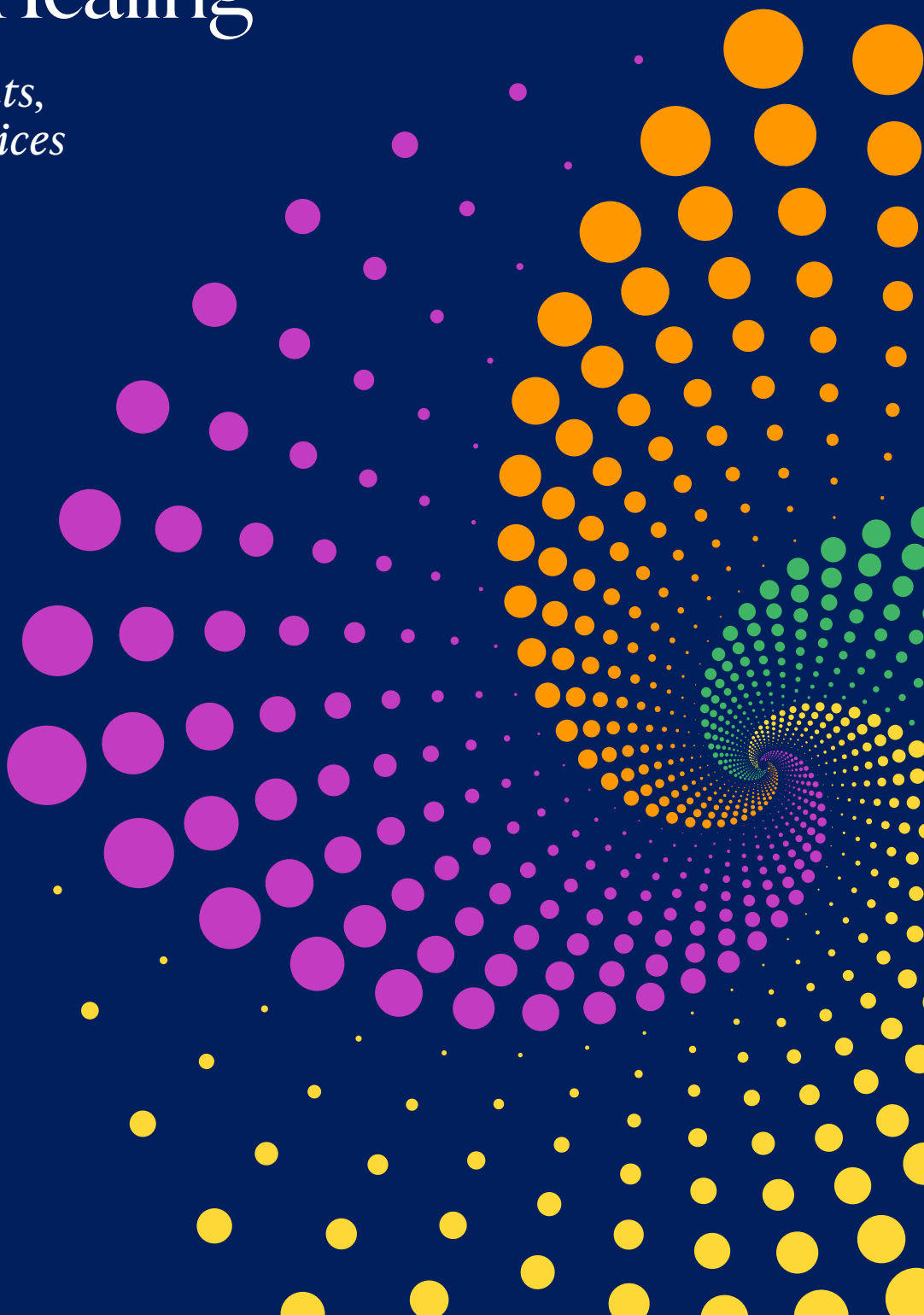
Policy Brief

NCHE

Facilitating Social Transformation Through Self and Collective Healing

A Collection of Insights, Resources, and Practices



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About the Authors

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Colette Rausch is the Co-Executive Director of Think Peace. With 25+ years of experience in conflict zones such as Nepal, Libya, Liberia, Yemen, Colombia, Afghanistan, and Iraq, she is also a Research Professor at George Mason University's Mary Hoch Center for Reconciliation. Colette is a lawyer, international peacebuilder, and Somatic Experiencing Practitioner (SEP), trained in the neurobiology of chronic stress and trauma. She specializes in peer support and training in crisis stabilization and support. During her 18-year tenure at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), she founded the Neuroscience and Peacebuilding Initiative and pioneered the "Justice and Security Dialogue" for police reform in conflict-affected regions. Colette has also held leadership roles in human rights and rule of law with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the U.S. Justice Department, and the Federal Public Defender's Office. She is the author of numerous books and articles on topics ranging from justice, security, and the rule of law to transitional justice, conflict transformation, and neuroscience and peacebuilding.

Laura Webber

Laura Webber (she/her) engages in research and practice at the intersection of trauma healing, embodiment, social neuroscience, social justice, and peacebuilding. She centers a healing-based and whole-being approach as she engages in work toward conflict transformation from the individual to the collective. Laura is particularly passionate about supporting peace practitioners and activists to nurture and build their resilience and sustainability. She currently works with peacebuilding and social change organizations in a variety of capacities including research, program design, and evaluation. Laura holds a Bachelor's degree in International Studies from Vassar College, and a Master's of Arts in Peace and Justice from the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies at the University of San Diego.

