

7 Essential Elements of a Circle

1. **The Circle Keeper** – the facilitator does not control the group or move the participants towards a particular outcome or opinion, but rather monitors the tone to ensure that the circle remains respectful and inclusive. The Circle Keeper is also a participant and must share their authentic self to build community. Any question that the Circle Keepers asks of the group, they must also answer themselves.

2. **Talking piece** – an object of significance to the group, that embodies a lesson or value. It is passed around the circle in one direction giving each person a chance to speak.

3. **Ceremony/Ritual** – circle time is different from other times of day, different from other kinds of discussion. This is marked by having a clear opening and closing ritual.

- **Opening Ritual:** A ceremonial act that indicates the beginning of the circle and helps to transform the circle space into a special and intentional process. Possible opening rituals include: taking a moment of silence, reading a poem or quote, playing music, or ringing a bell/chime.
- **Closing Ceremony:** The Circle Keeper briefly reflects on what was said and makes meaningful connections, thanks participants for sharing, and closes with a ritual similar to what they used to open the circle. This establishes a distinct end to the process, which helps participants transition out of the circle and back into everyday life.

4. **Shared Values** – participants develop their own shared values for how they will conduct themselves in circle so that it is a safer space for everyone to share. These are reached through consensus. Providing the opportunity for shared values is part of creating a safe space and allows participants to take ownership of the circle.

5. **Center Piece** – an artifact placed in the circle's center that creates a shared center and grounds the circle. It reminds participants that we are all connected and should have some significance to the group. The Center Piece also acts as a focal point and gives participants a place to look when discussing difficult issues. Possible circle centerpieces can include a plant, a candle, small rug, statue, culturally relevant symbols, etc.

6. **Guidelines** – protocol that helps create a shared sense of responsibility for the outcome of the circle. Guidelines are an essential element in maintaining a peaceful tone. While the following are essential to every circle, circle participants might add to these depending on the environment and needs of the group.

- Participation and sharing is by choice. Everyone has the opportunity to share and they also have the right to pass and to listen respectfully.
- Speak only when you have the talking piece. Speak from the heart and listen with respect.
- Pass the talking piece around the circle, not across.

7. **Guiding Questions** – prompts designed to get beyond surface discussion by encouraging sharing from each person's unique perspectives.