

## How to talk about conflict impartially

This resource aims to support adults such as educators and youth group workers to impartially support young people in their discussions of war and conflict. Young people see the news, and now more than ever due to social media and access to the internet, they are aware of things going on around them. Sometimes however, this information can be misleading or overwhelming. Use this document to start thinking about ways you can impartially and neutrally discuss conflict with learners using a humanitarian approach.

In this document you will:

- Reflect on your own biases and learn ways to manage them
- Explore how to start establishing reliable information about conflict
- Consider ways to acknowledging learner's feelings and how conflict impacts and is impacted by emotions and values
- Consider humanitarian responses to conflict
- Consider ways to create inclusive, impartial, and neutral spaces for discussion
- Explore some suggested activities to run with learners to explore conflict and cope with its emotional impacts

### What does it mean to be impartial and neutral?

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The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is the world's largest humanitarian organisation. We play an important part in helping people in crisis and conflict. Two of our seven principles, values which underlie all of our work, are the principles of impartiality and neutrality. This means, we do not take sides in conflicts and prioritise helping those who most need our help, no matter who they are. We also follow the principle of humanity, which means we strive to alleviate human suffering and believe everyone deserves dignity and respect. These principles are vital to our work and we have a recognised and important role in promoting international humanitarian law, and respect for humanitarian values and human dignity.

For more information about International Humanitarian Law and how it protects different categories of people in times of armed conflict, please see the accompanying factsheet.

We believe that these principles are also important to education. We favour a 'learner led' approach to education, meaning educators are there to support learners share their ideas and come to their own conclusions. Learners may not agree with each other, or with you and your beliefs. As educators we have a responsibility to support learners come to their own understanding about topics. We guide and support their journey by providing information about humanitarian law and principles, without imposing our own views and opinions. We challenge learners to think for themselves, to learn how to analyse information thoroughly, how to reflect on and justify their beliefs and decisions, and how to consider the difficult decisions and complexities that take place in a conflict.

### How to prepare yourself: evaluating bias and reliable information

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Conflict is a difficult and emotive topic. Before you speak to learners, it's important that you work through the emotions you have about the issue. Start by just asking yourself how you feel about the events going on. You can never turn off your feelings, but learning how to manage them can help you more confidently, and neutrally, discuss this topic with others. If it helps, write your feelings, worries and opinions down somewhere, or speak to friends and colleagues about them before you speak to your learners.

Reflecting on how you feel will help you be more aware of your own personal views about the topic. Avoid presenting your personal views as the one cause or solution to a conflict. Bias can come across through things you say but also facial expressions and gestures. Remember that young people, especially younger ones, are likely to be influenced by your opinions and how you present the conflict. Using a humanitarian approach can help you maintain neutrality and impartiality.

Now it's time to consider what knowledge you have on the topic. Conflict is fast changing and complex, so it is not realistic that you will have all the answers. However, you can prepare yourself by investigating what reliable information is out there, and use that to answer questions or support learners understanding.

Remember to use only reliable sources. Trusted news coverage, or information on the Red Cross website are good tools to use.

Here are some top tips for evaluating trusted sources and managing misinformation:

- > Source: where is this information from? What bias might this source have? Is social media a reliable source of information?
- > Dates: how old is this information – remember in conflict and emergencies, things change very quickly and something might already be out of date. Likewise, if it's breaking news, has it had chance to be verified yet?
- > Repeated: can this information be corroborated by other trusted sources?

The BBC news 'Reality check' service is a good way to check information. You can use this to go through anything learners might have heard on social media. Share the three tips above and make time to teach your learners about the importance of critically analysing sources of information. The most effective way to tackle misinformation is media literacy skills.

### **Preparing what to say to learners: a humanitarian approach**

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You can use this checklist to help you frame what information you give to learners, and how you choose to respond to events going on in the world.

