

CHAPTER 3

MENTAL HEALTH ACTIVISM TECHNIQUES

Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.

—ARTHUR ASHE

When you imagine activism, you might think of people protesting in the streets or speaking out from the steps of a governor's office. But that type of activism might not be your cup of tea.

The good news is there are many ways activists can make change. Using the Activism Path, you will find a match between your gifts and powerful motivation, like Karyl found after her daughter's death by suicide.

Activist in Action: Karyl Chastain Beal

Karyl Chastain Beal is not a well-known author, performer, speaker, social media influencer, or podcaster. She is a woman living in Spring Hill, Tennessee, who experienced her own pain and saw the pain of others and decided to turn a craft she loved into a key to open a locked door to a dark room and shine a desperately needed light.

Karyl talked with us about her own pain and grief and her choice to bring light and love to the reality of mental illness and suicide.



My daughter Arlyn died by suicide on August 7, 1996. She was diagnosed with bipolar disorder by a psychiatrist only after she died; based on her writings, we learned of her mental health struggles and of an apparent drug problem we knew nothing of.

Not only was I Arlyn's mother, but I was also a teacher. My ignorance on the issue of mental illness and the related drug abuse problem didn't cause her suicide, but my awareness and recognition of her issues before her death could possibly have changed the trajectory of her life.

Each year for the past fifteen years, I've coordinated the creation of a memorial quilt in honor of people who have died by suicide in Tennessee. The quilts accomplish a double mission.

First, people who are grieving the death of someone they love who died by suicide may be comforted to know that their loved ones will be remembered on a memorial quilt; since they know that the quilt will be displayed at suicide awareness and educational events, it may comfort them to know that their loved one's photo may help overcome the stigma associated with suicide and open a dialogue.

Second, the quilt helps educate the public about the fact that suicide happens to real people, people who were loved and valued—it's not cold hard data, they're not just statistics.

Generally, when people see a memorial quilt with a photo of their loved ones on it, they seem to be profoundly grateful.

It's hard to actually measure the impact long-term, but the immediate impact is obvious. When people see the quilt, they sometimes come to see it alone; other times, they bring a group of family members or friends with them because it's so important to them.

It's fairly common for people viewing the quilt to cry. Some of them sob. They don't take their eyes off of it. Many of them hug each other—or me. They take photos of the quilt and of themselves standing by the quilt. It's a memory they want to take with them. Seeing the memorial quilt is an experience they won't forget.

Mental health has always been in the closet, but it seems that if we crack the door open, some of the issues hidden in that small dark room will find their way out. Then, eventually, the world will be a healthier, happier, more peaceful place to live.

That's where I find the motivation to create the memorial quilts. I want to help others who walk the same road I've walked, but even more, I want to open the minds of other people to the fact that suicide prevention is essential and all lives are worth saving.

*View photos of the Love Never Dies quilts.*²¹



Traditional Approaches to Mental Health Activism

Karyl's story is about using a creative activism method, quilting. That is quite different from the traditional approaches to mental health activism: lobbying, advocacy, and fundraising. Although these approaches aren't quite as stimulating as others presented in this book, they are vital to the mental health community. So, if your gifts match these techniques, consider focusing on one.

Advocacy (Educating Others)

Advocacy is essential to mental health awareness. Advocacy includes educating people about issues such as stigma. Advocacy is also used to welcome and prepare volunteers for activism work.

Educating Others

Examples:

The social media community includes many people with a diagnosis who share their stories to reduce the stigma of mental illness. If you enjoy interacting on social media, consider this technique.

- ✓ Stand up for others by sharing your story privately with a friend, neighbor, or loved one. You also don't have to share your story if you're not yet ready. Both NAMI and MHA suggest that you:
 - ⇒ Support someone who needs help
 - ⇒ Volunteer for a local mental health organization

- ⇒ Attend an awareness walk or other event benefiting the mental health movement
- ⇒ Encourage your local politicians to prioritize mental health
- ⇒ Correct those who use stigmatizing language
- ✓ Nonprofits welcome volunteers but getting them up to speed takes time and effort. If you are an excellent teacher, support mental health awareness by helping prepare volunteers for their work.
- ✓ Organizations put on awareness days to focus attention on mental health. Volunteer at community events related to mental health, like health fairs, health resource events, and parenting fairs.

Patient and Family Support Programs

Mental health organizations provide support programs for those with a diagnosis and their caregivers. NAMI, Mental Health America (MHA), and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) are just three of the national organizations that offer support groups for those with the lived experience and their families and caregivers.

Examples:

- ✓ Work with your local NAMI affiliate, join an affiliate board/steering committee or become an instructor for NAMI programs like Family-to-Family²².

