

Implementing Safer Spaces – Ideas for how to put words into action

Ideas and thoughts from somebody involved in conceiving and implementing a Safer Spaces Agreement at 'The Outdoor Skillshare 2011' an open event organised by Coal Action Scotland

Many radical groups choose to have a 'safer spaces agreement' at their meetings and events. A safer spaces agreement is a set of guidelines that draw attention to oppressive types of behaviour that are not tolerated in the space created by that group. Typically, it is expected that anyone taking part in that event/meeting or action is agreeing to the safer spaces agreement through their participation. Below is an example of a safer spaces agreement:

A Safer Spaces Agreement (put together by Coal Action Scotland)

At the Outdoor Skillshare we want to cultivate an atmosphere of open expression and active participation. To this end, we have a safer spaces agreement that, through your participation in this event, you agree to respect and uphold.

What is a safer space for..?

It's crucial that we do not recreate structures in our groups that silence people who are already silenced in society. We recognise that oppression can happen at a political, social or personal level and typically occurs on the basis of ethnicity, class, gender, gender identity, gender presentation, sexuality, age, income, ability, appearance, immigration, activist experience, and other forms of difference and inequality. A safer spaces agreement aims to create a space free from the experience of marginalisation and inequality that many people regularly face.

What does a safer space mean..?

A safer space is a dream and a vision of a better society, of what it could be like to feel supported, to feel autonomous, and most of all to feel safer. If we want to create a radical community then we have to question our learned behaviours and challenge others and ourselves. We need to work towards acting in ways that are respectful, & build communities of trust & support.

How can we create a safer space..?

Zero tolerance for..

- Any behaviour (including body language and verbal language) that demeans, marginalises,

dominates, or perpetuates hierarchies. This includes; Abusive, threatening or violent behaviour, Homophobia, Transphobia, Ableism, Racism, Sexism, or Classism.

An awareness that..

- Feeling confidence in a skill is a privilege, so make space for others to learn what you already know, and share your knowledge with others in a way that is empowering.
- Everyone has an equal right to be heard & an equal responsibility to listen.
are a range of different identities (gender, race, class) that people may identify as, so avoid making sweeping generalisations or assumptions about people.
- Anyone could be a survivor of a particular form of oppression, so treat others with care and consideration.

Identify..

- Your own privilege(s) and actively challenge them.

It is everyone's responsibility to challenge prejudice & oppression. This list is not exhaustive and it is up to all of us to help create a space where everyone feels safe and included. For more information on safer spaces you can visit the tranquillity space – we have zines!

Anyone who breaks the safer spaces agreement will by their behaviour exclude themselves from The Outdoor Skillshare.

How is a safer spaces agreement upheld and implemented?

While creating and prominently displaying a safer spaces agreement at an event or meeting seems fairly straight forward, what do we do when somebody breaks the agreement? This is a question that many people participating in radical events/spaces find difficult to answer. On the one hand we should **all** be taking active responsibility for challenging oppressive behaviour, but on the other hand, sometimes generalised responsibility can mean that nobody takes it upon themselves to address a potentially serious situation.

Tranquillity Teams and Tranquillity Spaces

In order to address this, some groups create a working group of people

specifically responsible for making sure that the safer spaces agreement is adhered to. This working group has sometimes been called a “Tranquillity Team.” In addition to this they might also set up a “Tranquillity Space” - a quiet, private and safe space within the camp/event for the Tranquillity Team to meet and deal with conflict situations, and which can be used as a point of access for people seeking support and advice. There is no blueprint for how to create a “Tranquillity Team” or what their responsibilities might include and this probably depends on the specific needs of the situation as determined by the people involved and the type of event. Below is an example of the remit that the Tranquillity Team at the Outdoor Skillshare event came up with for themselves:

Tranquillity Team Responsibilities (put together by Coal Action Scotland)

The Tranquillity team..

- Will act as the access point for sharing information about conflict situations.
- Will attempt to mediate personal tensions if they develop between people at the camp if they are asked to by one or both parties.
- Will communicate with people who are acting in a way contrary to the Safer Spaces Agreement
- Is responsible for planning and setting up the tranquillity space at the event.
- Will take responsibility for making sure that the safer space agreement is displayed and accessible to read around the site.
- Will organise and facilitate a workshop during the event which explores safer spaces agreements and their implementation.
- Will co-ordinate a tranquillity team rota and be responsible for ensuring that shifts are always covered.
- Will facilitate communication between rota shift hand-overs, so that information is shared effectively.
- Will come up with guidelines for dealing with difficult situations.
- Will meet as a working group during the event in the case of an extreme situation and, if appropriate, call whole camp meetings so as to involve everyone in the process.
- Will aim to support people and mediate conflict to the best of our responsibilities, but will also commit to looking out for our own physical and emotional safety and the recognise the limits of the help we are able to give.

