

Participation Through Support Circles

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Most people who work in a professional capacity vis á vis people who have been labeled disabled have been shaped and trained into viewing disability as the focus of their efforts. Regardless of what one's role is, disability is the reason for that role to exist. If one does therapy it is because a circumstance limits the client's physical or mental functioning. If one finds residential placements it is because the client has a limitation leading to a need for unusual support in typical daily activities. Even if one is an advocate it is because the presence of disability in a person's mind and/or body often puts that person at risk of negative social circumstances.

Most family members and friends of people who acquire disability labels are shaped by our surrounding culture to adopt similar approaches.

This simple fact leads into the greatest dilemma facing people everywhere who are, or who work with, or who care about people labeled disabled. That dilemma is captured by the slogans adopted world wide by people who live with these labels: "Label jars not people." and, "Call us People First."

Even those who try consistently and faithfully to relate to people as people find that dis-

ability inescapably remains at the core of most interactions. The very nature of our culturally given perception of disability and our response to it seems to obscure our perception of the people behind the labels. What can a concerned person do?

You may find that by becoming a circle builder you may find an opportunity to actually make a difference in the lives of some people.

Support circles break through the disability focus in several ways. Most significantly, circles are powerful because they exist to honour, support and make available a person's capacities and interests, not his or her deficits. Support circles are formed to be vehicles for people to discover and to talk about ways in which a person could be contributing to the wider community through, often overlooked, interests and talents. They struggle to communicate to a wider world what capacity the focus person has to enrich others. They discover or create places, supports and contacts that will make this person's participation grow and develop.

Secondly, support circles are powerful because their focus is on relationships and not individuals. Circles function primarily by bringing the focus person into a richer, more diverse network of listening people. The person's nature

and ability is unfolded by the interactions fostered by the network. Disability loses its power to focus people's time and energy. Disability is disempowered.

A support circle belongs to the world of participation. Just the initial establishment of a circle is already a step forward to having someone participate in the community. The focus is on one person yet all the members of the circle typically will experience their participation in the circle as a vehicle for examining and improving their own contributions to society.

Although a support circle is not always necessary it has a unique power for rapidly changing the life experience of an individual who is facing great barriers to participation. A circle is a creation in the area of relationship, meaning and interaction. People experience being part of a circle as 'natural' and they 'know' how to offer both formal and informal support to each other.

Circles also empower circle members and builders because they are unpredictable. Energized by multiple, complex relationships they often become magnets of synergy, taking advantage of 'lucky accidents' - opportunities that cannot be predicted or bureaucratically managed into existence. This living essence of

circles drives out the deadening spirit of disability thinking.

The lives of people who have been 'helped' are usually scarred by disrespect, physical and emotional abuse, and broken relationships. Often these wounds are the result of well-intentioned interventions. At the beginning and throughout it is important to recognize that support circles have power - both to support or to hinder. The person who is interested in starting circles can still be drawn into disability as a focus. A personal discipline will help restrain them from doing this harm in a vulnerable person's life. This practice is outlined below.

Build a safe course by following these steps.

- Give up disability, its language and its forms. People are opportunities and people have opportunities to enrich community. Learn to see these.
- Practice inclusion to learn Inclusion.
- Dream. Invite people to listen to your dreams.
- Listen to other people's dreams.
- Say 'Yes'.
- Listen.
- Give up doing what doesn't work.
- Invite diversity into your own life.
- Recruit a coach. Be a coach. Together support each other to learn circle building more deeply.

In the gathering of the circle the intention is established to listen to a person's dream and

to create the resources and openings required to bring this person's dream into the community. The focus remains on the person who is vulnerable to being isolated and to being a non-participant.

The following are the steps required to create a support circle:

1. Figure out who the circle is for.
2. Invite.
3. Ensure that dreaming, story telling and listening happen at every circle meeting.
4. Keep the circle meeting.
5. Make sure that the focus person says 'Yes' to something that the circle offers.

