

The Learning Circle

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Participants: Participants may include workers, residents, family, and community members or any combination thereof. The ideal number of circle participants is 10-15. If more than 20 are involved, consider suggesting that everyone limit their responses to a sentence or two.

Goal: To develop common ground and mutual respect among the diversity of the nursing home residents, direct care givers, families, management, different departments, and professions.

RULES FOR THE LEARNING CIRCLE:

Everyone sits in a circle without tables or other obstructions blocking their view of one another.

One person is the facilitator to pose the question or issue. (The question and facilitator may have been determined ahead of time by the team/individual planning the circle. If a universally negative response to a question is predicted, consider shaping the question into two parts. For example: "Share one thing that worries you and one thing that excites you about...")

Be aware that emotional topics can be overwhelmingly in large circles. If the facilitator believes a question will elicit strong feelings of sadness, depression, grief, or anger limit the number of participants to 8-10 and keep them apprised of the time allotted for the circle so they may adjust themselves emotionally. Keep the time per person fairly short (30 seconds is good.) Remember you will be opening it up for discussion immediately after, and it does not take too long to share the feeling. The interpretation or the reasons why would, in this circumstance, be better in general discussion so that people may support, motivate, placate, and cheer as needed.

The facilitator poses the question or issue and asks for a volunteer. A volunteer in the circle responds with his/her thoughts on the chosen topic. The person sitting to the right or left or the first respondent goes next, followed one by one around the circle until everyone has spoken on the subject without interruption.

No cross talk. The facilitator should have made this rule clear at the beginning so that they do not need to interrupt often to enforce the rule of no talking across the circle. (Involuntary laughter and simple words of empathy should not be quelled. But others may not add their thoughts or opinions on an issue until it is their turn to speak.)

One may choose to pass rather than to speak when their time comes. But after everyone else in the circle has had their turn, *the facilitator goes back to those who passed and allows each one the opportunity* to respond. Of course no one is forced to speak, but there is the expectation that they will. (Usually, they do respond with gentle encouragement from the facilitator who may need to prompt the talkative to hold their tongue.)

Open general discussion on the topic after everyone has had a chance to speak. While on the surface, the Learning Circle is simply a common sense technique for organizing meetings; there are subtle, underlying forces (of sharing, respect, and broadening one's perspective) at work that yield astounding results.