

Additional Exercises for Working Youth

In the exercises that follow, you'll find additional ways to address, discuss, and process other concepts that are related to what's covered in the PS manual. Some exercises are not appropriate for all participants.

Most of these exercises are not scripted like the PS manual, but rather just list the order of how to move through each exercise. They're categorized based on general content area.

Facilitators will generally need the same materials as they would for any other PS group (e.g., PS books, pencils, whiteboard or newsprint, etc.). An asterisk (*) indicates that there is a worksheet available for that exercise.

Emotions and Trauma:

1. Pick an Emotion, Any Emotion
2. Ways to Work with Shame
3. Grief

Families:

4. Family Roots*
5. River of Life
6. Foster Care/Adoption Sentence Completion*
7. Parental Incarceration

Core Self

8. Tuning into the Core Self Exercise*

Risk-Taking and Offending:

9. Risk-Taking and The Way I See Myself*
10. When a Crime Hits Home
11. Repairing the Damage

Forgiveness:

12. Forgiveness
13. Forgiving Our Parents
14. Giving Thanks*

Exercise #1:

Pick an Emotion, Any Emotion:

Objective:

This is an “emotional awareness” exercise that can be used during group to enable participants to better identify and label a range of emotional states. It also helps youth develop greater empathy as they hear others who have experienced similar feelings. The exercise can be done in a variety of ways; the goal of all variations is to have youth reflect on a time they experienced a particular emotion.

Materials Needed:

- A list of emotion words. You can use the emotions from the EWR, though also add in some positively valenced words, as the EWR does not have many of those (e.g., amazed, appreciative, cheerful, enthusiastic, grateful, happy, honored, hopeful, joyful, peaceful, pleased, relaxed, relieved, respected, surprised, thrilled, understood).

Outline:

Choose the format you will use to have youth choose emotion words. Some options include:

- Put the emotion words on slips of paper (one emotion per paper). Simply place the emotion words into a bowl, box, or envelope and have youth pick one out at a time
- For younger youth or for an extra challenge, you can create a “fishbowl” with magnets on the ends of a “fishing rod” where youth fish for emotions (paper clips work well to attach to the words themselves)
- Tape, glue, or write emotion words around a basketball, soccer ball, or other large ball that youth can catch. Whatever word is at the top is the emotion they use (this can also be turned into a game—once they answer, they can shoot the ball for an extra point)

Once youth choose an emotion word, have them answer one or two questions about the emotion. You can also have them make art, music, or any other form of expression (e.g., “if you could draw this emotion, what would it look like?”)

Some options for questions include:

- When was a time you experienced that emotion? Be as detailed as possible.
 - What triggered the emotion?
 - Were other emotions present?
 - Did your feelings change over time?
 - Did others experiencing the event have the same emotional response?

- What do you usually do when you feel this emotion?
- Are there usually thoughts or body sensations that go along with having this emotion?
- Is this an emotion that you like feeling, or don't like feeling? If you don't like feeling it, do you do anything to try to avoid it?
- When you feel this way, do you share it with anyone? Why or why not?
- If the emotion you chose was a more negative one (e.g., sadness, grief, loneliness), is there anything that helps? A person who helps?

Optional:

As an extra aspect of the activity, and to strengthen bonds amongst participants (once a baseline level of trust has been built), you can also have them share these in small groups (or groups of two). This helps youth practice many SEL skills simultaneously, including self-awareness, relationship skills, social awareness, and personal responsibility. In particular, it allows for practice with empathy and active listening skills.

This may require you to set some ground rules, do some modeling of what a conversation like this may look like, and help set youth up for success, such as:

- Model active listening through short facilitator role-play
- Offer sample empathic responses (e.g., I'm so sorry you had to go through that; thank you for sharing with me)
- Set boundaries or guidelines for the exercise (e.g., you can only offer non-verbal responses, like head nodding or finger snapping, while the person is speaking, no verbal responses until the person is done)

If youth complete this in small groups, you can offer them these follow up questions to use:

For the person sharing their emotion:

- What was it like to share your experience with another person? How did you feel?
- How did you feel after acknowledging and accepting your emotions?

For the person listening:

- What was your experience listening?
- Can you relate what the person said to anything in your own life?

Exercise #2:

Ways to Work with Shame

Objective:

The PS curriculum addresses shame fairly extensively, but some youth may need some deeper or more targeted work in this area. The following are suggestions for places to start.

