

HOW TO START A CRONES CIRCLE



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BACKGROUND of WOMEN'S GROUPS

Women gather together in groups for a variety of reasons such as support groups, ritual circles, discussion forums, gatherings that nurture creativity - all are ways in which women create community, banish isolation, and empower themselves.

Women's circles provide safe and nurturing spaces for participants to own their feelings and experiences, to take creative risks, and to allow their deepest yearnings to take root and blossom. Women's circles provide a safe place for participants to come to terms with and honor themselves.

The women's circle has enjoyed a recent revival. For those interested in nurturing their female spirit, the traditional women's circle provides a more spiritually satisfying domestic alternative to Pilates, aerobics or high tea.

Women's circles have been around for aeons. From native America, pagan Europe, indigenous Australia to tribal Africa, different circles have existed across the earth, all performing a similar function: to share information, honor women's intuitive wisdom and acknowledge important milestones in their lives.

From births, deaths, marriages, divorces, healing and naming a child, to graduation and even to celebrate the monthly cycle of life, women's circles provide a way to honor meaningful occasions.

One of the many reasons women's circles are becoming more necessary is that women may not have a place to honor ritual in their lives. The wisdom behind the circle and why it is innately feminine, is that no one is a leader; that is why it is called "a circle".

FORMATION OF A LOCAL CRONES CIRCLE

PURPOSE OF GROUP

The first step is to determine the need that your circle will fill. In other words, determine what your purpose or focus is. Consider the purpose of other groups--

a group for spiritual exploration, either within one tradition, or across a broad spectrum of beliefs, a circle that will get you in touch with your creative Muse, a group for the discussion of books or current events, or a support network for a specific topic like body image or aging.

Crone circles differ in type and focus from all of these and from such groups as the Red Hat Society, church or synagogue groups, and discussion or book groups. The RHS is a social organization whose primary purpose is to "support social interaction among women 50 years and older, and to encourage fun, friendship, freedom and fulfillment". Religious groups meet for prayer or meditation, for study, and for support within the bounds of belief and practice. Discussion groups and book clubs have one focus—to discuss topics or books all are interested in. All of these groups may appeal to older women.

Crone circles are another type of group with unique characteristics. It is one which can be called a spiritually-based group which focuses on honoring elder women together to create a nurturing, mutually supportive, and confidential environment in which to express and explore their experiences of aging and the sacred passing of time. This type of group provides each woman a place to speak, a place for her story to be told and acknowledged. In addition, crones groups intend to recognize, celebrate, and encourage members in all aspects of the feminine archetype by encouraging qualities such as these: creativity, vitality, spiritual life, joy, service to others, recognition of individuality, and the power of being an elder woman coming into her own.

The vision of the "feminine archetype" includes these stages, "maiden, mother, matriarch, and crone". The Maiden is the youthful, independent woman. The Mother is a woman who guides others--as a biological mother or as a teacher. The Matriarch is the woman who may have completed her "mothering responsibilities" but is still involved in her career and not ready for the next stage. The Crone is the postmenopausal woman who enjoys a special, revered status.

The elder woman, historically, was viewed by the younger women as a fount of wisdom, law, healing skills, and moral leadership; her presence and leadership were treasured at every significant tribal ceremony and each personal occasion from birth to death. In that light, the national organization, Crones Counsel, Inc. and local groups consistently focus on the empowerment and well-being of older women and claim the honored status of the ancient crone for contemporary women.

Younger women can be a part of a crone circle although the focus is on elder women, primarily over fifty years of age. Some younger women have "old souls" and gravitate to and share with older women their lives and stories. They are lovingly referred to by the others as "maidens", "mothers", "cronettes", or "crones in training".

It is up to those who want to start a crones group to consider all of these differences. The point is to be as specific as possible, for your focus will provide the structural foundation for your group and determine the type of women who will be participating.

MISSION OR GOAL

Mission Statement

Creating a mission statement helps those who lead and those who will be members to have the goals of the group in mind.

