

Guidance on how to create your own safe space



Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for women who live in the UK and who are refugees, asylum-seekers or survivors of trafficking with an interest in creating safe spaces for other women in their communities to meet and support each other.

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Why do we have this guidance?

We want to help empower women who have sought refuge in the UK and who may have experienced physical, emotional or psychological traumas because of their gender or sexual orientation.

It's important for survivors to have a place to go where they can access support and information in safety and without judgement. This guidance is designed to empower refugee and asylum-seeking women and survivors of trafficking to create their own safe spaces and overcome and manage their traumas.

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What is a safe space?

A safe space is a place of sanctuary that is created by and for any marginalised group needing to share experiences and receive support. These spaces can be formal or informal, online or in real life where members can feel confident they will not be exposed to judgement, fear, abuse or violence.

A safe space can be a place where you talk about your trauma or experiences, or it can simply just be somewhere where you come together with others and feel free from harm. Talking about trauma doesn't need to be the main focus. For example, it could be a meeting with your friends to do a certain activity such as painting, sewing, dancing or cooking.

Why should I create a safe space?

- To share experiences and challenges with other women who have been through or are going through something similar
- To make friends, build community and support networks
- To reduce isolation
- To create a space for others who may need support
- To heal and help others heal

You may have had some very difficult experiences in your past or you may be facing some very difficult challenges at the moment. You might feel sad, lonely, anxious, and afraid. You may not feel like this all the time, but sometimes what you have experienced in the past or what you are experiencing now can affect your daily life.

A safe space can be helpful if you feel this way. It can allow you to build social networks and entertain yourself. It can be an important way to connect with people and can be a healing space if you have experienced trauma.

Therefore, you might want to think about creating a safe space for you and your friends or for you and your community. Sometimes, just simply coming together with others on a regular basis in an environment where you feel comfortable can be an important source to manage your trauma. This can help the process of healing.

Examples of a safe space



An example of a safe space could be:

- 5 friends visiting a local park every Wednesday at 1pm to share different sweet treats they each have baked.
- 10 people in the community using a room in a local religious place of worship every Saturday at 10am to discuss a book they are reading.
- 4 friends coming together to learn English. They meet in a local café and speak to each other in English for one hour on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

How to create a safe space

It can be difficult to know where to start with creating a safe space, especially if you have limited resources. To make a start, try to address some of these initial questions...

Why?

Think about why you want to have a safe space and what the overall purpose of the safe space is.

This can really help you to organise your thoughts and help you decide on how to go about the next steps.

For example, who do you want the safe space to help? Do you want to bring together friends who have experienced trauma? Do you want to bring together members of your community?



What?

To start creating a safe space, it can be helpful to find an activity for everyone who attends to do or to think about a reason for the meeting. For example:

- **A book club**
- **An indoor sports activity (e.g. doing online yoga classes together)**
- **An outdoor sports activity (e.g. running)**
- **Food (e.g. everyone cooking their favourite foods and enjoying a meal together)**
- **A games club (e.g. chess, scrabble)**
- **A talking group where you speak about your challenges and worries in a group**



If you choose an activity, think about who will lead the activity and how you can ensure it is affordable and inclusive for everyone attending.

Simple and affordable activities you can do include:

- **Gathering women and encouraging them to write (where possible) or narrate one of their favourite moments, experiences, or memories**
- **Playing card games**
- **Going for a walk together in the park**



Where?

Think about finding a venue. This can often be the hardest part of creating a safe space. To find out about free indoor venues or spaces you can hire in your area try:

- **Contacting your local council**
- **Contacting a local library**
- **Contacting a local school**
- **Contacting a local charity. In particular, your local City of Sanctuary Group may be a good place to start (<https://data.cityofsanctuary.org/groups/list>)**
- **Contacting a local business such as a restaurant.**

If you already volunteer for an organisation or if you are working somewhere, it might be a good idea to approach the people where you work to see if they can offer you a space for free. Or you can approach a local business or organisation and offer to volunteer for them in exchange for using their space for free.

When you contact them, you should:

1. **Tell them what you want to do and why. Explain why it is important to you to create this safe space and who you will be helping.**
2. **Tell them how long you will need the space for and how often you will need it.**
3. **Tell them how many people will attend and give them an idea of who will be attending e.g. refugee women.**
4. **Tell them what activities will take place in this space.**

You can also explain that you have limited resources but that you are trying to help your local community and ask if they can offer a physical space for free.

It is important to think about somewhere that is easy for people to travel to.

