



# COMPASSIONATE ORGANISING

THE  
TOOLKIT

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# WELCOME

WELCOME! To our compassionate organising toolkit.

This toolkit is for anyone who is exhausted from the way that they have been working or organising for a long time, for people right at the start of their adventures into changemaking, and for anyone in between. Everyone is welcome.

We are living in trying times. In a world that is oscillating between different challenges, there are many people out on the streets, in their homes, from their desks, trying to make the world an easier place for all of those who inhabit it. Through activism, growing, caring, surviving, thriving, policy, campaigning, or all of the above.

And this story is not new.

For so long people have been fighting the good fight and winning! Winning workers rights, health care, access to basic services, new infrastructure and environmental protections. And alongside this, people have been burning out, becoming disillusioned and having to take a step back.

As authors of these principles, we have been dancing between the lines of organising for collective liberation and burn out, for over a decade of doing this work. And in this process, we began to believe that there must be lessons and learnings, reviews and changes, that could be made and shared - to make the work we do and the spaces we create, more compassionate and caring. So that people leave from a meeting feeling nourished, not depleted or triggered. Where the politics that we strive for are actively embodied in the way that we work, and not just paid lip service to - in the visioning of a distant future.

The following principles and toolkit for embedding them are our starting point. We invite you to consider them, play around with how they feel, expand upon them, and develop ways of working and being that best serve you.

We have developed these working practices based upon our lived experience as people who experience racial and/or social marginalisation, and from our experience of the campaigning/activist/NGO world. We have tried different techniques through working with one another, and drawn inspiration from the accompanying research report: Stories of Exclusion and Belonging in Climate Action.

We have been inspired by many of the people and organisations (some listed in our resources section) that are also seeking to solve the same problem, as well as looking to nature to incorporate natural cycles into our work rhythms.

This report is for anyone who feels identified in the above text, and for anyone who doesn't. Life is complex, and we don't promise to solve all of your organising work woes in one document. Here we hope to do our best to lighten the load, and spark conversations about how we might take this further and deeper.

Go gently, we hope this toolkit brings something of what you need.

Thank you for reading.

# WHAT IS COMPASSIONATE ORGANISING?

We've noticed how in any space, but particularly ones that are passion-driven, there are often varieties of competing needs and traumas coexisting within the group. We know that our lived experiences and sensitivities are gifts that give us powerful insights and motivate us in our organising. However when we try to repress or ignore them for the sake of outputs or the greater vision, our working and organising cultures can often lead to burn out, illness, overworking, exhaustion, depletion and even individuals dropping out of movement spaces all together.

Through focusing on how we work together, Compassionate Organising has become a term to define a way of organising that aims to centre the whole human, the environment and world that we are operating within. From this point we work outwards, designing work, organising processes and structures that enables our wholeness and humanity to flourish and be. In compassionate organising we ask ourselves, what does practising compassion look and feel like; for individuals, organisations and groups - so we can bring our whole selves, to make organising both sustainable, joyful and nourishing?

The term compassionate organising was coined by one of our team members Rowan Mataram, after a long period of burn out. A group of women came together and organised an event in such a way that it aided in the healing of her burn out; thus igniting the spark for the process to capture the magic, and share the potential that compassionate organising could mean for others. In that moment it was a feeling and a few vague ideas; what we hope to offer here are a set of principles to guide us in embedding a more compassionate and inclusive organising practice.

We recognise that when things feel pressured, it can be hard to make time for culture building and that some of the principles and tools may seem slow paced or unnecessary. What we have found is that these principles have made our work and organising more efficient, effective and enjoyable. Where we have been impacted by societal pressures or structures and become unable to uphold our principles, we have noticed the familiar patterns of fatigue, burn out and disillusionment. We also recognise that upholding our practices amidst the pressures and structures within which we operate is a form of radical resistance, and should not be devalued.

**Our proof is in our practice.**

*N.B. The term Compassionate Organising is copyrighted to the authors Copyright © 2023 Rowan Mataram, Yosola Olaoye, Saphra Bennett & Maia Kelly. While we actively encourage practising the tools in your organising and organisations, to prevent the term from being co-opted or used within profit generating activities we have copyrighted the term Compassionate Organising to the authors of the Compassionate Organising Toolkit. Feel free to contact us on [compassionateorganising@gmail.com](mailto:compassionateorganising@gmail.com) if you would like to share the principles more widely in training, public events or within profit generating activities.*

Part of compassionate organising is to centre the arts in our work and world. In the releasing of this report we have worked with two artists, Camille Etchart on report design and illustration, and Lawrie Burton on Soundscape Creation. Camille responded to our text and brought you these beautiful illustrations - you can read little bits of her thought process throughout. Lawrie responded to the interviews that we carried out ahead of writing our report: *Stories of Exclusion and Belonging in Climate Action* and this toolkit - to bring you something that you can listen to as you move around in your day to day.

*You can find our Compassionate Organising Soundscape on the following Platforms: You can access them for free on Soundcloud or Youtube, and any major streaming platform including Spotify, Apple Music, Tidal, TikTok, Instagram, Amazon, Soundtrack, Pandora etc - by searching 'Climate Equities Soundscapes' or for Compassionate Organising*

## OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES

Our Compassionate Organising Principles can be summarised into the following acronym for **CARE**:

**C**ompassion  
**A**ccountability  
**R**est and Recovery  
**E**xpression

To organise compassionately, we believe all of these things must happen together in tandem. Each principle compliments the others.

In order to keep this guide as accessible as possible, we have offered a short description and a few activities and tools to help you to compassionately organise. This is not a definitive guide, and by no means exhaustive. See our suggestions as prompts from which you can develop your practice. As an individual or a group - you may want to go through and add your own definitions and tools after each section.

With all of these tools a level of self-reflection is essential. Take some time alone to assess the areas in which you would love to develop, and celebrate the principles that you are already demonstrating.

