

Center for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking

An International Resource Center in Support of Restorative Justice Dialogue, Research and Training
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Talking Circles

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Talking circles, peacemaking circles, or healing circles are deeply rooted in the traditional practices of indigenous people. In North America, they are widely used among the First Nation people of Canada and the hundreds of tribes of Native Americans in this country, most notably among the Ojibwe and Lakota in this region. The circle process establishes a very different style of communication than most from European tradition are used to. Rather than aggressive debate and challenging each other, often involving only a few more assertive individuals, the circle process establishes a safe non-hierarchical place in which all present have the opportunity to speak without interruptions. Rather than active verbal facilitation, communication is regulated through the passing of a talking piece (an object of special meaning or symbolism to the circle facilitator who is usually called the circle keeper). The talking piece fosters respectful listening and reflection. It prevents one to one debating or attacking. After brief opening comments by the circle keeper about the purpose of the talking circle, listing of ground rules and asking for additional contributions to the ground rules, the circle keeper says a few things about the talking piece and then passes it to the person on the left, clockwise. Only the person with the talking piece can speak. If others jump in with comments, the circle keeper reminds them of the ground rules and re-focuses on the person with the talking piece. Participants are not required to speak: this would create an un-safe, pressured tone to the circle. If someone feels unable to speak they can simply pass the talking piece to the next person. The circle process has been brought into European culture by many over the years, including community activists in the restorative justice movement and activists in the feminist movement, most notably Christine Baldwin, author of Calling the Circle, The First and Future Culture, 1998, Bantam Books.

Purpose: To create a safe, non-judgmental, place to discuss an issue or react to a speaker or film that allows the opportunity for each person to speak, without interruptions.

Intent: To engage in a sharing of authentic personal reactions and feelings that are owned by each individual and acknowledged by others, without judgment or condemnation.

Ground Rules:

1. Listen with respect.
2. Each person gets a chance to talk.
3. One person talks at a time. Don't cut people off.
4. Speak for yourself and not as the representative of any group.
5. It's OK to disagree. No name-calling or attacking.

Guidelines for Participation:

1. Listening from the heart
 - attentive
 - sincere
 - bearing witness
 - not active/reactive
 - deep compassionate listening

2. Speaking from the heart
 - honesty
 - from our own true stories
 - sharing our journey
 - not philosophical or abstract
3. Speaking concisely
 - clarity
 - simplicity of language
 - lean speech
 - not verbose or rambling
4. Spontaneity
 - not a prepared statement
 - not rehearsed
 - honesty

(adapted from *The Way of Council*, by Jack Zimmerman & Virginia Coyle, 1996)