Guidelines for Creating Circle

Information gathered collaboratively by Ana Couch (Oceanside, CA, USA), Sharon Mijares (Costa Rica), Suzan Nolan (Rapid City, SD, USA), Ann Smith (Naples, FL, USA) and Deborah Zaher (Liverpool, UK) of Gather the Women

Compiled and written by Deborah Zaher (Liverpool, UK)

Quick Start Guide
This is a very simple, bare-bones guide to forming a circle... Inside these pages is contained a fuller description.

- Before the day:
  - Set the intention to create a circle.
  - Locate a venue.
  - Choose a theme.
  - Send out invitations, advertise.

- On the day:
  - Set the space... arrange chairs in a circle.
  - Set the space... create a centre using candles and/ or objects of meaning.
  - Burn incense, fragrant candle or other relaxing fragrance.
  - Welcome each guest with a smile.

- The circle:
  - Welcome everybody and thank them for attending.
  - Open the circle (hold hands, short meditation, read a poem or other activity).
  - Check in... Allow each woman to speak her name and answer a simple question.
  - Share your circle guidelines/principles.
  - Introduce the theme/ why you've gathered.
  - Circle commences.
  - Check out... Again each voice is heard.
  - Close circle.
Contents

Page 1  Quick Start Guide
Page 3  Introduction and Our Intention with Creating these Guidelines
Page 4  Gather the Women Vision Statement
Page 5  “A Brief History of Circle” by Sharon G. Mijares
Page 7  “What is Circle?” and “Why we Gather this Way”
Page 8  How to Create Circle Space
Page 10 Photos of GTW Circles from Around the World
Page 20 Circle Roles
Page 21 The Talking Piece
Page 22 Circle Guidelines/principles
Page 26 Circle Format
Page 28 Suggested Themes for Your Circle to Use
Page 30 Dealing with Conflict Within Circle
Page 32 Finding a Venue and Costs Involved
Page 33 How to Invite and Advertise Your Circle
Page 34 Recommended Reading
Page 37 Further Support
Page 38 Peer Spirit Guidelines
Page 40 Millionth Circle Guidelines
Page 41 The Centre for Contemplative Mind in Society Guidelines
Introduction and Our Intention with Creating these Guidelines

Within our organisation we recognised a need to help our members create their own circles. Many women were coming to us with no circle background or experience and we sought to find a way in which these women could create their own circles with confidence.

The five women involved in creating these guidelines are wonderfully experienced and together encompass decades of circle background and wisdom. All had input during information sharing and together formed an incredibly strong group with much insight and ideas.

The process for information sharing throughout this collaboration was to discuss one topic at a time. The topics are the chapter headings of these guidelines.

Our mission statement for this collaboration was “to create an easy to follow set of guidelines in forming a circle, accessible to both new and experienced circle creators, using simple and inclusive language.”

We had a strong desire to create a set of guidelines that were neither too rigid nor too loose. The intention has been to create a set of guidelines that encourage and inspire women to follow what feels best for her and her group. A basic structure is required which will be provided and we encourage women to elaborate upon this.

There is a whole new world of language with regards to the women’s movement, gatherings and circles. We found that some of this language does not yet relate to new members and therefore we have kept the language of these guidelines simple. For women seeking a deeper experience there are many sources out there and we encourage you to explore!

Our current GTW members use several sources of information in creating their circles such as Peer Spirit and Millionth Circle which we will include with these guidelines. However, we will be using our own language in which to discuss how to create a circle.

We have included photos as a picture speaks so many words and cuts through language.

If you have any ideas, questions or elaborations on these guidelines then please do get in touch! We would love to hear what you have to share! From each other we inspire, grow and learn much more. Please contact Deborah Zaher cheerydeb@gmail.com
Gather the Women Vision Statement

Gather the Women Global Matrix™ (GTW) is a global sisterhood that connects women through circles. We create a safe place to share our true selves. Meeting in circle, we find our voices, claim our power, and celebrate our self-worth, leading to personal and planetary transformation.

Annual GTW Gathering, Wisconsin, 2011

Annual GTW Gathering, Canada, 2012
A Brief History of Circle

© 2012 Sharon G. Mijares

There is evidence of spiritual ritual gatherings occurring possibly as early as 300,000 years ago in Middle Paleolithic societies, although little is known about the complexity of these gatherings. Actual evidence is found that communities gathering for spiritual and shamanic experience have been evidenced in the Upper Paleolithic societies (over 30,000 years ago, long before modern humanity). Although there is no written history, there is evidence of ritual art, paint, and other religious ceremonial relics, including the first representations of the revered female form. This means that human beings have been gathering in purposeful circle for a very long time and that the central representation of divinity was feminine. Women equally participated in circles around the fire for ritual and did the same as they prepared food for families and community. During these times they shared stories and tribal experience. Societies were egalitarian in earlier human stages.

We are well familiar with Stonehenge and its mystical ring of gigantic stones, but in her article, Gather the Women’s Ann Smith notes that “In contemplating the power of circle [she] likes to look at the images of the first temple in the world built as a circle of standing stones 12,000 years ago by hunter-gatherers in a place called Gobekli Tepe, Turkey. In this archeological dig six circles have been found with more to be uncovered. [It is relevant to recognize that the famous] Stonehenge came 7,000 years after.”