Note: Note that all of the suggestions within this section can be very deep work and should only be done in the context of **an established and trusting therapeutic relationship with an experienced clinician.**

1. *Embodying Connection:* One of the most impactful ways we can work to combat shame within our youth is with **connection and empathy**. As they work through whatever comes up around their own shame, if we as facilitators embody a non-judgmental, empathic, and connected stance, this can actually be one of the most empowering and effective methods to combat shame. If at its core, shame disconnects us from everything and tells us we are not worthy of connection, then connection with safe, regulated people is one of the answers. Shame is healed faster in the presence of a safe person. This concept also surfaces during the harmful and offending behavior sections, when shame is often masked by defensiveness, anger, or lack of empathy. **Showing participants that we see their Core Selves, beyond their masks, their shame, and anything else they throw at us, is the key to change, but we have to be willing to provide that connection.**
2. *Building awareness of shame and the body:* Shame is quite prone to getting stuck in the body, and we may have all seen this physical embodiment of shame: hunched shoulders, crossed legs, head hanging, eyes down or fixed on a point, an overall appearance of trying to shrink or disappear. In beginning to explore shame in the body, the emphasis should not be on sitting in it, but allowing it to move through, as any other emotion. Using art, movement, words, poetry, or any other medium can provide youth with a chance to explore the ways in which their body experiences and releases shame. Be mindful of individuals who may have experiences with shame that are *rooted* in their body or expression of their body (e.g., sexual abuse, physical abuse, gender dysphoria), and provide extra support, as needed. **When doing this, it is also helpful to assist participants in exploring body sensations that feel good, calm, settled, or safe.**
3. *Identifying Hot Thoughts that accompany shame:* In addition to building body awareness, it can be useful to mindfully identify and explore automatic cognitive processes (“Hot Thoughts” in PS language) that underlie and feed feelings of shame (e.g., “I’m not worth anything”). Connecting these automatic thoughts with the feeling of shame, and then as we do in meditation, giving them a “no big deal attitude” or reminding them that thoughts are **not facts** can be useful.

Often when these thoughts come up there is a tendency for a person to latch on to them and travel down the rabbit hole into an even more negative state. Giving some safe space to explore these thoughts and acknowledging them for what they are – just thoughts – can be a powerfully therapeutic experience. It should be noted that as facilitators or treatment providers, it's often an impossible task to “talk” someone out of their shame. Perhaps a more useful approach when working with these specific thoughts is to normalize them (people often say they feel “crazy” for having them), and to note how giving them attention only feeds the feeling of shame—it adds on judgment. Remember that shame is alleviated best through connection to another, through repair, through a **felt sense or knowing that one is worth loving**. As one master PS Facilitator, Laura McDonnell, once said: “Youth need to have their goodness reflected back to them.” This often happens best through actions (e.g., nonverbal and verbal cues emphasizing validation and understanding), not words.

4. *Building Cool Thoughts and Good Moves to combat shame*: One of the major sticking points in shame is that it often forces people to isolate themselves from others, disengage from areas of their life that would make them feel good (like sports or activities with others), or engage in high-risk behavior. If you are working with a person who identifies shame as a main emotional trigger, once they have a good handle on their own experience of shame (i.e., triggers, body sensations, thoughts, and other emotions that accompany it), it can be helpful to assist them in building a shame ‘safety plan,’ or other ways to build their emotional resiliency when they feel ashamed. Identifying Cool Thoughts (e.g., “This is just my shame talking, I know that I am worthy of love”) and Good Moves (finding ways to be social with people they trust) is a place to start, but be creative.
5. *Identifying sources of shame*: Though they can bring up a lot of emotion, exercises that allow participants a chance to explore the origins and prior experiences of the shame (e.g., memories of specific interpersonal interactions) can be useful. Shame is often disorganizing and confusing, but allowing a person to renegotiate these experiences with the help of an attuned therapist can be incredibly restorative.

Assist youth in exploring individual, as well as societal or group experiences of shame (e.g., based on race, gender, class, disability status, etc.). While we acknowledge that many experiences of shame will be encoded in the body *without context or words* (i.e., in the case of early relational or developmental trauma), shame often gets layered on top of itself, so working through a “newer” experience of shame may also allow for some renegotiation of the “older” shame. For these specific memories, youth can also play with imagining a corrective or reparative experience--through visualization, role-play with their therapist, or anything else that allows for an alternate narrative to be formed. Within these new narratives, therapists can encourage youth to also notice physical sensations that go along with them (e.g., feeling connected or not alone might lead to opening of the heart, a settled or grounded feeling). Connecting to the body helps to encode and reinforce these new experiences.

