

Core competences for psychologists practising human rights-based approaches

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Introduction

This chapter addresses the key competences relevant for psychological practice based on human rights, connecting them with the International Declaration on Core Competences in Professional Psychology (IDCCPP) (IDCCPP, 2016). It further elaborates how one of the core competences in the Declaration, the one that requires psychologists to practise ethically, can be linked with psychologists acting as human rights defenders. Two models are used: James Rest's and Urban Jonsson's. Then the role of psychologists as human rights teachers is described, as they have to be a model for the students. Finally, challenges and benefits of human rights involvement are tackled in the concluding part of the chapter.

Competence-based approach

Seymour (2016), in his chapter in Ulrich and O'Flaherty's book on the professional identity of the human rights field officer, sets out to "if not bridge different aspects of the work of two different but related types of professionals, then at least define where such a bridge starts and ends and what it may look like" (p. 115). In this case, the two professional groups Seymour is considering are both concerned with human rights work, but we can apply some of the same ideas to begin to build a similar bridge between human rights workers and psychologists. The European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA) started building one such bridge by establishing the Board Human Rights and Psychology that put the education of psychologists on human rights as one of its core activities (EFPA, 2017).

The competence-based approach was taken as the starting point in defining what psychologists need in order to become better human rights defenders and promoters within their professional setting. Competencies for critical human rights-based approaches to applied psychology, as a wider framework, are presented earlier in the book. However, the necessary key competences can be linked to and build upon the IDCCPP (further: Declaration), which was adopted by the International Association of Applied Psychology (IAAP) and the International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS) in 2016. According to this Declaration, competence is defined as a "combination of practical and theoretical knowledge, cognitive skills, behaviour and values, used to perform a specific behaviour or set of behaviours to a standard, in professional practice settings associated with a professional role" (IDCCPP,

2016, p. 4). If taken as a useful model of key competences a psychologist should perform, this model can be translated to competences for human rights-based approaches in psychology. Our attempt to do so is presented in Table 17.1. The first column lists competences from the Declaration, the second column is a proposal of how these competences can be translated to competences for a human rights-based approach in psychology and the third column provides some generic examples.

Table 17.1 Example of core competences in professional psychology translated to competences for human rights

<i>Competence in the Declaration</i>	<i>Translation to competences for a human rights-based approach</i>	<i>Example</i>
Possesses the necessary knowledge	Interprets human rights and links with underlying psychological rationales	Illustrating how violation of human rights relates to mental health deterioration
Possesses the necessary skills	Identifies the necessary human rights-related documents and institutions	Linking actions, or the lack of, with violation of certain articles of specific conventions, covenants, etc.
Practises ethically	Implements procedures according to ethical codes and principles	Refusing to do something that is against the ethical code
Acts professionally	Applies psychological procedures in a human rights-based approach	Defending client's right to get the appropriate service
Relates appropriately to clients and others	Protects human rights of clients and others	Educating people about human rights
Works with diversity and demonstrates cultural competence	Works with diversity and demonstrates cultural competence	Supporting decisions clients make related to their cultural background
Operates as an evidence-based practitioner	Operates as a human rights and evidence-based practitioner	Making policies related to human rights protection
Reflects on own work	Reflects on own work from the human rights-based approach	Discussing procedures on supervision
Sets relevant goals	Sets goals related to human rights promotion and alleviation of human rights violations	Planning and implementing a campaign for protection of certain human rights
Conducts psychological assessments and evaluations	Assesses (risks of) human rights violation and evaluates human rights protection	Risk assessing in a community (e.g. in an institution, town, country) or in a specific group of people (e.g. national groups, professional groups, age groups)
Conducts psychological interventions	Conducts interventions to protect human rights or alleviate human rights violations	Counselling people whose human rights were violated
Communicates effectively and appropriately	Communicates effectively and appropriately	Giving interviews to the media about the human rights-related action

As Table 17.1 suggests, the core competences for psychological work can be a good base to introduce competences relevant for psychological work related to human rights. Going back to Seymour's metaphor, the large degree of overlap suggests that bridging the two professional sets of competences makes sense.

