




AMERICAN FRIENDS
of the **PARENTS CIRCLE**
— FAMILIES FORUM —
Palestinian and Israeli Bereaved Families for Peace

Listening from the Heart

— A FACILITATOR'S GUIDE



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About the Parents Circle – Families Forum

The [Parents Circle – Families Forum](#) (PCFF) is a joint Israeli and Palestinian organization made up of more than 750 bereaved families who have lost loved ones due to the ongoing violence in the region.

Motivated by their profound pain, PCFF members are dedicated to reconciliation and peace, recognizing that their grief is shared across humanity. They transform feelings of anger and despair into hope and reconciliation.

Since 1995, PCFF has organized Personal Narrative Exchanges in Palestine, Israel, and worldwide. During these sessions, bereaved Israeli and Palestinian members share their stories of loss and engage in open discussions, modeling dialogue and reconciliation. By speaking

together, PCFF members demonstrate how to transform anger and revenge into dialogue and hope. PCFF members engage in empathetic discussions about the pain on both sides to create a framework for reconciliation.

Importing a binary view of the conflict into the United States and other countries exacerbates tensions, strains relations, and deepens polarization in local communities. It can also lead to misinformed opinions, hate crimes, and challenges in foreign policy.

American Friends of the Parents Circle – Families Forum

The [American Friends of the PCFF](#) shares the human side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the American public to foster peace and reconciliation. The *Listening from the Heart* Program, designed for contexts outside of Palestine and Israel, uses pre-recorded videos and activities. Originally used in Israeli and Palestinian schools and communities, this program allows facilitators to access materials online and lead sessions in person, online, or in a hybrid format. The program offers flexibility, allowing facilitators to choose between activities.

What will *Listening from the Heart* accomplish?

The PCFF members are committed to reconciliation and peace despite having paid the highest price in the conflict.

By sharing their personal stories, they provide a way forward for all. If they can do it, anyone can.

Listening from the Heart aims to:

- **Generate empathy** and **cultivate understanding** and compassion
- **Challenge binary, simplistic views** with more thoughtful and empathetic alternatives
- **Diffuse tensions and polarization** among communities
- Model a **humanized and heart-centered approach** for meaningful discussion

What this program is NOT about

This program is **not** about assigning blame, promoting one-sided narratives, fostering animosity, or perpetuating stereotypes.

Instead, it fosters understanding, empathy, and constructive dialogue. It does not offer historical lessons on displacement, wars, or persecution, nor potential

political solutions. It respects the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without oversimplifying its nuances. The goal is to provide a

nuanced, humanized perspective, highlighting the experiences of bereaved Israelis and Palestinians who have chosen reconciliation. The program does not force participants to adopt a specific view-point but encourages critical thinking, reflection, and open-mindedness. Ultimately, it aims to build bridges and promote peace.

How to Use This Program

The *Listening from the Heart* program consists of five modules:

- 1. Background for Facilitators:**
This introductory section is designed to orient facilitators to the history, guiding principles and pedagogical background of the program.
- 2. PREPARING for the Personal Narrative Exchange (PNE):**
This section is designed to prepare facilitators for the PNE. It includes preparation activities, strategies, and exercises.
- 3. PRESENTING the Personal Narrative Exchange:**
This section includes the videos of the PNE, bios of the speakers and how to introduce and close the presentation of the PNE.
- 4. PROCESSING the Personal Narrative Exchange:**
This section includes activities and exercises to help participants process, reflect, and engage in a discussion with each other about the PNEs.
- 5. Resources and Appendices:**
This section includes additional resources, maps, a glossary, and a bibliography.

Why use *Listening from the Heart* in the United States and around the world?

Communities across the United States and globally have become embroiled in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, fostering divisions and sometimes violence.

This conflict's impact has transcended borders, affecting college campuses, corporate boardrooms, local municipalities, NGOs, and political arenas.

Since October 7, 2023, these divisions have escalated, profoundly impacting American communities and intensifying tensions. When American communities adopt a binary, simplistic view of the conflict, they magnify its complexities and distort the narrative to fit American contexts, which may not accurately reflect the realities experienced by Palestinians and Israelis.

