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HEALING-CENTERED VIRTUAL FACILITATION

GUIDEBOOK

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Introduction

Welcome to the *Healing-Centered Virtual Facilitation Guidebook: Creating & Sustaining Healing-Centered Virtual Learning Spaces*! This guidebook will offer a space for learning and reflection while you build your skills as a healing-centered peer supporter and/or facilitator of virtual peer support trainings. This document serves as a freestanding (but supplementary) resource to two trainings developed by the South Southwest Mental Health Technology Transfer Center/Texas Institute for Excellence in Mental Health: (1) *Healing and Power in Peer Support,* and (2) *Virtual Facilitation through a Healing-Centered Lens.*

While the need to develop technical skills to navigate virtual platforms is important, they can be ineffective if they are not matched with the soft skills that make learning possible.

Simply put, virtual skills only get us half-way there, and soft skills need to evolve to meet the growing demand for virtual engagement. To respond to these needs, this curriculum weaves together practical technical skills, principles of Healing-Centered Engagement, trauma-informed care principles, and the recovery framework to highlight and sharpen the skills that are necessary for peer supporters to facilitate virtual learning spaces.

Background

In 2020, the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic led to discussions about the need to have more guidance on how to hold trauma-informed learning spaces in virtual settings. Through these discussions, Nadia Maynard created an eight-week training that offered peer supporters the ability to learn about Healing-Centered Engagement, peer support, and virtual facilitation of training spaces.

That training, titled “Creating and Sustaining Healing-Centered Virtual Learning Spaces,” was developed specifically for peer supporters and came from the understanding that in the midst of a pandemic (as well as now and always), there are critical virtual facilitation skills which can be honed to support healing, learning, and growth. Jason Howell edited the training content, and Nadia and Jason co-facilitated the training to peer supporters throughout Region 6 (Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, and the tribal communities within the region). From this, the *Healing-Centered Virtual Facilitation Guidebook* was created.

Through feedback from multiple trainings, the South Southwest Mental Health Technology Transfer Center divided the original training into two different curricula:

- *Healing and Power in Peer Support*, where participants learn the basics of Healing-Centered Engagement and how to provide healing-centered peer support in one-on-one and group settings; and
- *Virtual Facilitation through a Healing-Centered Lens*, where participants take the information they learned in Healing and Power in Peer Support and apply it to the practice of facilitating peer support trainings in a virtual environment.

For more information on these curricula and the *Healing-Centered Virtual Facilitation Guidebook*, please email us at southsouthwest@mhttcnetwork.org or txinstitute4mh@austin.utexas.edu.

How to Use the Manual

The *Healing-Centered Virtual Facilitation Guidebook* will function like a workbook and a living document that can grow with you, as your reflections and experiences change. You are invited to write in this guidebook and revisit the content as needed. Throughout the content, you will notice three icons with an invitation to pause, reflect, and connect.

Pause. The invitation to pause allows readers to sit with the concepts that were introduced in the content and/or provides an opening question about their experience with the content.

Reflect. The invitation to reflect encourages readers to integrate both their experience in facilitation and the preceding content up to that point.

Integrate and Embody. The invitation to integrate and embody encourages people to think of ways they can integrate the concepts in the chapter. These prompts invite readers to integrate their experience and how they might embody/practice this new learning to inform their facilitation practice.

What is "Healing-Centered Engagement?"

Healing-Centered Engagement may be an unfamiliar framework for many people. This section provides a basic overview of what Healing-Centered Engagement is and why it is an integral change in peer support, learning, and facilitation.

Answering the What and Why

First coined by Dr. Shawn Ginwright in 2018, Healing-Centered Engagement is an "asset-based and culturally-rooted approach to healing and well-being for young people of color and their adult allies."[1] Healing-Centered Engagement is a response to traditional trauma-informed care approaches, acknowledging that trauma-informed care: (1) did not go far enough, (2) based in deficits and symptoms, (3) relies on the medical model approach to supporting people who experience trauma, and (4) does not integrate the whole picture of a person's life.[2]

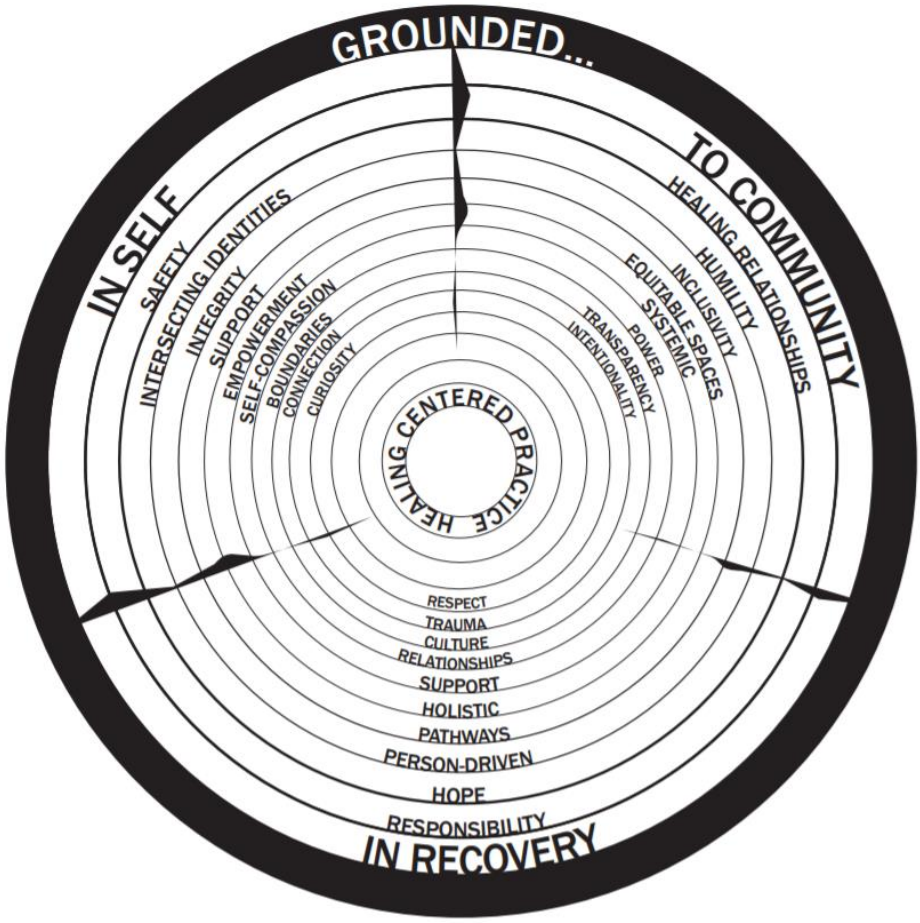
In working with youth who are incarcerated, Dr. Ginwright found that using a trauma-informed lens was insufficient, and proposed healing-centered engagement as a ***non-clinical***, ***asset-driven*** approach that advances a ***holistic view*** of healing and ***re-centers culture and identity*** as a central feature in ***well-being***. Healing-centered engagement is based in ***agency***, integrating what is known about systemic inequities. Healing-centered engagement is ***focused on the healing*** of the person, those supporting the ***person's recovery*** and the communities they engage. It is culturally grounded, views healing as restoration of identity is ***explicitly anti-racist and founded in hope.***

Healing-Centered Engagement moves the conversation on trauma forward, reframes it, and bases in five principles: culture, agency, meaning-making, relationships and aspirations.

- **Culture.** Supporting and learning about culture and social identities.
- **Agency.** The individual and collective ability to act, create, and change the root causes of personal, social, and community challenges.
- **Relationships.** The capacity to create, sustain, and grow healthy connections with others.
- **Meaning-Making**. The profound discovery of who we are, where we are going, and what purpose we were born to serve.
- **Aspirations**. The exploration of possibilities for our lives and the process of accomplishing goals for personal and collective well-being.[3]

[1] *Become certified as a Healing Centered Engagement Practitioner*. (n.d.). Flourish Agenda. https://flourishagenda.com/healing-centered-engagement-certification/
[2] Ginwright, S. (2018, May 31). *The future of healing: Shifting from trauma informed care to Healing Centered Engagement*. Medium. https://ginwright.medium.com/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c
[3] Ginwright, S. (2020, February). NW Children's Foundation.

Healing-Centered Engagement is grounded in self, in recovery, and to community!



Healing-Centered Engagement is grounded in self by making space for us to be:

- Grounded to our own needs around physical and psychological safety;
- Grounded in our intersecting identities;
- Grounded in trust and transparency;
- Grounded in integrity;
- Grounded in our source of support;
- Grounded in empowerment;
- Grounded in self-compassion and authenticity;
- Grounded in our own boundaries;
- Grounded in connection; and
- Grounded in non-judgement and humble curiosity.

The 10 Guiding Principles of Recovery from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration show us how Healing-Centered Engagement is grounded in recovery.[4] Healing-Centered Engagement is:

- Grounded in our belief that recovery emerges from hope;
- Grounded in person-driven recovery;
- Grounded in our understanding that recovery occurs via many pathways;
- Grounded in a holistic view of recovery;
- Grounded in an understanding that recovery is supported by peers and allies;
- Grounded in a belief that recovery is supported through relationship and social networks;
- Grounded in our understanding that recovery is culturally-based and influenced;
- Grounded in our understanding that recovery is supported by addressing trauma;
- Grounded in our understanding that recovery involves individual, family, and community strengths and responsibility; and
- Grounded in our understanding that recovery is based on respect.

Finally, Healing-Centered Engagement is grounded to community by emphasizing that healing happens when we are:

- Grounded in the belief that healing happens in relationships;
- Grounded in our practice of cultural humility;
- Grounded in fostering and sustaining inclusive practices;
- Grounded in our growing understanding of systemic inequities as a source of trauma;
- Grounded to learning more about systemic inequities;
- Grounded in your commitment to fostering safe, equitable, spaces;
- Grounded in acknowledging power dynamics and supporting “power with” and “power to;”
- Grounded in clear, transparent and trustworthy information;
- Grounded in intentionality; and
- Grounded in best assumptions and challenging behaviors that make spaces less safe.

[4] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2012). *SAMHSA’s working definition of recovery*. United States Department of Health and Human Services. https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/pep12-recdef.pdf

Being Clear on Terms, Developing Shared Language

To be sure we are sharing the same language, we want to provide the definitions for racism, anti-racism, systemic approach, and hope.

Racism = Racial Prejudice + Power

- Racial Prejudice: a set of discriminatory or derogatory attitudes based on assumptions deriving from perceptions about race/skin color.
- Power: the authority granted through social structures and policies — possibly supported by force or the threat of force—and access to means of communications and resources, to reinforce racial prejudice, regardless of the falsity of the underlying prejudiced assumption. Basically, "all power is relational, and the different relationships either reinforce or disrupt one another." For more reading, visit Calgary Anti-Racism Education.

Citation: Calgary Anti-Racism Education. (n.d.). *Racism.* Retrieved September 23, 2024 from https://www.aclrc.com/racism.

Anti-Racism

Anti-racism is an active, transformational, process. "*Anti-racism is the active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organizational structures, policies and practices and attitudes, so that power is redistributed and shared equitably*." - NAC International Perspectives: Women and Global Solidarity

Citation: Calgary Anti-Racism Education. (n.d.). *Anti-Racism.* Retrieved September 23, 2024 from https://www.aclrc.com/antiracism.

Systemic Approach

The importance of power to anti-racism is clear: racism cannot be understood without understanding that power is not only an individual relationship but a cultural one and that power relationships are shifting constantly. This suggests that racism is embedded in systems and policies, thus we are all affected and impacted – although we each experience it differently.

Hope

Hope is based in optimism and trust and has three components:

- Future goal orientation
- Agency and capacity for transformation
- Structural pathways for possibility

Citation: Feldman, D. (2019, June 27). *The three conditions for hope to thrive*. Psychology Today. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/supersurvivors/201906/the-three-conditions-for-hope-to-thrive

Chapter One: Learning as a Process

Humble Inquiry

Before embarking on one's journey to become a healing-centered facilitator, it is important to develop a common language and engage in **humble inquiry**. Humble inquiry is the skill of asking questions to which you do not already know the answer (even if you think you do!). It is the process of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest.[5]

You can (and some would argue you should) engage in humble inquiry with yourself, which helps cultivate introspection (self-awareness) - the examination or observation of one's own mental and emotional processes. You can also engage in humble inquiry or humble curiosity with others, learning more about another person and settling into knowing that sometimes you don't know what you don't know.

Settling into self and tapping into humble inquiry can be difficult for many reasons. Some of the reasons people share for this discomfort with settling into themselves and tapping into self-inquiry include:

- it feels self-indulgent to take the time to do this work;
- humble inquiry was not encouraged or modeled in their home;
- it takes too much time;
- it sounds like meditation;
- feeling incapable of engaging in humble inquiry;
- history of trauma; and
- feeling easily distracted/unsettled.

The work of becoming a healing-centered facilitator may require a bit of settling in, matched with humble inquiry which aligns with the peer core values of peer support. Getting curious with our own comfort and discomfort is what we ask people to do when they are engaged in a learning process. Practicing settling into your body and engaging in humble inquiry may lead to a sense of feeling grounded and can help you model and better identify these processes in learning spaces, whether the learning is in-person or done virtually.

[5] Schein, E. H. (2013). *Humble inquiry: the gentle art of asking instead of telling*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Groundedness

Michael Daniels refers to groundedness as "a sense of being fully embodied, whole, centered and balanced in ourselves and our relationships.[6]" It's also a deeper connection to the authentic self. He further explains that groundedness is associated "with an experience of clarity, wholeness, 'rightness' and harmony." When you're grounded, you're balanced or centered in your mental and emotional self. Practicing grounding techniques and becoming more centered can help facilitators navigate learning spaces by bringing clarity and connection to our values.

Pause.

Using grounding techniques can open up a space for connecting with the present moment, allowing us to get curious about the sensations in our bodies and the world around us by using our senses. It is an access point to humble inquiry and allows a space to settle into the mind. Practice a physical grounding technique of your choice from the list provided below or one that you have found helpful in the past.

- Working backward from 5, use your senses to list things you notice around you. For example, you might start by listing five things you hear, then four things you see, then three things you can touch from where you're sitting, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.

- Put your hands in water. Focus on the water's temperature and how it feels on your fingertips, palms, and the backs of your hands. Does it feel the same in each part of your hand? Use warm water first, then cold. Next, try cold water first, then warm. Does it feel different to switch from cold to warm water versus warm to cold?

- Listen to your surroundings. Take a few moments to listen to the noises around you. Do you hear birds? Dogs barking? Machinery or traffic? If you hear people talking, what are they saying? Do you recognize the language? Let the sounds wash over you and remind you where you are.

[6] Daniels, M. (2005). *Shadow, self, spirit: Essays in transpersonal psychology*. Charlottesville, VA: Imprint-Academic.com.

Reflect.

How did that feel? What messages came up for you? Did any challenges come up?

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When you have led trainings or been a facilitator before, have you used grounding techniques prior to getting started? If so, how did that feel? If not, what would you imagine the effect might be if you had?

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Identifying Your Values

Values are "the beliefs people have, especially about what is right and wrong and what is most important in life, that control their behavior."[7] In the simplest terms, values help inform our thoughts, words and actions. As a peer supporter, you have a set of values that informs how you navigate various areas of your life. In the context of facilitating a learning space, knowing your values can help you stay aligned to the purpose of learning, can help navigate ethical and interpersonal challenges, and can inform your decision-making. Taking the time to explicitly identify your values is worthwhile and can cultivate a more healing-centered approach.

The reflective practice in this chapter provides the basis for your own understanding of how you come into a learning space – being grounded, understanding what you value and practicing being grounded to what you value.

[7] Cambridge University Press & Assessment. (n.d.). Values. In *Cambridge English dictionary.* Retrieved September 12, 2024.

Integrate & Embody.

Step One. Create your own list of values. Your list can include peer support values, personal values that are not connected to peer support values, or any value that speaks to you. Pick no more than five values. Arriving at a concise and short list of personal values can be a daunting task.

Values are discovered and revealed through our experiences (which does not need to be related to facilitation). Using a list may influence your selection – a simple Google search offers many different values lists (for example, Brené Brown has a values list in the resource section on her website).

To help uncover your own personal core values, there are three prompts which are offered below.

Peak Experiences
Consider a meaningful moment—a peak positive experience that stands out.

- What was happening to you?
- What was going on?
- What values were you honoring at this time?

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Suppressed Values
Now, consider a time when you got angry, frustrated, or upset.

- What was going on? What were you feeling?
- What value is being suppressed?

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Code of Conduct

- What's most important in your life? Beyond your basic human needs, what must you have in your life to experience fulfillment?
    - Creative self-expression? A strong level of health and vitality? A sense of excitement and adventure? Surrounded by beauty? Always learning?
- What are the personal values you must honor or a part of you withers?

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Step Two. Going through this process, you may have identified more than five values. That's too many to be actionable. Here are a few questions to help you whittle your list down:

- What values are essential to your life?
- What values represent your primary way of being?
- What values are essential to supporting your inner self?

Step Three. Once you've completed your list of core values, walk away from them and revisit them the next day after a good night's sleep. Review your list:

- How do they make you feel?/Do you feel they are consistent with who you are?
- Are they personal to you?
- How do you bring your values into a learning space?
- How do you feel your values and your commitment to learning are connected?

My Values

After completing the Integrate and Embody activity above, write your five values below:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Learning as Process

At its core, learning is a process that results in a change in knowledge or behavior as a result of ***experience***. As a healing-centered facilitator, there is an orientation to process, meaning that there is a constant process of learning, and growth, for the facilitator and for participants. This commitment to process, is anchored in the guiding principles of recovery. As a reminder and reflective of our commitment to process, throughout the content there will be moments to pause, reflect and connect.

Pause.

Thinking back to a positive learning experience, what traits or behaviors did the person facilitating that experience possess or exhibit?

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What values did you see shine through?

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How do your own values that you identified in the priming exercises shine through in your facilitation?

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The Role of a Healing-Centered Facilitator

A facilitator is a ***guide to help people move*** through a process together. Some other terms that are commonly used to describe facilitators include: trainer, instructor, presenter, speaker, and the list goes on. These terms often reflect one-directional learning, where the learner/participant is seen as an empty vase/vessel and the trainer is there to impart or fill that empty space. This can often reflect clinical service delivery. It is also a very transactional way of viewing the dynamic relationship between facilitator and participant, which has many more moving parts.

A peer facilitator acknowledges that the vase is not empty, and that people come with experience and knowledge that shapes what the information they interact with on a moment-to-moment basis. For that reason, we will be using the term facilitator to reflect a person who ***guides a process*** and may simultaneously be changed in that process.

Reflect.

What are the skills you use in facilitation that communicate your values?

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Are there skills or values you would like to use more intentionally in learning spaces?

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When a peer supporter engages in facilitation, like most, their lived experience may inform their facilitation style and voice. Providing a healing-centered framework is intended to ***support, not replace*** your facilitation style or voice. Since the healing-centered framework integrates recovery principles, it may even feel familiar, or not be a surprise.

Peer Competencies & Healing-Centered Facilitation

A healing-centered peer facilitator engages all of the *core competencies* of peer support in being recovery-oriented, person-centered, peer-supported, voluntary, relationship-focused, and trauma-informed.[8] As such, a healing-centered facilitator:

- Starts with equity and inclusion, understanding that one cannot be healing-centered without being equitable and inclusive;
- Focuses on how people participate in the process of learning or planning, not just on what gets achieved;
- Is neither a teacher nor an expert, and asks themselves "Why Am I Talking (WAIT)?";
- Is not the seat of wisdom and knowledge, but someone who encourages inquiry;'
- Is not there to give opinions, but to draw out opinions and ideas of the participants;
- Engages participants in a process of self-discovery, helping them recognize their own biases;
- Is grounded in self-awareness (i.e., how they show up) and curious about the participants, listening to both themselves and others; and
- Co-creates a culture and community among participants, where they learn and support one another.

We will take a moment to unpack a few skills that require more mindful attention and intentionality: (1) *self-awareness*, (2) *humble curiosity*, and (3) *listening*.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is a critical asset to have in a learning space that enables facilitators to connect with participants. Daniel Goleman defines self-awareness as the ability to monitor our inner world – our thoughts and feelings[9]. From this, we develop two types of self-awareness – internal and external.

- *Internal self-awareness* represents how clearly we see our own values, passions, aspirations, fit with our environment, reactions (including thoughts, feelings, behaviors, strengths, and weaknesses), and impact on others.
- *External self-awareness* means understanding how other people view us in reference to those factors.

In navigating learning spaces, a facilitator often stops to ask, "how is my role influencing the learning experience and how is this being received?" This takes a certain amount of self-awareness and self-reflection. It helps facilitators identify areas for course

[8] BRSS TACS. (2018). *Core competencies for peer workers.* Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. https://www.samhsa.gov/brss-tacs/recovery-support-tools/peers/core-competencies-peer-workers
[9] Kamath, S. (2019, November 18). *Cultivating self-awareness to move learning forward*. Education Dive.

correction, need for clarity, and what is working. Research suggests that cultivating self-awareness in the learning space also helps in the following ways:[10]

- Allows us to see ourselves more clearly.
- Increases confidence and creativity.
- Enables us to make sounder decisions.
- Builds stronger relationships.
- Allows us to communicate more effectively.
- Helps assess your facilitation skill set.

Seeing the clear benefits of self-awareness in facilitation, it is helpful to identify strategies for increasing it in our daily practice.

Integrate & Embody.

Engage in an *internal* self-awareness and an *external* self-awareness practice.

- *Internal self-awareness practice***:** Use a grounding or mindfulness technique (for more examples, read *Grounding* by University of Louisville[11])
- *External self-awareness practice:* Ask for grounded feedback from a trusted colleague who has seen your facilitation.

What did it feel like to engage in an internal self-awareness practice?

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What did it feel like to engage in external self-awareness practice?

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[10] Eurich, T. (2018, January 4). *What self-awareness really is (and how to cultivate it)*. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2018/01/what-self-awareness-really-is-and-how-to-cultivate-it
[11] *Grounding*. (n.d.). University of Louisville. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://louisville.edu/counseling/coping-with-covid-19/Grounding-Worksheet.pdf/

How can you use these practices to strengthen your facilitation skills?

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Humble Curiosity

Humble curiosity is similar to humble inquiry, in that it starts from a ***place of wonder*** and then reminds us to check our thoughts, words, and actions. In contrast to humble inquiry, humble curiosity does not necessarily invite us to ask follow-up questions. Humble curiosity can sit with (and in) ambiguity and asks that we sit in silence. It reminds us that dialogue is the most powerful tool for growth and connection, but only if people feel respected, seen, and heard. Humble curiosity invites people in and asks them to participate in learning about each other by asking thoughtful questions and remembering that whatever we know (or think we know) from previous conversations, articles, ideas, people, classes, experiences, etc. probably does not apply to the person or the situation currently in front of them.[12]

Practicing humble curiosity as a facilitator enables greater capacity for empathy and connection to the participants and the content. It makes facilitation more dynamic and models a more reflective stance in which the facilitator is as much a participant as the participants.

Integrate & Embody.

How does it feel to use the following techniques when facilitating? Is it easy to engage in these practices?

- Being okay with not knowing. Create a space for sitting with uncertainty.
- Practicing deep listening.
- Having more questions than answers/responses.
- Refraining from judgement, seek to understand.

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[12] *An argument for humble curiosity NOT cultural competence*. Camp Stomping Ground. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://campstompingground.org/blog/2019/10/17/an-argument-for-humble-curiosity-not-cultural-competencenbsp

Are there certain circumstances in which there is not an opportunity to engage in these practices fully while you are facilitating? Or certain situations that make it difficult? What are some facilitation practices/strategies you use to counteract these limitations?

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Empathic Listening

Listening is the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or non-verbal messages.[13] Listening is often the *foundation* of strong relationships, and it is a critical skill for facilitators to hone. While most take listening for granted, it is something that needs to be nurtured and developed over time. Understanding what listening is and how we can become better listeners will further enhance facilitation skills by enabling the facilitator to build stronger relationships with the participants.

To simplify, there are two basic types of listening:

1. *Discriminative listening* is the most basic form of listening and does not involve the understanding of the meaning of words or phrases but merely the different sounds that are produced.
2. *Comprehensive listening*, on the other hand, involves understanding the message or messages that are being communicated. [14]

From comprehensive listening, there are three more common subtypes of listening in interpersonal communication:

1. *Informational Listening*: Listening to Learn
2. *Critical Listening*: Listening to Evaluate and Analyze
3. *Empathetic Listening*: Listening to Understand Feeling and Emotion

While there are other types of listening, like rapport listening, selective listening, and appreciative listening, this guidebook focuses on empathic listening as a skill set for healing-centered facilitation.[15] Empathy is a way of deeply connecting with people. As such, empathic listening involves attempting to understand the feelings of the person. It can be challenging and involves intentionally removing our needs, opinions, and need to insert ourselves in the process.

[13] Trenholm, S., & Jensen, A. (2013, December 20). *Interpersonal communication,* Oxford University Press.
[14] Wolvin, A. D. (2010). *Listening and human communication in the 21st century*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
[15] *Types of listening*. Skills You Need. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/listening-types.html.

Cultivating Empathic Listening.

- Create a psychologically safer space for the person who needs your empathic listening.
- Remember, empathic listening does not mean, "I agree with you." It is merely a gift of intentionally making space for the person's feelings and experiences.
- Use thoughtful questions to get deeper into the person's experience, controlling the urge to talk, insert self or help.
- Pay attention to body language, posture, non-verbal cues. Try to maintain comfortable eye contact, expressions, and intensity that matches the person who needs your empathic listening.

One way of practicing empathic listening is thinking about it on three levels:

1. Internal listening ("what is happening in me?");
2. Focused listening ("what is happening in them?"); and
3. Global listening ("what is happening in the environment/context?").

Actively engaging those levels can foster connection. The benefits of exercising and modeling empathic listening in learning spaces include the following:

- Building *mutuality* and sharing in the joy of experience;
- Creating and sustaining *trust;*
- Making sense or *meaning* out of something;
- Gaining *clarity;*
- Becoming *aware* of underlying feelings that accompany an experience;
- Building *community;* and
- Fostering a safer, more inclusive and more accountable, learning space.

The benefits of empathic listening extend to not only the person speaking, but also to the facilitator. Not every exchange in a learning space will involve empathic listening. It is important to acknowledge when and where there is a need for more space and intention around listening and where this is not possible and being able to shift as needed.

When confronted with the tension to meet an empathic listening need and a situation or timing that will not allow for intentionality, make sure to name it and find another time to meet this expressed need. This can be particularly challenging in virtual learning spaces as there are multiple forms of stimulus and attention being activated at the same time.

Integrate & Embody.

To gain a better understanding of empathy, take a moment to watch Brené Brown's video on the difference between empathy and sympathy.[16] What are some takeaways regarding empathy? How do they align with our values and core competencies?

