

...CREATE EMOTIONAL SAFETY

Experiential education (EE) programs often involve small groups where clients are engaged kinesthetically, emotionally, and socially. For EE to become a space for transformation and growth, programs need to create and maintain emotional safety. **Emotional safety** is freedom from psychological harm based on individual client perceptions of safety and trust.

However, perceptions of safety and trust are not just fashioned by what is happening in the group, but are also formed from client histories, their families or cultures, their experiences with intergenerational trauma, and systemic racism or sexism. These experiences also influence their ability to feel safe and trusting, especially in unfamiliar environments. Here are some basic guidelines to create emotional safety.

1. **Role model:** Ownership of words, feelings, and behaviors will offer group members permission to do the same. This will also minimize counter-therapeutic power and help establish a sense of equivalency.
2. **Co-create group norms:** For shorter EE programs, the [Full Value](#) (or [Five Finger](#)) contract can be used. For longer programs, consider writing charter or agreement over time for what clients need from each other in order to benefit from a fully positive experience, including norms for how the group will handle conflict when it arises.
3. **Prioritize Diversity, Equity and Inclusion:** EE is about creating community and a greater sense of belonging and engagement in the world. Without overt values, placed front and center in programs, clients will not feel comfortable taking emotional or physical risks with one another.
4. **Create voice and choice opportunities** by:
 - a. conducting **client check-ins** in order to build rapport and create opportunities to share thoughts they are initially too afraid to share in front of the group.
 - b. facilitating **group process conversations** by asking: How is the group doing? Are we following our group norms? Where do we need to shift/adjust for people to feel heard? Supported? Acknowledged? How are we handling our conflicts?
 - c. providing **opportunities for optimal participation** using [Challenge by Choice](#). However, groups whose members may already be in a state of disequilibrium and/or trauma, may need to first find safety and stabilization in their comfort zone before being able to engage in the challenges. Therefore, offering a choice of three roles may assist clients to feel included and may create psychological growth by gradually sequencing their participation. These three roles may be **active** (some participation with asking for help when needed), **observational** (watch others and share individual strengths and group dynamics in later discussion), and/or **supportive** (cheer on others through positive feedback and encouragement).

EE practitioners have the honor of creating unique opportunities for clients to engage in learning experiences to expand their sense of possibilities, but they must perceive safety and trust. By creating, maintaining, and repairing emotional safety, practitioners can ensure that EE programs help clients to fully transform.

Christine Norton & Simon Priest

Christine Norton
TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
cn19@txstate.edu
512-757-6776

<https://www.socialwork.txstate.edu/websites/norton/norton-bio>

FURTHER RESOURCES

READING

Cave, D., Pearson, H., Whitehead, P., & Rahim-Jamal, S. (2016). CENTRE: Creating psychological safety in groups. *The Clinical Teacher*, 13(6), 427-431. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/tct.12465>

Dressel, D. P. (2020). Breaking the Ice to Build Relationships: Using Icebreakers to Create New Relationships, Promote Emotional Safety, and Incorporate Social and Emotional Learning: Editor: Ferman Konukman. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 91(5), 51-54. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/07303084.2020.1739434>

Edmondson, A. C. (2018). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. Wiley.

Talbot, W. (1992). Emotional Safety in Outdoor and Experiential Education. In: Hanna, G. M., Ed. *Celebrating Our Tradition Charting Our Future: Proceedings of the 20th International Conference of the Association for Experiential Education* (pp. 33-41). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED353111.pdf>

Vincent, S. M. (1995). Emotional safety in adventure therapy programs: Can it be defined? *Journal of Experiential Education*, 18(2), 76-81. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/105382599501800204>

VIEWING

Guide to Psychological Safety and Teamwork for Change Makers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7b2YSSrWyo>

OTHER

Accountable Space Guidelines: <https://medium.com/@elise.k.ahen/safe-and-brave-spaces-dont-work-and-what-you-can-do-instead-f265aa339aff>

Adventure-Based Learning--Challenge by Choice: <https://www.pa.org/what-is-adventurebased-learning>