

## Circles of Support

A circle of support is a group of people who gather regularly to talk about, improve and expand the life of the person at the centre of the circle, who is usually a person with a disability. Indeed, the first thing to establish is who is at the centre and who the circle aims primarily to benefit. Others will naturally benefit as well. For example, the family cannot help but benefit if their family member is happier and more engaged and included in their community and has a more interesting life.

The person who has a disability should be present at and participate in every circle; after all it is their life the circle is discussing. When the person does not have the ability to do this and someone else needs to act as their proxy, it is vital that that person is someone who knows the person well; for example, I represent my son, his interest and his life at each circle meeting.

So what are some of the potential pitfalls of circles of support? A major issue is that circles of support may be seen as some kind of panacea; one that will solve all the problems, sort out all the dilemmas and make a life valued, interesting and included and that it will all happen quickly.

This is not so. Circles of support are hard work and may take some months or years before they actually achieve positive change and they can be difficult to implement in a sustained and meaningful way. Sometimes they become just one more thing that has to be organised, facilitated and maintained. Circles can languish and eventually dissolve if they are seen as an onerous task that *should* be done instead of a means of providing practical advice, solving or unravelling problems, generating ideas or emotionally supporting the people at the centre of the group.

It is important to find the right people to be members of the circle. The group needs to consist of people who know and understand the central person and their wants and needs. If someone on the group has the best interests of the central person at heart, but their ideas of what is best, do not align with that person's, then there is the potential for disagreements, alienation and fracturing of the group. So be very careful who you invite to be part of the group and be very clear about the values and philosophy from the beginning.

Another difficulty people have is asking friends, family, colleagues or acquaintances to be part of the group. Asking is not something that comes easily to many people, myself included. It can be helpful to give this role to someone else. This is a contained and well-defined role; you are not asking someone to devote their life to the central person or to commit to being on the circle forever; a good friend or empathetic family member who might otherwise be fearful of taking on a more central role in the circle may be happy to take on the role of organiser or facilitator and do the asking.

It is important to establish what is expected of circle members at a very early stage. I used the first meeting as an opportunity to 'set the scene'; for example, to confirm for the group my own values and hopes for a good life for my son; to discuss the purpose and proposed values of the group, and to establish what we might discuss and strive to achieve.

Membership of the circle may be fluid. For a start, life is fluid; an ever flowing river of changing directions, wants, needs, achievements and set-backs. This is true for all lives. Circle members may be genuinely interested in and committed to the circle but at times their own life gets in the way. So they might be unable to attend all the circle meetings. However

just because a person is not physically in the room, it may not mean that they are ineligible to be a part of the group. Nor does it mean that they don't care.

Circles need to find their own dynamic and they do not always develop in the way that might have been anticipated. Setting goals and targets which are too high or having unrealistic expectations of the group can lead to disillusionment with the process. Marking achievement and progress no matter how small or seemingly insignificant will provide encouragement and build enthusiasm and by meeting regularly, though not necessarily frequently, members are encouraged to have faith in the process.

Keeping the purpose of the circle at the centre of the process is vital. The formal processes and procedures should not overshadow the purpose of the circle. The circle does not exist for its own sake or to be a wonderful example of how to run an efficient circle meeting but as something that should seek out, create or foster meaningful experiences and relationships for the central person.

Having a note taker, however, is essential. Someone needs to take brief notes and ensure all members of the circle, present and absent, receive them. This could perhaps be one of the roles of the facilitator, if there is one. This informs all circle members what was discussed and decided at meetings and is a crucial element of maintaining a strong sense of purpose for the group.

One way to prevent meetings becoming overly formal is to make them fun. Turn each meeting into a celebration. Celebrate achievements with food and drink; coffee and cake, tea and cucumber sandwiches, champagne and finger food, beer and sausages. Start each meeting with the good things. Talk about what positive changes have been made, what is good in the life of the person or ask each member to speak of something they admire or enjoy about the person with a disability.

Move on to the parts of the person's life that need to change, so that their life will be better. Work this out first so that the meeting has a real focus. For example, the best circle meetings I had were when I asked the group to brainstorm work experience opportunities for my son and when I wanted to plan my son's business launch. People are happy to contribute their ideas if they are given a specific problem to discuss. If group members don't know why they are there or told something vague like 'I want my son's life to be better' they can feel inadequate and foolish and are unlikely to want to be involved in the future as they feel there is nothing they can contribute. This is another reason why it is important that the people involved in the circle know the person and their needs well.

Maintaining a circle of support is a vexed question. Has this circle been formed to explore a longer-term role or a short-term goal? Different people with different skills will be required in each case. For example, when I was planning the business launch mentioned above, I invited a very good friend who is a caterer and an events manager, but who is not part of Jackson's regular circle, which has the longer-term focus.

Circles of support are not for everyone. Some people may not need one; others simply do not like them. It is not mandatory that every person with a disability has one. But if this is something you decide to pursue for your family member, then find an ally, take it slowly, celebrate the gains, big and small, and give the circle time to develop. Circles provide an opportunity to develop and improve the lives of a person with a disability and their families; the opportunity is valuable and cannot be hurried.