Creating Safe Spaces for Sensitive Conversations

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A Guide for Peace Corps Volunteers

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One of the most critical considerations for engaging communities around sensitive topics such as gender-based violence or harmful norms is creating a safe space for these discussions. It is important to take time to build trusting, supportive environments where people feel comfortable sharing concerns, experiences, and questions. This involves creating physically as well as emotionally safe spaces. While this brief focuses mainly on emotional safe spaces, it recognizes that the physical environment, including the setup of the room or venue, can greatly affect someone's comfort. But what is a safe space really like, and how can we create one?[1]

> A safe space is an environment in which participants are willing and able to participate and honestly struggle with challenging issues, without fear of attack, ridicule, or denial of experience.

When engaging in dialogue around sensitive topics, recognize that people, whether community members, Volunteers, staff members, or others young or old bring their own values, experiences, history, backgrounds, identities, and possible hurt or pain. These conversations can be high risk and pose challenges in group settings – which are not the typical settings for emotional discussions. They may:

- Elicit feelings of tension, anxiety, awkwardness, fear, or guilt;

- Highlight major differences in worldviews;

- Open participants to public challenge; and,

- Put participants at risk for disclosing intimate biased thoughts, beliefs, or feelings.

Some may fear their perspectives being denied or invalidated, others may fear saying the wrong thing, while for others, the discussion may raise pain or trauma. The aim is to foster a space in which everyone, coming from different experiences and having different needs, can participate. This holds true for a range of topics, including gender-based violence, harmful gender norms, discrimination, race, ethnicity, religion, or other identities.

In a safe space:

- Confidentiality and privacy are honored in a way that reflects an understanding of the local context.
- Active listening is modeled and encouraged.
- Everyone feels acknowledged and respected, and their unique experiences, backgrounds, and identities are validated and "seen."
- Everyone is encouraged to take risks and ask questions.
- Everyone is encouraged to speak personally and from their own experience.
- Honest examination of assumptions and behaviors is encouraged, while shaming or personal attacks are discouraged.
- Participants are encouraged to engage to their own comfort level.
- Silence is honored. No one has to speak.
- Cultural context and social identity dynamics are considered.
- Everyone experiences both comfort and discomfort. Spaces of examination, honest dialogue, and self-reflection are uncomfortable, but they are also the spaces of learning.

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[1] Holley and Steiner (2005) and the staff at Arizona State University Intergroup Relations Center (n.d.) as found in "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces," Arao and Clemens (2013).

How should we prepare for these conversations?

1. **Know and understand yourself**

Before you try to facilitate or co-facilitate a discussion, you should first try to experience the activity as a participant. This helps you to understand the strengths and possible weaknesses of an activity, to learn more about the issues the activity addresses, and reflect on your own comfort level and ability to handle and discuss those issues. Self-reflection is important. Take the time you need to understand your own views, assumptions, prejudices, feelings, and perspectives. Be aware if people from particular social, cultural, or religious backgrounds trigger emotions in you, whether positive or negative, which may affect your engagement. If you feel uncomfortable talking openly or have strong opinions about certain topics, it may make it hard to facilitate an open discussion. You may also be reminded of painful experiences from your own past, in which you suffered or caused others to suffer, which may make it hard to talk about certain topics.

2. **Know and understand the community and the people you are engaging**

Remember that transforming norms and attitudes does not happen overnight, but is a result of longer-term, deeper conversations led by and amongst community members over many years. Your primary "job" is to get to know the community, build trust, and foster relationships before engaging in discussions around sensitive topics. You should ideally spend your first 6-10 months at site using PACA and other participatory tools to better understand norms and expectations, and working with a counterpart to conduct a needs assessment that can help identify priorities, needs, goals, and challenges. Understand local terminology and slang, as well as how specific language and words may be interpreted. Focus on the people you are hoping to engage – are they young or old, men or women, girls or boys? What other factors (language, religion, ethnicity, etc.) may affect participation? .

3. **Know your appropriate role**

As an outsider, you should not be the one leading the discussions. Instead, you should co-facilitate with a trusted community member who can offer cultural understanding and ensure community ownership. Your role is to support your co-facilitator in creating an open and respectful environment in which participants feel comfortable sharing and learning from their own experiences. Keep in mind you are there to support reflection and should not insert your own perspectives, judgment, or criticism about the attitudes, language, or views of the participants. Facilitators should ideally receive training in guiding dialogues around the topics addressed. If this is not possible, spend time with your co-facilitator going over issues that might come up. There may be participants who open up and express feelings, while others may not want to talk. You could also assist when the dialogue seems stuck.

