

## Principles and Practice of Restorative Circles

### Principles of Circle

The circle space is a specific form of sacred space, with particular features that are intentionally applied. By sacred space, I mean a protected space that allows for the deepest truth of a human being to come forth and be present. In a broad sense, the restorative principles provide a fundamental orientation for placing human existence in relation to the greater existence of the Earth itself and all its inhabitants. The starting point of all restorative practices is the awareness that each individual life is part of the Earth's life, which inherently links to every other individual life that exists. From this first overarching principle, there are many other principles that naturally follow, and these principles overlap and reinforce each other. Restorative practitioners identify and describe these principles differently, but some of the key principles that guide our work are listed and described here<sup>1</sup>:

- **A community is a living system of meaningful relationships.**

“We do know that in healthy human systems people support one another with information and nurture one another with trust. Our wonderful abilities to self-organize are encouraged by openness. With access to our system we, like all life, can anticipate what is required of us, connect with those we need, and respond intelligently.”

Margaret J. Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers

It is not uncommon for people to intellectually accept that we are all connected. But in order for this truth to really come alive, it must be reflected in people's actual interactions with each other. In a community, these connections are part of our direct experience. We see it and feel it, inwardly and outwardly. The restorative circle is a format in which this can take place on a small scale.

When people meet in a community that reflects circle principles, it is explicitly expressed that, when encountering others, we encounter an extension of ourselves. There is a clear priority toward demonstrating care. For individuals, this brings a sense of comfort and belonging. There is no danger of being superficially judged, so we are able to relax and fully engage with whatever circumstance we find ourselves in. Furthermore, each individual acknowledges the essential unity of the community and behaves with respect and responsibility.

At a collective level, this orientation toward interconnection allows people to communicate regularly and openly, and information can easily flow throughout the community. As a result, people are equipped to respond quickly and organically to a variety of ongoing changes that form part of all community life. Organizing of groups and systems can occur spontaneously and

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<sup>1</sup> The principles listed are adapted from Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community, by Carolyn Boyes-Watson & Kay Pranis, p. 10-16.

without the need of rigid hierarchical structures. There is also a pervasive feeling of trust that all individuals will act in the interest of the overall well-being of the community.

- **An individual's true nature is inherently valuable.**

"A living being belongs to the whole universe, is a member or limb of the universe; existence is unthinkable apart from the universe. And so it is with [humanity's] life and being."

Rudolf Steiner

By virtue of sincere participation, the value of each individual's true nature is explicitly acknowledged and supported. Restorative principles hold that the true nature that is the essence of each person carries the meaning of a person's life and the power to live that meaning in relation to the community. In our modern community, more often than not, an individual does not experience this true nature, and it is not reflected in the individual's behavior. Furthermore, this true nature is frequently unacknowledged by the individual's family or community. It lies covered up and ignored within that individual.

Restorative practices aims to create a space that reveals this true nature in a manner that the individual can recognize. From this recognition, the individual can access the power and meaning of who they really are and begin to express that meaning through their behavior. This new behavior, in turn, allows the community to recognize what always was present but not overtly visible before. This, then, becomes the basis for that individual's relationship to the community.

- **Community requires full freedom to live according to one's own true nature.**

"Peacemaking Circles use structure to create possibilities for freedom: freedom to speak our truth, freedom to drop masks and protections, freedom to be present as a whole human being, freedom to reveal our deepest longings, freedom to acknowledge mistakes and fears, freedom to act in accord with our core values."

Kay Pranis

This principle involves the issue of individual freedom in relation to community. The unfolding of an individual's true nature does not happen through imposition. It must be invited. People are allowed to refuse, yet they should continue to be invited while also being held accountable for the effects of their refusal. This goes with the understanding that one's true nature is enhanced in relation to community, as the community is enhanced by individuals living according to their true nature. By contrast, the use of punishment and consequences is based on the view that people are naturally concerned only with themselves and, therefore, society must have systems of control that impose a regard for others on people who otherwise would not care.

From a restorative perspective, because of people's inherent, fundamental connection to others, we all naturally want to have open, trusting relationships with our community, unless

our life experience has taught us that it's not safe to care about others because they will betray our trust. A restorative circle offers a space that is free from imposition, persuasion, coercion, and all other patterns of control. Rather, the circle space offers continuous reflection of the ways an individual's behavior affects the other circle participants, both beneficial impacts and harmful ones. This reflection serves as an ever-present mirror in which an individual can measure the degree to which his or her behavior is in accordance with their true nature. Over time, this reflection process in circle facilitates individuals' choosing of their own accord to adapt their behavior to be more in harmony with the circle. It is through this encounter that one accepts and internalizes the invitation to live in awareness of community.

