

# Empathy Circle



A Method for Accompanying and Processing  
Social Transformation Processes

A brochure by Katrin Valentin

based on the work of Edwin Rutsch with the collaboration of Bill Filler and Lou Zweier

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The Empathy Circle method was developed in the USA by Edwin Rutsch, later working in collaboration with Bill Filler and Lou Zweier. Our sincere thanks are to Edwin Rutsch, who supported the creation of this brochure.

The author of this guide is Prof. Dr. Katrin Valentin. She is a Professor of Education with the focus on transformation research at the Protestant University of Applied Sciences in Nuremberg. She gained her experience in the implementation of Empathy Circles primarily in the context of supporting municipal transformation processes towards a sustainable community and in cooperation with various organisations and initiatives.

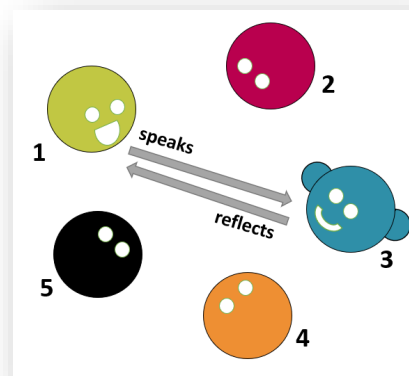
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# Brief Overview

**Empathy Circle** is a method for exchanging views on a controversial topic that enables a deep mutual understanding of different perspectives.



- 3 to 7 people talk about a predetermined topic (or whatever is in their heart and mind) (approx. 75 min).
- One person speaks (approx. 3 min), another person briefly summarises what has been said in between. The others listen attentively.
- Each person listens and speaks several times.
- A moderator structures the process and ensures that the time is kept to (and possibly that the topic is loosely related and that the rules of conversation are adhered to).

## Rules of dialogue

Whoever speaks talks about the common topic, but does not have to refer to what someone else has said in the round.

It is perfectly permissible to express your own ideas, thoughts and even feelings. However, this is in no way necessary.

The active listener briefly summarizes their understanding of what has been said by the speaker. (KV: However, they do not judge, interpret as little as possible and do not give their own opinions.)

The conventional rules of conversation apply, i.e. respectful behaviour when talking about other people is a matter of course.

## Possible applications

Empathy Circles can be used in all situations in which major change processes are being implemented, where there are very heterogeneous opinions on a topic or where very different groups of people have to make joint decisions. For example, in a local authority, a school, a company, a community or even in a small private circle of people who want to explore a topic in greater depth.

## Remark

Empathy Circle is a simple dialogue process that can be carried out by non-professionals. If the topic is very emotionally charged (e.g. war or abortion), it may be advisable to implement an Empathy Circle with the support of people who are trained in dealing with strong feelings (e.g. psychologists, psychotherapists, counsellors).

# What Does Transformation Mean?

First of all, transformation means that a fundamental change takes place in a relatively short period of time (UBA 2017).

A well-known example is the caterpillar that transforms into a butterfly. Between these two stages, the creature is in a cocoon. The body becomes liquid and acquires completely new structures.

It is similar with social transformations. **The subsystems of a system realign themselves**, their functioning, their relationships and perhaps they themselves change in a previously unknown way.



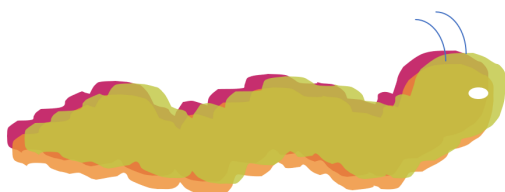
As in a cocoon, such transformation processes initially mean instability (Böhme 2011). Orientation knowledge and action routines are outdated and it is not yet recognisable what will be. Several transformation processes are currently taking place simultaneously in our society. These include, for example, **the digital transformation and the transformation towards a post-migrant society**.