Tragically, from the onset of patriarchal ideology, and related religious influences, this began to change approximately 6,000 to 4,000 years ago. This was accompanied by an emphasis on increasing cognitive development, resulting in more linear thinking and behaviors. Prior gathering in circle was replaced to meeting in lines. In this way, both men and women became passive receivers of information and instruction from persons in leadership positions. Thus community and egalitarianism were replaced with patriarchy and resulting divisiveness. Although it became a male-dominated world, it is important to know that there are a few matriarchal societies existing in our world at this time. Regardless, the dominant metaphor became more linear in that the male-dominated patriarchal model turned away from circle, and hence, from authentic connection.

Many indigenous groups still gather in circles, for example, Native Americans, the Maasai tribe of Kenya in ritual circle. These groups regularly gather in circle to confirm the identity of the community through ritual, story-telling, dance and music. In ancient times, both men and women shared stories around the fire, and, in fact, they still do in indigenous tribes. These gatherings provide meaning and direction in life. Gathering in circle is a vital element in human life, and increasing numbers of women are discovering its potency for healing, meaning-making and enriching communications, and all the numerous countries throughout Mother Earth where people still engage
The Newer Movement of Women Meeting in Circle

Back in the 80s a feminist movement began with the idea that meeting in circle was a feminine way to share stories and promote healthier communication. It was taking place with Western women and also as far away as Africa. They were remembering, consciously or unconsciously, the importance of circle and healthier ways of gathering.

In that there is tremendous support that both men and women met in circle as early as 300,000 years ago, it is not accurate to believe it is only related to the feminine gender. What happened was that as the male image became dominated through patriarchal ideologies and related behaviors, many human beings lost the community that was once encouraged by circle and communal gathering. Historically, earlier societies were naturally more matriarchal as lineage had been based on the mother rather than the father. The rise of patriarchy also meant that lineage would be based on paternity. This new movement of women in circle represented a return to pre-patriarchal communal connection.

Naturally, these wise women, particularly with the circle movement increasing throughout the latter part of the 1980s (as discussed in The Goddess Remembered and in the numerous books emerging in the late 80s and 90s), recognized circle to be a non-patriarchal way of gathering. It was thus a return to a more feminine and egalitarian way of communal experience.

This has resulted in the increasing movement and return to circle gatherings throughout the last 30+ years. Although the indigenous have always maintained communal circle, this is a new movement for the modern women. (Even progressive schools and various meeting places have moved desks and chairs, so that participants are looking at one another as opposed to the more linear expectation of looking at the back of someone’s head.) The association of the feminine with this movement is because egalitarian ways of being are more associated with a healthier sense of gender as experienced in pre-patriarchal times.

When we meet in circle we join to hold everyone in sacred space and purpose. We are bringing forth an ancient way of connecting into modern times. We gather to share stories, to deepen our identities individually and in group—often with the intention to enable and shape a post-patriarchal way of being. We also gather to heal life. We can meet in circle to share our joy, we can meet in circle to work on projects or join in ritual at various levels of depth and purpose, and we can meet in circle to help to change our world.

Jean Shinoda Bolen added to this movement in creating the Millionth Circle Movement. Her idea is to both increase and unite the circle movement so that we reach a tipping point and our united goals for a healthier humanity and planet can facilitate a morphogenetic shift as our united mind creates a significant and positive transformation in the human field of consciousness. Thus our vision and hope for a better world will become a reality. Gather the Women has emerged to support this movement. The emerging reality would be a gender-balanced world, a healthier world for nature and all species—for we are all related.
“What is Circle?” and “Why we Gather this Way”

Please also see “A Brief History of Circle” by Sharon G Mijares on Page 5

Circle is wonderfully versatile in allowing us to communicate with others in a way that is non-hierarchal, equal, respectful and connecting.

Some ways in which circle can be used are:
- To share stories, experiences and feelings around a set theme
- To discuss important information such as when the UN meets
- To learn (workshops can be carried out this way)
- To dance, drum and sing
- To read and sew
- To discuss births, children, ordinary life processes perhaps around new and/or full moons
- In ceremony as in a Mother Blessing
- In a corporate meeting to discuss an agenda
- To discuss community needs as indigenous peoples meet
- To prepare food as women in some cultures do
- To gather around a campfire at the end of the day as some tribes do
- To work through and resolve conflict
- To determine a court sentence
- To work with students in schools at all levels

It’s well known that indigenous people met in circle to share stories and discuss community needs. As patriarchal ideologies developed, communities were divided as hierarchies were put in place. Thus we had lines of people listening to rulers and experts.

The return to circle initiated by the women’s movement, especially in the 1980s, was to once again be able to see and listen to one another in a spirit of equality.

The first temple in the world was built as a circle of standing stones built some 12000 years ago by hunter-gatherers in Göbekli Tepe, Turkey.

(Photo from Wikipedia)
How to Create Circle Space

- Seats arranged in a circle
- Creation of a “circle centre”
- Using fragrance and music to draw women’s attention to the different “space”
- Going deeper: Pre-cleansing the space, cleansing whilst seated together, calling the Directions, singing or chanting.

Circle is expressed in many different ways and you’ll find that your circle becomes unique in this!

Circle is very simply arranging chairs or cushions in a circle on the floor. Removing tables (although a table may be required for crafting or for the circle centre) and objects and creating a “circle centre” in the middle. Your circle could be indoors or outdoors. Some circles cover their chairs with fabric or add a flower to each seat. Some circles cover the entire floor with a tapestry or material. Some circles sit on cushions on the floor.

