



Open Circle Network

Purpose: The purpose of the Open Circle Network is to provide opportunities for individuals and communities to explore the application of spiritual principles to address difficult and challenging personal and social issues that can benefit from having a safe and supportive sharing environment. Specifically, Network activities provide opportunities for individuals struggling with challenging issues to share with others, reflect on their experience in a safe and non-judgmental environment, and to use that reflection as a springboard for service to the broader community. Open Circle Activities draw directly on spiritual principles from the Baha'i Faith, however all Network activities are open to people of all religious and philosophical backgrounds. There are no requirements for participating in Network activities other than a desire to reflect on how spiritual principles can help us address the challenges of our lives and a willingness to abide by Open Circle Guidelines which are intended to create a safe and supportive environment for all who need it.

Operating Principles

Healing environment. The Network's goal is to provide a loving and supportive environment in which participants can share experiences in an atmosphere of confidentiality and provide support for each individual's healing and spiritual journey. Judgments about good or bad processes or discussions about right or wrong approaches have no place. All participants are asked to manifest an attitude of loving support, and to actively participate in creating a non-judgmental and healing environment.

Confidentiality. Because of the sensitive nature of the issues discussed in Network activities, and because many people are dealing directly with these issues, it is important to maintain confidentiality at all times outside of the group. In general Network activities are not "anonymous" in the way that many other support groups are. Individuals taking part in activities are often known to others in their communities and it is important that information shared within a Network activity stays within that activity and is not shared with others who were not part of that experience.

Avoidance of Conflict and Controversy. The primary aim in holding Network sponsored activities is to provide a nurturing environment that is spiritually and emotionally safe for all participants. Network activities specifically seek to avoid challenging or engaging in controversy regarding Baha'i teachings or institutions as well as the teachings of any other religion or group. The Network is specifically non-political and seeks to avoid conflict or controversy of any kind as part of its activities.

Active protection. Unity among those participating in Network activities is an important part of safeguarding the Open Circle process. Open Circle activity organizers have the responsibility in all cases to protect the safety of the group and of the process. Disruptive individuals, acting in a threatening or judgmental manner or refusing to abide by Network guidelines may be asked to leave activities or to no longer take part. When necessary the Open Circle Network Board will support any groups that are experiencing challenges of this type.

Guidelines for Activities

Introduction. Over the course of Open Circle Network's experience, we have found that certain guidelines are important in establishing an environment that is safe and non-judgemental. We suggest that individuals planning local consultations and sharing circles be informed by the following:

Appropriate standards of conduct. Many Network activities take place within the context of the Baha'i community and it is important that all participants comply with overall Baha'i standards of conduct including refraining from the use of alcohol and drugs, observing appropriate levels of modesty in behavior and dress and refraining from inappropriate sexual activity. If the activity is held at a Baha'i facility, then all ground-rules of that facility need to be observed. If the activity is held at another facility, all must respect the ground-rules of the hosting facility.

Conversations outside of Network activities. Network activities are times for special consultation and are protected for sharing of personal stories and experiences that are sometimes intimate in nature. When someone shares something within a Network activity this does not necessarily mean that this person is interested in or even willing to discuss their experiences outside of that activity. In general, participants should assume that sharing during an activity is private and particular to that activity and only continue discussions outside of activities if there has been specific agreement to do so.

The issue of touch. An area that can be particularly sensitive when sharing personal experiences is the issue of touching or hugging. Because of our widely diverse experiences in situations like this, not all people are comfortable with unsolicited touching or hugging. There are also times in which we may feel strong emotions that bring tears and which may cause others to want to hug or console us. Sometimes tears are a healthy part of the process and hugging or embracing may interrupt the process of experiencing the feelings that are occurring. At other times a hug or embrace during an emotional time may be very welcome and important. The general principle is to ask whether or not a person is comfortable with touching or hugging before you just assume it's okay.

Personal judgment and self-care. In any activity that involves dealing with challenging personal issues there may be times that participants feel overwhelmed or emotionally charged. Activity organizers are asked to be aware of these experiences and to provide support and options. But it is ultimately up to each individual to remain mindful of their own experience and to ensure that the experience is a safe and healthy one for them. Participants should feel free to discontinue participation or seek support from others at any time they feel it is important to do so.

Transformative vision. It is the experience of participants in Network activities that when a safe environment is maintained it is possible to address even the most difficult and challenging issues in a healing and transformative manner. It is a fundamental principle of all Network activities that reflecting on spiritual principles can illuminate even the most tense or difficult situations. Participants are encouraged to keep this illuminating vision in their hearts and to turn its light onto every situation that arises so that all can nurture growth and transformation and foster the spirit of love and unity that is the underlying purpose of all Open Circle activities.