Peace Literacy Aggression Lesson Day 2
(an abridged version of Peace Literacy Lesson Plan 1)

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Learning Outcomes for an approx. 90 minute lesson

- Exercise Empathy to Recognize Distress in Ourselves
- Calm Others Down During Conflict
- Calm Ourselves Down During Conflict
- Recognize the Fuels that Can Cause the Fires of Aggression
- Listen with Empathy and Appreciation

5 mins

Distribute worksheet

Lead Empathy Exercise 1 from worksheet:

- Exercise Empathy for yourself.
- Write down 1 or 2 things that are nagging at you in the background, lingering worries or concerns that have nothing directly to do with this class but might affect your learning today
  - Bringing these issues to conscious attention is called mindfulness.
  - Read over the concerns you’ve listed—don’t make a judgment about whether the concerns are good or bad, reasonable or unreasonable, they are human concerns.
  - This exercise won’t get rid of those intrusive thoughts, but by noticing them they are less likely to have an effect—they won’t surprise you.
  - And when these concerns come back, which they might, perhaps several times during this class, you can recognize them now as old friends: “Oh look, here is some anxiety again.”
  - This recognition is self-compassion, which means having empathy for yourself.
  - It helps you to be kind to yourself.
  - It is not easy being human – cut yourself some slack!
  - If this seems difficult, remember that you can gradually get better at this, just like you can gradually get better at anything through learning and practice.
• Practice doing this on your own at the start of each class, and **remember that everyone in the class is having their own struggles!**

  o **Write this on the board as you say it:**
  o We can think of training as two things: 1. Learning 2. Practice.
  o If we want to get better at something, this requires training in the form of learning and practice.
  o Yesterday we ended with a Venn Diagram illustrating Peace Literacy training for **Healthier Ways to Deal with Pain/Discomfort:**
  o All aggression is caused by pain/discomfort/distress, but not all pain/discomfort/distress has to lead to aggression!
  o We can learn and practice Peace Literacy, which gives us a larger range of options/skills.
  o We can exercise our empathy so we can recognize when we or others are in distress.

• **In others:** When we empathetically see the fire beneath the aggression of others, this allows us to have even more empathy for them which can expand our options for responding effectively.
  • We might not know the specific fires they’re dealing with, but we can recognize that they’re in distress of some kind.

• **In ourselves:** When we see the fire beneath our own aggression, we can learn how to deal with the fire rather than just lashing out with aggression.
  o The skill of recognizing aggression as a distress response forces you to pause, even for a few seconds, which can be the time you need to consider options.
  o The more that we rely on peace skills to solve conflicts in our relationship or community, and the less we rely on aggression, the more shared trust and shared empathy we can build in our relationship or community, and the more resilient our relationship or community can become.
  o Aggression has its place. If you are surrounded by wolves, it can be best to use warning aggression or posturing.
  o But if you are having a conflict in your relationship or community, or even with a stranger, peace skills offer us more effective options in the vast majority of situations.
  o This lesson will focus on some of these more effective options.

  **We get some hints** at these options from the Key and Peele sketch, this time by **focusing** on Michael Keegan Key’s character.
Show Key and Peele video again (remember first 18 seconds contain profanity – you can mute it until 19 seconds in) http://www.cc.com/video-clips/kisry6/key-and-peele-school-bully
Tell students this time to focus on Michael Keegan Key’s character.

10 mins
Have students Think/write in their worksheet/pair/share: What did Michael Keegan Key’s character do really well?
- He stayed calm!
- Staying calm is the first step to keeping other people calm.
- Telling people “Calm down” almost never works!
- Ask students: Why does telling people to calm down rarely work? Allow for responses.
- Answer: When people are upset, they usually feel that they have a right to be upset, that they are justified in being upset.
- Telling people to calm down can feel dismissive of their distress and in some cases even demeaning.
- Ask students: What else did Michael Keegan Key’s character do well? Allow for responses.

5 mins
To calm other people down—which Michael Keegan Key’s character did very well—we need to practice three skills (write these on the board, have students fill in their worksheets)

1. Be calm ourselves.
   - We’ll talk about ways to stay calm ourselves in a few minutes.
   - Aggression and panic can be contagious, but calm can be contagious too.
2. Listen with empathy and be respectful.
   - We practiced this yesterday and will practice again today.
3. Show care and concern.
   - This is a very important and often overlooked step.
   - If you borrow someone’s car, wreck it, and they are yelling at you, if you just stay calm they might mistake your calm for apathy.
   - You have to show care and concern.
   - One way to do this is by saying it.
   - Ask students: What is something that you could say in this situation to show care and concern? Allow for responses.