People outside Israel and Palestine will always have a limited understanding of the conflict compared to those living there. This external perspective often exacerbates the conflict's impact rather than facilitating resolution. Outsiders must consider whether their actions and engagement help resolve or worsen the conflict.

The *Listening from the Heart* program can foster understanding, empathy, and constructive dialogue, addressing the polarization and divisiveness observed in the United States and worldwide.

Who is this program for?

The *Listening from the Heart* program is designed for diverse audiences seeking to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through empathy and reconciliation.

Various groups have used this curriculum to address the conflict's effects in their communities, including:

- **Community Leaders and Educators:** Tailored for leaders, educators, and facilitators promoting peacebuilding initiatives.
- **Students and Academic Institutions:** Suitable for universities and high schools to integrate into their curriculum.
- **Civil Society Groups and Advocacy Organizations:** For groups advocating for peace and justice in the Israeli-Palestinian context.
- **Towns and Cities:** Accessible to the general public interested in understanding the conflict from a human-centered perspective.
- **Workplaces:** Employers and HR professionals can use it in diversity training and employee development programs to promote empathy, communication, and conflict resolution strategies.

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.



4. The personal narrative is a powerful peacebuilding tool

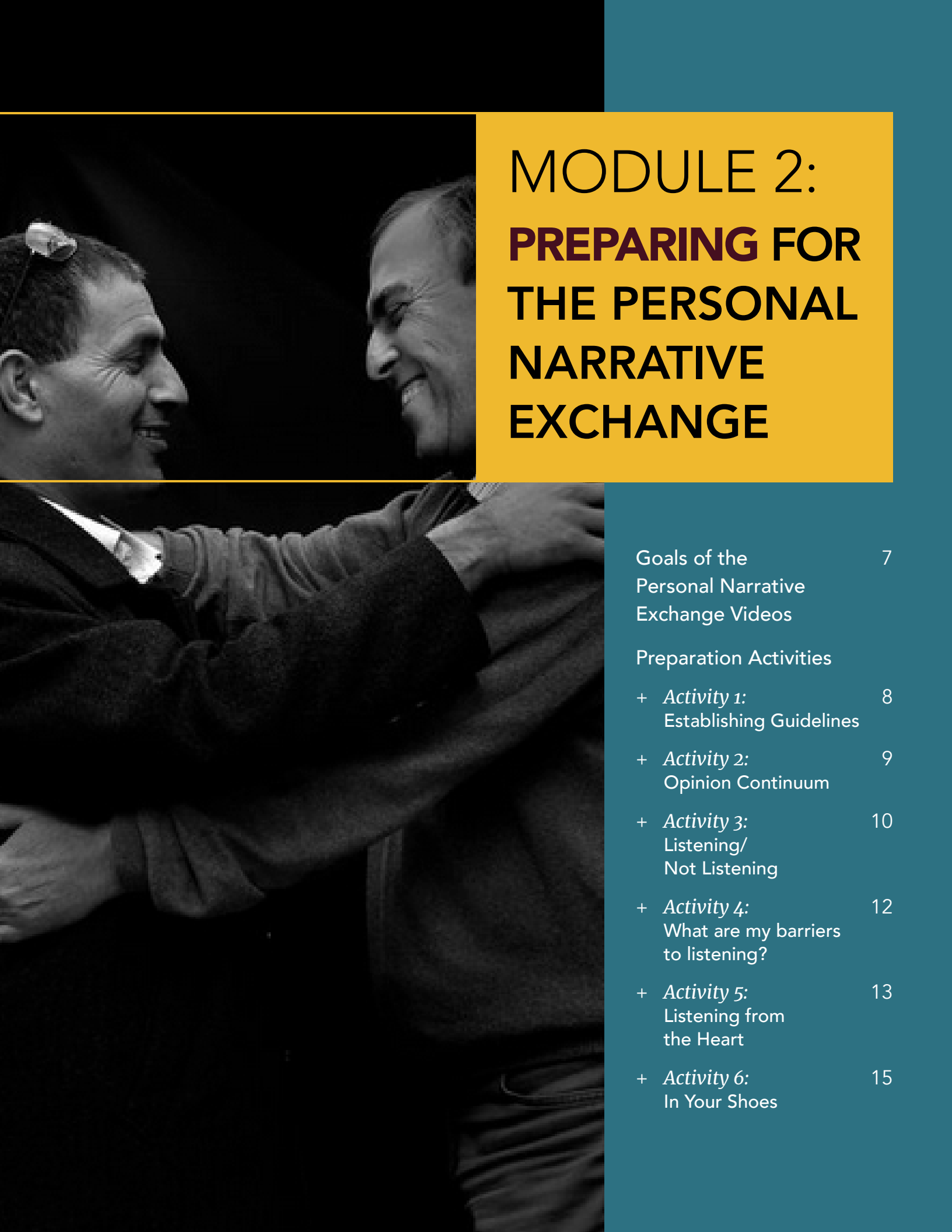
The Personal Narrative Exchange (PNE) relies on honest disclosures of personal stories. Bereaved members share their experiences, opinions, and fears authentically. This demonstrates that people from the other side have legitimate histories, beliefs, identities, and desires, existing beyond binary agreement. Listening to these stories fosters an atmosphere of empathy and understanding, contrasting with the tendency to argue about “facts.”

