implication is highlighted by other authors, such as Maslach and Gomes, who recommend "increase autonomy, shared leadership, and an understanding of the importance of all having some confidence in their ability to decide the use of their own time" (46).

This is not, however, an argument for a lack of organisation: ATS (2007: 7) emphasises that better-organised meetings reduce the risk of burnout, while Shields (1991: 146-7) argues for clear goals and priorities, clear expectations of individuals, and good supervision as features which lead organisations to be less "burnout-prone".

Nor does it mean sole personal responsibility. FFII (2008: 1), echoing DIY activist practice, highlight the importance of a transparent and collective work structure:

"People must never work alone on projects. This is probably the main factor [in burnout]: the concentration of responsibility on one person who is naïve enough not to set limits.

Help improve the organisation... Making yourself irreplaceable almost guarantees burnout. Ensure the organisation has a stable, documented framework so people can switch in and out of projects easier."

Similarly, Plyler (2006: 129 – 130) links movement sustainability to processes of creating effective movement cultures geared around participatory decision-making, respect for others and skill-sharing. This is not necessarily a conflict-free process:

"Force the people who are already involved to teach you skills; a lot of the time hierarchies that are actually based on race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, and age pass themselves off as being based on skill. You can blow those lies away when you have a particular skill, be it designing a poster or filing legal papers. And you really have to push to get those skills." (Mac Scott, quoted in 2006: 132 – 3).

Finally, Maslach and Gomes also highlight the importance of internal fairness in reducing burnout, and recommend clear policies and procedures to support a sense of "equity" as well as taking actions that value diversity.

At the widest level, they suggest that the politics of prefiguration can enable activists to experience themselves as achieving something in the here and now; of course, this will only be effective if their ideological perspectives lead them to value this as meaningful. It is certainly important that participants perceive a good fit between the goals of a movement and the means as they experience them.

Good political practice, then, is also a good prophylactic against burnout.

### *Acknowledgement and other rewards*

US authors in particular focus on the need for rewards, material or otherwise. Maslach and Gomes highlight the importance of "opportunities for joy and satisfaction in the work", and note that "[A] group can develop meaningful forms of acknowledgement that provide praise and support for people's accomplishments." (2006: 46) The Australian Shields (1991) similarly highlights regular evaluation of achievements and frequent celebration of successes as features of organisations which are not burnout-prone. Lester et al. (1996) note the need to celebrate even partial success.

In a community organising context, Minieri and Getsos write:

"Be sure to acknowledge and recognize members for their work by holding volunteer and member parties that recognize people's contributions and help energize them. Similarly, CVH [Community Voices Heard] recognizes those members who put in a lot of time by prioritizing them to participate in exciting movement-building activities in other states and countries (2007: 71).

The Foundation for a Free Information Infrastructure write "The simple cure to burnout is to get paid for your work. This is hard in a setting like FFII but sometimes it's possible. It's why we are trying to build up a small core of professionals, who we know can work for years without getting burnt-out" (2008: 1). This is perhaps an extreme situation, where the work that participants do as activists is close to work they could be paid well for doing as employees elsewhere, and in this sense parallels fields like free legal aid services, women's refuges, health projects, adult education etc. where professionalisation (and hence an orientation towards funding) seems almost bound to win out as the endpoint of an organisation which survives over decades.

### *Personal development as organisational strategy*

As Shields (1991) notes, valuing individuals' needs and development is important in reducing the risk of burnout.

In addition, taking on varied roles and tasks energizes people. Directly ask members if they would like to do something new or different and what kind of training or support would they need to do it. Make sure that you are not over-asking the same members to do things. It is easy to go to those who do the job well. You don't have to prep them, you know they will show up. Check in periodically so you know those members aren't feeling burned out." (Minieri and Getsos 2007: 71)

This is, of course, advice to leaders and movement "managers", in this case in US community organising, and these kind of hierarchical situations are not universal in movements. They also note the importance of work beyond the individual campaign in combating burnout:

"[W]hen leaders, members, and staff are burning out, movement-building can help to bring back their energy. They spend time learning about other struggles – current or past. Learning about the personal sacrifices, obstacles, and challenges others face or have overcome puts their work and their own individual concerns in context. It can be invigorating and freeing just to go to another city or town and move to action, not getting involved in administrative aspects that can be frustrating." (Minieri and Getsos 2007: 348)



Radical educators working with movements will know that being able to think about something that goes beyond the immediate day-to-day concerns of the organisation is one of the things their students most commonly highlight as worthwhile to them as activists.

