

**Don't judge yourself against others**  
- listen to your inner-selves and be aware of your physical health. There are a few people out there who can work incredibly hard for many years under very stressful situations and seem to suffer very little ill effect from doing so, but it is certainly not the case for most people.

**Get some R & R** - rest AND recreation - let go, have a laugh, dance, do some martial arts, get into the countryside, make love, eat well – do whatever you need to feel good and remind yourself that life is worth living. And if/when those little/loud voices creep into your thoughts allowing guilt in, acknowledge it, smile at it and tell it to mind its own business. You are in this for the long haul and need to look after yourself, and you will be back in the fray soon enough if you look after yourself.

**Reduce other stresses in your life** - if possible. Don't take anything else on until you have recovered from the last escapade. For example, if you find meetings difficult, and you don't NEED to be there, then don't go.

**Sleep!** What could be more anti-capitalist, carbon friendly and non-consumerist? And it's FREE! Get as much of the lovely stuff as your body demands.

## **What to do if you think your colleagues are burning-out or cracking up.**

Let them know, gently and wherever appropriate, in private, that you have noticed some worrying changes in their behaviour. If it is affecting their ability to work effectively or get on with other people, tell them. It might be useful to be specific. Make it clear it's their current behaviour that you are commenting on, not “the normal them”, and that it is because you care so much about them that you are bringing this up. Take them out and have a good time, if possible avoid talking shop. Show them this leaflet.

**For more information or to discuss the issues in this pamphlet, get in touch with us at Activist Trauma Support.** There is also a leaflet on the [activist-trauma.net](http://activist-trauma.net) website about burnout and another about trauma and more details about what it is and ways to deal with it.

**website: [activist-trauma.net](http://activist-trauma.net)**

**email: [activist\\_trauma@riseup.net](mailto:activist_trauma@riseup.net)**

**mobile 07962 406940**

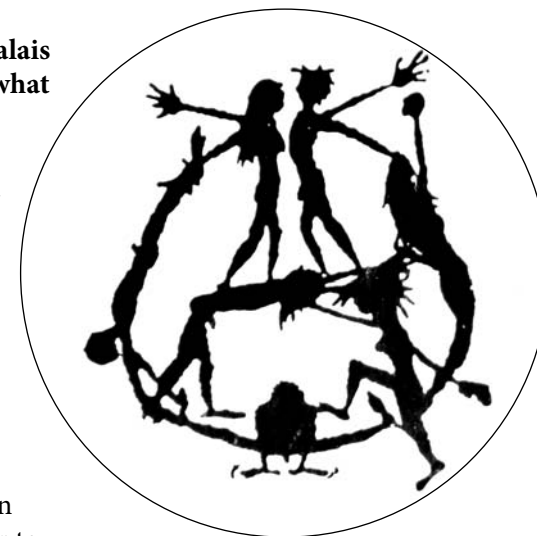
# *No Borders:* **thoughts on guilt, shame & trauma**

Recent events in “the Jungle” in Calais probably give a fair indication of what the future may well look like for increasing numbers of people – both for migrants themselves, and for the activists trying to support them.

**This leaflet aims to look at the possible psychological impacts of such activism and also looks at coping strategies and other tips to avoid burnout.**

Many of the people who have been involved in No Borders work appear to be suffering from a complex mixture of guilt, shame and “low level accumulative” trauma. On top of this, some are also in a state of denial about their own symptoms, and if they do recognise any symptoms they do not think they should be “allowed” to have them. This is all very similar to activists’ experiences in Palestine and other conflict zones.

When the true brutality of the state is unleashed, it is often a traumatising experience for the people on the receiving end – and crucially it can be extremely traumatising to witness someone else's trauma, especially if the person suffering is a child.



It does not take much imagination to think the same thing could happen to you – or to your friends. And if your imagination is not too vivid just watch the film “Children of Men”.

Whilst everybody involved is working towards No (National) Borders, there are still personal borders which need to be respected. It seems that many women were sexually harassed during the camp in Calais. This brings up all sorts of difficult issues and internal debates. It is too complex to discuss here, but it is almost certainly something that does need to be addressed openly so experiences and ideas can be shared.