- **Everything we need is already present.**

"The resources we need are present within the web of life that interconnects us. This is the nature of synergy, the first property of living systems. As parts self-organize into a larger whole, capacities emerge that could never have been predicted and that the individual parts did not possess. The weaving of new connections brings new responses and new possibilities into play. In the process, we can feel sustained—and are sustained—by currents of power arising from our solidarity."

Joanna Macy and Molly Brown

In every individual person and every community, there is untapped potential that, when brought forth, can meaningfully respond to any situation in a community. This perspective directs a community to shift away from a focus on scarcity and lack, which entails looking outward for additional resources or advice from experts to help meet community needs. Instead, there is a feeling of abundance in which the community knows that they are equipped to effectively respond to all situations, if only they are open to the full range of resources at hand and are committed to any depth of change that a situation may require of them. Rather than asking, "What do we need but do not have here?" a community asks, "How do we need to come together in order to activate knowledge, resources, and abilities that we have not yet recognized?"

The restorative circle is designed to provide a contained space where participants can safely explore and reveal the full depth of their capacity for being and discover knowledge, power, and creativity that had not emerged before. This is part of the transformational magic that characterizes a sacred space. By coming together as a community for the sake of the community, doors are opened that otherwise would remain closed, and the community can gain access to whatever is truly needed for its welfare.

- **Community engages and supports all levels of being.**

"Sacred is nothing special. It's just life, revealing its true nature. Life's true nature is wholeness, Indra's net embracing every living thing, able to contain all unique expressions. In a sacred moment, I experience that wholeness. I know I belong here. I don't think about it, I simply feel

it. Without any work on my part, my heart opens and my sense of 'me' expands. I'm no longer locked inside a small self. I don't feel alone or isolated. I feel here. I feel welcomed."

Margaret J. Wheatley

All people have a need to live and relate to others from an experience of wholeness. It is not enough to feel that some parts of us are accepted but others must be hidden. If we feel that our full depth of character does not have a place in our community, then we cannot express our unique truth and make a creative contribution to the community. This is particularly true in our Western culture that idealizes the physical and mental abilities of people while systematically denying the emotional, symbolic and spiritual dimension of what it means to be human.

By contrast, the dynamics of a restorative circle not only allow, but demand full participation of its participants at all levels, with nothing held back. While it accepts the many shortcomings that all people carry, the circle also welcomes all the unrecognized potentials that have not found a place in other family or community settings because they do not factor into our cultural value structure. Again, within the specific context of Western culture, it is contact with our symbolic and spiritual capacity that is so grossly neglected and, therefore, so desperately needed for our personal and community wellbeing to be restored.

All restorative circles, to a greater or lesser degree, implicitly or explicitly, incorporate symbolic and spiritual elements into creating the circle space and engaging with the participants who hold that space. Any transformative process is necessarily grounded in the symbolic and spiritual power that lies at the core of all human experience, and the restorative circle is a space where this core can be accessed and integrated into the youth's life and relationships.

- **We need practices to fully embody our true nature in relation to the community.**

"In daily terms, the work of listening is to be constantly worn free of our preconceptions and preferences so that nothing stands in the way of our direct experience of life."

Mark Nepo

In the current state of our communities, it is not easy to live in alignment with our true nature. Our culture as a whole, and the many institutions that derive from it and that we operate in, do not support a full engagement with core human values such as connection, trust, openness, respect, love, authenticity, etc. Even our family interactions offer no guarantee that we will have an opportunity to experience these most basic aspects of our true humanity. For many people, it is even quite the opposite.

As a result, it can by no means be assumed that youth will naturally grow up fully embodying their true nature and living a life in harmony with their deepest purpose. For many people (youth or adults) there is not even an awareness that the life they are currently living likely bears no resemblance to their actual potential as a human being. The need, therefore, is to find

ways, both individually and as a community, to remind ourselves of what our lives are really about.

Restorative circles are a simple, yet powerful process that invites communities to come together openly and authentically for the sake of renewing their essential unity. As a community, we need dedicated times for coming together to reflect on our experience and to offer meaningful support around life's most important issues. We need a space where we can collectively explore the central questions that guide our lives (What does it mean to be a human being? What do I really value about the world? What are my needs?) And we also need regular opportunities to voice the fundamental human values that connect us, and through those values, to reaffirm with each other how we prefer to live together.

