

# The Compassionate Listening Project

## **Considering a Practice Group?**

*"We must listen with our spiritual ear, the one inside, and this is very different from deciding in advance what is right and what is wrong and then seeking to promote our own agenda. We must literally suspend our belief and then listen to learn whether what we hear expands or diminishes our sense of truth."*

*A quote about listening for truth*

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of all members of our Compassionate Listening community in developing these materials, in particular Andrea Cohen who wrote this document using materials written and gathered by TCLP over the past few years; and Brian Berman and Therese Charvet for establishing the first Compassionate Listening Practice group in Kitsap County in Fall 2001.

## **Why Form a Compassionate Listening™ Practice Group?**

Many people are drawn to deepening their understanding of Compassionate Listening™ following a workshop. Practice groups provide a wonderful opportunity to do that. And, for many people, these groups have proven essential to helping them integrate the skills learned in a workshop into their everyday lives.

It takes a while to really "get" what it means to make heart-to-heart connection, particularly in the heat of conflict. And being a part of a supportive learning community can be critical to your ability to begin – and sustain – the journey.

Compassionate Listening™ is different from the usual way of listening, in part because it takes considerable practice to set one's own judgments and emotional reactions aside in order to be completely present to another human being. Dedicated compassionate listeners have discovered that participation in a practice group is an extraordinary gift to one's own on-going growth and development.

## **Purpose of a Practice Group**

- 1) To deepen skills in Compassionate Listening™;
- 2) To provide a container for intimacy, depth, healing and connection;

- 3) To provide the opportunity to develop facilitation and leadership skills, with feedback to assist with self-awareness and skill-development;
- 4) To offer guidance and reflection on the application of Compassionate Listening™ at the personal, interpersonal and collective levels;
- 5) To afford opportunities to “sit in the fire” with individuals and groups in your community;

## **Setting Up a Practice Group**

What follows is a laundry list of things to consider as you think about forming a practice group. You might find it helpful to find a partner to vision and create the group with you. It’s simply more fun, (and it can be far less burdensome) to do this as a joint project. And you may also decide to ask a Compassionate Listening mentor for periodic guidance to help you get the group off the ground and/or troubleshoot challenging issues.

Here are some of the issues you’ll need to think about.

### **1. Participation**

You’ll need to make some decisions about who to invite up front, knowing that everything can change when and if the group members are interested in something different. Will your invitees be:

- People who were in your or another CL workshop only?
- Others who have expressed interest?
- Will this be a drop-in group, or will you ask people to make a regular commitment?
- How will you add newcomers, if at all?

*Tips:* Try to keep the practice group to no more than 8-10 people. To reach that number, however, you might need to invite more people to an initial meeting to measure the level of interest and answer questions.

### **2. Facilitation**

Someone will need to do this, but it may not be the same person each time. Decide if it should be:

- One person who appears to be the most experienced
- A rotated responsibility
- Co-facilitators – if you decide to co-facilitate, make sure to clarify who will do what in the course of the session.

### 3. Meeting Frequency, Dates and Times

- This is something you can decide at the first meeting. Most practice groups meet either once or twice/month.
- Also determine the length of time you'll be meeting. We suggest sometime between 2 and 3 hours.

### 4. The Meeting Place

- Depending upon who you're inviting and how many people are likely to show up, it's often ideal to hold a practice group in someone's home.
- If that's not possible, find as friendly and cozy a setting as you can. You might consider a community center, a library, or a faith-based community meeting space.
- Consider prospective participants' comfort with whichever space you choose.

### 5. Suggestions for Creating the Space

- Having tea and snacks can help build the relationship necessary for people to feel comfortable to take risks. And that, of course, is a prerequisite for learning about and embodying the practices of Compassionate Listening.
- Have participants sit in a circle. There's something magical about that configuration.
- Light a candle before you begin - or perhaps there's another equally compelling ritual participants would like to do.
- Take a minute of silence to set the intention
- Do a quick check-in to help release preoccupations that might keep people from listening or speaking from a centered place -and also to determine if someone would like a listening session
- Review guidelines
- At the end of each session, look at what worked and what didn't.
- Also at the end, make sure to do a closing round to see where people are at and what new awareness or intention they may be taking away with them.

### 6. Compassionate Listening Guidelines

It's important to review these at the beginning of each session.

- ☞ Fully Participate (Take risks - embrace opportunities to try new things)
- ☞ Confidentiality
- ☞ **Notice** your judgments and what triggers you.
- ☞ Permission to express strong emotions
- ☞ WATCH when you may be getting lost in your own story
- ☞ Respect and share time

- ☞ There are no mistakes
- ☞ Stay present. If you find yourself shutting down, speak it.
- ☞ Self-care

Practice Group participants may decide to add guidelines if they need to in order to ensure their safety.

## **7. Ideas about format and activities**

A suggested format is: welcome, meditation, check-in with talking circle object (including whether you would like to request a listening session that evening), listening sessions (small group or whole group) and/or skill-building exercise, debrief and closing.

