



The Compassionate Listening Project

Setting Up a Practice Group

A Guide from The Compassionate Listening Project

Compassionate Listening is, first and foremost, a practice. It takes repeated, focused, intentional effort to integrate these skills, principles, and practices into our lives. Convening a practice group is one of the most vital and effective ways to cultivate your capacity as a compassionate listener.

Purpose

A practice group can:

- Deepen skills in Compassionate Listening
 - Provide a container for intimacy, depth, healing, and connection
 - Offer the opportunity to develop facilitation and leadership skills, with feedback to support self-awareness and growth
 - Offer guidance and reflection on applying Compassionate Listening at the personal, interpersonal, and collective levels
 - Afford opportunities to “sit in the fire” with individuals and groups in your community
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Part 1: Getting Started

Date, Time, and Location

Practice groups may meet in public or private settings — each has trade-offs to weigh for privacy, accessibility, and cost. Decide on a rhythm that’s sustainable for your group: many groups meet every other week for two to two-and-a-half hours, in person or online.

Outreach

Invite participants personally, or via email, flyers, or Compassionate Listening presentations — including people who have attended CL trainings or delegations in your area, along with friends, family, coworkers, and members of organizations you belong to. Consider offering a short presentation to nonprofits or community groups that might benefit from these skills, and follow up with an invitation to join or form a practice group. Members of established communities — congregations, civic groups, affinity groups — are often especially interested, as a

way to deepen relationships and build skills within a community they already trust. What other communities exist where you live?

Sample Invitational Letter

Use and adapt the template below to invite people to your group.

What Is Compassionate Listening?

The realization that all parties in a conflict are wounded and need to be heard led international Quaker peacemaker Gene Knudsen Hoffman to develop the practice of Compassionate Listening. Leah Green, Founder of The Compassionate Listening Project — originally founded as the Middle East Citizen Diplomacy Project — began developing the practice through citizen diplomacy trips to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, one of the organization's early projects. As a number of facilitators stepped in to help shape the work and discern how best to teach it, our broader mission came into focus: spreading the practice of Compassionate Listening itself. Out of that shared experience came the five core practices we teach today: Cultivate Compassion, Develop the Fair Witness, Respect Self and Others, Listen with the Heart, and Speak from the Heart.

Compassionate Listening is a way of listening deeply to people who are not often listened to closely or well in our world. It creates a safe place in which people are free to express themselves fully, to the level of their deepest concerns. For listeners, it means empathizing with the feelings and life circumstances of people affected by events — sometimes very difficult events — far beyond their own control. Compassionate listening groups come together specifically to listen with openness to people who may be suffering or in conflict. Compassionate listeners set their own opinions and judgments aside and strive to be fully present, with an open heart, to the human being who sits before them.

[Learn more at www.compassionatelistening.org](http://www.compassionatelistening.org)

Why a Compassionate Listening Practice Group?

Compassionate Listening represents a real shift from our usual ways of listening to and being with people in day-to-day life. It can look simple, but it is, in fact, quite hard to do — especially when we disagree with or dislike the beliefs, values, or opinions being expressed. It takes real practice to set our own judgments and emotional reactions aside in order to be fully present to another human being who may be very different from ourselves. Dedicated compassionate listeners find that ongoing participation in a practice group is an extraordinary gift to their own growth and development.

Join Us!

We welcome your participation in our group. Some people who join our practice group have attended longer Compassionate Listening trainings; others come with no previous experience at all. We meet [FREQUENCY, e.g. "every other Tuesday evening from 7–9:30 PM"] in [LOCATION / NEIGHBORHOOD]. If you're looking for a way to deepen your ability to listen to people very different from yourself — to dialogue with, or be in relationship with, people who hold opinions opposed to your own — Compassionate Listening may have something to offer you. Please reach out for the date, time, and location of our next gathering.

[Your name(s) and contact information]

Part 2: Running a Practice Group

Structure & Agreements

Ideas for format, exercises, and activities can be found in *Listening with the Heart: A Guide for Compassionate Listening* by Carol Hwoschinsky, and in *Practicing the Art of Compassionate Listening* (our “blue book”), which walks through many of the exercises taught in the Intro training. Both are available through compassionatelisting.org.

