

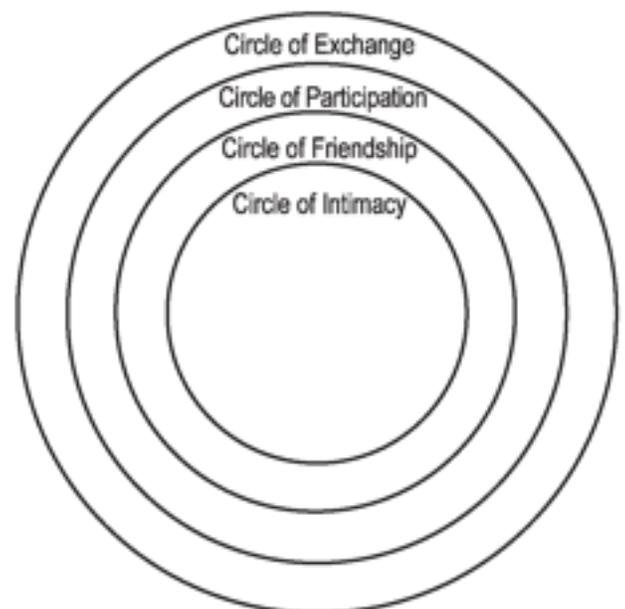
Circles of Support

Judith Snow, and her story, inspired the concept Circles of Support. Judith, born with quadriplegia was a passionate intellectual, and a teacher at York University. At age 28 Judith had exhausted every attendant care living option available in Canada. She found herself living in a geriatric ward of West Park Hospital. Her good friends from University, Marsha Forest and Jack Pearpoint, were shocked when they saw first hand the living conditions she was in and at such a young age. Upon learning of her poor living conditions and inadequate support, Marsha and Jack formed a group and circled around Judith. They formed a team in which they fought to get Judith out of the nursing home and into her own home with personal assistance. Judith dubbed the group the “Joshua Committee,” because together they ‘blew down the walls’ (Joshua 6:20).

The work of the Joshua Committee in joining with Judith demonstrates the way in which people can work together to be a life-changing force in each others’ lives. Author and disability advocate, Bob Perske, was inspired by the unusual work of the Joshua Committee and conceptualized the idea of “Circles of Support.”

A Circle of Support is a group that forms in order to help a person with a disability to achieve goals or lend a hand when needed. Prior to developing your own Circle of Support, it can be helpful to consider the current relationships in your partner’s life. There are four basic relationship “circles” to consider:

1. The **Circle of Intimacy** is made up of the people we love. These are people we feel safe with and are able to be vulnerable with. This circle usually includes family members and very close friends.
2. The **Circle of Friendship** includes the people who we may call up to grab coffee, see a movie with, or join in a shared interest with. We consider these people good friends, but they are not most dear to us.
3. The **Circle of Participation** is made up of acquaintances from the various spheres in which we participate, including colleagues at work and school, members of a sporting group, or fellow volunteers at church. These people are not close enough to be called friends, but as time goes on they could move to one of the first two circles.
4. The **Circle of Exchange** is comprised of the people who are paid to be in our lives. Some examples include doctors, teachers, social workers, barbers, etc. These relationships are purely transactional.



Many people with disabilities have relatively few people in their lives that fall into Circles 2 and 3. In most cases Circle 4 far outweighs the other circles; the majority of people are paid to be

in their lives. There are many reasons for this, including the person's lack of opportunity for work, access to social or religious groups, or connections with people who share their interests. Therefore there is a lack of acquaintances (Circle 3) and opportunities for friendships (Circle 2). This incomplete network of relationships can put an overwhelming strain on family (Circle 1). Sadly, it is far too common that the person is in Circle 1 alone—leaving only paid workers in their life to support them. This is why your relationship plays such an important role in your partner's life.

Creating a Circle of Support can help relieve some of the stress of the 'faithful few' in Circle 1, and can truly help your partner flourish. This is done by identifying people in your partner's life, brainstorming together about how to mobilize resources to meet specific or potential needs, and then acting upon those ideas when appropriate. It can be transformative, yet it takes intentionality and organization in order to form a fully realized, effective Circle of Support.

Ideas to begin forming a Circle of Support:

- Meet with your partner and write down where each person in his or her life fits into the four relationship circles. Keep these people's contact information in one place. Over time, you might meet people you didn't realize were actually present in their life., in one of the circles.
- Assess areas of need in your partner's life and how various people in their life could support or advocate for them in that need.
- Plan a "circle meeting" in which you and your partner bring together the important people in their life to organize, reflect, and make decisions this person's life and future possibilities.
- Your partner is integral mapping out their Circle of Support. Make sure to include them in all steps of this process! To every extent possible, you want to empower them to make decisions and utilize these resources.