Mental Health: Dealing With Stress as an LGBTI activist

Blog, Health, Human Rights Defenders, Mental Health

> 2020 has drastically altered our daily lives and as an activist it's easy to put your mental health and wellbeing on the back burner, while you get on with other hugely pressing priorities. On top of this, LGBTI activists can suffer from particular mental health stresses that stream from discrimination, LGBTIphobia, and the uphill battle that working to secure our rights and equality can be. To mark World Mental Health Day, this blog brings you some tools to help you cope with challenges that come your way.

"A field that has rested gives a beautiful crop." — Ovid

It's been a remarkably arduous year for all of us on a global level, and considering that LGBTI communities can carry additional burdens, it's especially important to take care of our mental health and wellbeing. Mental health, as defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO), is a state of well-being in which an individual realises their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to their community. We can think that because we don't have a particular mental health condition, that we are fine, but mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders.

The particular stresses on LGBTI activists

Stress is a totally natural reaction — it is the way our bodies respond to challenges in our environment. Having a certain amount of stress is positive as it can improve our motivation and effectiveness. Yet, intense and prolonged stressful situations affect our wellbeing. Here are some particular stresses that LGBTI activists face every day.

1. **Facing LGBTIphobia** in both real life situations and on a daily informational basis
2. Being overwhelmed by perceived and real **barriers to positive change**
3. Being overwhelmed by **negative news**
4. Being overwhelmed by **too much work, often with no financial compensation**
5. Being overwhelmed by the perceived and real **expectations of the community**

Stress affects our body (physical reactions), it influences our mood (emotional responses), and it changes our behaviour. In the table below are the examples of different types of reactions that may arise.

Source: ILGA-Europe

How to effectively deal with stress

There is no universal solution to deal with stress, because:

- **Stress is person specific** — what stresses one person may not stress another person in a similar situation.
- **Stress is time specific** — what may stress one person at one point in time, it may not stress them at another time, sometimes because their experience mitigates it or the stress has become cumulative.
- **Stress is context specific** — having similar experiences in different contexts, for example, a context where you count on supportive relationships while another where you don't, can fundamentally shift the experience of stress.

So, it stands to reason that dealing with stress is an individual thing. We need to identify the key factors of why and how we get stressed, and look at ways of changing them. For instance, how do you take care of your stress levels when going into a particular situation, say one of conflict with an anti-LGBTI group? What are the things you can put in place for yourself to manage the stress in that moment, such as breathing consciously or repeating a calming mantra in your mind? What are the ways your work as an LGBTI activist gets you stressed? If for instance, you can become overwhelmed by how much you are needed, how do you find ways to disengage for a moment so that you can tune into your stress levels? What are the self-compassionate breaks you can put in place for yourself on a

daily basis that take you away from being overwhelmed? Activism is based in compassion for the human race, and you are part of that, so you need to be compassionate towards yourself as you do this work.

Stress is individually experienced, based on our own personalities and circumstances, but here are five universal elements for coping with stress in your daily life:

1. Check how stressed you are: are there some signs of stress mentioned in the table above?
2. Identify what is causing your stress — observe your daily routine and identify the triggers. It is important to know what is causing stress.
3. Take care of the basics — try to eat healthy food, do some physical exercises, and have proper sleep.
4. Make sure there is space in your daily routine for pleasant things: a walk in the park, a chat with a friend, cooking a meal — anything what brings you positive feelings.
5. Talk to other people about your stress and ways to relieve it. You can talk to people you trust (friends, colleagues etc.) or you can appeal to the help of specialists / coaches / consultants. Currently there are plenty of people and organisations offering professional help on burn-out prevention.