



## PREPARE

Understanding  
Holistic Security





# I Prepare

## Understanding Holistic Security

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### Introduction

In this Section, we will take the first steps towards adopting an organised holistic approach to our security as human rights defenders. In order to do this, we will first explore what the notion of ‘security’ actually means to us as human rights defenders, and consider the aspects of it which may not have occurred to us before. What is ‘security’, and what does it mean when we regularly put ourselves in danger in order to fight peacefully for what we believe in?

Although we may want to better organise our approach to security, we are never starting from scratch, but rather building on our existing well-being, attitudes, skills, knowledge and resources, which we will explore in this Section. Within this we will consider the personal beliefs which colour our perception of the world and can be important resources when we are under threat, as well as the instinctive responses our bodies have evolved to respond to threats, which we must recognise in order to better understand ourselves.

When we suffer threats to our security, the dynamics of the groups and organisations in which we operate can change in a number of ways. In this context, we will explore here some best practices for communicating about security as a peer-group, team or organisation.

### In Prepare, we will:

- define what **security** means to us
- explore what we mean when we refer to **holistic security**
- reflect on our **existing security practices**
- learn about **natural reactions** to danger, and their advantages and limitations
- explore some **team, peer and organisational responses** to threat
- highlight best practices for **communicating about security** within groups and organisations.

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## What is Holistic Security for Human Rights Defenders?

All of us desire and need a sense of security, the feeling that we are protected from harm. When we feel safe, we can relax our bodies, calm our minds, rest and recuperate. If we are unable to feel safe for extended periods, it is possible for us to quickly become tired, miserable and even physically ill. As human rights defenders, we sometimes choose to sacrifice our sense of safety (at least temporarily) in the pursuit of a better society, free from oppression and exploitation. Unfortunately, in the course of our work as human rights defenders, we are occasionally confronted by others who will try, perhaps through violence, intimidation and harassment, or by more subtle methods of oppression, to prevent us from achieving our goals.

## Maintaining and expanding our space

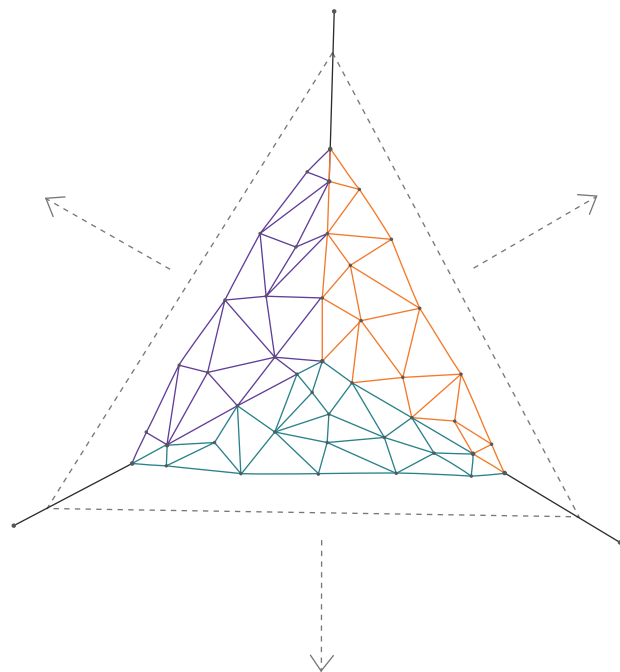
Incidents ranging from arrests, intimidation and violent attacks, to harassment, reputational attacks, surveillance and social exclusion, can all be viewed as attempts made by our adversaries (those who don't share our aims or actively oppose them) to limit or close the spaces in which we work and live. These 'spaces' can mean literal physical spaces, including public squares and areas where groups can protest or demonstrate, our offices or homes, as well as our economic space (by limiting our access to resources), our social space (by limiting our freedom of expression or peaceful association), our technological space (through censorship, surveillance and access to our data), our legal space (through judicial, administrative or bureaucratic harassment), our environmental space (through promotion of 'development' models which are not sustainable), to name but a few.

By adopting an organised approach to security, our ultimate aim is to defend our space for work and, ideally, expand it so that the societies and States in which we operate will move with us towards respecting and protecting human rights.

In order to do this, we can adopt various tactics and utilise tools and weave them into plans for our human rights activities. These tools and tactics often correspond to one or more strategies for maintaining and expanding our space for work: those which encourage others to **accept** our work; those which **deter** attacks against us, and those with which we **protect** ourselves.

### Work Space

- △ Acceptance
- △ Protection
- △ Deterrence



These over-arching strategies are expanded upon in more detail in [Section III | Strategise](#).

## Well-being as subversive and political

The threats faced by human rights defenders are varied and complex. We are perhaps used to thinking about security in rather narrow terms such as protecting ourselves from violent attacks, office raids, judicial harassment or threats from armed groups.

While an organised approach to these kinds of threats is indeed necessary, a holistic approach to security goes beyond that. Threats may also include structural forms of violence and harassment: economic and other types of marginalisation, extremely heavy workloads, lack of financial security, stress and traumatic experiences among a host of other factors. Such threats not only affect us, but also have implications for the people around us, including friends and family. Further, we must recognise that external threats affect not only our physical safety but also the space within ourselves, our bodies and our minds which, when threatened, inhibit our capacity to carry out our work and be content doing so. Well-being is central not only to carrying out our activism effectively but also to our ability to think as 'objectively' as possible, analyse and strategise.

A holistic approach to security understands self-care not as selfishness, but as a subversive and political act of self-preservation. How we define our well-being in the context of activism is subjective and deeply personal. It is influenced by the differing needs of our bodies and minds, the challenges we face, our beliefs (religious, spiritual or secular), our gender identities, interests and relationships. As activists and human rights defenders, we must define security for ourselves and build solidarity and support for one another into our groups, organisations and movements on this basis.

In spite of threats to our space for work and personal expression, we don't often give up: we decide to keep challenging the injustices which we see in the world. For this reason, **we can think of security for human rights defenders as well-being in action**: being physically and emotionally healthy and sustaining ourselves while continuing to do the work that we believe is important, and carrying out the necessary analysis and planning to stay secure on our own terms.

