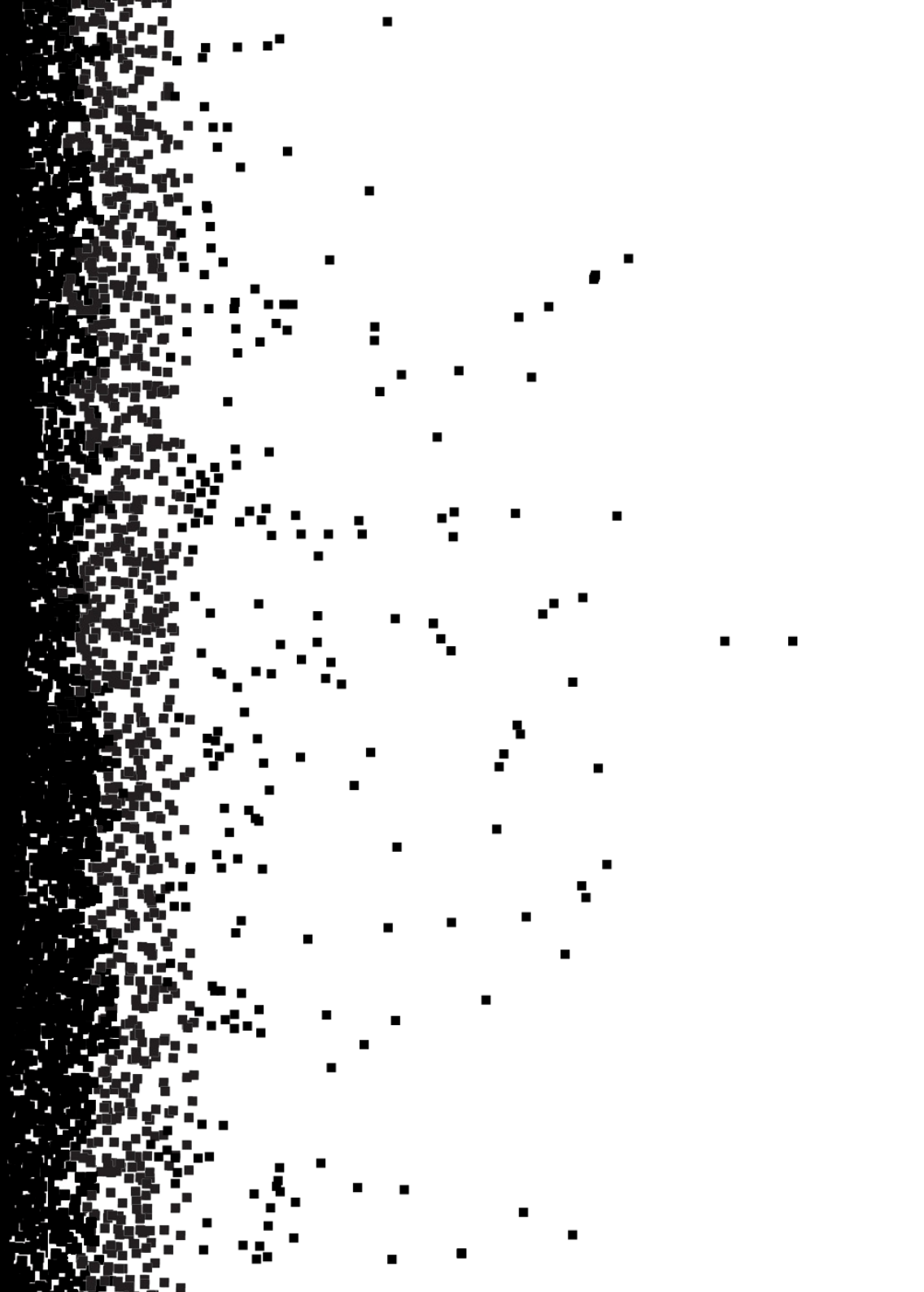


# **SUSTAINING THE CLIMATE JUSTICE MOVEMENT:**

A Psychosocial Resilience  
and Regenerative Activism  
Training Manual



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Somatics, LABO VWZ and of course a shout out to all you Freirean pedagogues all over the place.

The material has been improved over the years with feedback from numerous partners and participants, so massive thanks for supporting us with that - and needless to say we'll appreciate hearing how this can keep becoming more useful. It's always going to be work in progress.



# A LITTLE BACKGROUND

Some of you might remember: 2009 was the year of the COP15, the United Nations Conference on Climate Change in Copenhagen. Most of us writing this manual were there. Delegates arrived from across the world to explore global efforts to address the perils of human induced climate change – or the lack of them. COP15 was a magnet for campaign NGO's and grassroots activists. The scientific consensus had reiterated (again) that we were on a collision course towards devastation of the earth's biodiversity, and human suffering on a vast scale. In fact, we were already colliding. The rhetoric was that this was our last chance to catalyse decisive action.

Some long-time climate activists scoffed. For them the maths was clear. It was already too late. But for many others it was still worth a last-ditch effort to avert climate chaos. The conference became a focus for the passionate exertion of activists across the world.

Amidst the Scandinavian winter, delegates argued, and campaigners lobbied. Activists gathered and planned, generating a wealth of meetings, protests, and actions – aiming to pressure global leaders to do something worthwhile, or to inspire people to take matters into their own hands and sidestep the political circus in a popular struggle for climate justice.

The Danish police response was unapologetically, if predictably, harsh and repressive. The grassroots were battered. The outcome of the conference itself was the announcement, amidst self-congratulatory fanfares, that the representatives had agreed to talk more at some point...

Basically, no agreement of action whatsoever. That 'last chance' passed us by. No meaningful coordinated effort was agreed upon. Economic growth continued to trump ecological security. Amidst the sense that it was now or never for the planet, we missed the 'now', so presumably it was 'never'. The last ditch had been overrun.

As people dispersed, bruised and exhausted, there were tears, anger, and disillusionment. Soon enough the theme of climate chaos dropped out of mainstream attention. Presumably news editors struggle to get the news cycle quite right for the story of the end of the world and our reluctance to face it. And in the following months, the levels of burnout amongst environmental activists soared. The anecdotes tell of action groups falling apart, generalised dismay and deepening despondency. For many, the post-COP slump was deep and devastating. But in some senses, it was nothing new. We'd seen repression and the steep uphill struggle for radical change wear down innumerable talented activists and organisers throughout the previous decades. Post-traumatic stress, intransigent group conflicts, under-resourcing, and mounting cynicism had led to the haemorrhaging of talent from our movements for years.

The widespread disillusionment of 2009-10 prompted many activists to recognise that something in their approach had to change. Many of them saw that they couldn't go on like this – and that clearly this was going to be a long-term struggle.

This was the backdrop to the first training in what would become the Sustaining Resistance Programme, which the authors of this manual were all involved in developing. It aimed to bring about a shift in activist practice capable of sustaining our movements for the long-term struggles needed to achieve deep structural transformation. It has been the development of that work, driven by that moment of crisis within the climate movement, that informs this manual on psychosocial resilience and regenerative activism. And it is still as needed today as it was when we set out to develop this work over a decade ago.

As we publish this manual in 2022, we're on the verge of COP number 27. The struggle continues and we've been involved in many important developments. We've witnessed a series of massive mobilisations of many new actors into the movement, phenomena such as: Fridays for the Future; Extinction Rebellion; the development of Ende Gelände and numerous climate camps; growing connections being made across climate and racial justice organising; the development of platforms for just transitions and Green New Deals; fantastic alliances such as those surrounding the Keystone XL struggle or divestment campaigns; and many more. We've also seen a significant shift in mainstream public narratives and generalised concern about the issues – as well as many notable victories. Since 2009 there has been real progress.

Nevertheless, the movement waves rise and fall. The fossil fuel industry continues to pour vast resources into its lobby and repression machine. There is powerful pushback, of which the recent decision by the US supreme court that effectively hobbles US climate policy is a stark reminder. Similarly, we're seeing the far-right resurrecting climate denialist narratives that we thought were consigned to history or twisting climate fears to fuel xenophobic and racist calls for stronger borders and

the demonisation of migrants. In recent weeks, the energy pressures, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, are leading to a rolling back of commitment to phase out coal. Attention is easily drawn away from our planetary existential crisis.

There is still a very long way to go in this struggle. And the stakes keep getting higher. We need to keep going and we need to stay committed and creative if we want to achieve the impacts required.

Just as in 2009, it is still common for people working in frontline situations or tackling the immense forces involved in the climate justice struggle to fall into despair, cynicism and loss of a sense of the possibility of change. We can feel ineffective, overwhelmed, despondent and deeply disillusioned. We still lose people from the struggle, or we remain, but in such a worn-down state that we can actually have a detrimental effect. To build the power we need, a regenerative and resilient approach is crucial. And when we manage that, the creativity, commitment and dedication we achieve is deeply inspiring.

## Who is this for?

This material is aimed at activists in Europe. Like many others, we don't use the term 'activist' uncritically. We do use it as a very broad term, embracing a wide variety of socially transformative practices aimed at building collective power and agency. If the word activist doesn't fit you, just replace it with the terms that do. We say 'Europe' because this is the context we know best and where we've tested its relevance. People outside of Europe might find it useful, but we're conscious of the importance of adapting this kind of work to diverse settings, so we don't

want to assume its applicability.. Even within the narrow boundaries of Europe we've found the need to adapt it to the different socio-cultural settings of northern, southern, and central or eastern Europe. If you are based outside Europe, you'll need to do your own work to translate and adapt as you see fit.

Of course, it isn't only geography that makes a difference. We've applied it within many activist sub-cultures and adaptation is always needed. We've applied it within grassroots settings, NGOs, and community groups, with radical feminist organisations, LGBTQIA+ networks, with anarchists, trade unionists, and so many more. It has proven valuable in all these contexts - but it always needs tailoring to make it a good fit. No doubt you will find creative ways to do that for yourselves!

Perhaps the biggest limitation in this sense relates to racialisation. Although the core development team is relatively diverse in terms of gender, class, and cultural background, we are all racialised as white Europeans, as are the vast majority of the activists we've worked on this material with. We're aware that our own socialisation and the demographics of the networks we've been part of have shaped, and do limit this material in some significant ways. We've already taken steps to push past some of these limitations - developing funding streams and support for BIPOC-led work exploring regenerative and sustainable activism for BIPOC activists and working to diversify our PSR training teams. We hope that the learning from those projects and efforts will bear fruit and enable us to augment, improve and broaden the material we explore here, very soon.

In keeping with this, we offer this manual as work in progress and we look forward to seeing its many evolutions, as diverse groups pick it up, use it, and make it their own.

Spring 2022

# REGENERATIVE ACTIVISM AND PSYCHOSOCIAL RESILIENCE

In this manual you'll find a range of ideas and practices all aimed at supporting activists and organisers to develop skills and understanding to sustain their work, strengthen their organisations, and take meaningful action to bring about a more just world. It covers a wide range of interlinked themes from deeper work with emotions to the development of security protocols, from addressing burnout to exploring helpful and unhelpful power dynamics in our groups. But what holds them all together? This chapter offers some background that might shed light on the underlying approach and methodologies involved.

## Regenerative Activism

In 2010, amidst a surge in the rates of activist burnout following a moment of failure and crisis in the environmental movement, as well as of high levels of repression surrounding the COP15 in Copenhagen, some of us now writing this manual launched a series of workshops on sustainable activism. Known as *Sustaining Resistance*, the training evolved over several years as our understanding deepened and as it was adapted to different groups and cultures. That exploration led us to realise that merely sustaining activism isn't enough. Instead, what is needed is a regenerative approach.

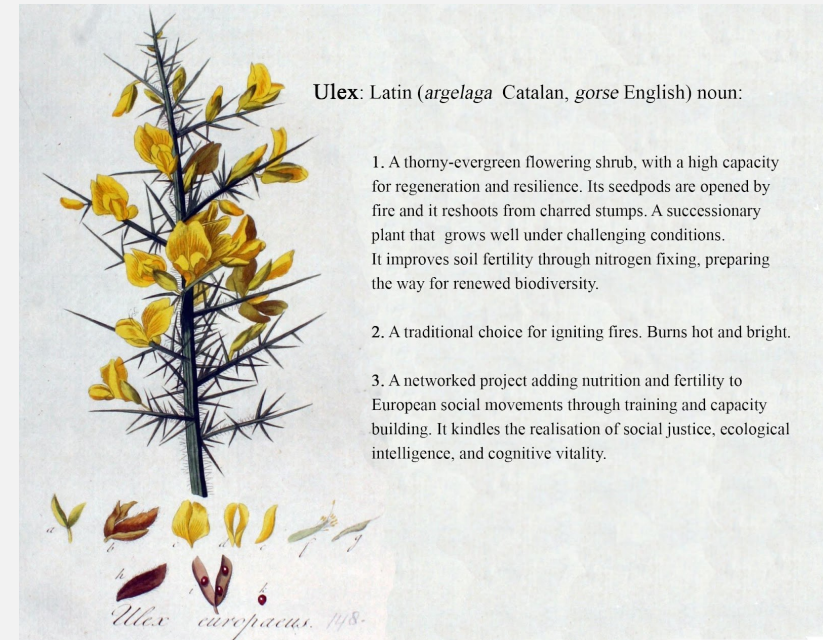
The idea of *regenerative activism* is borrowed from the field of regenerative agriculture, which is counterposed to the damaging practices of extractive agriculture. Although sustainable agriculture aims to put an end to patterns of depletion and to create a stable relation between the inputs and outputs, when we consider the level of damage already done through centuries of extractive practice (deforestation, soil erosion, species extinction), it becomes clear that a sustainable approach just isn't enough. What is needed is a regenerative approach that "goes beyond sustainability, to enable regeneration through processes that restore, renew or revitalise their own sources of energy and materials" (Vosper, 2016).

This is how we think of regenerative activism. If the social and cultural matrix is the soil our activism grows out of, today it has been severely depleted and damaged by several decades of neoliberal hegemony, underscored by the long history of oppressions including racism, colonialism, and patriarchy. Under these conditions, a merely sustainable activism isn't enough. Instead, we need to develop a *regenerative activism*, that, like its agricultural namesake, integrates practices that 'restore, renew or revitalize' our movements. This involves replacing behaviours and mindsets that reproduce extractive approaches with practices that deepen relationships in which we honour and support each other's potential and learn together how to foster cultures of care and solidarity.

Activism is always shaped by specific social and historical conditions. Today we can struggle to gain traction amidst eroded communities, wounded psyches, the haunting failures of historic movements, an inability to reimagine a future in which we can truly flourish, and a sense

that even time and opportunity for real change is draining away. The soil our activism grows out of is seriously depleted. In recent decades, as activists, we've been failing too much. Despite some wonderful recent achievements deserving celebration, our movements can feel marginal, fragmented, and self-preoccupied. No wonder that so many of our ambitions for radical transformation have diminished, or that our organising and mobilising seems to rise and fall in wave after wave that dissolve away leaving only minimal traces in the form of minor reforms, victories that feel all too incomplete, or simply fail. Given everything we are up against at this time, there is a profound need to rethink, reimagine, and rebuild activist practice and culture so that it can become the creative, powerful, and caring force called for today. This is the function and vision of *regenerative activism*.

Of course, we are not alone in this. We feel part of a networked shift in practice that can be seen in the many ways people across our movements are experimenting with and breathing life into regenerative activist cultures. We can see it in new conceptions of leaderful organising, in the bridges built between the worlds of political activism and community organising, in projects of the feminisation of politics (both in new political parties and radical feminist collectives), in the growing attention being given to the inseparability of inner and outer transformation, in the integration of spiritual insights with hardened materialist analysis of power, in the growing influence of ways of organising led by indigenous people and people in the global south, and in the increasing recognition of the importance of intersectionality and transversal forms of organising for the health of our movement ecology. These emerging practices, amongst others, are the mycelium networks and microbial forms breathing and metabolising life into the earth in which our movements are rooting.



This manual has been put together in collaboration with the Ulex Project training collective. Ulex is the Latin name for a plant known in English as gorse. As a leguminous plant it has the capacity to draw atmospheric nitrogen down into its roots where it can be fixed in the soil, adding a key nutrient. It is a plant that is a successional species that pioneers regrowth on deforested, depleted, and damaged land. As it goes it enriches the soil and creates an ecological niche to enable the regrowth of other shrubs and trees, as well as providing important shelter for a gradually increasing biodiversity. We see many of the practices and approaches we share here as working on the depleted soil and ground of our movements in a similar way, adding nourishment and creating spaces for their growth and renewal.



Regenerative activism is a dynamic and evolving cluster of practices and emergent culture. Just as healthy ecosystems aren't static (they grow, adapt, and respond), regenerative activism similarly implies developing the capacity of our movements to renew, evolve, adapt and keep learning. This involves transforming the dominant modern extractive systems that have been underpinned by a reductionist and mechanistic paradigm that breaks the world up into separate parts - dividing human from nature, labour from its fruits, head from heart, mind from matter, and people from each other. Regenerative activism, in contrast, is informed by the insights of interconnection, interplay, and mutual dependence. It incorporates an ecological way of seeing in which we recognise everything as woven into networks of reciprocity, each thing as embedded in context, and which understands phenomena in terms of relationships. This interconnected worldview is inherent to regenerative activism as an expression of our solidarity with life.

This holistic framing also requires us to understand regenerative activism as a constellation of practices that intersect and inform each other. Some focusing on our inner lives, some our collective work, some the culture we create and the ways we relate, some attending to emotion, and others to analysis of power and empowerment. The value and relevance of all of these practices depend on context - sometimes one needs to be emphasised, sometimes another. In this sense regenerative activism can be seen as an art, a skill, where we develop the ability to balance these multiple dimensions of our practice in an ever changing and fugitive equilibrium.

A lot of our thinking and practice around this grew out of our initial work on activist burnout and the following chapter on that issue will help to unpack what we're getting at here. But before we move on to that, it might be useful to look at this through the lens of resilience.

## Activist resilience

We consider resilience a core social movement capability<sup>1</sup>. Social change is complex and usually requires long periods of education, organising, and the building of community and culture (even if sometimes it appears to happen all of a sudden). Developing collective power to achieve deep transformation is often an intergenerational project, involving the gradual accumulation of knowledge, skills, and resources. This requires individuals, organisations, and movements that last. Given all of the obstacles and the challenges we face, resilience is an indispensable quality.

At its most basic, resilience is the capacity of a system to bounce back from shock or to recover after difficulties or damage. It is a quality that encompasses robustness without rigidity, and in some cases the ability to adapt and learn. We can understand resilience as the capacity to absorb the stresses and pressures of a situation, enabling people to endure and survive under duress. But there are valuable critiques of conceptions of resilience that stop here. Focusing on the ability to endure in the face of marginalisation and oppression can deflect our attention from the underlying injustices that create the difficulties in the first place, that require us to survive rather than flourish. 'Activist resilience' is about more than this.

Activist resilience is specifically about our capacity to build and sustain *transformative power*. In this sense, it does include our ability to weather the stresses involved in our activism, but we do so in ways that strengthen our collective efforts towards social transformation and the creation of worlds in which we can thrive, rather than merely endure.

In their *Resilience Handbook: A Guide to Integrated Resilience Programming*, Action Aid presents a resilience framework incorporating the principle of transforming unequal power structures that keep people vulnerable to shocks and stresses. They name three capacities integral to their conception of resilience:

**Absorptive capacity:** the ability to prevent, prepare for, or mitigate the effects of negative events, through coping mechanisms that focus on essential structures and functions

**Adaptive capacity:** the ability to engage in longer term change - rather than simply responding to the immediate threats, this is the capacity to find longer term flexible responses

**Transformative capacity:** the ability to push for institutional reforms, cultural changes and behavioural shifts, questioning values and assumptions.

Although the framework has been developed in a different field, it can be usefully integrated into a framework for activist resilience to emphasise the interplay of skills and conditions that can enable us to: 1. Endure and maintain stability under duress; 2. Build flexibility, learning and adaptation into our approaches; and 3. Build the power and collective agency to achieve structural changes in society.

#### **ACTIVIST PSYCHOSOCIAL RESILIENCE: A WORKING DEFINITION**

An ability of activists, organisations, and movements, to endure and maintain stability under duress, build flexibility, learning and adaptation into their approach, and to build the power and collective agency to achieve structural changes in society, that derives from a diverse range of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and political practices.

It emerges from the quality of connections in and between the intrapersonal and interpersonal fields in the lives of activists, their groups or organisations, and the networks they operate within.

## Why Psychosocial?

Activist resilience depends on a complex of conditions that are both intrapersonal and interpersonal. The intra-personal includes the dimensions of our inner life, our psychology, our ways of cognising, our emotional experience, and so on. The inter-personal includes the wide range of relationships from friendships and family, through our colleagues and the cultures we work in, to the wider socio-economic factors that bear upon us. We don't think of resilience as a personal quality so much as something that arises in the interplay between people and their relationships, the inner and outer, or the individual and the collective. This is what we aim to point to with the term 'psychosocial resilience'.

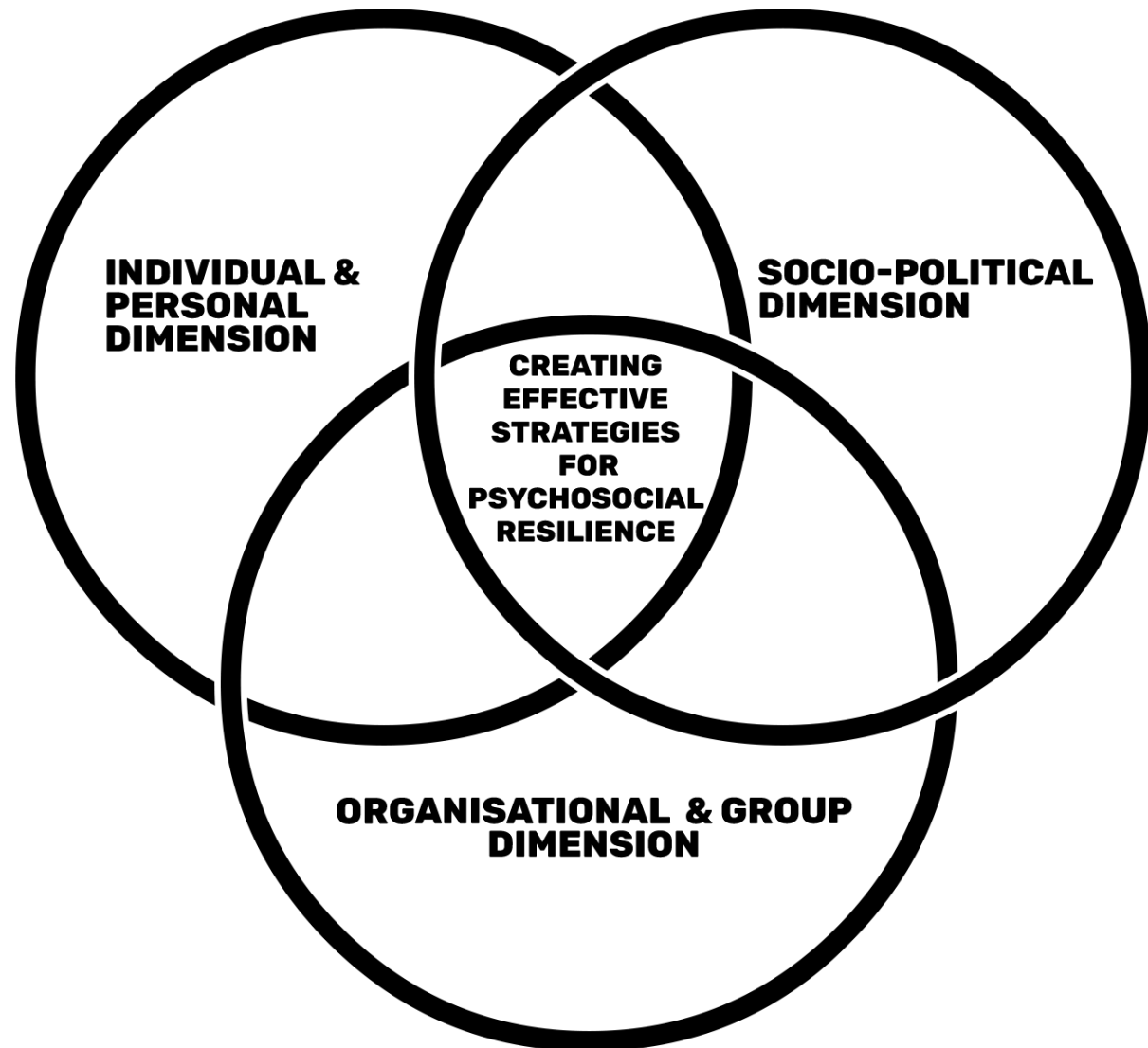
Based on many years of research into the impacts of stresses on activists, such as repression, overload, or socio-political conflict, we have come to see how the symptoms of these stresses show up in three overlapping fields: 1. The individual (where they can show up as burnout, despondency, inflexibility, etc); 2. The group or organisational (manifesting in the breakdown of trust, increased internal conflict, loss of people, etc); and 3. The movement or network (witnessed in increased fragmentation, distrust, lack of coordination or cooperation, etc).

The impacts of stressors are felt from the contracting of the heart, through the strains on our groups, and out into the wider field of the movements (or lack of them) that we work within. Developing the resilience to meet these challenges involves interlinking strategies addressing all three fields.

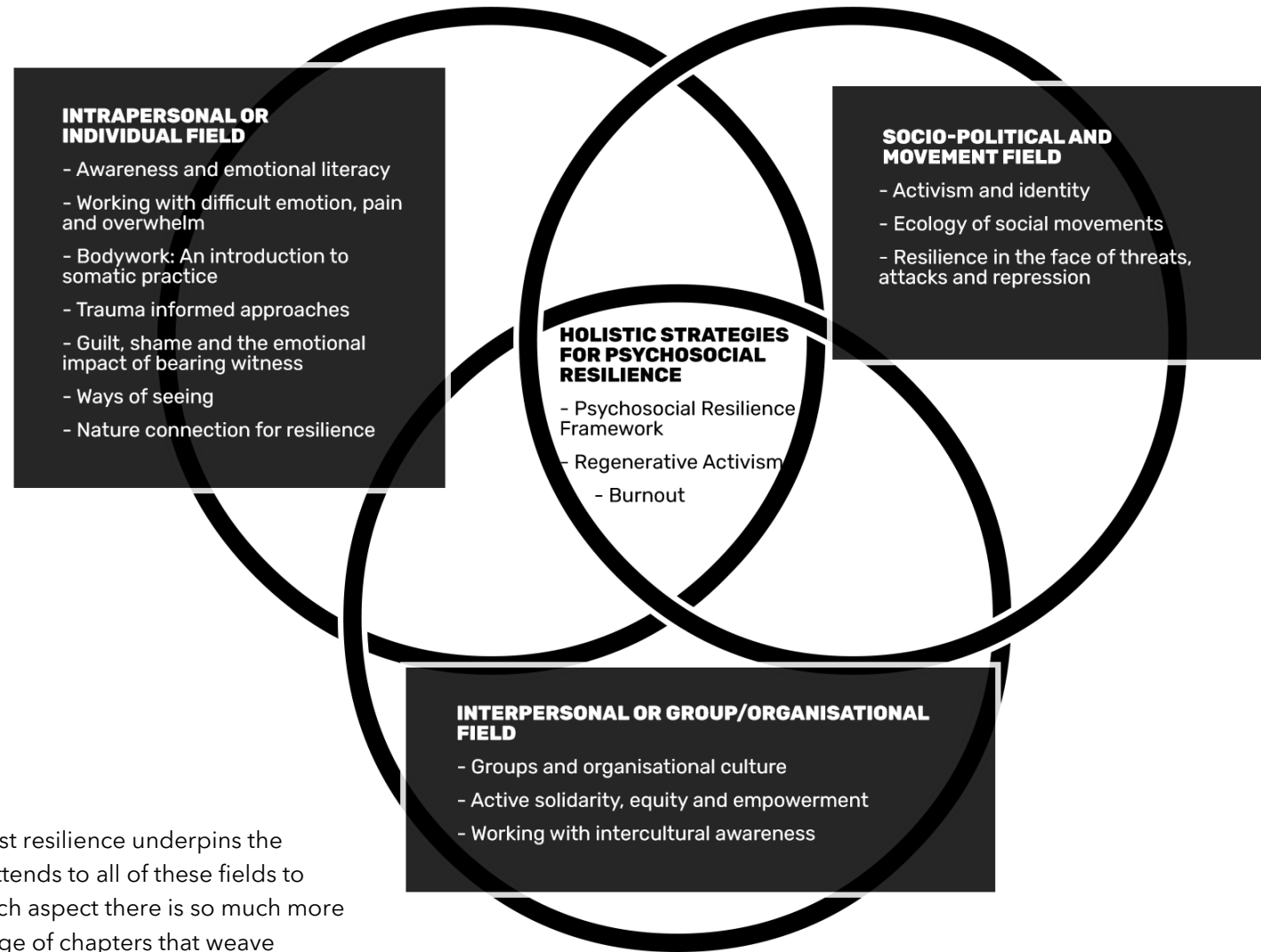


## A holistic approach to

We need to take a holistic and multi-dimensional approach to build resilience, because the health and vitality of individual activists, our groups and organisations, and our movements or networks are deeply interdependent and connected. Individuals are affected by group culture and group culture shapes individuals, likewise in the reciprocal relationship between groups and movements or networks. Effective strategies for activist psychosocial resilience need to acknowledge the inseparability of inner and outer transformation. They need to attend to the quality of relationship and connection between and within these fields: the connections of people to themselves, of people to people in our groups and organisations, and the connections across our networks within the *ecology of social movements*.



**THE OVERALL  
MODULAR  
STRUCTURE**



This holistic understanding of activist resilience underpins the structure of this manual, so that it attends to all of these fields to some extent (although clearly in each aspect there is so much more to learn and explore) through a range of chapters that weave together intra- and inter- personal elements with political and cultural practices.

# APPROACHES TO LEARNING AND USING THIS MANUAL

## How to use this resource

The resources collected here are designed to support activists and organisers to develop skills and acquire learning that can help them to build personal, organisational, and movement level resilience - and to bring forth a culture of regenerative activism.

As we described in the introductory chapter, we take a holistic approach and recognise the importance of developing strategies for resilience and regeneration at the personal, interpersonal, and movement levels. Each chapter tries to integrate both individual and collective aspects of the topics they address, but some chapters focus more fully on personal, 'inner', or psycho-emotional themes and skills, while others give greater attention to group, collective or wider socio-political dimensions. Nevertheless, we have compiled the resource thinking of it as a whole, with each part informing the other. The parts are mutually reinforcing and ultimately, attention needs to be given to each of these areas for a fully integrated and holistic practice to emerge.

Consequently, it is possible to explore the material in a linear way, but equally ok to take a non-linear and meandering approach. Do follow your interest and be drawn by what most intrigues you - but be wary of side-stepping and ignoring the areas that might feel less 'your kind of thing' or potentially uncomfortable. Sometimes that's where the learning really is!

You will find that there is lots of cross referencing between chapters and often activity plans are listed as relevant to various chapters. So, even when you do take a more linear approach, you'll find yourself weaving through the material to some extent anyway. Whatever way you decide to engage with the material, we do recommend that you look at the chapters on Regenerative Activism & Psychosocial Resilience and Burnout, in order to get an overview of our approach.

In most of the chapters you will find a framing article that gives the background and key concepts related to the section. These are followed by a set of selected activity plans for each key topic. The chapters are (to our hearts) painfully short. In many cases the topics warrant whole books in themselves. So, they are intended to be read along with exploring the topics through the activity plans connected with them. In some cases key ideas are unpacked more fully in theory and practices within the activity plans. In all cases, deeper learning is intended to really happen through the reflection and experience generated by the learning activities - the framing chapters are certainly not intended to stand alone!

The activity plans are designed to support both **peer-to-peer learning** and experienced **trainer-led workshops**. You will find numerous activity plans and resources that are designed for people with little training experience to use the resources in their groups, without the need to rely on specialist trainers. There are also sessions that will benefit from being carried out by people with long standing experience. They might involve emotionally charged work, involve deep reflection, or give rise to significant challenges, where experienced trainers will be more comfortable and able to support safety for participants.

We've used a simple method to indicate the level of experience we think is needed to responsibly facilitate the learning activities. Each activity is marked as Level One, Two, or Three. We describe these levels as:

**Level One:** Suitable for use in peer led sessions, with minimal facilitation experience required.

**Level Two:** Facilitator will need competence to support more complex group processes. Personal experience of the content to guide the learning journey will be valuable.

**Level Three:** These sessions are likely to require one or more of: confidence to hold emotional processing; ability to bring a trauma informed approach; skills to support contemplative/somatic exercises; capacity to articulate more complex theoretical material.

### Using the activity plans

The activity plans follow a general structure which offers an initial, brief overview of the running time of the activity, the group format, and what kind of materials you will need. They go on to unpack some of the key framing concepts or background theory, to support the facilitator to understand and contextualise the session. There are also links to chapters and other activities, offering further theoretical framing. The activities are subsequently broken down into step-by-step guidelines and timings, with hints and tips for facilitators throughout. The specifics of timing, group sizes, and appropriate approaches to framing and use of activities will need to be adapted according to the kind of group and context in which they are being used. We have written most of these plans with a group of up to 20 participants in mind - some of the activities will adapt to smaller or larger groups more easily than others. Many of the activity plans are applicable across various themes or chapter topics.

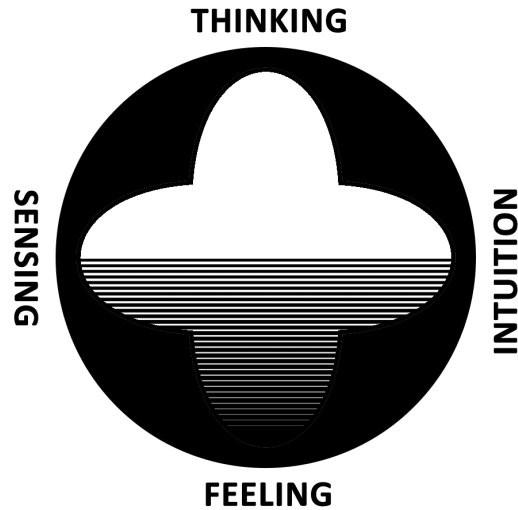
## A bit about learning

This is not a handbook about training and facilitating. We assume that anyone taking up the activities will either have basic training/facilitation skills, have enough competence to use these resources with peers, or seek out opportunities to develop basic trainer competences. We've linked to some of the resources we have found useful in developing our own skills and practice as trainers for anyone who needs or wants to dive into that more fully.

Nevertheless, we do want to give a flavour of the approach to learning and training that informs the design of the activity plans and the way we have put this handbook together. So, here we share a few short reflections about the way we approach design and deliver training ourselves. We hope this will help anyone using the material to get a better feel for the ways we intend it to be used.

### Holistic Education

The learning explored here happens at various levels. It engages the head, the heart, the body, and even our intuition. This requires a holistic approach to education that addresses the whole person - the rational, the feeling, the sensing, and the relational dimensions of who we are (see diagram on following page). A holistic approach also recognises that the personal is nested within the inter-personal, that the inter-personal is nested within the socio-political, and that the socio-political is nested within the ecological. Each of these dimensions has its own systemic structure and yet also needs to be understood as part of larger systemic wholes. Learning and effective practices for transformation need to attend to each of these layers and to the connections between them.



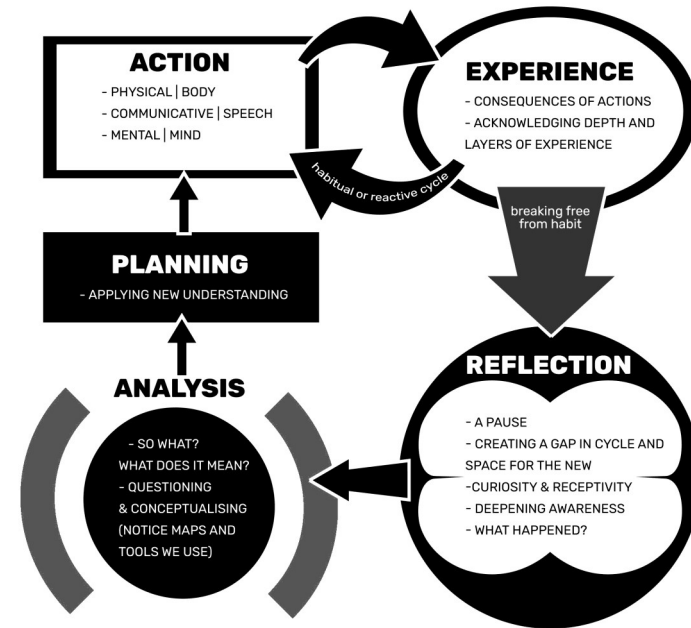
### Transformative Education

The approach draws on the practices of participatory and popular education, to which we add the latest methods of experiential and immersive learning. To paraphrase Paolo Freire: Education is a practice of freedom. It is a means by which we deal critically and creatively with reality. It is a way of discovering how to participate in the transformation of our world. It should lead to action, especially collective action. Learning of this kind helps us to change our lives according to our own ideas.

### Critical Solidarity

Training should enhance the capacity for self-critical reflection and help us to stay alive to on-going learning through balancing action and reflection. This is most effective when it is pursued in solidarity with others, when we recognise the struggles we share, and gain empowerment through our collective activities. We can discover the transformative power of working with others and recognise the mutually

reinforcing relationship between building collective agency and personal empowerment – learning to keep these complementary through the balance of autonomy and cooperation.



### Action-Reflection Learning

Telling, showing and doing are all ways of learning. Each has their place. Using an Action Learning Methodology incorporates them all, but places emphasis on learning from experience by supporting deep reflection, analysis, and testing. In an activist education context we have found that additional emphasis needs to be put on reflection, in part to antidote the activist propensity towards action. It can be useful to think about how sessions and workshops can help people to move through the phases of the action learning cycle. We often start with reflection, taking experience

to mean what people already bring with them. But when designing experiential learning exercises we'll set up an activity to generate an experience to serve as the basis for reflection and then analysis.

### Learning Styles

The session plans are designed to meet a wide range of diverse learning styles. While we can all learn something from almost any type of workshop activity, each of us usually has one predominating or preferred style which will support our learning more effectively. Some people approach tasks or experiences either by watching others involved in the experience and reflecting on what happens (reflection/watching) or through 'jumping straight in' and doing it (active experimentation/doing). Others learn best through transforming experience into something meaningful, gaining new information by thinking, analysing, or planning (analysing/thinking) or through experiencing the 'concrete, tangible, felt qualities of the world' (experience/feeling). It is useful to design sessions and combinations of activities to provide variety that can meet different peoples preferred ways of learning. For more on this look at [David Kolb Learning Styles](#).

## Additional considerations for trainers doing this work

### Duty of Care

A lot of the topics explored in this manual have the potential to elicit strong emotional responses and to involve participants facing challenging experiences related to self and collective discovery. It is essential that anyone facilitating this work reflects on how well they or those around them will be able to hold and support other learners through such processes.

### Emotional Work - when stuff comes up

Considering our capacity and the capacity of the group to hold challenging or strong emotions is important. The chapter on [emotional literacy](#) and on [working with difficult emotions](#) can provide useful ways of resourcing ourselves and supporting each other. It is important that facilitators consider their own capacity to hold the emotional response of others and to bear in mind the potential to be triggered and affected by the work themselves.

### Work in Teams

The challenging nature of this kind of learning needs us to think carefully about the different elements that will generate a supportive learning environment. If we as facilitators are overstretched we will not be able to provide this. Consider the different qualities, complementary styles and competences a diverse team can bring, how you will attend to someone leaving the workshop space mid-session having been triggered by something, or the importance of debriefing some of this work yourself. All of these considerations lead to the very strong preference we have of always facilitating this kind of work in teams.

### Creating the Container & The Learning Zone

Creating a space for people where they feel safe enough to take risks and step out of their comfort zone is essential for some of the learning this manual seeks to support. See the sessions on [The Learning Zone and Creating the Container](#) for suggestions on doing this. Important considerations here relate to the length of workshop, the wider context it is taking place in, and the number of participants. Smaller groups tend to enable more trust and intimacy.

### Anti-Oppression Practices

An important aspect of creating 'brave spaces' (a way of talking about 'safe spaces' that acknowledges some of the limitations of the 'safe space' concept) is paying attention to the ways oppressive behaviour and attitudes can show up in the training space. This material on Active Solidarity and the Facilitators Anti-Oppression Toolkit are important references that can help us to attend to this.

### Cultural Appropriation

A number of the activities and practices in this manual in chapters such as Awareness and Emotional Literacy or Bodywork build on practices developed in global south or non-western contexts. Without care, the use of such practices can reproduce post/neo-colonial dynamics. Care should be taken to avoid falling into the trap of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation can be defined as a "misuse of a group's art and culture by someone with the power to redefine that art and, in the process, divorce it from the people who originally created it"). As facilitators, whenever we are proposing an activity, a tool or a method, we need to check if we know where it comes from and give credit to those who created it, especially if it was not created in the global north

by white people. It is important to make marginalised group labour visible and dismantle deeply embedded assumptions of white/western superiority.

### Bodywork, Consent and Touch

There are numerous sessions that involve 'embodied learning' and somatic activities. The chapter on somatic practices offers useful guidelines for facilitating these kinds of activities. Special consideration needs to be given to various aspects of inclusion as well as approaching questions around consent, personal boundaries and touch.

### Adapting to Needs and Emergent Design

All of the session plans have taken form through experimentation and adaptation. We assume that this process will continue and that facilitators using these resources will continue to try things out, adapt them to the needs and specific experience of learners, and adjust them according to what arises within workshops. The forms, timing and structures we suggest are all tried and tested, but there is no doubt room for improvement and redesign. So we encourage you to use the plans as they are useful to you, but to make them your own and bring your own creativity to improving and diversifying the material.

### Additional Resources

- [Approaches to Integral Activist Training](#)
- [Ulex Anti-Oppression Toolkit](#)
- [Introducing the Learning Zone model](#)
- [Exploring Group Agreements and Group Culture](#)
- [Hearing the Needs of the Group](#)



# 01 BURNOUT

## Why?

Anyone giving time and energy to tackling injustice, oppression, and exploitation in the world around us, will be familiar with burnout. The scale of the challenges we face, the way this work brings us up against suffering, and the seemingly incomplete nature of our victories, can all take their toll. As activists, all of us will either have our own personal experience of burnout or we'll be close to the experience of burnout in others.

Burnout damages people. It can have a significant, long-term impact on individual health and wellbeing. It causes pain, despair, and disillusionment. It also damages our collective efforts, reducing the capacity and strength of our organisations. The associated cynicism and internal conflicts drain energy from our groups. The strains can lead to a loss of responsiveness and creativity. People drop out, groups collapse and movements lose momentum and haemorrhage talent. Inter-generational wisdom is lost. These impacts are a cause of personal and collective disempowerment. Clearly then, whilst deeply personal, burnout is not only a personal matter. Burnout is also a political issue.

Burnout presents activist and human rights defenders with significant ethical, strategic, and political challenges. These challenges lie at the heart of our work to build the personal and collective capacity to change the world for the better. Dealing with the causes and conditions that lead to burnout is not an add-on to our activist work. It's integral to it. It sits right at the heart of our ability to develop effective organisations, resource transformative work, and build collective power.

## The Transformative Possibilities of Burnout

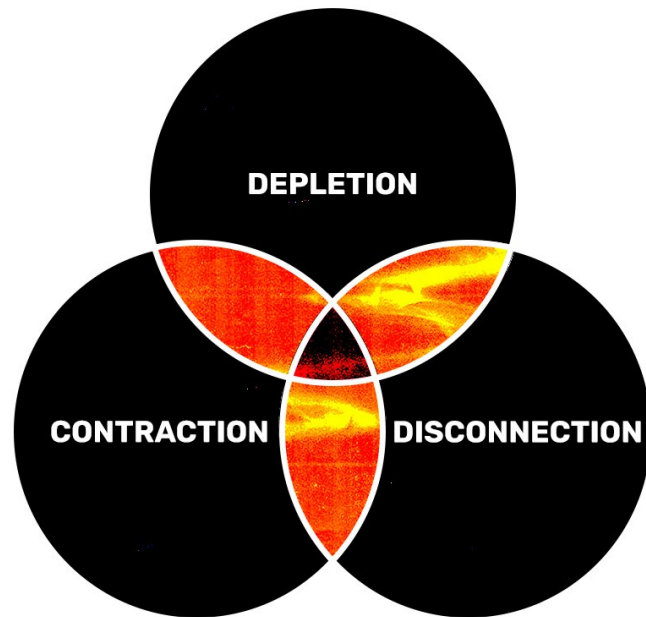
As difficult and painful as the effects of burnout are, it can be the starting point of a valuable transformative journey. When confronted with the challenges related to burnout, we can find ourselves prompted to stop and to reflect more deeply on our practices, and to discover approaches to social change that are truly regenerative and more fully aligned with the kind of world we want to construct. Addressing burnout requires deepening **self-awareness** and reflection on our **group and organisational cultures**, honestly evaluating some of our activist practices, being prepared to acknowledge some of their limitations, and letting go of unhelpful approaches.

Healing and preventing burnout leads us to develop regenerative and resilience practices that are themselves a refusal of the extractivist, exploitative, profit driven system we work to transform. They contribute to a greater sense of coherence and authenticity within our activism, enabling us to more fully embody our values, restoring a sense of joy and meaning to our actions, and establishing new cultures of care and integrity. Our work towards greater resilience, for ourselves, our organisations, and our movements, are a necessary element in long term strategies for social transformation. In this way, the journey through burnout can be one that leads to greater empowerment.



## What is burnout?

It is important to acknowledge that there is a very wide range of burnout experience. It is important to validate the full spectrum of experience people have and support them to learn from it. We've found it useful to think in terms of a constellation of experiences related to **Depletion**, **Contraction**, and **Disconnection**.



**Depletion** is commonly the way that burnout is recognised. It represents a draining away of energy and vitality. Our inner being can feel empty, and spent. We rarely feel fully nourished or properly recharged. Motivation and inspiration dry up. Everything we do can feel like it requires more and more effort from us. We may feel that our will to keep trying has gone, at least temporarily. There is less and less we have to give.

**Contraction** is a protective response to the loss of energy and capacity - imagine a body shape that tightens up into a ball. One way people feel it is as a denseness and blockage in their body. We contract emotionally, pulling away from others and losing our capacity for empathy. We can also contract mentally, becoming more narrow minded, cynical, and rigid in our thinking. All this produces suffering.

**Disconnection** is disengagement from life and relationships.

Disconnection can also be felt as confusion, numbness, or emotional detachment. We become disconnected from ourselves, our feelings, our bodies, and cut off from sources of nourishment and support. We can find ourselves disconnecting from relationships, feeling less willing to be seen. It relates to despondency and hopelessness, and the loss of a felt sense of agency is common.

Thinking in these terms allows us to explore burnout in ways that can validate a wide range of symptoms and experiences. Some people find it hard to describe verbally what burnout actually feels like. They might question the validity of their experiences and see other more extreme experiences of burnout as more 'real'. Some people experience burnout as total numbness and disassociation, so they might feel foggy and unclear about what their experience has been. It can be useful to have a sense of the variety of indicators and symptoms that are related to burnout experiences. We'll explore these before going on to look at the causes and ways of responding.

## COMMON SIGNS OF ACCUMULATING STRESSES ASSOCIATED WITH BURNOUT

### FEELINGS

- Heavy sense of burden and low energy
- Lack of joy and anticipation
- Entrapment
- Loss of control
- Anger and resentment
- Lack of support
- Low in confidence, feeling hopeless, useless
- Undervalued
- Disempowered
- Lost or confused
- Fearful or over anxious
- Shame and inadequacy
- Numb and unable to feel anything

### BEHAVIOURS

- Lack of flexibility, creativity and responsiveness, rigid and stubborn
- Chaotic and unpredictable
- Blaming others for what is happening
- Passivity and helpless behaviours
- Resistance to further responsibility
- Refusal to rest, even when work patterns are unproductive
- Withdrawal, avoidance, self isolation
- Seeming absent or dazed
- Expressions of cynicism and pointlessness
- Flight/escape/avoidance behaviours (not showing up, staying in bed)
- Increased use of intoxicants
- Crying
- Anger and aggression
- Constant procrastination
- Small stressors create disproportionate responses

### BODY

- Rigidity/tightness/tension/cramps
- Shutdown/blank affect/numbness
- Dissociative moments/episodes
- Hypersensitivity
- Sleep problems (over or under sleeping)
- Sexual problems
- Eating problems
- Contracted body shapes
- Collapsed body shapes
- Headaches
- Stomach pain
- Lower back pain
- Digestive problems
- Breathing problems
- Dental problems- due to jaw clenching and teeth grinding

### Signs of burnout

It isn't always easy to recognise or to acknowledge that we are burnt out. There can be stigma attached to it and we might think it indicates weakness of failure on our part, or that we're letting people down. But failing to recognise what is going on and to take steps to prevent further deterioration cannot be good for ourselves or our groups. The sooner we can acknowledge that changes are needed the less energy we'll waste and the less pain we'll cause. So, how can we identify that something needs to be addressed?

Sometimes there's just no denying it. People collapse, they simply can't go on, or things fall apart. But often the symptoms of burnout are more subtle and pervasive. Combined with the *depletion, contraction, disconnection framework* the table below can help us to identify common signs that a person is no longer coping and that their system is becoming overwhelmed. If their imbalanced state continues too long, it's possible that this will lead to a deeper experience of burnout, which can be viewed as an extended state of collapse.

None of these signs alone are clear indicators of burnout. They might arise from conditions that are unrelated directly to burnout. But when we begin to notice clear changes in these directions, especially where a combination of these signs are showing up, this can offer us useful feedback about the need to make changes or seek support.

Many of the signs listed are connected to physiological responses to stress. Not everyone needs to know the scientific details, but understanding something about the related physiological processes can help trainers think about session design, group dynamics, and appropriate responses to participants. More on this [here](#).

## Exploring the causes and conditions that lead to burnout

In addition to the range of indicators that show up in the experience of individuals, it is also useful to notice other signs that become visible at the interpersonal and group level, such as increased levels of conflict, inter-relational tensions, quick turnover of staff or team members, and so on. These can help us identify the need for changes in our working culture or group dynamics.

The most important step in tackling burnout is to form an understanding of the complex of factors that contribute to it. Once we can identify the key contributing factors then we can develop appropriate strategies and practices to transform them.

### Diverse contexts

These factors will manifest in different ways relative to the broader context and forms our activism takes. As our colleague Laurence Cox, in a paper on Sustainable Activism, points out, 'different movements interface with everyday life and social routines in different ways. Put another way, someone's movement participation can be primarily a job, an identity, a part of their everyday culture or a dimension of their working life; and these different situations affect individual activists but also shape movements...' He goes on to list different activist contexts in terms of:

**Workplace-based movements:** Peasant and labour struggles are naturally workplace-based

**Community-based movements:** Some movements naturally tend to organise within people's residential or social communities – working-class community organising, LGBTQ+ activism and many ethnic or religious movements, for example

**Professional or full-time activism:** In some kinds of movement situations (parties, unions, media, NGOs and so on) many or most activists are employed *by movement organisations*

**"Leisure" activism:** Some kinds of movements take place outside where most of their participants work and live, in the social space otherwise occupied by leisure activities.

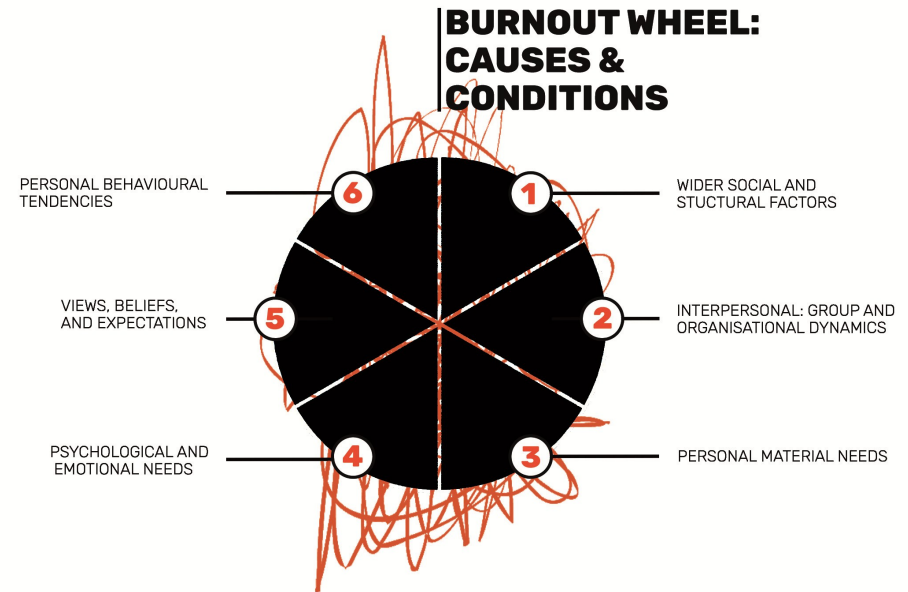
To this we can add voluntary full-time activism, such as is often seen in migrant solidarity work for example, where people engage in unpaid and often under-resourced activity for sustained (if temporary) periods.

The list isn't definitive, but can help us to recognise how different contexts involve different forms of institutionalisation (or lack of it), diverse economic situations, distinct organisational cultures, and can be more or less subject to attack and repression. Activists from marginalised and discriminated communities will suffer stresses that privileged NGO professionals might not. And yet these professionals will themselves be subjected to other diverse pressures related to their own organisational structures.

Consequently, a wide range of factors across different settings can be more or less relevant. For this reason it is more useful to support deep reflection on the specific personal situation, the actual organisational context, and the concrete socio-political setting that people are working within, than to offer a generic list of causes and conditions.

### The Burnout Wheel

Roughly speaking, burnout arises from the interplay of conditions that exist across three fields: *Personal, interpersonal or group, and wider socio-political factors*. We use a framework called the Burnout Wheel to support reflection and analysis on these causes and conditions. The six categories that make up the sections of the wheel support reflection on the wide range of contributing factors both inner and outer, individual and collective, that can have an important bearing on our experience.



**Wider social and structural factors:** To avoid and heal burnout it is vital to focus on the factors most immediately within our power to change. But this can lead to a sense that burnout is fundamentally caused by our own poor choices or bad habits. The primary strains and stresses that cause burnout are often deeper structural factors such as social exclusion, economic precarity, racism, and innumerable other forms of injustice and oppression. Some of these factors are things that will only be changed through long term social struggle. Nevertheless, by paying attention to which factors are most relevant to us we can develop strategies that can mitigate their impact. We can also, importantly, take account of the different ways these conditions impact us relative to our levels of privilege and take account of these differences in the ways we support each other in our movements.

**Interpersonal dimension: Group and organisational dynamics:** This is a broad area that includes the dynamics within our groups and ways we reproduce unhelpful tendencies in our organisational cultures. This can include cultures that pressure us to overwork, unresolved or entrenched interpersonal conflicts, and unhealthy power dynamics. While burnout is generally associated with our work-life, it is often factors related to our intimate relationships that can tip the balance, things like the break-up of a close relationship or the loss of loved ones can add significant strain - and we can't entirely compartmentalise the emotional impact of these things.

**Personal material needs:** These relatively obvious factors relate to how well we are able to meet our basic needs for food and nutrition, sleep, rest and recovery, shelter and housing, physical safety, economic security, and many similar factors such as our basic level of health or fitness. It is important to recognise and acknowledge our needs and the extent to which an inability to meet them creates stresses and strains on our lives. All too often we see activists deprioritising their own needs in self-sacrificial ways that are ultimately unproductive.

**Personal behavioural tendencies:** It can often seem that the easiest place to make changes relate to our behaviours, but these can be driven by deeper emotional needs or perpetuated by group culture and expectations. So, whilst it might not be as simple as just stopping doing things that are unhelpful, beginning to recognise the patterns can support us to explore the deeper causes and enable gradual shifts. Common tendencies include persistent overworking, struggling to sense and protect our boundaries, distracting ourselves from our experience in various ways, and placing ourselves in situations where our nervous system remains in a high stress or 'activated' state for long periods without coming down into resting states.

**Psychological and emotional needs:** Understanding how our psychological and emotional needs drive behaviour, will help us to see why we don't take rest when it's needed or why we regularly take on more than we can manage. This can help us to examine our work habits, our personal strategies for dealing with stress, and the balance we strike between work and other aspects of our lives. Factors can include our need for approval, to be seen, or to prove ourselves. We can find that we are acting out of guilt and shame or to avoid acknowledging other emotional pain that we are carrying. Sometimes we can find that we are ignoring or overriding emotional needs that eventually reassert themselves through symptoms of physical illness or mental strain.

**Views, beliefs and expectations:** While our behaviours might be underpinned by emotional or psychological needs, more often than not both behaviour and psychological needs are informed and shaped by our views and beliefs about ourselves and the world. Some of these are conscious and others less so. These views shape the way we see the world and the choices we make. Some of them are helpful while others less so. It is not only useful to uncover the views that shape our experience, but to also explore the ways we hold onto our views, how tightly we cling to them or how open mindedly we can be with their inevitably partial and provisional nature! Core factors here are our views about how change happens, our human nature, and ways we construct meaning and our sense of who we are.

### **Predisposing, precipitating, and perpetuating conditions**

Amongst all of these factors it can be useful to recognise the difference between those that *predispose* us to burnout (which lie in the background or form the long term context), factors that *precipitate* burnout (things that can tip us over the edge, like the resurgence of an

interpersonal conflict or a sudden increase in workload), and those that *perpetuate* longer term experiences of depletion, contraction and disconnection (such as refusal to take rest or unwillingness to prioritise self-care even when it is clear we need it, or withdrawing from the relationships that could actually help us through tough times). This understanding is helpful if we want to think in terms of what we can do to prevent burnout, how we can identify points of risk, and how to recover and restore ourselves once we've already tipped over into a depleted state.

## A holistic response

As we've seen, the impacts and causes of burnout can be found across all three fields: the personal, interpersonal and socio-political. Responding to this requires a holistic approach that involves developing individual and collective practices. Throughout the chapters of this manual you will find ideas and learning that are relevant to all of these dimensions, helping us to replace ways of doing activism that encourage burnout with regenerative and resilient ones.

However, the place to start is with deeper reflection on what is going on for us and those we work with. Before moving on to the transformative practices and tools throughout the manual, the crucial starting place is deeper reflection on experience. The core sessions connected with this chapter are designed to support that reflective process. Using the **Rivers of Experience** and **Burnout Wheel** exercises you will learn more about the specific conditions that underpin your experience, where change is needed, and you will then be able to use those insights to guide your journey through the rest of the manual.

# 10

## ACTIVITIES: EXPLORING BURNOUT

- Rivers of experience
- Resilience trees
- Using the Burnout Rating Scale
- Burnout Wheel – Group Activity
- Burnout Wheel – Personal Activity

### ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES

- Bricks and hammers
- Centering Practice
- Body Scanning Practice (meditative)
- Self Solidarity Practice (meditative)
- Exploring Group Agreements and Group Culture
- Hearing the Needs of the Group (container building)
- Task - process - relationship
- Conflict Icebergs
- Conflict Sculptures
- Spectrum Lines (generic)
- Action-Reflection Spectrum Lines
- Perceiving and Responding to Threats
- Making Changes Coaching

### ACTIVITY RESOURCES

- Burnout rating scale
- Burnout wheel
- Making changes grid

### FURTHER READING

- Annex: Psychoeducation and burnout
- Sustainable Activism and Avoiding Burnout.
- Cox: How do we Keep Going? Activist Burnout and Personal Sustainability in Social Movements.
- Rettig: The Lifelong Activist: How to Change the World Without Losing Your Way.
- Vosper: Overcoming Burnout (
- Wollman: Dealing With or Preventing Burnout in Activist Work
- Introducing the Learning Zone model
- Annex: Working with Touch and Consent

## 02

**AWARENESS AND  
EMOTIONAL LITERACY****Why?**

Our mind and heart shape our experience. The quality of awareness that we bring to situations and the way we feel things mediate our encounter with the world. Our ways of looking and ways of feeling influence how we experience everything - ourselves, our work, our relationships, our groups, and the wider world.

It is important to realise that we have agency in these areas. We can often assume that how we think and feel is 'just how it is' or 'how we are', but neuroplasticity (if you want the science) and experience show that that is not necessarily the case. We can take a huge amount of responsibility for developing our mental and emotional capacities in ways that will support us to engage with our experience, other people and the world around us more sustainably, more helpfully, and more creatively too. This makes learning how to work with our mental and emotional states a fundamental piece in the resilience puzzle.

Of course, taking the time to focus on this kind of personal/inner work can in itself feel challenging. We might worry that it's self-indulgent, a product of privilege, that there are 'more important things to be doing than worrying about our state of mind'. That is all completely understandable when there is so much at stake globally, and probably in our everyday lives too. But a holistic approach requires us to honour the inseparable connection between who we each are as individuals, how we show up for others and work together, and how we bring about change in the world. If we can't claim agency in our own minds and hearts, we can't expect ourselves to develop the skills and qualities necessary to build the healthy, sustainable and effective movements we need, for everybody. As activists, taking the time to work with our own mental states *is* an act of solidarity! If we genuinely want to give more, we need to take the time to strengthen our capacity to do so.

**A bit about awareness**

The behavioural outcome of awareness is increased capacity to choose. Agency in this context means us realising we can develop our minds to be clearer, brighter, more focused, more attentive, and more aware of what's happening both within ourselves and around us. It means becoming increasingly able to make wise and helpful choices about what we do and how we do it, rather than perpetuating habits, knee-jerk reactions, and tendencies which might not be serving us or our work.

Awareness is something we have to take a large chunk of personal responsibility for. However, it's not only about 'us'. The quality of our minds is influenced not only by our own efforts, but also by the surrounding conditions - quality of relationships, group culture, and wider social conditions. In the same way, the quality of our mental states



will influence those same relationships, groups and so on.

*Self awareness*, as it is often referred to, is an overly limited notion.

Working on our own minds will also help to cultivate greater awareness in other fields of experience: the wider socio-political field, the group/organisational field, and other dimensions of interpersonal experience. It's worth bearing this in mind, when we find ourselves thinking we 'don't have time' for it.

For now though, let's focus on the personal dimension of this. How do we work at this level?

Through **mindful awareness practices** we can support ourselves to:

- **Counteract tendencies to dispersion, distraction and fragmentation**
- **Generate clarity and brightness of mind**
- **Build continuity and focus**
- **Develop self awareness and integration**
- **Strengthen our capacity to choose**
- **Increase our levels of wellbeing**

All of us, at times, experience ourselves feeling distracted. Maybe you've read the statistics on humans only using about 10% of their brain capacity. We have a huge amount of mental energy available to us, and we waste a lot of it through distraction. When we can't choose where to direct our attention our mental energy ends up being spread all over the place, jumping from one thing to another, fragmented, and broken up. This mental dispersion can deplete us. It can leave us feeling dull and superficial, lacking the sense of presence needed to really take things in, be clear about what's happening, and be alive to the choices available to us from moment to moment.

Mindful awareness practices are effectively practices which train us to work against these tendencies by helping us to gather our attention more and more fully in the present. To train our mind in this way, we'll often choose a single object as a focus. As we do this, we find ourselves with more of our mental energy in one place, which deepens our awareness and experience - rather than being spread thin, our attention is gathered and available. This brings more clarity to the mind - because we have more of its capacity available to us we'll often notice less confusion, mental and sensory experience can feel clearer, and the experience of the mind becomes brighter and enriched.

As we develop greater mindfulness, we find we are more able to direct our attention where we choose, enabling us to sustain continuity and focus with the things that are most relevant and important. We miss so much because we don't or can't stick around long enough to really take something in. Being able to sustain continuity of attention with objects of mind/experience - whether they are feelings, ideas, views, other people - gives us so much more information than the often fleeting moments of attention that get stitched together to make incomplete and inaccurate pictures of reality. Here lies increased wisdom, intelligence and realism!

To become effective, resilient, helpful group members, allies, trainers, friends, we need to be self-aware. We need a good sense of who we are, our particular propensities, habits, needs, and sensitivities. We also need to be able to choose to do things differently when our habits aren't helping us.

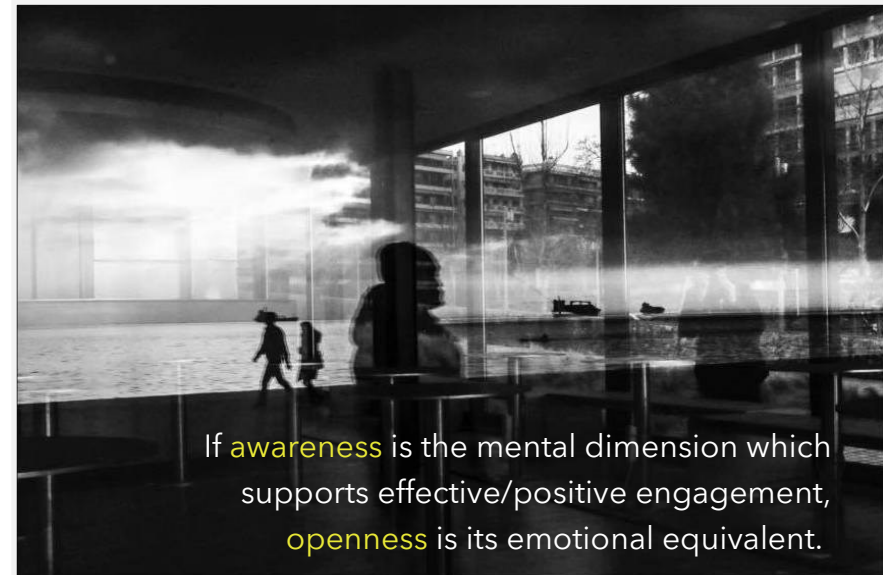
Mindful awareness practices not only provide us with more information, they also offer us a gap, a moment of space between noticing a feeling/ thought/impulse and acting on it. This can let us choose not to say the inflammatory thing in the meeting, but instead offer a more useful or constructive response. Or it can help us to notice the effects of repeatedly staying up late and decide to go to bed when rest is needed. As we develop our sensitivity to ourselves and establish more of a relationship with our experience, not only do we become easier to work with and more sustainable, but this deepening relationship with ourselves also has a stabilising effect on us - we become more integrated, balanced, and secure.

All of this leads to an increase in our levels of wellbeing. Being more present and less distracted we get to experience more of the pleasure and beauty there is in life - our experiences go deeper, and we're enriched by that. Because our minds are brighter and clearer we feel more buoyant and animated. Because we are choosing where our attention goes, we get to experience more of what serves us/others, and less of what doesn't. Because we have space to make more skilful choices in how we act and what we say, we spend more time in good relationship with people, and less time clearing up the mess we leave in our unconscious trail. And because we are in better relationship with ourselves, we are more likely to notice what is undermining and depleting us, and to enjoy a more well-rounded experience of who we are.

That's a whole lot of wellbeing! And taking responsibility for our wellbeing is, for obvious reasons, key to our resilience, sustainability, and flourishing.

## A bit about emotional literacy

Even more, perhaps, than with our minds, we can tend to think that our emotional life - the ways we feel - is something that just happens to us, that "this is what I feel and that's the way it is". In a sense, this is a helpful view: there is no point resisting or denying our emotional experience. Our emotions will generally find a way to shout at us more loudly when we do that. But the way we hold and understand our emotional experience, the way we respond to our feelings, the emotional 'ground' on which our experience lands, offers a lot of scope for agency!



Just as we can cultivate and develop our mental capacities, building new pathways in the brain that tend us more towards clarity, brightness, and presence, we can also cultivate and develop our emotional qualities and capacities. We can take significant responsibility to

cultivate emotional lives of connection, warmth, and openness, rather than disconnection, aversion, and rigidity. At the level of personal empowerment, if awareness is the mental dimension which supports effective/positive engagement, *openness* is its emotional equivalent.

As with most things, we can (and do!) develop bad habits. Just as it's common to develop mental habits of distraction, we easily develop emotional habits of aversion. All of us experience aversion to some things in our lives - basically, not liking stuff, and pushing stuff away. While aversive responses are natural and can usefully provide information for us, they can also become habitual and cumulative, so that we find ourselves spending more and more time feeling grumpy, cynical, disinterested, critical, resentful, and so on (all of which we might recognise as symptoms of burnout).

Aversion functions at different levels but generally speaking, when we encounter things we 'don't like', if we simply shut down and push them away, we lose connection and lose the possibility for awareness. We cannot hope to engage creatively and helpfully with others or the state of the world if we allow our habitual emotional responses to dictate our behaviour and decisions in this way.

Instead, we can practice staying open (when that is appropriate and it's safe enough). We can develop our heart response like training a muscle. We can learn to lean in and engage, take an interest, care, even love, more and more of the time. And with that we find not only increased awareness, but also increased tolerance or carrying-capacity for difficult and painful experiences (which will come whether we like it or not), and the increased resourcing, wellness and joy that come from emotional tendencies that are more open, empathetic, and connecting.

This kind of emotional reorientation also has important political implications. It challenges and subverts the patriarchal machismo that sees dwelling on emotionality as somehow 'weak' or of less importance than other things. Through taking this stuff seriously, we learn the emotional literacy and skill that will enable all of us to share the 'load' of emotional work - a labour that has historically fallen on women - and that is undeniably necessary for the wellbeing and healthy functioning of our relational and group life.

It is important to emphasise that this is not about 'putting on a happy face' or giving things a 'positive' spin. It's not about denying rage or anger or grief. Nor does it involve ceasing to be critical of what needs to be confronted. There is plenty in us and in the world that is difficult or painful, that rightly produces emotional experiences of unhappiness, despondency, rage, etc. This kind of work is about strengthening the capacity to stay open to those kinds of experience, to all kinds of experience, so that, rather than becoming numb/avoidant/resentful, we cultivate our ability to meet ourselves, others and the world more fully. It empowers us to show up, to connect and engage creatively, courageously and with the kind of openness that deep solidarity requires. It can help us learn to channel our passion and energy more effectively in service of radical transformation.

How do we do this kind of emotional work? Again, it's about deliberate practice.

Using practices for cultivating emotional awareness and the capacity for **skilful emotion** we can support ourselves to:

- **Counteract tendencies to aversion/closing down/pushing away**

We can employ practices which encourage us to come into more receptive contact with ourselves and our experience to strengthen our willingness to stay open, rather than emotionally contracted. We might do that in more 'meditative' ways, bringing attention to our emotional experience (often through bodily awareness) and noticing what is present in ourselves, cultivating an interest or attitude of care towards that. We might use practices that involve bringing other people to mind - people we are close to, people we don't find very interesting, people we find difficult - and seeing if we can find and pursue this attitude of openness/ care toward them. We might use other more reflective techniques like journaling to support us to be in relationship with the flow of our experience in an affirming way. Basically, practices which help us notice when we are shutting down/pushing away and gently encourage us to inquire into what happens if we are willing to stay a little more in relationship.

**- Develop self awareness**

(psychological integration & emotional literacy)

**- Strengthen wellbeing and nourishment**

(incl. through positive self regard)

In order to develop 'personal' (nothing's just personal, but hey!) activist practices that are more sustainable and healthy, we need to know more about who we are, what motivates us, how we respond to others, what our limits are, how we manage disappointment and difficulty, and what we do when we encounter conflict. We need to be able to be in relationship with our experience, to become familiar with the 'lie of the (emotional) land' and the currents in the stream of our emotional experience. We need to be able to meet our experience and say "yeah,

this is what's going on for me, this experience is part of me, I get that, I'm aware of it, and this is something I can hold and take responsibility for".

Without this capacity, much of our behaviour will be habitual and stuck. The unconscious parts of ourselves can give rise to unpredictable reactions that become more erratic and unhelpful the more we encounter stress, tiredness or triggering situations. Lack of self-awareness will make us more likely to project problems outwards too. Obviously, certain problems are more 'external' and need 'external' solutions, but it is amazing how much group conflict can be avoided by people having a little more awareness of themselves and their needs, taking a little more responsibility for that and utilising a little more creative agency in their responses and actions.

Another thing we can discover is just how much self-aversion many of us are working with. A lot of people seem to find it very difficult to come into a positive, affirming, or truly caring relationship with themselves. The internal judging voices can be extremely harsh and undermining. We can find we that our 'inner critic' speaks to us in ways we would never dream of speaking to another person, and that can become so much part of the internal wallpaper that we don't even notice the hostile and unsupportive emotional climate we are creating for ourselves. This is highly undermining and depleting. And often we don't realise how much we are working against, until it changes.

When we develop greater kindness and openness to ourselves, we begin to 'warm up' the inner environment which not only provides nourishment and wellbeing - we feel happier - but also allows much more of our experience to come into awareness. With this comes more fullness, stability, and 'wholeness' all of which serves our growth and

maturity as human beings. This has deep value of its own, even aside from making us better activists - it is a radical and subversive thing to become more fully oneself in a world where we encounter so much shaming, prejudice and oppression.

- **Build connection: self, others, world**
- **Deepen experiences of empathy & solidarity that our work is built on**

All of this helps us connect. If we can connect with more of ourselves, we can connect more with others. If we can be open to a wide range of our own experience, our capacity to be open to the experience of others will strengthen. When we are emotionally able to be open to a wide range of experience, our fear of the pain and horror in the world, of being overwhelmed, begins to diminish. Empathy, solidarity, building cultures of care - they all depend on an ability to be open and in connection. And, what we find with practice, is that openness and our capacity for connection are all qualities we can cultivate. In terms of resilience, when we are able to be more fully in connection with ourselves and others the energy for our work grows - our motivation is nourished and supported by genuine care and a lived sense of solidarity.

These practices start with 'us', but we can cultivate these qualities through collective practices too, developing **group structures and cultures** that take peoples' well being seriously.

- **Increase our capacity to hold emotion**

The more we strengthen our ability to stay with our experience, the stronger our 'emotional container' grows, and the more we are able to

meet whatever comes our way. Often, in challenging situations, we can find ourselves shutting off from experience, gritting our teeth and attempting to power through. Sometimes this is the only the option, and occasionally that can be okay. But this approach is brittle and usually causes kickback or delayed reaction somewhere down the line. True resilience is pliable, like a tree that is able to move with the wind, without breaking. Being able to let things in and process them, without becoming overwhelmed, is one of the great benefits of skilful emotion practices. Through these practices we become both more tender *and* more courageous because we learn more about our emotional experience and how to hold it. We'll find greater richness in an increased range of emotional experience, both heights and depths, as feelings come and go, without us having to tense up or push away. And perhaps we'll get a sense of what is meant by the flamenco folk saying - that our capacity for joy is equal to our capacity to hold pain.

## Difficult emotion, pain, and overwhelm

Working with these kinds of emotional experience is an important part of developing emotional literacy and resilience, especially for people working in the often confronting and painful world of migrant solidarity.

**The next chapter** focuses on this.

## 02

**ACTIVITIES:  
EXPLORING AWARENESS**

- Body Scanning Practice (meditative)
- Three Step Breathing Space: AGE (meditative)
- Freeform Following the Breath Practice (meditative)
- Structured Following the Breath Practice (meditative)

**ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES**

- Finding a Posture that Works
- Following Hands
- Centering Blanket
- Centering Practice
- Yes/no/maybe - Boundary Setting
- Giving and Receiving Feedback
- Introduction to Trauma Awareness
- Orientation / Name 3 Things in the Space Technique (regulation)
- Rivers of Experience
- Sit Spot
- Making Changes Coaching
- Personal Identity and Complexity

**ACTIVITIES EXPLORING EMOTIONAL LITERACY**

- Self Solidarity Practice (meditative)
- Structured Kind Regard Practice (meditative)
- The Milling
- Open Sentences

**ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES**

- Working with Suffering (compassion practice)
- Introduction to Trauma Awareness
- Going to Ground – lying down meditation
- Interrelationship of the 4 Heart Practices
- Sitting Back to Back
- If Nothing You Can Do is Ever Enough...

## ACTIVITY RESOURCES

- Introducing working with awareness
- Introducing working skilfully with emotion
- Ulex basic meditation notes
- Holding short, reflective and meditative sessions
- Heart Practices Diagram

## FURTHER READING

- [wildmind.org](http://wildmind.org) (Excellent online resource with tonnes of material)
- [Change Your Mind, Paramananda](#) (An easily accessible introduction to the basics)
- [Buddhist Meditation: Tranquillity, Imagination and Insight, Kamalashila](#)  
(A comprehensive resource which covers everything needed to get a good regular practice going – and to take that practice a long way!)
- [radicalembbrace.org](http://radicalembbrace.org) (Guided meditations on a variety of relevant topics)

## 03

## WORKING WITH DIFFICULT EMOTION, PAIN & OVERWHELM

### Why?

In the last section we explored [emotional literacy](#), looking at the ways it can equip us to respond skilfully to the ups and downs of our emotional lives, as well as enabling us to manage our relationship to others and our collaborative actions most helpfully. These qualities and skills are some of the cornerstones of a resilient personal and collective activist practice. Emotional literacy practices support us to lay the ground on which a robust and sensitive emotional capacity can be built.

One of the biggest challenges we can face in this area is increasing our capacity to work with painful and overwhelming emotions. We can feel afraid of these feelings, exhausted by them, thrown around by them and we can end up using a range of psychological strategies to avoid, deny, and even repress them. This is not conducive to resilience.

This can be especially challenging for activists. Our work brings us face to face with injustice, harm, violence and oppression. We can feel impotent and hopeless in our efforts to address the immensity of the challenges we face.

We meet grief and loss, deep anger and despondency, and we may also be working with the effects of [trauma](#). Learning how to handle and manage these kinds of strong and painful emotions is especially important in this context. This chapter offers some additional focus on what we can do to support ourselves and each other face these difficult, but also enlivening, challenges.

### Difficult emotion, pain and overwhelm

Activism can be a source of joy, connection, and deep meaning. But the work we do is also likely to bring us into contact with various forms of suffering on a regular basis. Sometimes this shows up in fairly concrete ways - through close contact with violence and repression for example, or the frustrations we encounter when our efforts don't bear the fruit we anticipated, or our plans fall apart. It also manifests in more pervasive ways, such as our long-term exposure to awareness of injustice, ecological destruction, and the suffering these imply both today and in the future. When we come into contact with suffering (our own or others') it can give rise to a wide range of potentially difficult emotions: anger, grief, fear, anxiety, rage, and despair. These feelings can become overwhelming and, unless we become skilled in working with them, debilitating.



It is not unusual to attempt to push this kind of experience away, distract ourselves from it, or to try to shut it down somehow. This is understandable, as many of us dislike the experience of pain. Sometimes this kind of strategy is necessary. It can help us to cope. But if we do this too much, it begins to cause us problems.

Pain is vital feedback - it lets us know that something is wrong. The pain we feel about the state of the world is an important source of energy, motivating us, compelling us to act. Experiences like grief and loss are also an important part of the texture of life, connecting us to what we love and care about. They are part of what makes us alive in a world where people and things matter.

When we close these feelings down, we can increasingly find ourselves falling into numbness, cynicism, apathy, and depression, losing connection with our sources of creativity and energy. These are all symptoms and factors connected with burnout. On top of this, when we consistently push parts of our experience away or shut down parts of our psyche, especially with regards to powerful feelings like grief or anger, they will often push hard to come back into experience. They want to be seen and felt. The resulting tension between different parts of ourselves can be fragmenting and depleting, and often the suppressed feelings are more likely to 'erupt', often bigger and louder, surfacing in unexpected situations, in disconnected and irrational ways. This can be confusing and damaging to us and our relationships with those around us.

It can be helpful to think of our psyche as a small ecosystem. All the parts need to be in a healthy relationship with each other, otherwise the system breaks down. Difficult emotions are part of our emotional ecosystem,

they fulfil a necessary function, needing space and attention like everything else. So, building the capacity to be in touch with and feel difficult emotions is vital in building emotional literacy and deeper resilience.

As described in the emotional awareness chapter, through paying attention to our emotional experience in an open and kind way, we can discover a lot about our inner lives. It helps us become more skilled at recognising the way our emotional experiences come and go, exploring the ability to recognise and acknowledge our feelings without over identifying with them. We can learn how to hold them gently, receptively, and with space around them as part of a bigger whole. We can learn to increase our capacity to hold stronger and more difficult emotions, both in ourselves and in others, with more confidence, robustness, and subtlety.

## How?

So, what can we do to build our capacity in this way? Some are things we can do as personal reflections/practices, some need to happen at the collective level.

### 1. Working with our own attitudes and awareness

#### Cultivating a basis of kind regard

As we have explored at length in the preceding chapter, establishing a base of emotional literacy and *openness* is a prerequisite for all other forms of emotional work. This is the ground onto which all other emotional experiences 'land'. It is very easy for us to develop habits of aversion, irritation, criticism, and resentment (towards ourselves and others) and these habits do not help us to hold difficult emotions well. In contrast, establishing tendencies towards connectivity, openness and

warmth will give us a good foundation, when working with difficult emotions is required. Our capacity for *kind regard* is a foundational quality that will support us to meet and hold difficult emotions as and when they arise. And we have the opportunity to practice this in every moment, with our own experience, and with whatever is in front of us! You can read more about these practices [here](#).

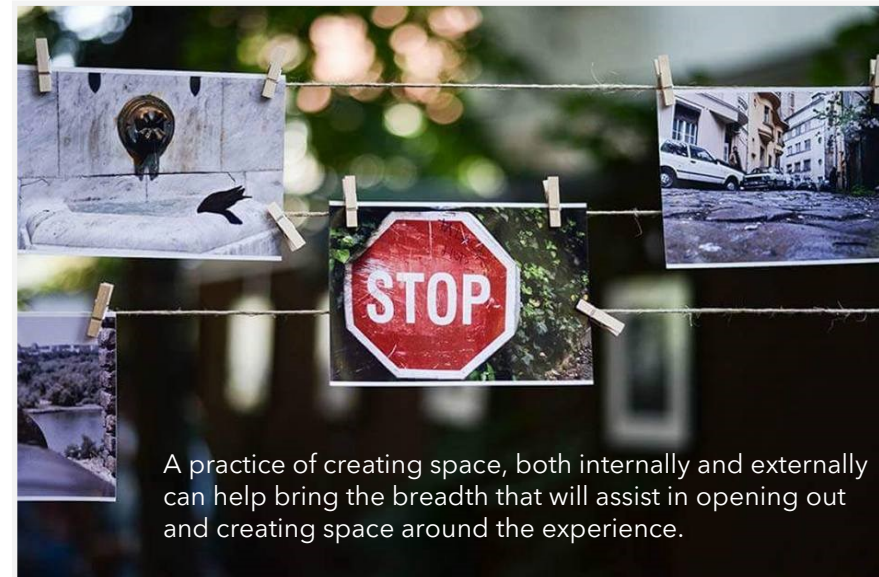
### Welcoming our experience

As we have explored, when we encounter pain, discomfort, and suffering of any kind, we can find that we want to push it away. Often, the more pushing away and resisting we do, the more we reinforce the suffering. The aversion or turning away can, in itself, compound the pain. What this means is that when we experience difficult emotions, if we can receive them, acknowledge them, and even welcome them - as something necessary and healthy, possibly even nourishing and fruitful - the experience will actually be less unpleasant. To support 'turning towards' these emotions it can be useful to reflect on the attitudes or views we carry about them. For example, recognising grief as an expression of love, or anger as an expression of care and sense of justice, or fear and pain as necessary and important feedback, can help us find transformative responses and reframe the experience of them. We can really help ourselves become more robust, resilient and to suffer less in relation to emotions we find difficult if we can practice welcoming them. We might as well! - they are there anyway, and resistance is just extra energy being expended.

### Non-identifying

Sometimes we can become very identified with our emotions, especially the stronger ones! We can tend to unconsciously assume that our emotions are ourselves, that 'I am angry' rather than 'I feel angry'.

Becoming aware that we are not (simply) our emotions, practicing taking a step back to notice "I am experiencing grief/anger/fear, but I am also experiencing other things" and "there is more to me and my experience than this, and I will still be here when this feeling is gone" can be such a helpful practice for supporting resilience. Importantly, this is not a suggestion for bypassing, dissociating, or becoming alienated from experience - we need to feel our feelings, but we can do so without becoming unhelpfully defined by them.



A practice of creating space, both internally and externally can help bring the breadth that will assist in opening out and creating space around the experience.

### Cultivating spacious awareness

In keeping with this approach, a general practice of 'opening out' can be very useful. Strong emotions can act like a bit of a vortex, drawing more and more of us in, building and building themselves up. This is part of what can be overwhelming about these experiences - the lack of breadth becomes destabilising. A practice of creating space, both internally (by

being aware of what else is going on, by trying to contact more calming, open parts of our experience (such as the out-breath, or the feet) and externally (by being aware of others in the space or the objects in the room, the sky above, earth below etc) can help bring the breadth that will assist in opening out and creating space around the experience.

### Reflecting on impermanence

It can also be helpful to reflect on or bring to mind that emotions are not fixed, lasting or always reliable. We know that we can feel one way about something today, and tomorrow feel completely differently about it. When we feel bad, it is often difficult to remember that we won't feel like this forever, however much experience we have to the contrary. Reflecting in this way can help us become wiser and more mature with our emotional lives. "Yes, I am feeling something very strong right now, but the experience is going to change". Holding the experience lightly - without undermining its substance - is a bit of an art, but certainly something we can learn to cultivate.

### Grounding the body and mind

The physicality of the body and posture can be a helpful image when thinking about holding stronger emotions. Sitting in a good stable **posture** with a rooted base, balancing a sense of calmness and vitality, can be a very helpful way to gain a felt sense of how we might hold emotion. Lying on the ground, having a sense of connection with the way the earth is holding and supporting us, can also be a useful image here, as can any image that helps to ground and calm, when intense feeling is arising - a still pool, the depths of the ocean, the presence of someone loving or brave. Whatever works for you.

## 2. Creating collective cultures that are comfortable with emotion and support processing

The old adage "a problem shared is a problem halved", though glib, illustrates an important point. Sometimes things are too much for us and we simply need some help.

Developing relationships and **group cultures** that offer emotional support and space for people to share what is going on for them is crucial. Listening to one another, **making time for relationship building**, practicing care in how we speak to one another and about one another, are all factors that help us to hold and honour the emotional dimensions of our lives. For a group to be able to hold difficult and strong emotion, it first needs to be comfortable with emotion, full stop! An emotionally literate culture will be more able to hold and process difficult emotional experiences when they arise.

Making dedicated time and space for sharing and collectively holding some of the difficulties people may be experiencing is important. It creates a culture that acknowledges that these things are important and not to be brushed away or denied. Learning how to sit collectively with strong emotions without the felt need to 'fix' them can help us to create a way of being together where stronger emotions are welcomed as healthy parts of the fuller range of our human experience. This is especially the case in contexts where **trauma and secondary trauma** are likely to be showing up.

There are so many reasons groups might feel resistance to opening up emotional spaces. These can include internalised patriarchal values around deprioritising emotion and appearing 'strong'; not wanting to bring people down; anxiety about looking uninformed or seeming precarious and unreliable; fear of vulnerability and exposure; worry that we won't be able to put ourselves back together if we 'fall apart', and more. But with consistent effort we can learn to recognise the value that these practices bring to our group life and establish the skills and structures that support them.

Making a space, with clear boundaries, to come together and listen well to what is going on for people in these ways, can do so much for allowing people to air and release emotions that may be being held tightly and painfully inside. And, if held well, these spaces can do a lot to develop connection and empathy between people. Obviously, they need to be treated with care and respect - it can be quite intense to listen to people share in this way. But this is part of the relationship between personal and collective resilience - the more I am able to open to and hold my own difficult emotions, the more fully I am able to show up for other peoples', both in my groups and in the world at large, as part of my work.

# MO

## ACTIVITIES: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT EMOTION

- Working with Suffering (compassion practice - meditative)
- Cairn of Mourning
- The Truth Circle
- Going to Ground – lying down meditation
- Interrelationship of the 4 Heart Practices (meditative)

### ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES

- Sitting Back to Back
- Open Sentences
- Structured Kind Regard Practice (meditative)
- Shame, Blame and Building Collective Resilience
- Three Step Breathing Space
- The Milling
- Self Solidarity Practice (meditative)
- Freeform Following the Breath Practice (meditative)
- Sit Spot
- Introduction to Trauma Awareness
- Body Tapping Technique (regulation)
- Orientation / Name 3 Things in the Space Technique (regulation)
- Exploring Secondary Trauma
- If Nothing You Can Do is Ever Enough...

### ACTIVITY RESOURCES

- Heart Practices Diagram
- Annex: Working with Touch and Consent
- Annex: Cultural Appropriation

## 04

# BODYWORK: AN INTRODUCTION TO SOMATIC PRACTICE

## Why?

Our bodies are the foundation for everything in our lives. All of our experience is mediated and processed in and through the body. Our capacity to sense, feel, and intuit resides there. Even our 'thinking' faculty, which we might conceive of as 'other' than the body, depends on our brain tissue, nervous system, capacity to metabolise, and so on - there is no such thing as unembodied thinking (yet!). Our bodies provide us with the information we need to live, relate and understand. They act as our primary interface with the world. Our race, gender, sexuality, ability and other identities are all bound to the relationship between the body and how it is perceived by culture and society. And our commitment to and expression of values, meaning and purpose, happen by physical action - they too are 'embodied'.

Given how fundamental our bodies are to living, relating, and working, it's no surprise that a holistic approach to radical resilience practice involves focused work with our bodies - work we also refer to as 'somatic practices'. For change and transformation to happen, we need the support of these practices to help us resource our wellbeing, embody our values, and access the information we need to be as informed and responsive.

Unfortunately, we are working against a lot in this area. Dominant western culture has, in many ways, prioritised rationality over the feeling, intuiting and sensing faculties. The result of this is a form of socialisation which can disconnect us from our bodies and the felt sense of what is going on. Consequently, we often don't know how to read signals from our bodies or how to process the information they offer us.

These factors have a significant impact on our resilience. Crucially, they will undermine our ability to metabolise and recover from stress and intensity. But this kind of alienation will also prevent us gathering somatic information that supports **awareness of ourselves and empathy** with others (key aspects of the resilience puzzle). Our bodies are a source of information about our own and other peoples' states. To be able to be in connection with others, our environment and ourselves, we need to reclaim and restore connection with our bodies.

This process of becoming more aware of sensations and feelings in our body, which were previously less conscious to us, as well as being more connected to our bodies, is what we refer to as *embodiment*.

## Some causes of body disconnection

### **Social Oppression and Body Normativity**

In contemporary, western society our relationship with our bodies risks becoming highly troubled. Through social media, cultural materials and daily social relationships we are beset with multiple, confusing, normative messages that can foster subtle hatred, disgust and fear of our bodies and the bodies of others (especially those who live in bodies we perceive as different from our own). Normative messaging takes many forms: it can refer to our level of aging, our body shape/size/weight, our skin colour, our gender expression, our perceived level of personal and sexual attractiveness, our physical abilities and health limitations, and so on. These experiences with systemic oppression, limiting body norms, traumatisation and stress can all contribute to contracted and exhausted bodies. This in turn encourages unconscious body avoidance, a 'numbing out' from experience, in order to avoid pain and discomfort.

### **Relational Anxiety and Trauma**

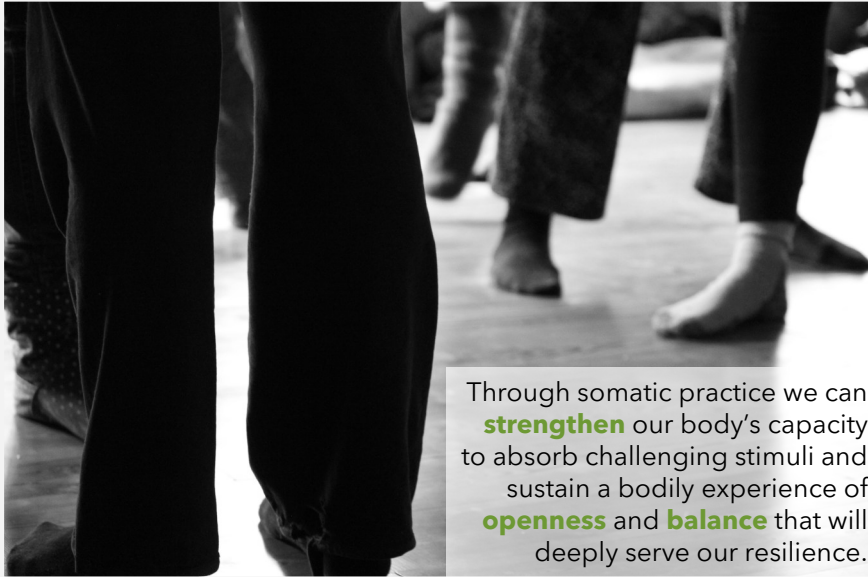
Body disconnection is also shaped and conditioned by our relational experiences. Patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, ableism and so on, act on our relationships, as do our early life and attachment experiences. Where these relationships have been physically and emotionally harmful or traumatic (rather than resourcing and connecting), the pain can leave traces that we carry in the body. This is intensified around physical harm - sexual abuse and physical violence are, unfortunately, very common experiences - and this too can be held in the body. This residual pain, as well as the fear and mistrust of others related to it (that manifests in physical tension and anxiety), can lead us, quite understandably, to avoid and push away our embodied experience, breaking connection and diminishing awareness. (More on working with trauma, [here](#).)

### **Overstimulation, lethargy, and addictive behaviours**

A lot of us live our daily lives amidst speedy, complex, and highly stimulating conditions, largely in front of screens and mentally or physically rushing between 'productive' activities. This will generate tension and rigidity, putting us in 'heady', narrow, and potentially reactive states of stress and adrenal activation. Under such conditions we tend to pull out of bodily sensation and even shut off to uncomfortable levels of stimulation and agitation. Combine this with sedentary lifestyles and lack of exercise in our lives and we can find ourselves drifting towards dullness, alienation, and desensitisation.

The stimulation of screens can themselves become addictive forms of avoidance, but food, sex, alcohol and other substances or activities are also common ways of anaesthetising pain and discomfort. While this needn't be overly problematic, these behaviours take us 'out' of our experience, and, generally speaking, the more we use them (in service to avoidance), the less in touch with our bodies we are. As they say, "the opposite of addiction is connection".





## Reconnection and resilience

As we take steps to establish and strengthen connection with our bodies, we will see our resilience benefited in various ways:

### Reinvigoration, energy, aliveness and pleasure

Body connectivity gives us energy. For the reasons we have explored above, it is common to be in a state of relative avoidance of our body-experience (this includes physical sensations, emotions, energy, and intuition). This state of avoidance deadens us, it makes us numb, pushes things down, internally repressing and blocking us. As we begin to reconnect, all the 'content' (or you could say 'energy') that has been compressed and obstructed in this way starts to become available, as does the energy we have been using to resist and push away. Avoidance is a state of tension. As we allow experience in, we relax, and with that, energy is made available.

More open to experience also means more 'alive'. As our bodies begin to 'wake up' we start to *feel* more. Enthusiasm, interest, care, and desire are all experienced with more intensity, serving our resilience and work. And through the increased sensitivity that comes with this, our experience of pleasure and enjoyment is also heightened.

(Yes, this also means that difficult things in our experience and in the world 'strike' us more strongly as well - we are more sensitive to them - but ultimately, learning to meet, welcome and feel our difficult experience serves our resilience too. See chapter on **Difficult Emotion, Pain and Overwhelm**).

### Broadening the scope of awareness

As we have explored in the **Awareness and Emotional Literacy** chapter, awareness means information, and this kind of somatic information significantly informs choice. Through connection with the body, we are offered direct and valuable feedback, related to all sorts of things including burnout, trauma, stress and anxiety. This higher quality feedback gives us a vastly improved capacity to make choices and changes that serve our resilience practice.

And as we have said, this kind of response-based sensitivity also supports our relationships and group work. Our capacity to read another person, to intuit what is going on for them, to resonate emotionally with them, is all directly linked with body awareness. We become much more skilful relationally, when we have access to the content and 'wisdom' of the body.

**Integration, integrity and embodying our values**

The more willing we are to let experience in, the more aware we are of what is going on, the more our experience can come together into a kind of whole. Rather than experiencing ourselves as fragmented and contradictory (although there will probably always be something of this - human consciousness is complex and diverse!) we can begin to find more congruence, continuity, and joined-up-ness. We can call this integration. And with integration we get integrity. This means our ability to hold/resolve tensions and our ability to act in alignment with our values is heightened. It also means we let down, confuse, and frustrate ourselves and others a lot less.

In relation to social justice and equity, embodied practices play an important role. It is (partly) in the micro movements, actions, and patterns of our bodies that we hold and reproduce oppression. As part of our increased connection and awareness, we can begin to shift these patterns at an embodied level. We can consolidate new ways of being and acting in the world and relating to each other that bring to awareness and transform the unconscious reproduction of habitual patterns of privilege and submission through our bodies.

Agency also seems to be deeply linked (though of course not limited) to our capacity to feel our needs, our centre, our boundaries, our sense of 'self' and our vitality through subtle body sensation. Through working with internalised systemic oppressions, blocks, traumas, wounds, and no-go zones that can be undermining us, we can experience a new kind of empowerment in reclaiming our bodies as free, flourishing agents.

**Bodywork and somatic practices**

Bodywork aims to build, restore, and maintain our felt body connection through focused body awareness work and through the basic stimulation of physical activity, alone and with others. As previously stated, through this kind of reconnection practice, we are supported to become more aware, integrated, energised, and sensitive to life and experience. We also experience more access to and familiarity with body-states of ease, openness, relaxedness, centredness, groundedness and balance. Many body-based practices aim to increase and stabilise our access to these psychosomatic states supporting us to become more skilled in moderating, processing, and responding to our experience. Through somatic practice we can strengthen our body capacity to absorb challenging stimuli (whether that be a memory, another person's behaviour, or cultural impacts) and sustain a bodily experience of openness and balance that will deeply serve our resilience.

