



STUDENT PEACE ALLIANCE

Restorative Justice Training: Peace Circles

A guide to facilitating and utilizing Peace Circles

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“Doing this peace circle, I’ve been able to express myself and come up with ways to help me fix my problems. I can learn from others' mistakes and they can learn from mine. It’s a give and take situation.” –Anthony Ricks, 21

Overview

What is a Peace Circle?

A peace circle is a Restorative Justice model that, like other Restorative Justice practices, can be used to address conflict holistically and solve problems. Peace circles emphasize healing and learning through a collective group process, aiming to repair harm done and assign responsibility by talking through the problem.ⁱ

Peace circles combine victim reconciliation, offender responsibility, and community healing.

What does it look like?

At a peace circle, a minimum of 3 participants sit in a circle of chairs, ideally without tables or other obstructions between them. They use a talking stick to take turns speaking and determine (1) what happened and why, and (2) how it can be fixed. Peace circles can be used in a myriad of settings including schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, among family and friends, and in the juvenile and criminal legal systems.ⁱⁱ

Discussion and resolution of the problem may be achieved in a single session, but peace circles may extend into multiple sessions until genuine consensus is reached. Circle processes are simple and organic but certainly cannot be facilitated in a pinch and are by no means, an 'easy way out'.

How can SPA chapters use them?

Peace Circles can be used in a myriad of ways by SPA chapters and members. You can use these circles to deal with internal conflicts, and you can also provide them as a service to other student organizations, judiciary proceedings, classes or on-campus conflicts. This will help you to build SPA's on-campus visibility. Further, the principles Peace Circles such as listening, hearing, communicating and healing lay a perfect groundwork upon which to build yourselves as a community of activists and decision makers.

What beliefs underlie Peace Circles?

- Positive potential and rehabilitation.
- Humans are interdependent.
- We have a responsibility to help one another.
- People are inherently good even if they make bad choices.
- Punishment disrupts victims.

What does a peace circle do that other processes tend not to?

- Transforms relationships
- Gives everyone a voice
- Resolves conflict in a non-punitive, rehabilitative way
- Inspires taking responsibility to repair harm done
- Grows and transforms relationships (interpersonally and in communities)
- Builds consensus and empathy
- Creates opportunity for individual growth
- Allows leaders to emerge naturally

- Develops problem-solving skills
- Explores issues holistically, in context, and at-depth
- Offers a safe space of equitable power sharing and mutual respect
- Goes beyond the mundane and the ordinary

Where did Peace Circles come from?

Peace circles started to surface in the United States in the 1970s. However, they have been around much longer than that. Peace circles are largely based on talking circles and carry with them the history of cultural traditions from all over the world. Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, Nigeria, Kenya, and Uganda, to name a few, used peace circles for conflict-resolution. Today, communities are beginning to adopt and adapt restorative practices like peace circles to systems that, for centuries, have used more punitive, judiciary measures to address conflict and violence.

Why should I use peace circles?

- Peace circles give you the full picture by hearing every side of the story.
- Peace circles are holistic and engage multiple aspects of human life. They use logic to resolve problems and require pathos or human emotion, connection, empathy, and understanding.
 - A peace circle can hold: anger, anxiety, distrust, hope, faith, fear, love

Facilitation Guide

Step 1: Logistics of Peace Circles

Participants:

- At least two people involved in a conflict
- Observers or community members
- Circle Keeper

Four Stages of the Peace Circle:

These are the stages typically seen in a peace circle process.

1. Acceptance: Is the circle process appropriate for the given situation? Has everyone accepted that is a process they want to participate in?
2. Preparation: As circle keeper, conduct private conversations with involved persons to explore potential issues and to prepare all parties to participate in the peace circle process.
3. Gathering: All parties come together in the peace circle to express their feelings and find solutions.
4. Follow-up: Regular communication and check-ins are used to assess progress and adjust agreements as necessary after the peace circle is completed.

Three Basic Guiding Questions:

1. What harm has been experienced?
2. What led to the harm happening, or why was this issue experienced as harm?
3. How might this harm be healed?

