

BCACC Association of Clinical Counsellors Insights

The Clinical Counsellors' Magazine & News

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Enhancing Mental Health All Across Our Province

Talking Circles: Connections to nurture our practice

By David Osborn, M.Ad.Ed., RCC, Contributing Writer

The magic of a summer camp fire—mesmerizing flames dancing and curling, friends circling the fire, the stories told, the sounds heard, and the connections made. The delight of a special dinner—good food, dear friends, and intimate conversation gathered around a warm table. Circles happen in many places and in many ways; some are primal and informal, some formal, some familiar, and some unfamiliar. So, it seems fitting that one of the most powerful tools I use consistently within my practice today is the “talking circle.”

A talking circle is a group of individuals working together in an intentional way to address a concern or task brought to the circle. In my practice I have used a talking circle within all aspects of my counselling and community work: visioning, conflict resolution, leadership groups, parents, students, and extensively for training others in restorative justice.

Within the talking circle, the familiar and the unfamiliar sit comfortably together. Your first talking circle will have much that feels unfamiliar; it will also have much that feels familiar—your connections with others. Your hundredth talking circle will have much that feels familiar; it will also have much that feels unfamiliar—the uniqueness of each person’s story. Margaret Wheatley suggests that a circle is a shape that: cools; forms equality; pacifies; and is the most universal and enduring mode of human meetings. Circles by their very structure create a softer and more cooperative response from their participants.

We are indebted to aboriginal societies for their historical use and their preservation of talking circles. The use of talking circles has been shared with our western culture from the Aboriginal peoples of North America and in the evolution of Restorative Justice from the Maori people of New Zealand. During the last few decades, circles were used more in homogeneous settings such as personal growth workshops, men and women’s groups, and religious communities. Recently, their use has emerged in a variety of mainstream community settings and applications.

A “talking circle” is a powerful and valuable tool and when well facilitated it is a place for:

- Telling our stories and finding our voice;
- Bringing clarity to our concerns;
- Equalizing power or status differences of the individuals participating in the circle;
- Resolving conflict;
- Reflecting on a completed project; and
- Celebrating the shared life of the individuals present.

The beginning of a talking circle requires an opening that sets apart what happens in the circle from what happens before and after the circle. This opening can take the form of a ritual, a prayer, or an invitation that establishes the space as a unique and even sacred opportunity. The closing

of a circle is equally as important as its opening and also requires the use of a closing statement, a prayer, or summary that allows participants to step out of its space.

In a talking circle, a topic, problem, behaviour, or concern (not a person), is placed at the center of the circle as the object of reflection. To accomplish and support this task a talking circle may take different forms: the use of a talking piece; the use of a conversational mode (a free flow conversation); or the use of silence.

The use of a “talking” piece is a dominant and crucial aspect in creating the structure and power of the talking circle. The person with the talking piece may speak and others are committed to listening. Christine Baldwin (1994) suggests participants develop three



practices in the talking circle: speaking with intention; listening

with attention from the heart; and self-monitoring our contributions. For on-going groups she also encourages the practice of rotating leadership and sharing responsibility.

It is important that each circle has a facilitator or keeper. A circle is not a leaderless group that is wondering aimlessly. The First Nations tradition places strong responsibility on the elder, the gatekeeper of the circle, and refers to the gatekeeper as the servant of the circle process. Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge (2000) suggest that the gatekeeper’s qualities should include “community respect, knowledge of the community, a reputation for fairness and integrity, understanding of the practices and principles of peacekeeping (talking) circles, skill in facilitating difficult conversations, empathy and respect for others, and humility”. The facilitator is responsible for upholding the circle’s intention in

a respectful and mutually beneficial way. To be a "reflective leader." Research on reflection indicates that reflective leaders tend to be collaborative. It also suggests that collaborative individuals are able to be both assertive and cooperative, qualities that build healthy relationships and help to establish trust.