- ✓ NAMI Smarts for Advocacy²³ is a hands-on advocacy training program. People living with mental illness and their friends and families transform their passion and lived experience into skillful grassroots advocacy.
- ✓ MHA seeks motivated volunteers to support their events, such as mental health screenings, and take part in their legislative advocacy efforts.
- ✓ Mental Health First Aid²⁴ is an eight-hour course that teaches you how to help someone experiencing a mental health or substance use challenge. The training enables you to identify, understand, and respond to signs of addictions and mental illnesses.
- ✓ Become a volunteer for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.²⁵

Community Support Programs

Be a resource to those in the community with mental illness.

Examples:

- ✓ Work to bring Crisis Intervention Team training to your community. This team supports law enforcement to help those experiencing a mental health crisis.
- ✓ The QPR Institute uses a simple three-step process of Question-Persuade-Refer²⁶ to save lives and reduce suicidal behaviors. QPR training is available in hundreds of cities across the US and can be taken online.

- ✓ The MakeItOK²⁷ campaign is designed to reduce stigma. The website offers extensive resources, such as posters, flyers, a PowerPoint presentation, brochures, tip cards, and more.
- ✓ Help prevent suicide in the elderly population by using social opportunities to combat isolation.

Lobbying

Lobbying is talking to people in government who have influence over your issue. Your goal is to state your position on the subject and persuade the other person to use their power on your behalf.

Examples:

- ✓ Meet with your state representative to ask for better access to mental health care in your community.
- ✓ Call your senator to ask for changes to Medicare options.

Fundraising

Fundraising is an essential task in activism. Your community connections can pay off in financial support for mental health organizations. Funding is desperately needed for improvements to mental health care and treatment. Consider becoming involved in these ways.

Examples:

- ✓ Participate in NAMIWalks, an annual 5K (3.1 miles) walk to promote awareness about mental illness and raise funds for NAMI state chapters and local affiliates.

And we can say from experience, it is a fun and joyous experience.

- ✓ Have a Facebook fundraiser, a simple way to request donations to the nonprofit organization of your choice. Folks have fundraisers for birthdays, graduations, and for any life event. So why not raise money to support a mental health organization?
- ✓ Have your garden club sell bouquets and donate the proceeds to a mental health charity.
- ✓ Create a product that highlights mental health awareness and donate the proceeds to your cause. Brewers Dave and Emily Mobley donate the proceeds of a beer called "Your Story Is Not Complete"²⁸ to a suicide prevention organization in honor of Dave's brother Josh, who died by suicide.

Rallies

With rallies and public events, organizers hope to increase awareness and change public opinion about mental illness.

Examples:

- ✓ Attend a rally day at your state capital to influence elected officials.
- ✓ Organize a public event in your town to bring awareness to the difficulties faced by people living with mental illness, as NAMI Chattanooga (Tennessee) did. NAMI Narratives: Finding Courage in Mental Illness, is an

outdoor event in which courageous community members impacted by mental illness share their stories with the public to destigmatize mental illness and promote open and honest conversation.

Summary

Lobbying, advocacy, and fundraising are necessary types of mental health activism. If you enjoy these activities, please use your skills to support those with mental illness and their caregivers. But if these methods don't motivate you, read on, because there are other ways you can make a difference.

Creative Approaches to Mental Health Activism

Now, for those of you who don't want to lobby elected officials, teach, or fundraise, you can still make a difference doing something you love.

The Arts

Putting the arts and activism together sounds strange, doesn't it? But many professional and amateur artists use their skills for social justice, like Karyl and Christina. Why not apply your talents to mental health awareness?

Drawing and Illustration

Do you have the ability to draw, illustrate, sculpt or paint? Use your skills to make a difference.

Examples:

- ✓ Create a mental health T-shirt design.
- ✓ Organize a drawing contest for mental health awareness and fundraising.
- ✓ Create art to display in your community. Artist Kimmy Henderson installs sculpted butterflies in her communities to highlight bipolar awareness.²⁹
- ✓ Offer art therapy classes to those with a diagnosis.
- ✓ Do portraits of famous mental health advocates. (Get inspired by Joan Baez, who created an exhibition of well-known activists.³⁰)

Crafting

Are you a crafter? If you love to knit, crochet, or embroider, use your skills for mental health awareness.

Examples:

- ✓ Embroider a message about mental health on a handkerchief and send it to your elected representative. (Hat tip to the Craftivist Collective³¹ for this idea.)
- ✓ Sew mental health-related shirts for stuffed teddy bears.
- ✓ Knitters can handcraft mental health messages and display them in a well-visited spot in their community.

Theater

The theater, like film, impacts social change by using a compelling story. It displays a live, three-dimensional message more powerful than movies because of the immediacy and intimate setting.

If you love theater, think about ways you can use your passion for mental health awareness.

