



Online Support Circles in Response to Social Distancing



Over the past two decades in the Restorative Justice movement, we have been nurturing relationships as the basis of healthy community and as a critical part of any response to the disruption of healthy community. That relational work has been done primarily in physical face-to-face presence with one another. The COVID19 pandemic has severely limited our ability to be physically present with one another. Consequently, many people are seeking ways to continue relational work by other means—other than being in the same physical space. The Internet is proving to be a very valuable resource to support relational work at this time. Online platforms, such as Zoom, GoTo-Meeting, and Skype, can be used to conduct virtual Circles where participants can be in visual and audio connection.

The Circle process depends heavily on the use of a talking piece. In physical space, the talking piece is an object that passes from person to person in order around a group seated in a circle of chairs. Participants speak only when they have the talking piece. When someone has the talking piece, everyone else listens without interrupting the speaker. There is never an obligation to speak. A participant may simply pass the talking piece to the next person. The talking piece creates order, ensures each person an opportunity to speak, distributes power around the group, allows thoughtful reflection, offers the opportunity for silence as well as words, and validates the importance of each participant's presence. The structure of the talking piece creates an environment of profound respect and deep listening.

Online Circles are most effective when they reproduce the function of the talking piece: only one person speaks at a time and there are no interruptions to that speaker. This can be achieved by

establishing an order of speaking at the beginning of the Circle that includes every participant in the group. This order is then strictly followed for the duration of the Circle. It is helpful to have a co-facilitator or assistant to the facilitator who keeps track of the order and can remind participants when their turn arises. If they wish, each participant can have a talking piece that they hold when they speak, and they can share the story of their talking piece the first time they use it. As in physical Circles, it is always okay to pass without speaking or to hold a few moments of silence before passing.

A round is a pass of the talking piece all the way around the Circle one time.



CONDUCTING AN ONLINE SUPPORT CIRCLE

Online support Circles begin with a welcome that conveys a sense of hospitality and honoring of those present. The welcome also includes clarifying how the Circle process works and the order of speaking.

To invoke the sense of sacredness of Circle, it is very important to do an Opening Ceremony. This is all the more important to do in online Circles. The opening can be an inspirational reading, deep breathing, meditating, stretching or movement, listening to music, or other creative possibilities. This opening should create a sense of pause, of breathing deeply, and of slowing down the body and the mind.

The opening can be followed by a brief introduction or check-in round, or the introduction/check-in round can be incorporated with one of the questions below.



VALUES AND GUIDELINES

To strengthen the atmosphere of deep respect, it is important to pay attention to the values participants are bringing to the space by doing a round of the talking piece about values.

ROUND *What is a value in your life you are trying to lean into particularly at this time?*

Offer standard Circle guidelines along with any special instructions necessary for using the technology. Here are some possible guidelines that participants use in physical Circles:

- Honor the way the talking piece works (speak only when you have it)
- Speak and listen with respect
- Speak and listen from the heart
- Take the time you need to speak, while being mindful of the need for others to have time as well
- Honor privacy – personal information shared in Circle stays in Circle
- Take care of yourself

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS FOR ROUNDS IN THE SUPPORT CIRCLE

Choose one to four of the questions below that feel right in your circumstances and then decide the order in which you want to pose the questions. The number of questions you can process in the Circle will depend on the amount of time you have, the number of participants, and the depth of sharing. You cannot predict exactly how long any round will take, so it is very important to remain flexible and adapt your plan based on what is happening in the moment in the Circle.

What does this moment mean to you?

How is anxiety manifesting for you—body, mind, spirit, heart?

In this new reality, what are you grateful for?

What is your greatest fear? Where does the fear lodge in your body?

What personal practices are feeding your fears?

What are you doing to support someone else at this time?

Who can you talk with about your anxieties and concerns?

What gives you hope?

Do you have intentional practices to interrupt thoughts of hopelessness or anxiety?

What is the gift of this moment?

What is bringing comfort at this time?

What is a source of strength for you at this time?

What forms of connection are you discovering or recovering?

How would you like to use this time? What is the growth opportunity of this time, personally and professionally?

Who is a role model for you in this situation?

What would you like to release into the center of our Circle?

What helps you to remember that you are never alone?

What is your favorite music for lifting your spirit?

What tickles your funny bone—something you can laugh at even in tough times? (movie, TV show, etc.)

How is this situation impacting your relationships in your family?

What is the hardest part of this situation for you?

What is one positive thing you can do for yourself in the next week?

How can we support each other through this difficult time?

What are you proud of in your response to this difficult time?

Always use one or more positive questions after you have allowed opportunity for participants to talk about fears, concerns, pain. It is very important to end with a sense of positive possibility and hope even in very difficult situations. Toward the end you want a strong sense of connection and support for one another.



CLOSING

It is very important to close in an intentional way that acknowledges the sacredness of the space and honors everyone present.

CLOSING ROUND *Share a word or phrase describing how you are feeling as we close our Circle.*

Conduct a closing ceremony of breathing, music, meditation, inspirational reading, body movement, singing, or other forms of sharing that seem appropriate and meaningful.

Thank everyone for being part of the Circle.



Kay Pranis, whose work is devoted to enhancing the knowledge and practice of Circles as a way of life, offers this “Online Support Circles in Response to Social Distancing” with the intention that it be shared freely.



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