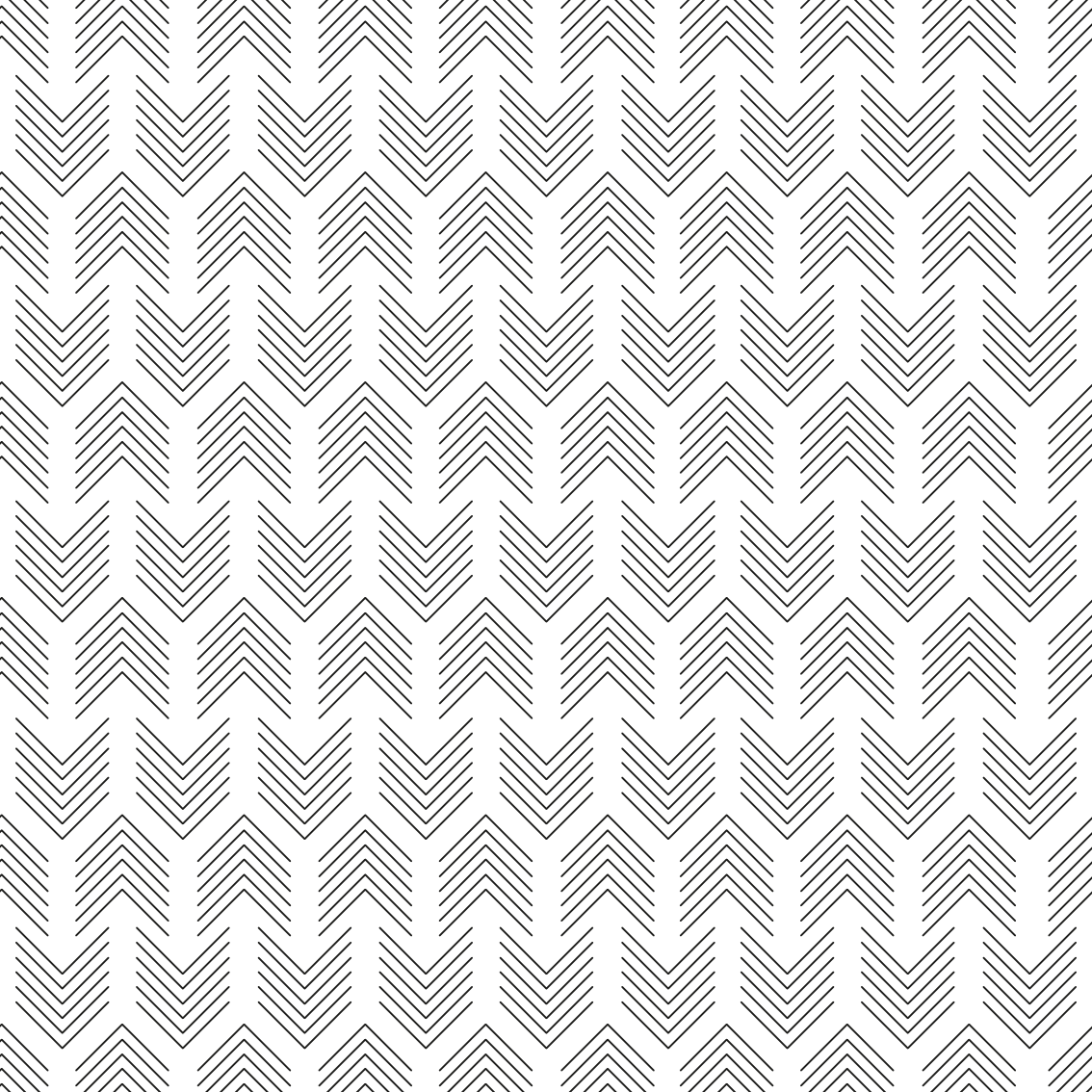


POCKET GUIDE

for
courageous
people



CENTRE FOR PEACE STUDIES



POCKET GUIDE

for courageous
people

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PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS



// Author: Tea Vidović //

“In the context of the Republic of Croatia and the set normative framework, based on their definition and expression, attitudes and values, numerous individuals continuously receive the message that their needs are inferior to the needs of the majority. One part of these individuals will accept and internalize the position of the majority, i.e., that certain aspects of their identity need to change and that they do not correspond to the norms set by the society. In the other part of the minority, deprivation based on definition, expression, attitudes, and values will arouse a desire for change and a potential active pursuit of that change. This brings us to activism.”¹ It means reacting to this and other phenomena in the society that is not in accordance with our values, as well as expressing the attitude that we do not accept it as adequate behaviour and norm. A bit like a child with its desires and needs, wishing to fulfil them with some resistance. A child’s desire to resist what is called the “social norm” is often silenced by the discipline within different educational circles (especially in educational

1 Text of a psychologist Ivona Eterović “Activism: How can higher goals lead to burnout?” Available at [libela.org](https://www.libela.org) - <https://www.libela.org/sa-stavom/10834-aktivizam-kako-visi-ciljevi-mogu-dovoditi-do-sagorijevanja/?fbclid=IwAR3FcPTki8rmEhKoGBFaoMDcZyY0SEswQgFJ-RozvOWs4cpXzn3oqMVQnQ>

institutions), and especially in the Croatian context where citizenship education is not accepted as part of the regular education. Although this is still not the case, there are individuals who have nevertheless preserved their values, norms and ways, and found the collectives through which they act.

This guide is intended for you, and for us, the ones reacting; for you and for us who do not remain silent; for you and for us who take action in the moments when we feel social injustice. You, as well as we, are brave and persistent people due to whom the society in which we live does not remain blind to social injustice and human rights violations. With this courage and perseverance often comes a weight that affects our psychophysical condition. We are compiling this guide precisely so that weight does not become your permanent condition, but so that we are aware of it from the very beginning of our action.

It is important and courageous to act and react to social injustice, but it is also important and courageous to speak about the psychophysical state you are in while taking action. The feelings you have and the burden you feel are not a bad thing. Many people around you have faced those feelings. Did they share that with you? Did you share that with them? Were you asked at work how you felt? Did they offer you support? Did you think that if you told your employer what kind of weight you were dealing with, you might get fired? How long did it take for a civil society to start talking about these topics? Why do we come to a state of burnout in our work and actions? How can we pause, look at ourselves and everything around us, and continue taking action?