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Rising to the Challenge

Understanding participants and their backgrounds is important to facilitating a healing-centered learning space. This will take an empathic and engaged understanding of where they are, and it will take rising to where they need you to be. This takes practicing integrity in our facilitation. Brené Brown writes, "*Integrity is choosing courage over comfort; choosing what is right over what is fun, fast, or easy; and choosing to practice our values rather than simply professing them*."[17] In this section, we will explore: (1) what it means to be an adult learner, (2) navigating accessibility, (3) using trauma-informed principles in a learning space, (4) supporting digital equity, and (5) engaging virtual learners.

Engaging Adult Learners

Adult learners are primarily in charge of their own learning, to that end, someone who ***facilitates learning spaces*** for adults has a different role from a traditional classroom teacher who may have other responsibilities that involve meeting the basic needs of their learners. These are some basic characteristics in understanding adult learners:

- Need to know why they are learning something
- Learn through doing
- Are problem solvers
- Learn best when the subject is of immediate use
- Prefer social interaction
- Want to use their life experiences in the learning space
- Want to integrate new ideas with existing knowledge

[16] RSA. (2013, December 10). *Brené Brown on empathy* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw
[17] Brown, B. (2015, August 25). *Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution*. Random House Publishing Group.

Beyond understanding adult learner characteristics, it is important to get a baseline understanding of *who* is in the room, what experience they may come with, and the specific needs they have in relation to the content that will be covered. These are things that can be obtained through identifying the need for the learning space, coordination of the event, and the registration process.

Often, facilitators are asked to contribute their content matter expertise and are informed through the *coordination process* what the needs of the participants might be. Facilitators sometimes use the beginning of their time with participants to assess who is in the room, their experience and the particular learning needs of the participant. This can also be done by asking focused questions in the registration process (example: what do you hope to gain, what is your experience, how are you planning on using this information)

Strategy for Engaging Adult Learners: Priming

Priming is a simple strategy for engaging and *promoting curiosity*. Priming plants the seeds for the learning that will be done. In short, it preps the minds of learners to engage. Priming involves reviewing what we have learned in the past and connecting it to what we are going to be learning next. Using the concept that we learn better when we can attach something new to something we already know, priming is a strategy that involves intention. This emphasizes the importance of facilitators' need to learn about the learners.

Examples of priming strategies include:

- Send questions in advance of holding the learning space that are aimed at understanding the person's experience with the content prior to meeting online or in-person.
- Use videos, pictures, objects, or other content which help set the stage.
- Build a vocabulary and/or practice around the content. This helps make meaning.

Pause.

What have you experienced in a facilitation setting that is helpful to consider about adult learners?

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What strategies do you employ to engage adult learners?

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Navigating Accessibility

There are ***many considerations*** for navigating accessibility. Whether online or in-person learning is taking place, it is important to integrate this into your planning as not doing so may make participants feel excluded. This section will provide basic tips for navigating online accessibility, open the conversation around integrating trauma-informed ***and healing-centered*** principles throughout facilitation and define what digital equity is and tools for increasing inclusion.

Online Accessibility Tips
from Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology (DO-IT)[18]

- Use clear, consistent layouts and organization schemes for presenting content.
- Structure headings and lists using style features built into Microsoft Word and PowerPoint, PDF, etc.
- Use built-in designs/layouts (e.g., for PowerPoint slides).
- Use descriptive wording for hyperlink text.
- Provide concise text descriptions of content presented within images.
- Use large, bold fonts on uncluttered pages with plain backgrounds.
- Use color combinations that are high contrast and can be read by those who are colorblind.
- Caption videos and transcribe audio content.
- Use accessible IT tools and make sure they present content and navigation that require use of the keyboard alone.

[18] Burgstahler, S. (2022). *20 tips for teaching an accessible online course*. Disabilities, Opportunities, Interworking, and Technology. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://www.washington.edu/doit/20-tips-teaching-accessible-online-course

Accessibility Suggestions for more Equitable & Accessible Learning
from Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology (DO-IT)[19]

- Provide options for learning by presenting content in multiple ways (e.g., in a combination of text, video, audio, and/or image format).
- Provide options for communicating and collaborating that are accessible to individuals with a variety of abilities.
- Provide options for demonstrating learning (e.g., portfolios, presentations, single-topic discussions).
- Address a wide range of language and literacy skills as you write content (e.g., spell acronyms, define terms, avoid or define jargon).
- Make instructions and expectations clear for activities, projects, discussion questions, and assigned reading.
- Make examples and assignments relevant to learners with a wide variety of interests and backgrounds.
- Offer outlines and other scaffolding tools
- Provide adequate opportunities to practice.
- Allow adequate time for activities, projects, and tests (e.g., give details).
- Provide clear and consistent feedback, opportunities for teach backs and lots of practice!

There are many more resources for considering online accessibility. This is not an exhaustive list of tips and again, requires understanding your learners/participants and what their unique needs are.

Reflect.

What are practices that you use to make the virtual learning space more accessible?

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[19] Ibid.

What can you do to build accessibility into your preparation?

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Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered Principles in Learning Spaces

Exposure to traumatic events is extremely common, with 89.7% of the US adult population reporting exposure to trauma.[20] Recognizing the pervasiveness of trauma, has driven discussions around exercising universal precautions/universal expectations.[21]

Universal expectations in reference to trauma are similar to universal precautions in preventing the spread of blood borne pathogens in that no matter the context, they are helpful and effective. Exercising *universal* expectations when it comes to trauma comes down to preventing the possibility of re-traumatization in a population that has been largely exposed.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has developed a set of principles to guide trauma-informed work.[22] These principles, which are expanded upon over the next few pages, help guide action and decision making and can cut across settings to include the learning environment:

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and Transparency
3. Peer Support
4. Collaboration and Mutuality
5. Empowerment and Choice
6. Cultural, Historical and Gender Issues

For the purpose of this section, we will be covering how they apply in virtual and in-person learning spaces.

[20] American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders. 5.* Arlington, VA.
[21] The language has changed from universal precautions to universal expectations to address stigma.
[22] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). *SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach.* United States Department of Health and Human Services. https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma14-4884.pdf

Safety. This is a core principle that includes both physical and psychological safety. Some would argue that learning cannot take place in a setting where one's physical and/or psychological safety felt threatened. For survivors of trauma, safety can be undermined, violated, or lost. A facilitator can engender feelings of safety in the following ways:

- Making the physical environment safe and accessible to all of the participants (e.g., safe and accessible restrooms for all persons);
- If meeting virtually, thinking through how one can provide digital equity (e.g., providing instructions and access on how to access content);
- Using activation warnings and encouraging participants to take care of themselves if they feel psychologically unsafe;
- Limiting the discussion of traumatic events and telling war stories;
- Omitting graphic details of traumatic events (while providing enough detail to convey information); and
- Practicing gender expansiveness, (e.g., inviting participants to introduce themselves with pronouns and modeling pronoun use through example).

Trustworthiness & Transparency. In a learning space, trustworthiness and transparency means maintaining appropriate boundaries and making tasks clear, which fosters trust between participants A facilitator can communicate trustworthiness and transparency in the following ways:

- Being clear in your role as the facilitator and providing appropriate resources for other needs (e.g., referring participant to available psychological support if the need arises, instead of expanding your role to be all things to all people);
- Having boundaries and setting clear expectations (e.g., time of learning is respected);
- Engaging in clear communication (e.g., preface any activities that might be upsetting or have charged content with an activation warning);
- Making sure to follow through on actions or tasks (e.g., providing the materials to support participants' learning); and
- Modeling trust (e.g., using inclusive language).

Peer Support. In a space in which people are coming together to learn about trauma, it is important to draw on peer support. This can be done in the following ways:

- Facilitators should, to the extent possible, include lived experience (not only their own). This models an orientation towards recovery and peer support.
- Peer support is voluntary, non-judgmental, empathetic, respectful, requires honest and direct communication, involves mutual responsibility, sharing power and is reciprocal (Blanche, Filson, & Penny, 2012). Using learner engagement strategies that highlight these characteristics is invaluable.
- Modeling this between facilitators and encouraging connection outside of the learning space also models peer support.

Collaboration & mutuality. Learning is an ongoing collaborative process. Facilitators can increase collaboration and mutuality in the learning space by:

- Providing opportunities for participants to interact with one another through small group or dyad discussions;
- Sharing power in the learning space (e.g., listen more, speak less, provide space for ideas instead of providing answers, be comfortable with ambiguity when people are questioning things), and develop "power with"; and
- Encouraging learning examples that come from the group, building on them as you move through material.

Empowerment & Choice. A participant who feels empowered in the learning space will be able to absorb and provide more contributions to the environment. Independent learning material (i.e., material that participants engage on their own time) allows for choice in timing and pace of learning. This can also be navigated in the shared learning space in the following ways:

- Providing opportunities to opt in or out of activities (facilitators can take this personally, but it may be a reflection of where the participant is physically or emotionally on any given day);
- Highlighting the reflections of the participants and integrating it into the learning; and
- Providing options on how to engage an activity.

[23] Blanche, A., Filson, B., & Penny, D. (2012). *Engaging women in trauma-informed peer support: A guidebook*. National Center for Trauma-Informed Care. https://www.nasmhpd.org/sites/default/files/PeerEngagementGuide_Color_REVISED_10_2012.pdf

Cultural, Historical & Gender Issues. Participants in learning spaces bring their multiple intersecting identities and experiences. It is important that facilitators of healing-centered learning spaces make room for people's intersecting identities. One can do that in many ways, but here are a few ways to be explicit:

- Acknowledging the power dynamics (and as a facilitator, shifting them to ensure that voices which are not typically heard have a space);
- Making learning accessible in multiple ways (physically and psychologically.) by examining and actively working to remove barriers in your environment;
- Communicating using language that reflects nuance, lived experience, and anti-racism. An example is using person-centered language, coming from a place of humble curiosity (not assumptions), challenging language that describes people as homogenous or monolithic, and examining stereotypes and microaggressions.

These principles are best supplemented by self-awareness and being *grounded in healing*. In understanding ourselves as facilitators of learning, we are better able to navigate these principles in the shared learning space. Being reflective, understanding that healing happens in relationships, can often take away the self-imposed, rigid connection to formulaic learning which has been instilled and modeled in traditional learning spaces. Take a moment before holding a learning space to reflect on *what you want to see* and how you can integrate these principles in practice. It may take a slight change in language, or drastic changes to your environment, or be somewhere in between.

Integrate & Embody.

In this section we discussed many considerations and options for integrating trauma-informed principles in the learning space. What are some options that resonated with you?

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How can you use these strategies to create a healing-centered virtual learning space?

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Are there any other ways that you can envision using trauma-informed principles in facilitating virtual learning spaces? If so, how?

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Digital Equity

Digital equity is defined as equal ***access and opportunity*** to digital tools, resources, and services to increase digital knowledge, awareness, and skills.[24] Digital equity is a significant consideration and may change the composition of the virtual learning space. When planning a learning opportunity, consider broader issues that may impact participation, such as cost, time of day/week, religious holidays, language access, learning platform, and time commitment.

[24] Davis, T., Fuller, M., Jackson, S., Pittman, J., & Sweet, J. (2007, June). *A national consideration of digital equity.* Institute of Education Sciences. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED497214

In addition to these broader issues of access, there are issues of access that affect the person which are equally important to consider.

Tips for Increasing Digital Equity & Inclusion

- Use discretion while asking questions regarding access to digital tools and resources. Participants may not feel comfortable sharing that they do not have access to the tools they need and may require privacy.
- Work with participants to find solutions to technology issues.
- Be explicit in providing directions regarding technology tools that will be used. Assume nothing about the person's experience or comfort level. Proactively provide orientations to the tools.
- Be mindful of the current situation and any crisis that may be occurring locally or nationally. These experiences may affect communities in different ways. Moreover, depending on a participant's race, ethnicity, age, religious affiliation, gender, sexual orientation, there may have different responses or differential impact in reference to a situation. When something is happening in a community, make space for discussion as needed. Ignoring a major event which affects the lives of participants can feel dismissive or tone deaf.
- As much as possible, offer flexibility or alternatives if access becomes an issue.
- Consider whether video is necessary in all cases, given how streaming videos require strong internet connections, and how they can deplete data plans and memory on participant's devices, this may be a concern. If possible, record sessions so they can be downloaded and viewed later.
- Provide transcripts and captions of audio and video. This benefits not only participants who are hard-of-hearing, but those who are in noisy locations, those who don't have headphones, and those who English might be their second language.

Integrate & Embody.

What is your experience in intentionally planning and facilitating learning spaces that integrate digital equity?

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What questions can you ask if you are invited to facilitate/present/speak to increase digital equity for participants?

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How can you use digital equity principles in planning, engagement and post-learning?

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Engagement Considerations for Virtual Learning

Virtual learning has both opportunities and *real challenges* for both the facilitator and the participant. Other than the lack of person-to-person connection, other unique challenges exist in virtual learning spaces. These challenges include unexpected technology-related issues that may arise, low or distracted participant engagement, inability to read non-verbal cues, and lacking a good fit of technology to the needs of the learners. In addition, gaining the confidence of participants can take longer.

The skills we covered earlier – self-awareness, empathic listening, and humble curiosity may help lessen these challenges; however, this section will cover technology-specific solutions to some of these challenges. We will cover *preparation*, facilitating *engagement during* an online learning community, and *post-learning considerations*.

Virtual Engagement
Virtual engagement describes the participation level of learners in the online learning platform. Unfortunately, virtual learning platforms by design, do not allow for movement and reading expressions to *gauge engagement* may be limited. As such, it is important to assess the tools that are provided on the virtual learning platform and maximize them to meet the needs of participants and increase overall engagement. This may require time, practice, use of other applications and tools, and comfort in maneuvering your virtual learning platform, as well as significant experimentation.

Preparation

- Communicate with the participants prior to holding the learning space. Provide basic information on how to access and navigate the virtual learning environment. Provide information that is helpful, concise, and not too overwhelming or long.
- Invite and make space for participants to communicate their specific learning needs with you. Ask about accessibility, so as not to make assumptions. Offer digital equity options to meet these needs.
- If you are using a priming strategy prior to meeting virtually during an online session, be ready to ask about how that felt, and make the connection between the priming and the content you are covering. Prepare questions in advance to make this link.
- Inform participants of anything that may be a surprise, like muting, or video camera options.
- Align the content with the modality. Some learning objectives do not align with virtual learning platforms or will require limitations on audience size or scope.

Physical Preparation

- If possible, use two monitors to make navigating sharing content on your screen easier.
- Use an ethernet cord linked to your router to minimize the potential for internet instability.
- Pull open all the material you will be sharing prior to the learning session, setting it aside but having it ready for quick, easy, transitions.
- Play with your lighting, consider using a virtual background for privacy.
- Remember the position of your camera as you navigate sharing screens.
- Consider how you are going to manage any noise or outside distractions. Some facilitators prefer to have a headset to be able to focus on the sound, this also helps navigate external disruptions.
- Play with the features you will be using prior to the online learning session and factor your time allowances.

Engagement

- Minimize disruptions, use online security best practices. This also increases the psychological safety of participants. This will be covered in module four.
- Consider using all of your options for movement and engagement, such as:
    - Virtual whiteboards – for documenting the group process
    - Breakout rooms – for encouraging small group discussion and problem-based learning spaces
    - Reactions – to interact and read the temperature of the group
    - Chat box – online participation can sometimes feel like merging into oncoming traffic, this allow for people to interact, provide comments and questions
    - Polling functions – allows participants to vote and provide their perspective
- Engage participants using any of the options you have available to you every five to seven minutes.
- Use reflective questions and breakout groups as an opportunity to integrate learning and experience.
- Use open-ended questions, allowing time for processing.
- Use screen-sharing options mindfully, not overwhelmingly content heavy.

Post-Learning

- Virtual learning can be particularly challenging as there are multiple stimuli going on at the same time. Take the time to take care of your emotional needs, debrief and re-center.
- Provide links to everything that was shared during the learning session. Clearly communicate the timelines and expectations for receiving follow-up communication.
- Request feedback from participants, it communicates your mindful consideration of their experience.
- When possible, encourage participants to form learning communities to build connection through learning and find ways for implementing or engaging their newfound knowledge.
- If you are hosting a multi-session learning opportunity use scaffolding and priming techniques so that the learning can continue to build off of the prior experience.

Integrate & Embody.

What are some takeaways from this module?

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Are there areas which you will choose to stretch your skills? If so, which ones?

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How do the skills and tools shared in this module connect to peer support competencies and recovery framework?

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In Chapter One, we started with self: our values and how we show up in a learning space. We talked about learning as a process which involves humble curiosity and empathic listening. Building on that we gained foundational knowledge around trauma-informed and digital equity approaches which support engagement in a healing-centered virtual learning space.

In Chapter Two, we will be discussing and practicing holding equitable and healing centered learning spaces. The work is deep and intentional. It will require openness and reflection. We will be moving from self-reflection to building a container with intention.

Chapter Two: Holding Space

Holding Space for Yourself

Before diving into holding space and building a container in learning spaces, let's talk about what holding space for yourself is and how to practice it with intention. For people in supportive roles and caregivers, holding space for others might feel comfortable (even natural!). Holding space for self can feel like a gift that you give to yourself. It is a place of compassion, where you can feel at peace with yourself in a space of non-judgement. It is a sacred space where you can listen deeply to yourself, hear yourself clearly, and feed your needs with compassion.

Pause.

Definitions of holding space for yourself may vary, looking and feeling different for each person to honor their own experience of what that might be. What is your definition of holding space for yourself? Sometimes thinking about how it feels can help come up with your definition.

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Azriel Re'shel offers nine practices for holding space for yourself.[25] They are outlined below and further expanded upon in their article, How to Hold Space for Yourself.

- **Embracing your imperfection**
- Saying "no" to what does not align, and saying "yes" to you
- Developing boundaries
- Communing with yourself
- Listening
- **Reaching for support**
- Being authentic
- Being a good caregiver to yourself
- **Developing supportive rituals**

[25] Re'shel, A. (n.d.). *How to hold space for yourself*. UPLIFT. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://uplift.love/how-to-hold-space-for-yourself/

If you are able to add other practices that help you hold space for yourself, there is space offered below to do so.

For the purpose of honing in on areas where people who support others may like to practice intentional skill building and reflection, this self-practice work will focus on embracing your imperfection (self-compassion), reaching for support, and developing supportive rituals.

Self-Compassion

Embracing our imperfection takes self-compassion. At its core, self-compassion is being kind and understanding to yourself when confronted with your imperfections. Self-compassion thrives under these three conditions: (1) kindness to self, (2) tapping into our common humanity, and (3) being mindful. Mindfulness involves non-judgment, openness, and observation of our own thoughts and feelings as they are – without trying to suppress or deny them.

Reflect.

The following exercise is from Dr. Kristin Neff, an expert and pioneer in the field of mindful self-compassion.[26]

First, think about times when a close friend feels really bad about him or herself or is really struggling in some way. How would you respond to your friend in this situation (especially when you're at your best)? Please write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you typically talk to your friends.

[26] Neff, K. (n.d.). *Exercise 1: How would you treat a friend?* Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://self-compassion.org/exercises/exercise-1-how-would-you-treat-a-friend/

Now think about times when you feel bad about yourself or are struggling. How do you typically respond to yourself in these situations? Please write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you talk to yourself.

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Did you notice a difference? If so, ask yourself why. What factors or fears come into play that lead you to treat yourself and others so differently?

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Please write down how you think things might change if you responded to yourself in the same way you typically respond to a close friend when you're suffering.

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Why not try treat yourself like a good friend and see what happens?

Reaching for Support

Is reaching out for support easy? Is it hard? Is it complicated? What is your relationship with asking for help? Reaching for support is critical to holding space for yourself. It sets aside ego and the narratives of rugged individualism and acknowledges our common humanity. Let's think about how reaching out for support and accepting support has shown up in your life.

Reflect.

Think of a time when you asked for help. What did that help look like? How did it feel?

Did the person supporting you share what it felt like for them? If so, what did they say? If not, how has it felt when you have helped a friend?

Developing Supportive Rituals

In holding space for yourself, it is critical to identify supportive rituals which can sustain you. Azriel Re'shel recommends for people to "*do at least one nurturing thing for yourself every day and make a promise to yourself that you will check in with you every day*."[27]

Integrate & Embody.

How do you nurture yourself daily? If you do not have an intentional practice, take the time to name a nurturing practice and commit to it.

[27] Re'shel, A. (n.d.). *How to hold space for yourself*. UPLIFT. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://uplift.love/how-to-hold-space-for-yourself/

How do you check-in with yourself? If you do not have an intentional practice, take the time to name a time and way you can check-in with yourself on a daily basis.

Holding Healing-Centered Spaces

Learning spaces, whether physical or virtual, can influence learner engagement and outcomes. Ideally, learning spaces are safe[28], purposefully designed, inviting and engaging environments in which knowledge can be co-created. These characteristics can exist both physically and psychologically. In developing a space where learning can happen, facilitators need to account for the dynamic interplay between participants, the physical environment and the content that can impact feelings of safety. In this module, the primary focus will be *holding space*, *safe spaces, container building and intentionally creating and sustaining healing-centered spaces*

Holding Space

Before we get into how to hold space, and more specifically how to hold a healing-centered learning space, we need to define what it means to hold space. There are many definitions that have come from work in various settings, with a few definitions outlined in the exercise below.

Pause.

Step One. Reflect back on a time in which someone held space for you. How did that feel?

[28] *Safer, braver, and daring spaces are terms that have evolved to describe spaces in which participants feel a level of psychological safety in which they can engage, be accountable and hold others into account

Step Two: Now reflect back on a time in which you held space for someone? How did that feel?

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_____

Step Three. There are many definitions of holding space. Read through the various definitions outlined below.

- Holding space means to be with someone without judgment. To donate your ears and heart without wanting anything back. To practice empathy and compassion. To accept someone's truth, no matter what they are. To allow and accept. Embrace with two hands instead of pointing with one finger. To come in neutral. Open. For them. Not you. Holding space means to put your needs and opinions aside and allow someone to just be. [29]
- It means that we are willing to walk alongside another person in whatever journey they're on without judging them, making them feel inadequate, trying to fix them, or trying to impact the outcome. When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgement and control. [30]
- At one time or another, someone in our lives will need a space held that is loving, nonjudgmental, and empathetic. When that time comes, the relationship you already have will provide a foundation for building this so-called "container" in which you hold space for the other person. If you accept the challenge, your desire to be of service to the other person will be the first building block for holding that sacred space.[31]
- When you hold space for someone, you bring your entire presence to them. You walk along with them without judgment, sharing their journey to an unknown destination. Yet you're completely willing to end up wherever they need to go. You give your heart, let go of control, and offer unconditional support. And when you do, both of you heal, grow, and transform. [32]

[29] The Angry Therapist. (2018, September 25). *What does it mean / look like to hold space for someone?* Medium. https://angrytherapist.medium.com/what-does-it-mean-look-like-to-hold-space-for-someone-5feb78134caf
[30] Plett, H. (2015, March 11). *What it means to "hold space" for people, plus eight tips on how to do it well.* https://heatherplett.com/2015/03/hold-space/
[31] Pearl, R. (2017, May 23). *11 things that will help you hold space for someon*e. GoodTherapy. https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/11-things-that-will-help-you-hold-space-for-someone-0523175
[32] Hauka, L. (2016, May 28). *The sweetness of holding space for another*. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-sweetness-of-holding_b_9558266

Step Four. What words from the definitions on the previous page resonated with you the most? Jot them down.

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Step Five. Thinking back to your own experience and what has resonated with you, how would you define holding space? What do you need to hold space?

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"Holding space" is a term that has gained popularity in the past decade. In that popularity, it may also be losing the nuance of what it means. In her work on holding space, Heather Plett asks the question about what kind of space we are holding.[33]

> *Is it safe space? Not entirely – sometimes it feels frightening and unclear and requires that we step into that which makes us uncomfortable. Is it brave space? Sometimes, but other times it just feels like soft space that doesn't require bravery. Is it deep space? Often it is, but then there are those times when shallow is good enough, at least for a first step we are holding.*
>
> – Heather Plett, *Holding Liminal Space*

Peer supporters do the work of holding space when they walk with someone in their journey. Facilitating healing-centered learning spaces requires the ability to hold space – in ambiguity, uncertainty, discomfort, sometimes going shallow and other times going deep, it is transformative, not transactional. In that ambiguity, as facilitators, we strive for holding safe spaces in so far as we can hold them.

[33] Plett, H. (2016, August 22). *Holding liminal space*. https://heatherplett.com/2016/08/holding-liminal-space/

Safe Spaces

Safe space is a term that has received a lot of attention in recent years. Scholar Moira Kenney talks about the history of the term "safe space" in her book, *Mapping Gay L.A.*[34] With anti-sodomy laws still in effect, a safe space meant somewhere you could be out and in good company – at least until the cops showed up. While the term originated in the '60s to describe a space where LGBTQ people did not have to think twice about whether they could be themselves, the term "safe space" has expanded to include other groups experiencing systemic inequities, like Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) and women.

Considerations for Facilitating Safe Spaces

Safe spaces aren't solely about physical safety, they are about the psychological safety as well. People who engage in a learning space need to feel *both physically and psychologically safe* in order to fully participate. A facilitator's work in developing an intentional learning space which is psychologically safer, braver, more daring, may take into consideration the following:

- *Accessibility.* Being able to get in the door or access the virtual learning space with warmth and guidance and without obstacles or hindrances makes the space feel safe. It should be noted that access implies not only physical access or navigation, but economic access (cost, time of day, childcare) and other forms of access that may impinge on full participation (religious holidays, meeting dietary needs).
- *Building a Container.* Establishing secure parameters, inviting conversation, being able and willing to name complex realities and feelings as they come up, and building comfort in process and ambiguity (sometimes even discomfort).
- *Physical Comfort.* While this guide primarily attends to virtual learning platforms, it is important to consider physical comfort. Are facilitators visible when speaking? Are cameras used in a way that makes people at ease and comfortable? Facilitators can and should encourage participants to engage at their own comfort level and not enforce a camera-on standard that participants may not feel emotionally capable of meeting.
- *Power Dynamics.* Facilitating a learning space brings with it power differentials, trying to navigate the space so as to not enforce a top-down standard will need to be active and intentional. Removing the "sage on the stage," model and replacing it with a journey everyone engages together from different standpoints will be critical. This will be addressed further in the chapter on power.

[34] Kenney, Moira. (2001). *Mapping gay LA: the intersection of place and politics*. Bibliovault OAI Repository, the University of Chicago Press.

- *Shared Language.* Preparing participants (priming) before presenting new language. Building a common language with participants, co-creating a way to share information which leaves room for identities and experiences.
- *Content and Delivery.* Using activation/content warnings, thinking thoughtfully about how people receive information and identifying purpose with each activity and piece of shared information. Maximizing opportunities to ask questions instead of imparting information. Ask the question, "how can participants create discovery and understanding among one another, rather than being told/informed?" When content is intense, purposefully include spaces of calm, not forcing beyond the capacity of the facilitator or participants.
- *Opportunities for Calm.* Create intentional opportunities for calm. If information is plowed through, participants can feel overwhelmed. Mindfully create a pause for your own breath, for reflection and for integrating information

Taking and Making Space

People represent their social identities, wherever they go, and in whatever spaces they occupy. With these identities comes a different experience, history, and relationship to power based on systemic inequities. Social identities inevitably play a role in learning spaces, but are often not discussed. In some cases, identities may be intentionally ignored, erased, silenced, or made invisible. This makes it all the more important to understand and address the dynamics which unfold in the ***taking and making of space*** in relation to social identities in a learning space. In an intentional, healing-centered learning space, there is acknowledgement, and a drive toward understanding, and processing the power dynamics in the room. To that end, let's reflect on taking space and making space.