The circle centre acts like the hub of a wheel... imagine spokes leading out to each chair from the centre. The chairs collectively form the rim of the circle. When viewed in this way we can see that all people seated in a circle are equally significant to the structure of the “wheel” and without one all would be weakened. This gives rise to a feeling of equality within circle and also signifies the importance of the circle centre.

In creating the circle centre you could use flowers, candles, scarves, items of significance, the talking piece (which will be explained later), crystals, ornaments, feathers, shells, pictures, books... Just about anything! Ask the women who are attending to bring an item to place in the centre. Some circles have a different centre depending on the theme of the circle. Some circles keep it simple with a single candle. Some circles are elaborate and include all of the above! Some circles have a bag/box containing items donated from circle members that they can choose from to create the centre. Whatever you choose for your centre is right and wonderful. Be as creative or as simple as you desire!

“Circle space” is very different from “social space”. In social space we chatter and are not always aware of our surroundings. In circle space we become aware of where we are and why we’re there.

To add to the atmosphere, you could light incense or another relaxing fragrance. When women walk in they’ll become tuned into the new smell and the space they’ve just entered. However, be mindful of any members who are sensitive to these fragrances. You could play relaxing music when women arrive, again tuning them into the space they’ve just entered.
The above can be deepened if this feels right for you and your circle. Although these practises are not necessary for a deep and engaging circle, some circles find it does deepen their experience:

Some circles pre cleanse the space with sage.
Some circles open by each woman cleansing herself or cleanses the woman next to her with sage which is passed around.
Some circles call in the Directions... East (air which brings mental clarity), South (fire bringing purification, death and rebirth and passion), West (water bringing emotions and fluidity, the womb), North (earth bringing groundedness, Above (planets, galaxies, angels and hosts), Below (that which lies beneath the surface, the shadow self) and finally Centre (bringing all of the directions together into one place, the heart centre, love). In doing this, polarity is set to the group and it allows the group to feel they have cast their circle for the night.
Some circles light a candle for each Direction and place the candle in the centre.
Some circles chant or sing together when opening their circle.
Some circles meet on the New Moon or Full Moon.
Here is a selection of photos from Gather the Women circles and connected circles around the world. Note how each circle and circle centre is beautifully different and expresses the women of the group and the activity of the group, be it craft, discussion, drumming... Circles are extremely versatile and connecting. Use your imagination in what you can use your circle for!

North Bay, Sonoma County, CA, USA

North Bay, Sonoma County, USA (a drumming circle)
Uganda, Africa (outdoors)

Costa Rica, South America (outdoors in a therapy space)
Rapid City, South Dakota, USA (an event where the shape had to be slightly changed to accommodate all the guests!)

Rapid City, South Dakota, USA (instruments in circle)
Oceanside, California, USA (seated comfortably on the floor in someone’s home)
Oceanside, California, USA (seated comfortably on the floor)

Juneau, Alaska, USA (a crafting circle)
Juneau, Alaska, USA (a crafting circle)

Liverpool, UK (a wishing tree as circle centre)
Liverpool, UK

Liverpool, UK (an emotive circle, this was to honour a circle sister who died)
UN Women Workshop (a breakaway group from the main group to discuss in more depth)
Circle Roles

- The Facilitator
- The Guardian

Every member of the circle is responsible for holding the circle, this responsibility is not given to one single person. Some circles make a mention of this at the start in order to emphasise equality.

Gather the Women encourages shared leadership and the roles of Facilitator and Guardian should be offered to all members of your circle if this feels right for you and your circle.

The Facilitator is the person who keeps the circle flowing by opening the circle/welcoming, starting the check-ins, introducing the theme, check-outs etc. Some circles have the same Facilitator whilst some circles share the Facilitator role. Some circles use the person who contributed the theme as the Facilitator. Some circles co-facilitate if one person is particularly shy about the role and feels more confident with an experienced Facilitator on hand.

The Guardian is the person who monitors the mood and conversation of circle as well as having the capacity to call for a few moments of silence. The Guardian may hold a small chime, bell or a rattle and when the Guardian feels the conversation has ventured off topic they may shake the chime, bell or rattle as to bring everyone’s attention back to the theme at hand. Anyone in the circle is welcome to request the Guardian to shake the chime, bell or rattle and sometimes it may be appropriate to request this when something profound or deeply emotional has been shared to allow for a few moments of silence and reflection. The Guardian will signal the sound to commence the circle again. The Guardian’s role can be useful if any conflict arises (to be discussed later). Some circles do not use a Guardian whereas some do and some circles use the same person as Facilitator and Guardian.
The Talking Piece

- Using a talking piece
- Not using a talking piece

There are a couple of ways in which circle conversation can flow. Of course, attendees can “pass” on speaking. They may like to sit and listen to discussion rather than participate in it.

A Talking Piece is an object that signifies to everyone that whoever is holding it is the only person allowed to speak at that time. It’s useful in ensuring that each person has a turn at speaking at large circles. A talking piece can encourage the people not speaking to listen more deeply since they’re not thinking about what they may say in response to the person speaking.

There are two ways in which a talking piece can be used in circle. You can send it in a clockwise or anticlockwise direction or you can place it in the middle of the circle and whoever feels ready to speak can pick it up and replace it when they’ve finished. Both of these ways lead to very different types of conversation ensuing. Passing the talking piece consecutively around the circle leads to deeper experience for the individual and the circle together whilst placing the talking piece back in the centre after a person has spoken leads to more conversation type discussion.

