

# Protest Efficacy & Safety Training Guide

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2025 version

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# I. Introduction

This guide is intended to help people learn, practice, and teach skills for engaging in effective activism. The training was developed for adults, though mature teens and even younger people can usually do most activities with adequate support from trusted adults. The workshops we have led from this material typically run from one to three hours; most workshops do not attempt to address all the material, but are focused on the skills most pertinent to the audience. Practice for specific planned actions can either be added on after basic skills, or addressed via targeted scenario practice throughout the training.

## What's new in the updated edition

While previous versions of this guide foregrounded “nonviolent” protest, the prevalence of violence against peaceful protest has led us to also include some basic concepts of physical self-defense. The material still loosely assumes an “ethic of least harm” approach.

While many organizations offer valuable protest safety training online, in our experience, physical practice in a group better replicates the actual experience of protest safety work. Our hope is that this guide will allow more people to train and practice in person, with whatever size group they have, on the schedule that works for them.

## Where this material comes from

This guide draws on a violence reduction method known as empowerment self-defense, or ESD. ESD is a research-based, queer-and-POC-developed holistic approach to personal, interpersonal, and community safety. It uses somatic therapies to teach you to control your own fear and anger. It also addresses structural violence as a primary cause of harm to individuals. Thus it provides a clear lens for understanding political violence, and is a powerful tool for mobilizing resistance.

The Basic Skills section of this guide incorporates several foundational principles from ESD, including boundary setting and non-verbal communication. Practicing these skills is not necessary for all de-escalation training, but it does provide a compelling physical experience that many people find transformative to their understanding of their own power.

The material also incorporates practice wisdom from movements including Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, Ruckus Society, Earth First!, and the Religious Society of Friends. I am especially indebted to Bruce Hartford of the Civil Rights Movement Veterans (<http://www.crmvet.org/>) for his expertise, feedback and encouragement.

This guide is further informed by actions on the ground in Austin, Texas, since 2017. These have involved police riots and the beating/arrest of peaceful protesters at UT-Austin, neo-Nazi and fascist marches at the Texas State Capitol, with tacit support from the state (including Department of Public Safety troopers), armed and violent counter-protesters, and frequent interference from right-wing “media” operators such as Infowars.



## Allies, community, and goals

### Expectations around “nonviolent” protest

Many people are invested in popular myths about “nonviolent” protest. Unrealistic and ahistorical legends about nonviolent protest have historically been used to divide and restrict protesters, particularly those at most risk of structural violence. You may want to address those expectations ahead of time, either in your workshop call/description, or during introductions. Discussions of peace policing and tone policing are covered in the training itself. Here are some additional talking points that have proven helpful:

- Right-wing actors have grown emboldened since 2016, prompting a rise in violent confrontations even at planned peaceful protests. Examples: The murder of peaceful counter-protester Heather Heyer at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, N.C., in 2017; The 2020 murder of Garrett Foster at a Black Lives Matter protest in Austin; armed attacks on the peaceful pro-Palestinian student encampment at UCLA in 2024; tear-gassing, trampling, and mass arrests of peaceful protesters by ICE in multiple US cities in 2025.
- Authorities (governments, schools, etc.) are increasingly using police to commit violence against peaceful protesters. Examples: The University of Texas at Austin repeatedly called in an enormous Austin Police and DPS presence, including mounted police and tear gas, during peaceful pro-Palestinian actions in 2024, resulting in scores of illegal arrests and detentions, and numerous injuries to students. The New York Police Department assaulted students and blocked medical assistance at two Columbia University and the City College of New York while breaking up peaceful Gaza solidarity encampments. Masked immigration agents are increasingly kidnapping citizens without identifying themselves, or showing warrants.
- This structural violence is much more likely to affect the poor, people of color, and others who are traditionally targeted by state violence and oppression.

As a result,

- Many activists now avoid top-down organization, permitted marches, etc. These structures expose activists to state surveillance and violence.
- Non-hierarchical, collective organizing model can often be safer and more effective, especially in marginalized communities:
  - We keep each other safe.
  - We protect and defend our communities.
- Activists are now expected to have some practical awareness of operational security, communications, medics, legal observers and jail teams, etc. We should not always expect marshals or other visible leaders to manage the crowd at an action. **We are safest if we can rely on distributed knowledge**, not experts.
- In the same way, we take responsibility for our own actions and allow space for others to use their right to protest in their own way. Part of protest safety means knowing the risks you are comfortable with, recognizing when the situation around you is exceeding those risks, and responding to those risks using tactics that are respectful to your allies.



- EVERYONE can and should see themselves as a de-escalator. Strong communities are strong not just because their members “don’t fight” with each other, but because they learn different ways to negotiate their conflicts and differences. Committing to that work, on the person-to-person level, is what builds our cohesion and power.

The following reminders about the **strategic aims of nonviolent protest** may be helpful in discussions with those who are very invested in this concept:

**Philosophical versus tactical nonviolence:** Practitioners of philosophical nonviolence try to love their enemies, and are usually specifically committed to pacifism. Tactical nonviolence, on the other hand, means you can feel any way you want to about your opponents, but you commit to behaving nonviolently for the duration of the action.

**A primary goal of nonviolent protest is to expose structural violence**, including the sometimes latent violence of racism, misogyny, homophobia, poverty, etc. We can think of resistance to nonviolent actions (police violence, abusive counter-protesters, etc.) as the normally invisible power structure sharpening into focus. Not every protester will encounter violence, yet it is inevitable that some protesters will—the existence of the abusive power structure that enacts the violence is precisely why we are protesting in the first place. The resulting violence does not mean the protest is somehow flawed or failed, or that the protesters “weren’t nonviolent enough.”

**Audience** is critical to successful nonviolent action. People who have been unaware of structural violence, or willing to ignore it, must see what is happening in order for change to occur. To hold perpetrators accountable, you need witnesses. This is a crucial point when you are planning actions or making personal decisions about how you will react in the presence of violence. No matter how committed you are personally to nonviolence, letting a bunch of Nazis beat you up in an alley where no one can see what has happened does nothing to advance your cause.

Activists should think in advance about what kinds of actions they are willing to take, what they can support from allies, what kinds of violence they will resist, and what they will passively accept. Allies and affinity groups should try to **communicate explicitly** about expectations for an action. Don’t just assume. If you don’t know what your allies consider “nonviolent protest,” everyone will be at much greater risk.



## II. Workshop Planning

You don't need to cover everything in this manual in one session, and it's probably better not to. Choose the skills and practice activities that best fit the needs of your group. We do recommend practicing emotional grounding no matter what else you'll be covering.

Be sure to read through, and **walk through**, each activity you plan to teach, ahead of the workshop. The value of many of the activities lies in their physical nature, so get a feel for that before you lead them.

**Location:** Look for a space where people can move around a bit, and is at least semi-private, since the scenario practice can become noisy. Public-use rooms in libraries often work well, or church fellowship halls, rec centers, and other community spaces. Parks and backyards can work too.

Generally, larger groups require more time to cycle everyone through the exercises and answer all their questions.

### Materials:

- Markers, tape, and blank posters for sign-in. You can also make posters of key concepts like the de-escalation tools. That is a handy way to help people remember the tools as they are trying to deploy them in scenario practice.
- Handouts—if you want folks to have a takeaway.
- Nametags, and a sign-in sheet, if you want to contact people afterwards.

### Setup:

- Arrange chairs, if you have them, in a semi-circle or rows. Leave as large an area as you can open for the activities, and make sure there is an obstruction-free path from that space to an exit. There are a couple of activities where people might choose to exit the room.
- To give people something to do as everyone arrives, and to help you understand why they're there and what they expect from the workshop, you can put up two big sheets of paper near the check-in area. Across the tops, write:

"To me, a successful protest/action means . . . "

and

"A concern I have about protesting/activism is . . ."

As people arrive, invite them to write a response to each statement on the posters. Quickly reviewing these comments before starting the workshop will help you understand what attendees are worried about, how much experience they have, and what their goals are for protesting.



