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May 22, 2014



Anonymous

The Importance of Support:

**Building Foundations,
Creating Community,
Sustaining Movements**

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Fall 2008

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anyway. If these things can be taken care of by someone else, it will certainly take some of the weight off.

Coordinate and organize: Providing support is not always an easy thing to know how to do, and it can be hard to find a starting place. Work with the person you are supporting and others to figure out what people can do to help; coordinate to make sure that tasks are completed and responsibilities are distributed.

Do what they need you to do: not what you feel should be done.

Let them decide the terms of their support: For instance, when they need support and what they need. This may mean making personal sacrifices to meet people where they are at. Change your expectations of those you're supporting in accordance with their specific situations.

Be honest and be accountable: with the person you're supporting, your community, and yourself about what you can or cannot do. Making false promises and flaking out builds distrust, weakens our bonds, and weakens our movements.

Know your own limits: it's important to recognize our own limits and considerations when trying to provide support in order to sustain our own health and not overextend ourselves. It's important to try the best we can, but important not to beat ourselves up for making mistakes or not meeting certain expectations. The best we can do is try and learn from our mistakes, while letting our past experience guide our future efforts.

Things To Do and to Keep In Mind

Here are some important considerations to guide your support efforts and your interactions with those in need of support.

DO:

Be consistent: This is one of the most important things, and a foundation for providing concrete and meaningful support. There is a place for one-off gestures of support, but consistency is key to playing a primary support role, and to reducing the isolation of hardship.

Volunteer: Effective support needs to be voluntary. Real support is not doing a favor or acts of charity. Real support is genuine solidarity extended because you share a community, because the well-being of your family, friends, and comrades is bound up with your own. Make yourself available, ask how you can help, be there voluntarily. Don't wait to be asked—that may never happen.

Be proactive: Take initiative and try to anticipate needs. *Maintain awareness:* Remember what your friend is going through, especially when you are together; let this awareness guide how you interact and how you speak. Be sensitive and remember the context. Everyday greetings and vocabulary might not be appropriate.

Follow-through: Keep promises, do what you say you are going to do, and check in regularly. If you don't hear from someone for a while, remember that through the hardship, it might be up to you to initiate contact. Take responsibility for maintaining contact and communication.

Make your support effort a priority: Check your priorities: do they need to be rearranged to adjust to new circumstances of supporting someone in your life?

Ask questions: Speaking about needs and feelings might not be easy for people you are supporting. Ask questions to meet them halfway, and give your friends opportunities to share their thoughts if they'd like to.

Share the work: Whatever your friend is going through is probably affecting all aspects of life: housework, food, rides, and other things that might have little to do with the immediate issue but need to get done

The Importance of Support

Building Foundations, Creating Community, Sustaining Movements

How do we develop anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist movements that are capable of maintaining and expanding over the long haul? The infrastructures we create in the course of our political work are key to unlocking the answer. If our infrastructures are to succeed and deepen our movements, we need to abandon the pervasive separation between politics and “personal” life and ground our movement activity in everyday practices of mutual aid and support—both in times of happiness and in times of hardship. This article looks at the latter of these: reflecting on how we can develop models for providing each other with compassionate, nurturing support through tragedy, trauma, and hardship.

Integrating support efforts into daily organizing is a crucial element of working for change. Such efforts are foundational parts of radical infrastructure building, both in explicitly political contexts and in more personal contexts. Trauma, tragedy, illness, and other forms of hardship are things that everyone experiences throughout their lives. However, activists engaged in the intentional construction of radical infrastructure often handle these in ways that are at odds with our stated intentions and our efforts to create better lives and a better world.

The conversations and experiences that have helped shape this article involve personal experiences with death, illness, chronic pain, and with state-sponsored murder, repression, and imprisonment. Some of these are a direct result of the systems we struggle against; others are an everyday part of life. Support work isn't always intuitive; we draw from complex skill sets, character traits, experience, and privilege or lack thereof. Developing effective models of support is imperative for making our communities relevant and desirable, both to ourselves and to anyone we wish to join our movements.

In recent years, there has been increasing discussion within anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian communities of support for those facing

illness, trauma, and serious personal hardship. Zines such as Counterbalance (Seattle), The Worst (New York), and Support, as well as the recent publication of patrice jones' book Aftershock: Confronting Trauma in a Violent World, have helped develop conversations on support. Organizations like The Icarus Project and the multiple support committees for Green Scare indictees and prisoners provide a few examples of solid support efforts based in everyday life experience and overt political organizing.