Exercise #3: Grief

Objective:

Give participants a chance to learn more about grief and the ways it is processed.

Outline:

Have participants brainstorm about what the word **grief** means to them. Write their responses on the board.

Then, move to loss. Engage participants in brainstorming what feelings **loss** generates (e.g., sad, alone, unfair, depressed, irritable, touchy, unstable, hopeless, angry, scared, out of control, like things will never be normal again).

Discuss with youth:

- All of those feelings are part of grief
- All of those feelings are normal
- Sometimes we try to shut these feelings out, or shove them down inside and carry them around. We do this because the feelings are painful and we don't want to deal with them
- If you allow yourself to feel the sadness and grief of a loss, you find that it eventually hurts less and less. But if you spend all of your energy trying to shut it out or block out the pain, you end up carrying the pain around inside.

Read Aisha's story (page 141 of your PS book). Ask participants:

- *What feelings did you hear Aisha expressing that she felt?*
- *How do you think her feelings changed over time?*
- *Can you ever "get over" the death of someone close to you? How long does it take?*
- *How long does it take to "move beyond" any loss, like being locked up or having someone close to you move away?*

Review the Stages of Grief in the PS book (pages 143-144) . Invite participants to share their thoughts. Remind youth that we all move through the process of grief in our way and our own time.

Exercise #4: Family Roots

Objective:

This exercise can take several sessions, and might be easier to do in smaller groups or in individual therapy. It's a powerful exercise, but requires a fair amount of guidance and support from group facilitators. The goal is to assist participants in exploring their family of origin and look for any patterns that may be present. It's important to look for not only patterns that are challenging (e.g., substance use), but **also patterns of resilience, strength, and growth.**

It may help to have an idea of the family structure of your participants prior to choosing to use this exercise, as it may not be appropriate for some youth (e.g., youth in foster care or child welfare, youth with significant family trauma). Prior to beginning this exercise, you can gently inquire with youth how much they know about their family of origin, or if it is within the scope of your role, look at any case files that provide information. Use discretion.

Note: Due to systems of oppression, genocide, forced migration, and other structural inequalities, many youth may not have access to their full family lineage, or may not want to discuss it (e.g., undocumented youth). In addition, youth currently in, or with histories of being in the foster care or child welfare systems also may not have access to their family lineage. As such, tread lightly and acknowledge to youth that having access to family lineage is a privilege.

Materials Needed:

- My Family Tree Worksheet

Outline:

Say: Some people talk about their families as their roots, where they came from.

Brainstorm: *What do family roots mean to you? Do you see your family as being your roots? (allow time to brainstorm).*

To really claim your power and control, it can be important to know where you come from and what's been going on in your family. Writing down your family tree gives you a chance to see the patterns in your family. For example, did many of the men on your father's side have problems with their anger? Is there a pattern of grandmothers taking care of the children in the family? Who were you named after?

Let's try this Family Tree exercise. You'll see yourself at the top, and then spaces for your parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, as well as other adults or people in

your life that are important, like foster parents. You can add as many people as you want, even if there aren't boxes for them.

Hand out **My Family Tree** and allow youth to fill in spaces, as appropriate. Note that this is just a template, feel free to allow youth to make their own. In our model, all options to fill in family members are gender-neutral. Have youth add any lines/colors that illustrate difficult relationships, substance abuse, anger issues, etc. (much like a genogram, if that is part of your practice).

Next steps:

Going back over the family tree you just created, look at each of the names you wrote down. As you read the names, become aware of what feelings come up for you. Some may make you feel good, others make bring about fewer positive feelings. Maybe these people hurt you or weren't there for you. During this part of the exercise, simply be aware of the feelings that come up as you re-read what you've written. (allow participants to share anything that comes up for them).

Examples: Does writing your uncle or aunt's name make you feel good? Do you remember the positive times you had together? How about your grandmother? Maybe you learned to cook from her?

Now, next to each person's name, write down a few of the important things about that person. So, next to your uncle you might write: 'lived down south, sent money to my mother sometimes, was over six feet tall.' You can write anything that you wish about the person, from the color of their hair, their personality, where they live, their job, their hobby, anything. (allow time for this).