## Suggested Introduction:

**Names/pronouns (for large groups, just have the leaders introduce themselves)**

**Community agreements (adapt as you wish):**

- Confidentiality: what's shared here stays here.
- Be curious, not critical.
- No one knows everything, but together we know a lot.
- Move up, move back: We are here in the interests of protecting the oppressed, the marginalized, and the silenced. Those of us with privilege should be intentional about not dominating the discussion.
- Be aware of our time. More sharing can happen after the workshop concludes.
- Encourage people to be aware of their emotional tolerances and to step out if they need to. You'll want to build in some 5- or 10-minute breaks, depending on your available time.

**Basic protest safety and etiquette:** These are almost universally held values at actions today. If you do any of the things below, you can expect some of your allies to object.

- **Don't talk to cops.** This is a practical as well as an ethical issue. It often makes people less safe, and **it poses the greatest risk to the most marginalized.** You, personally, may feel safe talking to law enforcement; you might be safe talking to them! But your doing so puts at least some of your allies at risk.
- Don't **tone police:** Don't tell others, especially those whose identity puts them at greater risk, what they should or shouldn't say, or how to express their sense of injustice. Let people feel what they feel.
- Don't **peace police:** Don't insist others abide by whatever your definition of "non-violence" or "appropriate" protest is. They choose their tactics, you choose yours.

Remember: direct action, civil disobedience, and property damage are *nonviolent!* Do not perpetuate media framing that puts vandalism in the same category as physical harm to people.

As Earth First! Founders have said, from long experience, "Direct Action involves conflict. More likely than not, you're gonna piss someone off."

### "How will you practice and teach this?"

Remind attendees that we need to populate these skills out through our communities. Throughout the session, they should be thinking about ways they can practice the skills in daily life, and how they can share what they are learning with others.

## III Basic Skills

### Emotional grounding

**Emotional grounding** means doing something to calm yourself physically and mentally *in the moment* so you can act from a place of strength. It is very helpful if you want to remain



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calm and focused in a stressful protest environment. You may already know some methods from meditation, yoga or other practices. It's good to try out different methods of emotional grounding, to find the ones that work best for you. It's also important to *practice* emotional grounding, throughout our daily lives, in low-stress situations. This helps train your autonomic nervous system to respond quickly to the calming cues we send it.

Below are several common methods of cueing emotional grounding. We suggest teaching two or three of them at the outset, and then cycling through additional methods as you manage the energy and noise level during activities. This gives everyone a chance to find one or two methods that work well for them. **Find and practice what works for you.**

### **Box breathing**

1. Breathe in for four counts
2. Pause for four counts
3. Breathe out for four counts
4. Pause for four counts.

Cue people not to hold their breath on the pauses.

### **3-2-1 Sensory input**

Ask everyone to stand silently and notice

- 3 things you can see around you in the room; (pause while they do this)
- 2 things you can hear; (pause)
- 1 thing you can feel with your body (pause).

Take a deep breath and shake out your body to release tension.

### **Pressing Palms**

Place your hands palm to palm in front of you. (You can also move your palms out but keep your fingertips and thumbs touching, like a spider doing a pushup.) Press together firmly for three breaths. Release and shake out your arms.

### **Other methods (ask participants to share any that they have used successfully):**

- Counting to ten (or five, or three, if time is of the essence).
- Self-encouragement, either out loud or silently: "I can do this," or "I am committed to nonviolence."
- Saying a short prayer, mantra, or phrase that has significance for you.
- Focusing on any neutral sensory input, like feeling the solid ground under your feet or the chair beneath you.
- Observing/naming your emotions so you can set them aside temporarily: "I feel angry, but for now I am going to project calm."
- Touching a ring, necklace, or other object you carry for its spiritual or emotional significance.



### Teaching Tips:

**Take advantage of noise levels to cue and practice emotional grounding** throughout the session. When noise levels go up, instead of shushing people or calling for quiet, say “I can hear our emotional activation levels rising! Let’s take a moment to practice a grounding technique.”

**Minimize chatting.** People will usually feel the urge to break the tension during these activities by saying something casual, making an observation or a joke. This is completely normal! Still, try to resist this urge for now. We want to pay attention to nonverbal messages, and verbal communication can interfere with that goal. We also want to notice how much discomfort can be generated by silence, and how our minds and bodies respond to that tension.

**Encourage participants in this activity to keep their facial expression neutral**—that means NO SMILING OR LAUGHING. This will be hard! But it’s important to notice how hard it is, and try anyway.

**Notice your emotional state, and re-ground yourself periodically.** After you finish an activity, invite people to try an emotional grounding technique for a moment.

### Eye contact

Eye contact is an important component of nonverbal communication and boundary setting. This activity will help you understand how others perceive you and how you can alter their perception. It’s also a good way to build and project confidence.

#### STEP ONE:

Give each person a different number: 1, 2, 3, or 4. Each number corresponds to a different style of eye contact:

1. **Assertive:** Making eye contact and then looking away without dropping your eyes. Keep your gaze at the same level, and look off to the side or over the person’s shoulder.
2. **Submissive:** Making eye contact and then dropping your eyes to the floor.
3. **Avoidant:** Avoiding eye contact entirely.
4. **Aggressive:** Making and holding eye contact (staring).

#### STEP TWO:

Within the space you have, form a little crowd and mill around silently, walking past and around each other. Make eye contact (or avoid it) using the style your number calls for. Do this for about 30 seconds.

#### STEP THREE:

Switch roles (“All the 1s will now make eye contact and then drop their gaze; all the 2s will avoid eye contact, the 3s will stare, and the 4s will make eye contact and look away on the level”) and repeat Step Two. Do a total of four rounds, so each person tries all four styles.



**Give cues for grounding between each round:** *That was great—everyone take a moment to breathe in slowly, and let it out on a slow count of three. Ready? In . . . and out.* Remind people not to chat; if necessary, point out that this is an emotional response to discomfort, and they can discuss it in a moment.

## DISCUSS:

- How did you feel while performing each style of eye contact? Was one form more natural for you? Which was least comfortable?
- Could you tell what others peoples' styles were? What was your impression of others when they looked down? When they kept their gaze level? When they stared?
- Notice the effect of having a large number of people moving around in close proximity. This usually raises people's emotional arousal level (stress level). And of course, it's the kind of situation you're probably going to be in during an action.

Note: This activity can be adapted for non-sighted participants, or those who use mobility aids, by having them move through a group of individuals (standing still) in ways that feel more confident/more tentative. Sighted and non-sighted attendees can say what they notice that projects confidence or hesitation—speed, how a cane or other aid is used, verbal cues, etc.

## TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS ACTIVITY:

- Eye contact, gait, and posture send subtle but powerful **social signals** that influence the way people regard us and interact with us.
- Just as important, these things can also make **us** feel a certain way. Making assertive eye contact often helps people feel more confident. Submissive patterns may make us feel “weak” or uncomfortable.
- We can make choices to feel more powerful, look more powerful, or seem less threatening.
- “Appropriate” eye contact depends in part on cultural expectations. We don’t want to violate people’s sense of decorum by staring, but we can push back against cultural expectations—for example, that some people (women, people of a certain ethnicity, disabled people) should demonstrate submissive gaze and movement patterns.

## Communicating a boundary

We sometimes refer to this activity as the “invisible wall.” It’s best to explain and demonstrate each step:

1. From a standing position, move one foot back slightly to create a stable stance.
2. Hold your hands up in front of you at chest level, palms facing forward and fingertips up, in a “stop” gesture. Keep your facial expression neutral.
3. Make eye contact with the person approaching your boundary, and say, firmly, “*Stop.*”

Have everyone do this together, several times. Then ask everyone to find a partner.



Form your group into two lines, each person standing across the room from their partner. Make sure everyone has enough room behind them to take a step backward.

Explain the steps of the activity:

**STEP ONE:**

When the instructor gives the word, one line will walk toward their partners. Partners maintain eye contact.