However, there is a particular need for negotiation with regard to a **socio-ecological transformation** (WBGU 2011; UBA 2020), i.e. the process towards a sustainable society. The challenges that need to be addressed here are particularly great, they require the involvement of all areas of society and the time pressure is immense (IPCC 2023). How positive or negative the outcome will be is still relatively open. This openness is another characteristic of transformation processes (Merkel 2010). It is therefore not surprising that numerous processes have to be carried out in all forms of social interaction in order to manage and shape this process of change.



**Empathy Circles** offer the opportunity to accompany this process.

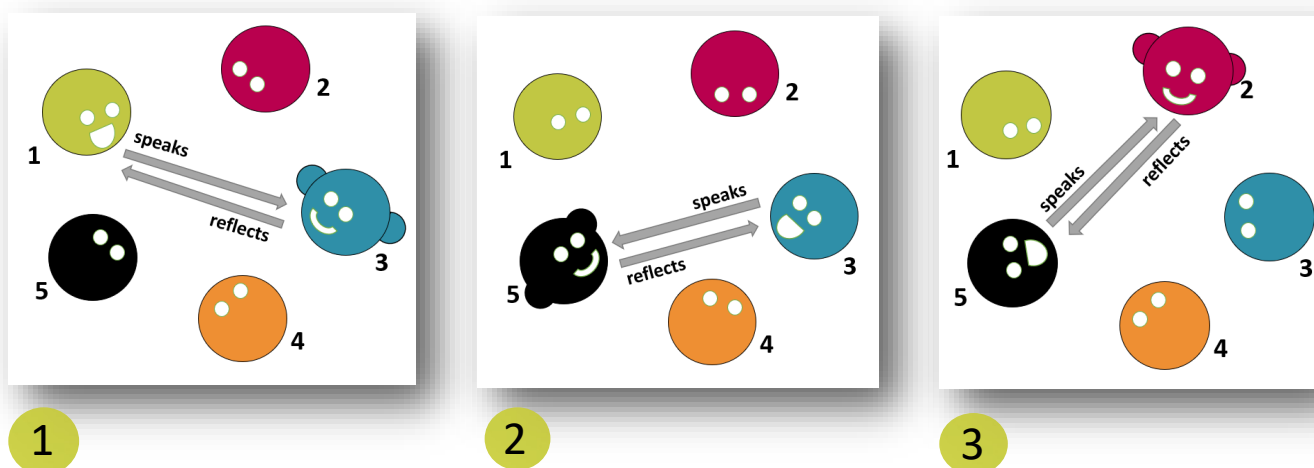
They enable individuals who have to develop new structures together to recognise other parts of the whole that are relevant for the establishment of new orientation knowledge, rules and action routines. Ambivalences can be uncovered, feelings that can arise due to disorientation or overwhelm are given space. New impulses and innovative perspectives can develop in co-operation.



# Procedure

Firstly a **topic** is chosen for an Empathy Circle. This can relate to abstract phenomena (e.g. climate change, democracy, peace) or to concrete phenomena (e.g. shortage of skilled labour, weapons delivery, sponge city, restructuring of a company or merger of two parishes) - depending on the context. The discussions take place under this thematic heading.

In a large group, it is advisable to first meet in **plenary** to introduce the procedure and the aim of the process. The actual Empathy Circles then take place in groups of around five people with a **moderator**. This moderator can be a layperson and has the task of ensuring that the rules of the dialogue and the time are adhered to. They are also participants in the dialogue. In the case of larger groups, the discussion ends with a **follow-up discussion in plenary**. A brief insight into the progress of the other groups is usually enriching for everyone involved.



## Procedure of a discussion group

- 1 One person is the speaker. He or she chooses an active listener and then will have about three minutes to say what is important to him or her on the chosen topic (or whatever is in their heart and mind). During this time, the active listener has the task of summarising what has been said in their own words.
- 2 The person speaking briefly signals when he or she feels understood. The active listener then takes on the role of the person speaking and asks another person to reflect him or her.
- 3 This process is repeated again and again so that everyone is speaking and reflecting several times. Those who do not have a role at the moment listen attentively. Everyone always has the opportunity to say that they do not want to reflect or speak.

