

A Guide to Hosting a Circle

During these times, there's so much in the collective realm that is alarming, painful, and very difficult to process. Despite this, many of us are processing our feelings alone, sitting at our screens. Or, we aren't processing at all – feeling flashes of emotion but quickly moving on, in busy days and demanding lives.

The following is a guide to hosting a gathering, a circle for a small group of people to come together to slow down, become more conscious of their own feelings and experience right now, put that experience into words, and be met in a spirit of loving witness by others in the circle.

Being together in this way, sharing aloud, and showing up without debating or advising each other has healing power.

Together, we can keep grounding ourselves, strengthening community, and regrounding in our values and our hope. We can keep renewing ourselves so that we can take positive action. This document includes a variety of resources for hosting such a circle.

Invitations

Reach out to a small group of your friends or close community members with an invite, for example:

I know we are all feeling a LOT about what's happening in the collective right now, and I'm hosting a circle for us to pause, check in with ourselves and share, and be in community with one another.

Or, there may be something that just happened in the news that you want to support people in processing, I know many of us are feeling a lot right now about the recent x. I'm hosting a circle for us to pause together, share and express our feelings, and reground in hope.

When you make your invitation, include a few words that **help people to take a pause and consider if this is the right fit for them**. For example, *This is a peer support circle, and is not therapy. We are gathering simply as human beings affected by what's happening in our [city, country, world – insert what makes sense for your context]. At times, though, we each need a stronger container of support – like one in a professional therapeutic setting. Consider if a peer gathering feels like the right support for you at this time.*

Meet in person, or if a virtual video call is better for your schedules and geographies, do that.

Circle Guidelines

Here are some **suggested guidelines** for the circle. Talk through these in the opening of your circle, and you can also send them to attendees in advance, if you would like.

- **Confidentiality.** What is shared with the group shouldn't be shared outside this group/gathering.
- **Self-Sovereignty.** Affirm that everyone attending is welcomed to find their own way through the gathering. Let them know: If things feel too intense during sharing or writing, and they need/want to take a break, you can do so. If you want to pass on sharing, know that is an option & welcomed. If this ends up not being a fit for you, it's totally okay to change your mind and step out.
- **No crosstalk, advice giving, or debating.** This is a gathering that's all about each person having a place to share their own experience and feelings, and to be met with present, loving witness from others. Make sure all understand to not give advice, or offer direct responses (even well intended ones), or engage in discussion. This is a very different approach than how we often gather! Emphasize that the purpose is to hold each other in sacred space and loving witness. (If someone forgets this guideline during the time, as circle host, you'll give them a friendly reminder!)
- **Strong Container.** A group like this functions well with a strong container. Clear guidelines shared at the start, adhering to timelines and giving each person equal time to share, grounding activities to open and close. Providing resources for people who may want to seek additional (professional or other) kinds of support after the group is also important.
- **Co-facilitation.** It's a good idea to have two co-facilitators, or a facilitator and a support person. That way, if any individual needs extra support during the gathering, that second facilitator can play that support role, while the primary facilitator continues with the main group. (For example, if someone feels flooded with emotion and needs to step out, the co-facilitator can step out with them for support.) In addition, if your circle topic/focus could potentially touch on participants' past experiences of trauma, and you don't have training in working with trauma, it's a good idea to co-facilitate with a therapist or other professional who does. That person can help ensure circle processes are trauma-informed, be available to anyone needing individual support during the circle, and provide referrals or resources for anyone who would like additional help afterwards.

Customizing Your Circle

Of course, the issues in the collective right now are impacting different people very differently – depending on their situation, geography, identities, and other factors. Consider the group you are hosting and how to adapt your circle so that it is culturally relevant, as well as sensitive to the particular individuals in your circle.

Format & Flow of the Circle

Your time together can be about ~90 minutes in a circle, closer to 2 hrs if you want to include the Taking Action step below. It's a good idea to include some buffer time before and after as well for less structured connection, arrivals, etc.

I. Opening & Welcome (10-15 minutes).

- Welcome everyone to the circle.
- Do a grounding exercise. Given the intense feelings that may come up in the gathering, it's important to start and close with something that can help people ground themselves and regulate their nervous systems. You could do some deep breathing together, or a meditation with an emphasis on grounding. Or bring in a calming, centering piece of music, or a poem to read aloud. A candle or central object, or something each person can hold in their hands, can also help people stay grounded.
- Talk through the guidelines for the group, such as the suggested guidelines described above (confidentiality, self-sovereignty, no crosstalk or advice). You can also re-state some of the important ideas you included in your invitation:
 - *Our purpose is to be in community together, share our feelings and responses to what's happening, find hope and inspired commitments together, to connect, to bear witness. This is a peer support group, a community healing circle and is different from diving deep into our own trauma stories – that can best be done in a more extended time and often with a professional support person.*
- Let people know about available resources: *If you find that what comes up for you today feels bigger than what this space can hold, or bigger than what you can hold on your own afterward, that's important information. We have a resource sheet with professional support options for you to take home.*

II. **Quiet Reflection** (5-7 minutes). Journaling time for everyone to write about what they're feeling right now, what the circle topic/focus has brought up for them, the feelings that need expression. Remind people that they can do writing that is not in full sentences – it might be phrases or a stream of words; perhaps something more like a poem will want to emerge.