If an attendee passes the talking piece on when it’s their turn to speak, they can be offered the talking piece at the end or at any point through the circle if they request it. Some people simply need some time to collect what they’d like to say.

Not using a talking piece is useful if having a more open circle where discussion is taking place and responses are required for what people are saying or for a small circle.

If an attendee has been silent throughout circle you can say something to the whole circle similar to “Is there anyone who would like to share who hasn’t shared?”

A talking piece can be a purpose created talking piece (search online), a feather, a crystal, a book… Some circles use a talking piece that is in line with their theme such as a small pumpkin for the theme of Food, an empty journal for the theme of What’s the Story for Your New Year and a vagina puppet for the theme of Sexuality!
Circle Guidelines/Principles

Your group is encouraged to create your own unique set of circle guidelines/circle principles. These guidelines/principles will be a shared set of beliefs on how you wish your circle members to communicate with each other during your circle and your “code of conduct”.

For your information and exploration, three sets of guidelines are included here:

From Millionth Circle

CIRCLE GUIDELINES
- Create a circle
- Consider it a sacred space
- One person speaks at a time
- Speak and listen from the heart
- Encourage and welcome diverse points of view
- Listen with discernment instead of judgment
- Share leadership and resources
- Decide together how decisions will be made
- Work toward consensus when possible
- Offer experience instead of advice
- When in doubt or need, pause and silently ask for guidance
- Decide together what is to be held in confidence
- Speak from your own experience and beliefs rather than speaking for others
- Open and close the circle by hearing each voice (check-ins and check-outs)

From Peer Spirit

SETTING CIRCLE AGREEMENTS:
The use of agreements allows all members to have a free and profound exchange, to respect a diversity of views, and to share responsibility for the well-being and direction of the group.

Agreements often used include:
- We will hold stories or personal material in confidentiality.
- We listen to each other with compassion and curiosity.
- We ask for what we need and offer what we can.
- We agree to employ a group guardian to watch our need, timing, and energy. We agree to pause at a signal, and to call for that signal when we feel the need to pause.

THREE PRINCIPLES:
The circle is an all leader group.
1. Leadership rotates among all circle members.
2. Responsibility is shared for the quality of experience.
3. Reliance is on wholeness, rather than on any personal agenda.
THREE PRACTICES:
1. To speak with intention: noting what has relevance to the conversation in the moment.
2. To listen with attention: respectful of the learning process for all members of the group.
3. To tend the well-being of the circle: remaining aware of the impact of our contributions.

From The Centre for Contemplative Mind in Society
http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree/council-circle

Council uses four simple intentions that provide the basis for interaction in the council circle. An intention is a direction that we want to move in to the best of our ability, despite difficulties we might encounter.

- The first intention is to “speak from the heart” when you have the talking piece. This means to speak not only with your head and your ideas, but with your feelings as well. It means to tell your own story as honestly as you can trust in the moment. You have countless important and meaningful experiences. When you speak about them truthfully, you are speaking from the heart.

- The second intention is to “listen from the heart” when another person has the talking piece. This means to listen without judgment, to listen with an open mind, even if you disagree with what the person is saying. Listen not just with your mind, but with your heart as well.

- The third intention is to “speak spontaneously.” This means that we try to wait before the talking piece comes to us before we decide what we want to say. There are good reasons for this. First, if you are thinking about what you are going to say, then you are not listening completely to the person who is speaking. Second, when you don’t preplan what you are going to say, you will often be surprised what comes to you when it is your turn.

- The last intention is to “speak leanly.” Something that is “lean” doesn’t have anything extra on it. When you speak, keep in mind that many others would like a chance to speak, and that there is limited time. Use only those words necessary to get your point or story across. Please remember that no one is required to speak.

These four intentions provide the foundation for all council practice.

From the book "Doing Democracy with Circles: Engaging Communities in Public Planning" by Jennifer Ball, Wayne Caldwell, and Kay Pranis

Circles that have evolved in restorative justice contexts, and therefore have assumed the potential for conflict, emphasise developing a foundation of shared values and guidelines.

Shared Values
Before creating shared Guidelines, some Circles begin by establishing a foundation of shared values. This is done by passing the talking piece and inviting participants to identify a value that they would like to form the foundation of their dialogue. Or ask them to think of a relationship with someone they love and care about, and to identify a value/characteristic that influences the way they relate to that person (when they are at their best). Invite the participants to write these values on paper plates and to place them around the centre of the Circle during their turn. In another round of the talking piece, ask if clarification is
needed on any of the words and if each person is willing to have these values inform the space that they hold together in the Circle.

"Honesty, respect, openness, caring, courage, patience, and humbleness: these are some of the values that people want to see expressed. The exact words vary with each group, but the values raised in Circles across a wide variety of contexts are basically the same. They describe who we want to be in our best selves.

The values that express our "best self" provide the touchstone for the Circle. When, for example, the keepers [facilitators] consider using a particular strategy during the process, they ask themselves, Will this strategy help this group of people become more aligned with their values? The Circle assumes that everyone carries best-self values. They may lie buried beneath layers of 'not-best-self' habits, but they are nonetheless there.

The Circle also assumes that, if the space is safe enough, these values are likely to emerge. The values that represent the best self (an inner focus) turn out to be the same values that nurture good relationships with others (an outer focus). In Circles, the values we share are not taken for granted; they are discussed. Nor does the facilitator impose them. Having a conversation about the values we wish to hold in the Circle’s collective space forms a critical part of the Circle process."

