



# REFLECT TO CONNECT

TOOLKIT FOR DEMOCRATIC  
YOUTH EDUCATION



# TABLE OF CONTENT

<b>03</b>	Introduction
<b>04</b>	How to use this toolkit
<b>05</b>	Activities: First thematic introduction
<b>11</b>	Activities: Second thematic introduction
<b>13</b>	Activities: Human library
<b>14</b>	Activities: Steaming and reflection
<b>16</b>	Activities: Culture of remembrance
<b>17</b>	Activities: Culture of remembrance 2
<b>21</b>	Activities: Reconnecting
<b>22</b>	Activities: Resistance
<b>23</b>	Activities: Narratives
<b>24</b>	Activities: Individual resistance
<b>25</b>	Activities: Evaluation and closing
<b>26</b>	Psychological safety. Caring for others and yourself
<b>28</b>	Somatic practices in youth work

**03**

## INTRODUCTION

This toolkit focuses on strengthening democratic youth education by exploring historical and contemporary forms of authoritarianism and developing strategies to resist them.

It is the result of the Reflect to Connect training course, which brought together young people from Italy, Germany, and Belarus. Over the course of the program, participants exchanged experiences, explored historical and contemporary forms of authoritarianism, developed practical approaches for democratic youth education and also engaged in practices connecting mind, body, and collective action - testing approaches that combine critical reflection with somatic awareness. The methods, reflections, and exercises collected here are based on what was tested and experienced during the training. They are intended as a resource for educators, youth workers, and activists who wish to continue and expand this work in their own contexts.

The training was born out of a pressing reality. Across Europe, democratic societies are under strain. The rise of right-wing populism, the spread of anti-democratic tendencies, and the devastating impact of Russia's full-scale, unprovoked invasion of Ukraine highlight the urgency of critically engaging with authoritarian patterns - both past and present.

In Italy and Germany, temporal distance has led to a decline in young people's awareness of their countries' fascist histories. By contrast, young Belarusians face authoritarianism not as history but as a lived reality of ongoing repression and dictatorship. These differences shape how young people relate to questions of democracy, memory, and resistance, and they underline why historical-political education remains essential. By investigating patterns of fascism and authoritarianism - from the early 20th century to today's polarizations - and integrating practices that connect reflection with bodily awareness, this toolkit seeks to cultivate critical awareness, resilience, and active participation.

# 04

## HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is designed as a practical companion for those working in the field of democratic youth education. It does not provide a fixed curriculum but rather a set of adaptable methods and inspirations.

**Target audience:** Youth workers, educators, trainers, and young activists seeking to address authoritarian tendencies, foster democratic values, and encourage cross-border solidarity.

**Structure:** The toolkit follows the logic of the training course, beginning with introduction, moving to historical-political exploration, personal reflections and practical methods for democratic engagement.

**Approach:** All activities emphasize experiential and participatory learning. They can be used independently as workshops or combined into longer learning pathways.

**Adaptation:** Readers are encouraged to adjust the methods to their group's needs, cultural context, and resources.

Our aim is not only to document what was learned in the training but also to extend its impact. By connecting historical awareness with contemporary struggles for democracy and human rights, we hope this toolkit inspires new spaces of dialogue, solidarity, and resilience.

## 05

# FIRST THEMATIC INTRODUCTION

## OBJECTIVES:

- To introduce the concept of politics as an overall understanding in order to offer the key to understand totalitarianism
- To understand the map of political ideas and ideologies
- To understand one's own stand in terms of political ideas and ideologies. As well as where our societies are.

## DURATION: 90''

**MATERIALS:** Printed A5 with the ideologies, post-its of 2 colours, projector, PPT Presentation

## DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY:

Participants are introduced, through quotes on the meaning of politics.

“Politics is the study of power, a very special kind of power. The kind of power . The power of humans over one another. A cannon is physical power, but when a human ignites it, its power becomes from physical to political. Politics asks questions about power. What is power? Who should have power? And under what conditions? When should it be exercised? In what way? And for whom?”

“What is most important? For this power to be fair or for this power to be effective?  
If you want to know how important is power, just consider how you are reading and listening to me. Your device was made by workers told what to do by their companies, following laws done by their countries, living side by side with other nations in a fragile international system. So we can say that power is the most important component in making these devices.”

