



# Hints and Tips

## Circles of Support

### What Circles of Support are

Circles of Support are a good way to bring together community-based support for someone who needs some extra help.

- It works well for people who are older, including people with dementia. It also works for people in other situations.
- It can be used to support someone in the longer-term, or when someone needs help over a short period.

### How Circles of Support work

This note draws together what has been learned by people in Canada and elsewhere, and the experience of groups in Scotland developing support for older people and their carers that have been in touch with the Wisdom in Practice project. Each Circle is based on what works for those people at that time, so this is just a guide.

You can think of the person needing support/care, or their carer, or both people as being at the centre of the Circle - whatever is right in that situation.

- The person/carer is in control as far as possible.
- The members of the Circle are there to help the person/people - not to take over or make decisions for them.
- The Circle is explicit. The Circle members know who else is involved. The person and the carer know that they can contact anyone in the Circle.
- Usually it is also explicit that the Circle members will take the initiative and can say something to the person and carer and to the others if they are worried about the person and/or the carer. But each Circle decides how they will respond in these situations.

### Background

Circles of Support are based on effective ways of people keeping in touch which many people use every day and which people have learned over many, many years. The approach uses this experience in a way that is planned and a bit more structured, although it is still not a formal structure. It is for situations where the consequences of more patchy social contacts are that someone could be at risk or in distress because they are worried or alone.

Circles of Support for people with disabilities or health needs and their families/carers have been developed a lot over the past 25 years or so.

Some families in Canada started using this approach for people with learning disabilities and their families. Often it was someone living with only an elderly parent, who was worried about what would happen to the person after they died, and who had few friends and family to help. (If you read about what they did it helps to remember that these would be people with disabilities born in the 1930s or 40s, when the services and attitudes were different from today.)

People found that when they planned for the future, and brought in a few more people who wanted to help support the person and their carer, they came up with arrangements that also made life easier and better for both the carer and for the person who needed support.

The families who started doing this formed an organisation: PLAN, which stands for Planned Lifetime Advocacy Networks. This is essentially what the Circles of Support they created were designed to do: be a network of people who would advocate on behalf of the person for the rest of the person's life.

Since then many other people and groups have used and developed the approach.

- Often there is reciprocity which includes the person and/or carer - for example, a neighbour is part of the Circle and is helping the person while the person who needs support and doesn't get out much takes in parcels for their neighbour, so it is 2 friends helping each other out.

Because there are more people involved, there are not so many tasks or responsibilities falling on any one person.

- People have found it is easier to ask someone to get involved when they know that they are not going to become a sole or main support.
- It means that it is much more likely that there will be someone available to help when the need arises.

The Circle can take on various roles - whatever the person wants and makes sense for them.

These are some common roles:

- Being there for emergencies - whatever might arise, such as the carer being unwell, or one person in a couple going into hospital and the other still at home, or a burst pipe.
- Some day-to-day practical things such as shopping, being with the person for a few hours, doing things together.
- Emotional support/sounding board for the person and carer.
- Helping the person and the carer plan ahead and/or make decisions - finding out about options, helping consider the options.
- Supporting the person and/or carer in difficult or upsetting situations, such as hospital appointments.
- Often different people within the Circle take on different roles.

A Circle usually has 3 stages:

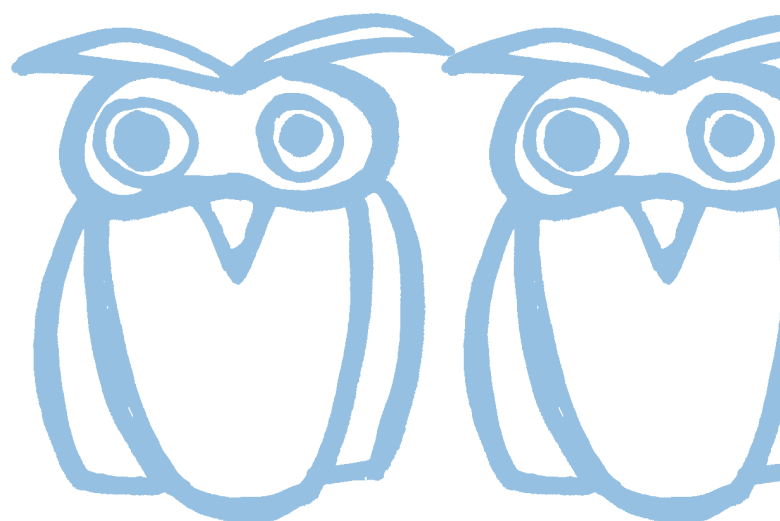
- Exploring and planning: working out what the person and their carer/family want, what types of support are they looking for.
- Setting it up - approaching people, asking them to be involved, working out who else you need, learning how to work together.
- Sustaining it - keeping things going.

