

Sharing Stories of Connection

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| Timing: | Roughly 3-5 minutes per person, plus additional time for reflection |
| # of Participants: | Preferably not more than 15 (if larger, break into smaller groups) |
| Equipment needed: | Each participant needs an item of his or her choosing. |

This exercise can be done in a variety of ways; here are three options. Choose the one that will work best with your group—or invent your own.

1. In the preparatory material sent out before the workshop, ask participants to bring physical items that represent what has drawn them to the session. What is their relationship to this issue?
2. Have the group members leave the workshop space and go for a short walk. Ask them to pick up objects that represent their relationship to this project.
3. Provide a random collection of items, some natural, some not. You'll need at least three times the number of objects as people. Display these items in the center of the circle as people walk in the room.

PURPOSE/DESCRIPTION:

This exercise helps group members begin to see themselves, develop relationships, and build a sense of connection while enhancing the group's capacity to listen empathetically.

GENERAL NOTES:

This session works well in the evening, after dinner, when people are relaxed. Using an object to aid the storytelling process allows some of the focus to be placed on the object rather than on the storyteller, which can make members of the newly forming group feel safe. The facilitators must be extremely attuned to the group's energy and may want to offer brief reminders about empathetic listening.

PROCESS:

Option 1 and General Instructions

1. Ask group members to bring the items they brought with them to this session. Have them sit in a circle, holding on to their items.
2. Introduce the exercise:
 - We all have come to this circle for many different reasons. We have traveled different paths, had different experiences, lived different lives. But something has drawn us here. We all care and are committed to transforming [insert focus area].
 - I am going to ask you each to share some of your own story. Why did you bring the object that you did? What meaning does it hold for you in relation to this work?
 - Now, that's the role of the storyteller. The listeners have a role, too. Please forget what you think about the story. Try to see it for what it is—an opening, a sharing. Think of the story as a gift—something special that you are being trusted with. Don't try to figure out if you agree or disagree, or whether it makes sense; just listen to it for what it is offering. Open your heart. Listen to understand and from within that person.
 - We are going to go around the circle—everyone is welcome to share their stories. You can pass if you wish. To keep things moving, we're looking for each story to be 3-5 minutes. Once you've shared your story, please place your object in the middle of the circle.

3. After you have given the instructions, ask people to take a minute to breathe in. Request that someone volunteer to start. Depending on the size and energy of the group, you can go around the circle “in order” or else popcorn style (that is, participants can speak in a random order when they are ready—they can “pop”).
4. Don’t rush from story to story. Encourage a short pause between the stories to let them “land” and be absorbed.
5. Once all the stories have been shared, ask people to look at the remarkable collection of objects and reflect in silence on the group’s richness, history, experience, and perspectives.
6. Depending on the time and length of the storytelling session, you could ask for people to share their reflections.
7. Pay attention to people’s energy. It’s important for the group to really listen to the stories that are being shared. If people are starting to nod off or get itchy, end the exercise after everyone has had a chance to share, and tell people they can stay behind to share informally if they wish.

Option 2:

This option is similar to Option 1, but instead of having people bring objects to the workshop with them, ask them to go outside for a short walk and bring back something that represents what has drawn them to session and their relationship to this issue.

Option 3:

For this option, place a collection of objects in the center of the circle. Follow the instructions above but instead of having people speak about the objects they brought, ask them to select an object from the center and bring it back to their seats when it’s their turn to share. Often, a collection of objects that the group is not familiar with can trigger a story that a participant may not even realize was there and is just bubbling under the surface. The object may be enough of a reminder for the story to surface.

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