

## Facilitating after Tough News

A devastating electoral loss, a rollback of basic rights, a climate disaster, a gruesome headline, a state sanctioned murder... As we train and facilitate groups in intense times, we increasingly have to absorb the shock of tough news. Many of us, participants *and* trainers, arrive at workshops in various states of crisis and grief. Facing uncertainty and violence, the rage, numbness, and fear are right at the surface. We feel it in our bodies as exhaustion, fogginess, or nausea.

**As movement trainers, facilitators, and organizers, we have opportunities to help groups build skill and resiliency, to weather these moments.**

A workshop can provide a refuge — a place for expression, support, and grounding — even as we deliver content, whether that's how to recruit volunteers, plan actions, practice de-escalation, strategize, etc. When we can support our people to feel their power amidst the intensity, they're more likely to commit to action after the workshop.

When facilitating after tough news, if we find ourselves frozen, overwhelmed, or anxiously reading off our agenda, here are some ways to go toward resiliency. We offer these as options, when your group is in distress, distracted, or processing political developments. Whether you're a new or experienced trainer, designing an agenda or making in-the-moment facilitator choices, we hope these support you and your groups to be authentic and powerful.

### WELCOME A RANGE OF EMOTIONS

Recognize that reactions and emotions will be different among participants; this range could be influenced by race, gender, class, geography, prior organizing experience, degree someone is impacted by recent news, etc. As a trainer, it's important to name out loud the range of emotions that might be present. At the beginning of the workshop, you can welcome despair, resolve, hopefulness, rage, exhaustion, depression, passion, shock, cynicism, gratitude, love, anger, etc. Using your facilitator role to explicitly welcome what's present relieves participants from holding it all on their own.

Unsure what might be in the group? Start by checking in with yourself and noticing how you're feeling. Naming your own emotions can give permission to others: "I know I'm feeling both inspired and fatigued right now. What other feelings would you like to welcome?" You can also simply elicit them from the group, with a brief go-around or pair share prompt.

## USE TOOLS TO GET A SENSE OF WHAT THE GROUP NEEDS

We can guess about how a group is doing, but we might need more information to assess how much to adjust our agenda. In a workshop following a wave of violent repression, a trainer asked people to place themselves on a [spectogram](#) between “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree” in response to two prompts: *I’m overwhelmed by the range of emotions I’m feeling this morning*, then, *it’s challenging for me to be present in the room this morning*. They debriefed with a discussion about what would help people be present in the room, as the workshop continued.

Alternatively, a [maximize/minimize](#) list could help assess a group's buy-in on the agenda. In a contentious strategy meeting, a trainer built two lists. First, even though *there’s disagreement here, what are ways you can contribute toward decision-making (maximize)*. Then, *what ways might you get in your own way (minimize)*. Reflecting on both lists, group members shared requests that would support strategy decisions. Making time to tend to what’s underneath the surface beforehand can prevent unhelpful conflict and mid-meeting eruptions.

## BODY-BASED ACTIVITIES SUPPORT EMOTIONAL RELEASE, ENABLING A GROUP TO MOVE FORWARD

Many people experience shock or trauma as feeling tension, tightness, or numbness in the body. Using kinesthetic activities that bring attention to the body helps people release what’s stuck, make space for emotional clarity, and strengthen decisions in high stakes situations. Taking time for breathing, grounding exercises, gentle stretching, dancing it out, or anything to connect with the body helps.

During a de-escalation training with a group facing potential gun violence, a trainer noticed a dip in energy. Instead of saying, “I know we’re tired, but we have important work to do, let’s go!” the trainer chose to go toward the body. They had people pair up, then stand back-to-back around the room. After a pause, they invited everyone to notice how it felt to have someone at their back. The energy shifted dramatically! Then, the trainer asked, “What’s it like now? What feels different?” People reported feeling a potent strength, in their bodies, from others in the group. The trainer had folks walk around the space, silently, to tap into the new energy. Afterward, the group brought renewed enthusiasm and risk-taking to the next roleplay activity. You could remix this tool by inviting folks to close their eyes or not, have backs touch or keep some distance — as long as folks can sense having someone ‘right there’ behind them.

## ENCOURAGE PEOPLE INTO A FULLER EXPRESSION OF WHAT THEY MIGHT OTHERWISE DENY

Organizers and activists can carry a strong sense of *should*, that at times will contradict their primary feeling state: *I'm really tired but I should show up to the protest. I don't feel hopeful but I should express hopefulness for the people around me.* When we're torn between two impulses, we're less likely to think and act at our full potential. As trainers, we can help the parts more easily denied to find voice. One training team used a [mingle](#) tool, inviting the group to walk around and have short one-on-one exchanges with different people, answering the prompt, "one place I'd like to be today, instead of here, is..." Then, "the value of being here anyway is..." This helped people locate their stake in the workshop, without disavowing the part of them that didn't want to be there. Alternative prompts could be, "one way I *should* feel right now is..." Then, "one other thing I feel *anyway* is...", debriefing the value in recognizing the parts we might deny.

## TALKING ISN'T ALWAYS THE BEST WAY FOR A GROUP TO PROCESS

Moving out of the cognitive level allows some people to access emotional or spiritual resources. Singing, chanting, praying, or even listening to music together are ways to process in a group. As [Singing Resistance](#), the decentralized, anti-authoritarian signing movement in Minneapolis, exemplifies, song and singing has been a life force of liberation movements throughout history. Sharing a song that gives you strength or inviting a group to sing together in a workshop, even to transition between activities or open/close a session, can cultivate courage, connection, and emotional release toward collective action. If not singing, other options include permission for silence, loud exhales or sighs, and humor and laughter.

## USE RITUALS TO HELP MOVE THE ENERGY

After a devastating electoral defeat, facilitators started an organizational retreat with a blazing bonfire. After a little framing about how some may feel like a wildfire has swept over them, they invited people to draw or write their feelings, or find a natural object. Then, they placed their drawings or objects in the fire, speaking briefly about them. People embraced the transformative power of fire. The structure made room for a wide range of responses. A ritual doesn't have to be elaborate — it's any symbolic way to express emotions. In indoor settings or online spaces, similar rituals can be created through lighting a candle, filling a bowl of water, or placing a plant that

---

## BREAK DOWN ISOLATION AND CREATE STRONG SUPPORT SYSTEMS

One response to distress is to feel that we are alone in our experience. Help people through that by using [buddy systems](#), pair shares, and checking in with individual participants during meals or breaks. Another tool is “Stand-Up/Sit Down” or “Hands Up/Hands Down” where any member of the group can say, Who else... (is feeling pissed off, is scared for their family, wants to take power) and other members of the group can stand up or raise their hand if they agree.

## ALLOW A GROUP TO EXPERIENCE ITS RESILIENCY

We may adjust our agendas or change activities to make space for support, processing, and emotions, including many of the options above. But that doesn't mean we have to abandon the goals of our workshop or meeting. Groups are resilient — and these times demand we learn how to tend ourselves *and* take action in tandem. As trainers and facilitators, any time we can support a group to experience this rhythm right there in the room, is precious. It counters internalized narratives about our weakness or failure, helps guard against burnout and over-exhaustion, and builds skills for moving through setbacks, threats, and tough news.

---

contributions by TFC trainers and network, including by Matthew Armstead, Nikki Marín Baena, Diana Gonzalez, Holly Hammond, Daniel Hunter, Katey Lauer, Betsy Raasch-Gilman, Karen Ridd, and Shreya Shah.

Licensed under Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license) by Training for Change