As participants in anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist communities for over a decade, we have personally experienced the benefits and deficits of our radical communities' support efforts. Since we count on these communities for fulfilling non-hierarchical and anti-oppressive social relations, we've dedicated ourselves to building infrastructures that work to support these relationships—as a way to improve our daily lives and support our and others' resistance efforts. Both of us have felt the need to give support and be supported by our loved ones and comrades, particularly in recent times. Sometimes our experiences with support have been positive, but other times there has been a lack of support—or a lack of understanding of the need for support. Some of the attempts at support we have experienced have even been harmful.

The instances when we have felt seriously let down by our friends and political allies for their failure to provide tangible support, or to show true compassion and understanding, have raised serious questions for us about movement sustainability, especially at moments of low power and energy. At times the disparities between what we've experienced and the potential of anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian communities has been maddening. We need to constantly ask ourselves: who are we and what do we really stand for as communities based in resistance, if we can't support each other in times of need?

We feel that our communities are more relevant, useful, and sustainable when we are collectively capable of providing support. Likewise, they are more inviting and inspiring when they model forms of mutual aid that are practical and consistent. Support work builds solidarity, strengthens our bonds, and deepens the integration of our politics into our lives in ways that are crucial to the struggles we engage in.

Do's and Don'ts to Consider in Providing Support

Common Mistakes and Problematic Behavior to Avoid

At worst, these behaviors will destroy a relationship and add more pain and hardship to an already unbearable situation. We rarely have the intention of hurting someone else or making things worse, but our culture often perpetuates these unhelpful practices. Part of building alternatives is recognizing ways in which our behavior is problematic and working to overcome problematic tendencies.

DO NOT:

Make people feel like their need for support is a burden: The thought of burdening you adds to the burden of the person who needs support, which only makes an already horrible situation worse.

Assume everything is OK: It's not helpful to avoid the subject of someone's illness or hardship because of nervousness about saying the wrong thing, or because you don't want to talk about things that aren't fun. Saying something is almost always better than ignoring the obvious.

Assume your friends will ask for support if they need it: Many times people are unable to ask for help as a result of their own character, or because of shame or any number of other factors. Do not assume that because people don't ask for help they don't need it.

Use someone's tragedy or trauma for friendship capital: Providing support to get into someone's good graces or to impress them or others is disturbing and gross. Opportunism around trauma is a sad reality that exists in radical communities as well as elsewhere.

Support over the long haul is particularly important. This means figuring out how to provide meaningful support throughout the duration of hardship—though the need for support, what it looks like, and how long it is needed will vary from situation to situation. In many experiences, it seems support is strongest immediately after a traumatic or tragic situation. We have experienced our communities to be impressively good at this: we throw benefits, we join our friends at their hospital beds or at their court hearings. But what happens six months or two years later? Are those support efforts maintained? Too often the answer is no. After the overt urgency of a situation subsides, it can become harder to determine what sort of support is needed, and the attention of people we need support from sometimes begins to drift elsewhere prematurely. This responsiveness to urgent situations is useful and even inspirational, but we need to build on this to be stronger in providing support more generally. Support over the long haul means that we must sustain our support efforts for as long as our loved ones and comrades need them.

Anarchists and explicitly anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist communities can learn a great deal from the history of radical support work. Such work has been crucial to organizations like ACT UP, as well as the civil rights and women's liberation struggles. ACT UP provides one example in which support work was quite literally a matter of life and death, and the organizational functions that activists engaged in—from massive research initiatives to directly politicized forms of mutual aid—teach valuable lessons about the potential of radicalizing care and building political activity with support work at its center. It's been our experience in radical communities that we often attempt to figure out everything for ourselves—reinventing the wheel as if no one came before us. Learning the histories of these movements and the experiences of those who participated in them can inform and guide our work today.

Finally, although everything is political, it is necessary to remember the importance of support work beyond explicitly political activity—though at their roots, we must understand the interconnectedness of the two. It is important to support our friends, families, and allies simply because we love and care about them, because they are integral parts of the social webs we inhabit, and because they are crucial to our

daily existence. Support is something we all need when we're going through tough times.

