

Enjoying the journey – individual wellbeing

The challenges of animal activism

- The needs/wants of humans come before animals. And there is massive human suffering and injustice. We constantly need to justify our work for animals.
- Not seen as serious work; something less important, even frivolous.
- Activists are seen as sentimental, extreme.
- You see animal abuse and suffering everywhere you turn – though others may not.
- Always in fighting mode and posing ideas that conflict with society. This can be frightening and tiring.
- Unlike other injustices involving humans, industrialised animal use/abuse is normative and sanctioned by society. Many practices are legal and condoned by society, yet may cause suffering to animals. Some outright cruelty may be illegal but in countries like China, even such abuse may not be illegal.
- Most of us are not professionally trained in animal welfare so there is self-doubt on whether we are professionally qualified to speak up for the animals. However, the government, industry and academics seem to have the power and credibility that we do not possess. This needs to be challenged and it is difficult. Our confidence and credibility can be affected and we need to work on this so that we can not only project it but also believe it internally.
- Many are volunteers. Some want to work full-time for animals but cannot find a way to do that. This creates added frustration.
- In some parts of Asian society, such work is not understood or given respect, and our choosing to do it does not bring pride to our family. In fact, they may discourage our work.
- Constant and sometimes simultaneous stream of problems but limited resources (time, money, energy, access to information, experts, knowledge and skills).
- Level and kind of cruelty unparalleled. The images of animal suffering can be extremely shocking and traumatic to see. Sometimes we may develop post-traumatic stress. Sometimes these stay in our mind and we replay them over and over again. Sometimes we switch off our emotions as a coping mechanism.
- Isolation is a common problem because people, including those close to us, may not understand our work or our reasons for doing it.
- Grief and sadness are natural in our work. Sometimes we put all our energy into helping animals and they still suffer or die. These are difficult emotions to express, especially in the Chinese culture. However, their release is important for us to function in a healthy manner.
- We are sensitive to animal suffering. But we also need to be strong to deal with all the above. We need to be tough to face resistance whilst recognising our personal and human limits. This may be challenging – to be sensitive and strong.

Addressing these challenges

These are part and parcel of being an animal advocate. Many advocates in the movement face these challenges. We need to take the challenges in our stride, accept them and not be broken by them.

Be as professional in your knowledge and skills as an advocate whenever you can. This will help you improve your work and build confidence.

It is very important to be able to express your emotions in a healthy way. Identify people who are good listeners, understanding and can give you the support you need.

Develop a life outside activism that enables you to view life in a more balanced way.

When helping starts to hurt

“This is horrible/unjust/cruel. I want to do something about it.”

⇓ Over time can change to

“I am not doing enough. I have to do more. Millions of animals are suffering now. How can I stop to enjoy life or rest or look after myself when they are suffering NOW?”

“If I stop working I am selfish.”

“If I sacrifice my life, I can save one animal, so I cannot stop working. My tiredness is just a sign of my sacrifice. I must accept it and keep going.”

“Nobody will do it as well as I do so I have to do everything.”

⇓ Over time can change to burnout

“The problem is too big – animal abuse is everywhere. The people who are involved in it have power and big money; they will win. The public does not care about animals. I am not making a significant impact. My organisation doesn’t appreciate me anyway.”

Why does this happen?

Inherent challenges of animal activism (described above)

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Lack of personal coping ability

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Lack of organisational/social/personal support

What is burnout?

“When your body and mind are relentlessly strained, you can develop emotional and physical fatigue. Burnout is a physical, mental, and emotional response to constant levels of high stress. Burnout produces feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, cynicism, resentment and failure—as well as stagnation and reduced productivity. These stress reactions can result in levels of depression or unhappiness that eventually threaten your job, your relationships and your health.”

Source: Helpguide.org

The alternative

Sustainable activism allows you to understand and accept the nature of your work, yourself and your environment better so that you can function at an optimal level for the animals – and enjoy the process.

Study of 29 animal advocates from the San Francisco Bay Area by Mary E. Gomes, PhD

Current advocates (15)

- Took time off
- “Let someone else do it for a while”
- Balance with other non-animal protection activities

Former advocates (14)

- “I am on duty 24 hours a day, 7 days a week”
- Feel guilty or pressurised if not working
- When feeling burnt out, push harder
- Constant personal sacrifice. Activism takes over your life

ARE YOU GETTING THE MESSAGE?

