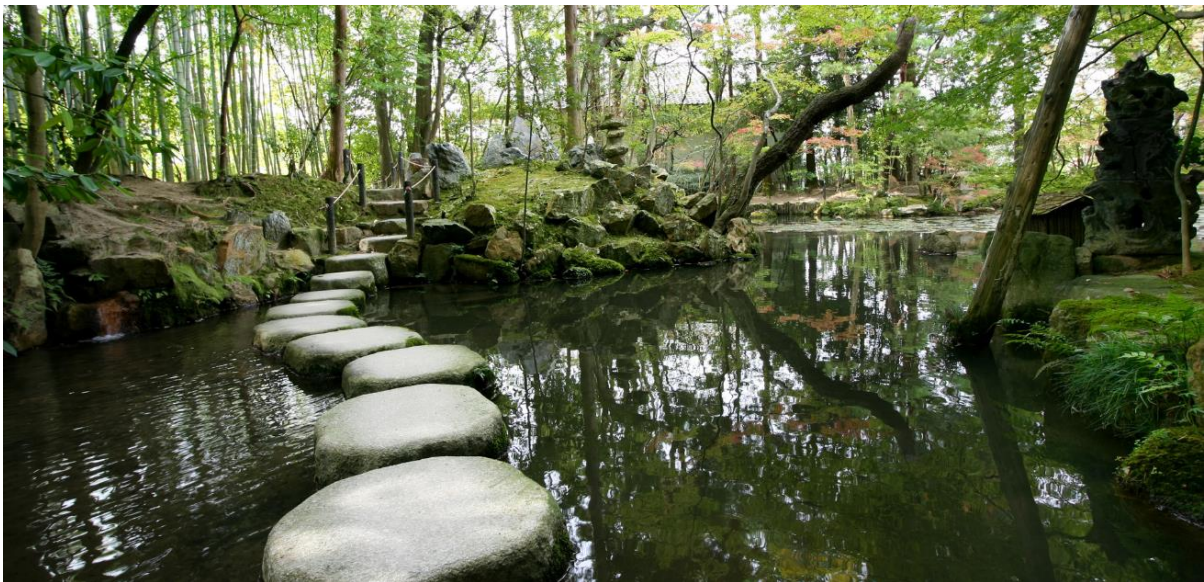




The practice of healing circles



How to hold a basic circle

About Healing Circles Global

Healing Circles Global (HCG) is a program of Commonwealth, which is a nonprofit organization based in California. HCG's vision is to alleviate loneliness and isolation by fostering social connection. We meet this need via small circles that encourage participants to treat one another with kindness and respect, hold one another's stories in confidence, withhold judgment, and honor one another's unique path to healing without advising, fixing, or rescuing.

Circle participants work together to explore ways to alleviate suffering, remove obstacles that prevent healing, and deepen their capacity to heal. They also access their own inner guidance to determine where the greatest healing—physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual—can occur.

Our goals

Our primary goals are to:

1. Offer welcoming, safe, and nourishing **circles** that promote healing and connection for anyone regardless of their location.
2. Provide meaningful experiences of learning, service, and belonging for our global community of **volunteers**.
3. Create a sustainable, loving, global **community** for healing circles work, drawing on the strength of circle lineages, collective service, partnerships, and generosity.

About this guide

In this guide, you'll find information about how to host a basic healing circle. It's designed to increase your skill in being a circle host or guardian and to take you deeper into the circle experience.

Contents

About Healing Circles Global	2
About this guide	2
What are healing circles?.....	4
Welcome	7
Heart-sharing	13
Harvesting.....	15
Closing the circle.....	18
Appendix: Sample host script	19
Acknowledgements	20
License.....	20

What are healing circles?

“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 and Ann Linnea, *The Circle Way*

What is a circle?

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

“If the circle provides sanctuary, touches your heart and guides you on your path, it’s a healing circle.”

-Michael Lerner, co-founder, Commonweal

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.



Reflection: Have you personally felt the healing power of a circle? What made it healing?

How does a healing circle work?