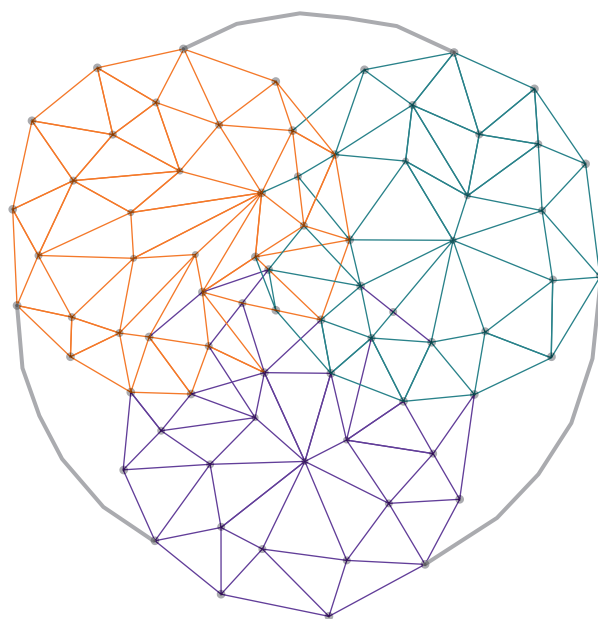
## Taking control of our information

No organised approach to security is complete without an organised approach to information and data management. The tools we rely on to manage our information – digital and analogue – also form part of our space for work and are subject to many of the same threats which we face in other areas.

Largely unseen and operating behind closed doors, the surveillance industry has experienced huge growth since the turn of the century. Access to our sensitive data (the files we manage, our email and mobile phone communication, etc.) is ever more important to those seeking to hinder the work of human rights defenders. Equally, the digital dimension now comprises a huge part of our lives, yet many of us feel that it is not within our control or treat it as something which does not impact our ‘real’ security. We must challenge these perceptions; identifying our sensitive data, understanding where it is stored and who has access to it, before undergoing a process of implementing means to protect it is not only a security measure, but also an act of political self-empowerment.

### Holistic Security

- △ Physical Security  
Threats to our physical integrity. Threats to our homes, buildings, vehicles.
- △ Psycho-social Security  
Threats to our psychological wellbeing.
- △ Digital Security  
Threats to our information, communication and equipment.
- Holistic security analysis, strategies and tactics.



Holistic security practice, therefore, refers to the conservation of the well-being and agency of ourselves as human rights defenders, our families and communities, through the consistent use of psycho-social, physical, digital and other tools and tactics in ways that reinforce (rather than contradict) each other. These tactics enable us to increase our overall security, mitigate the threats we face and expand the choices we are able to make on a day to day basis.

## Resilience and agility

It is worth bearing in mind that the threats and challenges in the world around us are always changing. This is particularly true for human rights defenders.

We must avoid falling into the trap of thinking that we can plan for everything. Unfortunately, due to our work, ‘unexpected’ events are almost the norm for many of us and activist communities need to be able to develop the necessary emotional and mental flexibility to deal with this. Cultivating a strong sense of well-being and feeling mentally and emotionally centred, is critical in a context where the risks and threats that we encounter are largely unpredictable.

Given the needs and demands of activism that can destroy even the best laid security plans, a more realistic approach is not to ignore the unexpected but instead to incorporate it into our responses. In this sense, it is not sufficient to simply develop a security plan and follow it to the letter. Rather, it is better to work with the unexpected and develop other attributes such as presence of mind or centredness to sharpen our ability to cope with it.

We often continue to carry out our work in full awareness of the threats that come along with it. Indeed, it is our own vulnerability that keeps us connected to the experiences of others whose rights are being violated. It is not possible to make ourselves completely ‘safe’ and perhaps it is not even desirable. With this in mind, we also need to build **resilience** and **agility**. Resilience is the ability to recover quickly from set-backs or injuries. Agility is the ability to quickly adopt new security practices in response to new or emerging threats. The goal is not to be safe through doing nothing, but to consciously face threats and protect ourselves and our communities as much as possible, so that we can still be engaged and active.

For most human rights defenders at risk, the notions of resilience and agility are not new, nor is the idea of having tools and tactics for staying safe during dangerous work. In this first exercise, we will explore some of the existing practices we have for staying safe.

**Note:** The exercises throughout this manual can usually be done alone or in a group. In some group settings the topics addressed may be sensitive or divisive. It is therefore important that you create a ‘safe’ space where everyone in the group feels comfortable speaking and sharing their own opinions and there is a general atmosphere of trust. Some tips on how to create a safe space include establishing shared agreements at the beginning of the conversation, being mindful that it’s OK to have differing opinions, making sure that all members of the group are heard and that each person’s contribution is treated as equally valid.

## 1.1 Exercise

### Reflection on existing security practices

**Purpose & Output** This exercise helps you reflect on what security means to you and explore the security tactics, plans and strategies that you consciously or unconsciously have in place.

You get a snapshot of your existing practices, how they interact with each other and how you can use it as a foundation for the next steps.

**Input & Materials** If you want to document the results, write the answers on a flip-chart or sticky notes on a wall.

**Format & Steps** **Individual reflection or group discussion**  
 Ask yourself or the group the following questions:

1. Think about the word ‘security’ or ‘safety’. What does it actually mean to you? What do you need in order to feel secure or safe?
2. What do you do every day to avoid danger and protect yourself, your property, your friends or family?
3. When was the last time you did something which made you feel safe and strong?
4. Call to mind an activity you carried out which was dangerous. What did you do in order to stay safe?
5. What other people are important in helping you to feel secure or safe?

6. What resources or activities are important in helping you to feel secure or safe?

Take note of your answers to these questions as they will be useful in later exercises and Sections of the guide and will remind you that you are not building new practices from ‘scratch’.

**Remarks & Tips** Colleagues or team members might feel strange talking about ‘security’ if there is no existing organisational culture of talking about these issues. This exercise can nevertheless be utilised to start such a process of awareness raising.

The exercise itself might start the process of generating ideas on what to improve or add to your security practices. You might want to take notes on these in preparation for **Section III | Strategise** which deals with planning.

As activists, we may pay little conscious attention to security, and only passively note the absence of danger or feeling insecure. By referring to holistic security as ‘well-being in action’, we propose to be more conscious about security from an empowering perspective and to create an integrated experience by grounding security in our daily perceptions of threat and security, our feelings, reflections and practices shaped by the communities in which we live and work.

