

Embracing our emotions

*"Our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge."
- Audre Lorde*



Shamillah 
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TRANSFORMATION • LEADERSHIP • WELLNESS

Embracing our emotions

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Thank you for reading *Embracing our emotions*.

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I am grateful for the support of my family, friends, colleagues, partners and circles of support who hold space for me as much as they allow me to hold space for them as we navigate our ways towards an expansive life in the world we are striving to create. I hope you find this updated version of *Embracing our emotions* useful on your activist path.

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No journey towards inner change is complete without a focus on emotions.

As activists, we regularly experience a range of difficult emotions, including rage, fear, guilt, anxiety, grief and joy. It can be easy to succumb to negative feelings and reinforce them by, for example, seeking out and sharing negative news stories. Rationality is also often prioritised over feeling. We are encouraged to ignore our feelings, bottle up our emotions, or 'deal with them at another time'. Suppressing negative feelings can, however, lead to dysfunctional coping mechanisms and avoidant behaviours, whereas observing and naming our emotions can help us act more rationally.

Audre Lorde noted that our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge. They're not paths to knowledge about the physical reality but to knowledge about ourselves. By learning how to work with our emotions, we can use difficult emotions as tools to guide our journey and sustain our activism.

We must remember not only to engage with negative emotions or feelings but also to reclaim joy and see it as an essential part of our work. At the same time, seeing happiness as the ultimate goal of our emotional work feeds into unrealistic binaries that do not represent reality. Rather, we need to learn to see the world in its entirety and acknowledge all its different facets and the complex mix of emotions that make up our lived experience.

As Sarah Jaquette Ray writes, *"The opposite of suffering is not happiness; it's compassionate acceptance of negative feelings."*



Activism and emotions

In our activist work, we often use emotions to maintain cohesion and reduce tension to build solidarity and movements. We do so by encouraging positivity, compromise and the relief of tensions, as well as expressing, interpreting and listening to our feelings. Our collective work also requires navigating tension, dissent and other group dynamics in decision-making.

Only recently have we started engaging more openly with emotional states that are not directly used for movement building and solidarity (for example, despair, hopelessness and burnout), and with making space at the individual level to witness the many stories of rage, anger, aggression and sometimes powerlessness that in many ways have always fuelled our activist fires.

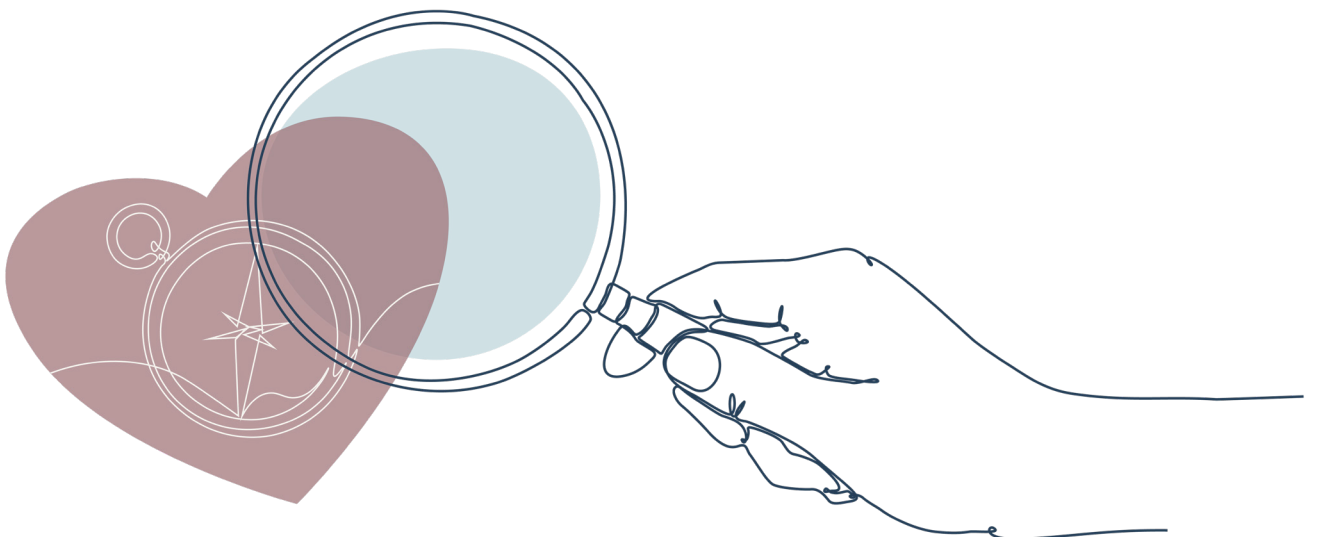
It has become increasingly apparent that the 'instrumentalisation' of emotions as activators has meant that they are given insufficient attention, particularly those emotional states that can cause people to burn out, drop out or damage the spirit or work of a collective. While the importance of emotions is acknowledged, this is mainly in relation to their support of activism. This instrumentalist view of emotions often means favouring whatever emotions make you a better activist (and these can vary from person to person). This leads to

agnosticism about desirable emotions. Thus anger, sadness and even disgust are fine if they don't hinder action or damage group dynamics.

On the other hand, emotions that affect individuals are often treated as private matters. As a result, they are encouraged to seek support for their emotional difficulties but are given little collective attention.

An approach that values activists as individuals recognises the importance of equipping all activists with emotional reflexivity. Leading from within requires self-awareness in allowing our feelings, understanding them, and navigating different emotional states for the sake of our own wellbeing and that of the collective cause.

While plenty of attention has been paid to the undesirable outcomes of emotions — for example, anger causing rash actions or despair causing burnout — there has been less focus on what emotions activists should cultivate and why. Should they be calm or passionate? Should they be happy? Or should they be distressed about the world's problems? This is a striking omission considering how much attention is paid to good practice in other realms, such as non-sexist language, environmentally sound behaviours and nonviolence.



Emotional labour, power and positionality

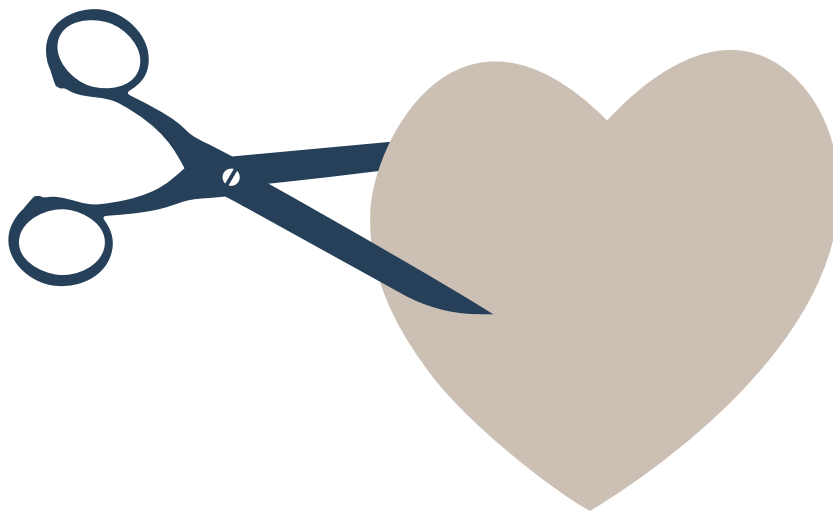
Activism involves immense emotional labour, which is about tending to other people's emotional experiences and wellness. This typically results in the labourer's own emotional needs being disregarded within the context of the collective. Sara Ahmed, in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, notes that emotions are not just physical and psychological states but also social and cultural practices in which emotion becomes a social currency rather than simply an individual's self-expression. Thus emotion can be used to hold the social body together. In this framing emotions can be tools for more effective activism. For example, anger or compassion can be harnessed and channelled to motivate our actions. From this perspective, the ability to control emotions or express 'appropriate' emotions is regarded as "emotional intelligence" and used to advance our positionality.

Emotional labour is often central to an activist identity and, while there may be some collective reciprocity, role-specific emotional tending might be left up to the individual. For example, emotional labour might be performed because of a personal investment in activist causes. However, the emotionally charged nature of organising might mean that the emotions of those in an organising role might require extra attention. On the other hand, the relationships among activist colleagues may also evoke emotional labour. In this case, because of a shared investment in the work, emotional labour is both personal and shared. As a result, coping with its effects takes on a collective nature, with strong relationships assisting in defining and managing emotional labour. In other words, where activists share motivations and roles there is often collective support, but where roles are not shared emotional labour might be the work of the individual.



Emotional labour is also often embedded within the care economy. Political analysis helps us recognise that this emotional work is usually invisible, and the demand for this work and its invisibility increase when we add intersectional marginalisation such as race, class, gender and education. This emotional labour then extends to propping up current systems, the same systems that historically set up the majority of us to care for the few without complaint and with little or no compensation. As a result, those with less power are often expected to cater to the emotions of people with more power, and this dynamic is rendered invisible.

