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Circles of Support - an introduction



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Introduction

This article briefly describes:

- what a circle of support is;
- how circles work;
- why they are important;
- who should be in circle of support;
- key ideas;
- the facilitation of a circle of support;
- and the relationship of circles to person centred planning.

A circle of support is what happens when someone's allies get together to co-ordinate their efforts to help. It's not a formal structure.

Circles of support

Most people have allies. If things go wrong allies will be sympathetic, concerned, and interested. They will listen, help out, and seek help from others. If things are going well they will be interested, pleased and will share the good experience.

Crucially, allies do what they do for personal, not professional reasons. Allies are people who like you, never people who don't. They are people who want to know you, not people who are assigned to your care.

For some people it can be helpful when allies meet to listen, share ideas, solve problems, and to plan how to help. If there are particular, identifiable people who show a personal commitment in organising around someone who needs help, it can be helpful to refer to this being the person's circle of support or circle of friends.

Of course real life isn't that simple, and when we talk about circles of support we shouldn't forget this. Few people have a clearly defined group of allies. We might have one or two people to whom we are very close, a small group who are key allies, a larger group who are distant friends, and a whole load of people who have a professional relationship with us but who are also friendly. If we needed some support over an issue in our life some of these people would be willing to organise around us to help out. Allies might gather around us in different ways and at different times. Some would help consistently, and others would help sporadically. Some would always be supportive, and some might be allies at one time and not at another.

What circles do

A circle of support organises around the person at the centre of the circle - the focus person. The people in the circle do the things that come naturally to true allies. They listen - not in the way that people do when consulting, but in the way that friends do. They solve problems by thinking together, bouncing ideas around, checking things out, and by going back to the drawing board over and over again. They pull in favours, put themselves out, and use their contacts. Sometimes they act together, and sometimes each person works alone. They celebrate success, and they find failure disappointing.

Of course working together in any group of people can be complex. In order to ensure that a group keeps the focus person at the heart of decision making and direction finding, certain key ideas are useful. Some of these are explained later.

Why this is important

The ideas around circles of support become particularly important when we remember that some people:

- have few allies;
- are disempowered by organisations and people who have power over them - limiting their hopes, ambitions, and confidence;
- may not be able to tell us about their hopes, dreams, and nightmares.

Services tend to entice people into a parallel world which we can call Serviceland. People who are at risk of having the character and quality of their life defined by Serviceland are a key group who can benefit from others nurturing a circle of support around them. The ideas which are associated with circles of support are particularly useful in challenging the problems that can arise through contact with Serviceland.