When you're finished, look at the chart. Do you see any patterns? Do you know one side of the family better than the other? (allow responses).

Exercise #5: River of Life¹

Objective:

This exercise can take several sessions, and might be easier to do in smaller groups or in individual therapy. It's a powerful exercise, but requires a fair amount of guidance and support from group facilitators. The goal is to provide participants with a chance to look over the course of their lives and identify significant events.

Materials Needed:

- At minimum, a piece of paper and a pen/pencil
- If you have the resources, feel free to use bigger paper and materials to draw or paint with (paint, markers, colored pencils, pastels, etc.). Magazines or newspapers for collages can also be great. Be creative!
- For youth who may need more structure, the **River of Life Worksheet** is also available to you

Outline:

Many of you have already seen a lot of changes in your lives. Take a minute and imagine that your life has been like a river. It flows, then turns in a new direction, maybe part of the river splits off if there has been a death or divorce in your life. Maybe your river has waterfalls, island, or is covered by trees.

Now, with the materials we have here, try and draw this river. Start your river with the time just before you were born. (facilitators, for historical context you can have youth search what current events were going on around the time they were born).

Then, draw the big events that have happened in your life up until now. You may find it helpful to list these out on paper before you draw them on your river. Include anything that you think is important (e.g., deaths, births, divorces, marriages, graduations, accomplishments, choices, or changes in where you live), making sure to include both the good, positive things, and anything that might have been challenging. If you don't want to write the words for something that was challenging, you can just write "something happened." Then, add anything else that you think is important in telling the story of your life.

If you want, you can write the age you were when different events happened. You can draw pictures, use words, anything you want. The most important thing is that you let the river tell the story of what your life has been like up until now.

Facilitators: an extra option is to have youth create short stories, songs, poems, etc., to go with these major life events. This can turn even bigger into a “story of my life” presentation or small play, depending on how much time you have.

Once participants have completed their rivers, there are many ways to review them. If done in a group setting, youth can come to the front of the room and ‘present’ their rivers.

Facilitators can also use the following questions to discuss with participants:

- *What do you notice as you take a step back and look at your River of Life?*
- *What parts of the river stand out to you most?*
- *What event(s) do you think has had the biggest impact on your life so far?*
- *What was it like to make this river?*
- *Were there parts that were easier? Or more difficult?*

Exercise #6:

Foster Care/Adoption Sentence Completion

Objective:

This is primarily for youth who were/are in foster care or who were adopted, though can be used with all youth. **This exercise is likely to bring up strong feelings for participants, so only use if you have youth who seem ready to engage with this material.** This is an exercise that can also be used individually.

Materials Needed:

- Sentence Completion Exercise Worksheet

Outline:

Take a minute and think back of your foster care or adoption experience. (or: Take a moment to think of your own childhood). Complete the sentences on this handout:

I would never want my child to feel _____ like I did.

I would never want my child to see _____ like I had to.

I would never want my child to be _____ like I was.

I would never want my child to think that I didn't _____ them.

I would never want my child to grow up without _____.

I would never want my child to have to _____.

I never want to _____ my child.

I **want** my child to grow up feeling _____.

I **want** my child to have _____.

Give participants time to complete the exercise. If you are doing this in a group and it is appropriate for the youth you are working with, ask them to share.

Exercise #7:

Parental Incarceration

Objective:

For use with youth who have a parent who is/has been incarcerated. There are multiple aspects to this exercise; use what is suitable for the youth in your group.

Materials Needed:

- None

Outline:

Start this section by asking participants: *“How many youth in this country have a parent in jail?”* Facilitate discussion around this.

About 1.7 million youth in this country have a parent in prison.

Continue: *Has someone close to you gone to prison? If the answer is yes, how has this affected your life?*

Discussion questions (can also be done via worksheet):

1. *What feelings did you have when you first found out this person was going to jail or prison?*
2. *Did you witness (see) the arrest?*
3. *Did you “feel something like this might happen?”*
4. *How did your family deal with this person going to jail?*
5. *What message has your parent (or the other incarcerated person) sent you about what they did?*

You can also read Susan’s Story (pages 82-84 of the Power Source book). After reading the letter, generate discussion exploring the feelings of both the mother and the daughter. Some key issues the story brings up are:

- Feelings that arise when a parent repeatedly breaks their promises
- Whether parents are really choosing between their children and prison
- The time lost when parents are in jail
- Kids feeling that they are more responsible or ‘put together’ than their parents
- The stigma/shame that kids feel when a parent is incarcerated
- The guilt/shame/humiliation that the incarcerated parent feels

If appropriate for your group, this is also a time to assist youth in writing their own letters to their incarcerated parents.

