



Coping with Technological Disasters Appendix G:

Outreach Activity - Talking Circle

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This appendix provides an overview of a cultural activity common for Indigenous Alaska Native, Native American, and Pacific Islander populations. The talking circle activity may be an option for engaging more diverse populations in a community.

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Introduction

This appendix provides an overview of a cultural activity common for Indigenous Alaska Native, Native American, and Pacific Islander populations. As noted in Chapter Two of the guidebook, a version of this activity was developed after the Exxon Valdez oil spill by the Growing Together program, working closely with the Alaska Native community through representatives of the Native Village of Eyak. The Talking Circle activity may be an option for engaging a more diverse population in your community.

This information is included to demonstrate the need to identify community characteristics and potentially address the needs of unique populations within a community. Community leaders should determine culturally appropriate activities through organizations and leaders of Indigenous populations.

The Talking Circle

The Talking Circle is a key part of restorative practices in a community. Restorative practices are ways of proactively developing relationships and community, as well as repairing community cohesiveness when harm is done. After conflict or harm, Restorative Practices provide a way of thinking about, talking about, and responding to issues and problems by involving all participants to discuss their feelings and opinions, identify what happened, describe how it affected everyone, and find solutions defined by the community.

The following steps are suggested for the organization and presentation of Talking Circles:

1. Identify and contact leaders in local culturally diverse groups. Some of these groups may have already established means to connect with community councils or community governments which can be used as a starting place for outreach. For example, city meeting minutes may identify appropriate leaders in the Native community for contact.
2. The talking circle is one activity that might take place but there are other options. Ask local cultural groups what kind of activities, ceremonies, or other interactions would promote healing and wellness within their community and how they can be supported in implementing them. Ask for already present practices before providing suggestions. The involvement of group leaders is key in motivating group members to participate in the programs. Allow local groups to provide their own internal leadership if possible and offer support as needed.
3. Identify spiritual leaders to conduct the appropriate ceremonies for cultural groups. There may be additional items necessary (ceremonial items, sacred pieces, regalia) which may have to be obtained outside.
4. Implement an outreach plan. Distribute information throughout the local community to promote maximum participation; this may include announcing it on the local radio, newsletter, store/post office notice board, community blog, or social media page/group. Check with the spiritual or other group leader to determine if it is appropriate for those outside of the cultural group to participate.

Talking Circles Examples

The following explanation of the Talking Circle and its variations was adapted from Mary Stachelrodt, a Yup'ik Alaskan leader and alcoholism researcher. It provides some background and descriptions of different types of Talking Circles and their purposes. It also includes discussion about some of the ceremonial items, rules, and practices of Native Americans and Alaska Natives in preparation for the Talking Circle.

The Talking Circle has been used throughout history in many diverse cultures and as a therapeutic tool in support group systems. There are many kinds of talking circles. Usually there are some basic rules that each facilitator uses as parameters for the talking circle participants. Two basic rules are:

1. Confidentiality is respected.
2. Each person has a chance to speak without interruption and can opt not to share if they chose not to.

Basic Talking Circle: A designated “leader” starts the circle. There are no talking circle “gurus,” anyone who has the interest and the “heart” can start a circle. Each person gets a chance to share if they choose to. The circle usually goes in the direction of the sun in respect for the cycle of life. This circle may go around a second time to give those who want to share more to do so. There is a beginning, a middle, and a closure. One may choose to start with a meditation or a prayer and end with a closer prayer. A circle may also start with a moment of silence to reflect on why people are there. Each person can start with stating their first name, so that others can know who they are.

Healing Circle: A circle that specifically addresses grief and loss issues. A circle may be dedicated to a loved one or for each individual to express specific issues. A candlelight talking circle is also very healing. Each one is given a candle and as their turn comes up, their candle is lit by the person before them, until all the candles are lit.

Feedback Circle: A circle group may want to have feedback during the activity. This may be decided ahead of time by the group. If a person wants feedback on what they just shared, then they can ask for feedback from the rest of the participants.

Magic Circle: The circle can be used with very young children. Each child can share, much like “show and tell,” and the basic rules of respecting and listening to the speaker is emphasized. This can be a very useful circle in working with youngsters to teach good listening and sharing skills.

Community Circles: A community talking circle can be very powerful after a meeting that addresses community problems or issues. This gives members a chance to voice their opinion without interruption and allows conversation to flow openly without agenda or time restraints. Community talking circles may last several hours. Breaks can be scheduled or determined during the activity by the leader, especially if there are Elders in the circle that may need a break.

Ceremonial Circles: A pipe ceremony or a prayer circle has been used by many groups. These vary from region to region and are sacred practices that take time and space.

Prayer Sweats: A circle can be done in a sweat/sauna with prayer. A sweat/sauna can purify the body as well as the spirit through prayer. Sage, cedar, sweet grass, or a local herb can be offered and sprinkled on the rocks to “smudge” or purify the air.

Talking Stick: A talking stick can be used to grant “permission” for whoever is holding it to talk. A feather, rock, or other item can be used. The talking stick is passed on to the next person when the person speaking is done. Remember, that if the next person wishes not to share or talk, they have that option. Sometimes, a person may just sit with the feather or stick and not say anything. They are sharing their silence and should be allowed to hold the talking stick until they are ready to pass it along.

Smudging: Smudging, or purifying with smoke, is also used in traditional talking circles. A bowl of herbs is offered with prayer and/or silence. The intent is to clear or purify personal space, aura, or body energy with smoke from the burning herbs, just as shower or bath is used to clean the physical body.

Resources

More information about Restorative Practices and Talking Circles is readily found on many indigenous and tribal websites. Three sources are provided below for your consideration:

Talking Circles Overview from the First Nations Pedagogy Online Project

Talking Circles or Circle Talks are a foundational approach to First Nations pedagogy-in-action since they provide a model for an educational activity that encourages dialogue, respect, the co-creation of learning content, and social discourse.

- <http://firstnationspedagogy.ca/>
- <https://firstnationspedagogy.ca/circletalks.html>

Talking Circle: Fact Sheet – Talking Together

Suitable for: Group Activity | Facilitator-led Activity “Talking circles are based on the sacred tradition of sharing circles. People leading a traditional sharing circle will have a blessing from an Elder to do this, and will use special prayers and sacred objects in the ceremony.”

- <http://www.learnalberta.ca/>
- https://www.learnalberta.ca/content/aswt/talkingtogether/facilitated_talking_circle_fact_sheet.html

Mi'kmaw Culture - Spirituality - The Talking Circle

The talking circle is a traditional way for Native American people to solve problems. It is a very effective way to remove barriers and to allow people to express themselves with complete freedom.

- <http://www.muiniskw.org/>
- <http://www.muiniskw.org/pgCulture2c.htm>