

Core Assumptions of Circle Processes

As outlined in *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community* and shared by many traditions from around the world, these are assumptions about what makes human beings tick. They form the rationale for why there is power in the circle. We invite you to reflect on them and examine your own core assumptions.



1. The core self in everyone is good, wise, and powerful
2. The world is profoundly interconnected
3. All human beings desire to be in good relationship
4. All humans have gifts and everyone is needed for what they bring
5. Everything we need to make positive change is already here
6. Human beings are holistic
7. We need practices to build habits of living from the core self

Guiding Principles of Circle Keeping

Understanding these guiding principles allows the circle keeper to tap into the power of circle practice without robotically following a set of instructions. It will make circle keeping more authentic and enjoyable, unleash your creativity to experiment and adapt circles to new settings and purposes, and allow you to respond dynamically to unanticipated challenges.

Circles are a special space to share from the heart and the core self; to promote equality as humans and break down social hierarchies.

Circles welcome emotional expression as a natural and healthy part of being human and connected to others with no responsibility on anyone else to change or fix a person who is experiencing emotions.

Circles prioritize relationships and long-term transformation over short-term, unilateral problem solving.

In Circles, we work towards shared understanding, accountability, leadership, power, and decision making. We slow down and reflect, to be fully present to the experience.

Circles are all inclusive, inviting everyone's participation as a human who is part of a community; there are no observers or "neutral" facilitators.

Circles are non-coercive, offering participants informed choice around whether and how they will share, participate, or even attend.

Circle keepers are entrusted to care for the integrity of the process, not determine the outcome.

Circle keepers are most active in guiding the process when participants are unfamiliar, increasingly allowing the circle to govern itself as participants become more familiar and invested.

Circles, and its elements, are one effective strategy for human connection, however an experienced keeper or the consensus of participants can intentionally change or choose other strategies that are judged to better serve the underlying purpose and group

When in doubt about how to handle a situation as a circle keeper, wait calmly to determine whether the situation really threatens the integrity of the process and/or the circle self-governs to come back to the process; if not, then guide the group back to the basics of the process, the purpose of the circle, and/or its own values/ guidelines; then, if needed, name the situation in observational terms and ask the group what their experience is and/or what to do about it.

1. **Circles are an effective, but not exclusive, strategy for human connection**
2. Circles are a special space which value:
 - a. **Speaking and listening from the heart**
 - i. Emotional expression
 - ii. Slowing down
 - iii. Presence with hard emotions over “fixing” them
 - b. **Relationships over unilateral problem solving**
 - c. **Sharing power, leadership**
 - i. Equality of people, participation as humans not titles
 - ii. Inclusion, no observers or “neutral” facilitators
 - iii. Consensus decision-making and mutual accountability
 - iv. Informed choice, lack of coercion, voluntariness
3. Circle keepers:
 - a. Care for the **integrity of the process**, not the content or outcome
 - b. Are **most active when participants are unfamiliar with process**
 - c. **Allow the circle to govern itself** as participants become more familiar and invested
4. **When not sure what to do:**
 - a. **Breathe, wait calmly**
 - i. Is the **integrity of the process** threatened?
 - ii. Is the **Circle coming back** to the process by itself? If not,
 - b. **Guide the group back to**
 - i. Basics of the process, and/or
 - ii. Purpose of the Circle and/or
 - iii. It’s own values/guidelines
 - c. If needed,
 - i. **Name the situation**
 - ii. **Ask group about** their experience of the situation, and/or what to do about it

Overview of Circle Process in the Peacemaking Circle Tradition



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Purpose: Found in the traditions of many indigenous cultures and applied to 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 harm/conflict.

Key Features:

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

The Keeper facilitates the circle, holding a collective space and process that encourages participant to be present, open, vulnerable, reflective, and compassionate. The keeper may contribute their own voice to the circle, but does not control the issues raised by the group or try to move the group toward a particular outcome.

Opening and Closing Ceremonies mark the Circle as a special, even sacred, space in which participants are present with themselves and one another in an interconnected way that is different from other settings. They may include mindfulness moments, readings, quotations, movement, music, lighting candles, and/or ringing bells. Openings set the tone of the Circle and closings transition participants back to their ordinary lives.

The Centerpiece sits on the floor in the center of the open space inside the circle of chairs. Typically, a cloth or mat, the centerpiece holds talking pieces and other items of personal and collective significance such as the group's written values and vision of the group, as well as candles, bells, pens, or other objects used during the Circle. The group can be involved in collectively building the composition of the centerpiece over time.