**Shared Guidelines**

Guidelines then build on the shared values. They are often more specific behavioural commitments.

"Explain the importance of developing guidelines that will help people align themselves with these values. For example, confidentiality as a guideline will support the values of honesty, respect, and trust. Describe the importance of the Circle as a place where people can speak their truths. Then pass the talking piece around the Circle again and ask participants to identify commitments they would like from the other participants that would help to make the Circle a place where they could speak their truth.

Record the guidelines on a flip chart or notepad. At the end of the round, read the list to the group. Ask the group whether they can commit to these guidelines for their process, and pass the talking piece. If there is not consensus, work to modify the guidelines, so that everyone can accept them."

Both the shared values and guidelines remain 'open documents' in that they can be added to or adjusted as needed over time. Each time the group meets, these values and guidelines are brought back and placed where they are visible. These are not rules but rather gentle reminders of how that the group wants to interact in their discussions together. It is important to be gentle with ourselves and with others as, in Circle, we are all learning and practicing how to be in good relations. It's important to keep these values and guidelines alive, so it can be useful to periodically reread them or discuss them in more depth.

These values and guidelines are key touchstones to go back to when tension or conflict arises, as it will in any group that meets over time. When this happens, it is valuable to
suspend topics of discussion and go back to the foundation of values and guidelines to
discuss how these are being experienced and expressed by each person. In this way the
group is able to share responsibility for the quality of the space and interactions, based on
their earlier discussion and agreement on their values and guidelines.
Circle Format

Circle has a simple format to enable it to flow.
The basic format is:
- Welcome everybody and thank them for attending.
- Open the circle.
- Check in.
- Share your circle guidelines/principles.
- Introduce the theme/why you've gathered.
- Circle commences.
- Check out.
- Close circle.

Opening the circle shifts the attendees’ awareness from social space to circle space and allows for a few moments of collective silence. Some ideas for opening a circle: holding hands: humming together: singing: chanting: meditating: taking a few deep breaths together: reading a poem: lighting a candle.
Either the Facilitator or another attendee can open the circle.

Check in allows each attendees’ voice to be heard, one at a time, in the circle space and helps people into the frame of mind for circle, naturally easing attendees into the different atmosphere. Some ideas for checking in can be to answer a simple question such as: “if your feelings could be a colour, what colour are you right now?”; asking attendees how they felt about the poem that was read during opening the circle; asking attendees to share their journey to circle that day.
Be free to create your own ideas for this! If it is a particularly large circle and you are limited with time, then each woman saying her name can be enough.

Sharing the guidelines/principles at this point further deepens awareness away from social space to circle space, gives new members direction on how to communicate and listen and is always a refreshing reminder for existing members!

Sharing the theme/reason you have gathered is a great reminder to everyone why you’re together. We’ll explore themes in more detail in the next chapter.

This is the point where the circle commences. Some circles may drum, sing, dance, paint instead of discussion.
As mentioned previously, a talking piece may or may not be used.
How do you know when a circle has come to a close?
Some circles set a specific time limit on circle.
Some circles who do not use a talking piece can “feel” when discussion naturally comes to an end and the Facilitator can mention this.
Some circles pass the talking piece around and when it’s done one rotation, circle comes to an end or for small circles, two rotations.
Check out again allows each voice to be heard in the circle space and allows attendees an opportunity to reflect upon the circle they’ve just experienced. Some ideas for checking out are: asking what people have learned from the circle; asking what will each person take away from the circle; to repeat something they heard in circle that particularly resonated with them.

Closing the circle gives a definite ending to circle space and opens up the space to become social and chattery once again. Some ideas to close the circle: simply thank everyone for attending and say the circle is now closed; ask if anyone has any notices or news to share; blow out the candles.
Suggested Themes for Your Circle to Use

A theme is a great way to give your circle focus instead of coming together and bumbling around not knowing which direction to move in.
What you do in your circle is entirely unique to your circle!
Some circles like the deep heavy emotional topics.
Some circles like to drum together.
Some circles like lighter topics.
Some circles share food whilst discussing.
Some circles use their time together to craft.
Some circles do all of the above!
Themes can be as imaginative as you like! Ideas for themes can be found all around us... In current news, nature, feelings, being a woman, activities...
Some circles ask all circle members to contribute to theme ideas.

Take a look at the suggested themes for discussion and ideas for activity below... Do they inspire you onto other themes or ideas? Do you or another member of your circle have a skill or hobby they’d like to share with the circle and that circle members are interested in learning more of?

Some discussion themes that Gather the Women groups have used:

Spring
HERstory
Mindfulness
Goddesses
Meditation practises
The Liberation of Men is Linked to the Liberation of Women
Sexuality
Nourishment
Shame
Forgiveness
Our Mothers, Ourselves
Death and Dying
Winter
What’s the Story 2014?
The Shadow
Discussion of a specific book
Partners in a Process of Change
Aspirations
When Meeting a New Friend, What’s the First Thing You’d Like Them to Know About You?
Self-relationship
Stepping into the Light
The Unspoken
Care for Self, Care for Earth
Other types of circle that some Gather the Women groups participate in:
Drumming
Crafting something specific
Singing
Chanting
Planting a garden together
Creating a huge mandala
A one woman play!
Rebirthing workshop
Breath workshops
Body movement
Summer solstice
Dealing with Conflict within Your Circle

- Conflict arising inside circle
- Conflict arising outside circle
- Restorative Justice

Conflict is not common to arise in circle since the guidelines/principles have been shared and everyone has a common understanding of why they are gathering. However, sometimes conflict does arise! Inside and outside of circle.