## 06

“Man is a political animal, it is in our nature to live in societies and have power over one another. It is our choice how to use it. Does not have to be that the strong do what they will, and weak suffer what they must. Aristotle.”

“Liberalism changed forever the landscape of political thinking. “Government is only legitimate if people want to be controlled” Rousseau - Social Contract. So, governments have no automatic right to govern. People have a right to be governed how they choose to.

Politics is at its most interesting when it is in debate.

When talking politics usually people understand 2 things.

1) the game to play to get elected. And General things how things get done by governments and societies. Government meaning the group of people who control society, otherwise the state. State means society united under one government.

2) concerns political philosophy/theory. Politics - The study of force “What actions are permissible”. So political theory talks about how society should be structured. And political philosophy gives the ethical grounds for that.

Political philosophy is how groups of people should act, which affects the government, which in turn affects society and therefore the state.

In the second part they are asked to express their opinion about politics, by defining an Image and Feeling connected to politics and then to different political institutions. The session ends by gathering different quotes and definitions of what politics is, starting from ancient times and participants are asked to choose which one of these “speaks to them” the most.

# 07

**Democracy** - Feeling and Image “The common people, considered as the primary source of political power.”

**Liberalism** - Feeling and Image “A political theory founded on the natural goodness of humans and the autonomy of the individual and favoring civil and political liberties, government by law with the consent of the governed, and protection from arbitrary authority.”

**Socialism** - Feeling and image “Any of various theories or systems of social organization in which the means of producing and distributing goods is owned collectively or by a centralized government that often plans and controls the economy.”

**Progressive** - Feeling and image - A political ideology that favours progress towards better conditions in society

**Conservative** - Feeling and image “Conservatism is a political and social philosophy promoting traditional social institutions in the context of culture and civilization. The central tenets of conservatism include tradition, organic society, hierarchy, authority, and property rights.”

**Right wing** - Feeling and image “Right-wing politics hold that certain social orders and hierarchies are inevitable, natural, normal or desirable, typically supporting this position on the basis of natural law, economics or tradition. Hierarchy and inequality may be viewed as natural results of traditional social differences or the competition in market economies. The term right-wing can generally refer to “the conservative or reactionary section of a political party or system”

**Left wing** - Feeling and image: politics supports social equality and egalitarianism, often in opposition to social hierarchy. It typically involves a concern for those in society whom its adherents perceive as disadvantaged relative to others as well as a belief that there are unjustified inequalities that need to be reduced or abolished.

**08**

**Centrist** - Feeling and image . “centrism—the centre or the center—is a political outlook or specific position that involves acceptance or support of a balance of a degree of social equality and a degree of social hierarchy, while opposing political changes which would result in a significant shift of society strongly to either the left or the right.”

**Fascist** - feeling and image “is - a political philosophy, movement, or regime (such as that of the Fascisti) that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition.”

**Authoritarianism** - Feeling and image - “Authoritarianism is a form of government characterized by strong central power and limited political freedoms. Under an authoritarian regime, individual freedoms are subordinate to the state, and there is no constitutional accountability”

**Nationalism** - Feeling and image “loyalty and devotion to a nation; especially : a sense of national consciousness exalting one nation above all others and placing primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations or supranational groups.”

**Populism** - Feeling and image “A political philosophy supporting the rights and power of the people in their struggle against the privileged elite.”

**Identitarianism** - Feeling and image “Identitarianism rests on the assumption that ethnic-cultural factors have a central role in human welfare and the functioning of society. Man is viewed as a combination of inherited and environmentally aquired traits, and the need of ethnic Europeans to defend and develop themselves as distinct peoples is emphasized.”

# 09

**Anarchy** - Feeling and image - Anarchy refers to the state of a society being without authorities or a governing body, and the general confusion and chaos resulting from that condition. It may also refer to a society or group of people that totally rejects hierarchy .

**Communism** - Feeling and image. “In political and social sciences, communism is the philosophical, social, political, and economic ideology and movement whose ultimate goal is the establishment of the communist society, which is a socioeconomic order structured upon the common ownership of the means of production and the absence of social classes, money, and the state.”

### **Plenary discussion.**

Why do you think the results are so diverse and different from one another?

What creates different perceptions of the same item?

Which one of the descriptions better resonate with you?

