

Circles of Support: How to... 2020

Preface 2020

The 'instructional notes' which follow were written in 2000, after many years of working with Circles of Support in just about any context you can imagine. We had not anticipated a pandemic. We had not anticipated a physical distancing lock-down and forced separation and isolation caused by the coronavirus pandemic. We had not anticipated that physical distancing would mean that folks that needed supports could be even more dramatically isolated. The dangers of "congregate services" are painfully obvious in facilities where over-worked staff attempt to provide support and safety to over-crowded residents.

We do not have a magic bullet, but even under these dire circumstances, we are not helpless. We can 'organize' virtual connections and build, refresh and renew networks of friends and colleagues thus diminishing isolation - including our own. Even when people are unable to participate electronically, just knowing they are not alone is a huge support. And knowing that we are not alone in our fear and grief is vital.

Right now we can make/take the time to create and refresh our networks – our circles of friends and support. It is good for our souls and for people we love. What follows are the instructions written at a time when we could gather together physically. But the principles are the same.

It begins by focusing on someone we know and care about. And then we reflect on who shares our deep commitment to that person. And we begin connecting, talking, zooming – whatever works – to create options to reduce their and our 'isolation', to create more safety for the individual we love. Sometimes we will be able to create electronic networks with visits with loved ones (using media like Zoom, Skype and beyond). For others, an old-fashioned phone tree will nurture connections and comfort. In other circumstances, perhaps our focus is to be supporters and cheerleaders for the frontline workers to sustain them through this crisis.

We do not have an answer except that being alone – in isolation - is devastating. We must reach out and connect.

There are hopeful opportunities if we reach out and build and renew our support networks. First, our own isolation is diminished. People in the network remember how to support each other – and then they do.

Additionally, when this crisis abates (and it will), we will already be mobilized to explore and implement new policies. Homelessness and hunger will be no more. We will have genuine respectful options for care and support – living in our homes and participating in our communities. Some will say it 'costs too much', but clearly we have the resources; it is a matter of will. There must never be a return to the 'old normal'. We can and must build a better future for all of us who are aging – which means ALL of us.

We could have rewritten the instructions that follow, but the principles are simple, and there is a kind of irony in the fact that we are 'returning to basics' to face the crisis of our generation.

CIRCLE OF FRIENDS/SUPPORT

Purpose:

To notice who are the important people in our lives - and move to strengthen our circles of friends and supports.

Time:

15-60 minutes
depending on the
depth of exploration

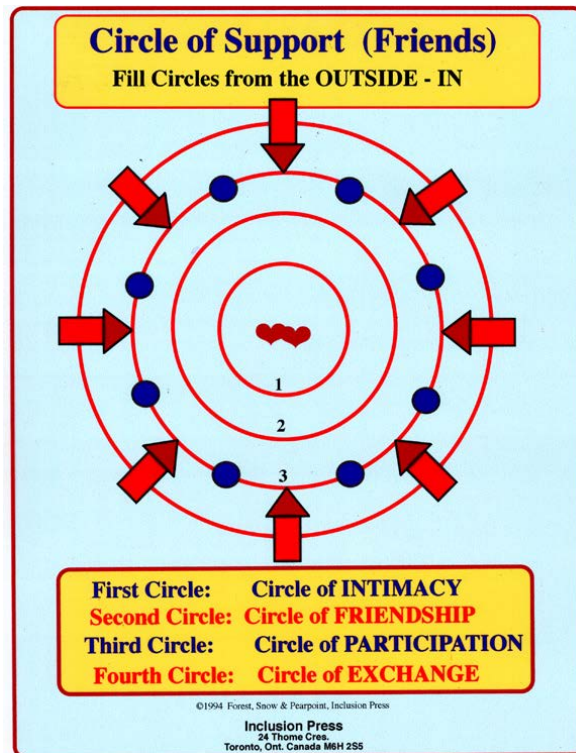
Materials:

Blank sheets of paper
for everyone present,
pens.



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Judith Snow, Marsha Forest, Rose Galati



How To Use the Circles Exercise

1. Present the following introduction:

What is a Circle?

Circles do not belong to any one author. They are an ancient concept of building community and relationships in a modern context.

Sometimes a Circle is called a Circle of Friends, at other times it is referred to as a Circle of Support. A Circle is a group of people who gather around a person who has become excluded or isolated. The focus of the group is to find and create ways for the vulnerable person to participate in her/his community.

This participation will be structured around the gifts and talents that this person wants to contribute to community.

The Circle discovers these gifts by listening to the person's dream and personal story.

Historically, Circles have often been built around people who have been labeled disabled and who have become trapped in the human service system or other forms of isolation. However, Circles are change tools and can apply to anyone of any age who is lonely, vulnerable, isolated, or in crisis, (older people, people in prison, people struggling with illness, etc.) Circles usually begin with the needs of one individual, but over time, they reduce dependency and foster reciprocal respectful relationships for all.

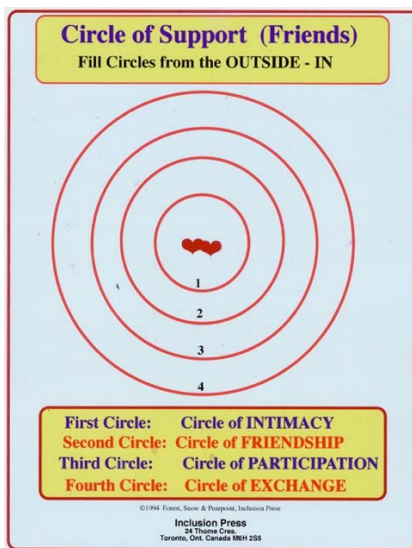
A Circle is not a program. It is not a one shot exercise. It is not a quick fix. It is a way of being with a person. It is a form of being members of each other.

