**SETTING UP A PRACTICE GROUP**

Compassionate Listening™ is first and foremost a *practice*. It takes repeated, focused and intentional efforts to integrate the skills, principles and practices into our lives. Convening a practice group is a vital and essential way to cultivate your skills and capacity:

**PURPOSE**

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;

#### How to do it:

#### DATE, TIME and LOCATION

Practice Groups may be held in public or private settings; there are pros and cons to both. Create a plan for the frequency and length of meetings.

#### OUTREACH

Invite participants personally or via email, flyers, or CL presentations, including people who have attended CL trainings/delegations in your area, friends, family, co-workers and members of organizations you belong to. You can offer presentations to non-profit groups and organizations that would benefit from these skills, and follow with an offer to facilitate a practice group. Members of established communities such as Churches might be especially interested in participating as a way to deepen their relationships and build skills within their community. What other “communities” exist in your area?

**Sample Invitational Letter:**

*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, executive director of the Compassionate Listening Project, further refined the practice during citizen diplomacy trips to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. 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 and completely, to the level of their deepest concerns. For the listeners, it means empathizing with the feelings and life circumstances of people who have been affected by events, sometimes very difficult events and circumstances which have been 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 must put their own opinions and judgments aside and try to be fully present to the human being who sits before them with an open heart. Learn more at www.compassionatelistening.org

*Why a Compassionate Listening™ Practice Group?*

Compassionate Listening™ is, in effect, a paradigmatic shift, from our usual ways of listening to and being with other people in our day to day lives. It may appear easy but it is, in fact, quite hard to do, especially when one does not agree with or dislikes the beliefs, values or opinions being expressed by the speaker. It takes considerable practice to set one’s own judgments and emotional reactions aside in order to be completely present to another human being who may be very different from oneself. Dedicated compassionate listeners have discovered that on-going participation in a practice or training group is an extraordinary gift to one’s own on-going growth and development.

*About the North Seattle Compassionate Listening Group:*

The North Seattle practice group was started in September 2004 as a way for several committed compassionate listeners to get more experience and training as they prepared to become Certified Compassionate Listening trainers. We wanted to deepen our own skills in listening as well as in leading, and we also wanted to offer compassionate listening sessions to marginalized people in our own community. Our experience since September has been extraordinarily rich. Meeting primarily in the Ballard, Fremont, Phinney Ridge area, our sessions have alternated between doing practice exercises, listening to each other and bringing in outside guests for listening sessions. The variety of our guests has been amazing. Over the past few months we have listened to: an Iraqi physician who fled from Saddam Hussein, an Israeli torn about returning to live in Israel vs. staying in the US, a Bosnian Muslim who survived being shot during the Bosnian war, and an American wife and mother whose husband in the Army Reserves is awaiting orders to be shipped out to Iraq. Next month we are visiting an apartment for the homeless to talk with several mentally ill clients about their challenges with homelessness. Our sessions are facilitated by individuals who have taken Advanced training or who are applying for Compassionate Listening™ certification.

*Join Us!*

We welcome your participation in our group. While some people who attend our practice group have attended longer Compassionate Listening™ trainings, other people are attending who have had no previous Compassionate Listening™ experience. We meet every other Monday evening from 7 to 9:30 PM in a private home in the Ballard/Fremont area of Seattle. If you are looking for a way to deepen your ability to listen to people who are very different from yourself, to be able to dialogue with or to be in relationship with people who hold opinions opposed to your own, perhaps Compassionate Listening™ has something to offer you. Please give us a call for dates, times and locations of our next group.

*(signatures with names and phone no.)*

# RUNNING A PRACTICE GROUP

# Structure & Agreements

# 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). Also, *Practicing the Art of Compassionate Listening* helps guide through many of the exercises from the basic intro. [These materials can be ordered from the website.](https://www.compassionatelistening.org/store)

# At your first gathering:

* + Finalize plan for regularity, frequency & timing of meetings (if this hasn't been determined or co-created in advance)
  + Finalize the format for the sessions: may include a meditative silence and setting of intention; check-in; listening sessions; guided exercises; journal-writing; and/or de-briefing at the end; and closing circle. Other activities may be included as well, depending on the desires of the group.
  + Establish ground rules for safety, including agreements about confidentiality, how often people are expected to attend, full participation (what that includes for this group such as welcoming all emotions), whether the group is open to new people on an ongoing basis or closed once the group has been formed. (You can use the Agreements in the Intro packet of handouts)

**Facilitating the Practice Group in an ongoing way**

The following 'tips for facilitators' will help ensure your effectiveness:

* Facilitation can be shared or led by one person. If co-facilitating, clarify with your partner how this will look. Decide who will present the exercises/directions and in what order. One facilitator can monitor the group in order to watch what’s working and what is not.
* If the group is large, divide into smaller pods for listening sessions. (3-5 is recommended)
* Time management is essential!– both within small groups and for the whole group.
* Build in and plan bio breaks, stretch breaks, physical activities, and centering practices
* Encourage participants to practice the skills during the time between sessions and report back to the group each session.
* If someone wants 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 continues practicing other skills.
* If desired by participants, work with one exercise each time you meet. Use exercises from the Intensive Workshop and/or those in the “Reference” section of *Listening With the Heart*.

# Giving Helpful Feedback

The following guidelines are for the facilitator and participants to give and receive feedback.

The purpose of giving feedback is to provide an opportunity for growth. Honest feedback is more easily accepted when there is a trusting relationship. It is essential to create a safe circle where honest participation and feedback is freely offered and received. Practice Groups provide opportunities to develop awareness of our “blind spots”. We can help each other when our feedback is constructive and well timed.

