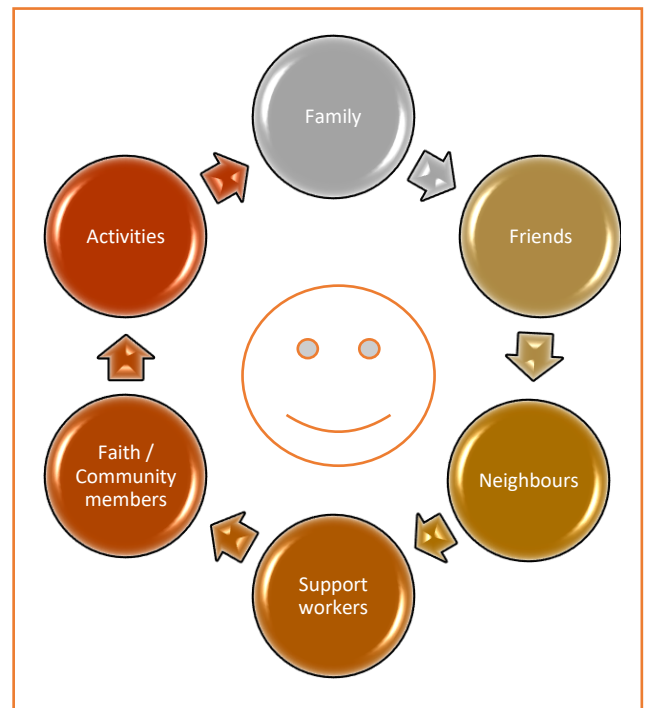


Circles of Support

A 'how to' guide
To help you develop your own circle

A Circle of Support is simply a group of people who come together voluntarily and intentionally to help promote and progress the goals and interests of one person.



We have put this guide together to help you to think about and start your own circle of support, it could be for yourself or more often it will be for a person you love and care for. We have found that it may not be easy to start, but the results can be worth the effort and a circle, once formed can last a lifetime.

- **Circles of Support help consider possibilities**
- **Circles of Support make time and space for thinking, planning and dreaming**
- **Circles of Support are all about the focus person**

Members of your circle of support, how often they meet, and the issues they talk about, will be as unique as their focus person in the centre. There is no one size fits all, it's what works for you.

What families have said about circles of support?

- Things happen because of the people, people really like being involved
- I decided that I couldn't come up with all the ideas myself and that starting a circle could bring in some fresh perspectives. Problems that seemed insurmountable were solved
- My son has had more confidence since the circle started. People who he likes come together and are there to listen to him and make his plans real. It's created a space for him to be heard
- It can take a lot of effort to get started, but it made so much difference

Why are they useful?

Circles are a natural part of life for most of us. When we are troubled we call on our family and friends to share our worries and again, when good things happen to share our joy.

We also find our own circles useful to help us think through what we can do and achieve, our dreams, hopes and plans for the future.

Circles naturally support individuals to become better connected in the community and through their connections help to make lasting friendships and relationships.

For people who are at risk of being disempowered, like a person with learning disabilities this does not always happen without intention.

What does a Circle do?

It's a gathering of people who care. They help the focus person to make decisions about their life, change things that may be worrying them or help them to achieve their dreams. Having ideas are great, but making plans from those ideas and acting on them makes the ideas reality.

By meeting at intervals, the group can review progress with the focus person, discuss new goals and alter the path they are on, if that is what the focus person wants.

They intentionally put the person with a learning disability in the centre and help the focus person to keep in charge and in control.

Different people or members bring their own gifts, talents and connections to help get things done.

Circle members can help by connecting people and introducing new ones.

Circle members can help make action plans to bring about positive change.

Circles can be fun, informative and supportive for all members involved.

Who to invite into your Circle?

Circle members can be drawn from family, neighbours, friends or other people who know and care about the focus person. **The key is to invite them.**

Without that **'ask'** there may be many people who don't know how to help or how to offer it.

Research shows that when people were invited to join a Circle of Support they are generally pleased to do so. And if they do say no or only come once, there is no harm done. If you don't ask you will never know.

Your Circle of Support might be small or large and that's okay.