**Covering the basics**

As a starting point, we can take steps to ensure we are attending to the basics - making sure we move and get exercise, rest/sleep well, eat nutritious food regularly and attend to other body needs we may have, such as a need for sexual connection or touch-based contact with others. This is our baseline and is worth reminding ourselves about! Basic forms of physical self-care like a warm bath or a 10-minute break to lie down in the middle of the day, can help the body relax in a way that hugely supports connection and awareness - when we are tense, there is a kind of physical rigidity present that makes it difficult to be in touch with what is going on. The inability to meet these basic needs over longer periods is clearly not sustainable and it is vital to strategise together to change the conditions and ways of working that can make this impossible.

**Getting some exercise**

Although this might be obvious, it is still worth saying: regular exercise offers real benefits here too. Activities like running, swimming, walking, stretching, sports, dance, and others will unlock and increase energy flow in the body, release endorphins, dopamine, and other wellbeing-producing chemicals, and support the body to feel more relaxed and able to rest well afterwards. Of course, some people have physical work, and therefore additional 'exercise' activities are not so important, but for those of us spending much of our time at desks, we can't hope to develop sensitive relationships to our bodies if they/we are existing in ongoing states of sedentary inertia. Building regular exercise into our daily or weekly schedule can be surprisingly transformative!

**Engaging in body-awareness practices**

Although exercise in general is an important basis of body sensitivity and stimulation, the deeper benefits of somatic practice and embodiment lie in the relationship between the body and awareness, and the subtle information we can gain through that. As we have unpacked above, the benefits that can come from uncovering the richness of more varied emotional experience, the ease of a more integrated body-mind whole, the relief and energising from the release of subtle holding and tension, and the discovery in more of the depths and mysteries of who we are, all have so much to offer us, not only in terms of awareness and information, but also in terms of enrichment and meaning. In this way, the experience of the 'body' can always become more subtle, offering us ever deeper resourcing, nourishment, wisdom and even wonder! All of this can begin with as little as just five minutes of Centring or **Body Scanning** each day, which can make a huge difference to us.

Some common examples of somatic practices and embodiment techniques might be:

- **Meditation and mindfulness-based techniques, including Focusing**
- **Authentic movement, Feldenkreis, body-mind centring, Tai Chi and other similar techniques**
- **Tension Release Exercises (TRE)**
- **Feminist self-defence methodologies and martial arts**
- **Yoga**
- **Massage**

Some of the relevant sessions we have covered in this manual are listed at the end.

**Guidance for trainers**

**Establish your own practice.** Embodiment and somatic practices are *practices*. That means that ideally, they are repeated on a regular basis. This offers us the possibility of sharing from experience, and the more personal experience we have, the better we can model and communicate about embodiment. Bodies read and resonate with other bodies. If you show up in an embodied way in a training space, you will encourage your participants to do the same, even before you've said anything!

**Have confidence.** The specific western (and capitalist) framing of somatic work might feel alienating, presented as professionalised, specialised, copyrighted techniques. We do not need expensive certified training in a specific methodology to be able to support more connection to our bodies for ourselves and others. As holistic trainers, and in thinking about design, it is *always* good to be thinking about how we can help people embody learning more fully.

**Mix it up.** Embodied exercises can be a good way to meet the needs of different learning styles. Some of these activities can become regular collective practices, like meditating at the start of the day, or centring together before a session begins. We can support embodiment by weaving it through our sessions, as a returning theme, regularly asking a group to "take a pause from speaking and notice how your body is feeling", or "try answering this question from your body instead of from your head", or "stand, stretch, take a few deep breaths, and then come back to the activity". The more we do this, the more we create learning environments that draw on balance, connection, depth and integrity.

**Name and honour your sources.** Connecting, working, and engaging our bodies in different ways is as old as human history. Often the modern western approaches take from non-western traditions, without acknowledging the sources (like martial arts, meditation techniques or yoga which are all methodologies integral to eastern lineages and traditions). It is important to keep the context in mind, and to be aware of the sources we are drawing on or benefitting from.

**Go carefully!** Sometimes dropping down to our bodies can be challenging and might bring up difficult emotions. It's also possible that through deeper, more consistent and committed body work practices we will access and invite the release of trauma, held in the body. This can support healing, increased ease and release, and more honesty and integrity. But it is very important that we approach the body with care and respect for these reasons, and always encourage participants to listen to their bodies in a manner of care, receptivity and respect (rather than over-assertive will!). Take a look at the chapters on **Trauma**, **Working with Difficult Emotion**, Pain and Overwhelm, and **Emotional Literacy** for further guidance on this.

## 04

**ACTIVITIES:  
EXPLORING BODYWORK**

- Body Scanning Practice (meditative)
- Finding a Posture that Works
- Following Hands
- Centering Blanket
- Centering Practice

**ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES**

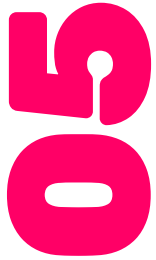
- Freeform Following the Breath Practice (meditative)
- Going to Ground – lying down meditation
- Sitting Back to Back
- Three Step Breathing Space: AGE (meditative)
- Introduction to Trauma Awareness
- Body Tapping Technique (regulation)
- Orientation / Name 3 Things in the Space Technique (regulation)
- Yes/no/maybe boundaries setting

**ACTIVITY RESOURCES**

- Annex: Working with touch and consent
- Annex: Cultural Appropriation

**FURTHER READING**

- Getting Our Bodies Back, Christine Caldwell
- Oppression and the Body Roots, Resistance and Resolutions, edited by Christine Caldwell and Lucia Bennett Leighton
- Embodied Social Justice, Rae Johnson <https://www.embodiedsocialjusticesummit.com>
- Generative Somatics
- Rooted, Online Trauma and Somatics Learning Community
- Cradling



# GROUPS AND ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE: SKILLS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION

## Why?

The importance of our group and organisational cultures can hardly be overstated when thinking about resilience. Creating both formal and informal structures and spaces for working with others is a crucial aspect of activist work. It is through these spaces of collaboration and cooperation that we empower each other with the collective agency needed for socially transformative action.

Our groups and organisations are:

- **The foundation for effective action:** They bring together talent, ideas, energy, and multiply our capacity to achieve what we want to in the world,

- **A vital context for transformation and learning:** The complex and challenging nature of social action requires ongoing learning and adaptation, both individual and organisational. Contexts of collaboration can provide the feedback and support needed to grow and keep learning as we go.

- **An opportunity to embody our values:** They can provide spaces in which to make real the kind of affirming and caring social relations we strive to create through our work, challenging systems of oppression and dominant socio-political narratives by creating alternative forms of social relations in the ways we struggle together.

- **An expression of our willingness to align with the realities of Interconnectedness:** Commitment to collaboration is a way of refusing to conform to the atomised individualism propagated by neoliberal capitalism and to live our lives in a way that honours the complex mutuality of life.

- **The ground for true synergy and creativity to come into emerge:** Through collaboration the possibility for something bigger and more beautiful than the sum of the parts can arise. And, let's face it, we need a bit of that magic.

The trouble is, working with other people is challenging. People can be annoying! And we can be pretty annoying to others too. We all, at times, get stuck in our ways, and become rigid, needy, avoidant, resistant, impatient, wanting our own way (the list goes on), in ways that can make trying to work together frustrating, exhausting, and demoralising. This can be the case even when we really care about each other and what we are trying to achieve. And all of that is before trying to address the ways systemic oppression is showing up in our groups or is replicated within certain kinds of organisational structures.

The health of our groups so easily becomes undermined (sometimes to the point of real damage and toxicity), and that has massive consequences for our personal and group resilience and for activist praxis more generally. Our activist groups and work cultures are the contexts within and upon which everything is happening - sense of self, arising of identity, relationships, personal and collective processes, analysing, taking action, reflecting and learning, and longer-term project development. These organisational cultures condition everything we are doing together. So, they are a key point of intervention when considering resilience and regenerative approaches to social transformation.

To meet these challenges, we need knowledge and skills! Both for understanding the dimensions of group culture that need attention, and for addressing those dimensions - ideally *before* things get too messy!

All of this is especially important when we are working in stressful and demanding situations. If we want to develop resilience for our activist work, attending to the health and wellbeing of our group and organisational cultures is essential. Long-term resilience usually requires shifts in organisational culture. That is a long-term process, but it cannot be neglected if we really want to change the conditions that deplete us and undermine our effectiveness. Where our organisations are large and long-standing, making shifts in the culture can be difficult. Organisational change isn't easy. In more informal and grassroots settings we face different kinds of obstacles. But, adapted to our different settings, all the suggestions here can help us to form more resilient groups and give direction to the changes we need to make within existing ones. Taking any steps to move towards some of the approaches suggested here can make an important contribution to that change. It is important to

remember that we need each other to achieve the kinds of transformative ends we are seeking - if you don't currently have any group contexts for your work, these suggestions can help set them up on a healthy and sustainable basis.

## Building constructive and resilient group cultures

As with individual humans, exactly what produces health, wellbeing and optimism in our groups is, in some ways, a bit of a mystery. Sometimes it can be difficult to see what is needed in a group, to understand why things seem to work out in one case, and in another fall apart. Some elements are also beyond our control - the success of our endeavours being subject to timing, external social and material factors, luck, or lack of it, and so on. What we *can* count on however, is that if we attend to the basic building blocks of our groups and cultures intelligently and with some diligence, we give ourselves the best chance at adaptability and buoyancy if things do get difficult. By attending to some key aspects of group life we can set up systems that are more likely to contribute to revitalisation, connection, trust building, and rejuvenation, rather than depletion, disconnection, and contraction. This section explores some of the key building blocks that can help us care for the resilience of our groups.

### 1. Establishing Vision and Purpose

Underpinning everything is our collective sense of purpose and clarity about what we are coming together for. Our purpose acts as our invitation to those joining us - we come together with a sense of shared motivation and intention. Often in groups we assume we are on the same

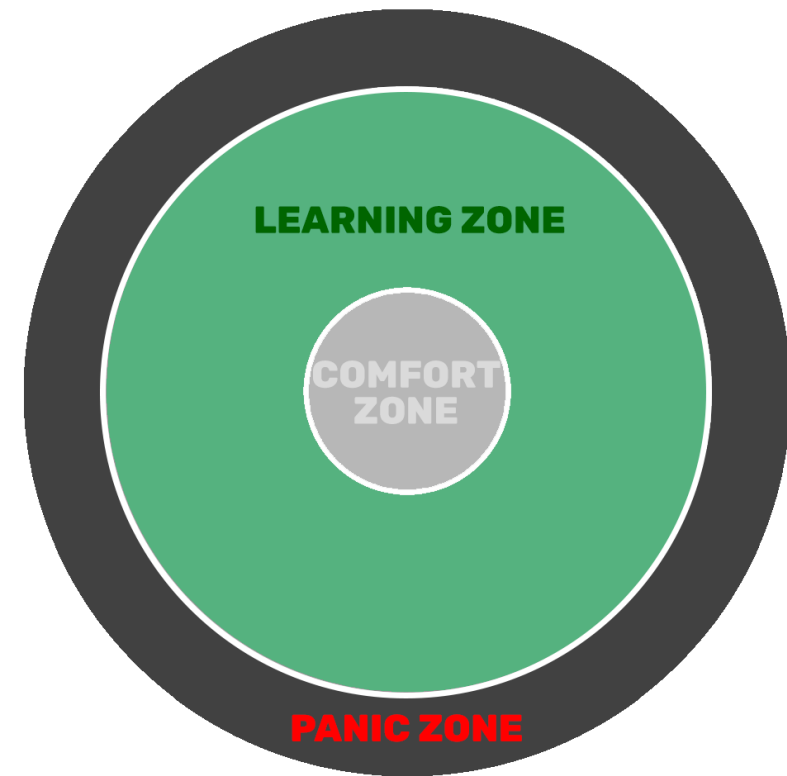


page, thinking that because we all care about migrant solidarity work, for example, we know what we're doing together. This is rarely the case. We need to clarify (and re-clarify) our vision and purpose as fully and explicitly as we can, so that people can be clear what they're committing to when they join a group or continue to work within one. This helps gather and align energies with a sense of coherence. When things go wrong or get difficult, it is so useful to have something clear and shared to come back to as a point of reference. We can think about overall organisational vision and purpose, and the specific vision and purpose we have for different strands of work and projects.

## 2. Attending to Group Formation

Paying attention to the process of the formation of a group is crucial. We need to think consciously about the kind of group, culture, values, needs, boundaries, membership etc, that will be part of getting people on the same page and managing or mitigating assumptions and expectations right from the start. It can be useful to open up space to explore the needs people bring into our groups, what causes them anxiety or fear, and what can support them to bring their best. These are valuable practices in the early stages of group formation, but long-standing groups and organisations also need to review these dimensions of group life regularly. The model of the learning zone, is one we have found particularly useful in working with group formation (see diagram).

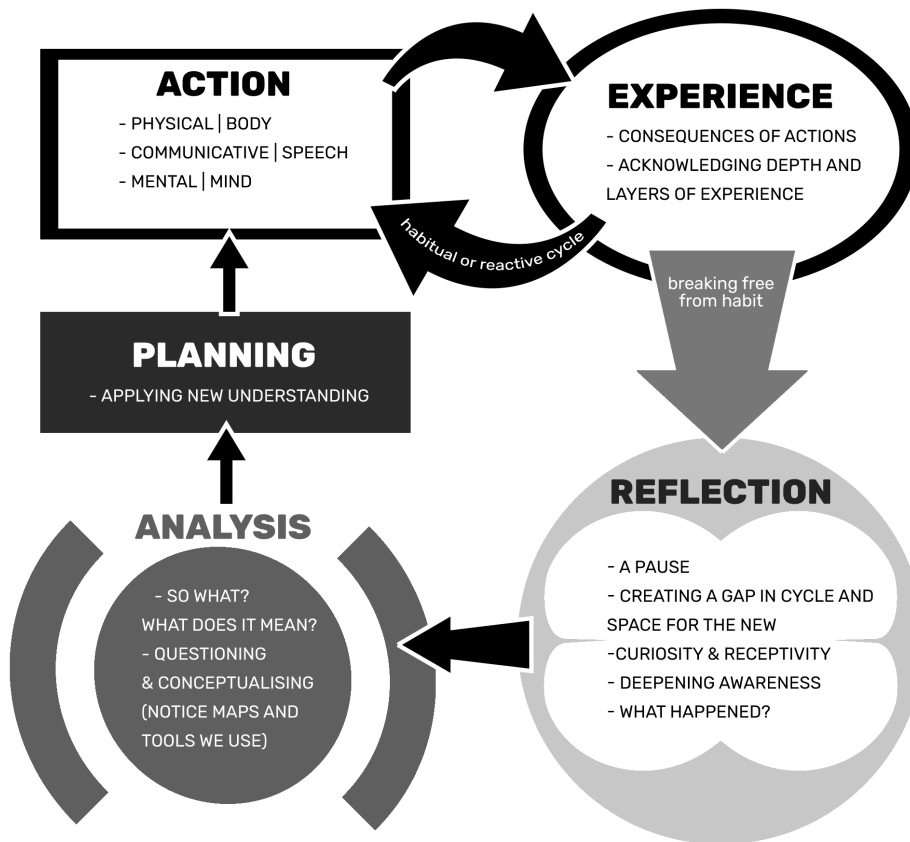
If we understand the group as a context for learning and growth, as a container which we establish together, within which we can explore, make mistakes, and stretch ourselves, then we frame a group culture that can support us to step into the 'learning zone' together. This is a space that is not so comfortable or familiar as to become lazy, nor is it so



challenging that it induces panic and leads to us shutting down. Exploring the question of how we can help each other step into the learning zone is a useful way to frame conversations about group agreements or codes of conduct, and building a culture that is both caring and challenging. It also offers a lens through which to reflect on our experiences of group life as they unfold, and bring a more level perspective to challenges that may emerge, especially in areas where we are likely to make mistakes (like around **active solidarity**, for example).

### 3. Using an Action-Learning Approach

We need strong vision and purpose to hold and return to, but, particularly in terms of resilience, we also need responsiveness, adaptability, the ability to learn from experience and mistakes. Everything is always changing - we need to embrace that, and, wherever possible, use it to our advantage!



Action-Learning Methodology is an approach to helping us make sure we don't get stuck in ruts and habits, repeating behaviours that aren't serving us, the relationships in the group, or our external endeavours.

This framework breaks down the necessary elements and steps that support effective learning. If we attend to each of these elements, we can nurture and strengthen our personal and collective ability to successfully adapt and respond. Responsive adaptability is the blood of resilience.

As with our Learning Zone framing above, here we see again that models/ ways of looking that help us welcome and expect learning and change, are key. Rather than hanging on rigidly to how we think things ought to be or how we want or expect them to be (which we do a lot!), we can nurture the adaptability and flexibility that will really serve resilience for our groups. (You can read more about this methodology [here](#)).

### 4. Understanding Participatory Process

Groups are always in process. Our ability to be aware of the dynamics of participation in these processes (the way power, personalities, roles and influence are at play) and the shape and patterns of these processes, can support healthy group culture. Knowing that periods of divergence and conflict are to be expected and can be integrated, is part of a creative process towards agreement and coherence. This helps us weather the challenging times with more forbearance, less anxiety and, hopefully, fewer explosions! Resilience in this context means developing the skills and sensibilities to hold the complexity of participatory process and make good decisions together. It means the development of skills and capacities to keep drawing on the wisdom and diversity of the group, ensuring that the whole remains greater than the sum of the parts, and avoiding unnecessary fracturing and crisis.

## 5. Balancing Task, Process and Relationship

Learning to balance task, process and relationship is essential for effective collaboration and nurturing group resilience. We come together as a group with a **task** to do, and that can often take most of our energy. That makes sense - we have come together to do something, and we need a clear sense of our task and shared commitment to it, for the group to thrive. But overemphasis on task neglects other important factors which, over time, will unbalance the whole.

To achieve this balance we need good **process**, the establishing and holding of structures and systems for making decisions, communication, delegation, accountability etc. This helps us ensure that the frameworks, agreements, and protocols are in place to enable us to pursue and fulfil our tasks efficiently and in a way that empowers people and manifests our values.

Often, we encounter groups where the task and the process are well attended to, but things are still not working out. That may be because our processes and structures are only as good as the people inhabiting them. The quality of the **relationships** within the group is often what we find neglected here. Failing to attend to the relational dynamics between us can have a significantly detrimental effect on the health of the group and its culture, no matter how well designed the processes, or how committed to achieving the task people are. The quality of relationship underpins all our collective efforts, and we need to put time and energy into strengthening and caring for our relationships, fostering trust, and paying attention to the quality of our communication and sense of connection. These things are crucial if we want our groups to be resilient and to thrive.

All groups are different and require different emphases at different times. Whatever your group's tendency is, applying the Task-Process-Relationship lens can help you to consciously cultivate a healthy collaborative culture and ensure adequate care and attention is given to all three dimensions.

## 6. Working with Power

One of the biggest challenges in group work is working with the dynamics of power. It is essential that we develop the ability and courage within our groups to face these issues skilfully, identify what's happening, become able to listen to one another, and find collective strategies and solutions. The more we can engage with each other creatively and respectfully around this topic, the less frightening or triggering it gets, and the more we can flourish as empowered individuals and as groups.

Resilience in this context is not only about strengthening our capacity to deconstruct unhelpful and undermining power dynamics. It is also about cultivating the skills to build empowering environments which allow people to bring their best to the group, find a space in which they can grow, and where we can all benefit from the richness and synergy that intersectionality can offer.

Easier said than done! But the resources listed at the end of the chapter should help.

## 7. Making Decisions Well

One of the key ways that power and its distribution manifests in groups and organisations is in the way decisions are made. Effective and appropriate decision-making lies at the heart of all good group process. All sorts of dynamics can show up when we are trying to make a decision together, conflicts can arise, resentment can grow, people can feel steamrollered, or the whole thing can take so long that we become deeply jaded, worn down and frustrated. Good decision-making practices and structures can completely transform the experience of being in a group. They offer us enhanced accountability, creativity, initiative and, on a good day, a sense of the synergetic power of collaboration! Apart from being more effective, this is also just a lot more enjoyable and resourcing.

## 8. Working with Conflict

The more we pay attention to the different areas explored in this chapter (and throughout this manual), the healthier our group cultures will be. As we apply the various practices, we'll lay good foundations for harmony and creative alignment between each other. And yet, even under the best conditions, conflict will sometimes happen, and that's okay! We just need to know what to do when it does.

It is important that we learn not to be conflict avoidant - sometimes conflict is healthy and necessary. But often it can escalate and cause real and lasting damage to people, organisations, and movements. It can be deeply unpleasant, undermining, and damaging to trust. So we do need to acquire skills and understanding to work well with conflict, face up to our differences, and find creative ways to have difficult conversations. Having a good 'justice system' for a group - a safety net and clear process for what happens when conflict arises (in advance of that happening) - is invaluable.

## 9. Working with Teams and 'Types'

We are all different. And this can bring diversity of skill, personality, and experience to our group. But it can also lead to misunderstanding, tension and difficulty. It is common in groups and teams to assume that other people are the same as us, that what we think and how we behave is what we can expect of others. But this is not the case, and we can save ourselves a lot of wasted energy and potential for conflict if we take the time to explore our differences and, hopefully, celebrate and utilise them to the advantage of our group.

Using some of the resources developed for looking at teams, types and diversity can help us to develop a more nuanced and inclusive way of understanding what is happening in a group, helping us to celebrate and harness the diversity of strengths and talents, and help everyone to bring their best.

## 10. Strategic Thinking and Planning

Strategic thinking is essential for moving from vision to effective action. It is key to enabling us to feel resourced and inspired by our collective effort, rather than diminished and burdened. After all, we have come together to achieve a purpose, and if we consistently fall short of achieving that, it is difficult for the group to thrive, at any level. Establishing good group practices for strategic planning and streamlined and adaptive implementation of our plans and actions will do so much to resource us, supporting us to avoid the pitfalls of confusion, unclarity, lack of 'progress' and wasted energy (and the inevitable frustration that produces).

Like anything else, this is a skill, and it can take a bit of effort to overcome resistance to these ways of working. Often we just want to 'get on with the task' and not feel hemmed in by (what can feel like) controlling mechanisms. But taking the time to develop skills in strategic thinking and planning will gain us time and enable us to become more responsive to an ever-changing world. Apart from anything else, by investing adequate time and energy in 'development', we reduce the energy and time required for the 'task'.

### **11. Strengthening Self and Collective Care**

We need to create spaces that are nurturing, forgiving, and affirming if we want our groups and their aims to succeed in the long run. These things are essential, if we want to be able to stick around and transform patterns of burnout and conflict. We all want to feel connected to others, to be seen, appreciated, and cared about. And when we create a collective sense of this, we will find that we work better together, and become more able to embody our values. Because we are often engaged in work and struggles that feel urgent and overwhelming, it can be difficult to prioritise this area.

### **12. Skilful Communication**

Group culture is significantly shaped by communication practices. There is enormous value in creating a communication culture where we aim to speak in ways that strengthen kindness, that are helpful and considered rather than reactive, and that increase harmony while also being truthful and courageous. With this, we need the knack of good listening - receptivity, respect, the capacity to see or feel beyond our own needs, preferences, and views. All this takes practice and commitment, of course. Developing the skills, awareness and group trust that allow us to

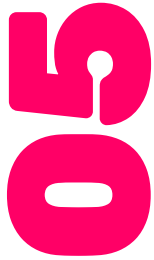
have conversations about challenging or important things, in ways that are creative and respectful, rather than creating division, will also help to reduce and mitigate the arising of conflict in our groups and strengthen resilience.

### **13. Cultivating Awareness and Emotional Literacy**

We can't really do any of this stuff effectively if we don't have the levels of awareness (of ourselves and of others) or the emotional literacy to know what is going on. Developing these skills (and they are skills we can cultivate) is central to creating a positive and functional group culture. Working deliberately on our minds and hearts is like making an intervention right at the roots of group culture, strengthening and transforming our capacity for creative engagement with each other - a powerful and profound point of agency.

### **And finally...**

Exploring group dynamics and looking at these areas can be tricky if you are working with a group where participants don't know each other. Using the experiential learning exercises, which create a situation where the group needs to collaborate on a task or make a decision, can be a useful way to explore and apply these tools and techniques, both with established groups or people coming together for training from different settings.



## ACTIVITIES: EXPLORING GROUPS AND ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

- Exploring Group Agreements and Group Culture
- Hearing the Needs of the Group (container building)
- Task - Process - Relationship
- Understanding Blended Decision Making
- Spectrum Lines (generic)
- Action – Reflection Spectrum Lines
- Raft game
- The Warehouse
- Power Paper
- Exploring Power with Chapati Diagrams
- Exploring Privilege and Rank
- Conflict Icebergs
- Conflict Sculptures
- Giving and Receiving Feedback

### ACTIVITY RESOURCES

- Annex: Helpful Perspectives on Privilege and Rank
- Understanding Power Map
- The Warehouse Sheet
- Annex: Working with Touch and Consent

### ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES

- Centering Blanket
- Mapping Mainstreams and Margins
- Step With Me
- Shame, Blame and Building Collective Resilience
- The Milling
- Diversity Welcome
- Bricks and Hammers
- Resilience Trees
- Structured Kind Regard Practice (meditative)
- First Impressions
- Exploring Identity Positions
- Exploring an Ecology of Strategies

### FURTHER READING

- Ulex Transformative Collaboration PRIMER
- Blue Sky Envisioning
- Diamond of Participatory Process
- Understanding Consensus Process
- Activities/Games from Theatre of the Oppressed
- Belbin Team Types
- Kolb Learning Styles
- MJB Learning Styles
- NVC intro
- Power and Privilege Handbook (NEON)
- Facilitators Guide to Participatory Decision-Making

## 06

# ACTIVE SOLIDARITY, EQUITY AND EMPOWERMENT

## Why?

As we know all too well, our work together sits within a global and historical system of interlocking forms of oppression. These shape the material, relational, and psychological conditions that influence every one of us. Unfortunately, as many of us will have witnessed, this means that within our groups and organisations, we are likely to reproduce mechanisms of oppression in terms of gender, racism, ableism, and so on. This often leads to personal and collective difficulties with the emergence of various kinds of trauma responses, anxiety, and the erosion of trust. Without the skills to identify and transform these things, they will give rise to tensions and misunderstandings, seriously undermining organisational resilience.

While our movements often champion inclusivity as a principle, in practice many organisations struggle to include the voices of those most impacted by the patriarchal and colonial capitalism we live within. We can

find ourselves reproducing the barriers to participation, empowerment and wellbeing that we see in the world around us. This is especially depleting for people who are already marginalised and discriminated against and needs to be addressed if our groups are to be genuinely empowering and transformative spaces.

The practices of active solidarity, equity, and empowerment in this section are intended to help us to better embody the values we strive for. Through these practices we learn to transform relationships of inequality, oppression and disempowerment into relationships of solidarity and mutual agency. As we refine these skills we can begin to create groups and organisations which better exemplify these core values in their structures, practices, and in the ways we treat each other. Our organisations and movements can become more creative, courageous, and effective, while we come to be fuelled more by compassion and care and less by guilt, blame or reactivity.

Through this kind of work, we can become increasingly skilled in transforming harmful tensions and conflict into enriching growth opportunities, and through better working with diversity, we can include a wider range of perspectives, experiences, and histories, for more adaptable, resilient, and powerful movements.



## What do we mean by active solidarity, equity and empowerment?

In the most general sense 'active solidarity, equity and empowerment' can refer to *all the work that has to do with naming, identifying, deconstructing and transforming existing power dynamics related to the systems of oppression we function within* - capitalism, white supremacy, ageism, ableism, patriarchy, heteronormativity and others. In this section we are focusing more specifically on the internal life of our groups and organisations and how we can adopt practices that challenge and transform structural oppression in the ways we organise and relate to each other.

When we speak about 'oppression', we understand it in terms of *systems of structural power that have been established historically and give certain constituted groups of people influence and dominance over and at the expense of others*. These systems of power are structural in the sense that they are built into and perpetuated through specific institutions and reinforcing cultural norms.

These institutions can include forms of government, education systems, economic structures, religions, and laws. And within our groups, they show up in the ways decisions are made, how power is distributed, our economic relationships, and the ways certain voices are valued over others.

Institutional structures tend to embody particular beliefs about the world and humanity, which often coalesce as ideologies. Whereas ideologies are generally conscious, social systems are also underpinned by less

conscious preferences and assumptions which manifest through cultural norms (for example through the performance of gender roles or individualistic competitiveness). Through the process of socialisation we unconsciously internalise these norms in ways that both shape who we are and that further reproduce them throughout society.

Institutions and cultural norms tend to reinforce what is widely *accepted and valued within a society*. Obvious examples include the way that traditional capitalist societies promoted the social norm of heterosexual marriage both as a cultural bias and by inscribing its value in preferential legal and economic structures, or the way that the preferencing of able-bodiedness can be seen both in the stigma associated with non-normative bodies and in the development of architecture that has often failed to meet diverse mobility needs. (This is not to ignore incredible gains won by activists in these areas, in recent years).

The interplay between institutions and cultural norms can serve to reproduce oppressive structures all the way from explicit material conditions (like economic inequality) right down to our innermost thoughts and feelings (like self-worth and confidence). Those who do not conform to these norms, experience oppression in the sense that *they are not afforded the levels of influence, opportunity, investment and attention (privileges)* often given to those who do conform to them. Along with this they may be stigmatised, subjected to subtle or explicit forms of exclusion, scapegoating and hatred or regarded as legitimate victims of violence or discrimination.

The approach we are advocating means active engagement in deconstructing and transforming oppression and privilege at multiple levels - personal, interpersonal, socio-cultural and institutional. It involves becoming aware of how intersecting power dynamics play out in our groups and the development of skills to transform them in ways that can enhance empowerment and fuller participation for us all. It aims at building a **culture of care** and spaces for transformation and growth, rather than taking a self-righteous approach to 'cancelling' or undermining others in ways that fragment and reproduce mistrust. We want to empower each other more, not less!

Within all of our groups (in one way or another) forms of oppression connected with the wider systems of oppression will show up unavoidably. Due to their pervasive and historic nature, they will often bring significant pain with them. They will produce visible or invisible dynamics connected with social privilege, influence, power and entitlement. But in addition to these, every group will include other specific experiences, norms, values and the dynamics related to subcultures, organisational types, and individual psychology. Systemic oppression is not the only factor influencing the relationality and culture of a group, and there are many ways that systemic oppression intersects with accrued influence, rank, and other kinds of power dynamics that can make matters complex to navigate! All of this points to the need to develop nuanced skills for working creatively with these issues.

Active solidarity is a transformative practice requiring both energy and patience. We need to be able to recognise that oppression is doing real and immediate harm, that must be addressed through acknowledgement and accountability, *and* that deep transformation of these tendencies is a long-term process that also involves mistakes, forgiveness, developing emotional literacy and a gradual deepening of mutual understanding.

## How do we practice this?

Doing this work well requires nuance and wisdom, as well as the patience, emotional resilience and robustness we have already referred to. This is a lifelong practice and there are no quick-fix solutions. Here are some useful areas to reflect on and consider when looking to establish or deepen an active solidarity practice within groups or organisations.

### 1. Basic education

An obvious starting point is to ensure that everyone has at least a basic knowledge of how gender, race, class, sexuality, neurodiversity, and body and mind abilities influence power dynamics and what can be done to work consciously and skillfully with these issues. This can help to reduce problems that often arise due to lack of awareness.

Oppression dynamics are almost always more visible to those who are institutionally and socially marginalised, because their negative effects are felt much more keenly. Unfortunately, this means that often the responsibility and energy of bringing these things up, naming them and educating others about them is deferred to those most affected and harmed by them. This is exhausting work!

It is important that our groups do not rely on members of unprivileged or marginalised groups to do the emotional labour of educating others. It is so important that we find ways to support each other in creating cultures of responsibility and engagement around solidarity, equity and empowerment. As active group members, and as facilitators, it's essential that we take clear steps to support our own and others' learning journeys in these areas, especially if our identities or positions are socially endorsed.

## 2. Acknowledging power and privilege

*Social privilege is an unearned advantage that a person is either born into or acquires during their lifetime, often linked with conforming (or not) to social norms such as gender or able-bodiedness. (More on social privileges here).*

The way we are treated and perceived by other people is always, at least partially, happening through the lens of our social privileges and, as we have seen, when we have privilege, it is often invisible to us. It is crucial for members of our groups to understand and become aware of privilege and the dynamics associated with it, in order that we avoid its reproduction.

Being socially privileged (like being socially marginalised) is not an individual characteristic - it is a *systemic* characteristic that shows up at an individual level. It is not chosen by an individual but ascribed to them by society, based on (constructed) social group membership. Recognising privilege is not about blaming those who benefit from it, nor about feeling guilty or ashamed of our social positioning. It is about becoming aware of the existing dynamics, in order that we are better able to transform them and more fully support one another's empowerment and flourishing for the benefit of everyone!

## 3. Emotional awareness, building trust and embracing discomfort

To be able to engage with this work sustainably, we need to develop **awareness and emotional literacy** and learn how to build and rebuild trust in our **relationships and groups**. This emotional intelligence helps us to work creatively with symptoms of wounding, defensiveness (our own and that of others), and the anger and fear that often surface when we engage with these issues. It is a requirement for supporting the necessary

processes of healing. We will need to become competent in **working with discomfort, guilt and shame**, as well as in cultivating courage and openness.

In a world inscribed by exploitation and abuse, building trust can be a slow process. Within groups where people carry histories of oppression and discrimination, we can't really be surprised if trust and safety don't come easily. It is important to remember that our capacities and tendencies in this area will be strongly influenced by our life experiences, socialisation, where we are on the neurodiversity spectrum and our early experiences with relationship building. In the challenges of this area, managing our expectations of one another and ourselves, and bringing as much understanding and patience as possible, is part of the work!

## 4. Addressing oppressive behaviour and dealing with conflicts

There is no best strategy for addressing oppressive behaviour. The strategies we adopt need to be based on analysing a variety of factors: the wellbeing of the person being affected; what is best for the group/ community involved; factors that led to the event; and the particular situation of the person who caused harm (there is a difference between a person repeatedly causing harm and refusing to be accountable for it, and a person committing a mistake and being willing to change their behaviour).

In most cases people act in oppressive ways out of ignorance or lack of knowledge and not out of ill will. We need to acknowledge this, while at the same time not ignoring the oppressive behaviours. We will need to make a decision on whether it is better and safer to address the issue in the whole group or whether it is something better talked about with people individually, or a combination of both.

The most important thing is to see, acknowledge and name the damage caused by oppressive behaviours - and to protect people from further harm. These are the first and necessary steps for healing and rebuilding the safety in a group. We will need to consider whether and what kind of space we make to address the issue. We might hold a specific session on anti-oppression work or on a specific kind of antagonism or discrimination; we might need to hold a conflict resolution or restorative space for the group; we might need to come back to our group agreements and adjust or improve them. Some form of group discussion can be necessary in these situations (even if the majority of the restorative work is happening in smaller/less collectively visible contexts), but this needs to be facilitated well, being mindful to not put the responsibility of educating others on those who were marginalised or hurt. We need to use accountability mechanisms that are rooted in core values of care and compassion, rather than reproduce a culture of shame, blame and individualisation.

### **5. Failing, giving and receiving feedback, and establishing accountability structures**

As we have said, acknowledging fallibility and the high chances of “getting it wrong” at times, is really crucial to healthy engagement with this work. We need to embrace making mistakes and learn how to fail with an open heart! The first step is to understand the bigger picture and connect with the deeper motivations for doing work on active solidarity. If our motivation can come from a place of love and commitment to a better world, rather than obligation and fear of doing something wrong, we are more likely to stay inspired and resilient, even when failing at it.

Key to this area is creating structures and mechanisms for sharing experience and giving feedback. We need to make it easy for one another to communicate about what we need and what is and isn’t working for us in terms of active solidarity. We need to know where to go with this stuff when it comes up, and, ideally, we need to be clear and explicit in what our shared commitments to these things are. A lot of this is covered in the activities on **Exploring Group Agreements and Group Culture, and Hearing the Needs of the Group**.

And as we have already said, because of the often inconspicuous nature of these dynamics, when someone points out oppressive attitudes or language, it is important to build a collective practice of believing, taking an interest and listening, in order to learn about what is going on.

### **6. Moving beyond polarisation**

The dominant traditions of Western thinking have been highly dualistic. Good-Bad, Right-Wrong, Us-Them, Masculine-Feminine, Body-Mind, Matter-Spirit and so on, pervade our ways of seeing. These dualistic frameworks give rise to blame, shame and essentialism, which can get in the way of a deeper transformative approach to active solidarity.

Of course, in our lives and political work it is important to be able to identify the existence of antagonism, differences of power and responsibility, and the presence of conflicting demands or needs. Dissolving differences into a non-discriminated ‘oneness’ is damaging, disempowering, and reactionary. Nevertheless, it is common in activist and solidarity groups to reproduce polarising ways of thinking that are very unhelpful. Those who fail to uphold certain behaviours, views or standards (which have become norms in activist ‘woke’ culture) are often

treated as 'bad' and ostracised or 'othered' in ways which directly correspond with wider social patterning. Unhelpful binary categorisations emerge ("either you get it or you don't", "either you're an ally or you're an opponent"). We do this kind of ostracising and othering with parts of ourselves too!

The wounding, trauma and anxiety present within activist groups, as a result of existing and historic oppression, can feed into these tendencies. As a way of protecting ourselves and asserting boundaries needed for personal safety, we can often shut down and fall into simplistic ways of thinking. This is understandable and its necessity or usefulness in certain moments needs to be acknowledged. Nevertheless, the gradual deconstruction of these polarising tendencies is important in our work to heal oppression, trauma and the impacts of violence.

We need to become more adept at holding the complexities and (often irresolvable) tensions of things never being as simple as This-or-That (while maintaining a reasonable amount of discernment!). This means embracing both a less polarised way of looking, while developing the emotional capacities to tolerate discomfort, explored under point 3.

**Note for trainers:**

These practices are relevant for our organisations, but also need to be modelled within the training environment. As facilitators (either in a formal role or less formally within a peer-learning context), we can do a lot to transform existing power structures and challenge oppressive social relations, including the dynamics embedded in traditional educational methods. We should aim to use our facilitator's influence to bring awareness to existing power dynamics and address relevant issues where possible. To engage with emerging tensions requires understanding, courage and emotional resourcing, as we have seen. The chapters on **emotional literacy** and **working with difficult emotion**, offer clear strategies for building the kind of resilience and ease that can support us to become more robust in our active solidarity work. The Facilitator's Anti-Oppression Toolkit, offers additional guidance.

## 06

**ACTIVITIES:  
EXPLORING ACTIVE SOLIDARITY, EQUITY AND  
EMPOWERMENT**

- Diversity Welcome
- Step with Me
- Mapping Mainstreams and Margins
- First Impressions

**ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES**

- Exploring Group Agreements and Group Culture
- Hearing the Needs of the Group (container building)
- The Milling
- Resilience Trees
- Exploring Power with Chapati Diagrams
- Conflict Icebergs
- Conflict Sculptures
- Giving and Receiving Feedback
- Three Step Breathing Space: AGE (meditative)
- Self Solidarity Practice (meditative)
- Structured Kind Regard Practice (meditative)
- Open Sentences

**ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES (ctd...)**

- The Truth Circle
- Centering Blanket
- Centering Practice
- Spectrum Lines (generic)
- Power Paper
- Shame, Blame and Building Collective Resilience
- Introduction to Trauma Awareness
- Exploring Secondary Trauma
- Exploring Identity Positions
- Personal Identity and Complexity
- Reflecting on Our Political Identities
- Movement Timelines
- Movement Mapping
- Perceiving and Responding to Threats

**FURTHER READING**

- Ulex anti-oppression tool kit
- Annex: Active Solidarity Terminology and Definitions
- Annex: Examples of privilege and calling in / calling out
- Annex: Cultural appropriation
- Annex: Working with Touch and Consent

## 07

TRAUMA INFORMED  
APPROACHES

## Why?

In recent years the dynamics of trauma and its impact on individuals and groups has been getting more and more attention within communities involved in solidarity work and other forms of activism. People doing this kind of work are likely to meet trauma frequently, in their own experiences of oppression and marginalisation, through close witnessing of the experience of others facing harm and discrimination, and through encountering violence and repression carried out by state and non-state actors against them.

As a consequence of the violence and harm done by the systems and institutions of oppression we live within, trauma is a pervasive issue. In terms of resilience, it should be obvious that the impacts of trauma have the potential to seriously undermine us, our groups, and our movements. Bringing awareness to the impacts of trauma on ourselves and our work we see that:

**Trauma obstructs and drains.** Existing in the body as a kind of constriction or blockage (like an unconscious protection mechanism) it prevents the easy flow of energy, awareness, emotion and breathing in the body. This in turn inhibits wellbeing, flexibility, adaptation and new learning. Being contracted and constricted in these ways is also a form of tension that uses up and drains embodied energy. There are clear links between trauma and burnout.

**Trauma confuses.** Our capacities for clarity, objectivity and vision are impacted because of the way the mind can become distorted, dulled, and obscured by trauma. These mental experiences are protection mechanisms, like subtle forms of dissociation, which allow us to avoid pain or intensity, but prevent our minds from working at their best.

**Trauma disempowers.** By trapping people in habitual cycles of anxiety and fear, it can hold us back from giving the best of ourselves and fulfilling our full potential. It can make it very difficult to get out of our comfort/safety zones and into the learning zone, so that we easily end up straight in the panic zone when challenged. (More on the zones model [here](#)).

**Trauma disconnects.** Traumatic experience undermines our effectiveness and full expression of our agency, by disconnecting us from our sense of self, our bodies and our feelings. It also leads to disconnection from others, weakens our capacity to build trust, and can leave us seeking to withdraw. When poorly understood, trauma can underpin a wide range of relational difficulties, undermining our capacity to collaborate and work well together.



Given these impacts, it is clear that to empower and resource our solidarity and activist work we need to develop strategies for attending to and transforming the impacts of trauma on ourselves and our communities. Developing our understanding and skills for working with trauma is crucial in our efforts to build resilience for ourselves and our organisations. Employing methods for processing some of the 'charged' material around trauma, and by sharing practices that help to steadily dissolve some of the blocks in our experience, we can help address barriers to growth and learning, opening up transformative opportunities for ourselves and those we work with.



## Understanding trauma

### What is it?

Trauma shows up as a range of mind/body symptoms connected with life experiences in which intense stress or threat to ourselves or others (perceived or actual), has overwhelmed our natural defensive responses. This experience of being unable to respond effectively to protect ourselves, leaves a residual energy connected with the incomplete threat response, which disrupts and imbalances our bodies, our thoughts, our memory structure and our emotional patterns. The most severe symptoms relate to experiences of helplessness, collapsed shutdown and/or feeling trapped and unable to escape. Trauma can also be the result of accumulated exposure to sustained experiences of disempowerment and social oppression, both as these experiences impact us directly and through bearing witness to their impacts on others.

Trauma is currently understood as being principally held as embodied memory. Many innovative trauma-informed approaches prioritise carefully and compassionately bringing to awareness, fully feeling, releasing and integrating these residual, unconscious embodied impacts of trauma, using a broad range of practices and techniques (more on this below).

The term 'trauma', as a label for experience, can be unhelpfully overstretched and overused. However, contemporary perspectives on the body, race, non-binary gender experience and body normativity have brought attention to a relevant *spectrum* of embodied experiences. Such perspectives highlight not only those severe symptoms associated with a

diagnosis of **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** - “Trauma with a big T”, as non-binary therapist Alex Iantaffi calls it - but also the more gradual yet still considerable mind, body and emotional health impacts connected to sustained experiences of fear, anxiety, intense stress and persistent disempowerment, or “trauma with a small t”. Thinking about trauma as a range on a spectrum of experience intensity offers a useful way of cultivating the kind of care, patience, and awareness that can serve people wherever they are on this spectrum.

Trauma is also increasingly understood as much more than a personal wounding or individualised pain to be treated by therapists. Many contemporary perspectives on trauma highlight the political dimensions of power and social identity and aim to develop collective healing practices that can transform the social and relational conditions that generate trauma.

Solidarity work and activism, that seeks to engage transformatively with structural violence and oppression, almost inevitably involves encounters with or experiences related to trauma. In these contexts, ‘trauma with a big T’ can happen through directly experiencing or witnessing repression and violence in the context of our work or actions. It is not uncommon for activists to also enter their activist work carrying developmental or attachment traumas from earlier life, as well as social traumas that can impact upon their activist experience, making them more vulnerable to other forms of trauma and burnout. So, what can we do about it?

## Trauma informed practices and strategies

Throughout the various chapters of this handbook, we share a wide range of practices and tools that can help to lay groundwork and sustain some basic conditions that will help individuals to engage with and process trauma. Through these **awareness, emotional literacy, body-based** and **group** practices we can learn to:

- Safely release past and present emotional/physical pain
- Soften contracted, habitual, defensive patterns (felt as tension) creating space and resourcing
- Restore feeling and strength to body parts that have become obscured from awareness offering information, feedback and integration
- Rebalance the nervous system and ease anxiety and reactivity
- Establish new physical ‘shapes’ and more expansive and connective possibilities
- Effectively process (and reduce) overwhelm experiences, helping towards sustainability and burnout prevention
- Create relational and group cultures that support healing, integration and transformation at multiple levels.

This section builds on these practices and augments them with specific insights and considerations for developing a trauma informed approach.

It is worth mentioning that we would not expect all groups to be appropriate contexts for this level of trauma engagement and that, as with some of the **working with difficult emotion** material, establishing the right conditions (in terms of longevity, trust and so on) would be a requirement.

### **Therapeutic Support and Supervision**

Although we want to emphasise the importance of affirming and strengthening our capacity to offer and find peer support in this kind of work, it is important to start with acknowledging that in many cases support from professional and trained therapists can be needed. Working with deeply held and historic trauma can be challenging. Attempts to process it in spaces with insufficient safety or understanding can compound trauma. If we feel professional support is needed, it is important to take care in choosing appropriate support. Not all therapists will understand or be sympathetic to the socio-political context of our work. Although our motives for the work we do are bound to be mixed and complex, it is not unusual for unsympathetic therapists to see activism and social change work as some kind of displacement or psychological dysfunctionality, and to assume that conformity to wider social norms is a sign of mental health. It is important to find someone who can bring a politically informed understanding to trauma and who is less likely to pathologise your solidarity or activist work.

In many human rights defence organisations, where encountering traumatic experience is common or likely to have cumulative impacts, ensuring adequate provision of 'supervision' or formal spaces to debrief and process these experiences is vital. Although it can be difficult for organisations to prioritise resourcing these 'services' to staff, there can be no question that even at the most basic economic evaluation the increased wellbeing, retention of staff, and capacity in the workplace,

makes this an obvious priority for investment. Supervision can be provided by contracted professionals or by trained staff members, both for individuals and in a group context.

### **DIY, Peer-to-Peer Approaches, and Cultures of Care**

There are many reasons why professional support and formal supervision might not be appropriate. For a start, and as we have said, the therapeutic model tends to reinforce de-politicised understandings of mental health and wellbeing, by individualising the problems and the solutions. Additionally, in less formal settings (volunteer networks and grassroots organisations) there is often little capacity to resource this kind of professional support. Instead, we can learn and share skills to strengthen DIY, peer-to-peer approaches and cultures of care.

There have been attempts to respond to activist trauma with these kinds of approaches, especially as developed by the widely respected work of **Activist Trauma Support**, Out of Action, and Support and Recovery Teams. Still, in general, trauma work can be avoided, being seen as private pain, individual weakness, and/or too risky for a non-professional person to go near. The inability of groups and collectives to compassionately and skilfully hold the distress of one or more of their members can painfully compound damage. We lose people from our groups and movements this way, through gaps in our collective care.

To help to address these challenges we can learn how to recognise, hold, and work through some of that trauma collectively - as well as being clear when to signpost our companions to appropriate and sympathetic skilled support as needed. Over time we can build our capacity and skill to support politicised healing practices that enable us to process the psycho-emotional impacts of our socio-political work together while also healing and transforming the impacts of structural oppression.

## Strengthening Our Capacity to Create Trauma Informed Groups and Spaces

### 1. Psychoeducation: Understanding What is Going On

The physiological processes related to trauma are complex and only just beginning to be fully understood. But understanding some of the theory can help us to make sense of what is going on when difficulties are surfacing. Providing, reading and studying basic psychoeducational material within our groups - such as this chapter and the content of the accompanying sessions - is a valuable place to start.

Trauma symptoms and the effects on the body of stressful experiences are connected to the involuntary responses that our *autonomic nervous system* mobilises in response to a perceived threat to life or self-integrity. The word perceived is important here - it is what our body senses is threatening that matters in understanding our responses, not the event itself, nor what our mind rationalises and thinks about the event later. An event or stimulus that one body perceives as totally overwhelming due to a unique set of life experiences and memories, may not even register in awareness for another body with a different set of experiences and memories.

It is useful to be aware how trauma can manifest as conflict and patterns of blaming and shaming in groups, undermining collaborations through polarisation. Of course, it is not only trauma that leads to group breakdown or difficulty, and neither is every painful experience evidence for the presence of trauma, but the idea of the trauma spectrum is useful again here.

### 2. Keeping Resilience in Sight and Affirming Our Own Capabilities

It is important to affirm our 'innate' capacity to work with trauma. Many people carry stresses in their body that consistently undermine their health and wellbeing. Yet they also carry tremendous resilience and strength. Working skilfully with trauma relies on using the underlying intelligence of our bodies to help us move through and transform blocks and patterns.

### 3. Creating Safe Enough Conditions: Structure, Trust, and Group Building

Healing work requires conditions where our bodies feel safe enough to start their natural process of discharge, release, and restoration. Such conditions give our bodies an opportunity to relax and rebalance.

As we have said, there is a clear relationship between unprocessed collective/personal trauma and cycles of group conflict and breakdown. Suppressed toxic pain and rage can do serious damage to working relationships when it leaks or explodes into group spaces. Since trauma is generated by disempowering and disregarding relationships, it must be transformed in empowering relationships that help restore visibility, authenticity and trust. Personal and group time needs to be given to creating safe enough relational conditions for one another to heal and thrive. Empathy, honesty, self-responsibility and non-judgemental kind regard are essential ingredients.

All groups require a good amount of '**container' construction and maintenance**, as well as attendance to trust and relationship building, in order to hold and support whatever is being explored or may come up in the group. Generally speaking, the more of this there is, the safer and more resilient/adaptive the group will be. The practices and

considerations found in these resources on **Groups and Organisational Culture** and **Active Solidarity** are very relevant. We need to be developing skills and practices that strengthen our capacity for empathy, promote active listening skills, enable us to give and receive feedback sensitively and honestly, as well as cultivate respect, integrity and accountability in our relationships.

If we are opening up spaces in our groups to explore the experience of trauma (or even just emotionally intense or painful experiences) it is important to consider the context and framing. This means that as a rule of thumb, if there is an intention to engage with emotionally challenging material, it should happen with clear preparation and with time for absorption afterwards. This means:

1. Clarifying expectations and giving people the information they need to prepare themselves for what's coming and consent to it - without adding stress or being alarmist!
2. Giving time to container building and creating trust in the group
3. Finding time for 'decompression', 'recovery' or processing spaces, if they are needed
4. Providing some form of closure and opportunities for the harvesting and integration of meaning.

We also need to consider who is in relationship with whom, and how we support the growing of allyship and trust amongst our group members. There will be power dynamics in the group, character differences and a diversity of experiences and views that need to be thought about when working with challenging material or trauma.

#### 4. Supporting Body Connectivity and Somatic Awareness

If we cannot feel our bodies fully enough, we cannot access many of the signals that help us to sense/feel into our present experience. This means the sense of self is compromised, and, without a clear sense of self, it is hard to find a grounding for agency and purposeful, consciously chosen action. Developing our capacity to **feel into the body**, to recognise the patterning and holding of tensions related to trauma, and develop the skills to gently hold, transform and release those patterns, has a key part to play in healing trauma responses. Although we often need to take it slowly and be respectful and gentle with ourselves, **body based practices** offer key resources to working effectively with trauma for ourselves and our colleagues.

Some related practices:

- **Trauma sensitive mindfulness**
- Practices which release stress, emotional holding and tension through working with the PSOAS system - eg. **Trauma Release Exercises (TRE)**
- **Trauma Sensitive Yoga**
- **Practices to support centering and grounding**
- Practices of working with the breath (**1** and **2**)
- **Practices which support expansion and boundary recognition/setting**
- **Self Defence Practices.**

#### 5. Encouraging Emotional Connection and Being With What We Feel

The emotions associated with traumatic experiences are some of the most primal and overwhelming, such as terror, rage, desolation, and revulsion. These are emotions we are least likely to consider acceptable or to express publicly, so they are commonly silenced and suppressed. They also get mixed, in complex ways, with the social emotion of shame and humiliation.

Gradually, and over time, we need to find ways to feel and release the tension around these emotions. There is nothing wrong with the emotions themselves - they are simply sensations in the body to be felt, full of life, meaning and information. However, the tensions and blockages that can accompany them, the tiredness that holding-on produces, the fear of suffering and overwhelm they carry with them, and the unpredictability of behaviours or actions they might produce, are the problematic elements. As well as strengthening our relational and group containers to support us, we can also develop our personal capacities for holding difficult emotions in ways that no longer overwhelm and destabilise us. This takes time, patience, humility and self-compassion (and sometimes too, the support of therapeutic or trauma professionals).

## 6. Regulating our Nervous System States

It can be useful to think of the impacts of trauma as a kind of unbalancing of our nervous system. As part of both embodiment and emotional connectivity (above) we can develop skills in restoring our nervous systems to balance - which can be very useful in addressing burnout, stress and trauma.

Through practices such as **nervous system mapping**, and awareness and interpretation of body states, we can begin to recognise indicators such as muscle tension, trembling and 'butterflies', feelings of constriction in the body, sense of heaviness and lightness, facial and eye shape changes, energy levels, changes to breathing and heart rate, and so on. Generally speaking, it can be useful to understand how, when triggered or challenged, the body and nervous system can become over-stimulated (activation/hyperarousal) or under-stimulated (shut-down/hypoarousal). Knowing this, we can develop practices for

'down-regulation' and 'up-regulation' to help us work with these responses. Examples of down-regulating practices include: silence and solitude; reduced stimulation; soothing contact with nature, animals, or other people (including consensual touch); breath practices (emphasising the out breath). Examples of up-regulating practices include: gentle sensory stimulation such as sitting in the sun or listening to music; safe/non-triggering communication or physical contact with others; careful work with the in-breath; energising, gentle body work or exercise.

## 10

**ACTIVITIES:  
EXPLORING TRAUMA**

- Introduction to Trauma Awareness
- Trauma Do's and Don't's
- Body Tapping Technique (regulation)
- Orientation / Name 3 Things in the Space Technique (regulation)
- Yes/No/Maybe – Boundary Setting
- Sitting Back to Back

**ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES**

- Centering Blanket
- Centering Practice
- Body Scanning Practice (meditative)
- Structured Kind Regard Practice (meditative)
- Three Step Breathing Space: AGE (meditative)
- Self Solidarity Practice (meditative)
- The Milling
- Sit Spot
- Going to Ground – lying down meditation
- Interrelationship of the 4 Heart Practices (meditative)
- Following Hands
- Exploring Identity Positions
- Perceiving and Responding to Threats

**ACTIVITY RESOURCES**

- Heart Practices Diagram
- Annex: Working with Touch and Consent

**FURTHER READING**

- Annex: Trauma Theory
- Annex: Guidelines on Trauma Informed Training Practice and Design
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Finding a Therapist
- Approaches to Trauma Support
- Activist Trauma Support
- Nervous System Mapping



## 08

**GUILT, SHAME AND  
WITNESSING HARM**

## Why?

Human bodies are connected and communicate with each other non-verbally through attunement and resonance. This is a source of strength - we can bring calm and balance to each other, as well as offer support to other people using our own feelings of safety or ease as a resource at times of crisis. It is also a vulnerability - this sensitive attunement means our systems respond to witnessing other beings in danger and distress. Our survival responses can be activated by seeing others at risk, even if we are not directly threatened ourselves.

Activists and organisers consistently place themselves in the world in ways that involve them witnessing and attending to suffering and injustice. For many of us this involves facing and feeling our own oppression and the harm inflicted on our communities. For others working in allyship and solidarity, the trauma of bearing witness (also known as secondary trauma, vicarious trauma and trauma exposure response) gives rise to specific challenges in our day to day work.

This form of indirect, relational stress, which arises through witnessing the trauma and suffering related to social, ecological and economic injustice can have its own significant impact. For climate activists it can involve a relentless awareness of the immensity of the damage being caused to human communities and the non-human world and a pressing sense of deep urgency. It can be overwhelming.

People doing humanitarian work involving frequent witnessing of trauma (see for example the **International RC** and **The Headington Institute**) have identified a range of survival and coping strategies developed by volunteer workers who are regularly bearing witness to the traumatic experience of others. These coping strategies can include;

**Constant activity.** It isn't uncommon for people to keep working in order to not have to deal with the cumulative impact of pain and stress on their systems. It can become 'easier' to keep going than to stop and deal with what has become 'too much' for the conscious mind.

**Denial and numbing out.** Another related strategy involves disconnecting and disassociating from our feelings, or denying the feelings are there. We try to stop responding or we seek experiences or substances that help us to minimise our felt responses.

**Disengagement.** We can begin to steadily disengage, to avoid feelings of helplessness generated when we recognise the limits of what we can personally do to help those who are threatened. This experience of 'not being able to do enough to help' can lead to the phenomena called '**moral injury**'.

**Displaced emotion and other outlets.** We might find other ways to 'let out' feelings in ways that seem more acceptable or are more readily available to us (anger directed at colleagues for instance). This can have an impact on our health and those we work with, potentially generating conflict and other forms of harm.

Although these strategies can enable a degree of coping, none of them allow for adequate processing of experience and tend to gradually lead to disconnection or overload. In the long run and most often, our bodies will not cooperate with having their needs overridden - they will find a way to communicate unmet needs through stress related ill health or otherwise 'inexplicable' symptoms and syndromes (migraines for example, digestive difficulties or lower back/pelvic pain).

It is common for people working in frontline situations or tackling immense challenges like climate justice to find a cumulative experience of despair, cynicism and loss of hope in the possibility of change, beginning to undermine their ability to respond to ongoing and complex situations. These feelings of ineffectiveness, overwhelm, despondency and deep disillusionment can take us by surprise. They can unexpectedly and gradually become dominant in the experience for people who have felt highly committed and motivated in their work for many years.

The combination of unprocessed, suppressed/denied **emotions**, unrelieved stress, **trauma** exposure, and isolation from wider support networks, are common causes of **deep burnout**. For this reason, building in strategies and practices for recognising and processing these aspects of secondary trauma, are an essential part of effective regenerative practice.

## Guilt and shame as obstacles to resilient activism

Reflecting on her experience in the migrant camp known as the Calais Jungle in northern France, Justine Corrie writes in **The New Internationalists**:



*I noticed that many of the volunteers appeared to be suffering from a complex mix of guilt, shame and secondary trauma, partly induced by the relentless daily witnessing of others' traumatic experiences without any filter, training or guidance. On top of this some were in a state of denial about their own symptoms and if they did recognise any symptoms they did not think they should be 'allowed' to have them"* (ebook p1006)

The Activist Trauma Support Network observed similar experiences among European No Borders activist volunteers. Workers and volunteers face the intense reality of border violence, state power, structural racism, far right pressure and economic exclusion. This combines with their moral commitments to social justice to add a sense of pressure to personally disassociate themselves from the racism and xenophobia embedded in their own culture, and to somehow 'compensate' towards those impacted. This is compounded by peer pressures to 'get it right' and live up to a range of subcultural and socio-political ideals. These factors contribute to feelings of shame, guilt and anger, which then very often underpin reluctance among activists to practice self and collective care.

Climate activists also often find themselves confronted by the stark injustices of a system that simultaneously bestows upon them privileges related to race, class, and citizenship or nationality. It can be difficult to bear the awareness of one's own unearned privilege in the face of the suffering, disempowerment, and marginalisation of others directly impacted by the system that grants you those advantages. At the same time, the way our lives are inextricably intertwined with the very systems of production and consumption that are causing damage, can leave us feeling deeply compromised. The ensuing complex of discomfort, guilt and sense of complicity can lead people to try to 'cancel' their privilege out through denying themselves care and access to support, along with other self-sacrificial tendencies. For many white-identified or white-passing people involved in climate justice work, this has the potential to coalesce around racialised anxiety and shame.

Staci Haines uses the term 'over-accountability' to refer to shame linked to being in 'impossible situations' where we feel overwhelmed and under-resourced to respond. We can react by taking blame upon ourselves for situations that are beyond our capacity to affect directly. The personal blame is a way to avoid the helplessness we actually feel when met with things bigger than we can face. In **The Politics of Trauma** she writes,

“

*“over accountability as a reaction can also show up as generalised shame for positions of systemic privilege. This shame does not mobilise connection and action, rather it moves towards polarisation, proving, blaming, defending or immobilising guilt” (pp310)*

Cycles of self-sacrificial activity, underpinned by these feelings of not being able to 'allow' ourselves to take a break or take our own **emotional wellbeing** seriously, and feeling undeserving of care and support, typically leads to **burnout** and collapse. Such behaviours undermine our own best intentions to act in solidarity with others. These self-sacrificial tendencies often lead to punishing and shaming ways of behaving towards others too. Consequently, individuals become less and less effective and **groups** increasingly strained.

## Antidoting guilt and shame

Addressing unhelpful propensities towards guilt and shame involves becoming able to understand the injustices we face within a broad analysis of power and social change, distinguishing where our personal responsibility begins and ends, and learning to recognise our own tendencies to internalise blame and critical judgement. In doing so we will become better able to understand and use our privilege well and in service of true solidarity.

Injustice and the suffering it causes in the world is pervasive, historically conditioned, and deeply inscribed in the power structures of our societies and economic systems. However deeply we feel this pain, there can be no escaping the fact that its transformation is a long and complex process. Although every one of us can make valuable contributions to social change, no one of us can do this alone or easily. Facing these facts requires that we cultivate a deep patience to compliment our passion for justice, enabling us to act strategically, steadily and more effectively over time. But this involves the significant challenge of holding the suffering in our own and others' experience along with the additional pain of acknowledging the limits to our agency and resources.

When we are unable to bear this kind of emotional challenge we can look for unrealistic short-cuts or fall into a personal sense of worthlessness, incompetence or 'not-enoughness'. To strengthen our capacity in these areas involves work on our **emotional literacy** and ongoing reflection on our **ways of seeing, social change** and our role within it.

Another possible area for exploration lies in the distinction between guilt and remorse. Remorse can be a healthy part of our ethical sensibility involving the recognition of where we might have let ourselves or others down, and the clear intention to change our behaviour in the future. Guilt on the other hand can prey on us unconsciously with the haunting sense that we are not good enough, not worthy, and somehow intrinsically flawed. Learning to differentiate between these related dimensions of our moral and emotional lives is crucial in enabling us to avoid the pitfalls of both 'over-accountability' and 'under-accountability'.

## Regenerative practice around secondary trauma

It is important to unpack unhelpful individualising cultural tendencies and honour the need for giving and receiving mutual support, as well as sharing practices and tools that can help us work relationally with emotional overload and stress. We need to approach these challenges holistically, considering personal, group and wider social context.

So, what can help?

### 1 Awareness and respecting experience

Primarily, we need to be able to bring awareness to the ways we might ignore or subtly disrespect/deny the impacts witnessing injustice, harm and trauma can have on ourselves and others. Increased awareness will put us in a position to begin to take these impacts seriously and respond more respectfully to others and ourselves. Contemplative and **body-based** practices (including regular exercise) are so important in helping us to digest our feelings and release tension and stress (see also chapters on **awareness** and **working with difficult emotion**). Where appropriate and needed, we might take the time to look in more depth at how such witnessing can activate our own past traumas (*often in the form of embodied sensations*), and to explore the support we might need in working through that.

### 2 Practising being in solidarity with ourselves and others

Especially with regards to guilt and shame, an emphasis on positive self-regard is invaluable here. Counter to a fear that this will make us lazy or overly accepting, a practice such as the **Self Solidarity Practice**, can, over time, deeply transform the way we hold ourselves in relation to our work and efforts, for the better. This can enable us to take much more effective and sustainable responsibility for ourselves, and to hold others to more reasonable standards too. As ever, we need the support of our **groups and cultures** to really do this well,

### 3 Spaces for processing experience

We need to create safer spaces for being with our feelings, both alone and with others, to support regular emotional processing, through emotional literacy practices, or through therapeutic or peer supported spaces (see **groups**, **difficult emotion**, and **trauma** chapters). Creating a working culture in which stepping back and taking rest is encouraged and affirmed, can be a necessary support.

#### 4 Shared responsibility for action

This means actively keeping the wider socio-political picture and the breadth of collective efforts present in our awareness, as we explore in the **Ecology of Social Movements chapter**. This can help us to avoid falling into individualised forms of self blame, saviour behaviours and over-accountability. Working through personal guilt/shame, can help us move towards shared accountability and political solidarity, and we need healthy supportive **relationships and group cultures** to enable this.

#### 5 Sustaining meaningful narratives

As we have explored in the chapter on **views**, our ways of seeing and making sense of what we are doing, who we are, what is happening, how it is happening and so on, have a huge impact on our wellbeing and resilience. For example, where we are able to keep in sight the possibilities for growth, connection and potential that adversity brings along with suffering (see the work of for example **Rebecca Solnit, Hope in the Dark**); or where we are able to view our actions not as means to specific ends but as expressions of deeply held values (regardless of outcome), we have the potential to alter our experience and even gain new forms of nourishment and resourcing from our work (see material on building capacity to work with suffering, **here**).

\*More on trauma theory in this **annex**.



## ACTIVITIES: EXPLORING GUILT, SHAME AND WITNESSING HARM

- Shame, Blame and Building Collective Resilience
- Exploring Secondary Trauma

### ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES

- Self Solidarity Practice (meditative)
- Interrelationship of the 4 Heart Practices (meditative)
- Resilience Trees
- Three Step Breathing Space: AGE (meditative)
- Working with Suffering (compassion practice – meditative)
- Cairn of Mourning
- Introduction to Trauma Awareness
- Sit Spot
- Evolutionary Remembering
- The Truth Circle
- Power Paper
- Time and Activism
- Exploring Identity Positions
- Personal Identity and Complexity
- Reflecting on Our Political Identities

## ACTIVITY RESOURCES

- Heart Practices Diagram
- Time and Activism Notes

## FURTHER READING

- Annex: trauma theory
- ICRC
- The headington institute
- Moral injury
- The new internationalists
- Activist Trauma Support
- No Borders Reflections on Guilt, Shame and Trauma
- Embodied Social Justice Summit, Spring 2021
- Annex: Working with Touch and Consent

## 09

**WAYS OF SEEING:  
WORKING WITH OUR VIEWS**

## Why?

The choices we make and the ways we behave are deeply conditioned by our views and beliefs - our *ways of seeing*. Often these views sit in shadowy parts of our minds - unconscious, confused and contradictory - inherited from others and the pervasive influence of socialisation. Sometimes they are waved like banners, as strongly held opinions that coalesce as ideology. Sometimes they reflect mainstream worldviews. At other times they are specifically constructed to refuse and challenge the status quo.

Some of these views help us. Some hinder us. Some empower us, some deplete us. Some will support our political agency, some won't. Some will support our resilience; others will undermine it.

The beliefs we carry shape the way we do activism or solidarity work. They can unhelpfully underpin self-sacrificial tendencies, self-righteousness, heroic vanguardism, competitive radicalism and activist sub-cultures that can't connect with the constituencies that they claim to

fight for. They can make it impossible to give ourselves permission to rest and lead us to push each other in unhelpful ways. They can drive boom and bust cycles of hope and hopelessness, inspiration and despondency.

However, they can also help us to deepen trust in each other, to create cultures of care, to find the deep patience required to balance our passion for justice, to reinforce our sense of solidarity and commitment, and enable us to develop the capacity we need individually and collectively for radical transformation.

Examining how our views condition our approach to activism and solidarity work is essential for building resilient and regenerative approaches.

**Deeper reflection on our views and beliefs can help us to:**

- Identify and let go of views and ideas that are not serving us
- Recognise the partial and provisional nature of our views and the stories we tell about ourselves and about the world
- Hold our views more lightly, increasing our ability to learn.



## Key views shaping activist practice



Working with activists and solidarity workers on resilience, we've noticed constellations of views or beliefs that have an especially strong influence on how activism is practiced. They include views about self, others, and the world. While some of these may seem painfully obvious, as André Gide once wrote: "Everything that needs to be said has already been said. But since no one was listening, everything must be said again,".

### Human nature

Political ideologies tend to grow out of core views about human nature, as intrinsically selfish or benevolent, as noble and perfectible or fundamentally corrupted and irredeemable, as inherently competitive or cooperative. Forming the basis for what we think it is possible for humans to be or become, our activist goals and strategies are coloured by these beliefs - as is our predisposition to trust or distrust others.

### Essentialism and conditionality

Beneath beliefs about human nature lie views concerning whether it is somehow 'essential' or 'conditioned': whether our traits are rooted in nature or socially constructed; whether our characters are fixed or changeable. In our collaborative endeavours, whether or not we believe that people can really transform will influence our ability to forgive when we let each other down, and to support each other to change, to grow and to realise our potential.

### Racism, patriarchy and other oppression

These views about the relative value, superiority and inferiority, of people based on diverse traits are deeply inscribed in our society and our ways of thinking. **Uncovering them** in ourselves is an important part of challenging their structural functioning in the world around us and in our organisations.

### Self-views

The confidence we have, our self-belief, the sense that we can make a difference, are all influenced by our self-view. Our self-view is informed by childhood narratives; psychological models; and formative socialisation. We can internalise narratives about not being good enough or of entitlement. They can condition us to overwork to prove ourselves, and to ignore our needs or those of others. The ways we might have internalised shame and guilt can be important factors in activist life, as are the high levels of **self-aversion** or habitual self-criticism that are commonly bound up with our self-view. All of these can be very disempowering and depleting of our resilience.

### How Social Change Happens

Consciously or unconsciously, coherently or not, social change work is inevitably permeated by views about how change happens. We might carry assumptions that change comes from the ground up or from the top down; gradually or suddenly; from within the system or from outside it. Sometimes this is represented by explicit theories of change. At other times they are embedded implicitly in a culture of action or specific tactics, without too much reflection on how those actions connect with the change we want to see. Examining our assumptions about social change can give us access to greater strategic clarity and tactical flexibility.

### Causality and Complexity

Related to our models of social change are more fundamental views about causality. Although the world exhibits great complexity and non-linear properties we can often think simplistically in linear notions of cause and effect. These often fail to honour complex processes of influence and transformation. Such views affect how we see our own agency and impact. Thinking in terms of linear causality tends to predispose us towards shorter term planning. Conditionality and complexity can help bring longer term perspectives and capacity building.

### The Individual and individualism

Examining how we understand the relationship between the individual and the collective is key to being able to avoid reproducing prevailing atomistic and narcissistic tendencies in our activist work. In social change work, individualistic mindsets can manifest in the 'hero complex',

characterised by a high sense of personal responsibility for the state of the world and a sense of burden in needing to fight injustices. Caught up in this individualistic mindset we are not able to see collective agency and interdependence. We lose connection with that which is bigger than ourselves, our movements, our groups, or even a sense of solidarity with life. And through that disconnection we lose access to sources of deep sustenance and the power that arises from coming together with others. Learning to balance autonomy and cooperation is crucial for effective collaboration.

### Time and history

Many modern approaches to social change unconsciously reproduce old religious narratives. The relationship between political liberation and religious salvation, between revolution and apocalypse, end times and utopia can be seen to run through diverse political traditions from communism, anarchism and neoliberalism. Exploring the ways we might carry views about the directionality of history and how these can influence our action is important. These views can shape our assumptions about the future and our expectations – both important in understanding our relationship to hope and hopelessness.

### Scarcity, productivity and perfectionism

These mindsets are all derived from the western cultural roots of capitalism. On the one hand a scarcity mentality tells us there is insufficient time, insufficient resources, or that we are not enough as human beings. It tells us that we need to fight over resources and undermines cooperation. It feeds into tendencies to keep ourselves productive and busy all the time to make maximal use of our time and resources. It shows up in a sense of urgency and short-term focus.

Valuing productivity, measurable outputs and a concept of continuous improvement, underpin perfectionism. While demanding the best from ourselves can be healthy, this easily falls into an overly critical attitude setting ourselves standards neither we nor those around us can ever live up to.

It is important to create space and capacity to examine how these diverse mindsets and views shape our activism, for better and worse.

## Attending to our ways of seeing

Given that our views, our ways of seeing, shape our experience<sup>1</sup> and the ways we act in the world, it is important to make them more conscious. But it is also important to bring awareness to the *manner* with which we hold our views. Often, we hold them very tightly - they offer a sense of self, purpose, meaning and security. They help us navigate a complex and confusing world.

There can be something beautiful about this. Our choices about who we are, what we stand for, what we will fight for (even die for!), are the basis of our unique, creative, extraordinary unfolding in the world. But often this is not happening in a creative or liberating way, but habitually and unconsciously. We have acquired views and opinions along the way, bound them up with our identities and sense of self, and whether they are helpful or not, we often just hang on to them - not entirely understanding why. This can lead to rigidity, defensiveness, self-righteousness, and an inability to listen to others. It can mean that what were once empowering and helpful ways of seeing, that supported us as we grew through certain stages in our lives, become imprisoning mindsets that keep us trapped and unable to develop further.



Without falling into a facile relativistic “all views are of equal value” position, consider what happens when we are able to become more conscious of our views *and* become better at holding those views more lightly. Quite simply we become better at acknowledging other perspectives; we listen to others more deeply; enter into dialogue without becoming as conflictual, aggressive, or domineering; tend to collaborate more effectively and (importantly) enhance our capacity to learn. We also increase our ability to choose, rather than being driven by our unconscious or habitual assumptions.

## Shedding light on our views and learning to hold them less tightly

### Acknowledging the partial and provisional nature of views

Just as views shape our behaviour, our views about views will affect the way we relate to them. Acknowledging that our views are necessarily partial (never the whole picture) and provisional (at best, only ever as good as our current limits to knowledge and understanding allow, and liable to be superseded in time) can help us to hold them more lightly. It can help us to see how our views offer functional approximations to the way things are, without fixing them as final and unassailable truths. We can begin to face up to the fact that the world will never be reducible to the way we think it is, nor will it conform to how we want it to be. Simply reminding ourselves that our views are only views, ways of seeing the world, and not a reflection of ultimate reality, begins to help us grasp them a little less tightly.

### Understanding why we are holding on

Acknowledging the partial and provisional nature of our views can be unsettling, disorienting even. That it is unsettling points to the way our views and beliefs function as parts of psychological and even existential survival strategies - and how holding on to them provides security. Pascal once said that 'the heart has its reasons that reason does not know'. Even our beliefs have reasons that reason does not know! To hold our views more lightly involves deeper inquiry into the psychological and existential drivers that underpin them. Changing our mind about something can often involve much deeper change too. It can often mean changing ourselves, gradually deepening **self-awareness, emotional literacy** and psychological integration - as well as creating spaces where we can feel safe enough to let go of old strategies previously needed to provide security.

### Noticing the indicators

To loosen that grasping, we need to recognise the indicators that give us feedback about holding on too tightly. As the chapter on **bodywork** notes, our bodies can be a particularly helpful indicator of what is going on in terms of our tendencies to cling on to things and become rigid. Getting better at noticing when tension is creeping in - in the chest, in the stomach, or around the eyes - can be the first sign that something is happening that we want to avoid, defend, or assert. Likewise, when we notice ourselves becoming stubborn, dismissive of others' views, and generally defensive, we can be pretty sure that there's something we're holding onto that might be worth exploring more deeply for ourselves.

### Optimising multiple perspectives

Some of the views and mindsets explored earlier are simply damaging and are incompatible with building a world where people can flourish or develop a regenerative activist practice. But sometimes it is less about them being unhelpful views, and more about how or when they are applied that makes them helpful or not. A sense of ourselves as a relatively autonomous individual is healthy, if it is balanced with recognition of our inter-dependence with others and the value of cooperation; linear, mechanistic, cause and effect ways of thinking are useful, as long as they are complemented by organic, non-linear and systems-type approaches; short-term planning is good, especially alongside longer term deep-time perspectives. Working with our views is often less about rejecting one thing as bad and adopting something else as good, and more about optimisation and assessing the value of different ways of seeing in different contexts. It is more about finding balance and complementarity and involves increasing our capacity to sit with a multiplicity of perspectives (sometimes even seemingly contradictory ones).



### **Dialogue, inquiry, and analysis**

Creating spaces to bounce ideas off each other, to engage in critical inquiry, and to test out ideas and concepts are essential for deepening self- and group-awareness about our views. Group study sessions, appreciative inquiry, active listening, and non-polarising debate are all valuable methods for building a culture for learning together. As we develop practices for testing and analysing our views and positions, we should take especial care not to simply reproduce the echo-chambers that so many political cultures are prone to do where our ideas aren't tested but are simply reinforced and perpetuated.

### **Creating space for reflection**

Complementing critical inquiry and analysis we also need spaces for **reflection**. The practice of reflection preferences receptivity over working things out. It is a space where we can suspend our need for answers, where we can take a break from the demands of certainty, and practice curiosity. With reflection we allow the mind to wander a little, to meander, to see what comes up. Being less directed and 'productive' we can find it more difficult to justify taking this time, but in terms of deepening awareness it is unbeatable!

### **Positive association**

Finally, moving entrenched perspectives (especially about ourselves) often requires good friendship, associates who will reflect back to us the best in ourselves, offer feedback on our blind spots with kindness, and cherish our potential (while loving us for who we are). Spaces where we feel solidarity, care and support are of enormous value in helping us let go of old worn-out ways of seeing and learn to see in fresh, more empowering, and ultimately liberating ones.

## 09

**ACTIVITIES:  
EXPLORING WAYS OF SEEING**

- Widening Circles
- If Nothing You Can Do is Ever Enough...
- Time and Activism

**ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES**

- Giving and Receiving Feedback
- Exploring Power with Chapati Diagrams
- Mapping Mainstreams and Margins
- Structured Following the Breath Practice (meditative)
- Sit Spot
- Evolutionary Remembering
- Interrelationship of the 4 Heart Practices
- Power Paper
- First Impressions
- Exploring Identity Positions
- Persona Identity and Complexity
- Reflecting on Our Political Identities
- Exploring an Ecology of Strategies
- Perceiving and Responding to Threats
- Making Changes Coaching
- Critical Pathways
- Goals and Resources

**ACTIVITY RESOURCES**

- Time and Activism Notes
- Heart Practices Diagram
- Understanding Power Map
- Making Changes Grid

**FURTHER READING**

- The Tree of Knowledge

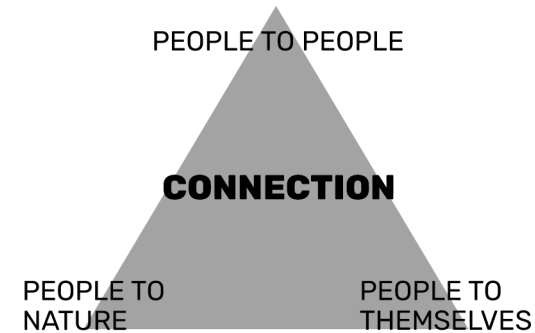
## 10

# NATURE CONNECTION FOR RESILIENCE

## Why?

There seems to be a correlation between the resilience of an ecosystem and the level of connectivity between elements within it. More connections mean more resilience. To some extent this seems to apply to people too. Healthy connections make us stronger. But we face a problem here: we live in a society in which disconnection, alienation, and atomisation have become pervasive. A long history of factors have contributed towards this. Mechanistic and reductionist scientific paradigms, religious and cosmological dualism, individualistic and competitive oriented economic models, among other factors, have all played their part. We have become less connected to ourselves, less connected to each other, and less connected to nature.

Throughout this handbook we are sharing a wide range of practices that can be seen in terms of restoring, regenerating, and rediscovering sources of resilience through psychological, interpersonal, and social reconnection. In this chapter we explore the value of reconnecting with nature and the nourishment, resourcing, and insights that can come from that.



The increasingly industrialised, digitised and urban character of our human-centred societies mean that many of us have few opportunities to spend time in and connect with non-human nature. Of course, this doesn't really mean that we are not connected with nature! Our intrinsic identity and security is ecological. The air we breathe, the food we eat, the water we depend on, all weave us into the ecological and natural systems our lives depend on. We can never really fall out of the web of life. Nevertheless, we can easily forget that basic truth. All too often we can lose touch with it. It can become rare that we actually sense and feel that connection.

But reclaiming connection with non-human nature can be restorative and empowering. Consciously spending time in nature can offer nourishment, bring our senses alive, and help to connect us with something greater than ourselves, renewing perspective and deepening our sense of purpose. Connecting with the non-human world offers a kind of deep nourishment that is hard to find elsewhere. It can support us to process difficult emotions and integrate challenging experiences.



Many nature connection practices are exercises in observation (eg 'Sit spot', Tree reflections). With awakened senses and an alert mind, we become much more conscious of what's going on around us. This is foundational for learning, understanding, and connecting. Everything else builds on that. We can experience powerful and profound insights when we spend time in nature, as challenges and struggles come to be seen from a bigger or differing perspective.

Some forms of nature connection activity can bring elements of fun and lightness to our lives, and bring balance to the heavier or more 'heady' parts of our experience, providing time to reflect, process and integrate learning. For many people, nature connection can support a kind of 'coming alive' as we reactivate the senses and intuition and reignite a sense of awe and wonder in the world around us. In a training context, these kinds of activities and games can bring out a playfulness and curiosity in people, which can support wellbeing, nourishment, and group cohesion.

Despite the potential for nourishment and reconnection, it is important to bear in mind that for some people this might not feel accessible or easy to engage with. People can feel uncomfortable with some approaches to this kind of work, often for good reason. Others can carry fear and wariness about a natural world that feels alien and unfamiliar to them. And different kinds of socialisation, related to race, gender, class, sexual orientation and other identities, can shape our sense of self in relation to the world around us in ways that need to be considered when engaging in nature connection activities. We come back to this at the end of the chapter.

## Aspects of nature connection practice

### 1. Nourishing and Enlivening

So much of our lives are structured around productivity, getting things done, and a utilitarian approach to the things around us. Simply taking time out with the natural world (short walks, observing plants in a park, or longer periods of immersion in non-urban settings) we create opportunities to enter into an appreciative relationship with nature. It can offer a nourishing antidote to the time-bound, high pressure, stressful environments we often find ourselves in as agents of social change, and a breathing space to integrate learning and reassess priorities.

Being in and observing nature, wandering, sitting, or playing, can help us to enliven and restore our sensory vitality, as well as supporting a valuable sense of embodiment. Connecting with the intimate beauty in plant life, the forms of an insect, or the wonders of woodland can revitalise our sensory life just as drinking water quenches our thirst. Coming into relationship with the non-judgemental 'other', that nature can be, can be a deeply healing and restful experience, and the sense of awe and joy which can arise when we open our eyes and ears to the wonders of the world around us can help us return to our work refreshed, resourced and inspired to continue.

### 2. New Perspectives

Our sense of who we are and our place in the world underpins our action and social change work. Feeling ourselves to be small, isolated individuals is deeply disempowering in the face of global issues. One of the major contributors to burn out for activists is the feeling that the task is overwhelmingly big and urgent, and that we are too small to make a difference.

When we connect to the breadth and depth in the web of life, we can access a sense of being part of something bigger and greater than our small self. This can shift our sense of purpose, put our actions in a new perspective, and renew our sense of self. Perhaps we can begin to open to a more ecological sense of who we are as part of the living breathing ecosystems that we are woven into. Maybe we can even get a felt sense of how, in our work for social change, *"we are nature, defending itself"*. Within this expanded sense of self lies restorative power, energy, courage, and resilience, and all of that becomes available to harness for social change and keeping ourselves resourced.

This widened ecological perspective also has implications for how we relate to time. Our experiences of time in the modern industrial world tends to be linear, scarce, and focused on the short term. This can lead to a sense of having ever more-and-more to do with less-and-less time to do it. Other cultures hold different views about time - many indigenous cultures for example, view time as cyclical rather than linear, connected to a deep past and accountable to future generations.

As we connect with the non-human world we can begin to attune more with the cycles and rhythms of nature (such as the seasons, the sun and moon, and cycles of growth, decay and regeneration) and the deep time process of evolution we are part of. This can bring deeply empowering perspectives. We can come to see ourselves as the inheritors of millions of years of evolutionary adaptation, with the wisdom of generations of ancestors behind us and the potentialities of future generations ahead. Such a perspective counters the depleting sense of at-all-costs urgency and the instant demands of an 'always on' and 'everything now' culture, helping us to respond from a deeper, wiser place with greater clarity.



### 3. Nature's Wisdom

As we pay attention to the workings of the natural world, we might begin to notice patterns, cycles, strategies, relationships and ways of being that are effective, efficient and resilient. Often what we see in the natural world is what works; solutions and adaptations that are the result of billions of years of adaptive experimentation. Through observing and attuning ourselves to this wisdom, we can discover that nature is a teacher - with much to teach us about activism and resilience!

For example, we might observe how the resilience of trees to withstand mighty storms is found in their deep rootedness within the earth, their flexibility which enables them to bend rather than break, and their collective support network of intertwined root and mycelial systems. When we apply these principles to ourselves we might consider staying grounded with supportive practices, being flexible mentally, emotionally and strategically, and being part of collective support systems will all enable us to be as resilient as trees in a storm.

In ecosystems, the edges between different habitats, such as where woodland meets meadow, are where the most abundance and growth are to be found. The same principle can be applied to humans and movements. We can choose to stay within our own habitat - our comfort zones, our activist communities and cultures, our preferred tactics and ways of organising. But we will not have as much impact and growth (individually and collectively) as if we were to explore the edges between comfort and learning zones, or open ourselves up to communities, cultures, tactics and ways of approaching social change that are different from those we are familiar with. This is fertile ground for learning, growth, collaboration, and impact. We have seen this in some of the mutual aid networks arising out of the Covid-19 Pandemic, which have been able to respond far beyond the food distribution issues many of them set out to address offering access to healthcare and food, IT provision and support, company for the isolated and more. Historically, social movements that have bridged these gaps using a diversity of tactics, approaches and collaborations have enabled the most significant results.

From the dynamic responsiveness of starling murmuration to the formidable collective power of swarming bees; the strength and resilience of mycelial networks, to the exquisite organisation of ant colonies, nature shows us how to make our movements more effective. Ende Gelände, XR, and Detroit based artist collective Complex Movements, provide living examples of putting this into practice.

The valuable lessons that can be learnt from our non-human relations are endless. Applying nature's principles, we have the potential to build more resilient, effective and regenerative movements, organised as a force of solidarity in alignment with life itself. Adrienne Maree Brown's work on

**Emergent Strategy** is a recent presentation of some of these ideas that have been inspiring social movements in recent years. It promotes nature-aligned collective resilience practices, with a focus on natural principles such as emergence, adaptation, fractals, interdependence, resilience and cyclical patterns.



*One final paragraph of advice: do not burn yourselves out. Be as I am - a reluctant enthusiast....a part-time crusader, a half-hearted fanatic. Save the other half of yourselves and your lives for pleasure and adventure. It is not enough to fight for the land; it is even more important to enjoy it. While you can. While it's still here. So get out there and hunt and fish and mess around with your friends, ramble out yonder and explore the forests, climb the mountains, bag the peaks, run the rivers, breathe deep of that yet sweet and lucid air, sit quietly for a while and contemplate the precious stillness, the lovely, mysterious, and awesome space. Enjoy yourselves, keep your brain in your head and your head firmly attached to the body, the body active and alive, and I promise you this much; I promise you this one sweet victory over our enemies, over those desk-bound men and women with their hearts in a safe deposit box, and their eyes hypnotized by desk calculators. I promise you this; You will outlive the bastards.*

Edward Abbey

Author of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975)

**Notes for trainers**

The nature connection activities presented here can be adapted for different audiences. Whatever context you are working in, make sure you adapt the content and framings to the group you are working with. Attention and sensitivity should be given to any potential trauma present in the group. For example, activities involving blindfolds or hiding may need to be adapted to avoid triggering traumatic experiences.

Ideally, these activities should be held in quiet, natural environments with plenty of space to wander around and not be disturbed. However, this is often not available, accessible or practical, so you may need to adapt to what is available, and be creative! It's surprising how much is possible even in heavily urbanised environments.

It's important to try the activities out a few times yourself before facilitating them for others, so you have an embodied sense of what you are trying to create for participants and can answer their questions with confidence. You can then also inspire and enthuse by relating your own experience when you set the activities up - the delightful moment a butterfly landed on your hand in a sit spot, how much more bird song you've noticed since awakening your senses and how that's changed your mood in the mornings. Rather than give lots of framing and explanation beforehand and risk taking the magic out of it, just inspire people to get out there and be led by their own experience, then draw out key points when they return to share their stories.

Keep it light and playful - modelling this will give participants permission to do the same. This may be outside of some people's comfort zones, so try inviting them to suspend judgement, give it a go and see what happens. As one nature connection mentor said, 'if you're not having fun, you're not doing it right!'.

**Nature Connection and Inclusion**

Different people experience the non-human world differently; race, gender, class, sexual orientation and other identities shape our sense of self in relation to the world around us. Experience affects people's comfort zones, and each of us may need specific conditions to feel at ease and able to grow in these spaces. It is important to be sensitive to the histories that are present in us and in the land, and consider how to adapt and support ourselves and others to engage with this kind of work in appropriate and helpful ways.

For example, People of Colour and LGBTQI folk have often been made to feel that they do not belong, biologically, socially, or culturally. Racist and homophobic attitudes can be more prevalent in rural areas where we might go to engage in nature connection activities. Certain kinds of language around 'belonging' to the natural world or the gendering of nature as 'feminine' or 'mother' etc can also float around the subject, producing further alienation. Other issues can arise around the false dichotomy between humans and nature (often with a value judgement of 'bad' human world vs 'good' natural world) as well as the romanticising or appropriating of indigenous cultures. (See notes on cultural appropriation).

There is a growing movement of marginalised groups reclaiming their access to and autonomy in these spaces, such as Land in Our Names (UK) and Queer Nature (US), and of course the indigenous communities who's very presence on the land has become an act of resistance, like those at Standing Rock. We can act in solidarity with those on the margins and look to these groups and others like them for the ways marginalisation should be addressed in the context of our relationships to the natural world.

# 90

## ACTIVITIES: EXPLORING NATURE CONNECTION

- Bat and moth
- Evolutionary Remembering
- Sit spot

### ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES

- Widening Circles
- Time and Activism
- Centering Practice
- Going to Ground – lying down meditation
- Cairn of Mourning

### ACTIVITY RESOURCES

- Shambhala Warrior Mind Training Verses
- Time and Activism Notes
- Annex: Cultural Appropriation

### FURTHER READING

- Emergent Strategy
- Cradling
- Annex: Working with Touch and Consent



# IDENTITY AND ACTIVISM

## Why?

Identity formation is integral to movement building and activism. Our political identities help us to define what 'we' stand for, the kind of world 'we' aim to create, and the kind of people 'we' want to do that with. It enables us to build collective power and to find belonging and meaning in our struggles. And yet, mixed in with these empowering functions, there are some obvious psychosocial dynamics related to activist identity that contribute to burning us out, breaking up our groups, fragmenting our movements, and consequently undermining our resilience and effectiveness.

In working to understand and navigate the sensitivities and challenges surrounding political identities, we have come to identify three modalities of identity formation: *empowering*, *limiting*, and *liberating*.

**1. Empowering identities** are those that are formed when we come together around a shared social or political endeavour. They strengthen our sense of personal and collective agency, creating an empowered sense of 'us together' or 'political community'

**2. Limiting identities** occur when our empowering identities become rigid or stuck. We can become highly identified with our political work or what we stand and fight for. This can lead to us grasping our identities in ways that undermine our abilities to build connections, alliances and coalitions, to adapt to changing circumstances, and can be depleting for us as well.

**3. Liberating identities** arise where we are able to weaken the tendencies that contribute to limiting identities and allowing our sense of self and our sense of 'us' in our groups, to be more flexible, adaptive, and responsive, utilising the identities that serve us and the world helpfully and creatively. This supports us to become better equipped to work across differences, embrace diversity and transversality, and allow our sense of self and community to evolve and adapt responsively – enhancing our potential to realise radical transformation.

While the dynamics associated with the limiting modality arise for understandable reasons, over the years we've seen how depleting, disconnecting, and undermining of resilience they can be. The qualities that mark the liberating modality offer an antidote, while honouring the significance of our identities and the important part they play in developing regenerative activist practice. So, let's dive in a bit deeper.



## Political communities and identity

### Empowering identities

Political struggle involves taking positions. It involves developing narratives and discourses that articulate common projects, values, and interests. Often these will coalesce in a sense of a shared socio-political identity (e.g., feminist, environmentalist, anarchist, queer, socialist). These identities support us to mobilise action and define our communities and groups in ways that can generate the necessary collective agency to realise meaningful social change. Identities matter!

We can understand the process of forming these identities as a process of politicisation. It involves people recognising the commonality of their grievances and goals. Typically, this means individuals recognising (or coming to believe) that everyday personal or local challenges and oppressions are shared by others *and* have structural and political causes. Through the process of politicisation, the personal becomes political, and with the recognition of shared goals and grievances, a shared political identity begins to form. Gramsci calls this process 'articulation', and it comprises the formation of the 'we' in creating group bonding and solidarity.

So, the formation of activist identities is generally intended to create or define communities which *empower* their members to defend themselves or to drive forward social change. In this way, the construction of identity is central to political struggle and the formation of political community and social movements.

However, this doesn't only happen in ways that support agency for positive social transformation. It also plays a part in blocking that change. In the constant struggle over power in society, there are also groups and identities formed with the aim of defending the dominant institutions and narratives. Identity formation is central to the mobilisation of all the social actors involved in these struggles, but functions differently according to the role they play.

A useful framework that sheds light on these differences, found in Manuel Castells' *Power of Identity* volume, identifies three 'forms and origins of identity building':

- 1. Legitimising identity:** is shaped and maintained by the dominant institutions in order to underpin and reinforce (legitimise) their dominance (can include forms of nationalism, dominant group ethnicity, fixed gender roles, etc)
- 2. Resistance identity:** is shaped by marginalised groups or actors resisting 'the logic of domination, thus building [...on] principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society' (can include religious fundamentalism, identity-based rights movements, far right reconstruction of traditional values, etc)
- 3. Project identity:** is shaped by social actors seeking to 'build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek[s] the transformation of overall social structure' (can include forms of feminism that move beyond the resistance of women's rights to challenge patriarchy, some environmentalism, anti-capitalism, etc).



In our work on activist resilience, we are mostly concerned with the dynamics involved in resistance and project identities. However, all three can overlap and even change position. Project identities can grow out of resistance identities, and if either gain dominance can themselves become new forms of legitimising identity. As patterns of social dominance shift, previously legitimising identities can become the basis of resistance identities - take for example the way the far right currently leverages ethno-religious or nationalist interests in the face of liberal globalisation. In all cases, the identity is intended to empower the group and its members.



This construction of political or social identities always involves drawing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion - the creation of an 'us' and a 'them'. This is present in all forms of identification and isn't in itself unhealthy. At the personal level, psychological individuation requires the formation of boundaries in developing a healthy sense of self. Likewise, many empowering identities involve a rejection of the identities imposed by an oppressive system and claim the right to redefine ourselves. In this process we assert what we are and want to become, as well as being clear about what we are not. For our groups and communities, this is what allows us to form affiliations and connections on the basis of chosen values, and a broader range of experiences, and preferences. This brings diversity and variety in ways of living and understanding the world.

The inclusion aspect enables us to find belonging, security and a sense of community. When the identity reinforces a positive self-view, as part of something meaningful, and enhances collective agency, it serves to *empower us*.

Along with this, the exclusion aspect involves the construction of 'them', our adversaries, what we are not and are against. It often reveals latent conflict and generates antagonism. These are also necessary steps in the process of social change - all part of taking a position. So, exclusion too is part of the process of empowerment.

However, as we probably know, there can be a shadow side to these dynamics. In many situations the inclusion-exclusion dynamic deteriorates from a healthy 'differentiating' into the problem of 'othering' and unhelpful forms of polarisation. The very dynamics that enable us to constitute *empowering identities* (inclusion-exclusion, bounded community and belonging) then also lead us to become stuck and disempowered. This is what we mean by *limiting identities*.

### Limiting Identities

The way *limiting* identities show up in activism is probably painfully familiar to us. Most of us will have seen (and may also have been part of) tendencies to form exclusionary subcultures that become over focused on 'oppositional identities' where sub-group perpetuation can begin to side-line wider socio-political transformation. At its worst, this is often accompanied by emphatic rejection of the 'mainstream' and disparagement of anyone who doesn't take the same stance. Self-righteousness and a sense of moral superiority can emerge and within the group, a new small scale hegemony can form, which demands conformity to new norms, thus reproducing the Legitimising function we saw earlier, but at a microcosmic scale. This leads to group cultures that replicate unhealthy wider societal **mainstream and margins dynamics**, but within their own subcultures. People who are perceived as harbouring attitudes that linger on from previous socialisation can end up ostracised or banished, and we will often see *strong attachment to a kind of 'outsider' status*.

Along with this we might observe how the (healthy) need for belonging can lead to a 'stuckness' and inability to renew or adapt. This can show up in the repetition of tactics that are more about signifying belonging than really achieving impact or maintaining the organisation despite its loss of strategic relevance. Political identities are constructed in response to challenges that are specific to the moment in which they are formed. Our need to hold onto them for security and belonging can easily contribute to them becoming worn out, outdated and increasingly irrelevant amidst changing circumstances.

People, both inside and outside such groups, who don't want to conform to the norms or analysis held by them, will become alienated. It leads to increased fragmentation across movements, and a narrowing of the field of potential alliances and connections. Where these tendencies are strong, the internal dynamics of groups are often fractious, and a great deal of energy can be expended in conflict and tension both within and between groups or organisations. This doesn't do much to support our resilience!