* Emphasize it is a learning experience.
* Draw comments from the participants.
* Ask the person being critiqued what they think their strengths were and what ways they’d like to improve. Praise the person when they identify their own weaknesses.
* Be as direct and clear as possible.
* Start with the positive.
* Be honest. Honesty with empathy and compassion is far better than politeness.
* Remember that truth without compassion can be abusive.
* Use reframing skills. Frame negative feedback as a suggestion for something to try in the future.
* Give feedback privately if needed.
* Remember: Truth without compassion can be abusive.

Discuss: What were the favorable conditions that created success?

What were the un-favorable conditions that inhibited success?

# Guidelines for Requesting Listening Time in Practice Group

The purpose of Compassionate Listening™ is to offer deep listening as a source of healing and transformation. Our practice group is dedicated to deepening our skills so that we may be of service in the world.

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 others as friends and from counseling or therapy. We hope you will consider whether the situation you are about to share will afford the group a challenging practice ground for their compassionate listening skills. We ask that you refrain from bringing the same situation to the group beyond a couple of sessions.

We offer the following questions as guidelines; the more “yes” responses, the better the learning opportunity for the group:

* Does your situation reflect a challenge to compassion?
* Have you reached a point where dialogue with the party you are in conflict with no longer seems possible?
* Is your heart closed and hardened towards the person you are in conflict with?
* Does this go beyond a personality clash?
* Does the conflict seem to reflect a difference in world views?
* Is the conflict highly polarized?
* Will it help bring the group “into the fire” of listening to something that is difficult to stay open to?

# COMMUNITY LISTENING PROJECT GUIDELINES

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

You may want to create a Community Listening Project as a project you design to gain a deeper understanding of marginalized people and how to build relationships with them, as well as offering ‘healing through listening’ to people who can benefit from CL. Examples include veterans, homeless people, battered women, youth, people of color, differently-abled people, immigrants, people in prison, and ethnic or religious minorities. This project may challenge you to grow and connect with people with whom you have little or no contact. It will take you out of your comfort zone and develop both inner and outer capacities. You are encouraged to stretch and work in an area you do not know well. It is wise to create such a project with partners.

* Consider the background of the group, history of the people involved, status in your community, their customs and leadership. What do you hope to accomplish? What are the areas of anticipated growth? Keep a journal throughout this process and submit at intervals to your mentor: What worked and what didn’t? What are you learning?
* Gather feedback from the people involved in the project including other listeners and the speakers.

Suggestions:

Keep a journal throughout this process: What worked and what didn’t? What are you learning?

Solicit feedback from the people involved in the project including other listeners and the speakers.

**Suggested Typical Agendas:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Length** | **Action** |
| 5 | Gather; announcements: |
| 10-15 | Set intention and create the courageous space ‘slowing down to the speed of wisdom’: light candle, inspirational poem, meditation, silence |
| 10-15 | Quick check in: “weather report” or single word or phrase of how feeling or what seeking from the evening; plus indication of whether requesting/offering self for listening time |
| 20 | Listening in Pairs (set up is important! to center in heart, no advice giving, listen/speak from heart beneath story to deeper meaning) – “What is challenging for me right now…” (could add 3-2-1 reflection or offering Deepening Questions) |
| 45 to 60 | Skill practice: facilitator offers an exercise to deepen skills and practice of Compassionate Listening |
| 45 to 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 are learning, feedback on use of skills |
| 10 | Closing circle: quick check out, what we are leaving with  (could add an inspirational poem) |

# Inviting guest speakers:

# Sample 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 developed this tool after she realized that all parties in a conflict are wounded and need to be heard. The practice has been further refined by Leah Green, executive director of The Compassionate Listening Project, during citizen diplomacy trips to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. 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 and completely, to the level of their deepest concerns. For the listeners, it means empathizing with the feelings and life circumstances of people who have been affected by events, sometimes very difficult events and circumstances which have been 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 must put their own opinions and judgments aside and try to be fully present to the human being who sits before them with an open heart.

***Who are we?***

We are members of a Compassionate Listening Practice group. Some of us are committed to becoming certified trainers of Compassionate Listening™ and some of us are participating simply because we believe deeply in the practice and the benefits it brings us for our own lives, as well as the long term benefits it brings to the members of our society living peacefully together. We meet twice a month and practice through a combination of listening to each other and to guest speakers, the difficult skill of deep and respectful listening to others. We often engage in skill-building exercises and enjoy having a safe place to make mistakes and to fail. We realize that compassionate listening is a life-long practice that one can never completely master, but that one’s skills do deepen with intention and practice over time. We welcome guests to our group, especially guests whose life background, culture, stories and values are very different than our own. The usual number of participants at one of our evening groups varies from about six to ten.

***What can I expect during a Listening Session?***

In a typical listening session we will first introduce ourselves to you and make you feel at home! We are very honored and excited to have you as our guest. We will then invite you to share with us anything in your life story that you care to share with us. This may include: where you grew up; formative life experiences; involvement in particular cultural, religious or political experiences that were particularly important or wounding to you; where you are now in your life. Members of the group may have some questions for you when you are done. We will reflect back in a very honoring and appreciative way, the essence of what we heard in your story – the qualities, values, and essence we saw in you and your deepest yearnings -- thus offering the gift of being fully seen and heard at the deepest level. Often there is a rich conversation that is warm and enjoyable after the speaker has concluded. The most important thing to remember is that you are in charge! You can choose what to talk about and what not to talk about. If anything makes you uncomfortable, please let us know and we will respect your wishes. Our intention and hope is that this listening session will be nourishing and healing to your spirit.

Please let us know if you have any questions or requests to make this a safe and positive experience. For example, you may want us to respect confidentiality and not share anything we hear beyond the confines of the listening session.

Thank you so much for agreeing to be our guest.