It is also, of course, one of the major reasons for activist get-togethers at any level, be they book fairs, radical conferences, social forums, movement gatherings, summer camps or whatever – and a key fuel in making movement-building itself possible: the people who give most to movement-building beyond their own local circumstances are often those who have difficulties in continuing within the local (or national) situation.

### *Specific interventions*

A small number of more specific movement interventions against burnout have been documented, although evidence of their effectiveness or otherwise is harder to come by. Thus, for example, Guatemalan human rights activists suffering burnout through overwork, direct attack and vicarious stress designed a multilevel response consisting of 10 sessions of therapy with a specialist who understood political violence and trauma; a monthly three-hour session reviewing how they handled a case and worked together on it; and a monthly four-hour self-help group exploring different relaxation and stress release exercises. (Barry / Dordevic 2007: 111).

Good Grief (2008) offered access to resources on activist trauma and burnout, debrief for people who had experienced a police raid and the fallout (eviction of their social centre), as well listening and support.

ATS (2005) reflect on the G8 2005 protests in Scotland, where they organised a recovery dome at the Stirling campsite and a support group in Edinburgh.

"The recovery dome saw a steady flow of people coming to find somebody to talk to about what they were going through, to get a massage (often fulfilling the same purpose), to find a quiet place to cry, to retreat or to just calm down with a cup of tea and a blanket" (ATS 2005: 259).

Their evaluation identified a few learning points from this experience, which are worth repeating in that it is unusual to see any self-critical reflections on burnout or trauma interventions. In common with other authors working in this area, they found that experience ratified the value of tackling these issues:

"all of us enjoyed doing the work; it felt useful, it was appreciated and it was rewarding to feel that somebody actually feels better after talking to you." (ATS 2005: 260)

As we might expect from discussions above, they found interpersonal relationships challenging and identified both the need to put effort into group-building among those working on any future trauma support group, and for an external supervisor / counsellor on site to support the frontline workers themselves.

They also identified difficulties in drawing boundaries and defining tasks, in good and bad ways:

"There is a definite need for general welfare work – cups of tea, massages, a quiet space and blankets can make an enormous difference, and can help prevent burn-out (on a really basic level, we underestimated the profound impact of a lack of sleep). This blurring of general welfare and trauma support proved to be very useful" (ATS 2005: 260 – 1).

However, "we found out that trauma support work is very narrowly focused and inevitably ended up doing other mental health work" (ATS 2005: 260). Some things on offer – phone and personal support in Edinburgh, long-term support – were underused and so they wound up focussing on other things (prisoner support in Edinburgh, website subsequently).

I have yet to find any reflection in the literature on why activists have chosen one particular frame or theme (burnout, trauma, depression etc.) to work on rather than another, although there are critiques of these frames as categories of the medical establishment. ATS (2005) do note that the "trauma" category may discourage people from accessing needed services, and they have in fact produced separate leaflets on burnout and on trauma for distribution in movement contexts.

## **Just stopping**

A temporary break from movement work occasionally appears as a valued strategy for combating burnout. Thus Fillieule and Broqua (2005: 192) discuss a "green card" procedures used by an AIDS activism organisation, in which volunteers could agree a period of 3 – 6 months without activity, at the end of which they could choose to return to activism or to leave the organisation. Some Irish community groups similarly have "duvet days": staff (paid in this case) have a certain number of days each year which they may take off with no need for explanation.

A number of organisations and individuals offer retreats for activists, most commonly with a spiritual basis, such as Joanna Macy, Starhawk and the Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement. At the most developed level, the Windcall program in the US (documented in Wells 2007) offers 2 – 3 week residential retreats, primarily for grassroots community and labour organisers of at least 5 years' standing, working on social / environmental justice issues in low-income communities. These programmes include time alone and in nature, creative activities and exchange with other participants (only 4 people participate at a time). Interestingly, Barry and Dordevic note that in the first year of the programme, take-up was very low because people didn't feel they deserved it!

The project has run for 20 years at this point, moving beyond its original organisers, and claims that evaluations by participants show that the programme enabled them to continue in leadership roles, to create sustainable organisations and to innovate. They argue that it gives time for reflection, shows activists that they are valued for the personal sacrifices they have made, and that it gives them a badly-needed period of rest and renewal.

