

Mental health in the Palestine solidarity movement amidst a genocide

Fostering persistence and supporting each other through stress, burnout and trauma

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12 June 2024. This article is continuing to be developed and enhanced.

Summary:

Unprecedented horrors are currently being perpetrated against Palestinian people. In addition to witnessing genocide live streamed via mobile phone, solidarity activists have been working at fever pitch to challenge the genocide and our Governments' complicity in it. As this horror continues, we must support one another as we run this collective marathon.

This article, written by activists in the Palestine solidarity movement in south eastern Australia, presents a resource to Palestinians and the solidarity movement to sustain ourselves and our groups through incredibly stressful and distressing times. This article draws on activist and mental health theories about stress, vicarious trauma, burnout, and resilience. It also draws on current experiences in the Palestine solidarity movement as expressed in workshops, online events and debriefing sessions. This piece offers the metaphors of a healthy garden bed and a burnout spiral as tools for supporting our own wellbeing, and practical ideas for building healthy patterns of activism and self care.

Context:

While Israel's policies against Palestinians have been brutal for many decades, the period since October 2023 has been unprecedented in the scale and intensity of the violence. Israel's bombings of Gaza have been compared to Dresden, with every element of basic infrastructure decimated. Hospitals, schools, churches, mosques, roads and universities have been bombed. Israel is using mass starvation of a civilian population as a weapon of war, as millions of Palestinians have been deliberately deprived of the basics of life. There are so many incidents that would be horrific as single incidents – discovering a mass grave at a hospital, a sniper attack on a humanitarian convoy, evacuations of hospitals, denial of entry of enough food and water, bombing a school or a refugee camp being used as an evacuation shelter. Every single day since October 2023 has brought more horrific stories. Alongside this, the situation in the West Bank has also escalated dramatically, with hundreds of Palestinians killed, thousands rounded up and imprisoned, and hundreds of thousands experiencing further restrictions.

The global resistance in response to this genocide has also been unprecedented. In Australia regular rallies are taking place in both major cities and small towns in every State and Territory. Many new collectives have emerged, each playing their own unique role in calling for a Free Palestine. Some of these new collectives include: Unionists for Palestine, Families for Palestine, Mums for Palestine, Healthcare Workers for Palestine, Teachers for Palestine, Mental Health Workers for Palestine, local council areas for Palestine, and so many more. There have also been dozens of motions for Palestine moved in Local Councils, often as a direct result of pressure from local constituents. There have been countless sit ins, vigils and gatherings at parliamentary offices, major public squares and in small

towns. Disruptive direct action has proliferated – blocking the docks to disrupt Israeli shipping lines, pickets at arms manufacturers, sit-ins at the Prime Minister’s office. Recent student led encampments at universities have called for their institutions to cut ties with arms manufacturers linked to Israel. There have been dozens of solidarity actions around Australia each week. At the time of writing, solidarity actions for Palestine continue to increase in number. We believe the scale in numbers and persistence of action over such a concentrated period of time is unprecedented on this continent. Whilst the level of activity has been phenomenal, we must acknowledge also that it has been exhausting for us all individually and collectively. As the President of the [Australia Palestine Advocacy Network \(APAN\)](#), [Nasser Mashni recently said](#) - “I’m not okay, and I am sure you are not either. And it’s ok to not be ok... you’re not supposed to be ok during a genocide”.

When the attacks on Gaza began in October 2023, we rose up in solidarity. We responded to this crisis as we should, by throwing everything we could at fighting it. As we write, that was eight long months ago, with an estimated 45,000+ Palestinians being killed in this time. The crisis moment has become protracted, lasting far longer than we imagined possible. Since October 2023, we have been sprinting. However we now find ourselves in a marathon.

And of course we know it did not start on October 7th. It is crucial to look at the socio-political and historical context of the illegal occupation of Palestine to understand impacts of this moment on Palestinians (both in Palestine and the diaspora), as well as on pro-Palestinian activists worldwide. The historical and political trauma lived by Palestinians impact on our reactions as we watch a genocide live on our screens.

We acknowledge this trauma disproportionately affects Palestinians, people of colour, Muslims and people who have already survived other trauma. It can also be particularly challenging for newer activists.

