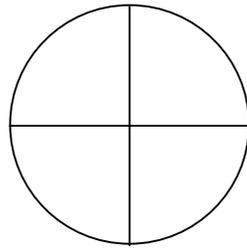


Circle Keepers Manual



A guide for those who are called to serve
as keepers of circles

Roca, Inc
2004

Circles

Circles are an alternative process of communication, based on traditional discussion and healing practices of aboriginal peoples in Canada and the Southwestern United States.

While circles have been adapted for many communities and to serve many purposes, they share essential features:

- everyone in the circle is equal and has equal opportunity to speak,
- decisions are made by consensus, and
- everyone agrees to abide by guidelines established by the group based on shared values, in order to work toward a common goal.

Additionally, circles are generally established as sacred space; circles open and close with words of reflection, and people may be invited to symbolically cleanse themselves before entering the circle; such a cleansing is particularly effective in culturally oriented circles.

Sources: Carolyn Boyes-Watson, Suffolk College; Jon Prichard, University of Maine; Gwen Chandler-Rhivers; Pranis, K., Barry Stuart and Mark Wedge, 2003, *Peacemaking Circles, From Crime to Community*, Living Justice Press.

CIRCLE KEEPERS MANUAL

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INTRODUCTION

Circles are a way of being and a form of gathering that creates individual and collective empowerment. They derive from aboriginal and native traditions where they were considered sacred and essential to community well being.

While one of the principles of circles is that all participants are equal, circle gatherings are most successful when they allow a gentle form of facilitation, which they receive from trained circle “keepers.”

This manual is a guide for keepers.

Part 1 provides background on circles as a refresher.
Part 2 is a guide for those who serve as circle keepers.

PART 1 - UNDERSTANDING AND DESCRIBING CIRCLES

Understanding circles

The circle is a process that brings together individuals who wish to engage in conflict resolution, healing, support, decision making or other activities in which honest communications, relationship development, and community building are core desired outcomes.

"Circles" offer an alternative to contemporary meeting processes that often rely on hierarchy, win-lose positioning, and victim/rescuer approaches to relationships and problem solving.

Derived from aboriginal and native traditions, circles bring people together in a way that creates trust, intimacy, good will, belonging, generosity, mutuality and reciprocity. The process is never about "changing others", but rather is a gentle invitation to change one's relationship with oneself, to the community and to the wider universe.

Circles intentionally create a sacred space that lifts barriers between people, opening fresh possibilities for connection, collaboration and mutual understanding. The process works because it brings people together in a way that allows them to see one another as human beings and to talk about what matters.

Circles can be understood in terms of the values and principles upon which they operate, and the structures they use to support these values and principles.

Values and Principles - Though each circle develops its own values and principles, all peacemaking circles generally:

- are designed by those who use them
- are guided by a shared vision
- call participants to act on their personal values
- include all interests, and are accessible to all
- offer everyone an equal, and voluntary, opportunity to participate
- take a holistic approach, including the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual
- maintain respect for all
- encourage exploring instead of conquering differences
- invite accountability to others and to the process

Structure - Circles provide gentle, highly effective support to groups seeking to stay on course with the values and principles they have established for their circle.

The circle process is "simple but not easy." There are some key structures that help to define the circle.