An example of a mission statement is the following:

"We endeavor 1) to create a nurturing, mutually supportive, and confidential environment in which to express and explore the experience of being an elder woman, 2) to provide each woman a place to speak, a place for her story to be witnessed, 3) to provide each woman a place to be honored by her peers for her life experiences and the wisdom she has gained, and 4) to recognize, stimulate, celebrate, and encourage in our members the creativity, vitality, spiritual life, joy, service to others, individuality, and power inherent in all aspects of the feminine archetype."

Meeting Ground Rules

Each group determines their own guidelines. The following are some agreements that have helped circles to function more successfully for all participants.

- Consider the Circle a sacred space.
- Be truly present.
- Speak one at a time.
- Speak and listen from the heart.
- Speak from your own experience and beliefs rather than speaking for others.
- Encourage and welcome diverse points of view.
- Listen with compassion and for wisdom.
- Listen with discernment instead of judgment.
- Share leadership and resources.
- Decide together how decisions will be made.

- Work toward consensus when possible.
- Offer experience instead of advice.
- Pause and silently ask for guidance when in doubt or need.
- Decide together what is to be held in confidence.
- Open and close the circle by hearing each voice.

Circle Intentions

- I am on time.
- I consider the Circle, when we meet together, "sacred space", which implies confidential sharing.
- I speak from my heart as well as from my own personal experiences.
- I listen to others with an open heart and will not interrupt so that I can give each woman my undivided attention.
- I honor silence.
- I seek to develop gratitude.
- I focus on gaining some knowledge and wisdom each time we meet.
- I refrain from giving advice.
- I am aware of the impact of what I say.
- I respect differences and individual opinions.
- I listen with a non-judgmental attitude.
- I respect each woman's right to take an equal turn.

Structure

The leadership of the circle is generally a shared facilitation, with no one serving as an actual leader. Someone does have to take responsibility for information sharing and the structure of the circle, but ongoing, each meeting is "facilitated" rather than "led".

The group, once established, can set the schedule of meetings for the year; however, a tentative schedule may be set up to begin with.

The group will need to decide if each woman will take a turn to facilitate or if guest speakers will be invited. Many groups have a mix of both while some groups are all self-facilitated.

Type of Group

Groups may be open to new participants at any time, or perhaps only once a year, or become a closed group with no additional members after a certain time or number is attained.

FIRST MEETING

Participants/Members

For the person considering starting a Crone circle, a decision must be made as to who you would like to invite to your first meeting. Aim for a final group number of twelve to fifteen committed group members. Keep in mind that people will come and go, especially at the start, and during key transition points in the evolution of the circle itself. There are at least three ways to extend invitations.

- You might just invite twelve or thirteen women from various aspects of your life if you think they would be interested - two or three from work, a neighbor or two, your workout partner who keeps you accountable to your fitness program, etc. This approach allows you to carefully orchestrate the circle's founding members, but it can also result in a group that is too homogenous to be effective.
- Another approach is to invite six or seven people yourself, and then ask them to invite one person a piece. While you can't control the group dynamics as carefully as with the preceding method, you can get a nice mix of people this way. Personalities, communication styles, and life stories have a better chance of being diverse with this technique. In addition, you are quietly giving responsibility to the circle from the very start, and this is the ultimate goal.
- Advertising may also be considered. This may bring in many more women to the first meeting than you had planned. Once this meeting has occurred, however, a decision can be made about the size of the circle or circles. One way to publicize is to place informational flyers at alternative healing clinics or bookstores. This would get out the word of the initial organizing meeting.

Other Considerations

In planning for the first meeting, other details need to be considered. The length of the meeting needs to be determined up front. Many groups meet for three hours, some for less and some for more. You might want to start with that amount and then see if it meets the group's needs. If not, then consider a different length. By the end of your first year, you will know what works.

Next, give some thought to the location for your first meeting. Can the space be customized to suit the potential needs of your group? For example, if you are using a public space, like a church hall, or a lounge at the local community college, can lights be dimmed to promote intimacy? Is the site accessible to those who may have hampered mobility? Whether you utilize your home or an outside location, is there comfortable seating that can easily be moved? Is there ample counter or table space? Paying attention to these details helps to establish an environment of caring and safety. Comfort is the key, as many of the women may be strangers to one another with frayed nerves from the challenges of their day.

