

Guidelines for Talking, Healing, and Sharing Circles

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Talking, sharing and healing circles are useful when the topic under consideration has no right or wrong answer, or when people need to share feelings. Moral or ethical issues can often be dealt with in this way without offending anyone. The purpose of talking circles is to create a safe environment for people to share their point of view and experiences with others. This process helps people gain a sense of trust in each other. They come to believe that what they say will be listened to and accepted without criticism. They also gain an appreciation for points of view other than their own. During the circle time, people are free to respond however they want as long as they follow these guidelines.

- All comments should be addressed directly to the question or issue, not to comments that another participant has made. Both negative and positive comments about what anyone else in the circle says should be avoided. Just say what you want to say in a positive manner. Speak from the heart.
- Only one person speaks at a time. Everyone else should be listening in a non-judgmental way to what the speaker is saying. Some groups find it useful to signify in some way who has the floor. Going around the circle systematically is one way to achieve this. Another is to use some object (such as a stone or stick) which the person who is speaking holds and then passes to the next person who has indicated a desire to speak.
- Silence is an acceptable response. No one should be pressured at any time to contribute if they feel reticent to do so. There must be no negative consequences, however subtle, for saying “I pass.”
- At the same time, everyone must feel invited to participate. Some mechanism for ensuring that a few vocal people don’t dominate the discussion should be built in. For instance, no

one speaks twice until everyone in the circle has been given the opportunity to speak once. An atmosphere of patient and non-judgmental listening usually helps the shy people to speak out and the louder ones to moderate their participation. Going around the circle in a systematic way, inviting each person to participate simply by mentioning each name in turn can be an effective way to even out participation.

- It is often better to hold talking circles in groups of five to fifteen rather than with a large group, because in smaller groups everyone has time to say what they need to say without feeling pressured by time.
- The group leader facilitates the discussion by acknowledging contributions in a non-judgmental way (that is, by avoiding comments such as “good comment” or “great” which can be seen as making comparisons between different contributions), and by clarifying comments when necessary, (e.g. “If I understand what you’re saying, you’re...”).
- No comments which put down others or ourselves are allowed. Some agreed-upon way of signaling the speaker when this is occurring should be established. Self put downs include such comments as, “I don’t think anyone will agree with me, but...” or “I’m not very good at...”
- Speakers should feel free to express themselves in any way that is comfortable: by sharing a personal story, by using examples or metaphors, by making analytical statements, etc.
- Some groups have found it useful to encourage participants to focus on consciously sending the speaker loving and compassionate feelings. In this way listeners are supporting the speaker and not tuning out so they can think about what they will say when it is their turn.
- *(Excerpted from The Sacred Tree Curriculum Guide produced by The Four Worlds International Institute, 1988) These guidelines for Talking, Sharing and Healing Circles were passed down to our Circle in 1975, during the early part of our spiritual journey , by Beloved Elders Abe Burnstick, Dakota and Eddie Bellrose, Cree. Both Abe and Eddie made their journey to the "Other Side Camp" years ago . In this digital age, what these Beloved Elder's shared, also give some good guidance on how to share our perspectives, experiences and feelings with one another.*