An Injury to One is an Injury to All: Why Support Matters

Becoming physically ill and experiencing trauma are isolating; only the person with the illness or experiencing the trauma can feel the pain specific to them. In a context where most of us lack access to adequate health care and often have to devise creative ways to get what we can to make it through, our communities play important roles for navigating these experiences in the day to day. Even for those with insurance, the healthcare system is still terribly isolating, alienating, and disempowering, characterized by professionals who are often callous and cold. Here as well, our communities play necessary support and stabilizing roles on an everyday level.

For those facing state repression, enduring the legal process and penal system can be a nightmare. The struggle to get through costly and lengthy legal battles is a traumatizing experience, and when imprisoned comrades finally leave the prison system, they carry with them stigmatizing records and severe emotional scarring. Others spend their lives behind bars and die inside the prison system. In the case of comrades who are serving life sentences, the challenge for our support efforts is to help create community for those whose lives have been stolen from them, who are trapped in a place that offers very little beyond pain, isolation, and misery. They need and deserve the support of their friends, comrades, and community on the outside to help them make the most of life in the face of such a horrible reality.

“The issue of solidarity, taking care of each other, creating structure, making our own reproduction as people, as activists, the issue—the political issue—is as important as the issue of fighting outside.” This was Silvia Federici’s response when we asked her about building sustainable movements. She has pointed out elsewhere that “the analysis of how we

It is important to see the community aspect of support work. We are woven into social webs; each member of our communities has a role in a support chain. It is common in many situations for the person facing illness or trauma to choose primary supporters; those supporters will also need support. While the issue of illness is often very personal, to the extent that it is appropriate and comfortable, our communities need to expand and open dialogue to make issues like illness less stigmatized and more open for discussion and assistance.

Our politics and our commitment to radical change are put to the test in hard times. We’ve learned—personally, and through the experiences of those who have benefited from support through tragedy and hardship—that when meaningful, concrete support has been present in times of need, it has created an important sense of community. Such community can help us get through the most painful and difficult situations. These moments when we are able to provide and really come through for each other underscore the best that our communities and movements have to offer.

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As political activists sometimes it feels as if we carry the weight of the world on our backs. The degree to which things are fucked up in the world can result in mental and emotional devastation, but we have found ourselves keeping our own problems to ourselves, thinking that—relative to so much horror and atrocity—we have it OK. How can we complain when things could be so much worse? In other situations, we keep things to ourselves because we know our family and friends have enough problems and hardships of their own, and we don't want to add to their burdens.

Ashanti continues on this subject: “Sometimes you know you need to get in with someone else, whether it's family, loved ones, or some of your close political companions and say ‘hey,’ even if it's them coming up for a visit, there needs to be time when you just like, ‘man, such and such happened to me, this counselor . . . this guard, that judge, whatever, I'm sick of it. This fucking shit, just . . .’ Hey, it's out. And those who are with you, they help you process that . . . you always want to help them. Sometimes, you know, let people help you too. Let them also make that decision.”

We do ourselves a disservice when we dismiss our own needs and emotions, and we do our larger communities and movements a disservice as well. We need to be concerned with our own mental and physical well-being if we want to be effective activists, effective supporters, and generally positive people.

Day to Day Life: Modeling A Better World

We desire a world better than this one: a world that is more thoughtful, more caring, less isolating, a world that celebrates and nurtures community. Our movements are spaces for practicing new ways of relating to each other, spaces to model relations based in compassion and practical forms of mutual aid, for building and expanding resistance. If we can't love and care for each other here and now our movements will be easily destroyed and unsustainable. On the other hand, if we are able to develop a culture of mutual support, this new way of relating to one another will make our resistance to the dominant culture even more inviting.

reproduce these movements, how we reproduce ourselves is not at the center of movement organizing. It has to be.”¹

Silvia is a movement fixture and an elder with important insight. She played an important role in the feminist movement in the United States during the 1970s. She helped found the Wages for Housework campaign and has written extensively over the past four decades on the intersections of gender and class exploitation. From her experiences in women's liberation struggles, Silvia developed the concept of self-reproducing movements. “The women's movement put on the agenda the fact that a self-determination struggle, a liberation struggle—it's also a struggle that immediately raises the question of the reproduction of the community, and without that reproduction of the community being part of the struggle, the movement will die.”

Self-reproducing movements are intentionally grounded in the day-to-day; they are founded on a micro-political base and develop cultures that use the everyday as a space of activism to expand overt political struggle. Long- and short-term support work is crucial to building movements capable of acting on this terrain. The idea of self-reproducing movements is one useful way to conceptualize the need for support work.