Although all social groups exist through symbolic differentiation and through exclusion, not all of them fall into extreme exclusion, polarisation or 'othering'. So, why does this happen?

As we've seen, social identity, including activist and political identities, provide a sense of belonging and meaning, defining the membership of community. Throughout all stages of human history and prehistory these have been necessary conditions for security and often survival. They address deep existential needs - and when threatened, provoke understandably strong defensive reactions.

When we get into 'othering' and unhelpful polarisation it is usually an indication of fear - there is a vulnerability or fragility in or around the identity and so a tendency to over assert difference comes in, as a reasonable attempt to protect and provide security.

Identities that are affirmed by a wider society and supported by its dominant forces offer relative security. They rest on a sedimented bedrock of decades and centuries of social practice. But even these, when challenged, quickly reveal their brittleness (think male or white fragility). How much more so, then, for the *Project identities* of activism

which are 'works in progress', often in the early stages of accumulating their own language and symbols and constructing historical narratives? There is vulnerability in this as groups and individuals remake themselves, let go of old ideas of who they are and step into still emerging cultures and new frameworks for (re)individuation.

At the same time, activist communities often exist in an environment that is **hostile** and can pose a real threat to their survival. The assertion of strong boundaries can serve both to provide material defence and provide protection against the psychological pressures of the old social matrix which new activist selves are seeking to grow beyond.

When we add to this the widespread presence of wounding and **trauma** within communities fighting oppression, the defensive reactions and needs for safe spaces to heal that this implies, and dynamics related to the **guilt and shame** common among activists grappling with recognition of their privilege, we can see how understandable (even necessary) some of these *limiting* tendencies are. By pointing to them we are not seeking to judge or pathologise them, only to help us bring attention to them so that we can learn to grow beyond them in service of the fuller empowerment that *liberating identities* can foster.

**INCLUSIVE** - The 'we' or 'us' which defines the boundaries of the group or community. The basis of bonding, solidarity and belonging

**EXCLUSIVE** - The 'them' or 'other' who are outside of the boundary of inclusion. The basis of antagonism, conflict and discrimination

**DIFFERENTIATING** - Able to honour diversity and pluralistic conceptions of truth and identity

**OTHERING** - Seeks completion through the negation or annihilation of the other

### **Liberating identities**

Liberating identities are simply empowering identities held with awareness of the factors discussed above. On the one hand they require understanding of the constructed and non-fixed nature of our empowering identities, understanding them as inseparable from their social and political function. On the other hand, they involve the **awareness**, skill and courage needed to work with the psychological and existential dynamics that shape our relationship to those identities. This knowledge and ability help us to avoid over-identification and unhelpful attachment, preventing the inclusive-exclusive dynamic deteriorating from empowering 'differentiation' to limiting 'polarisation'.

Liberating identities don't negate the empowering modality. They complement it, offering us greater flexibility, capacity to embrace and work with diversity, and to build connections and alliances that strengthen

our social change projects. They don't erode the boundaries that our empowering identities erect. But they do enable us to see that they are permeable and not fixed. Liberating identities allow us to set boundaries from increasingly centred and connected positions, rather than reactive ones. We are more able to remain connected to ourselves, the world around us, a bigger purpose and our core values, and this means we can differentiate, navigate and articulate inclusion-exclusion with much less reactivity.

The idea of liberating identities doesn't require us to achieve some lofty ideal, but it does assume our potential to grow and mature psychologically and spiritually. Liberating identities are not an idealised state in which we have grown beyond the all too human limiting tendencies! Rather, they emerge amidst our efforts to bring awareness to the ways we get stuck in limiting identities. They manifest in the ways we help each other to recognise when we polarise, lack empathy, or become narrow minded. They show up in our patience with our defensive reactions conditioned by trauma and the ways we support each other's healing processes. They lie in the ways we remind each other of our aspirations for wider social transformation and the transversal alliances we need to achieve it.

Generally, empowering identities need to precede liberating ones. Without the construction of a positive and empowered sense of who we are we can't begin to loosen attachment to that identity in a helpful way. The loosening usually needs to come from a position of relative strength, security, and integration. Our identities (like our **views**) are always incomplete, partial, and provisional – even the empowering ones. They cannot ultimately provide the security we seek in them. Liberating

identities are able to acknowledge this and support us to lessen the need to cling to them in unhelpful ways. To do this we need the support of caring and affirming **communities**, the relative security of noble purpose, and the courage solidarity can bring. Doing so will enable us to recognise the creative dimension of identity formation and help us shape, choose and even play with identities in yet more empowering ways.

We construct activist identities from a wide range of material and experience. There are the categories associated with identity politics, arising out of specific issues or challenges to diverse forms of oppression. Commitment to different strategies for transformation play an important role, as do the specific traditions, parties, and organisations associated with them. And, although we can distinguish between identity (as that which organises meaning) from roles (which organise functions), diverse roles within movements can also become the basis for identification, as can the different sub-cultures shaped by the range of forms and economies related to professional, grassroots, part-time or full-time activism.

In our work on the **ecology of social movements**, we emphasise the contribution all these different elements make to our movements and the importance of attending to the quality of relationship between them. Liberating identities enable us to work creatively with movement diversity in all these dimensions, recognising complementarity and transforming polarisation and conflict into generative and creative tensions. Through the cultivation of liberating identities, that bring openness, flexibility and adaptability, we can support a more vibrant movement ecology, healthier group cultures, and more empowered individuals, all contributing to resilience and regenerative practice. We can build our capacity to do this through the numerous personal and collective regenerative practices described throughout this resource.



## ACTIVITIES: EXPLORING IDENTITY

- Exploring Identity Positions
- Personal Identity and Complexity
- Reflecting on Our Political Identities

### ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES

- Widening Circles
- Giving and Receiving Feedback
- Exploring Power with Chapati Diagrams
- Shame, Blame and Building Collective Resilience
- Yes/No/Maybe - Boundary Setting
- Centering Practice
- Diversity Welcome
- Step with Me
- Mapping Mainstreams and Margins
- Exploring Privilege and Rank
- Body Scanning Practice (meditative)
- Rivers of Experience
- Exploring an Ecology of Strategies
- Self Solidarity Practice (meditative)

### ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES (ctd...)

- Sit Spot
- Evolutionary Remembering
- Spectrum Lines (generic)
- Power Paper
- First Impressions

### ACTIVITY RESOURCES

- Understanding Power Map
- Annex: Working with Touch and Consent

### FURTHER READING

- Haider: Mistaken Identity
- Joyful Militancy
- The Way of Tenderness: Awakening through Race, Sexuality and Gender



# THE ECOLOGY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

## Why?

As we said in the section on **activist psychosocial resilience**, the resilience of individuals is bound up with their **group and organisational cultures** - and other interpersonal relationships. Likewise, the resilience of groups and organisations is influenced by the quality of their relationships within the networks and movements they are part of. To develop deep activist resilience, the network or movement level needs to be attended to - by looking at the solidarity across our movements, the alliances, cooperation and support between actors, as well as areas of depleting and unhelpful conflict and tension.

More than this, looking back to our working definition of APR, we emphasised three capacities: absorptive, adaptive, and transformative. *Transformative* here refers to the capacity to change the power relations and structural conditions that stress us and keep our communities vulnerable. Generating the aspect of resilience we are referring to as its *transformative* capacity involves projects that can build collective agency and the power that emerges from networks of collaboration - or social movements. So, in this section we'll explore issues related to movement resilience, using the idea of an *ecology of social movements*.

## Why an Ecology of Social Movements?

Perhaps the most generally accepted definition of a *social movement* comes from Italian sociologist Mario Diani. Aiming to offer a synthesis of the diverse range of definitions in use, he suggests that social movements are:



*a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity.*

Thinking in terms of the *ecology* of social movements, helps to emphasise this networked characteristic that involves a plurality of actors engaged in a wide range of activities. It also draws attention to the ways they are connected in numerous ways, both informally and (despite Diani's view) formally. But it's a bit more than this. Rather than agreeing with Diani's suggestion that "a shared collective identity" is a necessary component of social movements, an ecology of movements approach sheds light on the ways that social movements contain tensions between the commonality of identity, which ties it together as a movement, and the diversity of identities contained within it. Thinking in terms of an ecology of movements can help us to conceive of a movement as able to contain non-aligned, antagonistic, and even contradictory identities - and to acknowledge that this diversity is often crucial to the building of the collective agency needed for radical transformation.



A healthy social movement field requires a multiplicity of contributions, a diversity of identities, as well as actors and roles. Movement resilience and power emerges from the quality of relationships between these parts. Beginning to think at a movement or network level, to recognise the value of different and even antagonistic contributions to the whole, attending to the quality of relationship between them, and becoming better able to acknowledge and hold the diversity in a healthy movement ecology, is of great value to our effectiveness and our resilience.

To fully unpack the approach would require a whole manual on the subject. To dive more fully into related theory and practice you could explore Ulex's Ecology of Social Movements training (and the resources we'll launch in 2023/24). In this section and related activities, we'll concentrate on how gaining a sense of the importance of diversity in our movements and developing the capacity to work well with it can support resilience – especially the importance of strengthening alliances, and exploring how we can begin to transform depleting and unhelpful conflict or antagonism into more creative or generative tensions or even synergy.

## Diverse strategies, identities, roles and actors

We can begin to get a good sense of the necessary diversity in effective and resilient movements by reflecting on five categories of contributions and approaches: 1) transformative strategies, 2) movement roles, 3) movement capabilities, 4) the way activism interfaces with everyday life, and 5) issues and struggles.

### 1. Transformative Strategies

One way we think about this is in terms of the different kinds of strategies of transformation that are found across our movements. Applying a simple typology, we can think in terms of strategies that seek to: 1) *Create alternatives within the system*, 2) *Build alternatives outside the system*, and 3) *Produce rupture*.

These three are based on Erik Olin Wright's work, where he relates them to specific political traditions:

- a) **Creating alternatives within the system** (symbiotic metamorphosis), is associated with the Social Democratic tradition. It includes strategies in which extending and deepening the institutional forms of popular social empowerment simultaneously helps solve certain practical problems faced by dominant classes and elites. These strategies can have a contradictory character to them, both expanding social power and strengthening aspects of the existing system.
- b) **Building alternatives outside the system** (interstitial metamorphosis), is associated with the Anarchist tradition and seeks to build new forms of social empowerment in the niches and margins of capitalist society.
- c) **Ruptural strategies** are associated with the revolutionary Socialist or Communist traditions and the organisation of classes through political parties in direct confrontation with the state. They envision creating new institutions of social empowerment through a sharp break within existing social structures. They imply a radical disjuncture.



Wright offers the following schematic representation in his  
*Envisioning Real Utopias*:

TRANSFORMATIVE STRATEGY	ASSOCIATED POLITICAL TRADITION	PIVOTAL COLLECTIVE ACTORS	STRATEGIC LOGIC IN RESPECT TO THE STATE	STRATEGIC LOGIC IN RESPECT TO CAPITALIST CLASS	METAPHORS OF SUCCESS
<b>RUPTURAL</b>	Revolutionary socialist/ communism	Classes organised on political parties	Attack the state	Confront the bourgeoisie	War (victories and defeats)
<b>INTERSTITIAL METAMORPHOSIS</b>	Anarchist	Social movements	Build alternatives outside of the state	Ignore the bourgeoisie	Ecological competition
<b>SYMBIOTIC METAMORPHOSIS</b>	Social democratic	Coalitions of social forces and labour	Use the state: struggle on the terrain of the state	Collaborate with the bourgeoisie	Evolutionary adaptations

All three seem to imply different forms of organisation and distinct ways of conceptualising and working with power. In this sense the connotations and practices of leadership are likely to be quite distinct and the differences in their analysis of power lead to distinct types of **organisational culture**.

So not only do these different strategies imply diverse political practices, they also (loosely) align with different political traditions, cultures, and identities. Clearly, the historical manifestation of these strategies has often involved overlapping practice and they shouldn't be seen as completely firewalled from each other. Today, the typology can help us to think about the range of approaches across and within movements, although, more often than not, contemporary practice often seeks to distinguish itself critically from the traditional forms. From an ecology of social movements perspective, all three approaches are seen as capable of contributing something valuable towards radical transformation.

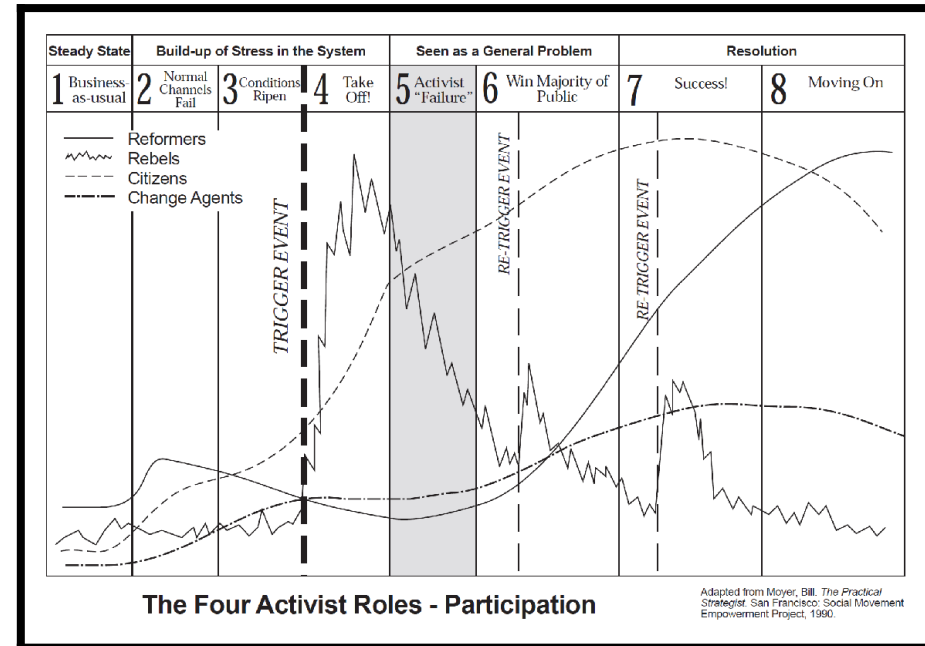
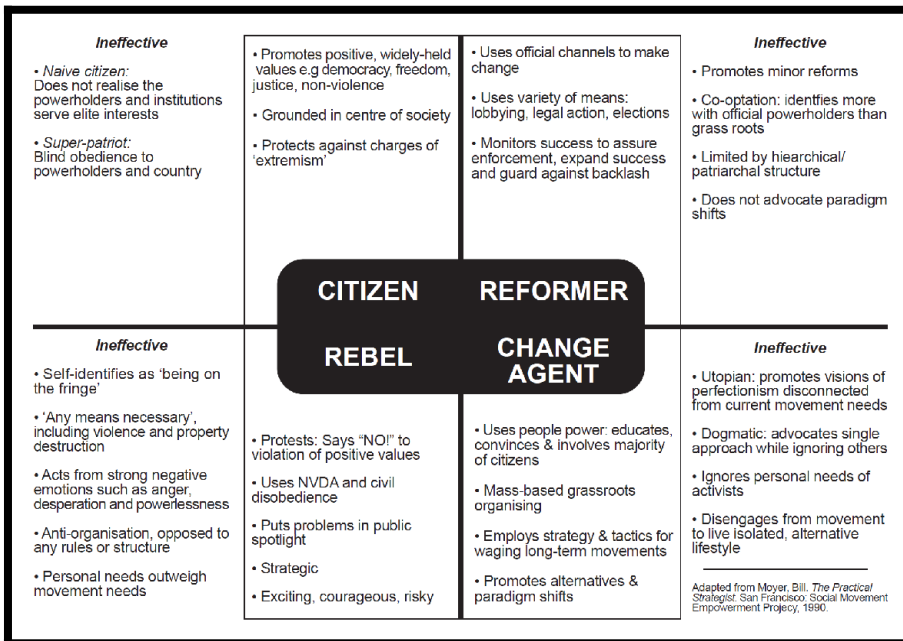
In contemporary practice we might recognise the *symbiotic metamorphosis approach in new municipalism or efforts at radical democratic reform*; we can see *interstitial metamorphosis* reflected in practices as diverse as autonomous social centres or the ecovillage movement; ruptural strategies are less prevalent in practice today, but the tradition still provides an important source of political identification and inspiration for many activists, and continues to motivate work for radical (even revolutionary) transformative projects.

## 2. Diverse Roles

Another aspect of movement diversity relates to the wide range of roles involved in successful movements.

A well-used typology here comes from the work of Bill Moyer. He identifies four key roles: *rebel*, *reformer*, *citizen*, and *change agent*. These roles and their significance in the process of social change are mapped onto a timeline that suggests a specific sequence of phases in the life of a movement, running from 'kick-off' to success. During different phases the different roles take on greater or lesser prominence, but through the entire process all have a key part to play. George Lakey also offered a useful **reinterpretation** of Moyer's work.

### Moyer's Four Roles and Phases



Again, it is worth considering the different organising cultures that characterise these diverse roles – and different ways that leadership shows up within them. It is also worth noting, that unlike Wright's typology of strategies, Moyer's typology of roles operates more or less exclusively within the framework of a liberal-democratic reform process.

Building on Moyer's work, Natasha Adams, generated an **expanded typology** based on research into the history of environmental and LGBTQIA+ movements in the UK. Her extended typology adds the role of news media, thought leaders, artistic and cultural production, and the roles involved in the diverse approaches across grassroots and professional NGO mobilising and organising. Her typology suggests a broadening out of the field of a social movement to include some actors who might not usually be identified with it, but whose role, based on her research, fulfil a decisive function.

**Natasha's full list becomes:**

- Rebels
- News Media
- Culture, Celebrity and Transformative Thought Leadership
- Shallow Public Engagement
- Deeper Public Engagement
- Bridge Building
- Coalitions
- Policy Research
- Insider Advocacy
- Supportive Groups Inside Political Parties
- Other actors (Unions and faith groups)

**3. Movement Capabilities**

Considering the range of capabilities social movements need to be effective can help us to understand the diversity of actors and contributions required to have transformative impact. Building on a list derived from Zeynep Tufekci's book, *Twitter and Teargas*, we've devised a framework that emphasises six key capabilities: Narrative, Disruptive, Institutional, Cooperation, Resilience, and Prefigurative. Thinking in terms of movement capabilities can provide a different way to categorise diverse contributions, tasks, and roles within our movements:

**Narrative capability**

Movements need to be able to tell stories, especially stories about how we got here and where we want to be heading. This is about analysis of the conditions that give rise to the injustices and problems we want to address. It's also about vision and aspiration. And, importantly, what we can do to achieve that. Often these articulate a shared sense of purpose and some degree of collective identity that can underpin collective agency. But movements can also contain multiple and competing narratives.

**Disruptive capability**

Often this is one of the most visible manifestations of movement capability, and often what the onlooking public think of when bringing the idea of more radical social movements to mind. Action that in some way creates a disruption to normal service can take many forms. Massive demonstrations that spill out of the permissible rules of the game, strike action, boycotts, occupations, the wide-ranging tactics of nonviolent direct action, and of course riots or rebellion.

These actions are simply ways of saying 'no, we're not standing by as more damage is done'. They put the system under pressure, raising the cost of the everyday functioning of the systems they challenge, escalating tension and creating pressure for demands to be heard.

**Institutional capability**

As Tufekci usefully discusses in her analysis of the Arab Spring, social movements that achieve disruptive capability but lack institutional capability, might be able to articulate areas of resistance and achieve certain victories, but they mostly fail to constitute a systemic threat. Or as Chantal Mouffe writes concerning the Indignats and Occupy movements,



*Those protests were the signal of a political awakening after years of relative apathy. However, the refusal of those horizontalist movements to engage with the political institutions limited their impact. And without any form of articulation with institutional politics, they soon began to lose their dynamics. Although such protest movements have certainly played a role in the transformation of political consciousness, it is only when they have been followed by structured political movements, ready to engage with political institutions, that significant results have been achieved.*

Of course, any such analysis runs the risk of exposing its short sightedness and failing to take adequate account of the non-linear and complex nature of social change. Sometimes the legacy of these attempts and the shifts in culture and discourse they achieve can lay important foundations for new rounds of action.

Nevertheless, movements that lack what Mouffe calls a *political relay*, and intentionally eschew institutional engagement, find their demands hit a wall, are co-opted, or need to be taken up elsewhere. These are the kind of lessons that saw the 15M movement in Spain inform the party formations of Podemos and the new municipalism of Barcelona En Comu.

### Cooperative

Rarely do organisations or groups achieve deep and lasting social change alone. It requires broad based alliances, collaborative efforts, and coordination between diverse actors. Working with other actors, groups and organisations involve a range of specific skills and attitudes. Without people and organisations in our movements who bridge between other groups or communities, bring people together, and help to find alignment and cooperation we cannot build the collective power we need to generate.

### Resilience capability

This is the crucial capability that this manual is centred around, so we won't unpack it again here. But it includes our ability to keep going for the long-haul, to sustain and nourish our motivation, as well as being able to weather repression and the push back we meet as our movements build power. If it's not already clear, refer back to the section on **Regenerative Activism and Activist Psychosocial Resilience**.

### Prefigurative capability

It is important that the ways we work for change embody the new kinds of social relations we strive for, as best we can. Prefigurative capacity is simply about walking the talk. It's about creating organisations that embody a **culture of care, anti-oppression practice**, and honouring each other's potential as human beings. This includes considering the way power functions in our groups, the ways we make decisions, and how we work with finance and the economic dimensions of activist organising. Developing and implementing all of these practices and systems is part of our building this capacity.

Each of these movement capabilities depend on diverse types of contribution and skills. Some take place on the ‘front line’, some are hidden away, and others happen in spaces we might not customarily associate with our movements.

#### 4. The Interface with Everyday Life

Another set of factors that affect movement ecology relates to different types of movement organisations, their economic models, and the ways people interact with them. Laurence Cox in a paper on Sustainable Activism points out that:

*“Different movements interface with everyday life and social routines in different ways. Put another way, someone’s movement participation can be primarily a job, an identity, a part of their everyday culture or a dimension of their working life; and these different situations affect individual activists but also shape movements insofar as most movements have a centre of gravity in one or other of these (perhaps a characteristic of a truly powerful movement is its presence across multiple dimensions).”*

He goes on to list different activist contexts in terms of:

- **Workplace-based movements:** Peasant and labour struggles are naturally workplace-based, while other types of activism (e.g. sabotage during the European resistance to fascism) can also be centred here.
- **Community-based movements:** Some movements naturally tend to organise within people’s residential or social communities – working-class community organising, LGBTQI+ activism and many ethnic or religious movements, for example.

- **Professional or full-time activism:** In some kinds of movement situation (parties, unions, media, NGOs and so on) many or most activists are employed by *movement organisations*.

- **“Leisure” activism:** Some kinds of movements take place outside the working and living conditions of most of their participants, in the social space otherwise occupied by leisure activities.

Each of these represent different forms of institutionalisation (or lack of it). This has effects on many aspects of activist and organising culture. The different economic relations and dependencies (or lack of them) also have a significant effect on movement dynamics, bearing on questions of power, resourcing, and influence.

#### 5. Issues and struggles

This is perhaps the most obvious and visible basis for identifying difference and divergence across movements. In many cases our struggles coalesce around specific issues and causes. At times they can seem to compete for attention or in their claims to greater importance. But we’re beginning to see more recognition of the interconnections between struggles and the commonalities between them, in terms of the ways they contest power and make claims to a more just and equitable future. More and more we can see how issues are interlinked and find the cause of the ills they challenge in common systemic injustice. Increasingly we can recognise that deeper transformation requires us to organise transversally (across issues and communities) and build majority social movements that act in solidarity across a diversity of interlinked struggles. Put simply, in order to tackle the interlocking systems of oppression we are facing, requires interconnected movements of resistance and regeneration.



## ACTIVITIES:

This section is especially complementary to **Identity and Activism** and **Ways of Seeing** chapters.

### EXPLORING THE ECOLOGY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

- Movement Timelines
- Movement Mapping
- Exploring an Ecology of Strategies

### ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES

- Spectrum Lines (generic)
- Diversity Welcome
- Step with Me
- Mapping Mainstreams and Margins
- Exploring Privilege and Rank
- Widening Circles
- If Nothing You Can Do is Ever Enough...
- Time and Activism
- Power Paper
- Exploring Identity Positions
- Personal Identity and Complexity
- Reflecting on Our Political Identities
- Critical Pathways
- Goals and Resources

### ACTIVITY RESOURCES

- Ecology of Social Movements Mindmap
- Time and Activism notes
- A Network Theory Lens

### FURTHER READING

- What role were you born to play in social change?
- Abstract from The Practical Strategist
- Expanded typology for social movement participation
- Mouffe: Hegemony, radical democracy, and the political
- Nunes: Neither Vertical nor Horizontal



## RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF THREATS, ATTACKS AND REPRESSION

### Why?

As we've seen throughout this manual, to sustain ourselves, our organisations, and our movements, we need to attend to a wide range of conditions and factors. One critical area we need to pay attention to relates to the risk and threat of attack from both State and non-State actors who aim to undermine our work. Activists and organisers find their work opposed by those who want to resist change or who see our transformative efforts as a threat to their interests.

These attacks and threats of attack can take the form of uncoordinated by hostile individuals and groups, but often involve highly coordinated campaigns, run by corporations, the state, or other interest groups who oppose our efforts. They are intended to damage our effectiveness and the wellbeing of ourselves and those around us. Such attacks seek to deter and hinder efforts towards greater social justice and ecological integrity. They often become more focused as we become more powerful.

As part of our effort to build radical resilience, we need to understand the mechanisms of these attacks. We need to learn how to analyse risks, develop strategies that take them into account, and acquire the skills to implement methods for protecting activist spaces and our work. We'll explore these issues by looking at 1) Social reproduction, 2) Suppression and Repression, 3) Practices and strategies for resilience.

### Social reproduction

To understand the nature of the attacks we might face, it can be useful to see how they sit within the broader framework of how social systems maintain themselves.

Shifting historical conditions, different pressures and demands for change from diverse actors and groups, and the simple fact of impermanence, all mean that the survival of any social system or institution requires mechanisms for self-maintenance. These mechanisms can be referred to as processes of 'social reproduction'. They are the ways a social system is maintained and resists efforts to transform it.

In capitalist society, we can say that social reproduction is achieved through two types of interconnected process. The first, is *passive reproduction*. This is just the by-product or result of our everyday activities and choices. These passively perpetuate and reinforce similar actions, dispositions, and attitudes, which conform to the existing system. Simply through buying products for example, we passively reproduce prevalent economic relationships and systems of ownership. Working for a wage, passively reinforces the conventions of production and labour.



The second type of process is *active reproduction*. This refers to the way that the system and its institutions are specifically designed, at least in part, to serve the purpose of social reproduction. This includes legal structures, the courts, police force, state administration, the education system, media, and so on.

#### Four key mechanisms

There are four clusters of mechanisms that are especially important in the active reproduction of the current capitalist system. They combine to obstruct both individual and collective actions which would be threatening to existing structures of power and privilege, aiming to reinforce the stability of those social structures:

##### 1. Institutional rules

These are the 'rules of the game' which make some courses of action more difficult to pursue and others much easier. They create gradients of opportunity for collective or individual action - those actions more likely to threaten the stability of the system require a steep uphill push, while less threatening actions encounter a lower gradient and involve less risks to pursue. An obvious example is the way that liberal democratic systems tend to channel social conflicts into the electoral system in ways that tend to support the reproduction of capitalist social relations.

##### 2. Ideology and Culture

There are two key mechanisms which shape our subjectivities ('personal sense of things'): *Ideology* includes the conscious aspects of beliefs, ideas, values, doctrines, and theories; *Culture* includes the unconscious aspects of dispositions, sensibilities, habits, tastes, and skills. These are steadily reproduced or conditioned through media, education, cultural production of many sorts, and are affirmed and reinforced in the daily practices of individuals.

##### 3. Material Interests

Within a well-functioning capitalism, the material interests of almost everyone depend to a significant degree upon successful capitalist economic activity. This near-universal dependence of everyone's material interests on the pursuit of profits is perhaps the most fundamental mechanism for the social reproduction of capitalist society. So long as capitalism can effectively tie the material interests of the population to the interests of capital, other mechanisms of social reproduction have less work to do.

##### 4. Coercion

This includes a wide range of mechanisms which raise the costs and consequences of collective challenges to the system. There is a scale of tactics that range from almost invisible forms of suppression to more overt and violent forms of repression. We'll explore these in the next section.

These four types of mechanism aren't separate from each other. Social reproduction is the result of complex interactions among and between these mechanisms. Legislation (a form of Institutional rules) is most effective when it is thought to be legitimate or in line with material interest. Coercion is more effective when rarely used because most people comply out of self-interest. In a 'hegemonic' social order coercion is kept in the background where possible - Ideology and material interests play a more central role. The active consent of subordinate classes is tied to the belief that willingly participating in reproducing existing structures is both in their interests and the right thing to do. Nevertheless, consent is always armoured by coercion. Where coercion becomes more visible and dominant than consent, we can say that the system has shifted from a hegemonic one into a despotic one.

## Suppression and repression

### Limiting our space

Attacks against us will often use a range of mechanisms. They aren't always visibly violent, but nevertheless, can be highly effective in damaging and undermining us and our work.

One way to think about attacks is as *"attempts made by our adversaries to limit or close the spaces in which we work or live."*

These spaces include:

<b>Physical space</b>	Offices, homes, public spaces, our bodies
<b>Economic space</b>	Capacity to generate and manage resources
<b>Social space</b>	Freedom of association and communication - impact on family and friends and our communities
<b>Technological space</b>	Surveillance and access to data
<b>Legal space</b>	Rights and restrictions on activity
<b>Environmental space</b>	Common resources and natural products
<b>Mental and emotional space</b>	Filling our heart and mind with fear, doubt, and additional work for us to manage

Another way to think about these attacks, suggested by Jules Boykoff, in his 2007 book, *Beyond Bullets*, is as *"actions aimed at causing social movements, civil society organisations and activists, to be less able to meet the preconditions for collective action."* In order to be able to participate in effective collective action, there are certain preconditions that need to be in place.

These preconditions include the capacity or opportunity to:

- Maintain solidarity  
(sustain the morale and commitment of current people/members)
- Attract new people/members
- Build alliances
- Create, nurture and support leaders/leadership
- Generate media coverage (preferably favourable)
- Mobilise support from potentially sympathetic groups
- Carve out the tactical freedom to pursue social-change goals (rather than having to put resources toward self-protection and maintenance)
- Generate resources (finance and infrastructure).

Attacks against us may be aimed at preventing us from meeting these preconditions, undermining our work and making us less effective, if not wiping us out entirely.

## Suppression-Repression Scale

Following Boykoff, we use the term *repression* to refer to attacks which are overtly violent, such as police brutality. Suppression on the other hand, we take as a broader term. It encompasses other, more subtle modes of silencing or undermining opposition, such as a media smear campaign or social welfare cuts. Both repression and suppression then, are ways of inhibiting/denying the preconditions for action, mobilization, and collective organisation directed at challenging the injustices of the prevalent system. They undermine our collective efforts by either making things too difficult or costly to achieve, or not worth doing because the impacts are so curtailed.

With this in mind, we can begin to get a sense of the wide range of attacks we often face, some overt and visible, others more subtle and yet still intentional (if not specifically focused on us). We think of this range in terms of a scale from suppression to repression. On this scale we can plot and identify numerous forms of attack. Boykoff offers a list that runs from more overt forms of repression to more subtle forms of suppression:

1. Direct Violence
2. Prosecutions and Legal Hearings
3. Harassment and Harassment Arrests
4. Surveillance and Break-Ins
5. Infiltration, Bad Jacketing, and Agent Provocateurs
6. Black Propaganda
7. Denying/Limiting Employment
8. Introducing New Rules and Laws
9. Mass Media Manipulation
10. Bi-level Demonisation
11. Mass Media Discrediting
12. Mass Media Underestimation, False Balance, and Disregard

We explore this list in more detail in the exercises that are appended to this chapter.

## How?

The activities in this section aim to provide resources and tools that will help you to analyse risks and threats, develop strategic responses and implement those plans.

### Bringing emotional literacy to these issues

The way we explore these themes is important. Discussing security and threats can create a greater sense of insecurity (e.g. by causing alarm or anxiety). It can also damage trust (e.g. by increasing concerns about surveillance and infiltration). So, it is important that we bring emotional literacy to this work in our groups. One of the most palpable impacts of threats and attacks are experiences of fear and the breakdown of trust within our groups. We need to use all of our skills related to **emotional awareness** and **relationship building** to offset these impacts. We need to allow space for the emotional dimension to come in, and design the process so that it contributes to building trust and connection, rather than fear and anxiety. We should be especially wary of using discussions about security to reinforce macho cultures and immature attitudes of activist self-importance or romanticisation of risk taking. These are common pitfalls and undermine efforts to build resilient and regenerative activist practices.

### Considering vulnerability and privilege

Different groups are more vulnerable to attack than others. The way violence is legitimised in our cultures so often relates to the way different people and groups are represented in the mainstream. Demonisation or

othering of some groups, makes them more susceptible to attack. Similarly, different types of privilege offer different kinds of security. Economic precarity, legal status of individuals, and other forms of social exclusion or marginalisation, can increase vulnerability. In exploring these issues, a good understanding of **power and privilege** is important.

### **Acknowledging the subjectivity involved in perceiving and recognising threats**

How we perceive threats is influenced by subjective factors and the availability of information. It will be influenced by our previous experience and that of people we know. Prior trauma can heighten our sensitivity and increase our 'arousal' or 'activation'. This heightened arousal can lead to perceiving 'unfounded threats' which are not based on current external conditions, or perceiving actual threats disproportionately. At the same time, lower arousal and poor information flow can mean that genuine threats are not recognised. We need to attend to both the 'objective' data and the 'subjective' experience to try to make a balanced picture of what is really going on.

If we don't attend to the 'subjective' and emotional dimension, building **emotional literacy and resilience**, we can allow fear to debilitate us. This is one of the primary inhibiting impacts of repression and suppression. For all these reasons, it is valuable to reflect on the ways we and our colleagues respond to threats.

### **Analysing threats and developing security strategies**

If we risk facing threats and attacks, we need to acquire tools that can help us analyse the threats and evaluate risks. In the activities outlined below, we'll offer some basic tools that can be used. Analysing and assessing risks and threats is the crucial first step that will equip us to

develop appropriate and responsive strategies. The next steps involve developing security strategies and implementing them. There are three broad types of security strategy we should consider:

- **Acceptance:** Strategies that help to create wider acceptance of our work, our legitimacy, and our right to live and contribute as we do
- **Deterrence:** Strategies that deter our opponents from attacking us, often by increasing the negative consequences for them - economic costs, loss of legitimacy, damage to support networks, etc.
- **Protection:** Strategies which are specifically defensive and include basic security measures - property security systems, activity security protocols, digital security, etc.

In addition to using these tools and approaches, there are certainly situations where the experience of security experts working with human rights defenders on digital and physical security can be of real value. Of these groups some of the most helpful include: **Front Line Defenders**, **Tactical Tech**, the Holistic Security Collective, who also work on Ulex hosted Holistic Security Trainings.

The following exercises can help you and your groups to better understand threats and attacks in a balanced and realistic way. They will support you to unpack and explore how these can impact your work, and what you can do to prepare and respond in ways that will strengthen your relationships and deepen your personal and organisational resilience.



## **ACTIVITIES:**

### **EXPLORING RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF THREATS, ATTACKS AND REPRESSION**

- Perceiving and Responding to Threats
- Suppression – Repression Sale
- Risk Matrix Analysis
- Theat Analysis and Security Strategies

#### **ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES**

- Bricks and Hammers
- Goals and Resources
- Burnout Wheel – Group Activity
- Resilience Trees
- Working with Suffering (compassion practice)
- Introduction to Trauma Awareness
- Yes/No/Maybe - Boundary Setting
- If Nothing You Can Do is Ever Enough...
- Self Solidarity Practice (meditative)
- Open Sentences
- Spectrum Lines (generic)
- Movement Timelines
- Movement Mapping
- Making Changes Coaching

#### **ACTIVITY RESOURCES**

- Risk Matrix
- Security strategy template
- Threat analysis template
- Making Changes Grid
- Burnout Wheel

#### **FURTHER READING**

- Front Line Defenders
- Tactical Tech



# MAKING CHANGES AND APPLYING OUR LEARNING

## Why?

One of the biggest challenges facing us, when it comes to learning, is integrating it into our lives in ways that actually transform us and our groups. This is especially the case with learning that is reflective and **holistic**, and aims to support real changes in our behaviour, our ways of thinking, and the ways we relate to each other - not just the acquisition of knowledge or ideas.

We can all be deeply habitual. So, even when we gain some insights or acquire some new practices that could make a significant difference to us, we'll often meet resistance in ourselves and amongst those we work with. We'll run into obstacles and numerous reasons to prevaricate and leave making the changes until later - usually until they've been long forgotten. At the same time, the kind of deeper transformation that some of this manual aims to support, takes time. It happens gradually and over long periods of steady application and consolidation of our learning. Supporting this needs planning and lots of clear intention.

All of this means that it is really important to build into any workshop or training some space for clarifying what our learning means to us in terms of our future practice, how we're going to apply it, and to make at least some 'next steps' plans for carrying it forwards beyond the workshop or session.

Here we share a few of our 'Taking it back' session plans and tools that can be used in both shorter and longer training contexts.

### 1. Action Learning Methodology

Not so much a session plan, but a method that is worth sharing, encouraging participants to consider how they can build the **Action Learning Cycle** into their own lives and work. It is when we apply and test out our learning that we discover its limitations, the deeper challenges it brings up, and the range of additional insights it offers. But to do so we need time to reflect on our experience, analyse what it means, and make new plans that we can test out in the next round of action-learning. There is a short description of the method **here**.

### 2. Visioning exercises

To help us implement learning and develop plans for making changes, it can be valuable to take some time to get a sense of where we are heading. This doesn't need to be a clear and comprehensive picture of some personal utopian future. We just need enough of a sense of vision to help draw the needle of our decision making compass in a helpful direction as we encounter forks in the road. This kind of visioning can engage the imagination, heart, and body. As part of a longer 'Taking it Forward' session, these exercises are a good place to start.

- Walking into the Future
- Blue Sky Visioning
- Boal Sculpture Transformation

### 3. Resourcing ourselves for change

Making changes requires all kinds of supportive conditions: friendships, additional knowledge, material resources, time and space... it's a long (and in some aspects, mysterious) list. It can be useful to check out what resources we already have in our lives to draw upon, which resources we need to find, and to consider how we might approach and overcome some of the challenges that can get in our way. These are some shorter sessions that can help.

- Goals and Resources
- Ally Mapping

### 4. Overcoming Obstacles

There are always going to be things getting in the way of best laid plans, and some of that will be unforeseeable. Plenty of it, however, is perfectly predictable and we can plan for it - personal sabotaging tendencies, particular relationship challenges, funding or other kinds of material precarity, even political changes, can be considered and, where possible, mitigated.

- Bricks and Hammers
- Cops in the Head
- Forum/Playback Theatre

### 5. Getting Strategic About It

Although it is important to stay responsive, adapt our plans as we and the world around us changes (using Action Learning amongst other things!), there is still enormous value in projecting ahead, thinking strategically, and developing plans for longer term and effective transformation. This doesn't come naturally to everyone, but introducing some key strategic thinking tools in a 'Taking it Forwards' session is a great way to support people to develop the skills involved. This will also require them to think more deeply about applying their learning.

- Making Changes Grid
- Sphere of Influence/Sphere of Concern
- SWOT Analysis
- Critical Pathways (inc Objectives)





## ACTIVITIES: EXPLORING MAKING CHANGES

- Walking into the Future
- Critical Pathways
- Goals and Resources
- Making Changes Coaching
- Bricks and Hammers

### ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES

- Resilience Trees
- Open Sentences
- Centering Blanket

### ACTIVITY RESOURCES

- Making Changes Grid

### FURTHER READING

- Blue Sky Envisioning
- Boal Sculpture Transformation
- Ally Mapping
- Cops in the Head
- Forum/Playback Theatre
- Sphere of Influence/Sphere of Concern
- SWOT Analysis

# **[ACTIVITIES]**

# RIVERS OF EXPERIENCE ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 1h30 - 3hrs

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual work > small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** [Action Learning Diagram](#) flipchart / Pre-drawn demonstration river / flipchart paper / coloured markers, pencils and crayons

**LEADING FORMAT:** Individual

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Burnout

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- To support an extended period of reflection on personal experience
- Build relationships and trust within the group
- Emphasise value of reflection as part of the process of learning

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

For resilience, we need responsiveness, adaptability, the ability to learn from experience and mistakes. Everything is always changing - we need to embrace that, and, wherever possible, use it to our advantage!

This activity supports a process of **reflection** on experience (more on the importance of reflection under Action Learning Methodology, [here](#).)

Reflective spaces/activities provide opportunities to ask questions like "What happened?" without immediately jumping to making sense of it all. They allow us to pause, bring curiosity and receptivity, and deepen awareness, supporting us to acquire new knowledge, rather than persisting with more habitual/narrow ways of understanding.

It is quite common for us to pass quickly from experience to analysis and making meaning - we end up fitting our experiences into predetermined and preferred models and maps. When we do this we can often ignore the aspects of our experience that don't fit our expectations or preferred understandings of the world. To learn deeply from experience we need to find ways to hang out in the reflective space that precedes the phase of analysis.

Participants are asked to draw a river of their experience - a depiction of their personal history. You can apply this to various contexts and frame it accordingly - you might ask people to draw a river of their involvement in social engagement/activism, or of being/working in groups/organisations, or of their inner-life, or leave it completely open for them to include whatever seems most important to them.

We are aiming to create a space where people bring curiosity and interest to their previous experience - less about trying to make sense or meaning, more about room to recollect and recall. It is not necessary to seek coherence or patterns at this stage. More important is an attitude of interested curiosity and openness, a quality of mind that is meandering, associative and receptive.

Utilising drawing helps to support this. The drawing and doodling help to keep the process less conceptual and analytical, engaging a different kind of faculty. It is not at all important how "good" people feel at drawing.

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

If necessary a few words can be included in the drawings, but it is useful to discourage people from incorporating too many words.

We follow up the drawing exercise with a period of sharing the rivers in small groups (this can go on for a couple of hours, if you want to give it the time). This enables further reflection and a gentle movement towards analysis (somewhat inevitable as we move towards story-telling). We do remind people that this is not meant to be a definitive account and a fully coherent story is not necessary.

The sharing in groups strongly accelerates a group getting to know each other and beginning to sense more deeply the richness of diversity and shared experience. As an aspect of group formation it is a very valuable tool.

#### **Related material to support framing:**

- [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)
- [Identity and Activism chapter](#)
- [Action Learning, in Approaches to Learning chapter](#)

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

You'll need a minimum of 30 minutes for the individual activity, ideally 45-60. You can choose to leave informal time for people to work on these more as they wish (eg. over a break).

Ideally the group sharing activity should happen in groups of 4 or 5, for a minimum of 15 mins per person, ideally with plenty of time for this to spill over into informal time.

Sometimes this can be a painful activity, as people look at their lives and, for example, notice how many periods of burnout or depression they have lived through, or recall times of pain and difficulty.

## **ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

### **Setting up the activity (15 mins)**

- Introduce the activity in the context of whatever session/theme you are using it. You will likely want to share the [Action Learning Diagram](#) and unpack the importance of creating space for reflection, using the framing material above.

- Give the instructions:

- Take a large sheet of paper (at least A2) and begin to doodle and draw a river as a representation of the flow and history of your experience

- You do not need to be good at drawing!

- You should start the river as early in your life as you feel is meaningful (sometimes this can even trace back into the lives of your families) and then draw up to the present

- Use a large format, lots of colour, and try to avoid words

- Either draw in front of them as you speak, or show them a pre-prepared example of a river, as shown in the image on the right.

- Explain that the river itself can offer wide ranging analogies for life's experiences and phases – meandering or fast flowing, stagnant or cascading, pools and deltas, bogs and dry places, etc. The banks can be inhabited by people we have known and worked with, groups and actions, places and interests.



- Give them timings (between 30 and 60 minutes) and encourage them to wander off to somewhere quiet. Explain the plan for the end of the session and that they will be sharing this in small groups. Reassure them that, because it is a drawing, there will be no imperative to unpack or explain parts of their drawing that they are not comfortable to share.

### **Facilitating the activity (30 - 60 mins)**

- Be around and available for people, notice if anyone is struggling and offer support, answer questions, etc.

- Give them a five minute warning and/or let them know when to transition to a break or to the small groups.

### **Debriefing the activity (45 mins - 1h40)**

- Get into groups of 4-5 people, where each person will take 15-20 minutes to tell the story of their river. (Consider whether you want to be strategic/directive about who is in the small groups).

- There is no need for further unpacking or concluding in the group - the session speaks for itself.

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

As above, the benefits of and reasons for the session really speak for themselves - a conclusion is not really required. If you want to reiterate anything, it would likely be something around the importance of space for reflection.

*Often the group will express that they would like to hear everyone's stories. This is understandable but not advised since it would take a lot of time! You can always suggest that they share with others in their own time if they are desperate.*

# RESILIENCE TREES ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 35mins - 1hr

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual or small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Flipchart paper / Pens / Art materials (optional) / Pre-drawn resilience tree flipchart

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Burnout

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Exploring the range of conditions and factors that can support resilience
- Helping identify some of the characteristics of resilience
- Helping recognise the fruits and benefits of attending to these factors
- Create a space for meaningful sharing of experience and understanding within the group

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

'Resilience Trees' is a visual illustration activity in which participants have the opportunity to identify the "roots, branches and fruits" of resilience. The activity directs the focus of the group towards the "roots and ground" of a more resilient life/work/activist practice and the benefits gained from generating one.

This activity can be done as an individual reflective exercise or as a small group activity, creating space for people to link resilience to meeting important needs, e.g connection, belonging, meaning, safety, integrity, autonomy etc.

You can also use the trunk and branches of the tree to illustrate the benefits - the core features/expressions of feeling more resourced, e.g greater energy, more capacity, more mental clarity, more harmony etc.. This is a longer way to do it, and if you are short of time it is fine to simply focus on roots and fruits, as the key learning aims relate to those areas.

The fruit of the tree is the capacity and effectiveness that is generated by greater resourcing and resilience in ourselves and in our movements. What becomes possible? What energy is freed up? What space opens up?

The most important aspect of framing the session is to give people a sense of the symbolic meaning of the different dimensions of the tree illustration.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Burnout chapter](#)
- [Regenerative Activism and PSR](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This exercise can be really enhanced and supported by visualisation/ imagination exercises, contemplative and body based exercises and relaxation work, either before, during or after this session.

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

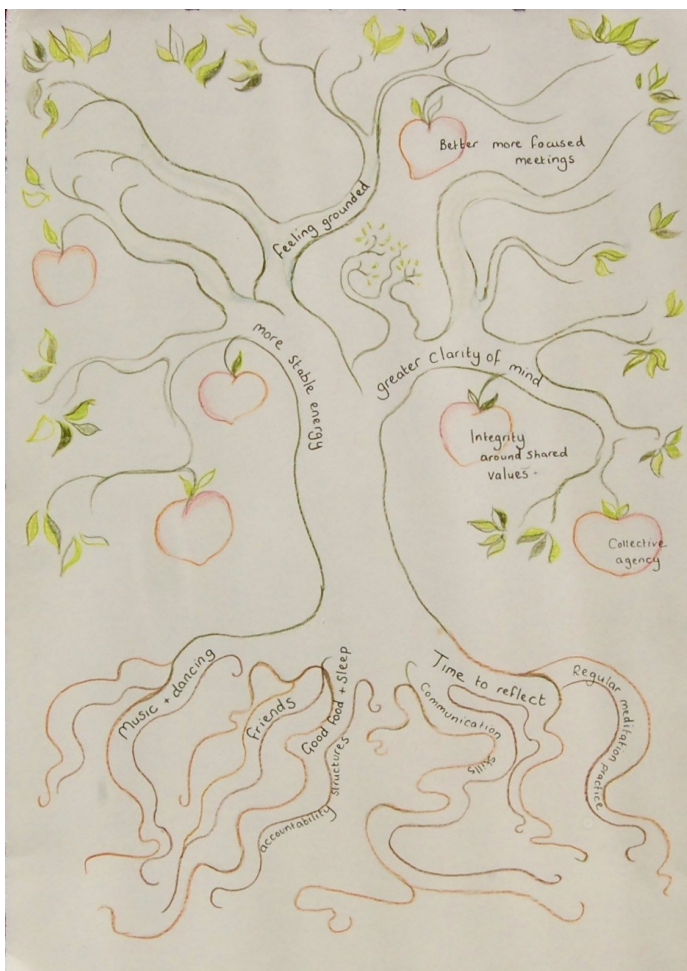
This activity has the potential to be felt as a little 'superficial'. Still, it can be useful in certain contexts, especially in shorter trainings when there isn't the scope for diving deeper into the various resilience factors, or as a way of consolidating all the learning that has been done on resilience, at the end of a training period. To avoid superficiality encourage participants to deepen their analysis of causes and conditions by asking what in turn supports those and delving more deeply into an analysis of underlying causes and conditions.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 - 10 mins)

- If you are doing the activity in groups rather than individually, support the participants to form small groups of between 4 and 6, ensuring each group has flipchart paper, coloured pens and perhaps artistic materials.

- Explain the exercise, offering any relevant framing (drawing from above) and using an illustration example depicting a tree with roots, branches and fruits, like this:



The picture should include roots AND sub-roots... an important part of the activity is analysing the causes or supports and then getting beneath those too, so that root system will have more levels and words than shown in the image here.

- Ask them to populate the roots, fruits (and if time the trunk and branches) in the following way:

- **Roots and sub-roots** - what do we need to be 'drawing upon' to feel more resourced and resilient? What supports our resilience?

- **Trunk/Branches** - how do we feel when we attend to these things? What grows out of those roots?

- **Fruit** - what wider impact does that have? what capacity and benefits for our movements and activities flow from our greater resourcing and enhanced resilience?



- Remind the groups that the focus is on what supports resilience i.e to try not to drop back into problem diagnosis.

- Note that the process does not have to be sequential, groups can decide how they want to manage documentation/discussion

- Point out that the process is what is important, rather than the outcome.

- Ask for clarifications, give them timings and send them off.

### **Facilitating the activity (20 - 30 mins)**

- Keep an eye on them and offer support where required. Give them a half-way and five minute warning, then bring them back together

**Debriefing the activity (10 - 20 mins)**- Offer an opportunity for the groups to share their work with each other. This can be a 'go-round' in which each group presents their work or a 'gallery', where the work is shown and people wander around looking at each other's drawings

- Depending on the format, the group sharing can itself be used as an opportunity to ask for feedback and information about what stood out for people during the exercise, including key learnings about resilience factors and the benefits of building resilience into our activities. Alternatively, a short whole group debrief might need to be added to the end of the session.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- Have we learned anything new/unexpected about personal and collective resilience?

- What are you taking away from this session?

- Anything we need to give more attention to?

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

Reiterate that this is not designed to be perfect depiction of what resilience must look like, but an opportunity to consider the multidimensional and intersecting nature of the elements that give rise to resilience.

# USING THE BURNOUT RATING SCALE ACTIVITY

(RESOURCE FROM [THE CHANGE AGENCY](#))

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

**RUNNING TIME:** 25 - 40 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual > whole group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** copies of [Burnout Rating Scale sheet](#) p/p

**LEADING FORMAT:** Individual > peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Burnout

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Opening up the arena of burnout and getting people thinking about their personal experience of it
- Dialogue and reflection
- Group building, deepening understanding, connection and solidarity

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Burnout, as a topic, can be tricky to engage with, bringing up painful, overwhelming, exhausting or even traumatic material for people. It can cause people to feel depressed or despondent, or put them back in touch with triggers of burnout experiences. It can make them feel hopeless.

Hence it is important to frame clearly *why* we are spending time with it as a topic. And it also means you are unlikely to want to use this activity without clear follow on into activities/process that will support people to feel empowered with it, on the other side. This can be a useful activity for opening up the topic of burnout and getting a discussion going, but you are likely to want to embed it in a longer session, such as the Exploring Burnout session.

Some bits of framing theory might be:

- Knowledge Supports Prevention:** if we can recognise burnout and understand its conditions and causes we are better equipped to intervene soon enough to prevent it, thus increasing our sense of agency
- Burnout as a spectrum:** that our understanding of burnout is grounded in shared experience and there is a wide spectrum of embodied/felt experiences to take account of - from the mild to the extreme. Give/ask for examples if desired or requested. Note that a fixed definition presents challenges, as experience is diverse, but that does not mean it's purely subjective either. There are common experiences we can identify.
- Conditionality and Cyclicity:** That burnout happens in the context of conditionality and complexity - that we can explore causal conditions, but each burnout experience springs from a unique coming together of contributing factors layered over time. That burnout can be cyclical and people can work through many cycles before they recognise what is happening.

ii) **Breaking Burnout Cycles through Awareness;** that using action-learning, we can break the cycles through awareness. That it can be useful to feel more deeply into our non-verbal experience before shifting to a more cognitive level - connecting with our experience (reflection) before moving to deeper more analytical reflection and on to action (you can refer to the action learning cycle if useful).

You will need a copy of this sheet for each participant:

### Related material to support framing:

- [Burnout chapter](#)
- [Burnout Wheel - Group activity](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

It is not uncommon for people to get somewhat upset, frustrated or anxious when doing this activity, particularly if they are recognising for the first time how burnt out they may be or have been. At the same time, this tool is a rather 'rough and ready' (or superficial) one, and people can also resist it for that reason, and in a sense, quite rightly - we are unlikely to be able to effectively or accurately determine whether we have burnout by answering a few generic questions. Hence the framing is important - it should be introduced as a way to open up the subject and get us thinking about the topic, not taking the results of the questionnaire at face value, but also taking seriously that it can be upsetting or confronting for us.

Make sure you have team members around to support anyone who needs it. And offer the activity to the group with an attitude of care.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Frame the activity in the context that you are using it. You may want to introduce some of the framing material (above) at the start of the session, but it can also be good to let them do the questionnaire first, and then weave that material into the discussion.

- Introduce the [Burnout Rating Scale](#) as follows:

- Developed by The Change Agency, it is a useful and simple tool for establishing some engagement with the burnout theme and beginning to support a shared understanding of what the term means

- It is a very "rough and ready" tool, and as such the scores shouldn't be taken too seriously. At the same time, it can be surprisingly informative, so do also give it a chance! But basically, this is a way to start a conversation.

- Hand out one worksheet per person explaining we will take some time to fill it in individually if people wish to, before moving to some sharing and discussion.

### Facilitating the activity (10 - 15 mins)

- Allow people 10 to 15 minutes to do the worksheet, keeping an eye on the group and bringing everyone back together when people are done.

### Debriefing the activity (10 - 20 mins)

- Ask the group to turn to the person next to them and have a few minutes of debrief in pairs, then bring them back as a whole group.

- Especially if this is the first time the group have spoken about burnout

**the change agency**  
**Burnout Rating Scale**

Think over the past 3 months and answer the following questions according to how often you have experienced these symptoms.

0 = Never	1 = Very rarely
2 = Rarely	3 = Sometimes
4 = Often	5 = Very often

Adding up your total score will give you some indication whether you are likely to be burnt out or not.

1. Do you feel fatigued in a way that rest or sleep does not relieve?
2. Do you feel more cynical, pessimistic or disillusioned about things you used to feel positive about?
3. Do you feel a sadness or an emptiness inside?
4. Do you have physical symptoms of stress, eg insomnia, stomach pains, headaches, migraines?
5. Is your memory unreliable?
6. Are you irritable or emotional with a short fuse?
7. Have you become more susceptible to illness lately, eg colds, flu, food allergies, hay fever?
8. Do you feel like holding yourself back from colleagues, friends or family?
9. Is it hard to enjoy yourself, have fun, relax, and experience joy in your life?
10. Do you feel that you are accomplishing less in your work?

My score: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Scoring**  
0 - 15 You are doing well!  
16 - 25 Some attention needed, you are a candidate.  
26 - 35 You are on the road to burnout. Make changes now.  
36 - 50 You need to take action immediately - your health and well-being are threatened.

**Reference:** *In The Tiger's Mouth: An Empowerment Guide For Social Action*, Katrina Shields (2000) self-published, p.130.

Other 'indicators' of being over-stressed or approaching burn-out for me are ...

together, it is an important moment of recognising shared experience and difficulty. Let the group guide the discussion while also looking for ways to weave in some of the theory points from the Framing section above.

- Reiterate that obviously the reflection and discussion together is more important than the accuracy of the score – and it is worth pointing out again that it is a very “rough and ready” tool, and as such the scores shouldn’t be taken too seriously.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- How does it feel to see your score? Were you surprised?
- How do you understand all this?
- What comes up for you?

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

You may want to offer some kind affirmation/reassurance/thank the group for engaging with the topic. But, as above, you are likely using this as an introduction to something else, and so it may be fine to simply acknowledge the potential challenge in peoples’ experience and then move to whatever is coming next.

# BURNOUT WHEEL - GROUP ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 50 mins - 1h10

**GROUP FORMAT:** Small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Pre-drawn Burnout Wheel fl pchart

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Burnout

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Deepening understanding of burnout, and its causes and conditions
- Building confidence and self belief around capacities to work with burnout
- Moving us towards informed intervention and strategy
- Group building, deepening understanding, connection and solidarity

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This is a very useful activity for supporting groups to collectively explore and unpack what some of the key causes and conditions for burnout are. It opens up the complexity and breadth of the terrain which, while it might at first make it feel like a very 'big problem' with so much needing to be addressed, in another sense it helps us to see that there are many different possibilities for creative intervention. Putting an end to burnout cycles is not a simple unilinear process; an effective resilience practice is holistic and requires all kinds of dimensions and diverse approaches as part of it.

This activity is a great way to explore and depict that. And by working in small groups, you get a multiplication of learning and diverse perspectives (through sharing the work of each group with the others).

You will need to build some kind of shared understanding of what is meant by 'burnout' before doing the activity. You can do this using the [Burnout Rating Scale](#) activity, by drawing on the experiences of the group, by framing and offering some kind of working definition yourself, or a mix of all of these. You can read more on this in the [Burnout chapter](#), or some possible framing pointers might be:

i) **Knowledge Supports Prevention;** if we can recognise burnout and understand its conditions and causes we are better equipped to intervene soon enough to prevent it, thus increasing our sense of agency.

ii) **Burnout as a spectrum;** our understanding of burnout is grounded in shared experience and there is a wide spectrum of embodied/felt experiences to take account of- from the mild to the extreme. Give/ask for examples if desired or requested. Note that a fixed definition presents challenges, as experience is diverse, but that does not mean it's purely subjective either. There are common experiences we can identify.

iii) **Conditionality and Cyclicity;** We will be exploring why burnout happens with an openness to conditionality and complexity - that we can explore causal conditions, but each burnout experience springs from a unique coming together of contributing factors layered over time. Burnout can be cyclical and people can work through many cycles before they recognise what is happening.

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

*There is a fine line to tread between not being too fixed and prescriptive about defining burnout, thus valuing experiential diversity, and ending up saying that burnout is purely subjective. Often the middle way emerges from what is shared, the common ground and the clarity that comes through conversation and reflection. By doing this collective work we make space for both uniqueness and commonality.*

ii) **Breaking Burnout Cycles through Awareness:** Using action learning we can break the cycles through awareness. It can be useful to feel more deeply into our non-verbal experience before shifting to a more cognitive level – connecting with our experience (reflection) before moving to deeper and more analytical reflection and on to action (you can refer to the [action learning cycle](#) if useful).

**Related material to support framing:**

- [Burnout chapter](#)
- [Using the Burnout Rating Scale activity](#)

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

People can find exploring burnout painful, triggering, demotivating and upsetting. It is important to be clear in the framing and in the way you hold the activity that the purpose of this is to understand the conditions, *so that we can make interventions and changes*. And that through sharing experience and building shared understanding we strengthen solidarity and enable the establishing of more caring cultures. For this reason, it's generally useful to consider what will follow on from this activity – ie. how to support people not to feel that they have opened up all the problems and are not getting to any solutions!

Have enough team members around to support the group.

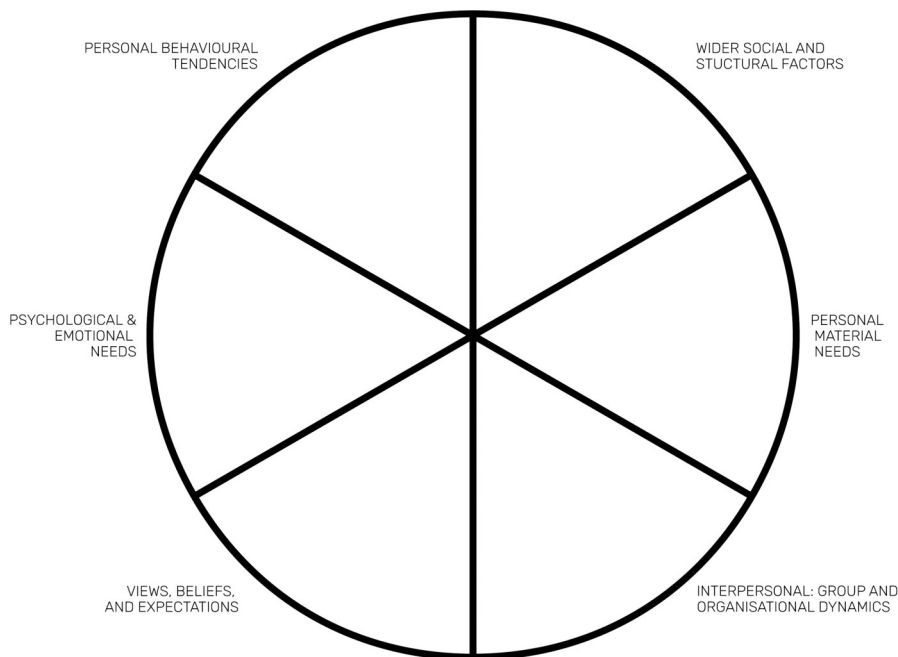
## **ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

### **Setting up the activity (5 - 10 mins)**

- Frame the activity, ensuring that there is enough of a shared understanding of the term 'burnout' to enable them to do the activity (as above). Then give them the instructions:

- We will be trying to understand and identify what causes and conditions can contribute to burnout, with a more general/collective focus
- There are a wide range of factors which can produce susceptibility to burnout. It is rarely simply a matter of uni-linear cause and effect. More often than not a number of different kinds of conditions act in combination to give rise to burnout.
- The shift from causal to conditional thinking is important, as we begin to recognise the range of both personal and environmental conditions.

- We will use the format of the burnout wheel to help us explore some of these conditions, something like this:



(show them the pre-drawn flipchart of this)

You will fill in the wheel and its segments with examples of things under each heading that might contribute to burnout, for example: in the segment 'Personal Behaviours' you might write "not enough sleep", or in 'Personal Material Needs' you might write "housing insecurity", or in 'Social and Environmental Factors' you might write "rising power of the far right", and so on.

- Get into groups of 4-6, copy the wheel onto one flipchart page per group. Then brainstorm, discuss and write down examples of these contributing factors, for every segment. You'll have X time.

- Answer any clarifying questions, give them their timings, and then send them off..

### **Facilitating the activity (35 - 45 mins)**

- Keep an eye on the groups, move between them, see if they need any help. Give them a "half way" and a "five minutes left".

### **Debriefing the activity (10 - 15 mins)**

- Give some time for people to move around and look at the other groups' work.

- Then bring everyone together and have some time for reflections, experiences and, especially: how are people now? what are they left with? how are they feeling?  
Give this time and hold it with care - it is not good for people to feel 'dropped' at the end of an activity like this.



## CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

If there is a sense for people that they have opened up lots of 'problems' and haven't yet achieved much in the way of solutions, it could be useful to refer back to the [action learning cycle](#) and the importance of not 'jumping' to analysis and planning before adequate reflection. You can also point to whatever ways there might be (either coming next in the training or elsewhere in their lives) to get into more planning, analysis and strategy with regards to these themes and resilience in general.

You may want to offer some kind affirmation/reassurance/thank the group for engaging in an activity of potentially quite heavy themes!

## FURTHER NOTES

It can work well to move straight from looking at the Burnout Wheel collectively, which emphasises general conditions, to looking at it personally. This is covered in the activity plan called [Burnout Wheel - Personal Activity](#). This supports learners to move from general observations to the specific conditions in their own lives. From there they can begin to explore different interventions.

# BURNOUT WHEEL - PERSONAL ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 40 mins – 1h

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** [Personal Burnout Wheel](#) worksheets (per participant)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Burnout

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Deepening understanding of burnout, and the causes and conditions as they show up in our own life
- Building confidence and self belief around capacities to work with burnout
- Moving us towards informed intervention and strategy
- Self awareness and reflection
- Group building, deepening understanding, connection and solidarity

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Using the Burnout Wheel as a personal reflection tool offers the opportunity to get into the specific details of what may be occurring in the lives of each participant in relation to burnout. It will allow them to consider and unpack what is going on in some of the different dimensions of their lives, in relation to causes and conditions for burnout, opening up the complexity and breadth of the terrain which, while it might at first make it feel like a very 'big problem' with so much needing to be addressed, in another sense can help to expose the many different possibilities for creative intervention. Putting an end to burnout cycles is not a simple unilinear process; an effective resilience practice is holistic and requires all kinds of dimensions and diverse approaches as part of it.

You will need to give some time to ensuring that people know what kinds of things might go in each segment usually by preceding this activity with the collective version of this activity as set up, [here](#).

You will also need to have built some kind of shared understanding of what is meant by 'burnout' before doing the activity. You can do this using the Burnout Rating Scale or Group Burnout Wheel activities, by drawing on the experiences of the group, by framing and offering some kind of working definition yourself, or a mix of all of these. You can read more on this in the Burnout chapter, or some possible framing pointers might be:

i) **Knowledge Supports Prevention;** if we can recognise burnout and understand its conditions and causes we are better equipped to intervene soon enough to prevent it, thus increasing our sense of agency.

ii) **Burnout as a spectrum;** our understanding of burnout is grounded in shared experience and there is a wide spectrum of embodied/felt experiences to take account of- from the mild to the extreme. Give/ask for examples if desired or requested. Note that a fixed definition presents challenges, as experience is diverse, but that does not mean it's purely subjective either. There are common experiences we can identify.

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

*There is a fine line to tread between not being too fixed and prescriptive about defining burnout, thus valuing experiential diversity, and ending up saying that burnout is purely subjective. Often the middle way emerges from what is shared, the common ground and the clarity that comes through conversation and reflection. By doing this collective work we make space for both uniqueness and commonality.*

iii) **Conditionality and Cyclicality:** We will be exploring why burnout happens with an openness to conditionality and complexity – that we can explore causal conditions, but each burnout experience springs from a unique coming together of contributing factors layered over time. Burnout can be cyclical and people can work through many cycles before they recognise what is happening.

ii) **Breaking Burnout Cycles through Awareness:** Using action learning we can break the cycles through awareness. It can be useful to feel more deeply into our non-verbal experience before shifting to a more cognitive level – connecting with our experience (reflection) before moving to deeper more analytical reflection and on to action (you can refer to the action learning cycle if useful).

#### Related material to support framing:

- [Burnout chapter](#)
- [Burnout Wheel - Group activity](#)
- [Using the Burnout Rating Scale activity](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

People can find exploring burnout painful, triggering, demotivating and upsetting. It is important to be clear in the framing and in the way you hold the activity that the purpose of this is to understand the conditions, *so that we can be more aware and make interventions and changes*. And that through sharing experience and building shared understanding we strengthen solidarity and enable the establishing of more caring cultures. For this reason, it's generally useful to consider what will follow on from this activity – ie. how to support people not to feel that they have opened up all the problems and are not getting to any solutions!

Have enough team members around to support the group

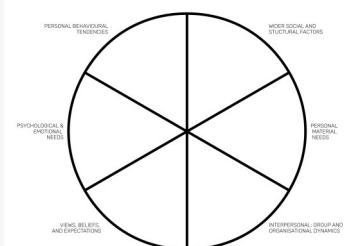
## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

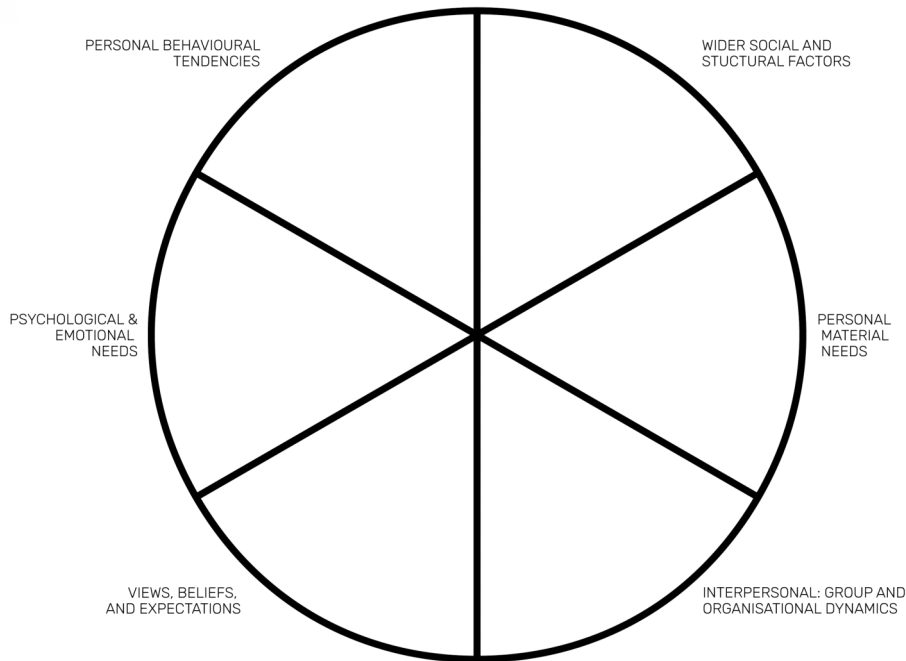
### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Frame the activity, ensuring that there is enough of a shared understanding of the term 'burnout' to enable them to do the activity (as above). Then give them the instructions:

- We will be trying to understand and identify what causes and conditions can contribute to burnout, with a focus on the specifics of our personal lives
- There are a wide range of factors which can produce susceptibility to burnout. It is rarely simply a matter of uni-linear cause and effect. More often than not a number of different kinds of conditions act in combination to give rise to burnout.
- The shift from causal to conditional thinking is important, as we begin to recognise the range of both personal and environmental conditions.
- We will use the format of the burnout wheel to help us explore some of these conditions, something like this:

**PERSONAL BURNOUT WHEEL:**  
THE CAUSES AND CONDITIONS THAT CAN  
CONTRIBUTE TO LACK OF  
SUSTAINABILITY IN MY SOCIALLY ENGAGED  
ACTION.





(hand out the worksheets so they can see what you are referring to)

You will fill in the wheel and its segments with examples of things under each heading that might contribute to burnout, for example: in the segment 'Personal Behaviours' you might write "staying up late scrolling my phone", or in 'Personal Material Needs' you might write "needing to leave my house next month", or in 'Interpersonal: Groups and Relationships' you might write "the conflict with Benjamin", and so on.

- You will have X time, to work on this on your own, and then we will be sharing it with a partner (although you won't have to share anything you don't want to!)

- Answer any clarifying questions, and then send them off.

### **Facilitating the activity (20 - 30 mins)**

- Give people a half-way and five minute warning, then bring them back together

### **Debriefing the activity (15 - 30 mins)**

- Invite the group to get into pairs and share their work and reflections, splitting the available time between them

- Then bring the group back together, and ask for any experiences, reflections or thoughts people might have about the subject or the activity.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- What did you see/learn about the causes and conditions in your life that maybe you weren't aware of before, or that surprised you?
- How has this activity made you feel?
- How was it to hear and share with someone else about this?
- What are you left with, at this stage?

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

If there is a sense for people that they have opened up lots of 'problems' and haven't yet achieved much in the way of solutions, it could be useful to refer back to the [action learning cycle](#) and the importance of not 'jumping' to analysis and planning before adequate reflection. You can also point to whatever ways there might be (either coming next in the training or elsewhere in their lives) to get into more planning, analysis and strategy with regards to these themes and resilience in general.

You may want to offer some kind affirmation/reassurance/thank the group for engaging in an activity of potentially quite heavy themes!

## **FURTHER NOTES**

It can work well to look at the Burnout Wheel collectively first, and then move to looking at it personally. This collective version is covered in the activity plan called [Burnout Wheel - Group Activity](#).

# BODY SCANNING PRACTICE (MEDITATIVE)

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

**RUNNING TIME:** 20 – 50 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** cushions, blocks, blankets, mats, chairs (multiple options for sitting for extended periods of meditation) / [Introducing Working with Awareness flipchart](#) (if using) / [leading a body scan script](#)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Bodywork: An Introduction to Somatic Practice

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Basis of all other mindful awareness and meditation practices
- Developing self awareness/knowledge
- Calming, settling, stabilising
- Nervous system regulation
- Key to self care

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

The primary basis of any awareness practice is in the body, as we have seen in the [awareness](#) and [bodywork](#) chapters, where you can also see clear rationale for the importance of body-connectivity.

This is a practice to support people to connect, increasingly sensitively, with what is going on for them at a somatic level – physically, emotionally and energetically. In order to meditate, or work with our experience in really useful ways, we need to know what is happening, really, in the here and now. If we are not in touch with our experience, we are in a state of more or less alienation, and this is not a good basis for any kind of psychological, emotional, reflective or relational practice (or anything at all really!). We need the information our bodies can offer us about what is happening. This will underpin our capacities to show up for ourselves (self care, knowing our limits, setting boundaries, making conscious choices), show up for others in an available way, and show up more fully, with more of ourselves, in the world and in our work. It will support regulation, wellbeing and our capacities for authenticity and integrity (the bases of skilful relating).

Doing a body scan, even a short one, every day for an extended period can offer huge transformative potential for us – much more than we might expect. And starting any meditative or reflective practice with some body scanning is ideal. In terms of developing awareness and emotional literacy, this practice is our bread and butter!

Our bodies hold our histories, past experiences, emotions and possibly also traumas. We must therefore proceed with caution and care when doing this kind of work, and encourage participants to take responsibility for their welfare, acknowledging that people in the room will be carrying different levels of personal and social wounding/oppression. If something doesn't feel okay, they are free to stop. We should proceed with care for ourselves, rather than willful effort.

If you are doing this as a quick one off practice, standing, lying or sitting in a chair will work fine. If you want to set it up more formally, you will need to support people with their [posture](#).

#### Related material to support framing:

- [Introducing working with awareness resource](#)
- [Bodywork chapter](#)
- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)
- [Trauma Informed Approaches chapter](#)
- [Finding a Posture that Works activity](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The principals around working with somatic/body connection can be applied with different levels of depth and intensity. Almost any time is a good time to ask people to take a moment to notice how their body is feeling, or ask people to move and connect with the breadth of their experience.

The description of this practice is aimed at going a little deeper, and therefore require some appropriate time and space: ideally a calm/quiet environment, and a way for people to keep still comfortably for up to 20 minutes (ie, chairs/cushions for sitting, blankets/mats for lying down).

As a general rule, doing meditative activities after lunch is not a good time - people tend to be much more drowsy and prone to falling asleep than at other times of day.

There are some risks, as mentioned above. Ensure you ask participants to take responsibility for their experience and limits. We should aim to approach the body with respect and kindness.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 - 10 mins)

[not including [introducing working with awareness](#) (10) or [posture set up](#) (20)]

- Frame the activity, telling the group why you are doing this (as above).
- Introduce the shape and structure of the practice (in advance of leading through it in real time)
- Let people know how long you'll be meditating for, invite them to close their eyes if that's comfortable (if not, a soft gaze on the fl or in front of them), then guide them through the practice

### Facilitating the activity (10 - 30 mins)

- Begin by asking them to broadly take their whole experience in - physical, mental, emotional, energetic. You could suggest they drop in a question like "how does it feel to be sitting here, right now?", or just "how am I now?". (It's always good to start broad, and gradually gather in, so that the practice has enough 'base').
- Lead through a body scan, asking people to feel/notice the sensations in their various body parts. Begin at the feet, move up through the legs, up the back of the body, then from the root of the torso up the front of the body, finishing with the face, head and crown. (You can find an example 'script' for leading the practice [here](#)).
- End by again asking them to take their whole body/experience in, notice how they are now, then bring awareness to the sounds in the room and beyond, awareness of others in the space, and when they're ready, gradually moving the fingers and toes and opening the eyes. (It's always good to leave the

*Consider what length of practice is likely to serve the group you are working with - you need to balance there being enough time to allow people to settle a little, while also ensuring they aren't being asked to sit for too long too quickly, which is likely to be uncomfortable/frustrating/undermining for the inexperienced..*

*Awareness of the ableism implied in assuming that all bodies will work or cope with sitting for extended periods the same, is important. It should be possible to help most people find a position that is more comfortable than they...*



practice gradually, giving people a chance to transition and absorb whatever has happened, avoiding jarring or unnecessary closing up, after a sensitising experience).

### **Debriefing the activity (5 - 10 mins)**

- How did they find the practice - Questions? Challenges? Things they found interesting?

- Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- Issues with the posture? (reiterate core where relevant principals)

- Patience, perseverance, playing: don't get too uptight with it - keep experimenting!

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

10 mins doing some body awareness like this each day can make a world of difference to levels of self awareness and the chances of actually engaging in some self care or resilience-serving boundary setting. It may seem small, but resilience is a practice and it has to start somewhere.. A small routine like this can easily move from being a chore to becoming something precious/nourishing.

*might have found on their own, but for some people, chronic pain (for example) will prevent them from sitting comfortably. Encourage people to check in with you between sessions for more support and always make it okay for people to move during a meditation if they need to.*

# THREE STEP BREATHING SPACE: A.G.E (MEDITATIVE)

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

**RUNNING TIME:** 10 – 25 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** n/a

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Awareness and Emotional Literacy

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Counteracting tendencies to dispersion, distraction and fragmentation
- Settling the mind and gathering awareness
- Increasing levels of wellbeing
- Supporting nervous system regulation
- Breaking up and balancing more cognitive/conversational/relational activities

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This activity offers a very short and succinct alternative to other meditative following the breath exercises. With this activity we are practising being able to be present with and focused on something, so that in our day to day lives, we are able to be more present with and focused on what is happening, what we are doing and what we want to direct our attention to. It can also help us to notice and ease physical/mental tension, and bring some regulation to emotional states and anxiety.

Much of our lives and day-to-day activities lead to a sense of dispersion. Our attention can be pulled in many directions. By learning to take a few minutes from time to time to gather our attention with our body, breath and feelings, we can help ourselves to cultivate greater presence and mindful awareness, and so show up for others and our work more effectively.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)
- [Body Scanning activity](#)
- [Introducing working with awareness resource](#)
- [Freeform Following the Breath](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Almost any time is a good time to ask people to take a moment to be present – to notice how they are feeling (in the present), notice current sensations, be mindful of sounds or activities, or notice what is happening with their breath.

This activity offers a simple framework that people will be able to adopt as a simple, quick practice at almost any time in the day. The suggestions in the descriptions and suggestions in the longer mindfulness activities, particularly the [following the breath](#) activity, will be useful background for anyone guiding this activity.

*Many meditative and somatic practices draw from indigenous and so-called 'Eastern' traditions. Much of this kind of work as we are using it here has been modernised and 'westernised', thus it is important to name the ways we are benefitting from other traditions and cultures, especially in the historical context of colonisation, violence and power imbalance. More on this, [here](#).*

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Frame the activity appropriately for the setting in which you are using it, emphasising its applicability and versatility.

- Explain the three steps of the activity, which we can name using the acronym **A.G.E.** as follows:

- **Acknowledge:** involves sitting (or could be standing), closing the eyes (or casting the gaze downwards), and bringing awareness into the body. We give attention to our physical, emotional and energetic experience and simply notice what is going on. We acknowledge our present experience.

- **Gather:** involves gathering our awareness with/around the sensations of breathing. We simply notice the movement and rhythm of our breathing and take a couple of minutes to intentionally gather our awareness with these sensations, wherever we feel them in the moment.

- **Expand:** involves gradually relaxing and expanding our awareness back out from the breathing to the whole of the body, other aspects of our experience, and the environment we are in, perhaps taking in the sounds around us and then opening the eyes to take in the visual field of wherever we are. This might also include taking in the presence of other people and other aspects of the situation.

### Facilitating the activity (5 - 10 mins)

- Simply encourage people to follow the three steps, guiding the process lightly. The less experienced people are with this kind of activity, the more verbal guidance is needed. As people become more familiar with the activity it can be done with almost no guidance except mentioning the steps.

- For a short version, allow 2 minutes for step one, two minutes for step two and one minute for step three. This can be extended to up to 10 minutes in total, as people become familiar with the exercise.

### Debriefing the activity (5 mins)

The first time the activity is introduced it might be useful to debrief. Once the practice is familiar it can be done without this.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- What worked for you?
- What was difficult? (and try to respond with constructive suggestions)
- Did anything surprise you?
- What effect has the practice had on you - how do you feel now?
- Do people feel they might use that practice themselves? Does it seem helpful?

*This activity is an excellent way to introduce a mindful and meditative exercise without needing a lot of setting up.*

# FREEFORM FOLLOWING THE BREATH PRACTICE (MEDITATIVE)

**RUNNING TIME:** 20-50 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** cushions, blocks, blankets, mats, chairs (multiple options for sitting for extended periods of meditation) / [Introducing Working with Awareness flipchart](#) (if using)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Awareness and Emotional Literacy

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Counteracting tendencies to dispersion, distraction and fragmentation
- Generating clarity and brightness of mind
- Building continuity and focus
- Developing self-awareness and integration
- Increasing levels of wellbeing
- Supporting nervous system regulation

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Gaining the benefits listed above comes from developing our capacities to 'concentrate'. It means learning to gather our attention - our mental energy - in one place so that we have more of it available to us. We are practising being able to be present with and focused on something, so that in our day to day lives, we are able to be more present with and focused on what is happening, what we are doing, what we want to direct our attention to. We are effectively training to show up for our lives, relationships and work with more and 'better' of ourselves.

We can practice this skill by focusing on any object. We simply pick an object and practice staying with it, noticing when we have become distracted, and coming back to our object again. The breath is probably the most commonly used object - it's always there, it's always changing and it's intricately linked with our bodies/somatic experience/emotions. You can use it as an anchor for presence and focus, wherever you are and whatever is going on.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)
- [Body Scanning Practice \(meditative\)](#)
- [Introducing working with awareness resource](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The principals around working with awareness can be applied with different levels of depth and intensity. Almost any time is a good time to ask people to take a moment to be present and notice what is going on. This practice is aimed at going a little deeper, and therefore requires some appropriate time and space: ideally a calm/quiet environment, and a way for people to keep

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

*Many meditative and somatic practices draw from indigenous and so-called 'Eastern' traditions. Much of this kind of work as we are using it here has been modernised and 'westernised', thus it is important to name the ways we are benefitting from other traditions and cultures, especially in the historical context of colonisation, violence and power imbalance. More on this, [here](#).*

still comfortably for 20+ minutes (ie, chairs/cushions for sitting, blankets/mats for lying down).

As a general rule, doing meditative activities after lunch is not a good time - people tend to be more drowsy and prone to falling asleep.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 - 10 mins)

[not including [introducing working with awareness](#) (10) or [posture set up](#) (20)]

- Frame the activity, telling the group why you are doing this (as above).
- Explain that there will be exploration of a few different approaches/ways-in to following the breath, and that you will guide them for X amount of time. Invite them to close their eyes if that's comfortable (if not, encourage a soft gaze on the fl or about a metre away from them, or on the ceiling above if they are lying down) then guide them through the practice below

### Facilitating the activity (10 - 30 mins)

#### a. Establish basic conditions for presence

- Begin by offering suggestions for ways to 'arrive' and connect with how they are. Key things to mention:
  - Physical elements of posture, and qualities to embody in them (eg. relaxed legs in the posture supporting a quality of groundedness)
  - Awareness/connection with physical sensations
  - Awareness/connection with emotions/feelings/feeling-tone
  - Awareness/connection with energy (eg. agitated, sleepy etc)
  - Welcoming and allowing experience, not wasting energy with resistance and judgement - kind attention
  - Connection with purpose - why are we doing this, why does it matter? (for others, not just ourselves!)
  - Clear intention and resolve - bringing energy and determination (without becoming overly willful)

..you could even lead them through a quick body scan to set them up.

#### b. Freeform following the breath

- Then, ask them without doing anything special or changing anything, to notice how the breath is moving the body
- Spend the rest of the time helping them explore the nuances and dimensions of the experience of breathing. Help them generate interest in the breath eg:
  - Difference between in-breath and out-breath
  - Allowing the breath to lead - notice if there are tendencies to want to control the breath
  - Going towards what's pleasant - have a good time!
  - Attitude of curiosity/interest, rather than 'forcing' or excessive determination/discipline - balance effort
  - 'Quality' or 'texture' to the breath?

*Increasingly you are likely to find there are people in the group who already have experience of this kind of work. It's good to acknowledge that and suggest that it is 'always good to go back to basics with these things'. This will help them feel recognised and so relax into the activity.*

*support people to connect with themselves and their real, lived experience, right now, before doing anything else. These practices are about supporting us to deepen 'into' our experience, not do something 'else' that alienates us/takes us away from ourselves*

*The most important thing is that you keep on pointing them to their experience of breathing - the sensations, how it feels, in the body. It is easy for people to get lost in an 'idea' of the breath, and some notion of a 'special practice' they are supposed to be doing. All we want is to stay present.*

- Colour?
- 'Image' of the breath in our mind
- Stay with the whole of one breath, moment to moment, every transition
- Rather than holding the mind/attention *on the breath, become absorbed in the breath; sink/rest into it, like water getting absorbed into a sponge*
- Emphasis on in-breath, notice effect, then emphasis on out-breath..
- All the way through, keep being encouraging of the fact that people will be getting distracted (and probably frustrated). Every so often you can say something like "and whenever you get distracted by something, just try to notice that as soon as you can, and then patiently and kindly come back to the breath"
- Conclude the practice by again asking them to take their whole body/ experience in, gradually moving the fingers and toes and opening the eyes, leaving the practice gradually in a non-jarring way.

### **Debriefing the activity (5 - 10 mins)**

- Ask them about their experience of the practice. You could do this first in pairs before discussing as a whole group.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- What worked for you?
- What was difficult? (and try to respond with constructive suggestions)
- Did anything surprise you?
- What effect has the practice had on you - how do you feel now?
- Conclude with something encouraging (but not patronising!) about this stuff being difficult. Our minds tend to be very fragmented by things constantly wanting out attention, and that is a habit which takes time to break. Like going to the gym and developing muscles, the attention gets stronger the more we practise.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

Depending what you are using this activity for, the concluding points will need to serve and be reflective of that.

However, key points that may be useful to foreground:

- This is challenging stuff! We live in a world determined to distract us, and we have been ingraining this habit of distraction for most of our lives probably! It's a skill that takes time to develop, like learning an instrument.. Don't expect yourself to be able to do it straight away. Keep playing and exploring, don't get too heavy with it - you're unlikely to keep practising if your associations with it are judging or chore-like.
- These kinds of practice can quickly feel self indulgent or self involved and as such, easy to bypass for tasks/activities that feel more directly 'useful' - reiterate why and how much this stuff can serve our work, our groups and the world, and how fundamentally radical they are. Keep the practices contextualised, particularly within altruistic and politicised purpose.

*Try to use language like  
"perhaps.." "maybe.." "sometimes.." when  
giving instructions/  
making suggestions about  
what might be going on  
for people.. You don't  
know!*

- Taking the time to focus on developing a skill like this is really important and useful - we are unlikely to bring about much fundamental change in our minds without it - but remember too that focus/concentration/awareness can be cultivated all the time, and that matters a lot too! Practising being more present and aware of experience/sensation in some of the repetitive activities of the day (such as cleaning teeth, washing up, walking stairs, getting dressed, listening to someone etc) is another useful way to start to build up the 'muscle' of awareness and clarity. As is trying to practise doing one thing at a time! (Multi-tasking is the opposite of concentration/focus and basically turns our frontal cortex to mush!)

## FURTHER NOTES

This session is well supported by the [Following Hands](#) activity, as a way to physically practice 'following' and to draw out some of the qualities we need to support us to do this well. It can act as a good precursor, or as a movement-based activity in between this one, and the [Structured Following the Breath](#) practice.



# STRUCTURED FOLLOWING THE BREATH PRACTICE (MEDITATIVE)

**RUNNING TIME:** 30mins - 1hr

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Cushions, blocks, blankets, mats, chairs (multiple options for sitting for extended periods of meditation) / [Introducing Working with Awareness flipchart](#) (if using)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Awareness and Emotional Literacy

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Counteracting tendencies to dispersion, distraction and fragmentation
- Generating clarity and brightness of mind
- Building continuity and focus
- Developing self-awareness and integration
- Increasing levels of wellbeing
- Supporting nervous system regulation

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Gaining the benefits listed above comes from developing our capacities to 'concentrate'. It means learning to gather our attention - our mental energy - in one place so that we have more of it available to us. We are practising being able to be present with and focused on something, so that in our day to day lives, we are able to be more present with and focused on what is happening, what we are doing, what we want to direct our attention to. We are effectively training to show up for our lives, relationships and work with more and 'better' of ourselves.

We can practice this skill by focusing on any object. We simply pick an object and practice staying with it, noticing when we have become distracted, and coming back to our object again. The breath is probably the most commonly used object - it's always there, it's always changing and it's intricately linked with our bodies/somatic experience/emotions. You can use it as an anchor for presence and focus, wherever you are and whatever is going on.

The four stages of the structured following the breath practice are unpacked at length within the instructions below but in summary they are:

- Stage One: **Counting after each out-breath**
- Stage Two: **Counting before each in-breath**
- Stage Three: **Experiencing the flow of the breath**
- Stage Four: **Experiencing a more subtle breath.**

This is a long standing practice of the Buddhist Tradition.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)
- [Body Scanning Practice \(meditative\)](#)
- [Introducing working with awareness resource](#)

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
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*Many meditative and somatic practices draw from indigenous and so-called 'Eastern' traditions. Much of this kind of work as we are using it here has been modernised and 'westernised', thus it is important to name the ways we are benefitting from other traditions and cultures, especially in the historical context of colonisation, violence and power imbalance. More on this, [here](#).*

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The principals around working with awareness can be applied with different levels of depth and intensity. Almost any time is a good time to ask people to take a moment to be present and notice what is going on. This practice is aimed at going a little deeper, and therefore requires some appropriate time and space: ideally a calm/quiet environment, and a way for people to keep still comfortably for 20+ minutes (ie, chairs/cushions for sitting, blankets/mats for lying down).

As a general rule, doing meditative activities after lunch is not a good time - people tend to be more drowsy and prone to falling asleep.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 - 10 mins)

[not including [introducing working with awareness](#) (10) or [posture](#) set up (20)]

- Frame the activity, telling the group why you are doing this (as above).
- Introduce the shape and structure of the practice (in advance of leading through it in real time) as follows:
  - The practice has 4 stages, designed to support the mind to gradually gather, settle and refine. The first two stages involve counting the breath. This is a way of giving the busy mind something obvious and 'tangible' to do, as a transition towards being able to settle into more subtle kinds of attentiveness.
  - Stage One: **Counting after each out-breath**  
We pay attention to the experience of breathing and then we look for where the breath ends - for the space between the breath ending and new one beginning - and we place the count there. We breathe in, we breathe out, and then we count "one" (to ourselves/in our heads), breathe in, breathe out, count "two" etc, counting up to ten, and then starting again at one. If we forget where we are, or find we have accidentally counted to 23, not to worry - just notice asap and start again at one.
  - Stage Two: **Counting before each in-breath**  
We pay attention to the experience of breathing and look for the moment just before the breath begins, placing the count there. Of course in reality these are the 'same place' (ie. between breaths), but they have a different emphasis. In stage one we are acknowledging something that's already happened, which takes a little less attention/effort than it takes to anticipate something that has not happened yet, as in stage two. Stage two is asking a little more of us. So, we count "one", then breathe in and out, count "two", breathe in and out, all the way up to ten, and then start again at one.

Nb. counting the breath can be a very useful, simple and effective way to help a distracted mind to settle. It is also likely to amplify a tendency of the mind to want to control the breath. We might find the breath becoming more clipped or regimented or unnaturally regular. This is something we need to watch out for in the first two stages, remembering that the breath is leading, and that the experience of the breath in the body is always first and foremost. It might take a bit of practice to get the knack of this.

- Stage Three: **Experiencing the flow of the breath**  
We let go of the counting and try to simply stay with the experience of breathing (more like what we were doing in the [Freeform Following the Breath Practice](#)). People can do this in whatever way works best for them, looking for whatever supports them to best feel interested, sensitive, engaged and enjoying of breathing.

*Increasingly you are likely to find there are people in the group who already have experience of this kind of work. It's good to acknowledge that and suggest that it is 'always good to go back to basics with these things'. This will help them feel recognised and so relax into the activity.*

*Support people to connect with themselves and their real, lived experience, right now, before doing anything else. These practices are about supporting us to deepen 'into' our experience, not do something 'else' that alienates us/takes us away from ourselves*

Nb. This is a chance to allow the mind, body and breath to hopefully settle and quieten together, after the 'noise' of all the counting. The risk with this stage is getting too loose, 'wandering around' so to speak, which will lead to dullness/distraction. We need to make sure we keep enough effort, focus and precision with what we are doing.

- Stage Four: **Experiencing a more subtle breath**

We gather the attention to the place where we first feel the breath entering and leaving the body. This might be high in the nose, around the nostrils, or on the upper lip. We try to encourage the mind to rest at this place/point, still feeling the sensations of breathing but in this more focused/subtle/distinct way. The risk with this stage is getting too tight, becoming overly focused and things getting tense and brittle. We need to make sure we stay relaxed and in touch with ourselves.

- Name the four stages again, and take any questions.

- Let people know how long you'll be meditating for, invite them to close their eyes if that's comfortable, then guide them through the practice a. - f. below

### **Facilitating the activity (20 - 45 mins)**

#### **a. Establish basic conditions for presence**

- Begin by offering suggestions for ways to 'arrive' and connect with how they are. Key things to mention:

- Physical elements of posture, and qualities to embody in them (eg. relaxed legs in the posture supporting a quality of groundedness)

- Awareness/connection with physical sensations

- Awareness/connection with emotions/feelings/feeling-tone

- Awareness/connection with energy (eg. agitated, sleepy etc)

- Welcoming and allowing experience, not wasting energy with resistance and judgement - kind attention

- Connection with purpose - why are we doing this, why does it matter? (for others, not just ourselves!)

- Clear intention and resolve - bringing energy and determination (without becoming overly willful)

- From here ask them to **notice the movement of the breath, in the body**, without doing anything special or changing anything - just notice how the breath is moving the body

#### **b. Stage One: counting after each out-breath**

- Introduce the first stage, placing a count at the end of the exhale/out-breath. Encourage them to do this both gently but with clear intention, allowing the breath to keep moving freely, the breath to continue to 'lead', paying attention and waiting for the end of the out-breath to arrive, and gently placing a count there when the time comes

- Depending how much time you have for this section, spend the rest of it dropping in helpful suggestions/reminders such as:

- Try not to allow the counting to overly impinge on or control the breath - let the breath lead!

- When you get lost or distracted, don't worry, just notice as soon as you can, come back to the body, find the experience of breathing, and then begin again at 'one'

*Try to use language like  
"perhaps.." "maybe.."*  
*"sometimes.." when*  
*giving instructions/*  
*making suggestions about*  
*what might be going on*  
*for people.. You don't*  
*know!*

*Particularly with*  
*beginners, you can*  
*assume that they are*  
*very distracted and*  
*therefore quite a lot of*  
*instruction is helpful*  
*to bring them back to*  
*what they are supposed*  
*to be focused on. It's*  
*fine to repeat*  
*instructions, just keep*  
*on telling them to*  
*notice that they're*  
*distracted and come*  
*back, patiently and*  
*kindly (people tend to*  
*get frustrated quickly,*  
*and benefit from*  
*encouragement!).*

- See if you can become really interested in where the end of the out-breath actually is, as you look for where to place the count

- Allow the regularity and rhythm of the breathing and the counting to rock/soothe the mind and body into an enjoyment and ease - almost like sitting by the sea and watching the waves come and go

..etc.

- Remind them of the body and present experience, before transitioning to the second stage

#### **c. Stage two: counting before each in-breath**

- Continuing to count but changing the emphasis now, placing the count at the beginning of the inhale/in-breath. Again, remind them not to 'rush the breath in', by counting too early. The breath still leads, we wait and watch for the moment just before the in-breath, and carefully place the count there

- As above, **drop in instructions/suggestions/reminders** for the remainder of the time on this stage...

#### **d. Stage three: experiencing the flow of the breath**

- Letting go of counting and simply following the flow of the breath, as it is *experienced*, right now. Encourage them 'into' the body, looking for the experience of the breath there, and re-state some of the options for ways they might do that, as per the [Freeform Breath practice](#). (This transition may be a good moment to have a 'reset'. Mention coming back to the 'set up' elements, reconnect with the posture, sensations, feelings, energy, purpose etc, reestablishing good conditions for presence)

- As above, drop in instructions/suggestions/reminders for the remainder of the time on this stage...

- Transition to the fourth stage as smoothly and seamlessly as possible.

#### **e. Stage four: Experiencing a more subtle breath**

- Gathering the attentions at the point where we first *feel* the breath entering the body. The danger of becoming alienated from experience and ending up 'in the head' is strong here. Encourage continuing to experience the breath in whatever way they are doing that, and then to very gradually and gently allow the attention to begin to gather, with a sense of continuity between stage three and four.