In the rest of **Section I | Prepare**, we begin preparations for a more comprehensive and organised approach to security. We start with an examination of how people react to danger and threats on a physiological level and in what ways this affects our perceptions, mindset, and subsequent actions. We then explore working in teams and groups while being under stress and danger and how positive (and negative) dynamics emerge in this context which will influence our security.

## Individual Responses to Threats

Organising our approach to security is largely about developing a more accurate ability to perceive and analyse threats and choose means of avoiding them. However, we need not develop this perception from scratch: we already have physiological responses to threats which should be understood and acknowledged. Furthermore, our perception and ability to analyse may be challenged by some aspects of our work. If we are at least aware of these, it will help us plan more realistically.

People have natural defence mechanisms which developed through our evolution. Hard-wired into our brains are neural pathways and structures with the primary function of keeping us alive when we are threatened. These functions are most often below the level of conscious awareness; that is, our security processes are operating even if we are not aware of them. This applies both when we ourselves are under threat, or indirectly, when someone close to us is threatened.

One of our survival mechanisms is often called intuition, those powerful but seemingly irrational feelings that we sometimes have about a particular person, place, or activity. When our intuition is signalling untrustworthiness or danger, it is often because we have picked up multiple, subtle **indicators** which alone do not identify a particular threat, but taken together strongly suggest the presence of danger. Many human rights defenders have been saved by paying attention to their intuition or 'trusting their gut', even when they could not explain how they knew they were in danger.

Intuitions of danger produce a feeling of **anxiety**. Although anxiety is an uncomfortable feeling, it is an extremely helpful one. Anxiety provokes us to act to reduce our discomfort. When we feel anxious we actively seek out information that might confirm or challenge the possibility that we are in a potentially harmful or dangerous situation. Depending upon what we learn, our anxiety might develop into fear.

When we feel fear we demonstrate powerful **survival responses**. These responses are driven by the same brain structures and supported by biological changes. When this happens much of our behaviour becomes automatic, in the sense that we have less conscious awareness of choosing to act in a particular way. Common survival responses include the following responses.

- 1 **The 'freeze response'** is when a person becomes utterly still while remaining highly alert and poised for action. This response relies on escaping notice until the danger has passed. For example, we might cease the work that we are doing, stop communicating through our usual channels, or reduce communication with someone with whom we are in conflict. In each case, we are hoping that the unwelcome attention will pass if we become inactive.
- 2 **The 'flight response'** is when a person quickly tries to get as far away from the danger as possible. We might move our operations to a safer location, abandon certain activities or modes of communication, or separate ourselves from people who might cause us harm.
- 3 **The 'comply response'** involves doing what an aggressor instructs in the hope that cooperation will result in the attack ending quickly and with less injury. We might agree to suspend or abandon certain objectives or activities, or give up passwords to secure information.
- 4 **The 'tend response'** happens when people try to protect other, more vulnerable people who are being similarly victimised. Many human rights defenders are motivated to help others because of our own experiences of oppression and exploitation.
- 5 **The 'befriend response'** involves trying to build some kind of relationship with the aggressor in the hope that this will limit the harm perpetrated against oneself or others. By telling physical aggressors about our families, we might try to humanise ourselves in their eyes, a strategy that is sometimes useful in reducing violence.
- 6 **The 'posture response'** is an attempt to drive off the danger by pretending to have greater power than one actually does. As human rights defenders, we often threaten to expose and publicise threats of violence so as to publicly embarrass our adversaries.
- 7 **The 'fight response'** is when a person attacks with the intent of driving off or destroying the aggressor. Of course there are many different ways to fight and we all make our own choices about this.



It is important to note that when engaged in a survival response, we become quicker, stronger, more focused and more resilient than we would normally be. As a result, these survival strategies are extremely effective in many circumstances. It helps to remember that even though you might only be beginning to develop your own organised approach to security, your natural survival mechanisms are already hard at work.

As powerful as our survival responses are, they are not perfect. While our brains are capable of processing enormous amounts of information and reacting very quickly, they do not do this in a systematic and logical manner. There are some situations in which our brains are particularly untrustworthy, and we should pay special attention to these.

### Threats from the digital sphere

One of the ways in which we can be let down by our physiological responses discussed above relates to digital and information security. We are well adapted to respond to physical threats (such as defending ourselves from attack), or inter-personal threats (such as coping with estrangement from family members) and as a result we have strong intuitive and emotional reactions to these kinds of danger.

However, whilst our physical and digital worlds are closely interwoven, we can struggle to identify or respond appropriately to digital attacks; a suspicious stranger standing outside our home might make us very anxious and prompt us to take action to make ourselves safer, yet clear warnings of viruses on a computer are more likely to be experienced as irritants, and ignored or even disabled, despite having very real implications.

Moreover, the prevalence of proprietary technology and the secrecy surrounding electronic surveillance make it difficult to establish what threats we face. Frequently we fail to recognise these threats, or conversely we perceive threats which may not actually be relevant to us.

Since human rights defenders are subjected to ever more sophisticated means of electronic surveillance and depend more than ever on digital tools, we must learn to make up for this lack of protective instinct. Through taking account of our information as an important asset in our work and opting to protect our data from unwanted access or surveillance where we deem it necessary, we can increase our levels of certainty and reduce the stress and fear which this topic may cause us.

