

ACTIVITY: Story Circle

TIME: 45 minutes+ (depending on size of group)

DESIGNED FOR: Groups of 6, up to 12

NEEDS: Quote, story, or question for reflection; timer

Description: A Story Circle is a structured format for a guided conversation, led by a facilitator, that gives participants a chance to speak and share space. Participants use “I” statements and speak from their own experiences. Silence is a member of the group. To begin, a prompt (a question posed, or a short passage or quotation read) is shared with the group for reflection. The guided conversation then proceeds in three rounds (with optional additional introductory round) as described below. This exercise works best with small groups of 5-8 people and can work with groups up to 12.

An example of a prompt: *“What’s an experience you’ve had or a moment you’ve witnessed in 2021 that continues to resonate for you and you’d like to share?”*

News features, biographic profiles, or short stories that are relevant to the audience or topic of discussion also work well in Story Circles. In this format, these are other examples of prompts to consider posing to the group after sharing a reading:

- *What word/phrase stood out to me in the passage read? What is my thinking or feeling response to this quote/passage? Or what is my physical reaction to this quote/passage?*
- *What ideas reflected in this quote/passage are similar to other books I have read or songs you have heard? How do the ideas reflected in this quote/passage relate to my life or experiences? How do the ideas reflected in this quote/passage relate to our community – past, present, future?*

Ground Rules: In a Story Circle, there are no observers – only participants, and to listen is to participate. Participants practice active listening; turn off cell phones and avoid other distractions. During the Story Circle, participants speak only during their turn. There is no comment or cross talk between individual sharing. There is space for group reflection at the end. The facilitator assigns the order of sharing, which is maintained through the first two rounds. In a Story Circle, what’s said stays, what’s learned leaves; participants respect one another’s privacy. **The person telling their story is the expert of their own experience.**

Setup: Form a small circle of up to 12 people sitting in chairs or on the floor.

Instructions:

1. The facilitator invites participants to take a deep breath and get comfortable. The facilitator shares with the group of the Ground Rules (included above). “After brief introductions, we will start the Story Circle. Each of you will have 3 minutes to share, and we’ll go around the circle two times. As the facilitator, I will raise a finger to let you know when you have 1 minute left. This will let you know it is time to find an ending to the story. There will be a pause for silence between each story. Use this time to reflect. After each speaker finishes, I will thank them, and invite the next speaker to begin when ready.” (The facilitator should only say “thank you” – and not offer additional comments.)

- OPTIONAL: If the group doesn't know each other well, before the Story Circle begins, start with a short Introductory Round, where participants introduce themselves, such as: "Share your name and something that made you laugh recently." (10 minutes for a group of 6)
2. Round 1: The facilitator reminds participants of the speaking order. The facilitator then shares the prompt or reading, followed by the question. When the first participant begins to speak, the facilitator starts the 3-minute timer, raising a finger at 1 minute remaining. After each person finishes, say: "Thank you" and then invite the next speaker to begin when they are ready. Participants are reminded use "I" statements and speak only from their experiences. (20 minutes for group of 6)
 3. Round 2: The facilitator reminds participants the speaking order is same for this round. There is no additional prompt or question. In this round, participants can connect with other stories they heard in Round 1, continue or add to the story they originally shared, or tell something new. However, there is still no cross talk or discussion, and participants should use "I" statements and still speak from their own experiences. The facilitator again gives each participant 3 minutes, with 1 minute warning, thanks each speaker, and invites next speaker. (20 minutes for group of 6)
 4. Round 3: This is a group discussion round, and the structured circle sharing is replaced with participants raising hands and being recognized by the facilitator to speak. Taking turns encouraged, but it is not formalized as in the first two rounds. The facilitator should let the conversation in this round unfold organically, guided by the group with little intervention. However, if someone is dominating the discussion, the facilitator should try to make space for others to contribute. If there is a lull in conversation, the facilitator can introduce some of these questions: (10 minutes for group of 6)
 - *How do these stories relate to your own experience?*
 - *What stood out to you in the stories that you heard?*
 - *What common threads did you hear in our stories?*
 - *What were some differences in the stories? Why do you think that is?*
 - *How did someone else's story open a window into an experience you've never had?*
 - *What is one image or moment from someone else's story that will stay with you? Why?*
 - *What did you hear that is missing from the current conversation on this topic?*
 - *What is one action you are inspired to take based on the stories you heard?*
 5. The facilitator should then close the Story Circle, summarizing themes that emerged and thanking participants for their sharing. Participants are reminded again to respect the privacy of the Story Circle: what was shared in the Story Circle stays, and what was learned in the Story Circle is what leaves.

The facilitator can choose to debrief the experience of the Story Circle itself with the group, if they would like.