It can grow over time and members might come and go, that's okay too.

If there are support workers or other professionals who know the focus person well, you can invite them in to the Circle of Support from time to time. They may join because they want to, or because they want to share ideas and learn. Or they might be able to share their expertise for a short time when there is a particular issue.

You may also find that there might be people who cannot come to meetings, but they still want to be involved. If this is the case in your Circle, you could ask that person if they could join your meeting via Skype or would they like to receive the notes by email or post to remain informed or use a WhatsApp group. There are lot of ways to be involved, just be creative. Offer the opportunity for people to share their own ideas for the Circle to discuss, they may be able to offer support to the Circle, like research or phone calls, letter writing or just be a sounding board.

A great way to start is by thinking about who the focus person knows. If their network is sparse, start small. You might ask a neighbour who you say hi to, they may have wanted to get to know the person better. What about an old friend you haven't called in ages?

'What can I offer? I don't have any skills'. – You may hear this from potential Circle members. However even people who think they do not have much to offer might share local knowledge, life experience, wisdom, living skills, recipes, jokes, etc.

The point is we **ALL** have something to share. You don't need experts, just people who care.

What is a facilitator and how can they help to manage a circle?

One member, is known as a facilitator.

This role is important as they help the focus person to think about what they might need help with before the first meeting, they help to arrange and run meetings and keep people up to date if they could not attend.

The facilitator can also help a person to think about who else to invite into their circle, and take practical steps, doing the asking, helping to do the inviting etc. This person maybe you or someone who is good at organising? Who do you know who could do this?

Inviting people to join.

As we said before ASK. This is very important. People like invitations. People like to be wanted.

You can invite people by phone, email, WhatsApp, Facebook messenger, letter or face to face.

Tell potential members a little about what you are doing or hoping to do with the Circle. Be welcoming.

A suggested invite could be something like this.

Dear.

We would love for you to join our gathering of xxx's friends at the Red Lion from 2 -4pm on 6th March.

We will provide tea and cakes and hope you will help us as we explore ideas and make plans for xxx's future. Please do come and support us.

Rsvp 079xxxxxxx

This will be the 1st? meeting of xxx's Circle of Support.

What is the purpose of your Circle?

Items that the Circle of Support might want to consider and review with could include.

- Hopes, dreams and life goals
- Having fun and joining new activities
- Making new friends
- Making decisions about support, where to live etc.
- Making financial/legal plans and managing money
- Making a plan for emergencies
- Keeping an eye on things
- Making a plan for the future
- Talking about difficult subjects
- **Having a voice!**

Finding out about what a person's goals really are can be hard, using a tool called MAPS can help (see appendix).

Or just grab a big bit of paper and some pens draw as you ask about dreams, then ask the *what, how, why, when, who* etc. Use probing questions to see how the goals would feel if they were achieved then work towards this. It might be you start with safe, secure, happy, not alone, and work from there. Or you might have a specific goal like visit Paris for a birthday. Again the 'what you do' will be very personal to you and the person your Circle of Support focuses on.

Running your Circle meeting.

Circle meetings can be casual or formal. Regular meetings are best to strengthen the structure and bond between members to start with and then go with what works for you. Some happen once a month or only once or twice a year.

Circle meetings typically take around 1.5 - 2 hours each time. As members are volunteering their time this is important to stick to.

Some circles take place in the focus person's home, some in local venues.

Most of the time the focus person is there but sometimes members do meet without them. This may be because the focus person is not engaged or confident, or there is a sensitive subject to discuss. In this case members should remember to keep the views of the focus person central to their discussion.

Some Circles like to have a plan or agenda to start with. But others just talk about ideas.

You could use a simple agenda like this:

For a first meeting

- 1. Introductions*
- 2. What is a circle of support*
- 3. Life now and how we want it to be*
- 4. Opportunities, activities and options*
- 5. Reflection, review and feedback*
- 6. When shall we meet again*

For ongoing meetings

- 1. Review notes from the last meeting and issues arising*
- 2. Update on action points*
- 3. New opportunities*

It is generally easier to form a Circle when you have committed people already in your life.