Overtly expressing our emotions is also often seen as unreasonable, too extreme or manipulative. In organisations, there is often a hierarchy that places reason above emotion, with reason being attributed to whiteness and maleness and emotion to blackness and the female body. Sarah Ahmed speaks about how emotions are bound up with securing social hierarchy; where emotions become attributes of bodies in ways that are judged as 'lower' or 'higher' and where expressing certain emotions in certain ways increases "not only the risk of becoming feminine, but also of becoming 'less white'. In this way, hierarchies of emotion are established, with some emotions seen as 'elevated' whilst others are stigmatised and marginalised as signs of weakness, as less than and as 'other'. When working towards developing emotional awareness and capabilities it is also important to be aware of the preferences and stigmas around certain emotions and to question how these are combined with invisible emotional labour to hold up the very hierarchies of power we are working to dismantle.



INTERSECTIONALITY ALERT:

<https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/one-right-way.html>

Objectivity is another characteristic that reflects the ways in which white supremacy culture is also a manifestation of gender and class. Women of all races and classes are often targeted for being "too" emotional within the white supremacy cultural expectation that emotions need to be controlled, "mastered," or absent. Poor and working-class people are similarly targeted, with the intersecting belief that expressing emotions indicates a lack of intellectual rigour, intelligence and control.

White supremacy culture requires that we cut ourselves off from our emotions in order to participate, therefore emotional intelligence is anathema to white supremacy culture. Read journalist Lewis Wallace's article *Objectivity is Dead and I'm OK With It* for more on this subject.

Building emotional capabilities

Over and above collective understandings of emotion, it is important for every human being to learn the language of their emotions. Doing so empowers us to understand them, work with them and learn from them. For example, in the context of activism, emotional capabilities mean acknowledging our emotions and acting on them in ways that feel aligned with our intentions. Rather than hastily reacting to injustice from a sense of 'righteous anger', a skilful navigation of our emotions might lead us to name and dwell with feelings until they transform into tactically appropriate and compassionate action.

Emotional awareness

Emotional awareness refers to our ability to recognise our emotions and their effects. Having this ability means you will:

- Know what emotions you are feeling at any given time, and why.
- Understand the links between emotions, thoughts and actions, and what you say.
- Understand how your feelings will therefore affect behaviour..

Being aware of your own emotions, and how they affect your behaviour, is crucial for effective interaction with others. It can also be vital for your health and wellbeing.



Story of navigating rage: Moving from powerless to powerful

Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women.
- Maya Angelou

Late last year, I had an encounter that ignited my rage so much that I could not ignore it. I don't usually work with rage as an energy or emotion. Perhaps because I am a fire sign, I find it better to work with other energies and emotions, rather than let rage consume me.

Yet, my most recent encounter felt so consuming that I had to explore why the situation evoked such deep rage in me, and thus to understand it better. To give some context, I (along with another collaborator) had been invited to hold a space and support process for a social justice organisation and a group of communities working on food security. Usually, when invited to collaborate I do so on the premise that I am a full partner and co-creator of both the process and outcomes, and with the understanding that the work of holding space and choreographing process is a deeply political act that calls for deep engagement and reflection and can be challenging. However, our experience preparing for this encounter was the opposite of this approach. We were given a fully developed programme; one that was content-heavy, and did not allow for much participation.

We expressed our misgivings about what was transpiring, pointing out how their requirements opposed our principles of process and change. Being able to voice what we felt was important, accompanied by our realisation that what we saw and experienced was, in fact, a power play between global North actors and local (global South) communities. Our voicing and challenging did not result in any noticeable shifts in the ways that the global North partner was showing up and, at this point, we seriously considered walking out of the process. However, ingrained 'professional

ethics' (ethics that could be attributed to white supremacy culture) meant we felt it would be irresponsible to abandon the process. We were also concerned about the potential ramifications for the communities invited into the space should we be replaced by less aware facilitators.

So we suppressed our discomfort while remaining very aware of how triggering we found our own 'participation' in a dance that surfaced the systemic ways in which global North actors instrumentalise communities to legitimise their research and often also their interventions. We struggled with and named the ways in which, diverse voices were not given space to express, question or contribute to the outcome of an important conversation. We did eventually walk out of the process, but only after our continued naming of power dynamics led to reductions in our power until eventually our role and contribution were reduced to being masters of ceremony instead of the skilled process weavers we are.



I kept trying to understand the deep rage that, by the time I walked out, was burning in me like an inferno. Over time I realised that the intensity of my rage was because what I experienced was not an isolated incident. Writing about and navigating these systemic microaggressions in many other situations was the reason behind my insistence on deliberate and inclusive process work. So why did I not do so in this instance? My reason for saying yes to this work, despite my reservations, was based on my belief that robust dialogue and conversation are important approaches to transformation, and I believed that even though this process was flawed it could still offer these.

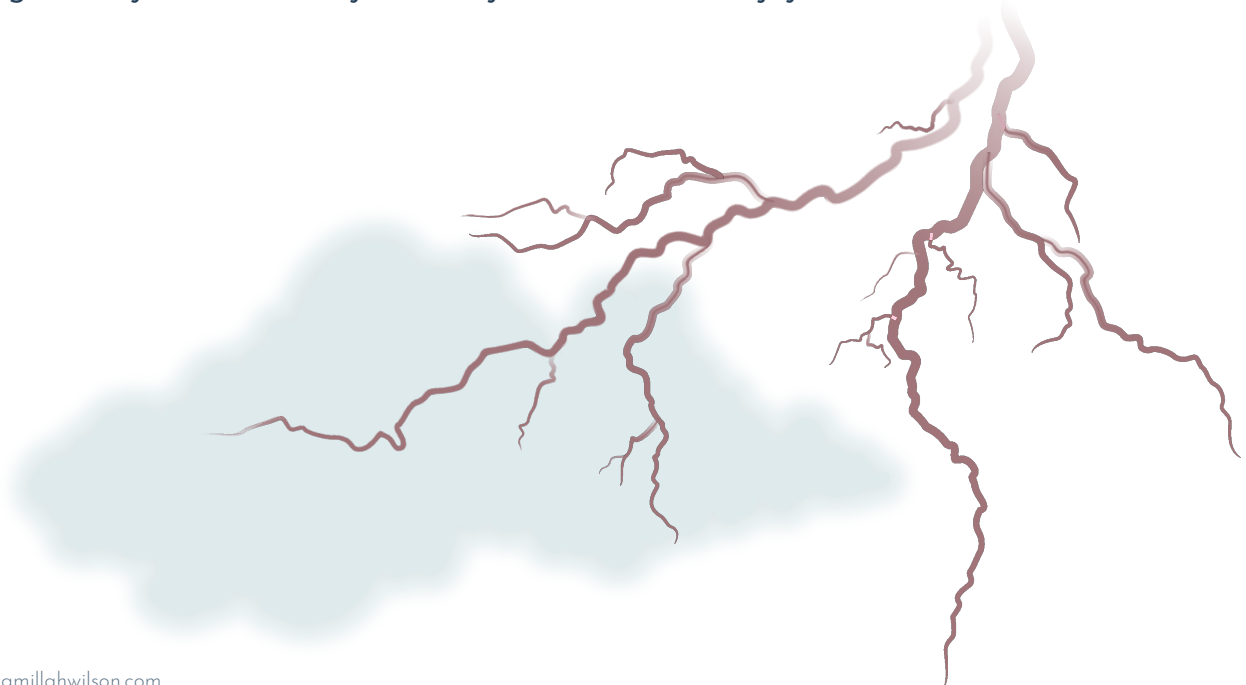
However, from this experience, I learnt that content without political intent and commitment results in empty rhetoric rather than deep change. My rage was a powerful reminder that isolated voices are not enough to disrupt or shift power. My own privilege meant I was able to express what I saw and experienced. I was able to challenge it to some extent, in stark contrast to the many silenced, less privileged (and less powerful) voices in the room. I was enraged that my naming of the process as exclusionary and depoliticised was shrugged off by the organisers from the Global North, who dismissed my concerns as the gripes of an individual who is too 'emotional', 'problematic,' etc. Realising that even my naming, my acts of subversion during the process and my pushing back against power did not cause even a minor tremor in the system, deepened my rage.

The experience, although deeply uncomfortable, affirmed why I seek support through collective organising and deliberate disruptions of unequal power. It also allowed me to recommit myself to holding space and facilitating processes that are deeply transformative and allow for co-creation, reciprocal understanding, standpoint plurality, mutual accountability, trust and integrity.

What else did I learn from my most recent encounter with rage?

#1: Honouring your rage

I firmly believe that our anger and rage are loaded with information and energy. We might need to sit with the discomfort of our rage for a while before we reach a space of holding it, knowing it and owning it. As articulated by Audre Lorde, "...we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart. We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives." Anger breaks through passivity and apathy and drives us to act for justice. When used with clarity anger can expand our access to resources while also clearing the way to authenticity, intimacy, self-esteem and joy.