4. **Identify an appropriate location and set up a safe, comfortable physical space**

As highlighted earlier, the physical space is often just as important in creating a sense of safety. Identify a location where participants will feel most comfortable and that they can also easily access. This could be a familiar space where they already gather – in a school, club, sports field, community or civic center, village center, someone's home. People might also be more comfortable in a space that is not so easily visible to others, which might require additional logistics. Attention should be paid to the set-up of the room or venue itself. Arranging chairs in a circle rather than classroom style, sitting on the floor as appropriate, creating space for intimate dialogue while allowing for ease of movement, and bringing in snacks, drinks, or tea help to warm the environment. [2]

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[2] Peace Corps prioritizes protecting and keeping children in the communities we serve safe. Make sure to read and keep in mind Peace Corps' Child Protection Policy contained in MS 648, the Volunteer Code of Conduct in Attachment A of MS 648, and any related Post policies whenever you are working with youth.

How do we begin the discussions?

1. **Use icebreakers**

Icebreakers are a good way to build trust, establish connections, foster sharing, and develop comfort – all of which are crucial when having sensitive conversations. The exact icebreaker used is not as important as the role it plays. Select an activity that is fun and engages people with humor. Icebreakers involving physical movement are excellent, as long as they are appropriate and everyone is able and comfortable participating. The activity can also be a short game, a collaborative challenge or problem-solving exercise, or sharing of fun stories. Activities should emphasize safe, low-risk topics.

2. **Create shared common norms and expectations**

Invite the group to come up with an agreed upon set of norms and expectations (some use "rules"; others do not like that term) for the time you are together. This process helps to build trust and understanding, as well as group ownership around the creation of a safe space. Examples of norms might include listen to others, let others speak and don't interrupt, don't judge, ask if you don't understand something, turn phones off and be "present," or honor confidentiality. Understand what confidentiality means and looks like in the local context, how it is conveyed and applied – or not applied. Ensure everyone agrees on abiding by the norms. Consider displaying the norms in a visible place in the room, and refer back to them before and during sensitive conversations.

3. **Model vulnerability**

If you are going to ask people to become vulnerable and engage in high-risk conversations, start by modeling vulnerability, if culturally appropriate. Share a personal story that offers a glimpse into your own background. Emphasize humility and acknowledge personal moments of growth, noting you are not there as an expert, but to share and learn with the group.

4. **Invite sharing of hopes, fears, and gifts**

Begin the discussion by inviting participants to share their hopes for the time you are together, any fears they may have and, importantly, any gifts or strengths they bring to the conversation. This can be done anonymously through notes posted on a flip chart or wall, or by simply asking people to volunteer their thoughts. Spend some time acknowledging the hopes, fears, and gifts identified, making sure to check in from time to time to see if hopes are being met, fears allayed, and gifts validated.

5. **Ensure participants are aware of any potential high-risk topics**

Talk about risk levels before any dialogue, noting topics that may raise discomfort or pain. Emphasize that no one is required to contribute and anyone can opt out. While participants are encouraged to experience some discomfort and growth, everyone will be able to choose the zone they want to be in and whether they want to actively participate. Recognize how power dynamics affect risk. Consider risk levels when designing the activity, offering low-risk alternatives for processing. For example, quiet time and personal journaling are relatively low-risk, pair-sharing introduces higher risk, and group-sharing has the highest risk. Sequence activities so that the group engages in low-risk dialogue and only moves to high-risk conversations and topics when they are ready.

What techniques might be helpful when (co)facilitating the actual dialogue?

The facilitation techniques outlined below can all help with fostering a sense of safety, and promoting open dialogue and shared understanding around deeply sensitive topics.

Technique	Description
Name feelings	Name feelings and acknowledge emotions, i.e. "I sense this may be frustrating…"
Practice humility	Acknowledge you are not an expert and don't have answers but are there to listen and learn
Honor silence	Allow silence and silent reflection, and resist the urge to fill it, even if uncomfortable
Model vulnerability	Demonstrate vulnerability and encourage participation by sharing personally
Suspend judgement	Refrain from openly judging or criticizing someone's viewpoint or perspective
Be comfortable with discomfort	Be comfortable with your own discomfort around hard conversations so it isn't a barrier
Listen actively	Be present, listen without interrupting or sharing your views.
Exhibit empathy	Place yourself in someone's shoes - feel what they feel. Don't try to fix, just to understand
Take perspective	Encourage the group to examine an issue from different perspectives and viewpoints
Affirm people's sharing	Use visual (nods) and *minimal* verbal ("uh-huh") and other cues to affirm and validate
Bridge differences	Emphasize learning, connection, and common understanding to help bridge differences
Encourage understanding	Use open-ended questions to foster reflection and encourage non-judgmental responses
Paraphrase to ensure understanding	Paraphrase or restate to ensure everyone understands what is being said
Clarify misunderstandings	Clarify misunderstandings, promote group understanding, ensure voices are really heard
Share your own moments of growth	Be comfortable sharing your own personal moments of growth and learning
Promote self-care	Continue to promote things participants can do to foster self-care – i.e. stepping outside
Self-check hot button issues and triggers	Be self-aware about issues that may be triggers for you and how you might respond
Trust your intuition	Trust when you feel that something is making participants (or one person) uncomfortable
Ensure culturally appropriate responses	Understand what is and is not appropriate, i.e. placing a comforting hand, eye contact, etc.
Lean into discomfort	Encourage people to move from comfort to growth zones while avoiding danger zones
Invite lower-risk follow up options	Use one-on-one, pair share or smaller group dialogues to offer lower-risk processing