When conflict arises in circle:
Using a Guardian is a good way of calling for silence. If you do not have a Guardian any member of the circle can call for a moment of silence should they feel it necessary. Using a talking piece is a good way of showing who can speak and allows one person to speak at a time. If a talking piece has not been used during a circle when conflict arises and you feel it may help to calm the atmosphere it can be introduced mid-way.
Reminding members of the guidelines/principles can encourage contemplative thought.
Asking the question "how are we doing on our values/principles/guidelines?" and passing the talking piece allows for a discussion about the quality of the space and allows the group to make itself accountable to its values and guidelines without any one person defaulting to trying to control the dynamics, often out of fear of the conflict. It is important that no one person becomes the 'mediator' but that the group shares responsibility and each person, using that talking piece, speaks out of their own experience.

Using non-violent communication is a powerful tool. You can read more about this at The Centre for Non-Violent Communication [http://www.cnvc.org/](http://www.cnvc.org/)
Agreeing to disagree is often a good cure-all for conflict!

When conflict arises outside of circle:
There may be circle members who are unhappy with how the current circle is running or who have issues amongst themselves. When these situations arise, some circles call the members in question into a mini-circle with two more members to act as mediators. Each person can then share their thoughts and feelings in a smaller setting and come to an agreement.

Your circle may find other ways in resolving conflict. Ask the members in question how they would like to resolve the issue.

For all conflict, coming to a decision by consensus (shared equal discussion) is always recommended. This means talking things out together and communicating using circle guidelines/principles.

Restorative Justice contributed by Jennifer Ball, PhD, RPP MCIP
There is a whole stream of Circle practice that flows out of a restorative approach to community conflict. A restorative approach is one that is focused on building and repairing relationships, addressing harms in a holistic way, and balancing concern for all parties, as well as for the well-being of the whole community.
Such a perspective comes out of restorative justice, which re-emerged as a movement in North American mainstream society in the 70s and 80s, but has been an integral part of many indigenous societies. Restorative justice is “a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible.” The essence of restorative justice boils down to a set of questions:

1. Who has been hurt?
2. What are their needs?
3. Whose obligations are these?
4. Who has a stake in this situation?
5. What is the appropriate process to involve stakeholders in an effort to put things right?

This approach becomes a worldview - a way of looking at everything. As Susan Sharpe describes, restorative justice is “an orientation, not a type of program. It is a set of values and beliefs about what justice means, which in turn point to principles for responding to...harms... These principles are: Invite full participation and consensus; heal what has been broken; seek full and direct responsibility; reunite what has been divided; strengthen the community, to prevent further harms. Restorative justice does not have a prescribed protocol. Different programs find different ways to carry out the five principles and many factors influence choices.

Circle is one of the practices used within restorative justice and it is being used in court systems, prisons, schools, universities, churches, planning departments, non-profit organisations, community groups, and families.

The primary difference between Circles coming from this stream and other streams is the strong emphasis on collectively establishing a foundation of values and guidelines before entering discussions. Shared values and guidelines that are determined by consensus create a strong container in Circle that can hold a lot of emotion and some very difficult conversations. These values and guidelines become the touchstones that bring us back to how we want to have any discussion, how we want to try to be in good relationship with ourselves and with others, and how we want to hold the quality of the space for all of us to be present in. Without these, in times of conflict, there is little grounding and it is too easy to default to control.

An excellent resource on Circles with a restorative perspective is: www.livingjusticepress.org (check out the section ‘About Circles’)
Finding a Venue and Costs Involved

- Venue
- Costing

Seeking a **venue** can be the greatest challenge for some circles!
Some ideas from Gather the Women circles around the world:
A members’ home
A therapy room
The outdoors
Local charity that allows use of a room

When using somewhere that is not a members’ home there may be **costs** involved. You can ask each attendee to contribute towards this cost either by a set amount or by donation. Other costs involved may be candles, flowers, tea and coffee. Again, ask the attendees to contribute towards this cost with either a set amount or by donation. You are not expected to foot the cost alone!
How to Invite and Advertise Your Circle

- Inviting
- Advertising

When thinking of who to invite to your circle there are no rules!
Some circles invite just a few friends and friends of friends to start off their first circle.
Some circles invite the same circle of women every time, a set of women who have a shared interest in being together.
Some circles make a public invitation and make the circle open to local women who would like to attend.
Some circles invite a specific group of women who may be interested in the theme or activity.

Advertising your circle is now easy with social networking websites, emails and texting.
Oh, and good old fashioned posters and flyers in shops!
Some circles use a mailing list to advertise.
Some circles team up with other local women’s groups and share information on upcoming events.
Some circles use www.facebook.com creating an “event” and inviting local women.
Some circles have a dedicated Facebook page for their circle where friends and friends of friends can be added and events and news displayed for all page members to see.
Some circles use www.meetup.com to create a page and events.
Some circles create posters and flyers and leave these in women's clothing stores, book stores, therapy rooms, cafes.
Some circles gather women’s phone numbers who have attended previous circles and send out a reminder a few weeks before the circle.
Some circles rely on word of mouth.
Recommended Reading
(Largely compiled by Sharon G Mijares)

Do you have any recommendations to add to this list?
Please do contact Deborah Zaher cheerydeb@gmail.com with them!

