

PEACE POWER TOOLS

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Peacemaking/Restorative Circles

Summary:

Peacemaking and Restorative Circles are adaptations of indigenous practices from around the world that emphasize healing and learning through a collective group process (as opposed to punishment), and are one emerging form of “conferencing” and restorative justice practices. They are an organic response to Native understandings of interrelatedness, and stress that individuals must live in “right relationship” with the larger community as well as the natural world. Within the original traditions, such processes are recognized as communal and spiritual, and require a very challenging level of shared power. Circles are increasingly being used in non-Native, secular settings as a way of creating communal spaces for problem solving. In circles, involved parties come together in a non-confrontational peacemaking process to talk through the problem and develop a solution. Although the process may include restitution, it is primarily designed to heal relationships among people and within the community rather than to impose punishment. Circle processes may be completed in one session, but also may extend over days, weeks, or even months until genuine healing is achieved. In the event of violent or abusive offenses, the safety of the victim must be considered throughout the healing process; bringing victims and offenders together immediately is generally contraindicated.

Resources Needed:

- The main resources required for this practice are the people involved in the incident, including victims, the offender, their families or other supporters, community members impacted by the incident, professionals working with those involved, and the “Circle Keeper” who is responsible for maintaining the process of the Peacemaking Circle.
- A Talking Piece (A “talking piece” is an object that is passed, usually clockwise, to indicate whose turn it is to speak; only the person holding the object speaks while others in the group give the speaker their full attention.)

Implementation Steps:

(Persons interested in developing circle programs are strongly advised to attend circle training, and to become very familiar with some of the materials cited below. The books by Pranis are particularly useful.)

- The Circle Keeper brings those involved or affected together into a single circle, usually after meeting with them individually to obtain agreement and commitment to participation in the circle process (which may in some cases be offered as an alternative to legal or disciplinary procedures).
- In traditional settings, an opening prayer is offered. In secular settings, an alternate opening may be used to set a tone of welcome, warmth and partnership. A commitment to participating with an open heart and mind is requested of all.
- The Circle Keeper then clarifies the issue to be discussed, as well as how the process will work: the Talking Piece will be passed clockwise around the circle; only the person holding the talking piece may speak, and others should simply listen.
- The circle then usually begins by asking the affected parties to describe their understanding of what transpired and their feelings about it.
- When it their turn, the offender(s) are given the opportunity to explain their behavior in full. Denial and excuses can be directly confronted, and clarifications offered by supporters, victims and others affected, and other community members present when the Talking Piece comes to them. The goal of this part of the process is to clarify the situation and get at the root of the problem.
- The Circle Keeper provides leadership and guidance to circle participants (in Native cultures often by drawing on traditional values and cultural stories). In secular settings,

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the Circle Keeper's role is the same, but the values and stories may differ according to the group's culture. As the Talking Piece travels around the circle multiple times, discussion continues on the nature of the problem and what might be done to heal the damage that has been done among individuals and the community, with the goal of reaching an agreement among all present.

- Circle participants develop a holistic action plan, often including restitution or reparations to repair the damaged relationships. To ensure on-going support and accountability, follow-up circles are often planned before the end of the circle.
- Those participating generally close with some form of ritual (handshakes, thank you's), and then share refreshments together.

Variations:

- Support Circles focus on assisting a person through a major life change.
- Circles of Understanding seek to develop a deeper understanding of a conflict, event or behavior.
- Healing Circles offer support to persons experiencing trauma, loss and pain.
- Reintegration Circles are used to assist individuals in reconnecting to their community. These circles are often used with persons returning from correctional or other institutional settings.
- Sentencing Circles involve both the community and the criminal justice system. They represent a collaborative process in which everyone impacted by a crime comes together to decide a sentence for the person who offended. They may also establish community actions to support those involved in the offense and prevent further harms.

Rationale and Evidence Base:

Peace-making and Restorative circles are powerful restorative justice processes designed to help the victim of a crime and the offender along their healing journey. Offenders must commit themselves to a healing process that includes restitution and reconciliation with the victim, their family and the larger community. Victims' needs and desires are prioritized throughout the process, and they are treated with love, support and therapeutic care in dealing with the trauma of the offense against them. Victims consistently report feelings of satisfaction, increased safety, and respect as a result of the circle process. Recidivism following circle processes appears to be low. In some communities using this process, offenders have been found to come forward on their own to disclose their abuse and seek circle healing.

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