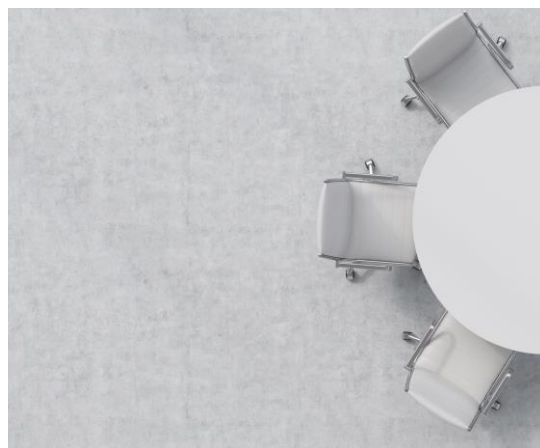


# VALUES FOR CIRCLE KEEPERS



Traditional circle practices (also known as council circles or talking circles) may be interpreted as representing some of humankind's earliest approaches to community health and human interaction. Modern circle practices are now found in many well-established fields of health and human development, including education, therapy, governance, and justice. Many diverse fields of modern research and practice emerged from these communication traditions. Research in several fields of human science reflects back on the strong pedagogy that exists within circle practices. Aligning the pedagogy and praxis of circle communication with modern discoveries of the sciences, it is possible to distill core values that inform meaningful circle interactions. These core values also give those who facilitate circles ("Circle Keepers") and researchers a starting place to consider the evaluation of traditional circle practices. For a detailed understanding of the structures of circle practices, please refer to *Timeless Traditions: Conducting Council Circles in a Modern World* FS320E (Wallace 2018).

## New Ways from Old Traditions

The twenty-first century is seeing intersections in many heretofore isolated fields of science; they are sharing discoveries and synthesizing new and significant ways to approach the brain, human interaction, and well-being (Siegel 2012). Derivatives and components of ancient circle practices remain evident in many well-established fields of health and human development, including education, therapy, governance, and justice (Greenleaf et al. 2019; Ross 2006; Semple et al. 2017; Tang and Leve 2016). Many findings emergent in neurobiology, motivational psychology, and sociology indirectly give credence to the human and social benefits of circle practices. Circles remain a healthy, communal, and restorative practice in our modern world. In this era of fast paced technological advancement, cultural critics, such as Richard Louv, suggest people appear to be losing contact

with the more natural and essential processes of interacting with each other and their environment in healthy ways (2008). For many cultures, the practice of communicating in circles has historical precedence and ongoing value; it provides a way to engage humanely in relationship with the larger world (Ross 2006; Zimmerman and Coyle 2009).

Circle practices operate on both individualistic and communal levels "based on the belief that human beings are a part of nature and health [is] the result of holistic balance among body, mind, spirit, emotions, behavior and social group" (Greenleaf et al. 2019). In the practice of circles, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of their thoughts and feelings and develop skills for communicating those thoughts and feelings to others. At the same time, each participant is called upon to listen deeply and to hear what others are saying. To apply this practice encourages participants to listen for agreement. As long as participants adhere to the basic guidelines (Wallace 2018), circles have the potential of creating safe spaces for growth. When circle facilitators ("Circle Keepers") are guided by core values, they provide the participants with the direction necessary to deepen their experience.

**It is proposed that values practiced through Council Circles create both individual wellness and community cohesion.**

With the assumption that there are values that guide an effective Circle Keeper, this paper will call upon current theory and research that suggest measurement domains for each value. Although these four values are always holistically integrated in the total experience of a circle, they are divided here between the values that produce individual wellness and the values that promote community cohesion.

