

CIRCLE ACTIVITY

This activity came from the work of the Beyond Diversity Resource Center.

Objectives

Participants will recognize the beliefs and stereotypes they were taught about their own and other racial and ethnic groups. They will also recognize that stereotypes are learned behaviors, something we are socialized to believe, and can therefore be unlearned by openly discussing and purposefully combating them. This activity helps to move participants from feelings of denial, shame or blame, to taking responsibility for unconscious behaviors.

Time Needed

1-1 ½ hours, depending on the length of time spent debriefing

Facilitating

1. Begin by forming two concentric circles. Have everyone find a partner and stand facing that person so that an inner and an outer circle with equal numbers of people are formed (one partner is in the inner circle, one in the outer circle). If you have an extra person, you'll rotate so a different person sits out with each new round.
2. Tell them that you are going to be asking a series of questions and they will have 30 seconds each to respond. One person will talk for 30 seconds while the other listens. While they listen, they should be silent, not asking questions or commenting. When the second person talks about the same question, they should not build on or respond what was said by the first but should answer the question as if they were the first person to speak. Tell them you will alternate who speaks first.
3. Establish a signal for when the 30 seconds is over so you can make sure everyone switches. Flickering the lights or ringing a bell works well. If you have a loud voice, you can try to yell over everyone, "And stop!" Acknowledge that they may have to stop in the middle of a sentence.
4. After each person talks, they thank each other and then have one of the circles rotate one person to their left. This way, they talk with someone new every time.
5. Start with a practice question such as, "What is one of your pet peeves?" or "What is one of your favorite holidays and how do you celebrate it? If you don't celebrate holidays, discuss that." Have the inner circle go first.
6. After 30 seconds tell them to stop and switch, reminding them not to respond to what was said. Observe the group and answer questions about logistics. You'll want to make sure they aren't talking back and forth or asking each other questions during the 30 second intervals.



7. For the next set of questions tell them, “You are going to be discussing messages you were given about different groups when you were a child. Think about media, family members, schools, and other sources of information. If you were not given any messages or very few, talk about why you think that was the case? What message is given when there are no messages given?” You’ll want to remind them of this prompt for the first few questions. *Remember to switch who goes first.*
 - a) What is your ethnicity and how do you feel about it? If you feel indifferent, why is that?
 - b) What is your race and how do you feel about it?
 - c) What messages were you given about racial differences when growing up?
 - d) What messages were you given about black people when you were young?
 - e) What messages were you given about Asian Americans when you were young?
 - f) What messages were you given about white people when you were young?
 - g) What messages were you given about Native Americans when you were young?
 - h) What messages were you given about Pacific Islanders when you were young?
 - i) What messages were you given about Latinos when you were young?
 - j) How did you feel doing this activity? Give 1 minute each to answer this one.
8. Following the activity, have everyone return to one large circle to debrief. You can start with these discussion questions and/or come up with your own.
 - a) What did you notice about yourself as you were doing this activity?
 - b) What hadn’t you thought about before?
 - c) How did you feel when talking with someone who was of the racial/ethnic group you were asked about?
 - d) What was difficult to answer? Why?
 - e) Given that we grew up with stereotypes, how do they influence our subconscious as adults?
 - f) What can we do to consciously combat these messages in our lives and for young people?

Challenges

Some people have complained that 30 seconds is not enough time to think and talk about the messages they were given. Point out that the time limit is intentional so they can’t carefully plan how to respond but have to say the first thing that comes to mind. Too often in discussions



about stereotypes and biases, we carefully plan what to say as a way to avoid deeper conversations about our own biases.

After sharing the messages they were taught, some people may want to talk about how much they *aren't* influenced by these messages. At this point you may want to take that question to the group, asking if anyone has a different perspective. You can also acknowledge their perspective and ask them how they would talk with young people to insure that they too can avoid being influenced by stereotypes.

Some people may believe that talking about biases and stereotypes will make them more likely to occur. The opposite is actually true. It is only by acknowledging our unconscious behaviors that we can actively work to change them. One analogy I frequently make is about gender bias in schools. When research showed that boys were being called on more frequently, teachers began making a concerted effort to call on girls just as often. The teachers didn't know they were favoring the boys, but once they recognized that fact they could easily make a change.

