

Protest Safety Training Guide

DRAFT 1.0

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INTRODUCTION

This guide is intended to help organizers acquire and disseminate basic skills for engaging in effective non-violent activism.

Here are some important points to clarify about nonviolent action (these are drawn from Bruce Hartford's posts at the [Civil Rights Movement Veterans](#) website):

1. **"Nonviolence"** isn't all one thing. Some people take a philosophical approach to nonviolence. Practitioners of philosophical nonviolence try to love their enemies, and are usually specifically committed to pacifism. Tactical nonviolence, on the other hand, means you can **feel** any way you want to about your opponents, but you commit to **behaving** nonviolently for the duration of the action. This guide focuses on tactical nonviolence.
2. An underlying goal of non-violent protest is to **expose structural violence**, including the latent violence of racism, misogyny, homophobia, economic violence, state violence, etc. We can think of resistance to nonviolent actions (police violence, abusive counter-protesters, etc.) as the normally invisible power structure sharpening into focus. Not every protester will encounter violence (the vast majority will not), yet it is almost inevitable that some protesters will. If violence was not a problem in our culture, we wouldn't be protesting in the first place.
3. **Audience** is critical to successful nonviolent action. People who have been unaware of structural violence, or willing to ignore it, must see what is happening in order for change to happen. To hold those who perpetrate injustice accountable, you need witnesses. This is a crucial point when you are planning actions or making personal decisions about how you will react in response to violence. In short, no matter how committed you are personally to nonviolence, letting a bunch of neo-Nazis beat you up in an alley where no one can see what has happened does nothing to advance your cause.

For these reasons above, **planning** is critical to successful tactical nonviolence. There should be **an explicit agreement among your group** that everyone is committed to nonviolent behavior during the action. If some of you believe you are acting nonviolently and others don't, everyone will be at much greater risk. And of course, **training** is vital. Remaining nonviolent in the face of abuse and provocation requires discipline and practice. Sharing the skills in this guide will help keep everyone involved in your actions safer.



Where did this training method come from?

This handbook draws on expertise from three areas. The first is a violence reduction method known as empowerment self-defense, or ESD. ESD is a holistic approach concerned with personal, interpersonal, and community safety. It uses somatic therapies to teach you to control your own fear and anger. It also addresses structural violence as a primary cause of harm to individuals. Thus it provides a clear lens for understanding the violence inherent in today's politics, and is a powerful tool for mobilizing resistance.

This book also draws from the practice wisdom of the civil rights movement, from the 1950s through today's activists fighting for Black lives, indigenous rights, and other fundamental principles of humanity. I am especially indebted to Bruce Hartford of the Civil Rights Movement Veterans (<http://www.crmvet.org/>) for his expertise, feedback and encouragement. His notes from non-violent training sessions he led half a century ago formed the nucleus of the workshops I teach today.

Finally, I've drawn upon personal experience gained very rapidly since November 2016. In less than six months, I've protested Neo-Nazis, Islamophobia, misogyny and climate denial; I've helped with safety at marches, rallies, and townhalls; I've used tactical non-violence skills on campuses, at City Hall and the state Capitol, and in the offices of Congressmen. I've learned about crowd management, dealing with DPS troopers, and how to use a walkie-talkie. I've also learned a great deal about my own strengths and weaknesses in the high-energy, sometimes high-conflict setting of civic activism. I've learned that anyone can do this work—but it's a lot easier if we pool our knowledge.

My knowledge is limited by my privilege. As a white, middle-aged, middle-class woman, most protest actions are not especially risky for me. Someone who lives in Chicago or Baltimore and has darker skin than me, for example, takes very different risks when they protest. Our experience of protest in America, like our experience of everyday life here, is shaped by the same factors we protest against: Racism. Religious intolerance. Homophobia. Transphobia. Gender discrimination. Ageism. Ableism. It's important to remember, as we raise our voices, that the people whose voices most need amplification are those who are most vulnerable to injustice and violence. To do the most good, we must defer to the knowledge and experience of those who know oppression best.

And we should remember too that, given the volatility of the current political climate, any one of us may be at greater risk tomorrow. No identity will keep us safe in a society where identity is used as justification for violence. No matter what we risk by protesting now, the risk increases for all of us if we remain silent.



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A word about "always" and "never"

When we plan ahead for potential emergencies, we're prone to look for always/never advice. This makes sense in many situations: "Always steer into a skid" is good advice for safe driving. Having pre-determined rules can speed our decision-making in a crisis and keep us safer.

But human conflict is infinitely variable and fluid. All people are different, for one thing—that's why conflict arises! Circumstances also vary widely, even within the realm of protest safety. Two people discussing a difference of opinion present a very different safety challenge from, say, a large group of protesters confronting organized counter-protesters while hostile police surround them all. Then too, conflict can develop very rapidly. Something as innocuous as a person's accent, or the logo on their baseball cap, can tip a conflict over the edge into violence, or walk it back into civil territory.

We'll see throughout this guide that there are innumerable things you can think, say, and do, to influence other people's attitude and behavior. As you practice each skill, remember that the situation you find yourself may call for something different. There are simply too many variables to be certain of what will or won't "work"—and that's good. The diverse, complex nature of human interaction means that **violence is never a certainty, and there are many, many ways to prevent or limit it.**

So our only "rule" is "**Never say 'never,' and never say 'always.'**" Instead, be alert to the situation you are in, observe the behavior of those around you, and make the best choice you can in the moment. Remember that you can always change strategies. As long as you do your best, you are "doing the right thing."



