

Facilitating Compassionate Communication

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Employing a trauma-informed research approach often starts with acknowledging that people (e.g., participants, research personnel) experience different lived experiences and, as such, have different life perspectives, reactions to experiences and situational interpretations. These two exercises are designed to build study team understanding of individual diversity and encourage team members to be open to different perspectives. *Story of Your Name* encourages team members to share a bit about their history and is a light way to foster team bonding; *Drawbridge* encourages team members to discuss their perspectives and come to an understanding of how many different perspectives can arise from one story. We recommend providing a trigger warning for some of the content of *Drawbridge*, specifically noting that some participants may feel uncomfortable while reading the story and that the intent is to work with and support others through the discomfort. – *Maile Young Karris MD*

Using the arts and humanities in medicine

Operating from within the T. Denny Sanford Institute for Empathy and Compassion at UC San Diego Health, the Center for Compassionate Communication utilizes techniques from the arts and humanities to improve healthcare providers' communication skills through a robust survey of empathic and compassionate principles directly related to interpersonal communication. The arts offer a mechanism for us to step away from our daily pressures and into the realm of story, imagination, metaphor, and creativity. Through these humanistic practices, defenses are lowered, and broad lessons can be discovered. After studying these principles, providers demonstrate increased personal awareness and professional satisfaction. These types of improvements lead to better health and wellbeing outcomes for providers and patients alike.

We offer this abbreviated Guide as a reference for the exercises and materials our expert facilitators use when teaching live and/or Zoom sessions. We have provided timing for each exercise to allow adequate discussion and debriefing. If you have a group larger than 18-20 consider breakout groups for discussion. If you are interested in more tools drawn from the humanities, you can access our full facilitation guide here:



If you are interested in training with the Center for Compassionate Communication, scan here:



Story of Your Name

[Large Group | 40 - 75 min. based on group size]

While names are simply a fact about us, they often hold personal meaning. This exercise is intended to help participants reflect on that meaning and consider how their name relates to their identity. Secondly, in listening deeply to others' stories we build fodder for connection and space for curiosity.

Learning Objective:

Reflect on personal identity to share with a group.

Setup:

- Ask participants to spend four to five minutes writing the story of their name. Be sure to let them know that these writings will be shared with the group. Encourage them to use pen and paper if they have it, otherwise typing on a device is fine.
- After the time is up everyone will share. Make explicit that preamble to their writing is not allowed; participants are to simply read exactly what they've written on the page.
- If conducting this exercise in person, hold comments until the end. If on zoom, you can encourage those listening participants to react via chat or Zoom reactions after each person has read.
- Move through the participants asking that each share their writing verbatim (again, NO PRE- or POST-AMBLE).
- After everyone has gone, use the debrief questions to facilitate discussion.

Questions for Debrief:

- What was this experience like to write and share?
- What did you discover as you listened?
- Did you feel as though the message you wrote and read was the message you wanted to convey to the group?
- Were you nervous while anticipating your turn? Did that make it more challenging to listen?
- Did you think of additional things you might say about your name or other ways you may have communicated the information as we heard others?
- When it comes to communication that helps build trusting relationships, how are stories, identities, and personalities important?

Talking Points:

- Names can be deeply personal, revealing our histories and aspects of our identity. It can be vulnerable to share personal things with a group of strangers—particularly if there are power dynamics at play.
- Listening can be difficult when our thoughts are racing; it takes intentional effort to quiet one's thoughts and lean deeply into listening.

Drawbridge

[Large Group & Small Groups | 45-60 min.]

Learning Objectives:

Participants recognize unconscious bias and societal rules as foundations of their own perspectives.

Setup:

Have the instructor, or the class, take turns reading the following story out loud:

As he left for a visit to his outlying districts, the jealous Baron warned his pretty wife: "Do not leave the castle while I am gone, or I will punish you severely when I return!" But within a few hours of the Baron's departure, the young Baroness received word that her mother was dying and desperately wanted to see the Baroness.

