

Personal, “relaxed” approach:

Ken Wilmarth from the Us TOO Modesto California Support group shares that his group prefers a more intimate informal setting for their meetings which they refer to as “Discussion Circles”. These circles are the heart of our support group. We often review the discussion etiquette before we begin. (Ken and Jenny Willmarth Photo)



Discussion Circles

At monthly meetings, following formal presentations and group business, we divide into men's and women's circles.

Typically, within the men's circle, a few of our more seasoned members prime the conversation by sharing their stories, giving newcomers a sense of discussion scope and content, and the diversity of our circumstances. Then newcomers are given extended time to share whatever is in their heads and hearts. This promotes much back-and-forth discussion from which we all learn. Others seeking clarity of thought regarding their circumstances can also have additional time. At most meetings, if we stick to our guidelines, every person wishing to talk will have a chance to be heard.

Recently, an exceptionally talented facilitator has been leading the circles, modifying this model, by soliciting the stories of newcomers as they arrive at the meeting, matching them with someone whose story fits with their experience or intended course of action, and then guiding those sets of folks through their conversations. Others chime in as topics trend their way.

The women hear this litany and honor its spirit, but since their group tends to be smaller, they conduct their session with a more informal, conversational manner with satisfying results

In order to facilitate an emotionally safe and socially comfortable environment where we can effectively share our personal stories, we commit to the following guidelines.

- ✓ Speak clearly and loudly enough to be heard by some of us hearing-impaired (though if two men's circles are in the same room, not so loudly as to interrupt the other circle)
- ✓ Say what you want to say, fully, but with economy of words. Please make each point just once, unless asked to repeat.

(We strive to allocate extra time for newcomers and for anyone needing extra time to work through an issue.)

- ✓ Be a careful, respectful listener (especially avoid sidebar conversations)
- ✓ Honor one another's privacy – keep shared information confidential
- ✓ Refrain from advocating for or against any particular treatment or physician

Together, through this process, we seek to be a source of accurate information, encouragement, compassion, counsel, and comradeship.

Above all, the *trust and respect* we show one another here keeps us a healthy organization, and help us maintain healthy relationships within our network of support.

The social dimension is important to their groups continued viability. Early arrivals to our meetings have time before the program to reconnect and strengthen friendship bonds. After the circles, there is social time to pursue discussion prompted by the circles, or simply to continue visiting. The welcoming atmosphere at the beginning and the lingering engagement over snacks at evening's end serve as slices of bread within which we sandwich nutritious staples of program and discussion circles. More often than not, we all leave with a satisfied feeling of satiation, but already anticipating the next meal.