**STEP TWO:**

When the people who are standing still feel that their partner is close enough, they will move one foot back, raise their hands, and say "Stop." **They won't say anything else.**

Partners will STOP WHEN TOLD TO DO SO!

**STEP THREE:**

When the instructor gives the word, everyone will return to their starting positions. Repeat Step Two. Then, change roles and let the other side put up their invisible wall. Have each side try the invisible wall at least twice.

When you're done, try this or another emotional grounding method: Pull your toes up and press the heels of your feet into the ground, feeling the connection there as you pause, then release. Repeat two more times.

**Coaching, as needed:**

- Remind people to keep a neutral expression. Try not to smile, laugh or talk.
- If you notice people taking a step forward instead of backward as they put up their hands, point this out. Ask how each is different (stepping forward can look more assertive or aggressive; stepping back creates more distance).
- Remind people to make their invisible wall at about chest level. Putting the hands up higher, near eye level, can look threatening. As long as we're not already in a physical defense situation, chest level will usually be more effective.

**DISCUSS:**

How did you feel when you used the invisible wall to set a boundary? How did it feel to approach someone and have them use the invisible wall?

**TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS ACTIVITY:**

- This method of setting a boundary is powerful because it uses **message alignment** and **message repetition**:
  - Being clear with **yourself**: What do I want from this interaction?
  - Sending a clear, strong **physical** message: direct eye contact, balanced stance, universal hand gesture.
  - Using a short, simple **verbal** message and an assertive tone of voice.
  - **Not mixing** messages by smiling, speaking tentatively, or making our body appear smaller.



- When we take action to set and defend our boundaries, we tend to feel stronger and more capable.
- We also remind ourselves and others that we deserve respect.
- You can always change the message if you decide that's best, but avoiding mixed messages reduces the odds of misunderstanding.
- We can modify elements of the invisible wall as desired. For example, the body position used is sometimes called a “five-point stance,” meaning your partner can see five points on your body: the forehead, both shoulders, and both hips. This stance is direct and assertive. If we want to de-escalate an interaction, we can move into a “three-point stance,” by shifting one foot, hip, and shoulder back slightly. We can make a more placatory gesture by dropping our hands slightly and turning the palms toward the floor (de-escalation is covered in more detail below).

## Saying No (Broken Record)

Saying “No” is a basic act of self-defense. It establishes a clear boundary, and can keep small-scale annoyances from turning into full-fledged safety problems. Even the legal system recognizes its importance! For example, you have the right to tell police, “I’m going to remain silent. I want to talk to a lawyer.”

Most of us don’t enjoy saying “No,” so we avoid it. That makes it all the more important to practice this skill.

Everyone will need a partner for this activity. One person will be asking questions, and the other will be saying No. Each person will have a turn in each role.

### STEP ONE:

Decide who will ask first. For a large group, we often pass out cards or slips of paper with different scenarios written on them, because some people are more comfortable if they have something to hold and look at while asking. Here are some possibilities:

- Can you give me a ride to Alice’s party tomorrow night?
- Can you take my Friday night shift for me?
- Can I use your phone for a minute?
- Can you babysit my kids next weekend?
- Do you have money for bus fare?
- Can I borrow your notes from class?
- Do you want to go have lunch after this workshop?
- Can I buy you a drink?

### STEP TWO:

Have the asker spend 60 seconds asking their partner for whatever their scenario calls for. The asker’s goal is to get their partner to say Yes. They can ask in as many different ways as they can think of—but they should not threaten, yell or be abusive.

The other person answers “No” to all the questions. That’s **ALL** they do! Don’t smile or laugh, but do maintain eye contact with the asker.



### **STEP THREE:**

Switch roles and repeat Step Two.

### **STEP FOUR:**

When you finish, try an emotional grounding technique to transition to the discussion.

### **DISCUSS:**

- Which was harder, asking questions, or saying “No”? What was hard about each?
- Discuss the strategies people used to try to get you to change your “No” to a “Yes.”
- Why do we feel like we need to explain or apologize?

### **TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS ACTIVITY:**

- We sometimes call this technique the “broken record” treatment. It’s similar to ignoring a person you don’t want to engage with, but slightly more assertive.
- This activity can feel very stressful in part because many of us don’t make a habit of saying “No” to people, so it feels uncomfortable. Another problem is that we don’t know how to react gracefully when someone says “No” to us. We may feel embarrassed or ashamed. As a society, we need to do a better job of modeling respect for boundaries, which means being able to accept a “No” without feeling injured.
- When you are faced with persistent attempts to override a boundary you have set, keep in mind what YOU want from the interaction. Very often, people who don’t respect boundaries will try to focus attention on what THEY want, or try to twist the situation so that your goals and theirs appear to be the same.

### **Saying No to cops: Call-and-response practice**

We find this activity easiest if the workshop leader “plays” the “police officer” and all the participants answer “I’m going to remain silent. I want to speak to an attorney” in unison.

The “cop” can say things like:

- It’ll be a lot easier for you if you just tell us your name and employer.
- We can keep you in the county jail for a long time.
- Your friends here are probably going to be deported; you don’t want to end up in front of an immigration judge, do you?

### **Preparing scripts in advance:**

If your group is prepping for a specific action, they may want to come up with some phrases that might be handy to repeat—for example, if they expect pushback from a nearby business owner, they might want to practice repeating “We have a right to be here, and we’re not leaving.”



Here are some other phrases that have produced really powerful feelings when practiced in unison at workshops:

- That's not OK.
- I'm not comfortable sharing that information.
- I'm not discussing that with you.
- That's not funny.
- You don't speak for me.
- Stop bothering her.
- I don't listen to bullies.
- I think for myself.

### **Using distance for safety**

Distance is often the simplest means of increasing safety in a conflict. This activity will give you a new way to think about distance, and how it relates to safety. You'll do this with a partner.

You might start by pointing out how we've already used distance: When we step back instead of forward during the invisible wall activity, we are making a very slight adjustment in distance which produces significant safety benefits—it can take us out of striking range.

#### **Activity: Four Distances**

Have people partner up, and line up as they did for the invisible wall activity. Explain the four steps of this drill:

##### **STEP ONE:**

In the first stage, one line will advance until their partners tell them to stop (they can use the invisible wall to signal the boundary if they like). Once stopped, both partners should stand silently and focus on their bodily response.

##### **STEP TWO:**

In the second stage, the advancing party will take one more step, **inside** their partner's comfort zone. Again, they'll pause—at least three slow breaths—and absorb what that feels like.

##### **STEP THREE:**

In the third stage, you'll ask those who have been standing still to adjust their stance and positioning so they are more comfortable. They might pivot or back up, for example.

##### **STEP FOUR:**

In the fourth stage, everyone in the advancing group will take three big steps back.

Direct everyone through the four steps, then take a moment to re-ground. Switch roles and repeat all four steps.

Help people focus on their physical and emotional responses to this activity by keeping the atmosphere, and your own instructions, low-key and calm.



When you have finished, try an emotional grounding method from the list.

### **DISCUSS:**

- What physical cues did your body send when your partner stepped inside your comfort zone (maybe flushing, shallow breathing, elevated pulse, sweating)?
- What was going through your mind? Most of us (especially women) have been socialized to ignore or stifle our gut reactions.
- Was your partner's comfort zone larger or smaller than yours? Different people are comfortable with different degrees of closeness. Some of this is cultural, some is personal, some has to do with gender or age or other attributes.
- What happened to the energy level when the advancing group moved back?

### **TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS ACTIVITY:**

- The sensations we experience when our comfort zone is breached are early warnings from our bodies saying that the situation could become unsafe. Most of the time, it won't. But we want to hear that little voice when it says, "I'm uncomfortable; I don't feel safe." We want to be aware of what our body is expecting and preparing for.
- At a rally, you're likely to be in close proximity to a lot of strangers. Even if everyone is friendly, this can raise stress levels.
- This also means that moving away from a crowd, or from an individual, is an easy way to reduce stress levels. Simply increasing distance can **decrease emotional activation** and reduce chances of violence.
- Notice also that distance makes it **harder to reach or hear** the other party. Obstacles and third party interveners can serve a similar function by making it harder for parties in conflict to hear/see/reach each other.