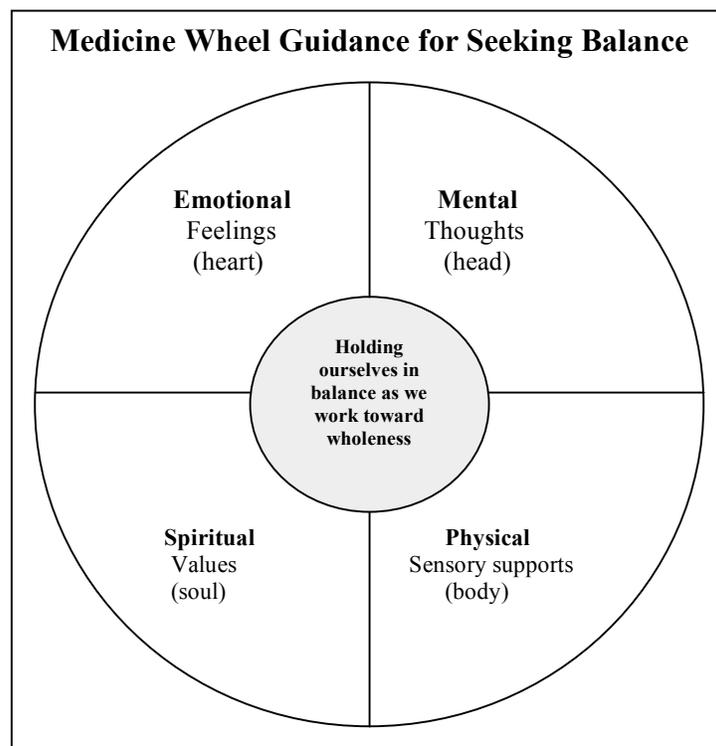
- The *meeting space* is the most visible structure. Participants are seated in a circle. The center of the circle may contain symbolic objects that help remind participants of shared values, or may relate to the purpose of the particular circle. It is sometimes helpful to include such objects as a focal point. However, it is not necessary; the center may simply be kept empty.
- A *talking piece* is used as a way to ensure respect between speakers and listeners. The talking piece is passed from person to person within the circle and only the person holding the piece may speak.
- A "*keeper*" of the circle has been identified. The keeper guides the participants and creates and holds the circle as a unique and safe space. Keepers are qualified to lead circle if they have experienced circles themselves and/or if they have undergone training in the process. Keepers often will self-identify, or they may be recruited by those who will be involved in the circle.
- *Ceremony and ritual* are used to create safety and form.
- *Consensus decision making* honors the values and principles of peacemaking circles and helps participants to stay grounded in them. All needs are heard and the group commits to addressing them in some manner.

Types of circles - There are different types of circles. Circles serve different purposes.

- *Support circles* provide emotional or spiritual support to individuals.
- *Talking circles* create an open dialogue about specific topics.
- *Criminal Justice circles* work in partnership with criminal justice and the community to address "harms" caused by offenders and "reparation" to victims and/or communities.
- *Sentencing circles* may be in partnership with criminal justice and the community used to "sentence" individuals.
- *Reentry circles work in partnership* with criminal justice and the community to address "harms" caused by offenders and "reparation" to victims and/or communities. They support the reentry of an offender into the community.

- *School based circles* may be used by teachers to address the climate in the classroom or as a “teaching” style.
- *Domestic violence circles* address harm caused in the home.
- *Peacemaking circles* are used to build relationships, as well as to promote “peace” within a community.
- *Healing circles* may be used to heal bonds that have been broken or to create new bonds.

Grounding the circle in the medicine wheel - The medicine wheel is at the core of all spiritual traditions. The aboriginal and native people in particular have kept the wheel at the heart of their lives. The practice of circles is grounded in the tradition of the medicine wheel. The medicine wheel is build upon the natural phenomenon of things occurring in “fours” (for example, seasons, phases of the moon, stages of life.), to suggest that there are four components of individual and community health: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

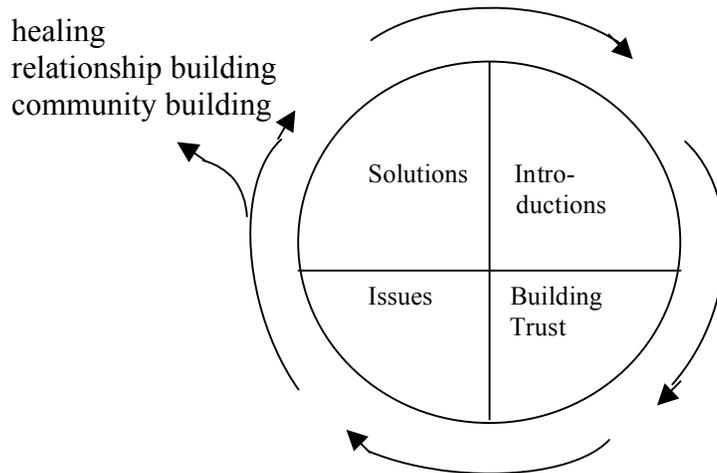


If things are going wrong in the life of an individual or a community, the circle offers a way to examine where there may be an imbalance in the physical, mental, emotional or spiritual dimension of the individual or community.

In seeking to bring an individual or community back into balance circles use a four stage process that brings people together in a process in which they get to know one another on

deep levels, and in which they learn to trust one another, so that they may move through issues and toward solutions.

An inevitable consequence of the process is healing, relationship building and community building.



Describing Circles to Others

It is a challenge to describe circles to someone who has not experienced one. Here are some phrases that may be helpful.

