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## Healing Circles help those in need with community, support

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Healing Circles for Houston is a nurturing, supportive place where anyone impacted by illness, a life-changing condition, or loss can explore and engage in their own healing.

Through out the week, different groups of people come together in Houston to share their stories and listen to one another.

Each one of these people are in need of healing, whether it be from losing a loved one or from a stressor in their lives. These groups are a part of an organization called Healing Circles Houston.

The idea for Healing Circles originated from a center in California called Commonweal. According to [www.commonweal.org](http://www.commonweal.org), Commonweal works in three areas—health and healing, art and education, and environment and justice. There is a Commonweal Cancer Help Program, which is a week-long retreat for people with cancer.

David Spaw, the director of Healing Circles Texas, became involved with Commonweal when he took his wife to the retreat, who had stage four cancer.

"It is a place where you can go and embrace your struggles. There are circles there where you can meditate and share your fears and joys. She had morphine patches for her pain but the morphine made her nauseous. After three or four days of this retreat, she was able to get rid of the patches. She managed her pain with her mind and she got her life back, for a while. It was a truly transformative experience," Spaw said.

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Michael Lerner, the founder of Commonweal, and others, decided to figure out a way to make the Commonweal's healing practices more accessible to other people around the country. And so Healing Circles came to be.

Spaw, who was originally a CEO for a construction business, remarried after his first wife passed away, but she too, tragically passed away from cancer. He and his second wife were in the process of starting a Commonweal in Austin, but after her passing, he stepped back from it for a few years.

"What has brought me to this work is my loss. I mean, I had a great life, a great business. But having something that is really purposeful is so powerful. I wake up in the morning and know that I get to do something that makes a difference," Spaw said.

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Healing Circles is currently in seven places in the United States, including Houston, which started in February of 2016. There are also groups in Canada and Israel.

"We had about 100 circles last year," Spaw said of the Houston group. "In 2017, we are tracking along at 300 circles, or events, with people coming together in groups."

According to Spaw, there are different circles in different places, all free to attend, and they all ascribe to a similar process.

The philosophy of Healing Circles is to "Create conditions for healing by providing safe space, support, community and resources that promote healing. We believe healing is a natural and often deeply personal process that can encompass the entire spectrum of our lives – physical, mental, emotional and even spiritual. For some it is a return to wholeness or a return to hope – to others it is a sense that 'I will be all right no matter what happens.' It can be a return of a long lost sense of joy or a renewed sense of purpose despite difficult circumstances."

In a healing circle people will get together and share their journey. Often there is a specific topic, such as "restorative practices," and sometimes a speaker will attend as well. Those in attendance agree to keep what is said inside the circle confidential.

"It is not in lieu of therapy in any sense. We are not like a therapy session. We have wholesome guardians, which lead the process, but they are also sharing, too. Everyone is a volunteer," Spaw said. "It can be a good companion to other support being received."

Some current circle series include circles for veterans, parents of children with special needs, deep listening, grief and loss and survivors of sexual assault and abuse. Some are art based, giving people the opportunity to create artwork and share their stories.

Spaw continued, "I've sat in on a few of the veterans circles. In one veteran circle, someone shared something that caused us all to belly laugh for 10 minutes. The circle lost control and everyone just came away lifted up. You learn about yourself and you learn from others."

Different circle meetings are held at St. Paul's United Methodist Church, The Jung Center, and the Healing Circle Center located at 1100 Milford Street. A half-dozen other sites are currently being considered.

Spaw and the co-director of Healing Circles Houston, Susan Rafte, are looking for more partners who are interested in the healing circle process. They are currently targeting faith communities, healing centers and healthcare institutions.

"It is just bubbling up in different parts of the country, one circle at a time," Spaw said.

Spaw continued, "The experience that we always hear is that you leave lighter and less burdened just by the virtue of being listened to."

Healing Circles are non-denominational and do not involve any adherence to a particular ideology, group or individual. For more information, and to see the schedule of circles, visit [www.healingcircleshouston.org](http://www.healingcircleshouston.org).

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