THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL ACTIVISM

Working for social change is an excellent way for survivors of trauma to channel the normal anger that results from having been abused or oppressed. Public engagement also benefits advocates and other social service providers who sometimes feel frustrated in their efforts to help make the system work better for people who need help.

For some people who have survived trauma, activism offers one way to heal from the violence or abuse. Says Judith Herman (1997):

“These survivors recognize a political or religious dimension in their misfortune and discover that they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action. While there is no way to compensate for an atrocity, there is a way to transcend it, by making it a gift to others. The trauma is redeemed only when it becomes the source of a survivor mission. Social action offers the survivor a source of power that draws upon her own initiative, energy, and resourcefulness but that magnifies these qualities far beyond her own capacities.”

Social action on the part of survivors can take many forms (Herman, 1997):

• **Helping others who have been similarly victimized.** Survivors may become volunteer advocates at rape crisis centers or domestic violence shelters, or advocates for other victims in court. Or they may share their experience with other survivors in a support group setting.

• **Political involvement.** This may involve educational, legal, or political efforts to prevent others from being victimized in the future. Some survivors have gotten involved at the legislative level, by participating in letter-writing campaigns or lobbying efforts, or even testifying before legislative committees about their experiences.

• **Attempts to bring offenders to justice.** Many survivors believe holding the perpetrator accountable for crimes is not only important for their own personal well-being but also for the health of the larger society and for other victims. For many survivors, the act of reporting the crime to police or going to court is helpful in and of itself, regardless of the outcome the case.

• **Educating others.** Many survivors have shared their experiences and success stories as a way of offering hope to other survivors, or have told their stories at conferences and other training venues to help educate service providers about the needs of survivors.

A survivor shares: “I just told my story a couple of weeks ago to some providers, with the intent of sharing the different pieces about medical health, mental health, chemical dependency and domestic violence so they can know, when they get a call, to keep their eyes open to make sure they are referring appropriately, depending on what somebody presents with. I’m using my story to help do that.”
Another survivor shares: “I try to use my experiences in the schools and other settings now to help, whether they hear it or not. … I really believe each of us has a gift and each of us has something to share, and each of us can make a difference. So even if I talk to 500 people and one person might be touched, I keep doing what I’m doing.”

Common to all these efforts, says Herman (1997) is a dedication to raising public awareness. Using the police and the courts to pursue justice, or participating in consciousness-raising activities, are ways to defy the perpetrator’s attempt to silence and isolate victims and open the possibility of finding new allies.

Social activism can also hold benefits for advocates and their community partners:

- A study of sexual assault program coordinators found that an ability to influence public policy was a particularly rewarding part of their job. Central to their positive experiences was the focus on working with women and advocating and lobbying on their behalf (Carmody, 1997).

- Advocates and other providers may also feel anger about attitudes, actions or statements from criminal justice personnel, including police officers, judges, detectives, defense attorneys and prosecutors; toward the perpetrators of the abuse; and toward societal attitudes about women and other marginalized groups (Wasco & Campbell, 2002). Social activism can be a productive way to channel this anger. As such, it can help advocates and other providers avoid the burnout and vicarious trauma that can result from anger that’s not channeled in a healthy way.

- Many providers report a sense of higher purpose in life and a sense of camaraderie that allows them to maintain optimism in the face of horror (Herman, 1997).

References


Herman, J.L. (1997). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York: Basic Books.