Since its inception, the National Collaborative for Health Equity (NCHE) has dedicated its programs and activities to creating health equity in the United States by ending racial and ethnic health inequities. NCHE's leadership, staff, and consultants always recognized that ending racism requires achieving and sustaining meaningful progress toward this goal. Beginning in 2020, NCHE joined over 150 other nonprofit and philanthropic organizations in leveraging the pillars of the Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT) Framework to inform programs, policy research, and action. These five pillars (Narrative Change, Racial Healing and Relationship Building, Separation, Law, and the Economy) offer a comprehensive and holistic conceptual framework for action to end racism and jettison the deeply embedded belief in a false hierarchy of human values.

NCHE's vision is embodied in our name. We work in collaboration with others to help our nation achieve health equity. NCHE's mission is to promote health equity by harnessing data, developing leaders, and catalyzing partnerships across the many sectors that share responsibility for creating a more equitable and just society. As NCHE continues to collaborate with others, we implement three key strategies: (1) Supporting Leaders, (2) Applying Data Research and Information, and (3) Expanding the TRHT Movement. NCHE equips institutions and leaders to work effectively with and within historically marginalized and excluded communities, providing tools to help improve the social, economic, and environmental conditions that shape health. We help organizations and communities to envision and actualize an America that has faced and redressed historic and contemporary effects of racism in all its forms.

I am pleased to present this new collection of briefs offering insights into each TRHT pillar. Leaders, practitioners, and researchers can utilize these resources committed to overcoming the unique racial history and legacy of the United States.

The original organizations that participated in the design phase of TRHT in 2016 were included in a platform created by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, *Connected Communities*. Based on preliminary Connected Communities research, these participating organizations and representatives from over 150 nonprofit entities could reach over 189,000,000 people in the United States. A lot has happened since 2016. The momentum continues to increase for the expansion of local and national efforts to address and heal from the historic and contemporary effects of racism.

While the potential of reaching almost 200 million people has yet to be realized, recent surveys suggest that tens of millions are aware of the effort, and the work continues to expand. As the momentum has increased, resistance and backlash to this progress grows. The resources or tools provided in these briefs can help leaders, practitioners, and researchers maintain momentum in the face of resistance.

There are many consequences of chronic exposure to structural racism and racial discrimination. The most insidious consequences are disease and health inequities. Our failure to effectively address and redress America's legacy of racial hierarchy has economic costs that reach well into trillions of dollars for our society. But it is communities of color that bear the lion's share of the burden of the costs of failing to eliminate racism and its consequences. The courageous and dedicated work of leaders in communities across America provides hope that we will succeed in overcoming racism. We offer these resources as support for these ongoing efforts.

Sincerely,

Gail C. Christopher
Executive Director
National Collaborative for Health Equity

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1.

Introduction

The *Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT) Implementation Guide* offers a holistic approach toward sustainable racial equity that addresses all dimensions of our being, from the intrapersonal to the interpersonal to the systemic. Bridging the head and the heart, the individual and the collective, the TRHT framework invites us into the deep work of transforming deeply held belief systems that shape our communities and institutions—to replace structures and narratives that fuel racism with those that see and celebrate the inherent value of all people. Many of us are called to and engaged in this important transformative work because we acknowledge, feel, and experience the unequally distributed and detrimental impact of racial injustice in our communities and within ourselves. As such, this work is deeply personal at the same time as it is inherently collective.

This document is intended as a practical resource for individual and collective care designed for practitioners and leaders engaged in bringing forth TRHT processes in their communities. The practices included are grounded in stories that represent four contexts of challenge we may encounter in the course of our work: crisis response, burnout, challenging relationships, and complex organizational dynamics. Alongside the stories of Amari, Mona, Lyla, and Ali,[1] we explore the neurophysiological and social mechanisms that both undergird these common challenges and support our healing.

1 The characters and elements of each story represent amalgamations of individuals and contexts encountered in settings of conflict and peacebuilding from around the world.

2.

Guiding Transformation

For the work and practice of healing and transformation to unfold in its fullest expression, it must be holistic, taking place within and between us, as well as in the organizations and systems we navigate every day. Such journeying toward and into the realms of healing, peacebuilding, and truth telling necessarily entails great proximity with pain, wounding, and injustice expressed at each level from the most intimate landscapes of the self to the most expansive geographies of our world. To be sustainable and effective in holding space for individual and collective transformation, it is incumbent for social change practitioners and leaders to nurture deep wells of inner and relational resourcing.

Within each culture and community, there exist many diverse and profound pathways and resources for individual and collective care. And yet, the organizational systems and societal structures we inhabit too often cause us to forget or neglect these resources. It is common practice for practitioners and leaders of healing and transformation to conduct critical analysis of systems of harm and identify pathways to bring forward just social change. These skills can be usefully applied in a way that centers and facilitates the development of support structures for individuals and communities to be well resourced—physically, emotionally, mentally, relationally, spiritually—as they seek transformation within and of these complex systems.

There are many ways to understand, make meaning of, and respond to experiences of stress and wounding at both the individual and collective levels. One of these lenses is that of the nervous system and neurobiology. Understanding what is happening in the human body on a neurophysiological level in response to stress, as well as the body's inherent capacity to repair, provides profound insight into the power and potential of practices of individual and collective care.

Centering the Whole Self

As highly adaptive embodied and social beings, humans have innate impulses toward survival, repair, and connection. These impulses manifest in our physiological systems, our mental and emotional landscapes, and our relationships. In each of these dimensions, our bodies and our beings adapt in response to our experiences and our environments. In this section, we review how our bodies respond to stress, trauma, and burnout, as well as our embodied and relational impulses toward repair and healing.[2]

While this section focuses on the neurobiological and social dimensions of the human experience, it is important to emphasize that how we perceive, put into language, and make meaning of our experiences is within the purview of each person, emergent from our own unique contexts and histories. There are many ways of understanding our lived experiences and their effects on our mind, body, and spirit, as well as our relationships with each other and the world around us. There is long-held knowledge and awareness in diverse lineages of wisdom, practice, and research into the domains of embodiment, somatics, neurobiology and neuroscience, physiology, mental health and psychosocial approaches, and spiritual traditions. Current research in Western sciences and sources of knowledge are finding alignment with what Indigenous cultures have recognized and respected for millennia: the sacred and intrinsic connection between each individual's body, mind, and spirit, as well as with our environments and one another.