No.1

# COMPASSION

“Compassion begins with listening”

*“Compassion is a word that has long been rooted in many different practices and cultures. For me, compassion begins with listening. Listening to self, to others, to our environment, and responding to the needs that we hear when we listen carefully. This feels like such an important aspect of organising, working and being, because so often we confuse our needs with our goals or outputs. We prioritise these things thinking that we are fueling ourselves, and wonder why we feel depleted after long stints working on a deadline or an action. Ultimately because we haven't valued the needs that have to be met to feel nourished. Food, connection, safety, warmth, play, laughter, rest, purpose - these are all essential needs that often get superseded in these capitalist constructs of production and value. The hardest part for me in compassionate organising has been to practice valuing my own and others needs, over the work we are doing. Yet in doing so, I have discovered the most joy, and the best outputs.”*

Rowan Mataram

Compassion is a practice. It is the sense of solidarity between all living things, and the steps to alleviate any suffering or struggle that an individual might be experiencing. From this context, compassionate organising seeks to address the harms that organising and working can cause. Whether the harm is caused by lack of resources, lack of political alignment, lack of understanding across struggles, disillusionment, lack of focus or an over-focus on outputs. Compassionate organising is about being intentional in building cultures that nourish and can ensure long term resilience in our working practices.



## Compassion: Principles and Tools

### Tool: Community Principles / Agreements

Collectively creating group principles or a group / community agreement (or if short for time, a needs-check) is a valuable way to centre everyone's needs from the get-go to build a shared understanding for how we want to work together to maximise inclusion and potential. Seeds for Change have a great facilitation guide for this [here](#), and Danial Hunter from Training for Change has written an important article [here](#) on the limitations of 'ground rules' which is helpful to bear in mind, to make our community agreements more meaningful for the group. Some great example Principles can be found on p18 & p19 in [Voices That Shake Guidebook: Rituals Tools and Practices](#). All of these tools can be found in the resources section

### Tool: Culture Setting - 'Joys and Needs'

Don't forget about JOY! Whilst the content of our work can be heavy, that doesn't mean that there shouldn't be space for joy, fun, pleasure. In fact this is an essential part of living the world of tomorrow, today. Another key part of establishing a compassionate working culture is creating an environment where people can be honest about their needs and where there is a culture to support that. A great culture setting activity for the start of any team can be Joys and Needs. This activity helps everybody to share the following:

- What brings them 'joy' in a team/ group or work dynamic, i.e. autonomy within a collective or clear tasks
- What 'disclaimers' you might want to share to your new in a team/ group or work dynamic, i.e. I am sometimes grumpy in the morning and it's not personal
- What 'needs' you may have to flourish the most in your team/ group or work dynamic, i.e. I need food, flexible agendas and participatory meetings or I need clear focuses, deadlines and tasks
- How you might overcome 'challenges' in your team/ group or work dynamic, i.e. having regular space for reflection to highlight what is going well and what isn't

A suggestion for how to run this activity is below, but you can take the key ideas and run through it however feels right. Take some big sheets of paper, write 'joys', 'disclaimers', 'needs', 'challenges' on each of them. Ask everybody to take some post-it notes and write their responses to the prompts. Stick these on and run through them collectively. Note where there is agreement or divergence. If in a larger group you can also do this by asking everyone to put stars next to the suggestions that resonate with them. Following this you can agree things that you feel can be met in the space, and any that you feel cannot (if any).

A next step can be to write your 'team processes' - where you agree ways to meet everyone's needs through proposals i.e a monthly reflection cycle, space to relationship build, feedback loops where you share things that are challenging etc. This activity was developed for the team by Rowan Mataram.

### Tool: Check ins / Check outs

We've noticed how much more effectively we organise together when we are able to bring as much of our whole selves into the space, as feels comfortable. Creating moments to arrive and close out together, with disclosures about how we are arriving, what our needs are for the session, and then reflections on the session, and needs going forward allow us to build trust, empathy, understanding and take care of each other's needs while organising together. This tool is used widely in movement spaces, but you can read more about this practice from Page 34 - 36 in the [Voices That Shake Guidebook](#).

### Principle: Hosting with Hospitality, humility and generosity

Sharing food has been an age-old ritual; it has served as a tool to bring people together since the beginning of time. Food can be a great way of creating accessible events whilst implicitly embedding a culture of collectivism.

In a room full of diverse cultures, it is a universal language that everyone understands without need for translation. Working in a space where there is food is such a simple yet enriching and healing way to bring in that grounding and welcoming factor into a space. It can also aid in setting and resetting a group culture. Setting a culture where people serve each other comes from a place of humility and generosity as people can get an opportunity to serve and be served. Serving each other can involve group members and group facilitators giving time together to setting up/prepping/cooking food and or clear and clean up at the end. People can find collective ownership of the groups and spaces that they are in, by giving themselves in this way.

### Principle: Hosting with Accessibility

There's a huge amount that needs to be considered when ensuring that the spaces that you create are accessible for a range of needs, neuro-diversity and cultures. In addition to that, everyone is an individual and access needs can be unique to one person. The easiest thing to do is to ask people to share if they have any access needs - which can be done 1-1 or ahead of the date. Below are some key things that you may wish to consider:

- Language translation provision for when there will be multiple languages in a space
- In a group event setting, if you know that there will be diverse levels of knowledge in the room, it can be good to create a space for people who already feel very informed on a topic, so that these people don't dominate the space and prevent others from asking questions. These people can then share at times when it is appropriate. For example having a 'tech-xperts table' for those with technical expertise of the subject at a community conversation on the topic.
- Centre lived experience (this links to the above point). Whilst many people may not know the ins and outs of complex or technical issues, everyone knows how something is having an impact on their lives - particularly if the framing is given for participants to explore that. By centering lived experience you value multiple perspectives as important which can in turn address power imbalances in a space.

- Don't use language that excludes, we say more about this under 'expression'
- Consider providing food and catering to multiple dietary needs
- Consider cultural sensitivities around certain foods, alcohol, festive periods, different faiths and what activity can happen during certain times of year, different cultures around touch and ways of expressing. Request feedback in spaces with diverse cultures to ensure that you are always listening and reviewing.
- Getting out of our comfort zones and meeting people where they are at - diverse groups are not hard to reach - we need to put in effort, resources and creativity to reach marginalised groups. When attempting to build relationships of trust, accountability and solidarity, there is a tendency for groups in positions of power to invite more marginalised groups, who they want to build alliances with, to their space, expecting others to get on board with their existing campaign or project work. However when we are willing to get out of our comfort zones, and go to the events and spaces of those we are attempting to work in solidarity with, with an open mind and no agenda, we can add capacity to their existing work, and build deeper relationships of trust and mutual support that isn't one directional or extractive.
- Making sure people with a disability are not disabled by being in the spaces we create and host in, i.e. that everyone can participate equally and no one is excluded due to the activities that are happening and the access arrangements etc.

