

Emotional self-management for activists

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It is important for activists to be able to deal skillfully with their emotions, a process we call emotional self-management. Done both individually and collectively, this can help activists to be more effective and help create the sort of society they believe is desirable. One approach to skillful management of emotions is through the concept of mindfulness, which involves paying attention to one's state of being. Activists have much to gain by moving from negative emotions to ones such as 'joyful hope'.

Keywords: activism; emotions; mindfulness; self-management; joy

Introduction

Most activists, as the name suggests, are oriented to action, typically as a means of bringing about a change in the world to address problems such as war, poverty, exploitation, and environmental degradation. For activists the usual focus is on what is 'out there', beyond their own personal problems. But aware activists realize that a preoccupation with action can lead to cynicism, burnout, and dropping out of activism altogether. Therefore, they pay attention to group dynamics, both task functions – getting the job done – and maintenance functions for building commitment and mutual support.

The attention to maintenance functions is an acknowledgment that in activism emotions matter. However, emotions have usually been treated as tools for more effective activism, such as when anger is harnessed and channeled toward those responsible for social problems or when compassion for the suffering of others motivates action. Far less frequently are emotional states seen as goals in themselves.

These comments about activists are generalizations and obviously do not apply to every activist or every activist group. They are most relevant to Western activism; in countries such as India, where there is a longstanding spiritual tradition, the idea that external change is the priority is not so dominant. Our focus is on Western activism, which in our experience and observation tends to be task-oriented, with emotions playing a secondary role. Our view is supported by examination of activist manuals.

Guides to activism

Consider first the highly influential *Resource manual for a living revolution* (Coover, Deacon, Esser, & Moore, 1981). This book was the outgrowth of a set of notes, called *The monster manual*, used within the Movement for a New Society (MNS). MNS trainers refined and codified methods of nonviolent action training and were instrumental in

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spreading them throughout the USA and many other countries in the 1970s and 1980s. The *Resource manual* covers the theoretical basis for change, working in groups, developing communities of support, personal growth, consciousness raising, training and education, organizing for change, and numerous exercises and other tools. There is some attention to emotions in the *Manual's* section on working in groups, in which the distinction between task and group maintenance functions is developed. Roles/functions of group maintenance include encouraging, expressing feelings, relieving tension, compromising, interpreting, and listening, with the purpose of maintaining cohesion, reducing tension, etc. (p. 47). A greater focus on emotions is found in part four, 'Personal growth' (pp. 115–127), which is the shortest in the book. It presents two main techniques: re-evaluation counseling (as a personal discipline) and clearness (group support and feedback for an individual) for making personal decisions.

Compared with many others, the MNS emphasized personal development quite a lot. A more conventional approach is given in the *War Resisters League organizer's manual* (Hedemann, 1986). The major sections cover politics, basic organizing techniques, constituencies, literature production, action, and working with the establishment. The only two chapters of relevance to emotions are 'Group process' – covering group dynamics, meetings, meeting preparation, and decision-making – and 'Conflict resolution'. In this manual emotions are treated as resources, along with leaflets and organizing techniques, to achieve a goal, rather than as desirable ends in themselves.

The book *Doing democracy* (Moyer, 2001) presents the influential Movement Action Plan, an eight stage model of social movement success. Emotions are especially important in stage 5, 'perception of failure', characterized by 'despair, hopelessness, burnout, dropout'. The book includes responses to reasons for believing in movement failure, solutions to the culture of failure, and attitude adjustments to overcome the aversion to success. These are mostly rational, awareness-based methods. *Doing democracy* also spells out four roles within social movements: citizen, rebel, reformer, and change agent. Negative rebels are 'angry, dogmatic, aggressive, and powerless' (p. 28).

In these and other manuals (Clark, Crown, McKee, & MacPherson, 1984; Jelfs, 1982; Nonviolence Training Project, 2005) emotions are treated as important, but mainly as supports for effective activism. Because negative emotions can cause people to burn out, drop out, or damage the operation of a group, there is attention to addressing anger and despair, resolving conflicts, and working in groups, especially group maintenance functions. Most of the 'tools' introduced in these manuals are oriented to the analysis of social problems, developing strategies, carrying out actions, or working in groups. The one tool explicitly oriented to emotions, presented in the *Resource manual*, is re-evaluation counseling – also called co-counseling – which is designed to help people deal with and avoid negative emotional states.

