

Beginning a Session

Find a place for the meeting where people can sit in a rough circle and feel comfortable. Welcome people as they arrive, and introduce everyone. An introduction might simply involve asking people to say their name and where they are from. It could include a short statement about what drew them to the group — but beware, as you continue around the circle, those statements will get longer and longer until people are telling their entire life stories. Here are some suggestions for quick rounds of introductions.

Quick Intro

Tell us your name and something that's happened this week that gives you hope.

Weather Report

Tell us your name, and if your mood right now were a state of the weather, what would it be? Sunny? Cloudy? Stormy?

Partner Intro

Find a person in this circle you don't know, and introduce yourself and what drew you to this group. Then the other person takes a turn. You will each have five minutes to talk without being interrupted or questioned. After you've both spoken, you'll have a few minutes to talk freely about what might be common or different in your experience.

Leader: Keep time and announce each five minutes with a bell, chime, drum or your voice. After the exercise is done, call the group back together and say:

Now I'm going to ask each of you to introduce your partner, and tell us in just a sentence or two what drew your partner to the group.

Pride Intro

(For an ongoing group) Say your name and tell us what you've done since we last met that you're proud of toward furthering the work of this group.

After introductions, review the plan for the meeting and its purpose and intentions. Ask the group, "Can we agree to this plan?" DON'T say "Are there any objections, concerns or suggestions about the agenda?" unless you want to spend a long time hearing them and revising the plan on the spot.

If it is appropriate in your group, you might also begin with a short grounding or meditation to bring the group together. There are hundreds of suggestions in my other books that I won't repeat now.

Group Grounding

This is a very simple and general grounding. Let's all stand in a circle. Take a moment and stretch, and feel your body. Where are you holding tension? What needs to be released? Take a deep breath, let it go and bring yourself to a nice, easy, balanced stance, with your knees slightly bent. Take some deep breaths, down into your belly. Close your eyes. Feel your feet on the ground.

Allow yourself to feel the weight of gravity and how your feet push down against the earth. Let yourself think for just a moment about what you stand for. What drew you to this group? To its work and values?

Imagine you have roots, like a tree, extending down from your feet into the earth. As you breathe, let them push down through the soil and rock and water under the earth, thinking about what feeds and supports the work of this group and your own work within it.

As you reach the mantle of living fire beneath the earth, take a breath and release anything you don't want to bring into this meeting. Just let it go, on your breath, and feel the fire transform it.

Now take a breath and draw up a spark of that fire — a spark of the inspiration and passion you feel for the work at hand. Draw it up through your roots, through the rocks and the water and the soil, up into your feet and legs, up through the base of your spine, and feel your spine expand and grow like the flexible trunk of a living tree. Draw some of that warm fire into your heart, and feel the heart connections you are making. Draw it up into your shoulders and down into your hands, and honor the work of your hands. Draw it up into your head and out the top of your head like branches that reach up to the sky and then sweep back down to touch the earth. Feel the circuit of energy that this creates. Now feel the sunlight (or moonlight, or starlight) on your leaves and branches. Take a deep breath, and draw some of that down, into your leaves and down through the top of your head, through your heart and hands and belly, down through your feet into the earth.

Draw in some of the energy you need to realize the vision and do the work.

And just stand for a moment, breathing, feeling yourself as a conduit between earth and sky. Now become aware that under the earth, all of our roots are intertwined. And above our heads, our branches are intertwined. We stand together, a sacred grove, sharing our vision and our work to make it real.

Let's take some deep breaths together, in and out ... our breath becoming one breath, in and out ... letting your breath become a sound, a tone that you give to the circle.

(When the tone dies away) And now let's just take in some of that energy, the energy we each need for the work tonight. And look around, and acknowledge everyone in the circle. Thank you! And now let's begin.

Anchor to Core Self

This exercise is probably the most basic and useful spiritual practice I know. I learned a version of it originally from bodywork teacher Suzette Rochat, and another version can be found in *The Twelve Wild Swans*. I use it every day, as a basic wake-up meditation, under stress, when I need to make an important decision. I've taught it to activists preparing to go into dangerous situations, to permaculturalists wanting to learn how to better observe what's going on in the garden and to spiritual circles wanting to meditate in the woods.

Begin with the grounding above. Now, as you stand grounded and centered, notice how your body feels. Think of a time, place or situation in which you feel at home and comfortable, when you can just be yourself, without any masks or pretense or face to keep up. A grounded but neutral state, when you can be in touch with your deepest, creative power, without having to use it. Say your own name to yourself, and notice where in your body you feel it reverberate.

