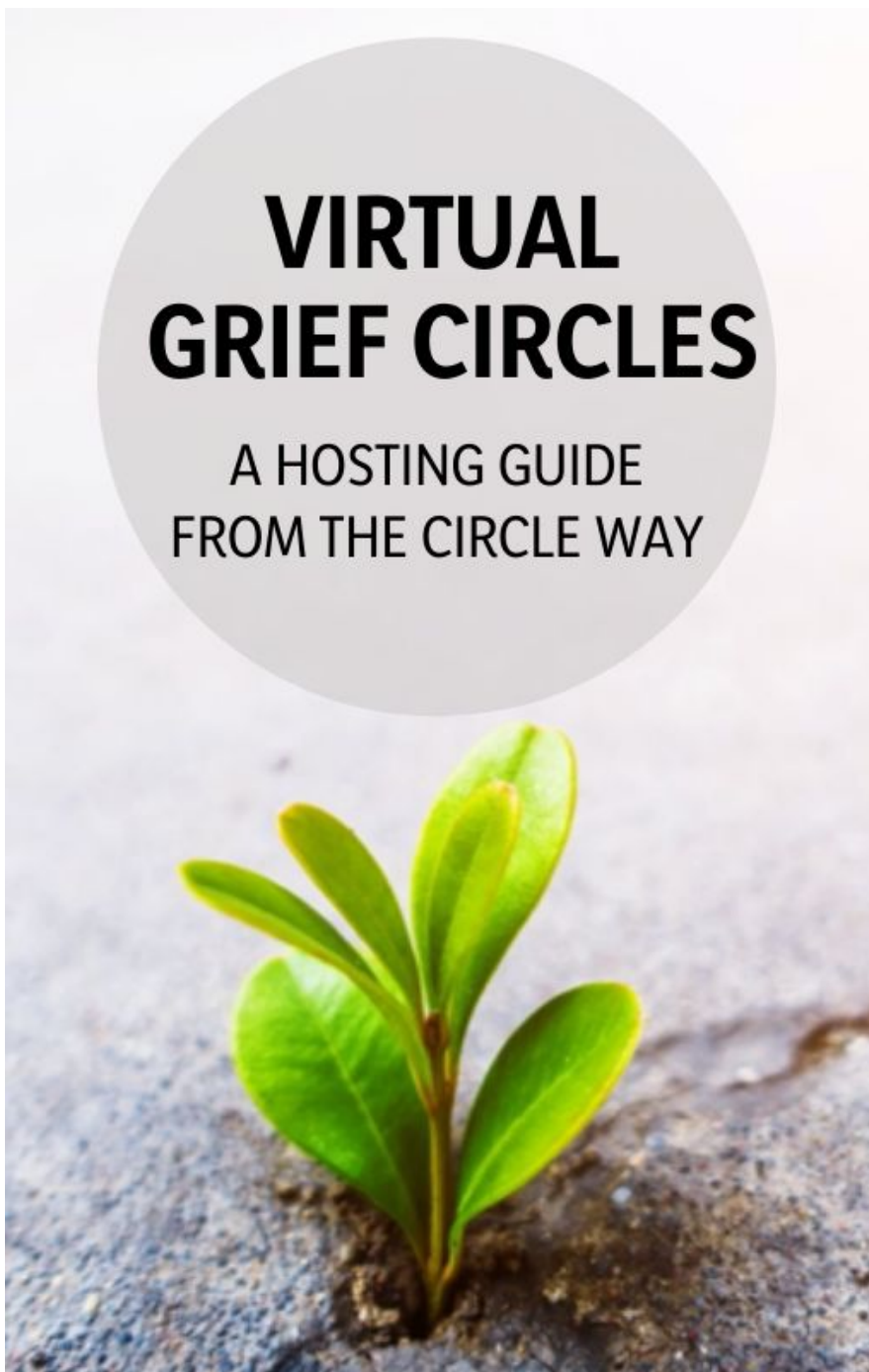


VIRTUAL GRIEF CIRCLES

A HOSTING GUIDE
FROM THE CIRCLE WAY



Published by:



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Hosting Guide for Virtual Grief Circles from *The Circle Way*

“Every one of us must do this. We must learn how to work with the grief in our lives. Begin with a friend or two and speak honestly to the heartaches you carry. These may be very personal sorrows, or they may extend to the daily losses that we witness in the news. If you feel comfortable doing so, begin with a moment where you and your friends together focus your intention on your purpose. Otherwise, simply gather the courage to speak from your heart, and let the others know that you are feeling sad and carrying grief in your body.