They highlight a series of elements as key to the effectiveness of such retreats:

- "Sufficient length of residency: 2 weeks minimum, four weeks preferable.
- A small group of like-minded companions. Four residents at a time.
- Space for privacy, as well as communal activity.
- The absence of schedule or determined end product.
- A natural environment open to exploration.
- Outlets for creative expression and exploration of new activities and interests.

- A human environment of caring regard." ([http://changingcourse.org/?view-burnout\\_solutions](http://changingcourse.org/?view-burnout_solutions))

One of the original organisers, Susan Wells, writes

"[W]e watched as residents hungrily began to pursue new adventures, relationships, creative expression and periods of reflection. As we read their writings about newly awakened senses, saw them laugh and play with each other or mourn their losses, we knew they were regaining parts of themselves that they had forgotten even existed. They were reassembling a multifaceted picture of themselves. They also were regaining the intricate system of inner feedback that balances needs and goals and helps each of us chart a healthy course...

In the beginning, the chance to do work based on their values had offered enough reward for their efforts. But somewhere along the way, the reciprocity was lost. They began to sacrifice too much and run on empty too often. At Windcall this pattern is disrupted. Organizational crises and the desperate needs of others no longer define their days. Eventually residents step far enough out of the old structure to see its price tag and recognize that its most onerous by-product is a loss of self. Many begin to explore a healthier work ethic that includes their own growth and well-being. They search for a way to continue to do the work they love and make room for their whole selves as well." (2007: 110 – 111).

The resource implications of a project like this are of course enormous, and probably only sustainable in the US, or as part of majority world solidarity projects; however, adult education programmes (Horton and Freire 1990) may at times have a similar role to play.

## Change and rethinking

Cronburg (2008) argues along with many others to be aware of ineffective "busywork", and be aware of our own basic needs. More unusually, she writes

"If you aren't enjoying your activism, you're doing it wrong... when you start to get frustrated or annoyed with your activism, take a break, find something else to do that you truly love and enjoy, and do that." (Cronburg 2008: 3)

Consistent with this general theme, a number of authors suggest that full-blown burnout, if it is not to lead to permanent demobilisation, can only be effectively tackled by changing organisations, if not movements. Thus Downton and Wehr (1991) note that many of those who dealt effectively with stress and burnout did so by changing organisations while remaining within the same movement.

Klandermans (1997: 107) similarly notes that when a group ceased to exist, those who quit activism altogether reported feelings of burnout, unlike those who shifted to other movements. Presumably the reasons for this have to do with habits, roles and associations in one's existing movement context.

In a non-activist context, Mind Tools (2009b) similarly suggest that rest may not be enough to cure full-blown burnout, and larger changes are needed. They argue against a change of career, and encourage a change of work within the same profession as offering a better chance of not making the same mistakes, while keeping many of one's existing skills.

In this, they parallel, Shields' suggestion that once burnout has reached its peak one should simply stop and recuperate, exploring new outlets that may release creative energies (e.g. art, bodywork, meditation etc.) which can eventually make it possible to reflect on what happened and do things differently in future (1991: 148 - 150).

As ATS put it,

"We can also look at burnout as a warning sign – in this sense it is an opportunity to re-evaluate and re-prioritise, to develop more sustainable and healthy working methods... 'it doesn't have to be all breakdown, it can also be breakthrough'." (ATS n.d.(a): 1)

At the broadest level, this can mean a re-evaluation of life priorities:

"The only cure for this kind of burnout is to be truthful about who you are, what your values are and what your needs are, and to start reorganizing your life around that truth". (Rettig 2006: 18).

### **Activism as rich, joyful, constructive**

"When we view trauma from a political perspective, two truths emerge which stand in stark tension with each other: that trauma can psychologically debilitate people in ways that help to perpetuate domination and oppression; and that trauma can help to spark personal and political resistance to domination and oppression... It is in the push and pull between [these] that our prospects for mobilizing effective social change movements rise or fall." (Wineman 2003: 25)

In other words, it is not all bad; or, more exactly, sustainable activism depends on creative responses to difficult situations.

"Human rights activism is gruelling, stressful, insecure, low paid (if it pays at all). It leaves little time for friends, family, and lovers.

And, at its best, it's one [of] the most rewarding, challenging, and powerful vocations in the world." (Barry and Dordevic 2007: 104).