## IV. Movement Safety & Tactics

### Situational awareness

#### ACTIVITY: Identifying hazards and opportunities

- Ask everyone to close their eyes.
- Now, ask them to point to an exit from your space (or, if you are outside, to a gate in the fence, a water fountain, or some other landmark).
- Ask them to point to a few other things: something red, the stairs, etc.

Open eyes and discuss: What have we already noticed about the space we're in?

**Daily practice opportunity:** This is a good way to build a habit of curiosity rather than fear. Whenever you go into a new building, try to take a different way out. Make it a game to find extra exits.

#### ACTIVITY: Scouting

- Singly or in pairs/groups, send everyone to scout your space for useful information as if it were the site of a direct action. Look for exits, hazards, and resources.
- When they come back, set out a scenario. For example: "Let's pretend we are outside this building protesting a band that has neo-Nazi ties. All of a sudden, we see a bunch of cop cars coming up the street. They start to turn into the driveway here. What are our options?" You can also run through scenarios involving counter-protesters, or whatever you feel is most likely to be an issue in your area.
- Run through various possibilities: "There's a hole in the fence behind the building, if people need to escape kettling. The next building over is hosting an event, the people there are potential witnesses. The parking lot only has one exit, so we might be able to block the cop cars from leaving if we wanted to." And so on.

#### Situational factors at a protest:

- Who is involved in this protest?
- Is there a history of violence at actions around this cause, or in this location?
- Map/scout the area ahead of time—online or in-person.
- Identify exits (doors, alleys, buildings, any path to more space/less threat)
- Identify threats (law enforcement, disruptors, weapons, crowd pressure)
- Identify hazards (concrete, steps, traffic, weather, dead ends/bottlenecks)
- Identify advantages (High ground, accessible seating, restrooms, water, medics, cover)

### Crowd safety and mobility

The skills in this section will help you stay on your feet, unified, and in the space you choose to defend.

#### ACTIVITY: Push defense



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- Review the invisible wall stance, above, and modify it to a slightly lower stance, ready to receive a strong push from the front. The keys to this stance are keeping it low, keeping one foot further back, and maintaining some width to the stance (feet hip- or shoulder-width apart).
- Have half your group stand in a line, shoulder to shoulder. Ask the other half to act as “cops.”
- Using body shields (large sparring pads) if available, have your “cops” slowly advance, letting the protest line practice bracing and pushing back. A good visualization is to tell them “Imagine you’re about to push a refrigerator.” If people seem comfortable, ask the “cops” to increase the level of force a bit. They may also “bump” a bit with the shields (you’ll often see cops do this with riot shields).
- If you don’t have practice pads or body shields, people can push arm to arm, but go very slowly and don’t ramp up the force too much.
- Switch sides and repeat.
- Ask people how that felt. They’re often surprised at how much resistance they can muster against forceful pushing.

### **ACTIVITY: Stack**

“Stack” is a shorthand term for specific formations used in an action. In this activity, we’re going to “stack the line” of protesters we used in the previous pushing activity, to reinforce the protesters in direct contact with the police.

Shorten your lines of protesters and “cops” and have the extra people line up behind the front-line protesters. Ideally, have at least three people “stacked” in this way.

XXXXX – “cop” line, facing protesters

OOOOO – front line of protesters, facing cops

1 1 1 1 1 – protesters “stacked” behind front line

2 2 2 2 2 – protesters “stacked” behind second line

< you can create a deeper stack, with more people, if you have them!

People in the “stack” should put one or two hands on the shoulder(s) of the person in front of them.

Repeat the “cop” pushing/bumping activity, and let everyone practice the reinforced resistance provided by the stacked lines. Be sure to switch positions so everyone has a turn in the front, and everyone who is acting as a “cop” gets a chance to be in the protest line as well.

### **Stacking for mobility**

A “stack” can also be a mobility tactic. A stack of three people is good for safety and maneuvering, but more can work too. This formation helps people keep together when moving through a chaotic environment. Practice moving around your space in a “stack:

Put people in groups of three, and have them stand one behind the other. The second and third people in the line should put one or both hands on the shoulder(s) of the person in



front of them. Practice moving forward, left, right, and backwards. Notice that the second person in the stack will have more situational awareness than the front person, because they aren't having to choose the path. They can communicate what they see going on. The third or last person in the stack can keep an eye out behind.

### **ACTIVITY: Pyramid formation**

Have the three people in a stack stand with their backs together, and lock arms at the elbow, so they form a triangle, with everyone facing out. This formation provides stability to all three people, and prevents anyone having their back exposed. It's good in a chaotic situation where you need to stay vertical and assess the environment.

### **ACTIVITY: Surround**

This is a similar tactic to the U- and O- formations commonly taught for intervention and de-escalation (see below). A stack of three or six people surround either a target of violence, to protect them, or an aggressor, to isolate them or move them further away from their target.

### **ACTIVITY: De-arrest/target denial**

This is a way to use stacked lines to prevent police from randomly snatching and arresting peaceful protesters.

- Set up a protest line with a "stack" of two or three people behind each front-line person.
- Have the front line lock arms, or put their arms around each other's shoulders.
- Have the second and third lines reinforce the front line with their hands on the shoulders in front of them.
- Have a few people act as "cops."

### **Explain this part carefully before walking through it:**

- The "cops" are going to walk slowly along the front line
- At some point, one "cop" is going to single out one protester in the front line – by pointing at them, or verbally ("The one with the braids!")
- The rest of the "cops" will then try to grab the targeted person and pull them out of the line.
- **As soon as the target is identified**, the person immediately behind them in the stack **grabs them around the waist and pulls them back**.
- The people behind them help. The targeted person is passed back to a safe place.
- **At the same time**, the front-line people who were to the right and left of the targeted person de-link their arms, to let the target move back. Then they **immediately** join together and link up, to close the gap in the line.
- Lastly, someone from the back of the stack comes forward on the side to join the front line on the end, and keep it from growing shorter.



## V. De-escalation

We often put the basic de-escalation strategies on posters, so everyone can refer to them as we go through these activities.

De-escalation is a tactical approach to reducing the violence, or the potential for violence, in a conflict.

- It's an assertive option, a way to take charge of a situation. De-escalation doesn't mean humoring a bully or letting a violent person have their own way.
- It's a **short-term solution** to reduce the immediate risk of violence.
- It's not the same thing as conflict resolution or mediation.

De-escalation strategies can be helpful when someone is upset but still able to regain control of their emotions and calm down. In other situations, where the angry person has something to gain by being violent, or is getting a lot of emotional fulfillment from their violent behavior, de-escalation might not be your first choice of response. That said, de-escalation can work even on extremely angry people. The more you practice it, the more likely you are to have success with it.

In order to help someone else regain control of their emotions, we have to have control of our own. So, the first skill we'll practice is emotional grounding in a conflict scenario. Then we'll move on to de-escalating such a situation.

### De-escalation tools

All of the skills we've already practiced are part of our de-escalation toolbox:

- managing your own emotions in the moment
- setting boundaries
- communicating clear, unmixed messages (body, face, and voice)
- using physical elements like distance to help reduce tension

Here are some additional skills we can use when de-escalating:

- **Stance and position:** Having a path to safety; being aware of the crowd and terrain around you; adopting non-threatening body postures (stand at a 45-degree angle rather than face-to-face). Small shifts in our body presentation send signals that are more likely to elicit the response we want from people.
- **Active listening:** Making assertive eye contact (but not staring), nodding, reflecting back what they say ("I hear that you are very upset.")
- **Controlling tone and volume:** Starting at a lower volume than them and making them work to hear you, OR, matching their tone/volume at first, then bringing it down.
- **Expressing concern:** "Are you OK? Was anyone hurt?" Ask in different ways to shift their attention. Expect to repeat a lot when talking to an emotionally agitated person.
- **Short questions or requests:** "Can I get you some water? Would you like me to call someone? It's safest if you leave this way. Can I ask you to look at me and not



at him?" It's usually best to avoid giving orders, which tends to escalate tension.

