

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

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Carolyn Franzen, LMFT, Wellness Center, Windham High School SBHC cwestcottfranz@gmail.com

The talking circle group intervention is structured for the active involvement of all group members. It emerged from the Native American tradition of building community through the life of the circle, a tradition known to the Cherokee as *Donelawega*, or “a coming together of people for a special purpose” (Wilbur, Wilbur, Garrett, & Yuhas, 2001, p. 369). The idea of the talking circle symbolizes an entire approach to life and to the universe, in which each being participates in the circle, and each one serves an important and necessary function that is valued no more or no less than that of any other. This approach allows youth to express thoughts and feelings in the context of acceptance, belonging, and creates a sense of social, emotional, and spiritual health. The talking circle atmosphere has been found to increase productivity, draw out full participation of all group members, and fulfill the group’s need for bonding (Garrett & Garrett, 2002).

Examples of Talking Circle 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.

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.

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.

Sometimes I feel like "What's the point?" I wonder why I even bother to get up in the morning.

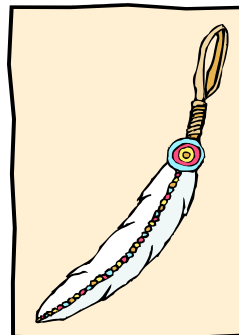
Guidelines

- Speak honestly and truthfully
- Be brief
- Listen with respect
- Arguing is not productive
- Frame statements as “I-statements”
- Use feelings, beliefs, or ideas, not attacks
- Focus on connection, not agreement
- The talking circle is a place to be understood, not to be told what to do. Giving advice in the talking circle is not helpful

Empathy
Listening skills
Self-awareness
Sense of interconnection with others
Respect and appreciation for diversity

Structure

1. Opening
2. Secret is drawn
3. State a feeling word
4. State reasons for feeling
5. Group members talk about how he or she can relate to the secret
6. Group member may ask questions of each other
7. Closing



References and additional resources

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