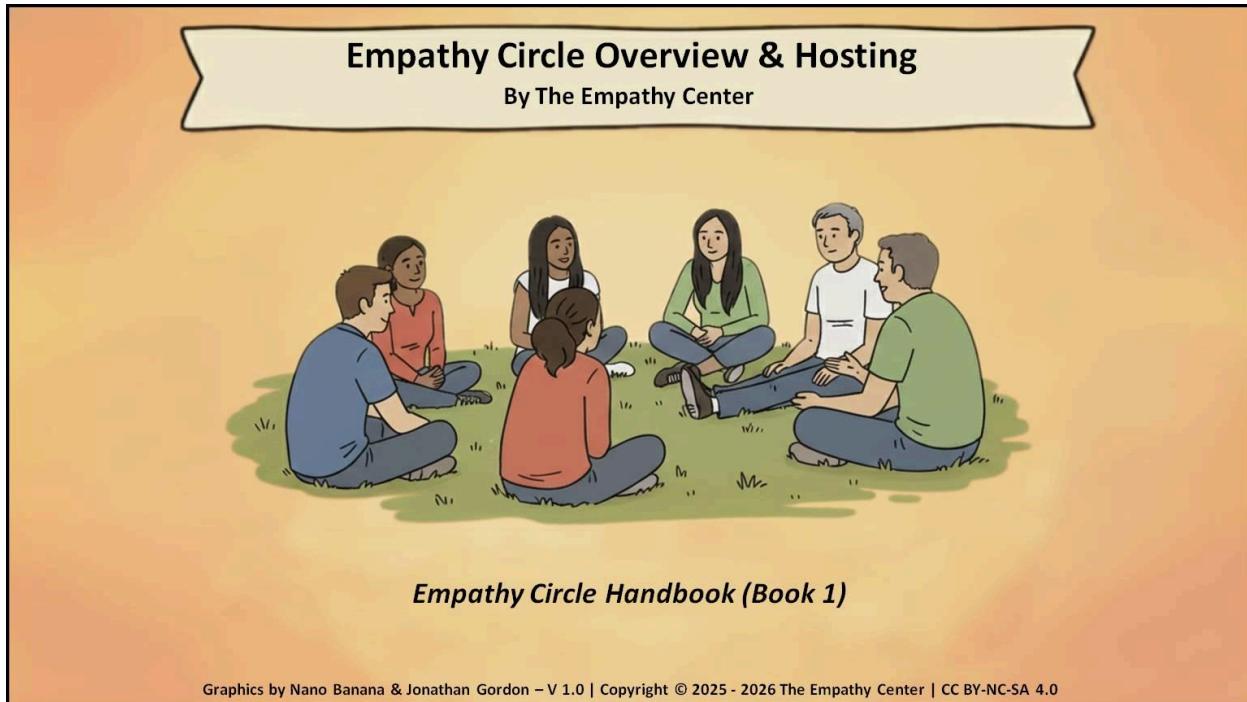


Empathy Circle Overview & Hosting

The Empathy Circle Handbook (Book 1)

By The Empathy Center



Empathy Circle Handbook (Book 1)

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Empathy Circles are a simple yet powerful way to transform how we listen, speak and connect with one another. This handbook serves as a practical guide for learning, teaching and producing the Empathy Circle practice.

Empathy Circles create space for everyone's voice to be heard, fostering mutual understanding and connection.

Whether you're working with families, schools, organizations, communities, or movements for change, Empathy Circles offer a way to build respectful dialogue and stronger relationships. This handbook provides step-by-step instructions to help you introduce and sustain this practice in any setting.

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Introduction

Empathy Circles are a simple yet powerful practice designed to transform how we listen, speak and connect with one another. This handbook is intended for a general audience, from individuals curious about empathy to facilitators seeking to guide others in meaningful dialogue. Its purpose is to teach the practice of Empathy Circles and provide readers with the tools to lead, participate in and adapt these circles in a variety of settings, online, in person, or within community spaces which we call Empathy Cafés.

The rough concept of the Empathy Circle was pioneered by **Edwin Rutsch**. And in 2012 through a collaboration with **Lidewij Niezink, Ph.D** this led to the co-development of the Empathy Circle. In 2016 **Lidewij Niezink, Ph.D** published a research article called **Empathy Circles, A Blended Empathy Practice**¹ with the results of their work. This PDF document is in the public domain and can be downloaded at ResearchGate:

[Empathy Circles, A Blended Empathy Practice](#)

Over time, our facilitator training program led by **Edwin Rutsch, Lou Zweier** and **Bill Filler** further developed and systematized the practice, creating a scalable, open-source model for teaching empathic listening resulting in an online training program for Empathy Circle Facilitators:

[Best Empathy Training](#)

Our training programs incorporate structured sessions, practice circles, reflective exercises and continuous feedback from participants to ensure the practice remains effective, adaptable and responsive to real-world challenges. Empathy Circles have become an essential component of community-building initiatives such as Empathy Cafés, demonstrating the broader potential of empathy to strengthen social cohesion and cultivate meaningful connection.

This handbook on Empathy Circle Overview & Hosting is book one of a planned three part series. It is directed to the general audience. Book two is about how to manage an online Empathy Circle Facilitator training class. And book three is how to conduct an in person training with the addition of theatre games.

— The Empathy Center

¹Niezink, L.W. & Rutsch, E. (2016). [Empathy Circles: A Blended Empathy Practice](#).

Conceptual Philosophy

Edwin Rutsch, who developed the Empathy Circle and who has spearheaded the Empathy Movement has frequently spoken about the importance of our common humanity. We believe that participation in mutual empathic listening is a very effective way to access that common humanity.

Our Vision: We envision a global culture of empathy that is based on the core values of empathy, mutuality, openness and care. We believe that fostering such a culture will contribute to the greater wellbeing of humanity and the planet.

Our Mission: Our mission is to raise the level of empathy on the planet by training all 8 billion people to be able to take part in Empathy Circles.

Our educational focus is not “to put empathy into people”, but to create an atmosphere where people can rediscover their innate empathy. We believe that empathic communication is a human birthright and we want to share the joy of that rediscovery with you. No one “owns” empathy, we all share it. In practical terms this means that we focus on supporting people to progress at their own pace and seek learning experiences where they become increasingly aware of their inner strengths.

This handbook not only guides readers in learning and facilitating Empathy Circles but also invites them to become part of a growing movement to make empathy a practical, lived value in daily life. By practicing, teaching and sharing these circles, readers contribute to a culture of empathy that reaches from personal relationships to communities at large, nurturing understanding, hope and connection in a world increasingly in need of both.

You can use, study, modify, distribute and build on the information in this handbook. Just be sure to give proper attribution and credit. And link back to the Empathy Center website:

[The Empathy Center](#)

We welcome collaboration and invite you to join us in co-hosting, co-designing, co-developing and co-promoting this training for the mutual benefit and well-being of humanity and the planet.

— The Empathy Center

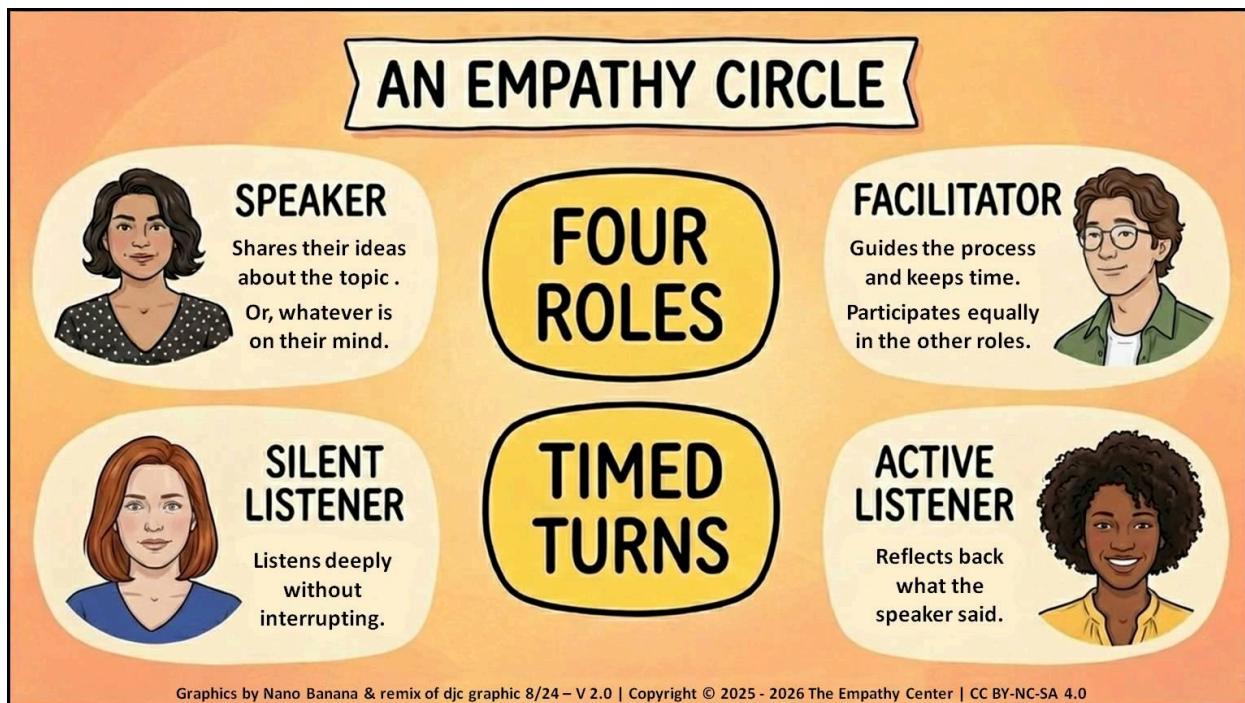
Empathy Circle Overview

A) What is an Empathy Circle?

An empathy circle brings together four to six people, either in person or online, who agree to follow a simple process. The group sits in a circle, real or virtual, and takes turns speaking and listening. One person speaks for a few minutes about a chosen topic or whatever is on their mind.

Another person, called the active listener, listens closely and then reflects back what they heard, capturing both the speaker's words and feelings. The speaker confirms whether the reflection is accurate or whether it needs clarifying. Once the speaker is done and feels understood, the listener becomes the next speaker and the process continues around the circle.

The facilitator keeps time, ensures everyone has a chance to participate and gently reminds participants to return to the process if needed. The facilitator also takes turns as speaker and active listener. Those waiting for their turn are called silent listeners.