The Talking Piece is an object of personal or shared significance used to support the sanctity of the space, full expression of emotions, thoughtful reflection and listening, an unhurried pace, and equal voice. During rounds, it is passed from person to person around the rim of the Circle. The person with the talking piece is invited to speak authentically and all others to listen.

Values to hold the space are elicited from the group early on and often memorialized in written form on the centerpiece. They can be the basis upon which participants adopt **Guidelines** of what will make the space safe and encourage openness. Three important guidelines that the keeper may propose are voluntariness (anyone can pass the talking piece without talking or leave the Circle at any time); respecting the talking piece; and confidentiality (what is shared in the circle will not be discussed outside of the Circle without permission).

Guiding Questions are open-ended prompts that stimulate deep sharing during rounds.

Model Circle Flow

Welcome

Opening Ceremony – Mindfulness moment, poem, reading, quotation, song, activity, visualization, meditation, yoga.

Explain and Introduce Centerpiece/Talking Piece (as needed)

State the Purpose – Remind participants of the purpose of the Circle.

Opening Round – For participants to get acquainted (for groups with individuals that are new to each other) or check in on how everyone is doing.

Generate Values/Guidelines – During the first session, the group shares grounding values and agrees to guidelines that will help bring these values to life. Ask “what proposed guidelines to you have for yourself and others to help bring out these values?” then seek consensus on each request. Write down the values and guidelines, making them a visible reminder at subsequent sessions.

Storytelling Rounds – To prompt the sharing of personal stories for greater understanding and connection in the Circle.

Exploring the Topic of the Circle – This is where the primary topic or purpose of the Circle is addressed through rounds and/or activities.

Closing Round – To provide closure by asking participants to reflect upon their experiences in the Circle or share how it may carry into the future.

Closing Ceremony – Mindfulness moment, poem, reading, quotation, song, activity, visualization, meditation, yoga.

Seven Key Assumptions Underlying Circle Processes:

The core self in everyone is human, wise, and powerful

Everything we need to make a positive change is already here

The world is profoundly interconnected

All humans have gifts and everyone is needed for the gifts they bring

Behind our defenses, all human beings desire to be in good relationship with others

Human beings are holistic

We need practices to build habits of living from the core self

Sample Guiding Questions and Prompts (See also *Circle Forward*, Appendix 1, p. 323-327)

Opening round:

- What brings you here today?
- How are you doing today?
- Describe your mood as if it were the weather (sunny, cloudy, etc)
- What would you like to get off your chest to be more present here?

Exploring values:

- What value do you think would help us have this conversation best?
- Imagine you are in conflict with a person who is important to you. What value would guide your conduct as you try to work it out?
- What principle do you keep returning to in your life?
- What quality do you have to offer this Circle?
- What value would you like manifest in Circle today?

Establishing guidelines:

- What agreements would you like to make for our Circle to fully live out our values?

Getting acquainted:

- What is something we wouldn't guess about you?
- What do you do to release stress?
- Share a funny story from your work/school.
- What do you appreciate about your work/school?
- 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 prompts from our lives to share who we are and what has shaped us (to build understanding and empathy)

- 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 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 did not.
- A time you discovered that someone was very different from the assumptions you first made about them.
- An embarrassing moment that you can laugh at now.
- An experience of feeling that you did not fit in.

Making decisions:

- What values or other criteria should guide our decision?
- What objections or concerns do you have about any given idea?
- How will you know if things are better or have worked?
- What are possible solutions or strategies?
- What needs to happen, by whom and when to implement this decision?

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?
- What can be done to make things better?
- Does anyone have anything to clear up with someone else in the Circle?
- How have we each contributed to this situation, and how can each of us, by taking responsibility, act differently now?

Addressing an incident of harm:

- What happened? How did you experience the incident?
- Who has been affected by the incident and how?
- In your experience what supports healing?
- What were you thinking and feeling at the time?
- What do we need to do now to repair the harm that happened and to make sure it doesn't happen again?

Closing round:

- 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 Resources for Opening and Closing Ceremonies (See also *Circle Forward*, Appendix 2, p. 329-394)

Readings: <http://www.keepinspiring.me/positive-inspirational-life-quotes/> or <http://www.doc.state.mn.us/rj/Inspirational.htm>

Sample activities: Help Increase the Peace Program manual (<http://afsc.org/resource/hipp-manual>).