Exercise #8: **Tuning into the Core Self Exercise**

Objective:

Assist participants in further exploring their Core Self.

Materials Needed:

- You have two worksheet options for this: 1) a star, similar to how the Core Self is presented in PS; 2) a radio dial. Use whichever fits best for your youth

Outline:

Provide participants with one of the handouts, either the **Self Star** or the **Tuning In** handout. Ask youth to first write the things they consider to be parts of their True or Core Self in the center of the star or dial. Then, ask them to write the things (roles, acts, things others have said about them, etc.) that are part of them sometimes around the star or on the lines of the radio dial.

For the radio dial, emphasize that the Core Self is sometimes like tuning a radio dial. Sometimes all we hear is static, but that doesn't mean that the station is gone, it just means we need to adjust the dial to tune into it!

Once youth have finished, invite them to process what they wrote. Some questions (use whichever works best for your group):

- *When you look at the words on the inside, how do you feel?*
- *When you look at the words on the outside, how do you feel?*
- *What was it like to think of these words?*
- *Do you think you act more like the inside or the outside words?*
- *Is there ever a time when acting in one of the outside words has kept you safe?*
- *What about the inside words?*
- *Do these words change over time?*
- *How can you remind yourself of who you really are?*

Exercise #9:

Risk-Taking and the Way I See Myself

Objective:

Introduce to participants how risk-taking sometimes becomes a big part of how we see ourselves (especially if this has gone on for a long time). Maybe they got a reputation or admiration from friends for being a big risk-taker. Some of their strengths as a person might even come out when they are risk-taking (bravery, strength, being smart or clever). Maybe they think that risk-taking is the most unique part of who they are.

Materials Needed:

- Optional: My Risk-Taking History Worksheet

Outline:

Begin by taking a poll: *How many people think that their risk-taking is the best/coolest/most powerful thing about themselves and, if they gave it up, they would become a nobody?*

Brainstorm:

- How does risk-taking shape the way you see yourself or the way others see you? Do you like this image? What do you get out of this image? (reputation, friends admiring you, people in the community letting you have your way?)
- What part of your identity would you miss most if you stopped getting involved in high-risk behavior? Would you miss the image? Would you gain anything by losing this image?
- What strengths of yours come out or shine when you take a risk? (bravery, toughness, thinking fast on your feet, loyalty to friends) Do these strengths come out at other times? Maybe when a friend or family member needs help? Think of a time when you were able to show your strength when you were **not** in a high-risk situation.

Additional Discussion Questions:

- Ask participants to think about some of the high-risk behaviors they have gotten involved in. Ask if they see themselves taking these kinds of risks as an adult. What do they think of adults who commit offenses? (vandalize things, sell drugs, steal)
- What would you say to a younger sibling (or cousin or friend) who was involved in risk-taking behavior? What do you think it would take to make them stop? How would you feel if you saw a younger sibling get into a lot of serious trouble?

For more discussion, either individually or in group, have participants complete/review the worksheet, **My Risk-Taking History**. Note that this can be triggering or very personal for some youth, so only use if/when youth are ready to discuss.

Exercise #10: **When a Crime Hits Home**

Objective:

Engage participants in a discussion about a time/s that they were victims of a crime. This exercise pairs well with the exercise “Who’s Shoes are You In” from the PS manual and Workbook, as well as with Module 12, Harms Survived.

Materials Needed:

- None

Outline:

Begin by asking participants if they’ve ever been victims of a crime. Use the following prompts to facilitate discussion:

- *What happened?* (Facilitators: to avoid youth giving the entire story, which can sometimes be traumatic and/or not useful in group, ask them to give a ‘newspaper headline’ version, like: “Young person jumped on way home from grocery store” or “Stolen from while waiting for the bus”)
- *What feelings did this lead to? Fear, helplessness, anger, resentment, wanting revenge, sadness, feeling unsafe in their home or neighborhood?*
- *How long did these feelings last?*
- *How did this victimization change their life?* (e.g., do worse in school, difficulty concentrating, bad dreams, fear leaving loved ones alone, become suspicious of everyone?)
- *Who else were victims? What were their responses?*
- *Do you see any possible connection between being a victim and victimizing others?*

After youth have explored their own victimization, inquire about what they would have or have done if a loved one was a victim of a crime. Note that this may elicit strong emotions; offer additional support to any youth needing it.

