

# Connected Practice Circles

*A Do-it-Ourselves approach to sanity and wholeness...*

## What is a Connected Practice Circle?

3-6 people meet online every morning (or night) to connect and do some simple practices together to support their sanity and general well-being. The group runs with a simple structure that includes mindfulness practice, gratitude practice and setting small achievable goals or intentions each day.

The first group was initiated by someone in crisis desperate to avoid yet another unhelpful admission to a psychiatric ward and more drugs. They knew they needed help, but the kind of help they needed was simply not available so they created the closest approximation to it they could. *Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.* The concept of a Connected Practice Circle was born.

Thankfully the idea resonated with a few people and the group has been meeting daily since the beginning of the lockdown. Some, but certainly not all of us identify as having mental health issues. Some of us just think it's a great way to start the day! We are *all* loving it and finding it beneficial!

## Why be involved in a group like this?

You are excited by the idea of building a culture of mutuality, autonomy and collective healing in community, one small group at a time.

You are socially isolated (either because of Co-vid or other reasons) and want to see some friendly faces each morning to get some of those good ole fashioned social mammal belonging cues into your body/mind!

You are struggling with your mental health and feel you need more or different kind of support than what is available to you.

If you are struggling to build or sustain a mindfulness practice or other routines and practices that you know enrich your life and you want to practice *with* others.

You may or may not have had contact with mental health experts, you may or may not identify as having a 'mental illness' or mental health issues- either way, you want to give it a go.

# Our Basic Daily Routine

Good morning

Welcome/ Acknowledgement of Country

Take a few breaths to settle and notice that

I am here... you are here... we are here....

Mindfulness practice (7-10 mins)

“What can you **see**?”

“What can you **hear**?”

“What can you **smell**?”

“What can you **taste**?”

“What can you **feel**?”

“Where is your **Balance**”

“Where is your **body in space**?”

“Sit in **stillness**.”

Gratitude (1 round)

Intentions (1 round)

Take a few breaths together – breathe love in, breathe love out

Go well! See you tomorrow!

## + Weekly ‘Loose Days’ and Monthly Review Sessions

We built in one “loose day” each week when we can try something different if we choose. In addition to this we are setting aside time each month to reflect and review the process.

# Daily Routine in Detail

## Welcome or Acknowledgment of Country

As we practice being *here* together, may we all know *where we are*...

Go for authenticity. If it feels awkward to you, it's because we are living in a settler colonial society and we have a lot of collective healing to do! Honest awkwardness is worth more than a heartless routine thing. This is a practice too.

## Mindfulness

This simple practice involves focusing for one minute on each of the senses, including balance and proprioception (awareness of your body in space).

While it is not necessary you might find it useful to have things on hand for some (or all) of the senses that can pull your attention more strongly. A cuppa can be useful to smell, taste and feel.

For the balance section you can stand on one leg, do a yoga balance, or just stay seated and play with finding your centre of gravity by leaning forward, then back, each side, etc.

The length of the last part (sitting in stillness) can vary depending on group preference/ size/ time restraints.

Someone will need a meditation timer/bell (we use Enso Meditation Timer & Bell app) set to the following intervals and ask the question at the end of each bell.

### BEGIN

- 20 seconds to settle and get comfortable.
- 1 min x "What can you **see**?"
- 1 min x "What can you **hear**?"
- 1 min x "What can you **smell**?"
- 1 min x "What can you **taste**?"
- 1 min x "What can you **feel**?"
- 1 min x "**Balance**"
- 1 min x "Where is your **body in space**?"
- 1 min x "Sit in the **stillness**."

### END

## Gratitude x 1 round

"What are you grateful for?"

Everyone shares 1-3 things they are grateful for (an arbitrary number but useful to keep things running within a reasonable time).

## Actions or Intentions x 1 round

“*What* can you do today?” “*How* do you want to do what you are doing today?”

Everyone shares 1-3 actions/ intentions.

## Practice Notes

### Mindfulness

There are countless mindfulness practices. The one we use requires minimal facilitation and no external media. This means that whoever is timing and guiding it can also participate in the practice. Not relying on any external media reduces opportunities for tech glitches. It can also just be empowering to build a practice independent of guided meditations.

