

Guiding Principles

1. Challenge a binary way of thinking

Continuous, violent conflicts make it difficult for parties to listen, understand each other, and imagine an end to the conflict. Intractable conflicts last many years, are violent, and have many casualties. Both sides often believe the conflict cannot be resolved due to its long history, lack of resolution, and the perception that the other side won't stop the violence.

This “zero sum game” mentality, where one side's loss is the other's win, is rooted in binary thinking. Understanding the dangers of binary thinking is crucial for conflict resolution .

Rooted in tribalism, binary thinking creates an “us vs. them” lens. Social media amplifies this by forming echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs and limit exposure to diverse

perspectives. This exacerbates polarization and hinders societal unity.

To move beyond binary thinking, we need to develop self-awareness, embrace diverse perspectives, and recognize the complexity of human experiences. This approach encourages intellectual openness and empathy, which are essential for genuine dialogue.

2. Humanize the “other”

Stereotypes are entrenched perceptions shared by members of a society, often stemming from faulty generalizations and lack of exposure between groups. They deeply influence how individuals view others. Perceived intractable conflicts arise from and perpetuate fear, danger, and violence felt by both sides. People rely on stereotypes to seek clear explanations for safety and stability, but stereotypes worsen the situation, deepening distrust and hostility.

Stereotypes are driven by “us vs. them” beliefs, portraying each side with positive and negative qualities. Each side justifies its goals while negating

the other's. During peak conflicts, most people support these stereotypes, which decrease in calmer times.

Participants in this program will learn to understand groups on a human level, breaking down stereotypes. Humanization and recognizing the “enemy” as a fellow human, fosters empathy and reframes the conflict constructively. Knowing the “other side” makes it harder to rationalize stereotypes and violence. Humanization promotes cooperation, trust, and constructive dialogue, laying the groundwork for respectful engagement and honest communication.

3. Embrace multiple narratives

From stereotypes, negative emotions, and the collective memory of past events, a national narrative is created — the story of the conflict each side claims to own. This narrative organizes facts, history, and a collective explanation.

When entrenched in mutually exclusive narratives, where each side views its perspective as the sole truth, conflicts persist. This rigid adherence to one side's narrative creates barriers to reconciliation, fueling animosity and perpetuating hostilities. Each group becomes entrenched in its worldview,

unwilling to consider alternative interpretations or acknowledge opposing viewpoints. Parties prioritize defending their own narrative over seeking common ground. By engaging in empathetic listening and recognizing the complexity of human experiences, we can allow for multiple narratives to coexist.





Activity 4 What are my barriers to listening?

Goal: The goal of this exercise is to simulate how it feels to listen to someone talk about a difficult topic that the listener feels strongly against without responding. Participants will explore what makes it difficult for them to listen. Examples of controversial topics: gun control, charter schools, arts, artificial intelligence, local politics, climate change, popular culture, dominance of digital devices and anything except the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Duration: 20 minutes

Materials needed:

- Whiteboard
- Whiteboard markers
- OR
- Flip chart with markers

Instructions

1. As a facilitator, you might choose the controversial topics in advance for your participants to discuss. These might include local issues or how controversial topics affect your community.
2. Ask participants what makes listening challenging for them to listen. Make it clear that we are now talking about what could hinder them from listening as opposed to what prevents others from not listening to them.
3. Write down points that emerge. Below are some common hindrances for good listening:
 - I plan what I will say next, instead of listening
 - I already know what they're going to say
 - I remembered my personal experience and stopped listening
 - I jump to solutions/advice
 - I want to ask all kinds of questions
 - They say wrong/stupid things and I want to correct them
 - I'm bored or distracted by other things
 - I have preconceived notions and stereotypes about the person speaking
4. In pairs, each participant will talk for one minute about a controversial topic.

	PERSON A	PERSON B
Round 1	Choose a topic that you feel strongly about for Person B to take a position on.	To the best of your ability, discuss the opposite of what Person A feels strongly about. Talk for one minute
	Listen only. Do not speak or respond, just listen. Notice what might be preventing you from listening to Person B.	
	<p>Share: How did you feel? Participants might respond, "I felt hot. I wanted to argue back. My heart was racing. I was so angry I couldn't think straight. I started to stereotype the speaker."</p> <p>Share: What did you do? Participants might respond, "Nothing. I waited. Took a breath. Counted to ten. Refocused on the words. Reminded myself of what we were doing here. Shut down."</p>	

(Round 2 instructions continue on next page.)