

Guidelines to Creating a Reading Circle for

The Magic of Circlework

The Practice Women around the World are Using
to Heal and Empower Themselves

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Number of Participants

A reading circle can include anywhere from two to twenty participants. A good number is 6-12—large enough that things won't fall apart if someone can't come, but intimate enough to give everyone time to speak.

Length of Meeting

90 minutes is generally a good amount of time for a meeting.

Number of Meetings

It's recommended that you meet at least eight times. Some groups meet once a week. Others prefer to meet every other week, or even once a month.

Punctuality

Try to be punctual! Latecomers force others to waste time waiting or to deal with annoying interruptions. Arriving on time is a mark of respect for the circle.

Use a Talking Object

In most groups, some people are more talkative than others. To ensure that everyone gets equal time, try passing a "talking object" around the circle. This could be a stone, a crystal, or some other object. The rule is that only the person holding the talking object speaks; everyone else listens without interrupting or commenting.

In our culture, we aren't used to listening to others without responding. Our impulse is to immediately speak any comments, objections or thoughts that pop into our mind.

In a circle, this leads to a situation where (a) the loudest and most vocal get the most airtime, and (b) our thoughts don't have a chance to undergo the ripening process that occurs when we sit with them for a while. So even though the discipline of not speaking until the talking object comes to you may initially feel difficult, I highly recommend that you adopt it.

Timekeeper

If your group is fairly large or some people tend to talk a lot, it can be helpful to determine how long each person may speak before you begin a round of sharing. Assign a timekeeper who will signal when the speaker has 30 seconds left, and will interrupt them when their time is up.

Facilitation

Many circles do fine without a facilitator, others benefit from having one.

Facilitating a reading

circle does not require a great amount of skill, and in most groups, at least one or two people are capable of fulfilling this role.

Your main job, as the facilitator, is to remind the group of the topic for the meeting, initiate the discussion and uphold whatever structure and ground rules the group has adopted.

Facilitators are servants of the circle. Their job isn't to be especially brilliant or run the show or always be in charge. Rather, their intention should be to help create a space where everyone feels honored, seen, heard and safe.

Everyone Speaks

No matter what structure you use, make sure everyone has a chance to speak. Do the math: if a dozen people have an hour to share, don't talk for ten minutes, because if you do, someone else will be missing out.

Speak about Yourself

When it's your turn, speak, about yourself—your thoughts about the book, your experiences and feelings. Avoid telling long stories that don't relate to

the topic or concern people who aren't present. Don't criticize or judge others—it serves no one and only creates an unpleasant atmosphere.

A reading circle is not a therapy group. While it is entirely appropriate and even valuable to share your feelings, this is not the place to complain about your difficult mother-in-law or your marital issues. Hold the intention of contributing something meaningful to the discussion.

Monks, a statement endowed with five factors is well-spoken, not ill-spoken. Which five? It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of good-will. A statement endowed with these five factors is well-spoken, not ill-spoken.

From the Buddhist *Vaca Sutta*

Don't Give Advice

This is a really important point, and one that many people struggle with. When someone is struggling, *don't* offer advice, unless they've asked for it. Our advice is rarely as helpful as we think, and if someone hasn't requested it, it can feel condescending or even intrusive.

A 90 Minute Time Structure

Different circles may choose to use different structures. Here's an example of what a simple 90 minute structure could look like. This one integrates two practices that I've outlined below: *Minutes of Silence* and *Intention Setting*. Experiment, and find a structure that works well for your circle.

1 min: Welcome

1 min: Silence (see below)

5 min: Introduction

Either the facilitator or a participant prepares introduces the first round of sharing by clarifying the focus of this week's meeting. Normally, this would be one or two chapters from *The Magic of Circlework*. Also, they clarify the focus of this first round of speaking. Besides sharing personal thoughts and responses to the book, groups may choose to work with specific questions or practices (see below for details).

40 min: One or two rounds of sharing

Use the talking object and follow the guidelines for speaking.

1 min: Silence (see below)

35 min: Freeform Sharing and Discussion

Continue to use the talking object along with the rule that only the person holding it may speak. This will ensure people can speak in peace, without fear of being interrupted.

During this period, you may speak whatever is coming up for you in the moment. People speak in no particular order, each simply passing the stone to whoever wants it next. Sometimes only a few might share. Nonetheless everyone should be mindful not to hog the time.