Circles
- Pranis, K., Stuart, B & Wedge, M Peacemaking Circles Living Justice Press.
- Riestenberg, N Circle in the Square: Building Community and Repairing Harm in School Living Justice Press.
- Thalhuber, P & Thompson, S Building a Home for the Heart - Metaphors in Value-centered Circles Living Justice Press.

Women’s History

Healing Gender
Feminism (for the more political feminist books and articles)
- Betty Freidan’s The Feminine Mystique


UN Commission on the Status of Women (1947-2014)
- The UN CSW has held fifty-eight sessions resulting in four world conferences on women and the Platform for Action document. For information go to www.UNWomen.org To get involved in the campaign for a fifth UN world conference on women go to www.5wcw.org

Women’s Stories: Fiction, Prose and Creativity
Religion and the Feminine

Buddhist List

Christian List

Jewish List

Islamic List

Mythology

Wiccan

Women and Bio-physiological Differences
Further Support

- Conveners (Directors) of Gather the Women who can help you
- Social networking and website
- Newsletter
- Monthly Regional Coordinators’ Conference Call
- GTW Annual Gathering

Gather the Women have dedicated women who can help you further.
If you’re in Canada you can contact our Canadian Convener Diane Jung djung@i-zoom.net
For everywhere else in the world you can contact our Regional Coordinator Convener Mary Cunningham maryonmoonrise@gmail.com
Our Communications Convener is Deborah Zaher cheerydeb@gmail.com Her role is to add your events and circles to Facebook, Twitter and the website. She can also create a Facebook page for your group. She welcomes all of your circle and event photos too!

- We have a Facebook group especially for Regional Coordinators www.facebook.com/groups/gtwrc
You can meet and pose any questions to other Regional Coordinators here.
- And a public Facebook group for all women www.facebook.com/groups/Gatheringthewomen
- We have a Twitter page www.twitter.com/gatherthewomen
- We have a website www.gatherthewomen.org
On the website we have a blog… We encourage you send Deborah Zaher a blog piece!

We have a newsletter which often shares information on our Regional Coordinators. Keep an eye on your emails for requests to join in with contributing!

Once a month you are invited to participate in our Regional Coordinators’ Conference Call.
This is on the second Monday of the month at 09:00 PST.
Mary Cunningham emails the call details and agenda out to all Regional Coordinators a few days before the call.

Our annual gathering is a time when we come together as an organisation to celebrate and be with each other!
This gathering moves around and is hosted by different regions of Gather the Women. Check the website and Facebook group for upcoming gathering details. It really is a nourishing few days and a wonderful way to meet Gather the Women sisters from all over!
Basic Guidelines for Calling a Circle

Establishing the Center
The center of a circle is like the hub of a wheel: all energies pass through it, and it holds the rim together. To help people remember how the hub helps the group, the center of a circle usually holds objects that represent the intention of the circle. Any symbol that fits this purpose or adds beauty will serve: flowers, a bowl or basket, a candle.

Check-in/Greeting
Check-in helps people into a frame of mind for council and reminds everyone of their commitment to the expressed intention. It insures that people are truly present. Verbal sharing, especially a brief story, weaves the interpersonal net.

Check-in usually starts with a volunteer and proceeds around the circle. If an individual is not ready to speak, the turn is passed and another opportunity is offered after others have spoken. Sometimes people place individual objects in the center as a way of signifying their presence and relationship to the intention.

Setting Circle Agreements:
The use of agreements allows all members to have a free and profound exchange, to respect a diversity of views, and to share responsibility for the well-being and direction of the group. Agreements often used include:

- We will hold stories or personal material in confidentiality.
- We listen to each other with compassion and curiosity.
- We ask for what we need and offer what we can.
- We agree to employ a group guardian to watch our need, timing, and energy. We agree to pause at a signal, and to call for that signal when we feel the need to pause.

Three principles:
The circle is an all leader group.

1. Leadership rotates among all circle members.
2. Responsibility is shared for the quality of experience.

3. **Reliance is on wholeness**, rather than on any personal agenda.

**THREE PRACTICES:**
1. To speak with intention: noting what has relevance to the conversation in the moment.
2. To listen with attention: respectful of the learning process for all members of the group.
3. To tend the well-being of the circle: remaining aware of the impact of our contributions.

**FORMS OF COUNCIL:**
The circle commonly uses three forms of council: talking piece, conversation and reflection.

*Talking piece council* is often used as part of check-in, check-out, and whenever there is a desire to slow down the conversation, collect all voices and contributions, and be able to speak without interruption.

*Conversation council* is often used when reaction, interaction, and an interjection of new ideas, thoughts and opinions are needed.

*Reflection, or Silent council* gives each member time and space to reflect on what is occurring, or needs to occur, in the course of a meeting. Silence may be called so that each person can consider the role or impact they are having on the group, or to help the group realign with their intention, or to sit with a question until there is clarity.

**GUARDIAN**
The single most important tool for aiding self-governance and bringing the circle back to intention is the role of the guardian. To provide a guardian, one circle member at a time volunteers to watch and safeguard group energy and observe the circle’s process.

