CONVERSATION CIRCLE
On sexuality, intimacy, & relationships

Conversation circles are a tool that facilitate talking and listening while supporting an equity of voices. The following instructions will guide you through a circle intended to facilitate dialogue and conversation on the topics of sexuality, intimacy, and relationships, as well as build community.

Preparation
1. Determine who will participate and which questions you’d like to focus on. Several different questions are provided below; we recommend choosing 3-4 questions for a single circle experience.
2. Decide who will be the circle keeper to read the instructions aloud and keep the circle accountable to the ground rules. Note: this role is not about answering questions as an expert or authority. The purpose of circles is to collectively share as a group, as opposed to seeking or providing answers. The circle keeper participates equally in the circle.
3. Determine whether you will hold the circle in person or virtually.
   - In person: set up chairs or space to sit on the floor in a circle with no tables in the middle. Choose a talking piece, such as a stress ball or stuffed animal.
   - Virtually: choose which platform you'll meet on and share the meeting info. The rest of this guide will assume a virtual format.

Setting Context (start reading aloud here)

Hi everyone :) Welcome to our circle.

This circle format was developed by SHARE in collaboration with the Native American Cultural Center (nacc.stanford.edu) as a community building tool. It is rooted in indigenous practices of conflict resolution, understanding, and healing -- sometimes called “talking circles” or “peacemaking circles.” We’re not aiming to “perform” this indigenous practice; we are instead aiming to learn from the practice and the values it is rooted in: truly listening to one another as human beings, in all our differences and sameness. In doing so, we can become better at talking and listening, and building stronger relationships.

Circles allow for the equal opportunity for everyone to participate, and for all voices to be heard, valued, and respected.

It is a practice rooted in values: balance, empathy, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, trust, accountability, love.

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1 Informed by the Center for Comparative Studies in Race & Ethnicity, Native American Studies, the Design School, and restorative practices.
Conversation circles have the following components:

- **A circle keeper(s)** will read the instructions and keep the circle accountable to the ground rules.
  - This role is not about answering questions as an expert or authority. The purpose of circles is to collectively share as a group, as opposed to seeking or providing answers.
  - The circle keeper participates equally in the circle.
- We’ll each choose a **talking piece** to keep the attention on one person at a time. It can be a water bottle, pencil, stuffed animal, anything nearby.
- We’ll agree on **ground rules** to create parameters so that people can share and listen effectively.
- There will be a **structure** with an opening and closing of the circle. It can be an intention, an expression of gratitude, or taking a breath together.

**Introductions**

- We’ll do a round of introductions: **What’s your name, pronouns (optional), and your talking piece?**
  - (Jot down the order in which people introduce themselves in the chat. This will be the order you proceed with for responding to the circle questions)
- Now we’ll review the ground rules.

**Ground Rules for the Circle** (to be approved and added to by participants)

- Know that your participation in this circle is voluntary. If you’d like to excuse yourself, you may do that now.
- You’re encouraged to take care of yourself in whatever way you need during the circle (stand up, sit on floor, turn off your video, get a drink, go to the restroom, etc.) Keep us posted in the chat.
- You’re also encouraged to speak. We all benefit when we get to hear each other’s thoughts. Share as little or as much as you wish, but be mindful of the time so that others can speak too.
- Confidentiality -- what’s said here stays here.
- When holding your talking piece, you can:
  - **Speak** with care and respect, or
  - **Sit quietly** and hold the talking piece to reflect on what has been said, or
  - Simply **pass** the talking piece to the next participant.
- Use “I” statements to describe what you’re thinking or have experienced as opposed to generalizing or directing statements toward or about others.
- When you are **not** holding the talking piece, your role is to **listen** with care and respect. You can listen with the intention to learn.
- Does anyone have anything else to add?
Opening

Our intention is to express ourselves, listen to one another, and build understanding within this circle of people. There will be # questions, which are each followed by a response round so that we have a chance to respond to things we heard others say. The questions are intentionally broad to allow everyone to reflect and answer in a way that feels true for them today. Remember that there are no right or wrong responses when we speak from our own experience; we are each doing our best to express ourselves, listen to one another, and build understanding among one another.

Circle Questions

To get us started, What values do we want to center in our circle? Each person will name one value (e.g., honesty, openness, empathy, learning).

1. Getting connected. Choose a question to connect the group to what’s present.
   a. What does it feel like to anticipate this conversation circle and talking about these topics?
   b. How are you showing up today? What are you showing up with?
   c. What lifted you up this week?

2. Going deeper. Choose 3-4 of the following questions to explore topics of shared interest. After each question, pass the talking piece around the circle for the opportunity to respond to what others said.
   a. What is one thing you remember from sex ed in school or from a parent, whether it’s what you learned or what you remember from the tone of the conversation?
   b. What’s something you wish someone had taught you when you were younger about sex or sexuality?
   c. Do you want to get married? Why or why not?
   d. What do your parents want for you with regard to sex and dating? Or, what are their beliefs around sex and dating?
   e. Have you ever had a crush on a friend? Can you?
   f. Describe an experience of loneliness. What did it feel like?
   g. What’s your experience of saying “I love you,” whether among family or in a romantic context? Or, who do you say it to?
   h. How do you feel about being naked in the presence of or with another person?
   i. Where/when do you feel the biggest expectations of your gender? (e.g., with your parents, at a party, on a date, in a hookup, among your friends) How are you “supposed” to act?
   j. What’s an experience you’ve had where you felt rejected? How did you respond?
   k. Pandemic: What’s something you feel like you’ve lost? What’s something you feel like you’ve gained?
   l. Do you love yourself? Or, where are you on the journey of learning to love yourself?
   m. What person or experience helped you learn to love?
n. How do you feel after sex or a sexual experience?
   o. What would make a hookup better? Or, if you were to redesign hookup culture, what would it look like?
   p. How do you know when you’re a “no” to something? How do you go about expressing that “no”?
   q. If everyone has taken the Sexual Projects Quiz (bit.ly/sexualprojectsquiz): What did you learn about your sexual projects? Who or what influences yours? What is/are your top priority sexual project(s) right now?
   r. How do you like to show love for others? What makes you feel most loved?
   s. What’s the biggest thing that prevents you from having deeper relationships?
   t. What are you actively learning right now in your relationships?

3. **Digesting.** What was that like to talk about these topics? What are you feeling right now? Is there anything you need?
   a. *Response round*

4. **Looking ahead.** After responding to these questions and hearing one another, What’s one thing you want to take from this circle into your own life and/or our community?
   a. *Response round, if desired*

***Closing***

Now we’ll close the circle. In closing, we want to remember that the intention of this circle was to express ourselves and listen to one another. It wasn’t about being right or wrong -- rather, it was about sharing thoughts and questions, listening and learning. We don’t need to agree on everything; we are just finding our way, together, in a conversation that we can choose to continue in the future. We appreciate the courage it takes to share and the gift it is to hear one another. *(optional: take 3 deep breaths together)* Thank you.
You can share the following resources with circle participants.

Want to talk to someone confidentially?
- Confidential Support Team (CST)
- Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS)
- The Bridge Peer Counseling Center
- Office for Religious Life
- YWCA Sexual Assault & Domestic Violence Support Line

Want to learn about resources at Stanford?
- Sexual violence support
- Relationship violence support
- Transgender support
- Virtual support during COVID-19
- Community Centers
- Virtual Well-Being Resources

Stanford University SHARE. For questions or to provide feedback, email Brianna Booth at boothbk@stanford.edu