The authors of this paper have been actively engaged in supporting activist mental health and wellbeing in this period. Ziyad, is a Palestinian active in organising online events focusing on the mental health of Palestinians through the Shifa Project, an initiative to support the psychospiritual needs of communities impacted by the Gaza war. Irene has been a core part of the Mental Health Workers for Palestine collective that provides individual and group debriefing sessions to activists. Liz and Jess have facilitated workshops on wellbeing for the movement. Jess worked with the Australian Palestine Advocacy Network (APAN) for 13 years and Liz is doing a PhD about the health and wellbeing of activists engaged in disruptive direct action. It is through these experiences, and noticing signs of stress in our own bodies, that we have decided to think and write together.

Living in Australia while our hearts are in Palestine:

Many of us who are witnessing a genocide from afar are experiencing significant distress as these events unfold. As [Dr Awaad with the Muslim Mental Health and Islamic Psychology Lab at Stanford University](#) writes “A storm of intense emotions has clouded our daily lives and even our ability to function”.

A range of factors have led to this current moment being overwhelming for activists. The following themes have been expressed by Palestinian activists in Australia and by Dr Awaad:

- **We can be feeling helpless-** it's hard to see how we're making a difference when we haven't been able to stop the genocide. While history might teach us that social change is propelled forward in moments such as these, we haven't been able to intervene in real time to stop this horror.
- **We may feel the need to deprioritise our own personal needs** in light of the horrendous suffering in Gaza. It is difficult to honour the basic needs of our bodies, such as sleep or food or water, when we know that Gazans are being denied the basics of life. While we know that depriving ourselves of these things doesn't help people in Gaza, our profound distress about the injustice can make it challenging to meet our own needs. We are painfully aware of the privileges of our own lives – and desperately want to be able to 'give' these to those in Palestine, and feel a sense of **guilt** that we can't.
- **Going about life as normal.** There is a deep cognitive dissonance for us, that on one hand we are tuning into the news of unmitigated horror, while we are also trying to go about life as normal. As one placard at a protest says, we are "struggling with work-genocide balance". It is difficult to go about our usual routines, or participate in special events, while the lives of Gazans are so disrupted. In settings like work, study, and extended family or community, many of us are spending heaps of energy on masking emotions or pretending everything is fine.
- **Don't you care?** Many of us have family and friends who aren't engaged in the solidarity movement. It can be difficult to feel connected to these people we love, and we can feel disappointed about why they don't seem to want to know or care about what is happening to Gazans.
- **Disconnection with the dominant narrative.** There is a profound disconnect with the dominant narrative shared in media in Australia (eg. Difference between watching ABC and Al Jazeera). When parliamentarians and media focus on 'harmony' and 'local tensions'; and frame this genocide as Hamas 'started it', it is not only politically offensive, but for many of us, this raises a fundamental question of whether or not we belong in this society. This is felt particularly by those who have migrated in recent years to Australia. For some of us from Palestinian or broader Middle Eastern communities, this disappointment is merged with a sense of betrayal. Islamophobia is more prevalent and visible which is another layer for some of us feeling disconnected from the broader community.
- **For Palestinians there is the extra burden of historical, intergenerational trauma.** The current socio-political climate facing Palestinians must be contextualised in light of the historical and political trauma that has been ongoing for 76 years and more. [Dr Samah Jabr](#), practising psychiatrist and head of the Ministry of Health in Palestine, talks about historical trauma as cumulative emotional and psychological wounds over time, arising from massive collective traumas that cross generations.

What activists in Australia are saying is hard right now

- **How do we digest so much suffering?** Through the news and social media, we are seeing constant horrific violations of people's basic rights and needs. When digesting these images, some of us feel voyeuristic. Others feel triggered by other trauma. Others are disassociating with their emotions. Others are feeling hypervigilant and want to ensure that they hear every news story.

- **A feeling that we can never do enough.** With the unfathomable suffering, it is hard to feel like any response is adequate. There are so many activities, so many actions. Some have identified that sometimes 'doing' activism is an unhelpful diversion to avoid feelings.
- **Where do emotions fit?** Some are struggling with our own grief. While people distant from the direct impacts of the genocide are not wanting to centre their own feelings, they know they need appropriate spaces where grief can be expressed and legitimated. Some people are struggling with others around them expressing white hot anger about Gaza. Some people are feeling constantly grumpy at others. Some are feeling the tension in tempering their own language and behaviours at work and in community settings when they are overburdened by frustration.
- **Being consumed by the movement.** We want to stop the genocide. Many of us have put a massive focus of our energy and time into this work. For some of us, this is our first time in this movement. As the horrors have dragged on for months and months, many of us have felt 'consumed' and wonder where other parts of our life fit in. Some feel like they are only normal when they are doing activism. Others are seeing other projects and activist campaigns fall away, and wondering how to make space for them. Some of us are struggling to juggle time between deeply emotional and often online organising spaces, and our responsibilities towards families and friends. While solidarity activism seems like the most important thing to do right now we don't want to be neglecting our key relationships. One person says "we are forgetting ourselves as we're finding ourselves".
- **Conflict in the movement.** Some say "we are tearing each other apart". Others, particularly new activists are struggling to navigate the very different ideas about how we move forward in the movement. Some are saying that *call out* culture is resurfacing, taking precedence over the need for continuous personal improvement and positive self transformation. This feels like a backward step, like exclusion is prioritised over learning.
- **Overwork is leading to people getting sick or pulling out of the movement altogether.** Many of us still have jobs we need to go to, families to care for, lives to balance. And it's now winter. Some people are able to proactively take a step back to refuel, but others are finding we are often physically or emotionally sick.

