

How to Lead Listening Circles

1. THEORY OF LISTENING CIRCLES

What is a Listening Circle?

- Listening Circles enable all participants to share their thoughts and feelings in a confidential, supportive group
- Basic format is a check-in, some theory about listening, shared listening time either in 2s/3s or as a whole group or both, some feedback and finishing with a checkout
- Talk about listening circles you have been part of. Some are for particular constituencies. e.g. activists, men, parents

Why are they needed?

- We have chosen to face the climate emergency and to step outside our comfort zone and take action about it, we are also having to handle our feelings and those of others around the issues of leaders' inaction
- This can bring up strong, often painful emotions—hard things in the present often triggering earlier traumas and feelings can be confusing
- Releasing painful emotions helps us to think better and be more effective. E.g. being scared stiff or full of anger, can't think straight
- To be more connected to others

Why Listening?

- Being listened to by someone with a friendly, warm, and non-judgmental attitude helps people review their thinking, express how they're feeling, and unload feelings that get in the way of thinking and action
- It's important to allow space for the talker and not interrupt the flow. Talking, tears, laughing, trembling, indignation, yawning, are all ways of getting rid of some of the weight and intensity of what we're feeling - there's something very healing about it
- This sort of listening tends not to happen in everyday conversations, can feel awkward or embarrassing
- When a clear space is organised for each person to speak everyone can relax a bit. It's good to share this valuable resource fairly

Basic understandings

- Ask for agreement to listen without interruption, without judgment, with an expression of caring and interest. Facilitator can offer more intervention (affirmation, encouragement) and tell them to indicate to you if they want that.
- Agree not to refer to things other people say, and not to use the listening circle to direct upset at anyone in the circle
- People are good and want a just, sustainable world, but get hurt in ways that impact how we act
- People don't benefit from blame or criticism—an offer of non-judgmental help can make a difference
- Role of listener is to communicate that you are on their side, whatever they are struggling with and whether or not you agree with what they say (with and without talking)
- Not doing one way listening—being peers makes a difference, collective care, all need to be listened to

2. START WITH A LISTENING EXCHANGE—PRACTICE IN PAIRS

- 2 or 3 people, but same guidelines about listening. Prepares people to be able to listen to everyone in the group.
- Possible prompt questions: What is challenging about this time for you? What would be good for you to address to have good attention in the group?
- This process is for us as facilitators too, we are peers

3. PRACTICE OF LISTENING CIRCLES

- Everyone will have a turn to speak without interruption from others
- In your turn you can talk about whatever you need to, without judgment from anyone

continued . . .

... continued

- Our job as listeners is to direct 100% of our care and attention onto the person whose turn it is to talk
- Relaxed eye contact is important, so the person can feel your attention. Just smiling and keeping warm, inviting attention on them is enough to show our caring
- As facilitator you are the main listener, but everyone should pay good attention to the person talking
- We will divide up the time available equally between the people present, including the facilitator, leaving some time for wrap-up. We encourage people to take the whole time, unless they really want to stop early. Silence is ok, but if a person is having trouble thinking of how to do this, facilitator can offer to ask them a question or two to help get them started
- After each turn the facilitator assists the person who has been talking to get their attention back to the present by asking a question which is unrelated to what they have been talking about. Examples include: name three blue things you can see, how do you spell your name backwards, what is your favorite vegetable?
- People might talk critically about others in their turn. It is important to remember that this is their perception, coloured by their feelings, and is not necessarily accurate. Important to let off steam about upsets and not always how people feel outside of venting.
- As facilitator, it is good to avoid criticising others in your turn, as it can make the group feel less safe. Best to try and identify and talk about your own difficulties.
- As facilitator, it is helpful to model good use of time.

4. CONFIDENTIALITY

- We agree that what is said in someone's time is not repeated or referred to by anyone, except with permission. If talking about same topic, fine, but not refer to what they said. Expand, explaining why and answering questions

5. LET'S DO IT!

- Get group agreement on confidentiality
- Whole group, divide the time remaining, allowing 10 minutes at the end for feedback and closing
- Each person decides what they will talk about, how they will use the time, but you can suggest a question, for example: "If you don't have an idea of what to talk about today, what is a struggle you are having in your climate work?"

6. FEEDBACK

- The process - how was it? What did you notice being listened to, doing the listening?
- How did it feel? (Either everyone, or if less time, whoever wants to contribute)

7. ANY QUESTIONS?

8. CHECKOUT/CLOSING

- Possible questions: What have you enjoyed and/or learned?
- What is one thing you are looking forward to?

Sustaining All Life • www.SustainingAllLife.org • sal@rc.org