Possible discussion questions:

- *How would it feel (or how did it feel) to have a loved one (grandparent, cousin, parent, sibling) be a victim of a crime?*
- *What feelings did, or would, it generate in you?*
- *How do you think they felt? Or how did they feel?*
- *What would you do to cope, or how did you cope?*
- *What would you like to say to this person now?*

Exercise #11:

Repairing the Damage

Objective:

Provide youth with additional opportunity to make amends for harms they have committed. Emphasize that ‘repairing the damage’ does not *ever* justify the offense or undo it. Rather, it offers a way to lessen the negative impact of the actions—even if the person that they are repairing with wasn’t even the victim (e.g., the victim’s family or neighborhood).

Materials Needed:

- None

Outline:

Read aloud **Make it Right** from pages 198-199 of the PS book.

Ask participants what they think of this idea. *Has anyone ever tried to repair the damage they caused their victim? If so, were they forced to do it? (i.e., a judge ordering them) or did they do it out of a sense of fairness?*

Discuss the importance of trying to fix the damage one has caused. For example, *what are the benefits to the person who receives the amends? What are the payoffs for the person who tries to ‘make it right?’*

Brainstorm: *What ways can they ‘repair the damage’ for their harms or offenses? Discuss ways that go beyond just the victim, but reparations made to the community (e.g., volunteering opportunities, donations, helping the family). Are there ways that others have repaired damage that they’ve done to you? What was useful?*

Write their answers on the board.

Invite each youth to think of **two ways** they can repair a harm or offense that they’ve committed and share with the group.

Exercise #12: Forgiveness

Rationale:

Forgiveness is an extraordinarily powerful process that has the potential to liberate and heal those willing to make the choice to forgive. As discussed in Module 14, however, many youth are not ready for this step initially (or ever). Use this exercise only with youth you feel are ready.

How many times have we heard the expression, “I could never forgive them for what they did?” For adolescents and young adults, most of whom are consumed with issues of fairness and justice, the idea of forgiveness can be abstract, even off-putting (“They’re the one that did it, why should I forgive them?”) Yet, the healing potential is just as powerful for young people as it is for adults. While not every youth will be ready to begin the process of forgiving the people who hurt or betrayed them deeply, simply introducing the concept of forgiveness may open a new door and offer a resource that they can return to when they feel ready. As one young person put it, “When you’re tired of being so angry all the time, you can try forgiveness.”

In this exercise, it’s important to highlight that forgiveness is **not** about condoning negative or hurtful acts, and not about rationalizing abusive behavior so that we remain stuck in harmful or toxic relationships. Forgiveness is actually a way that we can become disentangled from toxic and unhealthy bonds. Until we make the choice to forgive, we are handcuffed to the person who hurt us—reliving those painful feelings over and over again. **The fundamental power of forgiveness is that it *frees the forgiver, unleashing us from those ties.***

As you introduce the topic of forgiveness, it’s helpful to gauge whether youth seem to really be getting it. Allow them the time and space to express their reservations and resistance. Forgiveness, like many other concepts in PS, isn’t something you can force youth to do. Only when they see the payoffs of forgiveness for themselves will they be willing to try to do it. It might be helpful to inform youth that you are not telling them that they “should” forgive, but that it is a possible option to help them cope with some of the feelings they have toward people whom they feel resentment and hostility towards. Further, forgiveness should never be used as a means to avoid dealing with the genuine feelings of anger, rage, disappointment, pain, and sadness that stem from trauma. Saying one forgives in order to defend against these difficult emotions is not real forgiveness.

If participants have experienced significant interpersonal violence or traumas (e.g., sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, domestic violence), it may be premature for them to forgive the people responsible for these events. Facilitators should respect and validate this reluctance. At the same time, youth may be able to forgive many of the smaller grudges and hostilities that they hold. Given a greater understanding of forgiveness, and seeing it as a practical option, they may use it to free

themselves from the burden of anger and frustration that they hold against the people who have hurt and violated them.

The concept of forgiveness goes far beyond what we have been able to present in this exercise. For additional resources, we recommend you refer to *Houses of Healing: A Prisoner's Guide to Inner Power and Freedom* and *Forgiveness: A Bold Choice or a Peaceful Heart*, both by Robin Casarjian.

