

CIRCLE SOLUTIONS FOR STUDENT WELLBEING

SUE ROFFEY

3RD EDITION

 CORWIN



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Circle Solutions for Challenging Situations

This chapter deals with some of the most difficult issues students might face and the feelings that may arise from these. Some challenging situations are short term, others ongoing and part of life. We include here some of the more recent concerns arising for young people. These issues are often at the root of many of the social, emotional and behavioural concerns manifested in school.

The aims of Circle strategies in this chapter are to:

- provide an opportunity to talk about challenging issues safely;
- show students that others have similar experiences and they are not alone;
- help students learn the skills involved in effective problem-solving;
- construct coping strategies;
- explore difficult feelings and how to stop these from becoming overwhelming;
- encourage students to develop collaborative solutions to problematic issues;
- reflect on individual and class responsibilities.

Introducing Issues Safely

Individuals need to feel comfortable and safe when difficult issues are being addressed in a Circle, and teachers need to feel confident about facilitating. The use of puppets, stories and games engages students with limited personal risk. Should students become distressed in any way, however, the facilitator needs to give them the opportunity to opt out. It is essential to follow this up with a conversation that shows concern and, if appropriate, a referral to a suitable professional.

Puppets

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Creative teachers use puppets to motivate young students to be thoughtful problem-solvers. Give puppets names and characters and make them regular visitors to the Circle. Puppets can talk with the teacher and the children about problems such as being teased

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or left out, not being sure about something or being frightened. The puppets ask for suggestions as to what they might do. The students can discuss the puppets' problems in small groups and give feedback in the Circle. A follow-up in the next Circle session reinforces the learning.

Stories

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Stories are a useful means to engage students and stimulate discussion. These are available both in books and other media for a wide range of ages and abilities. They free up individuals to talk about issues rather than divulging personal events.

The facilitator reads a short story or shows a short film to the Circle, focusing on a specific issue, such as life changes, loss, failure, being sick, disability, racism, sexism, violence, family matters, peer group pressure, mental health issues or natural disasters. This is followed by a paired or small group discussion with feedback to the full Circle. The following are general suggestions; some stories give rise to more specific questions.

Small group discussions

What did you feel on hearing this story?

- Did your feelings change as the story went on?
- What do you think were the feelings of the characters in the story?
- Without giving names, do you know anyone who might have had similar experiences?
- Has this story made you think or feel differently about their situation?
- What things could be done to help?
- What does this story mean for our class and/or others in this school?
- What did you think about the ending of the story? What might have been an alternative?

Specific Challenging Issues

Loss

Loss is a serious issue for many young people and at the root of strong emotions. These activities address the universality of this experience. There are some excellent programs available to help students with change and loss.

Silent Statements

Stand up and change places if:

- you have ever moved house;
- you have lived in another country;
- the team you support has ever lost a match;
- someone has taken something that belonged to you or your family;
- a family pet has died;
- you know someone who has lost an important person in their lives.

Loss and Losing

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Learning outcome: to acknowledge that loss happens to everyone, but feelings about this may differ according to circumstances.

In small groups, students make a list of everything that people might lose, from losing a game or a possession to losing an important person. Loss is not only about death, but someone disappearing from your life in other ways, such as in the case of family breakdown.

- What are all the feelings you might experience when this happens?
- Do the circumstances of the loss make a difference to your feelings?
- What might help people come to terms with a loss? Make a list.

Celebrating a Life

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In small groups, discuss how you might celebrate someone's life, or an animal you have loved and lost. Be sensitive to individual situations here.

Make a poster with drawings and words.

What might you want to put in a memory box to help remember them?

Losing Someone at School

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Losing someone at school and loss of trust can happen at any age. How the following activities are introduced needs to be appropriate for the level of understanding of the pupils involved.

Without going into details or breaching confidentiality, the facilitator – who could be a counsellor alongside the teacher – speaks to the Circle about what happened. Facts are usually easier to deal with than imagination. It is useful to acknowledge the range of emotions that may accompany this announcement. These include:

- shock;
- sadness;
- emptiness;
- anger;
- numbness;
- confusion;
- fear;
- indifference.

Not everyone will feel the same. How individuals feel depends on many things, including how well they knew the person, the circumstances of the death and what else is happening in their own life.

Ask students to talk to each other in pairs about what support people might need at this time. What, if anything, do they need for themselves and what could they do for others? The facilitator might then choose one or more of the following activities, perhaps leaving this for later Circle sessions.

In pairs, talk about the person and in what ways they might be missed.

In small groups, plan a memorial Circle for the person. Each group decides what they will do.

The Last Straw

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Learning outcome: to realize that just one thing can tip people over the edge.

Give small groups a pile of thin coloured sticks (straws) about six inches long. Taking it in turns with one stick each, students build these into a tower with four sticks for each level. This can be at any angle. Each person adds one stick in turn until the tower collapses. The same activity can take place with playing cards.