When there are few people to draw on the experience from other agencies suggest that it can take up to 2 years to really get going but all Circles of Support are different and some organise quicker, **the important thing is that you try**. Two people can share and shape ideas where one person can't alone.

Top Tips

- Have someone lead Circle meetings
A facilitator to keep time and people on track
- Ask someone to take notes
The actions and important notes and share them with all members
- Set goals or action plans
Short and / or Long term. What, When, Who and How
- Review and reflect
Take stock, update the goals, decide on the purpose and focus for next time
- Celebrate success!
Celebrate the good times and achievements.

Some Circles find having an action plan like this helps focus the discussions,

<i>What</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>By when</i>
<i>Find out costs for cycling sessions</i>	<i>Bill</i>	<i>Next meeting</i>
<i>Speak with MCH about volunteering options</i>	<i>Jean</i>	<i>By 20th March</i>
<i>Speak to a local solicitor and start process to make a trust will</i>	<i>Grace</i>	<i>In next 2 months</i>

Emergency plans and Circles of Support

One of the issues that comes up often in Circles is what will happen when a parent or carer passes away or becomes ill.

Making an effective emergency plan is a great task for a Circle of Support to take on and can put some of the uncertainty and worry aside.

To start you could list the sort of emergency help the focus person might need.

Doing the shopping, cooking, look after the house, managing finances, maintaining contact with health and social services etc.

- Consider how to share contact details, communication passports and other documents the focus person might need them to have
- Find a way for this list of people to meet or contact each other if they don't already know each other
- Keep the plan under review as circumstances change
- Practice and learn from any emergencies. How did people respond, what worked? Were there things you had not thought of before?

What do you need? How can you help?

If people say that they don't know how to help out. Or that no-one would have the time to help out, this might be of use. You might not want to offend someone or do something that creates them work. Being specific is key. This is true whether you are asking for or offering help in your circle.

<p><i>What about these following ways to reach out and let someone know what you can do:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><i>1) I have 2 hours this Saturday – I could help with cleaning the flat</i><i>2) I can visit with your daughter for an hour on Wednesday nights for the next month.</i><i>3) I have a car and can pick up groceries or drive your son to an appointment.</i><i>4) I'm really good at finding information online – I could look into community support or activities and send you some helpful links.</i> <p>Instead of saying 'how can I help?' you have just made it much easier for your friend or family member to know how you can pitch in.</p>	<p><i>What about these ways for asking for help</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><i>1) I am struggling a little keeping on top of the cleaning</i><i>2) It would be really wonderful for someone to pop in for an hour just for a few weeks so I could have a bath</i><i>3) Would it be possible to pick up some shopping for me if I call you with a list once in a while?</i> <p><i>Or My son has an appointment at Epsom hospital next week, can you help with transport?</i></p> <i>4) I am so bad at technology but I know there is so much more in the community to do, would you be able to have a look online for me?</i> <p>Instead of saying I am ok or just muddling along, you have made it easier for your friends to offer help or say I can't do that but I can do this?</p>
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So where can you find circle members from?

Sometimes you have to be intentional; where natural relationships don't exist,

Intentionally look to develop relationships, reach out within your own networks and explore ways of building connections.

Circles are a way for people to support each other in local communities; so, think about the person's community.

Where does the person go regularly, who are they on first name terms with, how can connections and support be built to deepen their relationship?

For example – 'Mary' got her circle members from her church, going to church regularly has enabled Mary to deepen her relationships and invite more people to become part of her circle.

Facilitators can think about their own relationship networks; do they know someone who could be matched to a circle, perhaps they know someone with a particular gift who can contribute to someone's circle. Who is good at finances or listening for example?

'Barry' thought he has nobody to invite to his circle. After chatting with Barry, a man called James was invited to be part of his circle, James was someone his carer knew who had similar interests to Barry.

We have to be intentional about inviting people in.