*What I have discovered in grief rituals over many years is that we feel relief when we finally are able to acknowledge our pain with one another. We can also share our grief with a tree or express it through music. The main thing is to welcome it and grant it a place in our lives. When we do, we become larger, and we can sense our intimate bond with all creation.” ~ Francis Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief**

Intention of this Guide

In times where people are navigating different ‘gates of grief’ such as the loss of a way of life, loss of livelihood, loss of human life, and other losses, you may sense an opening to call a circle to support grief and healing. Many of these circles might need to take place virtually instead of face-to-face, and this guide offers some preparation questions, invitation, ideas for creating centre, using ritual and other practices, tips for hosts and guardians, and a sample virtual grief circle session flow. We hope this guide weaves with the creativity and wisdom you bring to your circles..

For additional resources on hosting circles, please see [The Circle Way Pocket Guide](#), the [2-page Basic Guidelines](#), as well as these [online circle resources](#).

Preparation for the Host

Questions to support the host’s preparation for calling the circle:

- Who can help “co-call” this virtual grief circle with you? Who can help hold the circle with you as your guardian?
- Who would you like to invite to your virtual grief circle, and what is the maximum number of people?
- What technology do you want to use, such as Zoom, Google Meet, or other video conference platform)?
- What is the schedule and duration, such as a ‘one time’ circle, or a series of circles happening over a period of time?
- What is the length, such as 1.5 hours, 2 hours, etc.?

- What is the focus of the virtual grief circle you want to call, and what do you hope people leave with at the end; any tangibles or intangibles? Is there a key, simple question that activates the purpose?

Invitation

Some additional items you might include in the invitation for your virtual grief circle:

- What do people need to know to decide if they are interested in responding to this call?
- Include any information on what people will need to participate well technologically such as:
 - Computer or tablet with camera for video.
 - A microphone, either built into the computer or headphones (headphones are helpful to be able to hear each other well).
 - Access to the internet.
- Encourage people to arrive online early to test their technology; if possible let them know you will be online for your circle 30 minutes before the circle starts to assist anyone in getting connected with the technology.
- Include any other items they might want to have with them such as:
 - A talking piece of their choice.
 - Any items that help them to feel grounded or supported (e.g. essential oils, favourite scarf to have at their back, tissues for any emotion that might arise).
 - Knitting, crocheting, clay, or playdough that can help people stay present during the circle.
 - A notepad/pen for their own reflective notes.
 - If you will be using breakout rooms for smaller circles, you might also invite them to have a gentle sound-making device to mark pauses and transitions such as a meditation bell app on their phone, singing bowl, tingsha, chime, rattle, etc.
- The “[Tips for Participating in Online Circles](#)” might be helpful to include or adapt.

Creating Centre

Some ideas for creating a tangible centre for your virtual grief circle:

- You might put together a photo collage you can share on your screen.
- Consider having a candle, flowers, or a meaningful object that reflects your intention that you can show and acknowledge as your centre.
- Share an image of a circle of chairs and a centre as part of your start-point, inviting people to imagine themselves connecting to each other and the centre.
- Ask people to have an object with them that they can show on the video camera during their check-in as a way of ‘placing it in the centre’, having it with them for the duration of the virtual circle.

- You could log into your video conference with a second device and set that image as your centre image. [Learn how to do that on Zoom here.](#)

“Grief has always been communal and has always been connected to the sacred. . . . ritual is the means whereby we can work the ground of grief, allowing it to move, shift, and, ultimately, take a new shape in the soul.” ~ Francis Weller

Using Ceremony, Ritual, and other Practices

As part of your design for the virtual circle, consider including ceremony, ritual, and other culturally competent practices such as:

- Integrate non-verbal practices such as journaling, music, drumming, dance, movement, meditation, and breath-work.
- Include mandalas or colouring pages in your invitation that people can print out and draw or colour on while speaking and listening in the circle.
- Invite art by asking people to draw an image and show it on their camera or bring with them an image, photograph, or painting and show it to the camera to silently bear witness.
- Invite cultural representation by asking people to bring music, instruments, artifacts, or poems that reflect their identity, heritage, ethnicity.
- Build in silence such as after a deep round of sharing (offer two minutes of silence), or inviting silent journaling or doodling before responding to a question.
- You might have your own cultural or faith community practices that you want to include as appropriate that could help you find meaning and sustain you through grief and loss while you are moving forward.

“Choose something tangible that everyone has in front of them to connect the group physically. It could be a cup of the same tea, a candle each person lights, a song everyone plays in the background... Get creative!” ~ [Seeking Ceremony](#)

Host and Guardian in Grief Circles

Some tips for host and guardian of virtual grief circles:

- Consider an additional person to hold the role of “tech host”, who can tend to tech needs, questions, and troubleshooting that occur during the virtual circle.
- Support the circle to hold space for emotion that might arrive. If someone with the talking piece is sharing, and some tears or emotion arises in them, don’t ring the bells in the midst of their tears. You might instead wait until they are complete and have passed the talking piece and then ring the bells for an extra breath before the next person shares. [See this story on the power of the pause for some additional insights.](#)

- Remember that the purpose of this circle is not therapy, but rather a shared witnessing of our experiences. It is not a place for advice giving or fixing.
- You are doing extra work to hold the rim. Your own emotion might arise from what is being said and that's okay, but be honest with yourself if you can host this circle in this time. Bring some extra attention to your personal preparation before and after hosting these circles.
- Also include breaks in your circle, particularly if the time is longer than 90 minutes. Encourage people to turn off their video/sound and move their bodies; this is a gift for the host as well.
- Beware that vulnerability remorse can be accentuated in virtual circles. You share something deeply personal but then the visual and emotional cues online are less obvious than in physical face to face circles. Naming this out loud as invitation is enough.

