a relational conflict practice to support trauma-accessibility

"If the land is stolen, broken, rich, and beneath our feet, what practices might we engage in together from this knowledge?" – kara lynch

"Everyone wants to be seen. Everyone wants their best intentions for connection and care to be known. But once nervous systems start to change states, it becomes a wild ride that we usually don't have many words for." --Sarah Peyton

Hi. I want to offer a concrete practice for navigating conflict that is both wise to the reality of trauma and accessible to the ways it can manifest in conflicts. This zine is especially for conflict between friends or inside a group that already has affinity or interpersonal conflict with community members that you can't leave behind or throw away.

At this point in my life, thresholding out of my first saturn return, I've witnessed so many such conflicts turn disastrous (unnecessarily) that it's easy to feel gloomy about the possibility of finding community that won't eventually self-destruct.

So I'm writing this zine for my friends and their friends, as something that hopefully gets passed around a few times and hopefully has a positive impact on my own relational webs and assemblages, my own not-yet-communities.

I'm also writing this zine because i have seen way too many fellow trans people and trauma survivors get isolated and ghosted out of relationship after relationship, community after community, because the way they and everyone around them knew how to practice conflict wasn't accessible to their trauma or neurodivergence or both. This phenomenon kills people, and I am exhausted with burying.

LEARNING TO SHARE RESONANCE

SHARING RESONANCE:
While listening to a story, tune in to the moments during the story WHERE and WHEN you feel most engaged by what you hear.

PROMPT: Share back with the storyteller the MOMENTS in their story WHERE and WHEN you FELT right there with them.

Examples:
"I resonated with the moment when you and your family were having an argument over dinner one night."
"I resonated when you shared how you felt supported by your team."
"I was right there with you when you said you felt you had finally found a home."

Hint: they may have been the moments when you felt almost as if it was happening to YOU! Those are the moments when you were resonating and most connected to the storyteller.

Alert! Resonance does not necessarily mean that you've been through the same experience that the storyteller shares in their story, nor that you can relate to it directly from your experience. Sometimes we resonate with something we hear because we've had a similar experience, and sometimes we resonate because we have not and hearing about it activates us in new ways. Sometimes there is not a clear "why" to the moments of resonance. Resonance simply means that our mirror neurons are firing, and we are *feeling with* and connecting to the storyteller as they share.

SHARING RESONANCE IS NOT:
Making Meaning aka interpretation
e.g. "From your story it sounds like you were actually depressed."
Telling Your Own Story
e.g. "That reminds me of..." resonator launches into their own story and forgets they are sharing resonance.
Asking Questions
e.g. "So how old was your mom when she had you?"
Opinions/Judgments/Advice
e.g. "I don't think you should share that!" "You know you really should consider skydiving!"
One-Upping
e.g. "You think that's bad, listen to what happened to ME!"
One-Downing
e.g. "I can't even IMAGINE going through something like that!"

If you catch yourself doing any of these, CONGRATULATIONS! You caught it, which means you're becoming more aware of habits that interfere with resonance.
Hint: If you're not sure whether you've drifted away from resonance, you can keep to the storyteller's own words when sharing the MOMENT. If you find yourself drifting while listening, it might be because you are doing one of these. Once again, great noticing!

Relational Uprising (2018) training manual

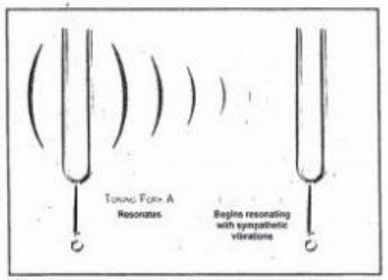
CONNECTION ELICITS RESONANCE

What is Resonance?
The latest social neuroscience confirms humans can detect the emotional tones of other animals, and when we live our lives in close proximity to one another, our nervous systems are networked through the phenomenon of resonance. We can become entangled so deeply that we can detect, evoke and even synchronize our emotional states with one another.

How do we know when it's happening?
Resonance is something we can feel in our body. It is strongest when someone nearby is engaging with us. Being with someone who is expressing emotion, especially about a struggle—registers in our bodies. We vibrate with others who are having a challenge that evokes what is important to us. We are most engaged when we become aware of what we hold most precious. But any moment in which we feel moved, we KNOW it because we FEEL it.

What INTERFERES with it?
The dominant culture reinforces isolation, suspicion, and rupture. It desensitize us through continual overexposure to violence and sensational media. These signals interfere with our resonance sensors so that we do not notice how connected we are to one another. To notice and call attention to our mutual experience of resonance is a powerful strategy for subverting the Stories of Separation. Making resonance explicit is actually a subversive act!

Collective Resonance
Resonance is not an individual skill but a collective capacity. When we share with one another how we are resonating, we increase the effect of resonance. And the more of us who do that together, the greater our collective capacity to bear our struggles. It is a powerful resource for a community, and one that's 100% renewable! It can bring us together, and keep us together.



Diverse Resonance
Just like a healthy ecosystem needs diversity of microbes, fungi, plants, insects and animals to survive, people need resonance from diverse sources. Imagine a guitar with six strings. Sound is going to vibrate from each string differently. We too need different resonance for all our humanizing notes to ring.

Resonance is a Right!
Just like food and water, humans have a fundamental need for resonance. It is critical to a sense of belonging, acceptance, and empathy for others. It is even necessary for your health and immunity. Resonance should be considered a human right. It should never be restricted to only those who can pay. Resonance is free, a resource for collective liberation.

Why Resonate?
Sharing resonance is a gift to a storyteller. It lets them know what parts of their story are the most humanizing for both of you, supporting connection through vulnerability and empathy.

Sharing resonance is an intentional somatic practice like meditation that requires shared responsibility and discipline. Group members should support one another to stay engaged while listening and keep to the guidelines.

I want to dream different futures for us and our formations. I want conflict over hurt that doesn't actually rise to the level of harm to stop ending in purges and volcanic call-out threads and cancellations that offer catharsis but not actual justice or safety, with exhaustion so thick in the air that we give up, too locked into our own reactions and attachment wounds for it play out any different this time.

Maybe my core motivation for putting out this zine is that the practice proposed here is what I needed in order for my nervous system to access conflict that didn't leave giant, gaping, relational wounds or leave me in frozen despair and dissociation for weeks or months or years. What you will find in this zine is what I slowly and painstakingly pieced together because it worked for me, based on my trauma history, the resulting shape of my relational disability, and my access needs. That's what I have to offer and I hope you take it and shape it and make it work for your context.

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So, now the zine. A few notes and content warnings:

1) This zine references casually and often the idea that we have feelings for a reason.

2) CW!: this zine talks about trauma and dissociation (including detailed signs and symptoms), a lot.

3) I have tried to distinguish between the neurobiological research and my own takeaways and thoughts and opinions, and be super clear about when I am transitioning between them.

4) If you want to skip directly to the practice, you can totally do that. It should be pretty easy to find.

5) I have a hard time distinguishing any kind of seam where my
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neurodivergence ends and my trauma shape begins. I don't actually think such a seam exists. This zine sticks mainly to the discourse of trauma, but not for any particular reason other than I knew better how to write it this way.