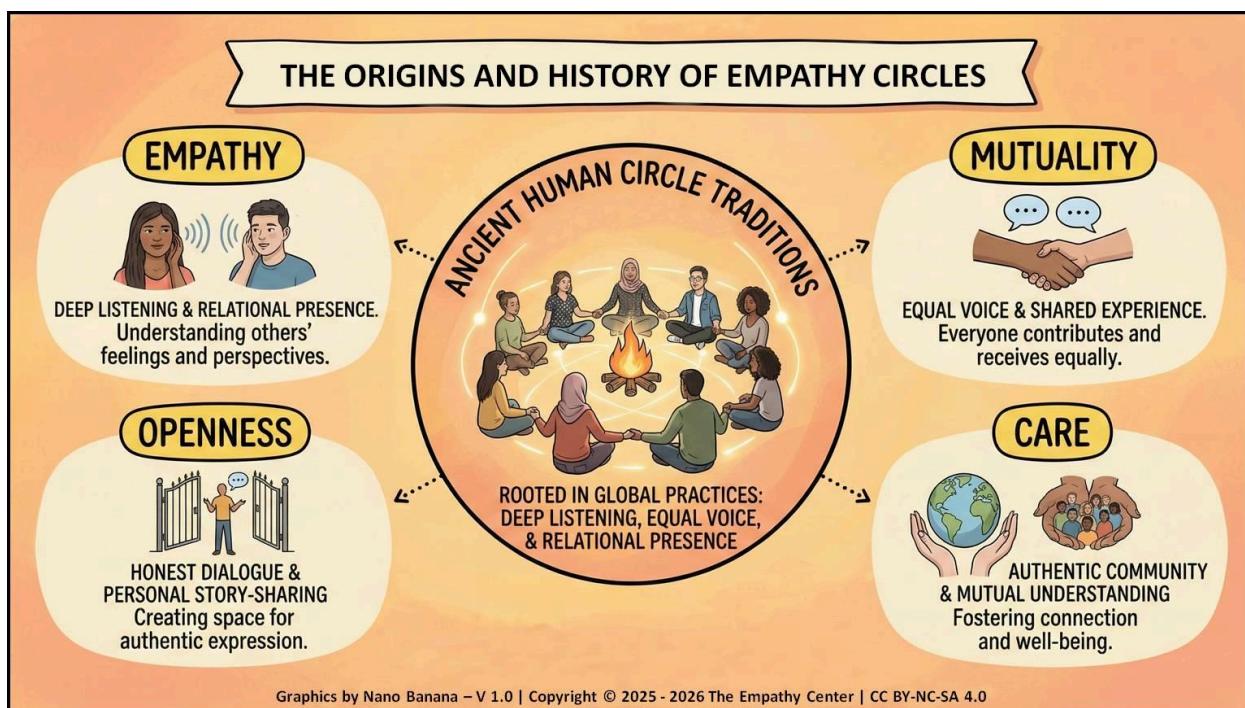
To distinguish the **Empathy Center's Empathy Circle** from the many variations that have developed, we recommend referring to the practice described in this handbook as the **“Basic Empathy Circle.”**

In general conversation, it's fine to simply say **“Empathy Circle.”** Throughout this handbook, we use the term *Empathy Circle* in that simpler way. However, when it's

important to be precise, such as when distinguishing this practice from other versions, please use the full term **“Basic Empathy Circle.”**

B) The Origins and History of Empathy Circles

The core values of the Empathy Circle process, empathy, mutuality, openness and care, are rooted in the ancient human Circle traditions practiced by cultures across the globe. These traditions emphasize deep listening, equal voice and authentic community connection, often grounded in personal story sharing and relational presence. Passed down through generations, these Circle based practices created powerful spaces for honest dialogue and mutual understanding, shaping the communities in which they were practiced. Their wisdom continues to inform and inspire the contemporary Empathy Circle process.



The principal practice of modern Empathy Circles draws on the work of psychologist Carl Rogers, particularly his concept of "testing for understanding." Rogers emphasized the importance of actively reflecting on another person's words and intentions to ensure genuine comprehension. As he and Richard Farson wrote:

"Because understanding another person is actually far more difficult than it at first seems, it is important to test constantly your ability to see the world in the way the speaker sees it. You can do this by reflecting in your own words what the speaker seems to mean by his words and actions. His response to this will tell you whether or not he feels understood. A good rule of thumb is to assume that

you never really understand until you can communicate this understanding to the other's satisfaction²." - Carl Rogers and Richard Farson

Building on this foundation, the Empathy Circle was developed as a structured, hands-on practice designed to cultivate empathy through guided dialogue and reflective listening. The initial concept of an Empathy Circle was pioneered by Edwin Rutsch. And in a collaboration with Dr. Lidewij Niezink in 2012, they set a goal of creating a practical, "walking the talk" method for practicing empathy in everyday life. Together, over a one year collaboration, they co-developed the Empathy Circle as an approach for fostering both self-awareness and mutual understanding within a group setting.

Dr. Niezink later documented the outcomes of this work in her 2016 research article, *Empathy Circles: A Blended Empathy Practice*. The article is publicly available as a PDF on ResearchGate:

[Empathy Circles, A Blended Empathy Practice](#)

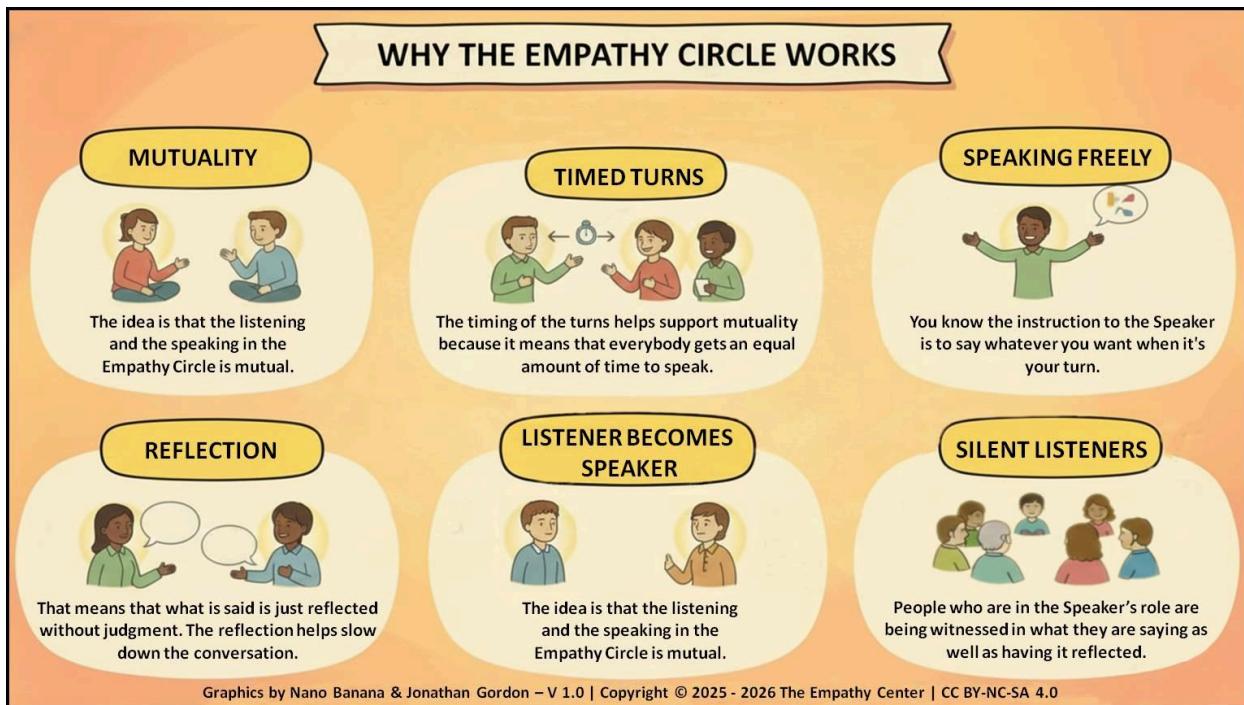
Over time, the practice evolved through the ongoing work of the Empathy Center, where facilitator training programs led by Edwin Rutsch, Lou Zweier and Bill Filler further developed and systematized the Empathy Circle into a scalable, open source model for teaching empathic listening. These programs include structured sessions, guided practice, reflective exercises and community feedback. Empathy Circles have since become foundational to community initiatives such as Empathy Cafés where participants come together to deepen mutual understanding and social connection through active listening.

. See the video:

 [EMPATHY SUMMIT: The history of the Empathy Circles development](#)

² Carl Rogers and Richard Farson (1957) "Active Listening", p.11, *Mockingbird Press LLC. Kindle Edition*.

C) Why the Empathy Circle Works by Lou Zweier



This section, **“Why the Empathy Circle Works,”** is by Lou Zweier. It is an edited transcript from a presentation that he made at the October 4, 2025 Empathy Summit. Here is a link to his video:

[▶ Why the Empathy Circle Works](#)

Why does the Empathy Circle work the way that it does? How does the structure create the effect that it does? There are several reasons. One is that it helps Facilitators have greater confidence that the way the things are structured is not random. There is a reason for it and how the pieces of the structure contribute to making the Empathy Circle experience what it is, so there's a reason for holding the structure. This sets the stage, so when people in the Circle object to the structure, or they want to break out of it, or they don't like it, or they object to it in some way, the Facilitator has reasons for why we do it this way. It isn't just random. There are specific reasons. So, I'd like to take a few minutes and just talk about that.



The first structural element is **Mutuality**. The idea is that the listening and the speaking in the Empathy Circle is mutual. It's not that some people get to speak and others just listen. It's that everybody gets an equal chance to speak and be heard. That's a basic principle of the Empathy Circle.

The second thing is **Timed Turns**. The timing of the turns helps support that mutuality because it means that everybody gets a roughly equal amount of time to speak. The timed turns also support people's tolerance for listening to things that they disagree with or that might even be offensive to them. This is because you know that what you're hearing is only going to go on for a short amount of time, three to five minutes and even less than that because that time also includes the reflection that the Active Listener's doing. It's easier to tolerate listening to something that's uncomfortable if you know it's going to end soon. It's also easier to listen to it if you know that you're going to have a time to speak as well. This gives you the opportunity to say how you feel about it, or you can object to what the person's saying. You might share how it was for you to hear what they said.

The third item is **Speaking Freely**. You know the instruction to the Speaker is to say whatever you want when it's your turn. The reason for that is if you give people a lot of rules about how they can speak, it inhibits their ability to express themselves. I've certainly seen that in work that I've done teaching communication skills, where you teach people about how they should be thinking and how they should be expressing themselves, what kinds of words they should use, or what kind of words they should avoid. While people can do that, it tends to block people from being able to say what's on their mind or on their heart. In this practice there's much more focus on listening and just reflecting what you're hearing, not evaluating it, not agreeing or disagreeing with it, or commenting on it or any of that. The ability to speak freely and say what's on your mind and relax and not worry. It helps people say what's important to them and what they feel strongly about without worrying about any judgments.

Then the next aspect of the Empathy Circle is **Reflection**. That means that what is said is just reflected without judgement. The reflection helps slow down the conversation. Slowing down the conversation is one of the primary things that prevents it from escalating into an argument. This frequently occurs when you get a rapid back and forth conversation where people are arguing with each other. When that happens, things tend to escalate. When the Speaker pauses, says a few things and then they're pausing and getting that reflected, the Speaker gets to reflect on what they've just said and everyone else listening also gets to reflect on what they said. So, even if you hear something that's upsetting to you or that you really disagree with, it's going to be a little while before you get a chance to respond to it. And chances are your emotions will shift. After that time, you'll be in a different place than whatever energy you had when you first heard it. You're likely to be in a more reflective place when it's your turn to express yourself.