4. How might this harm be prevented in the future?

Role of the Circle Keeper:

Unlike other restorative justice models such as victim-offender mediation in which the facilitator is a driving force moderating the conversation, in peace circles the keeper plays a less prominent role. The circle keeper acts as a participant and witness to the process as much as a facilitator, and as a result must step back in order to allow the group to reach true, autonomous consensus. The keeper asks questions and intervenes in lulls or during particularly heated interactions, all while allowing discussion to flow naturally and the group to steer its direction.

A circle keeper must model the behavior expected of participants by, for example, using a respectful tone of voice and limiting speaking time in order to allow others time to voice their opinions. Keepers should also praise participants for their responses and for their bravery in dealing with the issue in a public manner and encourage others who are shy to speak up.

Step 2: Preparation

Facilitating a peace circle requires preparation and intentionality. The preparation that is done should vary with the group and the scenario that is being worked through. That said, there are certainly some basic models that are applicable to most peace circles. Once you have done the preparation of determining if a circle is right for the scenario and checking in with all parties, you can consider the following preparation steps.

Develop a Ritual:

Marking the peace circle as a special, meaningful event makes reaching resolution easier.

- One way to do this is with distinct openers and closers that demarcate the time and space of the event- such as reading a poem, or closing your eyes together to take deep breaths before and after.
- A center piece also contributes to the ceremony of peace circles, bringing energetic and spatial stability and providing a place in the center of the circle for people to focus as needed. This centerpiece can be something handmade, a candle, a small plant, or anything else that is grounding and holds positive energy.
- Create a talking stick or item. A talking piece focuses attention on the person speaking and endows him or her with authority, providing a feeling of importance and agency.

Setting Guidelines:

Before beginning, the group may set guidelines and agreements. Often, participants are more open and willing to share when they feel safe and comfortable in surroundings. To give you an idea of what these agreements might look like, we often hear things like “ensuring mutual respect, no interrupting one another, refrain from using accusatory language, no yelling, etc.”

Before starting discussion, take suggestions for guidelines and write them down so that everyone can see. Alternatively, solicit suggestions via email or a doodle poll prior to meeting with the group and have

handouts ready for each participant upon entering the circle. Commitments to the circle, such as ‘what comes out in the circle, stays in the circle’, must be agreed to by all participating individuals.

Step 3: Peace Circles in Action

Opener

Peace circles consist mostly of asking questions and listening to answers. Start by thanking everyone for being present and sharing in this experience, then begin asking with low-risk questions such as “what is your name, and your favorite place to spend time?” or a short, opening exercise like passing a hand squeeze around the circle. These introductory activities ease participants in to tougher questions and get them used to talking in front of the group.

After this, let everyone know that you’d like to talk about why you’re all present, and what happened to bring the group to this point. Allow people to volunteer to speak first, but aim to hear from the victim first about what brought them here. Then move to the offender, and then to the rest of the participants.

Remember the Go-Round Rules

Use the talking stick and pass it around the circle for each question. Some people might respond “I don’t know” or may pass on certain questions. Be understanding and let this happen but be sure you have a response ready in order to keep the conversation moving. If a particular question sparks a lot of interest, feel free to pass around the talking stick multiple times to allow the conversation to develop.

Remember: Not only listening, but *hearing* what everyone has to say is crucial.

Begin the Process of Asking the Following Questions to Each Person

- Exploring the problem
 - What were you thinking at the time?
 - What did you think when you realized what happened?
 - What have you thought about since?
 - Who has been affected?
 - What impact has this had on you and others?
 - What has been the hardest thing for you?
- Finding solutions
 - What do you think needs to happen to make things right?
 - What could anyone do to help these harms?
 - What can we do to make sure this doesn’t happen again?
 - What are the steps we agree to take as a group and what is our timeline?

Give Praise

Be sure to praise all individuals for their bravery in addressing the issue publicly. Thank them for their responses. Seek ways to create an inclusive and open space and to reintegrate the offender in the group.

