



## Circles are a Foundational Process, a Restorative Methodology

adapted from: Hart, M. (2002) An aboriginal approach to social work practice. In M. Hart (Eds.). *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin: An Aboriginal Approach to Helping*. (pp. 105-122). Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.

An Aboriginal approach is made up of several foundational concepts that stem from the medicine wheel: **wholeness, balance, relationships between all parts, harmony, growth, healing and the primary goal of mino-pimatisiwin** (the “good” life)

**Techniques** in an Aboriginal approach includes:

- Utilizing a circular world view based upon spirituality (*acknowledging the great mystery, rhythms of the universe and sacredness in the ordinary*);
- A strengths-based perspective (*we all have a gift*);
- Empowerment strategies (*we all have capacity to act*);
- The incorporation of humor (*never take yourself too seriously*);
- The alignment of ceremonies with sharing circles (*ethical relations with all life forms*);
- Storytelling as a central activity (*experience is a great teacher*);
- The act of role modeling for one another (*we are all learners and teachers, we lift each other up*);
- Utilizing Elders and local wisdom (*we all have knowledge to offer*);
- Acknowledging those (*teachers, facilitators, mentors, ceremony leaders*) who have trained, prepared, and centered themselves so as to be able to support others in determining their goals (*honor the experiences, accomplishments and contributions of others*)

Dialogue (sharing, talking) circles demonstrate these **foundational concepts**:

- Wholeness is demonstrated when there are no gaps in a circle and people are brought together and unified as one; when we try to understand each part and how it is connected to all other parts;
- Balance is addressed in circles when individuals work on connecting themselves emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually; and in ensuring that the wellness of all individuals is supported;
- Interdependence of relationships is expressed by being involved in a shared experience of learning and growing;
- Harmony includes respect for one’s relationships with others and within oneself, as well as the give and take between entities;
- Growth includes the development of a person’s body, heart, mind and spirit in a lifelong process which leads them to their true selves;
- Healing comes about through emotional expression, discharging turmoil and through cleansing and purifying oneself; it is a journey, something that people practice daily throughout their lives.



Sharing circles demonstrate **an Aboriginal understanding of people** in that:

- Facilitators acknowledge both positive and negative aspects of life;
- Participants are supported in continuous learning;
- There is willingness to look at the past, present and future and seek to understand how they influence each other;
- Individuals are encouraged to deal with emotions they are experiencing or else they run the risk of being sick in the future;
- Participants are purposeful in seeking more balance and harmony through their participation in such processes as healing and learning;
- The motivation for change lies within the individual since participation is voluntary;
- People respect each other when they maintain confidentiality and trust.

Sharing circles follow **a helping process** that is reflected in an Aboriginal approach in that:

- There is emphasis on the relationships between people in the circle (no interrupting, respecting each other);
- There is validation of the uniqueness of each individual (thoughts, feelings, experiences) by paying attention and not pressuring others to finish;
- Sharing and talking about new information helps everybody to benefit from the information;
- It is understood we all each on a personal learning and healing journey and we have responsibility to 'lift each other up' to success.

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NOTE from Blue Quills First Nations College:

Relational engagement occurs in an environment where participants feel physically safe, mentally safe, spiritually safe, and emotionally safe.

SAFETY is of paramount importance when planning for circle involvement...

*When participants seek the involvement of an Elder or other support person in order to feel safe in a circle, we (BQFNC facilitators) encourage this and the circle invitation is often phrased around safety as a central theme: "What would it take for you to feel safe in this circle and to participate in a good way?"*



**"Let us put our minds together as one."**

Irving Powless, Sr., Onondaga Nation

If we sat in a circle and put an object in the center of the circle and we all described what we saw, everyone would see different points of view from each other. Some would even see opposites because they would be sitting on opposite sides of the circle. In other words, you don't have to see what I see for you to be right. In fact, everyone in the circle is right based on their own point of view. If we are willing to listen to everyone's point of view, then we can get a more accurate description of the object in the center. This is one way to put our minds together. When we get the clarity from each other, we should give thanks and be grateful to each other.

***Grandfathers from the four directions, guide me today with Your wisdom from the east, from the south, from the west and from the north.***

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***"It is a native tradition to sit in a circle and talk***

***– to share what is in your heart."***

John Peters (Slow Turtle), Wampanoag Nation

The talking circle is also a listening circle. The talking circle allows one person to talk at a time for as long as they need to talk. So much can be gained by listening. Is it a coincidence that the Creator gave us one mouth and two ears?

The power of the circle allows the heart to be shared with each other. What we share with each other also heals each other. When we talk about our pain in the circle, it is distributed to the circle, and we are free of the pain. The talking circle works because when the people form a circle, the Great Mystery is in the center.

***My Creator, give me the courage to share, and the courage to listen.***



March 26 and 27, 2012

## Types of Peacemaking (Restorative) Circles

adapted from: Pranis, Kay. *The Little Book of Circle Processes: A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking*, Good Books, Intercourse, PA, 2005

Terms are not universally used, but are helpful to determine the purpose of the Circle. Circles may have more than one purpose or will progress from one level (talking) to a next level (healing).