From talking to various people, it seems that the situation down in Calais was often quite chaotic, as well as very stressful. Those returning often had a mixture of guilt or shame for “not having done enough”. For those who felt they had maybe “done enough”, burnout could be a serious danger. Statements such as “how can I have fun and relax when people are being deported / killed / attacked...” highlighted the emotional trauma on people's return.

The guilt and shame of not having done enough is the bane of almost every activist's life and every campaign. This all comes into much sharper focus when it's a person being torn from your arms and dragged away. This might seem obvious, but it needs to be said over and over: **IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT**. What might be happening is that the idea of a state being so powerful and dangerous that it can do that to people psychologically and politically is very difficult to accept. It seems that some people say to themselves “If I try harder, then I/we can win and save these people”. And if your mind does not play that trick on you then you might default to some other “displacement activity” or distraction activity – for example, blaming yourself as above, or getting upset or obsessive about some other “trivial” issue. When this is mixed in with burnout and intense working situations, it can often lead to bad group dynamics, arguments and guilt-tripping others over “not doing enough”.

We often talk about sustainability in all things except ourselves. We can clear-cut our own “emotional reserves”, or “burn the candle at both ends” and simply expect our bodies and minds to deal with it. But everyone has a breaking point and if you go beyond it then it can take months or even years to recover. Tragically, all too often, people may drop out of the movement altogether.

Some people have learned where their limits are and try to work within them. However, in the intense atmosphere of The Jungle, people may be a) tempted to go well beyond their own limits or b) push other people to go beyond what they feel able to do. If this does happen in the heat of the moment, it is essential that you later take the time and/or other steps to recover.

The fight, flight or freeze defence mechanism is a very powerful reaction that automatically kicks in during threatening situations. In the split second of a tense situation it controls what a person does. The part of the brain that controls this is called the amygdala; it has to react so quickly because such situations can be a matter of life and death, and also because it only has to decide from a short list of options: fight, run or freeze. Natural chemicals are released to enable this process. Whilst this can be very useful in the short term, they can have harmful effects if fired too many times; and activists put themselves in these kinds of situations all the time.

Being in this constantly stressed state can be unhealthy and leave you open to infection as your immune system is often shut down during this time. The mind and body are trying to deal with an apparently short-term crisis.

## Coping techniques and personal borders

**Acknowledging** what you have done, are doing, or intend to do is essential, and even if what you achieve in the short term does not seem to be enough, it should be viewed as part of a much longer struggle. Unfortunately, for the foreseeable future, there will be states to oppress and exploit migrants. You burning out will not change that, neither will it help the people you are trying to assist. We all need to look at ways to avoid burnout and blaming ourselves.

One controversial coping technique is to maintain or develop “**professional distance**” - not getting too 'emotionally' close to the individuals involved. Whilst this maybe impossible for some, others find it enables them to do such support work over a longer time than people who feel every deportation as a personal loss.

“**Buddying up**”, going out there with someone you trust, or finding someone there that you can work, rest & play must be preferable. Whilst buddying does not work for everybody, many find deep solace in knowing someone is looking out for them.

Some people are bottom liners and often end up picking up the pieces if other people lunch things or don't do what they said they were going to do. It is definitely not helpful if someone tries to share the work load – only to find the job has not been done. If for whatever reason you can't complete a task you have taken on, then tell someone before it's too late. This will cause everyone less stress in the long run.

Whilst talking to people recently, the issue of an office space in Calais was discussed. Some people believe that the office space was needed as a base from which to work and also as a relaxing and safe space away from the frontline. Other people thought that all available space should be used to help migrants directly; for example, allowing them to live in what would otherwise be the office. Whilst the details are not crucial, in the opinion of activist trauma support, the wider point as to whether or not activists should give themselves **space**, “**away from the action**”, is that they definitely need to do this. If we do not start to value our own space and our own needs, then most people will burnout and not be able to do anything to help any one else. Furthermore the burnt out activists will then need to be supported and that will take more resources away from the main struggle. Maybe one question we should ask ourselves is “am I in this for the long haul?” If your answer is yes, then you need to be honest and think whether or not the way you are behaving is likely to help or hinder that.