Then the role the **Silent Listeners** play is important. Having people there who are silent and listening and just receiving what's being said helps hold the structure of the Circle. People who are in the Speaker's role are being witnessed in what they are saying as well as having it reflected. That helps the Speaker feel heard and feel like they're being received.

Another structure of the Empathy Circle process that contributes to success of the Empathy Circle experience is that the **Active Listener becomes the Speaker**. Because the Active Listener is paying attention to the Speaker enough so that they can reflect what the Speaker is saying, they're not spending a lot of time thinking about how

they want to respond to what the Speaker is saying, or whether they agree or disagree with it. When it is their turn to speak, they then become the Speaker. There's an emptiness there, the person's not all charged up and ready to go. That contributes to more reflectiveness in what's being said and slows things down.

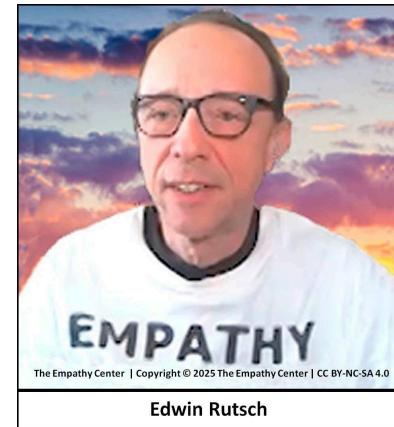
Another attribute is that the **speaking happens in rounds**. It's not that everyone just speaks one time and they only have one time to say what they're going to say. They know they're going to have multiple chances to say what they want to say. A person's awareness of what they are thinking and feeling, unfolds like peeling an onion. It comes in waves. I know this is true for me. Other people may experience this differently. I know when I participate in an Empathy Circle, I notice how my thinking and feeling evolves over time and over multiple opportunities to speak. This gives me greater insight into my thoughts as opposed to just having one opportunity to speak. You'll have maybe three five-minute turns as opposed to one 15-minute turn to speak and to be reflected. I think the thoughtfulness and the depth of the conversation is different because the speaking happens in rounds.

The last one is that the **Facilitator is a Participant**. When I first started doing this practice, I thought, this is kind of weird. You know, usually the Facilitator is not part of it. They're just monitoring and making sure people follow the process. The real power of the Facilitator being a member of the Circle is that it creates a more egalitarian environment. This creates less of a hierarchy because the Facilitator is taking a turn just like the other Participants. There is an opportunity for the Facilitator to have an influence on the Circle because of the way the Facilitator listens and speaks. In a new group I would usually make myself the first Active Listener, role modeling what reflection is like and allowing people to get a sense of what a skillful reflection is like. If I'm the first Active Listener, that means I'm the second speaker, so then as Speaker I get an opportunity to demonstrate openness, honesty and expressing feelings. That signals to others in the Circle, "Oh, it's okay to talk about one's feelings and it's okay to talk about stuff that's real for me. It helps set the tone.

D) Wholistic Empathy and Empathy Circles by Edwin Rutsch

The **Wholistic Empathy Definition Model** was created by Edwin Rutsch, director of *The Empathy Center*. Edwin has been studying empathy since 2010 and is the developer and leading advocate of the **Empathy Circle** practice.

Why Define Empathy in the Context of an Empathy Circle? Empathy can feel abstract, but the Empathy Circle offers a concrete way to experience it. Through structured dialogue, participants can directly sense and practice the different facets of empathy—bringing clarity to what it means to live empathically, both individually and together.



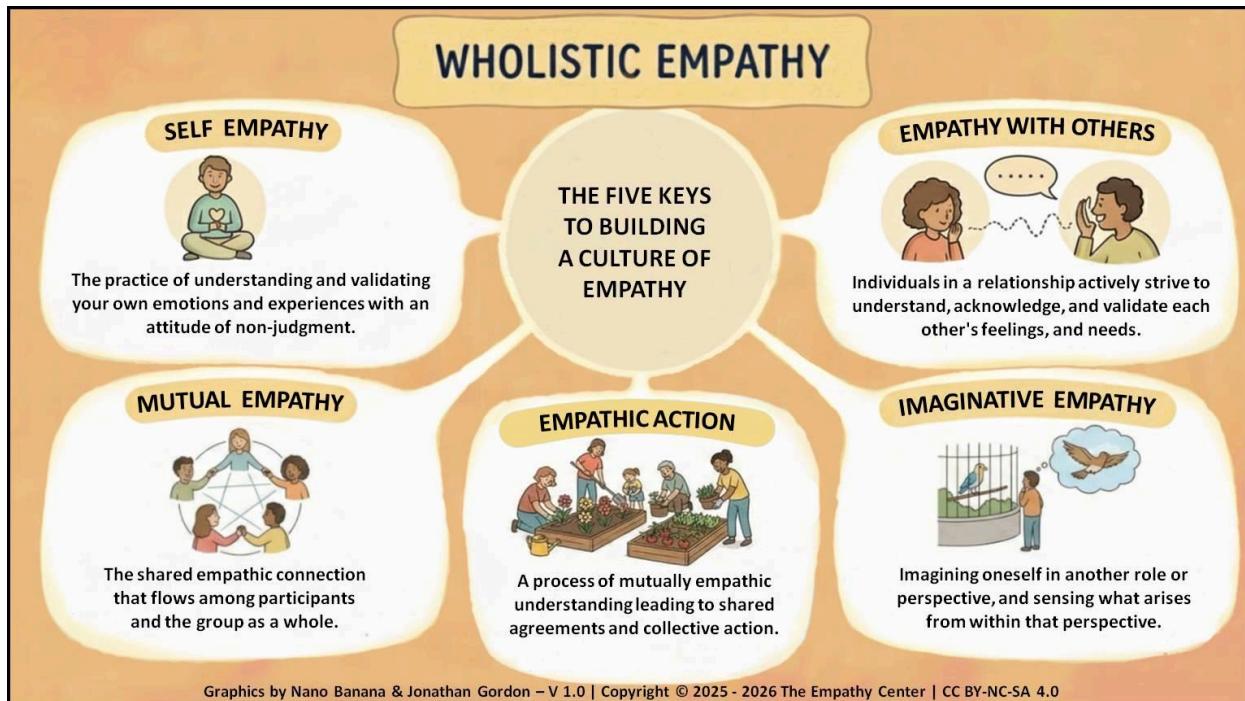
Because empathy is defined in many different—and often conflicting—ways, Edwin Rutsch created the **Wholistic Empathy Definition Model** to bring greater clarity. The model is grounded in the work of Carl Rogers, who described empathy as sensing into the experiences of others. Many of the criticisms focus on the lack of what we call Self-Empathy or a listening to oneself and our needs and priorities. Below, Edwin Rutsch has outlined our definition of Empathy in the context of what he has termed, "Wholistic Empathy". For a more detailed video exploration, see:

 [Wholistic Empathy: Defining Empathy Presentation #3](#)

In its broader sense, **empathy is a way of being in relationship with life itself**. Grounded in the practice of the **Empathy Circle**, this model views empathy as:

- **Sensing into life** with presence, openness and care.
- **Listening deeply** rather than being judgmental, indifferent, detached, or domineering.
- **Attuning to experiences and meaning** within ourselves, others and our relationships.

Wholistic empathy is **multi-faceted**. By placing it in the context of the Empathy Circle, we move from abstract definitions to *lived experience*. Anyone who takes part in an Empathy Circle can directly sense, explore and name the different dimensions of an empathic way of being.



Facets of Wholistic Empathy

1) Self-Empathy – with oneself

- Moment-to-moment awareness of one's own experiences (feelings, thoughts, meanings, desires, etc.).
- Can be deepened or blocked.
- ***In an Empathy Circle:*** *shown when the Speaker listens inwardly and shares authentically.*

2) Basic Empathy – with others

- Moment-to-moment sensing into the experiences (feelings, thoughts, meanings, desires, etc.) of others. This is what Carl Rogers called empathy.
- A deep quality of presence and listening.
- Can be deepened or blocked.
- ***In an Empathy Circle:*** *shown when the Active Listener listens closely to the Speaker.*

3) Imaginative Empathy – taking on a role

- Imagining oneself in another role or perspective and sensing what arises from within that perspective.
- Can be applied in limitless contexts.
- Can be deepened or blocked.
- ***In an Empathy Circle training:*** *shown during role-playing, such as practicing conflict situations in training and taking on the role of being another person.*

4) Mutual Empathy – within relationships and groups

- The shared empathic connection that flows among participants and the group as a whole.
- The mutual empathy that emerges in groups and relationships.
- Reciprocal, multi-directional empathy within a group.
- Can be deepened or blocked.
- ***In an Empathy Circle:*** *shown when participants listen deeply to each other, raising the level of mutual empathy in the group.*

5) Empathic Action

- A process of mutually empathic understanding leading to shared agreements and collective action.
- ***In an Empathy Circle:*** *shown when participants agree on next steps together through empathic dialogue.*

The above Facets of Wholistic Empathy list is adapted from: The [Wholistic Empathy Definition](#) page of the [Defining Empathy](#) Website.

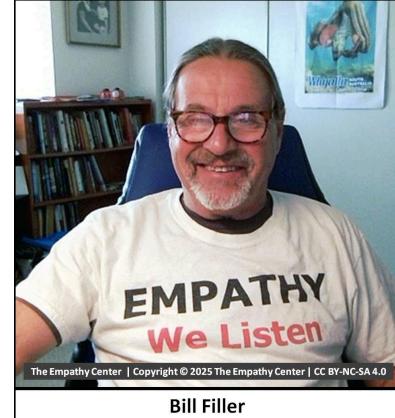
E) The Core Values of Empathy Circles by Bill Filler