The circle is a protected space where youth can begin to practice living authentically in community in a manner that is not possible in other community settings. By design, the circle is a small-scale restorative community in which the principles of circle can be tangibly experienced through intentional language, dialogue practices, and many other levels of interpersonal interactions. Furthermore, the youth can feel confident that they will not be judged by their past harmful behavior, will be supported by other youth facing similar challenges, and as a result can take risks in exploring new ways of relating to themselves and others, which can open up new possibilities for positive change in their life. Finally, the youth learn that the journey of being human is itself a matter of practice, and that there will always be new situations that challenge them to more fully embrace the totality of what they have to offer.

## **Creating the Circle Space**

There are many specific elements of a restorative circle that provide a contained structure that creates the conditions for reflection, introspection, and meaningful engagement with others in a community setting. This interplay of inward exploration and outer expression is critical for genuine community-building. Five of the central circle elements that form the circle structure are as follows:

- Sitting in circle
- The talking piece
- The centerpiece
- Circle values
- Circle guidelines and agreements

## **Sitting in Circle**

The circle is one of humanity's most ancient symbols. It has a long-standing place in the mythology and cultural practice of human communities throughout history and around the world. For many reasons, some of which we'll explore here, there is something undeniably powerful about a group of people whose bodies are intentionally arranged to create a circle. At Restorative Resources, when we hold trainings to introduce people to a restorative circle, we often begin by asking people which words or values come to mind for them in relation to sitting in circle. Responses always vary, but some of the most frequent ones are words such as connection, equality, openness, vulnerability, listening,

awareness, trust, and many others. Even before any information is given about what will happen in a given restorative circle, the simple fact of sitting in circle immediately and mysteriously aligns people to the very values and principles mentioned already, which are the cornerstone of restorative circle dialogue.

On a very practical level, sitting in circle allows all participants to be in full view of each other without having to lean or shift body position. This makes it clear that one of the objectives of the circle is to be able to communicate openly and directly. The fact that we make a point of assuring that the circle is empty of all furniture or any objects except for the centerpiece also aims to remove barriers (physical or otherwise) that might impede a connection forming between circle participants. At the same time, this removing of accustomed barriers also provokes a feeling of vulnerability, as we invite people to trust that the circle structure will respect and protect the parts of them that are sensitive to the judgments of others. In response to this need for protection and containment, a properly formed circle also does not have any gaps or empty chairs, unless they are needed for a specific purpose. Keeping the circle unbroken is the outer representation of the intention for a restorative circle to be a space with its own internal cohesion and value system distinct from wider cultural influences that may detract from the purpose of the circle space. Of course, there are times when the features of a physical location do not allow for all of these parameters to be strictly observed, so in those cases, we maintain the recommended circle structure to the fullest extent possible.

Beyond these overt characteristics of sitting in circle, it also holds a deeper symbolic function that helps to orient participants to the particular values of restorative dialogue. As mentioned earlier, the circle itself is one of the oldest, most pervasive symbols of human experience, especially in relation to the subject of community. When people come together in the circle format, it prompts a deep response that almost instinctively informs the attitude with which people see themselves in relation to others in the circle. More specifically, there is a subtle, yet unmistakable pull toward establishing a deep connection with the people who sit in circle with you. For this reason, sitting in circle is the foundation of restorative practices, and great care is taken to preserve the circle format to the greatest degree possible when people come together as a community.

## **The Talking Piece**

The talking piece is a standard element of restorative circles. It is one of the elements of circle that is drawn from indigenous traditions, especially concerning community dialogue in a ritual space. When a talking piece is being used, the person who is holding the talking piece at a given moment is designated as the only one who has the right to speak, until the talking piece is passed to the next person or placed in the center of the circle. Its broader function in circle dialogue is to structure communication in a way that naturally aligns people to ways of speaking and listening that support the underlying principles of circle.

First of all, the talking piece slows down the pace of dialogue. Too often, when we communicate with each other, especially concerning important or sensitive issues, the speed with which people feel the need to respond to what another person is saying does not give adequate space for a truly reflective response. When people respond in an immediate and reactive way, they are much more likely to speak from their surface emotions, rather than making contact with the full depth of their feelings. Moreover,

their actual words and tone are also less likely to be articulated in a productive way, with due attention to the impact their words might have on others. By contrast, the pace of passing a talking piece from person to person allows people to take their time to look inward, feel within themselves what feels right to say in that moment, and to choose their words thoughtfully, and in a manner that represents their truth and meaningfully contributes to the wider purpose of the circle.

Along these same lines, the talking piece ensures that all voices have an equal opportunity to be fully heard. With the frenetic pace of our habitual conversation practices, it usually happens that some people will tend to dominate the discussion, while others will quietly recede into the background and never have a chance to speak. In many cases, there is no identifiable pause between the start of one person speaking and the response from the next person speaking, resulting in an unbroken chain of constant speech from the beginning of a meeting until the end. In the worst case (though still commonly observable), people are not even allowed to finish speaking before being interrupted by another person. The assumption here is that unless you forcefully assert your voice into a conversation, there is no guarantee that anyone will ask for your perspective. Therefore, in order to be heard, it is your responsibility to wedge yourself into the conversation in some manner (assuming you care to say anything anyway), even if it means stepping on what someone else is trying to express.

