

Peacemaking Circles & Community-Based Peace Program

“True peace is not simply the absence of hostilities or agreements to end the violence. True peace requires for some, a change of heart. It asks of us to be open to understanding the life, context, experiences, and suffering of another, and to demonstrate a willingness to see the humanity in others’ situations and experiences (empathy.)”

Collective Voices offers a training/consulting package that explores:

- The theory and fundamentals of Peacebuilding and the definition and application of a “Restorative Framework.”
- How to effectively facilitate various types of Peacemaking Circles.
- The theory and details included in planning, structuring, and implementing a sustainable Community-Based Peace Program.

This training/consulting also covers the history and applications of Peacemaking Circles. It delves into how to incorporate various types of Peacemaking Circles to address a community’s needs and also outlines the development and implementation of a sustainable community-based Peace Program. Also covered are techniques of effective listening, facilitation basics, and effective Circle Keeping,

A. Peacemaking Circles:

Peacemaking is everything in our lives. It is in our minds, physical bodies, and the voice in our hearts. Circles bring us together to share who we are beyond our appearances. Peacemaking Circles draw directly from Indigenous traditions around the world. They are not just for conflict - they are used both proactively for community building, celebrating, and honoring, and as a response to crime, harm, violence, and negative impacts. Circles are described as “Peacemaking” because the process builds a foundation of understanding and trust as well as a commitment to share values that people need in order to work things out in a peaceful way. The ultimate question of justice is “how can we live together in a good way.” In that regard, Circles are also about justice. The justice of being heard, valued, and respected. Circles are a force of transformation that is greater than the sum of the individual that make it up.

Circles have been around for thousands of years as a way to be in community with one another. What sets Circles apart lies in the process – the real force comes from the values the Circle embodies. Most of the spaces we experience daily are about power and values of control. Circles affirm a social order based on inclusiveness, equality, and respect for all members. Circles work to create a space to discuss, share, improve and strengthen relationships, remove barriers to effective communication, and respect differences. Circles assume a universal human wish to be connected to others in a good way. Circles are a philosophy, a method of relating, and a healing intervention that can support people taking responsibility for how they have had a negative impact on others. Circles involve people of all ages and backgrounds and across lines of serious conflict and division and varying perspectives. Circles are a forum where people can come together to be seen and heard - both a right and a vital form of social and racial justice that is currently missing from many spaces.

Circles have the power to rebuild the three qualities shattered by violence: safety, compassion, and dignity. In Circles, we practice seeing with our heart, speaking from the heart, and listening from the heart. Circles challenge us to shift our mental and emotional framework. Peacemaking Circles use a restorative framework and involve two or more participants. By engaging in the Circle process, we learn how to create a sacred space where we are able to lift barriers and open ourselves up to fresh possibilities for connection, collaboration, creativity, and mutual understanding. Circles promote equality. Everyone is given an equal chance to participate. The belief is different points of view are needed to fully understand what is going on, the full picture that is leading to a compromised and harmonious dynamic. Circles promote 2 important skills – reflection (being aware of ourselves and how we are perceived) and practice (following the agreed upon guidelines which are about how one thinks and behaves.) In a Circle, reasons for your point of view and perspective are welcomed and not seen as excuses, as is the common assumption and narrative in Western society.

Violence is protected by silence and Circles offer the possibility of reconnecting, repairing, and breaking the silence. Violence is the opposite of dialogue. Violence is an act of disconnection. Dialogue allows people to express themselves and their view of reality, to be heard, and to have their views and feelings respected. A functional community is made up of individuals who have the ability to empathize. Circles promote empathy by helping people to understand another’s words, feelings, and attitudes.

The Peacemaking Circle is a container strong enough to hold:

- Anger, frustration, joy, pain, truth, conflict, diverse worldviews, intense feelings, silence, and paradox.
- It is a space in which participants are safe to be their most authentic selves.
- It is a structure to create possibilities for freedom to speak our truth, freedom to drop masks and protections, freedom to be present as whole human beings, freedom to reveal our deepest longings, freedom to acknowledge mistakes and fears, freedom to act in accord without core values.
- The physical format symbolizes shared leadership, equality, connection, and inclusion.

Types of Peacemaking Circles include (but are not limited to): Talking, Understanding, Grief & Healing, Sentencing, Support, Community-Building, Conflict & Repair, Celebration or Honoring Circles, Family Circles.

B. A Community-Based Peace Program:

An effective Community-Based Peace Program can create a change in a community’s culture that moves people away from violence, crime, isolation, and antisocial behavior and towards community, trust, and connection. A Community-Based Peace Program can be implemented at a community center, school, government, or community agency, and for a First Nations tribe.

The components of the Peace Program offer an opportunity to reconnect, repair, and break silence. Silence is a protector of many forms of abuse, violence, family issues, and negative mindsets that hamper people’s ability to overcome challenges, sustain wellness, and be successful in many aspects. A community-based program such as this will, over time, become a safe space for people to come together to effectively resolve conflicts, have dialogue, and build community.

In many communities, people do not have a free, safe, local space to share, heal, discuss, resolve, or celebrate with one another. The Community-Based Peace Program's aim is to address lack of access to vital services that people deserve - services in which residents themselves can become lead facilitators and stakeholders.

Over a pre-determined period of time, the training phase of the Peace Program will train/mentor a group of people by teaching them how to facilitate a variety of types of Peacemaking Circles, Nonviolent Communication, and de-escalation skills, while simultaneously engaging key local leaders to help support the project - the goal is to create a change in community culture that moves away from firearms, violence, and antisocial behavior.

At the conclusion of the training phase of the Peace Program, the community will be able to use this free and accessible program to better address the prevalence and impact of violence and victimization in various neighborhoods and city regions. The components of the Peace Program offer an opportunity to reconnect, repair, and break silence. A community-based program such as this can serve as a place for individuals and groups to come together to effectively both build community and connection and resolve/repair conflicts through two distinct services - Peacemaking Circles and Conflict & Repair Dialogue.

"Having spaces and forums where people can come together to be seen and heard is both a right and a vital form of social and racial justice that is currently missing from many communities, schools, and systems. The children, mothers, fathers, community members, government, police departments, schools, members of faith communities, and, without a doubt, the youth and young adults on the corners will be inserted into the equation to address this problem. We live in an extended community that is in desperate need of a place for people to come and solve conflicts in a non-violent fashion, and to have the difficult, honest, and sometimes emotional discussions that lead to change. A place where there are opportunities to move their lives forward with opportunities, connection, and hope."

~ Dr. Carolyn Boyes-Watson, Ph.D.