

# People's Guide to Surviving High-Risk Activism

The suggestions in this guide are drawn from *Aftershock: Confronting Trauma in a Violent World: A Guide for Activists and Their Allies* by patrice jones (Lantern Books).

## Tips for Individuals

Every day..

- **Get your rest**

Sleep deprivation can cause otherwise happy people to become anxious, enraged, or despondent. When you're struggling with difficult feelings associated with activism, lack of sufficient rest can make the struggle much more difficult. Make time to sleep. Rest your body even if you're having trouble sleeping. If you are having trouble sleeping, you may want to try a non-addictive herbal sleep aid such as chamomile tea or look into other strategies for promoting sleep.

- **Take your vitamins**

By this, I mean get all of your essential nutrients. Eat well — I recommend a vegan diet — and do take a good multivitamin to make sure that you've got the building blocks of good health. Healthy bodies are better able to bear strong emotions without breaking down.

- **Listen to your body**

Where does it hurt? What helps? What is it trying to tell you? What needs to stretch or rest? Remember that your body has its own animal rights. Don't do it wrong. Do give it fresh air, plenty of exercise, and whatever safe and consensual pleasures it craves.

- **Go outside**

Get some fresh air and a dash of sunshine every day. If you can, get a little exercise along the way. In addition to promoting general physical health, walking and other forms of moderate exercise oxygenate the brain, improving its functioning. Going outside connects you with the wider world.

Before high-risk actions...

- **Practice, practice, practice**

People feel less upset when they know that they did as much as they could as well as they could. Whatever it is you'll be doing, practice any aspects of it that can be approximated in advance.

- **Use performance visualization**

In fields as diverse as surgery and public speaking as well as virtually every sport in which its been tested, performance visualization — imagining yourself successfully completing a task — has been shown to actually improve performance. Practiced repeatedly, performance visualization serves as a kind of mental rehearsal while also allowing you to anticipate and plan for any problems that may arise. To put performance visualization to work for you, gather as much data as possible about the setting and other factors so that you can imagine the event as accurately as possible. Then, do your best to actually see or feel yourself doing whatever it is you are going to do. Do this over and over again until you feel confident and relaxed all the way through.

- **Get your rest**

Too often, we get less rather than more rest in the days leading up to a stressful action, leaving us especially vulnerable just when we need to be especially strong. Avoid this if you can. Cut out other things to make room for rest. Delegate tasks to activists who won't be participating in the stressful action. Put off anything you can until afterwards.

- **Prehydrate**

Your body is mostly water. Like a duck pond in a drought, you can get sluggish and murky without regular infusions of fresh water. Dehydration can cause fatigue and fuzzy thinking, neither of which will help you during a stressful action. You may need to avoid drinking right before the action, in order to avoid the awkward need for a bathroom break at a delicate moment, but you can prehydrate as bikers and other

athletes do before a long race. Test this out in advance to make sure it works for you. And, of course, make sure that you stay well hydrated everyday.

- **Remember that food is fuel**

You'll be needing your calories. You'll probably want to eat lightly on the day of a stressful action. Maybe, like me, you won't be able to eat at all if you're jittery. What many bicyclists do to prepare for a long ride is to "carboload" by eating lots of complex carbohydrates, such as those found in rice and pasta, the night before. Because the energy in complex carbohydrates is released slowly, carboload the night before can make sure that you have energy the next day, even if you're too nervous to eat breakfast.

- **Respect your own animal rights**

Don't go out drinking the night before and then expect your poor body to juggle a hangover along with the stress of activism after too little sleep. Don't sabotage yourself and your comrades by saying mean things to yourself — negative self-evaluations have a way of becoming a self-fulfilling prophesies. If you catch yourself predicting folly or failure, argue back. At the same time, don't ignore any genuine warnings of danger your body is sending you. You'll be better able to tell the difference between last-minute anxiety and forebodings that ought to be listened to if you are in the habit of listening to and trusting yourself.