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Conflict is any challenge in a relationship. That's a simple definition, and it's also just the tip of the iceberg. More importantly, conflicts (and the big feelings they bring up) are also like emergency flares: signals that something valuable is at stake. Humans only defend what we hold precious. In my experience, when something vitally important to me is put at risk—that's when I become most activated and when recieving signals of support and solidarity is most meaningful.[1]

When something important to me is under threat, having access to conflict communication that leaves room for the way I am shaped and lets me testify to my experience of the impacts of other people's actions is really, really important.

Trauma can be a shattering, a fracturing that alters the shape of our narratives just as it alters the shape of our nervous systems. I am a trauma survivor. The way my narrative and nervous system are shaped is a journey from an unchosen starting place. For me, learning how to do conflict with a nervous system shaped by trauma has felt like struggling with some kind of relational disability.[2] My experiences have convinced me that every single person deserves tools of conflict communication that have an analysis of trauma accessibility.

1 Acknowledgments and gratitude to Lucien Demaris and Cedar Landsman of Relational Uprising for this framing.

2 Whether or not you agree that trauma should be able to count as a disability, it tends to function that way in relationship.

thier ancestors and movement elders and wounded healers. I needed the practice outlined above for my own needs, as a harm reduction strategy for my own nervous system, and now it feels valuable enough and wanted enough to show to others. I hope it can eventually scaffold into or onto a culture change strategy.

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followup and additional excerpts

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Let me know what you think! Reach out to fennelpress@riseup.net with thoughts, reactions, inspirations.

This zine is findable online at: (https://fennelpress.tumblr.com/a_relational_conflict_practice_to_support_trauma_accessibility)

1. Make sure that you have received enough emotional support that you are no longer angry at yourself for what you have done, or at the other person for whatever you think that person has done. You may need to do a posthearsal before you can even begin to think about making a repair (see above). If you are blaming the other person or thinking about what that person did to cause your outburst, or you want that person to acknowledge his or her part in the event, then you are not yet at a point where repair is possible. Certainly a dialogue is possible in such cases, but not a repair. (If you want to blame, you need to get more support and empathy!)
2. Ask the other person if he or she is willing to receive a repair. Here is one example of how you might ask this: "I don't feel good about something I said or how I acted. Are you willing to have me tell you about what I regret?"
3. State what you did that you regret, as briefly as possible.
4. Ask the other person what he or she would like you to hear about how it was to receive your original outburst.
5. Let that person know that you heard what it was like, and how that knowledge impacts you. You can do this by reflecting verbally, using gestures, or with silent, full presence. With the silent, full presence, people may not actually have a sense of being heard, so it is always possible to check at the end and ask if the person feels heard, or complete, or whatever words you like to use to ask about his or her experience.

Peyton (2017)
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should I be expected to try?

These crunchy moments of rupture that lead to conflict, when the field is undersupported--and so sensitivity to impact is undercultivated--could be seen as *moments of leadership by those most impacted*. We could start collectively orienting to our comrades' vulnerabilities and triggers and neurodivergencies (and our own!) as leadership--people carrying something valuable and different on behalf of the collective and bravely bringing it forward to be included, because it isn't yet included, and we all need it to be. Because in an ecosystem, more diversity means more overall resiliency.[28]

If this kind of collective capacity for inclusion-appreciation does not feel possible or accessible to people in a particular conflict, (firstly, that makes a lot of sense and secondly) it signals the need to bring more resonant cues of support to the social field. People's bodies need to relax before they can be asked to look at a conflict from a different perspective.

I'm putting out this zine because more often than not, we don't have the agency or access to bring such support online.

It is definitely not a pretty picture, down here in the world of the humans.[29] There are a lot of stragedies masquerading as strategies. Many of us have been handed absolute garbage to work with by those who came before us--the very ones who were supposed to have our backs. There is *a lot* of work to do. Those of us now alive are paying the price of the white settler colonial crater that has been made of the world we live in. That is the context in which I cobbled together this map of the nervous system out of bits of the wreckage and some of the wisdom handed off by wor-

28 Lucien's analysis
29 Shit is fucked

We know from Disability Justice[3] that when a commons is made accessible everyone is better off, not just "people who need it". DJ's principles make this explicit. So much gratitude to the ancestors of DJ and their descendents for the work they have done, are doing and will do. I owe them a great debt for the ways DJ has shaped this zine. I hope that this zine offers some benefit or contribution back to them.

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cues

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The terrain of the nervous system is the landscape that all human (i.e. mammalian) conflicts play out on, whether we like it or not. If we are committed to doing relationships with other messy and fallible human beings, let alone a community, we need a map of that landscape, and some basic terminology to refer to its features.

The human brain doesn't just live in the skull. It flows down the spine, into all the organs and is distributed throughout the body as the nervous system. One of the most ancient and innermost parts of the skull-brain, called the amygdala, links the body-brain and skull-brain. It recieves sensations from the body and translates them into emotions. The amygdala assumes that the most *intense* emotional moments from our lives are also the most *important*, and in order to help us learn to survive going forward, it forms vivid emotional memories. The amygdala watches for danger by making rough comparisons between these memories and whatever is happening around us, now.

Our brains are always trying to keep us safe and they percieve our

3 DJ is a framework and set of principles created by members of Sins Invalid, a disabled POC-led performance art collective.

survival primarily through the lens of belonging. A person's amygdala constantly (between 12 and 100 times per second) scans their social habitat—all the incoming information—to see if there's anything alarming or emotionally significant, essentially asking "Am I safe? Do I matter? Do I belong?" over and over and over. This all happens reflexively, faster than the speed of thought. Some researchers call this type of pre-thinking cellular intelligence "neuroception".

To understand this, it might be helpful to use the metaphor of a snowglobe—a container swirling with snow-glitter. It's like every interaction between humans takes place in a social or relational 'field' or habitat, like a snowglobe, but instead of snow-glitter, there is a rich broth of verbal and nonverbal, conscious and nonconscious cues floating and whizzing around. Before they even reach cognition, the nervous system sorts all these incoming signals into two categories—cues of safety and cues of danger.

When the amygdala recieves enough worrisome cues of threat, it can shift the entire nervous system into a different 'state' or 'gear' in order to prepare for danger. These gears are so distinct from each other that it can help to imagine an elemental state change—like water turning from liquid into steam, or downshifting to ice. There are commonly understood to be three main states for the nervous system. Each state corresponds to the activation of different bundles of nerve fibers—especially of the vagus nerve, which follows the esophagus down the spine into all the organs and especially all along the digestive system, as well as up into the face.

The transitions between these different states are not under voluntary control—they are reflexes that happen outside the window of conscious choosing. These states come with their own distinct sets of embod-

(even accidentally) sending a cue of danger instead is not a good look. Messing up in this way may be worse than not trying at all.

Resonance differs from empathy in that I can have empathy for someone driving by in a car and they will never know, but resonance is relational—the person recieving the cue should be the one who actually gets to say if they experienced a resonance.

The ability to resonate is a biological capacity we all have, and an ancestral resource of everyone now living. The tool of resonant language and this analysis of it that makes resonance accessible with a few basic guidelines comes from Lucien Demaris and Cedar Landsman of Relational Uprising. I highly recommend their body of work.

