

healing
circles
healthcare



The practice of healing circles



How to hold a basic circle

Table of Contents

Welcome	4
Introduction to healing circles.....	5
What are healing circles?.....	5
Why healing circles?.....	5
Who we are	6
What we offer	6
The healing circles lineage	7
Preparing to hold a healing circle	8
Why are you calling a circle?	8
Who will hold the circle?	8
Preparing to hold space.....	8
In-person circles	8
Virtual circles	9
Roles in healing circles	9
The circle.....	9
The role of host	9
The role of guardian.....	10
Role of the bell.....	10
The role of the talking piece	11
Healing circles agreements.....	11
Agreements.....	12
The basic circle format.....	13
Sample basic circle	14
What makes hosting a circle different from your professional role?	14
Applications in healthcare.....	16
Circles with multiple participants.....	16

Formal healing circles	16
Event-related circles	16
Framework to guide class instruction	16
Circles in clinicals with nursing students	16
Listening circle.....	16
Shift-change huddle	17
Learning circle	17
Leadership circle	17
Discovery circle.....	18
Unit meetings.....	18
Patient-family meetings	18
System-wide needs	18
Circles of two.....	19
Circles of one.....	19
License.....	20
Acknowledgements	20

Welcome

Thank you for participating in “How to Host a Healing Circle for Healthcare” training. Healing circles can benefit nurses and other healthcare professionals in a unique way, using our core skills of therapeutic presence and deep listening.

The goal of this guide is to support your training and provide you with resources that will strengthen your knowledge and confidence in the Healing Circles Healthcare peer-support model.

Through your training, you’ll be introduced to the roles, agreements, and the basic structure of healing circles. You’ll learn about the healing circles process, principles, practices, and intentions in healthcare and academic settings. And you’ll have time to practice the roles of host and guardian.

Healing circles are an invitation to discover a deeper way of being together, and you’ll find that, with time, you’ll be able to use healing circles principles in many formal and informal ways in your professional and personal life.

Here are a couple of things to bear in mind as you move through the training and these resources:

- **The basic circle format is simple.** Most find the model flexible and achievable. *Feel free to make it your own.* You’ll be offered a script as a starting place, but find your own language and make it fit for you, your practice, and your environment. Trust your intuition.
- **Circle is best learned by being in healing circles and practicing the roles of host and guardian.** The more you sit in, and hold, circles the more you’ll naturally incorporate the principles. So, go ahead and start holding circles. You have everything you need.

Introduction to healing circles

What are healing circles?

Healing circles are collective care that:

- Are an intentional practice whose purpose is to heal ourselves, each other, and healthcare itself
- Transform peer-to-peer support, guided by a unique set of agreements that generate trust, hope, and resilience
- Can be co-created with anyone, in any setting, involving two people or more, within two minutes to 90 minutes, in-person or online

Why healing circles?

- Healthcare professionals need a space, in community, to state what is true, to be heard, and to feel supported.
- Moral injury has left many in healthcare feeling helpless, hopeless, and abandoned.
- Healthcare professionals aren't meant to endure hardships alone.
- Healing circles provide a place of strength, safety, and confidentiality for all health professionals, where truth, kindness, respect, curiosity, and compassion heal.
- Self-care is important, but collective care is what's needed now.

Who we are

Healing Circles Healthcare is a community of nurses and healthcare professionals who are part of a movement to heal individuals, healthcare, and our world.

We:

- Provide healing circles and training in healthcare and academic communities.
- Cultivate environments of safety, sanctuary, and compassion.
- Support the development of personal strength and the power of community.
- Deliver services to build healing communities that embody truth, vitality, integrity, trust, and courage.
- Support research on healing and resilience through healing circles.

What we offer

- Healing Circles Healthcare provides services and support that prepare individuals and teams to use healing circles in their healthcare communities. This includes tools, training, skills, and coaching.
- The word healing means “to make whole.” Healing circles blend mindfulness, reflection, and presence.
- We honor each person’s unique ways to healing and do not presume to advise, fix, or save one another.



The healing circles lineage

"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 took place around cookfires millennia ago became a model for face-to-face interaction that is so effective, it survives to this day. One of the reasons for its survival is that it's "portable" and can take place around a coffee table, hospital bed, and even a computer screen. Different groups have embraced this model and moved it forward over the years, and Healing Circles Healthcare is built on the firm foundation of their work. You can read more about our lineage [here](#).

