

Transformative Justice
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LIVE, LAUGH, LEARN: TOOLS FOR BUILDING HEALTHY & INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY IN COMEDY

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INTRODUCTION

This toolkit serves as an introductory set of resources to allow comedians in community with one another to practice healthy relationships and support one another in one of the most emotionally-taxing industries there is. Too often, comedians are seen as clowns providing only levity and making careers of easy wit, when in fact the work itself requires an intense amount of hustle, disclosure, and emotional processing, not to mention the heaps of vulnerability this kind of performance requires. Therefore, we must create tools to support one another in career and in community.

Comedy is a practice that builds community on its own, especially in more collaborative fields such as improvisation. This is no surprise when we look at the origins of improvisation itself, how Chicago educator Viola Spolin developed the first improv games to build community and understanding among immigrant children who had multiple language barriers. Applied improvisation is continually used to break down walls and bond groups together in prisons and underprivileged schools, and even utilized by corporations to improve employee efficiency. Professional comedians often form close-knit communities with one another through collaborative creative processes. These relationships would be deepened and enhanced by access to intentional community-building and repair.

Relationships in comedy can be fraught due to a number of factors that lead to a thread of toxicity within the industry as a whole. High-stress environments, the pressure of a gig-economy lifestyle, the kinds of personalities that make people want to pursue comedy in the first place, debates over boundary-pushing alongside “cancel culture”-- there’s a number of reasons why comedians frequently have public breakdowns or leave the scene entirely. I’ve found in my experiences within comedy communities that a great deal of falling-outs take place because of a lack of understanding surrounding how to approach harm, accountability, and repair.

Within this toolkit, I will offer some (SOME!) tools for comedians to utilize in their relationships and in their self-focused practices to encourage healthy, edifying, perseverant connections that will support growth personally and professionally in the industry. Comedy has created some of my life’s most meaningful relationships and experiences. It’s also created nightmarish social situations. This is my attempt to uplift the former and avoid the latter.

TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE

What is it?

Transformative Justice is a framework rooted in wisdom from BIPOC communities spanning back thousands of years. It is frequently centered around alternatives to carceral punishment in the aim of prison abolition, but is applicable within our smallest interactions, even with ourselves. At its core, it aims to alleviate harm without creating further harm. For a run-down of TJ, watch this succinct video:

[▶ What is Transformative Justice?](#)

What's it got to do with comedy?

It's got to do with everything! Comedy has always been a political and relational practice based on interpersonal connection and precise POV. In creating comedy, strong relationships are formed, both with fellow creators and with audiences. Being aware of harm, its effects, and how to go about repairing it is essential to maintaining these relationships and continuing a sustainable creative career.

What do I need to know?

1. Accountability vs. Punishment

Often these two are equated, when they could not be more different. Punishment is often unrelated to the actual harm caused, and involves removing the harmer from community and often taking away support. Accountability invites the harmer to repair the harm in community with others, including the victim when volunteered. It is an opportunity to strengthen relationships and improve.

