

Teaching During Tense Political Times

Jane Abbott & Ray Feller | October 29, 2024

For the chat, while we're waiting to start: share some of the worries you have about teaching during tense political times.

Norms for our conversation today

- All are welcome in this conversation! Any space could have people who are on either side of an issue, or who are apathetic about it. We invite everyone!
- Format: We will both do some speaking and sharing, but will also be asking questions for you to answer in the chat. Later we will also have a break-out room activity
- Note: We will share some of the comments/questions from the chat along with the recording, but they will be anonymized.
- We want this to be useful for you, so please feel welcome to share questions, ideas, or worries along the way

1. Guiding Principles for Yourself as a Person

Think about your own needs ahead of time.

- it might be a long night on Tuesday—plan for that rather than hoping it won't be
 - have someone with whom you can express your feelings and concerns
 - think ahead about the activities that help you when you are stressed and plan ahead to include them in your day/week
- For the chat: Name a tool you use to manage stress.

2. Guiding Principles for Yourself as an Instructor

Plan ahead as much as you can—for your sake and your students’.

- Identify contingencies for students’ potential needs—preferably this will not involve you having to manage a lot of e-mails that day
- You may want to plan flexibility in your course requirements
- For the chat: What do you plan to do in your classes/work spaces? (It can be something you already planned or something you have just come up with today!)

3. Guiding Principles for Your Students as People

You/we can acknowledge that things are tense without needing to field a discussion.

- some students could be relieved, while others could be struggling with intense feelings: fear, anger, sadness, and more... and some students will not be engaged in it at all
 - keep in mind that there are many populations: students voting for the first time, international students who are not voting but will still be affected by the decision, etc.
 - whatever the position: no one needs to be alone
 - it will take time, intention, and patience to find our way through as a community
 - we need times and places to engage with challenging topics—we also need times and places to retreat
- For the chat: What are you worried about in your classroom or workspace?

4. Guiding Principles for Your Students as Community Members

Remember that people of good will can have very different views.

- Views are grounded in values, which may not be evident.
- People are mostly well intentioned (though it may not always seem that way).
- We are wired so that we frequently misinterpret or misunderstand each other.
- Curiosity and compassion will help us understand each other.
- Considering our own and each others' underlying values can help us find compassion, even common ground.

A reflection on values that you might find useful

Research into Moral Foundations Theory shows that these six moral foundations account for most of the differences in the way we see the world.

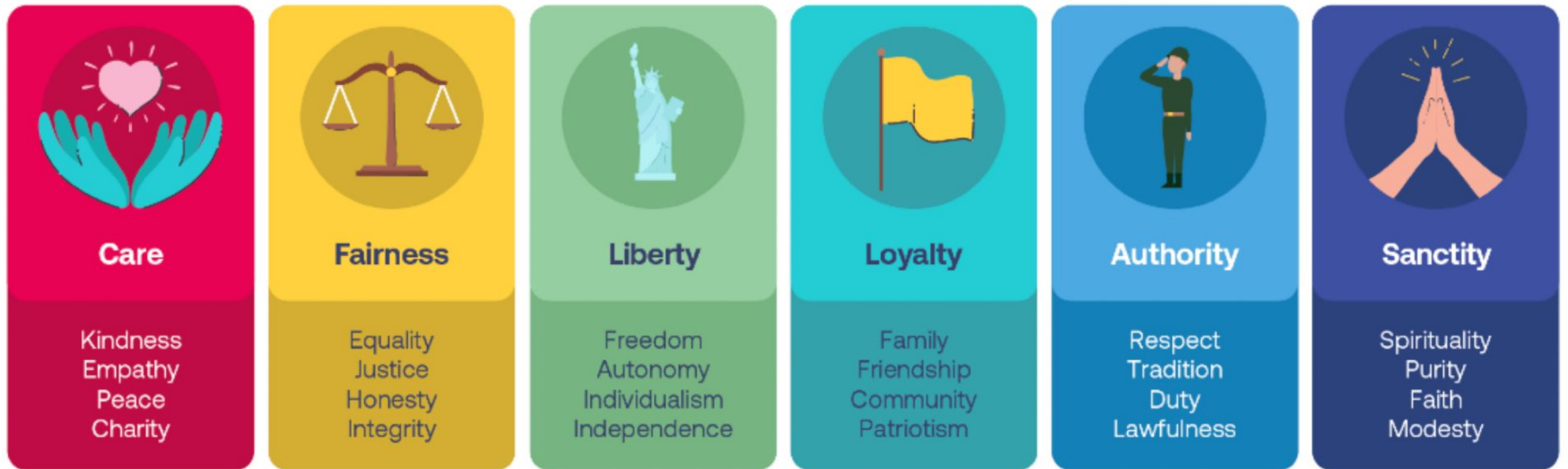
Culture, upbringing, and life experiences lead each of us to prioritize them in different ways and to different degrees, resulting in our particular, individual worldview.



