Active Hope Sentence Starters

A Spiral of Active Hope

This explanation and following exercise is taken directly from the Active Hope Foundations Training from Chris Johnstone and Madeleine Young. We hope that you enjoy this practice. They say "Please feel free to use, copy and adapt it".

Active Hope is a practice we can apply to any situation. It involves three key steps:

1. We start from where we are, taking in a clear view of the reality we face, seeing what we see and feeling what we feel.
2. We identify what we hope for, in terms of the direction we'd like things to move in or the values we'd like to see expressed.
3. We take steps to move ourselves or our situation in that direction.

Can we have a conversation that helps us meet each other more, support each other in facing disturbing world events, and nourish our capacity to play our part in responding with active hope? Can we have this conversation with others, and with ourselves? Inspired by the work of US author and activist Joanna Macy, and the spiral practice described in her book Active Hope (co-authored with Chris Johnstone), the process described here offers a suggested conversation structure designed to head in that direction. Please see this guide as an invitation rather than prescription, with suggestions to follow and experiment with, while also respecting your choice about how and if you do so.

This practice moves through four stages – Gratitude, Honoring our Pain for the World, Seeing with New Eyes and Going Forth.

Stage One - Gratitude.

We begin with Gratitude as this helps resource us, putting us in a stronger starting point to face the disturbing information. Gratitude also reminds us of our inter-dependence, of ways we receive from others. Evolutionary psychologists identify gratitude as a social emotion that increases our desire to give back to the communities and networks of support we receive from. There are two sides to gratitude – appreciation and thankfulness. To experience appreciation, see what words naturally follow the start of a sentence that begins with the words "I love…" You're invited to name what you

love, appreciate, relish and delight in – this might include people, places, experiences, colours, qualities, or anything else that follows the words ‘I love… ‘. For thankfulness, you’re invited to see what words naturally follow the sentence starter ‘I’d like to thank…’ Who or what have you received from, in ways that support you? See how it feels to name and thank them.

Stage Two – Honoring Our Pain for the World.

When we give attention to what we appreciate and feel supported by, we may also recognise ways these are threatened by conditions in our world. The next part of the spiral invites our witnessing of our own or each other’s concerns, as well as the feelings these may arouse, seeing what words follow this sentence starter: ‘Looking at the future we’re heading into, my concerns include…’

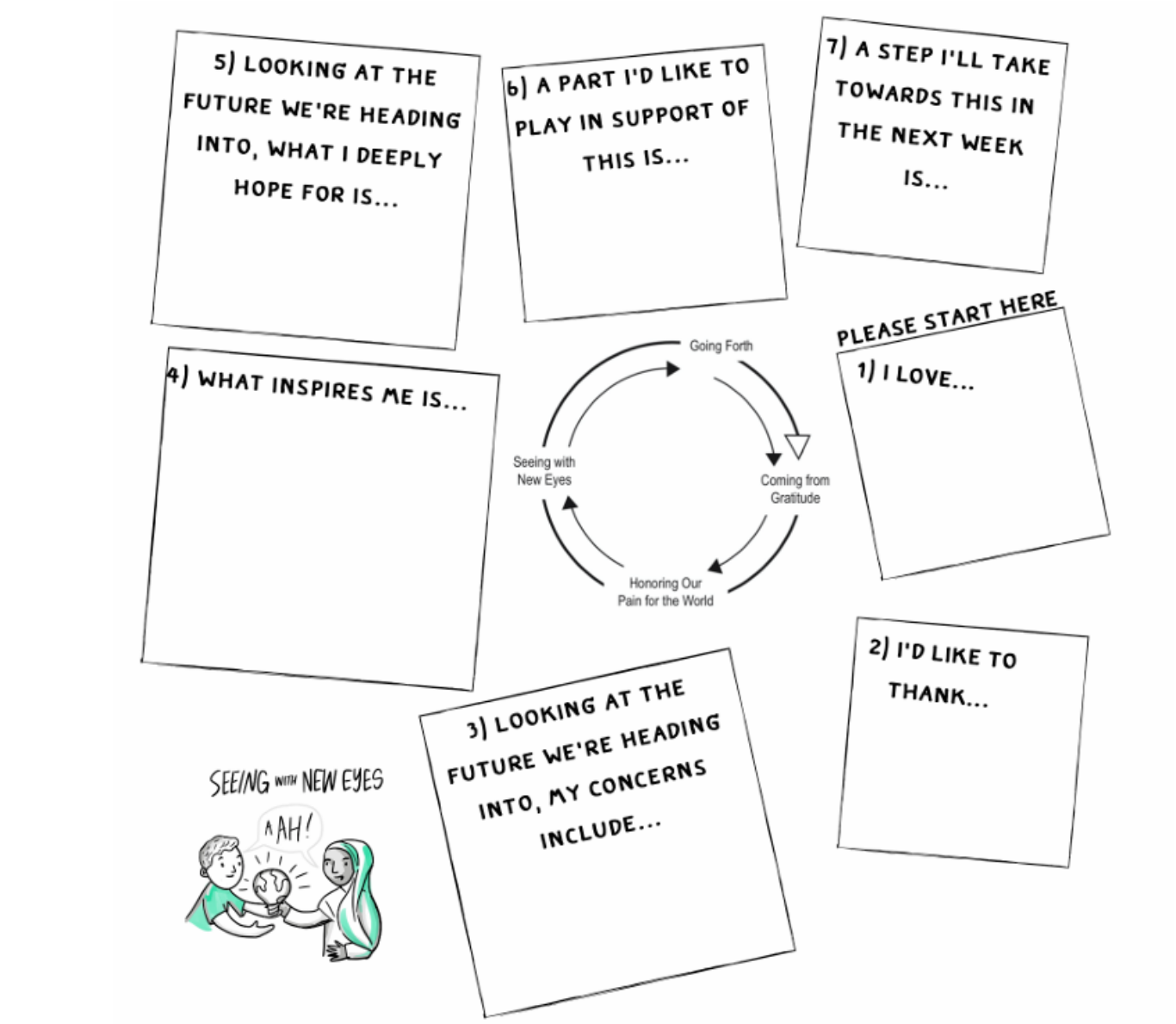
Stage Three – Seeing With New Eyes.