Discussions

Often, many negative or difficult things happen before you get to that 'last straw', when you feel that you can no longer 'hold it all together':

- Can you give examples of how things pile up?
- How can you tell if someone is getting very stressed? What are the signs?
- What might stop stress building up?
- How might you increase the resources to cope?

The group feeds back their ideas to the Circle.

Sadness and Depression

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Learning outcome: to understand the difference between sadness and depression so it is clear when further support is required.

Ask for two volunteers to stand in the middle of the Circle – one to represent sadness and one to represent depression. Ask others in the Circle to say how each might stand and how each face might look. The two actors comply with instructions.

Small groups, including the volunteers, address the following questions:

- What might have happened to each person (sadness is usually a response to specific events, while depression might not be)?
- Can you usually tell if someone is sad?
- Can you always tell if someone is depressed?
- What is the difference between the two?
- What does the sad person need (comfort, a good friend, time)?
- What does the depressed person need (more specialist help)?

Silent Statements

Stand up and change places if:

- you have ever had a day in which nothing seemed to go right;
- you have ever felt like staying in bed all day;
- you know someone who is sad and upset about something that is going on in their life;
- you know someone who has recovered from a difficult time and is now doing well.

The L.A.T.E.R. framework

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Learning outcome: to have an effective way of responding to a student in crisis.

Teachers in many high schools have had to deal with suicide and suicidal ideation in their students. This is very distressing for everyone. Research appears to show, however,

that young people are more likely to talk to their friends than adults about their worries and even their plans. It is therefore critical that all young people (and adults) learn this framework for responding. It is adapted from Michael Tunnecliffe's original model.

Table 13.1 The L.A.T.E.R. framework

L stands for Listen	Do not interrupt, give advice or talk about your own problems ('see Active Listening in Chapter 8). Nod, say 'go on' or ask them to clarify if you don't understand.
A is for Acknowledge	Show that you believe that what this person is experiencing and what they feel are real and important to them. Do not try and cheer them on or, even worse, suggest they are over-reacting.
T is for Talk	Discuss with them all the options available – it is a brainstorming session. This is not an opportunity to take over the conversation or to ask about specific plans but to join in with ideas, i.e. 'Have you thought about ... ?'
E is for Encouragement	Encourage the person to choose a safe option.
R stands for Review	Arrange to see the person again to see how things are going. The more worried you are, the sooner this needs to be.

* Adapted from Michael Tunnecliffe and Kerryn Ashford-Hatherly (2017) *Peer Support Officer Training Manual*. Perth: Ashcliffe Psychology.

In small groups, pupils discuss this framework to answer the following:

- Would this be a useful response to a friend in need?
- Is there anything you would change?
- How might you support someone if they tried to help a friend in this way and it was not successful?

In spite of everything, life is worth living

MS

Learning outcome: to reflect on broader perspectives in life.

A further activity, especially following a suicide, might be this one.

Spread pictures or symbol cards around the Circle and ask students to pick up one that shows something that might make life worth living. They discuss why they picked this up with a partner.

With the proviso that anyone can 'pass', students complete this sentence:

- Life is worth living because ...

Managing mountains

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Learning outcome: to reflect on what has worked in the past to overcome challenges.

In pairs, each student draws a mountain and a small person at the bottom of it. This mountain represents the biggest challenge that the student has faced. Each student talks to the other about what has helped them manage this mountain in their life. Do they see themselves as getting through it, over it or around it?

Feed back to the group. Each student says which strengths, qualities, person or other resource helped their partner.

Current Issues

The following issues have been of increasing concern since the second edition of this book was published and are now addressed here.

It is important for students to have the opportunity to reflect on and discuss in a safe and structured way how these issues may impact on them and their futures.

Wanna be in my Gang?

MS

Learning outcome: to raise awareness of what is good about all being together and when this might become uncomfortable and/or dangerous.

Some gangs are good to belong to, while others lead to crime, violence and fear. The following statements can be divided into two piles. Ask pairs of students to divide these statements up into positive and negative. Ask them to identify the emotions for each statement.

Table 13.2 Gangs good and bad

Makes you feel good to belong.	You have to be violent to show loyalty.
You are able to disagree with others in the gang without fear.	One of the reasons for the gang is to attack others.
Gang members are frightened of gang leaders.	Members have the choice to leave if they wish.
Loyalty is linked to obedience.	The gang exists to have fun together.
You might get rich belonging to a gang.	You could lose years of your life in prison because of gang activity.

Once this activity is complete, ask students to work together to discuss the following:

- Getting into a gang: what would make someone want to become a gang member?
- Getting out of a gang: why would someone want to leave? How easy would it be?
- Alternatives: what alternatives are there to belonging to a gang that would give someone some of the positives of being a member?
- What might help young people stay out of a violent gang?

Radicalization

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Learning outcome: to raise awareness of how young people are groomed.