Debra King (2005, 2006) has insightfully analyzed co-counseling as a process of mutual help in which participants, as equals, help each other 'integrate thinking, feeling and acting in ways that are more appropriate to the immediate situation' (King, 2005, p. 156). Co-counseling has a history as a process supportive of activists. Emotional reflexivity, in other words self-awareness in both feelings and knowledge of feelings, is central to its effectiveness. King (2005, p. 166) commented that activists may promote emotional reflexivity in other ways besides co-counseling, but these are not taught or theorized to the same extent as co-counseling.

What is striking by its absence from the manuals is attention to desirable emotions in activism. There is plenty of attention to undesirable emotions, such as when anger causes rash actions or despair causes burnout. But what emotions should activists have? Should

they be calm or passionate? Should they be happy? Or should they be distressed about the world's problems?

Instrumental emotions and prefiguration

Two main answers are offered to these questions. The first treats emotions as instrumental means for bringing about social change: whatever emotions make you a better activist are good emotions, and these can vary from person to person. This leads to a *de facto* agnosticism about desirable emotions: anger, sadness, or even disgust are fine as long as they don't hinder action or damage group dynamics. Emotions are treated as largely private matters. Individuals may seek support for their own emotional difficulties, but this is seldom a task for a group.

The second answer to the question of desirable emotions for activists draws on the tradition of prefiguration, in other words making the means reflect the ends. Prefiguration is expressed in the saying 'There is no path to peace; peace is the path'. If the goal is a society in which people are happy or content then current practice should aim to promote and incorporate these states. Prefiguration has been influential within, among others, the non-violence movement – if we want a nonviolent society, then don't use violence to achieve it – and the feminist movement – let's have equality in our groups and not wait until 'after the revolution'. But it has seldom been applied to emotions in any systematic fashion. As a result, there are few discussions of the emotions an effective activist should aspire to. This is a striking absence considering the enormous attention to good practice in other realms, such as non-sexist language, environmentally sound behaviors, and nonviolence.

Our comments here are about the relative neglect of collective understandings and practices about desirable emotions. We know that there are many individuals and groups that take emotions and, more generally, personal development extremely seriously. Spiritual traditions in particular have paid attention to personal growth, and this is quite influential in faith-based activism. In some areas, such as deep ecology and Paganism, new practices with spiritual dimensions have developed with strong activist links (see Starhawk, 1989). In addition to organized practices, many individuals seek to transform their emotions through practices such as meditation.

Our concern, therefore, is with a gap in theoretical understanding relevant to activists, namely an understanding of desirable emotions, as both means and ends, and the processes of self and group transformation to bring about these emotions. We refer to this transformation process as 'emotional self-management'. It involves applying skillful means to emotional states or, in other words, emotional self-regulation. We appreciate that the term emotional self-management may carry connotations of control, surveillance, and excessive rationalization. However, we use this expression not in the sense of hierarchical management in bureaucracies but analogously to 'workers' self-management' in which workers collectively make decisions about how and what work will be done, without the need for bosses.

Further, for us the notion of 'emotional management' implies the development of 'skillful means' in relation to emotions, i.e. ways of being with our emotions and acting on them that are appropriate to the circumstances and bring beneficial consequences. Rather than react hastily to injustice from a sense of 'righteous anger', skillful means might lead us to name and dwell with feelings until they are transformed into a tactically appropriate compassionate action. As we have noted, some activists have been doing some of these things, but usually without the aid of a cohesive theoretical framework or an associated set of collective practices.