### Principle: Boundaries that don't bind

As a writing team, all of us have experienced cultures where the expectation is to say 'yes', to be available at all hours, and to prioritise the 'work' above everything else. In this context boundaries can become blurred or non-existent. This is an invitation for everyone to be clear on their boundaries. Overworking within a team can create an expectation that this is the norm. In activist spaces this can create double harm because often people are contributing to movements in addition to other responsibilities, which can increase risks of exhaustion and burn out.

We are also mindful of how our traumas can manifest in our movement work as addictions such as workaholism or codependency. These coping mechanisms can risk becoming unsustainable fuel for social movements. Creating environments to gently support one another with boundaries, kindness and compassion, not to overwork, overgive and self-sacrifice, can contribute to longer term healing by providing the space and time to process our traumas, should this be wanted.

Ways that you can have more boundaries are to express clearly when you will and won't be available. Whilst this can sometimes be awkward, we know that these actions can also

support others to do the same. For example, being clear about what hours you will or won't be available, turning off your work phone, or not answering emails/calls about non leisure things on off days/ out of hours.

You can also collectively agree boundaries as part of your culture setting activity. Agreeing when you do and don't talk about certain issues, and supporting people to have leisure time. Even though activism comes from a place of love, it is also draining, and time for relaxation is important to build into our collective structures.

### Principle: Appreciations

A vital part of culture setting and building trusting relationships, and valuing labour, is 'appreciations'. One theory or tool that we have been inspired by is "Shine Theory" by Aminatou Sow and Ann Friedman, first introduced to the team by Saphra Bennett. The premise is that "i don't shine if you don't shine" - you invest in those you care about or work closely with in order that they can be their best selves, and that they do the same in return. Our interpretation of this has been to ensure that we celebrate and acknowledge everyone's specific contributions to the work. This is why we, as authors, have quoted ourselves throughout this piece of work - and named when someone originated an idea. As women with experiences of marginalisation, this is an essential building block to stepping into our power. It felt uncomfortable for many of us at first, but longer term it is supporting us to recognise and honour our strengths.

# ACCOUNTABILITY

*'To me, accountability is a big word for building trusting relationships - where we listen deeply to our bodies and each other, trusting one another to follow through on what we commit to doing. Its value in social justice work is that we don't know what counts as winning if we aren't in a relationship with and listening to the parts of ourselves as well as communities near and far who are most marginalised by the issues we are trying to address. I see it as an important part of Compassionate Organising because all our struggles are so interconnected and interdependent. The more we build trusting relationships on both levels - personal and interpersonal, the more effectively we can show up for the futures we want to build, in a way that sustains our spirit through feeling authentically expressed, connected and united'*

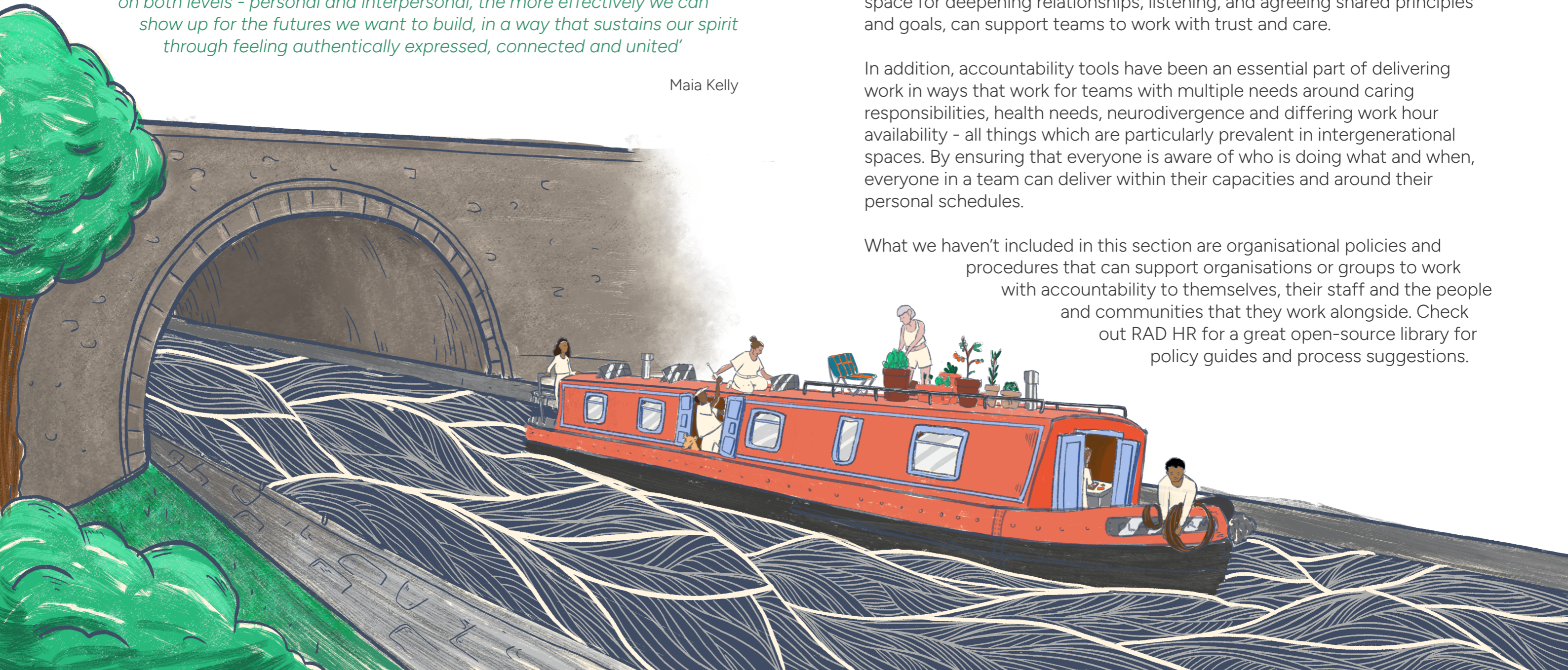
Maia Kelly

“All our struggles are so interconnected and interdependent”

To be able to trust those we work alongside, we need to know that people will do the things that they say they will and act responsibly. Yet very often, the reasons that people do not act with accountability are because there are not the structures in place to enable them to do so, because they have not been shown how, or because life is throwing a bunch of stuff at them that they can no longer juggle everything. Accountability tools, such as those that create space for deepening relationships, listening, and agreeing shared principles and goals, can support teams to work with trust and care.

