



TOOLKIT FOR IMMIGRATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATES

A Self-Preservation Guide

Prepared by
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About the Creators



I'm Díana Díaz Madera, MPH, LCSW, a bilingual and bicultural Licensed Clinical Social Worker with a master's degree in Public Health and Founder of Corazón Norte. As a psychotherapist, mental health consultant, and human rights advocate I have had the privilege, for the past 17 years, of working with immigrant communities, including farmworkers, people with irregular immigration status, refugees, those who are seeking asylum and those who have endured torture and persecution.

As an immigrant who came to the U.S. at the age of 15, I have a deep passion for creating equitable pathways and protective factors for other immigrants.

I am also committed to equipping fellow providers in this field with the tools and resources needed to navigate the unique demands of our work—where the weight of the work is as profound as its beauty.

Diana Díaz Madera, MPH, LCSW#10859

Corazón Norte is a consulting firm dedicated to supporting professionals facing vicarious trauma and moral injury—such as human rights defenders, social justice activists, and social workers—through workshops and training. We partner with organizations to create inclusive, culturally responsive practices that offer immigrants the tailored support they need to rebuild their lives in the U.S. Additionally, we conduct mental health evaluations in immigration contexts. Above all, Corazón Norte exists to foster communal belonging and healing, helping to build systems where we can belong, grow, and thrive—not just survive.



I am a licensed attorney with decades of experience in the non-profit sector working with the immigrant, refugee, and asylee communities in California. I have had the privilege to represent and advocate for individuals from around the globe and create programming in response to changes in immigration laws and policies of several federal administrations.

My commitment to the professionals engaged in this work—from advocates, case managers, social workers, and mental professionals, among others—is rooted in my belief that our health and wellbeing is vital to responding to the needs of the communities we serve and sustaining quality services across our disciplines.

In this spirit, I welcome the opportunity to develop tools and share strategies which may be useful as this group of committed professionals consider how to engage in the current emotionally charged environment.

I invite you to explore this toolkit which Diana and I have prepared with you in mind. Rest assured that your efforts matter, that they have value and, importantly, you are valued.

Elizabeth Camarena, Esq.

Dear Beloved Changemaker,

This toolkit is our love letter to you, an offering for the souls who stand at the intersection of advocacy and healing, who carry the weight of change with grace and grit. We crafted this from the perspective of two humans first, and with a lawyer and a social worker interdisciplinary lens, second. We created this resource not to provide all the answers but to offer a space of support, comfort, and affirmation in these shifting political tides. For each of you advocating for immigrant rights, human rights, and the causes that affect our communities, we honor your sacrifices, your triumphs, and every quiet moment of doubt you've faced.

We see you—the ones who have held space for clients, stood alongside communities, and, for some, walked this journey for the safety and dignity of your own loved ones. And we acknowledge the times you've fought for yourself, while offering strength, compassion, and a sense of belonging to others. You have been in the trenches, showing up day after day, even when the weight feels overwhelming.

This toolkit originated as an expression of communal care, with intention and tenderness poured into every word. We hope it can be a gentle guide as you navigate the complexities of the present, offering some ideas to help you process the political changes affecting our communities. You may find some tips that resonate deeply, others that you're curious to try, and still others that may not feel quite right—and that's okay. Please take what you need, and know that we welcome your curiosity, courage, and open mind.

We invite you to explore these practices as they speak to you, knowing that every effort you make to preserve yourself matters. Through it all, please remember this: your presence is enough and your well-being is as essential as the work you do. We are grateful to walk alongside you and celebrate the courage it takes to keep showing up as your whole self.

With endless appreciation and solidarity,

Diana & Elizabeth

Disclaimer: This toolkit is intended as a resource for self-preservation practices but is not a substitute for professional mental health support. Please seek help from a licensed mental health professional as needed.