How can we close these discussions in a meaningful and supportive way?

As highlighted earlier, these conversations can elicit a wide range of emotions for participants that may last long after the discussion ends. Just as important as preparation and facilitation in creating a safe space is the need to close the dialogue in a way that ensures everyone feels supported moving forward. The following considerations can help facilitate meaningful closure:

- Make sure to thank everyone for participating in the discussion.

- Acknowledge that the conversation might have been difficult, and that people may continue to process and struggle with a wide range of feelings for a while.

- Build in time and space at the end of the discussion for participants to sit silently if needed, to engage in quiet self-reflection, or to have one-on-one conversations with you, your co-facilitator(s). or any other participants.

- Encourage everyone to practice compassionate self-care.

- If you are available, offer to have one-on-one follow-up conversations with participants.

- Encourage participants to continue the dialogue through discussion groups or one-on-one conversations with others.

- Encourage continued relationship building amongst participants and community members.

- Offer additional resources on the topics covered, as relevant and appropriate.

Are there helpful models and frameworks we can use during the discussions?

1. Self-Other Bridge

This model provides a three-step process (self, other, bridge) you can use when approaching situations where you may feel challenged or upset by another person's perspective and struggle to understand their viewpoint or how to discuss an issue in a meaningful way. The following are helpful questions to ask during each of the three steps, with the aim of promoting understanding and respect.

SELF: Analyze and understand your own reactions, worldviews, values, and attitudes
• How do I build trust, and what assumptions do I have about how trust is built?
• When I have a reaction to someone or something (positive or negative), what is it in my cultural programming, values, beliefs, attitudes, and worldview that causes that reaction?
• How do my social identities, worldviews, and attitudes affect who I choose to build relationships with, and who might want to build relationships with me?
• What assumptions do I have about the community's assets, skills, and motivations?
• How might I engage in a way that allows others to fully express their ideas and draw on their wisdom and experiences?
• What wisdom and experience do I bring to the table?
• What ideas bring up excitement, joy, fear, anxiety, etc., within me and why?
• What are my own priorities, and how do they align or not align with the community?

- What is my communication style and "persona"?
- What are my past experiences in managing my own reactions to issues that may come up?

OTHER: Practice perspective taking and consider other people's worldviews, background, and experiences

- How is trust built in different contexts and by different people within my community?
- How are approval, disapproval, anxiety, excitement, trust, respect, disrespect, fear, investment, and commitment communicated within various kinds of relationships and in the community?
- What non-verbal cues may signal discomfort, and how is such discomfort typically alleviated?
- What are their communication styles?
- What behaviors are similar and different from what I expect, and what might be the reasons behind those behaviors?
- As I engage community members, what might arise for various people as they share their perspectives with me, and how might that affect what and how they share?
- As I engage a particular community member, what is it in regard to that person's identities, values, experiences, and worldviews that might shape what they choose to share, how they share, and how they respond to particular topics and ideas?

BRIDGE: Explore options and bridging behaviors to promote understanding and bring differing worldviews together in mutually respectful ways

- How can I meaningfully, respectfully, and appropriately build relationships and trust with community members?
- With whom can I appropriately reflect, ask questions, and check my perceptions about integrating into my community?
- What are our options when someone shares something we find challenging, or shares something in a way that we find challenging?
- How do we appropriately seek multiple perspectives in the community in terms of social identities, worldviews, and attitudes?
- What can we do to ensure discussions are healthy, authentic, and reciprocal, so that they spark mutual understanding, deeper learning, and relationship-building?
- How can we practice suspending judgment and seek to understand the value within various ideas, including the ones we don't agree with?
- As we engage in conversation, how will we handle disagreements and concerns?
- How will we ensure everyone has the chance to share their ideas, and that are we listening to everyone's ideas?