When the talking piece is in use, however, each participant in the circle is guaranteed a period of time to speak and be heard by the circle without feeling concerned about being interrupted. There are some parameters regarding how long one is allowed to speak at a time and the manner in which one is expected to speak, and we will identify these parameters in more detail when we describe the circle guidelines. Nonetheless, participants are given considerable freedom to fully articulate their perspective on a given topic in whatever manner accords with their own experience, without comment or criticism from the other circle participants. As a result, there is a definite equalizing effect in which the circle dialogue arrives at a more complete inclusion of all the varying perspectives that are present within a group of people. The individuals who may, in other discussions, be tempted to withdraw their participation, either because of insufficient space or because they are unsure how to participate, are instead prompted to be fully engaged in the circle dialogue and make a vital contribution that would otherwise be lacking.

The other side of this, of course, is that the talking piece also gives circle participants permission to *listen* with their full attention. With the slower pace and the assurance that their turn to speak will come, the circle participants can relax and allow themselves to be focused and present with the person who is speaking. There isn't the need, as with other conversation settings, to be thinking and rehearsing what you want to say while someone else is speaking.

There are times when a more lively discussion pace and allowance for questions, comments, and responses are appropriate for a specific purpose. At these times, the circle keeper explicitly announces to the circle that the discussion will proceed without the talking piece and places the talking piece at the center of the circle. The circle keeper also explains that, if at any time participants feel that they are not being heard, anyone may retrieve the talking piece from the center and gain the exclusive right to speak. If a participant does so, once they have finished speaking, they will either place the talking piece back in the center of the circle, and the discussion will continue without it, or else the circle keeper may decide that the talking piece should remain in use in order to protect the circle integrity. Any time the talking



piece is not in use, it must still be understood that there should still be only one person talking at a time, while everyone else listens silently. It is the circle's responsibility to be attentive and try to intuitively sense whether or not a participant has finished speaking before taking their turn to speak.

## **The Centerpiece**

The centerpiece is simply one or more objects placed at the center of the circle. Often the objects are placed directly on the floor or the ground, but some practitioners prefer to place the objects on a special cloth or fabric. The objects themselves can be anything, and there are no strict guidelines around how many or what kind should be included, provided they do not obstruct the circle participants' view of each other. Centerpieces can be elaborate or very simple, depending on the setting, the preferences of the circle participants, and the purpose of the circle.

There are many reasons why a restorative circle includes a centerpiece. For one thing, a centerpiece lends a sense of beauty and aesthetic appeal to the circle space. This is meant to make the circle feel welcoming and to convey the message that a restorative circle is a gathering characterized by care and attention. The centerpiece also provides a focal point for circle participants as they share in the circle. Especially when the purpose of the circle is to explore a difficult issue and participants may be nervous when speaking, the centerpiece serves as a safe space to focus one's attention when it is difficult to maintain eye contact with others.

If a group of people intends to meet regularly in a restorative circle, during the first circle, the circle keeper often invites everyone to contribute one or more objects that have special meaning to them to help form the centerpiece in subsequent circles. In this case, time is set aside during the circle dialogue to allow everyone to share what they brought and why it is important to them before placing the object in the center of the circle. This process symbolically demonstrates that each circle participant is personally invested in engaging with the circle process in a meaningful way. Furthermore, placing each person's objects of special importance together as a unified centerpiece also instills a sense of shared purpose and shared responsibility, with the understanding that the individuals who make up the circle are working together toward a common goal, with a commitment to protect the integrity of the circle space and accomplish the purpose for which the circle is convened.

Finally, a centerpiece visually signals to circle participants that the circle is a sacred space, formed for a sacred purpose. Because a centerpiece is formed from objects that have symbolic value and/or have a story behind them, it helps people to access that deeper part of themselves where stories and myths are alive, and where the true transformative potential of a human being is found. This is a different sort of community engagement than what is expected in other social settings, so the centerpiece assists in orienting people to the specific expectations of a sacred space.

## **Circle Values**

When people come together in circle, especially if it is the first time, it is helpful to invite circle participants to name the core values that they feel are most important to them. This is part of the process of moving more deeply into who we are as human beings and uncovering the essential qualities that guide our basic relationship to life and to each other. By naming these values in circle, people can



observe which values are shared with others and which are unique to particular individuals. This process highlights the dual movement of connecting with others through shared values and experience while also discovering our unique characteristics that distinguish us from others and define our specific gifts that can be offered in service to the community. In this way, we not only arrive at an experience of belonging to something greater than our individual self, but we also find how our natural talents can be embodied in a manner that enhances the life of others.