Stress

Stress is a fact of life and prompts us to navigate the daily and varied challenges we encounter, ranging from, for example, preparing for a speech to avoiding a car accident. When we encounter internal or external stressors, our bodies mobilize a stress response that includes the release of particular hormones that trigger an array of physiological changes. Among many other responses, we may experience an increased heart rate and blood pressure, changes to our breathing pattern to become shorter and shallower, and an increase in the tension of our muscles.

The stress response is designed to assist us in avoiding and escaping potential threats in our environment. It can thus help us to safely and effectively navigate our daily activities and be beneficial when we need to respond quickly to danger or a challenging situation. A certain amount of stress is an essential part of learning and growth, as it is necessary to expand the edges of our windows of coherence, that is, the range of activation unique to each person in which they can effectively regulate and maintain presence without moving into hyper- or hypo-arousal of the nervous system. Such stress, also known as 'eustress' or 'good stress', provides the energy and impetus for growth and transformation. However, when stress is persistent and prolonged, it can have severe detrimental effects.

2 For purposes of clarity, these topics are covered in what may seem to be a sequential manner, and each may appear as a separate phenomenon. It is important to note, however, that from the perspective of the nervous system and embodied experience, the dynamics described in this section are more layered, nuanced, and integrated, operating not as a continuum but rather as co-existing dimensions of experience.

Chronic Stress

Chronic stress can affect us in many ways, including impacting our physical, cognitive, and emotional health and well-being, as well as our relationships with others. As chronic stress persists, it can lead to "allostatic load," a term for the wear and tear on the body caused by the cumulative effects of prolonged and repeated exposure to stressors. Allostatic load can affect our ability to concentrate, problem solve, and connect with others. It can also affect our physical health in a variety of ways including sleep difficulties, digestive problems, a weakened immune system, and strain on the cardiovascular system. When stress persists over time, so too does the inflammation it elicits in the body, which may lead to the development of chronic disease such as diabetes, heart disease, and auto-immune illnesses.

Burnout

Long-term stress can also lead to burnout, which can result from prolonged periods of intense pressure or stress at work or in other aspects of our lives. Burnout often includes feelings of extreme tiredness, exhaustion, and helplessness. It can also include a feeling of loss of a sense of self and one's own agency, as well as a diminished sense of accomplishment and meaning in work and in life.

Trauma

Trauma can be very generally defined as our bodies' natural response to experiences that were too much, too fast, or too long, and through which we did not have adequate support. What defines trauma is not the originating experience itself, but rather the impact of the experience on the individual. Trauma can develop in response to acute experiences that are perceived as life-threatening. It can also develop as a result of cumulative stress over time. A wide range of experiences may lead to the experience of trauma including birth trauma, physical or emotional abuse and neglect, accidents, medical procedures, and natural disasters. It can also occur as a result of experiences of loss, war, and violence, as well as bullying, discrimination, and oppression.

Physical, mental, emotional, and relational manifestations of trauma can include those of chronic stress discussed above. Further, trauma has a neurobiological impact related to the autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nervous system has two parts—the sympathetic and parasympathetic—that work together to maintain homeostasis (or equilibrium) in our bodies. The sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems are metaphorically like our body's gas and brake pedals, respectively facilitating acceleration and slowing down of the body's systems. Trauma can affect the regulation of the autonomic nervous system, resulting in a sense of being "stuck" in survival mode. When the sympathetic nervous system is pushed to hyper-activation, we can find ourselves in a state of being hypervigilant, constantly alert for threats and having difficulty feeling safe. Alternatively, we may find ourselves stuck in excessive "parasympathetic activation," which may be expressed in feelings of overwhelm, dissociation, and shutdown. Even in this state, there can be a simultaneous and persistent sympathetic activation. Following our metaphor, this is like having both the gas pedal and the brake on at the same time, which wears down the body system and affects our well-being.

While trauma impacts the individual, it is also highly relational, impacting our ability to connect with others. Our nervous systems are in constant communication with one another and the world around us. The levels of nervous system activation and regulation of others can either facilitate or impede our own ability to feel safe in a given relationship. In acknowledgement of the relational dimension of trauma, a fourth response has been added to the commonly known "fight, flight, and freeze" responses the

body mounts in experiences of stress, namely the "appease" response. As a stress response, appeasement can occur particularly in instances of power imbalance when challenging authority could create a threat to one's safety or survival, including physical survival, economic safety, or social position.

Trauma also has collective and structural dimensions. Based on our position within unequal and unjust social structures, we are differently predisposed to experiencing or developing trauma. Further, shared trauma impacts entire communities, reshaping the narratives and relationships that weave our social fabric.

Intergenerational Trauma

Intergenerational trauma refers to the transmission of unresolved trauma across generations through genetic inheritance, social learning, and collective narratives. It has physiological, relational, and collective dimensions, creating and emerging from legacies such as serious abuse and neglect, violent conflict, slavery, and genocide. Physiologically, trauma can create changes in cellular and gene function that get passed down from parent to children, an epigenetic inheritance that can predispose future generations to emotional and physical dis-ease.

