

INDIVIDUAL COLLECTIVE

PLEASURE ACTIVISM FOR COUNSELLORS

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Take a moment. Take a moment and see if you can conjure a memory of a time when you felt really good.

What were you doing? Who were you with? How does your body remember this? And: how do you recognize pleasure?

Yes. How do you recognize pleasure? As a noun, it has various descriptors: desire, inclination, sensual gratification. Somatically, pleasure can feel like warmth, unwinding, expansion, calm. Some folks see pleasure as a luxury — a superfluous expenditure if one's cup runneth over. Still others regard it with caution: perhaps it feels sinful, possibly dangerous. Pleasure requires embodiment, and the body can be both a site and source of trauma.

Yet, here's another idea: what if engaging in pleasure were a conscious, revolutionary act? This is the premise of adrienne maree brown's book, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*.

Whether this concept is new to you or not, I want to share some ideas about how it can be useful, both as an individual and as a counsellor.

BUT FIRST...

There are three tenets of brown's work I'd like to highlight from the outset. First, though the book centres on pleasure, it's actually about oppression and justice. Second, it emerges from the field of somatics: simply put, pleasure activism is an embodied movement. Third, though it welcomes everyone, there is a call to "prioritize the pleasure of those most impacted by oppression."¹

brown has belonged to activist movements for most of her adult life. However, she began to notice that her activist peers were frequently stretched thin, underresourced, and burnt out. In her words, she grew "tired of the idea that misery and movement felt synonymous."² It spawned a question





TO

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at the heart of pleasure activism: “What would it take to make the work we do for justice and liberation the most pleasurable experiences we can have with each other?”³ For brown, transformational change that’s grounded in scarcity is destined for limited success. We can accomplish more with abundance.

Before going deeper, I want to name a couple of things. One, I’m a white person writing about a Black woman’s work. It’s relevant because pleasure activism centres “the experiences of Black women pursuing and related to pleasure.”⁴ This is who informs her. To make invisible or omit this would be to reproduce what Alta Starr calls “the relentless theft of our time, our labour, and our lives.”⁵ In writing this, I aim to be as faithful to brown’s vision as possible.

Two, when we step into the arena of politics — and pleasure activism does this, even if it’s the politics of feeling good — the ground may seem rife with what Gabor Maté calls “rhetorical cannonballs.” Otherwise known as triggers, these can be “hurled back and forth by opposing sides in many a debate or confrontation, rarely deepening conversations and often ending them.”⁶ So let me say this: the premise of this work is pleasure. And justice. And dignity. For all. Should a concept here land like such a cannonball to you, know that we can tap into “an abundance that has enough attention, liberation, and justice for all of us to have plenty.”⁷ There’s enough room for everyone’s dignity.

WHO TAUGHT YOU TO FEEL GOOD?

Or maybe the question is: who taught you to fear feeling good? For the body that has known trauma or oppression, the experience of pleasure may have been disrupted or denied. On the other hand, pleasure that’s associated with hedonism and excess can similarly be suspect. As brown writes, many of us “are so repressed, our fantasies go to extremes to counterbalance all of that contained longing.”⁸



Working in harm reduction for years at a music festival, I saw this: the implicit permission to experiment with sex or substances drives some folks to excesses beyond pleasure. It's not unusual for newcomers to this concept to need to acquaint themselves with genuine pleasure or learn for the first time "what it means to be satisfiable."⁹ Still, I love this idea of "contained longing" — that at their core, our yearnings look more like love than like greed.

Who taught brown to feel good was Black women. In particular, she teaches that pleasure is not just each person's birthright; for some, it's also a resistance to — and victory over — oppression. When an external force diminishes the freedom to govern oneself, reclaiming that right is a triumph. brown lists by name several Black women who influence her work. I'm going to discuss one in particular:

Audre Lorde.

In her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," activist and academic Lorde describes the erotic as an untapped source of power that "becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence."¹⁰ As a Black woman and a lesbian, she intimately knew the experience of oppression. Within this context, she reclaimed the erotic as a revolutionary act. brown takes Lorde's premise and expands it to encompass other forms of sensual delight. This, she calls pleasure.

Note: you don't need to be a Black woman to find yourself within this work. As brown says, "En masse, we are not satisfied with what we experience and accumulate. As a general state of affairs, we are overworked, undervalued, overwhelmed, burnt out, inauthentic, and suffering unnecessarily."¹¹ Yet, if we are in touch

with our bodies as sources of pleasure, perhaps we become "less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to [us], such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial."¹² Remembering our own power, we can celebrate others in theirs.

SOMATICS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

The disabled body can be erotic. The queer body can sense safety. The racialized body can know liberation. However, to facilitate others on this journey, we must first feel it in ourselves. So, what is somatics? It comes from the Greek root *soma*, meaning "the living organism in its wholeness."¹³ Certain readers will be acquainted with it as a body-based therapy. Especially helpful in working with trauma, somatic enquiries lean more into what the body is

experiencing than what the mind is thinking. And though some may be familiar with this therapy for individual clients, less may have considered it as a tool for systemic transformation.

Collectively, what we embody can both harm and heal. If we know more about reactivity than we do about accountability, more about scarcity than abundance, that will show up in the soma of our culture. In such climates, there will be more division than solutions. Still, we can unlearn entrenchment in conflict, for example, and deepen our capacity to tolerate the unknown. The more we can “hold our seat” during difficult conversations or uncertain times, the greater our potential to create positive change.

How do we get there? As individuals, we can explore the query: What would I be doing with my time and energy if I made decisions based on a full-bodied yes?¹⁴ As a collective, we can notice what we lean into with pleasure, and ask: Does this space “allow for aliveness, connection, and joy?”¹⁵ Note the curiosity in these questions. When our nervous systems are in fight or flight, there’s no room for wonder; our only concern is responding to threat. When we’re calm, we can stay open for longer and engage until we find common ground.

THE COUNSELLOR AS PLEASURE ACTIVIST

Perhaps you’re asking: How does pleasure activism pertain to me as a clinical counsellor? Valid question. We exist as part of a larger culture, and so

do our clients. The structural conditions that create or contribute to trauma do not cease to exist just because clients go to therapy. The idea that we could (or should) return clients to “a pre-trauma Pollyannaish view of the world”¹⁶ is somewhat misguided — and in cases of historic or intergenerational trauma, impossible. (For those unfamiliar, Pollyanna was a fictional character who has become synonymous with a person of “irrepressible optimism and a tendency to find good in everything.”¹⁷) Rather than this, we can support the wisdom that comes from traumatic knowledge, uniting it with “libratory community/collective practices [that

are] connected to transformative systemic change.”¹⁸ Trauma generally happens in relation to people and systems; it’s also healed in relation to the same.

Somatically, we take in more, and with greater curiosity and openness, when our nervous systems are relaxed. We can connect with (rather than contract from) others when we’re settled.

Activism often demands change — and rightly so — by calling out injustice. That makes sense when the oppressing person or group has a great deal of power and little motivation to engage.¹⁹ Yet it can leave activists exhausted and underresourced. Perhaps pleasure activism captures the imagination of so many because it calls in the expansive power of joy. Maybe we intuit that when we remember our own goodness and dignity, “we can generate justice and liberation, growing a healing abundance where we have

been socialized to believe only scarcity exists.”²⁰ ■

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