

# **Holding the Circle**

Stephen R. Andrew LCSW, LADC, CCS, CGP

*"Speak a new language so that the world will be a new world." ~ Rumi*

**Holding the Circle** is helpful to facilitators, doctors, psychologists, social workers, teachers, coaches, parents, palliative care nurses and other healthcare professionals. It is what ALL of us can do for each other - for groups, partners, lovers, children, friends, neighbors, and even strangers with whom we strike up conversations. We can create an imaginary psychic circle.

**Here are the principles:**

**Give people permission to trust their own intuition and wisdom**

*"Dreams are candles to help us through the dark." ~ Mark Nepo*

Give people we are with permission to trust their own intuition and wisdom. When we are supporting people, we have no experience to rely on, and yet, intuitively, we know what is accurately needed. It is to be present, to listen well and then skillfully with empathy, acceptance and compassion and then skillfully mindfully respond.

There's a part of all of us that contains a soft compassionate voice that lives within; it holds our dreams, our need to love well, to be in our power and control over the destiny of our lives, to feel capable, and to belong, to be a part of community.

Empathy is more than an act of helping, it's the ability to be able to feel so close, so knowing the person, so connected to their perspective and vision of their world, so comforting, it's almost breathtaking to the point that you feel that you can't take it, at this moment you're part of them, their spirit, and that is compassion. This will bring forth the wisdom.

**Give people small amounts of information that they can handle**

*"The notes I handle no better than many pianists. But the pause between the notes... Ah, that is where the art resides." ~ Arthur Schnabel*

We need to give people as small amount of information as they can handle. Please be kind and give people simple instructions and leave them with a few handouts. Do not overwhelm people with far more than they can process in their time. Too much information starts to make people feel negative about self.

**Don't take their power away (Power With not Power Over)**

*"I believe the greatest gift I can conceive of having from anyone is to be seen by them, heard by them,*

*to be understood and touched by them.” ~ Virginia Sati*

When we take decision-making power out of people’s hands, we leave them feeling useless, oppressed, and incompetent. There may be times when we need to step in and make hard decisions for other people (ie. when they’re dealing with an addiction and an intervention feels like the only thing that will save them). In almost every other case, people (even our children) need the autonomy to make their own choices. We need to let them feel empowered in making decisions on their own behalf and in finding ongoing support and never try to direct or control them.

### **Keep your own ego out of it.**

*“I begged the wise one to tell me the secret of the world. Gently he whispered, ‘Be quiet, the secret cannot be spoken, It is wrapped in silence.’” ~ Rumi*

This is a big one. We all get caught in that trap now and then – when we begin to believe that someone else’s success is dependent on our intervention, or when we think that their failure reflects poorly on us, or when we’re convinced that whatever emotions they choose to unload on us are about us instead of them. It’s a trap we occasionally found ourselves slipping into when we teach and/or give information. We (I) can become more concerned about our (my) own success (Do the students or people like us? Do their marks and responses reflect on our ability to be a caregiver, to teach, etc.?) than about the success of the student or person. This doesn’t serve anyone – not even us. To truly support their growth, we (I) need to keep our (my) ego out of it and create the space where they have the real opportunity to grow and learn.

### **Make people feel safe enough to make mistakes, to fail**

*“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” ~ Maya Angelou*

When people are learning, growing, or going through grief or transition, they are bound to make some mistakes along the way. When we, as their space holders, withhold judgement and shame, we offer them the opportunity to reach inside of themselves to find the courage to take risks and the resilience to keep going even when they fail. When we let them know that failure is simply a part of the journey and not the end of the world, they’ll spend less time beating themselves up for it and more time learning from their mistakes.

### **Guide with presence and curiosity, towards help with their humility and thoughtfulness.**

*“Gentle, tender interventions, if they are clear, overcome rigid resistances, self protective patterns. If gentleness fails, try yielding or stepping back altogether. When the leader yields, the resistances will relax” ~ Stephen Andrew*

A wise caregiver, lover, parent knows when to withhold guidance (i.e. when it makes a person feel foolish and inadequate) and when to offer it gently, cleanly (i.e. when a person asks for it or is too

lost to know what to do). Recognizing the areas in which they feel most vulnerable and incapable, and offering the right kind of help without shaming them takes practice and humility.