When individuals share their personal stories, they highlight the broader national and historical contexts that shape their lives. A Palestinian may refer to the Nakba of 1948, reflecting displacement’s impact, while an Israeli might evoke the Holocaust, underscoring persecution’s deep scars. These references highlight individual suffering and historical traumas shaping both Palestinians’ and Israelis’ collective narratives.

Personal narratives reveal shared history, cultural norms, and societal forces influencing individuals and their communities. Thus, personal storytelling becomes a powerful vehicle for understanding human complexities within the broader scope of history and culture.

Reconciliation is a process, not a finite event, spanning from building trust and empathy to truth-telling and amnesty. Reconciliation is challenging to build during an ongoing conflict.





MODULE 2:

PREPARING FOR THE PERSONAL NARRATIVE EXCHANGE

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This section details the preparation required for participants **before** viewing the Personal Narrative Exchange videos. This preparation can be scheduled immediately preceding the exchange or as a separate session. While not mandatory, the preparatory session is strongly recommended to optimize the exchange's effectiveness.

Goals of the Personal Narrative Exchange Videos

The goal is to foster empathy by actively listening to the experiences of those directly impacted by the conflict, acknowledging each group's valid narrative.

Understanding different points of view is important, even if agreement is not necessary. Introducing the "other" can reduce concerns and help both parties recognize their shared humanity. Positive emotions from this exchange can generate understanding and alter conflict perceptions, ultimately supporting reconciliation.

If more than one session is possible, we recommend preparing participants with background on the conflict, sharing resources like documentaries and external readings (See Module 5: Resources and Appendices).

Facilitators will learn how to:

- **Prepare participants** for the Personal Narrative Exchange
- **Anticipate challenges** and devise coping strategies
- **Conduct a constructive and non-confrontational discussion** following the exchange

Participants will learn how to:

- **Recognize challenges** in listening
- **Identify barriers** to effective listening
- **Enhance active listening** skills in challenging conversations
- **Cultivate a safe environment** for expressing emotions and challenges



Preparation Activities

These activities are intended to be conducted all together in sequential order but facilitators can select the activities according to their time constraints and group.



Activity 1 Establishing Guidelines

This activity focuses on establishing a set of guidelines to follow during the group's time together to establish a sense of security. This is important, especially when discussions involve sensitive topics that can evoke strong emotions. By establishing clear expectations and boundaries, guidelines serve to prevent misunderstandings and reduce tensions. Guidelines promote equity by giving everyone an opportunity to speak and be heard and preventing any single participant from dominating the conversation.

Goal: To collaboratively establish a set of guidelines that will guide difficult conversations throughout the program that will create a respectful and caring environment where participants feel safe to open their hearts, listen to each other respectfully and show empathy and compassion, regardless of disagreements.

