

TOXIC BEHAVIOUR IN ACTIVIST SPACES

What is Toxic behaviour, why does it concern us and what can we do to begin addressing it?



The Movement Hub, Greenpeace

What is Toxic behaviour?

We hear about and use the term toxic a lot when talking about, individuals, relationships or behaviour.

So what do we mean by Toxic behaviour? Where does it come from? And what does it mean for activist spaces - collectives, groups, actions?

When talking about Toxic behaviour in activist spaces we mean:

A range of behaviours which destructively impact activist groups or whole movements by destroying trust and relationships, potentially traumatizing activists and reproduces systems of oppression.

Why do we need to address it?

Many of us have experienced toxic behaviour during our activist lives, and seen it's impact. Perhaps the reason you are looking at this resource, is because it is something you or someone you know is experiencing.

Based on our experiences and the experiences of others we can say that:

We need to address Toxic behavior, because it damages our capacities, causes burnout, puts off newcomers and can hamper our public image. But also because we want to know how to create fairer, juster and “better” structures than the ones we see in the world around.

Contexts of Toxic behaviour

There are various ways and various contexts in which Toxic behaviour can manifest itself and which, if unaddressed allow it to fester.

These contexts can be:

1. Egotism in movement spaces
2. Group structures and dynamics
 - Conflict resolution
 - Decision making
 - Trauma and it's manifestations
 - Awareness and membership structures

While all of these can play a role, we will focus more specifically on the first two contexts

1. Egotism in movement spaces

Is a model of toxic behaviour of individuals, based on the work by Carol Zou.

Movement egotism is a set of behavioural patterns by which people with a tendency for self-promotion, abuse of power and/or egotistical behaviour gain space in activist collectives. This behavior if unaddressed can lead to burn out or even destruction of collectives.

We understand three phases of Egotistic behaviour:

- Entry
- Self-Promotion
- Destruction

Phases of Egotistical behaviour

	How it looks	What to look out for - red flags
Entry	Person says “all the right things” and holds all the “right values”	Do they practice what they preach? - f.e. Silencing FLINTA voices while claiming to be a feminist
Self promotion	Choosing the most visible or “important” roles during actions and in the collective.	Do they truly value and appreciate support and reproductive work in the collective?
Destruction	Creating factions of supporters and “opposition” and pitting them against each other	Avoiding direct confrontation, shaming, not taking accountability, spreading rumors

How to (begin) addressing egotistical behaviour?

<p>BELIEVE THE IMPACTED</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Talk with others, listen to their experiences.• Support the impacted• Support accountability of perpetrators	<p>DEPLATFORMING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Minimize opportunities for individual self presentation.• Implement Group processes of collective voice and collective decision making.
<p>BUILD DIFFERENT GROUP CULTURE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make support and reproductive work visible and appreciated.• Organizing around relationship building.	<p>LEARN ABOUT TRAUMA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Educating yourselves on trauma and it's various manifestations and contexts.• Make your collective a 'safer spaces'.

2. Role of Group dynamics and structures

Toxic behaviour is not purely a case of individuals behaving “badly”. The way we structure our collectives and the way we work can be crucial in enabling or preventing toxic behaviour from taking hold.

Our work often aims, not just to address the pressing issues of the world around us, but also to transcend the oppressive and exploitative structures of capitalism, extractivism, patriarchy and other systems of oppression. And we want that to be reflected in the way we work.

An open, caring, trustful, just and social collective is not just about individual responsibilities. It is determined by structures and rules and their effect on people in the group.

Building our groups

To help prevent toxic behavior taking hold of our collectives we...

Need to:

- Have clearly defined, understandable and transparent decision making.
- Establish “process” (from decision making to care work) , as equally important to “outcome” (actions, demos, events).
- Building strong relationships to each other and to those outside our group as central to group life.
- Actively engage with new members, put trust in them and in their skills.
- Define procedures for awareness and membership (termination).

Building our groups

To help prevent toxic behavior taking hold of our collectives we...

Should avoid:

- Leaving the majority of decisions to a small, closed group of people.
- Leaving care and reproductive work unrecognized in the life of the group.
- Being distrustful of new members, because they are new to activism or political work.
- “Sacrificing” every other part of our lives for activism.
- Putting up with abuse and toxicity because “we are friends here”.

Resources and further reading

Individual Behaviour

- Activists and difficult people, by Brian Martin
- Movement Narcissism: A warning and a guide, by Carol Zou
- ULEX Training manual - Pt 2. Awareness and emotional literacy

Conflict resolution

- Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity by Arnold Mindell

Resources and further reading

Trauma informed spaces

- [Rooting Resilience, by Comhlámh organization](#)
- [Forward Together: Breaking through with bold vision, by The Movement Strategy center](#)
- [ULEX Training manual pt. 7 - Trauma informed approaches](#)

Resources and further reading

Group culture and dynamics

- [The Tyranny of Structurelessness, by Jo Freeman](#)
- [Mutual Aid, by Dean Spade](#)
- [Joyful Militancy, by carla bergman and Nick Montgomery](#)
- [Jedis Handbook of the Code Rouge movement](#)

About The Movement Hub

The Movement Hub empowers anyone fighting for positive change in the world – by providing a platform for learning and sharing stories, tools and techniques.

Whether you're an activist who fought injustice or climate breakdown for decades, a young member of a grassroots group, or even a changemaker working alone – this community has something to offer you.

www.themovementhub.org