These are the questions we wish to answer with your help. That is why we are compiling this guide and that is why we use the term “pocket” - because it is not finished, this is only its beginning and an invitation for you to upgrade it, in cooperation with us, over the time. We want this guide to be of help to you and

to us in action, your and our weight-bearing tool, **your and our pocket edition for psychophysical balance**. In the moments when adrenaline makes us act, the psychophysical weight can move us away from that action. It's alright to feel that way and to share that feeling with others, as well as to take a step back; take some time for ourselves in order to be well. What we wish to offer in this guide are ways and methods that can help us not to drive ourselves to a complete burnout and withdrawal from action. Although there are moments in which we feel like we are completely alone – that is not so. You are not alone in your fight! And never give up on it. Take a break or a step back, but resume the action and stay persistent.

Appendix to the introduction

The Centre for Peace Studies compiled this guidebook with the essential input from different colleagues and friends coming from various backgrounds and contexts.

In order to make this contribution authentic, the Centre for Peace Studies first administered a short questionnaire to detect different roles and challenges in our work. Organizations and collectives from Croatia, Italy, Spain, all STEP-UP partners ([link to step-up page/footnote](#)) are directly acting with and for refugees in their work as volunteers, activists, social workers, legal advisors, trainers, and project officers in the field of integration and respect of human rights.

The second questionnaire, entitled “Personal Experiences of Activists”, was distributed among activists active in the field of providing support to refugees and migrants. Through nine open-ended questions, we wanted to gain an insight into why activism is important to activists in the field of migration, how they approach activism, how engagement in activism affects them and what are the related possible consequences for mental health.

HOLISTIC APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE



// Author: Maddalena Avon //

Among the [STEP-UP partners](#), the Centre for Peace Studies conducted a short questionnaire to detect different roles and challenges in our work. Organizations and collectives from Croatia, Italy, Spain are directly acting with and for refugees in their work as volunteers, activists, social workers, legal advisors, trainers, and project officers in the field of integration and respect of human rights.

The aim of the questionnaire was to map different approaches and challenges in our everyday work regarding our wellbeing and how our working collectives are dealing with it. The results are as follows:

The part of our everyday activities that **negatively affects** our wellbeing is mostly detected in:

- » Frustration when facing public administration and institutional racism
- » Stressful and precarious working conditions, with strict deadlines and short-time notices
- » External factors like politics, institutional relationships, which hinder the extent and meaningfulness of the work we do
- » Worries about the consequences of our job on people's lives, about not having all the answers

On the other hand, the part of our everyday activities that **positively influences** our wellbeing are found in:

- » Satisfaction of doing something useful for someone else who recognizes it
- » Knowing how our work benefits individuals, even if it is harder to make a difference on a grand scale.
- » Tangible positive results that have been reached towards protecting the migrants' rights to asylum, thanks to collective efforts
- » The goal of contributing to a real integration of refugees and other migrants in our communities
- » Knowing that education is our major tool to fight against discrimination, and learning from others

Topics like mental health, wellbeing and burnout prevention are approached differently in our workplace/collective.

Even though the majority of respondents affirmed that their workplace/collective takes mental health care seriously in consideration, other respondents pointed out that topics like this one were until recently only partially touched through light talks, and that only recently their collective started talking about it in a more serious and constructive manner. In other cases, workplaces have mental health policies, but they are not implemented in an appropriate way, and on the contrary, others do not have mental health policies but do have inner cohesion and open confrontations on the topics.

The majority of the respondents confirmed that there is no implementation of systematic mental-care measures. In some cases, the workplace/collective offers supervision sessions (individual/group), or regular meetings to check on each other. Almost all respondents stated that, even if there are no systematic mental-care measures, there is a prompt and compassionate reaction if a critical situation is addressed.

The respondents had precise suggestions that would help our collectives to positively influence our wellbeing, and prevent burnout and exhaustion, coming from very different perspectives and suggestions:

- » Individual and group supervision sessions - not as a problem solver but as a burnout prevention measure
- » Techniques, tips and tricks, sharing experience
- » Diminish working hours and increase personnel to have a more efficient labour division

- » Increase time for brainstorming and strategic thinking among working teams
- » Better planning and organization - rational internal organization of work and assignment of tasks
- » Peer work / share in couple more challenging tasks, not be left alone
- » Open and constructive conversations when the problem and the prospect of a work overload arises

The research that the Croatian Youth Network (Mreža Mladih Hrvatske - MMH) conducted in 2020, "Identified problems of dealing with mental health in the Republic of Croatia"², revealed similar results. Through their research, the main challenges have been identified in four different spheres: the social perception of the mental health issue; the challenges inside the workplaces and collectives of civil society; and more specifically the problems of relevant/responsible stakeholders working on a certain topic, and the ones specific for youngsters.

Several elements emerged in both the MMH and the CMS studies:

- » employee burnout because they are under capacitated and often work with demanding and / or risk groups
- » insecure income due to financing through projects
- » the problem of satisfying different project requirements and adapt project conditions to the real-life activities
- » a lack of training to lead associations in general
- » large fluctuations of people in civil society organizations

2 <https://www.mmh.hr/uploads/publication/pdf/37>
Prepoznati_problemi_bavljenja_mentalnim_zdravlje_u_RH.pdf

Additionally, a research mentioned in the Guardian points out that 79% of people working in the humanitarian sector have experienced mental health problems.³

Mental health issues

Have you personally experienced or been diagnosed with any of the following during your time working in the sector?

Anxiety	51
Depression	44
Post-traumatic stress disorder	29
Panic attacks	22
Not applicable	22
Other mental health problems	11
Alcoholism	10
Eating disorder	7
Obsessive compulsive disorder	3

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/nov/23/aid-workers-stories-mental-health>

MENTAL HEALTH OF HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS



// Penned by the expert who supervised many activists:
Zdenka Pantić //

***As you try to make this world the best possible place, you are
witnessing the worst of it...***

(Americas Youth and Human Rights: A Fanzine for activists and volunteers,
April 2020)

Working with people belongs to the group of stressful occupations. It is precisely the focus on other people through close contact and compassion with the aim of providing help in life's challenges, treatment, or fight for their rights - that is a source of stress and can pose a risk to mental health and well-being of those who are helping (helpers).

In protecting and fighting for human rights, the role of activists and helpers (as well as movements) is specific because they seek to significantly influence the environment that is violating human rights. Their work, whether paid or volunteer, is full of unique challenges. In addition, focusing on others requires a special emotional effort ("emotional work"), so they are particularly exposed to professional stress and burnout.

