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## Doing good without burning out – why change-makers need to care for themselves too

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Why are people who devote their careers to changing the world so often bad at taking care of themselves?

I have worked with people and organisations seeking change for several decades, on a wide range of issues including progressive politics, global poverty, climate change, social injustice and many others. One thing that has remained constant during this long period is the difficulty these people have in prioritising their own needs above – or even on a similar level to – their work.

If you look at it objectively, there is an irony between the strong value of care for others that drives these people to seek a better, fairer and more sustainable world, and the apparent lack of value they place on themselves and their own well-being. For the record, I count myself as one of these people, so I can speak with some experience about the tendency to overlook my own well-being.

This article will examine what it is about people who have careers in seeking change that makes us particularly vulnerable to overlooking our own self-care, and what we can do about it.

### Why do we overlook ourselves?

I think there are some factors that are unique to the person who commits their working life to make the world better that can influence their worldview and their tendency to prioritise their work above their own well-being. These factors include:

- **We are passionate about our work** – we love the work we do because it matters to us and gives us sense of meaning, identity and fulfillment, from making the world a better place. This is clearly a good thing in itself but it can also bring potential issues. For example, we may use our sense of meaning from work as a substitute for other areas of our personal or professional life where we lack meaning. Or, we could begin to feel that our sense of personal identity and value is based solely on our work output, rather than on our intrinsic value as an individual.

- **There is always more to do** - most of the issues we work on, from environmental problems to social injustice, don't have a clear solution or specific point at which they will be solved. They are ongoing challenges - there is always more to do, which can make it hard for us to accept that we've done enough on them, either personally or as a movement.
- **The problems can seem more *important* than our own personal issues** - as people driven by values, it can feel that the problems we are dealing with are much greater than our own welfare. For example, the lives of people in poverty compared to our own comfortable lives, or the existential threat of climate change. This sense of our own welfare being less important than the issues we are working on can also be implicitly (or explicitly) reinforced by the sectors and organisations we are working in.
- **The problems can seem more *urgent* than our own personal issues** - for example, the need to prevent the rise of the far-right in forthcoming local elections can seem more urgent to address than your need to attend your Tuesday evening pilates class! Again, this diminishing of the importance of our own interests can be implicitly (or explicitly) reinforced by the sectors and organisations we are working in.
- **There's a lack of resources** - the organisations we work for are often under financial pressure, so we are often asked - or feel an obligation - to give additional time or expertise beyond what we are paid for.
- **We admire self-sacrifice** - in our broader culture, there is something heroic about the person who sacrifices everything to fight injustice or make the world better. This is reflected in various aspects of our culture, including our views of history and the way people are portrayed in cinema, television and other media. For example, the journalist who stays up all night, sustained only by whisky, to investigate corruption, or the office worker who gives up everything to start a school in Somalia. This can set an unrealistically high bar for the level of self-sacrifice that we may feel we need to demonstrate.
- **We have an exaggerated view of our own importance** - throughout our careers seeking change we have been told that each person's support and contribution is critical to building a movement and achieving the change that's needed. This is a useful motivator to encourage people to engage initially, but can make us feel an over-inflated sense of personal responsibility for the success or failure in achieving results. And this in turn can make it hard for us to take our focus off these external issues and attend to our own needs.

To summarise, there are a range of factors that could make it difficult for people working in the search for change to look after themselves adequately. Aside from our passion for our causes, there is an open-endedness to the external issues we are trying to tackle, and it is easy for us to feel that these issues are both more important and urgent than our own needs as human beings. Not only that, we can feel an obligation to give too much of ourselves, and we can build an unrealistic sense of our own responsibility for addressing the external issues. Cumulatively,

this can lead us to a somewhat skewed worldview that lacks a sense of self-worth and a willingness to adequately fight for, or meet, our own needs.

### **How can we look after ourselves better?**

Below are a few initial steps people working for change can take to start looking after themselves better. Most of these points are not detailed, practical actions, but suggestions as to how to challenge and change your mindset so that you are open to giving your own welfare greater priority. Because it starts with giving ourselves permission to prioritise our own needs.

- **Get some perspective** - the first step is to stand back from your situation and ask whether you are really looking after yourself or prioritising your needs. Challenge yourself - are you adopting some of the skewed thinking above? Be honest if there are areas in which you have lost a sense of proportion and where you could re-think your worldview.
- **Check your life balance** – there's nothing wrong with being completely dedicated to changing the world in every waking hour, but it makes sense to regularly check in with yourself as to whether you have the right balance of things that matter to you in your life. Are you sacrificing other things that matter to you – such as exercise, interests and relationships – too much in favour of your work? If so, it might be time to rethink how to make more space for them and readjust your life balance.
- **Recognise that you'll be more effective if you look after yourself** - a good analogy is the message given by an airline pilot in their safety briefing - 'attach your oxygen mask before helping your child with theirs'. You're not going to be effective at helping others unless you are looking after yourself first.
- **Recognise that you matter as an individual** - you might not believe this, but you have value in yourself, not just in the contribution you can make to the causes you care about. For example, if all human problems were solved today, there would still be a human being called \*you\* living on the planet. As a conscious, reflective and experiencing creature, this human being has value, needs, desires and goals. Like everyone else, you also have a limited time to exist - 80 years if you are lucky - so, allow yourself to make the most of the experience of existing in whichever ways are meaningful to you.
- **Set some boundaries** - take control of your relationship with work. You may still work in an organisational culture that implicitly discourages people from prioritising their own lives, even if it outwardly promotes people-friendly ways of working. So, take responsibility for setting boundaries on areas like your workload, working hours, pay and other factors.
- **Communicate your boundaries clearly** – you can politely but assertively communicate with your workplace about the boundaries you'd like to set, and the important reasons why you would like to set them. This may open up some interesting and useful discussions. Communicating your boundaries to colleagues and networks as well helps

them to understand what you're doing, and sets an example for them to follow – or at least, starts an important conversation about the need to look after ourselves whilst doing our work.

- **Don't feel guilty in arguing for your needs** - your needs matter. Don't let organisational culture or biases in our sector stop you from lobbying for them, or make you feel guilty for doing so. When you do this, be aware that you are not being 'difficult', 'lazy' or 'greedy' by standing up for your needs, despite what anyone else may tell you.
- **If you are a manager, look after your teams** - reinforce the points in this article to your teams. Give them a sense of perspective on their lives and the issues they are working on. Even if they don't currently believe so themselves, remind them that they are valuable as people and their time and wellbeing matters, beyond the causes they work for.
- **Set up supportive networks** - it can be lonely working for a better world. We all need solidarity and human help. Find a support buddy or join groups of other people across the sector to support and look after each other in your work. You could also consider coaching - like the ongoing '[Work Guide](#)' sessions I provide to help leaders, team members, the self-employed and anyone, to feel supported in work and life.

## **Conclusions**

Those of us with careers seeking to change the world need to look after ourselves better. This starts with gaining some perspective and challenging some of our thinking that may have led us to undermine our own sense of self-worth.

We can then start to place reasonable boundaries on our relationship with work and the causes we are so passionate about, which could enable us to let other things into our lives that have value for us, but that we have neglected – from relationships to hobbies to relaxation. This could not only make our own lives better but make us more effective in our work.

So, by valuing ourselves and our well-being, we will not be diminishing our positive impact on the world – we will be increasing it.

## **Next steps**

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