# Values of Individual Wellness

## ATTENTION

Circles elicit a great deal of attention from participants. In a circle, both speaking and listening can be done with a full awareness of self and others. Enhanced interpersonal attentiveness and communication have been reported as outcomes of circle practice (Dietsch 2001). Speaking thoughtfully and succinctly is similar. As a reflective practice grounded in remaining present, much of the attention and focus exercised in circle can be considered similar to the practice of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is a state that is typically described as “nonjudgmental attention to experiences in the present moment” (Kabat-Zinn 1990). Bishop and colleagues (2004) include in their operational definition: “A quality of non-elaborative awareness to current experience and a quality to one’s experience within an orientation of curiosity, experiential openness and acceptance.” These definitions are similar to the circle intentions of listening and speaking from the heart (Wallace 2018). The benefits of mindfulness and its use in therapeutic interventions and education is well documented (Tang and Leve 2016; Semple et al. 2017). Many current practices of mindfulness adhere to its origin as a meditative discipline; however, mindfulness is also encouraged as a secular daily practice, “allowing the student to respond skillfully to situations that evoke emotional responses” (Bishop et al. 2004). Unlike traditional introspective practices, circle mindfulness includes a focus on intra-personal *and* inter-personal experience and can provide numerous opportunities to support emotional development and respond skillfully to emotional evocation.

- It is proposed the practice of circles will help participants develop a capacity for expanded interpersonal and intrapersonal attention. Circle Keepers will develop and model sustained, non-elaborative awareness, openness, and acceptance, fostering nonjudgmental interactions in themselves and others.

## NARRATIVE

Humans seek meaning. Every individual has a running narrative about who they are and what their life is about. These narratives become progressively more complex as people mature and are called upon to take on multiple roles or are challenged to integrate broader and more difficult experiences. An individual’s stories can have a powerful effect on how they interpret personal meaning (Seligman 2011) and how they develop ownership and agency in their lives (Sokol et al. 2013). This may be why indigenous cultures consider a person’s story sacred.

Our beliefs contribute strongly to our sense of well-being. An individual’s stories define their interactions with the world. As individuals move towards adulthood, they can be empowered by a story that reconciles and consolidates all their roles into a

meaningful whole. In adults, a healthy life narrative can be confirmed when stories reflect self-control, meaning, direction, and resilience (Habbermas and Reese 2015). Wenger (2000) defines a strong communal identity as one that has connectedness, expansiveness, and effectiveness. Healthy communities support the growth of their members. The circle concerns itself with each individual’s story, it supports non-dialogic narrative sharing and stresses the importance of viewing each individual’s story as a sacred part of the individual and the community.

For many participants, getting the most out of this opportunity requires trust in the circle’s confidentiality. The circle practice provides opportunities for a group of individuals to suspend internal judgements and criticism, engage in active listening, and consider varying viewpoints. It allows people to offer trust and concern. In circle, participants don’t judge or fix other people’s stories, they accept and honor them. The positive and restorative effects of hearing others completely and being heard completely cannot be understated.

- It is proposed that the prolonged practice of circles will build positive self-concept and increase participant self-confidence. Circle Keepers will exhibit reflective listening and encouragement.

# Values of Community Cohesion

## ABUNDANCE

*It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.*

—Gibran (1923)

Abundance is the shared recognition of human potentials. Abundance is the active expression of a growth mindset (Dweck 2016) that recognizes competencies (both in self and others) and that pursues reciprocal empowerment. To reach a place of reciprocal appreciation requires listening for opportunities of agreement. Circles often call upon their participants to find trust in challenging situations (Ross 2006). The abundance that is required from participants in such situations is considered an expression of their faith.

Circles offer disassociated participants a chance to establish reciprocal disclosure with one another. Collins and Miller (1994), in a meta-analysis on the nature of disclosure, confirmed that opening up to others can increase likability and the likelihood of reciprocity. When the intention of being open-hearted and non-judgmental is coupled with sharing personal stories, powerful personal transformations are possible. Fredrickson and Branigan (2005) have conducted meaningful research demonstrating that when people conduct their decision making through positive emotions, such as being valued, they become more aware of the options they have available in any given situation. Likewise, learning to express gratitude to one another not only increases the positive relationships and regard

for participants in the circle, it is an exceptional personal practice for wellbeing (Seligman 2011).

In a world of dwindling resources, it may seem counterintuitive to focus on recognizing abundance, yet only humans with abundant reciprocal competencies will have the vision to resolve such issues. For any number of reasons, our large-scale, institutional, and technologically-driven culture can leave its members feeling undervalued and isolated (McKnight and Block 2010). By defining ourselves for one another, we increase the collective contribution to our learning community and improve its effectiveness (Wenger 2000). With repeated opportunities for sharing, communities become proficient at recognizing the “tenants of abundance” (McKnight and Block 2010):

- What we have is enough.
- We have the capacity to provide what we need in the face of the human condition.
- We organize our world in the context of cooperation and satisfaction.
- We are responsible for each other.
- We live with the reality of the human condition.