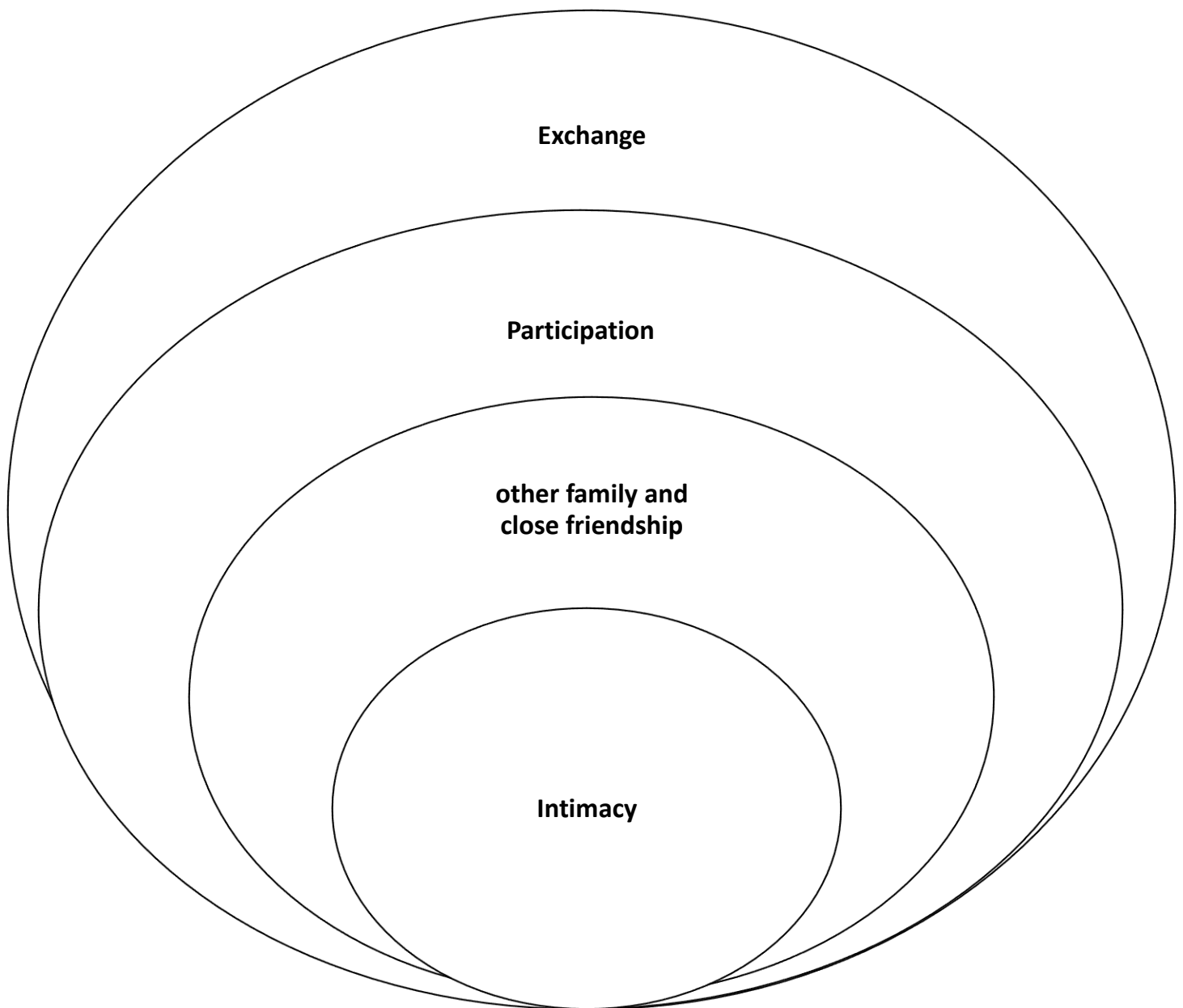
Once you have identified a facilitator think about their wider connections to identify people who may want to join the circle.

Mike became part of Simon's circle after mapping out the facilitator's connections. Mike and Simon have much in common and are both benefitting from their new relationship.

You can also reach out to local voluntary organisations who may be able to involve volunteers in a person's circle, how about a local befriending scheme.

Below is a relationship map you can use to think about who is around the focus person and others in the Circle.

Relationship Map



Use this map to plot who could be invited in to the circle

How to be a good facilitator for a Circle?

1.Be welcoming friendly & approachable - Smiles, warm words, handshakes, hugs as people come into the room depending on your relationship with the participants and the cultural expectations of those you are meeting with all play an important part.