We humans have evolved to mirror each other in this way, to be moved by each other into either reactivity or connection. I think all of our deep ancestors understood this and encoded ways of leveraging the relational wisdom of this feature—and reducing its equally great potential harm—into all of our original ancestral cultures. In my own ancestry, patriarchy and assimilation into whiteness are responsible for what I experience as an irreparable cultural dissociation from these ways, but that doesn't have to be the end of the story. I suppose that as a future ancestor of those-to-come, I have to start *somewhere*, in order to have any chance at all of being able to offer *something*.

I think an ever-valuable place to start is this way of approaching your own and other people's nervous systems as fundamentally wise and always trying their best to support safety and belonging, as well as forever shaped by the social habitats we are in and the implicit cues that we find there. And yet! When someone has casually trod on my tenderest places, its really hard to see wisdom in anything they do--and why the hell

Be careful that you respond *only with the precise moment* in their story of your accompaniment, and do not stray into interpretation or advice giving or any kind of response that signals evaluative attention. Yes, this is a really simple guideline, but it is counter-intuitive in a domination/superiority culture. Most of us have been recruited into the cultural habit of responding to someone's experience by laying our own experience on top of (or underneath) theirs, which effectively shuts down the possibility of resonance. The more of your own words you pile on, the less chance of establishing a resonance. The safest option is to say their own words (or as close as you can get) back to them.

Resonance is a way for a witness (or listener) to signal their solidarity with a person's amygdala in a moment when that person is having an emotionally powerful experience (or accessing a powerful emotional memory), especially a moment in which they were 'too alone' or anticipating a lack of reception in the social field (shame). Resonance answers the questions that the amygdala asks (Am I safe? Do I matter? Do I belong?) with a resounding "Yes!" In this operational sense, resonance is the polar opposite of shame.

Because the amygdala does not have a timestamp, this super powerful cue of safety can actually time-travel into the associated memory and be included as accompaniment in a moment when the self was not accompanied enough. This is why it's so important to make sure (before you try this with someone) that you genuinely and honestly have capacity to offer them support—the quality of your voice, your eyes, and your face and head movements will tell them if you don't. This, as well as accidentally straying into interpretation, will be seen by their nervous system as a cue of danger. Asking someone's consent to send a cue of safety and then

ied sensations, their own emotions and their own stories/strategies—in that order. That is, distinct narratives are formed *from* and preceded *by* the neuroception of each state. First, an incoming stimulus hits our system, then our neuroception of it organizes our stories about it, which in turn organizes our behavior.

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state shifts

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The best/most strategic 'gear' for accessing generative conflict (and complex relationship) is **social engagement:** when people feel safe, they have a sense that they matter to others, that when they speak other people will listen, that they belong. They have exquisite mastery of their social interactions; the world feels like a good place to be and the self makes sense and matters in it; bodies are set for growth and restoration.

The strategy of this gear is simply: health, growth, and restoration—because safety and connection are already established; they are prerequisites for this strategy to come online. People can both offer and recieve support because the nervous system trusts in reciprocity. The stories that come from this gear are narratives of possibility, in which change and transformation and adaptation are possible—these stories can include wide ranges of difference, they can handle the complexity of 'both/and' thinking and they can sustain long-term, liberatory change and transformation.

The fine muscles of the face are in a dance of responsiveness with the other faces in their world, coming alive to express emotion and help us understand others. The focus of the eyes tightens to the human face. The muscles of the middle ear tighten to the sound range of the human

voice. The larynx relaxes to support lively vocal expression. The bronchii of the lungs expand to take in more oxygen. The soft internal organs of the body get a 'go' signal with full blood supply to support their full functioning. The heart has high heart-rate variability, which means our heart beats differently in response to the world (like a lively, responsive dancer instead of a plodding hiker with a heavy burden) because we have a sense that we can rely on others for support.

All this changes as alarm mounts. Conflicts tend to get messy real quick when people start leaving the state of social engagement. When a person's nervous system shifts gears from "safe" to "threat", the consequences can be significant, especially if it happens in the context of a risky or delicate relational moment. The amygdala can take the prefrontal cortex off-line, so that the part of the brain that's responsible for choosing actions and words with care, and for soothing and regulating the high intensity reactions of the amygdala, simply goes dark.

The alarmed amygdala as a dominant force can be scary to experience. In **fight-or-flight**, every cell responds to the flood of stress chemicals. The lungs constrict, the breath is shallow, the throat tightens, digestion stops. The heart and the face become unresponsive to relationship or nuance, the immune system responds as if under attack by infection, the eyes become tools for watchful survival instead of sources of presence and connection. The part of the brain that reads faces is affected, interpreting neutral facial expressions as hostile (!!!). *People can no longer really engage with others at the complex level that is possible when things are*

to try 'free-handing' one.

Another option when someone has shared their narrative (of their own experience) is to offer resonance (see the scans below from Relational Uprising). Offering resonance one-to-one is workable, but far from ideal. Cedar and Lucien recommend doing this practice in groups of *at least* five or six people.

First, make sure you have the capacity to offer support. This may only be possible if you are **not** directly (or even indirectly) in conflict with the person. Do not attempt resonance with someone you are in conflict with unless you both have already recieved enough meaningful support and have some solid ground for trust built **before you try this**—enough that you have a neuroception of safety with the person. The best source of data for discerning whether or not attempting to share resonance will lead to relaxation or constriction is your own body sensations; *listen to them* if you have access to them.

Then, ask consent to shareback the moments you resounded or resonated most strongly with—the moments when and where you felt the most *with* them. The struggles of others register in our bodies when we witness them, and resonance leverages this feature of being human. Your heart may have thrummed along with theirs in the moment of their story where they described recieving news of losing a beloved friend. Your stomach may have dropped when they named arriving alone in a new place and feeling lost. These moments—whatever they were—that their narrative elicited responses from your body are your body's recognition of something valuable in their experience. These moments are parts of their diversity that your body is has signaled its willingness to include--and to change in solidarity with.

their scrutiny.

The second reason is that the high, clear space in between your autonomous narratives becomes the place where bridging can then happen (or scaffold onto later). Bridging can happen when everyone in the conflict has recieved enough meaningful support (from their community or separate support teams, **not** from each other) that they are all in social engagement state, and there is some trust that nobody's experience will be disposed of. When people have been able to share their experience and their story, bridging happens when one person recognizes something valuable in the other person's experience, can signal to that person that they have included the value of that experience in their own story, and then the other person has the felt, embodied flush of being met, recieved and included.

Bridging is Cedar and Lucien's term for something that organisms inherently do, like breathing or swimming. It implicates the inclusion of multiple narratives into a 'story of us' that leverages the diversity of everyone's experiences as a resource for sustaining complex change.[26] And bridges need a lot of support, as Cedar says. If either of the people in a conflict don't have access to their own support group, the system size might be too small. Bridging is not an individual skill, but a collective capacity for narrative range and coherence. Importantly, it depends upon aligned or alignable values. *Bridging doesn't work with cops or fascists.*[27]

The final excerpt from Sarah (below) is a step-by-step 'stencil' for making an effective repair that opens a space for possible bridging to happen. If the formula feels too rigid for you, maybe it offers an idea of how

26 Relational Uprising training manual 2018
27 ACAB

calm.[4]

The strategy of this state is protection-through-action. The narratives that emerge from the experience of being in this gear are stories of an unsafe world and unsafe people, of taking action to survive. These stories feature "either-or" thinking. They are stories of the binary, of Us-versus-Them, of separation, domination and superiority.