- **Shifting the environment:** Walk away from them, remove the target, move them through a doorway or other threshold, stand up or sit down.

**NOTE: De-escalating people when the conflict is directly related to structural violence is more complicated than an everyday conflict.**

- People defending violent or abusive systems may enjoy anger and violence. Or, they may feel their livelihood depends on defending the system.
- People opposing abusive systems feel they are fighting for their lives. They are in survival mode.

Success with the former might involve invoking **accountability** ("You're being filmed"), or appealing to **authority** or **expertise** ("Officer, is this what your training calls for? I know you're going to behave professionally here.")

With the latter, we can try appealing to **solidarity** or **vulnerability**: "Our beef is bigger than this one officer/day. We need to organize for this fight, not take it on individually. Let's find someone to connect you with." Let the person know they are not alone, and that people who care about them want them to stay safe.

You may have other tools that you've used to de-escalate agitated people (some workplaces provide this training). If so, add them to the list.

### **De-escalation and trauma**

Some people are already skilled at de-escalation, and can do it intuitively. If you are, it's a good idea to think about why. People who grew up in dysfunctional families, for example, often have highly developed de-escalation skills, but using those skills can be extremely draining emotionally, because of associations with past trauma. Similarly, people who belong to groups that are stereotyped as "dangerous" may spend much of their lives de-escalating. For instance, a tall, powerfully built person may adopt explicitly non-threatening body language whenever they step into an elevator.

De-escalation is a valuable skill, but it requires intense emotional work. We live in a culture where violence is unfairly directed against certain groups of people, which means that the burden of de-escalation is also unfairly distributed. Whatever your own background, we hope that practicing de-escalation, in your daily life as well as in protest, will make you more aware of this burden of structural violence. The expectation that some individuals must continually absorb or manage other people's anger is an injustice we need to be conscious of, and fight to end.



## Emotional grounding during confrontation

### Teaching Tip: Coaching scenario practice

In any scenario activity, beginners should be given a **specific skill** to deploy or, if they are choosing from among several skills, should **have help remembering those options** (a handout to refer to, for example). Instructors and other students should support and coach them as needed by making suggestions, reminding them to go at their own pace, and offering encouragement. Go **slowly, especially at first**; let learners explore the options they are trying out, and the emotional and physical response they have when deploying each skill.

"Realistic" scenario practice (real-time, with lots of fluidity and change) should come only after a learner has experienced some solid successes and feels comfortable using the skill. Rushing this process can create a lot of discomfort and feelings of failure, which make it harder to practice the skill.

This activity is often called a "hassle line." Have people partner up and stand in two lines, facing their partner. Remind everyone to only interact with their partner during the drill, so it doesn't become too chaotic. Give them one of these scenarios (or create your own):

**Scenario 1:** You are standing on the sidewalk outside your congressional representative's office, holding a sign protesting their recent vote in Congress. Your partner will pretend to be a counter-protester.

**Scenario 2 (more local, more specific):** You are in Boerne, Texas at the Civic Center where Ted Cruz is holding a town hall. People in one line are silently holding up signs protesting a recent vote in the Senate. The people in the other line are members of the audience who support Cruz and are angry about the signs.

### Instructions for the aggressor:

The aggressor should approach the peaceful protester and heckle them. They might say things like "We don't want you here. What gives you the right to wave that sign? You are going to hell. Why do you hate America?"

The first few times you do this activity, it's best to **avoid personal insults, threats, or slurs**. You can always build up to that later, if everyone trusts each other and feels they would benefit from more pressure. Initially, you just want to help your partner be successful at their task. Give "aggressors" a little time to think up some things to say.

### Instructions for the peaceful protester:

Maintain your calm regardless of what your partner says or does. Try, as best you can, to work through any stress responses you have, physical or emotional. Use any emotional grounding method that works (this is an activity where a poster may be helpful to people):

- Breathe, slowly, paying attention to the physical sensation of breath going in and out of your body.
- Count to 10, or 5, or 3.
- Use positive self-talk: "I can do this. I am committed to nonviolence. I have practiced



this. I'm doing the right thing. I am standing up for those who cannot stand up for themselves."

- "Soft focus," either ignoring your antagonist entirely, or looking "through" them.
- Assertive focus, looking calmly and directly at your antagonist, but still not responding verbally or in any other way.
- Noticing any physical or emotional reactions (such as elevated heartbeat, flushing skin, shallow breathing, or irritation, anger, or fear), naming that reaction silently to yourself, and setting it aside for later consideration.
- Critiquing your antagonist's performance and arguments silently to yourself (once you have tried the aggressor's role, you'll see that it is in fact somewhat difficult to come up with things to say!)

Run the scenario for about 60 seconds. Then take a moment to breathe, and re-ground. Switch roles, and try another 60-second round.

### **DISCUSS:**

What worked for you? What didn't? What do you notice in your role as the aggressor? Is it easy or hard, and why?

### **De-escalating an aggressor**

Use the same set-up as the "hassle line" activity, but spread the line out as needed to give people room to use body language and positioning. You can keep the same partners or choose new ones.

**Scenario 1:** You are at a rally and someone is speaking to the crowd. A counter-protester comes up next to you and begins yelling at the speaker. Other people in the crowd are distracted and irritated.

**Scenario 2 (more local and specific):** We are at a pro-immigration rally at Auditorium Shores in Austin. Everyone in Line B has volunteered to help keep people safe, and is trying to keep the sidewalk clear for foot traffic, which the police insisted had to happen. People in Line A are pushing a baby in a stroller; they disagree with our stance on immigration and think we shouldn't be here.

#### **Instructions for the aggressor:**

The aggressor/counter-protester can say anything disruptive (you don't have to actually yell, if the setting you're practicing in would make that awkward). Try to react honestly to your partner's attempts to manage the situation: If you feel yourself losing steam, go ahead and back off. As with the previous activity, it's best not to use profanity, slurs, or threats, especially at first. If you want to practice with more violent language, we recommend building up to it over a few sessions.

#### **Instructions for the peaceful protester:**

As calmly as possible, do what you can to reduce the tension in the situation. If one approach doesn't work, try something else.

Do the scenario for 60 seconds, then take a moment to process/re-ground, and switch roles



for another 60-second round.

## **DISCUSS:**

Allow a few minutes for discussing what worked, what didn't, and why.

## **Intervention tools**

We often summarize Intervention skills on a wall poster (see "Intervention Poster" in Section Three), and review it before we begin practicing these skills.

Intervention is the act of inserting yourself into a conflict that didn't originally involve you. It is **inherently more risky** than skills we have covered so far. Generally, **the earlier you intervene** in a conflict, the lower the risk, and the greater the odds of success.

Intervention can have different goals:

- To prevent/disrupt/reduce violence ("Stop pushing him! You are being recorded!")
- To divert violence from its intended target or minimize its impact ("I'm sorry they're being so rude. Would you like me to walk across the street with you?")
- To call attention to violent behavior by naming and rejecting it ("We don't talk to each other disrespectfully in this community")

When intervening, you might seek to de-escalate tensions and help one or both parties calm down. Or, you may simply seek to increase the distance between the two parties. As with de-escalation, remember that intervention is a **temporary solution**. The goal is to reduce the odds of immediate violence. The goal is not to make everyone love each other.

The goal is also not to be a hero! As we tell workshop participants, "You're not Dolly Parton, everyone doesn't love you." Even when you successfully de-escalate a situation, people involved can have hurt feelings, and they may direct them toward the de-escalator. Expect this; it's a temporary reaction to the discomfort of having to disengage from a conflict. It isn't about you at all.