A reflection on values that you might find useful

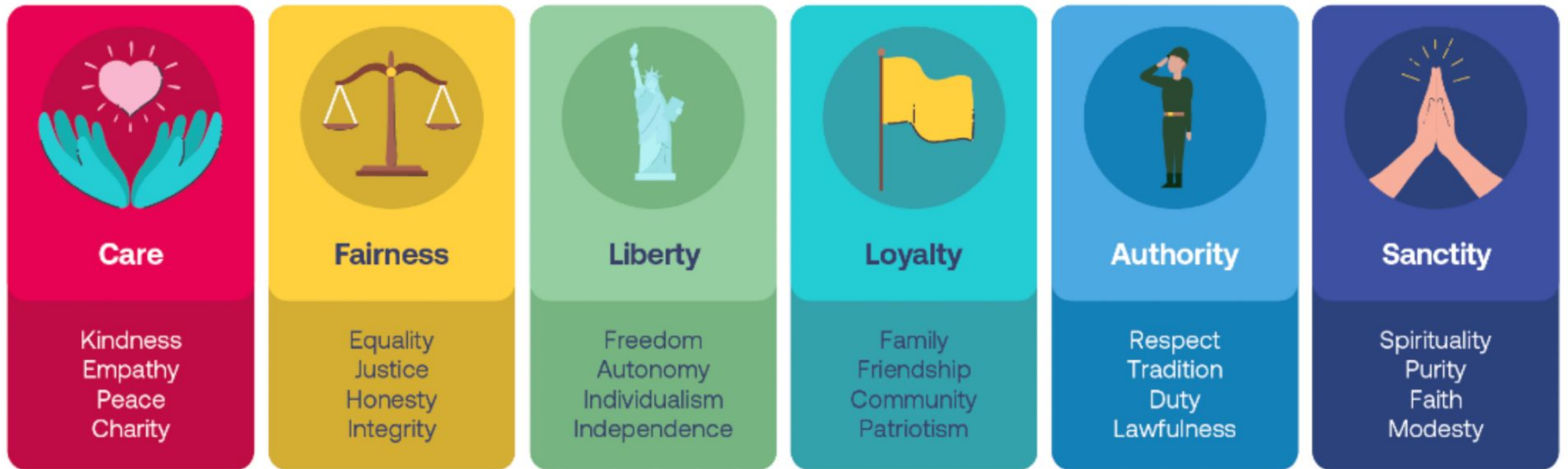
They underpin our core values, which powerfully influence our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It's as if we each have a moral filter through which we process the world.

There is, of course, much more to be said about this, but a discussion guided by some reflective questions can illuminate this concept, leading to increased understanding and openness.