Much of the usefulness of support work comes down to building community engaged in everyday forms of solidarity, as opposed to charitable approaches. In our conversations, Silvia emphasized what this might mean for sustainability: “. . . if you are a movement, what is it that people do? What is the necessity? That has to be put not only [on] the level of personal goodness—you know, ‘I'm willing to help . . .’ [so you] spend two hours at someone's bedside . . . That has to be seen as part of political work—that kind of solidarity, and that kind of help. As long as that is seen as some sort of charity or personal favor, it will not work. You know, people will do it for two months . . .”

¹ patrice jones, *Aftershock: Confronting Trauma in a Violent World, a Guide for Activists and Their Allies*. New York: Lantern Books, 2007.

Support through State Repression

Daniel McGowan was grounded in a small but strong activist community in 2005 when he was arrested for his involvement in Earth Liberation Front activities. His support committee took the name Family and Friends of Daniel McGowan, signifying the connection of multiple communities directly engaged in supporting him. Family and Friends of Daniel McGowan illustrated various positive elements of proactive and tangible emotional and general support: participants helped raise funds, conducted a massive outreach campaign, helped Daniel with graduate school, helped him to prepare to serve his sentence, and much more. Jenny, Daniel's partner, was a key force in his support committee. Not coming from an activist community, Jenny faced state repression with a group of people largely new to her:

<quote>“Daniel and I kept pretty separate social lives and, though I always knew what he was working on and I was acquaintances with many of his friends, I never felt like I was very involved in the activist community. I think one of the most helpful things that came from this community was the solidarity offered to me. It was very comforting to me to have groups of people come over to keep me company. It was also very important that there was no judgment placed on the situation and that, although no one really knew how to solve the problem, everyone was willing to try to figure it out. At times it was like we were all in it together. That is something I didn't feel at all from my friends outside the activist community.”</quote>

Ashanti Alston went through the prison experience himself. A member of the Black Panther Party during the 1970s in New York and New Jersey, and a soldier of the Black Liberation Army during the 1970s and early 1980s, Ashanti speaks passionately about the importance of connections in struggle:

<quote>“Support from the political community was small, but it doesn't matter in the sense whenever there's like . . . even this small core group of supporters being there for you and demonstrating it through letters, or you know they're carrying on their political activism—it helps to keep your spirit up so that you can do this everyday experience in

he just decided he's not gonna be this macho person. And whatever it was, my man was cryin' on the phone. I'm like, cry on. The kinda thing now I affirm, rather than just, 'oh you a boxer, you a fighter, we need you in the revolution.' It's this—really understanding that this new man, new woman thing is like—we gotta really begin to practice this. So inside it helped us to be able to survive that. But I think it also helped us develop better relationships with family and other folks on the street, where they began to sense that maybe it was not always just political stuff, too.”</quote>

Ashanti relates this to present day support for those facing state repression:

<quote>“And so like even today, like when I talk to Daniel McGowan and Andy Stepanian from the animal folks, who are now political prisoners, it's around the same stuff. Like they're getting ready to do time, they know they're getting ready to do some prison time—but my advice is always around the same thing, you know: remain human, develop relationships; the relationships you got with people, really appreciate them. But really don't get into the macho thing about doing this time. Recognize that it's gonna be hard, it's gonna be some hard days. But you gotta draw on some strengths that you may not normally draw on. However you identify them: spiritual whatever, you know. But you also want to recognize that you're a loving human being. And you want that too. I don't care what the conditions are inside, figure out ways to keep nurturing that. Through your relationships with family and political community, but you also gonna find folks inside who are kinda on that same page. And those are people that you kinda wanna develop relations [with] inside, cause you gotta figure out ways to stay human.”</quote>

Throughout our own experiences, we've noticed that we commonly keep our problems and stress bottled up for fear of burdening our loved ones. Ashanti touched on this as well: “. . . You need someone that you can talk to, you cannot bottle up emotions just to keep saving other people. Let them make the decision if they can handle it. Don't you just make it all for them, you gotta figure out how to stay healthy. . . Sometimes you can't express that to the folks who you may even be close with inside.”

to navigate our own trauma and hardship. In addition to challenging ourselves to provide better support, we can also serve ourselves by learning how to open up emotionally and better recognize our own needs.