Highlight for students that even though Michael Keegan Key’s character stayed calm, he was not passively “turning the other cheek.”
- He was actively practicing peace skills.
Remember, these three skills are not a guarantee; they might not always completely calm the situation. However, they will:

- Give you a higher probability of success.
- Be far less likely to escalate the conflict.
- Decrease the likelihood of creating bad blood.

Ask students: What does the phrase “bad blood” mean?

Answer: Bad blood is created when we say something harmful during a conflict that generates animosity or increases animosity between you and another person.

- When bad blood is created, you not only have to deal with whatever conflict you are having with this person, but now you also have animosity or increased animosity to deal with.
- Bad blood makes your life more stressful and complicated.

Even though Michael Keegan Key’s character was not able to completely calm down Jordan Peele’s character, Key’s character was able to prevent the situation from escalating and his actions did not create bad blood.

10 mins

Discuss 4 steps to staying calm ourselves

Calming ourselves down is not an all or nothing process.

- Every bit can help.
- Even if we can only calm ourselves down a little bit, this can help.

Ask students: Why is it important to be able to calm ourselves down? Allow for answers.

- Martial arts, sports, performance arts, the military, and peace leaders such as Gandhi and the Reverend Dr. MLK Jr. teach people the importance of being calm under pressure.
- When we can calm ourselves under pressure, this can help us think more clearly and make better decisions.
- Our minds do not function optimally when we are filled with anger or panic.

Write these four techniques in a list on the board. Have students fill in their worksheets:

1. Maintain empathy when we are in conflict with someone.
   Recognize the fire beneath their aggression; recognize that their aggression is a response to distress.

2. Give people the benefit of the doubt when we are in conflict with them, which means seeking clarification rather than acting from a position of ignorance.

3. Do not personalize the conflict, which means using empathy to escape the confines of our own ego, and training our mind to see the other factors playing into the conflict.

4. Keep things in perspective, which means training our mind to think about reasons why
we appreciate people when we come into conflict with them.

- This doesn’t get rid of the conflict, but it helps us keep the conflict in proper perspective.
- Conflict can blow things out of proportion, and people can destroy friendships and relationships over minor conflicts.

All four of these skills allow us to see the **bigger picture** by **broadening our perspective into the psyche of others, our own psyche, and the many factors that can be at play in a conflict**. Later we will discuss how these factors often include misunderstandings, miscommunications, and the misinterpretation of ambiguity.

**10 mins**

*Now you can build on these points.*

1. **Maintain empathy**
   - **Ask students**, “When we are in conflict with someone, how might having empathy for them help us remain calm?”
   - **Answer**: As long as we maintain empathy for the person, we are less likely to be aggressive with them, and we are more likely to keep our temper under control.
   - Empathy is also like a metaphorical eye that allows us to see deeper into ourselves, the other person, and the situation, which can help us more effectively interact with the other person and deal with the situation.
   - We might still become frustrated, but having empathy keeps this frustration from building to a flood of rage.
   - Rage prevents us from being able to reason clearly. That is one reason why we have to put so much effort into strengthening our empathy.

2. **Give People the Benefit of the Doubt**
   - Often when we are in a conflict with someone we learn later that we were mistaken and that we had misunderstood the person or the situation.
   - **Ask students**, “What does it mean to give someone the benefit of the doubt?” and “How might this help us remain calm during a conflict?” **Allow for responses.**
   - **Answer**: Giving people the benefit of the doubt means seeking clarification rather than acting from a position of ignorance. When we jump to conclusions we act from a position of ignorance.
   - How would you feel if people did not give you the benefit of the doubt, versus someone who did give you the benefit of the doubt? How would this affect your trust toward them?

*Note to remind students:* Advocating these peace skills does not mean condoning aggressive behavior or refusing to hold people accountable for that behavior.
o Practicing these peace skills helps us hold people accountable in ways that are fair and just.

o Staying calm by seeking clarification is necessary for assigning accountability fairly.

o When we stay calm we are in a better position as community members to assign consequences for aggressive behavior that are fair and just, rather than vengeful and cruel.

o When it comes to demanding accountability, we need to keep from personalizing the other person’s actions in ways that go beyond accountability and into vengeance.

o Have students turn to page 3 of their worksheets, and on the board draw a simple ship on the sea.

• Our community is like a ship and the sea represents accountability.
• Sailing the sea of accountability is a challenge for every community.
• The four skills for staying calm help our community navigate the sea of accountability.
• Giving the benefit of the doubt, for example, puts us in a better position as community members to assign consequences for aggressive behavior that are fair and just, rather than vengeful and cruel.
• Embracing vengeance is like sinking beneath the sea.