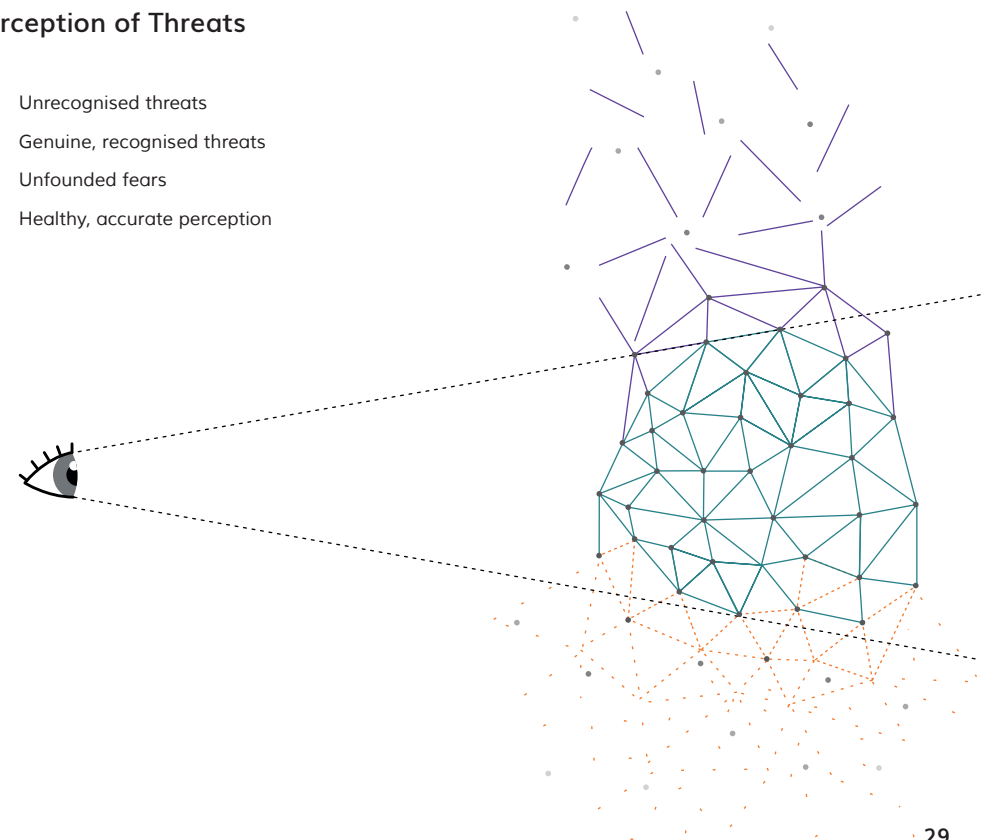
### Trauma, stress and fatigue

Very disturbing or **traumatic past experiences** may unhelpfully distort the way we respond to indicators of danger. This is particularly true of those traumatic experiences that stay with us in powerful and uncomfortable ways, even years after the event. These kinds of traumatic experiences lead to two common reactions. For many people, past traumatic experiences contribute to our **unfounded fears**. These people become over-sensitive to things that remind them of past traumatic experiences. When this happens, entirely harmless situations take on a sinister appearance and our intuition begins to tell us that we are in danger when we are not. This can lead us to having reactions which are inappropriate and impact our relationships with the people and organisations around us.

Other people recognise their problem or become exhausted by continually having their brains and bodies reacting to these false alarms. Over time, these people sometimes start to suppress or ignore their healthy internal alarm system. While this helps people live more effectively in the world, it does also reduce their awareness of potential threats in the environment. In this way, past traumatic experiences may contribute to **unrecognised threats**.

#### Perception of Threats

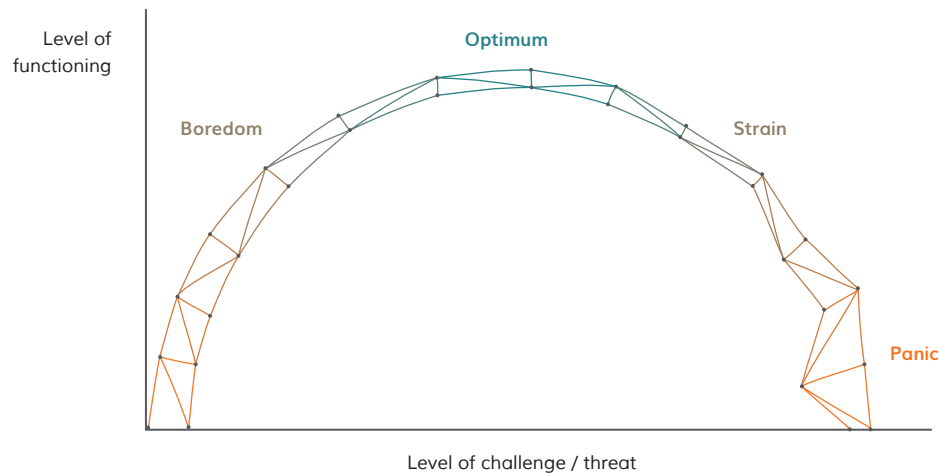
- △ Unrecognised threats
- △ Genuine, recognised threats
- △ Unfounded fears
- Healthy, accurate perception



**Stress and fatigue** can also result in us inaccurately identifying and responding to indicators of threats in our environment. When we feel overwhelmed by the challenges in our work and home lives, or when we have been working too hard, for too long and without enough rest, we start to behave differently.

Every person has a level of challenge or threat that stimulates them to a point of maximum productivity and well-being. If there is not enough stimulation and challenge in our lives, we feel bored and become unproductive, even depressed. If there is too much challenge or threat, we start to become overwhelmed. We feel that we cannot cope with everything that life demands of us, and once again we become unproductive, anxious and depressed.

### Stress Curve



Many human rights defenders may be accustomed to high levels of challenge in their lives, and some may even enjoy it, but this doesn't mean that we are impervious to stress. Each of us has a limit after which we can no longer cope. When this limit is reached, we become unhappy and our productivity suffers. Furthermore, the level of care and attention that we give to our security drops.

When we are over-worked, security indicators can sometimes be seen as just one more problem we have to deal with. If our coping resources are already completely committed, we might choose to ignore the indicator or react in ways which

are not helpful to ourselves, our colleagues or our work. Another reason for failing to deal adequately with real threats is that we become accustomed to a certain (and sometimes growing) level of threat in our personal or work life. This level of threat starts to feel 'normal' or comfortable. When this happens, we are less likely to take steps to improve our safety.

As a result, developing a culture (both individually and as a group, organisation or movement) of stress management and self-care is fundamental to a holistic approach to security. Not only will this help to prevent threats brought about through long term exposure to stress and fatigue, but it will greatly aid critical thinking about security in general.

In the following exercises, we will reflect upon some of our past experiences and how these may continue to affect our perceptions of danger. Once we are more aware of this, it will be easier to build tactics for keeping our perception 'in check' in our security planning.

### 1.2a Exercise

#### Self-awareness exercise: Recognising and reacting to threats

**Purpose & Output** The purpose of this exercise is to help you recognise the areas in which your perceptions are most accurate and the areas in which you may be less clear-sighted.

You should gain a clearer understanding of:

- your reactions to threats in the past which went well and not so well
- the gaps in your recognition of threats
- things you may want change
- things which make you confident facing new threats and should be continued.

**Input & Materials** Printed copies of the questions



**Format & Steps** Individual reflection  
Think back on a past experience where you felt particularly unsafe and then acted to take care of yourself. While the experience might have been primarily physical, emotional or related to information security, it might also have had additional impacts on other aspects of your security.