- Suggestions for instructions to drop in during this stage might be:

- Just because we are at a more focused/'smaller'/narrower point, try not to allow the mind to become overly tight/squeezed - keep a sense of relaxedness (particularly notice if the body/hands etc are becoming tense, relax them)

- Rather than a sense of trying to 'hold the mind on this point', look for a sense of sitting back/relaxing/resting *into* this point of sensation - the mind is filling and becoming suffused through it

- Notice the nuances of the changes in sensation, even in such a small area - eg. the change in temperature in the nose/lip as the breath comes in cold, and goes out warmed

- Look for a sense of bringing/folding 'everything in' to this point of focus  
- the whole body, the rest of your experience and how you are, even distracting sounds in the room etc, keep folding these things in, rather than trying to 'push them out' or hold them at bay

..and so on.

#### **f. Conclude the practice with whole-body awareness**

- Ask them to again take their whole body/experience in, bring awareness to the sounds in the room and beyond, awareness of others in the space, and when they're ready, gradually move the body and open the eyes.

### **Debriefing the activity (5 - 10 mins)**

- Ask them about their experience of the practice..

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- What worked for you, which stages did you prefer?
- Were there particular challenges? (and try to respond with constructive suggestions and encouragement to keep playing/exploring)
- How did you find the counting? (you may want to mention that although it can feel clunky or disruptive in some sense, it is such a useful tool to have up your sleeve to use when you're agitated/distracted)
- Did anything surprise you?
- Do people feel they might use that practice themselves? Does it seem helpful over all?

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

Depending what you are using this activity for, the concluding points will need to serve and be reflective of that. However, key points that may be useful to foreground:

- This is challenging stuff! We live in a world determined to distract us, and we have been ingraining this habit of distraction for most of our lives probably! It's a skill that takes time to develop, like learning an instrument.. Don't expect yourself to be able to do it straight away. Keep playing and exploring, don't get too heavy with it - you're unlikely to keep practising if your associations with it are judging or chore-like.
- These kinds of practice can quickly feel self indulgent or self involved and as such, easy to bypass for tasks/activities that feel more directly 'useful' - reiterate why and how much this stuff can serve our work, our groups and the world, and how fundamentally radical they are. Keep the practices contextualised, particularly within altruistic and politicised purpose.
- Taking the time to focus on developing a skill like this is really important and useful - we are unlikely to bring about much fundamental change in our minds without it - but remember too that focus/concentration/awareness can be cultivated all the time, and that matters a lot too! Practising being more present and aware of experience/sensation in some of the repetitive activities of the day (such as cleaning teeth, washing up, walking stairs, getting dressed, listening to someone etc) is another useful way to start to build up the 'muscle' of awareness and clarity. As is trying to practise doing one thing at a time! (Multi-tasking is the opposite of concentration/focus and basically turns our frontal cortex to mush!)

### **FURTHER NOTES**

This session is well supported by the [Following Hands activity](#), as a way to physically practice 'following' and to draw out some of the qualities we need to support us to do this well.

# SELF SOLIDARITY PRACTICE (MEDITATIVE)

**RUNNING TIME:** 25 – 40 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual work > group debrief

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Cushions, blocks, blankets, mats, chairs (multiple options for sitting for extended periods) / [Introducing Working Skilfully with Emotion fl pchart](#) (if using)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Awareness and Emotional Literacy

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Counteracting tendencies to aversion/closing down/pushing away
- Developing self awareness (psychological integration & emotional literacy)
- Strengthening wellbeing and nourishment through self love
- Building connection to self
- Deepening experiences of empathy & solidarity that our work is built on
- Key support to self-regulation (trauma work)

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Our resilience is massively impacted by the kind of relationship we have with ourselves. It can be surprising to discover just how much self-aversion many of us are working with. A lot of people seem to find it very difficult to come into a positive, affirming, or truly caring relationship with themselves. The internal judging voices can be extremely harsh and undermining. We can find that our 'inner critic' speaks to us in ways we would never dream of speaking to another person, and that can become so much part of the internal wallpaper that we don't even notice the hostile and unsupportive emotional climate we are creating for ourselves. This is highly undermining and depleting. And often we don't realise how much we are working against, until it changes.

When we develop greater kindness and openness to ourselves, we begin to 'warm up' the inner environment which not only provides nourishment and wellbeing - we feel happier - but also allows much more of our experience to come into awareness. With this comes more fullness, stability, and 'wholeness' all of which serves our growth and maturity as human beings. This has deep value of its own, even aside from making us better activists - it is a radical and subversive thing to become more fully oneself in a world where we encounter so much shaming, prejudice and oppression.

This practice can stand on its own, it is also the first stage in the [Structured Kind Regard Practice](#) - self solidarity being the primary basis for the development of solidarity with others.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Introducing working skilfully with emotion resource](#)
- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)
- [Structured Kind Regard activity](#)

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
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*This kind of work can bring up resistance for people who might find it 'touchy feely' or 'sentimental' etc in a way that makes them disinclined to engage. Bringing in clear reasoning for why it's useful and giving it political framing can help to ease this.*

*Many meditative and somatic practices draw from indigenous and so-called 'Eastern' traditions. Much of this kind of work as we are using it here has been modernised and 'westernised', thus it is important to name the ways we are benefitting from other traditions and cultures, especially in the historical context of colonisation, violence and power imbalance. More on this, [here](#).*



## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This can be an uncomfortable activity for people. If they are not used to directing kindness towards themselves, or they are becoming aware of their self-critical/harsh attitude for the first time it can be upsetting. Let them know these responses are common, hold the activity with kindness and care, and give people space to debrief.

As a general rule, doing meditative activities after lunch is not a good time - people tend to be much more drowsy and prone to falling asleep than at other times of day.

If this is the first 'meditation' activity you are setting up with the group, you may want to spend some time on [posture](#). It is much more difficult to turn towards our experience and stay present if we are uncomfortable or in pain and most people will be! This will add 15 - 20 mins onto the session.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 - 10 mins)

[not including [introducing working skilfully with emotion](#) or [posture set up](#)]

- Frame the activity, telling the group why you are doing this (as above).

You will likely want to draw attention to:

- The importance of basic positive self regard to support wellbeing and enable growth, development and flourishing, as well as connection with and empathy for others
- The strength of many peoples' (often unconscious!) self aversion and how undermining and depleting this is to live with
- The resistance that can come up when attempting to work with this, acknowledging that modern capitalist heteropatriarchy doesn't generally help us feel good about/in ourselves (making this a politically radical practice)
- The difference between kindness/care/solidarity with oneself and a blind acceptance of everything we do/are - we can still bring helpful critical faculties to supporting ourselves to grow and develop, without heaping on self negating stories and self judging hostility!
- The nourishing benefits of creating an internal environment that does not perpetuate fear, anxiety and shrinking
- The unlikely chances of fulfilling genuine "self care" practices (and avoiding burn out) if we actually fundamentally don't like ourselves..

### Facilitating the activity (15 - 20 mins)

- Let people know how long you'll be meditating for, invite them to close their eyes if that's comfortable, then guide them through the practice a. - d. below

#### a. Establish basic conditions for presence

- Begin by supporting people to get in touch with their posture, body and current experience, with a quality of interest and care. You can do this by encouraging them to:
  - Connect with the ground and a sense of letting go/weight/rootedness in the base/foundation of the posture
  - Balance this by connecting with a sense of brightness, length and spaciousness in the body/spine (or connection to the 'sky')
  - Notice how they are right now: physically, emotionally, mentally,



energetically – “How does it feel?” “What are the sensations?”

- Welcome and ‘bring in’ whatever is going on: there is no right way to be feeling, and the more we push away/judge our experience, the harder it is to be relaxed and present – try to bring an attitude of kindness/patience/willingness to meet what is here

- Notice if there is any balancing or adjustments that need to be made: for example if they notice they are feeling sleepy/drowsy can they connect more with the ‘sky’/height/brightness aspect, lengthen the spine/bring extension into the body, perhaps open the eyes, take some deeper breaths, or vice versa if they find they are feeling anxious/restless etc

- Drop the question into their bodies “What wants attention”

..you could lead them through a quick **body scan** to set them up, if required.

### **b. Establish the somatic dimensions / focus on sensation**

- From here, note that the setup has already begun the cultivation of skilful emotion – we are meeting our experience, taking an interest in ourselves, practising being emotionally willing to be with and welcome what is going on..

- Without losing connection with a broader sense of the posture/body, bring attention to rest in the chest/heart area and notice what is happening there. Suggest options such as:

- Notice the sensations of the breath as the chest rises and falls/opens and closes

- Look for a sense of softening, relaxing and opening in the chest area (letting go of any tension)

- Explore possible emotional tone

- Foster a sense of warmth in the chest area (this can be supported through suggesting imaginal interventions eg. imagining “stepping out of a dark, damp forest into warm sun”, or “the ember of a fire in the heart”, or “warm water filling/surrounding the heart” etc)

It can be difficult to connect with any clear sensation at first – that’s normal. It can help to place a hand on the chest to stimulate sensation (do this yourself to encourage people).

- Give them some time to feel into/explore this.

- If they are managing to connect with something of this physical/emotional tone/quality of positive self regard, encourage them to breathe with it, let it grow, fill and permeate the body and sense of self.

### **c. Offer a range of metaphors, images & ‘ways in’**

- Over the rest of the practice, suggest possible approaches such as:

- Bring to mind someone/somewhere/something that you love and feel safe with, notice what happens to your body/the heart space when you think of that – can you direct that quality towards yourself?

- Connect with a sense of gratitude towards yourself for making the effort to be here, doing this, despite so much else you might be doing instead

- Connect with something that you appreciate about yourself – something kind or generous you have done, the efforts you make for others or the world. Or simply appreciate the body and what it achieves every day

- Notice the judging/‘correcting’ voices that may come in – bring kindness

*People will be getting distracted (and probably frustrated). Throughout the practice, name this and be reassuring about it: bring them back to the body and sensations, invite patience and kindness, let them know it’s normal (that’s the point of practising!)*

to them too. Even if you consider them 'right', can you gently encourage them to take a break while you focus on something else? A "Yes, perhaps, and..." approach

- A 'big feeling' of love for ourselves is not required - a simple sense of solidarity, of being on our own side, of having our own back (rather than undermining and negating ourselves and efforts) is enough
- ...a sense of being a friend to ourselves.. An image like taking our own hand, or an arm around the shoulders, looking at ourself through kind/soft eyes
- A sense of giving yourself a break, giving yourself a bit of rest from the ongoing opinions and pushing of our inner critics?

#### **d. Conclude the practice with whole-body awareness**

- Ask them to take their whole body/experience in, bring awareness to the sounds in the room and beyond, awareness of others in the space, and when they're ready, gradually move the body and open the eyes.

#### **e. Some extra pointers/things to mention if needed:**

- Judgements and moderate resistance are very likely to come up. Occasionally people will have a strong response. It's also not uncommon for people to cry (generally because they are noticing for the first time how unkind they are being to themselves and this is painful to discover). Encourage them to keep bringing kindness to whatever is coming up - if they feel:

- Distracted and frustrated, bring kindness to that
- Aversion and resistance to the practice, bring kindness to that
- Numb and unable to connect, bring kindness to that
- Angry, bring kindness to that
- Pain in the body, bring kindness to that
- ..etc etc.

And if it gets too much, they can always just come back to the body, simply feeling the sensations of the breath moving in the chest looking for a quality of ease/gentleness/soothing in that

- Simply noticing tension/contraction in the body and encouraging it to release and relax will do wonders for the development of kind regard - the opposite of contractedness is openness... If physical relaxation is all someone can manage, it is a very good start

- To begin with, it can be difficult to find and connect with a quality/feeling of kindness - it will come in time! For now, to simply be cultivating an *attitude of welcoming, willingness and turning towards experience in as embodied a way as possible, is good enough! It is paving the way for deepening..*

#### **Debriefing the activity (5 - 10mins)**

- Ask them about their experience of the practice..

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- What worked for you?
- What was difficult? (and try to respond with constructive suggestions)
- What effect has the practice had on you - how do you feel now?

*It's always good to leave the practice gradually, giving people a chance to transition and absorb whatever has happened, avoiding jarring or unnecessary closing up*

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

- Be encouraging (but not patronising!) about the difficulty of this stuff:
  - we are often surrounded by things trying to undermine us and generate feelings of inadequacy and lack
  - our minds can be very critical/judging and that is a habit which takes time to break
  - this stuff is a skill and skills require patience and perseverance - like going to the gym and developing muscles, the mind/heart gets kinder/warmer/more open, the more we practise
  - Even when you feel like you've spent the practice frustrated/contracted, it has benefit.
- You may want to say something to counteract experiences/critiques of sentimental self-involvement.. (ie, how does this serve others and our work?)

# STRUCTURED KIND REGARD PRACTICE (MEDITATIVE)

**RUNNING TIME:** 35 - 50 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** cushions, blocks, blankets, mats, chairs (multiple options for sitting for extended periods of meditation) / [Introducing Working Skilfully with Emotion](#) fli chart (if using)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Awareness and Emotional Literacy

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Building connection: self, others, world
- Deepening experiences of empathy & solidarity that our work is built on
- Developing psychological integration & emotional literacy
- Strengthening wellbeing and nourishment (incl. through self love)
- Building our 'emotional holding capacity', serving emotional resilience
- Key support to self-regulation (trauma work)

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Most of us suffer from some unhelpful emotional habits which do not support our resilience. This is a focused meditation practice which supports systematic working with the various facets of personal connection capacity.

Just as it's common to develop mental habits of avoidance/distraction/dullness, we easily develop emotional habits of aversion. While aversive responses are natural and can be useful in providing necessary information for us, they can also become habitual and cumulative, so that we find ourselves spending more and more time feeling grumpy, cynical, disinterested, critical, resentful and so on. These states are unhelpful and depleting, they do not nourish us and they disconnect us from the world and people we are trying to work with. We cannot hope to engage creatively and helpfully with others or the state of the world, if we allow our habitual emotional responses to dictate our awareness capacities, behaviour and decisions in this way.

Practices like these can help us to cultivate and develop our emotional qualities and capacities, taking us more towards emotional lives of connection, 'positivity' and openness (rather than disconnection, 'negativity' and closedness). This means developing the heart - like training a muscle - to lean in and engage, take an interest, care, even love, more of the time. With that we find increased awareness, increased tolerance/carrying-capacity for difficult/painful experience, and increased resourcing, wellness and joy - all key to psychosocial resilience.

Importantly too, as we do this, we are subverting and undermining the patriarchal machismo that can make us feel that dwelling on emotionality is somehow 'weak' or not worth prioritising. Through taking this stuff seriously, we learn the emotional literacy and skill that will enable all of us to share the 'load' of emotional work - a labour that has historically fallen

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

*Many meditative and somatic practices draw from indigenous and so-called 'Eastern' traditions. Much of this kind of work as we are using it here has been modernised and 'westernised', thus it is important to name the ways we are benefitting from other traditions and cultures, especially in the historical context of colonisation, violence and power imbalance. More on this, [here](#).*

on people socialised as women – that is an undeniable part of functional personal, relational and group life.

It is important to emphasise that this is not about ‘pretending to be happy’ or ‘being positive’ when we’re not, nor ceasing to be critical of what needs to be confronted; there is plenty in us and in the world that is difficult or painful, that rightly produces emotional experiences of unhappiness, despondency, rage, etc. This kind of work is about strengthening the capacity to stay open to those kinds of experience, to all kinds of experience, so that, rather than becoming numb/avoidant/resentful, we grow our abilities to meet ourselves, others and the world, show up, connect and engage creatively, courageously and with the kind of openness and emotional adaptability that deep solidarity and resilience demand.

The five stages of the structured kind regard practice are unpacked at length within the instructions below but in summary they are:

- Stage One: **Cultivating kind regard for oneself**
- Stage Two: **Cultivating kind regard for a good friend**
- Stage Three: **Cultivating kind regard for a ‘neutral’ person**
- Stage Four: **Cultivating kind regard for a difficult person** (or ‘enemy’)
- Stage Five: **Cultivating kind regard for everyone/everything/‘all beings’**

This is a long standing practice of the Buddhist Tradition.

#### **Related material to support framing:**

- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)
- [Introducing working skilfully with emotion resource](#)
- [Self Solidarity activity](#)
- [Interrelationship of the 4 Heart Practices activity](#)

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

The principals around working with emotional literacy and kind regard can be applied with different levels of depth and intensity. Almost any time is a good time to ask people to take a moment to notice how they are feeling. This practice is aimed at going a little deeper, and therefore requires some appropriate time and space: ideally a calm/quiet environment, and a way for people to keep still comfortably for upto 20 minutes (ie, chairs/cushions for sitting, blankets/mats for lying down).

As a general rule, doing meditative activities after lunch is not a good time – people tend to be much more drowsy and prone to falling asleep.

## **ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

### **Setting up the activity (5 - 10 mins)**

[not including [introducing working skilfully with emotion](#) or [posture set up](#)]

- Frame the activity, telling the group why you are doing this (as above)
- Introduce the shape and structure of the practice (in advance of leading through it in real time) as follows:
  - The practice has 5 stages, designed to support the establishing, developing and strengthening of kind regard/empathy/solidarity/openness by asking us to turn towards different ‘categories’ of people.

*Introspective practices, especially ones that seem more ‘touchy feely’ need strong, clear, rational framing to gain the ‘buy in’ and respect of those who might feel resistant or cynical about them. Why are we doing this? Give it the time, explain it clearly, ideally write it down/show it visually.*

- Stage One: **Cultivating kind regard for oneself**

We look for the quality of kindness/openness and try to bring that into relationship with ourselves, to turn towards ourselves with a quality of interest, appreciation and care, and allow ourselves to be nourished by that.

- Stage Two: **Cultivating kind regard for a good friend**

Commonly the easiest for people, we bring to mind somebody we have a straightforward, easy feeling for, someone we care about, appreciate or love relatively comfortably. We 'turn towards them' imaginatively looking for this experience/attitude of care and solidarity, allowing this to stabilise and strengthen, supporting us to become familiar with the quality and how it feels. It is generally suggested that this shouldn't be a lover/someone we're sexually/romantically involved with, as this can add unhelpful complexity to the practice, particularly when just learning it.

- Stage Three: **Cultivating kind regard for a 'neutral' person**

We look for someone whom we don't have a strong feeling for one way or another. Obviously nobody is entirely 'neutral' to us, just find someone close enough, perhaps the bus driver, or a shop assistant or someone you noticed in a cafe. In this stage we are working to counteract/overcome tendencies towards indifference. Often we feel neutral about people simply because they don't look likely to meet any of our needs.. In reality, they deserve care, respect and solidarity as much as anyone else. We practise taking an interest in them, turning towards them and working to transform our indifference.

- Stage Four: **Cultivating kind regard for a difficult person** (or 'enemy')

We bring to mind someone we find challenging, and look for ways to stay in relationship with them, to find willingness to engage in some way. With practice, we may find ways to come into relationship with our 'enemies' with care and understanding, despite (but not necessarily condoning) their problematic behaviours. We suggest not choosing the worst enemy to begin with, as this can be overwhelming and unhelpful.

- Stage Five: **Cultivating kind regard for everyone/everything/'all beings'**

In the final stage we open up the practice, allowing the heart to open, expand and honour the non-preferential 'nature' of the quality of kind regard. We can do this via a general somatic/imaginal sense of expansion in all directions, or through a more directed focus on the people in the room, then out into the rest of the building, the street and surrounding area, and so on..

- Name the five stages again, and take any questions.

- Let people know how long you'll be meditating for, invite them to close their eyes if that's comfortable, then guide them through the practice a. - e. below

*If you want more guidance on this, you can follow the approach laid out in the [Self Solidarity Activity plan](#)*

## **Facilitating the activity (20 - 30 mins)**

### **a. Establish basic conditions for presence**

- Begin by offering suggestions for ways to 'arrive' and connect with how they are. Key things to mention:

- Physical elements of posture, and qualities to embody in them (eg. relaxed legs in the posture supporting a quality of groundedness)
- Awareness/connection with physical sensations
- Awareness/connection with emotions/feelings/feeling-tone

- Awareness/connection with energy (eg. agitated, sleepy etc)
- Welcoming and allowing experience, not wasting energy with resistance and judgement - kind attention
- Connection with purpose - why are we doing this, why does it matter? (for others, not just ourselves!)
- Clear intention and resolve - bringing energy and determination (without becoming overly willful)
- From here, note that the setup has already begun the cultivation of skilful emotion - we are meeting our experience, taking an interest in ourselves, practising being emotionally willing to be with and welcome what is going on..
- Take attention to the chest/heart area, notice what is happening with sensations there, find a way to connect with the felt quality/experience of openness/warmth/kindness in whatever way works (see [Self Solidarity Activity](#) for suggestions)
- Take some time to establish/explore/stabilise this.

### **b. Stage One: self solidarity**

- In touch with sensations in the chest, and the body more generally, offer a range of 'ways in' or possible approaches such as:
  - Bring to mind someone/somewhere/something that you love and feel safe with, notice what happens to your body/the heart space when you think of that - can you direct that quality towards yourself?
  - Connect with a sense of gratitude towards yourself for making the effort to be here, doing this, despite so much else you might be doing instead
  - Connect with something that you appreciate about yourself - something kind or generous you have done, the efforts you make for others or the world. Or simply appreciate the body and what it achieves every day
  - Notice the judging/'correcting' voices that may come in - bring kindness to them too. Even if you consider them 'right', can you gently encourage them to take a break while you focus on something else? A "Yes, perhaps, and..." approach
  - A 'big feeling' of love for ourselves is not required - a simple sense of solidarity, of being on our own side, of having our own back (rather than undermining and negating ourselves and efforts) is enough
  - ...a sense of being a friend to ourselves ..an image like taking our own hand, or an arm around the shoulders, looking at ourself through kind/soft eyes
  - A sense of giving yourself a break, giving yourself a bit of rest from the ongoing opinions and pushing of our inner critics?
- Remind them of the body and present experience, before transitioning to the second stage

### **c. Stage two: solidarity with a good friend**

- In touch with sensations in the chest, and the body more generally, offer a range of 'ways in' or possible approaches such as:
  - Bring this person to mind, notice what happens for you, the response of the body, sensations, feeling tone etc
  - Try not to strain too hard for anything, just let yourself take an interest in them, turn towards them, pay attention to them (paying attention is already an act of care)

*These are suggestions for ways to connect with the quality/feeling/attitude of self solidarity. The 'point' is not all these approaches, the 'point' is the quality of kind regard - whatever helps to access this is good, once accessed/found, they should stay with the quality and let it fill the experience/body.*



- Look for a sense of appreciation, for the efforts they make, for their qualities
- Aware of their frailty/vulnerability and the ways they suffer
- Aware of a sense of a basic shared humanity/human-ness between you
- A sense of looking at them through kind eyes, or with a sense of cherishing
- Wishing them well.. "may they have what they need", "may they find ease of being", "may they flourish and grow"

..etc.

- Remind them of the body and present experience, before transitioning to the third stage

#### **d. Stage three: solidarity with a neutral person**

- In touch with sensations in the chest, and the body more generally, offer a range of 'ways in' or possible approaches, as in the previous stage. Additional suggestions for this stage might be:

- The chances of getting bored/distracted are stronger here, we have to work a bit harder to cultivate interest..
- Look for what you have in common: like you, this person has needs, desires, potential that wants to be fulfilled; like you they suffer disappointments, loneliness, illness etc; interest/care for them as another human being..
- ...find the feeling of wanting them to be well.

- Remind them of the body and present experience, before transitioning to the fourth stage

#### **e. Stage four: solidarity with a difficult person**

- In touch with sensations in the chest, and the body more generally, offer a range of 'ways in' or possible approaches, as in the previous stages. Additional suggestions for this stage might be:

- Bring this person to mind and notice the response in the body - we might notice resistance, contracting, tension, pulling back, restlessness, heat, shutting down, numbing..?
- Bring kindness first to this, a sense of care and interest for what is going on for you in relation to them with a bit of space around the experience (ie. aware of it, rather than fully identified with it)
- Watch out for views about the person or internal dialogue about them and what they are like/have done etc - leave that aside for now. We are looking to work with our habitual tendency to close down and push away what is difficult for us and try to stay in relationship
- We don't need to condone their behaviour to be willing to stay in relationship with them
- What happens if we take an interest in what might be going on 'behind' or 'underneath' their unhelpful behaviours/unpleasant characteristics?
- Does it help to connect with the things we share: the desire to be happy, wanting basic needs to be met, experience of fear and vulnerability etc?
- The point is not to grit one's teeth through an endurance test of unpleasantness, and possibly fear, anger or overwhelm! The point is to be

*There's a danger of this practice getting a bit 'busy' with all these different people, thinking about them and their lives etc. Always remember that the point, the focus, is the quality of kindness/care/openness, the experience of that in the body/heart and strengthening/growing that. All the other reflections, images etc are supports to that.*

working with our edge, with the limits of our capacities to stay open and in relationship. Therefore, if it gets too much, come back to the body, reconnect with the quality of kind regard, settle, and then try again. Or put a bit more imaginative distance between you and the person, in your mind's eye. Or accept that this person is too challenging for now, and choose someone less provoking to begin with.

- Let this person go, reconnect with the body/posture/experience/the heart space, settle and bring kindness to any tension or painfulness that might have crept in, before transitioning into the fifth and final stage

#### **f. Stage five: non-preferential solidarity**

- In touch with sensations in the chest, and the body more generally, allow the awareness and the quality of kind regard to expand outwards in a non-preferential way. Particular suggestions for this stage might be:

- No need to 'push' the expansion - have a sense that the core of kind regard *wants* to expand - it is made of opening! - all you need to do is relax your edges and get out of its way..

- Connect with the non-preferential nature of this quality/practice - whatever it meets, it remains open to

- Enjoy a sense that this quality is abundant - always available, if we can open to it..

#### **g. Conclude the practice with whole-body awareness**

- Ask them to again take their whole body/experience in, bring awareness to the sounds in the room and beyond, awareness of others in the space, and when they're ready, gradually move the body and open the eyes.

#### **Debriefing the activity (5 - 10 mins)**

- Ask them about their experience of the practice..

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- What worked for you, which stages did you prefer?

- Were there particular challenges? (and try to respond with constructive suggestions and encouragement to keep playing/exploring)

- Did anything surprise you?

- Do people feel they might use that practice themselves? Does it seem helpful over all?

Nb. you may well at this point, get some questioning (or reactivity!) around the idea of being open/caring towards the difficult person. Eg. "sorry but I don't want to be open to a fascist" type comments. Be prepared for this! Hopefully you framed the activity well enough that people have a grasp of why it is worth doing this but you may need to reiterate. The basic point being, when we simply block/hate/push away, we lose connection, information and the capacity to respond helpfully and creatively. This is why we talk about love as being transformative - it allows/enables change, in a way that blocking/disconnection does not. Connection and openness do not equal affirmation or condonement.

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

Depending what you are using this activity for, the concluding points will need to serve and be reflective of that.

However, key points that may be useful to foreground:

- This is challenging stuff! We live surrounded by attitudes of 'othering', 'cancelling', competition and divisiveness! It's a skill that takes time to

develop, like learning an instrument.. Don't expect yourself to be able to do it straight away.

- These kinds of practice can quickly feel self indulgent or self involved and as such, easy to bypass for tasks/activities that feel more directly 'useful' - reiterate why and how much this stuff can serve our work, our groups and the world, and how fundamentally radical they are. Keep the practices contextualised, particularly within altruistic and politicised purpose. A kind regard practice focused on members of your group/team can be absolutely transformational!

- If all they take away from the session, is the intention/practice to notice their internal negativity, criticism, judgmentalism, cynicism, harshness etc and bring some kindness to that, and they manage to sustain some effort around that, they will find their lives and wellbeing levels transformed - no doubt!

## **FURTHER NOTES**

These activities can be well combined with The Milling, Sitting Back to Back, Open Sentences, The Cradling which all help to support emotional connection and connection to others, and also break up extended periods of sitting. See Working with Skilful Emotion, on the [possible extended sessions page](#).

# THE MILLING ACTIVITY

## (ADAPTATION FROM [WORK THAT RECONNECTS](#))

**RUNNING TIME:** 25 – 30 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group (works for groups of 6 or more)

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** n/a

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Awareness and Emotional Literacy

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

### KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Group building and relational 'deepening'
- Building connection, empathy & solidarity: self, others, world
- Building our 'emotional holding capacity', serving emotional resilience
- Counteracting tendencies to aversion/closing down/pushing away
- Developing self awareness (psychological integration & emotional literacy)
- Strengthening wellbeing and nourishment (incl. through connection with others)

### FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

The development of skilful emotion is an invaluable source of nourishment and wellbeing at both individual and group levels. It underpins resilience and deepens capacities for awareness.

In this activity we ask participants to stand face to face with someone else and 'take them in', guided through doing so via various prompts and perspectives.

Being present with others, sharing, listening etc in more conscious ways can be uncomfortable – we are often used to relationships/communication being mediated or 'diluted' amongst busyness and distractions. Developing our ability to be more fully present with each other can offer nourishment and enhance our capacity for empathy.

The discomfort can often produce laughter during the activity – sometimes a bit of giggling, but also commonly louder outbursts. This is okay/normal, but it can hijack the session if it doesn't settle down. The best thing to do as the facilitator in this case is to hold strong to the centrality and structure of the activity, stay with what you are doing and focus on those who are doing the exercise and not laughing. If you keep putting your attention and focus there, not becoming ruffled/distracted by the laughter, it will usually settle down pretty quickly. Requesting that people stop laughing is likely to make them laugh more, while ignoring it and modelling focus, presence and groundedness, will more likely settle things.

#### Related material to support framing:

- [Introducing working skilfully with emotion resource](#)
- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This can be an emotionally charged activity, so prepare yourself appropriately and ensure adequate group trust is in place.

It is best with this activity to 'drop the group in' without telling them what is going to happen. However, this does involve some risk, since it removes the option for anyone who might find it unhelpfully intense (or even triggering) to opt out in advance. Based on your knowledge of people in the group, you have the option to check in with individuals you feel concerned about before the session.

You will need enough space for the group to walk/mill around one another relatively freely in the space.

You will need an even number of people as they will be mostly in pairs (the co-facilitator can step in and participate so long as they keep an eye on what is happening in the group and are ready to shift role if necessary).

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (0 mins)

Generally it is best to simply begin this activity, rather than framing and introducing it (see considerations above).

### Facilitating the activity (15 - 20 mins)

- Ask the group to walk around the room, changing direction, filling in the gaps/spaces they see (you should walk around with/amidst them, setting a relatively upbeat pace in order to bring energy and vitality). Drop in suggestions such as:

- Be aware of yourself moving through space and the sensations of that
- Aware of sensations of the feet on the floor as you walk, a sense of groundedness
- Relaxing the body, allowing the movement to ease out any tension, have a stretch if you need to, make some noise if you feel like it, notice how you're feeling
- Noticing others in the space as you walk by them, perhaps acknowledging them
- etc...

You may also want to play with some speed changes, giving them a fictional/imagined reason to rush/run, slowing them right down and then speeding them up again.

### a. Round one: stand in front of someone and take them in (3+)

- After a couple of minutes of this, ask them to stop in front of somebody else in the group, standing face to face

- Offer the following prompts:
  - Stand in front of your partner and allow yourself to take them in
  - Perhaps it feels a bit awkward - that's okay, just notice if there's tension in the body and see if you can encourage it to relax
  - Feel the feet on the ground, relax the body, breathe freely
  - You don't have to do anything special, as simply as possible just stand in

*The purpose of this part is really to change the mode, energise the group, bring a sense of presence and play/fun and release self-consciousness (ie get people into their bodies and into the room)*

*Usually people sense for themselves how close to stand but this will generally be about 50cm apart*

- front of your partner and allow yourself to take them in – another human being
- Perhaps you're aware that they are also taking you in, at the same time
- Notice how all this feels
- Thank your partner and begin to move through the space again.

You will need to intuit the appropriate length of time that participants remain in each pair, but roughly we suggest 2-3 minutes for each round.

#### **b. Round two: shared desire for a better world (3+)**

- As they walk around, encourage them to move the body, breathe deeply, make some sound if they like, etc. in order to readjust and have some time to 'come back to themselves', then ask them to stop in front of somebody else
- Offer the following prompts:
  - Stand in front of your partner and allow yourself to take them in, encouraging the body to relax as much as possible, stay in touch with how you feel etc (as before)
  - Allow them to take you in, in a similar way
  - Then, aware that this person is here [wherever you are..] because they care about similar things to you
  - They bothered to organise their life, time off work, away from family/ other commitments etc in order to be here
  - They did this because they see this work as important..
  - In one way or another, this person shares your values, shares your desire for a better world
  - Appreciating that, appreciating them...
  - ...
- Thank your partner and begin to move through the space again

#### **c. Round three: shared experience of pain and difficulty (3+)**

- As before, walk around and space, shake off any tension and reset before stopping in front of a third person
- Offer the following prompts:
  - Stand in front of your partner and allow yourself to take them in, encouraging the body to relax as much as possible, stay in touch with how you feel etc (as before)
  - Allow them to take you in, in a similar way
  - This time, we're aware that this person suffers – they experience pain, as you do
  - This person is vulnerable – aware of how thin the skin is, how easily torn/ damaged; that they become ill/sick at times and are susceptible to that; perhaps they are working with physical discomfort or pain right now, that you don't know about..
  - This person experiences loss/grief, sadness, anxiety, fear about the future..
  - They are hurt by a harsh word, by rejection, by the social and political violence of the world we live in, etc..

*Give these instructions with lots of space and pauses around them.. They are like gentle invitations to bear in mind, as support to connection*

*Depending on the size of the group, participants may or may not be able to work with a different person in every round. As much as possible, encourage them to work with a range of members of the group, but if you run out of options, it is okay to work with someone more than once*

- Holding all that in mind, as you take them in...
- ...
- Thank your partner and begin to move through the space again

#### **d. Round four: witnessing potential (3+)**

- As before, walk around and space, shake off any tension and reset before stopping in front of a fourth person
- Offer the following prompts:
  - Stand in front of your partner and allow yourself to take them in, encouraging the body to relax as much as possible, stay in touch with how you feel etc (as before)
  - Allow them to take you in, in a similar way
  - Now bringing awareness to the extraordinary potential of this human being, standing in front of you
  - They bring a lifetime of experience with them to this moment - all the learning, relationships, settings and places they have experienced; the skills they have cultivated
  - ..their talents and the range of qualities and capacities they embody
  - ..the extraordinary potential they are carrying around within them; their capacity to learn, grow, develop..
  - ..dimensions and possibilities within them that they themselves are not even aware of, and have not yet imagined!
- Holding all that in mind, as you take them in...
- ...
- Thank your partner and begin to move through the space again

#### **e. Round five: support and connection (3+)**

- As before, walk around and space, shake off any tension and reset before stopping in front of a fifth and final person
- Offer the following prompts:
  - This time take a step closer to your partner, raise your hands up in front of your shoulders and place them palm to palm with your partner, then very lightly lean in (nothing too physically demanding as you'll be here a while)
  - As you do this, aware of the sense of connection and support you can now feel through your hands, with this person
  - This person is somebody who could offer you support, who you could offer support to..
  - This is somebody you could work with..
  - Aware again that this is somebody who shares some/many of your values; experiences suffering; who is full of many qualities and a wealth of potential etc.. (recap of earlier stages)
  - Allowing yourself to feel the resonance and possibility of solidarity with this person..

..give them a moment or two longer, and then let them know the activity is over.



### **Debriefing the activity (5 - 10 mins)**

- Give them a few minutes to talk with their final pair about how they found the activity, before debriefing with the whole group

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- There is no one way that the activity is supposed to feel for people. Reflect back and balance the perspectives of the eye-gazing-enthusiasts (!) with those who might have felt more 'blocked' or uncomfortable
- Generally people will have quite a bit to say about this activity and you won't need to prompt them too much - as you reflect back what they are saying, you are looking for ways to:
  - affirm any new awareness they are bringing about their experience of themselves in relation to others
  - encourage an atmosphere of curiosity
  - assist them in articulating their somatic/felt experience
  - hold the space in a way that reflects, maintains and nourishes whatever sense of connection/intimacy the exercise may have brought with it.

### **FURTHER NOTES**

This activity works well as part of a broader session on working with skilful emotion or introducing kind regard practice. You might also find it useful as part of a session exploring the four heart practices.

You are also free to remove a one or two 'rounds' if you want the activity to be shorter, although having more rounds will allow more deepening into the exercise.

# OPEN SENTENCES ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 30 - 40 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Pairs

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Comfortable seating options (either chairs or cushions for the floor)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Awareness and Emotional Literacy

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Group building and connection
- Deepening experiences of empathy & solidarity that our work is built on
- Practising active listening
- Supporting spacious, reflective, embodied communication
- Practising (self) reflection
- Developing self awareness (psychological integration & emotional literacy)

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

The format of Open Sentences can be applied to different topics/areas of exploration at many different points in a training. You can introduce the form early on, and then come back to it as a loose structure to enable speaking about something for a set period of time with the benefit of somebody making an effort to listen well. It adds focus, encourages self/other awareness and asks people to apply themselves in a way that simply asking people to talk about something between themselves in a freeform way, may not.

If you have introduced somatic awareness and emotional literacy practices elsewhere, you can draw on some of that language as part of the Open Sentences activity - ie. encouraging people to be in touch with themselves (with their bodies and emotions) and speak from that level (rather than just from the head) and similarly, to listen with the whole body/being and perhaps with an intention to listen with a 'kind' attention. Depending what types of themes you are exploring, you might also ask the group to sit in a meditation posture in front of their partner, to encourage them to really embody the qualities of attentiveness and openness as they speak/listen.

There are many ways you might use this activity, examples of sets of open sentences you might use in the course of a training are as follows, though you are free to design your own to fit the group purposes.

**Example One:** in a session on *working with kind regard/self solidarity*

1. "Some of the things other people appreciate about me are..."
2. "Some of the things I appreciate about myself are..."

**Example Two:** in a session on *working with difficult emotion*

1. "When I think about the state of the world, things that concern me are..."
2. "Some of the ways this makes me feel are..."
3. "Some of the things I do with these feelings are..."

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**Example Three:** in a session on *next steps*

1. "Some of the resources I already have, to support me to take this learning back are..."
2. "Some of the resources I need to find, to support me to take this learning back are..."
3. "Some of the obstacles I might find/put in my way, when trying to take this learning back are..."
4. "Some of the ways I might overcome these obstacles are..."

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This is a pretty low risk, widely applicable activity. You can use it when the group are new to each other or when they know each other well. You can allow them to choose a partner that they feel comfortable with (if the content requires it) or you can encourage its use as a way to connect with someone in the group they don't know yet/haven't spoken to. It is adaptable.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Introduce the activity in the context of whatever session/theme you are using it

- Ask the group to get into pairs and then find a space in the room to sit facing one another, close enough that they can hear each other well

- Once they have settled down in their pairs, you can give them their instructions:

- You will give them the beginning of an incomplete sentence which will act as a springboard for exploring the theme - you will start the sentence for them, they will repeat this and then continue speaking...

- The other person will simply listen, they won't respond, reflect back or question, supporting their partner by taking an active interest in what they are saying, paying attention to them, perhaps practising listening with a quality of warmth/empathy

- There will be [X] sentences. They will have [X] minutes per stage. The first person will go through all sentences, before the pairs swap over.

### Facilitating the activity (variable timing according to number of sentences / how much time appropriate to give to each)

- Having decided who will speak first, give them the first sentence (it's usually best to say it twice)

- Time the period of speaking. If you notice people are 'drying up' / running out of things to say, encourage them to start again with the beginning of the sentence and see what else comes - this form is intended to encourage exploration and reflection in an open-ended way, rather than giving the answer and then sitting silently waiting for the next instruction

- When the time is up, draw the group's attention back to you. Remind them that the same person is still speaking and give them the second sentence (..and so on, until all sentences have been completed)

- Repeat with the other person speaking. Reiterate that the partner's job not to comment, question or reflect, simply to be present and available as the other person explores the themes, offering them warm attention and interest

*You may want to ask them to sit in a meditation-type posture, to add a little more structure/formality to the process, or you may prefer to encourage them to find a way to be relaxed together.. It depends on the group and what you think will help them speak and listen best*

*In some cases when using the open sentences format, you may want to leave participants to explore and speak for longer (say up to 10 minutes). In this case, it can be useful to write the open sentence up on a flipchart so that they can refer back to it, if they lose their way.*

### **Debriefing the activity (5 - 10 mins)**

- Give them a few minutes to talk in their pair about how they found the activity in general, then bring them back together and continue to draw out experiences and thoughts amongst the whole group, in a way that is relevant to the session in which you are using the activity.

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

Debriefing activities is not always/only about drawing out particular teaching points, it is also a useful/necessary way to allow the group to feel connected to one another and like they are in a collective process, rather than something private between them and their partner/small group. This is especially necessary around more emotional/experiential activities. If someone has become upset during a pairs activity for example, the group will be aware of that but also 'apart' from it. You need to find a way of bringing that in (even if just by general acknowledgement) so that the group and its process can feel whole.

### **FURTHER NOTES**

This activity does work well at the beginning of a session as a way to begin exploring a theme in more subjective ways, bringing people and their experience into the room, before you introduce activities or content that might be more directive or theoretical.

However, it can equally be applied to conclude a session, as an approach to reflecting on what has been learned. As we've said, it is a very flexible and adaptable activity, a great one to have in the toolkit!

# WORKING WITH SUFFERING (COMPASSION PRACTICE - MEDITATIVE)

**RUNNING TIME:** 30 - 60 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** cushions, blocks, blankets, mats, chairs (multiple options for sitting for extended periods of meditation) / [Introducing Working Skilfully with Emotion fli chart](#) (if using)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Working with Difficult Emotion, Pain and Overwhelm

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Building our emotional 'holding' capacity
- Growing capacity for staying in relationship to discomfort/difficulty
- Strengthening wellbeing and nourishment
- Developing emotional 'courage'
- Deepening experiences of empathy & solidarity that our work is built on

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

An important part of resilience praxis resides in our abilities to meet and engage effectively with difficult emotions and the suffering we encounter through our work. Compassion practice supports us to increase our emotional 'holding' capacity - we become more able to meet and accommodate difficult feelings through, effectively, practising feeling them skilfully (which means, with openness, relaxation and willingness). As we do this, our emotional 'container' gets stronger, we become more able to stay relaxed, open and loving with the difficulty (rather than contracted or aversive), and this transforms the experience of it.

We are never going to be able to avoid encountering suffering. Changing our relationship to it, being able to engage with it in a way that nourishes rather than depletes us, is potentially deeply transformative. With practice, compassion can become the more available response to situations of difficulty. Not only will we be less tired and resentful as result, we will be much better placed to make skilful choices about how we behave, how we want to show up, and what will be helpful.

Compassion also sustains and nourishes motivation. Rather than being driven by guilt, resentment, panic or anxiety (which are depleting motivators), we can be increasingly moved to act from care and the desire to respond beneficially.

This is a relatively intense meditative practice and requires the group to have done some preliminary activities and groundwork (unless they happen to be a group of reasonably experienced meditators). A reasonable understanding of the skilful emotion arena should be in place, and some practice of [working with kind regard](#) is a requirement.

The practice sits within a system of four practices which are explored further [here](#).

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*Many meditative and somatic practices draw from indigenous and so-called 'Eastern' traditions. Much of this kind of work as we are using it here has been modernised and 'westernised', thus it is important to name the ways we are benefitting from other traditions and cultures, especially in the historical context of colonisation, violence and power imbalance. More on this, [here](#).*

### Related material to support framing:

- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)
- [Introducing working skilfully with emotion resource](#)
- [Interrelationship of the 4 Heart Practices activity](#)
- [Working with Difficult Emotion, Pain and Overwhelm chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

To be offering this session there needs to be some basic ground/practice already in place. Participants will need to have a [posture](#) they are comfortable with and a basis in [kind regard practice](#). Both of these sessions are available as linked.

Emphasis on care and not pushing willfully (see more in framing and debrief points) are important for mitigating risks of people becoming triggered or overwhelmed by the practice. Ensure there is another facilitator to respond to anyone who might need to leave/stop.

It can be useful to have done this practice in advance of (although not directly before) the [Truth Circle](#) or [Cairn of Mourning](#), offering people a way to work with suffering that might come up as part of those activities.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (10 - 15 mins)

- Frame the session, explaining the relevance of the practice and what it's designed to do, drawing on material above.
- Explain the format and structure of the practice as follows:
  - This practice is designed to support the cultivation of compassion, through the bringing together of kind regard with suffering/difficulty
  - We choose some kind of image that holds a resonance of pain/difficulty in it for us - eg the image of a friend who suffers from chronic pain, the image of someone in emotional anguish, the image of a distressing situation such as a warzone or detention centre.. Etc.
  - We hold that image in mind - it can be helpful to have a sense of it 'in front of us', like we are looking at it
  - As we breathe in, we imagine we are breathing in the image and the suffering that's there. We allow the suffering/difficulty to 'come in' to us, counteracting patterns of pushing it away or rejecting it. We practice welcoming and staying relaxed with the difficulty. (Sometimes this is imagined as breathing in dark smoke)
  - As we breathe out, we imagine we are breathing out kindness/care/empathy/solidarity/love, balancing the suffering aspect with the kind regard aspect. We practice responding to difficulty with kindness and care. (Sometimes this is imagined as breathing out warm light)
  - For some people, and to begin with, the length of the inbreath and outbreath can feel too short to be able to connect sufficiently with the experience of the suffering and the kindness in such quick succession - in this case, one can stay with the suffering for a few breaths, and then stay with the kindness for a few breaths, aiming for a balance between the two
  - It's best not to choose the most horrifying image one can imagine. We

are aiming to work with an image that brings us some discomfort or is close to our edge in terms of what we feel able/willing to stay open to, but not something which completely overwhelms us. Start with something that's not too difficult and build up the intensity later, we do not want to 'overwork' in a way that would leave us shaky and fatigued

- This is not an endurance test! The practice is designed to help us transform aversive/pushing away habits, by gently, skilfully training us to stay in relationship, in a sustainable and enduring way. It is not a case of gritting one's teeth until it's over! We are actually looking for the positive/nourishing quality of compassion to arise out of the tension between the suffering and the kind regard

- Finally, if we do become unhelpfully agitated/distressed by the practice, one can turn one's attention to the pain/suffering in one's own body/experience in the present moment and use that as the object of the practice (ie. breathe in your own distress, breathe out kindness towards yourself). It is important in this case to contextualise the experience of suffering as something that others share, that other people are experiencing right now, along with you, somewhere in the world

- The practice in general should be supporting us to connect with a general and broad sense of universal suffering and universal compassion. It is not about the particulars of the situation and us as the individual, but about opening things up in a way that connects and embeds us with others (and everyone).

### **Facilitating the activity (15 - 25 mins)**

- After checking for questions and clarifications, ask people to take up their posture and let them know how long you'll be sitting for. Reiterate that they should take care of themselves in the practice, not pushing too hard.

#### **a. Establish basic conditions for presence**

- Begin by offering suggestions for ways to 'arrive' and connect with how they are. Key things to mention:

- Physical elements of posture, and qualities to embody in them (eg. relaxed legs in the posture supporting a quality of groundedness)

- Awareness/connection with physical sensations

- Awareness/connection with emotions/feelings/feeling-tone

- Awareness/connection with energy (eg. agitated, sleepy etc)

- Welcoming and allowing experience, not wasting energy with resistance and judgement - kind attention

- Connection with purpose - why are we doing this, why does it matter? (for others, not just ourselves!)

- Clear intention and resolve - bringing energy and determination (without becoming overly willful)

- From here, draw attention to the fact that where there is any discomfort in their experience (either physically, emotionally or energetically) and they are bringing interest and awareness to that, they are already beginning the cultivation of compassion

- Take attention to rest in the chest/heart area and notice what is happening there. Allow some moments to connect with the quality of kind regard/empathy/care/kindness/friendliness/love/solidarity etc (see [Structured Kind Regard Practice](#) for suggestions)



- Take some time to establish/explore/stabilise this

### **b. Finding the image of suffering**

- Bring to mind the image of suffering/difficulty they have chosen asking - "what happens, in the experience/body, when we hold this image in mind?"

- Stay with this for some breaths, looking to stabilise the loving kindness in relation to the image/letting them coexist (at this point, if that feels impossible, it probably means that the image is too strong/difficult to work with. Equally if there is no response to the image, if the image does not elicit an emotional response, it is also likely not the one for today. In both cases, try choosing something else, and try again)

### **c. Working with the image**

- Then invite them to begin the practice proper: as we breathe in, we allow the image/quality of suffering to come into the body, we attempt to relax and welcome it into us; as we breathe out, we let go and open to what is in front of us, offering connection/solidarity

- Over the rest of the practice you can 'drop in' various suggestions to help them deepen, settle and connect with this quality of compassion. For example:

- Stay in touch with your body, experience and sensations.. It is easy to get lost in an 'idea' of the practice. We won't find it anywhere other than in our embodied experience! So keep coming back to what is happening in the body
- Look out for tension creeping into the body (eg. hands beginning to clench, eyebrows tensing into a frown, stomach/solar plexus becoming tight/uncomfortable etc). This is a sign that something in us is resisting in some way (and very understandably!). We can work to soften and ease out these tensions when they come, soothing them with the out-breath of loving kindness
- It's not an endurance test. We are aiming to work with gentleness, kindness and skill. If it feels too much, bring in more kindness, create some more distance between you and your image, focus kindly on your own discomfort (in context) for a few breaths to settle, then try again etc. Play with adjustments to support the heart to stay as open and present as possible
- Notice and respect the parts of you that might feel unsure of a practice like this. Prioritise being kind to these parts, and getting their consent to continue - we want this practice to serve opening and connection at all levels, if parts of us are not okay, we need to breathe them in, and offer them loving kindness too (in context, as above)
- It can be helpful to connect with a sense of the abundance of the skilful emotions (eg kind regard, or compassion) - imagining them not as finite resources for us to 'generate' more of, but as plentiful, ever-present dimensions/aspects of consciousness.. A sense that we 'just have to get out of their way'.. that 'the heart wants to open' etc, can be useful
- If we need more support, images such as connection to the earth, roots growing out of the bottom of the posture, deep water, a sense of others in the room practising with us, connectedness with everyone working to meet and transform suffering in the world etc, can all be stabilising assists
- Allow the steady rhythm of the breath coming in and out to hold you and the practice - a sense that the breath is reliable, certain, pervasive and timeless, a constant friend inside/beside which the intensity of the practice can be held and supported

#### **d. Conclude the practice with some soothing/regulation**

- Let go of the image and let the attention rest primarily with the body and personal experience as it is now

- Stay with a light/effortless sense of the loving kindness/care/warmth in a way that is gentle and soothing. Bring a quality of patience and appreciation for the effort that's been made to engage in a demanding practice!

- To close the practice, you can suggest that people 'dedicate' the benefits of the practice to others

- Again, ask them to take their whole body/experience in, notice how they are now, then bring awareness to the sounds in the room and beyond, awareness of others in the space, and when they're ready, gradually moving the fingers and toes and opening the eyes.

#### **Debriefing the activity (10 mins)**

- Ask them about their experience of the practice..

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- It's best to be led by the group here. People may need reminders of why we are doing this, what its benefits are etc

- Probably the most important thing is to be kind and affirming, appreciating the courage/strength it takes to undertake a practice like this and encouraging them to take care of themselves (there is always a danger that folks who are used to pushing themselves hard, or are working with underlying psychological tendencies around guilt or low self esteem etc will attempt this practice in a 'martyrish' or self-negating way - try to encourage lots of self care and appreciation)

- Remind them that this practice will only 'work' in so far as kind regard is well established - if we are doing the practice on the basis of willfulness, endurance or self-negation, we are strengthening aversive tendencies (the opposite of cultivating skilful emotion!).

#### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

Reiterate that this practice sits in context (four heart practices) and requires us to attend to other dimensions of our emotional lives.

# CAIRN OF MOURNING ACTIVITY

## (ADAPTATION FROM [WORK THAT RECONNECTS](#))

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr - 1hr45

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Items for a centrepiece (eg. a low table or other appropriate base and objects to dress base eg. cloth, candles, flowers, other natural objects) / Space to explore and collect natural objects, or alternatively squares of paper, pens and a basket

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Working with Difficult Emotion, Pain and Overwhelm

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

### KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Honouring emotions and engaging with grief
- Group building and connection
- Nature connection
- Deepening experiences of empathy and solidarity that our work is built on
- Supporting spacious, reflective, embodied awareness & communication

### FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Sections of the PSR manual cover the significance of finding spaces to share, hold and process [strong emotions](#). Collective witnessing of one another builds bonds within groups, and can empower people to move through emotional states which may be undermining them and their resilience. We need to create spaces to honour our pain and welcome the various aspects of our emotional lives if we are to achieve the levels of integration, connection and ease with our emotional experience that true resilience requires.

This simple ceremony offers a held space for participants to acknowledge and process some of the feelings they might be experiencing in relation to the state of the world, or inside of themselves. It provides an alternative to [The Truth Circle activity](#), and is usually a little less 'intense' or 'dramatic' to hold (some of the framing material, guidelines and considerations explored in that activity plan may be supportive here).

Running this activity outdoors can strengthen the sense of connection to the earth and the elements, which can help to ground the emotions in a spacious and natural container. However, if conditions make this tricky, an inside space can be used instead (see below for alternative format). The ceremony should be held in a space which will not be disturbed and offers participants a sense of comfort and containment.

#### Related material to support framing:

- [Working with Difficult Emotion, Pain and Overwhelm chapter](#)
- [The Truth Circle activity](#)
- [Working with suffering \(compassion practice\)](#)

### OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Take the group into account carefully - the kind of group, quality of relationships, maturity, trauma levels and histories, etc - and consider whether this activity is appropriate.

It is important to facilitate this space calmly and with enough resources to hold what it brings up. Check there is capacity within the facilitation team, sensitivity to the group, and time for the activity to run to an appropriate ending (ie. that there's space to debrief or decompress, and experience does not end up 'dropped' or prematurely cut off). Strong emotions can arise, and it's important that participants don't feel rushed and aren't left without closure.

It can be good to hold the session before a break to enable people to look after themselves and do what they need afterwards.

More on this under 'Other Considerations' in the Truth Circle session, as above.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (10 - 15 mins)

Before the session begins, prepare the space appropriately - make it feel cared for, aesthetic and intentional. The location could be under an old tree, in a secluded clearing or another appropriate place. Set up a centrepiece, eg. a tree stump with some flowers or other aesthetic items on it - a candle or tealight in a jar can create a focal point.

Decide what you will use to call people back - this could be a bell or chime (check the range this can be heard in), or a call which you agree with the group. (You might want to get them to practice passing this call on when they hear it, so the sound spreads.)

- Gather the group at the chosen centrepiece and offer some framing for the session, drawing on the material above/elsewhere re importance of honouring difficult emotion

- Give the instructions - you can refer to this adapted script from the [Work that Reconnects](#), if useful:

- *"We'll be using this time to create a space for people to acknowledge and share some of the loss they are experiencing in our world today.*

- *It's a simple ceremony we'll create together, using objects we gather from the land around us.*

- *You're invited to engage at whatever level feels right for you - we're here to support and hold each other, and all the ways you can engage with that are welcome.*

- *Your reactions to this might not be the same as anyone else's, that's perfectly OK.*

- *Together, all we need is to be present and witness one another, in our strengths and vulnerabilities.*

- *We will take **15 minutes outside, walking alone in silence, bringing to mind something that is precious to us in this world, but that we feel a loss in relation to.***

- *This might be a space or being that is disappearing or lost from your life. It might be a species, a specific thing - a place or people, a movement or moment which you feel a loss of. It could be a woodland destroyed, a place you have left behind or a campaign you lost. This is a chance for you to consciously say goodbye.*

- *As you take time to consider this, **look out for an item to represent what you're celebrating and mourning the loss of** - this will be what you offer to co-create our cairn of mourning. (A cairn is a small pile of*

*Empower and instruct the group to approach the activity at whatever level feels comfortable to them. Remind them there's no obligation to excavate deep grief that they're not comfortable or ready to disclose. Personal boundaries are important here, as is connection and compassion.*

*stones made to mark a place or as a memorial).*

*- Take space to be quiet and considered in your journey outside, and stay close enough that you can hear the call to return.*

*- I will call (or ring a bell) when it is time for you to return, after 15 minutes, and we will regroup here to co-create our cairn of mourning and share with the group either verbally or in silence..*

*- When you return, let's hold silence together to enable people to honour the feelings they are experiencing.*

*- Enjoy this moment to appreciate and celebrate the precious things in your life!*

### **Facilitating the activity (50 mins - 1hr30)**

- Ring a bell or chime to mark the start of the exercise.

- Walk out with the group and spend some time considering what you might share yourself, and finding an object for the cairn

- After 15 minutes, sound the bell or call to bring the group back together. Ring/sound again after a couple of minutes if people aren't returning

- Warmly welcome them, but with few words - hold a quiet space as the group returns. Encourage them to sit so they can all see the centrepiece.

- When everyone is sitting in a circle, give the next instructions - again, you can refer to the Work that Reconnects script below, if useful:

*- Now we have the opportunity to honour some of the precious losses we are experiencing in this world.*

*-The invitation is that one by one, we'll offer our objects to the cairn of mourning.*

*- You can speak about the offering, explain to us what the loss is that you'd like to honour, and why you've chosen the object.*

*- If you don't feel comfortable speaking, you're welcome to honour your loss without words, and we will witness your contribution as you lay the object you've brought, silently in solidarity.*

*- After each person has placed their object and spoken if they wish, we will acknowledge them by saying "We hear you."*

*- Let's be courageous and caring as we hold this space for one another, and the mourning we experience for the complex world we live in.*

*- Whenever someone is ready, you're welcome to step in and share...*

- It is often best to step in and share first, as the facilitator, so as to model approach and timing (bearing in mind the size of the group). You might:

- Describe why you chose your object, and what it represents to you

- Explore the parallels between the item and your experiences

- Express the feelings which arise in you relating to your sense of loss.

- As the activity progresses, some may not feel willing or able to join in, or might seem a bit frozen. If this happens, invite anyone who is left to come and place their item on the cairn, so that the activity can be drawn to a close.

- Once the cairn is complete you can end by saying something like:

*- We're going to close the ceremony now - let's take a few more moments*

*to be aware of these losses and experiences we have shared, and the courage and care that the group has shown.*

*- Care and compassion sit beneath the loss and grief we feel, and here we have been acknowledging our loss, our love and our appreciation for the world - this helps to connect us.*

- You may want to ring a bell or chime (or find some other way) to mark the closure of the ceremony.

- Leave a moment of quiet and then support transition, eg:

*- Feel free now to take care of your needs - take a break, a cup of tea, a walk. We'll come back together as a group in xx mins.*

*- We will all be feeling different - take care of yourselves and each other. The team will stay quiet here in the space for a while to sit with those who need it. Indicate if you'd like support, a chat, a walk etc - we are available.*

### **Possible Indoor Variant:**

If working indoors, or when natural objects can't be collected, squares of paper can be used instead. People can write words or draw images to represent the losses/experiences they would like to reflect on and share. Place an open basket in the centre of the circle. People bring one square at a time to the basket, describing the loss it represents.

This method allows for a variety of creative expressions, some people may write short poems, or draw pictures.

### **Debriefing the activity (varied)**

Participants can be left to debrief this in the way which feels appropriate for them - people will engage at different levels so it is good to have a break scheduled afterwards to allow for a range of processing styles.

Invite participants to take care of themselves and their needs, and make facilitators available to check in or support those who need it.

(See more under debrief on the [Truth Circle activity plan](#))

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

A sense of loss or grief depends on the presence of love and care of something in the first place. Bearing witness to this love and cherishing brings cohesion and closure, and a sense of appreciation for what we love in the world.

## **FURTHER NOTES**

- This is adapted from Joanna Macy's Work that Reconnects
- Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown - *Coming Back to Life* (New Society Publishers, 2010)
- The Work that Reconnects online: [www.WorkThatReconnects.org](http://www.WorkThatReconnects.org)

*If there are participants taking a long time to step forward, remind them they don't have to speak, and can place their object in silence.*

# THE TRUTH CIRCLE ACTIVITY

## (ADAPTATION FROM **WORK THAT RECONNECTS**)

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr15 - 1hr25

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Five ritual objects / chairs or cushions / tissues

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:**

**CHAPTER:** Working with Difficult Emotion, Pain and Overwhelm

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

### KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Strengthening personal/emotional robustness
- Building our 'emotional containing capacity', serving emotional resilience
- Building connection: self, others, world
- Deepening the experiences of empathy & solidarity that our work is built on
- Counteracting tendencies to aversion/closing down/pushing away
- Supporting relational/group 'deepening'
- Group trust and relationship building.

### FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This is a 'strong' and intense session to hold, and therefore requires a good amount of framing and lead-in. Taking the time to explain clearly and in detail to the group, the rationale for doing this, and how it will work, is more important than usual. You need to sensitively solicit consent from the group, establishing a sense of safety and holding. The framing is an important part of building the container for the exercise.

In activist work, we are likely to come into contact with forms of suffering on a regular basis, sometimes in more concrete terms through close contact with people facing violence/repression for example, or in more abstract terms through working with projections about what is/may be going to happen elsewhere. When we come into contact with suffering (our own/ others) we generally experience difficult emotions: anger, grief, fear, anxiety, rage, despair, overwhelm and so on. The 'natural' response to this is to push the experience away or shut it down somehow. This is understandable. There are certain kinds of pain we don't tend to enjoy experiencing.

However, if we do this too much, it begins to cause us problems. Pain is vital feedback, it lets us know that something is wrong. The pain we feel about the state of the world is an important component in the energy that motivates us, it gives us the impetus to act. Experiences like grief and loss are also an important part of what makes life feel rich, varied and meaningful to us, part of what makes us feel alive and like we care, like things matter. Without this, we increasingly experience numbness, cynicism, apathy, depression, lack of creativity, lack of energy and so on (key symptoms/factors in burnout). On top of this, when we consistently push parts of experience/the psyche 'out', especially significant parts like grief or anger, they work hard to try and come back 'in' - they want to be seen and felt - and the build up of tension there, means they are likely to 'erupt', often louder and surfacing in unexpected situations or disconnected/irrational

*To run this session, you need to be confident that as a facilitator and within the team, you have the emotional capacity to hold what may come up. See 'other considerations' below, for more on this.*



ways. This can be overwhelming, and damaging to us and our relationships and groups.

It can be helpful to think of ourselves as small ecosystems. In a system, all parts need to be in healthy relationship with other parts, otherwise the system gets 'sick'. Difficult emotions are part of our systems, they play a necessary part, needing space and attention like everything else. So the ability and opportunity to be in touch with and feel difficult emotions is vital in building emotional literacy and resilience.

As we all know though, experiencing difficult emotions can be undermining and/or overwhelming if we don't have the skills to engage with and hold them well. That's the 'literacy' part. As described in the [emotional literacy chapter](#), through paying attention in an open/kind way, we can learn a lot about our emotional experience - the insubstantial/transient nature of feelings, the difference between fully identifying with feelings and being able to hold them with space around them as part of a bigger whole - and we can start to build a more substantial/bigger container for experience, so that stronger emotion can come, and we have confidence that we can hold it, in the body/posture and psyche.

This personal 'container building' is one way to support the inclusion of this kind of material. Another way is to create 'collective containers'. Building relational and group cultures that support resilience is partly about offering emotional support to one another and space for people to share what is going on for them. When we are trying to manage alone, needing to hold parts of our experience out/away/hidden from the collective, we have the 'outer' version of what was being described earlier, internally - tensions build up, cracks appear..

This is why it can be valuable to create dedicated time and space for sharing and collectively holding some of the difficulties people may be experiencing.

There are so many reasons *not* to share publicly:

- Tendencies around deprioritising emotion, not wanting to seem weak/sentimental and endeavouring to appear 'strong' (internalised patriarchy?)
- Wanting to be/seem 'stable', 'together', 'healthy' etc (internalised ableism and neurotypical-orientation?)
- Wanting to be/seem happy, successful, reliable and productive (internalised capitalism?)
- Not wanting to bring people down or "ruin the dinner party"
- Not wanting to distress/hurt others
- Anxiety about looking stupid/incompetent - a sense that we "don't understand" well enough to express pain about something, that we'll be told we're wrong
- Basic fear of feeling pain
- Fear of feeling guilt around the inevitability of our own complicity in some of our global/relational problems and injustices
- Fear of feeling a lack of agency and powerlessness and the hopelessness/despondency that might come with that
- The fear that all these feelings will cause us despair and/or lead to overwhelm, that we won't cope
- Worry that we won't be able to put ourselves back together if we open up
- Awareness of our responsibilities - a sense that we simply cannot fall apart
- Embarrassment/shame - a sense that our own pain is nothing compared to the pain of others
- The presence of social violence which requires us to wear a protective armour, not feeling able or safe to bring that down

..and so on.

This means there is a lot working against us and holding us back. Designing and holding dedicated spaces for the expression and sharing of these difficulties

emotions, encouraged by the support and modelling of others, can help us to reclaim the value and energy bound up with these feelings.

This session creates a 'ritualised' space to do so.

It will involve using some physical objects in the space, which you will need to gather ahead of time: a rock, a bowl, some decomposing leaves/mulch, and a large stick. It's a good idea to have some tissues as people are likely to cry. You will also need to consider in advance what you, as the facilitator, will share with the group when you step into the circle to share your difficult emotion, as an example.

#### **Related material to support framing:**

- [Working with Difficult emotion, pain and overwhelm chapter](#)
- [Working with Suffering practice](#)
- [The interrelationship of the 4 heart practices activity](#)

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

Running this session means inviting strong emotion into the room/space. You don't know what people might bring up or express, and that brings with it undeniable risks. A member of the group may speak about a painful experience for example, that could be highly triggering for someone else in the group. Seen from a certain perspective, in a sense you are constructing a situation designed to 'make people feel bad'! And if it isn't held well, you are likely to get that kind of critical feedback from the group.

So the framing is very important, as we have already said. We need to explain clearly to the group why we are doing it and what its benefits are. We also need to show them we are taking care and responsibility seriously - you will let them know, for example, that there will be support available afterwards in a number of formats. You will be clear with them, in the set up, what you are asking of them, and what you are not. You will make the boundaries plain.

Also important is the manner with which you hold the space. If the group can sense that you are anxious and not ready to hold their emotion, it will affect their participation and sense of safety. As best as you can, you need to show them that you are okay with your own and their emotional experience - you can show this with your posture, quality of presence and willingness to engage with and face people in the circle.

The main skill is to manage to strike a balance between showing them you are taking it seriously, that you understand the weight of what you are inviting them to do; and that you don't express over investment in it being a 'big deal' somehow, or 'laying it on too thick'. You want to come with a sense of, "yes, this can feel intense and weighty and we need to take care of ourselves in that, and also, it is just emotion, just expressing how we feel about something, a very human and, in a sense, straightforward thing to do.. We don't have to be scared of our feelings".

We'd highly recommend that the whole team is present for this session. Apart from the support to hold the space, things are likely to be shared here that it's important that the whole team witnesses, in order that the group remains well connected. The same goes for the group itself. This is a strong session and if people miss it, they are likely to experience some sense of distancing from the group. So letting the group know in advance that it's important they try to be there, is a good idea (though obviously not at the expense of their wellbeing).

The placement of this session in the design of the course is also important to consider. Firstly, it is not a good idea to run this session without a decent amount of container/relationship building, group trust and continuity. We would not, for example, suggest running this session on a one day workshop

with a group who don't know each other or the facilitators. It is likely best placed somewhere near the middle of a group's time together in a well held longer process – giving time in advance to build trust, and time after to absorb, integrate and look forwards. And the same goes for the day itself: somewhere near the middle of the day, with time before to prepare and set up, and time after to attend, recover and support. We usually do it at the end of the morning, just before lunch break.

In the shape and spread of the day, this will be the session to plan other sessions around – something before which sensitises and connects people in a positive and inviting way, and something after which is soothing, probably embodied (rather than cognitive) and not too demanding! We usually do some [open sentences](#) and the [cradling](#) in the first part of the morning, and some lying down [meditation/body work](#), or some [nature connection](#) activities in the afternoon.

Finally, it's important that you are doing this in a space/environment that is unlikely to be accidentally intruded upon! Someone from next door accidentally coming in while someone is sharing is not what you want! If this is a possibility, a sign on the door not to disturb will be important. We most commonly use it within a residential training process lasting several days.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (30 mins)

[not including pre-session prep]

*Before the session begins you will need to prepare the space. You need the group to be able to sit in a circle such that everyone can see everyone else. We usually do this sitting on the floor as it supports a sense of grounding and allows people to sit in meditation posture if they find this helpful (in supporting them to stabilise and process what is going on). However, sitting on the floor does not work for everyone, and you need to have a sense of the group already enough to know whether this will be viable for all the bodies in the group. If not, everyone should be on a chair – you want everyone on a level with each other.*

*Since this is a 'ritual' space, and you also want the group to feel cared for by you, it can be helpful to make the space feel nice as well – tidy things away, sweep the floor, put the mats/cushions/chairs out precisely and evenly etc..*

*You also need to have your 4 objects, plus an extra cushion, ready to one side (you will put these out in the space, later).*

– Once everyone has arrived, let them know that you are going to spend some time framing the activity and they should make themselves comfortable while you do so

– Frame the session thoroughly. You are likely to want to cover the following areas (supported by the framing material above):

- What is the relevance of difficult emotion in our lives and work? How does it show up?
- What does it offer us?
- What happens when we cut off/repress/numb ourselves to it?
- What can we do to bring it in/honour it?
- What might prevent us or disincline us from doing so?

...explain to the group **why** it is important that, as part of emotional literacy and emotional resilience, we are able to meet and hold our difficult emotions.

- Then give the first instructions:

- We are going to create a container/space as a group, collectively, to allow us to engage with, practice holding and feel some of our difficult emotion.

- By doing so, hopefully we will be supported to become more familiar and at ease with these kinds of experience, amongst each other and also just in ourselves.

- We are going to engage in a 'ritual' together.

- In this context, 'ritual' simply means that there is a clear beginning and end, that we are trying to be as present as possible, and that there will be some objects in the space to help us frame/shape what we say.

- At this point, go and collect your objects, and, as you place them in the space, explain what they symbolise as follows:

- Stone/rock: symbolises Fear - cold, hard

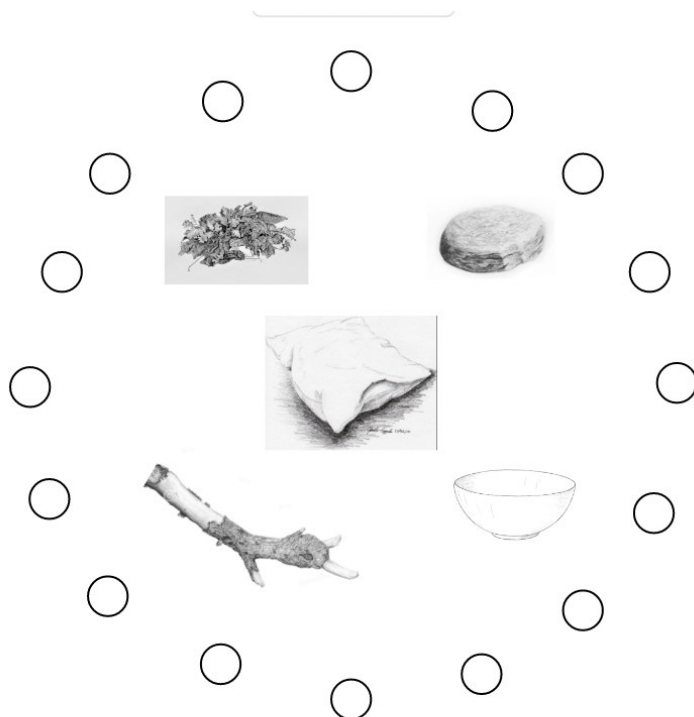
- Leaves/mulch: symbolises Grief/loss - decomposition

- Stick: symbolises Anger/rage - 'for holding with two hands, not for striking/hitting anything'

- Empty bowl: symbolises Numbness - lack, emptiness

- Cushion: for sitting on when none of the others feel right

They should be placed in the space something like this:



- Now you need to give an example of what you are asking the group to do. It is good to have considered in advance what would be a helpful/appropriate thing to share. You need to share authentically and deeply, in order to set up the space well and model and invite what you are asking of them. At the same time, as the person holding the space for them, you also don't want to share something that might undermine the sense of safety for participants or be too much too soon for people (or for you!). The way you model the activity will

*It can be a habit for people to want to 'balance out' negative emotion they have expressed with something 'positive' - "it's bad in all these ways, but it's okay because...". Make sure you don't do this in your modelling. You may even want to mention this in your instructions to the group.*

have a big impact on what people understand they are 'supposed' to share, so consider it carefully! (You might, for example, share something of the pain you experience around your work, or of what you see happening in the world.. You might also share something more personal but again, be wise about what it is helpful to share, in terms of your responsibility to create a safe enough container). It can also be good to model using a number of the objects in the space, i.e. "I feel this.. (holding the rock) ... I also feel this.. (touching the leaves)" etc.

- Having shared your story, return to your seat and take a pause! (If you have been sharing authentically, you are likely to be feeling some emotion yourself at this point, as will the group.. Give yourself and them a few breaths/ moments to absorb what has been said, before you finalise instructions). Look at the group, and offer them confidence with your body and face that you are okay, that everything is okay.

- Finalise the instructions by stating the following:

- I will ring a bell at the start, then we will sit in silence together. When someone is ready, they can move into the centre of the circle and using the objects to support you if you wish, share what you want to share with the group.

- You can share something more personal or something more 'political' or global.

- If you prefer to speak in your native language you can do so

- You can come in more than once, but be sensitive to the limited time and leaving space for everyone who wants to share having the opportunity.

- If you don't want to share, that is okay! It is just as important and significant that you are here being present and holding the space for others, feeling what you are feeling. There is no expectation to feel anything in particular. Just be authentic.

- I will ring the bell at the start, and after around 40 minutes I will ring the bell to end.. (beyond 40 minutes people start to become a bit fatigued).

- One more piece of the structure: when people finish sharing and return to their seat, we will all say together **"we hear you"**, supporting people to feel that they have been heard and they are not speaking into an unresponsive vacuum.

- Finally: sometimes people can become quite upset or will cry and so on. There can be a natural inclination to want to comfort somebody when they come back to sit next to you. This is lovely, but let's bear in mind that when we do that, we can be sending a message that it's not okay for them to be upset, that something needs to be 'made better' or 'fixed'. The invitation is to let people feel what they feel and trust that they are okay..

- Let the group know that there will be support offered after the activity, and that you will tell them about that at the end.

- Ask the group if there are any questions. They will probably ask you to remind them what the objects stand for. Once everyone's happy, you are ready to begin.

*Once the ritual is happening there is little you can/will want to do to intervene in someone's sharing (you shouldn't really be giving instructions etc once the ritual starts unless absolutely necessary)*

### **Facilitating the activity (40 - 50 mins)**

- Ring the initial bell, and then sit quietly, modelling ease and patience. It will usually take a little while for someone to muster up the courage to enter the space.. Don't worry or become agitated by this, just continue to hold the space with a warm and affirming attitude.

- As people begin to go into the space and share, make sure you lead/remind the group to say "we hear you" at the end of peoples' sharings.

- Sometimes it can happen that someone sharing becomes intense. Although in a sense there is nothing wrong with this - it is still just them expressing how they feel, and given the state of the world, it is understandable that a person might become agitated or distressed sometimes! - it is generally better if we can maintain a sense of groundedness and stability through the ritual (for the sake of the group at the time, and in terms of the 'hangover' this kind of experience/expression might produce). Of course, once the ritual is happening there is little you can/will want to do to intervene in someone's sharing (you shouldn't really be giving instructions etc once the ritual starts unless absolutely necessary), but you can again do a lot to model and hold a presence that is grounded and tries to invite stability (through embodying with your posture, emphasising the out-breath and 'emitting' an air of emotional maturity and confidence). The group will look to and 'check' you - let them see that groundedness is (in a sense, and at this time) 'preferable' to frenzy.

- Let the group know when there is about 10 minutes left, and invite anyone who still wants to speak to take the opportunity now.

- Allow whoever is sharing to finish, and then ring the final bell.

- Take a pause, and allow people to fidget, adjust and 'come out' of the space you have been creating/sharing together.

- Close the ritual by standing, going into the circle and collecting up the ritual objects. As you do this, find a way (as naturally as possible!) to name the 'positive' counterparts associated with the negative emotions. For example:

- The stone/rock: we may experience fear, but our willingness to meet and engage with that is an expression of our courage

- Leaves/mulch: we feel grief/loss, but this shows our love, the fact that we care

- Stick: our anger and rage are expressions of passion, a fierce sense of justice

- Empty bowl: the empty spaces also provides opportunity and space for the new, for growth.

- Thank the group for their willingness and care..

### **Debriefing the activity (5 minutes)**

There won't be a group debrief of the activity. At this point, the emphasis is on people doing what they need to recover, recuperate and integrate the experience.

However, it is very important that you make some suggestions about what next, and what support is offered. Something like:

- Take care of yourselves and do what feels best for you right now - that might be some time alone in nature/somewhere quiet, getting into bed, having a cup of tea, going for a walk etc

- Consider whether it would be best for you to be alone, or to be with

*Expressing emotional groundedness and maturity does not mean that it is not ok for you to be touched, moved or upset by what is shared! The more open and authentic you can be, the better for the group.*



someone else/others

-One thing that can be good to do is to lie on the ground and imagine being held/supported allowing the body to release any holding or 'residue' into the earth

- Some of the team will stay here in the space so if anyone wants to talk, we are here for that. Please do use us if that would be helpful to you.

- Be aware that sometimes after a session like this, people can find themselves 'swinging' to the other end of the spectrum into a bit of giddiness or hilarity or silliness. Understandable, but just be aware of not lifting out of your experience too soon - give yourself a bit of time to integrate, absorb and be gentle.

- The next session will be XXX - something gentle and not too taxing. See you all ..(whenever you will next see them).

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

As above, just let the group go and do what they need. Do bear in mind though, that the holding of this activity goes beyond the end of the activity itself. You must make sure that the group feel supported in the following activities/sessions - refer back to this activity, make it clear that you still have its integration in mind and that you are holding them with care, reiterate why you did it and remind them of the intentions behind it.

## **FURTHER NOTES**

In the shape and spread of the day, this will be the session to plan other sessions around - something before which sensitises and connects people in a positive and inviting way, and something after which is soothing, probably embodied (rather than cognitive) and not too demanding! We usually do some [open sentences](#) and the [cradling](#) in the first part of the morning, and some lying down [meditation/body work](#), or some [nature connection](#) activities in the afternoon.

Having done some previous work on [skilful emotion](#), [kind regard](#), [working with suffering](#) or the [four heart practices](#) will be invaluable.



# GOING TO GROUND ACTIVITY - LYING DOWN MEDITATION (ADAPTATION FROM EARTH DESCENT PRACTICE, REGGIE RAY)

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

**RUNNING TIME:** 25 mins - 1hr

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Mats, blankets, cushions (options for comfortable lying down)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Working with Difficult Emotion, Pain and Overwhelm

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Developing self awareness/knowledge
- Calming, settling, stabilising
- Nervous system regulation
- Self care and relaxation
- Alternative to sitting meditations (if there is a lack of cushions or bodies need alternatives)

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

You can see extensive framing material on body-awareness/somatic practice in the session plan called [Body Scanning Practice](#), and more framing on importance of awareness/contemplative practice in the chapter on [Awareness and Emotional Literacy](#).

The particular use of this activity is in emphasising the grounding and stabilising aspects of contemplative practice, and bringing in more strongly the potentially resourcing image of the support of the earth/ground. It can be a good session to use if the group needs some kind of gentle recuperation or integration time (say after an intense activity like [The Truth Circle](#)).

The body holds all of our experience, including emotions. Spending time paying attention to some of that material, supported by the ground in an intentional way, can be deeply nourishing and resourcing.

The main issue with this session is that people are likely to fall asleep. In some cases this is not a problem - if you are using the session for recovery, deep relaxation which falls into sleep may be just what is needed! But if you want to support people to stay awake you can make suggestions of:

- Keeping the eyes open
- Keeping the knees up, in a semi-supine position, rather than fully laid flat in 'corpse-pose'
- Bend the arm at the elbow so that the lower part of the arm (forearm) and hand are in the air - if you fall asleep the arm will fall and wake you

It is also possible to do this practice in a sitting posture, with a few adjustments, if you want to make it more directed and less focused on recuperation/rest.

**Related material to support framing:**

- [Body scanning practice \(meditative\)](#)
- [Bodywork chapter](#)
- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

Our bodies hold our histories, past experiences, emotions and possibly also traumas. We must therefore proceed with caution and care when doing this kind of work, and encourage participants to take responsibility for their welfare, acknowledging that people in the room will have different levels of personal and social wounding/oppression they are carrying.

If something doesn't feel okay, they are free to stop. You can also reassure them that the body/psyche *tends* to know how to take care of itself as a self-regulating system - so long as we don't apply undue force/willfulness (ie, proceed with care for ourselves), things will come up to the surface when we are ready for them, and we can expect to get the feedback to 'stop' from our bodies, if something is too much.

As a general rule, doing meditative activities after lunch is not a good time - people tend to be much more drowsy and prone to falling asleep than at other times of day.

## **ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

### **Setting up the activity (5 mins)**

- Introduce the activity in the context of whatever session/theme you are using it, giving them some framing around the body and awareness if you haven't already done so
- Give the instructions:
  - We will lie down on our backs for XX minutes (minimum 15 to allow enough time to deepen into the exercise; maximum 50) and I will guide you through a meditative/refl ctive exercise supporting body awareness, relaxation, resourcing and grounding
  - It is common for people to fall asleep. To help yourself stay awake you can... (see suggestions above)
  - Find whatever, mats, cushions or blankets you need to be comfortable and set yourselves up - if your lower back feels uncomfortable, it will help to roll a blanket into a 'sausage' shape and put it under the backs of your knees
- When the room has settled, you can begin..

### **Facilitating the activity (15 - 50 mins)**

- Either lie down with the group, or if you prefer to sit up, move to somewhere appropriate in the room so that you are not talking right over people's bodies

#### **a. Establish basic conditions for presence**

- Begin with supporting people to get in touch with the sensations in their bodies, as they are currently. You might do this by suggesting that they:
  - Notice how they are right now: physically, emotionally, mentally, energetically - "How does it feel?" "What are the sensations?"

- Welcome and 'bring in' whatever is going on: there is no right way to be feeling, and the more we push away/judge our experience, the harder it is to be relaxed and present - try to bring an attitude of kindness/patience/willingness to meet what is here

- Notice if there is any balancing or adjustments that need to be made: for example if they notice they are already feeling very drowsy, they may want to adjust their position or open their eyes

- Drop the question into their bodies "What wants attention"

## **b. Body scan**

- Lead them through a body scan, beginning with the feet and working up towards the head. See [body scan script](#) for inspiration on this. Basic suggestions would be:

- Invite them to notice how it feels, looking for sensations in the feet/ankles/calf muscles/behind the shins/knees/thighs/hips/groin/and so on..

- Use evocative language, eg. "trace the vertebrae of the spine with the sensitivity of your awareness" or "look for a sense of opening and space in the fold of the hips" or "allow the belly to soften and spread, as though it were melting" etc

- Where appropriate ask them to notice the sensations between the weight of the body and the contact with the ground (eg. back of the head or heels of the feet)

- Repeatedly suggest that they try to relax, release any holding and give the weight of the body to the ground.

## **c. Going to ground**

- Ask them to notice the movement of the breath, in the body, without doing anything special or changing anything - just notice how the breath is moving the body, as they lie here.

- Then take their attention to the back of the body and the contact with the ground, looking for a sense of being supported and held by the huge mass and depth of earth beneath them. Then offer some of these instructions:

- Stay with the sense of the earth meeting and supporting the body as you lie here breathing, feel the way the breath coming in pushes the body into more contact with the ground, etc (stay with this for a while)

- No allow awareness to drop down a few inches below the body into the earth and breathe from there - perhaps it is dark, or damp, perhaps there is a sense of something quieter or still here

- Stay with this for a few breaths

- Now allow the attention to drop a little further into the earth, a foot or so, and breathe now from here

- Stay with this for a few breaths

- Then deeper again, relaxing and really allowing yourself to let go, drop and sink, sink deeper into the earth, and rest there, breathing from there, breathing this deeper, quieter, stiller environment into the body, with the sense that it is beneath you, holding and supporting you

- You might even look for a sense of breathing with some form of benevolence, the 'care' (as it were) of the earth that is always there, always present, never gives up on supporting you, never abandons you, is utterly reliable etc.

- All the way through, keep being encouraging of the fact that people will be getting distracted. Remind them to try to simply notice that as soon as they can, and then come back to what we're doing.

- Having spent an appropriate amount of time with the attention in the earth, invite them to take their whole body/experience in, bring awareness to the sounds in the room and beyond, awareness of others in the space, and when they're ready, gradually move the body and open the eyes. Allow time for a gentle and slow transition.

#### **Debriefing the activity (5 mins)**

- If appropriate, you can give some time to hear how they found the practice. Given that this is often used as a recuperative practice though, it might not feel right to draw out learning points or enter into discussion.

#### **USEFUL RESOURCES**

<https://www.dharmaocean.org/foundational-practices/>

# INTERRELATIONSHIP OF THE FOUR HEART PRACTICES (MEDITATIVE)

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr10 - 1hr40

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual (works for groups of any size)

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Cushions, blocks, blankets, mats, chairs (multiple options for sitting for extended periods of meditation) / [Introducing Working Skilfully with Emotion fli chart](#) (if using)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:**

**CHAPTER:** Working with Difficult Emotion, Pain and Overwhelm

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Building our 'emotional containing capacity', serving emotional resilience
- Counteracting tendencies to aversion/closing down/pushing away
- Strengthening wellbeing and nourishment (incl. through self solidarity)
- Building connection: self, others, world
- Deepening experiences of empathy & solidarity that our work is built on
- Developing self awareness (psychological integration & emotional literacy)

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

As we have explored at length in the chapter on [emotional literacy](#) and in the framing for the [kind regard session plan](#), tendencies and habits of aversion - of emotionally pushing things away/closing down - are very common and part of what undermines our work (and general wellness as human beings). While aversive responses are natural and can be useful in providing necessary information for us, they can also become habitual and cumulative, so that we find ourselves spending more and more time feeling grumpy, cynical, disinterested, critical, resentful and so on (these are also symptoms/facets of burnout). We cannot hope to engage creatively and helpfully with others or the state of the world, if we allow our habitual emotional responses to dictate our awareness capacities, behaviour and decisions in this way.

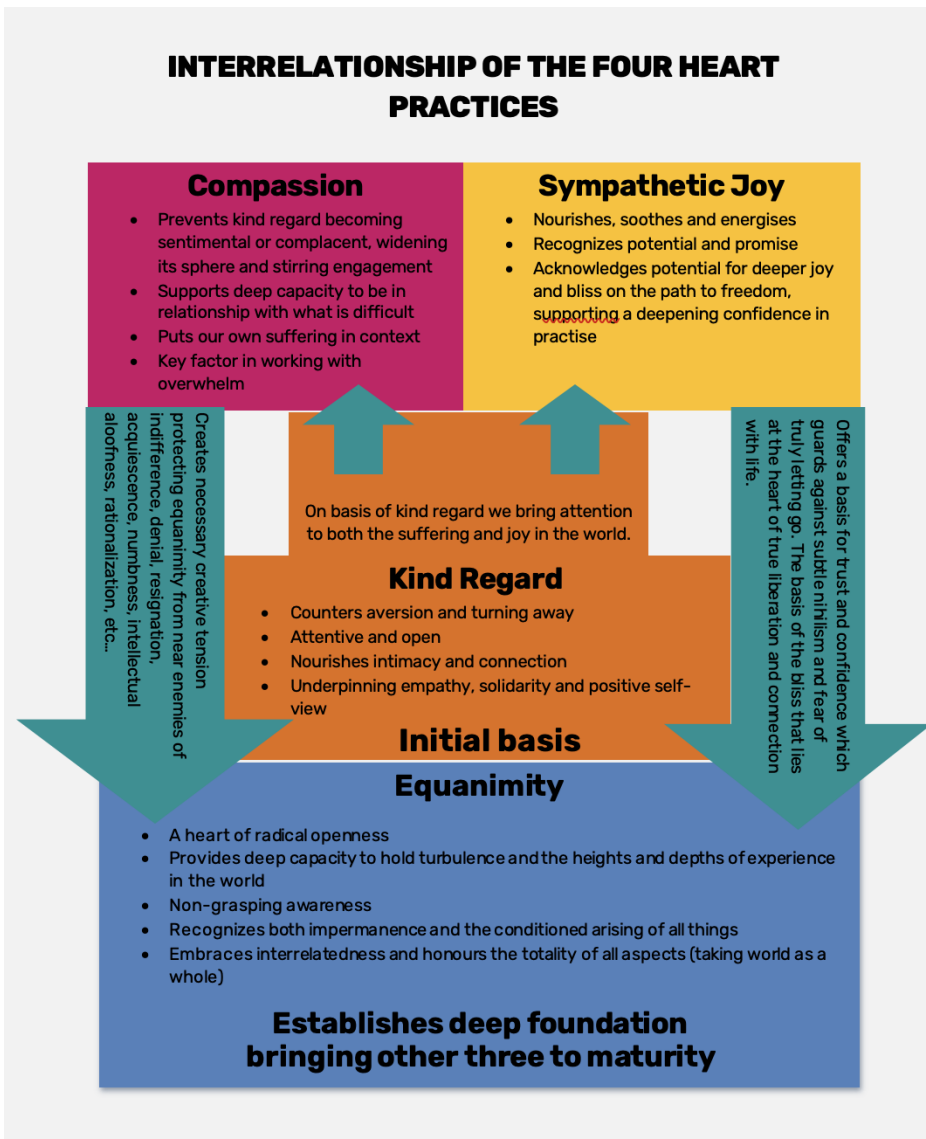
Kind regard practices act as the starting point, or the foundation, for the development of skilful emotion. They support us to become increasingly open, 'warming up' the internal environment of our everyday experience, and enabling us to feel more easily connected and nourished by our relationships, supporting our groups and work in fundamental and encompassing ways.

The four heart practices (sometimes called the 'four immeasurables' or the 'four sublime states' in the [buddhist tradition](#)) are really an expansion/unpacking of different dimensions of skilful emotion. We can imagine the heart as something which is made up of different facets, each of which we can cultivate/develop in order to make a more full and balanced whole.

This system of practices basically acknowledges that, while a general attitude of kind regard will make an enormous difference to our lives and capacities, if we really want to establish the kind of unshakability of heart that true emotional resilience requires, we may well need something a little more comprehensive.

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

This diagram describes the four dimensions/practices and how they come together:



### Kind Regard

Beginning at the centre of the diagram, we develop the capacity for kind regard as a foundation or 'ground'. With this we are increasingly able to feel nourished by being open to and in connection with ourselves/our experience, other people and the world around us. Our wellbeing is significantly improved by this, and tendencies towards resentment, conflict and othering are undermined.

The problem with stopping here, is that we run into 'dangers' (or what are sometimes referred to as 'near enemies' - nearly kind regard, but not quite) which can keep our emotional capacities limited. For example, we can end up in a state of emotional sentimentality - something that may feel loving, but that fails to take into account the complexity and challenging aspects of a thing/life. Like wearing rose coloured glasses, it's helpful in a way, but can end up feeling sickly and is not, in the end, really honest (and neither therefore, wise). It can also lead to forms of passivity in some cases, as the quality of kind regard is not, in itself, inherently 'active'. It is perfectly possible to sit happily contemplating/emoting over how beautiful and miraculous other humans/the planet are, without experiencing an imperative to do something to protect them, for example.

## **Compassion**

So we need the aspect of compassion, to rectify or protect against these false friends of kind regard. When we take our ground/foundation of kind regard and bring it into relationship with suffering, as this practice asks us to do, we find the possibility for sentimentality and/or inaction are removed.

As we practice working with suffering/pain/diffic tly in a way that enables us to remain increasingly open to ourselves/situations where pain and suffering are present, we begin to see big impacts on our emotional resilience.

As human beings, we put a lot of energy into avoiding painfulness! Partly this makes good sense and is biologically reasoned. But at an emotional level and over time, it tends to have unhelpful consequences. See more on this in Working with Diffic t Emotion chapter and the Truth Circle session framing. Compassion practice helps us begin to build our capacity to stay with painfulness and diffic ty, rather than run away from it. This means we are able to stay in relationship with our own painful experiences and integrate/heal them, supporting us to 'hold' diffic t emotion when it arises and make choices about what we do/say rather than simply reacting/acting out because we can't bear the feelings. As this containing capacity grows, we are therefore able to remain more fully present and available for others when things are diffic t - eg when someone is overwhelmed and needs support, or when there is conflict or anger in the group. And with this, our ability to show up for what is going on in the world, in sustainable and consistent ways, grows.

It should be obvious what massive implications this has for our resilience. With this practice we become increasingly able to remain stable, available and intentional in relation to diffic y. And not only that, but the fl vour and experience of painful things begins to change within us. It's like the painfulness of things is built and intensified by us pushing them away. When we turn that around and practice welcoming them in, they change fl vour, they change tone and consistency, it can feel nourishing and beautiful to stay close to someone who is suffering, for example, rather than, at some level, wanting to get away from them.

Given that our work as activists asks us to turn towards suffering in the world in pretty intense ways a lot of the time, this practice offers us a way to energise and strengthen our work by completely transforming how it feels to be open to global suffering..! It's like we stop resisting and 'struggling against' our experience, and our being becomes more tolerant and 'relaxed with' experience. This frees up our energy significantly, and fundamentally enhances the quality of mind/heart that we are able to bring to our work.

Practising this can be overwhelming. We can bring a situation of suffering to mind and find that our kind regard shrivels away as we're overcome by fear, anger or grief etc. That's the necessity of the kind regard foundation. As we strengthen the kind regard dimension and keep practising bringing it into relationship with suffering, the compassion dimension strengthens and our tendencies for overwhelm gradually diminish.

## **Sympathetic Joy**

But suffering is not all there is! For the heart/emotional life to be healthily balanced, we also need to help ourselves attune with the more lighthearted, pleasurable, joyful aspects of life/experience. We can become over-identified with being 'down', develop habits of negativity/cynicism, and our emotional/neural pathways for 'higher' states can wither a bit. Equally, it is common to find that peoples' capacities for tolerating/welcoming joy also need strengthening - we can feel ashamed of our ebullience, or find it uncomfortable to bear the intensity of elation or rapture.

So this practice helps to combat some of the 'dangers' of the compassion practice, also helping to undermine any tendencies towards jealousy and envy of others' joys/successes which can be so depleting. This brings with it the



potential for a huge amount of untapped energy and wellness for the body and being. As we bring the foundation of kind regard, this time into relationship with the joy we witness in the world, we strengthen habits towards affirmation and gratitude, noticing beauty, rejoicing in what is good and positive in the world, loving and celebrating the efforts being made by our movement allies.

In terms of resilience, apart from the obvious wellbeing and energy these kinds of emotional experience offer, we are also strengthening an important basis of our motivation - we don't only act because things are wrong/because suffering exists, but also because the world is miraculous and beautiful and worth protecting. Ensuring this more 'positive' or affirming dimension is present in our motivation aligns us with inspiration and buoyancy that can really resource us over time.

It is important that this practice sits within the system as a whole, because without compassion, sympathetic joy runs the risk of becoming ungrounded and potentially 'giddy' or intoxicating. This would leave us out of touch with the reality of complexity and everyday struggle, unbalanced and unable to honour the slower, more shadowy, more earthy aspects of experience/life. We need both dimensions to enable the heart to mature into the capacity for equanimity - the final practice.

### **Equanimity**

On the basis of these three dimensions/aspects/directions of the heart, we get an overall fruition of equanimity. When the presence of kind regard, compassion and sympathetic joy are well established - that is, the heart is comfortable to be generally warm and open in all directions (whether towards oneself, others or situations, whether towards what might be intensely painful or intensely joyful) - the possibility for equanimity emerges.

This is a practice of unobstructed stability. It describes an emotional experience that is able to be big enough, wide enough, deep enough, expansive enough, that whatever happens, it is not disturbed. Sometimes the image of deep water is used as a metaphor to depict this. It cannot be overwhelmed, it doesn't have preferences about how things should feel, it welcomes whatever it is presented with, and on the basis of that kind of stability and consistency, we have the possibility for real wisdom and insight in our actions and choices - we are not thrown around into chaotic/reactive decision making.

The danger here is of the many false friends that equanimity has. Of course a lot of us want to seem cool and collected in the face of intensity and, especially in the hyper rationalism of modern western hegemony, a kind of pretence of equanimity is very common. Intellectual aloofness, numbness, indifference, denial, resignation, acquiescence, rationalisation, repression could all look like equanimity! And the valuing of a (false) equanimity can easily become a stick with which to beat down those from cultures/backgrounds where a wider range of emotional expression is the norm/valued.

Again, this is why it must sit within the system of practices. Equanimity depends on, in fact is *made of* the qualities of kind regard, compassion and sympathetic joy. It requires a maturing of these, before it can really be called equanimity. Where compassion is present, indifference is not possible. Where sympathetic joy is present, resignation is undermined. In this sense, and for most of us, a focus on the first three practices is enough to be going on with, for a few years at least! Still, the image/possibility of genuine equanimity can be a helpful and inspiring one, even if we are not putting time/energy into the specific practice/cultivation of the quality itself, for the moment.

Nb. given that we have a full session plan on [working with kind regard](#) elsewhere, we will assume that if you are running this session you have already set up and explored the basis/foundation of kind regard practice with your group. This session plan will focus on leading compassion and sympathetic joy practices.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)
- [Introducing working skilfully with emotion](#)
- [Structured Kind Regard Practice](#)
- [Working with Difficult Emotion, Pain and Overwhelm chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

As with any of the awareness and skilful emotion qualities, there are many ways to practice their cultivation. Given that they are mind/heart capacities, we can be encouraging folk to work with them all the time! Whenever someone brings difficulty into the room and we support the group to 'hold'/stay with/welcome that, we are practising compassion, for example. Since the basis of all skilful emotion is kind regard (as we unpacked above), almost any time is a good time to ask people to take a moment to notice how they are feeling, or what is happening in the group, and bring kindness, empathy or a welcoming attitude to that.