**"It feels easier to ask people for help with getting me to hospital appointments and the like, because they've already said they want to help."**

**"The Circle is great. It really works. If I can't do something with my aunt we just ask someone in the Circle. If they can't do it they phone around and come back and say 'Bill will go with you to the bank and Mary will pop in to help you get ready that morning' or whatever. Aunt Nell really likes it."**

**"It helps with the emotional side too. After dad went to live in the nursing home mum needed people to help her deal with how she felt. There were friends in the Circle who helped her work that through. She could say things to them that she wouldn't say to me because she didn't want to upset me. We knew they were willing to do this, and that they would get a bit of support from each other if they needed it."**

**"We have a Circle which is for mum and for my sister and me. It's as much about mum keeping an eye on us and knowing that we are ok. It's been good for all of us and gets away from that carers/cared for distinction that sometimes feels forced on you."**



# Who is in the Circle

A Circle of Support brings together usually 6-10 people who care about the person/people and want to support them.

- Each person is there because they want to be and they are making a commitment to be there for some time ahead.
- It can be a mix of relatives, friends and people who have particular skills that are useful.
- Examples of expertise can be someone who is good with finance stuff when the person's money is complicated or needs sorting, or someone who knows about getting building work done when the house need adapted, or someone who doesn't get flustered dealing with people in professional roles.
- When someone leaves - a move away, has changes in their own life - the Circle (including the person and carers) decides if it needs to find someone else.
- Over time the Circle membership can change but there should be a lot of continuity so it is not one sudden or big change.

People in the Circle do not need to all be physically near the person and their carer.

- The aspect that matters is that these are the people who are there to support the person and/or carer.
- A Circle can be a good way of linking a relative who lives far away and has regular contact by phone and neighbours who are near by, for example.

It works best when most of the people are not there in a professional role.

- Each person is there because they care about that person.
- Having a few people in work roles - like a CPN or a District Nurse - can be useful at the start. But it is not feasible for them to be there for lots of people they support.
- There are more problems with continuity when people are there in professional roles, as people move jobs, new colleagues do not have the time or the relationships, etc.
- Sometimes people who were involved with someone in a professional role join the person's Circle when they move jobs or retire, because they and the person want them to still be involved in that person's life.
- Often people in a Circle do have professional experience which is useful and they draw on their skills and contacts as part of the Circle (such as knowing who to contact about something because they have worked in a team which does that task).

The members of a Circle support each other as well as the person and/or carer.

- People know that if they can't do something, they can ask someone else in the Circle to pick it up.
- People support each other, especially when there are upsetting or hard situations. Examples include major transitions such as deciding about a move to residential care, when the person is very ill or at the end of their life.
- The knowledge and experience of the collective group is greater.

**"I was so pleased when Mary and her son asked me to be part of Mary's Circle. I've known her all my life. She was like an auntie to us as well as a neighbour."**

**"I know Frank's daughter. First she asked if I could pop in with the milk and paper each day after he got home from hospital, and that soon grew into a good friendship as Frank and I have a lot of shared interest. The first time Frank asked me to help him with some papers from the bank was a great honour to know that he trusts me. This winter when they decided that things needed to be a bit more organised I was glad to help. The Circle idea is a good one as you know you're all there to help."**

**"My brother is in the Circle even though he's in Australia. It's a good way for him to stay involved and be reassured as mum's dementia progresses."**



The Circle members know each other and know they are working as a group/team. So they have each other's phone numbers etc.

- It helps when people meet each other - often enough to make the Circle work for the person.
- Some Circles do this once a month when there is a lot happening for the person, and some do it once a year, with others in between. The frequency can also vary over time. It is whatever is right for those people at that time.
- The get-togethers are usually informal - hosted by the person or at someone else's house, a meal and enjoying each other's company, then having a review of how things have been going recently for the person, how the Circle and back up support is working, and looking ahead for the next while.