### **When we intervene, we may use**

- Our grounding skills.
- Our boundary-setting skills (verbal and physical).
- Our de-escalation skills.
- Additional tactics that can vary according to the setting (see below).

As with de-escalation, there are many variables that will affect the outcome, such as the gender, age, size, and other identities of the people engaged in conflict, and of the intervener.

As we go over the skills summarized on the intervention poster, we ask about scenarios where we might use each tactic, and also whether people have experience with the tactics:

- **Ignore the aggressor:** Note that we practiced this in some of the earlier activities.
- **Use broken record/boundary setting phrases.** Come up with some that you think would work well for you. "I'm a volunteer, we're working to keep this event safe,



- could you help out by moving along?" "It's safest if you leave this way."
- **Singing** is similar to broken record but has HUGE emotional grounding benefits and makes your group more cohesive. And it can send a message, is more easily sustained for long periods, and is harder to disrupt. Note that singing is easier to sustain than chanting.
  - **Target denial/creating distance:** Moving marchers quickly past a counter-protester, asking them to stay focused on our action, reminding them why we are here.
  - **Talk to the aggressor** and directly address the violent speech or behavior: "We won't let you hurt him/her. People are recording you. This is not the day/place/time for violence."
  - **Distract the aggressor:** "Hey, I like your hat. Is red your favorite color? It looks good on you. Tell me about your sign. Wow, you know a lot about this. Where did you learn all this?"
  - **Talk to/move the target:** "Oh hi, don't I know you from . . .?" "Sorry about that; please don't let it spoil your day." "Come on, let's go over to the shade."
  - **Step between an aggressor and target.** NOTE THAT THIS CAN BE VERY RISKY. One way to avoid seeming confrontational is to stand to the side of the people in conflict, then pivot to a 45-degree angle with one person or the other. It's usually best to keep hands visible and below face level. Try not to touch or grab the attacker. Choose one person to talk to.
  - **Form a line between aggressors and their object.** You can stand apart, hold hands, or link arms. Some situations are safest if you alternate the direction the people in your line are facing: one person faces the problem, the next person face the target, and so on. Stay grounded physically —knees bent, back straight or leaning forward slightly— and emotionally: breathe, sing, talk to your allies, talk to those you are blocking.
  - You can also **sit in a line**, which used to be recommended against police because it is not threatening. However, under current conditions, **be very wary of doing anything that reduces your mobility around law enforcement.**
  - Another option is for **everyone** to **film the aggressor.**
  - **U-formation around an aggressor (it's easier to demonstrate this than to describe it):** With allies, form a line and move single-file between the aggressor and their target. Slowly bend the line into a U-shape, with the open part of the U facing in the direction you want the aggressor to move (note the importance of advance planning here: you need to **think first about where you want to move the person**). DO NOT SURROUND THE AGGRESSOR: ALWAYS give them an exit. Moving slowly and calmly, shuffle the U forward to shift the aggressor toward an exit or away from their target. Say things to the aggressor like "This way please! Please watch your step! We'll get you out of here safely."
  - **O-formation around a target (also best to demonstrate):** With allies, form a line between an aggressor and their target. Draw the ends of the line in to encircle the target, then move them away and re-absorb them into the crowd
  - **"Puppy pile":** **Drape bodies** over anyone being dragged away or targeted, to thwart attackers. (Note that civil protest veterans don't advise doing this if police are making arrests; it can trigger increased police violence.)



## Intervening in a conflict

You might want to begin by **modeling** intervention tactics for the whole group. We have volunteers stand in as parties in conflict. For the most part, we pose them in a specific position, like a tableau, and then ask them to "freeze" so we can game out different options. Here's a typical scenario:

We are at a protest outside a campaign rally. The crowd is about evenly split between supporters of the candidate, and those who oppose them. Two people are confronting each other and beginning to act like they want to fight (you might see raised fists, chest-bumping, shouting with a finger pointed in the other person's face, etc.).

We refer everyone to the skills list/poster and ask what we might try to make the situation safer (remembering that the goal is not to "solve" the conflict). Then we walk through each suggestion, considering the risks, the variables introduced by the gender, age, size, etc. of the people in the scenario, and asking for feedback from the people acting out conflict (for example, "So, if I put my arm between you, and I face her, how does that change the situation for you? Is it harder to see her? Does it make me seem like a threat to you?").

We also swap out different "actors" in the scenario, to see how the dynamic changes with height, age, gender, etc. As the power dynamic between the people involved changes, so do the tactics we might want to try.

We also want to remember our **verbal** options. Ask: "What kinds of things could I say as I do this? What could I say to connect with this person and help them calm down? What would a boundary-setting phrase be for this situation?"

### DISCUSS:

Keep **context** in mind: how might bystanders or allies react to our intervention attempts? For example, if you are trying to de-escalate counter-protesters at a march, and turn to face them and talk to them, the people marching past you will see something that looks like a conflict. They may try to come to your "defense," and escalate the situation.

Of course, bystanders and allies can also be enlisted to help. The more specific your directions or requests are, the better.

Similarly, when there is conflict between protesters and counter-protesters, we often have better luck engaging with the person on "my side"—the one attending in support of the rally's goals. People who show up with the intent of peacefully demonstrating their support for a cause have some motivation to calm down and act with self-control. People who come to provoke and cause trouble are less likely to want to calm down.

Since people tend to want a lot of coaching and discussion with intervention skills, we usually run one scenario at a time for the rest of this section. We set up a scenario with volunteer "fighters" and one person walks through the intervention options with help from the rest of the group. Typically everyone wants to walk through situations they have encountered before, heard about, or seen in videos or news clips.



## Coordinated Response Scenarios

If we are training a group for a specific event or action, we will collectively walk through some scenarios that may come up, such as

1. A young woman is speaking to your group; a man in the crowd with a handheld video camera starts heckling her.
2. Counter-protesters are shouting slurs at a man who is standing quietly holding a sign. The man is not upset, but people around you are getting angry on his behalf.
3. Some young people near you are shouting rude things at the police, and then one of them throws a water bottle that bounces on the ground near you.
4. Two Trump supporters are standing on the edge of your rally with a big Trump banner. A man with a big American flag is yelling at them and waving the flag in front of them, telling everyone to ignore them but also arguing with them.
5. A counter-protester rushes onstage at a rally and grabs the microphone.
6. Law enforcement begins to roughly shove/knock down protesters.

## VI. Physical Self-defense

We have added this section for several reasons. First of all, Empowerment Self Defense, which forms the core of this training, centers physical self-defense as a way to build agency and confidence. It is central to ESD practice wisdom, which was developed by marginalized communities, and the training is incomplete without it. We urge everyone to take an ESD-based self-defense class in addition to the training in this workbook. See the ESD provider directory at <https://www.empowermentsd.org/find-a-practitioner>

Secondly, society often forces marginalized people to choose between the violence of giving up their space, identity, and rights, or the violence of being assaulted for trying to hold them. When society treats you violently no matter what you do, it is not inappropriate to fight back. Physical self-defense is an important way to resist and survive.

It is increasingly common for activists to be attacked physically, and few people are prepared to suffer a physical assault passively. Passive nonviolent protest requires planning and coordination to create change. It is important that we know how to defend ourselves, whether we choose to do so or not.

Finally, we may prioritize nonviolence as a way to distinguish ourselves from those we stand in opposition to. But people who are cruel, selfish, sadistic, and violent are often **terrified of their own vulnerability**. Their obsession with strength and dominance is part of a fundamental denial of weakness, a horror associated with even the thought of being vulnerable. If we truly want to oppose bullies and fascists, we have an obligation to study human strengths and weaknesses—ours and theirs—and embrace our awareness of vulnerability. That is one way to ensure that we do not become like them.

Remember too that sometimes the most compassionate thing we can do for another person is to stop them from hurting us. **This goes for our authority figures and power structures too.**



## A note on violence by law enforcement

### Police violence is a very real risk.

- Cops are generally trained to escalate; their command structure and procedures encourage it.
- Most have little or no training in emotional regulation.
- “Non-lethal” weapons commonly used by law enforcement can and do kill people, regularly.

