

## Utilizing Affinity Spaces in Your Community

### WHAT IS AN AFFINITY SPACE?

*An affinity space is a space specifically for people who share a specific identity or commonality to gather together in an atmosphere of inherent shared understanding and fellowship centered around that specific identity. That identity might be designated around race, gender, sexual[ity]...[disability status]...religion..., etc. An affinity space can be an opportunity for underrepresented or otherwise marginalized populations to talk about their experiences and share wisdom, offer support and create community.*

### WHO CAN BE PART OF AN AFFINITY GROUP?

*Having been built around a specific identity, only members of that group can be part of it. This is because an affinity group serves as a kind of shorthand. When you enter such a group, it is a given that much about the lives and experiences of everyone in the room is already understood and doesn't have to be explained, and that shared understanding and lived experience will engender an environment of welcome and support.\**

*\*<https://profiletheatre.org/affinity-space/>*

### THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND FOR ALL AFFINITY SPACES

- **Affinity spaces should be led by a person/people who share the identity the affinity space was designed for.** For example, a Person of Color (POC) should be leading a POC affinity space, a trans person should be leading a trans affinity space, etc.
  - Note: Leaders in a community who do not share the identity of the affinity space can provide logistical/operational support. For example, a white person can offer to assist Leaders of Color with setting up zoom logistics/a physical space prior to the affinity space meetings or assisting with advertising of the group but should not be present in the actual gatherings.
- **When creating affinity spaces for teens, caution against guardians or adults, who do not share the marginalized identity the group was created for, leading and/or participating in the space.** For example, a white guardian of a Teen of Color should not participate in or lead a Teens of Color affinity space. A cisgender guardian of a teen who is trans should not be leading or participating in an affinity space for trans people/teens. A youth professional who lives without a disability should not be leading or participating in an affinity space for teens with disabilities. Consider contracting a youth leader

(either within or outside your community) to lead the group, who shares the identity that the affinity space is designed for.

- Please note that guardians of children/teens with marginalized identities can have their own affinity spaces with other guardians (i.e., a group for parents of non-binary and trans teens, a group for parents of children with disabilities, etc.)
- **Leaders of groups should consider the structure/frequency of meetings.**
  - Will it be open to new members every meeting, or will there be established cohorts for a series of meetings? Will it be ongoing? What will the frequency of the meetings be? Will there be a different host each meeting, or a set host for all meetings?
- **Keep accessibility at top of mind.**
  - Choose an accessible location and possibly one that offers discretion/privacy if desired (keep in mind that not all members of the LGBTQIA+ community are able to be out safely with regards to their gender and/or sexual orientation).
  - Additional accommodations could include closed captioning/ASL or other language interpreters, meeting times/days that work best for participants, childcare options and/or any other accommodations that the group may specify.
  - For more ideas around creating an accessible and inclusive space, check out the [URJ's Inclusive Program Checklist](#)
- **Language is Powerful.** Ensure you are utilizing inclusive language. (i.e., use of [pronouns](#) in introductions, utilizing language that does not assume [see chart at the end of this resource], etc.)
  - Ensure that when creating spaces for people within your community you use language that includes both Jewish and Jewish-Adjacent people (people who are not Jewish but are in families or relationships with Jewish people). For example, "This affinity space is for Jewish and Jewish-Adjacent people with disabilities".
- **Affinity spaces can be both ongoing and reactive.** Having ongoing, regular affinity spaces can be powerful for those participating. In addition, when something happens in your community/in the world that specifically targets a certain identity, spaces can be offered for that specific group. For example, if an event occurs that specifically targets the Black community, you may wish to offer a space for Black community members.
- **Regularly provide space for different groups to meet.** A group of people may not be interested in an affinity space at a certain point in time, however, always note that needs and identities change, therefore consistently gauge interest in affinity spaces. For example, if you gauge interest in an LGBTQIA+ affinity space, and none of your LGBTQIA+ community members are interested right now, be sure to revisit this option again in the future. New members will likely join, and the identities and needs of your current community members can change with time.

