

Social Rights to Kindness for All People

An Orientation Guide by and for
People Seeking and Practicing Kindness

Why This Guide Exists

This guide is made by and for people seeking and practicing kindness. In this guide, the word “we” means any of us who are wishing to make more kindness in the lives of ourselves and the lives of each other.

This guide is written to help grow and protect our capacity to know about our rights that we as living beings are supposed to have in relationship with one another. We are articulating rights that help protect people in social spaces where protections are weak, absent, or difficult to apply.

This guide is updated regularly, and a more current version might be available at www.helpexists.org

A Social Rights Framework

This toolkit of social rights is offered within a framework of people practicing and building kind community together. Our community is intended to function as an exoskeleton, for and with each other, where we can learn about and practice our social rights with each other as safe-enough people in a low stakes environment together.

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In environments where social rights are not practicable, our focus shifts to inner rights and harm reduction. Harm reduction is what we do when our environments are not kind-enough or safe-enough.

What are Social Rights?

Inner rights lay the foundation for understanding social rights. Inner rights arise from our inherent capacity to know, feel, and respond to our own life from the inside. Inner rights recognize and protect our relationship with our own lived experience, and support us in tending to ourselves with accuracy, care, and respect.

Social rights recognize and protect our lived experiences in relationship with one another. Social rights recognize every person as an authority of their own experience – and not an object, resource, obstacle, or instrument for others. Social rights do not depend on other people’s perception about us; this includes all social determinants of health.

Recognition and respect are what make social rights functional. Learning rights requires a chance to experience them in safe-enough environments with safe-enough people.

Social Rights

Rights to Dignity and Respect

Dignity acknowledges living beings as existing, and respect treats living beings in ways that reflect that acknowledgment.

Dignity is the recognition that every living being exists as the authority of our own life—with our own experiences, needs, and interests. A living being is not an object defined by another person's perception, use, or judgment. Dignity is inherent. It exists whether or not others recognize it, and it cannot be earned or lost.

Respect is how the recognition of dignity is acted upon. Respect is the expression of dignity through behavior that acknowledges and protects the boundaries, needs and rights of living beings.

When people and systems teach respect as obedience rather than as dignity – or when words like "respect" become paired with threats, humiliation, or violence – this is *a violation of dignity*.

When we are treated as an object of someone else's perception or purpose, rather than as a subject of our own life – through both elevation or degradation: dehumanizing, idolizing, reducing people to jobs, etc. – these are actions of objectification and *violations of dignity*.

Some rights include:

1. I have the right to being spoken to with basic courtesy.
2. I have the right to have my boundaries recognized.
3. I have the right to disagree without being harmed.
4. I have the right to being valued even when I make accidents.
5. I have the right to be treated as a person whose feelings matter.
6. I have the right to be recognized as the authority of my own lived experience.

Rights to Seek Safety and Freedom from Harm

I have the right to seek safe environments and to leave environments that are harmful to me. When a path to decreasing danger and harm exists, I have the right to pursue it and to accept support from others in doing so.

In dangerous or harmful conditions where we are constrained by disability, dependence, coercion, or conditions beyond our control; our focus shifts to increasing protection through harm reduction and preserving our inner rights until paths to safety become possible.

Others may recognize the harm we are in and care deeply, while lacking the power or resources to remove us from harm's way. When others are unable to affect our conditions, this does not mean that the harm is acceptable. We have the right to continue seeking paths to freedom.

Some rights include:

1. I have the right to live free from abuse, neglect, violence, exploitation, abandonment, and coercion.
2. I have the right for my concerns about safety to be taken seriously.
3. I have the right to access support, advocacy, and protection when experiencing harm.

Rights to Autonomy

Autonomy is the capacity and authority of a living being to direct our own existence through our own intentions, choices, and actions. We may need support, accommodations, or caregiving. Non-harming support expands a person's ability to exercise autonomy rather than replace or override it.

As people, we can experience effects of mistreatment like fear or learned helplessness that can make exercising autonomy difficult. Autonomy also may be constrained by people and environments who do not have our best intentions in mind. These rights can

still be practiced in kind-enough community, even when they are not being upheld in society at large.

Some rights include:

1. I have the right to make decisions about my own life.
2. I have the right to say yes, no, or not now.
3. I have the right to change my mind. It is my mind.
5. I have the right to ask for help without giving up authority over my own decisions.

Rights to Consent

Where autonomy is the broader right and ability to govern our own life, consent is our voluntary and informed agreement within a specific domain of decision-making about matters that affect us. Consent is an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. It may be given, withheld, withdrawn, or renegotiated as circumstances or preferences change.

Some rights include:

1. I have the right to make my own decisions about matters that affect me.
2. I have the right to choose what happens to my body and my personal information.
3. I have the right to receive information in a way that I can understand before making a decision.
4. I have the right to change my mind and withdraw my consent.

5. I have the right to be supported to make my own decisions, rather than having decisions made for me.

Rights to Self-Definition

Self-definition is the authority of us as individuals to determine how we understand ourselves. Identity develops through lived experience. Because each living being experiences its own life from the inside, each possesses unique authority regarding the meaning of those experiences and how experience shapes identity.

Mistreatment, manipulation, and exploitation often attack self-definition by replacing a person's own understanding with someone else's narrative. People may be taught to distrust their own experience and adopt identities that serve other people's interests. Sometimes agreeing with other people's narratives of ourselves can be experienced as the only way to get care.

Developing self-definition creates inner boundaries. We do not have to accept other people telling us about who and what we are. And for people who do not have any sense of self, self-definition can be slowly built through safe enough relationships where their experiences are believed, their perceptions are respected, and their inner knowing is given room to emerge.

Some rights include:

1. I have the right to make meaning of my own experiences.
2. I have the right to disagree with inaccurate descriptions of my experiences.
3. I have the right to change and grow without being confined to past versions of myself.
4. I have the right for my self-understanding to have authority rather than assumptions made by others.

5. I have the right to be valid as existing.
6. I have the right to choose that I am already valid and deserving of respect, whether I am able to conceptualize a self or not yet.

Continuing and Expanding Our Social Rights

This guide remains open and evolving. The rights collected in this document are only an initial attempt to name some of the ways that we can protect ourselves and each other.

People are encouraged to adapt these rights, expand them, and add to them based on our own needs and experiences. We utilize a secured document share site where people can share their reflections, name more own rights, and help grow these documents together. That site can be found at www.helpexists.org.