"Taking space" is a term that has been used among communities of color to describe someone who is occupying a setting to the detriment of others, and to the detriment of the goals of the space. In learning spaces, this might look like a person with privileged identities always answering questions or talking. It can also be used in the positive and affirmative, as in, "take as much space as you need," for people who usually shut down or experience pushing out, erasure or minimizing in discussions.

The term "*making space*" can allow for a pause, can invite participation from various points of view, can acknowledge and redirect if power differentials are pulling into one direction. For example, if as a facilitator, you notice one or two participants taking up most of the oxygen, you can invite a time to make space. This would sound like, "let's make some space for what's been shared."

Reflect.

Reflect back on a facilitation or participation learning experience in which you may have noticed challenges in the way space was being used. Perhaps shame showed up, power differentials were distracting or potentially alienating to people, or it felt jarring. Name the challenge and name strategies that could have changed the outcome.

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Equity, inclusion, power dynamics, anti-racism, trust, and safety (to name a few) are critical in navigating and holding space. If a space is not equitable and inclusive, the power is imbalanced and trust as well as safety are greatly compromised.

The Opposite of Holding Space

Holding space can be a *profound experience* for everyone involved. It is a privilege to be held and hold that space simultaneously. It is then important to think about what often prevents people from doing so - to explore this from a perspective of power. Exchanges between people can be emblematic *of power exchanges* in systems. To frame this properly we need to consider the realities of historic and present-day systemic inequities.

Heather Plett offers a way to look at the opposite of holding space using an equity lens.[35] She makes the link between the systemic *overpowering, dominating, and taking away* of autonomy that happens in colonization to the interpersonal or emotional colonization that happens when people take or force control in spaces in an unhealthy and even exploitive manner.

[35] Plett, H. (2016, July 17). *What's the opposite of holding space?* https://heatherplett.com/2016/07/whats-opposite-holding-space/

> *Emotional colonization is the act of controlling and exploiting someone's emotional resources. While holding space involves supporting without judging, fixing, or controlling the outcome, emotional colonization involves manipulating, disempowering, and judging. When we hold space, we liberate. When we emotionally colonize, we violate. When we hold space, we leave the person feeling supported and empowered. When we emotionally colonize, we leave the person disenfranchised and weakened.*
>
> – Heather Plett*, What's the Opposite of Holding Space?*

Unfortunately, just like racism, emotional colonization is in our ground water. It is something we actively have to work not to repeat. It is not something that can be erased. We do this in our relationships and, as Plett points out, even to ourselves when we police our feelings to please or placate.

Being mindful of *our own potential* to disrupt the holding of space by emotionally colonizing using dismissing, fixing, shaming, and/or interrupting is critical; however, there are even more subtle ways this can play out. While this is not an exhaustive list, these are some of the ways that *emotional colonization* may show up:[36]

- Gaslighting, dismissing a person's lived experience or telling them it is all in their heads.
- Shaming a person for their feelings, telling someone either explicitly or implicitly that they are "too much."
- Having the expectation that a person informs or educates us about how we should be in relationships with them instead of doing the hard work ourselves.
- Worrying about a person in a way that implies we don't trust them enough to look after themselves (paternalism).
- Holding the expectation that people have the same experience of or interpret situations the same way we do.
- Acting as the "tone police" when a person's emotions are stronger than we're comfortable with.

These might seem like interpersonal examples that may not happen in a learning space, but they often do show up. See What's the opposite of holding space? by Heather Plett for a more exhaustive list.[37]

[36] Plett, H. (2016, July 17). *What's the opposite of holding space?* https://heatherplett.com/2016/07/whats-opposite-holding-space/
[37] Ibid.

Integrate & Embody.

Take a deep breath. Go to a place of comfortable discomfort *not beyond* and think back to a time when you were in a learning space and have witnessed or experienced emotional colonization. What feelings came up?

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_____

Envision what could have been done differently. What happened?

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Container Building

In holding space, we intentionally build a container based on a commitment to process, not forcing an outcome. This is the active work of transformation, which is willing to set aside ego and commit instead to compassion.[38] Like making your favorite recipe in the kitchen, you can add your own elements to building the container.

In this section, we offer three elements for building a container: (1) *community building,* (2) *compassion/non-judgement, and* (3) *care/intentionality.* These are not the only elements to consider, and one should consider their own values and how they are able to hold space in a specific learning space to identify the elements that are key for building a container in a given setting.

Community Building

Container building and holding space are ways we can express the concept of union.[39] Everyone that comes together in a learning space does not have the same experience, but they come together, unifying in intent or purpose. Actively engaged in building the container, they compassionately hold space for one another.

[38] Gibbs, B. (2017, October 9). *Holding space in yoga class: What the yoga sutras can teach us*. YogaU. https://yogauonline.com/yogau-wellness-blog/yoga-practice-tips-holding-space-yoga-class-what-yoga-sutras-can-teach-us
[39] Ibid.

The facilitator's ego actively steps aside to honor the community, in partnership with the participants, in order to lend power to the process and intention that brought them together. This is co-creation. It can be particularly tempting to invite the ego back in for control, but that distracts and disrupts community building.[40]

Compassion/Non-Judgment

Compassion cannot happen with judgement. Put another way, we must actively practice *non-judgement* to be compassionate. According to Dr. Elliott Dacher, "non-judgment is an act of kindness and compassion towards self and other. It is a healing elixir. It is a peacemaker for self and others. It is a surrender to life as it is, to reality as it is. It is a hard pill for our ego to take."[41] When we center ourselves in judgement, we run the risk of projecting our preferences, only leaving ourselves open to that which agrees with us, with what we deem pleasurable, fearing and running from anything that can shatter our experience of pleasure and comfort.

Holding space and building a container asks us to *relinquish our commitment to comfort*. Compassion does the opposite, it asks that we sit with discomfort and suffering without judgment. In holding space compassionately, we do not try to fix or ameliorate, but sit with the person/the experience however it shows up.

Care/Intentionality

Holding space, building the container, takes intentionality. It communicates care[42]. It honors process over product. In holding space with care and intentionality that honors the person, there is power and empowerment.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr referred to power in the following way:[43]

> "*Power, properly understood, is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. There is nothing wrong with power if power is used correctly. One of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites – polar opposites – so that love is identified with resignation of power, and power with a denial of love. What is needed is a realization that* ***power without love is reckless and abusive****, and love without power is sentimental and anemic*."

Creating and sustaining a healing-centered space with care and intentionality is using your power to have "power with" the participants in the learning space.

[40] Erickson, K. (2017, November 15). *How to "hold space" using reiki*. https://reikirays.com/39610/hold-space-using-reiki/
[41] Dacher, E. (2016, February 18). *The power of non-judgment*. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-power-of-non-judgment_b_9265942
[42] Erickson, K. (2017, November 15). *How to "hold space" using reiki*. https://reikirays.com/39610/hold-space-using-reiki/
[43] King, ML. (1967, August 16). *Where do we go from here?* https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/where-do-we-go-here

Reflect.

How do you bring community, compassion and care into learning spaces?

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_____

How does it feel to experience community, compassion and care in learning spaces?

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Developing Supportive Rituals

One of the ways to bring care and intentionality to facilitation is to engage in developing supportive rituals for yourself prior to, during and after holding a learning space. These can be simple rituals that cue you to shift, ground yourself, take a deep breath, pause. They can support your ability to hold space more intentionally.

Integrate & Embody.

What is a supportive ritual which you can engage in prior to holding a learning space?

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Is there a supportive ritual that you can employ to encourage a pause or grounding while you are facilitating?

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_____

What supportive ritual can you employ to close a learning space?

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Holding space is fundamental to the work of being a healing-centered facilitator. In the care, compassion and community building that is put into building the container there is healing.

Holding Space in Virtual Platforms

Holding space whether in-person or virtually involves building trust. Remaining present, staying engaged, and holding space for connection between participants are crucial ways to build trust. In this section, we will explore the difference between holding versus presenting, using breakout rooms, using Liberating Structures on virtual platforms.

Holding vs. Presenting

Using Liberating Structures and creating spaces for mutual learning (such as breakout rooms) are examples of how one can hold space, versus presenting. It invites participants to actively be a part of the container, holding space for each other and the possibility of what can be done together. Presenting is often considered the standard and is very limited in application. In a virtual platform, it can take away the opportunity for connection, community building, and more.

Breakout Rooms

Group work allows time for inter-group connection, collective growth and learning. For group work, you can use the breakout rooms function of zoom. It is the holding of space within a smaller, more intimate space.

Tips for Using the Breakout Room Function:

- Facilitators have the option to break participants into groups that are either randomly or manually assigned or have participants choose for themselves. Doing this manually does take time if there is a larger group unless it is done prior to convening the group.
- Be clear about what time you will have everyone return so they know how to pace their group work.
- As a facilitator, you can "float" from group to group as they work, as you would around a physical learning space.
- Ask participants to designate a timekeeper and build in flex time for figuring roles and recapping the instructions. Timers can also be used in breakout rooms to countdown the time for participants.
- Use the broadcast function to let participants know how much time they have left, additional instructions or any other important piece of information.
- Have participants select roles, such as Timekeeper, Facilitator, Reporter, Recorder, and Equity Manager or Harmonizer. Groups roles increase accountability to one another and ensure that everyone participates.
- When you come back together, have a specific prompt that clearly communicates what they will be sharing out on. You can use the chat function for this as well, so it is visible.
- Additional features to explore include merging two rooms into one, assigning participants to rooms prior to the session and automatic randomization of rooms.

Sharing Out

- When you want each person to have an opportunity to speak to something, ask for a volunteer of who would like to begin and when that person finishes, they say the name of another person, "tagging" them in. This keeps the flow going and ensures everyone speaks.
- Pair share is another option which gives them time for one-on-one participation/reflection, or at least 30 seconds of thinking time so that they are prepared to share and not cold called or put on the spot when it is their turn.
- Use the screen share function. Both you and participants can share your screen- you can share your whole screen or just a specific document or tab (the latter is recommended so that you do not over-share). This can be great for showing a presentation or inviting to present.

Integrating Liberating Structures on Virtual Platforms

Liberating Structures (LS) are a selection of 33 activities/structures for facilitating meetings and conversations, curated by Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless. Liberating Structures, are designed to distribute control and include a fairer, larger number of people in shaping conversations and the next steps in group work. Using Liberating Structures increases innovation, inclusion, participation, clarity and purpose.

Liberating Structures are easy to use and can be picked up by anyone. Facilitators often use Liberating Structures for their ease of use and their adaptability in the online learning space. There are online learning/facilitator collaboratives that share lessons learned and tools that enhance the application of liberating structures.

In addition to accessing these learning tools and the online LS community, the ten Liberating Structure principles can provide insight into how liberating structures supports the intentional holding of space. While not every online learning activity may be a Liberating Structure, one can use the principles to alter existing Liberating Structures to meet their needs and create activities which fit the learning space objectives and needs. The ten principles outlined by the creators of Liberating Structures are:[44]

1. Include and unleash everyone
2. Practice deep respect for people and local solutions
3. Build trust as you go
4. Learn by failing forward
5. Practice self-discovery within a group
6. Amplify freedom and responsibility
7. Emphasize possibilities: Believe before you see
8. Invite creative destruction to enable innovation
9. Engage in seriously-playful curiosity
10. Never start without a clear purpose(s)

Engagement tools like Liberating Structures are tools that will enable you to create and hold space, along with technology features and healing-centered aligned strategies (such as digital equity and trauma-informed principles).

For more information on Liberating Structures and its guiding principles, visit the Liberating Structures website: https://www.liberatingstructures.com/principles/

[44] *Principles*. Liberating Structures. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://www.liberatingstructures.com/principles/

Integrate & Embody.

What are some takeaways from this module?

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Are there areas which you will choose to stretch your skills? If so, which ones?

_____

_____

_____

How do the skills and tools shared in this module connect to peer support competencies and recovery framework?

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In Chapter Two, we explored holding space and what we can do to build container with integrity, which fosters a sense of safety. Intentionally integrating these strategies in your facilitation can support healing.

In Chapter Three, we will explore power as a dynamic that takes place in and outside of learning spaces, and power dynamics can support or create a block in supporting a healing environment. Chapter Three will cover power dynamics, how dynamics outside of learning spaces can exert influence, and how to navigate power imbalances while holding space for “power with” and “power” to in a healing-centered manner.

Chapter Three: Power Dynamics

Connecting to Power

Power is everywhere, yet often unspoken and uncomfortable for many. Having power means having a degree of control. When exerting that control, a person is able to make choices and has the ability to influence their environment and others.

A common (if unspoken) assumption about power is that unequal power relations are part of the natural order of things, and therefore are inevitable and unchangeable. This assumption is not true! Power is dynamic and relational, not absolute, and it is exercised in various areas of life. Understanding your own relationship to power can help navigate it in learning spaces and help ground you to your values (the ones you identified in Chapter One).

Pause.

What is your relationship to/with power (at home, at work, or other areas of your life)?

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_____

_____

What does that power look/feel like?

_____

_____

How does power play a role in your identities (gender, race, sexual orientation economic status, immigration status/country of origin, language)?

_____

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Unpacking our Relationship to Power

There are prevailing myths in our society around power. You may have heard them – power corrupts, power is unchangeable and power is negative or harmful. We have all heard or felt these myths and might have a negative association with power. In addition, our own upbringing may have reinforced messages. Family systems can, and often do, impact the way we view power in a positive or negative way.

Reflect.

What are the messages you have received about power?

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How has this influenced your own comfort with power (both your own or that of others)?

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As you can see, our own complex histories and the perpetuation of myths around power can make it a difficult topic to talk about, much less name.

Naming Our Relationship to Power

Understanding our own relationship to power enables us to shift it to a place of growth. Naming our complex relationship to power, or to anything else, can enable us to have a different relationship to it, to develop a different story around it, and to experience it from a place of reflection. Naming it gives you control in how you tell the story. It is an invaluable step in healing. Author and playwright, Eve Ensler, writes “Language has the capacity to transform our cells, rearrange our learned patterns of behavior and redirect our thinking. I believe in naming what's right in front of us because that is often what is most invisible.”[45]

[45] Ensler, E. (2006, March 20). The power and mystery of naming things [Audio podcast episode]. In *All Things Considered*. National Public Radio. https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5285531

A facilitator's work in naming things in a learning space can support healing, equity and inclusion. Whether you are naming power imbalances, or a collective experience which is highly charged, naming something can shift power.

Reflect.

Have you had an experience with naming something that is invisible?

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What did it feel like to name it? Were others witness to this process?

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Power Within

Identifying and naming our own power can enable the power we have within ourselves. According to Just Associates, "power within has to do with a person's sense of self-worth and self-knowledge; it includes an ability to recognize individual differences while respecting others. Power within is the capacity to imagine and have hope; it affirms the common human search for dignity and fulfillment."[46]

When we feel power within, we can manage our emotions, we believe that we matter and that we can affect outcomes. Like empowerment, it has the capacity to provide a sense of efficacy. Instead of reacting, someone who has power within can act because we have an internal locus-of-control.

[46] *Dynamics of power, inclusion, and exclusion*. (n.d.). Just Associates. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://justassociates.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/toolsforanalyzingpower.pdf

Integrate & Embody.

Chapter One raised the importance of self-awareness. Healing-centered facilitation invites us to engage in affirming behaviors using self-awareness. This will help cultivate “power within” in a more mindful and intentional manner.
Name three strengths in facilitation that you have.

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Using the facilitation strengths you have identified, create short phrase beginning with "I have," "I am," "I trust/accept," "I am grateful for,"...etc. Writing affirmations in the present tense can support feelings of power within.

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How can you incorporate these affirmations into your facilitation ritual to support power within?

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Power Dynamics

Power exists in and between all relationships. It is often unspoken, but it is worth repeating that having power means having a degree of control. When exerting control, a person is able to make choices and has the ability to influence their environment and others. It is a natural and healthy instinct to exert our power to get our wants and needs met. In learning spaces, it is important to acknowledge and understand the power dynamics at play while offering and inviting space for participants to come into their own power within.

Types of Power Dynamics in a Learning Space

In the previous section, we examined "power within." "Power within" is a critical area of practice for facilitators navigating power dynamics in learning spaces because it enables them to clearly align with their own values and stay grounded. There are three other types of power which are outlined by Just Associates – "power over," "power with," and "power to."

Power over is what people often envision when they are talking about power. It is oppressive power in which there is a win-lose kind of relationship. It is using power as a tool of colonizing – in other words, taking power from someone else, and then using it to dominate and prevent others from gaining it. In learning spaces, this is the traditional classroom model where the teacher holds knowledge and domain over the class. While there might be some rationing of power, it is just enough to keep students dependent. If you close your eyes to envision this example, who is in the position of power? What does that look like? What does that sound like?

Power with is what healing-centered facilitators try to cultivate in the learning space. Power with has to do with finding common ground among different interests and building collective strength. It is based on mutual support, solidarity, and collaboration. Power with multiplies individual talents and knowledge. It is a humble approach that chooses connection and empathy, and it sees power as something to be shared that does not lessen one's own abilities or resources, but rather contributes to self and whole group.

Power to, or what some refer to as empowerment, is the potential of every person to shape his or her life and world. Just Associates points out that when power to is based on mutual support, it opens up the possibilities of joint action (power with). In a learning space, this translates to empowerment of each participant – which enables the group to act collectively with mutual support and collaboration.

In addition to these types of power, there is the **de facto power** that a facilitator holds by the virtue of bringing everyone together, facilitating, holding the space/building the container, navigating communication, relationships, and the way the time will be spent together. It is important for facilitators to acknowledge and leverage this power to develop power with inside of the learning space.

Pause.

Going to a place of comfortable self-inquiry, think of a time where you observed or experienced, power over in a learning environment. What did that look like? What did it feel like?

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_____

_____

Now think of a time when you observed or experienced power with in a learning environment. What did that look like? What did it feel like?

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_____

What are some practices from your positive experiences observing power with that you can use in your facilitation? Similarly, what are some practices from your negative experience in a learning environment that you try to never repeat? Note that this is good information to have.

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Power dynamics can exist across multiple dimensions. They can be: visible, hidden, or invisible; implied or explicit; and, formal or informal. While we won't go these different dimensions in detail, it is important to ask yourself:

- What kind of power exists in the learning space you are facilitating?
- How are you going to create and sustain the supports needed to develop power with?

A facilitator can often find themselves invited into a space in which there are power over dynamics in the environment and participants initially feel limited in what they can say and how they can participate. This may be a space where psychological safety is not present due to the power over circumstances in the environment. Being mindful of the type of power that exists and perhaps your own limitations in that space are critical.

In a space where psychological safety is compromised, it is important to ask yourself

- How can I use the de facto power I have in this space to rise to the level the participants need me to be in this moment?
- What are ways to make space for power with, which can engender trust and psychological safety? (Acknowledging and accepting that this may be temporary psychological safety.)

It is also important to balance these questions with learning to let go of things that are out your control. We will touch on radical acceptance more in module seven. You can model what trustworthiness can feel and look like with the group of participants you are facilitating in the moment.

Options for Supporting Power With

The words we use can fundamentally shift power in a learning space. Language is a powerful way we can communicate support of voice, choice and autonomy. Some options for supportive language and framing in learning spaces include the following:

- **Asking vs. Telling:** Asking offers a bottom-up, inquisitive, consensus-style approach based in humble curiosity. Telling is a top-down, decisive, command-style approach. There is room for both styles; however, asking creates a space where power is developed from within by tapping into lived experience.
- **Invite vs. Direct:** Inviting participants to engage in a learning space provides choice and gives them the power to exercise autonomy and control. Directing provides less opportunity for choice and voice. Directing is also one-directional. Inviting can provide participants with the opportunity to exercise safety for themselves.
- **Involve vs. Instruct:** Involving participants in the learning space offers the opportunity for them to construct the container, hold space for one another, and contribute their strengths and experience. Instructing provides information and tells/shows how the information can be applied.

These options for using supportive language can shape power in the learning space. Rather than seeing these options in black and white terms, they can be seen in relationship to one another and as options for a facilitator to mindfully use.

It is not always possible or favorable to ask, invite and involve, and finding the balance in a way that favors power with the participant will be an important balance to strike.

Gatekeeping as a Power & Responsibility

In relation to power, peer facilitators not only navigate de facto power attributed in the role of facilitator, but also act as gatekeepers in and outside of the learning space. Gatekeepers control the flow of power, information and resources, and are often in a position to make space for and lift up voices of people without access. Gatekeeping is a responsibility for each of us to navigate with humility.

There are times when people may emphatically deny having any power or gatekeeping ability. Unfortunately, when we deny the power we hold, we allow ourselves to be unaccountable to communities for that power. Rather than deny the positional privilege which we can and do have access to, we can choose to use it in a way that disrupts the conventional flow of power and shift it to people with less access to these spaces. As peer facilitators, we cannot shuck that responsibility and say that we are powerless or deny that it exists, but we must be accountable to it.

We guard the gate in our recovery communities—overtly and sometimes subtly influencing conversations, accessing and facilitating learning spaces, using our networks to increase diversity or maintain the status quo, and persuading or discouraging actions that benefit our communities. Ideally, we use power within, power to, and power with, being unafraid to fail, providing space for self-agency, inviting opportunity for our communities, and exercising accountability to our communities – all while being mindful of the potential for hoarding power and perpetuating power over dynamics. This makes for a liberated gatekeeper.

Integrate & Embody.

Where and how are you a gatekeeper in your community?

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_____

_____

How can you use the role of gatekeeper to lift up the work of others in your community?

_____

_____

What commitments can you make to yourself to use your gatekeeping capacity to disrupt power hoarding? How can you do this to advance equity and inclusion in peer support and recovery spaces?

_____

_____

_____

Power & Privilege

In addition to thinking about power dynamics in a learning space, it is important to consider the role of intersecting identities in relation to power. These are not two separate things, but integrated ways of examining power systemically. It is true that by the virtue of being either Black or Indigenous or a Person of Color, one will have a different access to and experience with power.

Privilege Defined

It is not a surprise that discussions on power often bring up *privilege*. Privilege operates on personal, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels. Privilege affords people power in the form of advantages, favors, and benefits to members of dominant groups at the expense of members of non-dominant groups. In the United States, privilege is granted to people who have membership in one or more of these social identity groups (known as “dominant groups”):

- White people;
- Able-bodied people;
- Straight people;
- Cisgender people;
- Men;
- Christians;
- Middle or owning class people;
- Middle-aged people; and
- English-speaking people, to name a few.

Privilege is characteristically invisible to people who have it. People in dominant groups often believe that they have earned the power and the privileges that they enjoy or that everyone could have access to these privileges if only they worked to earn them. In fact, privileges and the power that comes with them, are unearned and they are granted to people in the dominant groups whether they want those privileges or not, and regardless of their stated intent. For more reading on this, read "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" by Peggy McIntosh.[47]

Reflect.

The identity wheel on the following page looks at who we are in relation to those who have power in society. We use the inner circle of the wheel to describe the social identity which is ascribed more power and privilege. Take a moment to review the identity wheel in two pages. Fill in your own identities. You can use colors or just mark where you are with a pen or pencil. For a fresh copy, see Pasha Marlow's LinkedIn post.[48] After reviewing the identity wheel, take a moment to answer the questions below.

Which characteristics cannot be changed?

_____

_____

_____

What does this say about your own power or potential for power?

_____

_____

_____

[47] McIntosh, P. (1989). *White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack*. National SEED Project. https://www.nationalseedproject.org/key-seed-texts/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack
[48] Marlow, P. (2024, September). *Wheel of privilege: An evolving learning and talking tool* [Image attached] [Post]. LinkedIn. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/pashamarlowe_leadership-privilege-power-activity-7236793893792194 56-W5_m

How many of your individual characteristics are different from the identity with the most power and privilege?

_____

_____

_____

What does this exercise tell us about identity and power more broadly?

_____

_____

_____

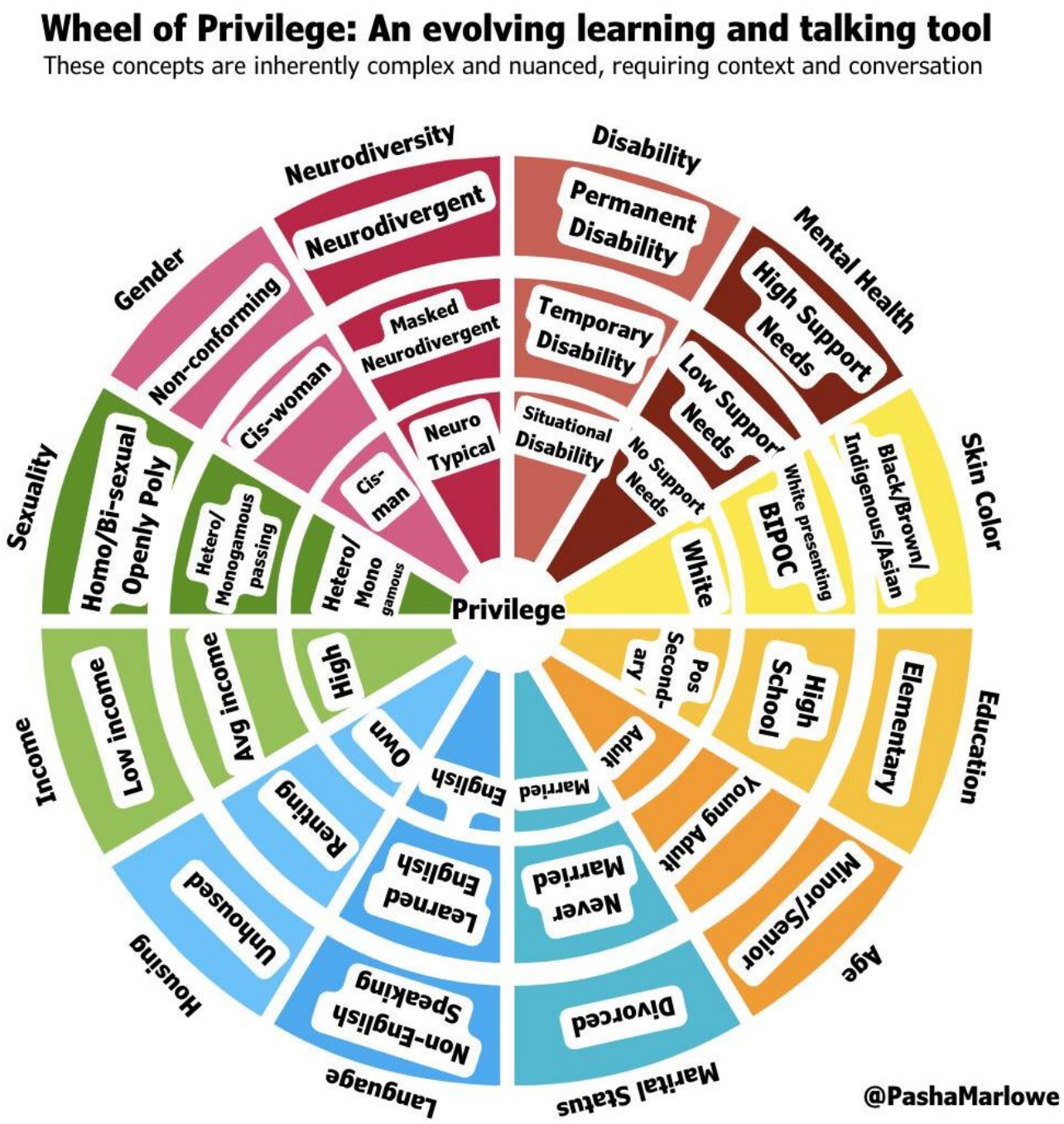

Image Source: Marlow, P. (2024, September). *Wheel of privilege: An evolving learning and talking tool* [Image attached] [Post]. LinkedIn. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/pashamarlowe_leadership-privilege-power-activity-7236739389379219456-W5_m

Power Dynamics in the Learning Space

In the best circumstances, we bring our whole identities into a learning space and feel safe in doing so. Unfortunately, that is often not the reality. History, personal experience, and structural inequities have shaped someone's experience and comfort in learning spaces. For people who have identities on the outer rings of the identity wheel (persons who belong to systemically marginalized social groups), their previous and current experience of access to power and privilege in learning environments may influence their engagement, their feelings of connectedness, and their power to exercise voice and choice in learning spaces.