Often it is best for a safe space to be outside of people's homes as a home is not always a safe space for everybody. Being outside of the home can also be helpful, as it gives people a chance to think about things outside their daily life. However, if you can't find a physical space, you can also think about whether you can do it remotely via Zoom or an app such as WhatsApp.

Online tools can also be useful so you can stay connected to the individuals attending your safe space in between meetings.



Who?

Who is your space targeted at? Is it you and your friends? How many people will you invite? Keep in mind that the more people, the larger the venue you will need.

As a safe space should be a place where you feel comfortable, try to ensure that people you invite are persons that everyone attending would be comfortable speaking to. For example, if you are creating a group for women who have experienced domestic violence or intimate partner violence it may be important for the group to be women-only.

Also, think about what will happen if someone else wants to join the group or a member wants to bring a friend. If you have limited numbers, you may need to explain this to those attending.

You can let people know about the safe space in different ways:

- **By word of mouth, speaking to friends and telling them to tell their friends.**
- **By putting up posters. For example, you can put up posters in a Mother and Baby group or in other settings where people who might need a safe space might gather.**
- **Telling other organisations, charities, faith groups or services about what you are doing and ask them to tell others who might be interested.**
- **Through social media or WhatsApp groups.**



When?



Think about when you want to open up your safe space.

Depending on who you are inviting, consider whether they have children or working hours. If they have children in school, maybe the time should be during school hours. If they are working, maybe weekends are best.

As many women may have children, think about whether it is possible for young children to also attend the safe space. Some women may not feel able to speak freely or without distraction with children around. Think about options for childcare such as a creche space at the venue. Funding might be needed to pay for creche workers or make a volunteer rota of group members who can take it in turns to look after the children, giving everyone an opportunity to access the space.

Important things to think about

Rules

Agreeing on rules or a code of conduct for your space will increase a sense of security for all group members and make it clear what is expected of everyone. Rules can be set through a discussion with all members at the beginning of the group and should be reviewed regularly to make sure everyone is still happy with them. You might find rules need to be changed and adapted over time to ensure they are still meeting the needs of the safe space.

- Respect others' opinions
- Respect others' differences
- Do not discriminate based on race, religion, class, sexual or gender orientation or any other characteristic
- Listen to others and do not talk over other people
- Give everyone the chance to speak if they want to
- Confidentiality. If anyone shares something private, it should not be repeated to anyone else
- Act with kindness
- Have fun

Access

Safe spaces often demand a certain level of controlled access to make participants feel confident as well as secure, for example, by not allowing cis-gendered men to attend. Having said that, it is also important to ensure that women are not excluded on the basis of faith, race, socioeconomic class and sexual or gender orientation.

Think about the things that might stop someone from accessing this space. If the venue is in a religious building would that prevent people from other faiths from attending? Would a member of the LGBTQI community know that they would be welcome in the group just by looking at the poster? Would a wheelchair user be able to get into the space easily? Have a think about all the different people who might want to attend and what factors might prevent them from attending. If you aren't sure - ask them!

Wellbeing

Looking after yourself and each others' well-being is an important part of creating a safe space. If your safe space involves talking about difficult and painful to recollect topics, make sure that you have prepared those coming so that they know that there may be topics that are hard to talk about. Make sure they know that they can remove themselves from the safe space at any point if it becomes too difficult for them to engage in these conversations.

Tips for looking after wellbeing in safe spaces:

- **Have a set of resources** available with contact details of refuges, counsellors and organisations in case anyone needs help. For example, they can call the Samaritans on 116 123 (<https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/>).
- **Start each group session with a 'Check In' exercise.** This is where you go around the group and give each person an opportunity to say how they are feeling today. This could be using a single word or colour to describe your mood or can be as long or as short as you want to make it. (See Appendix 1).
- **Build mindfulness or relaxation exercises in each session.** These can be energising (sometimes used at the beginning) such as movement or singing. Or more of a relaxing activity, like chair meditation or deep breathing exercises (sometimes used at the end). (See Appendix 2).
- **Use 'ice breaker' exercises** to help introduce new group members to everyone or while the group is still getting to know each other. This could be pairing off and interviewing each other and introducing your partner back to the group or other team-building activities. (See Appendix 3).

Roles

To help with the smooth running of the safe space, it might be worth assigning specific roles to different people involved. For example, one person who is in charge of booking the venue and organising refreshments, another dealing with letting people know what is happening and when, and another person to run the sessions or 'chair'.

The different roles can change or 'rotate' if everyone would rather take turns or can stay the same for a set period of time.