1. Basic Skills

Emotional grounding, boundary setting, and clear communication skills will let you approach all kinds of high-stress situations with less apprehension, more confidence, and a better sense of your options for creating positive outcomes. They are a huge asset in the often chaotic environment of a rally or other action. We're going to isolate each skill a bit in the first four activities, to help you understand it, feel it in your body, and practice it until it feels comfortable. Later, we'll combine skills in different ways to address different situations.

First, we need to define some key terms. I summarize these terms on a poster for workshop attendees, and distribute them as a handout. See "Conflict Management Skills Handout" and "Emotional Grounding Poster" in the Appendix.

Emotional grounding means doing something to calm yourself physically and mentally so you can act from a place of strength. There are many ways to ground yourself emotionally:

- Taking a deep breath, or several. You can count "one" as you breathe in, and "two" as you breathe out.
- Counting to ten (or five, or three, if time is of the essence).
- Self-encouragement, either out loud or silently: "I can do this," or "I am committed to nonviolence."
- Focusing on safe sensory experiences, like feeling the solid ground under your feet or the chair beneath you.
- Observing/naming your emotions so you can set them aside temporarily: "I feel angry, but for now I am going to project calm."
- Touching a ring, necklace, or other object you carry for its spiritual significance.

You may know other methods from yoga or other practices. It's good to try out different methods of emotional grounding, to find the ones that work best for you.

Boundary-setting is anything you say or do to clearly communicate what you want:

- Adopting a stance like the "invisible wall" (explained below) to set a physical boundary and keep someone at a comfortable distance.
- Using clear, direct phrases like "That's not OK," or "Stop bothering her."
- Refusing to engage further in an interaction when it is clear the other party will not respect your boundaries. The "broken record" technique, which you'll learn in this chapter, is one example.



De-escalation is a way of defusing conflict by helping one or more parties regain emotional control and calm down. De-escalation is a short-term fix to reduce the odds of violence; it's not a permanent solution for ongoing disputes. There are many actions that can help de-escalate conflict:

- Using non-threatening body language.
- Active listening (nodding, mirroring back what someone says).
- Expressing concern, repeatedly, in different ways.
- Shifting the environment ("Why don't we sit over here and talk?")

Intervention is simply involving yourself in a conflict you were not initially a party to, in order to protect a target of violence or otherwise make the situation safer. That might mean

- Summoning additional help, like a security guard, store manager or other authority figure.
- Creating distance between the two parties.
- Physically stepping between parties in conflict, or creating some other kind of barrier.
- Directly addressing either party—
 - about the conflict.
 - about something unrelated to the conflict.

Disruption and **distraction** are ways to re-write the "script" of conflict. They could involve

- Singing loudly, especially as a group, to drown out violent speech.
- Doing something silly or entertaining in front of counter-protesters to divert the attention of a potential audience.
- Engaging one party in a conflict in conversation. ("What are you protesting today? Have you been to a lot of protests? Where can I learn more about your perspective?")
- Pointing out (or inventing) some other focus of attention. ("Is that your car they're towing?")

These are all skills you already use intuitively, but we want to equip you to use them *intentionally*.



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Teaching Tips for activities 1-4:

Encourage everyone to keep their facial expression neutral—that means NO SMILING OR LAUGHING. This will be hard! But it's important to notice how hard it is, and to try anyway.

Don't chat during the activity. You may feel the urge to break the tension by saying something casual, making an observation or a joke. This is completely normal! Still, try to resist this urge for now. We want to pay attention to nonverbal messages, and verbal communication can interfere with that goal. We also want to notice how much discomfort can be generated by silence, and how our minds and bodies respond to that tension.

Notice your emotional state, and re-ground yourself periodically. Each time you finish an activity, take a brief pause to assess any changes in the way you feel. Notice any such feelings, and name them to yourself ("I feel a little offended by the look she gave me") and then take a breath and turn your attention actively to your next task.

SKILL # 1: Eye Contact

Eye contact is an essential component of nonverbal communication and boundary setting. This activity will help you understand how others perceive you and how you can alter their perception. It's also a good way to build and project confidence.

STEP ONE:

Give each person a different number: 1, 2, 3, or 4. Each number corresponds to a different style of eye contact:

1. Assertive: Making eye contact and then looking away without dropping your eyes. Keep your gaze at the same level, and look off to the side or over the person's shoulder.
2. Submissive: Making eye contact and then dropping your eyes to the floor.
3. Avoidant: Avoiding eye contact entirely.
4. Aggressive: Making and holding eye contact (staring).

STEP TWO:

Within the space you have, form a little crowd and mill around silently, walking past and around each other. Make eye contact (or avoid it) using the style your number calls for. Do this for about 30 seconds.

STEP THREE:

Switch roles ("All the 1s will now make eye contact and then drop their gaze; all the 2s will avoid eye contact, the 3s will stare, and the 4s will make eye contact and look away on the



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level”) and repeat Step Two. Do a total of four rounds, so each person tries all four styles.

Give cues for grounding between each round: *That was great—everyone take a moment to breathe in slowly, and let it out on a slow count of three. Ready? In . . . and out.* Remind people not to chat; if necessary, point out that this is an emotional response to discomfort, and they can discuss it in a moment.

DISCUSS:

- How did you feel while performing each style of eye contact? Was one form most comfortable for you? Which one? Which was least comfortable?
- Could you tell what others peoples' styles were? What was your impression of others when they looked down? When they kept their gaze level? When they stared?
- Notice the effect of having a large number of people moving around in close proximity. This usually raises people's emotional arousal level (stress level). And of course, it's the kind of situation you're probably going to be in during a rally or march.