#2: Name the true source of our anger/rage

Although rage signals that something is wrong, unconscious venting lets off steam rather than leading us to use our anger/rage to challenge injustice and make strategic changes. Part of the process of naming our anger is to remember our histories of freedom and oppression, of good things that have been and of the powers that destroy it. Naming what angers us allows us to move beyond the presentation of rage to tap into its capacity and power as sources of empowerment and transformation.

When listening to the message of anger/rage, let it tell you where you are experiencing oppression, suppression and violations, where your needs are not being met, or where you are being hurt and where you are compromising your integrity and ethics.

#3: Figuring out what to do with rage/anger

When working with our rage/anger these questions may be helpful to ask ourselves:

- What am I really angry about? What is the problem, and whose problem is it?
- How can I learn to express my anger in a way that will not leave me feeling helpless and powerless?
- What risks and losses might I face from my choice of strategy?
- If getting angry is not working for me, what can I do differently that will still leave me feeling empowered?
- Who are the people who can help me navigate my rage, people who are prepared to have courageous conversations and are committed to real change?



Navigating emotions

Working with or navigating our emotions allows us to develop the capabilities we need to take actions that alter the intensity of an emotional experience. It doesn't mean suppressing or avoiding emotions. With the necessary skills, it becomes easier to recognise what we're feeling and why, and we can, therefore, respond appropriately. In its most basic form, navigating emotions can be done through pausing; acknowledging that at times we need to take a step back and then using the pause to feel and then name what we are experiencing. By acknowledging our emotions and giving ourselves time to process them, we can carefully craft how we respond. Below is a much more detailed overview to support navigating emotions.

Emotional regulation skills

Objective	Immediate Goal	Action/Skill
Identifying and labelling emotions	Observe and describe events and the interpretations that prompt emotions.	Keep an emotion diary that includes events, interpretations, body feelings and action urges.
Reducing vulnerability to the "emotional mind"	Avoid stress that makes you vulnerable to emotional reactivity.	Take care of the body: exercise, eat well, avoid mood-altering drugs, and get enough sleep. Do one thing a day that makes you feel competent.
Increasing positive emotional events	Increase the number of pleasurable events in your life to increase positive emotions.	Do one thing a day that gives you pleasure. Make a list of positive actions and take the first step. Be mindful of positive experiences. Attend to your relationships.
Increasing mindfulness of current emotions	Experience emotions without judging them or trying to inhibit them because this simply adds an extra layer of suffering.	Observe your emotion, note its presence and step back. Accept your emotions: don't try to push them away or hang on to them. Remember you are not your emotions, and you don't need to act on them.
Taking opposite action	Change your behavioural-expressive response to emotions.	Do things that give you a sense of mastery. Fear: do a little of what you are afraid of. Sadness: get active. Anger: imagine sympathy and do something nice. Joy: make time to rest and integrate as well as celebrate
Applying distress tolerance techniques	Tolerate negative emotions without taking impulsive actions.	Ways to tolerate emotional distress: <i>Distract</i> yourself with positive activities such as hobbies or visiting a friend. <i>Self-soothe</i> your five senses: sniff a flower, listen to beautiful music, have a good meal, or take a warm bath. <i>Improve</i> the moment: meditate, create meaning and purpose, and relax the body. <i>Encourage yourself</i> : "I can do it"; "It will pass." <i>Calm the mind</i> by learning to follow the breath and put a half-smile on the face. <i>Radical acceptance</i> : decide to accept reality. Let yourself embrace "what is" through mindfulness.

Based on Linehan (1993b)

As activists and leaders, we can learn the above techniques to pursue our systemic and social goals and also our transformation. It is important to note that the framework presented by Linehan pursues not simply the management of destructive emotions but also the generation of positive ones such as calmness, acceptance and joy. Underpinning these skills is the core competence of mindfulness, which is simple to learn but requires practice to be effective. The idea of mindfulness is derived from Buddhism, which stresses the need for self-awareness that reduces our tendency to be caught up in difficult emotions and enables us to generate more productive and joyful states of mind.

Story of anger: Embracing the hurricane within

*What we don't let out traps us. We think. No one else feels this way. I must be crazy. So, we don't say anything. And we become enveloped by a deep loneliness, not knowing where our feelings come from or what to do with them. Why do I feel this way?
- Sabrina Ward Harrison*

"What we don't let out traps us. We think, No one else feels this way, I must be crazy. So, we don't say anything. And we become enveloped by a deep loneliness, not knowing where our feelings come from or what to do with them. Why do I feel this way?" Sabrina Ward Harrison

For most of my life, I have been told that getting angry and even expressing my anger was a bad thing. As a result, I cultivated the habit of repressing my anger. I kept telling myself and others that I am slow to anger, but if you keep making me angry I will eventually explode. Looking back, I realise that I was not necessarily slow to anger.

Rather, I would allow issue after issue to pile, ultimately leading to an explosion. As you can imagine, this was not fun for anyone involved, least of all me. What freaked me out about these explosions was how disempowered I felt. I felt that expressing my anger through exploding was a sign of weakness. In addition, the intense emotions evoked during the explosion would lead me to break down in tears. This process of complete disempowerment was one I wanted to avoid at all costs and to do so I knew I had

to find a healthy balance between expressing anger (exploding if necessary) and getting to grips with the vulnerability I felt after the inevitable explosion.

As I explored my experiences of anger, I realised that anger is a complex response. It is a normal emotion with a wide range of intensity, from mild irritation and frustration to rage. It is a reaction to a perceived threat, whether to loved ones, property, self-image or some part of our identity. Anger is a warning bell that tells us that something is wrong.

Anger begins with a physical component. It usually starts with a rush of adrenaline, an increased heart rate and blood pressure and a tightening of the muscles - the "fight or flight" response. Anger also has a cognitive component that relates to how we perceive and think about what angers us. For example, we might think something that happened to us is wrong, unfair and undeserved. Lastly, anger has a behavioural component in the way we express our anger. There is a wide range of behaviour that signals anger. We may look and sound angry, clench our jaws, raise our voices,

clam up, slam doors, storm away, or otherwise signal that we are angry. We may also state that we are angry and why, ask for a time-out, request an apology, or ask for something to change.

Everyone experiences anger, and it can be healthy. Anger energy can be a powerful motivating force to stand up against injustices, whether against ourselves or others. When managed well, anger can also lead to positive changes in our lives and situations. Mismanaged anger, on the other hand, is counter-productive and can be unhealthy. When anger is too intense, out of control, misdirected and disproportionately aggressive, it can lead to poor decision-making and problem-solving, create problems with relationships and at work, and can even affect one's health.

My anger triggers

Let's begin with the simplest part of this formula, the trigger event. There is always something that happens right before someone gets angry that serves as the trigger (e.g. being cut off in traffic, or being insulted by a coworker). People tend to think that their anger is caused by these situations, and they say things like, "I got mad because I got cut off by the driver in front of me" or "That guy made me so mad." The implication is that those events caused their anger, and there were no other mitigating factors. Of course, we know that can't be true. If it were, everyone would respond the same way to such situations.

A while ago, something happened that really triggered me. My younger brother who was living with me, had broken an agreement for about the 'millionth' time. Whenever the agreement was broken, we would have a conversation. I would express my discontent and then we would go on as before. This pattern continued until the day I was triggered to the point of deep, dark unhappiness.

When this happened, I knew I needed time out to assess what it was about the situation that troubled me to the point of evoking a 'violent' energy response. I knew that if I did



not confront it head-on, I would find myself on the brink of an emotional breakdown.

As I moved into the assessment process, I became aware of an old pattern and that I was indeed in danger of erupting. I feared the accompanying feelings of disempowerment and vulnerability that would ensue.

So I found a quiet place where I allowed myself to sit with the anger and feel it completely. In this space, I asked the anger what it was that it needed to communicate to me, and what about this situation tipped me over the edge. Through this process, I became centred and realised it was not the broken agreement (trigger) but rather my interpretation of that broken agreement. I experienced the repeated dishonouring of agreements made with me as a lack of respect and acknowledgement of ME. In fact, by repeatedly feeling it was okay to break the same agreement, my brother was saying, "You are not important". This realisation was a powerful breakthrough because it allowed me to see the matter for what it really was. Through the trigger, I was gifted with an opportunity to experience my anger, express my vulnerability and deepen my journey into self-love, appreciation and acknowledgement.

When I was ready to own my anger, I initiated a conversation with my brother. For the first time, I deviated from my calm and rational approach (operating from my head) and instead permitted myself to express what came up for me (operating from my heart). I was able to fully express my anger without fearing that I would break down. I allowed myself to fully express my anger energy without letting it get out of control.

I then did what I had never done before. Accessing my vulnerable self, and in a moment of authentic truthful self-expression, I said to my brother, "I cannot ask you to love me, but I do request respect and acknowledgement. When you keep breaking agreements with me it hurts me and I request that you stop." This moment of true vulnerability allowed my brother and me to cross a threshold in our relationship. For the first time, he saw me not as the one 'who is always in control and always providing', but as someone who also gets hurt. My explosion, expression of emotion, and vulnerability facilitated a moment of real connection between us, a moment when we both saw each other's spirit. The nature of my explosion was neither irrational nor unfocused. Instead, in that moment where I was able to

allow another to see me in all my vulnerability, it allowed both of us to express what we were feeling. My brother admitted that he had prepared himself for the usual speech that would merely wash over him. However, my authentic and REAL expression of self let him see the hurt and he felt my hurt as his own. For the first time, he felt comfortable asking if it was okay to hug me and we held each other in a moment of tender acknowledgement.