## 10

## SECOND THEMATIC INTRODUCTION

### OBJECTIVES:

- To offer an experiential activity that allows the exploration of the roots of totalitarianism, and different forms of political decision-making.
- To explore the commonalities of totalitarianism in different realities
- To offer an overview of the current global situation

### DURATION: 90''

**MATERIALS:** markers/pencils, 3xA3s (half flipcharts), scissors, rolls of masking tape.

### DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY:

The group is divided into 3 smaller groups, and need to stay away from one another, so that they can't see what they other team is doing.

Once divided the 3 trainers distribute the materials to each group (masking tape, half a flipchart, scissors markers) making sure that there are not enough materials for everybody. (for example 5 participants, 4 markers)

Then the trainers ask each group for two volunteers who are good in geography and in drawing. Once they are identified the trainer informs the two participants that they will be the leaders of the first part of the activity, and need to lead the group to draw a map of Europe. They have 15''

Sharply when the 15 minutes are over, the trainer forces them to interrupt whatever they were doing, and start the next phase, where they have no leaders anymore, they are all equals, and equally they need to use the tape to make a frame to the map. They have 5''.

# 11

Once the 5 minutes are over, the trainer interrupts them, and asks the group what they would like to do with the map they have drawn. Collects the options, and asks participants to vote on the options they mentioned.

In the meanwhile the trainer was observing the group dynamics and noticing if anyone was excluded or self-excluded, like on the phone, or simply because of language barriers, or lack of materials. And seducingly asks this person to destroy the map. If there is resistance to the destruction, the trainer may insist by further praising the participant, should there be even more resistance, then the trainer will take up a more aggressive and menacing stand to enforce the destruction of the map.

**Any outcome is viable, either the map is safe or it is destroyed, the whole group returns to plenary to debrief the experience, starting with steaming out emotions, followed by understanding what just happened. Leading the group to discover how totalitarian regimes (the destroy the map order) put pressure on those who (for whatever reason) felt excluded, and parallels can be made to the communists, fascists and nazis.**

## 12

# HUMAN LIBRARY

**OBJECTIVES:**

- To further foster a sense of community within the group
- To encourage further spending informal times together
- To further break the ice and foster mutual knowledge and learning

**DURATION:** flexible**MATERIALS:** A4 coloured paper, masking tape, markers**DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY:**

In this activity, participants become “books” and share their personal stories. Each participant creates a cover for their own book – choosing a metaphor, title, or image that best represents themselves or the part of them they wish to share with the group.

After decorating their covers (10–15 minutes), participants wear them and move around the room, forming small groups of 4–5 people. In each group, they present their “book”: explaining their chosen title, sharing their story, and answering questions from others. Afterwards, participants can switch groups and continue the exchange with new “readers.”

The activity encourages empathy, self-expression, and deeper understanding among participants through storytelling and attentive listening.

## 13

# STEAMING AND REFLECTION

**OBJECTIVES:**

- To reflect on the experience and process the experience
- To provide emotional steam out
- To encourage different forms of individual and group expressions

**DURATION:** flexible

**MATERIALS:** Big fabriano roll of paper cut into 3 pieces, tape, pens

**DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY:**

Somatic Self regulation and co-regulation techniques

- Lymph System Shaking - Participants gently shake their bodies to release tension and activate circulation.
- Box breathing - Practicing calm, rhythmic breathing (inhale–hold–exhale–hold, each for four counts) to regulate the nervous system.
- Kundalini fire breathing (done individually) - Short, powerful breaths through the nose to energize and awaken the body.
- “Fight or Flight” pressure points - Using light pressure on areas such as the upper chest, shoulders, base of the skull, and hands, they practice noticing sensations and breathing through tension.
- Breathing pile - Participants form a comfortable group “pile” – sitting or lying close together, with consent and attention to everyone’s comfort. The group begins to breathe slowly and deeply, allowing their rhythms to synchronize naturally.

# 14

## Inner Map - Group think exercise

This reflective group activity invites participants to explore shared emotions, sensations, and experiences through collective drawing. After a brief introduction to the Group Think concept, participants divide into three smaller groups and find their own working space.

In each group, one person lies down on a large sheet of paper while others trace their body outline. The process is repeated for at least two more people, creating overlapping silhouettes. Inside the shared contours, participants use colours, shapes, and symbols (no words) to express inner states, feelings, and insights that emerged during the process or experience they faced.