Check-out

Pass the talking piece asking for final thoughts and/or a word that sums up where they are at the time. Choose an appropriate closing activity (again passing the squeeze or meditation would work here) to signal the end of the session. If consensus has not been reached in a single session be sure to schedule the next peace circle at the end of the meeting.

Step 4: Follow-up

The Keeper or another designated participant should check in with participants after the peace circle is completed on the progress being achieved and the need for adjustments to the solutions decided upon as circumstances change. The maintenance of regular and open communication between all parties is key to sustaining reconciliation and building community and interpersonal relationships.

Application of Peace Circles

Peace circles can be applied to a wide array of situations, from schools to families, from neighborhoods to the juvenile justice system. In this section we will contextualize peace circles by explaining their direct applications in an SPA setting for meetings, as a decision-making tool to reach consensus, and in the wider campus community.

Within Your SPA Chapter

Opening/closing meetings

Fall back on the principles of peace circles to open and close meetings. Be sure to form a circle so that everyone can be seen and heard and employ an opening exercise that makes use of the talking stick. Even if the rest of your meeting does not follow a peace circle process, using certain peace circle principles at the opening and closing of meetings helps to mark the time and space in order to separate it out from other parts of the day.

Entirety of the meeting

Perhaps there has been some disagreement among members within the chapter about how to get things done, perhaps a few members have been dominating past meetings, perhaps you have an SPA campaign about which you need to reach consensus, perhaps you need to come up with a plan for fundraising or program an upcoming event...

Using the format of a peace circle can work for the entirety of SPA meetings. Simply follow the procedures explained in the facilitation guide, the basics of which are forming a circle and using a talking stick to go around the room and hear different voices and opinions on an issue.

If your SPA chapter has a symbolic object that signifies something to the group such as a campaign victory, this object could work well as the centerpiece of the circle!

The president of the chapter could serve as the circle keeper or another willing member who has read up on peace circles could step in as the keeper. The power-sharing model of peace circles works well for

a student organization in which members who are not part of the official leadership play an equally important role in the day-in, day-out action of the group. Similarly, the circle keeper acts not only facilitator but also participant of the peace circle, ensuring that all voices within the chapter are heard and equally validated. For groups working through tension or attempting to temper a few particularly loud voices or to empower a few particularly soft ones, the peace circle can explore issues of group dynamics and smooth out interpersonal conflicts.

You may or may not want to go through the entire procedure but, remember, above all else, to respect the person talking with the silence and attention they deserve. Full-on peace circles are not particularly useful during informational meetings in which the chapter's leadership needs to recount current goings-on in detail. If aiming to reach consensus on a specific question or plan for an event, tailor the questions to respond more directly to your desired outcome. For a brainstorming or planning session, you may even have the circle keeper write down the thoughts and ideas expressed as the talking stick is passed and go around the circle several times.

In the Larger Campus Community

SPA chapters can hold peace circles open to the campus community as a way to promote the SPA and practice its values. Peace circles on campus could be particularly effective in rebuilding trust and understanding within communities that have suffered from an incident like a theft on campus. A chapter could even hold a peace circle for the campus community on a topic related to a current campaign as a way to galvanize wider-spread action around it. It can also be a way to share your values with other student organizations that might want to be trained in using peace circles, or might be interested in having you facilitate something within their student organization.

Find a space on campus with chairs that your chapter can reserve for a peace circle. Advertise around campus with flyers, make a Facebook event, and designate a circle keeper from the chapter to prepare the questions and facilitation process. Invite students, faculty, and/or staff.

For Your Personal Use

The values of listening and empathy espoused by peace circles can be applied to your daily life. You may not carry around a talking stick but you can still practice these values when interacting with friends, family, professors, and classmates, making your SPA efforts even more personal.

After all, "the personal is the political", so, by applying these values to your daily life, you are ever so slowly changing the way that the world works, chipping away at feelings of distrust and selfishness and moving towards systems of inclusion and acceptance.

ⁱ <http://www.peacepower.info/modules/PeaceCircles.pdf>

ⁱⁱ http://www.project-nia.org/docs/Peacemaking_Circles_overview.pdf