

Talking Circles

Talking circles, peacemaking circles, or healing circles are deeply rooted in the traditional practices of indigenous people.

The circle process establishes a very different style of communication. 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 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.

Purpose: To create a safe, non-judgmental place for any discussion that allows 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*
 - look at the person who is talking
 - remember to sit quietly
 - sincerely think about what is being said
 - nod your head
 - relate to what is being said
2. *Speaking from the heart*
 - share honestly
 - speak from your own true stories
 - sharing your journey or experience
 - do not be philosophical or abstract
3. *Speaking concisely*
 - express with clarity as best you can
 - simplicity of language
 - lean speech – choose your words wisely
 - avoid being verbose or rambling
4. *Spontaneity*
 - not a prepared statement
 - not rehearsed
 - share honestly

Process:

1. *Opening comments by circle facilitator/keeper*
 - Set a relaxed and open tone
 - Welcome everyone and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere
 - Explain the purpose of the talking circle
 - Present above 5 basic ground rules and ask for additional thoughts about ground rules
 - Explain how a process we have learned from the wisdom of numerous indigenous cultures, most specifically Native American, will be used to create a safe and respectful place for sharing our thoughts and feelings. A talking piece will be passed around the circle and only the person with the piece has the opportunity to speak. If for some reason you do not feel comfortable or able to speak pass the talking piece to the next person
2. *First pass of the talking piece: Introductions*
3. *Second pass: Second question to reflect on*
4. *Third pass: Third question to reflect on*
5. *Fourth pass: Fourth question to reflect on (if time allows)*
6. *Facilitate open discussion/dialogue–no talking piece (if time allows).*
7. *Closing comments and thanks for participants' contributions.*

Talking circles are an excellent format to use frequently in classes and training seminars to actively engage participants in the sharing of perspectives and respectful, non-judgmental deep listening.