Thadeaus reflected on his own socialization as it related to his experience of hearing the news of Brad's murder: "Well, I felt pretty devastated when I found out. I was in the midst of DJing a party and it was on the Friday before Halloween and a friend came up and told me, and there wasn't really much I could do. He had pictures with Brad dead, with a bullet hole in his chest. I don't know, I don't think I asked him to show them to me, but I wish he hadn't right then. So I went home after that, and I cried on the way home—and it was raining out—and that was the first time I'd cried in years. The type of household I grew up in, it wasn't OK to cry, not just boys—but especially boys, not even my sister was allowed to cry, she doesn't cry either. So like crying's not something I do or know how to do. Somehow that night I knew how to do it. Like, the second I got on my bike I started riding home by myself through the rain."

As activists we struggle with racism, internalized gender oppression, and other issues in our political work and our interpersonal dynamics within our organizing structures. Struggling against and overcoming these traits of the dominant culture are crucial to how we deal with emotional and physical trauma.

Ashanti reflected on his experiences with issues surrounding masculinity while he was in prison:

<quote>"I remember one experience in particular with a brother who I would talk to a lot about love, relationships, and stuff like that—as I was learning about those things. He was in a relationship with a woman on the streets, and they had just had a baby. Whenever he talked on the phone he was real cold and harsh telling her, 'when you coming up, bring this and bring that.' But as we talked, and as me and his relationship grew, I saw him grow, where he began to reflect on his machismo, the sexism, how hard he was being on his partner . . . And I'm getting ready to walk back to the cell block, but he's on the phone and he's crying. And my man is a boxer, a heavyweight boxer, but when I talked to him about it later he was telling me that he finally just had to admit to himself how he was being harsh on his partner, and whatever the conversation was,

prison; even when the everyday turns into every year. For me that political support, and that family support, and that social support coming from your significant communities . . . is really important . . ."

Thadeaus was Brad Will's roommate when Brad was murdered by Mexican paramilitaries in 2006. Because of the depth of Brad's involvement in New York City's radical communities, the response to his murder was particularly intense, and people relied on each other to get through it:

<quote>" . . . when Brad died, no one had to deal with it alone if they didn't want to because every night or every day there was something happening in relation to Brad's death: there were meetings at Bluestockings, there were meetings in Brooklyn on how to respond and how to protest—because it was also a very political death—so that was helpful too, and it was also like, you didn't need to know Brad to be involved. You didn't need to have ever met him or ever heard him. Just the fact that he was an anarchist and he was murdered—or if you were an anarchist or even sympathetic to those ideas, you might have felt like you should've been part of some of that stuff . . . Lots of people flew in—and traveled to New York, people rallied together. People were just there for each other and I feel like that was really good."

When our comrades face state repression, whether it be imprisonment or murder, personal support among family and friends is crucial for getting through. Ashanti's personal experience highlights this: "My biggest fear when I did time was that I was gonna come out OK, but I was gonna come out cold and not able to laugh any more. I'm a jokester, I'm silly—and I always felt like, if they change that about me, I might come out but I'll think that they won in another way. I'm still silly . . . But things like that became important. The letters mean a lot. The conversations on the phone mean a lot. Loved ones, your relationships—whether it's family or your significant others, it means a lot. Those things help keep you going."

Part of the state's goal in repression is to send a message to future dissidents to deter them from engaging in resistance efforts by demonstrating the intensity of punishment people can expect if they engage in such efforts. Our support for those faced with state repression can send

the message that our movements take care of our own, and that we have each other's backs—no matter what the state dishes out.

Daniel McGowan has written about how some political movements have created infrastructure for supporting their prisoners during and after imprisonment: “The Irish republican movement has a group called ‘Welcome Home’ (translated from Irish) that exists to provide support for recently released political prisoners beyond the initial rush and euphoria of release. This work isn’t glamorous, but it’s necessary. Finding decent housing and jobs, helping people comply with parole and probation, setting them up with clothes and some money when they get out—these are all things our communities can and should do.”

A concrete program like the one Daniel describes is helpful on two levels. First, it provides for the basic needs of those released from prison and reduces their isolation. Second, this program offers a concrete model that demonstrates how we, as a movement, take care of those who find themselves in harm’s way. In demonstrating our capacity to support our friends through state repression, we can make it less intimidating for people to consider engaging in activities that entail considerable risk.

Overcoming Paralysis: Challenging Ourselves to Provide Better Support

It can be hard to know how to support or even interact with a loved one or comrade who is experiencing hardship, loss, or pain. It can also be hard to ask for support or to let other people support us. However, it makes us more effective activists and makes our communities more inviting when we take care of ourselves and those close to us.