- > **What do your learners want to talk about?**  
It is likely that they already have questions, and each learner may have heard different and contradictory things. Focus on talking to them about the things they are already aware of, clarifying any misunderstandings as much as you can, rather than trying to give them an overload of new information. Create an open space for discussion and let them share their opinions and ideas.
- > **How are your learners feeling?**  
As we've said, conflict is emotive, and our opinions about conflict usually come from emotions and values we have. Learners will probably be angry, confused or worried. Rather than focusing on the facts and figures of the conflict, it might be more beneficial to give learners space to share and acknowledge their feelings about the conflict instead.
- > **What can you do to help your learners?**  
Learners may benefit from a change in their usual schedule in response to certain events. Could you host an assembly and give the school space to share and answer

questions together? Could a wellbeing activity support them, or some time to just acknowledge how they feel?

> **What could learners learn about?**

As well as exploring one specific conflict, think about how you can talk about the common aspects of conflict and its impact on human beings. Specific conflicts can be used as case studies. Compare and contrast different conflicts as well as different sides or experiences of a conflict.

Learners might have questions or misconceptions about what is happening or happened. It then might be necessary to step in and offer guidance.

### **Creating a supportive and inclusive environment**

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It's important to remember that many young people may have personal connections to conflicts going on in the world. As much as possible, try to be aware of any people in your group who may need further support. [Use our guidance on creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment](#) for tips on how to support learners and create a safe space for non-judgemental discussion.

Armed conflict can also flare up national or cultural tensions. It's important that as well as being impartial and neutral, we are also following the principle of humanity, which means treating everyone with dignity and respect. We must work hard to resist the impulse to demonise or dehumanise the people involved in conflict. [For more advice on tackling discrimination see our guidance on racism.](#)

Be aware also, that conflict is a key cause of migration. There may be people in the group with lived experience of migration and conflict who may also feel upset and triggered by new events going on. It could be that people arrive in the UK as a consequence of conflict. You can help to build a welcoming and tolerant environment using [our guidance on supporting refugees and our understanding migration activities.](#)

### **How to respond to questions and comments from children and young people**

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Young people may have some misconceptions or questions about the conflict going on. It is important that they are given space to ask questions and learn, but do not distress others.

Questions may be related to causes of the conflict, or what the future will hold. These are difficult things to answer conclusively, but you can follow the steps below to offer support to learners:

- > Positively acknowledge questions. Even if the question is a difficult one to address, encouraging them to be confident enough to ask questions is important.
- > Encourage learners not to ask personal questions to people with personal connections about the situation or lived experience of conflict as it may cause them distress. If they are interested in learning about the conflict though, facilitate that by educating the whole group.
- > It's ok not to know the answer. Be honest about your own knowledge and understanding. If the question requires a definitive answer, you can use trusted sources on the internet to research the answer to the question together or you can offer to come back to it after you have researched further. Keep a note of the question. You could start an anonymous question box and set time aside to review and answer them.

- > If learners disagree or argue about something, remind them that they agreed to be tolerant and understanding of other peoples' views (use the classroom agreement you made as part of building an inclusive and supportive learning environment to refer to).
- > If learners use intolerant or offensive language to talk about others, calmly challenge it. Governments and armed groups do not necessarily represent whole nations or groups of people. Remind learners not to generalise or stereotype.
- > Focus the discussion on common values learners may have – for example, ask learners if they all agree that people deserve to be safe? Or that civilians should not be attacked in a conflict? Use the activity below and our factsheet on International Humanitarian Law to explore this issue through the lens of the Red Cross.
- > Encourage a range of views about solutions to the conflict to ensure balance. Don't show favour to one side or the other. You can use Red Cross resources to focus on humanitarian aspects of conflict.
- > For older learners, you can throw a question open to the group. What do they think about the situation?
- > At points you may need to offer balanced views by suggesting something in opposition to what learners are saying, you could ask them to consider how other people involved in the conflict are feeling or thinking. What does it look like from their point of view?
- > Be willing to listen and encourage an environment of active listening where people can share safely, and others listen and reflect on what others say.
- > Focus on supporting learners with the feelings of anger or worry that they might be feeling, and remind them that feelings are normal and healthy and by understanding how we feel it can help us manage feelings better.

### **How to explore the topic with young people**

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You can introduce the topic of armed conflict and international humanitarian law with learners using our [online teaching resources](#). Our topics cover case studies of real-life conflicts as well as introducing humanitarian action in conflict and decision making as a humanitarian.