As they draw, participants are encouraged to talk, reflect, and listen actively – allowing the “inner map” to become a visual expression of collective understanding and embodied experience.

## 15

# CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE

**OBJECTIVES:**

- To thematically debrief the ideological foundations of national socialism and the culture of remembrance.
- To uncover the mechanism behind the establishment of totalitarian regimes
- To explore testimonials from survivors of those regimes

**DURATION: 90''****DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY:**

Brainstorm (5''): As a group, identify and discuss different forms of memorials witnessed during the day – physical, digital, artistic, or spontaneous.

Group Work I (30''): Participants divide into four groups, each addressing one question:

“What can you do today to ensure that 100 years from now the existing injustice is remembered?”

Gr.1: Ukraine

Gr.3: The Climate Crisis

Gr.2: Gaza

Gr.4: Trumpism and Deportation in the USA

Plenary Sharing (20''): Each group presents key reflections and proposals.

Group Work II (15''): Returning to the same groups, participants reflect on:

“What can we still do today to ensure that the injustices and atrocities of totalitarianism are not forgotten?”

Final Presentations (15''): Groups share their conclusions with all participants.

Closing (10''): Collective reflection on the importance of memory, responsibility, and active remembrance in democratic life.

## CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE 2

### OBJECTIVES:

- To thematically debrief the ideological foundations of national socialism and the culture of remembrance.
- To uncover the mechanism behind the establishment of totalitarian regimes
- To explore testimonials from survivors of those regimes

### DURATION: 90''

### DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY:

Brainstorming using a quote:



“Memory per se does not exist, every time we recall something from our past experience, these images, sounds, sensations are constantly influenced by our current state of mind, emotions, and surrounding environments.”

Question for the group: How can memory be kept alive even if the environments and influences are different today when compared to the past?

Individual reflection circles:

1. Recall a moment of injustice or unfairness that you experienced or witnessed.

*Safety Note: avoid digging deep into strong traumatic events, something you still recall to this day, but not deep scars.*

*Give a light/not too serious example “my schoolmate is copying homework from me, and the teacher does not believe it is mine, she gets an A and I fail, because the teacher believes I copied from her.”*

2. On paper, draw a circle. In the centre, express the event with a word, symbol, or image and emotions connected to the event.

# 17

Add two more circles around it:

Second circle – thoughts or interpretations.

Third circle – lessons or insights learned.

3. In conclusion (in pairs) talk about how this event (can either tell the the event to the other person, or just express it in metaphors, or not mention it at all, what matters is that you express what life lessons you extract from this event, a learning that you will bring along for your whole life.

*Safety Note: In order to avoid personal traumas a safety option can be to foster more macro-thinking, “injustice in the world witnessed today, e.g. War in Ukraine, Gaza, Climate Crisis, migrants in the USA etc.”*

Collective reflection:

Repeat the same circle exercise in relation to the common experience that group had (study visit, museum visit, connected to the topic etc.) exploring what emotions, thoughts, and learnings emerged from being in this historical space.

Conclusion:

Memory and Remembrance are kept alive, when learning is associated with the object of memory.

## 18

**Options of quotes to be discussed and get inspired:**

Primo Levi, Italian chemist, partisan and writer, Holocaust survivor

“Monsters exist, but they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are the common men, the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions.”

“Auschwitz is outside of us, but it is all around us, in the air. The plague has died away, but the infection still lingers and it would be foolish to deny it. Rejection of human solidarity, obtuse and cynical indifference to the suffering of others, abdication of the intellect and of moral sense to the principle of authority, and above all, at the root of everything, a sweeping tide of cowardice, a colossal cowardice which masks itself as warring virtue, love of country and faith in an idea.”

“We must be listened to: above and beyond our personal experience, we have collectively witnessed a fundamental unexpected event, fundamental precisely because unexpected, not foreseen by anyone. It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say. It can happen, and it can happen everywhere.”

Anna Frank, Jewish girl who hid from the Nazis in Amsterdam and wrote a diary about her life in hiding.

“I keep my ideals, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart”

“Look at how a single candle can both defy and define the darkness.”