Navigating Communal Grief



In the world of human rights and immigration work, emotions often ride high. When political shifts—especially those that threaten the safety and rights of immigrants and asylum seekers—come into play, it's normal to feel a whirlwind of emotions. Grief can be a powerful but often unexpected emotion which can show up whenever our hopes for **justice, equity, and protection** feel under attack. Grief isn't only about personal losses; many of us engaged in this work will or are experiencing grief in the wake of the election results. The stages of grief offer a **compassionate roadmap** for processing these feelings, serving as a guide for self-preservation, helping human rights defenders honor their emotions. With tools to validate and navigate these intense feelings, we acknowledge our **humanity**.

THIS CURRICULUM EXPLORES EACH STAGE OF GRIEF:
DENIAL ANGER BARGAINING DEPRESSION ACCEPTANCE

01

“*This can’t be happening.*”

ACKNOWLEDGE THE FEELING

Recognize that denial is a natural defense mechanism and a way of temporarily protecting oneself from overwhelming emotions.



MINDFUL GROUNDING EXERCISES

Grounding techniques, like deep breathing or body scanning, help reconnect with the present moment and avoid getting lost in disbelief.

FOCUS ON IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

Write down small, actionable tasks related to ongoing work. Tackling immediate steps can break through the sense of helplessness that denial often brings.



02

“*This isn’t fair.*”



CHANNEL ANGER INTO ADVOCACY

Redirect anger into actions, explore what actions you think will release the emotion. Consider actions such as writing letters, organizing, or supporting community rallies. Anger can be a powerful fuel when channeled constructively.

CREATE SAFE OUTLETS FOR EXPRESSION

Allow space for controlled physical release, like going for a run or practicing kickboxing,. Creative expression can also help release anger constructively like writing, painting or drawing.

ENGAGE IN COMMUNITY DISCUSSIONS

Organize or join discussions with peers to talk openly about anger and frustration. Finding solidarity can normalize these emotions and create communal care.

03

“If only we had done more...”



CHALLENGE “WHAT IF” THINKING

Notice thoughts that dwell on “if only” scenarios, as these can deepen guilt and anxiety, rapid rage. Remind yourself that much has already been done and that your efforts have contributed meaningfully. Remind yourself that you can only control your responses, not other people’s choices.

SET CLEAR BOUNDARIES WITH SELF-COMPASSION

Permit yourself to set emotional and time boundaries, recognizing that constant self-blame is neither productive nor necessary.



REAFFIRM COLLECTIVE GOALS

Reconnect with the organization’s mission and goals, or your own core values that got you into human rights work. Acknowledge that the movement is bigger than any one action or election, and that long-term commitment can bring change despite it feeling like it is not enough.

“Remind yourself that you can only control your responses, not other people’s choices.”

04

“*What’s the point?*”



SEEK COMMUNITY CARE

Reach out to colleagues or allies in human rights for shared support. **Community connections** can serve as reminders of mutual purpose and strength.

PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION

Offer yourself words of **kindness** and **support**, reminding yourself that these feelings are normal. Recognize that this work likely will be a marathon not a sprint. There is no shame in sometimes walking the marathon, sometimes sprinting, sometimes jogging, sometimes walking, sometimes leaning on your people to help you get to the finish line. It does not make you less valuable.

SMALL WINS TRACKING

Reflecting on accomplishments, even minor ones, can combat feelings of despair. It helps our brain release serotonin or **“happy hormones”** that help boost our mood and ability to show up again after feeling defeated. You are rewiring your brain, be intentional to recognize those wins (yes, even if it is just making your bed today).

05

Corazón Norte

“*This is reality and we will move forward.*”

PLAN AND PREPARE FOR NEXT STEPS

Acceptance doesn't mean resignation; it means assessing the current situation and planning accordingly. Focus on **adapting strategies** to operate effectively in the new political landscape.

EMBRACE ADAPTABILITY

Use this stage to cultivate **adaptability**, **emotional elasticity**, acknowledging the need to be flexible in shifting circumstances. Strengthen contingency plans and explore new ways to support yourself.

FOSTER HOPE AND PURPOSE

Reaffirm the reasons behind your work. Engage in activities that explore how you want to show up for yourself. Explore your **sense of purpose**, whether that's participating in a solidarity group, contributing to strategy sessions, or **grounding yourself** in the mission, donating/volunteering to impacted communities and supporting the work of others.