Often, as a circle identifies its core values, these values are recorded and preserved so that the circle can return to these values regularly and be reminded of those qualities that help us to live from our true self and interact with each other from a place of authenticity. Once established, the list of values is usually read again as part of the formal opening of subsequent restorative circles, along with the naming of circle guidelines and agreements, discussed below.

### **Circle Guidelines and Agreements**

Circle guidelines and agreements are a set of shared commitments that help to define the expectations for participation in a restorative circle. Though a circle keeper may initially propose a set of guidelines for the circle to follow, nothing is established without explicit consent from all circle participants. This is in contrast to rules, which may be imposed by an authority figure, with or without the consent of those affected by the rules.

Circle guidelines are distinguished from circle agreements in that they are always proposed by the circle keeper at the beginning of a restorative circle. The guidelines articulate the very core of restorative practices and have been found to be consistently helpful in maintaining the circle space in keeping with restorative principles. Even if a group has been meeting in circle for some time and the guidelines are well-known to all circle participants, still the circle keeper will name the guidelines while opening the circle, and all participants will reaffirm their commitment to practice the guidelines or else have the option to discuss, clarify, or refine the guidelines. The exact number and type of guidelines vary among restorative practitioners, though there is a fair degree of consistency, as well. Guidelines can also vary depending on who is present at the circle, how many people are present, and the overall purpose of meeting in circle. The following five guidelines are the ones that we, at Restorative Resources, consistently apply in our practice:

1. **Respect the talking piece:** The circle acknowledges that the talking piece will regulate the circle dialogue by conferring the right to speak only on the person who is holding the talking piece, except in the case that the talking piece has been suspended for a certain period of time.
2. **Listen from the heart:** The circle commits to listening openly, attentively, and without judgment. Participants practice letting go of anything that may get in the way of being fully present with what a person is saying. It is not necessary to agree with a person's perspective, or even to fully understand it, though people are encouraged to try to understand. What's most important, however, is to care about what a person is saying and to honor its value unconditionally.

3. **Speak from the heart:** Everyone in the circle is given the opportunity to speak, if they choose to do so. When circle participants choose to speak, they do so from the truth and wisdom of their own experience. Rather than attempting to establish facts, voice opinions, or arrive at an objective truth, the circle space holds multiple truths and perspectives as equally valid and worthy of respect. As such, the emphasis is on telling one's story deeply and authentically, knowing that whatever one brings to the circle will be accepted.
4. **Trust the process:** In order to experience the full depth of a restorative circle, participants are asked to trust the circle process and the structure collaboratively established by the circle. This requires one to relinquish a certain sense of control over what exactly will happen in the circle or what the outcome might be. It also means opening oneself to a degree of vulnerability in order to allow the possibility of genuine expression and connection.
5. **Say just enough:** It is important for participants to be mindful of the length of time that each person is sharing, in order to give everyone an equal opportunity to share fully. Without feeling rushed, everyone commits to being concise with their sharing and, as much as possible, conscientiously distill what they want to say to its essence using well-chosen wording.

Some other common guidelines that may or may not be included at the discretion of the circle keeper are as follows:

6. **Confidentiality:** This guideline is important when the dialogue of the circle is centered on issues of conflict or harm, or else when it is likely that sensitive personal information is likely to surface. It states simply that whatever is shared in the circle is not to be shared outside of the circle. This makes the circle a contained and protected space where participants can be forthcoming about their experience in a way that they would not be comfortable in an open, unprotected space.
7. **Trust that you will know what to say:** This is a more specific application of the **trust the process** guideline already mentioned. Here, people are encouraged not to rehearse what they would like to say before it is time for them to say it. Rather than occupying their attention with thoughts on what to say while others are speaking, circle participants are encouraged to be fully present with the task of listening until they receive the talking piece. Then, they are encouraged to be spontaneous and to voice whatever is present with them in that moment.
8. **Be generous with your story:** This guideline was first proposed and adopted by a group of high school students in Santa Rosa who would meet regularly in circle. It is intended to encourage participants to move past feelings of nervousness and reservation toward others in the circle and to generously share their experiences, stories, and perspectives, knowing that a circle is more engaging and beneficial when we take the risk to be open with each other.