**Create, be a container for complex emotions: hurt, fear, anger/rage, shame, loneliness, trauma, etc.**

*"Follow the positive emotional spark" ~ Chris Wagner*

When people feel that they are held in a deeper way than they are used to, they feel safe enough to allow complex emotions to surface that might normally remain hidden. Someone who is practiced at holding space knows that this can happen and will be prepared to hold it in a gentle, supportive, and nonjudgmental way. In *The Circle Way*, we talk about "holding the rim" for people. The circle becomes the space where people feel safe enough to fall apart without fearing that this will leave them permanently broken or that they will be shamed by others in the room. Someone is always there to offer empathy, compassion and courage.

This is not easy work, and it is work that we (I) continue to learn about ourselves as we (I) host increasingly more challenging conversations and even sit with misery and mystery.

We cannot do it if we are overly emotional ourselves, if we haven't done the hard work of looking into our own shadow, or if we don't trust the people we are holding space for in this moment.

**Allow people to make different decisions and to have different experiences than you would**

*"People are more willing to change when they're completely free not to change."*anonymous

Holding space is about respecting each person's differences and recognizing that those differences may lead to them making choices that we would not make. Sometimes, for example, they make choices based on cultural norms that we can't understand from within our own experience. When we hold space, we release control and we honour differences.

**Holding the Circle** is something that we can be master with practice, you can adequately address this list of principles given here. It's a complex practice that evolves as we practice it, and it is unique to each person and each situation.

## **Biography:**

**Stephen R. Andrew LCSW, LADC, CCS, CGP** is a storyteller, trainer, therapist, and CEO (Chief Energizing Officer) of Health Education & Training Institute. Stephen maintains a compassion-focused private practice in Portland, Maine USA and facilitates a variety of groups: young person, men, co-ed, couple and caregiver groups. He presents workshops for health-care, criminal justice, social service agencies, mental health, substance abuse counselors, and other groups on adolescents and adults & addiction, motivational interviewing, dual diagnosis, men's issues, and group work. He is clinical facilitator, visionary and founder of InnerEdge, a compassion-focused outpatient agency and also the co-founder of the Men's Resource Center of Southern Maine.

Stephen is a former Substance Abuse Coordinator for a public school system, the former Executive Director of an adolescent prevention treatment agency, and founder of a recovery camp for adults and a family camp. He is a member of the International Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT) since 2003. He is the creator of the Spirit Wind CD series. And, first and foremost, he is a husband and the proud father of his son Sebastian.

## **Bibliography:**

### **Books:**

Andrew, Stephen R., Alan Lyme and David J. Powell. *Game Plan: A Man's Guide to Achieving Emotional Fitness*. Las Vegas, Nevada: Central Recovery Press, 2012.

Arkowitz, Hal, et al. *Motivational Interviewing in the Treatment of Psychological Problems*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2008.

Baldwin, Christina and Anna Linnea. *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. 2010.

Hohman, Melinda. *Motivational Interviewing in Social Work Practice*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2011.

Lesser, Elizabeth. *Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow*. New York: Villard Books, 2004.

Miller, William R. and Stephen Rollnick. *Motivational Interviewing, Third Edition: Helping People Change*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2012.

Naar-King, Sylvie and Mariann Suarez. *Motivational Interviewing with Adolescents and Young Adults*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2010.

Nepo, Mark. *Seven Thousand Ways to Listen*. New York: Free Press, 2012.

Rollnick, Stephen; Miller, William R.; Butler, Christopher C. *Motivational Interviewing in Health Care*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2008.

Rosengren, David B. *Building Motivational Interviewing Skills: A Practitioner Workbook*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2009.

Steinberg, Marc P. and William R. Miller. *Motivational Interviewing in Diabetes Care*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2015.

Wagner, Christopher C. and Karen S. Ingersoll, et al. *Motivational Interviewing in Groups*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2012.

Westra, Henny A. *Motivational Interviewing in the Treatment of Anxiety*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2012.

Zuckoff, Allan PhD. *Finding Your Way to Change*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2015.

**Recordings:** - see [www.hetimaine.org](http://www.hetimaine.org) click on the 'Bookstore' tab

Andrew, Stephen R. *A Motivational Interview about Smoking Cessation*. DVD

Andrew, Stephen R. Spiritwind Series CD's

♥ *Courageous Men:  
Men and Intimacy*

♥ *Letting Your Spirit Soar*

♥ *Principles of the Heart*

♥ *Dancing With Your Fears*

♥ *The Way of  
Courage and Kindness*

♥ *The Gift of Forgiveness*

**Websites:** [www.motivationalinterviewing.org](http://www.motivationalinterviewing.org) ♥ [www.motivationalinterview.net](http://www.motivationalinterview.net) ♥ [www.hetimaine.org](http://www.hetimaine.org)