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS ACTIVITY:

- Eye contact sends subtle but powerful **social signals** that influence the way people regard us and interact with us.
- Just as important, our style of eye contact can also make **us** feel a certain way. Making assertive eye contact often makes people feel more confident. Submissive patterns may make us feel “weak” or uncomfortable.
- We can make choices about our style of eye contact to feel more powerful, look more powerful, or seem less threatening.
- “Appropriate” eye contact depends in part on cultural expectations. We don’t want to violate people’s sense of decorum by staring, but we can push back against cultural expectations—for example, that some people (women, people of a certain ethnicity, the differently abled) should demonstrate submissive gaze patterns.

SKILL # 2: Communicating a boundary

We sometimes refer to this activity as the “invisible wall.” It’s best to explain and demonstrate each step:

1. From a standing position, move one foot back slightly to create a stable stance.
2. Hold your hands up in front of you, palms facing forward and fingertips up, in a "stop"



gesture. Keep your facial expression neutral.

3. Make eye contact with the person approaching your boundary, and say, firmly, "Stop."

Have everyone do this together, several times. Then ask everyone find a partner.

Form your group into two lines, each person standing across the room from their partner. Make sure everyone has enough room behind them to take a step backward.

Explain the steps of the activity:

STEP ONE:

When the instructor gives the word, one line will walk toward their partners. Partners maintain eye contact.

STEP TWO:

When the people who are standing still feel that their partner is close enough, they will move one foot back, raise their hands, and say "Stop." **They won't say anything else.**

Partners will STOP WHEN TOLD TO DO SO!

STEP THREE:

When the instructor gives the word, everyone one will return to their starting positions. Repeat Step Two. Then, change roles and let the other side put up the invisible wall. Have each side try the invisible wall at least twice.

When you're done, try this emotional grounding method: Pull your toes up and press the heels of your feet into the ground, feeling the connection there as you pause, then release. Repeat two more times.

Coaching, as needed:

- Remind people not to smile, laugh or talk.
- If you notice people taking a step forward instead of backward as they put up their hands, point this out. Ask how each is different (stepping forward can look more assertive or aggressive; stepping back creates more distance).
- Remind people to make their invisible wall at about chest level. Putting the hands up higher, near eye level, can look threatening, so as long as we're not already in a physical defense situation, chest level will usually be more effective.



DISCUSS:

How did you feel when you used the invisible wall to set a boundary? How did it feel to approach someone and have them use the invisible wall?

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS ACTIVITY:

- This method of setting a boundary is powerful because it uses **message alignment** and **message repetition** (here, I refer to the "Aligning Messages" poster in the Appendix):
 - Being clear with yourself **internally**: What do I want from this interaction?
 - Sending a clear, strong **physical** message: direct eye contact, balanced stance, universal hand gesture.
 - Using a short, clear **verbal** message and an assertive tone of voice.
 - **Not mixing** messages by smiling, speaking tentatively, or making our body appear smaller. Remember, you can always change the message if you decide that's best, but avoiding mixed messages reduces the odds of misunderstanding.
- When we take action to set and defend our boundaries, we tend to feel stronger and more capable.
- We also remind ourselves and others that we deserve respect.
- We can modify elements of the invisible wall as desired. For example, the body position used is sometimes called a "five-point stance," meaning your partner can see five points on your body: the forehead, both shoulders, and both hips. This stance is direct and assertive. If we want to de-escalate an interaction, we can move into a "three-point stance," by shifting one foot and shoulder back slightly. We can make a more placatory gesture by dropping our hands slightly and turning the palms toward the floor. We'll cover de-escalation in more detail below.

SKILL #3: Saying No

Saying "No" is one of the most basic acts of self-defense. It establishes a clear boundary, and can keep small-scale annoyances from turning into a full-fledged safety problems. Most of us don't enjoy saying "No," so we avoid it. That makes it all the more important to practice this skill.

Everyone will need a partner for this activity. One person will be asking questions, and the other will be saying No. Each person will have a turn in each role.



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Teaching Tip: Using Noise to Teach

As you run through these activities with a group, you'll probably notice that they generate a buzz of conversation, laughing, and other noise. You can use the hubbub to direct people's attention to the phenomenon of emotional arousal, and help them practice their grounding skills:

“Do you notice that the last activity got us all giggling a little? It provoked some social discomfort, didn't it? We respond to that by finding ways to reduce the tension. Laughing, smiling, and other responses are ways our bods seeks to discharge emotional tension, and communicate to those around us that we're not a threat. So let's take a moment to pay attention to that reaction we're having, and practice a grounding technique to bring our energy level back down.”

STEP ONE:

Decide who will ask first. For a large group, I usually pass out cards or slips of paper with different scenarios written on them. Some people are more comfortable if they have something to hold on to and look at while asking. Here are some possibilities:

- Can you give me a ride to Alice's party tomorrow night?
- Can you take my Friday night shift for me?
- Can I use your phone for a minute?
- Can you babysit my kids next weekend?
- Do you have money for bus fare?
- Can I borrow your notes from class?
- Do you want to go have lunch after this workshop?
- Can I buy you a drink?

STEP TWO:

Have the asker spend 60 seconds asking their partner for whatever their scenario calls for. The asker's goal is to get their partner to say yes. They can ask in as many different ways as they can think of—but they should not threaten, yell or be abusive.

The other person answers “No” to all the questions. THAT'S ALL: Don't smile or laugh, but do maintain eye contact with your questioner.

STEP THREE:

Switch roles and repeat Step Two.



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STEP FOUR:

When you finish, try this emotional grounding technique: Ask everyone to stand silently and notice

- 3 things you can see around you in the room; (pause while they do this)
- 2 things you can hear; (pause)
- 1 thing you can feel with your body (pause).