The structure of the group is also worth considering. Do you elect a leader who runs things and makes decisions for everyone else for a set period of time, before electing another or do you have a 'flat' structure where every decision is made as a group following a discussion? It is worth deciding the roles and structure of the group at the very beginning, alongside the rules and writing this down somewhere so everyone is able to refer back to this (attaching to a WhatsApp group or using google docs).

Fundraising

You may decide that you need additional funds for your safe space. If you come up with an idea for a safe space, you may want to consider approaching a local business or organisation to help with funding.

If you choose to ask a business or an organisation for help with money, you should make sure that you:

1. **Tell them what you want to do and why. Explain why it is important to you to create this safe space.**
2. **Tell them who you will be helping.**
3. **Tell them how many people will attend.**
4. **Tell them what activities will take place.**
5. **Tell them how much you need and what you will spend it on. Be specific. For example, 50 pounds a month to spend on travel for those who are attending.**
6. **Report back to the person giving you the money, ideally in writing explaining what you spent it on and who it helped.**

■ Colours Check In

This activity encourages people attending your group to check in with themselves and connect with how they're feeling. It helps you, as people facilitating the group, to understand how your attendees are feeling and offer them support.

1. Explain to attendees that this activity helps them to check in with themselves, and connect with how they're feeling.
2. Ask attendees to close their eyes, if they feel comfortable.
3. Ask them to take a deep breath and focus on their breathing.
4. Ask them to take 30 seconds to think about how they're feeling today – make sure you time 30 seconds.
5. Once the 30 seconds is over, ask them to think of a colour. Explain that sometimes thinking of our feelings and emotions in terms of a colour helps us to understand how we're feeling. For example, if you are feeling excited you might think of a bright yellow! If you're feeling tired, you might think of a grey.
6. Ask everyone to take 30 seconds to think of a colour that connects to how they are feeling today – make sure you time 30 seconds.
7. When 30 seconds has finished, ask everyone to open their eyes.
8. Invite those attending to share the colour and feeling they thought of, if they feel comfortable doing so.
9. Encourage them to explain why they have chosen this colour.

This activity invites people to think about how they are feeling, so make sure you check in on any attendees you think needs it!

■ Weather Check In

Everyone in the group takes it in turn to give a weather report of their week, answering the question - "What was the weather like in your life this week"?

For example: *"My week started out with severe thunderstorms as I had reporting this week and felt very anxious about it but on Tuesday the sun came out when I met a friend for a picnic in the park"* or *"My week started with heavy clouds as I was feeling very depressed and was having trouble sleeping but the clouds parted on Wednesday after a really good night's sleep"*.



■ Countdown to Five

This is a great way to regain focus and put your mind in an aware and receptive state. Ask people to write down or say out loud answers to the following:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can touch

■ Mindful Walking

Find a nearby park or green space to walk around. The activity leader encourages the group to walk quietly and pay attention to the things they wouldn't normally notice. Instead of looking around and seeing a tree, or a sign, or a person, the group are encouraged to think about the: colours and shapes, light and darkness, sounds and smells, textures and the sensations on their skin as they move. This helps to reconnect them with their own body and become more attuned to their environment.



■ Get to Know Your Partner

This activity helps people attending your group to get to know each other.

1. Create a circle of chairs and ask people to take a seat.
2. Put everyone into pairs – make sure that the people in the pairs don't already know each other.
3. Encourage them to get to know each other. Give them 5 minutes to:
 - a. Learn their partner's name.
 - b. Learn one thing that their partner enjoys doing.
 - c. Find one thing about their partner that they like or admire. Encourage members not to choose something about their physical appearance, but about their partner's character.
4. Go round each pair and ask them to present back to the group what they have learnt about their partner.

■ Talking About Respect

A way to establish respect. This is useful for future discussions and the reason for this exercise is to appreciate and learn from each other's perspectives. We are all different and it is important to understand what others think and respect each other's views.

1. In small groups, spend 5-10 minutes talking about respect. For example, what does it mean for you to show respect, and what does it mean for you to be shown respect? What kind of actions are used to show respect in your culture?
2. The small groups should then all come together and have an open discussion about what everyone has said.

■ Chat Show - a way to introduce yourself to others.

1. With a partner, one person should pretend to be a chat show host and the other person should pretend to be a guest. The chat show host should ask questions and find out three interesting facts about their guest. Swap places and do it again.
2. Everyone should then come back together and each person can tell the group the three facts they learned about their guest. It may be a good idea to go round the group randomly so people are less aware of their turn coming up next and do not panic about it.