

# Restorative Practice Circles

Circles have been used for millennia, by many different cultures and for a myriad of reasons. They range from informal discussion groups to formal conferences and are generally regarded as a positive experience. The concept of a circle is nothing new and to some may already be a familiar format, however in order to be considered a Restorative Practice circle it must follow the principles set out in this document.

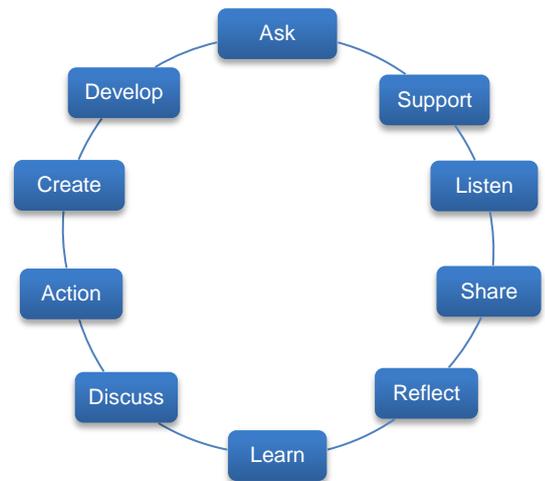
## What is a Restorative Practice Circle?

Circles are a way of bringing people together in which everyone:

- Is respected
- Gets a chance to talk without interruption
- Comes together to share their learning
- Is equal – no person is more important than anyone else
- Feels safe to discuss their opinion and feelings

Circles can be used to:

- Build trust and understanding
- Make decisions and develop plans together
- Bring people together as a group
- Share challenges and learn from mistakes
- Celebrate and learn from success



**Remember:** The meeting must be run in a fair and equal way so that all voices are heard. It is important that everyone comes to a circle voluntarily and understands why they are there and their role in the circle.

## How do Circles Work?

### Planning a Circle

A warm welcome and a thoughtful opening really contribute to creating the right environment for a successful circle. Preparation is key to this process and you will need to consider the following:

- Who will be invited – Everyone who is invited must be able to commit to regularly attending.
- When will the circle be held – Make sure you choose a time that suits everyone who needs to be there.
- Where will the meeting be held – The venue must be accessible to everyone and away from other distractions. Make sure that the room can accommodate a circle of chairs and allows for refreshments if needed.
- What will be discussed - Everyone who is coming to the meeting needs to know what it is about so that they can prepare.
- Who will lead the circle - this is not necessarily the person who would normally lead a meeting. However, this person must be able to: ensure all voices are heard, challenge behaviour that falls outside the group ground rules and keep the circle discussion within the time allocated.

### The First Circle

When a circle meets for the first time it is essential to discuss the guidelines for the group. Often called ground rules, these should include things like confidentiality and how you would like everyone to behave. You may also decide on a name for the circle to define its purpose.

## Introduction and Check In – Building Trust and Understanding

All circles start with an introduction and check in. The check in marks the start of the meeting and sets the tone for what is going to be discussed. It can be used to see how people are feeling about a particular issue or just to gather information. The check in question need not be work related and is intended to bring people together in a way that is different to their normal working day. It provides an opportunity to get acquainted and begins to develop the trust and understanding that is needed for circles to be successful.

**Remember:** A circle is not just how we arrange the chairs but how we share the power in the room to better understand each other and the issues we face.

## The Purpose of the Meeting – Addressing the Issues and Problem Solving

This is the part of the meeting where you introduce the topic for the circle. This could be anything from group reflection to see how people are getting on, particularly useful in times of change, or might have a more specific focus relating to a particular group issue. The purpose of each meeting should have been agreed beforehand so that people can come with some thoughts.

Formats might include:

- Ice-breaking and trust building exercises
- Fish bowl problem solving
- Reflective time, where people are able to say how they are feeling about a particular issue.

Meetings may consist of more than one of these elements; each one is covered as a series of rounds or turn taking which can be sequential or as people want to speak.

The circle leader is also a participant in the process and must balance their needs with the wider goals of the group.

Points to consider:

- Do you need a talking piece to ensure all voices are heard? If a talking piece is used there is no obligation to speak when you have it and the circle leader may speak without it.
- Will the circle leader change depending on the topic?
- Would the group benefit from a guest speaker about a particular issue?

**Remember:** Decision making in restorative circles is by consensus. It does not require everyone to agree on everything but each participant must be able to live with the decision and support its implementation.

## Check Out – Reflection to ensure everyone has been heard

All circles end with a check out. The check out marks the end of the meeting and ensures that all participants understand what has been discussed and agreed. It can also be used to identify next steps or future items for discussion.

The Circle leader must ensure that all participants are content for the circle to close and that any personal issues that may require 1:1 discussion outside the circle are followed up.

**Remember:** If your circle is addressing a particular need or issue that you feel would benefit from being co-facilitated you can always ask a member of the Restorative Practice Team to support you. We can also offer refresher sessions on specific aspects of Restorative Practice to help build competence and confidence within the group.