Take a deep breath and shake out your body to release tension.

DISCUSS:

- Which was harder, asking questions, or saying “No”? What was hard about each?
- Discuss the strategies people used to try to get you to change your “no” to a “yes.”
- Why do we feel like we need to explain or apologize?

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS ACTIVITY:

- We sometimes call this technique the “broken record” treatment. It’s similar to ignoring a person you don’t want to engage with, but slightly more assertive.
- This activity can feel very stressful in part because we don’t make a habit of saying “No” to people, so it feels uncomfortable. Another problem is that we don’t know how to react gracefully when someone says “No” to us We may feel embarrassed or ashamed. As a society, we need to do a better job of modeling respect for boundaries, which means being able to accept a “no” without feeling injured.
- When you are faced with persistent attempts to override a boundary you have set, keep in mind what YOU want from the interaction. Very often, people who don’t respect boundaries will try to focus attention on what THEY want, or try to twist the situation so that your goals and theirs appear to be in agreement.

Optional Activity: Boundary Setting Phrases

Because most of us don’t practice or witness boundary setting behavior very often, it can be hard to feel confident about doing it. I do this short activity as a call-and-response: The instructor says the phrase, then the attendees repeat it in unison. This can have a surprising impact. I’ve had people come up to me months after class and tell me how profound it felt to say these words out loud.



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- o That's not OK.
- o I'm not comfortable sharing that information.
- o I'm not discussing that with you.
- o I don't want to have this conversation (you can always add “right now” if you’re willing to consider revisiting the conversation later).
- o I know you mean well, but I don't need your help.
- o That's not funny.
- o You don't speak for me.
- o Stop bothering her.
- o I don't listen to bullies.
- o I think for myself.

SKILL #4: Using Distance for Safety

Distance is perhaps the most important, and simplest, means of increasing safety in a conflict. This activity will give you a new way to think about distance, and how you can use it to your advantage for safety. You’ll do this with a partner.

I like to teach this activity by first pointing out how we’ve already used distance: When we step back instead of forward during the invisible wall activity, we are making a very slight adjustment in distance which produces significant safety benefits—it can take us out of striking range.

Activity: Four Distances

Have people partner up, and line up as they did for the invisible wall activity. Explain the four steps of this drill:

STEP ONE:

In the first stage, one line will advance until their partners tell them to stop (they can use the invisible wall to signal the boundary if they like). Once stopped, both partners should stand silently and focus on their bodily response.

STEP TWO:

In the second stage, the advancing party will take one more step, **inside** their partner’s comfort zone. Again, they’ll pause—at least three slow breaths—and absorb what that feels like.

STEP THREE:

In the third stage, you’ll ask those who have been standing still to adjust their stance and



positioning so they are more comfortable. They might pivot or back up, for example.

STEP FOUR:

In the fourth stage, everyone in the advancing group will turn to face you, and follow you, in a line, out of the room (if it's not convenient to leave the room, take everyone to the most distant corner).

Direct everyone through the four steps, then take a moment to re-ground. Switch roles and repeat all four steps.

Help people focus on their physical and emotional responses to this activity by keeping the atmosphere, and your own instructions, low-key and calm.

When you have finished, try this emotional grounding method: Place your hands palm to palm in front of you. Move your palms out but keep your fingertips and thumbs connected (like a spider doing a pushup). Press firmly, fingertip to fingertip, for three breaths. Release and shake out.

DISCUSS:

- What physical cues did your body send when your partner stepped inside your comfort zone (maybe flushing, shallow breathing, elevated pulse, sweating)?
- What was going through your mind? Most of us (especially women) have been socialized to ignore or stifle our gut reactions.
- Was your partner's comfort zone larger or smaller than yours? Different people are comfortable with different degrees of closeness. Some of this is cultural, some is personal, some has to do with gender or age or other attributes.
- What happened to the energy level when the advancing group turned around and walked away?

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS ACTIVITY:

- The sensations we experience when our comfort zone is breached are early warnings from our bodies saying that the situation could become unsafe. Most of the time, it won't. But we want to hear that little voice when it says, "I'm uncomfortable; I don't feel safe." We want to be aware of what our body is expecting and preparing for.
- At a rally, you're likely to be in close proximity to a lot of strangers. Even if everyone is friendly, this can raise stress levels.
- This also means that moving away from a crowd, or from an individual is an easy way to



reduce stress levels. Simply increasing distance can **decrease emotional activation** and reduce chances of violence.

- Notice also that distance makes it **harder to reach or hear** the other party. Obstacles and third party interveners can serve a similar function by making it harder for parties in conflict to hear/see/reach each other.



2. Combining and Applying the Basics

The de-escalation and intervention tactics in this chapter are applicable in all kinds of situations. But the way you use them, which ones you try first, and other decisions, will depend on your **role** and your **goal**. Are you acting as a marshal at a march? Are you counter-protesting with a small group of friends? Variables like these will inform your choices.

Teaching Tip: Coaching scenario practice

In any scenario activity, beginners should be given a specific skill to deploy or, if they are choosing from among several skills, should have help remembering those options (a handout to refer to, for example). Instructors and other students should support and coach them as needed by making suggestions, reminding them to go at their own pace, and offering encouragement. Go **slowly, especially at first**; let learners explore the options they are trying out, and the emotional and physical response they have when deploying each skill.

"Realistic" scenario practice (real-time, with lots of fluidity and change) should come only after a learner has experienced some solid successes and feels comfortable using the skill. Rushing this process can create a lot of discomfort and actually make it harder to practice the skill.

De-escalation

I put information about de-escalation on two posters, which I refer to before we begin these activities. See "De-escalation Posters" in Section Three.