Additional Support Strategies



EMOTIONAL ELASTICITY RITUALS

Integrate daily or weekly rituals (like meditation, art, or nature walks) that foster flexibility and self-preservation.



COLLECTIVE HEALING SPACES

Host regular group sessions where you and your colleagues can process emotions together, share coping skills, and cultivate collective strength.



EMERGENCY PLANNING

Given heightened threats to asylum and immigration, develop or revisit contingency plans to adapt to potential legal and policy shifts, offering stability in uncertain times.



SEEK SUPPORT

Use your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or connect with a therapist to help process the emotional impact of political changes. It can offer a space to unpack concerns about how this change may affect the communities you work with, including heightened fears around immigration, rights, and access to services.



REMAIN GROUNDED IN YOUR ROOTS

In times of change, draw strength from the cultural practices and traditions that have sustained you and your people through generations. Let these connections support and preserve you.

Understanding Trauma Responses in the Face of Political Shifts



Your trauma responses once kept you safe— acknowledge them with gratitude. Now, with gentleness, let them know their job is done. You are ready to take it from here.

Diana Díaz Madera



When political outcomes—that threaten the safety of vulnerable communities—create fear and uncertainty, understanding our **trauma responses** becomes essential. As advocates, we’re often exposed to these high-stress events, and they can bring out powerful reactions like fight, flight, freeze, or collapse. It’s important to know that we may experience any or all of these responses at any time; they’re a normal reaction.

In this section, we’ll explore why **recognizing, identifying, and acknowledging** these responses can be profoundly helpful. By learning to understand them, we support our nervous system in easing anxiety and building flexibility. This awareness ultimately strengthens our ability to face difficult times with **compassion** for ourselves and the communities we work with.

THIS CURRICULUM EXPLORES TYPES OF TRAUMA RESPONSES AND HOW TO TRANSFORM THEM:

FIGHT FREEZE FLEE COLLAPSE

01

Feeling Angry, Defensive, or Hyper-Aware

ACKNOWLEDGE AND NORMALIZE

Recognize that feeling a surge of anger or defensiveness is a natural response to perceived threats or injustice.



CHANNEL ENERGY INTO ACTION

Use the energy from this response for constructive advocacy—consider organizing community outreach, participating in awareness campaigns, or crafting press releases to raise visibility for the cause.

SET BOUNDARIES AROUND ADVOCACY

While action can be empowering, start with setting healthy boundaries to prevent burnout. Schedule time for preparation before; have a transition plan, and relaxation and recalibration activity after high-energy tasks.



02

Feeling Stuck, Paralyzed, or Mentally Foggy



PRACTICE GROUNDING TECHNIQUES

When feeling immobilized (inability to move forward mentally or physically), use grounding exercises like deep breathing, mindfulness, or focusing on sensory details (like the texture of an object or the sounds around you) to reorient to the present moment.

BREAK DOWN TASKS

Combat feelings of overwhelm by breaking down larger responsibilities into small steps. Focus on completing just one small task at a time.

LEAN ON STRUCTURE AND ROUTINE

Establish a consistent daily routine or checklist to provide a sense of predictability and reduce the impact of mental fog.

03

Urges to Escape, Disengage, or Avoid



REFLECT ON PURPOSE AND VALUES

Reconcile with the values that drive how you engage. This can assist you in assessing what you need. Remember, it's okay to listen to the cues your body is giving you and how much it can handle at a time.

SET HEALTHY DETACHMENT PRACTICES

Allow yourself brief "micro-breaks" throughout the day, even if it's just stepping outside or taking five minutes to breathe, rather than fully disengaging.



REASSURE THROUGH FLEXIBILITY

Sometimes, the best way to manage "flee" urges is to give yourself flexibility in your work schedule. Allow room for varied tasks that align with your energy levels, and be gentle with yourself.

04

Feeling Overwhelmed, Helpless, or Emotionally Exhausted



PRIORITIZE SELF-CARE AND RESTORATION

Collapse responses can indicate emotional exhaustion, so it's crucial to prioritize rest, sleep, and activities that bring joy or relaxation.