Use the following table to keep track of your insights.

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**Remarks & Tips** It is helpful to take time for this exercise and write your answers clearly so that you can come back to them as you deepen your self-awareness. If you do this, take care to keep your notes in a private place, sharing your personal thoughts and questions only with people that you trust.

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Choose one moment when you felt threatened or in danger and then acted to protect yourself. Consider experiences of physical danger (such as a robbery), emotionally damaging experiences (such as being threatened or betrayed) or threats to your information and communications (such as devices being confiscated or telephones being wire-tapped).

How did you become aware of the threat? .....

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Were there earlier indicators of the threat that you noticed, or maybe failed to notice? Consider indicators in the socio-political environment, in your physical environment, in your devices and in your body and mind.

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Were there earlier indicators of the threat that you had noticed, but dismissed as unimportant? Consider indicators in the socio-political environment, in your physical environment, in your devices and in your body and mind.

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What were your initial reactions when you became aware of the threat and how effective were these?

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What were your subsequent actions and how effective were these?

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What would you change if you could go back in time? What would you do instead?

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What can you learn from this experience which might help you feel more confident in your ability to cope with future difficulties?

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## 1.2b Exercise

**Note:** If you, your team members, colleagues or fellow activists have gone through traumatic experiences and you want to know how this might impact your perceptions of threats, you can run this deepening exercise. This exercise may be more emotionally challenging so if you do not presently feel ready, consider completing it at another time.

### Self-awareness exercise: How traumatic experiences affect our perception

**Purpose & Output** The purpose of this exercise is to help you recognise areas in which your perceptions are most accurate and areas in which you might be less clear-sighted due to traumatic experiences.

**Input & Materials** It is helpful to take time over these questions and to write down your answers clearly so that you can come back to them over time and as you deepen your self-awareness. If you do this, take care to keep your notes in a private place, sharing your personal thoughts and questions only with people that you trust.

**Format & Steps** Think back on any past traumatic experiences that may not be fully resolved. These will be experiences that you think about often and which still have the power to make you feel frightened, angry, guilty, ashamed, or sad. Don't go into the actual situation, but focus on what you did to help yourself, what you did to help others and what others did or might have done to help you.

Consider the following questions:

- What kinds of dangerous situations are particularly emotionally loaded for you as a result of your past experiences?
- When you find yourself in potentially dangerous environments, are there any situations that make you anxious or scared quite easily?
- Is there someone you trust who could help you identify any unfounded fears you may have?
- What kind of threats do you feel you fail to recognise easily?

- How might you check whether you are failing to recognise some indicators of danger?
- With whom do you feel comfortable discussing your fears and possible blind spots?

**Remarks & Tips** As this exercise might prove to be emotionally challenging, communicate this clearly to your colleagues. It is important that nobody feel coerced into participating in this exercise, and if someone starts to become distressed, they should stop immediately. It might also be a good idea to relate it to other activities, which cover areas of psycho-social well-being.

### Optional Exercise: Use of Time<sup>6</sup>

As human rights defenders, a very important aspect of our lives which we often lose track of is our use of time. Our workloads are often extremely difficult to manage and our struggle to stay on top of them may come at the cost of our physical and emotional well-being. It may also have a negative effect on our ability to perceive dangers. You can explore this for yourself in the exercise below.

The development of successful security practice demands the commitment of resources, most notably time. As individuals, we need time to reflect on the effect our work is having on us, to ask questions and find answers, to identify successful tactics and tools, to plan and co-ordinate and to integrate new practices into our lives and work.

<sup>6</sup> Reproduced from Barry, J. (2011) Integrated Security: The Manual, Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, Stockholm.

Feelings of emotional security are often related to our use and perception of time. What is the ratio between our working or engagement hours and the time we spend with our loved ones or for recreational activities? As activists, we nearly always face the dilemma that our workload never ends but our energies do. So where do we draw the line? The “Use of Time” exercise from the Integrated Security Manual helps us to make conscious steps towards a healthier and more emotionally secure use of time, which you can find in **Appendix E**.

3

## Inner Beliefs and Values

Our instinctive physiological responses are not the only resource we have at our disposal to help us build resilience when facing threats. Understanding ourselves and our security in this context also demands that we reflect on the values and beliefs we bring to our activism: they inform how we perceive the world and society around us, our role within it, and indeed our understanding of security and well-being. From this perspective, it is helpful to recognise the inner beliefs and values which inspire us, motivate our work and build our resilience. It is equally important that we respect the values and beliefs of our colleagues and fellow human rights defenders in order to avoid contributing to division, tension and mistrust in our collectives, organisations and movements.

The inner beliefs and values that underpin our work vary greatly. For some, they may have their roots in traditional cultural, religious or spiritual beliefs; for others, they may be entirely humanist or atheist. In any case, for many human rights defenders, inner beliefs and ethical values are a fundamental lens through which we perceive the world: they offer many of us a sense of purpose; they can help us find inner peace in times of turmoil, strength in the face of adversity and healing when hurt.

However, these values are often deeply significant and personal, and we might hesitate before voicing them to others. We think about bringing our values to our work as a personal process, but what does it look like to be explicit about our values as individuals, or indeed our common values as a collective or movement? If we articulate our ethos, beliefs and their associated rituals, and recognise the role these values play in inspiring our activism and maintaining our resilience, we will be more inclined to create, respect and defend space for them within our work.

Conversely, it may also be the case that we assume (correctly or incorrectly) that our colleagues or fellow human rights defenders share the same values or beliefs as we do. Acting on the basis of these assumptions, we can inadvertently limit the space for the distinct values and beliefs of others during our work together. Regardless of what values or beliefs underpin our work, it is beneficial to forge a group environment in which we can be confident that the values that motivate us are respected and perhaps even celebrated.

A first step towards a more comprehensive view of our values – be they atheistic, spiritual, religious or otherwise – is to create a safe space where we can share them with those around us. This can prove a communal source of mutual understanding, inspiration, growth and support, paving the way for us to better understand why, as activists, we take the risks we take, and enabling us to better care for each other in the course of our work.

Further, such a space must be open and respectful, wherein each person feels able to share the values which inspire them in a way which does not lead to judgement, arguments or dogma, but rather fosters solidarity, mutual respect and learning.