Finally, after all of this, I had to acknowledge that my brother was mirroring how I continuously break agreements with myself when it came to my own care, wellbeing and self-love.

As I digested the final part of my anger lesson, I recommitted myself to greater respect, acknowledgement and love by keeping agreements with myself.

The most important lesson I learnt from this experience was that I needed to embrace the hurricane within. After all, she does not have to leave behind a path of destruction. If given the space and embraced, her power can be directed for deeper and more powerful interactions with those near and dear to me.

Our rage is a signal that something is wrong. Naming rage allows us to move beyond presenting rage in order to tap into its capacity and power as a source of empowerment and transformation.
- Shamillah Wilson

What I learnt from this experience was:

- To allow myself to feel angry, not to cover it up, and to consciously allow myself to feel it in my body.
- I explored my anger by being curious about what was behind it. What was the narrative behind the trigger event that resulted in the anger?
- I was able to figure out a response that was empowering, one where I owned what was mine, but also allowed myself to work with my vulnerability. I focused on a solution while also allowing myself to be open to someone else's perspective and experience.
- I learnt from the anger what it is I value and need, and how I need to communicate that to people around me.
- In this way, I navigated the emotion of anger by pausing, feeling and naming what I was experiencing, and this allowed me to carefully craft my response.

Emotional reflexivity among activists

Emotional reflexivity is the practice of reflecting on and altering one's emotions or emotional states in response to different situations and social expectations. It involves being aware of one's own feelings, interpreting those of others and adjusting one's emotional responses accordingly. Emotional reflexivity can be observed in various contexts, such as activism and leadership effectiveness. Emotional reflexivity allows individuals to navigate the emotional challenges of their participation in activism and sustain their activism while at the same time building practises of care within the movement. In terms of leadership, emotional reflexivity enables leaders to adapt to different social contexts and meet the expectations of their team, resulting in more effective leadership. Overall, emotional reflexivity plays a crucial role in personal and social interactions, allowing individuals to navigate emotions, build connections and adapt to changing circumstances.



Emotions that fuel activism and social change

Many activists feel anger and fear about current conditions, and it is these feelings that initially motivate them to pursue political action to address 'the excruciating contrast between the way things are now and the way things might be'¹. Similarly, activists might keep on engaging with other activists because collective action can generate emotions such as a boost of positive emotional energy, the joy of building social connections through a movement and developing a sense of belonging to a group. These emotions are all key to sustaining commitment.

Emotional effects of activism and social change

Emotions can also be destructive. They can induce burnout and withdrawal from social justice movements. Burnout can result from activist-related emotional impacts, for example, external societal hostility towards the causes that activists agitate for and the emotional strain that norm transgression, sanctions and backlash bring.

We must also acknowledge activists' different identities and social positioning when examining the causes and impacts of burnout. For example, racial justice activists who are racially marginalised themselves can be at considerable risk of burnout because they 'carry the burden of structural understanding on top of the challenge of coping with the grind of racism in their own lives'². Furthermore, when people are engaged in politics of survival there may not be a distinct separation between 'activism' and living, or they may not have the privilege of opting to

'disengage'. Instead, some organise because it is necessary for their own survival inside oppressive structures. Resisting under conditions of oppression and silencing within these institutions can take a heavy toll. The emotional labour of both these forms of resistance takes a greater toll on directly impacted people, hence the importance of paying attention to their wellbeing and ensuring appropriate forms of self-care.

Structures and systems in social justice organisations and movements

Despite activist critiques of wider social structures and conditions, social justice movements may also exhibit oppressive practices and structures that contribute to burnout or withdrawal from movements. Moreover, activists can feel pressured to commit to unmanageable workloads because issues are so urgent and because their sense of emotional responsibility to other community members makes it hard to step away. The 'ideal' activist is often perceived as an extraordinary person who sacrifices all other needs and desires in favour of the movement. This behaviour is not sustainable and activists must consider not only their political goals but also their emotional wellbeing and the sustainability of their activist approaches.

1. Jasper J. M. (2011). Emotions and social movements: 20 years of theory and research. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 37, 287–303. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150015>
2. Molly Talcott (2014). Together We Have Power, *Latin American Perspectives* 41(1):72-88 DOI:[10.1177/0094582X13492142](https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X13492142)

Strategies for emotional reflexivity among activists

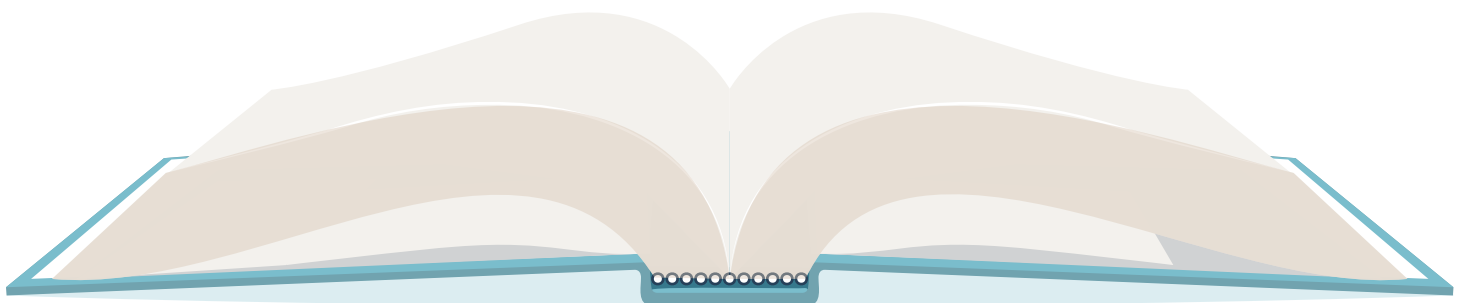
Storytelling

Engage in storytelling processes that relate to all the categories mentioned above - emotions that fuel activism, emotional effects of activism and the emotional effects of structures and systems related to organisations and movements.

Reflexivity practices

Containment

Reflect on and explore when it is necessary to contain emotional states. This process of accepting emotions and being able to hold them is called emotional containment. For example, emotions such as anger may not always be an appropriate or desirable response at a particular moment. Containment refers to holding on, and later finding a channel of expression or processing.



Attending

Naming an emotion is a powerful practice of self-validation. We acknowledge and accept our emotions without judging them or trying to change them. Labelling our emotions is an effective way to reduce stress and anxiety. Attending to emotions requires identifying what else is needed to create a state of emotional wellbeing. Containment refers to holding on, and later finding a channel of expression or processing.

Dialogue

Emotional dialogue is the process by which one person makes a bid for emotional connection and the other person receives it by validating the emotions and demonstrating a willingness to nurture those emotions or to engage in a process that contributes to collective emotional wellbeing.

Realign

Integral health is achieved by mastering emotional balance, understanding the power of stillness, and embracing gratitude. Surrendering to the inner core leads to true progress and happiness in life's unfolding evolution. After the hard work of (1) allowing yourself to feel your emotions and (2) letting the place from which they emanate rise to the surface, you often end up with a clearer idea of the pattern that was triggered. Connect to the inner source of the feelings, love that part of yourself, reframe the pattern within, and let it go. Choose another emotional response that feels truer to who you are and make it your natural response. Keep in mind that your brain and body are a set of automated systems and it will take consistency to reprogramme your reactions.

A story of claiming joy as an act of resistance

The last few years have been particularly tough for most of us. None of us has been left untouched by a world that seems to be burning. At an individual and collective level, the pandemic and the multiple crises in the world have left us reeling, and we are still seeing the effects of that unfold daily. I have struggled with the loss of both parents as well as multiple losses among family and friends. I have also struggled to maintain physical and mental wellbeing during this period.

Not surprisingly, even the idea of claiming joy can feel like a distraction from what is truly important given the issues the world is facing. In moments of stress, anxiety and depression, joy feels like a selfish or guilty pursuit. We are constantly reminded that our dreams for justice are slow to materialise and attract scant recognition from people other than a few co-fighters who are all exhausted as well. Burnout is prevalent and many of us are on the brink of collapse.



Antonio Gramsci advocated for “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.” Hope and joy in activism involve exploring the conditions that can sustain individual and collective senses of worth and dignity, and the ability to actively engage with the conflicting emotions that often arise while fighting for social change. If we take this seriously — the dynamic mix of analysis and emotions that propels activists — a useful perspective and way to explore this complexity could be through joyful potential, rather than a state of depression.