In contrast to the circle guidelines, circle agreements are more specific commitments established collaboratively by a given circle group that intends to meet regularly. If a group is only meeting together in circle once, then it is usually sufficient for the circle keeper to name and explain the circle guidelines, offer time to discuss or adapt the guidelines if necessary, and gain explicit commitment to practice the

guidelines from all circle participants. However, in the case of ongoing circle groups, spending time discussing and naming circle agreements is a good way to further distribute responsibility for the circle space among all circle participants, instead of solely with the circle keeper. Along the same lines, additional agreements beyond the more standard circle guidelines also allows the circle space to be more personalized and relevant to the particular needs of each unique group.

For example, if confidentiality is not named as a circle guideline, it is almost always described in some form as a circle agreement. As an agreement, there is more room for discussion around what precisely can be shared outside the circle and what cannot be shared, in accordance to the expressed needs of that particular circle. It may be that circle participants are okay with or even want to share certain parts of the circle dialogue with others who were not present at the circle. In that case, the language of the agreement may be that “Personal stories shared in the circle will not be shared outside the circle.” This allows circle participants to share about dialogue themes or their own personal experience of the circle, while still maintaining the limit of not sharing personal stories that others shared in circle. This is in contrast to the confidentiality guideline, in which circle participants are not allowed to share anything that is discussed in the circle.

Some agreements aim to further define the broader circle guidelines in order to make participation expectations more concrete and intelligible. For example, from the guideline to speak from the heart, a circle may wish to add an agreement not to put down others. Clearly, if one is truly speaking from the heart, one is implicitly not putting down others, but the agreement to avoid putting down others adds a further elaboration to what it means to speak from the heart. Similarly, an extension of the guideline to listen from the heart could be an agreement not to laugh inappropriately at what another person has shared. Agreements can also address other needs or concerns that may not be directly related to the guidelines at all, such as cell phone use, food and drinks, leaving a circle before it has ended, etc. Basically, anything that may affect people’s ability to engage meaningfully in the circle space can be addressed through the circle agreements.

However, it should be emphasized that naming circle agreements is not a one-time only process. Though the process of opening the circle space, including arriving at guidelines and agreements, is prioritized in the first circle meetings a group has, the efficacy of the circle agreements is something that can be re-visited at any time, as needed. In order to do so, when the circle is first deciding on preliminary circle agreements, the circle keeper also introduces the four meta-agreements, or agreements about agreements, to allow the agreements to be continually refined. The meta-agreements are as follows:

1. Anyone can request an agreement at any time.
2. Anyone can request to modify an agreement at any time.
3. If a requested agreement is not accepted by all circle participants, it is not a circle agreement.
4. It is everyone’s responsibility to maintain the circle agreements.

Since adopting circle agreements requires consensus among the circle, it is important that the circle keeper allows plenty of time for thorough examination, clarification, and discussion of requested agreements. If, after a requested agreement has been fully explored, there is still one or more circle participants who do not agree, it is fine to set the proposed agreement aside for the time being and

come back to it another day, if needed. The discussion around agreements is not meant to devolve into a debate regarding the relative merits of certain agreements, and there is no need for anyone to persuade others to adopt their own point of view. Rather, it is an opportunity for everyone in the circle to state their needs and to collaboratively name shared commitments that will serve to meet those needs. The circle principles of equality, respect, and empathy must be strictly observed throughout the process of arriving at consensus around circle agreements.

## **Circle Rhythm**

Along with the elements that together create the sacred space of a restorative circle, each accountability circle session follows a particular rhythm that is both structured yet flexible. Due to the rapid pace of activity that characterizes much of our daily experience, especially for youth in a school setting, this circle rhythm aims to bring about a smooth transition into a slower, more reflective mode of interacting with others. There are distinct phases of the circle session, which always progress through the same sequence. However, the time spent at each phase, as well as what is shared at each phase, can vary greatly, depending on many different factors, which will be explored in more detail below. The general phases of the circle are as follows:

- Welcome, statement of purpose, and awareness moment
- Circle opening
- Remember values, guidelines, and agreements
- Check-in round
- Main dialogue topic or activity
- Reflection/witness round
- Circle Closing

The combination of structure and flexibility creates a container that can be trusted as a firm reference point when exploring deep and challenging issues while simultaneously being spacious enough to adapt to the particularities of the circle participants and their specific needs as they become apparent moment by moment.

### **Welcome, Statement of Purpose, and Awareness Moment**

The accountability circle begins with a short welcome from the circle keeper to all the circle participants, and a brief statement of the purpose for the group coming together, which acts as a common intention for the group. This is immediately followed by an invitation for all participants to silently bring their full attention to the circle, letting go of any thoughts and feelings pertaining to events of the day or possibilities for the future. The awareness moment marks the beginning of the transition from the busyness of the mind to a more centered presence within oneself, allowing for space where a greater depth of connection is possible in the circle.