Whatever practice you use we suggest you keep it simple and neutral. Stick to things that connect you to your surroundings, the earth and your body in a simple, direct ways. While other kinds of meditations can certainly be useful it might be hard to find one that is accessible and useful for *both* inexperienced and experienced people and is inclusive of different belief systems and world views.

Find a practice that helps balance internal awareness and awareness of your immediate surroundings. Many of us will have a tendency to be very inwardly focused (feeling trapped inside our racing minds, feeling chaotic and flooded with overwhelming internal sensations and emotions, escaping into fantasy) or very externally focused (driven to “get on with it” ignoring and dismissing our feelings and needs, shutdown, numbed out), some of us will tend to switch between both ends of the spectrum. Our senses and our breath are the mechanisms of relationship between inner and outer experience so often mindfulness practices will use them.

Mindfulness practice is arguably less likely to be triggering for people than other styles of meditation. Of course, that is very individual! Sometimes, some people may find that focusing on the breath can trigger a panic response. This is not wildly uncommon. Trust your own experience and let people have their own experience. Just because there are messages everywhere saying focusing on your breathing is good for you doesn’t mean it is the answer to everything all the time for everyone. Experiment to find ‘ways in’ to being present that work for you. Learning or reminding yourself of grounding techniques can help when you feel yourself getting activated. For some of us building a felt sense of safety in our own body and mind takes a long time and a lot of hard work and gentleness. You might need more support in this process than what a Connected Practice Circle alone can provide but may still find a practice circle a useful part of whatever healing journey you are on.

## A quick note on Listening during rounds

Not everyone is used to being in circles or group processes. In a “round”, the general idea is that each person gets space to speak and be heard. Keep interruptions and comments to a minimum while people are speaking (even if you are being nice) and try not to start a conversation. Often just warmly saying “thank you” to someone when they are finished is enough. If you want to say more you can wait for your turn or wait for after the practice.

## Gratitude

It can be nourishing to focus on what you have and what is going well. It can be especially useful in a difficult time. It can remind us that the pain has not taken *everything* from us and does not define our *entire* experience. It is often said that “it’s impossible to be grateful and depressed at the same time”. However, it might be more useful to think of gratitude being able to co-exist with all kinds of feelings and states. Some days it might be a small warm round glow in a very deep dark pit! There’s no denying you are in the shit but paying attention to that glow might make it more bearable.

It’s important to acknowledge that we are probably hauling around *a lot* of cultural baggage about gratitude! What messages did you get about gratitude as a child? How about now as an adult? What thoughts, feelings and sensations does the idea of “gratitude” bring up for you?

Sometimes being asked to “be grateful for things” can bring up big feelings of invalidation, shame, resistance, pressure to perform, guilt, anger. We may become very good at *saying* we are grateful for things, but in a way that is more about avoiding the judgement of others and fear of “negativity” than expressing something that is heartfelt and true for us.

We all bring different life experiences. For some of us it might take some long gentle work to untangle complicated feelings from our gratitude practice. Remember, the harder it is to find something to be grateful for, the more powerful the practice is. It’s useful to remind each other of that sometimes.

Observe how you say what you are grateful for, do you tend to immediately follow it or pre-empt it with something that is going wrong? Are your gratuities actually complaints in disguise? (Eg. I’m grateful that someone finally put the stapler back in the right place, none of those other bastards do!).

## Actions/ Intentions

You can think of this in terms of *what* you want to do and/or *how* you want to do it (ie. What attitude or feeling you want to bring to what you do.)

Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.

It can be helpful to think about the day ahead and set some intentions having already grounded yourself in the moment, then connected to your heart with gratitude. Committing to act (and following through) builds a sense of our own power and capacity. Making a conscious choice about *how* to approach things you “have to” do can also give you a sense of agency, make a big difference to your experience.

DO NOT underestimate the power of “positive micro-actions”! Sometimes having a shower or drinking enough water or looking at the stars can be the beginning of change.

Getting fiercely honest with yourself about where you are at and finding a balance between challenging yourself and being gentle with yourself takes practice. Only you can know. When you don’t follow through, show yourself some compassion and don’t give up on yourself (and forgive yourself if you do give up for a while!). Experiment, adjust your approach, try again tomorrow.

Create the consequences you want for yourself and the world. Make consequences your friend! They give us feedback (collectively and individually). Consequences invite us and sometimes drag us kicking and screaming to engage with life. There simply is no way around them.