- **Talk and listen**

You have to trust your comrades too. If you can, tell them your hopes and fears for the action and then listen to theirs. Plan together for problems that might arise. Be positive and reassuring to one another but also listen carefully to any reasonable doubts. Some people can sense danger better than others.

## During high-risk actions...

- **remember to breathe**

If you can do so safely, stop, breathe, and review your options and your plans. If you can afford a moment to shake the tension out of your body and then relax and feel grounded, take it. Remember that the air and the earth are your friends and that what you are doing is backed by their natural energy. If you cannot stop safely, then it's even more important to remember to breathe deeply and steadily. You need to get enough, but not too much, oxygen into your bloodstream so that your brain and your muscles can work most effectively.

- **talk to yourself**

If you start to feel scared or disorganized, talk to yourself in a soothing manner. If it's true, say, "We expected this. I know how to handle this." Otherwise, say something like, "Okay, this is new and scary but I can figure out what to do." If you're very scared, you may find it useful to talk yourself through every step as a way to stay in the moment and focused on what you need to do. Even in situations where you are not able to actively do anything, such as when you are under arrest, you can use self-talk to feel less helpless and more secure. Assure yourself that you will live through this crisis and remind yourself that what feels like passivity is actually just a temporary result of being the kind of person who takes action against injustice.

- **listen to everybody**

Listen to yourself when you say those things. Listen to your feelings too, even if you then have to set them aside to do what you need to do. Before setting any feeling aside, be sure that it isn't trying to tell you something important about what's happening. No matter what you do, don't waste energy hating yourself for feeling things you wish you weren't feeling. Listen to your comrades too. It can be hard to listen carefully when you're overstimulated by your own emotions. But your comrades may be trying to communicate important facts or tell you about feelings that they need to share with somebody.

- **don't forget your friends**

In a joint action, trust your comrades to be there for you and make sure you are there for them. When you're very scared or not sure what to do, it can help to remember that you're not alone. Even in a solo action, you are not alone. Even though we may not be physically present, your comrades in the struggle for peace and freedom are with you in spirit and will be there to help you recover.

## After high-risk actions...

After a potentially traumatic experience, be prepared for a stress reaction. Do what you can to take care of yourself or allow others to care for you, remembering that taking the time and energy to do that right away may prevent or mitigate the emergence of more stable and debilitating symptoms of post-traumatic stress or clinical depression. Find ways to experience and express your feelings, especially in words to people who can empathize but also with movement, music, art, or other safe outlets. Take particular care with rest and nutrition, so that your body will have the resources to cope with the physiological aspects of the trauma. Also be sure to take advantage of any and all safe opportunities to have fun or feel pleasure. In addition to taking extra-good care of yourself following a stressful action, be sure to:

### • **check in with yourself**

After a shock, people often like to go right back to everyday life as if nothing has happened. That's a fine way to keep from being destabilized as long as you check in with yourself at the same time. This is when it's especially important to pay attention to your body, which may use odd aches and pains or other ways to tell you that it's time to deal more directly with what happened. You'll also want to watch out for uncharacteristic behavior or feelings that seem to come out of nowhere. These, along with mysterious illnesses, can be signs of aftershock.

### • **feel your feelings**

Now is when it's especially important not to fear your feelings. Unexperienced emotions can come out in destructive ways or be turned inward as disease or depression. If you're feeling numb and know that you ought to be feeling something, you may want to think about gentle ways to access your feelings. Some people can't cry until they listen to sad songs but then feel much better after music has helped some of the pent up sadness to come out. Similarly, some people think they're not angry until they start talking about what made them mad.

### • **express yourself**

Whether or not you were traumatized by a high-risk action, there certainly will be things you can learn from the experience. Since thoughts and feelings are social processes, we often need to express our ideas in order to discover them. Whether or not you share them with other people, try finding words for your reflections on the action. If you're not verbal, or it's not safe to put certain things into words, try other forms of expression such as music, movement, or visual art. If you do end up with insights that might be helpful to your organization or movement, please do try to find some way to share them with other activists.