This exercise is a social scan. It will give a quick picture of who is in your life and the role they play.

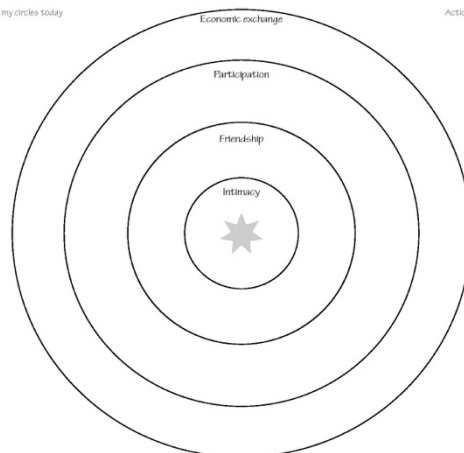
It is useful to know who you can count on to become involved in certain activities in your life, or to notice when Circles need to be filled.

This exercise can be a preventive health check for students, teachers or anyone.

The hidden key question is: "Who loves this person?"



What I notice by filling in my circles today



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Inclusion Press ©2015

2. Have the group draw four concentric circles and write your name in the middle of the diagram.

3. Explain the 'definitions' of the four circles and demonstrate with examples – preferably from your own life.

4. Lead the group to fill in the names of people as they fit in each of the four circles. Soft gentle music provides a nice background for this exercise.

Take time. Allow a minute or more for each circle. When the rustling starts, move quietly to the next circle.



FIRST Circle:

Circle of Intimacy

Think about the people most intimate in your life - those you cannot imagine living without

SECOND Circle:

Circle of Friendship

Think about good friends - those who almost made the first circle.

THIRD CIRCLE:

Circle of

Participation

Recall people, organizations, and networks you are involved with (work colleagues, the choir, places of worship, the square dance club, your softball team, etc. People or groups where you participate and encounter other people.

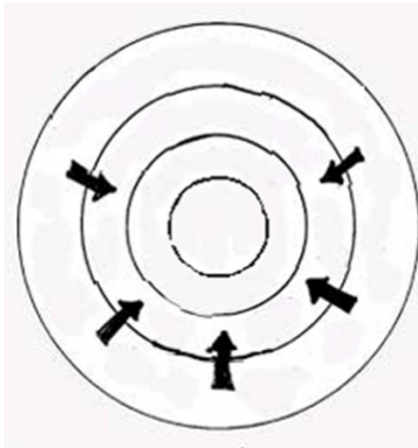
FOURTH CIRCLE:

Circle of Exchange



List people you pay to provide services in your life (medical professionals, tax accountants, mechanics, hairdressers, barbers, teachers, etc.)

Note: People can be in more than one circle. For example, your doctor or teacher could also be a close friend; a deceased parent, friend or even a pet, might be an intimate personal supporter.



5. Discussing the completed circles and brainstorm on ways to build relationships. It is important to note that circles are most easily filled from the outside in.

If you are planning to try this exercise, please read the article "Using Circles in High School" for an example of using the technique strategically.

Summary:

Circle of Friends is not a trick or a gimmick; it is a powerful tool. Like a chisel, it can be used to pry open one's heart, soul, and thoughts; or to create a work of art.

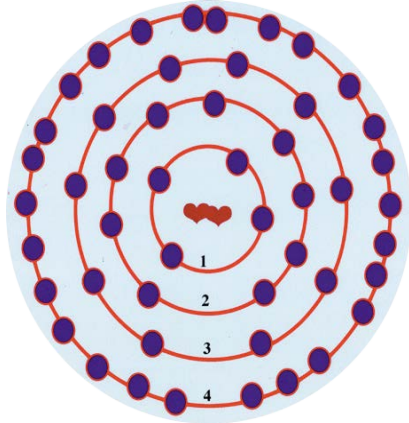
Such art does not happen overnight; neither does building circles or communities. Circles and community building are a commitment. It is as important as math, physics, or history. It is part of a curriculum of caring.

It is holistic, powerful and not something you do once, then walk away. It is an on-going strategy for growth, change and development.

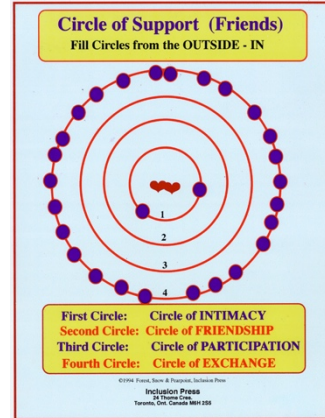
Creating friendship and support by appointment does not work. Instead people "do things together". Find and invent small occasions where people encounter each other- a pizza party, a garden club, sports, movies, walks.. DO THINGS! In this way circles can be filled from the outside in! (People who do things may just become friends.)

All of us have the capacity to gently reach out to another person and assist them to build Circles of Friends. People with healthy circles don't need to join a "gang" in order to have a better or safer life. Their life is already filled with people.

Each of us has choices - about whether we will pass each other without stopping, listening, or really seeing. Or we could help to build or to be part of someone's circle of friends.



Full Circles are the ideal for a full engaged healthy life.



Empty Circles are dangerous and lonely. FILL YOUR CIRCLES!

The 'ideal' is 'full circles' so that you always are connected to a network who will celebrate with you, and support you as you go through life. Filling your circles is very intentional work. Maintaining them equally takes work – to stay in touch and connected to people who matter to you – and to whom you matter.

