

# An Online Acceptance-Based Behavioral Burn-Out Management Guide for Activists of Color Resisting Racism

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## Background

- Psychology is increasingly recognizing the role of social justice in psychological well-being (Prilleltensky, 2012) and the integration of this psychological understanding to advance effective social movements and activism (Haenfler, Johnson, & Jones, 2012; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Ruiz Junco, 2013).
- For activists of color who target racism in their work, activist burn-out may be particularly high, as they engage in difficult actions and conversations to eradicate racial injustice related to their marginalization as People of Color, to “live the issue” and, demonstrate an ongoing dedication to the injustice issue (Bobel, 2007).
- Research indicates that mindfulness-based strategies, may foster more positive mental health and sustainability for activists, so that they might plan for and engage in effective activism (Bays, 2011; Gorski, 2015; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Acceptance based-behavioral therapy (ABBTs) (Roemer, Lee, Salters-Pedneault, Erisman, Orsillo, & Menin, 2009), which aims to increase awareness and acceptance of internal experiences, as well as encourages valued-action through mindfulness and behavioral principles, has the potential to be adapted into an effective tool for burn-out prevention and management.

## Purpose

1. Help users *identify signs of burnout*
2. Offer techniques to *interrupt burnout*
3. Provide psychologically based methods for *Maintenance of action*, given the *unique emotional cost of engaging* in activism, related to *marginalized identities* as People of Color.

## Method

- **Online Activist of Color Guide to Manage Burn-Out :** <https://sites.google.com/view/refillyourwell>
- Developed in a course for activist training for clinical psychologists, “Psychology and Social Justice Activism” (Suyemoto, 2018).
- Based on *acceptance based behavioral therapeutic principles* (Roemer et al., 2009) and *cognitive behavioral, developmental model of effective activism* for social justice (Alire, 2018), designed to empower activists of color to promote self-care and prevent activist burn-out (Alire, Hall, Gorman, & Suyemoto, 2018).

## What is burnout?

First things first – Let’s talk about the well.

Your well consists of all the energy and time you have to give. Like water in a well, you can access it and share it when we want. Everyone has their own well.

Unfortunately, just like any other well, your own well can only be shared so much. When you are devoting yourself to a project, you are putting “water from your well” into it. You can only do that so much before the well is empty!

Burnout can be thought of as your well running dry!



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Activists of color experience different kinds of burden when doing activist work around racial and ethnic identity. Burnout is common across all forms of activism.

However, for **People of Color** fighting for racial justice and challenging systems of oppression they face in their daily lives, the emotional and physical costs can be especially high!

Activists of color doing this work also face a greater risk of alienation by White activists and being seen as a “token” representative of their racial/ethnic group.

☞ There's a cost to doing activism that is personally relevant. It's real.

**These costs often lead to burnout, which hurts your well-being and effectiveness in activist work.**

## Contributors to Burnout

- Tokenism
- Pressures to “live the issue”
- “Perfect Standard” activism
- Critical thoughts (e.g., “not doing enough”)
- Little or no time for self-care
- Hard to notice signs of burnout

## Signs of Burnout

- **Thinking:** Difficulty with thinking straight or making decisions; forgetfulness; procrastination; putting off goals
- **Physical:** Headaches, trouble sleeping, getting sick, fatigue, changes in eating, muscle tension,
- **Emotional:** Feeling overwhelmed, anxiety, depression, feeling annoyed, Irritability, hopelessness, numbness, cynicism

## Resisting Burnout

- Self-care
- Self-compassion
- Noticing
- Conscious choices about how to use limited time and energy
- Boundary Setting
- Attainable goals
- Nourishing activities (that aren’t work)
- Community and Coalition-Building (affinity groups, allies)

## Discussion

- It is critical to support individual activists, particularly those who are advocating in areas in which *they are, themselves, oppressed*.
- These activists are at *risk for a higher level* of activist-burn out, a condition that not only impacts the individual well-being of individual activists, but also the sustainability of social justice movements (Gorski, 2015).
- Providing activists of color with such an online resource may encourage activists to continue to *fight against racial injustice*, and to further disseminate and sustain their important work within their communities.