The practices following here are generally aimed at going a little deeper and/or working a little more subtly/intricately with the mind/heart. They therefore require some appropriate time and space: ideally a calm/quiet environment, and a way for people to keep still comfortably for upto 30 minutes (ie, chairs/cushions for sitting, blankets/mats for lying down). We are assuming that if you are exploring these kinds of practice with people, they have some experience of meditation - [a posture that works](#) for them, and some foundation/experience in working with kind regard.

In terms of risk, particularly with the compassion practice, there is the possibility for people to become overwhelmed or triggered, if they have dived in with something that's a bit too 'big' for them. You can do your utmost to frame, model and guide in a way that emphasises self care and moderation (see activity instructions below), but you can't control nor know what people are doing in their own minds! As usual, your co-facilitator is your best friend here - if it does get too much for someone and they need to leave, you need someone who can follow up with them, while you continue to hold the session.

As a general rule, doing meditative activities after lunch is not a good time - people tend to be much more drowsy and prone to falling asleep than at other times of day.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (20 - 25 mins)

- Introduce the system of heart practices, ideally with the visual assistance of the diagram above (either as a flipchart or in handout form) making clear how the practices work together and the emphasis on compassion and sympathetic joy for this session
- Let them know that there are different ways to approach compassion practice meditatively (including following the five stage approach that we have introduced as part of the [Structured Kind Regard Practice](#)). We are going to focus on an approach used in the [buddhist tradition](#), referred to as Tong Len. This approach utilises the breath as an anchor around which the practice is built
- Explain the format and structure of the practice to them as follows:
  - This practice is designed to support the cultivation of compassion, through the bringing together of kind regard with suffering/difficulty
  - We choose some kind of image that holds a resonance of pain/difficulty in it for us - it might be the image of a friend who suffers from chronic

*This can be a tricky concept for folk to get their heads around. "Why would I want to breathe in someone else's suffering??" might be asked. It seems to go against what a lot of modern western 'new-age' 'self-help' narratives*

pain, the image of someone in emotional anguish, the image of a distressing situation such as a warzone or detention centre.. Etc. (It works best if you can find a simple image to hold in mind, rather than too complex/sprawling a situation - working with a situation is fine, but you need to find some kind of simple-ish image of that which reflects/holds the difficulty in it for you)

- We hold that image in mind - it can be helpful to have a sense of it 'in front of us', like we are looking at it - and we practice breathing 'with' it

- As we breathe in, we imagine we are breathing in the image and the suffering that's there. We allow the suffering/difficulty to 'come in' to us, counteracting tendencies to push it away or reject it. We practice welcoming and staying relaxed with the difficulty. (Sometimes this is imagined as breathing in dark smoke)

- As we breathe out, we imagine we are breathing out kindness/care/empathy/solidarity/love, balancing the suffering aspect with the kind regard aspect. We practice responding to difficulty with kindness and care. (Sometimes this is imagined as breathing out bright light)

- For some people, and to begin with, the length of the inbreath and outbreath are too short for them to be able to connect sufficiently with the experience of the suffering and the kindness, before they need to change again. If that's the case, one can simply stay with the suffering for a few breaths, and then stay with the kindness for a few breaths, aiming for a balance between the two

- It is best, when beginning with this practice, not to choose the most horrifying image one can imagine. We are aiming to work with something which brings us some discomfort or is close to our edge in terms of what we feel able/willing to stay open to, but not something which completely overwhelms us. Start with something that's not too difficult and build up the intensity later, if that feels helpful. We need to gradually strengthen our 'container', like building a muscle, and do not want to 'overwork' in a way that would leave us shaky and fatigued

- This is not an endurance test! The practice is designed to help us transform aversive/pushing away habits, by gently, skilfully training us to stay in relationship, in a sustainable and enduring way. It is not a case of gritting one's teeth until it's over! We are actually looking for the positive/nourishing quality of compassion to arise out of the tension between the suffering and the kind regard

- Finally, if we do become unhelpfully agitated/distressed by the practice, one can turn one's attention to the pain/suffering in one's own body/experience in the present moment and use that as the object of the practice (ie. breathe in your own distress, breathe out kindness towards yourself). However, it is important in this case to contextualise the experience of suffering as something that others share, that other people are experiencing right now, along with you, somewhere in the world. (We want the practice to remain connected to others and 'open'/non-preferential in that sense, to help us remain aligned with the nature and quality of all skilful emotions)

suggest to us about  
"always staying  
positive" and "getting  
that negative energy out  
of your life" or  
"putting up a shield  
against negativity" etc.  
With all the heart  
practices which involve  
the imagination in this  
way, it is often  
necessary to emphasise  
that their usefulness  
does not depend on  
literal ideas of  
energetically/cosmically  
helping the person we  
are imagining as we are  
practising (a person may  
believe such things, but  
doing so is not a  
requirement for the  
efficacy of the  
practice). The point is  
that through our  
imagination in this way,  
we are practising  
getting better at  
staying open and in  
relationship to things  
that are difficult  
(which we will  
inevitably face, as  
activists and as  
humans). We are not  
trying to 'poison'  
ourselves with extra  
suffering, we are  
understanding that  
suffering will come, is  
in fact always around  
and in us, and learning  
to meet that well has  
the potential to  
transform and  
revolutionise our  
experience,  
relationships and work.

## Facilitating the activity ( mins)

### a. Compassion Practice (15-25)

- After checking for questions and clarifications, ask people to take up their posture and let them know you'll be meditating for around 20 minutes (if this is the first time people have done the practice, any more than 20 minutes is likely to be counterproductive)

- Begin with supporting people to get in touch with their posture, body and current experience, already bringing in a quality of interest and care. You can do this by encouraging them to:

- Connect with the ground and a sense of letting go/weight/rootedness in the base/foundation of the posture

- Balance this by connecting with a sense of brightness, length and spaciousness in the body/spine (or connection to the 'sky')

- Notice how they are right now: physically, emotionally, mentally, energetically - "How does it feel?" "What are the sensations?"

- Welcome and 'bring in' whatever is going on: there is no right way to be feeling, and the more we push away/judge our experience, the harder it is to be relaxed and present - try to bring an attitude of kindness/patience/willingness to meet what is here

- Notice if there is any balancing or adjustments that need to be made: for example if they notice they are feeling sleepy/drowsy can they connect more with the 'sky'/height/brightness aspect, lengthen the spine/bring extension into the body, perhaps open the eyes, take some deeper breaths, or vice versa if they find they are feeling anxious/restless etc

- Drop the question into their bodies "What wants attention"

..you could even lead them through a quick body scan to set them up.

- At this point you might draw their attention to the fact that where there is any discomfort in their experience (either physically, emotionally or energetically) and they are bringing interest and awareness to that, they are already beginning the cultivation of compassion - being willing to meet what is uncomfortable with a quality of openness

- Ask them, without losing connection with a broader sense of themselves and posture/body, to bring their attention to rest in the chest/heart area and notice what is happening there. In whatever way works best (either leaving it to them if they're experienced enough, or offering some suggestions) allow some moments to connect with the quality of kind regard/empathy/care/kindness/friendliness/love/solidarity etc.

- When you have the sense that people have had time to find and establish a connection with the experience/attitude of kind regard, ask them to bring to mind their image of suffering/difficulty and to begin with, just to notice the response in the body - "what happens, in the experience/body, when we hold this image in mind?"

- Stay with this for some breaths, trying to stabilise the loving kindness in relation to the image/letting them coexist (at this point, if that feels impossible, it probably means that the image is too strong/difficult to work with - choose something a little less intense, and try again)

- Then invite them to begin the practice proper: as we breathe in, we allow the image/quality of suffering to come into the body, we attempt to relax and welcome it in to us; as we breathe out, we let go and open to what is in front of us, offering loving kindness

*Whatever 'meditative'/reflective practice you are doing, you want to support people to connect with themselves and their real, lived experience, right now, before doing anything else. These practices are about supporting us to deepen 'into' our experience, not do something 'else' that alienates us/takes us away from ourselves.*

*It is good to mix up the language you're using for the quality of kind regard - different words will work for different people and will also change at different times.*

- Over the rest of the practice you can 'drop in' various suggestions and helpful pointers to help them deepen, settle and hopefully connect with this quality of compassion. For example:

- Stay in touch with your body and experience - the sensations, how it feels, in the body. It is easy to get lost in an 'idea' of the practice, or some kind of 'projection' of compassion. In reality, we won't find it anywhere other than in our embodied experience! So keep coming back to what is happening in the body

- Keep an eye on any tension which might be creeping into the body. You might find the hands beginning to clench, or the eyebrows tensing into a frown, or the stomach/solar plexus becoming tight/uncomfortable.. This is a sure sign that something in us is resisting in some way (and very understandably!). We need to work to soften and ease out these tensions when they come, soothing them with the out-breath of loving kindness

- Remembering it's not an endurance test. We are aiming to work with gentleness, kindness and skill. If it feels too much, bring in more kindness, create a little more distance between you and your image, focus on your own discomfort (in context) for a few breaths to settle, then try again etc. Play with adjustments to support the heart to stay as open and present as possible

- Notice and respect the parts of you that might feel afraid of a practice like this (especially if you're working with a more graphic/distressing image). Prioritise being kind to these parts, and getting their consent to continue - we want this practice to serve opening and connection at all levels and if parts of us are not okay, we need to breathe them in, and offer them the loving kindness too (in context, as above)

- It can be helpful to connect with a sense of the abundance of the skilful emotions - imagining them not as finite resources for us to 'generate' more of, but as plentiful, ever-present dimensions/aspects of consciousness.. A sense that we just have to get out of their way.. that the heart 'wants to' open etc, can be useful ways of looking

- If you feel you need more support with the practice, images such as connection to the earth, roots growing out of the bottom of the posture, a sense of others in the room practising with us, a sense of connectedness with everyone working to meet and transform suffering in the world etc, can all be stabilising assists

- Allow the steady rhythm of the breath coming in and out hold you and the practice - a sense that the breath is reliable, certain, pervasive and timeless, a constant friend inside/beside which the intensity of the practice can be held and supported

- As you come towards the end of your allotted time for the practice, ask them to let go of the image they have been using, letting the attention rest primarily with their own body and personal experience in the moment

- Encourage them to stay with a light/effortless sense of the loving kindness/care/warmth as they spend some time just being with their own experience in a way that is gentle and soothing, after the potential intensity/challenge of the practice. If there is a residue of difficulty/painfulness/tensions/contractedness anywhere in the body, allow the breath and the kind regard to soothe and melt/soften these areas, bringing a quality of patience and appreciation for the effort they have made with a difficult practice!

- To close the practice, you can suggest that people 'dedicate' the benefits of the practice - "whatever is good and helpful as a result of doing this practice, letting it go, giving it away to others"..

- Conclude the practice by again asking them to take their whole body/



experience in, notice how they are now, then bring awareness to the sounds in the room and beyond, awareness of others in the space, and when they're ready, gradually moving the fingers and toes and opening the eyes. (It's always good to leave the practice gradually, giving people a chance to transition and absorb whatever has happened, avoiding jarring or unnecessary closing up, after a sensitising experience).

### **b. Debriefing the compassion practice (5-10)**

- Ask them about their experience of the practice.. You could do this first in pairs to help people who are shyer to speak, and to bring some more group interaction into the session, before asking people to share with the whole group

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- It is best to be led by the group here. People will have had all sorts of experience doing this and it's likely you may need to reiterate some of the earlier framing - people may need reminders of why we are doing this, what its benefits are etc

- Probably the most important thing is to be kind and affirming, appreciating the courage/strength it takes to undertake a practice like this and encouraging them to take care of themselves (there is always a danger that folks who are used to pushing themselves hard, or are working with underlying psychological tendencies around guilt or low self esteem etc will attempt this practice in a 'martyrish' or self-negating way. This is not necessarily controllable by you, but as the facilitator, you can try to communicate/hold the conversation in a way that undermines this, by encouraging a lot of self care and appreciation)

- Remind them that this practice will only 'work' in so far as kind regard is well established - if there's not enough kind regard (if we are doing the practice on the basis of willfulness, endurance or self-negation) we are strengthening aversive tendencies (the opposite of cultivating skilful emotion!). If this practice feels a bit 'much' at this point, stick with the kind regard which, in itself, is a radically transformative practice!

### **c. Sympathetic Joy practice (20-30)**

- Once you have addressed the change in mode/given people time to stretch/pee/get some fresh air etc (see tips and tricks on the right, and/or Further Notes below) let them know that you are now going to lead through the complementary practice around sympathetic joy. If it feels necessary you can reiterate the key framing points, but you will probably find people are ready to just get going with it

- You can also tell them that, as with all these heart practices, the traditional five stage approach (as laid out in detail in the structured [kind regard](#) practice) is an option for structuring the practice, and may be useful if they want to practise this alone, later. At this point, we are going to explore the quality of sympathetic joy in a more free-form way, looking for different ways in to the quality, guided by you, the facilitator

- Take up your posture and ask them to do the same, letting them know how long you'll be meditating for

- Spend the first part of the exercise setting up the conditions for presence and settling by offering suggestions for ways to 'arrive' and connect with how they are and what is going on for them right now. You can follow the approach laid out above, in the set up under heading 2 or follow your own way of doing this. Key things to mention are:

- Elements of posture, and qualities to embody in them (eg. relaxed legs in the posture supporting a quality of groundedness)

*You may well want to introduce something physical/relational here, to break up the sitting/meditative mode.*

*A physical game, something outside, a walking meditation or something somatic (such as a 'skin shower'/self massage) could be good. You could also introduce something like Open Sentences as another way to explore the themes.*

- Awareness/connection with physical sensations
- Awareness/connection with emotions/feelings/feeling-tone
- Awareness/connection with energy (eg. agitated, sleepy etc)
- Welcoming and allowing experience, not wasting time with resistance and judgement - kind attention
- Connection with purpose - why are we doing this, why does it matter? (helpful to connect to why this matters for others, not just ourselves!)
- Clear intention and resolve - bringing energy and determination (without becoming overly willful)

- As before, ask them, without losing connection with a broader sense of themselves and posture/body, to bring their attention to rest in the chest/heart area and notice what is happening there. In whatever way works best (either leaving it to them if they're experienced enough, or offering some suggestions) allow some moments to connect with the quality of kind regard/empathy/care/kindness/friendliness/love/solidarity etc.

- When you have the sense that people have had time to find and establish a connection with kind regard, ask them to notice if there is any experience of pleasure or wellbeing that they can connect with in the body at this time - it might be something warm in the emotional tone, it might be some quality of ease or contentment, it might be some tingling in the fingers or toes, it might be the way the sun is landing on the eyelids right now or something in the texture of the breath or the sense of satisfaction/pleasure at having some time to stop and pay attention to oneself/body (all/any of this may be mixed in with other less pleasurable elements, that's fine, they can be there, for now we're just focusing on something pleasurable we can find, and if we can't find it, not to worry, just keep bringing an attitude of curiosity and openness as to where it might be)

- Without grabbing on to this, see if we can keep our kind attention on this warm/pleasurable aspect of experience, and allow it to grow (this happens by just paying attention to it and staying relaxed - ie, not grabbing onto it, or trying too hard). 'Fake it til you make it' (perhaps more subtly worded!) can be a helpful instruction here - we may want to (try/'pretend' to) really, really enjoy sitting here being with ourselves breathing - a small smile on the mouth can help the body to move in the 'positive' direction, by association

- The quality of sympathetic joy naturally rises in an upwards direction, so we can look for a visceral sense of 'lifting' or 'rising' in the heart/body (while staying connected with the base of the posture/ground)

- After some minutes exploring this, you can encourage them to explore different approaches/images to assist in cultivating this quality. For example, instructing them to:

- Bring to mind a moment/experience over the last few days where you have witnessed joy/wellbeing/happiness in another person
  - a moment of laughter or playfulness
  - a shared good joke
  - someone happily by themselves or a pair/group enjoying connection
  - a quiet smile on somebody's face
  - seeing the flash/glow of someone winning/getting something right/

*Whatever we pay attention to, builds and grows. With this practice, we are basically attempting to 'build up' the experience of positivity and joy by focusing on aspects of experience and/or images and memories that will help us connect with and strengthen the quality of non-preferential joy/appreciation/delight.*



producing a beautiful meal/being pleased with something they've achieved

..etc. In touch with the body/sensations, allow yourself to resonate with their happiness/wellness, enjoy their enjoyment..

In a similar way, perhaps bringing to mind friends, family, acquaintances, work colleagues etc - people from your life - and considering their wellbeing,

- their moments of happiness and success
- their moments of getting what they need
- a comfy chair at the end of a hard day's exertion
- a plate of nourishing food
- reliable or satisfying work
- ease and safety where they were lacking
- warm sun on the body or a beautiful view
- dancing in a sweaty nightclub to great tunes
- intimacy

..etc. All these things that bring wellness and nourishment to people we know, can we resonate and wish more of these things for them, delighting in and feeling warmed by the enjoyment of others..

Or it can be helpful to look for a more general sense of 'the goodness in the world' - all the experiences of joy, ease, wellness and happiness that come from the good/positive actions that people take..

- peoples' efforts to address violence and injustice
- extraordinary acts of generosity and selflessness
- everyday acts of kindness and care
- the abundance in nature as it continues to replenish and provide
- the many gifts of our ancestors

...all these things and more are the basis of huge amounts of wellbeing and positivity in the world, for individual humans, and collectively. Looking for a sense of resonance with that, delighting in that, sharing in it, allowing it to lift the body/heart and nourish us..

As with compassion (or any of the heart practices) it can be helpful to have a sense of the abundance of the skilful emotions - imagining them not as finite resources for us to 'generate' more of, but as plentiful, ever-present dimensions/aspects of consciousness.. A sense that we just have to get out of their way.. that the heart 'wants to' open etc, can be useful ways of looking

- As you come towards the end of your allotted time for the practice, ask them to let go of the image they have been using, relax back into the body, into the physicality of the posture, in the room and on the ground. Using grounding, stabilising language/tone, take the time to transition back towards more neutral ground (the danger with the practice is that it can become

*If you've been with the group for some days, you might want to draw on general examples of things which have happened in the context of the training*

ungrounded and 'high', which may lead to a post-practice crash or 'run away energy', particularly if someone has had a strong experience. If you are particularly concerned about this, you can invite them to lie down after the practice, to support calming and ground connection).

- To close the practice, you can suggest that people 'dedicate' the benefits of the practice, as above - a sense of releasing/letting go/giving away the benefit, wellbeing and joy in the practice, to others..

- Conclude the practice by again asking them to take their whole body/ experience in, notice how they are now, then bring awareness to the sounds in the room and beyond, awareness of others in the space, and when they're ready, gradually moving the fingers and toes and opening the eyes. (It's always good to leave the practice gradually, giving people a chance to transition and absorb whatever has happened, avoiding jarring or unnecessary closing up, after a sensitising experience).

### **Debriefing the activity (10 mins)**

- Ask them about their experience of the practice..

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- Again, allow the discussion to be mainly shaped by what has come up for them.. reiterate/clarify the framework of practices and ways they work together as is helpful or appropriate

- The key thing will likely be to manage to hold a balance between those who have had a positive experience and may be feeling 'loved up', and those who haven't managed to connect with the practice so easily and may be feeling inadequate/like they're no good at appreciating others. As the facilitator, you need to affirm and delight in the positive experience people may have had (modelling sympathetic joy!) as well as bring kindness and reassurance to those who have found it challenging (modelling kind regard and compassion!). It can be reassuring to remind them that these practices are not necessarily about a 'feeling' - feelings can change on different days and will be different for everyone. It is more about attitude and willingness.. At the end of the day and in the broadest sense, skilful emotion means practising to cultivate openness, and exactly how we do that will be variable. And, it will always depend on our ability to be open to ourselves and where we are now - being willing to stay with our experience, however it is, is by far the most important aspect of working with skilful emotion - much more important than being able to generate a feeling of happiness on demand (though this will come in time).

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

If nothing else, a take away from these practices may be a gentle encouragement to notice more often the emotional tendencies and habits we bring to our selves, lives and work.

Being more inclined to notice the ways we tighten up, want to push away or reject what is painful - say when conflict comes into a group for example - can be so helpful in taking the edge off the more painful aspects of our lives and offer a little more scope for creativity/choice when it comes to difficult situations.

Being more inclined to notice the wellbeing and positivity there is around us all the time - rather than habitually defaulting to criticism and defensiveness/ jealousy - can do so much to bring nourishment and wellbeing into our lives and relationships. Building more affirming, celebratory cultures in our groups and movements is talked about so often - working on these things at the deep

-personal level (ie directly on the heart/mind) is a fundamentally effective way to support this.

## FURTHER NOTES

As mentioned above, to be offering this session there needs to be some basic ground already in place. Participants will need to have a [posture](#) they are comfortable with and a basis in [kind regard practice](#). Both of these sessions are available as linked.

You may want to bring something into the session between the two meditations to change the mode and get the group moving. Suggestions would be: a physical game, something outside, a walking meditation or something somatic (such as a 'skin shower'/self massage), something like [Open Sentences](#) as another way to explore the themes.

This session can also work as a good way to continue on the themes from the [Truth Circle](#) or [Cairn of Mourning](#) activities (not directly after! But in the days following).

# FINDING A POSTURE THAT WORKS - ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 20–30mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group (plus pairs if desired)

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Cushions, blocks, blankets, mats, chairs (multiple options for sitting for extended periods)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Bodywork

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Off ring a basis for meditative/reflective practices
- Enabling continuity, settling and focus
- Supporting body/self awareness
- Emphasising the significance of posture and the way we embody (in all aspects of resilience praxis)

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

It's important to give this activity the weight it deserves. A good posture is not simply a practical step to other things - "the posture **is** the practice", we do with the body what we want the mind/heart to do. Encourage people to take the way they sit, stand and embody seriously, when thinking about resilience in general. The principles of posture you are introducing are widely applicable.

It is difficult to effectively get in touch with experience if we are uncomfortable or in pain. Most people, if you ask them to sit still for an extended period, will find themselves one or both of these things. So as the basis for meditative, reflective or awareness practices we might want to do with people, we need to help them find a way to keep still that is as comfortable and easy as possible for them. This will enable the mind to settle more easily (since if the body is still, the mind will follow suit).

### Posture options:

#### a) sitting on a chair

ideally with the back free and upright and pelvis 'upright' rather than rolled too far back or forward

#### b) classic cross-legged posture

optimal cushion height is key here. Many won't have hip flexibility to allow knees to meet the floor and the legs to fully relax - there's no point in sitting in this posture if that's the case

#### c) kneeling posture

a great option for sustaining good connection with the ground, when flexibility doesn't allow for posture 'b.'. Keep the pelvis well aligned - tendency to slump is stronger here - good arm support needed

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#### d) lying down

tendency for people to fall asleep. Knees up, eyes open, or bending the arms at the elbow so (lower arm in the air) can help. Generally, better to try and find an upright posture for people if possible

#### e) standing posture

good option for shorter practices, or for shifting into, mid-practice, if the original posture becomes too uncomfortable.



### Basic posture principles:

**i. A stable base:** Weight of the body should settle straight down through the “sit-bones”. If using a chair, extra attention should be put into making contact with the ground through the feet.

**ii. Legs:** Give the weight of the legs to the ground, either by sitting with the knees contacting the ground (as in classic cross-legged or kneeling posture, or, if sitting on a chair, by having feet planted firmly and fully on the floor). Release holding in hips, groin, lower back and abdomen.

**iii. Cushion height/angle of chair seat:** The height of the cushion will impact on the angle of the pelvis. This influences the spine and torso. If the cushion is too high the lower back will tend to over-arch, if too low the lower back will have a tendency to slump, often producing discomfort in the upper back. If cushion height won't address the problem, it's because the chosen posture isn't allowing the pelvis to move.

**iv. Spine:** Spine should be free to rise up so that there is a gentle sense of lengthening or lifting through the spine, but also allowing its natural curvature. Playing subtly with the ‘pitch’ of the spine (leaning slightly forward of the centre line/slightly back) impacts on sensations in the upper back and shoulders. If lying down, ensure the spine is ‘naturally’ aligned.

**v. Chest, back and shoulders:** Allow the back to broaden (shoulder blades spreading out slightly) and the chest to open. Allow the shoulders to widen and drop away from the ears.

**vi. Arms and hands:** It's important the hands are supported so arms can completely relax their weight, and don't drag on the shoulders/upper back. Rest hands on legs or in lap and generally, an additional cushion or rolled blanket is required to support hands on the lap. You can also wrap a blanket/scarf around the waist and tuck the hands into that.

**vii. Neck and head:** The idea of a thread attached to the crown of the head and gently lifting towards the sky can help to get a sense of the poised position for the head and the chin tucked in slightly (but also allowing the throat to remain open and unconstrained). The tongue can be placed with the tip gently touching where the teeth join the upper palate.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Bodywork chapter](#)
- [Centering Practice](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Awareness of the ableism implied in assuming that all bodies will work or cope with sitting for extended periods the same, is important. It should be possible to help most people find a position that is more comfortable than they might have found on their own, but for some people, chronic pain (for example) will

prevent them from sitting comfortably. Encourage people to check in with you between sessions for more support and always make it okay for people to move during a meditation if they need to.

This activity is appropriate as a precursor to any meditative or reflective activity where people need to keep still for a period of time.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 - 10 mins)

- Frame the activity giving the reasons for why bodywork/awareness/connectivity is important, drawing on the framing material above and/or in the Bodywork chapter.

### Facilitating the activity (15 - 20 mins)

- Introduce all posture options (above) and talk through basic principles, demonstrating with your own body as much as possible.
- Get them to take up their chosen posture and make a few more comments/suggestions/reiterations about what you are seeing/what might help.
- Key to communicate is that there is little pride or use in managing to grit ones teeth through unnecessary pain - it will be unpleasant, generate aversion to the practice, and make it more difficult to concentrate (a task that is already difficult enough for most people!).
- Chat with group, go around and [support them physically](#) where helpful, answer their questions...
- Allow them to try out their postures in whatever the relevant activity and then come back to them to support improvement and adjustment.

*Another option is to form pairs and let them work together to try and improve/support one another's postures*

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

Everyone's body is different and will need different adjustments to make a posture work, people are unlikely to find a comfortable position first time around - encourage them to keep playing with it, checking out the different options and coming back to the principles. You might want to offer 10 mins at the end of the session for anyone who wants to talk more about their posture with you.

# FOLLOWING HANDS ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 20 – 25 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Pairs, with possible development to threes (works for groups of 4 or more)

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Space to move around

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Bodywork: An Introduction to Somatic Practice

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Developing whole body awareness
- Strengthening mind-body connection
- Playing with/exploring qualities of attention
- Group trust and relationship building
- Support/intro to more meditative awareness practices

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Encouraging people 'into' the body isn't always easy and a variety of approaches can be helpful, including movement and enjoyment/play. Although it is more difficult to pay attention subtly to experience when playing a game like this, the movement will generate more obvious sensation, the task will generate interest, and the cooperation required will (usually!) generate connection and enjoyment, which will all support people to be present and possibly more willing to participate than they might be in something that looks like 'meditating'. It can work very well as a lead-in activity to more focused, meditative activities. Encouraging people 'into' the body isn't always easy and a variety of approaches can be helpful, including movement and enjoyment/play. Although it is more difficult to pay attention subtly to experience when playing a game like this, the movement will generate more obvious sensation, the task will generate interest, and the cooperation required will (usually!) generate connection and enjoyment, which will all support people to be present and possibly more willing to participate than they might be in something that looks like 'meditating'. It can work very well as a lead-in activity to more focused, meditative activities.

Nb. You will need to ensure you have told the group to bring their Rivers to the session.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)
- [Body Scanning Practice](#)
- [Introducing working with awareness resource](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This is a good activity to include in sessions exploring awareness, body connection and/or following the breath. It can be especially useful to break up extended periods of sitting down (if you are exploring more reflective/contemplative approaches to body awareness or mindfulness). Similarly it offers lightheartedness/playfulness and enjoyment/fun - an important

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element in considering how to design and balance a good session. It works especially well as a precursor to exploring [following the breath](#), where the following of the hands acts as a very useful metaphor/parallel (see with instructions below).

The level of risk here is relatively low, but you *are* asking them to close their eyes and to [touch](#) another person (if very lightly), which might not work for everyone.

You need enough room for people to move around the space quite freely. As people will have eyes closed, fully clearing the area of trip hazards/sharp objects etc is a necessity.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Frame the activity, telling the group why you are doing this (unless you plan to 'throw them in' and explain the relevance later). For an introduction to working with awareness, see [here](#).

- Demonstrate with a partner as you give the instructions:
  - Stand a couple of feet in front of your partner and place your fingertips lightly on the back of their hand (at around chest height) and close your eyes (they should keep their eyes open)
  - With the knees relaxed and with a sense of connection to the ground and your centre, begin to follow your partner's hand as they start to move it (slowly/gently at first)
  - Allow your feet to move as you follow them, even if they are not doing big movements (rather than having your feet stuck on one point and your torso and back having to bend around excessively - you can demonstrate this as what *not to do*).
  - Then the partner begins to make it a little more challenging (playing with moving through the space, levels, varying speed, setting up and breaking patterns etc) - remain in touch with the ground and relaxed as it becomes more challenging.
  - Obviously there is some light [touch](#) involved - choose someone you feel comfortable to do that with.

### Facilitating the activity (10 - 15 mins)

- In their pairs, decide who is going to go first and then reiterate instructions:
  - **Person going first** should place their fingertips on the **back** of their partner's hand and **close their eyes** (you might need to say that twice!)
  - **Person with eyes open**, you can begin to **lead** your partner through the space. Begin slowly/gently, give them a chance to get used to it - don't challenge them too much to begin with. And take care of your partner - they can't see!
- Remind the person with eyes closed to keep the knees a little soft/bent/relaxed, and stay in touch with their centre (rather than up in their head). Encourage them to have as light a touch as possible.
- Allow them to play like this for a minute or two, before person with eyes open begins to build up the level of challenge. Remind them to take care of their partner, supporting them to explore (rather than trying to trick them), and to take care of/respect others in the space.
- Let them explore this for another three or four minutes. Then decide



*Sometimes people will get over excited and want to start running about immediately. This can make those who are more uncertain/slow feel insecure in the space and while it may serve the enjoyment side (for some) it doesn't do so much for the awareness side. Encourage people to slow down and see if they can find the sensitivity/groundedness/centredness you've been referring to.*

whether you encourage more challenge/intensity, or staying more calm/grounded/aware (depending on what you're using it for and/or how the group are engaging with it).

- As they are moving through this exercise, be attentive to the group, noticing what is happening and giving appropriate instructions/tips/encouragement in response. Possible/useful instructions/reminders to throw in as they are moving:

- Stay relaxed and in touch with your feet/the ground, notice tendencies to become tense/rigid and 'up' in your head

- Try to follow in the relaxed/authentic way that your body wants to - avoid getting into contact dance interpretations!

- There's no need to rush..

- Person with eyes closed, notice if you find yourself wanting to 'take over' or control what's happening - see if you can be receptive to your partner, and really let them lead you. See what it's like to try and trust your partner.. Person with eyes open, are you being trustworthy?! :)

- Try and allow yourself to move from your centre, with/aware of the whole body moving as one

- Notice how it feels to do this - both to be led and to lead. Be curious about what responses are coming up for you, if any

- See if you can enjoy it! It's supposed to be fun! No need to get too tense with it.

- etc...

- Bring the exercise to a close and before the talking starts tell them that talking will happen at the end, and just to swap over. Remind them that the **person with eyes closed** should have their **fingers on the back** of their partner's hand.

- Repeat the exercise as above, and remind them to slow things down again, to begin with.

Possible activity development:

If you want to extend/develop the exercise, you can ask the pairs to split up and form threes, where one person has their eyes closed and has their fingers resting on the back of two others' hands, so they are following two people/hands at once. Same pointers and instructions apply.

### Debriefing the activity (5 - 10 mins)

- Ask them to debrief the exercise in their pairs for 1-2 minutes, then interrupt them and continue debriefing as a whole group.

- Points to draw out/questions to ask in the debrief:

- How did you find it? How did you feel?

- What did you find challenging?

- What did you find good/enjoyable?

- What qualities did you notice you needed, in order to do the activity successfully/well?

*Them feeling you are fully engaged and vigilant will help with the sense of trust in the room, and you can also learn a lot about your participants in seeing how they are moving and responding to each other.*

### FURTHER NOTES

This activity works well with the [following the breath](#) activity, as mentioned above.

# CENTERING BLANKET ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 45 – 50 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Pairs

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Blankets or scarfs / big enough space for the group to move freely

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Bodywork: An Introduction to Somatic Practice

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Energising, play, group connectivity
- Embodiment, proprioception and physicality
- Awareness of body and space
- Exploring working helpfully/less helpfully with pressure
- Connecting with the centre, supporting stability, groundedness and balance
- Breaking up/balancing 'heady' activities

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

The speed of our lives, technology and urbanisation, alongside rationalism and disconnection from felt-sense and embodiment often means we get caught up 'in our heads' and become less in contact with our bodies, less aware of our centre of gravity or our relationship to what grounds and supports us.

Equally, with the stress and pressure we can encounter in our activist struggles, we may find ourselves responding to obstacles and difficulties in habitual and reactive ways that do not support us to be balanced and decisive in our approaches.

This activity is a fun way to introduce these themes and can be a great way to set up introducing the full [Centering practice](#). You can also use it to break up other activities in sessions and get people out of their heads. You can use it to bring the energy up and get the blood flowing around the body, as well as to explore awareness and embodiment themes.

This exercise draws from physical theatre, modified but taken from the post-Grotowski theatre tradition.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Bodywork chapter](#)
- [Centering practice](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

If you have people in the group with reduced mobility you will need to consider how to adapt the activity to meet their needs. Even for participants in wheelchairs, this should still be possible, just ensure you adapt your language/instruction appropriately.

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## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- Situate the activity in the context in which you are using it, but keep it minimal - you want to 'throw them in' to it and draw the learning out afterwards, rather than preempt their experience. It's important they don't know that the point of the exercise has anything to do with 'centering', at the start.
- Ask for an assistant so as to model the pairs position, which will be something like this:



and explain with the following instructions:

- Get into pairs. One person will be standing in front, the other one behind them
- The person in front will have a blanket around the front of their waist/hips (encourage them to adjust the blanket position to wherever feels best, but it shouldn't be too high)
- The person in the back will hold one end of the blanket in each hand and create some pressure (like a horse's reins, but around the waist)
- All the pairs will line up along the wall on one side of the room
- The first task is for the person who is in front to get to the other side of the room. (Do not model how they are supposed to do it)
- Go!

### Facilitating the activity (30 - 35 min)

#### a. Emphasis on 'getting to the other side'! (10-15)

- Most likely participants will lean into the blanket with the head leading, trying hard to push through the pressure/resistance, and the person in the back is going to try and stop them/hold them back. You can make it more exciting and competitive by saying that the other side of the room is "the world without patriarchy" or some other ideal place they really want to get to. You might want to encourage them verbally as they race towards the other side of the room.
  - After all of them reach the other side, ask them to swap roles.
  - Once both people have tried, give the pairs some time to debrief and share how they found it, then bring the group together and ask for any reflections and comments.
  - When the conversation runs out of steam, demonstrate the exercise again - this time leaning heavily into the blanket as most of them probably did, and ask your partner to let go of the blanket (you will lose your balance and fall forwards - watch out!).
  - Ask the participants what they noticed? What happens when the pressure is lifted? Do they see any parallels between that and their engagement in activism / the way they are in their lives?
- You can try to draw out points like:
- In our activist work we often rely on pressure and we are used to immediately reacting to it, habitually resisting and fighting against the obstacles we encounter.

*This activity is likely to bring the energy in the room up. Good one to start an afternoon session or a session on a low-energy day. Might not be ideal right after eating though!*

- This can lead us to act unwisely, unconsciously, chaotically or frantically, and these can contribute to situations that lead to overwhelm, exhaustion, disappointment and burnout.

- This exercise is an embodied metaphor of this reality.

### **b. Emphasis on centering and measured effort (10)**

- Invite participants to go back to their pairs and demonstrate a different way of moving through the pressure - one that allows you to keep your balance and work with the pressure. Demonstrate with the person who is holding the blanket releasing the pressure every now and then (in unexpected moments) showing that you are attempting to keep balance and stay centred (ie, no longer falling forward).

- The person applying the pressure (behind) can adjust how much pressure they apply with the blanket - it can't be too much (this will prevent the front person from moving) and can't be too little (so that there is enough resistance, requiring effort from the front person to keep their centre and remain balanced).

- Repeat the activity in this new way, asking participants to move from one side of the room to the other and then swap roles. Encourage them to do it in silence and only debrief after both people have had a go.

### **Debriefing the activity (10 mins)**

- Give pairs 5 minutes to share initial responses. Bring the group together and draw out observations and comments. How was this round different to the previous one? What was different? What did they notice? How was it useful?

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- Often getting somewhere without relying on the pressure / in a more centred way will take us more time, more skill and more patience, we'll also likely get a better result.

- The way we use our body will have a big influence on our mind states and the choices we make. Through becoming more aware of our bodily patterns and trying to change those that are unhelpful we can find we are in a better position to change unhelpful mental and emotional patterns too.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

This activity is likely an intro and part of a bigger session so there won't be a need for any big conclusions. It's always good to do a quick read of the room, after an embodied activity, to check people look like they are ok!

## **USEFUL RESOURCES**

For more information on different embodiment practices see this useful resource: <https://threadsbook.org/embodied-practices/>

# CENTERING PRACTICE

**RUNNING TIME:** 50 mins – 1hr

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Chairs for anyone who wants to sit rather than stand

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Bodywork: An Introduction to Somatic Practice

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Exploring basic principles of embodiment and body-awareness
- Exploring the relationship between body posture, body engagement and psycho-emotional wellbeing
- Learning a basic, simple grounding technique/tool for multiple applications
- Slowing down, getting 'out of the head'
- Emotional regulation and soothing

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This session explores standing posture and a basic grounding/stabilising technique. The speed of our lives, technology and urbanisation, alongside rationalism and disconnection from felt-sense and embodiment often means we are a lot 'in our heads' and less in contact with our bodies, not aware of our centres of gravity or our relationship to what grounds and supports us.

Centering is an easy technique that can be used to regulate our emotional states, support us in navigating stressful or heated situations or just as a daily practice of getting in touch with ourselves, connecting with our values and sense of belonging.

You can use this in sessions to break up activities and get people out of their heads. You can use it to follow something more stressful or challenging to support settling and soothing. You can use it to explore awareness and emotional literacy themes, as a simpler and quicker alternative to the [Body Scanning Practice](#), for example. It is very versatile and also works well as a technique/practice to return to repeatedly, building its impact and depth.

This practice draws from various traditions, including feminist self-defence techniques, which in turn stem from martial arts traditions. There are references to the centre of gravity and centering techniques in all kinds of movement practices – from martial arts to dance. Exploration of directions in the body comes from Feldenkrais technique – a somatic practice developed to support restoration from trauma.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Bodywork chapter](#)
- [Trauma Informed Approaches chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This activity is accessible to all levels of physical abilities. It is possible to do it while sitting and with participants with reduced mobility. Make sure to adapt your language, if you are working with participants in wheelchairs, using crutches or with other kinds of diverse bodies.

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Working with somatic awareness and 'going in' to the body can bring things up for people – the body holds histories, memories, unconscious material and all sorts! So encourage them to go gently and respectfully, to stop if they need to, and ensure there is another team member to support anyone who needs it.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 - 10 mins)

- If you haven't already given them any framing on embodiment etc, you may want to do so now, explaining why you are doing the exercise and what it can support.

- Explain the activity and give the instructions:

- We will stand (or sit if that is needed) for two periods of around 15 minutes, first exploring a conducive posture for Centering, then doing the Centering practice itself

- Feel free to ask questions as we go, if something feels uncomfortable, not quite right or if you have any doubts

- We'll do the activity with eyes open, if it feels ok for you. This enables us to practise centering in connection with the environment and each other and makes it a practice we can use any time without any special conditions needed

- Working with somatic awareness and connecting with the body can bring things up. We should approach practices like this with care and respect for ourselves and whatever our body might be holding, rather than willfulness or over-assertiveness. Look for comfort, ease and pleasantness in the practice – if possible! – and check-in with yourself as we go. You are always free to stop. (Perhaps remind them about staying in the [learning zone](#), if you have introduced it earlier).

- Ask them to join you in a standing position, probably best in a circle, rather than with them facing you – you can explain and demonstrate the posture while they do it with you..

### Facilitating the activity (35 - 40 mins)

#### a. setting up a centred posture (15-20)

- Demonstrate the Centering posture, and guide them through it as you do it yourself (while staying aware of them) as follows:

- Start with the feet – flat on the ground, with as much contact with the floor as possible, allowing the feet to sink and root strongly into the floor (you might suggest imagining actual roots growing from the soles of the feet and rooting deep into the earth below the floor). Feel how the gravitational pull creates a solid stability and groundedness, from which you can grow tall and long towards the sky..

- Move towards the knees and find the right amount of tension/extension – not over straightened and not too bent – so that keeping the posture is more or less effortless. You might want to bend and straighten your knees several times to find the right place, perhaps shaking/releasing the body a little bit through more vigorous knee bending.

- Then the pelvis. Bring your tail bone underneath (imagining that you still have a tail and want to bring it between your legs and towards the front) and your pubic bone up. This will increase tension in the buttocks and thighs, creating a strong, active base for your posture. Don't overwork though, it should be comfortable and relaxed.

- Then lengthen the spine, allowing the lower spine to elongate towards

*You will give similar instructions to people centering while sitting.*

*You can emphasise the contact with the chair/sitting surface when encouraging rooting down towards the earth.*

*Invite people to find a sitting posture that feels stable/relaxed and alert/alive at the same time. Emphasise the importance of having contact with the ground through feet, if that's possible for them. Encourage a sense of an engaged, active spine,*



the floor and the upper part of the spine towards the ceiling. Feel how the strong base of your legs allows you to lengthen your upper body, encouraging both grounding, as well as the converse lengthening upwards, growing.

- Bring your chin towards your chest slightly, encouraging length in the back of the neck and softness in the throat.

- Allow the shoulders to drop and rest on the skeleton. Encourage a sense of equal opening between the shoulder blades and across the chest. (Demonstrate over-doing - over lengthening/straining, overly opened chest, etc - and go back to neutral, centered so that participants can see the difference. Correct them if necessary).

- Bring your hand briefly onto your centre (if it feels comfortable) - the place just below your belly button. Notice anything about the sensations in this area.

- Draw this part of the practice to a close, gently shake the posture off, moving from one side to the other, wiggling your fingers or shaking the body a little bit (or anything else that feels right in the moment).

- Ask participants how they felt, what was easy or difficult, what they noticed. As part of this discussion you may want to draw attention to:

- The unnatural feeling of the posture in the beginning, and that this will shift with time

- Micro adjustments making a big difference - moving the hips slightly either way or shifting the weight slightly from back to front or the other way - experimentation!

- Each body finding its own way into this posture with time.

## **b. Centering practice (20)**

- Invite them back into the Centering posture, re-naming each of the steps to set up the posture and what they should be trying to do with the body. Remind participants to keep their eyes open if possible and if feels comfortable to do so.

- Once the posture is set up, guide them through the Centering practice as follows:

- Ensure you are both rooting down and growing up towards the ceiling/sky. Invite more space in the spine, between the vertebrae, between the ribs, relaxing the belly, allowing the shoulders to drop. Release the jaw.

- Expand the length of the body** - up towards the ceiling and down towards the ground.

- Notice what changes in the body as you do so - what sensations and feelings arise. It's OK if you don't notice much, just keep looking/feeling/asking. *If you are noticing things, whatever arises is OK - we are just observing.*

- Look for the sense of groundedness, the sense of growing, the sense of presence in your body and in the space, ready-ness to act, a sense of 'pride'/self-respect. All these come with this vertical dimension.

- A reminder that you can stop the exercise at any point if it starts to feel too uncomfortable or unpleasant. Take care of yourself and move towards pleasure/enjoyment/ease in the body (if there is any).

- Now **expand the body to the sides**, allowing/imagining a sense of space in the armpits, across the ribcage, between the hips, between the ears. Again, what happens as you allow the body to grow a little more in

*to avoid sinking into the chair/sitting surface with the back. Make sure to use language of invitation and suggestions, so that people feel a sense of agency in deciding what their bodies are able to do.*

*More info on posture and principles [here](#).*

this direction? What do you notice?

- Feel into the edges of your body - the place where the skin ends and meets the environment. Open up your peripheral vision a little more if that feels comfortable.

- Look for a sense of breadth, of filling out and taking up your space in the body, the room, the world. Allow the sides of your body to open out towards others and the life around you. All these come with this width dimension.

- Now **expand the body from front to back**, allowing the front and back of the body to relax your body to take up space in this direction - front to back, back to front. Allow the chest and belly to fully open and move with the breath - as much as it feels comfortable. There is no need to alter how the breath moves through the body, let it be easy and free. Look for space between the forehead and back of the head, in the throat, in the upper body and legs, allowing the body to take up a bit more space, front to back, as much as feels comfortable.

- Look for a sense of being held and backed-up by everything that is behind you - ancestors, experiences, histories, ecological lineages. Look for a sense of being open to what is in front or ahead of you. Feeling the resonance of our pasts and our futures, and the ways they are connected through the body. All these come with this depth dimension.

- Finally, place your hand just under your belly button - on the centre - feeling for the place where all three explored dimensions, and their qualities, meet, cross and are held in the body.

- After some moments here, let go of the hand and posture, move gently to the sides, wiggle fingers and toes and transition towards debrief.

### **Debriefing the activity (10 mins)**

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- This is a practice which will become easier and easier with time and can become an accessible, quick tool for difficult situations and conversations

- It is easy to practice wherever we are, as we don't need much to do it - just our bodies!

- It's main aim is to create a sense of grounded spaciousness in our bodies and psyches, so that we feel more resourced and resilient.

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

It is important to emphasise that centering is a practice that will become easier with time. It might feel artificial or difficult in the beginning. It might also be that embodied practices are not something one wants to engage with or explore further and that is also OK! Encourage participants to find the right balance between stepping into the learning zone without forcing themselves to do something that does not feel useful at all.

### **FURTHER NOTES**

For more information on different embodiment practices see this amazing resource: <https://threadsbook.org/embodied-practices/>

# EXPLORING GROUP AGREEMENTS AND GROUP CULTURE ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 40 – 60 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Pre prepared flipcharts 1-4 and the [Learning Zone diagram](#) (if using)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Groups and Organisational Culture

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Introducing possible frameworks, tools and approaches for approaching group agreements and practices that support a healthy group culture
- Exploring appropriateness and applicability of different approaches in different settings
- Sharing experiences and challenges of group life
- (Supporting group formation, laying ground for hearing needs and making agreements in the group itself – if you are using it for this)

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

There are many ways of approaching and making group agreements and the approach taken will depend on the group in question, its make-up, longevity, task and so on. It is useful to consider and explore the different options, so as to avoid falling back on default approaches which may or may not be fit for purpose.

Forming agreements in a group can be a painstaking and drawn-out process and people often come into new groups carrying memories of these kinds of experiences, often with a bit of a sense of dread. It can be useful and refreshing to open up dialogue and share experiences of this, supporting participants to think about the area with some new perspectives in the mix.

We usually introduce four possible approaches to this – as a teaching exercise for theoretical purposes (ie. how might this apply to participants' groups back at home) and beginning to draw out peoples' experience around the themes right from the start. This can then be developed in the context of the group itself, to form agreements, explore needs and so on, if appropriate. There is a version of this in the activity on [Hearing the Needs of the Group](#).

The four possible approaches are as follows...

### 1. Code of Conduct

This is a set of basic agreements about what behaviour is expected, which anyone taking part in the group is expected to observe. They might be pre-established and can be added to or adapted (according to a protocol). They can go some way to building trust, safety and healthy relationships, but will likely be relatively superficial expectations about peoples' basic conduct. They might be made up by the group or adopted from a pre-existing example and given to the group with people asked to comply. For example:

#### CODE OF CONDUCT

- BE ON TIME FOR MEETINGS
- TURN OFF MOBILE PHONES IN MEETINGS
- TIDY UP AFTER YOURSELF
- USE HAND SIGNALS IN MEETINGS
- ETC

flipchart 1

## 2. Self-made, shared Agreements

A process of establishing agreements as a group is a useful way of building safety and trust. A typical process might take the following form:

This process of taking an interest in each other's needs, creating space for needs to be heard and taken into account *can* create enough trust and safety so that specific agreements are not required. However, the process of developing agreements can help to clarify what the needs are and what is really required to take them into account. Explicit agreements are sometimes required (eg. around confidentiality).

## 3. Practices for effective Collaboration

Although agreements might be achieved by the previous process, very often the actual observance of the agreements can raise challenges and require shifts in behaviour and on-going learning within the group and by individual members. Treating the agreements as practices acknowledges the fact that for many of us the skills and abilities required to collaborate well require development. Naming them as practices acknowledges that we might not always get it right. We are all learning as we go. Building such practices into group life can help us develop our capacity. They can help individuals and groups to move from learnt tendencies to seek control, towards a healthy capacity to collaborate. A tired and tested set of practises include:

Some of these are a little jargonny, and may require some unpacking! Just quickly here:

- a) "Airtime" refers to the amount of time people take up when speaking
- b) "Accept all feelings" is not the same as accepting all actions that a person might take as a result of their feelings! - this does not legitimise being abusive or violent etc
- c) "Blended decision making" means having multiple, flexible approaches to making decisions, rather than being tied to a particular ideology/methodology around this - see [Understanding Blended Decision Making activity](#).
- d) "Liberate the elephants!" refers to the image of an elephant in the middle of the room, under the carpet, which is very obvious to everyone but which no one is talking about, often referred to as "the elephant under the carpet". The point here being - talk about and expose the uncomfortable things we may wish to ignore!

## 4. Principles for building an Evolutionary, Developmental, Learning Culture

Coming together with others in longer term collaborative efforts involve learning for each of us as individuals and as a group. In addition to practices, exploring the basic principles that can support us to embrace this developmental dimension of our association, can help that on-going process. They overlap with the practices in the section above. Some of the principles that can support the intention to develop and evolve include:

These are hopefully self explanatory enough and don't need to be unpacked further for facilitator purposes. We can understand these principles as lifetime practices in a sense - they are not things we simply do or don't do, but more a direction we align with. They are skills and capacities we deepen and develop more and more over time and with the support of various practices, agreements, relationships and so on, as in 1-3 above (for example).

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The session will require you to have prepared flip charts 1-4 in advance.

Using the model of the [Learning Zone](#) can be a good way to frame why agreements are useful, as can a framing around collective care or safer

### SELF-MADE SHARED AGREEMENTS

1. Asking each other: "What do I need to feel safe and do my best in this group?"
2. Harvest responses and ensure they are heard by everyone and can be respected.
3. Build shared agreements as necessary to ensure groups willingness to take the needs expressed into account

flipchart 2

### PRACTICES FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

- Balance action with reflection
- Include, respect and integrate different voices
- Share airtime
- Commit to resolve conflicts
- Give and receive feedback
- Seek shared ground and interest
- Accept all feelings
- Balance speaking and listening
- Check assumptions
- Use blended decision making
- Liberate the elephants!

flipchart 3

### PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING AN EVOLUTIONARY CULTURE

- Bring a whole hearted intention to transform
- Bring a commitment to engage
- Bring a beginner's mind
- Speak from most authentic parts of self
- Engage in deeper listening
- Explore risk taking
- Acknowledge we all have evolving edges
- Consider that if we are not uncomfortable we are probably not evolving
- Make a commitment to resolution (of conflict)
- Rise to the challenge of exemplification

flipchart 4

spaces and [active solidarity](#). For this activity plan, we will use the Learning Zone approach (but you don't have to!).

**Related material to support framing:**

- [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)
- [Hearing the Needs of the Group activity](#)
- [Introducing the Learning Zone Model resource](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

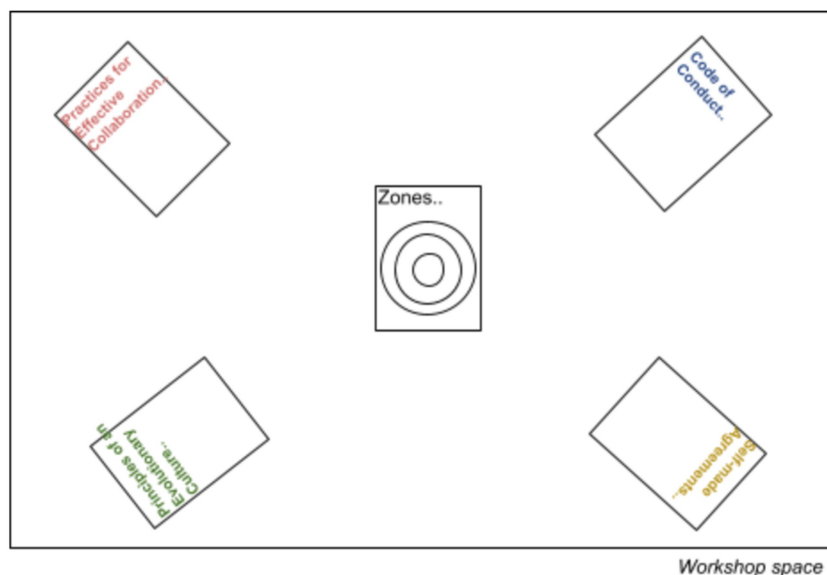
If you are using this activity as part of container/group building, you will need to consider the emphasis, depth and amount of time you put into exploring group agreements. It will depend on the length of the training, how well the group know each other, the group make-up, what kinds of histories and experiences are being brought into the space, and so on. Even on shorter trainings, you will want to put some time into establishing some collective agreements, but a longer activity like this one will not always be necessary or appropriate.

This activity works well as a precursor to [Hearing the Needs of the Group activity](#).

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

**Setting up the activity (10 - 15 mins)**

- Frame the activity, giving the reasoning behind what you are doing.
- Introduce the model of the Learning Zone as a way of thinking about the importance of agreements - ie: if we are going to learn well and grow together in our groups, we need to think about how we create the conditions to support that learning, rather than undermining it.  
(See more in [Introducing the Learning Zone Model](#)).
- If relevant, explain the double layer of the activity: this activity is relevant both in the context of this group we are in now, and also in terms of learning we can take back to our groups.
- Then, lay out spaciouly in the room flipcharts 1-4, around the Learning Zone fli chart - something like this:



### **Facilitating the activity (30 - 40 mins)**

- Name each approach and give a some examples or explanation for each (this only needs to be a quick summary as you will explore the details further, together)

- Ask them to spend some time wandering between the flipcharts reading through the practices, principles and so on, familiarising themselves (15 mins)

- Next, ask them to go and stand near to the flipchart/approach that they are most familiar with. Some people might stand between two approaches - that's fine. The group will end up clustered around in various formations. Hopefully you will have some people standing near to all of them..

- Begin a conversation by asking "someone standing next to 'Code of Conduct', tell us about that.. Why are you standing there? What's your sense of this approach". Hear from them, and see what comes out of what they say.. Perhaps there will be responses from the group, perhaps you have a response, perhaps what they say stands alone and you can ask someone else the same question.. And so on. Move around the space, drawing out peoples' experiences and reflections in each of the areas. (15 mins)

### **Debriefing the activity (0 mins)**

You don't need to debrief the session as such - the conversation has been the 'debrief'. Just thank the group for their participation. (If you are using this in the context of container building, you can tie up the conversation by letting them know which of these approaches you will be using in this group).

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

All groups are different! Habits and default approaches rarely serve us! A good and fit for purpose set of agreements/practices/etc that we can form together, building our knowledge and understanding of one another, and return to when there are challenges and conflicts arising, are an invaluable part of healthy group infrastructure!

*If you haven't already clarified, you are likely to get some questions here about what "liberate the elephants" means, etc. They might ask you, they might ask each other.. It can all be quite relaxed and organic*

# HEARING THE NEEDS OF THE GROUP (CONTAINER BUILDING ACTIVITY)

**RUNNING TIME:** 50 mins – 1hr15

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Flipchart paper / marker pens

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Groups and Organisational Culture

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Gathering information about how to take care of others/ourselves in the group setting
- Considering and exploring good conditions for supporting learning
- Building group trust, connection and safety
- Working towards building a culture of care

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Paying attention to the process of formation in a group is absolutely fundamental. When we don't attend to this dimension, and particularly in the context of design and facilitation, we can severely undermine the wellbeing and functionality of a group. The longer you are bringing a group together for, the more important this is. When the 'container' is not well established and cared for, people are likely to begin to feel 'unsafe', and are much more likely to resist, 'kick-back' against things/facilitators and find themselves in conflict with other members of the group. It is difficult to overstate how important this is! Especially in the context of training or groups that might involve explorations of personal issues, resilience, conflict, deep values, trauma and so on.

So we need to think consciously about the length of time and the kind of group, culture, values, needs, boundaries, etc, that will be part of getting people on the same page and managing or mitigating assumptions and expectations right from the start. On a longer training of a week or more, we will give most of the first day to this process! You can be using this as a teaching/skill-sharing tool for people to take back to their groups or into their own facilitation, at the same time as using it to build the 'container' of the group you are working with.

Finding a way to hear the needs of the group can be a useful element in this process. This activity uses the form of the 'self-made agreements' method (see [Exploring Group Agreements and Culture](#) activity), either to build agreements within the training group, or to model the process of how to do it, or both. The main purpose is to enable people to share and hear each others' needs. You may want to refer to the [Learning Zone Model](#) as a way to frame the exploration – ie, what are the needs people hold that will enable them to learn well for this time and with this group (rather than what are their needs in general).

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...



## Related material to support framing:

- [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)
- [Exploring Group Agreements and Group Culture activity](#)
- [Introducing the Learning Zone Model resource](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Make sure, if you are using this for container building, that the whole team is there, to contribute to the process and hear the range of needs – otherwise the purpose is compromised.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Frame the activity in whatever way is relevant to the context you are using it, perhaps referring to the [Learning Zone model](#), if appropriate. Then give the instructions:

- Break down into smaller groups of 4 – 5 people, taking a sheet of flip chart and some marker pens for your group
- You will have 15-20 minutes in your small groups to discuss and write down responses to: **“What do I need to support me to be in the learning zone in this group?”** or, more simply, **“What do I need to support me to bring my best to this group?”** (you can offer them both questions.. they should elicit similar responses)
- We will be sharing these in the bigger group, later.

### Facilitating the activity (45 mins - 1hr)

- Keep an eye on the groups as they work and offer support or clarification if needed.

- After 15 minutes give them a five minute warning and then bring them back together as a whole group.

- Inform them that the group is now going to hear what each of the smaller groups have produced, listening and taking on board what others are saying they need. Explain that **we are not aiming to tie things down into agreements at this stage**, we are just hearing from people and making sure we understand what they are saying/asking for.

- Hear from each group for around 5 minutes, letting them explain and clarify what they have written on their flipchart. Invite the rest of the group to ask questions if they need to.

- As the facilitator, you or someone else in the team needs to either remember or note down any needs that are expressed that will need a more formal agreement (for example, someone says they want everything shared in the group to be confidential, or someone says that they want to smoke in a way that doesn't impinge on others but doesn't leave them feeling ostracised. These things are not needs that can just 'be heard', they need the group to agree on a protocol of some sort. You will come back to these at the end).

- Having heard from and clarified what everyone has said, inform the group of the following:

- In this group, we want to try an approach of assuming that, in most cases, it will have been enough to have heard and discussed these needs and preferences, and that, based on that, we can go forward with a sense of care, respect and understanding for one another (as a starting point)
- It is not necessary to make agreements on everything now! There will be

*It can be useful to give them some examples, as the questions are quite open! Egs could range from things like “having enough breaks” to “being listened to deeply and with compassion”.*

*The point of this is to hear one another in a spirit of interest and care, so try to model this, as the facilitator. Where you can, reflect back/draw parallels and connections between what different people say, affirming peoples' contributions and supporting the group to feel relaxed with the process.*

various structures in place during the training which will offer opportunities for feedback, making requests, expressing further needs, taking steps to address any conflict that could be arising, and so on.

(Then name what these might include, for example:

- Morning practicalities slot, every day
- Community meetings with open agendas
- Regular small group sharing spaces
- The facilitators and/or organiser being available
- One to one meeting slots with the team)

- However, before we finish there might be a couple of things people have mentioned that will need an agreement (as above), so we will give a bit of time to that now.

- Name the things you have noted down that you think need an agreement and check with the group that there isn't anything else like that, that you might have missed.

- With whatever time you have left in the session, endeavour to reach these few agreements. There shouldn't be more than 2 or 3 and it should be possible to get them tied down. If it gets complicated and you run out of time, you will have to tell the group that you will come back to it at the start of the next session or whenever is next most appropriate. (Or if this session is a hypothetical exploration, you can just mention that that is what would need to happen if using the activity for more literal purposes).

- If the group haven't mentioned confidentiality themselves, it's probably worth you suggesting there is an agreement made about this - it is likely to come up later if you don't. You might also want to mention approaches to timekeeping, if that hasn't come up.

### **Debriefing the activity (0 - 10 mins)**

- If you are using this to form the container for the group, you don't need to debrief this. You have heard the needs and been clear about ways forwards. At this stage, a meta analysis is unlikely to be useful - people will be ready for a break! Just thank them for their efforts and for listening well.

- If you are using it more as a training tool, then invite reflections from the group about the process.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- How did you find the process? Difficult? Easy? Did you have a clear sense of what your needs would be?
- What did you notice about the feeling in the room/group as needs were shared?
- Can you envisage difficulties that might come up in a process like this? What might you do about them?

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

There can be some trepidation about opening things up like this, especially early on in a groups' formation. There can be some anxiety that we will hear a vast, wildly diverse and incompatible mix of needs and not know how to respond to or resolve them. In reality this is rarely the case. Most needs are shared by at least some others, if not everyone in the group, and if we frame the process in a way that emphasises learning, listening and taking care of one another, it can be a relaxed, nourishing and warm activity.

## **FURTHER NOTES**

You may want to retain the fl pcharts that the small groups made and display them somewhere communal, to support people to stay in touch with/remember the needs they heard and to come back to them if necessary.

# TASK - PROCESS - RELATIONSHIP ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 45 mins - 1 hr (+20 - 30 mins with session development)

**GROUP FORMAT:** Small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** diagram 1 flipchart (or worksheets), note paper and pens, (flipchart paper and markers if doing the session development option)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led > peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Groups and Organisational Culture

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Understanding group dynamics
- Framing/theorising group praxis
- Unpacking and exploring personal and group tendencies/habits
- Supporting improved health, wellbeing and functionality in our groups

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Learning to balance the elements of task, process and relationship is essential for effective collaboration and nurturing group resilience. We come together as a group with a **task** to do, and that can often take the majority of our energy. That makes sense - we have come together to do something, and we need a clear sense of our task and shared commitment to it, for the group to thrive. But overemphasis on task neglects other important factors which, over time, will unbalance the whole.

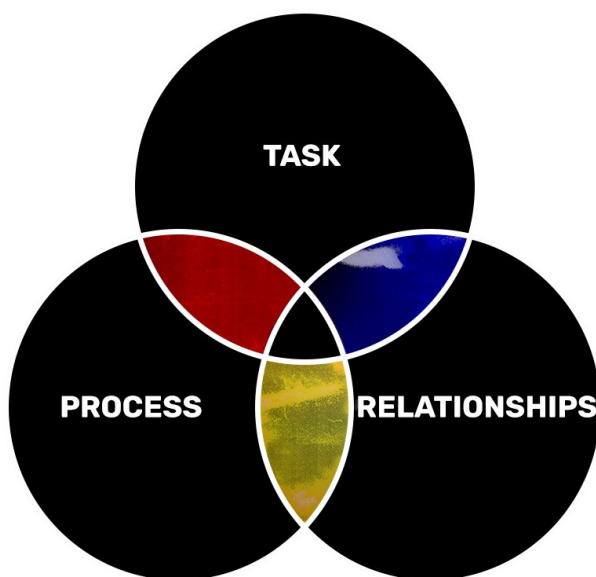
To achieve this balance we need good **process**, the establishing and holding of structures and systems for making decisions, communication, delegation, accountability etc. This helps us ensure that the frameworks, agreements, and protocols are in place to enable us to pursue and fulfil our tasks effectively and in a way that empowers people and manifests our values.

Often, we encounter groups where the task and the process are well attended to but things are still not working out. That may be because our processes and structures are only as good as the people inhabiting them. The quality of the **relationships** within the group is often what we find neglected here. Failing to attend to the relational dynamics between us can have a significantly detrimental effect on the health of the group and its culture, no matter how well designed the processes, or how committed to achieving the task people are. The quality of relationship underpins all of our collective efforts, and we need to put time and energy into strengthening and caring for our relationships, fostering trust, and paying attention to the quality of our communication and sense of connection. These things are crucial if we want our groups to be resilient and to thrive.

Here is a helpful diagram:

RANGES THROUGH:  
- MISSION  
- AIMS  
- STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES  
- PROJECTS  
- SPECIFIC WORK TASKS

STRUCTURES THAT SUPPORT COORDINATION -  
DECISION MAKING -  
MEETING PROTOCOLS -  
DELEGATION -  
ACCOUNTABILITY -  
COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION SHARING -



- INTERPERSONAL CONNECTIONS  
- TRUST  
- QUALITY OF COMMUNICATION  
- MUTUAL RESPECT AND CARE  
- HONESTY AND TRUTHFULNESS  
- NON-NEUROTIC INVESTMENT

diagram 1

All groups are different and require different emphases at different times. Whatever a group's tendency is, applying the Task-Process-Relationship (TPR) lens can enable conscious cultivation of a healthier and more functional collaborative culture.

A simple model for TPR with some annotations is depicted in diagram 2, below.

#### Related material to support framing:

- [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)

*text here*

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

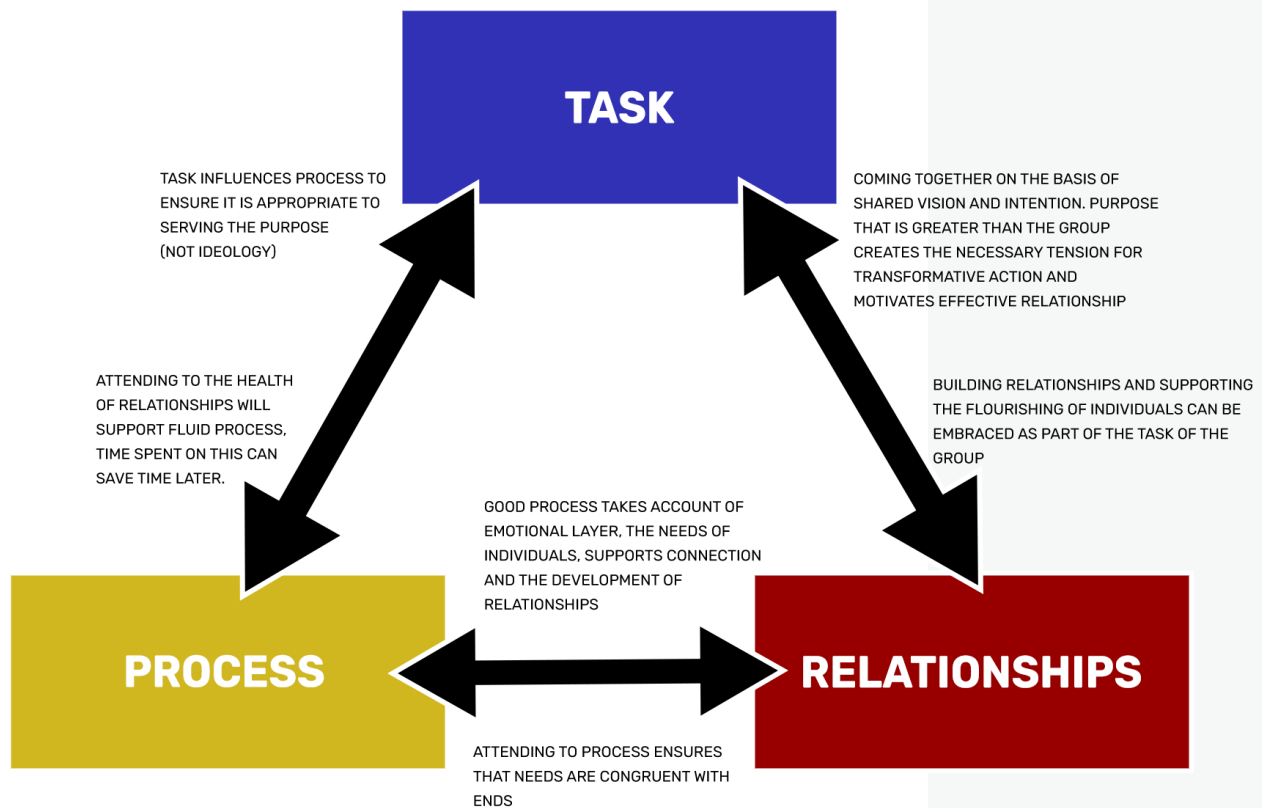
Depending on the kind of group you are working with, you might use this tool in different ways. As with a lot of the group work tools, to explore them well, we often need some kind of group context or real-life-example to help make sense of and apply them. If you are working with a group who know each other, you can bring a tool like this in straightaway, and ask them to think about it in the context of their actual group experience. If not, it can usefully follow on from an activity which 'generates' an experience of group dynamics in a session such as [The Warehouse](#), or [Raft Game](#).

We often design a day on group dynamics with a flow of activities that looks like: [The Warehouse](#) > [TPR](#) > [Understanding Power in our Groups](#) > [Giving and Receiving Feedback](#).

With the above considered, there is very little risk involved in the session itself (except insofar as it may draw out discussion and reflection on what may be painful group experiences, either in the room or historically). Enough to rely on container building and culture-of-care efforts you have hopefully already made, and, as usual, have a co-facilitator in the room, in case someone needs support. The activity can be used in groups of various levels and sizes.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

Setting up the activity (15 - 20 mins)



- Introduce the activity in the context of whatever session/theme you are using it

- Spend some time unpacking the model of TPR, using a flipchart like this:  
*diagram 2*

You can use the material in the section on framing above, diagram 1, and the information in the boxes in diagram 2 if useful. You are likely to want to mention:

- What each of the three dimensions mean and relate to
- How each dimension relates to, can support or undermine the others
- What some of the dangers, difficulties and patterns are, that we might see showing up in groups, in these three dimensions
- The fact that in a lot of groups, it is the relationship dimension that is most neglected

Involve and invite group contributions and examples from their experience.

- When you are confident that the group have enough of an understanding, they'll start to apply some of this theory. Give the instructions:

- Work in groups of 3-4 people
- Have a conversation together about the group dynamics/experience (either from the previous activity or from a group 'back at home') "through the lens of.." or "in terms of.." Task, Process, Relationship. "What happened?" in terms of these dimensions, and also, "What could happen?"

*This is one of the basic models that can be referred to across a training to support continuity and framing. When introducing various sessions, activities and tools, you can link back to this activity, situating what you are doing as a support to one or more of T, P or R, keeping everything joined up and relevant!*

if we applied TPR more effectively?

- Note down any key reflections, realisations or questions that come up in your conversations, for bringing back to the whole group

- You'll have 20 minutes.

- Answer any outstanding questions (sometimes it needs to be explained a couple of times for people to get what they are supposed to be talking about - give examples in this case!) and then send them into their groups.

### **Facilitating the activity (20 mins)**

- Move between the groups in the space and re-clarify or support them where necessary

- Give them a five minute warning before the end of the activity

### **Possible Activity Development:**

If relevant/appropriate. You can ask the groups to take a piece of flipchart and draw the 3 dimensions as a triangle [diagram 2 without text boxes]. Then ask them to write in each area the skills, practices and techniques that are or could be employed by a group to address/support these dimensions. This will add 20 - 30 mins to the session

### **Debriefing the activity (10 - 15 mins)**

- Ask each of the small groups to share 1 - 3 of their most interesting points, coming out of the conversations. These can be questions, reflections or experiences.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- Is this a useful model? Why/why not?

- Can you envisage how applying this might serve/support/improve your group life?

- What else might be needed?

- What resistance comes up, or might we imagine would come up in our groups?

- If this session is part of a bigger flow as described in the framing section, you will want to end the debrief with a reference to that overall flow/shape, the session's relevance, what comes next etc.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

There are always going to be times where we have to go more towards one of T, P or R in our work and over time, this is okay! We just need to keep an eye on the group's habits and the overall balance.

There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to getting this 'right'. Different groups will require different things, affected by conditions such as membership and member styles, longevity, group aims/vision/purpose and so on. It's more that we can use this model as a lens to help us make sense of what is happening, what might be going 'wrong', and what might help.



# UNDERSTANDING BLENDED DECISION MAKING ACTIVITY

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr15 - 2hrs10

**GROUP FORMAT:** Small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Set of decision methods cards (diagram 1) / sets of decisions cards per small group / pre-prepared blended decision making fl pchart (diagram 3)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Groups and Organisational Culture

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Exploring diverse range of possible decision making processes
- Supporting development of a Blended Decision Making practice
- Breaking down the polarity of horizontal v's hierarchical organising
- Understanding how power relates to decision making
- Building capacities for flexible and agile organising and group work
- Introducing reflections on context analysis
- Understanding how good decision making supports trust in a group
- Developing awareness around personal and group tendencies/habits/cultural defaults

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Groups often get stuck, and conflict arises in the realm of decision making. Sometimes difficulties show up at the time of making the decisions. Sometimes the challenges arise later when we realise we have forgotten to include someone or no one actually puts energy behind what was decided.

This activity is designed to support groups to think about a range of decision making processes that can be used in different contexts. It focuses on exploring different ways to make decisions. It is not a session on *how to carry out a specific type of decision making process (e.g. consensus)*. Separate sessions might be needed for that.

The session tries to support groups to move away from binary views of decision making - as being either based on consensus or power over others. Blended decision making helps groups develop a nuanced practice that integrates different decision making methods in different situations.

It can be a very good activity to do with a group who already know and work together, to help them reflect on themes of efficacy, trust and cultural defaulting.

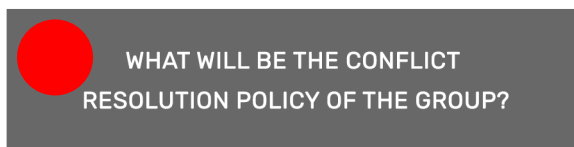
### Practical guide:

You will need to have pre-prepared both your 'Decision making methods' cards (see diagram 1 below), and multiple sets of example decisions cards (enough for one set per small group of 3-5 people).

Each set should consist of around 15 cards with hypothetical decisions written on them. Example decision cards you might use:

- *What is the final wording for our main campaign banner?*
- *What is the menu for next Thursday evening's workshop?*
- *Should we ban a member who is repeatedly abusive from the group?*
- *Should we accept funding from an international donor?*
- *What should be the budget for a local community consultation event?*
- *What is the date of the next team meeting?*
- *Should a team member intervene in a heated community situation, as a representative of the group?*
- *Should a direct action team remain 'locked on' all night?*
- *What should be the wording on a specific legal recommendation we create?*
- *What is the conflict resolution policy of the group?*

As the sets of decision cards for each group need to be identical, you must colour code each set so everyone can know where each group has placed their cards (something like this:)



You will need a pre-prepared flipchart/infographic of the blended decision making graph as below (diagram 3).

#### **Related material to support framing:**

- [Groups and Organisational Cultures chapter](#)
- [Exploring Power Activity](#)

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

It's normal that there is some confusion/doubt initially when you ask people to lay down the decision cards alongside their chosen 'decision process'. People may not feel familiar with the terms on the cards. The point of the exercise is to discuss these terms and to develop a shared understanding in each small group, so don't over explain. Allow the participants to develop their own interpretations. At the end of the day there is no 'right' answer (though there might be an obvious better choice), the point is to participate and discuss!

You will need enough space to lay the cards out spaciouly and for everyone to move around them. It works fine outside, as long as it's not windy!

The [Power Paper Activity](#) is a good precursor to this activity.

## **ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

### **Setting up the activity (5 mins)**

- Frame the activity appropriately, letting the group know why you are doing this, but without getting into too much theory at the start - you will move towards this in the second part of the activity

*Make sure that the set of decision cards are relevant and appropriate to the group that you are working with. If the group is mixed, try and make sure there are some decision cards that everyone can relate to.*

- Lay out the seven decision making methods cards in order on the floor, like this, leaving about one metre between each card:

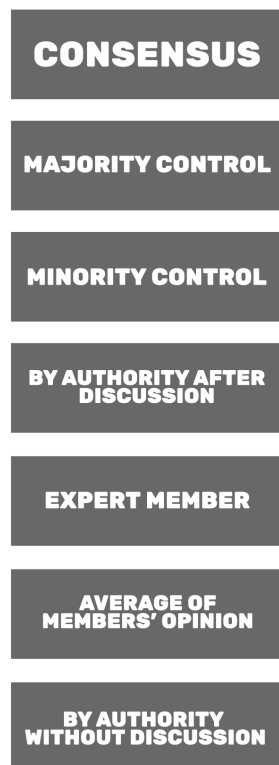
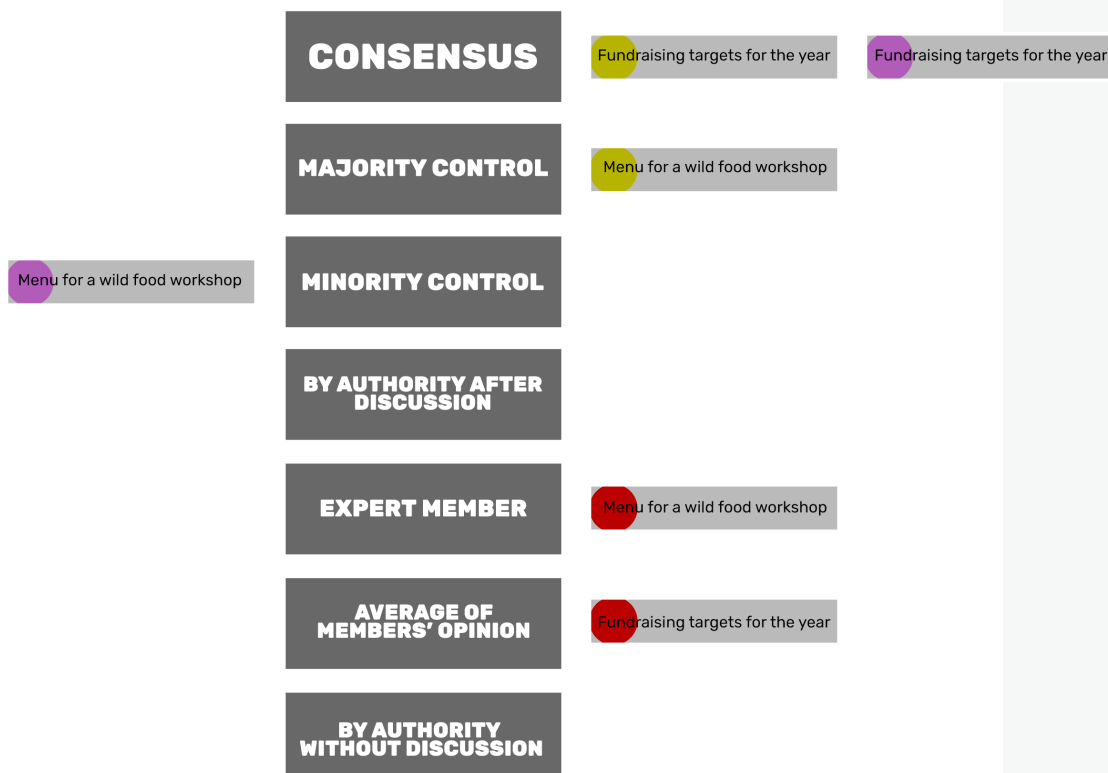


diagram 1

- Split the group into groups of 3-5 people and give each small group a set of identical (but colour coded) decision cards (see Framing section, above).

- Ask them to decide together which is the most appropriate method to use for making that decision and then lay their cards in line with the method they have chosen, like this:



- Answer any clarifying questions but keep it to a minimum - you want them to explore it together, not get the answers from you!

### Facilitating the activity (1hr - 1hr45)

#### a. Small group work on decision making methods (25)

- Set the groups off, keep an eye on progress and assist any groups who seem to be struggling

- After 10 minutes tell them they are half way through. Some groups will find they get stuck in discussion. Encourage them to go for 'good enough for now'  
- it's important to try and get all their cards down.

- With a 2 minute warning get the groups to quickly place any remaining cards.

- Then give 5 minutes to look at where other groups have made the same or different choices to their own. This is time for personal review, rather than discussion

#### b. Whole group discussion and blended decision making input (20-40)

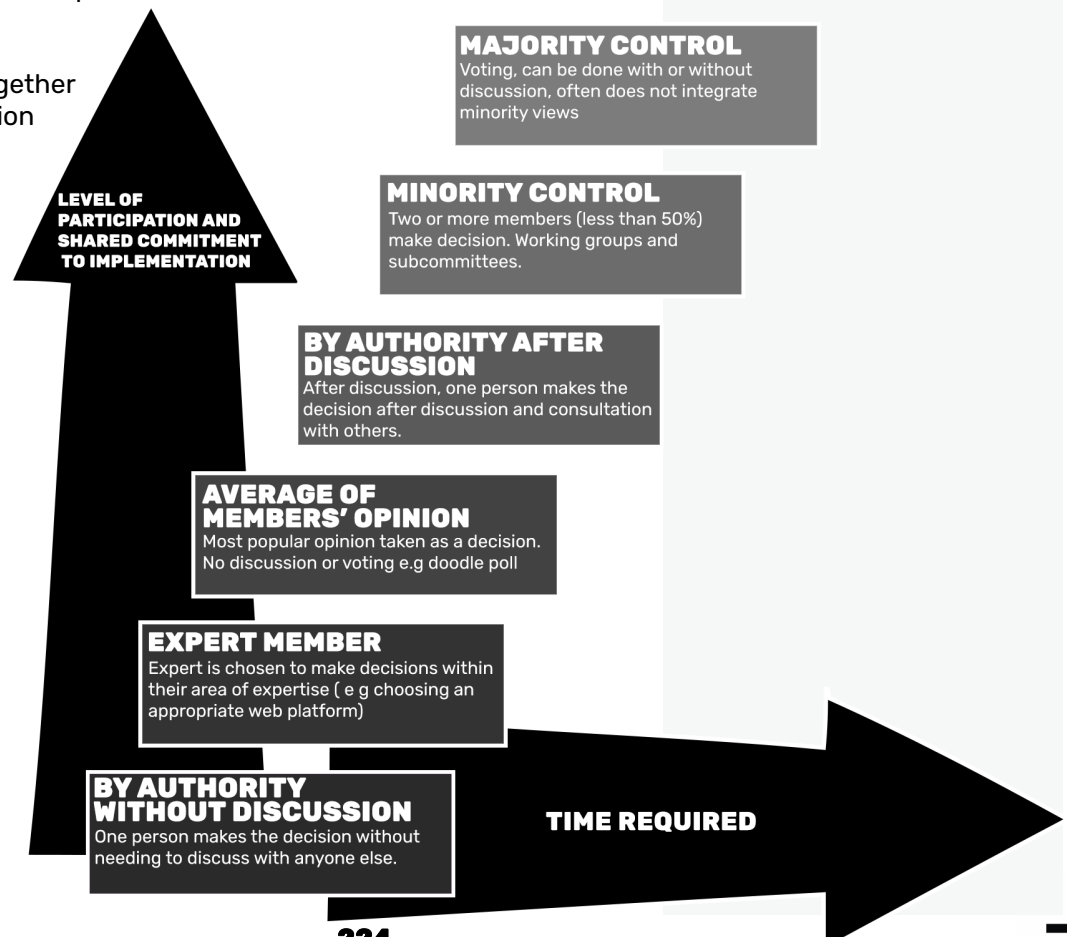
- Spend some time opening up conversation about the process/experience, choosing a decision and looking at where each of the groups has placed their card. You might want to ask/draw out:

- What are the commonalities and differences?

- What did you discuss in making these choices, what was challenging in choosing, did you all agree within the group, what kind of diversity was there, etc?

- Start to draw out information on what conditions affect decisions, what the context is etc. Ask elicitive questions, being curious about their experience.

- Then bring the group together around the Blended decision making axis flipchart:



- Explain and unpack this diagram and some more decision making theory, offering details/examples of each kind of process, clarifying understanding about what each means, introducing the axis of participation and commitment versus time required. Other possible things to highlight:
  - Context is as important as the content, in how we choose appropriate processes for different decisions:
  - Content: does it really need 10 people to make a decision about what to cook for dinner?; we probably do need everyone involved if a decision strongly affects the values or direction of the group, etc
  - Context: where does it sit on the participation/commitment <> time axis
  - sometimes we have to make a decision in a hurry and it might be necessary (if not ideal) that a small group of people decide. Sometimes it's better to include people in a process even though it's not something that obviously needs everyone's consent in order to ensure you have enough people committed to implementation, or to build shared understanding in the group.
  - Consensus decision making is often the default when groups are ideologically opposed to hierarchy and that consensus is also commonly misunderstood as an illustration of a group that embodies trust 'because we all make decisions together and no one has more power'. In reality power plays into consensus processes as much as any other decision making process, it's usually just more subtle and harder to name.
  - Groups that are operating regularly with members making decisions 'by authority without discussion' **and** experiencing the decisions taken as ones that the group are happy about, are actually some of the most effective and trustful collaborative contexts
  - Power in itself is neutral, it's how we apply it that affects whether it is experienced as empowering or oppressive to others
  - Groups who spend a good amount of time in their formation stage making bigger value decisions around policy and processes, will find it much easier to move away from consensus in their day to day decision making about operational tasks (because there is more buy in and trust, both structurally and relationally)
  - Likewise you can support groups who are practising a strong model of concentrated power and decision making (i.e a very hierarchical organisation) to understand the value of engaging with colleagues in value based discussions that build confidence and understanding of the real mission and aims of the group. This makes it easier to delegate decision making to small groups or individuals and lighten the load of the person with whom the power has been concentrated

- Invite any input or questions from the group as you go along and at the end, then ask them to get into either small groups or pairs (if possible, with others they work with in 'real life').

### **c. Small group work on blended decision making (20-40)**

- Ask them to reflect on the following questions:
  - **What are the main kinds of decision making processes used in my groups/our group?**
  - **What processes do we never use and why?**
  - **Is this explicit or implicit within the group? When are processes used explicitly with the group's agreement, and when is it just a default?**
  - **What changes, if any, to our decision making processes would**

## **support my group to be more effective and more trustful?**

You may want to write these up for the group to refer to, somewhere.

- Keep an eye on the groups, offer assistance if needed, and give/remind them of timings, then bring them together for a debrief.

### **Debriefing the activity (10 - 20 mins)**

- Ask them to take 5 or 10 minutes to take any notes for themselves of useful insights/reflections that have come out of their discussions, then take some time to draw out experiences and thoughts amongst the whole group.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- What did you find in your discussions?
- Was there anything that surprised you?
- What was challenging?
- What challenges do you think you might face in implementing/applying this knowledge in your groups/praxis? (and how might we overcome some of them?)

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

- Not all decisions should be made in the same way! This is important to understand when working in contexts where there is a strong cultural default to a particular way of doing decision making (eg. "we are non hierarchical so everything must be done by consensus", or "we have an agreed hierarchical structure and that means consultation is never required").

- The context of a decision is key in deciding what is the most appropriate decision making process to use. The amount of time available, who is involved, what decision making structures/existing policies already exist and the need/ not for whole group investment in the decision are all key influencing contexts.

- Sometimes we have to make a decision quickly or a moment passes. Not making a decision is worse than the wrong type of decision. Having invested time as a group in thinking about how you will make different types of decisions in advance, and spending development time to get really clear on group values, mission, aims and objectives will all help this process go smoother. Having regular sharing time that touches on power, personal values and needs will also help groups to be better informed about making decisions more autonomously that best reflect everyone's needs.

- Transformative groups are groups that are highly effective but also groups that show high levels of trust and cooperation. These are the ones that will survive the long haul. The more we can understand how trust building and power dynamics relate to decision making processes, the more effective and long lasting our groups will be.

- Adaptability, literacy and organisational clarity in these things will support group effectiveness, longevity and cohesion, and bring more ease, satisfaction and creative scope to its members - it's worth the effort of understanding and applying this stuff!

# SPECTRUM LINES (GENERIC) ACTIVITY

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

**RUNNING TIME:** 10 - 40 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** n/a

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Groups and Organisational Culture

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Supporting dialogue within the group
- Making visible diverse experience and views
- Enabling reflection on experience
- Supporting discussion in a more animated way

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

A spectrum line is a simple method to support reflection and discussion within a group. It can bring energy to the room, offer an opportunity to get people into their bodies, and offer a physical depiction of range and diversity in what is going on in the group in ways that can be especially useful for unpacking some particular subjects.

Framing will depend on the content to be explored.

You can repeat the exercise a number of times with different questions related to the theme you are exploring. Over 30 minutes it is possible to cover 5 or 6 questions. You can also use it just once, as an addition to another session, to unpack themes in many different contexts.

Consider using provocative questions to draw out new themes or learning. You might choose to encourage friendly debate between different positions.

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This can be done with groups of almost any size, but obviously larger groups will mean fewer voices can be heard. Most commonly we use it with groups of between 10-20 people.

This can be a very useful exercise for drawing people out and balancing the speaking time offered to all of the participants.

Be aware of any mobility issues or physical constraints such as back injuries. Not all groups will be comfortable standing for long periods, so have a few chairs positioned in the room, in case people need to sit during the discussion.

The risk involved will depend entirely on the subject you are exploring!

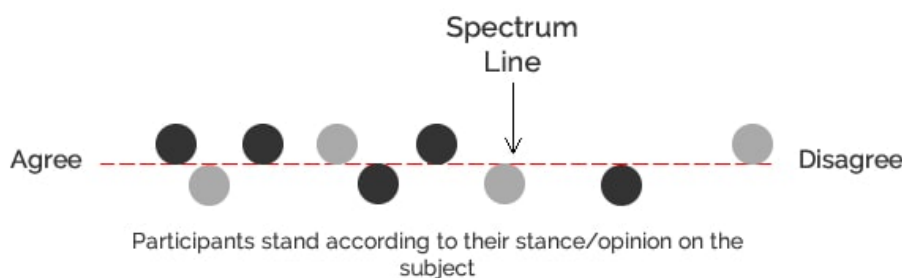


## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Framing will depend on the context in which you are using the activity. In general it's unlikely to need much of a framing - just explain the task:
  - I'm going to give you a statement or question which you will reflect on and then answer by positioning yourself on a 'spectrum line'.
  - Where you place yourself on the line will represent your 'answer'.
  - The spectrum line is an imaginary line between these two points in the training room or space (eg. this could be two walls facing each other, or between two markers you have placed on the floor. Show them clearly, ideally demonstrating with your body!)
  - This end of the line represents... and this end of the line represents... (For example: 'Chocolate is the best food in the world.' One end of the room represents the position 'I agree 100%', the other end of the room represents 'I completely disagree'). Place yourself somewhere on the line, between the two extremes, to represent your response.

It will be something like this (although depending on the size of the group, you may have a lot more crowding, clumping and clustering than is showed here!):



### Facilitating the activity (10 - 25 mins +)

- Give them their first question/statement and allow them time to reflect on the question and then to arrange themselves along the line.
- Once they are positioned on the line a number of different methods can be used to stimulate discussion. These can also be used in various combinations. e.g:

*text here*

1. Pairs discussion: Ask people to 'turn to someone next to you and explain why are you standing where you are...'
2. Small clusters: Ask people to 'gather in small groups of three or four and explain why you are standing where you are...'
3. Asking individuals to talk about their response to the whole group. While people stay in position, invite different people to share about their decision. Invite input from people across the spectrum to get a diverse range of views.

### Debriefing the activity (?)

Again, this really depends on what you are using the spectrum lines for and where in the session you have embedded them. Make a decision about what is appropriate, bearing in mind that if you have been exploring any emotional or charged themes, you may want to attend to some reassurance or care, in the debrief.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

Depends on the context!

*The question you use might require an agree/disagree type answer or contrasting options can be given with each end of the spectrum lines representing an answer (such as in the [Action-Reflection spectrum](#)).*

# ACTION-REFLECTION SPECTRUM LINES ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 20 - 40 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group discussion with pairs and small group huddles

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** n/a

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Burnout

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

Around the theme of balancing action and reflection, this exercise will:

- Support dialogue within the group
- Make visible diverse experience and views
- Enable reflection on experience
- Support discussion in a more animated way

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

In order to support individual and organisational learning we can integrate an action learning approach. This involves finding a helpful balance of action and reflection. Most individuals, and groups, will have propensities in one direction or the other. Bringing awareness to our tendencies in these ways enables us to make more informed decisions about how we work, both in terms of effectiveness and resilience. It is important to highlight that there is no right or wrong here – different aims will require different approaches/strategies, as will various moments in time. Having said which, some amount of both of these dimensions is like to be important for most people/contexts!

This exercise helps us to reflect on the balance of these in our lives and in our organisational cultures.

You will likely be using it in the context of a longer session on group work, strategies, burnout or something else so these will offer the framing context. You may like to draw on the Action Learning Cycle explicitly, in which case, preparing a visual aid of the [diagram](#) will be necessary.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Action Learning Cycle in Approaches to Learning and Using this Manual chapter](#)
- [Spectrum Lines \(generic\) activity](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This is a low risk activity that you can do with almost any sized group. It is an adaptable and useful way of starting a conversation in an energising way. Be aware of any mobility issues or physical constraints such as back injuries. Not all groups will be comfortable standing for long periods, so have a few chairs positioned in the room, in case people need to sit during the discussion.

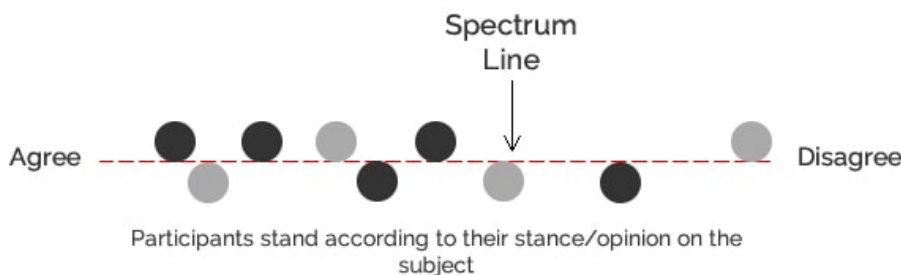
TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Frame (or don't!) the activity in the way that is appropriate for the context and then explain the task:
  - I'm going to give you a statement or question which you will reflect on and then answer by positioning yourself on a 'spectrum line'.
- Where you place yourself on the line will represent your 'answer'.
- The spectrum line is an imaginary line between these two points in the training room or space (eg. this could be two walls facing each other, or between two markers you have placed on the floor. Show them clearly, ideally demonstrating with your body!)
- This end of the line represents... and this end of the line represents... (For example: 'Chocolate is the best food in the world.' One end of the room represents the position 'I agree 100%', the other end of the room represents 'I completely disagree'). You will place yourself somewhere on the line, between the two extremes, to represent your response.

It will be something like this (although depending on the size of the group, you may have a lot more crowding, clumping and clustering than is showed here!):



- Then give them their first statement:

#### **1) Generally speaking I am more inclined towards (at one end of the room) Action or (at the other end of the room) Reflection.**

..use a few examples of extremes for both an 'action' type person (eg. "I'll have time to pause and reflect when I'm dead!") and a 'reflection' type person (eg. "until I have considered every possible eventuality, I will not take a single step in any direction!")

### Facilitating the activity (10-25+ mins)

- Once the group are arranged along the spectrum line, ask them to take a look around at where other people are, and then to get into pairs with someone close to them in the room to discuss their choice. Prompt:

"Explain why you are standing where you are..."

- Give them some minutes to discuss and then give them the next statement:

#### **2) Over the last year my life has been more oriented towards action (at one end) or reflection (at the other end).**

..again, give some examples of extremes for both.

- Once the group are arranged along the spectrum line, ask them to take a look around at where other people are, and then to get into small groups to discuss. Prompt:

"Why are you standing where you are and does it feel like it's where you want to be?"

- Give them some minutes to discuss, and then give them the next statement:

### **3) The culture in my organisation is more oriented towards action or reflection.**

- You can arrange discussion of this in either small groups or pairs. Prompt:

"If this is different to where you were with question 1), how does that feel? How does this balance (or tension?) show up in your organisation?"

- Then draw out among the whole group. Prompts:

"For people whose organisations are more 'reflective': How does your organisation 'reflect'? What practices do you use?"

"For people whose organisations are more 'action' oriented: What drives the 'action' oriented culture?"

- After some minutes of discussion, give them the next and final statement:

### **4) The appropriate balance between action and reflection for my organisation would be...**

- Discussion in small groups, prompts:

"If you have moved: Why have you moved and what blocks the organisation moving in this direction?"

"If you have not moved: Why do you think this is the appropriate balance for your organisations?"

### **Debriefing the activity (5 mins)**

Open up a short space for people to share anything that they found interesting.

Since most of the activity is discussion, it probably won't need much debriefing.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

Reiterate that:

- There is no right answer or perfect place to be - different contexts will require a different measure of these elements.
- Optimising rather than maximising is always a useful lens when thinking about effectiveness and resilience.
- Ideally we are able to balance the benefits of bringing awareness to habitual tendencies, without becoming bogged down/paralysed by over-analysis!

# RAFT GAME ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 15 - 35 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Yoga mats (or 'raft' equivalent), 1 per small group

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Groups and Organisational Culture

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Group building, connection and getting to know one another
- Provides basis for exploration into group dynamics
- Energiser/bringing play

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

When wanting to explore and understand aspects of group dynamics such as [mainstreams and margins](#), [working with power](#), [privilege](#), [rank](#), [levels of participation](#) and so on, it can be necessary to 'generate' some group dynamics to reflect upon. This might be the case if it is early on in a training/group's life and they don't have much 'real life' material to work from yet. Or sometimes it is more helpful to have a concise, bounded and specific example of dynamics to be working with, than to ask a group to draw on their whole history of working together which may be long and complex.