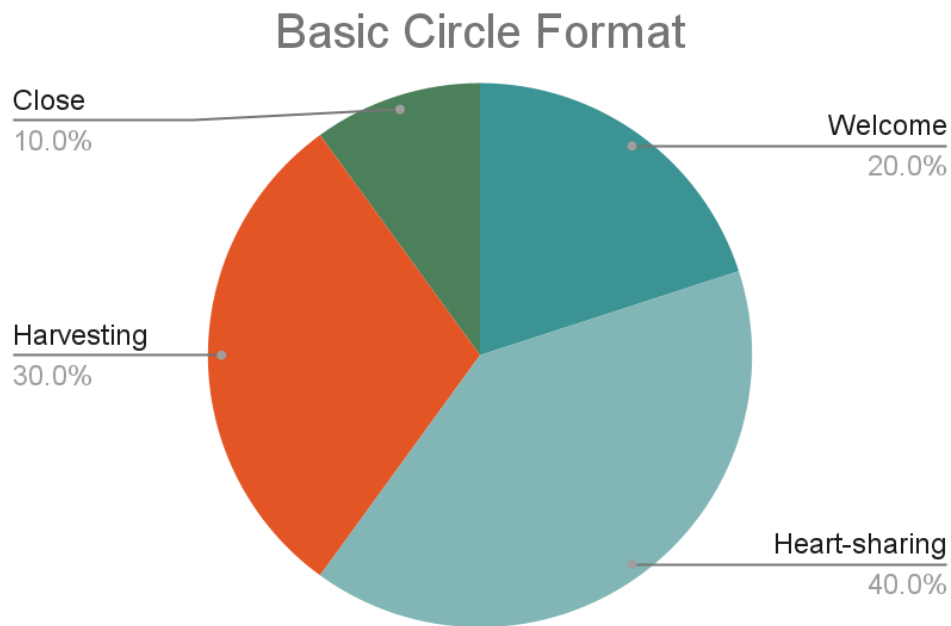
Circle practices help us become more aware of how we communicate with others—whether family, friends, partners, co-workers, or fellow circle members. These practices help us be kinder and more respectful toward one another and ourselves. Key to a magical circle are the agreements (see “Understanding the circle agreements” later in this guide).

A basic circle format

Circles can have many different formats. This guide describes a simple format for a healing circle that includes four sections—a welcome, a heart-sharing round, a harvesting round, and a close. You’re welcome to adapt it to your circle’s needs.

Healing circles are functional blends of mechanics and “magic.” The mechanics establish and maintain a safe, conducive environment for magic to emerge. The trick in a healing circle is to be mindful of the balance between the two—to avoid over-emphasizing one at the expense of the other.

Healing circles are made up of four parts, divided roughly as follows.



Roles in the circle

There are three main roles in a circle and, when needed, a fourth. We'll use a campfire metaphor to explain them:



Circle member places
their own aged wood
on the fire



Host keeps the fire
going



Guardian ensures
everyone on the rim is
safe

Circle member

Circle members hold the most important role:

- They tend the fire and protect the rim.
- All participants share responsibility for holding the circle.
- All participants are responsible for their own healing.
- Any member may initiate a pause, usually by calling for the bell.
- Members can bring in poems, songs, and questions to the circle and share if there is time.

Circle host

The host and guardian perform a service, not leadership, role, and those roles can be rotated from one circle to the next. They can even be alternated within a circle if the host or guardian needs assistance. If we continue the campfire metaphor, the host is responsible for tending the fire. Hosts start the fire and keep it going without letting it get out of control. In this basic circle model, the host:

- Welcomes everyone and asks the guardian to ring a bell to initiate silence at the beginning of the circle.
- Reads a poem or uses another way of entering the circle.
- Initiates the introduction round, the heart-sharing round, and harvesting rounds (any of these responsibilities could be shared with the guardian.)
- Makes announcements and closes the circle, asking the guardian to ring the bell for silence at the end.

Circle guardian

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:

- Rings the bell for silence at the beginning and end of the circle.
- Reads the agreements at the beginning of the circle.
- Rings the bell between every heart-sharing to honor each circle member's contribution and to allow for a pause between sharings. (This is optional, based on the circles' preference.)
- Observes the energy of the group and helps the host notice if something isn't understood, someone is uncomfortable, or someone has a need.
- Protects the safety of the circle by ensuring agreements are kept. If the guardian notices that the boundaries are getting fuzzy, it's usually enough to take a breath and offer silence as a way for the circle to return to equilibrium. If the breach is clearer, the guardian can initiate a conversation about the agreements.
- Protects the integrity of an online circle by being ready to mute audio or stop video if something in the background is distracting or offensive.

