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Talking in Circles - How One Men's Group is Taking an Innovative Approach to Mental Health

by [Catherine Morris](#) | June 8, 2020

Every week in Squamish, a group of men come together to form a support circle. They talk about their relationships, their work, their family or their fears. They sit and they share. They breathe, feel, and think. It sounds simple, but the idea of talking so freely and openly is alien to a lot of men. Societal pressures, the stigma surrounding mental health issues and cultural expectations all contribute to an environment where men feel they can't voice their vulnerabilities.

Reluctance to speak up is directly contributing to the spiraling rates of addiction, substance abuse, depression, and even suicide amongst men. [Just over 80 percent](#) of all alcohol-related deaths in Canada are male, and [four out of five deaths by suicide are men](#). Encouraging men to open up and engage with their emotions can help drive those frightening numbers down by addressing small issues before they become big tragedies. Life Coach [Ross Tayler](#) set out to do just that when he established the [Squamish Men's Circle](#) in 2014. Having gone through a bad break-up, and having started his own healing journey with a men's group based in Duncan BC, Tayler decided to set up his own circle in Squamish:



"There is this amazing thing that happens when men come together with other men. We need a place to share and to talk. There are so many complexities to life, and the tragedy of our time is that a lot of that feeling and emotion gets suppressed and shut down. We place so much expectation on ourselves, and there's a lot of external pressures as well. It can be crushing in so many ways."

Why a circle? Tayler says that, "When you sit in a circle you see every face, everyone is heard and everyone is seen. There is this wisdom that comes from it, that I call magic."





Talking, or sharing circles are a common occurrence in indigenous cultures. The circle itself is a highly symbolic motif across nations, representing connectivity, inclusion and equality. When a group gets together in a circle all contributions are valid, all voices are heard, and all needs are equal. The Squamish Men's Circle is a respectful nod to this tradition. Tayler consulted a Squamish Nation elder and discussed some of the practices such as smudging that are used in the circle. Tayler believes there is a lot to learn from First Nations cultures, and a lot that can be used to help men in Western societies cope with modern-day challenges. He says:

"I think these practices help us connect to a part of ourselves that has become dormant. In Western culture, we seem to have lost [our connection to nature], but it is in our DNA. This practice of sitting in a circle wakes up something within us."

There are between eight and 14 regular members of the Squamish Circle, but newcomers are always welcome. Given the emphasis on sharing and vulnerability, new men are introduced slowly, meeting once a month rather than weekly. A meeting lasts around two hours. It opens with some 'connecting exercises' and a ceremony that borrows heavily from indigenous smudging rituals. Sage is burnt and the smoke wafted through the room to clear energies and help participants focus on the present moment. The Circle then moves to 'call in the four directions' of north, east, south and west which Tayler says "helps us connect both outside and inside ourselves." After some housekeeping notes, which amongst other things covers confidentiality agreements, the group gets to work. There is a check-in where men share what they're feeling at that particular moment, followed by an accountability round, and then a work round. The accountability round is where members discuss their intentions, such as goals they want to pursue, or problems they want to solve. In this way, the group keeps track of each other's progress and are encouraged to share and offer comments. While it sounds intimidating, Ross says it's not about policing anyone, but supporting them by helping them see what's working and what's not. The work round is "where the magic happens". Designed as a therapeutic conversation, it's an opportunity to drill down into an issue, and fully examine it as members participate and give feedback for each other. "There are usually some collective themes that come up, but things are not scripted, it just happens," says Tayler who adds that discussions can range from family relationships to work troubles.

What Tayler has noticed over his six years running the group, is that at the heart of most issues, is a lack of self-examination:

"What I have come to learn is that men are largely disconnected from themselves. We tend to be externally focused. So much of the experience we get as boys is around things like sports, things where there is a goal or a direction in mind. We look for external ways of getting our needs met but true self-care comes from a relationship with yourself."

After the work round, the Circle closes with a brief check-out. While the session is mostly talking, there are also opportunities for physical connection, ranging from a supportive handshake, to breathing techniques, but all within the comfort of each participant.

"One of the reasons the group has proven to be an effective support for its members is that it helps pull men out of their minds, and reunites them with their bodies, which is hard for a lot of men". Tayler says, "That can be a good thing when it helps us achieve what we want and engage with life, but when it comes to emotional challenges our heads can get in the way."

The Squamish Men's Circle continued to meet virtually throughout the pandemic, but with the change in social distancing protocols in BC is, as of the writing of this article, returning to in-person meetings. Tayler wants the group to keep growing, and perhaps extend into the wider community by offering mentoring opportunities, or outreach to the younger generation. He knows sharing groups are a hard sell for some men, and says it's okay to just start where you're at, "Take the next step that feels right for you. Whatever that is. Whether it is talking to your doctor, or reaching

out to a support line, or joining a virtual group. Whatever feels like a doable next step, take it."

He predicts that life post-Coronavirus will throw more challenges at men as they face unemployment and family pressures. While Tayler is happy to see groups like his making a difference, he believes there's still plenty of room for improvement:

"We have a long way to go. So much of what men are experiencing is completely under the radar and is not being reported. Men might be suffering from depression and not even know it. They are just pushing through. There is a lot of surprise and delight when people come to our circle. Men do not know this is possible, that they could feel so good talking and sharing."

Six years after its first meeting, the Squamish Men's Circle is still going strong, and has forged a close bond amongst its members, that Tayler describes as "very, very special."



If you need to talk to someone, [Which Doctor](#) has a range of qualified life coaches and therapists offering virtual sessions and in-person treatment. You can also find resources and crisis line information at the [Canadian Mental Health Association](#).

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Catherine Morris

Writer

Catherine Morris is an award-winning journalist with a bad case of wanderlust and a passion for all things health and wellness. Originally from Northern Ireland, she worked as a news and feature writer for media outlets in the UK, South Africa, France and the Caribbean before settling in Canada. Catherine now lives in Alberta with her husband and rescue mutt and spends her time happily exploring the great outdoors with both.

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