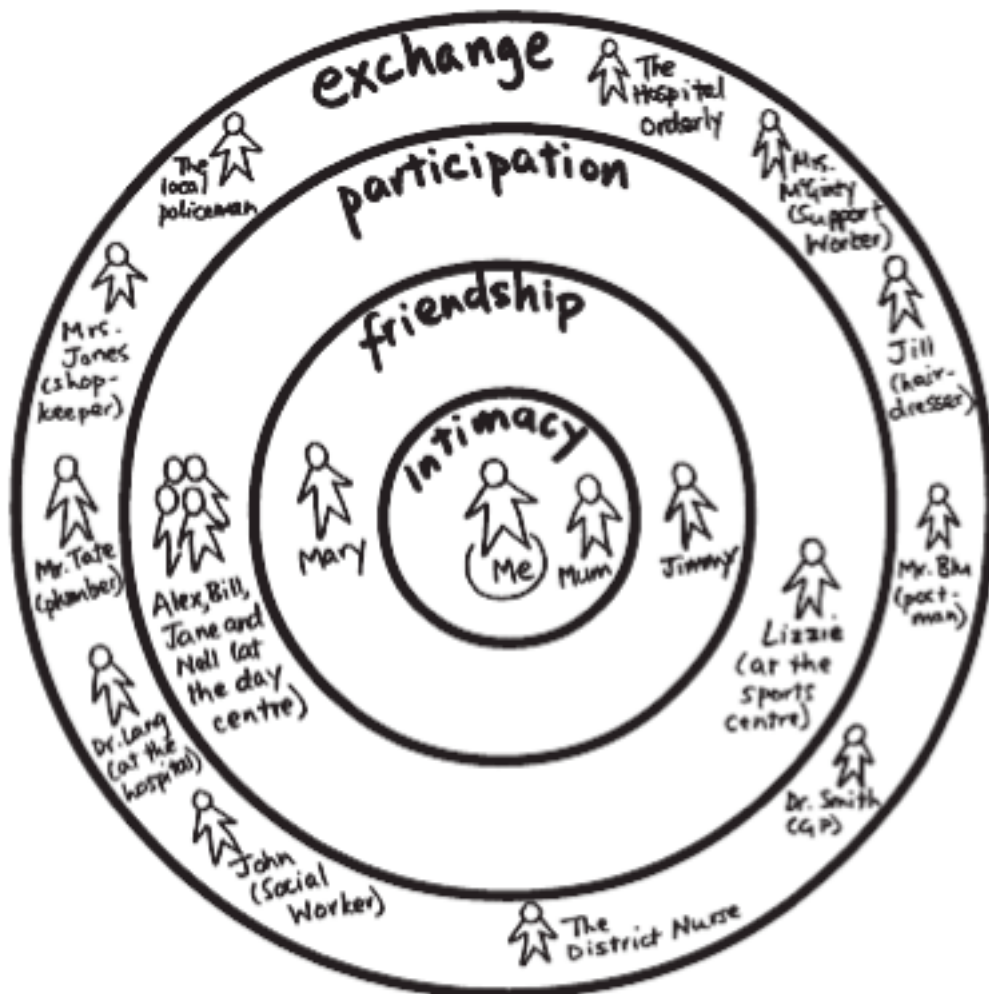
People ask "how do you set up a circle of support?" or "how do you make sure people commit to being in a circle for a sufficient time?" or "how often should a circle meet?" Such questions betray a level of misunderstanding. More reasonable questions are "how can we help someone bring their allies together?" or "how do we make sure that someone's allies don't become demotivated when things get difficult?" or "how do we make sure that allies working together don't become disempowering?"

A circle that works effectively can pool skills, ideas, connections. Most problems are more easily solved this way. Problem solving is even more effective if people are personally involved, are prepared to put themselves out, to call in favours, not to give up when things don't work, to be supportive when the focus person changes their mind about decisions, and so on. A circle can help the focus person's life to move forwards - prompting supportive and well designed services to add their considerable weight to the effort, or breaking free of the powerful limitations of others.

Supporting a circle to get together

A circle is made up of the focus person's allies - some meeting regularly, others providing support only on occasion. Circle meetings might choose to invite others to attend to provide their specialist skills or knowledge.

Facilitators can use a graphic to map relationships, to help to find out who the focus person wants to invite to an initial circle meeting.



Circle of intimacy

This is the innermost circle and includes the people closest to you. This may include family members and/ or some of our oldest and dearest friends... the people you can't imagine not being around even if you don't see them all that often.

Circle of friendship

The second circle includes the people we think of as friends in the real sense of the word. People we confide in, rely on, borrow money from, laugh and cry with, people who almost made the first circle.

Circle of participation (or association)

The third circle includes all the people we meet on a daily basis, people who work in our office, school friends, people who we meet when following our hobbies or interests, people who always say "hello" even though we don't know their first name.

Circle of exchange

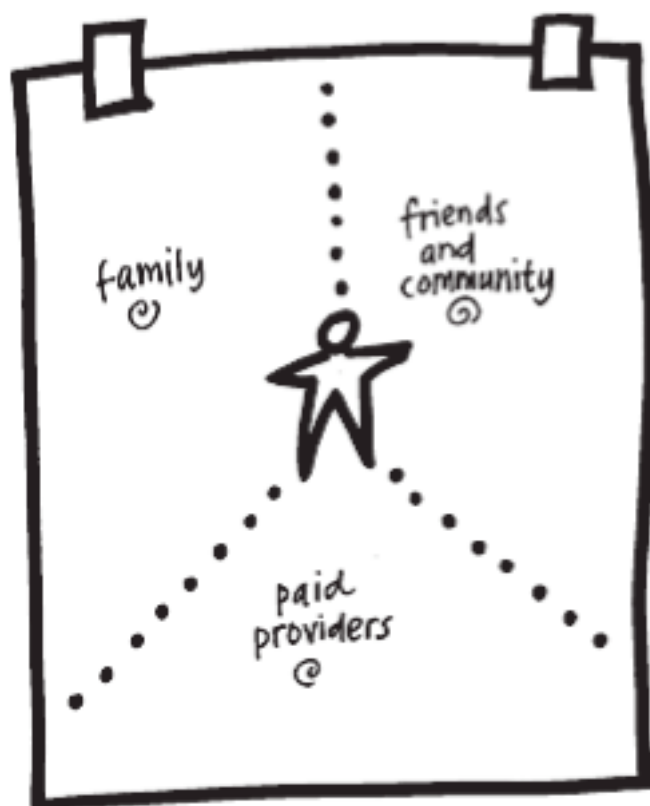
This outer circle includes all the people who are PAID to be in our lives - either directly by us or because they provide us with a service. This might include our doctor, dentist, child-minder, hairdresser, plumber. Most paid support workers will fit in this circle too.