### Logistics

While this is a co-created space and there is no “facilitator” as such, there are things that someone needs to take responsibility for.

Someone will need to set up a group to communicate about the circle (an email list, WhatsApp group, Messenger group, etc).

Someone will need to set up the actual meeting on Zoom or other videoconferencing platform and invite people. With Zoom you can create a recurring meeting (with password) and enable participants to “join before host”. This way it is a one-off set up job.

Someone also needs to have a timer set up and lead the mindfulness practice (we use an app called *Enso Meditation timer and Bell*). This could be passed around the group.

### ‘Loose Days’ and Reflection & Review

One day each week we give ourselves the option to go for a bit longer and do things differently if we chose. Loose Days provide a bit of a release valve for any simmering frustrations with the structure and gives us space for more playfulness, creativity, expression and sharing. We have had a games night, just talked and hung out after the practices, co-created a couple of simple rituals on significant days, and tried different meditation practices.

Aside from this, we also recommend building in a mechanism for reflection and review. This was the original purpose of what morphed into Loose Day, but we have learnt that it’s

probably better to keep the commitment to regular review separate. Loose Days for us are a very casual 'if we feel like it' affair which meant that we went for quite a long time without reviewing and checking-in in a deliberate focused way. There is always something to talk about even if nothing is "wrong"! If nothing else, you can use the review session to get more insight into everyone's experience of the group and re-inspire each other.

Our current approach is set aside time for a longer session (maybe 1.5 hours) each month when everyone can make it. This is time for us to really check-in with each other, reflect on the process, work through any issues, talk about ideas, make any changes, and recommit for the next month (or possibly not at some point). We are still experimenting and finding what works best for us.

## In Case You Were Wondering...

### Why Have A Structure?

The structure helps create a sense of emotional and social safety. It means there is very little pressure to be charming and make conversation, or to be vulnerable and "share" with strangers- which can be overwhelming for many of us at the best of times and especially if you just woke up!

The structure also keeps the focus on life affirming things and on the work of getting present and grounded rather than on what is wrong with the world and our struggles. While everybody's stories and struggles are important and deserve to be heard (!) what primarily connects us for the purposes of a Connected Practice Circle is our commitment to participating in a mutually supportive group and practicing together.

Structure means that everyone shows up knowing what to expect and that everyone knows they will get a chance to speak and be heard, and to listen. The structure also means that no-one needs to focus entirely on facilitating or leading the group. The "host" has some minimal technical responsibilities but is essentially an equal participant.

Connection and trust build over time from the daily drip feed of information we get about each other. You learn a lot about a person from hearing about what they are grateful for and what their intentions are each day. We observe each other's moods and energy shift over the weeks. Incidental bits of chit-chat and joking around will invariably happen. It is simply quite heart-warming to see the same group of friendly faces every day. Some days it feels as though we all really want to chat after the practice which is really lovely, other days it is more quiet focused, which is a different kind of lovely. Both are necessary. Your group will have its own rhythms and dynamics. Just pay attention.

Having a simple structure means that everyone can pour themselves into it, no matter what state they are in (within reason) and create something mutually supportive.

## Why Mindfulness, Gratitude and Intentions?

There has been a lot of hype about mindfulness in recent years. Mindfulness is simply about being present in the here and now, being in your whole body (not just your thoughts) and aware of your surroundings. Mindfulness was “discovered” sometime in the 2000s in much the same way female orgasm was “discovered” by scientists in the 1950s. It’s kind of ancient, and human but for cultural reasons it needed to be pulled out of its context and validated as “a thing” by researchers and sold back to us. Gratitude is becoming “evidence based” in much the same way.

If you are interested in research on the benefits of mindfulness and gratitude practice (there is plenty of it) feel free to Google. If you are interested, it’s worth reading some critical perspectives on the limits of mindfulness too.

This combination of things came out of lived experience and what the originator knew they needed at the time- connect with people; get present and grounded; open the heart; act consciously in simple, bite sized, low pressure way.

Try it for a while and see. If your experience doesn’t convince you it is irrelevant what the research says. No research is going to conclude that anything works for *absolutely everybody in all circumstances, all the time*. It’s your life, you get to work it out.