“There's only one rule you need to remember: laugh at everything and forget everybody else! It sounds egotistical, but it's actually the only cure for those suffering from self-pity.”

## 19

Svetlana Alexeevich Belarusian investigative journalist, essayist and oral historian

“Suffering is our capital, our natural resource. Not oil or gas— but suffering. It is the only thing we are able to produce consistently”

“Freedom is not an instantaneous holiday, as we once dreamed. It is a road. A long road. We know this now.”

Ales Bialiatski Human rights defender, Belarusian pro-democracy activist, writer

“It just so happens that people who value freedom the most are often deprived of it.”

“I look inside myself, and my ideals have not changed, have not lost their value, have not faded.”

“Common people have a much greater impact than they can even imagine.”

Viktor Emil Frankl was an Austrian neurologist, psychologist, philosopher, and Holocaust survivor, who founded logotherapy,

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way”.

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom”.

“Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation”.

## 20

## RECONNECTING

### OBJECTIVES:

- To reconnect the group
- To re-establish a positive and constructive atmosphere

### DURATION: 60''

### DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY:

The whole group has to get over the string without touching it. The string is tied approximately at the height of the waistline. There are certain limitations:

- The string cannot be touched or bypassed and participants cannot get underneath the string.
- If someone touches the string the whole group goes back and starts over from the beginning.
- The group has 2 “saves” in order they want to save their progress of getting over the string.

*The legend: You are the tribe that is experiencing the crisis of climate change. The ice age is approaching and you need to escape to another part of the world where you can survive and have the access to resources, food, water and possibility to rebuild your village. In front of you is the Ice Wall. This is the last obstacle you have to overcome. You need to get over the ice wall all together without touching it. If you touch it, all the people that have crossed, have to get back and you begin from the start. You have 2 saves (to save the progress). You can't use other objects to get over the ice wall. You have 10 min to develop a strategy and 30 min to get over the ice wall. Keep in mind safety!*

After the task the debriefing is carried out:

- How do you feel now? Why?
- What was the process of developing a strategy (and getting over the ice) wall like?
- What were the crucial things/factors for making this exercise?
- What links do you see between this exercise and real life situations (themes of the training)?

# 21

## RESISTANCE

### OBJECTIVES:

- To foster a sense of hope through understanding resistance to totalitarianism
- To explore creative and positive examples of resistance to totalitarianism
- To showcase possibilities and capabilities to resist to oppression

### DURATION: 90''

**MATERIALS: 2:13" - 26.56" A Force More Powerful - Denmark  
"Living with the Enemy"**

### DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY:

#### Introduction:

Provide examples of dilemma actions occurring in the recent past: Germany's antinazi movement, Serbia's Otpor, etc. Ask participants to share any similar examples they know.

#### Documentary screening and debriefing:

Watch A Force More Powerful – Denmark to illustrate the concept in action. Debrief the documentary, explain dilemma actions as activities that no matter how the opponent reacts or not, they do the wrong thing (facing a dilemma).

#### Group work:

Divide the group into 4 subgroups (mixed groups), they brainstorm about the actions they can do at home, they choose smth tangible.

#### Presentation and closing discussion:

Groups present their ideas, followed by a reflection on the role of creativity, ethics, and courage in nonviolent resistance.

## 22

# NARRATIVES

## OBJECTIVES:

- To understand the existing narratives, their origins and targets
- To understand creatively how to create counter narratives
- To experience narrative creation process to spur debates and discussion within the group

## DURATION: 90''

## DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY:

Input on Hegemonic culture - the pillars and examples, values oppressive to us.

Antonio Gramsci (founder of Italian Communist Party, critic of Benito Mussolini and fascism, he was imprisoned in 1926) - Theory of Cultural Hegemony (Domination)

Why do the powerless consent to be dominated by those in the position of power?

Those in position of power and influence use the ideas of hegemonic culture to gain domination over the subjugated classes - getting consent from the masses of ordinary people (as if not using power and force).

The consent was used through the tool called Common Sense - manipulating culture, language, morality and common sense. How individuals look to common sense to guide them in their immediate private concerns - just the way things are, they things have always been (so that people don't question economic, social and cultural exploitation, they don't challenge the status quo).

