

20 Quick Tips to Better Advocate for Yourself & Others

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"In my four years identifying as an activist, I have had the opportunity to learn from other experienced activists as well as engage in the discussion of theories-of-change in my academic social work experience. As an activist, you are never done learning. While I have been an activist for only a short while now, part of my learning process is to explain to others what I have learned. How can we effect positive change if we don't pass on our knowledge to others to benefit from?"

The wonderful thing about so many of the tips I have written below is that they are applicable to advocacy at all levels. Meaning, they are skills that can be used whether advocating for yourself, for another individual, for a group or community, or for broad level policy changes. I have used these skills when calling utility companies to clear up discrepancies on my own household bills. I have used these skills to help clients reach resources within agencies that they need. I have also used these skills when being interviewed on the radio, writing opinion editorials, blogging, meeting with legislators and their staff, giving feedback on drafted legislation, and providing testimony for legislative hearings.

Be respectful

It is important to be respectful to other groups, individuals, and causes in your advocacy. You do not have to put one group down to raise the needs of a specific group. If you send the message that other causes and issues aren't important (or as important), you alienate potential allies to your cause.

This also means not putting another cause down when it is receiving attention and yours is not. That being said, there are times when focus is put on something that definitely is not as important as a human rights issue is. For example, when legislators have ignored human rights bills because they were overcome with debating the State's official vegetable (yes, that actually happened). But deciding how to point out where priorities should lie should involve thoughtfulness, wisdom, compassion, and respect for other people.

Be inclusive

Seek to understand how the issue you are passionate about impacts a diversity of people, not just you. Advocate for everyone that your cause impacts. Make sure the voices of others are heard.

Take up space

Your cause and your needs are important. It's your legislator's job to listen to you. I say this frequently, especially to fellow female activists, *take up space*. You are entitled to raise your voice and be heard. You are entitled to complain when a service you use isn't working right. You are entitled to give feedback on issues that impact you.

Speak to common values

Politics has become divided between party lines. Speaking to common values can help create common ground. One example is why so many adoption activists reiterate words like "equality" and "truth" when it comes to discussing adoption policy. These are things many people value, regardless of political affiliation.

Know the cost

More often than not when you advocate for a policy or a new program, the legislator or person in charge is going to ask, "how much does this cost?" Sometimes people will disregard an idea based on how much they believe it will cost alone. It is important to know how much something may cost, who will benefit, and where the funding might come from.

Speak to strengths

When advocating for yourself or others, speak to their strengths. It's true that social justice advocates are often advocating for problems to be fixed. But it is vital to speak to the strengths of the human beings involved. Why? Because humans beings are deserving of dignity. Second, people are psychologically more likely to support a cause where people are spoken of positively, as survivors, and as heroes.

Tell a story

Having a story to tell in the midst of facts and figures makes everything you have to say memorable. A short, poignant story directly addressing the issue you are advocating for goes a long way.

Have an elevator speech

Recently, I went with a group of fellow social workers and students to advocate for some social work legislation. I ended up becoming the spokesperson for one large group of us in a brief meeting time with one legislative aide. I literally had two minutes to say what we wanted, how much it would cost, why it was needed, its benefit to our group and society, and how change could be made. Sometimes two minutes is all you will get; make the most of it; be prepared.

Respect the time

When you meet with a legislator, administrator, or any other type of decision-maker, their time is often spread very thin. Come prepared and respect the time frame that you have. It increases your chances of more frequent and positive interactions with these individuals in the future. Write a script or agenda for you and the other activists to help you keep time. You'll be sure to be invited back in the future.

Take care of yourself

Self-care is so important in any type of advocacy. Burn-out can impact how you approach your cause. When you become so entrenched in an issue that you begin stereotyping or feel like you will never make a difference, it's time to explore self-care options. Ways I self-care are to check-in with my mentors, take a break, write my thoughts down on paper, and even take time to work on other advocacy issues that aren't so close to home.

Be wise with emotions

The details of your facts and story will conjure emotions within the listeners. This tends to be more effective than outright telling someone how they should feel.

Don't set yourself at odds

Let people understand how they can connect to an issue. Some legislators (etc.) may surprise you by agreeing right away and wanting to get involved.

Know your audience

Stay current on your issue and other issues yours may intersect with. Educate others about your issue. Brush up on what's important to them; is there any common ground between issues you both are passionate about that will help them see your issue your way?

Use your story wisely

A single story won't speak for every person that faces a given issue. Use research and statistics to pull back the lens and broaden your focus to help more people most effectively.

Have a bottom line

You should have a say in how you want the issue you face to be resolved. Brainstorm some ideas. What does a solution look like to you and why should the issue be resolved your way?

Stay on task

If you get distracted from your goal, so will whomever is listening to you. When talking to someone about the issues, stay focused on your cause and topic at hand. Writing out a goal or mission with objectives and action steps to complete those goals can help you stay focused on what best promotes your cause.

Respect yourself

Be open to other points of view. But acknowledge that when you know an issue, you know it. If you've done significant work

on a topic and trust the research you've done, say so.

Get comfortable

Be comfortable with your platform. Research a variety of ways to advocate and practice those skills. Writing petitions, submitting testimony, in-person meetings, phone calls, demonstrating, blogging--the list is endless.

Don't lose hope

You never know how the seeds you have planted with your message will grow. Don't get discouraged. Even when the change wanted isn't made or your bill doesn't pass, the time you spent educating still made a difference.

Pay it forward

Give back. Become an advocate for other causes. Expand your understanding of social justice by seeking to understand the needs of as many people as possible.

In what ways do you advocate?"

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