“The circle is:

- ... voluntary, holistic, and flexible
- ... guided by a shared vision and shared values
- ... a space for collective empowerment; no one controls it
- ... a guide for community building
- ... a tool to exploring differences versus trying to conquer differences
- ... an invitation to us to go to the roots of our being, searching our hearts, souls and truths, and rediscovering the values that help us express how we want to be
- ... as much a way to be as it is an event or a program”

“Seven key principles of circle are:

1. Circles are not a thing or a program, but a way to be.
2. Circles are a sacred space.
3. Circles are about giving oneself up and sharing to help others.
4. Circles foster accountability.
5. No one “controls” circle; they are spaces of collective empowerment.
6. Circles are about the invitation; no one can be forced to sit in circle.
7. Circle is not about circle; it is about us.”

How to Describe Circles

Circles are an alternative process of communication, based on traditional discussion and healing practices of aboriginal peoples in Canada and the Southwestern United States.

While circles have been adapted for many communities and to serve many purposes, they share essential features:

- everyone in the circle is equal and has equal opportunity to speak,
- decisions are made by consensus, and
- everyone agrees to abide by guidelines established by the group based on shared values, in order to work toward a common goal.

Additionally, circles are generally established as sacred space; circles open and close with words of reflection, and people may be invited to symbolically cleanse themselves before entering the circle; such a cleansing is particularly effective in culturally oriented circles.

PART 2 - A GUIDE TO SERVING AS A CIRCLE KEEPER

Before keeping circle ask yourself

- *Am I striving to exhibit keeper traits?*
- *Am I doing my inner work?*
- *Do I know my 'stuff'?*
- *Am I the best person to keep this circle?*
- *Am I taking care of myself in a balanced way??*
- *Do I understand the circle process?*
- *Do I trust the process?*

What is a circle keeper?

Keepers are also known as servants, facilitators, carriers and other names. Whatever name is used, the roles are the same. Keepers are the caretakers and servants of the process. As a keeper, you must ensure that everyone takes responsibility for helping to keep the circle, and for making the “circle” a safe place for open dialogue. The keeper has responsibilities before the circle, during the circle, and after the circle.

Qualities of the keeper - *Am I striving to exhibit keeper traits?*

When you agree to serve as a circle keeper, you are taking on a sacred trust. It can feel intimidating at first. So the first thing to remember is to relax, and to forgive yourself for being imperfectly human like we all are. No keeper is perfect. We do the best we can.

Here are some traits that can help you to best serve the circle.

- A good listener
- Present
- Supportive
- Nonjudgmental
- Fair
- Inclusive
- Courageous
- Organized
- Able to keep the process moving
- Detached
- Appreciative
- Patient
- Well-disciplined
- Watchful
- Approachable
- Reflective
- Trusting
- Encouraging
- Respectful
- Aware
- Tolerant
- Humble
- Holistic
- Able to appreciate humor
- Open to other opinions
- Honest
- An anchor
- Willing to forgive
- Consistently flexible
- Able to keep the space safe

Remember, none of us are perfect at all of these things. But if you keep them in mind as you move into your keeper role they will serve you and the circle.

Inner work – *Am I doing my inner work?*

Since keepers serve as models and set the tone for circles it is important that you undertake inner work. Engage in ongoing inner work, regularly checking your thoughts and behaviors against your core values and circle principles. Just before a circle gathering, take time to center yourself and cultivate inner peace.

Self-knowledge – *Do I know my ‘stuff’?*

Know your stuff. We all have particular things that are challenging for us. We all have histories that may make us prone to having our buttons pushed by certain issues or types of personalities. Be aware of your buttons, your “stuff” and how it might affect your keeping a circle. Perhaps you have a hard time knowing how to relate to loud, boisterous people, or perhaps your history makes it hard for you to be objective in discussions relating to child abuse. Know your stuff and work at finding ways to keep it from getting in the way of your keeping.

Discernment – *Am I the best person to keep this circle?*

Because you’ve done your inner work and have worked toward clear self-knowledge, you are better able to discern when you may not be the best person to keep a circle on a particular topic or in a particular community. Be sure that you are willing and able to let go of your own positions and to be objective. Trust your instincts on this.

