

IF NOTHING YOU CAN DO IS EVER ENOUGH...

running time: 45 mins+

group format: Pairs, whole group debrief

materials/equipment needed: Bell, quiet/contemplative space

leading format: trainer-led

KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Deepen reflection on underlying views and attitudes that frame our work
- Open up space to attend to emotional challenges related to overwhelm, urgency, etc
- Create space for deep reframing of our experience in ways that support resilience and effectiveness
- Honour the depth of feeling we bring to our work and the depth of thought that shapes it
- Supports somatic and contemplative engagement with experience

FRAMING THE SESSION

For many people engaged in activist work there can be a real sense that we can never do enough. There is always more to do. What we achieve can seem insignificant alongside what is at stake and that there is just not enough time to do it.

- **Not enough time:** We can experience a strong sense of urgency. This is notably present for those working in the field of environmental activism. Concerns about tipping points, the non-reversible potential of anthropogenic climate change, diminishing resources, degradation of complex ecosystems (including loss of biodiversity and species extinction), can all lead to a sense that there is too much to do and so little time to do it in.
- **The demands are too great:** As we open up to the suffering, injustice and exploitation in the world we can feel that our efforts are tiny against the backdrop of the vast problems we are aware of. Our efforts are rarely felt to be adequate to deal with the power and momentum of the damaging tendencies we are opposing.

This kind of experience can leave us demotivated and despondent, or desperate. Inevitably this can leave us less able to engage effectively, cycling through periods of grasping at desperate hopes, and falling back into hopelessness and cynicism.

This exercise supports us to get a deeper sense of the views and attitudes that we hold and how they relate to these experiences. It helps us to explore the ways we think about the value and impact of our action, and the expectations we unconsciously bring into our work. It can help us to reframe these views and to place our action within wider perspectives and a deeper sense of meaning. Such perspectives can provide a framework for

Tips, tricks, coaching points, questions to ask...

As the exercise progresses we are aiming for the group to be 'dropping down' from their initial mental and discursive engagement to a more embodied and contemplative engagement. Some participants will remain fairly focused in their heads, but just gently continue to model the idea of this dropping down using gestures, images, and tone of voice. Staying with your own sense of connection with your body, heart and emotional experience will

more sustainable and consistent work, adding continuity to our efforts and creativity to our strategizing.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

It is best not to reveal the question until the first round of pairs work is actually beginning.

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

1 setting up the activity (5)

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Participants are asked to work in pairs. They each sit facing each other, in a posture that enables them to be fully seen and taken in by their partner (ideally in a meditation style posture if participants are familiar with this). They are told that during the exercise they will take it in turns to ask a question and respond. They decide who will be asking the question and who will be responding. They sit for a short while bringing awareness to their body and their breathing, noticing feelings and thoughts as they arise and pass.

2 facilitating the activity (35)

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Round one (10+):

The facilitator explains the 'asker' will pose the question, while the 'respondent' listens and responds to the question. After a while the 'asker' will repeat the question, the 'responder' again responds. This will be repeated for 5 minutes or so. The aim of this repetition of the same question is to encourage a deepening of reflection from the respondent. The gentle but persistent questioning encourages the person answering to explore the question from various angles and to venture into an increasingly deeper exploration, as though peeling back the layers of an onion. Layer after layer with each repetition of the question.

After the explanation of how the activity will work the facilitator states the question (repeating it a couple of times) and rings a bell to set off round one:

If nothing you can do is ever enough, what can you do?

It might be useful to mention that the form is derived from the Koan Practice of Rinzai Zen. Traditionally a question, often apparently paradoxical, is given to the practitioner who takes it as an object of meditation, exploring it and feeling into it, sometimes over a period of months of meditation. Consequently, in this exercise the role of the questioner is not to grill the other person inquisition style. Instead the question is offered as though dropping a pebble into a pool of water, watching the ripples that emerge in the form of the answers the other participant gives.

After sometime (5 minutes or so), a bell is sounded. The participants are

asked to remain silent during the swap over and the roles are reversed. The question is then asked for around 5 minutes in the same way to the other participant.

Round two (10+):

In all transitions the participants are asked to remain silent.

The facilitator explains that we will repeat the exercise. Same format and same question. But this time the person answering is encouraged to sit with eyes closed and to bring awareness more fully into their body and feelings. They try to allow the question to drop deeper into their experience and see if they can answer the question from deeper in the body and heart. An image we sometimes use is of the question being like a pebble dropped into a pool of water and the respondent watching the pebble as it drops down through the layers of water to the sediment at the bottom of the pool. This being like watching the question drop down through the throat, chest, abdomen, down to the base of the guts. Observing the resonance and response in the body, the respondent is asked to allow the answers to come from there, the heart and guts.

After around 5 minutes, the participants swap roles and repeat.

Round three (10+):

This can be a repeat of round two or a variant we like is that the respondent listens and observes their response to the question but does not answer verbally. They remain silent, simply noticing the response in their body. As the question is repeated by the various 'askers' in the different pairs, sometimes a beautiful soundscape of different voices, tone and deliveries can gently fill the space. Bear in mind that some participants can seem reluctant to ask the question into this 'silence' but you can help by occasionally asking the question gently yourself.

After around 5 minutes, the participants swap roles and repeat.

3 debriefing the activity (10-20)

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Once both participants in each pair have repeated the exercise in this way, some time is left for the participants to debrief the exercise in their pairs (10 minutes). Then, the debrief can be opened up for some whole group discussion.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

Rather than aiming to bring out any specific points, the aim of the debrief is to be as illicit as possible.

- How did the different rounds feel?
- What are the implications of the various different frames that diverse responses might have - and drawing out any shifts of perspective and their value.

Following the debrief it is usually possible to pick up on themes related to time and use this to link to a follow on and complimentary session exploring time and activism (see Time and Activism session plan)

CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY
FURTHER NOTES
USEFUL RESOURCES