At your first gathering:

- Finalize your plan for the regularity, frequency, and timing of meetings (if this hasn’t already been decided).
- Finalize the format for your sessions. A typical session might include: a moment of meditative silence and setting of intention; a check-in; listening sessions; guided exercises; journal-writing and/or debriefing; and a closing circle. Include other elements as your group wishes.
- Establish ground rules for safety: agreements about confidentiality, expected attendance, what full participation means for your group (including welcoming all emotions), and whether the group is open to new members on an ongoing basis or closed once formed. (The Agreements handout from the Intro training is a useful starting point.)

Facilitating the Practice Group

A few tips to help facilitators keep sessions effective:

- Facilitation can be shared or led by one person. If co-facilitating, agree in advance who will present each exercise and in what order. One facilitator can hold responsibility for watching the group’s energy — what’s working and what isn’t.
- If the group is large, divide into smaller pods of three to five for listening sessions.
- Time management matters, both within small groups and for the group as a whole.
- Build in breaks, movement, and centering practices.
- Encourage participants to practice the skills between sessions and to report back on what they noticed.
- If someone wants a listening session, decide as a group whether the whole group takes part, or whether two or three members break out while the rest continue other practice.
- Consider working with one exercise per meeting, drawing from the Intro training materials and the “blue book.”

Part 3: Giving Helpful Feedback

Feedback is one of the most valuable gifts a practice group offers. These guidelines are for both facilitators and participants, giving and receiving.

The purpose of feedback is to support growth. Honest feedback is most easily received within a trusting relationship, so it’s essential to create a safe circle where honest participation and feedback are freely offered and received. Practice groups are a place to develop awareness of our own “blind spots” — we help each other most when feedback is constructive and well timed.

- Frame it as a learning experience.

- Draw comments from the participants themselves first.
- Ask the person being offered feedback what they think their strengths were, and what they'd like to improve. Acknowledge them when they identify their own growth edges.
- Be as direct and clear as possible.
- Start with the positive.
- Be honest — honesty offered with empathy and compassion serves people better than politeness.
- Use reframing: offer negative feedback as a suggestion for something to try next time.
- Give feedback privately when it's needed.
- Remember: truth without compassion can be abusive.

Afterward, it can help to discuss as a group: What conditions supported success? What conditions got in the way?

Part 4: Guidelines for Requesting Listening Time

The purpose of Compassionate Listening is to offer deep listening as a source of healing and transformation. Practice groups exist to deepen our skills so we can be of service in the world.

In practice group sessions, members sometimes step in as a speaker, asking the group for the gift of listening and offering their own story as a source of learning for everyone. This is different from the ordinary sharing and support we offer each other as friends, and different from counseling or therapy. Before bringing something to the group, consider whether it will offer the group a meaningful practice ground for their listening skills — and try not to bring the same situation to the group beyond a couple of sessions.

The following questions can help you decide whether a situation is a good fit — the more “yes” answers, the richer the learning opportunity for the group:

- Does your situation reflect a challenge to compassion?
- Have you reached a point where dialogue with the person you're in conflict with no longer seems possible?
- Is your heart closed or hardened toward that person?
- Does this go beyond a personality clash — does it reflect a real difference in worldview?
- Is the conflict highly polarized?
- Will it help bring the group “into the fire” of listening to something difficult to stay open to?

Part 5: Community Listening Project Guidelines

Reaching out to marginalized groups and honoring them with deep listening is a signature offering of The Compassionate Listening Project. Compassionate Listening offers the first step toward the understanding on which relationships are built.

Consider creating a Community Listening Project — a project you design to build a deeper understanding of a group of people you don't yet know well, and to offer “healing through listening” to people who could benefit from it. Examples include veterans, people experiencing homelessness, survivors of domestic violence, youth, people of color, people with disabilities, immigrants, people who are incarcerated, and religious or ethnic minorities. This kind of project will likely take you outside your comfort zone and stretch both your inner and outer capacities — it's wise to take it on with one or more partners.

Before you begin, consider: What is this group's background and history? What is their standing in your community? What are their customs and forms of leadership? What do you hope to accomplish, and where do you expect to grow?

Suggestions:

- Keep a journal throughout the process: What worked? What didn't? What are you learning? (If you're working toward Compassionate Listening certification, share this journal with your mentor along the way.)
- Gather feedback from everyone involved — listeners and speakers alike.

