

Inner Rights

An Orientation Guide by Survivors for Survivors

Why This Guide Exists

This guide is made by survivors of abuse, neglect, and complex trauma. In this guide, the word “we” means ourselves as survivors who remain vulnerable to ongoing harm. This guide is written to help grow and protect our capacity to know about our inner rights.

If any information here doesn't apply to you or doesn't make a lot of sense to you, it just might apply to someone who's had an experience you haven't had. It's okay to skip any part that is not helpful for you or modify parts to fit your experience.

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

What are Inner Rights?

Inner rights arise from our inherent capacity to know, feel, and respond to our own life from the inside. Inner rights function to recognize, maintain, and protect the integrity of our experiences, perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and needs. Inner rights support us in tending to ourself with accuracy, care, and respect. Awareness and respect are what make inner rights functional.

Most folks are not aware we have these inner rights, and unawareness prevents people from being able to act upon them. If I, or at least a part of myself, become aware of them, and if myself, or parts of me inside, or people outside of me respect those rights – this is what makes them actionable.

Inner rights are not contingent upon other people's awareness, acknowledgement, agreement, approval, permission, or understanding. Inner rights are always true, regardless of other people's behavior; and regardless of any particular law of nations, corporations, statutes, etc. Inner rights only need to be known and respected by at least one person to have power, and that person can be our own self, or any part of ourself. By nature, inner rights are completely and entirely private and un-fuck-with-able.

During abuse and neglect, inner rights serve other protective functions: they prevent external harm from becoming internal identity and help victims to stay connected to their own reality, especially in situations where reality is being denied, distorted, or ignored.

For many of us, abuse and neglect have shaped our internal world to carry our abusers' judgments, distortions, and priorities inside of ourselves, long after the abuse may have ended. And for those of us who are still being abused, there may be little space to hear our own inside experiences above the demands of survival.

Knowledge and respect of an inner right is an opponent to the gaslit and perpetrator-based beliefs that we may hold.

This list of rights is useful to return to when, as survivors, we find ourselves believing that:

- Our needs do not matter.
- Our boundaries are selfish.
- Our pain is an inconvenience.
- Our suffering is our own fault.

- Our role is to absorb harm.
- Our value depends on how much suffering we can endure.
- We are powerless.
- We are the problem.
- We deserve what is happening.

Causing us to:

- Doubt our perceptions.
- Invalidate our own needs.
- Excuse what harms us.
- Question what we know.
- Feel ashamed of our reactions to mistreatment.
- Question whether we deserve help.
- Wonder whether our experiences are “legitimate enough” to matter or severe enough to warrant concern, support, or protection.
- Feel trapped between what we know and what we have been conditioned through abuse and neglect to believe.

Protection in Active Harm

When we are being actively harmed in conditions of abuse and neglect happening outside with external people, inside our own system, or both—inner rights orient us to protecting ourselves.

Inner rights function as principles of self-protection that help us to:

- Preserve contact with reality when reality is being denied.

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- Grow and protect our ability to recognize harm as harm.
- Grow and protect our awareness of coercion as coercion.
- Grow and protect our awareness of induced or compulsory confusion as confusion.
- Identify manipulation.
- Maintain a self that is separate from our abusers' narrative.
- Prevent internalization of abusive beliefs by preserving contact with reality.
- Protect our innocence from misplaced blame.
- Preserve our capacity to seek help when opportunities arise.

Inner rights help us to create a separation between external conditions and ourselves, preventing abuse from becoming identity; and helping to heal identity for survivors who have never had any identities outside of abuse.

We have rights to preserve an independent relationship with reality by learning and practicing inner rights. They help grow our realization that we are actually bigger than what has happened to us.

Discovering Inner Rights

We can begin to uncover, realize, and observe our actual inner rights by having contact or relationship with another who is interested and wants to uncover, realize, and observe our rights with us.

This document is meant to serve as a catalyst for that contact/relationship. This document is hoped to start the conversation, both inside our own system and with others outside our system, to do exactly that: realize our inner rights and respect them.

In the absence of safe-enough others to help us, which is horrible to not have, but is many peoples' reality, this document hopes to help us realize our inner rights and respect them with us.

Inner Rights

Rights in Dissociative Amnesia

Some abuse is remembered in fragments, smells, sensations, tastes, emotions, and movements – only to become understood years later, and even then, still hard to hold. Dissociative processes, fragmentation, confusion, delayed understanding, and amnesia are both injuries and adaptations to injuries. Adaptations and injuries do not arise spontaneously; they are responses to our environment.

Survivors can spend decades treating injuries and adaptations as evidence against ourselves, rather than evidence of reality – believing we need to prove experiences that we have already lived through.

We have rights in relationship with dissociative amnesia:

1. I have the right to treat dissociative amnesia with the same compassion I would offer someone recovering from any other type of brain injury.
2. I have the right to take my distress seriously even when I do not fully understand its origins.
3. I have the right to know more than I can currently explain.

