



A Strong Climate Movement Needs Listening Circles

In order to be effective, resilient, clear-thinking activists who stay motivated, we need to have a safe place where we can express the many emotions that come up for us. Listening circles can be such a place. In listening circles, we can release painful emotions and heal from past and present experiences that are the source of the hurts. Listening to each other in a structured way, even for two or three minutes each, can also prevent disagreements between activists from becoming divisive. Listening circles can be “pop-up circles” that are quickly organized during an action to encourage the activists and clarify their thinking. They can also meet regularly to strengthen and unify the participants and the movement.

THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND EMOTIONS

The climate breakdown has already caused severe damage. It has led to many deaths and the extinction of many species. It causes wildfires, floods, droughts, sea level rise, extreme storms, and disease. It is having an increasing impact. This can be an overwhelming reality to take in.

As activists we have chosen to face the truth about the climate and about climate injustice. We know that working-class people, poor people, Native and Indigenous people and

Global Majority people,* subsistence farmers, and the whole of the Global South are the most affected by global warming although they have done the least to cause the problem. We know that over centuries the Global North has enriched itself at the expense of the Global South and that resources are still being transferred from poor to rich countries. This happens by means of interest payments on loans, exploitation of cheap labour, resource-stealing dressed up as trade, and more. Governments show little political will to solve the climate emergency and associated injustices.

* The peoples of Africa, Asia, the Pacific Islands, the Caribbean, and Latin America, and those descended from them, are over eighty percent of the global population. These people also occupy most of the global land mass.

Using the term “Global Majority (GM)” for these people acknowledges their majority status in the world and interrupts how the dominant (U.S. and European) culture assigns them a minority status.

Many Global Majority people living in dominant-culture countries have been assimilated into the dominant culture—by force, in order to survive, in seeking a better life for themselves and their families, or in pursuing the economic, political, or other inclusion of their communities. Calling these people “Global Majority” contradicts the assimilation.



It is common to feel a range of emotions about the situation—guilt, rage, grief, deep discouragement, terror, hopelessness, desperation, or a mixture of all of these and more. Those who take action on the climate emergency often feel even more, including despair, exhaustion, contempt for those who oppose us or don't seem to know or care, frustration, and confusion.

Facing up to the climate emergency can also remind us of painful things that happened

to us in the past. Feelings from having been mistreated or oppressed affect how we feel about and react to the climate emergency. This “emotional baggage” gets in the way of finding and acting on our clearest thinking.

IGNORING OUR FEELINGS AND JUST CARRYING ON

It doesn't always work to keep putting our feelings aside. When we ignore our strong feelings over time, it can become difficult to stay motivated. We may become cynical or numb,



Sustaining All Life (SAL) is an international grassroots organization working to end the climate emergency within the context of ending all divisions among people. *United to End Racism* (UER) consists of a wide diversity of people in many different countries, who are dedicated to eliminating racism in the world and supporting the efforts of all other groups with this goal. UER and SAL are projects of and use the tools of Re-evaluation Counseling. Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) is a well-defined theory and practice that helps people of all ages and backgrounds exchange effective help with each other in order to free themselves from emotional harm resulting from oppression and other hurts. By taking turns listening to each other and encouraging the release of painful emotions, people can heal old hurts and become better able to think, to speak out, and to organize and lead others in building a world in which human beings and other life forms are valued and the environment is restored and preserved. Re-evaluation Counseling currently exists in 95 countries.



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apparently unmoved by each new piece of bad news. We may feel and sound superior to people who don't know the dangers, or who believe politicians' lies. When that happens, other people notice our feelings of superiority and may reject whatever we say. Sometimes we grimly throw ourselves into joyless activism, which is not an attractive model. Our unreleased, pent-up feelings can undermine our hope for the future. They can make it hard to connect with each other and to get joy from being part of a powerful movement for change and justice. We need to work free from our numbness. We need to be able to express what we feel and think without worrying about upsetting the people listening to us. We get to do this in listening circles.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING CIRCLES

Simply talking about our feelings can take the sting out of them. In ordinary conversations we are often waiting for a space to start talking. In listening circles, everyone gets a turn for the same length of time, including the leader. This means we can relax and listen wholeheartedly, knowing our turn will come.