De-escalation is a tactical approach to reducing the violence, or the potential for violence, in a conflict.

- It's an assertive option, a way to take charge of a situation. De-escalation doesn't mean humoring a bully or letting a violent person have their own way.
- It's a **short-term solution** to reduce the immediate risk of violence.
- It's not the same thing as conflict resolution or mediation.

De-escalation strategies can be helpful when someone is upset but still able to regain control of their emotions and calm down. In other situations, where the angry person has something to gain by being violent, or is getting a lot of emotional fulfillment from their violent behavior, de-escalation might not be your first choice of response. That said (and remembering our always/never rule), de-escalation can work even on extremely angry people. The more you practice it, the more likely you are to have success with it.



In order to help someone else regain control of their emotions, we have to have control of our own. So, the first skill we'll practice is emotional grounding in a conflict scenario. Then we'll move on to de-escalating such a situation.

The De-escalation Toolbox

All of the skills we've already practiced are part of our de-escalation toolbox:

- managing your own emotions in the moment
- setting boundaries
- communicating clear, unmixed messages
- using physical elements like distance to help reduce tension

Here are some additional skills we can use when de-escalating (here, I refer to the posters):

- **Stance and position:** Having a path to safety; being aware of the crowd and terrain around you; adopting non-threatening body postures (like the “three-point stance” explained in the previous chapter). Small shifts in our body presentation can send signals that are more likely to elicit the response we want from people.
- **Active listening:** Making assertive eye contact (but not staring), nodding, reflecting back what they say (“I hear that you are very upset.”)
- **Controlling tone and volume:** Starting at a lower volume than them and making them work to hear you, OR, matching their tone/volume at first, then bringing it down.
- **Expressing concern:** “Are you OK? Was anyone hurt?” Ask in different ways to shift their attention. Expect to repeat a lot when talking to an emotionally agitated person.
- **Short questions or requests:** “Can I get you some water? Would you like me to call someone? It's safest if you leave this way. Can I ask you to look at me and not at him?” It's usually best to avoid giving orders, which tends to escalate tension.
- **Shifting the environment:** Walk away from them, move remove the target, move them through a doorway or other threshold, stand up or sit down.

You may have other tools that you've used to de-escalate agitated people (some workplaces provide this training). If so, add them to the list.

De-escalation and trauma

Some people are already skilled at de-escalation, and can do it intuitively. If you are, it's a good idea to think about why. People who grew up in dysfunctional families, for example, often have highly developed de-escalation skills, but using those skills can be extremely draining for them emotionally, because of associations with past trauma. Similarly, people who belong to groups



that are stereotyped as "dangerous" may spend much of their lives de-escalating. For instance, a tall, powerfully-built man may adopt explicitly non-threatening body language whenever he steps into an elevator.

De-escalation is a valuable skill, but as we're about to see, it requires intense emotional work. We live in a culture where violence is unfairly directed against some people, which means that the burden of de-escalation is also unfairly distributed. Whatever your own background, I hope that practicing de-escalation, in your daily life as well as in protest, will make you more aware of this burden of structural violence. The expectation that some individuals must continually absorb or manage other people's anger is an injustice we need be conscious of, and fight to end.

SKILL #5: Emotional grounding during confrontation

This activity is sometimes called a "hassle line." Have people partner up and stand in two lines, facing their partner. Remind everyone to only interact with their partner during the drill, so it doesn't become too chaotic. Give them one of these scenarios (or create your own):

Scenario 1: You are standing on the sidewalk outside your congressman's office, holding a sign protesting your representative's recent vote in Congress. Your partner will pretend to be a counter-protester.

Scenario 2 (more local): You are in Boerne, TX at the Civic Center where Ted Cruz is holding a townhall. People in one line are silently holding up signs protesting a recent vote in the Senate. The people in the other line are members of the audience who support Cruz and are angry about the signs.

Instructions for the aggressor:

The aggressor should approach the peaceful protester and heckle them. They might say things like "We don't want you here. What gives you the right to wave that sign? You are going to hell. Why do you hate America?"

The first few times you do this activity, it's best to **avoid personal insults, threats, or slurs**. You can always build up to that later. Initially, it's important to help your partner be successful at their task.

Instructions for the peaceful protester:



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Maintain your calm regardless of what your partner says or does. Try, as best you can, to work through any stress responses you have, physical or emotional, and remain calm and in control of your feelings. Use any emotional grounding method that works (refer to the Emotional Grounding poster):

- Breathe, slowly, paying attention to the physical sensation of breath going in and out of your body.
- Count to 10, or 5, or 3.
- Use positive self-talk: "I can do this. I am committed to nonviolence. I have practiced this. I'm doing the right thing. I am standing up for those who cannot stand up for themselves."
- "Soft focus," either ignoring your antagonist entirely, or looking "through" them.
- Assertive focus, looking calmly and directly at your antagonist, but still not responding verbally or in any other way.
- Noticing any physical or emotional reactions (such as elevated heartbeat, flushing skin, shallow breathing, or irritation, anger, or fear), naming that reaction silently to yourself, and setting it aside for later consideration.
- Critiquing your antagonist's performance silently to yourself (once you have tried the aggressor's role, you'll see that it is in fact somewhat difficult to come up with things to say!)

Run the scenario for about sixty seconds. Then take a moment to breathe, and re-ground. Switch roles, and try another 60-second round.

DISCUSS:

What works for you? What doesn't? What do you notice in your role as the aggressor? Is it easy or hard, and why?

SKILL #6: De-escalating an aggressor

Use the same set-up as the "hassle line" activity. You can keep the same partners or choose new ones.

