

# The Practice of Healing Circles



## Module 1

### How to hold a basic circle

# About this Guide

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This Guide is an introduction to Healing Circles for those interested in hosting a basic healing circle. This is the first in a series of guides, designed to increase your skill in being a circle host/guardian or take you deeper into the circle experience.



## Who might benefit

This Guide can be used by individuals on their own or can be used in a group setting. For groups, the guide includes a range of activities—reading, reflecting, sharing, discussing—for a range of circle sizes.



## How long will it take?

If you are reading this on your own, take time to reflect on each question and return once you've arrived at an insight. If you are working with a group, you are always welcomed and encouraged to adapt these guidelines to meet your circle's needs and available time.

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# 1 What are Healing Circles?

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*Circle started around the cook-fires of humanity's ancestors and has accompanied us ever since. We remember this space. When we listen, we speak more thoughtfully. We lean in to shared purpose.*

Christina Baldwin, author, *The Circle Way*

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## What is a circle?

- There is a difference between meeting in a circle and invoking or calling a circle.
- The circle is the mother of methodologies: the **Campfire** that our ancestors gathered around to build tribe and clan.
- A circle is also a living entity, a full-bodied presence that we are creating together.
- The circle is an invitation is to discover a deeper way of being together, protected by agreements which we'll discuss later.

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*"If it touches your heart & guides you on your path,  
it's a Healing Circle."*

Michael Lerner, president, Commonweal

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## What are the hallmarks of a Healing Circle?

- Healing Circles help us step out of ordinary time into a safe and accepting environment in which each of us can **explore our own healing**.
- With **open hearts**, we access our own inner guidance to understand where the greatest healing—in body, emotions, mind and spirit—can occur.
- With **open minds**, we work together to discover the best ways to remove obstacles to healing, alleviate suffering, and deepen our capacity to heal.



## Individual Reflection followed by a Circle of Two:

*Have you personally felt the healing power of a circle? Reflect on what made it healing.*



2 minutes individual reflection

Your experience

## How does a Healing Circle work?

Circle practices help us become more aware of how we communicate with others—whether family, friends, partners, co-workers, or fellow circle members. These practices help us to be kinder and more respectful of each other and ourselves. Key to a magical circle are the agreements (see page 13).

Circles can have many different formats. This guide describes a simple, sample format for a healing circle that includes four sections—a Welcome, a Heart-Sharing round, a Learning round, and a Close. You are welcome to adapt it to your circle’s needs. Healing Circles are functional blends of mechanics and magic. The mechanics are necessary to establish and maintain a safe, conducive environment for magic to emerge. The trick in a Healing Circle is to be vigilant of the balance between the two—to avoid over-emphasizing one at the expense of the other.



Basic Circle Format

### For more information

#### Books

- Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, *The Circle Way*
- Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*

#### Online resources

- *About Healing Circles*: <http://www.healingcircleslangley.org/circles/what-are-healing-circles/>
- *About The Circle Way*: [www.thecircleway.net](http://www.thecircleway.net)
- *About the Center for Courage and Renewal*: [www.couragerenewal.org](http://www.couragerenewal.org)

## 2 Preparing for Circle

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*“The impulse to share the healing experience— to help others face what we have faced—is built into the human psyche. As Rachel Naomi Remen puts it, “we heal in community.” For many people, a key dimension of healing is to work in a circle of companions who share your wound and share your strong intention to find healing.*

*Healing is a movement toward wholeness – physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. Healing is different from curing – when an illness disappears, never to return. Healing can take place both in a movement toward recovery and, equally, when losing ground physically. Great healing can also take place in dying.*

Michael Lerner, president, Commonweal

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### IF YOU’RE STARTING A CIRCLE

#### Why are you calling a circle?

There are many reasons to call a circle but a Healing Circle is typically born out of love and a desire for service. Discovering your own purpose is a vital first step which you can return to as a touchstone again and again.

**Individual Reflection:** *Why are you calling a circle? Where does hosting this circle fit in your life? How does it serve your soul/own wholeness?*



5 minutes (or as long as it takes)

## Who will hold the circle?

- Healing Circles provide the **safest** experience for circle members when there are at least two people supporting the circle, **Host** and **Guardian**. (For a description of these roles, please see page 14.)
- Having a team of co-hosts is also best for **sustaining** the circle: either can host the circle when the other is unavailable. At those times, you can invite a circle member to act as Guardian.
- It's also more **fun** and more **fulfilling** to work as a team of co-hosts. The load is lighter, the learning deeper.