Circle Keepers develop the ability to recognize potential in others and demonstrate faith in each participant’s potential. This is a noteworthy trait of leadership. Rather than creating limitations and boundaries for people’s expression, Circle Keepers demonstrate eager receptivity for each participant’s contribution. By expressing abundance in the face of shared human predicaments, Circle Keepers help communities increase trust in their collective competencies and social efficacy.

- It is proposed participants will increase authentic disclosure during circles, recognize collective experience, and experience greater well-being. Circle-Keepers will model patience and reciprocal confidentiality, and encourage a deep sense of gratitude and recognition for what people share.

## INTERRELATEDNESS

It is easy to take a concept such as “interrelatedness” and present it in numerous abstract or esoteric ways. Sometimes the outcomes evoked through circle practice can seem quite serendipitous. For the purpose of this paper, interrelatedness in circle practice is perceived both as biological and experiential phenomenon. It is, simply stated, the reciprocal and visceral relationship we share with one another and other living things. Interrelatedness is foremost a relationship between two or more beings or experiences. Research on empathy, perspective-taking, and imagination can build a framework for interrelatedness.

While circle practice encourages mindful attention inward, participants also have the opportunity to “decenter” (Jackson et al. 2005) and experience each other empathetically. “It is only when people suspend judgement that they can be free to take on the perspective of the other” (Watson and Greenberg 2009). The meaningful connections people perceive in circles can be *felt* through the creation of a safe and supportive space. The research and theories of Stephen Porges (2017) help to illustrate how safe social spaces contribute to the shared biological regulation of

parasympathetic nervous systems which are key to our health. Through shared narrative and empathetic connections, participants build more recognition of human similarities and develop the strength and capacity to support positive responses to human challenges (Porges 2017; Carter et al. 2009).

Not surprisingly, evaluations around the use of circles identify time and prescribed schedules as challenges to practice (Dietsch 2001; Grahamslaw and Henson 2015). The institutional culture of the west is particularly adversarial towards non-productivity. Sitting in circles talking about ourselves probably will not drive production efficiency, but studies indicate group-sustained practices of cohesion do improve productivity (Michaelson et al. 1989; Pritchard et.al. 1988). While institutionally it may appear necessary for individuals to subjugate their nervous systems to accommodate hierarchical expectations of institutions, humans need to find value and health through co-regulation with one another.

Indigenous traditions experience interrelatedness as sacred. Humankind’s self-importance is seen as sustaining the illusionary division between man and the rest of nature (Ross 2006). The belief that inter-relatedness is “sacred” may be an acknowledgement that *judgement* and hierarchies can be detrimental to human perceptions of interrelatedness. Each person’s story is a part of a greater story and must be valued with equanimity. The natural world presents humankind with time on a grander and more humbling scale. Our interrelatedness to the natural environment has been cited as beneficial to human health. Studies on nature and well-being have repeatedly found that nature positively affects cognitive, psychological, social, and physical well-being (Greenleaf et al. 2019; Kaplan 1995; Louv 2008; Siegel 2012). These represent some of the reasons circle practices are often conducted with deference to the natural world.

- It is proposed the practice of circles will create enhanced group cohesiveness and improve participant’s empathetic responses. Facilitators will model empathetic behaviors, nonhierarchical communication, and they will find acceptable ways to honor the authentic value of each circle.

## Conclusion

A number of effective practices researched in other fields bear striking similarity to, and may have originated from, traditional circle practices. By drawing out these parallels, the author asserts that circles could be considered a research-based practice, with a collaborative body of evidence from practices that have evolved from traditional circles. The outcomes achieved in successful circles are not achieved without the intentional effort of the participants and the guiding facilitation of a “Circle Keeper.” Four over-arching values have been identified that are inherent to successfully “keeping” a circle: attention, narrative, abundance, and interrelatedness. Possible behavioral outcomes for participants have been suggested. Areas for facilitator skill development are suggested. Tools to measure circle effectiveness can be constructed from the proposed individual and communal values suggested in this paper.

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