



HEALING IN ACTION

*A Toolkit for Black Lives Matter
Healing Justice & Direct Action*

BLACK LIVES MATTER

CONTEXT

For the last few years, large numbers of our people have been out in the streets, engaging in powerful and necessary direct action, and fighting for the lives of our people. The political period we are now entering promises to require a redoubling of our efforts to organize against increasing oppression. We will need to match this fortifying energy with elevated and innovative ways of caring and showing up for each other. We will need to raise aloft a declared vision for Black freedom that is unprecedented in its scope. Healers committed to our liberation have stepped up and created spaces in our communities. They have built healing into our direct actions. Their presence and work will continue to be essential to how we sustain ourselves and how we create new ways of being along the way.

This toolkit was created to collate, condense and share the lessons we have learned in ensuring that our direct actions are centered on healing justice. This toolkit is a beta version; it will develop in real time as we continue to uncover the implications for healing justice in our organizing. We extend our gratitude to the BLM Healing Justice Working Group and all the chapter members who shared your insights, your innovations and your struggles to support our shared knowledge.

At the very root of healing justice is an analysis of trauma and resilience, of our need as Black people to care for each other and organize for freedom. We understand that Black people across the globe continue to endure trauma at all levels, from the State and institutions to our very communities and homes.

We may not always realize that we are navigating our own trauma at almost every step of our lives. Our perspectives, the way we build relationships, and our responses to conflict are informed in large part by the ways in which we have been traumatized, and what opportunities, if any, we have had to heal from that trauma.

In high stakes or high stress situations, we are at greater risk of reacting from a place of trauma. Organizing against violence and for Black liberation can consciously or unconsciously trigger us to relive unhealed experiences in which we, our ancestors and our communities have been oppressed and violated. That revisited pain becomes the anger that motivates us into action. Yet, sourcing our wounds and trauma in this way takes a hefty toll.

As a network, we have alignment on the necessity of direct action. As a whole, however, we are less clear on the relevance and implementation of healing justice.

HEALING JUSTICE ASKS OF US TWO THINGS IN PARTICULAR THAT ARE RELEVANT TO DIRECT ACTION:

1.

How do we scaffold and support our well-being through direct action and confrontation?

2.

How do we begin to draw energy from naming and sourcing our visions more often than our wounds?

The concrete questions are: How can we prepare and integrate healing justice into our direct actions? How can we institutionalize healing justice into the culture of our chapters?

Some of the ideas in this toolkit may not feel like second nature to us all, and may even feel like we are taking time away from the 'actual' work of organizing. There are so many reasons why supporting ourselves and each other in these ways might not feel comfortable. But healing justice is the work; taking care of ourselves and each other is how we live more fully in our principles and values.

PREPARING FOR AN ACTION

In the preparation for direct action, we often get singularly focused on our targets, our messaging and all the logistics that come with organizing our people into the streets. What often gets sidelined are the emotional, psychological, and spiritual aspects of our work that impact our ability to stay rooted in our fullest selves. Here are some suggestions for ways to make space for healing justice within planning spaces:

Centering and Grounding

Taking the time to center and ground, even if it is just breathing together or sitting in silence, is critical for becoming aware of ourselves, our bodies and how we are showing up in the moment. By doing these practices, we can self-identify moods, thoughts, anxieties, and energy levels that will contribute to how we engage in our meetings and how we shape actions.

Once we start to identify our own needs, we can make adjustments. What could make me more grounded? Do I need to eat? Do I need to make physical contact with someone else? Do I need to sit out? In the end, how you really feel always shows up in some way or another - in either interpersonal or physical manifestations. Grounding brings awareness that informs our self-care and our communications with our co-organizers.

Grounding Exercises

Breathwork – Breathing is obviously fundamental to life, but our breath can also be used consciously to control our nervous system. If we are short of breath, as an example, whether from asthmatic crisis or chronic anxiety, the resulting feeling we have is often panic. Deepening our breathing, even for a moment, can help us soothe our anxiety, calm our panic, and restore a grounded nervous system.

Box breath – Inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, release for 4 counts, and hold at the bottom for 4 counts. Repeat several times. Notice if your shoulders are able to drop, notice how thoughts and moods shift.

Body scan – Together, notice your bodies and what is happening for you internally. We spend a lot of time, especially if we are feeling unsafe, tracking what is happening outside of ourselves and in the minds of others. Take time (and breath!) to get curious about what is happening within your own bodies. Share out a mood and a sensation you noticed for the first time.

Chanting – Chanting and group singing are great ways to ground on a shared purpose or feeling. They are proven to regulate and sync up nervous systems within a group.

Check-ins – Most folks make time for check-ins at the start of meetings. The magic of check-ins can only work in relation to our vulnerability. Can we make room to ask each other how we are showing up and what we need to feel more present or grounded? What will you need during an action to stay grounded?

Visioning

Taking time to remember and re-affirm our vision is key to centering healing justice in our work. The reason why we fight is for a vision for ourselves, each other, and our communities where Black people are liberated. This visioning can continue to ground us in how we treat each other in our meetings, how we listen, and how we informally check in throughout the organizing process.

Organizing Community Support & Resources

Chances are there are healers and practitioners in your community who would be willing to offer support to organizers during or following actions, and they may be able to organize their communities to offer coordinated support. Some ways chapters have received community care and healing support include:

- **Coordinating bodyworkers and counselors either on site or on call**
- **Coordinating food drop offs**
- **National Queer and Trans Therapists Network - www.nqttcn.com**
- **Local University Counseling Clinics**
- **Community Acupuncture Clinics**
- **Acupuncturists Without Borders**

Some national resources can be mobilized with the support of Healing Justice staff.