In addition to this we would like to stress the responsibility of **all** participants in the event:

- To take collective responsibility for making sure that the safer spaces agreement is respected by everyone involved in the event.
- To include the safer spaces agreement in some form at the welcome desk and/or as part of general info materials.
- To call out behaviour that is contrary to the ethos of the safer spaces agreement.
- To volunteer for tranquillity rota shifts and to make sure it doesn't get overlooked (particularly in the evenings)
- To verbally and (if necessary) physically support the tranquillity working group during the event, by helping to implement decisions made by the working group, particularly in regard to extreme situations such as someone being removed from the event.

Guidelines for people in the Tranquillity Team

It can be important to sit down as a Tranquillity Team or working group and discuss how you might react to different potentially extremely sensitive, situations both individually and as a working group. You might find it helpful to talk about the kinds of skills that are needed to help someone who comes to you looking for support, what methods of conflict resolution you think work well, and how to practically deal with someone who has broken the safer spaces agreement. In the run-up to the Outdoor Skillshare event, those of us in the tranquillity working group sat down and talked over these issues over the course of several meetings. It took a long time and many tricky discussions to come up with the following guidelines/protocol for ourselves:

What do I do if the safer spaces agreement (SSA) is broken?

If the SSA is broken, perhaps the most important thing to do is to support the person(s) who has been attacked/effected. Depending on the situation support from us might take the form of..

- **Simply offering emotional support, kindness, being someone to talk to.**
- Supporting the effected person if they decide they want to talk to the person they feel broke the SSA directly, but with no intermediaries.
- **Being physically present as an intermediary, if the effected person wants to talk to the person they feel broke the SSA with a member of tranquillity team there.**

- Facilitating communication between people, when one (or more) of the people involved don't want to communicate face-to-face. In this scenario Tranquillity team could act as messengers as long as there was clarity over this role (i.e. not having any personal input).
- **Facilitated conflict resolution - If someone involved in a conflict wants an outside facilitator to engage in a mediation process, members of the Tranquillity team who feel able to do this can.**

What do I do in really serious situations?

In a scenario where the SSA has been seriously violated, the first step is to communicate what has happened to as many as possible (but at least 3 members of the tranquillity team) and decide what to do based on the effected person's needs. We decided that in the case of a serious situation, there should be a quorum of at least 3 people for the Tranquillity collective to make decisions. If the situation is one in which the effected person decides that they want to **contact the authorities**, or one in which someone who has violated the SSA needs to be **removed from the event**, then a general event organising collective meeting should be called. In this meeting, those who might also be involved by the decisions (e.g. police liaison – the person chosen to talk with the police) can be informed, and the event organising collective can be asked to give physical and emotional support to back the decisions made by the tranquillity team.

If someone is subjected to a serious breaking of the SSA (such as physical abuse) and wants the person/people to be removed from site.. We want to avoid the victimisation of people who 'call-out' oppressive behaviour. Tranquillity can ask the person effected if other people witnessed the event and talk to them about the incident. However, this will not be a determining factor as to whether an accusation is 'believed' or not. If someone is accused of breaking the SSA, the first step will be for the Tranquillity collective to approach the person and talk to them/establish their perspective on the situation. It will be the Tranquillity group's call, based on the effected person's needs, whether to remove someone.

Unfortunately we might be confronted by situations when removing someone is the only option. If the decision is taken by tranquillity (minimum of three people) to remove someone from the event, than the first step (having already spoken with the event organising collective) is to communicate this to the person who broke the SSA. It is recommended that no more than 2 members of Tranquillity team approach someone who is to be removed from site, to avoid potentially escalating the situation. It should be communicated to them that they have to leave and the reasons why should be explained.

Removing someone from the event might involve..

- Helping someone to leave e.g. offer a lift to the train/bus station (if feasible/not dangerous etc). Get them the bus timetable.
- Getting physical back-up from the event organising collective, if there is resistance to leaving from the person involved. Ideally the group implementing the person's removal from the event would discuss a plan of action beforehand. Approaches could involve many tactics, for example: trying verbal persuasion first, through standing in a line to block their access to the site, through to physically removing them as a last resort.

The tranquillity team may decide to call a general site meeting to share the necessary factual information (for example someone has been removed from site) so that everyone is kept informed.