SEEK SUPPORTIVE CONNECTIONS

Reaching out to trusted friends, colleagues, or a therapist can provide relief and support. Consider joining peer support groups where others understand the challenges of advocacy work.

FOCUS ON SMALL, ACHIEVABLE TASKS

When feeling overwhelmed, try to accomplish one small task that brings a sense of purpose and satisfaction, no matter how minor it may seem. Even a small action can build confidence.



Transforming Trauma Responses into Productive Advocacy

Understanding these responses allows human rights defenders to work with their own emotional needs rather than against them. **Here are additional tips for turning trauma responses into emotional:**



SELF-REFLECTION AND COMPASSION

Take time to acknowledge personal trauma and reflect on how you processed or responded to it. Acknowledge these responses with compassion, understanding they are survival mechanisms.



PHYSICAL PRACTICES FOR RELEASE

Engage in physical practices, like stretching, yoga, or walking, to help release any physical tension associated with trauma responses.



REFRAME THE EXPERIENCE

Remind yourself that these responses do not signify weakness; instead, they are part of the body's way of coping with immense stress. Reframe them as signs of strength and adaptability, reinforcing the power of adaptability in advocacy.

Building Your Tool Box

TOOL #1 BREATHING

In the midst of standing for justice, it’s essential to find moments of stillness and presence for yourself. Below you will find grounding and calming breathing mantras—simple phrases that anchor us, release tension, and invite rest, care, and preservation of your heart. Use these mantras when you feel overwhelmed, need to reset, or simply want to give yourself a moment of peace.



Find a comfortable spot to sit or stand. Place one hand on your heart and the other on your belly, letting your breath be gentle and deep. As you breathe in and out, repeat these phrases to yourself, letting each word sink in and carry you toward calm.

Inhale	Exhale
<i>I have done all that I can.</i>	<i>I allow myself to rest, free from guilt.</i>
<i>I am wise and present.</i>	<i>I will honor this grief at my own pace.</i>
<i>I allow my grief the time it needs.</i>	<i>I release tension with patience.</i>
<i>I honor my boundaries.</i>	<i>Rest is essential to my preservation.</i>
<i>I am deserving.</i>	<i>I am worthy of compassion and care.</i>
<i>I am hopeful.</i>	<i>I choose faith in humanity, even in difficult times.</i>
<i>I am worthy of compassion, too.</i>	<i>I honor my own well-being.</i>
<i>I carry strength and softness.</i>	<i>I honor my emotions as a source of power.</i>
<i>I respect my limits.</i>	<i>Replenishing myself renews my commitment.</i>
<i>I stand with compassion.</i>	<i>My empathy fuels justice.</i>

My rage is valid. *Let go of hate.*

TOOL #2 AFFIRMATIONS

Take these affirmations with you as reminders of your impact and strength. May they uplift you in moments of doubt, recharge you during challenging days, and affirm your role as a powerful advocate and healer. You are enough, exactly as you are.



Here’s how to use them:

1 CHOOSE AN AFFIRMATION
Read through the list and pick one or more that resonate with you. You can also choose different affirmations depending on your needs and mood each day.

2 REPEAT WITH INTENTION
Say the affirmation out loud, if possible, or quietly in your mind. Let the words settle, feeling each one as it affirms your purpose, perseverance, and worth.

3 MAKE IT A PRACTICE
Set aside a few moments each day to repeat your chosen affirmations. You might say them while getting ready in the morning, during a lunch break, or before bed.

4 WRITE THEM DOWN
Consider jotting down your favorite affirmations on sticky notes, in a journal, or as a reminder on your phone. Place them where you’ll see them often for gentle encouragement throughout the day.

“ / ... embrace my role as a defender. I trust in my efforts.
... am making a difference, one step at a time.

... carry the strength and perseverance of those who came before me.
... have the courage to continue, and the wisdom to pause.
... am steadfast in my purpose. My voice and actions matter.
... am not alone. I am part of a community committed to justice.
... don’t need to have all the answers today. My care and dedication are enough.
... am allowed to rest. Replenishing myself is part of the work.
... hold space for my grief.
... stand firmly for dignity and safety for all people.
My compassion and advocacy plant seeds for a future rooted in dignity and respect.