## Why Does The Size Matter?

1. Group belonging. There are social belonging cues we just don’t get from one on one interactions. You need at least 3 people to make this work.
2. Flexibility. Having a few more 3 people means that not everyone has to come every day.
3. Feel. We have found that 5 just feels good! You can still get facial detail and a sense of intimacy and group feel from four faces on grid view.
4. No need for a highly skilled facilitator or leader, shared leadership.
5. Time. A size limit of 5-6 means that the sessions take around 30-35 mins which seems to be a manageable amount of time for a daily commitment (and also fits within the meeting time limit of free version of Zoom). If you don’t have that much time, there is nothing stopping you from limiting your group size to 3 and running tight to structure.

## Why Videoconferencing?

Body language and somatic information! We are wired to see faces and hear voices and be present with people. Offline interaction is absolutely the ideal, but if it's not doable then videoconferencing is the next best thing. Whatever technology you have access to that most closely resembles a conversation around a fire- go for it. Can't do video conferencing? Try a group voice call. Basically, relying on text only, screen-based interaction is the interpersonal equivalent of living on junk food- it makes us sick.

## Why Every Day?

Essentially this is a kind of supported *practice* group. For practices like mindfulness and gratitude to enable new ways of being in the world, daily is best.

Having some daily routines can reduce inner chaos and overwhelm. If you are taking "a day at a time" (or less), having a daily connection commitment can help regulate sleep/waking cycles and give you a better chance of moving into each new day with a sense of possibility and give you a foundation to build on. Connecting daily can help build continuity, rhythm and momentum.

Our group has experimented with going for 5 days- Mon-Fri. This may work better for some groups. Also, we have been meeting in the morning but an evening circle with relaxation practice would be great and might also work better for some.

## Things You Might Like to Think and Talk About...

Discuss how you all feel about the boundaries of the group message. Are people happy for other members to contact them individually outside the group? What kind of intensity of traffic are people comfortable with? Do you want to keep it minimal and limited to circle business or more relaxed?

Have a think about how you will manage, as compassionately and graciously as possible a scenario where someone in the group becomes very disruptive, dominating or inappropriate. Having a structure from the beginning keeps the expectations and boundaries clear and reduces the chances of this happening somewhat. What does conflict look like in the context of mutual accountability?

How will you manage a situation where someone is included in the contact list but never or very rarely turns up to a circle? How do you balance remaining generous to people who may struggle to make it to the group for reasons to do with their health or living situation (rather than a lack of interest) with giving others the opportunity to join?

Talk about what mutuality means and what it could look like.

Discuss how to balance innovation with commitment. In this warp speed consumer world obsessed with “new” things, there is always a temptation to change things for the sake of it. If you are going to change something, try to make sure it really means something. Have a clear sense of why. Building in space for experimentation and reflection in the form of “loose days” and Review sessions is one way to manage this tension and test out ideas.

Talk about whether you want to put a timeline on the life of the group or have minimum commitments from members. Try it for a month and reassess? Try it for the duration of the lockdown? Putting a time frame on things, even if you reassess it when the time comes could make it easier to close or for members to leave the group gracefully.

## Talk to Us!

This is an experiment, an idea and some suggestions. We are not mental health professionals, nor are we providing a “service”. We are just ordinary people exercising our human capacities of mutual support. While we are enjoying what we have created for ourselves and love our cosy little group, we also want to situate what we are doing as part of a bigger movement to re/build a sane, regenerative culture of care, presence and inter-dependence.

We envision a network of people involved Connected Practice Circles (or similar things) who come together occasionally to share our experience, reflect and discuss ideas. The more groups in the network the more feedback and information we can collect to inform next steps. Having said that, simply participating in a circle *is* social change on a micro level. Even if your experience of setting up a circle isn’t the fairytale ours has turned out to be, daring or to even try is an act of creation...who knows, maybe a not-so-good experience inspires you to try something different again! Go for it!

We would love to hear from you if you would like start or join a Connected Practice Circle or if the idea sparks something in you, or you are doing similar things already.

If you can’t find people in your own networks to do this with contact us and we might be able to help. Let us know if you would like someone from an existing circle to come to your first meeting to offer some solidarity and support and talk about how we can stay in touch.

**Contact:** [harrison.bess@gmail.com](mailto:harrison.bess@gmail.com)

With lots of love, us 😊

**This is a living document about a living thing created by living people and will change...**