

Using Circles for Restorative Practices Training

By Liesbet Bickett

Introduction

Circles are an ancient and powerful structure for building connection, resolving conflict, making decisions, and restoring community. Rooted in Indigenous wisdom traditions across the globe, circles honor the sacred equality of all participants and affirm the collective wisdom that emerges when every voice is invited and respected. Within restorative practices, circles serve as both proactive and responsive tools, offering space for open dialogue, relational repair, and deep belonging. In spiritual communities, circles also echo ritual practices that center reflection, truth-telling, and communal healing.

History of Circles

Circles have long been used to:

- Resolve interpersonal and community conflict
- Make shared decisions with integrity
- Strengthen bonds of kinship and collaboration
- Mark transitions, grief, or celebration
- Facilitate collective spiritual or moral discernment

Modern restorative practices borrow heavily from these traditions—especially from Native American, Māori, and African communities—adapting the circle process to suit contemporary schools, workplaces, civic spaces, and faith communities.

Types of Circles and When to Use Them

Listening Circles

Purpose	For processing collective or personal experiences, especially those marked by grief, tension, transition, or disconnection.
When to Use	After significant events (e.g., leadership changes, conflict in community, societal trauma).
Key Elements	Structured sharing, talking piece, confidentiality, no dialogue or cross-talk.
Benefit	Allows participants to speak and be heard without judgment or debate. Promotes healing, empathy, and emotional integration

Healing Circles

Purpose	To hold and support emotional or spiritual pain—personal or communal.
When to Use	In the wake of loss, trauma, or when community members carry heavy burdens.
Structure	Similar to Listening Circles, but with increased emphasis on ritual, holding silence, and emotional containment.
Benefit	Builds sacred space for vulnerability, trust, and reintegration into the community. Healing Circles often include spiritual or ceremonial elements.

Decision-Making Circles (Fair Process Circles)

Purpose	To collaboratively discuss and make group decisions with shared input.
When to Use	Before implementing policy changes, making significant communal choices, or creating new processes.
Structure	May use Fishbowl or sequential circle methods; includes structured engagement, transparent explanation, and clarity of next steps (Fair Process).
Benefit	Builds legitimacy and trust by ensuring all stakeholders have a voice before decisions are made

Problem-Solving or Brainstorming Circles

Purpose	To generate ideas, solve challenges, and harness community creativity.
When to Use	When facing logistical challenges, resource questions, or planning projects.
Features	Open dialogue, shared responsibility, visual mapping tools optional. May be structured around a specific guiding question.
Benefit	Taps into collective wisdom, fosters ownership, and builds collaboration.

Restorative Circles

Purpose	To address harm or conflict and explore pathways for repair and reintegration.
When to Use	When a relationship or community has been disrupted by specific actions or breakdowns in trust.
Structure	Uses the Restorative Questions arc; includes affected parties and, when appropriate, supporters.
Benefit	Creates space for accountability, expression of harm, and movement toward healing and restored connection.

Fishbowl Circles

Purpose	To allow a smaller group to engage in structured conversation while the larger community listens and reflects.
When to Use	When transparency is needed in leadership conversations, during feedback sessions, or when engaging sensitive topics that affect many. Brainstorming. Training and Teaching.
Structure	Open Fishbowl: Allows observers to join the conversation via an open chair. Closed Fishbowl: Keeps discussion within a designated group, followed by structured reflection from observers.
Benefit	Balances transparency and containment, offers deep learning through observation, and prevents domination by any one voice

Choosing the Right Circle for the Moment

Circle Type	Best For	Not Suited For
Listening Circle	Community processing, grief, transition	Decision-making or problem-solving
Healing Circle	Grief, trauma, emotional release	Fast-paced strategic discussions
Decision-Making Circle	Leadership choices, group strategy	Deep emotional processing
Problem-Solving Circle	Brainstorming, logistical or relational challenges	Deep emotional or spiritual wounds
Restorative Circle	Accountability, addressing harm, relationship repair	Surface-level misunderstandings or ongoing community tension
Fishbowl Circle	Transparency, feedback, modeling vulnerable conversation, learning, connection.	Intimate or emotionally charged personal conflict resolution

4. Benefits of Circles in Communities

Circles align seamlessly with the values of many spiritual traditions and support:

Healing – Providing safe, nonjudgmental spaces to speak and witness pain

Belonging – Fostering equality, connection, and inclusivity

Engagement – Encouraging participation across all levels of leadership and membership

Trust-Building – Strengthening transparency and shared responsibility
Fair Decision-Making – Ensuring community buy-in for changes or policies
Conflict Resolution – Offering compassionate structures for acknowledgment and repair
Spiritual Growth – Creating sacred time and space for reflection, ritual, and transformation

Conclusion

Circles are more than a technique—they are a way of being in community. Whether used to celebrate, grieve, discern, repair, or create, the circle format reminds us of our shared humanity and inherent interdependence. Each type of circle—listening, healing, decision-making, problem-solving, restorative, and fishbowl—offers a unique contribution to the life of a community. By choosing the right circle for the right moment and honoring the practices that support authenticity and safety, we create spaces where voices are honored, wounds can heal, and wisdom can emerge.

In spiritual and restorative communities alike, the circle becomes a sacred container—a return to wholeness. May the practice of circling deepen your group’s trust, strengthen your collective capacity, and support the creation of just, loving, and resilient communities.

References

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This guide draws from IIRP's established practices. It should be used in conjunction with proper training and preparation.