In addition, accountability tools have been an essential part of delivering work in ways that work for teams with multiple needs around caring responsibilities, health needs, neurodivergence and differing work hour availability - all things which are particularly prevalent in intergenerational spaces. By ensuring that everyone is aware of who is doing what and when, everyone in a team can deliver within their capacities and around their personal schedules.

What we haven't included in this section are organisational policies and procedures that can support organisations or groups to work with accountability to themselves, their staff and the people and communities that they work alongside. Check out RAD HR for a great open-source library for policy guides and process suggestions.



## Accountability: Principles and Tools

### Tool: River of Life

Taking action in isolation from those most impacted that we endeavour to be accountable to, limits effectiveness and can reinforce power dynamics. This is why we encourage dedicating time to building meaningful and trusting relationships, before organising alongside one another, to help us all better navigate the nuance and complexity of dismantling systems of oppression as mixed groups with different lived experiences of marginalisation. A powerful tool for getting to know what brought us here and building understanding across different life experiences is called The River of Life. This activity uses a river, its rocks, twists and turns as a metaphor for our lives - which each person then shares with the group.

Give everyone a sheet of paper and tell them that we will be using the metaphor of a river to illustrate our lives. You might ask a prompt question like, 'what brought you to this moment today, or draw us the story of your activist journey.' Then ask everyone to draw a river. The river might have twists and turns and rocks as barriers to overcome. People can then draw on moments in their lives along the river - to the current moment. Everyone takes it in turns to share these drawings and talk them through with one another. This activity can also be a great way of understanding different life experiences that have led to our current ways of thinking, and can support us to better know how to relate to others. It is a great activity to do as part of your group culture setting. This tool was introduced to the team by Yosola Olajoye and was originally developed by [Joyce Mercer](#).

### Tool: Cares and Commitments

One way to support people to act with accountability, is to have clear roles and responsibilities. We wanted to move away from management speak in group settings, so use the term cares and commitments instead.

At the start of any new project, come together and agree on the different roles that are needed - these are the team Commitments, i.e. these can be the roles in a group such as: minute taker or food coordinator, or they can be a role in an organisational project.

Together you can then agree what 'cares' come under each commitment, these are specific tasks, i.e. reach out to X person, create social media posts, bring tea and coffee to the next meeting. Depending on whether this is a formal or informal setting, you might already have set commitments and therefore, setting cares would be the next step. Or you might use this activity as a way of deciding what commitment you want to carry out for the group.

The focus of each person's Commitments should enable them to work independently with agreed autonomy. The Cares should also be reviewed in regular meetings, and adapted based on what is still achievable and manageable. This exercise was introduced to the group by Saphra Bennett.

As an addition, in flat-structured/ horizontal or non-hierarchical settings, we have found the [MOCHA framework](#) very useful. This is a way of assigning different roles which have specific responsibilities for any task. You can read more about this [here](#).

### Principle: Creative and flexible support structures

Check-ins, check-outs, clear action plans, set work plans, group agreements, organisational policies - these are all ways to support people to understand what is and is not expected of them. Sometimes there is resistance to creating structures as these can be seen as bureaucratic.

One thing that we have observed is that **flexibility enables accountability**. Whatever agreements, structures or systems that you put in place for accountability, it is never possible to imagine every single event or occurrence that might happen in life. With this in mind, we promote flexible accountability. This means taking the whole person and context into account when making decisions. By using some of the techniques that we have outlined, such as check-ins, you can regularly adjust your plans in accordance with what else is happening in people's lives. Thus making your processes realistic, manageable and compassionate.

### Principle: 'Moving at the Speed of Trust'

We have been endlessly inspired by Adrienne Marie Brown's idea of 'moving at the speed of trust'. This refers to the idea that instead of working at the speed that you need X and Y actions to happen, you move at the speed that you are able to build collectively trusting relationships. This can be a fantastic way of preserving work into its longevity, especially if things pick up or become viral. A great example of this is the Preston New Road Anti-Fracking campaign. This campaign started in the community and resulted in a moratorium on fracking. The long-standing community relationships that were built ensured that everyone was working towards the same goal, so when big players came into the scene - such as politicians and big business owners - everyone was in agreement about the outcomes and the community needs could not be compromised. We find this phrase to be a helpful reminder in a world where we feel the urgency of the issues that we are trying to address - as it reminds us that relationships and trust building is essential - not an add-on.



### Tool: Inner Child Guidance

Self-awareness of our core self, and our needs is an important part of staying accountable to ourselves in our organising. Without this we might risk collapsing into codependent forms of organising that pedestal those on the margins and create reverse hierarchies, rather than being equal co-conspirators against systems of injustice. Being accountable to ourselves, helps sustain us as organisers into the long term, as well as helps us show up more authentically, with healthy boundaries when working within communities of resistance. A tool for strengthening our relationship to ourselves is through Inner Child Healing, where we might do a guided visualisation, go for walks with our inner child and listen to their needs, or receive written messages from them through our non-dominant hand - to help us to discern what actions will be mutually healing for us to engage in, and where we might need more boundaries in our organising work. These tools have been inspired by teachings from Thich Naht Hanh as well as the 12 Step Addiction Recovery Programme.

### Tool: Accountability Buddies

Creating structures of accountability can help us not get stuck in inaction, decision paralysis or different emotions that can block us such as fear, shame or guilt. A tool that can help us to show up for organising and continue to deepen trust and accountability is setting up accountability buddies or an accountability circle. Accountability buddies work best when paired with others with similar goals, areas of interest, or identities. The intention is to externalise our goals, and hold regular check in times to support and motivate each other in progressing towards them. For instance, two white people in a multi-racial team might form an accountability pair, to process emotions and hold each other accountable for how their whiteness might show up in the team, and support each other to take responsibility and change behaviour when needed. This tool was adapted by the Racial Justice Network's Unlearning Racism Collective Course, and inspired by the Training for Change [Learning Buddy System](#).