Self-care – *Am I taking care of myself in a balanced way?*

Keeping is emotionally challenging work. Especially during times when you are keeping a circle process, take care of yourself in ways that work for you. In your self-care try to include a balance of:

- *physical* – exercise, eat well.
- *emotional* – probe and experience your feelings through reflection, journaling, or with friends.
- *spiritual* – meditate or participate in other spiritual practices.
- *mental* – find ways to stimulate your mind. Avoid over-analyzing your circle work: read a book, do a puzzle, engage in creative arts, whatever works for you.

Understanding circles – *Do I understand the circle process?*

You may gain understanding of the circle process through experience and/or training. Participation in circles on a regular basis will ensure that your keeper skills are grounded.

Trusting the circle – *Do I trust the process?*

STAGES OF CIRCLE

We may think of circles as what occurs from the between the opening and closing of a particular circle gathering. We will discuss these "phases" of a circle gathering in another section.

We may also think of circles in a larger context, that is in terms of what occurs well before the circle gathering, all the way through the gathering itself and beyond. There are three stages of this larger circle process:

1. Before the circle

- Determine suitability
- Prepare others for the circle
- Handle logistics

2. During the circle

- Five phases of circle
 - Phase One - Grounding
 - Phase Two - Deepening
 - Phase Three - Exploring options
 - Phase Four - Building consensus or a sense of unity
 - Phase Five - Closing

3. After the circle

- Follow up

BEFORE THE CIRCLE

Determine suitability - When deciding whether or not to use circles for a particular community, consider:

- what the goals for a circle would be.
- if a circle is really suitable, appropriate for the situation at hand.
- if there are people who would be willing and able to *sit* in circle.
- if there are people who can and/or could keep a circle.
- if there are resources to support a circle (space, food, supplies, etc.)

Prepare others for the circle – In the weeks before the gathering, keepers work together to prepare others for the circle. *Remember always that participation in circle is an invitation.* Keepers

- help identify who needs to be there
- explain to participants how circles work
- find out what are the issues, concerns, and needs
- discuss guidelines and ask participants what guidelines will make the circle safe for them
- explain your role as keeper
- begin building relationships with participants

Handle logistics – Keepers determine

- Time – Choose a time that will be convenient to the greatest numbers of potential participants.
- Place – Choose a place that is neutral and will support all participants in feeling equal and safe.
- Participants – Remember you cannot force anyone to come to circle.
- Talking piece – choose something that will have meaning to the participants.
- Materials – Be sure to have markers, easels, talking piece, and materials for the center.
- Refreshments – Be sure refreshments will be available for circle.
- Cultural sensitivity – Be sensitive to special needs and requirements of different cultures.

DURING THE CIRCLE

As keeper, you are responsible for creating and keeping the "form" of the circle. You act as a guide as you move the circle through phases of circle it needs to experience. Note that these five phases are flexible depending on the purpose for which a circle has been called. However, it is important that all circles include Phase One (Grounding), and Phase Two (Closing), and those these two phases are always given time and depth.

Five Phases of Circles - Although the content or topical focus of circles may vary, all circles generally follow five phases. How you facilitate these phases is flexible. For example, a new group may need to spend more time on guidelines and on the storytelling round. As keeper, trust your instincts on how to structure phase one.

The five phases of circles are:

- Phase One - Grounding
- Phase Two - Deepening
- Phase Three - Exploring options
- Phase Four - Building consensus or a sense of unity
- Phase Five - Closing

Phase One – Grounding

The grounding phase of circle may include the following elements, all of which are designed at creating safety, form and beginning to prepare participants for deeper sharing and understanding. This phase generally should include the following:

Welcoming – Make sure everyone is greeted warmly.

Opening ceremony – All circles start with an opening ceremony that helps us make the transition from the outer world and into the reflective circle space. Openings are designed to help us feel more centered and open to inner peace and deep sharing. Openings may involve burning sage or incense which someone either places in the middle of the circle or passes over participants, using a feather to move the smoke around them – allowing people to cleanse themselves of negative energies and to prepare for sharing deeper emotions. They may include a poem, song or meditative music. Consider asking one of the participants (in advance), to offer the opening.

Introductions and check-in – In the first round, the keepers ask participants to introduce themselves by name (perhaps first name only), how they feel, why they are here in circle, and what they hope to achieve.

Seeking consensus around guidelines – If it is a new group, then participants develop guidelines of how they want to be together while in circle (e.g. respect all opinions, confidentiality, etc.) Then, take a complete round of the circle to ensure that each person indicates support of the guidelines. If it is an ongoing circle, then the keeper might

review the basic circle guidelines and if invite the group to add any additional guidelines if necessary. Take a full round to be sure everyone has a chance to comment on the guidelines and to demonstrate their support of the final list. Remember that the guidelines are a "living document" and ma be revised in circle at any time.