Scenario 1: You are at a rally and someone is speaking to the crowd. A counter-protester comes up next to you and begins yelling at the speaker. Other people in the crowd are distracted and irritated.

Scenario 2 (more local): We are at a pro-immigration rally at Auditorium Shores in Austin.



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Everyone in Line B has volunteered to help keep people safe, and is trying to keep the sidewalk clear for foot traffic, which the police insisted had to happen. People in Line A are pushing a baby in a stroller; they disagree with our stance on immigration and think we shouldn't be here.

Instructions for the aggressor:

The aggressor/counter-protester can say anything disruptive (you don't have to actually yell, if the setting you're practicing in would make that awkward). Try to react honestly to your partner's attempts to manage the situation: If you feel yourself losing steam, go ahead and back off. As with the previous activity, it's best not to use profanity, slurs, or threats at first. If you want to practice with more violent language, I recommend building up to it over a few sessions.

Instructions for the peaceful protester:

As calmly as possible, do what you can to reduce the tension in the situation. If one approach doesn't work, try something else.

Do the scenario for sixty seconds, then take a moment to process/re-ground, and switch roles for another 60-second round.

DISCUSS:

Allow a few minutes for discussing what worked, what didn't, and why.

Intervention

I summarize Intervention skills on a wall poster (see "Intervention Poster" in Section Three), and review it before we begin practicing these skills.

Intervention is the act of inserting yourself into a conflict that didn't originally involve you. It is **inherently more risky** than other skills we have covered so far. Generally, **the earlier you intervene** in a conflict, the lower the risk, and the greater the odds of success.

Intervention can have different goals:

- To prevent/disrupt/reduce violence ("Stop pushing him! You are being recorded!")
- To divert violence from its intended target or minimize its impact ("I'm sorry they're being so rude. Would you like me to walk across the street with you?").
- To call attention to violent behavior by naming and rejecting it ("We don't talk to each other disrespectfully in this community.")

When intervening, you might seek to de-escalate tensions and help one or both parties calm



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down. Or, you may simply seek to increase the distance between the two parties. As with de-escalation, remember that intervention is a **temporary solution**. The goal is to reduce the odds of immediate violence. The goal is not to make everyone love each other.

When we intervene, we may use

- Our grounding skills.
- Our boundary-setting skills (verbal and physical).
- Our de-escalation skills.
- Additional tactics that can vary according to the setting (see below).

As with de-escalation, there are many variables that will affect the outcome, such as the gender, age, and size of the people engaged in conflict, and of the intervener.

As we go over the skills summarized on the intervention poster, I ask about scenarios where we might use each tactic, and also whether people have experience with the tactics (the bullet points below are grouped to match the categories on the posters):

- **Ignore the aggressor:** Note that earlier activities have given them practice at this.
- **Use broken record/boundary setting phrases.** Come up with some that you think would work well for you. "I'm a volunteer, we're working to keep this event safe, could you help out by moving along?" "It's safest if you leave this way."
- **Singing** is similar to broken record but has HUGE emotional grounding benefits and makes your group more cohesive. And it can send a message, is more easily sustained for long periods, is harder to disrupt.
- **Target denial/creating distance:** Moving marchers quickly past a counter-protester, asking them to stay focused on our action, reminding them why we are here.
- **Talk to the aggressor** and directly address the violent speech or behavior: "We won't let you hurt him/her. People are recording you. This is not the day/place/time for violence."
- **Distract the aggressor:** "Hey, I like your hat. Is red your favorite color? It looks good on you. Tell me about your sign. Wow, you know a lot about this. Where did you learn all this?" (May have tried this in line)
- **Talk to/move the target:** "Oh hi, don't I know you from . . .?" "Sorry about that; please don't let it spoil your day." "Come on, let's go over to . . ."
- **Step between an aggressor and target.** NOTE THAT THIS CAN BE VERY RISKY. Usually best to keep hands visible and below face level. Try not to touch or grab attacker.



- **Form a line between aggressors and their object.** You can stand apart, hold hands, or link arms. Stay grounded physically —knees bent, back straight or lean forward slightly— and emotionally: breathe, sing, talk to your allies, talk to those you are blocking.
- You can also **sit in a line**, which is good against police because it is not threatening.
- Another option is to all **point at the aggressor** (can sit down to make them more visible).
- **U-formation around an aggressor (it's easier to demonstrate this than describe it):** With allies, form a line between the aggressor and their target. Slowly bend the line into a U-shape, with the open part of the U facing in the direction you want the aggressor to move (note the importance of advance planning here: you need to think first about where you want to move the person). **DO NOT SURROUND THE AGGRESSOR: ALWAYS** give them an exit. Moving slowly and calmly, shuffle the U forward to shift the aggressor toward an exit or away from their target.
- **O-formation around a target (also best to demonstrate):** With allies, form a line between an aggressor and their target. Draw the ends of the line in to encircle the target, then move them away and re-absorb them into the crowd
- **“Puppy pile”:** **Drape bodies** over anyone being dragged away or targeted, to thwart attackers. (Note that civil protest veterans don’t advise doing this if police are making arrests; it can trigger increased police violence.)

SKILL #7: Intervening in a conflict

I begin by **modeling** intervention tactics for the whole group. We have two people stand in as parties in conflict. For the most part, I pose them in a specific position and then ask them to "freeze" so we can discuss options. Here's a typical scenario:

We are at a protest outside a campaign rally. The crowd is about evenly split between supporters of the candidate, and those who oppose him or her. Two people are confronting each other and beginning to act like they want to fight (you might see raised fists, chest-bumping, shouting with a finger pointed in the other person's face, etc.).

