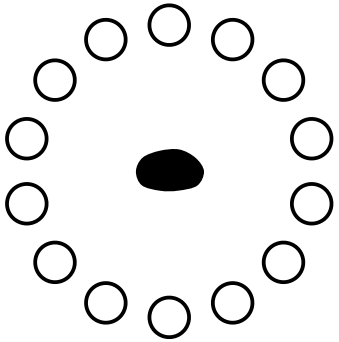


Copy this. Pass it to the next person.

Companion: *What Is a Pod?*

What Is a Circle? · Wilfred Henry

First pressing.

Half-sheet edition, set larger for easier reading. Printed by risograph in Teal and Sunflower.

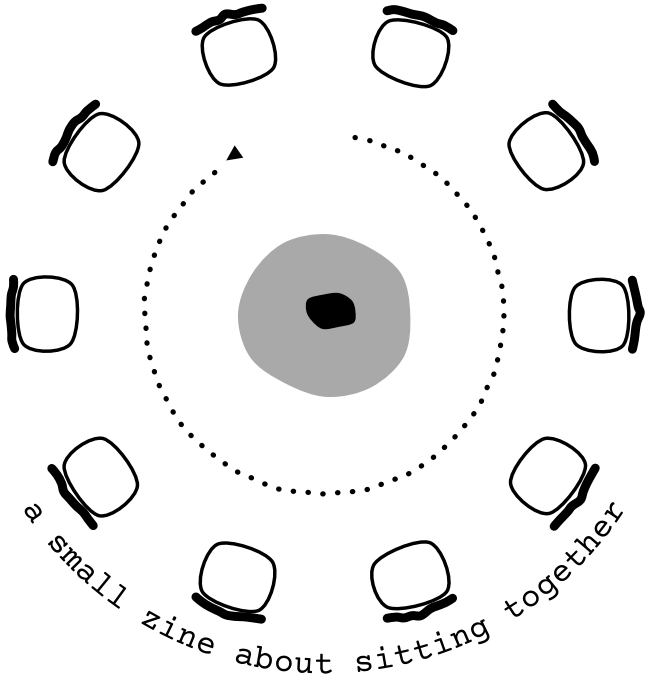
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WHAT IS A CIRCLE?

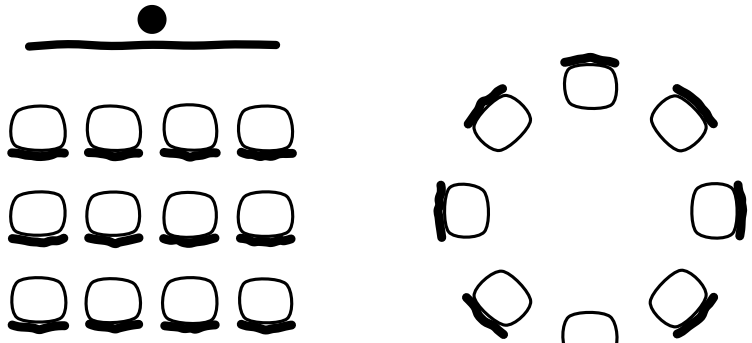
Wilfred Henry

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A CIRCLE IS PEOPLE SITTING SO EVERYONE CAN SEE EVERYONE.

No table. No front of the room. Nobody's back to anybody.



It's one of the oldest ways humans have for talking about hard things.

How to keep one starts on page 5. Where the practice comes from starts on page 19.

FIND PEOPLE

Hidden Water. Healing circles and keeper training, online and in Brooklyn. hiddenwatercircle.org

Living Justice Press. Publishes many of the circle books.

Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective. Pods, and responses to child sexual abuse.

Project NIA. Mariame Kaba's project. Zines and guides on accountability.

Common Justice. Danielle Sered's alternative to prison for violent harm, in New York.

Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth. Cofounded by Fania Davis.

Creative Interventions. The Toolkit, free online.

