

Creating and Hosting an Empathy Circle

Tips for creating an Empathy Circle

- *Start with an Empathy Buddy.* Invite someone to practice empathic listening with you, one-on-one. Then you can plan your first Empathy Circle together.
- *Set up a time and a space.* The ideal size for an empathy circle is between 3 and 5 people. This means you can start out hosting an empathy circle with friends, at home around your kitchen table. (Later on, you may want to offer empathy circles in workplace, school, or community settings.)

Depending on the size of your circle, you may want to plan between 45 minutes to two hours for holding your Empathy Circle. Make sure to leave some time toward the end, to get feedback from participants and also to plan any next steps.

- *Get the word out and invite others.* Those of you who are initiating the circle, are the "vision holders". Be prepared to let others know about the inspiration for your invitation, and what the potential benefits are. You can find more about this, on the "Why Empathy Circles?" page.

When you are starting out, you can invite people to a single session, to see if they enjoy the process. Once they have had a taste of it, they can figure out if they want to do more.

- *Bring along a simple set of instructions.* See the two-page ["how-to"](#) offered here. You can print one of these and make copies, or create your own.

Tips for hosting an Empathy Circle.

- *Welcome people.* Thank them for being there, and help them feel comfortable by orienting them to your space (bathrooms, water, snacks, etc.)
- *Go over the process.* If you are using a handout, review it with folks.
- *Ask for help.* See if anyone might be willing to be the time-keeper for timing the turns during the empathy circle. For example, the timekeeper could let each Speaker-Listener pair know when there's a minute left, before the end of their turn.

You can also ask the time-keeper to let you know when you are approaching the time to shift into feedback and next steps. For example, if you are planning to leave 10 minutes at the end for feedback and next steps, you can ask the time-keeper to let you know 15 minutes before the end of the meeting.

- *Intention-setting.* This part is optional, yet it can be a very helpful ritual. Start by sharing your intentions for offering the circle, then invite each person to share their intentions for being there. Ask the group if everyone is in agreement, with each person's intentions.

Then light a candle, and keep it lit for the duration of the empathy circle.

- *Start the circle.* If you are the only one with experience in reflective listening, invite someone else to start and choose you as the listener, so you can model reflective listening. Then when the first Speaker is finished, you become the Speaker, and choose someone else to be your listener.

It's ideal to host the circle with an “empathy buddy” – someone with whom you have already practiced empathic listening. Then one of you can choose to be the first Speaker, and the other one of you can be the first Listener.

This gives both of you the opportunity to model something for the group. The one who starts out as the Speaker, will model "pausing" every once in a while, so that the Listener can reflect. Meanwhile, the one who is being the Listener, models how to offer reflections. (They can also model how to ask for a pause as needed!)

Once the first Speaker is complete, the person who was Listening becomes the new Speaker, and asks someone else in the Circle to be their Listener. (Please note: you are NOT both just "switching roles" here, as you want to start including others in the Circle.)

- When the time approaches for the closing part of the circle (feedback and next steps), you can let the circle know that this will be the last Speaking-Listening turn.
- Shift into the closing part of your gathering, by inviting participants to share their feedback. What did they most enjoy about the experience? What changes would make it work better for them?
- Before you close, you can also ask if participants would like to meet again.