The guardian usually employs a gentle noise-maker, such as a chime, bell, or rattle, that signals everyone to stop action, take a breath, rest in a space of silence. Then the guardian makes this signal again and speaks to why he/she called the pause. Any member may call for a pause.

**CHECKOUT AND FAREWELL**
At the close of a circle meeting, it is important to allow a few minutes for each person to comment on what they learned, or what stays in their heart and mind as they leave. Closing the circle by checking out provides a formal end to the meeting, a chance for members to reflect on what has transpired, and to pick up objects if they have placed something in the center.

As people shift from council space to social space or private time, they release each other from the intensity of attention being in circle requires. Often after check-out, the host, guardian, or a volunteer will offer a few inspirational words of farewell, or signal a few seconds of silence before the circle is released.

May your circles be great teachers and places to rest on the journey.

---

[Image of the Components of Circle diagram]

---

CIRCLE GUIDELINES

To participate in a circle, all you need is the desire, the willingness to attend the gatherings and to agree to follow circle principles. Each group determines their own guidelines. Here are some agreements that have helped circles to function more successfully for all participants:

Create a circle
Consider it a sacred space
One person speaks at a time
Speak and listen from the heart
Encourage and welcome diverse points of view
Listen with discernment instead of judgment
Share leadership and resources
Decide together how decisions will be made
Work toward consensus when possible
Offer experience instead of advice
When in doubt or need, pause and silently ask for guidance
Decide together what is to be held in confidence
Speak from your own experience and beliefs rather than speaking for others
Open and close the circle by hearing each voice (check-ins and check-outs)
Council Circle

The process of Council comes from a number of Native American traditions and has been used by many non-native people for generations to facilitate meaningful interaction. A group is gathered in a circle for a conversation about a specific topic. The opportunity to speak is given one at a time to all members of the council, often passing a “talking piece” clockwise around the circle to identify the speaker. Members only speak when it is their turn and are encouraged to listen intently, without comment, while others are speaking. All members have the right to keep silent or “pass” when their turn comes. A facilitator is charged with maintaining the boundaries of the circle to protect the process.

Intention. Council uses four simple intentions that provide the basis for interaction in the council circle. An intention is a direction that we want to move in to the best of our ability, despite difficulties we might encounter.

1. The first intention is to “speak from the heart” when you have the talking piece. This means to speak not only with your head and your ideas, but with your feelings as well. It means to tell your own story as honestly as you can trust in the moment. You have countless important and meaningful experiences. When you speak about them truthfully, you are speaking from the heart.

2. The second intention is to “listen from the heart” when another person has the talking piece. This means to listen without judgment, to listen with an open mind, even if you disagree with what the person is saying. Listen not just with your mind, but with your heart as well.

3. The third intention is to “speak spontaneously.” This means that we try to wait before the talking piece comes to us before we decide what we want to say. There are good reasons for this. First, if you are thinking about what you are going to say, then you are not listening completely to the person who is speaking. Second, when you don’t preplan what you are going to say, you will often be surprised what comes to you when it is your turn.

4. The last intention is to “speak leanly.” Something that is “lean” doesn’t have anything extra on it. When you speak, keep in mind that many others would like a chance to speak, and that there is limited time. Use only those words necessary to get your point or story across. Please remember that no one is required to speak.

These four intentions provide the foundation for all council practice.

Council Facilitation. There should be one person designated as the facilitator, who sets the initial intention of the circle and offers the basic structure and ground rules. This person also helps the group maintain circle boundaries either in terms of content or behavior, and should use gentle reminders to individuals and the group to adhere to the
basic ground rules. This person should be empowered to call for brief pauses in the conversation or for a break if the group is too tired to continue in a productive way.

**Process.** Once people have gathered, it is helpful for the facilitator to begin the circle with a gesture that shifts people’s attention from social space to council space. This gesture of welcome may be a moment of silence, reading a poem, singing a song, or listening to a musical interlude to invite a sense of calm presence.

**Check-in** helps people into a frame of mind for council and reminds everyone of their commitment to the expressed intention. It ensures that people are truly present in mind as well as in body.

To check-in with a new circle, participants may say their names and offer a brief self-introduction. To check-in with an ongoing circle, they may speak briefly about their hopes for the meeting, offer social comments, or share anecdotal stories about their lives.

The **talking piece** can be any object that passes easily from hand to hand. This may be an object from nature, such as a stone, stick or feather, or an object that has meaning for a particular circle. Only the person holding the talking piece speaks, and other circle members listen without interruption.

A talking piece is used whenever there is a desire to move the conversation more slowly so that everyone’s stories, input or wisdom can be gathered. One member picks up the talking piece, shares his/her thoughts or story, and then passes it on. The talking piece progresses around the circle, either in sequence or by volunteering, until everyone has had an opportunity to contribute.

**Checkout and Farewell.** When is a circle over? There are a number of ways to define the length of a council circle. A time frame can be set or a decision made to go around two or three times. Another option is to continue the council until there is a completely silent passing of the talking piece indicating that no one has anything left to add to the discussion. Make sure that you define the limit of the circle before beginning.

At the close of a circle meeting, it may be worthwhile to allow a few minutes for each person to “check-out” and comment on what they learned, or what is in their heart and mind as they leave. Closing the circle by checking out provides a formal end to the meeting, a chance for members to reflect on anything that has transpired, and to reclaim objects from the center.

Often after check-out, the facilitator will offer a few inspirational words or farewell, or signal a few seconds of silence before the circle is released.