One of the more common ways that power dynamics can play out in the learning space in relation to marginalized social groups is the experience of microaggressions. A microaggression is the "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative prejudicial slights and insults" towards people in marginalized groups.[49] Microaggressions are one outgrowth of implicit bias and systemic racism.

Integrate & Embody.

Take a moment to watch this video on microaggressions in the learning environment.[50] Whether a facilitator commits a microaggression towards a participant or a participant commits a microaggression towards another participant, the power dynamics have shifted and it is important to address what just happened.

Given your understanding of microaggressions, what can you do as a facilitator when a microaggression happens in the learning space?

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[49] Sue, D.W., Capodilupo, C.M., Torino, G.C., Bucceri, J.M., Holder, A.M.B., Nadal, K.L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist, 62*(4), 271–286. DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271

[50] Focused.Arts.Media.Education. (2017, May 14). *Microaggressions in the classroom* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZahtlxW2CIQ

What skills do you think are necessary to navigate power dynamics in a learning space?

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In what ways can you support voice/choice/control that considers the diverse experiences people have with power?

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For further understanding on microaggressions, read *Examples of Microaggressions in Learning Environments*.[51]

Being an Ally

An ally is someone who makes the commitment and effort to recognize their privilege and access to institutional power (based on gender, class, race, sexual identity, etc.) and works in solidarity with marginalized groups. Allies commit to reducing their own complicity or collusion in marginalizing groups who are in the outer circle of the identity wheel and intentionally invest in strengthening their own knowledge and awareness of anti-racism, equity, and inclusion.

Being an ally does not necessarily mean you will ever fully understand what it feels like to be systemically marginalized; it *does* mean that you are willing to show up for the struggle every day and engage in the humble curiosity and compassionate accountability necessary to support marginalized communities. Anyone has the potential to be an ally. It is best not to focus on self-identifying as an ally, but instead focus on the undoing of systemic oppression by listening and taking cues from marginalized communities. Because an ally might have more privilege and access to institutional power, they are powerful voices alongside marginalized ones.

[51] *Examples of microaggressions in the classroom*. (n.d.). Rochester Institute of Technology. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://www.rit.edu/diversity/sites/rit.edu.diversity/files/2020-08/Microaggressions_in_the_Classroom.pdf

Performative allyship is a pitfall that can occur with persons who are well intentioned. Performative allyship refers to "easy and costless actions that often do not challenge the status quo and are motivated primarily by the desire to accrue personal benefits."[52]

The following acronym for ALLY offers some cues that can help reduce and remind that it is not about the performance of allyship.[53]

A - Always center those most affected by power and privilege differentials
L - Listen & learn from those who are marginalized and oppressed
L - Leverage your privilege
Y - Yield the floor

– Kayla Reed

Integrate & Embody.

This exercise is from the Guide to Allyship, on opensource manual on how to be an ally. The exercise, entitled: *Boots and Sandals: How to handle mistakes*, was contributed by Presley Pizzo has been modified.[54]

Imagine this: your privilege (the access to institutional power you have and gatekeeping roles you hold) is a heavy boot that keeps you from noticing when you're stepping on someone's feet or they're stepping on yours. At the same time, people in marginalized groups have sandals to cover their feet.

If someone one says, "Ouch! You're stepping on my toes," how do you react?

[52] Kutlaca, M., & Radke, H. R. M. (2023). Towards an understanding of performative allyship: Definition, antecedents and consequences. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 17*(2), e12724. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12724
[53] Reed, K. [@iKaylaReed]. (2016, June 13). *A- always center the impacted L- listen & learn from those who live in the oppression L- leverage your privilege Y-yield the floor* [Post]. X. https://x.com/iKaylaReed/status/742243143030972416
[54] Pizzo, P. (n.d.). *Boots & sandals: How to handle mistakes*. The Guide to Allyship. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://guidetoallyship.com/

Because we can think more clearly about stepping on someone's literal toes than we usually do when it comes to exerting power over a group, by marginalizing, silencing, committing microaggressions even inadvertently, we will review some common problematic responses:

- **Centering yourself:** "I can't believe you think I'm a toe-stepper! I'm a good person!"
- **Denial that others' experiences are different from your own:** "I don't mind when people step on my toes."
- **Derailing:** "Some people don't even have toes, why aren't we talking about them instead?"
- **Refusal to center the impacted:** "All toes matter!"
- **Tone policing:** "I'd move my foot if you'd ask me more nicely."
- **Denial that the problem is fixable:** "Toes getting stepped on is a fact of life. You'll be better off when you accept that."
- **Victim blaming:** "You shouldn't have been walking around people with boots!"
- **Withdrawing:** "I thought you wanted my help, but I guess not. I'll just go home."

Can you think of any others that might lack self-awareness or commitment to allyship?

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In reality, most of us naturally know the right way to react when we step on someone's toes, and we can use that to help us learn how to react when we commit microaggressions, silence or marginalize a person. Some of the ways that you might respond are:

- **Center the impacted:** "Are you okay?"
- **Listen to their response and learn.**
- **Apologize for the impact, even though you didn't intend it:** "I'm sorry!"
- **Stop the instance:** move your foot
- **Stop the pattern:** be careful where you step in the future. When it comes to power over, we want to actually change the "footwear" to get rid of privilege and power differentials (sneakers for all!), but metaphors can only stretch so far!
- **Reacting in a fair and helpful way isn't about learning arbitrary rules or being a doormat.** Be open to hearing another person's experience of how they may have experienced Think instead of ways to reframe the situation so that you don't feel defensive. Being able to let go of your ego is an incredibly important skill to develop.

Try starting with “Thanks for letting me know” to put yourself in a better frame of mind. If after you say that, you need to take some time to think about the situation, that’s fine, too. Just remember that this isn’t about changing the other person’s frame of mind. They’re allowed to be upset about systemic inequities and how they playout in daily life. For more on allyship, read *The Guide to Allyship*.[55]

How do you handle mistakes and restore “power with” in learning spaces?

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One way that facilitators acknowledge these power dynamics in learning spaces is to invite participants to use the terms, “ouch,” and “thank you.” In the “ouch,” participants have the power to exercise options for communicating how something lands. In the “thank you,” participants have the power to communicate radical acceptance of the way their words may have hurt or harmed. This is just one option, and facilitators may choose to use other ways to navigate these power dynamics in the learning space.

Power Dynamics in Virtual Learning

Virtual learning platforms have a pre-ordained power dynamic by the virtue of hosting, technology access, and technology skills. Chapter One explored digital equity, and this chapter will examine the use of a facilitation team, guideposts for single-person facilitation, and navigating the chat box.

The Facilitation Team

It is ideal to have more than one facilitator for learning spaces that have more than twelve participants. Online facilitation that uses various tools for engaging can require additional steps and time to navigate, so having another person to bounce off of and problem-solve issues with you is ideal and will enable more power distribution and equitable engagement.

Facilitation teams function best when they are clear on roles and have coordination before, during, and after holding the learning space. This allows each person to communicate expectations, strengths, and boundaries and align with the purpose of drawing together the specific group of participants that they will be working with together.

[55] lamont, a. (n.d.). *The guide to allyship*. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://guidetoallyship.com/

It is recommended that the facilitation team comes together to:

- **Align and coordinate.** This takes place prior to holding the live learning space and gives facilitators the space and time to set expectations, review the objectives, coordinate the execution of activities, and discuss the how, what, where, when, and why.
- **Facilitate, hold space, and navigate.** This is what takes place during learning. There are ways that this will play out, but having another facilitator in the space who can be another set of eyes when power dynamics shift, or when boundaries and accountability come up, can be extremely helpful. As a team, you can support the building of the container, while also attending to technical issues which may need additional navigation.
- **Unpack, debrief and integrate the learning experience.** A healthy protocol for facilitation teams is that they come together for the purpose of learning from the experience they just shared. In that time, they can unpack any issues or activity execution issues they may have encountered. They can debrief from the experience. This can be particularly helpful if it was emotionally intense or the content was heavy. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is that the team comes together to integrate what they learned from the experience.

Talking Through the Technical

In talking about and defining roles with your facilitation team, it is important to consider the various roles. On Zoom, there are: host, co-host, alternative hosts, and participants. The role that you have in a meeting is designated by the host.

- **Host:** The user that scheduled the meeting. They have full permissions to manage the meeting. There can only be one host of a meeting.
- **Co-Host:** Shares most of the controls that hosts have, allowing the co-host to manage the administrative side of the meeting, such as managing attendees. The host must assign a co-host during the meeting. Co-hosts cannot start a meeting. If a host needs someone else to start the meeting, they should consider assigning an alternative host.
- **Alternative Host:** Shares the same controls as co-hosts, but can also start the meeting. Hosts can assign alternative hosts when they schedule a meeting.

The co-host feature allows the host to share hosting privileges with another user, allowing the co-host to manage the administrative side of the meeting, such as managing participants or starting/stopping the recording. The host must assign a co-host. There is no limitation on the number of co-hosts you can have in a meeting or webinar.

Co-hosts do not have access to the following controls, as they are only available as host controls in a meeting:

- Start closed captioning and assign someone or a third-party to provide closed captioning;
- End meeting for all participants;
- Make another participant a co-host;
- Start breakout rooms or move participants from one breakout room to another;
- Start waiting room (co-hosts can place participants in waiting room or admit/remove participants from the waiting room); and
- Co-hosts also cannot start a meeting. If a host needs someone else to be able to start the meeting, they can assign an alternative host.

By logging on using the Zoom administrator's login, there can be multiple co-hosts on a Zoom meeting; however, the challenge is that there are certain features which will shift responsibility. For example, the polling feature may move to the second person who logged in as host, while the first might maintain the breakout room feature.

These aspects of Zoom might change, but it is important for each host to evaluate what tools are available to them when they log on.

Guideposts for Single-Person Facilitation

Single-person facilitation is sometimes necessary and preferred. In small groups where everyone knows each and the pace is predictable, single-person facilitation may not only be preferred but also more efficient.

But there are challenges associated with single-person facilitation as well. This section reviews some of those challenges, red flags that those challenges may be happening, and potential remedies when these dynamics are at play.

Challenge 1: Power differential between facilitator and participants may throw learning and holding of space off balance.

- Red flags include situations where the facilitator: (1) feels the need to add to each piece of input, (2) feels the need to finalize contact/conclusion of discussions, (3) cannot answer the question "Why Am I Talking? (WAIT)," (4) is not taking a pause to ask the WAIT question, and (4) facilitator has stopped asking questions.
- Remedies for facilitators include: (1) plan activities and reflective questions throughout your time, (2) leave uncomfortable silences alone and let them play out, (3) invite guest speakers, (4) create visual engagement opportunities (e.g., videos), and (5) hold time for reflection, movement, and art.

Challenge 2: Facilitator may overschedule time to where participants do not have time to meaningfully integrate knowledge.

- Red flags include situations where the facilitator: (1) does not lay out clear objectives, (2) the facilitator and/or participants feel rushed, (3) participants look disoriented or confused, and (4) participants may not be keeping up pace or have totally disconnected.
- Remedies for facilitators include: (1) create a plan in which you outline the specific activities or content needed to meet your learning objectives and options to add certain pieces as time permits, (2) stop and take temperature checks of the room, (3) do "more with less", and (4) sustain connection above all. For temperature check activities, see **Appendix A**.

Challenge 3: Facilitator can lose connection with the people in the room.

- Red flags include situations where participants: (1) do not respond to facilitator questions, (3) are seemingly distracted, and (3) engage in other activities while in the learning space (i.e., "multitasking").
- Remedies for facilitators include: (1) examine the blend of engagement (e.g., "Is there enough time to talk about the content and reflect? Are enough breaks being scheduled?), (2) ask participants what would help or what they would like to know, and (3) communicate expectations and the agenda before getting started.

The challenges highlighted above in single-person facilitation are issues that require navigating power dynamics and how much space you, the facilitator take up in relation to the learning. This takes skillful navigation, self-awareness and reflection.

Navigating Chat Box

Chat box is a good way to start immediate engagement of your participants, while also allowing them the time and space to process information and questions. Gentle yet prompt engagement of participants offers an opportunity for everyone in the room (including the facilitator) to connect and begin to build relationship. When facilitators provide a brief orientation to the chat box and how you will be using it throughout your time together, people have a sense of the expectations (which empowers them to engage by knowing what is available to them).

As a facilitator, the chat box is one of many tools at your disposal to connect with people and take the temperature of the room. Some recommended chat box practices include:

- Place all spoken questions into the chat box. This provides reinforcement of the question and creates another way of repeating the question without placing participants on the spot if they happened to miss the verbal cue (since distractions are a natural part of virtual learning).
- When placing questions from the host or facilitator into the chat box, it can be helpful to have a visual cue to signal to the participants that this is a question for them to answer. An example of a visual cue may be to have a row of a repeating symbol, such as **** or ###.
- Provide time for people to respond to questions, since they may be on different types of devices.
- Engage with the chat box responses by reading aloud, laughing, smiling, showing empathy, and acknowledging. If a response makes you curious, ask questions. Similar to when we engage people in person, participants will stop using the chat box if they do not feel heard or included.
- If there are two facilitators, both people should remain in the conversation ideally (even if one facilitator is primarily focused on chat box responses).
- If the participants are in close communication, they may choose to use private chat. This is good for building intergroup connection; however, it is important to inform participants that everyone in the meeting will be able to access the chat, as it is an automatic download for hosts and/or participants after the meeting.

While chat box is a great tool for engagement, there are times that facilitators may decide to limit chat engagement. For example, when an outside panel is coming into the learning space, it might be helpful for facilitators to limit chat to hosts only and encourage a question-and-answer session after the panel completes their discussion/presentation. This option can be altered at any time during the meeting to meet the needs and objectives. This is a personal choice and depends on the audience size and engagement.

Digital equity requires that facilitators not only examine issues of access (covered in Chapter One). It also requires facilitators to be in constant dialogue with the power dynamics of the learning space. Being in constant dialogue or a place of humble inquiry about power will enable you to shift, be responsive, and cultivate power with.

Integrate & Embody.

What are some takeaways from this module?

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Are there areas which you will choose to stretch your skills? If so, which ones?

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How do the skills and tools shared in this module connect to peer support competencies and recovery framework?

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In Chapter Three, we waded into considerations around power to explore some of the dynamics of power that are critical to creating and sustaining healing-centered learning spaces, and we reviewed some considerations for challenging our own assumptions around power. These considerations build into Chapter Four, which focuses on meaning making, storytelling, and practicing universal expectations.

Chapter Four: Storytelling

Meaning Making

Stories are a part of the recovery journey and peer support. Stories can change with time, perspective, understanding, and context. They are a multi-layered narratives that we tell about ourselves – ones that we can edit, revise, and interpret in various ways depending on where we are and how we show up. Linked to core values like honesty, authenticity, and mutuality, storytelling is a powerful way to make space and plant the seeds of hope. In each iteration of storytelling and the space in between, we add new meaning. To set the stage, let's take a moment to reflect on the evolution of our own stories.

Pause.

Think back to the first time you shared your story. Hearing it in your words, in your voice, how does it sit with you today?

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How has your story changed over time?

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How do connection, relationship, and hope show up in your story today?

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The Stories We Tell Ourselves

As our evolution in storytelling has taught us, each time we reframe a narrative, we open ourselves to the possibility of living more purposefully, more authentically, more grounded in our values and who we are. It is inevitable that we continually reflect on past events and try to assign meaning to them. In this space of reflection on what happened, we are **making meaning**, **which is a journey to understanding or making sense of life events, relationships, and the self.** It becomes less about the life events, and more about the meaning we assign them. It is our interpretation of those events and the narrative that we create which shapes us in turn. We engage in meaning making in small and big ways throughout our lives.

When we use mindful self-awareness and are grounded in our values, the stories we tell can positively reinforce the small everyday stories that we tell ourselves. When our stories do not evolve over time and the story begins to overpower the small everyday stories that we tell ourselves, it can limit the way we experience life. For example, consider statements like, “I can’t do that because I’m not good enough” or “I’m too [insert negative trait] for that” – these are limiting narratives that can show up in everyday life that are likely rooted in *other stories*.

Reflect.

Bringing in how we hold space for ourselves and tapping our power within, how have you challenged old and unhelpful narratives?

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What did it feel to challenge the old and unhelpful narratives?

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How has this helped you evolve your narrative and make meaning?

Learning as Meaning Making

It is important to consider the role of storytelling and meaning making when we facilitate a learning experience. In any situation of learning, people are actively engaged in making sense of the situation (e.g., the content, context, and relationships) based on their history of similar situations and the available cultural resources.[56] Thinking of learning as meaning making emphasizes the fact that learning involves identities, storytelling, power and emotions.

Integrate & Embody.

Think of a time that you made a meaningful connection in a learning environment, one that connected to your history and cultural resources. What did that look like?

What did it feel like to have that space and make that connection?

[56] Zittoun T., & Brinkmann S. (2012). Learning as meaning making. In *Seel N.M. (eds) Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning*. Springer. Boston, MA

What can or do you do as a peer facilitator to make space for people's history, culture and meaning making?

Storytelling

Everyone has a unique story to tell and unique narratives that they carry with them. Stories can change how we see the world. Participants will also carry stories, histories, identities, narratives, experience with trauma, and relationships to power into the learning space with them. It is important to consider these complexities and navigate a path forward that makes spaces for these multi-faceted realities.

Pause.

Going to a place of comfortable self-inquiry, think of a time when you observed or experienced storytelling that felt challenging and/or that safety was compromised in a learning environment. What did that look like? What did it feel like?

Now think of a time when you observed or experienced safe and supportive storytelling, in a learning environment. What did that look like? What did it feel like?

What are some positive practices from watching others engage in storytelling that you have used (adopted) in your facilitation? Similarly, what are some practices from your negative experience in a learning environment that you try to never repeat?

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Practicing Universal Expectations in Learning Spaces

Exposure to traumatic life events is extremely common, with 89.7% of the US adult population reporting exposure to trauma.[57] Recognizing the depth and reach of trauma has driven a critical discussion around exercising universal expectations. Universal expectations for trauma are helpful and effective. Similar to universal precautions,[58] exercising universal expectations for trauma aims to prevent (or at least, lessen) the possibility of re-traumatization in a population that has been largely exposed to traumatic experiences.[59]

Given how widespread trauma exposure is, it is safe to say that many participants will come into the learning space with trauma histories. This means that participants can potentially be re-traumatized if there is a not attention and intention brought to approaching the dynamics of the learning space. The potential for re-traumatization may come from a variety of factors, such as:

- *Content* (i.e., the manner or method of sharing intense content);
- *Environmental factors* (e.g., physical cues like restricted access to gender-neutral or gender-affirming restrooms);
- *Comments or psychological safety threats* of other participants in the learning space;
- *Reminders of previous trauma* (either directly or symbolically); and
- A *combination* of these factors.

In an effort to provide exposure to real-world issues, facilitators sometimes engage in sharing emotionally charged and intense material. In setting up a learning space, it is important to provide an activation warning that acknowledges the potential for re-

[57] American Psychiatric Association.(2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders. 5.* Arlington, VA.
58 Universal precautions is an approach to infection control to treat all human blood and certain human body fluids as if they were known to be infectious.
[59] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, July). *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*. United States Department of Health and Human Services. https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma14-4884.pdf

traumatization. It also helps to thoughtfully consider the need and deliberate use of case studies to meet learning objectives. Case studies and respectfully working alongside a person with lived experience (which could be a co-facilitator, an audience member, or both) to co-create a meaningful, rich, and contextualized learning experience that is grounded in learning objectives can help create a psychologically safer environment in which to integrate and absorb information.

A peer facilitator must be aware of these realities and practice appropriate universal expectations to avoid re-traumatization. This chapter will use the lens of universal expectations in storytelling to explore the challenges of fostering safe learning spaces, strategies for fostering a healing-centered learning space, and using activation warnings.

Reflect.

Take a moment to reflect on the preparations you make in order to share your story. What do you do before sharing your story? Are there supportive practices that you engage in during?

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What are supportive practices and rituals you have for yourself after you share your story?

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Challenges to Fostering Safe Learning Spaces

Storytelling is a powerful learning tool. In applying universal expectations, it is important to consider challenging issues that may come up around storytelling.

One challenge that can arise in the learning space are the use of *war stories* (which are not necessarily *literal* war stories). A war story is a facilitator or participant's story of indirect or direct contact with intense content. War stories run the risk of romanticizing trauma, thereby diminishing one's lived experience and the speaker's relational integrity. When someone shares war stories, it may unintentionally come off as dismissive of trauma and potentially damage the trust and safety of the learning space. The person may feel and think that they are providing the most content-specific real-world examples, generating empathy, and/or fueling advocacy, when in fact they may be activating trauma in participants.

Another form of storytelling that can activate trauma is media – whether it is written, photographed, or filmed – that exploits traumatic moments of adversity. This type of media is often referred to as "traumatic shock content" because it includes the exploitive sharing of the darkest, most jarring parts of a person's experience around trauma specifically for the purpose of shocking others (although sometimes hidden under the guise of learning). While traumatic shock content can be engaging for some people because of its sensationalism or shock value, it is not only unhelpful to survivors but often actually *harmful* because it can result in traumatization or re-traumatization. In these stories, Black Indigenous People Of Color (BIPOC) are often the ones being displayed as victims or being victimized, which can display a disregard for the depth of generational, historical, and/or race-based trauma that they experience.

Building the Container for Storytelling

While personal narratives and storytelling do not pose a direct challenge to a healing-centered learning space, it is important to think through how they are mindfully integrated. Personal narratives, specifically trauma narratives (whether one's own or another person's) need to be valued, respected, and approached with mindfulness. A few strategies to consider in facilitating the sharing of personal narratives/storytelling: (1) preparing, (2) sharing, and (3) debriefing.

Note: in the following sections, "ST" indicates a strategy for the storyteller/person sharing their personal narrative. "P" indicates a strategy specific to participants.

1. Preparing

- Provide informed consent for someone sharing their narrative. This may include preparing them for the size, composition, and questions of the participants. It can also include pre-planning, debriefing, and defining a post-event plan for sustaining wellness and connection. (ST)
- Provide participants with an activation warning and time to think through what they need to do to exercise self-care. Encourage self-inquiry and reflection. (P)

2. Sharing

- Work with the person who is sharing their personal narrative to co-create a meaningful and grounded learning experience that respectfully supports lived experience, agency, and supports the consent process. (ST)
- Check in with participants. This will largely depend on context, but checking in can include strategies like: pausing as needed, having floating support facilitators, using virtual breakout rooms as a personal space to restore safety, drawing attention to self-care strategies, emphasizing their agency in implementing self-care strategies at any point, and making grounding tools available (e.g., fidgets and coloring sheets). (P)

3. Debriefing

- Take the time to debrief with the storyteller communicates the time and care needed to work through the process with intention. Sharing information with others regarding one's lived experience is deeply personal. (ST)
- Check in with participants' felt sense of physical and psychological safety. Is this a place where a break makes sense? If you are working with a planning team, can people take time to float to check in with small groups? (P)

Integrate & Embody.

How does the concept of universal expectations (preventing the possibility of re-traumatization) help you make decisions in preparing the learning space?

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What are some universal expectation practices that you feel comfortable putting in place in the planning, execution and debriefing of learning spaces you hold?

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Activation Warnings

Activation warnings (also called content warnings) are statements intended to prepare an audience for the presentation of potentially distressing/activating material so that they can make the best decision for their own safety. Potentially distressing/activating material can be a piece of writing, video, pictures, etc., that often includes traumatic content.[60] While activation warnings are often done at the beginning, it is important to be flexible and place them throughout content, if appropriate.

Peer facilitators can use activation warnings as a way to foster an equitable and psychologically safer learning space. Using an activation warning at the beginning and informing participants as specific content areas are being approached can help them make the decisions that they need in order to navigate participation. Peer facilitators can do this by providing participants with a statement to prepare them that contains the following information: (1) content that is going to be covered, (2) the length of time required cover the content, and (3) options for navigating choice in participating in the activities that contain this content. This allows participants to make the choice to re-join after the content is covered.

An example of an activation warning is: “We are going to cover content regarding suicide. This will take approximately 10 minutes. Please use the self-care strategies you identified at the beginning of the session to make decisions that feel right for you.” An activation warning like this reminds participants of the self-care strategies that they identified and provides space for voice and choice in their learning.

Integrate & Embody.

Take a moment to develop an activation warning for a virtual learning space in your own voice.

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[60] Not all stimulus which activates a person with previous trauma exposure needs to be frightening or traumatic and may be only indirectly or superficially reminiscent of an earlier traumatic incident, such as a scent or a piece of clothing.

How can you use this activation warning in your own facilitation practice?

Facilitating Difficult Conversations

By virtue of being human, participants and facilitators often bring up difficult issues and may even clash in their responses to content. This can be related to storytelling or other content that is shared in the learning space. It is normal to feel discomfort in these instances when difficult conversations take place; however, the more you practice facilitating difficult conversations, the more you'll be able to manage the discomfort. Depending on the content, the conversations may not necessarily get easier, but your ability to press toward more meaningful dialogue will expand and create more trust for all involved. It is therefore important to stay courageously and vulnerably engaged because the journey can certainly be worth the effort. In this section, we will explore preparing, pausing, grounding, and resetting.