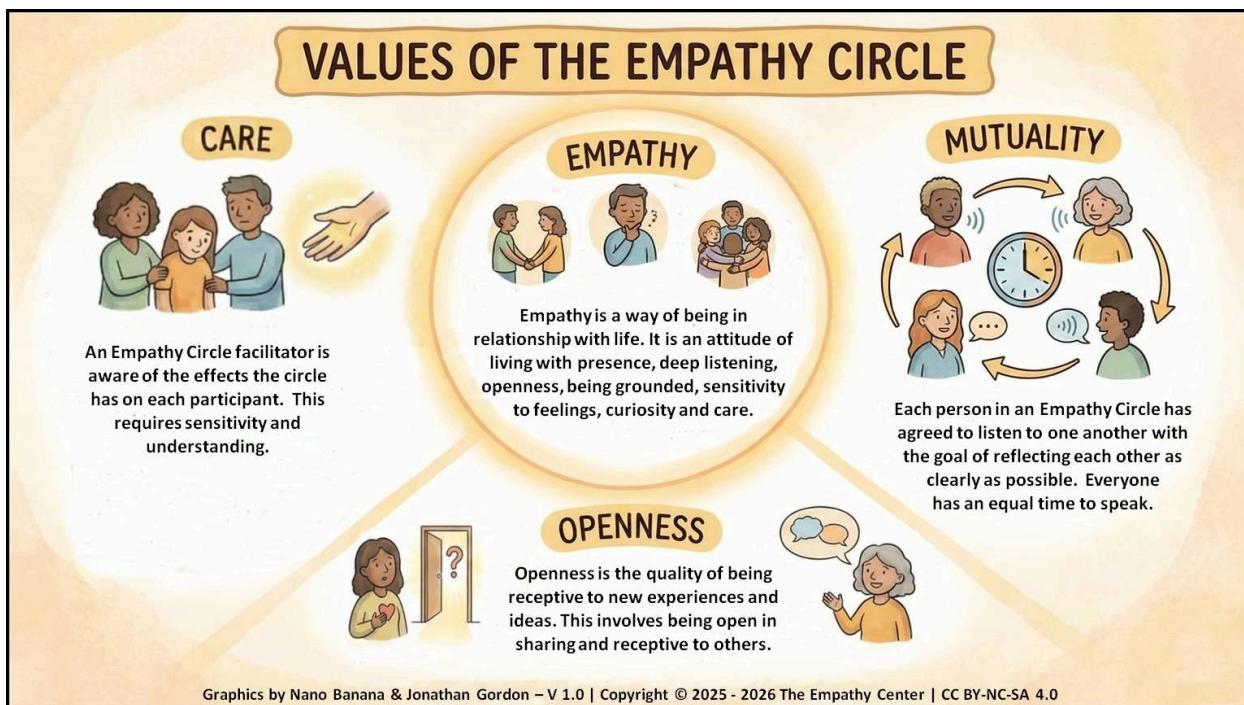
The simple rules of the Empathy Circle seek to create an experience of empathic understanding. This is created by two actions, being heard and understood and by providing that experience for others. These experiences provide a deep listening experience that leads to enhanced communications with others and a greater insight into oneself.

In the Empathy Circle we discourage judgements, or even sympathizing or agreeing with the speaker while you are reflecting them. These rules are formulated so that the speaker can follow their own empathic process, unimpeded by the judgements of the reflector.

When we speak of building a Culture of Empathy, we refer to our common humanity. What do we mean by this? After participating in Circles with people of all ages, religions, political persuasions, ethnicities and from countries all over the world, the commonality that we've seen is that we all like to be listened to and understood. This is why we seek to give everyone in the world an Empathy Circle experience. If we are to successfully meet the challenges we face, we'll have to start by listening to and understanding each other. This will create a healthy social environment in which effective, humane solutions can be crafted.

Edwin Rutsch said, "The Empathy Circle is the basic first step towards building a culture based on empathy." The Circle is a simple process designed to allow all in the Circle to be heard. To guide us in this, we have adopted four core values, Empathy, Mutuality, Openness and Care. These are not meant to be complete or comprehensive, but to be used as a general reference to guide us in our actions.





1) Empathy

Frequently, empathy is confused with concepts such as sympathy or weakness. This is not our definition. Our definition includes self-empathy, or valuing your own experience and being willing to actively “take care of yourself” when it’s needed. Our definition also includes empathy for others. In addition, we include empathizing with the needs of the community and the natural world around us. To be willing to experience empathy takes a certain amount of bravery. Once you experience it, you realize that you had nothing to fear.

2) Care

By Care, we mean that we are guided in our Circle facilitations by being aware, to the best of our ability, of the effects the Circle has on each individual Circle member. When we see someone who is having difficulties, we try to accommodate them, if possible, or guide them, if they need more support than the Circle can provide.

3) Mutuality

By Mutuality, we mean that each person in an Empathy Circle has agreed to listen to one another with the goal of reflecting each other as clearly as possible. Everybody speaks, listens and everybody has a roughly equal time to speak.

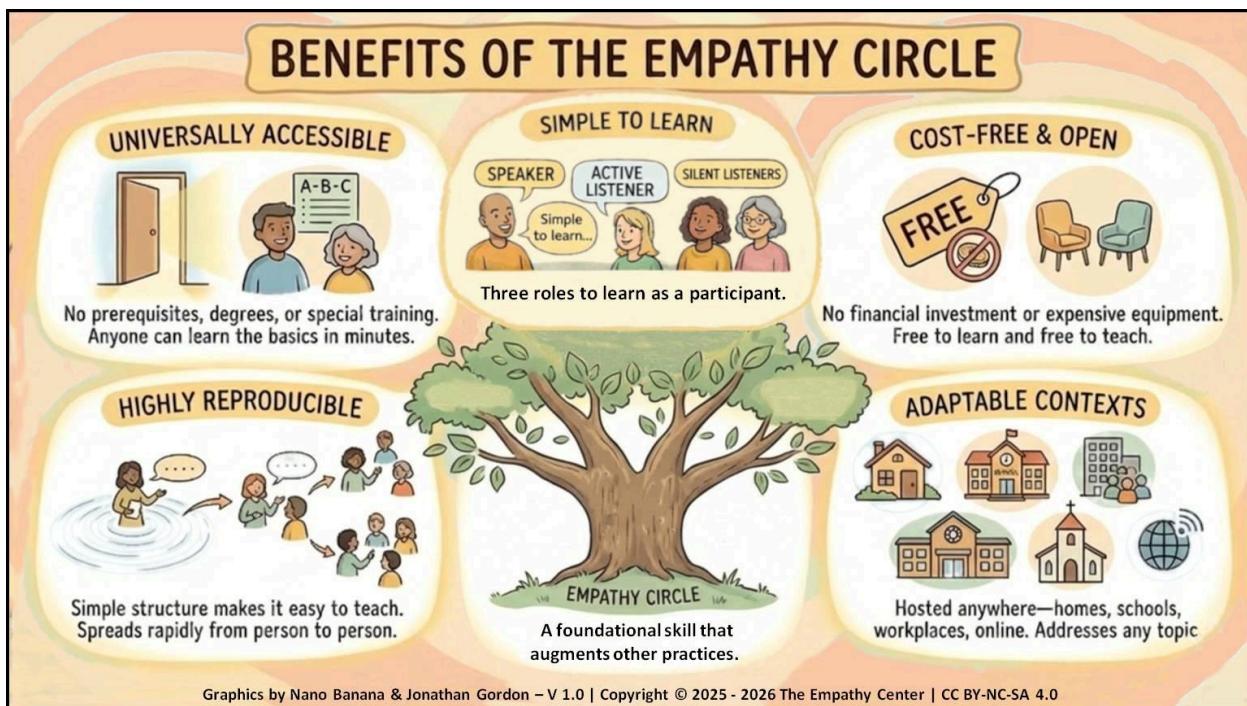
4) Openness

By Openness we mean that to the best of your ability, you are willing to be honest with yourself and others. This does not mean that we expect Circle members to share their deepest darkest secrets but be willing to be open and curious with others as they feel comfortable.

5) Your Unique Empathic Journey

Our goal is to encourage everyone to embark on their own empathic journey. We do not seek to “put” empathy in you, but let you experience your innate empathic self and trust you to accept the responsibility of developing your empathic skills. The Circle is designed to counteract certain social conditionings so that we can see and understand each other more clearly. What people generally find when they reflectively listen is that we’re well-meaning people with flaws, who have a lot more in common than we thought.

F) The Benefits of Empathy Circles



1) General/Structural Benefits

Simple to learn: There are only three roles that participants have to learn: Speaker, Active Listener and Silent Listeners. Reflective/Active listening focuses on reflecting the speaker, not responding or judging. The reflections can be anything from a simple recitation of the speaker’s words to a more involved analysis of the feelings and values inferred. The simplicity of the Empathy Circle practice makes it quick and easy for people to facilitate their own Circles.

It's experiential and augments other practices: There are many books on empathy as well as social and emotional programs. The Empathy Circle practice doesn't seek to supplant any of those, but is a great first step for people to experience empathy at their level of understanding. Then they can take that experience and apply it to all areas of their lives. Practicing mutual reflective listening for even a few minutes before and/or after a meeting/training, adds a connecting experience that greatly enhances all communication.

It's Proven: Our first online training took place in March of 2020, at the height of the Covid Pandemic. Our first Participants were doctors, nurses, medical students and other medical personnel who were working in Brooklyn, N.Y. which was considered ground zero for Covid at the time. The feedback we got from them was that just five minutes of reflective listening at a shift change could have a profound effect on them, helping them to deal with the trauma that they were enduring.

Easy to do and it travels: Do it anywhere and anytime. No requirements or prerequisites. You can participate whatever your skill level. No degree necessary.

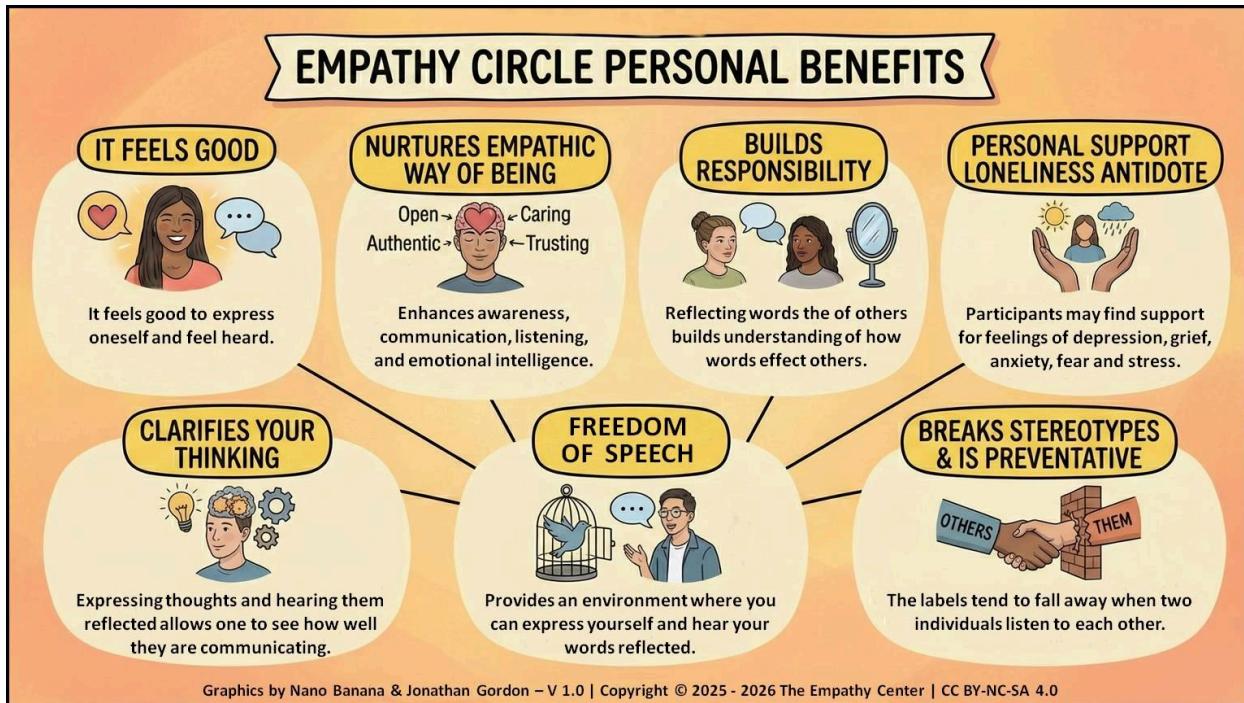
Free: It only requires your energy and time to create an Empathy Circle.