Circle Facilitation Practice



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Model Circle Flow

Opening Ceremony – Mindfulness moment, poem, reading, quotation, song, activity, visualization, meditation, yoga.

Explain and Introduce Centerpiece/Talking Piece (as needed)

State the Purpose – Remind participants of the purpose of the Circle.

Guidelines and Agreements- State the three standard guidelines:

1. Respect the talking piece/Right to pass
2. Listen and speak from the heart
3. Confidentiality

Get consensus from the group. If there is disagreement ask what do we need to make the guidelines agreeable for everyone.

Opening Round – For participants to get acquainted (for groups with individuals that are new to each other) or check in on how everyone is doing.

Exploring the Topic of the Circle – This is where the primary topic or purpose of the Circle is addressed through rounds and/or activities. Write 1 to 2 questions.

Closing Round – To provide closure by asking participants to reflect upon their experiences in the Circle or share how it may carry into the future.

Closing Ceremony – Mindfulness moment, poem, reading, quotation, song, activity, visualization, meditation, yoga.

Restorative Practices Capacity Assessment and Accommodations Guide



Please use this form to identify and make accommodations for differences in the "key capacities" of participants that may arise from disability,

STEP ONE: Identify from records any known diagnoses, history of trauma, or IEP/504 plan that predictably affect the "key capacities" of participant(s), and indicate those on the chart, along with any accommodations they may recommend.

STEP TWO: Inquire with the referral source, parents/guardians, and/or other individuals with a close knowledge of the participant(s) about the participants' "key

STEP THREE: Note significant differences in "key capacities" through observation of the participant(s) during outreach or prep, and indicate those on the chart, along

Key Capacities	Indicate what concerns have been raised and by whom	If concerns are significant and credible, circle and/or write in the most relevant accommodation(s)
<p>Receptive language: Functionally understanding verbal and non-verbal language; responding clearly to questions, instructions, and body cues.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare target participant to signal when not understanding • Have facilitator and other participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ simplify their language ○ verbalize non-verbals ○ speak slower ○ articulate clearer • Use hearing aids • Use written communication, visual aids, and/or skits • Use an interpreter • Get assistance from family/guardian to re-state/summarize • Other
<p>Expressive language: Expressing functionally using verbal and nonverbal language; expressing clear thoughts and uses consistent body language.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare other participants to signal when they do not understand • Coach target participant to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ simplify their language ○ organize their thoughts before speaking ○ verbalize non-verbals ○ speak slower ○ articulate clearer • Use pre-prepared written script or recorded "testimonies" • Use written communication, visual aids, and/or skits • Use an interpreter • Get assistance from family/guardian to re-state/summarize • Other

<p>Pragmatic language: Understanding the balance of speaking and listening; taking turns speaking and listening without dominating, interrupting, or being silent/nonresponsive</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coach target participant to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ take turns ○ avoid interrupting ○ respond to questions • Use written script • Other _____
<p>Attention: Maintaining focus; sitting and listening for more than an hour.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shorten or speed up the process • Add movement breaks to the process • Use fidgets • Other _____
<p>Memory: Recalling events from the past; recounting things that have happened with consistency and detail</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage target participant to use notes or have a separate note taker • Use written scripts or storyboards to remember/remind about events • Use a proxy • Other _____
<p>Intellectual processing: Understanding complex or abstract information; following moral reasoning and logical arguments</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare target participant to signal when not understanding • Have facilitator and other participants simplify their ideas • Use written communication, visual aids, and/or skits • Get assistance from family/guardian to re-state/summarize • Other _____
<p>Emotional literacy: Identifying and expressing emotions; verbally and non-verbally articulating or exhibiting past or present sadness, remorse, anger, etc.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coach target participant to identify and express emotions • Use an emotional vocabulary chart • Use pre-prepared written script or recorded "testimonies" • Use written communication, visual aids, and/or skits • Get assistance from family/guardian to re-state/summarize • Other _____
<p>Emotional regulation: Controlling the physical responses to strong emotions; remaining non-aggressive and engaged</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice with target participant identifying and dealing with triggers • Prepare target participant to signal when needing a break or other support • Use sensory/somatic calming techniques (breathing) • Invite a professional support into the process • Other _____

NOTES:

- If you have the target participant or their guardian's consent, consider educating the other participants about any of the above differences in capacity, so that the target participant is not perceived as lacking honesty, sincerity, or empathy. This may be best conveyed by a specialist.
- If confusing to other participants, make sure to explain the purpose of any accommodations to participants, revealing only as much about the target participant's condition as you have consent to.