Further, as discussed above, trauma has profound emotional and relational effects. Patterns of emotional distancing, defensiveness, or silence around particular experiences can become learned behaviors across generations. Over time, these emotional coping mechanisms can fray and even create rupture in the relational fabric of families and communities. On a societal level, groups develop narratives that emerge from collective trauma and can become formative of their collective identity. This can be seen significantly in legacies of famine, genocide, and slavery.

Repair and Healing

Our bodies have a tremendous capacity to self-regulate, repair, and heal. Our neurophysiological systems are wired to maintain a state of homeostasis, which enables us to return to and maintain balance, facilitating healing and restoration. When our systems are affected by chronic stress and trauma, our bodies respond in the best ways they can to restore and return us back to health. It is this complex and efficient body system that allows us to adapt to and survive in our respective environments and through our varied lived experiences. Without the ability of the body to continually assess, react, and regulate itself, we would not survive.

"Neuroplasticity" is our nervous system's ability to change its activity in response to our experiences. While this can result in change due to chronic stress and trauma, it can also take shape as new neural connections to support and sustain healing through injury, disease, and trauma. Neuroplasticity facilitates the body and spirit to heal, regenerate, and restore. Our health and well-being are not fixed or predetermined by our lived or inherited experiences. We hold within and between us the capacity to remap our nervous systems, even at the cellular level, enabling us to source and cultivate greater resilience and creativity in response to the inevitable challenges we face in our lives.

Healing is a deeply relational process. We heal by (re)connecting with ourselves, with others, and with the world around us. An element of the healing journey that can be particularly transformative is a relationship of safety and trust with another person. On a neurophysiological level, through the coregulation of nervous systems, the presence of a safe person who is regulated within their own nervous system can provide a relational "container" in which it becomes possible to access a space of regulation and grounding. It is from this space of settledness

within the nervous system that the deeper work of healing and repair can unfold. On a social and relational level, to be seen, heard, witnessed, and celebrated in our healing is essential to both facilitate and sustain this transformation.

There are also deeply collective dimensions of healing. Communities carry hurt and trauma, and it is incumbent on communities to engage in the deep work of healing and transformation to shift away from patterns of hurt and harm and toward collective compassion and supportive relationships. Many communities hold generational practices of healing that may involve ritual, ceremony, movement, circle processes, and storytelling. The continued presence of these practices across centuries and millennia indicates their potency as resources for collective resistance and transformation.

At the same time as trauma can be passed down from one generation to the next, so too can resilience, healing, and growth. The challenging or traumatic experiences we encounter or inherit can become catalysts for profound transformation, prompting healing and growth through our own wounding and that of the generations that preceded us. As we navigate these healing journeys, we may (re)gain a greater sense of empowerment and agency in our own lives and develop greater flexibility in our navigation of the complexity of being human. The continued presence of communities that have for too long been marginalized, oppressed, submitted to attempted eradication, or subjected to repeated cycles of violence evidences the power of generational healing and resistance.

3.

On Practice

The sections below introduce a variety of resources intended to offer support to individuals and groups across four themes. The themes identify key areas of challenge that practitioners and leaders often encounter in our work to support healing and transformation, namely:

- Crisis response and stabilization
- Sustainability through the long haul
- Complex relationships, and
- Organizational dynamics.[3]

Each theme is explored through a short story, a description of relational and neurobiological dynamics present in the story, practices accompanied by an explanation of their rationale, and selected resources for further exploration.

The practices included in each section are offered as invitations intended to support grounding, regulation, orienting, and discernment, as these are fundamental capacities in the work of healing and transformation. Strengthening these capacities can be particularly helpful to facilitate the skillful navigation of our inevitable encounters with stress and conflict in our work and in our lives, whereby conflict can be embraced as an opportunity for transformation. To this end, these and other related practices can help expand our individual and collective capacity to hold the complexity inherent to our work as practitioners and leaders of social change. You are encouraged to explore the practices in a way that feels supportive for you, using only what is helpful for you and your unique context.

3 The themes have been sequenced with an attention to scaffolding context and practices, and their order is not intended to suggest linearity or progression. The dynamics of each theme coexist in a constant interplay with the dynamics of each of the other themes.

Crisis and Stabilization

Amari had experienced a crisis. While engaged in a peaceful protest to bring attention to the need for changes in the criminal justice system in his country, he was hit by a tear gas cannister that had been used by the police. It was sudden and he had not seen it coming, nor did he realize at the time what was happening to him. It felt to Amari that time had been suspended and slowed down. It seemed as if his mind and body were not connected or working in sync. He could hear fragments of voices around him. He noticed blood on his fingers after he touched his head, but he didn't understand where it came from. Amiri felt numb and as if somehow he wasn't actually in his body.

It wasn't until many hours later, when Amari was in the hospital and his friends relayed the sequence of events, that he began to grasp what had happened. Amari had memory gaps of the time just before and after he was hit. It was as if someone pushed control-alt-delete in his brain and the memories no longer existed. He could only rely on what his friends told him.

What he did remember, although the memory was steeped in feeling and was more of a felt sense than an objective factual memory, was that he felt protected and safe. He remembered the face of one of the street medics who came to his aid. And he felt the presence of friends who had formed a circle around him, held his hand, and told him, "We've got you Amari," while an ambulance was called. And while it took time for the injury to heal and the physical scar remains, he found that the "stickiness" and impact of what he had experienced had faded.

Somatic and Relational Dynamics

Engaging in mobilizations, such as protests, sit-ins, or other frontline activist activities that have the intention to disrupt dynamics, systems, and patterns of power and violence holds risks for activists involved. Confronting systems of power often leads to confrontations among groups, and the presence of police or counter-mobilizations, in particular, can result in escalations of violence.

