

The Sovereign Safety Standard

Version 2

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A safe space is not a place where discomfort never happens. It is a space where discomfort is not weaponized.

Safety cannot be established by a sign, a mission statement, a facilitator, a clinician, or an organization declaring a space safe. It is experienced through what happens when someone says no, changes their mind, disagrees with authority, becomes emotional, names harm, makes a mistake, or reveals something inconvenient.

Safety is also not produced by facilitators alone. It is shaped by how everyone in the room treats everyone else.

What this Standard is for

This document names the conditions that safer practice should protect. It gives facilitators, groups, organizations, and participants a shared way to examine what a space actually does, rather than what it says about itself.

It is written to be used out loud. It can be read before a group begins, referenced when something goes wrong, and returned to afterward to ask honestly whether the space held.

It contains ten principles, a practical test, and an honest account of its own limits.

1. Belonging does not require concealment.

People should not have to hide parts of themselves to remain welcome. A person's identity, history, body, culture, relationships, and ways of surviving should not become the price of admission. No one should have to become smaller, quieter, or more acceptable to keep their place in the group.

People are also more than their symptoms, diagnoses, and coping strategies. Clinical language, group rules, and professional authority should never be used to dismiss someone's perspective or to reduce a person to a problem needing correction.

Understanding behavior does not mean excusing harm. It means responding to the whole person instead of turning one part of their experience into their entire identity.

2. Experience is not put on trial.

People must be able to speak from their own experience without being shamed, punished, interrogated, diagnosed, or debated out of it. Disagreement should not be used to erase the person having the experience.

This does not mean every statement must be accepted as fact. A person's experience belongs to them, but claims made about another person remain open to challenge and accountability. That includes claims about another person's identity, motives, dignity, or right to be in the room. A belief sincerely held about someone else is still a claim about someone else, and sincerity is not evidence.

The distinction matters most when someone is described in their absence, or when an account of harm names a specific person. The account deserves to be heard. If action is taken against the person named, that action requires a fair process—one that does not force confrontation, expose the reporting person to retaliation, or make them responsible for investigating what happened.

A safer response begins with curiosity, respect, and attention before it moves toward explanation, challenge, or correction.

3. Consent remains active.

Consent is permission for a specific thing: this exercise, this question, this touch, this recording, this disclosure. It is not a single agreement made at the start that covers everything after.

People may decline an activity, pass on a question, change their minds, withdraw permission, or leave a conversation. "No" does not require a defense.

Silence, hesitation, compliance, and fear of disappointing the person in charge are not consent.

4. Vulnerability is invited—not extracted.

Where consent governs permission, this principle governs exposure. It concerns how much of themselves a person reveals, and when.

Disclosure is not proof of trust, courage, honesty, or readiness. No one should be pressured into sharing personal information, revisiting trauma, forgiving someone, reconciling, or becoming emotionally exposed before they are ready.

An invitation must carry a real freedom to decline. If declining costs a person standing, credibility, or belonging, the invitation was pressure wearing better clothes.

5. Agency remains with the person.

Where consent governs permission and vulnerability governs exposure, agency governs influence over the process itself: its pace, its direction, and the decisions made inside it.

Participation should not require surrendering control over one's own story, body, or direction. Whenever possible, people should take part in decisions that affect them.

Agency includes the freedom to continue, pause, question, disagree, change direction, or return. It also includes knowing what is actually open to influence, so that a person is not invited to shape something that has already been decided.

Nothing about you without you.¹

6. Power is acknowledged.

Every space contains power. It may come from a title, a license, a role, race, gender, age, income, education, physical ability, social influence, control of resources, or the authority to decide who belongs.

Pretending that everyone holds equal power does not create equality. It only lets power work without examination.

People with greater authority carry greater responsibility for noticing how their decisions, reactions, and preferences land on others.

7. Safety is relational.

A space is only as safe as the way its participants treat each other. Every person is responsible for the effect of their own conduct on the people around them, and that responsibility does not transfer to whoever is facilitating.

Identity, honesty, personal experience, and freedom of expression are not permission to degrade, threaten, expose, target, or dominate another person. Speaking one's truth is not a shield for conduct that makes the space unusable for someone else.

Protecting a group sometimes requires interruption, limits, removal, or separating people from one another. Those actions should be in proportion to what happened, explained rather than done quietly, and carried out in a way that preserves dignity wherever that is possible. Protection that humiliates has traded one harm for another.

Removal is not a failure of safety. Refusing to remove someone whose conduct is making the space unusable for others is.

Any space using this Standard should be able to say, before anything happens, how a concern about one participant's conduct is raised, who considers it, and how the person named will be told and given a chance to respond. This matters most where no one is formally in charge. A space that cannot answer those three questions does not yet have a relational safety practice. It has a hope.

8. Accountability preserves dignity.

Mistakes must be nameable. Harm must be addressable.

Accountability should not depend on humiliation, public punishment, forced confession, permanent labeling, or banishment as its first response.

