

Session 6 – Introduction to Restorative Circles

Materials:

- Agenda charted on the board or chart paper, or provided as a handout
- A meaningful talking piece (see the description in “Key Elements of the Circle Process” handout)
- Handout of “Circles” by Black Elk
- AV equipment to play video: [Core Processes of Restorative Justice Circles](#)
- Handout: “Key Elements of a Circle”
- Handout: “Circles Tree”
- Handout: “The Structure of a Circle/Sitting in a Circle”

Note for the Facilitator/Circle Keeper: For today’s session, which is facilitated as a restorative circle, arrange the chairs in such a way so that everyone will be seated *in a circle* facing each other, preferably without tables or other obstacles in between. If you haven’t participated in, or facilitated circles before, you want to familiarize yourself with the “Key Elements of a Circle,” “Circles Tree” and “Structure of a Circle/Sitting in Circle” handouts ahead of time and watch the videos in today’s session, as well as those in the next few sessions to get a better understanding of what circle practices are about. After reviewing the handouts and learning more about the talking piece, make sure you bring a meaningful talking piece of your own to facilitate today’s circle.

Introduce Restorative Circles

Referencing how the space is set up, explain that today’s session will be facilitated as a restorative circle. Before moving further into the circle’s practice, ask participants to share what, if anything, they know about restorative circles and their use in schools.

Build on people’s existing knowledge as you introduce some of the key structural elements of restorative circles:

- Restorative circles start with an *opening ceremony* and end with a *closing ceremony* to create an intentional space where people can be more present with one another and show up as their best selves.

- *Sitting in a circle* is another important element, so that everyone can see and bear witness to each other. In circle, there is no one at the head. All are seated at the same level illustrating how circles upend some of the hierarchical ways of being in our lives.
- Taking turns sharing and listening, guided by a *meaningful talking piece* that is sent around from one person to the next, as an invitation to share or to pass is the next circle element.
- The facilitator in circles, known as *the keeper*, is both the host and participant and everyone is invited for what they bring—their full holistic experiences, knowledge, and wisdom. All are considered teachers. All are considered learners, including *the keeper* which is different from most other roles we as educators play in schools.

Ask participants if they have any questions or connection to the different elements of circles that they would like to share.

Opening Ceremony: Black Elk on Circles

Explain to the group that, to date, we've been using different openings to start our sessions. Today, using restorative circle language and practice, we'll start the session with an *opening ceremony*:

For today's *opening ceremony* you'll be reading a poem by Black Elk called "Circles."

Distribute the "Circles" by Black Elk handout.

Explain that Black Elk was a Native American holy man, a member of the Oglala Lakota people, and he is known to millions around the world from his 1932 testimonial, *Black Elk Speaks*. Adapted by the poet, John Neihardt, from a series of interviews, it is one of the most widely read and admired works of American Indian literature. A Black Elk biography, written by Joe Jackson, *Black Elk: The Life of An American Visionary*, was a 2016 finalist for National Book Award.

The version of the "Circles" poem below includes specific references to "Indian," capturing the original language, intent, and context for the poem.

Ask participants to read the poem collaboratively, by inviting participants, one after the other, to read up to a line each. Go around the circle, reading the poem as many times as necessary for everyone to read at least one line.

Have people reflect on the poem for a bit as they decide on a line from the poem that resonates with them.

Go-Round: Circles

Introduce your *talking piece* to the group by sharing a few words about the meaning the item has for you.

Now, as you initiate the go-round, share a line from the poem that resonates with you, including a short explanation about why.

Hand the talking piece to the person sitting to your right or left, inviting them to share while others in the circle listen from the heart. Remind participants of the Chinese character, Ting, from earlier. They will hand the talking piece to their neighbor when they're done sharing and so on, and so forth, around the circle until everyone has had the opportunity to share.

The Indigenous Roots of Circles

When the talking piece returns to you, touch on what people shared as you make connections to the many people, around the world, who have gathered in purposeful circles throughout history. People have always used circles to share stories and experiences to learn, connect, celebrate, and sustain their communities through challenging times.

Read and internalize the information below. Relay key learnings about the Indigenous Roots of circles by communicating the bolded information to your group.