If that doesn't work to get back to safety, the nervous system's option of last resort is to **immobilize**. This includes freeze-or-fawn as well as traumatic dissociation. This option can make sense for the amygdala to resort to when it feels hopeless or trapped and there is a sudden shock. Or if the amygdala is reacting to an unexpected tripwire or trigger of present-time stimulus that is associated with a vivid memory of unintegrated trauma.

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In this territory of dissociation, it's important to go slower, with lots of gentleness and warmth, and to acknowledge that even reading about this information can unearth and activate old pain.

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Immobilization can be really hard to self-identify, because part of the brain is literally offline. Some cues for tracking dissociation are feeling numb, floating or foggy, like an inanimate object, or socially out of synch, having difficulty tracking what others are saying, losing time,

4 These passages in particular and this zine in general draws heavily and paradigmatically from Sarah Peyton's "Your Resonant Self": a very accessible and warmly written book-shaped synthesis of neuroscience research, trauma-informed communication practices and strategic playbook for nervous system self-regulation and trauma healing in a broken world. I highly recommend it.

losing relational memory and ability to remember social details, imposter syndrome, blindness to body sensations, having a flat voice without inflection, having heavy and immobile face, large and nonreactive pupils, very shallow breathing, very low heart rate and blood pressure. It can happen suddenly with a shock, like the bottom dropping out, or as an imperceptable slip (and it can take weeks, months or years for a person to realize that they have been 'frozen').

This state is the farthest away from social engagement, so it makes sense that it is the hardest to return from, even with lots of meaningful support.

The strategy of this state is protection-through-disappearance. Stories that emerge from this state are stories of despair, of being not just disconnected but unreachable, abandoned, completely untethered and adrift.

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Reading these words silently or aloud can bring up a lot of stuff. I hope you are in a place where you can access support, even if it is just a pillow, a cup of tea, or a warm hug.

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The way I've portrayed these three 'gears' is a little simplistic. I've described the most extreme outlier states of each 'gear' in an attempt to differentiate them clearly. In my own experience, there is a lot of liminal space in this map, and most of my time is spent in various grey areas or 'in-between'.

The concept of "baseline" refers to the habitual resting state of a person's nervous system. Everyone has a different baseline depending on their own life experiences, and it can change over time, and we can shape

The way of speaking this author offers as an example might or might not be accessible to you—body sensations are often not accessible to many of us, for very good reasons! Additionally, this way of talking definitely comes from a certain culture and even a certain background and social location. There is no one right way to talk.

I like this passage because it's a good example of how trust can actually be built during conflict, instead of eroded, based on the way people use language with each other. Trust is built between people when they exchange something vulnerable without either person taking advantage of that vulnerability. [25]

Staying with your own experience, without over-reaching to label the other person's experience, is a radical act. If two people can agree to do conflict this way, and put in a solid effort (mistakes will happen), it constitutes an exchange of something vulnerable (the revealing of their inner experiences) without either person taking advantage of that vulnerability. Trust can be slowly built in the high, clear, uncluttered place in between your narratives. Each of your experiences gets to be autonomous and valid and to matter.

I believe the above protocol for conflict communication is strategic for two reasons. First, because sending the firm signal to all of our amygdalas that everyone's experience matters is the key to regulating them. When we make and hold agreements that guarantee that our experience will get to matter and be safe from disposal or erasure, it generates a flurry of implicit signals and cues that can allow our amygdalas to relax

25 Gratitude to Cedar and Lucien for this operational framing of trust. When building trust through exchanging vulnerability, it is important to titrate and start small. Vulnerable does not necessarily mean raw—it can be as simple as exchanging pronouns.

It's about asking consent before you touch someone else's experience with your words, just like you would ask consent to touch *any other part of them*.[24] At the end of the day, *that* is the value this conflict communication protocal is supposed to protect, so if you see some way that it doesn't do this, or does it but at the cost of something else that you can't part with, then try adapting it for your particular needs.

Now to finally offer some examples of what good conflict communication *could* look like. I've excerpted from Sarah again, because her take is the most useful I've come across so far, but as always, salt to taste:

> A nonharming regulated expression of anger takes practice. It necessitates staying closely connected with your body sensations and speaking them aloud, and combining them with your deepest values. For example, imagine your partner tells you he or she thinks you are lying or that you are hiding something. You do not have the sense that this is true, and you are feeling very angry. You might say, "I notice that I'm breathing very heavily, and that I have literally started to see red at the corners of my vision. My fists are clenched, and my toes are curling, and my chest is heaving. I'm having a hard time thinking at all, and I can hear the tension in my voice. It is so important to me to be seen for my intentions. Honesty and clarity are the most essential things for me. I want to be known, and I want shared reality with you."
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> Notice that in the aftermath of this expression, no matter how loud your voice became, there is nothing that has to be cleaned up. You have not insulted your partner or said how your partner feels or what he or she was thinking or was doing to you. You stayed with your own experience. You remained open and vulnerable. Your partner could hear both your intensity and your truth.
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> However, this clean expression of anger may not yet be very available to you. If you have integrated blame, contempt, threats, or actual violence in your expressions of anger, you have the responsibility to clean it up. Blame, contempt, threats, and violence are harmful to the brains, bodies, and immune systems of the people around you, and it is important to realize this.

24 I think it can be a beautiful and rigorous practice to name your own experience only and nobody else's. I also think it matters a lot more in conflict and other risky, delicate relational moments with high stakes compared to everyday, not-so-vulnerable contexts.

it--much like having an attachment style. For example, the more 'securely attached' someone is, the closer their baseline is to the 'social engagement state' and the easier it is for them to stay in (and return to) that gear, no matter what life throws at them. Every person with their own life experiences has their own particularly shaped window of tolerance for what kind and level of stress is bearable without a gear shift.

I think it's really important to state that there is no right or wrong way to be shaped. There are no right or wrong starting places. If there is any one basic takeaway that emerges from the research into interpersonal neurobiology, it is that the body is deeply wise and the things it does make sense. Besides, in my experience approaching the nervous system (your own or another person's) as if this were true is a really important pre-condition for trauma-accessibility, because it results in a particular kind of attention—warmly curious, leading with wonder, soft eyes—the way one might orient to a flower unfolding or a bumbling puppy.

On the other hand, approaching yourself or another person's nervous system with an evaluative gaze or a categorizing quality of attention will in itself be seen as a cue of danger by that nervous system.[5]

Wanting to fix or change something in oneself or another person does not get one very far in this deeply implicit terrain of the nervous system—the body does not deal in moral judgments, only in cues of safety

5 The kind of attention we bring to bear on the world changes the nature of the world we attend to. If you approach me with a particular kind of attention, it will change the way I feel, based on the kind of attention you are using. When someone can shift into relational attention (soft, warm, curious gaze) they literally tap into different brain networks, which relax the tone of the ventral vagus nerve fibers running down the esophagus and through the larynx, so that the quality of that voice changes, sounding literally sweeter to the human ear.

and cues of danger.[6]

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cascading contagion

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Understanding the nervous system states, and the ways our bodies protect our survival by shifting between them, is crucial for understanding the difference between doing conflict that deepens and strengthens relationships and doing conflict that exhausts and destroys relationships.

Equally crucial is understanding that all these nervous system states are 'catcheable'--that is, they don't stop with just one person. Humans are social animals, and we get caught up in each other's cascading nervous system reactions.