Facing disturbing realities can leave us feeling overwhelmed. If we’re to give our best response it helps to open to perspectives that inspire, empower and resource us, that open us to a sense of possibility. One way of doing this is to see what words follow a sentence that starts with “what inspires me is…”

Stage Four – Going Forth.

Now we move into the last stage of the spiral, which is about looking at what we can do, the part we can play, in the larger story of acting for what we love, addressing our concerns or following what inspires us. Our hopes give us a guide here. See what follows these sentence starters - - - looking at the future we’re heading into, what I deeply hope for is … a part that I’d like to play in support of this is … a step I will take towards this in the next week is.

Active Hope - The Spiral Seven Sentence Starters Exercise



There are 3 ways to engage with this exercise:

Personal Reflection.

Create a space for yourself, within your daily life – turn off any devices or notifications and minimise other distractions as much as you can. Do anything else that feels good for you, to prepare – maybe clearing your physical space, or taking a few deep breaths, or whatever enables this to feel like time for you.

The invitation is to take each sentence starter as a prompt for reflection, recording your thoughts and feelings in whatever way feels best. You may want to use pen & paper to ‘journal’ your responses, you may choose to draw or doodle, or you may wish to record yourself speaking – either audio or video.

Whichever method you choose, say the sentence starters to yourself (either aloud, or in your head), and then let whatever wants to come, come. If you freeze up at any point, go back to saying the sentence starter again and see if anything else comes.

When engaging with this exercise as an individual, it is entirely up to you if you want to set a time limit, or not. For some, it may be helpful to use a timer and choose an amount of time for each sentence starter (5 minutes, for example). Others may prefer to let it take whatever time it takes. You could even experiment with both to see what works best for you!

When you have completed all 7 sentence starters, take a moment to reflect on how this process has felt for you, and to thank yourself for engaging with it, before heading back out into your daily life. Check back in with what you have written, drawn, doodled, or recorded at any point in the future when you would like to reconnect a bit more with yourself.

Paired Active Listening

To do this, you can team up with another rebel , or you could enlist a friend or family member.It is a great way to bond and get to know each other.

We will also be using a different type of listening from the listening we tend to use in daily life. This is called Active Listening and it involves giving all of our attention to what the other person is saying – letting their words soak into us. One person is just talking, and the other is just listening – unlike a ‘normal’ conversation where the talking may go back & forth on any subject. Because we know that we don’t have to respond to what they are saying, we don’t need to give any of our attention to thinking about how we will reply. Instead, we can fully engage with their words with curiosity.

If you are unfamiliar with Active Listening, it can feel quite odd at first, but try sticking with it!

Each person will take a turn to say one of the sentence starters, and then see what words flow naturally for them from there. Silences, noises and gestures are welcome too! Decide whether you want to give a certain amount of time for each response.

Before you start the process, you may want to agree with each other about what level of confidentiality you would like in regards to what you share – or, you could agree to check-in about this at the end of the practice, and to respect whatever you decide on then.

To start the practice, we suggest that one person completes sentence starters 1 and 2, and then you swap over.

Then you can each take a turn at sentence starter 3, on its own.

And then each take a turn at sentence starter 4, again on its own.

It then works well for one person to complete sentence starters 5, 6 & 7, before swapping over for the last time.

When time is up, the listener raises a hand to let the speaker know. That doesn’t mean they have to stop straight away. If they’re in the middle of saying something, they might want to finish that, or say whatever is needed to feel complete enough for now.

When they do finish speaking, it works well to have a moments silence to let their words ripple out - or you may say a simple “I hear you”, or “thank you” - before swapping over or going on to the next sentence starter.

When you have both completed all the sentence starters, find a way to thank each other for all that you have shared, and you may want to have a few minutes chatting about how the process was for you. This is also a good time to check back in with each other about confidentiality – to see if anything has changed for either of you.

Group Active Listening.

In a group, we can follow a very similar process to in pairs, with each person taking a turn to speak, while the others listen. A timepiece can be passed around the group, so that each person is timing for the person next to them.

Or, depending on the size of your group, and the time available to you, you may choose to split into pairs (or 3s) to go through the sentence starters. If so, you can then follow this with a round of active listening (eg. 2 mins each), as a whole group, to reflect on how you each found the process. And, at the end, you can find a way to thank each other for all that has been shared. Again, it is supportive to come to agreement about confidentiality within this group.