● **TOOL #3 QUICK TIPS ON THE GO** ●

These self-care skills focus on maintaining well-being while navigating demanding work:

Preparing to face high-energy or intense experiences, **managing in-the-moment self-care** to stay grounded, using **transitions** to consciously leave work at work, and engaging in **recalibration** to reset afterward, all while finding personalized ways to **relax** and recharge.



PREPARING

- Arrive with extra time to center yourself in the car, allowing your mind and body to adjust before stepping in.
- Remind yourself of your skills and capacity to handle what lies ahead.
- Stay present: Use music, silence, or sensory items to keep grounded. Feel the warmth, taste, and scent of your coffee or tea to bring yourself to the here and now.

DURING

- **Engage Your Senses** Keep a grounding object (smooth stone, essential oil, comforting photo) to touch or look at when feeling overwhelmed.
- **Focus on Physical Grounding** Press your feet firmly on the ground, noticing the floor’s support. This helps bring awareness to your body and the present moment.
- **Practice Gentle Muscle Relaxation** Tense and release shoulders, hands, or jaw, letting go of built-up tension in small, focused actions.
- **Stay Hydrated** Sip water or tea to stay refreshed and create a small, calming pause. Focus on the taste, temperature, and feel of each sip.
- **Take Micro-Breaks** Close your eyes for a few seconds, stretch your fingers, or glance up at the sky. Even brief moments of rest can help you reset.



TRANSITIONS

- Change clothes or add a comforting sweater after challenging visits to remind yourself of safety and protection.
- Mentally “box up” difficult thoughts—visualize sealing them for now, knowing you can revisit them later.
- Listen to a calming playlist after leaving intense environments.

RECALIBRATION

- **Reflect Briefly** Jot down thoughts or small wins from the day, then set them aside to clear your mind.
- **Check In** Pause to assess how you feel and what you need—whether that’s rest, connection, or solitude.

RELAXATION

- **Physical Reset** Stretch, walk, or do gentle movement to release tension and signal the end of the workday.
- **Shift Focus** Dive into a hobby, book, or creative project to transition your energy from work to personal fulfillment.



Use these tips to support yourself, allowing time to reset and re-energize for the work ahead.

TOOL #4 WORDS AS SELF-PRESERVATION TOOL, FINDING LANGUAGE IN MOMENTS OF DISTRESS

When we’re under distress, our brains often enter an overwhelmed state, making it challenging to find words that express what we’re feeling or what we need. This is a normal response when our nervous system is activated, and it can sometimes prevent us from showing up for ourselves in ways that we truly want.

This page offers you three “buckets” of supportive words and phrases.

Use these to help express your needs, define your limits, and communicate self-compassion in tough moments. Let these words be a starting point—take what resonates most for you.



THE RISE BUCKET

“I am ... prepared, important, justified, generous, supportive, capable, afraid, mad, tired, committed, magic, rich, loyal, terrified, loved.

THE GANAS/HYPE BUCKET

“Today I ... rise, believe, pause, wonder, ponder, welcome, change, process, assert, reflect, perform, dream, care, show up, challenge, move, love.

THE PAUSE/HARD PASS BUCKET

“Today I can’t ... reconcile, prepare, sustain, amplify, go into the office, overextend myself.

- ... take on more work. I need to rest so I can come back fully present.
- ... listen deeply right now. I want to support you but will need to check in when I have more capacity.
- ... join in person. I’ll be here in spirit, and I hope to reconnect soon.
- ... handle any more conversations about this topic today. Thank you for understanding.
- ... hold space for others’ emotions. I’m working on my own and need time to recharge.
- ... provide advice or problem-solve right now. Let’s connect when I’m in a better headspace.
- ... give more than I have today. I appreciate your patience and understanding.
- ... be available. I’m taking the time I need to restore my energy.
- ... meet this request today. I want to be fully present when I can, so I need to reschedule.
- ... take this on today. I’ll let you know when I’m ready to engage again.

“

The best way to live in pain is to take care of it—wisely and unapologetically.

Pamela Ayo Yetunde, J.D. Th. D