Thankfully, lots of people in the movement are now having conversations about what are we going to do to sustain ourselves, our groups and our communities. We realise this is an ongoing war. And we're in it for the long haul.

Capitalist culture values activity, not people

Western societies are often driven by 'productivity'. There is a huge focus on activity, on producing. Critics are increasingly calling this [grind culture](#) where overwork becomes habitual, and exhaustion becomes routine.

For activists embedded in these cultures, it is easy to see how this can translate into frenetic activism, of the need to 'do' more - however much we're already doing.

As climate activist [Charlie Wood](#) puts it:

Capitalism has created the illusion that we can survive disconnected from one another and nature in concrete jungles climbing career ladders. However, the further we climb these

ladders, the sadder and sicker we often become. Unfortunately, I see activist spaces perpetuate this same illusion while pretending to be different. We work long hours. Many of us sit in offices in cities, fixed to our screens and struggle to get outdoors during the day. For years, I deluded myself that working more equaled achieving more. I stripped away anything that wasn't core to my work... But this made me miserable..

As well as being inherently problematic, if the focus is on 'doing' then it is difficult to value taking time to reflect and evaluate what we have done, and ask questions about how it could be done differently. But we absolutely need to reflect on these probing questions.

Also, if all the focus is on 'doing', then emotions are seen at best as irrelevant, or at worst as a distraction ([Banks](#), [Wood](#)). This is clearly dangerous for activists. Politically and intellectually, it is a contradiction. Many of us experience a deep anguish about the state of the world. While we recognise that action is an antidote to despair, we need to make time for all our painful emotions. If we don't, our unacknowledged emotions may discharge in unhealthy ways. Some activists say they use 'doing' to try and shield themselves from being overwhelmed by how they are feeling. If any emotion is acceptable to be expressed publicly in this frame, it is anger. While anger is important, it is clearly problematic if this is all we are able to express. Repressed emotions don't make for healthy individuals or communities.

As climate activist [Sophie Banks](#) puts it:

Staying busy can be a better option than allowing time to feel the despair, outrage, fear, grief, paralysis and other things that are the natural response to these images, and to the possible futures we are aware of.

But if we don't bring these feelings into awareness it's possible that they drive us beyond our health, and in ways that are themselves damaging. Our anger can leak out in our groups as frustration or attacks on those alongside us. We can become driven by fear in a way that is ungrounded and out of relationship with reality. Unexpressed grief can solidify into places of numbness, even into sickness in our bodies, according to some.

Another one of the foundational notions of capitalism is the notion of scarcity - there isn't enough time, enough money, enough people. Many now say that Western societies are drenched in a [culture of scarcity](#). Translated into activist communities this culture inherently creates a sense of [anxiety](#), which encourages competition between and within activist groups, rather than collaboration or the celebration of diversity of strategies.

Clearly as activist communities, we need to find ways to resist scarcity and grind culture. We need to resist the ideas of overwork and competition to create communities of people who can support one another to learn as we seek to change the world. We need to reorientate our thinking from being 'output' focused to being 'outcome' driven. Considering what actions are the most impactful and focusing our energy towards those, not acting for action's sake. We need to find ways to personally and collectively honour emotions in our activism. We need to be able to see ourselves, and one another, not as parts of a machine, but as co-creators of another world.

Adrenaline - great in short term - but dangerous for extended periods

The idea of hyperarousal - "fight or flight", or more recently "fight-flight-freeze-fawn" - has become part of common understanding of how our bodies work. In times of high stress or perceived threat, our bodies are flooded with stress hormones such as adrenaline that can lead us to a burst of activity.

