

**Case Study #3**  
**Healthcare Community-Building Circle**  
**Ana Laura Lopez Gonzalez, Author**  
**Pedro Flores, Circle Facilitator**

**Incident**

In a cardiac and pulmonary rehabilitation clinic in California, patients expressed psychosocial concerns that became barriers to their progress. The facilitator and owner of this clinic noticed patients had experienced depression, problems with their doctors and family members, difficulty paying for medication, and a lack of family support. The facilitator decided to coordinate a restorative circle so patients and employees could express any psychosocial problems they were experiencing.

**Restorative Process**

Although members of the clinic were familiar with circles as a staff meeting format, this was the first time the facilitator implemented a restorative circle to address patient concerns. The facilitator distributed a flyer with information on the circle process so anyone interested could participate. The circle lasted two hours and there were six participants: three patients, two employees, and one facilitator.

The facilitator opened the process by acknowledging the individual wisdom and power of the circle participants. He highlighted each individual's unique life experience and underscored that everyone's voice matters. The first round was a check-in so participants could introduce themselves and express their feelings. The second round encouraged participants to express what made them feel valued; these values became the guidelines of the circle. In the third and fourth rounds, participants shared how healthcare, in general, has let them down and shared some of their present psychosocial concerns. The facilitator ended the circle with a check-out round.

Participants were initially reserved. The facilitator modeled open-hearted sharing and listening, which supported participants in openly expressing themselves. One patient—previously unmotivated to engage in clinic activities—was able to share her vulnerabilities in the circle which led her to care more about her progress at the clinic. Employees felt comfortable expressing their professional values as well as sharing aspects of the healthcare system and their jobs that they did not like. The facilitator shared the dilemmas he had to face in a position of authority.

### **Outcomes**

- Patients strengthened their relationships by giving each other words of encouragement.
- Patients released stress and felt empowered.
- The employer and employees reinforced their relationship by sharing thoughts and feelings that have never been disclosed due to the difference in power between them.

### **Recommendations**

- Health care circles are very beneficial when the questions are tailored to address the needs of patients.
- For people who have not experienced restorative circles before, it is important the facilitator creates a safe environment and models open-hearted sharing. In this way, everyone feels more comfortable sharing, especially when there are power dynamics within the group.
- Facilitators need to remind participants to be mindful of the time so each participant has space to contribute meaningfully.
- When facilitators are in a position of authority, they should encourage people to uphold their values as a way to minimize inequalities.
- One of the most beautiful things about restorative justice is you learn more by not saying anything and just listening.