I refer everyone to our poster and ask what I might try to make the situation safer (remember that the goal is not to "solve" the conflict). Then we walk through each suggestion, considering the risks, the variables introduced by the gender, age, size, etc. of the people in the scenario, and asking for feedback from the people acting out conflict (for example, "So, if I put my arm



between you, and I face her, how does that change the situation for you? Is it harder to see her? Does it make me seem like a threat to you?")

I like to make sure we remember our **verbal** options: "What kinds of things could I say as I do this? What could I say to connect with this person and help them calm down? What would a boundary-setting phrase be for this situation? "

DISCUSS:

Keep **context** in mind: how might bystanders or allies react to our intervention attempts? For example, if you are trying to de-escalate counter-protesters at a march, and turn to face them and talk to them, the people marching past you will see something that looks like a conflict. They may try to come to your "defense," and escalate the situation.

Of course, bystanders and allies can also be enlisted to help. The more specific your directions or requests are, the better.

Similarly, when I de-escalate conflict between protesters and counter-protesters, I often have better luck engaging with the person on "my side." People who show up with the intent of peacefully demonstrating support for a cause have some motivation to calm down and act with self-control. People who come to provoke or cause trouble are less likely to want to calm down.

Since people tend to want a lot of coaching and discussion with intervention skills, I usually run one scenario at a time for the rest of this section. We set up a scenario with volunteer "fighters" and one person walks through the intervention options with help from the rest of the group. Typically everyone wants to walk through situations they have encountered before, heard about, or seen in videos or news clips.

Or, you can divide up into trios for scenario practice, if that makes more sense for your group.

Coordinated Response Scenarios

If we are training a group for a specific event or action, we will collectively walk through some scenarios that may come up, such as

1. Counter-protesters outnumber your group and attempt to shout you down.
2. Fringe group like the Antifa attempts to provoke confrontation with law enforcement.
3. Law enforcement begins to roughly move/knock down/yell at protesters.
4. Counter-protesters threaten/intimidate one member of your group (verbal, escalate to shoving).
5. A counter-protester rushes onstage at a rally and grabs the microphone.



APPENDIX: Handouts and Posters

- I try to distribute handouts via email ahead of a workshop. Some people like to prepare by going over the material early, and some will print out their own copies to bring, which means I need to make fewer copies. Have a stack of handouts ready at the workshop as well.
- I also prepare posters which I tape up on the walls. These are just sheets of newsprint that I write on with a marker. Poster contents are included in this section
- To fill time while we wait for everyone to arrive, I often post large sheets of newsprint on the wall with a few questions, like
 - To me, a “successful” protest/action means . . .
 - A concern I have about an upcoming protest/action is . . .
 - I think violence is . . .

I hand everyone a pen as they walk in, and ask them to write their responses on the newsprint. This activity can generate some conversation and break the ice. Also, I can then quickly scan the responses for a sense of what concerns and thoughts people are bringing to the workshop.

- Remind people to be aware of their emotional tolerances and to step out if they need to. You’ll want to build in some 5- or 10-minute breaks, depending on your available time.
- I usually explain that the session is built on some very basic skills and will build up. That way people don't grow impatient in the early stages.



Conflict Management Skills Handout

You can download a PDF version of this handout at susanschorn.com

Conflict Management Skills

1. Emotional grounding means doing something to calm yourself physically and mentally so that you can act from a place of strength. There are many methods:

- Taking a deep breath.
- Counting to ten (or five, or three)
- Self-encouragement: "I can do this," or "I am committed to non-violence."
- Observing/naming your emotions so you can set them aside temporarily: "I feel angry, but for now I am going to project calm."

2. Boundary-setting is anything you say or do to clearly communicate what you want:

- Using the "invisible wall" stance to set a physical boundary and keep someone at a comfortable distance.
- Using boundary-setting phrases like "That's not OK," "Stop bothering her."
- Refusing to engage further in an interaction when it is clear the other party will not respect your boundaries; for example, by using the "broken record" technique.

3. De-escalation is a way of taking control of a conflict, helping one or both parties regain emotional control and calm down. De-escalation is a short-term solution, not a fix for ongoing violent behavior. There are many ways to de-escalate:

- using non-threatening body language.
- active listening (nod, mirror back what they say: "I can tell you're frustrated.")
- expressing concern, repeatedly in different ways.
- shifting the environment ("Can we sit over here and talk?")

4. Intervention is involving yourself in a conflict you were not initially a party to:

- physically stepping between the parties or creating another barrier.
- directly addressing either party (about the conflict. or about something unrelated).
- summoning additional help, like a store manager or other authority figure.
- creating distance between the two parties.

5. Disruption and distraction are ways to re-write the "script" of conflict. This can mean

- singing loudly to drown out violent speech.
- doing something silly or entertaining in front of counter-protesters to divert the attention of a potential audience.
- engaging one of the parties in conversation. ("What are you protesting today? Have you been to a lot of protests? Where can I learn more about your perspective?")
- pointing out (or inventing) some other focus of attention. ("Is that your car they're towing?")



Emotional Grounding Poster

EMOTIONAL GROUNDING TECHNIQUES

Breathe.

Count to 10, or 5, or 3.

Positive self-talk: "I can do this. I am committed to nonviolence. I have practiced this."

Focus on senses: Feel the ground under you, press palms together.

Observe/name your emotions and set them aside.

"Soft focus": ignore or look "through" the other person.

Assertive focus: look at them but do not respond in any way.

Critique their performance silently to yourself.

Anything that works for you.