If you do run out of time, and have to end in the middle of an exciting conversation, remember that the process will continue internally. In the end, not everything can be spoken, nor does it need to be.

1 min: Silence

4 min: Intention Setting and Speaking (see below).

3 min: Closing

The facilitator or a participant closes the circle by thanking everyone and reminding them of the date, time, and focus of the next meeting.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

Your bonus materials include an extensive list of questions that relate to each chapter in the book. Some groups find the questions very helpful for stimulating discussion. Others prefer not to use them—it's entirely up to you.

If you want to use the questions as a way to stimulate and focus your sharing, you have several options:

- At the beginning of a meeting, the group can look at the list and select a few to focus on. This is, in my opinion, the best option, provided participants are able to reach agreement quickly and easefully.
- If you have a facilitator who has already read the book, he or she might suggest some questions to consider. This can happen at the beginning of the meeting, to get people going, at the end (in preparation for the next meeting), or via email.

Exercises

The Magic of Circlework includes some exercises, and you'll find many more in the *Circlework Training Manual*. Your group might want to try an exercise at home and then discuss the experience at the next meeting. You can also incorporate exercises directly into your meetings. In this case, make sure you factor in extra time for discussing the experience.

Inviting Circle Magic

Unlike Circlework itself, a reading circle usually doesn't include movement and touch, silence and many other elements that define the taste of Circlework. However, there are a number of simple ways to bring a bit of circle magic into your reading circle. Here are two suggestions:

Minutes of Silence: Try including a few minute-long periods of silence in your circle. Good times are at the very beginning, the end, and after talking periods. During these 60 second periods, your intention is to be present, to relax physically, breathe consciously and grant yourself a moment of inner peace.

Keep it very simple. Don't think of these silent periods as meditation. Just think of them as a time to stop, relax, and be. Sixty seconds doesn't sound like much, but many facilitators have told me what an impact the introduction of these short silent periods has had on the quality and depth of their circles.

Intention Setting: At the end of each meeting, spend a minute contemplating the question: "What intention, if any, would I like to hold from now until we meet again?"

Your intention might be to breathe more fully, or to connect with a certain friend, or to resume your gratitude practice. It might be to say something nice to yourself every morning, or to take a walk in the evening.

First, the whole circle spends about a minute sitting quietly, with closed eyes, looking inward to see whether there's an intention they'd like to hold. (If there isn't, that's absolutely fine, too.)

After a minute of silence the talking stone is passed. Everyone is invited to speak their intention—but absolutely no more. No explanations, no stories, no

background information, just that one sentence that communicates their intention.

These intentions are like sweet little gifts that we take with us when we leave the circle and go home. They can help us nourish and love ourselves well in days to come. And since they emerged from the circle, they can also help us maintain a sense of connection, even when we aren't physically together.

If you set intentions at the end of one meeting, then at the beginning of the next be sure to include time during the first round of sharing for people to comment on their experience, if they want to.

Please don't feel bad if you went home and promptly forgot about your intention. We're forgetful creatures, so this is bound to happen. Don't give up, just try again. It's worth it—the rewards for holding a clear, healing intention are great.

Need Help?

At www.magicofcirclework.com, you'll find a Question & Answer page. If you have a question, please email me and I'll do my best to respond.

More Ways to Get Involved

- ⊙ Visit my website at www.jalajabonheim.com to learn about other books, upcoming events, retreats and trainings, and much more.
- ⊙ Go to www.circleswork.org to learn about the Institute for Circlework, a tiny organization that is doing amazing work around the world. If you want to take the Circlework Training but need financial assistance, they're the ones to ask.
- ⊙ Join my Facebook community at <https://www.facebook.com/sacredego>
- ⊙ Meet me on Instagram
- ⊙ Check out my Youtube channel at
- ⊙ I love hearing from you! Let me know what your experience was, what you learned and what advice you'd give other people interested in starting a reading circle.

Please show your support!

- ⊙ Please recommend *The Magic of Circlework* to your friends.

- ⦿ Write a review on Amazon.
- ⦿ Write a review on Goodreads.
- ⦿ Make a secure online donation to the Institute for Circlework (www.instituteforcirclework.org). Besides publishing the Circlework Training Manual, the Institute for Circlework organizes circles for Jewish and Palestinian women in the Middle East. Most importantly, it provides scholarships that have allowed hundreds of women from the US and around the world to attend the Circlework Training.

Thank you, and blessings on your continued journey
into the magic of Circlework!

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