Preparing to hold a healing circle

Why are you calling a circle?

There are many reasons to call a circle, but a healing circle grows out of a deep sense of compassion and a genuine desire to support others. Discovering your own purpose is a vital first step, which you can return to as a touchstone again and again.

Who will hold the circle?

- Healing circles provide the safest experience for circle members when there are at least two people supporting the circle: a host and a guardian. (For a description of these roles, please see “Roles in healing circles,” later in this document.)
- Having a team of trained hosts and guardians is also best for sustaining the circle so that people can step in for each other when necessary.

Preparing to hold space

A space for healing circles is intentionally created.

In-person circles

- Prepare the physical space with comfortable chairs arranged in a circle without any tables separating participants.
- Use a candle to represent the metaphorical campfire that participants gather around. (It can be a flameless electric candle in hospital settings.)
- Have a way to make a sound or display a symbol. If sounds are appropriate in your setting, you can use a singing bowl, chime, or a smartphone app such as Insight Timer. You can also use a visual symbol, such as a heart drawn on a piece of paper, to indicate the beginning and end of silence.
- Create a center for the circle, such as a display of flowers or symbol(s) that represent your work together

Virtual circles

In a virtual setting, you can create a healing space through your presence.

- Consider your background. Where do you sit and what is behind you when you're on camera? Although virtual circles are made possible by technology, they enable us to invite one another into the intimacy of our homes. When an at-home setting is not possible, for example, at work, [virtual backgrounds](#) can make it *look* like we're at home.
- Consider lighting. Make sure that your face is well-lit. If you host virtual circles often, you may want to invest in an inexpensive ring light.
- Gather your tools: a candle (real or battery-operated), talking piece, and a way to make a sound or display symbol. (On Zoom, you might need to change some settings to optimize the sound.)
- Of greatest importance is privacy. One of the healing circles agreements is to hold what others share in confidence. To create a safe container, you and fellow circle members need to feel assured that no one outside the circle can overhear what is being shared.

You're ready! Take a big breath and prepare to welcome people into your first circle.

Roles in healing circles

The circle

The focus of a circle is the center where the campfire is imagined. This is why each individual reflection is directed to the center of the circle with no expectation of others to respond. Circles are not conversational in the traditional sense; they are a series of sharings and listening.

The role of host

The host tends to the "fire" by facilitating the circle process. Hosts open and close the circle and maintain the flow of participation. They set the intention for the circle, invite participants into presence, offer a prompt or probing question that speaks to the intention, and then open conversations with heart-sharing. Hosts make sure that each person has an opportunity to share, if desired, knowing that each contributes to the communal experience.

The role of guardian

The guardian tends to the “temperature” and sense of safety among circle participants. Guardians notice when something is said or felt within the circle that needs an extra moment of recognition, acknowledgment, or the space of a breath to clear the air before moving on. Guardians may say something, make a sound, or display a symbol to signal a pause that “resets” the circle.

When circles meet in person, the host and guardian sit opposite each other so they can observe both sides of the circle. In the virtual landscape, the guardian monitors the screen. For example: If the guardian notices that a circle participant has turned off video, the guardian may check in with that person via chat to ensure that they are OK.

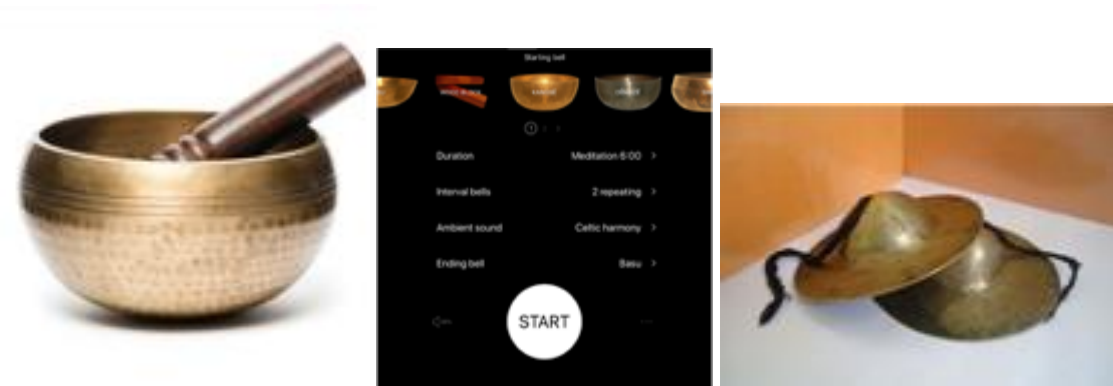
Role of the bell

A bell is used as a signal, inviting us to take a moment for silence. It has a “voice of its own.” You can use a bell or any adaptation of your choice.