If someone is subjected to a serious breaking of the SSA (such as physical abuse) and wants to involve the police..

The Tranquillity team will facilitate this decision as far as possible, believing that the most important aim is to fully support the person who has experienced oppression, whilst respecting and accommodating the fact that many people attending the event are likely to have had traumatic interactions with the police.

After communicating with the rest of tranquillity team and the wider event organising group, a general site-wide meeting should be called to share the necessary factual information (for example the police have been contacted), so that everyone understands the situation and has a space for discussion. However, this meeting is not a place to overturn decisions made by the effected person – for example it is not a place to decide to un-involve the police. The Tranquillity team will keep everyone at the event informed as far as possible on the developments of the situation, but we will have a general 'no names mentioned' policy. Tranquillity will be explicit that they do not represent any other people or their feelings. At this time, ideally the tranquillity team would organise a 'safe space' for those who do not wish to be at the event when police are on site, as well as giving people enough time to go elsewhere if they want.

Follow-up Stuff

Ongoing support for the person who experienced a violation of the SSA is very important. Following a situation, we might be able to arrange for someone to leave the event if they wanted to, stay elsewhere (with/without other people) or something else, depending on what they want. We lack the capacity, knowledge, and/or skills to provide all the follow up support that someone might need

following a traumatic event, however the Tranquillity Team can act as a signpost to other resources and sources of support.

NB. It is impossible to predict all of the situations that could arise, so these guidelines are intended only as a rough guide to compliment your own and others' best judgement.

N.B. The consoling/negotiating roles in implementing a SSA can often become quite gendered, with male-bodied people often taking on physical roles and female-bodied taking on emotional support. We aim to challenge these assigned roles and involve everyone in all aspects of conflict resolution regardless of gender. But we should also remember that people may wish to be supported by certain people / types of people (eg: they may want to be comforted by people of the same gender if they've experienced gender-based violence) and this should be respected.

Resources and Information

It is important to point out that the Tranquillity Team in the examples used above did not come up with these ideas on their own. Rather, we have been inspired by tranquillity teams we have witnessed at other events in the past, and were able to draw on a vast source of collective knowledge provided by others in the form of zines and on the internet. Seek these out! Some examples of some thought provoking zines are:

Excuse Me, Can You Please Pass The Privilege? A primer on privilege for the privileged by someone with privilege.

<http://zinelibrary.info/excuse-me-can-you-please-pass-privilege>

How to Put Together Your Own Consent Workshop. The zine offers a thorough blueprint for one kickass consent workshop. The zine was assembled by, and this workshop model was beta tested by, a Seattle University student group called Northwest Break the Silence

<http://zinelibrary.info/how-put-together-your-own-consent-workshop>

As If They Were Human: A Different Take on Perpetrator Accountability. This zine contains three articles by Tod Augusta-Scott, a social worker who works with men who have battered, abused, or used sexual violence.

<http://zinelibrary.info/english/prisons-and-police>

For a Safer World. A guide to local groups, online resources, zines, books and films on trauma, survivor support, communication, mental health, community accountability, anti-sexism, addiction, and conflict mediation.

<http://zinelibrary.info/safer-world>

Supporting a Survivor of Sexual Assault. A guide to supporting a survivor of sexual assault. By Men Against Rape Culture (MARC) and UBUNTU out of Durham, North Carolina USA

<http://zinelibrary.info/supporting-survivor-sexual-assault>

World Without Sexual Assault: For A Community Response to Sexual Assault. This is the second newspaper put out by the World Without collective based out of Melbourne.

<http://zinelibrary.info/world-without-sexual-assault-community-response-sexual-assault>

We Are All Survivors, We Are All Perpetrators // What To Do When... “To broach these questions is not to deny that there is such a thing as sexual assault, nor to defend it as acceptable behavior. On the contrary, it is to demand that we acknowledge that we live in a rape culture: a culture in which sexual assault is pervasive, as are the forces and dynamics that promote it.”<http://zinelibrary.info/we-are-all-survivors-we-are-all-perpetrators-what-do-when>

Anti-authoritarian Approaches to Resolving and Transforming Conflict and Harm . From the 2007 NYC Anarchist Bookfair

<http://www.radio4all.net/index.php/program/26976>

These and more can be downloaded for free from <http://zinelibrary.info/> and <http://anarchalibrary.blogspot.com/>

If you have any thoughts or questions about this wee pamphlet on Safer Spaces, you can contact us on contact@coalactionscotland.org.uk