Finally, decide whether or not to have food. Serving at least coffee and tea is always a good thing. After the circle is established, who brings snacks can either be rotated or anyone who wants to bring them can do it.

ONGOING MEETINGS

Sacred Space - Opening and Closing the Circle

Creating sacred space usually includes physically preparing the space to accommodate everyone in a circle, often with a centerpiece or altar. In addition, some ritual to open and close the Circle and thereby designating the time together "sacred space" can be included. One way this can be done is by reading together some words about the intention for the meeting. A reminder about the sacredness of the circle and its confidentiality is a way to help ensure a safe and trusting environment for sharing experiences and feelings.

Check-in

Check-in describes the time in a meeting of going around the circle to allow all who wish to speak to say "where they are" in the present moment. Passing a talking stick to reinforce that each woman has her time to speak and not be interrupted, is a useful symbol.

During check-in, while each woman speaks, it is a time to listen with compassion and for wisdom - this includes listening without an agenda, suspending judgment, or finding the underlying meaning in others' statements. It is listening for wisdom as it comes through each participant.

Each woman should take responsibility for her experience and her impact on the circle. This includes demonstrating self-respect and self-restraint. Self-monitoring is essential to ensure that the needs and expectations of all present are being met. We ensure our contribution adds to the positive experiences of all in the circle.

Topics and activities

Some Crone circles include only the sharing of the women's lives, similar to check-in but progressing for the duration of the meeting. Other groups add topics to be discussed or activities to be done during the meeting time. The location should be chosen with a layout that will allow for all of these

possibilities. For example, singing, dancing, music, or lighted candles may not be allowed in a public building such as a library. A home may not have the table space for painting or collage making. Topics of all kinds, from decluttering lives to energy medicine can be considered -- just about anything that the group is interested in.

Here are some suggestions for meeting topics from one circle: life goals or gratitude collages, dealing with clutter, energy medicine, honoring the seasons, storytelling, myths in our lives, creating a bucket list, tarot & other cards, meditation practice, finding your life song or your personal muse, war memories, house blessings.

In addition some groups plan activities outside the meeting. Examples of these are: crowning ceremonies, picnics, retreats, holiday parties, healing circles, birthday celebrations, trips, book clubs, etc.

Rituals

Each group determines what kind and how many rituals they would like. Most circles have an altar in the middle of the circle of the chairs. Anyone present can add to the altar with objects they will later take home holding the energy of the group.

They open with a check-in, going around the circle as indicated earlier in this section, and then close with a meditation or closing words, often standing and holding hands. Some groups hold hands with the right hand up and the left hand down, or thumbs to the left. This is a way of sending energy around the circle.

Other rituals can include things that are routinely done—order of the meetings, sharing of gifts at various times of year, having a giveaway table, honoring birthdays or other significant events, crowning ceremonies, etc.

MAINTENANCE OF THE GROUP

It is essential to the preservation of the group to have a core group to be dependable in the mechanics of the group as well as provide a positive influence with respect to making the others feel welcome, a full participant, and sufficiently meeting their needs as stated in the mission statement.

Responsibilities

Core Leaders Even though there is not a designated permanent leader for the circle, there are responsibilities that need to be taken care of. The women who have been part of the group longer must take on the tasks which allow the group to run authentically in terms of structure, content, and mechanics. They can also be encouraged to mentor the newer members as they consider the meaning and value of Crone as well as venturing into being an occasional facilitator for the group.

Scheduler One woman needs to take on the responsibility of keeping track of the meeting schedule, and the names, addresses, birthdates, and email addresses of those women who attend the meetings, and of sending out the monthly notices, either by email or regular mail.

Timekeeper Many groups designate one woman to be a timekeeper. Some groups develop guidelines and rely on each woman to ensure that no one dominates the group's time. In addition, at each beginning of each meeting the agenda for that meeting can also be written and posted on a chalkboard to help the women stay on track.