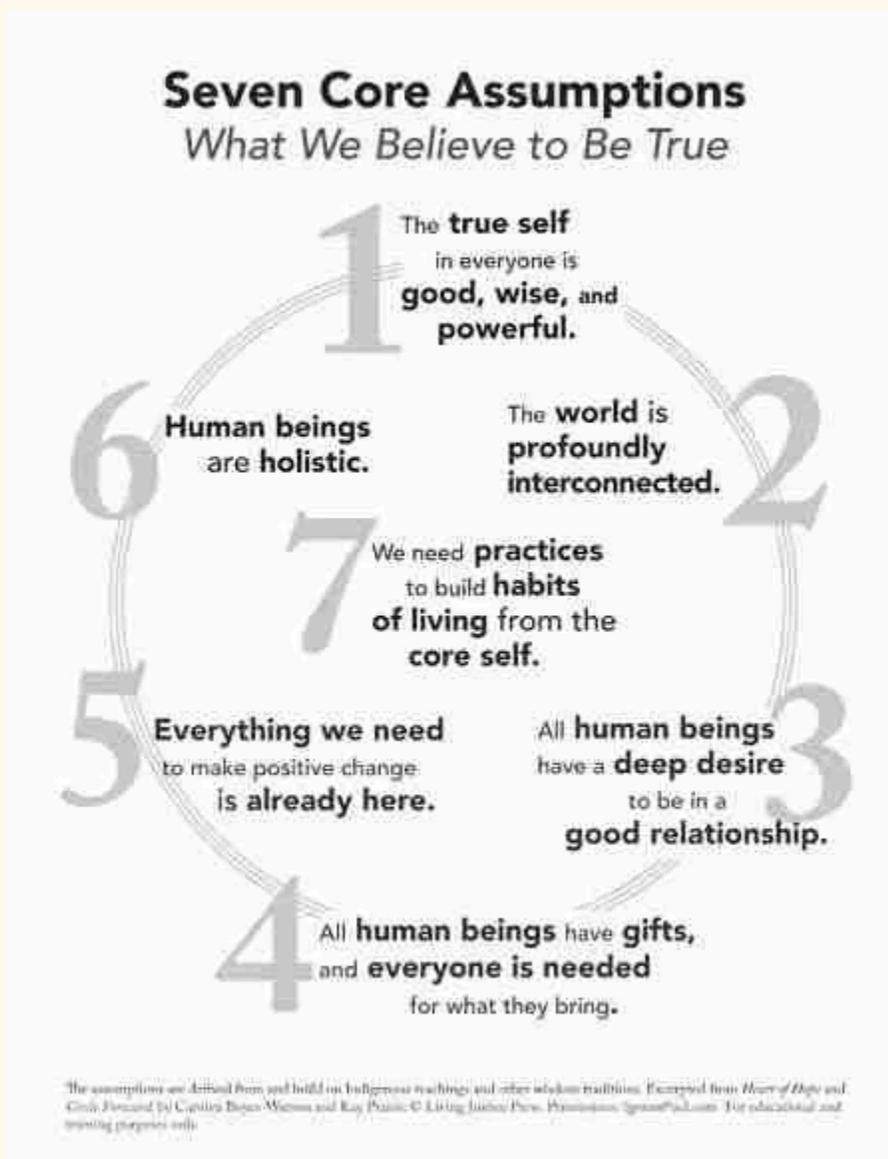
2. Harm

The working definition of harm for the purposes of this project is as follows:

A violation of relationships through crossing boundaries or perpetuating emotionally triggering ideals.

3. 7 Core Assumptions

In approaching restorative practices, I've always found the 7 Core Assumptions to be incredibly useful.



PRACTICES

The following exercises are tools to assist in building community, solidarity, and accountability in the world of comedy. For many of them, it is recommended you involve Restorative and Transformative Justice practitioners in your community for further support and education.

1. The Buddy/Business Distinction

Too often in comedy spaces, relationships are irreparably affected by mistakes made as professional collaborators. Friends that work together often struggle with honesty because of the pressures of exacting creative projects and working as professional artists. This exercise creates a distinction between speaking as buddies and business partners.

In this model, the individual who feels they are being harmed by the actions of their friend and collaborator will request to meet with them in person. To introduce an element of play, both parties will bring suit jackets (or another preferred professional clothing item that offers distinction). The two will begin without the jackets on, discussing as friends and setting values for the conversation.

Once both parties are ready, they can put on their suit jackets and have a discussion as business partners. It is understood within this discussion that the issues expressed and professional and that which is said will not be interpreted as interpersonal conflict as friends.

Following this, they will take their jackets off to check in as friends again and discuss the personal experiences the “harmer” is undergoing that are potentially contributing to their professional failings. Jackets can go on and off for further discussion, but once both parties feel like they have reached a satisfying conclusion, they will make a plan going forward for how to better support each other as friends and collaborators. It is also established that the professional relationship may be severed in the future if it too strongly challenges the longevity and health of the friendship.

It is also recommended that these parties make a distinction going forward in the time that they spend together, committing to having Strictly Buddy outings to preserve the personal connection.