The literature on burnout prevention speaks mainly about individual sensitivity, motivation, and organizational circumstances, and less about the broader context. Yet, all these influences intertwine.

On the broader context: Developing a deep understanding of the social and political circumstances associated with suffering and oppression, increases the level of stress among activists and volunteers, as well as the pressure they put on themselves, which is an additional burnout threat.

Over the years, we have witnessed how activists and volunteers of civil society organizations and initiatives (CPS, AYS, ID, BVMN, etc.) work in extremely unfavourable circumstances: their work on the protection of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers takes place in circumstances of difficult and impossible access to support and protection of people in need, and the criminalization of solidarity (CPS Annual Report 2019). This work takes place in the

circumstances of the EU's contradictory attitude towards the actions of the Croatian police (criticism for grave violations of human rights and encouraging the end of migration to Western Europe at the same time). All this affects the operation of the organization, the work of activists, and increases the risks to their health and well-being (e.g., visits to border areas where refugees are trying to enter the Republic of Croatia, inability to directly contact people in need of protection, etc.).

Protecting the vulnerable and disenfranchised often leads to increased vulnerability and marginalization of activists in society, the same as of individuals and groups they advocate.

On the organizational context: Frequent uncertainty and tension of working in project mode, workload and deadlines, often insufficient number of collaborators - are some characteristics of the life and work of activists in civil society organizations. Sometimes organizations and activist groups in the field of human rights, despite the emotional and health consequences of activist work, neglect the importance of reflecting on mental health, coping with stress, and the burnout of activists for various reasons. The neglect sometimes arises precisely from the belief that it is necessary to do our best to stand up for their rights and help the vulnerable (the term "culture of martyrdom" is mentioned in the literature). Uncertainty about the funding and the continuity of the organization's work can also result in reduced care for activists and, in some places, there is a lack of knowledge on mental health issues. Human rights organizations can be exposed to great pressure from the authorities and the public (activists can even face danger), which further aggravates the work and well-being of activists. It may also be difficult to reconcile different activities and priorities within an organization (e.g., more advocacy, education, or more

direct field work with those who are traumatized) which can also increase tensions within the organization and in individuals.

According to the definition of the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. Mental health is part of general health and not just the absence of disease, so the lack of care for activists' mental health can lead to burnout and other morbidities of activists. It is important to point out that this not only neglects the health of activists, but also the interests of the organization and the movement in the fight for human rights.

Care for the mental health and well-being of activists is visible, among other things, through good work organization and various preventive measures, the responsibility of the organization being the key factor. Education, support groups, individual and group supervision and mentoring as part of regular working hours are recommended.

Today, we are witnessing that some organizations show care for their activists through supervision as a form of support and prevention of mental health issues of their activists.

Activists fighting for human rights, social justice, and the protection of the most vulnerable share the fate of precarious working conditions in the civil sector. Highly educated people, in terms of the values they believe in, have chosen to work in the field of human rights and they consider it a calling, not just a job. They face illegal and unjust actions and often do not feel safe in their work,

depending on the political and social developments. In addition, today, most of the activists are (young) women who can find themselves in very demanding situations regarding health and their own safety, whether they are witnessing the suffering of those they help (witnessing someone else's suffering is a risk to their own mental health) or the obstacles and reluctance of society to provide protection in accordance with various international documents (e.g., awareness of violence against migrants and refugees and the inability to make contact with people in need, such as asylum seekers, victims of torture, unaccompanied minors; activists dealing with transitional justice, etc.).

Caring for those who care

All of us change through helping work: in a positive or in a negative way. This is often not discussed enough, and when deciding to work with victims of human rights violations and the severely traumatized people, it is especially important to know that trauma has a transformative effect on helpers and can endanger their mental health.

Here are some of the questions I ask, as a supervisor, in my first encounters with human rights activists, health and psychosocial professionals and volunteers, which are important for turning the attention to yourself:

- » What motivates you to do your work?
- » What feelings and reactions do you have when meeting the people you work with?
- » In which part of your work do you feel strong? Which part of it do you find difficult?

- » What are your expectations? From yourselves, from the people you work with, team members, from the environment (organization, family, community...)
- » Do you have any concerns or fears? Is there something you cannot talk about?
- » Who do you think you might not be able to work with?

Identifying key signals in the care for helpers

What is workplace or occupational stress? It is a discrepancy between the demands of the workplace and the environment in relation to our capabilities, between the desires and expectations to meet those demands.

Workload, encountering injustice and painful stories evoke strong emotions in activists (anger, anxiety, sadness, helplessness, as well as moral and ethical dilemmas).

It is necessary to ask yourself: **Do I, as a helper, also need support?**

- » Do I have any opportunity to discuss my experiences?
- » Do I have the opportunity to relax after work?
- » Can I speak about what happened to my family without anger or crying (activist - helper may have a similar experience as the beneficiary; may be part of an existing crisis in which he/she is helping others)
- » Can I be nice and kind to my family members?

If most of the answers are negative - you can hardly help others in a similar situation.

The next question could be: **Do I find it difficult to support others?**

- » Are people uncomfortable speaking about their difficult experiences in front of me?
- » Do I find it difficult to give full attention when beneficiaries share their experiences?
- » Do my thoughts wander as I listen?
- » Do I get bored, tired or restless when listening to beneficiaries?

If you want to help others, you must first become aware of your own difficulties and work on them!

It is possible to organize a support group among colleagues (topics: stress, coping, relaxation techniques ...) and supervision in order to prevent burnout and ensure the quality of work with beneficiaries.

The consequences of stress are compassion fatigue and burnout.

Compassion fatigue

People who come into close contact with a victim of human rights violations, trauma, a gravely ill person, etc., can experience significant emotional disorder and physical disturbances. Over time, they may become indirect victims

of trauma themselves. Being a resource to others, providing compassion, openness and empathy that are necessary in working with traumatized, unhappy, disenfranchised people (to gain trust, provide support, help to exercise rights, etc.) - changes helpers, changes their view of the world, affects their values, their private and professional life. The overwhelming experience of someone else's suffering can call into question a sense of control over one's own life.

Thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of helpers may be equivalent to those manifested by the traumatized individuals with whom activists work (e.g., anger, anxiety, helplessness). Possible symptoms of PTSD or similar:

- » sleep and concentration disturbances, depression, social withdrawal, anxiety, nightmares, imposed memories
- » a changed view of oneself and of others, a shattered view of the world
- » loss of interest in daily problems, disturbed sense of intimacy with close people
- » a feeling of guilt over having a better life than the beneficiary
- » a feeling of shame due to the indirect witnessing of the abuse that the beneficiary has experienced

Physical activity, exercise, walking (depending on age and health condition, massage) help to reduce stress. Furthermore, relaxation methods can be learned: Visualization, autogenic training, meditation and awareness, progressive relaxation.

Burnout

Workload, time pressure, working conditions, circumstances and the sensation of success increase the risk of burnout: When these factors and other challenges accumulate, it can become exhausting: from the initial stage of the “fire” of enthusiasm, through commitment and dedication, one can reach a point of burnout which can be recognized as smouldering exhaustion, cynicism and inefficiency ...

Burnout symptoms are multidimensional and can be grouped into the following categories:

1. affective manifestations (mood swings, most often as depression and anxiety)
2. cognitive manifestations (disturbances of attention, memory, and concentration)
3. physical manifestations (health problems, such as headaches, high blood pressure, diseases)
4. behavioural changes (affecting work performance, health, starting from delaying tasks to substance abuse)
5. changes in motivation (loss of motivation and increased feelings of alienation and discouragement)

How to recognize the negative effects of chronic stress or burnout?

PHYSICAL SIGNS

Exhaustion, chronic fatigue, somatic problems (skin irritations, digestion problems, stomach ache, high blood pressure, increased heart rate, trembling, headache, back pain or other chronic pain, chronic cold), sleeping problems (insomnia or hypersomnia, nightmares), sexual dysfunction, change in appetite, common accidents, nervous behaviour (biting nails for instance)

COGNITIVE SIGNS

Problems with concentration, confusion, forgetting, feelings of disorientation and/or feeling overwhelmed, fear, obsessive thinking, indecisiveness, inflexible thinking, decreased tolerance to vagueness in communication

PRIVATE LIFE AND EMOTIONS

Irritability, feeling like you are “on edge”, overreacting, fighting, losing your sense of humour, feeling depressed, imprisoned, alienated, chronically angry, sad, scared, hopeless, longing for “safe haven”, having mood swings, feeling abandoned, under pressure, being negative, cynical, paranoid, blaming self or others

How to recognize the negative effects of chronic stress or burnout?

BEHAVIOUR	Risky behaviours (ignoring safety regulations, driving too fast, promiscuity, chain smoking, alcohol or drug abuse), isolation, tardiness or absence from work, low productivity, overworking, neglecting self-care (not eating or not sleeping enough), chaotic behaviours, verbal assaults
SPIRITUALITY	Feeling disappointed, feelings of senselessness and/or emptiness, doubts about decisions you made in life, disappointment/doubts in your value system or religious attitudes, questioning different areas of your life (profession, job...), being preoccupied with yourself
TEAMWORK	Grandiose beliefs about your importance in the workplace, decreased effectiveness, frequent irritability and blaming others, poor team results, noticing signs of stress in others, distrust, forming cliques, conflicts, lack of initiative, high fluctuation of working force. Feeling ineffective without having the energy to change anything about it, experiencing very little pleasure from your work or no pleasure at all.
ATTITUDES TOWARD MIGRANTS	In long term, you can develop alienated, impersonal, careless, and cynical attitude towards migrants; distress, using too dark jokes about the people you are helping. Disappointment, feelings of failure.

It is possible to make **a self-assessment of the risk of burnout** associated with working conditions and the way work is organized by answering the questions covering the table above:

- » Investigate the range of permanent contact, workload, number of contacts
- » Detect unclear work tasks
- » Reveal unclear roles and expectations from leaders and society
- » Assess case-specific contamination
- » What are the opportunities for personal development?
- » A negative loss spiral will cause the loss of meaning of work
- » Occurrence of typical psychosomatic disorders: fatigue, digestive problems, high blood pressure
- » Changing attitudes towards beneficiaries: distancing and feeling uncomfortable, suspicion, cynicism
- » Changes in work: rigidity, resistance to change, less creativity, reduced work capacity, occurrence of a feeling of incompetence at work, anxiety that the colleagues may notice it...

Preventive measures:

- » Knowing the signs of burnout helps to connect with its causes.
- » Medical health control, proper diet, and exercise
- » Acquiring coping skills, gaining insight into one's own strengths and weaknesses

- » Monitoring feelings of depression
- » Good time management, setting realistic goals
- » Nurturing close relationships, community cohesion
- » Awareness of dissatisfaction at work, of the need for change
- » Maintaining healthy communication
- » Accepting leadership and cooperation, sharing experiences
- » Respect for confidentiality
- » Building a culture of mutual support and cooperation, as well as of supportive environment

When addressing burnout, it is important to know the personal characteristics of the affected individual, such as the ability to contain emotions, resilience, self-reflection, and knowledge of working with traumatized people, etc. It is especially important to recognize your own values, motivations, ideals given the fact that dealing with difficult topics and small or slow changes in the fight for human rights can lead to disappointment.

Burnout among activists along with some contributing factors (such as an unsupportive work environment in organizations) is considered one of the main causes of burnout and even giving up on activism. It is important to point out that those who ignore the signs of burnout often abandon activism (at least temporarily), which can disrupt the work of the organization and the movement itself, leaving younger activists without mentors, models, and the experience and wisdom of elders.

What distinguishes the human rights activists' burnout from other types of activist burnout is the fact that this specific burnout, having a harmful effect on activists and the movement, leaves injustice and human rights violations. This represents an additional level of pressure put on activists.

In conclusion

Although activism in the field of human rights and social justice is demanding and poses a certain risk to the mental health of activists, we do not intend to “pathologize” this work: Despite the risks, not everyone will feel its consequences on the mental and physical health, and well-being.

Just as there is the potential for the development of psychological and physical disturbances in response to trauma and difficulties, people also have the potential to cope well with difficult experiences, the so-called “resilience”. Even the resilient people feel discomfort, difficulties, suffering in the face of trauma, disease, and injustice. Focusing on others and a sense of responsibility for the community are characteristics of people we consider resilient. In addition, they usually have and build a caring and supportive environment (as well as relationships within and outside the family). When we have relationships that create love and trust, provide good models of behaviour, offer encouragement and incentive, we become more resilience to unpleasant life events.