We looked at activist manuals because they are a strong indicator of what is considered important for activists. Similar findings can be made by examining perceptive studies of activists and the role of emotions in social movements (Daloze, Keen, Keen, & Parks, 1996; Flam and King, 2005; Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001): emotions are quite important in activism but there is little indication that many activists share a common approach to emotional self-management, especially in relation to the promotion of positive emotions as ends in themselves as well as means to an end. For us, learning how to skillfully develop our own emotional states is an important question for activists to consider.

The skillful management of emotions

We approach this large area by spelling out one particular theory of identity and self-transformation, drawing on psychotherapy and Buddhism, with special attention to the concept of mindfulness. We begin by concentrating on the management of difficult emotions, but swiftly move to consider the generation of more positive states, such as happiness or joy.

We illustrate the potential relevance of this to activism through selections from a dozen interviews with activists – selected for having written about issues and ways to think about activism – undertaken during 2001–2004 in Australia and the USA, using ‘joyful hope’ as a key concept for self-perception and collective practice. We seek to integrate the work of Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh with that of Martin Seligman (2002), the key figure in helping to move psychology from its preoccupation with negative states to a consideration of positive ones. In the conclusion we sum up the insights from this exploration, laying out possibilities for building emotional self-management into activist practice. Our aim is less to recommend a particular approach to skillful emotional self-management than to point to its importance and the need for further investigations and reflexive experimentation.

Activists are usually committed to cooperative joint action. However, they cannot escape the fact that the central institutions of Western societies are geared to individuals rather than collectives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). As we become cut off from wider community narratives, so meaninglessness, emptiness, and anxiety become fundamental psychic problems. Yet the stress on individuals also presents us with the opportunity to make ourselves anew through ‘the reflexive project of the self’ (Giddens, 1991). Here, self-identity is constituted by the ability to sustain a narrative about the self and build up a feeling of biographical continuity. The identity stories that form a project attempt to answer the critical questions ‘What to do?, How to act?, Who to be?’ and lead us to grasp identity as the self that is understood reflexively by any given person.

Psychology and related disciplines now form one of the central constitutive discourses of contemporary culture and a resource for identity construction (Rose, 1996). In some instances this exhortation to self-improvement fuels narcissism, but in many others it offers genuine tools for self-management and skillful constructive change in relation to emotions. In that context a central assumption of cognitive and construct therapy (Kelly, 1955; Viney, 1996) is that people use linguistic constructs to make sense of what happens to them. Therapy involves making these constructs explicit and changing them in order to obtain ‘better’ consequences (Morgan, 2000).

A significant skill that activists can learn from psychotherapy is ‘reframing’, i.e. redescribing one’s experiences in an innovative way, in other words with a new frame around them. For example, instead of thinking about a particular campaign as a failure because it did not achieve its stated goals, we can reframe it as a success because it brought people together. We can try to avoid blaming ourselves for insufficient effort by

recognizing that goals were not achieved because of the power of others rather than the failure of the self.

However, in order to undertake such a reframing or any other useful psychological technique one first needs to be able to calm the mind and regulate one's emotions. Activists can learn some quite specific skills that can help them manage negative emotions and generate positive emotions. There are many sources from which to learn such skills: our example is drawn from Marsha Linehan's (1993a, 1993b) 'dialectical behavior therapy' (Table 1), with a particular emphasis on 'emotion regulation' and 'distress management'. Although the concepts 'regulation' and 'management' might sound narrowly rationalist and controlling, Linehan was in fact amongst the first to introduce wider notions of mindfulness into western cognitive psychology.

With respect to the final box, Linehan offers a number of ways to tolerate emotional distress, including:

- distract yourself with positive activities such as hobbies or visiting a friend;
- self-soothe the five senses by buying a flower, listening to beautiful music, or having a good meal;
- improve the moment by meditating, creating meaning and purpose, or relaxing the body;
- encourage yourself: 'I can do it', 'it will pass';
- calm the mind by learning to follow the breath and put a half-smile on the face;
- radical acceptance, deciding to accept reality – let yourself embrace 'what is' through mindfulness.

