

Guidelines for Facilitating a Listening Circle.

We all need a safe space in our lives in which we can think and feel without fear of criticism or judgement. A Listening Circle is one way to provide this. It is very simple to organise and need cost nothing. Many of you will be amazed at how the structure adds a level of safety which many people have never experienced, and which seems to enable our minds to work better than usual.

Such groups can serve many purposes from problem solving at work or exploring personal difficulties such as addictions. Some people use these groups to start to tell their life stories through which they often reach a greater personal understanding and pride in themselves. Some groups are 'one-offs,' and some meet with the same people regularly for weeks or even years.

They will only work if the ground rules are followed. The facilitator needs to take charge and create the structure which will enable true listening to happen. She/he will need a hand-held timer and will need to get a verbal agreement from each participant on the following three guidelines:

Ground Rules:

1. Confidentiality: What is said in each persons' time is completely confidential. No one refers to it again, ever, except the person themselves - if they want to.
2. Equal Time: everyone has an equal amount of time during which no one interrupts or comments on what they are saying. Listeners maintain an attitude of respect, interest and delight.
3. Expressions of emotion such as laughing or crying are welcome if they arise naturally. (Maybe bring a box of tissues to the meeting).

Creating the Structure:

Invite no more than eight people*.

Decide on a place to meet which must be private, usually someone's home, but it could be a room at work or even in a break-out room at a conference or workshop.

Encourage people to be punctual or early. People joining a group which has already started can be very disruptive.

You may or may not offer refreshments before the meeting, but make water available to all.

Sit in a circle as close as you can. If you are comfortable with it, holding someone's hand when taking your turn can add to the safety.

Ask people to begin with something that has gone well in their lives lately or something they are pleased with. Share their pleasure but do not start a conversation about it.

Divide the remaining time equally amongst the number of people present, leaving ten minutes at the end to close the circle.

The facilitator holds the timer (kitchen timers are good) and asks a question for everyone to answer in turn. This must require an answer which is open (there is no 'right' answer), personal and not general. Below are some examples of questions which have already worked well, but there is no end to these.

Set the timer and go round the room. Everyone gives their undivided attention to each person in turn including the facilitator (who is a peer – not an expert). The facilitator thanks each person when the timer goes off and moves the attention of the group to the next person.

Closing the Circle:

Use the last ten minutes of your meeting to let each person say something to which they are looking forward. Goodbye hugs are great but should *never* be forced on people.

It can be tempting to hang round after such a meeting, eat cake and slide into bringing up things which need to remain confidential. Also sticking to a set, agreed time may encourage more future commitments to come to meetings.

**This process can work with bigger groups but these would require more people who can facilitate the circles. These larger groups would need to divide into two or more smaller groups with a facilitator in each. This is because real attention is hard to maintain for longer than an hour or so.*

Some questions used in various groups:

- What work is meaningful to you?
- Who has been your ally and what makes them so?
- How has racism/sexism/ableism/classism/adultism (pick one!) impacted on your life?
- What was your first connection to nature?
- What makes you feel included?
- What made you decide to be an activist?

If you need some assistance thinking of the right question for the group, please email me at sparrowhawk@mail.com and I will try and suggest some.

GOOD LUCK!