Innumerable variables influence how an individual will react in a crisis, whether that person is immediately impacted by injury or near others who are threatened or injured. At the level of the nervous system, when our physical or emotional safety is threatened or violated, our sympathetic nervous system activate. Heart rate increases. Breath becomes short and shallow. Eyes dilate (enabling sharp, focused vision). The digestive system slows or stops. Fast reacting muscles prepare to engage. Thinking becomes very binary. All these mechanisms and more are set in motion to enable us to escape the threat.

If we are physically unable to avoid threat, our bodies mount a 'freeze' response, which is often accompanied by an experience of dissociation—a separation between mind and body, between conscious awareness and the present moment. It is common to experience lapses of memory, and for memories of the stressful experience to be limited to embodied, felt-sense memories that do not follow a linear timeline or coherent narrative. This is because in experiences of extreme stress, the language processing areas of the brain go 'offline,' such that it becomes extremely challenging to attach words to the experience. This dynamic of wordlessness impairs the ability of our memories of the originating stressor to follow a sequential narrative arc.[4]

4 Though therapeutic approaches and practices vary vastly, a common part of the journey of healing through trauma is to access language, create narrative, and make meaning of the harmful or stressful experience.

Persistent patterns of stress are not determined by the originating event or events. Instead, they develop through the constellation of many factors that influence our relationship to and how meaning is made of the stressful events or experiences we encounter. There are factors that predispose individuals to develop persistent patterns of stress, as well as buffering factors that promote integration and resilience through these experiences. The presence of safe and supportive relationships, connection, and support is extremely powerful in this regard. Whereas trauma can be understood as an experience of disconnection, healing is a journey of (re) connection in which healthy and safe relational connection is an integral component.

Individual Practices

In instances of crisis and intense pressure, our nervous systems mount a physiological response to help us escape perceived threats and find safety. Once we've escaped the immediate threat, it is important to cultivate the capacity to notice the sensations we are experiencing, to connect with the support of the ground beneath us, and orient to the present moment and our surroundings. From this space of centering, it becomes possible to reconnect and re-engage with our environments as well as the people we may be with. Below are two variations of somatic centering and orienting practices, which are powerful means to cultivate this capacity. These practices can be useful beyond moments of crisis to help access a sense of presence, regardless of our circumstances.

- **Street Somatics Centering Practice** with prentis hemphill
- **Somatic Experiencing SCOPE Crisis Stabilization and Safety Aid**

Collective Practices

As we navigate the immediate aftermath of exposure to crisis or potentially traumatic events, it is important to be heard, seen, and supported in processing our experience. Peer support reciprocally extended through active listening, reflection, and the sharing of simple somatic practices can be transformative in this regard. This can take place in a one-to-one format or through facilitated circles. In such relational containers where we experience a sense of safety and trust, our nervous systems coregulate with one another, supporting connection to ourselves and in relationship to others. Further, peer support can encourage collective meaning-making toward a narrative of the crisis experience that nurtures and amplifies resiliency and growth.

For Further Exploration

READINGS

- **Peer Support Core Values and Leadership**
- "**The Neurophysiology of Individual and Collective Trauma**" by Abi Blakeslee & Glyndie Nickerson
- "**The Benefits of Social Support in Alleviating Traumatic Experience**" by Onah Caleb

Sustainability for Practitioners through the Long Haul

Mona had been a dedicated and passionate activist and community leader since she was in her teens. Her country had experienced civil unrest in the past, and there were still rigid divisions in the populace in terms of access to equitable health care, education, and financial advancement. From the moment she understood the concept of justice, Mona was motivated to make a positive difference in the world, so she dedicated her time to various movements aimed at improving human rights.

Initially, she was brimming with determination and excitement, tirelessly organizing demonstrations, talking at conferences, and raising awareness about issues that mattered to her. However, after some time, she began to experience burnout—a physical, mental, and emotional fatigue from extended pressure and hard work. Mona noticed her sleep was being disturbed, she was quickly becoming irritable and frustrated, and it was getting more difficult for her to stay focused. Furthermore, her passion for human rights seemed to be weakening, replaced by a sense of despondency and disappointment.

Mona realized that she needed a break to better understand what she was experiencing and navigate a way forward to address this burnout, but she felt bad about stopping her activism. She also worried that if she paused, the topics she cared about would be overlooked and disregarded, and that people's perception of her might suffer. Ultimately, though, as her exhaustion worsened, Mona acknowledged that she couldn't carry on working as she had been.

Somatic and Relational Dynamics

Many of us drawn to social purpose, social justice, and social change work are driven by a sense of the "fierce urgency of now." The volume and severity of inherited and contemporary injustices, forms of violence, and crises facing individuals, communities, and countries around the world motivate a determined and fast-paced response. Additionally, it is common for people involved in activism to place an immense burden and responsibility upon ourselves to bring forward the change we feel is needed in the world. This leads to patterns of overwork and constant pressure to effect and enact change, a pace of and relationship to work that is unsustainable in the long-term.

The World Health Organization describes burnout as "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed." It is critical to acknowledge that burnout is not an individualized challenge, as organizational practices and systemic cultures contribute significantly to the burnout that manifests within individuals.

The experience of burnout is unique to each person. According to research conducted by Yu Tse Heng and Kira Schabram, burnout "can present as any combination of three distinct symptoms: exhaustion (a depletion of mental or physical resources), cynical detachment (a depletion of social connectedness), and a reduced sense of efficacy (a depletion of value for oneself)."[5]

The persistent physical, emotional, and mental stress that contributes to and accompanies the experience of burnout takes a severe toll. Our bodies are uniquely skilled and adept at adapting to a range of demands, but this adaptation comes at a cost. Over time, the effects of chronic stress may accumulate and manifest in challenges to physical and mental health.

