

Help and Tips for being an Effective Advocate

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Undertaking advocacy activities can be very rewarding, giving a sense of achievement and real empowerment. It also carries with it some personal risks. Putting yourself forward, being exposed to new situations, expressing your views is always challenging. It is a privilege to be able to provide consumer or carer perspectives and as such we have a responsibility to speak up, even though at first this may be difficult.

Some important reasons to take care of yourself are:

1. Before you undertake advocacy activities, consider ways of preparing yourself. Advocacy activities require effort. It also requires determination and commitment.
2. Be sure that you don't jump in too quickly, rather consider all requests for your perspectives.
3. Your personal preparation is important. Do you have confidence that you will be able to help with the issue?
4. Are you clear about how much you are prepared to do?
5. Do you know how to maintain your own energy and interest?
6. It may be necessary to adopt an attitude of patience.
7. Avoid burn-out (lack of energy and enthusiasm, anger and frustration, a sense of futility, lack of goals, interrupted sleep, health issues).
8. Learn how to say NO if you are feeling overwhelmed.

Recognise that not all of your advocacy activity will succeed

Overcome fear of failure by firstly acknowledging that you might be unsuccessful some of the time. Recognise that not succeeding, despite your best efforts, is OK and happens to everyone. You are not a failure, see it as an opportunity to learn from the situation, to be more objective and see the other perspective.

1. Advocacy needs to include the knowledge that change will come in time.
2. It may be that your activity cannot be directly measured as an immediate success.

Take stock of your knowledge, skills and resources

Different activities require different personal attributes.

1. Think about your own knowledge, and make sure that you are striking a reasonable balance between extending yourself and stressing yourself.
2. Take stock of where your knowledge and skills can improve.
3. Take time out for reflection.
4. Become aware of what you believe in and why, what you feel, the way you think.
5. Listen to and understand yourself.
6. It takes time, we cannot change the world overnight.

Be aware of your stress

At manageable levels, stress can be an important motivator. Too much can be harmful to you and others. Increasing your awareness of what contributes to your stress will enable you to choose strategies that work for you.

ONLINE TIP SHEET 1

1. Have ways of distracting yourself, i.e. read a book, draw, meditate, listen to music.
2. Actively take a break or time out, this can be brief or it may need you to take some time away from your work.
3. Pace yourself. Get in touch with yourself. Know when you are usually not at your best and when your energy is at its lowest.
4. Stop rushing.
5. Focus on the task.
6. Sort out what you are going to do and when you are going to do it.
7. Put things in priority order.
8. Value yourself.
9. Think positive thoughts.
10. Praise yourself for what you are doing.
11. Look back and see how much you have achieved to reach this point.
12. Symptoms of physical and mental illness are often a first sign of stress, so be aware of your limitations.

Create personal boundaries

Sometimes advocacy activities are very demanding. We need to be honest with ourselves about how much we are prepared to extend ourselves.

Decide what boundaries you are going to create for yourself before you commence.

Fear

Fear and anger are always present in advocacy. Your feelings are not a problem but ignoring them can become one. Everyone experiences fear, strong feelings can be aroused by injustice and inequality and recognise that these feelings are common to everyone at some stage or another. How much they show them is a matter of self-control. The more confident you are in yourself and what you are doing, the more you can achieve without your fears getting in the way.

1. You may be afraid of the whole situation or only a part. Focussing on what the fear is will make it easier to overcome.
2. Plan and anticipate possible scenarios, assess the best and worst things that can happen.
3. Consider strategies for achieving best outcomes.
4. Prepare well – gain as much information as possible.
5. Undertake advocacy activities that you feel are important and manageable.
6. Be clear about the advocacy activities.
7. Get support from an individual or organisation.

Anger

Often controlled anger can be the catalyst for change but make sure you depersonalise it. Like fear, the first thing to know is that it's OK. People seem to have two problems with anger that are not useful. One is to not express it, the other is to express it aggressively. Holding in anger and not expressing it, is a poor idea. Consider finding ways to acknowledge your anger. Try to remain rational about the situation. Consider whether your expectations of personal achievement in advocacy are rational. Are you angry because you haven't achieved your goals in a situation where it may never have been possible? Are you placing unrealistic expectations on other people? Maybe the circumstances are such that it is just too difficult to obtain a favourable response to your expectations. Remember the old saying, we don't know what we don't know!

1. Become increasingly realistic about the world around you.
2. Tolerate your own frustration.
3. Increase awareness and acceptance of the rights of others.
4. Overcome your own inadequacies.
5. Don't be consumed by the issue – move on before consumption leads to bitterness.
6. Maintain a cooperative outlook.

Direct communication

Often advocacy activity involves direct communication with people who have the means to improve a situation. If anger is an issue at these times you need to consider:

1. Be focused and clear about what you are striving for.
2. Be fully prepared – focus, plan, organise and rehearse.
3. Be consistent, authentic and genuine.
4. Separate the issues from yourself despite your passion.
5. Learn to actively listen.
6. Learn assertion over confrontation.
7. Stick to the facts.

Take personal care

All advocacy activity requires a level of personal commitment and effort. Remember, you want the images of consumers and carers to be positive.

Organise your time to create balance between looking after yourself and your advocacy activities. Be mindful of the need to attend to the ordinary things like shopping and washing.

Adopting a stance or attitude about mutual respect is fundamental to getting what you want and to looking after yourself. Self-respect is born out of treating others with the same dignity, consideration and patience that you would expect.

Identify your own barriers

Set realistic goals and expectations for yourself and others. This is part of caring for your wellbeing. Sometimes people create their own barriers. They create difficulties for themselves in their attitudes and their fears.

Develop ways to gain support

It is very important to develop pathways of support and this is about not being alone and being able to share in a safe and comfortable setting. Personal support can come from almost anyone, sometimes it is about talking through the issues, sometimes it is about being in the right environment that enables you to feel good about yourself.

One of the best types of support can be provided by a 'buddy'. This is a fellow consumer or carer whom you trust implicitly that all information you share about yourself will be kept confidential. A buddy can also be provided by an organisation specialising in supporting consumer and carer representatives or by the organisation which has asked you to provide your perspective.

1. Use support as a way to empowerment.
2. Don't put yourself in the position of needing to be 'rescued'
3. Maintain your role and purpose.
4. Set limits on your time and work.
5. Have your contribution recognised.
6. Stop people being dependent on you.

7. Discuss any issues.
8. Recognise your own limits and establish mutually rewarding relationships.
9. If you are employed, ensure there is a clear line of command.

Self promotion

It is quite legitimate to demonstrate your strengths and talents in advocacy and to have them acknowledged. Such recognition comes from:

1. Dedication and sustained interest and passion.
2. Achievements.
3. Working hard and working smart.
4. Knowledge of the issues.
5. Demonstration of thoughtful planning and delivery of advocacy activity.
6. Being in the right place at the right time.
7. Writing for publication.

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Disclaimer

The Network acknowledges the source of material for this resource as *The Kit, the advocacy we choose to do. A resource kit for consumers of mental health services and family carers* published by the Australian Government in June 1998. While the Network has taken care in the development of the content, it is not responsible for any action taken in response to it. Consumers of the resource are advised to seek help from their GP, mental health support worker or Lifeline if they are distressed by the contents.

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