Lester et al. (1996) note that alongside the difficulties noted above, there are some features of activism that are positive in terms of burnout. "Most significantly, activism allows people to act on their beliefs in ways that are affirming and personally meaningful..."

Jones devotes a whole chapter to "action against [psychological] fracture", which is largely focussed on solidarity:

"because breakage is at the root of trauma, connection is most essential. Luckily, opportunities for connection – among people, between organizations, and across issues – abound in the world of activism." (2007: 116)

This is in large part about other people; if relationships with other activists are the most common source of stress, they are also the most common reward for activism (Maslach and Gomes 2006).

## Conclusion

Beyond the points made by the various authors cited here, I think there are some elements of activist "common sense" which are also "good sense" in terms of avoiding burnout, particularly but not only within the Marxist and anarchist traditions (though actual organisations in these traditions have by no means always embodied this good sense effectively).

Firstly, that an initial commitment grounded in a sense of collective self-interest, or of solidarity with others, is likely to be less prone to burnout than one grounded in a sense of *individualist* altruism ("I am doing this for someone else with whom I have no particular connection"). Conversely, the most successful altruists, on the showing of the literature at least, are those with a strong *religious* foundation. A secular and individual altruism, despite its legitimacy within the broader culture, is perhaps the least likely orientation to "work" in the long term. As Mick McKeown put it at *Alternative Futures* 14, movements need a relational model of organising, with a strong sense of "we" – to which we could perhaps add the possibility of an expanded sense of "I", whether through solidarity or in a religious context.

Secondly, the importance of good analysis and strategy. It is not simply in the breaking down of large goals to manageable "aims and objectives", but in the linking of apparently overwhelming "bad news" to an explanation which allows for effective strategy and does not require that strategy to be immediately successful that continued movement participation is possible.

In particular, it makes a difference to see the "building" of movements, however understood, as a worthwhile achievement in itself, since it is something that is often within easier reach than the changing of structures, and it is important to identify small successes on the way to larger ones. It also enables the development of an immediate sense of "we"<sup>7</sup>.

It is also important to identify real social potential for change; analyses which see other people as simply complicit, ignorant, incapable of change or actively malevolent increase activists' sense of isolation and despair. Of course, they are often themselves expressions of unacknowledged burnout (which includes cynicism) or traumatisation.

Solidarity, famously, is a counter to this, along with the ongoing struggle to connect up individual campaigns, build movements, develop movement cultures and find supportive spaces within society as a whole. The more activism is "grounded" in a life which is not separate from other people's, and the more it operates from a sense of solidarity with others, the less the risk of burnout and the better the prognoses of recovery from trauma.

I leave the last words on this topic to Steven Wineman, who I find the most psychologically plausible of the writers considered here in his insistence that what is needed for continued and effective struggle in emotionally healthy ways is to find constructive ways of expressing the emotions that drive our movement participation:

"It is neither realistic nor desirable to seek to eliminate rage from radical politics. Outrage at the profound injustices created by existing conditions has to be a wellspring of social change movements. The key question is not whether rage will continue to play a pivotal role in radical

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<sup>7</sup> This can of course lead to the complacency of the Second International; a psychologically stable movement is not necessarily a radical or effective one in practice. To say that movement-building is *an* important achievement is not to say that it is sufficient unto itself; just that there are times when we have to be able to find some satisfaction in being still standing despite everything.

politics, but whether and how we can consciously shape our expression of rage to serve social change.

I have argued that rage is a natural and inevitable response to the trauma of powerlessness – but that in its raw and often unconscious form, powerless rage defeats effective movement building and can lead to destructive behavior...

What does rage look like when it is expressed and organized constructively?...

- Our expression is focused and strategic, allowing us to maintain awareness of the effects of our actions on others and to consciously assess the possibilities that our actions will produce desirable outcomes.
- Our means are consistent with our ends...
- Our actions are linked to positive visions and programs. We affirm the validity of our outraged 'no' in reaction against our own mistreatment and in reaction against broader conditions of social and political injustice. But we also take responsibility for translating that 'no' into ideas and possibilities for a more just society and world...
- We act from a commitment to equal power relations." (Wineman 2003: 205 - 6)

## References

Perhaps the single most useful starting place for people who are concerned about this on a practical level is the UK-based Activist Trauma site at [www.activist-trauma.net](http://www.activist-trauma.net), which also includes links to sister organisations elsewhere as well as relevant mental health resources etc.

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