Activists can learn such techniques in order to pursue not only their social goals but also the transformation of the self. It is important to note that Linehan was pursuing not simply the management of destructive emotions but the generation of positive ones such as calmness, acceptance, and joy. Underpinning these skills is the core competence of mindfulness, which is simple to learn but requires practice to make it effective. The idea of mindfulness is derived from Buddhism, which stresses the need for a self-awareness that reduces our tendency to be caught up in difficult emotions and enables us to generate more productive and joyful states of mind.

The core skill of mindfulness

Mindfulness involves 'paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally' (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 4). That is, 'When walking, the practitioner must be conscious that he is walking. When sitting, the practitioner must be conscious that he is sitting' (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975, p. 7). Awareness of the breath is the anchor by which one stays mindfully in the present (Table 2). Mindfulness brings our conscious attention to immediate experience without struggling to change it. When we pay attention to our thoughts we become less attached to them and are able to make more self-conscious choices. When we are mindful of our feelings we are more able to observe them without immediately acting on them. Mindfulness enables us to manage our emotions more skillfully because we are less caught up in their immediate demands.

Although this observation is a bringing to consciousness of emotions, it also works at a non-cognitive level, i.e. the movement and observation of the emotions is a step towards enabling a different response to habitual emotional states. We could call this freedom.

The way we handle the present moment is the key to transforming suffering and increasing our levels of contentment. There are many ways to develop mindfulness in daily life.

Table 1. Emotion regulation skills.

Objective	Immediate goal	Action/skill
Identifying and labeling emotions	Observe and describe events and the interpretations that prompt emotions	Keep an emotion diary that includes events, interpretations, body feelings, and action urges
Reducing vulnerability to 'emotion mind'	Avoid stress that makes you vulnerable to emotional reactivity	Take care of the body: exercise, eat well, avoid mood-altering drugs, get enough sleep. Do one thing a day that makes you feel competent
Increasing positive emotional events	Increase the number of pleasurable events in your life in order to increase positive emotions	Do one thing a day that gives you pleasure. Make a list of positive events you want – and take the first step. Be mindful of positive experiences. Attend to your relationships
Increasing mindfulness to current emotions	Experience emotions without judging them or trying to inhibit them because this simply adds an extra layer of suffering	Observe your emotion, note its presence – and step back. Accept your emotion: don't try to push it away or hang on to it. Remember you are not your emotion and you need not act on it
Taking opposite action	Change your behavioral-expressive response to emotions	Do things that give you a sense of mastery. Fear: do a little of what you are afraid of. Sadness: get active. Anger: imagine sympathy and do something nice
Applying distress tolerance techniques	Tolerate negative emotions without taking impulsive actions	See text

Based on Linehan (1993b).

Table 2. Mindfulness of the breath

1. Settle into a comfortable sitting position keeping your back straight
2. Bring your awareness to the breath as it moves in and out of the body. You can do this either at the entrance to the nostrils or on your lower abdomen
3. When the mind wanders off, as it will, note where it has gone, then gently bring it back to the breath
4. Practice this activity for 10 minutes a day, building up to 40 minutes
5. In stressful situations stop and follow the breath, if only for a couple of minutes

For example, Thich Nhat Hanh (1975), a long-standing peace activist, suggested that we carry a pebble in our pocket to remind us to be mindful. We might also pick a routine activity each day and make a special effort to be mindful during it. For example, one might make a point of doing mindful eating or teeth cleaning. This is enabled by learning a series of *gathas* or ‘mindfulness verses’. Faced with difficult emotions, activists might consider reciting the following to themselves: ‘Feelings come and go, like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor’ (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1990). Above all, argued Thich Nhat Hanh, we need to learn to return to our breath again and again. We can call both these actions ‘skillful means’.

Modern science is demonstrating the usefulness of mindfulness and meditation. For example, Kabat-Zinn (1990) has demonstrated its value in the treatment of heart disease, anxiety, panic attack, and chronic pain. Segal, Williams, and Teasdale (2002) have presented evidence for the efficacy of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy in reducing relapse rates for depression. Mindfulness enables patients to notice when they are about to undergo perilous mood swings and assists them to de-center or exit from ruminative depression-linked thought patterns. This seems particularly relevant to activists who are feeling demoralized, low, and burned out.