By distinguishing individual dispositions for burnout from organizational - structural causes, it is possible to respond more successfully at both levels (bearing in mind the different processes within organizations, which are reflected in the overall life and work of the organization).

In a broader perspective on this issue, it is necessary to reflect on the possibilities in the approach to activism. In doing so, individual and group prevention activities should not be neglected in order to improve the well-being of activists.

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HOW TO RECOGNIZE BURNOUT AND STRESS?



// Author: Maddalena Avon //

Through numerous group workshops and lectures, the Centre for Peace Studies team met with wonderful psychologists and experts that offered us tips and tricks to work on ourselves. We want to share them with you and support you in developing awareness, and then coping with stress and recognizing burnout signs.

The first step is - **awareness**.

It is crucial to develop awareness of our own warning signs and to recognize the need to adapt work tasks and/or take care of yourself on time.

This can include practices of deep belly breathing and relaxation techniques. We propose some of them below.



“You can’t do what you want until you know what you’re doing.”



Awareness⁴

THE CONTINUUM OF WARNING SIGNS

- » What does the continuum of my mental health look like? How do I feel, think, and behave when I am okay? How do I feel, think, and behave when stress starts to pile up? How do I feel, think, and behave under a lot of stress? What happens to me mentally and physically?
- » How do you know you are entering a “danger zone”, what are the first signs telling you that you should slow down?

⁴ <https://www.aals.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/18ClinicalOteyWarningSignsConcurrent.pdf>



Coping with stress⁵

Generally, we can differentiate between coping strategies that are emotion-focused and those that are problem-focused. We cannot say that one strategy is better than the other one; it depends on the context and the situation.

⁵ Jason M. Satterfield, 2008, A Cognitive-Behavioral Approach to the Beginning of the End of Life, Coping with Stress: Problem-Focused and Emotion-Focused Strategies

Emotion focused

- » Talking to friends
- » Reading, watching movies, playing games, singing
- » Journal writing
- » Doing something creative, making art
- » Relaxation techniques, massage, sleeping
- » Spirituality (meditation, prayer)
- » Introspection, rituals
- » Cognitive restructuring
- » Positive thinking

Solution focused

- » Identification of and solving problems
 - » Time management
 - » Looking for some practical, instrumental help (advice from a friend, another employee....)
 - » Learning new skills (communication etc.)
-

Awareness techniques

GROUNDING⁶

- » Breathe deeply in through your nose and out through your mouth
- » Slowly look around yourself and find...
 - » 5 things you can see
 - » 4 things you can touch
 - » 3 things you can hear
 - » 2 things you can smell (or 2 smells you like)
 - » 1 emotion you feel

This technique can help you when you feel like you have gone too far in your head and lost control of your surroundings.



6 <https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-article/grounding-techniques-article>

DEEP BELLY BREATHING⁷

Take a deep breath in. Now let it out. You may notice a difference in how you feel already. Your breath is a powerful tool to ease stress and make you feel less anxious. Some simple breathing exercises can make a big difference if you make them part of your regular routine.

Before you get started, keep these tips in mind:

- » Choose a place to do your breathing exercise. It could be in your bed, on your living room floor, or in a comfortable chair.
- » Do not force it. This can make you feel more stressed.
- » Try to do it at the same time once or twice a day.
- » Wear comfortable clothes.
- » Many breathing exercises take only a few minutes. When you have more time, you can do them for 10 minutes or more to get even greater benefits.

Most people take short, shallow breaths into their chest. It can make you feel anxious and zap your energy. With this technique, you will learn how to take bigger breaths, all the way into your belly.

Get comfortable. You can lie on your back in bed or on the floor with a pillow under your head and knees. Or you can sit in a chair with your shoulders, head, and neck supported against the back of the chair.

⁷ <https://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/stress-relief-breathing-techniques>

Breathe in through your nose. Let your belly fill with air.

Breathe out through your nose.

Place one hand on your belly. Place the other hand on your chest.

As you breathe in, feel your belly rise. As you breathe out, feel your belly lower. The hand on your belly should move more than the one that is on your chest.

Take three more full, deep breaths. Breathe fully into your belly as it rises and falls with your breath.



SAFE PLACE IMAGERY⁸

Start by getting comfortable in a quiet place where you will not be disturbed, and take a couple of minutes to focus on your breathing, close your eyes, become aware of any tension in your body, and let that tension go with each out-breath.

Imagine a place where you can feel calm, peaceful, and safe. It may be a place you have been to before, somewhere you have dreamed about going to or seen a picture of, or just a peaceful place you can create in your mind's eye.

Look around yourself in that place, notice the colours and shapes. What else do you notice?

Now notice the sounds that are around you, or perhaps the silence. Sounds far away and those closer to you. Those that are more noticeable, and those that are more subtle.

Think about any smells you notice there.

Then focus on any skin sensations - the earth beneath you or whatever is supporting you in that place, the temperature, any movement of air, anything else you can touch.

Notice the pleasant physical sensations in your body whilst you enjoy this safe place. Now while you are in your peaceful and safe place, you might choose to give it a name, whether one word or a phrase that you can use to bring that image back, anytime you need to.

.....

⁸ <https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/SafePlace.pdf>



You can choose to linger there a while, just enjoying the peacefulness and serenity. You can leave whenever you want to, just by opening your eyes and being aware of where you are now, and bringing yourself back to alertness in the ‘here and now’.

How charged has “my battery” been in the last 30 days?⁹

What drains my energy at the moment? What sources of stress are present in my life currently?

What fills me with energy at the moment and relaxes me, what do I do for myself?

⁹ Group exercise provided by Medecins du Monde during workshops with volunteers working with refugees and other migrants in Croatia

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF ACTIVISTS



// Author: Sara Kekuš //

In preparing this handbook, it was especially important for us to hear the activists out, to let them tell us what activism is for them, why are they engaged in activism in the field of refugee and migrant support, how activism affects their lives, what type of support they need and whether they consider that psychological support is available to activists. In order to find that out, we have prepared them a questionnaire entitled *Personal experiences of activists*, through which we have tried to provide answers to those questions. You can find the thoughts of activists below.