A slightly different graphic for relationship mapping originates from Personal Futures Planning (O'Brien, O'Brien and Mount). Rather than circles, the paper is divided into segments, with the focus person in the middle. As a minimum there are always at least 3 sections:

- Family
- Friends/community
- Paid providers

In this model, people are placed in the appropriate section, nearer or farther away depending on the strength of their relationship to the focus person.

Additional lines can further denote a really important connection. If it makes more sense to the person, further sections could be used, i.e. one for people who are paid to support them in a residential setting and another for other paid staff.



These tools might be used again later to help the circle and the focus person to think about who else might meet with them.

Sometimes an initial investigation suggests that a key move would be to develop allies in a particular environment. For instance where a child has few allies in school, or an adult no contacts at their work place or college.

In this situation, the use of simple facilitation techniques might bring people together for long enough to form the foundations of a circle. School children might be encouraged to think about what it would feel like to join a new school and then be asked to meet to support the inclusion of a new pupil. Where a child is being bullied because of some perceived difference, a group might be supported to empathise with their victim, before being invited to help in problem solving. Beyond these initial stages, the facilitation or support of the circle will probably be based on the same ideas as with any other circle.

Circles solve problems by thinking together, bouncing ideas around, checking things out, and by going back to the drawing board over and over again. They pull in favours, put themselves out, and use their contacts.

Key ideas

Several key ideas can guide the work of a circle of support. In particular we look here at the value of thinking about the focus person's history, identity, gifts, and dreams. A circle that hears these things described by the focus person will most often find the experience involving and motivating. A circle that spends time hearing from each person there about their best guesses on these things will also be motivated and directed.

History

Sometimes those attending a circle meeting need to be reminded, or to hear for the first time, about the history of the focus person. What's important here is that this history is the account as told from the point of view of the focus person.

"Once you get into this great stream of history you can't get out"

Richard Nixon

Hearing a few key stories, or even a few minor stories, can be revealing and involving. The idea is to get to know the focus person well, not to become involved in counselling them or in laying blame.

Sometimes knowing about someone's history can help a circle to avoid the repetition of past mistakes, or can remind them of missed opportunities, or lost relationships that can be picked up.

Sometimes people can gain status in the eyes of others by the use of their past - many people like to drop past achievements into conversations for just that reason.

Tom Kohler, a citizen advocacy co-ordinator in Georgia, talks about the poor conditions that he found one man living in. He relates that his first act was to display a photograph of the man as an important baseball player above his bed as a powerful message to care staff.

As with all the key ideas, the use of graphic facilitation can be an extremely important part of this process. Commonly, a person's story is presented as a time-line, more often wavy than straight, with the past at one end and the present at the other.

"Every single person has capacities, abilities and gifts. Living a good life depends on whether those capacities can be used, abilities expressed and gifts given. If they are, the person will be valued, feel powerful and well-connected to the people around them; and the community around the person will be more powerful because of the contribution the person is making"