Indeed, it could be argued that we are mostly confronted by anger and disillusionment in current political and socially oriented activism. In this sense, for activists the process of emotional management can become tainted. Indeed, in the interviews undertaken with different activists over the years one of the most prominent expressions is the ‘depressive’ states that can set in, in which anger, frustration, and fear take over.

Importantly, this aspect of depressive states – as one activist, Emma, put it: ‘deliberate sadness and misery and outrage’ – can often have an impact on how activism itself is understood and enacted. If outrage and misery take over it can lead to a certain wanton moralism, or ‘distortion of the ends, a purposeful sadness to demonstrate the outrage and suffering of others’. This is not to ignore the suffering of people that ignites a passion for and an interest in collective change in different contexts, however, it suggests that it can distort the groundwork for change, as forms of sadness and depression can take over the management of emotions and lead to more retroactive states of despair and disillusionment.

In that context the value of mindfulness does not lie simply in the management of difficult emotions but also in ‘watering the seeds of happiness’ (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2001). We need to focus not simply on what is wrong or difficult in our lives but on what is right, and so strengthen our ability to be content, which makes for a better world not simply tomorrow but today.

Joyful hope

... one aspect and important value that is refreshing in activism can be its joyful character ... a non-moralistic way of coming together ... that acknowledges one’s own complicity in power,

and also that this should not be seen as debilitating. ... It would be an interesting project to consider love as a political concept, and what that might mean is that joy becomes the basis of political relationships, rather than sadness and misery.

This is a reflective comment from Tony, a political writer and activist, that emerged out of the interviews on the role of hope and joy in social and political change and activism. Considering the ideas of hope and joy in activism involves exploring the conditions that can sustain individual and collective senses of worth and dignity and the ability to actively engage with the conflicting emotions that often arise in participation in and ongoing attempts at social change. As Kathy put it: 'there is a need to learn off each other and to adjust to the conflicting emotions we have and that may enable the potential and possibility of hope and joy in activism'.

Antonio Gramsci advocated 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'. If we take this seriously – the dynamic mix of analysis and emotions that propels activists – then a useful mantra and way to explore this could be through a joyful hope, rather than fledgling states of depression that are more prevalent in community and social narratives for change.

In this regard hope itself is an interesting concept and political idea. Without it there is despair and a sense of futility. Yet, hope is often conceived as future-oriented: 'I hope it will happen'; 'I hope things will get better'; and so on. This is an important aspect of individual and collective hope. At the same time hope needs to be considered as the 'future-present' where it requires the ordinary elements of daily life and activity – that spark of hope which enables different histories, emotions, and experiences to enter present conversations on revolution, freedom, and activism. When hope becomes a striving toward the future without recognition of what is in front of us – how we feel, understand, and work towards change – there is a loss of connection and dissatisfaction.

This is where something like joyful hope is much more peculiar to the language of individual and social activism. Joy emerges in the moment and provides a counterbalance to a future-oriented hope. For Nietzsche a joyous state of mind and activity is able to affirm and accept even the painful and destructive elements that we may encounter. As Alphonso Lingis (2003) noted, this state of mind can retroactively transform painful moments before it. It doesn't ignore them; rather, it becomes open to reality more than does a depressed or resentful state of mind. This is so because to be mindfully in the present moment is to be aware of one's emotional state. So to live for a joyful hope is to move towards the emergence of things as they happen – giving meaning to those moments of spontaneity and having an openness towards the future.

This openness, and how it might be directed toward what might be a 'hopeful' politics, was a constant theme in the interviews. In the streets or through the Internet or other means of technology or human endeavor the constant recurring theme of joy in celebrating a vision or working towards change seems the most helpful in collective and individual experience. For instance, the idea of the 'carnival' as part of activism can be seen as a movement away from despair, and for a renewal of the individual and collective spirit. Jenna, an anti-corporate globalization activist, suggested 'the best aspects of activism can emerge in a carnival atmosphere, where the ongoing movement of different emotions and the participation in the action provides an energy and feeling that can lift us out of moralism and despair'.