It is essential that we as practitioners and leaders of healing and transformation take time to pause, rest, and restore so that we can remain engaged

5 Yu Tse Heng and Kira Schabram, "Your Burnout is Unique. Your Recovery Will Be, Too." *Harvard Business Review*, April 12, 2021. https://hbr.org/2021/04/your-burnout-is-unique-your-recovery-will-be-too

in building more just and peaceful futures over the long term. Too often, these moments of pause become imposed when we are no longer able to continue our work. There is great power in taking preventative steps to enable sustained engagement over time.

There are many practical ways this can be approached. For example, it can be practicing healthy boundaries, developing balanced rhythms of work, or cultivating strong and supportive personal and professional relationships. In addition to such practical actions, it is also helpful to attend to the expectations we place on ourselves so as to nurture a balanced relationship with our work and a realistic understanding of our sphere of influence.

Many, if not most, of the challenges we seek to transform in the work of justice and peace will not be transformed in one lifetime. John Paul Lederach has suggested that it takes as long to transform systems of violence as it has taken for these systems to form into their current expression. This is not intended to discourage, but rather to encourage each of us to right-size our relationship to and expectations for the change we can reasonably enact in the course of our own lives.

In addition to managing our expectations of the change we can affect over time, it is important to acknowledge the reach of our respective spheres of influence across space. Each of us is uniquely situated in a web of relationships and holds a particular constellation of skills and capacities that enables us to impact transformation in a particular way. For some people, this may be in policy and advocacy, for others it may be with grassroots communities, and for still others it may be as responders on the front edges of conflict.[6] It is helpful for change-makers and leaders to understand how we are uniquely situated in the social change ecosystem in order to be clear about how we can best contribute to social transformation, and subsequently what we can reasonably accomplish within our sphere of influence.

In the co-creation of more just and peaceful futures, of a world characterized by dignity and belonging for all, it is imperative that the means through which these futures are built align with the vision they hold for humanity and the world. We have the opportunity to embody the future now, to lead our lives as though the world we are building is already here, because it is.

Individual Practices

To sustain engagement in social change efforts over the long-term, it is essential to regularly engage in practices that support restoration and replenishment of the body, mind, and spirit. There are myriad possibilities of such practices, which may include, as examples, spending time in natural spaces, enjoying nourishing meals, being held in supportive community, and engaging in whole-body awareness practices. Regardless of the form and context, restorative practices are essential to provide our bodies and our beings the space to process the range of emotions and experiences we encounter in our personal and professional lives.

It is important that, in the right time, context, and container, accumulated emotions such as sadness, grief, and anger be given voice and space to be felt and transformed. Restorative practices therefore enable us not only to access a sense of regulation for the nervous system but also to cultivate the ability to be with, and not avoid, discomfort. The journey to be able to notice and be with the wide range of sensations, emotions, and experiences we hold within us can be long and slow. This pace is determined by the wisdom of our bodies and what we can tolerate and transform in any given moment based on our previous and current life circumstances. The invitation is thus to approach restorative practices with compassion for ourselves and respect for the time we need to settle and find a sense of restfulness within.

6 See Deepa Iyer's wonderful work for more on the various roles necessary in the ecosystem of social change.

Below are two examples of guided somatic practices to support a return to the body and the present moment. Please note, these are just two of many that exist. These practices will resonate differently for each person. They are intended as a starting point, from which you can explore other modalities and approaches.

- **How to Practice Walking Meditation** with Leslie Booker
- **Somatic Resourcing Strategies** with Sarah Schlote

Collective Practices

Whereas a sustained state of stress can lead us to disconnect and isolate ourselves from others, regularly accessing caring community spaces that nurture connection and relationship can be very powerful to mitigate the impacts of stress and support our well-being. Being present in such spaces and community can also be a source of loving reminder, encouraging us to attend to ourselves and our relationships even as we continue to seek and lead transformation in the world. Community care spaces can take many forms, from facilitated circles or hobby or activity groups to communities of practice.

For Further Exploration

READINGS

- "**The Radical Work of Healing: Fania and Angela Davis on a New Kind of Civil Rights Activism**" by Sarah Van Gelder
- "**The Neuroscience of Resilience**" by Richard G. Hunter, Jason D. Gray, and Bruce S. McEwen

LISTENINGS

- "**Entering the Healing Dimension**" with Gail Christopher, Think Peace Podcast
- "**Community Care**" with Prentis Hemphill & Francisca Porchas Coronado, CTZN Podcast
- "**Self-Care for Change Agents and Activists**" with Dr. Thema, The Homecoming Podcast

Relationships

After eight years of armed conflict between the state and a rebel group, a peace agreement has been signed which was designed to bring the civil war to an end. Violence between the state and rebels has ended. However, nearly a decade of active conflict has left a vacuum in justice, security, and rule of law, one that is being filled by criminal organizations. These groups are engaging in kidnapping, ransoming, and human trafficking, specifically targeting women and children. In addition to these dynamics, just before the signing of the peace agreement, state security forces killed six protestors and injured many more after protestors took to the streets demanding a reinstatement of the civil liberties that had been rescinded by the president and a halt to the increasing clamp-down on journalists and civil society organizations.

In this context, representatives of the state security forces, human rights defenders, and members of civil society organizations have agreed to meet to discuss the urgent need to strengthen justice, security, and the rule of law in their country.

As the dialogue began, the tension in the room was palpable. Years of violence, mistrust, fear, and anger had worn the fabric of society very thin, and the fraying of relationships was evident in this dialogue. Ali, the facilitator, sought to focus the discussion on exploring a way forward for the country. However, each time he invited the participants to identify concrete steps to strengthen justice and security, the discussion would revert to the past as stories and grievances filled the room. Voices grew louder and body postures tightened as the emotional temperature in the room rose. Eventually, the escalation became untenable. The dialogue broke down and had to be ended for the day.