Multi-purpose: A circle can be started quickly in any context: family, friends, work, community, school, churches, book clubs, politics, etc.

Basic Practice: This practice is a gateway or foundation for many other practices and processes. Some examples are, Counseling, Nonviolent Communication, Focusing, Motivational Interviewing, Mediation, Conflict Resolution, Marriage & Family Therapy, Human Centered Design, etc

Can be sized to fit your needs: You can build on the basic Empathy Circle by adding different exercises such as intention setting, movement, or Theater Games, to name a few. You can also adapt a part of the Circle practice to use as a check-in or debrief as part of a larger meeting or training.

2) Personal Benefits



It feels good: It feels good to take part in a meaningful and constructive dialogue. It feels good to be able to fully express oneself and feel heard. It feels good to listen to someone else and feel one is contributing to their well being by listening to them.

Nurtures an Empathic Way of Being: You become more open, authentic, caring, trusting, grounded, stronger and it makes you more aware of everyone's humanity. It enhances quality of life and overall well-being. If practiced over time it can enhance your communication, reflective listening, empathic listening, cognitive, conflict management, emotional intelligence skills, among others. This leads to closer, more fulfilling relationships both within the Empathy Circle and without.

It builds responsibility: Not only do participants have the experience of being heard without judgment, but they are also required to reflect the words of others. This promotes self-reflection about how one's words can affect others. In addition, when an Active Listener successfully provides the experience of being heard for another, it builds an authentic self-confidence.

Personal Support & Loneliness Antidote The Empathy Circle provides an avenue for getting deeper emotional support for personal issues. Loneliness has been defined as one of the greatest contributors to poor health. Although it's not therapy, an Empathy Circle can have a therapeutic effect. Participants may find support for feelings of alienation, depression, grief, anxiety, fear and stress.

It helps to clarify your thinking for yourself and others: It's an opportunity to express your thoughts and have them reflected to you. It gives voice to the thoughts in

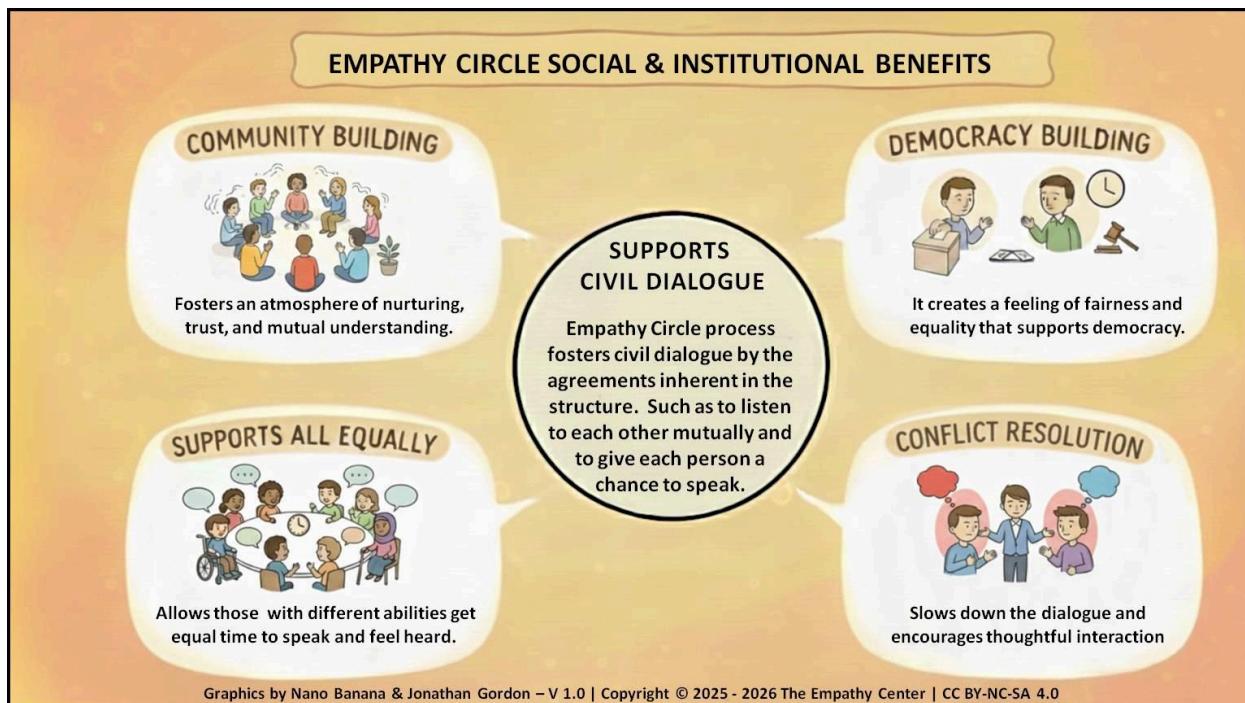
your head. You see how they are understood by others, which helps you assess how well you're communicating. This helps clarify and deepen your thoughts.

Freedom of Speech: The Empathy Circle provides an environment where you can express yourself and hear your words reflected without judgement, helping you process pent up feelings. Once these frustrations are expressed, it can relieve pressure and create room to seek solutions.

It breaks down stereotypes: In the present social and political environment, there's a lot of labeling of the "others". When people take the time to listen to each other, the labels tend to fall away and two individuals emerge. They may not agree on everything but in the Circle, they get to experience a process that gives them a powerful option for how a mutually agreeable solution may be crafted.

It's a preventative practice: As you improve your listening skills, you improve your communication skills and can head off personal problems and conflicts before they happen.

3) Social / Institutional Benefits



Community Building: In the Empathy Circle practice, when people are listening and trying to understand one another, an atmosphere is created that promotes nurturing, connection, trust building and mutual understanding.

Effective Working: By creating an emotionally supportive environment of understanding in the workplace, the Circle fosters a collaborative and constructive environment. That prioritizes the institution's goals.

Conflict Resolution: The Empathy Circle requires more patience than a normal conversation. You can't respond immediately to something someone says. You have to

wait for your turn as Speaker if you wish to respond. This allows tempers to cool and the individual to engage in some mindful self-reflection before speaking. The Empathy Circle can be expanded to allow for more serious disagreements. The process is helpful in potentially contentious dialogues. People may shy away from dialogue with people across the political or social divides in fear that it will turn into a shouting match.

The Empathy Circle process slows down the dialogue and can help keep shouting matches from happening. An experienced facilitator can enhance this effect. An existing conflict can be brought into an Empathy Circle and it can be talked out and possibly resolved. There are tools and practices that can be added that create an even stronger container for mediating conflicts. One such method is called a **Restorative Circle** process.

Supports Civil Dialogue: The Empathy Circle process fosters civil dialogue by the agreements inherent in the structure such as to listen to each other mutually and the extra time provided for self-reflection.

Democracy Building: In the Circle everyone has time to speak and be heard. It creates a feeling of fairness and equality. In a democracy, the vote is the political expression of those values. Deeper understanding is foundational for democracy to flourish. In an authoritarian relationship one or more people dominate the conversation and attention. A few people get heard while the others keep quiet. In an Empathy Circle each person (no matter their political views or social status) has a chance to express themselves and be heard to their satisfaction which supports a democratic mindset and way of being.

It supports all participants equally, despite any personal differences: In the back and forth of typical conversation, the extroverts or more aggressive people can dominate a dialogue. It may be hard for quieter people or people with different abilities, to find a way into the conversation. The Empathy Circle practice can help them get equal time to speak and feel heard.

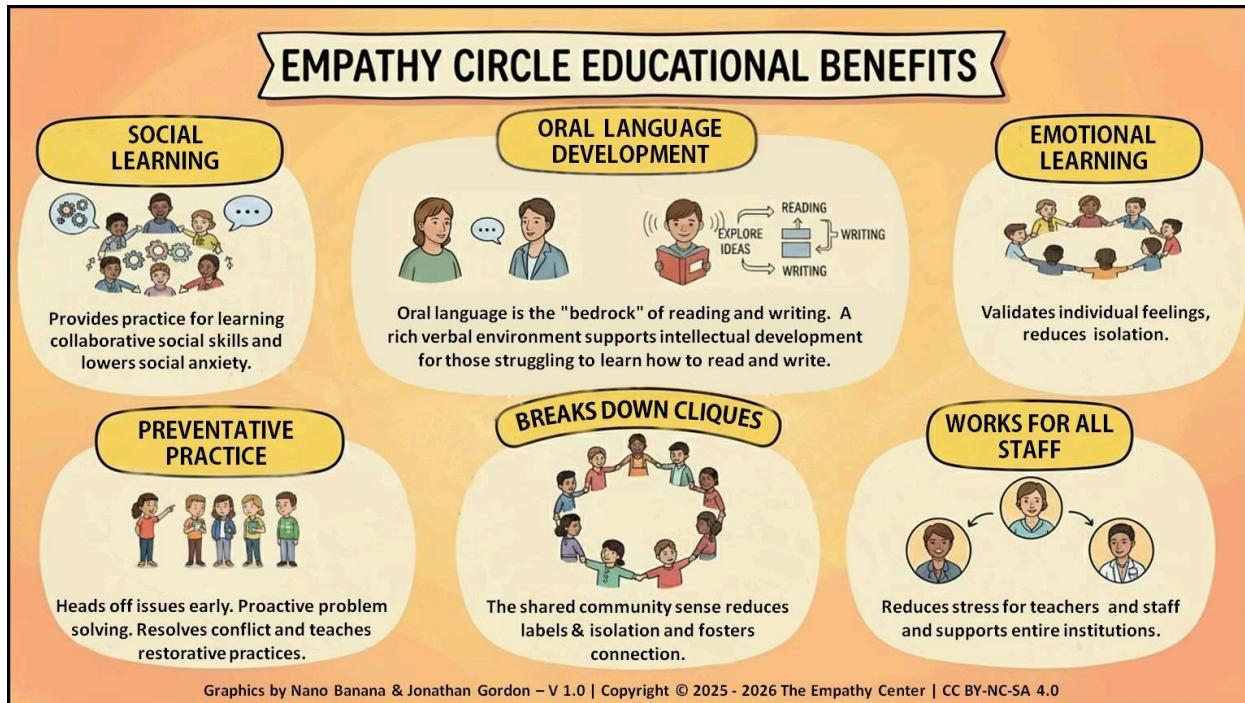
Small Groups allow for more involvement: The Empathy Circle is structured to create a small group of participants and as a result, each person gets more active involvement as both a speaker and listener.

The mutuality practiced in the Circles prevents “empathy fatigue”: When being listened to by a therapist or counselor, a person experiences one side of an empathic relationship. That is the speaking side of empathy. In a therapeutic setting the client doesn't practice the listening side. A therapist is not supposed to be a speaker with the client being the empathic listener. In an Empathy Circle one learns to listen as well because of the simplicity of the process, it can be easily introduced to others.