Stop It Now · 1-888-PREVENT (773-8368)

A helpline for anyone worried about a child's safety, including adults worried about their own thoughts or behavior. Weekdays, noon to 6 Eastern. Anonymous as long as you don't give names.

Near you: ask who keeps circle at your library, school, place of worship, or community justice center. In Virginia: **Central Virginia Community Justice** (Charlottesville), **Restorative Arlington**, and the **Virginia Center for Restorative Justice** (Richmond).

READ

CIRCLE

Kay Pranis, *The Little Book of Circle Processes*. Start here.

Pranis, Barry Stuart & Mark Wedge, *Peacemaking Circles*. The Yukon story, in depth.

Carolyn Boyes-Watson & Pranis, *Circle Forward*. Ready circle plans, made for schools.

Boyes-Watson & Pranis, *Heart of Hope*. Circles for healing.

WHERE IT COMES FROM

Robert Yazzie, "Life Comes From It"

Puao-te-Ata-tu (1988)

Rupert Ross, *Returning to the Teachings*. Includes Hollow Water.

Fania Davis, *The Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice*

TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE

Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*

Kaba & Shira Hassan, *Fumbling Towards Repair*

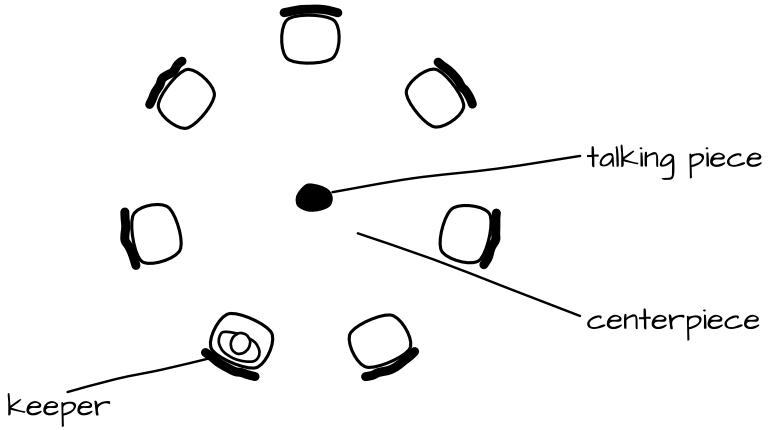
Ejeris Dixon & Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Beyond Survival*

Danielle Sered, *Until We Reckon*

generationFIVE, *Ending Child Sexual Abuse: A Transformative Justice Handbook*

Creative Interventions, the *Toolkit*

WHAT'S IN THE ROOM



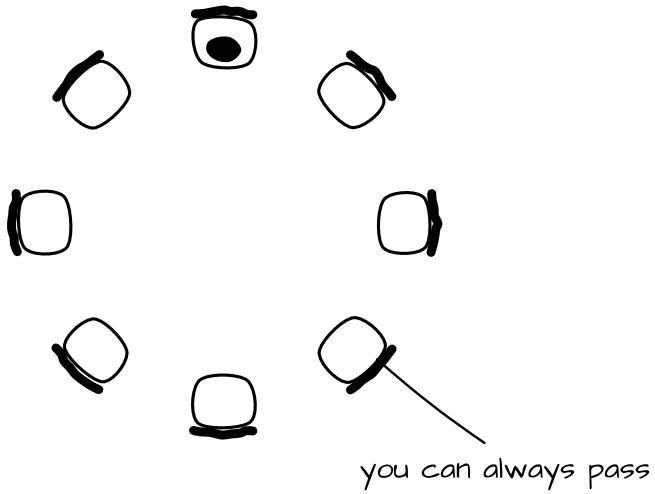
A centerpiece: something on the floor to rest your eyes on when looking at a face is too much.

A talking piece: an object that means something to someone.

A keeper: not a leader, more like a host.

An opening and a closing, so we know when we've stepped in and when we've stepped out.

THE TALKING PIECE



When you hold it, you speak. Or you don't. You can always pass.

When you aren't holding it, your only responsibility is to listen. No interrupting, no fixing, no rebuttal.