This activity follows on from the previous one. Young people want to have a purpose in life, feel valued by others and have a sense of belonging. Some are therefore vulnerable to being recruited into extremist groups. Messages on social media may use these worthy motivations as hooks to get individuals to join organizations, many of which are detrimental to their overall wellbeing. People grooming for radicalization have similar tactics to those grooming for sexual abuse and exploitation, including offers of support and friendship.

Silent Statements

Stand up and change places if you agree with the following:

- You can't believe all that you see and read on the internet.
- You need to weigh up all the pros and cons before making any decision for your future.
- Hate can be contagious and spread like a disease.
- You need to be wary of those offering friendship online.

Glad to be Gay

MS

Learning outcome: to acknowledge that everyone has the right to be who they are.

Although it is much better than it was a generation ago, sexual identity can still be a struggle.

Silent Statements

Stand up and change places if you agree with the following:

- Everyone has the right to be who they are.
- People do not choose to be either gay or straight – it is how they are made.
- Hatred of gay and transgender people is known as homophobia.
- Homophobia may be linked to fear of what is different.
- Everyone has the right to choose who they love.

Groups of three or four work together to design a poster or create a collage that illustrates the last sentence.

Hope, not Hate

MS

Learning outcome: to recognize how extremist groups work and consider alternative ways of being.

There is increasing concern about the rise of far-right groups who perpetrate hate and violence towards minority groups. Many have the same motivations as Islamic extremists – to feel they belong and have a sense of purpose. Their aim is primarily destructive. In this activity, groups of three or four use Table 13.3 to consider the views and behaviours that are indicative of extremism and to identify alternative positions.

Go online here to download Table 13.3:

<https://study.sagepub.com/corwin/roffey3e>

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Table 13.3 Recognizing extremism

Recognizing extremism	Alternative position: What could we do to turn hate into hope?
The talk is around 'them' and 'us'.	
One or more groups in society are denigrated and blamed for problems.	
Pride is linked to patriotism/nationalism/religion – supporting your country or faith at all costs.	
Someone who is different in language, culture, colour or religion is seen as inferior.	
People who are different – from another group – are demonized and stripped of their humanity.	
Violence against minorities and/or those who support opposing views is seen as legitimate.	
Language on social media is often extreme and threatening.	
How things were in the past is often seen as better than in the present.	
Leaders often stir up strong emotions that are contagious in groups.	
Evidence of historical inhumanity (the holocaust, slavery, massacres of indigenous peoples) is minimized or denied.	

**Photocopiable:**

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Extension Discussions

How do you feel about each statement?

Who could get hurt either on the outside (physically) or on the inside (their feelings) if people thought this and acted on it?

Do we have a responsibility to disagree? How is it best to do this? How can we do this safely?

What would you see, hear or notice in our communities if we turned 'hate' into 'hope'?

Pornography

The majority of young people have seen pornography online by the time they are sixteen. This can give a false impression of healthy sexual relationships, especially around consent. For some, it can influence their behaviour and for others it leaves them experiencing a range of negative emotions, from confusion to fear and disgust.

The Birds and the Bees Tree

S

Learning outcome: to reflect on what is involved in a positive intimate relationship in order to counteract material that students may have seen online.

Small groups of three or four are given a large piece of paper and asked to draw a tree with roots, trunk, branches, leaves and fruit. This is 'the birds and the bees' tree, and represents a healthy and happy intimate relationship where partners are equal, respectful and activities are consensual.

They are asked to write in what information and experiences would form the roots and trunk, what verbal and physical behaviours would be the branches, write in the qualities of relationships on the leaves and describe the feelings represented by the blossoms.

Groups are also asked to consider what might lead to the tree becoming diseased and what would happen to the leaves and blossom if it did.

Each group displays their tree in the centre of the Circle and all students check out what they have in common.

Embedding Circle Solutions as a Tool for Wellbeing

School policies on social justice, equal opportunities and safety need to be clear and effective.

It is helpful for all adults to be aware of the multiple issues that may affect student learning and behaviour, and to use relational/emotionally literate responses that maintain high expectations but do not exacerbate difficulties.

Resources

Personal, Social and Health Education: www.pshe-association.org.uk/curriculum-and-resources

Information and Support for Depression: <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/conditions/depression>

A Guide to Coming Out for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Young People: www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/media/1036/coming-out-guide-for-lgb-people.pdf

Educate against Hate: Information and Resources for teachers: <https://educateagainsthate.com/teachers>

Why we need to talk with young people about pornography: <https://uksaysnomore.org/talkingtoyoungpeopleaboutporn>

Seasons for Growth is a well-regarded program for supporting young people in times of loss and change (training is available worldwide): www.seasonsforgrowth.org.uk/programmes/children-and-young-peoples-programme

My Troubled Mind: Stories about Teenage Mental Health. A BBC resource: www.bbc.com/teach/class-clips-video/ks3-ks4-PSHE-my-troubled-mind/zdjv7nb