“Self-care is the constant practice of not letting more pain accumulate. It is about continually remembering that our lives are of value. It is the active process of settling our nervous systems so that we have more access to the present moment.” ~ Susan Raffo

Sample Virtual Grief Circle Session Flow (1.5 hours length)

Open the Virtual Room

- Be online for your circle 30 minutes ahead to assist anyone in getting connected with the technology.
- You might want to have some gentle music playing to help create a hospitable space as people arrive into the virtual room. Tip: Use a bluetooth speaker external from your computer to help create an ambient music experience.
- As people arrive, invite them to close any unneeded programs on their device to both improve connectivity and reduce distractions.

Welcome and Start-point (10 minutes)

- Welcome and [land acknowledgement](#) or acknowledge country; if it's in your practice.
- Start-point such as silence, reading a poem, quote, or listening to a song. Include any ceremony, ritual, or other practices, such as leading a few breaths together to help bring the virtual circle into shared presence and to release stress from their body.
- Share agreements or principles to help the circle be well together. You might draw from The Circle Way's basic agreements: hold personal stories in confidence, listen with compassion and curiosity, ask for what we need and offer what we can, and pause from time to time to re-gather our thoughts and focus.

- Share any norms of participation unique to virtual spaces, such as use of the chat room (e.g. use as a flip chart to display questions or deliberate harvests rather than for sidebar conversations).

Check-in (20 minutes)

- Invite people to respond to a check-in question. Here are some questions to be inspired by:
 - What makes it important for you to be here?
 - How are you arriving (mind/body/heart)?
 - What is helping to calm and steady you right now?
 - What is an object or picture you'd like to share and contribute to our virtual centre?
- *In face-to-face circles you can physically pass a talking piece. Online circles take extra signalling. Consider inviting a geographic direction (east to west), or for people to sense when they are ready and 'pick up the piece'. People can indicate they are complete by ending with "Piece to the centre" or "I am complete".*

Main Round (45 minutes)

- Invite people to respond to the question for the main round. Here are some questions to be inspired by:
 - What are the heartaches that you need to acknowledge or share to this centre?
 - What is ending in your life right now? What is beginning?
 - What do you miss the most about _____?
 - Share a story of a time you were able to learn from grief?
 - When have you thrived despite difficult circumstances?
- Include any ceremony, ritual, or other practices.

Check-out, End-point and Closing (15 minutes)

- As part of the closing, offer some suggestions for how people can be encouraged to take care of themselves after the circle such as go outside, take a bath or shower, lie down for a little while, play some favourite music and move their body.
- Invite people to respond to a check-out question. Here are some questions to be inspired by:
 - What is one thing you will do when you leave this circle to help tend to yourself?
 - What is one thing you can do to be gentle with yourself, and gentle with others, after this circle?
 - What is helping you feel grounded right now?
 - What's a favourite family tradition that you can lean on?
- End-point such as silence, reading a poem, quote, or listening to a song. Include any ceremony, ritual, or other practices.

- Closing collective gesture such as unmuting everyone and saying goodbye at the same time.

After the Circle

You might want to send out an aftercare email note with suggestions of self-care and collective care to reinforce the processing of grief that continues.

"The spiritual resilience that arises in circle is to welcome the full story, the full range of pain, sorrow, and joy we bring to the rim, so that we can place it at the center fire, listen one another into healing, and then to rise from speaking and listening with greater strength and clarity to do what is ours to do now." ~ Christina Baldwin

Additional Resources

- The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief by Francis Weller
- Ritual, Power, Healing, and Community by Dr. Malidoma Somé
- Of Water and the Spirit by Dr. Malidoma Somé
- The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief by Jan Richardson
- The Smell of Rain on Dust: Grief and Praise by Martín Prechtel
- [What it Means to “Hold Space” for People, Plus Eight Tips on How To Do It Well by Heather Plett](#)
- [That Discomfort You’re Feeling is Grief by Scott Berinato with David Kessler](#)
- [Grief in a Time of Not Knowing podcast with Roshi Joan Halifax](#)
- [Balancing Grief and Joy in a Time of Uncertainty by Kate Werning](#)
- [Brené Brown and David Kessler’s podcast on Grief and Finding Meaning](#)