In a **Talking Circle** participants explore a particular issue or topic from many different perspectives. Talking circles do not attempt to reach consensus on the topic. Rather, they allow all voices to be respectfully heard and offer participants diverse perspectives to stimulate their reflections. *Sometimes called a sharing circle or a 'where are we?'*

A **Circle of Understanding** is a talking circle focused on understanding some aspect of a conflict or difficult situation. A Circle of Understanding is generally not a decision-making circle; therefore, it does not need to reach consensus. Its purpose is to develop a more complete picture of the context or reason for a particular event or behaviour (*explore complex concepts such as poverty; may require the contribution of 'expertise', ie FASD, addictions, and so forth*).

The purpose of a **Healing Circle** is to share the pain of a person or persons who have experienced trauma or loss. A plan for support beyond the circle may emerge, but it is not required. *May be referenced as 'grief and loss'.*

A **Support Circle** brings together key people to support a person through a particular difficulty or major change in life. Support circles often meet regularly over a period of time. By consensus, support circles may develop agreements or plans, but they are not necessarily decision-making circles. (*such as cancer care, or schizophrenia support group.*)

The purpose of a **Community-Building Circle** is to create bonds and build relationships among a group of people who have a shared interest. Community-Building Circles support effective collective action and mutual responsibility. (*may be experienced as strategic planning process, or social action, or community league, etc*)

**Celebration Circles** bring together a group of people to recognize an individual or a group to share joy and a sense of accomplishment. (*an honoring circle*)

A **Conflict Circle** brings together disputing parties to resolve their differences. Resolution takes shape through consensus agreement (*ie: Family Group Conferencing is a conflict circle; mediation can also be processed within a circle framework*).

**Reintegration Circles** bring together an individual and a group or community from which that individual has been estranged to work toward reconciliation and acceptance of the individual into the group again. Reintegration Circles frequently develop consensus agreements. They have been used for juveniles and adults who are returning to community from prisons or correctional facilities.



*An excellent example of a program that is available in many major cities in Canada is called Circles of Support and Accountability which brings together a group of committed volunteers to support, over the long term, the reentry into the community of sex offenders returning from prison. The premise is that helping this individual access a community of support will reduce the likelihood that this person will re-offend and will develop new understandings and relationships.*

*In some cultures Reintegration Circles are convened to welcome someone back from 'treatment centre' or other absence from the community. A current practice is for 'repatriation' of Indigenous children who have been raised in foster care and disconnected from their families and communities of origin.*

A **Restorative Justice Circle** is a community-directed process in partnership with the criminal justice system. It involves all those affected by an offense in deciding an appropriate sentencing plan post-charge, and pre-charge how to correct harmful behavior. This Circle brings together the person who has been harmed, the person who caused the harm, family and friends of each other, other community members, justice system representatives, and other resource professionals. The participants discuss: a) what happened, 2) why it happened, 3) what the impact is, and 4) what is needed to repair the harm and prevent it from happening again.

**Circles are the original research methodology** “which controls for the intrusion of outside ‘experts’ coming into the community, experts who are keen to impose their framework of reality with pre-defined categories and frames of meaning. It overcomes historical obstacles such as: lack of meaningful participant involvement; lack of “authentic” partnerships with communities; lack of cultural data collection approach; lack of follow-up or reporting back to the community and lack of community involvement in defining the purpose of the research.” Marie Batiste

A **Recruitment Circle** brings applicants, employers, stakeholders together to discuss the available position, where it fits within the organizational structure, and the skills and abilities required to accomplish the job in a good way. Applicants have opportunity to learn more about the position he/she has applied for as well as opportunity to question for increased clarity.

**Q = How many other applications haven't been articulated yet?**



## APPLICATIONS OF PEACEMAKING CIRCLES

Peacemaking Circles have been used for the following:

- Supporting and assisting victims of crime
- Criminal sentencing for juveniles and adults
- Reintegrating inmates into communities upon leaving prison
- Supporting and monitoring chronic offenders on probation
- Providing support for families accused of child abuse and neglect, while keeping the child safe
- Team-building and staff renewal in social service agencies
- Developing mission statements and strategic plans within organizations
- Developing new programs in an agency
- Handling discrimination, harassment, and interpersonal conflicts in the workplace
- Addressing neighborhood disagreements
- Managing classrooms and playground conflicts
- Handling school discipline
- Teaching writing in an alternative school
- Repairing harms inflicted by a sixth-grade class on a substitute teacher
- Processing chemical dependency relapses in a high school for recovering addicts
- Developing education plans for special education students
- Resolving family conflicts
- Grieving losses in a family or community
- Handling environment and planning disputes
- Facilitating dialogue between immigrant communities and local government
- Facilitating dialogue between rival gangs
- Leading college class discussions
- Celebrating graduations and birthdays
- Discussing youth presence at a suburban mall
- Teaching parenting skills and improving one's self-development
- Recovery from trauma
- Other(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Adapted from: Kay Pranis. *The Little Book of Circle Processes: A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking*. Good and Beautiful Books, Intercourse, PA, 2005



## **Structural Aspects of a Circle**

**Ceremony** – Circles consciously engage all aspects of human experience—spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental. Circles use a ceremony or intentional centering activity in the opening and in the closing to mark the Circle as a sacred space in which participants are present with themselves and one another in a way that is different from an ordinary meeting.