People are sensible about risk.

- The people in the Circle care about the person, so are not likely to bring in someone who cannot be trusted.
- Each person who is part of the Circle will have been suggested and asked by or through someone else who is in the Circle or who is known well to them. The accountability is in the long-standing relationships.
- Because a number of people are involved and they are all looking out for the person and looking at each other, there is less chance of one person behaving in a way that puts the person at risk or harms them.
- People still need to use their common sense, such as starting by involving people they know less well in smaller roles until they are confident in them.
- Trust includes being reliable - doing what you say you will do. In practice, Circles recognise when someone promises but then forgets or has too many other things to do, and just stop including them in those sorts of tasks.

**"We found that it is easier for someone who is less personally involved to ask people to get involved when getting a Circle started. They are less embarrassed about asking and it is easier for people to say no, or not yet, and not feel anyone will be hurt or existing relationships spoiled."**

**"We found that the best people to get a Circle started were those who had experience of looking out for a friend or relative themselves."**

## Circles facilitators

Circles work best when someone takes on the role of facilitator.

- The facilitator makes sure the practical aspects are kept up to date - such as lists of phone numbers and when Circle members are going on holiday, other useful contact information, and so on.
- They organise the meetings, or work with the person to do this.
- They initiate approaches to new members - which is why it is an important role at the beginning but also is essential to keep the Circle sustained in the longer-term.
- They watch out for the wellbeing and strength of the Circle - watch out for the Circle having a wobble, pick things up if the Circle falters and then get it back on track again.

The facilitator is whoever is the best person for each Circle.

- It can be the person or carer, or someone else in the group.
- Often someone who is outside the group takes on this role at least in the beginning, and especially when the person whom the Circle is supporting has few relatives or friends in their lives.
- The start-up role is a short-medium term one. This is something that someone in a professional role can do, to get things going.
- The person who gets things started can hand over the facilitator role to someone else as the Circle gets more established.

These are the main qualities of a good facilitator:

- Listens to the person who needs some support and encourages or enables them to work out and say what they want.
- Likes the person and conveys that to other people.
- Is willing to ask people to help.
- Someone who is welcoming and hospitable.
- Confident and relaxed in what they do and makes other people feel confident and relaxed.
- Being clear what they are asking for - knowing what this person and/or their carer wants people to help them with.

- Being able to make this a positive thing for all the people involved. If they think of it as about dependency it won't work.
- Being a good community connector - knowing people in the area, or knowing where to start.
- Understanding about informal and semi-formal community networks, such as church groups, people who go to a local shop, friendships between people who have dogs, people who are interested in gardening or a hobby.
- Someone who is resilient and persistent - who does not get upset or give up when someone says no, who keeps going.
- Being able to give enough time to it - so able to follow up contacts and find new contacts, and to stick at it over time.
- Someone who is comfortable with a lot of flexibility and uncertainty, especially at the beginning, and who knows that each Circle is different and the process of building each Circle is different.
- Someone who is good at listening to and learning from other people and is open to ideas.

## How long it takes

Generally, it is quicker and easier to start up a Circle when there are already some people who know the person and it is longer when the person and their carer are more socially isolated.

- The experience for people who have more significant disabilities and who have almost no-one in their lives and everything is starting from scratch is that it takes 2 years for a Circle to 'have legs' - be working well and able to sustain itself.
- It can be just a few months - or less - when there are people already involved and they just want to become a bit more organised and be more explicit about being involved.
- Other groups are somewhere in between.

## Circles of support and emergency plans

Some of the groups we know were building up emergency plans for the people they knew – for example, what would happen if the main carer became unwell or could not get there if the weather was bad. The idea of using a 'Circles of support approach' came up when people realised that there were few people who a family felt they could call on in an emergency.

### For people who already have people in their lives

These are probably the main steps to identifying who can help in an emergency.

- List out what sorts of emergency help you want - someone to look after the house, someone to give you a lift to a hospital, do the shopping, someone to talk over options and help you get your thoughts straight.
- Make a list of the people you know. Most people find it is probably longer than they expected.
- Start linking the 2 lists to get a list of who might be able to help in these sorts of emergencies. You have probably started doing that already as you do the other lists.
- For each of the lists it can help to ask other people for their suggestions, and to build up the lists over a few weeks.

