



Thinking About Harm

TOWARDS A SHARED FOUNDATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

INCIDENTS

MISTAKE

Error: “a wrong action or statement proceeding from faulty judgment, inadequate knowledge, or inattention” ([Merriam-Webster](#)).

MISUNDERSTANDING

“incorrectly interpreting or not understanding what is being communicated” (adrienne maree brown, *We Will Not Cancel Us* p. 30)

CONFLICT

“disagreement, difference, or argument between two or more people. Can be personal, political, structural. Conflicts can be direct and named, or indirect and felt.” (*We Will Not Cancel Us* p. 28)

WRONGDOING

“violation of an established right or protection” (Sigal Ben-Porath, *Cancel Wars* p. 67). The **willful** breaking of an agreed-upon norm.

ABUSE

“behaviors intended to gain, exert, and maintain **power over** another person or in a group” (*We Will Not Cancel Us* p. 27)

IMPACTS

DISCOMFORT

“mental or physical uneasiness” ([Merriam-Webster](#)) “You aren’t quite in pain, but you don’t feel very good. Discomfort can also describe embarrassment” ([vocabulary.com](#))

OFFENSE

“upset and hurt or annoyed feelings” as a result of (perceived) rudeness, disrespect, or lack of regard for one’s feelings or identity ([Cambridge English Dictionary](#))

PAIN

“a distressing feeling often caused by intense or damaging stimuli” ([Wikipedia](#)). “Pain is often localized, felt intensely, and sometimes suddenly. Discomfort can feel like a general challenge.” ([nfpt.com](#))

HARM

Injury, damage, wound. “Harm is what **needs healing**” (*We Will Not Cancel Us* p. 28).

TRAUMA

A wound that changes perception + behavior. “A lasting rupture or split within the self” (Gabor Maté, *The Myth of Normal* p. 20). Not the incident, but its impact **over time**.

QUESTIONS TO THINK + TALK ABOUT

What is the difference between: mistake + wrongdoing; conflict + abuse; pain + harm; and harm + trauma? Why do these differences matter? Why is it important to be precise in labeling the nature of the incident, not just the impact? What categories of incident and impact are missing from the lists above?

Note that there is not always a predictable relationship between incident and impact. For example, a mistake may cause harm or trauma, while serious wrongdoing might cause mere discomfort. The same conflict or act of abuse often has different impacts for different people. Why is this? (Use examples, if you can, to think through and explain this.)

Looking at each of the incidents: which of these can and/or should be avoided if possible? What are ways you can think of to try to decrease the likelihood of those incidents you believe should be avoided—both as an individual person and as a community in dialogue with one another?

Looking at each of the impacts: which of these do you believe can or should be avoided if possible? Under what circumstances may some of them have value? What are ways you think you should respond—both individually and as a community in dialogue with one another—to each of these impacts when they occur?