**A Talking Piece** – By allowing only the person holding the talking piece to speak, a Circle regulates the dialogue as the piece circulates consecutively from person to person around the group. The person holding the talking piece has the undivided attention of everyone else in the Circle and can speak without interruption. The use of the talking piece allows for full expression of emotions, deeper listening, thoughtful reflection, and unhurried space. Additionally, the talking piece creates space for people who find it difficult to speak in a group, but never requires the holder to speak if they choose not to.

**A Facilitator or Keeper** – the facilitator for the Peacemaking Circle, often called a keeper, assists the group in creating and maintaining a collective space in which each participant feels safe to speak honestly and openly without disrespecting anyone else. The keeper monitors the quality of the collective space and stimulates the reflections of the group through questions or topic suggestions. The keeper does not control the issues raised by the group or try to move the group toward a particular outcome, but the keeper may take steps to address the tone of the group interaction.

**Guidelines** – Participants in a Circle play a major role in designing their own space by creating the guidelines for their discussion. The guidelines articulate the promises participants make to one another about how they will conduct themselves in the Circle dialogue. The guidelines are intended to describe the behaviours that the participants feel will make the space safe for them to speak their truth. Guidelines are not rules and they are not used to judge people's behavior. They are used as gentle reminders to participants about their shared commitment to creating a safe space for difficult conversation.

**Consensus Decision-making** – decisions in a Circle are made by consensus. Consensus does not require enthusiasm for the decision or plan, but it does require that each participant is willing to live with the decision and support its implementation.

***In a Circle, relationship-building and getting to know one another beyond the context of the task precede discussion about the task itself.*** Half the time of a Circle may be spent on creating the foundation for deeply honest dialogue about the conflict or difficulty before that dialogue begins. Discussion values, creating guidelines, and sharing unseen aspects of ourselves are all part of creating the foundation of dialogue that engages participants' spirits and emotions as well as their intellect.

***Wisdom in a Circle is accessed through personal stories.*** In a Circle, life experience is more valuable than advice. Participants share their experiences of joy and pain, struggle and triumph, vulnerability and strength to understand the issue at hand. Because storytelling engages people on many levels—emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental—listeners absorb stories differently than they do advice.



## Protocols of the Circle

- 1) Only one person may speak at a time while proceeding in a clockwise direction.
- 2) The Laws of the Creator shall govern the person speaking:
  - caring
  - sharing
  - honesty
  - determination
- 3) A person may only speak in turn. There are also to be no interruptions while the person is speaking.
- 4) If desired, a person may pass when it is his/her time to speak.
- 5) All other participants are attentive (listening) to the person speaking.
- 6) Confidentiality is assumed except where circle participants agree that information or decisions can be taken outside the circle.

Blue Quills First Nations College

Adapted from

Rupert Ross (1996). *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice*,  
Toronto, ON: Penguin Canada





### **Circle Process:**

- ***Who am I***
- ***How am I connected to (the topic)***
- ***How do I feel about what's happening***

### **Procedural Guidelines:**

The Dialogue Circle is organized on four basic principles. They are:

- Participants are to “speak from the heart” – to speak not only with their heads and give objective ideas, but with their feelings as well. They tell their own story as honestly as they can trust in the moment.
- Participants are to “listen from the heart” – to listen without judgment, with an open mind, even if one disagrees with what the person is saying when another person is talking. The success of a circle is determined by the quality of listening.
- Participants are asked to “speak spontaneously” – to wait until it is their turn to speak before they decide what they want to say. If they are thinking about what they are going to say, then they are not listening completely to the person who is speaking. When people do not preplan what they are going to say, they will often be surprised what comes to them when it is their turn.
- Participants are to “speak leanly” – to speak without embellishment. Participants are to be aware that others would like a chance to speak, and that there is only so much time.



### ***Imagine a Community ...***

“Imagine a community where people regularly express their feelings to one another, including anger, in a safe and respectful way, and where conflict usually reaches quick resolution. Imagine a community where people routinely confront one another for their inappropriate behavior and where wrongdoers are expected to reflect on what they have done, whom they have harmed and how they have harmed them, and then suggest how they can repair that harm.

Imagine a community where people routinely run circle groups for themselves and their peers to help manage behavior and even deal with chronic issues, like substance abuse. Imagine a community where managers earnestly solicit employees’ views in making decisions, explain decisions when they are made and clearly spell out their expectations.

Imagine a community in which those in authority actively engage families and sometimes extended families in critical issues, such as setting goals for treatment or deciding where an abused young person should live or planning how to support a family member in maintaining sobriety. Imagine a community where people minimize gossip and try to deal with concerns and conflicts in an honest and direct fashion.”

Ted Wachtel, 2009, Institute for Restorative Practices

***This vision reflects a truth about the Indigenous past;  
circles can return us to this future.***

*Blue Quills First Nations College, St. Paul, Alberta, June 2010*