The talking piece travels in order, person to person. The quieter amongst us get the same turn as the louder ones.

THAT'S THE WHOLE SOCIAL TECHNOLOGY.

CIRCLE IN TWOS

HOW TO DO IT

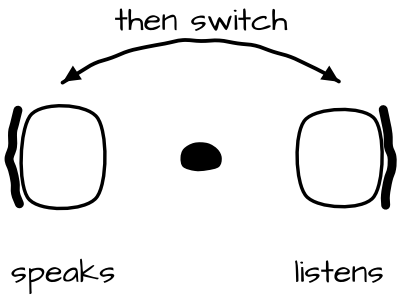
1. Sit facing each other. Put something between you.
2. Open: someone shares a poem, a meditation, a pause.
3. First round: *What do you want me to know about how you're arriving today?*
4. Second round, on something that matters to you.
5. Close: one word each for what you're leaving with. Thank each other.

About twenty minutes. The listener doesn't answer, ask, or advise.

AFTERWARD, DON'T BRING UP WHAT THE OTHER PERSON SAID UNLESS THEY DO.

CIRCLE IN TWOS

You don't need a group. Two people can keep circle.



With a partner, a friend, a sibling. Once a week, or when something's hard to say. Or inside a bigger circle, when the keeper splits the group into pairs for a few minutes and calls everyone back.

Same practice, smaller ring. One speaks, the other only listens. Then you switch.

If there's been harm between the two of you, and you're not already practiced at circling with each other, this isn't the place to work it out. And even if you are, this may not be. See page 27.

A FIRST CIRCLE

ONE HOUR, START TO FINISH

Eight people. Every round goes all the way around, in order.

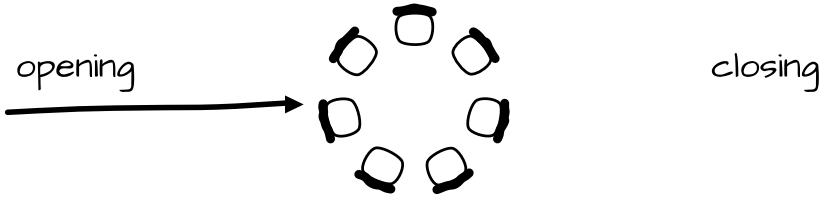


1	Opening	5 min
2	Check-in, a sentence or two each	10 min
3	Guidelines, first time only	10 min
4	A round to get to know each other	12 min
5	A round on what you came for	15 min
6	Check-out, one word each	5 min
7	Closing	3 min

Guidelines are on page 7; rounds and questions on pages 9 and 10.

OPENINGS AND CLOSINGS

An opening marks the step out of the day and into the circle. A closing marks the step back out. A minute or two each. They are a really significant part of the practice.



To open: a minute of quiet. A short poem, read aloud. A somatic invitation. The keeper says why we're here.

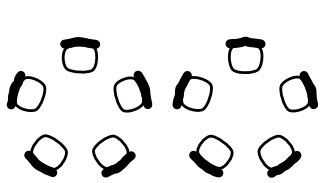
To close: a last round, one word each. A reading. Thanks to everyone who came. A reminder that what was said stays here.

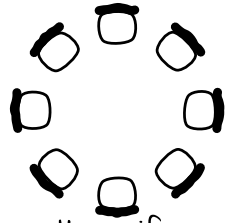
Pick something anyone in the room can join, whatever they believe.

WHEN IT'S ABOUT HARM

Most of this zine is about circles where people talk about how they're doing. A circle about a specific harm, with the person harmed and the person who caused it, is a different thing.

It takes preparation. Keepers meet with each person alone first, often more than once. Everyone chooses whether to come, and anyone can stop. Each person brings people to support them. Nobody is put in a room to make someone else feel better.

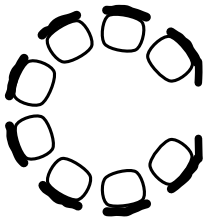

apart, first


together, if ever

At Hidden Water, people do their own work in their own color circles before any circle brings them together.