**Individual Reflection:** *Who would you enjoy co-hosting the circle with?*



1 minute

**Circle of Two:** *Share your ideas for what makes an effective, working relationship between co-hosts? How can you support each other?*



6 minutes

## What is the intention of the circle?

Circle of Two: *What is the intention of the circle?*



1-5 minutes

## Who will you invite and how will you reach them?

Circle of Two: *Who would you like to welcome into the circle and how will you invite them (if known)/reach them (if unknown)?*



1-5 minutes

## Where will you hold the circle?

Circle of Two: *Where will you hold the circle?*



1-5 minutes

## FOR ALL CIRCLES: PREPARING THE SPACE

**CIRCLE OF 2:** *How would you like to prepare the physical space so people feel welcome and safe?*



3 minutes

### Tips for hosts and guardians

- Create a beautiful welcoming space that is clean, well-lit, and has comfortable chairs
- Create a center for the Circle – candle, flowers, or symbol(s) of your work together.

### Make a checklist to remind yourself before every circle

Choose from any of the ideas below or add your own:

- Send a reminder to the circle members
- Welcome them with tea or beverage
- Prepare the space with comfortable chairs and a center for your circle
- Set an intention for the circle with your co-host (if the intention varies)
- Gather whatever pieces you'd like to add to the circle: a quote/poem/passage/meditation/music/art, etc. in this circle?

**You're ready! Take a big breath and prepare to welcome people into your first circle.**

# Welcome

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Being welcomed into circle has four key components.

- 1 **Welcoming**, the informal connection that starts to build between one human being and another from the time we come in the door until we sit down in circle.
- 2 **Entering the Circle**, the transition space that enables us to leave behind the world we've come from and enter the circle with full attention and presence.
- 3 **Introducing/Check in**—If the group is new or a new member has joined, make time for brief introductions. Returning circles often start with a brief check-in.
- 4 **Understanding Circle Agreements & Practices**, making sure everybody in the circle has a shared understanding of how the circle works.

## 1. Welcoming

*Group Discussion: What makes you feel welcome when you enter a new space? What is the value of social time in a Healing Circle?*



5 minutes

### Tips for Hosts

- The Welcome begins at the door with a smile, and for a returning member who would like one, a hug
- Light refreshments, perhaps a cup of tea
- A comfortable chair in a clean, well-lit place
- Circle set up with a center, either a candle, flowers, or other object

## 2. Entering the Circle

*Circles often begin with a simple ritual.*

- 1 Light a candle in the center
- 2 Ring a bell signifying the beginning of silence and ring one at the end
- 3 Read a quote or poem (such as the one below)

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*True solitude is found in the wild places, where one is without human obligation.*

*One's inner voices become audible. One feels the attraction of one's most intimate sources.*

*In consequence, one responds more clearly to other lives. The more coherent one becomes within oneself as a creature, the more fully one enters into the communion of all creatures.*

*Wendell Berry, from his poem "Healing"*

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*Individual reflection: What was your experience of this way of entering a circle?*



2 minutes

*Group discussion: What is the role of silence in entering a circle?*



2 minutes

### Tips for Hosts

- Silence has many advantages:
  - Creates a safe container or sacred space
  - Provides a pause, a separation between what came before and what comes after
  - Connects us to inner guidance

- **Silent Council** is when we each look inside and listen carefully to what is most important to us right now. We might experience this as a welling of intuition, a grace. Communications in a silent council can also come to us in the form of imagery, sensations, voices, or other means of communicating with our bodies, minds, and spirit.
- When we're on our own, we can also hold a **Circle of One**, a circle for different voices within.
  - These might be conflicts that arise between the *roles* we play in life—for example, being a parent vs. working late at the office.
  - We might be experiencing a range of *emotions* and have difficulty naming them and working with them in turn.
  - An inner council can also be held by *personifying* different organ systems within the body—for example, is the liver at risk from the therapy for the lung?

*Group discussion: What other ways of Entering the Circle might you and your group choose to use?*



3 minutes

### Tips for Hosts

Circles can be enriched with different ways of being and learning together if the group feels comfortable with them. These might include:

- *Guided meditation*—Our pain circle always begins with guided meditation. The circle views this as skill-building.
- *Guided visualization*—Our cancer circle has requested a visualization that they can use on their own.
- *Reading*—In addition to the host and guardian, different members of the circle can bring in different prose passages or poems to read to the group.
- *Music*—Circles whose members enjoy singing could sing or those who enjoy listening could use a piece of music as an introduction

### 3. Introducing/Intention/Check-in

Whenever there are new people in a circle, it is helpful to begin with

- Introductions to circle members
- Introduction to circle agreements and practices
- Introduction to the timing/theme/agenda of the circle today

## Introductions for new circles or new members

*Group discussion: What is the purpose of introductions?*



2 minutes

*Group discussion: For ongoing circles, how can you vary introductions based on the purpose of your circle each time?*



2 minutes

### Tips for Hosts

- The key purpose of introductions to get everyone's **voice in the room** as early as possible and as comfortably as possible.
- Introductions can serve many purposes and you can tailor them each circle. Here are some suggestions, but please use your own creativity.

