

CIRCLE OF SUPPORT (FRIENDS)

Jack Pearpoint & Marsha Forest (circa 1991)

First Circle: Circle of INTIMACY

Second Circle: Circle of FRIENDSHIP

Third Circle: Circle of PARTICIPATION

Fourth Circle: Circle of EXCHANGE

Fill Circles from the Outside-in!

This exercise is a social scan. It will give a quick picture of who is in your life. It is useful to gain clarity about who might be involved in certain activities, or circles that need to be filled. We recommend this tool personally and consider it an essential preventive health check for students, teachers and citizens. The hidden key question is: "Who loves this person?"

Instructions:

- Draw four concentric circles.
- Put yourself in the middle then take a few minutes to fill in the people in each of your four circles.
- **FIRST Circle: The Circle of INTIMACY**
List the people most intimate in your life - those you cannot imagine living without.
- **SECOND Circle: The Circle of FRIENDSHIP**
List good friends - those who almost made the first circle.
- **THIRD Circle: The Circle of PARTICIPATION**

List people, organizations, and networks you are involved with (work colleagues, the choir, the square dance club, your softball team, etc. - people/groups you where you participate.

- **FOURTH Circle: The Circle of EXCHANGE**

List people you PAY to provide services in your life. (medical professionals, tax accountants, mechanics, hairdressers, barbers, teachers, etc.)

Note: People can be in more than one circle. Example: your doctor or teacher could also be a very close friend; a deceased parent/friend or even a pet, might be an intimate personal supporter, etc.

To illustrate, a high school teacher's experience using a circle of friends process will be described. This teacher decided she wanted to avoid burning out and needed to inject life back into her students, herself, and the school. She knew she could not change everything, but she could make some changes for at least a few of her students who had been labeled "at risk", disabled, and/or were on the verge of dropping out of school. Her goal was to restore hope, and build relationships with other students.

Circle 1: The Circle of Intimacy

The teacher gathered about 50 students together and told them she wanted to have a frank discussion about friends and how to build more solid relationships in the school. She did not single out any individual, but talked in general for about half an hour about her own vision and beliefs in relationships and friendship as the core of a good school. She played music softly in the background and drew colorful images as she spoke. She then drew four concentric circles on the chalkboard. She gave each student a sheet of paper that also had four concentric circles and requested that they put their name in the center of the inner circle. She modeled this by putting her name in the center of her circle. Then she directed them to write, on the first and smallest circle, the names of all the people closest to their heart and those that would make them miserable if they were no longer in their lives. She gave an example of her own life by putting her husband, her mother, her two children, and for fun, her computer, as she was an avid computer fan. She also put in the spirit of a friend of hers who had died two years prior.

Circle 2: The Circle of Friendship

Then she explained that the second circle was for people who were good friends, but not as close as those identified in the first circle. Again, she

modeled this by using examples from her own life; she had six friends that she called all the time and two others who she saw once year but who called frequently. She also included some family members, a few teachers that she worked with, and her cat. She then asked the students to fill in their second circle, and found that the classroom was very quiet and that the students were taking this activity very seriously.

Circle 3: The Circle of Participation

The teacher explained that the third circle was for individuals or groups of people who they really liked but who were not very close. She modeled by identifying teachers at the high school; members of the church choir where she sings, her tennis partners, and members of her exercise class. She also listed individuals she sees occasionally, but who come and go, and three relatives she likes but seldom sees.

Circle 4: The Circle of Exchange

After the students had completed their third circle, she explained that the fourth circle was for people who are paid to be in their lives, such as teachers and doctors. She identified her doctor, chiropractor, and housekeeper as those people who were paid to be in her life. The students followed by identifying those people in their lives who were paid to be there. The circles were now complete.

The teacher explained that she could tell a lot about a person's basic 'health' by looking at the pattern of their completed circles. Circles that are relatively 'full' reflect a 'capacity' to deal with the ups and downs of life. People with 'full circles' are not alone, and when good or difficult circumstances arise, they have people in their lives who will go for a quiet walk - or organize a party. They are not alone.

She also explained that a different pattern is unfortunately too common. The pattern is relatively 'empty circles' with perhaps a few people in the inner circle and a very sparse array until the fourth/exchange circle - people paid to be in your life.

She explained that when someone has been 'labeled' into the 'special' world, we often see a very different pattern of relationships. There is usually a circle of intimacy. But in circle two, there will be fewer people, sometimes none. In the third circle - very few connections. The pattern of the fourth circle is an explosion with often ten to thirty people paid to be in this person's life.

The teacher asked for a student to volunteer to share their completed circles. They held up the completed circles diagram of the volunteer and read the names of the people in each circle. An actual completed set of circles of a student who has a high quality of life experiences and opportunities follows. They agreed that this example revealed a full life,

Then she showed the students a completed set of circles that reflected a student who had disability and "at risk" labels. The circles were much emptier.

She asked them to describe how they would feel if those were their circles. See Figure 3 for a completed set of circles reflecting students with disabilities and "at risk" labels. The most frequent response was that "the only people who are involved in this student's life were her family and those people who were paid to be there".

In addition, the students also responded with the following descriptors:

How would you feel if you had no friends?

Lonely	depressed
Confused	unwanted
upset	isolated
rejected	horrible
isolated	humorless
distraught	frustrated
suicidal	

Then she asked the students to identify what they would do? (How would they act?) if these empty circles were representative of their life. Their responses were:

What would you do if you had no friends?

commit suicide	kick
die	have a baby
try to make friends	take drugs
move to a deserted island	drink
do something really drastic	kill someone
stay in bed	get a tutor

A passionate discussion poured out of the students. They began talking about all the pressures they feel from their families, the school, their teachers, and society in general. They identified that they felt "pressure" as they put it, "to look good, to do well and to achieve a lot." They felt the general attitude of teachers was that if they could not make it to university they were a total failure. The teacher listened and contributed to the discussion. She explained that she started the discussion to see how many students would be interested in helping her figure out how to fill in the circles of those students who were isolated and without friends.

For Friends and Intimacy: Build from the Outside In

The teacher explained that if they knew someone whose circles were not full, her strategy would be to "fill the circles from the outside circle inward". For example, if 'Jane' were lonely, we would start by gradually getting Jane involved in groups and organizations in order to find people who would be more interested in more personal commitments. She explained that she was not asking, "Who wants to be Jane's friend?" which is a question searching for failure. Rather, she would ask "Who knows Jane and is willing to brainstorm with me ideas for getting Jane more involved?" For example, if Jane likes films, maybe we could identify someone who could invite her to the film club.

The teacher asked the students if there was anyone who wanted to carry on this discussion and help to figure out ways to build community and circles in their school. To her surprise, all but three students signed up and said they wanted to meet again and often.

Circle of Friends is not a trick or a gimmick; it is a powerful tool. Like a chisel, it can be used to pry open one's heart, soul, and thoughts; or to create a work of art. A work of art does not happen overnight; neither does building circles or communities. Circles and community building is a commitment. It is as important as math, physics, or history. It is part of a curriculum of caring. It is holistic, powerful and not a thing you do once, then walk away. It is an ongoing strategy for growth, change, and development.

We believe all of us have the capacity to gently reach out to another person and assist them to build circles of friends. People with healthy circles don't need to join "gang" and have a better safer life - because it is filled with people.

Each of us has choices - about whether we will pass each other without stopping, listening, or really seeing. Or we could build/be part of someone's circle of friends.

What is the most important thing in the world?

Tis people! Tis people! Tis people!

Maori Proverb