2. **Lenses/ Sunglasses**

Use the imagery of putting on different colored sunglasses or lenses. How do the different lenses affect what you see and perceive? Imagine those sunglasses or lenses represent your worldview, perspectives, background, and experiences through which you approach any issue or engage with others. Now consider what lenses or sunglasses others may be wearing. How might their own worldview, perspectives, background, and experiences affect the way they approach issues or engage with others? Envision switching lenses or sunglasses for a minute. What might you learn? How might that increase understanding, and how might it help when having challenging conversations with differing viewpoints? While you can never truly "take off" your own social and cultural programming lenses, you can still practice experiencing the world through another set of lenses.

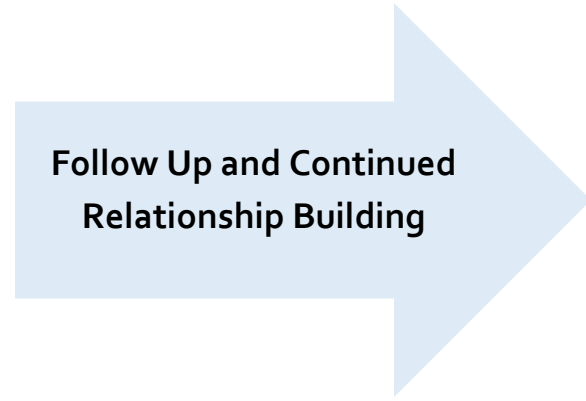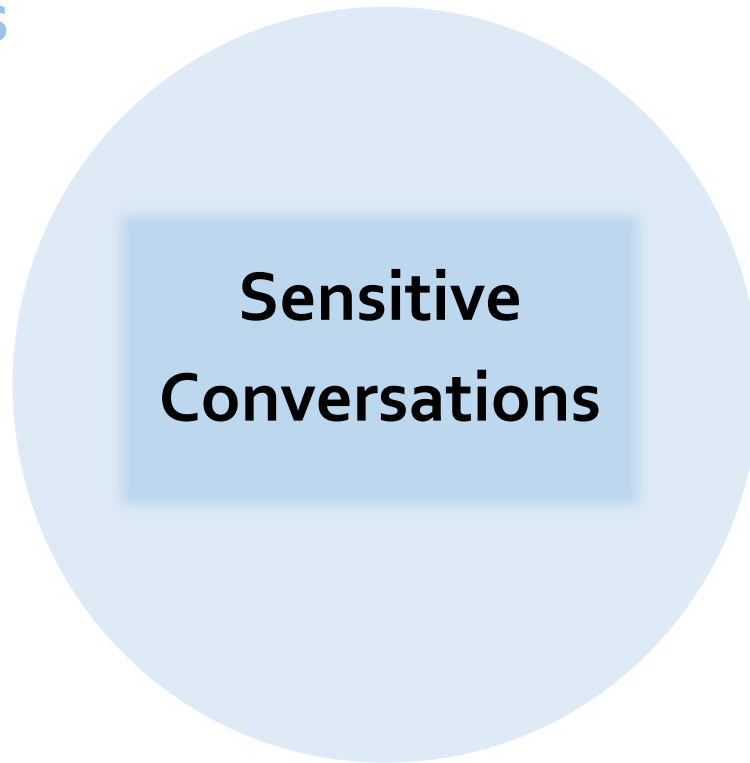### 3. Comfort, Growth, and Danger Zones

This language can be used to check in on how people are feeling at the beginning, end, and throughout the dialogue. Comfort Zones do not bring any risk or sensitivity. Growth Zones promote stretching, learning, and some discomfort, but still feel "safe." Danger Zones describe when someone is experiencing high psychological or emotional stress and they feel that they are no longer able to learn or grow. You can just use the language of the three zones, or introduce the zones by sharing a story and moving between the zones to represent how they or you feel at the different points in the story. Large concentric circles can be created on the floor, with the center circle labeled "Danger Zone," the middle circle "Growth Zone," and the outer circle "Comfort Zone." Invite the group to place themselves in a particular zone or in between zones. Ask for volunteers to share, as they feel comfortable, why they placed themselves in a particular zone. Use this language to encourage people to notice what zone they are in during the course of the conversations, and to check in from time to time. Encourage everyone to practice self-care. If they feel themselves in a danger zone, they can step out, take deep breaths, or connect with someone they trust to check in during a break. Note that the aim is to support each other in moving into the growth zone, inviting a little discomfort and learning, but never to push anyone into a danger zone. People should always be able to choose which zone they want to be in at any given moment.

Creating Safe Spaces for Sensitive Conversations

Societal Expectations

Worldviews

Culture

Community Engagement Trust and Relationship Building

Sensitive Conversations

Follow Up and Continued Relationship Building

Norms

Background

Religion