IF YOUR INTENTION IS TO	YOU MIGHT TRY THIS
Make people comfortable	<i>What's your name and what brings you to this circle?</i>
Orient each other to a common condition	<i>[For a cancer circle] We'll have the opportunity to learn more of our stories in a minute but let's begin by simply saying what type of cancer we have and when we were diagnosed.</i>
Establish sacred space	<i>[Ask people to bring a sacred object with them to circle] How does your sacred object represent who you are in the context of this circle?</i>
Create common bonds	<i>What brought you joy when you were young?</i>
Set intention	<i>What is your intention for this circle?</i>
Bring members into the present	<i>What's a one-word weather report for how you are feeling today?</i>

## 4. Understanding the Circle Agreements and Practices

### Why Agreements?

*Group discussion: Why do we have agreements?*



3 minutes

#### Tips for Hosts

- Circle agreements protect the safety of the individuals and the integrity of the circle.

### What are the Healing Circle Agreements?

- We treat each other with kindness and respect.
- We listen with compassion and curiosity.
- We honor each other's unique ways to healing and don't presume to advise or fix or try to save each other.
- We hold all stories shared in the circle confidential.
- We trust each of us has guidance we need within us and we rely on the power of silence to access it.

*Group discussion: Do you have any questions about these agreements? Does your group want to modify or add to them?*



As long as it takes

#### Tips for Hosts

- The Healing Circles agreements used at Healing Circles Langley were derived from many sources. Your group is free to adapt them to meet your needs. See these sources for other ideas:
  - PeerSpirit, *The Circle Way*
  - Parker Palmer, *Circle of Trust Touchstones*

## What are the Circle Roles of Host/Guardian?

- The Host and Guardian perform **service**, not leadership, roles in the circle.
- If we continued the campfire metaphor, the **Host** is responsible for tending the fire (protecting the center): starting the fire and keeping the fire going without the fire getting out of control. The Host opens and closes the circle and might direct the transition from one segments of a circle to another. The Host is usually not there to be a subject matter expert.
- Metaphorically, the **Guardian** is responsible for protecting the rim of the circle, making sure no one gets burned by being too close to the fire, and keeping an eye on those who feel the need to back away from the heat. Practically, the Guardian watches the energy of a group, protects the safety of the circle by ensuring agreements are kept, and rings the bell for silence. According to *The Circle Way*, creators of the Guardian role, “The guardian usually employs a gentle noise-maker, such as a chime, bell, or rattle, that signals to everyone to stop action, take a breath, and rest in a space of silence.” The Host and Guardian sit opposite each other to ensure sightline to everyone in the circle.
- **Circle members both tend the fire and protect the rim.** All participants share responsibility for holding the circle and for their own healing.
- **Any member may call for the bell to initiate a pause.**

# Heart-sharing

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*“The soul speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting, and trustworthy conditions.”*

— Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*

*“The work of seeing is done.  
Now practice heart-work...”*

Rainer Maria Rilke

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The core of the Healing Circle is the Heart-sharing round(s) where each person in turn has the opportunity to speak to what is most on their heart in the moment. At its most sacred, this is a moment of authenticity, vulnerability, and often self-discovery.

## The Mechanics: Talking Piece Council

At the invitation to enter the Heart-sharing round, all members direct their attention to the center of the circle, and then look within. When someone is ready to begin, they pick up a talking piece—which can be a rock, a symbol, or anything the group prefers—and begin to talk. When they’re finished, they pass the talking piece to their right or left. That person is free to take a moment to see if they’d like to share right now, and if not, they can pass the piece to the next person.

## The Magic

*When we speak*

We speak to the center of the circle, we put our metaphorical log on the fire. We use the time to center on our intention for this time in circle, exploring what is most alive in us. This is where we move toward our own wholeness, our own healing.

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*“The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention.”*

Rachel Naomi Remen

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*“The best way to help others heal is not to tell them what they should do. Rather, you start with generous listening. As Parker Palmer, the great Quaker educator, puts it: Do not advise them. Do not try to fix them. Do not tell them what they should do. Do not try to be wise or show off your expertise in healing. Simply be there for them, a witness to their exploration of their own path.”*

Michael Lerner, *Intentional Healing*

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### *When we listen*

The rest of circle listens without interruption or comment. We bear witness to the joys, the struggles, hopes and fears of another and so see ourselves. We don't take on each other's pain. Again, using the campfire metaphor, we can pull close to the fire, receiving the heat we need, or we can back away from the fire if we need to.

*Question for Heart-sharing round: What is most on your heart today?*



Each member of the circle shares and then passes the talking piece to the next person. That person is free to pass or share.

