



Simplicity Matters Earth Institute

www.simplicity-matters.org
Simple living for a sustainable future

Why Discussion Circles?

This document, with live links, can be downloaded from
www.simplicity-matters.org/volunteers/whycircles.pdf

What's special about discussion circles?

A discussion circle is a group of 8-12 adults who meet on average 7 times in order to learn together. The circle experience is unique. Magic happens when people read the same text and then discuss it together: others see what we did not, and our personal insights are expanded. In a circle you'll enjoy a deep and meaningful conversation about the topic at hand with lots of personal stories. Participants invariably report that they were greatly enriched from the sharing of experiences, ideas, and advice. Circle members also provide a support system that enables participants to make actual changes in their lives (if that is what they want; there's never any pressure). In sum, our discussion circles provide a safe environment for the exploration of lifestyle changes that support our living more lightly on Earth. Whether you're reading one of the NWEI discussion guides or jointly discussing videos or topics of your own group's choosing, discussing these subjects within a group will be a far richer experience than you could have on your own.

Is there a larger community?

There is definitely a larger community! Simplicity Matters Earth Institute (SMEI) is part of the [North American Earth Institute Network](#). The materials produced by the [Northwest Earth Institute](#), a nonprofit organization based in Portland, Oregon, have been used by more than 100,000 participants in all 50 states, DC, Canada, Sweden, and New Zealand.

Since SMEI began operating in 2002 our volunteers have started and supported more than 220 discussion circles in the District of Columbia, in twelve counties in Maryland, and in West Virginia.

You can access the larger community in several ways. Our [monthly forums](#) are gatherings held in Bethesda (Second Sunday Forum), in Towson (Baltimore Green Forum), and in Columbia (Howard County Earth Forum) which focus on different aspects of living more lightly.

We run four [online communities](#) on yahoogroups that discuss issues connected to simple and sustainable living.

Our [monthly announcement](#) lists events hosted by us and other organizations, as well as introductory meetings for circles about to start.

SMEI organizes an annual picnic each June, when circle members from all over the state congregate in a lovely outdoor location (varies each year), and a Winter Solstice celebration.

How do discussion circles work?

Circles are peer-facilitated, and participants take turns co-leading the group. There is no teacher, no leader, and no expert. You will learn from self-reflection and through discussion with others. Circle members create their own learning experience, which is different for each group. This is the tried and tested process adopted by SMEI:

Introductory Meeting: People who may be interested in joining the circle come together to learn more, with no obligation to join. An SMEI volunteer helps you figure out what you wish to do together, when and where you'll be holding your regular meetings, and how to order the reading materials. Once the discussion guides arrive and are distributed, you'll read the first chapter of the chosen book in preparation for the official first circle meeting.

First Meeting: Whenever possible, an SMEI volunteer attends and models tested NWEI procedures, described below. Circle members take turns co-leading subsequent meetings.

Regular Meetings: Every meeting includes an opening, a peer-facilitated discussion, and (often) action items.

The **opening** involves sharing of a personal experience by a participant who has volunteered to do this.

The **facilitator** is a participant whose job is to ensure that the conversation flows smoothly. He or she encourages everyone's participation and keeps the discussion personal, focused, and balanced among the participants. Text-based guides provide suggested discussion questions, and/or circles can pose and respond to their own questions. There are no "right" and "wrong" answers. The idea is to share personal points of view in a climate that is safe and non-judgmental. Circle discussions are kept confidential among circle members.

If a circle decides it wants to explore practical applications of what they discuss, they implement **action items**. At the end of every meeting each participant commits to doing one small action. At their next meeting everyone reports on their progress.

Final Meeting (Wrap-Up): A SMEI volunteer offers support throughout the process (if needed). He or she returns at the last session to help group members evaluate their experience and decide their next steps. Many circles choose a new activity on which to embark together, and commit to another series of meetings. Some circles have been meeting for years!