We were additionally encouraged to prepare this questionnaire by activist and psychologist Ivona Eterović, who wrote a text on how higher goals can lead to burnout, for the internet portal *Libela* at the beginning of the year, which includes a quote we find worthy of sharing in this manual:

"By joining the Croatian Youth Network, but also by meeting a new circle of people, over the past year I have come into direct contact with the activism


that I used to follow from the side. I have appeared and participated in various initiatives, but have never given too much thought to the fact that behind these initiatives stand people who invest huge amounts of time every day in preparing actions. I perceived activists as active citizens who are not afraid to point out the problems in society that others do not consider interesting or do not want to see. Acting and demanding change at the societal level was particularly interesting to me, because I was personally mostly focused on the individual level, probably because of the studies I have finished.

Once I've gained a small insight into that world, I was surprised at how often activism is intertwined with my idea of helping work, because activists are put in the position of marginalized groups, but are generally fighting for social progress. What makes a big difference in relation to the helping work I have participated in before is the exposure of activists to public criticism of society on a daily basis, which often directly refers to their attitudes, values and ways of expression. On the other hand, by getting to know the activists, I have realized that it is often forgotten that things that fulfil us greatly can exhaust us a lot, too. So, it often happens when there is a great personal motivation and an intrinsic desire for change. ¹⁰

The Croatian encyclopaedia defines activism as a mindset, a set of values, i.e., a view of the world that emphasizes the value of active and conscious voluntary activity for theoretical and practical creations, and impacting the environment, society, culture. It is opposed to passivity, as a view of life, that gives up on

10 Libela. Ivona Eterović: Aktivizam: Kako viši ciljevi mogu dovesti do sagorijevanja? 21.3.2021. <https://www.libela.org/sa-stavom/10834-aktivizam-kako-visi-ciljevi-mogu-dovoditi-do-sagorijevanja/>

any attempt to actively act on life circumstances (destiny).¹¹ Literature offers numerous definitions; each of us experiences activism in a very personal way and defines it differently. However, the responses of the activists we have contacted most often included the following terms and syntagms: solidarity, support, social change, fight against injustice, protection of human rights, equality. In order to paint a slightly fuller picture, we will single out a few quotes:




“Any engagement that affects a certain social change, helping a vulnerable group, expression of solidarity, civil disobedience, defence against violence...”


“Activism proposes a solution through non-hierarchical, feminist, collective self-organization for a higher purpose and for the good of the wider community.”

“Reaction to injustice, the only meaningful thing in the meaningless world.”

“For me, activism is vigilance. That is, being vigilant and noticing things that are wrong in society, and being ready to react to them in the fight for rights, equality, freedom and beliefs that I find fundamental for achieving an open society and a state that respects human rights.”




11 Hrvatska enciklopedija, mrežno izdanje. Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 2021. Pristupljeno 17. 5. 2021. <http://www.enciklopedija.hr/Natuknica.aspx?ID=1226>, <http://www.enciklopedija.hr/Natuknica.aspx?ID=46879>.




“For me, activism is a way of life, active participation in society and solidarity.”

“For me, activism is a feeling in the stomach that drives an individual to act when developments in society deviate from the values that make that individual what he or she is.”



The reasons for activist engagement in the field of migration, i.e., support to refugees and other migrants, are mostly motivated by the injustices we are witnessing and our own privileged position to fight against them, as well as by values that include equality and freedom, including the freedom of movement.



“Because migrants and refugees are my siblings who this society sees as second-class citizens, and in my set of values they are not. Through my actions, I want to influence social change, that is, the shaping of the society in which I live – it should be homogeneous rather than heterogeneous and realize that refugees and migrants can enrich it.”

“From an early age, I thought that states and borders exist only to restrict human freedom and security, and I always tried to fight against that. As it is almost impossible to abolish borders, the only thing we can do is try to reduce the damage they cause.”

“Because violent acts against refugees, the pushbacks, are one of the most brutal human rights violations not only in the Republic of Croatia, but in the entire EU. I believe that, over the years, it has grown into a systematic crime against humanity, and I personally cannot keep silent or close my eyes to it because I have a feeling that it would mean I am contributing to it. Getting out of the way and staying silent is definitely not an option for me.”

“The field of human rights protection has always been closest to my heart and therefore the most important for active engagement. In recent years, I have been particularly hurt by the dehumanization to which refugees and migrants are exposed and by the increased fascism of Europe.”


“I am engaged in activism in the field of providing support to refugees and other migrants for several reasons: I went through the international protection granting process, I believe that most refugees have a valid reason to migrate, and that they didn't have any other choice, I want to give them my support because I have studied law and politics, I see that there is a lot to be done in this field to protect human rights, which can be done through activism.”

“Because I strongly believe in the principle of freedom of movement and equal access to opportunities for a better life.”

“Today, refugees and other migrants are subjected to violence and discrimination in all instances. By supporting them, I want to directly help people exposed to physical, psychological, sexual, and structural violence, but also work in solidarity with them to dismantle the system that enables and supports this violence.”



In order for the questionnaire to provide a more complete picture of activist engagement in the field of supporting refugees and other migrants, we have tried to equally include the activists working in this field of activism, as well as those for whom activism is exclusively a private time activity. The concerned activists are mainly engaged in providing support in the matters of accessing asylum, protecting the human rights of refugees and other migrants, and the creation of an inclusive society in various segments. However, it is interesting that most of the people who have activism in their job description pointed out that it is impossible to separate activism from private life, and that these two realities are intertwined.




“I feel confused and sometimes conflicted between those two spheres, two identities that I have to deal with.”

“As an unemployed/self-employed person, my activist engagement is not defined by my workplace, and I have troubles separating work from private. Activism pervades all elements of my life.”

“Most of my activist action is a part of my job description and includes the people I work with, but at the same time, there are many other actions that take up a lot of my private time.”

“I don’t think you can engage in activism within the workplace because it conditions certain segments of activity. For me, activism is where I can connect my professional and private life - that connection makes it full. A wide range - from conversation, through research, to advocacy.”



We have decided to write this guide precisely because of our awareness of the complexity of activism and its impact on our consciousness and everyday life. That is why we asked the activists how activism affects their daily lives and what difficulties are they facing. Most of them emphasized again that activism is an integral part of their lives and as such has both positive and negative effects on their lives. They highlighted external factors and feelings of helplessness as the causes of difficulties, and some of them even pointed out that this question required a separate questionnaire.



“It affects my life in a way that it completely pervades it and defines me. The difficulties I face are continuous exposure to human trauma, being overwhelmed by the topic and feeling of helplessness.”