John McKnight

Identity and gifts

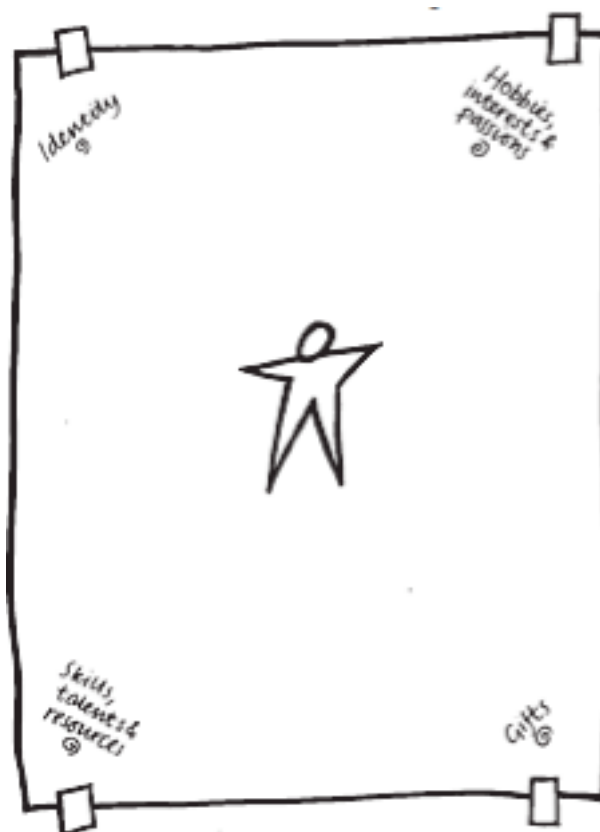
If you think of when you first meet someone it is unlikely that you would pick your own shortcomings to introduce yourself. On the contrary, you might mention things such as your job, where you're from, what some of your interests are. It's useful for a circle to take a tremendous interest in this kind of information. How are individuals seen? What kind of hobbies and interests do they have? What things are they passionate about? What are their skills, and resources? What do they know about? Finding out these things begins to build a fuller picture of a person.

In person centred planning the term 'gifts' is also used but it is important to realise that this is not meant in the conventional way. We do not mean someone's ability as a pianist or painter. Rather a gift is a "unique attribute" - something about you which creates a possible hook or connection with at least one other person.

Someone might have a welcoming smile or an ability to be calm and quiet. Discovering a person's gifts requires empathy, insight and the simple art of spending time with them. Sometimes friends, relatives and others, who know and like the person, might be better at seeing what the persons' gifts really are and find it easier to say. Hearing others describe a person's gifts can be a positive and affirming experience for the person and their family.

Gifts are the basic tool of community. When we seek to connect someone to community we are trying to find ways in which people can use their unique contribution so as to allow meaningful interaction. No one is without gifts.

One way of focussing on an individual's strengths and capacities is to do a capacity poster with them. Through having a conversation with the person and their allies, asking open questions, and through listening intently, we can make sure that as many of their capacities as possible are spoken about and recorded.



Dreams

Circles find it useful to find out about the focus person's dreams, and sometimes about their nightmares. Our dreams are a vital source of energy and a guiding star for direction. Hearing about a person's dreams is naturally engaging and involving, leading to a greater understanding of who they are and of where they want to go in their life.

When we think of dreams we don't set limits. We might dream of being an astronaut, despite lacking most of the skills piloting a space craft would require. We will probably never be an astronaut (although who can tell...) but nobody gains by efforts to make us be realistic, and the dream can take us to places we wouldn't otherwise have gone.

Dreams must be heard in a situation of huge respect - a circle that fails to create such a safe space for the focus person is unlikely to hear anything very profound. We are also asking people to reveal something which is close to their innermost self - and we may badly damage them through an inappropriate response.

To emphasise the most important point by repeating it: the whole point of dreams is that they are unlimited.

Of course, some people can't tell us, in words, about their dream. However, allies can be motivated and can find appropriate directions for their support if they do their best to dream for the focus person. John and Connie Lyle O'Brien, in "Members of Each Other" comment:

"Dreaming for another is, of course, dangerous: a vulnerable person could easily get trapped in what someone else thinks should be good for them. Dreaming for another must arise from a kind of love that includes recognition of the other person's separate identity. It is a dialogue of action in which circle members take a step and then carefully wait to see whether the person they are concerned for responds with a next step that confirms or redirects them"
John and Connie Lyle O'Brien

Circles are made up of the people who won't give up because things get difficult - people who'll remain supportive when you reject all of their ideas or when you change your mind at the most inconvenient times.