3. Do not personalize the conflict

o Ask students: When we personalize a conflict, how can this distort how we see the conflict? 
  Answer: When we personalize a conflict, we put ourselves at the center.

o Not personalizing a conflict means putting the conflict at the center, and trying to understand the factors revolving around the conflict. This allows us to see the bigger picture.

o We are just one of those factors. We might be the primary factor causing the conflict, or the conflict could be caused by other factors not related to us, such as the person having a bad day at work or reacting to trauma.

o Illustrate this on the board with two diagrams (see below)

• In the one diagram, titled “Personalizing the Conflict” you write the word “Me” at the center, and draw the factors revolving around the word “Me” (similar to how people used to think that the Sun and other planets revolved around the Earth).

• In the second diagram, titled “Not Personalizing the Conflict” you write the words “The Conflict” at the center, and “Me” along with other factors revolving around “The Conflict” (similar to how we now know that the planets, including the Earth, revolve around the Sun).

• Not personalizing the conflict is similar to the Copernican Revolution that changed how we viewed what was at the center of our solar system.

• How would you feel if someone personalized every interaction you had with them?
How would this affect your trust toward them?

- How would you feel instead if someone didn’t personalize everything and saw the bigger picture? How would this affect your trust toward them?

4. Keep things in perspective

When we are in a conflict with someone we often lose perspective. For example, we suddenly dislike everything about the person.

- **Ask students** Have you ever suddenly disliked everything about someone when you got into a conflict with them? How did this affect the way you saw the conflict? **Allow for responses.**
- **Answer:** When we suddenly dislike everything about someone when we get into a conflict with them, this can cause us to lose perspective and make the conflict seem bigger.
- Share with students that one effective technique for keeping the conflict in perspective is to train our mind to think about reasons why we appreciate people when we have conflicts with them.
- Even a small conflict can blow things out of proportion and cause us to lose perspective, and cultivating appreciation helps us keep things in perspective.
- Many people have destroyed friendships and relationships over small conflicts, because they lost perspective.

5 mins

**Lead an Appreciation Exercise from p. 3 of the worksheet** which helps develop the skill of keeping things in perspective during a conflict. (You won’t be asked to share this.)

- Think of someone with whom you’ve had a conflict (don’t write their name).
- Write down two things you appreciate about them:
• Remind students that these are skills, and like any skill, we will not master them overnight.
• Strengthening any skill requires practice and effort.

Finally, acknowledge that sometimes it is important to feel outrage when we witness certain kinds of conflicts.

- Ask students, “What kinds of conflicts should cause us to feel outrage?”
- Being calm does not mean that we never feel outrage.
- Confronting injustice can sometimes cause us to feel moral outrage.
- But our minds function optimally and we are best prepared to solve problems like injustice when we can be calm under pressure.
- Remember that martial arts, sports, performance arts, the military, and peace leaders such as Gandhi and the Reverend Dr. MLK Jr. teach people the importance of being calm under pressure.
- When we can calm ourselves under pressure, this can help us think more clearly and make better decisions.
- Our minds do not function optimally when we are filled with anger or panic.

Note: These four skills for calming ourselves down are psychological techniques and are primarily meant to help us remain calm in the midst of conflicts with other humans.

There are also physical techniques, such as “tactical breathing” that can help us remain calm in conflicts with humans, or in emergency situations of any kind.

5 mins
Break

5 mins

Present a Tactical Breathing Exercise to Help Remain Calm in the Midst of Struggle
- Soldiers need to learn to be calm in the midst of very difficult and even life threatening struggles.
- Many soldiers use Tactical Breathing, which can also be called Combat Breathing or Four Count Breathing to help them stay calm under fire.
- It is similar to breathing techniques in the yogic tradition that are thousands of years old.
- Have students read along with you from p. 4 of their worksheets the following passage from Lt. Col. Dave Grossman’s book On Combat:

Tactical Breathing Exercise

One of the most common breathing techniques for calming yourself down is Four Count Breathing, also referred to as Tactical or Combat Breathing. Four Count breathing requires you to consciously regulate the amount of airflow your body is
receiving over four second intervals. While it can be a difficult technique to master under extreme stress, the principle of the breathing is simple.

Breathing is as follows:
1. Slowly inhale a deep breath over 4 seconds.
2. Hold the breath in for 4 seconds.
3. Slowly exhale the breath out over 4 seconds.
4. Hold the empty breath for 4 seconds.
5. Repeat until your breathing is under control.