“Researchers have found much evidence that **societies were far more egalitarian in earlier human stages. **[Today] many indigenous groups still gather in circles, for example, Native Americans, the Maasai tribe of Kenya, and [other people in] numerous countries throughout Mother Earth** These groups regularly gather in circle to confirm the identity of the community through ritual, story-telling, dance and music.”**

“The Circle process that many non-Native people ... [use in schools] today is rooted in the tradition of talking Circles that Indigenous Peoples in North America use and have used for millennia. Different Native Peoples practice different forms of the Circle process. The form of Circles described in Living Justice Press books [that the Morningside Center Circle process draws on] most closely reflects the talking Circle process practiced by the Plains Peoples of North America. In these traditions, Circles are far more than a technique; they are a way of life. Circles embody a philosophy, principles, and values that apply whether people are sitting in Circle or not.”

In *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community*, restorative circle keepers and practitioners Kay Pranis and Carolyn Boyes-Watson talk about the indigenous roots of circles and “the source of key teachings that are foundational to the process.” Not surprisingly, they are very much connected to some of the themes touched on in the Black Elk “Circles” poem:

“These teachings often build on the Circle image as a metaphor for how the universe operates. For many Indigenous people, the circle is a symbolic expression of a world view – a way of understanding how the world works. **The following teachings are an integral part both of that worldview and of the space that circles create:**

- **Everything is interconnected.**
- **Though everything is interconnected, there are distinct parts and it’s important for them to be in balance.**
- **Every part of the universe contributes to the whole and is equally valuable.**
- **In the cyclical nature of life, there’s always another chance.”**



Talk Participants Through Today’s Agenda

- Introduce Restorative Circles
- Opening Ceremony: Black Elk on Circles
- The Indigenous Roots of Circles
- Check Agenda
- Introduction to Restorative Circles in Schools
- Video: Introduction to Restorative Circle Processes
- Video: Key Elements of the Circle process
- Key Elements of the Circle Process
- Closing Ceremony: Wayinkan’s Wisdom

Introduction to Restorative Circles in Schools

Frame today's initial exploration of restorative circles by first acknowledging that our schools have been failing to meet the needs of our children and their families, and by extension our country as a whole. **We want to create schools that promote equity, joy, healing and belonging. Restorative circles are a way to align to this deeper purpose of public education.**

Through restorative circles, student voice and leadership are amplified, students' cultures and identities are affirmed, and all work toward collective healing. In restorative circles, we show up more fully as the holistic beings we are and engage in storytelling. Remind participants of what they learned in session 1 about storytelling and how the brain is wired for narratives.

It turns out our brain secretes the bonding hormone, oxytocin when we hear someone's story or are privileged to have them share personal information about themselves. The brains of the storyteller and the listener fire in unison and we begin to feel empathy and compassion toward one another.

Video: Introduction to Restorative Circle Processes

Play the [Core Processes of Restorative Justice Circles](#) video from 0:00 to 3:32 minutes. In this 3-and-a-half-minute clip, educators outline how restorative circles can be used proactively and responsively in schools.

After watching the video, invite participants to take out their journals.

Invite participants to journal in response to one of the following reflection questions:

- What connections can you make between the video and the work that's already happening at your school?
- What aspects of circles shown in the video are you interested in exploring further? Why?
- What impressions, feelings, experiences or thoughts came up for you during this video, that you'd like to share with the larger group?

Video: Key Elements of the Circle process

Play the [Core Processes of Restorative Justice Circles](#) video again, this time from 5:04 to 8:43 minutes to illustrate the key elements of a circle.

Reflections questions:

- What IFETs (Impressions, Feelings, Experiences or Thoughts) came up for you during this video, that you'd like to share with the larger group?
- What connections can you make to work that's already happening at your school?
- What aspects of circles presented in the video are you interested in exploring further?

Key Elements of the Circle Process, Tier 1

Distribute the "Key Elements of a Circle" handout. As you review each of the key elements, ask participants to recall what they remember from the video you just watched, what resonated with them and/or what they already knew about these elements before watching the video. Build on what people share, using some, or all, of the following language:

The Structure of the Circle/Sitting in a Circle

The seating arrangement is a key component of circles. It's why they're called circles. When we sit in a circle:

- a) We can see each other in an unobstructed way (no tables, chairs or other furniture in between)
- b) It encourages participants to fully engage with one another
- c) There is a clear focus on the issue at the center of the circle
- d) There is a certain amount of flattening of the hierarchies that traditionally exists in school, in that the facilitator (known as keeper) sits at the same level as their students, without being at the head (or front), as is often the case in other non-circle classroom structures.