Many activists are familiar with this experience. During an action, mass mobilisation or time of extreme stress, we can feel our system jump into gear. Sometimes hyperarousal can occur over days or even weeks. However it is only meant for a short term boost.

When we are in hyperarousal, we activate the part of our brain that helps us to act fast and instinctively. It however turns off the higher brain functions, those that help us to reflect, to tune into others empathetically and to think laterally. All those latter things are really important for us to plan strategic actions together, and to be good to one another.

[Forman and Slap](#) say *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 addicting 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 adrenaline at some point after the stressful feelings end.*

Climate activist [Sophie Banks](#) talks a lot about the risks of becoming stuck in adrenaline fueled cycles, that *continued action without enough calm keeps the sympathetic nervous system in constant arousal – and when we add stress such as fear, urgency, anger it ramps up even more. Over time the hormones produced by this system start to erode our immune system and other bodily functions, leading to ... long term health problems.*

In the last eight months we have witnessed genocide, acted to try and stop it, and often felt overwhelming helplessness. Through this process, our nervous systems have been flooded with stress hormones. If stress hormones are not expelled, they remain in our system and deplete our inner resources internally.

Understanding Vicarious Trauma, Compassion Fatigue, Secondary Trauma & Burnout

The concepts of [vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, and burnout](#) are crucial in understanding the psychological toll on individuals who witness or engage with global scale traumatic events. The ongoing genocide in Palestine exemplifies a context where allies and activists are exposed to severe human suffering, unable to look away. These next few paragraphs delve into these psychological phenomena, tracing their historical background, defining their characteristics, and examining their implications for those bearing witness to the atrocities in Palestine.

It is important to note that much of the literature about psychology and mental health comes from a dominant Western framework, with its focus on individualism. There is much work to be done in developing and decolonising these concepts. For example, for Palestinians in this current moment, there is not just the individual trauma of watching the genocide - this is an ongoing, collective trauma that impacts communities collectively - and responding to it requires collective ways of processing, coping and healing.

Vicarious Trauma

The term vicarious trauma was first articulated in a 1985 journal article that examined the vulnerability of children who witness violence and other traumatic experiences. The recognition that children could be deeply affected by witnessing violence, even if not directly targeted, led to further exploration of how secondary exposure to trauma affects adults. By the early 1990s, the concept had been expanded to include professionals in helping roles, such as therapists, social workers, and first

responders, who experience the psychological impacts of the trauma of the people they are supporting, almost as if the trauma were their own.

Vicarious trauma involves the internalisation of the traumatic experiences of others. For instance, a professional working to support a newly arrived Palestinian family from Gaza or an activist working tirelessly to use their platform to monitor and share news and stories of people in Gaza, may start to internalise their pain, fear, and grief, experiencing distress and felt sensations of the violence as if experiencing it first hand. This intense resonance is rooted in the deep empathetic connections formed between the helper and the helped, the witness and the one being witnessed.

Those who have been continually advocating for an end to this genocide while watching the brutality in Palestine may find themselves envisioning the trauma and asking, "What if that were my child or family?" This strong identification can lead to a profound sense of vulnerability and emotional turmoil, as their nervous systems react similarly to those directly experiencing the trauma. Just as one can feel excitement from a thrilling book or movie, one can similarly experience the traumatic impact vicariously.

The concept of vicarious trauma underscores the importance of understanding the emotional and psychological toll that witnessing and engaging with others' traumatic experiences can take. Professionals and activists involved in the Palestinian conflict, for instance, may find themselves grappling with vicarious trauma as they empathise deeply with the suffering of those they are trying to help.

Compassion Fatigue

In 1995, Charles Figley introduced the concept of compassion fatigue, describing it as the emotional exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to the suffering of others. Compassion fatigue is particularly relevant for those in helping professions who repeatedly encounter traumatic stories and events.

The "oxygen mask metaphor" aptly illustrates the need for self-care: just as on an airplane one must secure their own oxygen mask before helping others in an emergency, professionals and activists must attend to their own wellbeing to continue effectively supporting others. In the context of Palestine, social workers, therapists, activists and other allies often face a relentless barrage of distressing information and harrowing personal accounts, which can lead to compassion fatigue.

Unlike direct trauma, compassion fatigue results from an empathetic engagement with others' trauma, where the helper's ability to care diminishes over time due to emotional depletion. This highlights the critical importance of maintaining personal wellbeing to continue effectively supporting others.

