

# **Holding the Circle**

## **Spiritually and Socially Connected**

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*"Speak a new language so that the world will be a new world." ~ Rumi*

**Holding the Circle** is helpful to us as people, doctors, psychologists, social workers, teachers, coaches, parents, palliative care nurses and other healthcare professionals. It is what ALL of us can do for each other - for groups, partners, lovers, children, friends, neighbors, and even strangers with whom we strike up conversations. We can create an imaginary psychic circle.

**Here are the principles:**

**Give yourself and all people permission to trust their own intuition and wisdom**

*"Dreams are candles to help us through the dark." ~ Mark Nepo*

Give yourself, and those you are with, permission to trust their own intuition and wisdom. When we are supporting our own selves and others we have no experience to rely on, and yet, intuitively, we know what is accurately needed for all. It is to be present, to listen well and then skillfully, with empathy, acceptance, and compassion, mindfully respond.

There's a part of all of us that contains a soft compassionate voice that lives within ourselves and others; it holds our dreams, our need to love well, to be in our power and control over the destiny of our lives, to feel capable, and to belong, to be a part of a community.

Empathy is more than an act of helping. Empathy is the ability to be able to feel so close, so knowing the person and, in turn, ourselves, so connected to their perspective and vision of their world, so comforted. It's almost breathtaking to the point that you feel that you can't take it. At this moment you are part of them and their spirit. That is compassion and this will bring forth the wisdom.

**Give yourself and others small amounts of information that they can handle**

*"The notes I handle no better than many pianists. But the pause between the notes... Ah, that is where the art resides." ~ Arthur Schnitzler*

We need to give ourselves and others the small amounts of information that can be handled. Please be kind and give simple instructions and leave only a few handouts. None of us need to be overwhelmed with more information than we can process in our own time. Too much information starts to make us feel negative about ourselves and about them.

## **Don't take their power away (Power With not Power Over) or Give your voice to their needs.**

*"I believe the greatest gift I can conceive of having from anyone is to be seen by them, heard by them, to be understood and touched by them." ~ Virginia Sati*

When we give up our own decision-making power or take it out of others' hands, we and they are left feeling useless, oppressed, and incompetent. There may be times when we need to step in and make hard decisions for other people (eg. when they're dealing with an addiction and an intervention feels like the only thing that will save them). However, in almost every other case, we all (even our children) need the autonomy to make our own choices, especially in these times of uncertainty. We need to feel empowered in making our own decisions and to support others in doing the same, as well as finding ongoing support. We need to make a stronger commitment to be socially and spiritually connected, one moment at a time.

## **Keep our own ego out of it.**

*"I begged the wise one to tell me the secret of the world. Gently he whispered, 'Be quiet, the secret cannot be spoken, It is wrapped in silence.'" ~ Rumi*

This is a big one. We all get caught in this trap now and then; when we begin to believe that another's success is dependent on our own ideas, thoughts, or interventions. Or when we think that our own or others' failures reflect poorly on us, creating negative self-talk. It can also happen when we become convinced that others' emotions are all about us and not about them. It's a trap we occasionally find ourselves slipping into when we teach or give information without our loved ones first giving permission or asking for what they need. We (I) can become more concerned about our (my) own success than about the success of the other person. This doesn't serve anyone, not even us. To truly support growth, we (I) need to keep our (my) ego out of it and create the space where we all have a real opportunity to grow and learn. This current pause in our world has given us a chance to choose to find our inner strength, our compassion for others, to lean in to the uncertainty and to take some different small steps towards self-love and great love for others.

## **Make people feel safe enough to make mistakes, to fail. Allow yourself to risk and fail.**

*"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." ~ Maya Angelou*

When we are learning, growing, or going through grief or transition, we are bound to make some mistakes along the way. When we withhold judgement and shame, we have an opportunity to reach inside of ourselves to find the courage to take risks, to risk loving fully, and the resilience to keep going even when we suffer. When we know that failure is simply a part of the journey and not the end of the world, we spend less time beating ourselves up for it and more time learning from the mistakes.

**Guide with presence and curiosity, towards humility and thoughtfulness, within ourselves and towards others.**

*“Gentle, tender interventions, if they are clear, overcome rigid resistances and self protective patterns. If gentleness fails, try yielding or stepping back altogether. When you yield, the resistance will relax” ~ Stephen Andrew*

A wise caregiver, lover, parent knows when to withhold guidance and when not to, (i.e. when it makes a person feel foolish and inadequate) but to offer it gently and cleanly. Recognizing the areas in which we feel most vulnerable and incapable, and seeking or offering the right kind of help without shame, takes practice and humility.

**Create/be a container for complex emotions: hurt, fear, anger/rage, shame, loneliness, trauma, etc.**

*“Follow the positive emotional spark” ~ Chris Wagner*

When people feel that they are held in a deeper way than they are used to, they feel safe enough to allow complex emotions to surface that might normally remain hidden. Someone who is practiced at holding space knows that this can happen and will be prepared to hold it in a gentle, supportive, and nonjudgmental way. In *The Circle Way*, we talk about “holding the rim” for people. The circle becomes the space where people feel safe enough to fall apart without fearing that this will leave them permanently broken or that they will be shamed by others in the room. Someone is always there to offer empathy, compassion and courage.

This is not easy work, and it is work that we (I) continue to learn about ourselves as we (I) host increasingly more challenging conversations and even sit with misery and mystery.

We cannot do it if we are overly emotional ourselves, if we haven’t done the hard work of looking into our own shadow, or if we don’t trust the people we are holding space for in this moment.

**Allow people to make different decisions and to have different experiences than you would**

*“People are more willing to change when they're completely free not to change.” ~ anonymous*

Holding space is about respecting each person’s differences and recognizing that those differences may lead to them making choices that we would not make. Sometimes, for example, they make choices based on cultural norms that we can’t understand from within our own experience. When we hold space, we release control and we honor differences.

**Holding the Circle** is something that we can master with practice, within our families, you can adequately learn to address this list of principles. It is a complex practice that evolves as we practice it, and it is unique to each person and each situation. Now, in this pause, is an opportunity to refocus ourselves.

**Biography:**

Stephen R. Andrew LCSW, LADC, CCS, CGP is a “storyteller”, trainer, author, therapist, community organizer, and CEO (Chief Energizing Officer) of Health Education & Training Institute, [www.hetimaine.org](http://www.hetimaine.org). Stephen maintains a compassion-focused private practice in Portland, Maine USA and facilitates a variety of groups: young person’s, men’s, co-ed, couple’s, and caregiver’s groups. He presents workshops for social service agencies, substance use and misuse workers, and other groups on adolescent and adult addiction, motivational interviewing, trauma, men's issues, and group work. He is a clinical facilitator, visionary and founder of Agape Inc., a compassion-focused outpatient agency and the Men’s Resource Center. Stephen is a former Substance Abuse Coordinator for a public school system, the former Executive Director of an adolescent prevention treatment agency, and the founder of a recovery camp for adults and a family camp. He is a member of the International Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT). He is the creator of the Spirit Wind series.

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