Without joy, life would feel too bleak. Its absence would mean that what we do in this world feels pointless and unrooted. For me, connecting to and claiming joy is about keeping the flame and fire of my activism alive because joy is a beautiful generator of hope. On the one hand, it provides momentary relief from the constant demands for our revolutionary energies and actions. On the other hand, sensory joy is a way to care for ourselves and allow the natural world and our bodies to sustain our struggle.

Claiming joy reminds us that love, connection and beauty are abundant and available to us all and that we are all worthy of a full, beautiful life. Coming to this conclusion led me to realise that claiming joy is an act of freedom and power, especially in a world where joy may appear to be available only to a few privileged ones. Without joy there is despair and a sense of futility, especially because hope and potential are often conceived as future-oriented: “I hope things will get better”, “I’m building change on behalf of my children’s children”, and so on. In our everyday lives, however, a spark of hope enables different histories, emotions and experiences to enter present conversations on revolution, freedom and activism. This is an important aspect of our individual and collective hope.

Similarly, and most profoundly, joy and hope offer the potential of connecting us by affirming our collective humanity. The kind of joy available in our solidarity and our collective ways of being is a propulsive force. It gathers and channels energy and disrupts rigidity and control. Celebratory joy creates emotional and physical connection, in turn generating energy

which keeps us going during the moments when we need it most. In this regard, hope itself is an interesting concept and political idea. To illustrate, when hope becomes a striving toward the future without a recognition of what is in front of us — how we feel, understand and work toward change — connection is lost and dissatisfaction arises. So, to live for joyful hope is to move toward the emergence of things as they happen, giving meaning to those moments of spontaneity, and cultivating an openness towards the future.

As Audre Lorde noted, “The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.”

According to Thich Nhat Hanh, to be fully mindful in the present moment is to be aware of our interconnections with others. Hope and joy in the moment therefore involves care for others and their suffering, which might be called love. From this place of care, we can witness prejudices and hostilities towards others and ourselves, and work towards justice while choosing not to perpetuate injustices. For example, witnessing years of constant struggle and unsuccessful change may not only spur active resistance but also lead to activists harbouring deeply rooted forms of anger and resentment. However, when we can acknowledge what causes our negative feelings, burnout and disillusionment, alongside the hope and joy involved in change, and are mindful of the day-to-day activities of living, we access more healing ways to deal with suffering.

The first step in claiming joy is the full acceptance of whatever is going on in your life. Starting there, we can respond with power, grace and ease to the chaos surrounding us.

Lessons I learnt from connecting to joy in my activism and life

#1: Making the connection between our activist politics and joy

The first step is to recognise that joy is not a luxury or privilege but can be a practice in which we ground our activism. Many of us feel guilty when making time for joy because we see it as separate from our activism. But making the connection between our activist practice and joy is an important step in claiming it. As Sebastián Mendoza-Price explains, “We think of joy and activism as separate entities, whereas I’m the kind of person who falls deep into these things... I’ve always had an issue detaching myself from work, little vacations stress me out... I try to take little breaks by myself... I’ll go on Netflix. I never do work when I’m eating.”

#2: Take little joy steps

Take care of yourself in little ways. Go to bed early, cut down on absent-minded phone use, and skip negative news first thing in the morning. Build simple ‘happiness breaks’ into your daily life, like placing stickers on your planner, wearing a colourful scarf, burning an aromatherapy candle, having your favourite snacks close by and facing a window rather than a wall. Fully savour joyful moments, like drinking your morning cup of coffee, inhaling the scent of a flower and taking a moment to listen to birds singing outside your window.

#3: Pay attention to your body

Make time for exercise. A study published in the Journal of Happiness Studies found that people who worked out for as little as 10 minutes per week tended to be more cheerful than those who never exercised. Pay attention to what makes you feel good and/or energises you. If one form of exercise does not work for you, try another. For example, some people love running, some prefer yoga, some love dancing and others enjoy walking through a botanical garden.



#4: Focus on gratitude

Create a Gratitude or Joy List. All of us have things for which we are grateful. Focusing on these not only produces happiness hormones in our bodies, it teaches our minds to recognise the things that are good for us. Joy is power! Understand that it will not be given freely to us. We have to make the time to create and cultivate joy.

#5: Connection and community

We all yearn for deeper connection and a sense of community. It's easy to become isolated when we focus on work more than on the people with whom we meet or work. Work with people who care about you. Don't sign up for a project or movement unless you know the kind of people with whom you'll be working. Strike up a conversation with friends, family members or even strangers. Taking a few minutes for conversation, for no other reason than the joy of finding out more about another, can be very revitalising. Sustaining a joyful community involves awareness of and skills at helping each other to sustain the love and care that are the foundations of individual and social change.

Emotional practice tools

In a well-functioning activist environment, we would have access to all the tools we need to deal with our emotions. Strengthening our emotional intelligence means we can have a better relationship with ourselves and form stronger bonds with others.

For instance, in a disagreement we need the ability to read our emotions to recognise if it is safe for us to engage (fear), to recognise where our boundaries are not serving us (anger), to recognise our commitment to what we are standing up for (sadness) and to remember what we value about the relationship in which we are experiencing conflict (joy). Once we recognise where we stand within a disagreement it is important to know how to talk about our feelings to resolve the issue appropriately. Furthermore, we should learn how to recognise the emotions others are experiencing through observing their body language and facial expressions. Lastly, we need the skills, not only to continue our social change work but also to live healthier, happier and more fulfilling lives and form strong supportive relationships both inside and outside our professional capacity.

Tool #1: Building awareness as part of our emotional practice

Awareness involves our whole self: emotions, thoughts, energy and physical sensations. Many of us rely on thinking primarily but, when leading from within, we need to attune to the full range of awareness. Awareness is a means to discovery. As an activist and change leader, you can use awareness to tap into your inner knowing, including the wisdom of your body, mind, emotions, soul and spirit.

Coming into awareness, coming into the moment, creates a clear mind. In this way, we become freer emotionally and can access creativity and inner resourcefulness. When we create the space for awareness, we create solutions that cannot be accessed through the mind alone.

Four simple steps for developing awareness

We can access awareness and develop deeper awareness through practice. It is important to note, however, that not all practices work for all people at all times. So, if any of the practices below make you feel uncomfortable, permit yourself to stop.

#1: Notice your breath

Sit, close your eyes, and focus your attention on your breath without trying to change it. Notice how your body expands and contracts as you breathe. Pay attention to the subtle sensations of the air flowing in and out of your nose.

What effect does focusing on your breath have on your body, emotions and energy?

#2: Physical sensations

Now turn your focus to whatever sensations you are aware of in your body. You may notice tingling, tension, coolness or relaxation. Do not try to change the sensations, judge them or create a story about what the sensations mean. Simply notice.

What effect does focusing your attention on physical sensations have on your breath, emotions and energy?

#3: Notice your emotions

Now shift your attention to whatever emotions are present. Accept whatever emotions are present without judging, changing, or engaging in inner dialogue about them. You may notice contentment or restlessness, joy or sadness, fear or love, or numbness.

What effect does focusing your attention on your emotions have on your breath, body and energy at this moment?

#4: Notice your energy

Now shift your attention to whatever energy lives in you. Accept whatever energy flows through you without trying to change it or engage in inner dialogue about your energy. You may notice desires or blockages, intensity or flow.

What effect does focusing your attention on your energy have on your breath, body and emotions at this moment?

*Every act of self-care is a powerful declaration: I am on my side.
I am on my side. each day I am more and more on my own side.
- Susan Weiss Berry*

Tool #2: Name it, normalise it, navigate it

In some contexts, it can be helpful to read emotions as data that informs our bodies' responses. We learn about our relationship to emotions from the ways our bodies respond to emotions. Emotions, from blinding rage to wide-eyed love, are your body's immediate physical responses to important signals from the outside world.

Many of us operate on emotional autopilot, reacting to situations without true awareness or understanding of how our emotions drive our behaviours. When we regard our emotions as data, rather than directives, we may discover that even our most difficult emotions can be signals to do the things that will benefit us the most.

In addition, when we can name a specific emotion, we are better able to work with it. Putting language to our feelings often creates enough distance between us and those feelings, enabling us to respond to the present rather than react to past experiences that the feelings might evoke.

Considering our language is part of **normalising** our emotions.

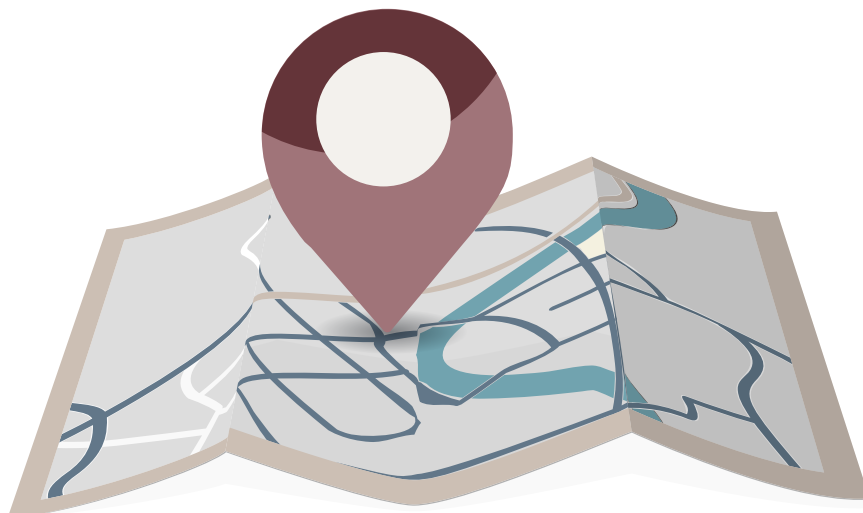
So instead of labelling emotions as positive or negative, accept that both comfortable and uncomfortable emotions are a normal part of life.

