

CAPE

# ACTIVISM BURNOUT



IN SINGAPORE

# WHAT IS ACTIVISM BURNOUT?

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A phenomenon that occurs when a political or social activist feels **overwhelmed, frustrated, hopeless, or depressed**, usually after a period of extensive activism

## SYMPTOMS

**Affective manifestations** - changes in mood, often related to depression and anxiety



**Physical manifestations** - health challenges such as headaches, high blood pressure, and illnesses



**Cognitive manifestations** - lags in attention, memory, and concentration



**Behavioural manifestations** - behavioural changes that impact productivity and health, ranging from increased procrastination to substance abuse

**Motivational manifestations** - diminishing drive and increased feelings of alienation and despondency

# SOME CAUSES OF ACTIVISM BURNOUT

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**Constant Direct Action**  
(especially when it ends in failure)



**Infighting Within Activists**  
(exhausting effect of competition  
overriding collaboration)

**Inability to fulfill one's self-set high standards**  
(perception of failing to do something  
meaningful in life)



# HOW DOES IT AFFECT US?

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- **Exhaustion** (feeling emotionally and physically drained)
- **Cynicism** (having negative associations with work that was once an utmost priority)
- **Inefficacy** (doubting self-worth & lack of activist achievement)



Burnout "deprives her organisation and movement of her valuable experience and wisdom", as well as less experienced mentees of a mentor

- Gorski and Chen (2015)

# CASE STUDY: DR CHOWDHURY

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Dr. Sudesna Roy Chowdhury, a recent graduate of the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, won widespread praise for **her efforts during the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in Singapore's migrant worker dormitories**. She created a website supporting English-to-Bengali translation overnight, galvanising support from friends and members of the broader community to form a team that worked tirelessly in producing resources that helped both workers and medical teams contain the outbreak.

At the same time, however, Dr. Chowdhury struggled juggling "being a houseman by day and activist by night", receiving **consistently inadequate rest** as the outbreak worsened. She suffered from **exhaustion** and a **constant sense that she wasn't doing enough to help the migrant workers**, citing her tendency to attach "self worth to the amount of work I produce instead of my inherent human value." This led to a **vicious cycle of self-hatred** during unproductive moments, and eventually **burnout** due to the constant pressure to do better.

"More weeks of this rabbit hole later came an acceptance that **I too am human and social work was a full-time job**. I read about this on the Internet: **"No single person is the one hero. This is a long haul. Remember, generations before you have worked to fight systems of oppression and generations after you will continue. Treat it as a marathon, not a sprint."** It was a beautiful piece of advice."

**- Dr. Sudesna Roy Chowdhury**



# SOME WAYS TO PREVENT ACTIVISM BURNOUT

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## Individual

**Manage physical health**  
(exercise, adequate sleep)

**Build a good social support network** (including outside of activist work as well)

Convert your end goal into a series of **specific milestones** that can be achieved in the short-term

Balance action with **reflection**, and consciously develop a **burnout plan**

## Organisational

Cultivate **healthy inter-activist** relationships

Organisations should create a work environment that **pays more attention to well-being**

Let activists have **greater autonomy** and **control over their own work**

**Acknowledge, praise and support** activists for their achievements, energise activists through activities like parties

# KEEP LEARNING & REACTING!

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## Continual Cycle of Learning in Action

Reflect on your experiences with others in ways that generate further insight and understanding into the problems they face so solutions can be found.



## Have an Action Plan

1. Come up with a goal for change
2. Plan an action and carry it out
3. Reflect on the effort when it is over to understand its successes, challenges, and ways to continue learning



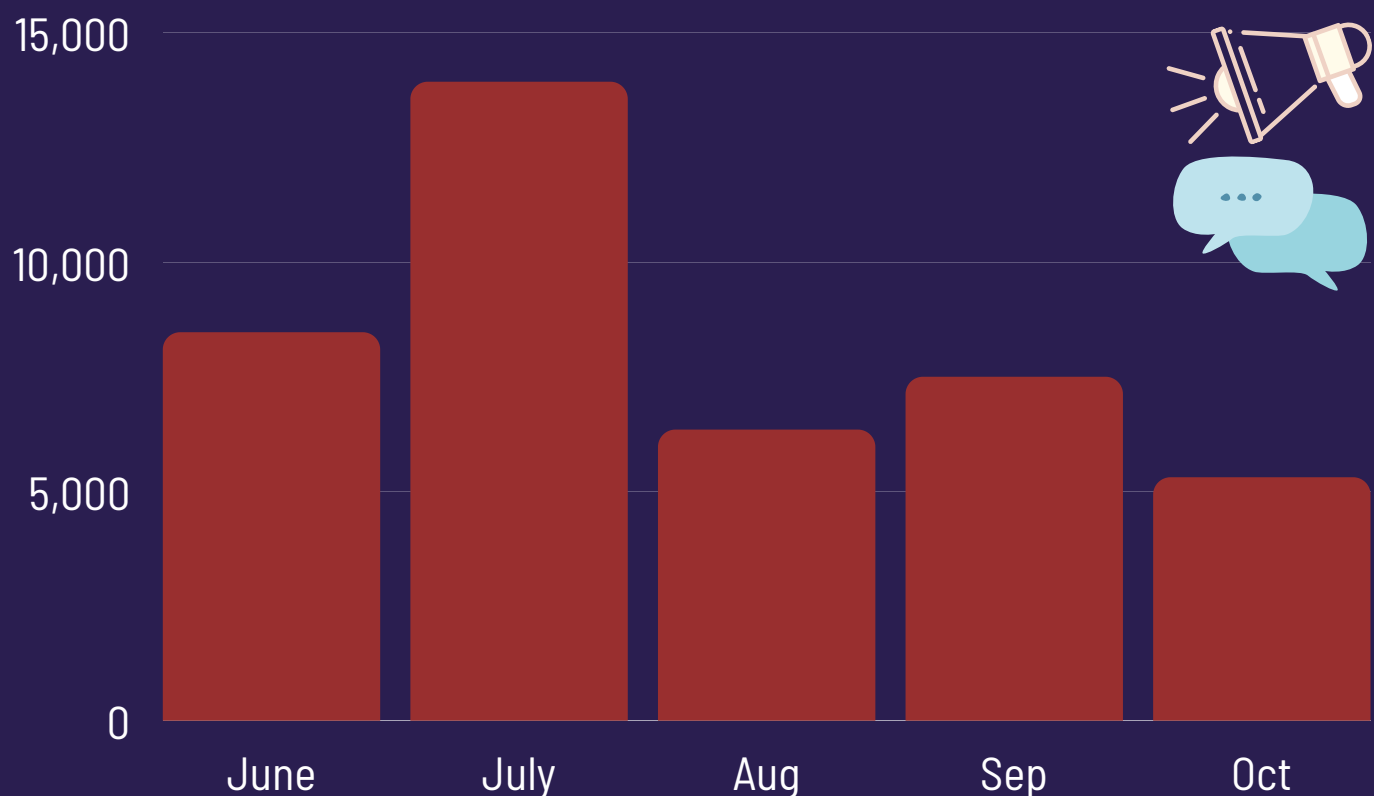
# CASE STUDY: CAPE

CAPE members have felt the burnout, producing less resources after the General Elections in July 2020.

**CAPE's followers** have also been noticeably less engaged with CAPE's posts after GE2020, which could be inferred as a sign of political fatigue or activism burnout.

CAPE's follower growth has also plateaued since Polling Day.

**Instagram  
Average  
Reach**





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