Duration: 30 minutes

Materials needed:

- Whiteboard or large poster paper
- Markers
- Sticky notes
- Pens for each participant

Instructions

1. Introduction

- Explain the importance of guidelines in creating conversations that are safe, respectful, and equitable.

2. Brainstorming Session

- Ask each participant to think about what kind of environment would make them feel safe and respected when discussing sensitive topics.
- Provide each participant with sticky notes. Ask them to write down one guideline per sticky note that they believe is essential for facilitating productive and respectful discussions.
- Once they have written their guidelines, have them stick the notes onto the whiteboard or poster paper.

3. Group Discussion

- Discuss why each guideline might be important and how it contributes to a constructive discussion environment.
- Encourage participants to share their thoughts about the suggested guidelines. This might involve merging similar guidelines, modifying others for clarity, or removing duplicates. You can use an AI tool to organize the guidelines into themes.

4. Consolidation and Commitment

- Together, decide on the final list of guidelines. Aim for consensus to ensure everyone feels a sense of ownership over the ground guidelines.
- Once the guidelines are agreed upon, write them down neatly on the poster paper or whiteboard.

5. Display the agreed-upon guidelines and refer to them as needed throughout *Listening from the Heart*.

Activity 1: Establishing Guidelines (continued)

If you do not have time for the activity, here are our suggested guidelines. Even if doing the activity, you can still refer or suggest them to the participants:

Suggestions for effective guidelines:

- Speak and listen honestly and from the heart.
- What's said here stays here; what's learned here can leave here.
- Allow room for different modes of self-expression.
- Step up, step back.
- Practice non-judgment.
- Speak from your experience.
- Focus on feelings, not facts.
- Dialogue, not debate.
- Be open to other perspectives.
- There's no right answer, and all answers are necessarily incomplete.
- It's okay to pass.



Activity 2

Opinion Continuum

Goal: The goal of this exercise is to illuminate the range of experiences and viewpoints within the room and to remind us that each participant brings a unique perspective, shaped by their own lived experiences.

Duration: 30–45 minutes

Instructions

Designate one side of the room to represent “Strongly Agree” and the other “Strongly Disagree.” The facilitator will choose 5–10 prompts in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (see below). For each prompt, participants will place themselves somewhere in the room that represents their opinion.

Prompts:

- The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is relevant to my life.
- I believe that difficult conflicts between nationalities can be resolved.
- I believe that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be resolved.
- I'm afraid to talk about this topic with others.
- I feel it is important to deal with this issue.
- I feel safe talking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- I have a direct connection with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

- Variation 1: You can also offer fewer prompts and after each one ask some participants to discuss.
- Variation 2: These questions can also be asked through a short, online survey to be completed prior to the PNE. When reviewing participants' anonymous responses, you quickly gauge the connection they are bringing to the discussion. Facilitators can also report the participants' responses back to the group.

Activity 2: Opinion Continuum (continued)**Debrief Questions:**

- What did you notice in the group as a whole during this exercise? (diversity of viewpoints, possibility of resolutions, comfort level of discussion)
- What did you notice in yourself? What came up for you? What was challenging? What felt good or hopeful?
- What is one thing you had not considered before?
- Did participating in this exercise highlight any common ground or shared values that you hadn't considered before?

Takeaway: We all have emotional and physical responses during challenging conversations. By reflecting on their feelings and actions, participants gain insight into their own reactions and coping mechanisms, promoting self-awareness and emotional regulation.