Another possible session you might use for this purpose would be the [warehouse activity](#).

The session itself doesn't require any greater framing than simply explaining the activity - you do not want the group to know that you will be analysing the way they participated while they are doing it, only afterwards.

They will be broken down into small groups of between 4 and 12, and given one yoga mat (or equivalent) per group.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Consider the bodies in the group. This activity will not work for some bodies and this needs to be taken into account when choosing whether or not use it.

You also need enough space! Groups need to be able to spread out and have some distance to move from and to.

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- As above, you should not preempt or frame the relevance of the activity before doing it
- Break them into small groups of between 4 and 12, and give them a yoga mat (or equivalent) per group. Then give the following instructions:
  - Your team/group is on the edge of a continent where climate change has provoked vast raging fires which are sweeping all living things to the coast.
  - Your team has a raft (mat) which can be used to get you to the other side of an ocean to a benign continent.
  - The rafts are the only way to cross the ocean. The ocean is treacherous and filled with hungry sharks. If one of you touches the surface of the ocean once they lose a limb; a second time, they will lose another limb; a third time and they are dead. The rafts cannot be used as jet skis (no hopping)!
  - With the fire raging towards the coast, you only have limited time to cross the ocean. Just how long might become clearer as the fire approaches. When the fire reaches the coast anyone who has not reached the other side will die.
- Go!

### Facilitating the activity (10 - 15 mins)

- Watch the groups, ensuring people are respecting the rules, losing limbs when they are supposed to etc. You might want to inject more urgency, telling them the fire is approaching swiftly etc. Have fun with it!
- When the first group arrives on the far shore, the game is over and you can draw the group back together

### Debriefing the activity (0 - 15 mins)

If you are using this game to create an experiential context for exploring dynamics such as: leadership, decision making, participation, collaboration, power dynamics or on individual tendencies in groups, you may want to head straight into the next activity without a debrief.

- Alternatively, when the game finishes, invite the participants back into a circle, saying: "Now we would like you to debrief that amongst yourselves." The facilitation team should discreetly stay out of the circle.
- After around 10 mins ask participants to pause and take 5 mins to reflect on their experience of both the game and the group debrief – focusing on their own feelings and tendencies. They may want to journal/take notes. If you want to debrief as a whole group you can do so asking them:
  - How was your experience?
  - What did you notice?
  - What seemed important?
  - How are you feeling now?

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

This will depend on how you are using the activity.

# THE WAREHOUSE ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 2hrs+

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group work (for groups of 10-18 people)

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** [The Warehouse Handout](#) (per participant) / Mobile phone with alarm setting / Long roll of paper for timeline / Post-its and marker pens

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Groups and Organisational Culture

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Creating an experiential context to support in-depth reflection on group dynamics
- Generating experiential content to support in-depth reflection on our own tendencies in groups
- Can provide space for practising/testing skills related to group process, such as decision making, facilitation of discussion, consensus process etc

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

When wanting to explore and understand aspects of group dynamics such as [mainstreams and margins](#), [working with power, privilege, rank, levels of participation](#) and so on, it can be necessary to 'generate' some group dynamics to reflect upon. This might be the case if it is early on in a training/group's life and they don't have much 'real life' material to work from yet. Or sometimes it is more helpful to have a concise, bounded and specific example of dynamics to be working with, than to ask a group to draw on their whole history of working together which may be long and complex.

Other possible sessions you might use for this purpose would be the [Raft Game activity](#) (this is much snappier and can be used in the 'getting to know each other' stage of the training. The Warehouse is more in depth and requires there to have been some group/trust building first).

The activity is generally not framed. The facilitator will usually simply follow the instructions for part 'a.', so that the participants are dropped into the activity with very little warning - they should not know what is coming in advance.

The intention of this is to create a challenge that the group needs to spontaneously find creative and collaborative solutions to. This will add some pressure to the activity, with the intention of heightening the dynamics. The point is not that they are able to do it well (necessarily), but that content/experience is generated which we can use to analyse and explore themes on group dynamics, participation and personal tendencies.

You will need to have enough copies of the [Warehouse Handout](#) for each to participant to have one. This is the version we use - you may want to adapt the story/narrative to make it more relevant to the context or group you are working with:

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...



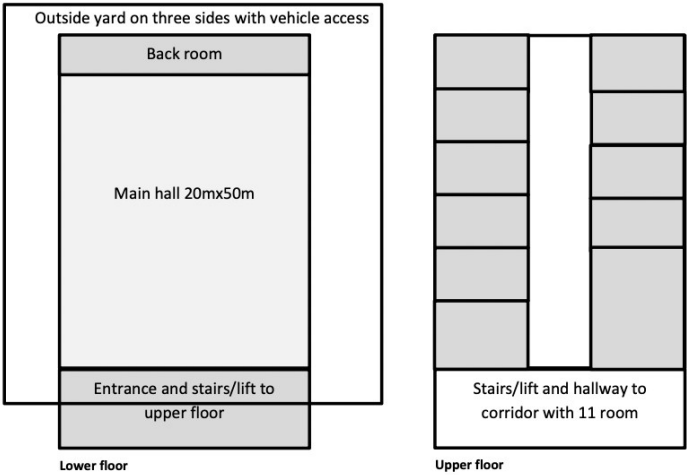
### The Warehouse

Miren has been given use of a warehouse space in Barcelona, rent free for six months (from Sept 2022). The owners live in Costa Rica and the building will be demolished for re-development in the next summer. The owners are happy for Miren to do what she thinks is best with the space during that time, but they need her to describe a clear idea and give them three reasons why it is a good plan.

However, Miren has realised she lacks inspiration at the moment. She needs help to come up with an idea at short notice. She met you at the party last week she was so inspired by you and your work, so is asking you to make a suggestion. She thinks that your experience and values are just what she needs to inspire and generate a good plan. But she needs to tell the owner what the plan is and three reasons why it is a good plan before they leave for Costa Rica this morning!

The building has a mains electricity connection and running water. The roof does not leak. The area has a good transport connection – metro, bus routes, and lots of parking in a light industrial, non-residential area. There is also an initial budget of €7000 to get the project going!

She wishes could have spoken to you sooner, but she needs to let the owners know the plan in 15 mins.



You will also need to have prepared a long roll of paper for your timeline (eg. by sticking together 3 sheets of flip chart paper). See image below.

**Related material to support framing:**  
 - [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)

### OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The activity can be exposing in the way that it encourages reflection on group dynamics and personal tendencies in groups. A reasonable level of trust within the group is advisable before using this activity and attention to care and emotional impact is important. Support people to recognise that it is a space for learning and that we can all make mistakes, as well as that the conditions the activity sets up are not ideal ones for bringing out the best of peoples' capacities in group work (that's sort of the point.. It allows us to ask, 'what would we do differently?')

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (10 minutes)

- Without off ring any framing, simply begin the activity by giving everyone a copy of the [handout](#) which should have the scenario description and instructions written at the start, as well as a simple plan of the building and two boxes (one for a 300 word description of the idea and one for the three justifications). Tell them that this is going to be an individual activity that should be done in silence.

- After 5 minutes you interrupt the silent work that individuals are doing. One theatrical way to do this is to set a phone alarm with a ringtone for 5 minutes in and then act as though you are actually receiving a phone call. You can then speak into the phone in hearing distance from the group saying something like:

*"Hi Miren, how are you... oh, really! Ah, that was my mistake, ok I will tell them now. 30 minutes? That's lucky.."*

- Then tell the group:

- Miren just rang to explain that actually the activity needs to be done as a collaboration.

- Really sorry for the mistake! It is exactly the same task, but it needs to be done as a whole group.

- Luckily, the plan has been delayed so you now have 30 minutes to complete the task: coming up with an idea for the use of the space and three reasons it is a good one.

- Step back and just let them get on with it! Usually this generates some excitement and movement as people gear up to the challenge they have just been presented with.

### Facilitating the activity (1hr10 - plus break)

#### a. The collaborative process (30+)

- This next phase involves very little 'facilitation'. Your job is to not get involved, but to leave the group to get on with the exercise themselves. However, you and the facilitation team should take on some observation and note taking roles. We suggest at least the following roles:

1. Note/tally the number of times individuals speak (this is only a rough indicator, but it is an interesting one)

2. Keep a list of all the key events and actions with a simple time note (eg. 2 minutes in Pietro takes on facilitation, 10 minutes in Asia lies down and stops participating, etc)).

- As the 30 minute point approaches you can decide whether to give them an extension or not. If it feels like an additional 5 minutes would be useful you can simulate another phone call to explain that the flight has been further delayed. This can also serve to help bring the activity towards a close.

- When the time is finally up you can also simulate a call and say to the group,

*"Hey, It's Miren. Who's going to explain the plan and the 3 reasons?"*

..and hand the phone to someone. Usually someone will volunteer to read out the plan and bring the process to an end.

#### b. Creating a timeline of the process (30+)

- Lay out your pre-prepared long roll of paper. Draw along the centre of the paper an arrow and invite participants to gather around it. Then give the

*You don't have to use the theatrical approach but it is a nice way to bring some fun and creativity into the session. If you decide not to, you can simply interrupt them and tell them there has been a change of plan.*

*Obviously it is important that you pay close attention to what is happening in the group so you are able to support them in reflecting on it later!*

*It can be a good idea to celebrate everyone at this point - often it will have been challenging for people.*

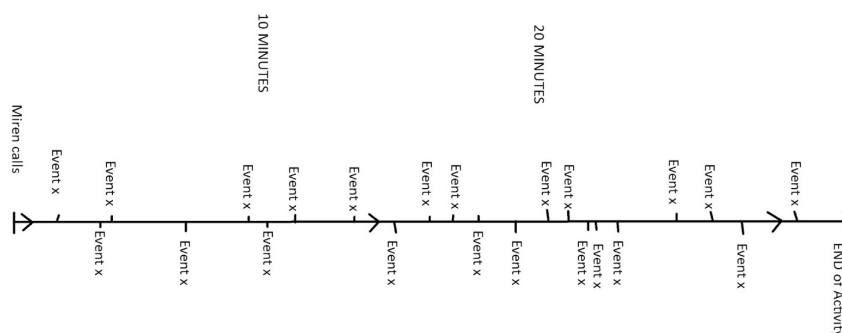
instructions:

- We will now make a timeline of the 30 minute period of the collaborative process
- We'll include all the key events we have witnessed.
- These should be **observable** events with as little interpretation or subjective judgement as possible (ie. things like 'Ben left the room' or 'Asad reminded us that we had 10 minutes left' which we can all observe and agree on; and not things like 'Alex was bored' which is speculation or someone's opinion)
- The names of people should be included.
- Write these on post-it notes and then arrange on the timeline in the appropriate order.

It might be useful to divide the group into subgroups, suggesting that each subgroup work on a 10 minute section.

(If, during the collaborative process, the larger group decided to split into smaller working groups, there might need to be several parallel timelines for those periods).

- Once the group has completed the timeline as well as they can (and you may need to get involved to help them get it done in the time you have), ask the facilitator who was taking notes of the events to suggest any obvious additions or amendments that will help to clarify the timeline. At this stage the timeline will look something like this:



### c. Break!

- Both of these processes require significant concentration and stamina from the group, they will definitely be in need of a break by now.

- However, it is often a good idea to let participants carry out the following activity 'd.' at the same time as calling a longer break. This enables some people to stay a bit longer to do the graphing, others to do it during the break, and others towards the end of the break. Otherwise it can be difficult for everyone to work on the sheet simultaneously. If you decide to do this, you need to introduce the activity first, as below.

### d. Graph plotting the levels of engagement (20)

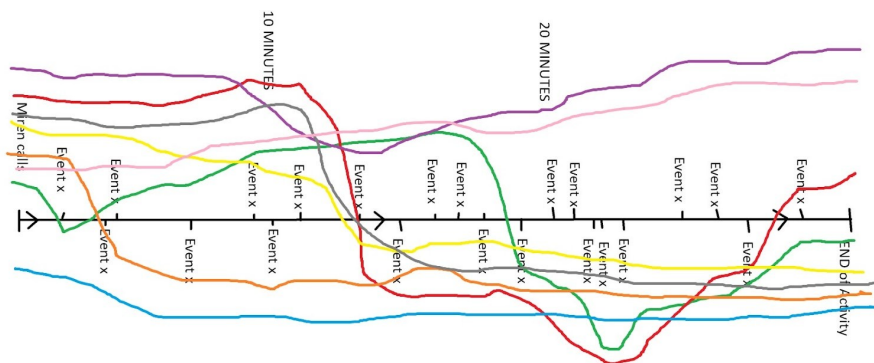
- The next step involves participants graphing their levels of engagement onto the timeline. Draw a plus sign at the top left hand corner and a minus sign at the bottom left hand corner. Then give the instructions:

- Mark with a small symbol (eg. a coloured x) the rise and fall of your level of engagement with the process

- Place a mark in relation to each event on the timeline - if you were very engaged you mark closer to the 'plus' and if you were not engaged, you mark closer to the 'minus'. (There is often some debate about what this means, but allow them to interpret the question in the way it most makes sense to them, rather than looking for a definitive definition)

- Once you have made a mark related to each event, draw a coloured line to join up the marks, creating a graph line of the rise and fall of your engagement.

The resulting timeline will probably look something like this (with one graph line per participant):



### Debriefing the activity (30 mins)

- The debrief for this activity involves a number of ways of analysing the graph and activity. Begin by mentioning the way that the timeline and graph lines help to expose the inner life of the group, showing the subjective experience that people had during the activity. By making this visible we can learn a lot about ourselves, our group's tendencies, and each other.

- The most basic option for debriefing is:

1. Invite small groups of three to look at the timeline and explain to each other what was going on for them at each stage. Why did their line rise and fall? What were the factors involved? What would have supported greater engagement?
2. Bring the groups together to discuss what they have observed and learnt:
3. What have they learnt about themselves?
4. What would they do differently next time?
5. What other patterns have they noticed?

### Additional debriefing approaches:

This activity can be debriefed using various lenses such as:

[Task-Process.Relationship](#)

[Privilege and Rank](#)

[Power](#)

[Mainstreams and Margins](#)

Or using [Spectrum Lines](#) asking questions such as:

- Who spoke the most or least and why?
- How satisfied were people with their participation?
- What level of influence did people think they had over the process?
- What level of influence did people feel they had over the outcome?

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

As mentioned previously, this can be an exposing activity, especially if people end up feeling 'called out' for having 'got it wrong' somehow, or if they have received the feedback that they held a lot of power/influence in the process (there is nothing inherently wrong with this, but people can find it uncomfortable!).

Make sure you close the session with something affirming about why it is important to make these things visible - not to point fingers but to help us work together more effectively and resiliently!

And part of that is also demonstrating the capacity to be self reflective, willing to learn/change, and express reassurance, kindness, patience and forgiveness, toward ourselves and others along the journey!

## FURTHER NOTES

You can extend this activity, using it as the basis for other explorations of tools, perspectives and practices around group work. For example, it can act as a good precursor for activities like [Task-Process-Relationship](#), [Giving and Receiving Feedback](#), [Exploring Privilege and Rank](#), [Exploring Power with Chapati Diagrams](#), [Understanding Blended Decision Making](#) and so on.

# POWER PAPER ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 10 - 15 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** A4 paper with 'POWER' written on it

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Groups and Organisational Culture

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Introducing the idea of diverse ways of holding/responding to power
- Approaching a (potentially) tricky subject with element of play/fun
- Supporting group and self reflection/awareness

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This activity should have no framing. You give the participants no input, no instructions and information. The point of the exercise is to see what they do!

..and then discuss it. See concluding points for more on this, as well as related materials here, for considering power more generally.

### Related material to support discussion:

- [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)
- [Active Solidarity chapter](#)
- [Exploring privilege and rank session](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This is a short and introductory activity. There is not much risk involved, except whatever might come up in the discussion. Power is a gnarly subject so, as ever, approach with kindness and the intention to support helpful transformation.

It works well as an intro in the [Blended Decision Making activity](#).

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (0 mins)

- Explain that the activity is to be done in silence, without talking.
- Ask participants to stand together in a close circle in groups of 6-8 people and then hand them a piece of paper with the word 'POWER' written on it.
- Don't say anything, simply hand it to them and watch what they do.

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
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### **Facilitating the activity (5 mins)**

- Things you might expect to see: the group look at you waiting to be told what to do; they drop it/don't want to touch it; someone grabs it; the group try to all hold the paper together; someone tears up the paper in order to portion it out
- The activity will likely come to some form of natural conclusion or pause, if not, interrupt them after around 5 minutes to debrief..

### **Debriefing the activity (5 - 10 mins)**

Ask the group what they noticed while doing this activity.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- What did you observe?
- How did you feel in response to the piece of paper?
- What did this create in the field and interpersonally?
- ..why do you think that was the case?

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

The point of the activity is:

- To draw out the different, complex and often slightly tricky responses people have in response to the word/concept/notion of 'power' (especially for those used to non-hierarchical organising and even when it's just a set of letters on a bit of paper!)
- To draw attention to the 3 patterns of distributing power in groups or organisations: 1. Concentrated (one person or a small group hold power) which can be depicted as a pyramid. This is a classic hierarchical situation. 2. Shared (power is distributed equally) which can be depicted as a circle. This is commonly referred to as a horizontal or flat structure. 3. Distributed (where power/influence is distributed appropriately according to role/responsibility etc) which can be depicted as a network and is commonly found in 'agile' organisational structures.
- To begin to notice/name some of the different ways we can respond to power - we might try to grab onto/appropriate it, we may want to share it, we might try to distribute it, or to avoid or reject it.. And so on. (You can name and or demonstrate versions of this with paper as you describe them).



# EXPLORING POWER WITH CHAPATI DIAGRAMS ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr25 – 1hr40

**GROUP FORMAT:** Small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Understanding Power fl pchart / paper, pens, scissors (per small group)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led / peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Groups and Organisational Culture

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Developing shared understanding and vocabulary related to power in groups
- Developing capacity to talk about power in our groups
- Group building

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Understanding and learning how to work with the way power functions in our groups is a key skill for effective collaboration. It can be a difficult theme to discuss and acknowledge, but developing the trust, frameworks, courage and willingness to look at and explore power and its dynamics in our groups is a crucial foundation for healthy collaborative work.

**Trust:** Transparency about how power is experienced in our groups can help us to build understanding and trust. The willingness to name and have named issues of power augments this. However, exploring power can be done in ways that erode trust if it is not done with sufficient sensitivity and a shared commitment to “Go for the Good of the Whole”. It is important to bring self-awareness to our own tendencies around power into such explorations – and take care not to use explorations about power as hidden power struggles. While such explorations build trust, they are also best done on the basis of an existing high level of trust – especially in shared ethical commitment.

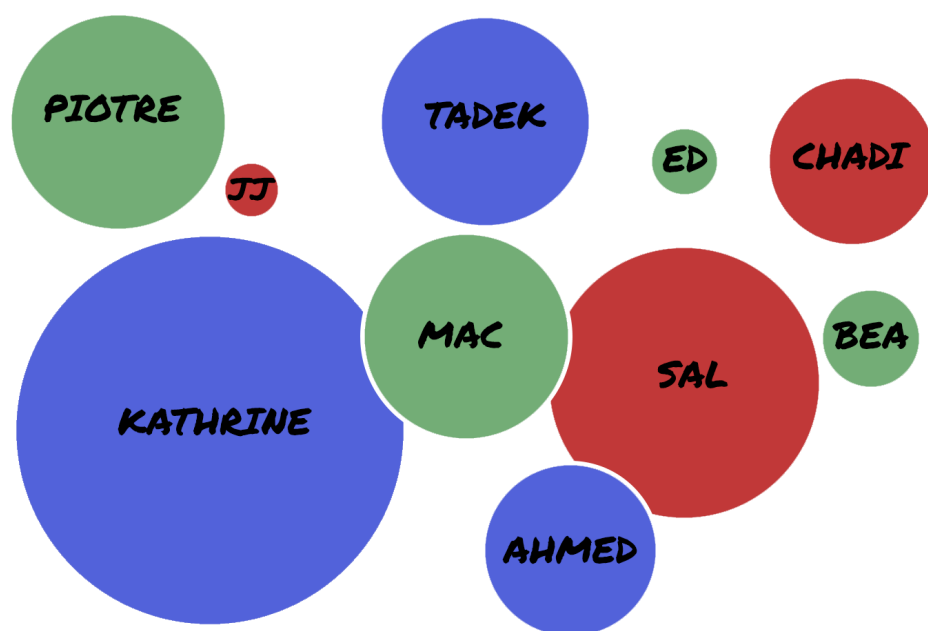
**Frameworks:** Power is complex and the word carries multiple connotations and uses. Along with this, power meanings are emotionally loaded. Creating a shared vocabulary that can help us negotiate the complexities of power is vitally important. Taking time to build an understanding of the framework we can use, the meanings we make of the word, and the different connotations it has is necessary.

**Courage and care:** Raising issues about power dynamics can require much courage and care. Often people can feel oppressed by the perceived power of others. Recognising the difficulty of owning and bringing this into the light is of great value. It can be equally challenging to hear that one is experienced as powerful and/or oppressive. The associations of power with oppression run deep. So compassion is often required in all directions to support a courageous engagement with these challenges.

**Willingness:** Much energy can be used up and many blocks created when we fail to address unhelpful power dynamics. Transparency is a first important step towards transformation. Recognising the importance of engaging these themes in our groups can be incredibly empowering. Being prepared to change and to be patient with the difficulty of change are of equal importance!

*This can be a very challenging exercise for people and requires emotional intelligence and care. As a facilitator it is crucial to be prepared to do the emotional holding this might require, both during and after the activity.*

Chapati Diagrams (unpacked below) are a way of exploring relative power and asking people to engage with making sense of a tricky theme. They will usually end up looking something like this:



(Don't show this to the participants, they should work out how they want it to look for themselves).

#### Related material to support framing:

- [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)
- [Active Solidarity chapter](#)
- [Exploring privilege and rank sesión](#)
- [Understanding Power map](#)

### OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

As above, this activity requires care! People often find it exposing and it is generally the case that at least one person from the group will need reassurance or a conversation afterwards about how they were perceived (often either because they were perceived/depicted as having a lot of power or very little).

We often design a day on group dynamics with a flow of activities that looks like: [The Warehouse/The Raft Game](#) > [TPR](#) > [Understanding Power in our Groups](#) > [Giving and Receiving Feedback](#).

### ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

#### Setting up the activity (5 - 10 mins [not including an experiential preparatory activity])

The chapati diagrams are a way of analysing power in a specific situation. The activity requires an 'experiential' element that can be analysed. This could be generated using a group activity such as [The Raft Game](#), or [The Warehouse](#). It could also simply draw on the dynamics that have arisen within a group conversation or in a course group more generally. Or it could draw on the actual functioning of a team or group in their 'real life' outside of the training.

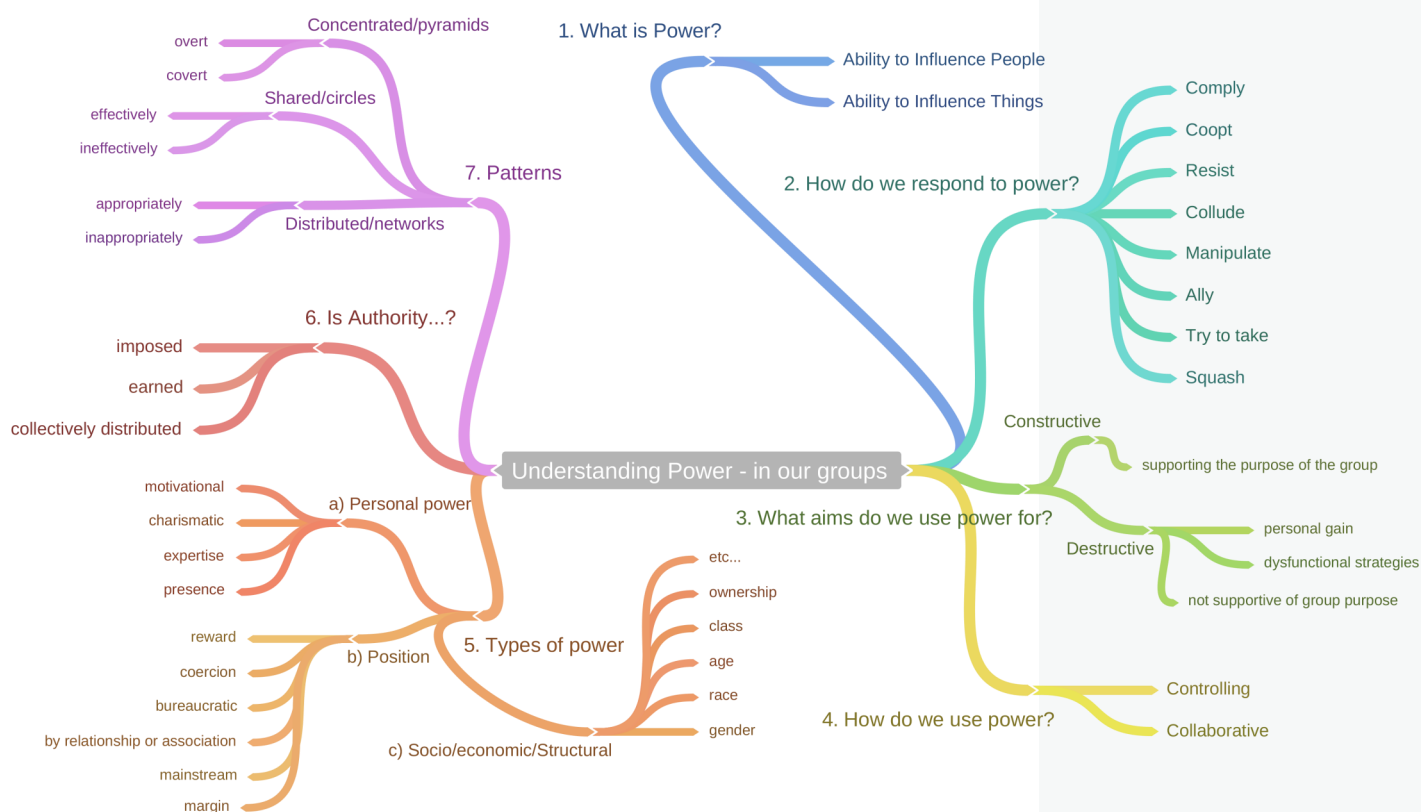
- Introduce the activity in the context of whatever session/theme you are using it. (Don't give them theory or too much information yet).

- Name the context to be analysed and then give the instructions:
  - We will explore the particular situation, through the lens of 'power'
- Using the materials, in groups of 4 - 5 people, make a 'chapati diagram' of the situation being analysed
- Each circle has a name of the person it represents, and the relative size of the circle represents the relative power of that person in the group, as you perceive it.

Keep the introduction minimal, allowing each group to find their way in interpreting what is meant by 'power' and how they will evaluate it.

### Facilitating the activity (1hr10)

- Watch how the groups are doing and encourage them to get started if they looking nervous or inactive. They may ask you for clarifications - do what you can to give it back to them to work out for themselves!
- After around 30 minutes, interrupt the groups and introduce some short input using the [Understanding Power](#) mind map:



This can help to provide additional vocabulary and framing. Show both flip chart and offer some handouts (10 mins)

- Allow the groups to continue working on their diagram (20 - 30 mins)

### Debriefing the activity (10 - 20 mins)

- Encourage each group to share their diagram with the others (perhaps a visiting gallery approach: One of each group (can rotate) stays with their diagram. Others tour around asking questions). Sharing the work should be made optional.

- Spend time unpacking the experience and reflections with the whole group.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- Highlight the care and skill needed to open up these issues
- Highlight the courage required
- Highlight the complexities related to connotations and associations of the term - and therefore the importance of building shared vocabularies

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

Invite people to be sensitive to each other in the time following the activity and let them know that you are available for conversations if people are finding it difficult to digest.

## **USEFUL RESOURCES**

The name 'chapati diagram' comes from the context that the exercise was developed within. It is a Popular Education exercise that has been used in community development work. When it was being used in rural communities on the Indian sub-continent the circles were made using flattened out dough balls - these flat breads are called chapatis.

# EXPLORING PRIVILEGE AND RANK ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr45 - 2h

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group work > personal work > small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** fl pchart paper, markers

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led > individual > peer-led Three

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Groups and Organisational Culture

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Building awareness around privilege and power dynamics in groups
- Becoming more aware of power and privilege individuals hold in groups and considering ways of navigating this well
- Building skill, literacy and courage in speaking about these themes
- Self awareness and emotional literacy
- Strengthening trust and deeper connection in the group

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This session will support participants in exploring privileges and power they hold in groups. The session focuses mostly on self-reflection and how to navigate the issue of power helpfully on the individual level, so that we best use our resources to serve the group's purpose and contribute to everyone's wellbeing. Unskillful use of power and privilege can often be a source of conflict and lack of resilience in social movements. Learning how to recognise unhelpful patterns and how to work with power beyond shame and guilt will make our movements more effective and long-lasting. The session uses the theoretical framework of 'rank' to look at power and privilege.

### What is rank?

Rank can be described as a sum of someone's privileges and power at any given moment.

Rank refers to the privileges we have relative to one another in relationships, in our groups/communities and in the world. Privilege refers to the access to benefits and resources that result from our membership of certain groups e.g. being white, being born a man, having received a lot of education. Rank is complex in that in any one moment we will have a mix of high and low ranks in relation to each other. It is also contextual. Often we are not aware of our high ranks and we notice more easily when we have low rank. When they are ignored they cause conflict in our relationships and groups.

### Types of rank:

**Social rank** - e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, income, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, education, health and physical abilities.

**Contextual rank** - changes depending on the situation, every group and organisation has its own rank structures, based on the norms and values it establishes. For example, in some contexts you may have high rank as a man, and in some it may be low (this does not negate the privilege of being a man in all contexts, under the system of patriarchy).

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**Psychological rank** - comes from life experiences; self awareness, having received love and positive feedback from friends and family as a child, sense of great conviction or justice, surviving and healing from suffering.

**Spiritual rank** - being connected to something bigger than ourselves (not necessarily understood in religious terms) or something that keeps us centred and at ease in the midst of difficulties.

It's important to see that rank and privilege are structural and not individual. It has nothing to do with being good or being bad. It's not about guilt or shame.

We can't get rid of rank or run away from it while these systems of oppression remain in place. But we can become aware of the rank dynamics and privileges in our interactions with others. And we can learn to use our rank and privilege more wisely for each other's benefit.

Based on processwork methodology and derived from Arnold's Mindell's book "*Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity*."

**Related material to support framing:**

- [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)
- [Shame, Blame and Collective Resilience chapter](#)
- [Exploring Power activity](#)
- [Understanding power map](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Talking about power and privilege might bring up resistance in participants and might be difficult emotionally, especially for those who have not had a chance to explore the topic in depth previously. Make sure to encourage kindness towards oneself and others as the group engages with the session and acknowledge that the topic might bring up challenges. Emphasise that session's aim is not to bring up guilt or shame, but to engage in reflection that will contribute to more awareness, wellbeing, resilience and ability to take care of and empower one another and ourselves.

Reactions of shame and guilt might arise - encourage participants to embrace them as much as possible and normalise them, as something we are strongly conditioned into. More about shame and guilt mechanisms, [here](#).

Only do the session with a group in which there is enough of a sense of trust to engage with challenging conversations.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Introduce the activity in the context of whatever session/theme you are using it. Emphasise strongly the purpose of talking about rank: to build deeper connections with oneself and others and transform unhelpful dynamics that limit group potential rather than contributing to group development and resilience.

### Facilitating the activity (1hr20 - 1hr30)

#### a. Introducing the theory (15 - 20)

- Explain the theory of rank, drawing on some of the material above, giving clear definitions of privilege and rank, and the difference between them. Give lots of examples from your own experience and make space for questions and comments from the group. If it's new, the subject can be tricky to grapple

with. It's not about people 'getting it right' - invite curiosity and questioning as much as possible. Some essential points to make would be:

- Rank is a conscious or unconscious social and personal ability/power that comes from culture/society, community support, personal strength and spiritual power
  - Rank is fluid, it changes. There are different kinds of rank
  - Some rank is unearned (being a certain sex, race, class, ... )
  - Some rank is earned (accomplishments, service performed, inner work)
  - You can't hide rank. We sense one another's rank through body language, communication styles, ways of relating etc
  - Usually we are unaware of our high rank, but aware of areas where we have lower rank than others.
- Reiterate the purpose of talking about this, acknowledging that it might be hard to talk about the power we hold as individuals and emphasise that power in itself is neutral - it's what we do about it and how we use it that matters!

### **b. Individual reflection (15)**

Give the instructions:

- You'll have approximately 10 minutes to reflect on some questions I will give you. I will write the questions up on a flipchart as we go along.
- As you reflect, use the medium of writing/journaling to support you.
- Think of a specific group context - it can be a historical context or a context you are in currently - and then answer the following questions:

**1. What are some of my high ranks in the 4 areas described previously (social, contextual, psychological, spiritual?) (5)**

**2. How does my rank show up? (5)**

**3. How do I use this power/influence? Is it conscious? (5)**

- Give them each question at 5 minute intervals (if you want to give them more time you can), then bring the group back together.

### **c. Group exploration (50)**

Invite participants to form groups of 4 (can be random, though the more diverse the groups will be, the more interesting the conversations). They will work in the groups for around 45 minutes, exploring the topic of rank.

- Once in their groups, give the instructions:
  - Each person will take 10 minutes being the focus of the conversation, the rest of the group will support them in their reflection through asking questions
  - Each person chooses one area where they have high rank and tells their group:
    - **What is this area in which they hold high rank?**
    - **What are the risks and how could they abuse their power in that group?**
    - **How might they use it for the good of the whole in the specific group context they are thinking of?**



- The rest of the group asks open ended questions that will support the focus person to go deeper in their reflection. Try to refrain from giving advice or sharing your experience and stay curious about the other person!

- Ensure you have the questions written up and visible for the groups.

- Keep an eye on the groups and make sure you remind them to move to the next person after each 10 minute slot. Bring people back together for the debrief.

### **Debriefing the activity (15 mins)**

- Allow space for people to share how it was for them to engage with the topics in the whole session.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- How was it to reflect on the topic of rank?

- How was it to share this with others? How was it to listen to other people's reflections and support them in the exploration?

- What has the session brought up?

- What else?

Acknowledge that ideally it would require much more time and that this is work they might choose to continue on their own. This kind of exercise can also be done in a group which works together.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

Holding power, privilege and rank often makes us feel guilty and ashamed, especially in social justice circles. Being able to shift our thinking about the power we hold from contracting, shameful attitudes towards a more open/neutral thinking about power as a resource we can use for the good of the whole or abuse if we are not aware of it and not handling it with skill, is a key competence to support the growth of our movements resilience and effectiveness - we want them and each other to be powerful!

Ideally these kinds of exploration would be an ongoing process in our groups and movements - it is never 'done'.

Exploring the topics of power and privilege requires trust building, emotional awareness and courage!

## **USEFUL RESOURCES**

To know more about privilege and how to navigate it in groups see:

- Leticia Nieto, Beyond Inclusion, Beyond Empowerment

- Arnold Mindell, Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity

- [Neon Introductory Guide: Power and Privilege, A handbook for political organisers](#)

# CONFLICT ICEBERGS ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 45 mins – 1hr

**GROUP FORMAT:** Small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** pre-drawn flipchart 1

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led > peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Groups and Organisational Culture

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

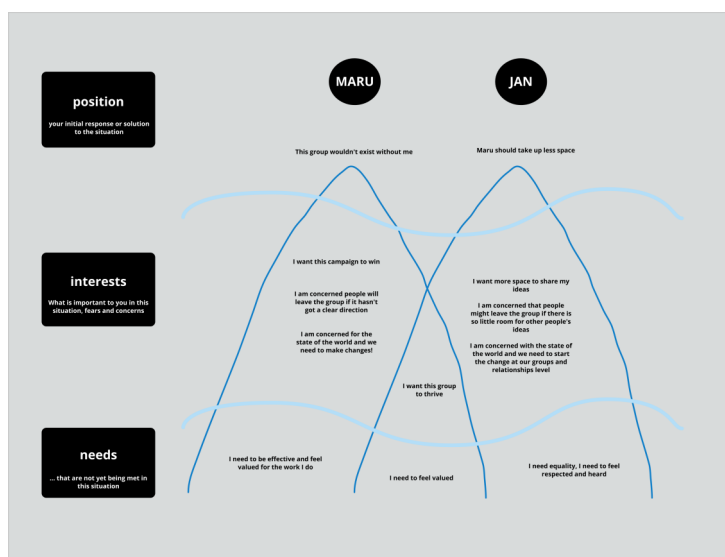
- Gaining a basic understanding of conflict mechanisms and why conflicts arise
- Basic preparation for approaching conflict resolution
- Transforming views around conflict towards more empowering perspectives
- Building capacity to hold discomfort

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Learning to be better equipped to face and transform conflict is essential for the long term wellbeing of our groups. Western, middle class culture often socialises people to become conflict avoidant and afraid of disagreements. We might be afraid that an open conflict will be something that destroys relationships and that a disagreement means we cannot work together anymore. In practice it is often the accumulated tension and the ignoring of brewing conflicts that leads to relationship damage, rather than the simple (and very normal) reality of holding different views from one another. If we can become more skilled in navigating complexity and getting genuinely curious about the disagreements we have, they can offer a precious opportunity for our groups and relationships to grow, our strategies to become more diverse and flexible and in turn our resilience as individuals, groups and movements to increase.

The simple 'iceberg' model presented in this session is a way of understanding what is happening underneath the surface of a conflict, so that we can embrace and work with it more skillfully.

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ASK...



More detail on what you might say to unpack this theory in the activity instructions below.

There is a lot more information on understanding conflict in this great resource by the [Seeds for Change / Navigate collective](#).

**Related material to support framing:**

- [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)
- [Working with Conflict in our Groups, Seeds for Change resource](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Talking about conflicts might create tension in the room, as we all (most probably) have some painful or unpleasant experiences around conflicts. You can use strategies such as encouraging participants to breathe and consciously release tension whenever needed - 'shaking things off' (just shake your body all over!), encouraging them to bring awareness and/or kindness to their experience/body, have short breaks or throw in a playful, energising game.

Ensure you have enough team support and that you hold the space with care and kindness.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (15 mins)

- Frame the session in an appropriate way, stating clearly the intention behind it and why it's important. Then present the Conflict Iceberg model and theory, use flipchart 1 (in the framing section) to support you. Some things you might want to mention:

- An iceberg provides a useful analogy for understanding conflict. Only a tenth of an iceberg is visible above water, while nine-tenths are below the surface. In terms of conflict, our **position** is the visible element. Often, it is difficult to access empathy and understanding if we only see the position of the other person, and not what lies beneath it.
- Immediately beneath the surface lie **interests** - what's important to us in this particular situation, or our concerns or fears about the issue. On this level, it is easier to identify shared interests, which can help to support rebuilding the relationship between conflicted parties and support us in looking for solutions that satisfy everyone.
- If we dig deeper we come to underlying, universal **needs** - for example, for respect, belonging, or to be understood. When needs are met, we are well, relaxed and able to collaborate. When they are not, we react with stress and automatic reactions which can interfere with us building honest relationships and collaborating well. Getting to this level supports rebuilding relationships and activating a sense of connection between conflicted parties, supporting mutual understanding and empathy to flow more easily.
- For example, Let's say there's a conflict between Jan and Maru, in a group. Jan's **position** could be an initial reaction, like "you talk too much" or a solution based on this initial reaction, like "you should take up less space".
- Jan's **interests** are that he wants more space to share his own ideas, and that he is concerned that other people might leave the group if Maru

continues to speak more than others.

- Jan's **needs** might be to be valued for what he brings to the group, and for equality. Maru founded the group and is very knowledgeable about the campaign. Her position is "If I didn't put so much into this group, it wouldn't exist". Her interests are to stay active in the campaign, and she's concerned people will leave the group if it hasn't got a clear direction. Her needs are to be effective in her work, and for her efforts to be acknowledged.

- This model only shows a conflict between 2 people but it might be applied to more - there could be 3 or 4 or 5 icebergs!

- And there will always be a **context** as well - people who are indirectly involved in the conflict, as well as other factors.

- After answering any clarifying questions about the model, divide participants into groups of 3-4 people and give the instructions:

- One person will bring a case to the group - an example of conflict from their life.

- The whole group will explore this person's case and try to apply the Iceberg model, looking for possible positions, interests and needs that may have been present in/influencing that situation.

- The aim of the exercise is not to find the 'right answers' (unlikely to be possible given that most of the group were not present in the situation) but to learn how to apply the model and practice differentiating between positions, interests and needs.

- You might come up with several different options/possibilities for each layer and that is OK!

- You'll have around 20 minutes.

### **Facilitating the activity (20 - 30 mins)**

- Keep an eye on the groups and support them in any way that they need. Give them a half way and 5 minute warning, then bring them back together..

### **Debriefing the activity (10 mins)**

Hold the group with care as you debrief, sensitive to the kind of material they have been exploring and the range of what might be coming up/going on for people.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- Was it easy or difficult? Why?

- Did the exercise change the way you are thinking about conflicts?

- Any other observations?

How are you feeling now?

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

- Conflicts are part of our lives and there is no way around it! Learning to relax with and accept them is an invaluable capacity.

*Be aware of what is happening in the small groups: since some people may not have had the opportunity to develop the skills to engage with the case sharer in the most ideal/sensitive way, occasionally this might need some intervention from you.*

- Being able to approach conflicts with curiosity and from a centred place supports our individual and collective ability to grow.

- Being able to recognise basic humanity in each other and understanding shared needs and interests is crucial in conflict transformation.

- We can do a lot to create the conditions in our groups and selves which will mean conflict arises less! For example, attending to group formation and culture, awareness and emotional literacy, giving and receiving feedback and so on. (See [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#))

## FURTHER NOTES

This activity can work well in combination with the [Conflict Sculptures activity](#).

## USEFUL RESOURCES

<https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/conflictbooklet.pdf>

<https://www.processwork.edu/>

# CONFLICT SCULPTURES ACTIVITY

## (ADAPTATION FROM THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED)

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr20 - 2hrs20

**GROUP FORMAT:** Small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Space to move bodies around / visual aid for any theory you are introducing

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led > peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Groups and Organisational Culture

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

### KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Basic preparation for approaching conflict resolution
- Transforming views around conflict towards more empowering perspectives
- Building capacity to hold discomfort
- Working somatically
- Developing awareness and emotional literacy

### FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Some cultures often socialises people to become conflict avoidant and afraid of disagreements. We might be afraid that an open conflict will be something that destroys relationships and that a disagreement means we cannot work together anymore. In practice it is often the accumulated tension and the ignoring of brewing conflicts that leads to relationship damage, rather than the simple (and very normal) reality of holding different views from one another. If we can become more skilled in navigating complexity and getting genuinely curious about the disagreements we have, they can offer a precious opportunity for our groups and relationships to grow, our strategies to become more diverse and flexible and in turn our resilience as individuals, groups and movements to increase.

The activity centres around an embodied and more energetic approach to opening up the theme and diving into the topic of conflict. This activity is derived from the [Theatre of the Oppressed](#) methodology and allows the group to start conversations in a fun and embodied way, often drawing out more than could be drawn out through a theory and discussion only. It also supports people to get in touch with emotional and felt associations they have with the topic.

It is not likely to offer everything required to resolve a conflict, which might be complex, long standing and require different kinds of intervention. It is a tool which can help to augment the process of looking at/working with conflict, and a good way to open up discussion and exploration around a theme that can be heavy, depressing and debilitating for people.

There is a lot more information on understanding conflict in [this](#) great resource by the Seeds for Change / Navigate collective.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)
- [Conflict Icebergs Activity](#)
- [Working with Conflict in our Groups, Seeds for Change resource](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Talking about conflicts might create tension in the room, as we all (most probably) have some painful or unpleasant experiences around conflicts. Asking people to embody an image of conflict has some risk to it – depending how connected to their experience people are, this is likely to bring about unpleasantness in the felt sense.

You can use strategies such as encouraging participants to breathe and consciously release tension whenever needed – ‘shaking things off’ (just shake your body all over!), encouraging them to bring awareness and/or kindness to their experience/body, have short breaks or throw in a playful, energising game. And be sure to let people know they can always stop if they need to.

Ensure you have enough team support and that you hold the space with care and kindness.

Depending how big the group is and how long the various stages take, you will need to consider where to put a break.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 - 10 mins)

– Frame the session in an appropriate way, stating clearly the intention behind it and why it’s important. You could ask the group what comes up for them when you use the word “conflict”. How do they feel about it? What comes to mind?

### Facilitating the activity (1hr10 - 2hrs)

#### a. Warm up - moving through the space (10)

– Invite participants to start moving around the space, making an effort to find new paths to move amongst the group, filling the space and avoiding simply ‘going around the room’

– As the participants walk through the space, invite them to imagine different scenarios. First:

– You are in a big city, it is summer time, and it is very hot. You are late for an important meeting with someone and being late will be seen as really disrespectful.

– As you rush through the city, you bump into a very old, good friend you have not seen in a while. You say hi to them! (the participants should stop in front of someone else in the group and act this scenario out with them)

– Allow participants to respond to the scenario, most probably they will increase their speed and become more rude towards others in the room with the first instruction, and the energy will increase even more when they greet the friend.

– After a minute or two, instruct them to let go of that scenario and continue moving through the room. Then invite them into a new scenario:

– Now, you are in a beautiful forest, the temperature is nice and warm but not too hot. You are on a lazy Sunday morning stroll, there are not many

*Between each scenario,  
as you invite  
participants to move  
around the space again,  
encourage them to notice  
how they are feeling  
after imagining the  
scenario, what are the  
sensations in their  
bodies? How do their  
feet feel on the ground?  
Any emotions coming up?  
Encourage them to relax  
tension, take some  
deeper breaths and so  
on..*



people around, the birds are singing and the air is fresh.

- Suddenly a person appears on the path (a narrow one and there is nowhere to turn). It is someone you have not seen in a while and the last time you met your interaction was awkward and unpleasant - you disagreed about something quite strongly and didn't talk again. Will you say hi to them? (participants will likely stop in front of someone else awkwardly, the energy will be very different to the first round)

- Again after a minute or two, instruct them to let go of that scenario, move through the space again, and then invite them to a third one:

- You are in an urban centre, moving through some central, busy streets. It is Monday morning and everyone seems in a hurry. It is winter time, it is really cold and the streets are full of half melted, grey snow. There is no sun. You just finished your shift and it was the last thing on the agenda after a few days of intense work. You are tired and keen to get home to get some rest.

- You bump into someone you don't know very well but are very interested to get to know them and you really enjoy chatting with them and being around them. Say hi to them!

- Invite the participants to let go of the last scenario after a minute or two and bring them back into the present - encourage them to keep on moving, in the tempo that best works for them at the moment. Describe the present environment and encourage participants to look around and look at each other as they mingle, supporting them to relax and notice how they are feeling in the body.

- Finally ask them to form groups of 3 or 4 (depending on the numbers, don't go lower than 3!) with people who are closest to them in the room.

## **b. Creating and reflecting on sculptures (20-40)**

[timing depending on number of small groups]

- Now give the instructions:

- In your small group, form one sculpture which depicts conflict

- You will have **3 minutes** to do it so don't overthink it or talk too much about it - you should use the time to form and adjust the sculptures

- The idea is to follow/go with the first thing that comes to your bodies

- Go!

- When the groups are ready (and you might need to hurry them along!), bring the whole group back together to the 'sculpture gallery' - each group will show their sculpture to the rest of the group, one by one.

- As the sculptures are presented, ask the audience (the rest of the group):

- What do they see?

- What is happening in the sculpture?

- What emotions are present?

Ask the viewers to describe people involved in the sculpture in a way that avoids ascribing the represented roles in the sculpture to the individuals who form them (for example through clothing items and using gender neutral pronouns, like: "The person with glasses and red jumper is sad and seems like they want to run away")

*Keep the tempo of the sculpture creation and interpretation quite high, so that people stay energised and engaged.*

*Be aware of how long you are asking people to stay in the postures, particularly if they are embodying something emotionally challenging. Always offer people the option to stop if they need to.*

Encourage different interpretations – there is no one right interpretation and people might see different things in the sculpture. Conflicting interpretations are welcome!

- Go through each of the groups in turn..

### **c. Introducing some perspectives/theory on conflict (20 - 30)**

Debrief and draw out learning/experience from the previous stage. You might say/ask things like:

- We all have some experiences of conflict, it is really common and our bodies know it really well
- Some of the named emotions and situations expressed in the sculptures had a feeling of difficulty and heaviness around them – we often see conflict as a problem and experience it as something unpleasant
- Some seemed more cheerful or 'lighter' in how they were held or interpreted – this is interesting.. there are different ways of approaching, holding and responding to conflict
- Why do we think conflict is challenging for us? What does it bring up?
- Then take some time to offer some perspectives on conflict and working with it, discussing with the group and drawing on the experiences of conflict they have encountered in their groups and lives. (A model we often use at this point is the Conflict Iceberg model, more on this [here](#)).

### **d. Returning to the sculptures (20-40)**

[timing depending on number of small groups]

- After this input/exploration,, ask them to go back into their initial sculpture groups and give the instructions:
  - Take 3 minutes to transform your initial sculpture into something different
  - Imagine that the conflict represented in the original sculpture has been looked at, explored and analysed through the lens/perspective of the theory we have explored
  - Again, try not to talk too much, see if you can use your bodies to find the possible transformation
  - The goal is to finally arrive at a different, still sculpture.
- After all the groups have formed their new sculptures, ask them to remember them and go back into the 'gallery', as in part 'b.'.
- Ask the groups to show their initial sculpture and then transform it into the new one, so that the audience sees the whole process of change.
- As before, ask for reflections from the group on what they are seeing and draw out the learning. Go through each group, and keep the energy up!

### **Debriefing the activity (5 - 10 mins)**

- Use whatever comes up in this last exercise to unpack and wrap up.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- Notice both 'positive' things that will come up in the new sculptures – like more connection between the different elements, more relaxation, etc
- and the more difficult things that might come up – like one element of

*Depending how long you have spent in the small groups, consider the need for a break somewhere...*

the sculpture still being removed/upset or other signs of disharmony.

- Acknowledge the limitations of the tool - that it won't always magically work to resolve a situation that is likely to be complex and ongoing.. The tool aims to draw on somatic/body knowledge to augment more analytical and cognitive approaches

- Emphasise that this session is a basic session on conflict, helping us to understand conflict dynamics, but there are a lot of other tools and practices we can use in terms of conflict transformation, and ongoing or entrenched conflicts are rarely fixed "just like that"!

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

- Conflicts are part of our lives and there is no way around it! Learning to relax with and accept them is an invaluable capacity.

- Being able to approach conflicts with curiosity and from a centred place supports our individual and collective ability to grow. Working with the body can be a very useful way of accessing new information and perspectives, particularly at the 'feeling' level.

- We can do a lot to create the conditions in our groups and selves which will mean conflict arises less! For example, paying attention to group formation and culture, awareness and emotional literacy, giving and receiving feedback and so on. (See [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)).

- Affirm and name the fact that this is not necessarily easy - our histories with conflict can weigh on us in ways that are painful and undermining. Thank the group for engaging with uncomfortable material and for the care with which they have done so (hopefully!).

## **USEFUL RESOURCES**

[Activities/Games from Theatre of the Oppressed](#)  
<https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/conflictbooklet.pdf>  
<https://www.processwork.edu/>

## **FURTHER NOTES**

This activity works well in combination with the [Conflict Icebergs activity](#).

# GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr15–2hrs

**GROUP FORMAT:** Small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** pre-prepared flipchart and/or handouts

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led > peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Groups and Organisational Culture

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Developing self awareness/knowledge
- Strengthening personal/emotional robustness
- Group trust and relationship building
- Supporting feedback loops/structures/mechanisms
- Developing listening skills
- Developing communication skills

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

No matter how much self-reflection and analysis we do, it is often very difficult for us to be aware of our blind spots, unhelpful behaviours and obstructive habits. Feedback from others can often be the most potent way for us to learn about and transform our behaviour. We need our colleagues and friends to help reflect these things back to us.

Creating a group culture in which people are comfortable and adept at offering and receiving feedback is therefore vital. If we can create cultures of care, that means people feel safe enough and are invited/encouraged to offer feedback, if we can make these practices the norm in our groups - supported by self awareness and emotional literacy practices - we do a lot to mitigate the inevitable tensions and conflicts that will present themselves over time.

However, it requires skill and understanding to do well. Here are a set of these simple guidelines that can help us to ensure that feedback is given and received more helpfully.

## GUIDELINES FOR GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

### OFFERING FEEDBACK

#### - Check and state your intention

Explain why you are giving this feedback. Constructive feedback almost always comes from a place of wanting to improve something e.g. your relationship, the group dynamic or effectiveness. Explaining this at the start will really help to open a safer space for the person to be able to hear you and hopefully minimise their defensiveness due to assuming you are trying to harm them in some way. If, on reflection you realise your intention is not constructive, then offering feedback is unlikely to be useful.

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

### **- Take responsibility for your own needs in the situation**

A very common situation is that our need to offer someone feedback is driven by one or more of our own needs not being met. It will really help the person receiving feedback to hear what you are saying without becoming defensive if you explain what need it is of yours' that is not being met because of their behaviour. By explaining this to them you are helping them to feel compassion for your situation rather than putting the emphasis on blaming them which is likely to trigger shame and therefore defensiveness.

### **- Offer appreciation early on**

It is much easier for someone to trust that you are not trying to harm them and that your intention is benevolent if you express something positive about them or your relationship before launching into the problem. Of course only do this if it feels authentic, however if you are not feeling any authentic appreciation for the person you may want to question if now really is the right time to talk to them about the situation. It is likely in this case that you are still 'triggered' by what's going on in some way and not fully taking responsibility for your own emotional baggage. Some kind regard practice, in advance of approaching them, can be of invaluable assistance here.

### **- Taking responsibility for your own emotional baggage**

It is rare for situations to be entirely one person's 'fault'. Situations that arise between us and others, almost without exception, contain within them our own emotional baggage. To be able to offer truly constructive feedback we need to be able to take responsibility for our own 'stuff' or emotional baggage in the situation and group more generally. The more we explore our own inner world the more we are able to take responsibility for both our own behaviour and our reactions to other people's behaviour. Understanding our own 'stuff' and what it is we bring to group dynamics is a lifelong journey. Therefore it is wise to have a certain amount of humility when offering feedback and to voice your recognition that whilst you may not be aware of your role in the situation, you are aware that these things are complicated and involve dynamics *between people, rather than being about one person 'getting it wrong'*.

### **- Timing**

If possible, it is wise to wait a while before offering feedback so that you are able to reflect on some of the above issues and come from the most integrated and constructive place possible. Being constructive does not mean not bringing your emotions. It simply means bringing them in a 'clean' way that includes taking responsibility for your own emotional baggage. The danger of waiting is that we tend to rationalise our emotions and in the process repress them. This is not the purpose of waiting. Indeed it is wise not to wait too long either - it is easy to talk ourselves out of offering feedback when it can be uncomfortable and painful for us. Once time has gone on, it is easy to feel like the 'moment has passed'.

We also need to consider whether it is an appropriate moment for the other person. Is it a time when the person we want to offer feedback to will be able to be receptive? Do they have too much on? Do they have the capacity to listen?

### **- Respond constructively to defensiveness**

It is rare that someone does not become defensive when presented with challenging feedback. Feedback that challenges someone's 'sense of self' or 'ego' is most likely to trigger defensiveness in them. When defensiveness does occur, support the person with compassion and empathy. Firstly recognise that defensiveness comes from parts of the person that are vulnerable and fragile. Try to imagine how you might feel in their situation and what might be useful to support you to hear what is being said without being defensive. Perhaps even voice this process ... explaining that it is not your intention to cause them pain or harm and that you feel a bit lost as to how to say what you are feeling in a way that they can hear it. Being honest about how you feel about their defensiveness can be really helpful. Bear in mind that defensiveness at the time of hearing feedback does not mean that they will not hear and process what you are offering, later.

## RECEIVING FEEDBACK

### - Listen; seize the gift

A common tendency when faced with challenging feedback is to close down and try and push the other person away by being defensive. Because it may have taken quite a lot of courage for the person giving feedback to approach you, becoming defensive does indeed often serve to close them down. But if this happens, you will have missed the opportunity to learn and grow and to deepen your relationship with this person. Indeed, feedback of any sort is always useful, no matter how challenging it may feel. It is very rare for there to be absolutely nothing useful in what the person is telling you. Feedback is a gift in that it is a rich opportunity to learn about yourself in groups and to transform your tendencies. Sadly it is rare that feedback is delivered in a way that it is easy to hear, even with the best of intentions. We therefore need to be patient and make the choice to (attempt to) learn from this situation – no matter how challenging.

Often it can be hard to discern between what is actually the other person's own 'emotional baggage' and which bits really do relate to your own unhelpful behaviour. Again, listen carefully and trust that there is always something to learn from the situation – even if it is simply observing your reaction to what they have to say.

Try to stay aware of this tendency to become defensive and/or close down and instead make the choice to take this opportunity to learn and grow and listen fully to what is being said. Often when we are really listening, rather than being defensive, we discover that what they are saying is extremely rich and complex and not nearly as hurtful as it could seem if we are lost in our reactions.

### - Take responsibility for emotions arising

If you feel emotions arising then voice this in a way that takes responsibility for them (rather than blaming the other person for them). This can help to keep the situation authentic and support the other person to empathise with how you are feeling. "I am noticing that I'm feeling hurt by this, and like I am not seen for the efforts I make" rather than "you are really hurting my feelings, you never appreciate or notice anything I do!", for example.

### - Ask for space to reflect

If the situation feels too challenging in the moment or you find yourself really not agreeing with what they are saying, then it is perfectly okay to explain you need some time to reflect on what they have said. This might also be an opportunity to check with others on what their sense is (in a way that is constructive rather than gossipy). Be sure that you do come back to them afterwards and share whatever reflections you have had – again, seeing this as an opportunity to learn and grow.

### - Express gratitude, if authentic

It can be really helpful to express gratitude to the person giving you feedback in recognition of their good intention and the courage it may have taken for them to speak out. Expressing gratitude sends a strong message to the person offering feedback that you are listening and gives them some reassurance that you are intending to act on their feedback. Of course, in more heated situations it may not feel authentic to thank the person ... stay authentic but stay grounded and remain aware of what emotional baggage you may be projecting onto the other person. Don't fake 'niceness' but be aware of how easy it is for our anger to be distorted and harmful. There is nothing wrong with anger, but very often because we live in a world that tells us it is wrong to be angry, we can have a lot of repressed anger that may burst or leak out in situations like this.



## THE SESSION

In this session, we can offer these guidelines to the group and create an opportunity to practice using them. This can be done in small groups of three or four.

It is important to emphasise the qualities of kindness and constructiveness when framing the activity and model this in how you are communicating. Feedback is not about self-righteously making other people wrong, it's about supporting one another to grow, supporting our groups and endeavours to flourish, in service to our bigger aims. We all probably know it's good and necessary, and almost none of us like it! This is a great opportunity to practice, hopefully in a safer environment – encourage participants to make the most of that.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)
- [Working with Kind Regard session](#)
- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This session has some obvious risks. You are giving the group tools/suggestions for how to give/receive feedback constructively but you have no control as to how well individuals will manage to implement these. If someone accidentally presses someone's buttons, or communicates clumsily/unhelpfully, or someone else's defensiveness levels go haywire, you have a potential bit of conflict or rupturing that will need attention to resolve.

Consider whether there are existing tensions in the group that mean it would be best that certain people didn't work together? Or would it be good to suggest they *do* work together? Is there a level of relationship established between them that can hold a bit of risk/difficulty? Do you want to trust the group to make this decision based on their own sense of it, or be more directive as the facilitator?

A more general sense of the levels of care, empathy and maturity in the group will inform your decisions around this too. And obviously, it's probably not worth running this session if people don't know each other at all! (Although you might still want to introduce the principals, in this case).

In general, you can probably trust the group to go in at an appropriate level for them. Sometimes you will find that a small group decides amongst themselves to only give each other 'positive' feedback, for example. Although this may seem like a bit of a shame after having encouraged them to make the most of the safer space to explore something more challenging, one can also see this as the group taking care of itself..

If you are especially concerned, you can always keep the groups in the room with you, so that you can keep an eye on anyone who might seem to be finding the activity upsetting/destabilising.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (20 - 30 mins)

- Introduce the theme and concepts thoroughly, as they are described above, with the assistance of a flipchart and/or handouts, showing the key headings. (They will need a copy of this to take with them when they break into smaller groups, so if you are only using a flipchart, you will need to ask them to copy the pointers down)

When you are satisfied that the group have a good enough understanding of



what you are sharing with them, give them the instructions:

- You'll spend the next [X] minutes in smaller groups (4-5) practising this together
- One person will give feedback to another, with the other two/three people witnessing and then offering feedback about how the feedback was given. Each person should have an opportunity to offer and to receive feedback.
- This can be a challenging area - intentions of kindness and constructiveness are important
- Most of us likely avoid this, generally. This is a great opportunity to practice, hopefully, in a safer environment - make the most of it!

### **Facilitating the activity (40 - 60 mins)**

- Keep an eye on the groups, offer assistance if required, and bring them back together at the allotted time.

### **Debriefing the activity (10 - 15 mins)**

The primary function of the debrief will be to ensure that everyone is 'ok' and bring the group together. Balance an attitude/modelling of care, with a straightforward sense that 'assumes' the best. (Any hurt feelings or conversations that need to happen might come up in the debrief but will likely be more helpful post-activity).

Other than simply hearing from people to get a read on how they are, you may want to draw out:

- What did people feel was most important for them, both in terms of offering and receiving feedback?
- What would they do differently if they tried the activity again?
- Was there anything that stood out for people or surprised them that they'd like to share?

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

Reiterate how important it is that we have mechanisms for feedback in our lives and groups. The more we make these things a normal part of our cultures, and practice the skills, the more familiar, easy and useful they become. It is always clunky to begin with - that's okay!

It is often necessary to put structures in place to make sure it happens. Of course eventually we hope feedback can simply be communicated in a natural, appropriate and timely way, but because we tend to find it uncomfortable and avoid it, if we don't make designated space for it in our groups, it is unlikely to happen (until something gets so difficult it becomes unbearable, which is not the best time to be giving feedback!).

# DIVERSITY WELCOME ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 15 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group activity

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** N/A

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Active Solidarity, Equity and Empowerment

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Welcoming the group - supporting people to feel seen/acknowledged
- Establishing an atmosphere of care and supporting trust in the group (container building)
- Establishing a culture of inclusivity
- Preparing the ground for active equity and solidarity work

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This short activity is an adaptation of recommendations from Training for Change. It can be used as part of container building activities, as well as as a very useful Inclusion tool. It won't fix the problems that might arise in the group around inclusivity or equity but it will lay foundations for building a culture of respect and solidarity. This activity makes visible the [margins](#) of the group and aims to support group members to feel seen and welcomed. It is a form of active intention setting for the space and an expression of values. As a facilitator you have significant power to influence and guide group culture - this activity helps to start shaping the culture towards one of solidarity, inclusion and equity in the group.

The more you are able to speak to the group and look at them (rather than read from your notes), the better - it creates more connection and makes the opening more heartfelt. Make the text of the Welcome as much 'yours' as possible, trying to make sure it does not feel like reading a list, but a genuine welcome to all of the mentioned parts of the groups' diversity.

Take pauses after some of the parts of the Welcome, and invite participants to add things ('Is there anything else?' 'Is there any other language present in the room?' etc)

Make sure you don't rush it, it is meant to be repetitive and spacious. It often creates a sense of tenderness and can be moving to the group. Give it space and enjoy it!

### Related material to support framing:

- [Active Solidarity, Equity and Empowerment chapter](#)
- [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Diversity Welcome will happen at the very beginning of the session or training.

If you can get some information about the participants' backgrounds and identities in advance of the session/training, that will help you frame your Diversity Welcome, but you can also carry it out without knowing much about the group. If you know that some particular minority will be present on the training or that there is a certain margin in the group you will be working with - make sure you mention them in the Welcome.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (0 mins)

(this doesn't need a set up, just begin it)

### Facilitating the activity (15 mins)

- Welcome participants into the space, by going through and naming some of the things listed below. Feel free to name more things than are listed here, as feels appropriate.

*"I want to welcome:*

*- **our bodies** and different ways we experience and engage with them*

*- **our emotions:** joy, excitement, grief, rage, indignation, contentment, disappointment, nervousness, any others?*

*- **our different ability levels:** Those who identify as having a disability, visible or invisible*

*- **different health conditions:** those who identify as healthy or not, those living with chronic illnesses, physical pain*

*- **different ways our brains work** and process information*

*- **educational background:** those with the experience of formal education on different levels and those without that experience, those familiar with workshop culture and not (if you are leading an online space: familiar with online learning spaces and not)*

*- **different ways we learn:** visual learning, verbal learning, learning through reading, doing things, problem solving, storytelling and all the other ways we learn*

*- **activists**, organisers, changemakers and those who don't identify as such*

*- **all our genders:** those who identify as trans, non-binary, man, women, on or out of the spectrum of gender, all the ways we experience and express our genders*

*- **all our descents:** Latino descent, African descent, Middle-Eastern descent, Asian and Pacific descent, European descent, and people of mixed, multiple descents*

*- **migrants** and people living in the country they were born*

*- **languages** spoken here: greek, swedish, flemish, english, arabic, italian, german, turkish, castellano / spanish, catalan, portuguese, polish, dutch, french ; are there any other languages spoken in the space?*

**- our class backgrounds:** working class, middle class, owning class, those who do not know where they fit in those definitions and all the different contexts of class dynamics we come from

**- our sexualities:** those sexually active and not, those who use labels and not, those who identify as gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, heterosexual and all the ways we experience our sexualities

**- our ages:** those in their 20's, 30's, 40's, 50's, 60's, 70's, 80's?

**- our faiths,** religious traditions and practices, those who identify as atheists, seekers

**- those who support us to be here:** team behind this event, your organisations, groups, families – genetic and chosen, friends, supporters, ancestors and spirits”

- At the end, ask participants if there is any other element of diversity in the group that you have missed and welcome them, as participants mention them. (If you are doing it in an online space, you can also invite participants to write their suggestions in the chat - read the suggestions from the chat out loud, so the suggestions are verbally acknowledged and included in the welcome.)

### **Debriefing the activity (0 mins)**

No debrief required here. Although participants will often tell you how much they appreciated/enjoyed it!

# STEP WITH ME ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 40 – 50 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group activity

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Space to stand in a circle

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Active Solidarity, Equity and Empowerment

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Building trust in the group, container building
- Drawing out marginalised experiences in the group
- Exploring the group's diversity
- Helping a group that's unconscious of its margins
- Supporting margins to express themselves

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This activity aims to make visible the margins of the group (which can often be invisible to those inhabiting the mainstreams of the group) and also shows the many different ways marginalisation can happen, how common it is, and how many of us are experiencing it all the time! It demystifies and supports the group to understand and be in a better position to take the needs and experiences of others into account.

This exercise is a powerful container building exercise – it can encourage a degree of vulnerability in the group. Make sure it is not the first container building tool you are using, as people do need to have a bit of trust established to take it to the level it's intended and not end up in something superficial or generic.

This activity combines well with other sessions on the theme of active solidarity and group dynamics. It can be a good way to open up dialogue around these themes, especially when a group is being very 'polite' together, and you want to encourage them to deepen.

It's important to give the group framing as to why they are doing this – without this, as with other sessions exploring oppression or group dynamics, it can appear to be emphasising difference or difficulty in potentially unhelpful or fracturing ways.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Active Solidarity, Equity and Empowerment chapter](#)
- [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)
- [Mapping Mainstreams and Margins activity](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This exercise gently encourages openness and vulnerability and might need more debriefing time than planned below. Ensure you have enough team support and you consider where in the day this activity is happening, with good set-up and debrief space. Thinking about something to follow that explores strategies to overcome and work with marginalisation could be a good counterpart to this.

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The activity should be conducted by the group in a manner of care, interest and kindness, rather than with any feeling of hostility and blaming! You can do a lot to model this as the facilitator.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 - 10 mins)

- Frame the activity well, explaining why you are doing it (as above).
- Ask the group to stand in a circle. If people need a chair, it is OK, but make it optional - the activity works much better and encourages more vulnerability if people are standing. The circle needs to be big enough so that people feel comfortable and have some space around them, but not so spacious that they feel distanced from each other
- Give the group the following instructions:
  - We will be standing in a circle for 15 - 20 minutes.
  - Whoever feels ready to, will take a step towards the centre of the circle and say: "I feel on the margins of this group when ..." and finish the sentence with something that is true in their experience (eg. "I feel on the margins of this group when people talk about things in gender-normative ways", or "I feel on the margins of this group in coming from a working class background", "I feel on the margins of this group when the term 'activist' is used", "I feel on the margins of this group when people are speaking english").
  - Anyone else in the group for whom this sentence is also true will then make a step towards the centre of the circle as well.
  - We'll then allow a moment or two to take this information in, before everyone steps back to their place, and the next person can step forward with something new.
  - One person can share multiple times, but be aware of how much space you take and leave space for others - moments of silence and waiting are ok!
  - There is no imperative to share if you don't want to.
- Demonstrate by going first, sharing a sentence that is true for you, encouraging anyone else for whom this sentence is true to take a step into the circle with you. Pause in there and encourage everyone just to notice, who is in and who is out and how it feels, does it bring anything up? Then step back, other participants stepping back into the circle as well.
- The activity is done in silence apart from sharing sentences (let people know there will be a chance to debrief at the end of the activity).

### Facilitating the activity (20 mins)

- Begin the activity - there might be a moment of hesitation and silence. This is OK. Eventually people will start stepping into the circle. If the sharing remains on a superficial level - step in yourself sharing something more intimate - around identity, marginalisation, emotions. People will usually follow, bringing more vulnerability.
- Sometimes people will do half a step, if the sentence is partially true for them. This is OK and usually just happens by itself.

### **Debriefing the activity (15 mins)**

- After the exercise seems to have wound itself down, stop and ask participants to turn to a person standing next to them and debrief the activity using these prompts:

- What was it like? What was hard? What was easy?
- How was it to step into the circle? How was it to stay on the outside?
- How is that connected to how you feel in the group in general?

- After 7 or so minutes, bring them back to the big group and ask them to share reflections. There are no specific generic points to draw out. Follow your intuition around what the group might need in the moment.

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

This will depend how the activity has gone, but it is generally good to appreciate the group for engaging in something that can feel vulnerable, and modelling care as you do so. (It's important the group don't feel 'dropped' at the end).



# MAPPING MAINSTREAMS AND MARGINS ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 1h30

**GROUP FORMAT:** Small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Pre-prepared fl pchart 1 (below), fl pchart paper, markers

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led > peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Active Solidarity, Equity and Empowerment

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Understanding Mainstream and Margins dynamic
- Putting Mainstream and Margin theory into practice
- Uncovering existing tensions in the group
- Deepening trust between participants
- Developing conflict and tension resolution skills

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

### The “Mainstream & Margins” dynamic

The Mainstream & Margin dynamic is part of every group’s life. No matter how homogeneous a group or organisation, a close observation will show that some characteristics or qualities in the group are marginalised. Eg, in a group that has a reputation for having vibrant social events and throwing great parties, there may be a margin which loves quietness. As a group evolves over time, different qualities will shift between the mainstream and the margins, so the dynamic is always changing. Each person in the group might have some characteristics of the margins, and some characteristics of the mainstream, and that too will change.

The benefit of learning about this dynamic is to bring awareness, understanding and offer capacity to make choices about how we participate in the group. It allows us to better tolerate and even welcome some of the tensions that these dynamics produce. Without the mainstream a group wouldn't exist, however without the margins a group wouldn't grow. In the short term, a group can grow by increasing the size of its mainstream, but for long-term sustainability, a group will grow by supporting its margins to participate on their own terms.

The margins (or ‘edges’ - if you’re into permaculture) of the group can be the most fertile place for growth.

**The mainstream** is identified by the qualities, behaviours and values supported by and deemed worthy by the group. The mainstream sets the tone, communication style and way of working in the group. A mainstream doesn't necessarily mean a numerical majority. Some characteristics of mainstreams:

- Feeling at home in the group
- Taking on more visible or 'responsible' jobs
- Using language like “we all think...” “everyone knows that...” “this is normal...” “that isn’t appropriate...”
- Perhaps not noticing that some people have different experiences or beliefs to them

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- Talking confidently in the group, and being listened to by others
- Putting a lot of work into the group, and feeling invested in it.

The mainstream does essential work in holding the group together. Sometimes people in the mainstream can feel guilty for having this power. It's normal that the mainstream is 'clueless' to the existence of the margins. If the dynamic starts to shift, and the margins come into their power, the mainstream can feel confused, and feel like new opinions or behaviours have come out of nowhere.

The mainstream often tries hard to stay comfortable, and might reject challenges from the margins, feeling attacked and alienated. This *doesn't* mean they have suddenly become marginalised! They need to practise being with the discomfort of what is being pointed out, and listening. If a group's mainstream refuses to positively engage the margins, ultimately the group will fail to thrive, so the mainstream has a big opportunity (and responsibility) if it can develop its awareness of this dynamic.

**The margins** are the qualities, behaviours, and values that are pushed to the periphery of the group. When the mainstream of a group is unaware, and until the margins of the group find their power, the characteristics of the margins can look like:

- Leaving a part of their identity 'at the door' in order to fit into the group
- Feeling like they aren't included in decision-making (because they probably aren't!)
- Doing work that is undervalued, not noticed by others, or not taking on jobs at all
- Losing confidence in the group
- Feeling isolated and not listened to
- Expressing views that might seem 'irrelevant' or 'outrageous' to the mainstream.

Being on the margins of the group can feel alienating. However, as the margins get more empowered and demand to be more seen and heard, it is also a powerful place to be. The margins have a freedom that the mainstream doesn't have. As the current existence of the group doesn't depend on the margins, they have a freedom to participate or leave as they choose.

It is very common that the people on the margins have a much clearer understanding of the dynamic than the people in the mainstream do.

### **How does this dynamic relate to privilege?**

There are many social factors that influence the power we have, or don't have, in society (see session on [rank](#)). However 'woke' a group is, these systems of oppression, many hundreds or thousands of years old, will undoubtedly influence how it interacts. It can be the case that the people in the mainstream of a group also have power in society in general, but is not necessarily the case.

For example, if a group has a mixture of middle class people and working class people, it's likely that some of the mainstream characteristics will resemble middle class culture. However, this isn't a rule – it's better to notice what's actually happening in the group than make assumptions about what you expect the dynamic to be.

Nb. You will need to ensure you have told the group to bring their Rivers to the session.

### **Related material to support framing:**

- [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)
- [Active Solidarity, Equity and Empowerment chapter](#)
- [Exploring power activity](#)
- [Exploring Privilege and Rank activity](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This session has some risks that go with it. Drawing attention to these kinds of dynamics can be painful and/or triggering for people. If it is not held well, this can lead to polarisation or people feeling vilified, ostracised, or unhelpfully criticised. It's important to keep a strong framing of the ways looking at this stuff will help make us more skilful, inclusive and resilient in our groups. It's not about shaming the 'clueless' mainstream, nor about victimising the margins, but about drawing attention to something that is always present, to some extent, in group dynamics, in a way that can help us make our relationships and groups stronger.

Modelling sensitivity and care is key. At the same time, coming in with confidence - that there are dynamics here and we don't have to be afraid of talking about them or tiptoe around them.

Considering when (in the course of a training) you might place a session like this is also important. Obviously the group needs to have a sense of itself and the people in it in order to talk about itself. At the same time, an activity like this can be a helpful way to support a group to get to know itself better and form. Some established trust is necessary.

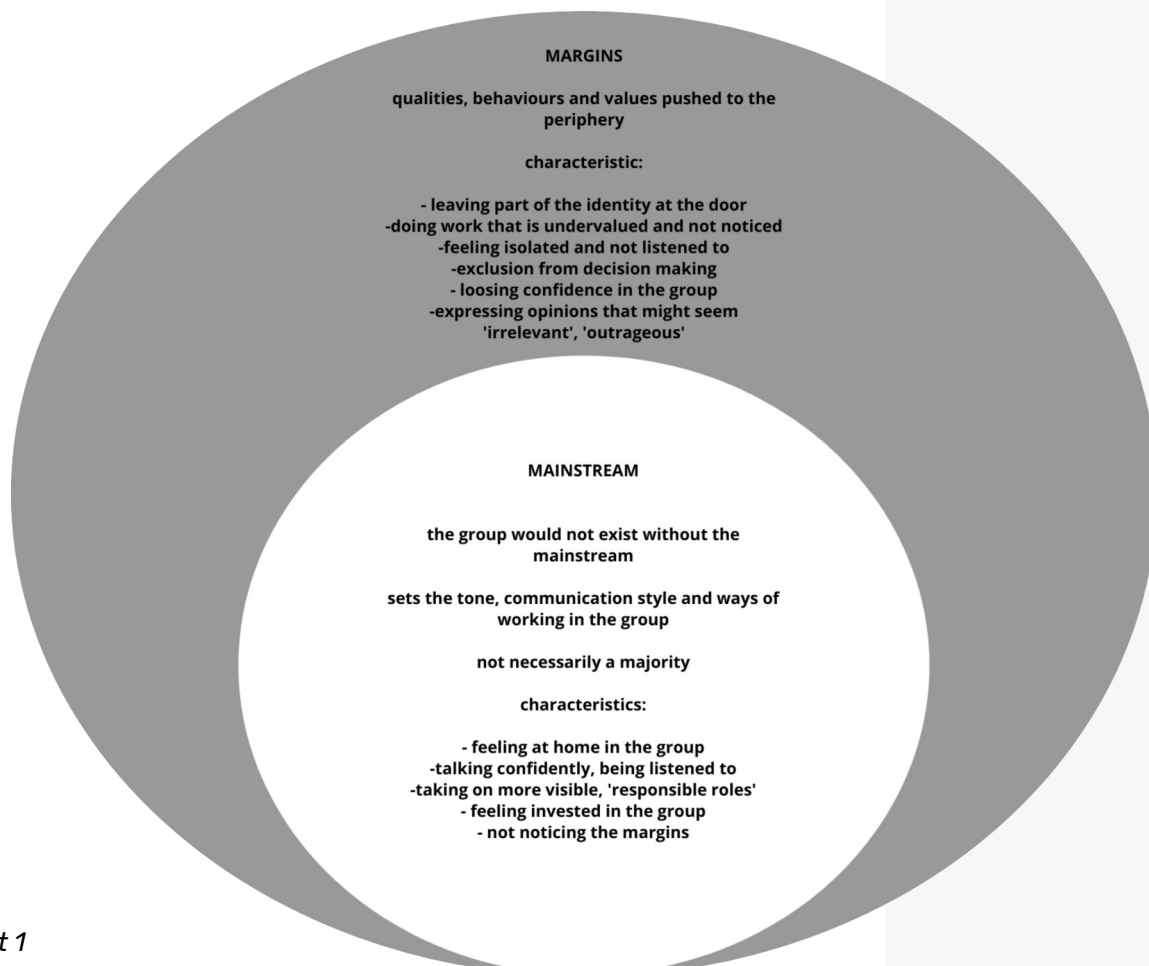
As always, a co-facilitator to support anyone who needs it, is a must.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

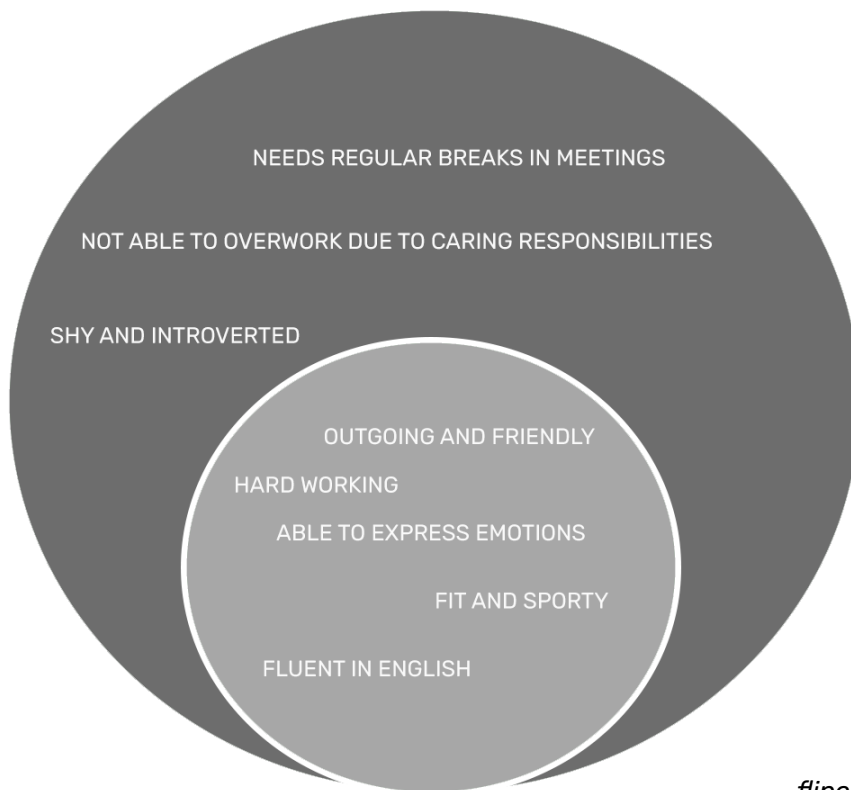
### Setting up the activity (20 mins)

- Introduce the activity in the context of whatever session/theme you are using it. You may want to link it to other threads (such as [Awareness](#), [Learning Zone](#) or [Power](#)).

- Using visual representation (flipchart 1 below), introduce the mainstream and margins theory, drawing on the material unpacked above.



- Then, as you talk, draw up a similar diagram and populate it with concrete examples of the behaviours/views/practices/identities/etc that you might find in the mainstream or the margins of a group that you (the facilitator) are part of right now. For example:



*flipchart 2*

- Take any questions / draw out useful discussion points and then give them the instructions:

- You will do something similar to the above diagram but for **this** group. (Return to the diagram and give some examples that you might find more specifically in this group, for example, a mainstream practice of getting up early, or being on time for sessions; or a marginal identity such as 'parent' or practice such as eating meat)

- You'll be in groups of 4-5 and will have around 25 minutes

- Draw your diagrams on flip chart, as you discuss, for sharing later.

### **Facilitating the activity (60 mins)**

- Keep an eye on progress and assist any groups who seem to be struggling

- Let them know when they are half way through, and when they have 5 minutes left

- After 25 minutes, ask the groups to swap their flipchart with another group, so they are looking at another group's work

- Then ask them:

**"What are some of the tools/approaches we could use to address some of these polarities? What practices or tools could we use to help us notice, and better include some of the characteristics of the margins?"**

They should write onto the other group's diagram, tools or practices we might already have looked at on the training, or others they are aware of.

Offer an example or two, such as: Giving and receiving feedback, or Step with

me. They can also be more 'informal' practices, such as 'practising being honest' or 'strengthening friendships'.

- Let them know they will have 25 minutes for their discussions and writing, and that the work will be shared.
- Again, keep an eye on the groups, give any assistance required and timings.
- Finally, give them around 10 minutes to walk around a "flipchart gallery" - looking at and learning from the work of the other groups.

### **Debriefing the activity (10 - 15 mins)**

- Allow a good amount of time for unpacking and debriefing this session, supporting the group to process anything sticky or tricky that might have come up.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- Did the session go how you expected? How are you feeling now? Were people uncomfortable? Did you have ways of managing/holding that discomfort?
- If the group is feeling a little tender or it feels like there are unresolved threads or fragments, it can be worth just naming that this stuff is tricky, is not resolvable in one session (or probably one lifetime!) and requires a fair bit of courage to talk about.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

Reiterate that the intention is not to point fingers or 'finger' people in particular positions/dynamics (M&Ms are not static) but to build our capacity to have transparent conversations about these things, in ways that don't have to be confrontational or conflictual - deep down, we all want what's best for ourselves, each other and the group. Affirm people for their willingness and care.

Also, we need mainstreams to keep things together and have a sense of group identity - it's not a simple binary of 'mainstreams bad, edges good'.

# FIRST IMPRESSIONS ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr – 1hr10

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group work for groups of up to 20

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Pre-prepared images on A4 / pens, pencils

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Active Solidarity, Equity and Empowerment

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Gaining awareness of the preconceptions and prejudices we carry
- Exploring stereotypes
- Building some shared understanding around personal experiences of prejudice/exclusion

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This session aims to very simply draw attention to the preconceptions we bring with us into all situations, as a result of our histories and socialisations. It is designed to support dialogue and conversation, opening up the theme and encouraging people to speak and listen around a tricky subject which is often, otherwise, avoided.

It is not designed to expose people or show them they are 'bad' or 'wrong', but to show the ways that we are all subject to these prejudices and the more aware we are of them, the more we can make choices that will invite more openness, connection and empowerment for ourselves and others.

More 'politicised' participants will already have a strong sense of this, and the session is not supposed to be 'revelation' for anyone.. It is supposed to elicit dialogue and the sharing of experience. Still, it is probable that there will be members in the group who will resist the idea that they still have stereotypes/prejudices.

It's important to communicate that people are invited to express themselves openly, even if some of the things they might share are not considered 'politically correct' or collectively 'acceptable'. Still, this should be done with care and respect for the diversity of experience in the room. As the facilitator, it will be your job to temper, balance and kindly problematise (in a non-judging way) if people communicate things that could be painful for others in the group.

It can be helpful to express some kind of 'position' or 'disclaimer' at the start of the session as regards you/your organisation's views in relation to equality, tolerance, racism, anti-LGBTQIA+, patriarchal behaviours etc. It can be helpful for people to hear you say this, and you can also say that, even when we advocate for these things, it is very difficult to be fully 'free' of prejudices/stereotypes all together – they have been influencing us since we were born!

You will need to have prepared for the session by finding/printing a range of images from magazines/online etc (enough for one per person), which show a breadth of visual characteristics and diversity. These should be cut out and each stuck on a piece of A4 paper, in advance of the session.

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## Related material to support framing:

- [Active Solidarity chapter](#)
- [Ways of Seeing chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This session can be a good lead into exploring themes around [power](#), mainstreams and margins, and rank.

Ensure the group have enough of a sense of each other and enough trust to be opening up tricky themes. Hold the space with kindness, care, curiosity and a non-judging attitude. Make sure you have team support, in case someone in the group finds they need something extra.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 - 10 mins)

- Frame the activity drawing on some of the content mentioned above, explaining why you are doing it and offering any helpful disclaimers. You might want to save some of the theory about the subject until after the activity and discussion (rather than preempting/shaping peoples' experience before they have explored it).

### Facilitating the activity (30 mins)

- Take your A4-mounted images and pass them around the group. When everyone has one, ask them to write down (in small writing) the first impression or word that comes to their mind when they look at the image, right at the bottom of the page.
- Ask them to fold the paper to hide their writing, and then pass it on to the next person, and repeat the exercise. (You can do this as many times as there is space on the paper).
- When complete, have all the papers placed on the floor in the middle. Then ask for someone to pick one of them up, unfold it, and read all the impressions for that image out. Have a different person do this for each image.

### Debriefing the activity (20 - 30 mins)

- Discuss the activity and peoples' experiences. Give a good amount of time to unpacking the themes and challenges. The discussion should not be a space for participants to criticise each others' impressions - it is important to focus on the *reasons for the impressions*.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- What surprises were there?
- Why were some of the impressions so different?
- Are these impressions linked to our background(s), experience(s), place(s) we live in ... what else?
- What feelings did participants have doing the activity, and hearing the results?

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

You might want to end the discussion with some more theoretical input on stereotypes and prejudices, if this wasn't covered at the start.



# INTRODUCTION TO TRAUMA AWARENESS ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 35 - 45 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Pre-prepared flipchart diagram, flipchart paper for mindstorm capture

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Trauma informed approaches

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Building basic understanding of Trauma in the context of psychosocial resilience praxis
- Strengthening capacity and familiarity with trauma informed language and themes
- Sharing experience and building collective understanding and trust
- Normalising trauma and stress, towards a depathologizing approach
- Acquiring a deeper understanding of one's own body and physiological reactions
- Becoming more equipped to support oneself and others in stress

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This activity is a simple introduction to trauma in the context of personal and collective resilience, supporting people with the basics for thinking about how we can approach building more trauma-informed practices for ourselves and together.

Whatever knowledge level about trauma theories participants bring to this session, the key framing to bear in mind is around the value of connecting ourselves with our embodied experience and supporting ourselves to bring more awareness to these issues.

We may want to consider that:

- our tendency is to seek/prioritise skills and expertise rather than focusing on basic wellbeing, care and human connection as resources to bring to a stressful situation
- that stress disconnects us. That it is a daily work to keep our capacity for connections alive and to keep our systems as balanced as possible
- that it is really important to keep processing our experiences - to make space for that on a daily basis
- that we will be more politically effective on the basis of such skills.

In terms of this, the key skills we might think about building are:

1. body awareness, so we know what is happening
2. having the cognitive knowledge that helps us interpret that experience in terms of stress and trauma (where appropriate)

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*notes here*

3. building our capacity to respond to different stressors by re-regulating our systems, giving them what they need to restore balance
4. using our own systems to support other peoples' systems to restore balance
5. building our emotional intelligence and learning how our bodies build up "toxic" emotional stress and tension and how to keep 'cleaning' that out.

Collective care should be trauma informed so that we move beyond seeing this as an individual skill or expertise and see more clearly how all of our nervous systems are connected. In building ecologies of care, we can use this resonance as a resource, rather than thinking of it as something which knocks each other off balance all the time! We empower our groups by learning how to collectively absorb and rebalance.

**Related material to support framing:**

- [Trauma Informed Approaches chapter](#)
- [Bodywork chapter](#)
- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)
- [Body scanning practice](#)
- [Structured kind regard practice](#)

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

Exploring these themes requires care and time. Build in enough time to hear peoples' experiences and to discuss what's happening. Ensure you have enough team support to respond to what might come up for people. And make sure you don't 'drop' people at the end of the session.

You don't have to be an expert on Trauma to run this activity. Just bring the knowledge you have and create space for group discussion, questioning, sharing of experience and modelling the talking about these themes with awareness, empathy, care and relaxedness.

## **ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

**Setting up the activity (5 mins)**

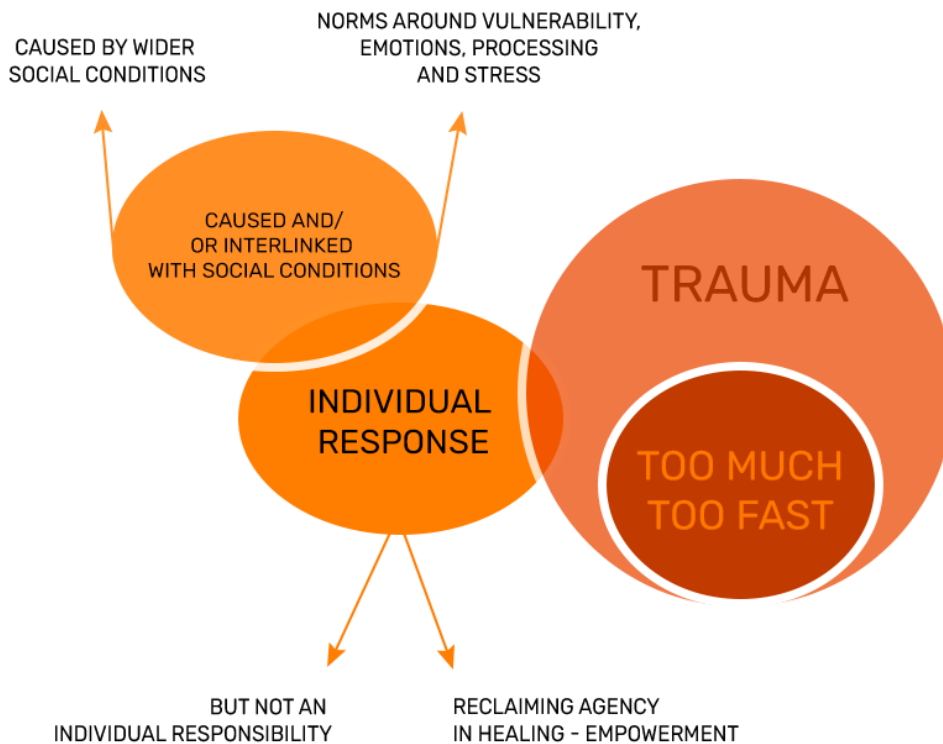
- Frame the activity in the context in which you are using it, making sure people know why you are looking at the theme (although you don't need to get into content around trauma at this stage, as this is what the rest of the activity aims to do!)

**Facilitating the activity (20 - 30 mins)**

- Begin with an associations mind storm: Ask the group to name some of the associations that come up for them when they hear the word "trauma". Allow people just to shout out anything that comes to mind. You can use a flipchart to note them down, so that they are more visible for the group.

Any and all associations are welcome, and don't comment on them quite yet! Finish the mind storm when the group runs out of steam.

- Drawing on the themes coming out of the mind storm and using this diagram if useful:



Introduce some of the key theory around trauma with points such as:

- A simple definition of trauma might be: too much, too fast, too soon.
- Trauma does not happen as a result of specific, particular or determinable events – the same situation may cause trauma for one person and not for another.
- In this sense, Trauma response is always an individual response, but it is influenced by and/or interlinked with wider social conditions, such as what support we receive, what is happening in our wider environment, how many stressors we experience at once, our social positioning, etc, as well as our personal neurological/psychological resilience levels.
- Due to this, Trauma cannot be understood as a simple individual responsibility. While taking individual responsibility for our healing is often the most empowering part of healing trauma, it is important to understand that it does not belong to the individual in which it is arising (given its conditioned nature). As such, we do also need to find collective mechanisms for supporting the healing of trauma.

..these are just suggestions for what you might cover. You may want to go into more detail than this. You can draw on theory pointed to in the framing section above and on what feels most relevant coming out of the mind storm and previous discussion.

You also have the option of giving the group time to discuss the themes/ theory you have introduced in small groups or in pairs, applying it to their experience. Be sure you keep an eye on the groups for any distress that might come up and draw them back together in a well held discussion afterwards, to ensure people feel supported.

### **Debriefing the activity (10 mins)**

Hear questions from the room and open themes up for discussion, drawing on the experience and knowledge of the group. If you don't know an answer to a question, that is OK! Ask if there is anyone in the room who might know and/or research the answer after the session and point participants to relevant material. Point people to resources for learning more.

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

You will likely be using this activity as an introduction to something more practical or applied. However, if you want to conclude with something, it is probably useful to say something reassuring such as:

"Trauma" can be a bit of a scary word/arena, we can be wary of moving towards talking about or exploring it, fearing we are not expert enough and that there may be messy consequences. Although this is understandable, and it is important to hold such discussions and explorations with care and respect, if we do so, bringing awareness and kindness and the clear intention to benefit and support ourselves, one another and our groups/cultures, we will generally find such explorations beneficial. As we have said above, we need to build our collective capacities to hold the realities of trauma, if we are to create genuinely caring, transformative and resilient cultures in which to do our work and thrive!

### **FURTHER NOTES**

This more collective, 'DIY' framing and perspective does not negate the need for expertise and more skilled/experienced interventions from experts or 'professionals' at times.

# TRAUMA DO'S AND DON'T'S ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 35 mins - 1hr

**GROUP FORMAT:** Small group > Whole group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Flipchart paper and pens

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Trauma Informed Approaches

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Building shared understanding about trauma experiences
- Exploring group/intuitive knowledge around possible responses
- Normalising trauma and stress towards a depathologizing approach
- Acquiring a deeper understanding of one's own body and physiological reactions
- Becoming more equipped to support oneself and others in stress

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This session is a simple way to support people to approach the arena of trauma and explore how we might hold and respond to it in a practical and down to earth way. It does not require people to have extensive expertise but invites them to see that, in the context of our groups and relationships, we often have a lot more skill, awareness and capacity than we might think, to respond to the needs of ourselves and others. A basic level of care/empathy, combined with the ability to be present and not become overly agitated/anxious/awkward, will go a long long way, when meeting stress, tension and triggeredness.

Whatever knowledge level about trauma theories participants bring to this session, the key framing to bear in mind is around the value of connecting ourselves with our embodied experience and supporting ourselves to bring more awareness to these issues.

We may want to consider that:

- our tendency is to seek/prioritise skills and expertise rather than focusing on basic wellbeing, care and human connection as resources to bring to a stressful situation
- stress disconnects us. That it is a daily work to keep our capacity for connections alive and to keep our systems as balanced as possible
- it is really important to keep processing our experiences - to make space for that on a daily basis
- we will be more politically effective on the basis of such skills.

In terms of this, the key skills we might think about building are:

1. body awareness, so we know what is happening

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

2. having the cognitive knowledge that helps us interpret that experience in terms of stress and trauma (where appropriate)
3. building our capacity to respond to different stressors by re-regulating our systems, giving them what they need to restore balance
4. using our own systems to support other peoples' systems to restore balance
5. building our emotional intelligence and learning how our bodies build up "toxic" emotional stress and tension and how to keep 'cleaning' that out.

Collective care should be trauma informed so that we move beyond seeing this as an individual skill or expertise and see more clearly how all of our nervous systems are connected. In building ecologies of care, we can use this resonance as a resource, rather than thinking of it as something which knocks each other off balance all the time! We empower our groups by learning how to collectively absorb and rebalance.

#### **Related material to support framing:**

- [Trauma Informed Approaches chapter](#)
- [Bodywork chapter](#)
- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)
- [Body scanning practice](#)
- [Structured kind regard practice](#)

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

Exploring these themes requires care and time. Build in enough time to hear peoples' experiences and to discuss what's happening. Ensure you have enough team support to respond to what might come up for people. And make sure you don't 'drop' people at the end of the session.

You don't have to be an expert on Trauma to run this activity. Just bring the knowledge you have and create space for group discussion, questioning, sharing of experience and modelling the talking about these themes with awareness, empathy, care and relaxedness.