The Centerpiece

In circles, we gather around a centerpiece that serves as meaningful focal point for circle participants so they can be more fully present and bring their best self to the

circle. Centerpieces may contain values, objects that serve as talking pieces, or other meaningful objects contributed by the community that is gathered around it.

The Talking Piece

The dialogue in circles is facilitated by a meaningful talking piece. The piece is passed around the circle in order, from one person to the next. The person who is holding the piece is invited to speak or pass. Everyone else in the circle practices mindful listening, knowing that their turn will come when the talking piece comes around. In this way, everyone in the circle has an opportunity to share without interruption what is on their mind and in their heart. Those without the talking piece can listen more fully knowing their turn will come. There's no need to prepare a response or rebuttal ahead of time. In this way, the talking piece also encourages more thoughtful reflection and unhurried expression. [L] [L] [L] [L] [SEP] [SEP]

At Morningside Center, we often use a Hugg-a-Planet, a plush globe, as a talking piece. Teachers we've worked with have used stuffed animals, conch shells or handheld mirrors but, ultimately, we encourage circle keepers to choose a talking piece of their own that brings meaning to their circle practice. [L] [L] [L] [L] [SEP] [SEP]

The power of the talking piece ultimately lies in its democratic nature. It gives each participant equal opportunity to speak, with the idea that all have something valuable to contribute. As the piece moves from one participant to the next, every person in the group is acknowledged, whether they speak or not. Sometimes holding the piece for a moment of silence before passing it on, can be as powerful a contribution as sharing a story or perspective. It can help to let things sink in as the circle catches its breath, slowing things down in what can be an otherwise busy and hurried school experience.

Opening and Closing Ceremonies

Every circle starts with an opening ceremony to mark the circle as a space apart from our normal ways of being together. In circles, we slow down the busy pace that dominates so many of our lives, focusing, as we do, on transformational relationships instead of the more transactional relationships, often favored in society. In circle, we seek to show up as our best selves and connect with others more fully, as holistic beings promoting empathy and listening deeply to understand.

Opening ceremonies can range from a mindfulness practice to a piece of music, from a poem or inspirational quote to an opening reflection.

And in the same way that we open up circles with an opening ceremony, we close them using a closing ceremony to close up the space before going back to our lives beyond the circle.

Closing Ceremony

Consider the following quote from Oglala Lakota elder, warrior and spiritual advisor, Dave Yakima, known by his Lakota name of Wakinyan:

“The Circle has healing power

In the Circle we are all equal,

No one is in front. No one is behind.

No one is above. No one is below.

We are all related – the Circle creates unity”

Invite the group to share their reflections and connections to Wakinyan's wisdom as they think about their colleagues in this space, as well as their students, their families and their communities.

Handout: "Circles" by Black Elk

You have heard that everything an Indian does is done in a circle.

And that is because the power of the world always works in circles,

And everything tries to be round.

Everything the power of the world does is done in a circle.

The sky is round like a ball, and so are all the stars.

The wind, in its greatest power, whirls.

Birds make their nests in circles,

For theirs is the same religion as ours.

The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle.

The moon does the same, and both are round.

Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing,

And always come back again to where they were.

The life of an Indian is a circle from childhood to childhood,

And so it is in everything where power moves.

Handout: Key Elements of a Circle



Key Elements of a Circle

The structure of the circle



Centerpiece



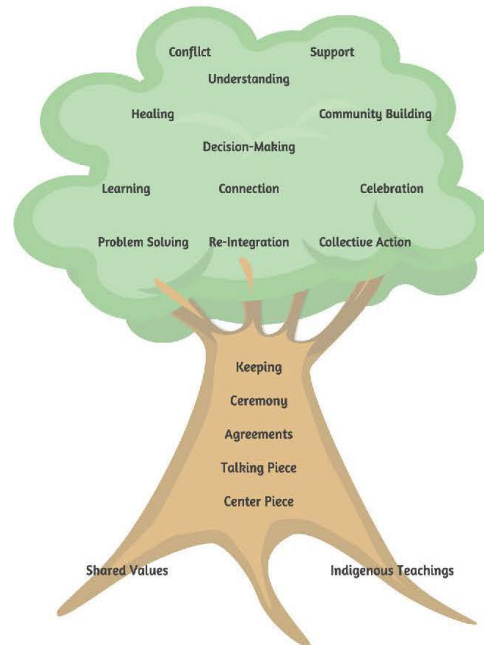
Talking piece (globe, figurine)