Activity 3

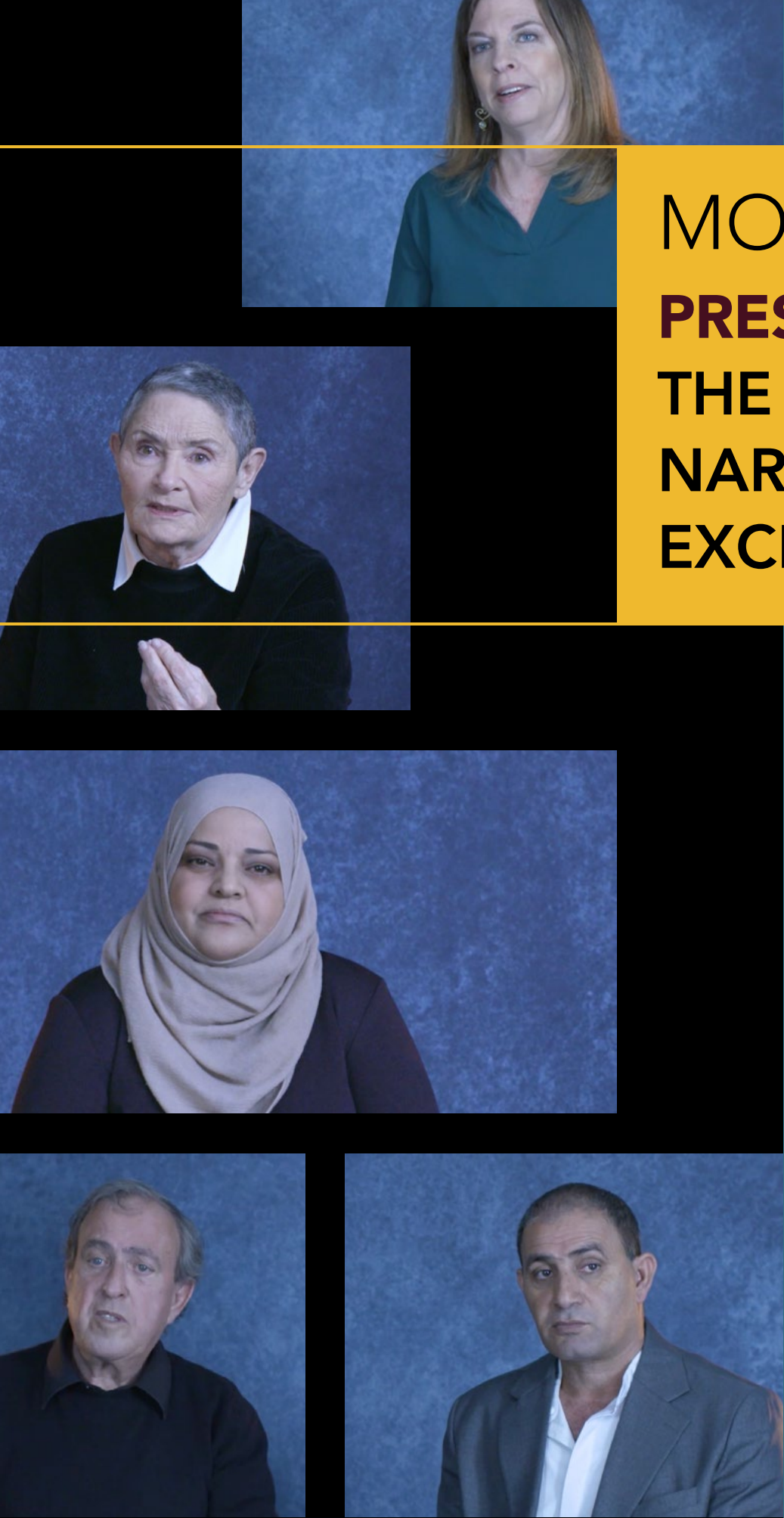
Listening/Not Listening¹

Goal: The goal of this activity is to reflect on the experience of someone listening to them versus. not listening to them. This helps build awareness of what makes someone feel listened to.

Duration: 25 minutes

Instructions

This exercise is dependent on each person talking about something of significance to them: a place, a place that makes you happy that you might tell a friend about; Alternatively, participants can choose to discuss an issue that they are working through (e.g., an upcoming decision they need to make; an interesting conversation they had, etc.).



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To the left: Video stills of bereaved Israelis and Palestinians; from top to bottom: Elana Kaminka, Robi Damelin, Laila Al-Sheikh, Rami Elhanan, and Bassam Aramin.

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