Person centred planning

The key ideas of history, dreams, nightmares, gifts and identity come together in person centred planning. Often a full person centred planning session, perhaps using the Path or Map tools, can be the ideal way to bring a circle of support together.

Person centred planning is helping someone work out what they want and then helping them work out how to get it.

Person centred planning uses a set of techniques for helping a focus person and their allies to plan for the person's future.

- The focus is on the person and their life - any meetings are not to discuss the difficulties support services or professionals may be experiencing or the constraints they are working within.
- The person and the people who love and care for the person are the primary authority.
- At a meeting, any professionals are there to provide advice and knowledge when it is sought - it is not their or their service's meeting.
- The control is with the focus person and their allies.
- Universal needs, such as the need to be included, to have friends, and to have the respect of others, are as important as medical or health needs.
- The focus is on individual gifts and on how the person can contribute these to their community, on dreams and aspirations, but not on deficiencies or disabilities.
- There is a future orientation, with an assumption that the future should be shaped by the focus person's aspirations, however extravagant, imaginative or unexpected, and whether or not others approve.
- There is usually an assumption that the focus person shouldn't live in an environment where they are segregated from the ordinary community or where they are automatically brought together with others sharing a label or categorisation.
- There is a commitment to address conflict openly and honestly.
- There is a commitment to reach a consensus for action.
- There is a willingness to come up with non-traditional solutions.

[this list from work by SHS Trust]

When person centred planning works it builds a desirable future for the person and engages the energy, commitment and ingenuity of

the person's allies to make that future happen. The process of the planning - what is happening in the room and in the minds of the people who are contributing towards the planning - is often more important than any records. It takes place in the world of the focus person. It need not involve services in any way, and in no way should it be a service procedure. The service system should have no control over the process.

For people in services, person centred planning is easily confused with assessment and care planning. Both of these also involve finding out about the person, and they both involve planning for the future. They might both involve changes in the way that people use services. However, assessment and care planning are for organising what services do. Person centred planning is instead about helping the person and their allies to think about future possibilities, and to plan to make that happen. Assessments and care planning can respond to this by working out what the service can do to help. But the process remains part of the service system.

In planning the facilitators have a very different role from anyone else, and from anyone involved in assessment or care planning. Their role is to co-ordinate and organise. They need to create the right conditions for the process to be successful, which means they must be seen to be free of other agendas. They need not to have any responsibilities for past or future action. Their role must be purely to support the contributors and the focus person through the process.

The best designed tools for helping with the direction and focus of a circle are also the ones which are good at getting people involved and engaged. If a person doesn't have many allies, these techniques should bring people on board.

Ongoing facilitation of a circle

A circle of support may find it useful to follow the steps described by John and Connie Lyle O'Brien and by Beth Mount in their articles and books on personal futures planning. Personal futures planning works with the same key ideas as in other person centred planning processes, but takes place over time, with a circle getting to know the person, developing their ideas, planning action, and checking out the results, before going back to developing and planning, and so on.

Detailed explanations of personal futures planning can be found in "Person Centred Planning: Finding Directions for Change Using Personal Futures Planning" by Beth Mount and in "A Little Book About Person Centred Planning" edited by John and Connie Lyle O'Brien.

"One Candle Power" by Cathy Ludlum also contains ideas.

Two key ideas are important when thinking about how circles are kept together and enthusiastic in the longer term. Firstly successes should be celebrated. Difficulties are to be expected, and the pressure of these can become stifling. Celebrating success is an antidote. Celebrations also give the group chance to remember the reasons for their working together.

The group should also take time for dreaming about the future, and particularly for helping the focus person to dream. Not only is this motivating, but it helps to check that they are working in the right direction, and to make sure that they know when the focus person's dreams change, as they surely will.

No part of the planning process should tie the focus person down to a situation as it was at the time the planning was done. Each part of the personal futures process is designed to be re-visited. Dreams change, hopes wishes opinions and ideas move on, relationships develop or become more distant. One of the factors which makes graphic facilitation useful in person centred planning is that finished graphics aren't easy to duplicate, distribute and file for long term reference.

If someone has few allies, look to whatever connections they do have. What would entice this person into a room to meet with others? Think in terms of a good meal, a celebration, a birthday party, or a personal approach from the focus person. The less like a service meeting it feels, the more likely ordinary people are to get involved.