

## **Holding Listening Circles for Your Organization**

### **1. Theory of Listening Circles**

#### **What is a Listening Circle?**

- Listening Circles enable all participants to share their thoughts and feelings in a confidential, supportive group.
- The basic format is a check-in, some theory about listening, shared listening time either in 2s/3s or as a whole group or both, some feedback, and finishing with a checkout.
- Some are for particular constituencies. e.g. activists, men, parents, or they can be open to everyone.
- Anyone who has been part of a listening circle can share what was useful for the newcomers.

#### **Why Listening Circles?**

- We are living in very stressful times and all benefit from emotional support.
- We have chosen to step outside our comfort zone and take action about it. We are also having to handle our feelings and those of others around the issues of leaders' inaction.
- This can bring up strong, often painful emotions—hard things in the present often trigger earlier traumas and feelings, which can be confusing.
- Releasing painful emotions helps us to think better and be more effective. It's hard to think straight when we're feeling scared or full of anger.
- With this emotional support, we can be more connected to others and build stronger relationships.

## **Why Listening?**

- Being listened to by someone with a friendly, warm, and non-judgmental attitude helps people review their thinking, express how they're feeling, and unload feelings that get in the way of thinking and action.
- It's important to allow space for the talker and not interrupt the flow. Talking, tears, laughing, trembling, indignation, yawning, are all ways of getting rid of some of the weight and intensity of what we're feeling - something is very healing about it.
- This sort of listening tends not to happen in everyday conversations; it can feel awkward or embarrassing.
- But when a clear space is organised for each person to speak, everyone can relax a bit.
- It's good to share this valuable resource fairly so we take timed turns.

## **Basic understandings**

- Ask for agreement to listen without interruption, without judgment, with an expression of caring and interest.
- An experienced facilitator can be agreed upon to offer more intervention (affirmation, encouragement).
- Each person can indicate if they want intervention in their time.
- Agree not to refer to things other people say, and not to use the listening circle to direct upset at anyone in the circle.
- People are good and want a just, sustainable world, but we all get hurt in ways that impact how we act.

- People don't benefit from blame or criticism, but an offer of non-judgmental listening can make a difference.
- Role of listener is to communicate that you are on their side, whatever they are struggling with and whether or not you agree with what they say (with and without talking).
- This is not one-way listening—being peers makes a difference. Everyone needs to be listened to, we can move forward together with this collective care.
- We create space for feelings in these turns, it is not important that the content be accurate.

## **2. Start with a Listening Exchange--Practice in pairs**

- 2 or 3 people, but same guidelines about listening. Prepares people to be able to listen to everyone in the group.
- Possible prompt questions: What is challenging about this time for you? What would be good for you to address to have good attention in the group?
- This process is for us as facilitators too, we are peers.

## **3. Practice of Listening Circles**

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- Everyone will have a turn to speak without interruption from others.
- In your turn you can talk about whatever you need to, without judgment from anyone.
- Our job as listeners is to direct 100% of our care and attention onto the person whose turn it is to talk.

- Relaxed eye contact is important, so the person can feel your attention. Just smiling and keeping warm, inviting attention on them is enough to show our caring.
- Agree upon a facilitator who is the main listener, but everyone pays good attention to the person talking
  - Divide up the time available equally between the people present, including the facilitator, leaving some time for wrap-up. Encourage people to take the whole time. Silence is ok, but if a person is having trouble thinking of how to do this, facilitator can offer to ask them a question or two to help get them started.
  - After each turn the facilitator assists the person who has been talking to get their attention back to the present by asking a question which is unrelated to what they have been talking about. Examples include: name three blue things you can see, how do you spell your name backwards, what is your favorite vegetable? A little lightness is so good!
  - People might talk critically about others in their turn. It is important to remember that this is their perception, coloured by their feelings, and is not necessarily accurate. We need space to let off steam about upsets and what is said in this space won't always reflect how people feel when they aren't venting.
  - As facilitator, it is helpful to model good use of time. Avoid criticising others in your turn, as it can make the group feel less safe. It works best to try and identify and talk about your own difficulties.

## **Confidentiality**

- We agree that what is said in someone's time is not repeated or referred to by anyone, except with permission. It's fine for people to talk about the same topic without referring to what others said.

## **4. Let's do it!**

Get group agreement on confidentiality

After a listening exchange and talk, divide the time remaining, allowing 5 - 10 minutes at the end for feedback and closing

Each person decides what they will talk about, how they will use the time, but you can suggest a question, for example: "If you don't have an idea of what to talk about today, what is a struggle you are having in your activism?"

## **5. Feedback**

- The process - how was it? What did you notice being listened to, doing the listening?
- How did it feel? (Either everyone, or if less time, whoever wants to contribute)

## **6. Any questions?**

## **7. Checkout/Closing mins**

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- Possible questions: What have you enjoyed and/or learned?
- What is one thing you are looking forward to?

For more information, see this handout:

<https://sustainingalllife.org/resources/listening-circles/>

And this website: <https://www.reevaluationcounseling.org/how-to-begin-rc>