

## MASS HUMANITIES | Reading Frederick Douglass Together

### Trauma Informed Discussion Guide

#### Best Practices for Discussion

Frederick Douglass's address "What to the Slave is the 4th of July?" forces us to reckon with the legacy of slavery and the promises of democracy. It is important to acknowledge that reciting the words, and discussing its content and context can result racial or historical traumatization and re-traumatization for participants and audience members.



*Frederick Douglass Photograph by Bettmann / Contributor / Getty Images*

According to the [National Center for PTSD](#) (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder):

**Racial trauma** refers to the emotional impact of stress related to racism, racial discrimination, and race-related stressors, such as being affected by stereotypes, hurtful comments, or barriers to advancement.

Racial trauma can refer to a specific incident of racial discrimination or the ongoing, harmful emotional impact of racial discrimination that builds up over time. People can experience racial trauma from something that happens directly to them or from seeing others mistreated because of their race. Coverage of events caused by racial discrimination in the media can also be upsetting, and repeated viewing or frequent media accounts can amplify those feelings.

### Creating Trauma Informed Event

Mass Humanities uplifts safe spaces for rich and productive community conversations. We recommend following the **six guiding principles to a trauma-informed approach** from the [Center for Disease Control](#) (CDC). Below the principles have been applied to the context of community conversations.





## 1. Safety (Physical, Emotional and Psychological)

While you **cannot guarantee that your event will prevent traumatization**, there are steps you can take to greatly decrease the likelihood. Creating a safe space does not mean there will not be discomfort or disagreement, but it does mean considerations such as:

- Making the event space accessible, with a variety of seating or standing spaces
- Having clearly posted emergency exits and restrooms
- Having a first aid kit and someone trained in CPR/first aid
- Creating community norms for interaction
- Assigning staff/volunteers to scan audience for signs of distress, signs of discomfort, agitation
- Providing warnings and exit strategy options prior to discussing or showing potentially traumatizing images or topics
- Setting aside a space or area where participants can go for an emotional break, if possible

## 2. Trustworthiness & transparency

**Audience members will be more likely to participate** when they know what to expect and they trust their perspectives will be respected and their experiences will be validated. While building trust takes time, here are a few recommendations for transparency:

- Obtain informed consent for photographs and audio/visual recording.
- Provide a program or agenda so participants know what to expect.
- Enforce group norms with reminders whenever they are not being adhered to.
- Use people's names when addressing them (nametags may be helpful).
- Consider quick check ins throughout to assess readiness to engage in discourse.

## 3. Peer support

- Encourage participants to provide a warning before sharing a personal experience that could be triggering for others.
- Encourage an agreed upon signal of validation for sharing of thoughts (ex. finger snaps, claps, or simply "Thank you for sharing").
- Interrupt social power dynamics and address discrepancies in which voices aren't being heard.

## 4. Collaboration & mutuality

- Include participants in the creation of shared norms.
- Consider structuring the discussion in different ways throughout the event (pairs, small groups, large group, guided, unguided).

## 5. Empowerment & choice & voice

- Remind participants that they have a choice to participate or not in any or all portions of an activity.



- Encourage participants to use their skills and interests to take on other roles that support the discussion (ex., note taker, group leader).
- Include participants in the decision making process whenever possible.

## 6. Cultural, historical & gender issues

- Use an anti-oppression framework in planning your event.
- Acknowledge that oppression based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, religion, mental health status, age and ability are systemic in American society.
- Acknowledge power imbalances.
- Offer land acknowledgement where applicable.

## Facilitating a Community Discussion

### Before You Begin

Hosting a trauma-informed discussion requires that **facilitators operate under the assumption that trauma is widespread**. Since trauma response is experienced in the body, beginning with a body “settling” activity can set the tone and ready participants for sharing. **A settled body is a body that is ready to *respond***, instead of react to stress. The type of activity depends on a number of factors, including timing, event space, audience size, accessibility, and everyone’s levels of comfort. Refer to the principle of empowerment, voice and choice when suggesting an activity.