## **ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

### **Setting up the activity (5 - 15 mins)**

- Frame the activity in an appropriate way, ensuring that there is enough of a basic working understanding/shared language around what trauma is and what you are exploring. If this is the first activity you have done around trauma, you will need to give more substantial time to your framing/intro. Ensure that the group know why you are doing this!

- Divide participants into groups of 4-5 people and give them the following instructions:

- In your small groups, you will have 20 minutes to come up with a list of some "do's and don't's" might be, when responding to someone who is experiencing a trauma response
- Think back to your own life experiences as well as drawing on your intuitive thoughts/feelings, to do this
- Note your answers down on fl pchart paper - you will share these afterwards with the rest of the group

*People might look a bit anxious as you give them this invitation - they may feel ill-equipped or lacking in knowledge. You can reassure them that you are not expecting them to be experts, and that together they will probably be surprised by how much they have picked up or can intuit..*

- You may want to give them a couple of examples, to help get them started...

*Examples of "do's": listen with empathy; reassure the person that you are treating them seriously and with respect - through body language and verbal communication; be present with their experience; watch out for your own triggers and emotional blocks; seek support / debrief space for yourself afterwards; ask for consent around touch, actions, etc; stay grounded and connected to yourself; distract the person from experiencing the trigger - by telling a story, giving them mathematical riddles to solve, asking them simple questions about what have they eaten for breakfast today, etc*

*Examples of "don't's": jump to problem solving and fixing; diminish the experience (it's not such a big deal, it is alright, you don't have to worry); force the person to engage in an activity you think will be good for them; tell the person your own trauma history; make it about yourself, talk over them, get agitated.*

### **Facilitating the activity (20 - 30 mins)**

- Move between the groups in the space and have a listen in, to check they are doing okay with the exercise. If necessary, you can interrupt the groups to re-clarify or support them.

- Give them a five minute warning before the end of the activity and then bring the group back together to 'harvest' their work, inviting each small group to share 4-5 elements from their sheets. Reflect back or unpack anything that needs it, drawing on the knowledge and experience of the group.

### **Debriefing the activity (10 - 20 mins)**

- Draw out any outstanding points, questions or reflections people may have...

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- We all intuitively know how to handle stress, it is not rocket science!
- Some of our learned reactions to stress and trauma are unhelpful
- These reactions are learned through social norms and it takes time and training to undo them
- Different things work better for different people - if we work on an ongoing basis with someone who does experience trauma responses, it is best to explore with them what works for them
- If you are a person experiencing trauma responses - self knowledge is the key to empowerment and healing. Understanding when it is happening and what is helpful in the moment and communicating that to others you work with, creates a solid ground for healing and coming back to a safe and socially connected space more quickly.



## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

“Trauma” can be a bit of a scary word/arena, we can be wary of moving towards talking about or exploring it, fearing we are not expert enough and that there may be messy consequences. Although this is understandable, and it is important to hold such discussions and explorations with care and respect, if we do so, bringing awareness and kindness and the clear intention to benefit and support ourselves, one another and our groups/cultures, we will generally find such explorations beneficial. We need to build our collective capacities to hold the realities of trauma, if we are to create genuinely caring, transformative and resilient cultures in which to do our work and thrive!

## **FURTHER NOTES**

This more collective, ‘DIY’ framing and perspective does not negate the need for expertise and more skilled/experienced interventions from experts or ‘professionals’ at times.

# BODY TAPPING TECHNIQUE (REGULATION)

**RUNNING TIME:** 15 - 20 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** n/a

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Trauma Informed Approaches

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Supporting self, body and emotional awareness
- Grounding, soothing and co-regulation
- Off ring somatic stimulation/body connectivity
- Acquiring a deeper understanding of one's own body and physiological reactions
- Becoming more equipped to support oneself and others in stress

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Offering people simple tools and methods for working with trauma does not have to require people to have extensive experience or trauma expertise. It can be helpful to invite people to see that, in the context of our groups and relationships, we often have a lot more skill, awareness and capacity than we might think, to respond to the needs of ourselves and others.

In terms of this, the key skills we might think about building are:

1. body awareness, so we know what is happening
2. having the cognitive knowledge that helps us interpret that experience in terms of stress and trauma (where appropriate)
3. building our capacity to respond to different stressors by re-regulating our systems, giving them what they need to restore balance
4. using our own systems to support other peoples' systems to restore balance
5. building our emotional intelligence and learning how our bodies build up "toxic" emotional stress and tension and how to keep 'cleaning' that out.

This activity offers a short and simple tool you can introduce to people to support them to work with triggering or a stress response and to gently regulate, alone or together. It is very simple and quite 'safe' to do and can be returned to throughout the course of a training as a kind of regulating anchor.

The premise lies in the understanding that when a person is triggered, they can become frozen, numb and cut off from their experience. This produces

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

tension, anxiety and eventually exhaustion, as well as preventing the necessary flow of information and feedback to move through the body/nervous system.. This practice offers a way to counter this, supporting us to gently and systematically re-stimulate the different facets and regions of the body. Even when we are not overtly triggered, practising to be in touch with and alive in the body, can be a helpfully resourcing and regulating thing to do.

You don't have to be an expert on trauma to run this activity. In fact you can use it simply as a mindful/somatic activity supporting people to connect with themselves and take a pause from whatever else you are doing in the session - you might not mention trauma at all! If you are using it in the context of trauma informed approaches as a regulation activity then you will want to give some light framing of its relevance to trauma themes. You may also want to combine it with some other regulation practices and run a longer session on "Trauma Tools" or something like that.

#### **Related material to support framing:**

- [Trauma Informed Approaches chapter](#)
- [Bodywork chapter](#)
- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

Depending on the context you are using this activity in, be sure to hold any content or exploration around trauma themes with a lot of care, space and groundedness. Always invite participants to be in touch with themselves and their needs, to take care of themselves, and stop if anything doesn't feel ok for them.

Having said which, this activity is very simple and relatively safe and you can feel confident that it is unlikely to bring anything very strong into the space, when standing alone, so long as people are gentle with their bodies.

## **ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

### **Setting up the activity (5 mins)**

- This exercise is used as a warm up exercise in many different movement based practices - such as contemporary dance or martial arts. It encourages blood and other fluids to flow and invigorates the body. It might be a very good tool to use to move a body from being 'stuck' or to transform a 'freeze' reaction.
- Demonstrate first, tapping your own body, explaining which parts you will cover and the amount of pressure etc:
  - Use your fist to tap on parts of the body that are more muscular and use fingertips on your neck, head and face. You can adjust the force - do whatever feels more pleasant to your body
  - We will tap the body from feet, over the legs, up to hips and bum, over the belly, lower part of the back, chest and shoulders, arms and palms of the hands and up again towards the neck, head and face
  - You can skip any part of the body if it feels too uncomfortable to engage with
  - Decide if you want to engage with the exercise, and remember you can stop if at any point it doesn't feel helpful any more.
- Invite the group to stand in a circle and instruct them to follow/go with you as you tap your own body.

### Facilitating the activity (5 mins)

- Start with tapping with one or both of your fists on the left foot. You can do it standing up but if it is a challenging position to be in - sit down on the floor or on a chair. Tap the foot and after a while move up towards the calf, tap on the front and back of the calf, move up to the thigh and do the same. Move up to the left hip and left bum cheek.

- Repeat on the right side.

- Move up to the belly - encouraging participants to be much more gentle here.

- Move to the lower back - again with a lot of gentleness and awareness.

- Move up towards the chest and towards the collar bones, tap alongside the collar bones.

- Using your right fist tap onto the left shoulder, front and back. Swap to the other side.

- Use your left fist to tap on the inner side of your palm, move onto the outer part and then up the forearm and arm back to the shoulder. Swap sides.

- Now use your fingertips to tap on the back of your neck, move up towards the skull and tap on the top and sides of the skull. Go down towards the ears and lower down onto your jaw. Move up again and onto the forehead. Tap around the eyes, onto the nose, onto the cheekbones and around the mouth.

- To finish, 'brush' (vigorously stroke) the body with open palms - brush over each leg, belly, chest, shoulders and arms and over the head and face.

- Then move into the debrief..

### Debriefing the activity (5 - 10 mins)

- Give them a few minutes to talk in a pair about how they found the activity in general, then bring them back together and continue to draw out experiences and thoughts amongst the whole group, in a way that is relevant to the session in which you are using the activity.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

-How did your body feel? What sensations did you notice?

- How was it? How did the activity influence you? What was happening for you?

- What felt good about it? What was not so good?

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

- Our bodies are very wise! If we can tap into their wisdom, we will be able to receive a lot of important information about what is happening for us and other people.

- The more we engage with our bodies the more comfortable we will get with them. We are socialised into disconnecting from our bodies and treating them

*Throughout the exercise encourage participants to find their own tempo, adjust the force they are using to what feels good and only go to places that feel right. Listen to the body/ experience and practice adjusting and responding (rather than ignoring or overriding)*

as separate beings we need control, rather than being encouraged to inhabit our bodies fully. It takes time to unlearn this conditioning.

- It might be challenging to get into our bodies, if we store a lot of stress/unprocessed emotions. Always, always aim to go towards comfort when doing embodied activities. Pushing oneself into them might be more damaging than beneficial. If we are not used to embodied practices, it can be helpful to try things out in small chunks, with enough space around to digest and debrief.

- A simple tool like this is a great example of how working with triggeredness and activation can be approached straightforwardly and in an everyday DIY way. There are lots of little tools, tricks and practices we can gather to help us take care of and regulate our nervous systems and over time, they can support us to feel more secure, resourced and resilient.

- This more collective, 'DIY' framing and perspective does not negate the need for expertise and more skilled/experienced interventions from experts or 'professionals' at times!

## FURTHER NOTES

This activity works well as part of a session exploring trauma more generally (eg. [Introduction to Trauma Awareness](#)) and then introducing a collection of shorter practices/tools like this, such as [Sitting Back to Back](#), [Orientation](#), [Centering](#) or [Three Step Breathing Space](#).

# ORIENTATION / NAME THREE THINGS IN THE SPACE TECHNIQUE (REGULATION)

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

**RUNNING TIME:** 15 - 25 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** n/a

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Trauma Informed Approaches

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Supporting self, body and emotional awareness
- Grounding, soothing and co-regulation
- Supported reflection and absorption
- Acquiring a deeper understanding of one's own body and physiological reactions
- Becoming more equipped to support oneself and others in stress

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Offering people simple tools and methods for working with trauma does not have to require people to have extensive experience or trauma expertise. It can be helpful to invite people to see that, in the context of our groups and relationships, we often have a lot more skill, awareness and capacity than we might think, to respond to the needs of ourselves and others.

In terms of this, the key skills we might think about building are:

1. body awareness, so we know what is happening
2. having the cognitive knowledge that helps us interpret that experience in terms of stress and trauma (where appropriate)
3. building our capacity to respond to different stressors by re-regulating our systems, giving them what they need to restore balance
4. using our own systems to support other peoples' systems to restore balance
5. building our emotional intelligence and learning how our bodies build up "toxic" emotional stress and tension and how to keep 'cleaning' that out.

This activity offers a short and simple tool you can introduce to people to support them to work with triggering or a stress response and to gently regulate, alone or together. It is very simple and 'safe' to do and can be returned to throughout the course of a training as a kind of regulating anchor.

The premise lies in the understanding that when a person is triggered, their vision is affected by being in 'alert' mode - the vision will contract and become unidirectional, casting around for/focused on the threat. This produces tension, panic and eventually exhaustion. This practice counters this, supporting us to soften, open and relax the visual field and take in what is around us in a more receptive and 'soothed' way. Even when we are not overtly triggered, practising to soften and open the visual field can be a helpfully resourcing and relaxing thing to do.

You don't have to be an expert on Trauma to run this activity. In fact you can use it simply as a mindful activity supporting people to connect with themselves and take a pause, and not mention trauma at all, if you wish! If you are using it in the context of trauma informed approaches as a regulation activity then you will want to give some light framing of its relevance to trauma themes. You may also want to combine it with some other regulation practices and run a longer session on "Trauma Tools" or something like that.

**Related material to support framing:**

- [Trauma Informed Approaches chapter](#)
- [Bodywork chapter](#)
- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

Depending on the context you are using this activity in, be sure to hold any content or exploration around trauma themes with a lot of care, space and groundedness. Always invite participants to be in touch with themselves and their needs, to take care of themselves, and stop if anything doesn't feel ok for them.

Having said which, this activity is very simple and safe and you can feel confident that it is unlikely to bring anything very strong into the space, when standing alone.

## **ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

### **Setting up the activity (5 mins)**

- Frame the activity in an appropriate way, considering the context in which you are using it
- Explain that this is a very simple technique that helps our body to anchor and orient in space. It soothes the nervous system and helps the body to regain a sense of connection and spatial awareness.
- Reiterate that anyone can opt out, or stop at any point, if they need/want to.
- Invite participants to find a comfortable position (sitting or standing are both fine) and then guide them through the practice, doing it with them.

### **Facilitating the activity (5 - 10 mins)**

- Ask participants to move the head to look slowly to the right, taking in all that they see as they move their head
- Do the same to the left side.
- Then come slowly back to look to the front, opening the vision and taking in everything they can see that is in their visual field, with their peripheral vision as well.

*Encourage really slow movement and as soft, open gaze as possible, as they look around.*



- Then again, look over the right and left shoulder.

- Then look up towards the ceiling/sky.

- After you have explored all the directions, ask participants to find 3 things/objects/elements from the landscape/environment and take a mental note of those 3 elements - they can be situated in any of the directions.

- The invitation is that whenever they feel like they need anchoring during the session or ongoing training, they can return to these 3 elements in the space, as if they were doing a 'checklist': this is still here, this is here, this is here.

- This will be a quick way of regaining a sense of openness to the wider space and environment, encouraging presence, grounding and connection.

### **Debriefing the activity (5 - 10 mins)**

- Give them a few minutes to talk in a pair about how they found the activity in general, then bring them back together and continue to draw out experiences and thoughts amongst the whole group, in a way that is relevant to the session in which you are using the activity.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- How did your body feel? What sensations did you notice?

- How was it? How did the activity influence you? What was happening for you?

- What felt good about it? What was not so good?

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

A simple tool like this is a great example of how working with triggeredness and activation can be approached straightforwardly and in an everyday DIY way. There are lots of little tools, tricks and practices we can gather to help us take care of and regulate our nervous systems and over time, they can support us to feel more secure, resourced and resilient.

This more collective, 'DIY' framing and perspective does not negate the need for expertise and more skilled/experienced interventions from experts or 'professionals' at times!

## **FURTHER NOTES**

This activity works well as part of a session exploring trauma more generally (eg. [Introduction to Trauma Awareness](#)) and then introducing a collection of shorter practices/tools like this, such as [Sitting Back to Back](#), [Body Tapping](#), [Centering](#) or [Three Step Breathing Space](#).

# YES / NO / MAYBE - BOUNDARIES EXPLORATION ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr30

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual work > pairs work > whole group

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Pre-prepared example of yes/no/maybe chart / flipchart paper, markers, big enough room for people to move in

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Trauma Informed Approaches

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Learning tools to facilitate boundary recognising and setting
- Exploring challenges around boundary setting
- Developing bodily awareness of boundaries
- Supporting personal resilience and trauma healing

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Boundary setting is one of the topics crucial to resilience building. As activists and as movements we need to set clear boundaries around what we want to say yes to, what our capacities are, what can we tolerate and when things are getting too overwhelming or non-aligned with our values. Learning to recognise and set boundaries might be difficult, depending on our socialisation. Often those socialised as female or who experience social oppression are conditioned to accommodate others and not encouraged to know our own boundaries and know how to set them.

Becoming aware of bodily messages around boundary setting is a powerful way to undo conditioning and to recognise early on when boundaries are being crossed.

These exercises come from feminist self-defense methodologies developed in Canada and Germany and practiced widely in Poland. A range of similar boundary exercises can also be found in various consent workshops and resources.

This activity involves using the Centering practice to support embodiment, which is linked below.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Bodywork chapter](#)
- [Trauma Informed Approaches chapter](#)
- [Centering activity](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

It is advisable to have some experience of holding somatic exercises for others in order to run this session. Make sure you have experienced/ practised the exercises yourself before you run them, so your body is familiar and you have a sense of what might come up.

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

Make sure to give participants opt-out options throughout the whole session and encourage them to take care of themselves and step out if something feels too uncomfortable or unhelpful in the moment.

This is an activity that will ideally require a group to have an already established sense of trust. Best not to choose this as a first session to run in a workshop!

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Introduce why it is important to look at boundaries in the context of resilience building, appropriately framing the session.
- Give them the following instructions:
  - We'll begin with some individual work to explore boundary setting in our group/work contexts
  - Using the template of the chart (below, show them an example!) we will reflect on and then write down examples of tasks, roles and actions under each heading, considering what we do and don't / would and wouldn't want to take on
  - Draw on examples from a **specific group** you are (or used to be) part of
  - You'll have a chance to debrief with others, but with no imperative to share what you don't want to
  - You'll have 10 minutes to reflect around these boundaries - draw a copy of the chart for yourself and fill it in, something like this:

**YES!**

**NO.**

**MAYBE?**

DESIGNING OF THE  
FLYER FOR THE  
CAMPAIGN

COOKING LUNCH  
FOR EVERYONE  
ON THE EVENT

GREETING PEOPLE  
AT THE ENTRANCE

- Off you go...

### Facilitating the activity (1hr10)

#### a. Yes / No / Maybe (30)

- Keep an eye on them, offer support if needed, and give them a half way and last minute warning, then ask them to get into pairs for 5 minutes to debrief, before bringing them back as a whole group, asking them:
  - How was it to do this exercise?
  - What did you realise? Was it useful?
  - What was difficult about it? Why?

As part of the discussion/debrief you may mention that:

- What we are up for doing depends on context (hence why it's important to think about a specific group when doing this activity)
- Thinking about our boundaries in advance will support us to be conscious about saying yes or no to things in the moment
- It might be useful to think about the circumstances under which our 'maybe' might become a 'yes' or a 'no'.

### **b. Centering practice (10)**

- Let participants know that you will be standing for about 10 minutes and give a couple of sentences of explanation of what you are going to do and why. (If someone needs to sit in a chair, that is also possible and be sure to give an 'opt out' option and encourage self care etc)

...see further instructions for running this part of the session in the Centering practice, [here](#).

- Guide (and participate in) a 6-10 minute version of the activity.
- Finish with a go-round in which each person says in two words how they are, following the activity. Participate in the round as well, preferably starting it off.
- Comment as appropriate at the end of the round: there might be a mix of feelings in the room - grounding and pleasant sensations as well as awkwardness, rawness, numbness or tenderness. Welcome/affirm it all.

You might note that:

- Centering is a practice and will get more comfortable with time and as one gets used to it. Body awareness requires developing sensitivity and this can be difficult, especially if there is trauma in the body. It takes patience and perseverance
- It might work really well for some and not at all for others - but do give it a chance!

### **c. Somatic Yes / No / Maybe (30)**

- Let participants know that they will work in pairs for about 10 minutes. Do a short demonstration of the exercise while talking the instructions through for the group:

- You will stand in front of your partner (co-facilitator or a volunteer from a group) at a distance that will allow them to walk up to you slowly
- First you'll take a moment for both of you to Centre, going quickly through the centering posture - 2 mins or so
- You will ask your partner to slowly walk up towards you and when you feel ready, you will say 'no' - marking it with a hand gesture that feels appropriate - it might be raising both of your hands, palms facing your partner, or any other gesture that feels right to you
- Your partner will then stop and you both stay for a moment in your postures, noticing how you feel/what it is like
- You will repeat this three times, and then swap roles.

- Take any questions from the group, and then let them choose a partner they feel comfortable to work with. Reassure them that they can always stop engaging with it if it feels like too much or too uncomfortable. Encourage them to choose partners for this exercise according to their preference and

*Just to reiterate, this is not an appropriate activity to do with a group who don't know each other! This kind of boundary exploration could be painful or triggering for people, especially depending who their partner is/what they might look like or remind them of.*

refuse if someone who approaches them does not feel like someone they are comfortable enough to do the exercise with. Remind them to balance this with welcoming the discomfort of stepping into the [learning zone](#).

- Give them a moment to decide who will go first, then ask them to stand in front of each other - make sure each pair has enough room to do the exercise.
- Lead a quick centering practice (quick reminder about the posture and feeling into the centre of gravity)
- Briefly reiterate that whenever the person saying 'no' is ready, they will nod and their partner will start approaching them. They will say 'no' whenever they feel like it is the right moment for them. The other person will stop.
- Ask participants to stay for a moment there and feel into whatever is arising for them.
- Ask the approaching person to go back, encourage everyone to recenter and then repeat twice more.
- In the third round, as they stop in the 'no', encourage recentering and more noticing - does a reminder to recenter change anything? How do they feel saying and receiving a no?
- Swap over in the pairs, and repeat the exercise 3 times.
- After both people have had a go, allow a short debrief in pairs.
- Now explain and demonstrate saying 'yes' - exactly the same principle. Choose a different hand gesture that feels appropriate - something open, welcoming, maybe raising palms upwards. Again, as the partner approaches, they will stop when they hear the 'yes' and notice how this feels.
- Lead pairs through as before, bringing in the recentering and deeper awareness in the third round. Let both partners have a go.
- Without a debrief move towards saying 'maybe'. Same process.
- When both partners have done all three, give pairs a few minutes to chat, debrief and share impressions..

### **Debriefing the activity (15 mins)**

Open up the discussion in the whole group, asking:

- How was it?
- What did you notice?
- Which one - saying 'yes', 'no' or 'maybe' was the most difficult, interesting, notable, uncomfortable, etc? Why?
- How about being on the receiving end?

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

- We will have bodily reactions to setting boundaries. They are important information about our patterns and tendencies.
- Being able to practice boundary setting in laboratory conditions gives us a chance to explore our reactions and create more space for choice.
- It might be that saying or receiving 'yes' will be more challenging than saying or receiving a 'no'!
- Our reactions will obviously depend on the situation and who is involved but we might recognise a general tendency in ourselves.
- We are not taught to set up, explore and receive boundaries so this is not easy work and requires practice.
- Being able to set up and receive boundaries is a very important skill for personal and group resilience building. Being able to tune into our own limitations and receive other people's limitations in a centred, grounded way will mean we engage with actions that feel right and that we feel resourced to undertake.

## FURTHER NOTES

This kind of practice is supported by body awareness in general, so sessions like the extended [Centering Practice](#), [Following Hands](#) or [Body Scanning Practice](#) could all be helpful precursors.

# SITTING BACK TO BACK ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 20 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Pairs

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** n/a

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Trauma Informed Approaches

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Connection and empathy with others
- Supporting self, body and emotional awareness
- Grounding, soothing and co-regulation
- Supported reflection and absorption

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This is a useful and adaptable activity, supporting self and body awareness, connection and solidarity, or simply offering a pause for reflection with the physical support/presence of another person. It can be a soothing and regulating activity after something more 'activating' or challenging, or a balancing, slowing down or settling activity after something more complex, heady or stimulating.

Physical connection with others has obvious benefits. Finding ways to 'use' physical contact in a training context requires sensitivity and care - we cannot assume people will be comfortable with touching one another. Sitting back to back can work well as a less intense/intimate way of being in physical contact. (Consent always required, see [Working with Touch](#)).

If you have introduced somatic awareness and emotional literacy practices elsewhere, you can draw on some of that language as part of the activity - ie. encouraging people to be in touch with themselves (with their bodies and emotions) encouraging kind regard, openness and interest etc. You might also use it in the context of [Nature Connection](#) and ecological awareness and sensibility.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Trauma Informed Approaches chapter](#)
- [Bodywork chapter](#)
- [Awareness and Emotional Literacy chapter](#)
- [Body Scanning Practice](#)
- [Structured Kind Regard Practice](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

You probably want the group to have some knowledge and experience of one another before bringing in this activity. Risks are relatively low, but a consent process around touch is important in the set up.

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...



## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Frame the activity as required, explaining why you are doing it
- Demonstrate sitting back to back with your partner on the floor\* like this:



\*if sitting on the floor is not viable/comfortable, offer the option of using stools or chairs with the backs of the chairs to the side/out of the way, so there is still contact between bodies.

- Encourage them to find a partner who is relatively similar in size, and to find a position that is comfortable, balanced and easy - they will be sitting like this for about 10 minutes - it is not supposed to be effortful for the muscles

### Facilitating the activity (10 mins)

- Once everyone's in position, spend around 10 minutes 'dropping in' comments, suggestions and reflections, to help them be present with their experience. Don't talk continuously but don't leave the silence too long as people will end up distracted. Possible suggestions might be:
  - Try to relax. Notice any tension, worry or awkwardness you might be feeling and try to just relax and take it easy - give yourself permission to lean in to your partner
  - Notice how your body is feeling, notice what is happening with your breath
  - Perhaps you sense the heat of your partners body through your back
  - Notice the breath of your partner.. What is that like?
  - Notice what it is like to be being supported.. Aware that you are also supporting someone.. Aware that the ground is supporting you both..
  - Come with an attitude of openness/curiosity - there is no expectation about what kind of experience anyone should have.. What is happening.. What does sitting like this with someone bring up, today, right now?
  - Keep coming back to sensations.. What does the body feel like physically? What is happening emotionally? What is coming to your mind? ...as much as possible try to stay present in the room
  - Is it possible to have a non-judgemental kind of awareness/attention -

*If people don't want to touch, they can do the activity with their back against the wall, and imagine being held and met by the support of the wall instead.*

noticing if there are ideas and preferences about our experience, what is good/bad experience etc.. what happens if we let them go for a while and just let experience be experience?

- What happens if you look for or lean into a sense of comfort? Ease? Enjoyment? Warmth? Pleasantness?

- Notice what changes are happening? How do you know there is a change? Is anything really continuous?

- What is it like, sitting here, simply, leaning into the warmth of another human, not having to 'do' anything.. Just two human animals, on the ground, back to back, breathing, alive..

..and so on.

- Let them know they can gently transition into a few minutes of debrief (pointers as above).

### **Debriefing the activity (5 - 10 mins)**

- Give them a few minutes to talk in their pair about how they found the activity in general, then bring them back together and continue to draw out experiences and thoughts amongst the whole group, in a way that is relevant to the session in which you are using the activity.

## **FURTHER NOTES**

This activity works well as part of a session exploring trauma more generally (eg. Introduction to Trauma Awareness) and then introducing a collection of shorter practices/tools like this, such as [Orientation](#), [Body Tapping](#), [Centering](#) or [Three Step Breathing Space](#).

# SHAME, BLAME AND BUILDING COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr30 - 1hr40

**GROUP FORMAT:** Small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** pre-prepared body fl pcharts (per small group) / pre-prepared questions fl pchart / fl pchart paper / markers

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Guilt, Shame and Witnessing Harm

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Recognising unhelpful dynamics connected to shaming and blaming in the context of social movements, especially in the context of navigating social privilege
- Finding ways of moving towards deeper compassion and solidarity
- Building a culture of care
- Developing self awareness and emotional literacy

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Through Western neo-liberal society we are socialised into a culture of achievement and perfectionism, as well as shame and punishment mechanisms. This builds a fear of making mistakes and limits our ability to navigate challenging situations or create accountability processes *not* based on punishment, in our groups and movements.

Added to this is the culture we create around social privileges - many of us feel personally responsible and ashamed for holding social privilege, rather than creatively thinking about how we could be in solidarity with each other using our privileges (while simultaneously holding ourselves accountable and working towards transformative processes of privilege recognition).

Shame and blame show up as 'contraction'/tension in our bodies. Connection and openness are antidotes to that tension. Critical to transforming shame and blame mechanisms are practices such as; working to increase our tolerance for discomfort by allowing it to be present, cultivating curiosity towards mistakes, developing our capacity to work with change, letting go of a fixed notion of self and creating space for vulnerability and courage in our relationships with ourselves and each other.

Shame and blame mechanisms lead to lack of resilience, through:

- Encouraging a culture of overworking and self sacrifice
- Contributing to tiredness, tension, pain and suffering
- Leaving us with less resources to engage with action, less creative energy
- Encouraging us to act out of a sense of inadequacy and fear rather than an open feeling of generosity and inspiration.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Guilt, shame and witnessing harm chapter](#)
- [Groups and Organisational Culture chapter](#)
- [Bodywork chapter](#)

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

*One of the risks here is generating "shame about shame" particularly when we first open up to how self protective and self absorbed shame can be. You might want to draw attention to this possibility. Keep your own tone light and pragmatic - this is just something that happens and it's okay!*

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The session may bring up difficult experiences. Encourage participants to take care of themselves and remind them to begin these explorations with experiences that feel manageable. Encourage kindness and model care and non-judgement.

Rely on collective knowledge and people's experiences with how shame and blame shows up in our organising - you don't have to be an expert!

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (15 - 20 mins)

- Frame the activity in the appropriate way, making sure the group understand what is being covered and why.

- Give around 20 minutes to building some shared definitions/understandings of 'shame' and 'blame'. You can begin by 'mindstorming' any associations people have with the words 'shame' and 'blame' - capture this on a flipchart as people say things. Ask them:

- What do we think is the difference between shame and blame?
- How do they show up?

.. again, write responses on a flipchart.

- Then give the instructions:

- In groups of 4-5 spend around 15 mins talking about the embodied experience of shame - where in the body do we feel shame? How do we recognise it as the feeling of shame? What does shame feel like?

- Using a flipchart with a human body silhouette on it that I will give you, write the bodily sensations of shame onto the body image.

*Be creative and draw a non-normative body shape!*

### Facilitating the activity (1hr)

- Be around and available for people, notice if anyone is struggling and offer support, answer questions, etc. Remind them of timings as they go.

- Bring the groups back together and ask what they noticed - they may want to share some of what they have written/drawn. Draw out key learning and reflect back important points.

- Inform participants that they will now work on specific cases of shame and blame mechanisms found in social movement settings, exploring the conditions that contributed to them and the consequences of those mechanisms, including what could have been done differently.

- Invite participants to find new groups of 4-5 and then give the following instructions:

- In small groups one person will be the case bringer. The case bringer will briefly explain the situation to the rest of the group:

- What happened, what was the context?
- How were shame and blame mechanisms present in this situation?

- What were the consequences for the group(s) and people involved?

- The case bringer has 10 minutes to present the case. The group can ask clarifying questions.

- You will then have 30 mins as a small group to answer the following questions:

- What reinforced shame and blame mechanisms in this case?
- What kind of views and beliefs were supporting the reproduction of shame and blame mechanisms in this case?
- What could have been done differently? Short-term and long-term?
- What could have prevented the situation from happening - what kind of tools, on a collective, personal and movement level?

..make sure you have these questions written up on a flip chart in advance so the groups can see and remember what they should be saying/asking.

- Keep an eye on the groups as they work, giving them the 10 minute marker (when the case giver should be finishing up) and then a 5 minute warning before the end of the 30 min exploration.

### **Debriefing the activity (20 mins)**

- Bring the group back together and ask all the groups to share a little bit from their work. You can also invite the sharing of some of the solutions and remedies to the situation they found.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- Defaulting into shame and blame mechanisms in our movements is very common!
- We might experience a lot of shame around our social privileges, especially if we work with communities less privileged than ourselves.
- Being able to identify how shame and blame dynamics are created in our groups and movements, what conditions lead to them and what the consequences are, is a first step towards shifting the dynamics and finding new, creative ways of being.
- There are no fixed solutions and we need to put a lot of work into reworking old patterns we were socialised into. Awareness, discussion and feedback really supports this.
- Transformative justice principles might be helpful in further exploring the topic of accountability instead of punishment.

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

- Shame and blame creates contraction in the body and disconnects us from ourselves and each other
- Feeling shame is unpleasant and we often treat it with aversion, it is hard to be curious about it! Exploring it is already, therefore, beginning to 'undo' it
- Both shame and blame are very automatic, deeply rooted protection mechanisms. We can often fall into them without really knowing it is happening. Thus, building more awareness of how we experience them will give us more choice over our reactions.
- Bodywork/embodiment practices really help with this, as do relational/feedback type activities where we can listen, understand, reassure and help reframe for one another.

### **USEFUL RESOURCES**

More on transformative justice here: <https://transformharm.org/>

# EXPLORING SECONDARY TRAUMA

**RUNNING TIME:** 2hrs15 - 2hrs30

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group work > small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Pre-prepared flipchart of definition, flipchart paper and marker pens, personal notebooks and pens

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Guilt, Shame and Witnessing Harm

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Recognising common symptoms of secondary trauma
- Understanding negative impacts on ongoing behaviour and attitudes of activists
- Supporting making the link between secondary trauma and burnout
- Building a shared vocabulary and empowering narratives around this theme
- Awareness around 'over-empathy' and overwhelm

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This session is designed to be an information sharing, critical discussion and awareness raising session. It focuses around potential symptoms and behavioural impacts of sustained exposure to other people having traumatic and highly stressful experiences and the trying (and sometimes being unable) to offer support and assistance to them. The aim of the session is for participants to understand the impacts of such a situation and normalise secondary trauma as a protective mechanism.

Rather than giving a list of medicalised checklists of symptoms and prevention methods, the session focuses on building shared understanding and supporting reflection, which in turn will support behavioural changes and hopefully cultural changes in broader organising. It will also build connection and care in the group.

There is a wide range of experience that can come up in response to witnessing the suffering of others (including non-human). As activists, most of us are having to deal with some of that! While we may not relate to this as full blown 'secondary trauma', our experiences of distress and overwhelm exist on a spectrum with this.

One of the more challenging topics that can come up in this session (which may need time in another session) arises when we open up to some of the challenges related to empathy, such as how our capacity for empathy can at times lead us to cross a line into a draining over-identification with another's suffering. This is different from compassion, which is a resourcing experience, based on self-resourced equanimity and firm boundaries. This set of ideas can take some time to absorb and can create resistance, but it is worth being patient with, as recognising this can be deeply transformative.. More on this in the session framing of the four heart practices, below.

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

### Related material to support framing:

- [Trauma informed approaches chapter](#)
- [Guilt, Shame and Witnessing Harm chapter](#)
- [Working with difficult emotion chapter](#)
- [Interrelationship of the four heart practices activity](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Encourage participants to take care of themselves during the session. For those who are new to the topic but might have had experiences of secondary trauma this session might be revealing - which can bring up a range of reactions - from profound relief to distress and shock. Ideally, allow a socialising break after this session and be available if participants have additional questions or are in need of further debrief.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (40 mins)

- Frame the session in an appropriate way, drawing on material above if useful.
- Then let participants know that you will do a mindstorm on following questions:
  - What is secondary trauma?
  - What are the first associations that come to your mind when you hear the term?
  - When and why does secondary trauma happen?

All answers are valid and you are not aiming at creating a definition or for agreeing on anything. The aim of the mindstorm is just to voice associations and get a sense of the level of familiarity with the topic in the room.

- Allow participants just to call out different things and associations and note them down on a flipchart as they do so. Continue until the energy in the room wears out.
- Then offer participants the following definition of secondary trauma on a pre-prepared flipchart:

*Secondary trauma - displacement and denial of our own feelings, caused as a result of exposure to others' distress, trauma and intense, life threatening experiences. Common for those in aid roles like those working with low resources to try and save lives and support people in overwhelming circumstances such as search and rescue teams working with migrants, people offering on the ground support to migrants, those who face the destruction of an ecological habitat or are exposed to animal exploitation and suffering and other activists. Happens when our coping mechanisms and lack of awareness of the impact of the situation on us locks us down into unhelpful patterns - defensive, rigid and limiting of space.*

- Ask participants if there is anything missing in this definition and if anything should be added from the brainstorm you just had.
- Clarify any misunderstandings or confusions about the term that might have arisen during the brainstorm.
- Note that:



- It is useful to have a working definition of what secondary trauma is to be able to recognise it when it arises and to prevent it from happening

- There is no point in trying to strictly hold to definitions though, and it is useful to make them our own. Working on the ground will give us enough expertise to create definitions, we do not need to rely on experts!

- Then inform participants that you will now explore symptoms of secondary trauma. It might be quite exhausting work - encourage them to take care of themselves, step out of discussions if they need to and to only share as much as they feel comfortable to.

- Present them with a list of symptoms, on a flipchart as shown here:

..you might add to this list some of the things that were mentioned in the brainstorm, if they seem appropriate / right.

- Unpack anything that is unclear for people on the list, and then send participants to work in groups of 3-5 people, giving them 25 minutes to explore the following questions:

- How can/did this show up in my activism / work / my own experience and experience of others I know?

- Do I recognise some of the symptoms?

- Are there any missing that I experienced myself or have seen other people experiencing?

- What is the impact of experiencing these symptoms on activism, work, group engagement, and personal life?

## Facilitating the activity (1hr40)

### a. Exploring how secondary trauma shows up (30)

- Keep an eye on the groups and offer any support needed. Let them know half way through and when they have 5 minutes left.

- Bring the group together and open the space for people to share whatever they want to, asking: How was that? What did you learn? You may want to note that:

- It might bring up difficult feelings or sudden realisations if they haven't thought about secondary trauma before.

- Talking about this and recognising it as a phenomena, as well as understanding it in terms of our own experience is a first step towards mitigating risk and healing

- The relational/non-personal elements of this, and how important shared understanding and cultures of care are to support us.

### b. Personal warning signs - individual reflection (30)

- Each person will need paper/notebook and pen and some space in the room

- Invite participants to spend 15 minutes making a list of warning signs for themselves - what would be their personal signs of overwhelm / being on the edge of their capacity in supporting others?

- Offer some examples such as:

- Problems with sleeping
- Thinking about work / activism obsessively
- Not taking a rest for (insert amount of time)
- Falling out with mum

### SECONDARY TRAUMA SYMPTOMS

Feeling helpless and hopeless  
A sense that one can never do enough  
Hypervigilance  
Diminished creativity  
Inability to embrace complexity  
Minimising  
Chronic exhaustion or physical ailments  
Inability to listen-deliberate avoidance  
Dissociative moments  
Sense of persecution  
Guilt  
Fear  
Anger and cynicism  
Inability to empathise/numbing  
Addictions  
Grandiosity- an inflated sense of importance to one's work

- Simply be in the space, maybe working on your own list or something else, so that they don't feel watched as they work.. Then bring them back together.

- Encourage participants to find a partner and shortly debrief. They might want to share their warning signs or just chat about the activity in itself and how it felt. Invite them to consider some possible coping strategies in the conversation - what might you need when these warning signs show up?

### **c. Creating conditions for deep solidarity (40)**

- Then, moving towards an exploration of some of the ways forward towards a more sustainable and transformative approach to witnessing and supporting people in distress and challenging conditions, offer the following instructions:

- Get into small groups of 4 or 5
- List some of the conditions that might support the creation of deep solidarity (in opposition to identification with others' suffering, saviour behaviours and patterns).
- Think in terms of conditions, behaviours and tools on 3 levels:
  - individual
  - group
  - general organising / activist culture (give them some examples)
- Draw from your experience and think creatively about possibilities.
- Document your work on a flip chart in a way that will be easily readable for others
- You'll have 20 minutes
- Keep an eye on the groups and offer any support needed. Let them know half way through and when they have 5 minutes left.

### **Debriefing the activity (10 - 15 mins)**

- Give groups 5 minutes to walk around the room and look at other groups' flip charts.

- Then open a discussion asking:
  - Was it difficult to do this task?
  - What was difficult or easy about it?
  - What are some of the remaining questions?
  - What are some of the insights you gained?

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- Is there a difference between empathy and compassion? How might we understand "over-empathy"? Investigating how we can fall from empathy into identification and how that differs from compassion as an experience. Clarifying this will support healing and resourcing of our energies for action.

- Can and do we draw resilience from the communities we are in solidarity with? How do we understand vicarious resilience? Can we hold both suffering and strength in balance as part of a practice of equanimity? How can we do this? What practices can support that?

- There are no fixed ways of doing this and opening up discussions and sharing experiences is a very important first step to broader change of organisational culture.

- Often the topic of secondary trauma is connected to shame and our own saviour and hero tendencies prevent us from understanding and sharing our experiences. See session on Shame and Blame, [here](#).

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

- There are a wide range of further topics that can open up in exploring secondary trauma which people may want to pick up and continue their exploration of, we can remind people of the key ones;
  - Recognition of habits of emotional denial and suppression that we may pick up in our cultures of origin or within some activist sub-cultures.
  - The ways in which we learn to override our bodies' responses to survive a situation. Coping and stoicism.
  - How we can easily step over a line from empathy into identification, particularly when a situation activates our own unprocessed trauma and past pain- and how this can drain us over time and lead to damaging behaviours (mainly towards ourselves) - this may require some deeper, more sustained individual support work.
- Finally, we can conclude with a recognition of the deeper meaning solidarity work has for people and how that keeps them going. Ongoing work with secondary trauma and other related phenomena such as moral injury is recognised as a practice of meaning and as 'spiritual or existential' whatever that means to you and your companions. Compassion is a resourcing experience, it draws on our deep capacity for human connection without losing equanimity or a sense of boundaries with the other. Working towards being able to experience compassion within equanimity is what we are working towards in our practice with our bodies and minds (more resources on this below).

## USEFUL RESOURCES

- Activist Trauma Support for No Borders Activists [here](#)
- 16 Signs of Trauma Exposure Response is in 'Trauma Stewardship - Caring for Oneself while Caring for Others' Laura Van Dermoot Lipsky with Connie Burk.
- Mathieu Ricard in a chapter in his book "Altruism" Explores compassion and empathy and their differences.
- [The Headington Institute](#): trauma, burnout, secondary/vicarious trauma and moral injury
- [The Antares Foundation](#) as above for more grassroots audiences
- Hernadez Wolfe and Colleagues on vicarious resilience. Online article [here](#)

# WIDENING CIRCLES ACTIVITY

## (ADAPTATION FROM [WORK THAT RECONNECTS](#))

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr – 1hr30

**GROUP FORMAT:** Pairs

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Enough space to sit in pairs and speak without too much distraction from others / a bell

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer Led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Ways of Seeing

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

### KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Training in complexity
- Recognising the relative and conditioned nature of views
- Exploring identity experience and positionality
- Augmenting stakeholder analysis and mapping
- Supporting the exploration of conflict transformation
- Building win-win solutions

### FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

We often prefer simplistic certainties over the confusing richness and complexity of life. It has been said of the complexity of living systems that “it is not just that ecological systems are more complex than we think they are, but that they are more complex than we *can* think”.

Recognising that it is not only ecological systems that have such complexity, but the whole of life, can be bewildering and disorientating. Most of us need to consciously train to work effectively with complexity. Failure to do so will significantly limit our capacity to act usefully and responsively. Our grasping at the reassurances of simplistic, black and white positions and identities can perpetuate polarisation and underpins many entrenched conflicts. Being able to recognise the conditioned nature of our position and that of others can support creative solutions. This does not mean agreeing with our adversaries, but developing the capacity to be more responsive and act on a more widely informed basis.

Recognising the partiality and provisionality of all views can free us up to grow and develop through testing out our assumptions and learning from an inquiring encounter with the world.

Complexity challenges us both emotionally and cognitively. At an emotional level we find that the world will never conform to how we want it to be. At a cognitive level we find that the world will never be reducible to the way we think it is. But such recognition need not tip us into futility and vapid relativism. Such insights can underpin an increasingly mature, wise and compassionate response to the challenges of the world.

#### Related material to support framing:

- [Ways of Seeing chapter](#)
- [Identity and Activism chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This is great session to use for both deepening strategy conversations (eg. supporting stakeholder analysis, increasing breadth of strategic thinking etc) and to explore views, identities and the ways we grasp onto them, at a more visceral level. It works well as part of a longer session on [exploring identity](#).

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Introduce the activity in the context of whatever session/theme you are using it. Don't preempt peoples' experience or give away too much - let them discover for themselves.
- Give the instructions:
  - Ask pairs to sit facing each other. They should sit closely and so as to be able to offer each other attentive listening
  - You will introduce each of the 5 stages one at a time, only revealing the content of each stage as it is beginning.
  - Aim to hold silence during all transitions until the final debrief.
  - Each stage is timed, stopped and started with a bell. One person does all 5 stages before swapping over with their partner.

### Facilitating the activity (60 mins)

#### a) Speak about an issue of concern (5)

- Instruction: Tell your partner about a social/ecological issue that really matters to you. It might be something you work on actively through campaign work or other forms of engagement, or it could simply be something that really matters to you. Take 5 minutes to tell your partner what the issue is and why it matters, why you care about it.
- Ring a bell to start them off, and a bell to end after around 5 minutes.

#### b) Speak from the perspective of an adversary (6)

- Instruction: Tell your partner about the same issue, but this time from the perspective of someone you could consider an "adversary" in relation to this issue. You must do this in the first person. For example, if the issue described in round one was migrant solidarity, in this round it might be something like: "My name is Steve and I am campaigning to strengthen immigration controls and ensure that new immigrants to this country are not entitled to social services that we need for... it is not so much for me, but I think about the future of my kids and...".
- Ring a bell to start them off. After a minute or so, interrupt them and ask them to beware of caricature and stereotyping or just 'saying the arguments' - it's important to really try to get into the adversary's position and skin!
- Ring a bell to end.

#### c) Speak from the perspective of someone adversely affected (5)

- Instruction: Talk about the same issue, again in the first person (give the person a name!), from the perspective of someone adversely affected by the issue.

*When you introduce every stage it is very helpful to give some examples of what you might say if you were doing it. People can get lost/confused without this.*

*Round two is often the most challenging. It is important to give it enough time, holding people in some of the discomfort, but also enabling them to drop past that and seek to engage more fully with the subjectivity and lived experience of their 'adversaries'.*

#### **d) Speak from the perspective of a disinterested person (5)**

- Instruction: Talk about the same issue in the first person, from the perspective of someone who is disinterested, doesn't feel the issue is relevant to them, or just doesn't understand what all the fuss is about.

#### **e) Speak from the perspective of a non-human (5)**

- Instruction: Finally, talk about the same issue in the first person, from the perspective of a non-human. You can interpret this in any way you like!

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- Once the first person has done all of these stages, with the partner simply listening without comment, the pairs swap over and the person who was listening now talks from these five perspectives. You'll need to give them the instructions again.

#### **Debriefing the activity (10-20 mins)**

- After both rounds give a decent amount of time for the pairs to debrief together and then draw out learning in a whole group discussion.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- Which rounds were easier and which harder? Why?
- What did it feel like to be the adversary? Did anything surprise you about this?
- What did you notice when listening to your partner?
- Do you have a sense of what these experiences/perspectives might contribute to your work or resilience?

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

What you want to highlight or tie the session up with will depend on the context you are using the activity in. You will likely want to mention something about the uses of learning to tolerate and work with complexity, and the partial and provisional nature of our views and perspectives.

### **USEFUL RESOURCES**

This activity is adapted from an exercise which can be found in *Coming Back to Life*, by Molly Brown and Joanna Macy.

An excellent introduction to complexity and systems thinking is Donella Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*.

# IF NOTHING YOU CAN DO IS EVER ENOUGH... (REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY)

**RUNNING TIME:** 50mins - 1hr

**GROUP FORMAT:** Pairs

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Bell, quiet/contemplative space

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Ways of Seeing

## 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, global suffering 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
- Support somatic and contemplative engagement with experience

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

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 with that, the sense that there is just not enough time to do it in.

- **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 actions, 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

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sense of meaning. It can also support us to practise 'bearing with' the pain we feel about the world, what we are facing and our responses to that.

Such perspectives can provide a framework for more sustainable and consistent work, adding continuity to our efforts and creativity to our strategizing.

#### **Related material to support framing:**

- [Ways of seeing chapter](#)
- [Working with difficult emotion chapter](#)
- [Working with suffering activity](#)

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

This can be an emotive exercise for people. It also develops into something quite meditative/quiet/reflexive. Ideal conditions are an environment that can be relatively quiet and undisturbed. As usual, ensure you have a co-facilitator who can respond to anyone who might need to leave/opt out.

This activity works well as a precursor to activities which explore views and ways of looking at activism, theories of change etc. We often combine it with the [Time and Activism](#) activity.

## **ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

### **Setting up the activity (5 mins)**

- Frame the session explaining its relevance for the group
- Give the instructions:
  - Ask the participants 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).
  - 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.
  - 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 repeating 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.
  - 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.

### **Facilitating the activity (35 mins)**

#### **a. Round one: respond to the question (10+)**

- Having explained the activity, state the question (repeating it a couple of times) and ring a bell to set them off:

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

*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 support modelling*

## ***"If nothing you can do is ever enough, what can you do?"***

- After some time (5 minutes or so), ring the bell. Ask participants to remain silent during the *swap over and the roles are reversed. The question is asked for around 5 minutes in the same way to the other participant.*

### **b. Round two: respond from deeper in the body (10+)**

- Explain that we will repeat the exercise. Same format and same question. This time the person responding/answering is encouraged to sit with eyes closed and to bring awareness more fully to 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. Coming back to the pebble-pool image, we can imagine 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, they are asked to allow the answers to come from there, to try to speak from the level of the heart and guts.

- After around 5 minutes, the participants swap roles and repeat. In all transitions the participants are asked to remain silent.

### **c. Round three: notice responses without speaking (10+):**

- Here we ask the respondent to simply listen to the question and observe their response, but not to answer verbally. They remain silent, simply noticing the response in their body, heart and mind. 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.

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

### **Alternative Round three:**

If it seems better for the group, you can simply repeat round two for a second time, giving them instructions again, and allowing the practice to deepen.

### **Debriefing the activity (10-20 mins)**

- Ensure time is left for the participants to debrief the exercise in their pairs (10 minutes), then open up for 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 illicitive as possible and not necessarily get into too much 'analysis' (which may be saved for whatever activity follows on from this more reflective one):

- How did the different rounds feel?
- What did you notice?
- How do you feel now?
- Any notable shifts in perspective or feeling?

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

- You may want to tie up by linking the activity into the broader context of themes around ways of seeing and resilience, and/or with whatever is coming next (eg. the [Time and Activism](#) activity).

- This can be an emotive/sensitising activity - give them permission to take care of themselves in the break that follows.

*Some participants can seem reluctant to ask the question into this 'silence' - you can help, if so, by occasionally asking the question gently yourself.*

# TIME AND ACTIVISM ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 60 – 90 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Presentation and small group discussion

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Attitudes to Time Flipcharts

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer > Peer led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Ways of Seeing

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Exploring the concept of worldviews and mindsets
- Exploring how worldviews frame our experience and action
- Exploring alternate worldviews and how these can impact on and shift our practice

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

*"It is by the meaning that it intuitively attaches to time that one culture is differentiated from another." Spengler, The Decline of the West*

Our attitude to time exerts a powerful influence on our experience of the world. As is implied by Spengler's phrase, the way we relate to time plays a key role in determining our experience of reality. It shapes our expectations and the strategies we use to engage with the world. Our current socio-economic models, political ideologies, and strategies are all influenced by assumptions about the very fabric of temporality. These assumptions are often unconscious and we rarely notice how our views of time condition our experience and world.

Time is so fundamental, the assumptions so basic, that we often take it for granted as a given factor of reality. But different cultures and traditions give different meanings to time, understand its structure differently, and consequently live in different worlds and interact differently with those worlds – giving rise to contrasting cultures.

Generally our assumptions about time are the ones that we have been socialised into, the ones that have most conditioned our current socio-economic structures. Many of these views can have unhelpful consequences. Many of them have underpinned the damaging practices of our current industrial growth society. It can be helpful to reflect on the extent to which we reproduce these unhelpful assumptions in our own work. Perhaps we can begin to recognize some of the consequences of holding one attitude or another towards time, and how these can liberate us from ways of acting, strategising and evaluating that are unhelpful.

Seeing the relative nature of our conceptions of time, the idea that even this basic building block of our reality is itself constructed, can help us loosen attachments, undo unhelpful assumptions, and contribute empowering perspectives able to sustain our effort and contribute to a more conscious approach to our lives, work, and social engagement.

In this session we explore how our conceptions of time influence activist practice.

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*It could be valuable to research some of the key ideas from the presentation to help feel confident in opening up the themes, but expert knowledge is not needed. The presentation is more of a prompt than a 'class'.*

You will need to prepare two flipcharts ahead of the session using the [accompanying notes](#):

- Flipchart one:

1. Spengler quote at the top to introduce the theme
2. List "Predominant attitudes to temporality within the industrial-growth socio-economic complex"

- Flipchart two:

1. List "Alternative Temporalities"

Nb. You don't need to write out all the notes under these two lists, just the headings are enough, and you can speak about the rest.

### **Related material to support framing:**

- [Time and Activism Supporting Notes](#)
- [Ways of Seeing](#) chapter

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

If this session is used to build on the [If nothing you can do... activity](#), it can be framed as an opportunity to explore the responses to that session through the lens of 'time' and 'temporality'.

## **ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

### **Setting up the activity (5 mins)**

- Introduce the topic and its relevance in the context you are using it, drawing on the framing above if helpful.

### **Facilitating the activity (50 - 60 mins)**

#### **a. Presentation (15-20)**

- Outline the topic using the Spengler quote. Then describe each of the themes in the list of dominant attitudes/beliefs using the first flipchart to support you/the group to follow.

- Having kept the second flipchart hidden until now, uncover it and, as above, describe each of the themes in the list of alternative attitudes/beliefs, connecting each item to its equivalent in the first list.

- Draw out the contrast and finish with a note that this is not meant to suggest that list one is 'bad' and list two is 'good'. Each may have value depending on context. This is intended to point to the different ways we can frame and think about time and the impact these different ways of thinking can have on us and our work.

#### **b. Small group discussion (15)**

- Asks groups to discuss and capture on a flipchart: "What impacts do the attitudes in the first list of dominant attitudes have on our work?"

#### **c. Small group discussion two (15)**

- Then ask them to discuss and capture: "How could integrating some of the attitudes and perspectives from the list of alternative temporalities help change your activist practice for the better?"

*Nb. if you are using the activity as a follow on from the 'if nothing you can do...' activity then you may want to tailor these questions differently, eg. "what happens when we apply these perspectives on time to our experience of the previous activity?"*

### **Debriefing the activity (10 mins)**

Use an elicitive approach to support small groups to share their thoughts and learning with the whole group. Use groups' flipcharts to support this.

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

Reiterate that views are the most basic mediators of our experience and decision making, that they are often deeply held, habitual and invisible to us, and it is therefore highly useful to develop a practice/capacity for noticing, exploring and interrogating their flexibility!

# BAT AND MOTH ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 10-20 minutes

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Blindfold eg bandana or scarf

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Nature Connection for Resilience

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Energising, curiosity, play, group connectivity
- Embodiment, proprioception and physicality
- Awareness of body and space (front space, back space and side space)
- Breaking up/balancing 'heady' activities
- Resourcing and nourishment

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

These activities are designed to help us reconnect with the playful and inquisitive, to engage with lightness and fun, and to encourage curious and connected interaction with the people and beings around us. In this way they offer a different way of building group connection. They also support embodiment and physicality, presence and awareness.

The game probably doesn't need much framing for the group! It's supposed to be fun and energising - just throw them into it!

### Related material to support framing:

- [Nature Connection for Resilience chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

When working with blindfolds be conscious of the potential trigger for people, particularly if you're working with survivors. It will make a big difference to people if you: Ask before putting a blindfold on them, check if they'd like your help to put it on, or would prefer to do it themselves; Name the option of not wearing a blindfold for anyone who wants to participate but doesn't feel comfortable doing so.

This can work well as a short activity in the context of almost any session, to change the mode or energise the group. It can also be used in the context of more specific Nature Connection focus and skills, or as one in a range of activities and games that work on [awakening the senses](#).

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Gather participants to stand in a circle - around 5 metres from one side of the circle to the other, with participants spread evenly around the edge.

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*Incorporating games into  
session design can  
helpfully support  
engagement and ranges of  
mode and learning style*

*Look out for ways to  
draw players into the  
game - some will be very  
keen, and others more  
shy. Try to help bring  
the more timid into the  
game, and support the  
more confident not to  
dominate the activity.*

- Ask the group what they know about bats, and pool their knowledge. Some possible additions:

- In Europe, bats eat beetles, flies, moths and other insects - with the exception of one - the Egyptian fruit bat

- Europe's bats contribute to pest control and some also serve as pollinators and seed dispersers of many plants important to humans

- They usually use echolocation to navigate and hunt for insects in the dark

- Echolocation is used by bats to determine what's around them even in pitch darkness, meaning they can navigate and hunt at night. To use echolocation bats send calls out and listen to the echoes of those calls as they return from the objects near them. Bats use these echoes to locate and identify the objects, including their prey

- A tiny pipistrelle bat can eat up to 3,000 insects in a night

- Things we get from bat-adapted plants include dates, vanilla, bananas, breadfruit, guavas, Iroko timber, balsa wood, sisal, Tequila and chewing gum!

- Pool the group's knowledge about moths. Some possible additions:

- Moths migrate, and the Hummingbird Hawk moth migrates across the Channel to the UK each summer

- You don't have to wait until it's dark to see moths. Some only fly during the day - including the shiny, black and red Six-Spot Burnet moth, and the Hummingbird Hawk moth

- Moths use all kinds of tricks to avoid being eaten - from camouflage, to startling and mimicking!

- Introduce the activity as follows:

- In this game, we'll be embodying the 'essence' of the bat and the moth

- Is there someone who would be up for being a Bat? (help the Bat put on a blindfold - see additional considerations section)

- We also need a moth, whom the Bat will be trying to eat for their dinner! Is there someone who would volunteer to be a Moth for this game?

- Ask the Moth to enter the circle with the blindfolded Bat

- Inform the rest of the group around the edge that they will become 'Trees'. They should make a 'shhhhh' (or whisper 'Tree') when the Bat or Moth come close, to let them know they're reaching the edge of the circle

- The Bat in the centre will be trying to get themselves a meal by capturing the moth using echolocation!

- The Bat will begin by calling out 'BAT'. The moth, then responds (*without hesitation!*) by calling out 'MOTH'. The Bat can use this technique as often as they want

- Bat, you'll be trying to tag the Moth, using your exceptional hearing and echolocation. Moth, you'll be trying to escape the Bat's lethal clutches by embodying silent agility!

- Let's practice together first..



### Facilitating the activity (10 mins)

- The game unfolds with the Bat trying to catch the Moth. Once the Moth is captured, that person can have a go at being Bat if they'd like, or someone else can have a go.

Possible Game development:

- You might like to limit the number of times they can use the echolocation technique, encouraging them to tune more carefully into their hearing
- You can add in a second Moth to make the game more lively
- If the players are loving the game, you can also add an additional player - the Owl - who isn't blindfolded, is trying to stay completely silent in their movement so they can catch the Bat (by tagging them) without being heard.

### Debriefing the activity (5 mins)

Depending what you are using the game for, draw out any relevant points.

You might want to ask:

- How is it being the Bat?
- What tricks work best for the Moth?
- What are you finding easy / difficult?

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

These kinds of games can help us notice our tendencies, our ways of relating to others and our physical and sensory temperaments and limitations. As we play more of these games, we may start to notice a change in the ways we are sensing others and our environment. See if you can take some of this into the session and into the experience of the rest of the day..

## FURTHER NOTES

An excellent how to video from Wild Watch on Youtube (there are some slight differences in game play but it should give the idea) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bcIN\\_U4cMQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bcIN_U4cMQ)

If you want to know more about the creatures we're imitating check out more information below.

#### Bat Facts:

<https://www.batlife-europe.info/about-batlife-europe/european-bats/>

<https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/arizona/stories-in-arizona/top-10-bat-facts/>

#### Moth Facts:

<https://www.thoughtco.com/fascinating-facts-about-moths-1968179>

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/natures-home-magazine/birds-and-wildlife-articles/features/myth-busting-moths/>

# EVOLUTIONARY REMEMBERING ACTIVITY (ADAPTATION FROM WORK THAT RECONNECTS)

**RUNNING TIME:** 40 – 60 minutes

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Cushions, blankets, comfortable space, optional drum

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Nature Connection for Resilience

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## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Exploring ways of seeing and shifting perspectives
- Developing connection with deeper sense of time, bigger and longer narratives, broader web of history
- Opportunity for rest and nourishment
- Shifting of anthropocentric perspective

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This guided meditation/story situates human history in the expansive narrative of evolution, connecting us with the immense energy and intelligence which has brought us here, the fleeting nature of this moment, and our place as inheritors of countless generations of wisdom.

By shifting perspective to incorporate this perception of 'Deep Time', the anthropocentric nature of a particular modern Western worldview is challenged, and we are assisted to reconnect with ourselves as ecological beings, integral to the evolving universe, and to a life sustaining future.

Often people find the experience very vivid – the comfortable position adds to a dream-like quality for the exercise and gives an opportunity for people to rest.

In the womb, our bodies go through many of the evolutionary stages outlined below – at times we literally have fins, tails and fur – you could say these shapes are deeply embedded in our bodies. The activity can evoke strong feelings and occasionally even trauma for some people, so be prepared to hold people gently afterwards.

We usually offer the activity with an open end as some will be sleepy, others will be excited and animated. In this way it can be best to hold the activity before a break to enable people to come back from the experience in whatever way feels appropriate for them. Informal debriefs can happen over a break – giving people space to rest a while longer, or take their time to return to the group as they need.

Decide how you will present the activity: This story can be offered as a guided meditation with people sitting or lying. Some groups also enjoy using bodily movements and actions to imagine or recapture evolutionary memories, using the script as a narration to a kind of improvised enactment.

*A restful/meditative activity for connecting with a felt sense of deep time. You might want to use a drum beat to accompany the story, representing a heartbeat. Be conscious of the volume of this – too loud can be distracting / make the story hard to follow. It's usually best to have a co-facilitator doing the drumming rather than trying to read and drum simultaneously.*

### Related material to support framing:

- [Nature Connection for Resilience chapter](#)
- [Time and Activism Activity](#)
- [Ways of Seeing chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This is not everyone's creation story, and it's important to acknowledge that this is one story amongst many. Invite participants to open to this story with curiosity. It's also possible to see this 'scientific' story as catching up with the stories told by many indigenous cultures and spiritual traditions.

The script has been written in a particular context by someone of a particular age, race, nationality etc.. you may want to consider rewriting or amending it in advance, to make it appropriate and relevant to the group and time you are working in.

It's not unusual for people to fall asleep during this exercise, and it can add to the dreamlike quality of the story we're remembering! If they're snoring, they usually wake themselves up eventually! If it's disruptive, you can gently nudge them, but it can be difficult if you're reading / drumming too. Don't worry about it!

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 - 10 mins)

- Prepare the space appropriately - provide cushions and blankets to create a cosy space for people to lie comfortably on the floor / give enough space for people to make movements to enact the story
- Explain the activity to the group and frame it with whatever relevance it has for the context in which you are using it. Let them know now what to expect at the end
- Encourage people to get comfortable, with blankets etc, sit or lie down and close their eyes (if comfortable)
- When the room is settled, begin with the gentle drumbeat / heartbeat (if you wish), and slowly begin to read the script:

### facilitating the activity (25-45 mins, depending on how slow you choose to read and how much time you choose to leave between passages)

*"Come with me on a journey to the past, a journey to help us remember who we are. We begin with the heartbeat; place your hand over your heart and feel this beat, listen to this beat. Follow this pulse all the way back, back through the long eons... follow it back to the first fire at the beginning of time, the immense hot birth of the universe some fifteen billion years ago. You were there. I was there, for the cells in our body burn with that same energy today.*

*We began, long ago, as great hot swirls of gas and dancing particles. Our galaxy formed, and then our sun, and then, four and a half billion years ago, our Earth. The Earth was rock and crystal, beneath which burned tremendous fires. Through eons it cooled to below boiling, and began to rain, and the oceans were born.*

*In these warm seas, under a brown sky, from this dance of rock and air, water*

and fire, organic life arose. Can you remember your life as a single-celled creature, a simple being floating in the Mother Ocean? Only bounded by a thin membrane, you are a bacterium feeding on the minerals in this salty soup. In the warm sea, you are pulled by the currents, stirred by the wind. How does it feel to reproduce by simply becoming two identical beings, and then four.... Every cell in our bodies is descended from those first ones.

Some of us learn to utilize the energy of the sun directly and become plants. But you and I from early on take our energy by eating others and we become one-celled animals. In our constant search for food, we actually invade other cells and combine our nuclei. In time this leads to a new way of creating life. Through sexual reproduction, unique individual creatures come into being, to live, to reproduce in turn, and to die.

Float on and remember linking up with other single-celled beings. Joining together, we become a sponge, or perhaps a jellyfish. What are our sensations now?

Can you remember our childhood drifting in the warm seas? Even today, some of our relatives continue to live in the ancient ways: the corals and snails, worms and plankton.... They have never forgotten what we once knew and now try to remember.

Can you remember being a slim silvery creature, a few inches long? Feel the muscles from your head all the way down your body. Feel the strength and support that slowly solidifies, and becomes over eons a string of vertebrae, extending the length of your body. We have evolved the first backbone. Now we can swim expertly with our fins, the water streaming past and through our gills.

Immensities of time are passing. Our gills slowly change to lungs. We begin to breathe the rich, harsh air, as our fins become strong lobes we use to drag ourselves through the mud of the receding lakes. We return to the waters to spawn, and our young still begin their lives there. Can you remember raising your eyes from the water into the sunlight, as our amphibian cousins, the frogs and toads and salamanders, do today? Blink your eyes in this brightness, and venture further and further into this strange new world

Millions of years pass as we dream amphibian dreams, and the world around us changes. The swamps are drying up and we learn to carry the water necessary for our young ones in the shells of our reptilian eggs. We can live now completely on dry land. We have evolved limbs which straddle out from our body and move together, alternating from side to side. How does it feel to move in this new way, crawling over the land, eating insects and other small creatures?

We store the sun's warmth in our body by day, let our hearts slow down and rest at night. Some of our cousins grow huge and toothy, and send bellows echoing over the once silent earth. Some of our cousins let their legs become wings, their scales become feathers, their bones hollow, their hearts fast and hot. Their children live today as birds. And some of our cousins are content as lizards, as turtles and alligators and snakes; crawling on bellies, they keep today the old wisdom, adhere to the old ways.

But we and other cousins take another path. We grow fur and keep the sun's warmth in our bodies by using the heat stored in our food. We let our young ones grow within us, to keep them safe and warm. More of our children survive, although they require more care. Our legs grow longer and swifter. As early mammals, we are nocturnal, hiding from dinosaurs during the day, and hunting at night. How alert we are as we dart among the roots of the huge trees, searching for food, ready to flee the great jaws. Remember returning to our underground den and curling up to sleep all warm together.

As we sleep, the rule of the dinosaurs fades away, and we mammals can

*spread now across the land. Some of our cousins return to the water and become dolphins and great whales. Others, like us, remain on land and become gazelles and lemurs, kangaroos and mice, and great cats. Except for resting, our belly seldom touches the ground. We take on thousands of shapes, try thousands of ways of life, and the ones that succeed are passed down. All around us now in the descendants of these cousins are unimaginable store houses of wisdom and diversity of ways.*

*We go our own way. We move on hands and feet with greater lightness, leaping and climbing. In the big trees, we run along branches and swing on them. Our acute binocular vision lets us judge accurately the distance between branches. Our strong opposable thumbs help us grip and release. Our fingers are sensitive, able to test the ripeness of fruit, to groom a friend. Life is easy and full. The food we need is all around us. We are curious, playful, adventurous. Some of our close cousins live this way still.*

*Night falls; we nest in the trees. As we sleep and dream the dreams of monkeys, another transformation takes place. We awake with a body that is stronger and heavier. We balance easily on two legs and look to the far horizon. We call to each other with strong voices.*

*As we sleep in our family groups, dreaming the dreams of great apes, our forests slowly give way to grasslands. We awaken to the next chapter of our story, where on the open savanna we learn to walk upright. Without trees to escape into, we are more vulnerable to the big cats and other large hunters that roam our world. But we are inventive, adaptable. We make intricate sounds that let us plan together in our groups. We send some members out to hunt while others gather plants for food and medicine, maintain the camp, and nourish the young. We learn in great leaps now, one discovery leading to another: tools, language, making fire, music, art, telling stories. It all happens so quickly.*

*We bury our dead with flowers, laying their heads to the east, to await rebirth in the womb of Mother Earth. We know we are related to all the cousins and that we are connected to all life, and we live in grateful harmony with cycles and seasons. We take the shape we now have; from now on we evolve through our minds and hearts as we live as gatherers and hunters for thousands of generations. Can you remember? Can you see the faces of the grandparents lit by the evening fire, hear their songs and stories, lean against their solid bodies, feel their arms around you, see in them features you wear today? Much has been forgotten, much passed on.*

*Only four hundred generations ago, we begin to cultivate food on land we have wrested from our cousin species. It all happens so quickly. Farming, property, domesticated animals, towns, markets, temples, governments, writing... We build fences and fortifications; we have houses in which to keep our goods and sleep safe from one another. Some of us begin to believe that we are separate from our world, and special.*

*Night falls, we sleep again, and now we open our eyes as modern humans. We awaken enclosed by the walls of a city apartment or suburban house, in a world constructed by machines. What do we smell and touch, see and hear? How did it happen so fast? Cars, motorways, sky scrapers, aeroplanes and TV screens, endless aisles in supermarkets filled with cans and boxes of processed food. We push our way along crowded city streets. We have not touched the earth or a wild cousin for weeks. Forces we've unleashed are darkening the air, cutting down and burning the trees, suffocating us and all our relatives. It all happens so quickly.*

*Yet we are the ones who can remember. We can remember who we have been. We can know once again that we are related to all things, that we are a dance of earth and air, fire and water. And we know we are more than this too. We are the laughter of a child, the strength of compassion, the gathering under the full moon, the shiver of poetry, the melody of a song not yet sung.*

*We are the part of the world that can gasp with wonder, be moved to tears, and imagine what can come. We are the witnesses and worshipers, the warm brainy ones with clever hands, ones who can love and who can destroy. Let us enter once more into sleep and dreaming. Can you imagine the capacities that wait to take form in us, through us? This time as we awaken let us bring forth the powers and abundance of our evolutionary journey, and imagine we can help to recreate a life-affirming world. Let us once again take joy in our bodies and each other, and all our relatives in the more-than-human world. You and I have lived in harmony with the Earth for millions of years, and this knowledge has not been lost. It is time now to draw on these memories and these strengths, and to let new ways emerge, so that the fire can still burn, so that the heartbeat will not be lost, so that the dance will go on."*

- You might want to continue the drum beat a little longer than the story..  
Leave a quiet pause before whatever is next.

### **Debriefing the activity (10 mins)**

The group will usually have a lot to say about the activity, but you definitely need to leave time for people to wake up and 'come back' from the experience.

After a break you might ask some questions to draw out reflections on the experience such as:

- Were there any moments in the story which stimulated memories or images for you?
  - Were there any parts which felt particularly notable for you?
  - How did the story make you feel about your own life?
  - What impact/relevance might this have on our resilience?
- discussion.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

You might mention any of the following:

- The human phase of existence on Earth is miniscule - the period of the current dominant culture is even shorter
- We are the inheritors of thousands of generations of wisdom
- Humans hold an incredible capacity for intelligence which can be harnessed for collective good
- Refer back to '[Ways of Seeing](#)' and the importance of exploring and adapting our views and lenses when considering effectiveness and resilience in our work and lives.

## **USEFUL RESOURCES**

Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown - *Coming Back to Life* (New Society Publishers, 2010)

The Work that Reconnects [www.WorkThatReconnects.org](http://www.WorkThatReconnects.org)



# SIT SPOT ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 30 mins - 1hr 45mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Mats to sit on (optional), outdoor space

**LEADING FORMAT:** Individual

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Nature Connection for Resilience

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- A key nature connection practice
- Builds self and nature awareness
- Resourcing and nourishing
- Quietens busy mind and allows for processing and integration
- Gently builds comfort and confidence in feeling at home in nature

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

The sit spot is a foundational nature connection practice. If you only do one nature connection activity, do a sit spot. The idea is to return to the same place in nature repeatedly and become increasingly familiar with its rhythms, patterns and cycles, and with all the life forms that exist/pass through there, to know what it's like there in sunshine and rain, in broad daylight and at night, in summer and winter, before a storm and after.

Some people are known to have visited the same sit spot every day for many years, even decades! They may have formed intimate relationships with individual animals and experienced all kinds of things there (inside themselves too).

However, we can also gain benefits from a single sit spot we never visit again. So while you may encourage participants to take up a daily practice at home, in a training context it may be just one activity among many. Still, we'd recommend repetition as much as possible (eg. every morning on a multi-day training, or morning and afternoon on a single day training) modelling this idea of returning and deepening.

Sharing experiences of the sit spot is useful for enriching the learning and deepening the benefits. We benefit from other people 'catching our stories' with interest and curiosity, and hearing other peoples' experiences/ approaches can offer inspiration and insight. So, allow enough time to do this, especially the first time.

### What to take:

Ideally nothing! It's important that people are comfortable, but encourage taking minimal stuff. 'Things' can become a distraction. However, participants may wish to take something to sit on, waterproofs, water, a notebook, binoculars.

### Tips on choosing a spot:

- Don't get hung up on choosing the perfect spot!

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

*Playing hiding games beforehand (especially before the first time you do this) can help to increase comfort levels of sitting quietly in nature. You can also help people to tune in by guiding a sensory awareness activity first.*



- Avoid places that are difficult to get to, busy with people or uncomfortable, which may discourage you from visiting or distract you when you are there

- Stay within hearing range of the signal to return

- Try and find somewhere not too close to anyone else.

Allow at least 15 minutes for participants to sit in their spot - it takes about this long for wildlife to return to their normal behaviour after being disturbed. You can increase the duration slowly as people's attention spans and comfort levels increase.

#### **Related material to support framing:**

- [Nature Connection for Resilience chapter](#)

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

Ideally this activity is repeated regularly (eg. every morning on a multi-day training) so that participants become familiar with one spot. Your role as facilitator is minimal, but your role as 'mentor' is important - model the cultivation of curiosity and inquisitive attention as you set up and explain the activity.

The Sit Spot is versatile and adaptable, and appropriate for a wide variety of circumstances in the context of training design.

## **ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

### **Setting up the activity (5 - 15 mins)**

- Frame the activity. Inspire people to *want to get out there*. You might share a story of an engaging or meaningful moment in nature you've experienced (ideally in a sit spot, or at least while being quiet and observing). Alternatively, ask the group about their experiences of this..

- Give the instructions:

- You'll be heading out to find a quiet spot to sit in for an extended period of time

- Simply sit quietly and pay attention to what's around you

- Don't check the time - this takes us immediately out of the connection practice

- We'll have a signal for when it's time to regroup (eg. a wolf howl or a whistle), if everyone echoes the sound when they hear it, it will ripple out to the whole group. (Demonstrate/practice this).

- When you hear the call, come back here and we'll gather in a circle to share some experiences.

### **Possible additional Pointers**

- It can be best to keep things simple, but if you want to add more pointers you might suggest:

- Try creeping into position as slowly and quietly as possible to minimise

disturbance

- Bring yourself into a more mindful space by spending the first couple of minutes paying attention to your breathing and sensations in your body

- Tune in to all of your senses – work through them one by one, noticing what you can sense with each

- Notice what or who lives here – plants, animals, birds, insects etc – and ask yourself why they are there

- Go beyond the 'boredom threshold'. You may find that after a short period of time you become restless. Sit with it. This is your signal to go deeper – pay more attention, ask more questions, get curious. The best moments are often on the other side of boredom

- Pay attention to scale – zoom in and zoom out. How much detail can you notice in a 10cm<sup>2</sup> patch of ground? Then take in the whole landscape this spot is situated within, what do you notice at this scale?

- Ask yourself questions. **Why** is it like that? **Where** does it come from? **Who** eats this? **How** does it do that? **How** did that get here? **When** did this happen? Curiosity is key.

- Ignore all these suggestions and enjoy this precious opportunity to just be *in nature! This should not be a to-do list!*

- It can add depth to share a poem or inspiring quote just before they go out

### **Facilitating the activity (15 - 60 mins)**

- While they are out, you can do a sit spot too. Stay near the gathering point so you can easily be found.

- Call the group back after the agreed time, using the agreed signal. You can begin asking questions before everyone is back if you are waiting.

### **Debriefing the activity (10 - 30 mins)**

- If there's time, share stories in pairs first (allowing around 5 mins each) before sharing highlights with the whole group. Otherwise go straight to whole group sharing.

Points to draw out/questions to ask (drawing on the range of senses):

- What did you notice?

- What did you learn?

- Did you smell it?

- Was there anything in what you noticed which reflected your inner landscape or experience?

- What more would you like to know/learn about this?

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

Reiterate the importance of repetition with this activity. It is a practice that is designed to deepen – we need to return again and again.

## FURTHER NOTES

### Sit spot variations:

- Dawn / dusk sit spot
- Blindfold sit spot
- Bird sit spot - focusing attention on bird activity
- Experiment with sketching, roughly map out your spot, but avoid the temptation to use these as distractions from simply being present to the life around you
- Group mapping - draw a map of the area, participants mark noises they heard / things they saw. Discover if many people were aware of the same thing from different perspectives, and piece together a story taking place across the whole landscape.

### Alternative activity: Aimless Wandering

This is a great stand-alone nature connection practice, a way to discover the unexpected and for adventures to start. It's especially suited to people who are unable to sit still for very long for any reason, for when weather is too cold/wet for a sit spot, or for exploring a new area.

Take a couple of minutes to tune in to each of your senses. Feel into your body and turn around slowly on the spot with eyes open or closed until you feel an urge to move in a particular direction. Which direction is calling you? This sensation may feel like an unexplainable instinct, warmth or tingling in the gut, a sense of 'rightness' - it's different for everyone. Allow this 'body radar' to guide your wandering.

Pay attention and be receptive to what you encounter: perhaps the way light is falling on a particular tree; the intricacy of a spider web; an insect you've never seen before. You might find a spot you are particularly drawn to and decide to sit instead of wander.

You could also take a question out with you and reflect on it as you walk, bouncing it off trees, rocks, water etc and seeing what answers arise in your mind - allow yourself to be surprised (eg. Medicine Walk).

## USEFUL RESOURCES

[Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature, Young Haas & McGown \(2008\)](#)

# EXPLORING IDENTITY POSITIONS ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 35 - 1hr35

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group > small group

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Pre-prepared identity markers on paper

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Identity and Activism

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Exploring identity experience and positionality
- Opening up space for reflection on dynamics related to our identities
- Training in complexity
- Supporting the exploration of conflict transformation
- Increasing awareness concerning the constructed and non-essential nature of our identities
- Supporting loosening and freeing around identity and self-sense, in service to more flexible, creative and resourcing approaches to inhabiting/performing identities
- Deepening understanding and solidarity between participants.

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

You can find extensive framing material on identity in both the [Personal Identity and Complexity](#) and [Refracting on our Political Identities activities](#), as well as in the [framing chapter](#).

The activity itself will require minimal framing in terms of theory - it is the kind of activity it is best to 'throw them in' to, drawing out the theory throughout the discussion. Having the background understanding yourself and at your fingertips will help you direct the discussion in a way that will enable much more nuance and learning for the group.

Whether you go for the 'Complex, Non-personal, Non-fixed' framing, or the 'Empowering, Limiting, Liberating' framing, or a mix of the two, is really up to you!

Having said this, the activity is exposing (more or less depending what identity groupings you are using), and so some framing that will support people to feel well held and cared for is important. If it feels helpful, you can let them know that the activity is designed to be a little bit pokey/challenging, supporting us to notice some of the ways we respond to one another around identity. And that the intention is to develop awareness and broaden our understanding - by witnessing the diversity and hearing a range of experiences - not to polarise, 'other' or point fingers. You can also name that the complexity of identity means that any position we might take will always be partial - we are never *only* any particular identity.

Make sure that you model this inclusive, welcoming and kind approach/positioning, when you facilitate the discussion.

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

To prepare for the activity, you will need to have made some identity markers (usually A4 paper with one identity written on each). Be sure to generate these with the group in mind, choosing identity examples that are relevant, while also considering how pokey/challenging you want things to be for the group you are working with.

Examples could be:

**First round: Sexual identities**

- Gay
- Straight
- Lesbian
- Queer
- Bisexual
- Sapiosexual
- Pansexual
- Asexual

**Second round: Gender identities**

- Man
- Woman
- Trans\*
- Gender fluid
- Non-binary
- Agender
- Non-gendered
- Two-spirit

**Third round: Social engagement identities**

- Change-maker
- Activist
- Artist
- Clicktivist
- Anarchist
- Campaigner
- Educator
- Radical
- Carer

**Related material to support framing:**

- [Identity and Activism chapter](#)
- [Ways of Seeing chapter](#)
- [Exploring an Ecology of Strategies activity](#)
- [Reflecting on our Political Identities activity](#)

**OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

The way that our (activist) identities serve our psychosocial needs can understandably and often healthily condition strong attachment to them. Exploring them visibly and collectively can be existentially challenging and may in some cases be unhelpful to individuals who are likely to polarise with others - sometimes for very understandable reasons! This can be an exposing exercise and there should be trust, care, and a good framing to support the group to feel safe enough.

Approach these conversations with sensitivity and in the spirit of genuine solidarity. Asking questions rather than making statements is encouraged.

As usual, ensure you have enough team members present to support anyone who might need to leave. And as ever, let them know that if they are too uncomfortable, there is no requirement to participate - they are free to observe.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Frame the activity as suggested above - not theory heavy, but inviting them into the activity with care and some signalling around possible exposure (while not over-stating the matter or making people unnecessarily anxious!)

- Lay the first set of identity positions on the ground, spaced evenly around the space (a couple of metres between each is ideal)

### Facilitating the activity (20 mins - 1hr)

[timing dependent on the number of rounds]

- Ask the participants to go and stand next to the identity they feel most aligned with. You can name that there might be multiple identities that feel relevant to them and that is ok, just pick the one you want to pick for today!
- When the group have clustered themselves, open up some dialogue amongst them, by asking some questions such as:
  - Why are you standing where they are standing?
  - How do you feel?
  - How does it feel seeing other people standing elsewhere?
  - Is this always where you would have stood, or have things changed?
  - Is there anything happening in the room that is making you feel uncomfortable?
  - How do different peoples' ways of speaking about where they are standing affect you?

Hold the conversation carefully. It is common that there are people in a group who are not as 'identity literate' as others, who might communicate clumsily or get things culturally 'wrong' (commonly the identities with more privilege will have some blind spots and the more marginalised identities will be sensitive to feeling misunderstood or invisibilised). The best thing to do here is to talk about it - that's the point of the activity! But there is skill required in supporting this to happen in a way that builds understanding and connection, rather than polarisation and alienation. Take an interest, ask questions, be curious, be loving and understanding of both 'sides', invite people to express how they are feeling and help that communication happen in an open way that honours complexity and diversity of experience and backgrounds.

- Draw the discussion to an end, and then lay the next set of identity markers out in the space. This time, ask the group to go and stand next to the one they feel least comfortable with, or identity least with.

- Again, once they have clustered, open some dialogue with questions:
  - How does it feel to stand in this position?
  - Can you imagine holding/inhabiting this identity?
  - Why?
  - What does it bring up, to imagine this?
  - What happens in the body?

Etc..

*Nb. If you are using this activity more to explore strategic or stakeholder positions in service to diverse/complex campaign development (for example) you would want to weight the questions slightly differently.. "What do you want", "What do you need", "How do you understand the views of the people over there" and so on.*

*Despite the challenges around this, we see it as unproductive to get into anything shaming or 'cancelling' of people. There may be limitations in individuals, they will be there for a reason, and it is in all our interests to stay in communication and learn from one another. Of course, all positions are not equal in this, and safety and care is paramount, particularly with those in marginal*

- Depending how many sets of identities you have prepared/thought it useful to explore, continue to draw out conversation and reflections that aim to reveal:

- The ways we cling/grasp, often painfully, to our identities
- The ways we want/need to 'other' others to sustain our own identities
- The attachment we can feel to being seen in a certain way
- The desire for belonging
- Etc

### **Debriefing the activity (10 - 30 mins)**

You may want to debrief the activity by specifically naming some of the theoretical framings around understanding and working with identities in more liberating ways (see Reflecting on our Political Identities or Personal Identity and Complexity), or you may be using this activity as a precursor to one of these activities and so not need to..

Either way, be sure to ask people how they are doing what they got out of the session, ensuring the group feel seen and cared for, in the challenge they might have encountered.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

As above, make sure people are okay. The tricky nature of these themes is renowned - developing the literacy and emotional buoyancy to be able to talk about them in diverse groups is important, but it's also hard work (and more often for some than others). Thank them for their efforts.

## **FURTHER NOTES**

This session leads well into activities on [Personal Identity and Complexity](#) and [Reflecting on Our Political Identities](#).

Note that if you noticed anything tricky or sticky come up between participants during the activity, you should always find a moment to check in with them outside of the session and see if anything is required - it's your responsibility to do this, since you set up the situation that caused the trickiness!

*positions or conditioned by trauma - as the facilitator it's your job to hold the conversation in a way that is productive. If that becomes impossible due to somebody being determinedly antagonistic or hurtful, the conversation should be stopped and will need to be addressed in some other format. Trust, group building and a culture of respect and care are necessary prerequisites to running this activity well.*



# PERSONAL IDENTITY AND COMPLEXITY ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr – 1hr30

**GROUP FORMAT:** group work > individual > pairs

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** flipchart / flipchart paper and pens / pre-prepared example of personal identity image (Diagram 2)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led > individual > trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Identity and Activism

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Exploring the components that make-up identities
- Unpacking the complex, non-personal and non-fixed nature of identities
- Looking at possible perspectives to support holding identities more lightly/with more ease
- Supporting loosening and freeing around identity and self-sense, in service to more flexible, creative and resourcing approaches to inhabiting/performing identities

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

### IDENTITY IS:

#### a. Complex

There are many dimensions to our identities, many 'parts' of who we are, many different identities, which all meet, intersect and overlap (not always harmoniously!) to form an overall sense of 'who we are'. Some of this material is conscious and chosen, and some of it is externally bestowed – whether we like it or not! There is no identity category broad enough to encompass all this and it is important to acknowledge this complexity. It helps us hold ourselves and others with more understanding, tolerance and flexibility. Without this perspective, we oppress ourselves and each other with limiting identity labels and boxes that seek to simplify and 'tidy up', what is not a simple matter!

As Audre Lorde puts it: "the true focus of revolutionary change is never, merely, the oppressive situations we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us."

#### b. Non-personal

The notion of identity, and the experience of it, arise within a matrix of the ways we are conditioned. It cannot be free of, or other than, that.

- Our identities are conditioned historically – we are the product of our past and have acquired a significant amount of who we are from what our history and experience has given us.
- Our identities are conditioned socially – how we are seen by others forms an intrinsic part of our sense of who we are, the socially, relationally shared conventions about what behaviours and choices *mean, in terms of identity. Identity only means anything because of shared experience, assumptions and semiotics! You may notice, if you ever spend an extended period of time alone, how much of your identity starts to fall away, or seem redundant*<sup>1</sup>.
- Our identities are conditioned ecologically – apart from anything else, we

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<sup>1</sup>Nb. This doesn't mean they don't matter!

are the product and continuing unfoldment of a vast evolutionary process. We cannot extricate ourselves from this dimension of our identities either.

### **c. Non-fixed**

Because of how complex and non-personal they are, our identities are not tie-down-able. They are not 'there' in a way that we can point to them, take hold of them or fix them as a 'thing'. There is so much going on, so much coming together, moment by moment, to constitute the experience of identity, and it is constantly changing in process.

- Our identities change over time – as we grow, learn, experience, adjust, uncover, form new relationships and so on.

- Our identities change dependent on the context – in certain situations we might find ourselves highly aware of a particular part of our identity, or particularly wanting to perform/present certain dimensions of our identity, or wanting to downplay or hide them. The identity itself, the experience of it, is affected by this. There's no 'true' version of ourselves, only what is arising moment to moment, situation to situation. And that changes.

- Our identities change dependent on how we are looking at them – the way of looking always affects the experience of the thing. This can impact in a whole range of ways. But an obvious one might be, to notice the way the identity is experienced when we are looking critically at ourselves or when we have just achieved something successfully, or the way we experience/see the identity of a friend when we feel annoyed with them, or when we feel appreciation for them.

## **DIFFICULTIES WE FACE WHEN WORKING WITH IDENTITY:**

### **a. Overattachment:**

Clearly our identities are important. We couldn't function socially without them! They protect us, in some ways and at some times they define us, and they support us to engage with others and the world, creatively. But most of us will admit a tendency to becoming overly attached to them. Not only is it a deeply rooted tendency of the mind to cling to the self-sense, we also live in a time of the social media bolstered personality cult, which encourages self obsession and overemphasis on the more superficial, less meaning-oriented dimensions of identities, such as body image.

When we are overly attached to our identities we will find that their being challenged, undermined, ignored or resisted, brings up strong negative emotions. We may find ourselves becoming angry, defensive, self-righteous, over assertive, unable to listen or emotionally shut down. Apart from these experiences being unpleasant, painful and depleting for us, they also leave us not very functional, not very helpful, and not very able to respond creatively. (Of course certain identities being undermined/ignored/resisted is a political problem in itself and needs addressing, but we are referring here to more 'personal'/generic experiences of constriction in the experience of identity – see below for possible responses to this).

### **b. Oversimplification:**

Counter to the more useful understanding of identity as complex (see above), identity categories and identity labels can bring the difficulty of marginalising parts of ourselves (or others). To the extent that we strongly identify with a certain identity category, the parts of us that do not so easily conform to that category are at least sidelined and ignored, and at worst hated and repressed. This plays out externally as well where, in order to strongly identify as something, we must visibly not identify as something else. Identity is dependent on 'othering' – 'this other than that', 'this not that'. This easily leads us into difficulties around marginalising, excluding and treating others prejudicially. We all do this at times, and to some extent! It is a natural tendency in the matrix of identity construction. But it can be helpful to

reflect that, the more strongly we are attached to our identities, the more strongly this tendency to 'other' will play out. And the more awareness we can bring to the understanding that it is never as simple as "we are all like this" and "they are all like that", the more inclusive and tolerant we are likely to be able to be.

#### **c. Mediating of experience:**

Our experience is mediated by our identities – the ways we are attached to being, the ways we want to be, the ways we don't want to be, the ways we want to be seen, the ways we don't want to be seen. To the extent that we hold to and assert out identities in fixed or rigid ways, they will limit the kind of experience we can allow ourselves to have, and the kinds of responses we can allow ourselves to make. For example, at a personal level, asking myself the question "What do I need?" can only have an answer that is mediated through my various identities. If I have an aspect to my identity that is as a competent, effective, reliable and dedicated person, my ability to respond to that question with (what might be) an honest answer of "I need to rest and recover" will be limited. My ability to meet situations creatively, really look at and respond to what the situation needs, will be similarly mediated and limited by my identities, equal to the extent that I cling to them as fixed and rigid.

#### **d. Impermanence and changeability:**

As unpacked above, our identities are always changing. Sometimes they change consciously, sometimes unconsciously. Sometimes they change organically, sometimes more intentionally. Sometimes they change because we want them to change, and sometimes they change because the situations of our lives demand it. However it is happening, if we are hung on tight to our identities, when they change, we will resist, and that will be painful (sometimes very painful!) and exhausting (sometimes very exhausting!).

### **SOME HELPFUL WAYS OF WORKING WITH IDENTITY:**

#### **a. Fluidity, openness and flexibility:**

A healthy relationship with our identities is great! And necessary. Along with our views, our identities are the key ways of relating to and mediating our experience of others and the world. They form a significant basis for the way others see and treat us, and in that sense they are important. They are a necessary element in our participation as social humans. If we can allow them to be less fixed and rigid, more fluid and flexible, then we have the opportunity to be utilising our identities creatively, in ways that are truly responsive, honest and 'free'. A sense of openness, a sense of expandedness, anything which helps us let go of the need to cling to our identities at all costs, will support us to be able to use our identities helpfully, and also enjoy their colour and diversity for ourselves! We can do this by exploring clinging and letting go in meditation, noticing when we are asserting out identities or 'othering' strongly and looking at what is driving that in us, in our day to day lives, or simply by reflecting on this topic and allowing our views and perspectives to change (which will also change the experience, over time).

#### **b. Seeing it clearly:**

The ability to understand, notice and be familiar with our notions and experiences of identity, to become identity 'literate', is so helpful in all aspects of our lives, not least our social change work. Our choices about where we put our energy, what we oppose, what we resist, the groups we join, friendships/relationship to self, how we see and/or moderate our behaviour and so on. As someone once said: "We do not see things as they are, we see things as we are." When we better understand what is going on in us, and amongst us, with regards to identity, we are in a much more advantageous (and less reactive!) position to engage helpfully and creatively with social oppression and marginalisation, and with doing the work that enables us and others to heal from all that.

### c. Holding it, but not clinging to it:

As described above, we need our identities. And to the extent that our work is focused around marginalisation, oppression, power and influence (which if we are working intersectionally, it probably should be!) the ability to hold our identities skillfully is absolutely fundamental. If we can hold our identities lightly, they will support us to engage with others, to understand identity-based experience in others, to work with and understand 'othering' and so on. This is a skill! If we can practise – meditatively and otherwise – releasing some of our grasping to all that we are hanging onto in ourselves, we train ourselves in the ability to adjust how we are holding things (like identity or views) increasingly subtly. The starting point though, is being willing to relinquish the tight holding on in the first place. And that can require a good bit of solidarity as a basis (connection, [integration](#), [kind regard for oneself](#) and [others](#)).

This activity offers the opportunity to explore some of the themes around personal identity, complexity and letting go of unhelpful grasping.

You will not use the framing material until later in the session – it is best to open up the themes drawing on the knowledge of the group, and give more theoretical input later.

#### Related material to support framing:

- [Identity and Activism chapter](#)
- [Ways of Seeing chapter](#)
- [Self Solidarity practice](#)
- [Reflecting on our Political Identities activity](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The main thing with this session is to manage to get the balance right between encouraging views that help people to hold lightly/let go of grasping to identities, without unhelpfully undermining peoples' need to identify and preserve needed/important and empowering identity positions (especially around marginalised identities). People who are working with marginalisation and trauma do not need to be told that their identities 'don't matter'! You must make sure to emphasise that this is not what is being suggested, and be clear about the intentions behind this kind of exploration. We are not aiming to do away with identities, but to support ourselves to work with them creatively, flexibly and in ways that nourish rather than deplete us.

Approach these conversations with sensitivity and in the spirit of genuine solidarity. Asking questions rather than making statements is encouraged.

As usual, ensure you have enough team members present to support anyone who might need to leave.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (15 - 30 mins)

- Frame the session minimally (we will bring in the theory later on!), just letting people know the intention of the session and its relevance. Then ask the group to mind storm: **"What are some of the things that make up identity?"**

Have another facilitator writing up whatever gets shouted out, so you can focus on hearing, clarifying and drawing out the group. You should end up with something like this:

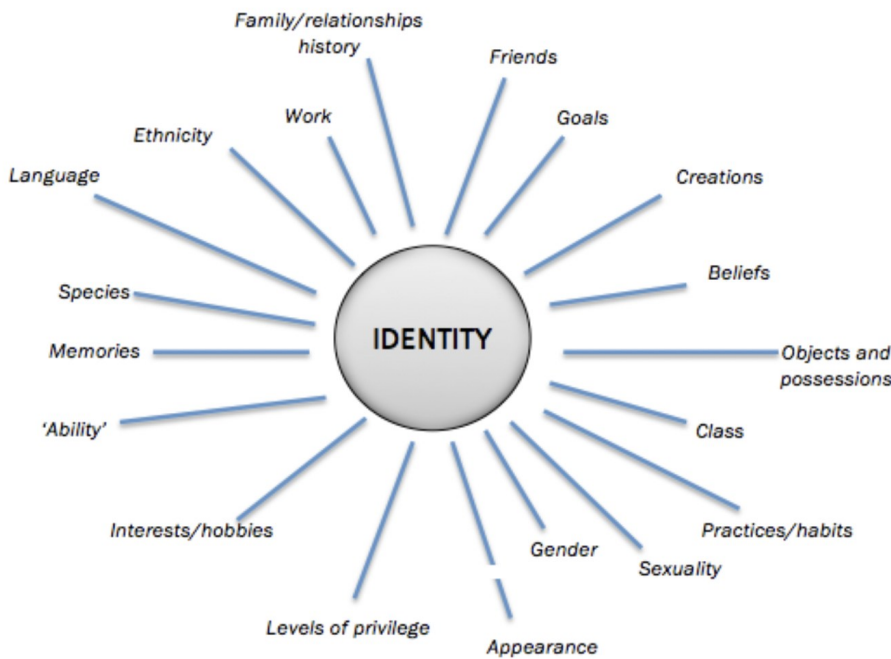
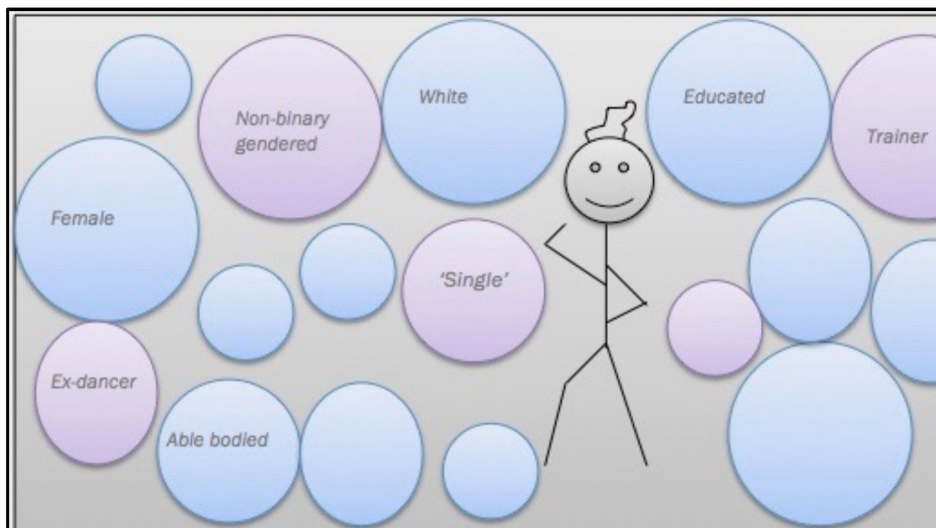


Diagram 1

Take some time with this, as it will support the next stage.

