

Overview of Dialogue Circles

Purpose: Found in the traditions of most cultures and applied in many modern-day contexts, circle processes promote openness and shared voice amongst individuals of a group in order to celebrate, build community, make decisions, or address conflict.

Key Features

Circular Seating (preferably without any tables). A circle emphasizes equality and connectedness. It improves focus and visibility amongst the group.

Keeper. The facilitator of the circle, often called a keeper, assists the group in creating and maintaining a collective space in which each participant feels safe to speak honestly and openly. The keeper monitors the quality of the collective space and stimulates the reflections of the group through questions or topic suggestions. The keeper does not control the issues raised by the group or try to move the group toward a particular outcome.

Opening ceremony. Circles use openings and closings to mark the circle as a special, even sacred, space in which participants are present with themselves and one another in a way that is different from an ordinary meeting or group.

Centerpiece. The centerpiece usually sits on the floor in the center of the open space inside the circle of chairs. Typically there is a cloth or mat as the base. The centerpiece may include items representing the values of the core self, the foundational principles of the process, a shared vision of the group. They can be collectively built with more and more representation of the group and the individuals in the circle as time goes on.

Values/ guidelines. Guidelines are adopted by a consensus of the participants to act as supportive reminders of what will make the space safe and encourage openness. Two guidelines that usually essential for this purpose, and may be proposed by the keeper, are voluntariness (anyone can pass the talking piece without talking or leave the circle at any time) and confidentiality (what is shared in the circle will not be discussed outside of the circle without permission).

Talking piece. Circles use a talking piece to support the sanctity of the space, full expression of emotions, thoughtful reflection and listening, an unhurried pace, and equal voice. During rounds, the talking piece is passed from person to person around the rim of the circle. Only the person holding the talking piece may speak; all others listen. Where possible the talking piece represents something important to the group.

Guiding questions. Circles use prompting questions or themes at the beginning of many rounds to stimulate conversation about the main interest of the circle. Careful design of the questions is important to facilitate a discussion that goes beyond surface responses.

Closing ceremony. Closings acknowledge the efforts of the circle, affirm the interconnectedness of those present, convey a sense of hope for the future, and prepare participants to return to the ordinary space of their lives.

Sample Short Circle Flow

Opening Ceremony – Poem, reading, song, activity, visualization, meditation, yoga (see below)

Explain Centerpiece/Talking Piece (as needed)

Establish Guidelines – During first session, group brainstorms and agrees upon guidelines that will support a safe and open space. Ask “what requests to you have for yourself and others to help bring out your authentic self?” then seek consensus on each request. Write down the guidelines and make them visible at all subsequent sessions where they can be referred to, revisited, and even revised.

Opening Round – The prompting question in this round can be used to break the ice (for groups with individuals that are new to each other) or check in on how everyone is doing (see below).

Topic Round/Activity – See Appendix or Help Increase the Peace Program manual (<http://afsc.org/resource/hipp-manual>).

Closing Round – The prompting question in this round may provide closure by asking participants to reflect upon their experiences in the circle or share how these may be carried into the future.

Closing Ceremony – Poem, reading, song, activity, visualization, meditation, yoga (see below).

Sample Prompting Questions/Topics for Circles

Exploring values:

- What value would you like to offer for our space together?
- What value do you think would help us have this conversation in a way that causes no further harm?
- When you are being human, at your best, what are you? (in a word or short phrase)
- Imagine you are in conflict with a person who is important in your life. What values do you want to guide your conduct as you try to work out that conflict?
- What is your passion?
- What do you keep returning to in your life?
- What touches your heart?
- What gives you hope?
- What demonstrates respect?

Establishing guidelines:

- What agreements would you like for our circle to feel that you can speak honestly and respectfully?

Getting acquainted:

- What brought you to this job?
- How long have you worked at the DOC and where?
- What do you do to release stress from the job?
- Share a funny story from your work.
- What do you appreciate about your work?
- How would your best friend describe you?
- What would you not want to change about your life?
- If you had an unexpected free day, what would you like to do?
- What is your cultural heritage and what role does it play in your life?

Storytelling from our lives to share who we are and what has shaped us (to build understanding and empathy)

Invite participants to share:

- A time when you had to let go of control.
- A time when you were outside your comfort zone.
- A life experience when you “made lemonade out of lemons.”
- An experience of transformation when, out of a crisis or difficulty, you discovered a gift in your life.
- A time when you had to hear something very difficult from someone and afterward were grateful that it happened.
- An experience of letting go of anger or resentment.
- An experience of feeling that you did not fit in.
- An experience of causing harm to someone and then dealing with it in a way you felt good about.
- A time when you acted on your core values even though others were not.
- An experience where you discovered that someone was very different from the negative assumptions you first made about that person.
- A time in your life when you experienced justice.
- An embarrassing moment that you can laugh at now.

Exploring issues, concerns, conflicts:

- How have you been affected by this situation?
- How do you feel about this situation?
- What’s been the hardest part of this situation for you?
- How have you been affected mentally, physically and emotionally by this situation?
- What can be done to make things better?

Taking responsibility:

- How have we each contributed to this situation, and how can each of us, by taking responsibility, act differently now?
- What needs to happen now to create a healthy workplace?
- Does anyone have anything to clear up with someone else in the circle?
- What is unspoken in the group that blocks good relationships or possible success? What do we need to do now to repair the harm that happened and to make sure it doesn’t happen again?
- What change would you like to see in your work group? What can you do to promote that change?
- In your experience what supports healing?

Clarifying expectations about the future:

- What do you expect to do differently as a result of this circle?
- What do you expect to be different (in your work unit or in this work relationship) after this circle?
- How will you know if things are better?
- What follow-up do you want to make sure that the understandings we have reached are working?

Toward the end of a circle:

- Is there anything you came with that you would like to leave behind?
- What are you taking from this circle that supports your healing?
- Where do you see yourself moving forward?
- What have you learned?
- What can you take away that is useful to you?
- How will these insights help you in the next two weeks?

Links to Sample Opening and Closing Ceremony Materials

Quotes: <http://www.inspirational-quotes.info/>

Readings: <http://www.doc.state.mn.us/rj/Inspirational.htm>

Deep breathing and relaxation: <http://www.innerhealthstudio.com/relaxation-scripts.html>