

How-to page for Empathy Circles

Empathy Circles are a great way to support fresh clear thinking, to build connection and empathy, and to develop our listening skills. Here's the basic format. You can choose a starter topic from the list at the end of this document, or come up with one of your own.

In a Circle of 3 to 5 Participants

1. The first person to be the speaker, asks someone else in the circle to be their designated listener.
2. If that person agrees, the speaker begins speaking about the topic of the circle (or whatever else may be up for them).



3. The listener reflects back periodically what they are hearing; the intention here is to help the speaker feel heard.
4. At the end of the first turn, the listener becomes the next speaker. They ask someone else to be their designated listener, and the process is repeated.

We keep going around the circle like this. Sometimes it helps to time the turns: each Speaker + Listener pair can continue, either until the Speaker feels fully heard, or until 5 minutes are up, whichever comes first.

Tips for the person in the role of "Speaker"

1. Pause every so often, so your listener has a chance to reflect what they are hearing. Your listener may also ask you to pause at some point, so they can reflect back what you've said so far.

2. After your listener has offered you a reflection, there might be something you want to clarify. Or, even if they got it exactly right, there may be something you want to add, to what you had said earlier.
3. When you feel complete, you can say something like, “I feel fully heard” to indicate that you’re finished. Now your Listener has a turn to become the next Speaker.

Tips for the person in the role of "Designated Listener"

1. Listen with interest to the person who is speaking. You can ask them to pause if you need to, so you can reflect back what you’ve heard before taking in more.
2. Let your speaker know what you’ve heard. The intention is to help them feel heard. Do this by reflecting back the gist of what they have said.
3. This is not a test. You are not being judged. You and the speaker are working together, to help them feel “gotten”.
4. Your role is to stay present, and refrain from judging, diagnosing or giving advice. Listen appreciatively, and then offer back your understanding of what they’ve said so far.

Tips for the other participants in the Empathy Circle

Your role is to listen and be present. You’ll soon have a turn to be a speaker or a designated listener. Meanwhile, your attention is a positive contribution to the process!

Potential Topics for Starter Circles

Something good that happened to you this week • A meaningful event in your life • Something you want to celebrate • A challenge you are currently facing • What is alive for you right now • An insight you want to share • A project you’re working on • & more!