2. The Restorative Circle

A restorative circle is a practice rooted in indigenous practices that have existed for thousands of years. They can be utilized when harm has taken place as a form of intervention, but are recommended as well for proactive use in building community and problem-solving skills. They typically follow this format:

Opening: A song, quote, or statement to open the space and set the tone for the gathering.

Check-in: A question to gauge where all participants are mentally when entering the space, typically coupled with an icebreaker of sorts.

Values: Creating or reviewing a list of agreements participants commit to upholding within the space.

Prompts: Reflective questions for discussion using the talking piece, which is passed around and grants the holder permission and full attention to share.

Check-out: A question to determine how everyone is feeling leaving the space.

Closing: A final quote/song/piece to reflect on going forward.

3. Comedy Friend Checklist

This is a checklist to help evaluate your relationships with fellow comedians in your community and see how you can deepen these connections to create a network of support and solidarity.

- Do I know their name, not just their username?
- Do I know what other projects they're a part of in the city?
- Do I know what neighborhood they live in?
- Have we had a conversation outside of a venue?
- Do I know what they are interested in outside of comedy?
- Have I established myself as someone they can come to for punch-ups and other comedy needs?
- Have I established myself as someone they can come to for issues outside of comedy?
- Have I heard them discuss heavy topics on stage? If yes, have I checked in with them?
- Is this a person I can ask to go to for support?

4. Call-in

The practice of informing someone you care about that they are perpetuating harm is a difficult and delicate thing to approach, but is necessary for all people regardless of community.

First, the person who enacted harm must enter the accountability process of their own volition. Accountability can never be forced. This process is often best done in the context of a circle, where the harmer is invited to listen to those impacted share their stories and describe how they were affected by the actions and/or words of the harmer. This process must always be centered around the needs of the victimized. All parties involved, including surrounding community members, are invited to share their needs and receive resources, and the harmer is invited to begin the process of a genuine apology.

5. The Real Apology

Apologies are necessary for repairing harm. I'm sure you've received an apology you found to be weak and insufficient, and it's likely that you've delivered one yourself. We all have. An effective apology is difficult to deliver, especially when we want to communicate why we did what we did. Mia Mingus offers a four-part model for practicing apologies, and it does take practice!

Step One: Self-Reflection

For an apology to be real, it must be freely and honestly given. Take time to center yourself and reflect before responding to being informed of harm you caused.

Step Two: Apologizing

Vulnerability is necessary for this. It's important to remember that impact is always the focus, not intent.

Step Three: Repair

This takes time and must be done in relationship. It should be led by the impacted party.

Step Four: Changed behavior

This often requires addressing personal trauma and areas of growth. It also takes time, bravery, and practice.

6. Values List

This activity explores how creative and communal environments compare and contrast when it comes to what you value and what helps you flourish. Take a piece of paper and create a T chart. Title one side “Creating” and the other “Connecting”. Under the first, create a list that answers the following question “What circumstances and values create an environment where you feel creatively stimulated?” Under the other: “What circumstances and values in relationship with others make you feel secure and supported?” Notice any connections between the two, and take some time in the space below your chart to reflect on how you can prioritize these values in your projects and relationships going forward.

Invite fellow comedians to complete the activity as well, and take time together to compare your values and communicate their importance to one another. Explore how you can together honor these values and create processes that highlight them in your personal and professional lives.

7. Shame Shake-Out

Shame is an emotion that strikes up defenses, paralyzing us and making it difficult to fully process the effects of our actions and the factors that led us to enact harm. Comedians have stronger and more activated defenses than most, which makes this an even more pervasive issue in our community. When someone approaches you with an accusation, take a moment to feel in your body where the shame is building, sit in that feeling and take a deep breath. Before you speak or fully react, focus on the physical sensations in your body, and then shake your wrists and head in an attempt to reset your brain and body. Imagine the shame you are feeling shaking off of your shoulders and fingertips, and begin with gratitude for the opportunity to take accountability and repair harm. This is one of the hardest and most rewarding things you can do for yourself and your community. If you need to go to the bathroom and do this alone, it’s totally recommended.

