

Longevity in the Time of Confrontation: a disabled medic's take on building sustainability in a movement

written by shrimp, with help from everyone who has ever loved them.

"Distracting Injuries"

In the medic world there is the concept of "distracting injuries". These are characterized as obvious, visible traumas that capture the attention of both the provider and the patient to the point where other more life-threatening injuries may go unnoticed. I believe there is value in extending this concept to the way we look at injuries sustained by protestors who have endured state violence.

Most of the media I've come across regarding injuries at protests has revolved around tear gas, pepper balls, and other chemical weapons. While there are very real risks associated with encountering these things (some of which we are still learning about, such as harm to reproductive organs/hormones), a vast majority of the people who do, will recover swiftly with no long-term impacts to their physical health.

What I am not seeing mentioned nearly as much are the psychological injuries that many folks are experiencing, even in the absence of physical harm. I find this disproportionate focus on physical trauma to be troublesome given that psychological injuries are much more likely to produce longer-term impacts. In this case, the chemical exposures and physical wounds are distracting injuries, eclipsing the trauma responses that can take root when emotional first aid is not provided after stressful experiences.

This trauma can disrupt your life in a variety of ways, including your ability to engage in future actions. When extrapolated beyond the individual, it is evident how the ramifications of these injuries extend to the movement as a whole; the less folks are emotionally resourced or supported,

the more likely they are to burn out or become traumatized, and the less sustainable our efforts are overall. We owe it to ourselves and to each other to invest in building individual emotional resilience as well as collective support networks, so that we may see the longevity of our work and be present enough to appreciate it.

“PPE, scene safe”

It’s the first thing you’re taught in EMT school. PPE in this context refers to “personal protective equipment”, such as gloves, masks, goggles, etc. These things protect us from exposure to communicable illnesses, thereby allowing us to show up in our role more consistently. Scene safety is a broad concept related to making sure that whatever hurt the patient isn’t going to also hurt us. These concepts are foundational because we cannot give what we do not have—in order for us to provide care to others we must first take care of ourselves. If you are committed to showing up on the long term, you have to plan and act accordingly.

PPE is of the utmost importance in the setting of direct actions as well—no matter what your role is—and it can look a lot of ways. To protect your body, you might wear goggles and a respirator. To protect your identity, you might wear all black and use encrypted messaging platforms. What then, can you do to protect your mind? Your spirit? Below are some suggestions:

- Set yourself up for success by getting enough sleep, water, and nutrition is always a good place to start as it makes accessing emotional regulation *much* easier. It sounds obvious and basic, but it really can’t be emphasized enough. (Pro-tip: If being consistent with these things is challenging for you, consider finding an accountability buddy for reminders and motivation).
- Make an effort to understand the level of risk and potential outcomes associated with the action you’re

going to participate in. Contemplate your boundaries and communicate them with your buddies. We can't account for everything, but calibrating expectations and having flexible plans can help us remain centered when things go sideways.

- Look up and try out various grounding techniques that help deescalate your nervous system. These include breathing exercises, visualizations, progressive muscle relaxation, bilateral tapping, and many others. (Pro-tip: practicing these things when you're already regulated makes it easier for your brain to remember to do them when you're stressed)
- Take time to think about what types of things trigger you, what clues your body gives you to let you know you're triggered (racing heart, hot face, tense shoulders, etc) what might help you deescalate in those situations, and communicate this info with people in your life who can support you.
- Preemptively block out time after a stressful action to focus on addressing your physical and emotional needs. This can look like having a confidential conversation with a trusted friend, taking a shower, making art, eating a safe food, listening to music, cuddling a pet, going for a jog, etc.
- Learn about the symptoms of post-traumatic stress (irritability, difficulty sleeping, hypervigilance, persistent memories, etc) and when it may be important to escalate the level of psychological care you're receiving.

So, yes, wear that respirator! (with the cartridges rated for organic vapors and acid gases...) and grab those safety goggles! (with no vents, or at least tape over the holes...) and while you're at it, try out some grounding exercises and plan to do something afterwards that'll help you emotionally process the events of the day. Chances are, these skills will continue to serve you in life far beyond the direct actions themselves.

Don't wait to be tear-gassed to start crying, let that shit out now!

"Slow is Smooth, and Smooth is Fast"

But shrimp...if I'm at a protest, the scene isn't always safe, and that's kind of the point. So what then?

Well, that's where informed consent and harm reduction come in!

Informed consent in this context refers not only to information acquired prior to engagement regarding risk level and potential outcomes, but it also includes recognizing and integrating the information your body is giving you in the moment. When our nervous systems are escalated it is much harder to access the slower, more diligent aspects of our reasoning. Being ungrounded in this way can move us towards doing things that might really screw us over in the long-term. That's why building skills around conducting an honest assessment of your needs and capacity is critical for engaging sustainably.

That being said, there is absolutely room for spontaneity in these movements; indeed it is often a vital component in keeping the momentum alive. Following an impulse is not an inherently negative thing; it depends on what is informing and motivating it. Being able to trust your impulses to guide you safely is something that is honed over time with practice.

Now, none of this is meant to dissuade or disparage any particular type of direct action. Whether or not you choose to engage in higher-risk activities is a decision that only you can make for yourself, and there are many valid approaches. All I am urging is that you make these decisions from a (relatively) grounded place. Slow down, check in with yourself, make sure you're acting in alignment with your long-term goals, be strategic about it, and practice harm reduction when possible.

“Why are we here, if not for each other?”

Okay shrimp, you convinced me; this shit is important! But what can I do if I'm flirting with burnt-out, or if I'm already traumatized? Participating in direct actions gave me an outlet for my rage and helped combat this crushing sense of helplessness. Switching to focusing exclusively on self-care feels bad when the world around me is still on fire...I'm afraid to slow down because I don't know if I'll be able to get back up.

That's so real, and I'm glad you asked! I'll get to that shortly. Let's start ~building your distress tolerance~ by subjecting you to one more heavy-handed analogy.

If we were to conceptualize political movements as fungi, direct actions would be the fruiting bodies; springing forth with great acknowledgement, striving to propagate their own truth. Mushrooms are bold, captivating, maybe delicious, maybe deadly—but is that all there is to fungi? Of course not! Working quietly underground, a vast and intricate network of mycelium supports this fantastic display of life by absorbing vital nutrients from its environment; without it, the fruiting bodies could not exist. What is the mycelium of a movement you say?

- Child care
- Emotional first aid
- Bodywork
- Jail support
- Canvassing
- Collective healing rituals
- Meal trains
- Supply distribution
- Teach-ins
- Zine making
- Accountability processes

- Ridesharing

These are but a few, the possibilities are truly endless! The more we reinforce the narrative that high-risk actions are the most important or effective ways of furthering a movement, the smaller our mycelial networks will be and the more vulnerable the protestors are by virtue of being under-supported. Recreating the toxicity of capitalism by valorizing Doing The Most only serves to undermine our efforts on the long-term. It's in the state's best interest for the majority of our attention to be placed on the most intense forms of direct action (AKA those sexy little mushrooms). They want you to burn out, they want you to get injured, they want you to be traumatized.

Engaging through the lens of sustainability is one way in which we can refuse this subversion. So don't be afraid to switch your mode of engagement to something more gentle on your nervous system. A diversity of tactics is crucial—whatever your skills may be, they are valuable and needed! Now is a great time to lean into creativity and imagination. Plus, nothing is stagnant; you can flow between various types of support as your circumstances and capacity allow.

At the end of the day, all we truly have is each other. So check on your friends, build those emotional regulation skills, and pace yourself. We're in it for the long-haul.