Adaptable: In a Circle, any topic can be addressed, making the understanding, collaborative environment of the Circle a tool that can be effective in any sort of dialogue.

Compatible with Human Centered Design: A major tenet of Human Centered Design is for designers to be aware of the felt experience and impact their designs will have on the people who interact with their creations.

4) Educational Benefits



It gives students a simple practice on which to build Social-Emotional learning skills: Practicing the listening skills in an Empathy Circle gives students an experience where they can explore their ideas and try to understand the ideas of others. Social-Emotional learning is supported by research as being a vital component of students' education. Acting on that research, major educational institutions, such as the California Department of Education list Social-Emotional Skills as essential skills that students must have to be successful adults. The Empathy Circle provides an experiential learning experience for students to practice and enhance those skills.

Link to [Handbook: SEL Research](#)

Oral Language is at the core of all academic skills: Practicing the listening skills in an Empathy Circle gives students an age appropriate, complex, linguistic experience. In an article in Language Magazine, [The Role of Early Language Development in Literacy Development](#), authors Timothy Shanahan and Christopher Lonigan state:

"Put simply, readers must translate print to language and then, much as in listening, they must interpret the meaning of that language³." - Timothy Shanahan and Christopher Lonigan

When addressing delayed reading and writing skills, providing a rich verbal environment can support intellectual development while the students try to master the technical structures of reading and writing.

The Empathy Circle provides an experiential learning experience for students to practice and enhance their Social-Emotional skills. The **Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education** states, "Oral language is often called a "bedrock" of reading and writing. Students' comprehension of spoken language is a defining factor for their reading comprehension — the ultimate purpose of reading — as well as for writing ability."

Link to  [Handbook: Oral Language Research](#)

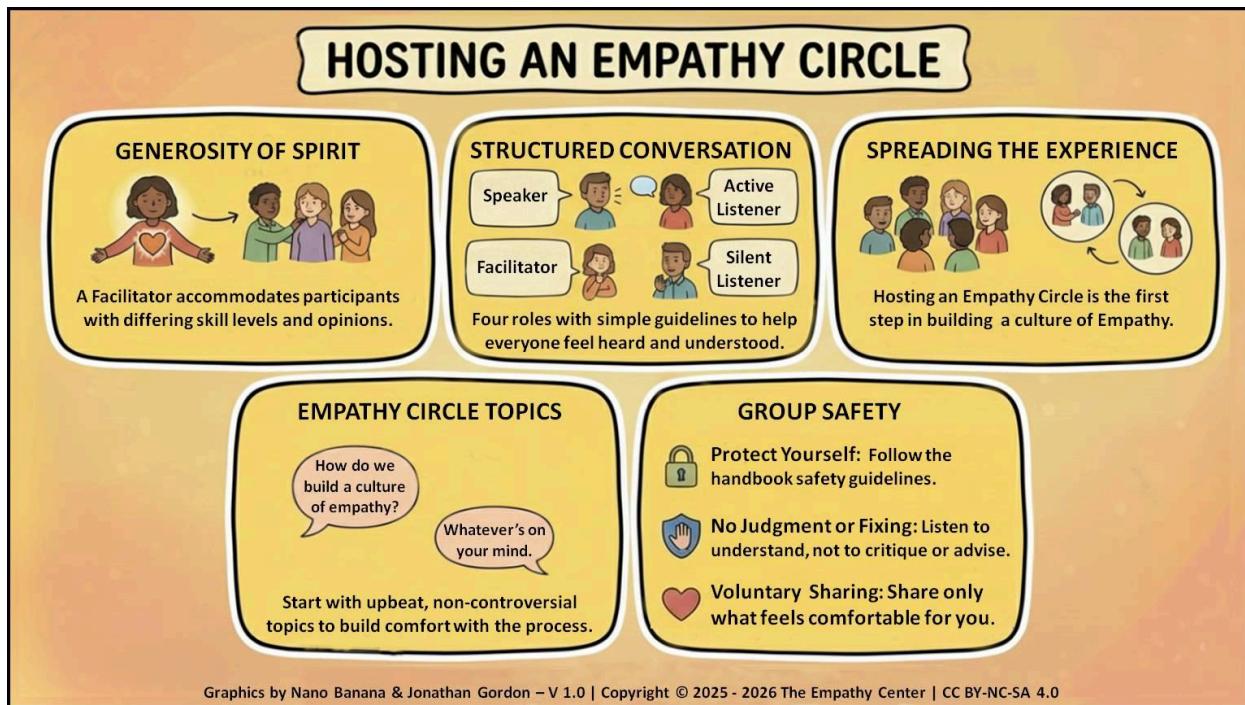
It's cost effective: Students eventually learn to run Empathy Circles themselves. This helps to resolve peer to peer problems proactively, freeing teachers and staff to focus less on discipline.

It breaks down cliques: When students have been listened to and have listened in return to every other child in their class, it creates a greater sense of a shared community.

It works for teachers and administrators too: We have been conducting our online Empathy Circle facilitation training since March of 2020, during the height of the pandemic. Our first class was composed of doctors, nurses and medical students in Brooklyn, N.Y. who were experiencing one of the most stressful work environments imaginable. They reported that 5 minutes of reflective listening at the beginning of a shift change could be effective in reducing their stress. Since then, over 700 people from all over the world have taken our training. The feedback that we've received confirms the notion that an empathic environment supports all of its members, no matter their role or status in the school or institution.

³ [The Role of Early Language Development in Literacy Development](#), authors Timothy Shanahan and Christopher Lonigan

Hosting an Empathy Circle



When you host an Empathy Circle you should have a certain generosity of spirit that makes accommodations for people who feel emotionally vulnerable and have different skill levels. If you find yourself overwhelmed, be open about it and remember that maintaining healthy boundaries supports psychological safety for you and others.

An Empathy Circle is a structured conversation with four roles that follow some simple guidelines that help people to feel heard and understood.

Once you gather 4 to 5 people, you can hold an Empathy Circle. If there are more people interested, you can split them into groups, each with a facilitator that knows the process. This can be a one time event, designed to address a certain subject or a periodic, ongoing event, designed to build skills in empathic listening.

This is the first step in spreading the experience of empathic listening. It's good to start with an upbeat, non-controversional topic that helps people to feel comfortable with the process. In one of our current Empathy Cafes we start with "How do we build a culture of empathy or whatever's on your mind.

Below is a snapshot of the most important things to remember if you are a facilitator of an Empathy Circle. It also explains the roles and values of the process. Also included below is an optional recap version. This version is good for younger children and for people for whom English is not their first language.

HOW TO TAKE PART IN A BASIC EMPATHY CIRCLE

WELCOME: In a Circle of 3 to 5 participants, welcome everyone and let them know you will facilitate today's circle. The Empathy Circle is a structured dialogue process based on mutual active listening. Values core to Empathy Circles are empathy, mutuality, openness and care.



BENEFITS: You can **briefly** share the personal benefits you have received from Empathy Circles. Examples: "I'm excited to share this process with you because Empathy Circles have made me a better listener / I love meeting people from all over the world / it builds connection."

OVERVIEW: The four roles in the Empathy Circle are **Facilitator**, **Speaker**, **Active Listener** and **Silent Listeners**.

SPEAKER: The Speaker chooses a Listener and speaks to the circle topic or whatever is on their mind. Speak in small chunks and pause often so the Active Listener can reflect what they heard. If the Speaker doesn't feel all or part of the reflection is accurate they can make corrections. When you are finished talking and you feel heard, you can indicate you are finished by saying, "I feel heard" or "I'm complete." If you feel complete before your time is finished, you can end your turn early.

ACTIVE LISTENER: In your own words, or using the Speaker's words, reflect the essence of what you heard until the Speaker says they feel heard. Ask the Speaker to pause if you need to reflect before you hear more. This is not a dialogue, so refrain from asking questions, advising, sympathizing, judging, agreeing or disagreeing. Your role is to simply reflect the Speaker. Once your Speaker reports being heard, it is your turn to be the Speaker.

SILENT LISTENER: Everyone else is a Silent Listener. This is an active role. The Silent Listener is listening to be fully present for the exchange between the Speaker and the Active Listener, just as if they were the Active Listener. Sometimes a Silent Listener will be engaged in something that may be distracting. Refrain from doing anything that would distract the circle. If you need a break, just turn off your camera and mute and return to the circle as soon as you are able.

FACILITATOR: I'll be the Facilitator and I will be helping everyone through this process. I will be the first Active Listener to model reflective listening.

BEGIN THE EMPATHY CIRCLE: We will have (3-5)-minute turns. Our topic today is _____, or whatever is alive in you. The best way to learn the Empathy Circle process is to experience it. Let's get started. I will be the first Active Listener. Who would like to be the first Speaker?

OPTIONAL RECAP: *This version is good for younger children and for people for whom English is not their first language.*

Active Listener: Reflect as best you can what the Speaker is saying. Avoid judging (or even agreeing) or adding your own experiences while you are the Active Listener. You will be the next Speaker.

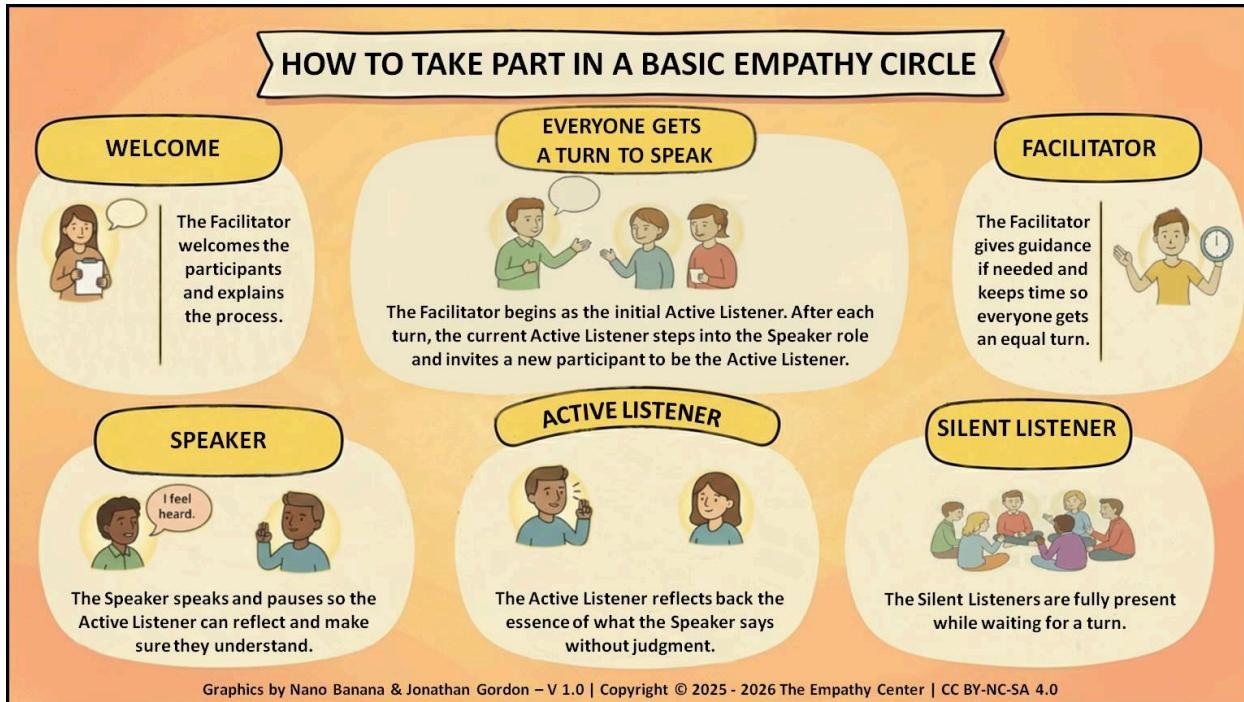
Speaker: Speak on the topic or whatever's on your mind in the time allotted. Pause often to let the Active Listener reflect. Say, "I feel heard" when you feel complete.