Welcome

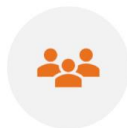
Being welcomed into circle has four key components:



Warm welcome



Entering the Circle



Introductions (if needed)



Circle Agreements

1. Warm welcome

Welcoming is the informal connection that starts to build between one human being and another from the time we enter until we sit down in circle. It's based on the deep roots of hospitality and an invitation into secular sanctuary.

In a physical setting, the welcome might include:

- Being greeted 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
- A circle of chairs set around a center that includes a candle, flowers, or other objects

On Zoom, the welcome includes:

- The host and guardian getting on the call a few minutes early to welcome early birds
- Greeting people by their name with a smile
- Making sure people are comfortable with Zoom, (for example, that they know where the mute button is and how to turn on gallery view)



Reflection: What makes you feel welcome in physical and virtual space?

2. Entering the circle

“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”

Entering the circle is the transition that enables us to leave behind the world we've come from and enter the circle with full attention and presence.

Circles often begin with a simple *ritual*:

1. Light a candle and place it in the center (this is optional in the virtual environment).
2. Ring a bell signifying the beginning of silence, and ring again at the end.
3. Read a quote or poem, or play a song.

Silence has many advantages in circle. It:

- 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

When we connect to inner guidance, we enter what is sometimes called “silent council,” a time for looking inside and listening carefully to what is most important to us right now. We might experience this as a welling up of intuition or grace. Communication 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.

Silence is also the foundation for a “circle of one,” a circle in which different voices within ourselves can come together to resolve a conflict or offer insight. For example, picture each chair in a circle holding a different:

- *Role we play in life*—for example, what conflicts arise from being both a parent and an employee who is asked to work late? Or how do the roles of daughter and mother collide when an elderly parent needs care?
- *Emotion*—each one begins the circle by naming itself and being heard.
- *Body part*—When health decisions need to be made, you could hold an inner council by personifying different organ systems within the body—for example, is the liver at risk from therapy for the lung?



Reflection: What other ways of entering the circle might you and your circle choose?

Circles can be enriched by entering them in different ways if the group feels comfortable with them. These might include:

- *Guided meditation*—A pain circle might choose to begin with different guided meditations that assist with managing pain.
- *Guided visualization*—A cancer circle might request a visualization that they can use on their own to heal or comfort.
- *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.
- *Video*—In the virtual environment, it is also easy to show a brief video.

3. Introductions

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.

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/intention/agenda of the circle today

The key purpose of introductions is 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 to each circle. Some suggestions are below, but please use your own creativity.

If your intention is to	You might try this
Make people comfortable	What’s your name and what brings you to this circle?
Orient each other to a common condition	[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.
Establish sacred space	[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?
Create common bonds	What brought you joy when you were young?
Set intention	What is your intention for this circle today?
Bring members into the present	What’s a one or two-word weather report for how you are feeling today? Sunny? Stormy? Full showers?

4. Understanding the circle agreements

Allowing time for circle members to **Understand Circle Agreements** gives everybody in the circle a shared understanding of how the circle works.

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.

Why agreements?

The agreements form the foundation for our time together in circle. They protect the safety of the individuals and the integrity of the circle. According to Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, authors of *The Circle Way*, “The use of agreements allows all members to have a free and profound exchange, to respect a diversity of views, and to share responsibility for the well-being and direction of the group.”

The agreements also offer the opportunity for lifelong learning as we incorporate more kindness and respect into our daily interactions with ourselves and others.



Reflection: Which agreement do you think you could learn the most from if you practiced it in all parts of your life?

Heart-sharing

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

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

“The work of seeing is done.

Now practice heart-work...”

- Rainer Maria Rilke

The mechanics

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. This way of being together is also called **Talking Piece Council**. On Zoom, participants raise their hand and unmute when ready to speak.

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.

“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

“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

When we listen

The rest of the 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.



Common heart-sharing question: What is most on your heart today?