The importance of sustained attention for the quality of a restorative circle cannot be over-emphasized. Awareness and presence are the foundation of authentic circle interactions, so the awareness moment is a critical piece of setting the tone of the circle. Nonetheless, a true appreciation of the value of

conscious awareness is something that is strikingly absent in our cultural atmosphere, so a practice in awareness may be distinctly uncomfortable for many youth, especially sitting in silence with a group of people. The circle keeper must be sensitive to this and find skillful ways to introduce awareness practice and establish it as a consistent aspect of the circle in a manner that respects the needs of the youth. It is important to include an awareness moment as a standard feature of the accountability circle, but the length of time and format should be adapted so that it does not evoke too much resistance.

This is a delicate, but important balance to maintain. In many ways, it characterizes the nature of restorative practices as a whole. On one hand, it is exceedingly clear that our culture and our communities would benefit from intensive practice in developing our capacity for being together in silence or simply having a full awareness of our experience from moment to moment. Our lack of such a capacity is one of the root causes for much of the suffering and conflict we experience in society. As such, it is part of the work of restorative practices to push against some of the cultural inertia that does not value our basic human abilities. It is necessary to risk causing some discomfort for participants who are unaccustomed to such practice for the sake of awakening them to their natural abilities that are a precondition for full engagement in the circle process.

At the same time, there is a need to respect the limitations that we all encounter as human beings. This quality of unconditional inclusion is one of the principles of restorative practices. We do not expect everyone who comes to the circle to be equally prepared for what we wish to offer them. Rather, we acknowledge participants' gifts and constraints as equally valuable, while still providing the support to make positive change toward a greater expression of their core self. Given this, it is important to carefully gauge how the circle is reacting to the awareness practice and assure that youth can still feel they have a place in the circle space. It is fine to ask the youth to stretch their comfort level a bit, but too much stretching and new experience only makes them feel as if the circle experience is not relevant to them.

### **Circle Opening**

After the awareness moment, the circle opening signals the formal beginning of the accountability circle. Often this is a simple reading or poem, the lighting of a candle, or the sounding of a bell. It could also be a brief group exercise that sets the tone of connection, often in a fun and active way, and helps people to relax and begin engaging with each other in a spontaneous manner. Many circles develop one or more standard openings that they use regularly, but there is always room for variation, depending on the felt needs of the circle. If a circle is becoming overly serious, a light-hearted game may be appropriate. If participants are having difficulty speaking openly, some kind of non-verbal activity may help to develop some preliminary trust that will facilitate deeper dialogue. The circle keeper may also select a circle opening that relates to the theme of connection that day. In keeping with the principle of shared responsibility, it is always encouraged for the circle keeper to provide opportunities for the youth to develop and conduct their own circle openings, or at least to have a voice in what form of circle opening would be most suitable for everyone.

The circle opening has a number of important functions. First and foremost, the awareness moment and circle opening together explicitly state to the circle participants that the restorative circle, and its accompanying expectations, has begun. The circle space is meant to be a space of focused attention

and a degree of openness and depth of engagement with others that is distinct from other social interactions. As such, it is important for the circle participants to be very clear regarding where that boundary between distinct modes of being is. For example, while it is fine for the circle to chat and informally share amongst each other as people are arriving at the circle before it has begun, the awareness moment and circle opening mark the boundary between informal social space and restorative circle space, where a different kind of interaction is invited.

Secondly, the circle opening, along with the awareness moment already mentioned, is also meant to actually facilitate the transition into the particular circle space. For some, the awareness moment alone constitutes a sufficient circle opening in this respect, as it helps to reset people's internal activity and begin to align them with the deeper rhythms of circle. However, depending on the intention for the circle dialogue later, there may also be a need for something more to set the direction for the circle that day. For example, a particular reading may bring up a theme that will be explored in more depth later, but plants a seed at that initial point in order to orient people's attention toward that subject. Also, if the main discussion is likely to be difficult or heavy in some way, a light-hearted opening may be required to provide a platform of resilience before asking the circle to encounter a theme that may bring tension or even discomfort. Beyond the all-embracing value of the awareness moment, the circle opening helps to set a tangible intention for the circle that day.