“A settled body enables you to harmonize and connect with others bodies around you...bring large group of settled bodies together and you have a potential- and a force for tremendous good the world”. - **Resmaa Menakem**, *Licensed Social Worker & Somatic Experience Professional*

### Here are a few suggestions:

1. Call and Response Phrases
2. Gratitude and Applause
3. Moments of silence
4. Sing
5. Walking in a circle
6. Deep Breathing
7. Listen to a song in silence and encourage organic movement
8. Dancing (line dancing, cultural dance)



Photo by [Anna Louise](#) on [Unsplash](#)



## Creating and Structuring Questions

When creating your own discussion questions, there are several factors for consideration: **audience size, audience demographics, allotted time for event, size of event venue, seating arrangements.** Collectively, these factors can influence discussion participation, comprehension, language, noise levels, shared views, and emotional response.

### Considerations

- Model and provide participants with correct terminology for how individuals identify themselves by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, citizenship status.
- Ask open-ended questions that allow participants to draw on their own experiences. Encourage participants to distinguish fact from opinion and avoid generalizations.
- Connect portions of the speech to specific contemporary topics that affect communities where the reading takes place.
- Ask that participants exercise discretion and provide a disclaimer when sharing experiences that could be traumatizing for others to hear.
- Be prepared to reword or paraphrase a question in the instance that clarification is needed.
- Assess your comfortability and skill level with conflict resolution, de-escalation and keeping people on topic, and in accordance with the norms.

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### Discussion Suggestions



The following discussion prompts are solely suggestions for rich conversation and are not requirements. You may use some or all questions or reword them for more clarity.

**Here are a few suggestions for possible ways to facilitate discussion:**

1. Place questions on index cards in a fish bowl. Have participants draw a question randomly.
2. Place one question at each table and divide audience into smaller groups, rotating to discuss each question.
3. Post or share questions in advance and allow participants to pick one question they would like to answer.
4. Use a timer to set a limit on how long each person speaks.

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### Discussion Prompts

1. **What expectations do you think a white audience would have for a black speaker such as Douglass in 1852?**

#### Possible follow up:

- What do you think expectations are for Black speakers today when addressing white audiences?



- Who bears the responsibility for educating audiences about racial injustice?
- Do you feel expectations when you are asked to speak, based on your identity/identities?

2. What do think the purpose was for Douglass's repetition of the words "your" and "you" throughout the speech when referring to his white audience and America?

Possible connections: colonization, citizenship, identity, belonging

3. Douglass says "Americans! your republican politics, not less than your republican religion, are flagrantly inconsistent. You boast of your love of liberty, your superior civilization, and your pure Christianity, while the whole political power of the nation (as embodied in the two great political parties), is solemnly pledged to support and perpetuate the enslavement of three millions of your countrymen."

**Do you have an experience you would be willing to share that was "flagrantly inconsistent" with what you understood about America and its ideals?**

4. Douglass uses his faith throughout the speech, particularly to call out the evils of slavery and the hypocrisy of the institution. **Does faith influence your understanding of justice, rights, or equality? What about other experiences, beliefs, or community values that influence your views?**

Possible connections: pluralism, church and state, Civil Rights Movement

5. Douglass mentions that there are "seventy-two crimes in Virginia that will subjugate a Black man to death while there are only two that will do the same for a white man." Sixteen years after this address, the 14th amendment guaranteeing "equal protection" under the law for all citizens was ratified. **In what ways has America tried and sometimes failed at providing equality under the law?**

Possible connections: the criminal justice system and policing

6. Douglass refers to the founding fathers' fight for independence, saying, "They petitioned and demonstrated; they did so in a decorous, respectful, and loyal manner. This, however, did not answer the purpose. They saw themselves treated with sovereign indifference, coldness and scorn." The story of the American Revolution has historically been glorified, particularly the acts of resistance employed by the colonists. However, resistance by historically marginalized and purposely excluded groups faces criticism, including accusations of a lack of patriotism or American-ness. **What do you think makes a protest patriotic? What legitimizes acts of protests, resistance and revolution?**

Possible follow-up: In your experience, to whom are these rights to protest and redress extended? Who gets to claim the legacy of the American Revolution?