### Principle: Accountability to Communities

In order to be fully accountable to the communities we are working with, we need to shift our thinking and practise away from "doing for" and "doing on" as this aligns and reinforces (whether consciously or subconsciously) with prescriptive model of work ie. experts vs user / participants, youth worker vs young person, worker vs service user / client. It yields a disempowering dynamic with communities that we want to serve. Instead we advocate for working with communities in a participatory way and building processes that amplify their voices and enable us to listen; serving is the key word here!

**To become fully accountable is to be able to hold difficult conversations with community members and listen without ego while welcoming hard questions.**

### Tool: Peoples Circle

A great way to do this is using a dialogic tool called People's Circle. This tool was created by Ella Baker; a staunch proponent for bottom up organising and adapted by friends of ours at the [Anne Matthews Trust](#) and [Ciasa Maloka](#) It is a great tool for engaging in issue-based conversations receiving, feeding back, dialogue, decision making and participatory research. It is a way to effectively use time and create more equality in the space;

so that the same people are not speaking all the time and more ownership and emphasis is placed on listening deeper and how we use time and space. To set up, have people sit in the circle ready to participate in the following layers:

- Layer 1: a go-round, the group agrees how much time each person takes on the go-round, everyone speaks within that time with the help of a timekeeper. Participants can choose how their round is used.
- Layer 2 : Burning Questions are asked - this is also done in a set time that is also agreed.
- Layer 3: Cross talk (optional) to expand on or add to what someone has said previously or to get a steer on something.

### Tool: Participatory Evaluation

**Accountability to communities means putting things in place that enables communities to become their own agents of change while bettering our practices and offerings;** we need to call on their wisdom and experiences from working with us. One way we can do this is by using participatory evaluation. Participatory evaluation is where communities are involved in designing the evaluation process, what information is used and how the information is used. From our experiences of working with diverse groups of people, we have found participatory evaluation approaches to be a powerful, exciting and empowering way for communities to share feedback and to get their needs met. This approach is radical and a lot sweeter than the conventional forms of evaluation used in the realms of development workers, practitioners working on/ treating people and then monitoring and measuring impact. Instead, the participants set the agenda, you just need to be clear on what the intentions are! You can do this by story telling, poetry, music. To find out more about what this entails, feel free to head to the resources section.

# REST & RECOVERY

*“Nothing in nature blooms all year round.” As a historical over-worker and overachiever, always “striving for excellence” and perfection, rest has always felt like a luxury I never felt I was afforded to me, for fear of being labelled “lazy”, “incapable”, “not enough,” particularly as a black woman and even more so, as a mother. Having experienced numerous incidents of burnout and now working with the backdrop of a Climate Emergency and working within a white supremacy culture of urgency and efficiency, funder deadlines etc, all too often we are forced to push through and push past both the natural cycles of rest and also our bodies call for recovery and healing. When you stop to take notice of nature’s cycles i.e. seasons, moons, menstrual; all have highs and lows and the onus is on us to honour those moments and work with the collective energy to maximise the most out of ourselves and our teams. Rest has for too long been deemed as a luxury or privilege, particularly in movement spaces but rest is our right, without deep wintering our roots remain shallow and untethered.”*

Saphra Bennett

As the saying goes, “you can’t pour from an empty cup.” Yet as we have expressed, part of our desire in writing this toolkit was to support people to move beyond overwork and burnout culture. We want to address the guilt of resting that many people feel, particularly those who identify as being from a racially or socially marginalised community. Rest and recovery is a radical act in a capitalist world.

When we move from places of urgency it can prevent us from working intersectionally (across multiple challenges and contexts) as we feel that we don’t have time to incorporate what may feel like issues that are unrelated to our work. Rest and recovery supports us to have the space to listen to everyone in the room, honour our interdependencies, and to sustain ourselves to take action longer term.

## Rest & Recovery: Principles and Tools

### Principle: Honouring cycles

There are so many different resources, practices and cultures that you can learn from to understand how best to honour cycles in your daily practice. We have been inspired by rural agricultural lifestyles, menstrual cycles, permaculture methodologies, moon cycles, and many other forms of nature connection. By following these different cycles we have been able to use our energy more effectively and efficiently.

Take any of the following suggestions to build natural cycles into your work plans. Depending on the makeup of your team, different options may feel more comfortable:

### Tool: Plan your year in accordance with the seasons

- Spring - the time for making new plans, planting seeds and building new relationships. New shoots, activating relationships, networking, face-face events (smaller scale)
- Summer - the time for your plans to bloom, build excitement and deliver great activity
- Autumn - the time for sharing your harvest, holding gatherings, sharing learnings
- Winter - A time for reflection, taking stock, nurturing, and making plans for the year ahead, reflecting, composting, laying the foundations (logistics for events, calendaring, start of relationship building)

Often people can be inclined to deliver ‘summer’ work all year round, or only remaining in the ‘winter’ phase and never doing anything. We find seasonal working a way of working in harmony with natural seasons, using our energy in a more sustainable way, as well as a way of moving us through the different stages of any activity, project or programme.



### Tool: Work with menstrual cycles

For humans who menstruate, having massive work outputs on the days of menstruation can be difficult for some. Where possible to plan work around this, we encourage it/ And if not possible, working flexibly for such occurrences is a great alternative. As well as organisations who have progressive period policies, we were very inspired by the book *Period Power* by Maisie Hill; who describes the four seasons of our monthly cycle: winter (bleeding), spring, summer (ovulating), and autumn - each with different ways to thrive. You can read more about her work in the blog we have shared in the resources [section](#).

### Tool: Working with moon cycles

Whether you think the moon has any impact on your life, or if you think that it is a bunch of hippy nonsense, we found planning reflection and review cycles into our months an incredibly useful practice that enabled our work to constantly adapt to the emergent needs and changing contexts around us.

Our invitation is to schedule planning intention setting meetings on the new moon, and action meetings on the full moon. Reflection meetings are monthly assessments on how things are going, what is working and what is not working, what do we want to let go? With suggestions on what could be done differently moving forward. Action meetings are meetings for setting intentions, making decisions, finalising plans, and smashing out tasks. (For some, this cycle can align with menstrual cycles too - to reflect in 'winter', and take action in the 'summer' seasons!)