Can you find a place on your body that resonates with this state? Take a deep breath, and touch that place. Or perhaps it's a stance or a gesture, but find something physical you can create as an anchor to this core, grounded, neutral state. Now, can you think of an image or a symbol for this state? Perhaps it's something from this scene you are remembering or imagining. It could be a color or a shape. Find something visual, and as you touch your physical place, hold it in your mind and tell yourself that by visualizing this image you can bring yourself into this core, grounded, neutral state.

Now, can you think of a word or phrase you can say, your magic word or affirmation that you can associate with this core, grounded, neutral state? Take a breath, and say the word or phrase to yourself, as you visualize your image and touch your physical place. Tell yourself that by using these three things together — your physical touch, your image and your word or phrase — you can quickly and instantly bring yourself into this core, grounded, neutral state. Take a breath, and open your eyes. Look around you, and notice how the world looks when you are in this core, grounded and neutral state. How do other people look, when they are anchored to their core self?

Now, you can let go of the physical gesture, the image and the phrase, and still stay grounded and centered. We will practice with this anchor, and I encourage you to practice also at home. The more you use it, the more it will become ingrained, until it becomes your natural, default state in response to stress.

Really Simple Grounding

For groups with less tolerance for ritual, here's a really simple, secular grounding

Let's stand together in a circle, just for a moment. Take a moment to stretch and release any knots and kinks. Now, let's all take a deep breath, and let go of any tension or distress you might be carrying with you from the day. Take a deep breath in, and out, and release anything you don't want to bring into this meeting.

Now, feel your feet on the ground. Feel the pull of gravity, and the solid contact you make with the earth. Think about what you stand for, and what we stand for together — those things we care about, the reasons why we do this work. Feel the solidity and the strength we have when we stand together. Know that any time you feel off-balance, physically or emotionally, you can bring yourself back to this solid, grounded stance simply by feeling your feet on the ground and taking a breath.

Look around now, and see your allies. Acknowledge them with your eyes, and let's begin.

Thanksgiving

The Iroquois nations begin every meeting with a Thanksgiving Address — a prayer of thanks to honor all of the cosmos. You might begin with a simplified version — asking people to share something they are thankful for and giving gratitude to all who have contributed to the work of the group that week.

Cultural Sharing

Groups that might feel uncomfortable with meditation or imposed prayer might still be open to starting with some form of cultural sharing. Musicians or poets can share their work, or any member can read a favorite poem or lead a group song. Artists get a chance to perform to a supportive audience and the group has an enriching experience that adds another dimension to the work.

Clap In/Clap Out

A leader holds her hands apart, and everyone follows suit. She counts one ... two ... three ... and claps, and everyone attempts to clap together as one. This is a very simple way to build unity, either to begin a meeting, to end one, or both. An alternate version is a group “Yes!,” either accompanying the clap or with a fist-punch up to the air.

Ending a Session

Leave some time at the end of every session for evaluation and closing.

Short Evaluation

Allow time either for free discussion or go around the circle asking:

What worked for you in this session? What could have worked better? What would you like to see in the next one?

Make sure someone takes notes that can be given to the facilitator for the next session.

Thank You Circle

Go quickly around the circle and thank each person for their contribution and for the work they’ve done for the group. Beware: when you thank people individually, you always run the risk of missing someone or slighting some accomplishment they feel is important. So don’t be sloppy.

Or: keep the gratitude general: “Thanks to those who organized the meeting, to everyone who brought food, to those who sent out the announcement and called people to remind them, to all of you who have done so much in this last period to further the work of this group.”

Cultural Closing

A poem, song or short dance jam can also close a meeting. Be aware, however, that when timing gets tight sometimes the closing gets postponed or foreclosed. It’s disrespectful to singers or poets to shove them off the agenda at the last meeting. So if that’s likely to happen, have the cultural offering first, rather than last.

Closing Meditation

For groups who are open to it, closing with a meditation, a grounding or a short empowerment ritual can be a lovely send-off.

Clap Out

A group clap can be used to end the meeting.

When to Have the Potluck

Before

“We gather at six for the potluck and start the meeting at seven.” This allows people with tight schedules to come just for the meeting, and others who have the time and inclination to socialize.

After

A daytime meeting can end with a potluck. This allows people in the group to release the tension of formal work and relax, and also to informally carry on the discussion started earlier.

During

A meeting can be held over brunch, lunch or dinner. This works well for building trust and connection when no decisions need to be made. It’s a great setting for deeper and more philosophical discussions, for tackling

the big questions that tend to get shoved out of agendas. But if conflict resolution is the purpose of the meeting, hold the food or risk indigestion.