

Activism is often associated with a special kind of person, an extraordinary degree of civic commitment or courage, a particular vocation. At heart, though, it is simply about noticing suffering or injustice and choosing to actively respond.

Whether through organized or spontaneous action, large public efforts or small personal gestures, being an activist is one of the ways we express care for the world.

The history of activism is deep and universal. In every culture and part of the globe, citizens have stepped forward to defend dignity and justice: the civil rights movement challenged racial segregation, the suffrage movement fought for women's political representation, and countless local struggles have secured safety, rights, and recognition for marginalized communities.

Meaningful change often begins with ordinary people choosing to act in the ways available to them. As Margaret Mead famously said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

This guide is an invitation to find your own way of contributing, and to recognize that every act of compassion, connection, and bravery participates in the larger movement toward a more humane world.

## What Activism Is (and Isn't)

Activism is not a single strategy, nor is it reserved for a particular kind of person. At its core, activism is a way of responding to the world: a practice of paying attention, taking responsibility, and choosing to act.

Activism involves:

- Seeing clearly where harm or injustice is present.
- Understanding the systems, histories, and conditions that allow harm to persist.
- Choosing a response that aligns with your values, capacities, and lived circumstances.
- Often, doing so in relationship with others.

Activism is sometimes fueled by anger and moral outrage. These emotions are often deeply warranted, and they can be powerful catalysts for action. But over time, it is compassion, generosity, and a desire to protect and nurture what we love that allow movements to endure. As Joseph Campbell reminds us, we are called to "participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world." Many movements that have shaped history were sustained by hope, imagination, creativity, and a sense of shared belonging.

## Making a Difference: Let Us Count the Ways

In his work on the deep-rooted goodness of humans, Dutch historian Rutger Bregman reminds us that most people are wired for cooperation, and that social change often becomes possible when we tap into our innate capacities for trust and solidarity. Seen this way, activism is not an exception to human nature, but one of its natural expressions.

Activism takes many forms, and most movements weave together several of them at once. Rather than fixed categories, they are pathways; avenues through which care, creativity, and commitment can flow into action.

### Digital Activism

Today, much of our collective life unfolds online, and activism has naturally followed. Digital tools allow people to share stories, circulate information, and mobilize across distances with extraordinary speed. Critics such as Malcolm Gladwell have cautioned that social media activism relies on weak ties and low-risk engagement, arguing that lasting social change depends on the deep relationships and commitments forged offline. Others, including writers such as Maria Popova, have countered that what begins as a digital connection can grow into meaningful, embodied relationships, and that many contemporary movements have been seeded through online spaces before taking root in the physical world.

In practice, digital activism is most effective when it serves as a bridge rather than a destination. Online networks can amplify on-the-ground organizing, lower barriers to participation, and help people find one another across distance. At the same time, lived experience, sustained relationships, and local struggles give digital campaigns their depth, direction, and staying power. What matters, in the end, is not whether activism happens online or offline, but how the two reinforce one another.

### Direct and Community-Led Action

Increasingly, community members are taking local, creative action to meet urgent needs. In Los Angeles, residents have painted their own crosswalks where safety improvements have stalled. These “guerilla crosswalks” are not just acts of protest, but also acts of contribution—people stepping in to protect one another when systems move too slowly. They reflect a wider trend in which activists create change *within* existing structures when possible, *against* them when necessary, and *around* them when they prove too rigid.

A larger-scale example of this approach is the [Transition Towns](#) movement. Originating in Totnes, UK, in 2005, it has expanded to more than fifty communities worldwide, each working to redesign local food, energy, and economic systems to increase resilience and reduce dependency on centralized infrastructures. The movement provides a practical framework and step-by-step guidance for communities wanting to get started, available through their online [Transition Handbook](#) and [resources](#).

## Legal and Economic Avenues

Some activists are channeling their efforts into legal and economic campaigns that challenge deeply entrenched, harmful industries. For example, Rutger Bregman's [School for Moral Ambition](#) has launched [a campaign](#) to end the influence of large tobacco companies, highlighting tobacco as “the deadliest industry in the world.” Their work combines policy advocacy, public-interest research, and economic pressure — aiming to dismantle systems that profit from addiction and illness. This kind of activism often happens behind the scenes, but it has the potential to reshape markets, increase public health, and shift long-term societal norms.