Part 6: Sample Session Agenda

A typical two-to-two-and-a-half-hour session might follow this shape:

Time (min)	Segment
5	Gather; announcements
10–15	Set intention and create a courageous space — “slowing down to the speed of wisdom”: light a candle, read a poem, sit in silence
10–15	Quick check-in: a “weather report,” a word or phrase for how you're feeling or what you're seeking tonight, plus whether you're requesting or offering listening time
20	Listening in pairs (the setup matters — center in the heart, no advice-giving, listen and speak from the heart beneath the story) — e.g., “What is challenging for me right now...”
45–60	Skill practice: the facilitator offers an exercise to deepen a specific Compassionate Listening™ skill
45–60	Listening to a group member — or, if no one has stepped forward, a second skill-practice exercise
15	Reflection and feedback on what we're learning, and on our use of the skills
10	Closing circle: quick check-out on what we're each leaving with (a closing poem is a nice touch)

Part 7: Welcoming Guest Speakers

Inviting guests — especially those whose background, culture, and life experience differ from your own — is one of the richest parts of practice group life. Prepare your guest with a short welcome, and let them know what to expect.

Welcome to Compassionate Listening: An Introduction for Our Guests

What is Compassionate Listening?

Compassionate Listening is a practice developed by international Quaker peacemaker Gene Knudsen Hoffman, who came to understand that all parties in a conflict are wounded and need to be heard. Leah Green, Founder of The Compassionate Listening Project — originally founded as the Middle East Citizen Diplomacy Project — began developing the practice through citizen diplomacy trips to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, one of the organization's early projects. As a number of facilitators stepped in to help shape the work, our mission came into focus: spreading the practice of Compassionate Listening itself, distilled into the five core practices we teach today. Compassionate Listening is a way of listening deeply to people who are not often listened to closely or well. It creates a safe place in which people are free to express themselves fully, to the level of their deepest concerns. For listeners, it means empathizing with the feelings and life circumstances of people affected by events — sometimes very difficult events — far beyond their own control. Compassionate listeners set their own opinions and judgments aside and strive to be fully present, with an open heart, to the person who sits before them.

Who are we?

We're members of a Compassionate Listening practice group. Some of us are working toward certification as Compassionate Listening trainers; others join simply because we believe deeply in the practice and the benefits it brings — both to our own lives and to the long-term work of people living peacefully together. We meet regularly and practice the difficult skill of deep, respectful listening — with each other and with guests. We welcome mistakes as part of learning: Compassionate Listening is a lifelong practice that deepens with intention and time, and none of us has mastered it. We're especially glad to welcome guests whose life background, culture, stories, and values differ from our own. A typical evening includes somewhere between six and ten participants.

What can I expect during a listening session?

We'll begin by introducing ourselves and making you feel at home — we're genuinely honored to have you as our guest. We'll invite you to share anything from your life story that you're willing to share with us: where you grew up, formative experiences, cultural, religious, or political experiences that mattered to you or affected you deeply, or where you are now in your life. Group members may have a few questions once you're done. We'll reflect back, in an honoring and appreciative way, the essence of what we heard — the qualities, values, and deepest yearnings we noticed in you — offering you the gift of being fully seen and heard. Often a warm, open conversation follows.

Most importantly: **you're in charge**. You choose what to talk about and what not to. If anything feels uncomfortable, let us know, and we'll respect your wishes. Our hope is that this session leaves you feeling nourished. Please let us know if you have any requests to make this a safe and positive experience for you — for example, if you'd like us to keep what we hear confidential beyond the session itself.

Thank you for being our guest.

Resources

Intro to Compassionate Listening training — we highly recommend this before starting or joining a practice group. See upcoming offerings at compassionatelistening.org.

Practicing the Art of Compassionate Listening (our “blue book”) — exercises and guidance practice groups return to again and again. [View the guide](#); also available as an eBook at compassionatelistening.org.

Listening with the Heart: A Guide for Compassionate Listening by Carol Hwoschinsky — a deeper resource for facilitators, especially Parts 1–2 and pp. 67–81.

Website: www.compassionatelistening.org

Questions? Write to us at staff@compassionatelistening.org

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