*Group discussion: What are some of the challenges of Talking Piece Council and how would you work with them?*



15 minutes

## Tips for Hosts

Thinking through some ideas for working with common challenges in the Heart-sharing round can increase your confidence in being a host:

- Lack of self-regulation whether because of lack of awareness, physical limitations (such as blindness or hearing loss), medications (such as steroids), or another reason

*What ideas do you have for how to work with this situation?*

- Not speaking authentically whether because of fear, a desire to please, a lack of self-knowledge, cultural norms, gender norms, or another reason

*What ideas do you have for how to work with this situation?*

- Not being kind or respectful for whatever reason

*What ideas do you have for how to work with this situation?*

- Going off point—outside the intention of circle

*What ideas do you have for how to work with this situation?*

# Harvesting

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*“We are exploring together. We are cultivating a garden together, backs to the sun. The question is a hoe in our hands and we are digging beneath the hard and crusty surface to the rich humus of our lives.”*

— Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*

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Researchers are still studying what makes social support such a critical and powerful element of healing. One focus has been on the practical—someone to help get you to a doctor and help with physical needs. Another focus has been on the quality of the emotional support that was just evident in the Heart-sharing round. Another focus is on how the social network delivers information needed for healing. The Harvesting round is intended to give space for this learning to take place. Harvesting can be done using many different *formats* and *practices*. Your group will find its way if you give it time.

## The Mechanics

### *Formats and practices*

- **Personal**—We go around the circle again using the talking piece, this time each in turn takes their own discovery process deeper by speaking to what they have harvested from the previous round.
- **Small group**—The group can divide into areas of interest—good for a large circle
- **Whole circle**—The circle explores questions using two different circle practices:
  - Popcorn Council*
    - Talking-piece variation where we don’t go around in circle but rather anyone can share their thoughts, without cross-talk or follow-up questions.
    - Used to get ideas out quickly, e.g., brainstorming
    - Used for harvesting experience in large groups where not everyone needs to share
    - Used to report individual reflection where not all will want to share
  - Conversation Council*
    - Similar to normal conversation without persuasion or disagreement

### *Ways of transitioning*

- Host, Guardian, or group decides to continue with their individual learning from the previous round and just pass the talking piece around again
- Group proposes questions they’d like the group to address today
- Host synthesizes Heart-sharing round and offers a question

## The Magic

The magic comes from the whole-heartedness of the group. The circle members genuinely want to learn and the circle respects that each person has their own area of pressing concern.

We've found these practices keep learning circles magical:

- Asking deeply relevant, authentic questions that matter in our lives now
- Answering the question from our own experience
- Reflecting clearly if we need further clarification to understand someone else
- Asking open and honest questions of each other if a person asks for direct help

*Typical Harvesting Round question: What do we want to learn from the wisdom in the group today?*



2 minutes: Each member of the circle identifies a question

### Tips for Hosts

- Honor the collection of inner wisdom before priming occurs in the group by having a moment of silence or the opportunity to write a question down.
- Harvesting to find universals or collectives may or may not ultimately be of value to the one. Beware of group think.

*Group discussion: What are some of the challenges of Conversation Council and how would you handle them in circle?*



15-30 minutes

### Tips for Hosts

Because conversation is how we normally interact with each other, we can easily fall into habits. Take some time to think about how you would address these situations in circle:

- Trying to fix or save
- Trying to impose a belief system on another
- Dominating or interrupting a conversation
- Not giving time to the quiet voices in the room
- Believing you know what's best for another

# Closing the Circle

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*"We clasp the hands of those who go before us,  
and the hands of those who come after us;  
we enter the little circle of each other's arms,  
and the larger circle of lovers whose hands are joined in a dance,  
and the larger circle of all creatures, passing in and out of life,  
who move also in a dance, to a music so subtle and vast  
that no one hears it except in fragments."  
~ Wendell Berry, excerpt from his poem "Healing"*

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Leaving the circle unwinds how we entered. Your circle is free to create its own rituals but they usually include three elements: a check-out, silence, and the blowing out of the candle.

## Check out

*Typical check-out question: In one word or sentence, what are you leaving with from today's circle? What is percolating inside that you'd like to continue to work on?*



One minute each

## Silence between bells

- *May start with a poem or song before ringing the bell for silence*

## Candle out

*This guide has been prepared by Healing Circles Langley based on our collective experience. We are deeply grateful to Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea of PeerSpirit and to Michael Lerner of Commonweal for developing the foundation of this work. Other healing circles are welcome to use and adapt this guide under Creative Commons principles. This is draft 3.0—we welcome your input to make it better. Please send suggestions to [dianalindsay@healingcircleslangley.org](mailto:dianalindsay@healingcircleslangley.org).*