Sharing our feelings and listening to others' helps us realize we are not alone. When someone else is listening and caring without an agenda of their own, we are able to release feelings from having been hurt. Then we can often notice that some of our previous perspectives were limited or inaccurate, and we have new thoughts. If we use the process regularly, we become more

aware of ourselves. We are more able to connect with and appreciate others. We can work out what we want to do and act more effectively. We recover more of our courage and hope.

In listening circles, we get a picture of how much we have in common with others. We also get to hear about our different backgrounds, situations, and perspectives. What we learn from this can help us build a unified, inclusive movement.

WHAT HAPPENS IN A LISTENING CIRCLE

Listening circles use a simple process. They are most effective when they are led by someone who is thinking about how to make the process work for everyone. In *Sustaining All Life/United to End Racism* (SAL/UER) workshops we offer tools for doing this.

The facilitator explains that in each person's turn they can talk about whatever they need to while others listen without interruption or judgment. Participants are encouraged to welcome their own and others' talking, crying, laughing, sweating, trembling and indignation. Being listened to with full attention frees our minds to do the internal work that is needed. After releasing our painful emotions we tend to see reality more clearly, including the reality about ourselves and others.

In SAL/UER workshops we discuss the uses of listening circles, guidelines to make them safe, confidentiality agreements, and speaking order to ensure that people whose voices have been silenced get heard. We mention difficulties that may arise and how to handle them. Participants practice listening to each other and share how it went. The workshop is followed by a listening circle where participants have a longer opportunity to listen, be listened to, and heal.





The Work of *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism*

It is possible to limit the effects of human-caused climate change and restore the environment—if we make some very large changes in our economy, our energy systems, and our lives in the next five to ten years. *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* believe the environmental crisis can be resolved only if we simultaneously address racism, genocide of Indigenous peoples, classism, sexism, and other oppressions. The impact of environmental destruction and climate change falls most heavily on the groups targeted by these oppressions, and on other vulnerable populations (including populations of people who are elderly, disabled, and very young). Making the changes needed will require a massive movement, spanning the globe, of people of every background fighting the effects of climate change, racism, and exploitation.

In *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* we believe that the barriers to building a sufficiently large and powerful movement include (1) longstanding divisions (usually caused by oppression, and especially racism and classism) between nations and between groups of people, (2) widespread feelings that it's too late and any actions will be ineffective, (3) denial of or failure to engage with the climate emergency, and (4) difficulties in effectively addressing the connections between the environmental crisis and the failures of our economic system. *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* work to address these and other issues.

The role of oppression

The economic and political forms of our societies demand growth and profit with little regard for people, other life forms, or the earth. This results in exploitation and oppression. Oppressions (such as racism, classism, sexism, and the oppression of young people) target everyone, inflicting tremendous injustices, limiting access to resources, and damaging the lives of billions of people. Once targeted by oppression, we tend to act toward others in ways that repeat the hurts that we have experienced. Much of the mental and emotional harm we experience is the result of this passing on of hurt. Our experience is that though people are vulnerable

to acting in oppressive ways, oppressive behavior is not inherent, but arises only when a person has been hurt emotionally. Oppressive societies manipulate this vulnerability to establish and maintain economic exploitation.

The importance of healing personal harm

The mental and emotional harm done to us by oppression and other hurtful experiences interferes with our ability to think clearly and sets groups of people against each other. This makes it difficult for us to think about and respond effectively to the climate emergency.

Healing from the hurts that help to hold oppression in place and lead to other harmful behavior is neither quick nor easy work. Many of us resist this personal healing work. We may have survived by numbing ourselves to the harm done to us by oppression. Some of us assume that we will never be free of this harm. In *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* we have learned that it is possible to free ourselves from these hurts and address barriers to effective organizing. We can heal from hurtful experiences if someone listens to us attentively and allows and encourages us to release the grief, fear, and other painful emotions. This happens by means of our natural healing processes—talking, crying, trembling, expressing anger, and laughing.

By releasing emotional pain in a supportive network, we can stay united, hopeful, thoughtful, joyful, and committed. This in turn strengthens us in building our movements to stop the effects of climate change and racism.



For more information, see:

www.sustainingalllife.org or www.unitedtoendracism.org
or **write:** Sustaining All Life/United to End Racism
19370 Firlands Way N, Shoreline, WA 98133-3925 USA
E-mail: sal@rc.org Tel.: +1-206-284-0311