**Assume that you have no right to self-defense against cops.** What few rights you might actually have under the law are unlikely to ever be recognized by the legal system. Even shielding your body from blows can be charged as “resisting arrest.”

But remind yourself that **cops are still human**, though they might not want us to think so. They share all the human vulnerabilities discussed below. When we refrain from defending ourselves against their violence, we are extending them a kind of grace, even if they do not appreciate or deserve it.

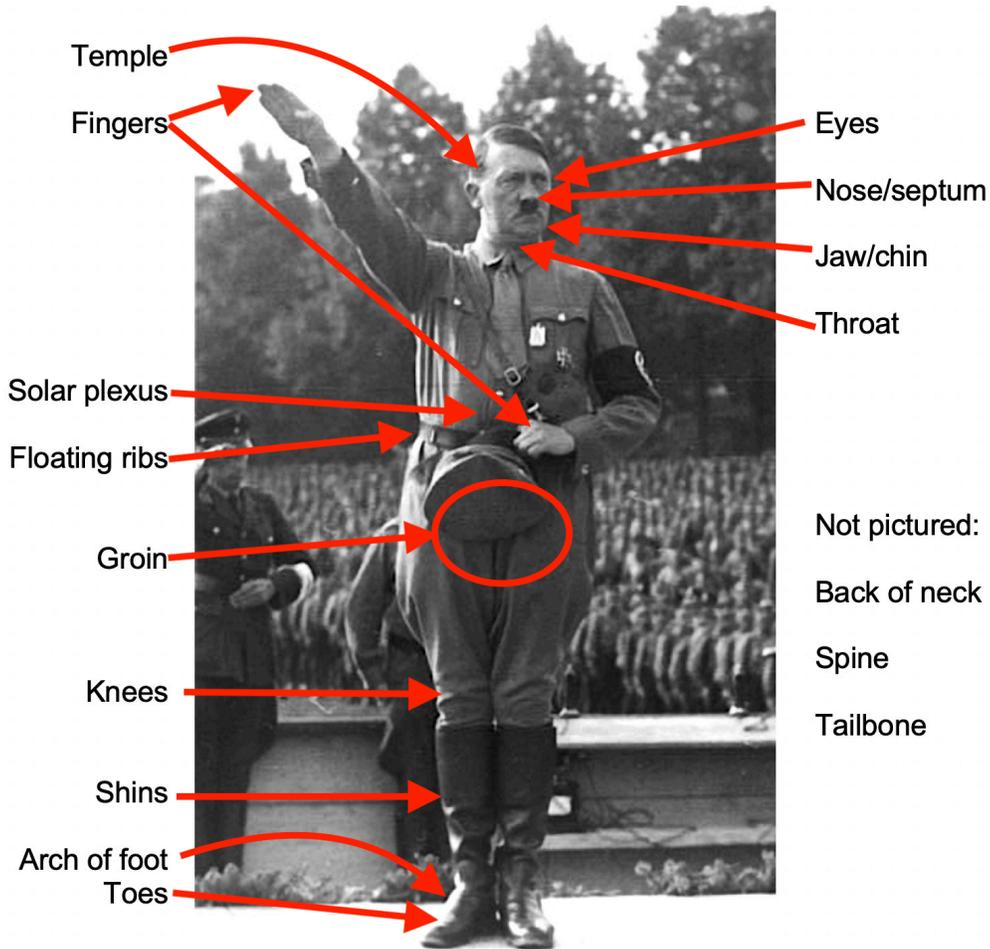
## Blocking and shielding

These basic moves can help reduce damage from physical attacks to the head and upper body.

- **Protect your head and spine, especially if you fall.**
- You can use a “turtle block” to protect your head and neck: both arms up, with your elbows near your ears, hand cupped behind your head.
- You can do the same block with just one arm, leaving the other hand free (to hold onto an ally, brace against something for balance, etc.).
- If you end up on the ground, protect your head: You can use a turtle block or, if you are on your side, let your head rest directly on the ground and put both arms over your head on the exposed side.
- If you end up on the ground, **protect your spine**. If possible, wiggle your back up against a curb or something else solid.
- If you are on the ground and dealing with an attacker, try to keep your feet between you and them, and kick towards them to keep them away from your head.



## Self-defense TARGETS on the human body (name each aloud while pointing to it):



## Self-defense weapons

- The general advice for self-defense is, when possible, to use “hard weapons” (fingernails, fists, elbows) against “soft targets” (eyes, throat, groin).

Try forming these weapons and striking an imaginary target first. Then move on to striking padded targets, if you have some. Go slow at first, and build up speed and power as you become comfortable with the technique.

- Fingers/fingernails: use to rake across eyes; push thumbs into eye sockets.
- Palm heel: pull your fingers back and strike forward with the bottom of your palm, where the long bones of your arm reinforce the strike. You can strike straight into the nose or upward, under the chin.
- Hammer-fist: Make a fist and drop it downward as if you are banging on a table. This strike can be used downward (onto the nose), or sideways (into the temple or throat/Adam’s apple).



- Elbows: Good for close fighting and angled strikes. You can use your elbow to strike behind you (straight back to someone’s midsection or circling up and back to hit them in the face), in front of you (swinging across like a baseball bat) upward (under the chin) and downward.
- Knees: Use the knee to attack the groin—ideally, from very close in so that you can come up from underneath and strike upwards.
- Heels: Stomp on toes, arch of the foot, etc.

**Basic strikes.** Start off striking the air, then a padded target. Go slow and easy at first, and gradually increase power as you feel more comfortable:

- Palmheel strike to the jaw
- Hammerfist to the temple
- Elbow strike to the ribs or solar plexus
- Heel stomp to the feet or toes (place a target on the floor)

It’s not practical to teach physical self-defense in written format, but if you have some experience with these and other techniques, you can slowly build toward practicing scenarios that you feel are most likely to occur in your area. Remember to

- **Work with people you know and trust.**
- **Go slowly:** Practicing physical self-defense in a “slow flow” manner not only reduces the odds of injury, but gives your body and brain crucial experience with decision-making and targeting while free of high emotional activation. This will help your body recall techniques more readily if you need to defend yourself in a high-stakes setting.
- Focus on body positioning and noticing what targets are available, and which weapons can be brought to bear on them.
- Look for multiple options in every situation, and always practice multiple strikes—“Keep striking until you can get away.”
- Be wary of online self-defense instruction and videos. Some are useful, but they vary wildly in terms of efficacy and practicality.
- A maxim from self-defense is “**Don’t talk it through. Walk it through.**” Walking through a scenario can very quickly show you whether it’s feasible or not.

Some basic scenarios that people often want to practice include

### **Ground fighting:**

- Notice the available targets from the ground: The attacker’s knees, feet, and groin are easy to reach. So is their head, if they are bending over you.
- If you are being kicked, one option to reduce injury is to grab the kicker’s foot and hang on to it. The attacker will not be able to kick you with their other foot, because they’re standing on it. You can then either kick/strike another target (such as the groin) or simply hold on to the foot and roll, to take the attacker down.
- Basic targets and weapons are the same in ground fighting, but the applications will differ, so try everything out—slowly.



### **Multiple attackers:**

- If you are surrounded, you can look for a “weak point” in the group to break through and exit the situation.
- Explore ways to move around so that some of the attackers are blocked behind the others. Make them impede each other’s access to you. This lets you deal with one of them at a time.
- If you are surrounded, but not yet being physically attacked, you can try to identify a “leader” in the group and negotiate with them, to stall for time.

### **If your back is against a wall or you’re in a corner:**

- You may be able to pull an oncoming attacker’s head into the wall, forcefully.
- You can use a wall or corner to brace against, so you can kick or strike more securely and forcefully.

## **VII. Self-care and Debriefing**

Talk to your friends and allies, before and after protest actions. Talk to yourself too!