For instance, the alarmed amygdala in one person moving towards a fight-or-flight response can create mounting and seemingly unstoppable flows of energy in conflicts.[7] People can get caught up in defensive back-and-forths, and faster-and-faster ricochets and ripostes. Basically, one person moving into activation can drag another person into their own activation, and the effect snowballs from there.

Dissociation is also contagious. Because human nervous systems entrain with one another by default, when we interact with someone in a dissociated state, the likelihood is high that our brains will entrain with that state. Trauma and harm can be transmitted intergenerationally in this helpless way without the conscious understanding or agency of the people caught in the cycle.

Fortunately, everything about our nervous systems that makes us

6 Whoever started calling it "the nervous system" was making an inside joke about my hypervigilant amygdala and I finally get it.

7 Peyton 137

of explaining the definitions will convince my amygdala that they are cues of safety during or after the experience of recieving them directed at me. The nervous system is implacable in this regard. Ignore that at your own peril (and the peril of your community). As Miriame says, someone will feel a certain way if you ask them to be accountable to activating hurts versus if you ask them to be accountable to having caused harms. This is at least as strategic a reason to be very careful with throwing around the word 'abuse' as the following one: I have witnessed how easily it can get turned around and used against someone who is actually just speaking up against injustice in a way that causes discomfort (or even pain) to those defending the status quo. Of course, *the pain caused by being challenged in a conflict is not the same as the pain of being impacted by deliberate harm*. Nor is it the same as the pain activated by being hurt unintentionally, *especially across disparities of power, access and risk*.

Basically, I worry that being too liberal with the use of these terms plays into the hands of liberals more than it increases safety and justice for radicals. And at the end of the day, when I'm in conflict with my close comrades and friends, my own experience and a few simple, mutually agreed guidelines around using language to communicate it furnishes me with more than enough incontrivertable legitimacy and validity in my bids to get other people account for their impacts and to change their behavior to include my needs.

To be clear, I am hella not advocating that we don't hold people accountable for their actions when they commit harm, or that we tiptoe around each other or mute our expressions of our truths in order to avoid triggering each other. This is not about coddling anyone. This is about treating everyone's experience as sacred—just like their body boundaries.

viduals using call-outs to get their needs for safety and justice met. This has been an effective tactic for harm reduction. I believe in a diversity of tactics. I also think we should understand the weapons we choose to wield so there is less chance of hurting ourselves or people we care about. "The basic step of sounding an alarm doesn't in and of itself lead to a new culture that doesn't generate that harm."[23] To transform the conditions that made the harm possible in the first place requires a set of practices focused on cultivating new conditions that transform the way we relate.

The above protocal for conflict doesn't center a strategy of leaning much on terms like 'abuse', 'gaslighting', 'manipulation', 'fragility'. This is on purpose (when inside of a conflict container and navigating challenging communication with people you want to keep). It's completely different if you are just venting to the people supporting you, but in a conflict conversation container where the people in conflict are present, and brainscapes shaped by trauma, it can easily backfire. Miriame Kaba says in the conversation referenced earlier that harm is deliberately inflicted and hurt is not (a rough guideline, complicated by lines of privilege and power, access and risk). Following her, 'abuse' could be defined as deliberate harm that is inflicted repetitively over time, as a pattern.

Even if you agree with Miriame, remember that other people might not agree or respect the clarity of these definitions as much. Additionally, always remember that these words are not just their explicit meanings! They are all implicitly *loaded* with cues of threat--no matter how gently you say them (and they are usually not spoken in real time conflicts from a larynx tuned to the social engagement state). No amount

23 Cedar and Lucien's words from their analysis distinguishing a culture-building strategy from a harm reduction strategy.

vulnerable to being shaped by harm and trauma also has a flip side: the social engagement state (of embodied safety and belonging) can also be contagious—under certain conditions. The amygdala's ability to move the rest of the nervous system into alarm is hardwired—we come into the world with it as baby mammals. However, the ability of the rest of the nervous system (and the nervous systems of other people) to calm and soothe the amygdala is softwired—it has to be grown and learned. When trauma has fragmented somebody's ability to trust, their bodies may not feel safe even in a safe environment. That person may have to grow whole new neural pathways in order to learn or re-learn how to soothe their amygdala. And in order for human brains to change (that is, learn)[8] they need a neuroception of safety--an embodied felt sense of safety at the cellular level.

You can see the paradox. Only when the amygdala feels safe can any learning or healing or transformation happen at a cellular level—so where are those of us whose amygdalas have not relaxed in decades supposed to begin? How are we supposed to take in cues of safety if our hypervigilant bodies don't trust the cues? How are our conflicts supposed to move or transform or change? If an entire community is locked in conflict, and there is not enough support available for the group's nervous system to shift back to social engagement, what are people supposed to do? If an entire culture or society is stuck in fight/flight activation or traumatic dissociation, how does anything begin to shift? Think fractally, at every scale—cellular, individual, group, culture. What practices are

8 Or in neuroscience jargon "become plastic" L O L not even kidding

needed? What practices are accessible?[9]

I love these questions and don't want to finish them off with answers. And we still need an analysis of trauma, without which we can't even really understand how to be accessible to it. So that's the next layer of the map we will tangle with, before we pivot back to coregulation and the social engagement state.

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Slippage

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Let's start with the Tl;dr of this section: our brains are for keeping us safe, not for seeing ourselves or each other clearly.

We now have a basic grasp of the contagiousness of nervous system states—how they can spread or 'leak over' between bodies. This can be *further* complicated by trauma reactions: i.e. the intrusion of past moments into the present with no clear sense that the memory is over. Believe it or not, this is a strategy that our amygdalas have evolved in order to help us survive emergencies. Again, I think it's a strategic and ethical choice to orient to this strategy (and to everything our bodies do to help us survive) as fundamentally wise.

Our amygdalas have evolved to encode a certain kind of memory—implicit, vivid, powerful, emotional memories. These implicit memories are stored throughout the brain, but indexed significantly to the amygdala. So there could be a sensory memory of a particular smell

9 The dominant cultural story of the nervous system is of an individual protagonist aspiring towards individual emotional self-mastery/enlightenment. Independent self-regulation is seen as the high standard for adulthood and co-regulation is relegated to the care of children and needy dependents. I don't think this story makes sense.

matter). When a person has had many experiences of not being heard, broken trust, having their experience dismissed, lack of safety, lack of predictability, or trauma, this can oversensitize the amygdala to the point that it reacts strongly to even ordinary alarms in daily life.[21]

The least useful and most harmful response to conflict is to level blame—that is, to identify the person at fault so as to set up a coercive inferior-superior dynamic, with shame as social enforcer.[22] The urge to blame can be very tempting, or at least familiar. In this trauma-soaked dominant culture of racialized capitalism, using blame, contempt and disgust to induce shame is so common, most of us have probably been unconsciously socialized into it. This tactic is so effective at making people quiet, it is commonly used by teachers and parents to manage children's behavior. Since children do not begin to place responsibility outside the self until they are nine years old, they are largely defenseless against this tactic. And since the way we relate to ourselves, treat ourselves and talk to ourselves is the internalized version of the way we are first related to, treated, and talked to, this cycle repeats intergenerationally.