Then ask people if they will be part of a Circle or group of people you can call on.

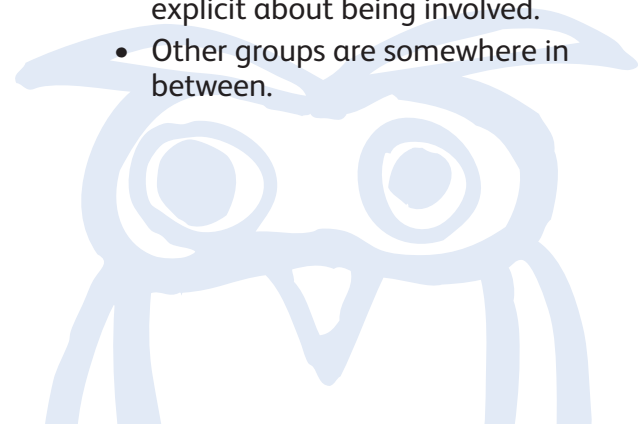
- Explain what you want them to do.
- Explain about the roles of other people and check it is ok to also give other people their phone number and so on.

Get it organised.

- Give people the list of phone numbers
- Agree who is the facilitator/organiser
- Find a way for people to meet each other if they don't already know each other.

Let it develop over time.

- Let people gradually begin to do more, or find the roles they can manage.
- Keep it under review to make sure it is right for that person and carer as their circumstances change.
- Learn from any emergency or unexpected things that do happen - how did people respond, who offered to help that you hadn't thought of before?



## For people who do not already have many people they can call on

It is the same starting points in terms of working out what is needed and who could be asked.

- It might take longer and the list of who they know will be smaller and take more gentle nudges.
- Include more workers in the list at this point.

Build up more people to ask.

- Ask the people on the initial list who they can think of.
- Think about friends of friends. You know or expect the first person is not in a position to do it, but think of their friends/relatives or other people they know. That way people come up with the daughter of an old friend who died or moved away, and similar relationships.

Start small and continue to expand the Circle.

- It helps the person and their carer get used to the idea of having people in their lives who they can call on - and that might feel strange for a bit.
- It lets the people in the Circle and other people think of who else could help.
- People in professional roles can look for other people to join and plan how they will reduce their role and withdraw back to their main professional role/relationship with the person and their carer.

Give it a bit more nurturing.

- The organising happens in the same way as for people who already have more connections.
- The facilitator usually stays involved for longer.
- These Circles can be more vulnerable and need more attention to making it work, replacing people who withdraw - getting it to be self-sustaining and 'have legs'.

## Resources/more information

The National Development Team for Inclusion and Innovations in Dementia are working to develop Circles of support for people with dementia. This includes useful tools to help people get Circles started and feedback from people who are benefitted.

[www.ndti.org.uk/major-projects/current/circles-of-support-for-people-with-dementia](http://www.ndti.org.uk/major-projects/current/circles-of-support-for-people-with-dementia)

**PLAN** (Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network) is at [www.plan.ca](http://www.plan.ca)

This is a useful report from the experience of people using and setting up Circles, especially for people with disabilities: <http://institute.plan.ca/blog/digital-download-reaching-out-a-portrait-of-social-network-facilitation-in-canada/>

**The Abundant Community** has a lot of materials about the capacity of communities and how to enable people to contribute: [www.abundantcommunity.com](http://www.abundantcommunity.com)

There are several organisations in the UK who develop Circles of Support for people with disabilities, such as **Equal Futures** [www.equalfutures.org.uk](http://www.equalfutures.org.uk) and **Circles Network** [www.circlesnetwork.org.uk](http://www.circlesnetwork.org.uk)

## About Wisdom in Practice

Wisdom in Practice is a project which supports and promotes the development of services and other activities led by older people. It is funded by the Scottish Government through the Equalities Programme and is run by Outside the Box.

There is a range of resources for groups, including publications, how to guides, events and development support for individual groups and projects.

This is one of a series of Hints and Tips on topics which groups led by older people have said help them in starting their groups, getting organised, keeping going and finding funds.

Wisdom in Practice has its own website [www.wisdominpractice.org.uk](http://www.wisdominpractice.org.uk)



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