**What are your own tolerances for risk, injury, and emotional engagement?** Know that protesting may test some of your tolerances. Remember that this is OK and can help you become stronger and a better ally.

**What kind of activist do you aspire to be?** Are you committed to passive nonviolent resistance, civil disobedience, disruption? How do you define each of those terms? What kinds of actions would you be willing to engage in? What would you feel you could not support? Discuss these boundaries with your affinity group. You don’t all have to believe exactly the same things, but you need to be clear what you can and can’t support each other in.

**After the protest, check in with others** who participated and compare experiences. What did you observe and learn? How do you feel? What did you accomplish? What might you do differently next time?

**Normalize dissent.** Share your experiences. Public demands for redress are an integral part of U.S. history and civic life; we can build support for protest by talking about it as a rewarding, positive experience.

**Share what you learn** about effective safety practices during protest. **WE KEEP EACH OTHER SAFE**, and we’re all learning as we go.



## APPENDIX: Sample Posters and Handout

This is material we find helpful to post on the walls for reference during certain parts of workshops. You don't need to use posters at all, or to replicate these models exactly if you do use them. Look for places in your workshop plan where you ask people to apply multiple skills to a situation. Posters can be a good way for everyone to refer to and remember those skills as you walk through the activities.

### Emotional Grounding Poster

#### EMOTIONAL GROUNDING TECHNIQUES

Breathe (one option: 4 counts in, hold for 4, 4 counts out, hold for 4).

Count to 10.

Positive self-talk: "I can do this. I am committed to nonviolence. I have practiced this."

Focus on senses: Feel the ground under you, press palms together, touch fingertips together.

Observe/name your emotions and set them aside.

"Soft focus": ignore or look "through" the other person.

Assertive focus: look at them but do not respond in any way.

Touching/holding an object with emotional or spiritual significance.

Anything else that works for you.

### Aligning Messages Poster

#### ALIGNING MESSAGES

Think what you want to say

Direct eye contact

Serious expression, not smiling

Stable stance

Simple, consistent gestures

Use short, clear words

Firm tone of voice



## De-escalation Poster

### DE-ESCALATION CONCEPTS

GROUNDING: Breathe, count 10, positive self-talk, etc.

STANCE: Path to safety, "3-point" stance, stable footing

ACTIVE LISTENING: assertive eye contact, nodding, reflecting back what they say

CONTROL THE TONE: Go quieter/lower than them, make them work to hear you. OR, match their tone/volume at first, then bring it down.

EXPRESS CONCERN: "Are you OK?" "I can see you are upset." Ask in different ways. Expect to repeat a lot.

SHORT QUESTIONS/OFFERS: "Can I get you some water?" "Would you like me to call someone?"

SHIFT THE ENVIRONMENT: Move to another location, through a doorway/threshold, stand up or sit down

## Intervention Poster

### INTERVENTION TACTICS

Ignore/broken record/sing

Target denial/create distance

De-escalate, distract, or set a boundary with the aggressor

Talk to or move the target

"Angle in" between parties in conflict

Form a line between aggressor and target

U-formation around an aggressor

O-formation around a target

"Puppy pile" on target

Others you know or have tried?



# Basic Protest Safety Handout

## PROTEST SAFETY BASICS

Compiled by Susan "George" Schorn, Austin, Texas.

### Prepare in advance:

- Review the location, weather, hazards (traffic, stairs, curbs) and amenities (shade, water, seating, restrooms). What do you know about the cause and the organizers?
- Check additional resources (below) for phone safety, tear gas and other weapons, and police tactics.
- Pack light, but bring your essentials: ID, phone numbers, medications, glasses, hat/sunscreen, snacks/water, contact information (meetup address, phone numbers).
- Prepare your message: Consider "hands-free" signs or other convenient options, like sashes, sign on a ribbon to go behind your neck, folded signs (for easier carrying to/from event).
- Find a buddy or group to go with you, or plan to meet them.

### At the protest:

- Stay aware of weather, crowd movement, and the general mood.
- Rest/drink water/find shade **before** you think you need to!
- Notice when you are tensing up, and practice breathing/grounding.
- Model your values, de-escalate judiciously, and use distance to create safety.
- Stick together with those you know.

### When you get home:

- Talk about how it went!
- Think about any changes you want to make to your approach, or skills you want to practice.
- Tell friends about your experience, and encourage them to join you next time.

### Emotional grounding skills to practice

**Box Breathing:** Breathe in for 4 counts, hold steady for 4, breathe out for 4, hold for 4.

**Self-encouragement** (aloud or silent): "I can do this," short prayer, etc.

**Focus on your senses:** Feel the ground under your feet, press your palms together, etc.

**Touching an object** with spiritual or other significance (rosary, etc.)

Find what works for you, and practice daily in low-stakes environments.

### De-escalation skills to practice

**Distract:** "Excuse me, do you know what time it is?" Act absurd, sing or dance, etc.

**Delay/divide/distance:** Separate parties in conflict; block sightlines with scarves/signs.

**Dialogue:** Control your own voice, reflect back what they say, offer to pray with them.

**Document:** Film or photograph (the law recognizes this right, if you don't interfere).

**Delegate:** "Can you film this on your phone?" "Your buddy seems upset, can you help him?"

**Direct:** "Step back." "Take your hand off her arm." Use firm voice/body language.

**Diversity:** Use your identity and experience creatively (gender, size, age, authority, etc.).

Walk through scenarios with your friends and try different approaches. The more you practice, the easier it will be in a real-life situation.



## Allies and Diversity of Tactics

Some people may have more assertive tactics than you—**especially those who are at more risk because of their identity.**

- **Don't peace police:** Don't insist others abide by whatever your definition of "non-violence" or "appropriate" protest is. **They choose their tactics, you choose yours.**
- **Don't tone police:** Don't tell others, especially those whose identity puts them at greater risk, what they should or shouldn't say, or how to express their sense of injustice. **Let people be angry, let them feel what they feel.**

Instead,

- **Model** the behavior you want to see; don't lecture or argue.
- Discuss goals and tactics, and learn how other people are approaching the same problems.
- Use distance to create safety. If activity near you is making you feel unsafe, relocate or leave.

Remember,

- A primary goal of nonviolent protest is to **make structural violence visible.**
- Sometimes, people demand "de-escalation" because **seeing structural violence makes them uncomfortable**, and they want to make it invisible again. That moves us backwards.
- **Property damage is not violence.** Don't conflate humans with property, and don't accept media or government accounts of protest activity that do this! When we allow the powerful to equate property with people, we create a society in which people can be considered property.

## Additional Resources

The Breakdown: [How Do I Prepare My Phone for a Protest?](#): Keep your cellphone and communications safe.



[More detailed info](#) on communications safety during protest from the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF).



Physicians for Human Rights: [Preparing for, Protecting Against, and Treating Tear Gas and Other Chemical Irritant Exposure: A Protestor's Guide](#)



[Frontline Medics: Police formations:](#) How to avoid kettling and mass arrests.



[Understanding Riot Munitions:](#) Law enforcement has, and will continue to, kill protesters with "less than lethal" munitions. Know how to protect yourself.



[Self-defense and protest safety workshops](#) at Austin's Sun Dragon Martial Arts & Self Defense, NFP: Learn to protect yourself and others.



These tips are compiled from the Protest Safety and Efficacy workshops I have taught since 2016, using a violence reduction method known as empowerment self-defense, or ESD. ESD is a research-based, queer- and-POC-developed holistic approach to personal, interpersonal, and community safety. It uses somatic therapies to teach you to control your own fear and anger. It also addresses structural violence as a primary cause of harm to individuals. Thus it provides a clear lens for understanding political violence, and is a powerful tool for mobilizing resistance. For more information, visit the [Empowerment Self-Defense Alliance](https://www.empowermentsd.org/) at <https://www.empowermentsd.org/>. For periodic updates on my work, see <https://susanschorn.com/>.



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