Any member of the circle can call for the mindfulness bell to:

- Pause and take a moment for presence.
- Keep time. The guardian can ring the bell to signal that it’s time to bring someone’s share to a close, so that everyone has time to share.
- Remind participants of the agreements.

You can choose from many different types of mindfulness bells, including singing bowls, meditation bells, cymbals, and apps. They vary in sound, size, and price.



The role of the talking piece

A talking piece is a physical object such as a rock or symbol. It's often used in in-person circles to signify who is speaking and to remind others that sharing in healing circles is without interruption. It invites participants holding it to take a moment to pause, connect with their breath, and reflect within before sharing.

In an in-person circle, at the start of the heart-sharing round, all members direct their attention to the center of the circle and then look within. The first person who is ready to share picks up the talking piece from the center and begins to talk. When the share is complete, that person passes the talking piece to the right or left. The recipient is free to take a moment to determine whether to share and, if not, can pass the piece to the next person.

In times of infection-control protocols, participants can bring their own talking piece, use their own pen/stethoscope/badge etc., or just raise a hand to signal a desire to share.



Healing circles agreements

"Helping, fixing, and serving represent three different ways of seeing life.

When you help, you see life as weak.

When you fix, you see life as broken.

When you serve, you see life as whole.

Fixing and helping may be the work of the ego, and service the work of the soul."

[Rachel Naomi Remen](#)

Healing circles help us step out of ordinary time into a safe and accepting environment in which to explore our healing.

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, fix, or save one another.
- We hold all stories shared in the circle in confidence.
- We trust that each of us has the guidance we need within us, and we rely on the power of silence to access it.

We practice with authentic presence by:

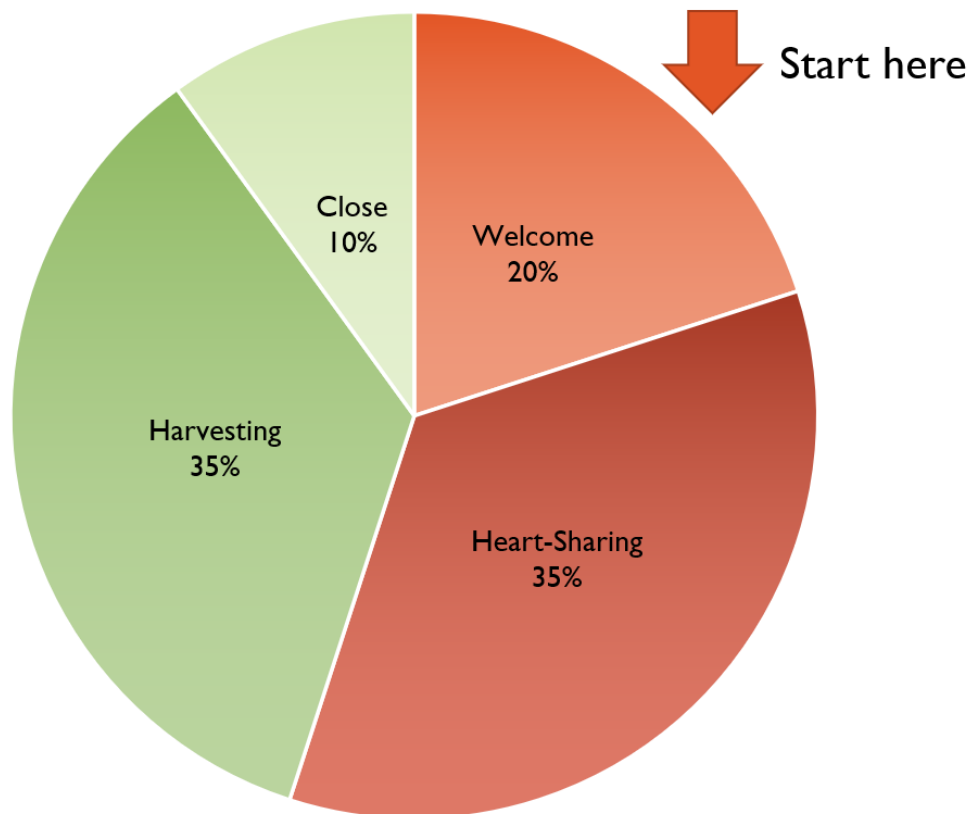
- Listening with attention.
- Speaking with intention.
- Tending to the well-being of the circle.

