

How Self-compassion Can Help Activists Deal with Stress

By Sophie Olivia Hanson

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Why are activists, who are so passionate about their social justice work, so often burned out by those very causes? We don't often think about activism as a form of labour, but it is. Research on the activists that make up social justice movements suggests that the pressures of activist work, can cause them to experience serious consequences to their own mental well-being.

In some cases they might be driven to leave activism altogether, hurting their activist movements as a whole.

To understand how activists can better manage the challenges of their work, our research examines how self-compassion could be used to help them alleviate stress and avoid burnout.

Activist work often isn't successful at first: social progress takes a long time, especially in the face of systemic barriers. Activists tend to be very aware of the injustices they fight against and how hard it is to make change happen. In the face of these struggles, many activists can feel hopeless about the issues they are passionate about, causing serious mental distress.

Can self-compassion help?

Given these burdens, activists need support for coping with their painful thoughts and feelings. However, some activists suggest that these resources aren't always available. Non-activists may look down on their efforts or be unsupportive and activists who belong to marginalized groups can experience discrimination even within their organizations. On top of this, some activists feel pressure to participate in social justice work without complaint even when they are seriously struggling.

It's important to acknowledge that many of the negative experiences that activists encounter will need to be addressed by systemic changes. This could include a society that is more open to progress and more sympathetic to those engaged in social justice work. Progressive movements could also offer more support to their members, particularly those who experience prejudice themselves.

However, if movements are going to provide resources to their members for coping with the stresses of their work, we should consider what supports might be most helpful. Enter self-compassion — this term refers to our ability to respond to our own suffering with care and support, and is made up of three components.

- Self-kindness is the ability to show ourselves warmth and encouragement rather than judgement during difficult experiences.
- Common humanity is the knowledge that our struggles unite us with, rather than isolate us from other people.
- Finally, mindfulness is the ability to be aware of our pain, without becoming overly entangled with it.

- As there are many resources and interventions for self-compassion that have been tested and shown to be successful, this adds to its usefulness for activist populations.

Tips for activists

For activists struggling with the painful emotions that arise from their work, being self-compassionate might be a valuable support. This could involve treating themselves with kindness, remembering that they are united in their struggles with other activists and being mindful of their thoughts and feelings.

Using these strategies could help provide activists with the internal strength to continue their efforts while also making time for their own self-care.

In previous research, self-compassion has been connected to higher levels of hope and lower levels of hopelessness. These are both emotional states that activists link to their well-being and ability to manage the pressures of their social justice work. Possibly, by being more supportive of themselves, self-compassionate people are able to be more optimistic.

Additionally, the mindfulness aspect of self-compassion may help individuals to avoid ruminating about difficult experiences, in turn reducing feelings of hopelessness. Self-compassion and self-compassion interventions have also been linked to lower levels of burnout across various working populations.

My own thesis research in psychology has expanded on these findings by identifying a relationship between higher levels of self-compassion and lower levels of hopelessness and burnout among activists. This suggests that the relationship between self-compassion and mental health extends to those involved in social justice movements.

From campaigns about climate change and income inequality, to protests against anti-racism and war, activism plays a vital role in the world. It draws attention to those marginalized by unequal systems and casts light on often forgotten issues. It is important to recognize this work as well as the emotional and mental toll it can take on the people struggling to make change.

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