

Story Circles Reimagined: Building Youth Connection and Advancing Community Health

Story circles are a structured, inclusive approach that brings people together to share personal stories around a common theme. Rooted in indigenous traditions of storytelling, grassroots organizing, and community-building, story circles create opportunities for participants to listen, reflect, and connect with one another through lived experience.

Illinois Public Health Institute (IPHI) has recently reimagined this longstanding storytelling practice as a tool for advancing health equity and community well-being. Through an innovative, community-engaged approach with youth of color, IPHI demonstrated how storytelling can help young people build connection, provide peer support, and inform recommendations for youth-serving systems.



While story circles can be adapted to different audiences and settings, several core components help create a meaningful experience. Skilled facilitators guide the conversation and support participants in creating shared agreements that establish trust, respect, and safety as they respond to thoughtfully designed prompts that support meaningful storytelling, reflection, and connection.

CORE COMPONENTS OF A STORY CIRCLE:

- Intentional setup of space
- Clear purpose and context setting
- Thoughtful, relevant prompts
- Structured sharing process
- Deep listening environment
- Skilled facilitation
- Reflection and meaning-making

STORY CIRCLE EXAMPLE PROMPTS:

Tell a story
about a
time...

Describe a
time when
you...

Tell the
story of
how...

When you
think
about...

How
does it
feel to...

The Connection: Social isolation and health outcomes for youth of color

**Lacking social connection
is as dangerous as smoking
up to 15 cigarettes a day.**

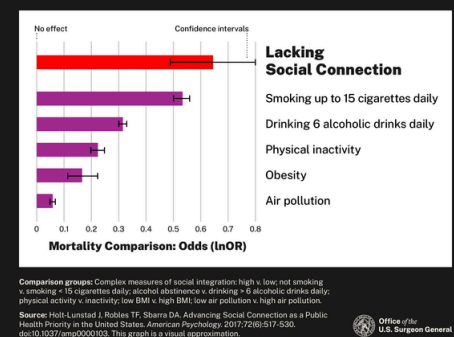


FIGURE 4: Lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day. Office of the Surgeon General. (2023)

Social isolation has increased nationwide and was recognized by the U.S. Surgeon General in 2023 as an urgent public health issue. The Surgeon General's report noted that lacking social connection can be as harmful to health as smoking up to 15 cigarettes per day. In contrast, strong social connections support mental and physical health, build resilience, and foster belonging.

However, not everyone has equal opportunities for connection. Youth of color living in disinvested communities may face unique barriers due to structural inequities and chronic underinvestment, while youth-centered solutions remain limited. Story circles offer one promising approach by creating opportunities for youth to share experiences, build empathy, and strengthen social connection through storytelling.

Findings and Emerging Themes:

To explore how narrative-based approaches can foster connection, while also learning how youth of color experience and build connection in communities impacted by disinvestment, Illinois Public Health Institute conducted three story circles, two workshops, and eight interviews with youth ages 14–24 from Cook and Peoria Counties. The themes below present these findings, organized by the project’s guiding questions and reflecting both shared experiences and differences across youth.

Guiding Question	Emerging Theme
How do youth describe moments of reconnection or resilience after isolation?	Youth often describe being more confident in themselves and their values after experiencing isolation and reconnection.
In what ways does participation in a story circle influence sense of connection, empathy towards others, and self-reflection?	Youth describe feeling connected to others through shared experiences and mutual empathy.
How do youth describe their experience of sharing and hearing stories?	Youth described their experience positively. They enjoyed that sharing their stories could help people and appreciated hearing diverse perspectives. Sharing stories helped them be more introspective and consider new viewpoints.
What elements of the story circle process appear to facilitate or hinder connection?	Youth expressed that the story circle being a group of their peers and a judgement free space helped them feel comfortable sharing and connecting. Youth recommended starting slow and building comfort through the process.
Do youth think that story circles could be a good method for fostering connection?	Youth expressed that story circles provide a safe place to share experiences openly and give and receive support from peers, which fosters connection.

Interested in Conducting Your Own Story Circle?

Reach out to IPHI for technical assistance and support in adapting this approach for your community or organization.

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At the heart of every story circle was a simple but powerful experience: being heard and knowing you are not alone. Youth shared that storytelling helped them connect with others, discover new perspectives, and recognize shared experiences. One participant reflected,

“It’s great to hear people that even if you don’t know them, they might go through the same things you do.”

Through honest conversations grounded in lived experience, youth described story circles as spaces where they could build trust, support one another, and strengthen their sense of belonging. By creating opportunities for connection among youth whose communities have been impacted by inequities and disinvestment, story circles represent a promising approach for advancing health equity and supporting the social connections that contribute to health and well-being.

The Alliance for Health Equity is convened by Illinois Public Health Institute.

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