### Faith and cultural practices as a source of connection or division

As much as faith and cultural practices can be a unifying or connecting factor within your team, they can also become the opposite. If minority practices are discouraged, for example by not taking dietary requirements (which may be cultural, ethical or religious) into account when organising group meals or creating an atmosphere of ‘us and them’, they can become a divisive force. This negatively impacts not only those who are marginalised, but the entire group.

Looking at wider society, faith and cultural practices could form a unifying (and perhaps strategically useful) connection between you and the society you want to transform. However, it could also become a divisive factor, which separates you from the ‘others’, and could be exploited to stigmatise or target you.

For a closer look at these connecting and dividing factors, and how you can impact them, see **Section III | Strategise. The Do-No-Harm Approach**.



So far we have discussed holistic security in terms of individuals. Nevertheless, as human rights defenders, we seldom work alone and most of us have families and communities which may also be directly or indirectly affected by our work. Commonly, we work with peers and in groups. As groups, we need to build sufficient trust to talk to each other meaningfully about our motivations and fears, to develop a shared understanding of the risks and threats facing us, to agree an integrated set of security practices, to build solidarity, resilience and agility together and to hold each other accountable for consistently implementing those practices. We will explore the dynamics of these relationships in the context of our work in the next Chapter.

4

## Team and Peer Responses to Threats

People organise themselves into groups such as families, circles of friends and teams – both within and outside our human rights activism. When people feel anxious or frightened, these groups may change in ways which are at least partly predictable. Since achieving holistic security almost always involves other people, it is helpful to think about how groups change in times of increased danger: this will aid our planning process. Below, we explore a few examples of how group dynamics can be affected by threats such as harassment, marginalisation, physical and other forms of violence (such as economic, gender-based, institutional, or structural violence).

**Harder group boundaries** One predictable change that occurs to groups subjected to threat is that the boundaries that define the group become solidified: people within the group become more closely connected to each other and those outside the group become more distant. It also becomes more difficult for people to join or leave the group. While the protective functioning of such changes is important, there are also some potential difficulties with this. Harder boundaries may distance the group from existing and potential allies, leaving it more isolated than it might otherwise be. They also reduce the flow of information

into and out of the group, resulting in members of the group being less informed than they might otherwise have been, and having fewer opportunities to check their perception of the world against that of others. Harder boundaries also make it difficult for people to leave groups. Members who wish to leave might be branded traitors or sell-outs in a way that is harmful both to that person and others perceived to be his or her allies. It is very helpful for groups to regularly discuss the ways in which people and information enter and leave the group, and how to manage this in a holistic way that truly promotes our security.

### Fixed patterns

A second predictable change is that the patterns of behaviour become more fixed and harder to change. This makes it more difficult for a member of the group to question supposedly shared beliefs, or challenge the behaviour of other members. When we lose the ability to question each other's assumptions or point out potentially unhealthy behaviours, our ability to constructively and compassionately build group security is greatly compromised. For this reason, it is important that groups regularly revisit and discuss their shared values in an honest way.

### Authoritarianism

A third predictable change relates to leadership and power dynamics within groups. When groups feel unsafe, group members tolerate greater authoritarianism from leaders or more powerful members of the group. This results in less information exchange within the group, and fewer opportunities for group members to check their perception of the world with other members of their team. In extreme cases, powerful members of the group may become abusive, and the increased rigidity of group boundaries may prevent victims from leaving. Again, it is important for groups to talk about power dynamics and leadership styles on a regular basis, and to make sure that every person has an opportunity to contribute.

Looking at the links between decision-making and security, we should not underestimate the positive effects of having fair and transparent decision-making processes. The danger of adversaries targeting leaders of a group is less pronounced if a group has shared responsibilities and knowledge.

Different groups can, however, respond in different ways: it is a good idea to consider how your group or organisation responds to the pressures of working under threat and the impact this has on each individual's well-being in the group. This demands an openness to the possibility of talking about security in the group, which we will explore in more detail in the next Chapter.

## Mistrust and infiltration<sup>7</sup>

Suspicion and mistrust within and between groups of human rights defenders is common and may or may not be justified depending on the circumstances. Often, it has its roots in the tactics of infiltration and spying which are frequently used against human rights defenders, although merely creating suspicion and mistrust can also be a primary objective of our opponents.

In a context of oppression, people become informants for many reasons: they themselves are often victims too. Therefore while carrying out our work, we may occasionally be suspicious of others in our movement or organisation. There are many cultural, sub-cultural and interpersonal reasons for this mistrust, including observed 'suspicious' behaviour of the person in question, and our own perceptions and subjective criteria about whom we trust.

This suspicion comes at a price paid in mistrust and fear. The potential benefit of perhaps outing an informant in the group may not protect us from other informants present. Furthermore, the atmosphere created by a 'witch-hunt' mentality can drain the energy and motivation of the whole group. It may be due to this atmosphere, that we falsely accuse a colleague of spying, which could in turn prove more damaging than actually having an informant in the group.

It is often useful to create an open discussion within the group and agree on a transparent process for deciding on how sensitive information is to be treated, and how to deal with members of the group who may be disruptive. It might be helpful to review your decisions on secrecy or the transparency of your activities in light of the possibility that there are informers in your group. Creating space to talk about fears linked to the possibility of informers in the group, or group members being pressurised to become informers might prevent situations of witch-hunting or demonisation of informers.

Infiltration of human rights organisations and movements often has the ultimate aim of either documenting or – more often still – provoking illegal activities.

In this regard, it is useful to ensure that the activities of the organisation or group in defence and promotion of human rights are explicitly of a non-violent nature, protected under international law and standards such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) among others. In this case, those in the group who push for illegal or violent methods of protest or civil disobedience should be treated with caution and their membership of the group reconsidered.

The question of infiltration is a complex one involving many different variables and much uncertainty. Many of the tools described in [Section II | Explore](#) of this manual are useful in helping human rights defenders carefully think through the problems of possible infiltration.

In the next Chapter, we will learn some helpful strategies for creating and implementing a regular space for talking about security within organisations.

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<sup>7</sup> Based on: Jessica Bell and Dan Spalding Security Culture for Activists. The Ruckus Society, [www.ruckus.org/downloads/RuckusSecurityCultureForActivists.pdf](http://www.ruckus.org/downloads/RuckusSecurityCultureForActivists.pdf)

## Communicating about Security within Teams and Organisations

Once we understand how individuals and teams react to stress and threats, it becomes important to reflect on how healthy practices towards this can be fostered in our groups and organisations.