Connecting psychological ethics and human rights in practice

One of the core competences in the Declaration that is perhaps closest to the human rights-based approach requires psychologists to practise ethically. The connection between how a psychologist acts ethically and how a psychologist acts as a human rights defender can be illustrated using two models. The first, The Four Component Model, was developed by an educational psychologist, James Rest (Rest, 1982), building on the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, and has been used, along with other related models, to frame psychometric assessments aimed at measuring ethical competence (Lind, 2016). The British Psychological Society (BPS) has published guidance based on this model for teaching and assessing ethical competence in psychology education (Bullen & Wainwright, 2015) and the model has been found to be useful for many different professional groups. The human rights expert and practitioner, Urban Jonsson, whose main area of practice was nutrition and human rights, developed the second model. He stresses that the aim is to shift the paradigm from one where meeting needs is the aim to rights being realised (Jonsson, 2003, p. 21). In a paper on how to develop human rights programming he describes a model of capacity building (similar to the concept of competence) that complements the four-component model and provides a helpful way to think about how human rights principles and ethical practice can work together (Jonsson, 2003; OHCHR, 2006). The four components are sensitivity, reasoning, motivation and implementation. These map on to the four themes in the Jonsson model (Table 17.2). In Table 17.2, we show how

Table 17.2 Comparison of the four-component model and the capability model

	<i>Rest four-component model</i>	<i>Jonsson capability/capacity model</i>	
	<i>Ethical practitioner</i>	<i>Human rights claims holder</i>	<i>Human rights duty bearer</i>
Sensitivity	Able to recognise an issue has an ethical dimension	Has the capability to assess a rights claim	Has the capability to assess a rights duty
Reasoning	Able to consider the pros and cons of different actions	Has the capability to analyse the rights claim	Has the capability to analyse the rights duty
Motivation	Has the motivation to take action on the ethical issue	Is motivated to communicate and take action about the rights claim	Is motivated to communicate and take action about the rights duty
Action	Has the competence to take effective ethical action	Has the capability to take action on the rights claim	Has the capability to take action on the rights duty

psychological ideas can be helpful when these two models are combined. From the above, there do not appear to be any conflicts between professional ethical duties and human rights obligations. Given this parallel, it underscores how ethical competence and human rights competence will be very similar.

The four-component model suggests there are some key psychological processes that are necessary when making a decision about what action to take in a situation where there is an ethical choice. One of the great benefits of this model is its simplicity as it gives a straightforward heuristic for decision making. However ethical choices are not the easiest decisions to make, and while this framework can be helpful, we don't pretend it can give all the answers, and we are not sure anything can. The four components are ethical sensitivity, ethical reasoning, ethical motivation and ethical implementation and we will describe these in turn and show how they can map on to Jonsson's approach. They are not to be thought of as stages, but as psychologically important aspects of the process that are necessary in acting ethically.

For our purposes in this chapter, Jonsson's model can be understood as starting from the assumption that there are two players (or, as typically described in human rights literature, "actors") – an individual who is entitled to make a human rights *claim* and an individual who has a *duty* to fulfil this (Jonsson, 2003). Jonsson then takes the important step of explaining that it is lack of *capacity* that may stand in the way of the claim being met. The main themes of Jonsson's model are as follows.

Claims and duties

The usually understood relationship between claim and duty is extended to include all relevant people and organisations at "sub-national, community and household levels" (Jonsson, 2003, p. 15). This important way of thinking takes the model away from a legalistic framework. A human right represents a specific relationship between an individual who has a valid claim and another individual, group or institution (including the state) with a duty to respect, protect and fulfil the right.

Capacity

Capacity, broadly defined, is the factor determining how well rights are claimed and duties are fulfilled. In this sense capacity is both an individual competence and also the contextual situation – availability of resources and so on that make fulfilling the right possible.

Communication

Communication patterns reflect power relationships within a community and the extent to which human rights are realised. Having laws is not the same as claiming a right in daily life.

Ethics

A human rights approach has an ethical dimension concerning both what should be done and how it should be done.

As the author and developers of the four-components approach to moral behaviour point out, the concept is not linear and actions result from a combination and interaction of the components, and if any one of them fails it will end up in a lack of action (Thoma, Rest, & Davison, 1991).