Repair does not mean pretending nothing happened. It requires honest acknowledgment, real responsibility, attention to impact, changed behavior, and appropriate boundaries.

Not every relationship or group can be repaired. Dignity can still be preserved when separation is the right outcome.

9. Privacy is practiced.

Confidentiality is more than a promise made at the start of a meeting.

A safer space explains plainly what is private, what cannot stay private, who has access to information, how records are kept, and what happens if confidentiality is broken. People should know the limits of privacy before they disclose, not after.

In peer and community settings, every participant shares responsibility for protecting what others have entrusted to the group.

10. No opening without a return.

When a space invites people into something emotionally difficult, it takes on responsibility for how they leave it. People should not be opened and then abandoned inside what the space encouraged them to reveal.

Facilitators should allow time for grounding, orientation, questions, and transition. Participants should leave with a clearer sense of where they are, what they need, and what choices remain available to them.

No activation without agency. No truth without grounding. No opening without a return.

The practical test

The safety of a space becomes most visible when safety is inconvenient.

Ask what happens when someone says no, declines to disclose, changes their mind, disagrees with the facilitator, names a power difference, becomes emotional, identifies harm, makes a mistake, needs something the space did not anticipate, or chooses to leave.

Then ask the harder question, the one a space is most likely to skip: what happens when the harm comes from another participant rather than from the facilitator? Who intervenes, how quickly, at what cost to the person harmed, and at what cost to the person who caused it?

The response to those moments reveals more than any promise of safety ever could.

When participation is not free

Some spaces are entered by choice. Many are not.

Participation, privacy, or the ability to leave may be limited by law, policy, age, custody, employment, education, treatment requirements, or institutional authority. In those settings, a person may be present because staying is required or because leaving carries consequences they cannot absorb.

Where that is true, the space should not perform a freedom that does not exist. Calling required participation voluntary does not make it voluntary. It teaches people that the space will lie about small things, which is a reliable way to lose them on large ones.

Where consent is constrained, honesty about the constraint becomes part of safety.

That honesty means stating clearly what is mandatory and what is genuinely optional, who holds authority and over what, what information may be shared and with whom, what consequences may follow from participation or refusal, and what real choices remain available inside the constraint.

Constrained consent is not an excuse to abandon the rest of this Standard. It raises the obligation. When a person cannot leave, the other principles become more important—not less.

A standard is not a procedure

This document identifies the conditions that safer practice should protect. It does not tell anyone how to run a group.

It does not replace facilitation protocols, crisis procedures, mandated reporting obligations, grievance processes, accessibility plans, staff training, or the legal and ethical duties that attach to a specific setting or license. Those are built locally, by people who know the setting, the population, the jurisdiction, and the risk.

Use this Standard to evaluate those procedures. Do not use it in place of them. A space with strong principles and no procedures will fail the first time something serious happens.

One exception is deliberate. Principle 7 requires that a space have some process for concerns about a participant's conduct. It does not say what that process should be. Naming a capability a space must have is still a condition. Designing it remains local work.

Use and misuse of this Standard

The Sovereign Safety StandardSM is not a certification. It is not a seal of approval. It is not proof that a space is safe. It is not a guarantee of what any participant will experience.

The Standard is a tool for accountability—not a badge of innocence.

Adopting the language, printing it, quoting it, or displaying it demonstrates nothing. No one becomes compliant by agreement. The evidence is in observable behavior, in what participants actually experience, in whether feedback reaches the people who can act on it, and in how the space responds when harm occurs.

Feedback also needs a route that does not run through the person it is about. A space where every complaint reaches the facilitator first has not built accountability. It has built a filter.

Used well, this document is something a space can be measured against, including by the people inside it. Used badly, it becomes marketing. The difference shows up entirely in what happens on the inconvenient day.

Honest limitations

This Standard does not promise a space without conflict, discomfort, misunderstanding, strong emotion, consequences, or necessary boundaries.

It does not guarantee that every person will experience the same degree of safety. Safety is shaped by identity, history, power, environment, and lived experience, and a space that is safe for most people may still not be safe for someone.

It cannot resolve every case. There are situations where protecting one person means limiting another, where factual claims cannot be reconciled, and where no available response feels wholly good. Principles narrow those situations. They do not eliminate them.

The Standard asks for something more honest than a guarantee: that safety be treated as an ongoing practice that can be examined, experienced, questioned, repaired, and improved.

Closing

A space does not become safe because someone in authority calls it safe.

Safety is what people experience when their humanity becomes inconvenient.

¹ "Nothing about you without you" adapts the disability rights principle "Nothing about us without us," which was carried into wide use by disability self-advocacy movements and later by mental health survivor and consumer movements. The principle is theirs. The adaptation here is only a change of address, from the collective to the person in the room.

The Sovereign Safety StandardSM

Created by Rob Pompa, LCSW The Sovereign Source™ thesovereignsource.com