Creating a safe and regular environment for communicating about security within teams and organisations is one of the most important preparatory steps towards a successful security strategy and organisational well-being. All of the tools outlined in this and other resources which help us build our security demand time and space to be made for speaking, exchanging, reflecting and learning about security. Aside from this clear practical necessity, creating space to talk about security with our peers and colleagues helps us to:

- more accurately perceive the threats to our work (reduce unrecognised threats and unfounded fears)
- understand why members of the team might react differently to stress or threats (individual responses to threats)
- assign roles and responsibilities for security measures
- increase group ownership of security measures
- build solidarity and care for colleagues who are suffering from threats.

However, there may be barriers that prevent us from discussing security openly within our organisation. Some barriers may include:

- heavy workloads and lack of time
- simply being afraid to discuss it
- a sense that our observations on security might be perceived as fear, paranoia or weakness
- not wanting to confront colleagues about their practices
- not wanting to be the first to bring the matter up for discussion
- gender issues and/or power dynamics.

In order to create a space for discussion, we can engage in the following:

- building trust within the team**
- regularly scheduling talks about security**
- fostering a culture of non-violent communication.**

As we explore each of these, we will discuss ways to establish them, and some of the benefits (as well as the disadvantages) associated with each of them.

### a Building trust within the team

Having a team that operates based on trust is optimal for productivity as well as for security purposes. Trust facilitates the implementation of new security measures, especially among members who could not be, or were not involved in making the decisions about it. It creates an atmosphere of openness in which members will more readily share their security incidents and the information they feel is important, and even their mistakes. It gives members confidence to know whom to talk to about which aspects of security.

There are several ways we can work on increasing trust within a team. Below are some examples of activities to accomplish this:

- Getting to know each other outside the professional or activist context, e.g. through out-of-work activities, socialising and having fun.
- Checking regularly on the well-being of team members (perhaps as a start to team meetings), to have an idea about everybody's stress levels, general mood and what they are bringing to their activism from their personal lives.
- Transparency about hierarchies and decision-making structures.
- Clear protocols for how to deal with personal or sensitive issues that may arise including (but not limited to) security incidents, threats and so on.
- Having access to a counsellor or trusted psychologist.

Building trust within a team is not a trivial task – it involves investment and taking risks, given the potential for infiltration noted above. However, in this regard, aside from trust in one another, we can also build trust in our strategies for managing sensitive information, clear channels and create means for communication about it.

An atmosphere of trust also relies on everyone being able to give and receive constructive criticism and feedback, which will be explored in the segment on interpersonal communication below.

### b Encouraging regularly scheduled talks about security

As explored in **Chapter 1.4 Team and Peer Responses to Threat**, it is essential to create regular, safe spaces to talk about the different aspects of security. When a team sets regularly scheduled time aside to talk about security, it elevates the



importance of the topic and the conversation. This way, if team members have concerns around security, they will be less anxious about seeming paranoid or wasteful of other people's time.

Scheduling regular talks about security also normalises the frequency of interaction and reflection on matters relating to security, so that the issues are not forgotten, and team members are more likely to bring at least a passive awareness of security to their ongoing work.

It is also important to incorporate security elements into the normal functioning of the group. As such, we avoid making security an extraneous element, but rather an integral part of our strategy and operations. For example, this can be achieved by adding security to the agenda of a regular meeting. Another way is to rotate the responsibility for organising and facilitating a discussion on security between members the group, so as to instil the notion that security is everyone's responsibility and not just that of a select few.

In situations of high risk, it is important to increase the number of check-ins at meetings and informal spaces, as well as raising group members' overall receptiveness to talking about security in a supportive atmosphere.

In the next exercise, you will find some questions to help you explore the culture within your group in regard to talking about security, identifying barriers and considering ways to deal with them.

1.5a

## Exercise

### Talking about security in groups and teams

**Purpose & Output** The purpose of this exercise is to reflect on how and when we talk about security with our peers, colleagues or team. It is best facilitated by at least two people, but can also serve as a useful individual reflection on your interaction with your colleagues. This helps start a process to constructively talking and discussing security in your team / group.

**Input & Materials** To do this exercise in a participative way and in order to document it, you may need writing material (cards or stickies and markers). A large area of wall-space, a flip-chart or pin-board may also be useful.

### Format & Steps

#### Individual work & group discussion

**Step 1:** Divide the group into pairs. Ask each pair to consider the following questions concerning group dynamics and write down their answers.

- What topics take up the majority of time in group conversations?
- What topics do we never seem to find time for? What aspects of our group interaction do we find energising?
- What aspects of our group interaction do we find exhausting?
- What happens in the group when people disagree?
- Have you created any space to develop and refine your own security practices (as an individual)? Describe it: where and when does this space exist? Is it sufficient, and how might you expand this space, if necessary?
- Do you have enough space to talk about security issues with others, such as peers or colleagues who work closely with you, and how might this space be created or expanded if necessary?

**Step 2:** Collate the full set of responses to these questions on a board or in a notebook.

**Step 3:** As a team, consider the following questions.

- Where and how do we want to set our priorities concerning security?
- What are common problems that arise around talking about security as a group?
- What can prevent us from talking about security? How can we deal with this?
- How can we create and maintain sufficient and adequate space for talking about security? What will this mean in terms of time and resources?
- How might we increase the effectiveness of our group interaction on security?
- What problems arise around committing to changing our security practices? Do we resist change, individually or collectively, and why?

**Format & Steps**

- Step 4:** Invite each person individually to reflect on:
- Whether you should have a similar awareness for your family and loved ones?
  - What are the differences in the dynamics and ways in which family and loved ones are affected?
  - In what ways do you communicate the threats you are facing to your family, community, friends and others not in your work circle?

**Step 5:** In the whole group, share the points that people feel free to share. Then you should agree on what can be communicated to those ‘outside’ the group, for reasons of confidentiality, intimacy and security. Agree on these guidelines for the whole group.

**Remarks & Tips**

Consider also discussing the steps and requirements necessary to put your ideas of how to talk about security in the future into practice.

Important questions to consider might be:

- What happens if you don’t progress on ‘talking about security’?
- What happens if someone does not stick to the guidelines on what can be communicated to the outside?

**C Fostering a healthy culture of interpersonal communication**

Individuals’ ability and willingness to engage in open communication with each other is fundamental to creating a space where security can be frankly and effectively discussed.