Find keepers who've been trained for this and have done it before. Ask how they prepare.

WHAT BEING A DESCENDANT ASKS



where's the door?

Courts, schools, and police departments run circles now. Plenty of real ones happen down the hall from a courtroom. Being close to the system doesn't cancel a circle. It does change what the circle is carrying.

Ask:

- ☐ Who called this?
- ☐ Who can leave?
- ☐ Who decides what happens next?
- ☐ Is anyone's freedom riding on what they say?

There's no wrong answer. There's only an answer someone didn't hear before they spoke. Say it in the opening, so whoever holds the talking piece knows what it weighs.

Name your teachers. Stay in touch with the people this comes from. Support them where you can. Carry the talking piece; leave other people's ceremony with them.

BEFORE ANYTHING HARD

We decide together how we want to be with each other. It usually lands near this:

Speak for yourself.

Listen like it matters.

Say enough, then stop.

What's said here stays here.

Then we go slowly. Easy questions before hard ones. Trust first, story second.



WHAT STAYS HERE

The last guideline on page 7, “what’s said here stays here,” is what lets people speak. It needs edges, said out loud before anyone talks.

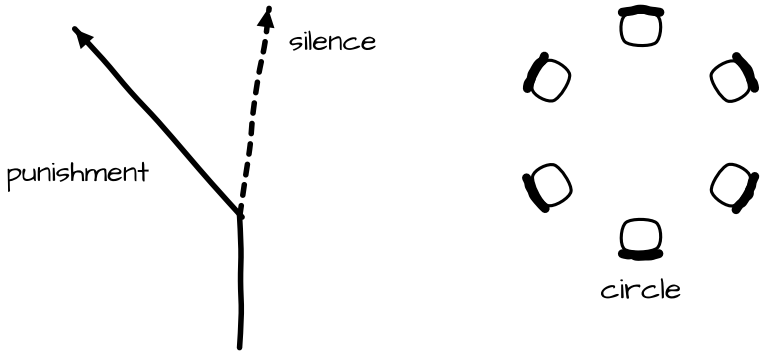
TAKE YOUR OWN STORY HOME. LEAVE EVERYONE ELSE’S IN THE CIRCLE.

Talk about what you felt or learned. Don’t repeat what someone else said, or who said it, even to people who know them.

Some things can’t stay. If someone says a child, or anyone, is in danger right now, the keeper will have to do something. Decide what that is ahead of time, and say it in the opening.

Some keepers are required by law to report child abuse because of their jobs. If that’s you, say so before the first round, so people can choose what to share.

WHY I KEEP CIRCLE



When harm happens, sexual harm included, it can look like the choice is the police or a circle. The real choice is punishment, silence, or circle.

Punishment isn’t only what police and courts do. Communities punish too: the callout, the cancellation, the person nobody will sit with again. Silence is the family that knows and says nothing.

Circle is a third thing. A survivor gets heard all the way through. A person who caused harm can face it without being thrown away. The people around them hold both.

It’s slow. It doesn’t fix everything. It keeps us in relationship, which is where repair happens.

WHERE THIS COMES FROM

HIDDEN WATER

Where I sit as a keeper. Founded by Elizabeth Clemants in New York, it starts from the view that when a child is sexually abused, the whole family system is harmed.

Circles go by color, not label:



GREEN
harmed as young people



BLUE
love someone involved



ORANGE
non-offending parents



PURPLE
caused harm, ready to take responsibility

We practice non-interference: no advice, no questions, no comments on what someone else shared. Keepers aren't therapists. We've lived it, and we sit as equals.

HOW MANY ROUNDS

A round is one trip of the talking piece all the way around.

8 people × 4 minutes

= half an hour a round

Plus the pauses. Do that math before you start. An hour can't hold much. A first circle wants fewer rounds, not more.

Hidden Water's healing circles are eight people, two of them keepers, meeting weekly for 90 minutes. We usually have an opening round (what do you need to say to get present?), one or two rounds of substance, and a closing round.