8. The “Why?” game

When a comedian you’re in community with makes a joke that you find harmful, invite them to participate in a series of “why”s. It’s important that this is approached with a sense of curiosity, a desire to together discover the root of a misconception that resulted in a harmful joke. Ask them to repeat the joke, then ask, “why do you think that?” When they respond, ask “why do you think *that*?” and continue until you find the root of the misunderstanding.

This does require the willingness to offer emotional labor and education for the approaching party. It is recommended that this tool be used by someone in community with the harmer that is not personally affected by the comments made, or that has a high enough level of comfort surrounding the harmful topics discussed.

In a community where misinformation is rampant and can be shared on large platforms, it is the responsibility of comedians who are friends with one another to call into question each other's apparent biases.

FAQ

Q: How do I know if someone is harmed by something I said?

Hopefully, through consistent trust-building in relationships, they will feel comfortable approaching you and informing you of the harm. It is never a bad thing to be proactive, though, and frequently reflecting on the effects of your actions on others is a recommended practice.

Q: What if I mess up again?

It's really a matter of "when" rather than "if". We are all human and all figuring this out together. Conflict is always going to occur, mistakes are always going to happen, relationships are always going to be messy. What is important is the consistent willingness to take accountability, pursue repair, and make changes in our behavior.

Q: How do I know who I am in community with?

This will be different for each individual, and is completely determined by you. I recommend practicing earnestness in your relationships and declaring the importance others have in your life. Being in community with others means putting energy into them and the relationship you share. It can also just mean that you share a diaspora or other connecting factor of identity.

Q: Doesn't this go against comedy as a boundary-pushing exercise in free speech?

You are free to do your speech! This does not make you free from accountability, and refusing it will lead to isolation. Boundaries should always be stretched and explored, but the impacts of our words and actions must be considered with great weight.

Q: How can I implement these practices under corporate-esque structures and organizations that discourage them?

Talk to people. Complain, organize, and invite them to spend time with you outside of these structures. Building friendships is powerful, and integral to building better working environments in the entertainment industry.

RESOURCES

1. How to give a good apology

<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/12/18/how-to-give-a-good-apology-part-1-the-four-parts-of-accountability/>

This is Mia Mingus's full piece about her approach to the apology and the process of repairing fractured relationships. It goes into detail about the process outlined above and provides fleshed-out examples at each step. It especially delves into the process and elements of the apology itself, how to go about formulating one and what is important to avoid when taking accountability. I recommend it for anyone being invited to take responsibility for harm caused, or anyone who wants to explore what a true apology should look like.

2. How to support harmers in accountability <https://vimeo.com/365578741>

This informative video explores how to offer support for someone who has committed harm. Keeping in mind the paralyzing strength of shame and the obstacles at play when approaching an apology, it is necessary for someone taking accountability to have a system of support throughout the process. This is incredibly useful in building skills to support community members in this way and train yourself to approach the process of repair with grace and understanding.

3. Accountability Road Map

This visual demonstrates a possible path to accountability that communities can utilize when harm has taken place. It serves as a flexible tool in seeing how these processes that vary wildly may unfold. It was created in tandem with a toolkit for abolition and community intervention as alternatives to carceral systems and practices.

PHILLY STANDS UP

Accountability Road Map

An Accountability road map sketches out a process to give it structure while clarifying intentions, goals and allowing you to get a sense of the trajectory and the big picture. Because accountability processes are never linear or clear cut, we use a road map instead of an agenda; Road maps have ample room for construction, road blocks and detours. They help you maintain sense of your over all goals, while remaining flexible and open to re-routing paths and re-imagining the journey once you've started.

The Five Major Phases of Accountability Processes

There are endless ways to map out phases of an accountability process, but here are the five most common phases we have charted in our work and experience:

1. Identifying Behaviors

The first step in a process is that a person must have an awareness and understanding of the actions and behaviors for which they are being called out. This is foundational and can sometimes take longer to accomplish than you might imagine.

2. Accepting Harm Done

Building on the understanding of what specific behaviors led them to this accountability process, the next step is to acknowledge in what ways these behaviors were harmful- even if harm wasn't their intention. This is the seed of one of the most frequent goals in a process: building empathy.