2.Be a good organiser – plan for how the focus person wants the meeting to go, keep time, help arrange the venue and invites Timing is essential and crucial when managing any meeting. Respect start and finish times When times of meetings are not kept to, group members can soon become stressed and resentful depending on their own priorities.

3.Make sure you are a great listener and communicator – use active listening skills, pick up on the key points, clarify, reflect back and question. The purposes of reflecting back and paraphrasing are many and include: They indicate real listening. ‘You have heard what I am saying because you have repeated it’. Many therapists argue that to be really listened to like this can actually bring about personal growth and change with no other intervention being present.

4.Remain person centred, focused and calm - be the constant in the room bring the conversation back to the task in hand and always focused on the person with a learning disability. Be supportive, encouraging, motivated & enthusiastic

5.Be a creative problem solver with the ability to quickly identify opportunities and offers of help. Don’t miss out! Pick up on offers of help and accept them. If they are not acknowledged they will dissolve and the person offering may not feel valued enough to offer again. When you see an opportunity or potential solution explore it, if there are no offers ask for them.

6.Be trustworthy and responsible – remember you are the glue, the constant. If you say you are going to do something, do it. Remember that the focus person may have been let down before. Be honest and clear on what you can and can’t do.

7.Keep a good sense of humour – roll with the punches, life will not act as you expect and nor might your circle all the time. Keep an open mind and don’t get flustered. Remember a smile and a laugh are good for you. Things do not always go as we expect, don’t worry, be happy.

Finally, whatever people can offer should be valued, celebrate and thank them. Time together as a circle is social time too. A chance for the focus person to have friends round just for them

Further guidance and resources

Listed below are video clips from other organisations who also support people to develop circles which you might find useful to watch. And of course, share with circle members. They show what a Circle of Support is and can do.

- <https://youtu.be/yVtCGFHPKWY>
- <https://youtu.be/gvt1ZmVMGEk>
- https://youtu.be/G7tBtm_O9g

A more detailed guide for facilitators can be found here: -

[https://www.pavetheway.org.au/sites/pavetheway.org.au/files/documents/Facilitation ideas and strategies July 2014.pdf](https://www.pavetheway.org.au/sites/pavetheway.org.au/files/documents/Facilitation%20ideas%20and%20strategies%20July%202014.pdf)

And if you are worried that the people you might ask are just too busy or too far away, have a read of Sarah's Story from Pave the Way Australia. It's truly inspiring.

<https://www.pavetheway.org.au/sarahs-support-circle-regional-story>

We hope this guide is useful for you and that your Circle becomes a successful and enduring one.

Appendix

MAPs are a planning style developed by Judith Snow, Jack Pearpoint and Marsha Forest with support from John O'Brien and others, these were the people who first conceived of Circles of Support. The MAP process has eight steps.

Step 1 - What is a MAP?

A facilitator asks people to think of words or images to describe a map. The answers they come up with, such as 'helps people to find their way through unknown territory' or 'helps people to see where they are now and where they need to go', sum up the point of the meeting.

Step 2 - What is the history?

This step allows the individual and those who have known him/her a long time to describe what has happened to him/her in the past. Often, the past is a revelation to others at the meeting and goes a long way to making sense of the present.

Step 3 - What are your dreams?

Dreaming is central to the MAP process. The person is invited to share her dream, and other people may contribute their ideas with the person's permission. Sometimes, people will choose to dream metaphorically. One person said that her dream was encapsulated in a pair of ballet shoes. It was not that she wished to be a ballerina, but that she wanted to have the lightness, speed and agility of a dancer in all the work that she did. The image of ballet shoes had been powerful to her as a child, and was still powerful in a different way in her adult life. For other people, dreaming is more about aspirations – they may want to travel the world or have a house by the sea. Whichever way the dreams are expressed, they provide a very strong focus for the rest of the process.

Step 4 - What are your nightmares?

Just as dreaming gives the group something to work towards, naming nightmares gives the group something to work away from. Although this step can be difficult for people, it is useful in allowing the group and the individual to express their fears and have them acknowledged. It may become clear that the person is very close to their nightmare now, or that the most likely service

