

Circles of Support and Shared Lives

What are Circles of Support?

Circles of Support is a concept that started in Canada, spread through North America and began to be developed in the UK in the 1980s. A Circle of Support, sometimes called a Circle of Friends, is a group of people who meet together on a regular basis to help somebody who needs some extra support to accomplish their personal goals in life. They may include family members, friends or support workers. People with learning disabilities often find a Circle of Support is a good way to improve their lives as it offers support to try new things, meet new people or plan for a change in their life.

The Circle acts as a community around that person who, for one reason or another, is unable to achieve what they want in life on their own and decides to ask others for help. This may be day-to-day things in a person's life, such as going out in the evening, meeting new people or going shopping. It may also be big things, such as going on a holiday, finding a job or moving house. The person who the Circle is built around is in charge, both in deciding who to invite to be in the Circle, and also in the direction that the Circle's energy is

employed. Sometimes a facilitator is chosen from within the Circle to make sure it keeps running smoothly.

A Circle of Support is based on seeing people as individuals who feel they need support in order to take more control over their own lives. A Circle can be empowering to all of the individuals involved and, unlike many service systems, does not reinforce dependence. The meetings work best when they are friendly and fun. The person at the centre of the Circle may want to send out invites and plan where it will be held and how it will be run. Some people have met in pubs, others may share a meal or an informal activity.

Circles can meet as often as they like - some meet only twice a year, but if there is something major happening in the person's life, it will probably be more regular. For many people using Shared Lives, living with or visiting a Shared Lives carer can have many similarities to being supported by a Circle, being supported by friends, family and the wider community.

How to set up a Circle of Support

Ideally the Circle should be set up by the person who wants the support, commonly

known as the 'focus person', although they can be established by a trained facilitator.

Facilitators may be paid, particularly if the focus person has a personal budget they wish to use for this purpose, but are more usually unpaid. The focus person is encouraged to think about who they would like in their Circle. It may just be family and friends that are close but may also include people who provide paid support or other people who are respected and trusted, although not close friends.

The focus person then needs to think about the first meeting to invite people to. Do they want to make it an event like a meal, choose an outside place to meet like a pub or café or just have a comfortable time at home? They may want to send out a written invite with details of where and when as well as a short explanation about Circles of Support. Before the meeting

it is helpful to encourage the focus person to think about what they would like the people in the Circle to help them with.

At the first meeting there needs to be time to explain about Circles of Support and to tell people the ideas the focus person has about the support they would like and what they want to focus on. Members of the group might have their own suggestions and ideas and it can often be helpful for these to be recorded. Ideally by the end of the first session there will be a plan for moving forward including who has offered to do things, what they will do and by when. It is usually a good idea to agree the date for the next meeting before the first meeting ends.

How can Shared Lives become involved?

Circles of Support provide an inclusive and energising way for people to receive extra support and advice in a structured, practical way. They are also a good vehicle for enabling Shared Lives carers to engage with the wider group of people in the lives of the people they care for in a supportive and productive environment.

Making Shared Lives carers aware of Circles of Support could provide another tool to help them in their caring role. If they are not already aware of this form of support, raising awareness of the simple steps needed to help the person they care for set up a Circle might provide new opportunities to engage with the wider community.

Anyone can start a Circle of Support, but help is available from the follow:

Circles Network at <http://www.circlesnetwork.org.uk> who have trained facilitators across the country to help groups set up.

The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities <http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk> also have resources and advice on their website.

Tyze is enabling people to develop online personal networks of care where caregivers can coordinate, share, and contribute within a circle of support. Visit their website at <http://tyze.com/business/health-and-social-care/>