Storytelling round – If the issue or purpose for the circle involves a difficult issue, it may be useful to have a storytelling round. Invite participants to share a personal life experience related to the issue offers (perhaps in a very indirect way.) Storytelling is a powerful way to move beyond masks and appearances and to develop a better understanding of one another.

Acknowledgment of those present – Remember to acknowledge those present in circle. It takes courage and commitment to participate in circle. Also be sure to acknowledge the volunteers who have helped make the circle happen.

Clarifying the purpose of circle – The keeper summarizes what has been experienced in phase one of the circle, using this summary to further set the tone of the circle and to clarify the purpose of the circle.

Phase Two – Deepening

Next the circle may move into a deepening round of dialogue. This round gets to the heart of why the circle was called. Depending on why it was called, this round may include an expression of needs and interests (in the case of a conflict circle), sharing memories and grief (in the case of a healing circle). If small group activities or dyad sharing feels appropriate it may be used here, but always come back to the circle and to sharing in the full circle.

Phase Three – Promoting healing and exploring options

In this round the focus expands from what's gone wrong or what's hurting to what can be done to make things right, to promote healing, or to initiate positive change. In many circles, such as those focused on healing, listening may be what's most needed – giving people a chance to tell their story and to have it received deeply. In other circles, though, exploring options helps break the sense of being stuck in either a painful experience or a self-destructive way of life.

Phase Four - Building consensus or a sense of unity

Some circles, such as those involved in healing or understanding, do not require decision making. In these circles, the keeper may attempt to create a sense of unity. Other circles do require decision making or resolution of conflict. In these circles the keeper attempts to build consensus by building on each circle participants input, weaving the contributions of each participant together.

Consensus involves an agreement among all participants to “live with the outcome” – to accept a decision or course of action because it promises the best for everyone given the circumstances. Generating consensus involves patience, creativity, candor about interest and concerns, and willingness to think outside the box. We are challenged to set aside our personal agendas and fixed notions about outcomes, so that something larger than any one person's preconceived ideas can emerge. Consensus is about dialogue, and listening, and honesty.

To build a consensus, the keeper may help participants identify areas of disagreement and give them serious consideration. Then use this fuller awareness of differences to work toward final decisions that are inclusive, and thus stronger.

Reaching decisions by consensus often takes more time than other decision making models, such as voting. The strength of the process is that it assures that all participants will “own” and support the decision. When using this process it is important that the group commit to addressing issues or concerns that may be raised on the way to achieving a consensus decision. One model for testing if consensus has been achieved is to use a consensus level system.

Consensus Level System

Consensus is achieved when each participant chooses a consensus level of 4 or less. If any member chooses a level of 5 or 6, consensus is not achieved. Be sure to address issues that are raised by participants who are at levels #3 and higher. If concerns cannot be addressed immediately, then create a process for addressing those concerns, perhaps at a future circle.

Consensus levels:

1. I can say an unqualified yes to the proposed decision. I am satisfied that the decision is an expression of the wisdom of the group.
2. I find the proposed decision perfectly acceptable.
3. I can live with the proposed decision; I'm not especially enthusiastic about it.
4. I do not fully agree with the decision and need to register my view about why. However, I do not choose to block the decision. I am willing to support the decision because I trust the wisdom of the group. (*Group finds a way to address remaining issues.*)
5. I do not agree with the proposed decision and feel the need to stand in the way of this decision being accepted. (*Group finds a way to address remaining issues.*)
6. I feel that we have no clear sense of unity in the group. We need to do more work before consensus can be reached. (*Group finds a way to address remaining issues.*)

Phase Five - Closing

All circles end with a closing ceremony that helps us make the transition from the reflective circle space back to the outer world. Closings are designed to help us feel centered and to bring a sense of closure to the circle. They may include a poem, song or meditative music. Consider asking one of the participants (in advance), to offer the closing.

<h3>AFTER THE CIRCLE</h3>

Follow-up is one of the greatest challenges of the successful use of circles.

- If an agreement is made in the circle, it is important that someone follow-up to see if people are accountable to those agreements.
- If strong emotions are shared, there needs to be follow-up with the individuals to see how they are doing and ensure that they are getting the support they need.