Opening and closing ceremonies

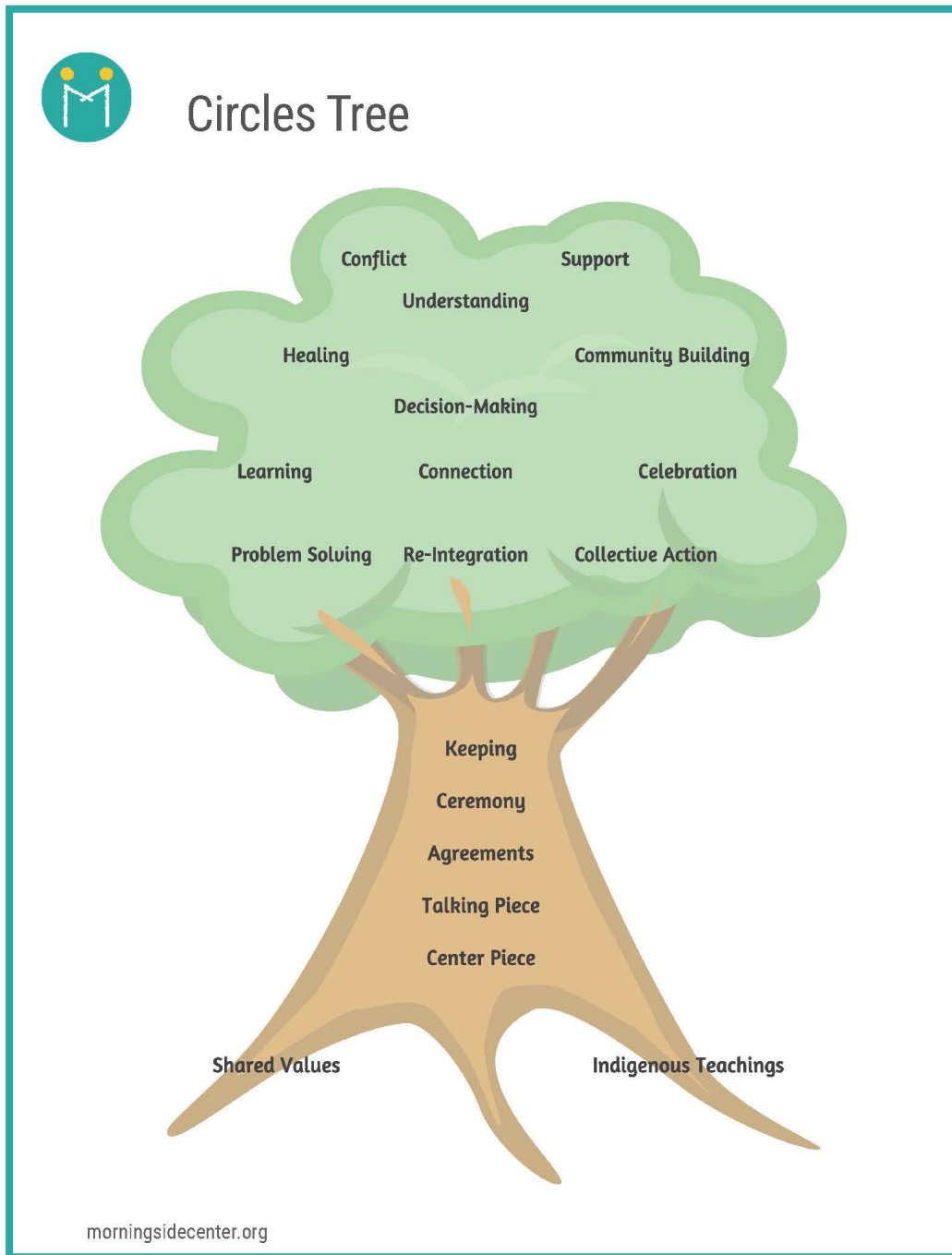
Values (see centerpiece image of index cards)

Community practices, guidelines, agreements

Role of the keeper



Handout: Circles Tree



Handout: The Structure of the Circle/Sitting in a Circle

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