- **When asking people from non-dominant backgrounds (i.e., people with disabilities, trans people, People of Color, and other underrepresented identities) to teach/facilitate, compensation should be offered.** For example, if a white anti-racist affinity group would like to contract a Facilitator of Color in their community to come teach or share their lived experience for one of their affinity meetings, compensation should be discussed and offered. This avoids asking marginalized people to do extra emotional unpaid labor, for the sake of a non-marginalized group to advance their knowledge and understanding.

### SHARED AGREEMENTS: FOR ALL AFFINITY SPACES

The resource below provides some sample shared agreements that all affinity spaces could benefit from utilizing. These agreements/norms provide some shared understandings from the start and help to support a productive and meaningful conversation for all participants. It is also important to note that though this is being shared for affinity spaces, setting shared agreements/norms can be a great practice for all groups that meet regularly, including but not limit to congregational boards, task forces/ committees, etc., and can also ensure that voices that are often missing (or talked over) are incorporated. [Download a sample set of Shared Agreements here.](#)

### RELATIONSHIP BUILDING: FOR ALL AFFINITY SPACES

It is important to always include a relationship builder at the beginning of your meetings. Relationship building can take up at least 25% of every meeting, and you can state that this will be an integral component of your affinity space. By prioritizing relationship over task, you are building trust and fostering connections within your group, which will ultimately allow for people to continue to bring more and more of themselves into each meeting.

In addition, in the spirit of fostering relationship building and trust, we recommend that you do not record affinity space meetings, to allow for a brave space where people can be open and vulnerable.

Below are a list of sample relationship building questions that you may want to consider for the beginning of each of your meetings. Note: As a facilitator, we suggest you model this relationship builder first, modeling vulnerability and possibly sharing some marginalized aspects of your own identity with respect to Jewish community.

- Name/Pronouns/three words to describe how you're feeling coming into this group/process.
- Share your top three identities that inform how you show up to this group (i.e., parent, partner, LGBTQIA+ identifying, person with disabilities, working class, divorced, single, artist, caretaker, person with a marginalized body-type, etc.).

- A space that I'm uncomfortable in and why. For example, "I am uncomfortable at weddings, because I am single/my sexuality/my partner recently died" or "I am uncomfortable on airplanes, because of my body size/physical disability; locker rooms, because of my gender identity/sexuality".
- One thing you cannot tell just by looking at me is [person's response...] This is important for me because [person's response...].
- Each person answers to the degree they are comfortable (afterwards, process what this was like for everyone to answer these questions):
  - What I think about me ...
  - What others think about me ...
  - What might be misunderstood about me ...
  - What I need from this group...

### UTILIZING RACE-BASED AFFINITY SPACES

*White people and [Black, Indigenous] People of Color [(BIPOC)] each have work to do separately and together [with respect to addressing racism]. [Affinity spaces] can provide spaces for people to work within their own racial/ethnic groups. For white people, an [affinity space] provides time and space to work explicitly and intentionally on understanding white [dominant] culture and white privilege [often utilizing resources previously created by People of Color] and to increase one's critical analysis around these concepts. A white [affinity space] also puts the onus on white people to teach each other about these ideas, rather than constantly relying on People of Color to teach them. For People of Color, an [affinity space] is [an intentional] place to [gather] with their peers on their experiences of internalized racism, for healing and to work on liberation. \**

Michael and Conger explain that mixed-race dialogues [about race and racism] are often inappropriate for white people, given that placing white folks in interracial dialogue is like "placing pre-algebra students in a calculus class. White people have so little experience discussing race, relative to their Colleagues of Color, that white people need something akin to a remedial course." \*\* For white people, identifying whiteness and white dominant culture can be a great first step, and a white affinity space can be a great environment for this first step.

*Whether there are a small or large number of People of Color in your community, race-based affinity spaces signal a proactive space of safety and belonging for people of a shared marginalized identity.*

We encourage you to read [\*Affinity Groups: A Space for Strength, Belonging, and Empowerment\*](#) by Anabelle Keimach.

\* <https://www.racialequitytools3sms1.org/resources/act/strategies/caucus-and-affinity-groups>

\*\* <http://www.justinccohen.com/blog/2016/10/28/white-affinity-groups>

## RESOURCES FOR AFFINITY SPACES FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR

Race-based affinity spaces for People of Color can begin largely as reflective, restorative, and relational; as the meetings progress, the leader and members of the group can make a decision about the group's intention, changing needs, and direction. Affinity spaces can be a place for groups to come together to reflect upon and determine what is needed in order for members of that group to experience a sense of belonging and equity in the community at large, a place to gather strength, or whatever the group members decide.