Putting the two models together

Ethical and human rights sensitivity

Firstly, there will be a need to be able to identify whether a given situation has an ethical dimension or human rights dimension. To be sensitive in this regard, both emotional reactions to the situation as well as the thoughts you might have are important factors. It turns out that there is a wide range of ethical sensitivity on this dimension: some of us seeing ethical questions in almost everything, others being much more limited in what they would include in their ethical scheme. Ethical sensitivity is clearly important, because if you don't notice that something has an ethical dimension to it, you may well not make judgments that take that into account – perhaps making simply practical judgments. The same is likely to apply to human rights sensitivity, where we know that many psychologists, for example, would be unaware of the various human rights duties and claims that might apply. So, the skill would include the ability to recognise the way a particular situation might be immediately detrimental to an individual or a group, but also that even if that isn't the immediate case, it may lead to future violations of human rights. This competence can be strengthened in a number of ways. Firstly, by keeping in mind our social identity as human beings. Seeing others as part of our group and being at risk of harm will be an important starting point. Secondly, by cultivating empathy and compassion towards others – taking perspectives from different roles, so learners can get better at perceiving when human rights might be endangered. In the case of ethical sensitivity, the touchstone might be a professional code; for human rights sensitivity there is the much more extensive material on human rights law to consult. So as a first step, learners can become more sensitive by being better educated in this material.

Ethical and human rights reasoning

Secondly, you need to be able to reason about the particular ethical or human rights questions that have been identified and to have the ability to weigh up how different responses to the issue align with professional codes or a human rights-based approach. In order to do this, there is a need to be able to consider both sides of an argument to be aware of the many biases that are part of our cognitive makeup. Some of these biases may be implicit – that is, you may have a particular emotional response to the situation that may lead your reasoning in one way rather than another. Reasoning about the rights and wrongs of a situation will also need

to be considered in the light of how you work out what are the relevant duties and claims in a human rights-based approach and in particular who are the duty bearers and who are the claims holders. This is not always as easy as it seems as in all situations, as human beings we are both duty bearers and rights holders. This component means taking into account all the various standpoints, different stakeholders' needs, expectations, previous experiences and other variables, while planning actions and solutions for the (potentially) threatening situation. For the creative practitioner, it can burst with ideas and proposals as it provides the opportunity to generate many solutions to potential human rights violations and to articulate arguments why certain approaches would be beneficial and how they would lead to protecting the person's human rights. Reasoning here should not be done in isolation and whether it is ethical or human rights reasoning, discussion with colleagues and other stakeholders is a significant part of this competence.

Ethical and human rights motivation

The next component poses the question of how motivated the person is to do something about the relevant issue. Psychologists have done much work on motivation so this is an area about which there is good research (Rosenberg & Siegel, 2018). While often the reason for ethical motivation being compromised is that there are conflicts of interest or experience of having taken ethical action and been punished for it. As noted in the next component, it may take courage to act ethically. Similar considerations that are raised in working ethically apply in taking a human rights-based approach. One in particular needs to be addressed directly, and that has been called "human rights scepticism" where a person may consider human rights as a framework to be flawed. To be motivated to address an issue in human rights terms there needs to be, at the least, some commitment to the idea that such rights are useful in practice. There are many possible reasons why an individual may be sceptical, ranging from seeing human rights only to do with the state's obligations, or being a legalistic way of viewing things. On a more positive note, motivation can be strengthened by learning about examples where actions taken resulted in useful outcomes to those concerned and some of that can be helped with an evidence-based as well as a values-based approach. So, for a psychologist, knowing that there are effective methods for delivering benefits to people using a human rights-based approach could be a strong motivator. One useful example of applying an evidence approach to "doing good", albeit from a somewhat different field, is called Effective Altruism (www.effectivealtruism.org) that sets out to show what were and what were not effective ways of doing good; there are summaries and reviews of such effective interventions in the Campbell Collaboration (<https://campbellcollaboration.org>).

Ethical and human rights action

This component identifies the integrity, character and perseverance that a person needs to see through plans and the organisational skills to deliver them. Even in relatively safe situations, outside, for example, of zones of conflict, raising concerns can be a high-risk strategy for various reasons. For example, for managers in busy

organisations, someone raising an ethical matter with them can mean a lot of extra work – it is much easier to ignore things and get on with the tasks allocated. If the question concerns the actions of an individual, it can divide opinion and the person raising the issue can suffer the “shoot the messenger” fate. Under ideal circumstances, raising either an ethical or human rights issue would be welcomed, but this may not be the case. Taking action, then, is best seen as something that needs planning and is best done with others, so that there is some collective commitment to the ethics, values and human rights involved. An important issue to recognise here for both teachers and students is that there is no dividing line between a psychologist who takes action and someone who takes on an activist role.