“It has a positive effect. Difficulties are solely systemic problems that aggravate, for example, conducting a systematic language course or involving as many people as possible in support programs (because they work, struggle to survive, hesitate, do not have time, there is a pandemic, etc.)”

“Sometimes it fulfils me and fills me up with energy, sometimes it makes me angry, sometimes it makes me sad, it often depresses me ... Activism = life.”

“I am an active being and as such, I consider myself as “activism”- there is not much separation from everyday life. Activism is my daily life. The difficulties I face are the world I live in and the injustices I see around me, to which many are blind. I want to be aware of them as I eat breakfast and as I go to bed. Of course, it took me years

of experience not to internalize those thoughts and feelings deep into my body. I am aware that injustice is separate from me, but that I can change it. The consciousness I have is activism, because sooner or later it will shape an action - the fact that this action is not always in motion, does not mean that it is not active.”

“Activism really has a big impact on my life because it demands a lot of time. I always try to balance my time, but it can sometimes be difficult, especially when most of the events I would like to participate in take place in my private time or when I have other things to do. It also helps me to meet new people who have the same interest as me. As for difficulties, I am an active agent of my own free will, no one is forcing me to do it. I am doing this because I want to provide support. I’m not focused on difficulties or maybe I haven’t faced something difficult yet.”

“It affects the whole personality, the image of oneself and the world. I see it as inseparable from my existence.”

“The biggest difficulty is the frustration with the feeling that I am tilting at windmills. That in providing support I encounter constant resistance from the state and its institutions, and that even the simplest things do not go easily. Sometimes I feel like Sisyphus, and sometimes like Don Quixote. It sometimes triggers some crazy motivation in me, but sometimes it just makes me wonder if there is any sense in it and if I can achieve anything. I try to focus on even the smallest victories.”

“I think that I’m looking at every aspect of my life through a different lens. The difficulties I face because of that are in the pressure I

feel due to external factors (institutions, racism, the disinterested population around me), but also within the activist scene where I see exhausted and powerless people.”



Activists who completed this questionnaire also have very different timeframes of activist engagement in the field of supporting refugees and other migrants. Some of them have been engaged in activism for more than 20 years, since the emergence of the first no border initiatives and anti-war movement in this area, some have been engaged in this field in the late 2000s and then again in recent years, some in the last 6-10 years, some since the beginning of the humanitarian and political crisis, i.e., the crisis of solidarity that began in the EU in the autumn of 2015, while some have joined the activism in the field of providing support to refugees and other migrants in the last two years.

We asked the activists if at any point they needed to give up activism or take a break, and what were the reasons for that decision. Most activists felt the need to take a step back at some point, and some even considered giving up. The reasons were mainly mental and physical health concerns and a lack of support.



“I don’t see activism as something that can be turned on and off, and that is necessarily defined by certain types of actions (protests, banner making or similar). I believe there are different types of active action, and I have used them as such in my life - depending on the phases that I have been in or that I am in. For me, activism is any action that transforms social consciousness - writing, talking, going out on the street, a hug, a shout, support, engaged art, and the like.”

“Yes. Non-transparency and the lack of understanding between different stakeholders (employed/unemployed, volunteers/refugees), exposure to violence, lack of support and collectivity of other activists.”

“Yes, activism has been a part of my life since I was young, and now I am not young anymore so it’s been a long time ... when I feel “worn out” or disappointed, I take a break for a while and come back when I feel better and when I feel that I again believe something can change and that a different world is possible.”

“I needed to take a break from a specific type of work because I felt absolutely helpless, but not from activism in general.”

“Well, it was sometimes difficult to connect activism and other obligations and engagements because it would all be too much for me. The reasons were also systemic; a lot of effort and time is invested in a certain programme, but it fails to be implemented as intended for some systemic reasons, so it can be demotivating. “

“Yes, because I felt helpless and exhausted.”

“Yes, I have. At one point of the burnout, I was thinking about giving up dealing with this topic, but I have come to the conclusion that by doing so, I would turn off an important part of myself and my core values, and that is something that I cannot do. However, I have learned to take a break from a certain type of engagement when I feel that I need to.”


“We’re all human and sometimes we get tired, so I take breaks from all that, but I never even consider giving up. The reason why I need a break is because of the feeling that the change I want sometimes takes a lot longer to occur, and that can sometimes be disappointing.”



We have also asked if they think that psychological support is available to activists who provide support to refugees and other migrants - the conclusion is that psychological support is not available to the extent that it should be. There are some improvements compared to before, some activists were informed about the psychological support that CPS provides in project cooperation with the Society for psychological assistance, but there is no long-term, accessible-to-all solution. The need for psychological help to be more accessible and normalized, and that access to that help becomes the rule, not the exception, was emphasized. Most of our respondents attended supervision at some point (some have also participated in psychological workshops for burnout prevention), those who didn't, didn't emphasize the need for it or have other ways of coping with difficulties (e.g., talking to friends). Those who attended

supervision believe that it helped them, and some of them point out that they should attend it more often.

In the end, we asked the activists what is it that they need in order to continue their activist engagement. Support, that is, various forms of support, was mentioned as a key element.



“Anything that would give me hope and faith that I’m not alone, i.e., that it’s not just a couple of us in that story.”


“Financial, psychological and social support. Not everyone can afford to volunteer.”

“I need the accessibility of psychological support, solidarity among activists and in society, the support of people who are close to me, protection from the criminalization of solidarity.”

“I feel like the coronavirus pandemic has disrupted my favourite way of blowing off steam, that is, shouting, swearing and being politically incorrect over a drink with people who are engaged in the same type of work. Those things mean a lot to me.”

“Professional supervision in moments of nasty crisis. Collective support. A collective that works united and together.”

“Joint search for creative solutions that would enable a concrete change.”



The complexity of activist action and its connection to mental health was well summed up by the British activist Kate Bradley:

“People do not think and act in compartments, with politics on one side and emotions on the other. Our worldviews and politics inform our other thoughts, which inform our moods, as well as vice versa. We are affected by changing political contexts, both in the ways that politics affects our access to services such as housing, work, or healthcare, and through direct repression in the form of surveillance, policing and systemic oppression. As activists, we also interpret our world in ways that can make us feel worse: identifying and dwelling on the injustice we and others face without being able to change it significantly.”¹²

We hope that this guide will serve as a modest but significant step in achieving support among activists and taking care of mental health in order for the fight for solidarity, equality and social change to become healthy, strong and sustainable.