Be open to experiencing the full range of your emotions without judgement. See your emotions as data without letting them determine behaviour.

Rather than treating them as directives, regard emotions as sound posts that can help you move towards a more integrated self.

Finally, **navigate** from what the data reveals. What is that emotion trying to tell you? What is the next best step based on this data?

The truth is that every emotion serves the purpose of moving you towards action. Emotions can influence the generation of an action in two ways: the tendency and readiness to act and the decision to act.



Tool #3: Transforming distress into light

A practice that deepens awareness is transforming distress into light. This harnesses the energy of emotional distress in a life-serving way. The following process is adapted from the work of many practitioners, including, Marshall Rosenberg, Susan Skye, Robert Gonzales, Byron Katie and Meganwind Eoyang.

Observation: Describe the stimulus of your distress.

- What triggered you?
- Describe the moment you first felt pain.
- What are you seeing, hearing, smelling, etc?

Judgement: Express your reaction.

- What are you telling yourself?
- What is your judgement of others or yourself?
- Voice all the judgments until you are clear about your core belief or deepest judgement.

Body: Scan your body.

- Sense your body from the inside and experience the wisdom of the body.
- What physical sensations do you notice?
- Notice any desires in the body — for attention, expression or movement.

Emotions: Experience your feelings.

- What are you feeling?
- Give voice to your internal emotions.
- Honour your deepest feelings without pushing them away.



Needs: Experience your needs fully.

- What do you want?
- Underneath that, what are you longing for?
- Explore all your needs, digging deeper until you identify the bedrock need.

Mourning: Grieve the unmet need.

- Feel the pain of the unmet need.
- What if this need were never met?
- Grieve the loss.

Alignment: Sense the radiance of the need.

- Stay with the distress and add an image of a bright light, sustaining this attention until clarity emerges.
- Feel the living energy associated with the exquisite need.
- Reaching for life, imagine the deep satisfaction of this need fully met.

Action: Getting needs met.

- What requests can you make of yourself that will help you remember the radiant need?
- What requests can you make of yourself to help you honour or meet these needs?
- What requests can you make of others that would be most likely to get your needs met?

The transformation of internal distress into light is the psychological alchemy of turning base metal into gold. Holding the light of awareness intently in an internal emotional state alters the frequency of the energy and completely transforms the initial emotions. As we mourn, we touch the sadness of the unmet need, but if we stay with it, we touch the beauty of the need as it lives in us. This connection activates healing and transformation.



Tool #4: Finger holds to manage emotions

Sourced from: From Self Care Manual for Women written by Katie Boyle and conceived and edited by Mariem Omari

The following practice offers a simple way to work with emotions by holding each finger. It can be done at any place or at any time in our daily life. Whenever we experience challenging situations, or whenever tears, anger or anxiety rise, we can hold our fingers to bring a sense of peace, focus and calm.

The practice can also be used just before going to sleep to release the problems of the day and bring a sense of deep peace to the body and mind. You can do this practice for yourself or another person. For example, finger holds are very helpful for young children who are upset, and for any person who is fearful, anxious, sick or dying.

The practice was developed by Capacitar International.

The theory behind this technique:

- Feelings and emotions are like waves of energy moving through the body and mind.
- We have channels of energy running through each of our fingers.
- These energy channels are connected with an organ system in the body, which in turn relates to a specific emotion.
- When we experience strong or overwhelming feelings, energy can become blocked or repressed. This may lead to pain or congestion in the body.
- By holding each finger while breathing deeply, we can bring emotional and physical release and healing.

How to use the finger-holding technique:

Hold the finger of one hand with the opposite hand for anywhere from two to five minutes.

You can work with all five fingers or with the finger related to the particular emotion you are experiencing. The thumb represents joy, the index finger fear, the middle finger anger, the ring finger sadness and the little finger disgust.

Breathe in deeply while you acknowledge the strong feelings you are holding inside.

For example, as you inhale, you may say silently to yourself, "Breathing in I feel anger" or "Breathing in I feel fearful".

Breathe out slowly and let those feelings go.

Imagine those feelings draining out of your finger and into the earth. For example, as you exhale you may say silently, "Breathing out I release anger" or "Breathing out I let go of fear".

Breathe in a sense of harmony, strength and healing.

Breathe out slowly releasing past feelings and problems.

Tool #5: Facing our fear

Self-help books often offer advice and techniques to rise above fear, defeat fear, go beyond fear, conquer fear and so on.

For me, these are false promises based on individualist paradigms that suggest that it is up to each individual to transform their reality rather than acknowledge the very real reality of systems of inequality and oppression where fear is often a much-needed ally rather than something based on a false belief system.

Living in the world that we do, fear is not a weakness or something to hide, overcome, conquer or eliminate, rather it is an important messenger to which we can pay close attention.

Throughout evolutionary history, anxiety and fear have helped every species to be wary and to survive. Fear can signal us to act, or to resist the impulse to act. It can help us make wise, self-protective choices in and out of relationships where we might otherwise sail mindlessly along, ignoring signs of trouble.
- Dr Harriet Lerner

Fear, therefore, is not something to be conquered or eliminated. Instead, we may need to pay close attention to its message and roots. Most of us experience fear as a sign that we should stop, and perhaps even turn around and run in the opposite direction.

But because we move through different contexts in which we hold different levels of power, we may sometimes need to decode the signals that our fear is responding to and examine the actual nature of the danger. Is it past or present, real or imagined? Are we feeling anxious because we are starting something new, or about to repeat past mistakes? Depending on our context, fear can be a wise protector or something that stops us from challenging old structures that we can change.

Thus, we may need to identify the real source of our fear, past or present. For example, the anxiety you experience when speaking up at work may relate to an old pattern of being humiliated when speaking up in your family of origin.



When we can't fully face our anxiety and clarify its sources, we tend to act it out instead - attacking a colleague, nagging our child for the twelfth time, or working all weekend on a project that was good enough on Friday afternoon - all the while convincing ourselves that these responses are totally rational and warranted.
- Dr Harriet Lerner

Much of the violence of white supremacy is fuelled by fear of the other or fear of losing security and position. Leading from within recognises the need to turn towards our fear and learn to distinguish its many messages and behaviours so that our fear and anxiety do not cause further harm to ourselves and others when we unconsciously act from spaces of power or position.

Naming Fear

A practice from anchored, a deck for healing by Margeaux Feldman

The annoying thing about the things that scare us is that making them less scary requires doing them (hello exposure therapy).

Here's a writing exercise to do.

- Set a timer for two minutes.
- Make a list of your fears. Start small with fears that do not hold as much of a threat for you. If you feel comfortable list some higher-stakes fears. If you don't, that's fine.
- Pick one of the fears on your list and use it as your writing prompt.
- Look up the word that represents your fear in an online etymology dictionary and write it down.
- You'll use the word's etymology as your writing prompt.

The reason I suggest this is (1) I LOVE WORDS and (2) it can be an entryway into writing about something that feels scary.