We create a safe container, or context, for our circle with these simple agreements. It's important to remember that we apply them to ourselves and hold them for each other. For many, the agreement that is the hardest to keep is not to "presume to advise, fix, or save one another." We practice this in a circle by not interrupting, not responding to, referencing, or commenting on another person's share. Focusing on our own experience, emotions, and heart instead allows us each to explore our own healing.

The guardian can ring a bell if a reminder of the agreements is needed. Also, it's important to remember that anyone on the rim can ask for a bell as well.

The basic circle format

Simple, yet powerful, the following illustration shows the general framework for a formal healing circle. These elements can be used in informal ways and the times are general guidelines.



- **The welcome** includes introductions, reading the agreements, silence/breath, and check-in (Approximately 10 minutes of a one-hour circle)
- **Heart-sharing** is an invitation to share how participants are right now (approximately 25 minutes)
- **Harvest** is for further reflection (Approximately 20 minutes)
- **Close** is a check-out (Approximately five minutes)

Sample basic circle

Begin by preparing the space (for more information, see “Preparing to hold space” earlier in this document).

1. Welcome participants.
 - a. Light a candle.
 - b. Ring a bell and observe silence (may include a guided breathing/grounding exercise).
 - c. Make introductions/ask a check-in question (for example: “In a few words tell us how you are arriving in circle today.”).
 - d. Read the agreements.
2. Heart-sharing
 - a. Read a poem or introduce a practice.
 - b. Invite participants to share using a heart-sharing prompt/question (for example: “What is on your heart today?”).
3. Harvest
 - a. Invite participants to share using a harvest question (for example: “After listening to yourself and others, what new insights have emerged for you?”).
4. Close
 - a. Ask a check-out question (for example: “In one or two words, what are you taking with you from today’s circle?”).
 - b. Thank participants for their sharing.
 - c. Observe silence between two bells.
 - d. Blow out the candle.

What makes hosting a circle different from your professional role?

Circle participants abide by agreements, including agreements around confidentiality. The volunteers who host healing circles do not provide medical or psychotherapeutic advice or treatment. Participation in a healing circle doesn’t replace the care provided by a qualified healthcare professional.

For those in professional caring or counseling roles, it can sometimes be a challenge to differentiate between the responsibilities associated with one’s professional role and those of one’s role as the host of a circle. It’s best to imagine “taking off your professional hat” when in circle. The following table shows how these roles differ.

Circle host	Professional counselor/therapist
Speaks into the center	Addresses client directly
Primary responsibility is to provide a safe container by paying attention to process	Draws on professional training, expertise, and experience
Follows circle agreements	Is bound by professional ethical standards
Is a member of the circle—is free to share personal issues—self-disclosure is valued	Is not a group member, very conscious of the limits of personal self-disclosure
Is free to develop friendships with members of the circle	Needs to maintain professional boundaries
Manages expectations, for example, articulates purpose of the circle: social-emotional support, not therapy	Clarifies and articulates to client what therapy means in their professional framework
Consciously takes professional hat off	Consciously puts professional hat on
Encourages and models heart-sharing	Asks poignant, probing, and often analytical questions
Refrains from interpretations	Gives feedback, interprets
Consciously delineates difference between social-emotional support and shares information only when that has been requested—careful to not fix and advise	Makes professional judgments about when to advise and when to move from process of sharing of content/information

Applications in healthcare

Circles with multiple participants

Formal healing circles

Formal healing circles enhance connection and foster a sense of belonging, trust, and community by creating a space for shared experience and shared humanity.