3. Looking for Patterns

Making Comprehensive change to prevent future assault requires broadening the focus beyond the isolated incident(s) that precipitated this process. This means identifying and naming the person's history of abusive/harmful actions and contextualizing these behaviors in their underlying assumptions and socialization.

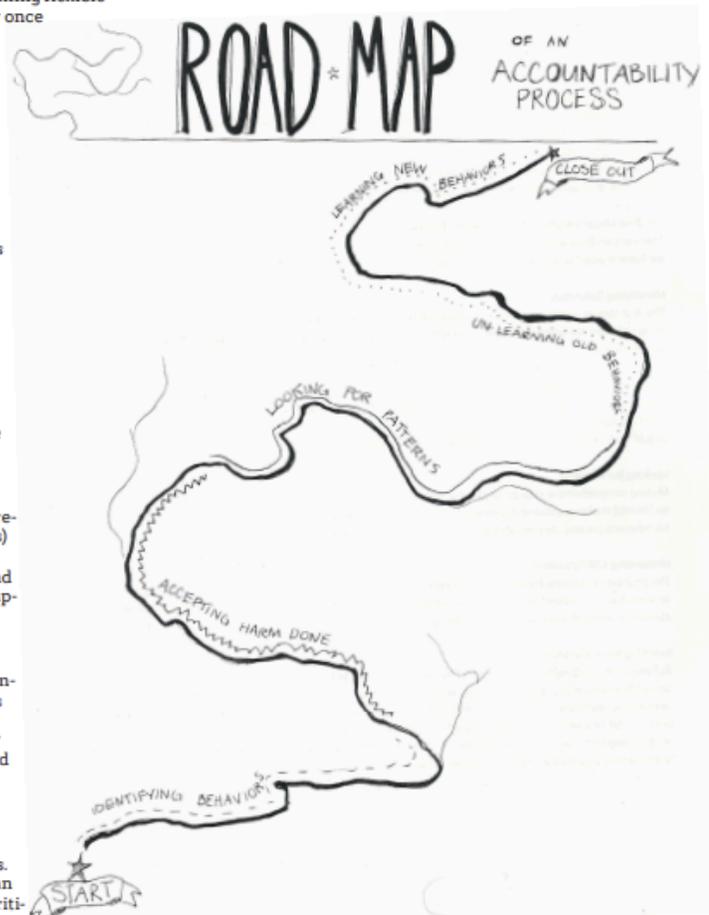
4. Unlearning Old Behaviors

The process of breaking habits starts with identifying harmful dynamics and then deepens beyond naming to analysis and understanding. Gaining an awareness and determining the kinds of situations that trigger or enable abusive or harmful behaviors and then having clear strategies to avoid and diffuse the potential path for harm.

5. Learning New Behaviors

Building new positive/healing patterns of behavior goes hand in hand with breaking down the old harmful patterns. One of the tools in this stage is role play, where a person can rehearse their consent practices, graceful acceptance of criticism, disclosure strategies, etc. Also important is becoming

familiar with their resources to support positive and new behavior [affordable therapy, sites to find jobs, a clearly defined network of supportive friends, membership to the gym, etc.] This phase is very much about understanding the ways to build new behaviors so this skill becomes sustainable and fueled by self reliance.



4. Dealing with shame

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58nAd6gDZKA&ab_channel=BarnardCenterforResearchonWomen

This video explores the pervasive nature of shame that was touched on in this toolkit. Featuring various Transformative Justice scholars and practitioners, it delves into this emotion and its uselessness in creating just spaces. With a sociological, psychological, and evolutionary approach, it unpacks the chemical processes that take place in our bodies when we feel shame, offering a scientific understanding of the emotion.

5. Community during conflict

https://transformharm.org/ca_resource/practicing-new-social-relations-even-in-conflict

This article by practitioner and law professor Dean Spade unpacks the incessant nature of conflict in community and how harm can continually take place between people committed to caring for each other. It describes the factors that lead to these high levels of conflict and then offers practices for individuals and collectives to maintain the work of repair and connection. It includes an emphasis on communication and tools to make it easier to practice it consistently.

**Go forth! Be funny! Care
for one another!**

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