For some quick activity ideas for exploring conflict see the suggestions below.

### **Activities**

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#### **Principles and values: Impartiality, neutrality and humanity (10-19 year olds)**

Learners will:

- Discuss the meaning of the terms 'impartiality' 'neutrality' and 'humanity'
- Explore their own principles and values

Ask learners what they think the three terms above mean, you can write them down somewhere visible so they can see them. After they have shared their ideas of the meanings, give the information below:

The Red Cross Movement plays an important role in upholding international humanitarian law. This is the law that governs armed conflicts – what governments and armed groups can and cannot do in a conflict. Our emblem – the Red Cross – is a protected symbol and shows people we are here to help people. The Movement also actively helps people in a conflict and crisis by offering aid and support to anyone who needs it. In order to do this, we follow

seven important rules. We call these 'principles' – beliefs or ideas that are very important to us and influence how we behave. Three of these rules are:

- > Neutrality: this means that in order to maintain the trust of all, we do not take sides in political controversies or armed conflicts.
- > Impartiality: this means that we help anyone who needs help the most, no matter who they are.
- > Humanity: this means that we believe everyone deserves to be treated with respect and dignity.

What do learners think of these definitions? Encourage them to think about the role of the Red Cross and ask them why it might be important that the Red Cross follow these three principles?

Now ask learners to consider what 'principles' they consider important to them. What beliefs or values do they hold which they think influence how they behave: what is important to them?

Encourage learners to create a piece of written or creative work which explores their values and principles. They can come up with one or three, or [seven](#) like the Red Cross have. If learners wish to, they can display their principles to the class and justify their choices.

For a longer session plan about these three principles, international humanitarian law and the work of the Red Cross [see our Rules of War resource](#).

### **Coping skills – breathing with colour (5-12 year olds)**

Learners will:

- Learn and practise using a technique for managing overwhelming feelings and worries

Use this quick breathing activity with learners who might be feeling overwhelmed. Explain that we are going to practise a way that we can feel better. For older learners, you can explain that this is called a coping skill. Ask them what they think a coping skill is and how and when we use them.

[Display the breathing with colour video](#) and Jonjo will explain how to do it.

After learners have watched the video, encourage them to try the breathing exercise a few times. Afterwards ask learners how they feel? What did they notice about this activity?

Ask older learners when they could use this coping skill in future to cope with overwhelming feelings.

For more activities on building coping skills, [see our First Aid Champions module on Kindness and coping](#).

### **Coping skills – circles of control (10-19 year old's)**

Learners will:

- Learn and practise using a technique for managing worries

Use this activity with learners who might be feeling worried and frustrated. Ask learners for suggestions of ways we can deal with worry. After they've shared their ideas, remind learners that worry is a normal feeling, especially in challenging and uncertain situations.

Explain to learners that you are going to watch a video demonstrating a technique for organise worries into things you can and cannot control.

[Display the circles of control video](#) and it will instruct learners on the activity.

After learners have watched the video, encourage them to independently try the activity. Give them 10 minutes to do this. Some may need support deciding what things they can and cannot control. If they are struggling, ask them to focus on the things they can control – what things can they do to feel better or help manage a worry they have. It could be things like: talk to friends and family about how I feel; acknowledge how I feel; do something relaxing or fun to distract myself for a while. In the context of conflict, it could also be things like: be careful not to share misinformation online; support people they know who might be directly affected.

Debrief the activity by asking learners if this activity was useful to them and when they might use it again in future.

For more activities on managing wellbeing, [see our being kind to yourself wellbeing activities](#).

### **What can learners do to help?**

Conflict can often leave us feeling powerless and frustrated, especially if it is happening far away. We can help learners feel better by giving them something they can do.

- > Fundraise for a British Red Cross appeal: as part of the Red Cross network, we often raise money to support Red Cross societies in other countries. [Look at our website for more information](#).
- > Focus on tackling misinformation. Spreading misinformation is a serious problem, especially in times of crisis. Could learners do anything to tackle the spreading of misinformation in their communities? For example, they could teach others how to critically analyse information?
- > Take care of themselves and others. Conflict is a challenging time, and it's important to take care of our wellbeing and offer support to those struggling where we can.