DURING AN ACTION

As we noted earlier, trauma can sneak in and take over in high pressure situations. Trauma exacerbates the stress of coordinating an action and staying present and grounded while in the midst of action. Tracking and addressing fluctuating needs in the midst of action is critical, yet challenging.

Assigning Roles

Are there chapter members willing to attend to the group morale, needs, and moments of crisis during a direct action? Assigning a recognizably grounded and emotionally-resourced point person ahead of time to intervene in challenges can be helpful. Staying grounded and present during crisis is not a skill that all people, or even all kinds of healers, hold. Healing is a vast art with many kinds of interventions. Take the time to identify who can best stand in this role. That person may not identify as a healer at all.

Questions for the point person to consider:

- How are the mobility needs of chapter members being addressed?
- What is the collective mood?
- Are there conflicts happening in leadership? Do they require immediate intervention or post action intervention?

This role can be distinct from a more safety-oriented role, but the two should work closely to identify how or if antagonism is affecting the group and its agreements.

Altar Building

Altars exist in many cultures throughout the diaspora and a broad spectrum of traditions have unique altar building practices. If building an altar resonates with your culture and expression, an altar can be a visual reminder of ancestors, Spirit, God or whatever we call that which is bigger than us. Altars can provide a place to reground and reconnect to our lineage and purpose.

Food and Hydration

Food and water are our primary sources of medicine. What we eat and drink affects our energy levels, our moods and impacts how and what we think – not to mention our overall life span and quality of life. Building in time for food breaks and having food on hand that can replenish and help maintain healthy blood sugar levels is important for maintaining the overall well-being of our family in the streets.

Community Support & Resources

If community care was mobilized in preparation, it is important for that information to be shared with other organizers. Can phone numbers for healers be passed out along with jail support? Can information be shared securely on text threads?

FOLLOWING AN ACTION – RESTORATION & RESILIENCE

Healing justice is not something we center and incorporate into our work only during direct action or crisis. Healing justice needs to be at the very center of how we work together. The time following an action can help lay foundation for the practice of centering healing justice.

In trauma research, resilience practices are those which restore us, bringing us back into our motivated and committed selves after a traumatic event. Resilience is distinct from coping. We often use coping strategies to get through or numb out following a trauma. Coping has its own utility, but growth comes from eventually addressing the trauma, initiating healing, and finding resilience.

Group Process

Moving beyond + and Δ. Taking an hour to process what feelings are coming up for people allows for a more profound process than addressing what worked and what did not work. Examine either what was triggered or what needs to be healed and repaired in the group. Do not wait until dynamics are untenable to address them and do not hesitate to appreciate the skills and commitment of your co-organizers. Courageous vulnerability and conversation can become the cornerstone of how we build relationship and trust.

Begin Anew - This is a practice that facilitates group appreciation, self-reflection and accountability. This can be used as a foundation for a process unique to your chapter.

Individual Work

As mentioned earlier, in most direct action trauma is getting kicked up on some level. Whether it is our own trauma or vicarious trauma from our community, individual work can be helpful in processing where our vulnerabilities lie. There are many modalities through which you can do individual work. Ask community members or healers you trust for suggestions on what might work best for you and your goals for healing.

Integrating Healing Justice

Reflect on what you learned from this action about your chapter, your own needs, and what you can implement to more deeply build trust, relationship, and care into your work. Reach out to staff for ideas and support on how to implement healing justice.

Other Great Resources

<https://justhealing.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/emotional-physical-safety-in-protests-blm.pdf>

<https://justhealing.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/self-care-for-trauma-grief-and-depression-blm.pdf>

<https://justhealing.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/practices-for-moving-through-grief-blm.pdf>

Who We Are

Black Lives Matter Healing Justice Working Group is a space for BLM chapters to build a shared analysis of healing justice, build skills around healing justice interventions, develop network wide healing justice campaigns, and offer cross chapter support. We hold this space together as sacred to our learning and practice of how to collectively enter into an embodied, restorative and transformative practice towards Black liberation.

We hold a vision of an intersectional, interdisciplinary, and holistic approach to Black healing and wellness. We believe in many paths to our wholeness and the vastness of Black spirituality. We also work to remember and to create ritual and culture to sustain us in and beyond struggle, and bring us into our rightful connection with the Earth, each other and our collective purpose.

What We Believe

Black Healing and Wellness are essential to our Liberation - State violence and systems of oppression traumatize us and our communities, and make it simultaneously impossible for us to fully heal. We have the inherent right to access healing and be free of institutions and systems that explicitly harm and undermine our capacity to live with our full humanity, connection and purpose.

Liberation is in Our Practice - Loosely defined, liberation is freedom from limitations. Liberation is not gained by the outcomes of a singular political event or destination, its roots live deep inside us and in all of our relationships. We know that our politic is revealed in our practice, in our intimacy and communication with one another. Through healing, we free ourselves from the oppression of respectability, and ground our interactions in love and accountability.

Black Wellness is Self-Determination - We recognize the sacredness, brilliance, and inherent worth in every Black body. Healing justice calls us to be changed in our consciousness and transform the internalized practices of ableism, heteropatriarchy, classism and all other forms of oppression that place value and order on our bodies. We see Black self-determination as bringing our communities into our whole, varied and vibrant expressions.