Silent Listeners: Pay attention to what is being said. Please do not distract the group.

Links to printable “How To” and a link to our training website:

☰ Short Version: HOW TO TAKE PART IN A BASIC EMPATHY CIRCLE

More Information Here: [Best Empathy Training](#)



A) Gathering People for an Empathy Circle

1) Promoting Your Empathy Circle

Promoting on the Internet: As of this writing, we have mainly promoted the Training on [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#). Recently, we've started promoting our Empathy Cafes on [Nextdoor](#). We can promote our events on these sites for free. LinkedIn In has given the best results. You may have other platforms that you use and that's fine. We encourage you to enlarge the number of sites that we can use. Let us know how it's going and share your successes with us so we can be more effective.

Promoting face to face: Talk to your family, friends, coworkers and community members. You can start with two people practicing mutual reflective listening and try to bring others as interest grows. For example, you might ask if they can help you out with a new class you're taking. There's no need for a “hard sale”, we are confident in the

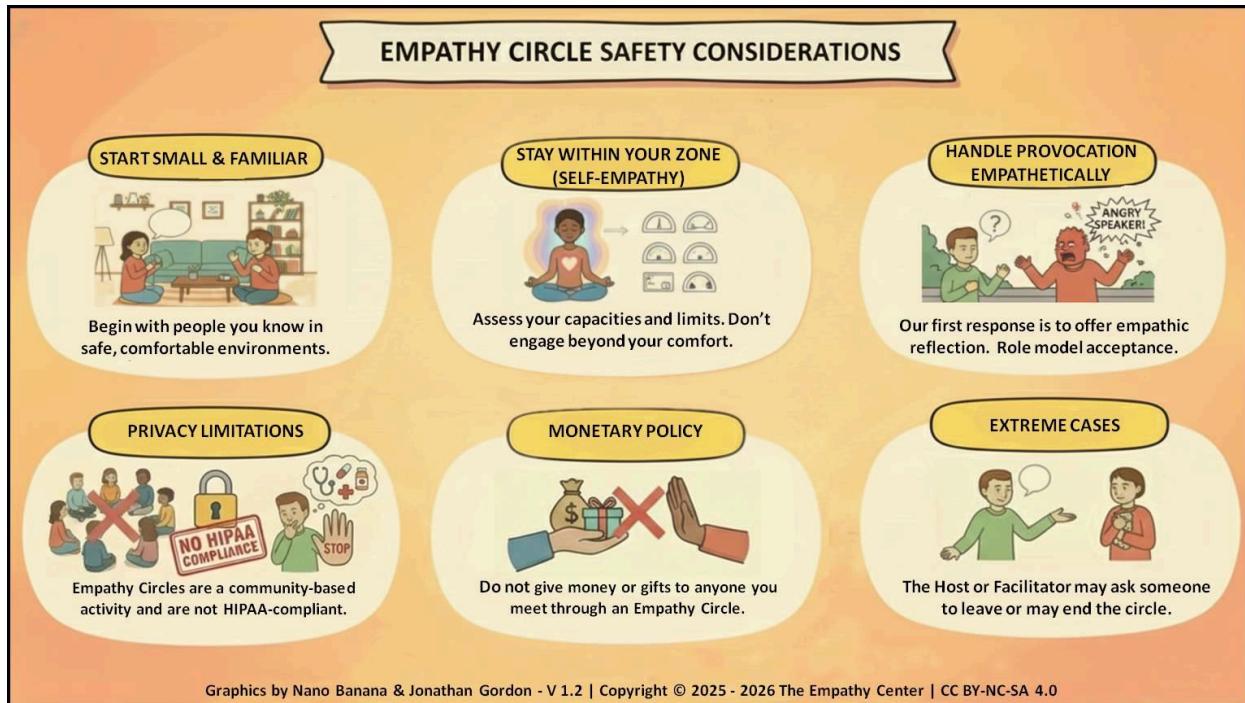
Empathy Circle process. When people experience it, overwhelmingly, they're glad they did.

Promoting the old-fashioned way: You can distribute flyers, business cards or other printed matter in stores, libraries and public light poles, where they're allowed.

Promote on the Empathy Center Events Calendar: Contact the Empathy Center if you would like to promote your circle on our calendar. See link to calendar:

[The Empathy Center - Events Calendar](#)

2) Safety Considerations



The feeling of safety depends upon a wide variety of factors and is very subjective. One person's "safety zone" is another's "unsafe zone". It's very important to consider this when inviting people into an Empathy Circle. If people feel safe, they are more likely to share freely and have the empathic experience the Circle creates. When first inviting people to your Empathy Circle, we recommend that you start with people you know, in a safe environment and suggest topics that ask people to reflect on positive experiences. As you become stronger and more confident in your skills and trust the empathic effect the Empathy Circle creates, you may decide to increase the diversity of people invited and the environments in which you host your Circle.

If you decide to open your Circle to the general public, it carries with it certain risks, but has great rewards as well. One of the most memorable experiences people have remarked upon is to watch people who were strangers two hours ago, share deeply with each other. We recommend that you stay within your safety zone. Self-Empathy is a main component of the Empathy Center's definition of empathy. This aspect of Empathy is one that critics of empathy frequently omit. We define this as being able to assess one's physical, emotional and intellectual capacities and stay within them. This is a good practice to remember when deciding to embark on staging an Empathy Circle.

Empathy Circles have been held in a wide variety of circumstances, from private houses, to political rallies on both sides of the political spectrum in the U.S. The Empathy Circle has demonstrated consistently that it has a profound deescalating effect. The film, "Trumphobia-What Both Sides Fear" ends with a MAGA Republican and a left-wing democrat talking out their differences in an Empathy Circle at a political demonstration. This is an example of the Circle working under very stressful circumstances and required all of Edwin Rutsch's skill and patience to accomplish.

[**Short Clip From Documentary That Shows How We Mediate Political Conflicts**](#)

One of the most frequently asked questions is how to deal with a very angry person who says something extremely provocative (racist,etc.). Our first response is to offer an empathic reflection. This doesn't require you to parrot something that you feel is offensive, but you may paraphrase them in a way that you find acceptable. It is important to recognize that the Empathy Circle rules allow the Speaker complete freedom of speech, so if you host a Basic Empathy Circle you should be prepared to role model a broad acceptance of divergent views.

In extreme cases where the person might threaten violence, etc., it is a police matter. This is extremely rare, even in tense situations such as political demonstrations. If a person rejects the premise of the Circle, or can't follow the rules, then invite them to leave. Try not to engage in a power struggle, state that you're just trying to keep within the process, as you've been trained and if it's not for them, that's OK, they can leave. It doesn't mean that they're a bad person, it's just that the Empathy Circle isn't right for them at this point in time. Should they feel differently in the future, they can try again.

If you encounter someone in extreme distress and you feel they're in danger, then have your local suicide hotline and/or mental health organization's contact information on hand. As of this writing, this has never happened, but it's good to be prepared.

3) Notice of Privacy Limitations for Empathy Circles

Empathy Circles are a community-based group activity and are not a HIPAA-compliant or a confidential healthcare service. Participants are encouraged to avoid sharing personal medical details or protected health information about themselves or others. By taking part, you understand that anything shared in the circle may be heard by non-healthcare participants.

4) Policy on Monetary Requests

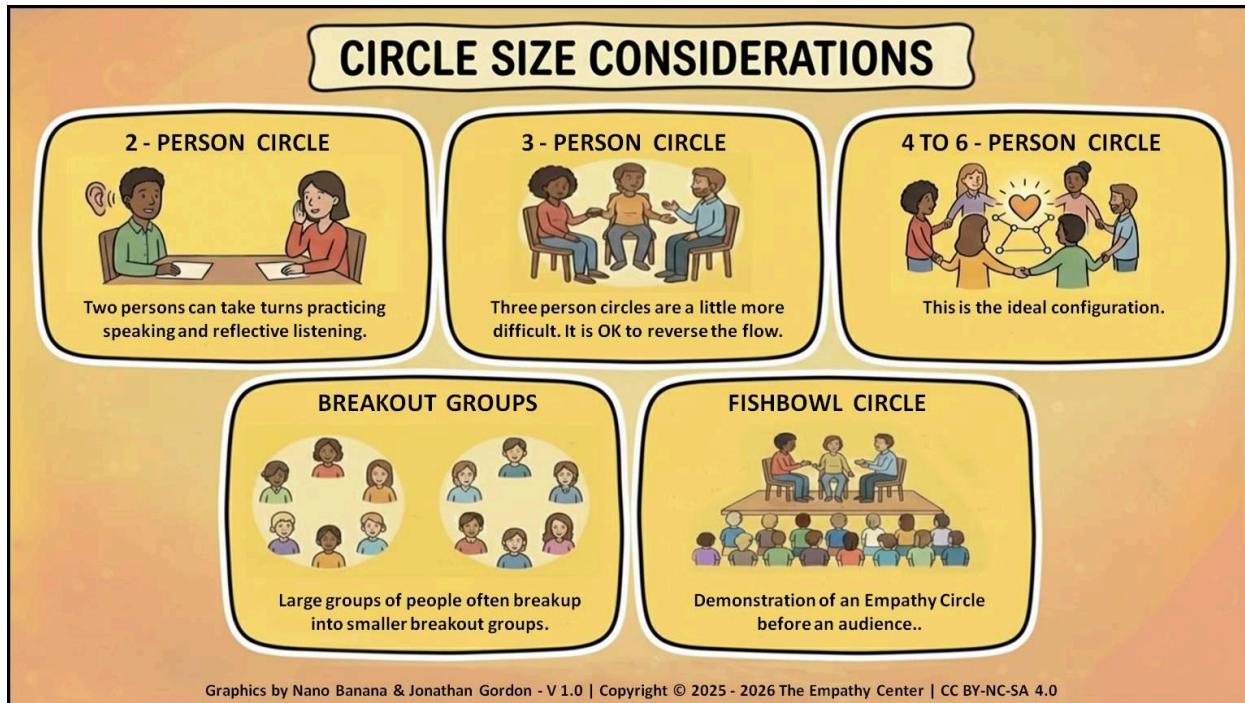
To support a safe and trustworthy environment, we strongly advise all Empathy Circle participants **not to give money, gifts, or financial information** to anyone they meet through an online Empathy Circle. While Empathy Circles foster openness, connection and mutual understanding, they are not a setting for financial solicitation or personal fundraising.