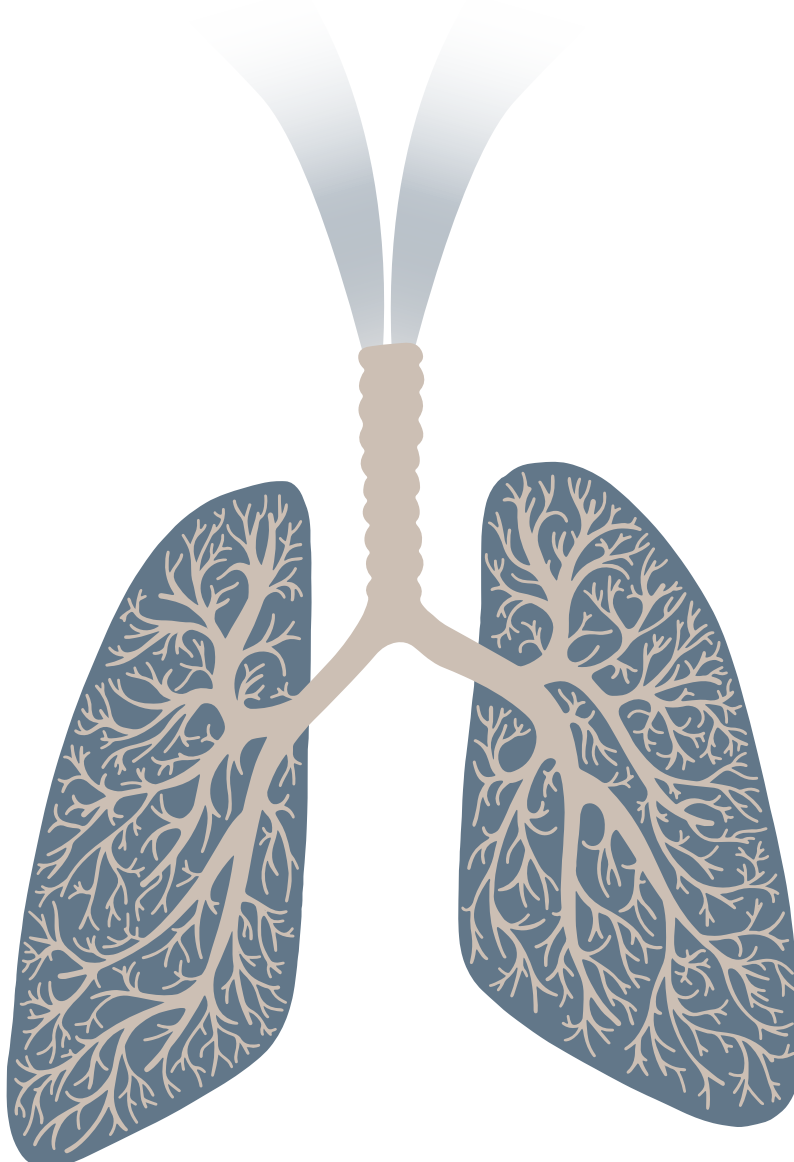
Breathing to settle anxiety

From Self Care Manual for Women written by Katie Boyle and conceived and edited by Mariem Omari

A key technique used to counter anxiety is to focus on one's breath. When you are calm, breathing tends to be smooth and rhythmic. In contrast, during anxious or fearful moments, our breathing can become disturbed. It may become quick and sharp or rigid and restricted, or you might even hold your breath or feel like you can't take a full breath.

A key technique for reducing anxiety is to focus on your breath and to learn to take deeper, more satisfying breaths. A great way of learning to improve your inhalation and take deeper breaths is to focus on your exhalation. It is important to note though that working with breath does not work for all people at all times, so permit yourself to disengage from the exercise should you notice that you are feeling agitated or zoning out.

If you practise the following breathing technique when you feel calm, you will become more comfortable with it and will be more likely to be able to access it during moments of stress and anxiety.



The theory behind this technique:

- The breath is the one automatic function of the body that you can also control consciously.
- Consciously slowing breathing during a period of stress helps to reduce feelings of anxiety.
- Controlling the breath is the first step to calming down an overactive stress response in the body.

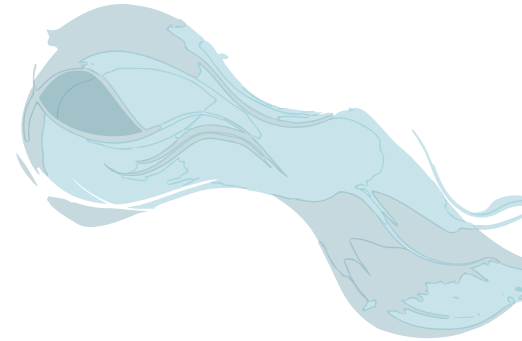
How to use the technique:

With all breathing exercises, you should not feel any shortness of breath or discomfort while you lengthen your exhalation. If you do, immediately return to your normal rate of breathing.

Crocodile breathing (Makrasana) - do this for six to ten minutes:

How to set up your body

- Lie on your front with your legs a comfortable distance apart.
- Turn your toes in or out, whichever is more comfortable.
- Fold your arms, placing each hand on the opposite elbow.
- Rest your forehead on your forearms.



Breathing techniques

Crocodile breathing (Makrasana)

Five-step approach to crocodile breathing:

- Focus your attention on your breath as it flows out and in. As you breathe out, feel how your breath empties and how the exhalation cleanses and releases tension. As you breathe in, feel how your breath fills you and how the inhalation nourishes you and restores energy. Continue watching the flow of your breath - feeling it empty and then filling you again.
- While you're feeling the flow of your breath, gently soften your belly, allowing the abdomen to relax.
- As you inhale, notice your abdomen gently expand, and as you exhale notice your abdomen slowly contract.
- When you come to the end of your inhalation, simply relax and exhale. In the same way, when you come to the end of your exhalation, relax and inhale. Let each breath flow slowly and smoothly into the next, without conscious pause.
- Observe the smooth and unbroken flow of your breathing. Like a wheel turning over and over, the breath flows out and in.



Additional tips on de-escalating anxiety

1. Find people you can talk through things with to understand what's worrying you from different angles. They could include friends, colleagues, mentors, coaches, therapists or support groups or communities.
2. Gather the facts. As anxiety escalates fantasies flourish. The absence of information often allows us to get lost in fearful fantasies, assumptions or projections.
3. Be reasonably vigilant. Don't be ashamed if there are certain risks you choose to avoid.
4. Don't go overboard on numbers 1 to 3.
5. Steer clear of platforms such as social media that can escalate anxiety. Often the strong opinions and sensationalism found on these platforms can dysregulate your nervous system even more.
6. Seek out activities that settle you. This could mean taking a brisk walk or sometimes you might need a soothing bath.
7. Turn to the things that allow you to reconnect with love and hope.
8. Reconnect to your values and regard moving into or away from a situation as aligning (more or less) with what you believe in.
9. At the same time remember to approach from a space of wisdom and self-compassion. When you notice that fear pulls you away from your values, ask yourself what support you need to change your inner or outer experiences to feel safer. Look for a connection. Ask yourself if there is someone or something that can protect me, comfort me, validate me, or care for me.

Tool #6: Holding our grief

As activists we navigate many griefs; grief from the loss of leaders, community members, colleagues and loved ones; grief for all the ways we and other marginalised people are dehumanised and treated; grief for the injustice caused by oppressive systems, grief about the potential that we lost out on or might never experience due to injustice, oppression and trauma; ancestral grief and trauma; and grief for harm we might have caused.

It is important to remember that we each hold different intersections of grief and that our capacity to engage with it in different contexts, and at different times, can be very different. At the same time allowing ourselves grief can confirm our worth. We are worth crying over. Our losses matter.

Because much of the grief we carry is not personal, but shared or communal, denying our grief and shutting it down uses up a lot of our energy and thus interferes with our ability to feel fully alive. On the other hand, honouring communal grief allows us to stay present and bear witness rather than allowing ourselves to retract and close down our hearts to the world. Too often we go numb and distract ourselves from our grief through social media, shopping, addictive behaviour or working in ways that lead to burnout.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that trying to protect ourselves from grief is an adaptive strategy, especially as we often don't have access to people, places and rituals that can hold us safely while we grieve.

Why do we do the inner work of grief?

One of the hardest things we as activists, and human beings, must do is turn and face the parts of ourselves that hide from the world and towards the intensity of our own losses.

We need to ask, What goes beyond the closed doors of our hearts? What are we grieving for?

It takes courage to feel our grief and turn to non-judgement, empathy and compassion so that we aren't numb to our own values.

We must therefore accept that our biases and pain can sometimes cause harm. For example, shutting grief down can lead to profound levels of dissociation, and if left unattended may find expression in the external world when we don't expect it and in unhelpful ways, or it can find expression in our inner lives, impacting our health and wellbeing. While grief might be the impetus for creating more just systems, if we do not process or work through our grief it can seep into our work and politics and may become blurred by feelings of powerlessness and disempowerment. This might lead us to want to rescue, fix, control or protect ourselves and others rather than creating spaces and communities that can hold grief and discomfort, trusting in its transformative potential.

This level of work is neither easy nor trivial and the level of commitment needed to do it should not be underestimated. At the same time, although grief can feel heavy and intimidating (and we might therefore believe grief work should be an intense, immersive experience) we can approach our grief in small, gentle steps, keeping in mind that grief is a process that will not happen overnight. As we do the work of healing, we'll find that our grief comes in waves, and while the pain lessens over time, the grief never fully goes away.

Author and grief activist Francis Weller suggests that systems of oppression force individuals, communities and generations to view the processing of grief as an individual responsibility. However, he argues that "the psyche knows we are not capable of handling grief in isolation". We therefore need to do the inner work to avoid isolating and protecting ourselves from suffering and grief so that we can connect with and hold each other in our grief and create communities of care.



The gates of grief

This exercise is based on the work of Francis Weller, in his books *The Wild Edge of Sorrow* and *Entering the Healing Ground—Grief, Ritual, and the Soul of the World*

<https://ritualsforgrief.com/the-gates-of-grief/>

First Gate: Everything we love we will lose

- Losing someone or something we love.
- Loss of those who depart this Earth before us; our parents, spouse, children, friends.
- Loss of home, beloved animals, places you have loved.
- Loss from illness or injury; treasured skills and capacities.
- Loss of a life dream.