The opening and closing rounds are short: ask for them in a single word, or in a sentence or two. The rounds of substance take the rest of the time.

When the piece gets back to the keeper, they can send it around once more for anyone who passed or has something to add.

QUESTIONS FOR THE ROUNDS

The keeper brings the questions. Good ones ask about experience, not opinion. Start light. Go deeper as trust builds.

LIGHT

> What's something small that went right this week?
>
> Who taught you how to listen?
>
> Tell about a time someone really heard you.
>
> What are you carrying that you'd like this circle to know about?
>
> What's a current edge of your healing?

DEEP

Everyone gets the same question. The keeper answers too, often first, so people can see how deep to go.

WHERE THIS COMES FROM

BLACK LIBERATION MOVEMENT

Circle didn't come from here. My reason for keeping it outside the state does.

Black women and women of color organizers said out loud what many already knew: calling the police can bring more violence to your door, not less. **The Combahee River Collective. INCITE! Critical Resistance. generationFIVE,** who built transformative justice around child sexual abuse. **Creative Interventions. Mariame Kaba,** teaching that no one is disposable. **Fania Davis** in Oakland, tying restorative justice to racial justice and to African ways of making things right. **Ella Baker** before all of them, insisting ordinary people could lead themselves.

ABOLITION ISN'T THE ABSENCE OF A RESPONSE. IT'S US, BUILDING ONE.

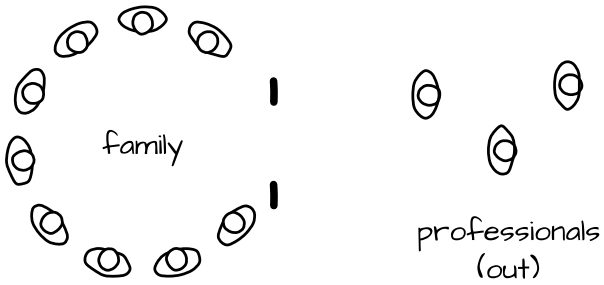
WHERE THIS COMES FROM

THE FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE

The Māori practice: hui ā-whānau.

Not a circle exactly. A cousin.

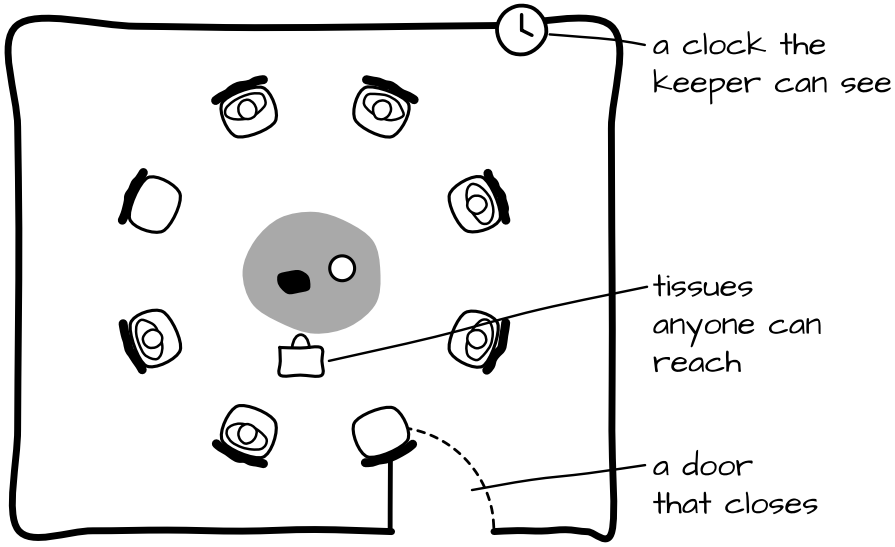
Everyone comes: the young person, the wide family (aunties, grandparents, whoever counts), the person harmed and their people, the professionals. The facts get laid out.