Despite her husband's warning, the Baroness decided to visit her mother who lived in the countryside nearby. The castle was located on an island in a wide, fast-flowing river, with a drawbridge linking the island and the land at the narrowest point in the river. "Surely my husband will not return before dawn," she thought and ordered her servants to lower the drawbridge and leave it down until she returned.

After spending several hours with her mother, the Baroness returned to the drawbridge, only to find it blocked by a madman wildly waving a long, cruel knife. "Do not attempt to cross this bridge, Baroness, or I will kill you," he raved.

Fearing for her life, the Baroness returned to her mother and asked for help. "I am weak and poor," her mother said, "I cannot help."

The Baroness then sought out a boatman on the river, explained her plight to him, and asked him to take her across the river in his boat. "I will do it, but only if you pay me my fee of five Marks." "But I have no money with me!" the Baroness protested. "That is too bad. No money, No ride," the boatman said flatly.

Her fear growing, the Baroness ran crying to the home of a friend, and after again explaining the situation, begged for enough money to pay the boatman his fee. "If you had not disobeyed your husband, this would not have happened," the friend said. "I will give you no money."

With dawn approaching and her last resource exhausted, the Baroness returned to the bridge in desperation, attempted to cross to the castle, and was slain by the madman.

Alternate Version:

As he left for a visit to his outlying districts, the jealous baron warned his pretty wife: "Do not leave the castle while I am gone, or I will punish you severely when I return!"

But as the hours passed, the young baroness grew lonely, and despite her husband's warning, she decided to visit her lover, who lived in the countryside nearby. The castle was situated on an island in a wide, fast-flowing river.

A drawbridge linked the island to the mainland at the narrowest point in the river. "Surely my husband will not return before me," she thought, and ordered the servant to lower the drawbridge and leave it down until she returned. After spending several pleasant hours with her lover the baroness returned to the drawbridge. Only to find it blocked by a gateman wildly waving a long, cruel knife.

"Do not attempt to cross this bridge, Baroness, or I will have to kill you" he cried. "The baron ordered me to do so." Fearing for her life, the baroness returned to her lover and asked him for help. "Our relationship is only a romantic one," he said. "I will not help."

The baroness then sought out a boatman on the river, explained her plight to him and asked him to take her across the river in his boat. "I will do it but only if you can pay the fee of five marks."

"But I have no money with me!" the baroness protested. "That is too bad. No money, no, ride," the boatmen said flatly.

Her fear growing, the baroness ran crying to the home of a friend and, after explaining her desperate situation begged for enough money to pay the boatman his fee. "If you had not disobeyed your husband this would not have happened," the friend said. "I will give you no money."

With dawn approaching and her last resource exhausted, the baroness returned to the bridge in desperation, and waited to cross to the castle, and was slain by the gateman.

Exercise:

- Ask everyone individually to rank-order the degree of responsibility for the baroness's death of each of the characters: Baron, Baroness, Boatman, Friend, Madman, Mother, [Alternate version: Baron, Baroness, Lover, Gateman, Boatman, Friend]. Have them do this on their own silently – they should not share.
- Send groups of 3 to 5 participants to break rooms to have them try to agree about a ranking order. Instruct them to identify a spokesperson to report out when rejoining the large group.
- After 10-20 minutes, bring participants back to discuss the results of the smaller group debates, the various rankings, and the different perspectives about society and social change the rankings implied.

Use the questions below to facilitate the identification of contrasting views and the assumptions each view makes about the possibilities and legitimacy of action against oppressive conditions. Ask them to consider differences in the ranking of each character, when they are viewed as individuals acting apart from any societal context or as operating within the confines of imposed social relationships.