Indeed, what was clearly expressed in the sense of joy that comes out of a carnivalesque atmosphere is the feeling of suspension, activity, performance, music, laughter, and dance as a mix of 'optimism and pessimism'. The carnival as a joyful response to critical and

sensitive issues helps move away from a confrontational politics as it engages both activists and spectators. Everyone becomes part of the movement and change exhibited through the event. At the same time, the essence of a carnival is a sense of ‘suspension’ that can’t last forever, and the next action will be different.

As Michael put it:

the carnival is one aspect of possibility. It doesn’t offer a final solution; however, it enables the possibility of creating new relationships. That is refreshing. To move out of self-disciplined modes of sadness and outrage, that can take over when misery sets in. It would be good if the carnival and theatrical didn’t always happen when there were world summits or when world leaders were meeting, but if we could meet on our own agendas and schedules.

This important aspect of recognizing joyful activism need not only involve the street or formal protesting – that is organizing around others’ agendas – but can also suggest the everyday, immediate, and diverse ongoing ways of engaging in social change. In this sense, the joy of activity acknowledges the movement and changes in the flow of human relationships and collective experience. It is the ability to hold the complexity of opposite ideas at once – the pessimism that requires the activism and the optimism through the activity that brings people together. This involves the transforming qualities of an open and present state of mind that can exist between individuals.

Interestingly, the notion of love is central to this aspect of the transformation of individual activism and political engagement. We might start by having hope and joy in everyday and political relationships as an alternative to polemical and conflictual emotional states and the expenditure of energy. According to Thich Nhat Hanh, to be fully mindful in the present moment is to be aware of our interconnections with others. If we take this one step further this hope and joy involve a care for others and their suffering, which might be called love. In this care we can witness prejudice and hostility towards others and ourselves. What may spur on active resistance may also harbor forms of anger and resentment deeply rooted in years of constant and unsuccessful change. In this notion of joy and care we can acknowledge what causes our negative feelings, burnout, and disillusionment, alongside the hope and joy involved in change, and be mindful in the ongoing day-to-day activities of living.

The psychology of happiness together

Here there is a good deal of agreement between Buddhism and the growing Western psychology of happiness (Seligman, 2002). The most solid of Seligman’s conclusions is that the richer one’s social life and the more optimistic one is about the future, the happier one is. In order to promote greater happiness he suggests that we adopt the following attitudes:

- in relation to our past we need to develop forgiveness and a sense of gratitude;
- in relation to the present we need to savor the moment and become absorbed in the flow of now;
- in relation to the future we need to develop hope and optimism.

For example, rather than ruminating on the pains and slights of the past, contentment lies in being grateful for that which did go well and developing forgiveness in relation to that which did not. Listing the things one has to be grateful for and cultivating our good memories while downplaying the bad ones is a valuable strategy. However, these states require our attention

in the flow of now. Gratitude, forgiveness, and friendships all depend on being in the present moment. Further, it is only by paying attention (through mindfulness) to the way we think now that we can cultivate greater levels of possibility and joyful hope.

Seligman went on to argue that the deepest emotional satisfactions in life come from the exercise of one's strengths and virtues (creating satisfaction) rather than from the pursuit of pleasure. Instead of asking 'how can I be happy?' we should ask 'what is the good and meaningful life?' This is found by focusing on one's 'signature strengths' in the central realms of life, particularly 'in the service of something much larger than you are' (Seligman, 2002, p. 263).

Joyfully together

Thich Nhat Hanh and Seligman would agree that contentment is built on the pursuit of virtue and the reduction of suffering for all. In other words, if activists can maintain an emotional balance and approach their work with joyful hope then the very pursuit of justice (as the good and meaningful life) can bring happiness. For activists this can be done collectively.

Western psychology and self-help literature tends to focus on individual ways of managing emotions. However, Buddhism stresses that its practices are best developed and performed collectively in the context of a Sangha or Buddhist community. Likewise, for activists the skillful handling of emotion can be developed together both formally in a group meeting and more informally through joint actions. Indeed, collective and appropriate actions can themselves be skillful means of developing willingness, confidence, and joyful hope. There is an ongoing dialectical interaction between individual and group emotional states and their management.