It seems best to assume that when people are not being supportive it is a result of their own uncertainty regarding how to discuss illness or trauma, or because of the impact of past scars or current events that make it too much for them. Although it may sometimes be simple selfishness, it seems more often than not it is these issues or simply lack of skill that keeps us from adequately providing support. Indeed, it’s fairly rare for activists to present workshops on how to give support—particularly long-term support—around health crises. Usually, these are things we

movements; we need to see setting limits and having clear communication as crucial to sustainability and the support work necessary for it.

We have experienced that activists often create cultures amicable to flakiness, and when our resources are strained—or when we’re not honest with ourselves or those within our community about what we can and cannot do—the most common response is to simply flake out. Creating serious resistance movements means lowering our tolerance for what amount to cultures of irresponsibility and rhetoric. This goes for all of our projects, but is particularly important when it comes to the issue of support—especially support that relates to life or death situations.

Being consistent and living up to what we promise to do are crucial for providing the person in need of support with some sense of security over the long term. When we can’t come through on our promises, we need to learn to be accountable for our shortcomings. Such accountability is part of a process that benefits everyone involved, and acknowledges our basic humanity: we make mistakes, even when we have good intentions. When flakiness becomes dominant and consistency is lacking, it can be directly harmful to the person facing illness. Ben spoke to this point: “You know, there’s a real fear when you get sick that people are going to drift away . . . and to start to think that that might be happening to you is terrifying, it’s absolutely terrifying to think that people might be drifting away and that not only might you need to be facing this situation with much less support than you thought you might be equipped with, but also just the absolute pain that’s involved in seeing people leave you . . .”

The Weight of the World: What Holds Us Back

Our social conditioning can cause us to act in ways that, though unintentional, end up being problematic to those who need our support and understanding. Our conditioning can also cause us to act in ways that are unhelpful to ourselves and those trying to support us as we endeavor

One of the worst things we can do is make the person we're supporting feel like our support for them is a burden. In cases of illness and state repression, it is a sign of seriously misplaced priorities, or ridiculously constrained resources, to make those suffering feel like a problem. David touched on this: "If I am in a situation where I need support and if I have to put a bunch of my energy into soliciting support and then feeling like I am putting people in a situation they don't want to be in—that's going to make me feel worse. The thing I learned and have learned repeatedly is that supporting people can't be a reactionary thing. You need to be proactive to provide meaningful support to someone."

Consistency and taking initiative are particularly necessary for long-term support work. Often, in moments of extreme urgency, communities come together to support an individual through a specific situation. However, support tends to decrease rapidly, even if it is needed for long periods. Long-term support efforts mean that we need to maintain discussions with the person needing that support. Likewise, those being supported need to increase their capacity to express their needs and desires—and the ways we interact with them should help make that process easier for them. When we engage in support efforts we also need to be honest with ourselves about what we're able to take on, and be honest with both the person facing illness or trauma and the larger community.

This last point is particularly important in activist cultures, where in trying so hard to put our ideals into practice we tend to over-commit ourselves. This sometimes has the effect of creating cultures that celebrate burnout or simply ignore it. In *Aftershock: Confronting Trauma in a Violent World*, patrice jones makes an important point on this: "The ability to go without sleep or work without taking a lunch break is often mistaken for a measure of dedication. In consequence, social movements are much smaller than they ought to be, simply because so many people burn out or become convinced they don't have what it takes."² Health needs to be a community priority if we're going to sustain ourselves and

learn on the fly, sometimes while supporting others with whom we have unhealthy relationships or poor communication. We rarely have the vocabulary to discuss stigmatized issues like illness, particularly when the illness is life-threatening or leads to long-term health struggles.

When a person experiences intense hardships that are so different from the day-to-day experiences of their peers, a major disconnect can develop between people who otherwise have much in common, particularly if their peers do not work to maintain an understanding of what they are going through. The expectations of the person experiencing the hardship may need to change; the ways in which they enjoy each other's company may need to shift. In order to hold onto our relationships and truly be there for friends in need, we need to be open to such changes and sensitive to what others are experiencing. Otherwise, we risk losing our connections with others and creating more isolation around those already experiencing intense hardship—and in a political context, we weaken our movements.

David has been active with punk and activist communities for some time. For the last few years he has been supporting his mother through severe illness. As a result of the overwhelming amount of support his mother has needed, David has sought support and help from wherever he could find it. In particular, he looked for help from friends in his primary networks—the punk and activist communities.