Second Gate: The places that have not known love

- Places in ourselves never touched by love; parts of us we had to cleave off to receive a provisional welcome or acceptance.
- Places within us banished and wrapped in shame.
- What we hate in ourselves and hold in contempt (which we deny the healing salve of community).
- Places within us that live outside of compassion, warmth and welcome.
- Outcast portions of our soul appear as addictions, depression, anxiety and other symptoms calling for our attention.

Third Gate: The sorrows of the world

- The losses of the world around us.
- Daily diminishment of species, habitats, Indigenous languages and cultures noted in our psyches.
- Sadness for the earth.
- Where we experience the soul of the world.
- The legacy of human and white supremacy.



Fourth Gate: What we expected and did not receive

Things we may never realise we have lost because we weren't born into communities that fully and joyously welcomed our gifts. And, so, we carry:

- Unconscious disappointment.
- Feelings of emptiness, loneliness, and aloneness.
- Diminished experience of who we truly are.
- At the core of this grief is our longing to belong and longing to be longed for.

Fifth Gate: Ancestral grief

Unacknowledged and untended sorrows of those who came before us, born of:

- Lost connection to land, language, imagination, rituals, songs, and stories of our ancestors.
- Sense of homelessness, orphaned between old and new worlds.
- Collective soul grief of abuses and oppression of millions.

In sitting in grief circles with other elders, such as Linda Thai, Laurence Cole and Kedar Brown, more categories of losses have arisen that seem deserving of their own gate:

Sixth Gate: Grief for harm done - first articulated by Rachel Rice

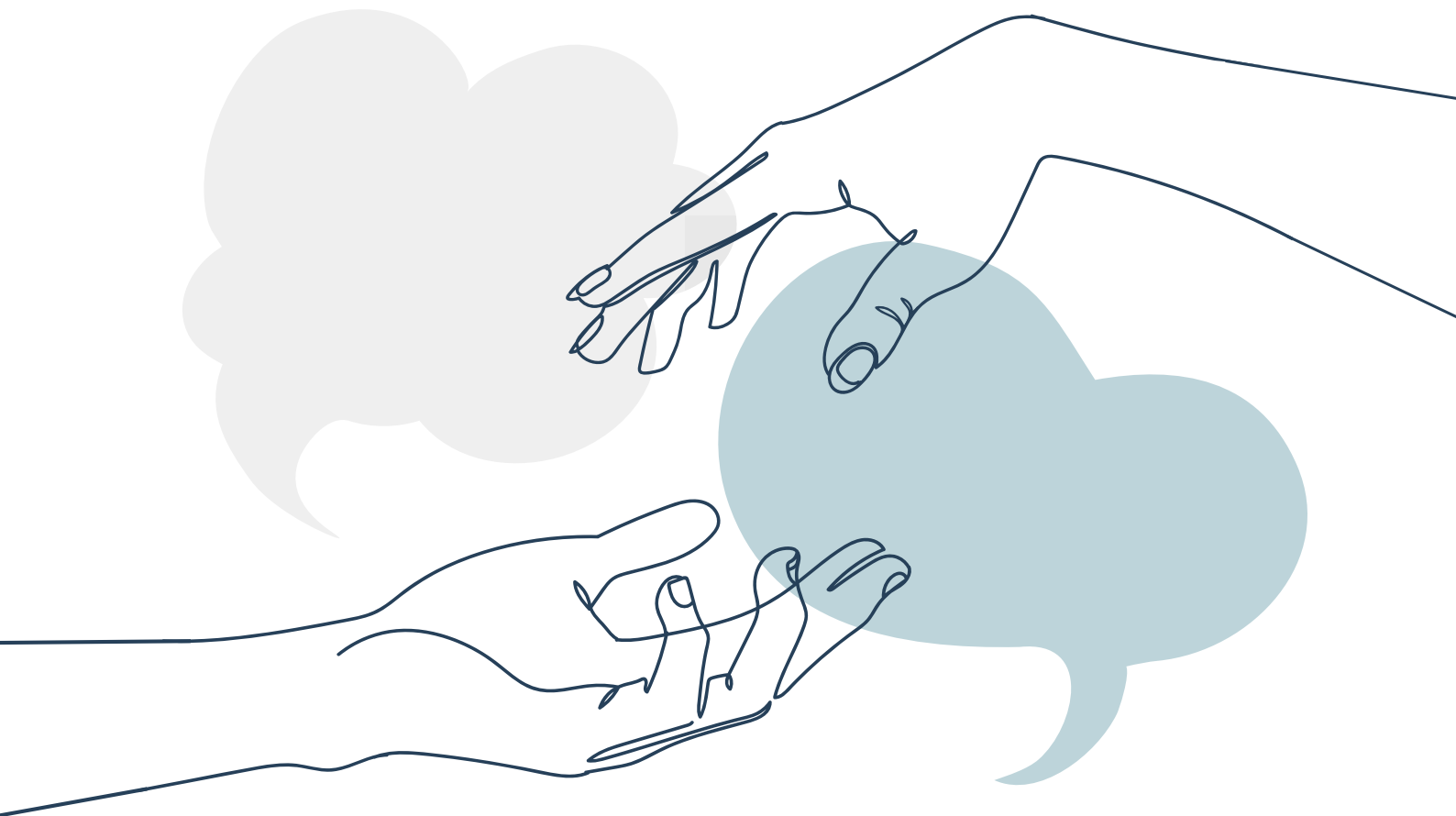
- Harm we have caused to ourselves and others.
- Collective harms in which we were complicit, such as racism, patriarchy, ecocide and inequity.
- Moral injury.
- Bystanding (not intervening when we can).
- Choices we've had to make to ensure our own survival.
- Feelings of regret, guilt, shame and self-blame can arise here.

The three Cs of grief

Choose: Grief often triggers a sense of losing control. When facing our grief, it is thus essential to empower ourselves through choice. Recognising what we can attend to, join, and do — and what we cannot — can help us lean into the dignity of choice. Choose what serves you best at any given moment, be it the darkest moments of grief or those moments when we feel hopeful that healing is occurring. It's important to acknowledge that in the midst of grief, we might need support to know what we want and how to go about getting it.

Connect: Human beings are inherently wired for connection. When feeling grief, it is therefore essential not to isolate ourselves from the lives of others or to feign wellbeing when we are struggling. Grief around issues of justice and inequality can intensify feelings of isolation, especially when we hold a marginalised identity, and this can often result in us withdrawing from our causes, communities and social circles. Yet, asking for help from those we trust fosters mutual understanding, facilitates support from others and also allows them to be more open about their own pain. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that connection to other people might not always feel accessible or desirable and that we can also connect with our ancestors, with nature, with animals or through reading about the experiences of people who represent us.

Communicate: During moments of grief, breakdown or overwhelm, by communicating our needs we begin to heal. Effectively communicating with friends, family, fellow activists or mentors enables them to provide meaningful support when our grief strikes. It is therefore important to express our needs openly and let people know our boundaries and needs when it comes to discussing grief. For example, after a loss, you could acknowledge that you appreciate an inquiry such as 'How are you?' but are not yet ready to speak about your feelings. You could also agree on ways to signal that you need space when the emotions simply feel too overwhelming to express.



Four steps for moving through grief

Cheryl Espinosa-Jones, a grief counsellor delineates four steps for working with grief.

Step 1: Be with the process in its entirety.

Grief has its innate wisdom and processes. When we interrupt or disregard these processes, it can lead to apathy, addiction and unhealthy expressions of anger. Ignoring loss exacerbates its impact. Leading from within asks us to fully experience our losses rather than evade them. We must include our own grieving bodies in our justice work and give them what they need, individually and collectively.

Step 2: Seek solace and support.

Recognising one's own grief, seeking professional or peer assistance and embracing one's grief journey can expand awareness to the point where previously unnoticed grief comes to light. In this way, we build a nuanced understanding of grief that allows us to approach our own grief and that of others without judgment so that we can accompany each other without rejecting any aspect of ourselves. In community, we can progress together, engaging in actions that can help process sorrow and transform grief, as well as come to terms with the truth that grief is an ever-present part of our activism as well as our lives.

Step 3: Find inspiration.

Art in its myriad forms allows grief to express itself, gives voice to our sorrow, deepens our gratitude and reminds us that only those who grieve deeply can love profoundly.

Step 4: Take action from a place of grounded grief.

Grief moves through a spiral of embracing discomfort, reaching for connection and inspiration and then taking small steps towards transforming our tangible and cultural realities. Processed grief can fuel profound and enduring change infused with heightened joy, while unprocessed grief can keep us stuck in fear, defence or dissociation. When we confront our struggles through the lens of grief, what was lost can be found, witnessed and honoured, and from this place we can build more soulful and just systems.

To have a movement that breathes, you must build a movement with the capacity to grieve.

References

Chris Barker, Brian Martin and Mary Zournazi (2008). Emotional self-management for activists. Published in *Reflective Practice*, Vol. 9, No. 4, November 2008, pp. 423-435.