

Native American Talking Circles: A Culturally Competent Structured Group Intervention to Address Youth Mental Health Issues

Carolyn Franzen, LMFT

The Wellness Center
Windham High School SBHC Willimantic, Connecticut

June 26, 2009
NASBHC CONVENTION

Presenter Disclosure

Presenter:

Carolyn Franzen, LMFT

The following personal financial relationships with commercial interests relevant to this presentation existed during the past 12 months:

No relationships to disclose

Presentation Summary

- Through this presentation NASBHC Convention participants will be introduced to a step-by-step descriptive process of the Native American talking circle model to address mental health issues facing at-risk youth.
- An experiential exercise will be used to illustrate how SBHCs can invite youth to collaboratively solve problems, maximize resources, and increase multicultural awareness and empathy.

Learning Objectives

Participants will be able to:

- Discuss the talking circle method of structured group work that addresses the necessary multicultural components for intervention while facing issues affecting at-risk youth to their SBHC's mental health initiatives
- Use talking circles to increase trust and sharing, promote personal growth, stimulate peer feedback, and improve listening and empathy skills
- Apply the talking circle group format to address relevant youth issues such as substance abuse, trauma, ADHD, and school violence

Outline

Part One

History, definitions, and applications

Part Two

Case Study: Talking Circle in a high school SBHC

Part Three

Workshop exercise and transferability:
Utilizing a talking circle in your mental health care context

Talking Circle

- Talking circles are historically credited to the Woodland tribes in the Midwest, where the circles were used as a form of parliamentary procedure
- Native American tradition of building community through the life of the circle
- Respectful and cohesive group format that creates a set of expectations and behaviors through ritual

Tradition

- The Talking Circle symbolizes an approach to life. Each person participates in the Circle and each person serves an important and necessary function that is valued no more or no less than that of any other person.

Sams, 1990

Tradition

- The Talking Circle serves as a forum for the expression of thoughts and feelings in the context of complete acceptance by participants
- Teaching, listening, and learning

Donelawaga

a coming together of people for a special purpose

Cherokee tradition

Wilbur, Wilbur, Garrett, & Yuhas, 2001, p. 369

The Circle Represents

- *Harmony* instead of power
- *Cooperation and patience* instead of competition
- *Privacy* instead of control
- Speaking *softly and slowly* instead of loudly and fast

Garrett, 1999

Tradition

- The Circle provides members with a sense of belong and comfort
- The Talking Circle reminds members of life and his or her place in it

Talking Circles Improve

- Empathy and listening skills
- Self-awareness
- Sense of interconnection with other students
- Respect and appreciation for diversity through exploration of individual and cultural differences

Talking Circle may be used to address relevant youth issues as:

- Substance abuse
- Trauma
- ADHD
- School violence
- Relationship problems

Talking Circle Contexts Include:

- Alcohol and drug treatment centers
- Education settings to explore issues of race and discrimination
- Cancer recovery support groups
- Diabetes education settings
- Group homes
- English as a Second Language programs

Empathy and Multicultural Awareness

- Talking circles explore points of difference or difficulty. The inherent tension of the meeting is balanced by protocols of listening and respect for varied viewpoints.
- Space is provided for productive possibilities rather than criticism and confrontation.

Multiculturalism

- Cultural empathy is important regardless of ethnic similarity or difference (Ridley & Lingle, 1996).
- Cultural messages needs are found in context of language, age, gender, cohort, family configuration, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, socioeconomic status, employment, education, occupation, sexual orientation, political ideology, migration, and stage of acculturation, ableness, etc., and is much more fluid than a set of fixed traits (Falicov, 1995).

Empathy requires self awareness

■ Empathy:

“The attempt by one self-aware self to comprehend non-judgmentally the positive and negative experiences of another self”

Wispe, 1986, p. 318

Self Awareness and Empathy

- Self-awareness of one's own emotional processes is essential in developing the capacity to understand the experiences of others (Lerner-Block et al., 2007).

Brems, Fromme, and Johnson (1992) present data that demonstrates that a self-run group intervention designed to increase empathy also increased self-disclosure, allowing them to speak about the reciprocal relationship between empathy and self-awareness, indicating that:

This finding is consistent with the developmental perspective that suggests that people need to possess self-knowledge before they can empathize with others and that once people are able to empathize they are also likely to be aware of their own feelings (p. 197).

Components

■ The Burden Basket

A Burden Basket is an Apache ornately hand-woven basket of various sizes, typically hung at the outside door or entrance to one's home. Prior to entering the home, or the home of friends and relatives, the Apaches would symbolically place their "burdens" into the basket, so that these concerns would not disrupt the harmony and balance of the home and the relationships with family and friends.

■ The Talking Stick

The talking stick is an object that represents truth and understanding – both powerful agents of healing

Traditionally in many native American tribes, people used the talking stick during council meetings to discuss issues or concerns peacefully by "speaking from the heart" and by listening intently to what others had to say.

