

A circle is a restorative practice that can be used to develop relationships or it can be used to repair relationships that have been damaged by wrongdoing or conflict. The circle process gives people an opportunity to speak and listen to one another in an atmosphere of safety, dignity, and fairness, while telling their stories from their own viewpoints. Circles incorporate the idea that every individual is part of a community and that individual actions affect those within that community emotionally, economically, and physically. Circles can be used for many purposes, including conflict resolution, healing, support, decision making, information exchange, and relationship development.

Ideas summarized from the following sources:

www.livingjusticepress.org

www.restorativejustice.org

Lit Review

Circles are for all types of people and can be used in an array of environment types. Circles can be used to support families, students and teachers, people in the workplace, activists and organizers, people in government, children and youth, elders, community members, city planning, people in church or in prison, and people celebrating or in crisis. Circles deepen dialogue.

The Indigenous Origin of Circles

The circle process is found in Native North American Indigenous practices. Different indigenous groups have their own form of circle practices, but the process that many non-Native people are learning and employing today most closely reflects the tradition of the Plains People of North America. Beginning in the 1990s, members of the Native tribe known as First Nations began to share their philosophy of circles to address community issues and advocate the process of circles cross-culturally. The process of circles is now an emerging modern tradition in the lives of Natives and non-Natives alike.

What Do We Mean By Circle?

Because the use of circles is such an adaptable concept, there are a variety of circle-processes, made culturally applicable and comfortable for the purpose and people being served. The process of the circle itself, creating a safe space to build relationships, is equally as important as addressing the conflict or harm that may have initiated a specific circle. The structure of dialogue within a circle is based on what participants have in common. Shared values based on the circle process, such as honoring all voices equally, provides the means by which participants can experience the perspective and knowledge of others. Based on popular practice, "circle" refers to a process of facilitating dialogue where:

1. A talking piece is the primary mode of regulating the conversation, so that each person has an equal opportunity to speak.
2. Participants engage in an intentional conversation about values and a set of guidelines for how they want to be together.
3. The process opens and closes with some form of ceremony.
4. Building relationships precedes and is treated as equally important as tackling difficult issues.

This adaptable process offers indefinite potential in its applicability. The circle process is currently being used in such circumstances as schools, youth centers, the workplace, community building, criminal justice, neighborhood block clubs, veteran services, environmental issues, churches, and others where deeper relationship and conflict-resolution can be addressed in a safe, understanding setting.

Specific forms of Circles**» Talking Circles**

A specific form of circle, talking circles emphasize community building and the deepening of relationship. Such circles place particular value on collaboration and consensus, still upholding the standard circle values of respect and equality of each person involved. Talking circles are a way of bringing people together as equals to have an honest exchange about a situation that has relevance for everyone.

» Peacemaking Circles

Peacemaking circles and healing circles are very similar and are often used interchangeably to refer to circles centered on some form of conflict-resolution. As with all circles, it is particularly helpful in peacemaking circles to engage in non-hierarchical ways that foster trust and respect among participants. Peacemaking circles are occasionally identified as a means to resolve conflicts involving violence or harm from one person to another. The circle dynamic provides a safe space for those involved to discuss personal history and experiences with violence that may provide clarity to both the victim and the offender. The goal of the circle process does not involve coercion or changing others, but rather is an invitation to change oneself and one's relationship with the community.

» Healing Circles

Healing circles are a testament to the circle process. As members of the First Nations Community made use of a sentencing circle to address issues of alcoholism in the tribe, participants in the circle began to disclose other experiences of abuse. The safety within the sentencing circle facilitated the sharing of new issues, which led to the development of the healing circle as a way of dealing with offender-victim harm. Such circles focus on restoring the community around the victim and offender as well as repairing the harm that was done between the parties.

The city of Chicago employed the use of healing circles in 2010 as it attempted to address and deal with the widespread violence many residents had experienced within the city. Circles were made available to youth, parents, neighbors, elders, educators, law enforcement, journalists, and concerned community members as a way to start healing and address the violence in local schools and neighborhoods.

Washington County Community Circles, Inc. (WCCC)

Circles in Washington County, MN are created in partnership with the justice system, and create a respectful space to support victims, develop sentencing agreements for offenders, and empower community members to work toward preventing future occurrences of crime. Washington County Community Circles, Inc. has facilitated circles for over fifteen years and has three currently active communities in Cottage Grove, Stillwater, and Woodbury. The types of cases the organization has dealt with over the past fifteen years provide the following demographics:

- Over three-fourths (78%) of cases are sentencing circles, 10% healing, 12% other.
- Seven in ten (70%) cases involve domestic violence issues.
- Seven in ten (63%) of client participants are male.
- With 96 clients served, circle numbers range from 1 – 46 per client, with an average of 14 circles per client.

These circle experiences provide WCCC with results yielding strengthened community support and lower recidivism of offenders who go through the circles process. The process of circles enhances the community by teaching participants an alternative form of conflict-resolution in a way that develops the community's collective responsibility of issues and assumes ownership for making decisions.

Circles Improving School Climate

In conjunction with the implementation of restorative justice in schools across the country, circles play various roles in school discipline and the classroom. Case studies of circle application in schools include:

- Springfield Township High School – Teachers use "check-in" and "check-out" circles in

Talking Circles

www.judithardner.com

Peacemaking Circles

www.ousd.k12.ca.uswww.centeronviolenceandrecovery.org

Healing Circles

www.restorativejustice.org

A procedural guide of the healing circle process:

www.healingchicago.wordpress.com/guide/Washington County
Community Circles, Inc.
(WCCC)www.peacemakingcircles.org

Circles

regards to classroom management and academic issues to create a school culture that conveys support and encouragement.

- Kawartha Pine Ridge District – 94% of school administrators rated the overall effectiveness of restorative circles over the course of a year as 7-10, with 10 being most effective.
- 45% of administrators rated the effectiveness of circles as 9-10.
- Cole Middle School, Oakland, CA – Circles were held in the first period of the school day, regularly in some classrooms, and also when situations arose that demanded them. Circles were held to build community, to deal with events affecting the school, and to address disciplinary infractions. They were used to deal with typical, age-appropriate issues such as boyfriend/girlfriend disagreements and jealousy, play fighting and bullying, and smoking. Some teachers used circles to introduce their lesson plans in the classroom, creating a way to focus students and to better understand difficulties the students might have in concentrating on the actual class work.

Circles Improving School
Climate

www.iirp.edu

www.law.berkeley.edu