Leadership within a circle also manifests itself in the self-discipline of the participants, by their commitment to hold themselves accountable to the values and principles of the circle. As the participants exercise this personal accountability, the leadership in a circle then becomes a shared experience.

Pranis, et al. suggest we recognize four stages in the preparation and use of the circle process as follows:

1. Acceptance of the circle (defining the process, parties agreeing to meet);
2. Preparation (information sharing, identifying the participants, building familiarity with people and process, determining timelines);
3. Gathering (sharing concerns and aspirations, building relationships, telling the stories, finding our voice, finding common ground, exploring options, building consensus, clarifying objectives); and
4. Follow-up (accountability of

participants, assessing progress, making adjustments, and celebrating successes).

Let me share with you an example from my consultation work to demonstrate how the practical application of these four stages might look. I am asked to consult with a group and help them get clarity and direction for their organization. I suggest the use of the talking circle format for our initial meeting together and discuss the benefits that a talking circle could bring to their group. They agree: the acceptance. I proceed to gather information and I make contact with each person who will be attending the circle: the preparation. My intention here is to begin the process of introducing the participant to the opportunity they are approaching, gathering a sense of their concerns and dreams for their organization, and answering any confusion or concerns they may have with the process. From these conversations I begin to "muse" and to compile the questions and activities best suited to achieve the goals for our approaching talking circle. This "musing" phase is followed by bringing the group together and leading them in a talking circle: the gathering. The final stage, the

follow-up, varies depending on the needs and goals of the group. To help the group maximize their experience of the talking circle it can be useful for the facilitator to provide opportunities for discussion and reflection similar to those in the preparation phase.

Often an individual's initial experience in a talking circle is one of surprise. In a talking circle one has to shift to a slower pace as the format requires a slowing down of one's thought processes.

This "slowing down" within a talking circle provides participants a number of outcomes:

- Direct and equal opportunity to participate;
- Improvements in the quality of their listening;
- The opportunity to participate voluntarily;
- The ability act on personal values and to respond with respect; and
- The creation of their own solutions.

These outcomes reflect the four criteria of respect, personal regard, competence, and personal integrity that researchers, Bryk and Schneider (2002), identify as necessary for an environment of trust to develop and flourish. They have demonstrated that "relational trust" is the single most important quality for making changes within institutions and improving the potential for change within individuals. Even though it may seem self-evident to people who work intimately with other people; this research is important as it reinforces the importance of relational and experiential based learning and therapeutic environments.

It is amazing how isolated we counsellors can find ourselves considering that we are always working with and caring for others. Our practice is not just a series of techniques and interventions that we use in isolation with clients to produce results. It is our use of these skills within the relationships we create and in the larger social context of our communities that establishes both the meaning and the outcomes of our work. Finding pathways out of this experience of isolation will help nurture our practice as well as our lives on the whole. The use of a well developed "talking circle" is an excellent path.

I suggest that nurturing our practice calls for more than working by ourselves in isolation. It involves two key qualities already present in our work with others, relational trust and reflective opportunities. It is within the context of a relationship that we are involved in listening to and working with others' vulnerable stories. Our stories require the same opportunities as those of our clients: Connection with others. Within the opportunity of an on-going talking circle with a trusted group of colleagues we can demonstrate and practice our willingness to be connected with others and with ourselves and for our trust with others to be strengthened. Trust helps create the "space" for us to make productive use of reflection. Our stories, once told, need time for viewing: Time for us to make meaning and to direct our lives.

Energy begets energy. Trusting relationships bring an opening for reflection. Shared reflections strengthen our connections.

Talking Circles...

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Together, relational trust and reflective opportunities strengthen us as individuals, increase our ability to be with others, open us to the larger purposes of our lives, and cultivate an environment wherein our practice may flourish. 🌳

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Training in restorative justice: Enhancing collaboration with public school educators. [Electronic version]
<http://www.restorativejustice.org/resources/docs/osborn/view?searchterm=osborn> Or visit his web site:
<http://members.shaw.ca/starrgazer/>

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