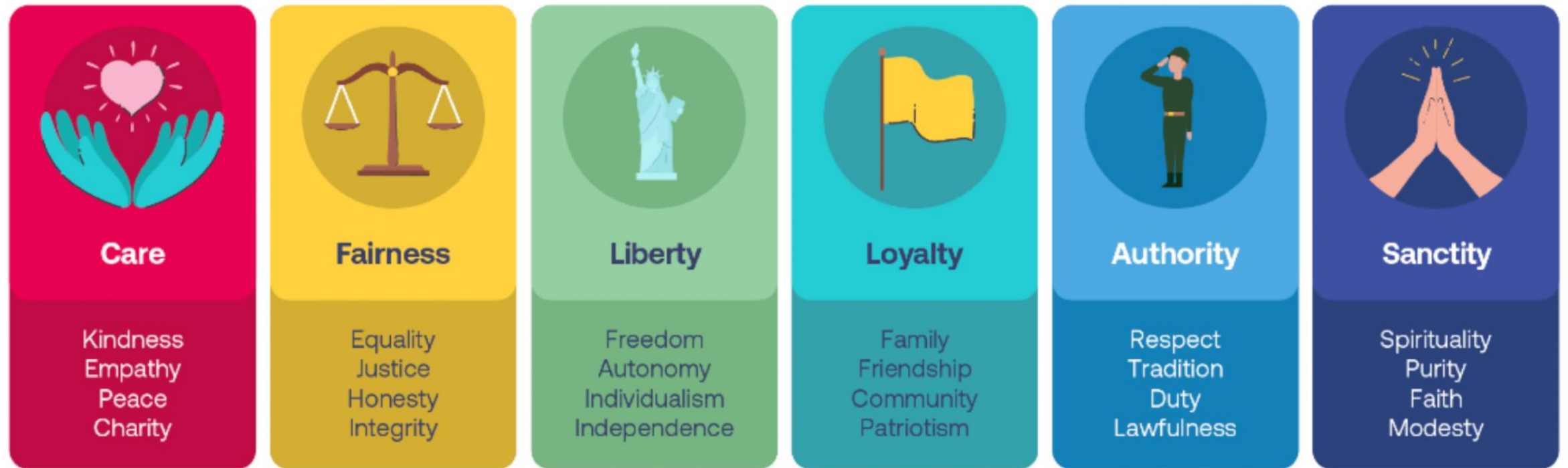
Choose one question to share about in your group:

1. Which of these moral foundations were you taught growing up? Which are most important to you now?
2. Think of a person who has shaped your worldview. What values have they instilled in you?
3. Tell a story about how one of these showed up in your life recently.
4. Have you changed your view of one of these? How did that happen?
5. Or have you changed your view about some important issue in your life? How did *that* happen?



A reflection on values that you might find useful

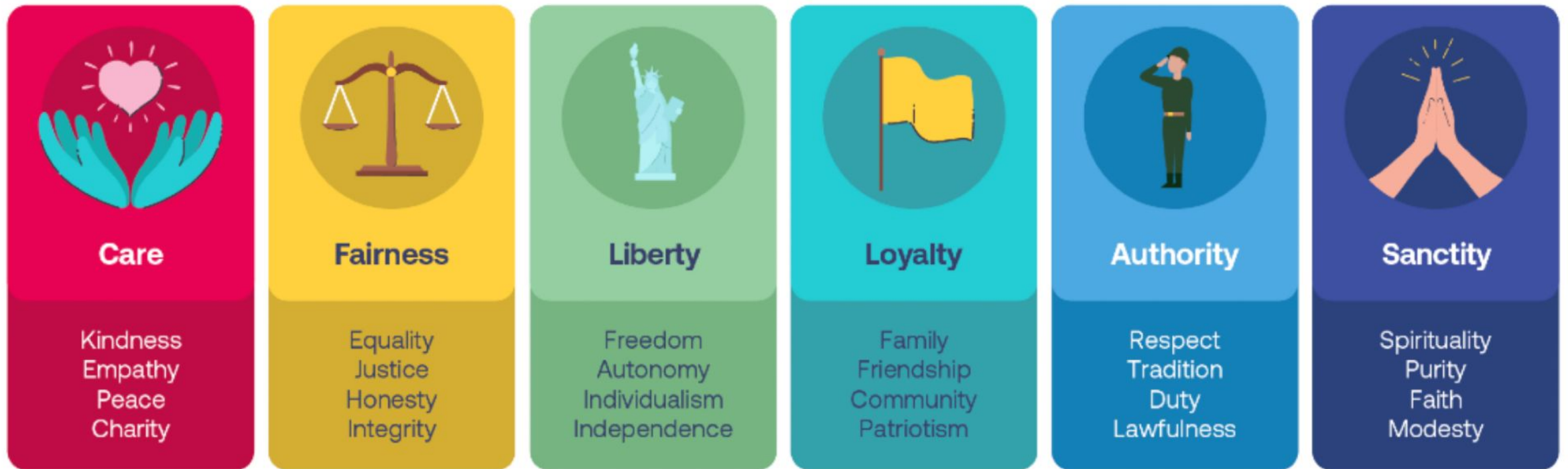
1. What did you notice in other people's sharing?
2. Did anyone's sharing surprise you?
3. What was it like for you to respond to these questions, and to hear from others?