Following Jonsson’s ideas, actions would involve addressing the capacity issues that have been identified, whether these are individuals who lack the capacity to make a claim or duty bearers, and finding ways to build capacity. Clearly the actions required will depend on the analysis and could focus on empowerment strategies for those making a claim, or other actions if the duty bearers lack capacity.

Among the extensive psychological literature on taking action, one that may be helpful draws on the work on expertise developed by Gary Klein (Klein, Shneiderman, Hoffman, & Ford, 2017). This suggests that, for the experienced practitioner in any field, plans to intervene are often built from a series of templates that we measure the current situation against. This is well-researched territory and should be an important source material for teachers and students. In brief, the way an action plan can be developed is by imagining various scenarios and simulations very rapidly, of actions with predictions of their feasibility, and then making the best choice.

Taking this a bit further, taking action, ideally with others, includes planning concrete actions and the timeframe, defining roles and tasks, foreseeing weaknesses, especially demotivation, fatigue, frustration and making back-up plans. It also involves debriefing, supervision, monitoring and evaluation. For psychologists it means that they have set goals and put their self-discipline, strength and skills into actions that will reach the set goals. This component embraces all kinds of competences: intrapersonal (self-awareness, self-confidence, persistence, emotional stability, etc.), interpersonal (active listening, non-verbal sensitivity, providing feedback, etc.), problem solving, technical and so on.

For psychologists it is important to commit to human rights protection. If they internalise this as a value, then they feel in harmony with themselves and they are seen as credible (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2017). The lack of this commitment to social responsibility results in taking no actions or in taking harmful actions. In order to support psychologists in setting higher aspirational standards in protection of human rights, good examples of psychologists as human right defenders can be promoted. This component can also be strengthened by reflecting on and discussing personal, professional and societal expectations and responsibilities.

Examples of actions that can be taken include directly approaching the individuals concerned, raising the issue with senior individuals or taking the matter outside the organisation to the general public through the press or social media. Psychologists could have, by virtue of their psychological training, particular skills in conflict analysis and resolution, so many actions can be developed that would build on these skills.

The righteous psychologist

Besides sets of specific knowledge and skills and quality assurance, a profession involves a commitment to serve the interests of clients as well as the welfare of society, providing the basis for the profession's autonomy and public esteem (Colby & Sullivan, 2008). The authors state that an occupation can be considered a profession only if it is, in its core, defined as serving some important aspect of the common good. Psychology undoubtedly fits the required description.

As in practically all applied psychological subjects, psychology teachers not only deliver content related to the subject, but also are models of what they teach. For example, a psychologist teaching educational psychology is expected to organise and perform the lecture according to the principles of good teaching practice that she/he teaches about. In the case of human rights education, the teacher becomes the model. As Magendzo (2005; p. 140) describes, such a teacher has “basic knowledge of the fundamental rights of people, who then applies them in the promotion and defence of his or her own rights and the rights of others” and “also has a basic knowledge of the institutions, especially those of the community, whose role is the protection of those rights, and to which one can resort to when such rights are violated”. Further such a teacher:

shall necessarily develop many skills that allow him or her to say ‘No’ with autonomy, freedom and responsibility when faced with situations that threaten one’s dignity. Ultimately what teachers gain is the power to refuse arbitrary, unfair and abusive requests that impair individual rights.