In *Joyfully together* (2005) Thich Nhat Hanh noted the importance of recognizing the qualities of other people without judgment and the necessity of care for each other as primary to a community. For instance, in considering the ways of joyfully living together in a community, and with others, we can adapt some of his key principles and specific practices in the following ways for emotional management and integrity in daily living and activist work.

Second body. Within a group or community care for oneself is also extended to others, or a 'second body', i.e. individuals look after themselves and their own feelings, but are also allocated and responsible to another member in the group. In this way, 'looking after' another person means taking care of and helping others when they are ill, or feelings overwhelm them, or they are overworked. This notion of care is about taking care of oneself as the basis of caring for others.

Mentor system. This mentor system involves more experienced people within a group supporting and sharing their feelings and experiences with new members; this can enable the positive and negative feelings of emotional management to be explored, discussed, and addressed without fear or recrimination.

Shining light. This principle suggests offering guidance and direction for everyone in the group. This practice encourages people to talk about their strengths in a community context, as well as their weaknesses and the difficulties and problems they encounter. Voicing both positive and negative feelings and experiences in a communal context creates the conditions for mutual understanding and love.

Beginning anew. This involves the principles of mindfulness and meditation. Individuals can – as outlined in the previous section on mindfulness and ‘watering the seed of happiness’ – build on the strengths of working together. Acknowledging the difficulties and tensions that may arise in activist work, and in the individual confrontations and mixed feelings that arise in communal settings, leads to greater awareness. This encourages the foundation of a community that is sustained through mutual recognition and respect.

Importantly, creating a joyful community involves an awareness of and the skillful means to help each other to sustain the love and care which are the foundations of individual and social change. This skillful management is not understood in an esoteric way, but in the very practice and reality of the situations that face individual members within a group, and how this translates in connection and relationship with broader social and political actions. This essence of care and skillful practice emerges in an ability to restore love and understanding between individuals and the community. In this way the struggle for change can be sustained through acknowledging our own drives, desires, fears, and mixed emotions of ‘pessimism and optimism’. Put another way, awareness and emotional integrity in our individual and collective experiences offer the possibility of transforming grief and open up the potential for a joyful and hopeful politics. As Michael put it: ‘the joyful aspects of community and activism seem to me to be pertinent and give us the tools to work afresh and rupture the states of despair’.

Conclusion

The emotional dimensions of activism are crucially important but are often seen as secondary to action. Many activists are well aware of the importance of emotions and take steps to deal with them, but aside from co-counseling (King, 2005, 2006) there seems to be little theory, formal practice, or training in emotions. Furthermore, most of the emphasis is on handling and recovering from negative emotions such as anger and depression, with very little attention to positive states such as joy, especially those that prefigure the sort of society activists are seeking to create. Therefore, we argue, there is a need for more attention to be paid to what we call skillful emotional self-management, namely the individual and collective capacities to foster desirable emotions, both as instruments for better activism and as ends in themselves.

Efforts to deal with emotions often involve bringing them to conscious attention. In accord with this we suggest that mindfulness is an important tool for emotional self-management: by becoming aware of one’s actions and one’s place in the world it is possible to step back from immediate emotional turmoil and obtain a more balanced perspective and to achieve a sense of peace. Mindfulness is a skill that can be developed through practice, with meditation being one important route. We see mindfulness not as an escape from action, but rather as a different way of living while acting.

However, activists need not adopt any particular practice in a pre-packaged form. Rather, our key message is that emotional self-management is an area that deserves more attention, experimentation, and sharing of insights. Many activists have sophisticated understandings of emotions, both their own and others’, and how emotions relate to their roles as activists and otherwise. These understandings are often developed through personal experience and observation and in discussions with others. However, these understandings often have to be learned anew by the next generation of activists. By exploring a range of tools for skillful emotional self-management, such as mindfulness, the collective emotional wisdom of activists can be better sustained and carried forward.

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