4. I have the right to allow understanding to develop gradually and to recognize that awareness, memory, emotion, and understanding may emerge and submerge at different times.
5. I have the right to refrain from treating missing pieces as evidence against myself.
6. I have the right to treat missing pieces as evidence of what happened. People don't have missing pieces unless something makes them go missing again. Missingness doesn't happen spontaneously or randomly.
7. I have the right to assure and reassure myself that I am valid as a being and that kindness can be applied to me at any time.

Abuse-created amnesia is an injury to the brain and nervous system, affecting how experience is recorded, organized, and retrieved. A person recovering from a brain injury should not be asked to prove that their symptoms are real. Pressure to remember or explain our symptoms can recreate dynamics of harm and abuse that caused the original injury, e.g. the demand for proof and punishment for not being able to provide it. The demand for proof and punishment just harms us and it is erasure and obfuscation and disrespectful of our rights.

We have rights to be free from being harmed inside for the ways our mind and brain have adapted in order to survive. Meaningful objectives with dissociative amnesia are just to reduce suffering and increase safety.

Rights to Uncertainty

Uncertainty does not negate reality. Uncertainty arises from causes—it does not arise randomly. In our context here, uncertainty of what happened to us arises from dissociative amnesia.

Sometimes survivors are vulnerable to harm by mistaking "*I cannot prove it*" for "*it did not happen.*" *Proving it* is a tool of perpetrators. The impulse to have proof is a tool of perpetration that functions to erase our rights. Dissociative amnesia by itself is evidence

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of what happened to us. The search for certainty disables us from knowing our own rights, making boundaries, and protecting ourselves until we can produce “enough evidence” to justify our own concern.

Inner rights help us interrupt this pattern by gently untangling knowing from proving, which abusers often fuse together. If a building smells like smoke, people do not wait until they see flames before moving to safety. With smoke, you can do safety first before seeing the fire. Similarly, we can notice symptoms first. Noticing the symptoms is enough to walk outside and seek safety, because they are symptoms of what usually tends to be a fire. Protection often begins with awareness and concern – not certainty!

1. I have the right to say, “*I don’t know right now,*” hold questions open, and remain open-minded. I am not required to have all the answers.
2. I have the right to distinguish between uncertainty and falsehood: “*I don’t know everything. I don’t know exactly what this means.*” is different from “*It didn’t happen.*” Uncertainty is an experience. Falsehood erases experience.
3. I have the right to acknowledge patterns that are difficult to prove but difficult to ignore.
4. I have the right to stop treating uncertainty and unanswered questions as evidence against myself. *Uncertainty and unanswered questions are evidence of something having happened!*

Rights to Indescribable Experiences

Many survivors experience a mismatch between what we have lived through, what we know, and what we can articulate. Awareness often comes before understanding, and understanding often comes before language.

1. I have the right to know and experience more than I can put into words.

2. I have the right to recognize that my reality can exceed my ability to describe it verbally.
3. I have the right to move myself to safety without having to articulate the threat.

We have the rights to know this, believe this, and take our needs seriously while we are still learning to communicate about their contexts. We do not ever need to articulate verbally, or otherwise describe reality to make it reality, or to describe what happened to me to make it what happened to us.

Rights During Deliberate Obfuscation

Many forms of abuse are perpetrated in private without witnesses; involve manipulation of perceptions; leave internal injuries that cannot be seen; and deliberately record misinformation. "*I cannot prove it*" and "*it did not happen*" are not the same thing. Sometimes people get those mixed up. Often times perpetrators mix those up deliberately. Sometimes whole cultures, whole communities, or even whole societies teach children to get them mixed up.

1. I have the right to stop measuring my experiences against the standards of those who deny them.
2. I have the right to not measure my experiences at all; I have the right to just have them.
3. I have the right to recognize that some people benefit from my confusion. This renders them unqualified to evaluate my reality. I possess the sole right to evaluate my reality.
4. I have the right to stop organizing my understanding around the reactions of people who harm me, deliberately or not.
5. I have the right to organize my understanding in any way that helps my understanding.

Rights to No Inside Trials

Perpetrators impose internal dynamics that mimic trials against ourselves where there is a stage, a jury, and an audience living inside of us. On trial inside, we relate to our symptoms as evidence that must be proven, rather than as people innocently experiencing them. Instead of answering "*What am I experiencing? How am I experiencing it? What do I need?*"—we are forced to prove that we are experiencing it in the first place. Inner rights are not a legal process. Legal processes are not reflections of reality, only reflections of rule makers, whereas inner rights are inherently existent.

One part of us remembers being abused. Another part challenges the details. Another part demands evidence. Another part is terrorized and confused. One part recognizes suffering and another part insists that suffering alone is not sufficient proof. The existence of all of these parts together is evidence of our experience, because it is our experience, and it is not random.