Then the professionals leave the room. Private family time. The family makes the plan. The state's job is to resource it, not write it.

It traveled: Australia, Canada, the UK, U.S. child welfare offices. Wherever it lands, ask one thing. Did the professionals actually leave the room?

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE



A room with a door that closes. Chairs in a ring, no table. A cloth on the floor with a few things on it: a candle, a stone, whatever the group brings.

Tissues where anyone can reach them without asking. A clock the keeper can see, so nobody else has to watch it. Phones away.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

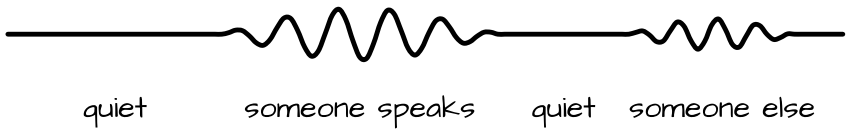
Slow. Slower than any meeting you've been to.

The first round is usually short. People are careful. The second time around, they say more.

YOU'LL WANT TO RESPOND. YOU WON'T.

No agreeing out loud, no fixing, no "me too." That's harder than it sounds, and it's most of the practice.

There are silences. The keeper lets them sit. If someone cries, nobody rushes in. The circle waits.



It can feel awkward the first time, and oddly restful after.

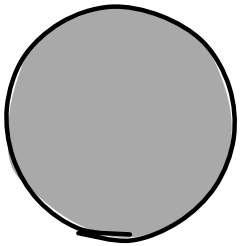
WHERE THIS COMES FROM

AOTEAROA

In 1988 a Māori-led report, *Puao-te-Ata-tu*, told the New Zealand government its welfare system was racist and was taking Māori children from their whānau. A year later the law changed: before a court decides about a young person, the family gathers and decides first.

It drew on Māori practice: whānau, hapū, iwi, a child as everyone's responsibility. Māori critics like Moana Jackson and Juan Tauri point out the state borrowed the form and kept the power.

BOTH ARE TRUE. HOLD BOTH.



WHERE THIS COMES FROM

DINÉ PEACEMAKING

Hózhǫ́ǫjí naat'áanii.

Older than the United States. The Navajo Nation wrote circle practices back into its own courts in 1982.

A naat'áanii is not a neutral mediator. They're someone respected, often kin, who will teach and tell you what they think. People talk it out with relatives present until they reach nályéél, making right, on the way back to hózhǫ́, balance.

Diné say of someone who does harm: he acts as if he has no relatives. So the answer isn't isolation. It's relatives.

Robert Yazzie, once Chief Justice of the Navajo Nation, calls this horizontal justice. No one above, no one below.

BEFORE

THE KEEPER'S JOB

Keepers aren't in charge. They hold the shape so everyone else can be in it. Two keepers is better than one.

- [ ] Invite people. Tell them what it is, how long it runs, and that they can always pass.
- [ ] Choose the room. Set the chairs before anyone arrives.
- [ ] Make the centerpiece. Bring a talking piece.
- [ ] Write the questions. Do the time math.
- [ ] Plan the opening and the closing.
- [ ] If anything heavy might come up, talk with people one on one first.

THE KEEPER'S JOB

DURING AND AFTER

Open. Introduce the talking piece. Say the guidelines, or make them together.

Answer the questions too. You're in the circle, not above it.

Keep time gently. Hold the guidelines.

Speak without the piece only when the circle needs tending. Do it rarely.

Close on time, even when it's going well.

AFTER

Check in with anyone who seemed shaken.

Keepers talk to each other: what worked, what didn't, how you're doing.

REST. HOLDING A CIRCLE IS WORK.