Our policy is:

1. **Do not send money or financial gifts to another participant** unless you personally know them outside the Empathy Circle and can independently verify their identity.
2. **Never share banking details, credit card numbers, personal identification, or login credentials** with anyone in or after the Empathy Circle.
3. **Be cautious of any requests framed as emergencies, emotional appeals, or investment opportunities.** Empathy Circles are not a place for financial solicitation of any kind.
4. **Report any financial requests or suspicious behavior immediately** to the facilitator or organizers. Such conduct is not permitted and will be addressed promptly.

B) The Basic Structure of an Empathy Circle

1) Circle Size considerations



A 2-person Circle: In the online training, we have a 30 minute call we term a “Buddy Call”. This can be structured various ways, but it includes a period of reflective listening on the part of both participants. It’s a good way to start off. Try it with a friend or family member. In the training we do it to strengthen the sense of community.

A 3-person Circle: This configuration can be more difficult because the configuration and number of people make it hard to constantly come up with new things to say. It can be done, the relationship between the participants can have a great effect on the success of the Circle, but consider shortening the time if you find that people run out of ideas.

Reverse Select: Feel free to reverse select. For example you just finished up being the Active Listener and it is your turn to speak. Rather than pick a new participant you could pick the person that just spoke. This helps keep the three person circles interesting.

A 4 to 6-person Circle: **This is the ideal configuration**, allowing more people to speak during the 1 ½ to 2 hour Circle duration. We try for 3 turns for each participant in a 2 hour Circle because it takes a few rounds, especially if people are new to each other, to feel comfortable and share more deeply.

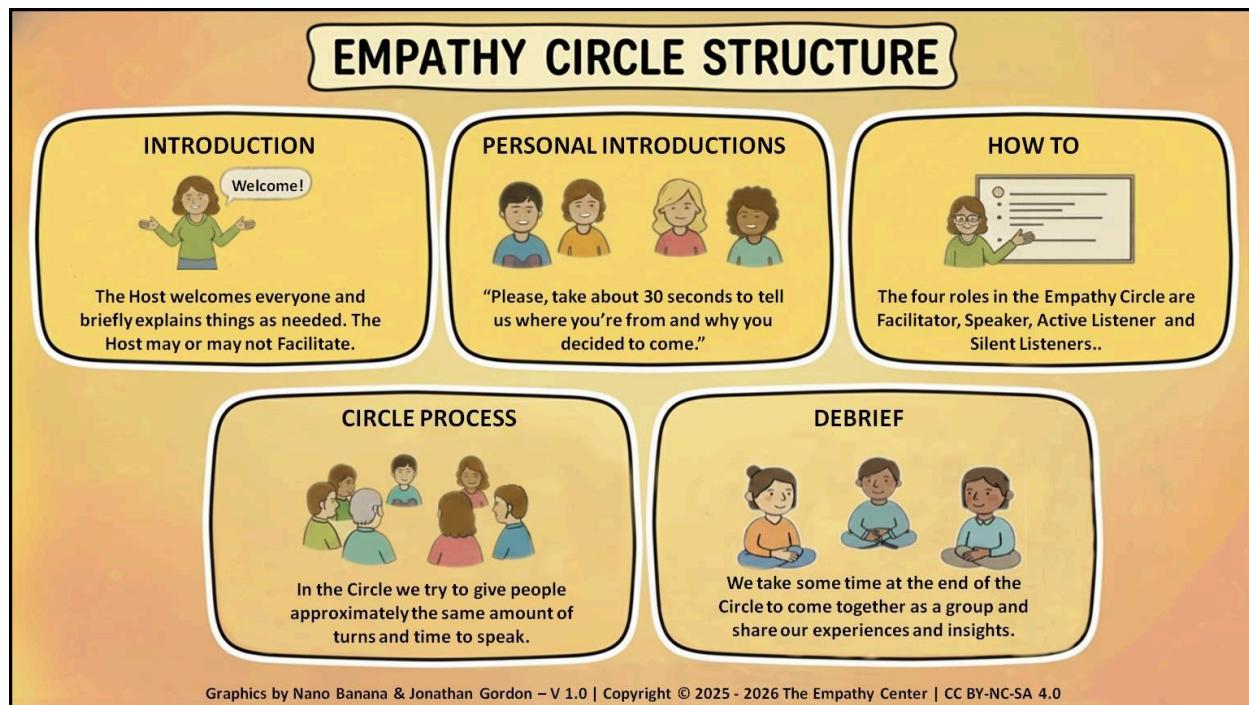
Scaling the Space (virtual or in-person)

The ideal group size for an Empathy Circle group is 4-6. Once a group reaches 8 or 9 participants, the host/facilitator should consider splitting the group into two breakout

groups. There are benefits and some drawbacks to doing this. When you split into smaller groups not everyone can hear what all the others in the other breakout room are saying, however in smaller groups people get more chances to speak and more turns usually results in sharing more deeply. Splitting the group requires having enough Empathy Circle Facilitators present to maintain the structure, safety, and flow of the process. Make your decisions as you wish to meet the needs of the situation. If you don't break up the group and people are still heard and understood, you have had a successful Circle.

Fishbowl Circles: This is a demonstration of an Empathy Circle before an audience. The organizer of the event arranges for the Facilitator to bring along a number of experienced Empathy Circle participants and they demonstrate a Circle in front of a larger audience.

There are three parts to an **Empathy Circle**, the **1) Introduction, 2) Circle and 3) Debrief**.



2) Introduction/Explanation

There are two optimum time frames for hosting an Empathy Circle or Empathy Cafe. One is an hour and a half and the other is two hours. The time breakdown described here is for the 1 ½ hour Circle. A two hour Circle gives people more time for practice and explanation if needed. It's best to allot any extra time to Empathy Circle practice in the breakout rooms.

Personal Introductions: Time allotted: approx. 10-15 min. This is the time to warmly welcome and get to know a little about the participants, as well as sharing a bit about the host(s) of the Circle. A sample question that we use is, “Please, take about 30 seconds to tell us where you’re from and why you decided to come.” This is a time to assess what the participants might be interested in learning about empathy. It is also the time to introduce those new to the Empathy Circle to the rules. You may have to adjust the time allotted, depending on the size of the group. If the group is very large, or time becomes short, you can wait until people go into breakout Circles, in smaller groups, for them to introduce themselves.

Present the “How To”: Time allotted: approx. 3-5 min. Please find our suggested “How To” above. We have other versions that you can use depending on the time available or the makeup of the participants. People’s attention may wander, so after presenting the “How To”, ask if there are any **questions**. Remember, time is short, so lengthy conversations can throw off the timing of the Empathy Circle.

Prepare the group for the Circle by stating: 1) topic, always adding, “ or whatever’s on your mind.” 2) The time allotted for the Circle (optimum 1-1 1/2hrs) and 3) the time allotted for speaking turns (3-5 min.).

Next: In the Circle, you will be the first Active Listener, so people will have a chance to see the Active Listener role modeled.

A sample “How To” is above. **Note** that an even **shorter recap** is included in case people aren’t listening, there is little time, or your group has a great deal of language challenges, such as young children or people for whom English is not their first language.

3) Empathy Circle Practice

Time allotted: 1½ hour Empathy Circle: 1 hour

In the Circle we try to give people approximately the same amount of turns and time to speak. The reason for the length of the Circle is that it usually takes people two or three speaking turns before they feel comfortable enough with the structure or the other people in the group to share more deeply.

4) Debrief

Time allotted: 1½ hour Empathy Circle: 15 minutes

We take some time at the end of the Circle to come together as a group and share our experiences and insights. This is very important in order to get feedback on how the Empathy Circle went. The description of people’s personal experiences can be quite moving. It’s hard to express that in a checklist. After people have shared, remember to give them information on any future Circles or events.

Tips:

Start with an upbeat subject such as one of the best days of your life, or a wonderful experience in nature. Remember, allowing people to talk about whatever they wish, even off-topic, is an essential part of an Empathy Circle.

You can ask a friend or family member if they would help you practice a new skill you're learning, reflective listening (active listening).

C) Empathy Circles and Empathy Cafés

When we refer to the Empathy Circle we are referring to the basic process described in our "How To" that can be employed in various informal or formal situations such as two people engaging in a conversation that uses reflection, as part of another type of training, or even spontaneously in a variety of social situations. An Empathy Café can be a one time occurrence or an ongoing event where people are invited to learn and practice the process. This can be online or in-person, depending on your circumstances.

Online Empathy Circles and Cafés

Traditional cafés and coffee houses have long served as the "living rooms" of a community as a deeply rooted space where members meet, relax, and find renewal. In our increasingly digital world, the Empathy Circle Café has emerged as a powerful online alternative to these physical spaces. By utilizing platforms like Zoom, hosts can recreate this café atmosphere regardless of geographic distance. We have found that the focus on giving each person a turn to speak while prioritizing understanding each other gives participants in an Empathy Circle a much more energizing and connected experience as opposed to simply listening to a lecture.

In-Person Empathy Circles and Cafés

Despite the increasing digitization of our world, traditional cafés, coffee houses, and private homes still exist and play a crucial role in maintaining our social connections. Sharing our personal space with others creates a richness that can't be completely replicated online. The Empathy Circle practice only benefits from that depth. Lou Zweier, who co-created the Empathy Circle Facilitation Training, holds regular cafés in his hometown, that are public conversations, based on the Empathy Circle, at local cafés and public meeting spaces. Others have hosted Empathy Circles in their homes. Some materials to have on hand would be multiple timers, space and chairs for breakout groups, and pen and paper if participants wish to write something down.

Empathy Circles and Cafés Series

If you hold an Empathy Circle on a regular basis, you may see some "regulars" that attend. This can foster a closer knit group and you can ask the group if they'd like to attend a short series of Circles around one topic or a series of topics that address a larger issue

Reference List

Bibliography

Niezink, L.W. & Rutsch, E. (2016). [Empathy Circles: A Blended Empathy Practice](#).

Carl Rogers and Richard Farson (1957) "Active Listening", p.11, Mockingbird Press LLC. Kindle Edition.

[The Role of Early Language Development in Literacy Development](#)

Links

[Empathy Circles, A Blended Empathy Practice](#)

[Best Empathy Training](#)

[The Empathy Center](#)

[Defining Empathy Website](#)

[Wholistic Empathy Definition](#)

✉ Handbook: SEL Research

✉ Short Version: HOW TO TAKE PART IN A BASIC EMPATHY CIRCLE

[The Role of Early Language Development in Literacy Development](#)

✉ Handbook: Oral Language Research

[The History of the Empathy Circles Development](#)

[The Empathy Center - Events Calendar](#)

Videos:

▶ Wholistic Empathy: Defining Empathy Presentation #3

▶ Why the Empathy Circle Works

Videos: Wholistic Empathy: Defining Empathy Presentation #3 EMPATHY SUMMIT: The history of the Empathy Circles development

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