Shame raises the body's level of cortisol more than any other emotional experience, compromises the immune system and increases inflammation in tissue to an extent comparable to the long-term effects of other kinds of abuse.

Shame has been used very effectively against those who are too powerful to be held accountable in relationship. I think it is important to acknowledge the long and powerful history of communities and indi-

21 Peyton 139

22 Lucien Demaris and Cedar Landsman of Relational Uprising distinguish shame in individualist culture (social coercion) from shame in relational culture (signals the need for more support) in this way.

and fragility shows that (depending on their own access, risk and power) humans often overestimate how much access and agency other humans experience and underestimate how much risk they run. This is another reason why each of us being able to testify to our own experience is such a valuable thing for all of us to defend our mutual access to.

Any agreements for doing conflict communication must have an analysis of tone-policing. Notice that in this protocal, it doesn't matter how loud or angry your voice (or anyone else's) gets. As long as you stick with naming your own experience and letting the other person name theirs, and are careful about reporting concrete actions as specifically as possible, you can get as emotive as you want.

I thought about offering some examples here for communication that falls within the fairly narrow restrictions of this protocal. However, I don't really want to be prescriptive and I don't love clunky formulas or NVC's didactic madlibs.[20]

On the other hand, there are really, really good reasons to use certain kinds of language and not others when in conflict with people we care about. The language we use with each other in these precarious moments matters.

When someone else tells us what we are thinking, or feeling, or doing to them, or otherwise mislabels our experience, or tells us we are wrong for feeling a certain way, or changes the subject or tries to fix, then it is an implicit signal that our experience doesn't matter, and is not fully welcome, which alerts the amygdala to mobilize and activate for a dangerous world. (Wondering aloud about our experience can be a different

20 i.e. "non-violent" communication (trademarked). Actually, despite my snark, this zine draws very heavily from Sarah's body of work, which has NVC in its lineage.

(perhaps the scent of a specific perfume) tinged with strong emotional information that our brain thinks we need to remember to be safe (perhaps fear and anger). The amygdala is always checking all incoming information against this index, looking for matches. When there is a rough match between some stimulus in the present time (we smell the same perfume, fifty years later) and the indexed association of the cue with past danger, the amygdala accesses the survival response it thinks we need. This happens faster than thought. It also happens outside of time, because *the amygdala does not have a timestamp feature.*[10] When we access these implicit memories (or when they access us, to put it more accurately), they flood us just as intensely as when they originally happened. There is often *no way to tell* that one is partially or fully in a memory, because it feels so intensely like it is happening *right now*. Implicit memory is capable of grafting the most emotionally intense memories of the past, complete with every twinge of sensation, onto whatever unique conflict you find yourself in now, with no discernable seam. Or rather, the seam is so hard to discern because it is entirely responsive and fluid to the situation at hand, like a tsunami wave traveling through the deep ocean.[11] To switch metaphors, implicit memory is like the bulk of an iceberg below the waterline--inaccessible except when it intrudes with often devastating impacts.[12]

Conflicts, for many of us, can be minefields of unexploded trauma

10 Another part of the brain, the hippocampus, holds our autobiographical, explicit, timestamped and contextualized memories.

11 Peyton 174

12 Every anti-racism training ever has a slideshow, and every slideshow has at least one slide dedicated to the concept of implicit bias. Yep. That's what we're talking about here.

material because there are so many opportunities for the exact kinds of stimulus that bring implicit memories surging forward with all the weight and significance of a survival emergency. When something precious to us is at risk, we are already primed to be reminded of earlier times when that value has been ignored or minimized in some way.

Anger is a protective energy—the degree to which it smolders, rises, or roars in us is in direct proportion to what core needs or values we percieve as being blocked, under threat, or under siege. We can react with out-of-proportion intensity (for the present situation) because our reactions are actually calibrated to a more extreme scenario that we don't yet know we've already survived. Unless the people around us know us very well, they can't know whether we are in the present or in the past or somewhat in both--unless we tell them.

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All this can lead to nuanced 'slippages' between nervous system states for multiple people in a conflict, based on cues that were percieved by one person, but not by another.

To illustrate this phenomenon I will quote this passage from neuroscience writer-interpreter-synthesizer Sarah Peyton, in which she writes about the wild rides nervous systems can take in conflict, and how little access we often have to any kind of language for naming what is happening in real time:

to move you so that you revise your values and your behavior to include my needs, you now have my loyalty. We both benefit and for every subsequent time we do it, the whole process gets easier and less likely to end in relational disaster. Again, this practice make the most sense to use in conflicts in which continued relationship and greater trust are sought, with people who are not disposable.

That said, if there are disparities in access, risk and power between people in conflict, what then? It is a good question, and I don't have an answer. If I am in conflict with a Black or Brown comrade, and we make any kind of mutual agreement about conflict communication, I absolutely expect to make room in it for them to name racism or anti-Blackness in something I said or did. In the same way, if I were in conflict with a cis goy, I would expect them to make room for me to name transmisogyny or anti-Semitism.

Here's the nuance, though: As far as I know, there is no consistent, objective way of tallying and scoring people based on their intersectional positions, privileges and disadvantages. For every conflict with a cut-and-dried disparity where centering the more marginalized voice is simple and easy, there are two where arbitrating who is more marginalized is impossibly sticky and complex. I think it is always strategic to name disparities so that they are explicit, instead of being invisibilized or lurking in the realm of the implicit. I think the above practice supports this happening rather than hinders it. Again, feel free to adapt it however you want or need.

Maybe the most reliable way to get information about how much access and agency people feel and how much risk they experience is for them to tell you. After all, research into the neuroscience of privilege
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speak, what they have said is an implicit dismissal of the other person's experience and its value.

If the goal is to resolve conflict in a way that builds trust, instead of eroding it, this is a strategic blunder because it forces the rest of the conversation into a zero-sum struggle where each person is struggling to be seen and have the value of their experience recognized, but is hobbled by the way the situation was framed, stuck intractably striving to prove and/or disprove a statement that is subjective simply on account of its broad generality.

Usually people don't have infinite energy to spend doing conflict. It is emotionally exhausting. I don't think it makes sense to use valuable energy making high-stakes abstract arguments about whether a particular label or term is appropriate to use when referring to a specific action in question. Just speak to the action concretely! I've been part of plenty of conflicts where people burned out doing this sort of processing and gave up, and never really got around to naming in their own words what an impact was actually like for them to recieve in real time.

Second, this practice lets people hold each other accountable for actual, specific, concrete words and actions—and even more vital, for the impacts they have. We get to offer useful, actionable information upon which future change can be based (which is the whole point of accountability).