TIPS ON KEEPING CIRCLE

When keeping for a circle, pay attention to

- Setting the tone
- Building trust, creating a safe place
- Balancing interests and perspectives
- Protecting integrity of the process
- Regulating the pace of the circle
- Maintaining focus
- Participating as yourself
- Ensuring self-care and community care
- Attending to culture/ethnic concerns
- Using ceremonies
- Using talking pieces

Setting the tone – As keeper you may create a safe and welcoming atmosphere.

- Greet everyone warmly.
- In rounds that involve expressing deeper feelings, you may go first to show that it's safe to be vulnerable.
- In rounds that involve expressing views or opinions, you may speak last to lend balance at the end by expressing respect for all sides.
- Strive to convey an atmosphere that's open, calm, unhurried, reflective, respectful of differing views, and appreciative of each person's efforts.

Building trust, creating a safe place

- Create strong openings and closings
- Use the taking piece
- Speak from the heart
- Speak with respect
- Listen with respect
- Remain in the circle
- Stress that all participants are equal
- Stress confidentiality
- Establish of guidelines
- Create a shared set of core values for guiding the community's circle work
- Practice acceptance
- Use consensus process
- Use ceremony and ritual
- Practice honesty
- Practice humility

Balancing interests and perspectives

- During circle preparation, try to ensure all interests will be represented.
- During the circle gathering itself, make sure the dialogue is balanced.

Protecting the integrity of the process

At times circles will have explosive or emotionally draining conversations. Before, during and after these intense moments, keepers can take various measures to maintain the circle's integrity.

- Be clear about the circle's values and guidelines
- Model appropriate conduct
- Offer gentle reminders of values and guidelines, when needed
- Use humor, when appropriate
- Speak privately with individuals during break, as appropriate
- Trust the circle to work through difficult situations

Regulating the pace of the circle

- If a participant holding the talking piece speaks at length, *and* it appears that others are growing uneasy, you may intervene, gently, as keeper and ask the piece be passed. Be sensitive if a deep, personal sharing is involved.
- Use breaks to help regulate the pace, and/or to manage someone who is speaking at length.

Maintaining focus

- For the circle rounds, create questions that will help keep the focus.
- Take a holistic approach to the questions.
- Be flexible; let the circle move where it needs.

Participating as yourself

Remember that although you are a keeper, you are also a member of the group. In a circle, everyone is responsible for "co-keeping", and everyone is a participant. As the designated "keeper", you have a position within the group, but you should use that position with great respect and care. As you perform your keeper functions

- Do *not* try to maintain a detached, observer role.
- Do engage in the circle process just like everyone else, stating your perceptions, expressing emotions, and sharing personal stories.
- Speak from your own voice.

Ensuring self-care and community care

- Ensure every community has many keepers.

- Regular meetings.
- Community recognition / celebrate your volunteers.
- Create on-going educational opportunities for keepers.
- Rotate the use of keepers.

Attending to culture/ethnic concerns

The circle should reflect the community that it is in. Language should be geared toward the community. Know the culture(s) of your participants so that whatever you say or do would be viewed as respectful. If you don't know or aren't sure, ask.

Using ceremonies

Circle ceremonies move us to ways of being together that are different from what we are doing or feeling before. The ceremonies use inclusive, nondenominational, non-threatening rituals to help move people into the circle space and then out of it ago. Ceremonies promote a sense of community – of pulling together around shared visions, aims, and endeavors – within the circle. Rituals need to be voluntary, and participants need to understand how they relate to shared principles and values. They may be fun and relaxing, deeply moving, or may be used to help lighten things up.

Using talking pieces

The talking piece helps create a respectful dialogue. Participants only speak when holding the talking piece. The talking piece will be passed around the circle. When the talking piece reaches them, each individual has an opportunity to speak, hold the talking piece in silence, or passing it without comment. The talking piece creates the space for each person to make a contribution (and silence can be as powerful as words.)

The talking pieces carries with it a responsibility to honor the shared values of the circle and should be used in a respectful way. The talking piece moves always in the same direction around the circle. In the circle, the talking piece helps to engage everyone in taking responsibility for the success of the process. The talking piece removes dependence upon key people and spreads leadership among everyone.

Examples or talking pieces are:

- Feathers.
- Rocks/stones.
- Anything that has a “specific meaning” for the community.

ATTACHMENTS

Prep sheet for circle

Sample outline of a circle