Talking Stick

■ Guarantees that every person in the group has the opportunity to be heard

■ Provides opportunity for speaking without concern of being interrupted, criticized, or judged

■ It offers group members the chance to simply listen instead of reacting to what has been said

■ It slows conversation

Secrets

- I messed around with someone. Now I wish that I didn't.
- I'm not doing well in school. My grades are bad. I want to get good grades, but when I try to do my work or study for a test I just can't do it. I end up watching TV or something. Then I get really mad at myself.
- My parents don't like me being around my friend, and I really like him. They get mad at me when they find out I'm with him. So I don't know what to do. He does bad things, but I get along with him, and it doesn't bother me. So I don't know what to choose, my friend or my parents.
- I'm so nervous that my girlfriend is going to break up with me. I don't really have a reason to think this, but any time I talk to her on the phone and she sounds aggravated, I think that this will be it. We're still together but I'm stressed out all the time.

Secrets

- I think that my boyfriend is playing me but I don't have any proof. Someone told me that he was, but it's not someone who I'm friends with. I still can't stop thinking that it might be true.
- My friend got really drunk, and was being stupid, and I had to take care of her. Now I don't want to chill with her. She doesn't care what happens to her.
- I'm afraid that my grandmother is going to die soon. She's the one who holds the family together and I don't know what will happen if she's gone.
- My mother is suffering from HIV/AIDS.
- I feel like some friends are fake and really don't care like they say they do.
- Sometimes I feel like "What's the point?". I wonder why I even bother to get up in the morning.

Structure

- Three rules apply when holding the talking stick
 - Speak honestly and truthfully from the heart
 - Be brief
 - Others should listen attentively with respect
- Group members may speak only when they are holding the talking stick
 - Offers a chance to speak without interruption while other members listen

- Questions and verbal exchanges may take place, but only by permission from whoever is holding the talking stick
- Any statements made are encouraged to:
 - Be framed as "I-statements" to own what is said
 - Use feelings, beliefs, or ideas, not attacks
 - Focus on connection not agreement

Clearing Ritual

- Starts the talking circle
- Allows participants to focus on the here and now of the present moment
- Encourages the creation of the talking circle atmosphere
 - Native American music
 - Lighting candles
 - Passing the talking stick

Phase One

- The Secret

Phase Two

- When receiving the talking stick, each participant states a *feeling* word describing how he or she would feel if the secret, or the burden, belonged to them.

Phase Three

- When receiving the talking stick, each participant states how she or he can personally relate to the secret
- If participants can not relate to the issue in any way, they then may state the reason for the feeling response they chose earlier

Phase Four

- When receiving the talking stick, each participant may ask questions regarding comments, stories, or statements that were made

Note

Using the talking circle structure can cause resistance at first

Students need to be informed that this is an introduction to a new way of thinking and behaving may at first be difficult or confusing

Process

- Group members can talk about whatever would be helpful for them to talk about during Taking Circle
- Respecting the Talking Circle and confidentiality is very important

Guidelines

- Arguing is not productive – it is easy to argue and more difficult to listen.
- Giving advice is not helpful. The Talking Circle is a place for people to be understood, not told what to do.
- Listening is very powerful.
- Whenever anyone is asked a question and they don't want to answer, they can pass.

Facilitator

- Facilitator's role is to keep talking circles safe. The facilitator intervenes whenever group members stray from the talking circle guidelines.

Closing Ritual

- Stick is passed around to ensure that nothing remains unsaid
- Each talking circle ends with a closing ritual
 - Allows participants to relax from heightened states of intention and attention
 - "Donelawega"

Agreements

Some talking circle agreements include:

- Confidentiality
- Practicing understanding and not judging
- Facilitator monitors both verbal and nonverbal communication and also participates in the process

Outcomes

Goals

- Talking Circle structure will prevent negative group dynamics, specifically power, control, and competition, and will involve every participant
- Will increase group cohesion, empathy and listening skills, self-awareness, and respect and appreciation for diversity among individual group members
- A safe, respectful group environment will be created



References

- Falicov, C. J. (1995). Training to think culturally. A multidimensional comparative framework. *Family Process*, 34, 373-388.
- Garrett, M. T., & Wilbur, M. P. (1999). Does the worm live in the ground? Reflections on Native American spirituality. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 27, 193-206.
- Ridley, C. R., & Lingle, D. W. (1996). Cultural empathy and multicultural counseling: A multidimensional process model. In P. B. Peterson, J. G. Draguns, W. J. Lonner, & J. E. Trimble (Eds.), *Counseling across cultures* (pp. 21-46). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ross, J., & Ross, J. (1992). Keep the circle strong: Native health promotion. *Journal of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology*, 16, 291-302.
- Sams, J. (1990). *Sacred path card: The discovery of self through native teachings*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Wilbur, J. W., Wilbur, M., Garrett, M. T., & Yuhus, M. (2001). Talking circles: Listen, or your tongue will make you deaf. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 26, 368-384.
- Wolf, P. J., & Rickard, J. A. (2003). Talking circles: A Native American approach to experiential learning. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 31, 39-43.