First of all it can often be a little mind-bending figuring out who the circle is for. In the situation where the focus person is an adult who speaks for themselves the scenario is fairly straight forward. Such situations are rare. More typically one person is the named focus but the real focus is on a parent or an advocate who typically speaks for this person.

There is nothing wrong with a parent or an advocate being the focus. In fact when the circle involves children it is essential that the circle be formed around the parents). The issue is simply that when the focus is confused the process gets unclear and the action stalls. Therefore it is essential that this issue be sorted out, likely on many different occasions.

Occasionally the focus of the circle will shift

for a short period of time. This is a good thing unless for some reason it is difficult to return the focus to the person the circle started for. In such a situation consider starting two circles that are interconnected by having some joint membership. This is a useful strategy in situations like a teacher with a vulnerable child in a regular classroom or a parent with a teenager who is vulnerable to being labeled. For example the teacher could have a circle of adults including the parents of the child and some of the child's classmates and the child could have a circle of children from the class and from the neighborhood.

Inviting is a critical stage often full of struggle. People typically say that they do not know anyone to invite. This is absolutely not true yet in a certain sense the experience is quite real. After all it is to be expected that the person's life is full of paid people and others focused on therapy and advocacy plus lots of other people who have been carefully trained by society to see this individual as limited and in need of fixing. The dynamics of the disability focus make it almost a certainty that all these people have been interacting in ways that push each other away. It doesn't occur to the individual in question that some of these very same people are able to and in fact would love to have an opportunity to foster participation.

Keeping the dreaming, story telling and listening alive is not difficult. Yet someone must always watch that dreams don't drop off

the agenda. We have all been carefully trained to become busy planners and behavior police. Listen for dreaming, stories and listening and keep the circle going.

The job of keeping the circle meeting arises because circles typically experience either great success or unexpected overwhelming barriers right at the beginning. In either situation the disability focus teaches us to give up because if we have succeeded then the situation must have been fixed and if we have failed it must be unfixable. It usually takes time for people to catch the rhythm of dreaming, story telling and listening. In fact the person is included as soon as the circle begins to meet since it is the journey of interactions and meanings and the listening to dreams that counts much more than the outward successes. In time, as the circle experiences the invention of its own story and as 'successes' emerge from unexpected directions, the issue of meeting will be less critical.

The point is that the support circle is the vehicle of listening to dream. The listening must

continue until there are enough other possibilities of listening in the individual's relationship network. Even then, life is very fragile, and the circle may need to be called together if the ghost of 'disability' raises its head again.

Perhaps the biggest surprise will be in how much work there is in getting someone to say 'Yes'. In many subtle and devious ways people have learned to say 'No'. When a circle listens to dreaming the listeners will begin to offer all sorts of opportunities and resources to the focus person. They do this because they are human and not because anyone asks them to. People will make suggestions of other people that might like to join the circle; they will offer to find jobs; they will offer to come and help out; they will offer to go to meetings or write letters; they will offer to make cookies; etc., etc., etc. And the focus person will say 'No' to it all. They will say 'No' because it is the wrong people; They will say 'No' because it's the wrong job; they will say 'No' because they can do it better themselves; they will say 'No' because they don't like cookies; etc., etc., etc.

Saying 'No' is a behavior encouraged by disability focus. People don't realize that 'No' limits possibility and that giftedness can only grow out of 'Yes'. In the world of participation the decision to say 'No' must be taken only after careful reflection and because there is a boundary to possibility that you want to make. It is the facilitator's job to get people to say 'Yes'.

In summary, circle building is a five step process liberating a person's participation in community. Like all simple things in life, there is an underlined integrity which must be honoured if support circles are to be effective. This integrity requires a commitment to give up disability and its focus on fixing people.

Building relationships, building participation and building community take time and commitment. They are a slow process that often takes years to reach full fruition. Yet, paradoxically, participation and relationship are the road to truly supporting vulnerable people. Nothing else works.

Three key ideas I want to remember from Judith's article

To learn more about Judith's circle of support & her approach to planning with people, read her book, *What's worth doing?* Inclusion Press.