### Tool: Polarity Mapping

Polarities are two interdependent activities or pairs that need the other over time, but cannot be done at the same time. For example breathing in / breathing out, or work / rest. Both poles have positive and negative qualities, but if either are overdone we end up getting stuck in their negative qualities. Mapping different polarities, that we often get stuck in as organisers, is a useful tool for helping us stay attuned to our body's warning signs, and maximise the benefits of both poles. For instance if we were mapping action and rest as organisers we would:

1. Draw a big infinity symbol, and write 'work' on one side and 'action' on the other.
2. Place a + at the top, and a - at the bottom of each side of the symbol.
3. Then we'd list the positives and negatives of both action and rest and write them into our map. E.g. positives of rest: self care, connecting with self, healing, recharge. Negatives of rest: isolation, apathy, disconnection, nothing gets done. Positives of action: feeling connected, sense of contribution, achievement. Negatives of action: burnout, disillusionment, compassion fatigue, apathy etc.
4. Then we'd draw arrows around the infinity symbol to show a state of movement between the two poles. The down arrows going into the negative sections of the map are where we can make note of what our personal trigger warnings are when we are overdoing 'action' or 'rest' and getting stuck in the negatives - e.g. headaches and insomnia might be trigger warnings when doing too much action, and loneliness and boredom

might be trigger warnings for too much rest. The idea is that as soon as we feel your triggers, you switch to the other activity in order to always stay in the positive sides of both poles!

5. This tool was developed by Barry Johnson, creator of Polarity Partnerships TM. You can read more about the tool and see it in action using the link shared in the resources.

### Tool: The Ideal Schedule

To organise in a way that nourishes us, we want to maintain balance with all other aspects of our lives, to be able to live a fulfilling life that meets all our needs and sustains our organising into the long term. We've found this tool a valuable way to protect our time for the things we need to do for ourselves, to make us more effective when serving others, communities or movements. Too often when someone asks if we are available to take on a task (particularly when we are passionate about the cause), we feel obliged to say yes if we don't have commitments to others. This tool helps us make commitments to ourselves (e.g. I want to be in bed by 10.30 each night) - so we can honour these equally to the commitments we make for others or the causes we care about.

- Step 1: Make a list of all the activities and tasks you do that resource you, make you feel energised and nourished (your everyday activities and any social action you do or want to do).
- Step 2: Then make a list of all the activities and tasks which deplete you, make you feel drained, or bored.
- Step 3: Then use this information to create a weekly or daily schedule, depending on how much structure you like - this can be on a spreadsheet or creative poster - whatever works for you. Look out for places where you can combine draining tasks (e.g. chores) with energising activities (e.g. listening to my favourite podcasts?)
- Step 4: While we can't always live up to our ideals, when using the schedule we don't need to follow it rigidly, but can swap activities around to help us be responsive to needs at the time. Aiming to swap the order rather than ditching the things we need to resource ourselves, ensures we are still honouring our needs and not self abandoning. This tool was introduced to us by holistic healer [Evelyn Quesada Cabrera](#) and adapted for social movement contexts.

### Principle: Celebrating & defining our wins

An ESSENTIAL part of rest and recovery is celebration. Celebrating our wins can help us to stay motivated, and encourage us to feel able to rest and recover from periods of activity. Yet what often happens is that we set our wins as the final stage - and forget to mark the little wins and achievements along the way. We suggest that you take time for celebration at least once a month, you may want to do this at the start of every group meeting, as well as after a local action that you have organised. In organisations this might take place in line-management or monthly team meetings. These moments of celebration can bring a group together, and help us to uplift each other's work, and recognise the importance of the many stages that lead to change.

N.4

# EXPRESSION

"Motherhood has left me with much to reflect upon and questions to ponder on! While dining with a friend and talking to her about some questions relating to being a new mum, she made me come to some realisation when she said "babies are powerful! They don't hold back..." I started to remember the many children I was blessed to play aunty to for years and what I learnt from being around them! Their expression of self is raw, undiluted, uninhibited and true; as we grow, we become conditioned by our culture, family upbringing and social norms thus leading to an incomplete or inauthentic expression of self. Expression of self in whatever shape and space it takes, can lead to developing meaningful connections with people, helping people develop a better understanding of who we are, what might be going on for us and communicating our needs and boundaries. In community organising, we need safe spaces AND brave spaces to be able to express ourselves in a way that is required of us to be able to work with others, feel a sense of belonging and unleash our creativity."

Yosola Olajoye

The word facilitate means "to make easy". As people who facilitate spaces within our respective communities; we need to make it easy for people in the spaces we create to express ourselves, void of judgement. The intention is to create space for collective affirmation, care, support and a wonderful mix of open dialogue, spaciousness, playfulness, creativity, and diversity of thought. A principle that we aim to embody is that difference is **beautiful and complicated**. People are complex, with multiple and contradictory needs, opinions, perspectives. We aim to welcome these parts of ourselves without judgement, and with the understanding that people are products of their socialisation. In order to "make easy" community spaces for people to openly express themselves, it is vital that we employ activities and tools that anyone can participate in.

“

We need  
safe spaces  
and brave  
spaces

”



## Expression: Principles and Tools

### Principle: Arts-based Organising

One of the findings that stood out to us from our research was the importance of the arts for every aspect of compassionate organising. The arts can be a tool for dialogue and are also a universal language. It can be a way of decolonising knowledge and making ideas

more accessible - and sharing experiences from different contexts that allows more human connection than reading a case study. Arts can also help us to move to a visionary mindset, moving beyond what is - to what could/might or will be. Using the arts can be a way of enabling multiple access points in the same space, whilst bringing a sense of playfulness into otherwise serious discussions. There are scores of resources on how to embed the arts more into our activities. A few suggestions include:

- Telling your story using drama
- Using poetry to open up a session
- Call and response songs as an energiser
- A combination of dance and spoken word to share your findings
- Collective doodling

The list goes on! The important thing is that art is meant to push boundaries, if you can imagine it (and there are resources to implement it of course), then it is possible!