In fact, actions like these have shaped some of the most important social and environmental breakthroughs of the past century — from the international divestment movement that helped end apartheid, to the strategic litigation that secured U.S. civil rights protections, to global efforts that forced tobacco regulation and landmark environmental laws.

## Art Activism (Artivism)

Alongside more traditional strategies, creative expression has played a growing role in social movements. Art can surface truths that numbers, reports, and formal analysis often struggle to convey: murals that reclaim public space, performances that make silenced histories visible, music and poetry that invite people to imagine different futures. After the murder of George Floyd, street murals became sites of mourning and protest that shaped public conversation far beyond formal demonstrations; in Russia, Pussy Riot used symbolism and public performances to challenge authoritarian power; and across Latin America, community-led theater and storytelling projects have given voice to marginalized groups while strengthening collective bonds. Artivism helps communities make values visible, share emotion, and rehearse the world they want to build together.

## Mutual Aid and Community Support

Another powerful form of activism is mutual aid: neighbors sharing food, skills, childcare, shelter, or emergency support without waiting for institutions to respond. Mutual aid rests on the belief that communities already hold the wisdom and resources needed to care for one another. This approach surged globally during the COVID-19 pandemic, when thousands of informal networks organized grocery deliveries, emergency funds, and care circles long before official systems mobilized. In the United States, groups like the Black Panthers pioneered mutual aid programs decades earlier, offering free breakfasts and community clinics. Today, community fridges, neighborhood repair collectives, and grassroots disaster response teams continue this lineage.

## Care-Centered Activism

One of the most promising developments in recent years is the growing recognition that activism is not only about resistance, but also about sustainability. Research from psychology, neuroscience, and movement studies suggests that chronic anger and constant urgency, while sometimes necessary, are difficult to sustain over time and can lead to exhaustion, cynicism,

and burnout. By contrast, practices rooted in compassion, connection, meaning, and care tend to support resilience, long-term engagement, and collective wellbeing.

Care-centered activism responds to this insight by integrating rest, grief work, relational support, and trauma awareness into the work of social change. It reminds us that transforming the world also requires tending to the nervous systems, relationships, and inner lives of those doing the work. Rather than softening activism, this approach strengthens it, allowing movements to endure not only through moments of crisis, but across generations.

## Your Place in the Movement

Activism is not only about *what* we do, but also about *how* we show up. Beyond the many forms of activism, each of us tends to play particular roles shaped by our personality, gifts, temperament, and life experience. Some people naturally step forward; others hold space. Some organize systems; others weave relationships or tend to emotional well-being.

To help people understand these varied contributions, strategist and lawyer Deepa Iyer developed the [Social Change Ecosystem Framework](#), a map of ten roles that movements need in order to thrive. These roles remind us that the health of any movement depends on honoring different strengths, not only the most visible ones.

A few examples:

- The Guide helps people navigate complexity and stay grounded.
- The Weaver connects people, ideas, and organizations.
- The Storyteller shifts narratives through words, images, and media.
- The Builder strengthens institutions, communities, or systems.
- The Healer tends to the emotional and relational wellbeing of groups.
- The Visionary imagines new worlds and possibilities.
- The Disruptor challenges harmful norms, policies, or behaviors.
- The Caregiver provides material and emotional support where it's needed.
- The Experimenter pilots new solutions and creative responses.
- The Frontline Responder offers immediate help during crises.

This framework frees us from the misconception that activism only looks like marches or petitions.

Instead, you can ask:

- What role do I naturally gravitate toward?
- Where does my compassion most easily turn into action?
- Which roles energize me, and which drain me?
- What does my community need right now?

Activism, then, is not a narrow identity or a heroic exception. It is a shared human capacity that shows up wherever care meets action. When we recognize the many ways people contribute,

we widen the circle of belonging and possibility. The question is no longer “Am I an activist?” but “How does my care want to move in the world, here and now?”