A reflection on values that you might find useful

When in a disagreement with someone and you find yourself thinking, “How can they possibly believe *that?*”...

...try asking yourself instead, “What would lead a reasonable, well-intentioned person to think that?”



In Summary

Acknowledge the difficulty of the time we're in.

Listen as best we can.

Offer what we authentically can.

Remember to ask for help.

Some Resources for the Community

- For individual students who are struggling:

Undergraduates: Student Support Services (S3) s3-support@mit.edu

* We will have extra staff on our drop-ins 10-12 and 2-4 *

Graduate students: GradSupport GradSupport@mit.edu

- Beginning the week of October 28th, the DoingWell page will launch a banner to promote the [Take Care of Yourself](#) page. This is a centralized website that lists tips, resources, and supports (including election specific supports) available for students during challenging times. There is also a resource page in the Faculty/Staff section
- At 12:10pm on Wednesday, November 6th, the Office of Religious, Spiritual, and Ethical Life (ORSEL) will hold space in the MIT Chapel for stillness and reflection through their Music in the Chapel program.
- For more information on constructive dialogue on campus:
co-efficient@mit.edu

Resources for the Community

- Wellbeing and Belonging will host a series of events and tabling during Election week to offer students “A Pause to Take Care of Yourself.” These will be designed to promote taking a moment to prioritize your wellbeing to avoid becoming overwhelmed and provide an opportunity to share available resources:
 - November 5th – Wellbeing Lab Pop-up for Sloan Students
 - November 6th – Wellbeing and Belonging will provide lunch and relaxation activities for SWB staff; staff can grab food to go or stay and take a break
 - November 7th – Wellbeing and Belonging will be tabling in Lobby 10 offering activities, snacks, and resources for students
- On November 7th, VPR will host a trauma informed Yoga class for students.
- During the week of November 11th, Disability and Access Services and S3 will co-sponsor a free Coffee Break for all students. SWB staff will be present to talk with students and offer any needed support.

For the chat: Are there any other resources people want to share?

Guiding Principles for Us All

The MIT community is driven by a shared purpose: to make a better world through [education](#), [research](#), and [innovation](#).

We are fun and quirky, elite but not elitist, inventive and artistic, obsessed with numbers, and welcoming to talented people regardless of where they come from.

(<https://web.mit.edu/about/>)

Guiding Principles for Us All

We can find our way through this difficult time with our relationships intact, even strengthened.

- It will take time, intention, and patience.
- We can do excellent work together even when we disagree.
- It takes practice.
- Ask questions with curiosity and listen to understand.
- Notice what we share.

The deepest need in every human being is the desire to be heard.

- William James.



Additional questions or thoughts?

Reminder that we will distribute the recording and an anonymized version of the chat.