¹² Libela. Kate Bradley: Živjeti s depresijom u kapitalizmu. 09.10.2017. <https://www.libela.org/sa-stavom/9015-zivjeti-s-depresijom-u-kapitalizmu/>

CONCLUDING COLLECTIVE REFLECTIONS OR HOW TO SURVIVE

// Your complements are desirable, given that upgrading ideas is a never-ending process //

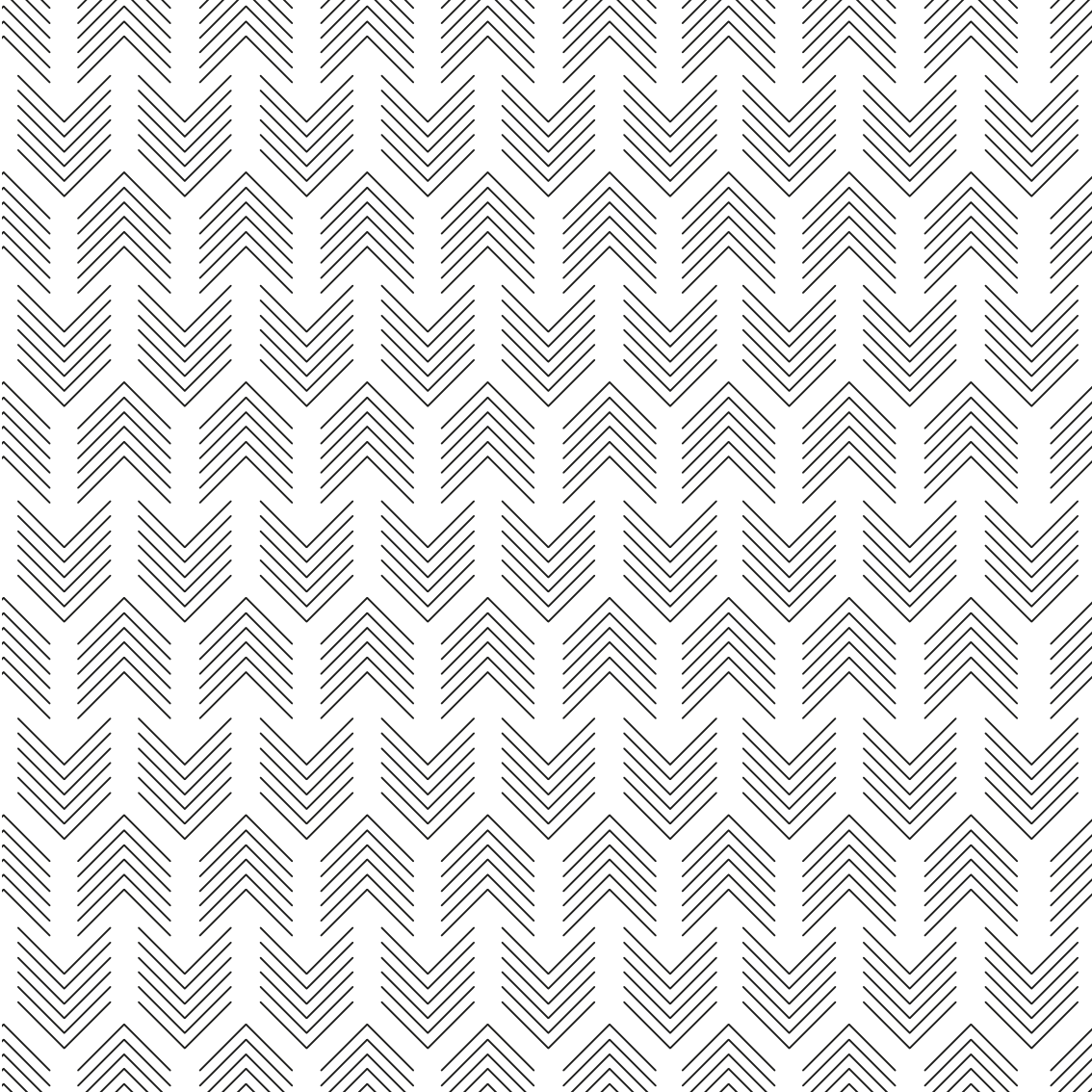
- » It is necessary to ensure better working conditions on the activist scene, **recognize activism as a valuable type of work and make sure that such type of action does not lead to burnout.**
- » It is necessary to **provide support** to those engaged in this type of action at the very beginning (before the adrenaline kick and burnout). By doing so, we ensure that activists know what needs to be done when they come to the burnout stage.
- » It is necessary to **create and nurture an atmosphere in which there is no discomfort when talking about burnout**, and the psychophysical

condition that leads to it. This way, we encourage support within groups that are working together, which is very important for the burnout prevention.

- » It is necessary to **ensure the availability of psychological support**, which largely depends on project applications of individual civil society organizations (which provide this support).
- » It is necessary to strive for **a long-term sustainable solution** that would enable healthy and long-term activist engagement not accompanied by burnout.
- » We must **demystify mental health as a taboo topic** and encourage conversations about the psychophysical state within collectives that act or cooperate. “Letting off steam” through conversation is healthy and can bring about new methods, solutions, and suggestions.
- » It is necessary to raise awareness of the need to **make time to take care of ourselves and our mental health**, and of the fact that time spent that way is a valuable investment in our work and future actions.
- » When you are having a hard time, it is okay to dance, sing, scream, write, read... **do everything that helps** you cope with that weight.
- » Although sometimes it may seem like you are alone in your fight - **you are not alone!**
- » It is alright to **take a break and distance yourself**; it is important that you communicate this with your collective.
- » **Find your own moments of peace** and nurture them - they preserve your spirit and energy.

- » If your mind is filled with thoughts, **find a way to remove those thoughts from your head and take a break** from them. Take a notebook, write those thoughts down, put them aside and come back to them after you regenerate. It is important to create a connection with your thoughts and ideas - to learn how to control them (as you do with, for example, hunger).
- » **Share your experiences with others** - you have learned from your mistakes, so help others not to repeat them.

We believe that we will continue upgrading this guide with new ideas and suggestions over the years. That is why we are leaving these blank lines and inviting you to inform us about the ideas and reflections you come up with. **You can find us at: cms@cms.hr**





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