

Circles for Empowerment

Guidelines for creating and running your own women's circle

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What are women's circles? When we speak of women's circles, we are referring to more than just a gathering of women. We mean 'circle' literally. When we meet, we sit in a circle and follow specific guidelines that invite the participants to go deeply into their experiences. When the intention for the circle is clear to all and the members bring respect and willingness to explore the process, the circle bestows blessings on each person individually and on the group as a whole. If you haven't yet explored the powers of a circle, please do!

Here are the basics of circles, as I understand them.

We set an intention for the circle.

The circle is created for some **specific purpose**, like support, spirituality, creativity, growth, problem solving, etc. It can be a one-time-only gathering, short-term or ongoing. The intention is known and agreed to by all participants. The intention of an ongoing circle may change over time.

We sit in a circle.

Why is this important?

- Everyone sitting in a circle shares an equal position with everyone else. There's no 'head of the table' position that confers special status and creates a hierarchy.
- Being on the 'front line' of the circle, each person is clearly visible. Everyone can see and be seen by everyone else in the circle. There's no one to hide behind and no one to block out.
- A circle acts as a container to hold our thoughts, our feelings, our energy and our confidences. **Confidentiality** is key. The information brought to the circle stays there. We do not share information offered there with others outside of the circle.
- Holding a place in a circle confers membership and a clear sense of belonging in this community. A sense of belonging is one of our deepest needs.
- Sitting in a circle, each member knows her presence is important. We sense our individual power at the same time as we are conscious of the support around us.
- Energy can flow perpetually in a circle – there's no start or finish. The energy from the circle also collects in the centre and represents the ground of our being. It's customary to mark the centre of the circle with a centerpiece or small altar. Speaking to the centre is speaking to the One, the Source of all.

We use a talking piece.

A talking piece can be anything you choose: a rock, stick, bowl, feather – anything at all. Ideally, it should be large enough that it can be seen easily by everyone in the circle when someone is holding it. At the same time, it shouldn't be so large or heavy as to be cumbersome.

In a circle, **only the one holding the talking piece has permission to speak.** This means there is only one voice at any time – there are no interruptions and no back and forth discussions.

The one holding the talking piece may take as long as she needs. She may take whatever time she needs in silence to allow what needs or wants to be said to emerge, and she may take as long as she needs to speak. If she is not ready to speak, she may simply pass the talking piece on and speak at a later time or she may choose to remain silent throughout the session. The speaker decides when she is ready to pass the talking piece on to the next person or to return the piece to the centre of the circle where someone else may choose it.

We speak of our own experience only, using “I” statements. We do not attribute our experiences and perceptions to anyone else. We do not comment on what someone else has said in the circle unless it ties directly to our own experience. Any comments that might foster interaction are best left to be raised after the circle has concluded.

Why use a talking piece?

- It is a rare gift in our society to be able to speak without being interrupted. In this situation, we are also less distracted by reactions from the listeners.
- It is a rare gift to have the time and freedom to say whatever needs to be said.
- The circle invites us to speak our truth and there's tremendous power in doing that. It offers an opportunity to experience a deep level of honesty and personal expression. In the circle, we learn to trust ourselves to speak our truth.
- The combination of silence, the opportunity for clear speech and the full attention of others helps us find our focus and draw out what we want to share. Participation in the circle invites us to carefully select our words because we understand the import of our presence there. The circle becomes a safe place for self expression. When someone needs to rant, the space and permission is there for that too.
- It's healing to know our truth has been heard.

Passing the talking piece clockwise around the circle takes us into deeper parts of ourselves. Moving it counterclockwise brings us up again.

We learn to be fully present and to listen with our whole being.

Being fully present in our own lives and fully present to others creates soul that nourishes us all deeply. **We honour the speaker with our full attention.** We do not mentally

rehearse what we are going to say before our turn comes. We learn to trust our truth will emerge when we give it space.

We practice mindful listening, accepting what is being said as the speaker's reality. **We let go of any tendency to judge what others say.** As there's no opportunity in the circle to respond to the speaker, we don't have any role to play other than to be fully present as a listener. We are present to support but not to solve anyone else's problems. We are not being asked to fix anything.

We share leadership.

Leadership is shared. Each individual holds ownership in the group. If we choose to join the circle and create community, we commit to its success.

Although all the participants of the circle hold equal status, **each circle needs a designated facilitator** to guide the gathering: to start the discussion, to remind of circle principles, if necessary and to close the circle when the gathering is complete. The facilitator holds the energy and structure of the circle so everyone else may relax into it.

Each circle member takes full responsibility for her own needs.

Shared leadership benefits us because:

- Every one of us has gifts to offer to others.
- We each benefit from the opportunity to lead and to follow the guidance of others.

We benefit from our time in circles when we are away from them.

Spending time in a conscious circle creates ripples that flow outward from the circle to change the quality of our lives. The principles of the circle carry forward into our other relationships and influence our dynamics with others.

Empowered by respect from others, we are better able to respect in turn. Empowered to speak our truth in the circle, we are empowered to speak it in all situations. Having experienced the magic of full attention, we know how to give our full attention to others and we see them bloom with the gift.

There is power in a circle, and for ongoing circles, the energy builds. When we sit in circle, we follow age-old traditions and benefit from the energies created by this form over time. Perhaps it's the ancient knowing of circle dynamics that is still present in our DNA. Perhaps it's the blueprint of a circle archetype in the energy field. Whatever, it imprints its wisdom on us and we are richer for it.

Interested in more information on circles? Visit <http://www.women-at-heart.com>