Even more precious, we get to testify to our experience of an action's impact—to share the story that only we can share. This is emotionally risky, but it is also the only way that we can invite and motivate other people to care about (and be motivated to protect) what matters to us. To say this another way: *if I can tell my story, and it is compelling enough*

> It is important to note the distinction between cause and stimulus here. Person 1 can be speaking in a voice that seems normal, but the partner, Person 2, could shift into a sense of danger and all of a sudden perceive this voice as yelling. It's very difficult to tell what is happening between two people. The perceived shift could be entirely due to Person 2's nervous system state, with defensiveness leading to Person 1's neutrality being perceived as hostile. This is what happens when there is a shift to the fight-or-flight state—danger is perceived everywhere. The perceived shift could also be due to Person 1 leaving relational space and addressing Person 2 as a to-do list, rather than as an infinite essence with his or her own path and unfolding journey. Other possibilities include that the perceived shift could be a result of Person 1 becoming insistent, trying to prove something, or losing hope of connection with Person 2 and becoming disengaged. Another possibility is that Person 1 doesn't have much of a read on his or her own emotional world and so uses a voice that really has increased in volume and tempo, but Person 1 can't tell that it has happened. And of course, past trauma could be disrupting connection for either Person 1 or Person 2.
>
> (Peyton 183)

Here are my takeways from this:

1) For either Person 1 or Person 2 to level accusations of gaslighting in this scenario erases and flattens a lot of nuance. Gaslighting is actually a very specific thing and the word loses a lot of its power when we use it to casually simplify this actually-quite-complex phenomenon of 'slippage'. Any protocols for trauma accessible conflict should have some analysis of this and offer some way to support us in distinguishing abusive behavior like gaslighting from the reality that our subjective experiences and perceptions when we are activated are very variable, diverse and malleable.

2) Similarly, let's be wary of tone-policing. Any worthwhile trauma-accessible conflict protocal should not enable tone-policing under the banner of "accessibility".

3) Person 1 and Person 2 should have an analysis of the disparaties

between them in risk, power and access, but this is not always enough in itself for them to get clarity about what is happening between them.

4) At level of the nervous system, the idea of an objective, singular, rational reality that Western culture puts so much stock into ceases to make sense. There are many realities. There are as many ways of testifying to what happened as people who witnessed it. Each persons experience is a reality and each must be made room for. There are so many worlds. Each of us deserves access. Our views of reality are organized by our wildly, beautifully different subjective positions and each is a meaningful whole of experience. Especially when it comes to heated conflicts with people we want to keep, we need to stop trying to definitively label each others' experiences of reality. Ecosystems are more resilient when they include more diversity. This narrative diversity can be our strength, if we can stop being threatened by it (or rather, make sure we are in a nervous system state that isn't going to lock us into a threat reaction of either/or thinking about the different narratives).

5) We also need to be able to hold each other accountable for concrete words and actions. Another way to say this is that we need some consistency or overlap between our accounts of each others concrete words and actions. This is a super valid and important need, but it can't always be met, simply because of the reality of the way trauma effects our nervous systems. Some of the scariest conflicts are when different people have different memories of words and actions with really, really intense impacts.

6) Ultimately the need for accountability is a need to address these impacts. Person 1 and Person 2 need a way to distinguish cause from stimulus, as the first line of the excerpt states. In other words, they

difference or recognize your disparity in power, access or risk (especially when you have been impacted by their actions). I think it makes strategic sense to name your needs and values in universal terms in this context--safety and choice really mattering to you, for example, or needing to know that the person understands the impact of their actions on you, has educated themselves on the context, and will not repeat the actions. If done carefully and strategically, this can be a really powerful 'bottom line' that clears a patch of solid ground and incontrivertably valid truth in a swampy, boggy conflict and it can be re-emphasized and returned to again and again, no matter what the other person does or says. If, however, you are needing a particular person to do or say a very particular thing that applies only to your specific context, then you might have some griefwork to do about that. Accountability in relationship is such a complex and challenging endeavor and is so completely subject to the mutual praxis of consent.

This protocal is substantively different from agreeing to speak with "I-statements" and avoid "You-statements" for two reasons.

First, it doesn't let people get away with saying vague shit like "I feel like you are being manipulative" or the even-more-passive "I feel manipulated". In fact, let's pause for a moment and analyze this classic, ever-popular "I feel like you are _____" statement. Despite the "I feel" slapped on the front, it is not even really about the speaker's experience—just a claim of what the other person is doing or being. The speaker isn't even trying to explain where they are at, or signalling what is at stake for them and why—merely offering a vague, general judgement that does no useful work in terms of holding the other person accountable to any specific, concrete words or actions. No matter how nicely or carefully they

wishes that life was otherwise. It can mean so many other things than can fit here.

• ***It generally does not mean judgments of other people**, even when they are couched in passive language or I-statements.*

• *When you do talk about the actions and words of another person (especially to that person's face) name only their actions and words, and report them as specifically as you can, in the most concrete terms you can. Try to avoid categorizing specific actions under broad umbrella terms. Try to avoid statements that 'sum up' a whole pattern of behavior over time. Try to be as clear and precise as you can and avoid generalizations.*

• *When testifying to your experience of the impact of those actions and words on you, it is strategic to include as many concrete details as possible and be as specific and elaborate as possible. In other words, if you feel strong enough to go on for five minutes talking about what came up in your body when you recieved their words, what came up in your memory, what was at stake for you in that moment, what deep values were challenged, what your struggle has been, what fears came up, what hopes for the future were dashed, what metaphors capture your experience, and more, (without labeling their experience at all) then for the sake of your relationship, do so. I promise that it will pay off if you have the capacity to do it. It can feel really vulnerable—a lot more vulnerable than labeling their experience—but maybe that is the price of doing conflict that generates trust instead of draining it.*

• *The part of the conversation where you are naming your needs going forward or testifying to your values is often the part where you are asking someone to change something about their behavior to include your*

(and we) need to be able to distinguish between what is harm and what is hurt. Since our trauma memories are not timestamped, the right stimulus can yank us right back to our experience of a past harm, which becomes functionally indistinguishable from the present situation. And for the impacted person, the pain is just as real now as it was then. Depending on the situation, the person who triggered us in the present with that stimulus *may have also caused us real harm* as well as triggered us—or they might have just provided the stimulus. Parsing this out can be very tricky and may require going very slowly, and mobilizing a radical amount of support.

I owe a lot of gratitude to Stas Schmiedt and Lea Roth of Spring Up and Miriame Kaba for their nuanced and clear-eyed take on the distinction between hurt and harm.[13] They frame the distinction as the impacted person having a deep cut on their arm. If I bump against their arm, that person will feel real pain. I activated that pain. It's legitimate for the hurt person to expect me to take responsibility for that. But I also didn't cut them in the first place. Who did? How did they get the cut? The distinction between hurt and harm allows us to access a really important distinction around accountability and who should be held to account (and to what magnitude? to what depth?) for the impact of the pain. Or did I scratch you (perhaps with a microaggression) and I took off a scab on a wound that is hundreds of years deep? Did I know the cut was there beforehand? *Should* I have known (since it is literally 2021)?

Please don't sharpen this distinction between hurt and harm into a weapon and use it to fend off people (especially people marginalized by

13 Their recorded convo is accessible via the internets if you search for Transforming Harm: Experiments in Accountability. I highly encourage watching it instead of just reading my half-assed paraphrase.

systemic violence) calling you out. It is a distinction primarily for the impacted person and maybe their support network to work with and parse out. Again, this might require slowing way down and mobilizing lots of support. There is no one right way to go about this.

A useful principle working with the boggling complexity of slippage is that when enough of the right kind of support comes online, it can change everything in ways that are not possible to see at the outset or from an activated place. Once people's bodies begin to relax and they have a sense of accompaniment and mattering *even in their memories of the original trigger*, a lot more options become available, a lot of entrenchment melts away, and the stuck, narrow places in a conflict system often give way and become more open. In my experience, our bodies actually want to heal and change. Once they are supported enough, I think they can be trusted to lead the way.

