

We don't need to be friends to be comrades

by David Camfield

September 17, 2018

“Be careful with each other” by Rushdia Mehreen and David Gray-Donald in the [September-October issue](#) of *Briarpatch* asks an important question: “Why are activists burning out, and what can be done to stop it?” There’s a lot I agree with in the thoughtful suggestions the article offers. Democratic decision-making processes, offering mentorship, distributing tasks and responsibilities while being aware of patterns rooted in oppression, encouraging involvement at whatever level of activity someone can put in, fostering the accountability of members to the group, “assessing what worked, what didn’t, and how to improve,” promoting accessibility, open communication – these are all valuable.

But I think the article also misses a big reason why activists burn out. Also, I believe some of what it recommends could be unhelpful or even lead to burnout. I hope this response contributes to discussion about how to build a stronger left.

Many people burn out or stop being active (these aren’t the same, though lots of burned out people do stop being active) because of mistakes in their political outlook. Some of us don’t realize we need to pace ourselves for the long haul. We may overestimate what relatively small groups can accomplish, or how likely they are to win victories. When we don’t see victories, sometimes we decide we just have to try harder. Or we start to blame each other. These mistakes are connected to weaknesses in our politics and how we understand the ground on which we fight. Mehreen and Gray-Donald’s important [2015 article](#) about the anti-austerity movement in Quebec in the spring of that year gives us a great example: impatient radicals misread the situation and wrongly thought they could spark a student strike leading to a general strike by unionized workers. How many of them burned out?

A remedy here is political education. We need to equip ourselves with the most accurate possible understanding of the society we’re trying change, along with the best ideas we can find about strategy and tactics for fighting to change it. This kind of knowledge helps us to have realistic expectations and calibrate our level of activity to the context we’re in. Without it, the good advice in “Be Careful With Each Other” won’t do much to [help people stay in the struggle](#).

That matters, since we need more organizers who’re in it for the long haul. Political education isn’t enough, of course. This is where I see the value in many of the article’s recommendations. But I’d like to sound a note of caution too. The article says collective care means “seeing members’ well-being – particularly their emotional health – as a shared responsibility of the group rather than the lone task of an individual.” However, it doesn’t say anything about the limits of that responsibility. I realize

Mehreen and Gray-Donald may agree with some of what follows, but their article doesn't say anything about the limits on the care that groups can offer members.

Groups working for social change should exist primarily to do work that in some way contributes to their goals. If they're not doing such work, they no longer have a good political reason to exist (in reality groups sometimes exist for other reasons, like giving like-minded people support in a hostile society). To do the work effectively, we should indeed be careful with each other. But there are real limits on how much members should try to take responsibility for the emotional well-being of other members. Not recognizing limits can further burden women and other people who are already doing a lot of caregiving in their lives. Also, if we don't recognize those limits, the group's focus can drift away from the work that justifies its existence in the first place to a different purpose altogether.

How much a group can be responsible for its members' emotional well-being will depend a lot on its size, resources, and context. To ask tiny activist groups operating in our context of a **very weak infrastructure of dissent** to take on more than a little responsibility for members' emotional well-being is to saddle them with an impossible burden – something that makes burnout more likely.

Everyday life is hard for a lot of people – harder than it used to be even a couple of decades ago. Capitalism imposes more insecurity, a more hectic pace, and often more work (unpaid and paid) on us. We often have little or no support in dealing with our everyday challenges. This may push activists to look to their groups to meet more of their needs. I think this makes it really important to acknowledge the limits of what our groups can do.

More than that, a lot of what we need for our emotional well-being isn't on offer from activist organizations. For example, when I suffered from depression in my early 20s one of the things I needed (but unwisely refused to seek out) was the help of someone trained in assisting people with that kind of mental distress. That's just one example of something that activist groups can't and shouldn't try to offer members.

My last thought is about a distinction I don't see in "Be careful with each other." As I see it, there's a difference between associating as members of an activist group because we think its project is worthwhile and we want to work together – which, when we're serious about it, makes us **comrades** – and being friends. What we owe each other as comrades is different from how friends may choose to commit to each other. Of course, some activists are or will become friends. But if we want our organizing to be effective we need to bring together people who want to collaborate for a common cause, but who'll never be friends.

Thanks to Kate Doyle Griffiths, Sheila Wilmot and Teddy Zegeye-Gebrehiwot for comments on the first draft of this article.