We must make sure that communication among team members stays healthy and open, so that we have access to as much information as possible and can make more informed decisions, as a group, about our security.

Talking about security can, however, be challenging for a number of reasons, due to its very personal nature and the fact that our vulnerabilities and even mistakes are often very relevant information. Finding a constructive way to talk about security in groups or organisations helps avoid misinterpretations that can lead to conflict between the people involved.

Below are some aspects worthy of consideration in creating a healthy culture of communication:

**Prevailing atmosphere around security** It helps to come to terms with what the existing (organisational) mindset around security is. For instance, we can reflect on whether the time allocated to talking about security is as valued and tended as other meeting times; or we can pay attention to whether group members are dismissive in voice and tone when discussing security matters; or if we are genuinely interested and personally connected when our colleagues are addressing their concerns.

**Existing hierarchies** It is also important to create mechanisms for such communication across hierarchies within an organisation, so that members are able to discuss things in an atmosphere free of power dynamics.

**Communication under stress** Paying attention to our communication style within teams becomes particularly important during times of increased stress. In times of threat and stress, we tend not to focus on our language and tone due to other extenuating circumstances. We may not even be aware of our impatience, or we may expect others to understand the reason behind our change in behaviour.

**Inter-cultural situations** We also have to bear in mind that communication is a fundamental aspect of culture and cultural diversity. We should pay attention to our verbal and non-verbal communication in intercultural situations.

**Formal modes of communication** Some groups tend to be more formal in communication and about decision-making in meetings. While formally establishing practices for security and well-being is useful in many contexts, this mode of communication can occasionally hinder open sharing, especially regarding the emotional aspects of security. Thinking about facilitation and formats for these discussions may help arrive at an effective structure that provides space for open sharing of hopes and fears, as well as for more technical discussions. It is important to incorporate all of these aspects when making decisions about security.

One example of a useful practice in interpersonal communication is through the method of **non-violent communication**. Non-violent communication is a method of communicating based on the assumption that all people are compassionate by nature, that we all share the same basic human needs and that each of our actions is a strategy to meet one or more of these needs.

While this method is certainly culturally shaped in the 'West', it allows for communication to include ways of comfortably reflecting on how the communication is affecting everyone involved. This can be especially effective for giving and receiving feedback about security and in discussing the impact of attacks, accidents, threats or other security-related events on us as individuals and groups.

A major advantage of employing such a particular way of structuring conversations and feedback is that it helps avoid accusatory manners of expressing views and encourages clarification where there is misunderstanding. In the following exercise, you can practice following the steps for giving constructive feedback on security according to the basic principles of non-violent communication.

1.5b

## Exercise

### Non-violent feedback

**Purpose & Output** The purpose of this exercise is to practice non-violent communication as a means of improving the effectiveness of communication about security within teams and groups. It provides for a reflection on how we can give our feedback in an understandable, clear way and avoid some of the pitfalls which can lead to arguments or ineffective communication.

The exercise is best carried out in pairs at first, although it can be adapted for larger groups.

**Input & Materials** It may be useful to write the guidelines for non-violent feedback somewhere visible, like on a flip-chart.

**Format & Steps** Decide on a setting for conducting a feedback discussion (this can be done in pairs, or with observers, taking turns). The participants should choose a topic (real or imaginary) about which they want

to give feedback. This can be a security-related topic, such as an incident which took place already, or something else entirely.

Ask the person giving feedback to follow the guidelines below. For each guideline, a small illustrative example is given. Here, we are imagining a scenario in which two colleagues are talking: one of the colleagues often works late and once forgot to lock the door of the office when leaving; the other colleague wants to talk about the incident.

The recipient of the feedback should only ask questions of clarification but not comment, reply, justify or question the content of the feedback.

Guidelines for non-violent feedback:

**I speak for myself:** You can only speak from your own subjective experience – not about 'common sense', 'my group', 'we', or 'one', but only 'I'.

- e.g. "I felt unsafe when I found the office unlocked this morning".
- Bad practice: "What you did yesterday put us in danger!"

**What did you observe?** You should speak only of the facts as you experienced them, so the interlocutor knows what your feedback is referring to (what you saw, heard, etc.).

- e.g.: "When I arrived at the office this morning, the front door was unlocked and I could open it without the key".
- Bad practice: "You forgot to lock the door yesterday!"

**What was your reaction to it?** What were your internal feelings and physical reaction to your experience? Try not to be judgemental, but again, simply speak from your experience as you understand it.

- e.g. "I was very worried, because I thought maybe we had been robbed. When I found that everything was OK, I was still quite angry."

**How do you interpret it?** What does your personal interpretation bring to the facts? Although your personal interpretation is indeed subjective, it is still valuable and colours your experience.

- e.g. "I think it happened because you have been working very late and were tired and simply forgot to close it"



**Format & Steps**

**What are your wishes, advice, or interests?** What are your suggestions for change based on this experience? They should be offered without demands, but rather as requests for consideration by the group.

- e.g. “I would feel better if I knew we were all getting enough rest and not overworking so that we could better take care of things like this, so it would be better if you didn’t work so late”.

Ask the pairs to then share their insights on the process and manner of giving feedback – not about the content. Did they experience different feelings than when they normally receive feedback?

This exercise can also be used to clarify the content and tone of your feedback as a preparation for an actual feedback session or potentially difficult discussion.

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**Remarks & Tips**

It is important to receive feedback with your ears and not with your mouth, and understand it as a personal reflection from your partner, not as ‘the truth’ or an invitation to justify or defend your actions. You decide yourself if it is valuable to you and how to react to it. Following such an approach might be a preventive step for conflicts within your team. As such, it can contribute to your overall well-being.

If you are interested in deepening modes of communication which deal sensitively with conflict, you might want to have a look at non-violent communication approaches.

Be aware that ‘speaking for myself only’ is not appropriate in many regions around the world. Adapt the methodology so that it fits your needs and setting.

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## Conclusion

Hopefully, these exercises will have helped you get a better sense of what security means to you, as well as a better understanding of the way you and those around you respond to threats to yourselves and your work. Establishing a healthy culture of communication as explored above may represent one of the more difficult changes to make in adopting a more positive and organised approach to our security and well-being. However, understanding this and all of the topics covered in this Section is vital in order to make space for the process of context analysis, a key set of activities in improving and maintaining an organised approach to security, which we will expand in [Section II | Explore](#).