Examples:

- ✓ An innovative theater group called Acting for The Future hosts "participative drama workshops, professional performances and post-show panel discussions with counselors and clinical psychologists to promote active healthy lifestyles, positive mental health, and suicide prevention."³²
- ✓ Pair up with a clinical psychologist to provide a participative workshop, where attendees can practice ways to maintain their mental health.
- ✓ Ask theater companies to mount productions focused on mental illness.
- ✓ Write a play about stigma for your high school.

Music

Music is a beautiful way to reach people. It can be used to inspire, relax, or rouse people to action.

For example, rapper Logic used his talent in the song "1-800-273-8255 (National Suicide Prevention Lifeline)." According to

Vibrant Emotional Health, formerly the Mental Health Association of New York City (MHA-NYC), in a December 2017 article on its website:

*Thanks to the heightened public awareness of the Lifeline due to increased media and National Suicide Prevention Month, as well as a general increase in call volume compared to last year, the Lifeline experienced its highest-ever call volume during September 2017. After Logic's performance at the Video Music Awards [September 2017], the Lifeline saw a 50% increase in call volume in the hours after the show. Since the song's release, the Lifeline website has also gained an extra 100,000 visitors per month.*³³

In a press release from Vibrant, Logic says,

*In [this song] we hear a person at the end of their rope. . . . We then hear words from the perspective of the Lifeline counselor who in turn gives them many reasons to keep fighting for their life. . . . Finally, we hear the caller express their new lease on life and outlook on a life that they thought was over but had actually been far from it all along.*³⁴

Examples:

- ✓ Set poems about mental illness to music.
- ✓ Create a playlist for someone who is a caregiver.
- ✓ Write a song about mental illness and perform it at an open mic night.

Writing

Perhaps you have a way with words. There are many ways you can use this talent to help those with a diagnosis and their caregivers.

Pete Earley has a way with words, and it paid off for at least one person. One man with mental illness sought help at a mental health center, and, in his pocket, they found one of Pete's op-eds from *USA Today*. The man's mother wrote to Pete, saying the article helped encourage her son to seek treatment.

Examples:

- ✓ Ask people to contribute song lyrics, poetry, and essays to a collection.
- ✓ Start a blog about mental health issues and include activist profiles and interviews.
- ✓ Share your experiences with mental illness on social media and create a support community.
- ✓ Write an article about mental illness in your community for your newspaper.
- ✓ Write a memoir about your lived experiences with mental illness.

Photography

Photos can inspire and educate us. If you are a shutterbug, how can you contribute?

Examples:

- ✓ Create a book of photos of those with a diagnosis.
- ✓ Teach photography to those with a diagnosis.
- ✓ Start an Instagram account to share your experiences with mental illness.

- ✓ Contribute photos about mental illness to media outlets.

Specialized Skills

Leadership

A lack of skilled leaders hinders most activist organizations. Without enough leaders, they end up tabling work important to their movement. They need leaders who can communicate a vision, inspire performance toward a goal, recruit and develop volunteers, and make change happen.

Examples:

- ✓ Reconsider work in the for-profit sector and consider a nonprofit job in mental health.
- ✓ Offer to use your strategic planning skills to help a nonprofit improve its operations.
- ✓ Run volunteer motivation and engagement sessions.

Legal Support

People with a legal background are much needed in mental health activism.

Examples:

- ✓ The MHA Advocacy Network³⁵ includes thousands of people who actively protect America's mental health through legislative advocacy.
- ✓ Volunteer in your community's Legal Aid to help people with diagnoses.

News Media Outreach

Activist organizations use news media outreach to give information about the cause to a broad audience. One way to make an impact is to develop relationships with reporters who write about your cause. Pitch them a story about how your activism relates to mental health, and you might get a feature article in your local newspaper.

Examples:

- ✓ Connect personally with someone at your local newspaper. Send well-written articles about mental health issues regularly.
- ✓ Ask the editor to run a regular mental health-related column.

Movement Support

In the same way leaders can help others use their strengths, those in movement support can take care of others' tasks. Supporting others in the movement can multiply the impact of the activism community.

Caregiving

This work supports most activism efforts. Provide support so volunteers, employees, and caregivers don't have to worry about other areas of their lives while helping the cause.

Examples:

- ✓ Create a referral program of people who would offer free or discounted help with personal needs. This might

include home repairs, transportation, caregiver days out, and caregiver meetups where food is prepared and served free of charge.

- ✓ Offer yoga or meditation classes to those with a diagnosis or to caregivers.
- ✓ Provide food and drink for caregiver support classes.

Administrative Work

This work supports most activism efforts. Every movement has tasks that just have to be done, such as setting up computers, answering correspondence, and handling money.

