

About Listening Circles

Circles are perhaps the oldest form of social technology known to humankind and their purpose varies according to the situation and the needs of those who call together the Circle. There can be Circles for listening, talking, community building, peacemaking, restoring damaged relationships, and healing, among others. We are indebted to indigenous elders from the Pacific North West of North America for sharing this tradition with our teachers in Circle Work.¹ Circles help us learn to slow the pace of conversation so we can listen more deeply and carefully to one another and give priority to understanding points of view other than our own. By sitting in Circle when studying about genocide and colonialism, we aim to teach skills and cultivate abilities that can serve as an antidote to othering, scapegoating, and bystanding.

In Circles all voices are equal and all experiences valued. Those who sit in Circle, over time, learn to lighten the grip of judgment, welcome open communication, and pay attention to the needs of others. Circles help us listen without distraction, release anxiety over being interrupted, and seek understanding over agreement.

A key to Circles is the willingness of all participants to speak from personal experience, share the airtime, and trust the Talking Piece,² which is often passed to the left from one person to another around the Circle. In Circles no one grabs the talking piece or speaks out of turn, nor is there coercion to speak. If a person prefers to pass, they can offer the gift of silence and hand the Talking Piece to the person on their left.

Instructions

Share the origins of Circles, the role of the talking piece, and their purpose. Circles can be done in a large group or small groups. They usually begin with a values-clarification question, such as: What values would you like to see upheld during our time together? Then, the Circle can focus on the issue at hand.

¹ See Kay Pranis, *The Little Book of Circle Processes*. (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005).

² We use beach stones as Talking Pieces. Teachers can use other objects: for example, feathers, driftwood, shells, or any object from the natural world. When not available, anything that can be easily passed will do.