The basic skills practiced, regardless of the activity, are reflective listening (reflecting facts, feelings, values) and inquiry (open-ended questions).

### ***Exercises***

More ideas for format, exercises and activities are included in *Listening with the Heart A Guide for Compassionate Listening™*, by Carol Hwoschinsky (Parts 1 and 2 and pp 67-81)

Note: A Compassionate Listening Workbook will soon be available for sale on the Compassionate Listening website which will include additional activities.

Additional resources for activities and skill-building include:

Joanna Macy, [Coming Back to Life](#)

Gene Knudsen Hoffman, [Compassionate Listening: An Exploratory Sourcebook](#). This is a free download:

<http://www.newconversations.net/listening.htm>

Try out new exercises that members pick up in their own reading or trainings. Listen to a teaching by Eckhart Tolle and discuss it. Read a quote and ask the group to reflect on it. There are endless creative ways to run a practice group. But at the very least, members come to connect, and to give and receive the gift of listening. So even if nothing is planned beyond the basic format above, and breaking into small listening circles for the evening, the value is immense.

The most important criterion for selecting an exercise should be that it supports one or more of the Five Core Practices of Compassionate Listening:

- Cultivating Compassion
- Maintaining the Fair Witness
- Respecting Self & Others
- Listening with the Heart
- Speaking from the Heart

Also, make sure to debrief (what did you notice that worked really well – what opened and closed you?) and do a round of gratitude following each exercise.

At the end of each practice group session, recommend that participants keep a journal and/or intentionally bring their Compassionate Listening practices into play when they're relating to friends, family and colleagues.

It's a good idea to periodically review all of the materials in the packet(s) you've received in your Compassionate Listening workshops.

### ***Listening Sessions***

There are two types of listening sessions you might choose to include in your practice group activities:

- **With a participant who requests a listening session.** If a group member would like a listening session, decide as a group whether the whole group will be involved or whether two or three people may break out to listen while the rest of the group practices other skills.
- **With someone outside the group who might be in need of and request a listening session.** Groups have listened to ex-felons, families of soldiers, residents of homeless shelters, and there are many more examples of "marginalized" voices in the community who have benefited from such a session. However, before doing this make sure you are well prepared and that there is sufficient skill in the group to hold this responsibility with integrity.

Here are some guidelines to follow for listening sessions:

#### *For Listeners:*

- Don't slip into trying to "fix it" – this requires a clear commitment by all involved
- Have compassion for the speaker's situation
- Hear the story and don't try to relate it to your own. This isn't about you!
- Listen from your heart, not your head
- Stay present even when you might feel "triggered"

- “Reflect” back what the speaker says if you need to make sure you’re understanding correctly
- Avoid “why” questions that can lead people back into their heads
- Ask open-ended questions that help clarify or deepen the speaker’s experience
- Allow silence

*For Speakers:*

- Speak from the heart about your own feelings and experiences, not your interpretation or judgment of the “other”
- Tune in to your body. When you find you’re disconnecting from heart and going into “heady” explanations, breathe – and return to what you’re feeling in the body and the wisdom of your heart
- Allow space

*Tip:* Always remember that the purpose of any listening session is to be of service to the listener. The intention is healing. And the method is by creating a safe space in which the speaker can hear his or her own voice and plumb new depths of their own story. In the nooks and crannies of a person’s reported experience may be hidden gems that can greatly contribute to the speaker’s healing.

The purpose of this type of session is never for problem-solving or to satisfy the listeners’ curiosity. At its best, a Compassionate Listening session will leave the speaker in a deeper place of self-inquiry, with new insights and a greater sense of peace.

Brian Berman and Therese Charvet share these thoughts:

*"In our practice group sessions, we may step in as a speaker from time to time, asking the group to offer their gift of listening and offering our sharing of story as a source of learning. We need to distinguish this practice from ordinary sharing and supporting we offer each other as friends - and from counseling or therapy. We ask that you refrain from bringing the same situation to the group beyond a couple of sessions."*

### **8. Giving Feedback**

Practice Groups provide opportunities to develop awareness of our "blind spots". We can help each other when our feedback is constructive and well timed, and when it's given with caring and compassion. We are all learners and all teachers!

Some tips for providing helpful feedback are:

- Emphasize it is a learning experience for all of us.
- Ask the person being critiqued where they think they did well and what they'd like to improve.
- Be as concrete and specific as possible
- Give everyone in the group the chance to add thoughts, experiences and appreciation.
- Always acknowledge the person's courage for taking risks.
- Know that your honesty is a gift. Honesty with empathy and compassion is better for learning than being polite; truth without compassion can be abusive.

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*"Every human being is an unfolding miracle, yet along the path we all have experiences that leave us feeling angry, confused, fearful or dis-empowered. These are the seeds of hatred, injustice and conflict. Deep listening doesn't sidestep those experiences. It meets them with empathy and compassion so that the people involved can begin to release their fears and go deep into their center – into the essence of their humanity, where we find our real potential for justice and love."*

Herb Walters, Rural Southern Voices for Peace Activist