Pause.

Going to a place of comfortable self-inquiry, think of a time when you observed or experienced a difficult conversation in a learning environment in which safety or trust was compromised. What did that look like? What did it feel like?

Now think of a time when you observed or experienced a difficult conversation take place in a learning environment in which safety and trust was maintained and/or restored. What did that look like? What did it feel like?

Preparing

While some difficult conversations come up spontaneously as a result of differing experiences or translations of events, content, and stories that take place in the learning space, others will come up in a planned and supported manner that is connected to the learning. Intentionally facilitating difficult conversations can be extremely fruitful and extremely challenging. For this reason, it is helpful to carefully think about the how, what, when, and why of facilitating difficult conversations.

The following list has considerations in preparation for holding a space in which a planned difficult conversation is taking place.

Consider the importance of the conversation (the "why").

- *Do you have the time and intentionality to dedicate to this topic in a way that does not compromise its value?*

Assess your own comfort and ability to authentically hold space for the discussion.

- *Would it be helpful to bring in support?*
- *What other resources might you need?*

Sit in comfort with the discomfort.

- *Do you have the emotional reserves to hold this space in partnership with the community?*
- *Are you willing and able to be uncomfortable?*

Vulnerability and authenticity are the anecdote to defensiveness. Difficult conversations can elicit defensiveness.

- *How are you willing and able to show up?*
- *Can you model vulnerability and authenticity?*

Be aware of any issues that may challenge the trust and safety.

- *How are you willing to show up to emotionally charged conversations?*
- *How can you set up an environment that is centered on safety and trust?*

Reflect.

What are some difficult conversations (in or out of the learning environment) that you take part in regularly? What do they look like?

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What are some strategies you can use (or questions you can ask) to prepare yourself for these difficult conversations?

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Pausing

As much as we can plan to mindfully and organically hold space, there will be times when difficult conversations come up spontaneously. In those moments, it is important to pause. Pausing can look like:

- Reminding yourself to put your mask on. Breathe in and breathe out and let yourself focus on the people before you.
- Making the active choice to respond rather than react.
- Acknowledging your own feelings and recognizing you have a choice as to whether you will act on them.
- Remaining curious. Make the choice to not take remarks personally and not respond angrily or punitively. Remember your de facto power! Reacting has the real impact of dissolving trust.
- Taking a step back to change your perspective. Taking a physical step back can help re-envision and re-engage everyone's humanity and examine the issues, listening for what is not being said (and the underlying meaning).
- Making it a practice to think about the issues that may also be playing a role inside the learning space that may not physically be there but are part of the broader story (e.g., social injustice and social movements, pandemics, national and local contexts).
- Taking a moment to decipher the underlying issues of every difficult conversation. This will help because it may come back up in other ways.

Grounding

A facilitator can use pausing to support grounding. Difficult conversations often elicit strong emotions. Grounding allows us to focus on the present and reality of the current moment. Grounding is the opposite of activation. It makes space for us to be present, even in a difficult conversation. Grounding during a difficult conversation can look like:

- Making space for feelings that you might not be comfortable with in this specific setting. For example, you might feel more comfort with sadness in certain spaces, but in learning spaces you might feel uneasy.
- Noticing and naming the dynamics that are taking place. This helps center the conversation.
- Anchoring yourself with the trust and safety of the participants and holding that space with integrity (e.g., noticing when the power imbalance is compromising the safety and trust of the group, like when participants start to gang up on another participant).
- Responding to needs as they are communicated (e.g., calling for a break if a participant says, “I need a break”).
- Focusing on the present, accepting that multiple realities can co-exist and we are not there to fix.

Resetting

After a difficult conversation, there can be a charge in the air and group members may have unsettled thoughts and feelings. Being able to name the energy in the room without seeking to “fix it” is part of what will help reset the space. Resetting does not mean erasing the difficult conversation or situation that came before. It means making space for these ambiguities and continuing to show up for each other in a more grounded way. Some ways facilitators reset include the following:

- Taking a break. This can help everyone clear the air and reset emotionally.
- Naming the challenges that came up and being clear in supporting the safety and trust of the participants.
- Celebrating or acknowledging the vulnerability and commitment to humble curiosity that allowed for the difficult conversation to take place.
- Communicating support of safe and vulnerable processes that enhance our understanding of one another.
- Leaving space for further discussion, ambiguity, and processing.
- Asking participants what they need to reset (being open and flexible in what those needs may look like).
- Focusing on the present, accepting that multiple realities can co-exist and we are not there to fix.

Integrate & Embody.

What are some pausing strategies you can use and how would you envision using them?

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What are some strategies you can use (or questions you can ask) to prepare yourself for these difficult conversations?

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What are some strategies you can use (or questions you can ask) to prepare yourself for these difficult conversations?

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Storytelling is pervasive – occurring not only in in-person learning, but in virtual learning platforms. In a virtual environment, storytelling can come with the limitation of not being able to check in on participants. Using universal expectations and the tools to help navigate difficult conversations outlined in this chapter will be helpful in creating and sustaining a healing-centered learning space that honors trust and safety.

The next section will specifically examine strategies to respond effectively when a virtual learning space is compromised by an outside source.

"Zoombombing:" Strategies for Reestablishing Safety in Virtual Learning Spaces

Using the pausing, grounding, and resetting strategies in the previous sections will be helpful in attending to the safety and trust when a virtual learning space is compromised. A virtual learning space can even be compromised by outside sources, which has become a concern for many hosts and facilitators as virtual conferencing platforms have become more widely used. These tactics for comprising safety in virtual platforms have gained such notoriety that they have gained a name and a Wiki page of their own. According to Wikipedia:

> *Zoombombing or Zoom raiding is an unwanted, disruptive intrusion, generally by Internet trolls and hackers, into a video conference call. In a typical Zoombombing incident, a teleconferencing session is hijacked by the insertion of material that are lewd, obscene, racist, or antisemitic in nature, typically resulting of the shutdown of the session. The term is associated with and derived from the name of the Zoom videoconferencing software program but it has also been used to refer to the phenomenon on other video conferencing platforms*."[61]

The threat of Zoombombing has elicited significan concern and a slew of blogs on virtual security strategies. While the technical strategies will evolve with the technology, there are some basic practices that may provide relief. Despite this, you may facilitate or participate in spaces that are compromised. It is important to acknowledge the psychological safety or persons who might have been the target of such an attack. Whatever you do, please make sure to name and not sweep under the rug something that is racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, ageist, or antisemitic. Naming these moments does not fix what happened, but it does humanize and help in grounding and resetting the learning space. *Always make time for humanizing and connection when safety is violated*.

In addition to making space for processing these violations, there are strategies for preparing and responding to these infractions. The following is a checklist that creates a space for role assignment if you are working with a team. These strategies are specific to Zoom, but they can be used in other platforms as well.

If you are working with co-facilitators make sure to debrief incidents and learn from one another. This will help provide information on how this was experienced and how to support one another better in the future.

[61] Zoombombing. (2024, September 9). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoombombing

OPTIONAL BUT RECOMMENDED		
☐	**"Lock" the meeting:** When you lock a Zoom Meeting that's already started, no new participants can join, even with an approved meeting ID and password. During a meeting, click "Participants" or the Security Shield at the bottom of your Zoom window. Click the option that says "Lock Meeting.	Have a communication plan in place for people who are dropped due to internet connectivity. Announce it at the beginning.
☐	**Set up a password:** A password adds an additional layer of security. You may wish to share the password in direct emails to your participants.	Can have drawbacks, limiting access to people who need it.
BEST PRACTICES		
☐	**Facilitation team login:** Have hosts and co-host sign-on using the same account or use panelist options. Multiple people on the can be part of the facilitation team using these features.	
☐	**Control screen sharing**: Turn off screen sharing option, which will leave it to Hosts and Co-Hosts on the team.	
☐	**Turn on waiting rooms:** The meeting host can turn on waiting rooms from within the meeting.	
☐	**Mute participants:** Hosts can mute/unmute individual participants or all of them at once. Hosts can block unwanted, distracting, or inappropriate noise from other participants. You can also enable "Mute Upon Entry" in your settings, which is a good option for large meetings.	
☐	**Turn off annotation:** You can disable the annotation feature in your Zoom settings to prevent people from writing all over the screens.	
☐	**Turn off file transfer:** In-meeting file transfer allows people to share files through the in-meeting chat.	

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE TO DISRUPTION		
☐	**Remove participants:** From that Participants menu, you can mouse over a participant's name, and several options will appear, including "Remove".	
☐	**Put participant on hold:** You can put an attendee on hold and their video and audio connections will be disabled momentarily.	
☐	**Disable video:** Hosts can turn someone's video off. This will allow hosts to block unwanted, distracting, or inappropriate gestures on video.	
☐	**Report a user:** Hosts/co-hosts can report users to Zoom's Trust & Safety team, who will review any potential misuse of the platform and take appropriate action.	
OPTIONAL – BUT CAN MAKE WEBCASTS LESS INTERACTIVE		
☐	**Disable private chat:** Zoom has in-meeting chat for everyone or participants can message each other privately. Restrict participants' ability to chat amongst one another while your event is going on and cut back on distractions.	
☐	**Do not allow participants to rename their ID:** The host can disable the ability for participants to rename their onscreen identity.	

Integrate & Embody.

What are some takeaways from this module?

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Are there areas which you will choose to stretch your skills? If so, which ones?

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How do the skills and tools shared in this module connect to peer support competencies and recovery framework?

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Meaning making and storytelling are part of the human experience. Engaging in healing-centered facilitation asks that we are mindful of the dynamics using the lens of universal expectations and provide practical tools to restore safety.

In Chapter Five, we will continue to explore the dynamics behind difficult conversations using the concepts of compassionate boundaries and compassionate accountability. We will examine compassionate accountability as a transformational strengths-based approach and what that looks like in relation to providing grounded feedback.

Module Five: Compassionate Boundaries & Accountability

Compassionate Boundaries

Chapter Four introduced storytelling and difficult conversations as important areas to develop as part of healing-centered virtual facilitation. Difficult conversations can bring up many different feelings, including feelings of discomfort or challenges to our own senses of safety. Some difficult conversations can happen spontaneously and can seemingly catch a person unaware. This chapter focuses on the specific skills that healing-centered facilitators can tap into that enable them to be fully present to hold a space in which compassionate boundaries and compassionate accountability can coexist.

Emotional Granularity – Naming the Feeling

Identifying and naming feelings can help in moments that may present more emotional charge, like difficult conversations. Being able to name feelings can help us to cope with various circumstances, be more empathic to others, and have improved skill to negotiate conflict and get along.[62]

In addition to naming specific feelings and building a robust vocabulary for emotions, being able to recategorize/reframe how you feel can also be helpful. For example, if you are about to facilitate in front of a large audience of people that you do not know and you feel your heart racing, you might categorize your sensations as harmful anxiety ("Oh no, I'm doomed!") or as helpful anticipation ("I'm energized and ready to go!"). Giving these feelings more than one meaning can add nuance to our experiences.

Pause.

Think about a difficult conversation that you have been a part of in your life. What feelings came up?

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[62] Feldman Barrett, L. (2018, June 21). *Try these two smart techniques to help you master your emotions*. TED. https://ideas.ted.com/try-these-two-smart-techniques-to-help-you-master-your-emotions/

Thinking back to that moment, are there ways these feelings could be recategorized/reframed? If so, how?

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What are some feelings which frequently come up (e.g., butterflies before a meeting, frustration at traffic) that can be recategorized/reframed? What would reframing them look like?

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Clarity & Boundaries

"Clear is kind, unclear is unkind" – these are the findings that Brené Brown shares about her research in which she found that most of us avoid clarity because we tell ourselves we're being kind, when what we are actually doing is being unkind and unfair.[63] Brown has described the following dynamics at work when it comes to clarity in communicating:

> - *Feeding people half-truths to make them feel better (which is almost always about making ourselves feel more comfortable) is unkind.*
> - *Not getting clear with others about your expectations because it feels too hard while holding someone accountable or blaming them for not delivering is unkind.*
> - *Talking about people rather than to them is unkind.*
>
> – Brené Brown, "Clear is Kind. Unclear is Unkind."[58]

[63] Brown, B. (2018, October 15). *Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind*. https://brenebrown.com/blog/2018/10/15/clear-is-kind-unclear-is-unkind/

Being able to name our feelings and supporting that process with clarity sets up the conditions for establishing boundaries. Setting very clear boundaries about what we are willing to do, unwilling to do, willing to take on, and unwilling to take on, is an integral part of being compassionate.[64]

Boundaries support our wellbeing and the wellbeing of others in our lives. When we are clear about our boundaries, we can share them with others more openly and honestly. Discussing your boundaries with others can help clarify expectations, support consistent boundaries, and consider exceptions to them. Similar to when we practice naming feelings, engaging in clear communication and understanding our own boundaries can support daily interactions, and it can build muscle memory for when we are engaged in difficult conversations.[65]

Reflect.

Think of a time when you experienced a lack of clarity in communication in a learning space. What feelings came up at that moment?

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How did you navigate the situation to gain more clarity?

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What are things that you do in your life to maintain clarity?

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[64] Brown, B. (2012). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. Avery.
[65] WISE. (n.d.). *Compassionate boundary setting to build compassion resilience*. Advancing Adult Compassion Resilience: A Toolkit for Schools. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://compassionresiliencetoolkit.org/media/Schools_Section6_Intro.pdf

Compassionate Boundaries

As we think about feelings, clarity, and boundaries, we are going to turn to *compassionate boundaries*. Because so many concepts are linked to compassion, let's take a moment to define what we mean when we use the term compassion.

Compassion is "the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering."[66] Compassion is the acknowledgment that not all pain can be 'fixed' or 'solved' but all suffering is made more approachable in a landscape of compassion.[67] When we feel compassion, "our heart rate slows down, we secrete the 'bonding hormone' oxytocin, and regions of the brain linked to empathy, caregiving, and feelings are activated, which often results in our wanting to approach and care for other people."[68]

So, what are compassionate boundaries? Practicing compassionate boundaries encourages us to turn toward the feelings in tension when it is hard to access compassion for another person.[69] It requires "listening to the underlying need that you have and to follow that underlying need up with a request that is both compassionate to self and to the other person involved."[70]

Often when a boundary is crossed, we may feel anger, frustration, or other uncomfortable or personally challenging feelings. This is a common reaction to a perceived threat. What we do with those feelings is how we can transform our response to one with compassionate boundaries.

If we don't allow ourselves to feel our anger or other personally challenging feeling, with kindness and acceptance, we can't create healthy boundaries and this can cause great damage to oneself and others through our words and actions.[71] These emotional cues can be a powerful ally that transforms us from reactivity in difficult conversations into a courageous and clear communication, which respects and honors you and the person.

To respond to a boundary being crossed in a compassionate way, tune into the feeling, the sensation in your body, naming the feeling, place and space it is taking up and acknowledge it with kindness. Instead of shutting down or judging the feeling, acknowledge and thank it for showing up to protect you.

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[66] The Greater Good Science Center (n.d.). *What is compassion?* The University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/compassion/definition.
[67] Feldman, C., & Kuyken, W. (2011). Compassion in the landscape of suffering. *Contemporary Buddhism, 12(*1), 143-155. doi:10.1080/14639947.2011.564831.
[68] The Greater Good Science Center (n.d.). *What is compassion?* The University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/compassion/definition.
[69] Hauck, C. (2017, November 22). *Compassionate boundaries: How to say no with heart*. Mindful. https://www.mindful.org/compassionate-boundaries-say-no-heart/
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.

Get curious, ask yourself – what are my needs, and how can I protect and restore them? Acknowledge the compassionate boundary that comes up and put it into words.

In communicating a boundary with compassion, it is important to think through how the message is best heard/received and considering assumption of positive intent. In doing so, this can enable you to start with appreciation of the person, considering them and holding them with compassion, while finding a compassionate space for yourself to clearly and directly communicate your boundary, while letting go of the outcome.

Compassionate boundaries are not only something we can engage when a boundary is crossed, but they can also be the boundaries that we establish to maintain and sustain our wellness.

Integrate & Embody.

Think back to a time (either in a learning space or at work) in which one of your boundaries was crossed. What feelings came up? What physical sensations do you experience?

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How did you choose to navigate the situation?

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What can you do in a learning space to maintain compassionate boundaries in the midst of a difficult conversation?

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How can you maintain compassionate boundaries in a learning space?

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As you can imagine, being aware of your own feelings and needs enables you to take conscious action about how to communicate with another person.

Compassionate Accountability

The beginning of this chapter introduced compassionate boundaries as a way to ground yourself before, during, and after difficult conversations. Building on this concept, *compassionate accountability* is a way to hold space in a learning environment. This section explores compassionate accountability through the lens of transformation, assumption of positive intent, and a strengths-based focus in providing grounded feedback.

Accountability is often misinterpreted as blame, when actually it is the willingness to accept responsibility. Compassion is a multi-textured response to the human experience that includes kindness, empathy, generosity and acceptance.[72] Compassionate accountability invites us to make room for both, and, while holding a space that upholds our integrity and intent.

Pause.

Going to a place of comfortable self-inquiry, think of a time when you witnessed or experienced accountability in a learning environment. What did it look like? What did it feel like?

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[72] Feldman, C., & Kuyken, W. (2011). Compassion in the landscape of suffering. *Contemporary Buddhism, 12*(1), 143-155. doi:10.1080/14639947.2011.564831.

Now think of a time when you observed or experienced compassion (including kindness, empathy, generosity and acceptance) in a learning. What did it look like? What did it feel like?

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Have you experienced or witnessed compassionate accountability in a learning environment? If so, what did it look like? What are some characteristics that you noticed which enabled this to transpire?

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Transformation, not Transaction

Engaging in compassionate accountability while facilitating difficult conversations in a learning environment requires a transformational approach, one that goes beyond the immediate exchanges and holds space for the discomfort. Transformational learning encourages humble inquiry, engaging in process, not simply an amicable end to the discussion, but taking the time to truly honor the complexity of the situation and sitting with ambiguity.

Research on the brain suggests that while transactional learning can be efficient, transformational learning is more long lasting because it engages the thinking and feeling parts of the brain.[73] Moreover, things that involve feelings (like when a difficult space occurs in a learning space) require a transformational learning process – one that requires stretching beyond comfort.

To step more intentionally into transformation, we will delve deeper into one of the obstacles that can interfere with the potential for holding a space for compassionate accountability and transformational learning – **discomfort**. There can be confusion, fear, and/or reservation with regard to discomfort. In fact, discomfort can often be mistaken for a lack of safety and our reluctance to engage in something that is

[73] Wenger, J. (2014, January 9). *Transformational learning*. Medium. https://medium.com/@johnqshift/transformational-learning-3deb1bb2e865

uncomfortable may stop us. Here are some questions that a facilitator can ask themselves to better understand where the tensions might be during a difficult conversation:

- Is the conversation unsafe, or uncomfortable?
- Is this conversation becoming personal – as in about the person and their values, or is it about behavior? If it's about behavior, then it is probably safe.
- How are my past experiences with difficult conversations influencing how the participants are feeling and interpreting the current situation?
- Are the people engaged in the difficult discussion open to understanding each other's perspective and experience? Are they open to changing behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs? If not, then they may view difficult discussions as a threat and the conversation may need to go on pause or have guided facilitation to navigate safely.

These questions can also be self-reflective for a facilitator to better navigate and understand their own feelings throughout a difficult conversation. Meeting discomfort with compassion, grace, and understanding can pave the road for transformational learning to take place in those moments.

Reflect.

Take a moment to reflect on your response to moments of discomfort in a learning environment. What was your response – physically and emotionally?

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What do you do in your own facilitation practice to support making space for discomfort?

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What are some questions you can ask yourself to work through sitting with discomfort?

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Assuming Positive Intent or Good Will

During difficult conversations and conflict, it is easy to imagine yourself on island onto yourself. When a conflict takes place, facilitators can perhaps even see people step away and go to their respective corners. This movement away from each other can separate participants from the relational aspects that draw them together and it can prevent them from humanizing one another.

The acts of showing up as human and humanizing one another create change, lessening the us-versus-them and right-wrong relationship. By humanizing one another, people interpret things with a more compassionate lens, collaborate better, are better able to speak and hear truths, and can more easily recognize one another's experience.[74] One way we can further humanize is to intentionally ground the learning space in the assumption of positive intent or good will.

Assumption of positive intent means consciously choosing to believe that people are doing the best they can in a given situation. In the context of facilitating a difficult conversation in a learning space, this means making the time and commitment to the person-to-person aspects of what is taking place and letting go of an expectation that one will feel, act, or believe as you want. In addition, there is a respect for the person, who they are, what they bring, and a balancing of that with compassionate accountability.

Assuming positive intent in a situation that may spark a difficult conversation has the potential for building trust and confidence of everyone engaged in the learning space. It also invites everyone into the process of learning without fear of judgement for how learning may show up on any given day. It makes room for our humanity by embracing our vulnerability and unique journey. Since assuming positive intent is not typically encouraged, it is something that requires intentionality and commitment. It also needs to be matched with boundaries and compassionate accountability.

[74] Taylor, J. T., & de León, S. (2018, September). *Healing systems: Reflections on the first four years of Trauma Transformed*. Trauma Transformed. https://traumatransformed.org/documents/Healing-Systems_Reflections-on-Trauma-Transformed.pdf

On Racism, Intent, and Impact

Assuming positive intent is certainly fundamental to humanizing, but does it have limits? Racism is one area in which facilitators need to pause and examine impact. As a nation built on systemic inequity, we have a well-documented history of racism. The impact of racism is evident in many areas of everyday life, making it incumbent upon us to understand that the impact far outweighs intent when it comes to racism.

Assumption of positive intent is also not distributed or experienced the same across all people, meaning that negative intent is often assigned more frequently (and impact more focused on) when it comes to BIPOC. As facilitators navigating discussions that are embedded in our shared humanity, exploring this nuanced space when it comes to impact and intent can be helpful. To this end, we need to be able to center the experience of persons who are most impacted and not the intent in the learning environment.

To put a finer point on it, Paul Gorski of EdChange writes:[75]

> *The impact of unintentional racism—the ways we participate in and bolster racism without actively trying to do so—is indistinguishable from the impact of intentional racism. Imagining myself as a good person, as a progressive person, means little if I am not examining and changing the impact I'm having even through actions I once took without intention. Given the indistinguishable difference between the impact of intentional and unintentional racism, can I really say I have positive intentions if I keep pointing out my positive intentions?*

Integrate & Embody.

Think of a person whom you have encountered in a learning space who you had a reaction to, someone who frustrated and upset you. What thoughts and feelings come up for you?

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[75] Gorski, P. (2017, December 22). *So you think you're an anti-racist? Paradigm adjustments for "well-intentioned" white folks*. Equity Literacy Institute. http://www.edchange.org/handouts/paradigmshifts_race.pdf

Thinking of the same person, absorb and sit with this idea - they were doing the best they can. What thoughts and feelings come up for you?

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How does this change the way that you engage with this person, now and in the future?

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Strengths-Based Perspective

Compassionate accountability, which is both transformational and assumes positive intent, provides a strong basis for navigating difficult conversations. Similarly, a strengths-based perspective can also support a facilitator when navigating a difficult conversation.

A strengths-based perspective is a non-clinical stance that rejects defining or reducing people to deficits, problems, or pathologies. Using a strengths-based perspective requires instead choosing to center on the strengths and resources of the person(s) while holding space for the complex realities that people experience.

Engaging in a strength-based perspective in a learning space builds confidence, self-efficacy, lifelong learning, and purpose. It helps further humanize and transform difficult conversations by focusing on the assets, experiences, and resources that all parties bring to the conversation. A strengths-based perspective is helpful not only at a time of tension, but also as you build trust, relationship, and community in the learning environment.

Integrate & Embody.

Take a moment to develop an activation warning for a virtual learning space in your own voice.

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How can you use this activation warning in your own facilitation practice?

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Grounded Feedback

Providing grounded feedback is one strategy for modeling compassionate accountability. Brené Brown's research on grounded feedback offers that there is a difference between being a knower and *being* right compared to being a learner and *getting it* right.[76] In relation to peer facilitation skills and navigating difficult conversations, grounded feedback can be a tool to generate humble curiosity by asking questions instead of providing answers.

Feedback is an ongoing process in facilitation, with some informal aspects and other more formal aspects. When navigating the nuances of a difficult discussion, a facilitator can either directly or indirectly provide feedback. It's important for facilitators to check in with themselves to gauge their own feelings about receiving feedback.

Before engaging in providing or receiving feedback, it is important to think about where you are and if the space you are in mentally can support you showing up in a way that reflects the outcomes you would like to see.

[76] Brown, B. (2015, April 7). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. Avery.

Assuming that each person involved in the feedback is ready, what are the key ingredients of grounded feedback? How can they be baked into your facilitation so that they do not just appear in times that are challenging, but are instead part of the DNA of your practice? One way to answer this question is to ask yourself what you appreciate in receiving feedback.

Taking a step back, engaging in setting compassionate boundaries asks us to be clear, name the feeling, and understand/honor our own limits – these can be good places to start when considering what you appreciate in receiving feedback. Building on those compassionate boundaries, establishing compassionate accountability (which carries the assumption of positive intent, is strengths-based, and goes beyond transaction into the transformational) creates another layer from which to have a relational and healing response. We can then ask ourselves if we are ready to show up in the way the situation calls for us to show up to provide and receive grounded feedback.

The following information uses universal expectations or trauma-informed principles[77] to explore the features or key ingredients of a discussion meant to provide grounded feedback. The following is a non-comprehensive list of features that might be helpful:

- **Safety and trustworthiness.** This looks like: not getting personal, is psychologically safe, genuine, asks for consent, does not disclose information which is not for them to disclose, open and non-judgmental, checking in with participants, acknowledging each person's humanity, empathic listening without feeling the need to respond, timely (not built on piled up or stored information), and a deep abiding compassion for what is transpiring.
- **Collaboration and mutuality.** This looks like: all sides having a voice in the discussion and exercising choice, building on shared goals, is supportive, relational and examines the role of systemic inequities on the person/situation, exhibiting both self-awareness and humble inquiry, considering the person and their lived experience, and tapping into the humanity of everyone involved.
- **Empowers and uses "power with."** This looks like: examining the power differentials, using opportunities to leverage power, providing helpful and important feedback in such a way that the person presented with the information can actually act on the information provided, building on strengths of the person(s), providing clear and consistent communication, assuming positive intent, and fostering growth.

[77] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). *SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach*. United States Department of Health and Human Services. https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma14-4884.pdf

Are there other features that show up in grounded feedback for you? What are features that you have experienced and appreciated in receiving feedback?

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Brené Brown provides these considerations for knowing when you are ready to provide grounded feedback:

- *When I'm ready to sit next to you rather than across from you.*
- *When I'm willing to put the problem in front of us rather than between us (or sliding it toward you).*
- *When I'm ready to listen ask questions, and accept that I may not fully understand the issue.*
- *When I want to acknowledge what you do well instead of picking apart your mistakes.*
- *When I recognize your strengths and how you can use them to address your challenges.*
- *When I can hold you accountable without shaming or blaming you.*
- *When I'm willing to own my part.*
- *When I can genuinely thank you for your efforts rather than criticize you for your failings.*
- *When I can talk about how resolving these challenges will lead to your growth and opportunity.*
- *When I can model the vulnerability and openness that I expect to see from you.*

– Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*

Integrate & Embody.