- What factors influenced your ranking decision? Did you base your decision on behaviors or responsibility?
- What feelings were provoked during this activity and your decision-making process? Why?
- In attempting to reach a group consensus, were you convinced of a different ranking order? Why or why not?
- How does this exercise relate to societal values and norms?
- What change work would need to be done to affect the outcome of the story?
- Suggest to the class that the characters in the story can be equated with social forces in contemporary society as described below. Then ask students to reconsider ranking the characters based on the new symbolization and present-day conditions. This part of the discussion deepens the consideration of the responsibility for maintaining or changing oppressive conditions and the power or powerlessness of the victim in self-determination and in effecting social change.

Baron: Dominant identity. The identity that sets values and rules for the collective. (i.e., White, male, Christian, straight, typically able-bodied, US born, etc.)

Baroness: Oppressed identity. They have little to say about values but are expected to adhere to them. (i.e., Black, female, non-dominant religion, disabled, immigrant, etc.)

Gateman/Madman: Law enforcement or the Unruly forces. They do not necessarily have a direct say in rules and values, but are expected to enforce them—sometimes the values behind the rules are embodied, sometimes not. In the case of the “madman” a conversation about mental health and stigma can emerge.

Boatman: Institutions. This identity is service for a cost: if you have resources you have the opportunity.

Neighbor/Lover: Allies with oppressed identities. They may have good intentions, within my values framework, I'll accept you if you follow the rules—but feel compelled to center their own well-being.

Friend/Mother: Enticements. This role represents the things we admire or respect, but in reality or practice they can fail to do us much good. (i.e., The U.S. constitution, Bill of Rights, other patriotic ideals of freedom, etc.)

Debrief:

- What was this experience like? What did you discover?
- Any discomfort? What do you think that stems from?
- When we cultivate awareness of privilege and oppression, that's great...what is next?

Talking Points:

As participants argue for their view, they become clearer about their own perception of the relationship between the individual and society. For most, this activity is fun and non-threatening because it centers on a fictitious historical situation. Nevertheless, when contemporary social relationships are discussed during the last part of the activity, some participants might experience discomfort. They are faced with the recognition that, from the perspective of the victim, current societal rules and relationships cannot be accepted if change is to occur for them. *Tell them to embrace discomfort as an opportunity to reflect and learn.*

Quotes: Isabel Wilkerson, Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents

"Caste is insidious and therefore powerful because it is not hatred, it is not necessarily personal. It is the worn grooves of comforting routines and unthinking expectations, patterns of a social order that have been in place for so long that it looks like the natural order of things."

"In our era, it is not enough to be tolerant. You tolerate mosquitoes in the summer, a rattle in an engine, the gray slush that collects at the crosswalk in winter. You tolerate what you would rather not have to deal with and wish would go away. It is no honor to be tolerated. Every spiritual tradition says love your neighbor as yourself, not tolerate them."

"Choose not to look, however, at your own peril. The owner of an old house knows that whatever you are ignoring will never go away. Whatever is lurking will fester whether you choose to look or not. Ignorance is no protection from the consequences of inaction. Whatever you are wishing away will gnaw at you until you gather the courage to face what you would rather not see."

"The price of privilege is the moral duty to act when one sees another person treated unfairly. And the least that a person in the dominant caste can do is not make the pain any worse."

"Radical empathy, on the other hand, means putting in the work to educate oneself and to listen with a humble heart to understand another's experience from their perspective, not as we imagine we would feel. Radical empathy is not about you and what you think you would do in a situation you have never been in and perhaps never will. It is the kindred connection from a place of deep knowing that opens your spirit to the pain of another as they perceive it."

"Empathy is no substitute for the experience itself. We don't get to tell a person with a broken leg or a bullet wound that they are not in pain. And people who have hit the caste lottery are not in a position to tell a person who has suffered under the tyranny of caste what is offensive or hurtful or demeaning to those at the bottom. The price of privilege is the moral duty to act when one sees another person treated unfairly. And the least that a person in the dominant caste can do is not make the pain any worse."

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