Examples:

- ✓ Make copies and help set up for a mental health forum.
- ✓ Volunteer for tasks at your state mental health convention.
- ✓ Manage the AV equipment for your local mental health organization's events.

It's not Slacktivism: Activism for People with Limited Time

You want to make a difference, but you also have a job, family, and limited time. If this is true, the following section highlighting quick activism is for you.

Social Media: Podcasts/ Social Media Campaigns

The internet has changed activism. Whether that change is directly making a difference in a cause is still unknown. But there is no denying the power of social media to connect with like-minded others and organize and implement social change activities.

Radio, Video, and Podcasts

Examples:

- ✓ Offer to do local radio interviews about your experiences.
- ✓ Create a YouTube channel to speak on mental health issues. Interview those with a diagnosis as well as caregivers, physicians, advocates, and politicians.
- ✓ Do a podcast or be interviewed on the podcasts of others.
- ✓ Man Therapy: Manly Mental Health Tips³⁶ uses a unique blend of humor and evidence to help men learn how to better talk about their mental health issues—and get the help they need. Humor is the key. Check out the episode about how men do yoga as proof.

Social Media

Examples:

- ✓ Create a local Facebook page to promote NAMI activities, training, classes, and news.
- ✓ #CureStigma and the StigmaFree Pledge³⁷ are NAMI's social media campaigns to stop stigma.

- ✓ Use digital communication to help provide crucial support and services to those suffering from mental health issues. Big White Wall³⁸ is an example. They support members in self-managing their care.

Corporate Protests

Corporate protests have increased as activists use their buying power to advocate for change within companies. This has led businesses to see employees, shareholders, and activist groups as stakeholders and recognize their viewpoints in company decisions.

Employee Activism

Example:

- ✓ Speak up at work if your company allows the use of mental illness-related words such as *crazy* or *insane* to refer to anything negative, different, or difficult. Instead, gently suggest they substitute a similar word, such as *wild* or *ridiculous*, that does not contribute to stigma toward those with the lived experience.

Shareholder Activism

Shareholder activism is a form of corporate boycott by those who own shares in the company. A bloc of shareholders voting together can influence the company to change policies and practices.

Examples:

- ✓ Shareholders can protest companies that do not provide a living wage. Having sufficient resources to live on contributes to mental health.
- ✓ Shareholders can ask for better benefits and unpenalized time off for those who need treatment.
- ✓ Shareholders can ask for better benefits and unpenalized time off for those who care for a family member with a diagnosis.

Consumer Activism: Boycotts and Buycotts

Have you boycotted any products because you disagree with the company's stance on an issue? *Buycotts* are the opposite—support an organization by purchasing their products. Both can make a difference.

Examples:

- ✓ In 1999, NAMI protested the Nestlé food company for the stigmatized names of their Taffy Bars: *Psycho Sam*, *Looney Jerry*, and *Weird Wally*.
- ✓ Wear your support for mental health awareness. A wide variety of clothing and accessories promote awareness. Green ribbon lapel pins are worn to represent support for mental health. Be prepared to address the issue and answer questions.
- ✓ Boycott companies that discriminate against those with a diagnosis or their caregivers.

- ✓ Activist Liz Beecroft and Nike created the Air Max 270 React *In My Feels* shoe to support mental health awareness.³⁹

Petitions

Petitions are floating around on many topics; signing them is an easy and effective way to participate in this type of activism.

Examples:

- ✓ Change.org has many petitions about mental health. The site also contains tools to create your own petitions.
- ✓ Create a petition to support the mental health of local teachers.
- ✓ Does your local high school have a gay–straight alliance (GSA)? If not, create a petition to start one.

Summary

We hope this section on creative activism techniques has sparked ideas for how you can use your gifts for mental health awareness. Get creative!

The Right Activism Method for You

As you learned here, there are so many activism methods, so many choices.

Karyl uses her quilting skills to help those in grief commemorate their loved ones who died by suicide. And in doing so, she educates others.

When you consider your gifts and motivation, how do they match up with either the traditional activism methods or the creative techniques?

What activism methods made you feel energized? Did something call to you?

We hope these activist stories have shown you the power of using your passion in a specific way to help those with mental illness.

Want to Learn More?

Take sufficient time for this step on the Activism Path. You will be more motivated and effective in your activism—and you might find your life is enhanced and fruitful in myriad ways.

At the end of each chapter, you will find additional resources for those who want the chance to get more detail about a topic.

If you are ready to move on, go to What's Next?

Additional Resources

If you'd like to learn more about activism methods, here are resources.

1. Terri Lyon's books *What's On Your Sign?* and *The What's On Your Sign? Workbook* offer a structured approach to finding the perfect activism opportunity for you. One that makes a difference for those you love, doing something you love. Get exercises, worksheets, checklists, and reflective questions to help you the best activism method for you.