Aligning Messages Poster

ALIGNING MESSAGES

Think what you want to say

Direct eye contact

Serious expression, not smiling

Stable stance

Simple, consistent gestures

Use short, clear words

Firm tone of voice



De-escalation Posters (usually requires two sheets)

DE-ESCALATION SKILLS

GROUNDING: Breathe, count 10, positive self-talk, etc.

STANCE: Path to safety, "3-point" stance,

ACTIVE LISTENING: assertive eye contact, nodding, reflecting back what they say

CONTROL THE TONE: Go quieter/lower than them, make them work to hear you. OR, match their tone/volume at first, then bring it down.

DE-ESCALATION SKILLS, Cont.

EXPRESS CONCERN: "Are you OK?" "I can see you are upset."
Ask in different ways. Expect to repeat a lot.

SHORT QUESTIONS/OFFERS: "Can I get you some water?"
"Would you like me to call someone?"

SHIFT THE ENVIRONMENT: Move to another location, through a doorway/threshold, stand up or sit down

OTHERS YOU KNOW?



Intervention Poster

INTERVENTION TACTICS

Ignore/broken record/ sing

Target denial/create distance

De-escalate, distract, or set a boundary with the aggressor

Talk to or move the target

Step between aggressor and target

Form a line between aggressor and target

U-formation around an aggressor

O-formation around a target

"Puppy pile" on target

Others you know or have tried?



Basic Protest Safety Handout

This is a general handout for anyone thinking about attending an action or protest, especially if it's their first time to do so. You can download a PDF version of this handout at susanschorn.com

Protest Safety: Some Basics

Prepare Mentally

Think in advance about your own tolerances for risk, injury, and emotional engagement. Know that protesting may test some of your tolerances. Remember that this is OK and can help you become stronger and more self aware.

Know that violence at U.S. protests is (currently) the exception, not the rule. Also, remember that choosing to protest does not mean you forfeit your right to safety or due process.

Clarify your specific **role**. Are you a leader or a follower? Are you in an official protector role, or simply hoping to step up in the event of problems? Are you engaging in debate, protest, or civil disobedience? You might expect to deploy your skills differently in each case.

Gather Information

Find out who is organizing the protest and what actions are planned. If there are marshals or other on-the-ground leaders, make sure you can identify them and are comfortable following their instructions.

Ask if there are legal groups who will help protesters if arrests occur. If so, write their number on your arm or somewhere else you can't lose it.

Assess the protest site/march route ahead of time. Look at a map if you haven't been there before. How will you get in and out? Where are the safest places to go if there is trouble? Where can you seek medical help, food, shelter, water, and bathrooms?

Check the weather and prepare for a range of conditions.

Make sure someone who won't be at the protest knows where you are and when to expect you back.

Plan a way to connect with your group if separated. Don't just rely on cell phone



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contact, and don't rely on your phone to remember people's numbers—write them down. Designate a meeting place and check-in time(s).

At the Protest

Use common sense: Bring funds for cab or bus fare, not a ton of cash. Secure your wallet. Wear purse straps across your body, not just over one arm. Wear comfortable shoes. Bring a water bottle and any medications you need.

At the protest, monitor traffic patterns and the pulse of the event. Be alert for crowding or shoving, direct confrontations (verbal or physical), shifting police barricades, and other changes to the terrain and mood.

Notice where the paths to safety are, and how they change depending on your location and the movement of the crowd.

Remember that violence prevention skills work best when they are used early in a conflict. A few friendly words or a simple reminder of the protest's goals are the skills you're most likely to use, and the most likely to be successful at preventing violence.

If you notice individuals actively trying to start trouble—shoving people into others, or provoking cops—bring them to the attention of safety officials. Agitators may desist if a sufficient number of people make it clear that they are unwelcome ("We're not going to use violence. Please leave").

If Problems Arise

If things grow chaotic, make a decision about whether to leave or stay. Don't feel bad about leaving. You can always come back later if it seems safe.

If you or others with you are especially vulnerable (children, elderly, mobility impaired, etc.), GET OUT.

If staying, identify potential exit routes in multiple directions (look 360 degrees around you). Note the hazards and obstacles: dead ends, bottlenecks like gates, bridges or doorways, police blockades.

If you choose to stay or cannot get out, decide on a role you can fill: Witness? Recorder? De-escalator? Intervener? Obstructor? It's OK to change your role as the situation develops. The point is to assert some agency, and not let yourself be swept up in events around you.



In a crowd, you want to avoid falling down or being compressed against walls or other people. Keep your wits about you and your feet beneath you.

Reflecting and Sharing

After the protest, check in with others who participated and compare experiences. What did you observe and learn?

Normalize dissent. Share your experiences. We can build support for protest by talking about it as a rewarding, positive experience.

Share what you learn about effective safety practices during protest. We're all learning as we go.

For more detailed information, see

- Know Your Rights: Free Speech, Protests & Demonstrations (ACLU) (<https://www.aclunc.org/our-work/know-your-rights/free-speech-protests-demonstrations>)
- Search and seizure (EFF) (<https://www.eff.org/issues/know-your-rights>)
- Protest smartphone tips (<https://popularresistance.org/how-to-use-yoursmartphone-in-a-protest/>)
- Tactical Nonviolence: philosophy & methods (Bruce Hartford) (<http://www.crmvet.org/info/nv2.htm>)
- Crowd psychology and safety (<http://www.festivalinsights.com/2015/07/bringing-crowdpsychology-event-safety-management/>)
- Activist's Guide to Basic First Aid (<http://www.urban75.org/mayday/safety.html>)
- Pepper Spray & Tear Gas: Avoiding, Protection, Remedies (<http://www.blackcrosscollective.org/page10.html>)