### Principle: Creating Leaderful Environments

The idea of leadership looks different to various people but it really is just a vehicle to get something done. Being in leadership equals holding power. We need to be aware of how power is held in a space, who holds it and how it is used. Are we using our power for and with people or over and against people? Can we readily share or relinquish power or is power being hoarded? Is leadership chosen by the people or self-selected? These are all important questions to reflect upon. We know that there is a need for clear leadership in organising work. This can often mean hierarchy of some sort; which is OK but this needs to be consensual, transparent and accountable. We need to initiate opportunities for shared ownership by; creating spaces for people to step-up into; in varying capacities and spaces for people to step down, away from holding too much power, in order to collectively create more leaderful environments. Creating opportunities to step up can be as simple as:

- inviting group members to co-facilitate workshops or elements of a programme.
- Having rotating leadership, where everyone in the team can experience leading
- Having different elements of a project that members can lead on
- Inviting people to step into roles that they will thrive in, and facilitating skillshares where needed.

### Principle: Principle of play

Playing is a socialisation tool that children are masters of. Often when someone is new to a space or when a newly formed group is venturing on a new initiative, their starting point can be fraught with a cocktail of anxieties, questions, cautions, unsettledness, inadequacies, shyness, uncertainties, excitement etc. Bringing play into work helps us stay

present, energised and can quell those internal insecurities that can serve as a hindrance towards our full expression. Making space for play can bring equity into a space. It is a way to decolonise and decivilize our practice as it eats away at stuffiness, glumness, pretentiousness and intensity that some spaces can breed. As we play together, we laugh and we are able to move beyond our collective vulnerability as a result, we can forge and maintain deeper relationships based on trust. Organising is hard work and play can lessen the effect of that. So next time you are meeting with your group either in a team meeting or in session, why not try out some fun icebreakers and energisers such as initiating a pillow fight; getting everyone to shake their body and pull weird faces at the same time to break up a heavy meeting; or randomly picking a song and dancing furiously with others like no one is watching. Here are a few more play-based tools below...

### Tool: Howdy Howdy Ice-breaker-Energiser

Get everyone to stand in a circle. One person walks around the outside of the circle and taps someone on the shoulder. That person walks the opposite way around the circle, until the two people meet. They greet each other three times by name by saying "Howdy Howdy, my name is xyz" - Once in English, once in their own language or any language you want, 3rd time the two participants will introduce themselves any other way they choose

The two people then race back, continuing in opposite directions around the circle, to take the empty place. The last person to reach the empty space walks around the outside of the circle again and the game continues until everyone has had a turn.

### Tool: Woohaa! Icebreaker-energiser

This energizer called "Woohaaaa!" was introduced to the team by Yosola when working in Refugee Youth. It is a silly energetic Icebreaker, and does not involve anyone speaking besides shouting "WOOHAAA!"

- Everyone stands in a circle. The facilitator ('It' Person) starts by shouting "WOOHAAA!", raises that hands above their heads in the shape of a sword.
- Immediately following that, The two people on either side of the facilitator will also shout "WOOHAAA!" gesturing the sword movement towards that the "It person's" stomach.
- The It person then throws the "WOOHAAA!" across the circle by point their hand sword at the person they want to throw it to.
- The person that has received the "WOOHAAA!" will then raise their hand sword above their head shouting "WOOHAAA!" while the two people on either side of the "it person" will shout "WOOHAAA!" whilst gesticulating their hand swords towards the "It person's" stomach.
- People in the circle that hesitate, or raise their hands at the wrong time will sit it out (within the circle) and will instead become observers.
- Players will carry on playing still keeping the circle the same size and shape. The game ends when there are two people left standing

### Principle: Calling-in, not calling out culture

Championed by people such as Dr Loretta Ross and Adrienne Marie Brown - we challenge the punitive culture that is being reinforced by 'calling people out' (publicly shaming people for using terms not considered to be politically correct or harmful) and instead encourage you to 'call people in' i.e. have compassionate, private conversations and dialogue with people when something is said that is harmful. The theory behind this is rooted in the abolitionist movement, in that we live in policed, punitive societies that are fuelling distance, disconnect and factionism. At a time when we need all parts of society to come together, calling people in supports us to see people as humans who can change their perspectives - instead of forcing people deeper into their own opinions through criticism and shame. Psychologically, people are more likely to change their views when they don't feel threatened. This is also not about avoiding discomfort, calling in conversations can be challenging, but when we challenge with care and compassion we are so much more likely to be able to hear each other - and listen to new views and perspectives.

### Principle: Stop or challenge coded-language

A real difficulty when we have been active in certain bubbles of knowledge for a period of time is remembering what anyone from outside of your bubble may or may not know. When we invite new people in who may not know the words or terminology that we are using, it can make them feel stupid or alienated, and only serves to make the speaker feel important. As facilitators we encourage you to provide explanations for any jargon, without making assumptions about what people know, or making people have to request explanations. As participants, we encourage challenging coded-language when you hear it, by asking people to provide explanations and definitions. Following on from our above suggestion, this can be done with care and lightness. It is important to note that in a rapidly changing world, assumptions about people's knowledge of new tech or social media moments or software can have the same impact as coded-language; particularly in intergenerational spaces.

### Tool: Noticings

Noticings can be done in pairs or groups. It is a tool that helps us to centre our bodies when giving feedback to our teammates. It can be especially useful if there has been any tension or challenging situations. This activity requires some spaciousness, and we tend to give it a minimum of 45 minutes as a pair, sometimes even 2 hours when working or living closely with another.

#### Step 1: Reflection

Sitting in your pair or group, either close your eyes if you prefer internal reflection, or make some notes in a journal if you prefer to externally reflect. The idea is simply to reflect and recall anything you've noticed about your interactions with each other. For people doing this for the first time, it can be helpful to add additional prompts - 'Were there any interactions where I noticed any tightness or tension in the body?' 'In which interactions did I notice a sense of connection, joy or feeling relaxed?' 'What do I notice about how I am feeling in my heart?' 'What do I notice about how I am feeling in my head?'

#### Step 2: Shareback

Take it in turns to express specifically what we are noticing coming up for us in our bodies, while in the presence of others. Sharing in this way helps move our language away from blaming 'you' statements, and helps reconnect us with our feelings, needs and whole selves, and move away from our thinking brain. It's been a powerful way to address emerging needs before tensions arise and as a way to address existing tensions between group members.