### **Remember Values, Guidelines, and Agreements**

Once the circle has been formally opened, the circle is invited to remember and renew its identified values and its commitment to the guidelines and agreements that it developed in relation to those values. If the circle is meeting for the first time, this is the time when values are named and the guidelines and agreements will be proposed, discussed, and adopted. This process may take the entirety of one or more circles as a particular group is just beginning. However, as a group continues to meet regularly, it is enough simply to name the values, guidelines, and agreements that the circle has previously adopted and gain an explicit commitment to practice them through the circle dialogue. This is also a natural time for circle participants to propose new agreements, to revisit discussion around an agreement that wasn't previously adopted, or to change the language or scope of an existing agreement (though all of this can potentially happen at any time during the circle). If there are new members to a circle with an established framework of guidelines and agreements, it is important to allow time to fully explore the values, guidelines, and agreements and offer the new members a chance to voice their own values, ask questions about the guidelines and agreements, or to propose new agreements that will help them to engage meaningfully in the circle dialogue.

### **Check-in Round**

After the circle space has been created, the check-in round marks the beginning of the circle dialogue. As the name suggests, a check-in round involves a passing of the talking piece around the circle to give all who are present an opportunity to briefly respond to a question or sharing prompt. If there are individuals who are unknown to each other, this round can also include sharing of names and other forms of introduction. A check-in question or prompt is intended to further acclimate the youth to being together and sharing in the circle format, while also giving a first taste at sharing one's story and listening to others' stories. As such, the youth are usually asked to reflect on what has been going on in



their life recently and to give the circle some sense of what kind of experience or feelings that they are bringing with them into the circle that day.

The circle keeper can articulate this in a specific question or prompt in a number of ways, but one example is for everyone to share “a rose and a thorn.” A rose is something positive or pleasant that happened recently or is an ongoing part of one’s life. A thorn is something difficult or challenging that has happened recently or is an ongoing part of one’s life. Along with the rose and thorn, each person can also share how he or she is feeling in that moment. This round of sharing builds on some of the momentum created by the awareness moment, circle opening, and affirmation of guidelines and agreements by inviting the youth further into a more open engagement with others who are present in the circle. At the same time, the circle is still in the process of easing its way into the practice of listening and sharing without going straight to the full depth of the circle process right at the beginning.

An effective check-in question is what is known as a “low-risk” question. This means that it allows the speaker a broad range of responses that can be as personal or as deep as the speaker wishes to go. Like the rose and thorn check-in, the dialogue is still on a getting to know each other level, without necessitating anything that might be viewed as “risky” to share with a group of people. As the check-in round proceeds, the circle keeper is assessing to what degree the circle is able to go beyond this preliminary level of depth. For circles that are just beginning to meet regularly, it may take one or more entire meetings of getting acquainted and learning the circle process in order to incrementally build the level of trust that is needed for more authentic sharing.

### **Main Dialogue Topic**

There is an endless variety of important themes that could form the content of a circle dialogue, though there are some that naturally lend themselves to the circle framework. Whatever the topic, the focus is on inspiring sincere reflection, open listening, and honest sharing. This is accomplished mainly through open-ended guiding questions that lead the youth into a deep engagement with the values and perspectives that inform their worldview, shape their identity, and are reflected in their outward behavior.

At this point of the circle, the youth have settled into the circle rhythm and are ready to take an honest look at how their inner attitude has brought them to where they are in their life and how a shift in that attitude is what is needed to make positive change and enhance the quality of their life and relationships. Depending on the dynamics of the circle or the nature of the topic, the circle keeper may use the talking piece to regulate the dialogue or else invite a more fluid discussion without the talking piece. Depending on the time frame for the entire circle session and the time spent on earlier phases of the circle, this phase can last anywhere from fifteen minutes to about an hour.

### **Reflection/Witness Round**

Once the main dialogue feels complete, the circle is invited to share reflection or witness comments from their circle experience. This can be anything that the youth saw or heard or felt during that day’s circle, especially those things that they felt were particularly important or stood out in some way. These



comments do not need to be comprehensive or especially insightful. They can be very simple observations about one or more experiences that came up during the circle.

The importance of the witness round is how it helps to develop the youth's capacity to witness their experience without interpretation or judgment. Though this may begin with their ability to witness the outer activities of the circle and report on those, the intention is for that capacity eventually to be applied to their own internal states. The first step of responding skillfully to outer challenges, strong emotions, or deeply felt experience is first to be able to witness their presence without judgment. When we judge our inner states, we are easily caught in habitual patterns that have already been set by past experience. However, with a capacity to truly witness our inner states, there is the freedom to choose our response to our moment to moment life experiences in a manner that is aligned to our true nature. In order to bring the circle into a slow, reflective pace, if the talking piece was not in use during the main dialogue, it is always used during the witness round.

### **Circle Closing**

The circle closing marks the completion of a circle. Like the circle opening, the circle closing is an important transition signal that releases the circle participants from the specific expectations of the circle space and allows a return to more informal social interactions. It often also invites any expression of feelings of gratitude for the circle's shared experience.