

# D.I.Y guide to Sharing Circles for humanitarian aid providers

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The mental needs of Volunteers and Humanitarian Aid staff are often overlooked, or offered personal counseling to try and combat secondary trauma and burn out. Basic group sharing circles, facilitated by members of the team itself are extremely powerful and beneficial, create a communicative working environment and can be an important element in Community building. We have found a facilitated training can help implementation in groups new to this practice, but you can surly do it without.

Emotional Self-care should not remain in the realm of professional providers alone, and can be complimented by community circles.

Learning and spreading the knowledge of holding space- together- and recognizing our similar issues in circle work can change the experience of aid providers on the ground dramatically.

This practice should be open-sourced and spread.



Picture by Mounir Chadli

## **The Goals of a sharing circle for humanitarian aid providers -**

- Acknowledge and legitimize the hardships of being a humanitarian aid worker/ volunteer.
- Allow and encourage self-help tools for everybody as part of community life and not out of personal crisis or Burn-out.
- Share difficult situations and feeling with our peer group while on the ground and not trying to process these things alone once back home.
- Creating a common space to vent, unload and enhance compassion within our community.
- Learn healthy communication skills through Participatory Circle Practice.

Principles of a Sharing Circle for Humanitarian aid providers-

*\*Based on "The Circle Way" by Ann Linnea and Christina Baldwin*

***Sharing Circles are a participatory practice- Responsibility is shared by everyone.***

***We listen with Attention, Speak with Intention.***

***Once a question has been asked and we start our circle, we speak by picking up a talking piece from the middle of the circle. Only the person holding the talking piece should talk. We do not respond, make side comments or jokes- it is a monologue, not a dialogue.***

***We do not name other people in the circle or speak directly to one person- talk about yourself, share your experiences, feelings and perspective.***

***We listen with compassion and Curiosity, actively creating our shared safe space.***

***We ask for what we need, and offer what we can.***

***We welcome emotions into our circle.***

***We welcome laughter and tears, if they should come.***

***The center of our circle can hold a lot of energy, focus on the center when difficult of highly emotional things are being said.***

***We welcome silence to our circle, we can hold Silence together, it can create space for new things to emerge.***

***What's said in the circle stays in the circle-  
Although we encourage personal follow up conversations between circle participants.***



Picture by Mounir Chadli

How to initiate a Community based sharing circle for humanitarian aid providers-  
(a facilitation guide for first time hosts) *\*Based on "Art of Hosting"*

1. **INVITATION-** Decide you want to host a sharing circle. Check in with yourself- are you ready and willing hold space for people experiencing extreme emotions? If you are, Speak to the intended participants personally, set a convenient time at the end of the day (no longer than 1 hour). Invite the participants, let them know it is not mandatory and they will not be forced to share if they attend. Invite in a few different ways- post a notice in the office, share in media groups, ask your friends to come.
2. **SETTING UP THE SPACE-** Pick a nice, private, easily accessible space. Make sure the area is clean and inviting, set up a circle of cushions, sitting mats or chairs. Create a "centerpiece"- this is where you place your talking piece (a stone, a tree branch, a ball- anything you choose). The participant will speak only after picking up the talking piece.  
Our circle is a living organism- a few nice flowers in the center will remind us of that. You can add candles or anything else you find beautiful. Prepare yourself as host- you are about to hold a lot of emotion for the group. Make sure you are 100% focused on the circle, present and mindful.
3. **WELCOMING** – like a dinner party at your house, host people coming into this informal gathering by helping they feel comfortable. Once seated in the circle open by welcome everybody and thanking them for choosing to come. Explain that this is a participatory practice, and it will as deep and meaningful as they make it. Invite them to dig deep and speak from the heart.
4. **FRAMING-** Explain the setting, what's about to happen and why you are initiating this practice. Let people know their presence is important, and that they do not have to speak if they so choose. Acknowledge the time, remind them when the circle will end, and ask people to be considerate with this shared resource of TIME.  
Read '*Principles of a Sharing Circle for Humanitarian aid providers*' out loud. You may choose to write them on flip chart paper and hang in the room. Explain that once you ask the question we will only be speaking with a talking piece. Ask people if they have any questions before you start.
5. **OPENING THE CIRCLE-** sharing-  
Ask the participants to ***Share a meaningful experience from the past week.*** This can be work related, a personal encounter, a dream or a dilemma. Ask them to leave out anything operational- this is not a work meeting. Repeat the question and go into "circle mode". Don't be embarrassed or alarmed if there are a few minutes of silence, people will eventually speak. People will share what they need to share, when they are ready. You can also choose to share something intimate about yourself, which might open up the field and allow others to dig deeper.
6. **PREPARE TO CLOSE-**  
learning how to build resilience-

about 15 minutes before the hour is up pick up the talking piece and ask a new question- ***What helps me cope with these challenges, or others I have encountered?*** Than place the talking piece back and allow people to answer.

**7. CLOSING THE CIRCLE-**

pick up the talking piece and say its time to close. As the host of the circle you can choose to summarize. You can speak in a general way about some of the common issues that came up; reflecting back to the group how we are dealing with similar issues and how powerful it can be to share these things. Thank everybody for coming and invite them to come again next time. After closing place the talking piece in the center and get up from the circle. It is important for the host to "break" the circle for others to feel comfortable to get up and leave. You can stay and talk to people in the room, just no longer in the circle.

At the end of the gathering, take some time to unwind- as the facilitator you might be feeling tired or exhilarated- it's good to share the experience from the hosts point of view with someone close. Go for a drink, have a bubble bath or do whatever relaxes you.

**8. FEEDBACK-**

speak to your participants about the circle, trust your intuition and allow for changes that best fit your community.

***Hopefully you will find this guide helpful- but truly, all you need is a circle of people and a talking piece.***

***Try it. It works.***

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This "D.I.Y guide to Sharing Circles" is based on my experience hosting dozens of Volunteer Sharing Circles throughout the Greek Refugee Crisis, and is an adaption of **Circle Practice** ([thecircleway.net](http://thecircleway.net)) & **Art of Hosting** ([artofhosting.org](http://artofhosting.org)). Both websites are rich in resources, ideas and inspiration, and you should check them out.

Feel free to contact me in you want to try this out and want some support, or are looking for other facilitation and conversation tools and methods.  
Thank you for doing what you do.

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