Building on Brené Brown's list on the previous page, what are some questions that you ask yourself to know that you are ready to provide grounded feedback?

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Going to a place of comfortable self-inquiry, think of a time when you received feedback in a work or learning environment that felt unhelpful. How could the feedback been posed in a more helpful, more grounded way?

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Now think of a time when you observed or experienced or observed grounded feedback. What are some elements of that discussion that resonated with you?

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Types of Virtual Learning Opportunities

Knowing our own limitations (or compassionate boundaries) and being accountable to what we can and cannot do with integrity can inform the types of virtual learning opportunities a facilitator may engage. Having said that, there are multiple learning and support modalities that can be accomplished in virtual platforms. In this section, we provide a sampling of the types of learning and support modalities that can be accomplished online as well as healing-centered considerations which might accompany them.

Webinars

A webinar is a large learning forum, which can be either pre-recorded or live. A webinar is usually hosted or facilitated by someone with experience or knowledge based in the specific content they are delivering. The core purpose of a webinar is to bring a learning experience to an audience using an online platform. Webinars can be large or small, open or closed invitation, depending on the objectives and activities involved in the webinar and a variety of other factors. The typical length of a webinar can range anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour and a half, but can extend beyond that as well.

The choice to pre-record or host a live session may also depend on accessibility and the desire to reach a broader audience. For example, if someone is seeking to place the recorded webinar on their website, a broader audience who is able to access the material at any time might be reached, whereas a smaller audience may be the goal for a live session. With this level of flexibility and choice, many facilitators and hosts have started to provide both options to their audiences, placing live recordings on a website to access later.

While webinars are effective in attaining a broader reach, one drawback is that it can be a challenge to build connection with the audience. Moreover, it is harder for interpersonal skills to come across in the same way. One of the tools that facilitators lean on to navigate this connection gap is to use breakout rooms, the chat box, and open-ended questions throughout that can be answered live or in the chat. For a recorded webinar, the connection and knowledge integration gap can be overcome with intentional integration of self-reflective activities.

Peer Support Groups[78]

There are many different group types and formats for virtual peer support groups, including:

- Open format, also known as drop-in groups;
- Closed format, where people bond over a shared topic or task and want to keep it closed to build familiarity both with the content and with one another; and
- Hybrid format, where groups may be open but centered in a specific type of support or task.

The ideal size for peer support groups is between 10-12 participants. If there are more than 12 participants, it might warrant having a co-facilitator so that breakout rooms can be used to best uphold the goal of mutual support. The length and the frequency in which these groups meet can vary on the needs and shared vision of the members.

[78] The information in this section is adapted from: *Tips for facilitating online peer support groups*. (2023, August 19). APS Virtual Learning Community. https://aps-community.org/tips-for-facilitating-online-groups/

Some peer facilitators have found that two facilitators is a better and more manageable setup because of the relational nature of support groups. In this configuration, one person can be focused on the engagement and another supporting the technology. However, roles can vary based on the strengths, comfort, and technical knowledge of the facilitators. Peer supporters facilitating groups are an equal member of the group with the added responsibilities of opening up the group, orienting everyone to the technology, providing an overview of the format, striving to make the space accessible and welcoming for everyone, and closing the group.

Support groups will require a password to the online platform to ensure the safety and confidentiality of the group. Clearly communicating the efforts made to ensure the participants' safety will build trust and transparency. To ensure psychological safety, some social support groups opt to use group agreements to establish consensus around expectations. Other strategies that enable safe and equitable group participation include members opening with topics or needs if they have something they want to discuss or share.

In the words of a peer supporter who has facilitated group sessions:[79]

> *We're all peers. Especially when we're in the role of the facilitator. Each of us have things going on too. If we feel overly responsible for making the group successful, we take away the group's ownership of and responsibility for its own success. We can't do it all. We can always do our best but we don't need to be perfect. As peers, it is important for us to be and show that we are human.*

Sacred Spaces

Sacred spaces are different from support groups which are based in self-identification and come together because of lived experience. Sacred spaces invite participants to step out of their daily roles and obligations into a safe and accepting environment in which they can explore their healing. Sacred spaces are often referred to as circles, some are called healing circles, coming from historical and cultural ties to specific communities. Specifically, healing circles have deep roots in Native American, First Nation, and indigenous people, while also having cultural ties to the Chinese yin/yang, Hindu and Buddhist mandalas, the Celtic tree of life, and Stonehenge, to name just a few.

Typically held in-person, scared spaces have undergone a transformation to virtual platforms in order to meet the needs of communities seeking safe spaces in which relationships can be built, voices honored and unity restored. Similar to what happens

[79] *Tips for facilitating online peer support groups*. (2023, August 19). APS Virtual Learning Community. https://aps-community.org/tips-for-facilitating-online-groups/

in-person, the process is, at its essence, story sharing, which brings together people as equals to have open exchanges about difficult issues or painful experiences in an atmosphere of respect and concern for everyone.
Sacred spaces have also been used as a place to find peace during conflict. Recently, restorative justice practices have been integrated into sacred spaces as a means for addressing the needs of survivors of crime to empower them to achieve emotional healing, as well as racial healing.

Although not a standardized format by any means, common practice for a sacred space includes four sections: (1) a welcome, (2) a heart-sharing round, (3) a learning/harvesting round, and (4) a close. Certain rituals help initiate and close the sacred space. This can include lighting and blowing out a candle, ringing of a bell or chime at the beginning and end, or reading a poem. During the heart round, each person has the opportunity to speak to what is most on their heart in the moment. At its most sacred, this is a moment of authenticity, vulnerability, and often self-discovery.

A key feature of a sacred space is that everyone sits in a circle and an item called a "talking piece" is used to ensure each participant gets uninterrupted time to share with the group; the person holding the object is the only one who may speak. In a virtual format, verbal and visual cues are used instead. Below are some alternatives of how this might take place:

- Hold their talking piece up so it is visible, which indicates they wish to speak.
- Say, "I'm passing the talking piece to [name]."
- Pick up their talking piece from an imaginary center and say "I'm picking up the talking piece." Then say "I'm returning the piece to the center" when finished.
- Raise hands to indicate they wish to speak—either physically or using the raise hand feature within Zoom.

Using methods like this, the talking piece is passed from person to person, and everyone is expected to respect others and be sensitive to their experiences as they share their stories. Participants listen openly without question or judgment.

While a peer facilitator may not be expected to hold a sacred space in the capacity of their work, it is important to understand the cultural relevance, the way that these practices are upheld today in virtual formats and serve multiple purposes.

Meetings

Since social distancing and quarantining during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, meetings have become the most common use for a virtual platform. While some may have been familiar with virtual platforms in the context of webinars, they had

not become a regular or daily use for everything from office meetings to time with family until recently. This has caused a rush of learning new skills and constant learning for teams that are working together for a common goal. Understanding this wave of usage may cause fatigue, be overwhelming, and worsen equity gaps, it is critical that we are mindful of how we use these virtual tools when engaging in shared work.

As with other concepts in this chapter, compassionate boundaries are helpful in using virtual platforms for meetings when working with a team. This may look like:

- Naming the purpose, feelings, and comfort level around using the virtual platform and providing training and orientation for everyone who will be working together;
- Being clear as a team on how to use a virtual platform, when to use it, and limitations in the functionality that may interfere with connection and teamwork (and finding avenues to remedy those gaps); and
- Setting clear boundaries around how the virtual platform is implemented and modeling good use standards which support self and collective care.

In addition to collectively establishing compassionate boundaries for self and for the team, it is helpful to keep the flow of meetings purposeful and engaging. Starting meetings by acknowledging people's time and using an icebreaker or check-in are helpful in minimizing distractions and providing human connection. Be mindful of the time that participants have dedicated to attending the meeting and make it only as long as what is needed to achieve the purpose thoughtfully and with breaks if needed. A guideline such as 10 minutes of break for every hour on a virtual platform can be helpful. If meetings end early, give back the time.

Using tools such as sharing your screen, polling, chat, breakout rooms, white board annotation, and reactions can also make for a more engaging meeting. Below are suggestions of ways that these features can be used in meetings:

- Screen share is an option that enables participants to look at a common document. It may be helpful initially to all look at the same document (agenda, for example), but it is not advisable to remain drilled in examining and working on a document as it can be hard on the eyes and exhausting.
- Polling can be an efficient way to take the temperature of the room, check in on the content knowledge, and/or connect back to the content of the meeting.
- White board annotation can be used to brainstorm ideas in a team. This can be expanded to co-annotation so that participants at the meeting can use the white board at the same time. White board writing can be saved and downloaded at the end of the meeting, ensuring you capture the ideas shared at the meeting.

- Chat box is very helpful for providing connection space for participants. It is also helpful in providing a space for people to ask questions, communicate tech issues and have private as well as group conversations during the meeting.
- Breakout rooms can be used to generate ideas, provide small group discussion before making a decision, and break up questions or work into smaller pieces.

While using virtual platforms to host meetings may not be new to peer facilitators, the way one chooses to use these tools and platforms can reflect much more than experience. It can also reflect values. As such, it can be helpful to use healing-centered facilitation practices to center yourself as you interact with/on these virtual platforms in even the daily function of having meetings.

Universal Engagement Practices

In each virtual opportunity presented in the previous section, there are some universal approaches to engagement that can be applied. Below are some practices that can apply to all of these formats:

- Engage participants as soon as possible, encouraging them to use the tools on the platform. This can support increased engagement later on.
- Provide a brief orientation to the virtual platform and options for reaching out in case they experience challenges with their technology.
- Throughout the time with participants, provide an open and welcoming environment, in which they feel respected and that their voice matters.
- Use digital equity practices to ensure access and increase feelings of trust and safety.
- Communicate expectations, such as group agreements and format clearly.
- Encourage choice and voice, which includes respecting the choice to not use video.
- Provide closure for the group, like a simple debrief or closing practice (if possible).

Integrate & Embody.

What are some takeaways from this module?

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Are there areas which you will choose to stretch your skills? If so, which ones?

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How do the skills and tools shared in this module connect to peer support competencies and recovery framework?

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We end this chapter with a few final thoughts on difficult discussions and the practices that help navigate them. Some difficult discussions stem from deeply embedded historic inequities, and there will be a lack of closure. Closure is not the goal, and difficult discussions do not need to be put out like fires or wrapped up in a bow. A healing-centered approach to difficult conversations is engaged in the process and has no easy solutions. The tools and concepts offered up in this chapter are meant to ground and stabilize facilitators in their healing-centered facilitation practice.

Chapter Six explores healing, how healing happens in relationship, the connection healing has to learning and empathy, and how healing plays a role in the learning space.

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Module Six: Healing Relationships

Healing Relationship with Self

A lack of compassionate boundaries and accountability often reflects a complicated truth about the relationship we have with ourselves and others. This chapter starts with a focus on cultivating and supporting a healing relationship to self.

Healing can mean many things to many people. At its core, healing is the process of restoring health, wellbeing, soundness and spiritual wholeness. To take a bit further, healing is "the process of bringing together aspects of one's self, body-mind-spirit, at deeper levels of inner knowing, leading towards integration and balance with each aspect having equal importance and value."[80] Healing is a journey and for many of us it includes making meaning and establishing a balanced integration of our lived experience.

Pause.

Think about healing. What does it mean to you?

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What does healing look like, feel like, taste like, sound like?

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[80] Dossey, B.M., Keegan, L., & Guzzetta, C.E. (2005). *Holistic nursing: A handbook for practice*. 4th ed. Jones & Bartlett Publishers.

What are the practices you engage in everyday to create and sustain a sense of healing?

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Healing is an Inside Job

Healing asks us to reconnect to the deepest part of ourselves – to acknowledge and listen empathically to our pain, as well as our joy. Healing calls for us to honor our struggles, not dismiss them. One of the most profound struggles that can reside in us is the struggle to create a loving and healing relationship with ourselves. This can happen for various reasons, such as societal norms, traumatic experience, and/or lack of support or models for having a loving and healing relationship with self. Bringing attention, intention, self-compassion, and commitment to a loving and healing relationship with yourself can be transformational, perhaps even a radical act of resistance.

For people who identify with a group which experiences systemic inequities, having a healing relationship with yourself can be hard work. Systemic racism that pathologizes, criminalizes, blames, and gaslights people can create barriers to having a loving and healing relationship with yourself. The same can be said for systemic sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, ableism, and xenophobia. These systemic forms of oppression often implicitly or explicitly promote messages that diminish the features of people in these communities, with many experiencing the intersection of multiple identities. Limited access to healing and healing resources adds yet another layer, which is why loving and healing can not only be a radical act of resistance but *resilience embodied*.

Taking all of this into account, what does it look like to bring attention, intention, self-compassion, and commitment to ourselves? It goes beyond bubble baths, pedicures, and the surface-level self-care advertisements. It is mindfully engaging in kinder, more compassionate, self-talk, having positive thoughts and feelings about yourself – not based on what you do or how you produce, but based on who you are as a person. Bringing attention to this relationship and approaching it with intentionality by mindfully engaging in the promotion of your wellness and fostering growth are parts of having a healing relationship with yourself.

Reflect.

Think back to a time when you were in elementary school or younger. Hold that image of yourself. In your own words, tell that younger version of you how important it is to love themselves and invite them to love themselves. What did that look and feel like?

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When you think of the relationship that you have with yourself, what feelings come up?

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What are some practices or rituals you put in place to sustain a healing relationship with yourself?

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Supportive Touch

Building on the practice and understanding in self-compassion from Chapter Two, this section explores how our brain and our bodies respond to touch – and how supportive touch can strengthen and heal our relationship to self. In her work on self-compassion, Kristen Neff points to the care-giving system that we tap into when we attend to our own pain. When we attend to our pain or the pain of others, showing care and compassion either verbally or through a loving touch, our brains release oxytocin. This release

increases feelings of trust, calm, safety, generosity, compassion for ourselves, and connectedness.[81]

In contrast, when we are self-critical, the part of our brain that responds is the amygdala, which is responsible for responding to threats, including emotional threats by and to ourselves. When the amygdala is activated, it responds through an increased heart rate, adrenaline and cortisol – the stress hormone.[82] While our body's stress response was designed to keep us safe from threats, and is helpful in the short-term, it can have harmful effects after prolonged periods of time.

Expressing self-compassion and kindness to ourselves can actually reduce cortisol levels and change our heart rate, allowing us to become less defensive and more open. Having a self-compassion practice can effectively change our body chemistry. One way we can intentionally and physically build a stronger, more compassionate, and more healing connection to ourselves is through the practice of supportive touch.

Hand-on-Heart Supportive Touch Exercise (by Dr. Kristin Neff)

The following is a guided exercise on supportive touch, provided by Kristen Neff.[83] Try it on for size and adjust it to your comfort level. Acknowledge your own comfort with bodily touch and go to a place that is comfortable.

One easy way to care for and comfort yourself when you're feeling badly is to give yourself supportive touch. Touch activates the care system and the parasympathetic nervous system to help us calm down and feel safe. It may feel awkward or embarrassing at first, but your body doesn't know that. It just responds to the physical gesture of warmth and care, just as a baby responds to being cuddled in its mother's arms. Our skin is an incredibly sensitive organ. Research indicates that physical touch releases oxytocin, provides a sense of security, soothes distressing emotions, and calms cardiovascular stress. So why not try it?

You might like to try putting your hand on your body during difficult periods several times a day for a period of at least a week.

[81] Neff, K. (2011, June 27). *The chemicals of care: How self-compassion manifests in our bodies*. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/self-compassion_b_884665
[82] Ibid.
[83] Neff, K. (n.d.). *Exercise 4: Supportive touch*. Self-Compassion. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://self-compassion.org/exercise-4-supportive-touch/

Hand-on-Heart

- When you notice you're under stress, take 2-3 deep satisfying breaths.
- Gently place your hand over your heart, feeling the gentle pressure and warmth of your hand. If you wish, place both hands on your chest, noticing the difference between one and two hands.
- Feel the touch of you hand on your chest. If you wish, you could make small circles with your hand on your chest.
- Feel the natural rising and falling of your chest as you breathe in and as you breathe out.
- Linger with the feeling for as long as you like.

Some people feel uneasy putting a hand over the heart. Feel free to explore where gentle touch feels soothing on your body. Some other possibilities are:

- One hand on your cheek;
- Cradling your face in your hands;
- Gently stroking your arms;
- Crossing your arms and giving a gentle squeeze;
- Gently rubbing your chest, or using circular movements;
- Hand on your abdomen;
- One hand on your abdomen and one over heart; or
- Cupping one hand in the other in your lap.

Hopefully you'll start to develop the habit of physically comforting yourself when needed, taking full advantage of this surprisingly simple and straightforward way to be kind to ourselves.

Integrate & Embody.

How much attention and intention do you place on the relationship you have with yourself?

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What do you do to sustain and feed your relationship with yourself?

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What impact does having a healing relationship with yourself have on your facilitation and the way you can hold a healing-centered learning space?

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How do can you maintain a healing relationship with yourself in a learning space?

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Being able to have a healing relationship with yourself can be something that will enable you to be more fully present in your facilitation.

Healing Happens in Relationship

Building on developing a healing relationship with self, this section gets curious about the healing that can take place in relationships and how that can translate into a learning space. In the remainder of this chapter, we will examine relational healing, empathy, the role of environment, and healing as a form of justice.

Relationships can be healing and relationships can be harmful. Having a universal expectation around trauma, or holding space for diverse life experiences inside a learning environment, means enhancing our own understanding about the impact trauma can have on relationships. This can certainly be the case with complex trauma, which involves both exposure to multiple traumatic events—often of an invasive,

interpersonal nature—and the wide-ranging, long-term effects of this exposure.[84] This type of trauma often occurs within a relationship to a caregiver or other trust-based relationship.

This experience affects the person's relationship to themselves (e.g., questioning their ability to trust themselves or seeing themselves as bad, not good enough, or undeserving) and relationship with others (e.g., having difficulty trusting, questioning the reliability of others, or having an overwhelming feeling that the world is an unsafe place). These feelings can extend into all areas of life, including daily functions such as learning.

While there are other potential effects on the survivor's body, brain, thinking, behavior and emotions (to name a few), for the purpose of this work, this section will focus on the impact of complex trauma on relationships, relational healing, and why these experiences are important in the peer facilitator role.

For many survivors, access to knowledge can represent access to healing. As Chapter Three introduced, access to words help create meaning and further create connections to their own healing journey. Healing learning environments can support this process by focusing on creating a space where trust, "power with," voice, choice, and mutuality exist so that the words and meaning the person is making can safely take root. Healing-centered peer facilitators recognize that the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the people in the learning space are of paramount importance, and that it is very challenging to learn without wellbeing present in the space.

Pause.

Think of a relationship that has been healing in your life. What does that relationship feel and look like?

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[84] *Complex trauma*. (n.d.). The National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/complex-trauma

What are the characteristics (or skills that you observe) which make it a healing relationship?

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Have you experienced a healing relationship in the context of learning? If so, what did it look like? What are some characteristics that you noticed which enabled this to transpire?

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Healing relationships operate from a position of trust, where clear communication and power with are consistently sustained and attended to, compassionate accountability and boundaries are respected, and people's needs and humanity are honored. While the preceding chapters have delved into these concepts, we must also consider the underlying skills and considerations that sustain these practices – (1) empathy, (2) understanding of context, and (3) healing justice.

Empathy before Education

Empathy is a powerful tool for human connection. It underpins many of the concepts introduced already, such as holding space, being anti-racist, supporting "power with," and practicing compassionate accountability (to name a few). Empathy does not require a person to have the same experience; rather, it is the ability and intentional choice to connect without seeking to fix or feel sorry for the person.

> *"It's the brave choice to be with someone in their darkness—not to race to turn on the light so we feel better."*
> – Brené Brown, Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.

Broken down into actionable skills empathy requires the following:

- **Perspective taking** involves taking another person's perspective, while setting aside one's own feelings and reactions. Asking yourself: Am I assuming positive intent? Am I using a strengths-based perspective?
- **Being nonjudgmental** involves taking a moment to step back and listen without judgment, choosing to sit with instead of respond to. Asking yourself: What are the things that I need to learn or better understand? Am I sitting with humble inquiry?
- **Understanding the other person's feelings** involves internally acknowledging that each person's experiences are their own while trying to connect to what the person is feeling. Asking yourself: What more do I need to learn and understand about how other people are reacting to or perceiving the situation?
- **Communicating your understanding** involves reflecting back what you hear, and being committed to a process and building of trust, instead of the short-term goal of fixing. Asking yourself: What more do I need to learn about how I communicate to others that I hear them, even though I'm experiencing my own emotions?
- **Mindfulness** involves becoming more focused in the present moment, such that we can pay attention to ourselves and others more readily. Think about compassion being a practice that helps build empathy and mindfulness being the key that unlocks both empathy and compassion.

Reflect.

Take a moment to reflect on a time when someone expressed empathy towards you in a learning environment or workplace. What was your response – physically and emotionally?

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What are some characteristics that stood out to you about the way the person expressed empathy?

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What are some ways that you can build empathy in a learning space?

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When modeled in a learning environment, empathy can build a positive learning culture by building relationship with and among everyone in the learning environment, strengthen our self-awareness muscles as facilitators, build community and amplify power with.[85]

Many of the strategies recommended by educators and facilitators for building empathy in a virtual learning environment are strategies we have been touched upon in other ways in previous chapters; however, they are worth repeating and reframing:

- Encourage and make space for participant-to-participant processing and meaning making. This can be done in chat box, breakout rooms, and group debriefing of activities.
- Build self and participant-to-participant reflection into the independent and collective learning content. Making time to reflect allows each person to transform the content into knowledge that they can feel in their bones by putting it into their own words and applying it to their own lived experience. This builds self-awareness and expands the participant's worldview when done in groups.
- Provide invitations to participate in experiential learning, where participants can bring in their own experience.
- Build a sense of community by making space for each person to fully bring themselves into the learning environment, acknowledging and engaging each participant's humanity, and cultivating a sense of joy and camaraderie.

[85] Owen, L. (2015, November 11). *Empathy in the classroom: Why should I care?* Edutopia. https://www.edutopia.org/blog/empathy-classroom-why-should-i-care-lauren-owen

- Develop user-centric learning through many modes (music, art, etc.,) which provides participants opportunities to share their experience. Express a genuine desire to learn more about participants, encouraging voice and choice.
- Use quick and efficient temperature checks to assess how participants are engaging the material.
- Ask participants to share their feedback – what worked, what didn't work, and when they felt the "volume" needed to be turned up or down.
- Model empathy in small and big ways. Regularly taking time to check-in and check-out and consistently building on relationships.

Virtual platforms have evolved from a space where information is exchanged to a space in which people can engage in more nuanced and dynamic human interactions. The more we use virtual platforms, the more our facilitation techniques (and the platforms themselves) will evolve – supporting our need to connect and empathize, creating and sustaining our humanity while learning.

> *"Looking back, I wonder if I had been one of her White kids would she have asked me: "What's wrong?" Would she have wondered if I was hurting? I wonder. I wonder if her racist ideas chalked up my resistance to my Blackness and therefore categorized it as misbehavior, not distress. With racist teachers misbehaving kids of color do not receive empathy and legitimacy. We receive orders and punishments and "no excuses," as if we are adults. The Black child is ill-treated like an adult, and the Black adult is ill-treated like a child."*
>
> – Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*

For further reading on how Ibram X. Kendi's work applies to education, read "How Ibram X. Kendi's Definition of Antiracism Applies to Schools" by Katrina Schwartz.[86]

Environment

Thinking of the "how" and "where" people come into a learning space is important. For example, if someone came into a learning space after just being pulled over and getting a ticket, that experience is likely going to come in with them. While that is an immediate example, we know that people have largely been stewing in environments for a lot longer than the hour or two that came before they entered in the learning space. They have been experiencing their environments in a variety of ways through messages (spoken and unspoken), lived experience, and memories past and present. Sometimes we call that a person's context, or where they come from. Where they come from builds their beliefs - their beliefs in themselves, in others, and in the world around them.

[86] Schwartz, K. (2019, December 18). *How Ibram X. Kendi's definition of antiracism applies to schools*. MindShift. https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/54999/how-ibram-x-kendis-definition-of-antiracism-applies-to-schools

Being in a learning environment can feel unsafe for some, safe for others, and everything in between. Thinking about and having empathy for people who feel apprehension in learning environments is not always something that is taught. Again, it is about rising to where people need you to be. They need you to have humble curiosity and empathy about the "where," "what," and "how" of them coming into the learning space.

Healing in relationship provides a foundation from which to think about this. Just as we may find that some of the answers to those internal questions reflect how relationships can harm, relationships can also heal. When we stop to empathize, think about the environments from which people come, and do the intentional work of rising to where people need you to be, we humanize the learning, provide connection, and act as a source of relational healing.

Having an expansive and inclusive approach requires us to step into humble inquiry and ask ourselves the following about the context participants may come from:

- What are some of the messages received in these settings?
- Who was included and how?
- Who was predominately portrayed?
- Whose history was learned in these environments?
- Who was telling the stories?
- Who was held accountable? Who was not?
- How was agency supported?
- How was self-efficacy supported?
- How was connection supported?
- How was power treated? Was it hoarded? Was it power over or power with? What did those with power look like? Without?
- How was information being shared? How accessible was it?
- How was the invitation to engage being extended?
- Was healing accessible in these environments? Were there healing relationships established?
- Most importantly, what can we do, as a peer facilitator in a learning space, to support healing when participants come from environments where there have been obstacles to healing?

Integrate & Embody.

What are some thoughts and feelings that come up for you in reading the questions referenced above?

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Are there any other questions that were not listed that you would ask yourself to step into humble inquiry regarding where, what and how people's environment may show up in a learning space?

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What can you do to encourage healing in relationship within a learning space that you facilitate?

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Healing Justice

Created by Cara Page and the Kindred Healing Justice Collective, "healing justice...identifies how we can holistically respond to and intervene on generational trauma and violence, and to bring collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies, hearts and minds."[87] Healing justice is an active framework which lifts up resiliency and survival practices that center the collective

[87] Cara Page, Kindred: Southern Healing Justice Collective, *as cited in* Barojas, Y, & Rey, E. (n.d.). *Healing justice*. SoCal Grantmakers. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://socalgrantmakers.org/resources/healing-justice.

safety and emotional, physical, spiritual, environmental and mental wellbeing of communities. Watch this video on healing justice.[88]

Peer supporters are change agents with a history and a movement, grounded in advancing equity and justice for people with lived experience. Walking with people on their journey, peer supporters create healing relationships that are based in recovery principles. The recovery principles and the history of this movement directly implicate justice as a tool for healing and healing as a tool for justice. To say it another way, healing and justice are joined and inseparable in the work that peer supporters do every day. So, how does that translate into facilitation in a learning space?