#### Step 3: Agreements

this often happens very organically, but after hearing how each other's bodies are experiencing your relationship, there tends to be some new agreements that emerge from gaining deeper embodied understanding of one another. This tool was adapted by Saphra Bennett and Maia Kelly, who encountered a similar Noticings tool while attending [Training for Social Action Trainers](#) by Training for Change.

### Principle: Safety in feedback loops

Everybody has different levels of comfort with sharing feedback, positive or negative. By creating feedback loops you can ensure that these moments for positive and negative feedback are part of your usual cycle, so that it doesn't feel like a big deal to share. Schedule regular feedback meetings or processes (this could be an anonymous feedback box, or survey). We encourage you to invite people to express emotions honestly, and that this will be received without judgement. Where feedback is about a person's individual actions causing harm towards another, whether intentional or unintentional, conflict resolution may be appropriate. We've shared some useful tools on this in the resources section.

### Principle: Stepping up / Stepping back

**Bear in mind where and how power sits in a space.** A great thing to do at the start of opening any space is to invite everyone to consider where and how power sits in a space. This could be due to race or class dynamics, it could also be about the level of education or experience of being in a certain type of space someone has or the skills that someone might have acquired. Invite people to consider how many times they have already contributed to conversation, and if they should step back to allow others to voice their opinions. Silence is welcome and can provide valid thinking time.

### Tool: Senses Activity

A great way to get people to start thinking about the power that they bring to a space is what we call the senses activity.

Have people split in groups of five, each person has a sense/ ability taken from them; one person is blindfolded, one person has their hands tied behind their back, another member is given ear plugs, the fourth team member's mouth is gagged while the fifth person is an observer.

Each group has the exact same instructions of building or creating something, using the

same tools and materials e.g build a tall sculpture using marshmallows, sellotape and spaghetti. Every group is also given the same amount of time to complete the task.

Once the time is up, let groups know that the task was not about completing the structure but how people worked in group together, how power shows in a working dynamic, what might empower and disempower us in groups and how we cope with different power dynamics (when we have powers and when we don't) what do you think helped complete the task? What did you notice? What did you learn?

Get group members to reflect on the above, the role they played and how they found playing it and then feedback to the wider group. For example someone might say; "I am someone that likes to be directed/ i tend to be in spaces where I am directed. In this activity I found it interesting when I was the one telling people what to do..."

Feel free to tease out challenges, motivations and learning. Discussions can go as deep as time will allow. The People's Circle can be a great enquiry tool to further the conversation around this activity.

### **Principle: Don't enforce toxic positivity!**

Part of being able to bring our whole selves to spaces, is to not create cultures that are too dogmatic in how we need to show up. Whilst centering joy can seem like we need to be 'joyous' at all times, we have to remember that the work we are doing can be challenging. Allow people to arrive as they are, and remain however they feel comfortable. If someone is not engaging in the dominant way, it may be that they have their own reasons for this. Private check-ins to check that they are ok is appropriate, but people also have different dispositions. So provided that everyone is comfortable, allow people to be who they are.

### **Tool: Diversity welcome**

The diversity welcome is a great grounding ritual, and a way of recognising all of the different identities that might be present in a space full of new people. It is a way of practising inclusion and letting everyone know that they are welcome. This supports people to bring their whole-selves, and is a building block to creating anti-oppressive, liberatory spaces. You can read more about how to facilitate this on the Training for Change website linked here.

# RESOURCES

## *Resources/ Activities recommended in the text in chronological order*

### Compassion

- Seeds for Change - Group Agreements/ Principles <https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/groupagree>
- Limitations of 'ground rules' article by Danial Hunter [https://www.trainingforchange.org/training\\_tools/break-the-rules-how-ground-rules-can-hurt-us/](https://www.trainingforchange.org/training_tools/break-the-rules-how-ground-rules-can-hurt-us/)
- Voices That Shake Guidebook - <https://voicesthatshake.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/SHAKE-GUIDEBOOK-lo-res.pdf>

### Accountability

- River of Life Activity- <https://trainings.350.org/resource/river-of-life/>
- MOCHA framework - <https://www.managementcenter.org/resources/assigning-responsibilities/>
- Learning Buddy System - [https://www.trainingforchange.org/training\\_tools/buddy-system/](https://www.trainingforchange.org/training_tools/buddy-system/)

### Rest and Recovery

- Working with menstrual cycles blog - <https://andsisters.com/blogs/blog/4-seasons-menstruation>
- Polarity Mapping - <https://www.sloww.co/polarity-thinking-101/>
- Eveyln Quesada Cabrera youtube channel - <https://youtube.com/channel/UCP9Dg4V4fYjXG4rqZk4U-Xw>

### Expression

- Howdy Howdy, Ice breaker Energiser activity <https://www.designbyjoyce.com/games/icebreakers/icebreaker01.html>

## Reading List

Some books that have restructured our ways of being and working...

Aдриene Marie Brown - *Emergent Strategy*

Aдриene Marie Brown - *Pleasure Activism*

Aдриene Marie Brown - *We Will Not Cancel Us*

Tricia Hersey - *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto*  
Maisie Hill - *Period Power: Harness your Hormones and Get Your Cycle Working for You*  
William Bridges - *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*  
Naomi Ortiz - *Sustaining Spirit: Self Care for Social Justice*  
Sarah Jaffe - *Work Won't Love You Back*  
Katherine May - *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*  
Staci Haines - *The Politics of Trauma: Somatics Healing and Social Justice*  
Gabor Mate - *When the Body Says No: the Cost of Hidden Stress*  
Bessel van der Kolk - *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*  
*Workaholics Anonymous Book of Recovery*  
Emily & Amelia Nagoski - *Burnout: Solve Your Stress Cycle*

## More facilitation tools

Chris Johnston - Drama Games for people who like to say no (book)

Seeds for Change - Conflict Resolution Booklet:  
<https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/conflictbooklet.pdf>

Seeds for Change - Group Agreement/ Community Principles

Rad HR - online library for radical & anti-oppressive policies and procedures:  
<https://radhr.org/>

Commons Social Change Library - tools for taking action, learning about movement history: <https://commonslibrary.org/>

Intrac - a starting point to learn about participatory evaluation:  
<https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Participatory-evaluation.pdf>

Seeds for Change - How to facilitate accessible meetings:  
<https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/accessiblemtg>

Training for change - facilitation tool library:  
<https://www.trainingforchange.org/tools/>



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