Empathy and Emotional Contagion

Empathy, defined as the ability to understand and vicariously experience another person's emotional state, plays a central role in both vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue. Distinguishing between sympathy and empathy, empathy involves an active sharing in the emotional experience, while sympathy is more about feeling concern for someone from a distance. Activists and allies intrinsically drawn to human rights and justice work, often have high levels of empathy, making them susceptible to emotional contagion. Their natural inclination to deeply feel and respond to others' suffering can lead to significant emotional strain. This heightened empathetic engagement can result in a mental, physical, and emotional toll if not properly managed. Overextending oneself and neglecting personal needs in the face of continuous trauma exposure can exacerbate these effects, pushing individuals

toward a significant stress response, flooding the nervous system with a cocktail of stress hormones, eventually leading to compassion fatigue. Maintaining a balance between involvement and detachment is essential to prevent the adverse effects of over-identification with the trauma of others.

Burnout

Burnout is the culmination of chronic exposure to stressors, leading to physical and emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a sense of reduced accomplishment. Risk factors for burnout include neglecting personal needs, isolating oneself, skipping meals, inadequate hydration, and insufficient rest. Allies and activists working within the Palestine solidarity movement may find themselves postponing self-care out of a sense of duty or guilt, further accelerating the burnout process.

Burnout can be understood as a failure of self-compassion, where individuals prioritise the needs of others to their own detriment. Such neglect is often justified through self-talk such as, “how can I sleep when people in Gaza may never wake”.... or when we remind ourselves of privileges afforded to us, like the food, shelter, and safety that Palestinians are desperately seeking. It’s easy to feel guilt while experiencing such privileges. In this case, it might be helpful to create a little distance to have perspective, reframe these privileges to serve, and transform them into instruments for revolution. Recognising the signs of vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue early and making conscious efforts to return to a balanced state, is crucial for sustaining one's ability to help others.

Being mindful of one's empathetic responses, often referred to as the ‘empathy dial’, is crucial. Allies and activists would benefit greatly from being aware of their levels of empathy in reserve, identify when in danger of depletion and learning to regulate their emotional engagement to recharge and top up to reset their ‘empathy dial’. Being too empathetic can lead to overwhelming stress, while being too detached can result in inadequate care. Finding a balance is key to sustainable activism and advocacy when fighting an extremely oppressive regime. Our private emotional states influence our public behaviours. If we want to influence others, we can consider how our behaviours are influenced by our emotions. This is where our ability to regulate emotions literally becomes a political issue.

Bearing witness to the genocide in Palestine presents significant psychological challenges for allies and activists. Understanding vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, and burnout is essential for safeguarding one's mental health while continuing to support the movement. By maintaining awareness of one's empathetic responses and prioritising self-care, it is possible to navigate these complex emotional landscapes without experiencing detrimental effects of trauma. In doing so, allies and activists might be better able to sustain their vital work in advocating for justice and human rights, ensuring they remain effective and resilient in their efforts.

For some of us, it is difficult to process emotions associated with fighting against injustice when we struggle to process previous, existing and/or concurrent traumas.

More on burnout

While the term burnout is frequently used colloquially to describe a range of levels of stress, it's important to recognise the severity and cost of burnout.

Burnout is much more than being tired. It's a systemic melt-down that can take years to recover from. In talking about burnout in her book *The lifelong activist*, Rettig says "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"

[Maslach and Gomes](#) talk about three elements to burnout:

- "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".

Put together this could look like someone not only in a state of complete physical exhaustion but with a negative view of their fellow activists and friends and a belief that nothing we've ever done makes any sort of difference to anything (which is very different to a healthy evaluation of the impacts of our activism).

Talking to activists in the Palestine solidarity movement, it is evident that many people don't realise how close they are to burnout until they become completely overwhelmed. While we are continually heightened, it is difficult to even notice the signs that stress is overwhelming our nervous system. For leaders of our various groups, this is further complicated by the responsibility to be constantly "on", to publicly maintain an image of emotional composure. We can learn from Nasser Mashni's ability to be publicly at ease with vulnerability. It's okay to cry in front of comrades. This is role modelling. It demonstrates emotional maturity. It shows connection, understanding and comprehension of what's going on. It publicly demonstrates emotional equality and expresses deep solidarity.

Checking in with ourselves - where are we at on the burnout spiral?

We recommend that we all make space to do a deliberate self check-in about where we are on the burnout cycle. This might be able to be done by looking at our checklist below. But given how revved up we are, checking in might first require exercises to slow down our nervous system to be able to even notice what is happening in our bodies. If this is the case for you, we recommend people undertake something that deliberately slows you down, and makes you receptive to listening. This will be different for each of us - it might be prayer, meditation, [a nature connection exercise](#), or a walk where you are disconnected from technology. Jeroen Robbe had developed a [body scanning and somatic awareness tool](#) through their work in the climate movement.

