



What is your WHY?

An activity to help people with lived experience understand WHY they want to engage in advocacy and activism, and what that means for the kinds of things they want to do.

A lived experience resource of The Meaningful Engagement Toolbox by Collective Threads Initiative

Introduction

Almost everyone who experiences oppression, abuse, or othering hopes that no one else will have to go through what they did. Sometimes, we carry that hope into our work, family, and community care in small ways while focusing our attention elsewhere. At other times, we have opportunities—or make a commitment—to dedicate a significant portion of our lives to ending the harm we experienced.

We may receive opportunities to engage in this work before we have had time to reflect on why we want to do it or what we hope to achieve. Sometimes, we are invited before we even know what kinds of work need to be done—or could be done.

The kinds of work you want to do may be influenced by your reasons for doing it. For example, if you want to help people who have experienced abuse to heal and recover, you might become a peer support advocate, mentor, or counsellor. If you want to prevent abuse from happening, you might work as an educator or in a government role to strengthen systems. If you want to influence your community or policymakers, you might attend protests, write opinion pieces for local media, or become a policy strategist.

Reflecting on your “why” is important to align the work you take on with your goals, skills, and interests. You may still take on work that does not fully align with your motivations, but at least you will know you are making a conscious choice.

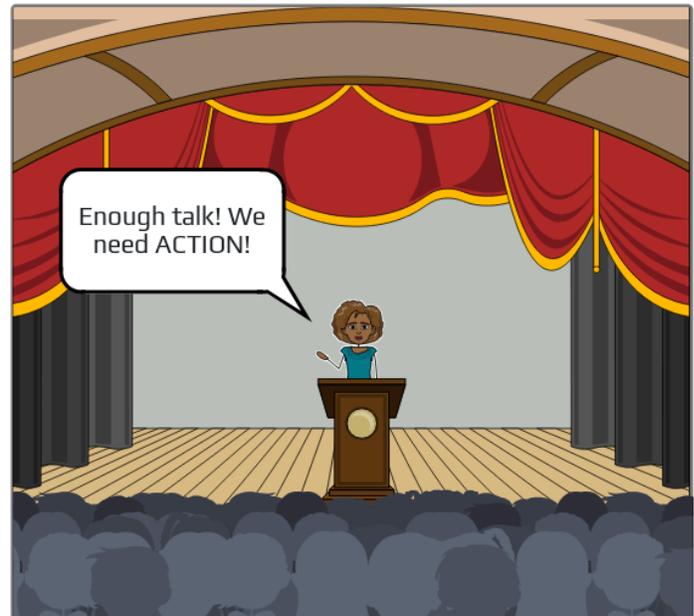
It is also important to reflect on your “why” to understand how your trauma and unmet needs may be driving your desires. For example, if you want to do this work to be seen as important, you will need to establish practices to ensure you never prioritise your own need for validation over your desire to address abuse and support those affected.

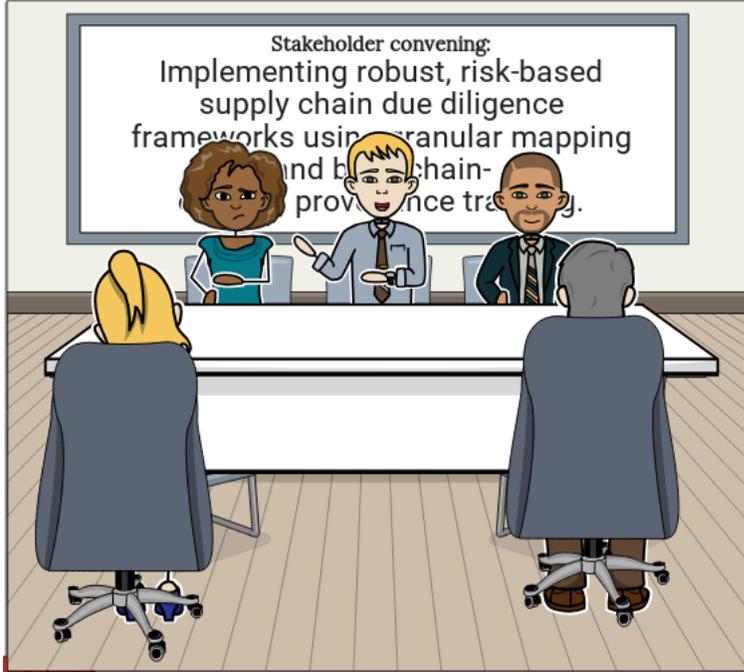
But first, a story about “Being in the Room”



Vanessa's experiences of child exploitation were horrific. Many considered her survival a miracle, and when she was first invited to share her story at a luncheon, the attendees were clearly inspired by her resilience. Vanessa had never before had people tell her how strong she was or that she had inspired them to take action. She decided then and there that she wanted to be in the room when leaders were developing efforts to end child exploitation. She wanted to make a difference.