Training for human rights education includes strengthening teachers for their role. Psychology students learning about human rights must have a model in their teacher. The model teachers, besides having the theoretical and practical knowledge about human rights issues, also show that they implement that knowledge for human rights promotion and protection in various communities. They can start in the classroom and stretch it outside to the local, regional, national and/or global levels (e.g. help to create policies, documents, campaigns or programmes for governments or institutions to be more respectful of human rights; explain to various audiences the harmful effect of human rights in certain cases and the beneficial effects of human right protection; work with people whose rights were violated, and so on). The teachers involved in human rights education advocate for their human rights as well, do not take part in actions that potentially violate human rights or dignity, discuss with students their examples of good practice in human rights promotion, but also discuss examples of mistakes and omissions, as learning from them is invaluable. It is essential that the teacher, being responsible and accountable, builds trust, respect and solidarity, and is opposed to offensive, abusive or discriminating requirements threatening human rights (Magendzo, 2005). However, such models also have intra- as well as interpersonal struggles and competing claims and try to reconcile them. Mentkowski and associates (2000) conclude from their extensive studies of competence development that substantial dimensions of professional growth, self-reflection and self-assessment can be developed and supported by instruction and practice. Bebeau and Monson (2011) stress that professional education is

most effective if it is authentic and accountable. An example would be education that pursues a culture based on respect for all students, faculty and staff and if it strengthens the responsibility of the professions to society by linking the study programme with societal inequalities.

Human rights and human wrongs

When teaching students about human rights, students may express doubts about their utility or significance – what we refer to as human rights scepticism. This needs to be openly discussed as it is a widely shared perception that human rights are overly legalistic and protect the rights of wrongdoers at the expense of everyone else. However, one particular challenge to human rights that we don't discuss elsewhere concerns the way that human beings, as a species, have become so dominant, and have exerted such an enormous impact on ecological systems and the environment more widely, that they should not be considered to be entitled to rights at all, but should be convicted of crimes against the species that have been made extinct by their actions. The challenge is that human rights advocates suffer from “speciesism” where they privilege our own species at the expense of all others (Adams, 2018).

There is a solid scientific consensus that, among other things, climate change, biodiversity loss, unprecedented rates of extinctions in recent times and acidification of the oceans have been caused by human activity. The impact of this human activity that we collectively take part in affects both human and non-human animals as well as plants. It differentially impacts on the poor and disadvantaged to a very significant degree, and this gives us the framework for climate justice.

So how should human rights teachers deal with this issue? Firstly, we suggest that students are encouraged to consider what effect a respect for human rights might have on climate change. This could be a simple exercise where a group of people living in an island nation are at risk of being flooded and their nation disappearing (<https://www.activesustainability.com>). This is likely to find that a respect for the rights of the peoples here would result in collective action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and so on. However, another possible response might be suggested, whereby people carry on with “business as usual” and here you might introduce the well-known concept of the tragedy of the commons that was the subject of a 1968 paper in *Science* by Garrett Hardin, philosopher and ecologist (Hardin, 1968), and, in a sense, is a thought experiment. Imagine you have some common land over which a group of farmers (commoners) have grazing rights. As there is limited grazing, there is only enough to support each commoner having a certain number of stock. However, it will benefit each one in the short term to increase the number of their stock, but this will be at the expense of the other farmers. This will result in overexploitation of the available resource and none of the commoners will be able to graze their animals. Hardin's analysis described the damage that innocent actions by individuals can inflict on the environment. So, writ large, the global impact on our use of the world's resources is having just the impact he would predict. Hardin has said that he should have called this situation “The Tragedy of the Unregulated Commons” as he believed that if we develop good governance we may avoid the worst effects. Human rights frameworks provide just such a governance system.

Furthermore, as Garrett Hardin concludes: “Education can counteract the natural tendency to do the wrong thing, but the inexorable succession of generations requires that the basis for this knowledge be constantly refreshed” (Hardin, 2001, p. 29).

Challenges and benefits of human rights involvement

Although there is considerable evidence of psychologists’ contribution to human rights protection in history as well as today (see, for example, Nadal’s article from 2017), there are many causes why nowadays psychologists may be reluctant to advocate for human rights. Nadal (2017) identified major obstacles underlying such hesitation: ethical concerns and professional boundaries, the belief in political neutrality in psychology, a desire to maintain personal balance and self-care, the lack of psychology training on social activism and the belief that such advocacy is unnecessary in psychology. Seymour says with reference to human rights scepticism something that echoes what we hear on occasion from psychologists and others:

One explanation given, particularly by those working in emergency contexts who are sceptical of the role of human rights in their work, is that a human rights based approach is a time-consuming luxury which is neither practical nor relevant when the urgent business of life saving necessarily dominates the resources of those on the ground.