Liz has begun to map out a burnout spiral. This model helps us see how stress can spiral into burnout and even beyond, into breakdown. In one of our workshops, activist James Godfrey noted how this spiral is actually a spring. - that if we're paying attention and intervening at particular times, we can not only slip down the burnout spiral, but by participating in regenerative activities and ensuring we have enough rest, we have the



capacity to spring back to health. This also acknowledges that in these times of extended horror, many of us might need to take time out of the movement to undertake an intense period of self-care or healing to stop ourselves from reaching burnout or breakdown.

What we have found helpful ourselves and in our workshops is to make space to actually map what we look like when we are in each section of the burnout spiral. This involves asking ourselves questions such as: what do I experience, behave like, feel like, when I'm in each of these phases? As some examples - for some people difficulties sleeping might be a sign; for others it might be how difficult it is to put down a phone for the night; or for others it might be alcohol or tobacco consumption. Mapping what we look like next to these factors when we are in a good space and then in each of the stages of the downward spiral can help us notice when things decline. And its important to recognise that in the middle of a genocide, it is unlikely activists will be in a minimal stress state of being.

Once we have begun to tune into our body and our warning signs, it will be easier to notice when we are slipping down the spiral.



Signs of Burnout

Symptoms that stress is overwhelming an individual's nervous system:

- o difficulty turning off the 'head'
- o feeling 'wound up' all the time
- o being grumpy/angry/judgemental/feeling no joy
- o unhealthy eating/drinking patterns
- o feeling a false sense of urgency
- o problems with sleep including bad dreams
- o thinking it all depends on 'me'
- o feeling that nothing makes a difference/helplessness
- o rumination and negative self-talk
- o heart palpitations, difficulty breathing
- o digestive issues
- o loss of trust, motivation and connection

Symptoms of high stress expressed collectively:

- o Attacks on each other
- o Rushing decisions
- o Feeling like don't have space to consider options
- o Gossiping

Healthy patterns of activism and self care

As we start to think about caring for ourselves, we maintain a healthy skepticism about the constructed nature of terms like “wellbeing” and the potential for [pathologisation and individualism](#). As long term activist Dave Sweeney says, “Activism is not a path to neoliberal wellness”.

It is also vital to acknowledge that personal sustainability and community sustainability are interrelated. First Nations communities intrinsically reflect this idea, [as NACCHO says](#): “Aboriginal health means not just the physical wellbeing of an individual but refers to the social emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole Community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being, thereby bringing about the total wellbeing of the community.”

[Charlie Wood](#), in reflection on her own experience of burnout, sees one of the core elements to challenging the burnout culture as decolonisation and listening to First Nations cultural wisdom. First Peoples not only value deep connections they also take a very long view of time.

The aim of foregrounding wellbeing is inherently about protecting and sustaining our movement. It is also a statement of value, that people matter and aren’t just a cog in a machine. We don’t want people involuntarily stepping out because they’ve melted down, either for the sake of them or the movement.

As activist scholar [Laurence Cox](#) puts it “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 involuntary and individual demobilisation.”

The good news is that for those that see the world as needing significant change, [evidence shows](#) that being active in political movements helps protect us from burnout. This is because we’re constantly digging into our highest values and hopes for the world and actually doing something about the systemic root of the problem. However, how we go about our activism is core to whether we burnout or not.

As [Shields 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”?

[Cox](#) summaries the literature as saying “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” .

This resonates in research conducted closer to home. In Liz’s PhD study of young climate activists engaged in disruptive protests in south eastern Australia, protestors commonly reported that connection to community provides an antidote to negative wellbeing impacts of disruptive protest, such as trauma arising from police brutality.

The Roots of Change collective in Aotearoa/New Zealand, in their resource [Police Brutality & Activism Trauma Support and Recovery](#), 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?"

After a detailed study of 30 long term peace activists in North America, [Downtown and Wehr](#) identified what made these people able to sustain their commitment long term, to become what they called *persisters*.

"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..."

"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".

[Banks](#) posits that there are two main things that cause burnout - our lives are out of balance; and we ignore the warning signs to rebalance.

She maps out the various factors in our lives that need balancing, reflected in the table below.