Facilitator At each individual meeting, it is the responsibility of the woman who has volunteered to lead the meeting to:

- Choose and plan a topic to present
- Ask for help from others if needed
- Write up information for meeting notice
- Start and stop on time
- Start each circle with an intention

- Use a talking stick to facilitate taking turns to speak
- Prepare and give a meditation for centering group's focus
- Present the information about the chosen topic
- Bring altar items if you wish, and invite other women to add to it
- Lead opening and closing statements
- Help group and individuals keep to time frame of agenda for meeting but make sure every woman has the opportunity to speak if she wishes
- If someone does not want to speak, let them pass without judgment
- Meet and introduce any first timers
- Allow time for a brief closing

Members For the circle to succeed, those women who attend the meetings and are part of the group must have a shared purpose which includes a commitment to this type of group, to its structure, purpose, and mission. The women must ask for what they need and offer what they have. What transforms a meeting into a circle is the willingness of the women to shift from informal socializing or opinionated discussion into a receptive attitude of thoughtful speaking and deep listening. They are there for friendship, connections, insights, and laughter.

When the group focuses on some other purpose or activity, it may cease to remain a "Crone circle".

Location

As described above under "first meeting", a number of locations may be appropriate. Finding an available and accessible place must include the consideration of the members' distance to travel so a central location may not be considered until the group members' addresses are known.

Time, Duration, Frequency

After the initial meeting, further meetings are the group's decision. However, the availability of the location may dictate some parameters to your decision. For the time of day and day of the week, take into account the working schedules of the women who attend, the hesitancy on the part of some women

to going out at night, and their other obligations. The duration of the meeting will depend upon the length of time needed for social time, check-in, topic, discussion, all rituals. The frequency may be monthly or twice monthly; however, each woman's energy, time, and commitment may be a factor in this decision.

At least two to three hours minimum once a month is suggested for each meeting to allow the individuals to develop into a group.

Scheduling

If possible, a yearly schedule should be set up for time, place, and topic. The group members should be encouraged to volunteer to facilitate at least one meeting a year, and if there are more than enough volunteers, have two plan a meeting topic together. Someone should be responsible for getting to the location, opening the room, setting up the chairs and altar, and if snacks are brought, those set out. The room should be restored to the order to which the organization agreed.

Dues or donations

To determine if your group will have dues or not, first decide what the dues would be used for. If not everyone in the circle has email, and a written schedule and/or meeting reminder must be mailed out, that would be one cost. Other expenses might include the cost of a website, printing handouts, group supplies for snacks, or a crowning celebration or retreat.

Some circles have a set amount for dues for the group. Many circles have a donation box with a suggestion of \$1 per meeting. Many circles do not collect any dues at all.

BOOK LIST

- Celebrating the Crone: Rituals & Stories* [Ruth Gardner]
Changing Woman's Workbook: Approaching Menopause as a Journey of Spiritual Transformation [Magdalen Daniels]
Crone: Women Coming of Age [a magazine edited by Ann Kreilkamp]
Grey Matter: An Anthology of Poetry Read at Amazing Greys II [ed. Mary Billy]
Growing Old Disgracefully: New Ideas for Getting the Most Out of Life [The Hen Coop]
If I had My Life to Live Over, I Would Pick More Daisies [ed. Sandra Martz]
Maiden, Mother, Crone: The Myth & Reality of the Triple Goddess [D.J.Conway]
The Book of the Goddess, Past and Present [ed. Carl Olson]
The Crone: Women of Age, Wisdom and Power [Barbara G. Walker]
The Grandmother of Time: A Woman's Book of Celebrations, Spells, & Sacred Objects for Every Month of the Year [Zsuzsanna E. Budapest]
The Storyteller's Goddess: Tales of the Goddess and Her Wisdom from around the World [Carolyn M Edwards]
Virgin, Mother, Crone: Myths and Mysteries of the Triple Goddess [Donna Wilshire]
Wearing Purple [Alexander, Harper, Owens, Patterson]
When I am an Old Woman, I shall Wear Purple [ed. Sandra Martz]

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