## Notes on initiation

The invitation to an Empathy Circle and the choice of venue (barrier-free, preferably "neutral" ground) can have a major impact on the course of the process. Particularly in the case of controversial topics where people from the public are to be reached, it is advisable for inviting stakeholder groups that are known to represent or could represent different opinions to join forces. These could be different political parties or municipal committees, for example. Participation in an Empathy Circle should always be voluntary.

# Rules of Conversation

Whoever speaks, talks about the common topic (or whatever is in their heart and mind). However, they do not have to refer to what someone else has already said. The person speaking is therefore free to spontaneously say what is important to him or her personally. Although this rule seems rather counterintuitive, it is often the case that a common thread runs through the conversation. It is of course possible to refer to what has already been said. However, the aim is not to come to an agreement or reach a consensus.

If possible, the person speaking formulates first-person messages and speaks rather slowly with pauses so that the active listener can keep up.

It is perfectly permissible to express your own feelings. But this is not necessary. The eponymous empathy is created simply by reflection. It is not necessary to focus on feelings in a particular way.

The active listener briefly summarises what he or she has heard in his or her own words. (KV: However, he or she does not make judgements, interpret as little as possible and does not give any advice. This is important and sometimes not so easy. The person leading the conversation has the task of intervening in a friendly manner if the reflecting person finds this difficult.)

If the person speaking feels understood, he or she signals this by nodding briefly or saying so. However, he or she always has the opportunity to correct and clarify what he or she actually wanted to say if he or she feels misunderstood.

The conventional rules of conversation apply, i.e. respectful behaviour when talking about other people is a matter of course. Anger, for example, can certainly be shown. (KV: However, it must not be expressed in a derogatory or insulting manner. Here too, it would be the task of the dialogue leader to intervene if this should be considered as necessary.)



# Possible Applications

+++municipality+++community+++school+++company+++centre+++  
specialised group+++neighbourhood++party+++event+++cooperation  
++++advisoryboard++++association++++foundation++++facility+++  
++union+++institution++++agency++++authority+++university++++

In principle, Empathy Circles can be used in any situation in which a group of people would like to reach an understanding. Conceptually, they are designed for highly controversial issues, for questions in which pro and con oppositions have developed and, above all, for situations in which all alternative courses of action have clear disadvantages or where great ambivalence prevails.

However, Empathy Circles can also be helpful as an ad hoc procedure, e.g. in work contexts that are based on a long and good working relationship. This does not always have to involve conflictual negotiation processes. An exploratory fathoming of an issue can also give rise to an Empathy Circle. The difference to a conventional brainstorming session is that the subtle meaning assignments (i.e. hidden meaning) of the participants come to light through the reflecting of the dialogue partners and thus become easier to process.

## Considerations

Before deciding to organise and hold an Empathy Circle, it is important to weigh up the options:

- Is there a relationship of dependency between the speakers that could have negative consequences for participants (e.g. in a school)?
- Is the chosen topic so emotionally charged by individual stakeholder groups that it requires psychological support (e.g. in a municipality)?
- Is such an exchange in danger of being misused for „outcooling“ processes (being used to deflect and avoid change)? In other words, is an Empathy Circle being held to distract from the fact that no real change processes are actually being initiated (e.g. in a company)?

## Variants and further developments

The simplicity of the procedure and the focus on the pure communication process not only ensure the low-threshold nature of the procedure, they also create space for inner processes among the participants, which very rarely arise in the usual utilisation logic of social gatherings in times of great pressure to act.