In other words, take a deep breath through your nose for a count of four. 1, 2, 3, 4. Hold that breath for a count of four. 1, 2, 3, 4. Breath out through your mouth for a count of four. 1, 2, 3, 4. Hold again for a count of four without breathing at all. Then repeat the entire process four times. If your heart is racing this is a very quick way to slow it down and get a hold of yourself. It is a technique that I’ve used in my military and civilian life and has allowed me to control not only my body but my thoughts when doing things.

You can use Tactical Breathing when you need to quickly get control of your breathing. It will take focus and control to maintain this rhythm . . . Every person is different and sometimes repeating it 4 times does not calm people down, they might need to do it 5 or 6 times. It depends on the individual, but a general rule, especially when there isn’t a lot of time such as in a combat situation, 4 is the way to go (from Greg Swanson’s 2011 online summary of Warrior Mindset by Asken et al 2010).

Lead students in a practice of 3 rounds of breathing.

10 mins

Examine the Fuels that Feed the Fires Beneath Aggression:
- We can experience multiple fires at the same time, leading to a larger inferno
  But there are also multiple kinds of fuel.

Have students list on p. 4 of their worksheets, the three kinds of fuel that feed the fires beneath aggression, and provide examples of each.
- Some fuels result from structures in our society (such as racist structures that can cause distress)
- Some fuels result from situations (such as losing your job, your car breaking down, or having a family tragedy)
- Some fuels result from our **perception** (such as how we interpret situations, especially in terms of misunderstanding, miscommunication, or misinterpreting ambiguity)
  - We can also experience multiple sources of fuel at the same time
  - **Societal fuels** include institutional injustices such as racism.
    - The experience of racism can fuel various fires of aggression: fear, humiliation, feeling disrespected, alienation, etc.
  - The **Situational fuels** are the easiest to recognize (e.g., when someone cuts you off in traffic).
  - **Perceptual fuels** involve misunderstanding, miscommunication, or misinterpreting ambiguity.
    - When people are struggling with trauma or feeling aggressive, they can be more likely to misinterpret ambiguous situations by assuming hostile intent behind people’s actions. (e.g., a kid being bumped into in the hall interpreting the bump as intentional hostile aggression).
  - All these three kinds of fuel can be connected.
  - We can also experience multiple sources of fuel at the same time leading to a much larger inferno:
    - Imagine you have as a fuel, a **situational conflict** (someone gossips about you on social media) that starts to cause a fire/distress (feeling disrespected, humiliated, alienated, betrayed, disillusioned).
    - If the **societal fuel of racism** is added to the situational fuel, this can escalate the fire significantly.
    - If you add the **perceptual fuel** of misunderstanding and miscommunication and ambiguity things get even worse (social media is notorious for escalating misunderstandings because of mechanical distance).
  - Most disrespect is caused in some way by misunderstanding and miscommunication.
  - **So when we have conflicts, we should expect that ambiguity, misunderstanding, and miscommunication are a likely fuel source.**
  - Seeking clarification helps us clear up ambiguity, misunderstanding, and miscommunication.

**Empathy Break:**
- How many of the adults that you know practice these skills? Probably not many.
- Think of some of your teachers, or your parents, or politicians you’ve seen on tv.
- But the reason they don’t practice these skills is not because they learned them and rejected them, but because they never learned them.
- They are floundering without much skill because they don’t know any other options.
- Remembering this might help you have empathy for them.
15 mins

Lead another Exercise for Listening with Empathy with added level of difficulty!

Once again divide the room along its longest axis and hang two signs one at either end: Agree, Disagree

- Pick a prompt ahead of time that is relevant to the students and for which you can think of good arguments in certain contexts for agreeing and disagreeing
- Tell them to stand and tuck away their bags
- Read out the prompt
- If there is time have them write our their response to the prompt
- Tell them not to answer their views out loud, but to move to the side of the room that fits with their view.
- Then have them form a continuum stretching from the Agree to Disagree positions
- Have them lock elbows, and double back until everyone is facing someone from the other end of the continuum (there will be some in the middle who are noncommittal and that’s ok)
- Remind them this is an exercise in empathetic listening.
- Have them shake hands and introduce each other.
- Remind them to communicate empathy and respect nonverbally – usually nodding and making eye contact (there might be cultural differences here)
- Choose which side of the room will speak first about their view.
- Tell them to breathe deeply. Feel their feet contact the ground. Look at their partner.
- The first partner speaks for ONE MINUTE, the other partner DOES NOT SPEAK, BUT LISTENS CAREFULLY.
  - Added difficulty! For ONE MINUTE the listening partner repeats what they heard, and says two things they appreciate about the other person’s viewpoint.
  - Now switch.
  - Have them end by shaking hands again.

5 mins

Debrief

- As students: Was this harder? easier? why or why not?