

Guidelines for Talking Circles



Talking Circles are important for creating a safe space for everyone to share their feelings, perspectives, and experiences with others. This process helps people gain a sense of trust in each other and develop emotional and empathic understanding.

The following guidelines ensure that Talking Circles create a safe place for sharing, listening, and exploring different points of views without criticism or judgments. This process also strengthens our understanding, appreciation, and respect points of view, other than our own. Moral or ethical issues can also be brought forward in a Talking Circle and addressed without offending or hurting anyone.

Whatever is shared in the Circle stays in the Circle. Complete confidentiality is fundamental to the Talking Circle Process.

people are free to respond however they may, 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. One can use an object (such as a stone or a talking stick) which the person who is speaking holds and then passes to the next person in the circle.
- Silence is an acceptable response. No one should be pressured at any time to contribute if, in any way, they feel they do not want to share. There must be no negative consequences, however subtle, for saying “I pass.”
- At the same time, everyone must feel invited to participate. Some processes 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 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 nine rather than with a large circle 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 that 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 they feel 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.

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