



## Helpful Hints for Planning Your Circle

### General Circle Format

When preparing to facilitate a Circle, use of the following checklist or format is recommended:

- (1) Circle Purpose and Opening
- (2) Talking Piece and Centerpiece
- (3) Guidelines / Values Rounds
- (4) Check-In and Relationship-Building Rounds
- (5) Discussion Rounds and Plan Development
- (6) Check-Out and Closing Rounds

These instructions are to be used with a fillable Circle Prep Form.

The above format may be amended depending on the topic or time limitations. It may be tempting to skip the guidelines and values round. However, it is important to go through it unless the group that has already been meeting in Circle and has generated shared values in previous circles. Even with a regularly meeting group, it is a good idea to revisit values and guidelines even if only briefly. It is also helpful to have written reminders of group values visible to all participants during all Circles.

### What is Circle Purpose and Opening Ceremony?

Welcome and thank everyone for coming. Explain the purpose of the Circle, why you have gathered. For an Opening Ceremony, you may share a poem, quote, song, or facilitate a guided meditation or breathing exercise – whatever seems appropriate for the group gathered. The purpose of the Opening Ceremony is to mark the Circle as a special or sacred space and as a time when everyone gets to share and connect in ways we ordinarily don't have the opportunity to do. The Opening also grounds everyone, inviting them to bring their 'best selves' to the Circle.

### Talking Piece and Centerpiece?

Rooted in indigenous traditions, the talking piece is a sacred or special object that is significant to the facilitator, to the Circle participants, and/or is relevant to the topic to be addressed. You might mention that whoever is holding the talking piece is talking with respect and from the heart, and those not holding it are invited to listen with respect and from the heart. The talking piece moves from one participant to the next, clockwise or counterclockwise, always tracing the path of the Circle. Very different from our western style of communication in which we frequently interrupt and engage in cross-talk, use of the talking piece is meant to encourage both deep talking and listening. A Circle participant may pass if she doesn't care to speak – coercion has no place in RJ. (However, the facilitator might do another pass of the talking piece in case



the previous participant is ready to speak next time around.) There are times when it is more useful to suspend the talking to encourage spontaneous sharing or brainstorming. (However, remember to return to the talking piece before the Circle is finished.)

The Centerpiece reminds us there are no sides. There is only a Center. The Centerpiece often has fire/air (candle), water, earth (a living plant), rock. It reminds us of our interrelatedness with one another and with nature. Any other items of special significance to participants may also be placed on the centerpiece.

### **Check-In and Relationship-Building Rounds?**

If the Circle is convening for the first time with participants who are strangers, an engaging or interactive Introduction round is important. If participants already know one another, a check-in round in which they share how they are feeling on physical, mental or emotional levels is suggested. Suggestions: *Describe in one or two words how you are feeling today? Or, if you were a weather pattern, what would that be (For ex., sunny, partly cloudy, stormy, etc.)? Or, do a physical gesture that describes how you are feeling today (and everyone else can repeat the gesture and words).*

Restorative justice is profoundly relational. At least half of all Circle time should be spent in interactive relationship-building or trust-building exercises where possible. A favorite exercise is to ask everyone to bring an object of special significance to them that symbolizes their passion in life or their life's purpose. Each person will engage in brief story-telling about the object and then place the object in the center of the Circle. Having an entire repertoire of fun interactive exercises and ice-breakers to draw from throughout the Circle time as needed is also recommended.

### **Guidelines and Values?**

*Guidelines.* You may suggest the following core guidelines and ask participants if they have questions, additions, and if they agree to adopt them (as revised as the case may be). Ask for a thumbs-up. Suggested core Circle guidelines are: (1) Silence Cells (2) Stay In Circle, but take care of yourself (Let us know if you have to leave) (3) Respect the Talking Piece (4) Honor confidentiality.

*Values.* Restorative Justice is a values-driven process. This activity allows Circle participants to identify and agree upon personal and shared group values which everyone will honor during the Circle. Circles assume that in every one of us there is a deep desire to connect to one another in a good way. Identifying and agreeing upon such values as respect, honesty, empathy, humor, love, etc. allow us to bring our “best selves” forward. At the foundation of circles are all values that nurture good relationships with others. These values and other elements can create a container



strong enough to hold anger, frustration, joy, pain, conflict, diverse worldviews, intense feelings, silence, and paradox.

You might hand out paper plates or colorful construction paper (shaped like hearts or stars) and markers to participants and ask them to write down three values that are important to them. Then ask them to circle one of the three that is most important. One by one, using the talking piece, invite them to share their values and why they chose them, and then place their value in the center of the Circle. Someone will chart all values mentioned. You will ask for questions, additional values, and then invite the group to reach consensus on the list of values to be observed during the Circle.

### **Discussion Rounds (To address issues or conflict)**

Choose a topic that is appropriate for the group to discuss. If this is a new group and you are just getting to know each other, you may ask people to share what is important to them about being in community. (The issue may be a conflict in which case the discussion will revolve around the restorative questions as prompts.) Whatever the topic may be, encourage and model sharing from the heart. If the discussion calls for an action plan and follow-up, this should be addressed.

### **Check-Out Round and Closing Ceremony**

*Suggested Check-out Round Prompt:* Share one word about how you are feeling now at the end of the Circle or about what they appreciated about it

*Closing Ceremony Suggestions:* You may suggest that everyone stand shoulder to shoulder and take three deep breaths together. Another option is to read a short poem or quote with an expression of gratitude to all present for their good work and participation. You may also ask participants to perform a simple physical gesture that expresses how they are feeling or the energy they bring to restorative justice work and ask everyone to repeat it.



## Circle Prep Form

1. *Circle Purpose and Opening Ceremony* [What is the Circle's purpose? How will you open it? A poem, quote, song, breathing, story...?]

2. *Talking Piece & Centerpiece* [Describe your talking piece and its significance. Describe your Centerpiece and significance]

3. *Guidelines/ Values* [What questions will you ask and/or interactive exercises will you use to create shared guidelines/values?]

4. *Relationship-Building Rounds* (What questions or interactive exercises to get acquainted, break the ice, deepen relationships, build trust, check-in? )



5. Discussion Rounds and Plan Development [What needs to be addressed in the circle? What questions will you ask? How many rounds? Is a plan with follow-up needed?]

7. *Check out Round & Closing Ceremony* [How are people feeling right now? How will you close the Circle? Poem, Quote, Movement, Song, Breathing, etc.]