

Activism and Mental Health: A Social Work Perspective

Rachel Tipsword, BSW

Emarely Rosa-Dávila, PhD

Abstract

While the connection between activism and mental health has been thoroughly researched, little consensus has been reached as to whether the end results are positive or negative. This data-analysis aims to combine previous research on the topic of activism and mental health with the core principles of social work. With this insight, social workers can provide more effective assistance to affected populations. To accomplish this task, I selected research dated from 2011 to the 2021 and conceptual articles specifically on queer activists and activists of color and the related mental health topics of anxiety and depression. Despite social justice being a core value of the social work profession, little research has been done on this topic through the social work lens. This data-analysis aims to combine previous research on the topic of activism and mental health with the core principles of social work. With this insight, social workers can provide more effective assistance to affected populations.

Activism

- In 2019 there were over 7,300 hate crimes in the United States, with an estimated 8,552 victims.
- Activism is defined as “a doctrine or practice that emphasizes vigorous direct action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue.”
- There are several areas of activism, including but not limited to political, religious rights, racial equality, LGBTQIA+ rights, gender equality, and medical/healthcare rights.
- It is important to contrast cost versus risk as related to activism. The cost could be as simple as the amount of time or energy expended, while risks can range from ‘low-risk,’ such as signing a petition, to ‘high-risk,’ such as engaging in a protest that turns into a dangerous situation. Not being involved in activism is a privilege in today’s society.
- Most activists identify as part of a disadvantaged minority, which could be due to race, physical abilities, sexual orientation, gender/gender identity, and various other factors.
- It should also be considered that those who participate in activism may have experienced physical aggressions, microaggressions, discrimination or oppression because of their minority identity.



Mental Health

- For this analysis, the term ‘mental health’ will encapsulate several significant aspects.
- On the negative side, it will look at stress, depression, anxiety, and burnout as major indicators of a negative effect on an activist’s mental health.
- On the positive side, being involved in activism can promote healing, allow for personal and community growth, and work as a protective factor against stressful events in the future.
- Research supports that those who identify with a minority population are more likely to be involved in activism and have poorer mental health statuses due to their minority identity.
 - This is likely because these populations experience microaggressions such as racism or heteronormativity.
 - These populations also experience stigma, prejudice, and discrimination at higher rates than their nonmarginalized peers.



Positive Effects

- For some people, activism can have positive effects such as feeling satisfied with life, experiencing personal growth, and having a healthier social well-being than people who are not involved in activism.
- Activists, especially when they can see the positive changes they are advocating for, feel a sense of accomplishment, and believe the work they are doing is worth the struggle.
- A common positive effect of activism is a feeling of empowerment. When someone feels empowered in their actions, they will be more likely to participate in their activist pursuits. Empowerment can also lead to enhanced well-being, which is a positive outcome of their activism.
- There is growing research into the notion that working toward the ‘something bigger’ as found with activism is a fundamental human desire and finding satisfaction in this also promotes personal well-being.
 - Several studies have shown individuals becoming more involved in volunteer work within the community and experiencing positive outcomes from that involvement.
- Outside of community improvement, many of the positive effects of activism are felt on a personal level. For those who are actively experiencing microaggressions or discrimination, activism can be an adaptive coping mechanism that promotes positive well-being in the individual

Negative Effects

- The most common adverse side effects from being involved in activism include depression, anxiety, and stress. These effects can easily evolve into more intense feelings such as burnout, compassion fatigue, and even suicidal ideation in some case.
- Involvement in higher-risk activism, such as involvement in a protest or riot, is associated with more negative side effects and distress than lower-risk activism.
- At its core, being involved in activism in any form can cause trauma and negative side effects to the activist.
- Once someone becomes involved in activism, they may begin to feel morally obligated to continue their activism and be available to help others.
 - Activists may become hypersensitive to the injustices around them and feel the need to be involved personally and responsible for the changes they wish to see.
- Some activists will either completely stop or severely reduce their activism efforts to protect their mental well-being.
 - While this is an effective strategy for managing the harmful effects of activism, it can also lead to feelings of shame and guilt for the activist after the fact.
- An additional concern relating to activism is burnout. Burnout can be described as an overwhelming feeling of exhaustion, feeling detached and cynical, and a lack of feeling accomplished.
 - Burnout can be found in all forms of activism, but it takes time to reach its peak. When an activist reaches a point of burnout, they can lose interest not in their activism and in their daily life as well.
- Compassion fatigue is considered a more intense form of burnout, with the key difference being that compassion fatigue takes away the activist’s ability to care for the suffering of others.
 - Compassion fatigue is a phrase often used to describe the feeling of exhaustion found in the helping professions.
- Of the negative side effects of being involved in activism, the most concerning is the increased rates of depression. Depression can be a serious concern, especially if the activist does not have the proper support to handle the diagnosis, assuming they can even get a proper diagnosis
 - In severe cases of depression related to activism, suicidal ideation can be found and could lead to a suicide attempt. When healing from depression, and especially a suicide attempt, activists must step back from their activism which can be difficult if it has become ingrained in their identity



Social Work Implications

- Despite the National Association of Social Workers or NASW Code of Ethics including social justice as a core principle of social work and requiring social workers to fight against social injustice, little research has been completed surrounding activists’ mental health from the social work perspective.
- To fully provide the best support for these populations, the social worker must understand all aspects of activism and mental health. For many activists who choose to attend counseling, whether it be with a social worker or a licensed counselor, therapy allows them to receive the positive affirmations they need, which are not available through their activism.
- The most effective model for treatment of activists is called trauma-informed care.
 - Trauma-informed care uses a strengths-based approach. This can be done by completing a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats, or SWOT analysis. A SWOT analysis completed by the activist can also help foster a positive self-image and increased self-esteem. It forces them to think about their own strengths, which can be difficult if they are experiencing depression, burnout, or any significant effect from their activism.
- The six core principles of being trauma-informed are: 1) safety, 2) trustworthiness and transparency, 3) peer support, 4) collaboration and mutuality, 5) empowerment, voice, and choice, and 6) being responsive to cultural, historical and gender issues
- For someone mainly experiencing positive effects from their activism, a social worker might focus on continuing to foster that person’s involvement and allow for validation of the activist’s efforts.



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