What needs balancing..	
Time spent stimulating the sympathetic nervous system (action and in emergency, fight or flight)	Time spent stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system (rest or digest, and in emergency, freeze)
Giving - Time, energy, money, commitment, attention	Receiving - Appreciation, connection, warmth, money, care
Action - Meetings, projects, building, growing	Rest - Downtime, silence, solitude, socials
Talking	Listening
Doing - Pushing to get things to happen	Being - Letting go into the flow, surrender
Focus on work, using will	Focus on relationships, care and connection
Knowing through mind, body, rational thought	Knowing through intuition, feelings, dreams
Positivity, optimism	Hurt and painful feelings given expression

Strength	Vulnerability
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Mapping what sustains us:

Healthy “garden beds”: a tool for mapping what we need to sustain ourselves.

Self care is a whole system of daily patterns and life habits that sustain our health.

In workshops facilitated by authors Jess and Liz, we have been inviting participants to consider their wellbeing as similar to nurturing a healthy garden bed.

To *establish* a healthy garden bed, gardens need diverse layers to optimise soil health.

To *maintain* a healthy garden bed, gardens need regular inputs of soil, light, compost, fertiliser and/or compost, good drainage, and protection from severe elements. We also need to consider what a garden bed might need if it is exposed to severe weather or other forces, or even diseases or pests.



We find the analogy of sustainable soil health helpful in thinking about sustainability both as individual activists, as well as our activist cultures. In the workshops we’ve been mapping what we believe we need to have our own ‘soil’ maintained in health and balance, considering the range of aspects of our lives that keep us healthy. This exercise could also be undertaken as a group - what practices the group needs to remain healthy.

These maps need to include consideration of the various aspects of our lives. While the following categories aren’t exclusive or prescriptive, they can help as prompts for us to think about elements of our lives:

- Physical: Basic things can get lost in times of high stress: giving your body the best opportunity for enough sleep; feeding your body plenty of water and healthy food (and limiting the unhealthy stuff); exercise and vitamin K.
- Social: Ensuring you are sustaining relationships you need to. Your parents; your children; your partners; your friends. Time with activists can help with a sense of solidarity. Many also appreciate spending time with those who are less politically engaged so that they can tune

into other aspects of life. Others find this difficult. Many find joy in connecting with children in their completely different world view.

- Spiritual wellbeing - which means different things to different people. It might be time within religious communities. Or time in silent prayer. Or being 'held' by spiritual mentors or elders. It might include time contemplating the vast world we live in - looking at the stars; walking in the bush.
- Sensory time - in the water; in the bush; time soaking in sun; physical touch.

Obviously this map will look very different for each person - for some people creativity is vital, for others it is time in the bush. It might include things to take up, and things to reduce. And recognising that living and acting during a genocide is a time of extreme stress, so we're going to need extra inputs to keep our own body and mind in some sort of health.

Other activists use different models to map this. [Resilience Trees](#) is another model, also drawing from the world of ecology.

Practical tips for sustaining ourselves - as individuals

Psychiatrist and Muslim chaplain [Dr Rania Awaad](#) suggests these as important starting points for getting through this time

“Do not guilt-trip yourself for needing to take pauses or for coping differently than others around you. Do not allow external pressures or internalised stigma prevent you from seeking out professional support and help when needed. Reflect on the idea that fostering perseverance requires a proactive commitment to self-care practices.

In our own communities, we retain the right to celebrate our own stories, histories and heritage, and be safely seen and understood without having to fight for or prove our humanity”.

Other practices that have been documented to be helpful and/or have come up in activist workshops:

1. **Healthy phone/internet habits.** It is easy to be constantly responding to news and phone alerts. It is suggested to have blocks of times to unplug, especially at the start and end of the day. Some even choose to have the phone in another room for different periods of the day or overnight. We can also turn off some/all notifications as well as make conscious choices about how much news to ingest.
2. **Create space to express emotions & normalise receiving support from mental health professionals**— spiritual practices; counsellors; healing circles; mental health professionals.
3. **Lean in to our contribution to the movement** – don't try and do everything. Ask 'What am I good at?', 'Who do I organise well with?', 'What actions are important for me to join and which ones are OK to sit out' (as much as we want to go to everything!)
4. **Daily check-in to remind ourselves of the purpose and commitment for this.** Say out loud or write guiding values and principles for why we're in this fight - such as social justice,

anti-colonialism, humanity, liberation. Let keep connected with our cores, make this a daily practice if we can.