There are many ways for healing justice can be applied in a learning space.[89] One way to think about healing justice in the context of peer facilitation is that it is a way of tapping into the resilience and lived experience of each person, while centering the collective safety and the emotional, physical, spiritual, environmental and mental wellbeing of the learning community.[90] It is moving from change agent into community agency for collective wellness, growth, and resilience with mutuality. The following principles on healing justice are based in healing in community and specific to peer facilitators:[91]

- Healing justice recognizes how generational, historical, insidious, and racial trauma impact people and the movement for recovery. Peer facilitator involvement in recovery movement work may also mean continually interrupting, challenging, witnessing, and being directly affected by the very things that may have informed their lived experience. It is important to acknowledge this and make space for restoration, repair, and reconnection.
- Healing justice lifts up practices that support resilience, wellness, connection, and safety, strengthening within and across movements. Peer facilitators acknowledge the diverse and intersectional lived experience of people and understand the importance of constantly engaging in deep conversation with racial, LGBTQ, disability, and other justice movements.
- Healing justice is not cookie cutter work. It has to be grounded in a community's particular experiences, traditions, and needs, and it has to be able to shift and change. Peer facilitators are able to shift, rising to where people need them to be.
- Healing justice is relational work that can and will experience conflict. Peer facilitators show up to this work tending to conflict and struggle in transformative

[88] Good Morning America. (2020, July 24). *What is 'Healing Justice'? I GMA Digital* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODhRcnhuarQ
[89] *Healing justice: Building power, transforming movements*. (n.d.). Astrea Lesbian Foundation Justice. https://www.astraeafoundation.org/microsites/healingjustice/index
[90] Ibid.
[91] Adapted from *Healing justice: Building power, transforming movements*. (n.d.). Astrea Lesbian Foundation Justice. https://www.astraeafoundation.org/microsites/healingjustice/index

ways (see Chapters 4 and 5). Peer supporters can hold space for compassion for the truth of past and present pain, cultivating space for these intensities to be witnessed and expressed while moving closer together (rather than further apart).

From the standpoint of peer facilitation, healing justice provides the added layer of not only acknowledging trauma, but healing in community with a specific aim of advancing liberation from systems, policies, and practices that are dehumanizing.

Healing justice offers a lens with which to integrate peer support movement work. Examining the way that peer facilitation contributes to justice can be empowering and can open up opportunities for building community in a learning space.

A peer supporter can support healing in community within a learning space by facilitating:

- Connection between others and within self (Chapter 1), while instilling hope;
- Co-creation and holding space, which promotes safety, trust, and vulnerability in the learning community;
- Consent, which cultivates power with rather than power over the community;
- Context, through storytelling and meaning making in community;
- Communication with clarity and compassion;
- Cohesion among group members; and
- Co-creating of a common language or shared values.

Adapted from Trauma Transformed and Pacific Southwest MHTTC

Integrate & Embody.

Take a moment to think about your own learning experiences. How have they integrated your lived experience? How have they modeled healing justice?

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How would a more just and healing learning space feel?

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How can you envision yourself facilitating a more just and healing learning space?

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Facilitating Connection & Healing in Virtual Learning

There are multiple trainings and tips that are developed to make learning experiences more interactive. This section is not going to be focused on engagement strategies, but rather on practical strategies that can support connection and healing when addressing two of the biggest challenges in virtual platforms: (1) Zoom fatigue and (2) fear of failure.

Preventing Zoom Fatigue

First and foremost, it is important to validate that our engagement in virtual platforms does require more mental energy than a typical face-to-face meeting. We are expending more mental and emotional energy trying to engage and fully attend to what is going on. We have less cues to work with than we do in person, so our brains are trying to do the work of connecting with people and we have much less information to work with. The following are some challenges and strategies for addressing Zoom fatigue.

- One of the biggest contributors to Zoom fatigue is keeping the self-view feature open during meetings. This preoccupies our minds with how we present ourselves and inhibits our ability to interact authentically. To prevent this, you can either turn off self-view or turn off your camera. Welcome participants to do the same from time to time, and teach them how.

Continues on next page.

- Too much time in front of a screen limits movement and strains our eyes (less blinking causes more dryness). To prevent this, try to create a reasonable ratio for engagement and break cycles. One general guideline can be scheduling one 10-15-minute break for every hour of engagement.
- Moving in and out of online activities can be disorienting. Account for more time for interactive engagement between participants. This allows them to shift gears and reset visually. You can also name the times when you and your participants need a pause in the form of breathing deeply, stretching or hydrating.
- Engaging multiple people at the same time is not how we generally interact in person. In person, we are able to shift from one person to the next, turn our bodies to face one another, and be more intentional. Encourage participants to adjust from gallery to speaker view to reduce stimuli. You can also use the pinning feature to pin the image of people you want to focus on.
- Staying still or centering yourself in one place in front of a computer can contribute to bodily exhaustion. As a facilitator, try to diversify your settings to the extent possible. You can also encourage group movement during breaks or as a mindfulness exercise. Group exercise, no matter how minor, can bring people together in breath and intention. In addition, group movement can also bring awareness to where certain feelings reside within our own bodies (which can be powerful for trauma-informed spaces). Naming and sharing that experience with participants can be both healing and facilitate connection.

Embracing the Spirit of Failing Forward Together

Technology can be daunting, and shame can feast on our own desires to create the appearance of perfection. Nothing can set the stage for shame more than trying something new in front of other people with a platform that is unfamiliar. What often gets lost in the story we tell ourselves is that we grow and allow for others to grow when we step into vulnerability and make space to name our mistakes, shortcomings, and learning. By sharing our failures, we embolden others to do the same. Technology (and the shift to virtual platforms specifically) provides an excellent opportunity to embrace failing forward together. Some strategies for embracing failing forward in virtual learning spaces are:

- Acknowledge that technology will not always operate in the ways we anticipate, and having empathy and compassion for yourself can bring calm and make space for humanity – bringing everyone closer together.

- Accept that failing in our efforts to facilitate is part of the process. Taking risks can set up an atmosphere of vulnerability and imperfection, which can be healing and strip the shame away from trying and vocalizing participation.
- Be authentic and name the feelings and the challenges in learning a new platform.
- Try not to personalize or see a failure as a permanent mark on you as a facilitator. This can come up in a variety of ways, whether navigating technology or difficult conversations. It is critical that we do not define ourselves by our failures and practice self-compassion.
- Fail fast and do not continue to invest too much energy and time based on the time and energy already spent. Imagine spending a lot of time preparing an activity and when the time comes, technology issues do not allow for the activity to happen. It is better to move forward.

Despite our best attempts to fade into the background and facilitate a healing-centered learning space, our egos will often get in the way. Egos are not bad, despite what is often portrayed; having an ego helps preserve our self-image, self-concept, and self-worth. Sometimes though, particularly when confronted with shame, blame, or embarrassment, ego can get in the way. When that happens, the concern you have for yourself overrides what actually may be happening in reality. Acknowledging our own humanity as facilitators can give us and others permission to fail forward together.

Integrate & Embody.

What are some takeaways from this module?

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Are there areas which you will choose to stretch your skills? If so, which ones?

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How do the skills and tools shared in this module connect to peer support competencies and recovery framework?

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Having a healing relationship with yourself and facilitating a healing relationship in a learning environment can be transformational. It can counter personal histories and systemic inequities. It requires empathy and supports resilience. In Chapter Seven, we will build on this work by exploring radical acceptance of self and others, building community, and strengthening mutuality.

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Module Seven: Radical Acceptance

Radical Self-Acceptance

Building a stronger relationship to ourselves and others is a process. One practice that can support healing is radical self-acceptance. Radical self-acceptance can be defined as being brave enough to see ourselves and accept ourselves exactly as we are. Certainly, we may not like or find certain aspects of ourselves ideal, but we can choose to accept that those are part of the reality of being who we are.

Acceptance – What It Is and What It Isn't

The word "acceptance" can be fraught with our own judgments, storytelling, and frameworks. Let's examine some of the prevailing myths around acceptance.

Myth: Acceptance is passive defeat, giving up.
Reality: Acceptance is an active choice, it is the agency we use and a practice that we can cultivate to accept and not resist.

Myth: Acceptance implies support, liking something, or even choosing something for myself.
Reality: You certainly do not have to endorse or want the thing you are accepting.

Myth: Acceptance of something means that it will always be that way.
Reality: Our acceptance of something does not place a stamp of "forever," on it. Take for example, experiencing sadness. Accepting sadness as it resides in us one moment does not mean that we cannot also make space for other feelings that come in soon thereafter.

Myth: Acceptance means that I am not going to work to change something.
Reality: We can work to changing something that we accept as a reality. For example, we can accept the role we are currently in and work towards changing that role.

Myth: I only need to accept certain things in life, not all.
Reality: Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we can practice acceptance with any person, anything or any situation – including our feelings, our thoughts, and any other area of life.

Pause.

Think about your relationship with acceptance. What has acceptance meant to you?

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What areas of life have you built an intentional relationship of acceptance to?

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What has acceptance looked, felt, tasted, and sounded like in your life?

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How do you actively engage in acceptance every day? How does this relate to your healing?

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Benefits of Radical Self-Acceptance

Radical acceptance is a useful approach in our inner dialogue (i.e., the things that we tell ourselves). Radical acceptance is seeing all of you and accepting all of you. It is letting go of resistance. It is an active choice to expend your energy in different ways.

Instead of using energy wishing that things were different or complaining, judging, or shaming yourself, radical acceptance means that you choose to accept the reality and walk towards a better understanding or better actions that create change.[92]

Much of what we have been exposed to throughout our lives (i.e., conditioning) is based on comparisons (like milestones, grades, jobs, money, etc.), which have us always striving for a non-existent ideal version of ourselves. This creates or feeds the notion of that we can never be enough. For a trauma survivor, this can be further complicated by messages of self-blame or other similarly harmful messages. When you practice radical self-acceptance, it does not change what happened, but it *can* change how you view yourself. It can bring a feeling of self-compassion because you are no longer working against your own thoughts. It brings us from judgment to curiosity. Radical self-acceptance allows us to differentiate between what we cannot control (while providing the space to let go of that) and what we can influence (which enables us to step into our own power).

Reflect.

Going to a place of comfortable discomfort, think back to a time when you experienced an inner message of resistance. This could be anything, like judging yourself for not being enough, complaining about a supervisor, family member, or job, shaming yourself about your past, or using the word “should against” yourself. We have all experienced resistance. Take a moment to name it, name what that looked like.

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Looking back on that time, imagine what it would have felt like to soften into acceptance. What would that feel like in your body? What would that look like?

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[92] Watson, A. (2019, September 29). *Radical acceptance: How to deal with teaching frustrations you cannot change*. Truth for Teachers. https://thecornerstoneforteachers.com/truth-for-teachers-podcast/radical-self-acceptance/

What are the benefits you get from practicing radical self-acceptance?

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Practicing Radical Self-Acceptance

Knowing about acceptance does not make it any easier to practice. On any given day, a commitment to acceptance (or even radical self-acceptance) can change. The following exercises provide options for practicing radical self-acceptance. It does not matter if you are new to this practice or have an advanced practice, these are exercises that can help strengthen your practice.

Pick one of the exercises from an article by Dr. Rick Hanson below to practice self-acceptance.[93] Try it on for size and see what it feels like (perhaps even for a few days).

- *Explore accepting different things.* Pick something pleasant and explore the sense of accepting it. Do the same with something that is neutral for you, and accept it. Then pick something mildly unpleasant, perhaps an annoying noise, and help yourself accept it.
- *Know what acceptance feels like.* Your body could relax and breathing could ease. There could be thoughts such as "It's just the way it is. I don't like, it but I can accept it." Be aware of the difference between a feeling of acceptance, which is usually calming and peaceful, versus a feeling of helplessness or defeat, which often comes with a sense of frustration, hopelessness, weariness, and depressed mood.
- *Explore accepting different parts of yourself.* Pick a positive characteristic about yourself and explore what it's like to accept this. Next, pick a neutral characteristic such as the fact that you're breathing, and accept it. Then pick something you think is mildly negative about yourself and explore accepting it. Try this with several things about yourself. Gradually raise the challenge level and build the "muscle" of self-acceptance.
- *Allow things to come up.* For a few minutes, let things bubble up into awareness, and explore what it feels like to accept them, such as: "Ah, an ache in my lower back, I accept this...loving feelings for a friend, accepting these...resentful feelings about someone mistreating me, accepting them too."

[93] Hanson, R. (2020, May 5). *Radical self-acceptance is possible with this 7-step practice*. MindBodyGreen.

- *Think about the things you like about yourself.* Look for sweet, admirable, passionate, tender, good things inside yourself and take time to accept them. You might imagine thanking them and including them in all of who you are.
- *Think about the things about yourself you may not like.* Pick something inside that you are embarrassed or remorseful about, and explore accepting it. Start with something small, establish self-compassion, and remember that we all have things that are hard to face. Let go of denying or hiding while also knowing that you can take responsibility and act wisely.

Integrate & Embody.

Using your experience practicing one of the exercises outlined above, what did you notice about your radical self-acceptance practice? What feelings came up?

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What messages did you take away or what did you learn about exercising radical self-acceptance?

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How can radical self-acceptance inform your facilitation?

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How can you practice radical self-acceptance in a learning space?

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Radical self-acceptance can pave the way for how we view or choose to accept others for where they are in their journey.

Peer Supporters in Community

The concepts covered in this chapter speak to the core practices and principles of peer support work, central to the work peer supporters do daily. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, practicing radical self-acceptance enables us to connect with our own humanity and helps us build connection with others. As facilitators, this practice can be further supported by: (1) adopting a radical acceptance of others, (2) strengthening mutuality, and (3) building community.

Radical Acceptance of Others

It is worth repeating that radical acceptance is easier to understand than it is to practice. The idea that acceptance leads to less suffering is alluring; however, in our own search for meaning making, control, or wishing something was different, we can easily lose sight. This can be especially true in relationships.

It is safe to say that in learning spaces, facilitators will encounter participants whose actions or attitudes may not align with their own. When building a relational connection with participants, our own thoughts and feelings about what they *should* be doing can interfere. In those situations, radical acceptance asks us to change our thoughts.

Instead of asking the person to change, it asks us to change the way we respond. If there are behaviors that violate the safety or trust of the learning space, holding compassionate boundaries and accountability can take place alongside acceptance. Again, this does not seek to “fix” or change the person or even what happened, but rather accepts and models a process from which the other participants in the learning space can move forward.

Pause.

Think of a situation in a learning environment in which you mindfully used radical acceptance. If you cannot think of one, think of a situation in which there was resistance. What did that look like?

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How did that change that impact the outcome?

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What attitudes and behaviors do you experience in facilitation that make it difficult to practice radical acceptance? What are some words you can tell yourself to help you in such situations?

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Radical acceptance can be practiced not only with yourself and others, but in situations in which you cannot exert control. Facilitating on virtual learning platforms lends itself to many situations in which you cannot exercise control. Technology can be unpredictable and you may often find yourself in a place where you are riding the wave of radical acceptance. This can be particularly helpful and provide the internal space that you need to navigate the technical issue at hand.

Strengthening Mutuality

It is easy to see how radical acceptance supports mutuality in a learning space. Mutuality shows up when all people in a learning space are encouraged to talk and listen, challenge and accept, and teach and learn.[94] Mutuality is a strong commitment to collective identity and accountability grown in the learning process. Furthermore, in a learning space where mutuality is supported, mutual empathy and mutual empowerment can come together for the purposes of community and mutual movement.[95]

The brain science around mutuality suggests that we are wired to connect, that the brain grows in connection, and that disconnection causes pain. [96] In addition, research on supportive relationships (like those that happen in peer support) indicate that not only are our nervous systems responsive to one another, supportive relationships based on mutuality are *essential to our wellbeing*. Mutuality in a learning environment can support the areas of the brain that ask "am I safe?" and "am I loved?", and it sets the stage for the brain to engage in new learning.

Mutuality in a virtual learning space requires that the facilitator makes intentional efforts to build community and collective identity/accountability, which fosters mutual growth. A significant amount of the content in this guidebook thus far contributes to mutuality, like: self-awareness, holding space, "power with," meaning-making, compassionate boundaries and accountability, and healing relationships. Mutuality can transform learning spaces by:

- Helping people discover who they are while being in community;
- Making space for "both/and" and sustaining a container of abundance;
- Creating and supporting openness and vulnerability;
- Cultivating diversity of ideas, people, moments, perspectives, etc.;
- Building self-confidence and community efficacy (i.e., the belief that we can accomplish things together);
- Leading to more process-oriented and person-centered learning because it is non-linear; and
- Fostering a belief that everyone is valuable – both in support of and receiving support of others.

[94] Flinchbaugh, K. (2011, May 5). *Implementing mutuality in the composition classroom*. Edutopia. https://www.edutopia.org/blog/writing-theory-conference-activities-education-english-kerri-bright-flinchbaugh
[95] Hartling, L. M., & Miller, J. B. (2004). *Moving beyond humiliation: A relational reconceptualization of human rights,* Jean Baker Miller Training Institute, Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College.
[96] Tierney, M. (n.d.). *Mutuality in the therapeutic relationship: A meeting of hearts*. The Irish Association of Humanistic & Integrative Psychotherapy. https://iahip.org/page-1075510

Facilitators can build mutuality in virtual learning spaces by using all the tools available to them that enable connection between participants. This will take mindful pausing and integration of activities, reflective questions, and small group discussions. Using the chat box, breakout rooms, whiteboard, annotation, and other features effectively and seamlessly can create those moments of connection that support mutuality.

Reflect.

Take a moment to reflect on a moment in which you experienced mutuality which carries a lot of meaning for you. What about that experience stands out to you?

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If you had to describe the key elements of mutuality in your own words, what would they be?

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What are some ways that you can build mutuality in a learning space?

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It is important to acknowledge that participants may experience radical acceptance and mutuality from the lens of their own experience. For participants whose voices have been marginalized or silenced in learning spaces, it can take time. Facilitators must not only acknowledge that there are systems that can create inequitable access to learning,

healing, and connection, but that they may also step into a space of accountability in creating and sustaining equitable spaces.

Building Community

Radical acceptance and mutuality create community-centered learning environments. Community-centered learning spaces explicitly promote norms and expectations that encourage critical inquiry and collaboration, where it is more important to take a risk than to answer every question.

A climate of trust between peer facilitators and participants are essential ingredients of a community-centered learning environment. When participants know that you are interested in their needs and those of the entire group, they are more likely to participate in the community building process themselves.

The following are trust-building measures that support a community-centered learning environment:

- Discover something about each participant's prior knowledge or interests and, if possible, help them make the connection between these and the content you are covering together or facilitating.
- Make the goals and expectations explicit and then elicit the participant's assumptions and expectations.
- Celebrate mistakes and failing forward together.
- Design experiences which encourage collaboration over competition.
- Be explicit that everyone is learning – and that the process is as important (if not more Important) as the final product.
- Use moments when participants may turn to you, to encourage inter-group voices, modeling mutuality.
- Structure your time with activities that encourage a high level of engagement and humble inquiry.

Some other community-centered strategies may include the following:

- Encourage risk-taking by allowing room for participants to be vulnerable, make mistakes, learn from feedback from their peers.
- Promote camaraderie, joy, and humble inquiry with activities that involve participants helping each other solve problems, build on each other's knowledge, suggest solutions and ask for clarification.
- Create a community of practice/learning amongst your peers.
- Set clear expectations.

All of the strategies on the previous page can be deployed in any setting, but the following suggestions are specific to the online learning environment.

- Provide orientation and clear communication around all technology tools.
- Place guidelines and expectations in a readily available and logical location.
- Increase participation and consider various learning styles with additional options for different modalities of participation.
- Encourage and make space for small group discussion and suggest that all or part of the collaboration take place via video conference.
- Make space and time for participants to get to know one another.

Community-centered learning can evolve over time, such that the participants form a learning community or community of practice where they apply the learning through lived experience and grow from one another *outside of what may have been the original learning space*. This is an exciting evolution, which is born of mutuality and community.

A learning community is an "intentionally developed community that exists to promote and maximize the individual and shared learning of its members. There is ongoing interaction, interplay, and collaboration among the community's members."[97] While evolving into a learning community or a community of practice might not be a goal of each learning space, it can help us think about how people are best supported in implementing the learning that took place.

Integrate & Embody.

What do you think of when you think of the words community-centered learning?

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[97] Lenning, O. T., Hill, D. M., Saunders, K. P., Solan, A, & Stokes, A. (2013) *Powerful learning communities: A guide to developing student, faculty and professional learning communities to improve student success and organizational effectiveness*. Stylus.

How do you promote community-centered learning through facilitation practices?

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What can you do to build community on virtual platforms?

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Building Community on Virtual Platforms

Community can be built in a variety of ways while learning. And, it can often be the fun and creative energy that a facilitator puts into planning that enables people to connect and have joy. In thinking about virtual platforms, however, there is the additional challenge that may arise from not being face-to-face. Technical tools, time, and good planning can help bridge that gap. In this section, we will explore whiteboards, the annotation feature, and bringing joy into the virtual space.

Whiteboard Feature

The Whiteboard feature on Zoom works the way that a dry erase board or a flipchart do in face-to-face learning. Whiteboards can be where people share and generate ideas collaboratively as a group. The Whiteboard feature on Zoom works by allowing facilitators to share a Whiteboard that the facilitators and participants can annotate (i.e., draw or type on). This tool can be helpful for collaborative projects and activities that might involve a drawing or typing element. Whiteboards can be used in breakout rooms; they can be saved; and if a participant is working from a tablet or touchscreen, it can be used as a drawing board.

Think about the creative ways you can use a Whiteboard. In what situations can you see yourself using the Whiteboard function?

Using the Whiteboard Feature:

1. Click the Share Screen button located in your meeting tool bar.
2. Click Whiteboard.
3. Click Share.
4. From this shared screen, the screen sharer and the other participants will have the ability to use the annotation tools (covered in detail in the next section).
5. If you would like to use multiple Whiteboard pages, use the page controls in the bottom-right corner of the Whiteboard to create new pages and switch between pages. *Note: only the participant or host that started sharing the Whiteboard has access to create and switch pages.*
6. When you are done utilizing the Whiteboard, click Stop Share. You can download Whiteboard pages as you see fit.

Annotation

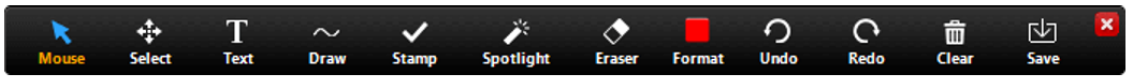
Participants can annotate (i.e., draw or type on) any shared screen as a viewer or as the screen sharer (including the Whiteboard, as mentioned above). The annotate tool is a great resource for the virtual facilitator's toolbox. It allows participants to participate in a variety of different icebreakers, brain breaks, and team initiatives as they would if they were sitting around the table together. It can also be an easy quick way to get feedback from a large group without people having to share out one-by-one. Make sure the annotation tool is enabled in your Zoom settings.

Once in screen share or Whiteboard mode, the annotation controls should be displayed. If you don't see the annotation tools, click Annotate (if you are sharing your screen) or Whiteboard (if you are sharing a Whiteboard). For participants, let them know to click "View Options" and then "Annotate" in the top toolbar when viewing a shared screen or shared Whiteboard (the toolbar says something like "You are viewing [name]'s screen.".

If you started the shared screen or whiteboard, click "More" in the screen share controls for these annotation settings:

- **Allow/Disable Participants' Annotation**: Allow or prevent the participants from annotating on your shared screen.
- **Show/Hide Names of Annotators**: Show or hide participants' names when they are annotating. If set to show, the participant's name will briefly display beside their annotation. It can be helpful to hide the names of annotators when doing a check in or other activity using annotation, unless you have communicated that the group may be able to see their names when they contribute.

Below are some of the features used in annotation.



Note: The Select, Spotlight, and Save options are only available if you started the shared screen or whiteboard.

Mouse	Deactivate annotation tools and switch to your mouse pointer. This button is blue if annotation tools are deactivated.
Select	Select, move, or resize your annotations. To select several annotations at once, click and drag your mouse to display a selection area.
Text	Insert text.
Draw	Insert lines, arrows, and shapes.
Stamp	Insert predefined icons like a check mark or star.
Spotlight	Displays your mouse pointer to all participants when your mouse is within the area being shared. Use this to point out parts of the screen to other participants.
Arrow	Displays a small arrow instead of your mouse pointer. Click to insert an arrow that displays your name. Each subsequent click will remove the previous arrow placed. You can use this feature to point out your annotations to other participants.
Eraser	Click and drag to erase parts of your annotation.
Format	Change the formatting options of annotations tools like color, line width, and font.
Undo	Undo your latest annotation.
Redo	Redo your latest annotation that you undid.
Clear	Delete all annotations.
Save	Save all annotations on the screen as a screenshot. The screenshot is saved to the local recording location.

Creating & Making Space for Joy

One aspect of community that is not often discussed is joy. Joy is a critical part of connection, and it strengthens mutuality and our ability to fully reside in our humanity. Technology can help us create moments of joy in a learning space. Of course, there is no one way to do this. In this section, we want to open the possibility for fun and creation and will be offering tools or activity considerations which might help create joy.

Bringing **art** into a learning space can be very liberating and joyful. The following are drawing applications which can be shared:

- Limnu – low effort, no subscription required, use share screen and use as chalkboard, grease board, or larger whiteboard.
- Miro – more project oriented, more effort, no subscription necessary for 5 or less project board, may want to set up a mind map before then share with group
- Mentimeter – word clouds, polls, freehand answer (explore)
- Google Slides – share the link to the Google Slide deck and create a collage using the insert picture tools

Team building activities can be silly and fun but also draw people together for a common purpose. The following are some suggestions for team building activities:

- Scavenger hunt (for example, see **Appendix B**)
- Virtual escape rooms (for example, see **Appendix B**)
- Online games (for example, see **Appendix B**)

Music and food are key aspects of culture and can bring much joy and inclusion into the learning space. Here are a few ideas on how to integrate music and food sharing using a virtual platform:

- Use the share audio features to listen to music together when you are creating and/or reflecting. Invite people to contribute to a playlist.
- Invite people to have lunch together or share their favorite homemade meals in a check-in. This is a small effort but goes a long way to including things that are meaningful and bring joy.

Integrating movement into a learning space may not feel natural using an online platform, but it can be done. The following are some tips for how to integrate movement:

- Provide an invitation where people can ease into the comfort of where they are on a given day. Remember, movement is not available to everyone, and movement may feel good one day and not so the next.
- Use a mindful meditation to invite movement.
- Invite people to turn off their cameras, so they are less concerned with the video and just listening to voice or music.
- After covering content, ask participants to find where feelings reside in their bodies. Being more attention to where things reside in the body invites more movement.

There are many ways to integrate joy into facilitation. Take the time to explore and find joyful activities that you can comfortably integrate into practice.

Integrate & Embody.

What are some takeaways from this module?

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Are there areas which you will choose to stretch your skills? If so, which ones?