**Possible connections:** Discrepancies in response to and treatment of protests (media coverage, language, descriptions, government response).

7. Douglass says “ You invite to your shores fugitives of oppression from abroad, honor them with banquets, greet them with ovations, cheer them, toast them, salute them, protect them, and pour out your money to them like water; but the fugitives from your own land you advertise, hunt, arrest, shoot and kill.” **Can you share an experience of being included or excluded based on where you come from or how you identify?**

**Possible connections:** Immigration; policy, citizenship, biases based on country of origin

8. Of *what to the Slave is the 4th of July*, Frederick Douglass biographer David Blight says, “...what the speech is saying is you must destroy first what you created and remake it, or it will be destroyed — and you with it.”

**What, if anything could be recreated and reimagined? What does change look like to you? How does change happen?**

9. Given all that he has said in his speech, **why does Douglass conclude on an optimistic note for black Americans?**

**Possible follow up:** Is there hope for reconciliation between America and its Black citizens? What would it take? What would it take for America to reconcile with other historically excluded groups?

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## Closing Out Your Event Harmoniously

In addition to thanking participants, sponsors, legislators and dignitaries, **it is recommended that you end your event with a collective practice, activity or words.** Similar to the start of your event, you want to end with re-harmonizing and settling of the bodies. As with the opening activity, the type of activity is depends on a number of factors, including timing, event space, audience size, accessibility, and everyone’s levels of comfort.



Photo by [Vonecia Carswell](#) on [Unsplash](#)





### Here are a few suggestions:

1. Call and Response Phrases
2. Gratitude and Applause
3. Moments of silence
4. Sing or hum
5. Walking in a circle
6. Deep Breathing
7. Listen to a song in silence and encourage organic movement
8. Dancing( line dancing, cultural dance)

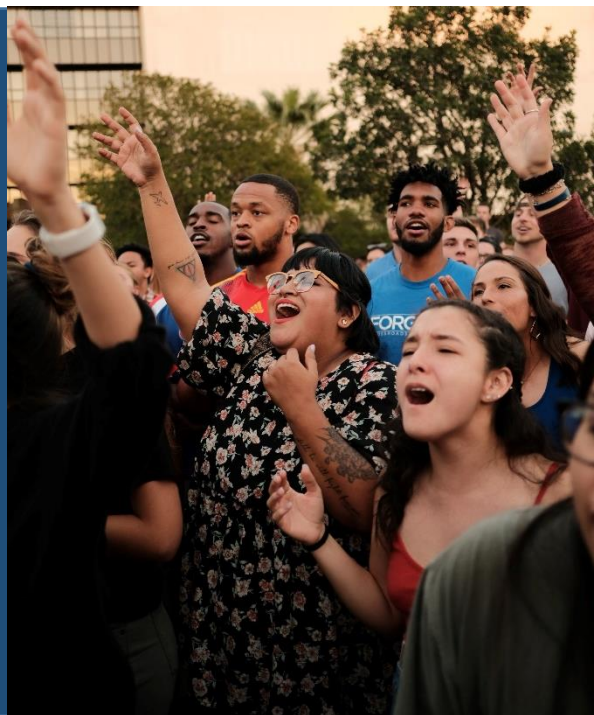


Photo by [Cason Asher](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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### Sources and Resources:

#### **Beautiful Trouble Anti-Oppression Tool Box**

<https://beautifultrouble.org/toolbox/tool/anti-oppression/>

#### **Infographic: 6 Guiding Principles To A Trauma-Informed Approach**

[https://www.cdc.gov/cpr/infographics/6\\_principles\\_trauma\\_info.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/cpr/infographics/6_principles_trauma_info.htm)

**Menakem, R. (2017). My grandmother's hands. Central Recovery Press.**

#### **SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach**

[https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA\\_Trauma.pdf](https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf)