This is a compilation of tools that help you learn how to support your friends in roleplaying. Before we even get to the tools, I’ve got some thoughts about support. I would appreciate it if you could bear with me and read them; if you’re in a rush, skip to page 8 for the goods.

The first set of thoughts are: why does support matter? Why do we care about it?

The second set of thoughts are: what is important in doing support? What do you need to know to support your friends effectively?

The third set of thoughts are: what happens when tools fail you? How can you build new tools or move past them?

After that is a glossary of terminology I will use throughout the document and then the list of tools themselves; some written by myself and some written by others.

At the very end of the document is a primer for designers on how to design support mechanics into your game. If you are at all concerned or confused on what that process looks like, I hope that it can show you a path.

If you want a support tool added, or have questions for me: email me at [queerestnatalie@gmail.com](mailto:queerestnatalie@gmail.com); @/DM me on twitter ([@rpgnatalie](http://twitter.com/rpgnatalie)); or message me on mastodon ([@rpgnatalie@dice.camp](https://dice.camp/@rpgnatalie)).

* Natalie

# Why Does Support Matter?

If you’re a **player**, why does support matter? Why should we spend the effort to do it, when we could focus on just playing games? If your experiences with games have been mostly conflict or hurt free it might not seem so, but caring for your friends is *hard*. It takes a lot of work and effort. It’s natural to look at the games you’ve played that have worked fine so far and think “well, I don’t think we need anything like these tools to deal with this. I don’t think we need to worry too much about support.”

But the tools do more than just help you help your friends. Support matters for concrete reasons that can enhance your game experiences in addition to helping prevent, mitigate, or resolve hurt.

**Support makes your game better, because everyone can contribute.** No one has to struggle to participate in your game because of emotionally difficult content. They’ll know they have your support if it gets too hard or emotional, because of the concrete tools you’ve agreed to, or because you’ve made that clear to them through the process of the game. They’ll know that topics that they can’t handle don’t have to appear and they’ll have a protocol to establish and handle boundaries. They’ll be more able to provide perspectives and ideas unique to them.

**Support makes your game more meaningful, because everyone can go harder into topics that might be emotionally difficult.** Without support, players might shy away from difficult but meaningful topics because they don’t want to hurt each other. If you have protocols and tools in place to support each other, you can go to those places and know that you have ways to check in on each other, establish boundaries, or back down from content safely.

**Support makes you better, by teaching you skills that you can use in both roleplay and also throughout your life.** The games you play with your friends are spaces for you to try out new perspectives and selves, but also places for you to try new practices in and out of game. You can think of support tools as being new ways of thinking about how you care about your friends - they can help teach you how to assert boundaries, check in with someone, apologize effectively, resolve conflict, and help your friends process their feelings. Use the tools to practice these skills so that when you leave the game, you have a foundation from which to use them in other games, or in the rest of your life.

If you’re a **designer**, why does support matter? Why should we spend the effort to design it into our games, when we could focus on designing the rest of the game mechanics? Many designers deeply care about their identities as players, but what reasons do they have to care about designing support into their games that is specific to their role as designers?

**Designers should design support into their games because it is kind to players.** Particularly when those games touch on emotionally difficult topics, if you cannot teach players how to support, or support them yourself, then you are inviting people to get hurt. Even if everyone goes into a game with the best of intentions, if they push into emotionally difficult territory they can get hurt. There are ways other than support tools to make support happen - plenty of games have support designed into the mechanics - but if you don’t help players do the hard work of supporting and caring for each other you are encouraging them to get hurt without recourse. Conversely, if you design support into your game, you are encouraging players to play your game because you’ve shown that you care about their wellbeing.

**Designers should design support into their games because then they can personally shape the support experience.** Support tools are highly contextual to the game being played. Some support tools will enhance the play experience by being smoothly integrated with the rest of the game’s mechanics. But some support tools will run totally counter to what a game’s mechanics do and a support tool can lead to play that is not at all what you want. If you want players to have the best experience with your game, while still helping them support each other, then it’s in your best interest to design the support into your games intentionally.

**Designers should design support into their games because it makes play smoother.** When people support each other, they are better able to shape play into something they enjoy - so they’ll get more out of your game. Support doesn’t just happen when players are in crisis; it’s when players encourage each other, when players commiserate with each other, and when players reflect with each other. Support will, at every level, function to enhance the experiences of the people who play your game.

# What Is Important In Doing Support?

**You can’t do it alone.** In the majority of groups I’ve played with only one person has put in the effort to make support a priority. Sometimes players do it as a way of protecting themselves in groups they don’t know well. Often it is the person who has put in the work of assembling everyone to roleplay together. The individuals will introduce tools, guide their use, and probably be the ones who use them the most. This is a one sided and exhausting kind of care. It’s not fair to the person who must take on the brunt of the effort. It’s not communal.

Support tools are a way of turning your group into a support network. They help curb habits that can hurt your friends, but also replace those habits with ones that make your games more effective and communicative. But if only one person is trying to build the support network, let alone actively participate in it, then it can fail when you need it most.

**You need to care for yourself too.** You have boundaries in what kind of energy and time you can put into care. Some topics will drain you, bring back difficult memories, or emotionally activate you; whether in roleplay or when you are caring for your friends. If you try to push past these feelings, you will not be able to support them effectively. It can lead to resentment and hurt feelings for both parties. For care to be mutual, you need to be able to communicate when you cannot help someone.

When you tell someone that you cannot take care of them in the way that they need, that doesn't mean they aren't your friend. It doesn't mean you cannot take care of them later. It doesn't mean you cannot play together. You can let them know when you *can* help them. You can offer them someone else who will be able to help them right now. You can affirm to them that you care about them and want them to get help. But you still need to take care of yourself.

**You need consent.** This thought is probably obvious to you, but it’s important. Some people aren’t ready to receive help in the way that you are able to give it. Some people aren’t ready to help you in the way that you need. Pushing past their boundaries to give care, or demand it of others, is disrespectful of their humanity. Give and receive care when both parties are able to accept and provide it.

There are times when you might want to share your experience, as catharsis or a way to show connection with a friend. This is natural and understandable, but sharing your experience isn’t always positive - the topic might be one they’re not ready to talk about, or one that puts them in danger. Just like how you have boundaries that you need to be careful of, they have boundaries too. Be gentle with your friends.

# What Happens When Tools Fail You?

Following the tools on their own won’t make hurt disappear from your game. They exist to teach you, by giving you frameworks to develop from - just like the rules of a game teach you how to play it. After many times using those rules, you won't need to read them and remind yourself how they work - you will have internalized them and in theory you will be able to apply the lessons you've learned to other games.

But just like any rules, support tools can fail you. Even a perfectly written rule must be implemented by imperfect humans. Mistakes happen and people get hurt. Support tools in particular are designed for a kind of hurt that can be really harsh. For many people, playing games can mean opening yourself up to vulnerability and inviting others to touch those vulnerable places. What happens when it’s too rough and someone gets hurt?

When you move beyond what the tools are capable of supporting you with, when your skills are underdeveloped and you aren’t sure what the right course of action is, what do you do?

I’d say there are a couple of paths:

**Build new tools from the bones of the old.**

Rather than purposefully trying to learn skills from the tools you use, you can make new tools that will solve the problems you encounter. Building new tools can look like taking an already existing tool and applying it to a different context, or making it up whole cloth.

I encourage you to alter the tools compiled here. Take the things that work for you and get rid of the things that don’t. Even in this compendium there are tools that were tweaked to be used in different ways - **support flower** and **support signals**; **x-card** and **o-card**; **rose, thorn, and bud** and **deroling debrief**; and **group check-in** and **ok check-in** are a few examples of support tools being altered from the same base to fit different needs.

Think about the problem you need to solve, the skill you need to practice, and see what you’ve tried already. Where did it fall short? What other tools exist that try to do similar things? What do tools in different contexts do to help build skills?

An addendum: tools are not bad. Relying on tools doesn’t make you a bad roleplayer, nor a bad friend. Taking care of other people is *hard*. Supporting other people, and being supported by other people, can mean putting yourself in a vulnerable position. Tools help put a foundation around your behavior, to build positive habits from. But even if you used a tool and never learned anything from it, it is still a kindness to your friends to use it.

**Build yourself away from the tools.**

When a tool doesn’t work right, or when you mess up, you can instead rely on your commitment to care. It means spending conscious effort to pay attention to your friends, *asking them* what they need, and doing your best to help. Tools are in service of this, but your commitment to care is foundational to them. Build up from a commitment to your friends with skills taught to you by these tools. When you fuck up and someone gets hurt, take care of them in the ways that they need. Allow them to take care of you when you’re hurt.

Caring for someone can look like:

* giving them space.
* being with them.
* listening to them.
* validating their experiences.
* sharing your own experiences.
* physical touch.
* no touching.

The skills you’ll develop can look like:

* evaluating when your friends are distressed and hurting.
* mediating conflict when it arises, without shutting down or hurting each other.
* apologizing effectively.
* confidently asserting your own boundaries when the need arises.
* leaving a space when you need time for yourself, without confusing or alienating your friends.
* encouraging your friends when they’re struggling with difficult content.
* initiating conflict (fictional or not) in a healthy manner.

It’s okay to use the skills you’ve developed outside of this game. It’s also okay to try to develop new skills too. Think of this as a chance to practice. The things that happen in your game are real and they matter, but you are with people whom you have a commitment to care for, and people who have a commitment to care for you.

These two paths perhaps seem separate, but reality is not so clean. You can build tools and build tools and still be learning new skills from them. Part of really internalizing the skill that you’ve learned might look like making a tool to help others learn it too. You can be doing both of these at once.**Glossary**

These are the words I use to think about and describe support tools. Perhaps you’ve heard of the word, but in another context. Perhaps you know the concepts, but aren’t familiar with a word. If you’re confused about something, I’d check here first.

**Communal tool:** A tool is *communal* if you do need all of your friends on board to use it. If not everyone knows about and consciously uses a communal tool, it just won’t work. Examples of communal tools include tools that are shorthands, tools for checking in, tools for establishing and asserting boundaries, and tools for mediating conflict.

**Personal tool:** A tool is *personal* if you don’t need all of your friends on board to use it. A personal tool is one that you can practice and develop skills from on your own. Examples of personal tools include tools for apologizing, tools for offering suggestions healthily, and tools for affirming others or helping them process their emotions.

**Crisis:** Crisis happens when a player is emotionally incapable of playing the game anymore. A player can be moved into an emotional space that is difficult or hard, but if they can keep playing then they’re not in crisis. A player deserves support whether or not they’re in crisis, but play cannot continue while a player is in crisis.

**Crisis facing tool:** Crisis facing tools are designed to mitigate crisis or to help resolve it when it occurs. Well known examples of crisis facing tools are x-card, cut and brake, and lines and veils.

**Calibration tool:** Calibration tools are designed to help players change the flow, direction, or tone of play. A tool might be a calibration tool and a crisis facing tool at the same time. Well known examples of calibration tools are the o-card, the x-card, cut and brake, and lines and veils.

# The Tools

You did it. You read through all of my thoughts on support and what you’ll need to know to do it, or maybe you just skipped right to here. Either way, now you want to get right to the goods. First, you’re going to have to know how to read the tools. Each tool has a structure to how it is laid out.

**[Tool Name]**

*[Personal or Communal]*

[Tool Description]

([Tool Theory])

[[Designer]]

You already know what I mean when I say “personal or communal” if you read the glossary. When I say tool theory, that means a little bit of background from me about what the tool is used for, what it will teach you, and what you will need to know to use it. The designer is whoever wrote it - no designer at the bottom means I wrote it. If a tool is improperly attributed, let me know and I will fix it.

Okay! Now you’re good. Read on.

## Tools to encourage each other and shape play

### O-Card

*Communal*

On a card (the back of the x-card, if you’re playing with that tool) draw an O. Place the card in within arms reach of everyone you are playing with. If you are playing online, use the ⭕ (heavy large circle) emoji instead of a physical card.

When something happens that you want to see more of, that you want to push further into, tap the o-card (or post the ⭕ (heavy large circle) emoji) so everyone can see. This tells them that you liked what they said and want to see more stuff like it.

(The o-card is a communal way of doing something like **play affirmations**, which works especially well if your group is already using a complementary tool like the **x-card**.)

[This tool was written by [Kira Magrann](https://www.patreon.com/kiramagrann).]

### Suggestive Hypotheticals

*Personal*

When you want to offer someone a suggestion for what they can do, phrase it as a hypothetical - “what if this were Amnum’s mother?” or “I wonder what Route-to-the-Sea is doing right now.” What you are doing is offering a suggestion - “this is Amnum’s mother” or “tell us what Route-to-the-Sea is doing right now” - but pretend you aren’t.

(By phrasing your suggestions as hypotheticals, you encourage your friends to think about the possibility of what you are suggesting without putting any burden to answer yes or no on their shoulders. You are giving them an idea and saying “do with it what you will.” It’s much easier to decline a hypothetical than a direct question - “what if this were Amnum’s mother?” versus “Is this Amnum’s mother?” Offering suggestions necessarily means allowing the other person to shoot them down.

Sometimes you need the directness and the forwardness; that’s fine, but it’s also not a suggestion. In those cases you are asking them to answer based on what they know to be true. A suggestion gives them the possibility of something more and allows them to act on its validity or invalidity.)

### Play Affirmations

*Personal*

When someone says something that excites, surprises, or impresses you, tell them how you feel (and perhaps why you feel it). It can be as simple as “oh shit that’s cool.”

(Let yourself be enthusiastic about what your friends say and communicate your enthusiasm to them. When someone affirms what you’re doing, it makes you feel good, but it also tells you what excites, surprises, or impresses them. It encourages you all to tell fiction that you enjoy.

A compliment on its own doesn’t say much. “You’re such a good roleplayer” is weak without context. When you say to someone, “this thing you just did was really cool and inspiring,” they will *know* why what you are saying is true. You don’t need to always explain why you feel the way you do - it’s often enough just to identify the things your friends do that excite you.)

### CATS

*Communal*

Have a conversation as a group before play begins, outlining what kind of game you will be playing together. One person who is experienced with the game might lead this conversation, but anyone can answer these questions.

1. **Concept:** pitch the game. At a high-level, what’s it about?
2. **Aim:** explain what the players are trying to accomplish. Can someone win? Can everyone lose? Are we trying to tell a specific type of story?
3. **Tone:** have a quick conversation about the tone of the game. What is the default? Are there different options for gameplay? (Serious vs. Gonzo, Action vs. Drama, etc.). Come to a consensus on what the group wants.
4. **Subject Matter:** explain what ideas might be explored during gameplay. Do they make anyone uncomfortable? Discuss what boundaries need to be set, if any.

(Note that CATS isn’t a replacement for taking care of each other during play. CATS is a tool to get everyone on the same footing before play begins, to make sure there isn’t any kind of miscommunication, but that doesn’t mean conflict can’t arise as play progresses. Watch out for each other and take care of each other even after you’ve had the CATS conversation.

In the Subject Matter section, where the tool tells you to “discuss what boundaries need to be set, if any” check out the “tools to help assert boundaries in content” section. Specifically, Lines and Veils are designed to communicate boundaries before play begins.)

[This tool was written by [Patrick O'Leary](http://proleary.com/).]

## The Luxton Techniques

[The following tools were [elaborated](http://briebeau.com/thoughty/2019/03/the-luxton-technique-by-p-h-lee/) by [P.H. Lee](https://www.patreon.com/benlehman), though first implemented by and named after AJ Luxton.]

I have separated them into three tools, though they are described as a set of techniques practiced together in Lee’s post. When citing any individual tool, please cite P.H. Lee and A.J. Luxton.

### A Frank Discussion

*Communal*

When you first start playing with a group of friends or when you feel like it’s been a while since you talked about it, have an honest discussion of potential traumatic triggers. If a friend is struggling to express themselves, be supportive and understanding.

(This discussion isn’t like the one that you might have when setting up **lines and veils**. The point isn’t to create rules or make sure that everyone avoids those things. The point is to be aware of what can hurt your friends, with the understanding that you cannot possibly pinpoint every possible source of potential hurt.

No one in this discussion has any obligation to share why something is a potential trigger. This can be a time to share particulars if you want, but do so with care. Your friends have boundaries and needs just like you do - give them the opportunity to bow out if you do have that conversation.)

### A Genuine Request

*Communal*

When you encounter triggering material in play, you have the option of talking about it with your friends. When a friend talks about triggering material, listen to them.

In the discussion, you can express a want or need about a character or the scene. In doing so, your friends give you fiat power over the scene and how it will end. Some examples: “I’d like to play [character name] for this scene” or “I need this to have a happy ending” or “I want this character to not be hurt right now” or “I need this character to not get away with this” or “by the end of play, this should not be a secret” or “I need to stop play and get a drink of water” or “I don’t have a specific request, I just wanted you to know.”

No one needs to use their traumatic experience to justify any requests or demands. You just do it.

(Making requests like this can be extremely, extremely difficult. Be gentle with your friends when they’re trying to express their needs and play towards accommodating their requests.

With something simple like “I’d like to play [character’s name] for this scene” accommodation is easy. Sometimes it’s more complicated, but keep in mind that your friend is asking from a genuine place of need. Treat their requests with the gravity that they deserve.)

### A Gentle Question

*Personal*

Keep a kind eye on your friends. When someone seems withdrawn, unfocused, or upset, check in with them. Ask them if they’re all right. Take what they say seriously.

(Taking what they say seriously means just that. Don’t read anything past what they say and don’t doubt their own understanding of their needs.

They might not know if they are all right or not - be patient with them. If they don’t know whether they’re all right or not, they probably aren’t. Give them the time to figure it out for themselves.)

## 

## Tools to help assert boundaries in content or behavior

### X-Card

*Communal*

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1SB0jsx34bWHZWbnNIVVuMjhDkrdFGo1_hSC2BWPlI3A/edit>

In addition to what the linked document says, when playing online you can use the ❌ (cross mark) emoji to serve the same purpose as the x-card. Simply post it where everyone can see when something happens that needs to be x-carded.

(The **x-card** on its own functions as a shorthand to help communicate your boundaries to your friends. It’s a tool that allows you to practice asserting your boundaries, and then having them respected by your friends.

It is difficult to x-card things that are not in the fiction of the game. If a behavior is something that crosses a boundary that you need to assert, tapping the x-card may indicate to your friend that they need to change that behavior, but it could alternatively indicate that they need to change something in the fiction they’re describing. If you require clarity, this tool might not be the one for you.)

[This tool was written by [John Stavropoulos](http://jstav.com/).]

### Lines and Veils

*Communal*

Lines and Veils are a way to delineate levels of acceptable fictional content in your game. Lines are things that absolutely will not appear in your game. Veils are things that may appear in the game, but will not be described in detail. When they would appear, the screen fades to black, the implications are discussed, and the game moves on.

Lines and Veils are often established before play and periodically updated as everyone plays. At any point you can say “this is a [line/veil] for me” and everyone will treat the content accordingly.

(In many games, Lines and Veils already exist but are unspoken by the players. Things like graphic violence or anachronisms are key examples of Veils - they might happen and be understood by the players to have occurred, but in many cases they do not go into the details of what these things look like. In the average game of Dungeons and Dragons no one stops to describe the depth of the wounds, the splatter of blood and viscera on the heroes’ armor, or the crunch of bone and dying wails of the monsters they face.

The biggest struggle in using Lines and Veils is keeping them in the forefront of your mind - they are things that you won’t touch upon in the process of the game, but for that to work everyone must remember them. Consider reviewing them before you play together, or when you take a break throughout play.)

[This tool was written by [Ron Edwards](https://www.patreon.com/doctorxaos) in the [Sex and Sorcery](http://adept-press.com/games-fantasy-horror/sorcerer/sorcerer-sword-soul-sex/) supplement for his game [Sorcerer](http://adept-press.com/games-fantasy-horror/sorcerer/). For a more detailed description of Lines and Veils, read Mr. Edwards’ work there.]

### Cut and Brake

*Communal*

When someone says something that you’re not too sure about, that pushes your boundaries a little too much, say “Brake.” They should immediately tone down, back out a bit, but play still goes on.

If you feel like things have gotten out of hand, or you feel scared or very confused, say “Cut”. All play stops immediately, and the group should be quiet and listen to whoever cut the game. Be supportive, find out what the problem is. Don’t continue unless everyone feels safe and wants to go on.

(This tool teaches you similar skills to those from the **support flower**, **script change**, and **x-card** tools. It’s a shorthand to assert your boundaries in the moment during play; to practice letting your friends know that you are uncomfortable or want play to change. It’s also practice for those who respond, to change their style of play to accommodate their friends’ needs.)

[This tool was written by [Emily Care Boss](https://www.patreon.com/emilycare), and [Matthijs Holter](https://norwegianstyle.wordpress.com/) in their game [*Play With Intent*](https://playwithintent.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/pwi03042015.pdf). It was adapted from an older Norwegian larp tool called “Kutt and Brems”.]

### Support Signals

*Communal*

<http://www.gamestogather.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/SupportSignals-A5-2.0J.pdf> (note: this link is currently broken, as the games to gather website is down)

(This tool creates a shorthand by which you can communicate how much intensity you want in what is happening - if you need more intensity, less intensity, if you need everyone to be careful of their intensity, or if this is the right amount of intensity.

This tool teaches you how to push each other to more or less intensity during play. It helps you practice saying both “I want to see more out of this scene; more impact” and also “I think this scene is too much and I need us to tone it back.” It also helps you warn each other when you think the scene might need more care and caution. It can help you practice asking each other what kind of intensity you need.)

[This tool was written by [Jay Sylvano](http://www.gamestogather.org/author/jay/), in collaboration with [Tayler Stokes](http://www.gamestogather.org/author/taylers/).]

### Support Flower

*Communal*

<https://www.gamestogather.org/files/SupportFlower-A5-PrintJ.pdf>

(This tool gives you a shorthand to communicate how you want play to happen, in a way that’s similar to, but much more specific than, **support signals**. Rather than just saying “I want to push farther” you can tell your friends “that was awesome!” or “keep going” or “I’m into this”. Each shorthand is expanded so you can communicate more specifically what you need.

But the tool teaches you the same things as support signals. It helps you practice communicating your needs with your friends and it gives you the opportunity to practice asking them what their needs are.)

[This tool was written by [Tayler Stokes](http://www.gamestogather.org/author/taylers/), adapted from **support signals** by [Jay Sylvano](http://www.gamestogather.org/author/jay/).]

### Script Change

*Communal*

<https://briebeau.com/scriptchange>

(This tool helps you practice communicating your boundaries to your friends. It’s also useful for practicing editing content that not everyone is okay with. It’s used in similar ways that the **support flower** and **support signals** tools are.

This is a tool that asks everyone to communicate freely among each other. It’s a tool that gives structure to the conversation, but not a tool that does the work of communicating how to change everything for you. In contrast, a tool like the **x-card** assumes that the player who said the content to be edited will figure out how to edit it on their own.)

[This tool was written by [Brie Beau Sheldon](https://briebeau.itch.io/).]

### Group Check In

*Communal*  
When you or someone else says something and you aren’t sure if everyone is into it or if it’s the best idea, make the “OK hand” gesture so everyone can see it. Everyone (including you, if you want or need to) should then respond.

There are three responses:

* **If you think what they said was fine and doesn't need to be revised:** make the thumbs up gesture or post the 👍 (thumbs up) emoji.
* **If you don’t know how you feel about what they said or don’t care:** make a flat hand gesture (palm pointing to the ground) or post the 🖐️ (hand with fingers splayed) emoji.
* **If you think what they said is worth revising:** make the thumbs down gesture or post the 👎 (thumbs down) emoji.

After initiating the check in, take the responses seriously. If someone makes the thumbs down gesture: revise what you said (or get the person who said it to if it wasn’t you). If many people make the flat hand gesture: maybe try something else that people will be more excited by (or offer the original person a suggestion that might be more enticing).

(Everyone says stuff that doesn’t fly with the group. This is a tool to help you make sure that you’re not saying stuff that makes your friends uncomfortable, or if you think maybe that other people might not be into what is being discussed. It’s also useful if you are really into what is being discussed, but aren’t sure if that means *everyone* is into it.)

## 

## Tools to navigate conflict without shutting down

### Conflict Affirmations

*Personal*

After conflict happens, or when conflict is particularly intense and difficult, say to your friends: “Thank you for doing this scene with me. I know it can be stressful. It means a lot to me.”

(By affirming your positive relationships with your friends, you’re letting them know that the conflict that happened in the scene isn’t something that has changed how you feel about them - often the biggest anxiety that people can have when conflict is initiated. If you don’t feel like the statement is true, don’t say it; instead talk honestly and openly about your feelings, negative or positive, and resolve them with any other tools you need.)

### OK Check In

*Communal*

When you are afraid that a friend is unsafe, or if you don’t know if they are able to continue to play safely, make an “OK hand” gesture so that they can see it. If you aren’t in the same physical space, send them or post in a text channel the 👌 (OK hand) emoji. If you have no text channels available to each other, ask them “are you okay?”

If there are multiple people you want to check in on: make the gesture to each of them and respond in kind.

There are four responses to the check in:

* **If you are okay and can keep playing:** make the thumbs up gesture, 👍 (thumbs up) emoji, or say “I’m okay.”
  + Keep playing
* **If you don’t know how you feel, or if it is neither very good nor very bad:** make a flat hand gesture (palm pointing to the ground), 🖐️ (hand with fingers splayed) emoji, or say “I don’t know”
  + Treats this as a thumbs down or “I’m not okay”
* **If you can’t respond:** don’t respond
  + Treat this as a thumbs down or “I’m not okay”
* **If you are not okay:** make the thumbs down gesture, 👎 (thumbs down) emoji, or say “I’m not okay”
  + Extract them from the situation

Extracting them from the space means asking them “can I pull you away?” and taking their answer seriously. It doesn’t mean pressuring them to be alone with you. Online this might look like talking to them in a private message or private voice chat.

If they need you to, stay with them (if you don’t know how to approach the situation, try reading the **active listening** tool). Trust them to articulate their needs to the best of their ability and leave yourself open to them changing their mind later.

Don’t forsake your own needs. If you need to take care of yourself, tell them so and trust them to understand. If you aren’t comfortable with the situation, ask for help from a friend.

(The “I don’t know how I feel” gesture has the same result as the “I’m not okay” gesture because many people feel like their discomfort isn’t enough to warrant disrupting the game; but they still deserve care and support.

When you check back in on a friend who needs space, you affirm to them that you care about their wellbeing, but also their need for space. This is primarily a tool for allowing people to get the space they need when they need it, and then return to the game if that is what they want to do. It’s a tool for players to communicate how they’re feeling.)

[This tool is based on the OK Check-In adapted by Maury Brown, Sarah Lynne Bowman, and Harrison Greene for New World Magischola from an older tool used in the Planetfall LARP.]

## 

## Tools to deal with player-player conflict

### Conflict Resolution Checklist

*Personal*

When two of your friends are in conflict and they cannot manage it on their own, suggest that they mediate it. You can help them mediate it by following this checklist:

* Ask them, individually, to describe what the source of the conflict is to you and their partner. Do not allow them to interrupt each other. Ask for clarifying questions if you don’t understand something.
* After each of them is done describing the source of the conflict from their perspective, ask them, individually, to describe what their partner said was the source of the conflict. Confirm with their partner if that accurately describes their feelings.
* Ask them what they need to get out of this. Do they need someone to change their behaviors? Do they need something changed in the fiction? Get each of them to establish what they need from each other.
* After they’ve both established what they need, ask them to say what they can do to fulfill their partner’s needs.
  + Ask their partner if that is enough, or if they need more, and continue with suggestions and offers from there.
* Summarize the plan of action - who will do what and how. Make sure that everyone is on board.
* Determine how they will be held accountable - what kind of timetable will things happen on, if necessary. How will the group help them? If they don’t do what they’ve promised to fulfill their partner’s needs, what will happen?

(This is a heavy duty tool - you can’t really get away with using this in the middle of play. But you really needn’t use it for most conflict - most of the time if two people are in conflict, if they talk about the problems that they have with each other in an open and honest way, they will resolve it by themselves. When it gets *really* heavy, when it doesn’t seem like it’s going to be easily resolved, when it’s emotionally difficult, or when it’s putting strain on the rest of your friends, that’s when you should offer to use this tool.

The hardest part about using this tool is making sure that everyone takes their turn and doesn’t speak over each other. Be firm if you have to - you are not having a discussion. You are walking your friends through the process of explaining their feelings to each other. All they have to do, and all they *should* do, is answer your questions to the best of their ability.

If you’re in a conflict that doesn’t seem easily resolved, you can also ask someone else to mediate in your conflict. Please allow your friends to help you if you need it. Conflict can be really difficult for people to resolve on their own - having an outside person guide you through it makes the process a lot easier, especially when you are tangled up in your complicated feelings. If they’re comfortable mediating, offer them this tool and tell them to follow what it says.)

### Apologizing

*Personal*

When you apologize to someone, do the following things:

1. Say “I’m sorry.”
2. Explain what you did that hurt them.
3. Explain how you will avoid hurting them in the future.
4. Tell them if there’s anything else they need from you that you are there to listen.

Do not apologize until you can do both 2 and 3.

(Apologizing is about trust. Just saying “I’m sorry” is not enough to restore trust. You have to show your friend that you know why what you did was wrong, and what you will do to fix it. It’s possible that the solution won’t be overly satisfying. That’s okay, it’s still worth saying. You’re letting them know that you are learning from your mistake, and that you care about them. Communicate that thoughtfully and with intent.)

## 

## Tools to leave a space

### Lookdown

*Communal*

To perform the lookdown, raise your hand clearly in front of your eyes like the See No Evil monkey and then leave the space you’re playing in. When someone does the lookdown, that means they have out of game reasons that they won’t be participating in the next scene/s until they come back to the game. Continue playing the game and fold them naturally back in if and when they are able to return.

If you are playing online, perform the lookdown by posting the 👋 (waving hand) emoji where everyone can see.

(What is most critical about the lookdown is that you shouldn’t question why your friend has to leave. Maybe the scene is unsafe for them. Maybe they had something sudden and personal come up. Maybe they need to pee. Whatever their reason is, it’s theirs to have and not yours to know. Not only is no one obligated to explain themselves, you actively should not explain why you invoke the lookdown (even after you come back) unless you need something from the group.)

[This [tool](https://participationsafety.wordpress.com/2016/09/18/toolkit-the-see-no-evil-or-lookdown/) was written by [Johanna Koljonen](https://www.patreon.com/johannakoljonen) with input from others including Trine Lise Lindahl.]

## 

## Tools to help each other process

### Active Listening

*Personal*

When a friend is in crisis and needs your help with shit, and *when you are able to do so safely*:

1. Sit with them and listen.
   * If they don’t know what to say, ask them “what do you need right now?” or if they can’t answer that, “what are you feeling right now?”
   * Give their words the full weight of your attention.
   * If you don’t understand something, ask for clarification.
2. Summarize what they have said and ask if you’ve understood correctly.
3. Tell them what your honest feelings are.
4. Repeat.

If what they need to discuss is too much for you, let them know that you need to take care of yourself and cannot help them right now. Trust that they will understand.

(The first step on this list is the most important. Skip step three with abandon. Skip step two if it doesn’t matter. Never ever skip step one. Sometimes your friend isn’t looking to hear your thoughts and they just need you to listen to them. If that is what you suspect, hold those thoughts inside yourself and do what they need of you.)

## 

## Tools to reflect and derole

### Rose, Thorn, and Bud

*Communal*

After you finish a session, story arc, or campaign, sit everyone down. Starting with a random person, answer the following questions:

* What in the session excited, surprised, or impressed you?
* What in the session confused, disheartened, or frustrated you?
* What are you excited to see the next time you play?

When one of your friends is talking, don’t interrupt with side conversations or comments. Give what they say the full breadth of your attention.

(This is a tool to decompress after a session. It is natural and not bad for things to happen that confuse, dishearten, or frustrate you and your friends. You’re all learning and growing and making mistakes. You will find times when shit doesn’t land right. That’s okay.

This is not a tool for feedback. It’s a tool for talking about your feelings. You can use what you learn from your friends’ feelings if you want to, but that’s not ultimately what this tool is for. Listen to your friends because their feelings are worth validating.  
  
Note: a version of this tool called "Stars and Wishes" removes the second prompt and focuses on the other two instead. [Stars and Wishes](https://www.gauntlet-rpg.com/blog/stars-and-wishes) was developed by [Lu Quade](http://twitter.com/real_luquade) with the assistance of [Sid Icarus](http://twitter.com/actioneconomy).)

### Deroling Debrief

*Communal*

After you finish a session, story arc, or campaign, sit everyone down. Starting with a random person, answer the following questions:

* What do you want to take away from this experience, character, or session?
* What do you want to leave behind with this experience, character, or session?

When one of your friends is talking, don’t interrupt with side conversations or comments. Give what they say the full breadth of your attention.

(This tool is extremely similar to **Rose, Bud, and Thorn**, but they serve different roles. **Rose, Bud, and Thorn** is a tool to help everyone decompress and talk about their feelings after a session, and start thinking about future sessions. **Deroling** is a tool to help everyone move outside of their characters and refocus on their everyday lives. This is especially useful if the content you’re dealing with is visceral and emotional for everyone involved - it helps create boundaries around the experience so it doesn’t bleed disruptively into the rest of your life.)

[SOMEONE ON NORDICLARP SO HELP ME GOD - if you recognize this tool and know who wrote it please let me know!]

### Dear Jane Letter

*Personal*

When a game has finished and you must return to your normal life, take 20 minutes and write a letter to a character you played who was emotionally resonant to you.

Tell them:

* What you wish they had done better
* What made you proud of them
* What you learned from them

After you’re done, destroy the letter.

(This tool is a form of catharsis and deroling, in a similar vein to the **deroling debrief**. Focus on the experiences and feelings of the character as a separate entity from yourself. Think about them as a whole person, but a whole person who you no longer inhabit.

Destroy the letter as a way of letting them go. If you don’t feel up to destroying the letter, take time to mourn for them until you are able to. Letting them go won’t mean they’re gone; holding on to them doesn’t do their memory justice either.)

# What Can Game Designers Learn About Support?

In the same way that support tools exist to help players learn and practice skills, I hope this compilation can help serve as a support tool for you - to calm your worries, to give you a place to start, and to offer you encouragement. Perhaps the most important thing I can say to you, besides that support matters, is that *you can do this*.

Something I hear from many game designers who talk about support is that they really don’t want to fuck up. They’re afraid that if they mess up support mechanics that it will be the end of the world. They feel as if support is a catch-22 where it’s impossible to get right the first time, but playtesting something incomplete will hurt the players and be irresponsible.

The truth, in my experience, is that integrating support mechanics - even ones that aren’t well thought out, innovative, or ground breaking - is a kindness to the people playing. It shows them that this game cares about them and wants them to be cared for. It shows them that they have the right to expect support from their friends, because the game itself expects it.

That doesn’t mean you can’t really mess up a support mechanic! It just means that the bar people place for themselves in writing support into their games is *much* higher than what success actually looks like.

What I hope to do in this section is to give you some ideas, frameworks, and encouragement in creating and integrating support mechanics into your game.

## Support mechanics should be natural in your game

(Note: this isn’t the same as “support mechanics shouldn’t interrupt the flow of play.”)

Support mechanics being natural in your game means that if someone saw the support mechanic, they would think “oh! Of course!” It means that the support mechanic fits smoothly and naturally into the structure of your game - it is integrated with the structures of play.

What structures precisely depends on the game! Let’s look at some examples:

[**A Knife**](https://rpgnatalie.itch.io/a-knife) is a two player horror game that involves pushing a knife between two players, in the vein of a slasher movie. At any time, players can pick up the knife off of the table and end play. They are encouraged to do this when the story is overwhelming for them, when they are uncomfortable with something going on, or when they can’t handle their fear anymore. When they pick up the knife, they say how the victim gets away to safety.

This is a natural extension of the mechanic of pushing the knife around. Picking up the knife breaks the tension of the game. It’s an immediate signal to the other player that something is going on. It allows players to stop play - to take care of themselves, for example - without requiring them to disconnect from the fiction. Finally, it is a common ending to slasher movie scenes, where the tension builds and builds until, instead of a climax, the break is that the victim manages to get to a safe place.

You could have written this mechanic differently, so that instead of picking up the knife and saying how the victim gets away to safety, you ask your friend to help you fulfill an outcome at the end of the game, for instance “I need her to get away safely.” This would be in line with support tools like the Luxton Techniques. However, you might be able to see that it isn’t integrated well into the structures of the game; it doesn’t feel natural in the way that picking up the knife does.

The naturalness of this mechanic is doing a lot of work. It’s making it easier for players to access that mechanic when they need it. They don’t have to do any extra work in making it happen, and they aren’t required to pull away from the fiction. When they need it, when they are in the throes of crisis, they don’t have to rely on someone else’s generosity or interpretation. They immediately get to say what happens and there are no questions asked because the game is explicit about how it happens.

Another example:

[**The Flame and The Quiet**](https://rpgnatalie.itch.io/the-flame-and-the-quiet) is a three player game based on the dark souls trilogy of video games. Play involves one player describing how they attempt to take down a powerful enemy, and the other two judging whether or not they do it. If both don’t agree that their description makes the cut, the character dies and must start again.

Whenever the character dies, players check in with each other and see how everyone is doing. They talk about what is going well so far, what could be better, and what they are excited to see.

In a Dark Souls game, tension climbs higher and higher as you fight a difficult boss and then breaks when you die. You are taken back to a previous checkpoint and you have a moment to breathe and collect yourself. In a similar way, checking in after the character dies in The Flame and The Quiet allows everyone to unwind and break the tension with each other before diving back into play.

The mechanic of checking in is *habitual*. It is ritualized, repeated, and returned to. It is not only natural but normalized in the game. By making it a specific moment in the structure of play - after a character dies - players will use it whether or not they think someone is in crisis. When someone *is* in crisis, they’ll be ready to use it then too.

[**Chess: Two Kingdoms**](https://noroadhome.itch.io/chess-two-kingdoms) (by [Takuma Okada](http://twitter.com/takuma_okada_)) takes Lines and Veils and adapts them to make more sense within the structure of the game.

Chess has Fire and Brimstone lists, which specify the same kinds of content restrictions Lines and Veils do. Because it’s a game about two rival countries, the name comes from an idea that these two countries once signed a contract that will result in divine punishment if broken. That punishment is represented by a penalty, immediate loss of your turn, if something from those lists is brought up or mishandled.

By creating a relationship between the fiction, the fiction-facing mechanics, and the support mechanics, Lines and Veils have been integrated into the game. They are both fictionally realized, and essential to play. You cannot skip them without skipping over and important part of how the game is played.

When someone pushes past established boundaries, the game says to you “tell them that they have pushed past your boundaries,” and then gives them consequences for it. Players have to care about each others’ boundaries not *just* because they want to, but also because there is a mechanical impetus to.

## So how do you do that?

You have some examples of how other games have integrated support tools into their structure. But I can very well imagine that it is daunting to go from what you’ve seen described here to integrating mechanics into your own games. That is completely reasonable!

I’m going to walk you through the design process I follow when I am working on a game.

1. Identify the difficult situations that may come up in the process of playing your game
2. Identify the skills necessary to avoid those situations, to process the feelings that come with those situations, or to cope with the feelings that come with those situations
3. Identify tools and mechanics that can help players develop those skills
   1. If no such tool or mechanic exists, write one yourself
4. Integrate the tools and mechanics into the structures of play

1) Identify the difficult situations that may come up in the process of playing your game

Games can inspire a variety of emotional states in players. They can set into play difficult circumstances that players aren’t equipped to handle.

The first thing I do when I’m making a game is think about what kinds of situations are likely to come up.

In a game about romance, I might think about situations where one person pushes past another’s boundaries (because they are too excited, couldn’t identify them, or any number of other reasons). Or maybe when someone pressures someone into something too quickly.

In a game about traumatic experiences, I can imagine players facing content that causes feelings in them that they cannot process or handle. I can imagine players getting so invested in what is happening that conflict between characters becomes conflict between players, or that fictional outcomes become outcomes for the person themself. I can imagine players becoming distressed and detached from the game without being able to communicate their needs.

I’m sure you can think of other kinds of situations that might come up, especially for your own game. If you can’t, try to show it to a friend and ask for their thoughts, or try to playtest and think through what things would be tough for you to handle.

2) Identify the skills necessary to avoid, resolve, or process those situations.

You’ve figured out what kinds of situations might come up that players will struggle with. Now that you know what those situations are, what kinds of skills can players use to resolve them?

Here are some examples of skills that players may need to use in emotionally difficult situations. I don’t think this list is exhaustive, by any means! I’m sure you can think of specific skills that you’ve had to use in games that I haven’t thought of.

* Apologizing to your friends in a way that communicates your sincere contrition
* Setting and enforcing boundaries without holding yourself back or feeling guilty
* Asking for help when you need it
* Offering help when you are able to follow through
* Processing feelings
* Complimenting your friends
* De-roling (i.e. separating yourself from the situations and characters you played)
* De-escalating conflicts
* Mediating conflicts

One of the reasons that support design can feel difficult is that there are so many valid skills that a player can use to resolve a difficult situation, and there are many ways to help players develop those skills. Which skill is it valuable to focus on? It’s a legitimately difficult question.

Here are a couple of ways that I use to identify a skill that will be valuable for me to focus on:

1. Think about the skills have you struggled to develop, and what ways you practiced them
2. Think about what skills have the most overlap with the game you’re writing
3. Think about the skills you have a really solid grasp on, that you feel like you could teach others to use well

The truth is that most of the skills you’d teach players of your games aren’t things many people have mastered. No matter the skill you want to help them with, there are going to be a lot of people who will benefit from your insight.

3) Identify tools and mechanics that can help players develop those skills

a) If no such tool or mechanic exists, write one yourself

This is, perhaps out of all of the steps on the list, the easiest to do. There are quite a number of tools that have been developed to help players support each other. In this compilation of support tools, I’ve even grouped them by the skill they can help teach!

Of course, not all tools and mechanics that have been developed are in this compilation. You’ll have to use your own abilities of analysis to look at a mechanic and see what kinds of skills it can help players develop. If you aren’t sure, you can compare it to existing mechanics and see what it resembles.

And not every skill has a mechanic developed to help address it. There are times when you will come upon something you want to teach to players and there won’t be anything existing to help address it.

If you are stuck and can’t think of anything, the advice I give in the “What Happens When Tools Fail You?” section for building new tools from the bones of the old can help you here. Think of a skill in a similar context and find tools that help address that skill: what can you learn from them and apply to the skill you’re working towards?

4) Integrate the tools and mechanics into the structures of play

Whereas 3) might be the easiest item on the list, I think this is the item that causes the most confusion. I said earlier that a mechanic is integrated when it is necessary in order to play the game. But how you take a mechanic or tool and integrate it might be unclear.

The way that I like to approach this is to pick one of these:

* Pick a moment of ritual in the game and insert the mechanic (a pause, a transition, an introduction, an ending, etc)
* Frame it as a fundamental part of the game (a basic move, a key mechanic of the game)

For mechanics that fit well into moments of ritual (e.g. check ins, deroling mechanics, and affirmations) I like to do the former. For mechanics that are more important to be used in the moment, the latter.

Either way, I want players to feel supported by the text when they invoke the mechanic. I want the text to convey how important this mechanic is to the group’s functioning. Just *saying* it might be enough for some groups, but making it incontrovertible means making it front and center.

But I talked a lot about a mechanic being “natural” earlier, didn’t I? Just being integrated isn’t the same as being natural. How can we make a mechanic natural? That is where the placement within the structure of the game matters.

In **A Knife**, the mechanic of picking up the knife is made natural by making it part of the physical act of play. Players must push the knife back and forth between each other, so picking the knife up is a natural action to do. Moving the knife away from the line between the players shows that play is out of order.

So integrating a mechanic isn’t *just* taking it and adding it into a part of play - it’s connecting it to the rest of the ligatures of your game. Sometimes adding a mechanic to a part of play is enough for it to be connected to your game! Sometimes adding words that connect it thematically is enough.

But more often than not in my experience, it takes a little more effort to integrate mechanics. That’s okay! Sometimes it takes time and thought to figure out how to synthesize these things together. Sometimes you have to try it out and see how the mechanics play together. You’ll mess it up and it’ll be awkward and weird.

But, just as much as it’s hard, it *matters*. Being able to make these mechanics work in this way makes them accessible to people they otherwise wouldn’t be. You’ll be helping the people who play your game to have the kind of experience you want them to have - one that doesn’t leave them hurt and alone, suffering without support or cause.

Thank you for reading this. I hope it can help you, and I hope you take this message from me to heart: you can do this. I’m proud of you for trying.

Love,

Natalie