Somatic and Relational Dynamics

Into every encounter, we inevitably carry with us not only what is alive in the present moment, but also the echoes of all we have experienced in our lives and inherited from previous generations. In contexts where legacies of conflict and violence are particularly raw, these echoes may reverberate loudly, shaping how we show up and engage both individually and collectively.

Social conflict emerges from and can perpetuate polarization and division at every level of society, from interpersonal relationships to the highest echelons of political power. In this process of polarization, certain aspects of our social identities—those implicated in the conflict dynamic—harden and reify. Us-them binaries grow stronger as in-group identities (who 'we' are) take shape in opposition to out-groups (who 'they' are). Fracture lines can deepen and widen between these salient identity positions, which may include race, class, religion, political party, and other expressions of identity. The binaries that come to shape society—us vs. them, right vs. wrong—are mirrored at the intra-personal, neurobiological level, as fear-based narratives of the 'other' reshape safety and threat perception in the nervous system. People deemed as 'other' or 'enemy' come to be perceived as threats to our survival, which can lead our bodies to mount a stress and fear response in an encounter with someone from a different side of the conflict. Beyond direct encounter, even exposure to the narratives that drive the 'other side' in a conflict dynamic can come to be processed in our bodies as a threat. For example, one may come to find it difficult or even intolerable to watch or listen to information conveyed by a news source affiliated with a political party different from one's own.

Active or direct expressions of conflict, whether in the form of armed conflict or even peaceful mobilization, arise from and make more visible dynamics and experiences of structural inequality and injustice. In these conditions, certain groups within society are denied access to resources, opportunities, and in some cases even the meeting of their basic needs. The pace of change in the structures and narratives that drive power over dynamics is slow, and the application of basic rights to many groups is equally slow, often moving at a generational pace. In efforts to push forward this transformation, the simultaneous momentum and inertia of these drivers of conflict are strong. The momentum of polarizing and divisive narratives that move quickly and pervasively within and between us is strong, and so is the inertia of structures resisting change.

In journeys of reconciliation and conflict transformation, the complexity and power of these conflict dynamics saturate our efforts and encounters. With this acknowledgement, it can be very helpful to understand what is happening within and between us at a physiological level. From this space of awareness and through the cultivation of individual and collective practices that center repair and (re)connection, it becomes possible to navigate challenging spaces and conversations with greater skill, resource, and compassion. In developing relationships with people whose views and values differ from our own, the hope is that we are able to develop sufficient safety and trust in one another, that our relationships are robust enough to hold difference at the same time as we affirm our connection in humanity.

Individual Practices

We each inhabit challenging relationships, those with a history of perceived and real experiences of injustice or harm. As we navigate these relationships, we consciously and unconsciously behave in a way to ensure our physical, emotional, and psychological safety. This may mean keeping distance from and a firm boundary between ourselves and a given individual or group, which may be appropriate and even necessary to support our physical and psychological safety. Yet circumstances may make it such that we have no choice but to be in more active relationship with challenging individuals, for example in work or community life.

One way to soften the edges of these challenging relationships is through practices of compassion. These practices, such as loving kindness meditations, involve extending compassion to yourself, to your loved ones, and to the people with whom you find it difficult to experience compassion, remembering that we all suffer differently and that we are connected in our suffering. While they may be involved in journeys of forgiveness, reconciliation, and transformation of harm, compassion practices can help individuals experience greater ease and more empowerment in relationships of harm. Importantly, these practices do not excuse any harm, violence, or injustice that has been committed by an individual or group. Rather, in full acknowledgement of that which we have endured, these practices uplift the ability we hold within us to choose how we are in relationship with a harmful experience and the individuals involved so as to bolster our own sense of power and agency.

To support our navigation of such complex relationships, it is helpful to access a sense of grounding and regulation within ourselves before and as we enter into conversation or shared space with a challenging individual or group. Practices that help us find and connect with a space of resourcing within can be very supportive in this capacity, enabling us to approach challenging conversations with a greater sense of ease.

- **Loving Kindness Metta Meditation**
  with Sharon Salzberg
- **Exercises in Support of Dialogue: Orienting & Connecting**
  with Colette Rausch & Laura Webber

Collective Practices

For conversations across difference to be effective and transformative, it is important to first establish a safer space whereby people from different social positions and lived experiences can come together in compassionate engagement. Through practices that nurture trust and relationship building through self- and co-regulation, active listening, and perspective-taking, we cultivate the capacity to be with and witness one another as part of a larger whole. This entails a recognition that difference and division are not mutually bound, but rather that we can honor and celebrate our differences while affirming our connection in shared humanity. From this space of acknowledgement, it becomes possible to engage in difficult conversations in ways that can deepen and transform perspectives and relationships. Rx Racial Healing circles are an example of such a process, providing a powerful framework through which to do this critical and transformative work.

For Further Exploration

READINGS

- "**The Neuroscience of Intergroup Relations: An Integrative Review**" by Mina Cikara and Jay J. Van Bavel
- "**Preference for Hierarchy Is Associated With Reduced Empathy and Increased Counter-Empathy Towards Others, Especially Out-Group Targets**," by Sa-kiera T. J. Hudson, Mina Cikara, and Jim Sidanius
- **The SCARF Model for Psychological Safety in Groups** by Maxwell J. Smith

VIEWINGS

- "**Unraveling Bias in the Brain**" by Emily Falk & Emile Bruneau
- "**Rx Racial Healing**" by Gail Christopher

LISTENINGS

- "**Deciphering the Political Brain**" with Liya Yu, Think Peace Podcast

Organizational Dynamics

Lyla, an emerging nonprofit leader, felt a sense of purpose and a call to action when they joined an organization focused on social transformation and conflict resolution. It was a place of deep contemplation and groundbreaking initiatives for shifting systemic injustices and creating paths to justice and equality and resolving societal strife. Lyla believed the work the organization was doing would make a significant difference in people's lives, and they were motivated to be a part of that change.