III. **Sharing Aloud** (~25 minutes). Go around the room and have each person share for up to 3-5 minutes (depending on size of the group), either reading from their journaling or using their writing as a jumping off point. Here are some reminders and guidelines to say aloud prior to individual shares:

- Given the relatively short time frame of shares, this peer setting, and the desire to be sensitive to information that may be retraumatizing for others, we ask that you not recount our own or others' stories of harm or abuse in detail or with graphic imagery. Instead, at this particular gathering, we'd like to focus on feelings, hopes, and thoughts in response to what's happening in the collective.
- When you share, use "I" statements, such as "I feel powerless at times..." vs. speaking for others "We are powerless to..."
- Remind participants to *deeply and actively listen* – but not to give advice or reactions, agree or disagree, or even "try to help" around anything that comes up. The listeners' role is to show up present, in a spirit of loving witness, giving each person a space to be heard. That's truly one of the most powerful ways you can support the others here.

That way of being in a group together may be new to some people, so it may require a little more explanation and facilitation. "Even when it's well intended, advice or attempts to help can land poorly. In this circle, our focus is on giving each person the opportunity to process and express their own emotions *without outside input from others*. We are here to deeply listen and bear witness. That may be a new way to connect for some of us, and we are glad you are trying it out today. As the circle host, I'll be helping us to remember this guideline and approach."

IV. **Second Round Reflection** (10 minutes). You may want to do a second round of writing, helping people turn towards looking forward to areas of agency and positive change. Take another five to ten minutes for all to write on a few prompts like these:

What values do I want to stand for?

What do I know to be true, deep in my bones?

What does healing mean to me, as I live it every day?

How do I feel called to be of service in this time? What do I sense about my role?

Who are the helpers that inspire me right now?

What is the self-care I most deeply need right now?

When I check in with my intuition (or inner mentor), what do I hear about what (tools, directions, actions, supports, healing activities) would be most nurturing to me during this time?

You may want to have participants invite a voice of higher wisdom to guide them in their writing. Depending on your context or community, you might call that inner wisdom, inner mentor, the voice of Love, or God, or Universal Truth, or Spirit, and so on.

- V. **Second Round Sharing** (~25 minutes). Take another pass around the circle where people share their reflections from this second round of writing. The same important guidelines apply: it's always an option to pass; no advice giving, discussion or feedback; instead provide loving witnessing of each other's shares.
- VI. **Taking Action** (~20 minutes). You may choose to focus the gathering entirely on reflection and sharing, or you may want to include another 20 minutes for taking action together – for calling your elected representatives to share what you want to see around this issue, or learning about or making donations to organizations doing good work, work that brings love into action.
- VII. **Conclusion** (~15 minutes). Bring people together for a conclusion time that helps people integrate all they've expressed and heard, and bring closure to the gathering. Here, you may want to include some kind of ritual element, imagery or music – something that impacts us on an unconscious level. You could have each person bring along an object from nature and place it into the center, a symbol of connection and collective power. Together, your group could sing an inspiring song. Maybe everyone places their old hopelessness or shame into a large bowl in the center of the circle, symbolizing letting that shame go. It can be powerful to share hugs around the group too. (Whatever you do here, let it be easy enough that it doesn't cause you to put off this gathering or get overwhelmed. Keep it simple!)
- VIII. **Follow Up**. After the circle, you may want to check in with participants to see how they are doing. Here the same guidelines apply: no advice giving or crosstalk, etc. If anyone is struggling with what came up for them during the circle, this is also a time to again share suggested resources that may be helpful to them.

A few more things to consider:

- Depending on the nature of your circle's topic, strong emotions and tears can surface and don't need any kind of intervention but sometimes benefit from acknowledgement ("tears are welcome here"). Depending on the intensity and nature of current events, it's also possible that someone in your circle may have more of a trauma response to what's being discussed.
 - Following the group guidelines closely is important to help people feel and stay as grounded as possible during the circle. This includes using grounding exercises in the opening, making sure people feel welcome to opt out if things get intense, no cross talk, and avoiding sharing graphic details in shares.
 - If someone does have a trauma response, you will want to make sure they are well-accompanied and can regroup themselves. If you and your co-facilitator do not have prior training in supporting someone who is having a PTSD or trauma response, take some time to read about how to know if someone is having that kind of response, as well as how to support that person through co-regulation, breathing together, helping them to take a break, helping them return to the present moment, and other methods. Make sure you have longer term/follow up support resources on hand so you can share them at your gathering.
 - If someone has had a strong moment in the circle, it can be helpful to acknowledge this with the entire group. "What just happened in this room is a reminder of how intense these feelings can be, and how deeply they impact us. Thank you all for being so gentle with each other just now. Let's take a few breaths together... [pause]... and now, we'll continue." Here we want to normalize the person's response, make space for a short pause, and then return the attention back to the group activity.

Supporting Yourself as a Facilitator

Don't forget to also support yourself as a facilitator! Consider how you can ground yourself, set your intentions, work through any fears or concerns that are coming up, etc. before hosting the circle. Also consider how you can give yourself some support after the group – such as debriefing and reflecting on the experience with a good friend, colleague, or support professional.