5. **Distress: fighting the settler colonial system is hard work.** Experiencing injustice, particularly if we're privileged or new to activism, often hits hard. It is expected that we will experience a level of distress and outrage, and that's okay, we're supposed to feel outraged and distress at a time of genocide. There is nothing wrong with any of us if we suddenly don't enjoy the same things we enjoyed before. However if we find ourselves not enjoying anything much at all, it indicates that our nervous system is overwhelmed and it is shutting down. Similarly, it is okay to feel outrage but if we find ourselves unable to regulate our anger and it is coming out in behaviour in an inappropriate manner, this also indicates an overwhelmed nervous system.
6. **Take time to get to know ourselves.** Spend some time to understand ourselves, become self aware, get to know our body, how it is reacting, what distress is it trying to communicate, identify our demons, be mindful that in times of stress and trauma, our demons gain in strength and energy. It's important to get support for our wounded parts if we know they are there already.
7. **Connection:** find ways to connect meaningfully to others in your world, we're social beings, it is through threads of connection we stay grounded to this earth and tethered to each other. Cultivate a community of support, find your people, with whom we don't experience the cognitive dissonance we experience day to day. Lean on more experienced activists and how they have sustained themselves.
8. **Listen to our intuition.** If we're in direct action and our body is signaling or our inner consciousness is telling us not to do something, pause and listen, investigate, be curious, talk about it, and if it persists, it might be that this is not going to serve us very well at present. Find another meaningful way to participate - we matter, we are worthy, we are needed.
9. **Discover a preferred form of self-expression:** Is this painting or drawing - we could paint about what liberation for Palestine will look like. If it is cooking - we could cook Palestinian cuisines for family, friends and workplaces, having conversations about Palestine over a meal. If we make candles, make candles of watermelon fragrance and give them to people. If it is poetry, write a poem, if it is singing, sing songs of liberation.... whatever our creative outlet maybe, find a way to use it to connect to ourselves and to others and to the cause.
10. **Repeat a simple mantra each day.** Many find it helpful as they awake or in going off to sleep. We can make up our own or find one that resonates with our purpose and values.
11. **Deep breathing** - a few cycles of mindful breathing each day can be the most helpful thing we can do for ourselves.
12. **Have a box of sensory items available at all times,** these can include a number of items ranging from fidget toys, something cooling, something warming, favourite essential oil,

something comforting, something soothing. A treasure box of gems which can offer some relief in stressful times.

Practical tips for sustaining ourselves - as collectives/groups

1. Be kind to each other – none of us are at our best right now – lets not back-stab or take people down – create spaces where we can all learn and grow
2. Celebrate small wins
3. Celebrate successes as collective wins, don't venerate individuals as heroes.
4. Acknowledge and support leadership roles, and take collective responsibility for healthy leadership models
5. Reward self-care, not over-work
6. Set up rosters – give everyone time off to recharge
7. Rotate roles – good for the movement and the individuals in roles
8. Get out of crisis mode. Get into strategic thinking, planning, reflecting, evaluating – considered actions are much better use of time than running around without a clear direction
9. Be unlimited in passion, but choose limited numbers of actions
10. Hang out together – get to know and trust the people you're organising with
11. Minimise online chats as main form of communication – too easy to misunderstand vibe
12. Make time to build capacity – bringing in new peeps; training
13. Engage in collective active activities - something creative, a guided group walk in nature to recharge, sing together, storytelling, poetry reading, sharing a meal together
14. Regular wellbeing checks
15. Attend rallies together
16. Debrief together. The Mental Health Professionals for Palestine facilitate group debriefing sessions.

Conclusion - we're amazing

Right now is extremely hard. We've been not only tuning into the horror unfolding in Gaza, but we've been giving so much in solidarity.

The forces that will lead us to melt down are strong. We have been deeply programmed by grind culture that calls us to work harder. The systems that maintain the military industrial complex and settler colonialism seem momentous. However, people power is even stronger. Historically we've seen how moments like this one completely reshape the world. Activists in Germany say that it seemed like the Berlin wall was impenetrable, until one day it fell. Activists in South Africa said that apartheid seemed entrenched, until one day it was overthrown. And so it shall be for Israel's apartheid and genocidal policies against Palestinians.

And we know it may take many more months for this genocide to end, and perhaps years before Palestinians have self-determination. We need to sustain ourselves through this burst of activism, and into the years to come.

The best solidarity and resistances comes when we look after the resources in the movement - people - individually and collectively. The best solidarity comes when we can bring our best selves to the movement. We can be courageous and strategic in choosing healthy patterns. We can seek help when we need it.