# 23

Hegemonic enterprises:

- Media (they were viewed as independent, but they are owned by someone or do business to survive - bias reproduction)
- English language - language of instruction, to excel professionally you need to speak english, universities don't accept students without english, it became a synonym of educated)
- Franchising (globalising cuisine, etc.) - McDonalds, Starbucks, etc.

Consent is not a real consent, it is still using the power. There is a constant negotiation between the ruling class and subordinate class about how the life and society should be organized. The ruling class tries to ensure its narrative is dominating to keep the influence on economics and oth

Group task (25'') and discussion (25''):

- What are the current hegemonic/dominating narratives that are used by people in power (document the current narratives - for each country)
- What are the values we want to promote, mainstream?
- Deconstruct the current narratives (in national or mixed groups, small groups) - give few examples for each country - EU-anti-EU, afd, anti-nonviolence law (anti-gandi law), belarusian protests

# 24

## INDIVIDUAL RESISTANCE

### OBJECTIVES:

- To reflect on personal learning
- To identify key insights, tools, and values to take home
- To develop a concrete action plan or set of ideas for how to apply, share, and multiply the lessons from the training in participants' own communities and contexts.

### DURATION: 90''

### DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY:

Networking exchange:

Participants circulate and talk in small groups or pairs, presenting their work and context:

- Topics and issues they address
- Local realities and target groups they work with
- Methods, formats, or creative approaches they use
- This helps to map out the collective knowledge, experience, and resources within the group.

Reflection:

After networking, participants reflect individually and in small groups on two guiding questions:

- What did I learn here?
- What do I want to bring home?
- They note insights, tools, or inspiration that could enrich their own work.

Action planning:

Participants develop short, practical action plans or project ideas based on what they discovered during the exchange. This may include future collaborations, pilot initiatives, or creative experiments that carry forward the learning from the training into their local environments.

# 25

## EVALUATION AND CLOSING

### OBJECTIVES:

- To qualitatively assess the process and outcomes of the training
- To quantitatively evaluate the results of the training
- To close all the loops that were opened during the project
- To provide a positive closure experience of the whole process

### DURATION: 90''

### DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY:

Activity 1: Four corners “Agree, Partly Agree, Partly Disagree, Disagree.” as the trainers make some statements concerning the logistics and preparation of the training and participants need to move to the corners according to their opinion. (Logistic arrangements, food, accommodation, learning spaces, materials available, overall organisation of the training.)

Activity 2: at one end of the room 5 chairs with 5 emojis (very happy, happy, neutral, sad, angry), the trainer says out loud a statement concerning the overall training and participants go and sit according to their opinion, if more, then they sit on each other's knees, creating a statistical chart with their bodies.

Activity 3: “Way of the Council” circle with a few simple rules, as a tribal council, but without the fire, talking pieces, and each shares a story of their experience in these days in Weimar. (As a closing ritual)

# 26

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY. CARING FOR OTHERS AND YOURSELF

Trauma is stress that the psyche could not process. It divides life into “before” and “after,” changing the way a person sees the world.

A traumatized person may experience anxiety, insomnia, depression, irritability, flashbacks, or sudden mood swings. Sometimes there is a sense of numbness, confusion, or “survivor’s guilt.” The world no longer feels safe or predictable.

When we work with young people who have lived through difficult or violent experiences, our task is not to heal or fix them. Our task is to create a space that is safe enough for trust, dignity, and presence to appear again.

**Every encounter with a person affected by trauma takes place in three overlapping fields:**

- 1. Your own inner processes**
- 2. The personality and current state of the participant**
- 3. The shared space of your interaction**

### **Your inner processes**

Working with difficult human stories touches something in each of us. It can awaken our own pain, compassion, helplessness, or even anger. Being aware of this is part of professional responsibility.

Pay attention to signs of emotional burnout - exhaustion, irritability, loss of motivation.

Care for yourself through clear boundaries and regular rest.

Know the limits of your role, keep your locus of control realistic - focus on what you can actually influence.

Stay proactive and responsible for your words and actions.

Monitor your emotional and physical state as part of everyday work hygiene. Your stability, presence, and authenticity are the most valuable tools you have.

# 27

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY. CARING FOR OTHERS AND YOURSELF

### **The personality and state of participants**

People who have gone through traumatic events are not “victims” but survivors.

They may be emotionally unstable, confused, or have unusual ideas about safety or belonging.