Objective:

Define what forgiveness is and is not. Discuss the benefits youth get when they forgive others.

Materials Needed:

- None

Outline:

Ask youth what they think of when they hear the word *forgiveness*. Write their responses on the board. Assess for preconceived notions (e.g., makes you look weak or soft; something you do for someone else; if the other person was wrong, you shouldn't have to forgive).

Ask youth to read Jake's story at the start of the forgiveness chapter of the PS book on pages 205-206. Then read the first two paragraphs on page 206. Invite youth to share their thoughts. Possible questions:

- *Have you ever forgiven someone? How did it feel?*
- *Has someone ever forgiven you? How did it feel?*
- *Are there people you wish you could forgive, but it's been too hard?*

Discuss:

What Forgiveness is NOT:

- Letting it slide when people hurt you
- Making excuses to stay in abusive or dangerous relationships
- Letting the person who hurt you back into your life (unless it's safe and you want to)
- Forgetting
- A one-time thing. You might find that after you think you have forgiven someone, new pain or anger resurfaces. This is especially true with regard to people who have hurt us deeply. Forgiveness is a choice that you can make over and over again. Each time you practice forgiveness, some of the anger, hurt, and fear fades away.

What Forgiveness is (you can also read pages 208-209 in the PS book):

- A choice that you make. It's not magic. It's just something you decide to do.
- Something you do for your own sake—not someone else's.
- Something you do so that the other person is not 'living rent free in your head.' You do it because you don't want to hand your power, peace, and happiness over to anyone.
- Frees you from a lot of the anger and resentment you may be carrying
- Lets you see a situation more clearly—without getting pulled into someone else's game
- Really seeing that the Core Self of each person is good, wise, and decent, no matter how disconnected that person might be from those parts of themselves.

Facilitate discussion (use any questions you deem appropriate for your group):

- *What do you think has to happen to forgive someone? (hint: nothing, you just decide to do it!)*
- *What might it feel like when you've forgiven someone?*
- *Do you have to acknowledge how much the other person hurt you before you forgive them?*
- *Does empathy have a role in forgiveness?*

Exercise #13: **Forgiving Our Parents**

Objective:

Facilitate discussion around the idea of forgiving our parents. Emphasize the roles of empathy, Core Self, and forgiveness. Note that this can be triggering for some youth, and may be better done individually.

Materials Needed:

- None

Outline:

Have one youth read Marshall's story on page 210 of the PS book. Invite youth to share their reactions. Possible questions:

- *What did you hear in Marshall's story that you can relate to?*
- *Did Marshall show empathy for his mother? How so?*
- *How easy/difficult is it to forgive our parents?*
- *Can we forgive them for some things, but not others?*
- *What gets in the way of forgiving our parents?*
- *If you were able to forgive your parents, what would be different?*

Read Sharon's story on page 212 of the PS book. Invite youth to share their reactions. Possible questions:

- *What did you hear in Sharon's story that you can relate to?*
- *What expectations do most people have of their parents? What happens when these expectations aren't met? (connect to Lost Childhoods, as applicable)*
- *What might be different if you let go of those expectations?*

Exercise #14: Giving Thanks

Objective:

Discuss the idea of gratitude and why it can be important.

Materials Needed:

- What I'm Grateful For Worksheet

Outline:

Begin by discussing the idea of gratitude: *Has anyone heard of the word gratitude? Or being grateful for something? What does it mean?* (allow responses)

When we begin to see what we are thankful for in our lives, we find that we have more and more to be grateful about. In fact, research shows that even just finding a few things a day that you're grateful for can increase a person's mood.

If you can find even one small thing to appreciate in life, it can make you feel more positive and hopeful. You can feel grateful even for small things like hot showers, food, and good music. Remember the small things, they're around you every day.

No matter how little participants have, there is always something to be grateful for. Hand out **What I'm Grateful For** and have youth complete. Discuss in group what youth are grateful for, and how they can be more mindful of the things they're grateful for on a daily basis. (Maybe ask how mindfulness could help build gratitude)

For added emphasis, you can have youth create posters, collages, songs, or other artistic creations to share what they are grateful for. You can also ask youth to reflect on gratitude often, both in group and individually, so it becomes part of their personal practice (like meditation). Lastly, if appropriate, youth can write a letter of appreciation or gratitude to someone in their life that has helped them (e.g., a parent, teacher, counselor, staff, friend, other family member, even a pet!)