_____

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How do the skills and tools shared in this module connect to peer support competencies and recovery framework?

_____

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This chapter introduced the concept in radical acceptance and celebrated peer supporters, the skills and competencies that they share, and the ways that peer facilitators can amplify those skills while bringing out joy and community. In Chapter Eight, we will expand on joy by exploring movement, language, the power of language, and language as a belief system.

Chapter Eight: Body, Language, and Learning

Body Connection

This manual has explored various practices that help strengthen facilitation skills and can be used to create and sustain healing while supporting the work of holding space.

One area that is critical to our own healing that we have not explored deeply is the relationship to body. Integration of learning is felt throughout the body and through our senses. Embodiment offers an opportunity for connection and full integration of bodily knowledge and collective wisdom. An embodiment practice is a method of using the unique sensations of our body as a tool to develop awareness, stay present, self-regulate, feel whole, find balance, feel connected, know ourselves, love ourselves, and be empowered.

The relationship that a person has with their body will expand or limit the way that they can identify feelings, communicate those feelings, and build healing relationships. Understanding that each person's relationship to their body comes with a unique history, the beginning of this chapter will focus on movement which is connected to the body.

Language of Movement

The first way that people learn to communicate is through their body — their facial expressions, gestures, and postures are all a part of a complex system of communication. Teal Burnell writes, "even after we figure out how to speak, this non-verbal communication still exerts a powerful and often unconscious influence over our interactions, people's first impressions of us and even our impressions of ourselves." [98] Having said that, movement is a powerful language that is embedded in the body of each person. It can increase energy, reduce stress, and calm the mind and body.

Pause.

Describe your relationship with movement.

_____

_____

[98] Burnell, T. (2019, June 12). *Body language: What it means and how to read it.* Discover Magazine. https://www.discovermagazine.com/planet-earth/body-language-what-it-means-and-how-to-read-it

What are the healing ways that you can move your body?

_____

_____

_____

What movement comes to mind when you think of the word joy?

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_____

_____

How do you mindfully engage in movement every day? How does this connect to your own healing?

_____

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_____

Movement and Culture

While movement is our first language, it changes to reflect our culture and societal cues. For example, if a cue from society is that women should take up less space in the workplace, they may make their movements smaller and less noticeable. Similarly, if a group did not have access to certain spaces historically, they may inhibit their movement in those spaces. These are ways that culture and cues that we pick up from society may inform our movement. Being intentional about our movement and examining how we move through certain spaces can be liberating.

Re-learning Connection

In addition to cultural and societal cues, the many stressors we experience every day, may prevent us from connecting to our bodies through movement. This can cause us to forget how to tune in to our bodies. Getting re-acquainted with the body and our movement can support our overall wellness. The following movement exercises can help to change the way you feel:

- **To De-stress:** Smiling can make running easier and tough tasks less stressful.
- **To Feel More Confident:** Standing like a superhero (legs apart, hands on hips, chest up) may make you feel more powerful. Striking this so-called power pose shortly before an interview or athletic contest can be particularly powerful for women, who tend to sit and stand in a way that takes up less space.
- **To Persevere**: Crossing your arms across your chest can help you persist in solving a problem.

Adapted from Discover, *Body Language: What It Means and How to Read It*[93]

Practicing Bodily Self-Compassion

When we pay deeper attention to our bodies and the movement we create, we can practice bodily self-compassion. Bodily self-compassion is concerned with helping us understand how experiences in our body support the way we navigate through the world. It is a source of body memory and keeps us feeling safer by exploring proactive methods of helping the body feel safer in the present moment and into the future.

The following three elements cultivate bodily self-compassion:

- **Affectionate Awareness**: Kindly noticing our sensations, imagery, reflexive responses, thoughts and emotions.
- **Courageous Connection**: Showing up for ourselves as we make meaning and attend mindfully to our bodies.
- **Radical Response:** Supporting ourselves through savoring, staying with, and offering self-compassion in response to stress.

[99] Burnell, T. (2019, June 12). *Body language: What it means and how to read it.* Discover Magazine. https://www.discovermagazine.com/planet-earth/body-language-what-it-means-and-how-to-read-it

The following invitations can encourage us to explore bodily self-compassion:[100]

1. What do I feel?
2. What does my body need?
3. What can my body do to meet this need?

These questions can bring attention to what your body needs – whether it is movement, food, physical touch, or connection. You can use these invitations throughout the day to cultivate deeper bodily awareness and compassion.

Reflect.

What are some social cues or cultural messages that you have received about the space that you occupy?

_____

_____

_____

What does it feel like to practice bodily self-compassion?

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_____

_____

What are the benefits you get from practicing bodily self-compassion? How can bodily self-compassion build connection and movement?

_____

_____

_____

[100] Arbon, K. (2020, April 18). *What do I feel? What do I need? What can I do?* HeartWorks. https://kristyarbon.com/what-am-i-feeling-need-do/

Authentic Movement

Exploring authentic movement can support bodily self-compassion. *Authentic movement* is a simple form of self-directed movement. It is usually done with eyes closed and attention directed inward. Movers explore spontaneous gestures, movements, and stillness, following inner impulses in the present moment.

Often the experience of authentic movement feels like meaningful play and is full of fun. At other times movers and witnesses experience intense feelings and helpful insights into the wisdom of their own bodies.

Starting as a form of therapeutic movement, authentic movement has grown and evolved over many years. It can be used as:

- A meditative, spiritual practice that integrates body and mind for increased access to consciousness;
- Part of a process for enhanced sense of self and well-being;
- Artistic support to connect with creativity and creative process, unblocking and opening to new ideas; and
- Community outreach, in community learning circles that address community-wide problems.

Developing movement awareness, interpersonal skills, empathy, and a sense of embodied presence are often natural outgrowths of an authentic movement practice. The sensing world is awakened, perceptions clarified, and feelings affirmed – restoring a sense of authority to one's own bodily-knowing.

Other benefits of authentic movement include:

- Heightened sense of self and well-being;
- Enhanced creativity and unblocking of the creative process;
- Instilled sense of hope and increased positive feelings about the past, present, and future;
- Improved sense of community; and
- Deeper insight into one's body, mind, and spirit.

Authentic Movement Practice
Take a moment to engage in authentic movement. Before moving forward, read through the directions. You may want to start with music.

- Find a safe, open space in which to move.
- Warm up, stretch, and take some time to attune to an inner experience.
- Pay attention to thoughts, emotions, and memories – and allow these experiences to move the body in any way that feels right.
- You can choose to do so in silence or with sound.
- It is through this process the mover can engage with the active imagination, allowing unconscious material to flow outward.
- Similar to the process of lucid dreaming, the mover is in control of what is happening but is open to being moved by the process.
- The movement may be allowed to continue until the mover feels ready to stop.

Take a moment to reflect on the experience.

Integrate & Embody.

Using your experience practicing authentic movement, what did it feel like?

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_____

What messages did you get from your body throughout the authentic movement?

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How can authentic movement inform your facilitation?

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How do can you practice movement in a learning space?

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Movement, Language & Learning

There is very strong evidence to show that we all learn best through movement. As you might recall, adults learn best when they are engaged in material or content that speaks to them, when the facilitators exhibit curiosity about their own experience, and when there is an invitation for integration of both what is being learned and what they have experienced.

Movement

There is very strong evidence to show that we all learn best through movement. Take the following examples:

- Movement supplies brain cells with oxygen, promotes the production of new brain cells, and aids in creating new connections between brain cells. This means any kind of physical activity, not just movement associated with the material participants are learning, can benefit mood, vitality, alertness, and feelings of well-being.[101]
- Research has shown that people learn better when information is presented in more than one way. In other words, if we take in information through more than one sense, we're more likely to encode it in long-term memory - strengthening learning. This would include visual, verbal, and kinesthetic modes of learning.[102]
- In addition, the use of gestures has been shown to contribute to more enduring learning than learning without gestures.[103] So even the addition of a few small hand gestures can have an impact on how well people remember material by improving memory and retrieval.
- Finally, movement can be an effective strategy to enhance motivation and morale, building connection between all people engaged in the learning space.

[101] *12 ways to keep your brain young*. (2022, May 13). Harvard Health Publishing. https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/12-ways-to-keep-your-brain-young
[102] *Brain-based techniques for retention of information*. (n.d.). Loma Linda University School of Medicine. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://medicine.llu.edu/academics/resources/brain-based-techniques-retention-information
[103] Novack, M., & Goldin-Meadow, S. (2015). Learning from gesture: How our hands change our minds. *Educational psychology review, 27*(3), 405–412. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-015-9325-3

Movement as Connection

In addition to being beneficial to learning, movement can also connect us. This is evident in gestures, expressions and movement in small and big ways. For example:

- Gestures and expressions that are intentional and hold participants' gaze express sincerity, trustworthiness and good listening skills.
- Mirroring the facial expressions and gestures of the participants you are engaging can help them feel more comfortable and foster connection.
- Through movement, participants in a learning space can be more expressive and watch how their peers engage in movement, which allows them to become more authentic and more empathetic.

Pause.

Think of time where you engaged in movement as a participant in a learning environment. What did you notice? What worked? What didn't work? Did this take place in-person or virtual learning?

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How did the other participants in the learning environment appreciate the movement introduced in the learning environment? What did the movement do to connect participants?

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What attitudes and beliefs do you have about using movement in a learning environment?

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Learning Strategies Using Movement

There are a variety of strategies that facilitators can use to integrate movement into the virtual learning space. These are methods that are typically done with in-person learning, but they can translate easily into the virtual learning environment. Strategies to integrate movement in the virtual learning space include:

- *Total Physical Response (TPR)* is a method educators and facilitators can use to support the learning of language or concepts by using physical movement to react to verbal input.[104] This process is something that aligns with what we know the way that infants learn their first language. It also reduces participant inhibitions and lowers stress. The purpose of TPR is to create a brain link between speech and action to boost learning. It can be as simple as assigning a movement to a word.
    - Example: In virtual learning environments, gestures of support such as wiggling your fingers (sparkle fingers) can create connection among participants and lessen the potential for piggybacking and sidetracking.
- Playing *thematic scavenger hunts* either in teams or individually can get people to take a break from their screen and walk around to find objects related to the learning.
- Playing *Simon Says* is a very simple, very effective way to engage people in a virtual learning space. The instructions for Simon Says can vary to include beliefs, values, and other themes that may be connected to the adult learner's experience.
- Intentionally using *facial expressions and gestures* part of the virtual engagement and encouraging participants to do the same.
- Taking a *brain break* which encourages a movement away from the screen. Similarly, invite participants to turn their cameras off to support their need for movement. Another way to do this is to do dance breaks, playing music during breaks to energize the participants.

[104] *Total Physical Response (TPR).* (n.d.). The Teacher Toolkit. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://www.theteachertoolkit.com/index.php/tool/total-physical-response-tpr

Reflect.

Are there strategies (not listed above) that you have used in your facilitation practice to support learning through movement? If so, what are they?

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_____

What are things that can get in the way of integrating movement in virtual learning spaces?

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How can you integrate movement in your own facilitation?

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Power of Language

Our language in and out of the virtual learning space is incredibly powerful. As facilitators, our language can both welcome and create obstacles for participants to feel included, seen, and heard. The culture and language of recovery-oriented practice communicates positive expectations and promotes hope so that people feel valued, important, welcome, and safe. There have been many guidelines developed that emphasize preferred language usage – the “shoulds and should-nots” of the words we choose to use. The words we use naturally evolve over time. Instead of directing our focus on what words can be used, we will explore how we can promote hope, value the wishes of the person, practice consent, and acknowledge/center their humanity, safety, inclusion, and belonging. One way we can do this is by exploring the principles of *authentic relating*.

Authentic Relating

Authentic relating is an approach to cultivate more genuine, fulfilling, and mutually rewarding relationships in any context. One does not need to be certified in authentic relating to start implementing this practice in their own life. We will be using the principles of authentic relating to better understand how we relate and use language.[105]

*Principle 1: Welcome Everything***.**
Like radical acceptance, when practicing welcoming everything in yourself first, it can translate into welcoming others. Here are some words or intentional thoughts that can help with practicing welcoming:

- I welcome all my thoughts, and emotions as they arise, giving space for each one to be fully felt and expressed.
- I welcome all the sensations I feel in my body, no matter how uncomfortable.
- I welcome all the judgments and assumptions I have about myself and others, without dismissing, suppressing, or rejecting anything that arises in my conscious awareness.

Principle 2: Assume Nothing.
When we assume, we reflexively react based on our experience of the past. When we don't assume, or are willing to check out our assumptions, we intelligently respond based on our experience in the present moment.

Principle 3: Reveal Your Experience.
This gets to the root of authenticity and opens up a vulnerable space for people to relate without fear of judgment.

Principle 4: Own Your Experience.
Owning your experience can help better understand a belief or an interpretation of the world that we hold that we didn't even know existed.

Principle 5: Honor Self and Other.
This authentic relating practice recognizes how our expression has an impact on others, and that when we create a space in which others can be fully expressed as well, we are honoring them as well as ourselves. This practice is a reminder and invitation to remember that connection is about being in relationship with self and other at the same time.

[105] *The five practices of authentic relating*. (n.d.). ART International. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://authenticrelating.co/five-practices/

As you can see, the practice of authentic relating speak to both our verbal and non-verbal communication. Using these practices as a launching point, let's think about how our language can communicate positive expectations, promote hope, value people, support feelings of welcome and inclusion, while fostering safety. Take a moment to think about it and answer the following questions.

Pause.

How do I communicate positive expectations verbally and non-verbally?

_____

_____

_____

How do I promote hope verbally and non-verbally?

_____

_____

_____

How do I communicate that I value people verbally and non-verbally?

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_____

How do I communicate inclusion verbally and non-verbally?

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_____

_____

How do I communicate and sustain safety, both verbally and non-verbally?

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Language as Externalized Belief System

The language that we choose communicates our values, our experience, and our culture. When we use inclusive, person-centered, person-directed, and recovery-oriented language to communicate, we can connect more easily with participants in a learning environment. In a healing-centered learning space (which is anti-racist), we need to be in constant analysis of our language because despite our best intentions, the systemic roots of racism (and all the other "isms") tend to show up in the way we communicate.

The Language of Healing

You may have heard something like this before: "Why are there so many new words? I feel like I am learning one and then I have to learn another - isn't this too much?" For many people who have experienced marginalization, discrimination, and the effects of systemic inequity, having the right words to communicate their lived experience and aspects of their identity can be validating, liberating, celebratory and a big sigh of relief.

A person who has had this experience but for years has had no words for it can feel gaslighted. Having the words or receiving acknowledgement that there is an experience which someone is not facing alone can be communicate hope, safety, and inclusion. In this way, language can repair, reconnect, restore, and regulate, which ultimately contributes to healing.

If healing-centered facilitators can contribute to healing by learning and examining their own language, this can be an invaluable way to connect with participants. The following are considerations for inclusive language.

- Practice using gender-neutral language – everywhere and all the time. Use plural pronouns, such as "they" and "them," instead of strictly masculine pronouns such as "he" and "him" to model gender-free terms.
- Be self-aware and recognize a misstep with humility and compassionate accountability.
    - *Example*: When someone informs you that your language hurt, the best response is, "thank you." Going quickly to sorry can be heard/experienced

as defensiveness. Similarly, when someone uses a word that can cause harm or perpetuates stigma, you can respond with, “ouch.” This gives them space to ask questions and hopefully get to, “thank you.” This continues to assume best intent and provides room for learning.

- Engage in humble curiosity and ask people how they would like to be referred to, how they identify. Make it a ritual to start with introductions that are inclusive of identities.
- Take the initiative to learn about identities that you feel you need more learning around. This will help you build more mindful language and understanding to this identity. Try not to rely on a person of that identity to teach you. This places a burden on them and that is unfair and exhausting.
- Practice universal expectations about trauma.
- Be mindful of invisible illnesses and how they may affect how people show up.

Integrate & Embody.

What are other considerations that you would add to the preceding list on considerations for inclusive language?

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_____

Take a moment to connect with a moment in which you heard words that were “ouch,” in a learning environment. What happened? How did that affect the learning environment? How did it affect you?

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_____

If you had a magic wand to change how the exchange took place, what would happen differently?

_____

_____

_____

What are some takeaways that you learned from that incident that have influenced the way you facilitate?

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_____

Integrating Movement & Language

Attending to people's need for movement may not initially feel natural in virtual learning spaces. On the opposite end of that, our language can sometimes flow without taking a mindful pause. With both movement *and* language, it is important that peer facilitators strike a more holistic balance in their healing-centered facilitation skills. This section explores how to integrate movement and language in the virtual learning space.

Movement

An earlier section of this chapter introduced Total Physical Response, games that can be played using Total Physical Response, and authentic movement. Participants can become bored if the movement becomes too predictable, so it is helpful to vary between independent movement, group movement, silent movement, invitation-based movement, and spontaneous movement or dancing. When planning for movement, consider the following:

- What is the purpose? Is it tied to the content? Remember, fun and joy are always good purposes for movement.
- How are the participants holding up? What is the temperature of the virtual learning space? Is a movement energizer welcome? Can it be meditative movement?
- How does an opportunity for movement work with the placement of other activities in the agenda? Usually, set up and instruction can take extra time.
- How does the movement activity vary the flow of the content?

As always, using universal expectations, and being mindful of mobility issues, it is good to provide an activation warning and options for activities that require people to be present in their body. Being mindfully present in their body can be activating and we need to plan alternate activities or spaces of calm. If this does arise in a virtual learning space, be aware that you can use a virtual breakout room and a volunteer to create a calm space for the participant.

Language

Establishing norms around language with the group's engagement can be helpful in developing shared values and inclusive language. The example of using "ouch" and "thank you" can be one way that you can come to an agreement regarding language and compassionate boundaries, but this does not have to be the only way to communicate or set expectations. Other ideas for integrating language that build community, learning, healing, and inclusion are listed below.

- Use participants' experience or a reading selection to develop a word cloud to capture the ideas and experiences shared.
- Create a group poem using the senses.
- Create space for participants to share words from their mother tongue, identifying words of love, common phrases, dichos, or greetings.
- Welcome participants with an invitation to share anything (privately, using private chat) that you can do to support their full participation.
- If you are facilitating or hosting webinars, try to accommodate language needs by having live translation, or closed captioning (which can be done live in Zoom).
- Develop a whiteboard with words or funnies that were picked up during the live session time together.
- Foster gender inclusivity by inviting everyone to use the renaming feature in zoom and having people include their pronouns.
- Use chat box to repeat and emphasize questions for discussion.
- Find creative ways to integrate meaning-making (storytelling), which can be healing and a way for people to share aspects of their identities. Use platforms like Google Docs or Google Slides.
- Add your favorite:
  _____
- Add more:
  _____

Integrate & Embody.

What are some takeaways from this learning experience?

_____

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_____

Are there areas which you found to be helpful in growing your facilitation skills?

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How do the skills and tools shared in this learning connect to peer support competencies and recovery framework?

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As virtual platforms evolve to meet the growing needs of diverse learners, there will be more features and more platforms. The purpose of this guidebook was not to provide an exhaustive manual of features, but to cultivate more intentional and healing-centered learning spaces – building on the competencies of peer support, calling attention to the interpersonal skills needed, and providing a window of how these practices can be sustained using virtual platforms to meet the needs and demands of the workforce and communities they serve.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Activities for Checking the Temperature and Preparing for Difficult Conversations

Staying on top of the emotional temperature in the learning space and checking in with participants about how they are feeling helps you know when to stop and address strong emotions. Checking in nonverbally to gauge their comfort levels allows everyone to participate without being singled out or put on the spot.

Preparing/Priming Activities

P.A.U.S.E. Encourage using the PAUSE self-de-escalation model below, created by BEAM (Black Emotional And Mental health Collective). You can post it or go over it prior to difficult conversations. If posting, please make sure to give credit to BEAM.[106]

[106] BEAM. (n.d.) *PAUSE tool*. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://beam.community/pause-tool/

Checking-in Activities[107]

Fist-to-Five. You can quickly gauge a number of things—readiness, mood, comprehension—by asking students to give you a "fist-to-five" signal with their hands.
Fist = I am very uncomfortable and cannot move on.
1 Finger = I am uncomfortable and need some help before I can move on.
2 Fingers = I am a little uncomfortable, but I want to try to move on.
3 Fingers = I am not sure how I am feeling.
4 Fingers = I am comfortable enough to move on.
5 Fingers = I am ready to move on full steam ahead!

Stoplight. Use the colors of a traffic light to signal readiness and comfort. Throughout the discussion, you can ask participants if they are green, yellow or red. Participants can also use the "red light" to request a break or a stop when they are feeling strong emotions or have been activated.
Green = I am ready to go on.
Yellow = I can go on, but I feel hesitant about moving forward.
Red = I do not want to go on right now.

Debrief Activities

3-2-1. Taking difficult conversations into a place of humble inquiry, this asks participants to draw on what they have learned and leaving room to explore a question they may still have.

- Three things you found out.
- Two interesting things.
- One question you still have.

Writing Debrief.[108] At the end of the day, set aside 10 minutes for the group to respond in writing to a few specific questions. (This may be especially helpful to do when a difficult conversation has taken place).

- At what moment were you most engaged?
- At what moment were you most distanced?
- What action that anyone in the room took did you find most affirming or helpful?
- What action that anyone in the room took did you find most puzzling or confusing?
- What surprised you most?

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[107]. Teaching Tolerance. (n.d.). *Let's talk! Discussing race, racism, and other difficult topics with students* .Retrieved September 12, 2024 from https://cdhe.colorado.gov/sites/highered/files/documents/Discussing-Race-Racism-and-Other-Difficult-Topics.pdf
[108] Schreiner, J. (2017, December). *Strategies for engaging with difficult topics, strong emotions, and challenging moments in the classroom*. Teaching Engagement Program, University of Oregon. https://teaching.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2021-04/strategies-for-engaging-with-difficult-topics-strong-emotions-and-challenging-moments-in-the-classroom.pdf

Keep all responses anonymous. Collect them at the end. Read and analyze the responses, and compile them according to similar themes and concerns. Report back to the group at the next meeting. Allow time for comments and discussion.

Make room for ambiguity. Difficult conversations are also brave and courageous and challenging. Before ending the conversation, make sure to invite folks to engage in a multiple-truths perspective.

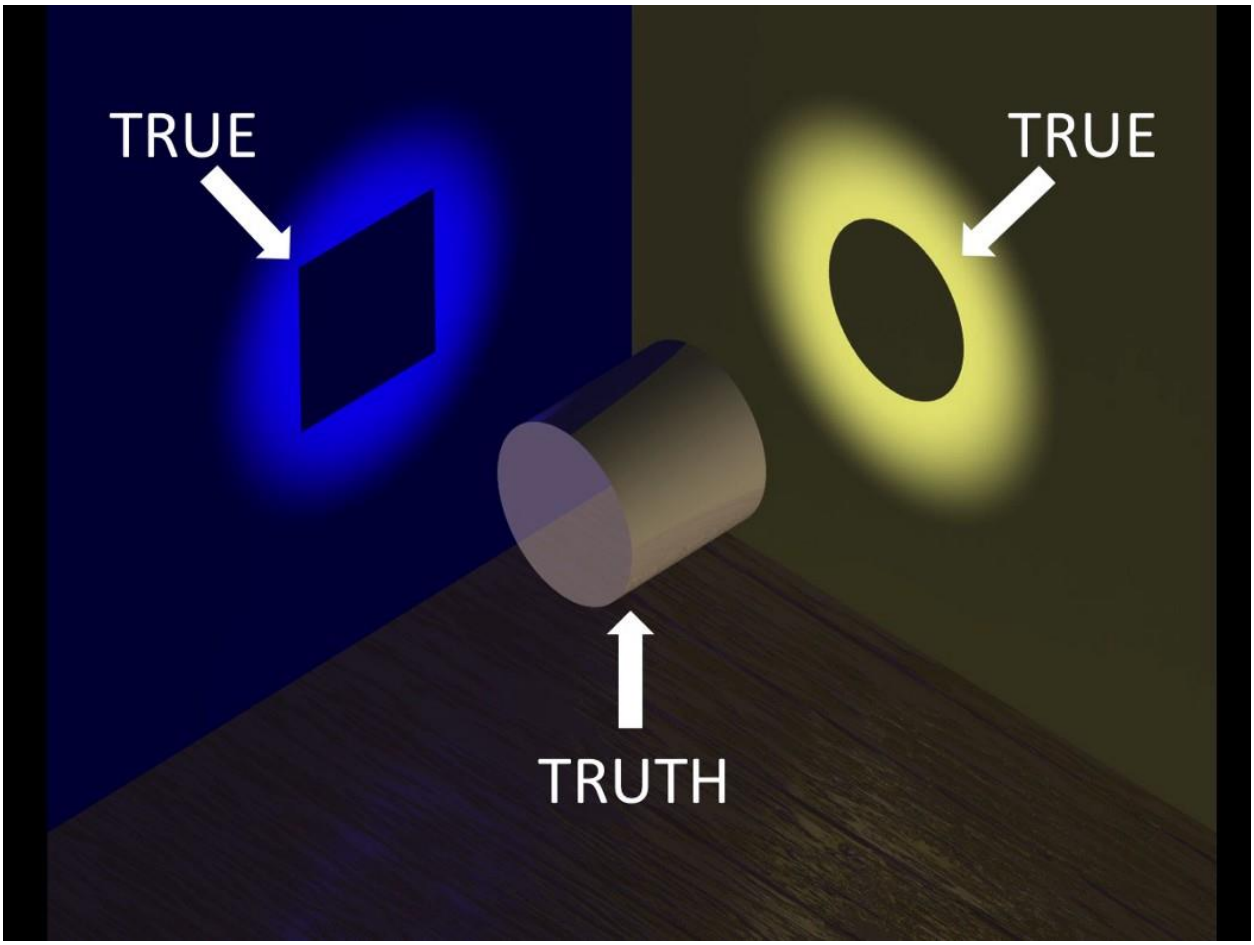

Image Source: Ervick, M. (2019, April 5). *Understanding truth* [Image attached] [Post]. LinkedIn. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/understanding-truth-michael-ervick

Appendix B: Resources for Virtual Games & Activities

Virtual Scavenger Hunt
Smart, J. (n.d.). *Virtual scavenger hunt.* SessionLab. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from **https://www.sessionlab.com/methods/virtual-scavenger-hunt**

Options for Virtual Games
Leed, E. (2020). *Guide to online board games.* Scribd. https://www.scribd.com/document/460606958/Guide-to-Online-Board-Games

Virtual Escape Rooms
Escape rooms quickly became a popular activity, and it is no wonder why many people utilize them as a teambuilding experience. They require teams to work on many different skills, including creativity, communication, critical thinking, mental agility, and of course problem solving!

The good news is there are many virtual escape room options that your team can still participate in! Also, there are many websites and resources out there on how you can create your own virtual Escape Room.

To facilitate with your group, simply have one person share their screen with the virtual escape room up and ready to go. This person will work as the controller or mouse operator. Have the group work together to solve the clues! In bigger groups, you can divide into breakout rooms and start at the same time.