- For units, departments, faculty, or an entire organization
- These often take place monthly or bimonthly, or at a set time as a standing circle

Event-related circles

Event-related circles can offer space for reflection on emotionally, psychologically, and physically impactful events as a way to honor gravity. For example, a code blue/patient death. A circle around the bed/in the room can allow for each person to verbally heart-share a few words to process or hold intentional silence after a patient's death.

Framework to guide class instruction

Harvesting with reflection can offer deeper learning for students as they check in and check out.

Circles in clinicals with nursing students

Offering questions for reflection around clinical experience may facilitate early clinician self-care development in the workplace.

Listening circle

A listening circle can facilitate a conversation in which all voices may be heard. For example:

- Educating and addressing racial or gender-identity trauma
- Asking staff/faculty "What matters to you?"
- Engaging in appreciative inquiry

Shift-change huddle

Healing circles can support clinicians at times of transition due to the burden of work.

- As a unit/group with a brief check-in/check-out question. For example:
 - Oncoming shift: What are you bringing with you today? What's on your heart as you begin your shift?
 - Outgoing shift: What are you leaving behind today? What's on your heart as you go out into the world?
 - Gratitude: What's one thing you're thankful for/about today? What's one thing that you're looking forward to when you get home?
 - Receiving and asking for help: What's one way you received help today? What's one way you'd like to receive help?
- At the bedside with a patient, family, and nurse. For example:
 - Oncoming nurse: How can we make this a good day for you? What is most important to you?
 - Outgoing nurse: What I leave with you is.....?
 - Each member of a triad (oncoming nurse, outgoing nurse, and patient) offers silent well-wish at the end of shift (starting with the patient, each says their own name out loud, everyone pauses in silence while offering them a silent well wish).

Learning circle

Learning circles can provide support around transitions and change. For example:

- New procedure: How do you see this being helpful in your process? What do you need to feel successful? How do you feel learning something for the first time? People can answer in one or two words.
- Policy changes
- Helping new nurse graduates process the transition into practice or integrating new members/new nurses to the unit

Leadership circle

Leadership circles can enhance communication. For example:

- “What am I bringing in with me? My take-away in one word or sentence is....”
- Curriculum-planning meetings

Discovery circle

Discovery circles can facilitate the harvesting of collective wisdom. For example:

- Adverse-event debriefs
 - One method would be to begin with a check-in from each member. Host reviews the case without crosstalk. End with “What I leave *in this room* today.”
- Brainstorming for a project or planning meeting

Unit meetings

Healing circles can enhance connection and foster a sense of belonging and community. For example:

- Use a talking piece (passed) so that everyone has an opportunity to share without being interrupted.
- Provide an opportunity to share gratitude for another team member.

Patient-family meetings

Healing circles can support whole-person/whole-system care.

- Offer a formal circle with patients/families who have similar issues/diagnoses.
- Gather in circle with an interdisciplinary team including the patient and family to share information regarding a diagnosis or care plan.

System-wide needs

Healing circles can facilitate a sense of belonging. For example:

- Other non-clinical departments can also benefit from healing circles. For example, staff members who work in guest relations, human resources, patient experience, food service, or housekeeping can use circle as an end-of-day check-out.

Additional resource: [How to Call a Circle](#)

Circles of two

Healing circles can enhance communication between colleagues. For example:

- Practice deep listening without judgment and the principle of “What is true for the other person?”
- One-on-one student advising
 - Harvesting for deeper learning
- At bedside with patient and nurse. This can create rapport and facilitate healing.
 - What is most important to you today?
- Resilience buddy on a shift. A resilience buddy is a support person you can check in with throughout a shift.

Additional resource: [Calling a Circle of Two](#)

Circles of one

A circle of one is a practice of bringing yourself back into balance. It’s a practice of connecting to your own heart, one that you can return to any time, multiple times in your day. It’s personal, private, and portable. It’s yours.

A circle of one can take the form of self-care daily practice at home, in the car, or in a break room and may include:

- Soft belly breathing
- Visualization of putting what you are carrying/wanting to leave behind in the center of the circle
- Body scan to check in with yourself
- Center before you enter
- Personal harvesting through journaling
- A prayer, a song, or a mantra

Additional resource: [Calling a Circle of One](#)

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