

# THE REFUEL TOOLKIT

For the Animals: Mental  
health and the psychology  
of sustainable advocacy

*Libby Peppiatt | The Vegan Society*

# ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

**This toolkit offers practical tools for nervous system regulation, emotional resilience, effective and sustainable advocacy.**

Working to create change for animals can be deeply meaningful, but it can also bring emotional challenges, particularly when we engage closely with issues of harm and injustice. Many people engaged in this work encounter distressing information, challenging conversations, or the ongoing reality of injustice. Throughout this toolkit, we use advocacy and activism as broad terms for working to create change for animals. This can include everything from personal conversations and education to campaigning, research, investigations, and other forms of organised action.

This toolkit accompanied the session:

‘For the Animals: Mental Health and the Psychology of Sustainable Advocacy’ presented at VARC (Vegan and Animal Rights Conference) 2026.

The session was delivered by Libby Peppiatt, CEO of The Vegan Society, and included an expert panel:

Claire Palmer, Founder & Director, Animal Justice Project;

David Magna, a former federal slaughterhouse inspector turned animal rights advocate, and;

Stephen Balfour, Counsellor & Author: ‘Vegan Mental Health: How to Survive and Thrive in a Non-Vegan World’.

Together the session explored how advocates can care deeply while sustaining their wellbeing, effectiveness, and long-term commitment to their work.

# WHY THIS MATTERS

## Caring deeply is not the problem.

If you feel overwhelmed, angry, exhausted, or heartbroken at times in this work, that is not weakness. It is a human response to witnessing suffering, living in moral dissonance, carrying responsibility without control, and working within systems that resist change. Activism requires courage. Sustainability requires rhythm. This toolkit is about protecting your capacity to stay committed.



Walnut the lamb at Amberwood Animal Sanctuary.

# THE ACTIVIST RHYTHM

Advocacy often asks a great deal of our attention, energy, and emotional capacity.

Many advocates spend long periods in a state of urgency - pushing for change in systems that are slow to respond. Over time, this can place significant strain on the nervous system. One way to think about sustainable advocacy is through a simple rhythm:



Rescued goose at The Retreat Animal Rescue Farm Sanctuary.

Healthy and effective advocacy tends to move through all three stages.

## Push

Push is the work of advocacy. Campaigning. Educating. Investigating. Protesting. Organising. Speaking up. Challenging harmful systems and advocating for change.

This stage often involves urgency, determination, energy, and emotional intensity.



## Refuel

Refuelling allows the nervous system to settle and recover. This might include:

- Rest and sleep
- Time with supportive people
- A short micro practice (for example grounding and/or breathwork)
- Connecting with animals or nature
- Setting boundaries around distressing content
- Activities that bring meaning, creativity, or calm

Refuelling is not stepping away from the cause. It is essential as it allows the work to remain sustainable.

## Return

After recovery, we return to advocacy with greater clarity and steadiness. This makes it easier to:

- Think strategically
- Stay connected to compassion
- Respond thoughtfully rather than reactively
- Remain engaged for the long term

# WHY THIS RHYTHM MATTERS

Discomfort is part of creating change. But recovery is part of sustaining the people who create that change.

Without refuelling, many advocates end up in patterns such as:



If we want to look after our health so that we remain effective advocates for life we need to adopt the activist rhythm :



# UNDERSTANDING YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

**The nervous system moves between mobilisation (sympathetic) and restoration (parasympathetic).**

Mobilisation supports urgency, action and problem-solving. Restoration supports digestion, repair, social connection and rest. If restoration never happens, the body can remain in a chronic stress response: tired but wired, reactive, emotionally exhausted or numb.



# THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

**Psychiatrist Dan Siegel describes the Window of Tolerance - the zone where we can think clearly, regulate emotions and respond rather than react.**

When outside this window, survival responses may appear: fight, flight, freeze, or fawn.

These are natural nervous system responses rather than character flaws.

The aim is not to eliminate stress but to return to the window more quickly and widen it over time.



## **TOOL 1: 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding**

**Time required:** *1–3 minutes.*

**Name five things you can see.**

**Four things you can physically feel.**

**Three things you can hear.**

**Two things you can smell.**

**One thing you can taste or appreciate.**

**This practice anchors attention in the present moment and signals safety to the brain.**

## **TOOL 2: Regulating your breath**

**When stressed, breathing often becomes shallow and fast.**

**Slow breathing, especially longer exhales, can signal safety to the nervous system.**

**Try inhaling for four seconds and exhaling for six seconds.**

**Continue for 60–90 seconds.**



## **TOOL 3: Working with your breath (nostril breathing)**

**For calming:** close the right nostril and breathe through the left nostril.

**For alertness:** close the left nostril and breathe through the right nostril.

**For balance:** alternate nostrils slowly.

**No force or strain** — this practice simply offers the body another option.

# BOUNDARIES WITH DISTRESSING CONTENT

**Repeated exposure to traumatic material can accumulate.**

You are not obligated to consume every piece of footage or news. Consider limiting exposure time, avoiding repetitive viewing, curating feeds and taking recovery breaks after viewing distressing content.