(Seymour, 2016, p. 119)

On the personal level, psychologists devoted to human rights promotion can also face various challenges. They should understand that personal growth happens life-long and they should query their own positions of influence. They explore how their positions of power and privileges or lack of them shape their views, biases, attitudes and actions (Nadal, 2017). In human rights education psychologists as teachers often become facilitators of an interactive, participatory process of experiential learning. A facilitator structures the learning environment with various activities and encourages participants to be active and included. A sensitive facilitator makes sure the atmosphere is safe and trustworthy so different opinions can be expressed without assault, shame and guilt. Nancy Flowers, with her colleagues (2000) as well as the staff of Global Kids (2007), have thoroughly examined good and bad practices of group facilitation related to the topics of human rights and have written useful handbooks about it. Competent facilitators are aware of cognitive and affective processes that arise during education; they use precise language, open questions and appropriate humour, avoid oversimplifications, encourage various perspectives, raise awareness of the influence words may have on people’s understanding and feelings. When it comes to examples of violation of human rights and consequently to suffering, it is important not to compare the intensity of pain between different examples, as people feel it is humiliating. All the student-centred teaching and learning strategies (e.g. Socratic questioning, problem-based, project-based, case-based, inquiry-based learning) are useful as they encourage students’ curiosity and motivate them to come up with their examples, experiences, observations and solutions. It is important that topics related to human rights are

relevant to participants' lives, but also connected to a larger, world picture. A facilitator carefully mediates discussions of controversial themes in the classroom and yet elucidates misinformation. Finally, a thorough and accountable human rights education should perpetually strive to reorganise its values, knowledge, skills and practices and unveil the underlying power structures and mechanisms (Keet, 2017).

One of the competences human rights practitioners should have and vigorously promote is self-care. Being actively involved in challenges and demanding and sometimes risky situations, they are exposed to numerous and various stressors (Ajduković, 2012). For example, while working with people who suffered from human rights violations, psychologists can suffer from vicarious or secondary traumatisation. Then there are many and often unrealistic expectations different stakeholders have from people included in the field of human rights. Also human right activists often share such high but unworkable expectations from themselves. Media can sometimes put further pressure or present human rights-related issues in a sensationalistic way that is additionally harmful. One of the most relevant problems in the field of self-care can be insufficient support (in capacity building, peer support, supervision, etc.) that human right activists get. It is therefore vital that psychologists dedicated to human rights promotion have in mind the high relevance of self-care and that they pursue efficient strategies of burn-out prevention, and coping if it occurs.

In return, a human rights-based approach can benefit the basic psychological competences and psychologist's capacities for good psychological practice, so it can boost psychologists' motivation to engage in it. On one hand, psychologists build their knowledge about human rights-related documents, institutions and procedures. On the other hand, they serve as models to other colleagues and students, as well as clients. Finally, promotion of human rights typically involves activism which appears to bring benefits at both individual and institutional levels. Namely, there is evidence that engaging in activism is related to higher levels of hedonic well-being (e.g. life satisfaction and positive affect), eudaimonic well-being (e.g. personal growth, purpose in life, vitality), social well-being (e.g. social integration) and satisfaction of basic psychological needs (Klar & Kasser, 2009). It seems that holding back from acting out against perceived social hazards presents a long-term risk for mental health trajectory. Longitudinal data show that activists report having lower (self-related) microworries and higher macroworries (concerned with larger entities) (Boehnke & Wong, 2011). At the institutional level, there is evidence that organisations that promote employee inclusion are more likely to obtain benefits of a high-trust workplace, including effective working relationships and increased employee performance and well-being (Downey, van der Werff, Thomas, & Plaut, 2015).

There is an interconnection between human rights protection and peace. The protection and fulfilment of human rights can help societies to be more peaceful, with elimination of violence and other direct or indirect forms of aggression. Peaceful societies promote the development of peaceful beliefs, harmonious relationships between groups, equality between political and economic systems (Twose & Cohrs, 2015) and consequently people with fewer mental health issues and better health status (Giotso & Mitrogiorgou, 2014).

Questions

1. What key competences do psychologists need in becoming better human rights defenders and promoters?
2. How can you define the cross-cultural competence of a psychologist?
3. In your country, which human rights are most violated and how can you help people to deal with them through your profession?
4. How could the challenges that Nadal mentions be overcome?
5. What would be the efficient coping strategies of self-care for human rights activists?

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