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influential support

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I want to pivot back to where we left off discussing the social engagement state, and bring this framework of accessibility along. After all, what does accessibility feel like at the level of the body? In my own experience, the social engagement state is the nervous system gear that allows me the most options, the most access to my whole self. But what about accessing social engagement? Or accessing support?

Back to the paradox of the alarmed, alone amygdala—to change anything requires a neuroception of safety, but what if cues of safety are impossible to self-generate in the first place? If they come from others, what if they are impossible to trust? If two people in conflict are so un-

is the superpower of our mammalian roots, which capitalism and white supremacy must deny, at the risk of losing coherence and relevance. It's almost as if there is an ancient, lost secret of being human, that we are meant to be calmed by being deeply understood by each other, but the trauma of colonization and assimilation has stolen it from most of us.[19]

Given this wild, rich, fractured-by-trauma and stolen-by-colonization territory of the human nervous system that we've been over so far, what practices might we engage in together from this knowledge?

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a practice

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Here is a protocal for 'conflict conversations' that I consider deeply strategic. It is simple, rigorous and language-based.

• *Speak only from your own experience, and only for yourself. Don't label the experience of others.*

• *"Your own experience" can mean how another person's specific action impacted you. It can mean emotions, feelings, sensations. It can mean what is at stake for you, what is important, what matters. It can mean memories that are coming up, fears and hopes for the future. It can be metaphors or images that approximate what it is like, right now, for you. It can mean values, desires, and needs. It can mean regrets and*

19 This paragraph contradicts individualism as an ideological system and cultural value, and might provoke a protest couched in the Western psychology concept of codependence. Everyone seems to have a different definition of 'codependence', and 'interdependence' and how to distinguish them. These definitions vary person-to-person, and are probably more rooted in the attachment style of that person's family, group, or culture of origin rather than any objective measure or benchmark. Basically, you decide.

Humans are so innately wired to be vigilant about how we will be recieved by the groups we belong to (the body sensations of shame and vulnerability encode this information for us and constantly update it) that self-regulating alone or coregulating with only one or two other people (especially about a conflict that effects a whole affinity group or community) cannot ever really be as strategic or effective at dispelling shame with signals of inclusion and accompaniment (resonance) as collective coregulation. Collective forms of coregulation are uniquely able to 'de-shame' the social field and make it more equitable, in Cedar and Lucien's terms.

White settler individualist culture assigns meaning to shame that roughly translates into english as: 'mediates inferior-superior relations, targets with disgust to the point of invisibility'.[17] Bear in mind that shame existed before white settler culture. Outside that culture, shame can simply be a signal that my body anticipates and/or percieves a lack of reception in the social field and more support is needed.[18] Essentially this just means there are not enough cues of safety and too many cues of threat, in a group context. So one could say that wherever conflict is undersupported (everywhere all the time, let's be honest), shame is present and is having an effect, acknowledged or not. In fact, because of how important belonging is to humans, shame is probably the most decisive and powerful force that acts on group members in conflict, and de-shaming the social field of a group is a radically liberatory and strategic tactic to bring to bear.

Embodied safety is something that can only come from being embedded in a rich and diverse web of deeply bonded relationships. This

17 Relational Uprising training manual glossary.
18 Ibid.

dersupported that they have become locked into their trauma reactions and feel hurt by each other to the point that there is zero ground for trust between them, and the other person's presence has itself become a cue of danger--what then?

The many ways that several or more human beings can calm each other and bring each other back to baseline equilibrium by 'regulating' any stimulation that is too extreme—whether it is the extreme peaks of fight-flight or the extreme troughs of freeze-fawn—is known as "coregulation". Coregulation is a huge topic beyond the immediate scope of this zine, but it might help to know that wherever the vagus nerve wanders (face, larynx, heart, stomach, lungs) is an especially powerful site to bring soft, slow, gentle rhythms. This could look many ways, from humming together to matching rhythms of breath, to allowing heartbeats or pulses to synch.

Personally, I've spent most of my life in a defensive immobilization response, with so little ground for trusting other people left that I couldn't imagine trusting anyone ever again for many years. So I'm not touting coregulation with other humans as an answer, necessarily. After all, it wasn't accessible to me for a long time. Coregulating with trees or a river or your well ancestors or other more-than-human beings is often a safer place to begin. Regardless, an important takeaway from any attempt to map the terrain of the human nervous system is that the more solid co-regulation we have shared and *been able to rely on*, the more able we are to 'self-regulate' in difficult situations.[14]

14 All self-regulation is internalized co-regulation. If someone has a high capacity for or seeming mastery of self-regulation, they are standing on the shoulders of whoever gave them co-regulation in the past that they have been able to internalize.

In other words, the more support and trust people have been able to rely on in their close relationships, the more they can internalize that support and bring it with them wherever they go—this is the process by which secure attachment is either passed on in childhood or earned in adulthood.[15] There is research showing that when people have a sense of being accompanied, they percieve the hills they are climbing as less steep than they actually are. As humans, the degree to which we feel accompanied is the degree to which we are immune (or at least resilient) to being alarmed or activated out of the social engagement state. The deeply accompanied self cannot be triggered.

I'll say it again, but differently: the degree to which my nervous system can be supported to return to the social engagement state by my comrades depends on my having reliably experienced the following (especially from those specific comrades): being seen, being known, being heard, being accurately reflected, having someone be curious about my experience, having my intentions seen, and being attuned with.

Our human nervous systems are 'open loop' systems that need to be met by and completed by other (not necessarily human) 'open loop' nervous systems for any kind of learning, integration or transformation to take place.

Although our individual nervous system states are in some ways our individual responsibility to contend with (we are after all, the only ones who can name our experience and tell our story)—in other ways they are really not our fault or under only our control—they are mostly mediated by the level of support that is (and was) available in our social

15 Those of us who never recieved internal 'ground' we could stand on were failed by caregivers whose own ground was not trustworthy or reliable enough for us to internalize (attach to).

fields.

There is a huge and important difference between coregulating with one other person and coregulating with six or more together. I suspect that to really understand that difference, it has to be experienced in an embodied way. In a very constricted conflict, where each person is convinced that both of their experiences cannot or will not be valued at the same time, such that if there is any validity in one narrative then the other must be wrong, then individual support in the form of 1-1 coregulation probably won't cut it. The system size is too small, as Lucien would say. Collective forms of coregulation are far more powerful and more sustainable (because the labor is distributed). Collective support here means at least five or six nervous systems synching and reverberating together at the same time.

Additionally, when there is an unspoken assumption of a zero-sum conflict where only one person's narrative can get to exist and be valid at a time, there be the bootprint of colonization and white supremacy culture. Two people together can exchange support, but they can't create a culture--or dispel a culture or keep its demons out. It takes a collective's worth--at least five nervous systems generating signals of accompaniment together--to contradict the wordless, implicit stories of shame and isolation swirling at the scale of cultural trauma.[16]

16 Five or more nervous systems is Cedar and Lucien's threshold number for the collective coregulation technology of storytelling and resonance. The efficacy of that practice for transforming the social field of a group rises exponentially when more people do it together. I've done it with 30 or so people and I can testify that it was fucking wild. Systemic constellations is another technology that comes to mind for bringing an influx of transformational support while distributing the heavy lifting among many nervous systems.