Vanessa let a few trusted contacts in the field know she was interested in building her leadership. Initially, this led to speaking engagements where she shared her story and reiterated the need to commit to ending exploitation. Over time, she became a well-known figure in the anti-trafficking conference and event circuit. She was invited to speak at conferences and galas and even began earning an income from it. Repeatedly, she shared her experiences, emphasised the prevalence of child exploitation, and demanded that her audiences take action.





As she gained respect in the field, she received invitations to serve on various projects—advisory panels for institutions and review panels for protocols. Through attending these conferences, she learned more about different solutions and efforts. However, without organisational sponsorship, she could not afford the professional development and educational opportunities that would help her build the credentials her peers possessed. In these powerful rooms, her recommendations were often not taken seriously. She was in the room but not the one with power, even as others praised her as a valuable team member.

Her country had a government council that decided all aspects of the government’s response, as well as an advisory panel of people with lived experience who advised the council. Vanessa was on the advisory panel and had spoken to the government council—she had been in the room with the actual decision-makers. However, the advisory panel was often dismissed or corrected by the government council. This led to a split among its members: some wanted to stay on the panel because it was the only way for people with lived experience to be in the room with decision-makers, while



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- There may be situations where you are poorly paid while others with similar skills and experience receive significantly more. How will you navigate these situations? There may also be situations where you are highly paid while others with lived experience, who have similar skills and experience, are poorly paid. How will you address income disparities in line with your values?

3. **Are any of your reasons emotional or related to personal healing?** This, too, is nothing to be ashamed of. People want to be seen, honoured for their work, and valued for their insights. **If healing and emotional needs motivate you, consider the following guidelines:**

- How will you ensure your desire to be heard does not silence other voices?
- How will you handle it when others disagree with you about issues you care deeply about?
- How will you keep the work focused on those impacted by the issues, rather than on yourself, your experiences, or your needs?
- Sometimes, the work is neither healing nor emotionally fulfilling. How will you handle that disappointment? What will help you stay motivated during difficult times?
- Some impacted people argue that this work should result from your healing (not be done *in order to* heal) and that it is important to develop reasonable conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and teamwork skills beforehand. They

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emphasise this because even those *impacted by* abuse and oppression can *perpetrate* it against others if they are not careful and self-reflective. How does this resonate with you? Which skills do you consider strengths? Which do you still want to develop? For those you want to develop, how will you ensure you do not cause harm to others while working on these skills?

- Is there someone you can discuss your concerns with, such as a therapist, mentor, or close friend? Is there someone you trust to be part of your “accountability pod”—people who care for you and can let you know if you are straying from your values?

4. **Are any of your motivations social?** Many of us who have experienced bullying, abuse, oppression, isolation, or othering are drawn to spaces where we feel honoured, valued, connected, and part of a community. **If social needs motivate you, consider the following:**

- How can you remain driven by your values rather than popularity, both in what drives *you* and in how you perceive others?
- How will you navigate times when the strategies or values you support are not those of the “in crowd” in your networks?
- As you become more public, people *will* form “parasocial relationships” with you, feeling a deep connection based on your work, story, or image, even if they do not know you well. How will you set boundaries in these relationships?
- As you become more public, people *will* sometimes be unhappy with you, and you may become the villain in their narrative. How will you hold yourself accountable for any harm you cause? How will you stay grounded in your values during unfair attacks?

- As you become more public, people *will* sometimes ask more of you than you can give. How will you care for yourself in a way that honours your values and commitment to community while remaining sustainable and avoiding becoming a hero or martyr?

5. **Revisit your response to question 1.** Keeping in mind the “Being in the Room” story and your answers to questions 2–4, are there any commitments you want to make to yourself? Are there things you want to commit to learning or practising? Are there people you want to connect with and learn from?

If you appreciated this worksheet, consider checking out our other lived experience resources in [The Meaningful Engagement Toolbox](#) by Collective Threads Initiative.

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