

## Western Massachusetts Recovery Learning Community (RLC) Defining Principles (Updated: July, 2019)

In the spirit of uncovering the hidden truths of this land, its people, and their collective histories, we acknowledge that we currently occupy the ancestral grounds of Indigenous People. We offer our respect to their elders, past, present, and emerging, and ask for their guidance in being humble guests in their homelands. In our attempt to build community upon these lands, we offer the principles below, which seek to undo the harms of the past and build towards a future that does not continue them. These guidelines for relationships and environments apply to all people in the community, whether paid or unpaid, in workshops, trainings, classes, groups, supports, and individual interactions that occur under our umbrella.

### RESPECT

- **We aim to offer respect, kindness, and compassion toward others and their belongings.** This may require putting ourselves in others' shoes, understanding how they would like to be treated, and learning to be sensitive to experiences and traumas we do not know first-hand.
- **We focus on inclusive and respectful language.** Our goal is to use open language that honors our differences, and avoids reinforcing the negative ways that systems have labeled us. This means staying open to learning from one another how words can empower or hold us back. It also means respecting the names, pronouns, and other words people ask us to use for them.
- **Shows of gratitude and appreciation for one another are encouraged.** Going out of our way to recognize other people's presence and contributions, even when we are not getting along, helps strengthen the foundation of our community and maintain connections.
- **It is important to respect differences of opinion, beliefs, culture, appearances and ways of life.** This means treating everyone with dignity, respect and as a valued person even in the face of disagreement. It also means encouraging learning, openness and conversations about different beliefs and cultures, provided that does not include hate speech, stereotypes, cultural appropriation (taking rituals, styles, or other practices from a group with less power, without full respect or recognition given).
- **We are committed to interrupting words and actions that are rooted in racism and other injustices when we see them happening.** This requires learning to recognize and interrupt instances of white supremacy (for example, centering the needs, wants, and perspective of white cultural norms), and microaggressions (unintended yet harmful words or interactions that signal to certain people they don't belong) rooted in ableism, sexism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, transmisogyny, sizeism, psychiatric oppression, and other forces that dehumanize people.

### SELF-DETERMINATION & PERSONAL STRENGTH

- **People get to make meaning out of their own experiences and choose their own paths through life.** We offer information and learning opportunities on many perspectives, particularly those not often heard, but regard people as able to identify their own priorities, hopes, and dreams, as well as the tools they want to use. We avoid doing too many things *for* others, and instead walk alongside them as they take action.
- **People are the experts of their own experience.** To support freedom and choice, we will aim to listen and be curious about one another's journeys, and honor our differences as much as we honor our similarities.
- **Rule-setting is avoided as much as possible.** Everyone is expected to make their own decisions and be responsible for their own actions. Unnecessary rule-setting gets in the way of creativity and progress, especially when it comes from managing our own fears about what could go wrong.

### POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

- **Each person has tremendous potential for growth and healing.** We believe this in spite of the racism, abuse, injustices, and other harms people have experienced and/or to which they may have contributed in some way. We all have value, and the ability to overcome great hardships if given the chance.
- **Everyone deserves compassion when they are struggling.** We all have ups and downs. Hard times may sometimes lead to disconnections, but we do our best to create opportunities to work through old conflicts and hurts, and to leave space for reconnections whenever possible.

## GENUINE HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

- **We prioritize real and meaningful connections.** Everyone is free to form connections with each other as they develop naturally, and in ways that strengthen their own support networks.
- **Respecting each other's physical, sexual and personal limits is important.** Everyone has the right to determine when and how they are available to one another, including physical touch (like hugs, patting someone's arm, touching their hair, etc.), and what sorts of conversations they take part in. Consent is key.
- **Imperfection is an expectation.** These values do not mean that all interactions will be perfect. Imperfection is expected and, when problems happen, we will work to see it as an opportunity for growth, not a failure.
- **Our relationships are impacted by biases that we need to actively work to become aware of and unlearn.** These biases were learned from living in a world where there are systems of oppression that effect how we see and respond to race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, education, ability, and many other factors. It is important to recognize that we all have room for growth, teaching, learning, and unlearning.

## MUTUALITY

- **Mutuality means a focus on the connections between us.** We all have the potential to give and receive support, and to learn from, and be impacted by one another. We aim to build relationships and community that considers each person's needs and our collective ability to create together.
- **There are no 'fixers' and people being 'fixed' within our community.** We will not act as therapists, case workers, or healers. It is assumed that all people who become a part of the Western Mass RLC for support or learning will also pass that benefit along to others in some way.
- **Each of us has the potential to move, question, change, act, teach, lead, and share.** In doing so, we also have the potential to inspire others to do the same.
- **We seek out opportunities to raise up marginalized voices.** We recognize the unique value of leadership from non-white people and people belonging to other marginalized groups that are presently under-represented in leadership positions in our society and within the Western Mass RLC.

## HEALING ENVIRONMENTS

- **Privacy is respected.** We can share the lessons we learn from one another, but should leave behind any personal information. It is always someone's personal choice when and how they share parts of their own story, even if they've shared something publicly in the past.
- **We strive to make spaces as accessible as possible.** This includes using wheelchair accessible spaces, scheduling interpreters and groups in other languages, awareness of different sensory needs, and avoiding the use of scented products, as well as being open and responsive to other requests whenever possible.
- **The impact of trauma on our lives is real.** In creating trauma-sensitive environments, it is important that we be mindful of how our choices affect others. This includes paying attention to how we say things (such as tone, volume, assumptions), and creating shared agreements to address community needs as they arise.
- **Conflicts are addressed directly whenever possible, and are valued for the learning opportunities they can often provide.** When conflict arises people are asked to address it directly, and without physical or verbal aggression, or spreading information with the intent to harm or isolate someone. When power imbalances (for instance, based on race, gender, or role in the organization) make addressing conflict directly unfair or impossible, support will be available to find the best way forward.
- **We are committed to creating environments that acknowledge and work to undo all types of systemic oppression.** We strive to achieve this through a mix of setting limits, creating learning opportunities that include asking us to examine our own privilege and power, and supporting one another to understand how we've come to believe what we believe.
- **We all have responsibility for caring for the spaces we hold within our community.** This means sharing responsibility for upkeep, cleaning, accessibility, being gentle with community belongings, keeping illegal activity and violence out, and not attracting attention in ways that put the community or space at risk.