Nevertheless, it is of course conceivable that Empathy Circles could also be embedded in larger processes that are very focused on concrete, realisable results. This can be done, for example, through further methodological steps that follow an Empathy Circle. A plenary discussion in which arrangements and agreements are made and collected on a moderation board would be conceivable here, or further work in special interest groups – depending on the working context. It is also possible to integrate Empathy Circles into other familiar processes, such as a future workshop, in order to intensify the process of understanding.

# Scientific Background

## Empathy

Empathy is considered one of the most important future-related skills – whether in an economic context, in school education or as a responsible (global) citizen (Spiegel 2021; de Haan 2008). Empathy can be described as "the affective feeling of the presumed emotion of another living being on the basis of the cognitive understanding of this emotion and while maintaining self-other differentiation" (Altmann 2021, own translation). In other words, the aim is to empathise with others without taking on their feelings, e.g. in the sense of "pity".

Thanks to their simple procedure, Empathy Circles enable experiences of empathy in a very low-threshold way. The simple dialogue-based process creates situations in which the participants witness the attributions of meaning, experiences and adventures and sometimes also the feelings of others. This alone creates empathy. However, the process has yet to be scientifically researched.

## Time for other people's feelings

The scientific community communicates clearly that the upcoming transformation processes, such as towards a sustainable society, needs to happen much faster (IPCC 2023). The required knowledge has already been available for some time. Psychologist Dr Rene Lertzmann speaks of a social paradox that we are facing (Lertzman 2021): On the one hand, there is great pressure to act, but on the other hand, people are more likely to take action if they are given a lot of time and accepted completely as they are.

Empathy Circles provide an opportunity for participants to feel understood and accepted in the way they perceive and approach significant challenges. This method can be utilized to offer individuals who are finding it especially difficult to confront the upcoming processes of change the necessary time to express their feelings and be genuinely heard. In doing so, it can help to gradually dismantle the walls of misunderstanding and blame that may have arisen between different groups of stakeholders.

## Education for democracy

In a time where there is increasingly more time pressure and ever less time prosperity, there are also fewer spaces where people can exchange ideas with leisure and ease. However, democratic processes require a lot of exchange (Beelmann/ Michaelsen 2022).

Empathy Circles are a good way of organising such exchange processes on as equal a level as possible. The freedom created by the fact that the process itself is not about consensus building or joint decisions allows participants to really understand the views and opinions of other stakeholder groups. The freedom of not having to take a direct stance on a statement makes it possible for different approaches to an issue to be taken in a relaxed atmosphere and thus possibly in a more informed way.

## Time for own feelings

The comprehensive change processes involved in dealing with major social transformation processes cannot simply be dealt with cognitively – in short, with the mind. With regard to the climate crisis, for example, the renowned German philosopher Jan Slaby warns that we need "a sustainable, practically effective *change of feeling* at a societal level" (Slaby 2023, p. 275, own translation).

Empathy Circles are an excellent opportunity to give space to such *processes of empathy*. The phases of listening in particular enable people to process their own emotional experiences in encounters with those who think, act and feel differently.



# Voices of Participants

"I was blown away by the depth of the encounters you can make there. In such a short time, with such a simple process!"

"You connect with yourself and really understand people who think differently much better, you understand them with your heart because you are forced not to judge them."

"I found the Empathy Circle very uplifting. It's a good feeling to be able to say what's bothering you and what's on your mind without being judged or having to come up with solutions straight away. And it was always very healing to realise that you're not alone. This makes it possible to open up. Many options open up and the helplessness disappears."

"Experiencing that others feel the same way and gaining the courage to carry on."

"More understanding for other perspectives!"

"Just being able to talk it all out until you feel truly understood – that really feels good!"

"Great method to train yourself in listening, even if listening and reflecting each other can be quite exhausting. The course was an absolute enrichment for my discussion group and caused me to reflect on my behaviour in everyday conversations and my own understanding of conversations. I can only recommend it!"

"Feeling understood helps to understand others."

The quotes reproduced here were expressed by participants following various Empathy Circles in the municipality of Fürth in Bavaria in Germany (own translation).

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