### Ideas for kicking-off a POC affinity space include:

- One could start with a relational question, such as:
  - What is one thing I'm hoping to get out of being in this group?
  - Three words to describe how I'm feeling coming into this group
  - What is going well for me right now? What is hard?
  - *\*Encourage/model sharing of names/pronouns when introducing ourselves*
- Review a shared resource (piece of text, poem, media clip, etc.) and allow people to reflect and discuss.
- Have chavruta-style check-ins, where people are paired with another person. Include a prompt for their conversation.

## RESOURCES FOR ANTI-RACIST WHITE AFFINITY SPACES

Race-based affinity spaces for white people are a space for white people to understand how whiteness functions, how white people benefit (often unknowingly) from systemic racism, and how white people can utilize their power and privilege to dismantle racism. It's also a space for white people to learn about racism without burdening People of Color with the labor of teaching them.

As mentioned above, relationship building is essential to your affinity work, particularly in a white antiracist affinity space where vulnerability is key to growth and learning. As you continue to delve deeper into white affinity work, it is much easier to *call someone in* and *to be called in*, when you have a relationship with them (liken it to when your best friend tells you that you have food in your teeth vs. a stranger informing you of this.)

See the sample relationship building questions above in the section titled "RELATIONSHIP BUILDING: FOR ALL AFFINITY SPACES".

**Framing for Conversations/Resources:** Once shared agreements are set, your group can begin delving into different DEI resources. Further down in this resource you will find a list of resources, including articles/videos/podcasts/books that you can consider discussing in your group. Consider asking group members to read/watch/listen beforehand or dedicate some time to read/watch/listen together, during your meeting. Below is a framing that you can use for these discussions.

- Start with asking everyone to state one word to summarize their feelings about the article/resource. This will give you a “temperature check” to gauge concerns, understanding, vulnerability, how the resource “landed” for everyone, etc. and help you prepare for the rest of the conversation. Be firm and only allow one-word responses. You can remind people that there will be time to share more than one word later in the conversation. Ask, “How is this article/resource relevant to our group?”
- Encourage vulnerability:
  - Take time to process and ask, “What part of this resource was tough to read/watch?”
  - Remind the group that they may face challenging feelings and encourage them to also spend time outside of this meeting processing those feelings.
- If lack of understanding/newness of concepts is coming up:
  - Invite people to bring up specific passages/parts they have questions about and invite the group to discuss. Address what you can in the meeting, but also ask people to note what they might want more clarification on and commit to seeking out additional information/resources.
- If people don’t like “the tone” of the article/resource, ask why? Be mindful that criticizing the “tone” of a DEI resource is often used as a way of distancing ourselves from the content. White people often like to hear, read, or watch things that affirm whiteness, and when presented with a resource that does not affirm whiteness/white dominant culture, often experience discomfort.
- Other questions to consider asking the group:
  - Which of the resource’s concepts seem “easy” to keep in mind? Which seem more challenging?
  - How can we ensure we are incorporating these concepts into our daily lives?

**Suggested Resources to discuss in anti-racist white affinity spaces:**

- [Tool for White People Navigating Conversations About Race](#)
- [What is White Privilege Really](#) by Cory Collins
- [What Does it Mean to "Code Switch" in Jewish Spaces?](#) by Chris Harrison
- [Video Messages from Deitra Reiser, Yolanda Savage-Narva and Evan Traylor](#) & accompanying [discussion guide](#)
- [How to overcome our biases? Walk boldly towards them.](#) TED Talk by Vernā Myers
- [White Dominant Culture & Something Different](#)
- [Jewish Fragility](#) by Arlene Stein
- [Wholly Jewish Podcast, season 1:](#) featuring URJ’s Audacious Hospitality JewV’Nation fellows from the Jews of Color Cohort
- Some additional resources (including articles, books, video clips, etc.) to consider can be found on the [Audacious Hospitality Racial Justice Resources Handout](#)