### • **listen to others**

The people who went through the experience with you will have their own thoughts and feelings. Invite them to talk and then listen with empathy. Besides being supportive to them, you may end up learning something or finding your own thoughts drifting in new and useful directions. You also want to listen to your friends and family if they remark on any changes in you since the high-risk action. You may be having reactions of which you are not aware but which the people close to you have noticed.

### • **don't make things worse**

People sometimes "self-medicate" stress or depression with alcohol or drugs. Such drinking or drug use can create more problems than they solve. Since alcohol is a depressant, people struggling with depression may want to skip the drinks altogether. Since alcoholism seems to have a genetic component, that is particularly true if you have a close relative with alcoholism. What if you've already been using alcohol or drugs to relax or feel better? How do you know if you have a problem? First, if any close friend or relative has suggested that you have a problem, you probably do. If more than one person has made such a suggestion, you almost definitely do. If more than one person has worked up the nerve to say something to you about your drinking or drug use, it's time to think about quitting or at least calling a temporary moratorium. If the thought of quitting even for a little while causes you anxiety or significant distress, that's more evidence that your drinking or drug use has become a problem. Other signs include black-outs (times when you cannot remember what you did), missed or impaired work due to hangovers, and embarrassment about things you have said or done (or have been told that you said or did) while intoxicated. Luckily, plenty of people from all walks of life have extricated themselves from alcohol and drug abuse. Some quit all on their own using sheer force of will but most find that a collective approach or some other form of help is useful.

### • **go back to nature**

Numbing is, in the words of trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk, “one of the most intractable” symptoms of traumatic stress: “Many people who stop suffering from intrusions of the trauma continue to feel unmotivated or ‘dead to the world.’” Anything you can do to help yourself feel more alive will be good for you. The healing power of nature is formidable. There is no synthetic substitute. Spend some time in the woods, at the ocean, or wherever you are most able to feel connected to the natural energy that we call life. If you can’t get away to your favorite place, go anyplace — a city park, your neighbor’s garden, the ragged patch of grass outside your own front door — where you can have any kind of contact with nature. Seize any and all opportunities to make contact. Literally stop and smell the roses. Stop and say hello to the weed pushing through that crack in the sidewalk or the centipede wandering by. Watch the birds when you see them in the sky. Feel your heart beating with their wings.

## Tips for Organizations

### Every day...

Groups are nothing other than collections of relationships. If the relationships are strong, even under-resourced organizations can do great work. If the relationships are weak or hurtful, even the best-funded and best-positioned groups fall apart, explode, implode, or limp along doing much less work than they would if healthy. Ideally, organizations should be structured non-hierarchically, with lines of communication that are like a spider web rather than a bicycle wheel, and consensus based decision making for broad policy, with individuals and workgroups empowered to make decisions about their own work. The organizational ethos should be one of care for each other rather than self-injurious self-sacrifice.

### Before a high risk action...

Use the technique of appointing a rotating “devil’s advocate” at every planning meeting in order to avoid groupthink and be more likely to perceive possible problems. Collectively use the process of performance visualization, actually talking through the action, imagining all possible outcomes, several times. This will serve as a kind of mental rehearsal while also helping to identify any possible problems with your plans. As the date of the action draws near, make time and space for the individuals who will be participating to take care of themselves and get sufficient rest. If needed, appoint people who will not be participating to take up any resulting slack.

### After a high risk action...

Understanding that different people will, due to their different bodies and life histories, have different reactions to the same event, make space for participants in the action to talk with each other and with the wider group about what happened and how they felt. Taking note of the tips for individuals above, encourage participants to take care of themselves in the wake of the event and watch out for signs of distress, which may not emerge for some time.

The suggestions in this guide are drawn from:

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by patrice jones (Lantern Books ISBN ).

The tips for individuals are direct quotes from the book; the tips for organizations are summaries.  
patrice wishes you luck with whatever work you are setting out to do.

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