When we spoke with him, David reflected on the disconnection he felt from his peers as he engaged in supporting his mother: "Some of the people I lived with would say to each other, 'David's not fun,' because I was so overwhelmed with everything, and would just come home and look upset. There were people in the house that criticized me for being upset and who criticized me for asking them for help because it was bringing them down. That was the opposite of what I looking for, because I felt overwhelmed and I needed help—and getting a negative response for expressing that made me feel like I needed to keep it to myself and that made me feel more alone. Since I was hearing this from people I was living with I couldn't not be around them, which made it even harder."

Being neglectful and failing to show sensitivity to the hardships our friends and comrades are experiencing is hurtful and damaging. This

² patrice jones, *Aftershock: Confronting Trauma in a Violent World, a Guide for Activists and Their Allies*. New York: Lantern Books, 2007.

behavior prioritizes selfish desires without taking others' needs into account. To build strong bonds of support and solidarity, as well as to be good friends to those we care about, we need to make a commitment to learn from our mistakes and strive to act in accordance with our expressed politics; otherwise, we fail those we care about and make our politics appear to be for the sake of identity alone.

David shared an experience with the inconsistency he experienced between his friends' politics and their everyday actions: "Living in a punk house at the time, with people who identified as anarchists—I remember feeling like they were not prepared to deal with a situation where someone actually did need support. And when I did ask they treated it like more of an inconvenience to their punk lifestyle than an opportunity to express the values they profess to hold."

No matter how hard or how much of a downer it may seem, there is a serious need to talk about illness and trauma—both when it first occurs and over the long-term. Hiding it by avoiding discussion increases feelings of isolation for the person facing the illness. It's also a disciplinary mechanism: by intentionally avoiding discussion we increase feelings of shame, let those facing hardships know that their problems aren't important, and send the message that they should be silent about their needs.

Adequate support means not just being receptive to what someone asks for, but approaching the other person about what they need. Jenny helped illustrate the importance of initiating communication by describing her own situation: "There were definitely times I felt extremely alienated and alone because friends weren't talking to me about what I was going through. I think that some people thought I just didn't want to talk about it. That was really hard to deal with because it came off to me like they didn't care . . . the times when those who assumed it would be better to back off and wait for me to talk to them about it seemed to only hurt."

Another friend we spoke with, Ben—a 27-year-old with a long history of involvement in radical communities—has been struggling against cancer. Discussing his experiences receiving support, he also emphasized the importance of communication: "The best thing you can do is to ask, and to just talk to the person . . . if someone is your friend and they're

dealing with a situation where they need support . . . [in general] the best way is to ask the people most directly affected." Jenny also spoke to this: "It's always better to surround the person going through this situation and ask them how they are, how they're feeling about everything and initiate a dialogue."

Ben continued: "We have this fear about saying the wrong thing to someone who's going through illness. In thinking of all the things that people have actually said to me—of all the thousands of words that have been said to me dealing with this issue, there's only like one or two examples where I thought, 'Oh, you know what, you just said the wrong thing.' When you think about . . . all the people [who] had the emotional investment and were willing to actually offer something in terms of even just words as that small level of support, it's overwhelming that such a large amount of people, even if they weren't very articulate, still managed not to say the wrong thing. My point with that is that that's a really overblown sort of fear, that fear is really bullshit and that saying something is always better than saying nothing . . ."

Part of being supportive in a truly helpful way means being responsive and listening to what the person needing support wants. It is not helpful, and may be harmful, to put your desires for how to support someone before the desires of the person wanting support. It's not an easy road to navigate. Ben spoke to this point: "A lot of times you feel like absolute shit. And when I feel like shit, at least with this particular thing, I don't feel like talking, and I don't feel like seeing people . . . I don't find it helpful to just get on the phone with somebody and say, 'I feel like shit,' and talk about all the ways I feel like shit. And I feel miserable and talking about all the ways I feel miserable is not helpful. I feel like people knowing that those times happen, and don't just happen one day but happen for two weeks at a time, and knowing that there's a reason that I'm not calling them back and understanding that, is really helpful."

Support needs to be tangible, consistent, and voluntary if it is to be helpful. At its best, support work is proactive and creative. Responsiveness is crucial, but so is taking initiative. Ben found that instances where people anticipated needs were "really meaningful, really important and really surprising."