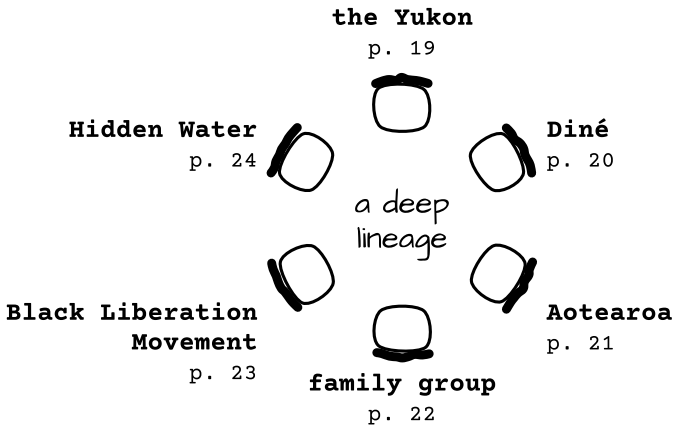
WHERE THIS COMES FROM

A DEEP LINEAGE

Nobody invented circle. Anyone who says they did is selling something.

I don't think of this as a debt. It's a lineage, and keeping circle makes us its descendants, with a responsibility to remain in relationship with where we come from. What follows is partial. Each of these is a whole world; this is a zine.

The circles I keep with Hidden Water come through Kay Pranis, who learned from Tagish and Tlingit teachers in the Yukon, where in the 1990s communities pulled sentencing out of the courtroom's rows and into a ring of chairs.



A CIRCLE IS NOT THERAPY. A DEBATE. A MEETING WITH AN AGENDA. A TRIAL.

No one is diagnosed. No one wins. There is no verdict. The keeper isn't the expert on your life.

YOU ARE.

WHEN IT GOES SIDEWAYS

Most circles wobble. Here's what keepers do.

Someone talks a long time. Let them finish. Before the next round, say how much time is left. You can use a timer if the group agrees. Don't single anyone out.

Someone answers someone else. Advice, a question, "me too." Say the guideline again, to everyone: we speak from our own experience. Speak from your experience as an example: "When I heard some folks offering advice in the last round, it made me feel…"

Nobody talks. Wait longer than feels comfortable. Answer first yourself. If it's still quiet, the question may be too big. Go lighter.

AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, LET THE CIRCLE HOLD THE RUPTURES.

THE HARDER ONES

Someone is overwhelmed. Slow down. Offer a breath, feet on the floor. They can pass. Pause the round if you need to.

Someone leaves the room. Let them go. A second keeper can step out to check on them. The circle can keep going or wait. A ground rule about this is a good idea.

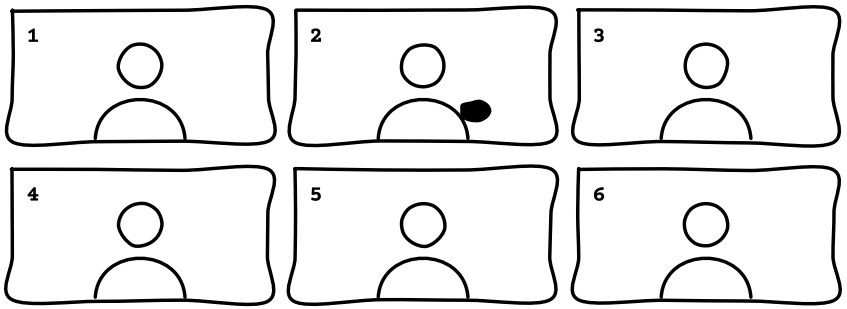
Someone says something that hurts someone else. Pause the round. Name the guideline. Check in with the person it landed on, during or after. Talk with the speaker one on one.

An argument starts. Stop. Put the talking piece back in the middle. Breathe. Sometimes the right move is to end early and talk separately.

ENDING EARLY IS ALLOWED.

ON A SCREEN

Circles work really well on video calls.



Post the speaking order in the chat. It stands in for the ring. You can often drag the video tiles into the chosen order.

Each person holds up their own object when it's their turn to share.

Mute when you're not speaking. Cameras on if you can, off if you need to.

When passing to the next person, do so by name: "Passing to…" And they can say, "Thank you, received."

Ask for a private spot and headphones. Confidentiality includes who can overhear.