Empathy does not require constant traumatising.



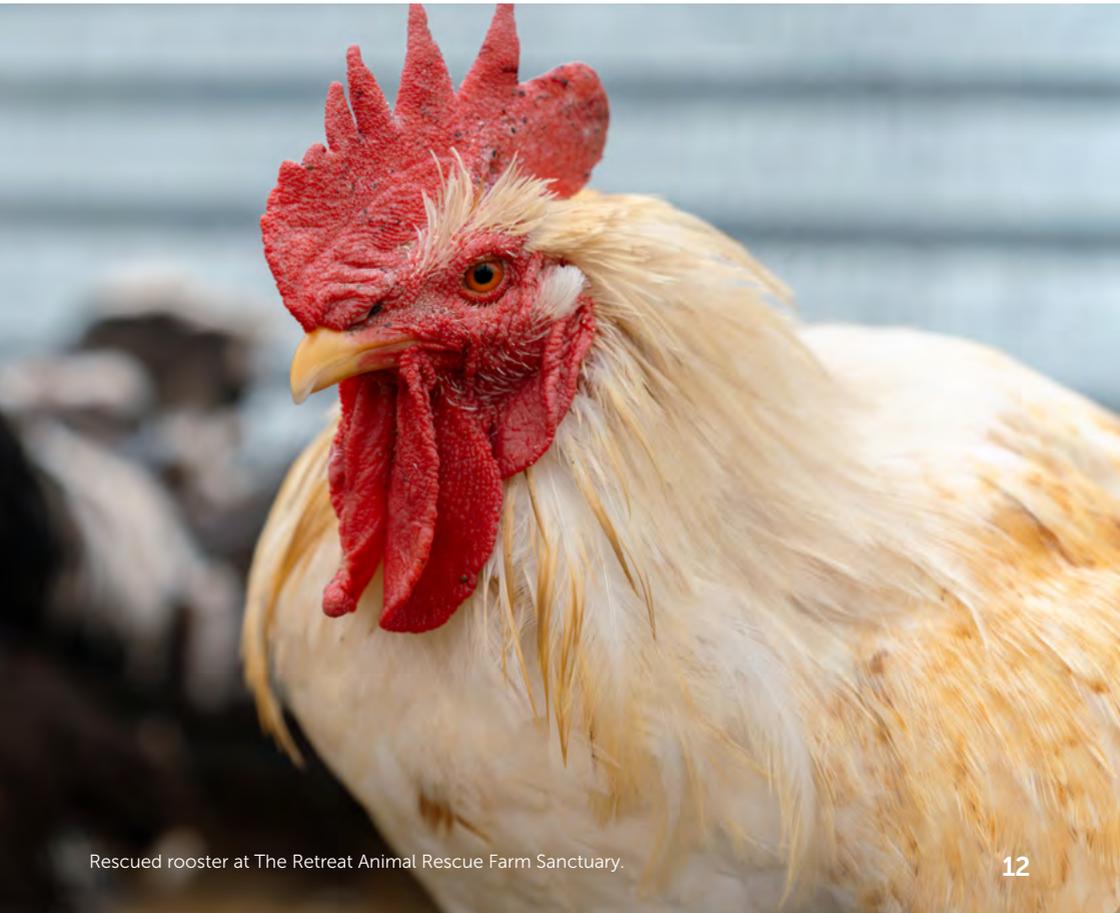
# ABSORBING THE GOOD

**Psychologist Rick Hanson describes the brain as 'Velcro for the negative and Teflon for the good.'**

Negative experiences tend to stick while positive experiences often fade away unless we deliberately notice them.

Pause for 20-30 seconds to absorb moments of connection, small wins, time with animals, nature, beauty or kindness.

Resilience grows through the positive experiences we allow ourselves to take in.



# REFLECTION, RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

**Reflection prompts:** What drains me most in this work? What reliably refuels me? What would a sustainable rhythm look like for me?

## Further resources:

Visit the 'We The Free' website for activist wellbeing resources and a 'mental health first aid kit': [activism.wtf/mental\\_health](https://activism.wtf/mental_health)

Vegan Counselling Directory: [vegantherapistdirectory.weebly.com](https://vegantherapistdirectory.weebly.com)

## References:

Balfour, S. - *Vegan Mental Health: How to Survive and Thrive in a Non-Vegan World*

Freed, M. - *writings and workshops on compassion fatigue and sustainable compassion in activism*

Hanson, R. - *Hardwiring Happiness*

Joy, M. - *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows; Strategic Action for Animals*

Mann, C. - *Vystopia: The Anguish of Being Vegan in a Non-Vegan World*

Siegel, D. - *The Developing Mind*

**Wellbeing note:** This toolkit is intended as an educational resource to support wellbeing in advocacy. It is not a substitute for professional medical or mental health advice. If you are experiencing significant distress, please consider speaking with a qualified healthcare professional or counsellor.