Inconsistency is the nature of abuse, neglect, and mistreatment. Inconsistency is evidence of our experience and evidence of reality; and uncertainty is evidence of our mistreatment and of our actual experience and reality. I, and all parts of myself, have the right to be done with trials for the ways I survived extreme experiences. The harm began outside, the trial began outside, and the gaslighting began outside. It always does.

When I find a trial occurring inside:

1. I have the right to not be blamed for being affected by shit that was done to me – and having inside trials, that's an effect of having shit done to us. We have inside trials because there were outside trials. Not random!
2. I have the right to not be responsible for the inside trials existing.
3. I have the right to let my experience matter, regardless of whether it is believed.
4. I have the right to treat my distress as a need for advocacy and help rather than as evidence against myself.

5. I have the right to stop demonstrating my experience for people who do not have rights to it and people who would deny it.
6. I have the right to stop performing, and it is important to notate the forced performance—it's never of agency and it is never a choice.
7. I have the right to do what I need and prefer with regard to whether I give information or not. I have the right to withhold information from those who are not working for my benefit; who would seek to harm myself or anyone including my loved ones, disprove me, etc. I don't owe data to anybody who is not actively for me. Someone who is actively for me would not be trying to gain information out of me.
8. I have the right to end all trials and attend to the person who has been living through them.

Right to Private Knowing

I have the right to know things before they are acknowledged by others – this is true for all parts of all people. No audience is the authority, and there is no audience in private knowing. Our knowing is authority enough.

Rights to Meet Unmet Needs

Abuse can cause victims to lose our innate ability to recognize suffering as something that should not be happening, especially to us. Inner rights help us to develop and maintain that recognition, and for some survivors, cultivate it for the first time.

Recognition of a need is creating the possibility for meeting it.

1. I have the right to recognize my own suffering as suffering.
2. I have the right to notice when a need is unmet, even if no immediate solutions are available. I have the right to protect and remember my awareness of the unmet need.

3. I have the right to identify needs without justifying or proving their legitimacy.
The existence of the need justifies and proves its legitimacy.
4. I have the right to always take my needs seriously, even when they are contradictory, controversial, stigmatized, complex, ongoing, or difficult to meet.
Different people inside of a system can have contradictory needs, and that does not erase the needs nor the parts holding the needs.
5. I have the right to clarify my understanding of my needs over time.

Rights to No Comparison

Measuring our pain and suffering against the pain and suffering of others is a tool of denial and perpetration. We can just respond directly by taking actions to meet unmet needs. Comparison denies our needs and imposes competition for acknowledgement over just meeting the need. Nobody is replaceable because everybody is unique and worth more than the harm their body-mind can take and the harm their body-mind can inflict.

Comparison causes us to:

1. Fear that we will be judged, disbelieved, or dismissed when we take our own experience seriously, and we then focus on fear instead of on meeting our need.
2. Believe that pain needs to meet a threshold of severity in order to matter. Pain just matters because it exists.
3. Question whether we are worthy of having our needs met or whether our needs are evil.
4. Question whether our reactions are justified instead of compassionately attending to what those reactions are communicating.

In place of comparison, we have rights:

1. I have the right to recognize that in gaslighting environments, comparison is learned as a behavior, and is not a measure of truth, but a negation of it. Comparison reflects conditioning.
2. I have the right to internal safety free of hierarchy, domination, deception, and erasure.

Rights to Our Own Thoughts and Discernment

Our capacity for freedom of thought and mind can be limited by what we were taught by abuse and neglect. Mental functions including contact, feeling, discrimination, attention, and intention are areas where mental agency can be grown. Even small moments of recognition—like noticing contact with an experience, shifting our attention, or identifying a feeling— can grow agency of mind.

1. I have the right to notice when I am being pressured to doubt my own thoughts and perceptions.
2. I have the right to trust my perceptions, even when others deny them.
3. I have the right to draw my own conclusions.
4. I have the right to trust my judgment while learning and growing.
5. I have the right to change my mind. It's my mind.

Rights to Imagination



Rights to No Outside Authority

Abuse teaches us to surrender authority to external people and systems. It teaches us to internalize the messages of abuse and neglect and to imagine hostile audiences judging our experiences. Abuse leads us to rely on impossible standards of proof or comparison to validate our experience.

1. Inner rights restore our authority. Access, expertise, observation, or familiarity do not give another person authority on our experience.
2. People who harmed us do not receive authority over the meaning of the harm they caused.
3. People who benefit from our confusion do not receive authority over our reality.
4. People who deny our experiences do not receive authority over the meaning or impact of those experiences.
5. Bystanders do not have authority over experiences they did not live through.
6. Social expectations do not have authority over our boundaries.
7. Family traditions do not receive authority over our safety.

Continuing and Expanding Inner 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 victims and survivors can protect ourselves during conditions of abuse, neglect, and internalized harm.

Survivors 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 survivors can share their reflections, name more rights, and help grow these documents together. That site can be found at www.helpexists.org.