It is important not to make decisions for them.

You can help within the framework of your shared activity - a workshop, a youth exchange, a learning space - but not beyond it.

A formal yet warm relationship is often the safest.

Be kind, but keep professional distance.

### **The space of your interaction**

Every encounter is a shared space - it needs to remain safe.

- Remember that not everything in the person’s reaction belongs to the present moment. Their nervous system may still respond to past danger.
- Respect personal boundaries, yours and theirs.
- Use “I-messages”: speak from your own perspective (“I feel...”, “I notice...”).
- Stay on an equal level; avoid taking the role of savior or authority.
- Do not try to comfort quickly or offer ready-made solutions , this can feel like pressure or denial of their experience.
- Take pauses when something feels too intense and come back later.
- Notice patterns of manipulation or passive aggression, and respond calmly and clearly.
- Be present, listen, and acknowledge what they share.
- You can gently ask, “How could I support you right now?” and let them choose what feels right.

## 28

## SOMATIC PRACTICES IN YOUTH WORK

When working with young people around traumatic or emotionally heavy experiences, somatic practices offer simple, safe ways to regulate the body and restore a sense of stability. Trauma affects the nervous system as much as thoughts and emotions; young people may feel tense, restless, disconnected, or overwhelmed. Body-based tools help them return to the present moment and create enough internal safety to engage in difficult conversations.

In youth work, somatic practices should always be brief, optional, and non-invasive. Young people need choice (“You can try this or skip it”), cultural sensitivity, and practices that focus on grounding and calming, not emotional release. No touch is needed - verbal guidance is enough.

Somatic practices can be woven into sessions naturally: a grounding moment at the start, a breath pause when emotions rise, and orienting at the end for closure. The aim is not to process trauma, but to help young people stay regulated, safe, and connected. When used gently and consistently, these tools support resilience and make difficult conversations easier to navigate.

### 1. Grounding through the feet

Invite participants to place both feet flat on the floor and notice how the ground supports them. Encourage them to feel the temperature, pressure, and texture under their feet. They can gently press downward or shift their weight from side to side. This helps the body settle, reduces tension, and brings attention back to the present moment.

### 2. Orienting to the room

Ask participants to slowly look around the space, letting their eyes move at a comfortable pace. They can name 3 things they see, 2 sounds they hear, or 1 colour that stands out. This gentle scanning signals to the nervous system that the current environment is safe, helping reduce hypervigilance or overwhelm.

## 29

# SOMATIC PRACTICES IN YOUTH WORK

### 3. Long exhale breath

Guide them to take a natural inhale through the nose, then release a slow, extended exhale through the mouth or nose. Emphasise that the exhale should be slightly longer than the inhale. Repeating this 3–5 times helps the nervous system shift toward calm, making it easier to handle strong emotions or stress.

### 4. Container hold (Self-Hug)

Invite young people to place their hands gently on their upper arms or the sides of their ribs—light pressure, no squeezing. Ask them to notice the warmth and boundary of their own hands. This simple self-contact creates a sense of containment and safety without needing touch from others.

### 5. Shake-out reset

Encourage a light, playful shaking of the arms, hands, shoulders, or legs. The movement can be small or bigger depending on comfort. This brief shake helps release tension, “reset” the body, and interrupt freeze or shutdown states by bringing energy back into movement.

### 6. Sensation check-in

Instead of asking about emotions, invite them to notice physical sensations: “What is your body telling you right now—tight, calm, buzzy, warm, heavy, activated?” This builds body awareness and helps them recognise when grounding or a break might be needed.

### Facilitator tips

Demonstrate exercises yourself; seeing a facilitator engage helps youth feel safe and confident.

Reassure participants that it’s okay if the practice feels unfamiliar or doesn’t “work” immediately. Highlight that noticing the body is the key step.

Remember, these tools support regulation—they are not therapy. Refer to mental health professionals when deeper trauma work is needed.

**THIS TOOLKIT WAS CREATED THROUGH  
SHARED LEARNING AND DIALOGUE.  
WE HOPE IT INSPIRES YOU TO  
CONTINUE QUESTIONING, CREATING,  
AND ACTING FOR DEMOCRATIC  
VALUES.  
DEMOCRACY GROWS WHEN PEOPLE  
CARE AND ACT TOGETHER.**