Physical

- Exhaustion
- Headaches
- Muscle strain
- Eye strain (Overuse of computer)
- Constant tiredness
- Unable to sleep (overactive mind) or eat
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Indigestion
- Become sick more often than usual
- High blood pressure, heart disease

Emotional

- Feel lonely, isolated
- Feel unappreciated
- Constantly emotionally fatigued
- Feel powerless
- Sense of futility – nothing matters
- Feel like you have nothing to give
- Unprocessed emotions such as grief, anger and frustration which manifest themselves in unconstructive ways such as crying too much, being violent, etc.
- Depression
- Anger
- Frustration
- Become negative and cynical
- Forgetful
- Anxious

Mental

- Difficulty in decision-making
- Guilt/sense of failure
- Lack of interest in people
- Difficulty in relaxing
- Forgetful
- Reduced concentration

Behaviours

- Addictions (eating/drinking/smoking)

Balance is the key

"At times, it is difficult to keep a proper balance in our lives. But, over time, an improper balance will lead to problems." Catherine Pulsifer

Isn't all this common sense?

Manage emotions

- Talk about your feelings in a "safe" place with people you trust to understand.
- Know about local sources of professional support such as crisis lines or counselling centres.
- Find peace with those close to you who do not understand or respect your work.
- Keep a journal and write how you FEEL.
- Enjoy humour.
- Allow yourself to feel joy about your work and train yourself to recognise beauty and kindness wherever you see it. This will help you keep a better perspective and balance on the world and you in it and so make you stronger, more resilient and less vulnerable.

Manage your mind

- Develop a hobby
- Meditate
- Accept that there will be problems

Manage your body

- Eat healthily. Make sure you get all your nutrients. Learn about good nutrition.
- Walk/Jog/Cycle/Go to the gym/Play a game.
- Integrate exercise into daily activities - walk whenever you can!

Reported benefits of exercise include:

- Increased strength
- Lowers blood pressure
- Reduces physiological and psychological stress
- Decreases fatigue
- Improves self-esteem
- Improves ability to sleep

Get enough sleep

Reported effects of sleep deprivation include:

- Reduced mental functioning (e.g.: concentration and memory)
- More stress and anxiety
- Weakening of immune system

Manage finances

- Save enough for yourself
- Learn basic local fundraising skills
- Work within financial limits so you don't feel financially drained

Manage time

- Prioritise
- Understand "boundaries"
- Set realistic time-frames

Manage expectations

- Remember what it takes to create real change
- Have realistic goals
- Accept that you can't change everything, but every small change counts. This will help you to fight off being discouraged too easily.
- Stop, take stock of your achievements and celebrate successes, big or small. This will help you realise that you are making progress. Then review and create new goals.

Remain inspired

- Despair about the world is natural, but try and remember the successes of the great people who changed history before us or who continue to; visualise scenes and leaders who have inspired you.
- Collect writings/quotations/pictures that inspire you and keep them in a place where you can go to when you need to.

Effective self-care

- Personal assessment
- Basic personal needs (e.g. sleeping, eating, inspiration, exercise, time for solitude, spiritual nourishment, self acceptance, laughter, fun, reasonable hours, boundaries of family/work, mentor/therapist....etc.)
- Know and work towards your specific goals

If you are in charge of an organisation...

- Know your goals and stick to your priorities
- Do not take on too much, however tempting it may be
- Value and show appreciation for your volunteers/workers
- Learn to recognise stress in your volunteers/workers
- Build a support system into your organisation so that volunteers/workers can share their frustrations/worries/problems in a safe environment. Also be aware of external sources of support
- Celebrate after major positive events and give some time for volunteers/workers to recover after major negative events
- If something negative has happened, pick a time for volunteers/workers to talk about it openly. Do not ignore it or think everyone is fine just because they have not said anything about it to you
- Seek the support of people who have experience in dealing with the issues you are grappling with

Last words

Start one thing that is easy for you to stick to. Slowly build up other positive habits. It takes time to break bad habits and build good ones. Be patient and kind with yourself. Ask yourself what you would advise yourself to do if you were your best friend.

Remember that activism is not only about changing the world but living life to the fullest.

You are more than your work for animals.

And the journey in life is also more than about animals, even if it is an important part of our lives; it is an opportunity for you to grow, understand yourself and deepen your experience of Life, and share a good thing with others.

*You are sensitive to animal suffering, because you are different from others.
The animals need your compassion and action.*

You have a unique contribution to make to them.

If you live in balance, your contribution will last longer and have greater impact.

And you will enjoy your Journey.