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
- Not speaking authentically whether because of fear, a desire to please, a lack of self-knowledge, cultural norms, gender norms, or another reason
- Not being kind or respectful for whatever reason
- Going off point—outside the intention of circle
- Being distracted by something taking place in the physical environment while on Zoom



Reflection: What ideas do you have for how to work with these situations in circle?

Harvesting

“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 Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*

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

Three types of harvesting

1. Personal harvest

In this type of harvest each in turn takes their own discovery process deeper by speaking to what stirred in them from the previous round.

- Send the talking piece round again without any introduction.
- Ask a general question, such as “After listening to yourself and others, what else have you uncovered?”
- Harvest by taking a few minutes to write down your thoughts before sharing.

2. Real-time circle harvest

In this type of harvesting, questions emerge from the circle in real-time based on what has just been said. This is a gift of collective wisdom: “This is the only time that this particular circle with these feelings and thoughts will ever be together so let’s make the most of the opportunity.” Circles become more skilled at this with time. This also allows us to practice listening to our inner guidance for our own intentional healing.

- Host, guardian or circle member may initiate the question for the harvesting round.

- Shared themes: Often after a heart-sharing round, a theme will emerge within the group and be reflected in many of the member's sharing. When this happens, the host can name it and allow the conversation to go deeper.
 - "I heard that many of us are anxious right now. What do you do when you wake up in the middle of the night?"
 - "It sounds like many of us were grieving this week. Grief takes many forms, each asking us to companion them. Which form did grief take this week and how did you sit with it?"
- Addressing the tough questions: Sometimes only one of us in a circle is brave enough to give voice to tougher questions. It can be a relief to all the circle members to address it together.
 - "We just heard one of us speak about their beliefs and fears about dying. What are your beliefs and fears?"

3. Preplanned harvest

This is the model we are used to in school: the teacher prepares the agenda and brings in the questions.

- Healing Circles hosts can also preplan a question based on a relevant theme. They can then choose to use or not use this plan based on what happens in the heart-sharing round. Having a question in your back-pocket helps alleviate the host's anxiety. It can also lead to a beautiful experience when the host brings in a poem or song and then follows it up with thoughtful questions. It works well for circles with members whose lives don't change dramatically from week to week.
- A key addition is that circle members can also bring in questions that have arisen since the last circle.

Two practices

Popcorn council

- Talking-piece variation where 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.

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?

Tips for hosts

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



Reflection: How would you handle these challenges of Conversation Council if you were the host or guardian of the circle?

Closing the circle

*"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"

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

As part of our close, we like to give ourselves the opportunity to begin assimilating what we've learned.



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

Silence between bells

This may start with a poem or song before ringing the bell for silence.

Candle out

Appendix: Sample host script

Host and guardian: open zoom room ten minutes before, close ten minutes after.

Welcome

- Greet every newcomer by name.
- Host and guardian introduce themselves.
- For new circles only, share a brief overview of the four phases of circle:
 - Welcome/brief introductions: Zen brevity: name, location, internal weather report
 - Heart-sharing round
 - Harvesting round
 - Close
- Guardian: Lights candle. (optional)
- Host: We start each circle with silence...and a bell at the beginning and end of the silence. (A short meditation or guided imagery can be added as well.)
- Guardian: Reads the circle agreements. (see <https://bit.ly/3RhOI8u>)
- Poem or song- read by either host or guardian, or shared screen via video/audio.

Heart-sharing

- Host: The simplest version: *What is on your heart today?*
- Guardian: Ring bell after each sharing (optional) or members acknowledge with a gesture.

Harvesting

Host: Sample personal harvesting question: After listening to yourself and others, what has newly emerged for you?

Close

- Host: *What is your three-word takeaway?* Please write in the chat.
- Guardian: Blows out candle and rings bell.
- Everyone unmutes and waves good-bye.

More Information

Additional resources to support your continued learning journey.

Books

- Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, [The Circle Way](#)
- Parker Palmer, [A Hidden Wholeness](#)

Online resources

- About Healing Circles: www.healingcirclesglobal.org
- About the Circle Way: www.thecircleway.net
- About the Center for Courage and Renewal: www.couragerenewal.org
- How to host a virtual circle <https://healingcirclesglobal.org/how-to-host-a-virtual-circle/>
- Downloads :<https://healingcirclesglobal.org/resources/downloads/>

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