- When the group has stopped producing, add anything important yourself that is missing, then give the instructions:
  - Using these mind-map categories as inspiration, create an image/map of your own identity, by drawing in the range of different elements, in a more personal way
  - You can be creative with the exercise – using colours, shapes etc to depict different things (eg. for aspects of identity that feel more 'chosen', and those which feel more 'externally imposed'; or for elements that are more or less 'conscious'; or use different sized shapes to describe the significance etc)
  - For example (and show them an example):



As you do this, refer to the images/maps they have made - they should see there, the complexity and so on, you are referring to!

Diagram 2

- Answer any questions, give them their timings and send them off.

## Facilitating the activity (30 - 40 mins)

### a. Making the identity image/map (30-40)

- Keep an eye on people and support them to go deeper with the exercise - some people may finish quickly.. encourage them to reflect further and keep filling out their map/image. (There are so many things, conditioning our identities!)

- Give people a half way and 'close to the end' warning, and then draw people back together for some theory and discussion..

### b. Theory and discussion (20-30)

- Drawing on the framing material above, unpack some perspectives on the Complex, Non-personal and Non-fixed nature of identity. Take your time with this, it can feel complex/new to people and, as mentioned in the 'other considerations' section, it's important to communicate around it in a way that strikes a useful balance for people.

- Having presented some of this, ask the group what their responses are:

- What do you think about this?

- Does it feel obvious/familiar, or new/challenging?

- What does it bring up for you? How does it make you feel?

- Facilitate some discussion around this, supporting nuance and deepening of understanding. Then open up more around why these perspectives might be useful in terms of working with the difficulties around identities and finding helpful approaches (also in the framing section).

### Debriefing the activity (20 mins)

- To debrief the activity, ask the group to get into pairs and spend some time reflecting on the questions:

- What might be possible if I were able to hold my identities more lightly?

- What strategies/approaches could I imagine implementing to help me do this?

- Draw the group back together for anything else that wants to be said and then offer some concluding comments..

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

Depending what has come out in the discussions, you can choose what seems helpful to say. Definitely good to reiterate that holding identity lightly does not mean not taking it seriously, and we should not use these kinds of perspectives as ways to sidestep or bypass responsibilities around privilege, care, healing and so on. Identities are magnificent - most especially when we are not imprisoned by them!

## FURTHER NOTES

This activity works well in combination with activities such as [Widening Circles](#) and [Exploring Identity Positions](#).

An additional element that could be added - depending on the kind of group/facilitator competences - is a meditative/somatic practice which invites people to notice the ways the body and the felt-sense contracts/tightens around the defending of identity/sense of self, and practising somatic relaxation with this.



# REFLECTING ON OUR POLITICAL IDENTITIES ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr - 1hr10

**GROUP FORMAT:** Pairs

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Pre-prepared prompts written up/on handout

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led > peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Identity and Activism

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Opening up space for reflection on dynamics related to our political identities
- Strengthening a sense of how our political identities empower us
- Increasing awareness concerning the constructed and non-essential nature of our political identities
- Deepening relationships and solidarity between participants

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Referring to the ideas discussed in the [Activist Identity](#) chapter, introduce the three modalities of identity formation: *empowering, limiting, and liberating*.

**1. Empowering identities** are those that are formed when we come together around a shared social or political endeavour. They strengthen our sense of personal and collective agency, creating an empowered sense of 'us together' or 'political community'

**2. Limiting identities** occur when our empowering identities become rigid or stuck. We can become highly identified with our political work or what we stand and fight for. This can lead to us grasping our identities in ways that undermine our abilities to build connections, alliances and coalitions, to adapt to changing circumstances, and can be depleting for us as well.

**3. Liberating identities** arise where we are able to weaken the tendencies that contribute to limiting identities and allow our sense of self and our sense of 'us' in our groups, to be more flexible, adaptive, and responsive, utilising the identities that serve us and the world helpfully and creatively. This supports us to become better equipped to work across differences, embrace diversity and transversality, and allow our sense of self and community to evolve and adapt responsively – enhancing our potential to realise radical transformation.

It is important to acknowledge the important role that activist identities play in offering empowerment and a sense of group solidarity, as well as noting how working with greater awareness around how our activist and political identities are formed can enhance and support our struggles and movement building.

The formation of activist identities is a complex process that includes both political and psychosocial elements. Exploring this material can touch on sensitive areas, especially where identities are formed in response

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to [oppression](#) and marginalisation.

Therefore it needs to be handled carefully and with a [trauma-informed](#) approach. In some cases it might be important to support participants to form caucus groups (groups formed around shared marginalised identities) to help to provide the safety needed to open up around these issues and discuss them in spaces that are sympathetic and informed.

It can be useful to open up some space to acknowledge the ways in which our social identities are constructed within long historical processes and shaped by systems of oppression, such as racism and patriarchy. It can be complex and challenging to unpick the ways in which our identities are:

- Chosen by ourselves or sometimes reclaimed and rearticulated from oppressive systems of signification and socialisation
- Given or attributed to us by the wider social systems we live within
- Determined or shaped by forces beyond our control.

Despite the complexity of these processes, creating space where deeper reflection and discussion can happen are important in equipping us to avoid falling into the limiting tendencies described in the [framing chapter](#).

If the activity isn't preceded by one or other of the related activities, it might be necessary to offer some examples of what is meant by a political or activist identity. These could include: feminist, radical, socialist, working class, queer, and so on.

#### **Related material to support framing:**

- [Activist Identity chapter](#)
- [Personal Identity and Complexity activity](#)
- [Active Solidarity chapter](#)

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

The way that our activist identities serve our psychosocial needs can understandably and often healthily condition strong attachment to them. Encouragement to consider these identity formations as non-essential, but rather conditioned and constructed, can be existentially challenging and may in some cases be unhelpful to individuals whose attachment to them serves important psychosocial functions.

So, it is important to honour everyone's self-determination and personal needs and not push non-essentialist views in an imposing way. It is important to trust that the psyches of others know better than we do what they need and honour that. Approach these conversations with sensitivity and in the spirit of genuine solidarity. Asking questions rather than making statements is encouraged.

As usual, ensure you have enough team members present to support anyone who might need to leave.

## **ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

### **Setting up the activity (5 - 15 mins)**

- Discuss some of the framing concepts referred to above and in the framing chapter, in a way that makes sense for the context in which you are using the activity.

*It can be helpful to encourage participants to be in touch with themselves and sensitive to their bodies as part of this reflective process, rather than simply speaking about the topics theoretically/from the head.*

- Organise people into pairs, bearing in mind whether caucusing would be useful or not. Aim to bring people together where a degree of trust can support openness and reflective self-inquiry.
- Let them know that in their pairs they will take it in turns to reflect around a series of prompts.

What activist or political identities are important to you and your practice?

How do you understand these to be shaped - are they determined or given by others or chosen - or a combination of these processes?

In what ways do you experience these identities or identity to be empowering for you and others?

In what ways have you found them to be limiting?

What could help you to ensure that these identities continue to be liberating and serve you and the struggles you are part of?

- Give them their timings and then send them off

### Facilitating the activity (30 - 40 mins)

- Keep an eye on the pairs, offer them support if needed, and let them know when they are half way through, and when coming towards the end. Then bring them back together for the debrief..

### Debriefing the activity (20 mins)

It could be useful to ask pairs to join together to form groups of 4 or 6 people to share:

- What arose for them in the exercise?
- What have they found useful?
- What further questions have arisen for them?

It might be best to leave the debrief in these small groups rather than coming back together as a larger group. But a final sharing in a larger group is an option in cases where this feels appropriate.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

Reiterate that identities are an important factor in what mediates all of our experience (at the personal level) and what influences and shapes our positions, strategies and approaches to our work. They are also sites of possible pain and difficulty, as well as being things we can be very attached to/defensive around. For this reason, it is useful to gently and carefully explore them and the ways we hold them, in service to more flexible and liberated ways of being in the world, relationally and in our work.

## FURTHER NOTES

This activity works well in combination with the [Exploring Identity Positions](#) activity or with the [Widening Circles activity](#), as a way to reflect more deeply on our identities.

*You will probably want to have these written up somewhere for the group to be able to refer to.*

# MOVEMENT TIMELINES ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 3hrs (+ preparatory research)

**GROUP FORMAT:** Small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Flipchart paper / pens / pre-prepared movement timeline / diagrams/documents to support framing discussion

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led > Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** The Ecology of Social Movements

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Understanding social movements within a historical context
- Building an understanding of ourselves as historical subjects
- Developing awareness of the complex processes of continuity and discontinuity in movement life
- Encouraging deep reflection on key concepts such as 'movement power' or 'movement progress'
- Beginning to recognise patterns in the lives of social movements.

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This activity should be preceded by a period of time for participants to carry out some research into a social movement they feel some connection with. This can happen in the days or weeks before. Simply set this up as a preparatory activity by explaining that they will be asked to develop historical timelines of a chosen movement, so they should do some research about key events. The timeline could start with historical precedents stretching back centuries or it could be started in recent times - but as a minimum participants should be looking back at least a couple of decades. Ask them to bring their notes with them to the session and be prepared to allow them access to the internet during the activity, in case they need to do some additional research.

It can be helpful to take some time to explore with participants what they understand a social movement is. We will often share a few quotes and support participants to engage critically with them. Examples include:

*"Following an old law of social evolution, resistance confronts domination, empowerment reacts against powerlessness, and alternative projects challenge the logic embedded in the... existing order."*  
Manuel Castells, 2003

*"Purposive collective actions whose outcome, in victory as in defeat, transforms the values and institutions of society."* Manuel Castells, The Power of Identity, 2003

*"A network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity."* Mario Diari, 1992

We emphasise that we are not looking for the 'right' definition, but using these suggestions by social scientists to help us reflect critically on our

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*If you are using these quotes as bases for discussion/reflection as suggested, you will need some way to have them visible to the group, such as written up in large-ish letters on flip charts.*

experience and understanding.

We also draw attention to the complexity of social change and social movement roles within it. We often use this quote from William Morris to give a sense of the discontinuity and intergenerational nature of many struggles:

*"I pondered all these things, and how people fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other people have to fight for what they meant under another name."* William Morris, 1886

We take some time to discuss the value of having a sense of the long struggles our movements are part of and the multiplicity of contributions that have been made over time.

#### **Related material to support framing:**

- [The Ecology of Social Movements chapter](#)
- [Ecology of Social Movements Mindmap](#)

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

This activity, particularly part one, requires a fair bit of focus, concentration and clarity. You may want to consider the make-up of the small groups to support them in this, as well as considering where you place the activity in the shape of the day or the overall training (ie. don't put sessions like this in moments when the group are likely to be feeling 'full' or fatigued).

## **ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

### **Setting up the activity (30 mins)**

- Frame the activity explaining its relevance to the context in which you are applying it, then take 20 minutes to explore with participants what they understand by the concept of a 'social movement' (see suggestions above).

Emphasise that:

- Most struggles which achieve deep structural transformation are intergenerational and involve many years of education, preparation, trial and error
- Having a sense of our connection to larger, long term struggles can support an expanded sense of the context of our work. It can help us feel and recognise the solidarity we share with others through time and across our movements.
- Show participants an example of a movement timeline (below) and then give the first set of instructions for **Step One**:
  - Draw a simple timescale, marking dates - often the scaling will increase as the timeline reaches the present (e.g. a historical line might only have short 10cm gaps between centuries in the early part, but 30-40cm gaps between years during the most recent period, with more detail to include)
  - Map the events onto the timeline. Events can include things that happened within the movement or organisations involved, events affecting other stakeholders or adversaries, and contextual events (such as elections, conflicts, etc), among other things
  - Use at least one full A1 sheet - you may need to stick a couple of sheets together
  - You'll have 50 minutes in small groups to develop one of these for yourselves

- Aim to form groups around movements you feel some connection to.

### Facilitating the activity (1hr40)

- Keep an eye on the groups and offer any support that might be needed. Once they have their basic timelines draw out, introduce instructions for

#### Step Two:

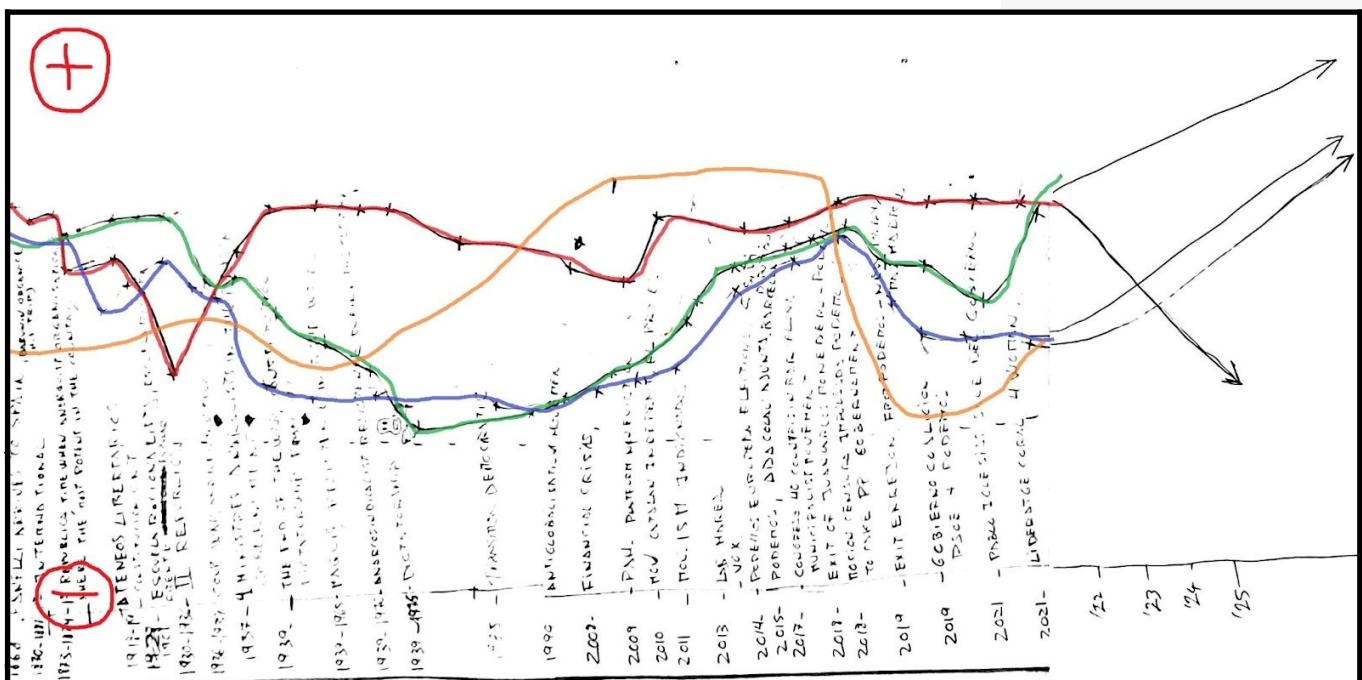
- Now we will add some graph lines to our timelines.
- Turn the paper horizontally (so that time is running from left to right) and put a plus sign in the top left hand corner and a minus sign in the bottom left hand corner (see diagram below)
- Now you can plot the rise and fall of certain factors along the timeline. We're asking you to plot your graph the following factors:

- 1) **Power:** The power of the movement, perhaps in terms of momentum, energy, numbers of people or decision makers in support...
- 2) **Cohesion:** The internal cohesion of the movement, impacts of internal conflict, clarity of direction...
- 3) **Progress on the issue**
- 4) **Opposition:** Impacts of push-back, resistance to the changes the movement wants, and repression.

Choose a different colour for each factor and plot the rise and fall of each of them across the timeline.

- You'll have 50 minutes.

The final timeline and graph lines will look something like this:



- Keep an eye on the groups, give them half way and ten minute warnings, then transition into the first stage of debriefing..

### Debriefing the activity (50 mins)

- In their small work groups, give them around 30 minutes to reflect on the following questions:
- What has contributed to the progress or lack of it?
- How are you measuring power?

*Do not over describe these factors, when you introduce them. The discussion participants will have about how they interpret these factors is a key part of the learning process.*

- What forms did opposition take?
- Can you find any patterns emerging?
- Does anything surprise you or make you curious?
- Does looking back like this, tell you anything useful about the situation your movement finds itself in today?
- Then ask two or more small groups to join together to share their work with one another and especially any new learning that has emerged from the process. Allow 20 minutes.
- Bring the whole group back together for some last comments - you may want to ask the groups for one or two key learnings/reflections, or else just tie the session up yourself.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

There will likely have been a lot of juicy discussion and plenty of material generated by the activity. You may want to point to the ongoing nature of this kind of learning - it is never done! - and reiterate some of the points from the framing section about the importance of these kinds of analytical and broad-scope perspectives in effective resilience praxis. Emphasise the way that these kinds of perspectives can feed into and significantly enhance our ongoing planning and acting, in all fields of our social change work.

## **FURTHER NOTES**

This activity works well combined with the [Movement Mapping activity](#), as well as with follow on sessions exploring strategic interventions that are suggested by the insights gained.

# MOVEMENT MAPPING ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 3 - 12 hours

**GROUP FORMAT:** Small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Example movement map (diagram 1) / A1 sheets / paper, scissors, glue/tape, pens

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** The Ecology of Social Movements

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Understanding the current strengths and weaknesses of our social movements
- Better understanding our own role within our movements
- Improving our appreciation of the diversity of contributions needed for a healthy and effective social movement
- Becoming better placed to consider strategic interventions that can improve movement resilience
- Deepening our understanding of Movement Ecology
- Learning to think about the relationships within our movements as indicators of strength or weakness

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

Movement mapping will help people to shift away from a view of their Movements centred on themselves and learn to think more in terms of the relationships between actors. It offers a useful way to analyse current Movement strengths and weaknesses - and then to consider interventions that will improve our Movement capabilities and resilience.

You can use the ideas and frameworks from the chapter introduction in the [Ecology of Social Movements](#) to share a sense of the value of thinking in these terms and to offer an initial way of thinking about the diversity of contributions and approaches found in effective Movements. It can be useful to refer to a couple of historical examples.

This chapter will also offer you some input on Movement typologies, categories, roles, capabilities and so on, which will help to frame part 'd.' below.

You will need to have pre-prepared an example of a Movement Map to show the group at the start of the session. Ideally use a hand drawn map using cut out pieces of paper to simulate the method you are encouraging them to use. Include a key and a variety of actors, category (part 'd.') and connection (part 'g.') types. (See 'diagram 1' below).

Related material to support framing:

- [Ecology of Social Movements Chapter](#)
- [Movement Timelines activity](#)
- [Ecology of Social Movements Mindmap](#)

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## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This activity can be done more briefly over a couple of sessions, but we have often found that there is enormous richness to the activity and it can easily be carried out across two full days without losing momentum or interest.

Generally the activity is designed for people with significant Movement experience, who have access to the kind of information required to complete this kind of map.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (30 mins)

- Frame the activity explaining its relevance to the context in which you are applying it, then offer an introduction to the topic drawing on the suggestions above.

- Then, show the group a relatively detailed example of a Movement map, but making it clear that there will be several steps before our maps have all of the characteristics of the final map you are showing them. It should look something like this:

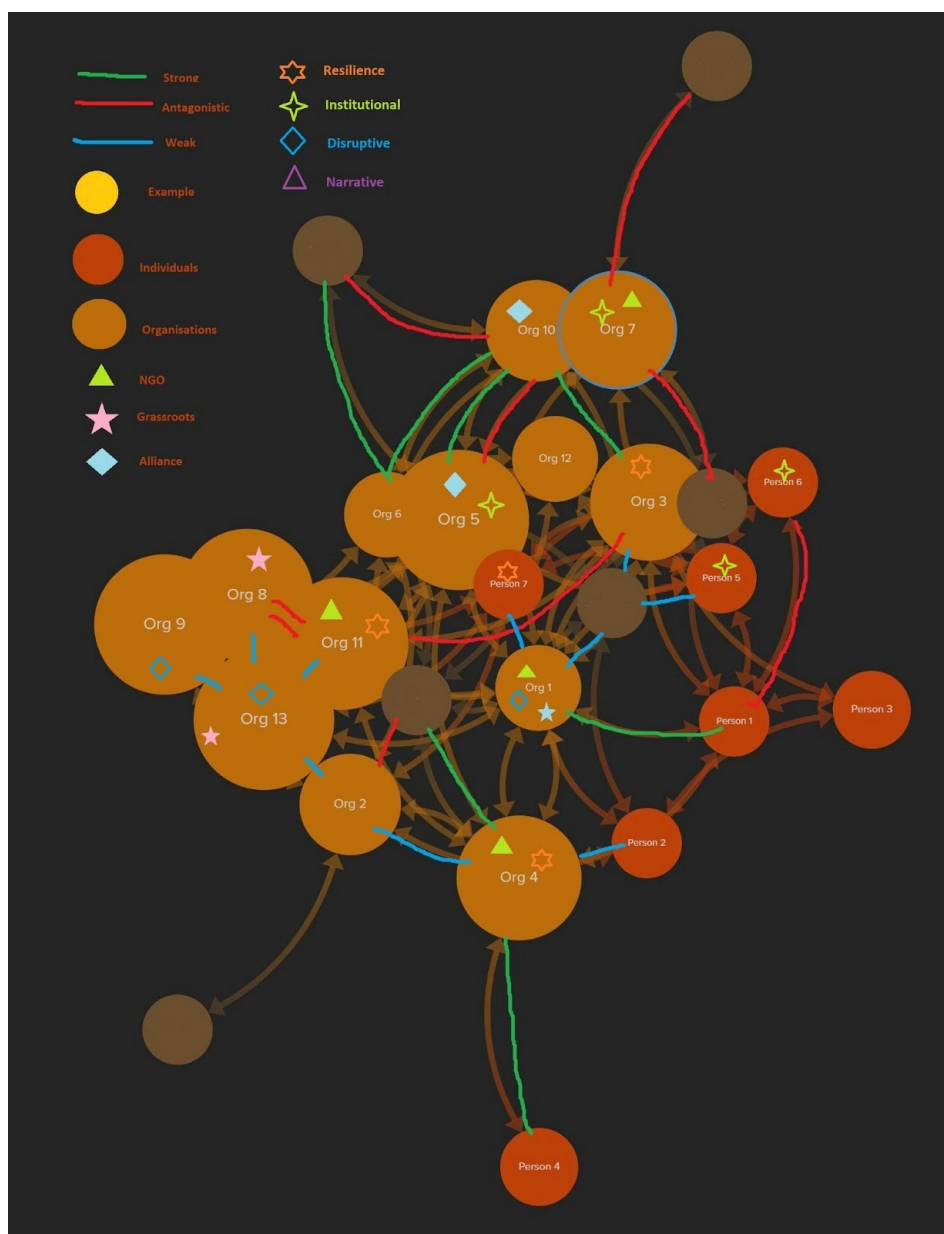


Diagram 1

- Let them know that there will be various stages to the process and then give the instructions for the first stage:

- Get into small groups of between 2-5 people (the make-up of the groups will depend on who wants to be involved in the Movement they are choosing to map)

- Then, define the Movement you will map

- The boundaries are unlikely to be entirely clear, but you should minimally be able to offer a coherent name for the Movement and to define its geographic context

- For example: 'European Climate Justice Movement'

You can refer to discussions around 'what is a social Movement' mentioned in the [Movement Timelines activity](#) if needed.

- Give them their timings and send them off...

### **Facilitating the activity (3-10 hours)**

#### **a. Defining the Movement to be mapped**

- This can easily extend into drawn out discussion - depending how much time you are giving it, you may need to hurry them along!

- When the groups have completed the task, draw them back together for the next instructions..

#### **b. Listing the key Actors**

- Now ask the groups to make a list of the key Actors involved in the Movement they are mapping. They should name organisations, groups, individuals, and other elements. (Again, the boundaries question is likely to come up - you can let them work out for themselves how they want to do this. It will also be impacted by how much time they have).

- Give them their timings and send them off...

- When the groups have completed the task, draw them back together for the next instructions..

#### **c. Making the Actor Circles representing levels of power/influence**

- Ask them to write the name of each Actor from their list on a Circle of paper, cut to a size representing the level of power you think/feel they have within the Movement (see the coloured circles on diagram 1). If you see them as having a lot of power, they will have a big circle, if you see them as having less power, they will have a smaller circle.

- Emphasise that we are analysing power *within* the Movement, not necessarily power/infl ence outside of the Movement.

- Give them their timings and send them off...

- When the groups have completed the task, draw them back together for the next instructions..

#### **d. Creating the Categories, Characteristics and symbols**

- Next, ask the groups to generate a list of key Categories and Characteristics which are most relevant to the Movement they are mapping. For example, a Category might be: [Types of Organisations](#) and under this Category might be Characteristics such as: [NGO](#), [Grassroots](#), [Alliance](#), etc.

*The timing you will allow for each step will be determined by the overall time you want to give to the activity. Almost any one of the steps can be extended.*

Other examples could be:

Movement Capabilities offered:

- Narrative
- Disruptive
- Institutional
- Prefigurative
- Resilience
- Training and Learning
- Others?

Movement Roles:

- Citizen mobilisation
- Agitation and disruption
- Organising and/or Movement infrastructure
- Reformers

Strategic alignment:

- Building alternatives inside the system
- Building alternatives outside the system
- Ruptural
- Others?

...and so on. (There is more background on this in the [ESM chapter](#) around typologies.).

- It is really up to each group to come up with whatever seems most relevant. They will be able to add more Categories/Characteristics later, if they find they have missed anything important.

- Explain that once they have generated their lists, they should give each of these characteristics a Symbol. This will add elements to the Key of the maps.

- Give them their timings and send them off...

- When the groups have completed the task, draw them back together for the next instructions..

#### **e. Giving Symbols to the Actor Circles**

- Then, using these Symbols, ask the groups to mark each of the Actor Circles with the characteristics they embody/relate to. Many will have more than one symbol. For example: on a Circle representing [Greenpeace](#), you might draw the Symbols for [NGO](#), [Institutional](#), [Citizen Mobilisation](#), and so on. (See Diagram 1 for examples).

- Give them their timings and send them off...

- When the groups have completed the task, draw them back together for the next instructions..

#### **f. Analysing the balance and spread of elements**

- Now, with the help of the Symbols, ask groups to analyse and explore the balance and spread of the various Characteristics across their Circles. For each of their Categories (capabilities, roles, strategies, etc) they should ask:

- What is present?
- What is missing?
- Where are Movement strengths?
- Where are Movement weaknesses?

- Give them their timings and send them off...

- When the groups have completed the task, draw them back together for the next instructions..

*You will likely want to write these questions up somewhere for the group to refer to.*

### **g. Assembling the map**

- Ask them to arrange their Circles on a large sheet and then to draw Connection Lines to express the relationships between them. It is up to them which types of relationships to depict, but generally it is useful to include:

- Strong relationship
- Weak relationship
- Direction of relationship: which direction / is there reciprocity (using arrows)
- Confli tual or antagonistic relationship

They can use coloured lines to depict these differences, and these should also be added to the Key of the maps.

- Give them their timings and send them off...

- When the groups have completed the task, draw them back together for the next instructions..

### **h. Analysing the maps!**

- Now the maps are assembled, participants should look at them (still in the small group) and ask some key analytical questions:

- What do you see at a first glance?
- How distant are you from key influencers or powerful actors?
- What actors are there, is there diversity? Who is missing?
- What are your strengths and the well developed capabilities of your network?
- What are your weaknesses, what capabilities are missing?
- What kinds of actors and/or relationships could help reduce your weakness and enhance your strengths?
- What are the key learnings in terms of fl w of information / organising / infl ence across the network?

They may want to take some notes on key reflections coming out of these discussions.

*An alternative approach to analysing the maps uses a [Network Theory Lens](#).*

- Give them their timings and send them off...

- When the groups have completed the task, draw them back together for the next instructions..

### **i. Rethinking the maps and expanding the boundaries**

- At this final point, it is often useful to encourage participants to rework the map having thought about expanding the boundaries. This will enable them to include actors who they might not necessarily think of as Movement Actors, but who can offer important contributions (such as friendly journalists or funders).

Similarly, they can begin to consider Actors in other Movements, where valuable alliances and connections could be made. Expanding the boundaries of what is being mapped can often provide ideas for new relationships that can help to address weaknesses and build greater resilience.

- Give them their timings and send them off...

*Again, it will be necessary to write these questions up somewhere for the group to refer to.*

- When the groups have completed the task, draw them back together for the debrief.

Debriefing the activity (30-60 minutes)

We usually ask small groups who have been working on a map to join together with one or two other groups (depending on the size of the groups) to share key learning and insights.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- What are some of the key learnings or insights for you from the activity?
- What questions are you now left with?
- What are some of the ways you can use and apply this new learning or insights now?

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

This is a very juicy, productive and thought provoking activity. It is also long and can feel taxing. You may want to point to the ongoing nature of this kind of learning - it is never done! - and reiterate some of the points from the framing section about the importance of these kinds of analytical and broad-scope perspectives in effective resilience praxis. Emphasise the way that these kinds of perspectives can feed into and significantly enhance our ongoing planning and acting, in all fields of our social change work.

## **FURTHER NOTES**

This activity works well combined with the [Movement Timelines activity](#), as well as follow-on sessions exploring strategic interventions that are suggested by the insights gained. Within a broader Movement strategy process, this activity provides some key insights into strengths and weaknesses and can be incorporated with a standard [SWOT \(Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats\) Analysis](#).

# EXPLORING AN ECOLOGY OF STRATEGIES ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr30 - 1hr45

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group work (12-20 people)

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** 3 prepared sheets of paper (Diagram 1)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led > peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** The Ecology of Social Movements

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Exploring the range of transformative strategies within a healthy Movement ecology
- Supporting shift from unhelpful antagonistic attitudes to different approaches, towards appreciation of potential complementarity and synergy
- Reflecting on tendencies to polarise and attach unhelpfully to certain political identities and to loosen this, towards a pragmatic approach to building power
- Breaking out of tendencies that can fragment and undermine our Movement building work
- Developing the self awareness and emotional literacy to work with our identities.

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

It is very common to hear people within our social Movements identify fragmentation and an inability to cooperate as significant challenges that undermine Movement building. This activity can help us to reflect on some of the attitudes we bring to our Movement work that contribute to this. It can help us to go beyond polarising tendencies and to transform energy depleting antagonism into more appreciative relationships. Similarly, it can shed light on some of the tendencies we need to bring awareness to, if we want to transform dysfunctional conflicts within our Movements into forms of creative tension of complementarity.

All of the content included in the introductory chapter on the [Ecology of Social Movements](#), along with elements of the content in the chapter on [Activist Identity](#) can provide useful framing material. The material on Eric Olin Wright's typology of three types of Transformative Strategies is a necessary framework (also in the ESM chapter). Unpack that material in some detail.

You will need to have prepared three large sheets of paper with the following written on them:

**Creating alternatives within the system** (on one sheet)

**Building alternatives outside the system** (on one sheet)

**Ruptural strategies** (on one sheet)

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

*This activity brings together some dense political science theory with psycho-emotional work and (hopefully) playfulness. It can be a challenging activity to hold.*

## Related material to support framing:

- [Ecology of Social Movements Chapter](#)
- [Identity and Activism Chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This activity draws out some antagonisms that exist between some Movement actors. It is probable that some of these tensions exist within a group of participants, so it is important and necessary that time has been taken to build some degree of trust and appreciative relationship within the group in advance of the activity.

The second step of the process will ask people to share antagonistic views that are common towards different Movement actors. The aim is to allow a degree of catharsis and to let people get some of this 'off their chests' in order to free them up to explore more appreciative views. There are some risks involved and it is important that the facilitator does not themselves strongly harbour these antagonistic attitudes, so as to be able to support and show respect for all the participants. The 'cathartic' round should be held in a humorous way, allowing the criticisms to be voiced, but also creating a sense of no-one in the space needing to take them too personally. Getting the balance between humour or playfulness and the seriousness of the issues the session is addressing is difficult and requires facilitators to be emotionally literate and mentally agile, in order to handle the dynamics well.

The activity, as is the case with most of the Ecology of Social Movements learning activities, is intended for experienced activists and organisers.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (25 mins)

- Give some good time to framing the activity and offering some theory about fragmentation and transversality in Movements. The way we often do this is to:

- Use the material from the Ecology of Social Movements chapter to do a short presentation on the necessity of diversity in effective and resilient social Movements
- End with the typology from Eric Olin Wright as a way into the activity, describing this in some detail.
- Emphasise the dangers of falling into unhelpful and energy depleting conflicts within our Movements and the need to shift towards recognising the importance of diverse contributions and the creative tensions or complementaries we can find between them.
- Name that most activists and organisers who have substantial Movement experience will be very familiar with the challenges and have a sense of the importance of transforming them for the sake of Movement building.
- Having described Erik Olin Wright's typology of Transformative Strategies, place your 3 large sheets of paper on the floor of the room to make a big triangle (you'll need about 5-6 metres between each point).
- Give a few examples of the 3 transformative strategies to ensure people have a sense of what they represent, but bear in mind that they are broad categories and there is often overlap. Then give the instructions:
  - Imagining that each of these 3 points exert a 'gravitational pull' upon



you, place yourself in the room according to which of the 3 strategies represents your own approach or sense of affinity ('own approach' and 'sense of affinity' are not interchangeable, but the vagueness can help people to make some sense of the activity).

- Stand closer to the transformative strategy you feel most aligned with.
- You can also stand so as to represent taking a blended approach (social Movement work is often complex and rarely fits into simple typological categories!).

### Facilitating the activity (1hr - 1hr15)

#### a. Arranging the bodies in the space (5)

- Allow people a few minutes to find a position they feel relatively happy with. Reassure them that this is bound to only be approximate.

People might distribute themselves something like this:

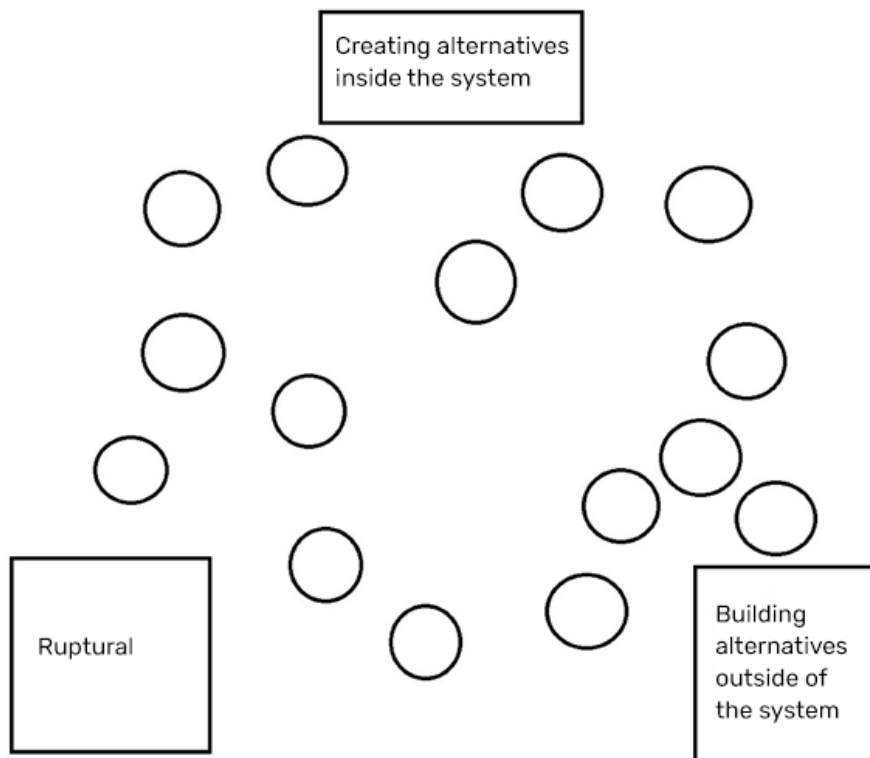


Diagram 1

- Now you will need to draw three imaginary lines to divide the participants into three groups of roughly the same size, so that each group is associated with one of the three strategic approaches. This will mean asking some participants to accept being more closely associated with a specific approach than they have indicated, but try to be light and playful about it. Explain that, even if this doesn't fully do justice to their own attitude, it is necessary for the dynamic of the exercise.

These imaginary lines might look something like this, to form three equally sized groups (it isn't necessary for the groups to be exactly equal, but roughly similar in size is best!):

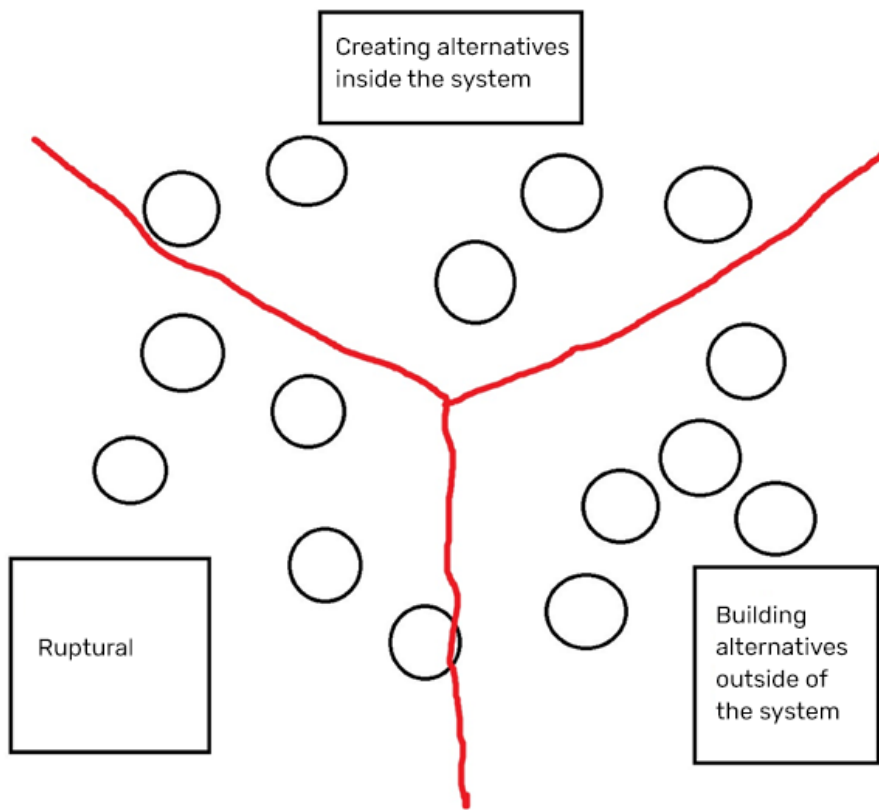


Diagram 2

### b. Exploring the antagonisms (30)

- Once the smaller groups are clarified, give the next instructions:
  - You will need to make two lists (written) - one for each of the other two types of transformative strategies.
  - The list will include the ways that these other strategies are unhelpful, the ways they fail, the ways they are mistaken and don't actually work!
  - For example, the group associated with 'Ruptural strategies' will write one list for the 'Building alternatives inside' group and one list for the 'Creating alternatives outside' group. In the first list you might have 'colluding with power' and in the second you might have 'marginalising yourselves into irrelevance!'
  - You'll have around 10 minutes.

You will need to make this playful in order to ensure the activity isn't going to deteriorate into actual antagonism and unhelpful criticism. Bringing humour should be relatively easy, given that some background discomfort about this idea will already add some emotional charge that looks for release somewhere.

- Once the task is completed (and you may need to hurry them along!) then give the next instructions:
  - Each of the groups in turn will read out the list of 'failings' or 'ways your approach doesn't work' to the other groups
  - One group at a time will address both (e.g. The 'ruptural group' will read their list to the 'alternatives inside group' and then the 'alternatives

*If the groups associated with each strategy are larger than 6 people break them into subgroups to avoid the groups getting too big. In this case you'll have more than one sub-group associated with each strategy*

outside group', and then swap over).

- You don't need to read the entire list, just the highlights.

- You will probably want to share out the speaking in your group (so it's not just one 'spokesperson')

- As you move through the groups, support them to keep it playful. Be a little theatrical, maybe using some pantomime like 'Ooohs' and 'take that!' etc, to keep it funny where you can. Maintain momentum and push the process along so that each group gets to address each of the others. If the groups have sat down to write the lists, encourage them to stand up and face each other for this phase. This entire phase should only take around **20 minutes**.

- At this point it is valuable to pause the process and make some comments, such as:

- It can be good to get some of this stuff out in a humorous way, but many of us encounter these kinds of criticism in our Movement work in ways that are deeply painful.

- It can be important to acknowledge the actual pain these kinds of polarising attitudes can give rise to.

- We have been being humorous, and that is a way of releasing some of the tensions around this stuff, but it's important we don't downplay or deny the real challenges and intensities of what can arise here, in our work and relationships.

### **c. Exploring the complementarities (30)**

- Now each group is asked to write two more lists (one for each of the other two strategic approaches, as before). These lists name the ways in which the other approaches can be complementary to the approach of the group writing the list, or beneficial as part of a wider Movement ecology - things we could appreciate as valuable contributions. Encourage sincerity and warn people against sarcasm! Allow around **10 minutes** for this.

- Then, as before, each group is invited to read out the highlights of their lists to the other groups. Again, emphasis sincerity and avoiding 'back-handed compliments' or sarcasm. Encourage expressions of genuine appreciation. Allow around **20 minutes**.

### **Debriefing the activity (15+ minutes)**

If time allows, give people a few minutes to discuss how they found the activity in pairs and then open up a whole group discussion. Otherwise go straight to a whole group discussion.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- How did you find that activity?
- What were some of the feelings that came up?
- What could be valuable to take from it?
- What are some of the questions you are left with?

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

It is important to acknowledge that the shift in attitude and thinking that this exercise can support does not mean that the antagonisms and conflicts across our Movements can be easily resolved. The activity can support motivation to work to resolve them, but strategies and the long work of relationship building take time and effort. This activity can support that process. Nevertheless, there are also ways in which differences of approach are not resolvable and where imbalances of power and influence within our

*Acknowledge these aspects of people's experience with sincerity before moving on to part 'c.'*

*Drawing out some points about identity and the ways we can unhelpfully grasp/cling to our identities can be good here - but be led by what the group bring up from their experience.*

Movements make coming into mutually empowering relationships difficult. The 'realpolitik' of this should not be downplayed, and yet a sense of the positive potential for building healthier relationships of reciprocity and mutual support is valuable in our work.

Bear in mind that some participants might feel a need for some post-session processing, so do have someone in the team available.

## FURTHER NOTES

This session can work well as part of a theme or process exploring activist identity and could combine with some more reflective or personal activities such as the [Identity Reflection activity](#), or a [Kind Regard practice](#). It also fits well with the [Ways of Seeing](#) material.

# PERCEIVING AND RESPONDING TO THREATS ACTIVITY

## (ADAPTATION FROM HOLISTIC SECURITY MANUAL)

**RUNNING TIME:** 50 mins – 1h10

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group discussion, pair work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Flipchart paper, Perception of Threats flip chart

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Resilience in the face of Threats, Attacks and Repression

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

### KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Reflecting on personal tendencies in terms of habitual responses to perceived threats
- Developing shared group understanding of the diverse responses there are within the group
- Reflecting on indicators and sources of information that are or could be used to ascertain existence of threats
- Preparing ground for risk and threat analysis work

### FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This session is a first introductory and framing session, acting as a precursor to a process of risk and threat analysis.

#### Perceiving and recognising threats

How we perceive threats is influenced by subjective factors and the availability of information. It can be influenced by our previous experience and that of people we know or are aware of:

- Previous trauma can heighten our sensitivity and increase our 'arousal'
- Heightened arousal can lead to perceiving 'unfounded threats' which are not based on current external conditions
- Lower arousal and poor information flow can mean that threats are not recognised.

We need to attend to both the 'objective' data and the 'subjective' experience.

If we don't attend to the 'subjective' and emotional dimension we can allow fear to debilitate us – which is one of the primary impacts of repression and suppression. It is valuable to reflect on the ways we and our colleagues respond to threats.

#### Conditioned responses to threats

Our personal histories and personalities will determine the way we respond to a threatening situation. Our response will also depend on the situation itself, our current state of mind and heart, the environment we are in and so on.

*Do approach these exercises in a way that models a holistic approach, bringing emotional awareness and care.*

We can usually identify 2-3 ways which are our conditioned, most common reactions to a threat. Being able to identify those reactions and recognise our tendencies gives us more agency and choice. Knowing ourselves and others in our groups will help us make more informed decisions about actions needed and will help us support ourselves and each other in challenging circumstances.

### **Common responses to threats**

(don't share this list until the responses to the initial pair work is completed) :

- Freeze
- Flight
- Comply
- Tend to others
- Befriend aggressor
- Posturing (making ourselves look big or strong)
- Fight
- others...

Bringing awareness to our own tendencies and those of others we work with can help us to evaluate and analyse risks and threats in ways that can take a better account of our subjective tendencies.

In addition to our responses, it is also important to think about what signs and signals we interpret to be indicative of threats and the sources of information we use. This session will also open up some space to discuss these things.

### **Related material to support framing:**

- [Resilience in the face of Threats, Attacks and Repression chapter](#)
- [Trauma Informed Approaches chapter](#)
- [Awareness and Emotional literacy chapter](#)

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

Bringing attention to the importance of emotional literacy for this kind of work should be integrated into the framing for this session. It is possible that triggering and upsetting examples and experiences are named and discussed. A safe and supportive space is needed.

This session works well in combination with sessions on Threat Analysis and Security Strategies.

## **ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

### **Setting up the activity (5 mins)**

- Use the framing above and bring attention to the importance of emotional literacy for this work to be held well and not lead to compounding anxiety, macho posturing, and so on.

### **Facilitating the activity (45 - 50 mins)**

#### **a. Pairs work (15 - 20)**

- Give the instructions:
  - Choose a partner you feel comfortable to do this exploration with
  - You are invited to recollect a time that you felt some degree of threat

- Choose something that is not too demanding or overly triggering
- In your pair, take it in turns to tell the story of the situation to your partner and describe how you responded to it
- Take some time to discuss if these responses are typical for you, or are there also other ways you might respond to threats.
- Give them their timings and send them off. Let them know when they are half way through, then bring the group back to together.

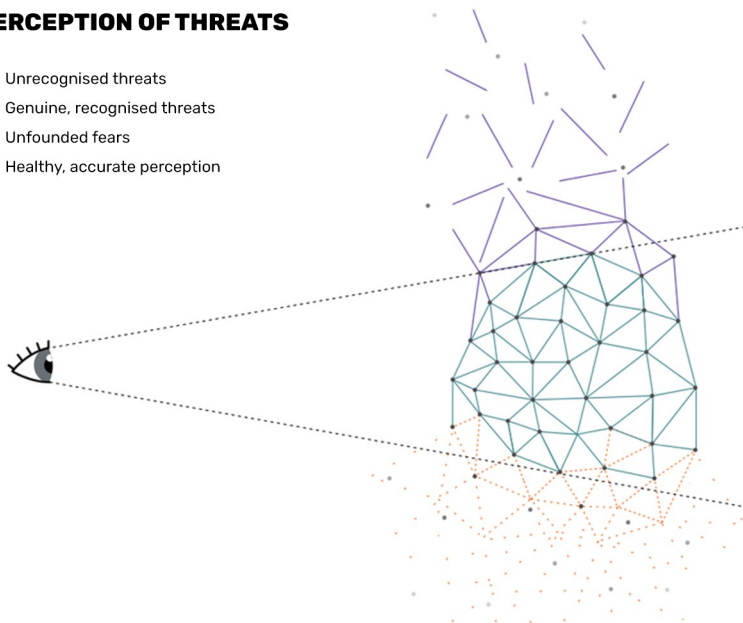
### b. Feeding back form pairs (10 - 15)

- Hear from the group, asking people to name some of the responses they explored. Capture these on a flipchart aiming at a fairly comprehensive list. Draw this together by sharing the list mentioned in the framing material (above) and asking if all of the responses mentioned are included there.

- Discuss with the group why it might be useful to bring awareness to these tendencies and then share this image:

### PERCEPTION OF THREATS

- △ Unrecognised threats
- △ Genuine, recognised threats
- △ Unfounded fears
- Healthy, accurate perception



Heightened arousal can lead to perceiving 'unfounded threats' which are not based on current external conditions

Lower arousal and poor information flow can mean that threats are not recognised

### c. Discussing security Indicators and Information (15)

- As a whole group, facilitate some discussion about this question and sub-questions:

#### How do you assess or identify threats?

- What is your baseline? (The baseline is a relatively stable condition from which to be able to measure and monitor change and trends)
- What are the indicators you could use to identify changes in terms of increases or decreases in risk or threat levels?
- What sources of information are available to you? How could you improve on the flow or availability of information? These might include: Colleagues and staff direct and personal experience, Specialist analysis, Allies, Media, Researchers, Internal logs and reports, Organisational and



context timelines which include stress indicators, Personal/psycho-social wellbeing indicators.

The aim is not to answer all of these questions, but to stimulate thought about them so as to emphasise the way these can influence our perception of threats.

### **Debriefing the activity (5 mins)**

As much of the activity involves discussion, there is not so much debriefing required here..

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- Take some time to name and attend to any emotional impacts people might be experiencing
- Name anything that feels like it will be useful to come back to or develop further

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

Ensure people feel held and cared for as the session ends, in case anything triggering has come up. As part of this, reiterate that this session is preparation for risk and threat analysis and developing strategies (so as to avoid people feeling they have opened up difficult material with an absence of solutions).

# SUPPRESSION - REPRESSION SCALE ACTIVITY

## (ADAPTATION FROM HOLISTIC SECURITY MANUAL)

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr15 - 1hr30

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group discussion > small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Suppression-Repression Scale flipchart / diagrams/documents to support framing / post-it notes / flipchart paper / pens

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Resilience in the face of Threats, Attacks and Repression

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

### KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Supporting learning about the range and nature of attacks against us and our organisations
- Opening up thinking about the nature of attacks
- Sharing knowledge and experience of any relevant history in an organisation or group
- Complimenting context analysis and laying groundwork for developing security strategies
- Leading into 'risk matrix' activity
- Supporting connection and solidarity in discussing and meeting shared challenges

### FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

#### SUPPRESSION AND REPRESSION—Limiting our space

Attacks against us will often use a range of mechanisms. They aren't always visibly violent, but nevertheless, can be highly effective in damaging and undermining us and our work.

One way to think about attacks is as *"attempts made by our adversaries to limit or close the spaces in which we work or live."*<sup>1</sup> These spaces include:

*Do approach these exercises in a way that models a holistic approach, bringing emotional awareness and care.*

Physical space	Offices, homes, public spaces, our bodies
Economic space	Capacity to generate and manage resources
Social space	Freedom of association and communication – impact on family and friends and our communities
Technological space	Surveillance and access to data
Legal space	Rights and restrictions on activity
Environmental space	Common resources and natural products
Mental and emotional space	Filling our heart and mind with fear, doubt, and additional work for us to self manage

Another way to think about these attacks, suggested by Jules Boykoff, in his 2007 book, *Beyond Bullets*, is as *"actions aimed at causing social movements, civil society organisations and activists, to be less able to meet the preconditions for collective action."* In order to be able to participate in effective collective action, there are certain preconditions that need to be in

place. These include the capacity or opportunity to:

- Maintain solidarity (sustain the morale and commitment of current people/members)
- Attract new people/members
- Build alliances
- Create, nurture and support leaders/leadership
- Generate media coverage (preferably favourable)
- Mobilise support from potentially sympathetic groups
- Carve out the tactical freedom to pursue social-change goals (rather than having to put resources toward self-protection and maintenance)
- Generate resources (finance and infrastructure).

Attacks against us may be aimed at preventing us from meeting these preconditions, undermining our work and making us less effective, if not wiping us out entirely.

### **Suppression-Repression Scale**

Following Boykoff, we use the term *repression* to refer to attacks which are overtly violent, such as police brutality. *Suppression* on the other hand, we take as a broader term. It encompasses other, more subtle modes of silencing or undermining opposition, such as a media smear campaign or social welfare cuts. Both repression and suppression then, are ways of inhibiting/denying the preconditions for action, mobilisation, and collective organisation directed at challenging the injustices of the prevalent system. They undermine our collective efforts by either making things too difficult or costly to achieve, or not worth doing because the impacts are so curtailed.

With this in mind, we can begin to get a sense of the wide range of attacks we often face, some overt and visible, others more subtle and yet still intentional (if not specifically focused on us). We think of this range in terms of a scale from suppression to repression. On this scale we can plot and identify numerous forms of attack. Boykoff offers a list that runs from more overt forms of repression to more subtle forms of suppression:

1. Direct Violence
2. Prosecutions and Legal Hearings
3. Harassment and Harassment Arrests
4. Surveillance and Break-Ins
5. Infiltration
6. Propaganda using False Discrediting Documentation
7. Denying/Limiting Employment
8. Introducing New Rules and Laws
9. Mass Media Manipulation
10. State and Media Demonisation
11. Mass Media Discrediting
12. Mass Media Underestimation, Presenting a False Balance, and Ignoring/Disregarding Activities

In this activity we apply these frameworks to our experience and the specific context of our work.

### **Related material to support framing:**

- [Resilience in the face of Threats, Attacks and Repression chapter](#)
- [Trauma Informed Approaches chapter](#)
- [Awareness and Emotional literacy chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The exercises exploring how we respond to threats and bringing attention to the importance of emotional literacy for this kind of work should happen before this exercise is conducted.

It is possible that triggering and upsetting examples and experiences are named and discussed. A safer and supportive space is needed.

A context analysis activity can be a useful prelude.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (10 mins)

- Take a short while to frame the session using the introductory framing above, then begin the first part of the activity...

### Facilitating the activity (1hr - 1hr10)

#### a. Group mindstorm - kinds of attacks (10)

- Lead the group in a 10 minute slow-paced mindstorm inviting participants to answer the question:

**“What are some of the kinds of attacks we are familiar with that might be relevant to our situation”**

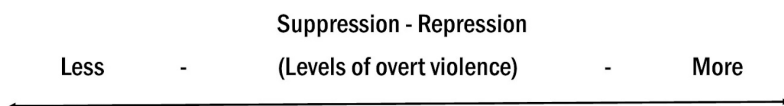
Capture responses on a flipchart. Keep the responses generalised, rather than listing specific actual instances (for example: Physical attacks on the street, online trolling, misrepresentation in the media...). Include those experienced by the group and those they are aware of in other situations.

#### b. Suppression-Repression Scale (20-30)

- Then invite them to break into smaller groups (around 4-5 people) and give the instructions:

- In your small groups, work together to arrange the kinds of attacks we have mentioned on a Suppression-Repression scale

- Draw the scale simply on flipchart paper with a simple plus/minus line, indicating more or less overtly violent, like this:



- The scale represents gradients of opposition from direct and violent repression to increasingly indirect forms of suppression. (For example, at the more direct, repressive end, we might see explicit physical violence, while at the other more indirect, suppressive end, we might see the underestimation of turnout at protests by the mainstream media)

- Write the threats on post-it notes and stick them on the scale - you can move them around as you discuss and explore.

- Give them their timings and then keep an eye on the groups offering support where needed.

### **c. Sharing the work and opening up discussion (30-40)**

- Choose an appropriate method for sharing the work each group has done. (For example, as short presentations or a 'gallery' approach).

- Use this as the basis for whole group discussion exploring the relationship between suppression-repression.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- Exploring the sense of impact on individuals and groups
- Considering the ways that public consent is built to justify more violent forms of repression
- Many forms of suppression can remain relatively invisible..
- More violence is not necessarily more effective..
- Looking at the implications of the kinds of attacks listed in terms of the spaces they attack and the ways they undermine preconditions for effective movement/organisational development (see framing).

### **Debriefing the activity (5-10 mins)**

The discussion above will serve as a debrief in terms of learning about content. However, a closing emotional debrief is an important way to model a holistic approach to these issues. Take some time to name that these can be difficult things to talk about, that we commit to care for each other, and ask if there is anything needed by anyone or the group at this point.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

As part of caring for people, you can reiterate that this session is a preparation for risk and threat analysis and developing strategies (so as to avoid people feeling they have opened up difficult material with an absence of solutions).

## **FURTHER NOTES**

This activity leads well into the risk matrix activity. Ensure you keep the work made in this session available, as the threats and attacks generated here will be needed for applying to the risk matrix.

## **USEFUL RESOURCES**

[Holistic Security Manual](#)

*If you aren't planning to continue on with the [Security Strategies activity](#), you will need some other way to address the need for looking to solutions*

# RISK MATRIX ANALYSIS ACTIVITY

## (ADAPTATION FROM [HOLISTIC SECURITY MANUAL](#))

**RUNNING TIME:** 3 hours +

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group discussion > small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Risk Matrix flip chart (4xA1) / previous work on suppression-repression scale / diagrams/documents to support framing / post-it notes / flipchart paper / pens

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Resilience in the face of Threats, Attacks and Repression

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

### KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Deepening capacity to analyse risks
- Laying groundwork for looking at how to prioritise strategic responses
- Leading into developing Security Strategies and Protocols
- Supporting awareness and capacity to meet challenge
- Supporting connection and solidarity in discussing and meeting shared challenges

### FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This session builds on the other activities related to threats, attacks and repression. It assumes the framing from that chapter and the framing material in the Perceiving and Responding to Threats, and the Suppression-Repression Scale activities.

In addition to this, in this activity we acknowledge that in order to develop strategies we need to analyse the level and relevance of threats and clarify the level of risk involved. This will enable us to prioritise the work needed to develop security strategies.

#### Related material to support framing:

- [Resilience in the face of Threats, Attacks and Repression chapter](#)
- [Perceiving and Responding to Threats activity](#)
- [Suppression-Repression Scale activity](#)
- [Trauma Informed Approaches chapter](#)
- [Awareness and Emotional literacy chapter](#)

### OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Exercises exploring how we respond to threats and bringing attention to the importance of emotional literacy for this kind of work should happen before this exercise is conducted. These are linked to above. It should also ideally be preceded by the [Suppression-Repression Scale activity](#).

It is possible that triggering and upsetting examples and experiences are named and discussed. A safer and supportive space is needed.

The activity will require break periods to be included.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (10 mins)

- Offer the necessary framing as found in the supporting chapter or reflecting on the current challenges being faced by the group in general terms to contextualise the session. Then, referring back to the threats identified during the [suppression-repression scale activity](#), give the instructions:
  - We will use the 'risk matrix' to explore the likelihood and level of impact these forms of attack might have. This will then enable us to decide on priorities and develop plans and strategies to address them
  - We will use the risk matrix flipchart (usually drawn up on 4 A1 sheets stuck together so it is big enough for a whole group to work on):

*Do approach these exercises in a way that models a holistic approach, bringing emotional awareness and care.*

### RISK MATRIX

Current: More likely to increase or continue		
Less likely to increase or continue		
Not Current: More Likely		
Not Current: Less Likely		
	LOW IMPACT ←	→ HIGH IMPACT

- In small groups (3-4), make copies of the post-it notes from the Suppression-Repression activity which name types of attack/threat and place them on the risk matrix sheet.
- Encourage the group to add any other risks they believe are relevant.
- There will be repetitions and the same type of attack might be evaluated differently by different groups and placed in different positions. This is fine and no attempt should be made to reconcile differences of opinion at this stage.
- You'll have around 70 minutes



## Facilitating the activity (2 hours 30 - plus break)

### a. Small group work (70)

- Keep an eye on the groups and offer support where needed. Keep an eye on the time and give them a half way and 10 minute warning..

### b. Break!

- After an intense period of work, you will need to give the group a break here.

### c. Whole group discussion (80)

- Facilitate a whole group discussion with the aim of building a shared understanding of the risks. Going from post-it to post-it, ask for clarification of what it refers to and why it is placed where it is. Prioritise more likely and higher impact threats and any places where there is obvious disagreement in assessing the level of risk involved.

This discussion should be given lots of time. Going into some depth about the assumptions and analysis that each group is making is really valuable. Don't rush and if the conversation is fruitfully going to exceed the 80 minutes suggested here, do try to redesign your plans to allow it to continue with the space it needs.

### Debriefing the activity (5-10 mins)

The discussion above will serve as a debrief in terms of learning about content. However, a closing emotional debrief is an important way to model a holistic approach to these issues. Take some time to name that these can be difficult things to talk about, that we commit to care for each other, and ask if there is anything needed by anyone or the group at this point.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

Link this activity to the coming [Security Strategies activity](#), aimed at developing responsive strategies. We don't want to leave the session simply feeling anxious about everything we are up against. End with a sense of how this analysis will serve us to develop responses. This could be an opportunity to mention the idea of *acceptance, deterrence, and protection strategies* (see framing of [Security Strategies activity](#)).

*If you aren't planning to continue on with the Security Strategies activity, you will need some other way to address the need for looking to solutions*

## FURTHER NOTES

The session is modelled on work from the Holistic Security Manual, which is a useful additional reference.

## USEFUL RESOURCES

[Holistic Security Manual](#)

# THREAT ANALYSIS AND SECURITY STRATEGIES ACTIVITY

(ADAPTATION FROM **HOLISTIC SECURITY MANUAL**)

**RUNNING TIME:** 3 hours +

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group discussion > small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** [Threat Analysis Template](#) and [Security Strategy Template](#) as sheets (per small group) or as flip chart / previous work on Risk Matrix / diagrams/documents to support framing / flip chart paper / pens

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Two

**CHAPTER:** Resilience in the face of Threats, Attacks and Repression

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Developing work done on risks and working on response prioritisation
- Deepening analysis of specific threats
- Development of Security Strategies and Protocols
- Supporting awareness and capacity to meet challenge
- Supporting connection and solidarity in discussing and meeting shared challenges

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This session builds on the other activities related to threats, attacks and repression. It assumes the framing from that chapter and the framing material in the Perceiving and Responding to Threats, and the Suppression-Repression Scale activities.

Drawing on the work done with the Risk Matrix, in this activity we are looking at decisions around which threats we will focus on/prioritise to develop response plans. It makes obvious sense to start with the most likely and highest impact threats (top right of matrix) and then work our way from the top right towards bottom left. Generally we can draw a line (see image below) to exclude threats that are both lower impact and unlikely - it's unlikely to be strategic to put time and energy into these, unless there is an excess of time available, to give them some attention.

*Do approach these exercises in a way that models a holistic approach, bringing emotional awareness and care.*

You will need to introduce the Threat Analysis template and the Security Strategy template, talking through some of the elements they contain:

### Threat Analysis and Template

(Use template to generate working documents or flipcharts)

<b>Title of threat:</b>	<b>Brief description:</b>
Who is targeted? Who is directly or primarily impacted?	Who is indirectly or secondarily impacted?
For primary 'target': What spaces are closed/limited? What capacities are reduced, or activities impeded? What are the impacts?	For indirectly or secondarily affected: What spaces are closed/limited? What capacities are reduced, or activities impeded?
Through what mechanisms does the threat have the above impact(s)?	Through what mechanisms does the threat have the above impact(s)?
What adversaries are involved? Institutions, individuals and other actors:	What secondary (sometimes neutral) groups or actors are involved (perhaps without intending the threat)? Institutions, individuals, other actors:
How do they carry out this threat? Or how would they?	In what ways are they involved?
How do they benefit? What motivates this action?	Are neutral entities aware of the impact?

### Security Strategy Template

For each of the analysed threats come up with potential security strategies using a sheet based on this template.

Existing capacities and practices	To consolidate or strengthen these, what:  - Existing resources do you have? - Resources do you need to find? - What obstacles might you encounter?
Acceptance Strategies:  New capacities, practices and tactics (e.g. campaigns, advocacy, alliance building, counter narratives...)	To develop these, what:  - Existing resources do you have? - Resources do you need to find? - What obstacles might you encounter?
Deterrence Strategies:  New capacities, practices and tactics (e.g. causing adversaries to lose support of neutral parties, reducing cost-benefit, alignment with broader coalitions...)	To develop these, what:  - Existing resources do you have? - Resources do you need to find? - What obstacles might you encounter?
Protection Strategies:  New capacities, practices and tactics (e.g. encryption, stress management, leverage allies, defence response communication channels, emergency response plans...)	To develop these, what:  - Existing resources do you have? - Resources do you need to find? - What obstacles might you encounter?

Some framing around the 'acceptance, deterrence and protection strategy framework' will be useful when introducing the latter of these. These are>

- **Acceptance:** Strategies that help to create wider acceptance of our work, our legitimacy, and our right to live and contribute as we do
- **Deterrence:** Strategies that deter our opponents from attacking us, often by increasing the negative consequences for them - economic costs, loss of legitimacy, damage to support networks, etc.
- **Protection:** Strategies which are specifically defensive and include basic security measures - property security systems, activity security protocols, digital security, etc.

#### Related material to support framing:

- [Resilience in the face of Threats, Attacks and Repression chapter](#)
- [Perceiving and Responding to Threats activity](#)
- [Suppression-Repression Scale activity](#)
- [Trauma Informed Approaches chapter](#)
- [Awareness and Emotional literacy chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The exercises exploring how we respond to threats and bringing attention to the importance of emotional literacy for this kind of work should happen before this exercise is conducted.

It is possible that triggering and upsetting examples and experiences are named and discussed. A safer and supportive space is needed.

The activity will require breaks to be included.

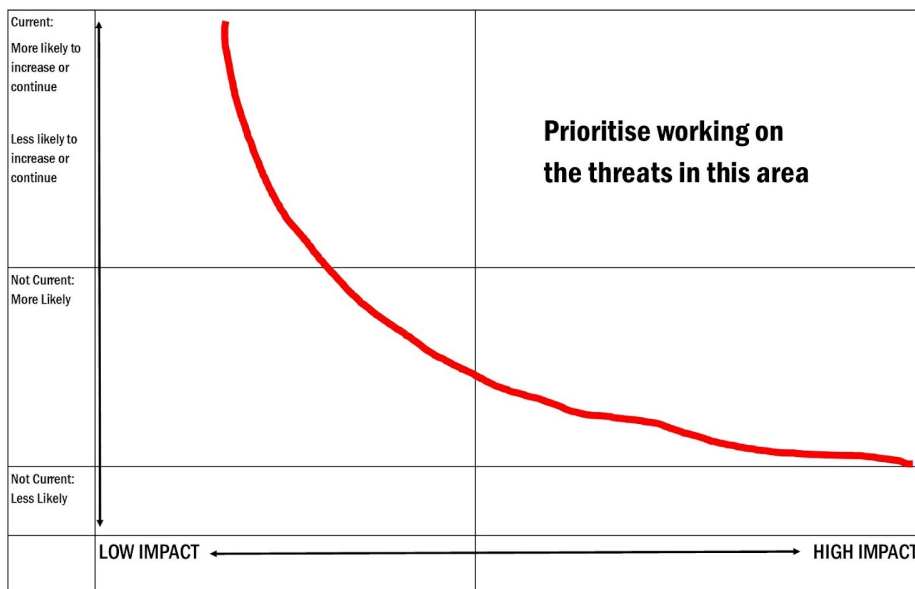
This session is designed to run over a morning or afternoon. However, depending on the nature of the threats and context, this activity can easily take several days to complete.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (10-20 mins)

- Off r the necessary framing to contextualise the session. Then, referring back to the [Risk Matrix](#) and (in dialogue with the group) set a boundary with the intention that time will be given to all the threats above the line.

RISK MATRIX



*Agreeing to this can involve quite a bit of debate! You will have to manage the time you have for this..*

- Show them the [Threat Analysis template](#) explaining that the first step will be to carry out a threat analysis for each significant threat. Give the instructions:

- In groups of 3-4 each group should apply the Threat Analysis template to the diverse threats we have named and prioritised previously (above)
- Copy the Threat Analysis template onto an A1 flipchart sheet for each threat - this will enable the work to be more easily shared with other groups.
- Offer an example using a specific threat. For example: If the threat is some kind of demonisation in the media or online trolling, those 'directly targeted' might be the publicly visible members of the organisation or spokespeople, those 'secondarily impacted' might be family members close to these individuals, and so on.

## **Facilitating the activity (2 hours 30 - plus break)**

### **a. Small group work on threat analysis (60)**

- Keep an eye on the groups and offer support where needed. Keep an eye on the time and give them a half way and 10 minute warning..

### **b. Sharing the work so far (10-20)**

- Work on threat analysis should be galleried (hung on the walls of the workshop) and shared, with time for groups to be able to inquire into the analysis other groups have carried out, making suggestions and additions if relevant.

### **c. Break!**

- After an intense period of work, you will need to give the group a break here.

### **d. Small group work on security strategy (70)**

- Share the Security Strategy templates and open up some discussion about the acceptance, deterrence and protection strategy framework (see framing section above). Then give the instructions:

- In groups of 3-4 each group should apply the Security Strategy Template to the diverse threats, in the same way.
- Copy the Security Strategy template onto an A1 flipchart sheet for each threat - this will enable the work to be more easily shared with other groups.
- Offer an example using a relevant threat. For example: Considering a threat related to compromising email or other digital communication, existing capacities and resources might include current protocols related to strong password use or password lockers. Resources you need to find could relate to additional specialist advice. And obstacles might relate to team members' reluctance to adopt protocols that make their work lives more complicated.
- This activity can take many hours of work! We'll give 'X' time to this now, but this is really only to set up the possibility of continuing it.

- Give them their timings and send them off Keep an eye on the groups and offer support where needed. Give them a half way and 10 minute warning..

### **f. Sharing work so far (10-20)**

Work on security strategies should be galleried (hung on the walls of the

*It sometimes makes sense to form small groups according to differentiated areas of responsibility and knowledge (i.e. digital threats might be best addressed by people with more responsibility and knowledge about the IT systems of an organisation).*

*A minimum of an hour would be needed here.*

*Again, consider what makes sense in terms of the make-up of the groups.*

workshop) and shared, with time for groups to be able to inquire into the strategies other groups have generated, making suggestions and additions if relevant.

### **Debriefing the activity and next steps (5-20 mins)**

- As with the other threats, attacks and repression activities, make sure to take some time to name and attend to any emotional impacts.

- Time needs to be given to next-steps: Who, when and how will this process be taken forwards, plans be agreed, implemented, and resourced? This is best organised as a facilitated session within the workshop, so that it doesn't get lost. As a minimum, clear delegation of responsibility to action next steps for these plans should take place.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

Addressing this kind of material can be both emotionally challenging and also potentially overwhelming when seeing the extent of the task at hand - there is a lot to think about and work with in developing effective strategy. It can be good to end with something affirming about the ways that being specific, precise and strategic with our strategies can really help empower us and increase our effectiveness and agency.

## **FURTHER NOTES**

The session is modelled on work from the Holistic Security Manual, which is a useful additional reference.

## **USEFUL RESOURCES**

[Holistic Security Manual](#)

*It sometimes makes sense to form small groups according to differentiated areas of responsibility and knowledge (i.e. digital threats might be best addressed by people with more responsibility and knowledge about the IT systems of an organisation).*

# WALKING INTO THE FUTURE - PERSONAL VISIONING ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 25 – 35 mins

**GROUP FORMAT:** Whole group

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** A4 paper and pens, open space for group to walk around in a circle

**LEADING FORMAT:** Individual

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Making Changes and Applying our Learning

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Generate an inspiring and guiding vision for oneself and one's group, which can serve as a reference for generating aims, objectives, actions and next steps
- Support a clear sense of personal and group potential
- Support a sense of the gradual and incremental nature of many change processes
- Placing our action in a longer time-frame

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This functions as an imaginative activity to support us to vision our potential as we consider the future, taking steps forward, and, potentially, putting into practice the learning and insights we have gained during a training. It can help to provide a point of reference for strategising in making changes, directing our action and determining next steps.

This is a good activity to use at the end of a training to support people to contact a more abstract or inspiring image of where they want to go, before getting into the more specific and pragmatic work of considering what they must do to get there. It supports to engage the different faculties in this way - especially when planning and strategising is challenging for people.

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This activity combines well with:

- [Critical Pathways activity](#)
- [Bricks and Hammers activity](#)
- [Goals and Resources activity](#)
- [Making Changes Coaching activity](#)

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Explain intention of the activity and place an object (eg. a candle, something aesthetic, something from nature etc) in the middle of the room, along with a pile of A4 paper (at least one sheet per participant) and a variety of coloured pens.



- Ask participants to choose a point in the future towards which they will walk. Five years is ideal (not so far that we can't imagine it at all, far enough that we can imagine significant change having occurred), but individuals will need to decide whether this makes sense to them. Two or three years can also work.

### **Facilitating the activity (20 - 25 mins)**

- Ask the group to stand in a circle, turn to their left and then stagger themselves, in order to be able to walk in a clockwise direction around the room together, with as much space as possible

#### **a. Meditative walking - getting into the body and becoming present (10)**

- With the group, begin to move clockwise around the room at a relatively slow pace with a soft gaze. Guide a walking meditation helping people to bring clear awareness to:

- The experience of walking,
- The physical sensations of different parts of the body and breath,
- Feelings, mental states, energy etc.

Use this to support a gathering of attention into the present.

#### **b. Imaginatively walking into the future, in a beneficial mist (5)**

- Continue walking clockwise, guiding a reflection of walking forwards into the future towards 5 years from now. Begin with more detail - walking through the coming day and days, onward journeys from here in the coming weeks, things that might happen, encounters they might have, how they might feel etc. Gradually, as you move further from the present, allow the detail to lessen until there is only a sense of the turning of the seasons year by year.

- The walking forwards takes place through an imaginary mist. The mist represents the permeating influence of the positive and skilful forces in one's environment and life, and/or the learnings and skilful approaches that have been discovered during the course. It is as if the mist - landing on the clothes and bodies and seeping its way in - is the nourishment and supportive influence of skilful action and relationships which enable a gradual and deep transformation and realisation of our potential.

#### **c. Arriving at the future point (3)**

- Stop. We are five years into the future. Standing still with eyes closed, everyone is encouraged to try to get a sense of themselves, transformed by the supportive influence of the mist of skilful actions and personal learning.

Ask them:

- How does the body feel?
- How is the mind?
- What quality of awareness?
- How is the heart?
- What is the quality of relationships and communication around you?
- Is there an image?
- Are there words that name these qualities?
- Etc...

Repeat such a questions a few times allowing around 3 minutes for this silent reflection with eyes closed.

#### **d. Capturing the image (5)**

- Ask everyone to take a sheet of A4 paper (piled up in the centre previously) and write the words or draw the images and symbols that help them to get a sense of or capture the vision of themselves in 5 years' time. They do not need to capture everything, just enough to recollect the image or feeling of this future self/circumstance.

- Everyone places their piece of paper in the middle of the room. They can fold

them and write their name on them. They will not be shared.

**e. Returning to the present**

- Now we all take 5 giant steps or leaps anticlockwise back around the room to return to the starting point 5 years earlier - i.e. today! Or one step for each year they went forwards. Treat this 'time travel' playfully.

- The pieces of paper in the centre of the room represent our potential, where we could be in 5 years, if we took the right steps or put the necessary conditions in place. The outside edge of the room represents today. Now we can use various activities or tools to explore how we might move from the edge of the room to the centre. (for example: [Making Changes](#), [Critical Pathways](#), [Goals and Resources](#)).

**CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

This future image is not designed to be some kind of 'target' that we must achieve or else feel guilty about it - like some kind of unhelpful new years resolution.. It is offered as a potentially useful mechanism for staying in touch with a sense of where we would like to be going, a guide of some kind, a connection with the bigger trajectory of our lives and values. It can act as something inspiring and energising and offer us the helpful perspective that it is easy to lose sight of when we are preoccupied with what is right in front of us and pressing.

# CRITICAL PATHWAYS ACTIVITY

(ADAPTATION FROM **THE CHANGE AGENCY**)

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr30 – 3hrs+

**GROUP FORMAT:** Individual work/small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Critical Pathway Instructions flt chart / SMART flt chart / lots of A4 paper / pens / large room

**LEADING FORMAT:** Individual > peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Three

**CHAPTER:** Making Changes and Applying our Learning

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Develop a strategic pathway towards specific goals
- Inspire longer term thinking
- Encourage strategic thinking
- Provide experience and skill in defining clear objectives
- Support exploration of how change happens

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This tool is used here to help participants think strategically about supporting any type of change they want to achieve, based on learning and insights gained in the context of a training. It is a demanding and thorough process.

The process will help participants to devise a 'critical pathway' that can enable them to move towards their goals. The exploration will help them to think more strategically about how to achieve the changes they seek.

Being able to break down the steps towards achieving our goals is a key skill for successful strategising. This tool gives participants practice in setting stepping stones of achievements and sequencing those towards successful transformation.

The basic concept is to have each person write down the outcomes they think need to happen, in order to achieve the final aim they have established – not so much the steps or activities they need to *do*, but the *changes that need to happen for their hoped for outcomes to be made real*.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Making Changes chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The activity should be preceded by some kind of reflection or visioning on the 'goals' towards which they want to move. These can be specific socio-political goals or (as is the case in a psychosocial resilience training) broader goals relating to culture and ways of operating for themselves and their groups. Naming some of the qualities of this 'future' is important. In some situations the goal will be very clear and specific. In others it might just serve to provide a sense of direction. The Walking into the Future activity is a good way to set this up.

Some participants will take to the task more easily than others. As the facilitator, you need to support and engage with people, as they work individually, to enable them to get the most out of it.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (10 - 15 mins)

(This timing does not include having established the future aim or goal - see Other Considerations above).

- Introduce the activity in the context of whatever session/theme you are using it and according to the kind of goals you will be working towards.
- Give the instructions:
  - Place an object or sheet of paper in the centre of the room that represents your overall aim/goal
  - The objects in the centre of the room represent a point in the future. The edges of the room represent today. Each person (or small group) will create a path of stepping stones, using sheets of A4 paper, from today to the future point
  - On each of the paper stepping stones, you will write down specific outcomes that are important and necessary to achieving your goal, starting from where you are now and taking you towards the goal (or working backwards from the goal to now)
  - Each paper stepping stone is one outcome or change that needs to happen for the ultimate goal to be realised
  - The pathway does not have to be uni-linear - there may be various strands happening simultaneously and intersecting with one another
  - You may want to think about different dimensions of where outcomes need to happen, eg. inner/personal qualities/skills, relational requirements, group capacities, practical/material outcomes etc.
- It is important to stress that each stepping stone represents an OUTCOME, not an action or something to do. This shift of emphasis is an essential part of the process and helps people to think strategically. For example, an outcome would be 'I have increased competence to facilitate inclusive decision making processes for my group', but habitually people will write something like 'Learn how to facilitate inclusive decision making processes'. When people realise they have made this mistake, they should turn the piece of paper over and reformulate the action as an outcome (it is usually just a case of changing the wording).
- Use a flipchart to capture the instructions clearly, leaving this visible for people as they work.

### Facilitating the activity (1hr - 3hrs)

#### a. Work on OUTCOMES (30+)

- Let people get on with the activity. Remain available to answer questions and proactively offer support, asking people how the process is going and offering pointers. The exercise can be very challenging for people and requires a lot of focus and engagement. Be patient. It can take people time to get into the process, but eventually they will produce some impressive material.
- Encourage them to:
  - Start with a few main stepping stones and then add intermediaries

*This can take time for people to understand, so invite questions, offer examples, and clarify as needed.*

- Consider personal and collective changes involved
- Consider material, psychological and relational changes.

### **b. Change OUTCOMES into OBJECTIVES (20+)**

- Once a critical mass of people seem to have generated a viable pathway of stepping stones, introduce the idea of OBJECTIVES. All OUTCOMES should now be changed into OBJECTIVES, using the SMART Objectives guidelines.

An objective should be:

- **Specific** (fill in the details!)
- **Measurable** (not always quantifiable, but names indicators that enable us to know when something has been achieved)
- **Achievable** (this simply means that the objectives seem realistic, even if they might be ambitious)
- **Relevant** (if the initial critical pathway has been well conceived, the objectives will almost inevitably be relevant to the pathway)
- **Time-specific** (the closer to today the objective the more time specific it is likely to be)

Introduce SMART, writing it up on a flipchart for the group and giving examples of how this might look

- Continue to support them, individually with the task

### **c. Goals and Resources or Next Steps (20+)**

- An additional step for deepening thinking about the pathway is to apply Goals and Resources. Thinking about each objective, ask the questions: 1. What resources do we already have that can support us to achieve this? And 2. What additional resources do we need to find to enable us to achieve this? The answers to these questions will often generate additional steps on the pathway.

### **d. Action Learning and Responsive Planning (20+)**

- One further step involves asking what methods and processes will be included to enable ongoing learning, reflection, and adaptation of the plan.

### **e. A useful question to pose as a concluding consideration might be:**

"To move this idea forwards, what concrete steps can I take in the next week or 10 days?"

- Support them to ensure that they have clear, measurable and realistic stepping stones to 'step onto' over the coming days.. (this is important support for increasing the chances of people leaving the training and actually beginning to implement the changes they are wanting)

### **f. Sharing work in small groups (45 - 60)**

- Participants form small groups (of 3-4) and take turns to share their pathways. The small group help each other to refine and further develop the pathway through helpful questioning and reflection.

### **Debriefing the activity**

The Small group work serves as the debrief. However do find a moment to mention that:

- This work need not be adopted as a plan without further reflection
- All such plans require regular reviewing and adaptation
- Where these strategic ideas will involve other close collaborators, it is useful to take this tool back and rework the ideas together, to ensure everyone can bring their own experience and creativity to developing the pathway and more easily get behind the ideas.

# GOALS AND RESOURCES ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 1hr05

**GROUP FORMAT:** Pair work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** 5 questions fl pchart

**LEADING FORMAT:** Peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Making Changes and Applying our Learning

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Exploring next steps we can take to implement learning or move forwards a specific initiative
- Gaining insight and clarity on what we need and what we lack (in relation to specific outcomes)
- Making obstacles conscious

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This is a useful activity for supporting the 'taking it back' or 'next steps' phase of a training - it is really important that we always give some proportionate amount of time for this phase, helping to avoid the 'life changing training experience' that is lost sight of as soon as people return to their everyday patterns and habits of living and working.

It can also be employed usefully as part of strategy development.

So you might apply this activity in various ways - specifically related to a visioning or strategy development session (eg. combined with the [Critical Pathways Activity](#)), more generally for people considering/reflecting on next steps or a particular change they are wanting to make, or in the context of more 'work' related strategic planning.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Making Changes chapter](#)

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

- Introduce the activity in the context of thinking about how to carry our learning forwards or beginning to develop plans to achieve specific goals, then give the instructions:
  - Get into pairs - each person will need something they can use to take notes
  - Decide who will answer the questions first, and who ask the questions and take notes
  - The person answering the questions should make themselves very comfortable, so they can reflect in an open and relaxed way. They can even lie down if they like

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

*This is one, more in depth, approach to using these questions. Another way is simply to offer the questions to individuals for applying to a strategic or planning activity they are doing.*

- The person asking the questions will simply ask the question and then silently listen and take notes of the answers, allowing the person exploring the questions to reflect deeply and feel assured that their thoughts and ideas are being collected for them

- Answer one question at a time with 5 minutes per question. The first participant answers all 5 questions and then they swap roles.

The questions are:

**In order to...** [whatever the specified goal of the reflection is i.e. 'take this learning forwards' or 'make the changes i wish to see'...]:

**1) ...what resources do you already have that will support you?**

(You can think in terms of material resources, personal qualities and skills, relationships and contacts, etc. Include things you might take for granted. All of this can build appreciation and a sense of supportiveness.)

**2) ...what resources do you need to find?**

(Include a wide interpretation of 'resources' under 1.)

**3) What obstacles might you find/put in your own way?**

(Think of self-sabotaging tendencies and habits.)

**4) How might you avoid or overcome those obstacles?**

**5) What specific steps could you take to move this forward over the next week or ten days?**

**Facilitating the activity (50 mins)**

- You can either leave the pairs to time themselves, or you can act as the time keeper, ringing a bell/interrupting after 5 minutes on each question and giving them the next one

- Be present in the space for anything anyone might need from you and then decide what you will do to close the session

**Debriefing the activity (10 mins)**

- Allow some time at the end for the pairs to debrief and to ensure they can read each other's handwriting!

(A whole group debrief is likely not appropriate, but it will depend on how you have been applying the questions.)



# MAKING CHANGES COACHING ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 1h20

**GROUP FORMAT:** Pairs

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** [Making Changes worksheets](#) (per participant)

**LEADING FORMAT:** Trainer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Making Changes and Applying our Learning

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Developing capacity for making strategic interventions
- Analysing experience
- Developing capacities for prioritisation and clarity
- 'Coaching' or supporting others in a helpful way
- Being 'coached' or supported to see beyond personal views

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

This is a very useful tool that can be brought in at various points and around various subjects in a training. It can be used by individuals for self reflection and analysis, and it can be used as a 'coaching' tool, with the support of a partner.

Generally it will make sense to have generated the 'content' of the grid in advance of using it. Activities such as the Burnout Wheel, Bricks and Hammers or Critical Pathways, are all possible precursors to this activity, with the Making Changes Grid acting as a step in the process for thinking about next steps and taking learning forwards in a more precise and defined way.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Making Changes and Applying our Learning chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

'Coaching' style activities do run the risk of people ending up in a pair with someone who isn't supporting them in the way they would most want. You can try to give pointers about what skills and qualities a 'good coach' would have in the set up, but in the end, this is a risk you cannot fully mitigate as the facilitator.

Ideally an activity like this would be coming in later in the arc of the training, having spent time with experience and reflection, before getting into analysis and planning of this kind (see [Action Learning Cycle](#) for more on this).

TIPS, TRICKS,  
COACHING POINTS,  
QUESTIONS TO ASK...

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (10 mins)

- Frame the activity in the context in which you are using it, and then show the group a big example of the Making Changes Grid on a flipchart, like this:

### MAKING CHANGES ANALYSIS GRID

	HIGH IMPACT	LOW IMPACT
MORE EASILY AVAILABLE		
MORE DIFFICULT TO ACHIEVE		

- Then give the instructions:

- Using the [Making Changes Worksheet](#), we will start to consider and categorise the changes we are wishing to make (drawing on whatever activity you have done previously to generate the 'changes' to be made)
- Take it in turns to offer supportive coaching, asking open questions, and trying to keep the process focused. Remember you are there to support your partner to work out what they think, not to tell them what you think!
- This kind of prioritization can be applied to working out where to make changes first. Obviously the areas that should be given most immediate attention are those which fall within the High Impact/More Easily Achieved quadrant of the worksheet. If there is time, you can move on to explore strategies which could begin to increase your capacity to address High Impact/More Difficult to Achieve aspects.
- Give examples of what might go in each section, and then ask them to get into coaching pairs
- Give them their timings, and send them off.

### **Facilitating the Activity (60 mins)**

- Be around to support people who find they are struggling with the process, and give people a half-way and five minute warning, then bring them back together

### **Debriefing the Activity (10 mins)**

Not much debrief is required here - the activity is a bit of an end in itself. But if you are using it in the context of a bigger session, you might want to debrief around it in a broader sense of the theme.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

It can be really helpful to get as clear, precise and strategic as possible about the changes we want to make. It is easy to feel overwhelmed with how much there is we want to do, how many possibilities there are, how long things should/might take, and so on. We can do a lot to mitigate the experience of confusion, vagueness, complexity and saturation, by spending time doing more precise work like this. It is really worth it!

# BRICKS AND HAMMERS ACTIVITY

**RUNNING TIME:** 50mins - 1h10

**GROUP FORMAT:** small group work

**MATERIALS/EQUIPMENT NEEDED:** Flipchart paper / Marker pens

**LEADING FORMAT:** peer-led

**FACILITATOR EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** One

**CHAPTER:** Making Changes and Applying our Learning

## KEY BENEFITS AND AIMS

- Gaining clarity on 'blocks' or problems
- Developing problem solving strategies
- Gathering collective solutions

## FRAMING THE ACTIVITY (for the facilitator)

The aim of this activity is to shift participants towards 'problem solving' by identifying the most significant obstacles to resilience (or anything else) and drawing these as "the bricks" in a wall blocking our way. There is then time to co-create potential solutions that could break down these obstacles, in small groups. These are illustrated as "hammers".

This exercise can consolidate and synthesise learning from previous sessions. It is also a good way to support people to feel that they are getting to the specifics of what is challenging them and what they might do about it (in contrast to more general/broader sweeping explorations on resilience themes or more reflective activities). The main benefit of this exercise is its focus on the collective agency we have to find and apply solutions.

It is also a relatively simple exercise and highly visual. Groups can see the ideas laid out in front of them as they work and they can share them with other groups afterwards either as a flipchart 'gallery' or presentation. This can potentially bring the whole group together in problem solving if required.

Encouraging people to be as specific as possible makes the activity more useful - the more specific, the more chance the hammers have of actually working and being applicable in concrete ways, in peoples' lives. The activity is a practical one and self explanatory - it does not need much wider framing or context.

### Related material to support framing:

- [Making changes and applying our learning chapter](#)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This is an ideal exercise to use as a follow on from the series of exercises and activities covered in [exploring burnout](#) (if you are ready to get into solutions forming) or to use at the end of a course/session to support people to overcome possible obstacles in taking their learning forwards and being strategic with their next steps.

TIPS, TRICKS, COACHING  
POINTS, QUESTIONS TO  
ASK...

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### Setting up the activity (5 mins)

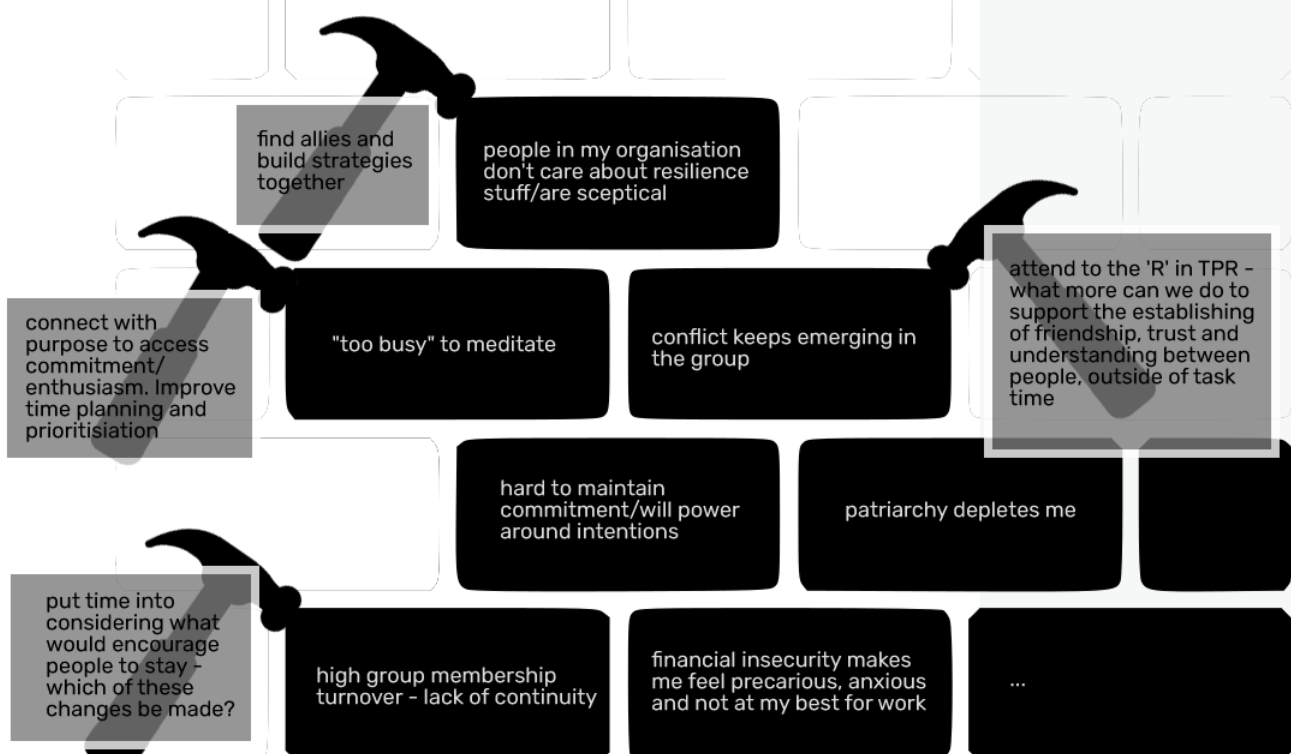
- Frame the activity in the context of the themes you are exploring.
- Support the participants to form small groups (of around 4). Each of the groups will need flipchart paper and coloured pens.
- Explain both parts of the exercise.
- For part a - working on the bricks:
  - Draw a wall made of bricks, and write obstacles/difficulties/problems encountered in each of the bricks, in relation to resilience or integrating learning.
  - There will be around 20 mins for this

### For part b - working on the hammers:

- Use post-its or pre-prepared hammers, and write a solution/approach to overcome the obstacle on them, which should then be stuck on the appropriate brick
- Aim to have one hammer for every brick (although some hammers may cover a few areas!)
- There might not and does not have to be a hammer for every single brick
- those we cannot solve just now will provide interesting information that the whole group can continue to work on
- There'll be around 25 mins for this.

### Generally:

- Don't over-dwell on the problems - get to solutions!
- The process does not have to be sequential- bricks and hammers often emerge together, just go with it!
- It can be useful to offer an illustration with a simple example drawn out showing a row of "bricks" and a couple of "hammers" like this:



### **Facilitating the activity (40 - 50 mins)**

- Keep an eye on the groups, remind them of timings and to move on to solutions. If they get stuck, give them a hand!

### **Debriefing the activity (5 - 20 mins)**

- It can be very worthwhile to gather the groups to share their work and explore what they have come up with and/or struggled with. Ask the group for any particular concerns/areas of stuckness and see if the rest of the group have suggestions.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- Which bricks were hard to break?
- Which ones remain obstacles?
- What has doing the activity revealed?
- Are there any areas we would like to focus on together in a later session?  
What follow up do you think would be useful?

too seriously. At the same time, it can be a really useful, and sometimes surprisingly informative.. Basically, this is a way to start a conversation.

- Hand out one worksheet per person explaining we will take some time to fill it in individually if people wish to, before moving to some sharing and discussion.

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS/SIGNIFICANT POINTS TO TAKE AWAY**

It is really useful to get specific about obstacles and solutions! The generalised, undefined feeling of being blocked (by the wall) can make us feel unempowered, hemmed in and at a loss for ways forward. When we approach the wall one brick at a time, we abandon our vagueness and allow for more strategic engagement and agency.

# SUGGESTED COMBINATIONS OF ACTIVITIES TO CREATE EXTENDED SESSIONS

The activities we list in connection with each of the chapters can be brought together in various combinations. Here are some suggestions for tried and tested sessions that we run, where we feel the coherence and flow from activity to activity works especially well. Some of these are the length of one session (around 2 hours), some are a morning or afternoon's work, some are more like a day in length (you can find the broken down timings in the activity plans).

## **Creating the Container:**

1. Diversity Welcome
2. Exploring Group Agreements and Culture
3. Hearing the Needs of the Group
4. Rivers of Experience

## **Exploring burnout:**

1. Rivers of Experience
2. Using the Burnout Rating Scale
3. Burnout Wheel - Group Activity
4. Burnout Wheel - Personal Activity
5. Making Changes Coaching

## **Introducing mindful awareness practice (meditative):**

1. Introducing Working with Awareness
2. Finding a Posture that Works
3. Following Hands
4. Freeform Following the Breath Practice (meditative)
5. (Walking Meditation or something embodied)
6. Structured Following the Breath Practice (meditative)

## **Introducing working skilfully with emotion (meditative):**

1. Introducing Working Skilfully with Emotion
2. Finding a Posture that Works
3. Open Sentences
4. Self Solidarity Practice (meditative)
5. The Milling **or** Sitting Back to Back
6. Structured Kind Regard Practice (meditative)

## **Working with difficult emotion, pain and overwhelm:**

1. Open Sentences
2. The Cradling
3. The Truth Circle **or** Cairn of Mourning **or** Working with Suffering (Compassion Practice)
4. Going to Ground

## **Cultivating somatic awareness (meditative):**

1. Introducing Working with Awareness
2. Finding a posture that Works
3. Body Scanning Practice
4. Centering Practice



### **Exploring group dynamics:**

1. Raft Game **or** The Warehouse
2. Action-Reflection Spectrum Line
3. Task-Process-Relationship
4. Exploring Power with Chapati Diagrams
5. Exploring Privilege and Rank
6. Giving and Receiving Feedback

### **Understanding conflict:**

1. Conflict Sculptures
2. Conflict Icebergs
3. Sitting Back to Back

### **Unpacking aspects of active solidarity:**

1. Step with Me
2. Mapping Mainstreams and Margins
3. Exploring Privilege and Rank
4. Centering Practice **or** Self Solidarity practice

### **Working with trauma and stress responses:**

1. Introduction to Trauma Awareness
2. Trauma Do's and Don't's
3. Orientation / Name Three Things in the Space Technique
4. Centering Practice
5. Sitting Back to Back
6. Body Tapping Technique

### **Exploring ways of seeing:**

1. If Nothing You Can Do Is Ever Enough
2. Time and Activism
3. Exploring an Ecology of Strategies

### **Awakening the senses - nature connection:**

1. Three Dimensions of Connection framing
2. Bat and Moth
3. Sit Spot
4. Evolutionary Remembering

### **Getting freer with our personal identities:**

1. Exploring Identity Positions
2. Personal Identity and Complexity
3. Widening Circles
4. Structured Kind Regard Practice (meditative)

### **Exploring political identities:**

1. Exploring an Ecology of Strategies
2. Reflecting on our Political Identity
3. Widening Circles

### **Movement ecologies:**

1. See [Movement Mapping](#) or [Movement Timelines](#) which are long, stand alone activities

### **Approaches to working with threats and attacks:**

1. [Perceiving and Responding to Threats](#)
2. [Suppression-Repression Scale](#)
3. [Risk Matrix](#)
4. [Threat Analysis and Security Strategies](#)

### **Next steps and making changes:**

1. [Walking into the Future](#)
2. [Critical Pathways](#)
3. [Goals and Resources](#) **or** [Bricks and Hammers](#)