Unfortunately, it became apparent that the organization was heavily influenced by bureaucracy and departmental isolation and silos that impaired cooperation, dialogue, and productivity. Regulations and practices were often rigidly imposed without clear communication about the rationale and process. On top of this, decision-makers appeared to value superficial data points over understanding real-world problems and listening to diverse voices in their mission to effect change.

For Lyla, it felt like the organization was mirroring the very systems of exclusion it sought to change. They felt a sense of betrayal, exhaustion, and disempowerment from within the very organization that promised to make a positive difference in the world. Internal conflict and animosity and disagreements permeated staff meetings and discussions designed to create a strategic plan for the organization. The demands of navigating the organization's hierarchical and inward-focused system created a deep apprehensiveness for Lyla, and the inefficiencies of the organization often seemed more like a burden than an opportunity.

Somatic and Relational Dynamics

A frequent pattern in social purpose organizations is the replication internally of the very dynamics in the world they are seeking to transform—a pattern that, among nonprofits specifically, David Allyn has termed 'mission mirroring.'[7] In fact, often an organization's stated mission points to the precise area of challenge or dysfunction it faces internally. For example, social justice organizations may be mired by harmful power dynamics, peacebuilding organizations may be rife with conflict, reconciliation organizations may be characterized by siloing across departments or programs, and human rights organizations may foster a rigid and strenuous culture of work that impairs employee well-being.

This pattern may manifest in organizational culture, policies, and practices that create stress or even harm for individuals working within these systems. While the nature of social purpose work inherently involves proximity to suffering, injustice, and different expressions of violence, people often report that the predominant source of stress that contributes to burnout is that which they experience navigating the dynamics internal to their organizations.

In addition to the burden of occupational stress, a profound source of psychological and emotional dis-ease we may experience is a sense of betrayal or burden emergent from the discrepancy between our organization's external mission and internal functioning. Further, the line between an organization's internal system and external engagements is not impermeable, as the patterns of relationship and practice internal to an organization may be replicated in its relationships with partner organizations and entities.

7 David Allyn, "Mission Mirroring: Understanding Conflict in Nonprofit Organizations," Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly 40(4).

As individuals that inhabit such systems, it is important we actively reflect on how we choose to engage, or not, in this misalignment. This may include actively working to transform organizational culture and processes from within, disengaging from organizational change efforts and focusing purely on our role, or possibly leaving an organization entirely.

It is vital that organizations seeking to build a world of greater equity and justice reckon with the ways in which their internal dynamics and external practice may be out of alignment with their guiding visions and missions. Herein lies a brilliant opportunity for our organizations to embody the very change they seek to bring forward in the world.

Individual Practices

To sustainably navigate organizational systems characterized by a misalignment between values, vision, and action, it can be supportive for individuals to cultivate a practice of discernment regarding their sphere of influence within their organization and in the communities they are alongside. This discernment may include questions such as: Given where you sit within your organization, how are you positioned to effect meaningful change? What transformation is your responsibility and within your capacity to engage? What is beyond your sphere of influence? For dimensions of change we are not able to impact, it can be helpful to engage practices that uplift our agency to choose not to engage in spaces or ways that will be ineffective, or that may potentially cause us suffering. This entails a letting go of that which we cannot change, at the same time as we affirm our agency to make change in the ways we can.

- **Holding On, Letting Go** with Ruth King
- **Guided Letting Go Practice** with Jason Bond

Collective Practices

Whereas organizational mis-alignment can have detrimental impacts on individuals and communities, it is also true that when these discrepancies are recognized and actively engaged with, these very spaces of challenge can become opportunities for transformation. Organizations can create spaces of reflective practice that build community and connection and that support collaborative efforts toward the alignment of vision, values, and action. These reflective spaces may be most effective when guided through an established dialogue structure or held by an external facilitator. It is important to acknowledge that change unfolds slowly and is an ongoing process that organizations will grapple with for the duration of their existence.

For Further Exploration

READINGS

- "**Integrating Individual and Organizational Well-Being**" by Alana Cookman and Gayle Karen Young Whyte
- "**Equity and Inclusion: The Roots of Organizational Well-Being**" by Mary-Frances Winters

VIEWINGS

- "**Changing the Way We Change the World**" with Organization Unbound

Additional Resources to Explore

- **Anchored: How to Befriend Your Nervous System Using Polyvagal Theory** by Deb Dana
- **Body Sense: The Science and Practice of Embodied Self-Awareness** by Alan Fogel
- **The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing, and Social Justice** by Staci K. Haines
- **Diverse Bodies, Diverse Practices: Toward an Inclusive Somatics** edited by Don Hanlon Johnson
- **The Mind-Body Stress Reset: Somatic Practices to Reduce Overwhelm and Increase Well-Being** by Rebekkah LaDyne
- **Decolonizing Trauma Work: Indigenous Stories and Strategies** by Renee Linklater
- **My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies** by Resmaa Menakem
- **NeuroPeace** (series) edited by Colette Rausch
- **Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers** by Robert M. Sapolsky
- **The Practice of Embodying Emotions: A Guide for Improving Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioral Outcomes** by Raja Selvman
- **The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma** by Bessel van der Kolk

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